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Peilin Liang

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Dreaming Muscular Prowess through Falling
Censorship, puppets and mimicry

PEILIN LIANG

The first thing which the native learns is to stay in his place, and not to go beyond certain limits. This is why the dreams of the native are always of muscular prowess; his dreams are of action and of aggression.

I dream I am jumping, swimming, running, climbing; I dream that I burst out laughing, that I span a river in one stride, or that I am followed by a flood of motorcars which never catch up with me.

My race: that of the fallen.
Frantz Fanon (1991: 52, 86)

CENSORSHIP, MIMICRY AND ITS DOUBLES

Colonial contact is often perceived as the beginning of 'falling' for the politically disadvantaged and culturally displaced. Having 'fallen' from a romanticized 'pre-contact' past, the colonized inhabits a hybridized cultural sphere frequently associated with notions of 'contamination' and 'bastardization'. This symbolic act of 'falling' is made visually perceptible in the materialization and embodiment of mimicry, the colonized's failure in completely imitating and conforming to the manners of their colonial rulers. In Homi Bhabha's notion of mimicry, he suggests that the 'indeterminacy' and 'ambivalence' of the colonized's 'partial semblance' offers possibilities of subversion and resistance.1 Positioning Bhabha's theoretical trajectory within the East Asian context of the twentieth century and the twenty-first, this essay further questions if the efficacy of mimicry could go beyond mere subversion and resistance to achieve a fuller equalizing of power relation between the culturally dominant and subordinate. This issue is especially pressing for (ex)-colonials, who not only have to deal with their colonial past but also a rapidly globalizing present and future.

1 See Bhabha's idea of mimicry, please refer to Bhabha (1994: 121–31).
Treating the idea of mimicry as a point of departure, this essay considers palm puppetry or po-te-hi (布袋戲) of Taiwan as the site where cross-cultural performative in its various guises are displayed. Attention will be given to innovations and aesthetic sensibilities shaped by political censorship imposed during Japanese colonization (1895–1945) and subsequently during the Cold War era by the Chinese nationalist under its martial-cum-colonial rule (1945–87). Through an examination of po-te-hi puppeteer’s anti-censorship strategies, artistic responses and cross-cultural performative, I argue that 'falling' can become a source of regeneration and agency. Such inscription of agency is contingent on the transformation of mimicry from an individual and historically specific act, and one often times unintentional, into a conscious and collective creative process that acts out the colonial desire for superheroism. In transforming 'falling' into an aesthetic discourse and a statement of taste and style, the act itself becomes transcendental rather than undermining.

PO-TE-HI: STORYTELLING THROUGH HANDS

Situated at the nexus of Chinese and Japanese empires, Taiwan, also commonly known as Formosa to the West, has been a site where cultural flows from China and Japan overlap and conflate throughout its modern history. The conflation and compression of various modernizing forces, colonization, Cold War struggles and globalization are especially visible in the miniature world of puppets. Po-te-hi literally means 'cloth bag drama', with its nomenclature referring to a palm-size and sack-like inner lining worn by the puppets under their ornately embroidered costumes. Averaged from six to eight inches in height, po-te-hi puppets are brought to life through the dexterous manual manipulation of master puppeteers. Following migrants from the Fujian province of China to Taiwan during the mid- to late nineteenth century, the puppets soon became an indispensable part of local life in religious worship, daily entertainment and celebratory occasions such as weddings and birthday parties. Puppet performances are typically staged on a square- or hexagon-shaped wooden structure of an intricately carved out front, resembling the façade of Daoist temples. Flanked on both sides are ornately carved wooden panels behind which a backstage band position themselves.

The master puppeteer’s ability to improvise was put to the test each time he performed. No script was written except for a dramatic outline. Each performance was an opportunity for the puppeteer to display the depth of his knowledge in literature, history and music, as well as skills in storytelling, improvisation and puppet manipulation. In this total theatre, a highly skilled puppeteer could even bring the puppets to shoot an arrow, to thread a needle and to write calligraphy with a pen brush. The ultimate mastery of po-te-hi is to allow even the blind, without the perception of visual details, to fully appreciate dramatic events through the musicality created by the puppeteer’s oral delivery and the stage band’s accompaniment (Jiang 2007: 158; Tsai 2007: 108).

The hosts of po-te-hi characters are classified into six major categories: the male (生 sheng), the female (旦 dan), the giant (怪 jing), the elderly (老 mo) the clown (丑 chou) and the miscellaneous (雜 za). Characters from the male and the female categories are usually heroes and heroines whose amorous encounter occupies the centre stage. Characters from the giant category, such as army generals, are larger-than-life characters of imposing deportment and sonorous voice. They are contrasted by characters from the elderly category, who are senile men and women of differing social standings. Moments of comic relief are brought onto the stage by characters that belong to the clown category, such as chatty matchmakers and bucked-tooth monks whose wits may be slightly out of sync. The miscellaneous category encompasses a kaleidoscope of characters that are defined as non-human. The greedy Pigsy and the flirtatious Monkey King from The Journey to the West are characters exemplary of...
Rather than being psychologically complex, traditional po-te-hi characters are type characters that reflect and affirm the class structure and values of Chinese feudal society.

UNTO DEATH WE SHALL SERVE: PUPPETS AND JAPANESE IMPERIALISM

The social and aesthetic landscape of traditional po-te-hi underwent a major remake with the arrival of Japanese colonization in 1895. Taiwan was Japan’s first territorial addition. During its initial rule, the colonial government tolerated local customs and cultural practices to ensure the island’s social and political stability (Chiu 1992: 26, 28). Such governing policy coupled with Taiwan’s reduced ties with China soon led to the localization and diversification of styles and aesthetic sensibility in po-te-hi performances. Puppet masters, who originally imported puppet heads from Fujian, began to commission local carvers and artisans in the making of heads, costumes and props.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, action-packed martial plays adapted from knight-errant novels, local histories and chapters of popular novels rose to dominance. Although performances were still given in their original religious contexts, the involvement of audience became increasingly central. Competition between different troupes was fierce. Records have it that the Huang family of puppeteers, a leading puppetry troupe known for its daring innovation, once set up their stage next to a jingju troupe touring from China. They performed alongside one another for three consecutive days and nights. In the end, the charisma of the puppets drew a greater number of crowds than their human counterparts in the jingju performance (Ji 2007: 44).

As Japan and China entered a second full-scale war, the former subsequently launched an assimilation policy in 1938 to ensure unwavering devotion from its Taiwanese subjects. The Taiwan Performance Association (台湾演劇協会) was officially established in 1942 as part of the censoring organ to closely monitor and regulate performance-related matters in the colony. Around ten out of hundreds of po-te-hi troupes were granted licence to legally perform (Chen 2007: 145). Various censoring restrictions were imposed on the genre to align po-te-hi performances with Japanese imperial ideals. Chinese musical instruments, such as gongs and cymbals, were banned and replaced with Western and Japanese music played on the gramophone. The oral delivery of po-te-hi performances had to be given in a mixture of Japanese and Hok-lo languages, which was originally and entirely performed in Hok-lo, the ancestral language of 60 per cent of Taiwan’s population. Puppets were dressed in kimonos and contemporary outfits to reflect the modernity introduced by Japanese colonization. Plots dealing with usurpation, surrender, defeat and adulterous relationships were forbidden. Period Plays (時代劇), performance pieces based on real incidents, were dramatized to valorize the audience into patriotic acts of self-sacrifice and undivided loyalty.

To prevent the gathering of unruly crowds, the Japanese government also banned outdoor performances of po-te-hi. The imposition of such censorship measure subsequently forced many puppeteers to make a living through performances given in enclosed theatre
venues with ticket admission. By the end of Japanese Occupation in 1945, po-te-hi had already become a fully commercialized art form surviving on box office sales. The change in performance space in turn led to innovation and experimentation involving mechanical technology for fuller visual appreciation. Puppet sizes were increased from six to eight inches to one foot to one foot and two inches. Along with the enlargement in puppet size, various body parts, such as the eyes, mouth and joints were made articulate for even livelier performance. Replacing the ornately carved wooden stage structure was a large flat backdrop painted in three-dimensional realism.

GUARDIANS OF RIGHT-WING IDEOLOGY: PUPPETS DURING THE COLD WAR

The development of po-te-hi saw another dramatic twist when Japan surrendered in 1945. Their departure was followed by the arrival of the Chinese nationalist Kuo-ming Tang (KMT). Having lost the civil wars to the Chinese communist on the mainland, the KMT established a provisional government on Taiwan with the goal of unifying China under its flag. The KMT was keen to assert its challenged authenticity as a governing entity and the orthodoxy of Chinese culture it represented. To achieve that end, the KMT handsomely sponsored art forms brought by its party to the island, and concurrently suppressed all local artistic and cultural expressions on various grounds. For instance, following the 2–2–8 massacre of 1947, local outdoor performances, including po-te-hi, were strictly banned in order to eliminate possibilities of insurrection. Again in 1949, po-te-hi performance was massively censored as part of the larger effort to eradicate ‘harmful folk customs’ and to cut back on sumptuous and wasteful ‘superstitious worship practices’. Accordingly, any offender would be ‘forced to change to a proper profession’ (Chen 2007: 98). From 1947 to 1955, the KMT’s policies to ‘improve local performance genres’ and attempts to ‘arouse anti-communist and anti-Russian’ consciousness in the people were carried out to its utmost rigour. Po-te-hi troupes were mobilized to perform propagandist plays that celebrated the bravery of those who valiantly fought for the right-wing cause. In the 1970s when the popularity of televized po-te-hi reached an unprecedented viewing rate of 97 per cent, it was again banned on the grounds of ‘interfering with the daily operation of commerce and agricultural activity’ (Ji, 150; Luo 2007: 137).

Major po-te-hi troupes that survived Japanese censorship were called upon to take part in the Cold War effort. Disrobing their Japanese outfits, puppets were dressed in uniforms of Chinese Republican conversing in Chinese Mandarin. They once again became the interface through which the governing entity disseminated its political ideology to the populace. Although the KMT were more lenient on their policy by the mid-1950s, most classical plays given in performances thematically emphasized filial piety and national loyalty. Plays were typically set in an unidentifiable historical and geographical locale. Plots dealing with rebellion, political corruption, monetary...
greed, assassination and superstition were strictly forbidden. Along with these taboo plots, plays adapted from Chinese history were banned in order to prevent puppeteers from raising political criticism and satire through historical analogy.

Censorship not only took the form of interdiction, but also an institutionalized spectacle. The KMT officiated many po-te-hi performance competitions in which celebratory variations of the right-wing ideology were juxtaposed and displayed. The troupe that gave the best performance of an ‘anti-communist and anti-Russian’ play was granted official recognition (Shi 2009: 110). The acknowledgement of the puppeteer’s achievement in turn legitimizes puppetry performance as a respectable profession. The elevated social standing of puppetry practitioners is a privilege not previously enjoyed by itinerant performers.

**ARTISTIC RESPONSES AND AUDIENCE RECEPTION**

In response to the censorship imposed by the Japanese colonial government and the Chinese nationalist, po-te-hi practitioners have invented a body of anti-censorship strategies to ensure financial and cultural survivals. These strategies consisted of a mixture of rejection, compromise and acceptance of the imposed culture and ideology. Some chose to perform in the country away from the gaze of surveillance. Others played hide-and-seek with the authority. Depending on whether the Japanese inspector was present, puppeteers alternated between Chinese and Japanese repertoires. When po-te-hi became commercialized indoor performances, a ‘messenger’ guarding at the entrance became an indispensable part of the theatrical experience. The moment a Japanese police was in sight, the messenger pressed the doorbell button, which in turn cued puppeteers and musicians for an instant switch to a Japanese play laudatory of imperialism (Wu 2007: 150). In a bilingual performance, puppeteers played with double-entendre to vent pinned-up frustration and anger to the delight of the audience.

Staying ambiguous and responsive and being playful with censorship restrictions were also required life-saving skills during the KMT’s martial rule. Political opinions were camouflaged in poetry and rhymed verses. Plots were set in a distant and unidentifiable past in order to evade political scrutiny. Puppeteers made sure that any handicapped character was disabled on the left side of the body rather than on the right side (Tsai and Wang 2003: 17). Even when censorship became an institutionalized performance competition, puppeteers were quick to adapt to such institution for their own commercial success. Puppet master Lee Tien-lu used to hang a banner with the wording of ‘Top Po-te-hi Troupe of Free China’ and ‘Provincial Champion’ across the bottom of his stage as a hallmark of quality control to his show. Additional anti-communist and anti-Russian performances will be given’ was once part of the extra perk used by the Chung family of puppeteers in their publicity to attract the audience (Chen 2007: 98). Many out of curiosity attended their performances wanting to see how propagandist plays could be done in the po-te-hi fashion. The restrictive censoring policy imposed on po-te-hi ironically became a creative benchmark by which the puppeteer’s transformative skills were measured. The attempt to search for creative possibility in a limiting and oppressive environment had itself become a spectacle of great attraction.
GOLDEN RAY PO·TE·HI: THE POWER OF COLONIAL MIMICRY RADIATING OUTWARD

Resourcefulness, hybridized materiality and technological display were the performative features po·te·hi acquired through the experience of colonization and martial rule. These features soon contributed to the emergence and rise of Golden Ray po·te·hi, also known as kim kong po·te·hi (金光布袋戲). As suggested by its nomenclature, the style and spectacle of Golden Ray puppetry was one of awe-inspiring glamour. Replacing the delicacy of traditional puppet performances was bold and striking flashiness manifested in the puppets’ exaggerated, and sometimes distorted, grotesque features, heavily painted faces, and ornate costumes made of dazzling studs, synthetic furs and bright fluorescent brocade. Its bombastic visual quality was further underscored by the aid of mechanical stage and audio technology. Crackling thunders, zigzagging shafts of lightening, mysterious shrouds of cloud and spouts of underground fire were no rare sights in a performance. The overall atmosphere was accentuated by streams of recent popular songs in Taiwanese, Mandarin Chinese, Japanese and English amplified through the boom box. Competing against mass media entertainment of the 1960s and 1970s, such as Japanese soap opera and popular music, as well as American Hollywood films, po·te·hi made use of its synthesizing skills acquired through the experience of colonization to mimic and memorize an even wider array of popular cultures. Whatever elements that would enhance the dramatic quality and financial competitiveness of po·te·hi, be it foreign or local, were quickly imitated, adapted and performed to sustain ticket sales.

Taking the centre stage of Golden Ray po·te·hi were mysterious knight-errants and swordsmen of long-winded and hyperbolic names. What differentiated them from their counterparts a generation ago was their complex psychology and potent magical powers. The grotesquery of these newly invented characters was beyond the role categorizations existent in traditional po·te·hi. They are unclassifiable in-between roles, or ‘classificatory confusion’ in Bhabha’s words, that transcend class boundaries and wander on the social periphery (1994: 130). Not only were they capable of sword and fistfights, but also magic and ‘emotional kungfu’. Through the exercise of the mind, the superheroes could telepathically throw their opponents into fits of emotional upheaval. Just as a fierce encounter between the good and the evil was about to end, an enigmatic figure of hidden identity and even greater martial might appeared on the scene. S/he was ready to turn the recently established world order into yet another bedlam. No one was certain as to which side the enigmatic figure belonged, and suspense filled the air. The scene ended on a cliffhanger. To learn the exact detail of his/her identity and to witness the aptitude of his/her magical power and martial skills, one had to pay the theatre another visit.

Mr Hundred Herbs Knight (大俠百草翁), created by the Chung family of puppeteers, was one of the first superheroes to herald the arrival of the Golden Ray era. With three tumors on his shiny bald head and whisk of goatish beard on the chin, the whimsical quake always went about his business with a basketful of herbs. His true identity of an accomplished wulin fighter was only accidentally revealed when he...
Godiwala (2007: 66, 67). Please see performative’ is made by cultural-ideological performative’ and ‘the cultural-linguistic performative level, another process simultaneously took place on the level of cultural-ideological performative.8

In transforming ‘falling’ into an aesthetic gesture that references Taiwan’s colonial and Cold War pasts, a new kind of ideology is brought into sharp focus. This ideology was neither Japanese imperialism nor Chinese right-wing belief. It is rather an ideological conglomerate that synthesizes the mysticism of folk religion, self-sacrificing spirit of samurai code of chivalry, desire for modernization through technology and the Confucian respect for the learned (Chiu 2010: 69, 100, 102, 106). The sum of all these ideal qualities is, in Fanon’s words, the desire for invincibility and aggression through ‘muscular prowess’ (1991: 52). Through a dramatic form that had its origin in colonial mimicry, the colonial subject dreamed not only of ‘muscular prowess’ but also of phenomenal power and metaphysical ability to an aggrandized proportion.

**Remediating puppets: mimicry in the age of globalization**

The spirit and aestheticism of Golden Ray po-te-hi was recast in the form of Pili po-te-hi that rose to the puppetry mainstream in the 1990s. Founded in 1994 by the third generation of the Huang puppeteers, the Pili International Multimedia launched a series of puppetry programmes through cable TV, videos, films and DVD recordings. Synthesizing the aesthetic sensibility of Japanese manga, anime, computer games and soap opera, as well as Hollywood cinema, Korean soap operas, cinemas and online games, the Huang brothers created something of an ‘in-between animation and puppetry’, a hypermedia that integrates ‘a number of different media creations’ (Silvio 2007: 501). The term pili (霹靂) literally denotes the crackling of thunder and the flashing of lightning. It also references a dazzling and awesome experience that greatly supersedes the sensation inspired by the radiating shimmer of golden ray. Since the incipience of the Pili series, more than a thousand Pili serials have been launched, introducing over two thousand and six hundred characters.

Extensively complex in psychological portrayal and plot development, the wuxia world of Pili consists of intertwining networks between fictional kingdoms, tribes and magical realms. Providing a sense of historical progression, the overall narrative is linked by one main character, Su Huanzhen (素還真). Multifaceted in personality, he is an invincible fighter, erudite strategist and a gymnast of the mind. He could be cunning, cruel or self-sacrificing when the situation calls for (Tsai and Wang 2003: 19). The gaudy flamboyance of Golden Ray po-te-hi is translated into luxurious grandeur and imposing loftiness in the Pili...
puppets. They are often shot from a 45 degree angle, with facial expressions of intense determination and deep calculation. Mystique and a sense of chivalrous cool and calmness enshroud the superheroes. Their flowing hairs and fine brocade robes suggestively hint at the speed and the powerfulness of their martial might. Instead of bricolaging with existing popular songs, the Huang brothers composed original scores expressive of each character’s personality.

Through the beauty and speed of computer technology, the metaphysical and the supernatural is distinctively delineated in the series’ flowing and accelerated action in fight scenes and the dazzling special digital effect displayed in rotating fire balls, glowing swords, flying darts and luminous auras. Intricate and detailed in craftsmanship, Pili puppets inherited a semblance that reminds one of Japanese manga and anime characters. In comparison to their Golden Ray counterparts, they are even larger in size, more articulate and human-like, capable of an even wider range of emotional expressions.

In a 2006 survey conducted by Taiwan’s Department of News Agency ‘Show Taiwan’, participants were asked to vote on an icon that would best represent Taiwan on the international stage. The survey was taken by a total of 780,000 people, with Pili po-te-hi vote the number one. As pointed out by Silvio, the iconoclastic status of Pili superheroes could not have been achieved without the quasi-religious support from their club fans. Currently there is an estimate of 300,000 registered club members around the globe. These club fans regularly interact through computer media technology as well as self-organized activities. Through the creation of fan arts, such as cartoons, novellas, music videos, and costume plays in which fans dress up as their favorite characters, the fan community constantly recontextualizes and reinterprets Pili narratives through multiple interfaces. The effect of remediation and the infinite variation on ‘the same’ is further enhanced by such side-products as photo albums, clay figurines, stuffed toys, desktop wallpapers and posters marketed by the company in chain stores throughout Taiwan. Through infinite variation and reproduction of the Pili narrative, its fictional world has acquired a mythologized status that appears to be timeless and real (Silvio 2007: 305).

From acts of unintentional slippages to conscious cross-cultural and high-tech performative, mimicry in the case of po-te-hi has operated on linguistic as well as ideological planes to become a collective process that documents Taiwan’s (post)colonial condition. From an unconscious individual gesture with a historical and geographical specificity, mimicry has evolved into a system of aesthetic sensibility, unclassifiable, exaggerated and flamboyant. With this repertory of performative vocabulary, the (ex)-colonials are able to play out their desire for strength and invincibility. In performing, repeating and proliferating this desire for ‘muscular prowess’ through the miniature world of po-te-hi, the dramatic tradition inspired by and created through mimicry is transformed into a mythologized and timeless reality iconoclastic of Taiwan’s cross-cultural encounter and collective
memory. The act of ‘falling’ is no longer a downward, hurtful and accidental motion that denotes a hierarchical spatial plane, but a horizontal and rippling out agency seeking for creative possibilities. ‘Falling’ has become an aesthetic gesture, a statement of style, and an indispensable choreographic component in the dancing of hands.

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