

Bodies of the People: People's Theatre as Political Infrastructure in Taiwan

Qiyi Huang

MA, Liberal Studies

The New School for Social Research

Research Question and Context

My project examines people's theatre in Taiwan through two decades of work by the Centre for Applied Theatre, Taiwan (CATT). I ask how theatre can help ordinary people form political relations in a society where opportunities for public participation already exist. By political relations, I mean relations in which people can bring their experiences into shared discussion, question one another's judgments, and act on problems they face. My research suggests that people's theatre can function as political infrastructure by organizing the conditions for these relations. Its political significance also depends on whether participants can question and change those conditions themselves.

I became interested in CATT through *Red Youth*, a production about Taiwan's White Terror that asks audiences to reconsider the political convictions of people persecuted under authoritarian rule. This led me to the broader tradition of people's theatre, with its connections to Third World cultural movements and leftist social practice. I wanted to understand how such a practice continued after democratization. My initial project approached this through political subjectivity: how does theatre help people become capable of interpreting and acting on their social circumstances? Field research gradually made the organizational work behind this question more concrete. Taiwan's community-building policy provided an important context. Beginning in the 1990s, government programs supported local culture and residents' participation, including community theatre. These programs shared some of the methods and language of people's theatre: workshops, collective creation, and an emphasis on ordinary people's experience. Yet CATT practitioners repeatedly questioned whether these activities could sustain social criticism. Participation could be encouraged while its terms were already largely decided through administrative boundaries, funding requirements, and project schedules. Understanding this tension became central to my research.

Fieldwork and the Meaning of Participation

My fieldwork coincided with two public events marking CATT's twentieth anniversary. One presented the organization's research into its own history, with invited respondents offering critical comments. The other brought practitioners together to discuss their experiences of dialogue. These events, interviews, and organizational materials gave me ways to follow work that often leaves an uneven public record. Before traveling to Taiwan, I had wondered whether the scarcity of recent writing indicated that people's theatre had become less active. Hearing practitioners discuss ongoing work made me reconsider how much I could infer from that scarcity.

At the anniversary presentation, a practitioner recalled an early community workshop in Gangbian, Yilan County. During theatre games, an older woman demanded to know what the visiting teacher had come to teach. She left, and others followed. The practitioner was anxious about completing the government-funded project. She subsequently stayed in one participant's home and joined her daily activities, including collecting seawater to pickle vegetables. Through spending time together, she came to understand the women's expectations and found a different way to conduct the workshop. The difficulty concerned a relationship already shaped by the project: the visitors arrived as teachers, while residents expected particular things from them.

An invited respondent offered another interpretation. From the residents' position, the theatre practitioners represented the government program that had brought them there. Their refusal could therefore be understood as a moment of community members expressing their own judgment. What appeared in one account as an obstacle to the workshop appeared in another as an expression of residents' own judgment. These different readings made me ask how researchers and practitioners recognize political action. If we measure it through participation in an activity we have designed, we may overlook people's judgments about that activity. The workshop's organizers also had to respond to those judgments.

The Conditions of Dialogue

The discussion event raised a related question about dialogue. Practitioners first shared occasions when it had failed to begin. Their accounts involved expectations that did not fit the people present, exhaustion after daily work, and difficulties finding

an appropriate moment. Many proposed adjustments required knowledge that could emerge only through some contact with participants. Entering people's lives, observing, and waiting were already part of the work of establishing a relationship. I began paying closer attention to what had to happen before the activity recognizable as dialogue could take place.

The discussion then turned to external resources. Practitioners described how government agencies, schools, NGOs, and foundations could influence content, demand measurable outcomes, or impose administrative burdens. With participants, they emphasized changing their own assumptions. With funders, they often emphasized retaining their commitments while finding ways to communicate them. These accounts showed that the conditions for dialogue were also matters of resources and power. The time needed to build a relationship could conflict with a project deadline; the judgments emerging from that relationship might not fit the outcomes anticipated by a funding program.

Political Infrastructure and Relations of Production

These observations helped me develop the argument about political infrastructure. A workshop can provide time and procedures for people to connect experiences, formulate a common problem, and test different responses. Its organizers' relationships with other groups and institutions help sustain that work. Understanding these arrangements as infrastructure directs attention to how political practice becomes possible and how it continues. It also makes the organization of participation itself available for scrutiny. The question is who can use these arrangements and how participants can take part in producing, organizing, maintaining, and revising them.

CATT's migrant workers' theatre provides one example in the materials I studied. Danilo, a Filipino migrant worker, initially participated in *Voices of the Poor*. When he returned to a later workshop, he helped new participants understand the scenes, coordinated rehearsals, and encouraged them to make props. Practitioners began to regard him as a facilitator and core organizer. His role expanded to include work that enabled others to participate. However, plans for further facilitator training did not continue after he returned to the Philippines. This showed both an opening in organizational relations and the difficulty of sustaining it within the conditions of migrant labour.

Walter Benjamin's "The Author as Producer" helps frame this problem. His concern with artistic production asks us to examine the positions of producers and recipients alongside a work's political commitments. In people's theatre, a participant may contribute to a production while still depending on professionals to decide the next issue, secure resources, or initiate another workshop. Danilo's experience prompted me to distinguish participating in an activity from helping organize its continuation. Whether a practice becomes available for people's own use depends on how these roles can change and on the material conditions that support them.

Research Reflections and ICI Support

The research also changed how I approach organizational history. CATT's willingness to discuss difficulties was valuable, but its present account of earlier work could not simply establish what practitioners had intended at the time. I needed to compare retrospective explanations with practice records and contemporaneous writing. Nor could I reduce a history of government-supported cultural work to a single story of co-optation. Funding could enable activity while shaping its limits, and practitioners could continue revising their work within those limits. The particular relations mattered.

I have developed these findings into a paper on people's theatre as political infrastructure, alongside two reflective blog posts. Questions remain about how participants sustain capacities developed through theatre when work, family, or migration changes their circumstances. I also want to understand more fully how the critical consciousness practitioners seek takes practical form. The fieldwork has given me a clearer way to pursue these questions by examining how people judge shared circumstances and gain access to the work of organizing collective practice.

ICI's student fellowship provided funding for my field research in Taiwan. Being there allowed me to develop the project through conversations with practitioners and to encounter the debates within their work. Those encounters supplied material for the paper and changed how I understood the conditions of people's politics. I am grateful to ICI for supporting this research.

Selected references

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