

**PERFORMING 'CHINESE-NESS': ARTICULATING IDENTITIES-OF-
BECOMING IN THE WORKS OF FOUR SINOPHONE THEATRE
DIRECTOR-PLAYWRIGHTS IN THE 1980s**

A Dissertation

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by

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ABSTRACT

Performing ‘Chinese-ness’: Articulating Identities-of-Becoming in the Works of
Four Sinophone Theatre Director-Playwrights in the 1980s

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This dissertation is the first full-length comparative study of contemporary drama that attempts to reflect the diversity of the Chinese-speaking world. By presenting a circuit of Sinophone creativity that differs substantially from that assumed by conventional literary history, which focuses on the People’s Republic of China, I investigate the formation of identity in the 1980s through the works of four important diasporic theatre director-playwrights — Gao Xingjian (China), Stan Lai (Taiwan), Danny Yung (Hong Kong) and Kuo Pao Kun (Singapore). I focus on the problem of “Chinese-ness,” arguing that the foregoing dramatists share an interest in problematizing essentialist notions of Chinese identity.

In the aftermath of the Cold War, the Iron Curtain not only divided the “two Chinas” across the Taiwan Straits, but also impacted the two former British colonies. Two imagined scenarios emerged — a re-sinification and eventual handover to China, and a clamp down on Chinese education due to the Red Scare — that forced the ethnic Chinese majorities of each state to respond to the accelerating emergence of China on the world economic and political scene on the

one hand, and simultaneously grapple with the ever-changing internal paradigm of the differing circumstances among each of the four sites on the other. While these dramatists were performing resistance against their individual ideological state apparatuses to monopolize identity through their theatre praxis, I argue that their formulation of cultural identities alternative to those sanctioned by their respective states is a reaction against cultural forces beyond national borders. Since the didactic function inherent in theatre produces, reconstructs, and problematizes identities in ways that other genres do not, my privileging of drama in the production of a global Chinese consciousness contributes to the discussion of Chinese-ness by providing a comparative vantage that highlights the diversity of Chinese-ness scripts in play. By mapping out the problem of Chinese-ness concretely and historically through my investigation of four geographically dispersed playwrights, therefore, this dissertation challenges the notion of a unified Chinese-ness that underscores a transnational perspective by which to view the question of identity construction as a postcolonial issue vis-à-vis China's ascendance that impacted the East Asia and Southeast Asia region.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Wah Guan Lim received his Bachelor of Arts (Honours Class 1) from the University of New South Wales (UNSW) in Sydney, a Master of Studies (M.St.) from the University of Oxford and a Master of Arts (M.A.) from Princeton University. In August 2015, he received his Ph.D. in Asian Literature, Religion, and Culture from Cornell University and became Assistant Professor of Chinese at Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, New York.

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Introductory Chapter

Through the pioneering efforts of Kuo Pao Kun 郭寶崑 (1939–2002), Singapore became a cultural epicenter of historic significance in the 1980s, a focal point that facilitated the inaugural meetings of important dramatists from Southeast and East Asia and provided a platform to showcase their works. In particular, in December 1987, Malaysia’s Krishen Jit (1939–2005), Beijing’s Gao Xingjian 高行健 (b. 1940), Hong Kong’s Danny Yung Ning Tsun 榮念曾 (b. 1943), Shanghai’s Yu Qiuyu 余秋雨 (b. 1946) and Taiwan’s Stan Lai Sheng-ch’uan 賴聲川 (b. 1954) — who were all on the brink of rising to become the most iconic figures and prime-movers of their own cultural scenes and beyond — met as a group in Singapore. This “Second Chinese-language Drama Camp” 第二屆華語戲劇營 blossomed into frequent artistic collaborations and exchanges between them and among other theatre scholars and practitioners in the Chinese-speaking world.¹ By situating the work of these contemporary Sinophone

¹ Held on December 31 1987–January 3 1988, this “Second Chinese-language Drama Camp” was preceded by an “Asian Chinese Playwrights’ Conference” 亞洲區域華人劇作家研討會 held earlier in the year in Hong Kong from April 30–May 4 1987. Kuo Pao Kun and English-language playwright Stella Kon were invited from Singapore to participate in this playwrighting conference and there met Gao Xingjian and Stan Lai among other luminary Chinese playwrights such as “Shanghai People’s Art Theatre” 上海人民藝術劇院 President Sha Yexin 沙葉新. This could well have been the inaugural meeting where all these important director-playwrights met as a group.

There was also a “First Chinese-language Drama Camp” that took place in December 1983 in Singapore whose list of invited master-dramatists included: veteran Hong Kong dramatist Lee Woon-wah 李援華, then Artistic Director of the “Hong Kong Repertory Theatre” 香港話劇團 Daniel Yang Shi-peng 楊世彭, the founder of Taiwan’s “Lan Ling Theatre Workshop” 蘭陵劇坊 Wu Jing-jyi 吳靜吉, Head of Drama of the United World College in Singapore Thomas Ray, Hong Kong dramatist Chu Hak 朱克 who was then hired as a playwright in the state-run television station “Singapore Broadcasting Corporation” (SBC), and Lee Wing Shek 利永錫 and Xia Xiaoxin 夏曉辛 both of whom graduated from the “Shanghai Theatre Academy” 上海戲劇學院 and were hired to train SBC actors. For further reading, see (Xinjiapo 1983; “Ying” 1987; Di’erjie 1988).

dramatists, I highlight the significance of studying comparatively these important public intellectuals as a group and how such analyses might reveal important but overlooked dynamics in the development of a pan-Chinese cultural consciousness outside the mainland in today's "globalizing" circumstances.

As the first full-length comparative study of contemporary drama that attempts to reflect the diversity of the Chinese-speaking world, this dissertation presents a circuit of Sinophone creativity that differs substantially from that assumed by conventional literary history, which focuses on the People's Republic of China. In particular, I investigate the formation of identity in the 1980s through the works of four important diasporic theatre director-playwrights — Gao Xingjian, Stan Lai, Danny Yung and Kuo Pao Kun. I focus on the problem of "Chinese-ness," arguing that the foregoing dramatists share an interest in problematizing essentialist notions of Chinese identity.² By examining the moment of the rise of these four playwrights — during the 1980s — I trace the reasons behind their ascendance to their celebrated status in their individual geopolitical regions. Why did their works become so important at their specific historical moments? How did the geopolitical situations relate to their individual spatial-temporal sites? Were they reacting to a Chinese hegemony or imagination? If so, what were they? While these dramatists are all important cultural figures and public intellectuals who influence their own artistic scenes and the surrounding regions, their works also reflect on the human condition and thereby create resonances in audiences across different cultures. I intend to focus my

² I have chosen not to pursue Krishen Jit and Yu Qiuyu as the subjects of my study because Jit does not contribute to the study of Chinese-language theatre and the bulk of Yu's creative energies have since moved from drama to cultural critique.

study on comparing the reception of their works in their individual locales in the 1980s — in what are arguably the most creative phases of their early careers during which all four of them were beginning to gain prominence and contributing to defining a pan-Chinese dramatic scene. Since the “Chinese diaspora” are defined essentially by what they are not — grouped under the same rubric precisely because they are outside the geographical confines of the People’s Republic of China — and not some kind of universal sameness or similarity, it is even more pertinent to historicize the unique geopolitical and socio-historical conditions in each site to account for the dramatists’ rise to auteurism. By the performance of their “Chinese-ness,” I do not mean to suggest that these director-playwrights have deliberately inserted elements of Chinese culture into their work to assert an aggressive claim to their Chinese heritage — either against the hegemony of mainland China or towards other (minority) cultures — rather, I had meant it as the phenomenon of their work that includes interpretations of their play-scripts and theatre productions, and other public intellectual and cultural discourses in which they are participants. I am problematizing here a multiplicity of “Chinese-ness” by looking at how they are each uniquely configured and performed by each dramatist. In so doing, this study aims to complicate the scenario of the Chinese government’s sole claim to cultural authenticity by offering alternative sites of cultural production other than the People’s Republic of China.

In the past eight years, the term “Sinophone” has gained increasing attention in the American academe. Most extensively advanced by Shih Shu-mei 史書美, David Wang Der-wei 王德威 and Jing Tsu 石靜遠, this emerging field

has called for other ways of imagining “Chinese-ness” apart from that being fixated on nationality and locality.³ Attempts to delink culture, nation and the political entity known as “China,” however, began two decades ago with Tu Weiming’s 杜維明 pioneering efforts to coin the term “Cultural China” in the early 90s and Leo Lee Ou-fan’s 李歐梵 discussion of what it means to be a self-imposed Chinese exile in the diaspora. These early attempts to privilege the periphery over the center that are critically opposed to nation-states’ appropriations of identity constructions for their own political agendas saw debates, most notably by Rey Chow 周蕾 and Ien Ang 洪宜安 among others, further echoing responses to de-center power from the hegemony of the PRC, nation-state, as well as Western academe, around the turn of the millennium. Ten years later, while seeking to resist the suturing call of Chinese-ness from mainland China, I see the work of “Sinophone Studies” 華語語系文學 as a continuation of the early attempts by Tu, Lee, Chow and Ang to challenge modern nation-states’ agenda of identity politics in general and the PRC’s political paradigm in its claim to authenticity of an essential Chinese-ness in particular.⁴

Apart from these efforts by scholars in the West, around the same period in Taiwan and Hong Kong, even if the same term is not invoked, scholars were making similar efforts to call attention to a plurality of the literary productions in the different Chinese worlds not based upon a centre-periphery or top-bottom hierarchy. While Yeo Songnian 楊松年 at Foguang University in Taiwan names

³ See, for instance, (Shih 2007), (Shih, Tsai and Bernards 2013), (Tsu and Wang 2010) and (Wang 2006).

⁴ See, for instance, (Ang 2000), (Chow 1997; 2000), (Lee 1991) and (Tu 1994).

this as “World Chinese Literature” 世界華文文學, in Hong Kong, Tam Kwok-kan 譚國根, Terry Yip Siu-han 葉少嫻 and Wimal Dissanayake have called for a similar re-examination of the field’s paradigm by underscoring the value of putting the Chinese writings from China, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore on the same platform:

The four Chinese communities represented in this volume, though sharing a common cultural heritage, have each taken a distinct path towards modernity and globalization, responding to the specific imperatives of their respective cultural geography. The way that citizens of these four communities seek to *make sense of being Chinese* in a rapidly changing world *makes each place implicated in the density of others*. ... it must be emphasized that we are *not positing a homology between state, nation, and culture*. As a matter of fact, the most innovative short story writers in these places, as indeed those anywhere else, seek to *break out of the single state-national-culture boundary* by focusing on the *sub-nationalities* and *sub-cultures* on the one hand and the *supra-national* and *super-cultural connections* on the other. ... In this process of cultural transformation and diversification, it is interesting to *identify the global issues the Chinese self must face while striving to remain Chinese and local*.

(Tam, Yip and Dissanayake 1999, xvii; italics mine)⁵

Although scholars have yet to come to an agreement on the exact definition of the Sinophone — such as Shih Shu-mei’s stance of defining the Sinophone against the mainland Chinese hegemony and David Wang’s approach

⁵ See, for instance, (Yeo and Jian 2004) and (Tam, Yip and Dissanayake 1999).

of a more inclusive field whereby literary productions from different Chinese-speaking regions whether within or outside of geopolitical China might become productive sites of comparative study — even more recently, scholars of Malaysian Chinese Literature like Tee Kim Tong 張錦忠 as well as scholars in Queer Studies such as Ari Larissa Heinrich 韓依薇 among others, have thrown in their lot and created “Sinophone Malaysian Literature” and “Queer Sinophone Studies,” thus contributing to the complexity and richness of the field and its ever-expansive definition.⁶

Perhaps more than what David Wang would call “boundaries in flux” (2006, 4), it is “The way that citizens of these four communities seek to *make sense of being Chinese* in a rapidly changing world [that] *makes each place implicated in the density of others*,” (Tam, Yip and Dissanayake 1999, xvii; italics mine) an interesting and productive comparative study — much more so than that of four individual cases of auteurism. By positioning my four Chinese ethnic dramatists in the discourse of “Sinophone Studies,” therefore, I aim to contribute to the discussion of “Chinese-ness” erstwhile appropriated through the lenses of sound, visibility, culture, writing, language, politics and nationality by these early scholars and extend it to the paradigm of theatre and performance. In the future discourse of world literature, I posit thus that “Sinophone Theatre” might offer an analytic lens which would open up new areas of inquiry that illuminate vital yet heretofore ignored dynamics in the escalation of a pan-Chinese cultural consciousness that is in an ever increasing need of heteroglossia and not one dominant voice.

⁶ See, for instance, (Tee 2010) and (Chiang and Heinrich 2014).

How do we understand “Chinese-ness” in each of these varied local contexts? How does Kuo Pao Kun’s multilingual and multicultural theatre praxis create a discursive space for Chinese-language theatre in Singapore — a country that is three-quarters ethnic Chinese but located in Southeast Asia, a region historically renowned to have tensions produced by the large number of diasporic Chinese struggling between integrating into local customs and retaining home cultures? Does Danny Yung’s postmodernist multimedia theatre preserve some aspect of a vanishing heritage of Chinese culture in a contemporary theatrical form, or are these (post)modern appropriations of still vital cultural production in a unique “borrowed time and borrowed space”? How do Gao Xingjian’s pre-exile plays propose an alternative Chinese imagination that differs so radically from the official Party line, which triggered censorship that forced him into an eventual self-imposed exile? Does Stan Lai’s presentation of a fragmented modernity in relation to some well-known element of traditional Chinese civilization in his plays suggest that traditional themes have relevance to modern frustrations?

With the methodological questions I propose in mind, I do not restrict myself to a presentation of four individual cases of “auteur studies”; rather, I examine how the reception of the work of these director-playwrights qualified their significance in the particular locale wherein each was working, keeping in mind at the same time that “flows” between these sites are porous and often influence the happenings in other locales. Principally, I investigate how several “Chinas” are imagined and performed through the reception of the dramatic productions of these auteurs, arguing for multiple sites of cultural production that advance different articulations of “Chinese-ness.” Above all, I identify the 1980s

as the period when the question of Chinese-ness was being radically (re)constructed in all four localities. Each of these regions with a majority of ethnic Chinese had to respond to and contend with a China newly emerged from the “Great Proletariat Cultural Revolution” 無產階級文化大革命 (1966–76), while simultaneously grappling with its ever-changing internal paradigm. It was also significant during this period when these director-playwrights all rose to become important auteurs in their own cultural scenes and beyond — establishing unique configurations of (Chinese) identities-of-becoming in their dramatic work.

Even though Lai (b. 1954) is roughly one generation younger than the other three artists — Kuo (b. 1939), Gao (b. 1940) and Yung (b. 1943) — somehow the 1980s appears to me an appropriate reference point for comparison because each of these dramatists began to increase in stature then. Arguably, despite their differing ages, their reputations only began to soar at about the same time. Consequently the three older dramatists can nonetheless be compared to Lai. Note that Lai was still in his early thirties when his first two productions *Na yiye*, *women shuo xiangsheng* 那一夜，我們說相聲 (The night we became crosstalk comedians; 1985) and *Anlian taohuayuan* 暗戀桃花源 (Secret love in peach blossom land; 1986) brought him early fame. What were these other dramatists doing in their early 30s? Kuo had already returned from his studies in Australia and setup his arts school to train actors and dancers, and he was also actively writing and directing plays. However, his career as a budding director-playwright came to an abrupt halt when the state detained him without trial for four-and-a-half years (1976–1980) on account of his leftist leanings. Only after his

reemergence upon his release and contributions to revitalize the badly shaken Chinese-language theatre scene through his efforts at building a transcultural Singaporean theatre was Kuo hailed as the “father of modern Singapore theatre.”

Similarly, the political circumstances of the times prevented Gao from pursuing his vocation publicly: he “was twenty-six when the Cultural Revolution began and thirty-six when it ended” (Moran 2013, 71). In fact, at the height of the Cultural Revolution, Gao even burnt a suitcase of nearly 40kg of his unpublished manuscripts — including ten plays, an unfinished novel, and numerous poems and notes — to avoid persecution (Quah 2004, 7). Only after the Cultural Revolution was Gao’s vigor as a writer noticed. In his late teens and twenties, Danny Yung was in the United States pursuing his college and graduate degrees. After graduation, he was preoccupied in the Asian American movement, becoming one of the founding members of the “Asian Counseling and Referral Service” (ACRS) in Seattle in 1973 — the year he turned thirty. He only made his mark as an avant-garde artist in Hong Kong after his return to the then British colony in 1978.

To anticipate my external factors — the end of the Cultural Revolution and China’s emergence into the global order — propelled the discourse of Chinese-ness to take shape simultaneously in all four locales shaping the rise of these four artists’ professional careers. In other words, in response to mainland China coming out of its long slumber, different senses of Chinese-ness were beginning to form in Singapore, Hong Kong, Taiwan and mainland China during the 1980s. Moreover in the exemplary works of these four dramatists one can discern these identities-of-becoming as an integrating theme. Contemporaneous

with these developments was the economic growth and rise of a middle class, prompting broad cultural changes, crucial among which was support for modernist and postmodernist theatres.

Chapter One discusses how the tradition inherited from the May Fourth intellectualism basically vanished by the mid-1970s in Singapore, mainly as a consequence of a series of educational reforms, personnel arrests and suppressions of artistic and social groups by the state. Kuo Pao Kun emerged from this low point in Singapore Chinese-language theatre with a resurgence that saw him transcend linguistic and cultural borders in his artistic practice. Reflecting on the painful emptiness that the end of the Cultural Revolution exposed, Kuo began offering theatre classes and writing his plays in English. Subsequently, he mounted his magnum opus *Xunzhao xiaomao de mama* 尋找小貓的媽媽 (Mama looking for her cat, 1988), incorporating actors of different ethnicities to perform in their various native tongues — English, Tamil, Mandarin, Hokkien, Teochew and Cantonese. This was the first multi-lingual production in Singapore theatre history that drew audiences from different language streams into the same spectatorial space, establishing an entirely new creative space for Singaporean Chinese-ness.

Chapter Two examines the pent-up frustrations that were culminating on the eve of the lifting of the martial law in Taiwan in 1987. This era witnessed a groundswell of societal forces unprecedented in its impact. While the government was forced to make political concessions to the “native Taiwanese” 本省人, the “mainlanders” 外省人 could look forward to the possibility of seeing their

families in China again after nearly four decades. During this historical surge the works of director-playwright Stan Lai, such as his series of *xiangsheng* plays 相聲劇 and *Secret Love in Peach Blossom Land* evoked a critical reflection and sense of affective belonging among both audiences across the Taiwan Straits — although Lai staged his productions in mainland China only in the recent decade, bootleg copies of his works have long penetrated the Chinese black market.

Chapter Three similarly details how Margaret Thatcher’s meeting with Deng Xiaoping 鄧小平 in Beijing in 1982 culminated in the signing of the 1984 Sino-British Joint Declaration forced the people of Hong Kong to rethink their current identities vis-à-vis their possible future of re-Sinification. Danny Yung’s series of plays such as *Zhongguo lücheng* 中國旅程 (Journey to the east) and *Zhongguo wenhua shenceng jiegou* 中國文化深層結構 (Deep structure of Chinese culture) gave currency for deep reflection to an audience steeped in such identity crises.

Chapter Four investigates Gao Xingjian’s rise to prominence in the experimental theatre scene in China at the end of the Cultural Revolution when his contemporaries — the *shanghen* 傷痕 (“Scar” or “Wounded”) and *xungen* 尋根 (“Roots seeking” or “Search for roots”) writers — were negotiating a discursive space with the state, seeking to redefine themselves and find a meaning of being Chinese other than what the Party has defined for them. Inspired by French avant-garde plays, Gao, too, attempted to wrest the idea of “an authentic Chinese-ness” away from the Beijing-centered political elites by championing

that Chinese heritage has multiple lineages — a notion that gained intellectual agency during the 1980s “cultural self-reflection” 文化反思.

These four pivotal figures are usually recognized as having acquired accomplished reputations in their respective homelands, yet their transcultural and transnational life experiences necessarily enrich their work and worldviews. In other words, they are not bound by any specific nation-state or culture. Nevertheless, they have always returned to Chinese-ness as their primary spring of creativity. Note, for example, that Stan Lai is the only one of the four not born in China. Kuo Pao Kun was born in a poor village in Hebei and Danny Yung in cosmopolitan Shanghai, and both left China at a relatively young age (and coincidentally, to Hong Kong). Stan Lai was born to a *waisheng* 外省 family serving in the Republic of China’s embassy stationed in Washington D.C.⁷ He “returned” to Taiwan at the age of ten, went through his late elementary-, middle-school and college education in Taiwan, before going back to the United States to pursue a doctorate in Dramatic Art at the University of California, Berkeley. Returning again to Taiwan upon graduation in 1983, the young Lai was invited by Taiwan theatre veteran Yao Yiwei 姚一葦 (1922–1997), then Dean of the College of Drama at the National Institute of the Arts 國立藝術學院 in Taipei, to teach in

⁷ The two million people mainly composed of families of the military and Kuomintang 國民黨 (KMT or Nationalist Party) government who moved to Taiwan following their defeat in the Chinese Civil War (1945–49) were known as the *Waisheng* 外省 people: literally those “(from) outside of the (Taiwan) province.” In 1949, although they made up only fifteen percent of the population they held military and governmental posts and hence were considered as being in privileged positions by the majority group the *Bensheng* 本省 people: those “(from) within the (Taiwan) province” who had moved to Taiwan from neighboring Fujian and Guangdong over several centuries. The identity politics between these two groups were to dominate Taiwan for the next few decades, with *bensheng* people claiming for more power to articulate a “nativist” position against the *waisheng* people whom they consider as oppressors. Stan Lai’s plays, I propose, offer a perspective that highlights the sufferings the *waisheng* people had also undergone to acculturate to Taiwan and is an attempt to suture the rupture between these two disparate groups.

the school, which subsequently appointed Lai as the Founding Dean of their Graduate School of Theatrical Arts (Chang 2003, 68). Along with actors Hugh Lee Kuo-hsiu 李國修 (1955–2013) and Lee Li-chun 李立群 (b. 1952) Lai co-founded “Performance Workshop” 表演工作坊 in November 1984, with Lai and his wife Ting Nai-chu 丁乃竺 serving respectively as the theatre company’s Artistic Director and Managing Director.

Kuo Pao Kun moved from Hebei to Beijing when he was eight, acquiring his trademark Beijing-accented Mandarin in his early years there, and transited for nine months in Hong Kong before being called to Singapore at the age of ten to reunite with his businessman father. Transferring between both Chinese and English-medium schools multiple times — due to the political upheavals in 1950s Singapore — changing schools as many as six times within a span of six years, much of Kuo’s early bilingual education was obtained in Singapore, allowing him to leave for Australia in 1959 to work as a Chinese translator/announcer in Melbourne with Radio Australia. Apart from visiting rural temple festivities and monthly village markets in Hebei and watching much street opera in Beijing as a young boy, Kuo’s early exposure to drama was his introduction to radio drama at the local Rediffusion Mandarin Drama Group in 1955. Not until 1957, however, did he receive formal screen-acting training from Wang Qiutian 王秋田 (1905–2000), Low Ing Sing 劉仁心 (1924–2002), Lin Chen 林晨 (1919–2004) and Zhu Xu 朱緒 (1909–2007) — pioneers in Singapore Chinese drama. They introduced the young Kuo to the concept of serious theatre, who subsequently enrolled in the National Institute of Dramatic Arts (NIDA) in Sydney in 1963 to acquire formal

training in contemporary theatre and humanities in the European tradition. The experience at NIDA solidified this sense of theatre professionalism. He returned to Singapore in 1965 and co-founded the “Singapore Performing Arts Studio” (SPAS) 新加坡表演藝術學院 with his wife, dancer Goh Lay Kuan 吳麗娟 (b. 1939), one month before Singapore was declared independent.

In contrast, Yung came on the last boat out of Shanghai in 1949 to Hong Kong when he was five. Brought up by extremely liberal parents who took him to nightclubs when he was only eight, he began to learn how to mambo and cha-cha with famous movie stars such as Teresa Lee Lai Wah 李麗華 when other children of a similar age were doing their homework! (Watson 2002) He went to the United States at the age of seventeen for his tertiary education, and was also involved in the early phases of the Asian American movement.⁸ In his eighteen years in the United States, he had not used a word of Chinese to the extent that a sense of alienation and renewed interest arose in him when he returned to Asia (Yung 2010), first to Beijing and later to Hong Kong where he set up his theatre group “Zuni Icosahedron” 進念·二十面體 in 1982 — the same year that Thatcher and Deng met that concluded in the signing of the 1984 Sino-British Joint Declaration.

⁸ Along with Eleanor Yung, Peter Pan, Frank Ching and Rocky Chin, Danny Yung founded the “Basement Workshop,” the first Asian American arts and cultural organization on the East Coast in 1971 in New York City. This organization was funded by the Ford Foundation — the first grant ever given to study Asian-Americans — and was an outgrowth of the research and data compiled for the Chinatown Report 1969, which became a landmark case study leading to similar studies by other universities, and is still cited in many community research reports. After the study was completed, Danny Yung and his colleagues continued to compile information about Asian American communities. This work eventuated in the Asian American Resource Center and founding of a magazine entitled *Bridge*. For further reading, see (Bolling) and (Wong 2006).

Gao Xingjian is the only one among the four who did not receive formal academic instruction in the West, but he majored in French language and literature in the Beijing Foreign Languages Institute 北京外國語言學院 (now Beijing Foreign Studies University). He was a ferocious reader in his college years and gave himself a comprehensive education through reading the world canon. During his stint working as a translator at the Foreign Languages Bureau of the Ministry of Culture upon his graduation in 1962 Gao was exposed to the latest Western literary trends coming into China at the time as he could read them in the original French, which was not as highly censored as works written in English. After the Cultural Revolution, he became a screenwriter and playwright at the “Beijing People’s Art Theatre” (BPAT) 北京人民藝術劇院. There he teamed most frequently with the then young avant-garde director Lin Zhaohua 林兆華 (b. 1936) to produce what was regarded at the time as highly controversial plays *Juedui xinhao* 絕對信號 (Alarm signal, 1982), *Chezhan* 車站 (Bus stop, 1983) and *Yeren* 野人 (Wildman, 1985) — works that have now become classics in the history of contemporary Chinese drama in Western academe.⁹ Misdiagnosed with lung cancer in 1985 and to avoid being arrested by the authorities for his “subversive” writings he traveled into the remote hinterlands of southwestern China for five months, going “through eight provinces and seven nature reserves, covering fifteen thousand kilometers in the Yangtze region”

⁹ It might come as a surprise for some that Gao Xingjian’s works are considered classics of contemporary Chinese theatre history in Western academia but not in the official discourse in mainland China, where they have remained banned since 1989 when Gao tore up his Chinese passport in front of the international media in protest against the Tiananmen Incident, swearing that he will never return to China so long as the authoritarian regime remained in power (Mabel Lee 2006, 11).

(Quah 2004b, 10). There his interactions with ethnic minorities such as the Qiang, Miao, and Yi peoples on the fringes of Han Chinese civilization became a prevalent theme in his magnum opus *Lingshan* 靈山 (Soul mountain, 1989) and in other works. Knowing full well that his works would never be tolerated and openly staged in China again after the authorities disbanded the production team for his next play *Bi'an* 彼岸 (The other shore, 1986) during the rehearsal stages and warned its cast not to collaborate again with him, Gao left for France in 1987 where he has continued to write ever since. From 1990 on, the first versions of the plays he wrote are all in French before translating them himself into Chinese.

The 1980s makes an interesting case for comparison, because, in some respects, these auteurs were all filling artistic vacuums and creating cultural traditions anew. As I argue here, the 1980s is a consequential time-frame for my study of these auteurs as it accounts for the identities-of-becoming in the various locales that are responding to a China that is emerging from the Cultural Revolution. From the identities of Gao Xingjian's diasporic position *within* the mainland, to the diasporic Chinese positionalities of Stan Lai, Danny Yung and Kuo Pao Kun on its peripheries: what were they now that an Other China is (re)appearing? Or perhaps, now that the Original has (re)appeared, its "authenticity" is forcing these various sites to confront their own "Othered" positions. I argue that the 1980s comprise as a transition from a "Chinese in Singapore" to "Singaporean Chinese" identity and so on, in varying configurations. According to theatre and cultural critic Quah Sy Ren 柯思仁, "the evolution of multilingual theatre [in Singapore] since the mid-1980s is not

only a result of innovative artistic representation, but it should also be perceived as a critical part of an identity searching process” (2002, 382). Similarly, while I am not trying to argue that a Hong Kong Chinese-ness or Singaporean Chinese-ness did not predate 1980, I would propose that since the 1980s, a new type of Chinese-ness came to the fore due to the changing conditions in the international scene, forcing the Chinese people in all four locales to reexamine their identities. And it is precisely at this time that the four dramatists I study contributed to the construction of the differing Chinese identities in their various locales that ascertained their significance in the Chinese dramatic world.

Chapter One Articulating Alternative Cultural Identity: Kuo Pao Kun's Multilingual Theatre Practice in Singapore

I. Introduction

On August 2 2013, a headline in the Singaporean Chinese-language daily newspaper *Lianhe zaobao* 聯合早報 read, “After 23 years, ban lifted on Liang Wern Fook’s song *Sparrow with Bamboo Twigs*” (Li 2013). This song was part of a genre known as *xinyao* 新謠 — literally new ballads or Singaporean ballads — created in the mid-1980s to celebrate the lives and vibrancy of the young nation, then eager to seek and shape its identity. There was, in fact, nothing seditious in the content of this particular *xinyao* and its writer Dr. Liang Wern Fook 梁文福 (b. 1964), who was awarded the Cultural Medallion in 2010 by the state, has since become an icon of Singaporean popular music and synonymous with the *xinyao* movement.¹⁰ The song was banned because it contained a line of Hokkien 福建話 and two lines of Cantonese 廣東話.¹¹

¹⁰ For a moving account of this incident by the songwriter, see (Liang 2013). Its English translation titled “The Little Sparrow That Could” is available at (Lai 2013).

¹¹ Together with Teochew 潮州話, these are the three most widely spoken regional languages or dialects among the ethnic Chinese in Singapore, who are largely made up of immigrants from China’s southeast coast. These three regional languages, as well as Mandarin, English, Malay and Tamil, are the most widely spoken languages used in Singapore and are employed in Kuo Pao Kun’s *Mama Looking for Her Cat*, which this chapter discusses in greater depth. Other sizeable minority groups within the ethnic Chinese community include the Hainanese 海南, Hakka 客家 and Hockchew 福州. What is referred to as the Hokkien dialect 福建話 in Singapore is the regional language spoken at Xiamen 廈門 (hence also known as Xiamen hua 廈門話 or Xiayu 夏語), Minnan hua 閩南話 (language of the Southern Min), or Taiyu 台語 in Taiwan.

With the exceptions of these three lines, the rest of the song was sung in Mandarin — one of the four “official” languages the Singaporean government has adopted since the nation-state’s newly independence in 1965. According to what has come to be called the “Multiracial Model,” governance is divided along “ethnic” lines. The recognized “ethnic” groups are Chinese, Indians, Malays and Others (also known as the “CIMO” model), and the state’s four official languages that represent these groups respectively are: Mandarin, Tamil, Malay and English. Regional variations of the Chinese language have not been permitted to air on public media since 1979 — the year the “Speak Mandarin Campaign” 講華語運動 was launched,¹² except for a three-minute news-reporting segment in each of the six dialects aired daily at 8pm over the radio (Chan 2008, 100).¹³

While the ban on dialects was only lifted in the music scene in 2013, the theatre circle already overcame this barrier in 1988 with the play, *Xunzhao xiaomao de mama* 尋找小貓的媽媽 (Mama looking for her cat), by Kuo Pao Kun 郭寶崑 (1939–2002). In this devised ensemble piece, remarks founder of the Theatre Studies Program at the National University of Singapore, K.K. Seet 薛謙恭, Kuo has integrated “multiple languages and dialects (English, Mandarin, Tamil, Hokkien, Cantonese and Teochew) in the same text to capture the cultural

¹² The “Speak Mandarin Campaign” was not, in fact, aimed at increasing the Chinese cultural literacy level of Singaporeans. Instead, it was targeted to discourage ethnic Chinese Singaporeans from speaking dialects and adopt Mandarin. Coupled with the government’s “bilingual” education policy that saw an elevation of the status of the English-language taught alongside another native language, the Chinese cultural literacy level of Singaporeans has in fact declined significantly over the years (Wong 1989, 73).

¹³ Another exception was made in 2003 with the outbreak of the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) in Asia, where the ban was temporarily lifted because the elderly — some of whom could only understand dialects — were the most prone to be affected by SARS and needed to be educated on precautionary measures through the mass-media.

syncretism and linguistic pluralism of Singapore,” and he “has come to epitomise the quintessential Singaporean in his increasingly instrumental role as a mediator between the hitherto polarised streams of Singapore theatre” (Seet 1994, 244). What were these different streams in Singapore theatre that Seet refers to and why were they “hitherto polarised”? Quah Sy Ren, who usually presents his academic work in Chinese, has commented on several occasions when he writes and speaks in public on Kuo in English that Quah has chosen to do so because of the bifurcation of the linguistic communities in Singapore; in other words, Quah chooses to introduce Kuo as the syncretic Chinese-intellectual to the artistic practitioners and academics in the English-language stream who would otherwise be unaware of the many contributions Kuo made to Chinese-language theatre (Quah 2002, 377–378; 2010, 149; 2012). Indeed theatre in Singapore as well as Singaporean society at large before the 1980s were “noticeably divided into different language streams” (Quah 2001, 378), and chief among Kuo’s many contributions to the arts scene in Singapore is perhaps his having become “the bridge-builder between the Mandarin and English streams” (Jit 2000, 92).

Kuo Pao Kun is widely regarded as Singapore’s most important dramatist to date. As an avid theatre practitioner who was originally only active in the Chinese-language stream, Kuo proceeded in the 1980s to conduct workshops and write plays in the English language, as well as to develop a multilingual theatre praxis that henceforth became the definitive model of the Singaporean theatre. As a result, all the major artists in both the current local Chinese- and English-language theatre circles have been nurtured under his influence. This chapter raises two questions: Why and how did Kuo cross the linguistic divide that so

governed the ethnic groups prior to the 1980s? What did this transgression mean for the young Singaporean nation, which had by then achieved a decade of economic progress and was seeking to establish its own cultural identity? In what follows, I examine the changing geopolitical conditions that determined the arts and cultural policies in 1980s Singapore, and demonstrate how Kuo's response contributed to a different mapping of Chinese-language drama that stood the city-state apart from the theatre scenes in Hong Kong, Taiwan and China — regions with a majority of ethnic Chinese that were each reacting to the external pressures confronting them towards the end of the Cold War. In contradistinction to the government's "Multiracial Model," I argue that Kuo's theatre practice — beginning with his multilingual play *Mama Looking for Her Cat* — can be seen as a medium for articulating an alternative form of cultural identity.

Before reviewing the Singapore theatre scene prior to the 1980s, I first briefly discuss the government's formulation of "Multiracial Model." According to Quah, "Critics generally recognized" the division of Singaporean society-at-large before the 1980s into "different language streams, namely, Chinese, English, Malay and Tamil ... as the result of the colonial governing authorities' 'separate-and-rule' policy," (Quah 2002, 378). When the People's Action Party (PAP) took over as Singapore's government in 1959, they sought to encourage the building of modern Singaporean society through "Multiracialism" wherein the four major ethnic groups were given "separate-but-equal status" (Benjamin 1975, 12). Quah points out in PAP leader Lee Khoo Choy's 李炯才 1967 speech, *National Culture in a Multi-Racial Society*, declaring that "we should seek for unity of content out of the diversities [*sic*] in the forms of cultural expression ... but the

content of this expression must be directed to a Singaporean loyalty” (Lee qtd. in Quah 151, 2010; [*sic*] quoted in Quah). Sociologist Geoffrey Benjamin exposes this paradoxical rationale:

In order to demonstrate the *distinctiveness* of each of the four cultures their *differences* have to be heightened, their similarities underplayed, and expressive forms have to be developed to display their separate-but-equal status. A simple example is provided by the vignette of four inter-linked but differently hued hands that appears on the back of Singapore’s ten-dollar currency note. The *constant reiteration* of the Chinese-Malay-Indian-Eurasian categorisation in national censuses, in the Reports of Government departments concerned with social policy, and in the schools, puts considerable pressure on people to see themselves as *ethnically defined*. Two institutions have emerged to give expression to this idea: the “cultural show”, and the organisation of broadcasting (especially television).

The cultural show consists of a series of dances or musical performances, almost always containing at least a Chinese, an Indian and a Malay item, the aim of which is to achieve *token representation* of each constituent “culture” rather than to provide an aesthetically satisfying evening’s entertainment.

(1975, 12; italics mine)¹⁴

¹⁴ This cultural variety show is known as *Aneka Ragam Rakyat* (Variety Concert of the People) in Malay — the national language. Launched by the PAP government, it was also “regularly staged by the performing arts groups,” each attempting to interpret its own version of the multiracial, multicultural makeup of Singaporean society (Quah 2010, 151).

Benjamin's study emphasizes that the government's primary "concern for ethnic representation ... is also displayed by the locally produced dramas broadcast on the Republic's television service, which are almost always performed by 'racially' homogeneous casts appropriate to the language used" (1975, 13). To be sure, from its inception as "Television Singapura" in 1963 to today's "Media Corporation of Singapore," the nation's television service has generally followed this ethos, with Channel 5 and Channel 8 screening programs primarily in the English- and Chinese-language respectively.

If what this "Multiracial Model" had intended was to promote "cultural interactions between different ethnic groups" (Quah 2004a, 35) and create a cohesive, integrated society as such, paradoxically the effects it generated were contrary to its aim: by highlighting the differences between individual cultures, one would be encouraged to think of oneself first as a distinctively defined ethnic person and therefore different from someone who might hold the same nationality but belonging to another ethnic group. Singaporeans are constantly reminded of the ethnic categories to which they are designated by the State each time these categorically marked differences are emphasized as they are "performed." This is further exacerbated by the seeming impossibility of transcending the governance of strict ethnic boundaries: "It is interesting in this regard to note a tendency for children of mixed Indian-Chinese marriages to become 'Eurasians', and for Straits-born Chinese — the so-called 'Babas' — to resinicise to become Hokkien Chinese: these are convenient ways of maintaining ethnic boundaries while

changing their content” (Benjamin 1975, 15).¹⁵ It is thus not surprising that “Although the Singapore government has been actively promoting cultural interactions between different ethnic groups since the 1960s, the search was still on, in the 1980s, to find a more effective and deeper form of interaction” (Quah 2004a, 35). As I demonstrate in my study, Kuo’s “multiculturalism” aimed to transcend these linguistic and ethnic differences. His drama strove to be an “innovative artistic representation” on top of “a critical part of an identity searching process” (Quah 2002, 382).

II. Development of Local Consciousness in Early Singaporean Chinese-Language Theatre

Quah’s research reveals the divisions between the different ethnic groups in Singaporean society-at-large prior to the 1980s:

In the case of theatre, practitioners strove along their own course and their works bore different characteristics—all well within their respective communities. ... Practitioners and audiences of different language streams, however, were normally interested in and confined to their own community. ... As such, before the 1980s, the development of theatre within each community was generally not known to members of the other communities.

¹⁵ The “Straits-born Chinese” 土生華人 or Peranakans, have lived in the region for three generations or more. They are English-educated and many are offspring of intermarriages between Malays and Chinese in Singapore and Malaya and do not speak Chinese even though they have retained Chinese customs. Unlike immigrants from China who have “strong emotional and family ties with China” and look “upon China as their homeland,” most Peranakans perceive “themselves as loyal British subjects” (Quah 2010, 149–150). Male Peranakans are known as “Babas” and females “Nonyas.”

(Quah 2002, 378)

Of these separated language streams, the Chinese theatre groups were the most vibrant prior to the mid-1970s. The history of Chinese-language spoken drama in Singapore can be traced back to as early as 1913.¹⁶ Several scholars have pointed out that the development of early Chinese-language drama in Singapore, perhaps up until the 1960s, follows in close step with that of the dramatic scene in mainland China. Very much influenced by the progressive intellectualism of the 1919 May Fourth Movement, many serious Chinese-language plays in Singapore were staged with the purposes of educating the public, their content reflected societal concerns with sympathy for the masses, and their mode of presentation very much in the naturalist-realist tradition. Singaporean society before the Second World War was still largely an immigrant one, and therefore its literature strongly reflected a migrant mentality (Yeo 1982, 246). This mentality was partly expressed in a stronger concern for events happening in mainland China (Yeo 2005, 416). For instance, troupes in Singapore would stage plays to raise funds for their hometowns in China affected by natural disasters, or to protest the Japanese militaristic encroachment of China in the 1930s.¹⁷ Furthermore, Quah points out that “the Chinese-educated intelligentsia in Singapore was historically, strongly influenced by Chinese political ideologies and inspired by the May Fourth Cultural Movement (1919) in China,” and that Kuo Pao Kun’s “political awareness and inclination, which began to emerge in his theatre practice towards

¹⁶ Quah Sy Ren’s latest research on the topic extends Singapore’s Chinese-language theatre history to more than a century old. See (Quah 2013).

¹⁷ Theatre historian and dramatist Zhu Xu 朱緒 details that as early as 1922, there were already troupes staging performances in the Tanjong Pagar area to raise funds for flood relief efforts in China (Tay, et al. 1982, 18).

the late 1960s and early 1970s, were clearly influenced by this tradition” (Quah 2010, 150).

Quah’s study of the Chinese-language drama scene before World War Two suggests that it was fraught with problems. For instance, plays that were staged then had neither standardized scripts nor directors. The “mubiao zhi” 幕表制 (plot summary) — a system adopted directly from classical Chinese theatre performing at temple fairs and other outdoor avenues, where actors were given a brief sketch of the scenes they were to perform and would improvise their own lines when they went onstage — was used (Quah 1996, 91), and therefore the standards of the performance varied drastically. Plays were performed in Mandarin in accordance with the “Overseas Chinese Education Bureau” 華僑教育所 policies, even though the Chinese community in pre-war Malayan society were mainly made up of immigrants from Hokkien, Teochew and Canton, and Mandarin was not then widely spoken.¹⁸ Coupled with the low quality of productions, these plays were literally driving away the non Mandarin-speaking audience majority, thus failing the dramatists’ aim of educating the public through drama! (Quah 1996, 91 & 94) In response, the dramatists staged plays in dialects, which the Overseas Chinese Education Bureau supported, admitting that their own their overseas Chinese education policy have not been widespread enough and thus welcoming these attempts by performing drama in dialect to fill this gap (Quah 1996, 94).

¹⁸ Before Singapore was formally separated from Malaysia in 1965, the two were usually considered as a single entity, Malaya. Therefore “Malayan Chinese literature” and “Malayan Chinese drama” would also include literary and dramatic works produced in Singapore in the Chinese language before 1965.

The average standards of Chinese-language drama performances before the Second World War were generally low (Quah 1996, 91), although there were exceptions. According to veteran dramatist and theatre historian Zhu Xu's 朱緒 (1909–2008) account, of significance are four one-act plays staged by the “Qingnian lizhi she” 青年勵志社 (Youth inspiration society) in 1931 in the 900-seater Victoria Memorial Hall. Prior to this antecedent, white Europeans dominated the venue solely denying access to all other ethnic groups. Those four one-act plays also had directors and a cast of male and female actors, which distinguished them from the *wenming xi* 文明戲 (civilized drama) of the past in which women's roles were almost all played by men (Tay, et al. 1982, 18).¹⁹ Other problems that fazed early Chinese-language drama in Singapore include the huge rift between dramatists and audiences: because dramatists are often more educated than their audiences, theatre performances was depicted as an elitist activity and were often criticized as a small group of educated elite seeking fun for themselves (Quah 1996, 95).

An oft-cited critique in Sinophone Studies is applicable here: just as Chinese-language literary production outside of the mainland is not merely a branch of mainland Chinese literature (Wang 2006, 2), Singaporean Chinese-language drama should not be considered as a mere extension or an “overseas

¹⁹ Veteran dramatist Wang Qiutian details that when modern Chinese drama first came from Japan, it was called *wenming xi* 文明戲 (civilized drama) or *xinxi* 新戲 (new drama), and it was only in 1939 that it came to be called *huaju* 話劇 (spoken drama) (Tay, et al. 1982, 18). The naming of the genre served as a marker of difference with what it wants to distance itself from: modern Chinese drama was initially called “civilized drama” or “new drama” to mark its break from the past (traditional or classical Chinese drama) which the Chinese reformers at the turn of the last century believed to be “uncivilized” and “old.” Even “spoken drama” serves this function: it is named thus to distinguish itself from traditional Chinese drama which had a heavier emphasis on singing instead of spoken dialogue.

branch” of mainland Chinese drama. Despite the strong immigrant mentality held by most dramatists in Singapore then who had themselves come from China and the close links maintained by the touring companies from China to Southeast Asia, there were already a few plays written to reflect local conditions. Notwithstanding the fact that critics have found the technique and content of these local play-scripts to be immature and probably not capable of being staged (Quah 1996, 90), Quah Sy Ren points out that in 1931 one by the pen name Mei Hua 梅花 wrote an article “Xiju zai Nanyang” 戲劇在南洋 (Drama in Nanyang)²⁰ in a local newspaper supplement calling for locals to create plays with “Nanyang content,” speculating that the success of Malayan Chinese-language drama (Quah 1996, 94) would win recognition from mainland Chinese drama or even world drama!²¹ This high aspiration was noble by any standards, not just because it predated Sinophone Studies by nearly 80 years, but especially since the average standards of Chinese-language drama performances before the Second World War were low. Wong Meng Voon 黃孟文 and Xu Naixiang 徐迺翔 even go on to say that despite attempts to introduce “local color” into their works, such attempts are superficial at best with the “local flavor” applied only to the terms of address of the characters (Wong and Xu 2002, 187). More importantly though, these early examples served as evidence that dramatists of the times had high ideals and that a local consciousness was brewing, no matter how formative a stage or how

²⁰ The term “Nanyang” 南洋, literally the “Southern Seas,” refers to Southeast Asia by the Chinese, who have to cross the South China Sea in order to get to.

²¹ I have based my paraphrased translation on Quah’s study. For the originals, see *Guanghua ribao · Xiju* 《光華日報 · 戲劇》 (Sep. 14, 1931). For a more detailed contextualization of Mei Hua’s account in light of the burgeoning of a Nanyang consciousness in Chinese-language drama, see (Lai 1993, 45–46).

fragmented it was. Further evidence of this was a literary debate that erupted immediately following the war in 1948 between local identity and overseas Chinese identity. Described as “Malayan Chinese literature vs. Overseas Chinese literature” 馬華文學獨特性和僑民文學爭論 (Yeo 1982, 247), this debate similarly impacted the dramatic circles, symptomizing a clash of ideas between writers and playwrights who had been in Malaya before the war and to a certain extent were developing a local consciousness with those who came to Malaya only during the postwar era to push for a different agenda.

Chinese-language plays that were staged then were mostly scripted by playwrights from mainland China or translations of Western classics — a phenomenon not unlike that of Chinese-language theatre of the same period in the British colony of Hong Kong. Quah remarks that in the 1940s, despite calls for writing plays with local consciousness, such play-scripts were still lacking (1996, 95). Perhaps ironically, some of the plays that reflected local conditions were by touring troupes from China, such as “Chinese Music, Dance and Drama Society” 中國歌舞劇藝社 (or “Zhong Yi” 中藝) that came to Singapore in 1947 and staged two plays by the troupe’s playwright Yue Ye 岳野 (1920–2001), *Fengyu Niucheshui* 風雨牛車水 (Tumultuous Kreta Ayer) and *Fengyu Santiaoshi* 風雨三條石 (Tumultuous Pudu).²² The troupe had been to Hong Kong before heading south to perform in Thailand and Malaya (Lai 1993, 145). According to Xu Lanjun’s 徐蘭君 research, although the group’s official aim was to spread

²² These two play-scripts are anthologized in (Xin she 1971). “Kreta Ayer” and “Pudu” are localities in Singapore and Kuala Lumpur respectively. *Fengyu Santiao shi* 風雨三條石 (Tumultuous Pudu) is also named *Fugui bianyuan wai* 富貴邊緣外 (Beyond the boundaries of riches) (Wong and Xu 2002, 198).

China's dramatic arts as well as impart dramatic techniques to troupes in Malaya, in actuality it was attempting to spread communist ideology to the Chinese overseas (Xu 2012). Given this ideological pursuit, therefore, it is not surprising that the languages used in the plays are deliberately composed to sound local. Some of the characters, for instance, are made to speak in a local dialect and the names of local places are employed to give a sense of the familiar. Zhan Daoyu 詹道玉 notes in her study that altogether Cantonese, Hokkien, Teochew, Hakka and even the Malay colloquialisms that ethnic Chinese in Malaya frequently used are employed in these plays (2001, 49). Interestingly, some terms like "tea" and "coffee" are footnoted in the play-script to explain what they denote in local lingua franca. Why would a local audience or reader, however, require explanation of local terminology? I posit three explanations: (i) these are explanatory notes in the play-script that is meant for the actors then who are from mainland China, and subsequently this script is collected in the anthology that I consulted; (ii) the footnotes are for the authorities in mainland China to whom they are reporting back; and (iii) in line with the international communist ideal, the publishers hoped that the play would also be performed by troupes outside of Malaya thus warranting the necessity of these explanatory notes. Nevertheless, all of these explanations indicate deliberate efforts to appeal to local audiences with the hope of spreading ideology to them, serving as an early example of "local language" being written into plays. According to veteran dramatist Chen Zhenya 陳振亞 (1919–1995), in spite of the group's short duration in Singapore, their impact on the local arts and literary scene, including music, dance and theatre, was enormous (Tay, et al. 1982, 18). Moreover, Zhan attributes the

group's artistic training of locals to be fundamental to the spawning of theatre practitioners and groups that vitalized the theatre scene in the 1950s and 1960s (2001, 50).

Apart from troupes like “The Wuhan Chorus” 武漢合唱團 and Chinese Music, Dance and Drama Society that came to perform and impart their dramatic techniques to groups in Southeast Asia, there were also individuals who came from China whose influence determined the continued sway of mainland China on overseas Chinese-language theatre.²³ One such example was Zhao Rulin 趙如琳 (1909–1983), a theatre director who arrived from Canton in the winter of 1946 to teach drama classes and direct plays at Chung Cheng High School, whose impact in no small part catalyzed the founding of the “Chung Cheng High School Drama Club” 中正中學戲劇研究會 in 1947.²⁴ The club's contributions to the development of Singapore drama from 1950 on are significant, and is perhaps best remembered in Singapore theatre history for its own spawning of the “Singapore Amateur Players” (SAP; later changing its name to “Arts Theatre of Singapore”) 藝術劇場 — the most influential Chinese-language theatre company

²³ According to Chen Zhenya, from prewar 1937 to postwar 1957, there were six such dance and drama groups that came from China to perform in Singapore (Tay, et al. 1982, 18). Not all of them were well received. For instance, “China Touring Troupe” 中國旅行劇團 was severely criticized for not being serious enough, resorting to cabaret-styled advertising strategies showcasing their actresses' bare breasts and powdered legs to attract the audience (Lai 1993, 73 & 79–80). If we agree with Xu Lanjun's analysis, this antecedent is evidence that the Chinese Communist Party's ideological outreach to overseas Chinese communities had its limitations.

²⁴ The “Chung Cheng High School Drama Club,” was formed in May 1947 after performing the three-act play “Qundai feng” 裙帶風 (Nepotistic trend) in Victoria Theatre to raise funds for Chung Cheng High School (Lim 1995, 147). Even though Chung Cheng already had drama activities since 1939, the school invited renowned dramatists from China to restart these activities after a period of hiatus during the 1942–45 Japanese occupation of Singapore (Yang 1993, 20). Consequently Zhao Rulin was invited in 1947 to teach dramatic theory, and local dramatist Low Ing Sing who was then teaching at the high school, was tasked to organize a drama club for the school, and thereby spawning the Drama Club (Lim 1995, 156 fn 4; Low's remarks in Tay, et al. 1982, 18).

prior to the 1980s (before its significance was superseded by Kuo's "Practice") and the longest surviving drama troupe in Singapore to date.²⁵

Pioneering historian of Malayan Chinese-language literature Fang Xiu 方修 points out two distinctive features in Chinese-language drama productions in the region in the immediate years following the Second World War: (i) few recapped or held nostalgia for the past, and (ii) these presented a severely weak migrant mentality (Lim 1995, 150).²⁶ Significantly, this was consequential of the geopolitical situation of the times. The Malayan Emergency was declared in 1948 in the aftermath of the Second World War as a response to the heightened sense of anti-colonialism and self-autonomy sweeping across the globe, which Southeast Asia was not spared. White prestige had considerably declined in Southeast Asia because of the Europeans' inability to protect their colonies against the Japanese invasion. The promise of self-determination as symbolized by the newly established United Nations further undermined the legitimacy of the European powers to maintain colonies; it was now hard for Southeast Asians to accept re-occupation especially after experiencing the brutal Japanese occupation.

²⁵ "Practice" has since become a brand name in Singapore theatre and synonymous with Kuo's theatre praxis. The "Singapore Performing Arts Studio" (SPAS) was founded in 1965 by Kuo and his dancer-choreographer wife Goh Lay Kuan 吳麗娟 (b. 1939) just after returning to Singapore having received professional training in Sydney's National Institute of Dramatic Art (NIDA) and Melbourne's Victoria Ballet Guild respectively. It is significant for being the city-state's first integrated arts school and that it nurtured almost all the leaders of the drama groups in the contemporary Singapore theatre scene. SPAS changed its name to "Practice Theatre School" (PTS) 實踐藝術學院 in 1974 and again to "Practice Performing Arts School" (PPAS) 實踐表演藝術學院 in 1984. Upon the foundation of the school, Kuo founded "Practice Theatre Ensemble" (PTE) 實踐話劇團 in 1986 based on the plan worked out 21 years ago with Lim Kim Hiong 林錦雄 (who served as the ensemble's president), and changed its name to "The Theatre Practice" (TTP) 實踐劇場 in 1996. In 2010, TTP and PPAS were reorganized and consolidated as "The Theatre Practice Ltd." (TTP) under the leadership of Kuo's elder daughter Kuo Jian Hong 郭踐紅 (b. 1967), tracing the founding date of the company to 1965. See (Kuo 2000, 386–404) and (Quah 2010, 160 fn 6 and 2011, 74 fn 5).

²⁶ This is quoted from Lim Soon Hock's study of Fang Xiu. For the originals, see (Fang 1979).

Thus, the British were returning to a different Malaya after the war. It was during the 1948 Malayan Emergency that many Chinese writers were deported back to China, Zhao Rulin left for France (Wong 1989, 65–66 fn32) and groups such as the Chinese Music, Dance and Drama Society were disbanded shortly after returning to the mainland (Lai 1993, 27).

As a result of the Chung Cheng High School Drama Club alumni's link to communist activities, the colonial government banned it from returning to its alma mater to lead or participate in artistic and literary activities (Quah 2012). To continue their social concern and activism through theatre, members of the Club's alumni, joined by alumni from other schools who too share a common vision of building a professional theatre company, formed the SAP in 1955. One way in which SAP stood out from its peers has been that unlike many groups of the times, SAP insisted on establishing itself as a cultural troupe having its own position and not sacrificing its artistic pursuit for ideological affiliations (Wong and Xu 2002, 201; Yang 1993, 23). The SAP's socially-conscious and serious approach to theatre-making (as opposed to the commercial and entertainment approach represented by the outdoor vaudeville-like *getai* 歌台) had a huge impact on the then young Kuo Pao Kun (Quah 2012): three of Kuo's four teachers who "introduced him to serious theatre" when he was selected for screen acting training at Cathay Kris Studio in 1957 (Kuo 2000, 388) were involved with SAP to a large extent.

In spite of the fact that works which were ideological in nature often did not pass the government censors, resulting in many being abandoned during the rehearsal processes, the collective efforts by the burgeoning drama groups in

supporting local productions made the 1960s a fervent period for the staging of local works (Wong and Xu 2002, 201). This surge in local play-scripts was caused, on the one hand, by audiences growing tired of some passé one-act plays that had been popular in the past and were repeatedly performed, on top of the unsuitability of a number of mainland Chinese play-scripts to be performed locally due to the differing circumstances in Singapore; on the other hand, audiences would like to see their lives reflected (on stage) and therefore increased the demand for local plays (Tay, et al. 1982, 38). Kuo considers this local consciousness developing around the 1950s to have been due to increasing affluence and social stability that in turn prompted a search for a collective identity (Tay, et al. 1982, 38). Apart from SAP, other notable groups that were active in the period included the “Rediffusion Mandarin Play Group” 麗的呼聲華語話劇研究組 founded in 1954, as well as the “Singapore I-Lien Dramatic Society” 藝聯劇團 and “Nanyang University (Nantah) Drama Club” 南大戲劇會 both established in 1957. These groups all had different artistic inclinations (Wong and Xu 2002, 201). Other troupes that came later onto the scene that made significant contributions to the development of Singapore theatre were Kuo’s “Singapore Performing Arts Studio” (SPAS) founded in 1965 and “Selantan Arts Ensemble” 南方藝術團 in 1972 (later renamed “Southern Arts Society” 南方藝術研究會) formed by SPAS graduates. Some of the local plays staged then include: Lin Chen’s *Dapo jingzi de nüren* 打破鏡子的女人 (The woman who broke the mirror; 1965) by “Singapore I-Lien Dramatic Society,” *Bainian shuren* 百年樹人 (Gargantuan efforts of cultivation; 1966) penned by

Low Ing Sing and staged by his “Eastern Arts Company” 東藝公司, Lim Beng Chew’s 林明洲 (aka Shi Keyang 史可揚; 1937–2005) *Shenghuo de xuanlü* 生活的旋律 (Rhythm of life) was staged by “Recreation and Music Research Group” 康樂音樂研究會 in 1966, and “Singapore Performing Arts Studio” staged Chen Bohan’s 陳伯漢 *Shengming de jue di* 生命的決堤 (The overflow of life) and Kuo Pao Kun’s *Wei, xingxing!* 喂，醒醒！ (Hey, wake up!) both in 1966 (Tay, et al. 1982, 38).

Veteran dramatist Wang Qiutian remarked, modern Chinese drama that entered Nanyang emerged out of the 1919 Chinese May Fourth Movement’s anti-feudalist and anti-imperialist tradition, and like literature and the arts, Chinese drama is always part of a (social) movement (Tay, et al. 1982, 18). As such, “From the late 1940s up to the early post-independence years in Singapore, Chinese-language theatre and the social and political activism of Chinese-educated students were always closely related” (Quah 2010, 151). The significant overlap in membership between workers and Chinese-language theatre participants provides further evidence of the strong social and political inclination in Chinese-language plays (Quah 2010, 151). The audience for Chinese-language theatre before the 1980s was also the biggest among the four language groups. As Kuo Pao Kun recalls:

It had to do with the emerging affluence of Singapore. And drama had had a very big market. Between 1965 to 1975, the Chinese theatre at its height commanded as many as 20000 people per production... Some of our original plays could sell out a season of 15 or even 20 performances

two weeks before opening at the Singapore Victoria Theatre, which seats 900. The market was not really the problem when you have mass movements, and if drama is entrenched in those movements. You could have 30000 people per production.

(Kuo 2001, 114)

While the plays of this period were not always characterized by calling for a Communist-styled revolution, the dramatists consciously attempted to effect societal change through their plays. Moreover, “Although Chinese-language theatre seemed more related to political struggle,” Quah is of the view “that the practitioners/activists’ interest in local society and people demonstrated a strong sense of belonging to the place, and this inevitably led them to a reflection of their identity” (Quah 2002, 383 fn 8).

When the People’s Action Party (PAP) was elected to govern Singapore, it decided to continue using the language of the colonial regime, English, as the main working language after its separation from Malaysia so as to establish “a common language of communication amongst its linguistically and culturally diverse people” as well as expedite “the young nation’s post-independence entry into the world of international commerce” (Chan 2008, 99). Thus English was elevated to a status higher than the other three official languages in a policy in 1966 — one year after the PAP took power. Post-war Southeast Asia was undergoing a volatile period in the 1960s and 70s, with the emergence of national self-rule on the one hand, and the threat of a communist insurrection on the other. Given that this period was in the midst of the international Cold War, thus “the geopolitical condition of Asia would not have permitted the ethnic-Chinese [in

Singapore] to declare the new state a ‘Chinese-majority’ nation,” observed sociologist Chua Beng Huat 蔡明發:

The fact that the communist and other leftist elements in Malaysia and Singapore were drawn from the ethnic-Chinese population, in affiliation with the Chinese Communist Party of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), would have rendered a ‘Chinese-majority’ nation highly unstable at what was then the height of the Cold War in Asia. A ‘Third China’ would not be tolerated regionally and internationally.

(2009, 240)

Since Chinese-language theatre in Singapore had traditionally “always been active — [and] especially vibrant during the postwar-pre-independence period ... with a strong social and political consciousness partly inherited from the Chinese May Fourth” Movement (Quah 2002, 378), like many of his contemporaries who were using the Chinese language as a mode of literary and artistic expression, Kuo treaded “too close to politics” (Quah 2002, 383 fn 9), and was imprisoned in 1976 during a mass arrest that targeted left-leaning writers, intellectuals, and political figures. Upon Kuo’s release from prison four-and-a-half years later in 1980, the ground had tremendously shifted. The government had implemented an “education policy of great consequence,” elevating English as the national first language and relegating all the native languages to secondary status. Consequently:

almost overnight, dialects were taken off and mother tongues were not studied with so much literature, and even language input was cut down. In a matter of 10 years, within one generation ... the supply of talent to the

theatre changed radically. Because most kids would have been much better educated in English and few kids would come out fluent in Chinese, with a layer of literature, because now they only studied the functional Mandarin.

(Kuo 1997b, 69)

This “education policy of great consequence” altered the social, and consequently economic, status of the different linguistic groups. Nanyang University 南洋大學 (Nantah), which was “[w]idely regarded as the jewel of Chinese education in Southeast Asia and a bastion of resistance to the government in the field of Chinese education” (Tan 2003, 754), in 1980 was amalgamated into the English-medium University of Singapore 新加坡大學 and renamed the National University of Singapore 新加坡國立大學 (NUS) — which used English as its language of instruction in all departments except Chinese Studies (which offered classes in both Chinese and English). This decision was “the final link in the homogenisation of a bilingual education system where English was the main medium of instruction” (Onn 2001, 100). The two leading Chinese newspapers — *Sin Chew Jit Poh* 星洲日報 and *Nanyang Siang Pau* 南洋商報 — were to undergo a forced merger into *Lianhe zaobao* 聯合早報 in 1983. Official decisions that were made during this “period, which resulted in the eventual disappearance of Chinese-language education, are now generally recognized as another major cause of the steep decline in Chinese-language standard and the shrinking of all fields related to the language” (Quah 2002, 383–4). In an interview with former Head of Chinese at NUS, Wong Yoon Wah 王潤華,

journalist Agnes Chen writes that when speaking “of the English-educated, there is a trace of disdain and not a little bitterness” among traditional Chinese medium school graduates 華校生 and Chinese intellectuals because they feel that they have “been shunted aside through no fault of their own” (Agnes Chen 1991). Wong explains, “When English was emphasised, because Chinese intellectuals couldn’t speak the language, they kept quiet. But this made it look like they had less ability. That’s one thing that continues to irk the Chinese-educated — that English is still considered the superior language and most times, is the only language used” (Agnes Chen 1991). This marginalized feeling is commonly reflected in Singaporean Chinese literature written in the 1970s, and one could certainly see *Mama* as an extension of that feeling. For the Chinese-language drama scene, the most direct consequences of these policies were that they effectively ended the supply of talent — both practitioners and potential audiences — going into Chinese-language theatre (Kuo 1997b, 69). Most Chinese-language “drama groups which had been very active in the past” were now confronted with the common “problems of dwindling attendance and lack of artistic talent” (Quah 2002, 384).

It would be erroneous to assume that Chinese dialects were never an important aspect in the lives and cultures of everyday Chinese Singaporeans. In fact, performances in Chinese dialects were an ingrained part of popular culture (one might even argue that this was “high art”) in Singapore’s history. Chinese Singaporeans over 40 years of age today would recall fondly, the telling of folktales 講古 and martial arts novels 武俠小說 of Ng Chia Kheng 黃正經 (Serious Ng; 1912–2003) in Teochew, Ong Toh 王道 (The way of the king;

1920–1999) in Hokkien and Lee Dai Sor 李大傻 (Big Fool Lee; 1913–1989) in Cantonese performed frequently from the 1950s to the 1970s on Rediffusion — “Singapore’s first cable-transmitted, commercial radio station” (Chia and Loh 2012). Subscribers received a sound box that was fitted into many Singaporean households and coffee shops as a means of popular entertainment.²⁷ In its heyday, “It was estimated that up to 100,000 listeners followed the programmes hosted by these master storytellers” (Chia and Loh 2012). On television, the comedic duo of Wang Sa 王沙 (1924–1998) and Ye Fong 野峰 (1932–1995) — who later became transnational celebrities in their own right by starring in films produced in Hong Kong such as the *A Niu rucheng ji* 阿牛入城記 (The crazy bumpkins; 1974) series and *Shuangxing banyue* 雙星伴月 (The happy trio; 1975) — were household TV celebrities in the 1960s and 70s, famed for their Teochew and Cantonese inter-linguistic comedic puns, peppered with Hokkien, Malay, English, Mandarin among other languages and dialects.²⁸ With the PAP’s rise to power

²⁷ According to the now defunct Ministry of Information and the Arts in Singapore, “Rediffusion Singapore Pte. Ltd. is a commercial audio broadcasting station that was established in 1949. It provides direct sound broadcast via cable to subscribers on two networks” (Koh 1999, 78). Compared to FM radio, the use of dialects was more liberal on Rediffusion. While Liang Wern Fook’s *Sparrow with Bamboo Twigs* “was silenced on FM radio, it could be heard on subscription radio station Rediffusion” (Boon 2013). However, “When the Singapore government launched the Speak Mandarin Campaign in 1979, Rediffusion was required to stop all dialect programmes by 1982. This proved detrimental to Rediffusion. As a result of the ban on dialect programmes, coupled with increased competition from free-to-air radio, its subscription plunged” (Chia and Loh 2012) rapidly. “Rediffusion subscribers continued to decline in view of the increasing penetration of wireless broadcasting” (Koh 1999, 78), and it eventually petered out in April 2012, only to be revived in May 2013 through the efforts of former Rediffusion DJ and media veteran Eva Chang Mei Hsiang 張美香 (Chia and Loh 2012).

²⁸ Wang Sa 王沙 was invited to perform in Kuo’s *Huanghun shangshan* 黃昏上山 (The evening climb) in 1992 with Ren Baoxian 任寶賢 (1935–1994), a seasoned actor with the “Beijing People’s Art Theatre” 北京人民藝術劇院 whom Kuo invited to Singapore in the early 1990s for artistic collaboration, most notably to revive the folkloric storytelling 講古 tradition, and veteran theatre actress Margaret Chan 陳美英, but he declined the offer citing reasons of poor health (Kuo 1988a). This invitation is evidence that Kuo did not discriminate against those who perform popular culture and did not see the bifurcation of high art and low art as necessary

came their standardization of all aspects of governance, including languages. Thus the vibrant performativity represented by these grassroots artists came to an end. Ng, Ong and Lee petered out, and Wang and Ye's show was later "cleaned up" to perform in Mandarin. It spelled the end of an era during which culture came organically to fruition among the grassroots, and silenced the public voice of an entire generation of Singaporeans whose native tongue was a Chinese dialect.

The play *Xiaobaichuan* 小白船 (The little white sailing boat) was a milestone in Singapore theatre history that saw fourteen drama groups collectively stage a play after a long hiatus in the Chinese-language drama scene greatly weakened by the mass arrests of the 1970s. During the production's organizational phase, in a public forum recapping and projecting the development of Chinese theatre in Singapore that was held in 1982, veteran dramatist Low Ing Sing expresses scant optimism in dissolving the bipolar language streams in the Singaporean education system. To Low, while it would be increasingly difficult to produce theatre practitioners with sufficient command of the language and cultural literacy to be playwrights and actors in Chinese theatre, the flip side of the coin was that those who traditionally went to English-medium schools and could not comprehend any Chinese, would now acquire at least a minimal grasp of aural Chinese no matter how piecemeal. It is difficult to say whether in Low's

discriminating factors. Other popular celebrities who have performed in Kuo's theatre productions include the highly acclaimed television actor Xie Shaoguang 謝詔光 in *Lingxi* 靈戲 (The spirits play, 1998), as well as Jack Neo 梁智強, then one of the most popular television hosts and performers and now best known as a film director, who was invited by Kuo to perform in the Chinese version of Kuo's monologues *Guancai taida dong taixiao* 棺材太大洞太小 (The coffin is too big for the hole, 1984) and *Danri buke pache* 單日不可泊車 (No parking on odd days, 1986) in the Singapore Arts Festival in 2000.

opinion this group who has most likely never attended a Chinese-language play, would do so now (Tay, et al. 1982, 38).²⁹ Nevertheless, although he did not explicitly declare so, I believe Low thought this group to be a potential audience for Chinese-language theatre. In more ways than one, perhaps Kuo's turn in his artistic strategy after his release from detention was responding to his mentor's query — tapping into this new English-speaking community both as resources for collaboration and potential audiences.

III. Attempts by English-language Theatre to Localize before Mama

Before we continue the discussion of Kuo's attempts to reinvigorate the much-weakened Chinese-language drama scene, let us turn briefly to examine the happenings in the English-language theatre circle. Prior to the 1980s, the English-language drama scene in Singapore was dominated by white expatriates mainly staging Euro-American classics for recreational purposes. This is the main reason, although Kuo Pao Kun was effectively bilingual, he did not participate in English-language theatre after his return from Australia. In addition, Quah reasons “the historical fact that practitioners in the Chinese-language theatre had since the 1930s begun to emphasize the production of locally written plays as an imperative

²⁹ Held at the Nanyang Hakka Association on September 26 1982, this public forum “Xinjiapo huayu huaju de guoqu · xianzai · weilai” 〈新加坡華語話劇的過去·現在·未來〉 (The past, present and future of Singapore Chinese-language drama) was chaired by Tay Bin Wee 鄭氏威 (1926–2000), with heavyweights in the theatre scene then that included three of Kuo Pao Kun's teachers — Wang Qiutian, Zhu Xu, and Low Ing Sing — as well as Chen Zhenya, Fan Jing 范經, and Kuo himself as discussants. The forum notes were organized by Chen Daocun 陳道存 and Zeng Yueli 曾月麗, and later published in two parts in the now-defunct local Chinese newspaper *Sin Chew Jit Poh* 《星洲日報》 (Nov. 4 1982): 18 and (Nov. 6 1982): 38. Kuo noted that with the exception of Tay, all the speakers at the forum, including Kuo himself, had come from China. Of those under 40 years of age, 90 percent were born and raised in Singapore, and it was this increasingly bilingual generation who was going to steer the direction of Chinese theatre development from then onwards. For further reading, see (Tay, et al. 1982).

form of engaging local society and building local consciousness, was certainly more appealing to the young and enthusiastic Kuo” (Quah 2002, 382–383).

However, there were exceptions to the rule. Playwrights Lim Chor Pee 林楚平 (1936–2006), Goh Poh Seng 吳寶星 (1936–2010) and Robert Yeo Cheng Chuan 楊清泉 (b. 1940) ought to be credited for their attempts at nurturing a sense of the local in their works when early English-language drama was still “shackled by a colonial consciousness” (le Blond 1986, 115). Even though Lim Chor Pee’s *Mimi Fan* (1962) was widely accepted as Singapore’s first English-language play, Robert Yeo contends that Goh Poh Seng’s *Room with Paper Flowers* (1964) first introduced Singlish (Yeo 2012) and his *When Smiles are Done* (1965) was the “first consistent attempt to use Singlish” (Exhibition 2012–2013). Following these plays was a seemingly decade-long hiatus in English-language drama discussing Singaporean identity. Commenting on the disparity between the Chinese- and English-language streams in terms of developing a local identity through playwriting, Clarissa Oon opines:

The state of English drama was unlike the Mandarin and Malay theatres at this time, where playwrights like Chen Bohan, Kuo Pao Kun and Nadiputra were consistently turning out original works commenting on their time and place. ... The problem was that the few English-language theatre directors had no concept of or desire to play dramaturg and help develop new scripts that might not have been very polished or did not translate immediately to the stage.

(2001, 67)

While Lim and Goh admirable efforts yielded little success, Robert Yeo's *Are You There Singapore?* (1974) and Li Lien Fung's 李廉鳳 (1923–2011) *The Sword has Two Edges* (1977) — the only two original full-length plays produced in the 1970s — achieved more with “their respective four- and three-night runs” sold out (Oon 2001, 62). The greatest obstacle that was preventing a genuinely Singaporean experience from being represented on stage in English-language theatre, according to director-academic Max le Blond (b. 1950),³⁰ was that “The characters initially *would not be themselves* ... we are not yet at home on stage; at home, that is to say, with ourselves as Singaporeans” (1986, 117; italics in the original). Couched by “a colonial view of reality” (le Blond 1986, 115), the local theatre is “frightened of being itself,” and whose solution, le Blond suggests, lies in confronting the “problem of theatrical *convention*” to get accustomed to colloquial language use and “Singaporean accents on the local stage” (le Blond 1986, 119; italics in the original).

What followed was an “impetus to stage local adaptations of foreign plays” that some critics consider “an abortive attempt to find a Singaporean theatre voice via foreign mouthpieces” (Sasitharan 1989) evinced in productions like Max le Blond's *Nurse Angamuthu's Romance* (1981) and *The Samseng and the Chettiar's Daughter* (1982), *Susan's Party* (1983), and TheatreWorks' debut *Be My Sushi Tonight* (1985). This “slew of localised adaptations” (Oon 2001, 115) that made “undirected use of Singlish” (Oon 2001, 116) was credited with

³⁰ Theatre director-academic and 1987 Cultural Medallion winner Max le Blond occupies a significant position in the history of Singapore English-language drama as having played a major role to push for the localization of plays. Perhaps his best remembered achievement is his direction of Stella Kon's 官星波 (b. 1944) *Emily of Emerald Hill* (1985), a monologue on the rise and fall of a Peranakan matriarch performed by veteran theatre actress Margaret Chan 陳美英, which critics hail as the “turning point of Singapore English theatre” (Birch 1997, 41–42).

preparing the audience for the coming and eventual “success of *Emily of Emerald Hill* and *The Coffin is Too Big for the Hole* [, which] was due, in no small measure, to its assured use of stage language” (Oon 2001, 117), yet the use of multiple languages was not without resistance.³¹ In Clarissa Oon’s observation, “this undirected use of Singlish was almost something to be exorcised from Singaporean drama, a parallel to Australian drama in the 1970s” (2001, 116). Quah’s findings echo this view, highlighting that at the time employment “of mixed languages would not escape attacks from ‘serious’ theatre audience and practitioners” (2002, 382). Imagining a multilingual theatre was difficult when the “apparent and approved choice” of the day was language purity: both actors and audiences were used to deliveries in British-style standardized English and standardized Mandarin (le Blond 1986, 117 and Quah 2002, 382).

Serious efforts by artists to create a national identity that reflects the multiracial makeup and multilingual reality of Singaporean society were apparent since the nation-state’s independence, although none of these endeavors ever truly succeeded (Quah 2002, 381). Another way by which “Singaporeans had been attempting to creatively imagine their own versions of multiculturalism” (Quah 2002, 381) was through staging their work in more than one language. Some might have done it to establish cross-cultural dialogue while others tried to tap into new audiences whose changing tastes were a result of the emerging affluence and new language policy. Both the English-language “Experimental Theatre

³¹ *Emily of Emerald Hill* and *The Coffin is Too Big for the Hole* are considered milestones in Singapore theatre history in opening the floodgates of local identity expression by Singaporean playwrights. After the rave reviews that these two plays received, writes Clarissa Oon, theatre journalist of Singapore’s main English-language newspaper *The Straits Times*, “Suddenly, dramatists everywhere were holding a mirror to the Singaporean experience on stage” (2001, 109).

Club” (ETC)³² and “Communications Theatre”, for instance, ventured to stage their plays in two language versions — English and Chinese. While Chandran K. Lingam directed a young cast for the English version of ETC’s *The Lovers* (1986), director-academic Chua Soo Pong 蔡曙鹏 was invited to direct a Chinese version of the play. The box-office for the English version averaged 40–50 percent while the Chinese version earned a mere 10 percent, and the company lost a total of SGD\$4000 for both runs (Ngui 1987).

In the case of Communications Theatre, Helen Chia wrote the play *You Only Live Once* (1986), intending to have the same cast members perform the play in both language versions, but realized through open auditions that few Singaporean actors possess the linguistic abilities to perform in the two languages. In the end, only one of their cast members performed in both. What derailed their expectations further was that the few bilingual audience members whom they knew did not attend both versions of their performances, and therefore dialogue could not be established with audience members on the differences they experienced in each viewing (Chia 1986, 46–47). Recalling this bilingual staging experiment, Chia reflected with resignation, “Or perhaps, despite the multi-lingual nature of our society, the need for staging bi-lingual plays was after all only a myth” (1986, 47). Attempts by other groups to stage multilingual productions have included the collaborative staging of Franz Lehar’s opera *Land of Smiles* by “National University of Singapore Society” and “National Theatre Trust” with

³² Lim Chor Pee founded the “Experimental Theatre Club” (ETC) in the 1960s and remained its artistic director from 1962–1967. Lim was not only attributed with having written the first English-language play in Singapore, he was also remembered as “one of the prime movers of Singapore’s English-language theatre” by establishing ETC as a group that set it “apart from other theatre companies such as the expatriate-owned The Stage Club by pushing for experimental theatre instead of drawing-room drama” (Maulod 2009).

some parts sung in English and others in Mandarin in December 1988, and the amateur group “Arts & Acts,” which has been staging plays in both Mandarin and English since its founding in 1986 (Lee 1989).

None of these endeavors, however, received as big a social response as those of Kuo Pao Kun’s *Guancai taida dong taixiao* 棺材太大洞太小 (The coffin is too big for the hole, 1984) or *Danri buke pache* 單日不可泊車 (No parking on odd days, 1986) — both of which were staged in Chinese and English — in addition to his multilingual *Mama*. Considered in this light, the significance of *Coffin* and *No Parking* is magnified. In Quah’s view, after staging these two plays in both language versions, Kuo became the first professional bilingual Singaporean playwright, and members of different linguistic communities have come to view his works as important indexes representing and reflecting on Singapore’s realities (Quah 2011, 90). Indeed this antecedent echoes both Krishen Jit’s high praise of Kuo on becoming “the bridge-builder between the Mandarin and English streams” (Jit 2000, 92), and K.K. Seet hailing Kuo’s “increasingly instrumental role as a mediator between the hitherto polarised streams of Singapore theatre” (Seet 1994, 244).

IV. Kuo’s Efforts Venturing into the English-Language Scene, Bridging the Two Language Streams and Re-vitalizing Chinese-Language Theatre

“In theatre, audience for Chinese and English streams rarely overlapped” before the 1980s (Quah 2004a, 35). Kuo Pao Kun’s return to the theatre scene in

1980 was the single most important factor that altered this configuration of the audience by language affiliation. Kuo sought to invigorate the much-weakened Chinese-language theatre scene by also inviting foreign dramatists to lecture, workshop, teach, direct and perform in plays and introduce new concepts to Singaporean theatre. Kuo's rising leadership status in the 1980s saw him cement alliances among the different local Chinese theatre groups that culminated in the formation of the "Singapore Federation of Chinese Drama Associations" 新加坡華語戲劇團體聯合會 in 1989, as well as develop extensive networks between local and foreign artists and groups. His move into English-language theatre by writing and directing plays and teaching workshops in English attracted an entirely new group of potential practitioners who would otherwise not have come in touch with the Chinese-language theatre scene due to the language barriers that traditionally separated these two groups. Owing to Kuo's efforts to work with practitioners in both language streams, he was able to adapt and introduce the resources of both groups to each other, opening up his vision of multilingual praxis that henceforth became a marked feature of the Singaporean theatre.

The Singaporean government's mass arrests of the left-leaning Chinese-educated citizens in the 1970s had shattered the vibrant Chinese-language drama scene. Coupled with the end of the Cultural Revolution that exposed the emptiness of this ideological fervor, by the mid-1980s those who belonged to this group either stopped doing art altogether or went into a deep reflection that saw them eventually abandoning art as a means to advocate ideology; from then onwards, art for them was no longer subservient to political or social movements (Shenzhen shi 1993, 7–8). After this series of events, one of the core issues that

confronted contemporary Singaporean theatre practitioners, whether practicing in Chinese or English language, was how an ethnic Chinese identifies with his/her ethnicity, whether s/he was a Chinese or not. In an interview with Ronald Klein, Kuo expresses the view:

I think when people begin to ask, “Who are we?” they begin this promotion of different cultures. But as an ethnic Chinese, you can’t go back to China. As an ethnic Indian, you can’t go back to India. Even if you are a Malay here, where do you go? To Malaysia? Indonesia? Also, we have borrowed so much from the European civilization, but are we Europeans? We cannot be.

So, who are we? I mean, we are cut away. We are descendents of these people, but we are also orphans looking for a parentage, and that parentage can only be a multiple one. You can only recreate a parentage that cannot be any one of these, but an integration of all.

(Kuo 2001, 117)

Being “cultural orphans” 文化孤兒 Singaporeans cannot return to their individual mother cultures (Kuo 1996). As a people who inherited from many cultures, yet at the same time, are cut off from all of these mother cultures, Kuo prescribed that Singaporeans should tap into their own heritage and find their own expression through “re-creating.” Kuo mentions in an interview:

In fact, we cannot actually do the art and call it our own without delving into our own tradition, our own history, our own experience. It is all really one. Different dimensions, different ways of seeing. How can you assert yourself without knowing who you are? What are you asserting?

As you ask the question, you answer it. As you answer you ask more questions. As you question, you inherit. As you inherit, you create.

Without creating, how can it become yours or your generation's?

(Kuo 1997a, 141)

As opined in the above critical reflections, Kuo's response to this conundrum was his multicultural theatre praxis. When "the potential strength of this form (multilingual theatre) in constructing identity" was unleashed, "it was surprising to the audiences and perhaps even more so to the authorities that the most vital and critical reflective Singapore theatre was in the hybrid language-mixing variety" in a Singapore where (standardized) English has become the "dominant language among various sectors of society," and proved itself to be "a most powerful form of challenge to the mainstream consciousness and values" (Quah 2004a, 36).

At the same time throughout the 1980s, Kuo continued to re-energize and contribute to Chinese-language theatre by inviting master practitioners from China, Taiwan and Hong Kong to teach and train with the local Chinese-language practitioners, most of whom unlike Kuo had not had the experience of professional theatre training. Prominent scholars and dramatists like China's Yu Qiuyu 余秋雨 and Gao Xingjian 高行健, Taiwan's Wu Jingyi 吴静吉 and Stan Lai Sheng-ch'uan 赖声川, and Hong Kong's Danny Yung Ning-tsun 荣念曾 and Daniel Yang Shi-peng 楊世彭 came to speak in Singapore at the First and Second Chinese-language Drama Camps 華語戲劇營 that Kuo co-organized in December 1983 and December 1987 respectively. Classic works such as "Beijing People's

Art Theatre's" 北京人民藝術劇院 *Chaguan* 茶館 (Teahouse) and *Death of a Salesman*, "Beijing Central Drama Academy's" 北京中央戲劇學院 *Hu fu* 虎符 (Tiger Tally) and *Sangshuping jishi* 桑樹坪紀事 (Chronicles of Mulberry village), "Lan Ling Theatre Workshop's" 蘭陵劇坊 *Hezhu xinpei* 荷珠新配 (Hezhu's new match) and "Performance Workshop's" 表演工作坊 *Zhe yiye, shei lai shuo xiangsheng* 這一夜，誰來說相聲 (Look who's cross-talking tonight?) were facilitated by Kuo to be brought over and performed in Singapore. Directors and actors Xia Chun 夏淳, Ren Baoxian 任寶賢 and Jiang Kun 姜昆 from China and Liu Ching-min 劉靜敏 from Taiwan were invited by Kuo to Singapore to convene artistic collaborations with him. Kuo's extremely active role in creating a network among drama practitioners and academicians in the greater Chinese-speaking world turned Singapore in the 1980s into a conglomeration of cultural celebrities (Quah 2006, 25) — in stark contrast to the "cultural desert" image that has so mired the city-state.

The concepts he introduced to Singaporean theatre circles included those of Bertolt Brecht (1898–1956) and Jerzy Grotowski (1933–1999). Already in 1967 he translated into Chinese and directed Brecht's *Caucasian Chalk Circle*. By introducing the Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt* to the Singaporean Chinese-language theatre erstwhile dominated by the Stanislavskian naturalist-realist mode of presentation stirred much heated debate in the Chinese drama scene (Quah 2006, 23). This antecedent instantly turned Kuo "into a controversial figure" among both the "Stanislavski adherents" and the "more radical forces in Singapore Chinese theatre", so that "like Brecht himself, Kuo found himself to be

in the uncomfortable position of being the man in the middle” (Jit 1990, 15).³³ He extended this in 1989 by co-organizing the Brecht symposium with the Goethe Institute, bringing distinguished dramatists and scholars of Brecht like Antony Tatlow from the United Kingdom and Huang Zuolin 黄佐临 (1906–1994)³⁴ from Shanghai to Singapore. At his invitation, in 1987 Liu Ching-min came to direct Kuo’s play *Sha guniang yu guai laoshu* 傻姑娘與怪老樹 (The silly little girl and the funny old tree) utilizing Grotowski’s techniques and introducing the concept of the “Poor Theatre” to the Singaporean drama scene. This production had a significant impact on audiences and practitioners alike with ripple effects that also aroused the English-language theatre (Quah 1994, 120). As opposed to realist dramatic staging, *Silly Little Girl* adopted minimal staging that did away with elaborate costumes and backdrop, relying instead on actors’ bodies and movements for stage choreography and the audience’s imagination to complete the *mise-en-scene*. The Grotowskian techniques used in this play were to again find their way in *Mama* a year later.

Kuo was perhaps the only artist to be involved as a core, organizing figure in all four productions that witnessed collaborations among scores of Chinese-language theatre groups to stage plays in the biannual Singapore Festival of Art in 1982, 1984, 1986 and 1988. He was tasked as executive director-playwright twice for both *The Little White Sailing Boat* (1982) and *Kopitiam* 羔呖店 (Coffee

³³ Krishen Jit thinks Kuo’s attempt might have been the first to introduce Brecht to Southeast Asia (1990, 17).

³⁴ A past President of Shanghai People’s Art Theatre, Huang Zuolin was one of China’s best known theatre director and theorist who hailed Stanislavsky, Brecht and Mei Lanfang as three of the greatest theatre figures in the world, and championed for a theatre which blended their ideas. In part perhaps of the collaboration between Kuo and Huang, Kuo’s first work to be staged in China — *Coffin* — was directed by Huang!

shop; 1986), involved in the directorial team in *Wula shijie* 烏拉世界 (The oolah world; 1984) and co-translated *Kapai-Kapai* 喀湃喀湃 (The moths; 1988). The formation of the Singapore Federation of Chinese Drama Associations in 1989 — of which Kuo was appointed advisor — was testament to the positive collaborative experiences formed among the various local Chinese theatre groups in the 1980s. *The Little White Sailing Boat* was, on the one hand, an encouraging event that helped cement alliances and promoted increased interactions among local Chinese-language theatre groups for further collaborations and was especially important for enlivening the scene in the 1980s after the deadened silence in the late-70s. On the other, however, it also signified that the Chinese-language drama circle was so depleted to the extent that it took the collective strength of almost all the major groups then in order to mount the productions “to dispel the myth that ‘Chinese-language theatre cannot produce plays of quality’” (Han 1986, 130). In a way, this also marks a closing chapter for the era of the “old” Chinese-language theatre scene.

In Quah’s view, *The Little White Sailing Boat* brought an end to one stage of Kuo’s writing in two ways. First, after *The Little White Sailing Boat*, Kuo no longer wrote play-scripts only in Chinese. All his plays from then on (except *Kopitiam*) were first written in Chinese or English, and translated by himself into the other language, or written in English for a multilingual staging.³⁵ Second, this was the last play that Kuo wrote in the realist tradition with a linear spatial-

³⁵ Quah notes that *The Little White Sailing Boat* is a “collective production” and thus Kuo’s “personal vision of society and culture was not clearly represented as it was clouded by a certain collective consciousness” (Quah 2004, 35). The same might be said of *Kopitiam*, and therefore remains the only play that is left untranslated after *The Little White Sailing Boat*.

temporal progression; from then on, his plays are defined by a complex multiplicity. Be it his linguistic or dramatic form of presentation, Kuo has entered a phase that is marked by a transcendent meaning (Quah 2011, 80), moving from the realist to allegorical. His creative works, which displayed a more confrontational stance in the 1960s and 1970s, moved to a more allegorical realm wherein the bifurcation between enemy and hero is no longer apparent but where the “enemy” is omnipresent and can even be the flipside of oneself. In Quah’s observation, “While his earlier works appear to pose a direct challenge to the political status quo, his post-1980 works did not retreat from the political but persists, albeit more obliquely, even allegorically, in provoking reflections on the relationship between the individual and the State and to interrogate the State’s ideology” (2010, 148). This allegorical type of writing manifests a deeper reflection of humanitarian concerns that is a signature of Kuo’s writing from 1980 onwards.

To cross this linguistic boundary and tap into the resources of the artistic practitioners whose lingua franca was not Chinese, apart from his own venturing into English-language playwriting, Kuo began a series of bilingual directing workshops that drew in students from both language streams.³⁶ In the 1990s, he further organized a series of playwriting workshops in Chinese to address the lack

³⁶ Kuo organized three important directing workshops in the 1980s. The first directing workshop, held in Chinese, was entitled “Shi ju shi ti” 十駒試蹄 (10 new directors’ works, 1983) with ten participants over five months, culminating in presentations by Lim Jen Erh, among others, during June 27–July 9, 1983. The second, entitled “Xingzhe 12” 行者12 (The 12 new directors), was taught bilingually and twelve out of ninety applicants were chosen, who included Ong Keng Sen, William Teo, Chia Hong Chye 謝宏凱, Goh Guat Kuan 吳悅娟, and Ng Sin Yue 吳倩如 among others, which culminated into a public presentation held April 15–25, 1986. The third had Alvin Tan and Ivan Heng. The fourth was held in Chinese in 1998 conducted by Szechuan Theatre’s Zha Lifang 查麗芳, had Kok Heng Leun 郭慶亮, Lim Haiyen 林海燕, and Koh Teng Liang 許聲亮 among others (Exhibition 2012–2013).

of locally produced Chinese play-scripts, a gap in the English-language scene that English theatre groups were able to fill themselves since they had come of age by 1990.³⁷ In addition to artistic directors in Chinese theatre, most of the current artistic directors in the English-language theatre companies also have been students of Kuo: Ong Keng Sen 王景生 (b. 1964) of “TheatreWorks” 劇藝工作坊 (f. Feb. 1985),³⁸ Alvin Tan 陳崇慶 (b. 1963) at “The Necessary Stage” (TNS) 必要劇場 (f. Dec. 1986), Ekachai Uekrongtham 呂藝謀 (b. 1962) of “Action Theatre” 行動劇場 (f. Jan. 1987), William Teo 張家慶 (1957–2001) at “Asia in Theatre Research Circus” (later renamed “Asia In Theatre Research Centre”) 亞洲劇場研究團 (f. Sep. 1987), and Ivan Heng 王愛仁 (b. 1963) of “W!ld Rice” 野米劇團 (f. 2000).³⁹ That almost all these major contemporary English-language theatre companies were founded in the 1980s attests to the significance of the serious training they received from Kuo to go professional themselves.⁴⁰ Writing in 1989 on the efficacy of Kuo’s “director training workshops, which was

³⁷ Beginning in 1991, Kuo organized the “Chinese Playwriting Studio” to address the small pool of local Chinese plays. He hired then Shanghai Theatre Academy’s (STA) 上海戲劇學院 lecturer Yu Yun 余雲 (now editor of Singapore’s daily Chinese newspaper supplement *Zaobao · Xianzai* 早報 · 現在) to conduct the first two batches while the third batch was taught by STA’s head of department Sun Zuping 孫祖平.

³⁸ The founding members of TheatreWorks were not students of Kuo. Again, it is significant that Ong Keng Sen took over the reins of the company from its founding artistic directors Lim Siau Chong 林孝沖 and Lim Kay Tong 林繼堂 in 1988 after being trained in Kuo’s school.

³⁹ Clarissa Oon commented that “Third Stage” ought to be considered as another theatre group of significance in the 1980s before the group was closed down in 1987 due to their alleged involvement in the so-called “Marxist Conspiracy.” She provided the rationale in the group’s name: “The group held that the first stage in Singapore drama was colonial, the second had foreign plays being performed by Singaporean casts, and the third stage would see Singaporeans creating their own plays for themselves” (2001, 107–8).

⁴⁰ Ivan Heng worked with several local theatre companies as well as in the United Kingdom before returning to join the “Singapore Repertory Theatre” (SRT) 新加坡專業劇場 (f. 1993) — made up of remnants of the expatriate group “Singapore Theatre American Repertory Showcase” (S*TARS) — as its Associate Artistic Director in October 1997. Shortly after taking over its helm in December 1998, Heng left the company to set up his own, “W!ld Rice,” in 2000.

attended by all the new directors working in the scene today,” Thirunalan Sasitharan (b. 1958), who would become one of Kuo’s closest artistic collaborators, comments that they “were crucial both in providing the rudimentary skills of stagecraft and interpretation, and in opening up new vistas of performance” (Sasitharan 1989).⁴¹

As previously mentioned, the first two English plays Kuo wrote were the monodramas *Coffin* and *No Parking*. Commenting on *No Parking*, which in Clarissa Oon’s view just as aptly applies to *Coffin* (Oon 2001, 117), Jit suggested:

Kuo’s real achievement in the play is his profound entrance into Singapore English. It is not quite Singlish ... But it is very astute in catching the rhythms of Singapore English. It is also not quite BBC English either. But it is just as grammatical and lucid. What Kuo has done is to create a fictive Singapore English that feels like the local version but he has reconstructed it in such a way that it is eminently usable for drama. Remarkably, Kuo, hitherto a playwright in Mandarin, has created one of the most dynamic and useful forms of dramatic English for the English language theatre of Singapore.

(2000, 96)

⁴¹ T. Sasitharan, more affectionately known as “Sasi,” first worked with Kuo on a major artistic project as a cast member in *Mama*. He then took over as Artistic Director of “The Substation — A Home for the Arts” when Kuo stepped down in 1995. When Kuo decided to close PPAS around 2000, citing reasons for a lack of governmental support and because Singaporeans now had other avenues for theatre training, Sasi dissuaded Kuo from doing so reasoning that the 40 years of artistic training that PPAS provided was too important a legacy to end, and offered ten years of his life to collaborate artistically with Kuo. With this promise, Kuo co-founded the “Theatre Training and Research Programme” (TTRP) 劇場訓練與研究課程 in 2000 with Sasi and the two remained as Co-Artistic Directors until Kuo’s untimely passing on September 10 2002. Sasi took the helm of TTRP and remained its Artistic Director when the program changed its name to “Intercultural Theatre Institute” (ITI) in 2010. In 2012, Sasi was awarded the Cultural Medallion in Theatre, the award that was bestowed on Kuo in 1989.

Even though Jit's comments are specifically on Kuo's achievements in English-language drama, Kuo is equally if not more successful in his Chinese-language theatre praxis. Kuo's language use in his theatre praxis is precisely what I would call: Chinese-language theatre in Singapore becoming Singaporean Chinese-language theatre. Quah argues that Kuo's *No Parking on Odd Days*, which Jit critiqued as being too colloquial and therefore lacking a universalist quality, precisely defines the uniqueness of Singaporean language use. With Mandarin as the play's foundation, interspersed with English, Malay and Chinese dialects, the play offers a convincing life-like take on Singaporean society (2011, 90). Articulating his thoughts in a series of newspaper articles, Kuo continued to probe this "life-like" language usage in Singapore and sought to transplant them onto the stage.⁴² Finally, in 1988, a milestone in Singapore theatre history was created with Kuo's magnum opus *Mama Looking for Her Cat*, a play composed of seven languages and dialects, having an ensemble actors of different ethnicities perform in their native tongues — English, Tamil, Malay, Mandarin, Hokkien, Teochew and Cantonese. This was the first multilingual play in Singapore that drew audiences from different language streams into the same spectatorial space — a space where audiences assembled to watch what they have collectively come to identify as their *own* play. In Jit's words, Kuo's "influence reached a peak when he embarked on an experimental theatre which was climaxed by his highly successful and inspiring performance piece called *Mama Looking for Her Cat*" (2000, 97).

⁴² See for example (Kuo 1984).

IV. Play Analysis: *Mama Looking for Her Cat*

The play *Mama Looking for Her Cat* dramatizes the increasing distance between an aged mother, Mama, and her children due to Singapore's changing language policies. The Chinese dialect Hokkien is the only language accessible to the monolingual Mama, and since dialects are discouraged from use in school and banned in the public media, her children have only acquired a very weak grasp of the dialect. Their inability to communicate and impatience with their Mama has driven her to seek solace with her pet cat. One day, her cat goes missing and she goes out in search for it. Outside she meets an old Indian man who too is looking for his cat. Both being monolingual speakers, the Tamil-speaking man and Hokkien-speaking Mama are unable to understand each other's words. However, through physical enactments and the intent to communicate, they seem to establish a camaraderie beyond the linguistic register, enacting what Max le Blond describes as "possibly the single, most moving scene of human interaction in all of Singapore theatre" (2000, 142). Each understands the other is looking for their lost cat and both realize that their cats are banished from their homes by their children. Once the Indian man's cat is found, he invites his new friend to play with his cat. Eventually, as they part ways unwillingly, they might have reached an understanding that they both are marginalized figures in this new language policy that enshrines the predominance of English speakers. Mama's children go out looking for her, blaming the cat for their Mama's disappearance. Turning into an angry mob as they proceed to hunt down the cat, the children end up in a heap trying to trap the cat, and from this pile of bodies Mama manages to lift her cat out. She sings in desperation to it the familiar lullaby that she sang for her

children in the beginning of the play as she strokes the animal in her hand, while the audience remains uncertain whether it is still alive.

Through this play, Kuo may have wanted to reflect what the language policy change meant to Singaporean society: economic growth at the expense of values, especially those of family bonds. Yet Kuo's play suggests more by depicting that communication between Mama and the Indian man is achieved through transcending linguistic and ethnic boundaries, reversing the expectation that there should be a bigger gap between the mother and the Indian man than among her and her children.

Kuo himself mentioned that two ideas germinated the play (1988b & 1996). The first was when one of his students in the adult's drama class — a Chinese school teacher — told Kuo she was intending to take up English lessons now that she was finally going to retire. When a surprised Kuo probed further, the soon-to-retire teacher said that she would otherwise be unable to communicate with her grandchildren. Reflecting on this response, Kuo commented that he had never heard a more poignant and painful account of how the language policy change had affected the older generation.

The second encounter was during a rehearsal exercise for which Kuo designated one actress to play a mother (Mama) able to speak dialect only, and some actors and actresses to play her children trying to write down what the monolingual mother orally dictates to her children as the content of a letter she intends to send another child who is currently studying overseas. As Mama spoke in Hokkien her children would repeat the message aloud in either Mandarin Chinese or English, symbolizing that these are the words being penned and at the

same time allowing the audience to learn audibly what was being communicated to their overseas sibling. As the dictation process progressed, the translated phrases shortened. What Kuo had not anticipated was that the younger actors no longer had a firm command of dialect compared to their older peers and were therefore abridging the mother's message, translating only the parts that they could more fully comprehend. The standardization of all language streams into English did not just mean cutting the supply of talent to Chinese-language theatre, it also meant rupturing the intergenerational relationship for Singaporean families at large whose first language is not English. If we could take this rehearsal scene as a reliable microscopic view of life in Singapore-at-large, it would essentially mean that communication between the first and third generation — or second and third generation — of Singaporeans was being severely disrupted, if not distorted. Under this new language policy, those who did not command the English language would feel increasingly distanced from their own children and grandchildren at home, and ever more alienated in society.⁴³

The bilingual policy mandated that English and “Mother Tongue” are studied respectively as “first” and “second language” subjects in the public school curriculum. It is not within the scope of this chapter to discuss the problematics of the term “mother tongue.” Suffice it to say, however, that regardless of one's

⁴³ This explains in part why bilingual dramatists who appeared in the 1990s like Kok Heng Leun 郭慶亮, Goh Book Teck 吳文德 and Lim Hai Yen 林海燕, artistic directors of “Dramabox” 戲劇盒, “Toy Factory Theatre Ensemble” Toy 肥料場 and “ETCs” 海燕等人 respectively, all came from what would have been traditional Chinese-medium schools and Chinese-speaking families. Those who were good in Chinese also had to better their English in order to move up the social ladder; by contrast, those with a strong command of English only needed a passable grade in their “mother tongue” to get through the education system to enter the local university. In 2004, even this requirement was flexed, resulting in an even sharper decline in Chinese cultural literacy standards nationally since, the argument goes, one can simply focus on getting good grades in other subjects that matter.

native language, so long as one is ethnic Chinese, one's *designated* "mother tongue" to be studied in school would be Mandarin, even if the first language one learns at birth or one's most commonly used language at home might be Cantonese or Teochew or another dialect. Cherian George puts it succinctly:

Singaporeans of all ethnic groups have had to make painful compromises, [and] even Chinese Singaporeans were not spared the rationalising impulse of the state. Their greatest loss has probably been the government's suppression of dialects and the imposition of Mandarin as their "mother tongue." "For many Chinese Singaporeans, dialect is the real mother tongue and Mandarin a stepmother tongue," Lee Kwan Yew acknowledges in his memoirs, before adding with characteristic matter-of-factness: "However, in another two generations, Mandarin can become their mother tongue."

(2000, 173)

Therefore, if the privileging of English displaced those who did not speak the language at home, then someone like Mama, whose native tongue is not one of the other three official languages, would feel twice removed under this policy.

Citing *Mama Looking for Her Cat* as the exemplary case in point representing the multicultural in Singapore theatre, Quah Sy Ren suggests that "In multilingual hybrid theatre, the *majority* of the audience is unable to understand *all* the languages used" (2004a, 37; italics in the original). The multiple languages used in the play represent "Singapore as an ironic social space in which an official lingua franca exists amidst many other socially dynamic languages and yet effective communication is a perennial problem" (Quah 2004a, 37). Note that

the play was performed entirely without surtitles. In this way, Kuo was intentionally not showing:

much concern whether the lines were fully intelligible to the audience....
Mama is a true reflection of Singapore's reality of language division among races as well as between generations, represented by the incommunicability of people using different languages.

The use of different languages on stage without providing any kind of translation for the audience was a bold and untried experimentation. Kuo must have deliberated on the effects of alienating the audience and inviting antagonistic responses. Paradoxically, it was also the same elements of theatrical representation of how languages divide the society in reality that brought issues with social, cultural and political significance into the artistic realm. Multilingual representation proved to be closer to the audience's heart; it struck a cord with the audience's search for social and cultural identity.

(2002, 385–6)

I consider Quah's observation that the audience's sense of alienation might turn into antagonistic responses to be precisely Kuo's intention. Employing such multiple languages potentially forces an effort on the part of the audience to translate and in turn be frustrated by it. This shared sense of alienation-and-frustration creates a very distinct "otherness," which strangely enough unites the audience in a collective shared experience. This antecedent is central to the paradoxical nature of the Singaporean artist's attempt to create a(n alternative) "national" identity whose distinction from other nation-states is that it does not

have a unified national culture. Being or feeling equally alienated can also be a unifying experience and provide a point of identification for the Singaporeans in the audience.

In my viewing of the performance's video recording, feelings of angst and estrangement that encapsulated the audience's own viewing experience in the performance turned from an outpouring of collective anxiety and frustration into a more critical insight during the dialogue session immediately following the play. Questions were raised in both Mandarin and English, by Indians, ethnic Chinese and white expatriates in the audience, and the discussion was facilitated by Kuo and his cast, with Kuo providing translations for the questions raised and his own responses for audience members of different linguistic communities that had all gathered in the same spectatorial space. Kuo opened the post-show dialogue session by soliciting responses from the audience on whether they considered the performance contrived or if they felt they understood the play. Members of the audience nodded in agreement with one who was pointing at a cast member and said, "I don't understand what he's saying exactly, but I understand him!" Another audience member remarked that Hokkien was more predominant 20 years ago and hence the play's setting might be more appropriate in the past. One of the cast members, William Teo, disagreed. He considered the play very contemporary, and that it contemplated issues of language, communication, generation and so on, and he himself was very moved devising the play with the rest of the cast. One middle-aged Chinese ethnic lady poured her heart out on how this play spoke to her situation at home: that they were failing to communicate with their elders. Although she still spoke her mother's dialect, her

education molded her to speak in a different register and therefore she often found her mother to be too long-winded and did not enjoy talking to her, much like the relationship between the children and Mama in the play. On the other hand, this lady bemoaned her daughter's inability to speak her grandmother's dialect and be unable to communicate with her. Instead, on her grandmother's birthday, she kissed her grandmother, bought her a cake and sang her a birthday song in English. This lady concluded that these were trendy and things they would probably like to do for their elders but not necessarily what their elders would want. Veteran Singaporean Chinese-language playwright Han Lao Da 韓勞達 (b. 1947), who was among the audience, said that a Singaporean way of communication had henceforth begun, and that he was extremely moved to see both the cast and audience members come from different ethnicities and language streams.

These audience responses that I gleaned from the recording suggest that the incomprehensibility of all the dialogue did not hinder the audience from connecting what they saw on stage with their own real life experiences. Indeed, this supports Quah's observation that critics of hybrid multilingual theatre "were not conscious of the potential strength of this form in constructing identity, nor were they aware of the necessity of theatre as the amalgamation of imagination and reality" (Quah 2004a, 36). Like the characters in the play, the audience too experiences the frustration and alienation of multilingual exchanges, assuming that no one person in the audience probably understands all the seven languages and dialects spoken. While the audience's feeling of alienation in the theatre is deliberately created by the mode of performance, the larger implication is that this

alienation extends into the everyday biopolitical reality. To be sure, as Kuo himself says in the play's program notes:

In Singapore, all our drama models have been mono-lingual. Is it odd making multiplicity in language the mainstay? "It is," said some. But what if when, as in our case, the reality has always been multi-lingual? *Mama Looking for Her Cat* is a new experience, registering our response to a very common phenomenon we have found very disturbing.

(1988)

Kuo is here using theatre as a medium for intervention, to call on his audience to reflect on the possibilities and imaginings of the scenarios and outcomes by making them experience firsthand the characters' frustrations on the other side of the fence of the language policy. Notwithstanding that the language policy has been applied across the nation, it has impacted different sectors differently. While the Chinese-educated might experience a different variation of marginalization from the Malay-educated, for instance, and a weak command of the English-language might impede the social mobility of both, they might be unaware of others in more dire situations, like the uneducated, the illiterate, or the monolingual whose only language command is not one of the four designated official ones, such as Mama. Assuming that the majority of the audience has consisted of the middle-class, tertiary educated and intellectuals, the play's alienation strategy has allowed them a chance to think and *feel* for those who were less empowered and occupied an even less privileged social position.

Moreover, does the absence of translation of the various local languages suggest also, in the words of Naoki Sakai 酒井直樹, the absence or avoidance of

“a power relationship inherent in the translation of a language into another”? (Sakai 1997, 27) In a language policy that makes English the working language in society, it would have seemed all too easy to provide surtitles as a solution to draw even more audiences into Kuo’s multilingual plays. It would have made obsolete the difficulty in understanding the play posed by the multiplicity of languages and thus eliminated the most fundamental of problems inherent in multilingual theatre. And if so, why did Kuo not opt for this ready solution? I suggest that this was because, in the course of watching hybrid multilingual plays like *Mama*, in Quah’s words, “audiences experience a *critical space* arising out of a sense of alienation elicited from the unfamiliarity of certain languages represented in the performance” (2004a, 37–8; italics mine). In a forum on playwriting, Kuo warned of the dangers inherent in a highly affluent and materialist Singaporean lifestyle that is prone to numbing one’s mind and emphasized the importance of developing a “critical sensibility” (1997b, 71). In a Brechtian way, Kuo’s theatre is a call to a halt, “cutting, interrupting, holding something up to the light, making us look again” (Brook 1969, 65), and an intellectual attempt to challenge this numbing effect through deconstructing the different layers that mask the problem. While the government’s “Multiracial Model” presupposes four official languages that provide equal representation to the four major ethnic groups, these languages have different hierarchical positions that translate into different realities in Singaporean society. Providing translation would only masquerade this difference inherent in the power structure and assume a selfsameness in power relations that is not an accurate actualization of the relationship among the different languages.

Furthermore, translation is, like the copying in dictation, a non-serious speech act, not necessarily enunciating what the translator him/herself wants to say, and thus an act that may be educated but not an act of properly constructed subjectivity. By not performing the act of translation, therefore, the playwright is making a conscious attempt at not coercing the characters to utter or translate what they do not think and feel themselves. Instead of claiming to speak *for* the characters, the act of withholding translation thereby emphasizes and reinforces the subjectivity of the characters created by the ensemble of actors through their workshop experience with Kuo. To put it another way, in contrast to Mama's children, whom she speaks through to communicate with her child studying overseas and who censor her message when they translate her Hokkien dictation into letters written in Chinese or English, the play empowers Mama and affirms her subjectivity by letting her address the audience directly in Hokkien.

VI. Conclusion

In the article, "Let the Banquet Begin, Who Needs the Cook?", Singaporean lawyer and writer Philip Jeyaretnam likens cultural (identity) construction to a banquet *without* a chef: unlike ingredients to add and methods of preparation in a banquet, the culture of a nation cannot be pre-determined via a top-down approach; it always has to be bottom-up, a groundswell. A government who tries to steer — or worse, dictate — the directions of a national culture's development always warrants resistance (1990). Kuo Pao Kun's work, argued Jeyaretnam, is an ideal representation of a culture of the people because it does

not try to pre-suppose what this culture already is. Instead, it reacted and responded organically to how the ground was pulsating. In Jeyaretnam's words, Kuo's intervention was a "natural re-working of traditional values to meet a modern context" (1990).

In this chapter, I highlight the significance of Kuo's efforts at rejuvenating the deadened Chinese-language drama circles, and in particular, the importance of considering his move from Chinese-language into English-language theatre, and then transcending these linguistic boundaries and creating multilingual plays in its historicity. At a time when all fields related to the Chinese language have been steeply declining, Kuo incorporated and utilized resources from other language spheres and carved out an entirely new space for Chinese-language theatre. Perhaps some might not agree that what Kuo was doing could still be considered "Chinese-language" drama. Significantly, it is owing to Kuo's timely intervention that theatre in Singapore did not become English-language, but instead multilingualism came to be accepted as a genuine reflection of Singaporean-ness. In a place like Singapore where English has become the dominant language in most domains of society, it is hard to imagine a theatre scene that would be otherwise. Indeed, as T. Sasitharan says, "*Mama* posed an implacable challenge to the hitherto entrenched assumption in the drama scene that a genuine national theatre in Singapore, if and when it emerges, would be an English-language one" (Sasitharan 1989). I would argue that Kuo's works reflect the socio-political conditions the ethnic Chinese were going through in 1980s Singapore, and are what I would call "Chinese-language theatre in Singapore"

becoming “Singaporean Chinese-language theatre” — one which distinguished itself from the theatres in other Chinese-speaking regions.

While I have highlighted attempts by dramatists in the Chinese- and English-language streams at building a local consciousness in their work prior to the 1980s, Kuo’s effort distinguished itself, beginning with *Coffin*, by constructing social identification through critically appraising the state bureaucracy and national discourse instead of establishing affective belonging (Quah 2011, 92). In other words, in contrast to the state’s simplistic celebration of the country’s diverse ethnicities in the *Aneka Ragam Rakyat* (Variety Concert of the People), Kuo’s plays attempt to critically reflect on the issues surrounding the multiracial construct and deconstruct the hierarchies that veil such power structures.

Despite having studied in six different middle schools — both Chinese- and English-medium — in six years and being effectively bilingual, Kuo would self-identify more strongly with those in the Chinese-language stream. In a discussion with Ong Keng Sen on whether or not the Chinese-language theatre had fallen behind their contemporaries in the English-language scene, Kuo expressed the view that:

Most of the Chinese-language theatre practitioners today, I think, are graduates of the Chinese-medium schools. But increasingly young theatre practitioners are bilingual, like Lim Jen-Erh, Ang Gey Pin, Kuo Jian Hong, Dramabox and Hwa Chong Alumni ... they are all bilingual, even though they mainly work in the Chinese language. This is becoming increasingly important. Because, if you know more Chinese, you will naturally know

more Chinese culture, then you will become an embodiment or a vessel of cultures. And if you understand Chinese culture, you will understand that the turbulent development of its language — more like a downfall — has been embedded in the memories of Chinese-language theatre practitioners. This has caused them to be concerned with how, in a cosmopolitan place like Singapore where English is the predominant language, they can rejuvenate their parent culture and make it relevant to the times. This type of concern, this type of struggle with dilemma — sometimes even a scar or a wound — is the hallmark of Chinese-language theatre practitioners.

(Huo 1993)

Indeed Kuo's works and those of the younger bilingual dramatists — following the example of Kuo's critical hybrid multilingual plays — tend to represent “the pluralism of Singapore society” (Quah 2002, 386) in a way that while “reflecting on the problematics of the time ... always displays a certain elevated marginalised consciousness” (Quah 2004a, 39). This articulation serves to provide an alternative view from that of mainstream discourse.

Chapter Two An Incomplete Break with the Past: Stan Lai's Identity (Un)making in Taiwanese Theatre

I. Introduction

“Performance Workshop” 表演工作坊 (f. 1984) is Taiwan's best known theatre company internationally and among the most commercially successful theatres today. Even during the period of the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) outbreak in 2004, the company's box office recorded all performances sold at between seventy percent and sold out — at which everyone in the audience had to wear a mask! (Lai 2011). The group's inaugural production, “Nayiye, women shuo xiangsheng” 那一夜，我們說相聲 (The night we became crosstalk comedians; 1985), created an unprecedented record of performing twelve sold-out nights in a row — a record that shocked the 1980s Taiwanese theatrical world (Li 1995, 52).⁴⁴ It was such a hit that newspapers ran headlines such as “*The Night We Became Crosstalk Comedians* creates the highest ever record in box office revenue in the nation's theatre scene, attesting to the commercial value of theatre” (“Naye” 1985), and audiotapes of the performance were subsequently made and sold over one million copies, with bootleg copies perceived to have sold five times as much (Lai 2011). The theatre group has since become part of Taiwan's collective cultural memory. So successful are the company's critical reception

⁴⁴ In a public forum organized by *Lianhe wenxue* 《聯合文學》 (Unitas literary monthly) in 1988, the renowned poet Ya Xian 痲弦 (b. 1932) mentioned that when Eugène Ionesco (1909–1904) came to Taiwan, “Da Peng National Theatre Troupe” 大鵬國劇隊 performed a Chinese rendition of his *Chairs*, entitled *Xi* 席 (translated by Wei Ziyun 魏子雲) in the style of Peking Opera whose impact was amazing (Ma Sen et al. 1988, 20). What stood Lai — and to a large extent, “Lan Ling Theatre Workshop” 蘭陵劇坊 (f. 1980) that I will discuss later — apart from these well attended theatre performances was that his are original works created for, about and by Taiwanese.

and mass appeal that many television and film celebrities from Taiwan as well as mainland China — for instance, superstar Brigitte Lin Ching-hsia 林青霞 (b. 1954), Taiwan’s top talk-show host Chang Hsiao-yen 張小燕 (b. 1948), and most recently China’s “Super Girl” pop actress-singer Chris Lee 李宇春 (Li Yuchun) (b. 1984) — have chosen to turn down offers and block out several months in their busy schedules just so as to work in a stage play with Performance Workshop’s director, Stan Lai 賴聲川 (b. 1954). By far the best traveled and most renowned Taiwanese theatre troupe, Performance Workshop was the first group from Taiwan to be invited to perform in mainland China.⁴⁵ Lai was tasked by the state to direct a rock-musical for the Republic of China’s centennial celebration, “Mengxiang jia” 夢想家 (Dreamers; 2011),⁴⁶ and is currently set to compose and direct a Broadway musical about Bruce Lee.

This chapter addresses the significance of Stan Lai’s *Anlian taohuayuan* 暗戀桃花源 (Secret Love in Peach Blossom Land) in 1986 vis-à-vis the socio-

⁴⁵ In 1994, Performance Workshop staged *Hongse de tiankong* 紅色的天空 (Red Sky) in Beijing, Shanghai and Tianjin (Fu 2005, 25), featuring “Beijing People’s Art Theatre” veteran actor Lin Liankun 林連坤 (1926–2004). Also in 2002, selections of Lai’s *Qianxiye, women shuo xiangsheng* 千禧夜，我們說相聲 (Millennium teahouse; 2000) became the first performance by a Taiwanese group to be showcased on China Central Television’s (CCTV) annual Chinese New Year gala 春節聯歡晚會 (Shui 2007, 140–1). The first play written in Taiwan and staged in mainland China was Yao Yi-wei’s 姚一葦 (1922–1997) *Hong bizi* 紅鼻子 (Red nose) in February 1982.

⁴⁶ Much heated controversy aroused in the production of *Dreamers*. While it is not within the scope of this dissertation to address this controversy, one could critically consider *Dreamers* as a part of the corpus of plays that Lai has directed. Theatre scholar Wang Chun-yen 汪俊彥 argues that *Dreamers* ought to be considered as a continuation of Lai’s “crosstalk plays” 相聲劇 (2014), while Jon Kowallis 寇致銘 suggests that this musical might to be considered as the third of Lai’s “epic trilogy,” after the films *Anlian Taohuayuan* 暗戀桃花源 (Secret love in Peach blossom land; 1992) and *Feixia A Da* 飛俠阿達 (Red lotus society; 1994) (Kowallis 2013, 137). While the two scholars group *Dreamers* into a different set of Lai’s works, they are both motivated by observing that Lai’s corpus intervenes critically with Taiwan’s identity discourse. This essential difference distinguishes Lai from non-serious, non-critical playwrights, thus explaining the fact that Lai’s works are box office hits as well as critically acclaimed.

political situation impacting the region in Taiwan's search for a local identity. In ways akin to Hong Kong, Taiwan's political reality lies outside its own making and is very much determined by the contestation of power among external forces with an invested interest in the region. What sets Lai's plays apart from previous dramatists is that not only do they reflect characters who straddle affiliations across the Taiwan Straits, they also comment on the geopolitical situation of their times, positioning Taiwan as an ambiguous entity that has roots in pre-modern "Chinese culture" itself and is descended via the Republic of China's exodus to the island-state from 1949 onwards. Lai's series of "*xiangsheng* plays" 相聲劇 for instance, straddles the fragmented Taiwanese/Chinese consciousness as he positions the Taiwan experience amidst a greater Chinese cultural framework.⁴⁷ In so doing, Taiwan's identity is always depicted as indeterminate, uncertain, and irresolvable.⁴⁸ This impossibility of Taiwanese self-determination, in my view, is precisely Lai's political comment: that Taiwan's subjectivity can neither be determined nor proclaimed by itself. Even if it wants to be independent, it will

⁴⁷ The Western performing arts form closest to *xiangsheng* might be the stand-up comedy. Literally "xiang" 相 meaning image and "sheng" 聲 sound, this art form from the Qing dynasty may be performed by one person, most commonly two, or even in a group of four or five called the "qunkou xiangsheng" 群口相聲. One of the very few scholars in the West who both studies and performs the *xiangsheng*, Perry Link, renders it as "comic dialogue" instead of the more commonly used term "cross-talk." Lai's "*xiangsheng* play" is not *xiangsheng* per se; rather it is a play performed in the mimicry style of *xiangsheng*. The first of the *xiangsheng* plays series, *The Night We Became Crosstalk Comedians*, was designed as an eulogy to *xiangsheng* because Lai had considered the traditional art form to have died out in Taiwan. Unexpectedly, the popularity of *The Night We Became Crosstalk Comedians* — a *xiangsheng* play — revived the *xiangsheng* form and saved it from extinction in Taiwan. Wang Chunyen's insightful discussion brings to light how the difference between Lai's *xiangsheng* play and traditional *xiangsheng* underscores Taiwan's subjectivity. See (Wang 2014).

⁴⁸ The sole exception is his latest *xiangsheng* play, *Nayiye, zai lütu zhong shuo xiangsheng* 那一夜，在旅途中說相聲 (Crosstalk travelers; 2011) where Lai foregrounds Taiwan's experience as self-contained with no resonances to a cultural past. In part this might be caused by the changing political climate in Taiwanese society, where a call for an exclusively localized Taiwanese identity is gaining momentum. Lai's rock-musical *Dreamers*, produced in the same year for the Republic of China's centennial celebration, depicted Taiwan in a greater cultural Chinese consciousness suffered a serious backlash.

not be recognized geopolitically and will merely be silenced — on top of risking incurring the wrath of its colossal neighbor across the Straits — on the international stage.⁴⁹

In an interview with a mainland Chinese TV on the tour of *Baodao yicun* 寶島一村 (The village, 2008) to Beijing, Lai, in my opinion, deliberately did not make clear what he meant by “roots,” in part for fear of incurring the wrath of the pro-independence pan-Green faction in Taiwan — because they have an agenda to dis-identify from mainland China — and also perhaps Lai’s position on Taiwan is precisely this ambiguity: Taiwan is an accident of history, a mixed entity of two contending forces that resulted in a strange offspring. Indeed, on more than one occasion, Lai has mentioned it is precisely this accident of history that has resulted in Taiwan’s genesis to be unreplicable anywhere else in the world. Both Joyce Liu Chi-hui 劉紀蕙 and Wang Chun-yen 汪俊彥 present the view that Lai’s plays offer a discursive reexamination of the China-Taiwan binary. While Liu argues that Lai delinks the two and therefore underscores Taiwanese subjectivity (1997), Wang is of the view that Lai has deliberately retained the ambiguity of the de-/coupling of the Taiwan-China binary (2014). Commenting on the “Taiwanese independence movement,” Lai suggests that it has provided another opportunity “of searching to *redefine who we are*”:

⁴⁹ Performance Workshop’s play *Chuqi tong* 出氣筒 (Frustration man; 2004) has satirized this incident: a character with a plastic bag on his head claims he was the one who attempted assassination on the then President Chen Shui-bian 陳水扁 in the 2008 Presidential Elections Campaign, even raising the pistol in the air proclaiming that that was the weapon that committed the act. However, the horde of reporters that were present could not be bothered with him and went off instead to interview other public figures who had not claimed that they were the gunmen but *if* they were that would be more news worthy! Besides criticizing the shallowness of Taiwanese media, this can also be taken as a political commentary that Taiwanese claim to subjectivity can simply be ignored if the major international players choose to remain unconcerned with the island’s self-proclamations.

In Taiwan, the “independence movement” hasn’t affected the way we work as much as the inner forces that this movement expresses. In my view, the movement is a struggle to be independent not from anyone else but from ourselves. This attempt to break away from ourselves constitutes another way of searching to *redefine who we are*.

(1994, 37; italics mine)

While Lai did not articulate as precisely as his detractors might have wanted him to on “whether or not Taiwan is part of China” — a question that intrigues historians and political scientists alike without conclusive results, and one that politicians endlessly milk for political cache — he clearly demonstrates in his works that Taiwan’s “Chinese-ness” is one that is unique and distinguished from that of mainland China and the rest of the Chinese-speaking world, and one that still finds relevance today.

II. Sino-Taiwanese Political History

In a special issue of *The Drama Review*, featuring prominent director-playwrights in the Chinese-speaking world, Stan Lai writes:

Taiwan in 1983, when I began creative work in the theatre, was pregnant with contradictions that were soon to evolve into political confrontations and acute social and cultural changes. Foremost among these contradictions was (and still is) the question of identity, not only the gross political questions, but the subtle questions of cultural identity and direction as well.

(Lai 1994, 33–34)

These are questions that continue to be discussed in many of Lai's works, and his intervention in the debate in the early to mid-1980s clearly distinguished him from his peers.

Perhaps more than the other sites I study, what defines “Chinese-ness” in contemporary Taiwanese society is a fraught question given its complex history of being ruled by several regimes and thereby developing this mistrust of foreign rulers — or who and what it considers as “foreign.” On the one hand, one might argue that Taiwan is the most “Chinese” of the four sites — even more than mainland China itself. When the Kuomintang 國民黨 (KMT) (or Nationalist Party) lost the Chinese Civil War (1945–1949) immediately following the Second World War, they retreated to the island of Taiwan with over two million military men and their families. As a result, in moving its capital from Nanjing to Taipei, the Republic of China (ROC) saw Taiwan only as a temporary site and a launching pad from which to reclaim the mainland. Since then, the Nationalist government has been waiting for the opportunity when they would be able to liberate their mainland compatriots from what they imagine must be the throes of Communist rule, and reunite with the many more millions of families and friends whom the Nationalist government failed to take along to cross the Taiwan Straits when they retreated in great haste. This position has since been dropped in the late 1980s: the ROC announced it was no longer seeking to liberate the Mainland, but continued to maintain that it was the legitimate government of China. However, on the one hand while many kith and kin of the Kuomintang military were left behind on the mainland, on the other much of the national treasures at

Beijing's Forbidden Palace were physically moved to the National Palace Museum in Taipei. Rhetorically at least, the Nationalist government has thus far been able to use part of the latter reason to claim that they were the true inheritors of Chinese civilization: Chinese artifacts were violently destroyed and traditional cultures eradicated in the People's Republic of China (PRC) especially during the times of the Cultural Revolution among other manmade calamities whereas they have been well retained in Taiwan materially as well as in everyday lived practices. In part as a response to the rampant destruction enacted during the Cultural Revolution, the Taiwanese government promoted the "Chinese Culture Renaissance Movement" 中華文化復興運動 in the 1960s and 1970s "to strengthen national spiritual education, promote Mandarin Chinese and carry on Confucian traditions and culture" (Lin 2011) to underscore that they were cultural promoters, not destroyers.⁵⁰

The ROC's deliberate attempt to distinguish itself from the PRC served specific ideological goals. Externally, by calling itself China, the Taiwanese government is staking a claim that it is the genuine inheritor of a 5000-year old civilization. Even though post-1949 ROC only exerts de facto control over the islands of Taiwan, Penghu, Jinmen and Mazu 臺澎金馬, by claiming its suzerainty over this vast landmass that Chinese civilization has been jostling over

⁵⁰ It probably goes without saying that meanings are stretched out of their normal contexts in such ideologically derived rhetorical wars. "Chinese culture," for instance, when used for the purposes of the Chinese Cultural Renaissance Movement, took on meanings that ranged from "a culture of adhering to the Three Principles of the People," to "supporting combat missions," and extended even to "denouncing Mao Zedong and opposing communism"! (Lin 2011) Others, like literary scholar Yvonne Chang Sung-sheng 張誦聖, were even more critical, "Yet, classical literary education in post-1949 Taiwan cannot be said to be of a very high quality. The euphoric rhetoric of the government's *wen-hua fu-hsing* (cultural renaissance) program, moreover, frequently performs a disservice to traditional Chinese culture by creating pretensions, kitsch images of it" (1993, 10).

for the past five millennia, it is an important attempt at convincing the Free World of Taiwan's legitimacy in representing "China" globally. Taiwan's continued assertion of its "being Chinese" was made possible by the geopolitical structure during the Cold War. Since the United States and its allies were determined to keep the Soviet Bloc at bay — being part of the Soviet Bloc the PRC was hence isolated — the ROC's continued representation of the Chinese seat in the United Nations Security Council after 1949 was welcomed by the international community.

Importantly, the geopolitical situation of the times ensured Taiwan's survival by contributing to its rapid economic rise in the 1960s–1980s. Along with South Korea, Hong Kong and Singapore, Taiwan experienced exceptionally high growth rates (in excess of 7 percent a year) and rapid industrialization between the early 1960s and 1990s. By the 1980s, all four had developed into advanced and high-income economies, known as the "Four Mini Asian Dragons" 亞洲四小龍 — named thus because the societies in these four states are heavily influenced by Confucianism and that they are located on the peripheries of mainland China. Other scholars, such as Peking University's Dai Jinhua 戴錦華, thought differently. She contends that the rise of the "Four Mini Asian Dragons" has nothing to do with Confucianist practices of hard work and diligence being converted into financial strength. As a result of the Cold War, it was in the best interests of the Free World to help these states that were on the periphery of Communist China advance quickly, since they did not want to see communism succeed. Hence the United States and Western Europe heavily

invested in and transferred technical knowledge to these states that propelled their rapid growth (Dai 2012). The fact that China's material conditions paled in comparison to the region's improving living standards and thriving economies rendered Communism ineffective ideologically.

Internally, the KMT regime used this rhetoric as an ideological tool to govern Taiwan. As cultural theorist Stuart Hall reckons, identities are always “in the process of becoming rather than being” (1996, 4). In this sense, the Nationalist government depended on this constant reiteration to ascribe “Chinese” identity to the denizens in Taiwan: that they are the true progenies and inheritors of Chinese culture and therefore they have a mission to reclaim the mainland and liberate their compatriots from the tumultuous communist dictatorship, and once again bring about China's reunification. As such, in the Taiwanese national curriculum, geography classes studied the landscape of mainland China — not Taiwan — “national” heroes were figures celebrated in pre-modern China, and children were made to recite Confucian classics since kindergarten. Reminding those who retreated to Taiwan with the Nationalist regime that they will one day reclaim mainland China ensured their allegiance to the state and in turn kept the populace in check. Thus, Tu Wei-ming's 杜維明 now seminal observation of a “Cultural China” 文化中國 existing in the geographical peripheries of mainland China — the centre wherein culture is lost (1994, 13) — is perhaps based more on realpolitik than cultural grounds. Chinese culture was not merely retained but aggressively promoted in Taiwan as an ideological tool to thwart the PRC's chances of *representing* China; in essence, this was motivated by ideology, not culture, with the explicit goal of grappling for the power of representation.

A series of domestic as well as external events beginning in the 1970s started to unsettle this identity formulation. Of greatest consequence is probably the People's Republic's replacement of the Republic of China as the Chinese seat in the United Nations Security Council in 1971, a process that set off Taiwan's isolation from the international community. Subsequently, following the "One China" policy whereby members in the global community have to decide which "China" to recognize, an increasing number of countries that wanted to establish official diplomatic relations with the PRC had to choose to end their formal ties with the ROC, further isolating the ROC globally. Prior to this, Taiwan had always had the Free World on its side. Embroiled in an unresolved ideological war with its mammoth neighbor — that is technically still ongoing today — Taiwan depends very much on American military presence in the Asia-Pacific region to ensure its sovereignty. Now that it has been booted out of the United Nations and its voice gradually fading out of the global sphere, how will the ROC government be able to ensure Taiwan's continued survival?

One of the questions that the Taiwanese probed as a result of ROC's failed attempt at representing "China" globally is how to represent "itself"? But what was this "itself" that the Taiwanese were now probing? If there is now a new "itself" that they are trying to represent, then who were they representing prior to 1971? Questions of Taiwanese subjectivity arose anew confronting the people who were living on the island to reexamine their identity. How one demarcates "Chinese-ness" as a result of a lost sense of cultural past and is propelled by asking what we can look towards in our contemporary times might raise further

questions in the case of Taiwan, where the Taiwanese were forced to do so as a consequence of realpolitik.

Taiwan's recent past was beset by the island having changed hands several times that led to a complicated picture of identification. After being ceded to Japan for 50 years, Taiwan was "returned" to China at the end of the Second World War. However, the government of China now was no longer the Qing court, but Chiang Kai-shek's 蔣介石 (1887–1975) Republic of China. "[M]any of Taiwan's residents initially welcomed the departure of the Japanese" (Wang and Rojas 2007, 15), since the Japanese were foreigners and had banned the use of Chinese language in the newspapers and other public media. However they were quickly disappointed when the Nationalist government displayed little tolerance and appreciation of the local conditions in Taiwan. Mandarin was implemented as the national language, in contrast to the Han Chinese in Taiwan who mainly spoke Hokkien and later acquired Japanese. This meant that the Han Chinese who had been living here for the past several hundred years suddenly lost their linguistic advantage when their native tongue was subjugated in place of a foreign language. For instance, children who grew up under the Kuomintang regime in Taiwan, if caught using Hokkien in school, were fined! Finally, a violent clash erupted on February 28 1947 between these two Han Chinese groups — (a) those whose families had been in Taiwan for several hundred years being called the *benshengren* 本省人, "people from the province" or Taiwanese, and (b) those who had newly arrived with the Nationalist Party being called the *waishengren* 外省人, "out of province people" or the Mainlanders — that came to

be known as the “228 Incident” 二二八事件, signifying the rupture between these two groups. Liou Liang-ya 劉亮雅 posits the view that “The crackdown not only ended the emergent civil society but marked a tragic beginning for KMT rule in Taiwan,” on top of the incident having become “a taboo subject, a reminder of ethnic clash, and a symbol of colonial brutality and state power that threaten dissidents with death” (2011, 680). The KMT government declared martial law on Taiwan in May 1949 and the reign of White Terror continued until Chiang Ching-kuo 蔣經國 (1910–1988), who had succeeded his father as Taiwan’s President, lifted it in 1987. Martial law was used as a way to suppress political opposition in the intervening years where Taiwan was run like a police state with many restrictions on freedom, such as all three television stations on the island being completely state-run. Following the death of Chiang Ching-kuo, his hand-picked successor Lee Teng-hui 李登輝 (b. 1923) continued Taiwan’s democratization process that the younger Chiang had started, and further pushed for a localization process that emphasized Taiwanese culture and history over a pan-Chinese cultural identity that had heretofore been promoted. Importantly, Lee was a *benshengren* — Taiwan’s first head of state who was born in the province — and thus marked a significant turning point in cultural identification in Taiwanese politics. Added to all these internal strife was its equally difficult relationship with mainland China.

How was Taiwan to realize itself, having such a complicated and mixed history of its government changed hands so many times, and not a single one of them chosen by the inhabitants of Taiwan themselves? Perhaps this “Orphan of

Asia” 亞細亞的孤兒 mentality, as diagnosed by Wu Chuo-liu 吳濁流 (1900–1976), was most telling of Taiwan’s national psyche. Originally written in the Japanese language between 1943–1945, the novella by that title recounts the story of a Taiwanese young intellectual being scorned by the Japanese in colonial Taiwan and equally ridiculed when he visited China for he was not considered Chinese enough.⁵¹ Yu Sheng-kuan 游勝冠 offers the view that the burgeoning of a “Taiwanese identity” began during the Japanese colonial period because the occupation by a foreign power foregrounded conflicting Chinese-Taiwanese identities. Otherwise, he argues, there should have been a resultant overlapping identification with the two, but this was not the case (2009, 6). This cultural ambiguity of being neither here nor there, having no sense of belonging and a failure to identify with any particular parent culture continue to beset the Taiwanese people. Furthermore, the PRC constantly reminds the ROC that they cannot represent “China” by denying them equal global status. Some examples include: compelling them to use “Chinese Taipei” instead of “Taiwan” or “Republic of China,” forbidding the Taiwanese National anthem to be played

⁵¹ Similarly poignant examples are found, for instance, in the works of film director Hou Hsiao-hsien’s 侯孝賢 (b. 1947) *Haonan haonü* 好男好女 (Good Men, Good Women, 1995), where a young group of Taiwanese students snuck out of colonial Taiwan onto Chinese shores with the aim of aiding the Chinese war of resistance against Japan. However, because Taiwan was under Japanese occupation, the Chinese were suspicious of their intent and instead of enlisting their assistance they detained these young students. One of the most heart wrenching scenes must be the three-way communication (that appeared more like an interrogation than an interview) conducted by the Cantonese-speaking Chinese military commander to probe the intentions of the Taiwanese-speaking students through a Teochew-speaking interpreter. Because Teochew and Taiwanese are languages from neighboring regions, they are similar sounding and mutually intelligible, the Taiwanese students and the Teochew-speaking translator could understand one another. Teochew is one of the regional languages on the north of the Canton province and it is likely hence that the Teochew interpreter is able to speak both languages. During the interview — which we later discover is an interrogation — session, the Taiwanese students were shocked to be asked, “What is your *motive* of coming here?” From the commander’s harsh tone of voice, the term “motive” used here is understandably not value free. The Chinese commander was in essence asking, “What are you plotting, scheming, conspiring by coming here?” This serves as yet another example whereby Taiwanese display of loyalty towards China has not been well received.

during international events such as the Olympics, and forbidding them to join the World Health Organization and World Trade Organization. This is on top of the People's Republic of China's constant threat of annexing Taiwan, either via softer rhetoric or more hardliner methods.

Given these intertwined geopolitics beset with internal contradictions, how Taiwan's self-determination revealed itself became an importantly contested historical moment. Lai's return to Taiwan having newly completed his doctorate from the United States and participated in this pivotal moment in the Taiwan's history — using theatre as a means of identity-seeking to pursue a subjective position for Taiwan — resonated strongly with Taiwanese society then. Literary scholar Michelle Yeh Mi-hsi 奚密 puts forward an interesting dictum that:

Chinese literature of the twentieth century is inextricably related to the ideal of revolution ... Ironically literary innovations often arise in reaction against political constraints. For example, modernism in postwar Taiwan flourished under the White Terror, and literature in mainland China in the early 1980s was a profound critique of the Cultural Revolution. In both cases, experimental works of lasting value were written, whether modernist poetry and fiction from Taiwan or 'Misty Poetry' and 'root-seeking' fiction from China.

(2010, 132)

Going by Yeh's analysis, hence in this sense, the literary and artistic scene was most exciting just before the lifting of the martial law because the energies were boiling from the ground up, with creativity from different sectors of society

coming together in an attempt to push the lid that has heretofore been repressing these creative energies.

To be sure, this search for a local identity was ongoing in all sectors of society on top of the drama circles. In the literary field, it was evidenced in the “Xiandai wenxue yundong” 現代文學運動 (Modernist literary movement) vs. the “Xiangtu wenxue yundong” 鄉土文學運動 (Nativist literary movement) debate, for instance, with Yü Kuang-chung 余光中 (b. 1928), Pai Hsien-yung 白先勇 (b. 1937), Wang Wen-hsing 王文興 (b. 1939), Ou-yang Tzu 歐陽子 (b. 1939), Ch’en Jo-hsi 陳若曦 (b. 1938) in the Modernist camp and Ch’en Yingzhen 陳映真 (b. 1937), Ch’i-teng Sheng 七等生 (b. 1939), Huang Ch’un-ming 黃春明 (b. 1935), Wang Chen-ho 王禎和 (1940–1990) and Yu T’ien-ts’ung 尉天驄 (b. 1935) in the Nativist camp.⁵² This is well documented in Yvonne Chang Sung-sheng’s 張誦聖 now classic work *Modernism and the Nativist Resistance: Contemporary Chinese Fiction from Taiwan*. In the realm of filmmaking, the works of Hou Hsiao-hsien 侯孝賢 (b. 1947) and Edward Yang 楊德昌 (1947–2007) were maturing at this stage. Stan Lai’s important work in the 1980s was contemporaneous with these Taiwanese filmmakers — arguably two of the most important film directors in the Taiwanese New Cinema Wave 台灣新浪潮電影 — and they have often borrowed resources from one another: for example, many of Hou’s films were subtitled by Lai (Wang 2010, 270), and when Yang

⁵² Even though Nativism was responding to Modernism, and in this sense functioned as “alternative” and “oppositional” cultural formations in Taiwan during this period (Chang 1993, 2), the boundaries between these two camps were more porous than one might have thought: many of the later vanguards of Nativism achieved their literary fame first through experimenting with Modernist writing styles.

was not shooting a film he would sit in at Lai's rehearsal studio, probably to borrow ideas or even actors. Therefore it was not a coincidence that the main actors in Lai's *Secret Love* ended up as the protagonists in Yang's *The Terrorizer* 恐怖份子 (1986), for instance (Lai 2008, 3). For Shen Shiao-ying 沈曉茵, the Taiwanese New Cinema distinguished itself from other cinematic modes for casting a "space for rethinking a collective's history and its present condition" (1995, 1), which Lai was also a part of.⁵³

III. Taiwanese Theatre History

When quizzed about how Lai created the spectacle that he did with his theatre works, he mentioned on several occasions that they had to begin from scratch because there was no *huaju* tradition in Taiwan to speak of:

There wasn't any grammar to begin with. Because the choice I had in 1983 when I finished my studies here was to stay in the States, or to go back to sort of a desert, where nothing — there was no tradition of modern theatre. ... I started working in sort of a vacuum, where we didn't have anything to rebel against, we didn't have anything to make revolution against, because there wasn't anything ...

(2011)

⁵³ Even though Stan Lai's main contributions are in the field of theatre and performance, his efforts in filmmaking have earned him a deserving place in Taiwanese film history. For instance, Shen Shiao-ying's excellent Ph.D. dissertation compares the works of four important Taiwanese film auteurs via a socio-political lens — placing Lai squarely alongside Taiwan's canonical filmmakers Hou, Yang and Chang Yi. See (Shen 1995). Lai has also been positioned among the most acclaimed filmmakers in the Chinese-speaking world, such as Ann Hui 許鞍華 (b. 1947), Zhang Yimou 張藝謀 (b. 1951), and Feng Xiaogang 馮小剛 (b. 1958). See (Wang 2010).

One cannot help but ask: what kind of theatre tradition did Stan Lai come out of? What was the Taiwan theatre scene like before he left for Berkeley to pursue his PhD in theatre? Did Lai not grow up watching plays? Lai shared in an interview that he had not only watched but was involved in plays in schools as a student. And if so, what does Stan Lai mean by saying there was no *huaju* tradition in Taiwan to speak of (Shenzhen shi 1993, 19)? There are certainly plays performed in Taiwan before the early 1980s, but they were perhaps low quality and heavily ideological in nature and certainly did not cause societal wide attention. The views of theatre scholar Wang An-ch'i 王安祈 echoes Lai's views: that the *huaju* tradition existed in the mainland but not in Taiwan, and therefore the scene was an empty one until the "Xiaojuchang yundong" 小劇場運動 (Little theatre movement) came along in the 1980s to fill the vacuum (2012). Wang and Lai are probably contrasting with figures such as Guo Moruo 郭沫若 (1892–1978), Ding Xilin 丁西林 (1893–1974), Hong Shen 洪深 (1894–1955), Tian Han 田漢 (1898–1968), Lao She 老舍 (1899–1966), Xia Yan 夏衍 (1900–1995), Chen Baichen 陳白塵 (1908–1994), Cao Yu 曹禺 (1910–1996) — master playwrights in mainland China — and lamenting that Taiwan does not have playwrights of the same literary calibre. Significantly, when the then *Lianhebao* 《聯合報》 (Unitas) editor, poet and essayist Ya Xian 痲弦 (b. 1932) announced plans in the early 1980s to anthologize Taiwanese literature because they felt they were now good enough to be included in world literature, they collected works from Taiwanese authors on fiction, poetry among others but not modern drama. According to Ya Xian, the only quality plays they could locate then were those of the veterans Lee

Man-kui 李曼瑰 (1907–1975) and Yao Yi-wei 姚一葦 (1922–1997), and since an anthology requires a collection of works from several authors and not just two, therefore drama could not be included as part of the compendium (Ma et al. 1988, 18). It is noteworthy that these “early modern writers studied abroad, and most were prolific translators of foreign literature” (Yeh 2010, 132). Spoken drama plays have not made a huge societal impact (even if seen by a small audience) until “Lan Ling Theatre Workshop’s” 蘭陵劇坊 (f. 1980) *He Zhu xinpei* 荷珠新配 (He Zhu’s new match), and then it was followed by Lai’s three decades of theatre practice.

According to film and theatre historian Lü Sushang 呂訴上 (1915–1961), modern Taiwanese drama can be traced to 1911, only four years after its founding by overseas Chinese students in Japan via two sources: one from Taiwanese students, who like their Chinese counterparts were also studying in Tokyo, and the other through Japan, which had occupied Taiwan since 1895 until the end of the Second World War (1961, 293). Catherine Diamond 戴雅雯 accounts that, “Since the Japanese had begun translating Western drama texts thirty years before the Chinese, they were already quite familiar with nineteenth-century Realism, and in the first decades of this century, the Japanese on Taiwan performed Western and Western-like plays” (1993, 2–3). In part owing to the two different genesis of the form on the island, in this way, “The development of spoken theatre in Taiwan differs considerably from that in mainland China” (Diamond 1993, 2). Unlike the Kuomintang who succeeded them, the Japanese had plans to make its colony a permanent settlement and implemented the *Kominka* 皇民化

(Japanization or Imperialization) policy to turn the inhabitants in Taiwan into Japanese subjects through widespread education of Japanese language and culture. Therefore, “Because all education on the island was in Japanese and Japanese culture predominated, Japanese and Taiwanese actors and troupes worked together with little influence from the mainland” (Diamond 1993, 4). Similar to the Kuomintang, however, the Japanese also “used the theatre as a vehicle for war propaganda” especially during its war with China that broke out in 1937, and perhaps for this reason “By the time the Japanese left, few mature Taiwanese play texts existed” (Diamond 1993, 4).

When the war concluded and Taiwan was “returned” to Chinese rule, three theatre troupes traveled from the mainland to showcase the best of China’s *huaju* to Taiwan between 1945–49, staging history plays that advocated patriotism and nationalism (Lü 1961, 365). Even though their aims were to raise artistic standards and increase the audience’s level of *huaju* appreciation, these had limited impact since the language used by these troupes was Mandarin — as opposed to Taiwanese and Japanese that most Taiwanese inhabitants spoke on the island then (Lü 1961, 336). Simultaneously during this transitional period, “a few Taiwanese performances attempted to address the issues dividing the natives and the newcomers, and present the Taiwanese side of the debate” (Diamond 1993, 6), but the outbreak of the 1947 “228 Incident” ended this attempt prematurely.⁵⁴ After 1949, however, the antagonistic relationship across the Taiwan Straits ended all exchanges, including the arts. Few playwrights followed the KMT regime’s

⁵⁴ For a brief description of three such plays, *Bi* 壁 (Wall), *Luohan fuhui* 羅漢赴會 (Arhat attends the meeting) and *Xiangjiao xiang* 香蕉香 (Banana scent), see (Diamond 1993, 5–6).

retreat to Taiwan as most of them were more sympathetic towards the Communist cause (Shenzhen shi 1993, 10). Moreover, in Taiwan:

all theatrical activity was exclusively devoted to the Anti-Communist / Recover the Mainland war effort. All new plays were subjected to censorships and virtually no plays without anti-Communist themes passed the extensive bureaucratic examination. Both the Ministry of Defense and the Ministry of Education supported theatre troupes, and theatrical societies emerged in the universities and high schools, but all served the purpose of consolidating the Nationalist hold on Taiwan and indoctrinating the people against the Communists.

(Diamond 1993, 7)

From the 1950s onwards, the party, the military, the government and the schools were the primary promoters of spoken theatre texts and performances (Diamond 1993, 8; Lü 1961, 395), and the theatre scene was dominated by the propagandistic works of “Fangong kang’e ju” 反共抗俄劇 (Anti-Communist Russian Resistance plays) that staunchly promoted nationalism and patriotism (Wu and Lan 2009, 212 fn 105). A ban was imposed on the works of playwrights who have chosen to remain on mainland China, and the few dramatists who followed the KMT government to Taiwan were “absorbed” by the state to produce works of such indoctrinating nature (Chung 1999, 15). As one could imagine, because theatre had been subjugated to a mere ideological tool, plays “continued to have little relevance to the lives of the native people” (Diamond 1993, 8). Lü Sushang details that these were not works of high quality: most were either adaptations of old works, or merely changed its anti-war sentiment to anti-

communism! (Lü 1961, 371) Perhaps for this reason Chung Ming-der 鍾明德, now a theatre professor at the Taipei National University of the Arts, quips amusingly that in his growing up years smart students had no desire to watch *huaju*, and that one would be sent by his/her superiors to attend a *huaju* performance only as a form of punishment back then in the 1970s! Furthermore, Chung himself admits that he had not heard of the art form until he entered college in 1971 (Shenzhen shi 1993, 10–11), further exemplifying that the art form was neither popular nor common then among the masses. Even though the KMT had imposed a ban on all “banditry and deceitful reading materials” 匪偽書刊 from across the Straits and that China and Taiwan did not have any contact from then onwards (Chung 1999, 9), what was ironic was that in a little more than a decade later an even stronger ideological fervor broke out in the form of the eight Model Operas 革命樣板戲 during the Cultural Revolution, spearheaded by Chairman Mao’s 毛澤東 (1893–1976) third wife Jiang Qing 江青 (1914–1991).

For these reasons, there were almost no theatre activities at the commercial or grassroots level (Ma 1991b, 16). The ground only began to shift in the 1960s, pioneered by the efforts of Lee Man-kui. Hailed as the “Father of Taiwanese theatre,” she was one of the earliest figures from Taiwan to be trained in theatre from the West (with an MFA in Theatre from Michigan), and organized the first “World Theatre Exhibition” 世界劇展 through her “Chinese Drama Centre” 中國戲劇中心 and “Committee for Chinese Drama Appreciation” 中國話劇欣賞委員會 in 1967 (Ma 1991b, 16). Lee’s aim was to use this exhibition to introduce college students to classic dramatic works from the West. Works

most often staged by graduating seniors in the Foreign Languages departments in various universities and colleges included Anton Chekov's (1860–1904) *The Seagull* (1896) and Oscar Wilde's (1854–1900) *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1892) (Zhang 2010). On top of this, theatre historian and playwright Ma Sen 馬森 (b. 1932) observed that the pioneering work of “a few forerunners in the 1970s who adopted some Western theatrical characteristics to write plays that did not conform with those of their immediate predecessors” laid “the groundwork for the little theatre movement of the 1980s.” He listed four such dramatists — incidentally, all of whom received their training in the West — and the particular style of Western modernist theatre they introduced to the Taiwan dramatic scene: Chinese Cultural University professor Hwang Mei-shu 黃美序 (1930–2013) translated many W. B. Yeats' verse dramas into Chinese and incorporated traditional Peking Opera elements in his works, the Christian playwright Chang Hsiao-feng 張曉風 (b. 1941) introduced Brecht's Epic Theatre in her plays, while the plays of the academics Yao Yi-wei and Ma Sen contained elements of the Theatre of the Absurd (Diamond 1993, 8–9; Ma 1991a, 262–270).

While these might have paved the way in preparing the audience's tastes for plays that have heretofore been indoctrinating in nature, these works did not generate as much societal attention as the second wave of the “World Theatre Exhibition” series in the early to mid-1980s, this time organized by Yao Yi-wei who had succeeded Lee Man-kui upon her demise. Significantly, Yao added a segment “Experimental Theatre Exhibition” 實驗劇展 to the series, thus achieving his ideal of synthesizing theatre with literature (Zhang 2009). The

plays in the inaugural batch of the “Experimental Theatre Exhibition” in 1980, notably Lan Ling Theatre Workshop’s *He Zhu’s New Match* broke new ground. The play distinguished itself by its novel style of presentation, use of corporeal and psycho-dynamic elements, as well as traditional Peking opera techniques. The group, spawned out of Zhou Yu’s 周渝 “T’ien Experimental Drama Club” 耕莘實驗劇團 (f. 1976) (Chung 1999, 35), were trained by Wu Jing-jiyi 吳靜吉 (b. 1939), who was himself trained as an educational psychologist in the United States but had taken such a huge interest in theatre he participated in the dramatic arts with New York’s “LaMaMa ETC.” Upon his return to Taiwan, he imparted corporeal and voice training to the members at Lan Ling, akin to the improvisational and spontaneity techniques by Viola Spolin (1906–1944) (Peng 1998, 23). The prominent writer Li Ang 李昂 (b. 1952 aka Shih Shu-tuan 施淑端) also assisted in the group’s training in Peking opera techniques for a brief period.

A hybrid and oddity in itself, *He Zhu’s New Match* is an amalgamation of modern Chinese drama with traditional Peking opera, and bedazzled the audience with its lifelike speech coupled with the recognizable Peking opera stylization. In a way, it was a product of its time — audience desiring to break out of the shackles of the martial law. The production was so successful it inspired many others to follow suit by spawning their own theatre groups, thus witnessing the burgeoning of the period of the “Little theatre movement” in the decade. Chen Ling-ling’s 陳玲玲 “Fangyuan Theatre” 方圓劇場 (f. 1982), Tsai Ming-liang’s 蔡明亮 (b. 1957) and Wang Yu-hui’s 王友輝 (b. 1960) “Xiao Wu Theatre” 小塢劇場 (f. 1982), Huang Ch’eng-huang’s 黃承晃 (b. 1948) and Lao Chiahua’s 老

嘉華 “Notebook Theatre” 筆記劇場 (1985–1988), Li Huan-hsiun’s 黎煥雄 (b. 1962) “Rive-Gauche Theatre Group” 河左岸劇團 formed by Tamkang University students in 1985, “Circular Ruins Theatre” 環虛劇團 formed by National Taiwan University students in 1986, and Tian Chi-yuan’s 田啟元 (1964–1996) “Critical Point Theater Phenomenon” 臨界點劇象錄 (f. 1988) were all products of the little theatre movement. Chung Ming-der reasons that this movement impacted Taiwanese society then because, in contrast to the “Anti Communist Resist Russia” plays of old, the plays created in the 1980s little theatre concerned itself with societal issues in contemporary Taiwan (Ma et al. 1988, 28), and not some ideological war fought with a mammoth neighbor that the youth cared little about. Despite their fervor for eliciting new and creative ways of self-expression, most of these experimental drama groups — even Lan Ling itself — were short-lived.

Undoubtedly, Lan Ling’s innovative performance techniques appealed to many. However, was that sufficient to influence an entire generation of theatre practitioners? As Ma Sen observes, “The burgeoning of the little theatre movement in Taiwan was not an independent phenomenon; it was developed in step with Taiwan’s politics, economy and culture” (1996, 20). Agreeing with this observation, Wu Jing-jyi is of the view that the reason behind Lan Ling’s sudden rise to fame was due to the “National Establishment Council” 國建會 inviting writers residing overseas like Ma Sen and Pai Hsien-yung back to Taipei in 1980 to watch and share their views on Lan Ling’s performance. Understandably, when the local press asked for their feedback they all expressed immense bedazzlement towards the works because they had been away from Taiwan for so

long. In this way, this became an event where media and the arts converged. To Wu, this actually explains the spectacular emergence of Lan Ling, as no matter how pleasing it was to the audience, it was unlikely to garner so much attention, much less become such a major cultural event. Hence theatre is intricately linked to politics (1996, 31).⁵⁵

Other major external factors that contributed to the significant cultural status of the little theatre movement included two foreign troupes that were invited to perform in Taipei: the Butoh dance performance 日本舞踏 of Japan's "Byakkosha" 白虎社's (White tiger club, f. 1980) and Hong Kong's "Zuni Icosahedron" (Wang 1996, 101). Wang Yu-hui points out that with the exception of a few dramatists like Hwang Mei-shu, Pat Ssutu Chih-ping 司徒芝萍, Huang Chien-ye 黃建業, Li Kuang-pi 李光弼, Stan Lai, Chin Mei-mei 金美美 and Chen Ling-ling, none of the other practitioners had (extensive) overseas experience and hence had never had a chance to watch an experimental play from the West. Therefore performances that were brought in from Hong Kong, Korea and Japan in the first "Asian Theatre Festival and Conference" 亞洲戲劇節和會議 was the inaugural firsthand experience in which local Taiwanese artists witnessed avant-garde performances! Of greatest impact was perhaps Zuni Icosahedron's performance, which discarded the logic of traditional linear narrative, and

⁵⁵ Chung Ming-der points out that Lee Man-kui had, in fact, already launched a "little theatre movement" in the 1960s that encouraged the staging of plays on a smaller scale and by amateur theatre troupes, but in actual fact it was only a case of filling new bottles with old wine by *huaju* actors. While there is little doubt in Lee's enthusiasm to promote little theatre, it was an untimely effort and hence after echoing these calls for several years, it eventually died out. So few knew what became of the movement to the extent that many of the younger participants in the little movement in the 1980s have not even heard of Lee Man-kui (Chung 1999, 9). I share Chung's view that timeliness is essential to the success of a movement, thus making it imperative for us to examine the rise of Lai and his Performance Workshop in the context of the 1980s little theatre movement and the socio-political conditions of the times.

displayed deep meaning in their creative methodology in form and structure (Wang 2000, 202). While most audience members might not have had much of an impression, Zuni's two plays *Lienü zhuan* 烈女傳 (Chronicles of women) and *Bainian guji* 百年孤寂 (Hundred years of solitude) left an indelible mark on the minds of theatre practitioners (Ma 1991b, 26), and perhaps most deeply influenced the work of Huang Ch'eng-huang's Notebook Theatre (Ye 2009). In particular, Zuni's performance style of physical installation employed minimal stage sets, from which the Taiwanese little theatre movement learnt to rely on one's body to narrate an anti-societal experience and a counter-culture image (Wang 1996, 101). In this way then, the little theatre movement's emphasis on corporeality signified as a reaction against the state, a liberation of the body that had hitherto been incarcerated by the KMT's regime of White Terror. Hence the little theatre movement stood for freeing oneself from an oppressive, authoritarian control.

Despite the media publicity that the little theatre movement received and the cultural and political significance attributed to it, most of the groups that blossomed in the early to mid-1980s were no longer relevant past the 1990s. Assessing the difference between these groups and Stan Lai — who would shortly enter the scene — Wang Chun-yen suggests that Lai's rise is a result of the channeling and convergence of two forces: the elitist, Western-influenced Modernist literary movement of the 1960s and the populist, nationalistic Nativist literary movement of the 1970s (2004, 42–3). This syncretism was not something the groups that burgeoned during the little theatre movement had. Yvonne Chang recounts that the rise of the Nativist literary “movement was triggered by the

nation's diplomatic setbacks in the international arena during the 1970s. It provided a forum for native Taiwanese intellectuals to vent their discontent with the unbalanced political power distribution between mainlanders and native Taiwanese and with the socioeconomic problems that had accompanied the country's accelerated process of industrialization since the 1960s" (1993, 2). Further, a "huigui xiangtu" 回歸鄉土 (return to the native) trend that went "beyond the Modernist-Nativist contention" (1993, 179) around the turn of the 1970s was triggered by "Taiwan intellectuals' growing consciousness of [their] endangered Chinese cultural identity," and hence these progressive intellectuals "exhorted their compatriots to show more respect for their indigenous cultural heritage as well as greater concern for domestic social issues" (Chang 1993, 148). Of those who participated in the five experimental theatre exhibitions in the early half of the 1980s, Wang Chun-yen points out that most were either college students or fresh graduates who founded theatre groups and took an interest in theatre primarily because of the dramatic training and exposure they received from their teachers in school — who were themselves mostly trained in the West — and hence the outlook in their plays was more geared towards the Modernists. Remember that the aforementioned dramatists active in the 1960–70s, Yao Yi-wei, Chang Hsiao-feng and Hwang Mei-shu — who Ma Sen famously hails as the "Second wave of Chinese modern drama from the west" 中國現代戲劇的兩度西潮 — were themselves exposed to Absurdist theatre, Poor Theatre, Living Theatre and Environmental Theatre, and thus influenced their students with a similar sense of modernist and postmodernist aesthetics. Wang

made the bold claim that therefore these young theatre practitioners were mainly responding to a society impacted by Western capitalism (very much in line with the Modernists' concerns) rather than the society that the Nativist writers were concerned with. The Modernists were more experimental in their approach (as were their works in the 'Experimental Theatre Exhibitions'), and therefore, lacking the "voice of the masses" (2004, 27), most of these groups dissipated as quickly as they mushroomed.

According to Ma Sen's and Wu Jing-ji's analyses of the interwoven relationship between the arts and politics (Ma 1996, 20; Wu 1996, 31), none of this excitement in the theatre and literary scenes in the 1980s was happening in a vacuum. In response to an emergent Taiwanese nativism, a groundswell of pent-up societal frustrations was unleashed on the eve of the lifting of the martial law. Yvonne Chang details these far-reaching societal changes:

Drastic structural changes, however, began occurring at all levels of the society in the mid-1980s following momentous political changes initiated by Chiang Ching-kuo during his last two years — the lifting of the martial law, the recognition of an opposition party, the removal of the ban on founding new newspapers, and resumption of communication with mainland China at the civilian level. New intellectual and artistic currents have emerged, many with the explicit or implicit motive of reexamining existing orders.

(Chang 1993, 1)

Critic Wang Mo-lin 王墨林 proposes that in a bid to discard the shackles of his father's anti-communistic legacy the younger Chiang emphasized the

development of politics, economy and culture in the 1970s. In the cultural realm, he established the Council for Cultural Affairs 文化建設委員會 and along with the newly established Cultural Centre 文化中心 auditorium, these became a state-determined network of cultural producers. Hence through the efforts of this state machinery Lin Hwai-min's 林懷民 (b. 1947) "Cloud gate dance theatre of Taiwan" 雲門舞集 (f. 1973) — the first contemporary dance troupe in the Chinese-speaking world — as well as the newly formed Lan Ling became the model of "New Taiwanese Culture" (Wang 1996, 104). Furthermore, the state also contributed to software infrastructures like adding a third theatre department to the then newly established National Institute of the Arts (NIA; f. 1982) in Taipei (becoming the Taipei National University of the Arts 國立臺北藝術大學 or TNUA 北藝大 in 2001) on top of Chinese Culture University 中國文化大學 and National Academy of Arts 國立臺灣藝術專科學校 or 國立藝專 (f. 1955, received university status in 2001 and converted its name to "National Taiwan University of Arts" 國立臺灣藝術大學 or NTUA 臺藝大). Taiwanese who were trained in the arts abroad were also invited to return to Taiwan to serve in the various arts centres of higher learning education as professorial faculty. Two such individuals who were brought back were the playwright Ma Sen and dramatist Stan Lai (Ma 1984a).

Stan Lai was still pursuing his doctorate in Berkeley when *He Zhu's New Match* created a sensation in Taiwanese theatre circles. Upon his graduation in 1983, he accepted the invitation of Yao Yi-wei — the founding chair of the Drama and Theatre Department at the National Institute of the Arts — to take up

a faculty position at the new arts institution established just a year before. Lai's directorial debut in his home country on January 11 1984 was an improvisational piece that he collectively devised with the inaugural batch of students in his "production exercise" class, entitled *Women doushi zheyang zhangda de* 我們都是這樣長大的 (We all grew up in this way), based on his students' experience growing up under martial law in Taiwan. Some Lan Ling members were among the audience of this college production, and approached the newly returned PhD holder for future artistic collaboration. This became the second play Lai devised and directed in Taiwan: *Zhai xing* 摘星 (Plucking Stars) in March 1984, about people with intellectual disability. Lan Ling had at this time conglomerated Taiwan theatre's best performers: Ku Pao-ming 顧寶明 (b. 1950), Chin Shih-chieh 金士傑 (b. 1951), Hugh Lee Kuo-hsiu who would become Performance Workshop's founding member and later found his own "Ping-fong Acting Troupe" 屏風表演班 (f. 1986), and Liu Ching-min 劉靜敏 (later renamed Liu Ruoyu 劉若瑀; b. 1956) who would later found her "U Theatre" 優劇場劇團 (f. 1988; later renamed 優人神鼓 in 1993). These artists would go on to be the mainstay in the Taiwanese theatre scene in the following decades. Lai's collaboration with Lan Ling members allowed him the opportunity to tap into a deep reservoir of the most creative energies in the Taiwan theatre then, which would immensely benefit his own subsequent creative work. Another, Lee Li-chun, a seasoned performer at cabaret dinner shows, who often came to see *Plucking Stars* and would go on to be the third founding member of Performance Workshop, became another important source of creativity for Lai. His third

theatrical piece in Taiwan was devising and directing *Guoke* 過客 (The Passer-by), for the end-of-year NIA college students production in June 1984, about unstable psychological conditions among Taiwanese youth.

Wang Chun-yen suggests that these three earlier works of Lai — before his founding of Performance Workshop — were probably the earliest works where experimental drama in Taiwan displayed a strong sense of realism and societal concern, which were not unlike the Nativist school (2004, 28). In his review of *We All Grew Up in This Way*, Ma Sen extols it as “the birth of a new theatre form on the Chinese stage” (1984b; Lai 1990, 141), clearly underscoring the distinctive elements that this play differed from earlier works that he had seen. Critics Hong Hong 鴻鴻 and Yue Hui 月惠 share the view that even though the play had a small audience it achieved a huge social impact (1992, 28).⁵⁶ Lai had just completed his training from the United States and might in this sense have been more inclined toward the Modernist school. What distinguished his productions from the other experimental works in the early to mid-1980s was his forte in exploring topical issues through his collaboration with both Lan Ling actors and NIA students, delving into a rich trove of stories about Taiwan by those residing on the island. Especially since this was a time of the “Return to the native” trend beginning in the late 1970s, in Wang Chun-yen’s view, Lai’s “elitist / intellectual concern for society” fulfilled such a need that won him the mass-based support that other experimental groups lacked (Wang 2004, 40). As a result,

⁵⁶ In an interview, Lai discloses that although the theatre exists for a small audience, and even his Performance Workshop, which is considered as a “mass-based theatre,” can only perform to tens of thousands of people — which is miniscule when compared to television audience numbers — the beauty of theatre lies in that when well executed, its impact on society can far exceed that of television’s (Wu 2008).

Lai's plays lent an important voice in articulating Taiwanese experiences. Unsurprisingly, therefore, Chung Ming-der remarked: Performance Workshop succeeded Lan Ling's trailblazing path and opened up the experimental theatre's audience base from the intellectual youths to common urban folks, and raised the production standards of experimental theatre, thus solidifying the foundation of avant garde drama (1999, 5).

IV. Play Analysis: *Secret Love in Peach Blossom Land*

If *The Night We Became Crosstalk Comedians* propelled Performance Workshop into the popular consciousness of the Taiwanese audience, it was the company's second piece *Secret Love in Peach Blossom Land* that established an unshakable foundation for the company's repertoire (Lai 1992, 16) and henceforth determined its niche position in Taiwanese theatre history. Wang An-ch'i's observation that "There would be no Taiwanese modern theatre to speak of without Stan Lai" (2012) can be traced to these two foundational works of the company that are hailed as "a milestone of the union of fine art and popular culture" (Chung 1999, 108) and can be "enjoyed by both the sophisticated and the vulgar." It is no wonder, too, that Taiwanese novelist and screenwriter Chu Tien-wen 朱天文 (b. 1956) remarks that Lai's plays always had a huge social impact (Chu 1986, 13). Both plays discuss issues of identity, using comical styles of presentation to address serious themes. Lai himself is of the view that the things discussed in *Secret* are more holistic and that it is a more mature piece of work than *The Night* (1992, 28).

Since his return from the United States in 1983, Lai has been using his now-signatory “collective improvisation” 集體即興 as a process of playmaking with his performers.⁵⁷ Lai elaborates:

Improvisation as a creative tool has the possibility to filter out the deeper concerns within a performer bypassing the question of form while at the same time creating form. ... We’re really extracting the deeper concerns of the performer and we’re not worried too much what the play is about ... We’re just looking for truth, we’re looking for real moments and real concerns within a performer. So it has a possibility to filter out the deeper concerns. So for me, improvisation is a tool to create moments.

(2011)

Not only did this formula overcome a lack of existing scripts in Taiwan at that time (Lai 1990, 137), perhaps more importantly, it allowed his performers to input their creative impulses, hence supplying the “Nativist” content of the equation while Lai could shape the creative process with his “Modernist” concerns. In this 1986 production, Lai worked with a most impressive team of theatre actors and actresses in Taiwan, including Chin Shih-chieh, Ku Pao-ming, Lee Li-chun and Liu Ching-min, with Hugh Lee Kuo-hsiu serving as its producer. The play consists of many diametrical opposites that are complementary in nature. Two theatre troupes vie for the same stage to rehearse their plays, one *Secret Love*, a straight-faced, no-nonsense, serious, romantic tragedy, and the other *Peach Blossom Land*, a farcical comedy filled with elements of the theatre of the absurd.

⁵⁷ For a more detailed account on this creative process for which Lai was reputed, see (Lai 1990).

The former is a script about recent historical ruptures: two star-crossed lovers Jiang Binliu and Yun Zhifan are separated in cosmopolitan Shanghai in 1948 due to the Chinese Civil War (1945–49) and reunite only in the economically thriving Taipei in the 1980s, not realizing that they have both fled war-torn China and been in Taipei for the past 30 years. Reunited at last but both already grey-haired and having become parents to their separate families, the lovelorn Jiang's final desires are crushed when he realizes Yun does not seem to share his nostalgic longing for the love that they have had — and all that it represents. The latter script is a farcical adaptation of the fifth-century poet Tao Yuanming's 陶淵明 best known text, on a Never-never Land, allegorically representing a utopic timelessness. When put together, the names of the three protagonists, Old TAO, Chun HUA, and Boss YUAN in this half of the play are homonymous with “Tao-Hua-Yuan” — the Peach Blossom Land — the Chinese imaginary utopia. However, their lives are anything but harmonious. The impotent boatman Old Tao, upon suspecting his wife Chun Hua of cheating on him with Boss Yuan, departs his home Wuling 武陵, only to find himself traveling upstream and landing in the “Peach Blossom Land” — a place where people are hospitable and serene. When Old Tao returns to Wuling once more with the intention of fetching Chun Hua with him, he is disillusioned by the dystopic family Chun Hua and Boss Yuan have established in his absence, and leaves yet again. It is not known if Tao manages to find his way back, but the avid Chinese audience who is brought up learning Tao Yuanming's *Taohuayuan ji* 桃花源記 (Tales of the peach blossom spring) will assume that he does not, as the protagonist in Tao

Yuanming's fifth century text did not. As the play progresses, each troupe's rehearsal process is constantly disrupted either by the workings of the other troupe or by personnel external to the two groups, such as a Strange Woman seeking a man by the name of Liu Ziji 劉子驥. In Lai's own words, "Conflicts and interruptions served the basis for fragmenting both rehearsals, as the audience sees fragment pieces of the two plays in an order that is not necessarily sequential" (1990, 147).

How do we understand the two plays juxtaposed in *Secret Love in Peach Blossom Land*? The original title of the play in Chinese is *Anlian taohuayuan* 暗戀桃花源, where "Secret love" 暗戀 functions as a verb to the noun "Peach Blossom Land" 桃花源. Who is secretly in love with whom? And where is this utopic "Peach Blossom Land?" If this Peach Blossom Land is indeed so utopic, why is one required only to be in "secret love" with it and cannot openly do so? One is a comedy, the other a tragedy; one utopia, the other dystopia; one Taiwan, the other ... China? However, which is which? Is Taiwan the utopia or the dystopia? The overt use of slapstick humor and comedic play in *Peach Blossom Land* depicts a very chaotic society: the marriage of the protagonist Old Tao is dysfunctional, his wife Chun Hua has cheated on him, and yet the new family of Chun Hua and the adulterer Boss Yuan is equally ineffectual, and the relationships among the three are played out in an absurdly comedic fashion. The chaos that is depicted in this half of the play reminds one of the portrayals of the disarrayed Taiwanese parliament where senators are either hurling verbal abuses or climbing over podiums and chairs and exchanging physical blows with one

another; it is anything but orderly. More of the disorderliness in Taiwan could be traced historically back to the ruling Kuomintang's lack of management: never having considered Taiwan as home and had always only intended it as a temporary base to relaunch its attack on the mainland, Taiwan's disorganized infrastructural state was thus the result of a lack of central planning even though the party had governed the island for more than four decades. When the international political climate changed, the Kuomintang increasingly realized they could no longer go back to China, and have to permanently stay in Taiwan — the dystopia they have to settle with. To many of the two million Nationalist Party cadres and their families who retreated to Taiwan with Chiang Kai-shek in 1949, the mainland still remained as the utopia to which they longed to return. As depicted in the character of Jiang Binliu in *Secret Love*, his last wish is either for his wife and children to visit his ancestral grave in China (in the 1986 version) or to take his ashes back to be buried in his hometown Manchuria (in subsequent versions).

Or is Taiwan the Peach Blossom Land to which mainlanders can flee from the oppression of communist China (at least, according to the Taiwanese media where news of mainlanders risking their lives to swim illegally across the Taiwanese straits were frequently reported)? On the one hand, Shen Shiao-ying also offers a reading of the utopic Peach Blossom Land as Taiwan and “The hospitable people there invite Laotao to stay on, yet he is unable to forget his past and therefore finds it difficult to feel totally at home in this ‘utopia’” (1995, 100). On the other, she proposes:

It is very productive if one can think allegorically about ‘Peach Blossom Land,’ and relate Wuling and Laotao’s wife as China, and Laotao’s leaving home as the Nationalists’ forced and humiliated retreat from the ‘motherland.’ Thus, the utopia that is the Peach Blossom Land becomes Taiwan (Formosa).

(1995, 100 fn 27)

Jon Kowallis quips, “one begins to wonder if the metaphor of the Peach Blossom Land might not extend to America, as well, the ‘new mainland’ to which many mainlanders wandered from Taiwan in the later 1950s and 1960s and continue to end up now” (1997, 175). Since Stan Lai himself proposes that Tao Yuanming’s utopia is just a place in any part of Chinese traditional rural society where one ploughs for one’s own keep, with the exception of “not knowing history” (1992, 19–21), in this sense then utopia can be anywhere. Indeed, Lai seems to suggest many such complementary opposites in this play, yet he does not allow an easy fixation of any one emblem as an unchanging identity. Quite the contrary, he encourages the audience to see the flexibility and constantly changing dichotomies that he sets up, and it is this constant dis-identification that I propose are useful categories to view his plays with. In so doing, Lai works purposefully to destabilize the signifiers from the signified, allowing a multivalent postmodernist reading of his play.

If the two troupes vying for the same stage allegorizes Taiwan and China fighting for the international platform, each trying to represent the “genuine” China, then who does the constantly absent “guy-in-charge” of the theatre allude to? To claim their lease of the theatre, each troupe produces their own copy of the

legal documentation, just as both the Mainland and Taiwan have the word “China” in their official names: the Republic of China and the People’s Republic of China. To sort out their differences then, they decide to turn to the “guy-in-charge” who has been absent in the entire duration of the play. Whom does he represent? The United States? The international community who will arbitrate on which China is “genuine” in the “One-China” policy? Kowallis points out in his analysis of the film version of the play that “the American government” has always turned a blind eye to this reality and “refused to recognize the division of” the two Chinas (1997, 184 fn 11). Whenever it was called upon to clarify, America has constantly been deliberately ambiguous and would never state in explicit terms which “China” it recognizes. The rhetoric has always been to maintain the status quo across the Taiwan straits and support the “One-China” policy: but which one? Furthermore, if we identify the chaotic presentation of *Peach Blossom Land* as Taiwan, then Tao’s purchase of different types of exotic animals’ genitals to be cooked as a tonic to strengthen his virility might be read as the impotence of Taiwan’s political leaders to articulate their position for Taiwan on the international stage. As Perry Anderson puts it: the future of Taiwan has always been determined within the Sino-American discourse of power (2004, 12). A possible indictment of Taiwan’s inability to articulate its own discourse and determine its own future might be Lai’s veiled criticism of the Chinese hegemony curtailing Taiwan’s voice from being heard on the international scene, therefore, as well as America’s standing by and unwillingness to do more for Taiwan.

Just as Chun Hua and Boss Yuan have never heard of the Peach Blossom Land, those in the Peach Blossom Land have never heard of Wuling or the outside

world. Old Tao explains that the current inhabitants fled there in order to *biluan* 避亂 or “hide from the chaos.” As Kowallis points out: this is again suggestive of the mainlanders who fled China to Taiwan to “hide from the chaos” of the Chinese Civil War (1997, 184). Inhabitants in the Peach Blossom Land are unaware of the outside world, which to me, is symptomatic of the “Republican” mentality: when the Kuomintang retreated to Taiwan, for a long time they still maintained the façade that they were the “real” China and would one day recapture the mainland from the communist insurgents. The Nationalist government in Taiwan occupied the Chinese seat in the United Nations until 1971, ignoring the reality that mainland China was now under communist rule. For more than 50 years when the Nationalists were the government of Taiwan, the school curriculum taught China’s history as its “national” history, and Chinese maps were studied in detail but students were not taught Taiwanese geography. Again, I detect Lai’s implicit criticism of such mentality here: unless ignorance is bliss, then perhaps this Peach Blossom Land is not as utopic as it seems. Here, I show that Lai could possibly be simultaneously criticizing the United States, the Chinese Communist Party and the Kuomintang.

I wish to turn to two other sets of characters in the play that I believe will further illuminate my discussion. The caretaker of the theatre attempts to lock up the theatre and is unwilling to concede to the troupe for *Secret Love* the ten more minutes they need to finish the play. As if too coincidentally, he arrives at the time when one play has just ended but not the next, and requests that they stop the rehearsal. If these two plays allude to two separate narratives, then he is effectively preventing the other story from being told; if we see the two

performances as two sides of the same coin, each complementing and completing the other, then the exact timing of the caretaker's arrival is neither an accident nor coincidental. It is precisely this deliberate attempt to censor the voice of the other side that highlights its importance to be told.

The female Stranger who is looming in the background of the entire play, at times coming in to interject a line saying she is looking for a certain Liu Ziji, is perhaps the oddest character in the play. Nobody knows who she is, no one in either of the theatre troupes seems to know her, and it is not clear to the audience by the end of the play what her function in the play is. It is equally puzzling who this Liu Ziji person is, except for a vague reference to the last line in *Tales of the Peach Blossom Spring*, of a Liu Ziji of Nanyang 南陽劉子驥, when the Stranger mentioned she has once eaten sour-and-spicy noodles with him in Nanyang Street for an entire year. I posit three possible readings for this female Stranger. First, she suggests once again a modern person of undefinable and unknown identity looking for fulfillment in something from the heritage of pre-modern Chinese culture, or something in the present understood or misunderstood through an allusion to the cultural past. Second, in all the versions of the play and film I have encountered, the ending has consistently depicted the Stranger being left alone waiting on stage. We assume she is waiting for Liu. This immediately reminds me of the ending in *Waiting for Godot*. The common reading for the ending of Samuel Beckett's seminal piece is that it is a tragedy because Godot does not eventually arrive, therefore making futile any hope that might come as a result. However, according to the late Singaporean drama doyen Kuo Pao Kun, he feels there can be no greater hope than that found in *Godot*. Kuo singles out the ending

in *Godot* to bear such optimism: even till the end of the play, Vladimir and Estrogen have not given up, but instead, are still waiting. If they who have been waiting endlessly for someone who does not show up, and yet still believe and continue waiting, it signifies they have hope that Godot will finally turn up. In other words, Vladimir and Estragon's persistence and belief in the eventual arrival of Godot is their greatest hope. Similarly, when *Secret Love in Peach Blossom Land* comes to an end and the female Stranger still does not give up on waiting for Liu Ziji, can she too not be an emblem of hope? One immediate take might perhaps be a signification that tensions along the Taiwan Straits will subside if we have hope and wait. A wider reading might be that the play promotes hope and patience in waiting for resolutions for conflicts of any kind.

The third interpretation I posit is that the female Stranger (and by extension, Liu) represents some kind of overarching narrative that is constantly being "other-ed." Kowallis notes the Stranger, "a young woman in her twenties wanders onto the set, ostensibly from off the street, continually calling the name of her boyfriend in Taiwan-accented Mandarin, which is not recognized by the actors of either troupe, *although each assumes him to belong to the other*" (1997, 174; italics mine). I emphasize this assumption made by both troupes here. Although more off- than on-stage, the female Stranger is a character who has been in the play from beginning till end whom no one takes seriously, although at times she seems to be speaking the "truth" to the two troupes that are having a communication breakdown. Here I highlight the moment just prior to both troupes agreeing to split the stage between them, and the two directors ridiculing each other's play:

Actor Yuan: How do you play a camellia? You act it out for me now ...
you act it out, you act it out!

Director: Has he seen the play?

Stranger: No...!

(sound of running footsteps on the metal catwalk above. Everyone looks up.)

Actress Yun: Let's stop arguing, shall we? Let's think of a solution.

Actor Yuan: Solution? How are we going to solve this? Time is short
for me. I don't have enough time now, do you understand?

Actress Yun: We don't have enough time too.

Stranger: Then all of us are short of time!

Actor Yuan: Ok then, what shall we do?

Stranger: Yah, what *shall* we do? What *shall* we do? What *shall* we
do?

Actor Yuan: Ok, let's not get too anxious.

Stranger: Alright.

Actor Yuan: How about this ...⁵⁸

In this exchange, the female Stranger's lines all cohere with those of the others. However, while the cast and crew from both troupes might have heard her, they do not listen, and are unwilling to engage in dialogue with her; no one is particularly invested in her because they assume she must be from "the other side." In a way, the Stranger brings to the fore the problem experienced by the two groups: because both troupes already see each other — and the Stranger —

⁵⁸ In this dissertation, I use Martha P.Y. Cheung's 張佩瑤 (Zhang Peiyao) translation of Lai's play. See (Lai 1997). However, the interjections by the female Stranger is absent in Martha Cheung's translation. I took the lines from the 1992 film version and translated them myself.

with tainted lenses, they have subconsciously already “other-ed” the other party, thus failing to hear what the other side has to say. If one of Lai’s messages is that these are two competing theatre troupes, each trying to tell their side of the narrative and needing the other to complete the picture, then the Stranger represents a figure from whom they must learn to see the other before one can usefully complement the other. After all, she responds (adequately) to both Actress Yun and Actor Yuan, and by extension, both theatre companies. I argue that Lai is using her to bring out the motif of the need to listen to both sides of the story, and too often it is difficult to do so because one can neither adequately put oneself in the shoes of the other nor see things from an overarching point of view. If she represents an overarching viewpoint as I suggested, then Lai is underscoring the importance of seeing things from the other side, to listen to the stories from each side in a bid to find a winning solution for both parties.

It is interesting to note that the “resolution” of the two troupes does not come with “sharing” the same stage space; in fact, they are not sharing but partitioning and fighting with each other in the same space. Yomi Braester 柏右銘 suggests:

In Scene 9, the troupes have drawn a line in the middle of the stage and try to speak at the empty theater, each pretending that the other troupe does not exist. ... Soon after, the dialogs break down completely, as actors from each troupe talk to those of the other, pretending that they are still reciting their lines, to the effect of telling the other party to go away.

(2008, 691)

On the contrary, by giving in to the other side, they both win the space to stage their own plays, allegorically alluding to winning a space each to tell their narrative. Notice towards the end of the play when the caretaker of the theatre wants to lock up the place, the actors from *Peach Blossom Land* stand up for those in *Secret Love*, who are still in rehearsal. A sort of camaraderie begins to develop at a critical time when one of the narratives is threatened with being prematurely ended.

It seems to me that Lai's juxtaposing two theatre troupes, telling two different stories with multiple references of utopia and dystopia, and yet having the two troupes at the same time competing with each other for the same space, is emblematic of the historical period this piece was written in, and also finds a broader contemporary relevance to the cross-straits situation. As earlier suggested, the signifiers in the play might take on more than one meaning and it is this multivalent reading of the signified that underscores the play's complexity. Above all, the juxtaposition of the two dramatic troupes on the same platform results in a dramatic staging of a play within a play — or, more accurately, two plays within a play — and I read these variations of meaning not as competing discourses but as complementary opposites. As Braester observes, "Various comic situations arise when the two plays compete for stage space, first performing intermittently and later even sharing the stage. ... the two texts become hopelessly entangled in each other" (2008, 691). The concluding remarks made by Old Tao in *Peach Blossom Land* might indicate Lai's attitude. He says:

In the past few years, I discovered that many things are not the way we've made them out to be. It might seem that there are no more paths ahead,

but if you were to change your point of view, you would be able to obtain a new sense of direction, and sometimes you won't even know where it is that you've positioned yourself.⁵⁹

Perhaps boundaries do not necessarily have to cut one another off. If we approach things from a different angle, as Tao suggests, maybe things can become complementary instead of competing, and accepting instead of excluding. Often, these are fine lines, and I believe *Secret Love in Peach Blossom Land* have provided much room for thought on this. The late Singaporean drama doyen Kuo Pao Kun provides a reading on how exclusivity and inclusivity are one fine line apart, and how this model illuminates a Stan Lai production:

Stan Lai's theatrical work can't be pigeonholed ... It's an exceptional form of theater, being neither Chinese nor Taiwanese, neither Eastern nor Western, neither elegant nor vulgar, conforming neither to this rule nor that. Change all those neither-nors to both-ands and you might have a fitting description of it.

(Kuo 1999, 13; Chang 2003, 69)

Conclusion

At a time when Taiwan was seeking its own identity, Lai's intervention in the debate saw him straddling an undetermined Chinese-Taiwanese identification. In the play, he sets up binary opposites that do not lend themselves to easy determination, allowing each avid Taiwanese audience of the 1980s enough ambiguity and openness to provide his/her own interpretation of whether s/he

⁵⁹ This monologue by Tao is also missing in Martha Cheung's translation of the play. I have again taken these lines from the 1992 film edition.

wants to stay or go, and choose which side s/he wishes to identify with. However, the reality of contemporary Taiwan that he depicts cannot be missed: it is one fraught with fragments of history, haunted by the wreckage of a ghostly (Chinese) past that does not go away just because one wishes it to. Cultural critic Stephen Chan Ching-kiu's 陳清僑 reading of *The Night* could serve as a reliable interpretation on these two inaugural Performance Workshop plays:

And this tradition, as it gradually becomes clear for Lai's audience, signifies — by virtue of its textual inscription in the story and history ... — not only an ensemble of past shows, past events and past values reminiscent of the history ... but the collective unconscious of a Chinese people lost amid their ambivalent memory of what constitutes 'modern history' for them.

(1987–88, 25)

On the one hand Lai is critical of the mainlander émigrés' mentality of refusing to accept the Taiwanese reality to which they are all bounded, on the other he does not side with those who advocate a clear cut with the past by reminding us of the impossibility of a complete rupture with the past because a fragmented sense of history is always at work in the frustrations of everyday life in Taiwan. By advocating that one should learn to view things from the other side — as represented by the Strange Woman — perhaps time might heal wounds and friction could mend.

We might be able to glean Lai's stance from his treatment of Jiang Binliu in *Secret Love*. Lai himself considers the play's strength to lie in having its fingers on the pulse of the contemporary Taiwanese experience, which is chaotic

and disrupting, and from this somehow managing to find an order, thus satisfying the subconscious desires of many (1992, 26). Nevertheless, is this play really about a utopia that no one can return to, or a dystopia in itself? Or both? Could this be Lai's message of saying there can be no utopia to return to, and one (the mainlander émigré) has to settle for Taiwan no matter how chaotic it is? The obvious allusions to Sino-Taiwanese relations makes this play "dangerous" at its inception: not only was it a taboo subject then, what is more, the role of Mrs. Jiang could be interpreted as one not being concerned about this wife in Taiwan and always secretly pining for the one in mainland China! (Lai 1992, 27) The final scene of *Secret Love* shows Jiang Binliu, now in his old age, in bed in a Taipei hospital. As his current wife, Mrs Jiang, plays the cassette tape he has just requested Nurse Wang to purchase, music from his old Shanghai days began to fill the room. In a separate spatial-temporal sequence — probably representing Jiang's dreams or innate desires — Jiang gets out of bed, wanders through the door of his hospital room, and into the park in 1948 Shanghai. Everything in the park appears to be the same, even Yun Zhifan — his lover from more than 40 years ago — who now shows up on stage right, crosses the door in the Taipei hospital and into the frozen time-space in the Shanghai park meeting Jiang. All this while Mrs Jiang is speaking in a mix of Taiwanese and Mandarin to Nurse Wang and later on the phone, possibly with a relative or a close friend who is trying to console her on preparing herself mentally in the event of Jiang's demise. Whether Jiang is entering a dream in his sleep in hospital or going into his subconscious, this nostalgic imagery of old China frozen in time is very much representative of the mindset of the mainlanders who fled China with Chiang Kai-

shek for Taiwan at the end of the Chinese Civil War. The unfamiliarity with the reality of Taiwan — where they now had no choice but to stay — is represented by Jiang's dislike of his wife's Taiwanese cooking, and his alienation by her use of Taiwanese, a language foreign to the ears of the majority of mainlander émigrés then. Everything nostalgic is represented here in this frozen-in-time Shanghai, but little has Jiang — and the two million mainlanders — known that this is a utopia to which they could no longer return. Yun Zhifan reinforces this notion when she rejects the huge stacks of letters that Jiang has written to her all these years, none of which reached her. In desperation, he hands her these letters and remarks that these represent their aspirations, only to have her throw them up in the air and reply, "Aspirations? One cannot just have aspirations! You must have the courage to do it" — symbolically destroying all hopes left in him that are clinging on to the past. This is further reinforced when the actress playing Yun Zhifan later breaks out of character and tells the director she cannot play the *real* Yun: if Yun Zhifan represents the symbolic love that Jiang and the Taiwanese mainlanders have of their nostalgic past, then this nostalgia is not only distanced further but completely shattered.

Five years after its inaugural production, the play had its second restaging, this time with Brigitte Lin Ching-hsia reprising the female protagonist Yun Zhifan. Taiwan's political circumstances witnessed further dramatic changes in these five years: after the martial law ended and the ban on visiting the relatives in mainland China was subsequently lifted in 1987, ironically the play's theme advanced even further and deeper (Lai 1992, 31). On the one hand it goes deeper into the human condition, on the other it probes the broader vision of the more permanent

commonalities of the meaning of life (Lai 1992, 31). While the success of the inaugural version depended on the emotions attached to real(politik) events, the second version is connected to a larger schema, and its theme aims at an even wider perspective, no longer merely confined to cross-straits relations (Lai 1992, 31). Shen Shiao-ying's observation of the two versions of *Secret Love* makes an interesting case in study. In the 1986 version performed in martial law Taiwan "when visits to China were prohibited," the protagonist Jiang Binliu "instructs his Taiwanese wife to take their children to the mainland and visit his ancestral graves in the future when possible" whereas in the 1992 film version he insists that his wife carry his ashes back to the mainland since he is physically unable to return to China because of his grave illness. In Shen's opinion, the character of Jiang "is one who, in order not to lose the idealized past, insists on being a foreigner in what he considers as a foreign land" (1995, 100). I agree with this analysis but offer a slightly different reading in Jiang's unwillingness to revisit China even though cross-straits relations had opened. If, in the 1986 version of the play when Taiwan was still under martial law and Jiang could not go back to the mainland, in the post-1987 versions of the play when martial law was lifted and yet Jiang still chooses not to do so: is this not simultaneously critiquing the mentality of Jiang (and his likes) for clinging onto the past and foregrounding Taiwan's subjectivity? In a similar vein, Joyce Liu asks:

What is the "Taohuayuan" to Stan Lai after all? "Taohuayuan" seems to suggest a land of unreality, in which Old Tao, Chunhua and Boss Yuan, all dressed in white, with handkerchiefs covering their eyes, play hide-and-seek cheerfully and innocently in slow motion. Chunhua and Boss Yuan

in this “Taohuayuan” are played by the same actress and actor at Wuling, but they refuse to recognize Old Tao. The uncanny resemblance makes this dream land a mirror image of reality, an imaginary vision projected by the subject, while the persistent disavowal energetically maintained by the blind dream thoughts protects the gap from being bridged so that the dream can remain intact.

(1997)

Where Shen considers it the mainlanders’ choice to remain as foreigners in Taiwan, Liu regards it as “a land of unreality” that is “a mirror image of reality” that the mainlanders want to keep “intact.” Yomi Braester, too, agrees that the sentiment expressed in this play is that “a return to utopia is impossible” (2008, 697). Remarking that “The question of ‘going back’ is largely irrelevant” in the play, Jon Kowallis also shares the view that “[o]n a personal level, the moral dilemma of the diaspora is how we deal with others while coming to terms with our own displacement” (1997, 176–177).

While a return to the past is depicted as ridiculous and choosing to isolate oneself in that utopic memory is being scorned at, Lai is not about to become a spokesperson of the pro-independence pan-Green faction either. At the same time, Lai is also critical of those who choose a willful forgetting of the past, or what Braester calls “Taiwan’s amnesiac self-definition” (2008, 698). Liu Kuang-neng 劉光能 suggests that the ending in the two halves of the play are analogous to each other: Old Tao returning from Peach Blossom Land in the hope of fetching his wife to join him, but only to realize how things have deteriorated at Wuling and hence disappointingly leaving yet again for the Peach Blossom Land; Jiang

Binliu after yearning for 30 years is finally able to meet his former sweetheart in Taipei, only to realize his longing for his sweetheart from the old Shanghai days is not reciprocated: Yun Zhifan, now a bespectacled, white-haired old lady, does not seem to linger on to the past to the same degree as Jiang, she leaves Jiang's hospital ward after a brief exchange, reassuring Jiang that she is currently "well" and that her husband is "treating" her "very well" (Liu 1986, 21). In Liu's view, this is akin to many of the "mainlanders" who returned to visit mainland China once (perhaps through illegal channels before the cross-straits relations resumed in 1987?), only to be shocked at how much mainland China has changed — their romanticized image of their motherland henceforth forever tarnished, and returning to Taiwan dismayed. Moreover, Liu also suggests that Jiang Binliu's dilemma is not between the two women of his life — Yun Zhifan and Mrs Jiang — but rather, the Yun Zhifan of old Shanghai and the Mrs Jiang of contemporary Taiwan. He cannot forget the Yun Zhifan of his memory — and everything that connects him to his memory of mainland China before he fled to Taiwan; it is the clinging onto this memory and the failure for its realization that is causing him pain (alas, it cannot *be* realized, as evidenced by Yun's visit in his hospital ward). Liu suggests that this is an ailment very similar to many mainlanders in Taiwan who after having lived in the island-state for more than 30 years still linger on to the nostalgic memory of their hometown in mainland China (Liu 1986, 23). Again, this seems to support Lai's affirmation of a "Taiwanese" identity through constructing the subjectivity of Taiwan and sense of belonging to the Taiwanese soil. However, I propose that Lai is calling our attention to the acute painful history encountered by the mainland émigrés, and that a willful

forgetting of the past might not be feasible because it is one of the components of the subject construction of the mainland emigré: it is what defines them as mainlanders in Taiwan, and this experience constitutes an important part of the collective Taiwanese experience — waisheng *and* bensheng people.

In the same light then, in seeking to establish Taiwan's identity, can it be done simply by a rupture with the (Chinese) past? Two scenes in this play suggest criticism of this. *Secret Love* opens with a scene in 1948 with two lovers in a park in Shanghai. This is the eve of their separation when Yun Zhifan will leave her lover Jiang Binliu for Guilin to reunite with her family for Chinese New Year.

Jiang: (*still with a heavy heart*) It's great to be able to go home —

Yun: (*noticing his sadness*) What's the matter? You're homesick again?
(*Comforting him*) You'll be able to go home to Manchuria one day!
The Russians won't be there forever.⁶⁰

Jiang: You can't just jump on to a train and be off to Manchuria just like that!

Yun: (*goes up to Jiang*) The day *will* come when you can spend New Year in Manchuria! (*The more she tries to comfort him, the sadder he grows. She squats down, holding his hands.*) Binliu, the war is

⁶⁰ There are textual variations here. The line "The Russians won't be there forever" in Martha Cheung's translation does not come up in the Chinese texts I referred to in a 2005 Taiwanese edition nor in a 2007 mainland edition. Neither were they in the 1992 film or 1999 stage versions of the play which I viewed. I suspect that Cheung could be relying on the earlier text of the 1986 version, as there are textual variations in several places throughout the play. In its stead, the line in later textual variant reads: "The Northeast (Manchuria) will not be like this forever."

over. We're lucky to still be alive. Why keep thinking about the unpleasant things?

Jiang: There are things one just cannot forget!

Yun: But you must, you must. Look around you, is there anyone who isn't scarred and hurt?

Jiang: *There are things one just cannot forget, for as long as we live.*

Yun: *(patiently, like coaxing a child)* But you must! You must learn to forget.

(Lai 1997, 382; italics mine)

If the word “Manchuria” is replaced with “China,” and “Russians” replaced with “Communists” or “Chinese Communist Party,” the scene might as well have been taking place between a Taiwanese and a Taiwanese mainlander in mid-1980s Taiwan (or for that matter, even contemporary Taiwan) instead of two lovers in 1948 Shanghai! The political differences between the Mainland and Taiwan resulted in a strained relationship across the Taiwan Straits during which citizens on both sides were not allowed visits from either side. When Yun attempts to comfort Jiang with “the war is over,” yes, the Chinese Civil War is indeed over but the ideological differences between the US and USSR have resulted in the Cold War that has kept the “two Chinas” separate still. Urging him to forget the past and move on, Yun must have been encouraging Jiang to forget about the pains of the Civil War — the war that Kuomintang lost — and accept the reality of Taiwan as their new permanent home. While this analysis is in line with our above discussion of Lai’s critique of Jiang for holding on to the utopic past and refusing to come to terms with the contemporary reality, it also suggests the

impossibility of a permanent break with the past. Jiang's painful sorrow is thoroughly expressed in his line, "There are things one just cannot forget, for as long as we live," suggesting that perhaps more than his unwillingness to let go, it is his inability to do so that the past always projects a ghostly presence in contemporary Taiwan.

The second example that might more clearly illustrate this point is Old Tao's entry into the Peach Blossom Land, when he meets the Man and Woman in White, played by the actor and actress playing Boss Yuan and Chun Hua, who tries to explain to Tao the utopic life they currently live:

Man in White: Our ancestors had a dream! (*With evangelical zeal*) They led us to this beautiful place, this land of plenty, so that we, their sons and grandsons, could, hand in hand, side by side —

Tao: (*chipping in*) Who were they — your ancestors?

Man in White: They... (*Momentary confusion*) They're not important now. (*resumes his oratorical pose*) Because...because their dream — has been realized! And their aspirations have come to fruition here!

(Lai 1997, 426)

The Man and Woman in White communicate to Tao that their ancestors have led them there to accomplish their aspirations and dreams. They also ask Tao to forget all about the past and stay forever with them there. Going with Shen's analysis that Chun Hua and Wuling represent China while the cuckolded and humiliated Tao (representing the KMT) retreats to Taiwan (1995 100, fn 27),

would this be Lai's message to the Taiwanese mainlander? That they should forget about the past and stay in Taiwan forever, thereby setting up the dichotomy of the utopian Taiwanese contemporary and the dystopian war-torn Chinese past? Certainly this might be a plausible answer, but Tao problematizes this further by blurting out: this place is good, but it still has many hurdles that are impossible to cross. What these hurdles are remain unknown to the audience, for they are only implied and not explicitly mentioned in the play. Using Joyce Liu's notion that the Peach Blossom Land "seems to suggest a land of unreality" and is merely "an imaginary vision projected by the subject" (1997), it is perhaps then not so much a letting go of a *lived* past experience, but a realization that this projection is based on one's *imagination* and might not after all be real.

I agree with Shen Shiao-ying that "Different people in Taiwan have different pasts that define their being. And the past that Lai delineates is only one of them" (1995, 117). Just as Kuo Pao Kun's Chinese-ness speaks more for the Chinese-educated Singaporeans who are now more socially marginalized compared to their English-educated peers, Lai's Chinese-ness addresses more the concerns of the mainlander émigrés — who form an inseparable part of the Taiwanese collective whole. On the one hand, he critiques their blind idolization of a utopic past — an image that they themselves project — on the other, he appeals to a broader audience to give these mainlanders room for reconciliation with their internal displaced condition. The mainland émigrés' insistence on clinging to a created past is a necessary condition that constructs their identity — an intricate part of Taiwanese history and identity that cannot be easily erased. Instead, Lai encourages his audience to look through different paradigms by

creating room for various interpretations in his dramatic work. Importantly, he encourages his audience to see things from the other's perspective — as represented by the character of the Strange Woman — and in so doing, has sought to diffuse tensions instead of incite them. If only people slowed down and watched them, and listened to the other side, as suggested by Old Tao in *Peach Blossom Land*, perhaps things could be better and deteriorating situations improve.

In an interview with Phoenix Satellite Television on his play *The Village* touring Chinese cities and eventually to Beijing, Lai expresses his thoughts on “roots”:

So what are roots? I consider *The Village* to be talking about a process, from assuming one is about to go home and then not being able to do so, to this place is home, Taiwan is home. Hence, I think I will stop here. Because what is called roots, this is a very complicated question; in the evolution of history, this is a very complex question. I believe for most of the inhabitants of the *juancun*, their roots are in their hometowns in mainland China, but time changes many things. When you have been living somewhere, you might have left home at age seventeen, and then you stay in Taiwan for sixty years, so then where is home?

(2010)

The *juancun* 眷村, known as “military compounds” or “veterans’ villages,” were built in the 1950s for the families of Chiang Kai-shek’s army that had retreated to Taiwan as a site of temporary dwelling. While *The Village* discusses exclusively the difficulty of the mainland émigrés’ settlement in Taiwan — again in the spirit of encouraging one to see from the other side’s perspective — might its intended

audience not be China (and the play did after all perform in many Chinese cities) as well as the pro-independence faction in Taiwan? Jon Kowallis suggests that Lai “has continued to bring the ‘two China’s closer” (1997, 176), and I wonder if his works have not also attempted to bring the different factions in Taiwan closer. This might be overly optimistic, but undoubtedly an admirable attempt. While unsettling the mainlanders from their seat of power has been a focus of contemporary Taiwanese politics, Lai portrays them as the underdogs — an generation who did not have a say in their chosen site of settlement, and having to cope with the difficulty in their everyday living conditions. In narrating the story of the sufferings and hardships of the mainlanders, the message seems to suggest: in the course of building this place, we, the mainlander émigrés suffered too, and by extension we are hence not that different from you. As mainlanders living on Taiwan for over thirty years, many have found Taiwan to be their new home. And the political realities are as such: even if they wanted to return to “China,” where could they go? Many — military men as well as men of *lettres* — came with the Nationalists in 1949 precisely because they did not agree with the Communist regime. Despite Lai’s critique of the mainlander’s holding on to a created past, it is also a condition that is necessary in the construction of the mainlander émigré’s subjectivity — it is this past from mainland China, his previous experiences that followed and continue to haunt him in contemporary Taiwan that his subjective self is formulated. Hence, a different type of “Chinese-ness” is being generated in Taiwan — one that is formed by its unique history and stands apart from the Hong Kong, Singapore or China experience.

Chapter Three Theatre of Rebellion: Danny Yung and Experimental Hong Kong Theatre

I. Introduction

Two events of immense significance to Hong Kong took place in 1982. On September 24, Margaret Thatcher's (1925–2013) infamous tripping and falling off the steps of the Great Hall of the People 人民大會堂, the political hub of Beijing, seemingly prophesized Hong Kong's future. The then British Prime Minister had just exited from a secret meeting with China's paramount leader Deng Xiaoping 鄧小平 (1904–1997). This meeting, which began behind closed doors in 1981 (Tang 2009, 131), paved the way for the 1984 Sino-British Joint Declaration 中英聯合聲明, a formal agreement between the two governments that the island of Hong Kong will “be returned” to the People's Republic of China in 1997. As if as a response to this incident, in March 1982, the arts collective, “Zuni Icosahedron” 進念·二十面體 was formed.⁶¹ In the next few decades, Zuni would make headlines so frequently centering itself in “controversies” such

⁶¹ Prior to the founding of Zuni Icosahedron, the group's leader Danny Yung had already been staging several of his artistic works after returning to Hong Kong from the United States. He had staged *Pojilu yihao* 破紀錄一號 (Broken record #1; 1979) (collaborated with John Sham 岑建勳) and *Zhongguo lücheng* 中國旅程 (Journey to the east; 1981) in the Hong Kong Arts Centre, with Gus Wong 王守謙 on the invitation of the “Hong Kong Repertory Theatre” 香港話劇團 (HKREP) to stage *Dalu* 大路 (The road; 1981), and set designed for “Xiejin jushe's” 協進劇社 *Fanshen* 翻身 and “Seals Theatre Company” 海豹劇團. Half of Zuni's founding members of were the alumni of Rosary Hill School Drama Club 玫瑰崗校友戲劇組 who were inspired by Yung's avant-garde theatre praxis after working with him, and the other half consisted of artists like Pia Ho 何秀萍 who collaborated with Yung while he was working with Seals. It was only out of necessity and to “organise publicly materials following an invitation to perform in Taiwan at the Asian Arts Festival” (Lilley 1998, 94) that these theatre-lovers registered themselves as an arts collective in March 1982 (Singerman 1983).

as being the first troupe in the territory to stage plays with nudity, discuss homosexual and overt political themes, and invite the audience onstage during the performance process provoking official intervention to shut down the performance that further led to a territorial-wide public discussion on the issue of censorship. Zuni would become Hong Kong's most outspoken arts group, both within the territory and on the international scene, and appear almost like a rebellious child constantly challenging the hegemonic powers-that-be that sealed Hong Kong's fate — a process that took place without a representative from the territory to arbitrate on its own behalf. As if by coincidence, these two events that took place in the same year were to have the greatest impact on Hong Kong politically and artistically for the next few decades, and Zuni's development intricately tied to Hong Kong's socio-political progress. Most importantly perhaps, Zuni's pursuit of a "Hong Kong theatre" was probably best reflected by Hong Kongers' commitment to seeking an identity for themselves. This chapter will discuss the significance of Zuni Icosadron and its artistic director Danny Yung in the context of Hong Kong theatre history by focusing on its 1984 production *Yapian zhanzheng — Zhi Deng Xiaoping de sifengxin* 《鴉片戰爭——致鄧小平的四封信》 (Opium War — Four letters addressed to Deng Xiaoping).

Shih Shu-mei's "Sinophone Studies" advocates for the valorization of sites outside mainland China that also employ the Sinitic script to be recognized as equally valid cultural producers. Hence she chastises any attempts "To fold Hong Kong literature back to Chinese literature," criticizing it as:

a simple-minded but heavy-handed political gesture with no regard for history. Sharing the Sinitic script does not automatically make every work of literature a part of Chinese literature, just as the sharing of the Arabic script in the Arab world of over 20 countries does not make all literatures belong to one national literature.

(Shih 2008, 16)

By valorizing sites of cultural production that have been given lesser attention in the traditional study of Chinese-language literature, perhaps especially in Western academe, Shih's advocacy lends voice to literary producers in Hong Kong, Macau, Malaysia, Taiwan, and Singapore among other diasporic Chinese communities. While generally positively received by the cultural producers and scholars of these "alternative Chinese" sites, at the core of Shih's advocacy is a power contestation over resources and recognition in the academe. Within this power paradigm is the assertion of identity: what determines with whom one identifies and how, which consequently determines resource allocation segregating the in-group from the out-group. Allen Chun 陳奕麟 reminds us usefully of the *constructedness* of identity by pointing out that there were no "Hong Kongers" before 1950 when most residents of the territory then "just called themselves Chinese," highlighting that "A separate Hong Kong identity began to emerge only with the widening rift between Nationalist and Communist China, which turned Hong Kong initially into a battleground for contesting 'national' identities" (1996, 120).

While not complicit with Shih's agenda, the whole of Hong Kong was embroiled in a statewide identity building exercise in the 1980s, prompted

primarily by the onset of the “1997 doomsday” 九七大限. This is what Ackbar Abbas calls “a culture of disappearance,” that is, Hong Kong’s subjectivity has now become “a focus of attention because its very existence is under threat.” In this way, the emergence of a Hong Kong identity or culture is predicated precisely “on the imminence of its disappearance” (1997, 7–8). Edward Gunn 耿德華 adds that 1980s Hong Kong was “when audiences with increased education and affluence demanded more from cultural production, and when greater symbolic capital was needed to assert a hegemonic cultural identity” (2006, 33). While the importance of the 1980s to the maturation of a Hong Kong identity cannot be underestimated, the beginnings of constructing this identity was well on its way, according to cultural critic Johnny Chan Koon-Chung 陳冠中, “starting in the 1960s but not achieving full speed until the late 1970s,” (2007, 383). In Gunn’s groundbreaking study of media language usage in the Chinese-speaking world, he identifies three areas that significantly contributed to the early development of Hong Kong identity. Firstly Hong Kong popular culture was launched as an answer to the People’s Republic of China’s mass culture when the children of a massive immigrant population were coming of age, born or raised in the territory, speaking creolized Hong Kong Cantonese (as opposed to Cantonese from Canton) and who unlike their parents might have migrated from Chaozhou, Canton or Fujian might be speaking Teochew, Hakka, Hokkien or Seiyap (Gunn 2006, 19; 22–23). Secondly, the media giant Shaw Brothers moved into broadcast television, shifting from Mandarin language film production to Hong Kong Cantonese television shows, reinforcing this collective constructed identity “just

as Hong Kong was separating itself culturally from the mainland in its terrifying rampage” in the midst of the Cultural Revolution (Gunn 2006, 22). Thirdly, the advent of Cantonese-pop music and comedy spearheaded by the college educated Hui brothers Michael Koon-man 許冠文 (b. 1942), Ricky Koon-yeng 許冠英 (1946–2011) and Samuel Koon-kit 許冠傑 (b. 1948) “that adopted a working-class persona ... and attitude of general irreverence and distrust toward status and authority that must have been calculated — most successfully — to appeal to a mass audience” broke the box office (Gunn 2006, 26). Sam Hui’s Canto-pop, moreover, distinguished itself “where the lyrics are in the local idiom rather than English or Mandarin” and the trio brilliantly “used current Cantonese slang to explore the peculiarities of the local situation” (Abbas 1997, 31) in their music and films, such as *Tieta lingyun* 鐵塔凌雲 (Eiffel Tower above clouds, 1971) and *Banjin baliang* 半斤八兩 (The private eyes, 1976) are now classics in the Cantonese popular music industry. This was Hong Kong identity that allowed one to remain very Chinese (like the very conservative language of martial arts television programs, for instance) but also distinguished it from being like the People’s Republic.

An important reason for Zuni’s continued relevance in the highly commercialized Hong Kong society despite it being an alternative avant-garde theatre group is due in large part to its active participation in Hong Kong’s identity seeking. In Chun’s analysis, he posits that “Discourses of identity produced by the state or cultural mainstream always make claims about the nature of identity as though they are based on *natural* facts, when, in actuality, they are

just claims, or *representations*, that need to be constantly legitimized” (1996, 126; italics in the original). In this way, Yung’s theatre praxis distinguished itself from his contemporary playwrights. He did not try to reinforce a preconceived notion of what he thought a Hong Kong identity ought to be. Instead, very much in line with the ethos of the Brazilian activist-dramatist Augusto Boal (1931–2009), Yung asked the “right questions” (Boal 1997, 36), exposed the representations that veil these identities, and empowered his audience to seek answers for themselves.

There is perhaps little doubt that Zuni Icosahedron has been the most influential cultural collective in Hong Kong. Its cultural impact has been compared to that of Hong Kong’s film industry, which earned the territory the iconic appellation “Hollywood of the East” 東方好萊塢. On the group’s 25th anniversary, the influential magazine *Hao wai* 《號外》 (City magazine) published a special commemorative issue on the arts group, commenting that:

There is a group of Hong Kongers in the late 70s who were influenced by the 1960s French New Wave — Patrick Tam Kar Ming 譚家明 (b. 1948), Tsui Hark 徐克 (b. 1950), Stanley Kwan 關錦鵬 (b. 1957), Kam Kwok-leung 甘國亮 (b. 1950), Ann Hui 許鞍華 (b. 1947) — who coincidentally met in the TVB training class and riding on the 1980’s abundance of capital, enriched Hong Kong’s film and television cultural industry. In the 1980s there was Zuni. 25 years later, their members would permeate all sectors of society ...

(*Hao wai* Editorial 2007, 108)

This speaks volumes to Zuni's significance in the territory, considering Hong Kong's preeminent global status is recognized as both an international financial centre and a powerhouse in the film industry.⁶² While Tsui Hark, Stanley Kwan, Ann Hui and their contemporaries have since become iconic filmmakers in the "Hong Kong New Wave Cinema" 香港新浪潮電影 whose high standards are held as a yardstick in the region, Zuni too has earned itself the reputation as the vanguard of the Hong Kong theatre scene, and its Artistic Director Danny Yung Ning Tsun 榮念曾 (b. 1943) as "Godfather of the artists in Hong Kong" (Amranand 2008) and "the 'Cultural Godfather' of Hong Kong" 香港的「文化教父」 (Tsoi 2012). The renowned political and cultural critic Leung Man-to 梁文道, who is himself indebted to Yung for inspiring him to take up the critic's armchair (Chen 2013), even goes on say that, "Danny Yung is first of all a mode of thought,' a mode that has influenced many cultural thinkers of my generation" (Leung 2009, 91).

Born to an industrialist family in cosmopolitan Shanghai, at the age of five Yung left with his entire family to Hong Kong via Taiwan on the last boat out of Shanghai in 1949 before the arrival of the Chinese communists. He had his formative experience in Hong Kong and at the age of seventeen left for the United States where he spent the next eighteen years of his life. Upon graduating with

⁶² By the same token, Zuni's impact on the Hong Kong artistic scene through film should not be undermined. In 1985, Yung was invited by Chinese American film director Wayne Wang 王穎 (b. 1949) to be the producer and art director of Wang's film *Dim Sum: a Little Bit of Heart* 點心. Moreover, for ten years since moving to its new home at Causeway Bay, the company has held screenings of "independent films" for the public at the basement of its new headquarters. In so doing, Zuni not only actively reached out to a wider audience beyond that of its theatre productions — which it recognized was limited to a small niche audience — it literally created Hong Kong's first underground film season! (Lam 2006, 26)

degrees in mathematics at Pacific University, Forest Grove, Oregon, architecture from the University of California, Berkeley (1967) and computer science and urban planning from Columbia (1969) respectively, Yung co-founded the “Basement Workshop” in 1971, the first Asian American arts and cultural organization on the American East Coast, where he was involved in social activist work with the Asian American community and also in the Bay Area for the next ten years before returning to Asia. America in the 1960s was filled with a revolutionary air of liberation championing the anti-Vietnam War, the Civil Rights Movement and advocating freedom of speech (Leung 2009, 99). These had a lasting impact on the young Yung, who was then in Berkeley and New York — the two major sites where these counterculture resistance activities were based — thus explaining his praxis of advocacy theatre later on in life.

The group, according to academic and arts critic David Clarke 祈大衛, “can be best described as a major feature of the Hong Kong Cultural Periphery” (1996, 146). It has also been hailed as “one of Hong Kong’s — and perhaps Asia’s — most cutting-edge grouping of artistes” (Madhavan 2004), and Zuni’s productions have since “become synonymous with the avant-garde theatre in Hong Kong” (Cheung 2003). Despite its reputation, Zuni is not a mainstream theatre company in the territory. This is perhaps not as paradoxical as it seems if one considers that Zuni has been at the forefront of experimental theatre since its inception. Unlike conventional western theatre, Zuni productions are distinguished by a lack of characters, plot, narrative and dialogue, and instead, as observed by Chinese drama scholar Hu Xingliang 胡星亮, “rely on objects, visual images, sound effects, improvisation or an unrelated sequence of information and

language that lack an interior cohesiveness” (2007, 92) — traits akin to the works of contemporary experimental theatre maestros Richard Foreman (b. 1937) and Robert Wilson (b. 1941), to whom Yung has often been compared (Yung 2009, 71). As Hans-Thies Lehman notes in his *Postdramatic Theatre*, “the notion of postdramatic theatre and its valorization of the performance dimension does not imply that texts written for the theatre are no longer relevant” (2006, 6), it merely implies that “The text was to become just one element in the scenography and general ‘performance writing’ of theatre” (2006, 4) and hence other components of the *mise en scène* are no longer simply subservient to the text. Most Zuni plays, especially those directed by Yung, do not use what is traditionally the most relied on element in conventional theatre — speech — and instead blend in elements of dance, sculpture, and visual and audio arts to create a collage of images (Chow 1983). Without an existing narrative Zuni plays seem to be in a continuous evolutionary process whereby actors neither create nor assume their characters, and instead are merely forming patterns on an empty stage; actors have turned into symbols, codes and actions (Hu 2007, 92). There have been Zuni productions in which actors walk across the stage a hundred times, without saying a line (Zhou 2008), and productions like *Bainian guji* 百年孤寂 (Hundred years of solitude) have no dialogue at all. Hong Kong theatre scholars Gilbert Fong Chee Fun 方梓勳 and Shelby Chan Kar-yan 陳嘉恩 suggest that “dialogue was a dispensable element” in many of Zuni’s productions thus “rendering the presentation zen-like, i.e., relying on directness rather than mediation through words” (forthcoming). Being so deviant from conventional theatre, it is then not

too difficult to understand why Zuni productions are not considered as mainstream or pandering to popular taste.

Zuni, in fact, thrives on positioning itself on the margins of society. While Yung has great “respect for mainstream artists who are true to their art,” he expresses his views in a made-up interview with an imaginary character Chen Yuguang 陳雨光:

They obviously understand the direct self-interest relationship between the system and themselves, and at the same time have to face the pressures of their own conscience as well as of those from the margins, and they have chosen this limited space for their creative work, inhibiting themselves [in a frame]. Unless they choose to live in a delusional state, this psychological dilemma will surely irk them, eventually finding it hard to be at peace with themselves, and hence this is the tragedy of the product of the system. ... Besides, the system is always scrutinizing the actions of the peripheries, because mainstream art is already part of the system. Under the system’s economic-political control, they will only be able to produce “good” or “bad” art, and never something that will go “out of bounds” (that will have an impact on the system). The system pays attention to the peripheries because it is on the one hand afraid of it and on the other wishes to absorb it, because it knows that the periphery is fluid, has the potential to incite and it is always an unknown. If we were to take a step back, we will see that historically the mainstream and the periphery are merely contending forces at work during systemic change.

(2009, 78–79)

Using this peripheral position as a vantage point, Zuni observes and critiques the centre, leading one journalist to title her article “Every production of the ‘cultural godfather of Hong Kong’ is a critique on society” (Chen 2013). Zuni plays are not about “stories” in the narrative sense. Often on stage almost nothing “happens” in the conventional Aristotelian understanding of dramatic progression: there are no characters who get into conflicts in need of resolutions. In fact there are no “characters” per se; actors merely play themselves, stemming from Yung’s belief:

I am of the opinion that that everyone basically can only play one character, that is him/herself. If we begin from this premise, the stage is precisely a place where we can learn about the collective and ourselves.

The concept of performance then becomes a discussion of the process of honest expression and a clarification of views.

(2009, 71)

As such, Zuni actors need not immerse themselves in characters in the Stanislavskian sense, and need not be “trained” in a theatre school — and as has been shown, they come from all walks of life and in this way enrich the repertoire of the company. Ackbar Abbas goes even so far as to say, “one of its [Zuni’s] achievements is to systematically blur the distinction between amateurism and professionalism” (1997, 144). Instead, Yung’s stage becomes a laboratory for discourse and criticism. The relationship between the individual and the collective and the changing positionalities of how one scrutinizes and is being scrutinized are themes continually probed in Yung’s theatre. In Yung’s words, “Especially in Hong Kong, we are facing a critical point, the relationship between

the individual and the collective is being put to the test. We are critically in need of self-awareness, self-questioning and a new identity. And this is the first step to a collective identity” (2009, 72). In a recent interview conducted by the “Radio Television of Hong Kong” 香港電台 (RTHK), Yung expressed most succinctly what his avant-garde plays seek to examine:

Play-scripts are a frame, theatre is also a frame; how do we understand this frame? Examining this frame, examining the meaning(s) of this frame, and examining the meaning of theatre. The audience responds by asking us many questions, because they are not used to this. Because when the audience enters the theatre, s/he is used to being fed information by others.

Normally audiences go to the theatre for two reasons: (i) to relax, and (ii) to be entertained. But we are discussing the meaning of the theatre! Where is the frame/extent of the theatre? The entire society is a frame. Therefore we have to understand this frame.

(Yung 2014)

In that sense, Zuni is not only contemporaneous with the development of Hong Kong drama, but is, as espoused by veteran theatre scholar and director Lin Kehuan 林克歡, “in a very true sense” Hong Kong’s first experimental theatre group (2007a, 104). Hong Kong theatre director Tang Shu Wing 鄧樹榮 echoes the view, saying that Zuni’s early work pioneered the experimental theatre scene in Hong Kong as they bedazzled the audience with a performance genre the territory has never encountered before (2009, 129). Twice were they invited to

perform at Taipei's "Asian Theatre Festival" in the early 1980s and left an indelible mark in the experimental theatre scene in Taiwan (Huang 1984), spawning many experimental theatre groups that led to a dynamic awakening of the senses that impacted the "Little theatre movement" in Taiwan in the 1980s and 1990s.⁶³

Because of the myriad of its activities — and the controversies it caused that gave it much media attention — Zuni, more than any other theatre group in the territory, was able to tap into artists in other genres to seek collaboration and hence produced a large audience following, despite the fact that Zuni is primarily a company that stages avant-garde theatre.⁶⁴ The name of this self-styled "cultural collective" is perhaps most telling of this phenomenon that it has created: "Zuni" is a color between blue and green and at the same time also the name of a tribe of North American Indians famous for creative handicrafts in western New Mexico, while "Icosahedron" can either mean a twenty-sided solid figure or an

⁶³ In the 1980s, Zuni performed in Taiwan for a total of three times: *Dragon Dance* 龍舞 (March 8) and *Journey to the East Part 5: Hong Kong-Taipei* 中國旅程之五：香港—台北 (March 9) in 1982, *The Second Year of One Hundred Years of Solitude — From a Past Event to Prophecy* 百年之孤寂第二年：往事與流言 (August 2–3) and *Chronicle of Three Women (Taipei Version)* 列女傳 (國語版) (August 4–5) (on the invitation of Cloud Gate dance theatre of Taiwan) in 1984, and *October/Decameron* 拾月／拾日譚 (台北) (on by invitation of Hugh Lee Kuo-hsiu's 李國修 (1955–2013) "Ping-fong Acting Troupe" 屏風表演班 to collaborate with them in August 23–28 1988. Critics like Ma Sen acknowledge the major impact Zuni had on avant-garde theatre in Taiwan (Chang 1989, 28; Ma 1985, 343).

⁶⁴ How "large" a following is always a question of relativity. Zuni's audience might be miniscule compared to Hong Kong's blockbuster mainstream films that cater to transnational Chinese-speaking audiences both within the territory and in the Chinese diaspora, but the company has accumulated a sizeable regular audience base in the 30 years of its theatre practice. Critics agree that the success of its 1987 production *Shitouji* 石頭記 (Romance of the rock) earned the company its new found popularity prompted by the participation of the "Tat Ming Pair" 達明一派, a duo of Cantonese pop idols (*SCMP The Guide* (May 17, 1987) qtd. in Lilley 1998, 94; *Hao wai* Editorial 2007, 105). Even though "audience numbers have fluctuated" throughout the years, Danny Yung pointed out, "the company is, at times, more popular than either the Hong Kong Dance Company or City Contemporary Dance Company" (Lilley 1998, 94). In terms of membership, Zuni grew from a few founding members to its height in the mid-1980s where the company had over 4000 members (Tian and Fong 2009, 412).

infectious virus (Zhou 2008). From these definitions, it appears that Zuni defies strict categorizations and aims instead to position itself on the margins of society. Multi-dimensional in its performative strategies, it seeks to provide multiple perspectives on issues, “infect” and expand its audience. In the company’s thirty-year history, Zuni has collaborated with people from all walks of life who have gone into so many different realms and in turn been influencing the Hong Kong cultural industry within and without. It has spawned the theatre-dance troupe “Edward Lam Dance Theatre” 非常林奕華 and Ellen Pau’s 鮑藹倫 multimedia group “Videotage” 錄映太奇; Kwan Pun Leung 關本良 in cinematography; Susie Au 區雪兒 in filmmaking; Wyman Wong 黃偉文, Pia Ho 何秀萍, Yu Yat-yiu 于逸堯, Wallace Kwok Kai-Wah 郭啟華 and “People Mountain People Sea” (PMPS) 人山人海 in music; Tomas Chan in art; Craig Au-Yeung Ying Chai 歐陽應霽 and Lat Tat Tat Wing 黎達達榮 in comics; Edward Lam Yik Wah 林奕華 and Mathias Woo Yan Wai 胡恩威 in theatre; as well as those who became TVB producers, album records producers, music album designers, furniture shop owners, educators, cultural educators, bankers, and policemen (*Hao wai* Editorial 2007, 105 & 108) — truly living up to its mission of being an infectious virus.

On top of influencing individuals, Zuni and Yung have also been ardent advocates of arts and cultural policies — through official and non-official channels — within and beyond Hong Kong. After the Recreation and Culture Branch produced the “Arts Policy Review Report” in 1993, local artists banded together to attack the Report for being “predictably facile in its self-congratulatory tone” yet failing “to encourage ‘artistic innovation and creativity’,”

and claiming that the Council for the Performing Arts 香港演藝發展局 (CFPA) allocated “a disproportionate amount of funding to a few professional arts groups and that the organisation lacked transparency and was manned by ill-informed bureaucrats” (Lilley 1998, 78–9). The result, lobbied by a united “arts community” formed by “a number of key organisations and individuals including some high profile members of Zuni,” (Lilley 1998, 81) saw the CFPA replaced by the Hong Kong Arts Development Council 香港藝術發展局 (HKADC), whose membership Yung was tasked to charter by the last British governor of Hong Kong Chris Patten in 1993 (Wong 2006).⁶⁵ Zuni’s sister organization, the Hong Kong Institute of Contemporary Culture 香港當代文化中心 (HKICC) (incidentally chaired by Yung), also founded in 2006 the first arts school in the territory — “HKICC Lee Shau Kee School of Creativity” (HKSC) 香港兆基創意書院 — whose inaugural Supervisor 校監 (equivalent to a Principal) May Fung 馮美華 has been a long term collaborator with Zuni (*Hao wai* Editorial 2007, 126). Furthermore, Yung has zealously promoted Hong Kong arts and culture onto the international arena, having directed and produced over 100 stage productions and had them tour Japan, Taiwan, Belgium, Britain, Germany, and the United States, and in 2010 was invited by the Japanese government to co-direct the main show of the Japan Pavilion, World Expo in Shanghai with renowned Japanese director Sato Makoto 佐藤信 (b. 1943) of the “Za-Koenji Public Theatre” 東京座・高圓寺藝術會館. At a high-powered cultural

⁶⁵ For a detailed account of the fiasco of the 1993 “Arts Policy Review Report” that led to the CFPA’s dissolution and replacement by the newly established HKADC with a higher representation of artists on its executive committee, see (Lilley 1998, 78–82).

conference in Europe, while the Hong Kong cultural bureau officer sat among the audience, Yung was at the chair's rostrum mingling with ministers from other countries: Yung's influence is so great that it might be hard even for friends within the artistic circles to imagine (Leung 2009, 91). As designer Freeman Lau 劉小康 said, "Zuni is an organization that promotes the whole of the arts. From research to policy-making to international exchange ... Zuni's influence is not limited to its artistic achievements, it has contributed bountifully to the ecology of the Hong Kong arts scene" (*Hao wai* Editorial 2007, 123).

Like Singapore's "The Theatre Practice" and Taiwan's "Performance Workshop," Zuni became a cultural icon in Hong Kong because of the social impact of their plays. But even more so than its Singaporean and Taiwanese peers, Zuni also influenced culture and society through the activities they pushed for off stage. The company has not shied away from being at the centre of controversies, often using the censorship and taboos that it has challenged to create platforms and spaces for dialogue. Through his decades-long negotiation with the authorities, Yung has become "an experienced tactician" adept at manipulating the media to Zuni's advantage whenever the company and the government are engaged in a tussle over censorship (Lilley 1998, 114). To challenge government restrictions, one of Zuni's strategies has been to force them into the open. For instance, it has always printed in its performance programs the scenes it has been required to cut out and the changes it needed to make in order that censorship be lifted to allow this performance to be held (Lilley 1998, 115). For example, the play *Lienü zhuan* 列女傳 (Chronicle of women; 1983) discussed the triangulated Sino-British-Hong Kong relationship from a feminized position,

breaking taboos such as showcasing the highly volatile political atmosphere when the the Sino-British Joint Declaration was still under discussion on top of using language with overt sexual references and vulgarities on stage. Due to the play's popular success, however, the government sought to implement a vetting policy on all future theatre productions. Yung responded by contacting over forty Hong Kong theatre groups to discuss this, of which twenty responded in the positive to hold collective discussions with the government for the next two years, and the event concluded with the government eventually backing down (Yu 2006, 204). In 1984, the play *Opium War — Four Letters Addressed to Deng Xiaoping* caused a huge controversy with the Hong Kong Cultural Centre that evolved into a discussion of the responsibilities of theatre practitioners and bureaucrats (Lam 2006, 26). No wonder cultural critic Stephen Chan observed, “Zuni Icosahedron is one of the few most persistent artistic groups in Hong Kong to have attempted to speak politically in almost all of its creative endeavours made in the last decade” (1992, 36).

II. The “Third” China: Different but Better? Increasing Sense of Localization in Hong Kong Society, Literature and Drama

Much like the modern history of Taiwan that tied the island's fate to the jostling of power between China and the United States, Hong Kong's fate has been inseparable from the relationship between two external powers. As anthropologist Rozanna Lilley puts it, “Contemporary discourse about ‘Hong Kong identity’ and contesting images of Hong Kong ‘selves’ can be partially seen

as expressing the dilemmas of people interstitially placed between dominating powers — China and Britain” (1998, 49). But perhaps even more so than Taiwan’s indeterminacy over its own subjectivity, Hong Kong has also been sandwiched by the “two Chinas” — the Republic of China and the People’s Republic of China — and is oftentimes considered the “Third China.” The relationships between these three “Chinas” interlock in historical complexities that are not always amicable. Neighboring the Southeastern province of Guangzhou, the Hong Kong Island was ceded to Britain in 1842 when they defeated the Qing government in First Opium War. Subsequently, Britain acquired the Kowloon Peninsula, which the Qing lost after the Second Opium War in 1860, and the New Territories, which the Qing again lost after the First Sino-Japanese War when Britain took advantage of the weakened Chinese government to force them into a treaty agreement in 1898 that leased the territory to the British administration for 99 years. In a somewhat ironic twist of historical fate similar to Taiwan, 99 years after 1898, the Chinese government that negotiated for Hong Kong’s “return” in 1997 was not the one that “lost” it: it was no longer the now defunct Qing Empire but the People’s Republic of China that wanted Hong Kong “back.”

In the 150-year period under British administration, the Cantonese-speaking Hong Kong had developed from a backward fishing village into a highly successful global financial centre, ranked third only after London and New York City, and had one of the highest per capita incomes in the world. Hailed as one of the “Four Mini Asian Dragons” along with Taiwan, Singapore and South Korea for its miraculous economic growth and rapid industrialization in the 1960–80s,

on top of its relatively democratic social freedom and status as a filmmaking powerhouse in the region, it earned the appellation “Pearl of the Orient” 東方之珠. Thus in the early 1980s when contrasted with a communist China newly emerged from its ten-year socially and economically destructive Cultural Revolution, it was hard for many to imagine a less than bleak future if Hong Kong were to be “returned” to China. As can be imagined then, from the early 1980s to 1997, the topic of the “1997 handover” loomed large in the imaginary of everyday Hong Kongers and vividly expressed in all kinds of literature and arts in the territory. In the field of theatre, the most important intellectual discussion and serious expression of self identity were to be found in works discussing this theme and were thus coined “1997 plays” 九七劇.

Apart from the social differences, Hong Kong played a historically complex role caught in-between the “two Chinas.” For instance, prior to 1984 before the Taiwanese authorities lifted its ban to allow its citizens to visit the mainland, Hong Kong was the most important site for cross-straits secret communications (Feng 1988, 3) where letters to and from Taiwan and China were sent covertly via Hong Kong. Most significantly perhaps Hong Kong was a “safe haven” that one escaped to if his/her political stance differed with both the Taiwanese Nationalists and the Chinese Communists. Literary historian Hong Zicheng 洪子誠 points out that at the outbreak of the Chinese Civil War in 1945 the Chinese Communist Party had arranged for many leftists and “progressive writers” to enter Hong Kong, thus turning the territory into a “leftist cultural centre” 左翼文化中心 (1999, 8) that effectuated a propaganda machine.

Following the communist victory in 1949, when the nation was “split up in to the People’s Republic in the Mainland and the Republic of China in Taiwan” (Kubin 2009, 33), many of these leftist writers returned to the mainland only to have “many a writer” simultaneously seek “for refuge in Hong Kong” (Kubin 2009, 33).

The foremost authority on Hong Kong literature, Liu Yichang 劉以鬯 (b. 1918), stated that in fact most of these “writers who came south” 南來作家 fled the mainland paradoxically because they “wanted to pursue a lifestyle of the past” (1985, 13). Considered retrospectively, among these writers who newly came to Hong Kong were those who might have expected the Communist regime to be a destructive force to traditional Chinese culture and did not agree with either political faction, hence found refuge in Hong Kong, making the territory an indispensably important ground to continue their articulation of thoughts and ideas on what it means to be Chinese. Among those who came south from China then were the Neo-Confucianists 新儒家 Tang Junyi 唐君毅 (1909–1978) and Mou Zongsan 牟宗三 (1909–1995) who actively promoted traditional culture in Hong Kong (Leung 2011, 108), as well as the “great novelist” Eileen Chang Ailing 張愛玲 (1920–95), of whom the literary critic Wolfgang Kubin 顧彬 wrote in high appraisal, “If it be possible to mention important literature written by a Chinese between 1949 and 1979, this author would be one of the first to be named” (Kubin 2009, 34). The British colonial administration focused on economic growth and hence in Hong Kong Chinese education was not suppressed and neither did it suffer from anti-Chinese purges as in some Southeast Asian

countries, allowing it to produce great Sinologists like Jao Tsung-I 饒宗頤 (b. 1917) (Leung 2011, 108). Furthermore, and unlike the two “Chinas,” Hong Kong literary production has never experienced a period of “rupture” since the May Fourth (Liu 1993). Importantly, adds Kubin, while “The Mainland and the Island after 1949 were both dictatorships under different auspices for more or less thirty years,” and in both states “The author was [merely] a tool in the hands of the mighty to punish anyone for diverging views with banishment or imprisonment ... Hong Kong’s arts scene was and is marked by an artistic openness that would deserve more attention of Western writers and artists outside the field of Chinese studies” (Kubin 2009, 35–6). Echoing similar sentiments, Zuni co-artistic director Mathias Woo Yan Wai 胡恩威 (b. 1968) stated, perhaps ironically, Hong Kong’s periphery and colonial status permitted it the space for “experimentation” that were disallowed in Taiwan and China: experimentation in photography, performance art, installation art, documentary art for instance have been taking place in the territory from the 1960s. In the past forty years, Hong Kong has enjoyed the most freedom in artistic and literary creativity among the Chinese societies (Woo 2007, 106–7). Adds David Clarke, “Hong Kong’s very lack of established traditional culture must perforce become its asset, freeing it from the kind of hang-ups Taiwan faces because of its self-imposed role as guardian of the Chinese heritage” (1996, 148). In this way, from the 1950s on, Hong Kong too became an important site of contestation of “Chinese-ness,” with some critics considering it the “Third China.”⁶⁶

⁶⁶ This perhaps explains why, apart from the oft-stated view that Hong Kong is a highly consumerist society, Hong Kong literature has erstwhile only occupied an “absent” or “marginal”

1980s Hong Kong literature not only reflected this altering cross-straits relations affecting the ever-changing and complex nature of Hong Kong's reality, many authors also expressed their concerns for the socio-political circumstances that impacted Hong Kong, with 1997 weighing most heavily on their minds (Feng 1988, 2–3). China's "Reform and Opening up" 改革開發 policy at the end of the Cultural Revolution in the late 1970s precipitated free visits on both sides, but probably achieved the opposite effect it had originally intended: pulling the two peoples further apart rather than gelling them closer together. According to literary scholar Amanda Hsu Yuk-kwan 許旭筠, "While in the 80s Hong Kongers were faced with the reality of returning to the motherland in less than two decades' time, the abolition of the *Touch Base Policy* by the colonial government in 1980 to control the influx of illegal immigrants from China seemed to increase the locals' estrangement from the Mainlanders" (2009, 9). Increasingly frequent contact seemed to accentuate the differences in these two groups. The contrasting categories of "new immigrants" and "Hong Kongers" and the disquietude between them inadvertently contributed to the creation of a Hong Kong identity

status in Chinese literary history. Hong Kong has been labeled "a cultural desert" not for the lack of cinema, architecture or literature, but "it was just not recognized to be culture as such," which Ackbas Abbas suggests, is "One of the effects of colonialism" (Abbas 1997, 6). Or worse, as Liu Yichang lampoons: some scholars actually assume "Hong Kong has no literature," Hong Kong literature is "only fit for the toilet bowl" 馬桶文學 and is "no different from middle school student compositions" (2002, 122). Scholar Chan Shun-hing 陳順馨 points out that these right-leaning intellectuals and "writers who came south" resulted in post-1949 Hong Kong literature to deviate from the direction that literature in mainland China has developed (Chan 2011, 73). Therefore since the literary ideals mapped out by these leftist writers in the 1940s failed to materialize in Hong Kong from the 1950s onwards (Chan 2011, 73), Hong Kong literature was sidelined or excluded from Chinese literary history, and the distinguishing characteristics that so defined Hong Kong literature such as "the blending of Chinese and Westerners" 華洋雜處 (Feng 1988, 2), "bun Tong Fan" 半唐番 (literally "half Chinese, half foreign": mixture of Chinese and the West) and "sam kap dai" 三及第 ("three layers" of classical Chinese, modern standard Chinese, and colloquial Cantonese) are blatantly ignored in the canon of Chinese literature. Sinophone Studies addresses this imbalance by foregrounding the subjectivity of Hong Kong as a cultural producer. I argue in this chapter that Danny Yung's theatre work intervenes in a similar fashion.

that is increasingly reflected in its literature. Literary topics that were explored based on these changing conditions included: mainland immigrants' inability to adjust to life in Hong Kong and committing suicide; Hong Kongers welcoming their families from mainland China; expressing sympathy towards new immigrants; and how the youths who have experienced the student movements confront the impending arrival of 1997 (Lee 2009, 22) — in each of these topics might be observed an increasingly apparent division of an “us” and “them” identity. Many writers also dwelled on what they imagined are the soon-to-be-lost traditions with 1997 approaching (Feng 1988, 3). Indeed “There were plans for a large-scale exodus as pessimistic people planned to emigrate before the ‘fall’ of Hong Kong after the handover” (Ooi 2005, 28), and thus an important question that constantly plagued the minds of many Hong Kongers is “whether to stay or to go”: caught between the ever-changing mainland China on the one hand and on the other a Hong Kong that wished to “maintain the status quo” (Feng 1988, 4). These are themes that Hong Kong writers and intellectuals of the times commonly faced, which are also actively probed in the theatre.

Theatre historian Gilbert Fong outlines the four waves of artists that established modern Chinese drama in Hong Kong: (i) beginning in 1908 through the pioneering efforts of the theatre troupes “Linlang huanjing” 琳琅幻境, “Xianshen shuofa she” 現身說法社 and “Qingpingle” 清平樂, and individual artists like Lai Man-Wai 黎民偉 (1893–1953) — hailed as the “Father of Hong Kong cinema” — modern Chinese drama in Hong Kong first took off; (ii) at the time of the Sino-Japanese War (or War of Resistance) of 1937–1945, when scores

of Chinese artists who came down to Hong Kong along with the students they had trained, such as Lu Dun 盧敦 (1911–2000), Chu Hak 朱克 (1919–2012), Chan Yau-hau 陳有后 (1915–2010) and Bao Hanlin 鮑漢琳 (1915–2007), brought with them the aesthetic and ideological styles of the *huaju* arts from mainland China; (iii) after the end of the Second World War (post-1945) playwrights like Yao Ke 姚克 (1905–1991) and Liu Ts’un-yan 柳存仁 (1917–2009) from China went south and contributed to the dramatic playwriting scene in Hong Kong;⁶⁷ and (iv) Hong Kongers returning from their study of the theatre arts in the West actively contributing to nurturing and the maturation of the Hong Kong theatre scene, such as Lee Woon-wah 李援華 (1915–2006) returning from the United Kingdom and Chung King Fai 鍾景輝 (b. 1937) returning from the United States (Fong 2006, 147–8).

As with the cases in Singapore and Taiwan, drama was utilized as an important anti-war vehicle in Hong Kong during the Second World War. This provided an occasion for a surge in drama in the territory with groups from the mainland such as the “Chinese Music, Dance and Drama Society” 中國歌舞劇藝社 and “China Travelling Theatre Company” 中國旅行劇團 staging performances in the territory — as well as Southeast Asia — thus creating the opportunity for dramatists from Hong Kong and China to work together (Tian and

⁶⁷ According to the testimony of Hong Kong literary historian and essayist Lo Wai-luen 盧瑋鑾 (aka Xiao Si 小思), several of these dramatists who came from China in the 1930 and 40s, such as Zheng Zidun 鄭子敦 and Chan Yau-hau 陳有后, all taught in schools in the 1950s, and thereby made use of their position as teachers to encourage students to watch theatre on a more regular basis. The curricula in those days were not as regimentally regulated and these teachers also used drama as a mode of teaching in the classroom, such as asking students to compose their own dramatic pieces as a form of expression. Xiao Si’s love for the theatre was inculcated at this time (Poon 2012, 196–7).

Song 1997, 10). The British government tightened its scrutiny of original plays produced in Hong Kong from 1949 onwards (Tian and Song 1997, 10–11) after China was declared a communist state. Instead of writing works with local concerns, some playwrights chose to write on historical material to avoid political persecution, such as Yao Ke's 姚克 *Xi Shi* 《西施》, Hsiung Shih-I's 熊式一 (1902–1991) *Xixiang ji* 《西廂記》 (Romance of the western chamber), Lai Kok Bun's 黎覺奔 (1916–1992) *Zhaoshi gu'er* 《趙氏孤兒》 (The orphan of Zhao), Liu Ts'un-yan's 劉紫雲 *Nie pan* 《涅槃》 (Nirvana), Lee Woon-wah's 李援華 *Meng Chang jun* 《孟嘗君》 (Lord Meng Chang) among others, thus creating a mini resurgence of historical plays in the theatre scene in 1950s Hong Kong (Tian and Song 1997, 11) that yielded luke warm responses (Chen 2010, 41).

On the one hand these dramatists who came south helped maintain the connections between Hong Kong and Chinese drama circles to a certain extent (Fong 1992a, 4), on the other this probably explains why Hong Kong theatre failed to take off in a different direction in this period. Part of this lukewarm response might be attributed to the fact local conditions were not reflected in the theatre scene that was dominated by practitioners newly arrived from China who were writing in Mandarin — a spoken language that was not native to Hong Kongers and would increasingly differentiate the pre-war arrivals and those born after the war that contributed to the rise of a Hong Kong identity. Two events of significant consequence prompted this change that began in the 1960s. According to Gilbert Fong and Shelby Chan:

The dearth of original play scripts had been a hindrance to the development of Hong Kong theatre. In the 1960s, reliance on Chinese spoken drama canons (such as the plays by Cao Yu) as well as adaptations from historical stories, classical literature and Cantonese opera only solved part of the problem, but these traditional Chinese themes were not enough to capture and hold the attention of a younger and more Westernized generation of audience.

(Fong and Chan, forthcoming)

Among those who returned from the West in this phase, Chung King Fai was singled out for devoting much effort to translating works from Western classics, which led to a surge of translated plays in Hong Kong that ultimately became the mainstream in the Hong Kong theatre scene in the 1960s–70s (Fong 1992a, 5). Theatre practitioner Tang Shu-wing 鄧樹榮 attributes Chung King Fai's significance as the first returned graduate to be equipped with professional theatre training from the prestigious Yale School of Drama, and “a very crucial role” Chung played was to bring the latest fads in western theatre into Hong Kong in the 1960s by staging several absurdist dramas in Cantonese, as well as adapting Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* as a TV series in Chung's capacity as a TVB producer and director (Tang 2009, 130). As such, he was also credited with pioneering an initiation to “break with ‘the shackles of realism,’ which had been dominating local productions” (Fong and Chan, forthcoming), as represented by the historical plays that mainly followed in the spoken drama tradition that were written in mainland China. The outbreak of the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s negatively impacted China's image in the minds of Hong Kongers (Fong 1992a, 5)

and hence prompting them to dissociate with things Chinese and accept more readily these works of translations from the West. In Fong and Chan's view: "Since Chung, translated drama has become a staple in Hong Kong theatre" (Fong and Chan, forthcoming).

Although Chung "insisted on a foreignization approach to staging Western plays, so as to retain their 'original flavour'" (Fong and Chan, forthcoming), other companies chose to rework the foreign pieces to adapt them to the Hong Kong context (Fong 1992a, 7). One such group was the "Seals Theatre Company" 海豹劇團. Founded in 1979, Seals was a major group devoted to the ideal of translating Western works into demotic Cantonese⁶⁸ precisely for the consumption of a local audience. Similar to the early phase of *huaju* in Singapore, dramatists and audiences alike were unsatisfied with translations coming from China, which uses standard Mandarin. In the words of its artistic director Vicki Ooi 黃清霞, the Seals were unsatisfied that "most Chinese directors and actors still preferred to work in the formal rather than the demotic Cantonese. But it seemed to me even then that you cannot act in a language that you do not use every day to quarrel in or make love in" (2005, 17). At a time when Chinese materials on the Western dramatic world were severely lacking and Hong Kongers' knowledge on this extremely skeletal, the Seals filled this gap by

⁶⁸ Wolfgang Kubin attributes the use of colloquial Cantonese as an important distinguishing feature in Hong Kong literature, "What actually makes literature in Hong Kong different from literatures in Peking, Shanghai or Canton? First of all one has to know that English is the language of the minority and Cantonese the language of the majority there, and Cantonese being different from *putonghua* (common language) in the Mainland and from *guoyu* (national language) in Taiwan has its own vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation. It is not only the ongoing use of full characters that makes any kind of reading for mainlanders in Hong Kong difficult, it is also the invention of new characters for certain words in Cantonese originally without written form that makes, for instance, Chinese newspapers in Hong Kong a riddle for those who have not learned the differing characters" (Kubin 2009, 34).

performing Western classics in demotic Cantonese translation — mostly through the skilful pen of academic and noted translator Jane Lai Chui-chun 黎翠珍 — and in so doing, increased the audience’s understanding of Western drama. Into the 1980s, however, this no longer served its purpose when the younger Hong Kong dramatists were expressing their views and experiences in the stories they wrote (Ooi 2005, 44). Considered thus, while on the one hand staging works translated into the local language nurtured a sense of localization, on the other the appetite for this sense of the local has outgrown what the Seals were offering: the company was after all staging stories from foreign countries whereas the changing audience needs and tastes determined that *their own* stories be told.

From the 1970s on into the 1980s attempts by the Hong Kong government also contributed to the building of a local consciousness that was increasingly evident in the Hong Kong people through a series of social movements, as well as propelling the Hong Kong theatre scene into the next phase of professionalization. The second generation of locally born Hong Kongers who grew up in post-war Hong Kong’s booming economy and did not necessarily identify with their ancestral hometown in mainland China as their parent generation did, saw for the first time the stability of the territory threatened by the “1967 riots” 六七暴動 — a spillover effect from the radical Cultural Revolution fervor that began in China the year before — that witnessed terrorist attacks, bombings and murdering members of the press who voiced their opposition to the violence by leftist sympathisers in the territory.⁶⁹ Responding to these aggravating attacks, the

⁶⁹ Academician Rey Chow 周蕾 has a poignant account witnessing this riot in her childhood growing up in Hong Kong. See (Chow 1995, 29–32).

succeeding and longest serving Hong Kong Governor Sir Murray MacLehose 麥理浩 (term: 1971–1982) made attempts at “cleaning up” the colony to improve Britain’s image. He narrowed the economic gap between rich and poor, tore down the old wooden houses from the 1950s–60s and built new housing, fought corruption, promoted the “Keep Hong Kong Clean Campaign” 全港清潔運動 in 1972, promoted family planning with the slogan “Two is enough” 兩個夠晒數 in 1975,⁷⁰ thus turning Hong Kong into a beautiful place where residents felt a sense of belonging (Bono Lee 2006, 7; Tsao 2008, 157).⁷¹ Two of the most established local theatre groups, the “Hong Kong Repertory Theatre” (HKREP) 香港話劇團 and “Chung Ying Theatre Company” 中英劇團, formed respectively by the Urban Council in 1977 and the British Council in 1979, are known for staging “works in translation and original works by local playwrights. Both attempt solid productions with some ‘social commentary’ but are criticised for being ‘predictable’” (Lilley 1998, 67). Nevertheless, along with the establishment of the “Hong Kong Arts Centre” 香港藝術中心 in 1977, and later the “Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts” (HKAPA) 香港演藝學院 and “Council for the

⁷⁰ Families in Hong Kong tended to have more children before the ’70s. Parents then wanted to have more children because it was considered a sign of prosperity and fortune. And since male offspring were favored in traditional Chinese culture so sometimes married couples kept having babies until they had a boy. Family planning thus was considered a way to improve living quality and also reduces the government burden of providing education and other social welfare. The slogan was written as a jingo and made popular by the copious and multitalented artist James Wong Jim 黃霑 (1941–2004).

⁷¹ Renowned cultural critic Tsao Chip 陶傑 (b. 1958) notes that Murray MacLehose’s significant contributions to the building of modern infrastructure in Hong Kong was also a calculated political move: he had wanted to package Hong Kong as an ideal Asian city so that the British can use this to negotiate with the Chinese to extend the British lease on the territory. But the plan failed and MacLehose returned to Britain after his term (Tsao 2008, 157). In this way too, Hong Kong’s economic boom benefited from Britain’s “miscalculation” that might be accounted for as yet another accident of history.

Performing Arts” (CFPA) 香港演藝發展局 both in 1982, these efforts demonstrated the government’s commitment to professionalizing the performing arts scene and in turn increased its status among the denizens of the colony. At the same time, denizens of the colony were also exhibiting an increased awareness of a local identity demonstrated in social events such as the “Protect the Diaoyu Islands Movement” 保釣運動, “Chinese Language Movement” 中文運動, “Golden Jubilee Secondary School Incident” 金禧事件, where Hong Kongers mobilized themselves and banded together for a united social cause. It was no wonder then that “the 1970s has been regarded as Hong Kong’s era of ‘localization’” 香港本土化的年代 (Lee 2009, 21).

As Amanda Hsu points out, “In the 1980s with the signing of the Sino-British Joint Declaration (1984) setting Hong Kong’s political direction, the 1997 imaginary started to loom large in literature of the 80s” (2009, 8). In the theatre scene, it was a particularly fruitful decade for locally written works with many probing the “’97 complex” 九七情節 and “local consciousness” 本土意識, such as *Shihai* 逝海 (Ebb; 1984), *1841* (1984), *Wo xi Xianggangren* 我係香港人 (I am a Hong Konger / Ngo hai Heunggongyan; 1985), Seals Theatre Company’s 1986 “Hong Kong trilogy” collectively titled *Xianggang wutaishang* 香港舞台上 (On the Hong Kong stage), *Xianggang meng* 香港夢 (Hong Kong dream; 1989), and *Dawu* 大屋 (American house; 1990) among others (Tsoi 1992, 78 and Lin 2007b, 39). All use the history of Hong Kong’s handover to discuss the anxieties caused by 1997 (Lee 2009, 23). On the quality and quantity of these plays, theatre director and then manager of the “Hong Kong Drama Project” 香港戲劇

工程 Hardy Tsoi Sik Cheong 蔡錫昌 cautioned, however, that these numbers are only on par with the number of translated plays being produced in the 1980s; the latter tended to be classic works, and hence the quality of locally written plays had much to catch up to (1992, 79). One of the ways to affirm Hong Kong's subjectivity in the plays of this period, is to impose what is known as "Da Xianggang, xiao Zhong Ying" 大香港, 小中英 (Fong 1992b, 109) — literally "Big Hong Kong, Little China and England" — this strategy lauds whatever represents Hong Kong and belittles things from mainland China and Britain. At the same time, they also exhibit a sense of loss, of being undecided about whether to stay or go, or if this is even their choice to be made (Tian and Fong 2009, 449), highlighting Hong Kong's precariousness sandwiched between two external powerful states that would decide its future.

Although Raymond To Kwok-Wai's 杜國威 (b. 1946) and Hardy Tsoi's *I am a Hong Konger* is usually considered as the most iconic work that marks the watershed of a local identity in Hong Kong theatre history, theatre historians Tian Benxiang 田本相 and Gilbert Fong are of the view that it was rather the pioneering work of *1984/1997 一九八四 / 一九九七* and *Opium War: Four Letters Addressed to Deng Xiaoping*, both performed in 1984, that spearheaded this movement (2009, 449). The former was staged by Augustine Mok Chiu Yu 莫昭如 and Ruan Zhixiong's 阮志雄 "People's Theatre" 民衆劇社 in the form of a street theatre enacted in front of the Hong Kong University library — the preeminent institution of higher learning in the territory. While Zuni's works were already raising eyebrows by challenging conventions, in the opinion of Ru

Xiu 如秀 it was not until Zuni staged *Opium War* that the company was etched in the collective memory of Hong Kong theatre goers (1983).

III. Play Analysis: *Opium War* — *Four Letters Addressed to Deng*

Xiaoping

No other topic in the history of Hong Kong theatre has been given closer attention than the issue of “1997” (Tian and Fong 2009, 449), since no other date has had a greater impact on the lives of Hong Kongers in its recent history. Indeed, theatre director Tang Shu-wing remarked, “If it weren’t for 1997,” he himself “might still [have been] a lawyer” (2009, 129). Zuni’s play *Opium War* represented a pioneering effort at probing a sense of local identity in that direction. From August 16–19 1984, Zuni staged the play at the 400-seat Shouson Theatre 壽臣劇院, Hong Kong Arts Centre. *Asia Week* hailed this play as an important milestone in the company’s history, openly discussing Hong Kong’s historical identity and its future relationship with mainland China on the eve of the official signing of the Sino-British Joint Declaration where the societal atmosphere was intense and unsettling (“Jinnian” 1988, 37). In each of the four evenings a different performance with variations to the specifics of the staging was enacted, each performance representing a different letter. The first was called “On the Beach” 在海灘上 the second “In the Living Room” 在客廳裡, the third “On the Road,” 在路途上 and the final night “Offstage” 在舞台下 that was a consolidation of the three previous nights. The letters were respectively addressed to God, Father, Lover and The Self — alluding to one’s relationship

with each of them with the final allowing oneself the opportunity to clarify what has been previously said (You 1984; Yung 2002). None of these letters, in fact, reached Deng Xiaoping — a point that Zuni was making about the “impotence in writing to someone ‘up there.’” “The idea is that if Mr Deng Xiaoping is so aloof, no effective communication can be established between him and us,” said Yung, and that the play’s controversial title was “meant as a takeoff to discuss some social and metaphysical problems” (Chan 1984).

The play’s contentious title makes no pretense of avoiding its political intentions, drawing attention to the 1839–42 war that sealed Hong Kong’s history for the next 150 years, and the paramount Chinese leader who would presumably determine the territory’s future from 1997 onwards. Like many Zuni play titles that refer to an important historical precedent or classic text, however, the play does not probe or reenact that particular history or literary classic but instead references some elements of these important sources to discuss matters of contemporary relevance. As Lilley espoused, “These productions are so torn from the original texts that we can hardly recognize their presence. Images and narratives are refigured and recontextualised for our allegorical interpretation” (1998, 98). For instance in the play the year “1839” was mentioned merely as a weather forecast announcement over the radio, and the first time the announcement was made as “the 19th year of the Daoguang era” 道光十九年 — “Daoguang” being the emperor’s reign in the last imperial Chinese dynasty that lost Hong Kong to the British which set off a further series of forced concessionary grants and loss of land. Additionally in this play, the anti-opium hero Lin Zexu 林則徐 (1785–1850) was reduced to two audio interviews that

asked for his views on being championed as a hero, the opium ban, Taiwan affairs and Hong Kong's being unrepresented at the Sino-British negotiations. What is more — and perhaps most sarcastically — is that the voice of Lin, the subject of the interview, is not heard in the entire play. That is, during the interview, we only hear the questions raised to Lin but not his responses. Hence, either he has chosen not to speak or his voice has been silenced. I wonder if this cannot be an allegorical reading of Hong Kong. Lin's persistent resistance to the opium trade on moral and social grounds was considered to be the main catalyst for the war. Yet the Qing government who had appointed Lin to lead the anti-opium campaign also made him a scapegoat for inciting the war and summarily exiled him after losing the war. Considered thus, the presentation of Lin's as a character who is unseen and unheard in the play might be motivated by this historical treatment: despite his elevated status as a people's hero 民族英雄, for his courageous "resistance to foreign encroachments" (Welsh 1993, 81), he was cast out and hence silenced from the Opium War narrative in which he was occupying a protagonistic position.⁷² Cultural critic Johnny Chan Koon-chung suggests, not without sarcasm, that in the discussion of the lease of the New Territories and Hong Kong Island, perhaps we ought to finally include a factor that has heretofore been ignored: the Hong Kong people (Chan 2001a, 60). Indeed the Hong Kong residents — the true protagonists of the Sino-British talks — have ironically been constantly absent from these negotiations about their own fate, thus explaining the

⁷² Interesting too is that the Queen of England was similarly caricatured as only an imageless voiceover that repeats the same line three times. When it was announced over the radio — one after the other in English, Mandarin and Cantonese — that the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) was going to transmit the Queen's comments on the Opium War, we hear a woman's voice (or a caricatured woman's voice) all three times in English with, "I am not a mute"!

sardonic title of Chan's article: "A Hong Kong of the Hong Kongers?" 〈香港人的香港?〉.

Enacted on a bare minimum proscenium stage the play has no plot narrative or traceable storyline. An ensemble of actors donning everyday clothing moves horizontally across from stage right to stage left repeatedly, at different frequencies and speeds, throughout the entire play. From upstage right enters a lady with a wide brimmed boater hat, shades and a long flowing dress — suggesting she is from a well-to-do family — walking extremely slowly and following two steps behind is someone carrying an umbrella over her — probably her servant — observing the same walking pace. A man pushes a bicycle casually across the stage in the same direction, passes them by with no contact made and continues walking until he exits on upstage left. Another man in a trench coat carrying a large suitcase hurries in from centre stage left, appears to look for a hiding spot, fails, then dashes out immediately. Many others come in, quick-paced, either singly or in groups, holding laundry baskets, suitcases and large boxes, also entering stage right and exiting stage left. It is not obvious that they have seen one another or are even in the same temporal space. While some of them appear to be mere passers-by, signifying the flow of life, others take on a more specific meaning, such as crowds running away from chaos attempting to seek a place of solitude. In the background at times are sounds of gentle waves and chirping crows playing to a relaxed ambiance, at others the magnetic contralto of Mandopop singer Bai Guang's 白光 (1921–1999) *Revisiting Old Dreams* 魂縈舊夢 (1940s) casts a reminiscent mood bemoaning a romantically

beautiful past that ceases to return. Yet at other times the atmosphere is heightened by sounds of cannon fire and gunshots, and especially so when the stage is in complete darkness, thus filling the entire theatre only with these reverberating sounds of explosion, perhaps reminding one of the technologically superior British cannons blasting open the gates of Canton that forced China's entry onto the global stage on terms that were being dictated to them in the Opium War.

One of the recurrent motifs in Yung's plays is that of an empty chair, at times facing upstage at the *mise en scène* and at others facing downstage confronting the audience. The empty chair in the performances would be a visual sign for "absence" 缺席 that marks "presence" 在場. But whose absence do they mark and/or whose presence are they calling upon to fill? Most of Yung's plays are broadly about being in an existential state, and in this phase of his theatre praxis in the 1980s to early 1990s, focus on the plight and condition of Hong Kong. My reading of his staged absence is a direct reflection of the emptiness upon the audience and call for intervention by a corporeal presence, which might be regarded as advocacy theatre in the Boalian sense. The theorist of the "Theatre of the Oppressed" Augusto Boal believes that human beings "have the ability to watch ourselves doing things" and that "In every one of us there's an actor — someone who acts — and a spectator, who watches the actor acting" (1997, 32). The Brazilian activist-dramatist is convinced that "we aren't content," however, "to be just actors and spectators of ourselves" and that we also want to be the playwrights, wardrobe masters and mistresses and directors of our own lives (1997, 32). Importantly, he proposes that "everyone can, and should, take part"

(1997, 33). In *Opium War*, actors continually bring in two chairs to be placed alongside each other at downstage left facing upstage. Actors who come in later remove these chairs, only to have other actors bring in another two to replace them in the same position. Similarly actors walk in from stage right to stage left to take up these seats, then leave, only to have other actors fill up the seat(s). In most of the duration of the play, one of the chairs remains empty. Because the chairs face upstage towards the *mise en scène*, and that the chairs are placed downstage, which is nearest to the audience, thus the actors who are in the seats are viewing the performance *just like* the audience. The one seat that remains empty most of the time is, it seems to me, an open invitation for the audience to fill it. David Clarke's analysis of Zuni performances supports my hypothesis:

The use of everyday moments in place of a specialized vocabulary of steps taken from the resources of formal dance is certainly a hallmark of Zuni's and is best viewed as stemming from their concern to demystify the stage. Not only does it widen access to the stage for performers (who are not required to submerge their personalities there) but it enables the audience to think of the stage as a place *which they too might occupy*. ... a deconstructive impulse is at work here, a desire to be explicit about the constraints, the parameters within which they are operating.

(1996, 146; italics mine)

Boal's "Forum Theatre" advocates the transformation of his spectators from passive onlookers to active "spect-actors": in using theatre as a "rehearsal process" for social change, he unmask the oppression in society thereby encouraging his spectators to perform an active revolutionary role in society

(1979, 122). While Yung's empty chair did not literally invite the audience to perform on stage there and then (although on the final evening of *Opium War* the audience were invited to go on stage to view the *mise en scène* from a contrasting position), it implicates the audience in the decision-making process, engaging us to think together with his cast how best to continue this path for Hong Kong. Boal and Yung's theatre are perhaps what Hans-Thies Lehmann would call "'open' or 'writerly' texts" in postdramatic theatre "in the sense that they require the spectators to become active co-writers of the (performance) text. The spectators are no longer just filling in the predictable gaps in a dramatic narrative but are asked to become active witnesses who reflect on their own meaning-making and who are also willing to tolerate gaps and suspend the assignment of meaning" (2006, 6). Watching a Zuni play can make the audience uncomfortable because it calls upon us to make a decision: if we pick the dissenting option, avoid choosing or choose not to pick, we will be guilt stricken; if we pick the affirmative option, however, we might not necessarily know what to do, or how best to pursue this cause. Then, which course of action does Yung advocate in particular? Stephen Chan considers that:

This peculiar kind of theatrical engagement allows, indeed requires, the political intervention by the private individual at a level of experience that is closest to her ties with the changing sociohistorical realities. It is predicated therefore on the emergence of a very different kind of cultural-political consciousness among the community at large ... Its success would have to involve the radical re-ordering not only of the fundamental relationships between culture and politics for a metropolis like Hong Kong,

But [sic] also of the respective fields of action/discourse delimited by the cultural and political practices of the Hong Kong people in the face of the difficult times ahead, towards and beyond 1997.

(1990, 36)

This state of being undecided or fearing to choose (for fear of repercussions) is also represented on stage: throughout the entire play, actors approach the empty chair one after the other in long intervals, stroke it but hesitate to sit down, and some eventually do. My reading of this apprehension is addressed and answered by continually having the chairs replaced after they are removed from the stage, and the actors who have taken leave of the seat(s) replaced by another. Here the message might possibly mean: there are always some who will leave the cause for various reasons, but there will always be others who will fill this absence and continue the cause, presenting an optimism that advocates will always be there. One of the most powerful ways that this has been depicted is having the sounds of the cannon shots thundering in the pitch black theatre with only a soft spot light cast on those two empty chairs, thus confronting the audience's affect with the audio impact of the bombardment and simultaneously reminding them that they too are implicated.

This reminds me also of Bertolt Brecht. Indeed Brecht's "Epic Theatre" would turn "the spectator into an observer" yet arousing "his capacity for action, forces him to take decisions" (Brecht 1964, 37). In that sense Yung's plays are always already Brechtian: the actors, without immersing into character, are playing themselves performing critique on stage. The German director-playwright's *Verfremdungseffekt* seeks to defamiliarize his audience's viewing

experience through interrupting the play's progress by having his actors step out of the characters they are playing, and in their actors' persona, interject critique on the *mise en scène* that has just been previously enacted. In disrupting the flow of the narrative thus, Brecht aims to prevent his audience from emotionally immersing in the storyline and introduce the idea of alienation. Even without employing the technique of having his actors step in and out of characters to halt the performance, Yung's stage has already achieved *Verfremdungseffekt*. Without a narrative plot structure or traceable storyline, in fact, most audiences have rather found it a difficult experience to get emotionally absorbed in Yung's plays. Hence, there is little risk that "part of us wishes to surrender wholly to the tug on the heartstrings" that would require "the alienating device" to "keep us awake" (Brook 1969, 73) in a Zuni production. Instead, by presenting a collage of visual images, movements and audio references that lack a coherent narrative and therefore requires the audience to synthesize these various elements in order to make sense of them, Yung's theatre is constantly engaging his emotionally distanced audience to observe the *mise en scène* with a critical eye. Akin to the spectator in Brecht's epic theatre who would stand outside of the narrative in order to study it (Brecht 1964, 37), the empty chair that is placed at the periphery of Yung's stage then induces the critical audience to observe and critique the *mise en scène* from a distance.

The first time sounds of cannon shots are heard in the play is when the entire performance space is darkened, and flashed on the backdrop of the stage are the numbers "1492" — the year that Christopher Columbus (1451–1506) discovered the New World that first began with Europe's exploration and

colonization of the Americas and later prompted global colonialism. The Italian explorer, however, was not originally on a quest for the Americas but Asia. How would Hong Kong's history have been different if in 1492 the place that Columbus discovered was not the Americas but Asia or China, or even Hong Kong itself? Would it merely be a case of an earlier colonization of the territory? Would 1997 still be relevant? Apart from these imagined alternative scenarios, by connecting the 1492 expedition of the Americas with the 1840 Opium War — and by extension 1997 — Yung is situating the Opium War in a larger historical context. This underscores that Hong Kong like the Americas had been forcibly colonized without the consent of the natives. Perhaps worse than the American Indians, Hong Kongers had to go through this twice: they were not consulted when the sovereignty of the land on which they were residing was to change hands both in 1842 and 1997. And what historical lessons might we learn from this, if any? Might this be Yung's attempt at lightening the historical burdens weighing on the British and Chinese governments by highlighting that they are but mere historical actors, and at the same time urging them to learn from the lessons of history? The Age of Discovery resulted in the founding of the Americas, which prompted global colonialism, and the Opium War belonged to part of that genealogy. By the same token, China's responsibility for losing Hong Kong — even though it was the Qing and not the PRC that lost it — is also relieved. European colonial expansion into Africa and Asia through their superior firepower and China's relative military weakness and hence inability to prevent Hong Kong from being severed at the 1842 Treaty of Nanjing 南京條約 were historical facts. In spite of the fears many Hong Kongers had towards the

impending handover to China in 1997, this reminds us at the same time that China too was a victim during the Opium War. Therefore, in drawing the parallels between these significant historical events, Yung might on the one hand be lightening the responsibilities and blame on Margaret Thatcher and Deng Xiaoping if considering 1997 is but another historical occurrence, and on the other reminding the British and Chinese leaders of the travesties that took place in history and cautioning the political actors not to repeat them. As we hear the sounds of the cannon shots reverberating in the background and on stage people are running hurriedly with their luggage appearing as though they were escaping from a calamity, one cannot tell if these were Hong Kongers attempting to flee from the “’97 Doomsday” 九七大限, Chinese seeking refuge from the British in 1840, or the Native Americans taking cover from the Spaniards in 1492. It is a stark reminder then that what the Spanish Conquistadors did to the American Indians — spreading diseases, killing them off and milking their resources — must not be repeated in Hong Kong. The adage George Santayana saying, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it” (1905, 284), finds adequate contemporary relevance here.

At the same time this also raises the important question of “us” and “them.” Are “we” Hong Kongers, and “they” the British and Chinese? Or are “we” Hong Kongers and the British, and “they” the Chinese? Or vice versa? These questions of identification and positionalities are explored in many Zuni productions. Even though *Asia Week* mentions that Zuni’s post-*Opium War* plays are about “Hong Kong’s political development” and “how some people dictate the lives of others” (“Jinnian” 1988, 37), this was already explored in *Chronicle of*

Women, another major Zuni play prior to *Opium War* that premiered in 1983. The play employs gender reversal to discuss the power dynamics — a traditionally masculine topic — between Britain, China and Hong Kong. In the final scene, in what appears to be a domestic squabble, two actors who are standing are fighting over the third, who is seated in bed in an agonizing manner with her head buried in her arms.

Actor B: I thought we had been discussing this? Even if you have her body, you won't have her heart!

Actor C: She's already said she doesn't love you!

Actor B: You made the decision? Have you ever asked her consent?

Actor A: Listen to me!

Actor B: See, see! Now it's not that I don't want you. But you might not belong to me for long. Hence, if something happens, I can't protect you!

Actor A: Can you all hear me out?

Actor C: Stop scaring her!

Actor B: I scare her? She's a woman,⁷³ she's a scaredy cat! When did I ever need to depend on her? I have my own hands and feet, why do I have to depend on her? Speak for yourself!

Actor C: So what if I depend on women? Why can't I? Why can't I?

⁷³ In all the versions of *Chronicle of Women* that I have watched, "Hong Kong" played by Actor A is always referred to as female even if the role is played by a male actor. Prior to this, it is impossible to tell whether the person or entity Actors B and C are referring to is of the male or female gender, since the drama plays on gender reversal, and in the modern Chinese language (Mandarin as well as Cantonese) the third person pronoun of both sexes is pronounced in the same exact sound and intonation.

Actor A: Give me a chance to say something...

(Actors B and C moves to sit with Actor A, sandwiching her between them, with their arms crossed looking like gangsters, and continue to speak over Actor A who is increasingly squelched between the two.)

Actors B & C: Speak lah! You keep saying you want to speak and now you don't?

In all the three versions of this play that I watched, whether it is an all female, all male or mixed cast (where the speaking roles would only be given to one particular sex at any one time), “Hong Kong” is always referred to as the female gender, hence occupying the subordinate power position among the three. In Jill Dolan’s now classic *The Feminist Spectator as Critic*, she points out that “gender is not innate” but rather “is dictated through enculturation, as gender divisions are placed at the service of the dominant culture’s ideology” (1988, 10). Drawing from Brechtian theory, she reminds us that:

By denaturalizing the illusionist forms of traditional theatre, the smooth operation of psychoanalytical processes is thwarted. Rather than being seduced by the narrative that offers a comfortable gender position, the spectator is asked to pay critical attention to the gender ideology the representational process historically produces and the oppressive social relations it legitimizes.

(1988, 14)

These strategies, aimed at demystifying “the dominant ideology masked by conventional theatre” (1988, 14), now deconstruct the “ideology in social formations influenced by gender, race, class, and categories of sexual preference,”

viewing “the power base in these relationships dialectically, as capable of change” (1988, 16). To what extent has Yung been able to achieve these deconstructionist aims through adopting a same sex cast performing differently gendered roles — and the nations/states that were assigned these genders — in this play, I wonder? At the very least, by masking gender identification within the same biological sex, it forces us to reexamine our assumptions of gender roles and the power relationships these roles inhabit. But does the blurring of gender differences performed through same sexed bodies provide us with a new lens with which to reexamine the “us/them” binary?

Here the allusion to Britain and China fighting over Hong Kong could not have been clearer. Negotiations over the Sino-British Joint Declaration — a document so important that it would decide the livelihoods of the 5 million residents in Hong Kong — has been reduced to the imagery of a domestic bickering between a couple. In one version of the play, as Actor A breaks free from Actors B and C, she is pushed by them and falls flat on her back in bed. In other versions, as Actor A attempts to break out of the other two actors’ physical confinement and opens her mouth to speak, she is immediately gagged by the other two actors. This climactic moment is interrupted by the playing of the Mandarin version of *The Internationale*, as a fourth actor sitting on the stairs on downstage centre screams repeatedly at the top of her lungs, “Give me a chance to speak!” while we see the gagged-and-bound Actor A being forcibly taken off stage amidst the lyrics heard in the background “Stand up, prisoners of starvation; Stand up, damned of the Earth ...” There could not be a more sarcastic juxtaposition of the non-diegetic music with the actions just performed.

In Actors B and C's squabble, they are continuously engaged in a series of physical activities: pushing, shoving, hugging and embracing. When an all female cast reenacted the scene of Actor B hugging Actor C from behind with B wrapping his arms around C's chest, it provided me with a more sexualized interpretation. In that same moment when Actress B hugged Actress C from behind, her hands were wrapped around C's breasts. The physical differences between male and female bodies inscribed on them different signs. Only upon seeing Actresses B and C enacting this corporeal act do I wonder if Yung is insinuating that Hong Kong has been sold out by two partners colluding in a complicit sexual relationship? Or, is this Yung's way of sending a warning to the political actors that, since the Sino-British Joint Declaration is still under discussion in 1983 when *Chronicle of Women* premiered, this complicit scenario that Yung is alluding to should not be turned into reality?

Returning to the discussion of *Opium War*, towards the end of the performance on the first evening, a chorus of actors assembles upstage, then they exit one by one, leaving only three actors and the two empty chairs with the stage fading into darkness during the sounds of cannon shots. We can see from the fading lights that the three actors remaining on stage have moved towards center stage in the darkness, and when the lights come back on again, facing the audience now are the backs of the three actors and the open side of the empty chairs! All of a sudden, the audience realizes that the stage has flipped! Or rather, the presentation of the performance has turned around 180 degrees so that the audience is now viewing from the opposite end of the original *mise en scène*. This visual flipping has surely thrown the audience off and challenged us to

reexamine our positionalities from which to view and act. The open side of the empty chairs, now squarely facing the audience, is visually even more confrontational and an immediate challenge to the audience to take up and stake a position. At the end of the second evening's performance, four actors were prancing in and out of the stage holding up a huge placard each inscribed with a different Chinese character. Their entrances onto the stage at different times form different pairings of the characters each person is holding. Finally when all four of them appear on stage and stand in a horizontal line, we see two idioms being formed: the first written in simplified characters in black print on a white background is "chubian bujing" 處變不驚, and when flipped around the placards reveal the second written in traditional characters in white print on a black background is "xinyou yuji" 心有餘悸. The two idioms form complementary opposites, with the former asking one to "remain composed amidst change," yet the latter suggests that one might still "have lingering fear" or "unforgotten trepidation." Which of the two attitudes should Hong Kong adopt to confront 1997? Are these two sides of the same coin? The performance on the second night concluded with actors running onto the stage and taking cover amidst the sounds of an alarm siren and explosions.

On the final night of the performance, Zuni initiated the idea of changing the audience positionality by inviting them onto the stage to view the performance that would take place offstage. This proposal was rejected by the Arts Centre authorities for reasons of violating "safety regulations": audience members were not insured under the Arts Centre's policies if they were not in seats that were bolted in a consecutive row of four. Just before the performance commenced,

Zuni explained the situation to the audience and allowed them to choose between coming on stage or remaining in their seats. About 30 audience members ascended the stage, prompting intervention by three staff of the Arts Centre, who made the “persistent threat of closing the theatre, calling in the fire brigade, and withholding future support” (“Row” 1984), if Zuni did not get the audience off stage and returned to their seats. One audience member, Ms Vicky Leung, chairman of the “Phoenix Cine Club,” when interviewed by the *Hong Kong Standard* said, “The staff shouted at Zuni saying it was inciting the audience and that if the play was not stopped immediately, they would summon fire services personnel and use *violence*, as a last resort, to evacuate the theatre” (Chan 1984; italics in the original). Eventually after Zuni had invited the audience to return to their original seats, in view of the authorities’ brash behavior in the matter, one member of the audience refused and stayed on stage. When the Arts Centre asked who he was, the audience replied “I’ve already been invited by Zuni to participate in this play and hence I am an actor!” The staff asked if he was a Zuni member and he replied, “I am a Chinese!” 我是中國人 which received rave applause from other audience members. The sound system and lights were then cut off and the fire curtain was dropped on stage, stopping about a metre from the ground only when it hit someone’s head, to which audience members shouted, “The Arts Centre is attempting murder!” (Yu 2006, 204) Amidst all this commotion, Zuni actors behaved very professionally and were focused on performing the play! Interestingly, during the heated exchange with the authorities, the dialogues that came from the actors were “keep calm,” “change your point of view,” “try to

think of a different angle” — it was as if performance had spilled over into real life and merged with it!

The fiasco saw many media exchanges between Zuni and the Arts Centre as well as members of the public who wrote in to express their opinion. While the play might not be Zuni’s most ambitious work to date, it certainly sent ripples through the public in general and the arts community in particular with the amount of questions it raised regarding public interests, accountability, censorship, sponsorship, and not least safety regulations. Zuni showed that it was a collective of individuals who would not bow down to authoritarian dogma, and would be willing to confront the authorities when pushed into a corner. They were not afraid because they had been very conscious of documentation and therefore in a series of followup media inquiries, interviews and commentaries, they could provide their side of the story with documented evidence, clearly demonstrating that they were not “trouble-makers” — an unfortunate stereotype many artists have been branded with. In fact, after a series of media exchanges, this confrontation seemed to convey the image of an all-powerful resource-wielding Arts Centre bullying a resource-stricken independent theatre company that was trying to make an artistic point — very much in the David vs. Goliath fashion. As *South China Morning Post* reported, “It was perhaps the first time in Hongkong that audiences attending a performance were involved in a fiery debate with theatre personnel on such a scale” (“Row” 1984). The fact that members of the audience were willing to stand up to the authorities alongside Zuni during the night of the confrontation at Shouson Theatre and that the general public wrote in

to show Zuni their support gained it credibility. Its uncompromising stance won it respect and leadership in the eyes of the artistic community.

This affair achieved significance in at least three areas. Zuni showed its uncompromising artistic position and courage to stand up to the authorities. The controversy at Shouson Theatre that the play sparked provided a chance for the artistic community and the bureaucrats managing the resources for the arts to hold a dialogue, and clarified the ambiguities in regulations governing artistic practice. It also allowed the general public the opportunity to be educated in these realms and be aware of Zuni's efforts to seek clarity and hence see it as a serious theatre company that is committed to pushing for greater boundaries for the arts. This is an important case study in the exploration of the definition of theatre experimentation, and the problem of communication between bureaucrats and artists (Yu 2006, 204).

IV. Conclusion

Returning to what Shih Shu-mei considers “should be properly called ‘Hong Kong literature’ in contradistinction to ‘Chinese literature’” (2008, 16), Yung’s “Hong Kong Chinese-ness” does not adhere to the criteria that Shih considers rightfully to be “about residency, sensibility, and commitment” (Shih 2008, 16). While on the one hand, he ardently advocates Hong Kong art and subjectivity and promotes the visibility of Hong Kong on the global scene, on the other hand, he also displays great concern for Chinese and global culture. For instance, contrary to popular imagination that Hong Kong’s culture would be

subservient to and subsumed under China's culture, Yung has proposed that it would be useful in the post-'97 scenario for China to study Hong Kong culture — championing it as the most important of all the Chinese subcultures. At the invitation of the Japanese government to direct the main show of the Japan Pavilion for the Shanghai World Expo, Yung proposed that he would only do so with the inclusion of performers from Nanjing. This demonstrates yet again Yung's willingness to play the bridge-building role in his attempt to lessen the intensity of Chinese hatred towards the Japanese for their atrocities committed at the Rape of Nanking during the Second World War. As I have attempted to demonstrate in my analysis of *Opium War*, Yung is not an intellectual who would cohere to a simplistic wrong-right binary but one who attempts to raise the level of discussion to a much higher plane and see it from a larger historical perspective.

By intricately examining the fate and history of Hong Kong, Yung is at the same time expressing in particular a deep concern with the notion of “Chinese-ness.” His inaugural “theatre” piece and solo cartoon exhibition after returning to the territory is *Pojilu yihao* 破紀錄一號 (Broken Record # 1) at the then newly established Hong Kong Arts Centre, introducing conceptual art and structuralist theatre into Hong Kong in 1979. After this, Shi Shuqing 施叔青 (b. 1945), who was then in charge of the performing arts at the Arts Centre and would be renowned for her *Xianggang sanbuqu* 香港三部曲 (Hong Kong trilogy) novels in the 1990s, approached Yung for further collaboration, to which Yung expressed keen interest only if he could do a series of and not one-off productions, thus inaugurating his *Journey to the East* 中國旅程 series that espoused the

relationship of the observer and the observed, and was itself a discursive examination of watching plays on stage. Using the idea of Marco Polo and Michelangelo Antonioni's journeys to China and the impact these travels have on global exchange and communication, in this play, Yung positioned China as the observed, to reexamine Hong Kong's own position as the observer and how Hong Kongers scrutinize their relationship with China (Yu 2006, 203). He mentions that *Journey to the East* might have been Hong Kong's first ever transmedial theatre production 跨媒體的劇場作品, which functions as a critical review of the media at the same time. On and off the stage, film, video and projection slides are used to critique the stage and to critique the media themselves (Yu 2006, 203). This was to become the first in Yung's play series that consists of other themes focused on "Chinese-ness," such as "One Hundred Years of Solitude" 百年之孤寂, "Deep Structure of Chinese Culture" 中國文化深層結構, and "Experimenting Traditional Chinese Theatre" 實驗中國傳統戲曲.⁷⁴ By the same token then, Yung has actively sought to collaborate with ethnic Chinese artistes not only from East Asia, but also the diasporas in Southeast Asia, Canada and the United States, to probe what it means to be Chinese in these various locales, viewed perhaps best through the contending and contesting relationships with China in each of these sites.⁷⁵ If Kuo Pao Kun started this network in late 1987

⁷⁴ Zuni has other play series that are spearheaded by members other than Yung, such as "Two or Three Things You Want to Know About Hong Kong" 香港二三事, "Social Theatre" 社會劇場, "Queer Theatre" 同志劇場, "Multimedia Dance Theatre" 多媒體舞蹈劇場, "Multimedia Architecture Music Theatre" 多媒體建築音樂劇場 among others.

⁷⁵ For instance, *The Eighth Year of One Hundred Years of Solitude VIVA* 百年之孤寂第八年 萬歲萬歲萬萬歲 was directed by Pun Tak Shu 潘德恕 (Zuni member) and avant-garde Chinese director Meng Jinghui 孟京輝, and was performed in September 1996 at the Hong Kong City Hall. *Journey to the East 97* 中國旅程 1997 saw seven ethnic Chinese theatre and film

by inviting the then most prolific aspiring theatre directors to Singapore, Yung most actively extended it.

Yung's defiance of boundaries takes his concerns to global cultures, being the only Asian representative at the World Culture Forum. His work crosses the genres of theatre, installation, music, film and dance, they also transcend national borders and establish cross-cultural interactions among artists from different parts of the world. For instance, his experimental films, videos and installations, have also been shown in festivals in Europe, Asia and the United States (Amranand 2008). Much of his collaborative work with foreign artists, as in *Book of Ghosts* 錄鬼簿, also crosses the traditional-contemporary temporal divide. He staunchly believes in the vital role artistic exchange plays in cultural development: "Through cultural exchange and dialogue with artists from different countries, artists can benefit from the outsider's perspective, as well as have more freedom to comment on other countries' situations" (Amranand 2008). In Yung's own words:

I don't see boundaries in arts ... when you talk about cultural exchange, you're talking about two parties. So it's a concern of both parties on both

directors experimenting with the "One Table Two Chairs" 一桌二椅 convention — a simplified stage that is representative of the *xieyi* spirit / essence of traditional Chinese theatre — and the participants were Edward Yang 楊德昌 (Taipei), Li Liuyi 李六乙 (Beijing), Stanley Kwan 關錦鵬 (Hong Kong), Hugh Lee Kuo-hsiu 李國修 (Taipei), Edward Lam 林奕華 (Hong Kong), Danny Yung 榮念曾 (Hong Kong) and Lin Zhaohua 林兆華 (Beijing), and staged in January 1997 at the Hong Kong Arts Centre. *Journey to the East 98* 中國旅程九八 went even further to invite collaborators beyond East Asia to include ethnic Chinese auteurs from Southeast Asia, Canada and the United States. Participants in this performance included Ping Chong 張平 (New York), Stan Lai 賴聲川 (Taipei), Lin Zhaohua 林兆華 (Beijing), Edward Lam 林奕華 (Hong Kong), Ong Keng Sen 王景生 (Singapore), Zhang Xian 張獻 (Shanghai), Eric Khoo 邱金海 (Singapore), Tsai Ming-liang 蔡明亮 (Taipei), Wei Ying Chuan 魏瑛娟 (Taipei), Paul Wong 黃柏武 (Vancouver), Wong Shun Kit 王純杰 (Hong Kong) and Danny Yung 榮念曾 (Hong Kong), and performed in January 1998 at the Hong Kong Arts Centre.

sides. If I'm not from Hong Kong, should I take Hong Kong taxpayers' money to do this and to do that? Come on, this is old-fashioned talking. Don't think that way. There's a regional identity. There's a global identity. There's a local identity. Cultural practitioners should be global citizens and should initiate global citizen responsibility.

(Amranand 2008)

Stephen Chan surmises that “In the context of Zuni's attempt to speak to the theatrical and cultural hegemony of Hong Kong throughout the 1980's and beyond, its avant-gardist strategy has been organized primarily to examine the extent of boundaries (of the stage, of theatre, of politics, of love, of sex) and explore the possibilities of retracing the very logic of boundary itself” (Chan 1992, 37). It is important to break down the boundaries between disciplines and institutions, so that, says Yung, “artists and business people, critics and the general public, can all feel they are part of a joint enterprise. We need global culture advocates. All of us have to pick up the responsibility to help global culture develop” (Wong 2006).

In his eighteen years in the United States, Yung claims that he did not use Chinese at all, and he had a completely different experience when looking at Chinese characters again after returning to Asia: these characters that used to be part of his everyday life, now appeared strange, strangely familiar, or familiar in a strange way (“Interview” 2010). Perhaps this explains his emphasis on Brechtian distanciation in his dramatic praxis: by making the familiar strange one can develop a new angle of consideration. In an interview Yung mentioned, “I think there are many things and events around us that deserve to be re-evaluated, it is

just that we have assumed them to be natural. But if we were to alter the angle with which we are familiar to reexamine them, perhaps we might be able to see even more” (You 1984, 6). Often when probed, Yung’s response has never been to provide direct answers but to always ask more questions that would explore the question even deeper. In offering questions instead of answers, Yung tries to help the respondent to think from more angles and see more possibilities, and hence seek alternatives instead of rely on the overly rehashed one.

’97 plays sought to probe an emotionly-burdened political problem. In examining their dilemma with the impending “return” to China, Yung did not merely foreground Hong Kong’s plight as a voiceless child sandwiched between two overarching parents as if pleading to be heard on the international scene. He instead reversed this power dynamics by placing China in the position of the observed and scrutinized it from Hong Kong’s position. Hence this effectively overturns the hierarchy that is frequently assumed between China and Hong Kong and gives Hong Kong much subjective agency. Audiences who attend Zuni plays are thus encouraged in turn to acquire this agency by being pushed to think for themselves instead of being fed ready-made answers, thus becoming active participants in Yung’s art-making process and in so doing acquire subjective positions in deciding their own fates for themselves — a method clearly influenced by the Brazilian dramatist Augusto Boal. Hence you might see why Yung’s plays often do not feed the audience a readily digestible narrative, but instead are always probing questions in the theatre that requires the audience’s participation to fill in the narrative and complete the art-making process. Analyzing Yung’s works, Lam Kam Po 林錦波 suggests, “The essence of art

rests in its ambivalence and ambiguity so that the audience could think” (2003, 45). Kurt Chan 陳育強 further suggests:

The works of Danny have been imaginative always. I never link up the topics of his art pieces with the (actual) content for my necessary comprehension. Like all his other works, the way his discourse takes place is in a form of questions, putting forward his various opinions. Most of his works are in fact posing questions rather than conveying concrete messages. That is the reason why he is a very good initiator who makes us discover the problems in the surroundings and reflect on the framework of one’s own thinking process. If art is the renovation of all kinds of experiences, which become numb or tired, Danny’s works undoubtedly achieve the end result of enlightening their audience. Indeed, sometimes he really needs some very active audiences.

(2003, 22)

In foregrounding Hong Kong’s subjective agency, Yung also connects it to a larger perspective. For instance, he saw the “One Country Two Systems” 一國兩制 policy, which guarantees the capitalist economic system and the rights and freedoms of the Hong Kong people to remain unchanged for at least 50 years beyond the 1997 handover, as an unrivaled opportunity for artistic innovation as Hong Kong entered into a bifurcated political structure yet unrealized in the world. He also proposed in the “1997 Cultural Policy” 一九九七文化政策 that Zuni drafted, that efforts should be made to study and introduce Hong Kong culture to mainland China — something one would not expect and quite the opposite of

Hong Kongers rushing to learn Mandarin! Beyond 1997, Yung proposed with great ambition that the West Kowloon Cultural Centre should be developed into the arts center of the region. Highlighting all of Hong Kong's preexisting strengths and further proposing to hire the best arts think-tank and artistes, Hong Kong could become the Chinese Cultural Experimental Centre 中華文化實驗中心 and Global Cultural Centre 世界文化中心. When asked if Hong Kong has a population large enough to consume the voluminous arts to be produced by West Kowloon, Yung rhetorically threw the question back by saying that that depends on whether one has enough cultural vision and will to situate and transform Hong Kong into a cultural centre of the surrounding regions like the Pearl Delta, Macau and Taiwan (Zhang 2004, 44), squarely underscoring the centrality of Hong Kong yet connecting it to the region and the world.

Chapter Four Diaspora within China: Gao Xingjian and the Theatre of Exile

I. Introduction

On October 12 2000, when the Swedish Academy announced Gao Xingjian 高行健 (b. 1940) the Nobel Literature laureate — and hence the first Chinese winner of the coveted prize — it shocked readers in both the Chinese- and English-speaking worlds. At the time of the award, not many in China were familiar with his name, as Gao has not expressed interest in making himself known to the literary and artistic circles in China since his self-imposed exile to France in 1987 (Lovell 2006, 7), and after he tore up his Chinese passport and denounced on international television the Chinese authorities' clampdown of the 1989 Tiananmen incident (Mabel Lee 2006, 11) inciting a de facto ban on his works. In the English-speaking world, many were equally puzzled. Jennifer Ruark remarked that, "American readers looking for books by Gao Xingjian ... wondered if they were banned in the United States as well as in China" when they failed to locate copies of his work in bookstores following the hype of Gao's winning of the coveted prize (2000, 211). Over in Taiwan and Hong Kong, however, Gao was generally celebrated as a *Chinese* writer who has broken the centurion-wait for the Nobel literary prize using Chinese-squared characters in his creative writing (Lovell 2006, 7). Of those who know of Gao, they recognized him to be a pioneering figure in the experimental drama scene in China in the early 1980s. Sinologists knew of his reputation as an avant-garde writer having expounded treatises on experimenting with techniques of fiction writing as well as

plays that got him into trouble with the authorities that later forced him to take flight to France. Even before Gao's self-imposed exile to France, he was already a known entity outside the mainland. Since the early 1990s scholars in Europe have been studying, discussing and translating his works (Moran 2013, 67), and he has been invited to guest lecture in Germany and France, his ink paintings exhibited in Austria, Denmark, Germany and France, and his works staged, radio broadcasted and translated in Yugoslavia, Hungary, Hong Kong, London and France, and the French newspaper *Le monde* hailing the production of his *Chezhan* 車站 (Bus stop, 1983) as "the birth of avant-garde theatre in Beijing" (Chan 2010, 196–208; Quah 2004b, 11; Yip 2001, 314–20).

Julia Lovell, whose analysis of the Chinese centurion wait for the Nobel Literature Prize demonstrates the paradoxical nature of such a "complex" (*Nuobei'er qingjie* 諾貝爾情節): the anxious need for China's "belief [in the superiority of its literature] to be affirmed by the West," reveals on the one hand the "Insecurity about Chinese national identity and the obsession with a diseased Chinese culture" and on the other has produced the inverse: a self-aggrandizing "cultural machismo, angrily sensitive to slights and humiliations, [and one] that asserts China's cultural uniqueness" (Lovell 2006, 7). Many historical factors account for this complex. This chapter examines the Chinese state's claim to culture, and how its artists, especially in the 1980s, respond to such hegemonic attempts at cultural definition. I focus on the example of Gao Xingjian, a pioneering figure who came to prominence in the avant-garde dramatic scene with his experimental play *Juedui xin hao* 絕對信號 (Alarm signal, 1982) and whose

leading position peaked with his *Bus Stop* that attempted to wrestle the right of cultural definition away from the Chinese state.

I will posit Gao's rise to fame in the 1980s against the broader literary and cultural movements amid the political changes in the 1980s. While Quah Sy Ren points out that Gao's innovations in theatre predate the *gegai wenxue* 改革文學 (reform literature), *shanghen wenxue* 傷痕文學 (scar literature) and *xungen wenxue* 尋根文學 (roots-seeking literature) that occupied a central position in Chinese literary history (Quah 2004b, 74), I suggest that it is worthwhile to consider Gao in light of these literary movements. Despite the fact that Gao has never claimed allegiance to any of them,⁷⁶ these intellectual writers were all responding to the same political and social issues and were in turn using their individual modes of expression to respond to the state. Notwithstanding that these modes of expression were unique to individual writers, their end goal could be viewed in the same light: writing against the excesses of the recent Cultural Revolution and seeking alternative sources of expression that thereby forms an alternative cultural identity to the one sanctioned by the state. In the words of Yan Haiping 顏海平, “‘Drama of the new period,’ like other forms of art and literature of the era, began as a critical response to the Cultural Revolution” (1988, ix), and like the reformers of these literary movements, Gao was searching for a means of creative expression that goes beyond the state's definition — one that they have since grown to distrust. Many sought to go beyond a Chinese past prior

⁷⁶ Gao has famously espoused that despite being labelled as “avant-garde,” “modernist,” “absurdist,” “roots-seeking,” and even “counter revolutionary,” he does not aim to belong to any school of thought or “ism” (1993, 4). His dictum, “Without isms” 沒有主義 most aptly sums this up.

to the history of People's Republic, by seeking ancient myths that defined an earlier past of what it means to be Chinese. In this way an alternative "Chinese-ness" was not just sought in the Chinese diaspora of Singapore, Taiwan and Hong Kong that I have discussed in the earlier three chapters, but also sought within China! As I have discussed in the preceding examples that China's coming out of the Cultural Revolution ignited an identity crisis in the other three regions with a majority of ethnic Chinese, likewise within mainland China, intellectual-artists too were seeking what it means to be Chinese beyond the state's definition. Hence, I propose the term "diaspora within China" to describe Gao's example: one who was born and bred in China, and chose to reside on the margins of society for critique and reflection from a distance.

II. History of Chinese Drama: Realism and Revolutionary Drama

Not unlike C.T. Hsia's 夏志清 famous dictum of modern Chinese literature's "obsession with China," one that has an "obsessive concern with China as a nation afflicted with a spiritual disease" (1971, 533), from its founding modern Chinese drama has attempted to play the didactic function of "saving the nation." In the words of Hong Kong critic Kwok-Kan Tam, "the modern Chinese theatre began with a tradition as political and cultural critique, in which the social and ideological implications of the theatre were emphasized." He further suggests that "the theatre reform in China since the May 4th Movement in 1919" aimed to achieve "the political effects desired by the revolutionary enthusiasm of the time" (Tam 2002, 40). Drama scholar Chen Xiaomei's 陳小眉 findings echoes this

view, noting that “playwrights and performers of civilized drama envisioned a new theater in service to the revolutionary cause of overthrowing the Qing dynasty, thereby placing new drama squarely in the construction of a new Chinese national identity,” and it is no wonder hence that “the central concerns of Chinese drama in this early stage of development” were largely shaped by “political orientation” (2010, 3).

Not all plays were, however, revolutionary in nature. Milena Doleželová-Velingerová observes that while some of the theatre companies in the early times “were not motivated by artistic ideals but only by hopes for money and fame,” others “were more concerned with theatrically pleasing adaptations than with a serious study of different Western plays and their aesthetic principles” (1977, 29). Chen attributes the decline of the revolutionary appeal of drama in the former period to largely be due to the “sinking morale after Yuan Shikai’s attempted monarchical restoration in 1914–15” (Chen 2010, 4). Nevertheless this ten-year period in the development of civilized drama “paved the way for the subsequent development of *huaju*, or spoken drama, and the landmark publication in 1919 of Hu Shi’s” *Zhongshen dashi* 終身大事 (The main event in life) (Chen 2010, 4).

The founding of modern Chinese drama, known as the *huaju* 話劇 (spoken drama), is attributed to a group of overseas Chinese students in Japan performing in February 1907 a Chinese-language adaptation of the third act of Alexandre Dumas fils’ *La dame aux camélias* 茶花女 by the renowned translator Liu Shu 林紓 (1852–1924). Initiated in 1906 by Li Shutong 李叔同 (1880–1942) and Zeng Xiaogu 曾孝谷 (1873–1937), the group, known as the “Spring Willow Society”

春柳社, “aimed at a complete separation from classic Chinese theater” and chose to “abandon “everything traditional and adopt a spoken delivery, realistic gestures, and contemporary costumes” (Doleželová 1977, 28). Spring Willow Society’s success spawned many similar dramatic groups across China, and “As a consequence of theater’s political orientation, new drama developed rapidly in the major cities of Guangzhou, Tianjin, and Hong Kong” (Chen 2010, 4). One of these pioneering groups, who founded the “New stage” 新舞台 in Shanghai around 1910, “abandoned the symbolic movements, masks, and costumes and introduced Western props, ‘realistic’ acting, and contemporary costumes” (Doleželová 1977, 28).⁷⁷

Contemporaneous with the overseas students’ endeavor was an ongoing effort by dramatists and the literati in China to reform traditional Chinese opera in a bid to join in the ranks of saving the nation. The resultant process was *wenming xi* 文明戲 (civilized drama)⁷⁸, or *xinju* 新劇 (new drama) as it was later called,⁷⁹ a hybrid form the dramatists experimented with that saw heavy traces of performance methods carried over from classical drama, such as the *mubiao zhi* 幕表制 (plot summary) where actors merely improvised their dialogues on stage instead of having memorized their lines in advance! Evident was the fact that this

⁷⁷ According to Chen Xiaomei’s research, the “New Stage” opened in 1908 (2010, 2).

⁷⁸ This term is most commonly translated as “civilized” drama. Kwok-Kan Tam’s rendition of “enlightened” drama (Tam 2002, 40) might be closer in the English language to the meaning of the original. As distinguished from things Chinese that were considered uncouth and uncivilized, things that were entering from the West then were honored with the title “civilized,” to the extent that even an English man’s walking stick was coined “civilized stick” (Tian and Song 1999, 43). Since modern drama was an import from the West, it was naturally considered more “enlightened” than the performance indigenous to China.

⁷⁹ It was only in 1928 that dramatist Hong Shen 洪深 (1894–1955) suggested adopting the term *huaju* (spoken drama) in place of *xinju* (new drama) that modern drama in China became an “art of words” (Ge 1990, 119 qtd. in Quah 2004, 45).

transitional new-style drama did not have enough literary merit, which was simultaneously deemed to be unprofessional. One solution was hence to adapt “many late Qing novels and translated novels ... for the stage” since “at the beginning the new drama lacked original texts” (Doleželová 1977, 28). Another reason for incorporating “features of traditional opera into the transplanted literary form, such as music and stylized arias,” was to “to make spoken drama more acceptable to the Chinese public,” and the result “was a strange hybrid” (Doleželová 1977, 28). According to Chen Xiaomei’s research, “The newly reformed operas (*gailiang xinju*) became an innovative means of transmitting an ideology directed at bringing about revolutionary changes while benefitting from an existing broad audience at the grassroots level drawn to the traditional form of operatic art” (Chen 2010, 2).

The urge to reform classical drama stemmed from dissatisfaction at the classical art form for being inadequate to reflect the reality of Chinese society (Tian and Song 1999, 41). Utilizing the influential progressive journal of the times *Xin qingnian* 新青年 (New youth) as their vehicle, leaders of the May Fourth New Cultural Movement 五四新文化運動 such as Qian Xuantong 錢玄同 (1887–1939), Liu Bannong 劉半農 (1891–1934), Hu Shi 胡適 (1891–1962) and Zhou Zuoren 周作人 (1885–1967) attacked classical drama, with comments ranging from it being whimsical, farcical and unrealistic to being clownish, boring and containing crass content (Tian and Song 1999, 47). Chen Duxiu 陳獨秀 (1879–1942), for instance, blamed traditional Chinese drama as “lacking in scientific understanding” to be a reason that accounted for the nation’s weakness

(San Ai 1960, 54–5). “Science” was one of the two most important slogans of the New Cultural Movement, and along with “democracy” were identified as the key elements most lacking in the Chinese consciousness that were necessary to build a strong national character. As the chief promoter of “science and democracy,” Hu Shi lambasted traditional Chinese drama for ignoring the myriad examples of separation and tragedy in the world and instead only focuses on the union of star-crossed lovers and is thus an advocator of “reunion and superstition”, taking this to be evidential of Chinese intellectual weakness (Hu 1981, 382). Fu Sinian 傅斯年, another pioneering May Fourth reformer and who would become Taiwan’s most important educator, too heavily criticizes this formulaic “happy reunion” plot in classical drama to be far too detached from reality (Fu 1981, 390). However overstated their criticisms might have been (Tian and Song 1999, 47), the cultural clout displayed collectively by these literary heavyweights were in no small measure consequential to the spawning of a new modern drama.

Eventually when Hu Shi’s *The Main Event in Life* — based on Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House* (1879) — came to the fore, he “sought to introduce Western dramatic form as an alternative to *xiqu* (Peking / Beijing opera), the traditional theatre, viewed then as ‘a dehumanized literature’ both in form and thematic concerns” (Chen 2001, 200). That “The impact of Hu Shi’s view on the modern Chinese intellectuals was so explosive” (Tam 2002, 42) should not be underestimated. Although the emergence of spoken drama was largely dominated by a realist aesthetic, Kwok-kan Tam suggests that “None of the early modern Chinese playwrights had any idea of realism” (Tam 2002, 40). Only through Hu Shi’s discussion of Ibsenian drama in his essay “Yibusheng zhuyi” 易卜生主義

(Ibsenism), published in the *New Youth* in 1918, did early modern Chinese theatre, however superficial their understanding of the form was, acquire “the ideological imprint of realism” (Tam 2002, 41) that set the scene for the influence of realism to permeate the development of modern Chinese drama.

However, as Quah Sy Ren pointed out, schools of dramatic expression other than realism were never totally unrepresented in China (Quah 2004b, 38). One of the three founders of spoken drama, Hong Shen 洪深 (1894–1955),⁸⁰ for instance, wrote *Zhao yanwang* 趙閻王 (Yama Zhao) already in 1923 in imitation of Eugene O’Neill’s *The Emperor Jones* (1920) that experimented with expressionist techniques such as depiction of a character’s psychological states (Chen 2010, 5–6). According to Quah:

As early as the 1920s, romanticism and neoromanticism, together with realism, received equal attention from Chinese dramatists. However, with the intensification of the leftist political movement and the Japanese invasion of the early 1930s, proletarian drama (*puluo xiju*) and national defense drama (*guofang xiju*), both essentially realist forms, took over center stage. In the following decades, politics had permeated the consciousness of the arts and the audience’s perception of the arts.

(Quah 2004b, 38)

It can be said, therefore, that the development of dramatic expressions other than the realist mode was prevented from taking root in China due to war efforts, which was subsequently usurped by the leftist political movement.

⁸⁰ The other two are Ouyang Yuqian 歐陽予倩 (1889–1962) and Tian Han 田漢 (1898–1968). For a discussion of the pioneering leadership roles of these three founders of spoken drama, see (Chen 2010, 5–8).

Citing respected drama theoretician and critic Liu Housheng, Chen Xiaomei points out that “during the seventeen years between 1949 and 1966 in the PRC, some 99 percent of dramatic productions exhibited the marked influence of the Stanislavsky system” (Chen 2001, 202). Paradoxically enough, when realism was suffused with socialist-realism as the Chinese Communist Party came to power, art served the function of politics and drama ceases “to be a (re)presentation of life, but become a formula” (Tam 2002, 45). Mao Zedong’s “Talks at the Yanan Forum on Literature and Art” 毛澤東在延安文藝會談上的講話 in 1942, that functioned as the blueprint for the development of literature and the arts in China, upheld realism and attacked Western modernism to be “heresy” and postmodernism to be “nothing but the further embodiment of the decadence of capitalism” (Ma 2001, 80). Kwok-kan Tam details how the Social Problem Play 社會問題劇 “in the 1950s and 1960s lost its power as an institution of public sphere in its opposition to state authority” and instead became the “State Ideological Apparatus” (Tam 2002, 47): as designated by Culture Minister Zhou Yang 周揚 the role of drama in contributing to the building of the new Chinese state is on the one hand to hold up “positive, heroic characters ... as political models to educate the people” and on the other to expose “reactionary (therefore negative) forces” with the ultimate aim of inevitably overwhelming the “backward and the reactionary ... by the invincible, new forces” (Zhou Yang 1954, 31 qtd. in Tam 2002, 44). Li Jianwu 李健吾 (1906–1982), a notable Chinese dramatist and critic in the 1950s, further developed Zhou Yang’s idea of socialist realism by always having the hero dominate the villain in a socialist play

that should observe a structure of “exposition, complication, crisis, and resolution” with no discussion necessary since “nothing was irresolvable” in “superior” socialist society (Li 1980, 56 qtd. in Tam 2002, 44). Tam points out importantly that in Chinese Marxist dramatic theory, owing to “The overemphasis on dramatic conflicts as the essence of drama and the confusion of dramatic conflicts with social class struggles[, this] resulted in many playwrights’ general approach to life from a politicized perspective.” Once a creative process, playwriting in socialist China now becomes a mere “mechanical application” and therefore it is little wonder that “Chinese audiences always complain that most contemporary plays in China share the same structural pattern and their endings can often be predicted according to the socialist logic” (Tam 2002, 45).

III. Cultural Revolution and its Aftermath

What originally began as an internal purging of dissident voices within the Party, the Cultural Revolution erupted into a ten-year upheaval that saw a massive wastage of human and material resources. During this phase, China was virtually cut off from the rest of the world. All cultural creativity was stifled, and the eight “model revolutionary operas” 革命樣板戲 promoted by Mao’s wife Jiang Qing became the blueprint for all cultural production (Mackerras 1989, 100). The saying of the times was “eight plays for eight hundred million people” 八億人民八個戲, with the dramatic stage almost barren (Ye 2008, 179). As Mabel Lee 陳順妍 puts it, “The rigid conformity imposed upon minds during that period, created symptoms of spiritual deprivation. The response was a voracious appetite

for the rations of personal freedom which allowed for a modicum of individual diversity and difference” (Lee 1996, 98). Chinese audiences were starved of artistic nourishment, thus opening up the immediate post-Cultural Revolution period as a wide vacuum for artistic innovation and experimental work.

The Cultural Revolution ended with Mao’s demise in 1976, propelling China into a new developmental phase with ramifications in all spheres of society. In literature and the arts, for instance, this was known as the *Xin shiqi* 新時期 (New era) which was characterized with movements spearheaded by artists known as the “Reform literature,” “Scar literature” and “Roots-seeking literature” that reflected on the turmoil caused by the ten-year upheaval questioning state authority on top of heated literary debates that pitted realism against modernism [現實主義還是現代主義] 的批判 (Gao 1993, 4), on the one hand, which signaled the state’s seemingly increased tolerance for criticism. On the other, state sanctioned movements such as the “Anti Bourgeois Liberalization Campaign” 反對資產階級自由化運動 (1981) and the “Anti Spiritual Pollution Campaign” 反精神污染運動 (1983) simultaneously clamped down further dialogue with civil society.

“Scar literature” was launched with Liu Xinwu’s 劉心武 (b. 1942) *Ban zhuren* 班主任 (My class monitor, 1977) and got its name from Lu Xinhua’s 盧新華 (b. 1954) short story *Shanghen* 傷痕 (Scar or Wounded, 1978). Characterized by its strong denouncement of “the excesses of the Cultural Revolution and the misery it caused of the intellectual class” (Lee 2012, 109), Gao Xingjian applauds

the genre for having revived literature's ability to critique reality (1992, 120). This "literature of lament and recrimination," according to cultural critic Gregory Lee, was "useful to Deng Xiaoping, as an integral part of a controlled expression of discontent in the period 1978–1980" since "the literary mode ... hardly differed from the establishment's old model, challenged little in terms of the politics of aesthetics," and therefore was first allowed and then even encouraged by the state (2012, 109).

In the sphere of poetry, the *menglong* 朦朧 ("Obscure" or "Misty") poets such as Bei Dao 北島 (b. 1949) and Yang Lian 楊煉 (b. 1955) composed their work "to suggest a kind of poetic quality detached from clear-cut political messages" (Chen Xiaomei 1991, 143). In no way does this suggest that their poetry were apolitical, however. Quite the contrary, their works were written as a response "against the earlier dominant mode of 'hymnal poetry' that seemed to exist only to praise Mao and the Party," and in this way Misty poetry "gave expression to, among other things, disappointment with the Party's lost idealism, its corruption, and the bureaucracy" with some of them going to the extent of singing "'hymns' to the late Premier Zhou Enlai, who was more popular than other top Party leaders and hence represented ... a 'proletarian' and 'revolutionary' ideal'" of the time (Chen Xiaomei 1991, 144).

Literary and cultural critic Leo Lee Ou-fan considers the "Roots-seeking literature" that took place around the mid-1980s to be primarily an "anticenter" movement that was "launched mostly by young writers who for one reason or another felt the need to look for the source of their own cultural origins — and hence their creativity — in areas other than the political center as represented for

over forty years by the Maoist ideology of the Chinese Communist party” (Lee 1991, 207). His observation of the movement’s “politically provocative” nature stems from “the argument that the strands of Chinese culture have been so severely ruptured by the ideological campaigns of recent decades, and by the Cultural Revolution in particular, that the younger generation has been cut off from its cultural roots and must go in search of them” at the political peripheries that are considered “culturally richer than the center,” hence further divesting Beijing of its political authority (Lee 1991, 207–8). As observed by Gregory Lee, the “Roots-seeking” literary writers were “part of a cultural interrogation of Chinese-ness that put in question the central elite Han cultural hegemony common to both Confucianism and Communism” who “sought an alternative basis for Chinese identity on the margins of China” (Lee 2012, 166) such as geographically in remote regions like Tibet, Heilongjiang or the ancient sites of Han or Chu cultures and in philosophical traditions such as Taoism, Shamanism and Buddhism for instance.

On top of the literary merit achieved by the avant-garde fiction produced in these movements in terms of their experimentation with formal techniques, several that were adopted into films also acquired the status of a prolific cultural phenomenon. Director Xie Jin 謝晉 (1923–2008), for instance, shot the film *Furong zhen* 芙蓉鎮 (Hibiscus town, 1986) based on Gu Hua’s 古華 (b. 1942) short story of the same name that he wrote in 1981. Zhang Yimou 張藝謀 (b. 1951), perhaps the best known among the fifth generation of Chinese filmmakers, adapted Mo Yan’s (b. 1955) novel *Hong gaoliang jiazu* 紅高粱家族 (Red

sorghum clan, 1986) and Su Tong's 蘇童 (b. 1963) *Qiqie chengqun* 妻妾成群 (Wives and concubines, 1990) onto the silver screen as *Hong gaoliang* 紅高粱 (Red sorghum, 1987) and *Dahong denglong gaogaogua* 大紅燈籠高高掛 (Raise the red lantern, 1991) respectively. Director Chen Kaige's 陳凱歌 (b. 1952) *Huang tudi* 黃土地 (Yellow earth, 1984), while not adapted from a novel, could perhaps be considered China's first avant-garde film to address the issue of state legitimacy by raising "the question of the Other voice — a true voice of the people that seems muffled and suppressed by the sound and the fury of the Communist Revolution" (Lee 1991, 210). Collectively, the distinguishing feature of these films focused on the repercussions the Cultural Revolution, the ills of Chinese society, or the inadequacy of the Chinese Communist Party. Leo Lee sums it up succinctly:

The intellectual impetus of this literary movement has also given rise to a broader movement of "cultural self-reflection" (*wenhua fansi*) [文化反思], a critical reexamination of all aspects of Chinese culture and history.⁸¹ In both cases, the dissatisfaction stems directly from a profound sense of disillusionment with the Cultural Revolution which ironically reduced

⁸¹ Jin Guantao 金觀濤 (b. 1947) hails the 1980s as the second period of enlightenment in Chinese intellectual history 第二次啟蒙運動, preceded only by the 1919 May Fourth Movement. Jin's influential editorial series *Zouxiang weilai* 走向未來 (Going towards the future), served as the blueprint for the television miniseries *Heshang* 河殤 ("River elegy," or "Deathsong of the river") written by Su Xiaokang 蘇曉康 (b. 1949) and Wang Luxiang 王魯湘 (years?) that reflected on the ills of Chinese traditional culture — and by extension, the Chinese Communist Party — could therefore be considered part of this "cultural fever" 文化熱 or "cultural reflection" 文化反思 of the 1980s. Chen Xiaomei, for instance, calls it "an anti-official discourse ... to critique the oppressive presence of official ideology" (1995, 28). The "*Heshang* phenomenon" 河殤現象 invited fierce debate among Chinese intellectuals and officials, and has taken the rap as a precursor for inciting the 1989 Tiananmen demonstration. For further reading, see (Chan and Jin 1997) and (Gunn 1993).

Chinese culture to rubble. It is out of this sense of void that these writers, artists, and intellectuals feel compelled to redefine their own culture as they seek to redefine themselves: How to find a meaning of being Chinese other than what the Party has defined for them?

(Lee 1991, 208)

Gao's consistent refusal to be claimed by any school of thought or ism is most famously manifested in his dictum "Meiyou zhuyi" 沒有主義 (Without isms) (1993, 4), even to the extent of showing disdain towards those who have made attempts to claim him to be part of certain literary movements. Furthermore Quah suggests that Gao's interest in experimenting with cultural traditions "had predated the nationwide fever for such discussion" and had in fact "went off in a different direction" such as favoring the "primitive and peripheral non-literati cultures (*fei wenren wenhua*) [非文人文化] of the Yangtze" over "the northern literati culture of the Han people" when "some members of the intellectual elite were more interested in the modernization of mainstream Confucian traditionalism" (2004b, 74). Nevertheless it is possible to examine Gao as a product of a greater reflection of the cultural traditions of an era that was responding to the existing political conditions. The creative impulse behind these artists is driven by the same repugnance to the political situation in post-Cultural Revolution China: disillusionment and distrust with the state. My reading of Gao's works in the 1980s suggests that they were similarly motivated by Leo Lee's observations on the goals of the roots-seeking movement and broader cultural reflection: his artistic expression alternative to the status quo is also "a quest for identities" (Lee 1991, 209) and "by implication ... raise new and

profound questions about what it means to be a Chinese even inside China” (Lee 1991, 210–211).

As with the realms of poetry, film and fiction, similarly in theatre “Chinese playwrights began to search for new ways of expression to free Chinese drama from the restrictions of the past thirty years” (Yu 2007, 821). Bearing certain semblance to Nikolai Gogol’s (1809–1852) *The Inspector-General* (1836), the play *Jiaru wo shi zhende* 假如我是真的 (“If I were real” or “The imposter”) originally published in 1979 by playwright Sha Yexin 沙葉新 (b. 1939) and actors Li Shoucheng 李守成 and Yao Mingde 姚明德 that dealt with corruption and “backdoorism” in official practice, “was artistically the most successful of several satirical plays written and circulated soon after the end of the Maoist era, testing the limits of censorship” (Gunn 2013). Even though *Wo weishenme si le* 我為什麼死了 (Why have I died, 1979) by Xie Min 謝民, and *Wuwai you reliu* 屋外有熱流 (Hot spring outside, 1980) by Ma Zhongjun 馬中駿 (b. 1957), Jia Hongyuan 賈鴻源 (b. 1951) and Qu Xinhua 瞿新華 (b. 1955) are usually considered as the pioneering works of experimental Chinese theatre, critics are in general agreement that it was not until Gao Xingjian’s *Alarm Signal* staged by the “Beijing People’s Art Theater” 北京人民藝術劇院 (wherein Gao served as a playwright) in 1982 that experimental drama achieved a significant impact hence marking the beginning of China’s “Little theatre movement” 小劇場運動 (Chen 2004, 250–1; Lin 2003, 1; Tian and Song 1999, 93).⁸² Employing techniques

⁸² Quah, for instance, considers *Hot Spring Outside* to only be “a transitional piece of work, combining formal exploration with contemporary social concerns” whose success was perhaps “due more to its novel form than to novelty in content” (Quah 2004b, 56).

“such as flashbacks, and changes in perspective” with an emphasis on character psychology, this play shocked its audience because its presentation mode significantly “deviated from established theatre practice in China” (Mabel Lee 2006, 5). Gao’s collaboration with the then young director Lin Zhaohua 林兆華 (b. 1936) earned the play such success that it “went on to more than a hundred performances” with “more than ten major drama companies across the country” producing the play soon after (Quah 2004b, 9), on top of the spawning of many other “little theatres” across different parts of China (Lu 2002, 45). Cao Yu 曹禺 (1910–96), the then foremost Chinese playwright and honorary president of the Beijing People’s Art Theater, sent a telegram to congratulate the creative team in Beijing on its success when he heard about it from Shanghai (Gao Xingjian 2006, 143).

IV. Play Analysis: *The Bus Stop*

The immediate post-Cultural Revolution period opened up as a wide vacuum for artistic innovation and experimental work. Gao Xingjian’s *Alarm Signal*, which heralded the emergence of experimental theater in China (Zou 1994, 46), was one of the works that began to fill that vacuum. Consciously experimenting with different ways of expanding the possibilities and expressivity of theater, Gao’s theatrical aesthetics has been inspired by the dramatic practices of Brecht, Artaud, Beckett, Genet, and Ionesco as well as that of traditional Chinese theater. As a French major in the Beijing Foreign Languages Institute, and later working as editor and translator at the Foreign Languages Press in

Beijing, he had direct access to works of these major Western theater theorists and practitioners before most others in China had even heard of them (Quah 2004b, 166–7). Gao’s advantage over his Chinese peers made him a central figure in Chinese experimental theater in the early-to mid-1980s, which led Li Longyun 李龍雲 (1948–2012), a contemporary playwright of Gao, to praise Gao as having had “an unprecedented advantage in establishing himself as leader of the ‘second wave’ of literary renaissance in the post-Mao period” by virtue of his mastery of the French language (Li 1993, 330 qtd. in Chen 2010, 28). By the time Gao left China, the sensational impact of his plays *Alarm Signal*, *Bus Stop*, *Yeren* 野人 (Wildman, 1985), and *Bi’an* 彼岸 (The other shore, 1986), had earned him the title: “undisputed leader of Chinese experimental theater” (Zou 1994, 54).

It is to his second play *Bus Stop* to which I will devote our discussion because it has been a most problematic piece for the authorities. Having been compared to a Chinese version of *Waiting for Godot*, *Bus Stop* opens at a non-specified locality with a group of people waiting at a bus stop for a bus to take them into the city. Buses pass but never stop. As the passengers begin to take note of time, they suddenly realize that ten years have passed and one of them — the Silent Man — has already quietly left to walk to the city. Panic stricken, they suddenly burst into self-reflection, asking themselves — and at times, directly addressing the audience — if they would not have already arrived in the city if they too had left with the Silent Man. Whether or not the Silent Man had successfully made his way into the city is not known, and is probably not as important as his having raised the possibility of doing something different from

the collective. We could assume that he has arrived, just as we assume at the end of the play that the crowd has come to a collective agreement to wait no more and walk together into the city. This assumption is disrupted, however, by Director Ma's ambiguous line at the end of the play calling out: "Hey, hey — wait a minute, wait a minute, I'm tying my shoelace!" (Gao 1998, 59). One of the strengths of the play lies in this ambiguity, perhaps frustrating the authority's penchant for clarity and certainty.

So, what was so controversial about *Bus Stop*? What warranted the play being labeled "more *Hai Rui is Dismissed from Office* than *Hai Rui is Dismissed from Office*" and "the most poisonous play written since the founding of the People's Republic of China" (Gao Xingjian 2006, 146–7)?⁸³ Even after the 73 year-old Cao Yu had given his tacit approval for *Bus Stop*, the play was only held as ten closed-door performances, not open to the general public.⁸⁴ Furthermore, on the orders of the Central Propaganda Department, two extra performances of *Bus Stop* were staged and tickets issued to "specific work units" so that "they could write criticisms" and attack the play (Gao Xingjian 2006, 148). Sure enough, as Peter Brook has elucidated so beautifully:

No tribute to the latent power of the theatre is as telling as that paid to it by censorship ... Instinctively, governments know that the living event

⁸³ Written by Wu Han 吴晗 in 1959, *Hai Rui baguan* 海瑞罷官 (Hai Rui is dismissed from office) is a play depicting the dismissal of a morally upright official, Hai Rui 海瑞 (1540–1587). The play is widely considered as "the opening shot of the Cultural Revolution" (Wagner 1990, 236). Even though He Jingzhi 贺敬之 (b. 1924), who was then in charge of literature in the Central Propaganda Department, attacked *Bus Stop* as such, he himself had not seen the play (Gao Xingjian 2006, 147).

⁸⁴ When Gao Xingjian and director Lin Zhaohua were making rehearsal plans for *Bus Stop*, they visited Cao Yu and told him about the play, who replied, "It's a global subject, why can't you stage it?" After watching the dress rehearsal, no one in the theater dared to speak except Cao Yu, who raised his walking stick high in the air and shouted "Bravo!" (Gao 2006, 145–6).

could create a dangerous electricity — even if we see this happen all too seldom. But this ancient fear is recognition of an ancient potential. The theatre is the arena where a living confrontation can take place. The focus of a large group of people creates a unique intensity. Owing to this, forces that operate at all times and rule each person’s daily life can be isolated and perceived more clearly.

(1969, 111–2)

Perhaps “the latent power of the theatre,” coupled with the messages embedded within *Bus Stop* and the form in which the play was presented, became a formula so truly formidable that it forced the authorities to ban further performances.

Scholars have commented that the content of the play is peppered with references to social problems in contemporary China, with the underlying critique underscoring a need for political reform. Harry Kuoshu, for instance, feels that not only are Chinese characteristics identifiable in the play, it also serves as a critical commentary on Chinese society. He views the relationships among the passengers, and between buses and passengers, as critiquing China’s social problems: “when the bus is too full for everyone to get on it, the queue is no longer respected ... ‘backdoorism’ (favoritism) becomes more and more prevalent in interpersonal relationship” (1998, 463). Indeed “backdoorism” has been an ongoing problem in China, even till today, where people skip through official channels not because of their extraordinary abilities, but their personal relationships with those in positions of authority. In the play, Director Ma mentions more than once having bribed various people in power, yet he still is unable to get onto a bus. This of course agitates the others. They would not be

able to bribe their way in if a bus should stop for them. Critics also viewed the refusal of the buses to stop as an allegory of the state's failure to deliver its promises to the Chinese people, resulting in their endless wait and wastage of their youth. Intentionally or unintentionally, the ten-year wait in *Bus Stop* would serve as a stark reminder of the ten-year Cultural Revolution. Furthermore, Kuoshu points out that the faded sign at the bus stop is: *feng yu* 風雨, literally “wind and rain.” These two characters could also suggest a second meaning of “political in-fighting” (1998, 466). The ending of the play then would suggest Gao's implicit call to the people — who are tired of waiting endlessly for the state to change — to rise up collectively against the state. Having newly emerged from the Cultural Revolution in the early 1980s, one would interpret the semiotics too readily as expounded, even if Gao has often stated that his plays should not be interpreted as social criticism directed at specific locales.

If Geremie Barmé 白傑明 is right in surmising that *Bus Stop* is “the first play to introduce elements of the Theatre of the Absurd to a Chinese audience” (1983, 373), then the form of the play could pose a direct challenge to the existing party line and practices allowed within the theater. As Quah points out, “Gao knew the political danger in admitting to any relation to himself or his play with absurdist drama and cautiously rejected any suggestion that there was such an association. To be labeled as an ‘absurdist’ was tantamount to being called a ‘reactionary’” (2004b, 64). The play's alleged “treacherous” content, taken at face value by today's standards, would seem rather mediocre. It was form rather than content that Gao was steering himself clear of. In fact, even the staging of *Alarm Signal* — whose impact might be deemed less critical of the officials —

was initially not approved “because its proposed form of representation was a breach of the tradition of socialist realism in the Beijing People’s Art Theatre” (Quah 2004b, 62). Quah states that for Chinese dramatists in the 1980s, “form became a motif in the representation of modernity” (2004b, 60). Borrowing from literary theorist Terry Eagleton, who “further argues that in the modern aesthetic form becomes its content,” Quah argues that through the “appropriation of these forms, a clear picture of their [the Chinese dramatists’] ideological intentions and intellectual consciousness can emerge” (2004b, 61).

The formal modes of presentation in modern Chinese drama were up until then dominated by socialist-realism and naturalism, mostly represented by Ibsen and Stanislavsky, and drama was often been used by different ideological factions to serve as a propaganda tool in political campaigns. It is worth bearing in mind that Brecht, Artaud, Beckett, Genet, and Ionesco, from whom Gao borrowed heavily, had also rebelled against conventional styles of Western performance. By deviating from the norm and borrowing from these alternative Western dramatic theorists, Gao’s act can be interpreted both as a mode of resistance performance against the political status quo as well as provide a subversive agenda. In *Bus Stop*, Gao had appropriated “Western theatrical techniques ... to reveal human subjectivity, a quality previously repressed in conventional realist theater” (Quah 2004b, 62). In the revelation of human subjectivity, the Theater of the Absurd and Brecht’s *Verfremdungseffekt* are most apparently utilized. Towards the end in *Bus Stop*, as the people waiting at the bus stop realize that the Silent Man has already left, they fall into a state of despair and desperation, lamenting at how much time has zoomed past and how many opportunities have

been lost in the interim. The performers then suddenly step out of their dramatic personae to address the audience directly:

Actor B *playing* Director Ma: There are times in your life when you really have to wait ... Then you must have lined up to wait for the bus? Lining up is waiting ... Didn't you stand in line all that time for nothing? You can't help but be boiling mad ... If you line up and line up, and wait in vain for half your lifetime, or perhaps your whole lifetime, aren't you just playing a big joke on yourself? ...

Actor D *playing* Mother: The mother says to her son: walk, darling, walk! But the child can never learn. You might as well let him crawl on his own. Of course, sometimes you can support him ... You also have to allow him to fall ... A child can't learn to walk without tripping. To be a mother you have to be patient about this. Otherwise you're not qualified. No, you don't know how to be a mother ...

(Gao 1998, 57–8)

By having his performers step out of their characters' personae to critique the performance and directly communicate with the audience, Brecht was highlighting the theater as a staged and not real event. This prevents his audience from a total emotional immersion in the theatrical spectacle and instead alienates them from the spectacle, thus allowing them to stand apart from the performance to critique it from different points of view offered by the performers. According to Peter Brook:

It was out of respect for the audience that Brecht introduced the idea of alienation, for alienation is a call to halt: alienation is cutting, interrupting,

holding something up to the light, making us look again. Alienation is above all an appeal to the spectator to work for himself, so to become more and more responsible for accepting what he sees only if it is convincing to him in an adult way. Brecht rejects the romantic notion that in the theatre we all become children again ... Brecht believed that, in making an audience take stock of the elements in a situation, the theatre was serving the purpose of leading its audience to a juster understanding of the society in which it lived, and so to learning in what ways that society was capable of change.

(1969, 81–2)

Here Gao aims to do likewise. While Actor B highlights the frustration and futility of waiting in vain and Actor D allegorizes and critiques the parental style of governance of the Chinese Communist Party, it is only through them stepping out of their *dramatis personae* that the audience, confronted with this defamiliarized mode of presentation, gets shocked into contemplating the messages being discussed.

Furthermore, having actors step out of their characters not only defies the spatial-temporal logic adhered to in socialist-realism and naturalism, it also confronts the audience directly when the words uttered by the actors are not in sync with the dramatic sequence of the play. This space-time linearity is similarly transgressed when the crowd first learns of the Silent Man's departure and is suddenly shocked to realize then that ten years have passed. Gao seems to have designed this as a cathartic moment to first take the performers out of their *dramatis personae* and then further confront the audience with the messages

directly delivered by the performers, sometimes without adhering to rational language. As Brook suggests:

By using language illogically, by introducing the ridiculous in speech and the fantastic in behaviour, an author of the Theatre of the Absurd opens up for himself another vocabulary ... The Theatre of the Absurd did not seek the unreal for its own sake. It used the unreal to make certain explorations, because it sensed the absence of truth in our everyday exchanges, and the presence of the truth in the seemingly far-fetched.

(1969, 59)

Having the performers step out of their characters to address the audience directly may also prompt the audience into reflecting about the issues imbedded in the production in relation to their own situations, which is completely in sync with Brecht's rejection of "the romantic notion that in the theatre we all become children again" (Brook 1969, 81). Kwok-kan Tam's observes these "cross-dialogue[s] between the characters and the audiences" that are symptomatic of the 1980s non-realist plays, shows a "break from the belief in the hero as an authority" and which are "critical, skeptical and self-reflexive in nature," thereby serving "as oppositional discourse" (2002, 52). This calls directly into question the regime which has governed in a patriarchal fashion: since times immemorial, the Chinese Emperor has always styled himself as Son of Heaven 天子, and these familial ties were extended to the people he ruled as his subjects. Although the Chinese Communist Party has long been an eradicator of the dynastic past, they have conveniently employed such methods — this mentality of ruling in a paternalistic fashion — to their own advantage. To ask the people to assume

responsibility as “adults,” therefore, is akin to treason, to deviate from the Party line, inciting revolution. Though never publicly admitted by Gao, this has been the reading, at least by the censors, of the ending of *Bus Stop*: the group rises up to leave for the city. The censors read this as a “call to arms”: inciting the people to stand up for themselves and rise to the occasion to take their individual stances. All this is made possible only with Gao’s choice of the form of presentation. The formal qualities of Brechtian and Absurdist theatre in fact work to subvert the Chinese regime.

With all these potential problems in the interpretation of *Bus Stop*, how did Gao prepare himself for the play’s production? Already after the staging of his first play *Alarm Signal*, the authorities were concerned with the play having “blurred characterization” (Zhao 2000, 185), which deviated from the Party’s standards. Though his first play to be openly staged by the Beijing People’s Art Theater was *Alarm Signal*, Gao had composed *Bus Stop* earlier, but was advised by Yu Shizhi 于是之 (1927–2013), the then Vice President of the Beijing People’s Art Theater, not to perform it because it was too avant-garde and could easily be used as a weapon to attack Gao in the highly fluctuating political environment of the early 1980s. As a consequence Gao wrote *Alarm Signal*, and only after its success did Gao Xingjian and Lin Zhaohua have the audacity to stage *Bus Stop* without first seeking Party approval (Gao Xingjian 2006, 145–6).

Here, I consider Gao’s resistance act to be an employment of what theatre historian and theorist Marvin Carlson calls “ghosting” to avoid the problem of the censors. Carlson describes this as a “process of using the memory of previous encounters to understand and interpret encounters with new and somewhat

different but apparently similar phenomena” (2001, 6). As part of his resistance schema, Gao strategically designed the performance of *Bus Stop* as a two-part sequel, with Lu Xun’s 魯迅 (1881–1936) “Guoke” 過客 (Passer-by, 1925) presented as a prelude to Gao’s play, and having the protagonist in “Passer-by” double-up as the Silent Man in *Bus Stop*. In this way, Quah observes, Gao could “borrow Lu Xun’s image of the wayfarer, easily recognized by the Chinese audience, who proceeds with his journey regardless of uncertainty, in stark contrast to the other characters who hesitate” (2004b, 65). Carlson explains his notion of the “haunted body”:

The most familiar example of this phenomenon is the appearance of an actor, remembered from previous roles, in a new characterization. The recycled body of an actor, already a complex bearer of semiotic messages, will almost inevitably in a new role evoke the ghost or ghosts of previous roles if they have made any impression whatever on the audience, a phenomenon that often colors and indeed may dominate the reception process.

(2001, 8)

Considered in line with Carlson’s theory of ghosting, Quah’s reading of Gao’s strategy, therefore, bears a semblance to the Chinese proverb of “using the past to refer to the present,” 借古喻今 or evoking a past memory and using it for contemporary purposes. Since, as Carlson further explains, “The expectations an audience brings to a new reception experience are the residue of memory of previous such experiences” (2001, 5), Gao’s deliberate doubling of the protagonists by using the same actor in the staging of the two plays, one

immediately following the other, might drive the message home to the audience: if Lu Xun's *Passer-by* is a wayfarer "who proceeds with his journey regardless of uncertainty," then his reappearance as the Silent Man in *Bus Stop* carries forth the message of continuity into the unknown despite the ambiguity he has to face, which is "in stark contrast to the other characters who hesitate" (Quah 2004b, 65) in Gao's play.

More importantly, I would argue that on top of this, what Gao is doing here is less to recast the actor into a new character than to ride on the cultural credence of the author of "Passer-by." Hailed as the "father of modern Chinese literature," Lu Xun is the preeminent modern Chinese writer; to date, no creative Chinese writer has surpassed his stature. Even Chairman Mao has heaped praises on him posthumously, extolling him as "not only a great writer, but a great thinker and revolutionary as well" (qtd. in Hsia 1999, 29). By evoking the memory of Lu Xun and claiming that the theme of *Bus Stop* is in line with "Passer-by," however vague that might be, was perhaps Gao's strategy to avoid censorship.⁸⁵ Indeed as Carlson has said, "The close association of the theatre with the evocation of the past, the histories and legends of the culture uncannily restored to a mysterious half-life here, has made the theatre in the minds of many the art most closely related to memory" (2001, 142). Despite whatever similarities there might be in the two plays, I am suggesting that the artistic considerations undertaken by Gao might be of lesser importance than its political implications: by riding on the authority of an esteemed literary figure, the ghost of Lu Xun, and the memories

⁸⁵ "Passer-by," Lu Xun's only play, is published as part of the collection in his anthology of prose-poetry entitled *Yecao* 野草 (Wild grass, 1927).

that respected figure evokes, Gao's staging of his resistance performance attempted to deflect potential criticism by the censors. Literary critic William Tay's 鄭樹森 reading of this doubling offers a most interesting complication: "the resurfacing of the lonely passer-by may also suggest that the struggle and the journey are not yet over, although nearly sixty years have elapsed between his two appearances" (2001, 73).

Evoking the ghost of Lu Xun in *Bus Stop* did not save him from persecution then or later on. In December 1983, Gao, along with four other modernist writers, "were singled out by the Central Committee for criticism" on charges for indulging in commercialism but whose actual basis, according to Wendy Larson, "is their acceptance of modernism and rejection of realism, and the implicit rejection of certain aspects of Chinese society that their work contains" (Larson 1989, 60–1). Gao's handbook *Xiandai xiaoshuo jiqiao chutan* 現代小說技巧初探 (A preliminary inquiry into the techniques of modern fiction, 1981) that "stood out as the first, basic introduction to modern writing-techniques" in China (Wedell-Wedellsborg 1993, 137) and "opened the debate on modernism in literary circles," had in fact placed him "under surveillance since 1981" (Lee 1996, 103). According to Mabel Lee, "It was in this context of anxiety and uncertainty for writers in the immediate aftermath of the Cultural Revolution that *The Bus Stop* nevertheless was brought to the stage, and then closed down" (Lee 1996, 103). As the play came under severe criticism and was abruptly halted after ten performances in the midst of the "Anti-Spiritual Pollution Campaign," Gao absconded for a ten-month odyssey from Beijing into the wilderness in southwestern China, hence escaping the venomous attacks

unleashed on him then (Lee 1996, 103). Reflecting on this and “his experience in the Cultural Revolution, Gao realized that self-censorship would not necessarily keep him from political oppression and that fleeing was the best way of protecting himself” (Quah 2004b, 10).

Even as his third play, *Wildman*, was “acknowledged by dramatists and critics alike as a bold attempt to push the performing arts of China into a new realm” (Roubicek 1990, 186), the production team for Gao’s fourth play, *The Other Shore*, was disbanded during the rehearsal stage, and its cast warned not to collaborate with him again. Gao concluded from then onwards that he would never again be able to explore his theatrical concepts in China freely nor would his works be staged without censorship, suspicion and threat of his being arrested. Finally in 1987, while traveling in Germany on invitation, he took his chance and sought temporary residence in France. In 1989 he publicly denounced the military crackdown on students in Tiananmen Square, and declared that he would never return to China as long as the authoritarian regime held sway in Beijing (Quah 2004b, 12). In response, the state imposed a de facto ban on all his works, which explains why many Chinese had not heard of Gao when he was announced the winner of the Nobel literature award on October 12, 2000.

V. Conclusion

Gao decries the tragedy of modern Chinese literature to be in the servitude of politics (1992, 121) and seeks to set it free from ideological constraints. Like the Roots-searching writers, Gao draws his creative expression from shamanistic

naturalism, primitive and peripheral non-literati cultures of the Yangtze, as well as religious cultural phenomenon such as Daoism and Chan Buddhism (Gao 1987, 116). Three of his plays *Wildman*, *Mingcheng* 冥城 (Nether city, 1987) and *Shanhaijing zhuan* 山海經傳 (Story of *The Classic of Mountains and Seas*, 1993) give “expression to cultural elements from regions, ethnicities, periods, and ideological systems that do not belong to the mainstream, orthodox, central plains (*zhongyuan*) [中原] Confucian culture,” and hence challenges the cultural hegemony of “Zhongyuan” as represented by the political center (Quah 2004b, 16–7). Assimilating elements from Brecht, Beckett and Genet in his theatrical aesthetics is further evidence of Gao’s anti-center stance: these Western dramatists had revolted in their own time from the conventions of realism, which incidentally also dominated the modern Chinese stage since its founding that Gao and his peers were breaking out of. This echoes the words of Swedish Sinologist Göran Malmqvist 馬悅然:

Gao Xingjian’s plays are characterized by originality, in no way diminished by the fact that he has been influenced both by modern Western and traditional Chinese currents. His greatness as a dramatist lies in the manner in which he has succeeded in enriching these fundamentally different elements and making them coalesce to something entirely new.

(Malmqvist 2000)

Paradoxically, even if *Bus Stop* has been labeled as an absurdist play, the state might be extremely wary because of the absurdist elements in the play’s

appeal to realism. Gao himself has said that there is a very “realistic character in the absurd” (1993, 8) and his “experimental plays often draw (their resources) from reality” (1993, 10). Indeed, as has been exemplified, much of the content of the play draw immediate references to the socio-political situation in mainland China at the time of its staging. On one level, *Bus Stop* exposes both the corrupt nature and ills of Chinese society: the ten-year wait and “backdoorism” allude to the wasted decade of the Cultural Revolution, political in-fighting and lack of direction of the state. Furthermore, realization of the Silent Man’s having entered the city on his own that prompted the rest of the passengers to rise collectively to the occasion is a direct challenge to the state’s legitimacy, stating obvious one’s distrust with the state governance and hence the wish to “rise up” and leave.

Critics like Geremie Barmé have asserted that despite not having explicitly stated so, the ending of the play is unambiguous: people rising and going to the city was obvious (1983, 375). My reading of this ambiguity by not plainly stating whether or not the people have actually gone to the city is a strategy Gao purposely employed. Just as what is absent is sometimes more present, hinting at the possibility of the people going to the city might be more powerful than stating it outright. Rather than specifically instructing them on what to do — which will be no different from what the Chinese Communist Party has always been doing (and which the people would have been sick of) — this ambiguous ending prompts the audience to consider the *possibility* of going into the city, and therefore by extension of rising up and taking life into own hands. Just like how “Brecht rejects the romantic notion that in the theatre we all become children again” (Brook 1969, 81–2), the audience will then have to imagine their own

scenario of rising up and assume responsibility should they choose it. Allowing people to exercise their power of choice and planting the seed of possibility in their minds is actually a more latently subversive tool than outright instruction. It is no wonder hence that Kwok-kan Tam considers “The controversy this play aroused, however, was chiefly on its ideological inclination and challenge to the socialist doctrines of literature and art rather than on its artistic achievements and innovations” (2001, 45).

Chen Xiaomei appraises *Bus Stop* to be “one of the most astonishing achievements of early post-Mao theater” and to have achieved “formalist and aesthetic innovations, which dramatically changed the landscape of modern spoken drama” (2010, 28). These experimentations with form and modes of presentation might perhaps have been seen as a greater threat to the state. Gao’s continued search for an “alternative aesthetics” (*Ling yizhong meixue* 另一種美學) was part of an ongoing innovation that Chinese dramatists were exploring. Collectively they view socialist realism as represented by Ibsen and Stanislavski as stifling and constraining the development of Chinese drama. In this way, “To challenge the orthodox dogma in the arts became an irresistible temptation for artists who were dissatisfied with the current situation. They were looking for an effective means to express divergent points of view” (Quah 2004b, 38–39). Employing a mode of presentation that deviated from the state sanctioned socialist realism hence is to pose a direct challenge to the state’s singular claim of historical narrative. In this way, like the avant-garde writers in the 1980s, Gao’s intervention too is a contestation over the right of historical interpretation and thus

to wrestle the meaning of being Chinese in the 21st century other than that defined by the state.

Conclusion

My dissertation attempts to map out four different narratives of “the Chinese” in East and Southeast Asia in the 1980s. Their different aspirations to nationhood were propelled by the same geopolitical factor impacting the region — China’s emergence as a major power — that invited different responses due to their differing individual conditions. As the Chinese state reemerged in the midst of the international Cold War to become the new hegemon in the area, the ethnic Chinese in each state responded to the question of “Who am I” in their variously distinctive ways.

Even if we assume the Chinese ethnics in these states share the same cultural traditions, the linguistic complexity challenging each locale was different too. In her astute study of representations of Shakespeare across the Chinese-speaking world Alexa Huang 黃詩芸 points out, “The linguistic diversity of Taiwan and Hong Kong theaters fosters distinctive views of “Shakespeare” and what counts as “Chinese” (2009, 10). While the postcolonial societies of Hong Kong and Singapore share the same British lineage, the Cantonese-Mandarin-English bicultural-trilingual 兩文三語 situation in Hong Kong demands a different response to Singapore’s multilingual reality. Gao Xingjian certainly drew creative expression from French-inspired avant-garde dramatists but he was quick, at the same time, to claim descent from traditional Chinese opera as well as ancient Chinese and folk cultures that included regional dialects. While chiefly portraying the circumstances of the *waisheng* people settling into Taiwan, Stan

Lai has incorporated the Taiwanese language into his plays in addition to Mandarin in his bid to ameliorate the accelerating tension between these two rival camps.

The dramatists I study were at least bicultural and bilingual if not multilingual. Yung and Lai were schooled in the United States, Kuo in Australia, while Gao majored in French language and literature. Their bilingual edge allowed them, on the one hand, to make connections with and draw on cultural resources from beyond the Chinese-speaking world thus enriching their creative repertoire. On the other hand, their bicultural vantage seemingly provided them with an extra pair of eyes to scrutinize the work that they were doing from a critical distance. Literary writer and critic Liu Zaifu 劉再復, for instance, comments that a recurrent aspect in Gao's plays is the presence of a "character" who is always reflective of his circumstances and dares to act differently from the crowd. Whether it is the Silent Man in *Bus Stop*, the protagonist who refuses to be the leader of the crowd in *The Other Shore*, the Middle-aged Man in *Taowang 逃亡* (Fugitives, 1989) or the Chan sixth patriarch Huineng 惠能 in *Bayue xue 八月雪* (Snow in August, 1997), these are critical and reflective individuals who make a conscious decision to walk away from the crowd, who would otherwise imprison them mentally (2004, 17). Gao suggests that the best place for a writer is at the peripheries of society (1993, 13) to observe with his cold eye. Kuo Pao Kun echoes similar sentiments. In the title of his play anthology *Images at the Margins*, Kuo considers himself to be most at home at the *margins* of several cultures. Danny Yung's insistence that the artist's foremost task is to retain

his/her independence to critique from a critical distance epitomizes this condition. Lai's vision of the ruptures and fragmentations in Chinese history that presents the other side of the story requiring levelheaded contemplation also supports this vision. As opposed to the work of fervor that so characterized the many political movements in mainland China, and in particular the Cultural Revolution, therefore, the work of these dramatists is deeply contemplative and reflective of the conditions in their own societies and beyond.

The reemergence of China on the world economic and political scene in the post-Cultural Revolution era was met with internal resistance by local artists. The state had lost their trust and hence these artists were seeking an identity alternative to the one sanctioned by the state. While the Scar literary movement specifically exposed the trauma caused to literati and commoners alike during the Cultural Revolution, the Roots Seeking writers drew from creative resources that predated the history of the People's Republic hence seeking legitimacy beyond the current political ideology to define a Chinese identity. Gao's participation in the movement challenged the dominant realist mode of expression to the extent that Chen Xiaomei judged his work to have achieved "formalist and aesthetic innovations, which dramatically changed the landscape of modern spoken drama" (2010, 28). When "form became a motif in the representation of modernity" for Chinese dramatists in the 1980s (Quah 2004b, 60), Gao's presentation of reality in the absurd encouraged his audience to seek alternative models of historical narrative. While his works are still banned in China,⁸⁶ he is without doubt

⁸⁶ This is not to say that Gao Xingjian is not discussed in China at all. Quite the contrary, several articles published in China have attempted to discredit him. The best of these essays discuss his merits as a pioneer in experimenting with Chinese drama in the early 1980s, but they

currently the internationally best-known writer from China as he performs his act of resistance against state definition through self-exile. To date his works have already been translated into more than 36 main languages in the world. Gao's works are studied, taught and translated by scholars worldwide thus contributing to his collective living repertoire as he continues his creative expression in the diaspora.

1980s Taiwan was still very much under the shadow of the contestation of the "Two Chinas." While the People's Republic was gaining increasing international stature, some of the two million *waisheng* military men and their families who moved to the Republic of China during the 1949 exodus are still clinging on to a last shred of hope that they will one day return "home." On the one hand, nostalgia beckons them to look backwards towards the past and project this romantic historical imagination across the Taiwan Straits; on the other, they have to come to terms with realpolitik and settle down in Taiwan — a place where the *waisheng* people are the minority and know neither the local language nor customs and hence have to adjust to an unknown reality. Stan Lai's plays offer this *waisheng* perspective. While Lai might be sympathetic to such a near-schizophrenic condition, his intellectual conscience forbids him to allow the

usually conclude lamenting the fact that Gao has since deviated ideologically and therefore that there is nothing more to learn from him. Fortunately, there are still sources published in China after 1989 that examine Gao's significance as a dramatist without having to color the discussion in "politically correct" terms. A series of exploratory plays in the 1980s such as He Jiping's 何冀平 (b. 1951) *Tianxia diyilou* 天下第一樓 (The world's top restaurant, 1988), Jin Yun's 錦雲 (b. 1938) *Gou'er ye niepan* 狗兒爺涅槃 (Uncle doggie's nirvana, 1986), Wei Minglun's 魏明倫 (b. 1941) *Pan Jinlian* 潘金蓮 (Pan Jinlian: The history of a fallen woman, 1986) as well as Gao's *Alarm Signal*, are anthologized under the book title *Alarm Signal*. Although the book does not contain any discussion of Gao, his pioneering efforts in experimental Chinese drama might hold a significant position in the eyes of the editors to adopt his first play that was staged by the Beijing People's Art Theatre as the anthology's title. A more recent book also uses *Alarm Signal* as part of his book title, and discusses its significant contribution in Chinese dramatic history. See (Zhang 1990; Zhou 1993; Gao Yin 2006; Tian, Hu and Fong 2008; Ye 2013).

waishengren to indulge in such futile nostalgia. He works seamlessly to highlight the psychological despair they underwent to acculturate to Taiwan while simultaneously criticizing this nostalgia as nothing more than a romantic imagination of a glorified past that never was. Take for instance the protagonist in *Secret Love in Peach Blossom Land* Jiang Binliu. In his final scene in the hospital, whether it is the young Yun Zhifan that he imagines into being in 1930s Shanghai in his dream sequence who asks him to let go and move on or the aged Yun Zhifan who visits him in the hospital in real time who is married with children, Jiang is confronted with the reality that he is the only one who continues to be pining. To the *bensheng* people who critique the *waisheng* group as the privileged minority who occupy all positions of power and influence, Lai's plays showcase the *waisheng* people as also having to go through their struggles in order to acculturate into the reality of Taiwanese society. The continued relevance of his work can be seen by the 1999 staging of *Secret Love* where half of the play is performed by Lai's Performance Workshop in Mandarin and the other half *Peach Blossom Land* is performed by the Taiwanese *gezaixi* 歌仔戲 troupe "Minghuayuan" 明華園 in Taiwanese operatic style. The following year in 2000 Taiwanese society experienced an unprecedented political furor when the Kuomintang's half-century streak was broken and political power changed hands for the first time amidst heightening social tensions. Lai's work is a critical intervention in an attempt to suture the rupture between these two disparate groups.

Responding to the 1979 language policy that clamped down on Chinese education and raised the status of English to the national primary working

language amidst a multilingual reality, Kuo Pao Kun played the principal role in introducing the resources of English- and Chinese-speaking theatre practitioners to each other that ensured the latter's continued survival. That the contemporary Singaporean theatre scene, unlike most of the other sectors in the city-state, did not become entirely English speaking but hybrid multilingual theatre came to be accepted as truly representative of the Singaporean identity was owing to Kuo's timely intervention.

As the 1984 Sino-British Joint Declaration announced the impending "return" of Hong Kong to the People's Republic, sending shock waves across Hong Kong society, Danny Yung's avant-garde theatre simultaneously focused on the triangulation of the Sino-British-Hong Kong relationship. In foregrounding a Hong Kong identity, Yung does not attempt to sever ties with mainland China either. His post-1997 creative works reflect his frequent travels to mainland China to seek collaboration with traditional opera performers there. Even his pre-1997 productions, such as *Journey to the East* and *Deep Structure of Chinese Culture*, suggest his desire to draw from Chinese cultural traditions. Identity remains a much relevant topic in Hong Kong, as evidenced by the "Umbrella Revolution" 遮打革命 of 2014. This student-led demonstration was joined by tens of thousands of Hong Kong residents to show their unyielding desire for a unique identity not subservient to the mainland government.

In presenting four different scenarios of how "China" could have developed, I argue that there is no singular overriding way that defined what "Chinese-ness" is or could have become. The development of Chinese-ness was determined by the emerging power of the PRC that impacted the entire region as

well as the internal responses adopted by each individual actor. Just as Allen Chun reminds us of the constructedness of identity, each of these dramatists, while constructing their distinctive senses of locality as defined according to their individual locales, has not attempted to sever ties with Chinese cultural traditions, always returning to and drawing from it as a creative resource. Hence a “Hong Kong Chinese identity” is not PRC Chinese yet more than just a Hong Konger — it is a Hong Konger and much more.

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