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Peilin Liang

Department of Theatre and Dance, University of Hawaii, Manoa, HI, USA

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Localising People’s Theatre in East Asia: performing Hakka women and pear-growers on Taiwan’s fault line

Peilin Liang*

Department of Theatre and Dance, University of Hawaii, Manoa, HI, USA

Since the 1960s and 1970s, theatre artists from around the globe initiated a wave of theatre practice that is commonly known today as People’s Theatre or Theatre for Empowerment. Transforming its participants from being mere ‘spectactors’ to ‘spect-actors’ capable of articulating their concerns on-stage, the ultimate goal of such theatre is to bring about social change to the daily reality of its practitioners. Beginning in the latter part of the twentieth century, People’s Theatre has exerted a profound influence on the development of contemporary theatre in East Asia. First introduced to Taiwan in 1990, the methodologies of People’s Theatre have been rapidly adapted by various socially conscientious and politically committed theatre groups. Taking the case of Shigang Mama Theatre Company (石岡媽媽劇團), this paper aims to examine the localisation of People’s Theatre in the (post)colonial and post-martial context of Taiwan. Consisting of Hakka housewives and pear-growers, Shigang Mama Theatre Company was initially established in 2000 to help its members with psychological recuperation after the catastrophic 9-21 Earthquake in 1999. Through People’s Theatre, the members of the company have been transformed from being victims of the earthquake to women storytellers of their own lives on the stage. Focusing on the company’s last major production, Pear Blossoms, this study aims to examine the localisation of People’s Theatre techniques in relation to the company’s treatment of language and bodies during the rehearsal process, and how such theatre practices have subsequently shaped the company members’ identity and self-perception. This study suggests that in the current practice of People’s Theatre in Taiwan, far greater attention has been given to the liberation of the physical than the language aspect of its performer. Local resistance through theatre can only be at its most powerful when imported theatre practices are fully adapted with the bodily and linguistic specificity of its practitioners taken into consideration.

*Email: peilinliang@gmail.com
Since the introduction of People’s Theatre to Taiwan in 1990, the theatre practice has significantly contributed to the localisation and cultural diversification of Taiwan in its post-martial and (post)colonial era. Numerous avant-garde and community theatres have adapted and localised these techniques to address the specific political, cultural, and gender issues confronted by their members. Founded in December 2000, Shigang Mama Theatre Company (石岡媽媽劇團) based in central rural Taiwan is one of the foremost theatre companies that have adapted the practice of People’s Theatre to address the needs of its members. Collectively known as the Mamas, the company members are female Hakka agricultural workers, housewives, and survivors of Taiwan’s largest earthquake in half a century. With the rise of cultural diversity in Taiwan, Shigang Mama Theatre Company’s performances are often considered representative of the Hakka minority. Taking the group’s latest major production, Pear Blossoms (梨花), which premiered in 2004 and continued to be performed throughout the subsequent years, my project here is to understand the empowerment process of People’s Theatre during rehearsals, and how that process is localised in an East Asian context. I argue that local resistance is at its most powerful and effective when it is rooted in and generated from the social, cultural, and political specificity of the actors’ bodies and languages. However, for the case of Shigang Mama Theatre Company, the current source of empowerment chiefly comes from the bodies rather than the languages of the Mama actors. To achieve a fuller empowerment will mean further localisation needs to occur in the complex communication patterns and language choices during the rehearsal process.

My first encounter with the Mama actors was during a performance of Pear Blossoms given at Guisui Park, Taipei on 22 April 2006. The event was a theatre festival where numerous socially committed theatre companies from different parts of Taiwan participated. During the event, each group brought their stories and life experience to the stage. This research paper is based on a fieldwork carried out during the years of 2006 and 2007 with Assignment Theatre and Shigang Mama Theatre Company in Taipei and Shigang, respectively. Rehearsal observation, workshop participation, daily interaction, interviews with directors and actors, DVD and production viewing were the methodologies used in gathering relevant data.

Central to the analysis of this paper is the concept of ‘localisation’. The term is chiefly understood as a process that goes beyond repeating and perpetuating certain theatre techniques or methodologies in social
and cultural contexts other than their original one. It is a process by which newly introduced theatre techniques are adapted, reinvented and refined to address issues and aesthetic needs of a local community. The ultimate goal of this process is to effectively empower its participants with the ability to bring about social transformation.

**Poised on the Pacific Rim of Fire: a theatre born of earthquake**

On 21 September 1999, Taiwan was struck by the largest earthquake in half a century, measuring 7.3 on the Richter scale. The earthquake is known as the 9-21 Earthquake for the date of its occurrence, and also as the Jiji Earthquake because of its epicentre in Jiji Township located in central Taiwan. According to statistics from the Ministry of the Interior’s National Fire Agency, the catastrophe resulted in a total of 2416 people killed and 11,443 severely wounded, with an estimated US$9.2 billion worth of damage; 44,338 structures were completely destroyed and 41,336 severely damaged (National Center for Research on Earthquake Engineering 2009; Neizhengbu Xiaofang Shu 2008). One of the areas that suffered severe damage was Shigang Township, located approximately 70 km northwest of the epicentre. The Shigang area encompasses 10 villages and has a population of around 15,000 who are mostly employed as agricultural workers. Approximately 70% of the inhabitants are of Hakka ancestry and speak a Dapu variant of the Hakka language, of which there are five (大埔客語). In the Shigang area alone, out of the 15,585 estimated residents in August 1999, 177 were killed and 65 injured. Of the villages’ 4040 dwellings, 1207 suffered total collapse, 924 suffered partial collapse, and 115 were badly damaged. Twenty-eight of the 32 traditional Hakka living quarters, fo fong (廬房), found in Shigang were totally destroyed.

Following the catastrophe, the Taiwan government sponsored a series of psychological recuperation programmes, which brought arts organisations and artists into devastated areas to work with survivors of the earthquake. One organisation actively involved in the project was Assignment Theatre (差事劇團). Based in the metropolis of Taipei, Assignment Theatre is a socially committed group that first introduced the practice of People’s Theatre into Taiwan. Here, and throughout the discussion, People’s Theatre is understood as an umbrella term referring to process-oriented theatre practices that became popular in Latin America beginning in the 1960s and in Southeast Asia in the 1970s. The goal of such theatre practice is to raise the critical awareness of its participants, ultimately leading to actual social transformation.
Since Assignment Theatre’s founding, the company has aimed to empower its actors and audience through the practice of People’s Theatre that draws its inspiration from local histories and living experience. Producing socially committed plays, offering educational workshops, and facilitating cross-cultural collaboration with neighbouring Asian countries have been the chief modes of its operation. Black Tent Theatre of Japan and Philippines Educational Theatre Association (PETA) are some of the theatre organisations that have joined in Assignment Theatre’s venture. The company frequently uses theatre methodologies including such practice as Theatre of the Oppressed, Rainbow of Desire, Bread and Puppet Theatre, and Playback Theatre. Shortly after the earthquake, members of the group arrived in Shigang Township and conducted a series of theatre workshops with local housewife farmers. These workshop series eventually resulted in the self-initiated founding of Shigang Mama Theatre Company, consisting of 10 members who are collectively referred to as the Mamas.

**Stories of the Mamas: translating private lives into public performances**

Following its founding in December 2000, Shigang Mama Theatre Company developed in phases marked by the different themes and theatre styles explored by its members. From psychological recuperation, heightening of social awareness to community empowerment, the Mamas’ works dealt with a wide array of personal as well as social experience. Facilitated by Chiao Chung (鍾喬), Show-shun Lee (李秀珣), and Fusheng Shi (施富盛) during the first phase (May to July 2000), the Mamas recounted their experience of the earthquake through various exercises and games derived from People’s Theatre, aimed at raising its participants’ social awareness. Later, they presented their stories for the first time in public in the form of Image Theatre under the title *The Earthquake*. In the performance, the Mamas created still images of their lives before and after the earthquake, and presented their individual experiences of the earthquake itself, linking together pre- and post-earthquake images. Under the guidance of the same facilitators, the Mamas explored possibilities for their future after the earthquake in the second phase of their theatrical exploration (August to December 2000). The goal of this phase was realised through various physical exercises, discussions, and theatre exercises drawn from Boal’s Rainbow of Desire, which focuses on the
psychological healing of individuals. At the end of this phase, the Mamas presented a play entitled *Home* to the community in the form of Boal’s Image Theatre.

Although the experience of the earthquake remained an important aspect of the company’s theatrical exploration during the third phase of its development (January to May 2001), issues regarding women’s roles in the public sphere became increasingly central. Facilitated by Chung and Lee, the Mamas began to reflect on their roles as Hakka women in the male-dominated process of rebuilding the *fo fong* after the earthquake. Concluding this phase of theatre work, the Mamas presented *The Mama’s Fo Fong* in the form of Boal’s Forum Theatre, addressing and critiquing the nature of their engagement as women with the community and its public affairs in the post-earthquake reconstruction effort.

As the company gained its independence from Assignment Theatre in 2001, there was a gradual shift to a new emphasis on aesthetics in addition to the company’s ongoing interest in concrete social issues. This culminated in the company’s first major production, *River in the Heart* (心中的河流), which premiered in September 2003 (He 2002, 43–65). Described by Ronald Smith as being in the style of ‘magical realism’, the production depicted the actors’ experience of the earthquake and their struggles, dreams, and hopes as Hakka women pear-growers. In the production ‘the Mamas fuse[d] an alterable rehearsal reality with a seemingly set and unalterable daily reality vis-à-vis their performance’ (Smith 2006, 237–8). Throughout these phases of theatrical exploration, the Mamas gradually left behind the traumatic experience of the earthquake, and grew into individuals with increasing awareness of their gender, ethnicity, class, and roles within the patriarchal social structure of Hakka tradition.

Yet, despite the Mamas’ seemingly progressive search for greater self-autonomy and self-awareness, these actors continue to battle against the reality of daily life behind the stage. The internal struggles of these women between tradition, reality, and their own emotional needs were dramatised in their next major production, titled *Pear Blossoms* (梨花), which premiered on 11 June 2004. The production was a highly stylised and lyrical expression of the Mamas’ accumulated life experience after their first theatre production, *River in the Heart*. The play consisted of the portrayal of three women, each representing an aspect of the Mamas’ lives: a bride who found her new self through theatre, an old woman shackled by Hakka tradition, and a pear-grower affected by the reality of the World Trade Organisation
Intertwining these three stories, the production was episodic in structure. The Mamas gave a second performance on 22 April 2006 in Taipei. Later, on 21 and 22 July 2007, the play was presented in a revised version during the IDEA Congress (International Drama/Theatre in Education Association) in Hong Kong, where the local concerns of the Mamas were brought to the international stage.

**Pear Blossoms in Performance**

Interweaving three strands of narrative told from the perspectives of three different women, the 2007 version of *Pear Blossoms* is a piece that sought to integrate People’s Theatre with elements and aesthetic sensibility of traditional Chinese theatre (Shigang Mama Theatre Company 2007). Each of the three women represents a facet of the

![Figure 1. The Mama at work in her pear orchard, Shigang, Taiwan, 2007 (courtesy of Shigang Mama Theatre Company).](image-url)
Mamas’ life in Shigang. Played by Rui-zhi Peng (彭瑞枝), the most senior of the Mamas who was in her sixties, the first character is a construction of an ideal woman according to the patriarchal standards of Hakka tradition (Figure 2). Clothed in a traditional blue Hakka outfit, she is compliant and long-suffering as a daughter, wife, and mother. The second is a deconstruction of the ideology championed by the first. Played by Zhen-zhen Yang (楊珍珍), a breakfast vendor and bonsai farmer, her doll-bride character embodies the psychological realm of a woman whose expression is often muffled and suppressed. Wearing heavy white facial and body make-up, the bride enters the stage with bare feet. In her white wedding gown with three red flowers in her hair, she carries a long wooden pole, hung with various kitchen utensils. During the course of the play, she comes to a self-awakening, defies the taboos imposed on her by her own tradition, and publicly (and on stage) makes known her sexual desire as a woman. The third narrative strand is a real-life autobiographical sketch of the actor Yue-xia Lin (林月霞) who plays the character, a pear-grower from Shigang. Love for her pears and for the land makes her a strong woman who fights as defiantly against the WTO as she would against the onslaught of a typhoon. In the telling and criss-crossing of these
stories, the three women searched for ultimate liberation through self-expression.

The overall performance of the piece was lyrical and dream-like. Warm yellow, blue, and white lights were used for the distinct realities depicted by Peng, Yang, and Lin, respectively. The lights established a slightly forlorn atmosphere suggestive of remoteness in time and space. A traditional san go (山歌) tune played on a harmonica and a yueqin (月琴), a four-stringed plucked instrument with a moon-shaped sound box, was the production’s sonic refrain, filling the performance space at many points. San go literally means ‘mountain songs’. They are songs originally improvised by Hakka agricultural workers as they worked in the fields or in the mountains. The tune was associated with Peng, serving as a kind of leitmotif whenever she appeared onstage.

Highlighting the phantom-like presence of Yang’s doll-bride character were the slow, inexpressive, and mechanical notes of a music box. An upbeat marching song was utilised to aurally portray Lin’s determination to fight for survival.

In order to highlight the presence and images of these female agricultural workers, the stage design for *Pear Blossoms* was minimalist. A red lantern was hung at stage centre and an incense holder was mounted on a pillar placed at stage left. A large white backdrop, serving as a projection screen, was hung across the rear of the stage. In this essentially bare space, the Mama actors, who in real life were often forgotten and deemed insignificant, were rendered highly visible by the projection of their photo images, silhouettes, as well as by their actual appearance.

Traces of Lee’s previous theatre training in nanguan (南管) and People’s Theatre were visible in the aesthetics of *Pear Blossoms*. Nanguan, a traditional Chinese theatre genre which originated in twelfth-century Fujian province, is known for the elegance and refinement manifested in its deliberately slow-paced movement and music. Lee was originally a member of Gang-a-tsui Theatre Company (江之翠劇場), the most established nanguan performing group in Taiwan to date. While with the group, she specialised in nanaguan music and focused on perfecting her art form. Her engagement with a socially committed and process-oriented theatre did not formally begin until 1999 when she joined Assignment Theatre, where she came to realise the power of social transformation that her theatre might bring. Since working with Shigang Mama Theatre Company in 2000, Lee has integrated her previous schools of training to empower the Mama actors.
In *Pear Blossoms*, each of the three actors adopted a different performance style. Lin’s portrayal of a Shigang woman pear-grower was the closest to everyday naturalism and perhaps the most commonly used performance style in People’s Theatre. Much of her action was mimetic of her daily activities, such as scrubbing the floor, hawking her pears, and gathering fallen pears on the ground. Her dialogue and monologues about her marriage and her hardships as a pear-grower were based on Lee’s actual interviews with her. The actor was encouraged to be as authentically her daily self as she could on the stage.

In contrast, Peng’s performance styles were marked by slow, intense movements that conveyed a ritualistic atmosphere suggestive of other worlds. Reciting poetry and singing *san go*, Peng was the eternal traveller who progressed slowly and steadily on her journey. As if performing religious rites, she solemnly and reverently repeated the duties of a perfect woman instructed by tradition, such as offering worship to her husbands’ ancestors, performing various household chores, and remaining demure and inexpressive of her desires. Her role functioned dramatically as the storyteller, but for most of the performance she related to the other two women by gazing at them as if they were fragments of herself. Different from Lin’s and Peng’s performances, Yang’s was the most intense, stylised and symbolic, evoking a sense of elegance and grotesquery at the same time. After she collapsed from being overloaded, her arms and legs slowly writhed and twisted in grotesque circular movements, all performed in silence. In her struggle she evoked the imagery of sexual intercourse, of a foetus, and of the pangs of childbirth.

The one-hour performance was a series of interlocking images. The recurrent stage imagery of a silent woman labourer carrying a burdensome load was inspired by the Hakka saying that a woman shoulders a home by lifting it by both ends (*it gien tiau ga/gei liong teu ti/te*, 一肩挑家/雞兩頭提/啼). Not only is the woman responsible for domestic chores, she is also in charge of heavy labour in the field outside. The bride who collapsed under her shoulder pole of kitchen utensils and chickens embodied puns in that saying, between ‘home’ (*ga*, 家) and ‘chicken’ (*gei*, 雞), and between ‘lifting/shouldering’ (*ti*, 提) and ‘crowing’ (*te*, 啼). Echoing the imagery of the silent labourer’s suffering was the pear-grower who carried a shoulder pole laden with pears, and the blue-coated old Hakka woman weighed down by a wooden box of memory she carried.
**Pear Blossoms in rehearsals**

The rehearsal process of *Pear Blossoms* was one in which Lee fused the artistic and the socially conscientious aspects of her training. While the aesthetic sensibility of *nanguan* is the most noticeable in the intensity and deliberate pace of *Pear Blossoms*, the philosophical and conceptual foundation of Lee’s theatre practice is far more political. Although the narrative strands of *Pear Blossoms* were performed in dissimilar styles, Lee’s approach to rehearsals was consistently applied to all three styles of performance previously described. Key principles underscored in her work with the Mamas concern methodology, expectation, and attitude. While grounded physical training was the fundamental building block of theatre creation, it was never perceived as a way to amass performance skills for building dramatic personae. Instead, physical training was utilised as a systematic methodology for the actor to examine and understand her own body, and consequently the society in which her body existed (Figure 3). The expectation that came with substantive dialogue and discussion between the director and the actor was not intended to convey the director’s unified artistic vision. It was to enable the actor to understand fully the social issues raised in the play or the workshop. The actor was led to reflect on her character and characterisation in relation to the social reality of her everyday life.

![Figure 3. Group sculpture, April 2007 Workshop, the Shigang Activity Center, Shigang (courtesy of Shigang Mama Theatre Company).](image-url)
In the process, the actor’s many existing cultural and social assumptions were challenged to form new ways of perception, leading to a heightened awareness of the political implication of their art. Lee believes that at the end of this intellectual process, actors’ heightened social awareness will in turn lead to achieving greater emotional sincerity in their performance on the stage (Liang 2007).

A central aspect of localising People’s Theatre concerns adapting and reinventing theatre techniques to suit the physical condition of local actors. In the case of Shigang Mama Theatre Company, the physical infirmity and limited memory retention of senior actors were factors that Lee had to consider in designing her rehearsal methodology. Consequently, long hours of rehearsal and concrete acting directions were characteristic of Mamas’ rehearsal sessions. When Lee first began rehearsing with Peng, who was already in her sixties in 2004, the director had to physically demonstrate basic blocking for the actor to imitate. The sequence of movements for portraying Peng’s traditional Hakka woman included carrying a wooden box, travelling across the stage, putting down the box, and finally sitting on the box reminiscing about her past. In the process, Lee asked Peng to take her time and try out different travelling routes, from stage right to stage left and vice versa, and different squatting positions that would be comfortable for her when unloading the box. Whenever the actor asked the director for a critique of her performance, the director always redirected the question back to her in order to engage her in active critical thinking. The final blocking was chosen after much discussion between the director and the actor. The rehearsals were usually long and arduous sessions, in which blocking was tirelessly repeated until the actor’s bodily memory retained its details.

Enhancing and challenging the actor’s ability in conceptualising abstract ideas was another challenge that Lee had to address. In addition to memorising blocking, the Mama actors spent a great deal of time developing their characters. During one rehearsal, Peng explained that, as she performed, she carried with her the memory of her mother who was considered by many to be a virtuous Hakka woman. However, to enable Peng to go beyond fulfilling the role of a virtuous woman as defined by patriarchal Hakka standards, Lee initiated discussions which strenuously examined the implications of Peng’s characterisation. The interaction between the director and the actor was one of intellectual rigour, forcing the actor to confront and probe deeply into traditional values and expectations rarely examined
in anatomical detail. During an almost two-hour-long rehearsal, Peng was asked to reflect on the traditional Hakka woman she portrayed in her performance. She was later asked how she could go beyond simply taking that role in a real-life situation. When Peng was unable to answer the question, she was asked again to examine what she saw in the other two actors’ performances and lives that she did not possess in her own. Through a series of questions and answers, the actor was guided into conceptualising, verbalising, reformulating, and finally embodying abstract ideas relevant to the play. The intellectual rigour of the process was one rarely experienced by the actors in their daily manual labour, and visible signs of physical and mental fatigue, such as increased silences, delayed verbal responses, slouching postures, were often observed toward the end of the rehearsal (Liang 2007).

Creating script through interview and dialogue
Unlike conventional script writing, the scripting of Pear Blossoms was perceived as a collaborative effort aimed at building confidence among the actors. Having lived in Shigang and been with the Mamas since the company’s founding, Lee searched for topics and ideas from her observation of and daily interaction with the Mamas. When the script development of Pear Blossoms first began, guided interviews built around open-ended questions were conducted, and sections of these interviews were excerpted verbatim to form the corpus of the play. In alignment with the practising philosophy of People’s Theatre, the attempt was to give voice to the Mama actors on stage in its most authentic form. For instance, Peng’s line about women being without shadows was a result of Lee’s brainstorming with her about what it means to be a woman. In co-operation with Peng, Lee scripted Peng’s lines in Mandarin Chinese with written characters. Peng then edited the script, rephrasing the lines to more closely reflect Hakka idiomatic expressions and substituting various written characters to approximate Hakka pronunciation. In interview with Peng (2007), I learnt that the edited script was brought to rehearsal for further discussion, and to take possible blocking into consideration, after which Lee typed up the final version (Figure 4).

Lee also held several one-on-one interviews and discussions with Lin, who had the largest speaking part in Pear Blossoms. Although Lin was much younger in age and more expressive with her body than Peng, she was semi-illiterate. The initial focus of Lee and Lin’s discussions was centred on Lin’s marriage into Shigang and her life
as a pear-grower. Later, Lee began to ask Lin to describe her mood during the typhoon season using her own everyday speech. To help Lin fully express her emotions, Lee asked her to physically improvise salvaging her pears from the onslaught of a typhoon while speaking her thoughts and feelings out loud. Going a step beyond simply asking about past experience and feelings, Lee then posed a series of ‘what if’ questions that made Lin reflect on the effects of the WTO. Lee recorded the discussions, and sections relevant to the theme of the play were transcribed and incorporated into the script in Mandarin Chinese with written characters. The script was then brought to the rehearsal and re-edited with Lin for fluency and proximity to Hok-lo idiomatic expressions. Lin, a Hok-lo woman who married into a Hakka family, still found it most natural to express herself in Hok-lo.3 Lee then typed up the final version.

**Tension and intention: paradoxes of localising People’s Theatre**

The good intentions of an educated theatre facilitator in bringing People’s Theatre to a community inevitably raise many critical questions. Chung Chiao, the founder of Assignment Theatre, who first
introduced People’s Theatre into Taiwan, describes People’s Theatre as follows:

People’s Theatre is not a theatre performed for the people. On the contrary, it is a performance arena created together with the people. The difference between these two is that the former is concerned with instruction, while the latter is concerned with interaction. Instruction constitutes a fixed relationship between a superior and an inferior, and interaction is about how to create a common ground for dialogue. Therefore, through the method of People’s Theatre workshops, a series of systematic bodily, cognitive, and psychological mechanisms are activated to create discussions. Such discussions are initiated within the local communities, focusing on exploring minority as well as individual consciousness. (Chung 2008)

To paraphrase in Augusto Boal’s terms, People’s Theatre is an empowerment process in which its participants learn to become aware of their oppression and their position as the oppressed. It is precisely this juncture, the intervention of the elite in facilitating a theatre aimed for empowerment, or adult education, which requires further scrutiny.

Taking Taiwan’s social and cultural climate into consideration, three important paradigms intersect and complicate the process of localising People’s Theatre in the case of Shigang Mama Theatre Company. These paradigms include culture, gender and class. To examine how these paradigms shaped the process of localisation, I shall address them separately. In Ann Phillips’s *Multiculturalism Without Culture* (2007), she highlights possible incongruities between the discourses of multiculturalism and feminism, which are useful and applicable in our reading of Lee’s theatre practice in the social and cultural milieu of Taiwan. In her study, she suggests that the promotion of multiculturalism, especially by the state, has the potential to shore up the power base of older men in a particular ethnic community. Therefore, when the importance of cultural tradition overrides the rights of women, such as freedom of choice and equity, then multiculturalism becomes harmful rather than helpful. Moreover, the notion of culture can represent a falsely ‘homogenising reification’, ‘forcing those described as members of a minority cultural group into a regime of authenticity’, and denying them the right to refashion themselves (Phillips 2007, 14).

One characteristic of Lee’s theatre practice lies in her highlighting of the physical and social conditions of the Mama actors. Since nothing can be more authentic and evident than the inscription of Hakka culture in and on the very material presence of the Mamas’ bodies, the
question of cultural authenticity is redundant. Lee is therefore able to eliminate the potential danger raised by Philips, and to work within the contours and specificities of Hakka culture without running the risk of overriding the importance of universal values. Furthermore, in working in the medium of a process-oriented theatre, the actors are constantly encouraged to re-fashion their identity through alterable dramatic realities.

As an educated member of the elite who assumed the role of facilitator, Lee was aware of the potential problematic of her own theatre practice. ‘Whose critical social consciousness is really highlighted in her collaboration with the Mamas?’ remained a question she often asked herself. Drawing our attention to the bodies of the Mamas, her indirect answer to this question was ‘What have you [the audience] seen?’ (Chung 2005, 232; Lee 2008, 17). This suggests that, had the Mamas not been straitjacketed by the patriarchy of Hakka traditional values, the very material substance of their being would not have been sculpted and moulded into the shapes and forms which the audience witnessed on the stage.

With the Mamas’ physical bodies as the basis of their theatre practice, Lee was able to secure a powerful and grounded speaking position for the theatre company. However, the great importance placed on the body can also unwittingly reinforce the dichotomy between the body and language. Such dichotomisation can in turn devalue the language-based aspect of the Mamas’ theatre. Because verbal communication between the director and actors was an essential component of the Mamas’ creation process, an analysis of the structure and medium of their communication at rehearsal and in performance is crucial for our understanding of the effectiveness of Lee’s theatre methodology in empowering the company members.

**Dialoguing across culture, class, and language differences**

Through the process of dialogue in theatre creation, a central goal of People’s Theatre is to enable the underprivileged in their expression of personal and social concerns. Two parameters deserve our attention in determining the effectiveness of this empowering process: the format of questioning and answering as well as the language choice in rehearsal. Here, I shall go to Gayatri Spivak’s idea of the subaltern as a point of departure for my discussion. If we were to pose Spivak’s perennial question, ‘Can the subaltern speak?’ to practitioners of
People’s Theatre, the answer would be an affirmative. However, when a member of the elite class attempts to teach the subaltern to speak through the medium of theatre, we may question what may be some of the effects/side-effects of that intervention. Further questions pertinent to our investigation should also be addressed: to what extent is the relationship between the director and actors in fact dialogic rather than instructional? And what constitutes a dialogue in this context? If a dialogue consists of a series of questions and answers, then an analysis of who is doing the questioning and who is providing the answer becomes essential. From my observation of the exchanges between Lee and these three actors, the greater the disparity between the education level of the director and the actor, the more Lee’s function tended to be instructional rather than dialogic. When the actor disagreed with the director over an issue or a perspective, the director’s viewpoint would eventually prevail toward the end of the rehearsal session or later in a different session. For instance, in Lin and Peng’s conversations with Lee, both actors commented that their lives were actually not as tragic and solemn as was being portrayed in *Pear Blossoms*; there were moments of happiness as well as cherished memories in their lives in addition to the traumatic ones. This resonates with Jan Cohen-Cruz’s observation on the danger of conceptualising identity as permanent and static in the practice of Theatre of the Oppressed. While it is useful to investigate solutions to oppression through storytelling, constantly highlighting such stories can inadvertently reinforce oppression rather than providing liberation from it (Cohen-Cruz 2006, 112).

Furthermore, theatre practice led by a more highly educated facilitator originally from outside the community raises the question of whether or not the facilitator was merely replacing an existing oppressive ideology with another one by imposing her own views on the actors. Moreover, as Spry observes concerning a common challenge for practitioners of People’s Theatre, the issue explored in our work may ‘speak to our own reality, [but] the end result must belong to the people with whom we are working’ (Spry 1994, 177). In the 2007 version of the play, Lee attempted to address the impact of the WTO on Taiwan’s farmers and other farmers worldwide. However, as Lin herself commented, that while she precisely understood the painful feelings of farmers, the WTO to a great extent remained an incomprehensible concept. The farmers may have been the ones suffering from a social problem, but the identification and interpretation of the problem still belonged to the educated elite. *Pear Blossoms*
might have movingly addressed the suffering of agricultural workers caused by the signing of the WTO on a surface level. Yet, it might not accurately reflect the individual actor’s personal conviction in the matter.

**Linguistic medium and power structure in rehearsal**

Because of Lee’s preoccupation with the physicality of her actors, the social implications of her language choice, and the relative use of instructional and dialogic forms in her communication with the actors, often remained unscrutinised. This can be seen in the cultural and class dynamics implied in her choice of language during the rehearsal process. Throughout the rehearsal, Lee communicated with her actors in Mandarin Chinese and Hok-lo, the two languages in which she was most proficient. While Mandarin Chinese is the official language used as the medium of formal instruction in Taiwan, Hok-lo is the ancestral language of 65% of Taiwan’s population, and Hakka 18%. When working with Hakka-speaking actors, Mandarin Chinese was the primary linguistic means of communication. When working with Hok-lo-speaking actors, a mixture of Mandarin Chinese and Hok-lo was used. Hok-lo-speaking actors also communicated in a mixture of these two languages, but with a greater amount of Hok-lo. However, the Hakka-speaking actors rarely spoke Hakka during the rehearsals. Mandarin Chinese was spoken to accommodate the director, and a mixture of Hok-lo and Mandarin Chinese was used with Hok-lo-speaking actors. While Lee’s theatre professes to empower its actors, the means of verbal communication ironically reflects the unequal and complex power relation existing in Taiwan’s larger social context. Rather than reverting this power relation in the rehearsal room, the director–actor dynamics in fact reflected and perpetuated on a micro-level that power relation. It was the most minoritised group that made the most effort and accommodation in communicating across class and ethnicity in the language of the dominant. The degree of empowerment granted to the actors therefore remains questionable.

From my repeated observation, the director’s competency in the actors’ ancestral languages and effort in communicating in the language of the under-privileged are determinants in the actor’s level of empowerment. One particular example was when Lee discussed the concept of the WTO with Lin. Not being able to express herself with total ease in Mandarin Chinese, Lin launched into Hok-lo as she commented on how she was unable to prevent manmade disasters
such as the WTO. The way she handled such difficult circumstances was to ‘take it as it came’. When there was no more rice, there was always the option of cooking sweet potato soup. This idiomatic expression made historical reference to Taiwan’s colonial experience under the Japanese rule. Taiwan being Japan’s largest rice-producing colony during wartime, most rice was exported to the main island (Japan). Eating rice was a luxury to the Taiwanese people, who then had to live on sweet potatoes. Unfamiliar with the historical expression, Lee asked Lin to repeat it and explain further. At this moment, the teacher/facilitator/director and student/actor relationship was reversed, a situation that lasted for the duration of the rehearsal. In contrast, for Hakka-speaking actors, who worked entirely in Mandarin Chinese with Lee, the potential for a reversal of the power relationship was completely eliminated. When the director worked with the actors in the language of the educated elite rather than that of the subaltern, there remains the possibility of disempowerment in a theatre practice meant for empowerment.

Pear Blossoms in full bloom

Such terms as ‘avant-garde’, ‘feminist activist’, and ‘progressive’ may aptly describe Shigang Mama Theatre Company and their work Pear Blossoms. Since the founding of the company, the bodies of the Mama actors and the social forces that have shaped their bodies remain central to inspiring, formulating, and localising their practice of People’s Theatre in Taiwan. By treating the Mamas’ bodies as complex signifiers that bear the inscription of social and cultural hardships and restriction, the company is able to secure a firm and powerful speaking position. However, while the body provides valuable insights into the social conditions of the Shigang Mamas, further critical examination and invention of theatre techniques are necessary for the verbal communication aspect of the Mamas’ theatre-making. In order for People’s Theatre to become even more localised and effective in empowering its practitioners, such as in the context of Taiwan’s multicultural society, the power dynamics implied in the complexity of the actors’ language habit and choices in the rehearsal room will be an area that requires further attention.

Keywords: People’s Theatre; feminist activist theatre; postcolonial Taiwanese theatre
Notes
1. Taiwan has been subject to various waves of colonisation throughout its modern history. These include the Dutch (1624–62), the Spanish (1626–42), the Ming loyalist rule (1662–83), and the Qing dynasty rule (1683–1895). The latest two waves of colonial force were the Japanese (1895–1945) and the Chinese Nationalist Party, which imposed martial law on the island from 1945 to 1987.
2. Currently Taiwan has a total population of 23 million, the Hakka forms 18% of that population.
3. The Hok-lo is a group of Han Chinese who first migrated to Taiwan during the late Ming dynasty (1368–1644) and early Qing dynasty from the Fujian province in southern China. They consist of 65% of Taiwan’s current total population.

Notes on contributor
Peilin Liang holds a PhD from the Department of Theatre and Dance at the University of Hawaii, Manoa. Within a theoretical framework of (post)colonialism and multiculturalism, her research interests focus on the literary and cultural process of theatre-making. Some of her research interests include: indigenous theatre, postcolonial theatre, cross-cultural theatre, and theatres of East Asia. This article was completed with the generous support from Taiwan Grant and sponsorship from the Department of Asian Studies, University of Texas at Austin.

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