

Physical Posture and Historical Memory: Taiwan Theater in the 1980s

Author/WANG Mo-Lin



After I returned to Taiwan from Japan in the 1980s, I started to participate in the small theater movement, and my continuing work was also related to small theater. It's not because I insist on doing small theaters by will, but because I don't want to let myself go down a path of being institutionalized or mainstreamed. What does it mean not to be institutionalized and not to be mainstreamed? This question is actually closely related to how to present a person's existence in the first place. I've always felt strongly that I needed a space, a space where I could have a voice. It can be said that making a sound is an important way for me to perceive my own existence. Until now, up to this moment, I have been working in a small theater. What the audience feels from my plays and can also read from my articles indicates that my long-term accumulation is producing a marked effect. Accumulation is very important for directors. Only with solid accumulation can we find a way to connect the trajectory of personal life with the context of history, and only then can we connect with the history of Taiwan and the history of Taiwanese theaters. Otherwise, the director is at best just a theatrical worker. In the end, 'accumulation' means constructing an artist's creative style and ideas from the accumulation over a long period of time.

The reason why the 1980s is important to the history of Taiwanese theater is because of the occurrence of a "small theater movement". It is necessary for us to review the historical traces left by the entire 1980s. The Democratic Progressive Party was established in 1986, Martial law was lifted in 1987, and the Berlin Wall fell in 1989, symbolizing the end of the Cold War era. From the proclamation of Martial law in 1949 to its dissolution, Taiwan has gone through a long history of 38 years. This is the political background. In terms of economy, neo liberalism is prevalent in the world, and its influence lies in promoting the secularization development of postmodern culture. In the context of the 1980s, the "small theater movement" not only occurred in theaters, but also on the streets, giving rise to the so-called "street theater". The report theatrical plays first appeared in various sports occasions at that time.

Action and Street Theater *Anti-deforestation*



It is worth mentioning that the introduction of Japanese dance to Taiwan through the White Tiger Society has influenced local theaters and led to many aesthetic innovations. Many works reflect Taiwan's discussions on numerous social issues in the 1980s. At that time, university clubs were also very active, and small theaters were set up one after another to carry out club activities. The concern of college students for social issues was reflected in the action dramas they created. Starting from the "body", performances were carried out in theaters and also in various spaces, and then, body actions gradually moved towards performance art. Of course it was not called performance art at that time, but it highlighted a kind of "body" action. The issues involved in these actions were very diverse, ranging from various socio-political issues to indigenous people, homosexuality, feminism and so on. A very important point is that the mind was gradually liberated from the spatial categories under the awareness of martial law, which had a huge impact on young people. There was a flash point: several young people carried out a performance in the underground passage in front of the Taipei Fire Station. They were chased away by the police, which caused a great disturbance. Because people were liberated from the idea of public space under the awareness of martial law, discussions on public space began to appear in the 1980s, such as the relationship between architecture and public space. New ideas were constantly emerging. At that time, the "NTU Graduate Institute of Building and Planning" played a very important role in the promotion of new concepts.

In addition to "space", there is another important concept, which is the "body" mentioned above, and I would like to talk about this issue in detail. In the past, "body" was a concept that was only used in the context of physiological health or medicine. In the 1980s, "body theory" began to appear in theaters. When it comes to "body theory", it is necessary to sort out my own creative context. At that time, I had already done more than twenty plays, and while doing it, I was thinking about how the "body" can be used as a communication tool in performance. How can artists present the relationship between the body, history and culture through performance? What kind of emotional expression has the Taiwanese body formed in the cultural context? How can we sort out historical memories from the cultural context, and then express the memory of history through the posture of the body in the theater? I believe that the expression of body posture originates from shared historical memories. Under the oppression of the Cold War and Martial Law, our bodies were restricted, which in turn restricted our minds. Then, such limitations are reflected in the body's actions, often resulting in a situation of retraction. Retraction does not refer to the retraction of movements, but rather to the tendency of the body to naturally retract when expressing emotions.

In 2010, I collaborated with Korean actors in a play called "Goodbye! Mother". The play is about Chun Tae-il, the leader of the labor movement in 1970, who set himself on fire as a protest against the factory's failure to implement the Labor Standards Act. He held the Labor Standards Law in his hand and burned himself to the ground. The body portrayed by Korean actors is also the body of Koreans under the martial law of the Cold War, which is different from ours. However, they express a suppressed and introverted emotion that I mentioned earlier, corresponding to the inner spiritual activities. That is to say, Korean actors present the bodies of workers suppressed under the Cold War martial law, while also expressing the physical posture of Koreans in a specific historical context.

The body postures presented by the Korean actors had a great influence on me, reminding me of the events that happened in Taiwan during the White Terror period and how Taiwanese people's posture was shaped under the influence of martial law during the Cold War. That is to say, during such a long period of this martial law, what kind of internal oppression did we have on our bodies and what kind of posture may we make? As I previously stated, a person's posture can evoke memories and other strong emotions. This type of nostalgia-inducing feeling helps to keep the memories of a martial law era during the Cold War alive. Thus, the Cold War's experience of martial law had a significant impact on how Taiwanese people expressed their emotional memories. Of course, we all know that memories gradually deteriorate with time, and even become somewhat vague or blurred to some extent. But this spotted memory evokes a particular feeling in us. We all appear to have a certain emotional memory that is triggered when we see an old house, a historical location, or even a small object.

We have formed a memory of the history of martial law, and the expression of memory needs to be reflected by external body postures, but in fact this is not absolute, because there is a certain haziness and vagueness in our memory. Just like the feeling you have when you see an old house or a historical site. So, later on, I successively created "The Waste Land" (2011), "Antigone" (2013), "The North Korean Defector" (2017), and even "The Sorrow of Two Girls" (2019). A narrative strategy is developed, that is, to use body gestures to perform repressed retracted emotions. In the narrative I applied this strategy where I used body postures to express repressed emotions. The "Wasteland" tells the story of my own personal experience. In the Taiwanese social atmosphere of the 1980s, I went through emotional upheavals when confronted with left-versus-right and unification-versus-independence political ideologies. "Antigone" is about what happened in three different cities, Beijing, Taipei, and Seoul, during their respective periods of martial law. "The North Korean Defector" features actors from Malaysia, Korea, and Taiwan, so I created a Cold War scenario in Asia there. In 2019, I created "The Sorrow of Two Girls", the plot of which takes place on the eve of the white terror incident on February 28, and the white terror actually began in the 1950s following Retrocession Day. I used a comparative narrative strategy to talk about the disintegration of the family, discussing the hidden emotions, not the emotions that exist outside, but rather allowing the characters to form their own emotional narrative space within the inner world. I won't speak directly about the history and concept of white terror, because I'm worried it will turn into dogma and propaganda. Watching a play is not taking a history lesson. We emphasize the process by which historical situations become personal memories. There are personal emotions in the drama, and these emotions are very complicated, or they contain political suppression, or the political persecution of people's loved ones, and so on. I avoid talking directly about this matter, but rather about the memory that these things have formed in my personal experience. If this memory contains very profound emotions, how should it be expressed? Whether it's the memory of white terror or the memory of the Cold War martial law, I basically use this way to handle the issue of expression.

The development of small theaters and even contemporary theaters in the 1990s was crucial, and a key factor was that Taiwan entered a period of social transformation during this historical stage. At that time, artists faced a problem of indigenization. Before the lifting of martial law, the indigenization movement had already had an impact. Artists were confronted with the legacy of 38

years of long martial law history. On July 1, 1987, martial law was lifted with a single order, but the lifting of martial law could not completely eliminate anti communist ideologies overnight. In the 1980s, the Martial Law was promulgated, followed by the end of the Cold War and the era of neoliberalism, while also facing the pressure of developed countries on the Third World through globalization. Due to problems with industrial structure, globalization in the neo-liberal era has severely squeezed the development space of Taiwan's industries. Taiwan's industries in the lower reaches of the third world began to slowly move outward to Vietnam, Mainland China and the Philippines. At that time, there was still a question, namely, how does Taiwan view the world and how does the world view Taiwan? That is to say, globalization has deeply impacted Taiwan's economy, culture, and ideology. In the era of neoliberalism, people's way of thinking about economy and culture is different from that in the atmosphere of martial law during the Cold War before the 1980s.

He Jingtai first touched on the sensitive topic of "White Terror" in 1990. That year, he published a photography collection called "The White Archives". This classic portrait series trilogy includes: the first book "Urban Underclass" tells the story of homeless and street dwellers, the second book "The White Archives", and the third book "Revealing Work Injuries". Regardless of his photography achievements, I think when he deals with these three issues of realism, the first thing he thinks of is not visual aesthetics. In "Urban Underclass", he focuses on abandoned bodies from a different perspective. In "The White Archives", there are imprisoned bodies, while in "Revealing Work Injuries", there are damaged bodies. The creative background of the photography collection "The White Archives", which is about imprisoned bodies, is closely related to the small theater movement in Taiwan in the 1980s. I will focus on two points: firstly, due to the influence of the left-wing trend in France, the reading clubs of the island's universities were reading left-wing books. Secondly, at the theoretical level, many research institutions that focus on left-wing ideas

Environmental Theater *Zhong Kui Marrying His Younger Sister Off*



emerged, such as the "NTU Graduate Institute of Building and Planning". For young people, left-wing research was a hot topic at the time. Influenced by left-wing ideology, art was linked to street movements, which means that realist art explored political and social issues through its integration with street movements. Also, another area related to the Taiwan Small Theater Movement is the avant-garde ideology of the New Enlightenment era, which refers to the ideological liberation before and after the lifting of martial law. The discourse of the 1980s is very different from that of the 1970s. The new discourse includes new language and forms, both of which are experimented and created in small theaters.

"Leftist ideology" and "avant-garde ideology" are two key words for a deep understanding of He Jingtai's photography collection "The White Archives". Additionally, I believe he boldly and fully utilized a piece of 'black cloth'. The so-called "black cloth" can also be seen as a metaphor, connecting with the body of the victims of white terror, becoming an imagery of the image. Metaphorical techniques have long been used in the history of photography, and obviously cannot be considered as He Jingtai's original creation. However, his uniqueness lies in "connecting" with the victim's body, thus reflecting the dark history. The use of metaphorical forms has already shown that He Jingtai advocates a modernist spirit in his works, which directly targets the deeper spiritual world rather than emphasizing external forms. The victims of white terror are flat images of the real world, and through artistic processing techniques such as the connection between the body and the black cloth, a victim's spiritual world is superimposed, forming He Jingtai's modernist aesthetics. It's like adding colors for the purpose of emphasis in painting, where the body, like a still life, has its own independent existence, but the spatial intention deployed by the black cloth turns the entire picture into a landscape. We can say it is a scenery of memory or a scenery of fact, but it is also a scenery with symbolic significance.

The black cloth is actually blank, just like a white screen, with images flowing inside. The image flow contained in the black cloth is a kind of black memory, where white terror and black memory are intertwined as text, creating a strong body that allows the audience to grasp the core of the photographer's expression, that states that violence and history are inseparable. That is to say, the trauma of violence, like history, gradually becomes an accurate record of the spirit of the times and the inner emotional world of people. Brainwaves and electrocardiograms are both manifestations of emotional expression, and we can observe precise records through instruments. Differences in radians and curves indicate fluctuations in emotions. That is to say, He Jingtai used a similar precise recording method in his photography works, but he not only used realism to depict the body of a victim but also portrayed a hidden history - the history of victims of left-wing underground party organizations, which is still undisclosed to the public. If the scenery of memory reveals the tragedy of the body, then the black cloth sets off the bodies of the victims of white terror in different ways, allowing us to see more vividly. Following the transition of the camera, it is like scenery jumping in one after another, and the state of the human soul is flowing and changing with the passage of time. How sacred and solemn all this is! (End)

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Images Courtesy of Wang Mo-Lin

WANG, Mo-Lin

Born in 1949 in Tainan, Taiwan, Wang Mo-Lin is a veteran theater/culture critic, theater director, and performance artist. Before 1991, when he established Body Phase Studio, Taiwan's first alternative performing arts collective with a focus on interdisciplinary projects, Wang organized and produced *October* (1987), a grand-scale outdoor show in a worn-down warehouse on the beach, realizing the idea of "environmental theater". In 1988, he organized Taiwan's first "action theater" event, *Dispel Orchid Island's Evil Spirit*.

Tent Theater *Taiwan's 400 Year History*

