

Danny Yung – Experimenting Traditions | Experimenting China

Excerpts from a dialogue between theater scholar CAO Kefei and Danny Yung, the artistic director for Zuni Icosahedron, September 2016

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Cao - In November this year, your theater work, *Flee by Night*, is invited by Akademie der Künste to be part of its big project *Uncertain States*; how do you see the relevance of this classic work of traditional Chinese Kunqu theater to German audience, and what kind of issues would like to address through this performance?

Danny - The classic play of *Flee by Night* depicts the story of a martial art training official, Lin Chong, in Song Dynasty. One night, he decided to leave the corrupted bureau pitching in the opposing gang. In short, he runs away from a system for another one, turning himself from a government official into a refugee. The stories about the way he left the bureau, the way he ran to the gang, the idea of being an escapist or someone who runs for one's dream, are all relevant to our discussions about refugees today. We take *Flee by Night* as the departure point to observe the shift of one's identity and its uncertain states. In such a process, we started to observe history and politics, and what goes beyond that, for instance, body language, spatial arrangement and forms of narration in the context of history and politics. At the same time, we discuss what is "observation", and that is the reason I added the role of "stagehand" who is the staff working at the side stages responsible for putting props on-and-off stage. Stagehand is also an audience member who watches the same production many times on the side. In *Flee by Night*, stagehand appears on stage as an observer, then turns into a performer, followed by playing the role in the performance, finally resuming his role as a stagehand who observes.

Cao - I find your *Flee by Night* is a rather abstract presentation, how does it relate to incidents in the Chinese historical development?

Danny - The construct of Chinese characters is an ideogram; each character is a pictograph and a symbol, a line of these characters conjured up to the idea of montage. What is presented on stage is all about combinations and variations of pictographs and symbols that provide audience room for imagination. For those who are familiar with contemporary Chinese history might fall into the pigeonholes to relate what's in the play as Chairman Mao or Chiang Kai-shek, the Revolutionary or the authority, pre-XXX generation or post-XXX generation, performer or observer, and performance or non-performance. I've adapted the symbolic set-up of one table and two chairs

regularly used in traditional Chinese theaters to test the confine of imagination. That is, some people would read into the set-up of one table and two chairs as distribution of authorities, some read like interaction on a fair ground, while some read political struggles or transition of our times. The two lead performers are of master and disciple relationship in reality, the construct between real-life stories and historical events between the two performers, and the system of passing on this dying art between the master and disciple provided an entry point to the play *Flee by Night*. My attempt is to make use of this classical kunqu work to create an experimental platform carrying multiple-layer narrative structure with montage style.

Cao - Let say German theater adopts the confrontational approach, would your work be considered as tacit?

Danny - I once had written an article on the way Germany reflected on the WWII experience that brought forth the later well-supported cultural policy, hence, nowadays a public sphere which allows dialectic debates among cultural, political and academic sectors is founded. A public sphere as such could not be found in China. After 1949, there were tons of problem in China. Cultural Ministry was bombarded by the pressing institutional reform that provided no room for reviewing culture from a broader perspective, and refrained from acknowledging the importance of culture over politics. In 1957, Cultural Ministry dared not speak up when those outspoken cultural practitioners were silenced; later on, even keeping the ideas in one's mind might cause problem during Cultural Revolution. Would our history be re-written if the Cultural Minister was strong and tactical enough to open up such a dialogue with the Chairman Mao? Political movements in contemporary China were all related to cultural issues, yet this pushed cultural practitioners to a ground of no confidence and righteousness. Looking at the history, Germany has made a clean move in openly reflecting on one's deeds; it didn't generally happen in China, where theater is a tiny niche which casts no influence on China's overall development, while Hong Kong carries least baggage in this case.

Any particular reasons for your preference in re-constructing the Chinese literatures or classical texts, such as *Book of Ghosts* (1996, 2009), *Outcast General* (2005), *Tears of Barren Hill* (2008) and so on?

Classical scripts are a kind of alternative history, since it is alternative that made us more aware of looking at what are we reading. Some artists from mainland China once told me the reason for their preference of classical plays like Shakespeare's over original plays is due to censorship reason. Yet, we have different opinions towards the authority of classical works. Besides the awareness mentioned above when reading classical scripts, we are also

reviewing the politics of reading, history and memory. Tears of Barren Hill was written in Republic of China period (1912-1949), while Outcast General and Flee by Night in Ming Dynasty (1368–1644), and Book of Ghosts in Yuan Dynasty (1279 – 1368) which was the first book documented musicians and artists of the time. Book of Ghosts inspired my theater work of the same title by its metaphors of artists as ghosts. Besides devoting my theater piece to documenting the artists of our time, the idea of critiquing on the concept of “documentation” was well in place too. Throughout the years, I have created different editions of Book of Ghosts, four traditional/contemporary performing artists from Beijing, Taipei, Jakarta and Bangkok were invited to take part in the latest production in 2009. In this edition, issues about artists’ identities and their positioning in the present society were explored, that was a contemporary Asian Book of Ghosts.

Outcast General depicts the famed general in Southern Song Dynasty (1127-1279) as a cunning master instead who manipulated those young warriors under him, that corresponded to the earlier mentioned notion “reading history alternatively from traditional scripts” inspired my work of the same title. In Outcast General, I have tried to explore the concepts, that constitute the differences between documentation and reading the documentation, and between history and memory through the experimentation of synchronized interactions between the performers and its own projected digit images; an attempt to adopt the new technology in stage works by then.

Inspired by the same title, the Peking opera of the 30s, a signature piece of the famous female impersonator CHENG Yanqiu, “Tears of Barren Hill”, attempted to draw attention on the importance of cross-cultural exchanges by making a case study out of Cheng’s study trip in Berlin in 1932-1933. Equally well-known and successful as his peer MEI Lanfang, CHENG made this Europe study trip purely out of his own interest that included personal visits to different theaters, hospitals, city halls, schools, churches, and so on. CHENG once made an impromptu singing an excerpt of “Tears of Barren Hill” in a church after attending a mass. Much inspired, CHENG prepared the 19 chapters of reports with extensive proposals on cultural development in China upon his returning home. I found this historical story much more meaningful than the original story of the classic “Tears of Barren Hill”. I have expanded CHENG’s singing parts in order to discuss the contrast in culture between East and West, Germany and Europe; at the same time, making creative dialogues and exploration on the cultural side of Berlin and its ecology. Eighty-five years passed, I still find this issue is very much relevant and worth further explored.

Cao - Since dramatic arts in China came from the West, in your opinion, what kind of possibilities that the aesthetics of Chinese theater could bring to the West?

Danny – In the past decade, I have been advocating the concept of “Experimenting Traditions”. By inviting classical/traditional performing artists from different countries of Asia to carry out various kinds of exchanges in order to look for possible collaborations and development between the traditional and the contemporary, and looking into the aesthetics through cross-cultural comparative experiments among the wide spanned Asian cultures. To me, more importantly, it is to raise our awareness in what’s on- and off-stage; care for critiques and transgressions in the process of creation and experimentation; in additions, placing equal emphasis on comparing the operational mode as well as cultural policy. I sincerely hope that we could compare notes with the peer practitioners in Germany.

Cao – Your theater pieces are not constructed in the usual way of narration, they are mostly reconstructed through different theatrical means out of the deconstructed narrative structures. Would you share with us the way you structure a theater piece?

Danny – From telegram to telephone, then email and mobile phone, the ever-progressing technology plays a crucial role in re-shaping our language and behavior, as well as the structure of our communications and narrations. To me, every single body movement, a line of lyrics, a posture and a fragment of storyline in the traditional theater where “alternative history” is kept, are all possible entry points for exploring the in-depth structural development of our language and communications in the context of hi-speed changing tempo. When we go deep into de-constructing every single detail of different elements in traditional theaters, our concerns and challenges such as how technology plays a role in art will be brought into the picture. I am not particularly interested in traditional stories since they appear overly inflated in the present political situation, and morally loaded.

Cao – What do exactly your proposed concepts of “Experimenting Traditions” and “Experimenting Theater” mean?

Danny – To me, “theater” and “tradition” no longer function properly as public sphere when they are regulated. No matter it is “Experimenting Tradition” or “Experimenting Theater”, what I have been trying to do is to re-visit their origins and definitions, and to analyze their framework and the value behind. I gathered, when theater serves well as a public sphere, the process of de-constructing the existing theaters as well as public sphere will be supported continuously. The search of existing framework in the public sphere and theater is similar to the searches in our social, cultural and language systems. De-constructing framework shall come after comprehension, while

comprehension comes after reading, and reading comes after critiquing. Bearing the spirit of experimentation in the process of comprehension, reading and critiquing is vital, yet, it is a very difficult task in the situation where politics and economy taking the lead.

Cao – Would it be fair to say that this experimentation spirit in theater is extended to the social and nation level?

Danny – When we explore the concept of “performing arts”, we are actually discussing what is not “performing arts”, and the external phenomena such as its social environment and structure. The same applies to studying the concept of “theater”, it touches on what’s “non-theater”, its context such as national policy that governs all operations. When the discussion comes to “society” and “country”, we read into its historical framework and the design of the frameworks.

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Cao – In the present globalized world, ruling under One Country Two Systems, what advantages Hong Kong possesses in the area of cultural exchanges?

Yung - After Hong Kong returned to China and ruled under One Country Two Systems, I think, it is an important opportunity for cultural diversity development and to develop Hong Kong into a global cultural laboratory. This laboratory is not restricted regionally but a global one that provides unprecedented space and opportunities for cultural dialectics. “One Country Two Systems” is an experiment, in my opinion, that provides opportunities for discussion and challenges on the cultural concept of what a “Nation” is. When the leaders of these two systems are visionary and with determination, this “One Country Two Systems” experiment might be able to re-position “Nation” in the cultural context and opening up a whole new world. At the same time, it might relax the border issues among different countries, and loosen up tension and opposing forces in cultural differences issues.

Cao - One last question, what do you expect from the local audience for your *Flee by Night* to be presented in Akademie der Künste, Berlin in November.

Danny – Before 1989, we didn’t do any curtain call for Zuni’s performances, performers went straight to the audience for exchange and discussion. Our concept was that performances actually begin before its beginning, stopped but not finished. The on-stage and off-stage exchanges are always the contents of our performances. In 1989, when we performed in New York City,

local organizer convinced us to do curtain call in order to avoid being considered arrogant.

In November, I hope the audience attending ***Flee by Night*** would like to stay behind to discuss with us, or leave us messages telling us how they think about the performance. If a platform could be built through this performance to explore the above-mentioned issues related to art, system and policy, and to make the exchange continues, that is my expectation. Speaking of which, I hope for the same for this interview, continuous dialogues are always what I care most.

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