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STRANGERS ON A STRANGE ISLAND: A STUDY OF THREE CONTEMPORARY CHINESE PLAYWRIGHTS FROM TAIWAN YAO YI-WEI, MA SEN, HWANG MEI-SHU

By

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ABSTRACT

STRANGERS ON A STRANGE ISLAND: A STUDY OF
THREE CONTEMPORARY CHINESE PLAYWRIGHTS FROM TAIWAN
YAO YI-WEI, MA SEN, HWANG MEI-SHU

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This thesis will present three contemporary Chinese playwrights, Yao Yi-wei, Ma Sen and Hwang Mei-shu, and their works to the English reader in the context of Taiwan's theatre, society and history in order to answer the proposed question why there is few playwrights in Taiwan. The thesis consists of five chapters: an introduction, one chapter for each playwright with personal history, summaries of the plays as well as analysis and a conclusion as the final chapter. The writing of this thesis is also intended to illustrate the three playwrights' efforts to merge elements found in both Eastern theatre and Western theatre in searching for a new theatre in Taiwan. Their endeavors may not gather as much attention as they deserve because of social factors, such as economics, language and censorship; but their works inspire young theatre practitioners in Taiwan, who are now free of those restrictions, to explore possibilities in theatre.

To Chien Yu Su-ying, my mother,

family and friends

Preface

Because the interest in interculturalism in the academic world is gradually being generated, any information about a previously little known third world country can be valuable. As a Taiwanese and theatre major, I feel obliged to undertake the task of making our voices heard on the world stage. Resulting from the "economic miracle," rapid modernization and, in particular, the lifting of martial law in 1987, modern theatre in Taiwan is currently experiencing the liveliest moment in its brief history.

The postwar baby boom generation eagerly follows its Euro-American forerunners, such as off-off Broadway, in participating in the avant-garde theatre and consequently kindles vigorous discussions about the exciting "Little Theatre Movement." Amid the widespread enthusiasm about "making theatre" and "talking about the theatre," what seems to be the least touched upon element is its dramatic literature. To these reckless avant-garde theatre workers who are deeply in love with group improvisation and "living newspaper" performances, dramatic literature is outdated and can be conveniently neglected for there is no such tradition

in Chinese/Taiwanese history.

Drama was never considered a Chinese literary genre until Western influences appeared in China one hundred years ago which explains why many scripts for traditional Chinese theatre have not survived. The emergence of modern Taiwanese/Chinese theatre, as its Western examples, moderately elevates the status of its playwrights. However, contemporary playwrights are still few in Taiwan, not to mention literary masterpieces. The fact that Taiwanese is not a written language as well as the historical and political complications in Taiwan have critically crippled its modern theatre development. Now, after all these years, modern theatre has become the most dynamic art in Taiwan, yet it leaves no space for its playwrights who exclusively employ Chinese as the sole Language for writing plays. What should be done to secure a space for playwrights in Taiwan, if not now, in the future?

It then occurs to me that it can be interesting and challenging to study the few existing contemporary playwrights in Taiwan and their works. Why are there so few playwrights in Taiwan? Who are the few? What do they write about? Are they popular, why or why not? When those questions are answered, perhaps a guideline can be built for future playwrights.

Having searched for published plays through libraries and bookstores in Taiwan, I discovered anthologies of plays

that never find a stage as well as scattered publications of acting scripts based on notable recent performances. So I decided to narrow my research to playwrights who have had their plays published as collections and are currently available in bookstores. Playwrights who meet the above mentioned requirements are therefore elected to be discussed in this thesis; they are Yao Yi-wei, Ma Sen and Hwang Mei-shu.

This thesis will present the three playwrights, Yao, Ma and Hwang, and their works to the English reader in the context of Taiwan's theatre, society and history. The thesis consists of five chapters: an introduction, one chapter for each playwright with personal history, summaries of the plays as well as analysis and a conclusion as the final chapter. The writing of this thesis is intended to illustrate the three playwrights' efforts in searching for a new theatre in Taiwan. It is also hoped that my attempt will be deemed as a tribute to Yao Yi-wei, Ma Sen and Hwang Mei-shu, who are certainly phenomenal pioneers endeavoring to explore a formerly untouched territory with unconventional devices. There is no doubt that they have inspired many to assume further research in the theatre and adventure into more daring experiments.

A Note on Chinese Romanization and Translation

Although pinyin, the official romanization for the People's Republic of China, is not used in Taiwan, it is growing in international popularity. Therefore, with attempts to keep the original romanizations used by the authors in Taiwan, I decided to use pinyin as the method of romanization to avoid confusion. Some habitual spellings, such as "Chiang Kai-shek" and "Tamkang University" will remain as exceptions. Names are rendered in the system of pinyin, with the family name (last name) coming before the given name (first name).

In pinyin, vowels are pronounced roughly as in Spanish and most consonants roughly as in English (Chung 1992). Exceptions are [x], pronounced [sy]; [q], pronounced very far forward in the mouth as [ch]; [c], pronounced [ts]; [zh], pronounced [dj]; [zhi], [chi], [zi], [ci], pronounced as if the [i] were an [r]; and [r], pronounced like an English [r] with tongue flattened and teeth together. Since there are few available English translations of the Chinese materials I employ in this thesis, the translation, including lines from the plays, if not otherwise mentioned, will be mine.

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CHAPTER ONE

THE BACKGROUND OF THEATRE DEVELOPMENT IN TAIWAN

Taiwan is a mountainous island of 13,885 square miles in the East-South China Sea, about 90 miles off the Chinese coast. The Portuguese called it "Ilha Formosa," the "beautiful island," when they arrived in the sixteenth century. Taiwan has had considerable experience with framing its culture to suit the preferences of other nations: it has been invaded by the Spanish, Dutch, Portuguese and French. The Portuguese were driven out by the Chinese who took control of Taiwan in the late 1600s and then administered it as part of China. In 1895 Japan gained control of the island as a result of the first Sino-Japanese War. China regained Taiwan after the Second World War. In 1949 the Kuomintang Nationalists under Chiang Kai-shek retreated to the island after losing the civil war on the mainland and moved the government to Taiwan that year.

The population in Taiwan is approximately twenty million, which consists of Aborigines, Taiwanese, Hakka and mainlanders. Each, originally, had their own language(s). Ancestors of the Taiwanese and Hakka came from the east-coast provinces of mainland China during the first Chinese

immigration in the eighteenth century. Mainlanders are those who newly arrived in Taiwan around 1949 and comprise one-tenth of the Taiwan population. The Taiwanese are the majority on the island. Not unlike the relation between the United States of American and Great Britain, the cultural influences in Taiwan come mainly from China though many differences remain.

The development of Taiwanese theatre is often intertwined with constant political changes and cannot be separated from the historical background of Taiwan. Inevitably, Chinese theatre movements in mainland have had greater influence on theatre in Taiwan than any other movement. The emergence of modern Chinese theatre inspired by Western examples began around the dawn of the twentieth century. Many contemporary playwrights in Taiwan are the living witnesses of most of the development of modern Taiwanese/Chinese theatre, including Yao Yi-wei, Ma Sen and Hwang Mei-shu who are in their early 60s and 70s. The influence of modern Chinese theatre on these playwrights was very significant.

Therefore, the first half of the modern Chinese theatre movement from the beginning of this century to 1945 will be briefly described to provide a partial background of these three playwrights who arrived in Taiwan from mainland China after 1949. A discussion of theatre development in Taiwan, arranged in chronicle order and based on its relevancy to

the modern theatre movement, will be added for Taiwan is the place where the three playwrights have had the most chance to have their plays produced, although there is very little audience for them.

The Early History of Traditional Theatre in Taiwan

Tribal dances by the Aborigines were probably the only form of theatre in Taiwan before the island became part of China's territory in the late seventeenth century. According to archaeological discoveries, the Aborigines have been living in Taiwan for more than four thousand and five hundred years (Yang & Ye 1993:402). Chinese immigrants drove the Aborigines into the mountains and the spirited tribal dances were hence preserved in that naturally protected environment until today.

Chinese immigrants in Taiwan multiplied despite constraints from the government. They entered this uncultivated, distant small island to escape economic difficulties at home, particularly those from the provinces on the east coast of mainland China. Having sailed across the Taiwan Strait, they were inclined to live with people with similar background to maintain safety and power; temples were built as centers of their communities. Their religion, a combination of Buddhism and Taoism, was

polytheistic and included diverse religious rites. Theatrical activities had been traditionally associated with their religion back in China and were therefore in heavy demand on this island as well. Consequently, various forms of local dramatizations, either put on by the Chinese immigrants or performed by touring troupes, appeared in front of the numerous temples in Taiwan.[1]

The functions of theatre among these early Chinese immigrants, later called the Taiwanese, were no less varied than its forms. To assure protection from gods or goddesses was crucial for those people and worship could hardly be called complete without a performance. Believers also made contributions by, among other things, sponsoring performances in front of temples to symbolize their piety. Theatre was often utilized, while providing entertainments at gatherings, for announcing regulations to community members who were generally illiterate. Invitations to far away relatives and friends would be extended to join these cheerful events. Sometimes paying for performances was part of the penalty for violating regulations (Qiu Kun-liang 1992:2-3).

Male members' participation in amateur theaters in their communities, *Zidi Tuan* [Son-brother Groups], were also emphasized aiming to reinforce mutual assistance as well as to prevent youths from wandering on the street. Amateur theatres gradually became a place where the younger

generation learned about the traditions of the community. For lack of an official education system, the male took part in amateur theatre to learn about historical stories, refined language, music and social skills. Moral teaching was an established requirement in all genres of Chinese literature and arts; theatre was especially didactic because of its role as the alternative educational institute for the public.

Theatre in Taiwan soon acquired immense popularity among its audience, yet favorable remarks from authorities and intellectuals were scarce. Theatre at that time was mainly uncomplicated outdoor theatre which often attracted shouting, gambling and even fighting around the performing area. Intellectuals condemned professional theatre for lacking artistic values, promoting superstitions and causing immorality.[2] Despite denunciations from the intellectuals and sometimes restrictions from the authorities to avoid disorders, theatre remained an important activity in the life of a Taiwanese.

Theatre in Taiwan During the Japanese Occupation

When Japan took over Taiwan from China after the Sino-Japanese War in 1895, theatre in Taiwan continued to flourish during the first forty of the fifty year Japanese

occupation. Although the Japanese were opposed to many local practices in Taiwan, theatre activities were allowed. Religious events were still most likely to see performances which our ancestors enjoyed, yet performances began to be provided as well at public ceremonies and private celebrations because of the economic growth. Indoor theatre structures were built following the urbanization of big cities where demand for professional entertainments grew. The first commercial indoor theatre opened in Taipei City on December 19, 1897 (Qiu Kun-liang 1992:72). Female performers were introduced on stage, at first as a Japanese practice, to entertain the increasing number of businessmen and then due to the huge commercial appeal.

The only native Taiwanese theatre, *Gozai Xi*, literally meaning the drama of songs, was generally believed to have appeared at the beginning of the twentieth century during the Japanese occupation (Qiu Kun-liang 1992:184).[3] *Gozai Xi*, sometimes conveniently translated in English as "Taiwanese Opera," arbitrarily wove all kinds of performing styles together and presented stories found in newspapers or in folktales. It especially fascinated the public for its close connection with the audience and, shortly after its emergence, it outshown all other forms of entertainments. *Gozai Xi* gradually assimilated many elements of the Peking Opera in hopes of being regarded as part of the high culture and therefore lost some of its ingenuity, but due to

promotions from commercial indoor theatres in the cities, *Gozai Xi* was the most popular form of theatre around 1925 in Taiwan.

Gozai Xi was successful because it came from people, but the intellectuals believed the educated should lead, not be led by the public who were not aware of the need to change. The more radical elite of society even concluded that the Japanese purposefully allowed the Taiwanese to indulge themselves in money-wasting, debased theatre and superstitious worship so as not to join the social/cultural movement. To them, the Taiwanese needed to be cut off from tradition completely to achieve actual progress in the Taiwanese society. Instead of developing a new local theatre of their own within the Taiwanese, an unconventional theatre was brought to Taiwan by the Taiwanese elite from outside of the Taiwanese/Chinese world to educate the public in Taiwan. The foreign theatre form was expected to alter the thinking pattern of people in Taiwan and enable them to take actions; it was called *Xin Ju* [the New Theatre] or *Wenhua Ju* [the Cultural Theatre]. A modern Taiwanese theatre was to be born.

In 1911 a modern Japanese theatre troupe produced plays with local actors in Taipei. *Xin Ju* [the New Theatre], a Western-influenced modern theatre, thus made its debut on the Taiwanese stage (Qiu Kun-liang 1992:289).[4] Yet modern Japanese theatre had few direct influences on theatre in

Taiwan until it was employed as a model by a group of Japanese-educated Taiwanese students who became active nationalists when they returned. They decided what was needed in Taiwan was a disguised cultural/social movement that would cause no more bleeding but would incite full-scale cultural changes: a modern Taiwanese theatre. Those students imitated the modern Japanese theatre they saw in Japan, not for its artistic value, but as a symbolic gesture of renouncing all that belonged to the detestable past and renamed it *Wenhua Ju* [the Cultural Theatre].[5] The direct cause of the birth of modern Taiwanese theatre was the mission of changing the society.

Wenhua Ju, modern Taiwanese theatre, strove to convey a message during the Japanese occupation: reform is no longer sufficient for the Taiwanese. It was more a theatre of revolt than just a different form of theatre from a foreign culture. Therefore the Japanese authorities ordered harsher restrictions for *Wenhua Ju* groups while tolerating forms of traditional theatre. The authorities required scripts to be handed in for censoring before rehearsals and demanded modern theatre groups to rehearse and perform exactly according to their scripts.[6] Having a permit to perform was not much of a guarantee because Japanese police would sometimes intervene and even cancel the performance without notice (Qiu 1992:315).

Besides interferences from the Japanese authorities,

modern Taiwanese theatre had other difficulties reaching its audience. The solemn themes it attempted to deliver were too complicated for the ordinary working class. The audience considered it especially wearisome because of the lack of loud music or colorful costumes as found in the traditional theatre. The zealous amateur practitioners in the modern Taiwanese theatre overburdened themselves with ideologies that were beyond the capacity of the immature Taiwanese stage. *Gozai Xi* and *Wenhua Ju* were the only two forms of theatre that emerged during the Japanese occupation and they illustrated the distance between the public and the intellectual. The former naturally rooted itself in the proletariat, folk arts, tradition and shortly gained approbation for its familiarity and spontaneity. The latter was a foreign product transplanted on the island by the intellectuals that alienated its audience with revolutionary doctrines and lacked commercial appeal.

When Japan started the second Sino-Japanese war in 1937, it banned all theatre activities, traditional and modern, in Taiwan. Performers in all kinds of theatre were recruited by the Japanese authorities and made to wear Japanese costumes and speak Japanese to boost Japanese morale. The vociferous and kaleidoscopic theatre in Taiwan was suppressed for about ten years till 1945. After the war, *Gozai Xi* was able to revive immediately, but *Xin Ju* [the New Theatre] or *Wenhau Ju* [the Cultural Theatre] was

replaced with, to be precise, modern Chinese theatre.

A Brief Description of Modern Chinese Theatre Before 1949

The emergence of modern theatre inspired by Western examples in the Chinese-speaking world began no more than one hundred years ago. Having experienced defeats after confronting Western countries at the closure of the nineteenth century, many Chinese were convinced that China would accomplish little without learning from the West. Many young intellectuals were sent abroad to study and brought back their impressions of different cultures. Some of them were so overwhelmed by a different world they envisioned all differences as the superior characteristics of Western countries. Whatever was traditional became the target of attacks; reform was in the air and theatre was no exception.

Based on essays and diaries written by those Chinese who had studied aboard at the end of the nineteenth century, they found Western theatre very impressive. Yet what captured them first were not plays or performing styles but theatre structures and Westerners' attitude toward theatre. Many detailed how those theatre structures looked like spacious palaces with delicate decorations. It puzzled them seeing that Westerners treated theatre workers respectfully

as artists instead of entertainers and went so far as letting their school children take part in performing. The characteristic that impressed them most in Western productions was the realistic stage design (Yuan Guo-xing 1993:18-23). Although these primary discoveries might not be entirely accurate, they were thought to be major elements that differentiated Western theatre from Eastern theatre.

In the second half of the nineteenth century when China partially opened its markets, Westerners began to move to big cities in China for the sake of commerce. They established community theatres and produced Western plays to entertain themselves. The Amateur Dramatic Club of Shanghai in 1866 was an example (Yuan 1993:57). Catholic schools operated by Western priests in China also produced seasonal performances in either English or French to celebrate Christmas. Those Western-style productions accidentally served as an introduction for the limited Chinese audience. Many who launched the movement of reforming Chinese theatre had their first experience of Western theatre by seeing these amateur/school productions.

While hundreds of Chinese students were sent to the West, thousands went to Japan because of the geographical and cultural closeness. Japan then was undergoing a progressive modernization and Chinese intellectuals who returned from Japan became a major influence on the early development of modern Chinese theatre. In late 1906 a group

of Chinese students founded the *Chunliu She* [the Spring Willow Dramatic Society] in Tokyo; it was generally held as the official inauguration of modern Chinese theatre. With the assistance of an acclaimed Japanese actor, Fujisawa Asajiro, members of *Chunliu She* staged a version of *La Dame aux Camelias* (*Chahua nu*) by Alexandre Dumas *fils* in December 1906 (Ma Sen 1991:36-39). The heroine's plight mirrored the rigidity of Chinese marital conventions and suitably echoed a dominant concern among the young intellectuals in China who viewed those conventions as detrimental to personal and national progress. The success of this production certainly helped to accelerate the modern Chinese theatre movement.

Nonetheless, modern performing groups led by intellectuals like members in the Spring Willow Dramatic Society were rare in China. Chinese culture never recognized drama as a literary genre, thus intellectuals were reluctant to participate in traditionally scorned theatre where accumulated only the uneducated, tramps or, at best, those who failed the civil service examinations.[7] The early phase of the modern Chinese theatre movement was conducted by misinformed theatre practitioners who often misinterpreted the little information they had, for instance, mixing Western theatre with the modern Japanese genre. The public faced an oversimplified version of modern theatre: a colloquial play without singing performed on a somewhat realistic stage. They called this form of theatre

Wenming Xi [the Civilized Theatre]. There were few scripts, almost no rehearsals because participants believed that modern theatre was too uncomplicated, compared with traditional Chinese theatre, to require any training or preparation. *Wenming Xi* [the Civilized Theatre] lured a fashionable audience and exhausted its own charm before long.

A turning point came during the years between 1915 and 1919 when a Western-educated generation was striving for cultural changes. In 1916 Hu Shi (1891-1962), an American-educated scholar, spearheaded a movement to replace the classical written language, which was understood only by an educated elite, with a standardized vernacular intelligible to all. This movement, among other things, made introducing Western literary genres to Chinese easier. Drama ignored by the old literati became recognized as a mouthpiece for social reform; modern Chinese theatre was now named *Hua Ju* [Spoken Drama]. Realism was promoted as the norm for writing and producing plays because it was what could not be found in traditional theatre and also an appropriate style that suited the purpose of social reform. However, the so-called realism found in China at that time was not the same as the realism generally understood by Westerners. Since the traditional Chinese stage was highly symbolic, such as Peking Opera, any utilization of items found in contemporary life could provide the audience with a sense of reality.

When relatively realistic settings and props were employed by theatre practitioners to convince the audience, playwrights described their characters as they ought to be rather than represented them as they were in the real world. Early Chinese playwrights created their characters either as villains or victims to emphasize the injustice in society.

The portrayal of bigger-than-life characters and the emphasis on the dark side of life responded well to the national cry of social reform, the didactic nature of traditional Chinese theatre and the compulsion of Chinese intellectuals to lead the people. The combination of the realistic stage with non-realistic characters was soon used by political activists to serve the purpose of propaganda which dominated the modern Chinese theatre for decades. Chinese playwrights at this moment might have had scarce knowledge of Western theatres and their skills might have been immature, yet they achieved a notable breakthrough in the history of modern Chinese theatre because this was the first time in Chinese history that the elite volunteered to join and contribute to theatre activities.

New Youth, a monthly edited by Chen Du-xiu (1879-1942), in 1918 devoted an issue to Ibsen whose work was discussed as an example to follow. Such promotion induced deeper study of Western dramatists and new translations multiplied. Various dramatic associations founded after the May 4 movement in 1919 infused new motivations to modern Chinese

theatre and became a forceful sponsor of new drama.[8] Many leading members in those associations had studied in Japan or America before their return to China. For instance, Ouy-ang Yu-quian (1889-1962), Tain Han (1898-1968), Xia Yan (b. 1900) were back from Japan. Ou-yang Yu-quian, trained in classical female impersonation techniques, had performed with the Spring Willow Dramatic Society in Tokyo and started a school in China seeking to reform actor training and education after quitting his professional career on the traditional stage. Tian and Xia were both playwrights and scenario writers; the former also worked as a teacher.

American-returned practitioners included Hong Shen (1893-1955) and Xiong Fo-xi (1900-65). Hong Shen, stage director-playwright-teacher-film director, roused controversy on his return in 1922 by refusing to countenance males playing women's roles, a convention endorsed by conservative pubic opinion that hindered the development of the naturalistic acting style. Hong defied long standing prejudices, recruited more open-minded female college students and actresses from the film industry and staged Wilde's Lady Windermere's Fan, Barrie's Dear Brutus and Ibsen's A Doll's House which were the outstanding theatrical events of their day. Xiong Fo-xi, playwright-teacher-producer who had studied theatre in America, advocated drama as a factor in social education. Cao Yu (1910-), an early important Chinese playwright, who did not study abroad, was

a graduate in Western literature. His plays exhibited obvious Western influences. Their combined efforts broke new ground for the theatre movement in China.

However, around the 1930s the Japanese military threat compounded by the Nationalist-Communist political feud overshadowed intellectual life. People in literature and the arts responded to a new political awareness. Plays were written and produced to portray current political-social problems and were vigorously promoted in schools and factories. Meanwhile, the Communists began organizing a theatre for political action soon after the Party's establishment in 1921. Troupes were trained at the Party school and then attached to army units for service in rural territory and the front line. Actors and actresses were recruited locally and provided with dramatic training, political education, food, clothing and a subsistence pittance. The Japanese attack on Shanghai in 1932 intensified theatrical protest. Government feelings were ruffled and a repression campaign was ordered forcing leftists theatre underground; active members were arrested as a deterrent.

As the Second Sino-Japanese war started in 1937, an era had closed for modern theatre, henceforth it was to be subordinated to national propaganda needs. A call for resistance united theatre people as never before. Itinerant by vocation, they responded with travelling troupes to take

propagandist theatre to the rural masses. Nationalists and Communists shared a common concept if with a divergent ideological intent. While the Government was aware of the theatre as a spur to patriotic fervor it also recognized its potential to spread Communism. A zealous censorship was applied to all dramatic activities for the duration. Political tensions notwithstanding, the 1930s witnessed the rise of a socially conscious theatre given credibility by the commitment of its practitioners. Theatre became a vigorous assertion of public will.

Reestablishment of the Nationalist Capital at Nanjing in May 1946 followed Japan's defeat in 1945. In 1946 full scale civil war broke out as the Communists began their drive for ultimate power. The hopes of a war-weary nation faded with the acceleration of a crippling inflation leading to economic chaos and social disintegration. When the Nationalist government left for Taiwan in 1949, theatre groups of key personalities stayed on to work under the new regime. It was a decision which was shared by a large proportion of the prominent in both traditional and modern theatre circles. Modern theatre workers who left China with the Nationalist government to Taiwan strived to follow the mission of the May 4 movement, yet geographical and political circumstances made any communication with China impossible and modern Chinese theatre in Taiwan had no choice but to begin a new phase.

Theatre in Taiwan After 1945

During the Second Sino-Japanese War followed by the Second World War (1937-1945), Japanese authority was increased in Taiwan. In order to get the Taiwanese to support Japan in the war, the Japanese attempted to eliminate elements of Chinese culture on the island by making Japanese education mandatory, forbidding writing in Chinese and barring all forms of theatre except those that could be manipulated to be a mouthpiece for Japan.[9] When Japan surrendered in 1945 and was expected to yield this island to China, "the Taiwanese, like an orphan welcoming its mother, awaited the arrival of armies from the motherland" (Jiao Tong 1990:22). The atmosphere was full of rejoicing. Donations flooded in to decorate the streets, welcome officials from the Nationalist government in China and to celebrate this transfer of authority.

The Taiwanese so joyfully discussed how to reconstruct Taiwan at this historical turning point that they naively overlooked the geographical and historical divisions between Taiwan and China which resulted in many cultural differences. Among the first few Chinese who came to Taiwan right after the war were some opportunists graspingly taking advantage of the warm reception provided by the Taiwanese.

This left an unpleasant impression. Officials and soldiers from the Nationalist government next arrived as superior conquerors treating Taiwan like a colony. Higher official positions in Taiwan were filled with mainlanders, the newly arrived Chinese, for the Taiwanese were told they required reeducation. All this greedy behavior and misunderstanding caused dissatisfaction among the Taiwanese (Jiao 1990:27-29).

Traditional theatre in Taiwan, especially *Gozai Xi*, regained its popularity soon after the war. *Xin Ju* [the New Theatre] or *Wenhua Ju* [the Cultural Theatre], never allowed time to come to its full development during the Japanese occupation, was a lesser known genre to most theatre workers and the public. Still modern theatre lovers struggled to stage a handful of plays.

Language and censorship were the two most critical obstacles that literary and modern theatre circles were confronted with. After fifty years of coerced Japanese education, the new generation could only write in Japanese because Taiwanese, though commonly spoken, was not a written language.[10] The political change seemed to make the language change unavoidable; the Nationalist government removed Japanese books, prohibited any publication in Japanese and demanded Chinese as the only official language. The younger generations in Taiwan could not write Chinese and even most of those who were old enough to remember it

could not write it very well. Many Taiwanese writers were eager to undertake the time-consuming process of learning Chinese, but soon met with another difficulty, censorship.

Censorship was the other obstacle to the modern Taiwanese theatre movement. In 1946 it became a regulation that all theatre groups had to acquire both group registrations and a separate performing permission for each production. Otherwise, besides cancellation of performances, the founder of the group could be fined or jailed for a maximum of seven days (Jiao 1990:38). To participate in theatre under these restrictions was difficult enough for Taiwanese theatre workers, yet they persevered until the 228 event occurred, paralyzing theatrical and other cultural activities.

228 was a social event that happened on February 28, 1947. On the previous afternoon, February 27, six Chinese officials, while on duty to suppress the private trade of tobaccos, probably because of misunderstanding, wounded the head of an old Taiwanese woman with the stock of a gun. This aroused complaints from the Taiwanese and the six officials, in fright, shot an onlooker to death and thus inflamed the 228 event (Jiao 1990:162). Earlier misunderstandings between the Taiwanese and mainlanders now became hated differences because of the event. The Taiwanese protested the Nationalist government's treatment of this incident and the government utilized armed troops to

suppress them. At least ten thousand Taiwanese were killed, the elite of the society in particular. Many of them were political leaders, professors, writers, theatre practitioners, doctors or entrepreneurs (Jiao 1990:50).

Creative writing is likely to be discouraged at a transitional break when political storms, social disorders, economical recession, massive misunderstandings simultaneously occur. Taiwanese writers who were able to write in Chinese wanted to reflect the reality of society faithfully and thus could not help implying social protests in their works. Shortly after the 228 event in 1947, some of these writers were subsequently imprisoned or sentenced to death, some left Taiwan for good. The more fortunate ones learned a good lesson and buried their thoughts and stories from then on (Jiao 1990:38-9). The 228 event in 1947 was a catastrophe in the history of Taiwan. Although the event had lasted for merely two weeks from the beginning to the end, it did unrepairable damage and became a taboo subject so as not to increase hostility between the Taiwanese and mainlanders until the lifting of the martial law in 1987.

Modern theatre in Taiwan was practically drained of its native culture for many Taiwanese theatre practitioners made their exit following the 228 event. The few surviving Taiwanese dramatists who could write in Chinese also stopped writing plays or, at best, did it privately with neither

publication nor production. The Nationalist government sent one entertainment unit of its armed forces, originally a part of the Propaganda Section, to perform on the empty Taiwanese stage immediately after 228 (Jiao 1990:50-51). This unit had many productions praising nationalism and patriotism. Its members stayed active on stage, television and screen for they soon became the few knowledgeable theatre practitioners available on the island.

The Chinese civil war ended in 1949 with Chiang Kai-shek moving the Nationalist Party and army to Taiwan. Under the shadow of the recent defeat, the Nationalist government started a cruel policy to repress all possible objections, whether from the Taiwanese or mainlanders. "White Terror" lasted till 1954 when the American government told Chiang Kai-shek that he would not be supported to regain the Chinese mainland (Jiao 1990:53). Chen Ying-zhen, among others, proposed the theory that the persecution of leftist intellectuals in the 1950s had left society with an "intellectual poverty" syndrome (Sung-sheng Yvonne Chang 1993:164). All intellectuals who stayed in mainland China were inevitably labelled leftists; their works could not be read and the staging of their plays were prohibited.

A pan-island martial law was also in effect from May 20 of 1949 until August of 1987 which broke the world record of the longest span of martial law. The Nationalist government struggled to build Taiwan into an island-nation. Because of

material scarcity and immediate military threat from a powerful enemy across the Taiwan Strait, social stability and economic growth were frequently sought at the expense of intellectual freedom. The political myth of regaining the Chinese mainland, while serving to boost the morale of the mainlander emigres, in effect intensified people's latent anxiety about the inevitability of an impending war. The Nationalist government announced an anti-communism policy which prohibited any contact with mainland China and required theatre along with other literary people to abandon individual opinions and work under the flag of anti-communism.

Anti-communism became not only the dominant propaganda but also the ultimate value in literature and arts and those who were active in these fields were basically mainlanders who imitated the realist style proposed in the May 4 movement. For a long time, there were practically nothing but anti-communist plays in the modern theatre in Taiwan for whoever eagerly advocated anti-communism was exorbitantly rewarded. This government endorsed policy was crucial during this economic time in attracting numerous propaganda-centered scripts or productions (Jiao 1990:57). Lacking further information from the other shore of the Taiwan Strait, emotionally anti-communist plays rendered at this period became so monotonous that they fatigued the audience in no time. In addition to the decline in box office

receipts, countless taxes were a further deadly blow to all theatre groups. Theatre had no choice but to yield the stage to film.

Although the political situation gradually began to relax in the 1960s, as economic development gained momentum, the society at large in Taiwan continued to suffer under various constraints from the conservative authoritarian government as well as remnant feudal social values. Peking Opera revivals had been privileged to obtain government support because four out of the five major Peking Opera troupes were associated with the armed forces. Yet interest in traditional theatre was steadily fading. Although the Chinese Spoken Drama Appreciation and Production Committee was founded in 1962 to promote modern theatre, its annual budget of NT$300,000 (US$7,500) never increased during its twenty-three year history (Chung Minder 1992:70). Under the direction of Ms. Li Man-qui (1962-75), CSDAPC produced, among other performances, both the World Theatre Festival (1967-84) and the Youth Theatre Festival (1968-84). University drama departments and spoken drama clubs participated in these two Festivals, which, at a time when modern theatre in Taiwan was moribund, saved modern theatre from disappearing altogether, though unable to restore it to glory. No wonder when James Brandon visited Taiwan in the mid-1970s, he remarked, "modern drama is of little importance: amateur performances can be seen from time to

time. This is the not too exciting Taiwanese theatre scene" (Brandon 1976).

Perhaps it was beyond Brandon's interest to inspect what happened behind the "not too exciting Taiwanese theatre scene." His observation was correct for there were actually not many productions worth noticing in the 60s and 70s, yet he failed to sense a subtle metamorphosis of modern theatre in Taiwan. If the May 4 movement in 1919 was the first Western wave that fascinated Chinese playwrights with realism, contemporary playwrights in Taiwan were, and still are, experiencing the stronger and more direct "second Western wave" (Ma Sen 1991:15).

In 1960 *Xian Dai Wen Xue* [Modern Literature] (1960-1973; 1976-), founded by a group of young writers who were at the time still undergraduate students in the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures at the National Taiwan University, pioneered in breaking away from long-lived realism. In addition to creative works by Chinese writers, the magazine also published translations of creative and critical works from the Western modernist canon, featuring such writers as Franz Kafka, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, William Faulkner, Thomas Wolfe, D. H. Lawrence, Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus; among them some were both important novelists and dramatists. This magazine became a milestone for bringing Modernism and Existentialism to Taiwan and its founders have grown into outstanding writers, critics, and

literary scholars (Sung-sheng Yvonne Chang 1993:4,189).

Ou Zhou Za Zhi [European Magazine] and *Ju Chang* [Theatre] were founded in 1965 and associated more directly with theatre. The former, edited by a group of Taiwanese students returned from France, published translations of plays by Albert Camus, Jean-Paul Sartre, Jean Anouilh, Eugene Ionesco, Samuel Beckett, Jean Genet, Jean Cocteau and other European writers and theories. *Ju Chang* [Theatre] introduced works by playwrights such as Luigi Pirandello, Samuel Beckett, Harold Pinter, Edward Albee and the Theatre of Cruelty. In order to acquaint the audience in Taiwan with the Theatre of the Absurd, people who worked for *Ju Chang* [Theatre] staged Waiting for Godot by Samuel Beckett. It was said there was only one person left in the auditorium at the end of the play; that person turned out to be a friend of one of the actors (Ma Sen 1991:262-3). It was obvious those postwar Western theories and plays merely interested intellectuals; the distance between plays and the audience was so great that it waited to be bridged by a new generation of playwrights.

Under the inexorable second Western wave, several contemporary Chinese playwrights in Taiwan begin to present works distinct from playwrights in the 30s and 40s. Among them are three playwrights worth noting for further discussion: Yao Yi-wei, Ma Sen and Hwang Mei-shu who endeavor to mingle the postwar Western theatre with their

Eastern thoughts and experiences. Besides writing plays, they also teach in universities, publish books and contribute critiques of plays and scholarly articles to periodicals. These three are still closely connected with current theatre circles in Taiwan; most theatre practitioners are either their students or friends. Nowadays, only collected plays by them are still available in bookstores. Because of their achievements and enduring efforts, their works serve as the best examples to represent playwrights of their generation, pioneers of the second Western Wave.

Richard Schechner described his trip to Taipei in 1990 as follows:

> . . . what I experienced on Taiwan was an artistic and intellectual community surging ahead with projects of a strongly intercultural kind--national theatres, experiments linking personal expression and politics, and research into the various ethnicities that comprise Taiwan. (Schechner:1991)

If possible, this thesis will attempt to bridge the distance between Brandon's and Schechner's assertions on modern theatre in Taiwan by studying the works by Yao Yi-wei, Ma Sen and Hwang Mei-shu.

Endnotes

1. Traditional theatre in early Taiwan consisted of diverse local forms transported from the east coast of mainland China and performed in dialects, mainly Taiwanese. The earliest and most favored form was *Qizi Xi* [the Seven-role Theatre] of which the actors were all children; other forms were basically its variations. Forms of puppet theatre were also popular, such as *Kuilei Xi* [the String-puppet Theatre], *Budai Xi* [the Glove-puppet Theatre] and *Piying Xi* [the Shadow-puppet Theatre].

2. Intellectuals before Western influences were devoted Confucianism disciples who disputed narrowly-defined religions and consequently theatre for its rooted association with religious rites. Other condemnations occurred because the professionals tended to utilize appalling narratives to thrill the audience and provided occasions for the sexes to meet which often resulted in scandals. Actors were also considered worse than beggars for leading loose life styles.

3. *Gozai Xi*, as indicated by the name, *Gozai* means "songs," its origin came from ballads sung in the east coast of China. The ballad singers used to be blind beggars on the road, so the ballads acquired the nickname, "beggars' songs." In Taiwan, the ballad-singing blended with singing techniques, tunes used in various forms of theatre and finally became a singing-acting performance style which could be seen both indoors and outdoors. *Gozai Xi* utilized contemporary clothing as its costume and social events as its story lines at the early stage. Its language was definitely daily conversation in Taiwanese; performers often improvised and interacted with the audience (Qiu Kun-liang 1992:184-208).

4. *Xin Ju* is the translation of Japanese *Shingeki* and literally means 'new theatre.' *Shingeki* is a Western-influenced modern Japanese theatre.

5. After the First World War, nationalism was sweeping all over the world. Stimulated by the movement they encountered in Japan, those returned Japanese-educated Taiwanese

students reconsidered the nationalistic movement at home. They decided to abandon violent struggles with the Japanese which cost more than thirty thousand lives within twenty years without any achievement (Qiu 1992:290). It was wondered if it must have been something rooted deeply in the Chinese-oriented culture that hindered the movement from being realized. Having followed the tradition of Chinese intellectuals, superstitions or religions were presumed the major obstacles to Taiwan liberation, so were activities associated with them. Theatre of conventional forms which can be seen in front of temples became the target; modern theatre, not being connected to the religions of Taiwan, became the weapon to attack with.

6. According to Zhang Wei-xian, there had been no scripts available in all kinds of theatre groups before the Japanese authority set this rule in 1926. All they had were story outlines with, at best, titles for acts (Qiu 1992:241). Perhaps the reason for not having complete scripts was the fact that not many could read.

7. The civil service examination system of old China was designed for all educated to be selected for civil service. The more examinations one passed, the higher position one attained. Therefore, parents encouraged their offsprings to study hard, pass the examination, earn a position in the civil service system because it was generally assumed the best way to honor one's family. The examination system lasted for thousands of years until the end of the nineteenth century. Almost all who wrote novels or plays during that period either chose not to take the civil service examinations or failed--otherwise they would have written documents instead.

8. In May 1919 students protested in Beijing against the surrender of Chinese sovereignty proposed at the Paris Peace Conference. When the Treaty of Versailles, signed on 28 June 1919, formalized the proposals to China's detriment, national outrage forced the Chinese government to refuse to sign. The new intelligentsia closed ranks in affirming an era of definitive cultural change called the May 4 movement. Some regarded this movement as "the Chinese Renaissance." It sought for changes among intellectuals who would lead reforms in politics and society, which were national independence, individual freedom and modernization of China. The ultimate goal was to save China (Zhou Ce-zong 1983:493-4).

9. The Japanese authorities also encouraged Taiwanese families to speak Japanese at home, adopt Japanese surnames to make the Taiwanese to think Japan was their country and fight for it during the Second Sino-Japanese War and the

Second World War. However, the majority of the Taiwanese felt closer to Chinese than to the Japanese.

10. Taiwanese and numerous other spoken languages in the Chinese society, although commonly said to be dialects, are actually different languages without written forms. Historically, people in the Chinese society have overcome their communication problem by utilizing one single writing system that, by nature, suppresses the diversities in tongues. Without a written language of their own, the Taiwanese have let their past be easily erased and forgotten which consequently cause the crisis of identity for the Taiwanese as a whole.

CHAPTER TWO

THE CHINESE PLAYWRIGHT WHO DEPARTS FROM REALISM TO BREAK NEW GROUND FOR THE THEATRE IN TAIWAN: *YAO YI-WEI* (1922-)

A Brief History of Yao Yi-wei

Yao Yi-wei was born at Nanchang, the capital of Jiangxi, China on April 5, 1922. At the age of 19, he went to study engineering at Amoy University, located at a seaport and trading center in the southeast of China, and later transferred to banking. Having worked at a bank since coming to Taiwan in 1946, Yao's career had a dramatic change in 1956. The fall of that year, one of Yao's old colleagues at the bank made the acquaintance of the newly appointed president of the National Academy of Arts, Zhang Long-yan. After having been informed of Yao's knowledge of theatre/drama and also having learned it firsthand in a conversation with Yao, Zhang soon invited Yao to give a lecture at his school, which led to a career teaching courses on dramatic and art theories at the college level (Yao 1988:1-2). A theatregoer who worked at a bank therefore became a theatre scholar, a playwright and a

critic.

Yao Yi-wei had his first full-length play, *Lai Zi Feng Huang Zhen De Ren* [People from the Town Called Phoenix] published in 1963. By 1971, he had finished four other plays: *Sun Fei Hu Qiang Qin* [Sun Fei-hu and the Bride] in 1965, *Nian Yu Quan Yin* [The Jade-Carved Statue of the Goddess of Mercy] in 1967, *Hong Bi Zi* [The Red Nose] in 1969 and *Shen Sheng* (titles without translations are proper names) in 1971. Three out of these five plays are based on either history or ancient Chinese stories; the style of all five plays imitates the realistic mode of his Chinese forerunners. Besides being a productive playwright and respected teacher, Yao is a devoted scholar on aesthetics as well. His translation of Aristotle's Poetics, *Shi Xuan Qian Zhu* [Poetics Annotated], was published in 1966. His other critical works in this period included *Yi Shu De Ao Mi* [The Mysteries of the Arts] in 1968 and *Xi Ju Lun Ji* [Essays on Drama] in 1969.

From 1971 to 1972, Yao was invited by the Department of State of the United States as a visiting writer to participate in the International Writers' Workshop at the University of Iowa. This trip can be seen as a watershed in Yao's career as a playwright and had a distinctive impact on the alteration of his style. On his return, to his creative playwriting publications he has added *Yi Kou Xiang Zi* [A Suitcase] (1973), *Fu Qing Zhu* (1978), *Wo Men Yi Tong Zou Zou*

Kan [Let's Try Walking Together] (1979), *Zuo Bo Tao* (1980), *Fang Ke* [The Visitor] (1984), *Da Shu Shen Chuan Qi* [The Legend of the Spirit of a Giant Tree] (1985) and *Ma Wei Yi* [The Courier Station at Ma-wei] (1987). Although three out of those seven plays written after the 1972 trip to the United States are still built on either history or ancient Chinese stories, influence of the Theatre of the Absurd is recognizable in those with relatively modern backgrounds while his personal techniques and many Eastern conventions remain. His critical works appearing in this era consist of *Wen Xue Lun Ji* [Essays on Literature] (1974), *Yao Yi-Wei Wen Lu* [Selected Writings] (1977), *Mei De Fan Chou Lun* [The Aesthetic Categories] (1978), *Xin Shang Yu Pi Ping* [Appreciation and Criticism] (1979), *Xi Ju Yu Wen Xue* [Drama and Literature] (1989) and *Xi Ju Yuan Li* [Dramatic Theories] (1992).

Yao has totally written twelve plays so far. His first five plays (1963-71) and *Yi Kou Xiang Zi* [A Suitcase] (1973) were published as a collection titled *Yao Yi Wei Xi Ju Lou Zhong* [Six Plays by Yao Yi-wei] in 1975 and the seventh, *Fu Qing Zhu*, as a separate volume in 1989. His other five plays, written between 1979 and 1987 were collected and issued as *Wo Men Yi Tong Zou Zou Kan: Yao Yi Wei Ju Zuo Wu Zhong* [Let's Try Walking Together: Five Dramatic Works by Yao Yi-wei] in 1987.

Yao was the director of the Institute of the Arts of

the University of Chinese Culture and taught in the Department of Drama at the National Institute of the Arts where he was the dean. He retired from his teaching career in 1992.

Among the three playwrights under discussion in this thesis, Yao Yi-wei is the oldest and, so far, the most productive in the area of creative playwriting. During the span of his entire playwriting career, Yao apparently wrote his first six plays according to a well-planned schedule--a play every two years. However, there was a five-year interval after his sixth play, *Yi Kou Xiang Zi* [A Suitcase] (1973), and the reason was clearly explained by the playwright himself in the foreword of his seventh play, *Fu Qing Zhu* (1978):

> Years ago, when I watched the movie, A Man for All Seasons, I was so deeply touched that I found Robert Bolt's original play to read. I knew then I would like to base a play on a great Chinese man, and the image of Fu Qing Zhu came to my mind. The realization of this ambition, however, had been put off due to lack of impulse and stimulus in creative writing. I had so far written six plays and all of them were published, but they were like bubbles in the air without attracting much attention. It was not until this March when I sat in the last row watching a production of *Yi*

> *Kou Xiang Zi* [A Suitcase] and felt so excited and believed I should keep writing plays for the rest of my life that I thought of Fu Qing Zhu again. (Yao 1989:5)

Yao wrote these words in 1978 and consequently wrote three other plays, one each year, including *Fu Qing Zhu* (1978). However, after 1981 he wrote plays at irregular intervals and no new dramatic works of his can be found after 1987. While Yao's plays have been brought to the stage in Taiwan, Japan and China, the quantity and quality of the productions were often unsatisfactory. Not being able to see his plays well translated onto the stage is probably what discourages Yao most from creative playwriting (Hwang Mei-shu 1980:203).

In addition to his achievement of being a knowledgeable and diligent dramatist, theorist and critic, Yao Yi-wei is highly regarded as an important figure in the modern theatre movement in Taiwan because of his role as a vigorous activist. In August 1978, the Ministry of Education invited him to serve as the Head of the Chinese Spoken Drama Appreciation and Production Committee. During his tenure of office (1978-1984), he started promoting non-university involvement in the Experimental Theatre Festival, which first opened on July 15, 1980 at the National Art Hall and was held each summer from 1980 to 1984. Yao explained, "'experimental performance' and 'experimental theatre' are

actually very modest terms. They express that these [performances] are just our experiments" (Chung Mingder 1992:70-1). Because of Yao's advocation of "art theatre" and "avant garde theatre," this Festival not only encouraged the establishment of the Little Theatre Movement, which has flourished through the 80s to the 90s, but also made fashionable experimental drama which searches for new possibilities and combinations for modern theatre in Taiwan.

The Departure from Realism

As stated earlier, Yao Yi-wei, a self-educated literary man, started writing plays as early as 1963, when postwar Western dramatic theories had not yet been widely introduced in Taiwan. Therefore, it can be easily understood that Yao's original style in playwriting was mainly modeled after the first generation of Western-influenced Chinese playwrights who had championed realism in the modern Chinese theatre since the May 4 movement in 1919. Many of his plays written during his early period (1963-71), such as *Lai Zi Feng Huang Zhen De Ren* [People from the Town Called Phoenix] and *Hong Bi Zi* [The Red Nose], included in the scripts detailed descriptions of realistic settings, atmospheres and sound and light effects. Each of the plays was written especially for the proscenium stage with decisively divided

acts and always followed by a "curtain down" at the end of the play. However, the realistic style seemed to be more in the realm of theatrical design than playwriting. Yet at a time when everybody was striving to be economical, the requirement of a realistic stage was no better than an announcement that made the already rare chance for a play to be produced reduced to almost none.

Besides the tight budgets, language as well has long been a major problem that hinders an authentic realistic theatre from happening in Taiwan. When, in 1916, Hu Shi initiated the movement to substitute a standardized vernacular intelligible to all for the then classical written language, he meant to write in Mandarin, a dialect used in Beijing and selected at the beginning of the twentieth century as the national spoken language in China. Playwrights who did not grow up in that area encounter difficulty in accurately capturing its accent and expressions. The problem of language becomes more evident in Taiwan where more than nine-tenths of the population's native languages are dialects from various provinces, mainly Taiwanese. Those dialects cannot be easily captured in writing due to the fact that Chinese write in characters instead of phonetic letters. Although currently almost all of those whose ages are under forty in Taiwan can speak Mandarin, if a playwright wants to adopt realism as her/his style, Mandarin alone is insufficient to reflect languages

used among the majority in their everyday lives.

The unexpected political transition after the mid 1940s, the defeat of Japan in the Second World War followed by the retreat of the Nationalist government, not only made language adjustment an immediate concern but also resulted in widespread social discontent that has continued for decades in Taiwan. Particularly after the disastrous 228 event in 1947, which intensified misunderstandings between the Taiwanese and mainlanders, the social blend between the majority by number and the majority by authority has been considerably decelerated. For Chinese playwrights in Taiwan, while their memories of China grow dim because of the prohibition of any contact with the mainland, materials they accumulate to represent the society in Taiwan are, though gradually improving as years go by, usually inadequate. Take Yao Yi-wei for example, his background as a intellectual mainlander automatically classifies him as a member of the privileged group; language difference further impedes him from communicating directly with the populace in Taiwan. The reasons mentioned all complicate the fulfillment of the requirement of Chinese playwrights in Taiwan to appropriately comprehend the society they desire to describe. Furthermore, Taiwan has undergone a phenomenal transition over the last thirty years, from an underdeveloped agricultural country into a highly industrialized nation. Many mixed descriptions of Taiwan

from both foreigners and residents confirm that Taiwan is presently in an ambivalent state. Many Taiwanese see their country as "developed" but can remember a time not too long ago when it was considered "underdeveloped." Perhaps only through time can playwrights, whether mainlanders or the emerging Taiwanese, familiarize themselves with the lives and concerns of the masses in Taiwan.

It is now clear that realism is a style, no closer to reality than the several movements that rose in reaction against it, each claiming to approach reality more closely. However, it is made apparent to Yao Yi-wei not through theories or movements but, conscious or not, an awareness of the rapid social changes happening in the world around him which enables him to move away from realism and break new ground for theatre in Taiwan. Yao turns his frustration of being unable to portray characters realistically in Taiwan into an advantage for himself: he attempts to discover the essence of human nature regardless of the limitations of period and location. This argument can be supported by the fact that he utilizes history and ancient Chinese stories as the major plot lines of half of his plays; many characters in his plays are general types rather than contemporary people found in everyday life.

The influence of the Theatre of the Absurd in some of Yao Yi-wei's plays written after his participation in the International Writers' Workshop in the United States in

1972, therefore, should be considered as a serendipitous discovery of a postwar Western theatrical style that corresponded to an idea of theatre he already held. Having experienced years of war with Japan, civil war, unanticipated exile and finally settling down on a unfamiliar island, Yao, actually along with most mainlanders in Taiwan, is definitely able to identify with the most genuinely representative attitude of our time: the absurdity of the human condition. No wonder he finds the Theatre of the Absurd adaptable to his perception of the world. Tight budget for production, language problem, alienation and an inner call to detect the very essence of life out of chaos all fabricate the path for Yao Yi-wei to undertake the inevitable (for him) departure from realism.

The Summaries of Plays by *Yao Yi-wei*

Lai Zi Feng Huang Zhen De Ren (1963)
[People from the Town Called Phoenix]

Act I: After refusing a young man's proposal, Zhu, who has concealed her identity as the daughter of a former doctor in Phoenix, prepares to commit suicide. She is rescued by Zhou, a prisoner who just broke out of jail and happens to hide at her place. Zhou expresses his wish of finding one good-natured girl who he once met in Phoenix.

Act II: Zhu's ex-lover in Phoenix, Xia, comes to request a chance to right the wrong he did to Zhu. Zhu reveals her identity and forgives Xia on his second visit.

Act III: When Zhu's current lover, Qin, tries to make her stay with him by force, Zhou again rescues her. Zhou learns from this event that he has not reformed yet and decides to return to jail. Zhu proves she is the girl Zhou is looking for and promises to wait for him in Phoenix.

Sun Fei Hu Qiang Qin (1965)

[Sun Fei-hu and the Bride]

Act I: Two travelers stop at a rest area and have completely opposite versions about what Sun Fei-hu, the famous bandit, looks like. One traveler says that on this very day Zhen, a general, is marrying Cui, daughter of the former prime minister, and will pass by on this road. Humbly-dressed Zhang, Cui's former boyfriend, and well-dressed Sun join the conversation without revealing their identities. Sun later recognizes Zhang and lends him his fine dress to see Cui for a last time. The wedding troop is dispersed by a rumor about the famous bandit's arrival; Zhen asks Cui to change dresses with her maid while he goes to ask for help.

Act II: Zhang, Cui and her maid wait at the rest area like strangers till Sun, in a bandit suit, arrives.

Act III: Zhang, Cui and her maid are at Sun's hideout.

The confusion as to Cui and her maid continues for the maid insists on keeping Cui's dress on, which is a fine lady's wedding gown, and acting accordingly. Sun, now in fine clothes, expresses his willingness to compete fairly with Zhang for the bride. He asks Zhang to try on his bandit suit to see if Zhang looks like a bandit wearing it. Zhen arrives with an armed troop.

Epilogue: The same two travelers meet again at the rest area and have different versions about who is persecuted or who is married to whom in this event.

Nian Yu Quan Yin (1967)

[The Jade-Carved Statue of the Goddess of Mercy]

Act I: Cui carves a statue of the Goddess of Mercy out of a piece of fine jade that curiously resembles his master's daughter, Xiu-xiu, which causes him to be expelled from the house. Xiu-xiu asks to run away with Cui, though he denies love as the cause of this incident.

Act II: Cui and Xiu-xiu run a jade-carving store which is not a success. Xiu-xiu, then pregnant, agrees to go back with her father's servant who comes to look for her on the condition that Cui will be left free.

Act III: Thirteen years later, the master passes away and Cui's child has grown up. A blind flute player who turns out to be Cui searching for his wife is found nearly frozen to death on a snowy night. Xiu-xiu takes him into

her house without telling him who she is. To show his appreciation, Cui carves a statue of the Goddess of Mercy which again resembles Xiu-xiu and says he has to leave for he has found his wife in another world. When Xiu-xiu decides to tell Cui the truth, she finds him dead with a smile on his face.

Hong Bi Zi (1969)

[The Red Nose]

Act I: People from all walks of life meet at a modest hotel in a tourist spot for the only road out is closed due to stormy weather. A circus asks to stay at this already-too-crowded hotel and, disregarding the owner's rejection, begins to perform in the lobby; the clown who never appears without his red nose is in the lead.

Act II: While dancers in the circus talk about the clown's mysterious identity, the red-nose clown confidently comforts and advises every one around, including a prosperous businessman who worries about his only son's fate. When the businessman learns his son is alive, he sponsors a performance by the circus to celebrate.

Act III: Following other performances, the red-nose clown starts his one-man show about a king who wanted to know the meaning of happiness. Wang, who quietly arrived earlier says she knows the answer. She calls the clown's name, *Shen-si* [a gift from God], and takes off his red nose:

a frightened, timid, childlike face is revealed.

Act IV: The clown, now without his red nose, talks about his past with Wang, his wife, saying he tried every job after he left home but only being a clown gives him a sense of security. He tells his wife that happiness is to sacrifice. After the storm, everyone is to leave and suddenly a female dancer is reported drowning. The clown puts on his red nose running to the seashore to save the female dancer, who comes back herself and declares that the clown couldn't swim. The play ends with Wang murmuring, "I knew he wouldn't come back. I knew he wouldn't come back."

Shen Sheng (1971)

Act I: Court ladies reveal that Shen Sheng, the brave but kind crown prince, conquers another country and lament about their native land, Li-rong, which met the same fate thirteen years earlier. Li Ji and Shao Ji are sisters from Li-rong and both the king's imperial concubines; the former is mean and opportunistic while the other kindness itself. An old lady in black chants in hope to forestall a coming calamity. Li Ji plans to elude Shen Sheng so her own son can become the heir to the kingdom.

Act II: Li Ji plots with her servants to poison the meat Shen Sheng sends to the palace and put the blame upon Shen Sheng. The old lady in black appears again chanting.

Act III: Court ladies talk and sing that Shen Sheng is

too kind to defend himself; he fearlessly kills himself. Li Ji orders her servants to guard but she is still bothered because the excellence of Shen Sheng seems to be invincible.

Act IV: Shortly after he becomes the crown prince, the son of Li Ji is killed by friends of Shen Sheng. Li Ji fills the position with her sister's son against her sister's will. When the son of Shao Ji is also killed, Li Ji decides to commit suicide, but implores Shao Ji to live. However, Shao Ji follows her in death by throwing herself into a pond. The old lady in black appears chanting.

Yi Kou Xiang Zi (1973)

[A Suitcase]

Scene I: Laoda, stout and strong, and Asan, skinny and small, push their bikes uphill. On Asan's bike there is a big old suitcase. They argue about why they lost their jobs when they stop to rest.

Scene II: A radio in a restaurant broadcasts that a doctor has offered a big reward to locate a suitcase containing radium. Laoda and Asan, unaware of the news, enter shortly and Asan's suitcase catches the attention of everyone in the restaurant.

Scene III: Annoyed by inquisitive strangers, Laoda and Asan hide themselves. They talk about childhood stories and Asan says the suitcase is only a family gift passed down from his grandfather, which is, for him the sole reminder of

his past since his father died three years earlier.

Scene IV: The policemen finally catch them in a deserted watch tower, but Asan strongly resists an inspection of his suitcase. Laoda asks Asan to compromise and tries to get the suitcase, Asan loses his balance and falls to the ground with his suitcase. The suitcase opens and childhood souvenirs, shabby clothes and toys are revealed. The crowd is disappointed and about to disperse when the policemen discover Asan is dead. One declares it is Laoda who pushes Asan down and the others agree. Laoda obediently lets policemen take him, and murmurs, "Asan, it's my fault. . ." leaving Asan's body behind.

Fu Qing Zhu (1978)

Part I

Prologue: A blind storyteller sings to tell the audience that among those who strive to restore the Ming dynasty (1386-1644) against the establishment of Qing dynasty (1644-1911), there is one called *Fu Qing Zhu*.

Scene I: Fu is arrested and seriously wounded by officers of the Qing dynasty because he refuses to reveal the names of his comrades and their plan.

Scene II: Including Fu, many participants of this aborted revolution are imprisoned. Discerning the presence of a possible spy among them, everyone in jail proclaims to be Fu to protect their true hero from being harmed.

Scene III: A doctor writes a letter to falsely accuse himself so as to take care of Fu in jail.

Part II

Prologue: The storyteller discloses the defeat of the anti-Qing movement and foreshadows the following events.

Scene I: Fu becomes a fine doctor who cares for the poor. The rich have to disguise themselves and risk costly charges when seeking a cure from Fu.

Scene II: The Qing dynasty attempts to befriend the intellectuals, including Fu, by offering them positions in the government. Fu declines the offers except to give permission to publish his poems.

Scene III: After various excuses and persistent refusals from Fu, the emperor has to finally give up.

Epilogue: The storyteller praises Fu's integrity.

Wo Men Yi Tong Zou Zou Kan (1979)

[Let's Try Walking Together]

Scene I: Amei and Acong, a girl and a boy, each with a similar bundle, meet at a park by chance. Two ruffians proclaim that Amei is their leader's woman who has managed to escape from their guard. When Acong gets into a fight with the two, Amei runs away with Acong's bundle by mistake.

Scene II: Asking directions at a restaurant, Amei meets Acong, who temporarily filling in as a waiter for his

relative. Acong returns her bundle when the ruffians arrive; Amei runs away with two bundles and Acong follows.

Scene III: A policeman asks his aunt, a dressmaker, to sew a button on his uniform and leaves. Amei and Acong stop at this dressmaking shop only to find that Amei's sister has left this job. At the sight of the ruffians, Amei and Acong hide in the display window where Amei puts on a dress. Acong happens to put on a policeman's uniform and scares off the ruffians. Amei and Acong dash away hastily.

Scene IV: When Amei and Acong realize they are wearing the clothes from that shop they decide to mail them back tomorrow so as not to be suspected as thieves. They talk about why they have come to this town. The ruffians come and then are scared away by a whistle, thinking a policeman is coming. The dressmaker and her nephew arrive.

Scene V: The whole matter is figured out at the police station, Amei and Acong are forgiven and released.

Scene VI: When Amei and Acong are about to go their different ways, they discover they truly care about each other and decide to find their future together.

Zuo Bo Tao (1980)

Scene I: *Zuo Bo Tao* wants to work for a respectable king in a faraway kingdom, so he makes sure his wife will take care of all domestic duties for him while he is gone.

Scene II: Zuo leaves, but first invites *Yang Jue Ai*, a

friend he admires, to come with him so they may serve the good king together. Yang agrees.

Scene III: The weather is cold and stormy and they do not have food for them both to reach the kingdom. Zuo decides to leave his food and clothes to Yang so Yang can continue the journey. Yang strongly objects to this suggestion and goes to find dried branches to build a fire to keep them warm. When Yang returns, he sees Zho's clothes and finds him frozen to death in the trunk of a dead tree. He at first wants to kill himself and then decides to repay his friend's sacrifice by fulfilling his last wish.

Fang Ke (1984)

[The Visitor]

The clock on the wall stops at twelve on a winter night. There is an old couple in a modestly furnished room; the husband is somewhat deaf and the wife blind. They first try to figure out what time it is, but without success. Then the wife mentions that their son is coming back, they disagree with each other about where their son is. The husband reads a letter from their son, yet neither of them is sure about when they got the letter. As the light changes, the couple talk and act as if they were younger arguing about the fight their son just had which ends with the old woman blaming her husband for driving their son away. They gradually calm down and sit in chairs as the

light returns as it was at the beginning of the play. The wind outside is blowing hard and a knock on the door is faintly heard. As the wind blows louder, the knocking on the door becomes harder. Despite their suspicions and fears, they decide to open the door together to face the thing that never answers but knocks. The husband observes a human shape in black with arms wide open and is scared, but he tells his wife he sees nothing. They hold each other tightly, talk about the bad times they have been through together and conclude they should be happy that they are still alive. As the light turns brighter, they are excited about what they can do in the garden after winter, something they can do little by little every day. They decide to take a short rest so they can start a good day tomorrow.

Da Shu Shen Chuan Qi (1985)

[The Legend of the Spirit of a Giant Tree]

Scene I: center stage, in front of heaps of deserted furniture is a giant tree. Two tramps, Zhang and Wang, come to find something useful. Wang bitterly leaves with a book entitled "How To Get Rich" and Zhang finds gold.

Scene II: Wang and Zhang, both exquisitely dressed, meet at the same place years later. Zhang used the gold to earn high interests. Wang, inspired by the book he found, invented a "youth potion" and made a fortune.

Scene III: The place behind the giant tree is covered

with used appliances and cars. Wang and Zhang have lost everything they had and unexpectedly meet each other when they come here to commit suicide. They comfort each other and, thinking this place once brought them luck, decide to build a temple here with donations. They will tell about the miracles made by the spirit of this giant tree as a way to make money.

Ma Wei Yi (1987)

[The Courier Station at Ma-wei]

Act I: The emperor, tired and regretful, stays at Ma-wei with companions as a way to escape the armed riot at the capital. The officers privately talk about the prime minster Yang who acquired his position and excessive power because of his sisters, who all married into royal families and one of them is the emperor's favorite concubine. Following word of the defeat of the emperor's armies, a general implies to the crown prince that the prime minister is the key to the defeat. The imperial concubine starts feeling danger. A huge crowd protests outside.

Act II: The emperor dismisses the notion that the prime minister is the cause of this riot. He asks his favorite concubine about her brother and she guarantees her brother's loyalty. An attendant reports that the prime minister has been killed by the crowd, so are his other sisters.

Act III: The imperial concubine talks about her sisters with her maid, while the crowd outdoors persistently demands her death as a condition for terminating the riot. Although the emperor wants to protect his favorite concubine, his subjects contend that the safety of the kingdom should come first. The imperial concubine later explains to the emperor she has been merely his plaything, though he mistakes their romance as love. She decides to calmly accept her destiny for she feels this is the first time that her life is of any importance.

The Unattainable Purity:

the Conflict Between Reality and Utopia as a Recurrent Theme in Yao's Plays

Most of the major characters Yao Yi-wei creates possess, thought in diverse manners, a bigger-than-life quality and certainly are far from being realistic everyday people. They pine for or indulge in their visionary worlds. The recurrent theme of Yao's plays can be generally condensed to the conflict between reality and utopia in those characters. Characters in *Lai Zi Feng Huang Zhen De Ren* [People from the Town Called Phoenix] (1963) and *Sun Fei Hu Qiang Qin* [Sun Fei-hu and the Bride] (1965) practically live on exaggerated impressions of each other which are

built on brief encounters. Miss Zhu in the former play plans to commit suicide because of her disillusionment when her ex-lover appears and then decides to live up to the prisoner's impression of her when she was a caring little girl. Characters in the latter play are left in confusion about their own true identities. There is no definite answer whether the identity crises will be solved in either play.

Some of the characters are by nature capable of overlooking reality to devote themselves to their idea of excellence. In *Nian Yu Quan Yin* [The Jade-Carved Statue of the Goddess of Mercy] (1967), the craftsman, Cui, explains his motivation for carving the statue of the Goddess of Mercy, which unintentionally resembles the daughter of his master, Xiu-xiu:

> I want to sculpt something I am capable of comprehending and have touched, something I respect and appreciate, something that is ideal and the most exquisite, something that lives among us. Then . . . (Excitedly) Then I forget about myself, forget about my real world. I advance to capture the illusion that has lain hidden in my heart for years--that mysterious illusion. (Yao 1987:206)

Cui concentrates his energy and attention exclusively to translate the images in his mind into artistic works

regardless of whatever happens in real life. He never once perceives why he is expelled from the master' house, why Xiu-xiu runs away with him, why his wife leaves him abruptly or who he talks to the minute before he dies. Cui has been blind to reality and becomes blind, literally, in his later life. Both kinds of blindness enable him to believe in the world he sees through his mind despite the real world around him. This is the reason why he is capable of obtaining joy before he dies, though his situation seems nothing but tragic to others' eyes.

Not unlike Cui, the honorable prince who never appears on stage, Shen Sheng, in *Shen Sheng* (1971) is not meant for this degenerating world either. When Li Ji and her servants plot against Shen Sheng, they know Shen Sheng is doomed to commit suicide; they are sure that Shen Sheng would not protest, defend himself or escape because "he'd rather sacrifice himself than harm anyone else" (Yao 1987:394). Premature deaths are destined for them who refuse to compromise, but insistence on keeping ideals intact achieves peace of mind for them.

Nevertheless, there are less fortunate characters who loathe the world they live in yet are unable to justify their nonconformity with a high moral code; they spend their lives escaping from reality by lacking a cause for which to fight. The nice younger sister in *Shen Sheng* (1971), Shao Ji, remains her innocent self by deliberately refusing to

know anything other than that which transpires in her quiet day-to-day life. When the power structure that protects her innocence shatters, for instance, the death of her king and the downfall of her sister's conspiracy, Shao Ji is finally driven to see the world around her. Hwang Mei-shu feels that Yao does not adequately justify why Shao Ji, a guiltless good person, deserves a suicidal death like her treacherous sister (Hwang 1980:185), but I believe refusal to encounter the cruelty of life is enough reason to commit suicide for a naive child who insists on not growing up.

The clown in *Hong Bi Zi* [The Red Nose] (1969) exemplifies another similar character that fits the escapist type who cannot reconcile with the real world. The mysterious yet confident, prophetic clown sharply contrasts to his vulnerable cowardly self after being deprived of the mask he chooses--he was a life-time loser before becoming a clown. Confronting his wife generates an immediate crisis of identity for him, his final action is to secure a heroic status for himself by putting on his red nose and sacrificing his life in a rescue. The irony comes when the person supposedly to be rescued returns declaring she was not in need which makes the clown's fatal attempt absurd instead of heroic. Ma Sen questions the definition of happiness Yao gives the clown as inadequate and requires clearer motivation for the clown's meaningless suicidal attempt (Ma 1991:165-6). Ma's question may be answered by

asking: if the clown indeed believes that "happiness is to sacrifice" as he declared, why does he need to put on his mask, the red nose, before he takes action? The clown shows no sign of gaining any strength without his red nose on. His wife argues with him about his definition of happiness and says,

> You do not understand yourself. You fantasize that you would become a great man. Let me tell you. You are ordinary, more ordinary than an ordinary man. You are apprehensive and cowardly; you stutter and are shy in front of people. You fear sleeping alone at night because you fear darkness. You fear everything, even a mouse or a worm--You scream when you see a worm. You fear wearing new clothes because you fear attracting attention. You fear thunder, illness and especially death. (Yao, 1989:348-9)

The clown convinces himself that "happiness is to sacrifice" so he can overlook those fears he possesses which seem unusual for a grown man. This high moral definition of happiness serves the same function as the red nose he never took off before others until his wife arrives; they are simply disguises that conceal who he really is. If he truly overcomes his fear and believes that happiness is to sacrifice, he would not have to put his red nose back on before taking action to rescue the dancer. His final self-

destructive action may not rewrite his identity, but it becomes an eternal mask for the clown which conceals his existence altogether.

Although in Yao's later plays his characters incline to reconcile with the world after going through difficulties, their dreams always await tomorrow to be fulfilled, such as *Wo Men Yi Tong Zou Zou Kan* [Let's Try Walking Together] (1979), *Fang Ke* [The Visitor] (1984) and *Da Shu Shen Chuan Qi* [The Legend of the Spirit of a Giant Tree] (1985). However, it is very possible for the readers or the audience to suspect the optimism in these plays and even call it false for apparently those characters have absolutely nothing but hopes at the end of these plays.

At least two attempted suicides and nine death out of twelve plays cannot be a coincidence. The two historical figures, Fu Qing Zhu and Zuo Bo Tao, who Yao Yi-wei admires so much as to write two plays exclusively about them are known for their integrity. No wonder the characters Yao creates yearn for absolute integrity and will not settle for less. The tragedy is that a time that can afford a character like Fu Qing Zhu has long gone, the choice for contemporary people to make seems more like Zuo Bo Tao's choice: survival or integrity. In *Yi Kou Xiang Zi* [A Suitcase] (1973), Asan's suitcase, with its history and all the souvenirs of his childhood, is the only evidence of Asan's tradition and existence, yet even the cost of his

own life cannot protect it from being invaded.

Characteristics of Yao's Plays

As pointed out several times earlier, utilizing history and ancient Chinese stories as the basis of half of his plays is one obvious characteristic of the plays by Yao Yi-wei. Ancient Chinese stories are what *Sun Fei Hu Qiang Qin* [Sun Fei-hu and the Bride] (1965) and *Nian Yu Quan Yin* [The Jade-Carved Statue of the Goddess of Mercy] (1967) are based on, even though the author provides the characters with some psychological aspects which leads to unconventional interpretations. For example, Sun Fei-hu, the traditionally-described wicked bandit, finally finds a voice to defend himself in Yao's version of this story. When Zhang, Cui and her maid cannot believe the man in fine dress is a notorious bandit, Sun asserts that a bandit is also a human being who is no worse than an intellectual for both of them neither produce nor trade and becoming a bandit was his only choice to survive a severe famine. Moreover, as Cui's marriage with Zhen is through arrangement instead of love, Sun feels he has no less a right to win the bride, not to mention that he has secretly admired Cui since he was a poverty-stricken youngster (Yao 1987: 152-5). Yao defies tradition and gives humanity to a bandit as well as defying

the traditional practice of the arranged marriage through the character which exemplifies the way Yao maneuvers the otherwise unexciting stories.

Shen Sheng (1971) *Fu Qing Zhu* (1978) *Zuo Bo Tao* (1980) *Ma Wei Yi* [The Courier Station at Ma-wei] (1987) are four historical plays with names of persons or location in their titles. *Shen Sheng* is set during the period of the Warring States (722-484 B.C.). *Fu Qing Zhu* and *Zuo Bo Tao* are about less known historical events; the former summarizes the life of an ancient Chinese man while the latter explicitly portrays a historical happening. The title of *Ma Wei Yi* indicates the place where the famous/notorious imperial concubine Yang in Tang dynasty (618-906) was strangled; the play, however, largely describes the emperor and the officials around him. The imperial concubine Yang does not appear until the end of Act I; fortunately she is given time, though limited, to contemplate her life which empowers her to achieve autonomy by choosing her death. For Yao Yi-wei, to sum up, the purpose of employing history or ancient Chinese stories is not to retell a story but to either glorify praiseworthy persons or develop innovative explanations from familiar themes.

Although specific resources cannot be identified unless pointed out by the author, techniques seen in the traditional Chinese theatre can be recognized in plays by Yao, especially those which are based on history or ancient

Chinese stories. The phrase "traditional Chinese theatre" is intended to refer to local theaters from various areas of mainland China, including, yet not exclusively, Peking Opera. Reciting, either verse or prose, and singing in diverse forms are the two most noticeable characteristics. They both appear in six of Yao's plays, which are *Sun Fei Hu Qiang Qing* [Sun Fei-hu and the Bride], *Nian Yu Quan Yin* [The Jade-Carved Statue of the Goddess of Mercy], *Hong Bi Zi* [The Red Nose], *Shen Sheng, Fu Qing Zhu* and *Zuo Bo Tao*. Singing alone appears in *Lai Zi Feng Huang Zhen De Ren* [People from the Town Called Phoenix] and *Ma Wei Yi* [The Courier Station at Ma-wei].

An especially large amount of verse reciting exists in Yao's second play, *Sun Fei Hu Quiang Qing* [Sun Fei-hu and the Bride]. A note by the author attached to the end of the play explains his purpose:

> I employ a kind of verse capable of being understood or appreciated by the less well-educated as my attempt to prepare our [modern] stage for "recital." I feel if recital cannot be established, there will be no way for us to produce plays in verse but only plays in prose which will certainly cripple our theatre. So far as music is concerned, every second half of a sentence will be repeated. The repetition is supposed to work as chorus. Every one on stage

> and backstage, even the audience, can join the singing to eliminate the distance between the performers and the audience. We also need to assimilate Peking Opera, puppet theatre and various local theaters to create performers' physiques, postures, melodies, masks and costumes. Dance should be a creative design that consists of our tradition as well as the ideas and the spirit of contemporary people. (Yao 1965:57)

Sun Fei Hu Qiang Qing [Sun Fei-hu and the Bride] illustrates several features of traditional Chinese theatre. Besides reciting, there is dance and singing by a group of children, an idea inspired by, *Nian Hua*, a traditional practice in Beijing of selling drawings for good luck in the lunar New Year (Yao 1987:104,106-7). It also contains an ancient Chinese wedding parade and symbolic usage of horse and palanquin drawn on conventions from the Chinese theatre. Another group performs a pantomime in the style of *Muou Xi* [Puppet Theatre] when the parade participants take a rest (Yao 1987:108). *Piying Xi* [Shadow-puppet Theatre] is mentioned by the author to emphasize his idea of staging one scene (Yao 1987:137-8).

A storyteller is employed in *Fu Qing Zhu*. Yao Yi-wei defends his choice in the preface stating that stories about the life of Fu Qing Zhu are so abundant that he has to select two important episodes and employs a storyteller to

bridge the time lapse. He acknowledges that this is a technique in epic drama and will not deny it if someone concludes he has been influenced by Bertolt Brecht. Yet he reminds readers that epic drama reveals exactly the characteristics of Chinese theatre and alludes to one traditional Chinese play, *Wang Bao Chuan*, as an example (Yao 1989:6-7). Another Yao play *Zho Bo Tao* addresses a crisis in life using the pure form of Peking Opera (Yao 1987:95).

As to the influence of the Theatre of the Absurd, the philosophy it bears seems to speak louder than the form it has established to Yao Yi-wei. Yet lack of communication first appears in *Lai Zi Feng Huang Zhen De Ren* [People from the Town Called Phoenix], when two characters preoccupied with their own concerns converse without adequate response (Yao 1987:28-30). *Yi Kou Xiang Zi* [A Suitcase] (1973), which was composed right after Yao's trip to the United States in 1972, shows a strong similarity to Waiting for Godot by Samuel Beckett. Its first scene starts with two tramps, the main characters of the play, resting by a tree to start their seemingly pointless discussion about who is to blame for their losing their former jobs. *Da Shu Shen Chuan Qi* [The Legend of the Spirit of a Giant Tree], written twelve years later, also uses a big tree as a backdrop for two tramps to narrate how they turned wealthy and then back into tramps again. *Fang Ke* [The Visitor] (1984) reminds readers of *The Chairs* by Eugene Ionesco, in which an old

couple in a dark room exchange seemingly meaningless remarks before the arrival of their visitor, Death. Among all the plays by Yao Yi-wei, *Fang Ke* [The Visitor] is the one with most modern spirit (Ma 1992:295).

Perhaps owing to lack of a more radical spirit, common among most Chinese intellectuals, Yao strives to provide explicit endings to his plays, whether providing death or hope for his characters. Since his bigger-than-life approach cannot be properly conveyed in the conventional realistic mode, Yao Yi-wei turns to traditional Chinese theatre and other Western theaters, especially the Theatre of the Absurd, to establish a style of his own. His skill may require further practice and his success may sometimes be hampered by causes beyond his control, such as social conditions and language differences, still Yao Yi-wei's endeavor to merge Western aesthetics and theatre with techniques found in traditional Chinese theatre and folklore deserves recognition and applause.

CHAPTER THREE

THE MODERN PLAYWRIGHT WHO CONTEMPLATES ROLE-PLAYING WITH A CHINESE MIND

MA SEN (1932-)

Background of Ma Sen

"A spear of worthless, helpless weed taciturnly grew up in a wasteland" is how Ma Sen describes his unhappy childhood experience in his conservative hometown where the residents seemed dull and ignorant, at best uncomplicated (Ma Sen 1992:7). Born on October 3, 1932, Ma Sen was a native of Qihe, Shandong, a province of eastern China. Only because of the chaos resulting from the wars could Ma leave himself from that backward environment and settle in Taiwan where he went to college. Owing to his self-described characteristics, such as "highly-motivated" and "self-disciplined," Ma Sen worked his way through college and in 1959 received a master's degree in Chinese Literature from the National Normal University in Taiwan. Afterwards he studied film and theatre at Institute des Hautes Etudes Cinemathographiques, Paris, and finished a thesis entitled *L'industrie cinemathographique chinoise apres la seconde*

guerre mondiale in 1963. Ma spent six years working in France and then taught at a university in Mexico before attending the University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada, where he was awarded a doctoral degree in sociology in 1977.

With "a passion for adventures" and "a strong will to control life," as he asserted, Ma often felt restless once his life became stable and comfortable. An inner restlessness urged him to pursue his teaching career at universities in various countries over the world, including Taiwan, France, Mexico, Canada, Great Britain and China. Not long after obtaining tenure at University of London, Ma grew weary of the nearly thirty years of self-imposed exile and resolved to return to his second homeland, Taiwan. Ma Sen currently teaches in the Chinese Department of Chenggong University, located in southern Taiwan, and is the editor-in-chief of *Unita*, a leading literary magazine in Taiwan. While Ma Sen considers being a college teacher and publishing academic and critical works fulfills his responsibility to society, he confesses his genuine passion is to write creatively.

Ma Sen, at one time a young poet, before long discovered he was more attracted to inventing plots and portraying characters. It is this to which he has devoted his life. His first attempt to write plays for the stage, however, did not start until his college years when he

forced himself to join a university theatre club to overcome shyness. He also wrote plays during his years in France. Unfortunately, all his early dramatic works are lost. Ma Sen's first surviving play, *Yi Wan Liang Zhou* [A Bowl of Cold Rice Soup] (1967), was written in Mexico and so were the following eight, including *Shi Zi* [Lion], *Cang Ying Yu Wen Zi* [The Fly and the Mosquito] (1967), *Ruo Zhe* [The Inferior], *Wa Xi* [A Frogs' Play], *Ye Bo Ge* [Wild Pigeons] and *Chao Sheng Zhe* [The Pilgrim]. He continued to pen *Zai Da Mang De Du Li* [In the Stomach of a Python] (1976) in Canada. In 1978, these nine one-act plays were collected and published under the title *Ma Sen Du Mu Ju Ji* [The Collected One-act Plays by Ma Sen]. *Hua Yu Jian* [The Flower and the Sword] (1977), *Jiao Se* [Roles] (1980) and *Jin Cheng* [Going to Town] (1982) were added in 1987 to the renamed edition of collected plays, *Jiao Se--Ma Sen Du Mu Ju Ji* [Roles: Collected One-Act Plays by Ma Sen]. Except for *Hua Yu Jian* [The Flower and the Sword] which is sometimes given a solo production, plays by Ma Sen are often performed together or along with plays by others due to their short length. His dramatic works are often performed on campuses and at student theatre festivals.

After having finished writing *Jin Cheng* [Going to Town] (1982), Ma Sen declared that he had difficulty breaking out of the style he had established in his playwriting. He then decided to devote his time and energy to other works,

largely novels and essays, and have them published in anthologies or as separate volumes in Taiwan, Hong Kong and China. Besides a collection of one-act plays, his books on theatre and film include: *Dong Fang Xi Ju, Xi Fang Xi Ju* [Eastern Theatre/Western Theatre] (1985), *Dian Ying, Zhong Guo, Meng* [Film/China/Dream] (1987), *Dang Dai Xi Ju* [Contemporary Theatre] (1991) and *Zhong Guo Xian Dai Xi Ju De Liang Da Xi Chao* [Two Western Waves on Modern Chinese Theatre] (1992). As indicated by their titles, the former three books are critiques on theatre and film while the latter is a historical overview of the two Western influences on modern Chinese theatre, namely the first one that caused the emergence of modern theatre in China at the turn of the twentieth century and the current one that initiated the revival of modern theatre in Taiwan. Besides the academic publications, translations and books mentioned above, Ma's other publications consist of two novels, five collections of short stories, three volumes of miscellaneous writings and seven books of essays on literature, culture and society. Ma Sen is most famous as a serious writer of novels and short stories.

Summaries of Plays by *Ma Sen*

Yi Wan Liang Zhou (1967)

[A Bowl of Cold Rice Soup]

The wife is so despondent after losing her only son three years ago that she does not even have the appetite for a bowl of warm rice soup. She and her husband recapitulate their last conversation with their son, in which the son defied the family tradition of accepting an arranged marriage and thus irritated this conservative old couple. Imagining a thing covered with black cloth on the long bench as their three-year-old son, they detail how the son brings hope to their family, how uncontrollable he becomes as an adult and how meaningless their life is now without the son.

Shi Zi [Lion]

Jia, a teacher, and Yi, a politician, talk about their old friends at an unexpected reunion; the last time they met was ten years ago. Surprised at learning of the death of "the Poet," a friend, Jia describes an inexplicable event he experienced around the time "the Poet" died. In that dream-like event, Jia followed the mysterious appearance of "the Poet" to a peculiar place where a lion is devouring the body of "the Poet." Yi argues that "the Poet" died in a subway.

Jia concludes that, due to the injustice in society, one must be a lion if one cannot be a poet and he wishes he could be as callous as Yi. The same inexplicable event occurs again and they both follow the call of "the Poet."

Cang Ying Yu Wen Zi (1967)

[The Fly and the Mosquito]

A fly and a mosquito argue which one of them is the member of the more superior race on earth. The fly states the race with the most staying power is the best while the mosquito claims the choice race should be the one that kills more people; they agree to meet one year later and whoever kills more will be the winner. As they meet they both complain that it is getting more difficult for them to kill now. While amazed at reports of massacres in human history, they also witness a war in which a robot terminates all humankind. After the fly and the mosquito defeat the robot, the fly claims victory because, unlike the mosquito, it will continue to survive even without a human life on earth.

Ruo Zhe [The Inferior]

Scene I: Though pleased at possessing all kinds of electric appliances, the wife desires to purchase a car for her hope is to die in a car accident. Yet her husband craves for farm land which, he believes, can add hope to his life. The husband asserts he is willing to die for farm

land and the wife strikes him to death with a hammer.

Scene II: The wife chooses to believe her husband has died in a car accident and envies her husband's luck. Under her persistent requests, the bandage-covered corpse explains that he actually committed suicide before the car accident due to the impossibility of obtaining farm land in modern society. Calling the corpse inferior, the wife turns to the baby in the crib avowing it will become a brave modern man and fulfill all her dreams, but the baby's face turns out to be identical to that of the husband.

Wa Xi [A Frogs' Play]

The pessimistic frog muses about the meaning of life, but the fun-loving frog suggests he look for pleasures instead. The greedy frog swindles the pessimistic frog's money and is later chased by the burglar frog. The dimwitted frog cannot comprehend the pessimistic frog's concern while his brother claims himself the smart frog for manipulating others. The jealous frog catches her husband, the fun-loving frog, flirting with the beauty frog. Under the instruction of the genius frog, who announces that a goal is needed to make them feel alive even after death, they happily smash their heads against a big tree they brought onto the stage. The genius frog declares he has fulfilled his mission of bringing them happiness and runs to the tree; he dies, but painfully.

Ye Bo Ge [Wild Pigeons]

The mother, who saw her son flying away as a wild pigeon one morning, blames it on the father for hunting wild pigeons. The father argues that a wild pigeon is better than a son; it does better in providing food for them in their old age. The mother is reluctant to cook a wild pigeon because she dreamt last night the wild pigeon she cooked turned out to be her son, yet the father insists as he is very hungry. After eating a wild pigeon with the father, the mother imagines another wild pigeon in the neighborhood may be her son coming back. Her joy vanishes as she looks at her husband, she shouts to the wild pigeon, "Don't come back! Don't come back! Fly! Fly! The further, the better!"

Chao Sheng Zhe [The Pilgrim]

A Buddhist monk travels westbound in a seemingly infinite desert in search of the paradise mentioned in the Sutras. Discouraged by the exhausting, futile journey, he endeavors to convince himself of the existence of this paradise which is the premise of the travails he chooses. A beggar, tired of the hardship in his life, follows the monk craving for an extravagant material life in paradise. The monk fears the beggar will hinder his journey and tells the beggar there is no material comfort in paradise. The beggar suspects the monk's motivation for this dissuasion. At the

end, the beggar, without realizing that the monk has died during a mirage, snatches the monk's belongings to resume the journey.

Zai Da Mang De Du Li (1976)

[In the Stomach of a Python]

A woman encounters a man in the timeless, boundless stomach of a python. The man challenges aggressively the woman's concepts of love and always responds with ambiguous answers for he insists that words are incomprehensible. The woman begins to believe she is in love with him, or rather, the man shaped in her imagination--she doesn't care. Yet the man insists there will always be a distance between them if love exists.

Hua Yu Jian (1977)

[The Flower and the Sword]

After wandering abroad for twenty years, the son, in his father's gown, returns to the place where he believes his father is buried to answer the call of his father he constantly hears. He also hopes this visit can ease his troubled mind for he has been tortured by the indecision of his love. What he recalls of his father is a flower in one hand and a sword in the other and now he gives the flower his father left him to a girl and the sword to her brother as tokens of his love. The person he encounters in front of

his father's tomb claims to be, at first, his mother, then his father, then the father's friend and then a ghost. Each of them discloses a different version of which one of his parents were having an affair with the friend and who is buried here. The son is bewildered and cries for guidance.

Jiao Se [Roles] (1980)

Five sexless people await their father(s) in front of a tomb, which gradually enlarges during the second half of the play.[1] They say their mother(s) tell(s) them their father(s) sleep(s) in that tomb and won't be back until dawn. Jia insists itself to be the mother for the other three and Yi the father, Yi believes otherwise; both of them are regarded as mothers by the rest. Jia and Yi assert that whoever does housework should be the mother and the father should be the one who does nothing but beats others. They find out they have taken turns to have children, share housework as well as the pregnancy of the third child. After Jia and Yi each slaps a child/person to death while trying to demonstrate how a father should act, they suddenly think the detached, sleepy surviving one, Wu, is their father. Wu soon loses its senses; Jia and Yi wonder if the day light will come.

Jin Cheng [Going to Town] (1982)

Two brothers, both young farmers, sit on a bench at the train station waiting to go to town. In the younger brother's bundle are hand-me-downs from his brother while the older brother' bundle contains hand-me-downs from their father. They enthusiastically talk about how life will be different from the detestable life at home with their father if they go to town, yet the thought of deserting their aging father makes them cry. They do not want to go home because they are convinced they will never have the chance to leave again. Trains come and go twice; they do not make a move, though they have train tickets in hand.

The Unspeakable Sin of Fathers:

the Recurrent Theme in Ma's Plays

Ma Sen's concern with the relationship and conflict between successive generations recurs in varying degrees in six out of eleven of his one-act plays. *Yi Wan Liang Zhou* [A Bowl of Cold Rice Soup] (1967) is a conversation between an old couple about their son who causes sadness in the family by choosing to marry an educated female colleague from the chamber of commerce where they work in defiance of the tradition of the arranged marriage. The old couple claim that "the kind of daughter-in-law this family needs is

an ordinary girl who is able to show filial piety to the parents of her husband and bear children to continue the family line" and whoever the son finds for himself is a "harlot" (Ma 1989:26-7). They have since lost their son after the day they had the argument, although it seems unclear whether the son leaves or dies. The husband urges the wife to have some warm rice soup but the wife has no appetite after their son is "gone;" she often lets her bowl of rice soup sit there till it is too cold to eat. Rice soup is what this old couple consume to continue their lives just as their son symbolizes the continuity of their lives. Having a son who does not come home is like a bowl of cold rice soup because both cannot serve their duties properly.

An immediate parallel is *Ye Bo Ge* [Wild Pigeons] which depicts an old couple who live on wild pigeons talking about their son who is said to have turned into a wild pigeon one morning and flew away. The son in the former play is referred to by his parents as "dead" or "gone" and the son in the latter one is said to "fly away." Here, "dead," "gone" and "flying away" should be taken symbolically rather than literally. Since there exist words in both Taiwanese and Chinese that criticize individualistic offspring as "having wings strong enough to fly away" in a negative tone, these two plays may be seen in this light. From the point of view of parents, offspring who "fly away," which means making decisions as independent individuals on their own

without concern for their responsibilities to their parents, are as bad as "dead." This concept may be hard for most Westerners to comprehend, but it remains true for those who are brought up in the traditional Chinese culture.

Through his choice of words the playwright endeavors to make the well-being of these two sons sound as ambiguous as possible and further reveals the ambiguity through disagreements between parents and their reluctance or inability to communicate with the son and each other. The ambiguity is necessary because the author means to portray the view of parents, not the viewpoint of the younger generation or the facts of the matter. Ma concentrates on the parents' impressions of the matters, their reactions, feelings and their ideas about traditions. Yet the effect it generates is not to praise the authority of parents but for the reader and the audience to identify with the younger generation who are never given a chance to appear or speak for themselves. The oppression of the orthodox thinking of parents goes on to such a degree that daughters either do not exist or are not parents' concern, and sons are often objects without faces or words.

The dialogues of both plays center on the "ungrateful" sons while none of them detail how those parents nourished or cared for their offspring. It can never be known what kind of parents they truly are unless their children speak, but sons can be called unappreciated if their deeds do not

match those that their parents did for their grandparents. However, such a comparison or criticism between generations cannot exist without the support of strong family ties and the ultimate respect for ancestors. While the old couple in *Yi Wan Liang Zhou* [A Bowl of Cold Rice Soup] are recalling the growing up process of their son to the age when the son decides to start his own family, they also tell us their idea of family ties which represents tradition in the Chinese family:

> Husband: He is going to live his own life.
>
> Wife: How can he abandon us to live his own life?
>
> Husband: Children are different nowadays.
>
> Wife: Will his life be comfortable without us?
>
> Husband: Of course not. That harlot will devour him alive!
>
> Wife: Sure. [She] will certainly devour him.
>
> Husband: Even if that harlot cannot devour him, the bastards born by the harlot will devour him alive.
>
> Wife: Sure. [They] will certainly devour him alive.
>
> Husband: Even if those bastards cannot devour him, without us, he will not have a good life.
>
> Wife: Even if he has a good life, a good life without us cannot be a good life! (Ma 1987:36-7)

While the assertion that the son will be devoured by members in his own nuclear family remains a vicious prediction in the old couple's conversation, the practice of devouring offspring has literally and traditionally existed in this family. The husband utters that in his family offspring never left their parents and they fed their fathers with the flesh on their legs when the fathers became ill, which, they believe to be an honorable way to show filial piety and to please their ancestors. The image of parents devouring their offspring continues to be exploited and enlarged in *Ye Bo Ge* [Wild Pigeons], in which the son is transformed into the food to nourish his parents. Compared with the fathers in these two plays, the mothers are inclined to be more sympathetic to their sons, yet they submit themselves to the patriarchal authority that perpetuates the harsh tradition as all virtuous mothers do in the Chinese culture. From the perspective of parents, sons are never seen as individuals but roles whose supposed function is to carry on the family line and tradition and provide for their parents. They are condemned if they fail to carry out these duties.

Jin Cheng [Going to Town] (1982) looks at the conflict between successive generations from a reverse point of view. The two brothers at the train station are aware of their responsibilities as sons and their acceptance of the orthodox stops them from taking the action needed to realize

their own ambitions. While parents unquestionably require their sons to dutifully fulfill their traditional roles, sons have to struggle with the dilemma of whether to fit in the rigid roles as expected or to rid themselves of these traditions, so as to be free. Therefore, rather than fearing the restrictions their father would impose on them, the two brothers actually fear that they will be doomed to be followed by guilt once they decide to be themselves. No matter how well they justify themselves for leaving their father, they still feel guilty. To relieve themselves of the guilt they would have to abandon their moral code. The brothers are like the bundles they carry with them which contain nothing that belongs to them but worn, unfitted things handed down from predecessors. The older brother says to the younger one, "Whatever Father does not want, he gives it to me; whatever I do not want, I give it to you" (Ma 1987:238). The bothers are successors of a tradition they do not desire yet cannot get away from because they are products of this very tradition they want to escape.

The son in *Hua Yu Jian* [The Flower and the Sword] (1977) was sent abroad so he would not discover the family tragedy. Troubled and overwhelmed by his feelings of love and hatred, symbolized by the flower and the sword he has inherited from his father, the son returns to the place where he believes his father is buried and hopes to find a solution to his torment. Coming back in his father's gown

after twenty years of wandering in order to solve the myth of the flower and the sword indicates the influence his father still has over him. Even the divisions of time, distance and environment cannot change this inheritance of thoughts and emotions. Yet the past is an obscure history which not only cannot be accurately reconstructed, but becomes fragments to be related from various perspectives. The person the son encounters in front of the tomb turns from his mother to his father, then their friend and finally to a ghost. Without being able to identify his parents and to reassemble a meaningful past, the helpless inheritor is left without means to unburden himself of the tradition that is carried in his blood. It will puzzle him for the rest of his life.

The husband in *Ruo Zhe* [The Inferior] yearns to realize the dream of his father to possess a land that grows plants, a dream nearly impossible to be realized in modern times according to the author. His wife, on the other hand, idolizes all the inventions and electric equipment of modern life with such a zeal that she believes dying in a car accident is the most glorious way to end one's life. Knowing that her husband has committed suicide because of his hatred of inhuman modern life, the wife calls him "the inferior" and waits for their child to grow up like her worshiping modern technology. The face of the baby, however, is revealed to be like that of the deceased

husband, which implies the inevitable mother-son argument that will come in the future--the continuity of the desires of the father and, for the son, the everlasting frustration of being unable to accomplish these desires.

With or without their appearances on stage, all fathers in the five plays discussed above exert repulsive pressure on their young. They may be ordinary, harsh or even barbaric, but the weight they impose on the shoulders of their sons is overwhelming whether they are aware of it or not. In *Jiao Se* [Roles] (1980), children yearn for oppressive father(s) so much that they become masochists. The characters are impatiently waiting for their father(s) and one of them laments, "Father! Father! Please come back soon! It is terrible to live in a world without father(s)! Everyone is so eager to cook meals, do laundry and bear children; no one comes to lay a finger on you!" (Ma 1987:15). Because none of the characters agree to assume the traditionally tyrannical role of the father, the order of this miniature society is thus lost and one can no longer recognize who they are. Without knowing what roles they are supposed to play, they lack motivation to act; they either sleep or passively wait for the unidentified father(s) throughout the play.

Apparently the author has mixed feelings toward traditions, especially traditions in the Chinese family, and uses the image of a father as the symbol of authority as

well as the protector of traditions. Ma at first describes fathers as the representations of the oppressive family traditions in *Yi Wan Liang Zhou* [A Bowl of Cold Rice Soup] (1967) and *Ye Bo Ge* [Wild Pigeons]. Then in *Ruo Zhe* [The Inferior], *Hua Yu Jian* [The Flower and the Sword] (1977) and *Jin Cheng* [Going to Town] (1982), he seems to start feeling that a person is not much more than a dot in a long family line; one cannot easily and clearly separate oneself from the traditions that one wants to avoid. The love-hate relationship reaches its peak in *Jiao Se* [Roles] (1980) when the oppression by the father(s) becomes the lost order that everyone longs for. The characters by Ma are like birds brought up as pets; they at first condemn the cages that deprive them of their freedom, then they doubt their ability to fly and, as the worst nightmare comes true, they do not know what to do with the freedom in hand because they cannot fly. Perhaps the bird will finally learn to fly if Ma Sen continues to write plays.

Ma Sen claims that he would rather "avoid direct didacticism in his creative writing to contemplate more fundamental questions of life: such as the mystery of life and death, the struggle in love, hatred and desires, the search for self and identity and the complications in interpersonal relationships" (Ma 1992:21). His other five plays, with no parents mentioned, continue to examine other questions of life for which no easy answers can be found.

Shi Zi [Lion] deals with integrity and survival, *Cang Ying Yu Wen Zi* [The Fly and the Mosquito] (1967) the price of the so-called sense of superiority, *Wa Xi* [A Frogs' Play] the definition of happiness and *Zai Da Mang De Du Li* [In the Stomach of a Python] (1976) romantic love. *Chao Sheng Zhe* [The Pilgrim] is about a beggar who follows a Buddhist monk to search for heaven and their motivations for the heaven-searching may not be as different as they appear. These are topics that have puzzled Eastern and Western thinkers and none of the five plays provide any definite answers.

Ma Sen believes that nowadays a writer does not necessarily know better than the reader; a writer is merely a person who is willing to represent or share her/his feelings, experiences and thoughts. Readers equal writers as adventurers in the wilderness of life (Ma 1992:21). For Ma Sen, writing plays is a medium he utilizes to relieve himself of the compulsion to communicate. He speaks his mind and invites readers and audiences to ponder with him on the doubts he has about life. His pleasure is to find that he happens to speak for them at the same time.

Characteristics in Ma's Plays

While Ma Sen indicates that all his plays are written between the 1960s and the early 1980s and arranges them

chronologically in the republished edition, many of them lack the specific date they were written. It seems that the playwright never expected the public to pay much attention to nor would there be any influence of his dramatic works when he composed them in foreign countries, mainly Mexico. He did know, however, that they would be printed in a minor newspaper in Taiwan. Knowing that there was little chance of his plays being produced at that time, Ma Sen daringly set free his imagination and wrote with no specific audience in mind. He participated in theatrical activities in college and further education and experiences in Western countries helped to familiarize him with the techniques and movements of Western theatre. He accordingly exercised his knowledge of Western theatre to give his perception of the world as a Chinese in the twentieth century. Moreover, being far away from his homeland enabled him to maintain a distinct view of Chinese culture that became a powerful attack on it.

> During those five years in Mexico, I consecutively wrote more than ten one-act plays, each expressed in a distinct manner and all definitely different from traditional Chinese spoken dramas written since the May 4 movement. (Ma 1992:268-9)

These are the words the playwright declares in the preface of his republished collected plays. Ma Sen's dramatic works are all one-act plays with minimum stage design. Conflicts

between generations create crises in his plays, which, with open endings, may kindle further discussions in readers and audiences. Yet plots appear less important because the focus of Ma Sen's plays is, rather than the development of a event, the representation of one selected aspect of an issue. The nature of Ma's dramatic works and his personal background draws the playwright nearer to Western theater, especially the Theatre of the Absurd. As Lin Ke-huan points out, the ever growing tomb in *Jiao Se* [Roles] (1980) reminds readers of the swelling corpse in Amedee or How to Get Rid of It by Eugene Ionesco, the black-box stage in *Zai Da Mang De Du Li* [In the Stomach of a Python] (1976) of No Exit by Jean-Paul Satre (Ma 1987:287). The two brothers sit on a bench, the only prop on stage, idly waiting for the train without taking any action in *Jin Cheng* [Going to Town] (1982) also suggests a strong connection with Waiting for Godot by Samuel Beckett.

Abundant metaphors are utilized by Ma Sen to create levels of meanings to enrich his plays. First, titles of Ma Sen's plays do not always relate to the plays themselves directly, which, further provides depth and a variety of possible interpretations to these short plays. The bowl of cold rice soup in *Yi Wan Liang Zhou* [A Bowl of Cold Rice Soup] (1967) does not relate directly to the major concern of the old couple in the play, yet the image of cold rice soup stresses the feeling of the parents about losing their

son. In *Shi Zi* [Lion], the closest thing to a lion in the play is the occasional cries of an invisible beast. "Lion" serves as the image of inhuman forces that is contrasted to the characters' idealist friend, nicknamed "the Poet," whom one of them believed to be devoured by a lion in Africa. The background of *Zai Da Mang De Du Li* [In the Stomach of a Python] (1976) can be truly in the stomach of a python, or any boundless, unknown environment of the world in which we live. The flower and the sword in *Hua Yu Jian* [The Flower and the Sword] (1977) symbolize any pair of feelings or materials that seem opposite but often coexist like Yin and Yang. The son in *Ye Bo Ge* [Wild Pigeons] becomes a wild pigeon, his parents daily nutrition, to emphasize the parents' distorted definition of a son as merely a food provider. A fly's indiscriminate taste of food and a mosquito's thirst of blood are utilized in *Cang Yin Yu Wen Zi* [The Fly and the Mosquito] (1967) to illustrate the greed in humankind. *Wa Xi* [A Frogs' Play] functions as an allegory on the meaning of happiness.

The most significant characteristic in Ma Sen's plays is his invention of characters of whom none have a specific given name as a real person. This characteristic is demonstrated first in the two personalized animal plays, *Cang Yin Yu Wen Zi* [The Fly and the Mosquito] (1967) and *Wa Xi* [A Frogs' Play]. In the former play, characters are identified and described according to their nature as actual

insects; in the latter, according to their invented natures as the playwright formulates differences by attaching adjectives to each, such as "the jealous frog" and "the pessimistic frog." This feature now appears as the most familiar technique seen in parables and children's literature and is further developed in the following plays.

Those human characters who are nameless in the other nine plays by Ma Sen are what deserve attention. In Chinese, code names for characters in *Jiao Se* [Roles] (1980) and *Shi Zi* [Lion], such as *Jia* and *Yi*, are like A and B in English. The other characters created by Ma Sen are all referred to according to their social functions in the family, such as father and mother, husband and wife or brothers. By not providing his characters with names of their own, Ma seems to deliberately reject them as individuals.

> In *Yi Wan Liang Zhou* [A Bowl of Cold Rice Soup] (1967), the characters are nameless but identified as husband and wife, so are they in *Ruo Zhe* [The Inferior]. The characters in *Ye Bo Ge* [Wild Pigeons] are marked as father and mother and in *Zai Da Mang De Du Li* [In the Stomach of a Python] (1976) as man and woman. [I did not notice this characteristic] until 1977, when I used "father," "mother" and "son" as code names for my characters in *Hua Yu Jian* [The Flower and the Sword], then I

> became aware that the quality I emphasize in my characters is the relationship between/among them. In other words, what is revealed through the characters in my dramatic works is the "roles" they play in their world. (Ma 1992:156)

Having became aware of this, Ma Sen wrote *Jiao Se* [Roles] in 1980 to emphasize the importance of the idea of "roles" and use it as the title of the republished volume of his collected one-act plays.

The idea of defining characters as roles according to their social functions serves as a critical key to understanding the dramatic works by Ma and the techniques he uses to represent his characters. Owing to his special experience of living in various cultures and countries, Ma learned to see beyond different colors of skins, languages and customs and concluded that people are all made of flesh and blood and share similar desires. "Thus my attention goes beyond phenomena to capture things that are more direct and real" (Ma 1989:17). The word "role" originally belongs to the terminology of theatre; Ma believes when this term is applied to real life, it means a selected aspect or attitude one shows in front of certain people just as actors play roles under the conditions provided by playwrights, directors and other factors. This shows the complexity of every person because each has various aspects. For example, A female can be a daughter, a sister, a wife, a mother, a

professional, a friend and so on; she would reveal different aspects of herself under specific circumstances.

> Our understanding of a person is through our relationship with that person. The perception of a son to his father is dissimilar from the son's mother to the same person as a husband. The image of this person is, furthermore, envisioned differently by his friends and by his son and wife. All the differences come from the fact that the roles one plays are different. One may argue that this is merely an subjective observation, not an objective matter. The problem is that no objective matter can be captured if not through this kind of subjective observations. (Ma 1992:157-8).

To Ma Sen, the best understanding of a person, the closest thing to the true identity of a person, is through the accumulation of every subjective observation.

Ironically, amid Ma's argument about the diverse aspects in every being, he also suggests the non-existence of individuality.

> One's personality is basically the collection of the roles one plays in the world. If we ask about one's personality after eliminating all the characteristics in the diverse roles one plays, "nothing" will be the answer. (Ma 1992:157)

Apparently, to Ma, a person is a vessel that contains all the roles one acts in one's life and a name to a person is no more than a serial number to a machine, which illuminates Ma's purpose of not providing his characters with names but roles they adopt under given circumstances. The author asserts that social relationships before the nineteenth century not only can no longer appropriately describe people living in the highly industrialized twentieth century, a time when the atmosphere of alienation prevails and people can be condensed to merely several major roles in interpersonal relationships. He says, "my characters do not have personalities. Although sometimes there are sexes, vocations or ages mentioned, they are not significant. The background [of a play] is not important, either is time" (Ma 1989:28). Ma Sen is inclined to ignore other qualities in his characters and emphasizes role-playing which, he believes, is an indispensable element in all cultures and societies.

Nevertheless, Ma proclaims that mechanic and monotonous repetition can be avoided despite the limited basic roles available in the real world because how one performs her/his role(s) is subject to two conditions: how one defines the role and one's ability to realize it. First of all, one cannot help but define roles according to the cultural codes and practices one perceives. Moreover, the variation of one's ability to bring the definitions of these roles into

realization will result in disparate performances. Ma contends that both conditions are actually learning processes whose foundation is built in one's childhood. According to Ma, parents function as the primary role models for most people, so the roles of parents can be said to be the origin of all roles in life. The influences of parents imprint so profoundly in one's mind that the parents' concepts of their other roles besides being parents will also effect one in defining the roles assigned to oneself. Since one's ability is the collection of imitations, mainly of the behaviors of parents, the roles of parents determine one's ability to fulfill one's roles as well.

This line of reasoning may lead to the conclusion that, though variations of interpretations of roles are allowed in a larger scale, every generation is incapable of producing that which is too great a departure from the previous generation. On the one hand, one tends to accept parents' concepts of matters and imitate their actions; on the other hand, parents may have developed the same expectation about their offspring and thus prevent them from being too creative. This perhaps explains the struggle and frustration in Ma's plays when those of the younger generation long for a new world of their own.

The playwright has invented several phrases for the techniques he employs to illustrate his theory of roles. *"Jiao Se Ji Zhong"* [role centralization] means to focus on

selected major roles in human relationships, especially those of parents, offspring and married couples; they are usually major characters in most of his plays. *"Jiao Se Nong Suo"* [role concentration] is to concentrate on a specific role to such a degree that the character exists only to fulfill this aspect of her/his life in the play. For instance, the author concentrates solely on the parents' attitude toward their son in *Ye Bo Ge* [Wild Pigeons] and he shows no interest in what kind of persons the parents really are. Another phrase, *"Jiao Se Fan She"* [role reflection] refers to the technique that employs seemingly unrelated roles to reflect other roles. The man and the woman who meet each other by chance in *Zai Da Mang De Du Li* [In the Stomach of a Python] (1976) may reflect the roles of lovers or a married couple and may reflect various roles to different audiences and readers. Increasing the complexity and ambiguity of those reflections can sometimes advance an interest in supplementary inquiry and analysis by the reader or the audience.

There are two types of *"Jiao Se Cuo Luan"* [role confusion] as the playwright applies this writing technique to his plays. The characters in *Jiao Se* [Roles] (1980) belong to the first type of "role confusion," those who are uncertain of what roles they are supposed to play and therefore allow their roles to become interchangeable. An example of the other type of "role confusion" can be found

in *Yi Wan Liang Zhou* [A Bowl of Cold Rice Soup] (1967) when the husband suddenly acts like the son and the wife talks as the mother without the son's actual presence. It happens when the characters mistakenly assume roles other than the ones initially assigned to them at the beginning of the play. The last phrase is *"Jiao Se Jian Yue"* [role concision] which describes the technique in *Hua Yu Jian* [The Flower and the Sword] (1977) when the ghost is also the father, the mother and their lover. "Role confusion" sometimes includes "role concision" as in *Yi Wan Liang Zhou* [A Bowl of Cold Rice Soup] (1967) when the couples take turns to assume the role of their son and therefore makes the appearance of the son unnecessary. Yet this is more an afterthought than a rule. Ma Sen explains that those writing techniques or terms are mostly afterthoughts for he tends to follow his intuition as an artist in creative writing. He also mentions that these techniques may not be suitable for other playwrights when their characters are not "roles" as his.

There is no noticeable technique of Eastern theatre utilized in plays by Ma Sen who admits he "started writing plays under the influences of Realism, Symbolism, Expressionism and the Theatre of the Absurd" (Ma 1989:7). His plotless narratives and analysis of the function of characters especially illustrate the influence of postwar Western theatre; they are exciting breakthroughs in modern

Chinese theatre. As a modern Chinese intellectual who is attracted to Western theatre, Ma attempts to assimilate the two major cultures by eliminating the elements that produce differences and alienation in modern audiences and focuses on the feelings that most people may experience, due to a similar human situation or social structure like the family regardless of their cultures. Unfortunately, there are relatively few basic human situations that can be expressed in such a simple and general way, which may be what confines Ma to one-act plays, and causes him difficulty in expanding his theories and techniques and therefore ends his career as a playwright.

Still Ma has his own particular style because of his colorful images and his special angle of perceiving the world due to his experiences, especially his background as a Chinese man who has seen both the Eastern and the Western worlds in the twentieth century. He often argues that many modern Western theatre practitioners are inspired by the traditional Eastern actor theatre which helps them enrich their theatrical creations. Theatre practitioners in Chinese societies should also learn from Western playwrights in order to enhance literary value in the Chinese theatre he believes. Ma Sen completely embraces Western theatre in the ways of stage design, narratives and techniques and strives to have drama classified as a respected literary genre. However, his arguments and concerns are genuinely Chinese.

Although he has not further explored his talent as a playwright and may be restrained by being too much of a theorist, Ma Sen points a way for future playwrights to write for their audiences, at least the audience of their generation, both of whom cannot help being universal citizens due to the advances in mass communication and free these future playwrights from the conventions of traditional Chinese theatre.

Endnotes

1. This play especially demonstrates the characteristics of Chinese as a language. First, there is no "he" or "she" in Chinese, so the reader cannot decide the sex of a character unless the writer points it out. There is also no plurality in nouns and verbs in Chinese. Ma purposely uses code names such as Jia and Yi, like A and B in English, to avoid indicating gender to his characters. In addition, the non-plural quality of this language helps him to leave the question of whether those characters share the same pair of parents unanswered.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE PLAYWRIGHT WHO WRITES ABOUT MODERN LIFE IN TAIWAN THROUGH THE FORM OF COMEDY: *HWANG MEI-SHU* (1928-)

The Personal History of Hwang Mei-shu

"My family had crawled to work in the field for generations," Hwang Mei-shu wrote at the beginning of the preface to the posthumous book by his brother. Hwang's background as the son of farmers not only affects his way of viewing the world but also enables him to speak for many people in Taiwan who share memories of rural life and are bewildered by the forever changing modern world. He recognizes that his audiences are in Taiwn and they share the same fate as residents on the island at a time of transition regardless of where they come from. These are the major qualities that differentiate Hwang Mei-shu from other playwrights. His works reveal he is one of the first theatre participants in Taiwan to focus the major concern of his plays on modern life in Taiwan.

Hwang Mei-shu was born on February 25, 1928 in Leqin, Zhejiang, a province on the east coast of China. His

grandfather was an illiterate farmer like the majority of the Chinese at that time and neither of his parents attended school. Although his father taught himself a handful of Chinese characters and was elected as the head of their village of some twenty families, Hwang wrote that his father still "had difficulty writing his own name" (Hwang Mei-shu 1980:155). The playwright's brother, nine years his senior, was the first one in the village who went to high school. However, instead of receiving applause, his father had to endure ridicule from friends and relatives for selling a part of his land and the only cow he had to support his older son in high school. It was considered a disgrace in a Chinese family if the offspring sells anything their ancestors hand down to them.

Still Hwang Mei-shu followed his brother's steps and became the second in their village to go to high school. When he came to Taiwan in the fall of 1949, his brother was the only family member on this island. He afterwards got a bachelor degree in English Literature from now Tamkang University which is located in north Taiwan. Hwang Mei-shu continued his study accordingly at the National Normal University in Taiwan, University of London in Great Britain and, in the 1970s, received a doctorate degree in Theatre from Florida State University in the United States. He currently teaches dramatic literature and theories in both the English department and the Graduate Institute of Western

Languages and Literature of Tamkang University and at other universities in Taiwan.

His first full-length play, The Fool Who Wins an Ass, was originally written in English in 1973 while he studied at Florida State University; its first performance was on February 14, 1973 at Florida State University. He himself later translated the play into Chinese as *Sha Nv Xu* [The Indiscreet Son-in-Law] and was published in *Zhong Wai Wen Xue* [Zhongwai Literature] in December, 1973; the Chinese version was first produced in the Experimental Theatre Festival (see Chapter Two) on July 30, 1980. Between 1977 and 1978, Hwang wrote four one-act plays: *She Yu Gui* [The Snake and the Ghost], *Zi Sha Zhe De Du Bai* [The Suicide's Soliloquy], *Nan Ke Hou Ren* [The Nan-ko Descent] and *Ming Ming Li Xian Ji* [The Adventure of Ming-ming]; all of them were published in 1979. *Xin De Chuan Qi* [The Legend of the Heart] was also published in *Zhong Wai Wen Xue* [Zhongwai Literature] 7.9 in February, 1978. It was a screenplay about the controversy of securing the current sort of heart implant and a critique of the various types of persons willing to donate that organ.

The 1980s has been the most important and productive era for Hwang Mei-shu as a playwright; many of his major plays were written during this time. *Mu Ban Chuang Yu Xi Meng Si* [The Wooden Bed and Simmons Bed] was published in *Xian Dai Wen Xue* [Modern Literature] in November, 1981 and

was first performed in Taipei on July 4, 1981. *Qi You Ci Li* [Good Heavens] was a revised version of *Sha Nv Xu* [The Indiscreet Son-in-Law] and published in *Zhong Wai Wen Xue* [Zhongwai Literature] 10.5 in October, 1981. This play was first produced at Tan Kuo University in the Republic of Korea on May 6, 1983. *Yang Shi Ren De Xi Ju* [The Comedy of Mr. Allman Yang] (1983) was also published in *Zhong Wai Wen Xue* [Zhongwai Literature] 12.2 in May, 1983 and then performed by students of the English Department of Tamkang University on May 7, 1983 to participate in the seventeenth World Drama Festival in Taipei. Hwang Mei-shu was rewarded the prize of *Wu San-lien Arts Awards for Distinguished Achievement* in 1984 for *Yang Shi Ren De Xi Ju* [The Comedy of Mr. Allman Yang] (1983). He then wrote a play for children's theatre, *Ping Guo De Xi Ju* [The Comedy of the Apple], which was published in 1985. *Kong Long Qu Shi* [Cathay Visions] was written in English in the United States during his 1986 visit and later he translated it into Chinese. The English version of this play was produced by the Department of Theatre Arts of Mankato State University in 1986. Hwang Mei-shu has now written one full-length play in the 1990s, *Shan He Lian* [Oh, My Native Mountains and Rivers!], which was published in *Zhong Wai Wen Xue* [Zhongwai Literature] 19.12 in 1991. All full-length plays except the last one, *Shan He Lian* [Oh, My Native Mountains and Rivers!] (1991), are republished in *Yang Shi Ren De Xi Ju: Huang Mei*

Shu Xi Ju Ji [The Comedy of Mr. Allman Yang: Collected Plays by Hwang Mei-shu] in 1988.

Besides being a playwright-director-theatre critic-drama professor, Hwang Mei-shu contributes to theatre in Taiwan also through his translations. So far as his English-Chinese translations are concerned, in 1970, he translated The Just Assassins by Albert Camus as well as The Countess Cathleen, Cathleen Ni Houlihan, The Pot of Broth, Deirdre, The Player Queen, The Cat and the Moon and Purgatory by W. B. Yeats. He then translated Smiles of a Summer Night and The Seventh Seal by Ingmar Bergman in 1973, I'm Really Here by Jean Claude Van Itallie in 1977, Man of La Mancha by Dale Wasserman in 1980, Humulus the Mute by Jean Anouilh and Jean Aurenche in 1981, The Harmfulness of Tobacco by Anton Chekhov in 1985 and King Lear by William Shakespeare in 1987.

In addition to several plays of his own which were originally written in English, such as The Fool Who Wins an Ass and Cathay Visions, Hwang also participates in making contemporary Chinese plays available to Western readers. In 1978, Hwang translated *Yi Kou Xiang Zi* [A Suitcase] by Yao Yi-wei from Chinese to English as The Chest.

Books on drama and other fields by Hwang Mei-she include *Mu Qian Mu Hou, Tai Shang Tai Xia* [Before and Behind the Curtain/On and off the Stage] (1980), *Lun Xi Shuo Ju* [On Theatre and Drama] (1981), *Xiang Ya Ta Wai* [Outside of the

Ivory Tower] (1981), *Wu Tai Ju* [The Legitimate Stage] (1985) and essays in either English or Chinese in periodicals. The first two books were used in *Oxford Guide to World Theatre* by Daniel S.P. Yang while introducing the theatre in Taiwan.

Summaries of Plays by *Hwang Mei-shu*

Sha Nv Xu [The Indiscreet Son-in-Law] (1973)

Dasha [big fool] acquires this nickname for he questions everything others take for granted. His wealthy parents arrange a marriage for him with a beautiful daughter of a landlord, but the servants embezzle all the money after his parents die. Meanwhile, his father-in-law's sixtieth birthday is coming. His wife and her sisters will bring their husbands (one is an arrogant government official and the other a farmer) to attend this event. The landlord asks his sons-in-law questions and Dasha is unsatisfied with those ready-made answers, but none of them can provide different ones. The landlord then holds a poem-making contest and offers a donkey as a reward for the winner. Favored by the landlord because of his honesty and simplicity, Dasha unexpectedly earns the donkey.

Mu Ban Chuang Yu Xi Meng Si (1981)

[The Wooden Bed and the Simmons Bed]

Act I: A rich urban girl whose father plans to purchase a mountain for an investment in tourism meets a young aboriginal hunter in the depth of woods and asks him to leave his dangerous family business and go with her. She lures him with the material comforts of the city and a Simmons bed is among the temptations utilized. Being content with his wooden bed, the simple-minded hunter cannot comprehend why city people enjoy Simmons beds.

Act II: Mocked by passers-by and overwhelmed with differences in the city, the hunter starts missing the rural life he led. The urban girl exhibits her fondness for him.

Act III: This act is mimed. Accompanied by the mixture of the wedding march and street noises, the hunter replaces his wooden bed with a Simmons bed. The hunter and the girl build around their Simmons bed a tent that looks like a modern structure. As their movements get more stiff, the girl covers the hut with money brought back by the hunter and they are buried under the hut when it finally caves in.

Qi You Ci Li [Good Heavens] (1981)

This is a revised version of *Sha Nv Xu* [The Indiscreet Son-in-Law]. Two middle-aged stage hands are added to comment on episodes of the play during the intervals and

make comparisons between the ancient time of the play and the modern time of this production. They are first inspired by Dasha's arranged marriage and talk about free love nowadays. After Dasha's paradoxical questions, they criticize that today's children cannot think. One of them even protests to one of the characters, the arrogant government official, that it is unfair for modern people to take more time to complete their education yet with lesser accomplishments. The relationship between modernization and life is also touched upon following two servants' conversation about happiness. In this version, Dasha endeavors to reason out answers of his own to substitute those he feels unsatisfied with. After the play, the two stage hands talk about going home but do not make a move before the curtain falls.

Yang Shi Ren De Xi J (1983)

[The Comedy of Mr. Allman Yang]

This is a free adaptation of the renowned morality play, Everyman.

Prologue: The play starts with words of an announcer who later comments upon, expands and finally concludes the play. The Voice, disturbed by disorders in the world, sends three Soul-catchers to summon all humankind to be tried in Hades. The Soul-catchers solve this challenge by settling to bring a Mr. *Yang Shi-ren*, a homonym of those who are in

the living world, and representatives from all walks of life. After ceaseless pleading, Yang is granted a three-day respite; the idea of bringing witnesses with him flashes into his mind.

Scene I: The well-to-do Yang seeks help from his fair-weather friends who, one by one, find excuses to leave when they realize that Yang's request is an invitation to Hades.

Scene II: Yang's wife does not care where he goes as long as he leaves her his money since he is seldom at home. His parents dismiss his notion as absurd. His brother is consumed by his own thoughts and does not listen to Yang.

Scene III: The dead brought by the three Soul-catchers as examples are given hearings by the Soul-catchers.

Epilogue: The Voice is so fascinated with inventions mentioned by Yang that it leaves to do research on modern products and sends the reluctant Yang back to life.

Kong Long Qu Shi [Cathay Visions] (1986)

Prologue: An old man tries to grasp contrasts between the East and the West because, according to his dream, there will be people telling him about his deceased wife and some of them are Westerners. A Chinese scholar arrives first with an empty cage.

Scene I: The scholar explains to the old man and his family about predestined relationships in Buddhism. His empty cage is used to illustrate that the void can sometimes

be heavy. A maiden comes out of the scholar's mouth and asks to bring her cousin here as the scholar falls asleep after the feast she prepared.

Scene II: The maiden's cousin turns out to be the American Indian hero, Hiawatha. He rejects the maiden's proposal; his wife, Minnehaha, follows him here and grows furious with the maiden.

Scene III: The fight between the maiden and Minnehaha is interrupted by the unexpected Faustus, who is later required to solve their dilemma. After untiring exertions of interpreting love and marriage from various perspectives, Faustus places the maiden, Minnehaha and Hiawatha onto an invisible boat to untangle their own problem themselves.

Scene IV: The old man's family continue discussing the issue of love with Helen of Troy and Faustus joins them afterwards. Many stories found in Chinese history and Chinese literary quotations are employed.

Epilogue: All the Westerners disappear and the scholar and the maiden claim they did not experience but dreamt about what the family saw.

Shan He Lian (1991)

[Oh, My Native Mountains and Rivers!]

Act I Scene I: A modernized Chinese God of Earth encounters Jesus who comes to Taiwan to find *Yu Gong* [the Foolish Old Man], an ancient Chinese famous for his

determined effort to remove two mountains, who may help humankind to rebuild Eden on earth. The God of Earth reminds Jesus that one day in heaven is ten years on earth, so Jesus misses changes in Taiwan for thirty years during his trip.

Act I Scene II: The God of Earth escorts Jesus to witness a family in Taiwan become "modernized" after a robbery. He also satirizes confusions and confrontations in Taiwanese history and contemporary life.

Act II: The God of Earth resumes his delineation of the transformations in attitudes in Taiwan due to economic growth. A group of grade school students further demonstrate the depictions the God of Earth makes.

Epilogue: After a brief report of the progress of Taiwanese society to Jesus, the God of Earth is puzzled by the appearance of Christ, who look strangely similar to Jesus yet has a different idea of Eden. He invites the audience to figure it out for themselves.

The Nostalgia to Innocence:

Recurrent Theme in Hwang's Plays

Although Hwang Mei-shu has written twelve plays, five of them are one-act plays that he does not include in his *Yang Shi Ren De Xi Ju: Huang Mei Shu Xi Ju Ji* [The Comedy of

Mr. Allman Yang: Collected Plays by Hwang Mei-shu], one is a screenplay and another is a simple narrative and has a later revised version. Therefore the discussions of his plays in this and following sections will only concentrate on five selected full-length plays for the stage that can fully display and represent his style. They are *Mu Ban Chuang Yu Xi Meng Si* [The Wooden Bed and the Simmons Bed] (1981), *Qi You Ci Li* [Good Heavens] (1981), *Yang Shi Ren De Xi Ju* [The Comedy of Mr. Allman Yang] (1983), *Kong Long Qu Shi* [Cathay Visions] (1986) and *Shan He Lian* [Oh, My Native Mountains and Rivers!] (1991).

When Hwang Mei-shu was rewarded with the prize of Wu San-lien Arts Awards for Distinguished Achievement in 1984 for *Yang Shi Ren De Xi Ju* [The Comedy of Mr. Allman Yang] (1983), the commentary given by the Committee of the Awards goes as follows:

> Prof. Hwang Mei-shu has a tendency to investigate the manners and the meaning of modern life through the form of comedy, and to explore the values and ideas of humanism by the skilled application of irony. . . . His plays aim at satirizing the precarious nature of the human mind. (Wu Yu-yun 1989: 2)

If only one sentence is allowed to describe the major theme of plays by Hwang Mei-shu, it should be "to ridicule the absurd modern/city world with a shade of nostalgia." This

theme repeats in various manners in all five plays under discussion. Hwang Mei-shu seems to encourage his reader and audience to appreciate the wholeness of the world as the Creator made it: a natural, simple world.

The playwright places a considerable weight on the significance of Nature in rural life and displays a certain tone of dislike toward city life. In *Mu Ban Chuang Yu Xi Meng Si* [The Wooden Bed and the Simmons Bed] (1981), the mountain area is where to find butterflies, "the fragrance of Nature," and "singing and dancing of country women" (Hwang 1988: 181-2). City people are indifferent, rude, ignorant and contribute nothing but destruction to Nature. After moving from the mountain to the city, the content hunter turns from an idealistic young man to a mechanical money collector and is finally ruined by greed. In *Shan He Lian* [Oh, My Native Mountains and Rivers! (1991), we also see the singing and dancing of farmers under a beautiful blue sky with white clouds and green mountains (Hwang 1991: 129). A happy life is represented by a country house with old Chinese furniture against the same attractive backdrop. The country house is later transformed into a house with iron-barred windows, couches and Fauves paintings. When Hwang mentions in directions that the backdrop is changed into a "cement forest covered with iron-barred windows," a distaste for this kind of living style is clearly revealed (Hwang 1991:130, 138-9).

Yang Shi Ren De Xi Ju [The Comedy of Mr. Allman Yang] (1983) is another example of degraded modern/city life in which no one cares about family or love but only wealth. The protagonist, Mr. Allman Yang, has no friends but fair-weather acquaintances he meets at bars. He is a husband who seldom comes home and has a wife who cares only about his money. He has other family members but none of them cares enough to listen to his concerns. It is a world where people marry and die for money and, at the same time, suffer from a polluted environment and are crippled by bookish learning, which means the knowledge of the abstract instead of concrete experience (Robert Magliola 1988: 361)

Although his characters in *Kong Long Qu Shi* [Cathay Visions] (1986) are all honest people without the corruptions found in most modern people, they burden themselves with feelings, experiences, knowledge and desires which keep them from seeing the truth. Hwang Mei-shu exhibits strong admiration toward uneducated, innocent minds, although those simple people are often laughed at by those seemingly successful people who deem themselves as smart. Hwang seems to suggest that an innocent mind is the key to a peaceful inner world against the corrupted outer world.

The young hunter in *Mu Ban Chuang Yu Xi Meng Si* [The Wooden Bed and the Simmons Bed] (1981) is brave and happy when he lives in the mountains following the old wisdom of

his fathers. The son-in-law who everybody regards as a fool in *Qi You Ci Li* [Good Heavens] (1981) is the one who actually uses his mind to think. Also the old servant in the same play considers himself lucky because he knows he has a kind-hearted master and therefore finds his peace of mind. Children in *Yang Shi Ren De Xi Ju* [The Comedy of Mr. Allman Yang] (1983) and *Kong Long Qu Shi* [Cathay Visions] (1986) are those who can see through confusions in the world to reveal the hidden truth of life because of their innocence. They are the force that makes adults come up with answers or, at least, take a closer look at questions. Children or innocent people provide different points of view and sometimes serve for further developments of plots.

However, in *Shan He Lian* [Oh, My Native Mountains and Rivers!] (1991) the lines between good and bad and right and wrong are getting more obscure. Things are changed for the worse and there are few good, innocent people to act as contrasts. Even children become complicated and greedy. The only hard-working, simple minded person in the play, *Yu Gong* [the Foolish Old Man], an ancient Chinese famous for his determined effort to remove two mountains, has long become history and can no longer be found.

The way Hwang Mei-shu looks at the modern world is well expressed by a conversation in *Qi You Ci Li* [Good Heavens] (1981):

Qian-er: I still do not have a color TV, a

> telephone or a car. I think I look at scientific civilization with both admiration and fear.
>
> Zhao-da: What are you afraid of?
>
> Qian-er: I am afraid that I cannot catch up with the new standards of the time! I will never be able to enter the scientific paradise. And yet, it is impossible to return to the good old days. (Hwang 1988: 249)

After examining an occurrence around dinner time when his young children's baby talk happens to disclose the meaning of life, Qian-er concludes "life is not scientific at all" (Hwang Mei-shu).

To Hwang, the modern world is a dehumanized, alienated absurd world that overemphasizes science and technology and falsely drives people into believing in materialism as the savior. He attacks those destructive powers in modern society and urges his reader and audience to listen to children or the inner child within themselves. As a son of farmers, Hwang expresses in his works his genuine love for Nature as well as his longing of returning to innocence.

Characteristics of Hwang's plays

Hwang Mei-shu's appreciation for the wholeness of the

world does not only exist as his major theme but also in the materials and techniques he utilizes. He freely employs anything he thinks can enhance and dramatize his ideas without any preference of nationalities, cultures or time periods. As a Chinese who has developed a passion for theatre since his childhood, he has a strong background in the traditions of local Chinese outdoor theatre. In addition, as a Western drama professor who received his higher education in Western countries, he has sufficient knowledge of Western theatre. Therefore there is no surprise to find elements of both Western and Eastern theatres in many aspects of his plays.

One characteristic of Hwang's plays is modern interpretations of the well-known. For example, *Qi You Ci Li* [Good Heavens] (1981) is based on a famous Chinese folktale with modern interpretations from two contemporary stage hands. *Yang Shi Ren De Xi Ju* [The Comedy of Mr. Allman Yang] (1983) is a free adaptation of the renowned morality play, Everyman. Many names of characters in *Yang Shi Ren De Xi Ju* [The Comedy of Mr. Allman Yang] (1983) suggest historical individuals and their qualities with a twist of irony. The original idea of *Kong Long Qu Shi* [Cathay Visions] (1986) comes from an old Chinese story of "The Scholar from Yang Xian" which is also known as "The Scholar with a Goose Cage" (Maria C. M. Tu 1987: 4). We also find the story of Dr. Faustus and Helen of Troy in this

play. Hwang uses literary quotations as well, such as words of Confucius and Shakespeare and lines from Peking Opera, to emphasize his points, to highlight the inner struggles of characters or to invite debates among characters as well as the audience.

The appropriation of Chinese ideas for the modern audience in Taiwan is another characteristic of his. Using the Voice instead of the image of God in *Yang Shi Ren De Xi Ju* [The Comedy of Mr. Allman Yang] (1983) properly corresponds to Chinese religious ideas which are inclined to believe there is "someone above" in general rather than a specific image. Many views and comments in *Kong Long Qu Shi* [Cathay Visions] (1986) are, as pointed out by Robert Magliola and Maria C. M. Tu, related to Taoism and Buddhism, such as concepts of emptiness, the void and the kaleidoscope, that the world of appearance is situationally constituted and so on (Magliola 1988:361).

The third characteristic of Hwang's plays is the reintroduction of Peking Opera techniques to the modern stage in Taiwan. Since the interest in traditional theatre has been declining regardless of sponsorship and promotion from the government, the aesthetics in traditional Chinese theatre may one day be lost if no new stage is provided. Hwang Mei-shu therefore endeavors to give new life to traditional techniques found in Chinese theatre. Most characters in *Qi You Ci Li* [Good Heavens] (1981), *Yang Shi*

Ren De Xi Ju [The Comedy of Mr. Allman Yang] (1983), *Kong Long Qu Shi* [Cathay Visions] (1986) and *Shan He Lian* [Oh, My Native Mountains and Rivers!] (1991) give brief self-introductions when they enter as in the traditional Chinese theatre. Yet Hwang lets his characters express their personal thoughts and feelings which is unconventional. In the same play, actors walk in circles to indicate long distance, use gestures to indicate opening a door and rowing to symbolize a boat. These are all elements found in traditional Chinese theatre. The rowing boat technique is utilized again in *Kong Long Qu Shi* [Cathay Visions] (1986) when three characters have a disagreement. The face painting in the Peking Opera is exaggerated and distorted to become masks in *Yang Shi Ren De Xi Ju* [The Comedy of Mr. Allman Yang] (1983) to indicate personality, disposition and so on.

The usage of chorus can be found in *Mu Ban Chuang Yu Xi Meng Si* [The Wooden Bed and the Simmons Bed] (1981), *Kong Long Qu Shi* [Cathay Visions] (1986) and *Shan He Lian* [Oh, My Native Mountains and Rivers!] (1991). There are two stage hands in *Qi You Ci Li* [Good Heavens] (1981) and one announcer in *Yang Shi Ren De Xi Ju* [The Comedy of Mr. Allman Yang] (1983). They all function to explain and comment on the plots and to reiterate the themes. Chanting can also be found in all five plays and, no matter whether Hwang describes his stage designs as expressionistic or symbolic,

they are all imagined by the playwright as non-realistic.

There are other elements in his works that seem to appear in stage plays by a Chinese playwright for the first time. He employs slides to display the (historical) background in *Mu Ban Chuang Yu Xi Meng Si* [The Wooden Bed and the Simmons Bed] (1981) and *Shan He Lian* [Oh, My Native Mountains and Rivers!] (1991). He interweaves classical and vernacular Chinese and prose and verse in *Mu Ban Chuang Yu Xi Meng Si* [The Wooden Bed and the Simmons Bed] (1981), *Qi You Ci Li* [Good Heavens] (1981) and *Yang Shi Ren De Xi Ju* [The Comedy of Mr. Allman Yang] (1983). In *Kong Long Qu Shi* [Cathay Visions] (1986) and *Shan He Lian* [Oh, My Native Mountains and Rivers!] (1991) he sometimes mixes Chinese with English. The third act in *Mu Ban Chuang Yu Xi Meng Si* [The Wooden Bed and the Simmons Bed] (1981) is completely performed in mime to intensify the transformation of the characters. Pop music is used in all plays. Most of all, he is one of the first Chinese playwrights to concentrate his efforts on writing comedies for the stage.

The most interesting characteristic of plays by Hwang should be his treatment of characters from various periods of time and cultures. We watch characters from both modern and ancient times on the same stage and they even talk to each other in *Qi You Ci Li* [Good Heavens] (1981). Modern family, ancient Chinese scholar and his maiden, Dr. Faustus and Helen of Troy from Western culture and Minnehaha and

Hiawatha from American Indian culture appear in *Kong Long Qu Shi* [Cathay Visions] (1986) to display aspects of love and diverse concepts. The Chinese God of Earth meets Jesus in *Shan He Lian* [Oh, My Native Mountains and Rivers!] (1991) to illustrate the history and changes in Taiwan. Utilization of characters from such a broad range, which is rare in theatre all over the world, works well for his purpose of exhibiting aspects of life and his idea of the world as a whole without boundaries.

As mentioned earlier, Hwang Mei-shu does not concern himself with telling a story as much as looking at a story from various angles. This goal enables him to employ all the techniques and materials that are available to him. His background as a Western-educated Chinese scholar perfectly suits his purpose of portraying life in Taiwan at a transitional time when the old confronts the new and the West encounters the East in the everyday life.

CHAPTER FIVE

LOOKING BACK INTO THE FUTURE:

THE CONCLUSION

In the previous four chapters of this thesis, there is first an overview of the theatre development in Taiwan and the influence of the modern Chinese theatre movement on it. Then follows the introductions of three contemporary Chinese playwrights in Taiwan, summaries of their plays and discussions of major themes and characteristics of their dramatic works. In this chapter, we will gather the materials and information presented and endeavor to answer questions posed in the preface to fulfill the purpose of this study. Those questions are: why are there so few playwrights in Taiwan? who are the few? what do they write about? are they popular? We also hope to lay out a guideline for future playwrights based on what we learn.

Theatre is often referred to as a mirror of life in the West and this is beginning to ring true in the theatre in Taiwan as well after the economic rise. Wealth accumulated during those three decades of economic boom has rendered Taiwan an affluent society, as the per capita income jumped from $164 in 1960 to over $7000 in 1989 (Chung Mingder

1992). Major social changes inevitably followed the economic growth and brought forth political transformations, particularly the lifting of nearly forty years of martial law in 1987. These transitions are reflected in the theatre history of Taiwan and dramatic works by Yao Yi-wei, Ma Sen and Hwang Mei-shu.

As mentioned in the first chapter, language differences were the first thing that halted theatre activities in Taiwan after the Japanese occupation. The Nationalist government chose Mandarin as the single official language, prohibited Japanese and discouraged speaking Taiwanese in public. The rare Taiwanese playwrights were excluded from the literary circle because they encountered obstacles writing in a new language. The language factor also eliminated the Taiwanese audience who had difficulty appreciating performances because they did not understand Mandarin.

Then strict censorship arrived with the Nationalist government. Almost all the remaining Taiwanese playwrights were silenced by the 228 event and censorship. As to Chinese playwrights in Taiwan, they were not spared either. The governmental policy of promoting propaganda-centered anti-communist plays did not help their cause and eventually exhausted their Chinese mainland materials. Also, the audience abandoned the theatre in favor of movies and television. Theatre ceased to reflect society but became

the mouthpiece for the authorities.

It was not an easy task to keep existing playwrights, not to mention attract new ones, to write for a stage without an audience. Failures at the box office made the problem of having tight budgets for productions even more serious. The beginning of economic growth started in 1960 and generated other opportunities of making profits which made even less appealing the prizes offered by the government for propaganda-centered plays. In the end, most of the remaining playwrights either changed their careers or wrote screenplays or for television. The language, political and economic factors combined explain why there are so few playwrights in Taiwan.

Yet who are the few? After the political and language factors mentioned above, they were, almost without exception, mainlanders. They also needed to have access to higher education in order to have secure careers in another profession as they could not depend on writing plays to make their living. Also, if they sought an opportunity to have their plays published, they needed to acquire fame in other fields to win publication. Since the practice of preserving and publishing scripts began roughly around the time that Western drama began to appear in China, most readers had not developed the habit of reading plays and therefore this made publishing of plays unprofitable. Playwrights needed to gain the attention of publishers by other accomplishments

first and then ask them to publish their plays as a favor (Hwang Mei-shu 1989: 9). For example, Yao Yi-wei and Hwang Mei-shu are renowned professors and Ma Sen had been a popular writer before he returned to teach in Taiwan.

Those who still wrote for the stage did not necessarily write for profit but for their passion for theatre. Due to those independent, highly-educated theatre lovers, individual voices started to emerge though political issues were avoided. Under such an atmosphere, Yao Yi-wei first wrote about the frustrations and shattered dreams when idealism encounters reality. He, however, never wanted his characters to give up hope. Ma Sen also concentrated on personal feelings in his dramatic works, but he was able to attack traditional "family values" by skillfully choosing to write from the point of view of parents.

The influence of economic rise on those playwrights in Taiwan grew stronger after the 1970s. Ma Sen wrote about the burden of traditions from the point of view of the offspring in *Hua Yu Jian* [The Flower and the Sword] (1977), *Jiao Se* [Roles] (1980) and his latest play *Jin Cheng* [Going to Town] (1982). Hwang Mei-shu started writing plays as late as 1973 and most of his major plays appeared after 1981. He especially focused on attacking unhealthy social values brought by modernization and industrialization and won an award because of such themes. Yao Yi-wei also depicted a similar theme in *Da Shu Shen Chuan Qi* [The Legend

of the Spirit of a Giant Tree] in 1985. In *Shan He Lian* [Oh, My Native Mountains and Rivers!] (1991), the latest play among all the plays under discussion, Hwang Mei-shu even went so far as to touch upon a few political issues. Furthermore, the most remarkable metamorphosis is from major characters as outsiders by Yao Yi-wei as in *Lai Zi Feng Huang Zhen De Ren* [People form the Town Called Phoenix] (1963) and many other plays to the major character as an insider as in *Shan He Lian* [Oh, My Native Mountains and Rivers!] (1991). It is particularly significant for a first generation mainlander like Hwang Mei-shu to identity with Taiwan as his native land.

The achievements of these three playwrights are not only in their bringing different points of view and how they are beginning to reflect Taiwanese society at this transitional time, but also in their efforts of combining Eastern theatre and Western theatre. The three of them all use their knowledge of Western theatre to explore new directions for Chinese theatre in Taiwan. Ma Sen tried to portray Chinese feelings through a pure Western theatrical form. Yao Yi-wei and Hwang Mei-shu endeavored to synthesize techniques and theatrical conventions found in both theatres in hope of vitalizing modern Chinese theatre. In fact, they have achieved what they wished to accomplish: the currently vigorous Little Theatre Movement in Taiwan is said to have been launched with the production of He Zhu's New Match in

1980, a modern interpretation of a Peking Opera play (He Zhu's Match) and Burden, a twenty-minute piece about love created by means of group improvisation and made up solely of sound and body movement (Chung Mingder 1992: 1)

Although we cannot say the dramatic works of the three playwrights are popular in Taiwan, there were economical, social and other reasons that affected their popularity. Fortunately, those negative influences are disappearing, if not totally vanished. After more than forty years of the establishment of the Nationalist government in Taiwan and pan-island public Chinese education, the obstacle of language difference no longer exists for the Taiwanese. Although many mainlanders and those of the second generation do not know Taiwanese, they pick up words and phrases here and there. The majority of the residents on the island have no problem communicating in Chinese. Censorship is also much less strict after the lifting of martial laws in 1987. The Taiwanese and mainlanders have been learning to accept each other and have at least forty years of shared experiences.

These changes in Taiwanese society all work in the interests of future young playwrights in Taiwan. Everyone has the chance to receive a college education if s/he puts her/his mind to it. Mass media brings abundant information from all over the world every day. As they grow on the island, knowing the place and people, they will have many

subjects to write about. However, partly because of the prominent influence of a type of off-off Broadway theatre and the lack of a drama tradition, few theater workers who participate in the Little Theatre movements care about their performances enough to script them.

From the first full-length play by Yao Yi-wei in 1963 to the latest play by Hwang Mei-shu in 1991, the thirty-year span covers a crucial period in the history of Taiwan. Many important economical, social and political transitions have taken place. All this has resulted in a Taiwanese society that is energetic and yet chaotic at the same time. We see the Taiwanese society as well as its theatre collectively searching for its identity and directions at a transitional time. The modern theatre in Taiwan is no longer like "the not too exciting Taiwanese theatre scene" James Brandon observed in the mid-70s; it has fast become the theatre Richard Schechner described in 1990. Let us hope that soon this young theatre will transform the energies and sounds it is currently experiencing into harmonious music by additional devotion to scripted dramatic works.

Since the history of Taiwanese theatre is relatively brief and was forgotten for a period of time, there are many subjects that deserve further study in this field. First of all, Ms. Li Man-kuei was an important figure in the modern theatre movement in Taiwan as a productive female playwright and a participant. In 1962, She organized the Committee on

Spoken Drama Appreciation which was for years the major producing agency of modern dramas in Taiwan. This Committee also started a World Drama Festival in 1967, presenting foreign plays in their original language by language students in local universities. In 1968 the Committee created a Youth Drama Festival presenting plays by local playwrights performed by university students in the Chinese language. An investigation of her work would be most worthwhile.

Zhang Xiao-feng is another female playwright that deserves notice. She wrote eight plays between 1971 to 1977 and then stopped writing plays to concentrate on essay writings and teaching Chinese Literature in universities. Future studies may discuss the characteristics of her plays and compare them to those of the male playwrights of the time in an effort to learn why she ceased writing plays.

The influence of the Theatre of the Absurd and/or Epic Theatre on the development of modern theatre in Taiwan also requires examination. From playwrights such as Yao Yi-wei, Ma Sen, Hwang Mei-shu to young theatre participants, many claim to be influenced by those two theatre forms. It would be an interesting topic to analyze the causes and affects of this influence and how many Eastern philosophies fit into this picture.

Many directors in Taiwan choose to adapt or translate Western drama as a blueprint for their performances. Can

this practice help or aid expressions the people in Taiwan or inspire theatrical practitioners? Is it possible that the theatre participants depend so much on Western theories and drama they suppress their own creativity and thus delay the emergence of a true Taiwanese voice on stage? Should people in Taiwan revive a modern theatre that speaks Taiwanese or should this sort of experiment be treated as an variation of modern Chinese Theatre in Taiwan?

There are other untouched topics and possibilities in the theatre in Taiwan that require theoretical examinations. After viewing the dramatic works by Yao Yi-wei, Ma Sen and Hwang Mei-shu and a quick glance at contemporary theatrical activities in Taiwan and its society, it is clear no attempt is too bold nor should be despised in this youthful theatre. This is a theatre that is eager to find its identity and voice among chaos and noises. The only principle that needs to be strongly emphasized here is to invite more participants and experiments because theatre is a world without limit.

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