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VISITING THE LEFT BANK
-RIVE-GAUCHE THEATRE ,
A THEATRE OF SEEKING AND REVOLUTION-

By

Hui-yi Chen

A THESIS

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ABSTRACT

VISITING THE LEFT BANK -RIVE-GAUCHE THEATRE, A THEATRE OF SEEKING AND REVOLUTION-

By

Hui-yi Chen

This paper is a supplement to a 20-minute video production thesis, 'Visiting the Left Bank: Rive-Gauche Theatre, A Theater of Seeking and Revolution.' The video tape deals with an avant-garde theatre group, River-Gauche Theatre Group, in Taiwan and the correlation between their performances and Taiwanese social context. This paper provides a more detailed historical background of both Taiwan and the theatre group to give audience a contextual setting. Both the paper the video program illustrate the common confusion and struggle in minds of Taiwanese modern day young intellectuals, how their beliefs about their cultural identity were shaped, and how those beliefs were destroyed and rebuilt.

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INTRODUCTION

This paper is a supplement to a 20-minute video production thesis, 'Visiting the Left Bank--Rive-Gauche Theatre, A Theatre of Seeking and Revolution', which introduces an experimental theatre group, Rive-Gauche, as well as relevant sketches of the history of Taiwan. Through the performances of the 10-year-old theatre group, the program is intended to illustrate not only the modern theatre of Taiwan but also the thoughts, the doubts and the process of self-awareness of today's young generation in Taiwan. The process of conceptualizing themselves correlated with the modern history of Taiwan becomes the most interesting part of the program.

Taiwan is well known by the rest of the world for its economical miracle. However, few people know that within the past 100 years Taiwanese people have gone through three different regimes, ruled by three different rulers. The sensitive relationship between Taiwan and Communist China during these 40 years adds another concern into the minds of Taiwanese. This phenomenon caused a special, complicated complex among modern day Taiwanese, and is still actively influencing the social development of Taiwan.

Rive-Gauche is a theatre group young members who received good education and have promising jobs, but were unsatisfied with all that. During their college years, they began to think and act rebelliously against the ideological system that they have grown up with, and inevitably touched the hidden history of intrusion in Taiwan and their problematic destiny. The significance of the program is that it illustrates the common confusion and struggle in the thoughts of Taiwan's modern day young intellectuals, how their beliefs about their cultural identity were shaped, and how those beliefs were destroyed and rebuilt.

This paper provides a more detailed background of Taiwan's history as well as the history and intentions of Rive-Gauche Theatre. Chapter 1 tells the historical background of Taiwan as far back to the sixteenth century. Through this sketch of history, the dramatic, if not sad, past of Taiwan is shown to the reader like an old movie. Chapter 2 introduces the 40-year rule of the Chinese National Party, the Kuomintang (KMT), since 1950. It is this rule that has had the strongest influence over the rapid changes of the modern Taiwan society and the formation of the value system found in minds of modern young people. Chapter 3 shifts to the modern theatrical development in Taiwan and the emergence of Rive-Gauche (left-bank) Theatre as an avant-garde theatre, subverting the conventional structure of theatrical aesthetics. The final chapter, chapter 4, explains how Rive-Gauche Theatre explored, from their aesthetic

experiment into the doubts of the discourses established by the ruling power, their self-awareness of being genuine Taiwanese, and how they have been carrying out their exploration by way of theatrical performances.

CHAPTER 1 HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Taiwan is about one hundred miles east of Mainland China, some seven hundred miles south of Japan, and only two hundred miles north of the Philippines. Taiwan is about half as big as Massachusetts with the same latitude as central Mexico.

Aboriginal people began living in Taiwan perhaps 6,000 years ago. Serious immigration from the Mainland China began only 400 years ago, around the Ming and Ching Dynasties in China. There were few Chinese in Taiwan even in 1590, when Portuguese navigators found the island and called it Formosa ("beautiful"), the name by which it became known in the Western World.¹

From the Rule of the Dutch to the Ching Dynasty

From 1622 to 1624, the Dutch established a military base on the Pescadores, just southwest of Taiwan and routed Spanish settlements on the northern part of the island, they expanded their garrison and used Taiwan as a trading center.²

The rule of the Dutch ended in 1661 when the forces of a Ming loyalist, Cheng Cheng-kung, defeated them. The regime established by Cheng lasted only for 22 years. Troops of Emperor of Ching Dynasty took over Taiwan in 1683, and ruled for the next 200 years. The legal exclusion of foreigners from Taiwan ended only in the mid-nineteenth century. Being defeated in the wars both in 1858 and 1860, the Ching state was forced to open

the cities of Anping and Tamsui as treaty ports. Three years later, another two ports were also opened to foreign trade. British and American merchants began trading at these centers, and missionaries soon followed. The Ching Dynasty then showed its concern for the island's security by sending high-ranking officials and making Taiwan a province. However, foreign threats didn't go away after those treaties. After the end of the first Sino-Japanese War, on April 7, 1895, Japan compelled the Ching court to cede Taiwan.³

A Japanese Colony

The Japanese landed on Taiwan on May 29, 1895, but they met fierce resistance from the Taiwanese, who had proclaimed the establishment of a Republic of Taiwan. The Republic lasted only ten days, but people continued to fight the Japanese troops for several years. Tens of thousand Taiwanese died. The local elites tried to preserve their cultural heritage and retain ties with other provinces in the Mainland.

The Japanese government in Taiwan decided to apply colonial law, instead of the same law as Japan, to the Taiwanese which gave the government the authority to impose any laws it believed necessary to keep the peace and ensure Japanese control. Because of the colonial law, Taiwanese never had the same rights as the Japanese. Taiwan's history under Japanese colonialism can be roughly divided into three phases.⁴ The first, lasting for at least a few years after the landing of the Japanese in 1895, was

a period of bloody resistance. The second phrase, which began around 1914, was a period of time when Taiwanese angrily reacted against Japanese political, educational and economic discrimination. During the third phase, beginning around 1940, wartime mobilization took priority over anything else.

The Japanese had tried to impress upon the Taiwanese the significance and superiority of Japanese religion and culture as soon as they took over the island. They quickly built Japanese shrines all over the island, and began to ask the Taiwanese to destroy their ancestral tablets and Buddhist idols. They even urged the Taiwanese to bow in the direction of the Showa emperor's dwelling and change their Chinese names to Japanese ones. During wartime, in order to secure the Taiwanese obedience, the Japanese government strengthened its overall control, including the propaganda and educational system. Students were taught about the virtuous young Taiwanese who had volunteered to serve in the imperial armed forces to fight against China. An increasing number of Taiwanese behaved like Japanese in dress and manners. Taiwanese in their teens and twenties probably came to respect, if not admire, Japanese ways. During the war years, there was also a rapid growth in industrialization which made Taiwan more advanced in terms of social infrastructure when compared to China.

A kind of ambivalence existed among Taiwanese toward the end of Japanese rule. A number of Taiwanese resented their status as colonial subjects while simultaneously appreciating many Japanese ways, taking for granted the validity of many

Japanese values and perspectives, and feeling superior to Chinese with differing values. This is why when Taiwanese people heard the news of Japanese surrender and the following arrival of Chinese Nationalist officials, many of them reacted with disbelief and felt overwhelming delirium. However, Taiwanese tried to accept the truth by convincing themselves that Mainland was their homeland, and that they were returned to the mother nation. Ornamental banners were pasted along the street to greet the Chinese troops and officials; the Taiwanese were ready to welcome a new era, in which they wouldn't be treated discriminatorily any more.

CHAPTER 2 KMT'S NATIONALIST RULE

Shifting of the Regime

During W.W.II the Chinese Nationalists under Chiang Kai-shek made clear their determination to return Taiwan to Chinese control. However, the Chinese Nationalists also had ambivalent feelings towards the Taiwanese. On one hand, the Nationalists perceived the Taiwanese as Chinese compatriots being returned to the Fatherland. Yet they also viewed the Taiwanese, many of whom had been conscripted and fought in Japanese armies against the Chinese as Japanese spies, with suspicion. Thus, when Chinese Nationalist leaders sent military forces to Taiwan to accept Japanese surrender, they failed to clarify in their own minds whether they were dispatching armies of liberation or of occupation.

The '228' Uprising and Massacre in 1947

The ambivalence towards Taiwan was combined with a cultural gap between the Chinese mainlanders and the Taiwanese, and created an explosive situation. When Chinese soldiers, who had never seen a bicycle, tried to ride and fell off, they looked ridiculous to Taiwanese. So did Chinese soldiers who bought taps and could not understand why water didn't flow when the tap was placed against a wall and turned on. Language barriers made

communication more difficult.

In addition, right after the end of W.W.II, the Chinese civil war in the Mainland happened. Small Taiwan received little attention during the great storms of civil war. The Chinese Nationalist center in Nanjing made little effort to control corrupted officials in Taiwan. This explosive mixture finally exploded on the incident on 28 February, 1947. After some demonstrations and brief riots, Governor Chen Yi agreed to negotiate with Taiwanese demands. While superficially negotiating, Chen brought in troops from the mainland who ruthlessly suppressed Taiwanese leaders around the island, killing tens of thousands.⁵ 228 became a forbidden history in which the KMT justified the massacre by interpreting it as a premeditated riot led by the Communists. After the 228 incident, the general Taiwanese public became quiet and apolitical. However, this tragedy has never been forgotten by the people. The resultant fracture between native Taiwanese and the mainlanders became the island's most important political cleavage for almost 40 years, and still continues to influence the political decision-making process today.

The Era of Chiang Kai-shek (1950-1975)

Finally, after being defeated in the civil war in late 1949, Chiang Kai-shek left the Chinese mainland for Taiwan, where he hoped to rebuild his strength for a counter-attack

against the Chinese Communists. Most observers believed the Chinese Communists would 'liberate' Taiwan sometime during 1950.⁶

Right after the retreat, in 1950, Chiang Kai-shek declared martial law, suspended the 1947 constitution of the Republic of China (ROC), and enacted the 'Temporary Provisions During the Anti-Communist Period' (the sole constitutional base of government), which gave the President unlimited power. The Nationalists went on to rule Taiwan for the next forty years as one of the most successful authoritarian political systems in Asia. He also asked the Grand Council of Justices, the highest judicial body, to interpret the constitution so as to extend the tenure of members of the National Assembly and Legislative and Control Yuans - the three chambers of the parliament of the ROC - until elections could be carried out in the whole China. This effectively resulted in life-long parliament seats for members of the three chambers.⁷ These mainlanders, holding life-long parliament seats insisted their existence maintained the tradition of legitimacy of the ROC government as the true legitimate government of the whole China, including of course the mainland. They were not forced to retire until 1990, after the political reform in 1987 and much protest from the opposition party and the public.

From 1950 to 1975, Chiang Kai-shek's 25-year rule of Taiwan was harsh and ruthless. He initiated land reform, which he had failed to do on the mainland, and laid the basic capitalist economic infrastructure for the eventual economic miracle of

Taiwan. However, he didn't allow any organized political opposition and maintained tight controls over every aspect of Taiwanese society.

Politically, in the 1950s Taiwan had two important features. First, an emphasis on control and security characterized politics during the decade. At least six security agencies kept tight reins on political activity and little political dissent was registered on the island. Second, the government instituted land reform in the countryside. The two important political consequences are: first, land reform eliminated the economic basis of the Taiwanese political elite and thus reduced the threat of Taiwanese political opposition to the Nationalists; second, it gave the Nationalists considerable support and legitimacy among the rural Taiwanese population.⁸

The significance of the rule of Chiang Kai-shek was not the economic reform, but, more important, the establishment of a systematic, ideological apparatus. To Chiang Kai-shek, any social construction in Taiwan was for only one purpose--to build a military and economic base, rather than a real country, for counterattacking Communist China and rebuilding his regime in the Mainland in the 'near' future. He claimed to the people the KMT government's sovereignty over the mainland by using such anti-Communist slogans as labeling Beijing a 'bandit' regime.

Chiang also strengthened and spread out his propaganda effectively through the education system. The educational reform was carried out in 1968. Students of all levels accepted the Nationalist ideology by being taught to read the text books

containing lectures and instructions from Chiang Kai-shek and Dr. Sun Yet-sen, the former leader of the KMT. Unifying the whole of China under the 'Three Principles of the People', a political theory introduced by Sun, became the everyday slogan of school times, and turned into a deep belief in minds of young students. Chiang Kai-shek also built an overall heroic adoration of himself by placing thousands of statues of himself in every campus and in public parks, and asking students to bow to them. In addition, the history and geography of Taiwan were a small portion of the curriculum; those of the Mainland were more important. Taiwanese students could tell you the detailed 4,000-year long history of the 'Great China', but they were not able to tell you what happened in Taiwan 50 years ago. 90% of the students whose families had been lived in Taiwan for more than 300 years had never been allowed to learn the history of their families. They were not even allowed to speak their mother language, the Taiwanese dialect, in school, only the Mandarin which was brought by the KMT mainlanders around 40 years ago was spoken. These maneuvers sufficiently reduced the possibilities of native Taiwanese self-consciousness, and helped the stability of Chiang's regime in Taiwan.

During the 1960s the rapid economic growth gave economic specialists and technocrats a new voice and status within the political system. Thus, by the end of the 60's, Taiwan's top leadership included relatively young, well-educated technocrats as well as increased numbers of native Taiwanese.

In the early 1970s a new spirit of reform and liberalism

swept through the political system. Many more young, well-educated people obtained high-level political positions, as did substantially increased numbers of Taiwanese natives. The government allowed journals of opinion to publish constructive criticism and the parameters of political debate broadened considerably. In 1972, three years before Chiang Kai-shek's death, Chiang Ching-Kuo, the eldest son of Chiang Kai-shek, became the successor of his father by being named the Premier. Looking for obtaining as much support as possible in the early days of his premiership, Chiang Ching-kuo was one of the most important factors which encouraged liberalism and reform in Taiwan.⁹

Rule of the Junior Chiang: Reforms & Transition (1975-1987)

In 1978, Chiang Ching-kuo became the President of Taiwan, retaining his post as Chairman of the Nationalist Party, the KMT. During the two Chiangs' Presidency, the dissidents had been making much effort to organize a genuine opposition party, and were always turned down by the KMT's power. Not until 1986 was an opposition party, the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), allowed to be organized.

The most important reform conducted by President Chiang Ching-kuo was the lifting of martial law. This was implemented in July 1987, less than a year after the founding of the DPP. The martial law had existed since 1950, and had been used by

foreign critics to demonstrate the authoritarian nature of Taiwan's political system. In fact, martial law did not affect the vast majority of Taiwan's residents; it manifested itself primarily in arrests by the Taiwan Garrison Command and in military court (rather than civil court) trials for important political prisoners.

President Chiang Ching-kuo's other major reform also took place in 1987, allowing Taiwanese to visit the Mainland. This decision followed considerable lobbying and demonstrations on the part of retired mainlander servicemen who wanted to visit their motherland before dying. Although only the people who did not hold government positions with relatives in the mainland were originally allowed to visit the mainland, hundred of thousands of Taiwanese have visited the mainland as tourists since then.¹⁰ For almost 40 years, Taiwan and Mainland China have seen one another as enemies, and Taiwanese never got any news from the mainland. The visits punctured the myths about the "Great China" which was built by Chiang Kai-shek.

The year of 1987 became a turning point for modern Taiwanese society. The environmental movement, the farmers' movement, the workers' movement, the students' movement, the "houseless" (referring to the housing shortage--not homelessness) peoples' movement, and movements aimed directly at political reform, all reacting to the release of decades of political repression, proliferated throughout Taiwan. The 1,172 demonstrations in 1988 were nearly seven times higher than the figure for 1983 (173).¹¹

The First Native Taiwanese President and More Reforms (1988-)

In the December 1986 elections, the infant DPP won about 25 per cent of votes and increased its number of seats both at county-city and national level,¹² indicating the dismantling of the KMT power, the Chiang dynasty. President Lee Teng-hui, a Japanese and American educated Ph.D. in agro-economics and, more importantly, a Taiwanese rather than a mainlander, succeeded Chiang in January 1988. President Lee was hampered by the consistent power struggle in the National Party. Pursuing the first 'real' term of Presidency, he decided to ask the support from the old National Assembly members. This over-inflated the political ego and power of these old people. The life-long National Assembly, called 'old thieves' by many Taiwanese people, suddenly regained self-confidence. They believed that they held the 'legitimate tradition' of the ROC in their hands and should continue to exercise their powers not only to elect the next President but also to 'save' the nation from such 'radical' proclamations as the independence of Taiwan, advocated by the DPP and more and more native Taiwanese.

The DPP based its election campaign on the controversial issue of Taiwanese independence, a case that is still illegal according to the National Security Law that replaced martial law in 1987. The independence of Taiwan has been seen as a fatal issue by the KMT since the rule of Chiang Kai-shek due to the

military threat from the PRC, Communist China.

However, both President Lee and the old National Assembly misjudged the Taiwanese people, particularly the generally submissive and obedient students. University students in Taiwan are the most Confucian, apolitical, conservative and nonviolent in Asia. They had never carried out any protest or demonstration against the government in the last 40 years because the KMT's soft but tight control over youth had always been effective. On this occasion, the students were disgusted by the conspiracy between the KMT top leader and those 'old thieves'. On March 17, 1990, students sat at the gate of the Chiang Kai-shek Memorial Hall in the center of Taipei to protest the election of Taiwan's president by the life-long Parliament. On March 19 there were more than 3,000 students attending the event with 20,000 of the general public standing behind them.¹³

Their demands were abolition of the anachronistic National Assembly, termination of the meaningless 'anti-Communist rebellion mobilization period' which was imposed by Chiang Kai-shek from the 1950s, and a promising reform timetable. The demands were so feasible and clear that they got instant public approval and support. This shook the very foundations of Taiwan's political power structure and the political legitimacy of the KMT regime. President Lee then promised to convene a National Affairs Conference. It was also because of the students that the 668 old National Assembly members were forced to give up their demands for more power and more money. For the first time, Taiwanese students helped to push Taiwan towards

continuous liberalization and genuine democratization.

In short, the late 80s and the early 90s in Taiwan marked a snow-melting period of turmoil and destruction of old powers. Taiwan's authoritarian political structure began to disintegrate, and political power began to spread, split and pluralize.

CHAPTER 3 LITTLE THEATRE MOVEMENT IN TAIWAN

The modern theatre in Taiwan has undertaken what can be described as a revolution during the past fifteen years and the cultural and political consequences of this upheaval are still far from resolved. This revolution, named the Little Theatre Movement after its Euro-American forerunners, has not only revived in Taiwan the dying Chinese modern theatre, but also created a new genre of performance art called "Little Theatre". Reintegrating theatre into contemporary life, Little Theatre has become the liveliest art in Taiwan.

Rive-Gauche Theatre is seen as one of the most important groups of the second phase of the Little Theatre Movement. In order to locate Rive-Gauche, a brief history of theatre experimentation of Taiwan needs to be introduced.

The Initiation of the Little Theatre Movement (LTM)

In Taiwan, the oft-used term, "Little Theatre Movement," refers to the theatre revolution of the 1980s. The rise of the Little Theatre Movement was a reaction to the lifeless Spoken Drama, which started to decay in 1960s. In fact, in the early 1980s, when Lan-Ling Theatre Workshop initiated the movement, the term used was "Experimental Theatre." In July, 1980, the premiere of He Zhu's New Match, an experimental play staged at

the First Experimental Theatre Festival by the newly founded Lan-Ling Theatre Workshop, excited Taiwan's modern theatre audience. The staging and the non-verbal expression were radical departures from Spoken Drama, the dominant form of modern Chinese/Taiwanese theatre, which, like Western realistic drama used spoken words as its major device. He Zu's New Match, based on the jingju (Beijing opera) play, He Zu's Match, attempting to "modernize traditional jingju stage."¹⁴ At the same time, it touched on living realities of contemporary Taiwan. The pioneering Lan-Ling, along with the annual Experimental Theatre Festival (1980-1984), made Little Theatre popular among intellectual youths by the middle 1980s. Aesthetically and politically, this new theatre art was an eclectic form resulting from the interaction of forces active in contemporary Taiwan; namely, the traditional and the modern, the Chinese and the foreign.

Although Experimental Drama borrowed some techniques from Euro-American avant-garde theatre, it continued to use some characteristics of Spoken Drama. Spoken words, plot, psycho-realistic characterization, and the proscenium stage remained predominant. It also appeared to exhibit an apolitical attitude toward both domestic and foreign forces. On the surface, it strove to remain free from political ideology; theatre art had, it was then thought, to soar above political and social conflicts. Experimental Theatre, however, did speak the "national language" promoted by the Nationalist government with its "Great China" ideology, which stated that Taiwan still

represented Mainland China. Its acquiescence to the dominant Kuomintang (Nationalist Party) and its failure to follow its revolutionary impulses opened the niche for the development of a radical "second generation" of the Little Theatre Movement, later to be termed as the Avant Garde Theatres.

The Second Generation-- The Avant-Garde Theatres

The second phase of the LTM, beginning in 1986, challenged Taiwan's political and cultural taboos and theatre traditions, creating a "one hundred flower blossoming" phenomenon. These radical theatres were dissatisfied with theatre arts joining Taiwan's nationalist capitalism, decorating the government's "cultural construction," or providing fashionable cultural commodities for the nouveau riche society. They believed that theatre must engage in a critique of the social systems, advocating that Little Theatre must draw a line between itself and Taiwan's Kuomintang dominance and the current capitalistic culture. They wanted Little Theatre to be a "Theatre of Social Action" actively participating in subverting or reforming the social system. This kind of radical theatre wave, encouraged by some of the social activists, suddenly burst into popularity during 1988 and 1989, having a strong impact on Taiwan's culture and society.

The political radicalization of these new theatres had its background. It was the result of two or three years of searching

undercover. In fact, before the political radicalization, the second generation had already experienced a radicalization of aesthetics in 1986 and 1987.¹⁵ Avant-Garde Theatre artists rejected the proscenium stage and the "bourgeois theatre structure," breaking the visible and invisible line between the performer and spectator. They were devoted to examining the cultural construction of the performer's self in order to develop a theatre art that belonged to this time and this place of Taiwan. Using the anti-narrative structure of image theatre to replace the narrative, literary tradition of Spoken Drama and Experimental Drama, Avant-Garde Theatre artists questioned the dominance of plot and character. Moreover, they deconstructed the close relationship between the representational system of theatre performance and the ideological apparatus, attempting to liberate the suppressed native discourses of Taiwan.

The Emergence of Huan-xu Theatre and Rive-Gauche Theatre

Two Little Theatres, Huan-xu and Rive-Gauche Theatre, appeared at National Taiwan University and Tamkang University in 1985. Their composition displayed the postmodern characteristics of anti-narrative structure. After 1988, these two theatre groups cooperated closely and both were involved in the political theatre trend. Huan-xu Theatre and Rive-Gauche Theatre were the most continuously creative Little Theatres among the second generation Little Theatres. They not only

exemplified the progression toward alternative aesthetics and politics but also put their concerns specifically on the struggles of Taiwan, reflective of its own history, geography, and place in the world.

After 1988, Huan-xu and Rive-Gauche were not the only theatres involved in Taiwan's social movements. The "resistant postmodernism" techniques they used were extensively applied to the "deconstruction of the System." Recently emerged theatres, under the influence of "political postmodernism", all critique and subvert Taiwan's dominant system. They had extended the early "revolution of form" to a practical political revolution. For example, a short play, performed by one of the avant-garde Theatres as a memorial to Zheng, Nan-rong, the "first hero of Taiwan's Independence Movement", was seen to be an efficient tool for political struggles. As mentioned above, this new theatre wave suddenly burst into popularity in the late 1980s in Taiwan, and caught the attention of the public media and art world.

Politicization of the Avant-Garde Theatres

After retreating to Taiwan, the Nationalist government imposed every possible restriction on Taiwan's theatre. Controls included but were not limited to:

1. Censorship of scripts: No performances of any type were permitted without prior clearance from the authorities, including police and

education officials.

2. Tax: All performances, including national cultural events, were liable to a heavy "entertainment tax," which had to be paid before any tickets could be sold.
3. Ban of "Communist" publications: Anything deemed to be an instrument of Communist ideology wherever produced, or any play, book or other material from mainland China or by mainland China author was prohibited. Offenders received maximum criminal sentences.
4. Restriction of public gatherings and meetings: Prior government approval for the formation of theatre troupes had to be obtained. Only one officially approved professional association was permitted thus ensuring complete government control of theatre activities.

Thus, with the combined policy of material incentives and repressive measures, the Nationalist government ensured that no dissident voice could be heard in Taiwanese theatre for over thirty years.¹⁶

In 1987, the lifting of martial law, marking the beginning of a new era of Taiwan's modernization also provided a climate for the birth and growth of the Avant-Garde Theatre. Those theatres, in turn, actively participated in the crises and achievements of Taiwan's social reformation. That is why a careful examination of Taiwan's Avant-Garde Theatre can be

interesting and important. It will illustrate not only the recent efforts and achievements made by Taiwan's theatre artists, but also the significant changes in recent Taiwanese society.

CHAPTER 4 RIVE-GAUCHE THEATRE

The video thesis, focusing on Rive-Gauche Theatre, follows its performances since 1985. The program, containing three parts with three different titles: 'Aesthetic Experiment', 'Critique & Subversion' and 'Searching for History & Destiny', sequentially introduces three phases and features of the performances. However, the three phrases are organically correlated rather than definitely separated. The correlation exists between each phase as well as between each play, in terms of both aesthetic and ideas. Rive-Gauche Theatre is chosen here to represent the young, well-educated generation in Taiwan. Through the examination of the group's experiments and overall intention, the reader and the audience should be able to get a clear picture of how Taiwan's social environment has been forming the ideological selves of the people, and the thoughts and pursuits of young intellectuals.

The First Phase of the Rive-Gauche Theatre: Aesthetic Experiment

I Want To Eat My Shoes (1985)

Rive-Gauche Theatre was initially a student poetry society in Tamkang University. In the spring of 1985, one of the club leaders, Zhi-zhong Ye created a composition entitled I Want to Eat My Shoes and performed it in his apartment. The audience

consisted of about twenty people, who sat around the living room. The performers moved the props around--tables, chairs, objects, performing various images with them, or reciting their poetry directly to the audience. This group of young people suddenly discovered the fascination of performance, and a new theatre was born. Rive-Gauche intellectuals such as Ye and Huan-xiong Li, another club leader, not only loved art but also were very concerned about Taiwanese society. As Ye said,

We named our group Rive-Gauche (Left Bank) Theatre. The message is to emphasize the position of our organization to the left, and outside, of Taipei mainstream culture. We are concerned about the changes in Taiwan as well as its political and social realities."¹⁷

The Intruder (1986)

After the performance of I Want To Eat My Shoes, Rive-Gauche presented The Intruder in April, 1986. The play expressed concern for the fate of the island of Taiwan and aggressively questioned the myth of "Great China." In terms of theatre techniques, the first and the second part of the play were like two unconnected, independent parts "montaged" in order to create surprises. The meaning became clear when the director, Li, came out and explained that Taiwan's history is a narrative of a series of intruders. This proclamation was startling because Taiwan's history of invasions was still a political taboo in 1986. Aesthetically, the director's combining unrelated stories, images and the direct communication between performers and audience went beyond what Experiment Drama was exploring at that

time, displaying image theatre and postmodern techniques.

The Second Phase: Critique & Subversion

The Sun Is Still Shining (1987)

In May 1987, Huan-xiong Li adapted a novel by Taiwan's dissident writer Ying-zhen Chen and created The Sun Is Still Shining. Although it was adapted from the novel, the performance did not develop according to the original story. It deconstructed the novel's narrative, repeating fragments of words and gestures and images to represent the rural petit-bourgeois' alienation and class-culture, which they had adopted from Japanese colonists during the Japanese rule (1895-1945), to arouse Taiwan's repressed memory. The lack of narrative, the non-realistic acting, and the image collage made the play a highly integrated construction of images conveying a clear socialistic message. The Theatre Between Huan-xu and Rive-Gauche, an article written by Wan-shun Shi (1988), said that, "With this strong social critique (use of the image of a burning red sun which people associate with communism), Rive-Gauche's postmodern performance teetered between ambiguous images and political invocations, between physical language and verbal messages. Rive-Gauche wanted their new performance style to become a tool for changing social consciousness, not just a postmodern theater commodity."¹⁸

October (1987)

In December 1987, Min-sheng Daily News spotlighted the

phenomenal trend of environmental theatre:

Environmental Theatre Became a Trend

The Impact Is No Less Than National Theatre

In January this year,.... young people began to step out of the proscenium stage and staged environmental theatre performance. These rough, simple compositions were full of originality and grassroots charm, a strong contrast with the fine arts produced in the newly opened National Theatre....

Notebook, Huan-xu and Rive-Gauche, three little theatres, collaborated on October, which was presented at the Xi-ban stop of Dan-jin Seashore Highway (Min-sheng Daily News 1987).

Rive-Gauche continued its experimentation in theatre aesthetics and forms in 1987, merged itself into a new trend of contemporary Taipei theatre at that time, seeking a shared environment of performance and audience. They carried out their peripheral identification by choosing the seashore, and an abandoned factory as a 'theatre' to express their disgust at government-managed National Theatre and the mainstream theatre performances which relied heavily upon the financial support from the KMT government.

More importantly, featuring three young students, a crazy controller and a prostitute, the play mocked the political festivals in October both in Taiwan and those in the Mainland. October is a 'brilliant' month on both sides of the Taiwan Strait. October 1st is the National Day (Liberation Day) for Communist China, while, in Taiwan, October 10th, 25th and 31st mark respectively the Returning Day of Taiwan (to China from Japanese rule in 1945), the National Day and Chiang Kai-shek's

birthday, which became a national holiday since his death.

The director, Huan-xiong Li, explained the main idea of the play:

It was a voice of distrust and anger, anger at the political controls. We experienced the most severe typhoon of the year, but 200 people came to attend the show all the way from Taipei City. We succeeded in our intention of opposition by having our own festival, an alternative one.

Both The Sun is Still Shining and October were held in 1987, the year of the lifting of the martial law. As mentioned above, it was a year of overall breakdown of old power and ideological systems which also opened the possibilities of different discourses, and provided a climate for the growth of the Avant-Garde Theatre. Since the performance of The Intruder in 1986, Rive-Gauche has spoken out that the history of Taiwan as a narrative of a series of intruders and political suppression. Now, driven by the exciting forces in the social environment, with their shouts of anger and ramming bodies, Rive-Gauche was trying even harder to dig the loose soil of the established discourses of Taiwan's history.

From Confusion to Searching: The Third Phase, 'Seeking the Map in Myths' Series

After the chaos during the post-martial-law phases, Taiwanese society was facing the challenge of building a new

order. The destruction of the old "Great China" tale caused much confusion, especially for the young generation like Rive-Gauche who were born in the 60s. Unlike their fathers' generation, who had grown up under the Japanese rule, these young people grew up with the nationalist education and the KMT value system. All of these were changed after the social reforms in the late 1980s. Now, the independence of Taiwan becomes a big issue; in reality, it is even ridiculous to talk about the possibilities of unification of the whole China by Taiwan.

In 1988, Rive-Gauche Theatre began to look at the problem seriously. Although giving up the 30-year belief was not an easy task, they decided to devote themselves to searching for the misty and missing history of Taiwan. Feeling lost in the myth of identity, from 1988, they started a research project, entitled 'Seeking the Map in Myths' to search for the lost part of their memories.

An Island Without Coordinates (1988)

The first play of the series was **An Island Without Coordinates** in 1988. Based on a Japanese novel, the play told a story of a woman's searching for her secretly lost husband. Through the conversation between the woman and a detective, both of them began to doubt that the lost man had ever existed because the woman couldn't remember anything about him. In the end of the play, the detective even began to suspect that himself might be the lost person. All the confusion in the play illustrated the embarrassing, floating and uncertain situation that Taiwanese faced after the ruin of the old belief. As the director, Huan-xiong Li, said,

The reality is that we all live in such a crowded, noisy island for 30 years, so close to this polluted environment, but everybody is thinking of going back to the Mainland, a remote and unfamiliar place to us, and never look at Taiwan as our home country....This is absurd...All of a sudden, I felt

that I was lost in a blurred map without boundary and direction,...I feel that if we don't look back to the history of Taiwan, don't look for a clear picture of our forefathers, we'll get lost more seriously in the future.

A Remembrance of the Departure I & II (1992)

Trying to find out how their fathers' and grandfathers' generations cope with their confusion and dilemma, Rive-Gauche dug into the forbidden history of the 228 incident, the 1947 massacre conducted by the KMT. The two performances, A Remembrance of the Departure I & II in 1992, were based on a true story of Chang family who suffered from triple deaths in the massacre. The massacre was interpreted by the KMT as a Taiwanese Communist riot and, during the rule of two Chiangs, Taiwanese were never allowed to talk about it. After one year research and interviews with the victims' family, those two plays provided an alternative aspect of the incident. As well as trying to unveil the mist, the performances searched for an overall forgiveness and peace for the historical mistake.

Stars, the Shimmery (1991) & Lai Ho (1994)

According to the group leader, Huan-xiong Li, they are not trying to re-interpret history. Instead, They want to create a space for conversations between the minds of Taiwanese in the past and in the modern day and to explore the thoughts of the people in old times. Li explained their incentive as,

By way of reading their works, their dairies,
 we want to find some answers from our ancestors,
 and to see if there is anything in their thoughts that
 can be passed to us, to give us courage for living in
 such a confusing time.

Based on this thought, the other two plays in the "Seeking the Map in the Myths" series flew back to the 20s, the time of Japanese rule. Stars, the Shimmery focused on the young anarchists in the 20s who aspired to drive Japanese imperialism out of Taiwan, and to build a happy land in which there was no government and political controls. Those secret, revolutionary organizations were eventually destroyed by the Japanese government and disappeared like shimmering lights of stars; but the wish of building Taiwan as a happy land has been passed through generations to the 90s, and is still asking a large effort of today's youth.

Also focusing on the 20s, the 1994 performance, Lai Ho, based on his dairy in prison, illustrated how Lai Ho, a Taiwanese doctor, socialist as well as a poet, suffered from his self-ambivalence, swinging between his Chinese and Japanese cultural identity just like today's Taiwanese swinging between their Chinese and Taiwanese identity. Lai Ho was a member of the Taiwan Cultural Association, which perceived Taiwanese as "suffering from a disease" caused by "mental malnutrition", due to the lack of Chinese culture. The group actively promoted Chinese culture all around the island. Lai Ho, being a member of the association, was arrested twice. He died in 1943, a year after his second release from prison at age of 49. Till the end

of his life, he was still not able to witness Taiwan's returning to China.

At the end of the interview, the director, Huan-xiong Li made his conclusion on their performances: "...All of our yearning and searching for the destiny which belonged to the time of youth have settled down onto the consequences of time, the structure of history."

SUMMARY: ABOUT THE VIDEO

All of the information in this paper, the historical background of Taiwan and the performances of Rive-Gauche theatre, are combined in the 20-minute video. Three different titles visually separate the growth of the group into three phases, marking their progressive attempts.

The first one, 'Aesthetic Experiment', introduces two performances of the group to exemplify their initial intention of finding a way of departure from the mainstream Spoken Drama and Experimental Drama, by using anti-narrative techniques of image theatre. The "in-between" phase, 'Subversion and Critique', is a transition period in which the group actively subverted the proscenium stage and dominance of character and plot in the conventional performances by choosing environmental theatre skills, and, at the same time, carried out their ideas on theatres' engagement in a critique of social system, namely the authoritarian KMT regime built by the two Chiangs. During this section, the 1987 political reform is introduced, and the audience will be able to see the juxtaposition of the social movement in the late 80's and the performances which reflected on the stage the ramming energy in the social environment. The third phase, 'Searching for History and Destiny', shows how the group settled down their anger and doubts on the central question concerning their destiny, and eventually related it to that of the island, the missing history of Taiwan. Through the

interviews and the performances in the 'Seeking the Map in Myths' series, the aspiration of seeking an answer from the misty history becomes more and more clear. Brief narrative explanations associated with old photos of the 20s and 50s are intermingled with performances to give the performances historical settings.

The program's ending does not provide a definite answer to the future of Taiwan, nor does Rive-Gauche. According to Zhi-zhong Ye, a key member of the group, they probably won't be able to get any 'real' answer. However, it is certain that, through the conversations with the past generations during the process of searching, they do get new courage to fight against their confusion and struggles about their identity. Insisting to develop a theatre art that belongs to this time and this place of Taiwan, they will keep going because there is always more to be done.

One copy of the video is reserved in the department of Telecommunication at Michigan State University. The original version of the video is in Chinese. English-speaking audience can use the Appendix in this paper as a reference to help understand the content of the program.

APPENDIX

APPENDIX

ENGLISH TRANSCRIPT FOR 'VISITING THE LEFT BANK'

- 1.V/O (voice over): In 1985, a theatre group named "Rive-Gauche" emerged in Tanshuei, a small town beside the Tanshuei River, outside Taipei City. Most of its members were born in the 60's. They are the generation which never experienced wars, were well educated, and grew up with the economic and democratic development of Taiwan. In the mid-80's, being college students, they chose the performing arts, and became one of the important avant-garde theatre groups in Taiwan.
- 2.Li: We had a strong idea that we didn't want to be part of the mainstream culture. It had something to do with our character. In addition, unlike Taipei metropolitan area, Tanshuei is a peripheral place located where the river runs out into the ocean so that we always felt that we were free; we could always leave.

Part I : Aesthetic Experiment

I Want to Eat My Shoes

- 3.V/O: In 1985, searching for a unconventional way of expression, the group made its debut with "I Want to Eat My Shoes", a play that transformed it from a poetry group into a theatre group. Imitation of poetic essence became the aesthetic basis of its succeeding plays.

The Intruder

- 4.V/O: A year later, Rive-Gauche performed its second play, "The Intruder", based on the novels of Capote

and Maeterlinck. Continuing their poetic experiment, the narrative structure was broken; unusual language, fragments of images, the idle-like movements of actors always under the threat of unknown intruders, all built an untranquil atmosphere, as if the audience were reading a poem.

5.(Play) Old Man: What's that again?

Girl: Nothing. Maybe you just heard our trembling.

6.(Play) Man: She is always unadorned, with gray hair, always wearing casual clothes.

7.(Play) Old Man: Didn't you see anybody?

Girl: Nobody, grandpa.

Man: How is it outside?

Girl: Pretty. Did you hear the nightingale?

8.Li: The language in the play sounded like translated texts. When you hear incoherent sentences or words, the meaning becomes unfixed, and you can have more room for imagination.

Part II: Critique & Subversion

9.(Social movement) People Shouting: Give back my land!
Resign! You old thieves!

10.V/O: In 1987, the martial law in Taiwan was lifted. It was a turning point in Taiwan. The release of the freedom of expression, end of political heroes, break-down of political taboos, all raised doubts and questions concerning the old KMT power and value systems. All kinds of social movements appeared, making Taiwan a chaotic and boiling island in the late 80's.

The Sun Is Still Shining

11.Li: It was around the time of the lifting of the martial law, no wonder many friends remember "The Sun's Still Shining" best. The expression of our bodies were the most subversive at the time because of the driving forces in the social environment. It had nothing to do with theatrical skills; it was a precious experience of our life.

12.V/O: "The Sun's Still Shining" illustrated the class conflict in Taiwan between a doctor's family and their neighboring community of miners in 20's, when Taiwan was under Japanese rule.

- 13.Li: There was a stratum between two different kinds of bodies, two classes. An unbalanced slant of classes became the motif of the play. We were young at that time and , to some extent, we were left-wingers, yearning for the ideal socialism and neo-Marxism. I think few people can avoid that yearning when they are young, a yearning for the left.

October

- 14.V/O: After performing "The Sun", in October, 1987, Rive-Gauche held a joint performance, "October", with two other avant-garde theatres. In the play, they made much effort to mock the political festivals in October, both those in Mainland and in Taiwan.
- 15.V/O: In the middle of the play, by way of two high school students' memories of the funeral of President Chiang Kai-shek, those young people challenged the 40-year totem.
- 16.(Play) Boy & Girl: In that Spring, everybody you saw was wearing a mourning band. The instructor asked us to pay respects to the remains of President Chiang. I saw many, many people in a long, long line. Lots of old people were crying and screaming: "Don't die! You can't die! You brought us to Taiwan, you've got to take us back to the Mainland. You can't just die!"
- 17.Li: It was a voice of distrust and anger, anger at the political controls.
- 18.V/O: In the play, they also expressed their rebellion against the mainstream theatres and their strong relationships with the government apparatus.
- 19.Li: In October of the year the National Theatre was built in Taipei, that's why we intentionally chose a seashore, an abandoned factory far away from Taipei City to hold the show.
- 20.V/O: Loose structure plus uncouth body language made "October" an alternative performance to the traditional ones which relied on concrete plots and beautiful performers. Meanwhile, the visible line between the performer and the audience was broken. Theater became an extended space; the audience became part of the settings, even part of the performance itself. The peripheral nature and identification of Rive-Gauche stood out even more

clearly in this play.

- 21.Li: We experienced the most severe typhoon of the year, but 200 people came to attend the show all the way from Taipei City. We succeeded in our intention of opposition by having our own festival, an alternative one.

Part III: Searching for History & Destiny

- 22.V/O: The lifting of the 38-year martial law and the death of Chiang Ching-kuo marked the end of the 40 year rule of Chiang family in Taiwan.
- 23.(Social Movement): We require an overall re-election of the parliament. A President must be elected by the people someday.
- 24.V/O: The suppressed Taiwanese native discourses rose up right after. Now, nobody believed the fairy tale of the "Great China" built by the Chiangs. To the young generations who grew up with the KMT's nationalist education, this was an overwhelming destruction of their ideological belief.
- 25.Sun: The lifting of martial law was an embarrassment to us, the second generation of mainlander. We didn't know if we should continue to consider the Mainland as our homeland, or embrace Taiwan where we have grown up for 30 years. The embarrassment was terrifying. My parents went back to the Mainland. They used to have connections and memories there. They have something to be nostalgic about, but I have nothing over there!
- 26.V/O: In 1949, the KMT, led by Chiang Kai-shek, was defeated in the Chinese civil war, and was forced to retreat to Taiwan. Always aspiring to return to the Mainland, Chiang built a dream of "Great China", educating people to construct Taiwan as a base for counterattacking communist China. Martial law was imposed. Students were taught to honor Sun Yet-sen and Chiang Kai-shek as heroes; to memorize Mainland's history, geography and culture, because someday, "Taiwan is going to unify the Mainland, unify China."
- 27.Li: The reality is that we all live in such a crowded, noisy city with this polluted water and air, but everybody was thinking of going back to the Mainland, a remote and unfamiliar place to us. This is absurd. All of a sudden, I felt that I was lost in a blurred map, lost in myths.

An Island Without Coordinates

28.V/O: Rive-Gauche began their work on "Seeking the Map in the Myths" series. The preface was "An Island Without Coordinates", indicating the floating, uncertain status of human existence, conveying the confusion of Taiwanese after the ruin of the old ideology.

29.(Play) Man: No clues. Know nothing. Remember nothing.

30.Li: We began to ask questions: "What's wrong on earth?"; "What keeps making us feel uncertain and insecure?" Then we realized that something has been missing -- the history, the memories. If we don't look back to the misty history of Taiwan itself and don't look back to see the faces of our forefathers, we'll get lost even more seriously.

A Remembrance of the Departure I & II

31.V/O: In 1992, trying to unveil the historical mist of Taiwan, the group performed "A Remembrance of the Departure", based on the true story of the Chang family who suffered from triple deaths of family members in the 1947's massacre conducted by the KMT.

32.(Play) Woman A: Even now, I can still hear the screaming and cries in the house.

Woman B: Don't cry! Don't cry!

33.(Play) Woman C: The belly of Grown was pierced.
Where's God? Where's God?

34.V/O: In 1945, after W.W.II, the KMT government accepted the Japanese surrender, and took over Taiwan. However, the misrule of KMT officials made Taiwanese feel as if they were subdued again. Two years later, on 28 February, conflicts burst out. Within two months, KMT troops from the Mainland repressed the uprising, killing most of the native Taiwanese elite. 228 became a nightmare of the Taiwanese and an forbidden history.

35.(Play) Man: My father and brothers are now lying in the cemetery outside our village.

Girl: Look! Mother and Sisters-in-law are cleaning up for them although they were dead.

36.V/O: This play accused on behalf of the victims as well as looked for overall forgiveness and peace.

37.Ye: Taiwan's past was a history of intrusion. It was continuously intruded upon against its will.

38.Chen: From the time of the ruling of the Dutch, to the Ching Dynasty, to the Japanese, to the KMT, Taiwan has always been uncertain about its own identity. The performance "The Intruder" in 1986 has touched this theme of uncertainty of Taiwan.

Stars, the Shimmery

39.V/O: Living on the constantly intruded upon island, facing the always-changing destiny, different generations of Taiwanese have had the same bafflement. In order to find an answer, Rive-Gauche explored the history of Taiwan of the 20's in the play, "Stars, the Shimmery". By showing the struggles of the anarchists in the 20's, the play reflected the entanglement of young people in the history of the 90's.

40.(Play) Boy A: Those Taiwanese dissidents are seen as bandits by the Japanese government. They got arrested to maintain the social security.

B: To build a happy land, we Taiwanese youth should wake up and fight against the evil Japanese imperialism. No government, no controls!

41.Li: "Stars, the Shimmery" contained conversations between the ideals and expectations of the anarchists of the 20's and those of modern day intellectuals which became the most interesting part in the play.

42.(Play) Woman: Recently, I dreamt of being pregnant for several times. In the dream, there was a huge black hole inside my body, and I could never fill it up.

43.Li: It was a dream of a mixture of history and the subconscious. This dream was intended to resolve our past and future doubts.

Lai Ho

44.V/O: Also focusing on the 20's, the 1994 performance,

"Lai Ho", based on his diary in prison, tells the story about Lai Ho, a doctor as well as a poet and novelist during Japanese rule. Being a doctor, Lai Ho suffered from his incompetency to cure people's mental anguish. He wrote compassionately of the

unresolvable puzzlement of cultural identity.

45.(Play) Man A: I can still remember why we named our party as Recovery Party.

B: "Recovery of health" is the goal of we doctors. But in my opinion, it also implied the wish of returning Taiwan to China.

Lai Ho: This intention failed eventually.

46.Tsao: I imagined Lai Ho as a quite person. He didn't say a lot, but he was always compassionate.

47.(Play) Lai Ho: Somebody asked me to join the Japanese police. No! I hate them. I want to be a doctor. Let me go to school; I want to be a doctor.

48.Tsao: He also felt self-contradiction about his traditional beliefs and new thoughts. That made him anxious. He didn't want to get rid of his Chinese legacy, yet he was fascinated by the technologies and methods introduced by the Japanese.

49.Li: Through the life of Lai Ho, we want to explore how our grandfathers' generation coped with their historical dilemma, to see if there is anything in their thoughts that can be passed to us, to give us the courage to live in such a confusing time.

50.(Play) Woman A: No, I didn't do it.

B: I didn't kidnap the child.

C: Why should I apologize? I didn't do it. Leave me alone.

51.Li: All of the yearning and searching for personal destiny which belonged to the time of youth settled down on the consequences of time, the structure of the history.

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