

ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: THE EXPERIMENTAL AESTHETICS OF
GLOBAL SINOPHONE THEATRE: THE
PRESENT, THE ABSENT, AND THE
AVANT-GARDE

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Focusing on the socio-political implications of Sinophone theatre network, this dissertation examines how the global circulation of Chinese-speaking theatre productions on the international stage challenges the conventional understanding of Chinese theatre as a pre-modern ethnic performance genre. My dissertation surveys a series of staged productions and dramatic plays produced by three artists whose works experiment with alternative manifestations of Chinese heritage that are positioned and performed outside of mainland China. These artists include Gao Xingjian (France), Edward Lam (Hong Kong), and Wu Hsing-kuo (Taiwan). The goal of this project is twofold. First, it asserts the importance of embodied knowledge to the fields of Chinese studies, Sinophone studies, and globalization studies, thus challenging the privileged position that textual knowledge has traditionally been granted. Second, through my discussion of the dramatic devices employed in the staged works of the above-mentioned theatre practitioners, I argue that the staging of alternative Chinese heritages highlights how “Chineseness” as an imagined category of cultural authenticity is destabilized by the bodily performance of things claimed to be Chinese that are in fact distinct from mainland traditions.

THE EXPERIMENTAL AESTHETICS OF GLOBAL SINOPHONE THEATRE:
THE PRESENT, THE ABSENT, AND THE AVANT-GARDE

by

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Chapter One

The “China” Problem and the Crisis of Traditional Chinese Theatre

Drawing on the intersections of theatre studies, performance studies, and Sinophone studies, this dissertation positions the touring theatre productions of three Chinese-speaking artists—Gao Xingjian (France), Wu Hsing-kuo (Taiwan), and Edward Yick-wah Lam (Hong Kong)—as the examples of what I call the Sinophone theatre network. The argument here is that the corporeal embodiment of Sinitic actors and the material presence of Chinese spectacle on stage shape the spectators’ historical consciousness of the vast geographies of pan-Chinese cultures. In order to highlight this very point, I employ the theoretical framework of Sinophone studies as an analytic lens to discuss the polarized reception of the three theatre practitioners on a global scale.

Coined and theorized by literary scholar Shu-mei Shih, the notion of the Sinophone critique refers to “the study of Sinitic-language cultures on the margins of geographical nation-states and their hegemonic productions—locates its objects of attention at the conjuncture of China’s internal colonialism and Sinophone communities everywhere immigrants from China have settled.”¹ Focusing on the production and circulation of transnational literature, Shih’s discourse of the Sinophone critique provides us with a critical lens of analysis because it embraces the marginalized voices of the vast Chinese-speaking communities inside/outside the People’s Republic of China whose Chinese experiences are reductively characterized

¹ Shu-mei Shih, “The Concept of the Sinophone,” *PMLA* 126.3 (May 2011): 709-718. p. 710.

as either a copy of the authentic mainland tradition or the Han Chinese cultures. Therefore, the concept of Sinophone critique is based on a premise that “China,” as a political entity and a cultural amalgamation, is a fundamental “problem” to the minority ethnic groups within China (e.g., Tibet) and the diasporic Chinese communities (e.g., Chinese American).

As many scholars have pointed out, Shih’s Sinophone critique is thought-provoking as it challenges the default assumption that anything “Chinese” is certainly from the Chinese mainland. However, Shih’s theoretical approach is also problematic because it automatically presumes that China is deemed to be a “problem” as the country’s pursuit of a unified Chinese nation-state and emphasis on ancestral cultural roots are considered a dire threat to the international community. Although Shih’s Sinophone critique is a timely response to the all-inclusiveness of the term “Chinese,” in this dissertation, I use the Sinophone as a method and a framework to expand the conceptual horizon of current Sinophone studies scholarship that tends to overemphasize the China problem through the lens of embodied performance. In doing so, I suggest that scholarly debates over the cultural and sociopolitical implications of terms like “Chinese” and “Sinophone” all revolve around *the presence and absence of “China”*—be it political, cultural, aesthetic, or ideological. By grouping the three theatre artists and their experimental production as the emergence of the Sinophone network, this dissertation offers a new theoretical approach to examine how Chinese-speaking artists across the globe develop alternative Chinese performance cultures that require the presence and absence of China simultaneously.

Most importantly, despite a decade of scholarship critically engaging Shih's generative arguments, we only have one published monograph² exclusively concentrating on the topic of Sinophone theatre. In this light, my dissertation aims to bridge the scholarly gap of current Sinophone scholarship by adding the critical perspective of theatrical performance as a counterpart of textual knowledge. My analyses of Gao Xingjian, Wu Hsing-kuo, and Edward Lam's experimental theatre productions focus on how they draw inspirations from traditional Chinese performance methods and reinvent new aesthetic genres by appropriating the vanguard aesthetic approaches from the West. Therefore, in what follows, this chapter covers background information regarding the aesthetic styles of traditional Chinese theatre, the impacts of avant-garde art from the West on the three theatre practitioners' works, and the theatrical reform movements in modern China.

1.1 The Existential Crisis of Chinese Performance Tradition

In the history of Chinese theatre, *xiqu*³ is often perceived as the crystalized product of ancient Chinese aesthetics because the theatrical genre is a harmonious

² Rossella Ferrari, *Transnational Chinese Theatres: Intercultural Performance Networks in East Asia* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020). At one level, Ferrari's book could be read as a comprehensive study of touring theatre productions with Chinese cultural elements or styles in East Asia. However, the author still uses "Chinese" as her conceptual framework" as opposed to the notion of "Sinophone."

³ In Mandarin Chinese, the term *xiqu* is a combination of two separate Han characters—"戲" (drama) and "曲" (song/melody). In this dissertation, I use *xiqu* and Chinese indigenous theatre interchangeably when referring to the traditional operatic performances derived from ancient Chinese dynasties. I choose not to use "Chinese opera" because the English translation fails to capture the complexity of different Chinese operatic performances produced and toured in various provinces of mainland China. For example, *jingju* (Beijing opera) is frequently misunderstood as the monolithic form of Chinese opera to many non-Chinese spectators because the theatrical genre is often praised as "Chinese national theatre." However, the fact is that Beijing opera is merely a regional branch of Chinese indigenous theatre. For more information with regard to the terminology of *xiqu*, please read Li (2010):6-9 and Wichmann 191-92.

combination of high-pitched singing, poetic language, choreographed movement, exquisite costume, acrobatic combat, and vernacular literature that constitute a canon of popular culture shared across the country. However, in the contemporary cultural landscapes of mainland China and other Chinese-speaking regions, the presence of traditional Chinese theatre is nearly absent from popular theatrical expression because the form is considered outdated and tedious, and thus incompatible with the current entertainment industry's emphasis on commercial profit and technological sensation. In *The Soul of Beijing Opera: Theatrical Creativity and Continuity in the Changing World*, theatre scholar Li Ruru argues that the demise of traditional Chinese theatre in the Chinese-speaking communities stems from two critical issues. First, focusing on *jingju* (Peking/Beijing opera) as the primary case study in her book, Li's interviews with various groups who are familiar with Chinese cultures indicate that generational bias plays an important role in the absence of *jingju* from the mainstream theatre. For example, while several of Li's interviewees from Hong Kong claimed that they respect the beauty of Beijing opera, they thought that "*jingju* or the traditional theatre was for elderly people who did not understand what was going on in the world."⁴ In other words, the young generation of Hong Kong, in the context of Li's interviews, suggest that Beijing opera—or Chinese traditional theatre in general—is identical to a piece of antiquity preserved and praised by the old generation of Hong Kong.

Second, *xiqu* performance is highly politicized with regard to its status as a national icon and representative of cultural authenticity. The staged display of

⁴ Ruru Li, "Introduction," in *Staging China: New Theatres in the Twenty-First Century*, edited by Ruru Li (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 3.

Chinese indigenous theatre functions as a cultural window that allows non-Chinese spectators to appreciate the presumably “authentic beauty” of classic Chinese performance. In this function, Chinese *xiqu* thus has limited space for any dramaturgical revision when it comes to style, movement, and costume. Therefore, the praxis of reforming traditional *xiqu*, to some extent, is seen as an act of betrayal to the original because the reformed or “modernized” performances are considered inauthentic. The tension between those who protect tradition and those who embrace innovation epitomizes the gradual disappearance of traditional Chinese theatre in the public spheres of the Chinese-speaking world.

By drawing attention to the existential crisis of traditional Chinese theatre in the twenty-first century, it helps us rethink why any attempts to reform or appropriate traditional Chinese performance styles are often understood as a betrayal of the authentic and an insult to the classics. The focus here is not simply a historical or historiographical survey about how reformed Chinese traditional theatre gains its prominence on stage again. Instead, I want to explore the fundamental driving forces that reshape the local presence of traditional Chinese theatre in mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong as well as its twenty-first-century global presence outside the Chinese-speaking world. Situated at the intersections between Chinese studies, theatre and performance studies, global studies, and Sinophone studies, my dissertation posits the Chinese diaspora and commercial globalization as the two driving forces expediting the continued progress of such theatrical reform locally and globally. Using the lens of this transnational migration and globe trade, I analyze the experimental aesthetics of what I call the Sinophone theatre network in this study.

Unlike the previous scholarship⁵, my dissertation does not reiterate the influence of Western modernity on the cultural landscapes of the Chinese-speaking world. While invaluable, the analytic approach employed by these scholarly works can hardly separate itself from the logic of binary opposition, such as the West and the East, the center and the periphery, or the dominant and the oppressed.

The historical impact of massive Chinese migration and the economic reform policies implemented in the Sinophone communities⁶ in the twentieth century are rarely the focal points when it comes to the aesthetic reform of traditional Chinese theatre. During WWII, the Japanese invasion of mainland China from 1937 to 1945 resulted in countless refugees who mostly retreated from the provinces on the East coast to the inner provinces. Some of them even fled to Hong Kong and Vietnam before the Japanese army completely occupied the Southeast regions of mainland China. After the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937-45), the immediate outbreak of the Chinese Civil War (1945-49) between the Nationalist Party and the Communist Party forced more civilians to abandon their homelands and migrate into Taiwan—a small

⁵ For example, in *Acting the Right Part: Political Theater and Popular Dream in Contemporary Drama*, Xiaomei Chen points out that the notion of “modern Chinese theatre” is often associated with “*huaju*” (spoken drama)—a cultural import from the West by a group of public intellectuals around the first decade of the twentieth century. Since then, the epistemological divide between traditional Chinese theatre (*xiqu* performance) and modern Chinese theatre (Westernized spoken drama) has become a scholarly paradigm in the field of Chinese theatre. Similarly, in *Performing Hybridity in Colonial-Modern China*, Siyuan Liu revisits this traditional/modern paradigm through the examination of a hybrid theatrical genre called “*wenmingxi*” (civilized drama)—a newly-established dramatic form in the early twentieth century with a mixture of performance elements from Western spoken drama, traditional Chinese theatre, and Japanese kabuki theatre. Liu’s analysis of *wenmingxi* highlights the necessity of reexamining this traditional/modern dichotomy when it comes to the history of Chinese theatre.

⁶ In the context of my dissertation, it refers to mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong whenever I use “the Sinophone communities.” Strictly speaking, Singapore and Macau are parts of the Sinophone community because Chinese languages (e.g. Mandarin, Cantonese, Minnan etc.) are commonly spoken by the majority in their everyday life. However, due to the scope of my case studies, I would not discuss the theatrical movements in Singapore and Macau.

island separated from the mainland and colonized by Japan from 1895 to 1945. The sovereignty of Taiwan was transitioned from Japan to the Republic of China (ROC) led by the Nationalist government in 1945. However, on October 1, 1949, the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) granted the Communist Party as the winner of the Civil War and the central government of the mainland. Since then, the political tension between the PRC (mainland China) and the ROC (Taiwan) has fundamentally destabilized the notion of Chineseness as a unified characteristic representing things from the mainland because both parties regard themselves as the only legitimate "Chinese" government respectively.

The Chinese diaspora in the twentieth century, to some extent, was the consequence of the brutal wars. These bloody battles generated numerous war refugees and triggered a massive wave of migration in the history of modern China. Those dispersed Chinese refugees resettled themselves in different locations, including Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, Malaysia, Macau, and even the United States. As a result, most of them attempted to reproduce Chinese cultural products that are reminiscent of their cultural roots, including the convention of *xiqu* performance. Ironically, regardless how authentic they are, those "alternative" *xiqu* repertoires are often considered inferior to the performances produced in PRC because of the emphasis on legitimacy and authenticity. In *Alternative Chinese Opera in the Age of Globalization: Performing Zero*, Daphne Lei proposes the notion of "alternative Chinese opera" as a critical response to the disparate reception between the operatic performances from the mainland and those produced outside of mainland China. Alternative Chinese opera, as Lei defines, "is alternative because it is updated,

modernized, or improved as compared to *the* tradition; it is alternative because it is not from the center, PRC; it is alternative because despite its local connection it takes a transnational approach; it is alternative because it imagines an ideal Chinese nation when no alternative China can exist legitimately.”⁷

Significantly, Lei’s definition of alternative Chinese opera requires further discussions. First, this performance paradigm positions itself as an amalgam of diverse Chinese operatic repertoires performed in non-PRC regions. Therefore, the key agenda of Lei’s alternative framework draws a contrast between domestic Chinese opera and global Chinese opera—operatic performances produced in PRC versus reformed operatic repertoires toured outside PRC. In this sense, such a theoretical paradigm inevitably reinforces the binary opposition between mainland China (the center) and the diasporic Chinese communities (the periphery). Second, Lei further emphasizes that alternative Chinese opera is “modernized and updated” because those performances do not stick to the dramaturgical tradition⁸ of Chinese *xiqu* repertoire practiced in mainland China. In other words, alternative Chinese opera is more dynamic and advanced because it keeps absorbing new elements from other cultures and developing an innovative aesthetic model based on the daily experiences

⁷ Daphne Lei, *Alternative Chinese Opera in the Age of Globalization: Performing Zero* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 11.

⁸ In *xiqu* performance, the actors are required to have comprehensive skills, including singing, dancing, and acting. Therefore, traditional Chinese theatre, as Elizabeth Wichmann argues, is “a performer-oriented theater” (188). Wichmann also highlights that Western-style drama tends to amplify the effect of spoken words on stage, but the presentation of traditional Chinese theatre emphasizes more the visual stylization—“the divergence between the behaviors of daily life and their [nonrealistic] presentation on stage” (186). In other words, the nonrealistic representation of the actors’ properly designed behaviors on stage creates a critical distance between the performers and the audiences. For more information, please see Elizabeth Wichmann, “Traditional Theater in Contemporary China,” in *Chinese Theater: From Its Origin to the Present Day*, edited by Colin Mackerras (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 1983), 184-203.

of people who live in the periphery of the Chinese-speaking world. Lastly, Lei specifically argues that alternative Chinese opera “imagines” an idealized Chinese cultural regime that can hardly exist in reality. That is, alternative Chinese opera serves as an intangible cultural heritage that unifies the diasporic Chinese communities who disidentify with the cultural orthodox rooted in mainland China.

While acknowledging the invaluable contribution of Lei’s theoretical lens, I would suggest that an alternative paradigm that revisits the commonly used center-periphery model is also required when we discuss Chinese cultural production domestically and globally. The term “Chinese,” as Lei reiterates in her books (2006: 6-11; 2013: 13-15), is a problematic adjective because it generalizes a wide spectrum of cultural heritages as a monolithic assemblage originated from mainland China. Inevitably, “Chinese” as a loaded term fails to reflect the complex cultural landscapes of the Chinese-speaking world in the age of globalization. However, as mentioned earlier, the theoretical construct of Lei’s alternative Chinese opera is not a satisfactory solution to this epistemological dilemma because it relies heavily on the contrast between the mainland and the peripheries. The lurking danger of this theoretical framework lies in its confrontational implication. Namely, the issue of Chineseness will always remain a heated debate because of the political tension between PRC and the diasporic Chinese communities.

In this study, I choose not to align myself with Lei’s “alternative paradigm” when analyzing the experimental reform of traditional Chinese cultural production in the works of three contemporary artists from mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. Instead, I turn to the discourse of Sinophone studies consolidated by a group of

pioneer scholars based in North America, including David Der-wei Wang (Harvard University), Jing Tsu (Yale University), and Shu-mei Shih (UCLA). One reason I adopt this theoretical approach is that the Sinophone creates a discursive space where the political, economic, and cultural diversities of the global Chinese-language communities are treated with equal attention. In “Against Diaspora: The Sinophone as Place of Cultural Production,” Shu-mei Shih defines the Sinophone as “Sinitic-language cultures and communities *outside* China as well as those ethnic communities in China where Sinitic languages are either forcefully imposed or willingly adopted;” thus, the Sinophone, “like the history of other nonmetropolitan people who speak metropolitan and/or colonial languages, has *a colonial history*.”⁹

Shih’s definition here is thought-provoking but needs critical examination. First, she positions the Sinophone as the opposite of the Chinese. In other words, the Chinese are excluded from the Sinophone and perceived as the source of oppression. The Chinese, in Shih’s theoretical agenda, is synonymous with colonialism because China as the political and cultural center strives to maintain a monolithic interpretation of Chineseness. The analogy between China and colonialism is further accounted in Shih’s introductory essay to *Sinophone Studies: A Critical Reader*. In the article, Shih challenges the historical narratives of positioning China as a victim of colonial invasion since the First Opium War in 1839 and contends that China under the governance of the Qing dynasty (1636-1912) should be understood as a continental empire because its legitimacy as a political regime is consolidated by the

⁹ Shu-mei Shi, “Against Diaspora: The Sinophone as Place of Cultural Production,” in *Global Chinese Literature: Critical Essays*, eds. Jing Tsu and David Der-wei Wang (Boston: Brill, 2010), 30; 36.

subordination of the periphery territories (i.e. Tibet, Xinjiang, and Taiwan).

Therefore, the center-periphery paradigm is defined by Shih as a mode of “continental colonialism” because both successors of the Qing empire—the Republic of China (founded in 1912) and the People’s Republic of China (founded in 1949)—inherit the colonized territories and continue the hegemonic paradigm of governance.

Furthermore, according to Shih, the governmental version of contemporary Chinese history often portrays China as the victim of colonial invasion in the early twentieth century. The narratives of “shame” plays a crucial role in “legitimizing the rising tide of Chinese nationalism from the Republican revolution¹⁰ to the present day.”¹¹ Hence, the Sinophone, in Shih’s theoretical agenda, constructs “a network of cultural production *outside* China and on the margins of China and Chineseness, where a historical process of heterogenizing and localizing of continental Chinese culture has been taking place for several centuries.”¹² While invaluable, Shih’s discursive articulation of the Sinophone is not impeccable. First, it is noticeable that Shih anchors the discourse of Sinophone studies on a base of minoritarian transnationalism. Outside the mainland, the Sinitic communities and the diasporic Chinese are constantly perceived as the periphery. Thus, Shih examines a series of

¹⁰ It relates to the revolutionary battles led by Sun Yat-sen during the first decade of the twentieth century in mainland China. Sun successfully overthrew the imperial Qing and established the first Republican nation-state in East Asia in 1911—The Republic of China (ROC). After the Nationalist regime lost the Chinese Civil War (1945-1949), the government of ROC has been transferred to Taiwan since 1949.

¹¹ Shu-mei Shih, “What Is Sinophone Studies,” in *Sinophone Studies: A Critical Reader*, eds. Shu-mei Shih, Chien-hsin Tsai, and Brian Bernards (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 2.

¹² Shu-mei Shih, *Visuality and Identity: Sinophone Articulations across the Pacific* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007), 4. Emphasis added.

cultural products¹³ generated, circulated, and consumed in these marginalized Sinitic areas and discusses how these works appropriate and deconstruct the hegemonic Chineseness imposed by mainland China. In this sense, it is obvious that Shih's approach particularly reinforces the boundary between the center (mainland China) and the periphery (outside the mainland). Second, in my opinion, the exclusion of mainland China from Shih's project seems to generalize everything Chinese as the source of oppression or hegemony.

Although Shih's account of the Sinophone is widely embraced as the foundation of Sinophone studies, many scholars still cast doubt on the exclusion of PRC as part of the great Chinese-language community in her theoretical framework. For example, film scholar Sheldon H. Lu critiques the shortcoming of Shih's Sinophone theory from the problematic analogy among the Anglophone, the Francophone, and the Sinophone in Shih's agenda.¹⁴ As Lu writes:

Shih also lumps together anglophone and francophone as similar linguistic and historical formations. But as we all know, these notions are rather distinct in an important way. Anglophone includes literature or cultural productions

¹³ In *Visuality and Identity: Sinophone Articulations across the Pacific*, Shih analyzes a series of film, art exhibition, political propaganda as case studies to articulate how cultural workers outside mainland China challenge the utopian imagination of a unified China. For example, in chapter five, Shih examines how the selected Hong Kong movies respond to the social and political anxieties generated by the island's return to mainland China in 1997.

¹⁴ As mentioned earlier, in the prologue of *Sinophone Studies: A Critical Reader*, Shu-mei Shi's essay outlines the colonial legacies attached to the Anglophone and the Francophone. When comparing the Sinophone with these linguistic communities, Shih provocatively argues that Sinophone studies deal with the oppressed and marginalized communities inside PRC and those who live overseas. By doing so, she contends that the Sinophone also bears the legacy of colonialism. The primary difference between the Western paradigm (e.g. the Anglophone) and the Sinophone is that the colonial activities of the former belong to marine colonialism while the latter should be understood as continental colonialism. In other words, mainland China has served as a colonial center since the Qing Dynasty (1612-1912).

from all English-speaking countries, from both Great Britain and its former colonies: United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and so forth. In contrast, francophone includes cultural productions from outside the sovereign nation of France. Shih is apparently leaning towards the model of francophone in the definition of the Sinophone. As a result, Sinophone carries an ideological bent: anti-sinocentrism.¹⁵

Indeed, Lu's account of the antagonist nature embedded in Shih's theory highlights the contested nature of this newly constructed approach. Furthermore, Lu's analysis illuminates how Sinophone theory could possibly be transformed into an ideological apparatus. That is, based on Shih's framework, the cultural production from PRC would possibly be excluded from the scope of Sinophone studies because the mainland represents the center of oppression to the peripheral Chinese-language regions.

Conceptually, my study of the three Chinese-speaking playwrights/directors rejects the confrontational structure of Shih's Sinophone theory because the focal point of my research is not on how these theatre practitioners contest the authority of the PRC center with their performance repertoires. Instead, I propose "the Sinophone theatre network" as my lens of analysis to investigate the ways in which theatrical performance becomes an experimental site that puts the Western avant-garde aesthetics and the Chinese operatic repertoires in dialogue. The global Sinophone represents a paradigm shift that compels us to reexamine the cross-cultural reception

¹⁵ Sheldon H. Lu, "Genealogies of Four Critical Paradigms in Chinese-Language Film Studies," in *Sinophone Cinema*, eds. Audrey Yue and Olivia Khoo (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 21.

of the touring theatre productions originating from the Chinese-speaking world. In this comparative study, I argue that the aesthetic avant-garde of Gao Xingjian, Wu Hsing-kuo, and Edward Lam's touring theatre is neither a betrayal of the Chinese tradition nor a bastard of the Western vanguardism. The avant-garde spirit of global Sinophone theatre challenges any forms of binary epistemology in theatre history and performance studies, such as the modern/the traditional, the elite/the popular, the experimental/ the commercial, or the local/the national. As Jing Tsu and David Der-wei Wang suggest, "nationality does not determine the geographical parameters of Sinophone writing"¹⁶ when it comes to the global exchange between Chinese literature and non-Chinese literature. In line with Tsu and Wang's statement, I suggest that "nationality does not determine the aesthetic parameters of Sinophone *theatre*." In doing so, this dissertation offers critical insight to the ways in which the experimental aesthetics of global Sinophone theatre transcends language barriers and cultural borders in the age of globalization.

1.2 Building the Sinophone Theatre Network: Gao Xingjian, Wu Hsing-kuo, and Edward Lam

While Sinophone studies or the Sinophone has been wide discussed in the fields of literary studies (Tsu and Wang 2010; Groppe 2013), queer studies (Chiang and Heinrich 2014), and cinema studies (Yue and Khoo 2014), there is yet a published monograph focusing on Sinophone theatre. Wah Guan Lim's PhD

¹⁶ Jing Tsu and David Der-wei Wang, "Introduction: Global Chinese Literature," in *Global Chinese Literature: Critical Essays*, edited by Jing Tsu and David Der-wei Wang (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 3.

dissertation, titled *Performing “Chineseness”: Articulating Identities-of-Becoming in the Works of Four Sinophone Theatre Director-Playwrights in the 1980s* (2015), is the most recent¹⁷ and comprehensive research on the theatrical creativity of four Chinese-speaking directors and playwrights from Singapore (Kuo Pao Kun), Taiwan (Stan Lai), Hong Kong (Danny Yung), and the People’s Republic of China (Gao Xingjian) in the 1980s. Structurally, my study of the three Sinophone theatre makers resonates with the blueprint of Lim’s project. However, what differentiates my work from Lim’s dissertation is our application of the Sinophone as the research methodology. Particularly, as Lim writes, the goal of his research is to showcase “a circuit of Sinophone creativity that differs substantially from that assumed by conventional literary history, which focuses on the People’s Republic of China.”¹⁸ The reference to “conventional literary history,” to some extent, critiques the dominant position of literary studies when it comes to the study of Sinophone cultural production. As an advocate of the Sinophone theory, I share a similar anxiety with Lim because this lurking phenomenon is reflected upon the actual publication of Sinophone research topics. Nonetheless, in his study, Lim argues that “the foregoing dramatists share an interest in problematizing essentialist notions of Chinese identity.”¹⁹ In other words, the key agenda of Lim’s dissertation is to examine how a

¹⁷ As mentioned earlier, in a strict sense, Rossella Ferrari’s *Transnational Chinese Theatres: Intercultural Performance Networks in East Asia* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020) should be the most recent publication focusing exclusively on Sinophone theatre. Although the author mentions the use of terminology in the text, she eventually locates her research scope within the framework of Chinese theatres in a transnational context.

¹⁸ Wah Guan Lim, “Performing ‘Chineseness’: Articulating Identities-Of-Becoming in the Works of Four Sinophone Theatre Director-Playwrights in the 1980s,” PhD diss., (Cornell University, 2015), 2.

¹⁹ Ibid., 2.

group of diasporic Chinese-speaking artists “problematize” the fixed definition of Chinese identity that is commonly associated with the ancestral root in mainland China.

As mentioned earlier, when discussing the transnational mobility of global Chinese literature, Jing Tsu and David Wang propose that a writer’s “nationality” cannot determine the aesthetic parameters of his or her writing. Nationality, in this context, is a direct reference to one’s identity as well. Therefore, an underlying question raised by Tsu and Wang’s account is whether we can transcend the linguistic barriers as we are exposed to various cultural products in the context of globalization. This unanswered question serves as a rationale for my investigation of global Sinophone theatre. As a result, this dissertation focuses not on how the works of these Sinophone artists challenge the debated identity politics—whether one is ethnically, cultural, linguistically, or legally Chinese—in the Chinese-speaking world. Rather, I want to explore how theatrical performance as a corporeal form of epistemology reconceptualized our understanding of cultural authenticity in the era of globalization. Can we resist the temptation to politicize non-Western performances that are perceived as the aesthetic avant-garde? This question, in fact, motivates me to select Gao Xingjian, Wu Hsing-kuo, and Edward Lam as the case studies of my dissertation because their works are normally described as the avant-garde reform of traditional Chinese cultures. Therefore, in the following, I would like to offer an introduction to Gao, Wu, and Lam regarding their biographical backgrounds and career paths.

The Swedish Academy, on 12 October 2000, officially reported that the recipient of that year’s Nobel Prize in Literature was the exiled Chinese novelist and

playwright, Gao Xingjian, who permanently left mainland China after 1987 and resettled in France as an individual form of protest against the Communist regime's oppressive policies. The unprecedented honor Gao received in 2000 has been marked as a watershed in the contemporary literary history of China because he was "the first Chinese" literary intellectual to become a Nobel laureate since 1901. However, harsh criticism of the Nobel committee's political intent and Gao's ideological stance from mainland China turned Gao's literary achievement from an individual milestone into a political controversy. For example, the Chinese Writers' Association accused the literature prize of being "used for its political purposes and thus lost authority"²⁰ and denounced Gao's literary reputation for winning the title because Gao has been considered as an unknown and second-rate writer in the mainland. The Foreign Ministry of China also took a similar stance and responded that "it is not worth commenting on [Gao's winning]"²¹ because the Swedish Academy is complicit with the overseas dissidents who always attempt to overthrow the Chinese government and undermine the stability of the Chinese society.

The controversy further intensified because of Gao's French citizenship and his stigmatized identity as a Chinese renegade. Compared to the enthusiastic reception of Gao's monumental achievement in other Sinitic communities (e.g., Taiwan and Hong Kong), the official media and governmental institutions in the

²⁰ Maya Jaggi. "Living without 'Isms.'" *The Guardian* (US Edition), 1 August 2008. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2008/aug/02/gao.xingjian>. Accessed on October 16, 2018.

²¹ Evan Osnos. "Mo Yan and China's Nobel Complex." *The New Yorker*, 11 October 2012. <https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/mo-yan-and-chinas-nobel-complex>. Accessed on October 12, 2018.

mainland have never publicly celebrated Gao's reputation as "the first Chinese" Nobel laureate in the Literature Prize.²² In other words, the presence of Gao's works is absent from the public sphere of mainland China because his legitimacy as a representative of "the Chinese" has been questioned and denied by the governmental institutions. Ironically, when Mo Yan, one of the current vice-chairs of the Chinese Writers' Association in the mainland, was awarded the same prize in 2012, the news channel of China Central Television (CCTV) proudly stated that "Mo Yan is the first Chinese person *still living in China* to win the prize for literature."²³ Although it is tenable to argue that the contrast between silence and celebration with respect to Gao and Mo is the direct result of the Communist regime's political manipulation, I would suggest that what truly deserves our critical attention with regard to the controversy is "the politics of recognition" and its political impact on the making of contemporary Chinese history.

The politics of recognition also demonstrate its impacts on the production of theatre and performance scholarship. For instance, in "Geographies of Learning: Theatre Studies, Performance, and the 'Performative,'" feminist theatre scholar Jill

²² It is said by the Hong Kong media press that the former Prime Minister of China, Zhu Rongji, used to congratulate Gao Xingjian on his winning of the prize in literature during a diplomatic visit to Japan in 2000 when answering questions proposed by the news reporters regarding his response to Gao's achievement. As Yuwu Song writes, Prime Minister Zhu said that "I am very happy that works written in Chinese can win the Nobel Prize in Literature Although *it's a pity that the winner this time is a French citizen instead of Chinese*, I still would like to send my congratulations both to the winner and the French Department of Culture" (94, emphasis added). The credibility of Zhu's statements remains dubious because the state media of China claimed that Zhu has never responded anything about Gao. For more information about this issue, please read Helier Cheung's news report titled "Nobel Laureate Gao Xingjian: I've Had Three Lives" on BBC, 22 November 2013. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-24952228>.

²³ "Live Signal: Mo Yan Receives Nobel Prize for Literature." *China Central Television (CCTV)*, 11 December 2012. <http://english.cntv.cn/program/newsupdate/20121211/100143.shtml>. The italicized words are my additional emphasis. Accessed on November 11, 2018.

Dolan insists that her commitment to “studying performance under the rubric of theatre studies comes from a keen awareness of the “the second-class status”²⁴ so many of our departments maintain their institutions. Dolan’s statement points out that the secondary status of theatre and performance studies in academic institutions alludes to the marginalized role of theatre and performance research with respect to knowledge production and contribution in academia. In other words, the spectral presence of theatre and performance scholars somehow reveals a biased attitude of perceiving theatre and performance studies as a less recognized field. Therefore, by analyzing the power structure embedded in the act of recognition, I would elucidate why a selected group of Sinophone theatre practitioners are simultaneously placed in an epistemological category where they are recognized as iconic figures either in North America or Europe but marginalized as avant-gardists whose theatrical works are mostly absent from the sight of the public both in the East and the West. Therefore, in addition to examining the theatre works of Gao Xingjian, I also discuss two case studies from Taiwan and Hong Kong respectively, including the intercultural *jingju* (Peking opera) performance of Taiwan’s Contemporary Legend Theatre and the postmodern gender parody of Hong Kong-based Edward Lam Dance Theatre.

Established in 1986, the Contemporary Legend Theatre (CLT) attempts to explore new possibilities of bridging the gap between traditional *jingju* aesthetics and contemporary Western dramaturgy. As the company’s leading performer and director,

²⁴ Jill Dolan, “Geographies of Learning: Theatre Studies, Performance, and the ‘Performative,’” *Theatre Journal* 45.4 (December 1993): 417-441. p. 424. Emphasis original.

Wu Hsing-kuo has successfully adapted several Shakespearean plays like *The Kingdom of Desire*, which is based on *Macbeth* and premiered in 1986. They have been staged in the form of traditional Chinese opera, and this emphasizes how the operatic repertoire becomes experimental when it is merged with the canonical works of Western theatre. Since the successful debut performance of *The Kingdom of Desire*, the CLC has been frequently invited to perform in a variety of theatre festivals such as Festival d'Avignon (1998), Asian Performing Arts Festival (2002), and The Edinburgh International Festival (2013). Although the experimental *jingju* aesthetics of the CLT is well-received during the overseas tours, the productions of the CLT are not enthusiastically applauded by the Taiwanese audience for two reasons. First, the company is more art-driven than market-driven in terms of commercial strategy. Although it is undeniable that Wu's reformed *jingju* performance aims to attract more young audience members who are relatively familiar with Western pop culture, it is also true that *jingju* as a genre is extremely marginalized in the market and therefore Wu's company can hardly survive without the financial support of both governmental and private institutions.²⁵ Second, the frustrating reception of Wu's repertoire in his homeland is further associated with ideological stance embodied by the practice of Peking opera in Taiwan.

²⁵ For example, in *Peking Opera and Politics in Taiwan* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2005), Nancy Guy points out that the Contemporary Legend Theatre "enjoyed strong support from grants awarded by the central government's Council for Cultural Planning and Development ... and several private organizations such as the Koo Foundation (*Gugongliang Wenjiao Jijinhui*) and the *China Times*" (31). In fact, the lack of proper funding also forced Wu to shut down the company once during the late 1990s.

It is the context of this reception that is of importance to my project. As Nancy Guy notes, the introduction of Peking opera to Taiwan and its development are closely tied to the shift of political regimes on the island. For example, when Taiwan was colonized by Japan (1895-1945), the performance of Peking opera in colonized Taiwan was perceived as a cultural paradigm that allowed the Taiwanese to “share a cultural bond with their mainland kinsmen.”²⁶ Later when the Nationalist Party was defeated by the Chinese Communist Party and retreated to the island in 1949, the exiled regime was determined to maintain its authority as the legitimate China through the promotion of Peking opera as China’s “national opera,” something they have done since the mid-1960s. In doing so, the Nationalist regime maintained “the exiled Mainlanders’ psychological and emotional ties to mainland China”²⁷ and strengthened Taiwanese people’s identification with the imagined homeland.

Ironically, when the international community established formal diplomatic relationships with the Communist Party in the mainland and denied the legitimacy of the Nationalist regime in Taiwan as the only representative of China since the 1970s, the rise of grassroots Taiwanese consciousness, at the same time, challenged the monolithic totality of a unified political and cultural China. Hence, the status of *jingju* theatre in Taiwan “evolved from a state-endorsed and well-funded theatre genre to one that was rejected by the majority of the Taiwanese people”²⁸ because the non-

²⁶ Nancy Guy, *Peking Opera and Politics in Taiwan* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2005), 16.

²⁷ Ibid., 74.

²⁸ Alexa Alice Joubin, *Chinese Shakespeares: Two Centuries of Cultural Exchange* (New York: Columbia University, 2009), 217.

native theatre genre has been perceived as a threat to the formation of Taiwanese identity and a proxy of Chinese chauvinism. I make reference to this particular example in order to highlight a key aspect of the focal point of my dissertation, namely “Chinese” as a loaded term is incapable of displaying the diversity of Sinitic theatrical performances outside the mainland.

In this regard, I suggest that the recognition of Wu’s hybrid aesthetics endorsed by the overseas audience members and theatre critics functions as an ironic contrast with the nearly invisible presence of the CLT in Taiwan. Resonating with Gao’s Nobel controversy, one might argue that the CLT’s precarious existence and ignored presence in Taiwan result from the debate of identity politics. However, in my dissertation I suggest that what needs to be carefully examined in Wu’s case is not whether his repertoire embodies chauvinistic Chineseness or represents a hegemonic cultural identity. Rather, the question my dissertation addresses here is how one might historicize the contribution of the CLT in a Sinophone context in a way that can tease out the interplay between the hybrid theatre aesthetics and the cultural landscapes of the Chinese-speaking world.

In terms of the recognition of a theatre maker’s achievement, the similar paradox of one being simultaneously present and absent could be found in Hong Kong theatre as well. Founded in 1991, Edward Lam Dance Theatre represents one of the most experimental and dynamic theatre troupes based in Hong Kong. As the company’s founder, Edward Lam (Lam Yick-wah in Cantonese pronunciation/Lin Yi-hua in Mandarin pronunciation) was born in Hong Kong and worked as a director and choreographer in West Europe from 1989 to 1995. Prior to the establishment of

his own theatre troupe, Lam was one of the founding members of Hong Kong's most iconic avant-garde theatre company in the 1980s: Zuni Icosahedron. The avant-garde spirit of Zuni, as Rozanna Lilley notes, is grounded in the artists' embodied practice of treating theatre as a medium to publicly address sensitive issues such as "Chinese democracy, critiques of British rules and emigration from Hong Kong."²⁹ Highly influenced by Zuni's artistic approach, Lam is interested in theatre's capacity for making critical intervention in the quotidian. Lam's productions often focus on issues that are usually taken for granted but lack serious reexamination on a daily basis. For example, gender politics and sexual taboos were the focal points of Lam's early works. In this case, Lam as a director constantly presented spectacles of staged gender parody aiming to establish "a self-defining history against the institutional and cultural stereotypes which afflict homosexual men in Hong Kong."³⁰ However, Lam's provocative aesthetics and sensitive topics in the early stage of his career often put him in a controversial position. When expressing his artistic vision, Lam emphasizes his belief in "cosmopolitanism" and the importance of examining critical issues on a larger global scale. That is, although Lam often discusses issues absent from the public sphere of Hong Kong society (e.g., homosexuality and female sexuality) on stage, he does not circumscribe these thematic debates within a specific geographical or cultural context. Instead, Lam frequently travels to mainland China, Macau, Taiwan and takes his productions on tour in these Chinese-speaking regions as well.

²⁹ Rozanna Lilley, *Staging Hong Kong: Gender and Performance in Transition* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1998), 91.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 108.

In doing so, he obtains opportunities to work with a variety of artists and host small-size workshops and roundtable forums, which allows him to exchange ideas with participants from different geographical locations.

Although Lam's touring theatre troupe has offered him access to different groups of audience population in the above-mentioned Sinitic communities, his contribution to the evolution of theatre practices in the pan-Chinese world remains relatively unnoticed in the academe and the industry for two reasons. First, in terms of artistic form, Lam's repertoire focuses not only on the verbal words articulated by the characters on stage, but, as Lam explains in an interview, he also pays more attention to the characters' emotional density externalized through bodily movement and interaction in a specific space.³¹ In other words, Lam conceptualizes his repertoire as "dance theatre" instead of the conventional style of Western spoken drama because he believes that the bodily gestures and kinesthetic movements of the actors on stage could convey nonverbal language as well. Thus, Lam's philosophical aesthetics potentially prevents him from being properly placed in any well-defined theatre genres.

Lam's resistance to "fixed categories" manifests the discrepancy between his theatre troupe and Zuni Theatre. For example, in terms of the contemporary Hong Kong theatre, Zuni's reputation is more iconic than Lam's troupe because of the

³¹ Edward Lam, "The 25th Anniversary of Edward Lam Dance Theatre: An Exclusive Interview of the Director." *YouTube*, 9 December 2016, 3:12-4:32. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tITV7ywnWik&t=494s>. Accessed on December 11, 2019. In this interview, Lam spoke Cantonese and the video is equipped with a subtitle in Mandarin Chinese. I summarize the key concept of Lam's response to the idea of "dance theatre" highlighted in the company's title, and then translate it into English.

founding father of Zuni, Danny Yung, whose mastery in minimalist stage design is widely acknowledged as the pioneer of avant-garde theatre in Hong Kong. Yung's aesthetics are often perceived as being radical because he boldly abandons the Aristotelian elements such as plot, character, and language. The productions of Zuni, in general, focus on "the careful repetition of images, gestures and words to create a metamorphosing network of associations designed to suggest arenas of social knowledge and feeling that are believed to be inarticulable."³² In contrast, Lam's stage aesthetics are considered less as avant-garde than as poetic or philosophical, largely because Lam is more interested in creating a "theatre of ideas" on stage. As a director, Lam wants the actors to "exhaust themselves"³³ through a series of choreography and techniques. For instance, during the rehearsals, Lam encourages the actors to deconstruct the linguistic patterns of their stage lines as a playful method to explore the rhythmic interplay between vocal sound and bodily movement. Furthermore, Lam's dramaturgy rejects the idea of having the audience "identify" with the status quo of the actors. Instead, Lam expects the audience to figure out their own interpretations of his productions because he believes that offering definite answers to the spectators is not a director's job. The stage, in Lam's point of view, is composed of a series of jigsaw puzzles fraught with information. The audience members, in this sense, are required to search for clues that can help them reorganize the fragmentary information presented by linguistic parody, gender reversal, and

³² Rozanna Lilley, *Staging Hong Kong: Gender and Performance in Transition* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1998), 91.

³³ *Ibid.*, 108.

repetitive movement etc. Although the political agendas of Lam's productions are thought-provoking to the local audience, Lam as a Hong Kong director is not well-received because his penchant for cosmopolitan subjects (i.e., the oppression of women in modern society) and experimental dramaturgy makes it difficult to locate Lam's works within the genealogy of either contemporary Hong Kong theatre or Chinese theatre because Lam's aesthetic approaches are inherently border-crossing.

Another reason Lam's contributions to the pan-Chinese world have not received much scholarly attention is that Lam's productions are usually perceived as more commercial-based than politics-driven. As a Hong Kong native who has witnessed and experienced the island's transition from the colonization of Britain to the reunification with mainland China, Lam seldom touches upon the sensitive debate of identity crisis in his productions. In fact, after the outbreak of the 2014 Hong Kong Protest (the Umbrella Revolution), the political conflict between the Beijing government and Hong Kong citizens has intensified the confrontational divide between the mainland and Hong Kong in terms of national identity. Since 2014, more and more Hong Kong locals, especially the young generation, tend to identify themselves as the Hong Kongese instead of the Chinese. In other words, Hong Kong people have begun to embrace a type of localized consciousness that celebrates a unique cultural identity exclusively rooted in the island. Such quasi-patriotism, to some extent, contradicts the cosmopolitan subject matter highlighted in most of Lam's theatre works.

The contradiction is not a result of Lam's indifference to the independent cultural sensibility of Hong Kong. As Kay Li has pointed out, Lam's productions

should be understood as a series of “ultralocal performances”³⁴ because Lam is always interested in exploring the local issues of Hong Kong as critical entry points to analyze the larger impact of globalization on the city, including emigration policy, education system, economic decline. Lam’s cosmopolitan orientation also influences his understanding of personal identity in a globalized urban city like Hong Kong. In a prologue of the CD version of his past production, *The Wild Life in the Fast Lane* (1996), Lam states: “As a Chinese, I am always upset that after a number of years, we have to go overseas. It may be involuntary, or upon careful consideration, but it is all for our future.”³⁵ At one level, Lam’s statement might be mistakenly read as his lament for the traumatic history of China in the twentieth century and his longing for a unified China. However, I suggest that Lam’s experience of studying abroad should be taken into consideration when we examine his statement. Therefore, I contend that Lam’s prologue is more like a response to the pervasive impact of Western modernity in a globalized world because his artistic experiment is in fact a fusion of Western dramaturgy and Eastern philosophy. In this sense, I would suggest that the presence of Edward Lam Dance Theatre could hardly be positioned as a local Hong Kong-based company because Lam’s troupe always communicate with a broader group of audience and practitioner in the Chinese-speaking world.

³⁴ Kay Li, “Performing the Globalized City: Contemporary Hong Kong Theatre and Global Connectivity,” *Asian Theatre Journal* 24.2 (Fall 2007): 440-469. p. 444.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 445.

1.3 Historicizing the Aesthetic Avant-Garde in Modern China

The biographical survey of the avant-garde theatre makers shows the ways in which they boldly embrace both Western and Chinese methods when putting their experimental aesthetics into practice. Conceptually, in the art history of contemporary China, terms like “the experimental” and “the avant-garde” are interchangeable when it comes to a series of pioneer art movements. However, since the avant-garde is loaded term in the modern history of Western arts, it is worth noting the historical development and impact of the avant-garde movements in mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong when the revolutionary thinking and pioneer cultural production were introduced from the West to the Sinophone world since the beginning of the twentieth century.

In *The Wall: Reshaping Contemporary Chinese Art*, curator Gao Minglu provides a comprehensive introduction to the historical trajectories of contemporary Chinese avant-garde art. The contemporary refers to the last three decades in the twentieth century when PRC awakened from the nightmare of the Cultural Revolution and implemented the economic reform policies after the 1970s. Significantly, Gao’s analysis of the avant-garde in the art history of PRC highlights the similarities and differences between the historical avant-garde of the West and the transformational avant-garde of the Chinese. First, the temporal specificity of the avant-garde has a different connotation in the Chinese context. As Gao writes, in mainland China, “different periods all use different words to replace ‘modernity’ (現代性 *xiandaixing*), for example ‘New Wave’ (新潮 *xinchao*), ‘Avant-Garde’ (前衛

qianwei or 先鋒 *xiangfeng*), ‘experimental’ (實驗 *shiyan*).³⁶ Despite the variety of terminology, these replacements are all tied to the pervasive impact of modernity transported from the West. Second, the conceptual interpretation of the avant-garde is historically contingent in the Chinese context. For instance, Gao examines how the English translation of “modern Chinese art” in the context of Chinese exhibitions often creates a conceptual gap between the Western audiences and the Chinese audiences. Specifically, Gao mentions:

The various uses of the term “avant-garde” by Chinese artists over the last two decades [1980s-2000s] become a part of Chinese contemporary art history in and of itself. In the 1980s, the understanding of the Chinese artists was that modern is avant-garde, and vice versa. The moment when art critics and artists formally and consistently start using the term “avant-garde” is from the *China/Avant-Garde Exhibition* in Beijing in February 1989. However, the English and Chinese titles of the exhibition are different. The English title of *China/Avant-Garde* was translated from the original Chinese title *Zhongguo Xiandai Yishuzhan*, which in English literally means “Chinese Modern Art Exhibition.” Modern art for a Western audience would mean the modernism of the first half of the twentieth century. But in the Chinese context, ‘modern’ and “avant-garde” were the same thing. Moreover, from the moment Chinese artists and critics began using this term [avant-garde], its meaning was already different from the earlier meaning derived from Euro-

³⁶ Minglu Gao, *The Wall: Reshaping Contemporary Chinese Art* (Buffalo: Timezone 8/Buffalo Fine Arts Academy, 2006), 43.

American modernism: the separation between aesthetics and politics implied by that earlier meaning was replaced in China by a unity of the aesthetic and the social.³⁷

In this case study, Gao utilizes the 1989 China/Avant-Garde Exhibition held in Beijing as an instance to discuss how the translation of “the avant-garde” makes an intervention in the conceptual understanding of art periodization in the Chinese context. Particularly, I think that Gao’s account of the paradigm shift deserves more discussion. As he argues, the meaning of the avant-garde in China has transitioned from the split between the aesthetic and the political to a combination of the aesthetic and the social. This conceptual and artistic transformation of the meaning of the avant-garde in PRC alludes to the dynamic role of art in the formation of social structure. If the European avant-garde³⁸ represented a total negation of the socially isolated taste of the bourgeois, perhaps the Chinese artistic avant-garde provides an alternative lens of analysis when we reconsider the intertwined relationships between art and society.

While the historical trajectory of the Chinese avant-garde is thought-provoking, I suggest that it is equally important to examine whether the cultural

³⁷Ibid., 44-45.

³⁸ In *The Theory of Avant-Garde*, Peter Bürger examines a series of artistic avant-garde movements (e.g., Dadaism) appearing in Europe at the beginning of the twentieth century. As its etymological root suggests, the military spirit embedded in the avant-garde designates a metaphor of “being ahead.” Historically, the early 20th century avant-garde(s) in Europe are commonly understood as the first wave avant-garde in the West or the European avant-garde. According to Bürger, the European avant-garde(s) could be defined as “an attack on the status of art in bourgeois society. The avant-gardists view its dissociation from the praxis of life as the dominant characteristic of art in bourgeois society” (49). Therefore, the European avant-garde movements were aggressive because they aimed to make art connect to people’s everyday life. Their attack on the taste of the bourgeois showed that art praxis had been confined to places that were distant from the public, such as galleries and museums.

transaction between the avant-garde campaigns in the West and those in the Chinese is one-sided. In other words, we should ask: Are the artistic avant-garde movements in the Chinese context merely a copy of the Western tradition? In fact, several scholars have expressed skeptical attitudes towards the Eurocentric narratives of the history of the avant-garde. For instance, in the introduction of *Not the Other Avant-Garde: The Transnational Foundations of Avant-Garde Performance*, the editors James Harding and John Rouse propose that “the term *avant-garde* is less fixed than in flux, and its contested status invites a discussion about whether the avant-garde is fundamentally and ideologically tied to a Eurocentric cultural sensibility or whether the existing histories of the avant-garde have privileged a Eurocentric framing of practices that were always already present in a variety of unacknowledged forms across the spectrum of world cultures.”³⁹

Harding and Rouse’s remarks on the contested nature of a Eurocentric avant-garde history opens up a discursive space for diversity. Importantly, their introductory chapter also emphasizes the role of performance in the production of the avant-garde histories across different global cultures. Resonating with the two editors, I would add that the same issue also exists in the current scholarship dealing with the Chinese avant-garde. For example, performance as a form of “live art” is absent from Gao Minglu’s historical survey of the contemporary Chinese avant-garde because the focal point of his study is the development of conceptual art in modern China. Although it is fair to argue that the research focus of Gao’s work is gallery exhibition, we still

³⁹ James Harding and John Rouse eds., “Introduction,” in *Not the Other Avant-Garde: The Transnational Foundations of Avant-Garde* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2006), 3.

need to acknowledge the lack of discussion when it comes to the avant-garde history of Chinese theatre and performance.

1.4 Remapping the Trajectory of Theatrical Reform Movements in Modern China

Unlike the tradition of Western theatrical dramaturgy, traditional Chinese theatre (*xiqu* in Mandarin Chinese) is an operatic form combining “speech, songs, dance, and acrobatic combat.”⁴⁰ The elegance and harmony embodied through *xiqu* actors’ physical choreography, bodily gestures, and vocal techniques consolidate the status of traditional Chinese opera as the most iconic theatrical genre in Chinese civilization. The prestigious reputation of *xiqu* as a crystallized form of Chinese theatre is further endorsed by the unprecedented popularity of *xiqu* actor Mei Lanfang’s international tours in Japan, the United States, and the Soviet Union during the first half of the twentieth century. For example, as the first Chinese *xiqu* actor who brought the exquisite repertoire to Broadway in 1930, Mei profoundly impressed his New York audience by the sophisticated impersonation of female characters on stage. When delivering a speech in a farewell party on March 22, Mei thanked his sponsors for helping him accomplish the U.S. tour and stated that the primary goal of his American performance series “was and is to promote a closer and more sympathetic understanding between your people and mine, through the medium of the stage.”⁴¹ In this sense, the sensational success of Mei’s performance in the United

⁴⁰ Kevin J. Wetmore, Siyuan Liu, and Erin B. Mee, *Modern Asian Theatre and Performance 1900-2000* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 76.

⁴¹ *New York Times*, 1923. “Mei Lanfang Praises American Cordiality: A Farewell Dinner to His Sponsors He Ascribes Reception to Our Amity Toward China,” March 23, 1930. ProQuest Historical Newspapers. Accessed on February 10, 2021.

States seemed to grant him the role as a Chinese cultural ambassador who promoted the visibility of Chinese theatre in the international stage. On the other hand, the domestic reception of Mei's overseas success deserves more critical attention with regard to the political agendas embedded in Chinese theatre.

Although Mei was the first Chinese *xiqu* actor who conquered the mainstream stage in New York and was well-received for his superb acting of female roles, Mei's iconic portrayal of staged femininity was severely criticized by his Chinese colleagues because his symbolic representation of "a feminized China" on stage disgraced his country and his fellows, which added "not glory but shame to the Chinese nation by allegedly projecting China as a socially and culturally weak and effeminate nation."⁴² In fact, such a gender-based criticism on *xiqu* performance was highly associate with the birth of modern Chinese spoken drama at the beginning of the twentieth century when Sun Yat-sen and his comrades overthrew the rotten government of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) that directly transformed China into a Republican country on January 1, 1912. Undoubtedly, one of the main reasons that the revolutionary intellectuals and the supporters of Sun wanted to overthrow the Qing regime was their passionate desire for the country's modernization project. Since 1912, a group of young Chinese intellectuals who used to study abroad (mostly in Japan or the United States) consciously and actively had launched a series of political and social campaigns aiming to achieve a cultural reform, and the waves of revolution reached the peak when the May Fourth Movement (New Culture

⁴² Min Tian, *Mei Lanfang and the Twentieth-Century International Stage: Chinese Theatre Placed and Displaced* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 77.

Movement) was promoted and celebrated from 1915 to 1919 by the radical intellectuals.

Among these revolutionary young intellectuals, Hu Shi (1891-1962) was a pioneer who introduced and translated the plays of Henrik Ibsen to the Chinese readers and theatregoers. As a cultural reformer, Hu argued that the old Confucius customs and strict moral principles should be abandoned because society had to embrace scientific progression and logical thinking. Particularly, Hu worshiped the rebellious attitudes carried by the characters in Ibsen's plays because their struggles resonate with the moral constraints Hu observed in the context of China's Confucius society. As a radical thinker who used to study at Cornell University, Hu advocated replacing "old [Chinese] forms to better express new [Westernized] contents."⁴³ Specifically, Hu suggested that traditional Chinese opera (*xiqu*) ought to be replaced by modern spoken drama (*huaju*) for two reasons. First, the verse lyrics sung and articulated by the *xiqu* actors were perceived as an outdated mode of linguistic utterance that hindered the audience from understanding the semantic meaning smoothly. In fact, as part of the New Culture Movement, Hu's advocate of substituting "vernacular" language for the common usage of verse language in Chinese society had a monumental impact on the production of modern Chinese cultural products such as literature and drama. The liberation of language barriers successfully helped playwrights and performers articulate specific political messages embedded in their works and communicated with the audiences in a relatively

⁴³ Xiaomei Chen ed, *The Columbia Anthology of Modern Chinese Drama* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 5.

straightforward manner because people belonging to the lower class (e.g., peasant) before the Republican era had limited access to formal education. Thus, the fluency in verse language, to some extent, was often perceived as a privilege of the wealthy class. The promotion of prose language in playwrighting and theatrical performance, in this sense, potentially erased the boundary between the highbrow and the lowbrow.

Second, in his justification of Ibsen's works, Hu characterized the Norwegian playwright as a "realist" who "demonstrates how the family and society have actually deteriorated to such an extent that everybody feels that there must be a reform," which Hu named "Ibsenism."⁴⁴ The idea of Ibsenism, to Erika Fischer-Lichte, accounts for the cultural export of Ibsen's plays to several non-Western cultures in the early twentieth century, including Japan, Korea, and China. In "Interweaving Theatre Cultures in Ibsen Productions," Fischer-Lichte characterizes the cross-cultural transportation of Ibsen's social plays (e.g., *A Doll's House*) to both Western and non-Western cultural contexts in the early twentieth century as a form of interweaving theatre culture in a global scale. Particularly, Fischer-Lichte justifies the reason why she insists on using the term "interweaving" instead of "intercultural" to describe the theatrical encounters between different cultures because "intercultural" as a loaded term "presupposes the feasibility of clearly recognizing the cultural origins of each theatrical elements and distinguishing between what is 'ours' and what is 'theirs.'"⁴⁵ Based on Fischer-Lichte's conceptualization of interweaving

⁴⁴ Elisabeth Eide, "Hu Shi: 'Ibsenism,'" in *China's Ibsen: From Ibsen to Ibsenism* (London: Curzon Press, 1987), 165.

⁴⁵ Erika Fischer-Lichte, "Interweaving Cultures in Ibsen Productions," *Ibsen Studies* 8.2 (2008): 93-111. p. 98. Emphasis original.

theatre culture, I would suggest that Hu's theoretical discourse of Ibsenism in China could be understood as an example of interweaving theatrical process because the introduction of Ibsen's social plays to China at the beginning of the last century seemed to comfortably erase the boundary between what Chinese tradition is and what European culture is. Specifically, at this point, I would like to analyze a one-act play titled *The Main Event in Life* and written by Hu as an example to illustrate why the political agendas carried by Ibsen's social plays were passionately embraced by the May Fourth intellectuals and impeccably compatible with the Chinese social and political contexts during the first decade of the twentieth century.

Published in 1919, *The Main Event in Life* is a comic satire of the conservative Chinese values on marriage. Set in the living of a middle-class Chinese family, Hu's play concentrates on the conflict between the protagonist's (Miss Tian Yamei) insistence on her freedom of choice and her parents' stubborn belief in Chinese tradition. When the story of *The Main Event in Life* unfolds, the first major event is that Yamei's mother, Mrs. Tian, is having serious conversations with a fortune-teller regarding Yamei's fiancé candidate, Mr. Chen. According to Mrs. Tian, it is her duty as a parent to ask for the oracles from different gods because marriage is "the greatest event in [her] daughter's life."⁴⁶ After examining the biographical information (e.g., Chinese zodiac sign) of Mr. Chen, the fortune-teller directly confirms that Yamei would die earlier than Mr. Chen because the fate of Yamei's marriage is doomed if Yamei insists on marrying Mr. Chen. Ironically, the

⁴⁶ Xiaomei Chen ed, *The Columbia Anthology of Modern Chinese Drama* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 58.

unfortunate news does not surprise Mrs. Tian at all because she got the same answer from the goddess Guanyin before consulting the fortune-teller. Feeling satisfied with the oracles, Mrs. Tian continues to persuade Yamei of the “fact” that Mr. Chen is not her doomed mate. However, Mrs. Tian’s obsession with the supernatural further prevents Yamei from accepting the idea of an arranged marriage. The tension between Yamei and Mrs. Tian becomes softer when Yamei’s father, Mr. Tian appears on stage and joins the conversations. Knowing that Mrs. Tian has consulted the fortune-teller, Mr. Tian expresses his dissatisfaction with Mrs. Tian’s superstitious behavior, claiming that they cannot decide their daughter’s further happiness based on the religious interpretations because “[t]his business of plaster bodhisattvas and fortune-telling is all just a swindle.”⁴⁷ Upon hearing her father’s critique of Chinese religious superstition, Yamei finally breathes a sigh of relief and believes that Mr. Tian is in solidarity with her. Surprisingly, after condemning his wife, Mr. Tian turns to Yamei immediately and urges his daughter not to marry Mr. Chen because their surnames (Chen and Tian) used to be written in the same way two thousand years ago. Therefore, based on the family tradition, Yamei is not allowed to marry Mr. Chen since such an act is perceived as a shame on her entire family. At the end of the play, Yamei bluntly disobeys her parents’ wish and chooses to elope with Mr. Chen without hesitation.

When it comes to the dramatic text, it is arguably fair to contend that *The Main Event in Life* is a condensed one-act version of Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House* set in a Confucius Chinese society. First, Hu’s mini play also focuses on the struggling role

⁴⁷ Ibid., 62.

of women in marriage and the repressive patriarchy system. Second, Hu directly imitates Ibsen's dramaturgy when he designs the moment of Yamei's elopement with Mr. Chen as the final solution to the dramatic conflict. Hence, *The Main Event in Life* could be read as Hu's severe critique of the conservative moral values pervading in Chinese society. Although it is widely acknowledged that Hu's play focuses on female agency and liberation when Chinese women were frequently treated as being secondary to their male counterparts, I would like to further tease out the problematic political agendas embedded in the seemingly liberal discourses articulated in *The Main Event in Life*. As mentioned earlier, I suggest that Hu's play could be potentially understood as a case study of what Fisher-Lichte calls "interweaving theatre" because the cross-cultural encounter between Ibsen's Norway and Hu's China are not mutually exclusive. In this sense, the dramaturgy of Hu's play resonates with Fisher-Lichte's argument that all interweaving theatre cultures are "political processes" because "every performance [in the process of interweaving theatrical exchange] creates both an aesthetic and political situation" that requires "two groups people meet and negotiate their relationship."⁴⁸ In other words, when *A Doll's House* was translated into Mandarin Chinese and performed on the Chinese stage, the Chinese audience encountered the opposite way of thinking when they read or witnessed Nora's door-slamming scene. At this point, the foreign culture serves as a reflective mirror projecting the social problems existing in the local society. Interestingly, when the Chinese audience read or performed Hu's *The Main Event in*

⁴⁸ Erika Fischer-Lichte, "Interweaving Cultures in Ibsen Productions," *Ibsen Studies* 8.2 (2008): 93-111. p. 100.

Life, it turned out to be that the spectators further noticed the similarities between both cultures because the lack of female autonomy in society was a shared dilemma for both parties.

Although Hu's play is an outspoken text directly addressing Chinese gender politics, in *Occidentalism: A Theory of Counter-Discourse in Post-Mao China*, Chinese theatre scholar Chen Xiaomei insightfully reminds us that it is necessary to clarify the "political orientation" behind the cultural products made or introduced by the May Fourth intellectuals in the Republican era. As Chen writes, both the West and women's liberation were appropriated by the May Fourth generation "as a strong anti-official statement against the Confucian tradition."⁴⁹ Therefore, what Chen critiques here is that the May Fourth playwrights did not fully concentrate on neither the dramatic structure of Western theatre nor Chinese women's autonomy. Instead, the Chinese playwrights were truly interested in "rebellious spirit" embedded in Ibsen's social plays. In other words, the Chinese male intellectuals "borrowed" Ibsen's dramatic style as a power weapon to fight against Confucianism. Therefore, following Chen's analysis, I would propose that the political orientation of Hu's play is not simply based on gender politics but more on "cultural politics." That is, "May Fourth domestic sons rebelled against their Confucian fathers by attempting to liberate their sisters from their domestic fathers" through the assistance of "a new surrogate father—Western imported tradition—which included its own form of patriarchal domination of women."⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Xiaomei Chen, *Occidentalism: A Theory of Counter-Discourse in Post-Mao China*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2002), 132.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 132.

Chinese spoken drama (*huaaju*) is often introduced to Anglophone readers as modern Chinese drama because the emergence of this genre was highly influenced by the dialogue-based tradition of Western theatre. Indeed, in Madeiran Chinese, “*hua*” refers to “spoken language” and “*ju*” means “drama.”⁵¹ Although modern Chinese drama is the outcome of cultural import from the West, several theatre historians have pointed out that the first production of modern Chinese spoken drama is dated to 1907 when a group of Chinese overseas students performed a Sinicized adaption of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* in Tokyo, Japan.⁵² Hence, it is worth noting that the concept of viewing Chinese spoken drama as a Westernized form of theatre, to some extent, is oversimplified. Undoubtedly, the May Fourth intellectuals translated a variety of Western classic plays into Chinese and introduced them to the Chinese readers and audiences. However, what needs to be highlighted here is that the Westernization of Chinese modern drama was not a “direct” import from the Western countries but a mediated import from Japan. In the last century, Japan was the first country that went through the so-called modernization and industrialization during the period of Meiji Restoration (1868-1912). Since then, Japan had become a model of imitation for many of its adjacent countries, and China was not an exception. Commenting on Japan’s influence on the formation of Chinese modern spoken drama, Mackerras suggests that theatre is of great importance in Chinese history

⁵¹ Xiaomei Chen, *Acting the Right Part: Political Theater and Popular Drama in Contemporary China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2002), 17.

⁵² The play title is called *The Black Slave’s Cry to Heaven*. The Chinese students organized a drama club named “The Spring Willow Society,” and their dramatic style was inspired by the westernized performance of Japanese “new school drama” (*shinpa*). For more information, please see Mackerras 2008: 2.

because of two distinct features. First, Chinese theatre as a social institution is “highly politicized” because it aims to “[affect] society as a whole.”⁵³ Second, Chinese theatre as a cultural practice often struggles with the tension between “a largely foreign-inspired change and a continuity driven by strong indigenous tradition.”⁵⁴ As a matter of fact, the two features highlighted by Mackerras could be verified through the historical trajectory of the twentieth-century Chinese theatre after the May Fourth Movement.

For example, theatre historian Liu Siyuan revisits the so-called China’s National Theatre Movement from 1925 to 1926⁵⁵ and focuses on how a new generation of Chinese theatre intellectuals responded to the cultural legacy of the May Fourth Movement. According to Liu, Zhao Taimou and Yu Shangyuan were the two pioneering figures who devoted themselves to the National Theatre Movement, and they both advocated a brand-new form of theatrical performance combining the advantages of both traditional Chinese theatre and Western modern theatre. Specifically, Chinese national theatre appreciates “the aesthetics and formal merits of traditional Chinese theatre that should be utilized in *huaqu*” and emphasizes “the Western modernist desire to learn from Asian performance in their efforts to combat

⁵³ Colin Mackerras, “Tradition, Change, and Continuity in Chinese Theatre in the Last Hundred Years: In Commemoration of the Spoken Drama Centenary,” *Asian Theatre Journal* 25.1 (Spring 2008): 1-23. p. 2.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁵⁵ See Siyuan Liu, “The Cross Currents of Modern Theatre and China’s National Theatre Movement of 1925-1926,” *Asian Theatre Journal* 33.1 (Spring 2016): 1-35. According to Liu, the Movement took place from June 1925 to September 1926.

stagnant realism and naturalism.”⁵⁶ In other words, Chinese national theatre preserves the aesthetics of traditional Chinese theatre and maintains a strong Western modernist pursuit for the breakdown of theatrical illusion. Hence, Yu particularly rejected the worship of Ibsen and the playwright’s iconic reputation promoted by the May Fourth generation because he insisted that the inspiration of Chinese national theatre should be rooted in the tradition of Chinese theatrical culture instead of the idolatry of Ibsen.

After the Cultural Revolution, the publication of Gao Xingjian’s *Absolute Signal* (1982) and *The Bus Stop* (1983) brought Western ideologies and politics back to the Chinese stage in the 1980s. Gao’s early plays were often characterized as the Sinicized version of Western avant-garde theatre. Particularly, Gao was influenced by Bertolt Brecht’s theory of the alienation effect and inspired by the artistic style of the Theatre of the Absurd. However, Gao also developed his directorial theory based on his analyses of traditional *xiqu* performance. For example, Gao proposes the concept of “neutral actor” when observing and analyzing the acting preparation of Chinese *xiqu* actors. To Gao, “Western performance theories have only ever talked about a twofold relationship: that of the actor and the role.”⁵⁷ In this regard, Gao points out that the neutral actor refers to the transitional moment when an actor “must cleanse himself of the individual he is in normal life.”⁵⁸ In Gao’s case, the fusion of Chinese theatre tradition and the experimental dramaturgy of Western avant-garde theatre further exemplifies Mackerras’s argument that modern Chinese theatre in the

⁵⁶ Siyuan Liu, *Performing Hybridity in Colonial-Modern China* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 2-3.

⁵⁷ Gao Xingjian, “Another Kind of Theatre,” in *The Case for Literature*, trans. Mabel Lee (New Heaven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007), 157.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 157.

twentieth century was constantly caught between Chinese tradition and Western modernity.

1.5 Dissertation Structure and Chapter Outlines

Framing Gao Xingjian, Wu Hsing-kuo, and Edward Lam as a group of Sinophone artists, I would like to highlight their shared Sinitic cultural background as a critical source of their artistic creation. Examining the ways in which they appropriate and reinvent the avant-garde tradition of the West, this project adopts the methodology of both theatre historiography and critical theory. Additionally, I also use digital archive sources (e.g., Late Qing and Republican-Era Chinese Newspaper digital archive), performance reviews, videorecording of the productions, autobiography, dramatic plays, newspaper entries as points of reference for my analyses. More importantly, I also incorporate academic scholarship from the PRC, Taiwan, and Hong Kong into my examination of the three artists' aesthetic styles. In doing so, this dissertation also places Sinophone scholarship and Anglophone scholarship in dialogue.

The first chapter of this dissertation provides an overview of the theoretical foundations of Sinophone studies and the practical applications of the Sinophone critique. While appreciating the value of current scholarship on Sinophone studies, I argue that Scholars like Shu-mei Shi focus too much on the presence and absence of “China” in the cultural production of Sinitic-language communities. Rather than positioning the Sinophone as the antithesis of the Chinese, in this dissertation, I develop a concept called the Sinophone theatre network where a group of theatre practitioners and performance artists absorb elements from Chinese artistic traditions

and use these materials to experiment with new aesthetic possibilities. Through their border-crossing collaborations, the selected three artists show that the presence of China is not necessarily an obstacle to their sense of cultural identification. Instead, what motivates these theatre practitioners to produce experimental works is their vanguard pursuit of redefining, reconceptualizing, and reinventing the ways Chineseness is displayed and performed in everyday life.

Chapter two revisits the legacy of French playwright Gao Xingjian's avant-garde theatre practices in the PRC and other Sinitic communities (e.g., Taiwan). By challenging the myth of attributing Gao's artistic accomplishments to the triumph of his individual talents, I argue that many scholars tend to overlook the impacts of his collaborations with other Chinese-speaking artists on the development of his dramatic theories and directorial styles. Drawing attention to Gao's partnership with Chinese theatre director Lin Zhaohua, I suggest that Lin's dramaturgical approaches and directorial experimentation play a vital role in the formation of Gao's aesthetic innovations such as the concept of Cold Theatre and the notion of omnipotent acting. Using the stage production of *Snow in August* (2002) as a case study, I examine the aesthetic politics of Gao's touring production in Taipei and investigate the collaborative interaction between Gao and artists from mainland China, Taiwan, and France. In doing so, I contend that many theatre critics and performance scholars tend to passionately share positive feedback or inexplicitly express gentle criticism because Gao's Nobel glory misleads us to believe that only "success" can secure the radical promise guaranteed by the avant-garde.

Chapter three analyzes the demise of Peking opera in Taiwan through the lens of Wu Hsing-kuo's avant-garde *jingju*. After the Nationalist government retreated to Taiwan in 1949, Peking opera performance used to be elevated to a national icon representing the legitimacy of the Nationalist regime in Taiwan and the continuation of authentic Chinese culture. Along with the denial of the Republic of China's sovereignty in the 1970s, people in Taiwan tend to identify with local cultures as opposed to those "imported" from the Chinese mainland. Therefore, *jingju* performance becomes a scapegoat of the anti-China sentiment in Taiwan. With this background in mind, Wu Hsing-kuo and his troupe members reinvent the tradition of Peking opera by fusing its performance methods with dramatic canon (e.g., Greek tragedy) from the West in the hope of revitalizing the development of *jingju* in Taiwan. Through the analysis of Wu's collaboration with American avant-garde director Richard Schechner, I argue that their intercultural production *Oresteia* (1995) not only exposes the issues of cultural chauvinism but also reminds us of the intertwined relationship between avant-garde practices and the pursuit of patronage.

Chapter four illuminates the dialectical relationship between the avant-garde and the popular through the lens of Edward Lam's experimental theatre. Known for his passionate interest in devised theatre and improvisation, and linguistic parody, Edward Lam has never shied away from making the taboo subjects (e.g., homosexuality, nudity, and scandal of the celebrities) present on stage. Although Lam's avant-garde reputation is built upon his embrace of the social taboo in Hong Kong society, the director is more concerned about the affinities and differences between the past and the present, the traditional and the modern, and the conservative

as well as the proactive. In this regard, Lam often draws inspirations from classic Chinese literature and uses them as critical points of departure to help his audience ruminate on modern people's sense of loss and lack of satisfaction. Focusing on Lam's stage production *What Is Man?* (2006), I analyze how Lam deconstructs the stereotypical image of masculinity in both traditional and modern Chinese societies and argue that Lam's collaboration with artists from the global Sinophone communities proves that the avant-garde and the popular are not mutually exclusive but coexist with each other.

I conclude this dissertation by suggesting that future scholarship should continue to explore the aesthetic possibilities of the Sinophone theatre network because it shows that theatre and performance facilitate a border-crossing platform where Sinophone artists can reimagine creative ways of communication and collaboration without the disruptions of identity politics. Meanwhile, I acknowledge that the selected case studies discussed in this dissertation are mostly about the experiences of male practitioners. Thus, I believe that future endeavors should be devoted to the works of Sinophone female artists.

Chapter Two

The Art of Isolation: Gao Xingjian and His Theatre of Distance

The avant-gardes activated formal ruptures in the present and at the same time produced—in the form of manifestos and declarations—the rhetorical envelope for that activation. They produced the envelopment of a real present in a fictive future. And they called this double production “new artistic experience.”

—Alain Badiou, *The Century*⁵⁹

How do we identify the aesthetic politics of avant-garde theatre when it is devoid of an impetus for social change? This chapter examines French artist Gao Xingjian’s avant-garde theatre aesthetics with a particular focus on his collaborations with practitioners and performers from Greater China⁶⁰ and the global Sinophone communities. In doing so, the focus of my analysis, in this chapter, is not about how Gao Xingjian’s pursuit of a highly individualized form of aesthetic experimentation justifies his call for the depoliticization of artistic creation. Instead, through a close reading and analysis of the historical materials related to Gao’s biographical records, the development of China’s artistic avant-garde movements in the twentieth century,

⁵⁹ Alain Badiou, *The Century*, trans. Alberto Toscano (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2007), 139.

⁶⁰ Greater China as a geopolitical designation is widely used in the context of a pan-Chinese community, including the permanent residents in the PRC, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Macao, and the members of Chinese descent in Malaysia and Singapore. Although the definition of this term remains in flux, in this chapter and that follows, I use “Greater China” and “Chinese-speaking regions” interchangeably without any political engagements related to the debates over national identity, territorial sovereignty, or ideological divides. As Sheldon H. Lu has suggested in *Chinese Modernity and Global Biopolitics: Studies in Literature and Visual Culture* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2007), “Greater China is not necessarily a monolithic, colonial, oppressive geopolitical entity, or an intrinsically conservative concept” because the Sinophone “margins” outside the mainland should not be automatically positioned as counterhegemonic sites (163). Similar to Liu’s argumentation, my employment of terms like Greater China and the Sinophone, in this chapter per se and the dissertation at large, pays more attention to how cultural products circulate instead of how power mechanisms operate in the Sinophone world, thus rejecting the temptation of perceiving the PRC as a pure oppressive state apparatus.

and Gao's touring theatre productions, I argue that the previous scholarship on Gao's work tends to overemphasize the aspect of his individual talent and that of his avant-garde exploration of alternative aesthetic forms and styles, thus overlooking the aspect of his team collaborations with artists with diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. In doing so, this chapter directs our attention back to Gao's identity as a theatre practitioner instead of a literary writer. Methodologically, through the lens of theatre historiography, I recontextualize the sociopolitical connotations of Gao's dramatic plays and theatrical productions along with my comparative study of China's artistic avant-garde campaigns in the Republic era (1912-1949) and the People's Republic era (1949-the present). With the help of this historiographical approach, this chapter suggests that Gao's experimental theatre aesthetics developed in the 1980s should not be marked as the beginning of China's avant-garde theatre in the twentieth century. Instead, Gao's pursuit of a distance-based avant-garde theatre is in conversation with his Shanghai theatre predecessors in the Republican era.

What draws my attention to the controversial legacy of Gao Xingjian's avant-garde theatre and its impact on the history of modern Chinese theatre in the twentieth century is my reading of two pieces of Chinese newspaper articles from China's *Guangming Daily*⁶¹ and *The Beijing News*⁶² respectively. Both articles provide an

⁶¹ He Lulu and Lou Xue, "小剧场风雨三十年" [The Ups and Downs of Litter Theatre in the Past 30 Years], *Guangming Daily* (Beijing, China), December 24, 2012. The full text is available on https://epaper.gmw.cn/gmrb/html/2012-12/24/nw.D110000gmrb_20121224_1-14.htm. Accessed on December 11, 2018.

⁶² Chen Ren, "小剧场三十年，先锋变多元" [From the Avant-Garde to the Diverse: Little Theatre in the Past 30 Years], *The Beijing News* (Beijing, China), September 24, 2012. The full text is available on http://epaper.bjnews.com.cn/html/2012-09/24/content_375245.htm?div=0. Accessed on December 11, 2018.

overview of the historical development of China's Little Theatre Movements from the 1980s to the 2010s, but their historical points of departure are different. For instance, published by *Guangming Daily*, He Lulu and Lou Xue's article clearly indicate that the 1982 premiere of the play *Absolute Signal* in Beijing People's Art Theatre was the genesis of China's Little Theatre⁶³ Movements and suggest that the show's director Lin Zhaohua 林兆華 is one of the most prominent avant-garde directors in the history of modern Chinese theatre. Although their statements are historically accurate, what is missing here is that *Absolute Signal* was written by Gao Xingjian and the stage version of this play was the product of Gao Xingjian and Lin Zhaohua's collaboration. In other words, a blind spot in this article is that Gao Xingjian's contribution to the growth of the Little Theatre Movements in the PRC is *absent* and *erased*.

Published in *The Beijing News*, Chen Ren's essay also positions the 1982 performance of *Absolute Signal* in Beijing as the signature event in the history of contemporary Chinese experimental theatre. Nevertheless, the significant difference between these two newspaper articles is that Chen does not consider Lin Zhaohua and Gao Xingjian's groundbreaking piece as the genesis of avant-garde theatre practices in modern China. Instead, Chen argues that the dramatic plays and productions of Tian Han 田漢 (1898-1968) and Tian's participation in the establishment of several

⁶³ In the PRC, the term "little theatre" (*xiao juchang* 小劇場) in Chinese usually refers to the work of theatre troupes or individual theatre artists whose aesthetic styles and performance methods are experimental. Therefore, little theatre and experimental theatre are used interchangeably in the scholarly and public discourses. For more information, please see Ding Luonan, "Examining Experimental Theater in Contemporary China," trans. Nienyuan Cheng, *Chinese Literature Today* Vol. 8.2 (2019): 45-51.

experimental theatre workshops and performance troupes⁶⁴ in Shanghai during the Republican era constitutes the foundation of modern China's search for alternative aesthetic expressions in theatre. Therefore, for Chen, the experimental theatre practices in the 1980s is more like an aesthetic revival of Tian Han's legacy in the 1930s. In contrast, from He and Lou's perspective, theatre artists in the 1980s initiated pioneer campaigns for aesthetic reform and experimental dramaturgy. In this regard, they contend that, from the early 1980s to the present, the Little Theatre Movements have remained a vibrant and dynamic form of artistic creation in the cultural landscape of modern China.

Although these authors offer lucid accounts of the development of China's experimental theatre from the twentieth century to the present, as a theatre and performance scholar, I am not so concerned about debates over the "origin" of either the avant-garde or the experimental theatre in contemporary China. On the contrary, my intellectual inquiry in this chapter derives from the presence and absence of Gao Xingjian in the historical discourses about China's alternative theatre practices. At one level, it is understandable that Gao is deemed to be absent from the historical documentation because he used to be a political dissident in the 1980s when Gao was still a citizen of the People's Republic of China. Prior to his relocation to France in 1987, Gao came to prominence as a literary writer and theatre practitioner based in Beijing during the early 1980s. Gao's literary publications and dramatic productions

⁶⁴ For example, in 1928, Tian Han was in charge of an art institution named *Nanguo she* 南國社 (Southland Institute) that hosted a variety of cutting-edge film and theatre events in Shanghai. For more information, please see Luo Liang, *The Avant-Garde and the Popular in Modern China: Tian Han and the Intersection of Performance and Politics* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2014), 84-101.

often conveyed a sense of opposition against censorship and speech control when Gao was still in the mainland. Eventually, Gao left the PRC permanently and became a naturalized citizen of France in the 1990s. Due to the political debates surrounding his identity and nationality, inevitably, Gao Xingjian and his publications seem to disappear from the public in the PRC, resulting in Gao's absence from the historical documentation of modern Chinese experimental theatre. In this case, Gao's presence is erased and therefore anything about the theatre artist will be treated as taboo.

While many scholarly writings about Gao Xingjian tend to adopt this political approach and analyze the sociopolitical implications of Gao's work through the lens of the Communist Party's censorship and oppression, I would suggest that an alternative way to look at Gao's absence in the PRC is through the lens of theatre historiography. The notion of theatre historiography, according to Henry Bial and Scott Magelssen, is "the study of the foundational assumptions, principles, and methodologies that determine how theatre history is written."⁶⁵ That is, as a methodological approach, it helps scholars and critics to reexamine how a history of theatre—or histories of theatres—is/are created and disseminated by challenging the established assumptions or methods devoid of critical reflections on the overlooked issues like gender, race, and sexuality, and citizenship. In this regard, I propose that a historiographical study of Gao Xingjian's "absence" from the modern history of China's experimental theatre will be a timely response to the concept of the Sinophone theatre network developed in this dissertation.

⁶⁵ Henry Biala and Scott Magelssen eds, *Theatre Historiography: Critical Interventions* (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 2013): 1.

Compared with Lin Zhaohua, Gao Xingjian is no longer or rarely mentioned when people discuss the production of *Absolute Signal* in Beijing because Gao has never returned to the mainland since his departure in 1987, whereas Lin continues to develop new performance projects in Beijing People's Art Theatre in the midst of Gao's physical absence. Therefore, it is worth recalling the fact that scholarly discussions about Gao's legacy remain active in the PRC. Significantly, it is important to stress that the Communist Party's censorship is not the overarching factor leading to Gao's lack of visibility in mainland China. Rather, I would suggest that it is because Gao has positioned himself as a Sinophone artist whose intercultural collaborations with theatre practitioners and designers from Greater China. With the help of this transnational network, Gao Xingjian is not confined to the debates about the presence and absence of China in his work.

By suggesting that Gao is a Sinophone artist as opposed to a Chinese or diasporic theatre maker, I focus on his practical experience in producing touring theatres with cultural workers from the global Chinese-speaking communities. Hence, my approach here is different from that of Shu-mei Shi because her approach of identifying Gao Xingjian as a Sinophone writer⁶⁶ is to emphasize that Gao should not be considered a Chinese or overseas Chinese writer as that false identification betrays Gao's current citizenship. Deviating from the conceptual framework of identity politics, this chapter will not focus on whether Gao is Chinese or French but pay attention to his efforts to consolidate the operation of the Sinophone theatre network.

⁶⁶ Please see Shi Shui-mei, "Global Literature and the Technologies of Recognition," *PMLA* Vol. 119.1 (Jan 2004): 16-30. p. 25.

In doing so, the critical intervention of this chapter is to analyze both contributions and flaws of the Sinophone theatre network. Most importantly, this lens of analysis renders the essence of theatre as a platform for community building and mutual understanding.

2.1 Debunk the Myth of Gao Xingjian's Individual Success

Who is Gao Xingjian? This is a haunting question that keeps lingering in my mind whenever I devote myself to the massive amount of scholarship on Gao's artwork and literary pieces. Although such a question, in its very basic rhetorical expression, sounds pretty much like a redundant inquiry, I believe that it deserves a critical length of discussion at the beginning of this section for two reasons. First, for those who have never received any linguistic acquisitions in Mandarin Chinese, it is highly possible that some of them have heard of this Chinese name because Gao Xingjian is first "Chinese" award recipient for the Nobel Prize in Literature (2000). Without the Nobel glory, Gao's name might remain unknown to the majority of people who live outside Greater China, especially those who have no access to the language and are unfamiliar with Chinese cultural products. Second, it is tempting to assume that people from the Chinese-speaking regions across the globe, to some extent, will acquire a basic understanding of either Gao's achievements or his career impacts by default. Arguably, there is no doubt that Gao Xingjian's influential reputation consolidated by the Nobel Prize has made his name somehow equivalent to a celebrity figure in the global Sinophone community, which is evident in the fact that

numerous publishers in Taiwan and Hong Kong fervently reprinted⁶⁷ his novels, essays, and plays commonly censored in Mainland China after Gao claimed the award. However, it is worth noting that twenty years have passed since Gao became a Nobel laureate in 2000. In other words, the paradox presented here, in my view, conveys a critical message that the presence of Gao Xingjian's artistic legacy remains simultaneously visible and invisible, remembered and forgotten, and canonized and erased within the cultural spheres of the Chinese-speaking regions all over the world.

To elucidate not just evidence-based, but also mythologized, the legacy of Gao Xingjian's theatre arts, it is necessary to reconsider the ways in which Gao Xingjian as an artist is biographically portrayed and historically evaluated in academic scholarship and literary criticism. Significantly, my point of departure here is to recontextualize Gao's artistic innovation and reconnect his dramaturgical experimentation with the seminal waves of theatrical movements appearing in the cultural landscape of twentieth-century China. Doing so requires a paradigmatic shift from an emphasis on Gao's biographical experience to a renewed focus on the development of avant-garde art in China. Scholarship on Gao Xingjian's work, especially that produced by Sinophone academics and then translated into Anglophone publication, has discursively constructed a vivid imagery depicting Gao

⁶⁷ In his essay "Gao Xingjian, the Nobel Prize and the Politics of Recognition," Hong Kong critic Tam Kwok-kan explicitly analyzes the different affective modes of reception after Gao Xingjian had been officially confirmed the winner of the Nobel Prize. In short, Tam's piece succinctly draws a parallel between the enthusiastic response from the literary circles in Taiwan and Hong Kong and the indifferent attitude from the state officials and well-established writers in the Mainland. Such a discrepancy, according to Tam, is the result of "his [Gao Xingjian's] non-recognition in mainland China and low popularity among general readers" (4). For more information on the polarized reception of Gao's Nobel award in the Sinophone community, please see Tam's essay collected in his edited book *Soul of Chaos: Critical Perspectives on Gao Xingjian* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2001), 1-20.

Xingjian those as a heroic figure who chooses voluntary exile because this is the only survival strategy when one is facing imposed censorship and omnipresent surveillance from the state.

For instance, in the introduction to *Cold Literature: Selected Works by Gao Xingjian* (2005), Hong Kong scholar and translator Gilbert C. F. Fong provides his readers with a comprehensive overview of Gao's biography, which consistently outlines how the impacts of China's political turmoil at different historical stages of the twentieth century has fundamentally reshaped the agendas of Gao's artwork. Aside from the additional comments of Fong's appreciation on Gao's gifted talents, in that introductory piece, we can unfold a commonly shared narrative viewing Gao Xingjian as an activist under the oppression of the Communist Party. And this is how such a narrative is composed: Born in a middle-class family nine years before the PRC officially established in 1949, little Gao Xingjian had a joyful childhood given the fact that his father was a banker with a decent income and his mother was an amateur theatre practitioner with formal educational training. Thanks to his parents' open-minded attitudes, Gao Xingjian grew up in an environment where every family member's individuality was fully respected, thus paving the way for Gao's future pursuit of "total freedom" devoid of "restrictions of any kind."⁶⁸ Gaining practical experience in making theatre as a student actor, Gao's mother had enlightened his oldest son about the pleasure of engaging with theatre and equipped Gao Xingjian with the ability to read and write. In the early 1950s, the Gao family relocated to

⁶⁸ Gilbert C. F. Fong, "Freedom and Marginality: The Life and Art of Gao Xingjian" in *Cold Literature: Selected Works by Gao Xingjian*, trans. Gilbert C. F. Fong and Mabel Lee (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2005), ix-xlix. p. xi.

Nanjing where Gao Xingjian completed his pre-college education. Moving to Beijing in 1957, Gao enrolled in the program of French literature at Beijing Foreign Languages Institute and initiated a theatre club named “Seagull” in 1960. During this period, the massive reading of Western classics and the public engagement with various student practitioners had prepared Gao Xingjian for his career as a translator, playwright, novelist, and painter in the future.

After his graduation in 1962, Gao worked as a French translator at the Foreign Language Press, an institution supervised by the Beijing government. Unfortunately, the outbreak of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) had fundamentally changed Gao’s perspectives on humanity and activism. During the heyday of the Cultural Revolution, Gao was initially part of the Red Guards but doomed to become another victim⁶⁹ of Mao Zedong’s ideological war. To his delight, in 1975, he regained an opportunity to return to his previous position as a French translator in Beijing. In 1980, Gao was appointed as a residential writer at Beijing People’s Art Theatre, the most iconic theatre in the PRC, and later served as a full-time playwright for the same company in 1982.

Admittedly, working as a professional script writer for the People’s Arts Theatre was an excellent chance for Gao to showcase his talented creativity and therefore pursuing a higher level of career achievement. This time he concretely put a

⁶⁹ When the Cultural Revolution erupted in 1966, Gao Xingjian destroyed the unpublished manuscripts of plays, novels, and poems as a self-defense measure. While being aware of the lurking danger, Gao eventually could not escape from being criticized and persecuted for his identity as an intellectual. From 1970 to 1975, Gao was sent to different rural villages in Jiangxi and Anhui Province respectively. For more information, please see Quah Sy Ren’s *Gao Xingjian and Transcultural Chinese Theater* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2004), 7-8.

series of cutting-edge performance theories⁷⁰ into practice along with three stage productions—*Absolute Signal* (1982), *Bus Stop* (1983), and *Wild Man* (1985)—that garnered both domestic and international attention despite the fact that *Absolute Signal* and *Bus Stop* were not publicly performed in the main arena of the Art's Theatre. Instead, both productions were granted permission to have rehearsals inside the space of the Art's Theatre under the guise of “by invitation only” events. Although these experimental productions were unexpectedly well-received among many theatre practitioners based in Beijing, they also put Gao Xingjian in a risky position because part of the thematic elements in these theatre pieces were considered a threat to the guiding principles of the Communist Party. Under the pressure of censorship, Gao initially comprised in terms of sensitive content but later decided to leave the PRC permanently in search of “absolute freedom of creation.” Since then, Gao Xingjian's name has been associated with numerous entrenched labels such as

⁷⁰ Although the detailed characteristics of Gao's performance theories and experimental theatre aesthetics will be analyzed in my discussion of the two chosen case studies in this chapter, I believe that it is worth offering a brief summary of Gao's major theoretical interventions into the making of what he calls “Another Kind of Theatre” (*Ling yi Zhong xi ju* 另一種戲劇) since the 1980s. As a theatre artist, Gao Xingjian's approach was widely considered either “the avant-garde” or “the experimental” before he left Mainland China because he was one of the few who had the ability to place dramatic theories from the West and performance traditions from the Mainland in dialogue. For example, the idea of *Total Theatre* (*Quan neng xi ju* 全能戲劇) epitomizes Gao's search for an alternative theoretical framework transcending the dominance of Western dramaturgy and remedying the shortcomings of Chinese theatrical conventions. For Gao, Western theatre emphasizes too much on the function of “spoken words” articulated by the actors whereas Chinese traditional theatre demands the “harmonious and balanced” combination of the performers' corporal gestures, skillful movements, and well-trained vocal singing. Therefore, Gao's practice of *Total Theatre* envisions a kind of theatre that liberates the characters from the hegemony of verbal communication (thus allowing the actors to explore the inner complexities of these roles) and simultaneously redirect the audience's attention to the critical role of theatricality evinced in the presence of diverse artistic expressions on stage, including dance, opera, pantomime, mask, acrobatics and so on. In *Bernard Shaw's Bridges to Chinese Culture* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), Kay Li provides a candid introduction to the key terminology of Gao Xingjian's dramaturgical theories. For the discussion of *Total Theatre* (*All-Round Theatre* in her translation), please see p. 166.

self-imposed exile and the founding figure of China's avant-garde/experimental/little theatres. The Nobel committee's endorsement of Gao's literary achievements, in this regard, has ultimately strengthened the discourse of viewing Gao's artwork as an attack on the ideological control of the Communist Party.

Having a biographical overview of Gao Xingjian's family background and artistic caliber plays a vital role in understanding the importance of his work and the value of his legacy. However, as many scholars⁷¹ have repetitively cited the biographical information I disclosed above, they tend to take it for granted that the experimental features of Gao Xingjian's dramatic plays, full-length novels, and ink paintings, at one level, designate a counterhegemonic stance as opposed to an isolated position because Gao's artwork often implicitly conveys a sense of resistance to the establishment and inherently shows the playwright's commitment to empowering the agency of the individual in the artistic landscapes crafted by Gao's creativity. Indeed, as I would suggest, such a taken-for-granted narrative has continuously demonstrated its impacts on the discursive formation of the history of Gao Xingjian's artistic legacy.

In this light, the recent publication of *Gao Xingjian and Transmedia Aesthetics* (2018), in my viewpoint, serves as a piece of evidence persistently reiterating the discourse that Gao as a global artist has fully committed himself to an

⁷¹ Among the large number of academic essays, journals, and monographs focusing on Gao Xingjian's artwork exclusively, Singaporean scholar Sy Ren Quah's book, *Gao Xingjian and Transcultural Chinese Theater* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004), is probably the most comprehensive collection of Gao's biographical data and their impacts on the artistic styles and experimental forms of Gao's theatre work. For more information about the genealogical tracing of Gao's biography, please read the introduction of Quah's *Gao Xingjian and Transcultural Chinese Theater* (p. 1-22).

eternal pursuit of absolute spiritual freedom by maintaining a critical distance between the independence of his artistic choices and the omnipresence of different sociopolitical forces. As Mabel Lee and Liu Jianmei, the editors of this collection, consciously remind us in their introductory essay, that “Gao Xingjian urges us to extricate ourselves from the wrenched cycle of politically or commercially driven literature and art” because such a vicious pattern only produces “works that indulge in nonstop negations, aggressive provocations, and sensationalism.”⁷² Following Lee and Liu’s reminder, however, it is worth pausing momentarily here to examine the paradoxical nature of Gao Xingjian’s escape from the influences of political ideologies and the dominance of consumer capitalism when Gao’s art pieces have been systematically scrutinized under a conceptual framework governed by the logic of identity politics by numerous scholars and critics (Shih 2004; Lovell 2006; Conceison 2009) over the past three decades. By identity politics, I specifically refer to the scholarly debates on whether Gao should be understood as a Chinese in exile, a French in transition, or a cosmopolitan citizen without fixed identities. Despite the fact that Gao Xingjian consistently disavows any kind of “labels”⁷³ attached to his

⁷² Mabel Lee and Liu Jianmei, “Introduction,” *Gao Xingjian and Transmedia Aesthetics* (New York: Cambria Press, 2018), 17. p. 1-20

⁷³ One quintessential example of Gao Xingjian’s resistance to the act of labeling would be his manifesto of “Without Isms (*Mei yu zhu yi* 沒有主義),” originally a speech delivered at a conference titled Past Forty Years of Chinese Literature held in Taiwan, 1993. This conference talk was later translated into an English essay through the efforts of Hong Kong scholar Gilbert C. F. Fong and Mabel Lee, the English translator of Gao’s Nobel winning novel *Soul Mountain*. In “Without Isms,” Gao asserts that: “For me, literary creation is a means to salvation; it could also be said that it is a means to life. It is for myself, not to please others, that I write. And I do not write to change the world or other people, because I cannot even manage to change myself. For me, what is important is simply the fact that I have spoken and the fact that I have written” (Lee 76). Gao’s understanding of literature is based on the assumption that literary work should not succumb to any kind of political agendas or become a medium for the circulation of ideological propaganda. Therefore, Gao argues that literature, in his viewpoint, transcends the conceptual barriers of various “Isms” (e.g., modernism, postmodernism, communism and so on) and allows the writer to remain truthful to his inner voice

aesthetics and artwork, Gao's cultural, national, and even "linguistic" identities, ironically, have been politicized by scholars who are either physically distant from Mainland China or partially familiar with Chinese cultural elements. Conceptually, the paradox I want to highlight here is that Gao Xingjian's efforts to minimize the dangers brought by all forms of political declaration (e.g., different "Isms") to the completeness of the artist's agency, at one level, are simultaneously proved to be an antithesis to these scholarly efforts to "politicize" his multiple identities. If we relate this paradox back to my prior question about who Gao Xingjian is, then, the answer for this straightforward inquiry suddenly becomes diverse but complicated at the same time: Gao is a bilingual playwright whose "French plays are considered only in their subsequent Chinese versions or English versions"⁷⁴; Gao is a Sinophone writer resisting "incorporation both into China and into the place of residence [France];"⁷⁵ Gao is an exiled theatre maker whose stage productions represent "a living example of transculturation that creates a new center for artistic gravity."⁷⁶

without imposing any kind of moral lessons or responsibilities on his writing. To a larger extent, then, we can say that Gao perceives both literary and aesthetic creation as a writer's pursuit of absolute artistic freedom unbounded by social engagement, political oppression, and ideological pollution. For the complete translation of Gao's "Without Isms," please read Mabel Lee's *The Case for Literature* (New Heaven: Yale University Press, 2007), 64-77.

⁷⁴ Claire Conceison, "The French Gao Xingjian, Bilingualism, and *Ballade Nocturne*," *Hong Kong Drama Review* No.8 (2009): 303-322. p. 305. The goal of Conceison's article is to emphasize the value of Gao Xingjian's plays that were originally written in French. The majority of scholarly criticism on Gao's work, in Conceison's viewpoint, focuses either on the Chineseness of his thematic choices or the transcultural aspects of his aesthetics, which completely ignores the fact that Gao received solid education on French literature before leaving the PRC and he is a prolific writer who has published a number of short essays and full-length plays in French when relocating himself to Europe after 1987.

⁷⁵ Shih Shu-mei, "Global Literature and the Technologies of Recognition," *PMLA* 119.1 Special Topic: Literatures at Large (Jan. 2004): 16-30. p. 26.

⁷⁶ Alexa Alice Joubin, "The Theatricality of Religious Rhetoric: Gao Xingjian and the Meaning of Exile," *Theatre Journal* 63.3 Asian Theatre and Performance (Oct. 2011): 365-379. p. 377. Based on the request of the author, in this dissertation, all the articles and books published under the author's previous name (Alexander C. Y. Huang) will be automatically converted into Alexa Alice Joubin.

Arguably, with reference to these discursive constructs of Gao Xingjian's myriad identities, it makes perfect sense to suggest that identity politics as a lens of analysis convincingly unfolds the complexity of Gao's multicultural backgrounds, bilingual writings, and interdisciplinary collaborations. Meanwhile, it is worth noting that this approach, in my opinion, is similar to a coin with two sides. On the surface, exploring Gao's multiple artistic identities provides us with a deeper understanding of central motifs of his novels, plays, and paintings. Additionally, it further encourages Gao's readers and audiences to pay more attention to the universal themes (e.g., human suffering) presented in his work. In this sense, we as the readers and spectators of Gao's artwork are empowered to move beyond the debate of cultural authenticity since Gao's diasporic trajectories have proven that his art is inherently transnational, transcultural, and multilingual.

The flip side of using identity politics as an analytic tool, however, perpetuates a myth that idealizes Gao Xingjian "as someone who stands between the classic writers of Chinese spoken drama such as Gao Yü, Tian Han, and Lao She—and the more radical alternative dramatists in the late 1980s."⁷⁷ Indeed, if we closely reexamine these multilayer identities embraced by scholars appreciating Gao's efforts to transcend national and cultural borders, we would have noticed that perceiving Gao's aesthetic choices as a means of either "dissident voice" or "artistic nonconformity" is inherently a flawed concept as well as a crafted myth. Given the

⁷⁷ Jo Riley and Michael Gissenwehrer, "The Myth of Gao Xingjian" in *Soul of Chaos: Critical Perspectives on Gao Xingjian* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University of Hong Kong Press, 2001): 111-132, edited by Kwok-kan Tam. p. 112.

fact that “myth” as a loaded term is always attached to negative connotations in semantics, it sounds, perhaps, bluntly offensive to describe those who devote their scholarship to the significance of Gao’s artistic identities as a group of myth makers. Granted, my conceptual intervention is polemical here because it challenges the foundational scholarship on Gao Xingjian’s art and legacy. But if we revisit how British historian Julia Lovell develops her argumentation on Gao’s radical artistic identities in her book *The Politics of Cultural Capital: China’s Quest for a Nobel Prize in Literature* (2006), it would be an excellent point of departure for us to discern a blind spot in English-speaking scholarship built upon a mythic obsession with Gao’s “success” in gaining worldwide recognitions.

As a well-trained historian familiar with both pre-modern and modern Chinese histories and an experienced translator for the literary works of several prominent contemporary Chinese writers such as Eileen Chang and Zhu Wen,⁷⁸ Lovell has skillfully demonstrated her fruitful knowledge about the historical development of modern Chinese literature and the heated debates pertaining to the so-called Nobel Complex: a yearning for the recognition of a Western-based award institution while simultaneously a resentment against the continuous marginalization of viewing China and Chinese cultural production as the mysterious, oriental Other. Consequently, the

⁷⁸ Eileen Chang 張愛玲 (1920-1995) is a novelist and film script writer whose work is considered emblematic of the compulsory moral regulations on female sexuality in Chinese society. Lovell is the translator of Chang’s sensational short piece *Lost, Caution* 《色戒》 (London: Penguin, 2007), which is adapted into a filmic version by director Ang Lee 李安 in 2007. Born in 1967, Zhu Wen 朱文 is a novelist, film director, and movie playwright whose work constantly explores the daily struggles of people from the lower class. Lovell translates several pieces of Zhu’s short stories and compiles them into an English collection titled *I Love Dollars and Other Stories of China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

controversy of Gao Xingjian's Nobel laureate in 2000, under Lovell's meticulous examination, has manifested an overlooked connection between "post-Mao China's rapid international success in cinema, sports, and the economies"⁷⁹ and its failure to enter the global literary market. While invaluable, it is not difficult for one to discover a striking fact that, similar to many scholarly remarks on Gao's career achievements, the success-failure paradigm also plays an essential role in Lovell's evaluation of Gao's artistic enterprise.

One explicit example of how this binary paradigm has continuously directed our attention to Gao's individual success is the moment when Lovell discusses the relationship between Gao's life journeys and his vanguard aestheticism. She writes:

The principal coordinates of Gao's avant-garde position — independence from nation, people, and commercial pressures; antidogmatism; individual artistic and political integrity; and skepticism — emerge in his biographical details and drama. Born nine years before the founding of the People's Republic, Gao grew up in a creative home environment, encouraged by his mother (an amateur actress) from a young age to write and draw. ... During the Cultural Revolution, he demonstrated his commitment to independent artistic creation, writing for personal expression despite personal danger. After Mao's death, Gao was at the forefront of those disseminating Western modernism within China. *Chezhan* (Bus stop, 1981), influenced by Beckett and the Theater of the Absurd, caused an immediate sensation among theater

⁷⁹ Julia Lovell, *The Politics of Cultural Capital: China's Quest for a Nobel Prize in Literature* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2006), 9.

audiences. Victim to the 1983 Anti-Spiritual Pollution campaign, Gao asserted his independence from political threats by taking off on a five-month tour of China.⁸⁰

In Lovell's assessment of Gao's career trajectory, it is clear that she defines Gao Xingjian as an "avant-garde artist" whose vanguard practices work in tandem with four crucial components characterizing his aesthetic styles. First, Gao's artwork keeps a critical distance from the national, the public, and the commercial for the purpose of maintaining the author's freedom of creation. Furthermore, as someone who survived the Cultural Revolution, Gao is aware of the danger of media propaganda and therefore disagrees with any attempts to characterize artistic expression as a vehicle for the delivery of self-righteous principles. Third, the artistic world created in Gao's work often presents a balanced integration of personal concerns and political matters without imposing ideological agendas onto the audience's mind. Lastly, as an artist promoting the esoteric position of art within society, Gao, in his work, consistently projects skeptical attitudes towards any take-it-for-granted principles, values, and cultures operating in human communities.

Although Lovell's candid summary of what consolidates Gao's avant-garde position has provided us with conceptual access to the Nobel laureate's experimental aesthetics, I would like to draw attention to the rhetorical pitfalls existing in Lovell's statement, showing how such generalized as well as problematic narratives persistently cultivate a myth that celebrates Gao's intellectual and artistic success as

⁸⁰ Ibid., 165.

the result of individual efforts and talents. To begin, the first pitfall I want to discuss from Lovell's passage is the comparison between the oppression of the Cultural Revolution and Gao's commitment to artistic independence and individual voice. Gao Xingjian, in Lovell's words, is an advocate for "independent artistic creation" and a pragmatic doer who dared to defend his "writing for personal expression" at the expense of "personal danger" when the PRC was in a state of turmoil for ten years at least. While Lovell's narrative is based on the fact that Gao is a victim of the Cultural Revolution, however, Gao had never risked his life for the sake of maintaining a personal expression/voice in his writing during those tumultuous years in China. On the contrary, as theatre scholars Sy Ren Quah and Henry Y. H. Zhao have mentioned, Gao Xingjian had no choice but to "burn all his manuscripts, including ten plays, an unfinished novel, and numerous poems and notes, which weighed almost forty kilograms in total."⁸¹ In this light, if we contextualize Gao's decision to abandon all

⁸¹ Sy Ren Quah, *Gao Xingjian and Transcultural Chinese Theater* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004): 7. In Henry Y. H. Zhao's book, *Towards A Modern Zen Theatre: Gao Xingjian and Chinese Theatre Experimentalism* (London: School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 2000), Zhao also discusses Gao Xingjian's decision to destroy all his unpublished manuscripts when the Revolution erupted in 1966. For more details, please see p. 29. Additionally, in 1995, Gao Xingjian visited Taiwan for an exhibition of his ink painting and received an in-depth interview in Mandarin Chinese with an editor of Taiwan's *Central Daily News* (中央日報) regarding the influences of his life experience in the PRC on the creation of his artwork. When responding to a question about what motivated him to become a playwright, Gao Xingjian made reference to his study of French literature and language as a university student and used it as an entry point to illustrate the importance of writing to him. As Gao stated: "I have devoted myself to writing and taken it seriously since the days in college. Before the Cultural Revolution, I had completed ten plays, an unfinished full-length novel, and several sporadic essays, poems, and the diaries I wrote in college. The total number of these materials is nearly equal to the size of a large suitcase. These manuscripts were all gone in flames when the Cultural Revolution begun (我從大學時代就開始認真寫作了,「文化大革命」之前,我已經寫了十齣戲,一部未完成的小說,以及好多零散的文章、詩、大學時寫的日記等等,足足一大皮箱,「文化大革命」一來,全部都燒光了)." This interview excerpt is from an essay called "In Search of the Soul Mountain in My Mind" (Xun zhao xin zhong de ling shan 尋找心中的靈山) by Wan-Ru Wu 吳婉茹, which was originally published in *Central Daily News* in 1995 and later collected into a book anthology printed in Chinese, authored by Gao Xingjian, and titled *On Creation* (*Lun chuang zuo* 論創作, Taipei: Linking Publishing, 2008), 195-211, p. 196. The English translation of Gao's interview passage is mine.

the unshared scripts and drafts within an era fraught with surveillance mechanisms, a legitimate account for Gao's choice of action would be that destroying these piles of paper, for Gao, was the only survival strategy because he could not avoid political censorship and nonfactual accusations without making the "written evidence" completely disappear.

If so, I would suggest that Gao's survival strategy during the Cultural Revolution contradicts Lovell's statement that Gao demonstrated his commitment to the individual expression of his writing "despite personal danger."⁸² Specifically, the contradiction highlighted here, is that Lovell's discursive construct of Gao's perseverance in the era of Mao Zedong Fever has falsely alluded to an nonexistent "fact" that Gao is similar to an activist risking his life in order to fight against authoritative oppression and defend individual freedom. In reality, Gao Xingjian was neither an activist nor a martyr, but someone who simply drifted on the currents when the PRC was saturated with the cult of Mao Zedong's ideologies and principles over the course of the 1960s. In other words, it is evident that he had neither truly "confronted" nor significantly "challenged" the authority as a means to protect an artist's freedom of creation under the threat of governmental control. Individual writing, within the context of the Cultural Revolution, functioned as a metaphoric exit for Gao to "escape" from the sociopolitical crisis in the Chinese society rather than an inviolable territory where Gao weaponized his artwork in order to defend the autonomy of his esoteric writing.

⁸² Julia Lovell, *The Politics of Cultural Capital: China's Quest for a Nobel Prize in Literature* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2006), 165.

The second pitfall in Lovell's passage, I contend, is that she undertakes a hasty generalization when establishing the correlation between the 1983 Anti-Spiritual Pollution⁸³ campaign and Gao Xingjian's self-exile to the rural provinces in Southern and Northwest China, which mistakenly leads her readers to believe that exile became another critical survival strategy for Gao to assert "his independence from political threats"⁸⁴ and demonstrate his resistance to comply with the CCP's oppressive ideologies. Undoubtedly, Gao was one of the many victims to the Anti-Pollution Campaign because the content of his second play, *Bus Stop* (車站),⁸⁵ was

⁸³ From October 11th to 12th, 1983, the Chinese Communist Party held its Twelfth Central Committee Meeting in Beijing. Aside from the discussions about the Party's core principles and policies, one of the pressing agendas was to come up with concrete solutions to the emergence of social and moral degradation after the PRC opened its door to the international community in 1979, especially in the fields of art, literature, and journalism. This political congregation played an important role in the formation and operation of Anti-Spiritual Pollution Campaign (清除精神污染運動), which imposed strict censorship on literary, visual, and printing materials related to body exposure, inappropriate clothing, or political criticism. In Yang Xingshang's 楊興山 article, "再谈清除精神污染运动" [Talk about Clear Mental Pollution Campaign], he traces the sociopolitical backgrounds of China from 1982 to 1983 and foregrounds the importance of Deng Xiaoping's 鄧小平 (CCP's chairperson) speech delivered at the Twelfth Council Meeting. According to Yang, Deng's talk addressed the issue of spiritual pollution existing in CCP's organizational structures and the cultural spheres of society at that time, which resulted in a social turmoil caused by the Anti-Pollution Campaign. Although the impacts of the campaign's activities were comprehensive, the entire movement only lasted for 28 days (October 19th to November 16th, 1983). For more details, please see Yang's "再谈清除精神污染运动" [Talk about Clear Mental Pollution Campaign], in *Theory Research* 学理论 No. 6 (2016): 118-119.

⁸⁴ Julia Lovell, *The Politics of Cultural Capital: China's Quest for a Nobel Prize in Literature* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2006), 165.

⁸⁵ Set in a rural town, *Bus Stop* (1983) features eight passengers/characters with different gender traits and class backgrounds. One day they all show up in a bus stop in order to take the bus to the city. To their surprise, they keep failing to get into a bus because the drivers repetitively ignore their presence whenever the cars are approaching the spot where these passengers are told to wait. The dramatic conflict of *Bus Stop* lies in the fact that it takes these characters nine years to realize the absurdity of their behaviors. That is, except one character named "the Silent Man," everyone has repeated the same dramatic action (waiting for the bus) for nine years without physically leaving the bus stop. Based on the plot summary of Gao Xingjian's *Bus Stop*, it is not surprising that many scholars would perceive this play as the genesis of China's avant-garde theatre because of its aesthetic connection to the Theatre of the Absurd and the play's antirealistic dramaturgy similar to that of Irish playwright Samuel Beckett.

severely criticized by the Deputy Minister of the CCP's Publicity Department He Jingzhi 賀敬之 in 1983. Originally written in Chinese, published in 1991, and later translated into English by Mabel Lee in 2007, Gao Xingjian's short essay, "Wilted Chrysanthemums (昨日黃花)," provides a detailed account for the controversy of *Bus Stop* and He Jingzhi's hostile attitude towards the play. According to Gao, one of his playwright friends, Su Shuyang 蘇叔陽, informed him of the news that He Jingzhi was extremely upset about the unexpected success of *Bus Stop*'s closed-door performance at Beijing People's Art Theatre in July 1983. Considering *Bus Stop* as the most vicious play produced since the establishment of the PRC in 1949, He Jingzhi, in Gao's words, "issued orders to *Literary Gazette*, *Drama Magazine*, and *Beijing Daily*, as well as *October* magazine, which had published *Bus Stop*, to arrange for articles that would denounce the play" and "said that the sort of person [Gao Xingjian] who would write such a play should be sent to Qinghai [an underdeveloped province spread across the Tibetan Plateau] for training."⁸⁶

Based on Gao's autobiographical recall of He Jingzhi's malicious attacks on the triumph of *Bus Stop*, it is crystal clear that the underlying agenda behind He's choice of action relates to the price Gao needs to pay for the production of such a politically incorrect play. For Gao, He's use of the term "training" is merely a euphemism for "reform through labor," which again reminds Gao of the traumatic memories with regard to the era of the Cultural Revolution. Consequently, in order to escape from He's political oppression, Gao took a series of "proactive" measures

⁸⁶ Gao Xingjian, "Wilted Chrysanthemums," in *The Case for Literature*, trans. Mabel Lee (New Heaven: Yale University Press, 2007), 149.

before He and his fellows had figured out a concrete plan to punish artists, critics, and cultural productions considered spiritually polluted. For instance, after knowing that the staff and artists of the Beijing People's Art Theatre were required to comply with the CCP's Anti-Spiritual Pollution agenda, Gao immediately left Beijing and fled to the less developed provinces⁸⁷ in the South and the Northwest so that He and his comrades could not secretly keep him imprisoned or cause any damage to his personal security.

Unlike those critics⁸⁸ who tend to take Gao Xingjian's statements for granted, I want to problematize Gao's account for He Jingzhi's campaign and use it as an example to elucidate my argument that Lovell makes a hasty generalization of Gao's victimhood in the event of Anti-Spiritual Pollution Campaign in 1983. In doing so, the larger goal here is to illuminate Gao's questionable "avant-garde position" constructed and endorsed by academic writings and international recognition (e.g., the Nobel Prize). As mentioned earlier, there is no doubt that Gao Xingjian was a

⁸⁷ Ibid., 149-150. Gao states: "Fleeing, I think, is the most reliable strategy for the protection of the self. From the huge snow-clad mountains of Sichuan, I travelled eastwards to the coast. I visited eight provinces and seven nature reserves in my fifteen-thousand-kilometer journey of wandering, which lasted five months" (150).

⁸⁸ Among the scholars who persistently commit their enthusiasm to Gao's art, Mabel Lee 陳順妍 (Australia), Gilbert C. F. Fong 方梓勳 (Hong Kong), and Liu Zaifu 劉再復 (China) are the most active and iconic figures. Since the 1990s, they have published a substantial number of articles and books advocating the aesthetic value of Gao Xingjian's art and Gao's contributions to world literature and intercultural theatre. While invaluable, Fong and Liu's essays constantly overemphasize the greatness of Gao's work without maintaining a critical balance between personal appreciation and scholarly critique. For instance, in the introduction to *Cold Literature: Selected Works by Gao Xingjian* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University of Hong Kong Press, 2005), Fong as the co-editor and co-translator of this volume unequivocally shows his appreciation for Gao's exile writing and his successful transcendence from one culture to another. Specifically, Fong writes: "What sets Gao Xingjian from the others is his ability to integrate the two cultures in his life to achieve a fusion of horizons. This has been accomplished not superficially or mechanically, but organically and as a way of life, or even a defense mechanism for survival" (xliv).

victim to that ideological campaign led by He Jingzhi and a group of CCP officials. Similarly, we cannot deny the fact that Gao Xingjian was also a victim to another ideological war launched by Mao Zedong in the 1960s. Nevertheless, it is worth having a momentary pause here and recalling how Gao Xingjian reacted to political controversies like the Cultural Revolution and the Anti-Spiritual Pollution Campaign. In the crisis provoked by Mao Zedong, Gao proactively destroyed his manuscripts in flames as a means to prevent accusations from the Red Guards that could possibly lead to public trial, illegal imprisonment, and physical abuse. With regard to the 1983 controversy, Gao did not stand out against the ideological war waged by the governmental agency. On the contrary, the Nobel winner was reluctant to put himself at the forefront of the battlefield because he believed that “escape” is the best choice of action when it comes to self-protection and survival, which is ironically the opposite of the avant-garde’s call for political activism, social transformation, and institutional reform.

By juxtaposing Gao’s choice to burn his unpublished drafts under Mao’s ideological dominance with his decision to run away from political confrontation in 1983, I draw attention back to the conceptual flaw of Julia Lovell’s statement that Gao Xingjian “asserted his independence from political threats by taking off on a five-month tour of China”⁸⁹ as a victim to the Anti-Spiritual Pollution Campaign. What is of particular importance here is that Gao’s artistic creation produced before the playwright’s permanent departure from the PRC had never achieved a truly

⁸⁹ Julia Lovell, *The Politics of Cultural Capital: China’s Quest for a Nobel Prize in Literature* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2006), 165.

independent status built up what Lovell calls “the avant-garde position.”⁹⁰ Unlike the avant-garde practitioners based in the West, Gao Xingjian as an artist has adopted an indifferent attitude toward the practice of weaponizing one’s artwork in response to political issues, thus contradicting, in Christopher Innes’ words, the avant-garde art’s “rejection of social organization and artistic conventions, aesthetic values and materialistic ideals, syntactical structure and logic, as well as everything associated with the bourgeoisie.”⁹¹

The inherent contradiction between Gao Xingjian’s aesthetic practices and the avant-garde art’s pursuit of radical reform is rooted in the articulations and applications of Gao’s literary theories as well as dramaturgical devices. At a one level, what aptly characterizes the foundation of Gao’s aesthetics is the idea of artistic neutrality emphasizing the writer/the artist’s disengagement with political ideologies, revolutionary activism, and oppressive dogmatism. In this light, the practice of “disengagement” becomes the key to unfold the complexities of Gao’s pursuit of artistic neutrality found in his novels, plays, and performance theories. To begin, it is worth reviewing Gao’s remarks on the role of a writer and the function of literature in human society. In doing so, we can trace the development of Gao’s aesthetic theories and obtain a more nuanced understanding of the role of artistic neutrality in the creative landscapes of Gao’s literature and theatre. Most importantly, analyzing Gao’s interpretations of a writer or an artist’s position in the process of creation will further

⁹⁰ Ibid., 165.

⁹¹ Christopher Innes, *Avant-Garde Theatre 1892-1992* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 5.

help us unveil the paradoxical relationship between Gao's reputation as an avant-garde artist and his commitment to pursuing a mode of artistic disengagement.

Prior to the success of his dramatic debut *Absolute Signal* in 1982, Gao had been known as a prolific writer producing several critical essays and short novels and has continued to publish literary writings after relocating himself to Paris in 1987. Among these seminal publications, "Cold Literature" (1990), "Without Isms" (1993), and "The Case for Literature" (2000) are perhaps the most representative illustrations of Gao's persistent efforts to advocate an aesthetic distance between his work and its sociopolitical context. Serving as his acceptance speech for the Nobel Prize ceremony in 2000, "The Case for Literature," for example, concisely addresses Gao's overriding concern about the disappearance of a writer's personal voice when the literary productions of twentieth-century China were overwhelmingly surrendered to ideological hailing of revolutionary politics (e.g., Communism). Contesting the dominance of state apparatus over the realm of literary creation, Gao argues that: "The so-called writer is nothing more than an individual speaking or writing and whether he is listened to or read is for others to choose. The writer is not a hero acting on orders from the people nor is he worthy of worship as an idol, and certainly he is not a criminal or enemy of the people. ... Literature remains an indispensable form of human activity in which both the reader and the writer are engaged of their own volition. Hence, literature has no duty to the masses."⁹² Consequently, according to

⁹² Gao Xingjian, "The Case for Literature," in *Cold Literature: Selected Works by Gao Xingjian*, edited by Gilbert C. F. Fong and translated by Mabel Lee (Hong Kong: The Chinese University of Hong Kong Press, 2005), 22.

Gao's speech, literary creation represents an individualized aesthetic enterprise devoid of any responsibilities to the readers, the public, and the authority.

Gao's articulation of a writer's position, in fact, is not something novel but a crucial concept that he has developed in "Cold Literature" and "Without Isms" thirty years from now. Representing one of the most iconic essays in Gao's writing career, "Cold Literature," as its title suggests, epitomizes Gao's understanding of literary creation as "a solitary form of work that no movement or collective can help"⁹³ because these external interventions (e.g., political movements) would only undermine a writer's autonomy. Consequently, Gao's insistence on a mandatory distance between literary creation and political engagement simultaneously gestures towards the fact that different waves of revolutionary politics, particularly the guiding principles of the Communist revolution⁹⁴ from 1949 to 1979, have profoundly affected the artistic expressions and the subject variations of Chinese literature in the

⁹³ Gao Xingjian, "Cold Literature," in *Cold Literature: Selected Works by Gao Xingjian*, edited by Gilbert C. F. Fong and translated by Mabel Lee (Hong Kong: The Chinese University of Hong Kong Press, 2005), 6.

⁹⁴ It is worth noting that the majority of scholarship on the Communist revolution of the PRC tends to focus more on the aspects of Mao Zedong and his political doctrines but less on how his political agendas reshaped the cultural landscapes of modern China. In this light, Barbara Mittler's *A Continuous Revolution: Making Sense of Cultural Revolution Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012) and Denise Y. Ho's *Curating China: Politics on Display in Mao's China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017) both provide critical insights to this epistemic gap. Mittler examines the ways in which the circulation of artistic products (e.g. posters, Chinese opera, songs) during the Cultural Revolution era was and *is* part of the country's continuous cultural reform project, arguing that the material legacy of these cultural artifacts produced during the Cultural Revolution has become a vehicle for Chinese people to "make sense" of the complex revolution politics in both pre-Revolution and post-Revolution China. Shifting focus to the impacts of public display when China was under Mao's control, Ho's book surveys a series of Mao-era "exhibitions" and discusses how these curatorial objects interacted with the visitors, the local communities, and the political campaigns. More importantly, Ho expands her discussion of the Mao-related exhibits to the politics of "artistic space" and shows how spatial design works in tandem with the spread of Mao's revolutionary ideologies, which demonstrates the continuous impact of this revolutionary legacy on China's contemporary cultural landscape.

PRC era. In this sense, it is understandable that Gao, as a writer establishing individual subjectivity through literary creation, would strongly oppose any attempts to politicize the motifs of any literary production. Significantly, Gao believes that a writer's voice cannot succumb to political ideologies since "the writer stands solitary and alone, making lucid observations that replace emotional outpourings and that also transcend moral judgements of good and evil," which ultimately requires him or her to "have a pair of cold eyes in his or her observation of society."⁹⁵

The demand for *a pair of cold eyes*, which thematically resonates with the title of Gao's essay "Cold Literature," reflects the foundational attitude of the Nobel winner's writing agenda in particular and his artistic enterprise in general. That is, as a writer as well as an artist whose freedom of creation was always subject to ideological censorship when the PRC transitioned from an isolated regime (1949-1979) to a member of the international community (1979-present), Gao Xingjian consistently uses his artwork as a medium to reiterate his call for a mode of cold aesthetic that secures an explicit boundary between artistic creation and political engagement, which remains a trademark feature of Gao's artistic creation after Gao chose to leave the PRC permanently in the late 1980s. The pursuit of coldness, both found in the forms of Gao's artistic practices and in the theories of Gao's literary creation, manifests Gao's belief that a writer/an artist would never become an advocate for any types of "Isms" such as Marxism, Communism, or Socialism. Instead, the writer/the artist is more like a neutral observer reporting what he or she

⁹⁵ Gao Xingjian, "The Position of the Writer," in *Gao Xingjian: Aesthetics and Creation*, trans. Mabel Lee (Amherst, MA: Cambria Press, 2012), 11.

considers crucial to the readers and the audiences. What is of particular importance in Gao's discussion of *the cold aesthetic*, as we have seen in the essays discussed above, is that it prioritizes the writer's/the artist's agency over the socio-political impacts of any given society because "[f]or a frail individual, a writer, to confront society alone and utter words in his own voice is, in my [Gao's] view, the essential character of literature, which has changed little from ancient times to the present, whether it be in China or abroad, in the East or in the West."⁹⁶

Although Gao's elaboration on the praxis of cold aesthetic, mainly from the perspectives of literature, has simultaneously drawn a theoretical contour of his artistic enterprise, I would like to problematize the application of Gao's cold aesthetic to the embodied forms of artistic creation—particularly theatrical productions and performative enactments. My analysis, in what follows, is built up a methodological inquiry to Gao Xingjian's argument that drama/theatre "is a pair of crystalized eyes—a cold pair of eyes that tranquilly observe and reflect the complexity of the multitudes existing in the world."⁹⁷ At a metaphorical level, the analogy between drama/theatre and a pair of cold eyes, in Gao's description, echoes the exile artist's search for a kind of cold aesthetic devoid of political interventions. Therefore, similar to the role of literature, drama/theatre is expected to function as a creative platform where theatre makers can present what they want to display on stage without necessarily turning

⁹⁶ Gao Xingjian, "Without Isms," in *Gao Xingjian: The Case for Literature*, trans. Mabel Lee (New Heaven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007), 67.

⁹⁷ Gao Xingjian and Gilbert C. F. Fong, "論戲劇" [On Drama/Theatre], (Taipei: Linking Publishing, 2004), 4. The original Chinese text is: "戲劇是澄明的眼睛，一雙冷眼冷靜地觀照這大千世界的眾生相。"

either the content or the style into an artistic device used by playwrights and directors to promote certain political thoughts or artistic conventions.

Considering Gao's hostility against any forms of authoritarian governance due to his traumatic experience during the Cultural Revolution, there is no doubt that the concept of cold aesthetic would occupy a significant role in the creation of both Gao's literature and drama/theatre. Nevertheless, as a theatre and performance scholar, I would contend that it is fundamentally problematic when theatre artists are attracted by Gao's cold aesthetic and encouraged to apply these parameters to the stage because the essence of *doing* theatre is based on human collaboration—the collective efforts of the design crew (costume, sound, lighting, and props), the director, the playwright, the stage manager, the dramaturg, and so on. What is more problematic, in my opinion, is that Gao Xingjian's advocate for a mandatory *distance* between art and politics has substantially constituted a mode of *esoteric theatre* speaking to a filtered group of audiences rather than a group of general spectators. One particular evidence supporting my viewpoint here is found in Alexa Joubin's article on Gao Xingjian's intercultural play *Snow in August* (1997). As Joubin has pointed out at the very beginning of her essay, Gao's Zen Buddhist play “redirects the transnational cultural flows between East Asia and Western Europe,” which addresses “an intellectual rather than mass audience.”⁹⁸ According to Joubin's observation, we have got an impression that Gao's drama/theatre seems to communicate with the intellectuals instead of the masses. Undoubtedly, it will sound profoundly arbitrary if

⁹⁸ Alexa Alice Joubin, “The Theatricality of Religious Rhetoric: Gao Xingjian and the Meaning of Exile,” *Theatre Journal* 63.3 Asian Theatre and Performance (Oct. 2011): 365-379. p. 365.

we simply conclude that Gao's dramatic pieces are merely created for the intellectuals living in the ivory tower based on the fact that his dramatic works often demand the audiences to be capable of appreciating a variety of aesthetic genres ranging from East Asian conventions to Euro-American innovations. Meanwhile, I believe that it is equally important for scholars and critics to acknowledge that Gao's pursuit of what he terms *cold aesthetic* mirrors the Nobel winner's conscious choice of distancing his artwork from the masses at the same time. Of course, one can argue that Gao's aesthetic approach could be interpreted as a defensive mechanism designed to protect an artist's freedom of creation and maintain the autonomy of artwork. However, such an argument, in my view, overlooks the role of collaboration in the making of theatre arts and reinforces the myth of Gao Xingjian's individual success.

The metaphor of *a pair of cold eyes*, in the context of Gao's aesthetic theories, refers to an artist's attachment to a neutral position allowing him or her to resist pressure from political campaigns or commercial profit. This aesthetic approach might be an ideal one for the creation of literature because the production of literary texts is normally considered a writer's individual enterprise, but it is untenable to suggest that the same approach is applicable to theatrical productions and performance events. Ultimately, the making of theatre relies heavily on collaborative teamwork, multidirectional communication, and audience engagement. In this regard, it is worth noting that Gao's obsession with a writer/artist's neutral position as well as a proper aesthetic distance contradicts the nature of theatrical performance as a participatory event as well as a collaborative product. Hence, in what follows, I would shift gears towards Lin Zhaohua, a veteran director in Beijing People's Art Theatre,

and analyze the importance of Lin's collaboration with Gao from 1982 to 1985. In doing so, I suggest that Gao's avant-garde reputation is not established on individual talents or esoteric distance. Instead, Gao would not have succeeded in developing his experimental theatre aesthetics without Lin Zhaohua's directorial techniques.

2.2 An Alternative Theatre Historiography: Gao Xingjian and Lin Zhaohua's Collaboration

It is unlikely that one can comprehensively categorize Gao Xingjian's aesthetic methods into fixed artistic genres because the artist has consciously expressed his hostility against the overuse of labeling in both the commentary and scholarly evaluations of his artistry. Consequently, it is not surprising that Gao repetitively advocates an alternative mode of artistic practice that is not politically oriented because he is deeply aware of the dangers of political dogmas to an artist's freedom of creation, especially how these dogmatic principles had caused irreparable damage to the foundation of mainland China's cultural creativity over the course of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, after Gao became one of the award recipients for the Nobel Prize in 2000, it is inevitable that more and more scholars, critics, and translators of Gao's work have simultaneously adapted the existing English vocabulary and invented new terminology so that Gao's aesthetic principles, playwriting structures, and directorial choices can be properly introduced to a wide array of audiences. While invaluable, their efforts to systematically conceptualize Gao's theatrical practices also attach multiple labels to Gao's art. Among these conceptual labels, what particularly attracts my attention is the emphasis on the vanguard characteristics of Gao's dramatic writing and stage aesthetics. For example,

in *Towards A Modern Zen Theatre*, Henry Y. H. Zhao claims that Gao Xingjian is widely recognized as “the best representative and the leading playwright of both the Experimental Theatre Movement in China in the 1980s and the Chinese Experimental Theatre of today”⁹⁹ because of Gao’s significant contribution to the modernization of traditional Chinese theatre.

As mentioned previously, the legacy of Gao Xingjian’s avant-garde theatre in the PRC is essentially built upon the experimental plays he wrote between 1981 and 1985 when Gao served as a residential playwright in Beijing People’s Art Theatre. Particularly, the successful premiere of *Absolute Signal* (1982) in People’s Art Theatre was said to be “the birth of avant-garde theatre in Beijing”¹⁰⁰ by the French magazine *Cosmopolitan*. Aiming to create novel theatrical genres different from Henrik Ibsen’s dramatic realism and the Soviet performance training system, Gao Xingjian collaborated with Lin Zhaohua—a director belonging to the younger generation at the People’s Arts Theatre in the early 1980s—in the exploration of bridging the intellectual as well as aesthetic gaps between the *mise-en-scène* of modern Euro-American theatre and that of modern Chinese theatre. Initially, Gao and Lin’s search for new theatrical expression was appreciated by the administration of People’s Arts Theatre because of their enthusiasm for nonconventional stage aesthetics and a substantial number of positive commentaries from not only foreign journalists but also domestic critics. In his comprehensive review of Gao and Lin’s

⁹⁹ Henry Y. H. Zhao, *Towards A Modern Zen Theatre: Gao Xingjian and Chinese Theatre Experimentalism* (London: The School of Oriental and African Studies, 2000), 3.

¹⁰⁰ Gao Xingjian, “Wilted Chrysanthemums,” in *Gao Xingjian: The Case for Literature*, trans. Mabel Lee (New Heaven: Yale University Press, 2007), 143.

Absolute Signal, for instance, theatre historian Qu Liuyi 曲六乙 contends that Gao and Lin's work creates "a vibrant stage imagery based on the harmonious fusion between the crystalized aesthetics of Chinese indigenous theatre and the dramaturgical renovations of foreign theatre."¹⁰¹ As an expert of the histories of Chinese indigenous theatre and Chinese ethnic theatre, Qu's evaluation of Gao Xingjian and Lin Zhaohua's experimental debut recognizes their efforts to cultivate the local audience with the ability to go beyond the sense of realistic hallucination produced by the fourth wall effect on stage while insisting that Gao and Lin's aesthetic breakthrough remains grounded on "the soil of Chinese indigenous theatre aesthetics."¹⁰² In other words, although Qu offers positive feedback on Gao and Lin's courageous attempts to challenge the conventional dramaturgical principles on the Chinese stage, he prioritizes the techniques¹⁰³ appearing in many traditional Chinese art forms—painting, theatre, and calligraphy—as the foundation of their theatrical experimentation.

¹⁰¹ Qu Liuyi, "吸收. 溶化. 独创性" [Absorption, Fusion, and Uniqueness], *Renmin Xiju* No. 12 (1982): 28-29. The original Chinese text is: "在我看来, 它的主要艺术成就是, 在中国话剧艺术發展中, 把民族戏曲美学精华同当今外国戏剧某些表现手段, 比较和谐地溶化于生动感人的舞台艺术形象之中" (28).

¹⁰² Ibid., 29. The original Chinese text is: "因为它不是食古不化的怪胎, 而是扎根于民族戏曲美学的土壤, 批判地吸取外国艺术手法的产物."

¹⁰³ In Qu's review of *Absolute Signal*, he particularly emphasizes that Gao and Lin have incorporated the performance techniques from traditional Chinese arts into their experimental stage aesthetics. For instance, in the production, director Lin Zhaohua externalizes the characters' inner monologue without the assistance of voice recording or a narrator. Instead, Lin allows the actors to directly articulate their inner voices as part of their stage lines, thus reminding the audiences that the stage is not a faithful representation of their everyday life, but a fictional world created by the performers' subjective feelings and interpretations. This technique is similar to the use of "suppositionality" (*jiading xing* 假定性) by Chinese *Xiqu* actors, which stresses the fictionality of the stage.

Similarly, echoing Qu Liuyi's observation of how Gao Xingjian and Lin Zhaohua incorporate elements from traditional Chinese theatre into the production of *Absolute Signal*, Zhang Renli 張仁里, a former theatre professor at the Central Academy of Drama in Beijing, argues that "the director's innovative spirit is not only exemplified by his exploration of the characters' psychological states, but also his choices of scenic design, lighting, and artistic expression."¹⁰⁴ Specifically, Zhang believes that director Lin Zhaohua's appropriation of "suppositionality," a performance method widely used by Chinese *Xiqu* actors to highlight the fictional nature of the stage, is the key to the production's success in shifting the spectators' attention from the illusionary world presented on stage to the complex psychological states of the characters. In this regard, I would suggest that Gao and Lin's theatrical experimentation in the 1980s not only strived to create a new type of theatrical genre liberated from the rules of realist drama, but also endeavored to cultivate the audience members with the ability to appreciate a variety of experimental stage aesthetics inspired by their determination to establish an alternative theoretical foundation for the future development of modern Chinese drama and theatre.

In 1985, Gao Xingjian and Lin Zhaohua visited London and participated in a panel discussion hosted by University of Leeds. Entitled "The Identity of Chinese Theatre Today," Gao and Lin shared their reflections how the transition of China's political climate—from the post-Cultural Revolution sentiment in the 1970s to Deng Xiaoping's Reform and Opening-Up era in the 1980s—affects the emergence of

¹⁰⁴ Zhang Renli, "话剧舞台上的一次新探索" [A New Exploration on the Stage of Spoken Drama], *Renmin Xiju* No. 12 (1982): 29-31. The original Chinese text is: "导演的创新精神不仅表现在对人物心理刻画的探索上, 还表现在对舞台布景、灯光、效果的艺术处理上" (p. 30).

alternative forms of theatre practices in China. When Lin receives a question about what motivates him to explore new aesthetics forms with Gao, he explains:

Contemporary Chinese theatre is facing a test: it is in competition with films and television, so no-one wants to go to the theatre, and the audiences are getting smaller. The forms and techniques of the theatre, namely Stanislavski, are very old. I was trained in the Central Drama School in Beijing. I am not against this approach, but China has a population of one billion, so one Stanislavski is not enough; one “ism,” realism, is not enough. Our [Lin and Gao] point of departure is to start with traditional drama to influence modern Chinese plays, turning them into a combination of Western and Eastern drama. In Chinese drama, time and space is limitless: the limited space of the stage can be turned into a boundless universe, and time can change very freely.¹⁰⁵

Based on Lin’s remarks, Lin and Gao do not position traditional Chinese theatre as the opposite of Western modern drama and believe that these two theatrical systems are not mutually exclusive. In a sense, Lin and Gao’s pursuit of theatrical experimentation is not grounded in the complete deconstruction of performance traditions. Instead, they draw inspiration from traditional Chinese theatre and appropriate some of the acting techniques in order to accommodate language-based dramatic forms from the West.

¹⁰⁵ Don Rimmington, “The Identity of Chinese Theatre Today,” Panel Discussion (27 July, Royal Court Theatre, London), quoted in Ashley Thorpe, *Performing China on the London Stage* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 192.

Similarly, in an interview, Gao also expresses an identical attitude and clarifies that his understanding of avant-garde theatre is different from the scholarly definitions. In response to the nature of avant-garde theatre, Gao argues that: “There are various directions and experiments in relation to the practices of avant-garde theatre, so it is difficult to simply draw a hasty generalization. Generally speaking, avant-gardism is normally considered as anti-traditional. I have done a lot of experiments and explorations, but I am not against tradition. On the contrary, I explore possibilities for renewal from traditional theatre.”¹⁰⁶ Therefore, based on Gao’s accounts, his vanguard pursuit of new aesthetic expressions and the foundation of his collaboration with Lin Zhaohua are not built upon a radical impetus for the collapse of tradition. To some extent, Gao is more interested in “moving beyond the rigid framework of realist stylistics, breaking the monopoly of Henrik Ibsen and Konstantin Stanislavsky, and thereby shaking the foundation that had underpinned the concept of modern ‘spoken dram’ [*huaju*] for decades”¹⁰⁷ in China.

It is important to recall that Gao Xingjian’s aesthetic manifestations (e.g., Cold Theatre), as I have introduced above, are often one-sidedly understood as either Gao’s guerrilla resistance to political persecutions from the Communist Party or his uncompromised belief in absolute individual agency by many literary and drama

¹⁰⁶ Gao Xingjian and Gilbert C. F. Fong, “論戲劇” [On Drama/Theatre], (Taipei: Linking Publishing, 2004), 71. The original Chinese text is: “前衛戲劇五花八門，眾多的方向，眾多的實驗，很難一概而論。一般所謂前衛也即反傳統，我也做許多的試驗和探索，可我不反傳統。相反，我往往從傳統的戲劇中去找尋更新的機制。”

¹⁰⁷ Izabella Łabędzka, “Avant-Garde Theater: New Trends in Chinese Experimental Drama near the Close of the Twentieth Century,” in *Asian Literary Voices: From Marginal to Mainstream*, ed. Philip F. Williams (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010), 98. It is worth noting that the author’s analysis of Gao’s experimental approach refers to the dramatic productions Gao made in the 1980s when he was still in the PRC.

scholars. While acknowledging the importance of their scholarly contributions, I would reiterate my argument of this chapter that such understandings of Gao's early theatrical experimentation have implicitly attributed Gao's success to his individual talents and moral courage, which inevitably neglects the fact that Gao's domestic and global triumphs are the result of his interdisciplinary as well as intercultural collaborations with various artists and his pursuit of experimentation supported by China's theatre field at this time. This argument, at a conceptual level, serves as the rationale of my focus on the role of Lin Zhaohua in the formation of Gao's early avant-garde aesthetics. Methodically, my approach is to draw a parallel between Gao's dramaturgical theories (e.g., total theatre) and Lin Zhaohua's directing methods (e.g., the duel structure of acting) and analyze their affinities as well as differences. In doing so, it recontextualizes Gao's theatrical experimentation within the genealogy of Mainland China's theatre reform movements from the Republican era (1912-1949) to the PRC era (1949-the present). Without a close look at Lin Zhaohua's contributions to the development of Gao Xingjian's avant-garde aesthetics, the future scholarship on the history of modern Chinese theatre will remain obscured by a discursive blind spot reiterating that Gao's play *Absolute Signal* designates the birth of Chinese avant-garde theatre and potentially foreshadows the death of the Ibsen-Stanislavski repertoires.

Of course, by making reference to the death-birth paradigm here, I am not suggesting that the successful debut of Gao and Lin first stage production automatically leads to the disappearance of Ibsenian realism and Stanislavski acting techniques in the theatre venues of the PRC. On the contrary, this paradigm serves as

a critical entry point for us to rethink how the current scholarship on the PRC's avant-garde theatre history is constructed through a conscious choice of marking Gao's dramatic pieces produced in the 1980s as the historical beginning of the country's search for theatrical modernization. Significantly, by emphasizing the importance of Lin Zhaohua's collaboration with Gao Xingjian, I want to trace the genealogical development of avant-garde theatres in the mainland and ask on what basis is Gao's work widely considered the starting point in the history of the country's theatrical avant-garde movements. The ultimate goal of using this paradigm is to draw further attention to the sociopolitical factors determining how the history of modern Chinese avant-garde theatre is made. In other words, I do not simply repeat some of the historical evidence analyzed in the previous scholarship on Gao Xingjian's dramatic plays and theatre productions but focus more on the ways in which these historical materials are cautiously selected and purposely rearranged by scholars to write a history of contemporary Chinese avant-garde theatre deemed to be problematic, in my opinion, when it is closely examined within the larger historical context of twentieth-century China.

Gao Xingjian is often associated with the emergence of China's experimental theatre movements in the twentieth century because the definitions of "the experimental" and "the avant-garde" remain in flux and often require specific contextualization. For example, as shown in Figure 2.1, many amateur theatre troupes in Shanghai during the 1930s had used the term "experimental theatre" to designate a theatre genre that is politically charged with leftist thoughts. The image attached below (Figure 2.1) is from *Iron Newspaper* (鐵報 *Tiebo*), a Shanghai-based local

tabloid known for sharp criticism of the Kuomintang government and innovative coverage of native entertainment news. Published on May 31, 1936, this special issue features the establishment of a new theatre troupe named “Week Experimental Little Theatre” (星期實驗小劇場). In terms of the content, the columns include special remarks from the newspaper editor (upper right), the “manifesto” of Week Experimental Little Theatre (upper left), and a brief commentary on the troupe’s initiation (the middle). Significantly, from the editor’s remarks, the role experimental theatre played in the society during the 1930s is clearly highlighted. As the editor writes:

Only a small number of people devoting themselves to theatrical activities in the literary and art fields of China. Among these people, two specific groups need to be identified and then removed. The first group is the one that utilizes theatre as a tool to achieve career success in government service. What motivates them to do theatre is the goal to become an official in the government, which turns the stage into the ladders leading to one’s political success. The second group is identified as those who are “theatre phonies” since their goals to swindle money and fake reputation are covered under the disguise of performing civilized drama to the public. Of course, there are theatre makers quietly and diligently working on their productions as well. However, if the two marked groups are excluded from the theatre circle, those left and considered diligent are proved to be an extremely small group in the field. Sunday Experimental Little Theatre Group consists of several hardworking theatre makers truly devoting themselves to the theatrical

developments in China. Making money is not part of their agenda. They are not interested in establishing a reputation as the field's pioneer artists through their participation in another kind of so-called theatrical movement either. It would be great if they can just concentrate on their experimental work. I believe that the future of Chinese theatre should not count on those drama "experts."¹⁰⁸



Figure 2.1 The special issue on the initiative of Shanghai's Week Experimental Little Theatre Group. Printed in Iron Newspaper, May 31, 1936. Courtesy of Late Qing and Republican-Era Chinese Newspapers.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁸ The original Chinese text is: “在這文藝界致力於戲劇運動的人數並不多。而這寥寥可數的幾個人中，還要除去兩種人：一種是想靠戲劇登龍的，其目的在做官而不在做戲，舞台被他當作作了上『場』（官場也）的階梯。一種是專賣野人頭的『劇伶』假話劇之名，演文明之戲，其目的在騙錢在盜名。自然這中間也還有不聲不響，在埋頭苦幹著的戲劇運動者，但二下五除一，剩下來的更其『寥寥』。星期天實驗小劇場，是由幾個真正努力於劇運的戲劇者所組織的，他們大概不想因此賺錢，也不想藉此造成『戲劇前輩』，去從事另一種所謂『戲劇運動』。倘不錯，那樣就很好。我以為中國話劇的前途，是不在那些戲劇『家』身上的。”

¹⁰⁹ The full text is available on <https://gpa.eastview.com/crl/lqrcn/?a=d&d=tibo19360531-01.1.2&srpos=2&e=-----cn-25-tibo-1--img-txIN-%e5%af%9a%e9%a9%97%e5%b0%8f%e5%8a%87%e5%a0%b4----->. Accessed on May 10, 2020.

From these passages, it is important to note that the editor critiques those who simply use theatre performance as a tool to make acquaintance with the officials and the rich in order to elevate their social status. To him/her, this is not what theatre does for the society. Therefore, the editorial office decides to support Week Experimental Theatre because the members have a sense of mission and believe that “theatrical experimentation” will bring new thought-provoking ideas for the majority. Although it is worth noting that many amateur theatre groups worked closely with the Communist Party in the 1930s, I am not suggesting that Gao Xingjian’s “experimental” theatre derives from the experimental styles in the 1930s. Rather, by introducing this piece of archival material from the Republican era, I would like to reiterate that terms like the experimental, the avant-garde, or the alternative are loosely defined in accordance with specific contexts. In the case of Week Experimental Theatre, it is apparent that the emergence of experimental theatre was a response to the political *crisis* in the 1930s when China was involved in wars.

In Gao Xingjian’s case, one could argue that his pursuit of experimental/avant-garde theatre is also a response to the crisis of modern Chinese theatre as Ibsen-styled realism is pervasive in almost every performance venue. Therefore, the ability to create new aesthetic approaches is fundamentally important to Gao as an artist. He writes:

The process of artistic creation will not carry significant meaning if the artist simply repeats what has been done by the previous generation without expressing personal viewpoint and producing novel work. Aesthetic creation means that the artist must break with the established conventions, including

those theoretical regulations. In other words, the artist's individual aesthetics is inseparable from the process of artistic creation. This kind of aesthetics, at first, is based on the artist's personal opinion derived from his or her personal aesthetic sensibility and understanding. Using artistic expression as a vehicle to put his or her aesthetic viewpoint and method into practice, the artist must maintain a close tie to the praxis of artistic creation when developing his or her aesthetics. Therefore, it is pointless for an artist to define what beauty means because such a task is out of the question.¹¹⁰

In accordance with Gao's logic here, it is clear that the artist prioritizes the role of individual thinking and foregrounds the importance of breaking established rules and boundaries. A desire for the unknown and a sharp awareness of aesthetic distance constitute the foundation of Gao's experimental aesthetics. In what follows, I will examine *Snow in August*, a transnational collaboration between Gao and the government of Taiwan in 2002 and discuss how the stage production embodies the concept of Sinophone theatre network.

¹¹⁰ Gao Xingjian, "有限與無限—創作美學" [The Finite and The Infinite: The Aesthetics of Creation], *Hong Kong Drama Review* No.8 (2009): 3-13. p. 4. This essay is published in Mandarin Chinese and the content is based on Gao's seminar lecture delivered at The Chinese University of Hong Kong on May 23, 2008. The English translation is mine and the original Chinese text is: "藝術家如果不能提出他自己的看法，做出新鮮的成績來，只是重複前人，那麼這創作的意義就不大。藝術創作本身就意味藝術家必須突破已有的規範，包括理論規範。換句話說，藝術家的美學必須跟藝術創作聯繫在一起，首先得是藝術家個人的看法，出在他個人的審美感受與認識，以一種藝術形式來體現他的藝術觀和他的方法，而這一切都必須與藝術創作的實踐密切聯繫在一起。所以，對藝術家而言，去定義美是沒有意義的，也是不可能的。"

2.3 Sinophone Theatre Network as a Mobile Ensemble: *Snow in August* (2002) in Taiwan

Snow in August is a full-length play written by Gao Xingjian and completed in 1997. The Chinese translation of this play was published by Taiwan's Linking Publishing 聯經出版 in 2000. It was originally developed as a tailored dramatic text for Taiwan's GuoGuang Opera Company 國光劇團 (a professional *xiqu* theatre troupe) as part of their annual productions that year. However, this project was not carried out in the end because of issues regarding the availability of performance venues and the pressure of budget concern. While Gao assumed that the play might not be performed as planned, his winning of the Nobel Prize in 2000 unexpectedly contributed to the debut performance of *Snow in August* in 2002. In fact, the eventual fulfillment of this performance project is a result of Gao's participation in a series of celebratory events hosted by the city government of Taipei and the central government of Taiwan in 2001 for congratulating Gao on his groundbreaking accomplishment.

One year after the presidential election of the Republic of China (Taiwan) in 2000, Gao Xingjian visited Taiwan for two weeks and received generous hospitality from Long Ying-tai 龍應台 (Director of the Department of Cultural Affairs of Taipei City Government), Ma Ying-jeou 馬英九 (Mayor of Taipei City), Tchen Yu-chiou 陳郁秀 (Executive Director of the Council of Cultural Affairs, the Republic of China), and Chen Shui-bian 陳水扁 (President of the Republic of China), a diverse group of cultural celebrities in Taiwan, and Gao's readers in Greater China. As mentioned

earlier in this chapter, the PRC government did not express excitement to Gao's Nobel triumph due to his nationality as a French citizen and his dissident attitude towards the Chinese Communist Party's governance in the mainland. Ironically, after the Nobel Prize committee officially announced that Gao was the winner for the literature prize, many cultural elites and academic intellectuals in Taiwan were extremely enthusiastic about Gao's marvelous achievement. All of a sudden, among the global Chinese-speaking communities, Taiwan became the place where many people identified themselves with Gao's honor *as if* Gao were born and raised in Taiwan. The majority of media agencies in Taiwan consistently used slogans like "the glory of *huaren*¹¹¹ 華人之光" to show their admiration of Gao's international success.

Although this would sound a bit exaggerated, during Gao's 2001 trip to Taiwan, it could be said that there was a sensational wave of "Gao Xingjian Fever" in the island. For instance, after the news confirmation of Gao's Nobel victory, many readers in Taiwan flooded into bookstores to purchase Gao Xingjian's novels, plays, essays, and collections of criticism. Prior to 2000, according to the publisher¹¹² of Gao's work in Taiwan, the overall sales figures of Gao's printed books were not

¹¹¹ See Shelly Chan, *Diaspora's Homeland: Modern China in the Age of Global Migration* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), 5. In a literary sense, the English translation of *huaren* (華人) is still "Chinese," referring to people "who locate their cultural origins in China but politically oriented to their adopted countries" (Chan 5). In Taiwan, the rhetorical expression of *huaren* is, most of the time, a diplomatic term used to avoid debates over one's positionality. For example, after the Martial Law was lifted in 1987, when one says he/she is "Chinese" in Taiwan, many people will believe that he/she identifies himself/herself with "the Chinese mainland" instead of Taiwan. Therefore, the use of *huaren* becomes a neutral form of language expression in the context of Taiwan's identity politics.

¹¹² Linking Publishing 聯經出版 is the main publisher of Gao's novels and plays in Taiwan. The company has published a comprehensive collection of Gao's work since 1990. For more information, please see <https://www.linkingbooks.com.tw/lmb/author/Author.aspx?ID=0001009>. Accessed on January 25, 2020.

significantly impressive. Taking Gao's *Soul Mountain* (1990) for instance, between 1990 and 2000 in Taiwan, the total number of sold volumes is less than 4000.¹¹³ However, between 2000 and 2001, the sales numbers went at least 5 times higher than the average of the past ten years. Additionally, readers in Taiwan also purchased Gao's plays and interview collections, contributing to the remarkable sales number of 15,000 volumes¹¹⁴ for the printed copy of *Snow in August*. It is evident that the popularity of Gao's work in Taiwan and his reputation as the pride of the global Sinophone communities played a vital role in the making of the stage production of *Snow in August* later in 2002. Specifically, after Gao and President Chen Shui-bian had a meeting in the Presidential Office Building in Taipei on February 6, 2001, Chen consulted members of the Council of Cultural Affairs and they reached a consensus that the central government must strengthen artistic collaborations between Taiwan and the world by concrete plans and strategies. Such a political intervention from the government of Taiwan leads to the birth of the stage version of Gao's *Snow in August* as the government sponsors the production costs in the amount of approximately 30 million NT Dollars¹¹⁵ (about 3 million US Dollars). With the full support from Taiwan, Gao revised the scripts of *Snow in August* again in 2001 and brought it to the

¹¹³ Peng Yu, “文學揚眉，台分享喜悅” [Literature Triumphs, Taiwan Shares the Joyfulness], in “解讀高行健” [Interpreting Gao Xingjian] edited by Lin Manshu (Hong Kong: Min Pao Publications, 2000), 117-121. p. 118.

¹¹⁴ Lu Yan-li, “靈山變金山” [Soul Mountain Becomes Gold Mountain], *Business Today* (February 2001): 46.
<https://www.bustoday.com.tw/article/category/183030/post/200102220026/%E9%9D%88%E5%B1%B1%E8%AE%8A%E9%87%91%E5%B1%B1%20P.46>. Accessed on October 11, 2020.

¹¹⁵ Zhan Min-xu, “Identity and Effects of Shame: Contextualizing Contemporary Taiwanese Literary Production in the Sinophone World,” PhD Diss., (National Cheng Kung University, 2013), 77.

rehearsal space in Taipei four months prior to the debut performance in December 2002.

The world premiere of *Snow in August* is on December 19th, 2002, and it consists of artists, musicians, and performers across the globe. The leading performers and designers include: Gao Xingjian 高行健 (Director, France), Wu Hsing-kuo 吳興國 (Actor, Taiwan), Lin Hsiu-wei 林秀偉 (Choreographer, Taiwan), Li Ching-mei 李靜美 (Music Supervisor, Taiwan), Marc Trautmann (Conductor, France), Nie Guang-Yan 聶光炎 (Stage Designer, Taiwan), Tim Yip Kam-tim (Costume Designer, Hong Kong), Philippe Gersperrin (Lighting Design, France), and Xu Shuya 許舒亞 (Music Composer, the PRC). By forming a group of artists with different cultural, ethnic, and language backgrounds, Gao Xingjian emphasizes that the stage production of *Snow in August* embodies his concept of “omnipotent theatre”—a type of modern theatre mobilizing “all available performance techniques and [include] in theatre creation the performance methods of song, dance, masks, face make-up, magic, and acrobatics.”¹¹⁶ As a play drawing on the concept and practice of Zen Buddhism, *Snow in August* represents Gao’s efforts to break all the aesthetic boundaries with regard to theatre making. Gao incorporates elements from Peking opera, symphony, modern dance, Zen arts, and musical theatre into the performance style and stage design of the production.

¹¹⁶ Gao Xingjian, “The Potential of Theatre,” in *Gao Xingjian: Aesthetics and Creation*, translated by Mabel Lee (Amherst, MA: Cambria Press, 2012), 45.

Spanning over 250 years in ancient China,¹¹⁷ the plots of *Snow in August* revolve around the life journey of a Zen master, Huineng (the sixth Patriarch), who transforms from an illiterate woodcutter to a legendary religious leader. Structurally, the play is divided into three acts with 7 scenes. Act one unfolds when young Huineng articulates a monologue detailing his miserable childhood. His father used to be an official in the central government. Unfortunately, he was sent to exile with his wife and son because those in power were offended by Huineng's father. After this self-introduction episode, the first scene of act one features young Huineng's encounter with a Buddhist nun in a temple and showcases their different interpretations of Buddhist scriptures. In act one scene two, young Huineng shows his talent in the spiritual practice of Buddhism and his wisdom is soon recognized by the fifth Patriarch of Zen Buddhism, Hongren. The last scene of act one dramatizes the aftermath of Huineng's succession as the sixth Patriarch along with the rebel of the monks against Huineng's leadership. In the end, Huineng has no choice but to flee into exile.

The second act of the play illuminates how Huineng continues to promote Zen Buddhism as he travels to different places. After Huineng successfully gives his first Zen Buddhist lesson in a pulpit, his profound wisdom is recognized by his followers and simultaneously attracts the emperor and the royal family's attention. In the end, Huineng disobeys the imperial edict demanding his return to the capital because he strives to maintain his freedom. The final scene of act two serves as a quasi-climax

¹¹⁷ In the dramatic text, Gao Xingjian clearly indicates that the time period of this play is from the mid-seventh century to the end of the ninth century. For more information, please see Gao Xingjian, *Snow in August*, translated by Gilbert C. F. Fong (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2003), 3.

moment when Huineng informs his fellow monks that he is about to die in August and will neither leave nor take anything in and from the world. Act three describes what happened after Huineng's death two hundred years ago. This formless episode highlights the evolution of Zen Buddhism and its organic development as time progresses. It is worth noting that, according to Gao, the structure of play requires substantial adjustment because the stage production employs diverse music genres, which was not part of the dramaturgical components in the original version written in 1997. Hence, in order to comply with the sound designer's music composition, Gao altered the original play by restructuring the end of act two and the act three. For the production version, Gao moves the scene of Huineng's death (originally in act two scene 4) to the beginning of act three, resulting in two newly developed scenes for the third act. Act three in the 1997 version used to be a single act without additional scene breakdowns, but Gao condenses the length of the original act three and redesigns it as the final scene of act three for the performance version.

At a conceptual level, the production of *Snow in August* is a piece of avant-garde theatre with its emphasis on border-crossing aesthetics. First of all, the mixture of multiple performance genres and methods in *Snow in August* makes it immensely difficult to identify what type of theatre that production is. In an interview with Tchen Yu-chiou, the producer of *Snow in August*, Gao shared partial details about the rehearsals with Tchen and emphasized that the piece is a product of collective creation instead of his personal work. Gao remarks:

I cannot say that I am teaching the actors how to perform. Instead, I would say that we collectively create this production and explore the methods together.

The selected artists are accomplished actors and choreographers, but we need to collaborate with one another. The type of theatre we want to present to the audience requires omnipotent actors. We recruit *jingju* actors, but we do not perform *jingju*. We need to work on music composition and the actors are required to do vocal training, but we do not want the singing styles and methods of Peking opera. Not only do the actors give vocal performance, but they also participate in the training of physical movement. It is not my intent to have everyone learn how to perform modern dance. I help them explore alternative ways of physical movement so that the actors will forget the performance patterns used in *jingju* repertoires. The production features dialogue, but it is neither spoken drama nor *jingju*-styled articulations. It [*Snow in August*] becomes a type of omnipotent theatre under this circumstance. It is not Peking opera, western opera, dance, or spoken drama, but elements from these performance genres are incorporated into this production. This artistic fusion results in a brand-new style and I call it “*sibuxiang* 四不像”¹¹⁸ (four unlikes).¹¹⁹

¹¹⁸ Thomas Y. T. Luk, “From Brecht, Artaud, the Absurd to Sha Yexin and Gao Xingjian: Two Cases of Rapport de Fait,” *Comparative Literature Studies* 48.1 (2011): 64-81. p. 77. Literally, the term “*sibuxiang*” in Chinese means that it is something completely unrecognizable. “Four unlikes” is the literal translation of the term in English.

¹¹⁹ Gao Xingjian, “陳郁秀與高行健對談台灣文化” [Tchen Yu-chiou and Gao Xingjian Talk about Taiwanese Culture], in “論創作” [*On Creation*] (Taipei: Linking Publishing, 2008), 271. The original text is: “我不能說這是在教大家演戲，而應該說是大家一起創作，大家一起摸索，這次我們選的人員都是有成就的演員、有成就的編舞，很出色的，可是要通力合作。我想，這次我們要做的一種戲劇，要一種全能的演員，用的是京劇演員，可又不演京劇；音樂要作曲，要大家練聲，可又不是京劇的唱腔和唱法，也不是西方歌劇的唱法；不只是唱還又請來編舞，給大家做形體訓練，可又不是要大家學現代舞，只是要找出另外一種肢體表現，化解掉原有的京劇功夫底子；又有對話又不是話劇，也不是京腔對白，在這種情況之下做一種全能的戲劇，既不是京

In his own words, Gao Xingjian clearly elucidates the concept of “omnipotent theatre” and uses the creation process of *Snow in August* as an example. In other words, Gao endeavors to experiment with different theatrical genres in the hope of inventing a new type of aesthetic performance transcending the current evaluation criteria such as the West, the East, the traditional, the modern, the postmodern, the kitsch, and the intercultural. In this regard, *Snow in August* is passionately embraced by many cultural critics and performance artists as an avant-garde production because it resists the established norms of aesthetic practices and envisions a new performance style that is yet to come in the present.

While Gao’s efforts to produce a type of unprecedented new theatre sound ambitious and radical, it is worth noting that this production is not artistically sophisticated without structural and thematic flaws. First of all, Gao as the director of *Snow in August* remains the authority figure despite claiming the final product is based on the collective done by all the team members. This phenomenon is particularly observable when Gao communicated with the actors and designers in the rehearsal days. The experience of Wu Hsing-kuo—the protagonist Huineng in *Snow in August*—could be a point of departure for us to examine the power dynamics between Gao and the performers. Trained as a Peking opera actor, Wu Hsing-kuo received solid training in operatic singing, acrobatic movement, and martial arts posture from his *jingju* education. In 1986, he established a theatre company called the Contemporary Legend Theatre in pursuit of saving traditional Chinese theatre

劇，也不是西方歌劇，又不是舞蹈，又不是話劇，卻各種成分都有，融合為一種新的形式，我把它叫做「四不像」。”

from its demise in contemporary Taiwan. In order to achieve that goal, Wu and his troupe members have produced a series of avant-garde Peking opera based on the fusion of classic literature from the West (e.g., Shakespeare) and the performance methods of *jingju*. Therefore, Gao's search for a new aesthetic model is no stranger to Wu.

Nevertheless, in the rehearsal space, Wu was constantly saturated with a strong sense of frustration when the preparation for the show was still in the early stage. As Gao has indicated in the interview, he wanted the actors with *jingju* backgrounds to “let go” of their professional identities and performance methods. In doing so, Gao paid attention to the playfulness and the possibilities when experimenting the new methods with the actors and designers. However, from the actors' perspective, it was challenging for them to change their behavioral patterns on stage in accordance with the abstract instructions from Gao. In Wu Hsing-kuo's case, Gao insisted that Wu's bodily movement should be more flexible and spontaneous as if he were to perform modern dance. However, the tricky part is that Gao did not expect Wu to use well-trained dancing skills to showcase how Huineng as a character moves on stage. Gao told Wu that his performance cannot be confined by the language of the play because what he had to do was to transform the linguistic connotations of the text into “abstract rhythm and posture” and “reproduced a set of repertoires different from the textual version.”¹²⁰

¹²⁰ Chou Mei-Hui, “雪地禪思: 高行健執導八月雪現場筆記” [*Meditation on Snow Ground: The Production Notes of Snow in August by Gao Xingjian*] (Taipei: Linking Publishing, 2002), 22. The original Chinese text is: “但高行健看過之後，要求他「從容、簡化」不必被劇本的語言左右「要把所有解說性的身段，像是小兒、睡覺、顛三倒四等，通通化解為抽象的節奏和姿態，再做個完全不一樣的來」。”

Not knowing how to improve, Wu Hsing-kuo responded to Gao's comments with a sense of confusion and argued that "my body cannot move without the impacts of the text."¹²¹ Indeed, becoming a professional *jingju* actor requires years of persistent physical training and repetitive practices for one single posture or speech pattern. There is no doubt that even a highly experienced *jingju* actor like Wu Hsing-kuo would feel disoriented with regard to Gao Xingjian's abstract instructions and requirements. In addition to acting styles, the performers in *Snow in August* also dealt with a similar dilemma when it comes to vocal expressions. For the stage version of *Snow in August*, Gao Xingjian abandons the music instruments¹²² appearing in *jingju* performance and selecting symphony as the primary music genre. Although the mixture of western music composition and Chinese performance tradition is groundbreaking, Gao Xingjian directorial choice, at this point, becomes a major obstacle to those *jingju* actors who have trouble reading sheet music. The problem here is that, for *jingju* actors, the percussive sound from instruments like *jinghu* 京胡 and *dalu* 大鑼 serves as a rhythmic transition reminding the actors of the timing of their appearance on stage. Therefore, the *jingju* actors in *Snow in August* have no choice but to memorize the specific music notations of their individual sections in advance or keep watching the videorecording of the rehearsals as a tool to create body memory.

¹²¹ Ibid., 22. The original Chinese text is "我的身段很難不受劇本的語言左右."

¹²² Grinnell College's Musical Instrument Collection establishes a digital database introducing the major instruments used in *jingju* performance. It includes visual renderings of the instruments and sound samples. For more information, please see <https://omeka-s.grinnell.edu/s/MusicalInstruments/page/beijing>. Accessed October 30, 2020.

Similarly, the gap between Gao's aesthetic pursuit and the group members' backgrounds deserves critical attention as well. For instance, Lin Hsiu-wei was hired as a choreographer and movement coach for the production because Gao Xingjian believed that alternative dance training will help the *jingju* actors use their body in a flexible manner. Lin's experience as a movement instructor for the production team is worth mentioning here since that relates to the presence and influence of Gao's authority as the director. According to Lin, being part of the production team gave her a sense of pressure because she is like someone who "intrudes his [Gao's] Zen temple and is required to obey his rules."¹²³ In the rehearsal events, Lin was constantly under pressure because her creative ideas were, most of the time, considered incompatible with the Zen poetic atmosphere of the production from Gao's perspective. Perhaps, this dilemma has much to do with Lin's training background as well. As a professional dancer, Lin is trained as a modern dance practitioner and studied in the United States in 1987. After completing her coursework in New York, Lin returned to Taiwan in the same year and established her dance troupe, The Tai Gu Tales Dance Theatre. In terms of Lin's choreographic style, she emphasizes how a dancer's body externalizes one's spontaneous feelings in relation to the rhythm and vibration of mother nature and the cosmos. Aesthetically, Lin's work involves strong physical waves¹²⁴ as the body moves, which is opposed to Gao's pursuit of simplicity and

¹²³ Chou Mei-Hui, "雪地禪思: 高行健執導八月雪現場筆記" [*Meditation on Snow Ground: The Production Notes of Snow in August by Gao Xingjian*] (Taipei: Linking Publishing, 2002), 189. The original Chinese text is: "「我好像進入他(高行健)的禪寺, 先得接受戒律才行!」."

¹²⁴ A sample video of Tai Gu Tales Dance Theatre's production, "心之景" [The Landscape of Heart, 2020], is available on <https://archive.ncafroc.org.tw/result?id=dd63605ba2464eaca0c9d711d24bd221>. Accessed on March 11, 2021.

tranquility in *Snow in August*. As a result, Lin acknowledged that her choreographic work was turned down by Gao several times and she did not have much space in terms of aesthetic creativity. Most importantly, Lin revealed the unpleasant fact that her artistic creation was governed by Gao's rules. Thus, she was not the one "creating or making movement" but someone who cautiously tried to "initiate or promote tiny creative ideas."¹²⁵

Lin Hsiu-wei's oppressed experience as a female dance practitioner in the production team requires critical attention because many scholars and critics tend to overlook the stereotypical representations of women in Gao's work. Therefore, by shifting focus from the rehearsal process to textual analysis, I would like to draw our attention to the lack of gender consciousness in the dramatic text of *Snow in August*. In the play, the story begins when young Huineng is a woodcutter making a living by firewood delivery service. The first scene of *Snow in August* features the unexpected encounter between Huineng and Boundless Treasure,¹²⁶ a young Buddhist nun living alone in a temple. It is a rainy night and Huineng overhears Boundless chanting Buddhist scriptures as he is unloading the firewood in the hall of the temple. Not knowing who Huineng is, Boundless asks him to leave the place because Huineng's presence prevents her from concentrating on the daily religious lesson. To Boundless' surprise, Huineng keeps begging for her permission to stay aside and listen to her chanting quietly. Feeling a sense of irritation, Boundless suggests that Huineng can read the

¹²⁵ Chou Mei-Hui, "雪地禪思: 高行健執導八月雪現場筆記" [*Meditation on Snow Ground: The Production Notes of Snow in August by Gao Xingjian*] (Taipei: Linking Publishing, 2002), 190. The original Chinese text is: "林秀偉開始嘗試一些「撥動」或「推送」的小創意，而不是製造或創造動作。"

¹²⁶ In what follows, I will use Boundless as the abbreviation of the character's name in my analysis.

scriptures himself and leave her alone. With a peaceful tone, Huineng reveals that he is illiterate. Upon hearing Huineng's response, Boundless is involved in a debate with Huineng regarding one's ability to be enlightened by Buddhist text:

Boundless: If you don't know any words, how can you understand what I am chanting? (*Beats the wooden fish twice then stops. Thinks to herself.*) Maybe this guy has an ulterior motive or something wicked on his mind?

Huineng: When we're thinking we don't need to write anything down. Especially with the profound wisdom of Buddha nature, how can it be explained by words? Why should literacy be a barrier? Please go on chanting. I'm listening. (*Boundless resumes her position, beats the wooden fish and start to chant rapidly.*)

Huineng: You're chanting too fast. (*Boundless Treasure turns to look at Huineng and frowns.*)

Huineng: The words can't get into your heart if you chant so fast. (*Boundless Treasure beats the wooden fish and chants slowly.*)

Huineng: Now you're too slow. You see, the sentences are all cut up and the thoughts broken.

Boundless: Do you want to listen or not?

Huineng: (*Takes one step forward and leans to one side, paying full attention.*) I'm all ears.

Boundless: (*Thinks to herself.*) This guy is a real pain! (*Beats the wooden fish*

continuously.)¹²⁷

According to the conversation between Huineng and Boundless, we as the readers will have a clear sense of the characters' personal traits. First of all, it is apparent that Huineng always responds to Boundless' demand or request with calmness and easiness (Figure 2.2). Although he cannot recognize a single character in the Buddhist scriptures, Huineng does not feel inferior to Boundless as he confidently informs Boundless of her unstable chanting rhythm. On the contrary, Boundless is impatient and often externalizes her internal emotions through tonal shift and speech pace. As a counterpart figure of Huineng in this scene, Boundless epitomizes the human flaws shared by the majority of ordinary people, whereas Huineng embodies the ultimate wisdom of Zen Buddhism with the emphasis on tranquility and unselfishness.



Figure 2.2 Wu Hsing-kuo (left) as Huineng and Pu Sheng-chuan (right) as Boundless Treasure.
Source: DVD Published by the Council for Cultural Affairs (Taiwan), 2003

¹²⁷ Gao Xingjian, *Snow in August*, trans. Gilbert C. F. Fong (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2003), 5-6.

Although Gao Xingjian emphasizes that *Snow in August* is based on the story of a real historical figure whose legendary life experience is similar to that of Huineng, it is equally important to point out that the portrayals of women in this production are profoundly problematic and disturbing. Throughout the play, Gao develops the characters' individual traits based on a premise that "Huineng is the one with a transcendental soul whereas women like Boundless Treasure and Song Girl have been struggling with aggravations in reality."¹²⁸ When the play is adapted into a stage production, Gao does not ameliorate the asymmetrical power structure between Huineng and the two female protagonists, which is a pitfall that scholars and critics tend to overlook.

To conclude, by using *Snow in August* as an instance to conceptualize the notion of Sinophone theatre network, I investigate how this production calls for a Sinophone theatre community where performers and designers familiar with Chinese cultural heritage exchanges ideas about new theatrical forms. While Gao successfully facilitates a platform for cultural exchange and aesthetic experimentation, I suggest that the collaboration between Gao and the government of Taiwan also requires more critical attention because this relationship is not reciprocal. At a practical level, the government of Taiwan invested time and money in the production of *Snow in August* since the Taiwanese officials were confident that the Nobel laureate's world reputation would help Taiwan promote its international visibility. The mindset is

¹²⁸ Chou Mei-Hui, "一齣全能的戲：專訪高行健談「八月雪」" [An Omnipotent Drama: Interview with Gao Xingjian], *Unitas Magazine* 19.2 (2002): 47-53. p. 50. The original Chinese text is: "慧能是超越的，而無盡藏和歌伎所構成的女性，始終在現實的苦惱中。"

particularly observable when the producer of *Snow in August*, Tchen Yu-chiou responds to an interview question regarding whether she read Gao's play prior to her decision to support the production. As Tchen said: "Actually, I hadn't previously read *Snow in August*, but I did understand what its artistic and creative merits were. The creative merit of Gao Xingjian's works is beyond question, irrespective of whether it is his novels, paintings, or plays."¹²⁹ At one level, Tchen's answer reflects a type of blind spot that prevents her from evaluating the value of her collaboration with Gao. Namely, her trust in Gao's work is merely based on the assumption that Gao's artistic creation is impeccable because the Nobel Prize committee have confirmed his talent. Arguably, this is the reason why a critical discussion of the power dynamics within the structure of the production team is necessary. Dance choreographer Lin Hsiu-wei's experience provides us with a crucial reminder that the issue of gender deserves equal attention when male artists relatively receive more resources and sponsorship compared with their female colleagues in the Sinophone communities.

2.4 Conclusion

In "The Postcolonial Blind Spot: Chinese Dance in the Era of Third Worldism, 1949-1965," Chinese dance scholar Emily Wilcox points out that historically Anglophone scholarship on Chinese dance tends to interpret the dance culture shaped in the Mao Zedong era (1949-1976) as a performance practice centering exclusively on the production and circulation of *revolutionary ballet*. This

¹²⁹ Sun Sung-tang, "Made in Taiwan—Interview with *Snow in August* Producer Tchen Yu-chiou," trans. James Decker, *Taiwan Panorama*, September 2002. <https://www.taiwanpanorama.com.tw/Articles/Details?Guid=e103e9b7-97c7-476c-8f66-f5723209ecbd&langId=3&CatId=8>. Accessed on December 5, 2020.

one-sided perception, Wilcox argues, “helps sustain a Cold War vision of Maoist culture as both oppressive to artistic creativity and hostile to indigenous cultural traditions.”¹³⁰ Although the research scope of Wilcox’s article deals with the pre-Cultural Revolution period and is different from the time period covered in this chapter, the notion of “blind spot” is in conversation with my critique of the scholarly documentation of Gao Xingjian’s aesthetic accomplishments. Blinded by the light of Gao’s Nobel medal, many scholars tend to overlook the fact that Gao’s career achievements are not based on his individual efforts. Instead, we should not overlook Gao’s artistic partnership with performers and designers with different ethnic, national, and language backgrounds.

Whether Gao is Chinese or not does not really matter when it comes to aesthetic innovation and theatrical experimentation. The most important part is that, as performance scholar James Harding has reminded us, “the avant-gardes are constituted not in the successes or the failures—not in the rise or the decline—but in the experimental gestures leading potentially to either outcome.”¹³¹ Likewise, through my analysis of Gao’s avant-garde theatre legacy and the controversial debates surrounding his advocacy of a distance-based cold theatre, I believe that the failures of Gao’s experimental approaches also deserve our attention in future scholarship.

¹³⁰ Emily Wilcox, “The Postcolonial Blind Spot: Chinese Dance in the Era of Third Worldism, 1949-1965,” *Positions: Asia Critique* 26.4 (2018): 781-815. p. 784.

¹³¹ James Harding, *The Ghosts of the Avant-Garde(s): Exorcising Experimental Theater and Performance* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2013), 25.

Chapter Three

The Art of Conflict: Wu Hsing-kuo and His Theatre of Mutation

By calling it [Peking opera] the national theatre, Peking opera advocates apparently intended to make their favorite form the official, “orthodox” theatre of China, perhaps hoping thus to regain for it the respect and prestige it was beginning to lose.

—Ching-Hsi Perng¹³²

How does a performance tradition survive under the demand of cultural modernization without abandoning its trademark aesthetic parameters completely? This chapter examines the intercultural *jingju* (Peking/Beijing opera) aesthetics of the Contemporary Legend Theatre (CLT), a Taiwan-based theatre group, and analyzes how members of the CLT develop their “avant-garde” stage aesthetics as a critical response to the catastrophic decline of traditional *xiqu* performance in Taiwan since the mid-1980s. In the above passage, Ching-Hsi Perng, an experienced translator of Shakespeare’s plays and a distinguished professor of Western drama in Taiwan, has pointed out that one of the reasons why *jingju*, a crystalized form of Chinese culture and civilization, will be facing an inevitable decline in Taiwan is that the name of this performance genre is ontologically at odds with the rise of local Taiwanese consciousness since the 1980s. Although Perng’s article was published thirty years ago, ironically, I find it highly relevant to the ongoing crisis of *jingju*’s development within the sociopolitical context of twenty-first century Taiwan. Namely, “the politics

¹³² Ching-Hsi Perng, “At the Crossroad: Peking Opera in Taiwan Today,” *Asian Theatre Journal* 6.2 (Autumn 1989): 124-144. p. 126.

of naming” has continued its far-reaching impact on the marginalized presence of traditional Chinese theatre in the cultural landscape of contemporary Taiwan.

In Mandarin Chinese, the term *jingju* consists of two Chinese characters: 京 (*jin*) and 劇 (*ju*). Literally, the former means “the capital city” of a given political entity and the latter could be interpreted as “drama, stage performance, or theatre” in accordance with the designated contexts or scenarios. Together the combination of the two Han characters refers to an established dramatic/theatrical form belonging exclusively to the capital city. In this regard, the name of this operatic performance genre has been accused of being a quintessential mode of Chinese cultural chauvinism oppressing the growth of native Taiwanese art forms and practices by local artists, policy makers, and cultural critics who perceives *jingju* as an ideological signifier of the capital of PR China. Consequently, in Taiwan, for those who fundamentally disagree with the Beijing government’s claim that Taiwan is part of “China,” Chinese *xiqu* performance is often reduced to a monolithic symbol reminiscent of the PRC’s dire threat to Taiwan’s autonomy and safety, thus wrongfully putting *xiqu* in an awkward position similar to a scapegoat.

Given the fact that the cross-strait relations between Beijing and Taipei since 1949 has remained haunted by the possibility of a comprehensive military confrontation, at a conceptual level, it understandable that many studies on Taiwan’s *xiqu* development and history pay much attention to issues regarding identity politics, cultural hegemony, and diasporic Chineseness, focusing primarily on how *xiqu* as a cultural product transplanted from the mainland to Taiwan gradually becomes a political signifier of pan-Chinese nationalism and thus a veiled threat to the

development of local Taiwanese art forms. In *Peking Opera and Politics in Taiwan* (2005), for example, American ethnomusicologist Nancy Guy explores the interplay between a performing art tradition and its surrounding environment through her ethnographic study of Peking opera's transformation in Taiwan. Focusing on how the political environment of contemporary Taiwan reshapes the sociohistorical status of Peking opera, Guy details the dramatic transformation of the performance tradition's popularity from its golden era (1950s—1960s) to its survival crisis (1980s—onward), arguing that “[s]tate regulation of Peking opera, which was critical in directing the tradition's growth, closely reflected the Nationalists' official stance toward mainland China.”¹³³ In other words, Guy's research prioritizes the role of Taiwan's Nationalist government in elevating Peking opera as the island's “national drama” (*guoju* 國劇) in the 1950s and the impact of institutional policy on the sustainability of the art form in the remaining territories ruled by “the Free China.”¹³⁴

Granted, if Guy provides us with conceptual avenues to understand how *Jingju* is ideologically constructed by Taiwan's shifting political attitudes toward the PRC, in *The Soul of Beijing Opera: Theatrical Creativity and Continuity in the Changing World*, *xiqu* scholar and practitioner Li Ruru places her analysis of *jinju*'s aesthetic transformation within the historically parallel but politically interweaved

¹³³ Nancy Guy, *Peking and Politics in Taiwan* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2005), 108.

¹³⁴ During the Cold War era, the term was commonly used by Chiang Kai-shek and his Nationalist government as a political banner to mark the contrast between Mao Zedong's “Communist China” and Chiang's “Free China.” Geographically, it refers to the four major islands controlled by Chiang's Nationalist regime: Taiwan, Penghu, Kinmen, Matsu. It was not until the PRC government substituted the ROC government for the official seat of China in the United Nations in 1971 that the Nationalist regime in Taiwan gave up using the term “Free China” as a political metaphor of its legitimate governance. For more information, please see Lin Hsiao-ting's *Accidental State: Chiang Kai-shek, The United States, and the Making of Taiwan* (Cambridge, MT: Harvard University Press, 2016), 1-13.

contexts of “the Two Chinas” across the Taiwan Strait in the twentieth century. In doing so, Li recontextualizes a contemporary trajectory of both mainland and Taiwan *jingju* practitioners’ valiant efforts to keep the performance tradition stay alive, showing how these selected *Jingju* artists adapt to new modes of performance techniques while simultaneously preserving the most exquisite skills developed by years of persistent physical training. Unlike Guy’s Taiwan-centered and politics-oriented approach, Li places more emphasis on how different aspects of Chineseness are produced, interpreted, and critiqued through the innovative works of a group of *Jingju* artists studied in her monograph. Ultimately, through her in-depth discussion of various stage productions and aesthetic features, Li succeeds in contesting a biased understanding of viewing *jingju*—or *xiqu* in a broader sense—as a living fossil incompatible with the modern stage due to its lack of adaptability, flexibility, and creativity.

Rather a static pattern of performance practice, according to Li, *jingju* is always tied to “the concept of ‘re-form’ since its inception” because its genesis was the outcome of “re-forming pre-existent music and genres, and thus one of the most distinctive characteristics of the new theatrical amalgamation was the interrelation of different styles.”¹³⁵ Inspired by Li’s account of *jingju*’s transformative nature, I focus the third chapter of this dissertation on the avant-garde performance aesthetics highlighted in the Contemporary Legend Theatre’s intercultural *Jingju* productions. Ranging from William Shakespeare’s plays, Greek tragedies, Chinese folklore, to the

¹³⁵ Li Ruru, *The Soul of Beijing Opera: Theatrical Creativity and Continuity in the Changing World* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010), 275.

works of absurdist writers like Samuel Beckett and Kafka, the CLT since its inauguration in 1986 has been fully committed to revitalizing *jingju* culture in Taiwan. Of course, the mission of the CLT is not to replicate an identical copy of the *Jingju* repertoire practiced in Beijing. Instead, the members of the CLT endeavor to attract more younger audience members to appreciate the beauty of traditional Chinese theatre. With this goal in mind, the founding figure of the theatre company, Wu Hsing-kuo (1953-) determined to reformulate the systematic performance patterns of *jingju* by adding novel materials from Japanese, American, and European cultures. Strategically, what characterizes the avant-garde *jingju* aesthetics of the CLT is Wu's decision to synthesize *jingju* actor's all-encompassing performance style¹³⁶ with the plots of dramatic canons from the West such as *Medea*, *Macbeth*, *The Tempest*, and *Waiting for Godot*. The immediate outcome of the CLT's artistic synthesis, or as some scholars prefer the concept of "cultural hybridity,"¹³⁷ is the polarized reception from *xiqu* critics, theatre scholars, and the general audience members in Taiwan.

Understandably, over the course of the past four decades, the CLT's intercultural fusion of Peking opera's performance skills with the masterpieces of

¹³⁶ Normally every *xiqu* actor is trained to become excellent in four basic performance skills: singing (*chang* 唱), recitation (*nian* 念), dance-acting (*zuo* 做), and combat (*da* 打). For the detailed explanations of these four skills and the actor training process, please see Jo Riley, *Chinese Theatre and the Actor in Performance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 89-93.

¹³⁷ Inspired by Postcolonial Studies, a number of Asian theatre scholars have referred to the notion of hybridity as either a tactic or a problematic term to discuss how intercultural theatre/performance complicates the power structure between the West and the East when it comes to culture exchange in a globalized world. Examples include, but not limited to: Rustom Bharucha's *The Politics of Cultural Practice: Thinking through Theatre in an Age of Globalization* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2000), Tuan Hsin-chun's *Alternative Theater in Taiwan: Feminist and Intercultural Approaches* (Amherst, NY: Cambria Press, 2007), and Alexa Alice Joubin's *Chinese Shakespeare: Two Centuries of Cultural Exchange* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).

Western drama has relatively received more criticism and less appreciation because this new performance genre challenges the audience's conventional understanding of the aesthetic differences between the highbrow and the lowbrow, the traditional and the modern, and the popular and the avant-garde. Specifically, in terms of audience reception, many local audiences familiar with the rigid performance patterns of *jingju* cannot help but wonder whether Wu Hsing-kuo and his team members still follow the rules required for the completion of a piece of "traditional and authentic" *jingju*. That is to say, for those domestic audiences with basic knowledge about Peking opera, they often struggle with Wu Hsing-kuo's experimental aesthetics because such "a mutated form" of traditional *jingju* is beyond their knowledge scope and therefore results in their inability to recognize the aesthetic innovation of Wu's repertoire. From an outsider's position, Stanley Warren, an emeritus theatre professor at the City University of New York (CUNY) and a Fulbright visiting professor at National Taiwan University from 1986 to 1988, captured the local spectators' ambivalent attitudes towards the CLT's experimental *jingju* performance. In his review of the CLT's debut production, *The Kingdom of Desire* 慾望城國 (1986), Warren expresses his concern about the negative criticism on the CLT's *jingju* adaptation of *Macbeth*. He writes:

I was most fortunate in being present at the first public performance of Contemporary Legend Theatre's *The Kingdom of Desire*, an attempt to fuse Peking Opera with a freely adapted version of Shakespeare's tragic masterpiece *Macbeth*. I was part of an audience that applauded vigorously, then stood and cheered what was certainly both a magnificent effort to extend

the boundaries of Peking Opera and a success in capturing the essence of Shakespeare's tragedy ... There was little question on opening night that the audience realized they were witnessing a very special and stirring theatrical event. Imagine my amazement the following week to hear negative comments about the production from several of my colleagues and friends. They voiced concern about the impertinence of this group of Peking Opera players who not only had the effrontery to modify "traditional" Peking Opera, but also had the boldness to "tamper" with an authentic Shakespearean masterpiece.¹³⁸

In this passage, Waren's observation of his colleagues and friends' trenchant critique of *The Kingdom of Desire* provides us with a crucial entry point to dive deeper into the audience's antagonist attitude against the *jingju* performers' border-crossing experiment. Although the CLT's courageous decision to modernize a declining performance tradition deserves rapturous applause, to the audience members equipped with preconceived understandings of what an authentic *Jingju* repertoire is, the CLT's efforts to adapt foreign classic canon by merging it with the strict acting methods of *Jingju* turn out to produce a kind of "Frankenstein performance genre" incompatible with the general taste of the local *Jingju* audience. Hence, it is equally important to note that the Frankenstein effect of Wu Hisng-kuo's *Jingju* reform, in the eyes of those considering Wu's aesthetic approach as inappropriate and disrespectful, generates a grotesque aesthetic pattern whose avant-garde characteristic is identical to what Robert Brustein calls "the shock art."

¹³⁸ Stanley A. Waren, "The Kingdom of Desire," *Free China Review*, March 1, 1987. Reprinted by *Taiwan Today*. <https://taiwantoday.tw/news.php?unit=20,29,35,45&post=25344>. Accessed on December 12, 2020.

In his essay “The Avant-Garde and Shock Art,” American theatre critic Robert Brustein responds to the controversial debate in 1990 about whether avant-garde art is qualified for government-related patronage in the United States such as the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). Strategically, at the very beginning of his commentary, Brustein directs the readers’ attention to a provocative question raised by columnist Robert A. Bernstein in *The New York Times* the same year, “asking why the ‘avant-garde’ should seek funding from the NEA when its main purpose was to overturn the Establishment.”¹³⁹ Focusing on Bernstein’s questioning of avant-garde artists’ anti-establishment stance, Brustein exposes the logical fallacy embedded in Bernstein’s argumentation claiming that these so-called avant-garde performances only produce a mode of “shock art” whose artistic innovation is built upon provocation instead of creativity. In other words, if Bernstein insists that the relationship between artistic provocation and institutional patronage is mutually exclusive, then, Brustein cogently reminds us that “it is wrong to say that the primary function of all vanguard art is to shock” since the shared goal of many cutting-edge artists “has been to explore the boundaries of what is known—which is to say, to

¹³⁹ Robert Brustein, “The Avant-Garde and Shock Art,” *The New Republic* 203.21 (November 1990): 26-28. p. 26. What motivated Robert Bernstein to critique the US avant-garde artists’ pursuit of government funding in 1990 derives from the NEA’s abrupt decision to withdraw its financial support granted to four provocative performance artists—Karen Finley (1956-), Holly Hughes (1955-), Tim Miller (1958-), and John Fleck (1951-)—the same year. Commonly nicknamed as the NEA Four, Finley, Hughes, Miller, and Fleck were excellent in addressing issues about gender inequality and socio-political taboo through their employment of bodily exposure, obscene slogans, and cross-dressing. The four artists’ lawsuit against the NEA triggered a series of debates in American society between 1990 and 1993. For more information, please see David Schlossman’s *Actor and Activists: Politics, Performance, and Exchange among Social Worlds* (New York: Routledge, 2002) and Jill Dolan’s *Utopian in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theater* (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 2005).

experiment with new forms in the hope of extending human consciousness.”¹⁴⁰ In this vein, while acknowledging that Wu Hsing-kuo’s avant-garde *Jingju* generates a shocking effect similar to what Bernstein describes, I would suggest that the sense of shock is merely part of the performative outcome of any experimental innovations. Hence, to accuse the CLT of destroying the aesthetic foundation of *Jingju* acting and undermining the organic structure of Shakespeare’s play, in my opinion, is to reinforce such binary modes of epistemology like the traditional/the modern, the conservative/the progressive, and the East/the West. What Wu Hsing-kuo and his team members keep pursuing, in fact, is to push the artistic boundaries of Peking opera so that the actors, stage designers, and music composer will obtain new skill sets allowing them to increase the flexibility of *jingju*’s acting style and narrative structure.

In addition to the issue of audience reception, it is equally necessary for us to unfold the complex agendas behind the stage presentation of the CLT’s intercultural adaptations. The critique of Wu Hsing-kuo’s intercultural acting style, indeed, is another reason why the CLT’s experimental productions are consistently subject to sharp criticism over the past decades. On the one hand, in 1986, the debut performance of *The Kingdom of Desire* at the Metropolitan Hall of Taipei¹⁴¹ City Arts Promotion Office, unquestionably, was a remarkable triumph in the history of the

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 26.

¹⁴¹ After 1949, Taipei city and its surrounding areas have gradually become the largest metropolitan zone in the north of Taiwan island. Meanwhile, Taipei has served as the political and financial center of the island until today. The massive population of middle-class residents with higher average income in Taipei encourages numerous art makers and entertainment producers to choose the city as the hub of their business. Therefore, Taipei is normally the first choice for the majority of cultural workers and performance groups in Taiwan when it comes to financial patronage, market scale, and audience diversity.

CLT since the production was widely reported by major local newspapers and highly praised by the seminal figures of Taiwan's cultural circle such as Lin Hwai-ming 林懷民 (the founder of Cloud Gate Dance Theater 雲門舞集) and Wang An-chi 王安祈 (the distinguished *xiqu* scholar and Executive Director of GuoGuang Opera Company 國光劇團). On the other hand, the successful debut of *The Kingdom of Desire*, I would add, failed to respond to the ontological crisis of *jingju*'s development in contemporary Taiwan. At one level, the success of Wu-Hsing-kuo's *Jingju* adaptation of *Macbeth* is more like a short-lived spark in the long history of Chinese *xiqu* transformation rather than an antidote to the performance tradition considered dying or outdated by the contemporary Taiwanese audience.

There is no doubt that the ideological politicization of equating *Jingju* as a signifier of Chinese cultural chauvinism, as detailed in Nancy Guy's *Peking Opera*, plays a significant role in the marginalization of Peking opera in Taiwan's theatre culture. Indeed, the call for a new genre of local Taiwanese literature in the 1970s, the establishment of Taiwan's first "legal" opposition party (the Democratic Progressive Party) in 1986, and the pursuit of a Taiwan-centered democratic society after 1987 all become evidence for Guy's argument that "[t]he story of Peking opera on Taiwan is that of an art caught up in a whirlwind of ideologies."¹⁴² Nevertheless, I contend that such a scholarly discourse tends to overemphasize the impact of political ideologies, thus overlooking other crucial factors leading to the CLT's pursuit of intercultural *Jingju*. Specifically, I argue that the influences of limited crew members and

¹⁴² Nancy Guy, *Peking Opera and Politics in Taiwan* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2005), 3-4.

unbalanced revenue budgets on the CLT's artistic approach are rarely discussed in the existing scholarship¹⁴³ on the formation of Wu Hsing-kuo's intercultural performance aesthetics. Therefore, in what follows, my analysis of Wu Hsing-kuo's *Jinju* reform will not return to questions addressed in previous studies on the CLT's work such as "Is Wu Hsing-kuo's avant-garde *jingju* a success or a failure" or "Can theatre and performance artists from the East avoid self-orientalization when participating in the network of intercultural exchange with the West." On the contrary, as I have emphasized in the previous chapter, every piece of theatrical performance is the product of collaborative work. If the practice of theatre relies heavily on human collaboration, then, it is time for us to pursue a paradigmatic shift when we conduct research on intercultural theatre. Other than these commonly discussed issues like power structure, cultural imperialism, and visual racialization, I believe that it is equally important to illuminate the aspects of patronage system when we investigate the driving forces pushing Wu Hsing-kuo and his crew to invent an alternative mode of *jingju* aesthetics in Taiwan.

Methodologically, by examining the experimental aesthetics of the CLT's intercultural *jingju* through the lens of human resource and financial sponsor respectively, I want to highlight the underestimated impacts of *jingju*'s training

¹⁴³ For instance, Catherine Diamond's "Kingdom of Desire: The Three Faces of *Macbeth*," *Asian Theatre Journal* 11.1 (1994): 114-133) and Tuan Hsin-chun's *Gazing upon Taiwan Contemporary Theater: Feminist Theater, Intercultural Theater, and Digital Theater* 凝視當代台灣劇場：女性劇場、跨文化劇場與表演工坊 (Taipei: Ainosco Press 華藝數位出版, 2010) are two major points of reference when it comes to scholarly research on the CLT's intercultural theatre. Diamond's article analyzes how Wu Hsing-kuo produces a set of "intercultural and intertextual collages" when adapting Shakespeare's text. In contrast, Tuan situates the CLT's intercultural productions within the historical context of Taiwan's Little Theatre Movement (1980s-1990s) and suggests that Wu Hsing-kuo's experimental aesthetics are part of larger theatrical reform movement ranging from the mid-1980s to the late 1990s in Taiwan.

duration and contingent grant support on the CLT's aesthetic approach and its market positioning as a private theatre company. Using the annual fiscal reports from Taiwan's official cultural institutions, published interviews, documentary notes on Wu Hsing-kuo's acting workshops, recorded productions, and playbills as the foundation of my analysis, in the following, I showcase how the CLT utilizes intercultural *jingju* as a marketing untactic to simultaneously sustain its business operation and fulfill its mission to pass the performance skills of *xiqu* to the next generation in Taiwan. That is to say, I disagree with the common saying that the ultimate goal of Wu Hsing-kuo's *jingju* reform is to prevent this old performance genre from vanishing into ephemeral memories, thus focusing solely on how to save the engendered tradition. Rather, I argue that Wu's aesthetic reform is not only to secure the dimming presence of *jingju* in present-day Taiwan, but also to explore a sustainable business model allowing a private company to cultivate a new generation of *xiqu* practitioners with adequate funding support and experienced faculty members.

3.1 From the Center to the Margin: The Artificial Presence of Jingju in

Postcolonial Taiwan

Born in 1953, Wu Hsing-kuo's miserable childhood, to some extent, epitomizes the shared diasporic experience of many mainlanders¹⁴⁴ retreating to

¹⁴⁴ From the Nationalist government's retreat to Taiwan in 1949 to the lift of Martial Law in 1987, the term "mainlander" (*Waishengren* 外省人) was widely used by local Taiwanese residents (*Benshengren* 本省人) as an identity marker, referring to those who originally lived in different provinces of the mainland but flooded into Taiwan Province in 1949 because of the Chinese Civil War. In order to decolonize the Japanese legacy in Taiwan, after the regime relocated to Taiwan, The Nationalist government implemented official policies to rebuild the cultural links between the mainland and Taiwan. Examples include the education of standardized Mandarin, the revival of traditional Chinese dance and theatre, and the promotion of patriotic Chinese songs. For more discussion about the political connotations of *Waishengren*, please see Chen Kuan-hsing's *Asia as Method: Toward Deimperialization* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 124-125; 142-144.

Taiwan with the Nationalist government in order to escape the devastating civil war in the mainland. Wu Hsing-kuo's father, Wu Yung-fu 吳永福, unfortunately passed away when Wu was one year old, so the *jingju* master does not have any memories related to his father in reality. To Wu Hsing-kuo, the absence of a father figure during his childhood results in his yearning for more attention and care from his mother, Chang Yun-kuang 張雲光. Sadly, as a single parent, Wu's mother could not maintain balance between childcare and workload when Wu was three years old. Consequently, in 1956, Wu's mother decided to send him to the Republic of China Army Boarding School¹⁴⁵ for Veteran Orphans 國軍先烈子弟教養院 in Taipei as a temporary solution to the unbearable economic pressure. Before Wu Hsing-kuo went to junior high school at the age of 12, Wu's mother only lived closely with her second son for approximately five years in total. During this period, Wu used to have an opportunity to stay longer with his mother and experience a sense of family reunion when Chang Yun-kuang (Wu's mother) got married again with a military officer. With bad luck, this marriage only lasted for two years, resulting in Chang's decision to settle Wu Hsing-kuo in another veteran boarding school (Huaxin Elementary School 華興小學) in Taipei.

¹⁴⁵The boarding school was affiliated with the Ministry of National Defense of the Republic of China (ROC). Established in 1957, the school was primarily designed to educate homeless or single-parent children whose family members sacrificed their life to execute military missions for the ROC. Although there is no clear evidence indicating why Wu Hsing-kuo's mother chose the school, in *The Contemporary Legend of Wu Hsing-kuo* 絕境萌芽：吳興國的當代傳奇 (Taipei: Commonwealth Publishing Group 天下出版, 2006), Lu Jian-yin 盧健英 mentions that Wu's mother gave birth to the second son in 1953 when Wu's father was on a "mission." Based on the context of Lu's chapter on Wu Hsing-kuo's family biography, it is highly possible that Wu's father was a military-related agent for the ROC Army so that Wu Hsing-kuo was qualified to be sent to the boarding school. For more details, please see Lu's book, p. 85-88.

Despite his strong desire for parental warmth, Wu Hsing-kuo often describes himself as a “nomad”¹⁴⁶ living in exile when recalling episodes of his unpleasant childhood. Although it was not until the school days of professional *jingju* training that Wu came to realize the importance of staying resilient for an actor, it is fair to draw a parallel between the difficulties Wu encountered as a child and the challenges he has been dealing with as a *jingju* artist because the former, in return, helped Wu prepare himself for the high level of mental resilience required by *jingju* training. After graduating from Huaxin Elementary School in 1965, instead of enrolling in the general high school system whose focus is primarily on students’ academic and intellectual performance, Wu Hsing-kuo treaded a different path by entering Fu-hsing Drama School 復興劇校—the first and only private¹⁴⁷ school devoted to full-time actor training for traditional Chinese theatre in Post-WWII Taiwan. Strictly speaking, Wu Hsing-kuo did not choose Fu-hsing based on his personal will since the financial conditions of his family could not afford Wu’s educational expenses. In this regard, Fu-hsing as a tuition-free institution eventually became the starting point where Wu went on his marathon journey of *jingju* apprenticeship.

¹⁴⁶ Lu Jian-yin 盧健英, *The Contemporary Legend of Wu Hsing-kuo* 絕境萌芽：吳興國的當代傳奇 (Taipei: Commonwealth Publishing Group 天下出版, 2006), 89. In an interview with journalist Li Hsin-tien, Wu Hsing-kuo also elaborated on the relationship between his childhood experience and his artistic creation. For more information, please see Li Hsin-tien 李欣恬, “Wu-Hsing-kuo: Theatricalizing the Contemporary Legend 吳興國：戲說當代傳奇,” *China Times*, 14 May 2018. <https://www.chinatimes.com/newspapers/20180514000618-260115?chdtv>. Accessed on January 15, 2019.

¹⁴⁷Founded in 1957 as a private school, Fu-hsing Chinese Opera School later was integrated into the public education system governed by the Ministry of Education and therefore became a public school in 1968. For the school’s institutional transformation, please see Josh Stenberg and Tsai Hsin-hsin’s “‘Traditional’ Opera in a ‘Modern’ Society: Institutional Change in Taiwanese *Xiqu* Education,” *Theatre, Dance, and Performance Training* 8.1 (2017): 76-88.

Not knowing exactly how stringent Fu-hsing's training system is, Wu Hsing-kuo passively accepted his mother's arrangement and began an unpredictable chapter of his life in the *xiqu* school. Conventionally, in the Sinophone cultural spheres, many people would share a similar impression that the training process of *xiqu* acting is notoriously time-consuming, physically demanding, and mentally exhausting because the ultimate goal of *xiqu* pedagogy is to equip trainees with comprehensive skill sets developed by generations of *xiqu* practitioners. The sophistication of *xiqu* acting is evinced by the actor's ability to externalize a character's inner state through vocal arias (singing), manifest a role's lyrical monologue and his/her conversation with other performers in a rhythmic pattern (recitation), perform the most precise posture designed for a specific role type (dance-acting), and animate the spectacles of military confrontation through martial arts choreography (combat). Together the combination of singing, recitation, dance-acting, and combat is generally known as the four basic skills (*jibengong* 基本功) required for *xiqu* training. Cultivating a qualified *xiqu* actor, to certain extent, is a long-term investment as it requires the actors to fully adapt themselves to a dull mode of living built upon many years of repetitive practice and persistent pressure. In addition, as mentioned above, the successful operation of *xiqu* training system depends heavily on the continuation of apprenticeship. In other words, there is a rigid hierarchy imposed on the power structure between the mentors/teachers and the mentees/students inside the education system of traditional Chinese opera.

Upon the first day of their arrival at the *xiqu* school, one of the most urgent tasks for the young *xiqu* apprentices is to learn how to "obey" all the rules—

regardless fair or unfair—established by their teachers and the school administrators. Moreover, such a strict hierarchy does not only apply to top-down relationships (e.g., the master teachers VS. the inexperienced apprentices) but also to peer relationships. For instance, at the school, when the most junior students encounter or collaborate with the more experienced seniors, they are required to keep using “senior brother/sister” (*shixiong/shizi* 師兄/師姐) as a polite and respectful substitute for the real names of the senior group. Under these circumstances, a network of hierarchical structure is developed by the older ones’ authority and the younger groups’ obedience. While it makes sense to argue that the unbalanced power dynamics help maintain the teaching quality, we cannot neglect that the lurking danger of this authoritarian structure is manifested by the omnipresence of physical punishment on campus.

As Wu Hsing-kuo recalls the days in Fu-hsing, he confesses that the eight years of *Xiqu* training are perhaps one of the most fruitful yet painful episodes in his life because it is nearly impossible for him to remember how much physical hardship he endured. For example, on the first day of school, Wu recollects,¹⁴⁸ all the senior students gathered together and helped the newly enrolled apprentices fasten their “waist belts” designed to accommodate the need of somersault practice. Anyone daring to loosen the belts at night—for the sake of comfortable sleep—will be beaten by wooden sticks three times if he or she gets caught during the routine morning examination. Every morning, students of Fu-hsing are required to wake up at 5:30

¹⁴⁸ Wu Hsing-kuo, “The 19th TECO Award Ceremony Program,” TECO Technology Foundation, 2012. p. 101. The full-length program file is available on http://www.tecofound.org.tw/teco-award/2012/download/prev-winner_19.pdf Accessed on August 12, 2019.

a.m. The mandate of each morning (*zaogong* 早功), for every apprentice, is to assemble on the hill adjacent to campus and then practice vocal vibration, handstand, vertical standing lift, and other basic skills summarized as “leg and back work”¹⁴⁹ (*yaotui gong* 腰腿功). Designed to improve the quality of one’s willpower and push the limits of one’s physicality, these basic skills demand these young apprentices to have the ability to endure physical pain and mental fatigue as much as possible. As the durational length of handstand practice may range from 1 to 20 mins per unit, the young trainees, when accepting the physical challenges, have already had an initial understanding of how demanding it is to become a virtuoso *Xiqu* performer. Essentially, to overcome such hardship requires one to maintain focus and stay resilient throughout the entire course of training per day.

In a piece of documentary video titled “Formosan¹⁵⁰ Children Trained in the Classics of China’s Traditional Opera”¹⁵¹ and released by British Pathé, an online newsreel archive offering short footages of significant cultural activities and political

¹⁴⁹ Here I borrow the English translation appearing in Emily Wilcox’s *The Dialectics of Virtuosity: Dance in the People’s Republic of China, 1949-2009*. 2011. University of California, Berkeley. PhD Dissertation. p. 2. Although Wilcox’s discussion of *yaotui gong* is situated with the context of Chinese dance, the author has clearly pointed out that the practice of *yaotui gong* in Chinese dance is a mixture of the skills from Chinese traditional theatre and Western ballet. Therefore, in what follows, I will keep using Wilcox’s translation when discussing *yaotui gong* as a skill set of *Xiqu* training.

¹⁵⁰ As an adjective of “Formosa,” a term coined by Portuguese travelers and merchants at the Age of Discovery in the 16th century, many historians and cultural critics have suggested the term “Formosa” refers to Taiwan specifically when the Portuguese discovered the island in the midst of the 16th century. However, the exact origin of the term has remained in debate since no written evidence can prove the credibility of this discourse. For instance, in *Decoding the History of Taiwan: 1550-1720* 解碼台灣史：1550-1720 (Taipei: Yuan-Liou Publishing 遠流出版, 2017), historian Weng Chia-yin debunks the Formosa myth in Taiwan’s history education by tracing a variety of archives related to the colonial governance of the Netherlands in Taiwan (1624-1662).

¹⁵¹ The archival video is available on <https://www.britishpathe.com/video/formosan-children-trained-in-the-classics-of-china/query/Formosan+Children+Trained+In+The+Classics+Of+Chinas+Traditional+Opera>. Accessed on November 12, 2020.

incidents in world history, an unidentified team of film crews documented the daily practice schedule of students at Fu-hsing Drama School during the 1960s. At the beginning of this one-minute short clip fraught with back-and-forth action sequences, the variety of camera angles leave the viewers with a strong impression that these child apprentices demonstrate a clear sense of order, precision, and discipline. The visual narrative unfolds when they form multiple groups of rectangle assembly in a wide-open space with the ground paved by cement. Standing firmly with their fingers held straight and placed on both sides of their thighs (Figure 3.1 and 3.2), the students are instructed to show respect to the anthem and flag representing the Republic of China. On the surface, this event is similar to a daily “ritual”—or, to put it in a theatrical scenario, a scheduled “rehearsal”—that every student at Fu-hsing must participate in on a daily basis. Nevertheless, it is through this repetitive act of self-discipline that the apprentices of traditional Chinese theatre start to use their body as a vehicle to make sense of abstract ideas like “*yizhi*” 意志 (willpower), “*shenduan*” 身段 (physique), and “*jianyi*” 堅毅 (perseverance), which are the indispensable elements for the satisfactory completion of any modes of *xiqu* repertoire, including that of Peking opera.



FIGURE 3.1 (Left) & 3.2 (Right) Similar to military training, students at Fu-hsing Drama School need to assemble at a playground where they sing the national anthem of the ROC and salute the national flag every morning. Copyright: British Pathé

After the shots of the quasi-military assembly, the footage continues and shifts to the next scenario in which male and female students are working on different training sessions, primarily a combination of “*tanzi gong*” 毯子功 (the carpet work) and “*bazi gong*” 把子功 (the handle work). In a sense, the carpet work includes, but not limited to, gymnastic movements involving elements of forward and back rolls, backbend and handstand. As shown by Figure 3.3, the practice of *tanzi gong* requires the ground surface to be covered by a carpet. By doing so, it prevents the fragile portions of the human body (e.g., head and spine) from being damaged when the trainees make mistakes. In contrast, the handle work, a rough English translation¹⁵² of its Chinese counterpart, refers to one’s ability to handle a variety of weapons—knife, sword, long stick, axe, whip and so on—appearing mostly in battle scenes filled with martial arts movements. Even if the character one plays is not a standard “*wusheng*” 武生 (a warrior role whose theatrical function is to intensify the stage dynamics

¹⁵² For the English translation of “*bazi gong*,” I make reference to the same word choice appearing in Chen Yu-hsing’s “Stepping out of the Frame: Contemporary Jingju Actor Training in Taiwan,” *Theatre, Dance, and Performance Training* 7.3 (2016): 389-402. p. 391.

through combat) based on Peking opera's role category, every student is still required to equip himself/herself with the basic parameters of managing *bazi gong* as part of his/her performance asset. In the case of *jingju*, at least, each stage prop has its own theatrical effect(s) achieved only when the actor precisely understands the distinguished feature of every object and sophisticatedly showcases how a particular prop enriches the minimalist scenography of *xiqu* stage through his/her acting.

For example, when it comes to the scenography presented in Figure 3.4, we can observe that it strictly follows the principle of “One Table Two Chairs; aka 1T2C”¹⁵³ (*yi zhuo liang yi* 一桌兩椅) commonly seen in *jingju* performance. The insistence on a modest number of scenic objects displayed on stage empowers the audience to fully concentrate on the performers' acting techniques without irrelevant visual disruption. Unlike Western modern theatre, *xiqu*'s theatrical effects are not rooted in the audience's identification with realistic scenery, mundane conversation, and everyday events appropriated and represented on stage. In this light, the role of dramatic text is less dominant in the creation of Chinese traditional theatre as opposed to Western theatre. The pleasure of watching *Jingju* and other *xiqu* genres, instead, comes from the spectators' poetic imagination of a nonexistent theatrical world produced by *xiqu* actors' embodied presentation of exquisite singing (emotion), well-

¹⁵³ For the English translation of “*yi zhuo liang yi*,” One Table Two Chairs as a literal expression has become a common usage in Anglophone scholarship when discussing the scenic design and stage aesthetics of Chinese traditional theatre. In addition, 1T2C as an acronym of One Table Two Chairs appears in many Anglophone scholarship on *xiqu* and *jingju*. For instance, in Rossella Ferrari *Transnational Chinese Theatres: Intercultural Performance Networks in East Asia* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), she utilizes “One Table Two Chairs” and “1T2C” interchangeably when analyzing the experiment performance project of Hong Kong's Zuni theatre. Since the discussion of Hong Kong's experimental theatre is the focal point of the fourth chapter in this dissertation, for the sake of consistency, I will adopt Ferrari's strategy by keeping both English expressions of *yi zhuo liang yi*.

trained physique (characterization), and rhythmic/choreographic movement (action). Put in simply, the guiding principle of *xiqu* aesthetics, in Chinese theatre historian and *xiqu* reform practitioner Qi Rushan's 齊如山 (1877-1962) words, is that in the performance space "every bit of sonic element must possess the charm of singing and every piece of action must contain elements of dance."¹⁵⁴



FIGURE 3.3 (Left) *Xiqu* teachers at Fu-hsing Drama School were helping students practice somersaults; **FIGURE 3.4 (Right)** A temporary outdoor stage where the young Fu-hsing actors perform *jingju* for the audience. Copyright: British Pathé

The last portion of the documentary video introduces the students' performing skills by observing the ways they prepare themselves for a public production. Although the *jingju* stage of that showcase event (Figure 3.4) is not a permanent one but a provisional platform for student presentation only, it does not prevent us from appreciating their serious attitudes since the little actors are consistently taught to treat every performance event as a precious opportunity to evaluate the outcomes of their hourly, daily, and yearly practices of *jibengong* (the basic work). Despite the

¹⁵⁴ Qi's succinct summary of *xiqu*'s guiding rules appear in many of his publications written in Mandarin. My English translation here is based on a passage from Qi Rushan's *The Memoir of Qi Rushan* 齊如山回忆录 (Beijing: Chinese Theatre Press 中国戏剧出版社, 1998), 98-99. The original Chinese text is: "凡有一点声音, 就得有歌唱的韵味, 凡有一点动作, 就得有舞蹈的意义."

fact that young and inexperienced apprentices are relatively incapable of managing vocal skills and externalizing the complexity of the roles' psychological states in accordance with the plot's development, as *xiqu* actors, most of them have demonstrated a lucid understanding that traditional Chinese theatre is inherently an actor-centered performance repertoire. In this regard, it is noticeable that the student actors serving as group bystanders, as manifested in figure 4, skillfully embody a sense of unified “*qi*” 氣 (presence) informing the spectators of their silent yet dynamic participation in being part the female warrior character's solo performance when she is carrying out a set of “*bazi gong*” (the handle work).

In *Chinese Theatre and the Actor in Performance*, Jo Riley elucidates the importance of *qi* in *jingju* training through a rigorous analysis of the term's connotations and that of its applications to the actor's posture, gesture, and movement. In a literal sense, the term can refer to breath, spirit, air, energy, or temperament in Mandarin under different circumstances. Within the context of *Jingju* acting, *qi* is normally associated with the methods of breath control as they influence the actor's vocal strength and rhythm of movement. In addition to the literal aspects of *qi*, Riley reminds us that a *jingju* (*xiqu* in a broader sense as well) actor “who has *qi* is considered to be ‘in-spired,’ moved by a special kind of energy or filled with presence.”¹⁵⁵ In other words, the discussion of *qi* is not limited to its literal meaning (patterns of inhalation and exhalation) but has more to do with the *xiqu* actor's “stage charisma” when being *present* in the performance space. *Qi* is technically translated

¹⁵⁵ Jo Riley, *Chinese Theatre and the Actor in Performance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 206.

as “presence” when being applied to the training process of traditional Chinese opera because it simultaneously gestures toward the presence of the actor’s individual aura on stage. Using *Jingju* as a case study to explore the function of this technique, Riley observes that *qi* has become a standardized criterion for the evaluation of the actor’s ability to strongly impress the audience as long as he/she remains on stage. With the help of the auratic presence on the *jingju* stage, audience members can almost immediately identify whether the actor successfully exhibits the iconic traits of his/her character. In this regard, *jingju* performers must manage the skills of projecting a high-wattage aura and therefore display “all the aspects of appearance, poise, school or style of presentation of the role as well as his¹⁵⁶ own version of it.”¹⁵⁷

Riley’s introduction to the role of *qi* in *jingju* training is to highlight that Peking opera as a mode of actor-centered performing art places great emphasis on the actor’s adaptability to “limited space and constricting stage areas without compromising the precision and integrity of his acting.”¹⁵⁸ Essentially, the lack of mundane props seen in one’s everyday life, as in the case of modern dialogue-based theatre, demands *jingju* performers to direct the audience attention to their exquisite skills of singing, recitation, movement, and combat through an amplified visual effect of their stage presence. That effect is achieved by a harmonious integration of well-

¹⁵⁶ Riley uses Mei Lanfang 梅蘭芳 (1894-1961), one of the most talented *jingju* actor in the history of traditional Chinese theatre, as an instance to illustrate the importance of the *jingju*’s actor’s ability to immediately draw the audience’s attention to his/her charisma when showing up on stage. For the impacts of Mei on the development of *xiqu* arts, please see Min Tian’s *Mei Lanfang and the Twentieth-Century International Stage: Chinese Theatre Placed and Displaced* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 206.

¹⁵⁸ A. C. Scott, “The Performance of Classical Theater” in *Chinese Theater: From Its Origins to the Present Day*, ed. Colin Mackerras (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1983): 118-145. p. 141.

trained posture (Figure 3.5 & 3.6), powerful eyesight, and rhythmic movement all at once. This requirement results in the fact that, compared to the actors of modern spoken drama, most *jingju* actors can only excel in one particular role type and spend years of effort on technical enhancement.

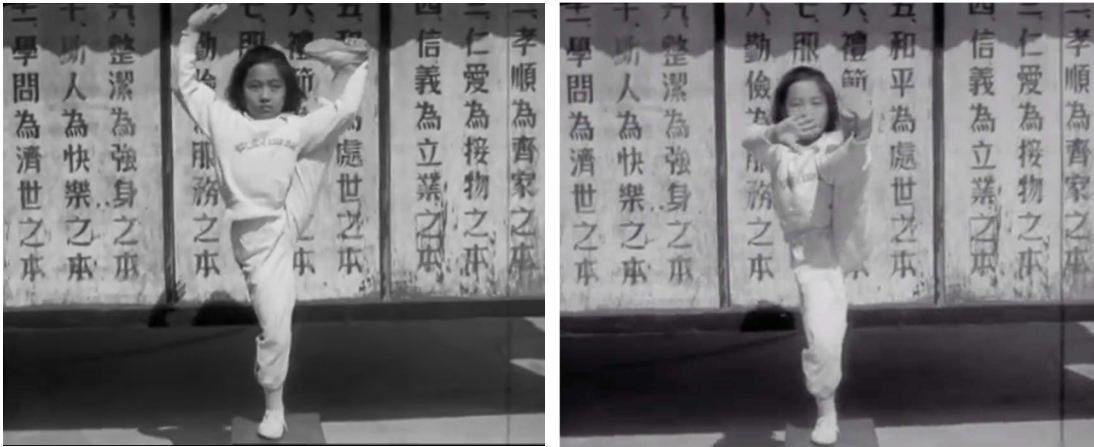


FIGURE 3.5 (Left) & 3.6 (Right) The daily practice of *jibengong* in Fu-hsing Drama School.
Copyright: British Pathé

To some degree, in Taiwan, it would be hard for students in favor of academic excellence to imagine how much effort these juvenile *xiqu* actors put in and how many sacrifices they made in order to achieve the highest level of artistic perfection. As Wu Hsing-kuo writes,

Neither do I have a father, nor will I recognize his physical appearance.
Somehow, I just treated those teaching me how to perform Peking opera as my fathers, and they were all strict fathers. You would be punished immediately if you did not stay focused. When all male students took a shower together in the school's public bathhouse, we made fun of one another by calculating the number of scars left on our bodies by severe beatings from the teachers, and jokingly described the shape of the scars as something

similar to that of military epaulets. Most of my scars were the result of “*datongtang*”—literally meaning that the entire class will receive the same level of physical punishment whenever one makes a mistake. The only way to contest these strict fathers was to present yourself with a more dignified manner, and this was my survival strategy at the *xiqu* school. I yielded to them humbly and quietly so that I could concentrate more on their instructions when studying the acting skills of Peking opera.¹⁵⁹

In this passage, we can get a clear sense about how nerve-wracking a *xiqu* student’s daily routine could be when one becomes a *xiqu* apprentice. Moreover, as Wu has pointed out, *xiqu* teachers tend to prove that physical punishment is the most efficient way to foster learning outcomes as it forces students to manage these performing skills not based on rational analysis but through “body memory.” From the audience perspective, we can say that *xiqu* performers acquire the impeccable acting skills at the expenses of physical pain, emotional fatigue, and psychological vulnerability. As a pedagogical approach, physical violence is not only applied to the context of *xiqu* training but also employed by many teachers in the public education system. It was not until 2006 that the ROC’s Ministry of Education imposed a ban on any forms of physical punishment for all educational institutions in Taiwan. However, it is worth

¹⁵⁹ 「我沒有父親，也不知道父親的長相，多少就把教戲的老師都看作是父親；他們全是嚴父，粗粗厚厚的棍子握在手上，稍不留神，一大板子就打下來，男同學脫光身子共浴一室時，會互相嘲笑身上有多瘀痕，還戲說是幾條槓的將軍；我的瘀痕大部分是「打通堂」得來的——一班同學只要一人犯錯全班挨打。對抗嚴父的方法，就是表現地更有尊嚴，這是在劇校的生存之道；我以謙卑安靜的方式向他們低頭，這也令我在學戲過程中，能專注傾聽他們對我的教誨」。Wu Hsing-kuo, “Autobiography,” in *The World Premiere of King Lear Program Book* (Taipei: The Contemporary Legend Theatre, 2001). The full text is available on http://shakespeare.digital.ntu.edu.tw/shakespeare/view_record_other_file.php?Language=en&Type=rf&rid=CLT2001LEA002. English translation of the selected passage is mine.

noting that nowadays one can still hear the famous Chinese idiom “*yanshi chu gaotu*” 嚴師出高徒 (strict teachers cultivate outstanding students) when people debate about whether it is more important to teach students how to think (liberal model) or how to behave (discipline model) in Taiwan.

Conceptually, during the Martial Law era in Taiwan (1949-1987), the emphasis on the technical ability to endure physical and mental hardship in *xiqu* education is similar to the concept of “*molian*” (磨練; to temper) elaborated by Chinese dance scholar Emily Wilcox in *The Dialectics of Virtuosity: Dance in the People's Republic of China, 1949-2009* (2011). Based on her short-term dance education in Beijing's Dance Academy, visits to different dance institutions in the PRC, and personal interviews with prominent dance scholars and practitioners of PR China, Wilcox provides us with a theoretical framework to discern the dialectical relationship between the technical abilities of Chinese dancers and the formation of a socialist subject/body in the PRC's revolutionary era. Significantly, Wilcox's research shows that many Chinese dancers hold a common belief in the correlation between *molian* and artistic greatness. As a metaphor, *molian* refers to “bodily and moral cultivation that is based on the image of tempering steel.”¹⁶⁰ In order to achieve a degree of virtuous sophistication, many dancers in the PRC are willing to spend much time and energy on long-term and repetitive practices as well as rehearsals. Their engagement in the pursuit of physical virtuosity could be understood as their participation in the formation of a dynamic social subject whose meaning of existence

¹⁶⁰ Emily Wilcox, *The Dialectics of Virtuosity: Dance in the People's Republic of China, 1949-2009*. 2011. University of California, Berkeley. PhD Dissertation. p. 18.

is manifested by hard work (labor) and durational endurance (willpower). In this conjuncture, Chinese dancers as dancing subjects become an embodied epitome of the country's socialist agendas with a rooted belief in physical labor and communal productivity.

Despite the fact that Wilcox's object of analysis is Chinese dance, her work remains beneficial to my discussion of Wu Hsing-kuo's *jingju* reform and the experimental aesthetics of Wu's innovative work in terms of research methodology. Methodically, Wilcox research shows that the interplay between the making of the PRC's dance culture and the state ideology is a bilateral network of dialectical contestation rather than a byproduct of government-controlled propaganda. At one level, Wilcox's method, though not completely identical, reminds us of what theatre historian Peter Davis calls "a microhistorical approach" and its application to the praxis of theatre history and historiography. Serving as a guest editor for *Theatre Survey*'s special issue (2014) in microhistory, in his preface to the articles selected for this volume, Davis justifies the need for a paradigmatic shift from evidence-based methodology to a narrative-centered approach empowering theatre historians to recontextualize the erased, the unnoticed, and the trivialized theatrical figures and events in the past. Specifically, Davis contends that microhistorians do not study historical events and figures only from state-controlled narratives and documents. Instead, the aim of microhistory is to "expose how larger systems and institutions react and function not just at the edges of history but through the normal lives of

those whose agency affected and reflected the greater world around.”¹⁶¹ To Davis, microhistory as a methodological approach gives theatre historians access to reconstruct the larger historical context of theatrical events through a detailed examination of “the highly individualized stories that reveal the larger structures, the commonplace, the everyday, the nontraditional centers of power.”¹⁶²

In this light, it is beneficial to juxtapose the practice of microhistory with Wilcox’s approach of dialectical virtuosity both methods gesture towards the importance of looking at the stories of those whose quotidian experiences are part of the larger (e.g., the official) historical narratives. Wilcox’s work, therefore, reflects on how the Chinese dancers’ bodily endurance of pain and pressure works in tandem with the state-supported ideology of unconditional obedience to the socialist doctrine. In other words, during the socialist era, while it is true that Chinese dancers participated in the making of new dance forms under the ideological guidance of state-supported values and worldviews, these cultural workers, in return, produced an alternative mode of dialectical epistemology stressing that the so-called “traditional” Chinese culture is not the unwanted antique frozen in the historical past or the unattractive product placed on the margin of the modernized present. On the contrary, Chinese dancers prove that traditional as a temporary signifier can be understood as a dynamic process of reinvention as well as remaking through embodied movements and gestures. Therefore, dancers in socialist China not only produced new artistic

¹⁶¹ Peter A. Davis, “Asking Larger Questions from Small Spaces,” *Theatre Survey* 55.1 (2014): 3-5. p. 3-4. His book, *From Androboros to the First Amendment: A History of America’s First Play* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2015) is an iconic example of the application of microhistory in the field of theatre history.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, 4.

forms considered politically correct by the CCP but also remade the traditional culture at the same time. A dialectical form of knowledge production, in this regard, legitimizes dance practice as a form of corporeal research envisioning the socio-political transformation of the PRC.

Serving as a critical point of departure for Wilcox's overarching scholarship on Chinese dance, the concept of dialectical epistemology continues to evolve and is eventually developed into the theory of "dynamic inheritance" addressed in Wilcox's *Revolutionary Bodies: Chinese Dance and the Socialist Legacy* (2019). As the first comprehensive study of Chinese dance in the PRC and its historical development, Wilcox demonstrates how dancers in PR China respond to the call for the birth of national dance culture and the need of stylistic transformation in pre- and post-Mao eras respectively. Of particular importance is the theorization of "dynamic inheritance" in *Revolutionary Bodies*. Wilcox writes:

Dynamic inheritance is a theory of cultural transformation that compels Chinese dance artists to research existing performance forms while also generating original interpretations of these forms. It is guided by the premise that cultural traditions inherently change and that they thus require continual innovation to maintain relevance to the contemporary world. In a basic sense, dynamic inheritance refers to the idea that cultural inheritance and individual innovation are mutually reinforcing processes. In Chinese dance discourse, a common phrase used to describe dynamic inheritance is "inherit and develop" (*jicheng yu fazhan*). Apart from being an abstract way of defining the artist's goal in a theoretical sense, it also implies a specific set of creative methods.

Thus, in both theory and practice, dynamic inheritance is what allows Chinese dance practitioners to take cultural continuity in new directions.¹⁶³

Based on Wilcox's analysis, dynamic inheritance as a cultural practice and artistic phenomenon in the PRC has brought our attention to an epistemic blind spot where inheriting a particular paradigm of cultural tradition is commonly misunderstood as a mechanical mode of repetition based on one's submission to rules enforced by the predecessors. The notion of dynamic inheritance, therefore, conveys a clear message that the continuation of a well-established art form and the practice of artistic innovation are not mutually exclusive.

In a sense, Wilcox's theory of dynamic inheritance provides us with a nuanced framework to reexamine the decline of *jingju* performance in postcolonial Taiwan and rethink why Wu Hsing-kuo insists that experimenting with new *jingju* aesthetics is the only solution to maintain the presence of this old tradition in the cultural landscape of the island. To begin, I suggest that dynamic inheritance as a lens of analysis helps us resist a temptation to attribute *jingju*'s loss of audience population in Taiwan exclusively to the Nationalist Party's insistence on promoting Peking opera as the national theatre and the regime's discriminatory policies against local Taiwanese theatre. Such a scholarly discourse, I would add, fails to unfold the complexity of *jingju*'s historical and artistic transformations after Taiwan was no longer a Japanese colony (1895-1945).

¹⁶³ Emily Wilcox, *Revolutionary Bodies: Chinese Dance and the Socialist Legacy* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2019), 7.

The discursive construct of politicizing the role of state-supported cultural agendas as a key to the crisis of *jingju*'s development in Taiwan appears not only in Nancy Guy's serial work¹⁶⁴ on this topic but also in many academic writings related to Peking opera's survival strategies in post-1949 Taiwan. In *Performing Shakespeare in Contemporary Taiwan* (2012), for example, Huang Ya-Hui explores how Shakespeare's work, from 1986 to 2003, was adapted into the cultural context of Taiwan and appropriate by local theatre practitioners as an artistic strategy to imagine an independent Taiwanese identity unassociated with the cultural hegemony from the Chinese mainland. Using Wu Hsing-kuo's *The Kingdom of Desire* as the first case study to delineate the emergence of Taiwanese Shakespeare in Taiwan and elaborate on the historical development of *jingju* on the island, Huang writes:

Although the history of Peking Opera is short in Taiwan, as it was imported from mainland China by mainlander refugees when the KMT retreated to Taiwan in 1949, Peking Opera really stood – and stands – for Chinese tradition, Chinese identity and Chinese authority, the national image that the KMT wished to retain, restore and recreate in Taiwan. In other words, Peking Opera in Taiwan, with its rigorous rule and strict stylised forms of singing, dancing, speaking and combat, represented an unbreakable, unshakable status in traditional opera's world. Hence, with harsh criticism from the audience

¹⁶⁴See Nancy Guy, "Peking Opera as 'National Opera' in Taiwan: What Is in a Name?" *Asian Theatre Journal* 12.1 (Spring 1995): 85-103; *Peking Opera and Politics in Taiwan* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2005). By examining the interweaving relationship between Peking opera and state ideology in post-1949 Taiwan, Guy contends that the Nationalist regime employed Peking opera as a propaganda tool to advance the government's nostalgic ideology of mainland recovery (to reclaim the lost territories in the mainland). This ideology, Guy explains, "was primarily a strategy for legitimizing and maintaining the regime's supremacy on Taiwan" (2005: 5).

alleging that Wu had destroyed the very tradition of Peking Opera, it seems it was more difficult for Wu to please the audience than to make the production of *Kingdom of Desire*.¹⁶⁵

According to Huang's accounts for the obstacles Wu Hsing-kuo encountered when he was producing the *jingju* version of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* in 1986, Huang makes a sweeping generalization about the history of Peking opera's transmission from the mainland to Taiwan. This generalized understanding of viewing Peking opera as a man-made propaganda device to amplify the Nationalists' cultural obsession with artifacts and theatrical activities originated in the mainland, I would suggest, fails to consider how Peking opera *was* and *is*¹⁶⁶ an active participant in shaping the cultural landscape of Taiwan.

Another lucid example of attributing *jingju*'s demise in Taiwan to the KMT's nostalgic obsession with authentic Chineseness could be found in Chen Yu-Hsing's article "Stepping out of the Frame: Contemporary *Jingju* Actor Training in Taiwan" (2016). Focusing on Wu Hsing-kuo's choice of combining *jingju* acting methods with modern dance movements in *The Kingdom of Desire*, Chen argues that Wu Hsing-kuo's innovative approach exemplifies Taiwan *jingju* actors' flexibility since most of

¹⁶⁵ Huang Ya-Hui, *Performing Shakespeare in Contemporary Taiwan*. 2012. The University of Central Lancashire. PhD Dissertation. p. 27.

¹⁶⁶ Many people in Taiwan, especially the generations born in the post-Martial Law era, tend to underestimate the impact of *jingju* on the popular culture of the island. Interestingly, many Taiwanese artists and those born in the Greater Sinophone spheres have drawn inspiration from the elements of *jingju* to enrich their music styles. As one of the most famous pop singers in the Chinese-speaking world and a Taiwanese artist, Jay Chou 周杰倫 used to produce a series of thematic songs featuring a trendy wave of Chinoiserie Pop Music. Examples of this music genre include *Fearless* 霍元甲 (2006), *Chrysanthemum Terrace* 菊花台 (2006), *Daomadan* 刀馬旦 (2001; composed by Jay Chou and sung by Coco Lee) and so on. The lyrics and melodies of Chou's Chinoiserie pop songs make direct reference to Chinese opera (e.g., *Jinju*), Chinese classic poetry, and ancient Chinese tales.

them are less afraid of exposing themselves to non-*Jingju* training scenarios and more inspired by the conflictual encounter between nonidentical cultural patterns and norms. Although I agree with Chen that what motivates Wu Hsing-kuo to advocate *jingju* reform is the ossified mode of state-sponsored patronage, I find it untenable when Chen critiques the Nationalist government's decision to nationalize Peking opera. In line with Nancy Guy's assertion that the stories and repertoires of Peking opera help soldiers retreating to Taiwan in 1949 reestablish a nostalgic connection with the mainland, Chen interrogates the nationalization of *jingju* and emphasizes the negative outcomes of the politicization of an art form. She remarks:

In 1949, when the Nationalists/Kuomintang (KMT), emigrating from China to Taiwan, brought over a million military men, they also brought *jingju* performers due to the preferences of high-ranking military officers and the soldiers' nostalgia... *Jingju* became known as "national opera" (*guoju*). The nationalisation of *jingju*, however, meant that it was expected to promote only official ideology, thereby restricting creativity and innovation. The so-called national opera strictly maintained *jingju* traditions from the late Qing and early Republican period. Nationalisation thus turned *jingju* in Taiwan into a vehicle for conserving "Chinese-ness," especially the morals of filial piety and loyalty.¹⁶⁷

Again, in response to Chen's passages, I want to reiterate that scholars entrenched by the ideological divide between Chinese hegemony and Taiwanese autonomy often

¹⁶⁷ Chen Yu-Hsing, "Stepping out of the Frame: Contemporary *Jingju* Actor Training in Taiwan," *Theatre, Dance, and performance Training* 7.3 (2016): 389-402. p. 393.

adopt a generalized narrative similar to that of Chen's because they believe that Peking opera represents an embodied symbol of oppression imposed by the Nationalists' (the mainlanders) on local Taiwanese residents. Therefore, to Chen, Wu Hsing-kuo's effort to create a hybrid form of modern *jingju* performance shows that Taiwanese performers are capable of redefining the performance patterns of *jingju* through intercultural collaborations with worldwide artists. In doing so, *Jingju* practitioners in Taiwan prove that they can achieve considerable success on the international stage without following the mainland-based *jingju* tradition.

The inability to think and move beyond the Chinese-Taiwanese dilemma, I would suggest, is the key to understand why so many scholarly debates often revolve around whether China/Chinese is a monolithic entity/signifier or how the minoritarian Chinese-speaking communities like Taiwan can resist the oppression from the mainland/the PRC. Following this logic, it is not surprising that many drama scholars outside the PRC will propose different jargons to decentralize the cultural domination of the PRC upon the global Chinese-speaking spheres. For instance, as mentioned in the first chapter of this dissertation, American scholar Daphne Lei coined the term "alternative Chinese opera"¹⁶⁸ as a conceptual tool to make sense of those Chinese operatic performances produced outside the PRC. Fully aware of the lexicon ambiguities of the term Chinese, in *Uncrossing the Borders: Performing Chinese in Gendered (Trans)Nationalism* (2019), Lei writes: "While the English term 'Chinese' can make a sort of apolitical and pancultural/ethnic identification, *zhongguoren* [中國

¹⁶⁸ Daphne Lei, *Alternative Chinese Opera in the Age of Globalization: Performing Zero* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

人] is politically contested and often rejected by people from Taiwan and Hong Kong because of their disidentification with the ‘*guo*’ (PRC regime).”¹⁶⁹ Semantically, Lei captures the internal ambiguity of the term “*zhongguoren*” (a Chinese) when it is used as a marker of one’s national identity. However, as a native speaker of Mandarin Chinese, I also want to note that many people in Taiwan and Hong Kong have trouble identifying with either “*zhongguo*” (China 中國) or “*zhongguoren*” (a Chinese 中國人) because they cannot obtain a sense of “home”—a semantic connotation embedded in the Chinese character “*guo*” (國/國家) that Lei did not address in her remarks—when being asked to conform to a politically-contested identity category.

The problem with Lei’s interpretation of the term Chinese, in my viewpoint, lies in the fact that she tends to oversimplify the literal meaning of the term as a synonym for the PRC/PRC regime/the CCP without acknowledging that a lack of proper English vocabulary is the root of the “Chinese” problem. In other words, though we all understand the problem of using “Chinese” as an all-inclusive term in a global context, we rarely discuss how institutional power plays out with regard to the acceptance/rejection of new terminology. For instance, Lei specifies the reason why she chooses not to use “Sinophone” as a substitute for “Chinese” because “the ‘Chinese’ conflict derives exactly from issues related to the definition, ownership, or rejection of the word ‘China’ or ‘Chinese.’”¹⁷⁰ This word choice, in this context, becomes Lei’s writing strategy so that she can keep the pressing debates around the

¹⁶⁹ Daphne Lei, *Uncrossing the Borders: Performing Chinese in Gendered (Trans)Nationalism* (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 2019), 15.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 3.

meaning of China or Chineseness at the forefront of her analysis. In contrast, by coining and theorizing a term called “the Sinophone,” Shi Shu-mei, as I introduced in the opening chapter, aims to give voice to the marginal communities subject to the dominance of PRC-based nationalism such as Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Tibet. While one may argue that scholars like Daphne Lei, Shi Shu-mei, Wang Der-wei, and Jing Tsu deserve credits on their contributions to the diversity of Chinese studies as an academic subject and a research field, I would suggest that it is equally important for us to pay attention to the institutions empowering them to articulate their dissident voices against “the threat of China-centrism.”¹⁷¹ Teaching at elite institutions like Harvard (Wang Der-wei), Yale (Jing Tsu), UCLA (Shi Shu-mei), and UC Irvine (Daphne Lei), Wang, Tsu, Shi, and Lei’s articulations of the Chinese conflict are widely accepted as trendy, groundbreaking, or thought-provoking scholarship on the global scale. A wonderful example of this phenomenon is the popularity of Sinophone studies in the humanities circle of Taiwan’s academe over the past decade. On the contrary, scholarship produced outside the Anglophone center and published in non-English languages can hardly receive critical attention and discussion.

In fact, a rich body of scholarship published in Mandarin has proved that Peking opera was *not* “imported from the mainland by refugees when the Nationalists’ moved to Taiwan in 1949” and its history in Taiwan can be traced back to 1891 when Taiwan was still under the governance of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1912). One iconic example of this body of scholarship is the work of Taiwan-based

¹⁷¹ Shu-mei Shih, *Visuality and Identity: Sinophone Articulations across the Pacific* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007), 191.

xiqu scholar Hsu Ya-hsiang 徐亞湘. In his article “The Triangular Effect: Twentieth-Century Taiwan *Xiqu* under the Impacts of Modernization, Politicization, and Market Mechanism” (2007), Hsu succinctly points out that Chinese operatic performances have been transplanted from the mainland to the island by immigrants from southeast provinces (e.g., Fujian Province and Guangdong Province) and by commercial troupes since 1891. Particularly, the seminal contribution of Hsu’s research to the historical study of Taiwan’s *xiqu* development is that Chinese operatic activities used to be part of local Taiwanese people’s everyday life when the island remained subordinated to the Qing Empire (1683-1895) and was subsequently ceded to Japan as a colony (1895-1945). In contrast to Huang Ya-hui’s untenable statement claiming that the history of *jingju* in Taiwan is short, Hsu’s archival work shows that commercial troupes of Chinese opera—both local groups and mainland groups—used to occupy a significant place within the popular entertainment industry of Taiwan during the first half of the twentieth century. By the end of the Japanese colonization, according to Hsu,¹⁷² there were over 140 commercial *xiqu* troupes making profit by public performances. Among these theatre groups, roughly 60 troupes were from Fujian Province and Guangdong Province (the mainland) and estimate 100 (or more) troupes were organized by local Taiwanese practitioners. Later in his book *Meditating on Taiwan Theatre History* (2015), Hsu offers a set of comprehensive and

¹⁷² Hsu Ya-hsiang, “The Triangular Effect: Twentieth-Century Taiwan *Xiqu* under the Impacts of Modernization, Politicization, and Market Mechanism 三角作用：現代化、政治力與市場機制多層影響下的廿世紀台灣戲曲,” *Hong Kong Drama Review* 7 (2007): 346-355. p. 347.

detailed charts¹⁷³ listing all the available *jingju* performance events documented by a variety of written, audio, and visual archives, highlighting that Peking opera was no stranger to local Taiwanese audience members before the central government of the Republic of China relocated from Nanjing to Taipei in 1949.

Historically, it makes sense when a number of scholars tend to map out the trajectory of Peking opera's popularity and decline through the lens of identity politics or state ideology. Indeed, there is no doubt that, between 1950s and 1970s, Peking opera in Taiwan was elevated to a privileged cultural status by the KMT because in the period "[o]ne of Taiwan's strongest claims political legitimacy has always been to present itself as the true custodian of 'Chinese culture.'"¹⁷⁴ In a sense, one can argue that Peking opera, the imperial antiques preserved in Taipei's National Palace Museum, and the quasi-palace architecture complex of National Theater and Concert Hall together were all perceived as the most authentic signifiers of Chinese civilization by the Chiang Kai-shek regime in order to legitimize the ROC's governance of Taiwan as the only "lawful" Chinese government in the world. However, it requires more space for clarification when one argues that Peking opera in Taiwan is similar to an *artificial* cultural product fraught with state-supported ideology and Confucian morality. As Hsu Ya-hsiang's research shows, it is dangerous when theatre scholars tend to be in favor of a generalized discourse claiming that Taiwan's *jingju* performance is a "foreign" import from the mainland and therefore a

¹⁷³ Hsu Ya-hsiang, *Meditating on Taiwan Theatre History* 台灣劇史沈思 (Taipei: National Central Library Press, 2015), 90-122.

¹⁷⁴ Ackbar Abbas, *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance* (Minneapolis, MI: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 80.

threat to the organic growth of native Taiwanese culture. This line of scholarship, in Hsu's opinion, generates an epistemic blind spot in the history of Taiwan's *jingju* evolution and reform. Responding to such an untenable discourse, Hsu writes:

jingju in Taiwan has been understood as a synonym for “the official,” “the external [provinces in the mainland],” and “the foreign” for a long time because of the unusual historical context in post-WWII Taiwan. Inevitably, such an understanding turns *jingju* into the opposite side of concepts like “the popular,” “the local,” and “the native.” It ignores the fact that *jingju* had been one of the “localized” performance genres when Taiwan was under Japanese colonization and that Peking opera was well-received by the local audience. Based on the long-term commercial success of Guangdong *Yiren Yuan* Troupe and local Taiwanese *Yiren Jingju* Troupe, these theatre troupes' ability to maintain a sustainable business model by box office revenue has proved that *jingju* was popular in colonial Taiwan.¹⁷⁵

In this regard, I believe that Hsu's in-depth and rigorous research on the different stages of *jingju*'s historical transformations in Taiwan—especially the period of Japanese colonization— facilitates new avenues to reconceptualize the scholarly discourse of “Taiwan's *jingju* crisis” and its misleading aftermath when scholars like Nancy Guy, Chen Yu-Hsing, and Huang Ya-Hui tend to attribute the decline of *jingju*'s popularity in Taiwan to the Nationalists' obsession with the mainland-defined

¹⁷⁵ 因為戰後特殊的歷史因緣，京劇在台灣長久以來似乎一直與「官方」、「外省」、「外來」等概念劃上等號，而與「民間」、「本省」、「在地」等概念對立起來，殊不知京劇在日治時期已是「在來」的劇種之一，且深受本地觀眾所喜愛，從廣東宜人園到宜人京班此一本地京班能夠長期於民間商業演出、完全靠票房收益維持營運即是明證之一。Hsu Ya-hsiang, *Meditating on the Theatre History of Taiwan* 台灣劇史沈思 (Taipei: National Central Library Press, 2015), 88. My translation.

cultural authenticity and the regime's oppression on local Taiwanese cultural expressions.

More importantly, by making reference to Taiwan *xiqu* scholar Hsu Ya-hsiang's study of Chinese opera's historical evolution for my discussion of the CLT's *jingju* experimentation, I endeavor to reduce the blind spots on the existing scholarship dealing with the history of *jingju*'s reform movement in Taiwan. The first blind spot, as I have delineated, is the claim that Taiwan's Peking opera practitioners have no choice but to experiment with *modern* artistic expressions in order to *localize* this cultural import from the mainland, thus turning the theatrical tradition into a Taiwan-invented performance genre appealing to a more diverse group of audience members. Such a claim, in my opinion, remains problematic and untenable because it fails to take the aspects of commercial orientation as well as market positioning into consideration and inclines to overemphasize the impacts of government ideology and bureaucratic policy on *jingju*'s fading presence in the cultural landscape of post-WWII Taiwan.

To reiterate, in this chapter, I particularly choose the Contemporary Legend Theatre and its pursuit of new modes of experimental *jingju* aesthetics as the focal points of my analysis since many cultural critics and theatre scholars in Taiwan are so entrenched by one-sided statements like "Peking opera is a northern style performance without local roots in the insular culture of Taiwan" and "It [Peking opera] was *artificially* introduced and originally served as entertainment for the Nationalist exiles and soldiers, and still receives little broad-based support from the

populace despite its promotion by the government.”¹⁷⁶ Following the logic of these statements, we are lured to believe that Taiwan’s Peking opera is a short-lived performance genre transplanted by the Nationalist regime and its followers from mainland China in 1949, which functions as a propagandistic device manipulated by the Nationalist government and therefore is considered a state-controlled tool of brainwashing by the majority of local Taiwanese people. In fact, the fundamental flaw of such a scholarly discourse is that it overemphasizes *jingju*’s elevated status as the national opera (1950s-1980s) and overlooks the commercial success of private *jingju* troupes¹⁷⁷ in Taiwan from the 1910s to the 1960s.

This generalized understanding of Taiwan’s Peking opera development inevitably leads to the second blind spot in relation to the study of *jingju*’s transformations in contemporary Taiwan. That is, as a response to the rise of Taiwan-centered consciousness¹⁷⁸ since the 1980s, Taiwan’s Peking opera troupes and

¹⁷⁶ Catherine Diamond. “Cracks in the Arch of Illusion: Contemporary Experiments in Taiwan’s Peking Opera,” *Theatre Research International* 20.3 (1995): 237-254. p. 238. Emphasis added.

¹⁷⁷ Hsu Ya-hsiang. *Meditating on the Theatre History of Taiwan* 台灣劇史沈思 (Taipei: National Central Library Press, 2015), 82-89. Particularly, Hsu traces the commercial success of Taiwan’s *Yiren Jingju* Troupe 宜人京班 (1915-1961), a private and grassroots Peking opera troupe whose actors and investors were mostly local Taiwanese people, and uses the company’s aesthetic transformations and marketing strategies as evidence to showcase the fact that Peking opera used to part of the popular entertainment in Taiwanese people’s quotidian life.

¹⁷⁸ In order to maintain its authority as the only legitimate “Chinese” regime in the world, from 1950s to 1970s, the KMT government in Taiwan used to implement cultural policies in favor of these mainland-based art forms and artistic traditions (e.g., Peking opera, classic Chinese dance, and the royal antiques from the Forbidden City in Beijing). Consequently, local Taiwanese intellectuals and cultural workers often had a sense of inferiority when Taiwanese dialects, literary expressions, and artistic practices were marginalized by the government and the cultural elite. However, the ROC’s withdrawal from the United Nations in 1971, the Canadian government’s rejection to offer Visa entry to the ROC’s Olympic delegation in 1976, and the United States’ diplomatic commitment to the People’s Republic of China in 1978 all had substantial impacts on Taiwanese people’s identification with “China” as a political entity and a cultural imagery. The denial of the ROC as political sovereignty resulted in the rise of grassroots consciousness prioritizing Taiwan’s political subjectivity and cultural identity.

performers are required to modernize the *jingju*'s formalistic performance patterns and develop new artistic styles different from their counterpart on the opposite side of the Taiwan Strait. In this regard, the CLT's efforts to promote an artistic fusion of merging *jingju* acting with the literary canon from the West and the company's international reputation, at one level, seem to reflect "the audience's approval of redefining *jingju* and its role as a symbol of government-defined Chinese-ness."¹⁷⁹

Nevertheless, I perceive this type of discourse as another blind spot with regard to the discussion of Taiwan's *jingju* reform and experimentation. Specifically, I consider it as a misleading narrative strategy because the CLT's attempt to transcend the boundaries between the classic and the contemporary, the past and the present, as well as the West and the East is not derived from an impulse to redefine what Chineseness means in Taiwan but driven by Wu Hsing-kuo's individual anxiety over the gloomy future of Taiwan's *jingju* inheritance. From its debut performance in 1986 to the first shutdown in 1998, the Contemporary Legend Theatre paid special attention to the loss of young audience population in the performance venues of traditional Chinese performing arts since the popular culture, at that time, was fraught with imported materials from the United States and Japan.

Particularly, after the Martial Law was lifted in 1987, people in Taiwan have more access to non-Chinese cultural products such as magazine, film, and literature because the government can no longer control one's freedom of speech with undemocratic law enforcement. More crucially, in the realm of popular culture,

¹⁷⁹ Chen Yu-Hsing, "Stepping out of the Frame: Contemporary *Jingju* Actor Training in Taiwan," *Theatre, Dance, and Performance Training* 7.3 (2016): 389-402. p. 400.

Hollywood movies, Japanese TV dramas, and Hong Kong pop singers represented the three dominant entertainment genres that simultaneously introduced their Taiwanese consumers to concepts of modernity and cosmopolitanism as mega cities like New York, Tokyo, and Hong Kong constantly serve as the background imagery in these cultural products, thus providing local Taiwanese audiences with a visual and cognitive impression that urban consumerism, English, and skyscrapers are indispensable elements for modernization. The directly impact of this phenomenon is that the aesthetic divide between the traditional (cultural elements from the mainland) and the modern (particularly Euro-American cultures) has become increasingly polarized in a way that the admiration of Western cultures in Taiwan gradually develops into a form of cultural fetishism, whereas local cultures and Chinese traditions are relatively considered unsophisticated and unattractive.

Therefore, in what follows, I would like to focus my discussion of Wu Hsing-kuo's avant-garde *jingju* on a production made by the Contemporary Legend Theatre: *Oresteia* (1995). The work is an adaptation of Aeschylus' *Oresteia* Trilogy and the theatre troupe's very first collaboration with American theatre scholar Richard Schechner. Using this production as an example, I emphasize that Wu Hsing-kuo's ambitious pursuit of experimental theatre aesthetics is not only rooted in the hope of revitalizing the invisible presence of *jingju* culture in Taiwan, but also a means to counter the public prejudice against traditional Chinese arts in modern Taiwan. In order to achieve this goal, the Contemporary Legend Theatre seeks opportunities to work with well-known international artists and scholars so that their productions, by default, have acquired recognition from the international community prior to the

actual performance. Intercultural cooperation, in this context, becomes part of the company's survival strategies since it guarantees media visibility and secures funding support from the government of Taiwan and various cultural as well as business institutions.

3.2 The Aesthetic Politics of Mutated Jingju in Oresteia (1995)¹⁸⁰

After the commercial success of *The Kingdom of Desire* in 1986, Wu Hsing-kuo as the founder of the Contemporary Legend Theatre makes it clear that he will continue this unprecedented aesthetic journey by producing more experimental *jingju*. By experimentation, it means that Wu will draw inspiration from literary canon of the West and strategically select themes or motifs related to the sociopolitical contexts in Taiwan. For instance, what motivated him to adapt Shakespeare's *Macbeth* in 1986 was that the assassination of well-respected kings and the triumph of villain characters are no stranger to many people in Taiwan because these plots also appear in a large amount of classic Chinese literature (e.g., *The Orphan of Zhao*). In this regard, it is not surprising that Wu and his team decided to work on an adaptation of ancient Greek tragedy because 1994 was an election year in Taiwan and the entire society was still saturated with aftermath of the heated debates and antagonistic ideologies in the previous year. In fact, the final scene of the CLT's adaptation of Aeschylus' plays is a political satire of Taiwan's election chaos in 1994 and it creates

¹⁸⁰ The Contemporary Legend Theatre and Richard Schechner, *Oresteia* videorecording (1995), All Hemispheric Institute Digital Video Library. <https://sites.dlib.nyu.edu/hidvl/gmsbcc9t>. Accessed on October 12, 2020. My analysis of the production is based on this videorecording.

a comic spectacle based on a variety show style that was popular in Taiwan at that time.

The collaboration between the CLT and Schechner derived from Wu Hsing-kuo's experience in watching a piece¹⁸¹ directed by Schechner when he visited New York as a Fulbright scholar in 1992. During his residency in New York, Wu also took a graduate class on environmental theatre with Schechner at New York University. Furthermore, Katherine Hui-ling, a well-known theatre professor and practitioner in Taiwan, was Schechner's assistant, translator, and a PhD candidate in NYU's performance studies program. To some degree, the CLT's *Oresteia* could be said to be a product of that NYU network. With this background in mind, there is no doubt that Schechner eventually decided to use Daan Forest Park—an outdoor space where many citizens in Taipei take exercise after daily work—as the place where the stage of CLT's *Oresteia* is located (Figure 3.7). This directorial choice exemplifies Schechner's emphasis on the role of open space in his famous essay "6 Axioms for Environmental Theatre." By redefining the concept of environment and its practical application to theatre practices, Schechner remarks that "[t]he ever-increasing use of public space outdoors for rehearsed activities (ranging from demonstrations to street theatre) is having its impact on the indoor theatre" because "one *creates* an environment by transforming a space."¹⁸²

¹⁸¹ Please see Catherine Diamond, "The Floating World of Nouveau Chinoiserie: Asian Orientalist Productions of Greek Tragedy," *New Theatre Quarterly* 58.2 (May 1999): 142-164. According to Diamond, the piece directed was *Faust* (p. 147). Schechner's production is also available in All Hemispheric Institute Digital Video Library: <https://sites.dlib.nyu.edu/hidvl/76hdr81j>.

¹⁸² Richard Schechner, "6 Axioms for Environmental Theatre," *TDR: The Drama Review* 12.3 (Spring 1968): 41-64. p. 50. Emphasis original.



FIGURE 3.7 The messengers are approaching the central stage from the audience area as they plan to announce Agamemnon's return from the battlefield. Courtesy of All Hemispheric Institute Digital Video Library.

Transforming an outdoor park in an urban city into a performance space manifests Schechner's ambition to put his theatrical framework into actual practice as he directed *Oresteia* in Taipei. The CLT's *Oresteia* consists of three acts and each of them corresponds to the original plays of Aeschylus. In terms of plot, act one unfolds when the messengers bring news about the fall of Troy and Agamemnon's return to Argos. Played by Wu Hsing-kuo, Agamemnon and his comrades slowly move towards the central stage from the hillsides where the spectators sit or stand up. After meeting with his old acquaintance, Agamemnon accepts Clytemnestra's hospitality and joins the banquet she prepares for. Symbolically, the banquet is also a metaphor of tomb because the audiences are informed by Cassandra—a Trojan woman captured by Agamemnon and brought to Argos—that she foresees the death of Agamemnon after Clytemnestra and Agamemnon both leave the stage. Upon hearing a dull thud from the backstage, the spectators and the performers remaining on stage both realize

that the king is dead. Clytemnestra reappears on stage with her lover Aegisthus, and they publicly announce that the Argos will be under their governance.

Act two features the return of Orestes after ten years of exile and focuses on how this young man revenges for his father by killing his mother Clytemnestra in the end. In the final act of the CLT's adaptation, similar to the original text, Orestes is chased by the Furies for his immoral crime. Following the advice of Apollo, Orestes seeks help from Athena and is committed for a trial under Athena's demand. The show provides the audience with a harmonious ending when Orestes is declared innocent and the Furies agree to give up their curse. Structurally and thematically, it is somehow inaccurate when the concept of "adaptation" is applied to the analysis of the CLT's *jingju* version of Aeschylus' classic trilogy. At one level, the CLT's intercultural version remains tied to plots of the original texts and the names of the characters are all identical with the English version. Hence, in terms of adaptation, Wu Hsing-kuo and his team do not alter the structure and characterization of the source text. Instead, what characterizes their intercultural experimentation is that Wu and the actors borrow the acting methods of *jingju* performance in order to emphasize that bodily gestures, vocal singing, and physical movement are the fundamental components for the creation of theatricality as opposed to the dominance of spoken words.

In *jingju* acting, as mentioned above, the performer is required to use singing and speaking interchangeably so that different modes of emotional expression will be differentiated from the viewers' perspective. For instance, when Agamemnon (Wu Hsing-kuo) appears on the stage for the first time in the production, it is the moment

that he just finished years of battle in a foreign country. Surrounded by his fellow soldiers, the debut presence of Agamemnon features a victory speech that he delivers to his citizens (the actors and the audiences as a whole) and family members (the actors who play the royal roles). Here Wu Hsing-kuo adopts *jingju* singing with pitch variations to create a sense of authority. In addition to communicating with the listeners, Wu Hsing-kuo skillfully adjusts the way his body moves as he articulates the lyrics with clear shifts in pronunciation. Physical movement works in tandem with vocal expression in order to externalize the internal feelings of the character. The switch between singing and speaking is also a signature technique employed by *jingju* actress Wei Hai-Min 魏海敏 when she plays Clytemnestra in the CLT's *Oresteia*. As a character, Clytemnestra is a fundamentally complicated role because she shows her mental resilience when her husband is away from home for many years. Meanwhile, Clytemnestra is also demanding and aggressive because she behaves like a gatekeeper of the kingdom in the midst of her husband's absence. With the help of *jingju*'s vocal training, Wei Hai-min's performance demonstrates how the performance methods of traditional Chinese theatre increases the intensity of a character's physical expression, which empowers Wei, for example, to vividly perform the emotional transitions from a sense of determination to a sense of insecurity when Clytemnestra provides the audience with account of why his husband must be dead through *jingju* singing.

While the CLT and Richard Schechner endeavor to create an environmental theatre based on the mixture of elements from Western cultures and traditional Chinese acting methods, many theatre critics cast doubts on the aesthetic experimentation of this production. In "The Floating World of Nouveau Chinoiserie:

Asian Orientalist Productions of Greek Tragedy,” theatre scholar Catherine Diamond investigates offers a comprehensive review of the CLT’s intercultural version of Aeschylus’ plays with a focus on costume design and directorial choice. Diamond argues that, in contrast to set design, the visual effects of the characters’ makeup and clothes play a vital role in the CLT’s experimental aesthetics. Diamond remarks:

Aegisthus’ [Figure 3.8] face was painted with a blue traditional Beijing opera design, but his costume was of Roman [armor], with a helmet crested with an imperial eagle, while Clytemnestra [Figure 3.9], in a heavy maroon robe, was topped with a conical hairpiece that added a foot to her height and made her seem from another planet. Agamemnon [Figure 3.10], in the gold face-paint of a Chinese King on stage, wore Greek-styled [armor] made from plastic, its overlapping pieces clattering loudly when he moved. ... The fusion was further complicated by the presence of a contemporary anachronism—a figure [3.11] in modern dress—appearing in each play of the trilogy.¹⁸³



FIGURE 3.8 Aegisthus by Ma Bao-Shan



FIGURE 3.9 Clytemnestra by Wei Hai-Min

¹⁸³ Catherine Diamond, “The Floating World of Nouveau Chinoiserie: Asian Orientalist Productions of Greek Tragedy,” *New Theatre Quarterly* 58.2 (May 1999): 142-164. p. 150-152.

Indeed, if we closely look at the diverse cultural elements embedded in the fabrics of these actors' costumes, it would not be an easy task to identify a specific pattern of design. In Aegisthus' case, those who are familiar with Chinese performing art might pay attention to the color of his face because this visual symbolism is identical to that of *jingju*. It is worth noting that the use of facial painting with regard to Aegisthus' costume is not confined to the *jingju* parameters¹⁸⁴ in a strict sense. It seems that the costume designer of *Oresteia* follows the CLT's experimental aesthetic approach and emphasizes more on the concept of fusion and hybridity. Nevertheless, from the audience perspective, it is potentially difficult for the viewers to recognize the creativity of the costume design because the overall visual spectacle reminds us of a carnival-styled costume. The performative outcome of this artistic fusion would be that the audience members might be visually impressed but not conceptually convinced.



FIGURE 3.10 Agamemnon by Wu Hsing-kuo



FIGURE 3.11 Western Boy by Li Hsiao-Ping

¹⁸⁴ Alexandra Bonds, "Costume and Makeup in Traditional Theatre: China," in *Routledge Handbook of Asian Theatre*, ed. Siyuan Liu (New York: Routledge, 2016): 206-211. According to Bonds, there are five upper colors used in *jingju* costumes that are considered noble and important, including red, green, yellow, and white. In contrast, the lower colors are defined as informal and impure, including purple, pink, blue, lake blue, bronze, and olive green. For more details, please see Bond's chapter, p. 207.

The juxtaposition of *jingju* costume with modern clothing is what makes this production controversial when it comes to performance review and theatre criticism. For instance, theatre scholar Chen Shixiong 陳世雄 also critiques the costume design of this production but pays more attention to the disappearance of *jingju*'s subjectivity in the CLT's work. In other words, Diamond's critique of the costume design in *Oresteia* focuses more on the visual representation of postmodernist art forms such as pastiche and parody, whereas Chen's critique has more to do with Wu Hsing-kuo and the production team's submission to the director's unsophisticated choices. According to Chen, the costume designer's pursuit of cultural fluidity not only undermines the structure of Aeschylus' plays, but also "completely disregards *jingju* audiences' taste for the art and destroys the aesthetic foundation of *jingju*."¹⁸⁵ In terms of artistic style, Schechner acknowledges that:

I did not want to make a "modern theatre work" with just the [flavor] of *jingju* (Peking opera). Nor did I want the opposite, a *jingju* version of a Greek tragedy, using the foreign narrative but little else. Instead, with the active collaboration of my Chinese artists, I was after an "intercultural" work; one that brought two—or more—traditions flat up against each other, sometimes

¹⁸⁵ Chen Shixiong, "从西方戏剧人类学反观中国戏曲的主体性" [Rethinking the Subjectivity of Chinese *Xiqu* through the Lens of Theatre Anthropology], *Drama: The Journal of the Central Academy of Drama* 148.2 (2013): 5-16. The original Chinese text is: "设计者完全不顾京剧观众的审美习惯，破坏了京剧的审美传统" (p. 14).

fitting together nicely, sometimes clashing.”¹⁸⁶

To some degree, there is a sense of self-righteousness in Schechner’s account for his directorial concept. It is obvious that he wants to produce a piece of work, with the Chinese artists, that is neither an authentic style of Greek tragedy nor a rule-based style of traditional *jingju*. His collaboration with the CLT, in this regard, seems to have reached a consensus that their intercultural remaking of Greek tragedy in Taiwan will cultivate the audience with a new theatre experience built up an experimentation with the unknown.

At one level, Schechner’s devotion to the practice of environmental theatre is closely related with his familiarity of the American avant-garde art movements in the 1960s. Inspired by the radical potentials of street protests and outdoor improvisation performance, Schechner theorizes the concept and mobile the practice of environmental theatre as a fundamental challenge to how theatre space is defined, designed, and deconstructed. By placing the stage of the CLT’s *Oresteia* in an outdoor park of Taipei, Schechner as the director, in my opinion, seems to suggest that the demise of traditional Chinese theatre in Taiwan could be a result of its museum-based advertising strategies. In other words, *jingju* performance normally takes place in well-designed auditoriums along with the physical presence of a group of well-trained musicians. The elegant beauty in the performers’ bodily movement and the poetic scenography of the minimalist stage design, in a symbolic sense,

¹⁸⁶ Catherine Diamond, “The Floating World of Nouveau Chinoiserie: Asian Orientalist Productions of Greek Tragedy,” *New Theatre Quarterly* 58.2 (May 1999): 142-164. p. 152-153.

elevates the status of *jingju* performance similar to a piece of priceless museum antique required to be carefully preserved in indoor space.

Methodically, I believe that Schechner's directorial approach was thought-provoking when the production was introduced to the audience in Taiwan. However, as Diamond and Chen have pointed out, Schechner's aesthetic experimentation is inherently flawed in terms of *mise-en-scène*. For example, Diamond criticizes the outlook of the "Western Boy" character who constantly serves as a messenger, crowd member, and bystander in the first part of the CLT's *Oresteia* because his dress style (T-shirt and hip-hop style hat) is totally incompatible with the costumes of other characters. While it is legitimate to argue that this is Schechner's directorial choice as part of the production's experimental elements, we should not forget that it is nearly impossible to precisely define the boundary between the experimental and the playful. Most of the time the presence of Western Boy—on stage and with the audience—reveals a sense of disidentification with those in "ancient" costumes as they are in conversations. From the audience's perspective, this visceral dynamic is particularly observable when the Western Boy character constantly eats chewing gum as he is listening to other characters' speech, monologue, or conversation.

Other than that, perhaps, the most disturbing aspect of Schechner's decision to have certain characters dressed in modern western style outfit is the issue of cultural chauvinism. When the audience members in Taiwan were introduced to a classic story from Greece in 1995, it was hard to tell how inspirational the CLT's *Oresteia* was to the theatre circle in Taiwan in terms of artistic style and audience reception. One practical reason is that it is difficult to measure the practical impacts of a

theatrical production based on scientific data or statistics analysis. Nevertheless, from the end of 1994 to the beginning of 1996, there were four¹⁸⁷ major theatrical adaptations of Aeschylus' *The Oresteia* in Taiwan, which generated a sense of Greek tragedy fever in the cultural landscape of Taiwan. As several scholars and critics have mentioned, perhaps, the theatrical reproduction of Aeschylus' plays in the 1990s represents that "the directors could not overlook the intertwined relationship between the political status quo in Taiwan and the original texts of *The Oresteia*."¹⁸⁸ The intertwined relationship, in a metaphorical sense, is associated with the scene of Orestes's trial under the governance of democratic participation in the original Greek text. In other words, the adaptations of *The Oresteia* in Taiwan were used as a political allegory alluding to the military confrontation between mainland China and Taiwan in the mid-1990s when the Republic of China (Taiwan) was about to have its first ever presidential election in 1996.

While this interpretation makes perfect sense, I would like to return to the issue of cultural chauvinism through the lens of theatrical recycling from theatre scholar Marvin Carlson. The concept of recycling plays a vital role in theatre making because the reuse of preexisting texts, the representation of historical figures, and the

¹⁸⁷ Please see Hsiao Hui-Pu, "The Archaeological Reconstruction and Contemporary Recuperation of *The Oresteia*: On Chen Li-Hua, Hung Hung, and Tien Qi-Yuan's Adaptations," *Taipei Theatre Journal* No. 18 (2013): 69-96. It is worth noting that the Contemporary Legend Theatre's *Oresteia* is one of the four adaptations, but Hsiao's article only provides an introductory review of the CLT's work and focuses exclusively on the other three theatre practitioners.

¹⁸⁸ Hsiao Hui-Pu, "The Archaeological Reconstruction and Contemporary Recuperation of *The Oresteia*: On Chen Li-Hua, Hung Hung, and Tien Qi-Yuan's Adaptations," *Taipei Theatre Journal* No. 18 (2013): 69-96. The original Chinese text is: "然而此現象顯見導演無法忽視臺灣當下的政治現狀，與《奧瑞斯提亞》文本之間的密切關連" (p. 92).

reproduction of traditional norms constitute the foundation of what Carlson terms “the theatrical effect of recycling.” As he remarks:

When recycled characters appear without a specific accompanying recycled narrative, audiences are encouraged to focus not so much on changes in the new versions but, on the contrary, on what has not changed, that is, on the predictable quirks, characteristics, and interpersonal relationships of the character or characters being recycled. This makes the movement of recycled dramatic elements, which requires important alterations as times and cultures change, easier in the case of recycled narratives, which accommodate such alterations fairly comfortably, than in the case of recycled characters, whose inflexibility makes this more difficult.¹⁸⁹

Based on Carlson’s interpretation, we are informed that the spectators’ familiarity or identification with the plot of and the character in a theatre production is affected by their memories of and impressions on everyday events or documented histories recycled as performance materials and recirculated as entertainment or educational devices in theatre space. In this regard, the concept of recycling provides theatre scholars and performance critics with a useful lens of analysis. Particularly, when it is applied to the case of the CLT’s *Oresteia*, I contend that this conceptual framework leads us to ruminate on the issue of cultural chauvinism from two aspects.

¹⁸⁹ Marvin Carlson, *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2003), 49.

First, if the adaptation of the Greek text will offer new insights to the Taiwanese audiences regarding democracy or interculturalism, the question would be how come the CLT cannot produce its own text written based on the troupe members' individual experience. Or why would non-Western theatre practitioners and performers often perceive the performance traditions and canonical works from the West as the standardized, the original, and the avant-garde? Undoubtedly, Wu Hsing-kuo and his troupe members have contributed to the dynamic inheritance of Taiwan's *jingju* development through their enormous efforts to promote *jingju* education and support the younger generation of *jingju* apprentices. However, what is at stake is that the Contemporary Legend Theatre emphasizes too much on the training of bodily skills while overlooking the importance of creating their own dramatic texts. By critiquing the lack of textual production, I am not suggesting that the troupe has never paid attention to literary research or script writing. Instead, the texts used for the CLT's productions, similar to their performance styles, are normally a mixture of different genres, structures, and time periods.

The promising side of the approach is that it allows the practitioners to explore new aesthetic modalities and revitalize the old performance methods. Meanwhile, the unpalatable fact is that it simultaneously reinforces a cultural hierarchy between the source text and the foreign performer. In other words, by taking the CLT's adaption of Aeschylus' trilogy as a case study in this chapter, I focus on the success and the failure of the CLT's bold and adventurous decision to create a *jingju*-based adaptation of Greek tragedy under the guidance of an American director. It is ultimately a success to the theatre troupe because Wu Hsing-kuo and his

cohort always strive to improve their performance skills through interdisciplinary cooperation. However, as I have mentioned, a lack of individualized and tailored texts for the local Taiwanese spectators remains a critical pitfall to the development of the CLT. Making reference to famous texts from the West, of course, will keep the young audience intrigued and impressed, but it also risks reaffirming an unhealthy mindset assuming that cultural materials from the West are superior to those from the non-Western areas by default.

One example of this mindset, ironically, could be observed from theater scholar Catherine Diamond's critique of the Asian adaptations of Aeschylus' trilogy in her article "The Floating World of Nouveau Chinoiserie." As I have discussed above, Diamond's criticism of the CLT's unsophisticated reading of the original text is indeed a sharp observation of the production's structural flaw. Nevertheless, Diamond characterizes the adaptations of Greek tragedy by the three Asian directors/practitioners examined in her article as "orientalized performances of Greek tragedy" desiring for "the prestige status of the text confers, while offering *no respect* for and achieving little understanding of the text itself."¹⁹⁰ Apparently, from Diamond's perspective, the CLT's failure to properly interpret the prestigious text from the West to some extent is an insult to the original source.

Understandably, one might argue that the CLT's adaptation is not artistically sophisticated and intellectually aspirational, but too often one tends to overlook the issue of positionality with regard to the power structure of academic production. Born

¹⁹⁰ Catherine Diamond, "The Floating World of Nouveau Chinoiserie: Asian Orientalist Productions of Greek Tragedy," *New Theatre Quarterly* 58.2 (May 1999): 142-164. p. 161. Emphasis added.

and raised in the United States, Diamond obtained her PhD from the University of Washington, has lived in Taiwan over 30 years, and taught at Soochow University in Taipei as a professor in drama and theatre. As a white American in Taiwan, Diamond's critique of the CLT's work obviously lacks a critical sense of self-reflexivity. As feminist theatre scholar Jill Dolan has pointed out, "positionality is a strategy that locates one's personal and political investments and perspectives across an argument [and] a gesture toward placing oneself within a critique of objectivity."¹⁹¹ Taking Dolan's remark as a reminder, we should be aware of the possible damage caused by scholarly discourses produced and advocated by those who do not take the issue of positionality into consideration. To a larger extent, in her article, Diamond seems to focus more on how the sacred status of Greek tragedy is irresponsibly misinterpreted as opposed to how the director as a white American male shows *little respect* to the *jingju* tradition and the *jingju* actor's years of performance training.

With regard to cultural chauvinism, I would like to shift gears to issues of patronage and sponsorship and use them as a focal point to discuss the aesthetics politics behind Wu Hsing-kuo and the CLT's continuous pursuit of avant-garde art. As I have argued in this chapter, the CLT's persistent efforts to promote the public visibility of *jingju* in Taiwan derive from Wu's individual sense of responsibility as a *jingju* veteran. Starting from the 1980s, given the fact that Peking opera was no longer a cultural symbol of a unified national identity in Taiwan, many *jingju*

¹⁹¹ Jill Dolan, "Geographies of Learning: Theatre Studies, Performance, and the 'Performative,'" *Theatre Journal* 45.4 (1993): 417-441. p. 417.

practitioners found themselves having trouble making career plans because the future of Taiwan's jingju development was at stake. Since the 1990s, with the rise of Taiwan-centered nationalism, Chinese cultural heritages and traditions in Taiwan are considered "foreign" because they are imported from the People's Republic of China. In this light, Peking opera is no exception. While the political tension between mainland China and Taiwan has a direct impact on the invisible presence of *jingju* performance in Taiwan, as I discussed earlier in this chapter, many scholars and critics tend to draw a hasty generalization about Wu's complicated career transitions. After twelve years of diligent work, in 1998, Wu Hsing-kuo announced that the Contemporary Legend Theatre would completely stop the company's operation and cancel all the commercial tours as well as educational events. While several decisive factors contributed to the company's shutdown, it was the burden of financial shortage that played a role in Wu's final decision.

Prior to the official announcement in 1998, it was true that many international art organizations and institutions invited the CLT for commercial tours, but the business operation of Wu's company still depended much on the financial support from Taiwan's government funding and private individuals as well as business donations. When it comes to government support, individual artists and performance groups in Taiwan are all required to submit grant applications for review. Although the majority of these funding agencies encourage diversity and creativity, in several interview occasions, Wu Hsing-kuo told the interviewers that their applications were constantly rejected by the committee because it was hard for them to see the potential of using traditional acting skills to perform literary cannon from the West. For

example, the CLT planned to produce a *jingju* version of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and started to seek patronage and sponsorship in 1997. With great ambition, Wu Hsing-kuo originally anticipated that the CLT would obtain support from the government of Taiwan because he invited first-class *jingju* practitioners from Taiwan and mainland China to join the performance project. To his surprise, the CLT's grant applications were denied because "the committee members could not understand their aesthetic approach as they proposed to use traditional acting style to perform modern literature."¹⁹²

The denial of the CLT's grant proposals was like the last straw to the theatre troupe's shutdown in 1998. Although Wu returned to *jingju* profession in 2001 and announced that the CLT would continue to produce innovative Peking opera performance for their long-term sponsors and supporters, it is worth noting that their aesthetic experimentation is always tied to different forms of politics. Therefore, my discussion of the CLT's aesthetic politics is not confined to the aspects of identity politics. Instead, through the analysis of Wu Hsing-kuo's *jingju* training experience and the CLT's collaboration with foreign artists like Richard Schechner, I want to highlight the CLT's avant-garde approach is not only an effort to foster an intercultural understanding but also a strategy for getting international recognition. In other words, by using the grant proposals as an example, the CLT needs to strategically justify how their experimental *jingju* will promote international visibility

¹⁹² Wu Hsing-kuo, "除了變成蟲，可還有其他選擇？吳興國談《蛻變》" [What Are the Alternatives except for Becoming a Bug? Wu Hsing-kuo on *Metamorphosis*], *PAR: Performing Arts Review* No. 251 (November 2013): 47. The original Chinese text is: "當代要以傳統背景演繹現代文學作品，不被認同。"

in order to have a better chance to be selected as a funding recipient. To some degree, I would suggest that the intertwined relationship between funding support and aesthetic innovation has become a vicious circle in the CLT's case. In order to prevent *jingju* from being stigmatized as a product of the Communist China, Wu Hsing-kuo turns to the international stage and brings his *jingju* repertoires to the well-known performing arts festivals such as the Edinburgh Festival. Although the success of the CLT's tours in these international events has contributed to the audience's familiarity with *jingju* and Taiwan, it also manifests that the so-called "intercultural exchange" always involves a structure of asymmetrical power exchange. The CLT's teamwork with Richard Schechner highlights that the cultural production of non-Western artists is inevitably subjected to the gaze of the West in the name of "modernization."

3.3 Conclusion

In this chapter, I focus on the experimental aesthetics of the Contemporary Legend Theatre in Taiwan, a theatre troupe working on the artistic fusion of the performance methods from Peking opera and the canonical literary works from the West. The company's leading performer and artist director, Wu Hsing-kuo, has collaborated with artists from Hong Kong, mainland China, France, and the United States from 1986 to the present, and continues to develop new productions featuring interdisciplinary partnership across fields of cinema, opera, dance, and theatre. The success of the CLT's international tours exemplifies the concept of Sinophone theatre network developed in this dissertation. Particularly, Wu's efforts to establish an artistic platform for cultural workers with different backgrounds manifest the power

of theatre and performance. That is, through the network of community building, Wu's collaboration with both Sinophone artists (e.g., Gao Xingjian) and international practitioners (e.g., Richard Schechner) showcases that the boundaries between the traditional and the modern are not mutually exclusive but quintessentially coexisted.

Chapter Four

The Art of Taboo: Edward Yick-wah Lam and His Theatre of Laboratory

One of the effects of colonialism was that until as late as the seventies, Hong Kong did not realize that it could have a culture. The import mentality saw culture, like everything else, as that which came from elsewhere: from Chinese tradition, more legitimately located in mainland China and Taiwan, or from the West. As for Hong Kong, it was, in a favorite phrase, “a cultural desert.”

—Ackbar Abbas¹⁹³

Focusing on the how the avant-garde aesthetics from the West has reshaped the theatre cultures in Hong Kong since the 1980s, this chapter looks at the work of Hong Kong-based theatre director Edward Lam and investigates how his directorial choices as well as dramaturgical devices challenge the audience members’ understanding of Hong Kong’s cultural production. Notoriously known as a “cultural desert” in the greater Chinese-speaking world, Hong Kong has struggled with a profound lack of authentic cultural norms while the city is simultaneously praised as a contact zone where the phenomena of cultural convergence and divergence occur. As a cosmopolitan city, Hong Kong is often associated with the triumph of globalization, the success of capitalism, and the pursuit of commercialization. Therefore, many, if not most, cultural workers and entertainment producers in Hong Kong are tempted to generate a large amount of profit-driven and speed-oriented products devoid of solid

¹⁹³ Ackbar Abbas, *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance* (Minneapolis, MI: University of Minnesota Press, 1997): 6.

contents¹⁹⁴ or intellectual aspirations. As a critical response to this phenomenon, this chapter pays attention to the development of Hong Kong's contemporary avant-garde theatre(s) and illuminates how the selected experimental productions from Lam's theatre company contest the amplified impact of cultural commodification. By analyzing the experimental methods applied to Lam's theatrical productions, chapter four concentrates on the ways in which Lam transforms the theatrical space into a curated laboratory where the spectators encounter with a set of complex *questions* raised by director Lam in relation to issues about the education system, the obsession with consumerism, and the insensitivity to gender inequality in the society. This question-based dramaturgy, I contend, serves as the foundation of Lam's experimental aesthetics designed to cultivate his audience with a nuanced understanding of theatre's role as a social laboratory manifesting one's inability to question the authority of "mainstream values" in both pre-colonial and postcolonial Hong Kong.

Methodologically, this chapter surveys a wide range of press interviews, production notes, newspaper entries, performance videos, professional reviews, and academic scholarship that maps out a trajectory of Lam's long and productive career.

¹⁹⁴ For instance, the popularity of TV melodrama from the 1990s to the early 2000s was an iconic example of this cultural phenomenon in Hong Kong. *A Kindred Spirit* (真情 *Zhen qing*), a TV drama series produced by Hong Kong's TVB Jade Channel, showcases how melodramatic TV series became a significant component in the formation of Hong Kong's popular culture in the 1990s. From 1995 to 1999, the marathon broadcasting of *A Kindred Spirit* series provided the local audiences with a sense of identification through its realistic portrayal of the mundane stories about middle-class and working-class Hong Kong citizens and families. However, in terms of content, the TV drama actually consists of topics related to divorce, gossip, affairs, and betrayal. To some degree, in the 1990s, the popularity of *A Kindred Spirit* (the television industry) worked in tandem with the emergence of paparazzi tabloids (the printing industry) and the hypervisibility of erotic films (the movie industry) that together outlined a trajectory of Hong Kong's pursuit of profit-based cultural commodities. For relevant discussions about this subject, please see Klavier J. Wang, *Hong Kong Popular Culture: Worlding Film, Television, and Pop Music* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).

Prior to the in-depth discussions of Lam's avant-garde staging in the pages that follow, I would like to delineate my decision to use the touring productions of Edward Lam Dance Theatre company as a lens to consolidate the concept of global Sinophone theatre network developed in this dissertation. First of all, Lam is one of the most prolific yet controversial theatre producers whose original stage productions have traveled to more than twenty cities across the conventional Sinophone regions¹⁹⁵ and the diasporic Chinese communities from 1998 to the present. Unlike his fellow avant-garde theatre practitioners and groups such as Zuni Icosahedron¹⁹⁶ 進念二十面體 and Theatre Fanatico¹⁹⁷ 瘋祭舞台, Edward Lam Dance Theatre not only envisions itself as a site of cultural experimentation but also a provocative platform of what I call "laboratory theatre." Namely, the works of Lam's theatre company are not grounded in the efforts to generate a sense of identification for the audience. Nor does

¹⁹⁵ Established in 1991 by Edward Lam, Edward Lam Dance Theatre has produced 58 original theatre productions through Lam's collaboration with artists based in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and mainland China. What "conventional Sinophone regions" means here is that it includes mainland China (the PRC), Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (the PRC), Macau Special Administrative Region (the PRC), and Taiwan (the ROC). Additionally, Lam also brought his productions to Singapore—one of the populated communities of Chinese diaspora—in 2011, 2013, and 2018. A chronological history of Lam's touring productions is available on the official website of Edward Lam Dance Theatre: <https://www.eldt.org/production>.

¹⁹⁶ Founded in 1982 and led by artistic director Danny Ning Tsun Yung 榮念曾, Zuni is widely recognized as Hong Kong's most well-organized and experimental theatre institution. In fact, Lam was a founding member of Zuni and actively participated in the development of Zuni's unique stage aesthetics from 1982 to 1987. Zuni's trademark approach is to integrate cutting-edge media technology into the stage design so that the boundary between the real and the artificial is blurred and problematized. A concise introduction to Zuni's history and style is available on https://zuniseason.org.hk/en-explore-details-experimental_theatre.html. In addition, Rozanna Lilley's *Staging Hong Kong: Gender and Performance in Transition* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1998) provides detailed accounts of Zuni's artistic style and institutional history (p. 89-180).

¹⁹⁷ Serving as the artistic director, Ho Ying Fung 何應豐 established Theatre Fanatico in 1996 as an effort to explore the new aesthetic possibilities of Hong Kong's local cultures when the PRC was about to exercise sovereignty over the island. For a general introduction to the theatre group, please see https://members.tripod.com/fanatico_2/.

Lam himself expect the spectators to feel entertained by or satisfied with his theatrical world. Instead, Lam endeavors to defamiliarize the take-it-for-granted social norms existing in the majority of Chinese-speaking societies through the staged embodiment and representation of taboo issues like homosexuality, cross-dressing, and solitude. In fact, Lam is one of few cultural celebrities openly acknowledged his sexual orientation as a gay man in the 1990s, which somehow epitomizes Lam's fearless and persistent pursuit of transforming the stage into a dialectical space where the audience will be challenged by a series of pointed questions related to modern people's lack of selfhood and fear of becoming the minority.

The second reason why Lam's performance projects and theatrical productions become the focal point of this chapter is that, in terms of theatre making, Lam's search for a diverse range of dramaturgical methods is motivated by a yearning for international visibility or commercial profit. Rather, for more than two decades, Lam's continuous collaboration with set designers, script writers, video editors, and marketing managers from Taiwan, Hong Kong, and mainland China has manifested how Edward Lam Dance Theatre's touring performances become a network of cultural exchange that momentarily transcends the geographical as well as ideological boundaries set by historical legacies and political confrontations in Greater China. Analyzing the network of this transregional artistic cooperation, along with the experimental aesthetics and international tours of Edward Lam Dance Theatre's works, allows us to recognize the importance of using theatrical practices as a tool to foster a mutual understanding among the global Sinophone communities.

Therefore, in what follows, I will introduce the pivotal features of Lam's experimental staging and directorial methods with specific instances drawn from his previous productions. In doing so, I showcase the ways in which Lam sophisticatedly integrates socially taboo subjects into the themes of his theatre pieces, thus attracting the attention of a large group of young, educated, and urban spectators self-identifying as non-conservative and tolerant. Verifying the target audience groups of Edward Lam Dance Theatre provides us with an opportunity to further engage with the sociopolitical implications of Lam's aesthetic approach—a questionnaire-based stage dialogue. Significantly, it is important to note that Lam often keeps a selected category of spectators in mind when developing a new performance project. At one level, as theatre critic Tang Ching Kin 鄧正健 has sharply observed, Edward Lam's aesthetic style is not appealing to the majority of Hong Kong citizens because the thematic contents and artistic expressions of Edward Lam Dance Theatre's stage productions are always associated with provocative social issues considered inappropriate, vulgar, or shameful in Hong Kong society, which makes the audience members wonder whether Lam's theatre is intellectually aspirational or "commercially hype."¹⁹⁸

Tang's doubtful attitude towards the efficacy of Lam's dramaturgical choices stems from the sensational and controversial marketing strategies employed by Edward Lam Dance Theatre. The visual imagery of the theatre troupe's early

¹⁹⁸ Tang Ching Kin, "噓頭還是命題：《萬惡淫為首》的赤裸演出" [A Publicity Stunt or a Thematic Motif: The Naked Performance of *Wan e yin wei shou*], *Tang Ching Kin's Theatre Review Collection*, August 21, 2001. http://theatrewhofraid.blogspot.com/2001/08/blog-post_20.html. Accessed March 12, 2021.

production, *Of All Vices, Lust Is the Worst*¹⁹⁹ (Wan e yin wei shou), for instance, could serve as a point of departure for us to understand how Edward Lam weaponizes taboo issues in Hong Kong society and transforms the heated debates surrounding these forbidden topics into the nutrition of his artistic creativity. Premiered in 2001 and sponsored by Hong Kong Arts Development Council, *Of all Vices, Lust Is the Worst* explores why so many people in Hong Kong are obsessed with the visual presentation and representation of obscene nudity. Director Lam selected a group of teenage female actors ranging from 16 to 26 years old whose primary task was to wear swimsuits and perform flirtatious postures for the gaze of male spectators particularly. Perhaps, what is more striking is that Lam also designed an episode of obscene burlesque performed by Ichijo Sayuri²⁰⁰—a veteran striptease artist and adult film actor from Japan—in conjunction with projected images of the male actors’ nudity on the backdrop.

¹⁹⁹ Based on the records from the official website of Edward Lam Dance Theatre and the archived show program, Lam did not offer a standardized English title for this production. Therefore, the English translation appears in this chapter and the dissertation is mine. The full-length program printed in Mandarin Chinese is available on <https://issuu.com/edwardlamdance/theatre/docs/eltd026-issuu>. Accessed on December 15, 2020.

²⁰⁰ In an interview, Lam discussed some of the unexpected controversies when he invited Sayuri and the female actors to participate in acting workshops prior to the official rehearsals of the show. For instance, in one of the workshops, each female actor took turn asking Sayuri questions about “sex” for 5 minutes and the covariations were videotaped. At first, Lam anticipated that both parties would have exciting dialogues. To his surprise, Sayuri refused to be part of the workshops anymore because the young girls always responded to her questions with a standard answer: “I don’t know.” In contrast, Sayuri was expected to answer all the questions related to her previous experience in the porn industry. For more details, please read Edward Lam’s “我為甚麼要做戲劇(場)” [Why would I work in theatre?], *Hong Kong Drama Review* No. 3 (2002): 43-46. p. 45.



Figure 4.1 The official Poster of Edward Lam's *Of All Vices, Lust Is the Worst* (2001).
Courtesy of Edward Lam Dance Theatre.

As we can see from the visual design of the show's official poster (Figure 4.1), Lam and his team create an imagery reminiscent of the tabloid cover pages fraught with sensational headlines and headshots of the celebrities. In its literal meaning, the phrase painted in water blue and placed around the collarbone of the central figure remarks that this performance is "a reality show about why Hong Kong people are so fascinated by wardrobe malfunction, freeboobing, and underwear

exposure” (一齣有關香港人為何對走光、凸點、露底如此着迷的真人劇場).

Although it is apparent that such a statement risks generalizing the ways Hong Kong citizens behave on a daily basis, we are simultaneously informed by Lam’s straightforward language that the main concerns of his stage production are inseparable from his sharp critique of the structural and conceptual flaws of Hong Kong’s mainstream cultures and values. Ultimately, the experimental spirit of Edward Lam Dance Theatre is grounded in an insatiable desire for analyzing what constitutes the basis of “Hong Kong citizens’ senses of identity, ways of thinking, modes of behavior, and perceptions of spirituality.”²⁰¹ In this vein, to better understand what shapes the fundamental characteristics of Lam’s experimental art requires us to dive into different stages of Lam’s career path and trace the evolving trajectory of Lam’s collaboration with interdisciplinary artists from the 1980s to the present.

4.1 When Theatre Becomes a Social Laboratory: Edward Lam’s Experimental

Aesthetics

During his six-year residency in London from 1989 to 1995, Edward Lam established his personal theatre company named Edward Lam Dance Theatre in 1991. Interesting, it is worth noting that the official title of Lam’s theatre troupe in Mandarin Chinese (非常林奕華 *Feichang lingyihua*) is not the literal translation of

²⁰¹ Liang, Weishi, “實驗戲劇中的香港圖像” [The Image of Hong Kong in Experimental Theatre], *Twenty-First Century* No. 65 (2001): 101-106. The digital version of this article is available on <https://www.cuhk.edu.hk/ics/21c/media/articles/c065-200103070.pdf>. Accessed on September 15, 2019. The original text is published in Mandarin Chinese: “追根究底，「非常林奕華」一系列的實驗劇場關心的對象就是「香港一主體」，特別敏感於香港人的身份認同、思考方法、行為模式和精神面貌等. p. 102.

its English version (林奕華的舞蹈劇場 *Lingyihua de wudao juchang*). Instead, the Chinese version of the company's title emphasizes director Lam's pursuit of "extraordinary" and "non-conventional" performance methods. In a literal sense, the character "非 *fei*" in Mandarin means "not-" in English and "常 *chang*" refers to "ordinariness." By juxtaposing the interpretive meaning of the English version with its Chinese counterpart, we can acquire a basic understanding of Lam's artistic vision. Put it simply, Lam's experimental theatre embraces non-traditional (e.g., dialogue-based drama) and non-formalistic styles, methods, as well as texts with a particular focus on the dramatic effects of the actors' movement on stage. In celebration of the Edward Lam Dance Theatre's twenty-fifth anniversary (2016), director Lam conducted a recorded interview in which he provided a lucid account for the meaning of "非常 *feichang*" in front of the camera. As Lam remarks, "*feichang* is about how one expresses himself/herself or how one communicates with other people. When it comes to theatre making, I usually select a subject and then treat it as a lawyer or detective's case. In doing so, I delve into the nitty-gritty of the case by raising questions. Normally I do not know what I am about to write when holding a pen, and sometimes I call it (this mindset) an adventurous spirit or a desire for adventure. This mindset is considered extremely unsafe because it is different from the standard values taught by school education."²⁰² At one level, by emphasizing the connotations

²⁰² The full-length interview is available on Edward Lam Dance Theatre's YouTube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tITV7ywnWik>. The English translation is mine. The original Chinese text is: "所謂非常的意思就是譬如說你如何去表達自己，或者怎樣和人溝通，尤其當你在做戲劇，我會找到主題之後把它當成一個律師或偵探遇到一宗案件，然後希望打破沙鍋問到底。我拿起筆桿時其實也不知道自己會寫出什麼，這一種（心態）有時候我把它稱為冒險精神，或者一種探險的心態，是很不安全的，因為這與我們一貫以來所接受的教育與價值觀不太一樣。"

of “*feichang*,” Lam suggests that theatre practitioners should be courageous and dare to expose themselves to the unknown.

Taking a glance at the mission statement of Edward Lam Dance Theatre offers us another chance to explore what motives Lam to accomplish as a theatre practitioner. Titled “In Conversation with Cities, Playing with Desires” (與城市對話與慾望遊戲 *Yu chengshi duihua yu yuwan youxi*), Lam outlines the central agendas embedded in his stage productions:

Edward Lam Dance Theatre is an urban type. From Hong Kong, Paris, Brussels, Manchester, Taipei, Beijing, Shanghai, Hangzhou, Nanjing, Wuhan, Chongqing, Xi'an, Changsha, Guangzhou, Shenzhen, Macau, to Singapore, we always take “the city” as the background and use “urban citizens” as the subjects of our productions. Because it is urban, Edward Lam Dance Theatre is simultaneously contemporary. Although some of our productions are characterized as traditional or classical due to their names drawn from literary masterpieces, it is through the process of deciphering the meaning behind symbols that we get closer to the essence of theatre. ... Edward Lam Dance Theatre is fundamentally “political.” It is deemed to be controversial because it aims at projecting the consciousness of the minority onto the theatres of the popular. ... Edward Lam Dance Theatre is pioneering. ... Every production is in conversation with issues about consumption, desire, and loneliness that are all related to modern people: Why are we unhappy?²⁰³

²⁰³ This statement is published in Chinese and the English translation is mine. The full text is reprinted in Hsu Yen-Mei's (徐硯美) *Who's Afraid of Lin Yihua: Playing with Taboo in Theatre* [Who's Afraid

Based on the narratives, we can highlight the signature characteristics of Lam's experimental theatre. First, Lam's stage productions always scrutinize the everyday life of people living in urban cities. Growing up in a densely populated global city, Lam is eager to understand the possible factors contributing to the cultures of unhappiness, solitude, and consumerism that almost every urban citizen is grappling with. Second, Lam's engagement with classical Chinese literary works is based on his search for alternative possibilities to place the past (e.g., traditional literature) and the present (e.g., modern people) in dialogue. Third, Edward Lam Dance Theatre is both political and avant-garde because director Lam is never shy away from politically charged and morally sensitive issues such as nationalism, gender, and sexuality. Therefore, by using theatre as a tool for communication, Lam is interested in tracing the historical evolution of the so-called "taboo subjects" in modern society. Admittedly, his quest for the sociopolitical implications of social taboo and the politics of its theatrical representation are closely related to Lam's past experience.

Born in 1959 and educated in Hong Kong and Taiwan respectively, Lam had demonstrated his artistic talents when working as a script writer for Hong Kong's television companies on a contract basis from 1975 to 1982. At the age of 15, Lam started practicing journalism as an amateur student journalist and interviewed with

of 林奕華: 在劇場, 與禁忌玩遊戲] (Taipei: National Performing Arts Center, 2015), 376-377. The original text is: "非常林奕華是城市的。從香港到倫敦、巴黎、布魯塞爾、曼徹斯特, 從台北到北京、上海、杭州、南京、武漢、重慶、西安、長沙、廣州、深圳, 再從澳門到新加坡, 每次落腳, 總是把「城市」作為背景, 以「城市人」作為題材和演出對象。因為是城市的, 非常林奕華也是當代的。即便劇名帶著傳統與古典文學色彩, 但把符號解碼才是戲肉所在。... 非常林奕華更是「政治」的。要把小眾的意識注入大眾化的劇場裡, 也就註定是爭議性的。... 非常林奕華是開創性的。... 每齣作品, 無一不是在跟消費、慾望、寂寞等現在人有著切身關係的議題對話: 為什麼我們不快樂?"

several famous Hong Kong entertainment celebrities such as Alan Tam Wing-lun 譚詠麟 and Kenny Chung Chun-to 鍾鎮濤. Serving as a part-time screenwriter for Rediffusion Television²⁰⁴ from 1975 to 1977, Lam had an opportunity to meet with Kam Kwok-leung 甘國亮—one of the most successful and influential television producers in the media history of Hong Kong—and was invited by Kam to write an episode for a situation comedy series that Kam was supervising at that time. With the help of Kam’s career guidance and professional network, Edward Lam was officially hired as a full-time screenwriter by Hong Kong’s flagship media company Television Broadcasts Limited (TVB) in 1978. By 1979, as someone who only completed high school education, Lam had a decent quality of living with a monthly paycheck in the amount of 4,000 HK Dollar when the average price for a movie ticket was 3.80²⁰⁵ HK Dollar.

Conventionally, in many Chinese-speaking regions where Confucius norms and doctrines are integrated into the foundation of the so-called “mainstream values,” one’s success is often defined by whether he/she has received degrees conferred by prestigious universities, obtained job offers granted by tycoon companies, or committed to someone whose family is rich and has social impacts because many, if not most, people still believe that one’s happiness is guaranteed by a strong sense of

²⁰⁴ Established in 1957, Rediffusion Television Limited (1957-1982), a Hong Kong-based TV company with its own radio programs, was institutionally restructured in 1982 and renamed as Asia Television Limited.

²⁰⁵ In 1979, the exchange rate between the US Dollar and HK Dollar was 1:4.9 ratio. For more information about Lam’s work experience in TVB, please see Xu Mei and Zhou Jingjie, “艺术家林奕华 先锋就是颠覆” [Artist Edward Lam: The Avant-Garde is the Rebellion]. *Southern People Weekly* No. 3 (2008): 73-75. p. 73.

security. Hence, tangible goods and material wealth become the ideological signifiers of “success.” In this context, Hong Kong society is no exception. To some degree, it could be said that Lam’s accomplishment in 1979 did not match any of the criteria discussed here because his wage was not tremendously impressive compared with the elite groups such as lawyers, business investors, and accountants in Hong Kong. However, this job position at TVB provided him with an alternative path to “success.” As a low-ranking screenwriter within the hierarchy of a large-scale entertainment company, Lam was conscious that the primary task of his job was to facilitate the needs of the senior producers concentrating on commercial profit and ratings. In other words, Lam came to realize that it was nearly impossible for him to obtain a sense of achievement from this TVB job because there was no space for Lam to express his creativity. Not knowing how to continue, Lam described himself as “a production line worker”²⁰⁶ whose everyday life was filled with repetitive production of tedious story lines and melodramatic plots. Eventually, in 1980, Lam got laid off by TVB. Since then, Lam only occasionally hosts radio programs for television companies and has never produced any screenwriting for TV dramas after 1982.²⁰⁷ After leaving TVB, Lam has fully devoted himself to theatre practice and persistently experimented with new modes of stage designs and actor training through his engagement with transcultural artists and participation in both local and international workshop events.

²⁰⁶ See Xu Mei and Zhou Jingjie, “艺术家林奕华 先锋就是颠覆” [Artist Edward Lam: The Avant-Garde is the Rebellion]. *Southern People Weekly* No. 3 (2008): 73-75. p. 73-74.

²⁰⁷ For the details about Lam’s critique of the structural flaws of Hong Kong’s TV industry, please see Edward Lam, *Waiting for Hong Kong: Once a Hongkonger, Always a Hongkonger* [等待香港 永远的香港人] (Hangzhou, China: Zhejiang University Press, 2014).

Despite the fact that he has never received college education and formal training in theatre practice, Lam was fortunate to become one of the founding members of Hong Kong's most prominent and productive avant-garde theatre company, Zuni Icosahedron in 1982 and received direct mentorship from the company's artistic director Danny Yung 榮念曾. Although a detailed discussion of Zuni's company history and artistic contributions will not be included in this chapter, we should pause momentarily here and look at how Yung's personal views on artistic creation influences Lam's directorial styles and dramaturgical approaches. In doing so, it does not only draw attention to the affinities and differences between Yung and Lam in terms of their artistic styles, but also chart a genealogy of Lam's aesthetic transformation from 1982 to the present.

In 1943, Danny Yung was born in Shanghai and his whole family moved to Hong Kong when Yung was five years old. Having received advanced degrees in architecture and urban planning from the University of California Berkeley and Columbia University respectively, Yung returned to Hong Kong in 1979 and presented his debut theatre work *Journey to the East* ²⁰⁸ to the theatergoers in 1980, a devised theatre piece known for “a combined platform for mixed media experimentation encompassing film, video, installation, music, design, performance, and photography.”²⁰⁹ *Journey to the East* (1980) is widely considered a pioneering work in the historical development of Hong Kong's experimental theatre because

²⁰⁸ The full-length performance is available in Zuni's YouTube digital media archive: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oGMycPOFm4>. Accessed on August 15, 2020.

²⁰⁹ Rossella Ferrari, *Transnational Chinese Theatres: Intercultural Performance Networks in East Asia* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 74.

Yung introduced an unprecedented form of minimal stage created by a mixture of complex media genres, a series of robotic human movements, and a set of black-white imagery patterns to the audience in Hong Kong for the first time. As theatre scholar Jessica Yeung observes, the trademark elements of Zuni's (and Danny Yung's) experimental stage include: "speeches in the form of fragmented Absurdist monologues spoken in a non-dramatic tone of voice, and performers walking or running in various directions and moving chairs to and from positions on stage."²¹⁰ Therefore, it is fair to suggest that the avant-garde expression of Zuni's is a radical form of "conceptual theatre" as opposed to either dialogue-based or plot-based dramas.

While the art of Zuni's performance is labeled as the avant-garde, the cutting-edge, and the revolutionary, it is important to note that Yung as the leading figure of Zuni has constantly expressed thought-provoking reflections on the dialectical interplay between the traditional and the avant-garde through public lectures, media interviews, and professional reports. In other words, though the *mise-en-scène* of Zuni's work is inherently western because of its emphasis on minimalist design and abstract choreography, Yung simultaneously meditates on how the development of experimental performing arts in Hong Kong could possibly create new avenues for the dynamic inheritance of traditional Chinese performance genres (e.g., *xiqu*). In this vein, Yung reminds us that "we [people in Hong Kong] often blur the boundary between the experimental and the traditional. What we do on a daily basis is a process

²¹⁰ Jessica Yeung, "Danny Yung in Search of Hybrid Matter and Mind: His Experimental *Xiqu* for Zuni Icosahedron," *Visual Anthropology* 24 (2011): 124-138. p. 126.

of experimentation. Thus, it facilitates multiple spaces where the traditional encounter with the contemporary, which becomes the strength and characteristic of Hong Kong's cultural development.”²¹¹



Figure 4.2 *Journey to the East Part 5: Hong Kong Taipei* (1982). Courtesy of Zuni Icosahedron.

As shown in Figure 4.2, the scenography of Yung's stage normally consists of a rectangular wall where a collection of Chinese characters will be inscribed on it through the effect of projection. These characters are not arranged in a sequential order. On the contrary, written words as a fragmented visual signifier of the performers' meaningless monologues direct the audience members' attention to the dialectical relationship between language and body in theatrical space. In this manner, Yung challenges the spectators' ways of seeing by the choreography of multidirectional movement and the penetrating effects of stage projection.

²¹¹ Danny Yung, “實驗中國—實現傳統” [Experimenting with China, Fulfilling the Traditional], *Hong Kong Drama Review* No. 6 (2007): 127-130. p. 130. The original Chinese text is: “我們經常模糊化了實驗和傳統的邊緣，我們每一刻做的事都是一個實驗過程，因此正好提供了很多傳統與當代互動的空間，也成為香港文化發展的強項和特色。”

Significantly, the abstraction of language and the incomprehension of character objective result in the audiences' inability to receive a definite answer about what Yung's theatre work deals with. Rather than treating the stage as a place of commercial entertainment, Yung transforms the theatrical space into a borderless workshop where both performers and spectators participate in an experimental forum devoid of standard answers and mutual consensus. After Zuni was formally established in 1982, Yung and the other founding members (e.g., Joseph Lau, Edward Lam, Pia Ho, Jim Shum) concentrate on how to *revolutionize*²¹² the cultural landscape of Hong Kong's performing arts through their artistic creation of multimedia theatres and international collaboration with non-Hong Kong artists.

At the age of 21, Edward Lam encountered Danny Yung's *Journey to the East* (1980) and found himself deeply impressed by the performers' compelling gestures and the poetic visual sentiments generated by multimedia projection. Lam and Yung had their first conversation when Yung served as a guest for Lam's radio program in 1980. To Lam, Yung is someone extremely knowledgeable about the history of modern Western arts and the trendy theatre cultures (e.g., Robert Wilson's image theatre) in the United States. After that meeting, Lam had maintained an intimate relationship with Yung until the establishment of Edward Lam Dance Theatre in

²¹² In Rozanna Lilley's *Staging Hong Kong: Gender and Performance in Transition* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1998), there is a section titled "Revolutionising Hong Kong Theatre" (p. 93-96), which details the radical agendas embedded in Zuni's artistic practices and the theatre company's ambitious pursuit of redefining the role theatre plays in Hong Kong society. Lilley's research on Zuni is based on her ethnographic fieldwork when she lived in Hong Kong and worked closely with Zuni members in 1991. Therefore, Lilley's book provides a variety of sources (e.g., interview and unpublished programs) related to the seminal impacts of Zuni on Hong Kong's performing arts and the structural issues about Zuni's company management prior to the handover of Hong Kong's sovereignty to the PRC.

1991. Their first stage collaboration took place in 1982 as Lam joined the production team of Yung's provocative work *The Long March*—a experimental quest for the historical implications of the great retreat of the Chinese Communist Party's Red Army (1934-1935) that Yung co-produced with Hong Kong Repertory Theatre. In the early years when Zuni was still in search for its own artistic styles, Yung as the company director provided guidelines for the institutional operation of the troupe and therefore almost everyone in Zuni, to a larger extent, is similar to Yung's apprentice.

The impact of this structural hierarchy was profound because some of the founding members of Zuni were amateurs with limited exposure to formal theatre training or education. In fact, Lam belonged to this amateur group because most of his theatre experience was from his participation in the drama club of Rosary Hill secondary school. Consequently, as Lam started to develop his own aesthetic styles in the middle of the 1980s, he came to realize that there are subtle yet distinct differences between Yung's experimental aesthetics and his own. For instance, Lam explains: "Danny's rehearsals have more to do with intellectualisation because they are about very abstract things. It's like vision; it's like 'What's the meaning of slow?'. My questions are more like: 'If you had an apple which part would you like to eat first?'. Everybody can relate to it very easily or personally. Our ways of dealing with performers are quite different. I am more conventional, but it doesn't mean I am less caring."²¹³

²¹³ Rozanna Lilley, *Staging Hong Kong: Gender and Performance in Transition* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1998), 177.

Following Lam's remark, we are introduced to the similarities and dissimilarities between Yung and Lam. First, in terms of expression, Yung is more interested in abstract forms, symbolic objects, and recorded dialogues designed to make Yung's intellectual curiosity present on the stage. In contrast, Lam prefers trendy topics and fancy subjects that would easily give the audience a sense of identification. Echoing the apple metaphor Lam used to describe his rehearsal process, *Walter Benjamin* (2015; 情場如商場—班雅明做愛計劃 *Qingchang ru shangchang: banyaming zuoai jihua*) would be another example showcasing how Edward Lam attracts the spectators' attention through controversial visual aids and popular languages. Inspired by Benjamin's the Arcades Project, in 2015, Lam replaced Paris with Taipei and crafted a fictional scenario that a flâneur self-identifying as Benjamin wants to have sex with 100 people in the city (Taipei). He does not show any interest in the personal backgrounds of these people. By having 14 actors (8 males and 6 females) take turns exposing their bodies on stage, Lam used public nudity²¹⁴ as a taboo signifier to manipulate our ways of seeing in theatre space. Similar to the apple question, in *Walter Benjamin*, Lam directly asks his audience members "which part of the naked bodies would you like to watch" through the display of both male and female nudity on stage.

²¹⁴ It is worth mentioning that several policemen closely monitored the live performance because they suspected that the display of naked bodies risked violating the law of Taiwan. Although none of the actors was charged by the police, this incident sparked off intense debate over the show's intent and value. For more information about the controversy surrounding this production, please see <https://tw.appledaily.com/headline/20051013/UG625MSM2IQJZVDAU6TX7X365M/>. Accessed on December 10, 2018.

The sensational elements appearing in this production further reminds us again of Edward Lam Dance Theatre’s mission statement discussed above. Particularly, it is obvious that *Walter Benjamin* (2015) is exclusively about the commodification of urban cultures and the technologized patterns of human behavior. In this light, it is reasonable to claim that Edward Lam Dance Theatre always lives in “the present” because the company and its members have never stopped raising questions about the socially forbidden topics from a marginal position. Indeed, Hong Kong’s theatre practitioners and performance workers are rarely considered as part of the mainstream labor groups in society because of work hours, promotion rates, wage increase, and commercial profit. According to *Hong Kong Theatre Yearbook 2015*,²¹⁵

Number of drama productions in Hong Kong		2015		2014		2013	
Number of productions by theatre companies supported by the Hong Kong Arts Development Council	57	10%	58	10%	46	10%	
Number of productions by theatre companies supported by the Home Affairs Bureau	54	9%	43	8%	42	9%	
Productions by independent theatre companies (including those of companies supported by the Leisure and Cultural Services Department's Venue Partnership Scheme)	111	19%	87	15%	72	15%	
Number of productions by amateur theatre companies (including those sponsored by the Hong Kong Arts Development Council and productions by The Hong Kong Academy of Performing Arts)	304	51%	312	55%	268	57%	
Number of productions by non-local theatre companies	68	11%	71	12%	45	9%	
Total	594	100%	571	100%	473	100%	

Figure 4.3 The total number of Drama Productions in 2013, 2014, and 2015 respectively. Source: International Association of Theatre Critics (Hong Kong).

²¹⁵ The full text is available here:

https://issuu.com/internationalassociationoftheatrecri/docs/8_drama_bernice_o. This chart (Figure 4.3) is from the section titled “A Survey of Developments in Hong Kong in 2005” on page 111.

We would notice that the majority of drama productions in Hong Kong were made by “independent theatre companies” and “amateur theatre companies.” If the total number is the only factor taken into consideration, we can say that those who received government funding were less productive compared with the little or minor theatre groups (the independent and the amateur). Nevertheless, it is important to clarify that theatre groups fully sponsored by the government are commonly recognized as the flagship companies in Hong Kong, including Zuni Icosahedron. Take Zuni as an instance, in Figure 4.4, the annual report²¹⁶ of the company’s 2019-2020 fiscal year shows that half of its income sources are from the government’s annual budget. In addition to grant support, prestigious theatre companies like Zuni are in a relatively advantageous position when it comes to the competition for performance venues.

整體收入分佈 Distribution of Income			
收入	Income	總額 Total	佔總收入比例 % Over Total Income
政府年度撥款	Government Grants - Subvention for the Year	13,962,054	54.4%
政府其他撥款	Government Grants - Others	902,700	3.5%
門票收入	Box Office Income	623,331	2.4%
其他應約項目收入	Revenues from Other Hired Engagements	4,115,121	16.0%
捐款及贊助	Donations and Sponsorship	5,594,388	21.8%
其他收入	Other Income	477,940	1.9%
總收入	Total Income	25,675,534	100.0%

整體支出分佈 Distribution of Expenditure			
支出	Expenditure	總額 Total	佔總支出比例 % Over Total Expenditure
製作開支	Production Costs	13,736,565	54.3%
工作人員酬金	Personal Emoluments	8,990,558	35.5%
經常性、財務及其他開支	General Overheads, Finance Costs and Others	2,355,027	9.3%
特別開支	Special Expenditure	222,438	0.9%
總支出	Total Expenditure	25,304,588	100.0%

Figure 4.4 The statistics of Zuni Icosahedron’s 2019-2020 Fiscal Year.
Source: Zuni Icosahedron official website.

²¹⁶ The complete report is available in a pdf file:
https://www.zuni.org.hk/new/zuni/web/upload/annualreport/zuni_1920_annualreport.pdf. The information regarding Zuni’s annual budget is on page 44. Accessed on January 10, 2021.

In Hong Kong, many citizens have been struggling with the housing market. While the housing demand remains incredibly high, the available prosperities are profoundly insufficient. Unfortunately, this is also the case for theatre practitioners and cultural workers in the city. According to theatre critic Chan Kwok Wai's 陳國慧 analysis,²¹⁷ in 2012, there were 51 performance venues available to accommodate music concerts, theatrical performances, and multimedia events. Almost 65 percent of these venues are directly administered by the Department of Leisure and Cultural Services. Given their differences in size and location, these 51 venues are divided into four categories by Chan. The first category consists of 9 large-scale buildings (e.g., the Grand Theatre at Hong Kong Cultural Centre), and each can afford up to 1000 audience members. The second category includes 18 mid-size venues (e.g., Kawi Tsing Theatre), and each can accommodate 200 to 999 visitors. There are 11 venues (e.g., McAulay Studio at Hong Kong Arts Centre) in the third category, and the maximum audience number is 199 for each. Lastly, the fourth category is more like a collection of multifunctional venues such as rehearsal studios, exhibition galleries, and squash courts. There are 13 venues available for the final category.

For most independent and amateur theatre groups in Hong Kong, it is nearly impossible for them to anticipate that securing performance venues will be a guarantee as long as they can afford the cost and submit their applications in time. As a matter of fact, in Hong Kong, the Department of Leisure and Culture Services is in

²¹⁷ Chan Kwok Wai, “二零一一年香港戲劇演出數據淺析” [A Brief Analysis of the Statistics of Hong Kong's Dramatic Productions in 2011] in *Hong Kong Theatre Yearbook 2011* (Hong Kong: IATC, 2013). The article is collected by Hong Kong Arts Critics' Profiles and Writings Database and available on <http://www.artscritics.hk/?a=doc&id=84>.

charge of nearly 60 percent of these performance venues²¹⁸ and reserve the right to decide the total number of shows allowed to be performed in these facilities per year. Hence, due to the limit of space availability and the massive number of local performance groups, many theatre practitioners strive to expand their business and artistic networks by engaging with non-Hong Kong artists or bringing road show to Greater China (e.g., the mainland, Taiwan, and Macau) as alternative survival strategies.

4.2 Touring Theatre(s) and the Sinophone Theatre Network

Edward Lam Dance Theatre is no exception.²¹⁹ As mentioned earlier, in the early days of Lam's theatre career, Danny Yung and Zuni Icosahedron played a crucial role in the formation of his individual identity as a professional theatre practitioner and his self-awareness of theatre's social responsibilities. From 1991 to 2000, the works of Edward Lam Dance Theatre focused exclusively on how Hong Kong's education system cultivates the younger generation with a fear-based understanding of issues related to homosexuality, sexual desire, and gender roles.

²¹⁸ For more information about the history of Hong Kong's art facilities and performance venues, please see Li Lingling's article "香港实验戏剧的空间实践" [The Spatial Practice of Hong Kong's Experimental Theatre], *Theatre Arts* [上海戏剧学院学报 *Shanghai xiju xueyuan xuebao*] 209.3 (2019): 84-93. Li points out the first well-facilitated performance venue, Hong Kong City Hall (香港大會堂) was built in 1962. After that, most of the cultural and entertainment facilities were financially sponsored by government funding or a special budget. Therefore, the Hong Kong government has the authority over the management of these prosperities (Li 86-87). That is also why many theatre groups in Hong Kong are constantly anxious about the availability of performance space.

²¹⁹ It is worth noting that Edward Lam Dance Theatre is not defined as an independent or amateur company in a strict sense. In Hong Kong's theatre circle, there is no doubt that Lam is a prominent figure. Edward Lam Dance Theatre also receives funding support from institutions affiliated with the government (e.g., Hong Kong Arts Development Council: <https://www.hkadc.org.hk/en/whats-on/press-release/hkadc-announces-results-of-eminant-arts-group-scheme>) on a rolling basis, but the financial support from Hong Kong government has never become the major income source for Lam's company.



Figure 4.5 The stage design of *The Story of Hero Boys and Girls* [兒女英雄傳之智取扯旗山] (1997). Courtesy of Edward Lam Dance Theatre. Copyright: The West Kowloon Cultural District (Hong Kong).²²⁰

Conceptually, the theatre space in Edward Lam Dance Theatre's work is constantly transformed into a fictional environment reminiscent of classroom atmosphere (Figure 4.5). Several of Lam's past productions have manifested this signature characteristic. *The Education of Love Part II: Watch Too Much Porn* (1998),²²¹ for instance, provocatively introduced the audience in Taiwan to Lam's "art of shock" and his trenchant critique of the stigmatization of sexual desire in societies where Han Chinese people are the majority.

²²⁰ For more information regarding the collaboration between Edward Lam Dance Theatre and the West Kowloon Cultural District for a screening event of Lam's previous productions, please see <https://www.westkowloon.hk/en/whats-on/past-events/screening-edward-lam-dance-theatre-four-works/chapter/programme-2791>.

²²¹ This production (愛的教育二年級之 A 片看得太多了 *Ai de jiaoyu ernianji zhi A pian kan de tai duo le*) is a sequel to *Hong Kong Is Not a Place for Love* (愛的教育 *Ai de jiaoyu*) premiered in Hong Kong, 1997. Here I use my own English translation of the production's Mandarin title because Edward Lam Dance Theatre did not offer an English title. The digital pdf file of the official program is shared by Edward Lam Dance Theatre and available on <https://issuu.com/edwardlamdancetheatre/docs/017>.

The Education of Love Part II is a piece of devised theatre since the final product is based on Lam's conversations with a selected group of workshop participants in 1998. Initially, in the summer of 1998, Lam received an invitation from Taipei Little Theatre Alliance²²² to visit Taiwan and share his directorial experience with the theatre practitioners in Taiwan. Prior to the actual performance, Lam devoted himself to a workshop consisting of high school students and amateur actors that lasted for three months. In a sense, *The Education of Love Part II* is quintessentially experimental because the production is the embodiment of collective creation. In other words, one can argue that the stage performance is a product of Lam and all the workshop participants' collective efforts.

From April to June, Lam had twenty-four meetings (in total) with the workshop members in a tiny studio (Figure 4.6 and 4.7) in Taipei. Each congregation featured a set of Lam-style routines. In terms of spatial orientation, Lam's method is to have the participants form a circle so that the members can see one another when sharing their responses to Lam's guiding questions. Normally Lam will sit or stand around the center of the circle, but he prefers moving to different directions as the

²²² In the mid-1990s, the theatre circle in Taipei (Taiwan) underwent the third wave of little theatre movements. The experimental groups in Taipei were diverse in terms of subject choice and stage design. Therefore, Chen Mei-Mao 陳梅毛, the founding member of Walker Theatre Troupe 渥克劇團, proposed to establish a community-based theatre network called Taipei Little Theatre Alliance in the hope of increasing the visibility of experimental theatre in Taiwan. Chen Cheng-Hsi's (陳正熙) article "從臺灣看林奕華的劇場位移 1998-2006" [Observing the Displacement of Edward Lam's Theatre Creation from Taiwan's Perspective 1998-2006], *Taipei Theatre Journal* 5 (2007): 137-150 and Lin Ke-huan's (林克歡) essay "香港的實驗劇場" [The Experimental Theatre in Hong Kong], in *Theatre in Consumer Society* [消費時代的戲劇] (Taipei: Bookman, 2007) both mention the historical context about Edward Lam's visit to Taipei in 1998. However, in Lin's text (p. 110), he specifies that the invitation was from "Taipei" Little Theatre Alliance whereas Chen writes "Taiwan" Little Theatre Alliance (p. 138). After carefully review of more published records, I believe that Taipei Little Theatre Alliance is the correct title.

participants are offering feedback to Lam's questions or responding to the previous speaker. Most importantly, raising questions is always an indispensable element in Lam's public talks, theatre workshops, and performance projects. Probing questions play an essential role in the formation of Lam's experimental theatre aesthetics. For example, when the workshop participants met with one another on May 23,²²³ Lam asked them to identify which part of porn videos is their favorite one. Not only did this question-based approach work in tandem with the overarching themes highlighted in *The Education of Love Part II*, it also profoundly challenged Lam's personal understanding of the cultural, political, and ideological differences between Taiwan and Hong Kong.



Figure 4.6 (Left) and Figure 4.7 (Right) Edward Lam was the host for a workshop of *The Education of Love Part II* in Taipei. Lam prepared a collection of questions about porn and sex for the participants. Courtesy of Edward Lam and ET@T Digital Archive.²²⁴

²²³ A detailed account of the meeting on May 23 could be found in the playbill of *The Education of Love II*, which is available for digital reading: <https://issuu.com/edwardlamdancetheatre/docs/017>, p. 17. Accessed on November 15, 2020.

²²⁴ Lam's workshop was recorded, and a digital excerpt of the full-length video is available here: <https://archive.etat.com/etat-varhive/1062/>. Accessed on May 21, 2020.

As Lam discussed in an interview, what motivated him to produce a piece of work focusing on the sociopolitical connotations of adult film in Taiwan derived from his reflection on how we look at certain things in our everyday life. To some extent, this production can be interpreted as Lam's sharp observation of the ways in which "sex" and "nudity" as culturally stigmatized in Taiwan and Hong Kong are not viewed from the same perspectives. Lam remarks: "Basically *The Education of Love Part II* is about 'seeing.' The society in Taiwan is also fraught with explosive information, which is way more obvious than that of Hong Kong. There are eighty television companies and newspaper agencies. Taiwan has more land properties and population compared with Hong Kong. People in Taiwan also have to deal with the political issue of the province complex. They [people in Taiwan] get used to watching a lot of materials on a daily basis. I was wondering what would make them reflect on the things they see in theatre. I directed a show about ways of seeing."²²⁵

Based on Lam's account for his motivation to produce this piece of controversial work in Taiwan, I would suggest that Lam's attempt to explore how erotic subjects are viewed and consumed in Taiwan, from an outsider's perspective, demonstrates that theatre and performance have become an embodied tool of communication for Chinese-speaking artists with different political stances and cultural backgrounds. As discussed in chapter two and chapter three, Gao Xingjian

²²⁵ Gilbert C. F. Fong, "香港話劇訪談錄" [An Anthology of Hong Kong Theatre Interviews] (Hong Kong: The Chinese University of Hong Kong Press, 2000), 280-281. The original Chinese text is: "好像我在台灣做的《A片看的太多了》，基本上我講的是「看」，台灣也是一個資訊爆炸的社會，比香港更厲害，有八十多個電視台，有很多報紙，地方比香港大很多，人口比香港多很多，又存在著省級等政治問題，他們習慣了每天看很多東西。當他們去到 theatre 的時候，有什麼東西可以令他們反想一下他們在看些什麼呢？我排了一個講關於看的戲。"

and Wu Hsing-kuo also use their theatre pieces as a tool of communication to bridge the gaps among communities of Greater China and Chinese diaspora. More importantly, Lam's contribution to the growth of the Sinophone theatre network cannot be reduced to eye-catching labels like "an avant-garde director from Hong Kong" or "the most provocative queer theatre practitioner in Greater China." At a conceptual level, whether Lam's theatre is avant-garde or kitsch is not really a matter of debate. The more compelling task here is to foreground the importance of Lam's efforts to place the avant-garde and the popular in dialogue for the audience members within the Sinophone network.

In "The Avant-Garde and Popular Culture," Luke Gibbons, John Hutchinson and Nigel Rolfe have in-depth conversations about the historical transformation of avant-garde art in the West and discuss the dialectical tension between the avant-garde and the popular. While they all agree that in the West, the emergence of avant-garde art stems from the influences of modernism, Rolfe suggests that the development of modernist art is built upon an impetus for becoming "stylistically innovative" whereas "all avant-garde art is oppositional."²²⁶ Traditionally, as I have provided an overview in the first chapter of this dissertation, the scholarship of avant-garde studies has paid specific attention to the contradictory relationship between the avant-garde and the popular. In a literal sense, popular culture is the enemy of avant-garde art because the former is normally understood as a synonym for bad taste, tunnel vision, and commercial kitsch, whereas the latter features "a sharp sense of

²²⁶ Luke Gibbons, John Hutchinson, and Nigel Rolfe, "The Avant-Garde and Popular Culture," *Circa* No. 44 (1989): 25-29. p. 25.

militancy, praise of nonconformism, courageous precursory exploration, and, on a more general plane, confidence in the final victory of *time* and *immanence* over traditions that try to appear as eternal, immutable, and transcendently determined.”²²⁷

Taking these critical discourses about avant-garde art into further consideration, we might be lured to draw a hasty conclusion that cutting-edge artistic practices are doomed to survive on the margin of the popular because the radical spirit of the avant-garde is grounded in its fierce positionality of being ahead of the present. Nevertheless, we need to be aware that “[t]he adversarial stance of the avant-garde should not be seen as directed particularly towards politics with a capital ‘P,’ but towards a dominant culture or ideological system.”²²⁸ Indeed, it is arguably fair to say that the avant-garde stance of Lam’s theatre is not merely a fierce attack on the dominant political ideologies and mainstream cultures. On the contrary, Lam’s theatrical practices, as I argue in this chapter, place the avant-garde and the popular in dialogue so that the audience members are invited to explore alternative “ways of seeing” when elements of the popular culture (e.g., vulgar langue, melodrama, and erotic film) are reconfigured and reproduced by Lam’s experimental dramaturgy.

Linguistic parody is definitely one of the signature characteristics of Lam’s experimental dramaturgy. After the trip to Taiwan in 1998, Lam returned to Taipei again in 2005 and has officially begun his long-term collaboration with actors, script

²²⁷ Matei Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1987), 95. Emphasis original.

²²⁸ Luke Gibbons, John Hutchinson, and Nigel Rolfe, “The Avant-Garde and Popular Culture,” *Circa* No. 44 (1989): 25-29. p. 25.

writers, and sound designers in Taiwan. Historically, Taiwan and Hong Kong have had a similar experience in terms of cultural diversity and economic development when both regions were widely recognized as the most competitive economic entities in Asia from the mid-1980s to the early 2000s. Prior to the handover of Hong Kong's sovereignty in 1997, the city has been known for martial arts cinema and cutting-edge music industry in the cultural circles of Greater China. Therefore, the artistic exchange and collaboration between Hong Kong and Taiwan, for instance, has simultaneously fostered a sense of familiarity with Cantonese (e.g., actors' dialogue in cinema and the lyrics of pop songs) and promoted the visibility of Hong Kong's entertainment celebrities. Consequently, although Lam's artistic style is quintessentially avant-garde, the subject matter and the visual expression of his work are intrinsically popular.

For example, in 2007, Lam visited Taipei for a tour of his production *Madame Bovary Is Me* and was invited to give a lecture on the creation process of this piece in a university classroom. In the event, Lam provided the students with an overview of all the theatre pieces he produced from 1991 to 2006. After that, Lam asked the students: "What are the differences between my theatrical productions and the ones you watched before?"²²⁹ With a sense of excitement, one of them answered: "I saw Daniel Wu!"²³⁰ Following the student's answer, Lam asked her again to identify why her immediate response to his previous question was guided by her familiarity with

²²⁹ Hsu, Yen-Mei, *Who's Afraid of 林奕華: 在劇場, 與禁忌玩遊戲* [*Who's Afraid of Lin Yihua: Playing with Taboo in Theatre*] (Taipei: National Performing Arts Center, 2015), 5. The original Chinese text is: "你們覺得看我的戲和你們看過的其他戲, 有什麼不一樣?"

²³⁰ Ibid., 5. The original Chinese text is: "我看到吳彥祖!"

Daniel Wu—a handsome and well-known Hong Kong film actor. Interestingly, Lam’s follow-up question to the female student successfully energized the classroom dynamics because most of the students became more engaged with the discussion because they felt excited about Lam’s previous collaboration with the entertainment stars in Hong Kong and Taiwan. However, Lam suddenly shifted gears towards a more provoking aspect of that discussion thread. “What do you think of the different between the entertainment stars’ photoshoot and that of yours,”²³¹ Lam asked the students again. While some of them came up with random answers about confidence, eyesight, posture, and charisma, Lam surprised them by saying “Fuck me.”²³² Not knowing what to do, the students were captured by an awkward mode of silence because Lam’s linguistic expression and his word choice are considered as extremely vulgar in Taiwan. Especially, the phonetic sound of the Chinese term “幹 *gan*” is nearly the same when it is articulated in Taiwanese Hokkien (a local dialect with large speaking population in Taiwan), which is commonly perceived as an insulting form of verbal expression. Hence, by creating a sense of shock through the use of vernacular language in Taiwan, Lam not only narrowed the cultural gaps but also

²³¹ Ibid., 5. The original Chinese text is: “你們覺得明星跟你們拍照有什麼不一樣?”

²³² Ibid., 6. The original Chinese text is: “幹我.” Upon hearing Lam’s answer, the students suddenly became silent for a couple of reasons. First, it is fair to say that no one would expect an answer like this one from Lam. As an artist, Lam often presents himself as an intellectual possessing extensive knowledge about theatre, dance, drama, and cinema to the public. Hence, the sharp contrast between Lam’s verbal expression and his public persona is a shock to “the audience.” Second, the use of such vulgar language is like an insult to the entertainment celebrities who used to participate in Lam’s stage productions. Therefore, some students clearly expressed a sense of discomfort after Lam shared his feedback.

reminded the students that the avant-garde are not necessarily in opposition to the popular through his skillful play with linguistic variations.

There is no need for us to insist that the avant-garde are always at the forefront for revolution. Avant-garde artists should not perceive themselves as anti-traditional or anti-conservative. As Hong Kong theatre practitioner and critic Chen Chit-Min 陳哲民 suggests, “the avant-garde actually coexist with the conservative”²³³ when it comes to theatre and performance practices because these cultural workers always live on the margin of Hong Kong’s cultural industry. It is worth emphasizing that Chen’s reminder should not be mistakenly read as a pessimistic reflection on the marginalized position of the theatre and performance practitioners in Hong Kong. Rather, I view it as a positive attitude suggesting that the center cannot exist without the presence of the periphery and vice versa. Of particular importance is that living on the margin empowers cultural workers to continue the search for alternative ways of thinking. This is inherently crucial in theatre making because the artists’ job is not to teach the audience how to fight with pale chants and meaningless conversations. Instead, by analyzing Edward Lam’s theatre, I contend that the stage is the place where the spectators are invited to explore the unknown and the incomprehensible so that they can resist a temptation to “make sense” of everything.

Significantly, this further relates to Lam’s personal expectation on the role that theatre plays in one’s individual growth. As mentioned above, Lam is

²³³ Chan, Lester Chit-Min, “從藝術的形形色色看香港戲劇的林林總總” [Examining the Diversity of Hong Kong Theatre through the lens of Artistic Variations], *Hong Kong Drama Review* No. 1 (1998): 57-61. p. 60. The original Chinese text is: “前衛，其實是與保守相輔相生的。”

experienced in transforming the stage into a quasi-classroom space where his spectators are challenged by a series of disorienting questions raised by Lam. According to Lam, conventionally, the issue of spectatorship has not been fully explored in the studies of Sinophone drama and theatre due to the fact that script writing and spoken words remain the indispensable and dominant elements in theatre making. When elucidating the concept of Sinophone drama, Lam writes:

First of all, given the fact that it is called “Sinophone drama,” there is no doubt that “text” occupies a dominant position. Writing produces dramatic script, and spoken language serve as the backbone of the script. This accounts for the reason why Chinese-speaking audience members get accustomed to raising this question: What does this dramatic piece want to say (or talk about)? It is impossible to change the idea that “the subject matter should be articulated by language” even if that is a piece of mine performance.²³⁴

²³⁴ Edward Lam, “三頭馬車之歌—華文戲劇何去何從” [Songs of Troika: What Is the Future of Sinophone Drama], *Hong Kong Drama Review* No. 1 (1998): 69-72. p. 69. The original Chinese text is: “首先，既稱「華文戲劇」，「文字」當然隱佔優勢。文字訴諸劇本，劇本又以話語為靈魂，這，解釋了華語觀眾為何習慣有此一問：「這齣戲『說』（或『講』些什麼？」——就算該齣是無言劇，也不能改變「主題應該宣之於口」。” It is worth noting here that Lam places great emphasis on “文 *wen*” (writing, script, or Chinese characters) in order to highlight that, in Chinese-speaking communities, many theatre-goers have never cast doubts on the authority of text and language. In this vein, using “Chinese drama” might be a more precise English translation of “華文劇場” because the term “Sinophone” has more to do with the phonic aspect of spoken words. However, many scholars tend to identify with the liberating potential of “the Sinophone” as opposed to “the Chinese.” For example, Taiwan theatre scholar Yu Shan-Lu’s (于善祿) book, *Causerie of Contemporary Sinophone Drama and Theatre* [當代華文戲劇漫談] (Taipei: Wu-Nan Book Inc., 2019) adopts “Sinophone” as the English translation of “華文 *huawen*.” Given the fact that this dissertation also focuses on the discursive flexibility of “the Sinophone,” I choose to use this term as the English translation of Lam’s Chinese terminology as well.

It is clear that Lam critiques the dominant role of language—both in written and spoken forms—in contemporary Sinophone drama and theatre. In addition to that, we should not forget that Lam’s concern about the overriding power of dialogue-centered theatrical expression on the Sinophone stage is ultimately the director’s reflection on the audience’s lack of agency. To Lam, the spectators’ demand for concrete answers about what the plot is or what the character represents simply manifests their inability to secure agency in the performance space.

Over the past three decades, Edward Lam Dance Theatre has made fifty-eight productions and traveled to a wide range of cities in Greater China. In addition to Taiwan, the company was set to embark on a special tour²³⁵ to mainland China in 2007 for the first time. Since then, commercial tours in the mainland have become part of the routine schedule on the business calendar of Edward Lam Dance Theatre per year. In this regard, Lam’s theatre troupe not only contributes to the diversity of avant-garde theatre practices in Taiwan but also ameliorates the mainland’s lack of alternative theatrical and performance events organized to cultivate the audience with a clear sense of “selfhood.”

²³⁵ In the spring of 2007, Edward Lam Dance Theatre was invited by Meeting in Beijing International Arts Festival to present its production of *Madame Bovary Is Me* (premiered in 2006, Hong Kong). After the debut tour in mainland China, Lam received a phone call from Beijing Zhong Ding Hua Yi Company (北京中鼎华艺) and was asked if he would be interested in establishing long-term partnership with them so that Edward Lam Dance Theatre will have an opportunity to make regular theatre tours in mainland China per year. Taking this collaboration as a point of departure, Lam and his teammates have facilitated an alternative mode of theatre culture in mainland China that emphasizes the importance of spectatorship as opposed to directorial choices or textual authority in theatre space. For the information about Lam’s participation in Meeting in Beijing International Arts Festival, please see <http://www.meetinbeijing.org.cn/index.php/Home/News/index/id/135>. Accessed on November 11, 2020.

Hsu Yen-Mei 徐硯美, an old acquaintance of Lam and a long-term dramaturg of Edward Lam Dance theatre, shares his first-hand observation of Lam's experimental aesthetics and the performative outcomes of Lam's stage experimentation. As Lam's traveling companion and tour comrade, Hsu often finds himself caught between a sense of identification and a sense of frustration when facing with sharp critiques of Lam's work regarding the incomprehensible nature of the characters' dialogue, the actors' physical gestures, and the questions raised by the director. Here the issue of spectatorship plays a crucial role in the analysis of some watchers' inability to make sense of Lam's directorial choices and the playwrights' employment of linguistic parody. As Hsu writes:

Edward Lam's theatre has been challenging the spectators' "ways of seeing."

Through this lens, Lam attempts to destroy something important—"habit."

When our behavioral patterns are disrupted, we will suddenly become

"aware" of something from a relatively unfamiliar and objective perspective

that leads us to ponder the question of why we see that thing in this way. This

is actually the question we need to think about before we concentrate on what

we see. However, as we continue to grow up, our ways of seeing remain

barely changed or poorly developed. This phenomenon results in a large

number of biased comments appearing on Facebook, Weibo, and WeChat.

What's worse, these biased viewpoints are identified as normal by those

embracing other forms of prejudice that circulate on the Internet. The ultimate outcome of this convergence is that it increases an emotional sentiment among the Internet population that gives rise to the polarization of viewpoints continuously: good looking vs. bad looking, art vs. business, and the highbrow vs. the kitsch.²³⁶

In these passages, Hsu succinctly elucidates the dialectical relationship between the director and the spectators with regard to the issue of sheer incomprehensibility in Lam's work. First, to some theatregoers, Lam's productions are difficult to "understand" because their personal modes of thinking patterns fail to guarantee them a sense of security. In other words, many, if not most, audience members have trouble making sense of the characters' ping-pong style conversations fraught with subtexts, indirect implications, linguistic play, and rhetorical parody. Second, Lam consciously challenges the viewers' visual perception by choreographing the performers' stage movement in order to create an effect of "visual disorientation." By doing so, Lam invites his audiences to abandon that kind of consumer mindset, assuming that they

²³⁶ Hsu, Yen-Mei, *Who's Afraid of Lin Yihua: 在劇場, 與禁忌玩遊戲 [Who's Afraid of Lin Yihua: Playing with Taboo in Theatre]* (Taipei: National Performing Arts Center, 2015), 219-220. The original Chinese text is: "林奕華的戲劇一直是挑戰觀眾「觀看的方式」, 透過這樣的挑戰, 他在打破一個很重要的東西——「習慣」。當習慣被打破時, 我們才會開始「察覺」, 才會突然站到一個比較陌生且客觀的角度來想「我為什麼要這樣看事情?」, 這原是我們在思考「看見什麼」以前, 就應該思考的問題。然而, 我們卻在「長大」的過程中, 鮮少經歷觀看方式的「改變」與「成長」。這也就導致了現代許多在 Facebook、微博或微信等社交平臺上面的發言, 偏見多於觀點太多太多, 甚至, 偏見也獲得偏見的「認同」, 引動出一種「情懷」, 使得對事情的觀點一再出現「兩極化」的評價——好看與不好看、藝術與商業、曲高和寡與譁眾取寵。”

simply purchase tickets for the shows and are mentally prepared for feeling entertained.

There is no doubt that, unlike Aristotle, Edward Lam does not treat the visual effects of “spectacle” as the least important of the six dramatic elements²³⁷ but places it at the forefront of his experimental aesthetics. At one level, the use of spectacle within performance venues is normally based on a consensus that it is “the staging of an event and arrangement of an audience that rewards passive consumption” that “deters engaged witnessing.”²³⁸ Nevertheless, to Lam, theatre is a practical tool that can teach the spectators how to navigate alternative ways of reconceptualizing issues that we tend to take for granted on a daily basis. The role of spectacle, in Lam’s dramaturgy, fosters a critical understanding of how and why we behave in a certain way that reinforces educational, social, and moral prejudice against the minoritarian groups in the global Sinophone communities.

In this regard, it is equally important to highlight the aesthetic implications of “dance” appearing in the title of Lam’s theatre troupe as it relates to the pragmatic function of visual spectacle and the discussion of spectatorship in Lam’s stage productions. In celebration of the 25th anniversary of Edward Lam Dance Theatre, in 2016, Lam accepted an exclusive interview and gave an overview of the evolving trajectory of his artistic creation. As an avant-garde theatre director, Lam has paid

²³⁷ In *Poetics*, Aristotle identifies the six elements of drama (for tragedy particularly) as follows: plot, character, thought, language/diction, song/music, and spectacle. Among these elements, spectacle is placed at the very bottom and considered less important compared with plot or character.

²³⁸ Emily Roxworthy, *The Spectacle of Japanese American Trauma: Racial Performativity and World War II* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2008), 8.

meticulous attention to the interplay between spatial design and bodily movement on stage. Lam's dramaturgical approach showcases that the fulfillment of dramatic action does not necessarily depend on language or conflict. Rather, by using his past productions as examples, Lam argues that: "They look like a series of pictures when the sound is turned off. Similar to moving images, these stage pictures represent a dynamic form of steady action that makes you realize that this action sequence has its own internal narratives, and you can call it an alternative text as well. Whether you agree with it or not, it certainly possesses "the core elements" in dance praxis."²³⁹

While Lam's analysis of the role of dance movement in his work sounds ambiguous, in the same interview, Lam further clarified the concept and suggested that *movement as an alternative text* is about how the performers communicate with one another and interact with the space through the dynamics of physical movement. Drawing parallels between dance choreography and stage movement, Lam believes that our understanding of "text" should be confined to printed characters (e.g., script) or spoken words (e.g., the actor's line). Instead, bodily gestures and choreographies convey the unheard or the unspoken messages (the absence of text in Lam's theory) that "reflect the performers' mental states and visualize the stories they present to the audience."²⁴⁰

²³⁹ Edward Lam, *The Twenty-Fifth Anniversary of Edward Lam Dance Theatre: The Director's Exclusive Interview*. Edward Lam Dance Theatre, December 9, 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tITV7ywnWik>. Accessed on December 11, 2018. The original Chinese text is: "我再看回這二十多年的作品，把聲音關掉的話，它會一幅又一幅的畫，它是不斷有行動，行動和行動，把聲音關掉來看的話，你會知道這些行動原來亦有它內含的敘事，亦即是說是另外一種文本來的，不論你是否認同這些叫作 Dance(舞蹈)也好，但它的而且確有了舞蹈的『內核（精髓）』" (3:13-3:41).

²⁴⁰ Edward Lam, *The Twenty-Fifth Anniversary of Edward Lam Dance Theatre: The Director's Exclusive Interview*. Edward Lam Dance Theatre, December 9, 2016.

In other words, at a conceptual level, Lam's work manifests that the external expression of actors' mental states should not be understood as one-dimensional or bilateral. For example, an actor or actress performs monologues on stage or reveals his/her objective through person-to-person conversation. On the contrary, the visual renderings of the characters' physical expression and kinesthetic movement, to borrow dance scholar SanSan Kwan's words, direct our attention to the little-known fact that [m]oving bodies can counter legible taxonomies of identity as they are tied to fixed notions of place."²⁴¹ Taking Lam's 2012 production *What Is Success* (Figure 4.8) as an example, we can see that the use of simultaneous and well-rehearsed body movement engenders an escalation of power dynamics between the female characters and the male character (stage right) that further manifests the externalization of the actors' internal mental states.



Figure 4.8 The visual rendering of Lam's concept of "movement as an alternative text" in *What Is Success* [三國] (2012). Courtesy of Edward Lam Dance Theatre.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tITV7ywnWik>. Accessed on December 11, 2018. The original Chinese text is: “就是通過你的肢體與走動，通過在一個空間中與人分享交流，其實你現在在一種怎樣的情緒狀態，以及你在說怎樣的一個故事” (3:46-4:03).

²⁴¹ SanSan Kwan, *Kinesthetic City: Dance and Movement in Chinese Urban Spaces* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 126.

Although Lam has mentioned the impacts of German choreographer Pina Bausch's dance theatre²⁴² on his artistic creation in many public events, we should not mistakenly perceive his dramaturgy as a replication of Euro-American modern dance or an imitation of American director Robert Wilson's image theatre. As theatre critic Lin Ke-huan 林克歡 has pointed out, Edward Lam does not treat dance and theatre as mutually exclusive on stage. In fact, they are both the indispensable elements in the formation of his experimental aesthetics. Lin writes:

Usually, Edward Lam will present his work by fusing elements from theatre and dance and perceive this artistic fusion as a whole. The entire progress of Lam's artistic creation includes pre-production advertising, stage performance, and post-show talkbacks. Lam consciously employs provocative posters, the slogans, the pre-show interviews, and the stage performances in order to counter social taboo and disobeys the regular norms (e.g., homosexuality, nudity, sex dolls without reproductive organs etc.). ... It is fair to say that Lam is a naughty boy in Hong Kong's theatre circle and his controversial advertising strategies are inseparable from issues of ticket selling. However, the flip side of Lam's satirical style is an unabashed attack on society, tradition, popular culture, and fashion.²⁴³

²⁴² Edward Lam, "港視應該讀狄更斯" [Hong Kong Television Network Ltd. Should Read Charles Dickens], *Min Pao* November 1st (2013): D1. The full text is available on the Facebook page of Edward Lam Dance Theatre: https://m.facebook.com/eldt.hk/photos/a.120578453137/10151833465068138/?type=3&locale2=pt_BR.

²⁴³ Lin Ke-huan, "「非常林奕華」之非常" [The Extraordinariness of Edward Lam Dance Theatre], in *Theatre in Consumer Society* [消費時代的戲劇] (Taipei: Bookman, 2007), 182. The original Chinese text is: "林奕華往往將戲劇／舞蹈演出作為一個完整的過程來呈現。這個過程包括前期的宣傳攻勢、舞台演出和演後座談會等信息回饋。他的演出海報、宣傳口號、演出前的訪談，包括舞台演出，大多都是有意識地觸犯禁忌，有意地逸出常規：同性戀、裸體、無性器人形 ... 你可以

Critically, Lin's analysis of Edward Lam Dance Theatre's avant-garde style provides us with an in-depth understanding of the rebellious agendas embedded in Lam's work. On one hand, Lam is excellent in making reference to popular culture (e.g., celebrity scandals, gossip of the politicians, Internet memes, and hit songs) and then refashioning these cultural materials as part of the visual spectacle in his stage productions. In doing so, many spectators are lured to believe that they can easily identify with the characters and the stories in Lam's productions since pop culture always plays an essential role in Lam's stage productions. On the other hand, the longer the spectators stay in the theatre space, the more confused they become. Gradually, they find themselves having trouble dealing with the probing questions raised by director Lam because these questions demand that the viewers should figure out the connection between their daily experiences and the characters' objectives, resulting in an extremely polarized reception of Lam's artistic style and dramaturgical approach.

In what follows, I would like to turn my attention to Lam's 2006 production *What Is Man?* and analyze how this theatre piece embodies the experimental aesthetics discussed in this chapter. By doing so, I suggest that Lam's stage experimentation not only showcases that the avant-garde and the popular are not mutually exclusive²⁴⁴ but also demonstrates that the avant-garde coexists with the

說林奕華是香港劇壇的頑童，可以說著一系列的作為包含著宣傳及票房銷售的策略，但其內裡，卻是一種毫不掩飾的挑釁精神，一種對社會、對傳統、對風俗、對時尚的反叛與抗爭。”

²⁴⁴ More discussions of this topic could be found in Lin Xiaoping's *Children of Marx and Coca-Cola: Chinese Avant-Garde Art and Independent Cinema* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2010) and Luo Liang's *The Avant-Garde and the Popular in Modern China: Tian Han and the Intersection of Performance and Politics* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2014).

mundane as the boundary between the radical and the passive has been blurred by the historical evolution of media and Internet technologies. More importantly, *What Is Man?* represents a concrete case study of what I call “the Sinophone theatre network” as the production has successfully crossed the political, ideological, and cultural borders in the communities of Greater China and Chinese diaspora.

4.3 Recasting the Classic: Edward Lam’s *What Is Man?* (2006)

First of all, by suggesting that *What Is Man?* is a seminal case study in relation to the concept of Sinophone theatre network, I refer to the multilingual and multicultural nature of the production team. In 2006, Taiwan’s flagship performance venue National Theater and Concert Hall (NTCH) embarked on a groundbreaking theatre project featuring a modern adaption of *Water Margin*—one of the four classic novels²⁴⁵ in the history of premodern Chinese literature and perhaps the most brutal piece with frightening portrayal of human nature. To some degree, Edward Lam Dance Theatre’s partnership with NTCH was a sensational hit to the theatre circle of Taiwan in particular and of Greater China in general. It is because, traditionally, NTCH is more inclined to select works produced by artists and troupes with solid

²⁴⁵ In the history of premodern Chinese literature, there are four pieces of literary work widely acknowledged as the “Four Masterpieces” (四大名著 *Si da min zhe*). That includes 水滸傳 *Shuihu zhuan* (*Water Margin/Outlaws of the Marsh*), 三國演義 *Sanguo yanyi* (*Romance of Three Kingdoms*), 西遊記 *Xiyou Ji* (*Journey to the West*), and 紅樓夢 *Hong lou meng* (*Dreams of the Red Chamber*). Lam had adapted the four classic novels into four modern stage productions with the support from Taiwan’s NTCH in 2006, 2007, 2012, and 2013 respectively. Simply put, the plot of *Water Margin* revolves around 108 male outlaws who are forced to exile because of the persecution from local bullies and corrupted authorities in Song Dynasty (960-1279). Coincidentally they flee to the same shelter space and then establish a quasi-military force that is perceived as a dire threat to the emperor and his ministers. These male characters’ courageous behavior and virtuous brotherhood in the novel, to some extent, romanticize the strict definitions of masculinity, which becomes the focal points of Lam’s stage adaptation.

international reputation. Given that Edward Lam Dance Theatre is not a large-scale theatre troupe known for marvelous artistic accomplishments or record-breaking commercial success, at that time, it was indeed a surprise to many theatre critics and performance practitioners in Taiwan when NTCH officially announced that a director from Hong Kong would adapt this classic Chinese novel into a contemporary audition event for a gangster movie and this adaption was part of the mainstage shows for the art center's 2006 season.

In this regard, the debut performance of *What Is Man?* on December 23, 2006, in Taipei could be considered one of the monumental events in the Chinese-speaking world for two reasons. First, Lam's adaptation features a literary canon from mainland China, a group of theatre technicians from Hong Kong and Taiwan, and a group of actors receiving performance training from and are based in Taiwan. Therefore, this performance repertoire not only represents a sense of artistic fusion but also facilitates a contingent Sinophone community where Mandarin, Cantonese, and local Taiwanese dialects became tools of communication. Second, *What Is Man?* made another round of tour to Macau, Hong Kong and Singapore in 2008 after its debut performance two years ago. This tour helped Lam's company expand their network of artistic collaboration to other Chinese-speaking communities and played a vital role in Lam's preparation for his debut commercial tour to mainland China in the same year. Therefore, Lam has become one of the few artists who frequently participate in events of cultural exchange among regions and communities of Greater China.

As one of the Lam-style productions, *What Is Man?* also consists of the elements of satire, role playing, gender switching, and parody in conjunction with trendy subjects drawn from local Taiwanese pop culture (e.g., lowbrow dialects). Although the Taipei tour in 2006 was well received by many theatregoers, the overall reception of this work remains extremely polarized in terms of directorial choices and cultural commodification. Originally published in the fourteenth century when China transitioned from the Yuan Dynasty (1279-1368) to the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) and written by Shi Naian 施耐庵 (1296-1372), *Water Margin* is a fictional story about the rise of an insurrection army organized by a group of grassroots civilians who rebel against the corruption of the feudal system and the emperor's regime in the Song Dynasty. There are 108 main characters in *Water Margin* and each of them are carefully crafted by the author with individualized personality and behavioral patterns. Although most of them are local bullies, gangsters, and military soldiers, the men protagonists are portrayed as courageous heroes as opposed to the less sophisticated characterization of the three female heroines. In addition, almost all of the civilian female roles appearing in the novel are characterized as either masculine women or flirt sluts. Therefore, many contemporary critics and scholars²⁴⁶ have pointed out the issue of misogyny in *Water Margin* and the novel's negative impacts on the development of modern Chinese culture.

What would be the main takeaway for the contemporary audience members when they reconnect themselves to a piece of Chinese canon grounded in a strong

²⁴⁶ See Liu Zaifu, *A Study of Two Classics: A Cultural Critique of The Romance of Three Kingdoms and The Water Margin* (Amherst, MA: Cambria Press, 2012), 197-214.

sense of anti-woman sentiment? In the preface of the playbill, Lam clearly remarks that “I do not want my audience to walk into the theatre and watch an “authentic reproduction” of *Water Margin*. It is because 1): the audience can read the original text or watch DVDs of the novel TV adaptations; 2): the stage version of *Water Margin* can also facilitate space for the audience’s personal interpretation provided that “reading” is considered a helpful way to explore one’s selfhood. That is the only way that the aftermath of the production will remain present in our communities—in a way that everyone interrogates how he/she communicates with himself/herself.”²⁴⁷

It is apparent that Lam’s objective is to empower the spectators through the modern recasting of these ancient characters so that the audience will have an opportunity to ruminate on what has been changed and what has not from the 14th century to the present. In light of this vein, it is fair to assume that whether one needs to know the original story of *Water Margin* is less a question of consensus but more of one’s preference. It is clear that Lam does not pay much attention to the issue of authenticity. Rather, as the director and a gay man, Lam “plays” with the stereotypical labels attached to the concept of masculinity through comic satire and role playing. Gender-switching performance disrupts the power dynamics between the male actors and the female performers in *What Is Man?* and therefore provides the audience with an opportunity to identify the affinities and differences between their

²⁴⁷ Edward Lam Dance Theatre, “The Playbill of *What Is Man?* (2006 world premiere in Taipei).” The full text is available on <https://issuu.com/edwardlamdance/theatre/docs/042->. Accessed on January 15, 2021. The original Chinese text is: “我不想讓觀眾走進劇場只看見一齣「原著再現版」的《水滸傳》，便是因為》（一）要看原汁原味，倒不如翻書或買電視的 DVD；（二）假如「閱讀」可以幫助認識自己，那舞台上的《水滸傳》也應該為觀眾保留可供閱讀詮釋的空間。唯有如此，它才有機會在散戲後繼續在人群中生長——以每個人反覆自問和跟自己對話的方式” (p.1).

understanding of gender norms and that of the characters. In other words, Lam believes that a question-based dramaturgical approach will transform the spectators into active thinkers in theatre space.

In *Theatre Audiences: A Theory of Production and Reception*, theatre scholar Susan Bennet provides a comprehensive overview of the scholarship focusing exclusively on theatre and spectatorship. While audience participation is absolutely the most crucial element in theatre making, Bennet reminds us that audience members are often treated as a passive role whose participatory presence in the theatre space is indeed confined by a sense of contractual obligation. In order to further elucidate the impacts of this contractual obligation, Bennet writes:

With this social contract put into place, usually by the exchange of money for a ticket which promises a seat in which to watch an action unfold, the spectator accepts a passive role and awaits the action which is to be interpreted. Many non-traditional theatre events, however, retain the general terms of that contract only to question them. Activity which falls within the theatrical frame employed by the production company will be received by the spectators as dramatic action. The activity “performed” for an onlooker who has not entered into the same contract will be read quite differently.²⁴⁸

According to Bennet’s analysis, it is worth highlighting that audience members are predominantly placed in a passive position because they are obliged to behave properly and perform obedience under the governance of theatre etiquette. To some

²⁴⁸ Susan Bennet, *Theatre Audiences: A Theory of Production and Reception*. 2nd ed (New York: Routledge, 1998), 204.

extent, such a contractual relationship between the performers/the producers and the spectators inevitably prevents the onlookers from becoming active participants who have the capacity to overcome a temptation for pure entertainment and explore alternative ways of thinking. Lam's work endeavors to cultivate the viewers with a critical sense of self-reflexivity because theatrical performance is not merely a pedagogical device or business model. Performance, as Shannon Steen argues, is inherently seductive and "structured as an imperative that calls upon the addressee to enact a specific behavior."²⁴⁹ Indeed, if part of performance's nature is to lure the spectators to pretend that something fictional is true, then I would suggest that, in *What Is Man?*, Lam encourages his viewers to resist that performative metaphors presented on stage in order to critically rethink the ways in which our everyday experience is manipulated by the phenomenon of information explosion, the rise of anti-intellectual sentiment, and the pursuit of commercial goods.

Rather than reconstructing the living conditions of the 108 ancient Chinese characters and bringing the audience back to the Song Dynasty, *What Is Man?* unfolds when nine male actors all participate in a film audition event in the hope of being selected as one of the leading roles. Structurally, the production features nine individual as well as collective audition scenarios in which the performers are required to improvise a scene based on the assigned topic. For these nine episodes, Lam makes reference to the prototypical characterization of masculinity in *Water*

²⁴⁹ Shannon Steen, "Neoliberal Scandals: Foxconn, Mike Daisey, and the Turn Toward Nonfiction Drama," *Theatre Journal* 66.1 (March 2014): 1-18. p. 3.

Margin and develops a set of metaphorical stage symbols that best represent the signature characteristics of being a man in both ancient and modern Chinese societies.

According to playwright Chen Li-Hua 陳立華, Lam and he both agree that the concept of “violence” will serve as the pillar of *What Is Man?* so that the stage production potentially creates new avenues for more critical reflections on the dialectical relationship between men and violence. “In the novel [*Water Margin*], the protagonists’ violent reaction against other characters is a direct result of the force of social oppression. In this production [*What Is Man?*], we make an analogy between acting auditions and social violence and use this metaphor to highlight how that violence is imposed on the individual. In the audition events, the casting calls from the director symbolizes the authority and represent a source of oppression against the individual. The actors perform the assigned characters under the demand of the director, which simultaneously forces them to the differences between their individual selves and the roles they play.”²⁵⁰

Following this lens of analysis, we can learn from the playwright of *What Is Man?* that Lam’s adaptation has less to do with how this Chinese canon is intellectually aspirational but more with how modern men develop their survival strategies when dealing with the same sources of social oppression in the past. In other words, *What Is Man?* expects the audiences to become active participants since

²⁵⁰ Edward Lam Dance Theatre, “The Playbill of *What Is Man?* (2006 world premiere in Taipei).” The full text is available on <https://issuu.com/edwardlamdance/theatre/docs/042->. Accessed on January 15, 2021. The original Chinese text is: “在小說裡，社會暴力的壓迫，迫使水滸人物用暴力去反抗吃人的社會。在劇中，我們則將導演甄選演員的過程作為社會暴力對個人施壓的對照比喻。在甄選過程中，導演對演員下達的指令，是至高權力對個人的暴力施壓，命令演員演出角色，逼使演員去面對自我和角色的過程” (p. 4).

Lam's question-based approach, in this production, is to invite the viewers to imagine and analyze what kind of decisions they would make if they were to encounter the violence scenarios presented on stage. Therefore, in this case, the audiences should not identify themselves with the characters/actors but detach themselves from the theatrical world. Using the collective audition episode in *What Is Man?* as an example, I would like to showcase how violence as a symbolic metaphor becomes a lens of analysis in relation to the issues of spectatorship and everyday performance.

As shown in Figure 4.9, the opening scene of *What is Man?* features an audition event where nine male actors are required to have individual and collective conversations with the director prior to their performances. For this scene, the nine actors stand on a bare stage devoid of any additional props or decorations.



Figure 4.9 The opening scene of *What Is Man?* [水滸傳] (2006). Copyright: Edward Lam Dance Theatre and Public Television Service (Taiwan).

Interestingly, although this is an occasion in which the fictional director (not Lam himself) is discussing the logistics with these actors and the audience members can hear their conversations, the one who plays the director's role is not physically "present" on stage. Instead, the male actors are in dialogue with the pre-recorded voice of the person²⁵¹ who performs as the fictional director. In other words, it is through the absence of the director's physical body on stage that both the male performers and the spectators become aware of their presence in the space. As the director's vocal sound circulates on and off stage, the nine actors encountering with a scenario that requires them to behave in accordance with his interview questions and stage instructions such as "Could you tell me your name," "How do you feel about your performance for the assigned topic," and "Will you make the same decision if you were the character." Upon hearing these questions from the fictional director, the auditionees will automatically switch to their personal selves as opposed to the movie characters and respond to the director with their own understanding of the issues addressed in the director's inquiries.

Dramaturgically, this open scene of *What Is Man?* epitomizes Lam's deep interest in theatrical experimentation because his approach here showcases that playing with the play—the stage adaptation of *Water Margin* and the playfulness of (re)casting—in his play (Lam's own dramatic text) is what fundamentally characterizes the theatricality in Lam's work. Namely, Lam not only defamiliarizes

²⁵¹ According to the playbill, playwright Chen Li-Hua 陳立華 is the vocal performer for this character. Edward Lam Dance Theatre also made a special video program documenting the complete rehearsal progress and the actors' reflections on the roles they play. Chen's vocal performance is also featured in this documentary video as well. For more information, please see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-nd5d5mNHV8&t=2267s> (6:25-6:49).

the auditionees with background knowledge about the novel, but also prevents the audience from identifying with the impersonated characters. In fact, when the auditionees speak with the director with their personal viewpoints, the spectators will immediately have a sense of disidentification with the plot and the roles appearing in the default audition scenes.

In a sense, the second audition scenario of *What Is Man?* is an ideal example for Lam's dramaturgical approach discussed here. Titled "Escape" (逃亡), this scene requires two male auditionees to collaborate with a female actor to perform the storyline assigned for this scenario. The basic plot here is that a junior member (小弟 *xiaodi*) of a gang is found having an affair with the leader's (大哥 *dage*) wife (大嫂 *dasao*) and the leader, in turn, demands that the junior member must kill his wife. Otherwise, the leader has no choice but to kill them both because the woman is an eternal obstacle for their brotherhood. The *xiaodi* character is played by actor No. 4, the *dage* character is by actor No. 6, and the *dasao* character is by actress Chou Ping-Chen 周品辰.²⁵² As this audition scene unfolds, the audience members will notice that *dasao* and *xiaodi* are on their way to the south of Taiwan in order to escape from *dage*'s territory.

²⁵² When watching Lam's stage productions, one often has difficulty recognizing the characters' names because Lam prefers having a large group of actors for his work. In *What Is Man?*, the nine auditionees all have double names. For example, when they are performing the roles designed for the gangster film, the auditionees will use the names identical to the characters appearing in *Water Margin*. When they switch identities to their everyday selves, the director will simply use actor No.1 to No. 9 to call them for the sake of convenience. In "Escape," actor No. 4 is also called 武松 (Wu Song) and actor No. 6 is simultaneously the role called 楊志 (Yang Zhi). Wu Song and Yang Zhi are part of the 108 characters in *Water Margin*.

On the stage, there are two folding chairs and a camera tripod. Sitting next to each other, *daisao* pretends that she is driving while *xiaodi* is busy talking with *dage* on the phone. Although both characters stare at the tripod in front of their chairs, the audience members observe their physical gestures from a monitor projection adjacent to the main stage (Figure 4.11). In this regard, the use of multimedia for this particular scene also creates a sense of visual disorientation because the viewers' gaze is directed towards a parallel stage with two identical groups of actors performing simultaneously. At the end of this scene, *xiaodi* does not follow *dage*'s order and chooses to stay with *dasao*. When the light gradually fades away from the center of the stage, the sound of a gunshot is heard by the spectators, implying that *dasao* kills *xiaodi* before they reach the final destination.



Figure 4.10 The use of multimedia design in *What Is Man?* [水滸傳] (2006). Copyright: Edward Lam Dance Theatre and Public Television Service (Taiwan).

When the stage is filled with light again, *xiaodi* stands up and slowly approaches the center stage. As the pre-recorded voice of the director starts to converse with *xiaodi*, the spectators will immediately realize that the one who plays *xiaodi* is transitioning to actor No. 4 as the director asks: “Will you shoot the woman (*dasao*) first if you were the character (*xiaodi*)?”²⁵³ With a sense of hesitation, actor No. 4 tells the director that it is unlikely that he will get involved in a dilemma like that because he knows how to deal with women. What deserves our attention here is that actor No. 4 begins to use his personal experience²⁵⁴ as an example to prove that he will not be fooled by women’s seductive tricks. As actor No. 4 dives deeper into his past experience, the spectators might cast doubts on the *xiaodi* character’s decision to elope with *dasao* since the narratives of actor No. 4 seem to offer an alternative solution to the paradoxical scenario (to kill his sister-in-law or to betray his brother). In doing so, Lam endeavors to deconstruct the stereotypical images of masculinity through the hypervisibility of a variety of male embodiments reminiscent of the standard definitions (e.g., body shape) of being a masculine man.

As Lam contends, “I use this production (*What Is Man?*) to raise a question about how men establish their selfhood based on social stereotypes and how this process

²⁵³ Edward Lam Dance Theatre “On Screen Project,” *What Is Man?* (2015). Similar to National Theatre Live (NT Live) of the UK, Edward Lam Dance Theatre also collaborates with film theatre in Hong Kong and Taiwan to promote the recorded screening of his past productions. The information is available on <https://www.eldt.org/eldtonscreen>. Accessed on November 12, 2020.

²⁵⁴ Actor No. 4 specifically uses his familiarity with surfing as a metaphor to suggest that the women he encountered are similar to the sea waves he conquered. In fact, his monologue also conveys a sense of anti-woman sentiment because women are described as superficial and unashamed human beings that are always in demand for abstract love. Therefore, in the context of the monologue of actor No.4, women represent the irrational while men are the rational.

engenders a stereotypical understanding of women at the same time.”²⁵⁵ While Lam is fully aware that the reiteration of stereotypical discourses and the presentation of biased images risk reinforcing their harmful impacts on the marginal groups in society, the polarized reception of *What Is Man?* reveals that Lam’s experimental aesthetics remain controversial and problematic to many theatre critics²⁵⁶ and performance audiences.

4.4 Conclusion

In this chapter, I examine the work of Edward Lam Dance Theatre and argue that Lam’s artistic partnership with theatre groups, performance organizations, and professional theatre technicians from different Sinophone communities manifests that avant-garde theatre practices, in the twenty-first century, are not confined to the realm of elite art. Through an in-depth analysis of Lam’s aesthetic styles, biographical backgrounds, and commercial tours, I showcase that Lam’s efforts to develop more possibilities of interdisciplinary cooperation in Greater China and other Chinese-speaking regions epitomize the concept of Sinophone theatre network theorized in this dissertation. Indeed, as theatre scholar Rossella Ferrari has pointed out, “manifest signs of an ever-expanding Pan-Chinese performance platform have emerged since the 90s, as testified to by increasingly frequent collaborations and exchanges between

²⁵⁵ Edward Lam, “林奕華的心之偵探學” [The Detective Theory of Edward Lam] (Shanghai: Shanghai People’s Press, 2016), 17.

²⁵⁶ For example, see Wang Molin, “從《水滸傳》談「非常林奕華」的生產模式。” [Using What Is Man? as an Example to Analyze the Production Mode of Edward Lam Dance Theatre] *PAR: Performing Arts Review* No. 170 (2007): 28. In this piece, Taiwan-based theatre practitioner Wang Molin 王墨林 argues that this Lam’s production is shallow and unsophisticated. Wang critiques Lam’s emphasis on erotic puns, male actors’ muscle, and vulgar languages.

practitioners who operate within and across the borders of Greater China—Hong Kong, Taiwan, the PRC, as well as Singapore and the diaspora”²⁵⁷ While the discussions about cultural, national, and intellectual identities in Greater China remain in flux, I believe that the critical lenses of theatre practices and performance scholarship provide us with creative strategies to facilitate an environment where the debates over the presence and the absence of “China” are no longer an obstacle to the artistic exchange in the Sinophone communities.

²⁵⁷ Rossella Ferrari, *Pop Goes the Avant-Garde: Experimental Theatre in Contemporary China* (New York: Seagull, 2012), 302.

Conclusion

Envisioning the Future of Sinophone Theatre(s)

Performance creates varied pathways to dramatic and cultural meanings across history, but polity-driven historiography has constructed linear, synchronic narratives that have been flattened by national profiling, a tendency to characterize a non-Western artwork based on stereotypes of its nation of origin.²⁵⁸

—Alexa Alice Joubin²⁵⁹

In this dissertation, I have argued that the concept of Sinophone theatre network expands our conceptual realm of Chinese theatre and performance—be it traditional or modern—to a more diverse and dynamic framework in which artists and performers of Chinese descent or with Chinese cultural background establish transient performance communities through the practice of aesthetic experimentation and the mobility of touring theatres. By placing the work of Gao Xingjian, Wu Hsing-kuo, and Edward Lam in dialogue, this project suggests that a study of the historical development of avant-garde theatre in mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong not only showcases how theatre artists in the three geographical locations reinvent alternative forms of cutting-edge performance that are distant from their Western counterpart, but also highlight the ways in which their artistic collaborations with Sinophone and diasporic Chinese performers and practitioners transcend the political, cultural, and ideological, and linguistic boundaries in relation to the politics of

²⁵⁸ Alexa Alice Joubin. *Shakespeare and East Asia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 7.

²⁵⁹ Alexa Alice Joubin. *Shakespeare and East Asia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 7.

naming and the pursuit of national profiling as the productions of non-Western theatre troupes are often explicitly and inexplicitly labeled as cultural ambassadors of their homelands.

To reiterate, the notion of Sinophone critique is employed in this dissertation as both a theoretical lens and methodological approach. In doing so, I am not suggesting that the use of “the Sinophone” is necessarily an antithesis of the cultural and linguistic connotations of “the Chinese.” On the contrary, I argue that the Sinophone as a lens of analysis create a discursive space for theatre practitioners and performance scholars to reconceptualize the production, reproduction, and circulation of touring theatres facilitated by Chinese-speaking practitioners whose senses of cultural as well as national belonging cannot be commensurate with the conceptual paradigm configured by the term “Chinese.” More fundamentally, it is because “Chinese” as an English term is all-inclusive and has limited space for specificities. Therefore, the use of “Chinese” as a loaded linguistic register tends to overlook the fact that a pursuit of authentic Chinese culture or an identification with *pure* Chineseness is simply out of the question.

The heated debates over what Chineseness *was* and *is* remain a crucial yet controversial topic in the fields of Chinese studies, Chinese diaspora studies, and Asian American studies. In addition to its all-inclusiveness, as I have pointed out in the previous chapters, the term “Chinese” is highly politicized as a direct signifier of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), the CCP regime, or Communist China, which gestures toward a demonized understanding of anything *Chinese* in a blunt and aggressive manner. Significantly, we have already witnessed such a tendency as a

detailed analysis of the problematic nature of Shi Shu-mei's Sinophone theories is provided in the first chapter of this project. The majority of current scholarship on Gao Xingjian's artwork, theatre productions, and dramatic theories also has the similar blind spot as that of Shi Shu-mei's work. As I have discussed in the second chapter, scholars like Claire Conceison, Shi Shu-mei, and Mary Mazzilli all suggest that the scholarly discussions of Gao's work should go beyond the realm of the Chinese because Gao is no longer affiliated with the PRC and therefore, we should abandon analytic frameworks like diaspora Chinese studies that presumably assert that Gao is still either culturally or emotionally tied to China and Chinese culture regardless what foreign citizenship he possesses now.

While this analytical approach makes perfect sense with regard to Gao's personal identification with his French nationality and his self-positioning as a cosmopolitan citizen, in my opinion, we should not forget that the Sinophone theory is not merely a critique of the PRC's cultural chauvinism. That is to say, by placing Sinophone studies, theatre studies, and performance studies in dialogue, this dissertation emphasizes that in theatre and performance practices, the presence and the absence of "China" in the work of Chinese-speaking artists are not solely determined by the impacts of a unified language system in writing or speaking forms. Unlike literature, theatre and performance mostly requires group and team collaborations. Each collaboration also represents the emergence of a transient community with possibly different ethnic groups and language variations. Therefore, in chapter two, I position Gao Xingjian as a Sinophone theatre maker because his artistic partnership with a variety of individual artists and professional groups

embodies the operation of the Sinophone theatre network. In other words, Gao's career accomplishments as a playwright and his reputation as a pioneer avant-garde theatre practitioner, I contend, are rooted in his efforts to seek advice from prominent Chinese-speaking practitioners like Lin Zhaohua and get inspiration from border-crossing aesthetics in the work produced by the younger generation like Wu Hsing-kuo.

In chapter three, I continue my discussion of how traditional Chinese performance techniques meet with the experimental aesthetics from the West by looking at the intercultural *xiqu* productions of Taiwan's Contemporary Legend Theatre and the avant-garde performance methods invented by the theatre troupe's founder, Wu Hsing-kuo. Undoubtedly, Wu's experimental *xiqu* repertoire exemplifies the call for intercultural and transnational art collaborations. His touring theatres to Japan, England, France, the PRC, and several other countries have substantially helped Wu's theatre company establish international reputation. However, as intercultural Shakespeare scholar Alexa Joubin has reminded us, it is time for scholars, critics, and practitioners to move beyond the framework of national profiling when we examine non-Western theatre and performance projects. Such a tendency, as Joubin suggests,²⁶⁰ undermines the creative foundation of non-Western artists' artwork since it simultaneously reinforces a stereotypical understanding of non-European theatre as non-sophisticated art or non-Western performance genres as premodern traditions.

²⁶⁰ See Alexa Alice Joubin. *Shakespeare and East Asia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 7-13.

To counteract against this biased interpretation of traditional Chinese theatre as a premodern performance genre, Wu Hsing-kuo endeavors to bridge the gap between text-based Western drama and body-centered Chinese theatre by fusing canonical plays from the West (e.g., Shakespeare) with traditional *xiqu* acting techniques. The combination of these two performance traditions constitutes what I call “the theatre of mutation” with regard to Wu’s theatrical experimentation. Unlike the concept of hybridity, to borrow the scientific and biological implications embedded in the term, the Contemporary Legend Theatre’s experimental *jingju* is similar to a mutated variant distant from the mainland tradition and incompatible with local Taiwanese norms in a metaphorical sense. Wu’s art is a form of mutation because it always challenges the spectators’ fixed understanding of dramatic forms and theatrical styles with the stage presentation of a mixture of elements drawn from ancient Chinese costumes, western music genres, and multimedia stage design. Although Wu’s aesthetic innovation is widely recognized as groundbreaking, my analysis of the *jingju* master’s avant-garde performance suggests that the Contemporary Legend Theatre’s continuous pursuit of artistic experimentation is not so much about reputation but has more to do with patronage and inheritance.

On one hand, there is no doubt that Wu Hsing-kuo is one of the most prominent Peking opera performers in Taiwan since his career achievements have been endorsed by several prestigious art and cultural institutions.²⁶¹ On the other

²⁶¹ For instance, Wu Hsing-kuo was one of the recipients of Taiwan’s National Awards for Arts in 2010. Hosted by National Culture and Arts Foundation and sponsored by the government of Taiwan, this annual award competition is dedicated to artists and musicians, and writers whose works are exceptionally important to the growth of Taiwan’s cultures and art. For more information, please see https://www.ncafroc.org.tw/grants_award.html. Accessed on December 16, 2020.

hand, Wu and his theatre troupe continue to struggle with funding support and the lack of young *jingju* apprentices. It is true that what motivated Wu Hsing-kuo to produce intercultural Peking opera in 1986 was his determination to save this traditional performance genre from disappearing in Taiwan. As mentioned in chapter 3, the decline of Peking opera in Taiwan, of course, is associated with the rise of native Taiwanese consciousness since the Martial Law was lifted in 1987. More and more people in Taiwan have become increasingly frustrated with the invisible presence of Taiwan in the international community when the island's sovereignty is denied by the majority of countries all over the world. Culturally, many citizens in Taiwan are less identified with Chinese civilization (e.g., architecture, literature, and music) but more interested in local Taiwanese dialects and artifacts. Inevitably, Peking opera as a quintessential form of Chinese art is commonly perceived as a "foreign" import that is not part of the authentic Taiwanese culture. In this regard, my examination on Wu's avant-garde aesthetics suggests that it is time for theatre scholars and performance critics to think behind the avant-garde when the call for experimentation has functioned as survival strategy for the troupe's future development. Only by its devotion to the practices of "avant-garde" performance will the Contemporary Legend theatre keep the donors and the funding sponsors' attention.

My investigation of the world premiere of Gao Xinjian's *Snow in August* (2002) in Taipei is worth mentioning here again. While this is not a selected case study for the chapter on Wu Hsing-kuo, the performance of *Snow in August* actually featured Wu and his wife as part of the production team. Serving as the leading actor,

Wu's innovative acting skills are an iconic example of what Gao Xingjian calls a "omnipotent actor," meaning that he/she can carry out comprehensive performance tasks (e.g., dance and singing) for a single production. While Wu as the leading character played a vital role in the success of this show, ironically, Gao Xingjian was the one who received media attention and grant support since the glory of the Nobel Prize remained a sense of authority in the cultural circle of Taiwan. Nevertheless, *Snow in August* epitomizes the concept of Sinophone theatre network as the production consists of artists from the global Sinophone communities. In a sense, theatrical performance facilitates a border-crossing platform for the Chinese-speaking cultural workers to experiment with new possibilities of rendering the notion of Chineseness.

The fourth chapter of this dissertation shifts gear toward the theatre culture in Hong Kong. Focusing on the experimental aesthetics of Edward Dance Theatre's dramaturgy, I underline Lam's contributions to the formation of the Sinophone theatre network in Greater China. Obsessed with the power dynamics between avant-garde art and popular culture, Lam creatively blends elements of the popular (e.g., gossip magazines and variety shows) with classical or highbrow cannons in order to challenge the spectators' ways of seeing. Although Lam's work is often criticized for his overuse of vulgar language, nudity, and a large number of performers, Lam still commits himself to exploring possibilities for social change through the embodiment of taboo subjects such as homosexuality and gender parody. In a sense, taboo refers to something forbidden and deemed to be absent from everyday life. Therefore, the stage representations of prohibited topics manifest how director Lam weaponizes

theatrical performance and utilizes it to attack the sources of social oppression such as toxic masculinity and anti-woman sentiment.

Significantly, by examining the cutting-edge mise-en-scène in Lam's stage productions, I further showcase that spatial design plays a vital role in how the actors navigate the power structures in the theatre space. At a symbolic level, the performers' cognitive response to the place they exist also alludes to how power plays out on a daily basis. As I have argued in chapter four, Lam's avant-garde theatre is completely different from his Western counterpart because the success of his touring theatres to mainland China, Taiwan, Macau, and Singapore demonstrates that the avant-garde and the popular are not mutually exclusively on stage. In other words, whether the death of the avant-garde deserves critical attention in consumer society is no longer a debate when we expand the intellectual scope of avant-garde studies to non-Western cultures. Conventionally, as Paul Mann has observed, "[t]he avant-garde is the outside of the inside, the leading edge of the mainstream, and thus marginal in both sense: excluded and salient."²⁶² In this regard, it is understandable when one claims that there is no longer avant-garde art in the age of consumerism because the irreversible progress of commodification will blur the boundaries between the highbrow and the lowbrow, the elegant and the vulgar, and the intellectual and the uneducated. However, based on my research on Lam's aesthetic styles and career transitions, I would suggest that the vanguard spirit embodied by artistic practices is not necessarily deemed to reside on the edge of the mainstream. Lam's work provides

²⁶² Paul Mann. *The Theory-Death of the Avant-Garde* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1991), 13.

us with an alternative way to ruminate on the sociopolitical implications of the avant-garde in the twenty-first century. It shows that the avant-garde is not an antithesis of the popular. To some extent, in Lam's dramaturgy, the revolutionary always coexists with the ordinary.

Lastly, I would like to envision how this research topic will continue to develop as Sinophone studies definitely requires more intersectional insights. Although this research makes a critical intervention to Sinophone studies by addressing the lack of theatre and performance scholarship, I am also highly aware of the thematic flaws in this project that requires further research. Specifically, the selected artists in this dissertation are all male practitioners, which obviously demands critical attention to female theatre practitioners in the global Sinophone communities. Particularly, in terms of women avant-garde theatre artists, it is difficult to locate specific point of contact because 1) female theatre directors are significantly fewer as opposed to their male colleagues in Greater China and 2) only a limited number of scholarly publications pay attention to female theatre directors whose productions challenge the social norms and gender stereotypes in societies where Confucian values and moral principles still exercise its power over the civilians. In this light, I believe that future endeavors should be devoted to female theatre artists in the Sinophone world.²⁶³

²⁶³ In the PRC, director Tian Qinxin 田沁鑫 is one of few female practitioners whose experimental work is recognized by the theatre circle in Beijing. In Taiwan, Katherine Chou Hui-ling 周慧玲 as a college professor and theatre director is known for her academic research and practical work on feminist theatre and queer performance cultures.

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