

A Fable for Now: **A New Direction for Taiwanese Little Theatres**

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Where is Taiwan and what is its recent history?

Taiwan is an island country in the western Pacific Ocean. Its neighbouring countries include China (the People's Republic of China, PRC) to the northwest, Japan to the northeast, and the Philippines to the south. People in Taiwan have experienced various alien regimes and authoritarian governance. After being a colony ruled by Japan for 50 years, the Nationalist Party, Kuomintang (KMT) regime from China took over Taiwan at the end of World War II (1945). Four years later (1949), after its defeat by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in the Chinese Civil War, over one million soldiers and refugees followed the KMT to retreat from mainland China to Taiwan. The KMT formed the government in Taiwan and named the island the Republic of China (ROC), while the CCP in mainland China named their country the People's Republic of China (PRC). In the KMT's opinion, the PRC regime in mainland China was illegitimate, so they planned to retake mainland China and to resume the KMT regime there. To do this, after moving from China to Taiwan, the KMT instituted Martial Law governance and expected literary and artistic works – including theatre – to promote the war preparation and Chinese nationalism. Taiwan underwent major steps of democratisation beginning in the 1980s. The KMT's Martial-Law governance ended in 1987, and many restrictions on public rallies, group activities, and mass media were removed. In 1996, people in Taiwan began to elect their own president and governors. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, people in Taiwan experienced a change in their national identity. The “Taiwanese” identity gradually surpassed the “Chinese” identity. Yet, the Chinese government in Beijing still claims that Taiwan is a rebel region that must be reunited with the mainland – by force if necessary. Despite its diplomatic isolation, Taiwan has become one of Asia's major economic players, and one of the most vital areas that addresses cutting-edge social issues, such as same-sex marriage (Taiwan is the first nation in Asia that legalised same-sex marriage in 2019), green energy, global warming,

food security, social justice, etc. The concerns of these issues are reflected in theatrical works created in Taiwan.

What is “Modern” Theatre in Taiwan?

“Modern” theatre is known as *huaju* (“spoken drama”) in Chinese, and it contrasts the idea of *xiqu* (literally “theatre [of] song,” a general term for Chinese traditional theatre, also known as Chinese “opera”). During the Martial-Law period in Taiwan (1949-1987), traditional *xiqu*, especially *jingju* (also known as Peking/Beijing “opera”) received the most government funding and resources for theatre, while modern theatre/*huaju* was treated as secondary. After 1949, the political power was greatly involved and influenced the development of Taiwanese “modern” theatre. As the KMT government planned to “retake” mainland China after retreating to Taiwan, the government took Taiwan as a base to fight against the Communist Party, and it needed the Taiwanese people’s full support for this war. Strict control and censorship made theatre into a political propaganda tool, which mainly represented patriotic subject matters.

Departing from the conventional style of spoken drama/*huaju*, a group of young actors and scholars (the most representative one was the Lan Ling Theatre Troupe guided by Dr. Wu Jing-Ji) in Taiwan gradually launched the Little Theatre movement in the 1980s. This was an experimental movement that was anti-system and, as such, had very little money. It was tightly connected with contemporary social issues, and was dominated by young performers, writers, and directors. From the mid-1980s to the early 1990s, numerous troupes created avant-garde works with more grounded political subjects exemplifying the disobedient stance. Previously taboo subjects were now fair game as the companies spurned mainstream commercialism. By the end of the 1980s, Taiwanese modern drama had a cross-cultural and international look and changed the theatrical art from political propaganda into a form of self-expression.

During the 1990s, the theatre of Taiwan became more diverse and some groups from the Little Theatre movement transitioned their work into large professional theatres. Commercialisation followed and, as such, these larger companies attracted bigger audiences. The spirit of the Little Theatre movement remained but no-longer dominated the theatre landscape. Cultural exchanges between Taiwan and the world

became much more frequent. Cross-cultural performance and diversification of topics turned common in theatre. Meanwhile, there was also a strong desire to represent Taiwanese local culture. Therefore, some troupes aimed to preserve the local culture. As Taiwan became more democratic, all kinds of critique on the government are allowed and commonly distributed by public media. In this case, criticising politics became only one of theatre creators' goals, but not all. Thus, modern theatre in Taiwan began to explore new issues and new styles. Local affairs, personal histories and provincial problems were the focus of community theatres, such as Minxin Troupe, Spring Wind Theatre, and Tainaner Ensemble. These were tackled with a commitment to the small-scale experimentation and defiance that characterised the Little Theatre movement. Some troupes, like Assign Theatre and Shigang Mama Theater, ran community theatre therapy programs for local people who have limited theatrical experiences. Most works explored topics about people's lives or mental traumas in contemporary Taiwan.

Group improvisation was common among early Little Theatre creations in the 1980s and so scripts were not important to theatre groups. However, the importance of scriptwriting gained more and more attention. In 1997, a group of playwrights, directors and actors joined with theatre academics and educators to found the Creative Society in Taipei. Supporting the development of new writing was central to the Creative Society's aim of raising the quality of theatre in Taiwan. They knew that this would only be achieved if they remained open to any theatrical style, which meant they had to remain immune to market forces. Currently, new scripts are treated as literary works rather than a framework of performance by scholars and performers. More and more playwrights polish their language and hope to provide various angles of a topic for the audience. Some playwrights even create new works to respond to the emerging new topics and new issues.

Who is the author of *A Fable for Now*?

Wei Yu-Chia is a Taiwanese playwright. She holds a master's degree in Playwriting from the Department of Drama and Theatre, National Taiwan University (NTU). As a talented writer who created poetry since elementary school and fiction during middle school,

Wei launched her journey into playwriting after she moved from rural Taiwan to Taipei to study at NTU. Her play, *A Fable for Now*, won Best Play at the Taiwan Literature Awards in 2014. Wei's other plays include *Mother Singer* (the 2015 Taipei Literature Award for Playwriting), a story about a single mother who is a singer, and *A Child from Nankoku* (the 2017 New Taipei Award for Playwriting), a story about a group of abandoned children.

What is the Creative Context of *A Fable for Now*?

Translator Jeremy Tiang describes the play with the following words:

In seven scenes, the world ends again and again, for any number of reasons: environmental collapse, war, government incompetence, unrestrained capitalism. Navigating this chaos are a panda, a polar bear and a duck, not to mention a genetically-modified chicken and a couple of humans. How can we coax meaning and happiness out of our brief time on this dying planet? When the dust settles, only one human being is left alive in the world -- but is he blessed or cursed to have survived?¹

Wei Yu-Chia created *A Fable for Now* in 2013, when she was a graduate student at NTU. That year she felt overwhelmed by ongoing debates about many social issues happening in Taiwan. Numerous social movements took place regarding same-sex marriage, LGBT rights, low salaries, and the anti-media monopolisation, which opposes the CCP-funded budget from China to make acquisitions of Taiwanese media companies and to spread biased or fake news that influences Taiwanese audience's perceptions. At the same time, politics and consumer culture were intertwined with people's daily life: North and South Korea each competed to test missiles, Dutch artist Florentijn Hofman's work Rubber Duck got exploded in Taiwan because an earthquake caused unstable air inflation, and global warming caused polar bears to starve to death

¹ Tiang, J., n.d. *A Fable for Now* by Wei Yu-Chia. Directed by Jeremy Tiang [WWW Document]. Jeremy Tiang. URL <https://www.jeremytiang.com/theatre#/a-fable-for-now/> (accessed 2.8.21).

while the first local-born panda in Taipei zoo grabbed most Taiwanese media's attention. When Wei tried to follow up on a specific topic, she found that the Internet search was blurred by irrelevant information. These excessive details made relevant information hard to find. Although Taiwan does not have strict state censorship as in China, the public media in Taiwan are commonly dominated by different capitalists, so the news report on one topic can have very distinct approaches based on different standpoints. Sometimes the information appeared, but it soon disappeared again in the vastness of the Internet. Taiwan has a very special news culture. Many TV channels repeatedly produce and broadcast news 24 hours a day, but different channels represent distinct viewpoints, and it is easy to feel confused by the contradicting information. Thus, Wei tried to dispel her own anxiety through playwriting. While the chaotic flow of information may lead to dizziness, madness and fragmentation, the theatre may be the best way to join the dots and connect all these topics.

Two main resources inspired Wei to frame *A Fable for Now*. One is British playwright Caryl Churchill's work *A Mouthful of Birds*. Wei happened to read this work and became inspired by its narrative. The play has a structure which can often be found in Churchill's plays. It is made up of a series of seven independent vignettes, of different lengths, each focusing on a different situation and character. While no consistent plot and causal relationship connect all the scenes, the main theme of madness is relatively clear, and a more or less overt link to Euripides' tragedy, *The Bacchae*, emerges. The God of Wine, Dionysos, watches the action from afar but then intervenes to transform the outcome of each scene. This structure inspired Wei to draft the outline of *A Fable for Now*.

Wei also got inspiration from the Chinese philosopher Chuang Tzu, who lived around the 4th century BC. *Zhuangzi* is a work of literature by Chuang Tzu that combines wordplay and parables to form renowned fables within its thirty-three chapters. His work was full of social and historical commentary laced with humour and irony. This style impressed Wei to consider why people rely on light and humorous stories to mirror realities. Chuang Tzu commonly used allegories rather than serious sermons to represent his philosophic ideas. A fable is a metaphor for human society with simple and easy-to-understand animal stories. This is the light part of a fable. On the other hand, a fable may also reflect on why the story needs to be told in a "light" way. What

kind of context will make people think that the loud sermon is ineffective? What kind of situation makes people have to use sweet stories to contend with unquestionable “official claims”? These questions embed themselves in fables to describe what the author feels. Wei’s work includes tales of war, the environment, and personal regret colliding as mankind hurtles towards a surreal apocalypse in the company of a disputatious duck, a sleuth of bears, and an exceptional chicken.

A Fable for Now can be read as a tribute to Taiwanese Little Theatres for their simplicity in form, but this work also breaks through Little Theatres’ lack of attention to the script structure and performance techniques in the past two decades. The description of scenic design at the beginning points out that the staging should be both simplistic yet fancy: “simplistic” in a manner that looks like it’s the result of a lack of budget, and “fancy” in a manner that seems like it’s the product of extreme seriousness.

The avant-garde use of stylized symbolism, improvisation, deconstruction, and cultural transplantation became popular after the 1990s in the Little Theatre. There had been little attention given to professional playwriting, directing, and performance that challenged people’s previous understanding of theatrical communication. Today, a very small market exists for the creation and performance of original plays by young playwrights. Therefore, there are not many opportunities for new theatrical productions to be transformed by professional actors and directors. This means that while there are brilliant ideas in these new works, most go unnoticed because they only get performed by amateurs.

A Fable for Now was performed and produced by the Creative Society in 2016, and the title was changed to #. A hashtag symbolises labels or indexes of information on social media. The text following a # is not necessarily related to the main text, but the # text echoes the main text or sounds like the derived words from the main text. The disconnected messages linked by hashtags have something in common with the logic of fables, which interconnect information that seems to be irrelevant. *A Fable for Now* not only demonstrates the vitality within the playwriting but also points out a new direction for Taiwanese Little Theatres to achieve localisation through the pursuit of specialisation. Theatre artists and workers show the division of labour based on professional specialisation, such as performance, directing, and playwriting. This approach can deepen the ideas and increase the quality of the work. It is no longer just

crude adaptations of Greek tragedies or Shakespeare's plays with Taiwanese local elements, but an original script with universal themes that transcend language barriers. The language in the script deliberately highlights the ridiculousness and absurdity in order to accentuate people's ignorance of environmental ethics. It shows how the vitality of Taiwanese theatre can connect to a global vision while not being limited to local symbols or issues.

Jasmine Yu-Hsing Chen is Assistant Professor of Chinese at Utah State University. She specializes in 20th-21st century Chinese and Sinophone theatre, media, visual culture, and literature. Her research weaves together the subject matter and history of Taiwanese theater, dance, cinema, and visual culture, and makes significant comparative connections with Japan, China, Hong Kong, Southeast Asia, and the West. Taking an interdisciplinary approach, she is preparing her first book manuscript, which focuses on how cross-cultural performance reshapes the performer and the audience's perception of artistry, nation, and gender in Martial-Law Taiwan. Her second project examines how theatrical works interact with multiple forms of new media. Currently, she serves as a guest editor of the International Journal of Taiwan Studies.