

# An Iconoclastic Rebel<sup>[1]</sup>

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## **I . White Freedom**

According to Wang Mo-Lin, the spirit of resistance in post-war Taiwan must be traced back to the liberalism represented by figures such as Hu Shi, Lei Zhen, Yin Haiguang, and even Li Ao and Nanfang Shuo. It may seem contradictory: Isn't it strange that, a cultural radical, in order to establish a method that encompasses both creativity and criticism, delves into the complex history of "Cold War - Martial Law - Anti-Communism," and despite a lifelong struggle against capitalism and nationalism in Taiwan, considers the anti-communist liberals as rebellious enlighteners?

In the 1950s, with the outbreak of the Korean War, Chiang Kai-shek's Kuomintang regime, in coordination with the global Cold War initiated by the United States, launched a crackdown on leftist underground organizations in Taiwan. This was partly due to the circumstances of the time and mostly driven by the mission of "anti-communism and resistance against Soviet Union" that the regime adopted. Intellectuals associated with "Free China Journal" had limited room for criticism amidst the bloody purges, and their silence of dissent was likely tinged with indifference. During the era of White Terror, even freedom itself was tainted with whiteness. Wang Mo-Lin, in his teens and twenties at the time, experienced the bleakness of this constrained freedom. How did such a white freedom become a source of youthful resistance?

We must transcend the barriers of ideology and see how to exist as individuals through critical thinking. The Chinese liberals who came to Taiwan after the war had to engage in thinking under the oppressive rule, where it was almost impossible to do so. They were unable to adopt a position different from the government's, nor were they able to persist in thinking for themselves. From this perspective, the post-war liberals were a generation that contemplated impossibilities. In the words of Wang Mo-Lin, having experienced Japanese colonization and the martial law during the Cold War, Taiwan collectively became accustomed to bodily inertia, harmless desires, and a lack of intellectual courage. It was a stable void, finding partial security in drifting. Liberalism served as a way to anchor this ethereal realm, providing a point of existence through thought. [2] Let me give you just one example: Li Shike committed his first armed bank heist in Taiwan in 1980. After the case was solved, amidst the applause, Li Ao wrote: "If you want to leave the army, you will not be allowed to leave. If you want to leave the country, you will not be allowed to leave. Distress, resentment, insecurity, every reason is justified and normal, it all constitutes a veteran's protest, it all constitutes a human being's protest. Without this kind of protest, would a person still be called a person?"[3]

People are born to resist; this is the torch that liberals carried during the period of martial law, helping people to move forward in the void when leftists and dissidents were all arrested and imprisoned. The reason why it was necessary to deal with liberalism is that liberals endowed Taiwanese people with an imagination of post-war modernity. This modernity not only includes the constitutional system, democracy, human rights, and freedoms, but also resistance, which ultimately nurtured later rebels such as Wang Mo-Lin.

However, the resistance of liberalism is to resist the government's violation of individual rights. Its belief in universal human rights makes it only brush aside historical and geopolitical issues. Even the "freedom" itself, which is equivalent to rights, is also problematic. Wang Mo-Lin's awareness of these issues comes from the historical materialism he came into contact with during his studies in Japan.

## **II. The Dialectic of Darkness**

It is known that what Wang Mo-Lin studied in Japan was drama. However, whether it was watching Shuji Terayama, Butoh, or Tent Theater, or joining Japanese friends in street protests against the Emperor and discrimination against indigenous people, what he truly learned was history, which was covered by the state of Cold War and global capitalism dominated by the United States. This history, like the universal halo of freedom and democracy, cast a deep shadow in East Asia and the Third World. His book, *The Post-Shōwa Japan*, is a culmination of his observations in Japan. It is mentioned in the book that after the outbreak of the Korean War, the United States brought Japan into the anti-communist war preparation system in the Western Pacific in order to suppress the labor movement organized by the Japanese left. The most effective way to achieve war readiness was to preserve the pre-war imperial system. [4] Consequently, the democracy and freedom that were at odds during the war became allies in the post-war era. The U.S. intervention prevented Japan from holding the emperor accountable for his wartime responsibilities and also suppressed Taiwan's criticism of imperialization and colonial history.

The Ankoku Butoh founded by Tatsumi Hijikata is a dialectical exploration of history from the most materialistic perspective, focusing on the corporeality of the body and the materiality of matter. It aims to peel away the layers of organs and flesh, rediscovering the war memories erased by post-war history and exposing a forgotten bodily memory, a history devoid of recollection. Wang Mo-Lin recognized this and has been writing about butoh since the mid-1980s, stating that butoh is a radical rebellion against Japan's high economic development. Through the bodies of farmers in northeastern Japan or by evoking the imagery of corpses in the ruins of the atomic bomb, it challenges Western modernization's bodily transformation. In modern society, the body is treated as a mere element of the urban landscape, while butoh transforms the body into a collapsing black shadow within the landscape.

In the spring of 1986, Hsu Po-yun, who invited Butoh dancer Isamu Osuga and his "Byakko Sha" to perform in Taiwan, commissioned Wang Mo-Lin to write an article on the first Butoh performance to appear in Taiwan. Compared to Tatsumi Hijikata, Isamu Osuga's reflection on the aggressive war launched by the Japanese army in Southeast Asian tropical jungles, including Bali

in Indonesia, better reflected Taiwan's colonial history as a "southward base" in terms of geopolitical context. After the performance, Wang Mo-Lin led the members of Byakko Sha to locations such as Yeliu, Lin Family Garden, Huaxi Street, and the roundabout for shooting, transforming these places into the savage scenes of "Modern Alice's Nightmare" and "Nightmare Banquet" through the lens of a photographic theater. They appeared as a group of returning ghosts from the South Seas, dwelling in the darkness of Taipei's urban landscape collapse. [5] The performances of Byakko Sha, along with these photographs, as well as Wang Mo-Lin's ongoing discourse on Butoh, later influenced the pioneering efforts of Tao Fu-lan and Lin Hsiu-wei in the field of somatic dance in Taiwan.

As for Wang Mo-Lin himself, the imprint left by butoh dance can be seen in his works, particularly in his "Black Hole" series, which he began creating in the year 2000. In 1999, the devastating 921 earthquake occurred, resulting in the death of over two thousand people. Following this event, Wang Mo-Lin was invited by Shu Shiwei, the founder of "921 Minbao," to join the team in the disaster area for reporting and editing work. Through his firsthand witnessing and contemplation, he became deeply involved in the tragedy. The collapsed buildings, crumbling hillsides, and cracked ground during the earthquake were already sudden shadows in the landscape, a violently disheartening scene. However, electronic media transformed the fallen disaster area into disaster images, satisfying the voyeuristic desires of the masses through the consumption of immediate visual content. The collapse of the landscape immediately turned into a collapsed spectacle.

Therefore, in the creation of "Black Hole," Wang Mo-Lin collaborated with blind actors. Because blind individuals do not perceive and move efficiently through sight, they enter a space slowly and through touch. The space of the blind is a collapse of visibility, akin to the fractures created by dark butoh dance. Within this concave crevice, the bodily perceptions consumed rapidly by spectacular images and the fears buried and forgotten in the collapsing space can be re-experienced.

### **III. Unresolved Martial Law**

The lifting of martial law in 1987 marked the historical conclusion in Taiwan. In 1989, Francis Fukuyama, a Japanese-American political scientist, put forth the notion that with the successive collapse of communist regimes, capitalism had achieved ultimate victory. He argued that capitalism represented the most suitable and perfect system for freedom and democracy, and that there would no longer be any fundamental contradictions that capitalism could not overcome. Therefore, history had come to an end. Similarly, the lifting of martial law in Taiwan ended authoritarian rule, paving the way for economic liberalization and political democratization. Taiwan entered a vibrant period of diversification and has remained in this era ever since, as it has become the endpoint of history.

At that moment, Wang Mo-Lin immediately posed a counter-question, preserving history for us when history was disappearing. In October of the same year as the lifting of martial law, Typhoon

Lynn struck. Wang Mo-Lin gathered active small theater groups such as Huan Xu, Bi Ji, and He Zuo An, along with Wang Junjie's installation works, and held a large-scale joint performance titled "Picking up the Moon" at the shipyard and UFO ruins in Xiban Village, Sanzhi. Despite the inclement weather, the rehearsal and performance persisted for several reasons. On one hand, both sides of the strait celebrate their national days in October, so we must ask: Has the divisive system created by the Cold War been resolved after the lifting of martial law? If not, what was the purpose of lifting it? On the other hand, the performance coincided with the opening of the National Theater and Concert Hall, which is still regarded by the arts community as a milestone for Taiwan's performing arts advancing towards professionalism and diversity. However, "Picking up the Moon," which occupied the ruins in Xiban, posed a challenging question for the future that is increasingly difficult to answer: Where is the space outside the system from now on? If the space outside the system is permanently closed, where will the diversity come from?

Less than four months later, Wang Mo-Lin crossed the sea and came to Lanyu Orchid Island during the Spring Festival in 1988, connecting with members of small theaters, colleagues from the "Renjian" magazine who had previously collaborated on reportage dramas such as "The Historical Testimony of the 60th Anniversary of the Taiwan People's Party" and "The Song of the Horse Carriage", as well as elders and young people of the local Tao tribe, to launch the "Expelling the Evil Spirit of Lanyu". Lanyu has been a storage site for nuclear waste since the martial law period. After the lifting of martial law, the government decided to expand the nuclear waste storage site in order to cope with the operation of Nuclear Plant 2 and Nuclear Plant 3, which sparked protests among local residents. "Expelling the Evil Spirit of Lanyu" is an "action theater" that combines the ritual of expelling evil spirits from the Tao tribe, the anti nuclear movement, and the small theater movement. In other words, this action has uncovered a historical scar that has not yet healed. Tao people have never enjoyed the convenience of nuclear power, and can only bear the waste of nuclear power with pain. Lanyu has always sacrificed for Taiwan's capitalist development, from the proclaiming martial law to the lifting martial law.

Has history come to an end, or has it come to a standstill in another way? So, what is this neo-conservative form that appears to be open and diverse, but is actually a larger-scale incorporation?

#### **IV. Defying the laws of nature**

In the book Pier Paolo Pasolini: Cinema as Heresy translated by Lin Baoyuan, the author Naomi Greene writes that Pasolini believed there was no distinction between dictatorship and democracy before and after the war. Instead, there was a transition from the old fascism of Hitler and Mussolini to a new fascism, which Pasolini saw as contemporary capitalism becoming the global order and creating a new empire. One can argue that capitalism had already triumphed during World War II rather than at the end of the Cold War. It can also be said that history has not moved much since the rise of fascism, and capitalism is just a continuous reinvention of the pre-war global power structure, with the post-war period being a certain kind of return to the pre-war era. When the linear time of historical teleology is eroded by the ancient religious-style eternal return, Pasolini said, history gives way to mythology. [6]

From the perspective of returning to the mythological era, the new form of governance is no longer clear entities like the state, patriarchy, or dictator, but a life politics that is as boundless as divine power or the sky, enveloping every life and penetrating every body. As Wang Mo-Lin stated in Taiwan's Body Politics, true modern revolution occurs within the body, elevating the political ideals of "freedom, equality, and benevolence" in civil society to a universal principle, treating the awakened consciousness of the petite bourgeoisie as reason, and transforming the body into a rational apparatus where only rationalized desires can exist, with Logos fully dominating Eros. [7] To this day, this rational myth has been renamed as "pluralism and openness," leading to the fictionalization of our bodies through pluralism. We believe ourselves to be inclusive and pluralistic, yet we still admire Western societies for being even more diverse and inclusive than us, to the extent that pluralization is actually serving as a global marketing tool for the dominant neoliberal Western nations.

When new forms of governance exercise control over our bodies in a righteous manner, reclaiming our bodies becomes an act of rebellious resistance. Wang Mo-Lin proposes two paths to reclaiming the body: performance art and improvisation.

In 1991, Wang Mo-Lin established the "Body Phase Studio" and subsequently held a series of performance art festivals. He himself began publishing performance art creations such as "My Body, My Country" at the beginning of this century. For him, as the body is extensively reproduced as flat images and consumed as symbols in electronic media, performance art becomes the most minimal yet powerful means to interrupt the media's penetrating influence on the body, allowing the body to rise before the gaze of the audience. Similarly, performance art creates resistance against the rapid reduction of the body and language into mere information. The "performativity" of performance art expands a rich sensory world within language, turning the performance itself into a metaphorical discourse and a language with multiple meanings. [8] In the era of digital reproduction, performance art fills the lost bodily sensation back into language symbols.

Wang Mo-Lin's method of improvisation began in 2001 when he participated in the "Asian Encounter" performance project. Over time, he discovered that actors from different parts of Asia could carry the influence of state violence during the Cold War and capitalism's oblivion of even more extreme state brutality. For instance, we know that performance is inseparable from the memories and imagined pseudo-memories of the performers. The actor's movements must possess a narrative quality, meaning that the actions generated by the activation of bodily energy are time-bound. However, in the memories of Asian actors, there often exists a blank space of forgetting, causing the actions to get stuck halfway. This moment of being stuck is the moment of improvisation because the actor faces a decisive choice in an instant: to confront the blankness or to pass over it with pseudo-memories and fake emotions. If it's the latter, the actor's movements become nothing more than a skill, and the performance becomes a mere algorithm of performing actions and facial expressions, perhaps versatile in its variations, but the movements remain lifeless, and the expressions remain frozen. The performer remains a person without a story.

On the contrary, if at this spontaneous and decisive moment, the actor can withstand the

interruption in their actions and face the sense of unfamiliarity and danger brought about by the disappearance of memory, then their improvisation becomes a rebellion against the death of action. Their movements will be filled with details, penetrating from the outward appearance to the organs, from gestures to touch, and trembling from their posture. In this way, performance ceases to be merely physical, but becomes a performance of the organs, approaching what Tatsumi Hijikata said: "The viscera of a Butoh dancer are outside the body!" [9] When actors learn to resist the death of action, the death of memory, and the death of time in an instant, improvisation becomes a practice of political resistance. The theater's resistance is primarily a resistance against oneself, it is the "me" in the performance of organs that generates a flow of energy to resist the "me" under the governance of biopolitics. All the resistance energy needed for any political action in reality stems from this.

## **V. Rebuilding Ethics**

The practices of performance art and improvisational bodily techniques are extensively employed in Wang Mo-Lin's various works, including adaptations of Eugene O'Neill's play "Long Day's Journey Into Night" in collaboration with Macau actors in 2013, which highlights the disintegration of protestant ethics amidst the development of capitalism. In 2015, he collaborated with performance artists Wadan Wuma, Wang Chuyu, Gao Xiuhui, and Jiang Yuanxiang to adapt Heiner Müller's "Hamletmachine," exploring national violence and the commodification of pleasure as a death apparatus. Particularly noteworthy are his series of works known as the "Asian Cold War Trilogy," consisting of "Antigone" (2013), "The North Korea Defector" (2017), and "The Children's Hour" (2019). In these works, the actors' bodies serve as a phantom limb phenomenon caused by the trauma of war, persistently haunting them even after history has been forgotten, evoking the ghosts of history with a lingering pain.

The recurring themes of family, incest, the living and the dead, history and spirits in Wang Mo-Lin's works reflect the significant role ethics plays in his creative endeavors. To a certain extent, his artistic practice is a manifestation of ethics. In a postmodern era characterized by the end of history and a flattened world, where concern has turned into self-obsession, interdisciplinary has become self-contained, encounters have turned into isolation, and the Other has disappeared from the field of vision, Wang Mo-Lin's work serves as a reconstruction of ethics.

We can turn back and ask from here: What is freedom? Is freedom, as advocated by liberals, simply the exercise of individual rights? In his book "Ethics 21," Kojin Karatani criticizes this definition of freedom, which is based on the pursuit of personal happiness and is utilitarian in nature. This kind of freedom treats all living others as means to an end, let alone those who have already died or those who are yet to be born. On the contrary, freedom should be understood as Jean-Paul Sartre said, "Man is condemned to be free." It is not a right but an obligation, a responsibility to recognize the limitations of human existence and then attempt to transcend them. To achieve a thorough understanding, one must place oneself in the concrete social context and production relations to comprehend others. This includes not only the living, but also the deceased and future children. In other words, freedom is ethics. The rebellious resistance that defies convention seeks to reclaim the body and the organs, to thaw the memories of the Cold War, to

restore the capacity to feel the presence of others and the other side, history and flux, existence and death.

And then, only under the sky of global capitalism and on the land of the new imperial colony, do we have the possibility to escape and open up an escape route to freedom. Regarding the scenery along this escape route, the ruins and wastelands on the way, the darkness and faint light, the violence and redemption, Wang Mo-Lin has taken on the responsibility to understand, traversing them throughout his life. I don't believe he has traveled very far; he has only arrived in a place that is relatively difficult to reach because anything can only be felt when it is close by, just like death always lingers around us. Wang Mo-Lin became a stranger nearby in this way. The following passage is excerpted from an email he wrote to me on December 21, 2019. Please allow me to quote it in the original text because only someone who has traveled for so long can describe the nearby with such freedom:

"After the defiance of the heavens, the escape route reflected in my work is a search for a utopian path and a search for the body. Both represent the existence of oneself as the subject, manifesting sensory responses born from the manipulation of disembodied organs. Similar to alchemy, the respect for natural elements becomes an aesthetic archetype of ethics, ultimately shaping a primitive form of understanding the world. Just as nomadic peoples represent our imaginative perception of the world's primitive form, utopia is a political totem. The exploration of the escape route implies a desire to bid farewell to the world, marking the beginning of a journey towards death. My work starts from death and follows the escape route that leads to death (the eternal utopia)."

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References

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