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## **Constructing “Taiwaneseness” ~ Taiwanese Opera at Interfaces**

In September 1990 a remarkable incident in the history of Taiwanese Opera occurred. For the first time after Taiwan became de facto sovereignly independent, the then Taiwan government had decided to send a professional Taiwanese Opera troupe as representative of Taiwan to participate in a state-sponsored cultural event in Beijing, the Art Festival of the Asian Games. The incident implied not only the maturity of the local drama, but also a shifting national identity that started emerging since the 1980's, in which the pursuit of “Taiwaneseness” began replacing that of “Chineseness.” In fact, it had always been Peking Opera (which is conventionally known as Chinese Opera) being picked to perform in events like this one, due to the “pro-China” attitudes of the ruling KMT party. Yet, the incident in 1990 should not be seen as a singular case: Nowadays Taiwanese Opera has become more popular than Peking Opera and can be recognized as the new “national drama.” This however raises an important question: What made Taiwanese Opera, a performance genre that has a history of approximately only one hundred years, and known as a form of popular culture, capable of replacing Peking Opera, which has a tradition of more than five hundred years?

Taiwanese Opera is one of the most famous local arts that is also native-born and native-bred. According to *Taiwan Annals* and *Ilan Annals*, Taiwanese Opera was born in Yuan-Shan, Ilan county (north-east of Taiwan), about one hundred and ten years ago, and it was also the first performance genre invented in Taiwan. It is said that the “founding father,” A-Chu, sang great melodies automatically, and the topics of his songs were in

general a reflection of ordinary people's life in a farming society. Moreover, because of the use of slangs in performances, Taiwanese Opera sufficiently expresses the spirit of the local, which is underlied in the language system. In short, the essence of Taiwanese Opera lies in the customs, culture, and life style of Taiwanese society.

In general, the history and development of Taiwanese Opera also reflects the transformation of society of Taiwan. Taiwanese Opera started as folk melodies, which functioned as the most important entertainment in daily life as well as religious ceremonies. Yet, this origin at the same time determined its entertaining rather than artistic characteristics as a genre of performance. Furthermore, during its course of history, Taiwanese Opera greatly benefited from the general advancing of the society. Land reforms increased the overall situation of the society, ranging from a more stable to a wealthier one, in the wake of which quality and performances of Taiwanese Opera were enhanced. The 1950's were known as the golden era or peak time of Taiwanese Opera. The overall number of opera troupes was the largest ever recorded, and performing techniques were greatly improved. A number of performers and troupe owners were able to make a good living out of performing. This progress was however halted by a lack of support from cultural policies which was at that time being directed by a pro-China identity. Moreover, the emergence of new entertainment forms, particular movies and television, brought another crucial impact, which also caused a dramatic decline in the importance of Taiwanese Opera in everyday life. Opera troupes had to return to the original roots by performing outdoors, maintaining survival of the opera troupes and again playing a functional role in religious ceremonies as well as business of entertainment. Taiwanese Opera has been recognized as a form of art only recently. This

image change emanated from the promotion of Taiwanese Opera as “local culture” by the government, by granting opera troupes more subsidies to improve performance qualities and giving the general public the opportunity to learn performing Taiwanese Opera either formally in schools or informally in clubs.

The purpose of my dissertation is to examine how a local theater, namely Taiwanese Opera, encounters the modernization and nation-building process. My research will focus not only on Taiwanese Opera per se, but also on its interaction with other social domains. Besides taking each interface an arena of competition and negotiation, I will also take an actor-oriented approach to clarify what strategies different agencies use when confronting with varies social phenomena. In doing so, I will examine six main indicators that have the most significant impact on the transformation of Taiwanese Opera.

**(1) National identity:**

The Chinese Civil War resulted in the fact that Taiwan does not politically belong to China – in 1949 General Chiang Kai-Shek retreated to Taiwan and Mao Tse-Tung built a communist regime, the People’s Republic of China, on the mainland. Since then, the question of whether or not Taiwan is an independent country has been debated nationally and internationally. For one thing, the Chiang Regime transferred classic, orthodox Chinese culture to the island, which made Taiwan more “Sinified;” for another, it was crucial to build a diverse, democratic regime that could make Taiwan conspicuous. Yet, due to the authoritarian essence of the Chiang Regime, the unification of the two sides as the most important political creed was unquestionable. In addition, Taiwan and China were considered culturally homogeneous. However, the long divide of political ideology

and economic development has formed a different collective memory in Taiwan, which strengthened original cleavages within the society, for instance, long potential conflicts between earlier immigrants and late comers. Nationalism in Taiwan, a pro-independent political tilt, hence has become a lot stronger since the late 80s along with the democratization of domestic politics. The critical presidential election held in 2000 resulted in the Democratic Progressive Party, the main pro-independent party in Taiwan, becoming the ruling party, which in a sense legitimated the claim that Taiwan is independent from mainland China.

National identity is located in the space between the collective cultural identity of the nation's people, and the political identity that transfers the substance of cultural identity into values that underpin political activity. It is, therefore, both a cultural and political phenomenon, endlessly translating changes in collective images of desirable ways of living into goals of political life (O'Mahony & Delanty 2001, 2). Since the pro-independence movement has gained political legitimacy, the primary goal is now to prove that Taiwan and China are culturally alien to one another. In Taiwan's case, cultural artifacts matter in the context that Taiwan is lacking a dominant religion or an isolated language that contribute to identity formation. In this sense, almost everything that is related to the concept "local" is politically profitable, in order to serve the purpose of nation building. Therefore, the success of Taiwanese Opera has to be understood in a political perspective.

## **(2) Language:**

Language has long been taken as crucial means to strengthening identity. Consequently, the "Taiwaneseness" designation of Taiwanese Opera is given partly because it is

performed in Taiwanese, the mother tongue of the majority of Taiwan's population. It is important to point out here, however, that whether Taiwanese should be defined as a dialect or a language is still a question on debate. Yet, it is certainly politically correct to see Taiwanese as primary as Mandarin, the official language of the state.

The reason why people are inspired by Taiwanese Opera performances is actually a feeling of liberation. Local dialect had been prohibited in Taiwan for a period of time when Chiang Kai-Shek tried to form orthodoxy and homogeneity in the society. The official language, Mandarin, was forcefully imposed at schools, official institutions, and formal gatherings. There were also strict restrictions on presenting vernacular programs on television and radio. Consequently, the government finally successfully labeled Taiwanese culture and dialects indecent and backward in the pursuit of "Chineseness." For example, Peking Opera, performed in classical Mandarin, was considered higher-class and gained much support from the government.

Language has a functional role of reflecting people's thinking. By the same token, local language should be seen as a reflection to local thinking that also draw people's affection. Local plays perform in local dialect, which not only make scripts understandable to everyone, but give a picture of the spirit of a drama through the intonation and flow of the dialect (Guo 1981). As a matter of fact, local language is the basis for traditional Chinese drama to survive and develop. During performances, a mother tongue or homeland accent gives people a sense of familiarity as well as connects one another, which also has an irreplaceable function in theatrical performance.

### **(3) Cultural Policies:**

Cultural policies serve as one of many ideological apparatuses. This is especially significant in Taiwan's political culture as a result of weak civil society. Learning from the loss of mainland China, the Chiang Regime set strict restrictions on party organization, labor union, and farmer's associations on the island. Therefore, there was little room for development of private sectors and civil society that is strong enough to challenge political goals the government pursues.

A top-down political will was practiced by means of cultural policies. During the first two decades of KMT's domination in Taiwan, the most important political belief held by the ruling class was that the KMT will eventually recover the lost land. As a result, forming a Chinese identity was imposed on the whole society, and the pursuit and promotion of such identity was the only political ideology permitted. In short, Taiwan was seen as the anti-communist base, and everything the government did was preparation for the returning of mainland China. For instance, precollege students at school were required to study Chinese history and geography intensively. In addition, censorship on literature, media programs, and cultural activities was based on the pro-unification doctrine.

However, starting in the 70s, there emerged among young intellectuals the Bentu Yishi (Nativist Consciousness) movement, resulting from a series of diplomatic frustrations that challenged Taiwan's international status, which led to reflexive thinking on identity. In contrast to the Chinese identity, the Bentu Yishi movement is an ideology that strongly identifies with the indigenous culture, which was embedded in Taiwanese people's own tradition and everyday life. This ideology has later become new principles on directing cultural policies as local power grows. In fact, the end of cultural and

political hegemony that came along with democratization movement resulted in a renaissance of local dialect, local culture, and everything related to this theme. The most vivid example is that school children nowadays have more access to Taiwanese customs, culture, and history than those of China. Ministry of Education in Taiwan call it the “Nativist course of studies.”

In this manner, Taiwanese Opera has benefited. As folklorist Lin Mao-Xian states (1990) on newspaper, “Taiwanese Opera is the only native-born theater; therefore, it is without doubt that it is the one to best represent the theaters of Taiwan.” A series of reforms on preserving the “local theater” hence started. In 1990, Ministry of Education and Council for Cultural Affairs picked one junior high school and one vocational high school to give lessons on Taiwanese Opera, and this was the first time that Taiwanese Opera was taught in formal school system. In the same year, Museum of Taiwanese Theaters was built in Ilan, in order to preserve related archives. In 1992, the first and only public Taiwanese Opera troupe, Lan-Yang Taiwanese Opera Troupe, was founded. In addition, a couple of drama schools started to form an independent “Taiwanese Opera department” that systematically gives formal lessons on performance training, dramatic theory, dance, etc. As the number of participants gets larger, status of Taiwanese Opera is also promoted.

#### **(4) Media:**

Media has both negatively and positively affected Taiwanese Opera during the past three decades. For one thing, the widespread of electronic media resulted in the loss of audience in traditional drama, because a slow-paced theater could not compete with the

new technical innovations. For another thing, it is also the electronic media that expands the publicity of Taiwanese Opera.

Broadly speaking, performances as well as general documentaries on Taiwanese Opera are broadcasted more and more often either on the radio or on television, which, as a social phenomenon, has to be seen in the context of new cultural policies. However, it is also the simultaneity electronic media brings that deeply connects audience and performances. It is the sense of distance between viewer and event that enables media compel the transformation of everyday discourse.

Because of the sheer multiplicity of the forms in which they appear and because of the rapid way in which they move through daily life routines, electronic media provide resources for self-imagining as an everyday social project (Appadurai 1996, 4). Equally important, however, are strategies Taiwanese Opera performers take in order to gain access to media. Publicity of an opera troupe is usually a key to striving for future subsidies and to gaining higher social position.

#### **(5) Patronage / Reciprocity:**

What are the reasons patrons give money to support a certain kind of art? What then, are the sponsored groups supposed to do in return? The government is always a major sponsor in terms of cultural activities due to great resources it controls. Yet, arts also have to give in some free expression in order to cater to the needs of politics (Balfe 1993). Take Peking Opera as an example. When Peking Opera got tremendous support from the then government due to the pursuit of Chinese identity, it was at the same time no longer a form of culture that belongs to everyone but became a side-product of political doctrine (Chou 1994). Hence, it is important to see if Taiwanese Opera is only used or promoted

to channelize the advance of “Taiwaneseeness,” either directly by the government or indirectly through non-governmental organizations or private sponsors.

**(6) Memory:**

According to Halbwachs (1980), memory to the past shapes a person’s action. In this light, in order to understand actions performers take in regard to new social and political atmosphere, it is crucial to examine their memory.

Generally speaking, social status of Taiwanese Opera performers was low. Almost all senior Taiwanese Opera performers did not “choose” performing as their career. One old saying goes in Taiwan, “Parents give their children to opera troupes because they are poor.” Some families could not afford to raise a child, so they gave children to opera troupes where they could get food and shelter. In fact, performers in traditional plays mostly came from lower classes in the society, and they were not educated because education was not available for poor people in earlier times. The illiteracy along with their low-social-status background made performers being prejudiced or even discriminated in the society.

With the political involvement transforms Taiwanese Opera from “outsider” to “insider,” this group of performers who were once marginalized finally became mainstream. Does this kind of memory, especially in a collective level, influence their concern and style of performing? Is there room for relative autonomy other than control of politics?

The ideologies of nationalism require an immersion in the culture of the nation – the rediscovery of its history, the revival of its vernacular language through such disciplines as philology and lexicography, the cultivation of its literature, especially

drama and poetry, and the restoration of its vernacular arts and crafts, as well as its music, including native dance and folksong (Smith 2001, 6-7). In this connection, the repositioning of Taiwanese Opera situates well into Smith's argument as well as what Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983) call the notion of "invention of tradition." In addition, following Victor Turner's (1980) statements, cultures are most fully expressed in and made conscious of themselves in their ritual and theatrical performance. Therefore, Taiwanese Opera should be taken as an important means to understanding the nature of Taiwanese culture. Furthermore, the contribution of literature and theater to state-formation has been explored in many nationalistic studies. For example, Kiberd (1995) argues that the awakening of Irishness is significantly related to the cultural inventions of writers and intellectuals. It also appears in Peter van der Veer's work (2001), in which he sees the ancient Indian epics, Bhagavadgita and Ramayana, being textualized and transformed into national needs to rediscover the spirit of India. For Taiwanese, ritual and theater performance have long functioned as ways to dissolve disagreements and unite people in the community. In this respect, Taiwanese Opera is a Taiwanese reading Taiwanese (Geertz 1973). By examining the tradition and development of Taiwanese politics and society, using Taiwanese Opera as one of many indicators, one can also find Taiwan's "road to modernity (Greenfeld 1992)."

The ideological shift in the political realm has redefined the value of Taiwanese Opera. Therefore, how is Taiwanese Opera reinvented, represented, and reinterpreted, matters to the redefinition of a particular "Taiwaneseness." How does Taiwanese Opera intersect with other social domains? How does it react to a new social and political order? How do we read Taiwanese Opera in a complex process of modernization?

### **Review of Available Literature**

Current literature on Taiwanese Opera focuses mainly on its history, performing style, and troupe organization. For example, two classic publications, *Development and Transformation in Taiwanese Opera* (Tseng Yung-Yi) and *Taiwanese Opera* (Yang Fu-Ling), focus on history of Taiwanese Opera and its social meaning. Other applied research (some theses), for instance, *The Past and Future for Taiwanese Opera in Kaohsiung* (Liu Mei-Ching), *The Development and Transformation in Taiwanese Opera ~ Case Study of Kung-Yueh Opera Troupe* (Liu Nan-Fang), *Changes in Taiwanese Opera ~ An Anthropological Research* (Chen Hsin-Chuan), and *Sociological Analysis on Taiwanese Opera* (Su Shuo-Pin), put more emphasis on transformation of the Opera and its interactional process with other social factors. As for recent trends, Tsei Shin-Shin's *Indoor Taiwanese Opera on the Process of Modernization* points out new tendencies in the Taiwanese Opera circle in respond to larger social phenomena.

Chou Hui-Ling's essay, *National Drama, Statism and Cultural Policies*, delicately states the connection between nationalism and Peking Opera, in which she sees Peking Opera lost its autonomy by serving political goals. The concept was later adopted by Su Kuei-Chih in her doctoral dissertation, entitled *Development of Peking Opera and*

*Taiwanese Opera in the Context of National Policies*, which examines in details transition of these two operas in reaction to government policies from an institutional perspective. With respect to the two publications, *A Theatre of Taiwaneseess* (Chang Huei-Yuan), concerning political involvement in Taiwanese Opera, gives a general review on the status change of Taiwanese Opera.

The transformation of Taiwanese society and political history are the background to my study. Therefore, discussions on political history and change of national identity which appear in various newspapers, private magazines, scholarly journals, and books, are also of my interest. Among them, *Nationalism in Taiwan* (Shy Jeng-Feng) and *Nationalism and Cross-Strait Relation* (Lin Jia-Long & Cheng Yung-Nian) give the most systematic analysis – the former offers a pro-independent point of view and the latter is relatively more pro-unification. The literature mentioned above underlies the background knowledge to my own research. Yet, an interdisciplinary and multi-dimensional study has not yet been conducted, and this is the purpose of my dissertation.

## **Methodology**

As the dominance of KMT as well as the pursuit of “Chineseness” failed, and the local Taiwanese strength rises, the rediscovery of the nature of Taiwanese culture and its presumed attributes have also become a new political paradigm. In this context, Taiwanese Opera has gone through a process of “re-positioning” during the past ten to fifteen years: It has been “promoted” from a type of popular culture to a form of art. As yesterday’s outsider becomes today’s insider, what elements of this local theater are emphasized, preserved, and what part is discarded, help us to understand development of the society at large. In order to understand this process and to give a full picture of the history and transformation of Taiwanese Opera, I will go to the archives to review primary sources, which are available mostly in Ilan County, Taiwan.

In addition, I have selected Lan-Yang Taiwanese Opera Troupe (the only public troupe formed by government) and Department of Taiwanese Opera in National Taiwan Junior College of Performing Art (the first systematic educational program on Taiwanese Opera instruction) to examine, in a group level, the forming of future performers and the transmission of tradition. These sources provide detailed information about the administration, organization and institutionalization of Taiwanese Opera, which also provide a chance to examine agencies that carry the responsibility of transmitting local

art. Moreover, I will search government documentaries for data concerning cultural policies, principles of subsidizing, regulations on private opera troupes, etc, to give a full picture of government plan. Equally important, however, are the “documentaries” of private Taiwanese Opera troupes, to offer a perspective “from below,” namely, to see how private troupes make use of government policies.

This research will be complemented by ethnographic fieldwork and interviews. I intend to spend a couple of months in a professional Taiwanese Opera troupe to participate in their life and performance. Through participant observation, I can also complete some first-hand fieldnotes. In addition, I will interview a) a number of senior Taiwanese Opera performers, b) troupe leaders who have reputation on theater management, c) scholars who have been doing research on local theater, d) executives who advocate Taiwanese Opera on media and e) private patrons who routinely give significant financial aids on Taiwanese Opera performances. Do those people have a set of beliefs concerning “Taiwaneseness?” If so, what is it? What actions they would take to spread such belief? Where do their identities come from? Do they intend to influence others through performing? How do they see Taiwanese Opera confronting modernization of society? How do they react to impact from mass media? What are their interpretations on current cultural policies? Do they see these policies restricted (in terms of its localness) or beneficial (in terms of opening up access)? What are the possible strategies they might take in reaction and are there any potential struggles among different agencies? The challenge will be to understand the complex connections between people’s attitudes, and to locate these attitudes within local arenas of power and fields of modernity.

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