'Which Country Should I Love?' Portrait of the Families by Cloud Gate Dance Theatre of Taiwan

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In September 1997, Cloud Gate Dance Theatre of Taiwan premiered Portrait of the Families,² a one hundred minute long dance which was described by choreographer Lin Hwai-min³ as 'a ritual that pays homage to the turbulent past and to those common people who died unjustly' ('Portrait of the Families').⁴ At the age of six, Lin, by chance, found a family photo album buried in the bottom of his mother's clothes chest and, for the first time, saw old pictures of his ancestors clad in Japanese kimonos (Lin, 'An Unanswered Phone Call'). Immediately warned by his mother not to touch the album, the young Lin understood that he was unfolding an untouchable past both of his family and of Taiwan. It was not until forty-four years later, due to the changing political climate, that he decided to face the traumatic history of Taiwan and choreograph a dance threading together the fragments of the past, by unearthing the old family photos of Taiwan over the past one hundred years. In this paper, I attempt to examine how *Portrait of the Families* showcases Taiwanese people's renegotiation

¹ The title is taken from the English Voice Text of *Portrait of the Families*, provided by Cloud Gate Dance Theatre of Taiwan. (I would like to give special thanks to Cloud Gate for providing valuable archival sources.)

² The premiere was on 20 September of 1997 at the National Theatre in Taipei, Taiwan.

³ All Chinese names in this article are written in Chinese usage, with family name first and given name next

⁴ For the people who share the same Chinese cultural heritage, the year 1997 was marked with historic significance: it was the same year of the hand-over of Hong Kong from the United Kingdom to China, ten years after the lifting of martial law, and fifty years after the island-wide massacre conducted by the Chinese Nationalists in 1947.

and relocation of their 'Taiwanese (local), Chinese (national) and Japanese (colonial)' (Ching 13) identities in a postcolonial situation, through personal story-telling. I will also show how the dance attempts to forge a new narrative of 'home' for Taiwanese people.

Through a collage of movements, voices of personal narratives, and slide projections of family portraits, Lin pieces together the 'truth' of personal stories in order to supplement and contrast the so-called 'facts' written in Taiwan's history books. As Lin writes, this work is created to 'console human pathos in those erased memories of the colonial years' (Lin, 'An Unanswered Phone Call'). 'Which country should we love?' is the main question raised by the recorded voice of *Portrait of the Families*. The performance embarks on a journey of finding not only the 'roots' but also the 'routes' of the Taiwanese immigrant communities in order to redefine their relationship with the land they inhabit.

Portrait of the Families begins with a series of family portraits projected onto a downstage screen. Having decided to open the old album of his homeland, Lin started collecting old photos from all walks of Taiwanese life and uncovering the stories behind these photos. The projections consist of a variety of subjects from different eras: 'the family portraits, the military troops, the religious rites, and the victims of the massacre' ('Portrait of the Families' 2). Through these photos, changes in the clothing

and hairstyle can be seen: a mix of Chinese and Taiwanese style, a mix of Japanese and Taiwanese style, and an Americanized Taiwanese style. These photos, along with the personal narratives of the survivors or their descendents, provide a valuable source for revealing civilian lives from Taiwan's colonial past, which was dominated by complicated imperial control – external foreign forces as well as internal ethnic suppression. They also unravel the Taiwanese people's complex mentality in search of identity.

In order to understand the layered Taiwanese identities presented in this production, it is essential to briefly introduce Taiwan's long colonial history from the fifteenth century onwards. A former offshore territory of China, Taiwan was occupied by the Portuguese, the Spanish, and the Dutch respectively due to its rich natural resources as well as its geographical location. In 1895, Taiwan was permanently ceded to Japan by China in the first Sino-Japanese war. During the following fifty years, Taiwanese were forced to receive Japanese education, to speak Japanese, to wear Japanese clothes and to adopt Japanese names.⁵ Taiwan was part of Japan, while Taiwanese people were not 'real' Japanese. Consequently, emotions about the identity change were split among Taiwanese people. Some transitioned to their new Japanese identities with ease because they saw that 'the Japanese substantially modernized and

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⁵ By 1944, seventy-one percent of Taiwanese spoke Japanese (Bedford 4).

expanded Taiwan's infrastructure' (Bedford 4);⁶ however, others chose to become loyal to Chinese nationalism and sought identification in this way because they 'opposed the colonial system and sympathized with the revolutionary movement to create a nation-state after the May Fourth cultural movement that began in the latter half of the 1910' (Shōzōn 70).

During the Second World War, thousands of Taiwanese people were forced to put on Japanese military uniforms to fight against the Chinese army, and many local women were sent to the front-line to provide sex services to the Japanese Imperial Army. After the defeat of Japan in 1945, Taiwan was returned to China's reign; however, this created a new internal dilemma because the new ruler, the Nationalist government (Kuomintang, KMT), did not regard the Taiwanese as 'compatriots, but rather as "semiferal" Chinese to be treated with suspicion as Japanese collaborators' (Bedford 6). The KMT even dismantled the infrastructure constructed by the Japanese, in order to 'liberate' the Taiwanese. In the spring of 1947, the tension finally exploded due to a conflict among different ethnic groups, causing an island-wide massacre (the White Terror) in which many local elites were arrested and then 'evaporated.' The Code Red of Martial law was declared and the KMT kept a watchful

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⁶ 'Japanese construct[ed] roads, railroads, hospitals, harbors, and sewage and power facilities, and improve[d] agricultural production' (Bedford 4).

⁷ These women were known as 'comfort women,' providing sex services in numerous 'comfort stations' in Japanese concessions in warring China during the Second World War.

⁸ A Taiwanese saying goes, 'the dogs (who could at least protect your property) had been chased away, but the pigs (who only make a mess) had come' (Bedford 6).

eye to prevent further ethnic riot mainly from the local Taiwanese against the Mainlanders (people retreating from China with the Nationalist army). Under the governmental crackdown, any hint of Japanese colonial legacy was strictly contained. 'To have a photo discovered of anyone wearing a Japanese kimono would result in being labelled un-nationalistic, or un-patriotic' ('Portrait of the Families'). In addition, to talk about politics in public was to be suspected as a 'pro-Communist.' Soon, the sympathy that Taiwanese people had with China prior to the handover was shattered and subsequently turned into a strong antipathy. It was not until the lifting of the martial law in 1987 that old photos were gradually unearthed, rewriting the history of Taiwan.

Taiwan's colonial past complicates the process of how people in Taiwan recognize themselves as 'the Taiwanese' and negotiate Taiwan as their current home. In order to chart the relationship of Taiwan's identity formation and its long colonial years, scholar Leo T. S. Ching uses the term 'three consciousnesses' to point out Taiwan's complex, but irreducible, triple identities: Japanese (colonial), Chinese (national) and Taiwanese (local) (Ching 13). Ching tries to explain that colonial identities are far more than just an 'essentialized difference and sameness between colonizer and the colonized' because the historical conditions of colonialism 'have enabled and produced various discourses of cultural differences and sameness in the

socially transformative projects of the colonizer and the colonized' (Ching 11). In other words, the residues of colonial forces complicate the trajectory of Taiwanese identity formation. Even though the last colonial force of Japan had retreated from Taiwan over fifty years earlier, it is still hard to pinpoint one single 'pure' Taiwanese identity, which completely dissociates the colonial influences.

Ching takes the example of Taiwanese writer Wu Cho-liu's famous novel, *The Orphan of Asia*, to map out this formation. Written between 1943 and 1945 under Japanese colonialism, *The Orphan of Asia* is one of best-known texts describing the mentality of the Taiwanese elite. As the protagonist of the novel, Hu Tai-ming (or Ko Tai-mei in Japanese) is trapped between his tangled, triple identities of being a Taiwanese, Japanese or Chinese. Hu sailed to imperial Japan from colonial Taiwan during World War II. Treated as a secondary citizen in Japan, Hu therefore journeys to his cultural motherland, China. Unexpectedly, he is suspected of being a Japanese spy in war-ridden China, arrested and put into jail. He flees back to Taiwan and devotes himself to mobilizing the Taiwanese consciousness. In the end, he is driven insane because he is unable to define his national identity (Ching 177-185). The 'orphan'

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Ching states that 'a contextualized reading of *The Orphan of Asia* must be apprehended and articulated in relation to a contradictory and irreducible triple consciousness that is the embodiment of a colonial Taiwanese identity formation' (Ching 176-177). This statement reflects the importance of the novel as a means of mapping out Taiwanese identity.

metaphor not only implies Hu's tragic ending but also reflects the Taiwanese people's sense of 'homelessness,' the loss of belongingness.

Portrait of the Families was also produced against the background of the complex triple identities of Taiwan, China and Japan. Instead of enforcing a single unified version of the Taiwanese identity on the Taiwanese people, as the colonizers did, Portrait of the Families highlights the notion that any 'myth of a homogeneous national identify' (Wiley 278) is indeed an artificial construction produced by the colonizers' imagination. In his article dedicated to the dance, An Unanswered Phone Call, Lin contends that 'Taiwan had long been treated as a woman through its colonial history. She was considered to be sad, fragile, and helpless with no right to speak, being forced to marry someone she did not love' (Lin, 'An Unanswered Phone Call'). 10 Lin is fully aware that Taiwan's colonial past needs to be recast and situated in a different light, departing from the colonizers' infatuation with the East (the colonized), which 'is characteristically coded negatively in Orientalist discourse as variously – voiceless, sensual, female, despotic, irrational, and backward', while the West (the colonized) 'is characteristically represented in positive terms, as masculine, democratic, rational, moral, dynamic, and progressive' (Moore-Gilbert 23). In the opening section of *Portrait of the Families*, the audience witnesses a bride with bound

¹⁰ The English title of the text and some quotations are my translation.

feet striving to escape the pull of a long, red dog leash controlled by a certain invisible force. After a protracted struggle, she falls down and is dragged into the pitch darkness of the wings. Another young woman, chased by a group of muscular men, is forced to wear a traditional Chinese costume and to pose like a doll. As the rhythm of the music increases, the woman rips apart a peony blossom in a frenzy, but ultimately lies feebly on the chair. It is worth noticing that Lin does not simply demonstrate these fixed fragile female images but also tries to internally subvert them. Gradually, towards the end, one female dancer skillfully expresses the gamut of her emotions using only the movements of her fingers. She succeeds in expressing anger, grief, excitement, anxiety, and even accusation, pointing to the invisible suppression of all these things. At this point, the woman is no longer voiceless in terms of her self-consciousness and becomes her own master. The transitional subversion of female images in *Portrait of* the Families implies that Taiwan's identity is not defined simply by the colonizers, but, most importantly, by her own people.

In order to contrast and highlight the rupture between historical facts and personal memories, Lin creates a 'collage' by juxtaposing the three theatrical elements: dance, voice, and images. These three theatrical elements are designed to intervene and comment on the narrative of one another periodically. For this purpose, Lin invited Ming Cho Lee, the distinguished American theatre designer to create a set consisting

of a huge white wall sized '8.1 metres long by 15.5 metres high.' Eight doors under the wall are designed for the entry and exit of the dancers while a dozen panels are raised in combination to create the 'spatial landscape' in each scene. The slides are projected onto 'twenty rectangles' ('Portrait of the Families'), each of which can be projected onto the stage dependently or independently. The dancers, as groups or individuals, weave in and out of the slides.

The juxtaposition of these elements to some extent makes 'presence' fragmented yet fluid. As a result, temporal discontinuity is able to challenge the monolithic fixed historical past and create a fissure for the new narrative. This is demonstrated in the opening scene when a series of happy family pictures is projected on a huge screen, while through the transparent gauze the audience witnesses a lion dance 'with a blazing red tail of silk, preluding a performance about family ties and tales of bloodshed' ('Portrait of the Families). It reveals the collective pain hidden behind the suppressed memories. During the process, the untold 'truth' gradually surfaces and causes the spectators to think about their own identity. It seems that for Lin, personal truth through photos and story-telling is far more authentic than the documented facts written in history books which serve the needs of dominant powers. His lighting designer Lin Keh-hua also states that 'Portrait of the Families tends to present those commoners' ordinary trivial acts under the pressure of their circumstances' (Lin Keh-hua). Under colonial discipline, daily activities, such as tooth brushing, face cleaning, hair washing, and swimming, all turn into mechanical movements and convey the agony of the suppressed to the audience. However, to distinguish 'truth' from 'fact,' it is crucial to use personal stories to reconstruct the history. 'Therefore,' as Toni Morrison contends in her essay 'The Site of Memory,'

the crucial distinction for me is not the difference between fact and fiction, but the distinction between fact and truth. Because facts can exist without human intelligence, but truth cannot. So if I'm looking to find and expose a truth about the interior life of people who didn't write it (which doesn't mean that they didn't have it); if I'm trying to fill in the blanks that the slave narratives left – to part the veil that was so frequently drawn, to implement the stories that I heard. (72)

Parting the veil, filling in the blanks, and rewriting the individual's subjectivity all rely on knowledge of how to unearth the shattered shards of personal truth from the masses of constructed historical facts. Ann Cooper Albright points out that, 'history is written about past events and stories are told in order to connect the knowledge of the past and hopes for the future with one's experience of present realities' (152). Toward the end of the performance, the black and white portraits are gradually turned into colour. Bright faces of youngsters are projected onto the screen in the last ten minutes after the video footage shows a burning sacrificial boat. On one hand, the boat mourns for the departed; on the other, it symbolizes a spiritual link between the past, the present, and the future because the predecessors' sacrifices create a better life for the

next generation. The once-forgotten memories of the sacrificed come to life and are re-lived in *Portrait of the Families*.

In order to re-live the memory, Albright also points out two requisite elements: 'a sense of truth, and a sense of community' (151). The latter contains the relationship of the speaker and the listener. Thus, collective memories are located in visual and aural stories and are based on the realization of a shared community. In addition to authentic traditional Taiwanese music and excerpts from music by Arvo Part, the soundscape for *Portrait of the Families* consists mainly of voices, 'passages from taped interviews conducted especially for this production' ('Portrait of the Families'). These voices reveal touching stories related to personal experiences as well as the shared, suppressed memories of other Taiwanese people: the forced assimilation of Japanese rule, the traumatic loss of their beloved ones during the 1947 massacre, the hardship of retreat to Taiwan at the end of the Chinese civil war, and the bodily remains hung on trees after a series of bombings by American planes.

The rich, textured voices are of different dialects and ages. A connection with Taiwan and ambivalence about identity is recounted in Yamis (one of Taiwan's aboriginal languages), Mandarin, and Taiwanese. Each dialect represents a different immigrant ethnic group which came to the island under various historical forces. An indigenous man recalls his ancestral tale that 'when you are far away from home, you

miss your family. Looking at the sea, you think of your family. In the evening, look at the stars, it will be just like looking at the faces of family' ('Voice Texts'). To the aboriginals, Taiwan is the final resting place, protected by their ancestor's spirits even though they had been expelled from their original 'home' by the late-comers. Another woman speaking in Mandarin depicts her family's arduous escape from warring China: 'In 1949, the Communists moved toward the South. "I will defend our land until the last minute" Father told us. Mother and I were in Kwan Chou, ready to get aboard for Taiwan' ('Voice Texts'). To the mainlanders, Taiwan is perhaps a makeshift shelter on their way 'home' to China. A man says in the Taiwanese dialect:

Speaking of patriotism, which country should I love? The Imperial China, or the great Japanese Empire? After having been ruled by the Japanese for fifty years, the last words from my Grandfather on his deathbed were, "It is painful, absolutely painful, under Japanese rule." Let me tell you something. The truth is: the Taiwanese don't have a motherland. ('Voice Texts')

'The overlapping shadows of the personal truths will form a historical forest,' said the lighting designer of *Portrait of the Families* (Lin Keh Hua).¹¹ By overlaying various images and voices, Lin does not mean to make any judgment because he knows there is no correct or incorrect answer about the Taiwanese identity. These storytellers all share a commonality: they are all current inhabitants in Taiwan. The performance demonstrates that 'it is the composite of these diversifying ethnicities that complete the term of "the Taiwanese" on this island' (Lin, 'An Unanswered Phone

¹¹ My translation from the Chinese text of Lin Keh Hua.

Call'). Shared memories create what Albright calls 'the sense of community.' All these different migratory experiences make up the historical content of Taiwan's collective memory, and build a new narrative of the Taiwanese identity.

When discussing the concept of migratory diasporas, Avtar Brah attests that [t]he word diaspora often invokes the imagery of traumas of separation and dislocation, and this is certainly a very important aspect of the migratory experience. But diasporas are also potentially the sites of hope and new beginnings. They are contested cultural and political terrains where individual and collective memories collide, reassemble and reconfigure. (Brah 193)

It is significant that the trauma of dislocation and separation caused by migratory experience should be appeased by collective memories, because an individual often has a sense of belonging among those who share similar stories. In the course of the dance, those intangible traumas of Taiwan's colonial past are presented by the symbolic deaths of individual dancers, who fall from the group and are carried from the stage. However, the chalk outlines of their bodies remain, declaring the existential marks of their passing lives. As time goes by, the marks increase and gradually lay out a map, a land, and a territory on stage. The home here is no longer the conventional one, dependent on ancestral roots, marked by the inscriptions on gravestones. The new narrative of home in Lin's work is 'primarily a mental construct built from the incomplete odds and ends of memory that survive from the past' (McLeod 211). It exits in a 'fractured, discontinuous relationship with the present' (211). Instead of

¹² My translation from the Chinese text.

giving one a specific address for home, Lin provides the audience with a piece of the map guiding one to find one's home – both spatially and temporally. It is the 'imagery of traumas of separation and dislocation' that Lin unfolds with pain, and 'the sites of hope and new beginnings' that he tries to write on the page/territory of Taiwan's history through *Portrait of the Families*. Only after embracing one's cultural 'root' – the Taiwanese, the Chinese or the Japanese – can one trace an ancestral 'route' to Taiwan and see it as home.

The restoration of memories, as Liao Ping-hui points out, is always accompanied by 'language reclamation' (Liao 11). Similarly, the reconstruction of Taiwan's history requires the preservation of different dialects, which have been suppressed by the dominant language as a means of cultural as well as political control. 'The control over language by the imperial centre – whether achieved by displacing native languages, by installing itself as a "standard" against other variants which are constituted as "impurities," or by planting the language of empire in a new place – remains [one of] the most potent instrument of cultural control' (Ashcroft 261).

Language functions as a medium of knowledge and power. Those who manipulate language are usually those who have access to knowledge and who seize power. In Taiwan, Mandarin was instituted as the official language by the KMT government in 1945, when it was a 'mother tongue to only 15% of the population'

(Liao 6). ¹³ The languages of Southern Min, Hakka, and indigenous languages in particular were considered to be 'minor and backward' (Liao 6) and were completely ignored in primary education. Lin's strategy, which showcases various dialects on stage, implicitly demonstrates his challenge to the single official version of the Taiwanese identity as well as the hegemony of the dominant power. However, despite Lin's efforts to present the variety of original Taiwanese dialects, he is still forced to face the fact that most aboriginal languages can be understood by only a small group of tribal people. The translation from Yamis to Mandarin points out the urgency of preserving the vanishing language of the Taiwanese minority because an irretrievable language will often be accompanied by the loss of cultural self-identity. Trin T. Minh-ha reminds us of the danger of minorities 'being said,'

You who understand the dehumanization of forced removal – relocation – reeducation – redefinition, the humiliation of having to falsify your own reality, your voice – you know. And often cannot say it. You try and keep on trying to unsay it, for if you don't, they will not fail to fill in the blanks on your behalf and you will be said. (qtd. in Ashcroft 246)

After its premiere, *Portrait of the Families* was invited to tour in the cities of Jerusalem, Israel and Vienna, Austria in 1998, and Berlin, Germany in 2000. All the recorded dialects remained without change, while the audience could only see an English translation projected onto a screen, and it was risky because those voices were

Language systems have long been the wrestling arena of different dominant colonial powers. Scholar Fujii Shōzō explicitly points out that the language system went through a major shift from the period of the Japanese colonial rule to the KMT rule for the KMT soon adopted Mandarin as the national language in lieu of Japanese (Shōzō 74).

exotic to foreign ears. However, Lin insisted that 'Taiwan should be understood, in its own way' (Lin, 'Keep the Chorus On'). Extremely anxious about his decision, Lin was not relieved until thunderous applause resonated in the auditorium. Ursula Kneiss, an Austrian critic of the newspaper *Der Standard*, said, 'Taiwan's history may seem remote, even strange to us. But in the manner it was presented by Cloud Gate Dance Theatre it was touching' (Cloud Gate, 'What Has Been Said About').

Toward the end of the performance, Lin has still not provided any explicit answer to the question, 'Which country should I love?' As he insists, 'Portrait of the Families is absolutely not about politics' (Lin, 'An Unanswered Phone Call'). The closing scene provides a clue to one possible narrative of Taiwanese identity while 'glittering, lit lanterns for the dead tranquilly [float] across the stage,' and complete 'the cycle of a ritual that pays homage to the turbulent past and to those who died unjustly' ('Portrait of the Families'). Again, it is also a circle bridging the present and the past and reaching to the far future. Home therefore is all-dimensional, including the past, presence, and future. The routes to home are traceable and uninterrupted.

'Which country should I love?' The voice piece and dialogue near the end of the production probably best answer the redefinition of 'home' in Lin's mind.

When Father was ninety-one, I took him to his home town in China. That was his first home coming in fifty-nine years. We went to the field to pay respect to his parents' graves.

Suddenly Father said: 'Let's go home.'

'Home? Aren't we already home?'

'No,' He said. 'Our home is in Ping-Dong [a county in Southern Taiwan]' Throughout his life, he had been homesick. I was surprised he took Ping-Dong for his home. After returning home, Father was calm and happy. Finally, I realized that Taiwan was the place he wished to have his body buried. ('Voice Texts')

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