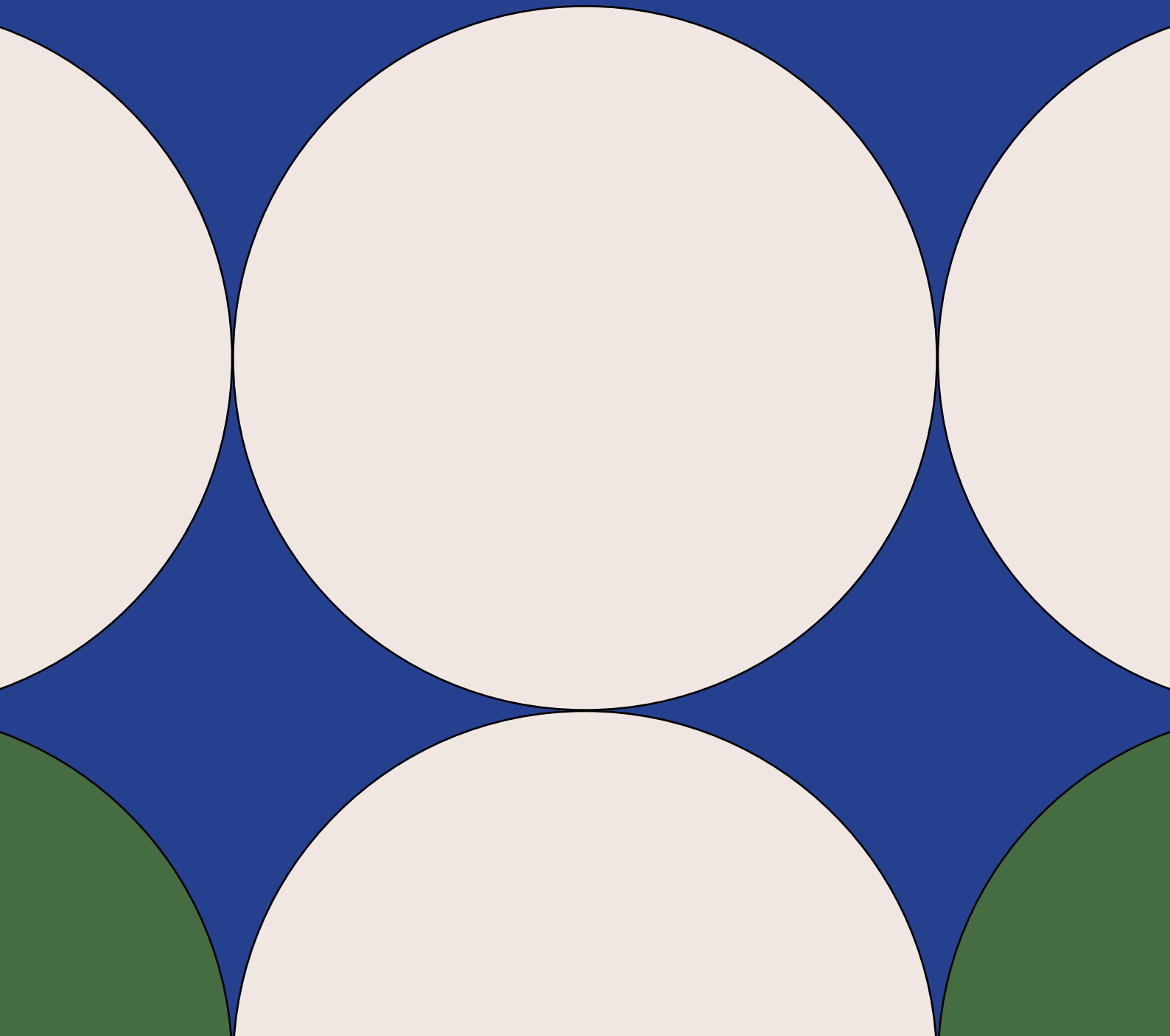


Drama's Being and Time

by Loi Ho-man Felix

# Hong Kong Playwrights on the Gap between Theatre and Society



Date	29 January 2021 (Friday)
Time	3pm-5pm
Format	Zoom Meeting
Moderator	Bernice Chan

**Interviewees** (in alphabetical order by surname)

Chan Kwun-fee	Artistic Director of Littlebreath Creative Workshop
Chan Ping-chiu	Artistic Director of On & On Theatre Workshop
Candace Chong	Freelance playwright in Hong Kong
Fong Ki-tuen	Freelance director and playwright in Hong Kong, member of Heteroglossia

Drama is an ancient art form, yet at the same time a metaphor on which the life of modern society depends and a reference with which the modern person establishes meanings in life. From the perspective of theatricality, drama is not only already deeply embedded in various modern and contemporary art forms, but has also played a vital role in micro- and macro-politics in the so-called "post-truth era": whether as a ritual that accords emotional recognition to the powers that be or as political propaganda taken to be a weapon of resistance, various performances of great theatricality have been able, in response to the social and cultural environment of the moment, to interact with "audiences" in differing senses of the word and, by mobilising them emotionally, open up all kinds of social relationships as well as social identities that derive from them.

However, many Hong Kong theatre practitioners are not content to view theatre as a political tool that replicates and reinforces ideologies; rather, invoking the dialectical relationship between drama and reality that has been tangled from time immemorial, they wish to open

up the possibility of intervening in the process of reproduction in society and alter the course of history in a broad sense. Indeed, as an “event” that exists in society, a dramatic performance should never be regarded as an ephemeral past occurrence that exists only in abstract memory, but has always shown a symbiotic relationship with its reality. Therefore, “liveness” and “uniqueness”, which have almost become clichés but have always been characteristics boasted by dramatic performances, should not be regarded as means by which drama is to be freed from the heaviness of history, but as coordinates that accurately check the pulse of society and guide us in traversing and reshaping reality through the sundry radiating powers of theatre.

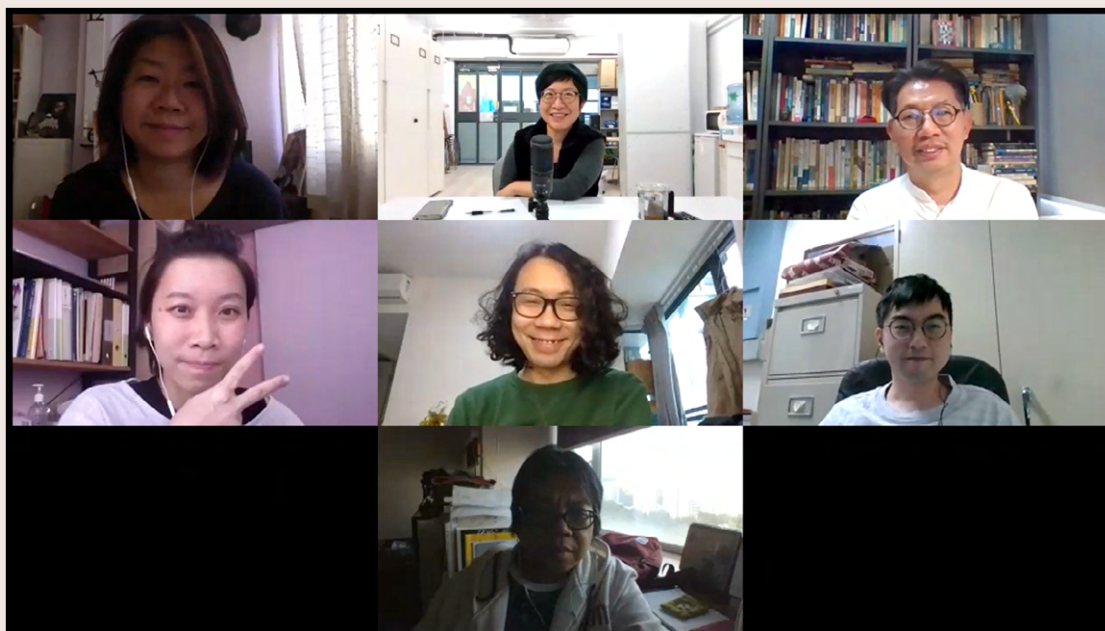
The year 2019 was probably an unforgettable year for most Hong Kong people, whatever their personal views and backgrounds. From the “Anti-Extradition Bill” movement that began in the middle of 2019 to the passage of the National Security Law in the middle of 2020, which apparently has put a stop to a continuous clamour akin to improvisation, we seem to have come to a moment where the tide is slowing ebbing. Yet, in a coastline full of rugged rocks, we seem to see the contours, beautiful or ugly, of Hong Kong society better than at any other moment. At this historical moment, what do Hong Kong theatre practitioners think about their position in Hong Kong society and the future? In the chaotic current situation, an interview with four Hong Kong playwrights may throw light on Hong Kong theatre and where Hong Kong society is headed.

## A “Person” or a “Creator” First? Our Times and (Non-)Forms of Drama

In the 21st century, contemporary capitalist society’s techniques of cutting up spaces have become increasingly subtle. Situated in different spaces, we often unwittingly assume the roles we are expected to play. Yet, however alienating the spaces may seem, the “empty

space” of the theatre, when compared with the clamorous crowd in the street, is inevitably seen as being out of touch with the present space and time. Indeed, regardless of the stance one takes, a suffocating exigency has built up during the 2019 Hong Kong social movement against the extradition law amendment bill and the subsequent developments. Do playwrights actually feel the necessity or pressure to respond to our times through creation, then?

All four interviewees say that they have felt pressure to a certain degree, but then add that, after all, this pressure comes not so much from others as from an expectation they have of themselves. Candace Chong, one of the interviewees, says that she had already felt the atmosphere of a “general uprising” as early as 2014, but this feeling was even stronger in 2019. It all seemed like a road of no return, and she was full of shock and agitation. She did not forget to point out, however, that perhaps she was often simply plagued by her own



Screen capture of the Zoom meeting (from left to right, top to bottom): Candace Chong, Bernice Chan, Chan Ping-chiu, Chan Kwun-fee, Fong Ki-tuen, Loi Ho-man Felix, Daisy Chu

anxiety. In the face of this expectation and even “emotional blackmail” of oneself that arise from general mobilisation, Chan Ping-chiu, another interviewee, has asked himself whether this really is society’s expectation. He asks, is this merely pressure that he has put on himself as a creator?

In fact, the playwrights interviewed all realise that, if they respond to reality with creation as soon as things happen, this creation can probably be filled only with reflexive emotions. Indeed, such works, whose creative aim is merely to project one’s own anxiety, have only ever been able to freeze time in what Albert Camus calls negative *ressentiment*.<sup>1</sup> Chan Kwun-fee, an interviewee, says that creation is something for “later” as far as she is concerned. If she has to deal with creative issues the moment things happen, she would probably just end up being emotional. Chong says that she is not even able as a person to deal with her emotions at the time, let alone intervene in reality in the role of a creator. When discussing his overall creative state in 2019, Fong Ki-tuen recalls that creation in that year was very painful. Because the situation was changing so rapidly, recent events would overturn earlier ones in a flash, leaving him clueless about how to come to grips with reality by creating, or whether he should at all. He points out in particular that the said pain stems from a feeling of “nearness”, from being at that moment yet understanding clearly that he is powerless to deal with and respond to reality. He recalls that he happened at the time to be writing *A Fork in the Road*, and was only able to feel his way forward and write whatever he could. In contrast, he says that when creating *Foreign Land*, a work about two locales, Hong Kong and Vancouver, he felt relatively at ease because he was writing about another place at a distance.



*A Fork in the Road* (2019) — Photo: hongnin. Photo courtesy: On & On Theatre Workshop

Perhaps the most natural reaction is to put aside the label of “creator”, step into reality and put the spirit of the citizen into practice. Chan Kwun-fee says that taking to the streets is an immediate response, and getting involved in the ongoing movement as an individual is for her more honest than imagining or creating. Chong also says that as a citizen she feels a sense of urgency to take part. Likewise, Chan Ping-chiu says that, when everyone has been mobilised to participate in this social movement, one is free to feel or intervene in it as an individual. And as a theatre organiser, he admits that, objectively speaking, the theatre is indeed currently in a state of paralysis. The people in the theatre are not truly invested in it, and their emotional ups and downs prevent the company from being in sync. He believes these are emotions that an organisation or a community must face up to in reality.

When the emotions subside and all is still, it does not mean, of course, that the current situation has been banished from one's thoughts. After all, if the creator wishes to deal with and sort out reality anew with the audience, and to engage actively in a dialogue with our times, sensitivity to the situation remains a necessity. Chan Kwun-fee says that, compared with the 2019 movement, the 79 days of the 2014 movement were more inspiring for her in terms of the building of public space and civil society. In the wake of 2014, she was therefore more concerned with the possibilities of production methods of theatre, such as more systematic questions of how to place society in her creation, rather than just focusing on a single work. Chan Ping-chiu says that the 1990s, in which veteran theatre practitioner Mok Chiu-yu promoted people's theatre with great effort, was in fact the era when people were the most apathetic politically and therefore when Mok was the most vocal. Times have changed, however, and Chan very much doubts that this kind of theatre is still needed today.

Can drama from other times and spaces then serve as an important resource for dramatic creation to respond to our times? Chan Ping-chiu says that, for example, some overseas outdoor performances other than street theatre, such as those of the American Bread and Puppet Theater in the 1960s and 1970s, with its huge effigies, have played an important role in social movements. These forms of performances have now been passed on even to South America, while Hong Kong seems to remain relatively limited to indirect intervention in politics in the form of forum theatre. He also says that, whether in thinking about protest strategies or rousing people's emotions, we cannot be cleverer or more inventive than those who are active on social media, which he thinks may well be regarded as a contemporary street theatre and may even have put into practice the idea of invisible theatre proposed by Augusto Boal. However, it seems that we must also ask, is this form of performance, which may lead to a complete instrumentalisation of drama, really able to make even the smallest

positive impact under the current, apparently polarised circumstances? Can a sentence full of dramatic tension, "You can beat me," not be viewed as a superb performance that deftly employs theatrical effects to stir up mass hatred?

Perhaps "sincerity is the greatest ability", as it says in a pop song. Chan Kwun-fee says that it is much more difficult in Hong Kong than it is in foreign countries to practise street theatre, a form of performance that calls for immediate reaction from the audience. She also says that, if one is sufficiently sensitive and honest with herself, a suitable form of direct response can in fact be found naturally. For instance, she says that she finds theatre actor Sung Boon-ho's "flash" street performances at the time of the social movement sufficiently responsive to the situation there and then, and this made a deep impression on her. Similarly, Chong and Chan Ping-chiu both stress that the importance of creative beliefs far exceeds that of a single aesthetic form or strategy. Chan says that some works that have an epistemological dimension and adopt "meta" forms of performance can remind creators to break norms boldly and bring new values to the fore in the complex and tangled realities of life. In this sense, avant-garde works are to him indeed more appealing than traditional theatre. He also says, however, that although experimental works may be justified by invoking a host of foreign theories, it is in the end more important to adhere to a creator's personal beliefs and life experiences rather than to so-called aesthetic correctness. Although traditional theatre seems aesthetically detached from, and is incapable of responding immediately to, reality, nor can it penetrate the community and directly evoke a sense of shared destiny in specific groups, it has the advantage of being able to leave room for general audiences in a broad sense to take a step back from reality and reflect.



## From Crystallisation of Creation to Crystallisation of Works: The Creative Significance of Personal Experience and Reruns

It has always been a tradition of Chinese intellectuals to “convey truths in writing”, but this sort of moral mission that requires works to foreground big principles has often shackled creation. The famous modern Chinese playwright Cao Yu, who experienced the catastrophe of the Cultural Revolution, in his later years warned young playwrights against aiming simply to create “dramas of issues”, and advocated a humanitarian spirit in which to “write what you have really thought deeply about, what really moves you and fills you with emotions in your own spiritual world”.<sup>2</sup> This is just the nourishment of life experiences required by the aforementioned “sincerity” originating from the creator, which is later realised and transformed into creative inspiration in an actual work of theatre and enables in-depth exchange with the audience. In a period of gloom, the real experiences in an individual’s real life, as well as the complex thoughts and emotions that accompany them, seem especially important. They transcend the hollow culture of taking sides and stay by our side at this difficult time.

Speaking of her own creative habit, Chong says that much deliberation is often needed before she can put pen to paper. When asked about *Mila*, a work based on her own experience and dealings with her foreign domestic helper, she says that she hired a “sister” (foreign domestic helper) to help take care of her sick mother and later felt that she could write a story of that experience. She recalls that, by coincidence, Asia Society invited her at the time to write an operatic work, and she felt that writing about the community of foreign domestic helpers, regarded by society as lowly, in the high-profile form of opera would

be much more appropriate and interesting than doing so in the form of drama. As for her creative considerations, she says that, being one of the “old school” of creators, she feels that she has to take responsibility for her words and therefore naturally mulls over how to deal with ethics in her work before creating it. Once she has put pen to paper, however, she would stop worrying, in the realisation that she is just a small creator in our times and has to let others complete the “full picture” with her.

This kind of record of life, which involves opening up and going beyond one’s own thoughts and emotions, is perhaps the wellspring of creativity that allows a work to resonate across time and space. Chan Kwun-fee also says that her creation represents an accumulation of personal life experiences. For example, *Present Absentee* draws inspiration from the people she met and the stories she heard in various war-torn regions, while *Heptahedron, A City's Odyssey (of Surreality)* is a series of works that derives from her friends’ sorting out during the Umbrella Movement the stories and feelings of individuals who participated in it, by having each person tell one story and by means of street theatre. Although many of these stories are about marginalised groups, they do not involve relationships of gaze between subject and object. She describes her role as similar to that of a psychic, acting as a medium on an equal footing who presents in the theatre other people’s experiences. She mentions in particular that she finds herself changed after 2014 in terms of both creative concepts and emotions, and increasingly in tune with the idea of “thorough and attentive cultivation”. She stresses that, when writing about society, she does not put strategy first or use herself as the subject, but creates through feelings and looks for media suitable for her themes and experiences when writing about the relationship between herself and the space and the community, refusing to place restrictions on herself.

But does completion of creation signify the end of such personal experience? After all, in this era with a seemingly democratised culture, we have all grown accustomed to the argument

that “the author is dead”, as if a work, once it is produced, would naturally break free from its umbilical connection to its author and come to have a life of its own. But in what manner is the work, now free, going to be presented and re-presented? If the work is a vehicle for the crystallisation of the author’s life experience rather than a “drama of issues” that arises from a need to fulfil the (authorities’ or protesters’) needs for political correctness, then how can this life experience manifest itself as it drifts across time? The attitudes of our playwrights towards rerunning old works can probably shed some light.



*Heptahedron, A City's Odyssey (of Surreality) (2015)* — Photo courtesy: Littlebreath Creative Workshop

The linear time of real experience may pass, but *Dasein* endures through it, suggesting the experience of coexistence that is capable of giving rise to Martin Heidegger's poetics. Chong says that she feels she should not go back to old works and rewrite them, but tends to let the audience themselves look for discrepancies between the present and the time when the original work was born. Even if no changes are made to the original, she explains, the audience would link it with reality on their own, but a playwright who consciously links the two together may do so incorrectly or only superficially. One act in *Murder in San José*, which she cites as an example, is about the relationship between China, Hong Kong and Taiwan, and now we cannot help finding it ridiculous upon being suddenly reminded of what that relationship used to be like. She also says that, when *Wild Boar* premiered in 2012, even the creator herself thought that it would take 30 years for the situation to worsen to that which the work depicts, and she had no idea that things would abruptly change after only two years. She is not especially keen on rerunning prophetic works like *Wild Boar*, she says, because we have now "gone beyond" them, but she considers such works records of our times in certain ways—we might have in the past found parts of the plot preposterous, but even more absurd things would be enacted in reality after only five or ten years.

Indeed, facing up to eternally recurring absurdities can help us get a sense of history in which to recognise our mission in our own times, and this is more important than a simple, itemised historical narrative. Chan Ping-chiu says that relatively mature works should be rerun at different times, because an old work has not only the character of the time it belongs to, but also a quality of projection that allows us to see how the work at that time viewed the future and that is for him the chief meaning of reruns. As an organiser, when considering which show to rerun, he would first decide whether the work itself has a central portion that audiences would still want to see, perhaps because the passage of time has given rise to new ways to understand it. Nevertheless, he believes that, in a general sense, if a theatre experience

enables the audience to compare their feelings now with those then, then the work, whether it has been revised or not, is able to generate a new dialogue. Chan Kwun-fee also says that rerunning old works in the theatre after a period of time can create a temporality that arises from crystallisation, and can inspire new and different ideas, which is very meaningful.

For creators, reruns are equally meaningful in that they can give insufficiently mature works an opportunity for growth. In the creative environment of Hong Kong, which is constantly racing against time, the lapse between premiere and rerun has doubtless become a crucial transitional space where a work, after enactment, can transform itself and make a fresh start. Chan Kwun-fee believes that, whether from the creator's perspective or the audience's, we should rerun old works rather than endlessly produce ephemeral new works as we do, which makes creation very wasteful. Fong also says that, if a painstakingly produced show comes to an end after just a one-week run, the audience has no way to let things crystallise or grow. He believes that, given the ecology of theatre in Hong Kong today, reruns are perhaps the more feasible approach for us to take. Chan Ping-chiu explains that the main reason playwrights often revise their works for reruns is that, after all, the majority of works are not strong enough to stand, boulder-like, at different points in time; in some other cases, playwrights have not properly adjusted their mindsets when dealing with current issues, so that some of their methods appear overly agitated and zealous, and even the playwrights themselves feel embarrassed when they later look back at them.

As regards invitations to perform overseas, Chan Ping-chiu thinks that such reruns are an opportunity for one's works to transform into different versions, and are therefore interesting from a creative perspective. But he adds that reruns are also important from the perspective of theatre company operation—the local market is too small and competition is fierce, so a dialogue may be expanded if opportunities for exchange are opened up. He recalls showing



*Best Wishes* (2018) — Photo: YC Kwan, hongnin. Photo courtesy: On & On Theatre Workshop

video clips of *Best Wishes* on an exchange visit to Iowa, where audience reaction was stronger than that in Hong Kong. A creator from Singapore described Hongkongers in *Best Wishes* as “lovable”, their forthright criticisms of the government being a far cry from Singaporeans’ relatively conservative attitude. Chan concludes that reruns may be a result of a playwright’s wish either to perfect a work not well written enough or to “allow a good work to have a dialogue with the audience again”; the one should not be confused with the other.

## Unease in the Post-National Security Law Era: Hong Kong Drama as a Collective Art on the Fringe

In reality, what must come has come. The National Security Law, regarded by many as a watershed in Hong Kong history, has finally been passed. How, then, will the interviewed playwrights face up to the cultural and artistic restrictions that are in the wind?

For many people, the unease caused by the National Security Law is self-evident. Chan Ping-chiu begins by noting that the first effect its passage has had on theatre is the attendant wave of emigration. He predicts that some theatre creators will choose to leave Hong Kong, and we will in consequence lose part of this creative force. This is not to say that those who are leaving lack fortitude, he adds, since everyone has his own plans. But he also asks whether our times can on the contrary produce creators with fortitude whom we would not have in an era of peace and prosperity.

Whether or not theatre practitioners choose to leave Hong Kong, they are probably well aware that theatre will not necessarily survive even though it is considered a fringe art here. Another issue that inevitably arises in the post-National Security Law era, Chan Ping-chiu goes on to say, is that theatre making will weigh things up and regulate itself. He says that we have to think about whether certain forms of presentation are subject to being fussed about and attacked, so vague still is the scope of the law. He also points out that, with the exception of a small number of works, such as some of Chong's, Hong Kong theatre is very much a fringe activity in the first place, with audiences far smaller than those of other media, such as film. In principle, then, ordinary works of theatre, no matter how radical they are, can only have a negligible effect, and he believes the government is cognisant of that. Putting it the other way round, he says that it is precisely because drama is on the fringe that works are allowed to speak freely in the theatre space. But then, with the law in question that apparently has sweeping powers, he says, even fringes that used to be beyond the reach of the authorities



are no longer safe. He mentions that some of the words in *Best Wishes*, which premiered in 2018, were previously innocuous but now have become an unusually touchy matter, so there is almost no possibility of a rerun of this work in today's Hong Kong.

It takes many theatre practitioners a great deal of time and effort while creating to speculate about the reach of that sweeping red line, and it is not difficult for us to appreciate the necessarily greater responsibility and pressure that an organiser or leader of an entire theatre company has to bear. A company's artistic director, Chan Ping-chiu says that he is not worried first up about himself, but the people he works with. It seems to him that, when working with young creators, he has an extra responsibility to remind them of things. He adds that this law also covers overseas exchange, so it may be violated by visitors to Hong Kong as well. They may misjudge the situation if their judgements are based solely on their personal experience, so he as a planner now bears greater responsibility in this regard. He further notes that this so-called responsibility begins with a concern about attempts at self-regulation, and such intangible concerns may continue to spread and have far-reaching effects. The artistic director of another company, Chan Kwun-fee says that some actors discussed with her in late 2019 whether the content of certain works would mean "suicide" (futile sacrifice, arrest of participants by the authorities) for the company. She finds that younger actors were more concerned because they were more active on the streets—she explains that they might not have actually done anything in particular, but obviously felt greater unease in this society and did not want to take any risk of arrest. Chong says that, after the passage of the National Security Law, she conferred with the *May 35<sup>th</sup>* team again to find out for certain whether its members really wanted to take part. Some theatre practitioners in the team often had to work in the mainland, and therefore preferred to use pseudonyms. She adds that political considerations may put pressure on those who commission works from her in the future, so she may as well put works online and let people who are interested contact her.



Speaking of themselves, the playwrights do not generally seem very worried about the political consequences of their creations, as if ready to deal with whatever may befall them. On the other hand, in order to embrace their own sincere creative practice, they need to be free from distractions in the first place, and while actually creating they can only tell themselves not to think too much about such things. As for the apparent lack of worry, it is difficult for people, indeed the creators themselves, to tell for sure whether it is a matter of the creators' naïveté or necessary self-deception. Chong says that, for creators, it has probably still been more of a lingering psychological fear up to this moment. She says that she may be naïve, too, but believes that she does not belong to any "extreme" group on the political spectrum and so will not be affected by the National Security Law. Yet she stresses that her mode of thinking can only be thus: to try her best to write what she can think of in her



May 35<sup>th</sup> (2019) — Photo: Kit Chan@KC Creative

Photo courtesy: Stage 64

position, to hope that she need not think about what she is allowed or not allowed to write, and to think of solutions to problems only when any comes up. Chan Kwun-fee says that she does feel something "in the air" but has not been too worried yet, because she does not think herself a writer of "radical" things either.

In the end, however, perhaps the creative experience has always been relative and cannot be reduced to a simple formula of addition or subtraction. What appear to be new possibilities or restrictions may become another matter when a creative concept takes shape and is realised as an actual performance, as exemplified by new media and information technology. Chan Ping-chiu says that it is too early to make any conclusion as to whether new technology can increase exposure for theatre. For example, he says that some theatre companies have acquired many techniques of live broadcast in response to the pandemic, so as to be able in the future to have shows performed both online and live and boost views. He believes that the liveness of theatre cannot be supplanted by live broadcasts, however, and is concerned that, if subsequent government policy encourages such two-pronged performances, the attendant restrictions on venues will result in the self-castration of theatre. Therefore, he thinks that we must carefully consider these issues from a macro perspective.

Similarly, the impact of the National Security Law on theatre creation cannot be elucidated in just a few words. Fong feels that there have doubtless been fewer creative choices after the passage of that law because some words can no longer be uttered, a restriction that comes not only from the creators themselves, but also from providers of production funding. Chan Ping-chiu believes that it is not necessarily a bad thing to have fewer choices, since different societies impose different restrictions on creators who are nonetheless able eventually to voice their views somehow. He also says that, in terms of "benefits", from now on there will perhaps be less emotional presentation in local theatre, which may mean more profound

works. Finally, he remains convinced that the future has in store good works that focus on things that are of great importance yet inevitably will touch a nerve in “some people”. But then he explains that finding freedom within restrictions is precisely the quandary of creation that all creators apparently have to face.

## Conclusion: The Lie of Mythology and the Truth of Drama

It is not difficult to notice in the interview that the interviewees are not concerned about only 2019 and the events in its wake, but historical junctures that have had impacts on Hong Kong society at large, as well as even more deep-rooted social issues. As Chan Ping-chiu points out at the start of the interview, what happened in 2019 was not a single event—many things had already happened and might even be traced all the way back to 2003—so we probably have to go back and forth over different junctures in order to comprehend reality. He says that we have the responsibility in our times to take a step back, sort ourselves out, and think about the developments to date and how people of different generations may trace their origins.

Indeed, our times are in the first place a mix of the past, the present and the future. In this sense, contemporary theatre, which is influenced by the mimetic tradition of Western drama that stems from Greek drama and by Bertolt Brecht’s dialectical theory of drama, always has the potential to traverse time and space and help us reorganise the experience of time in reality. Theatre as the “double” of reality, as Antonin Artaud calls it, can in various ways challenge, subvert and dismantle the existing order, and thereby regain many possibilities in reality that have been pre-empted by the system. As Chan Kwun-fee mentions in the interview, theatre creates a kind of temporality; it is not an instantaneity but a crystallisation. If we regard the rhythms of time as building blocks of order in reality, then the significance of theatre as “double” lies precisely in its creation of discontinuous instantaneities through a live show that presses infinitely close to reality; in its restructuring of the ways we cognise time in reality through the introduction of new experiences by such means as jumping,

disengagement and repetition in between those instantaneities; in its pointing, in days of unrest, to a hope at variance with that which the authorities hold out for the public.

Some things are easier said than done. Perhaps we still cannot easily extricate ourselves from time that has stagnated in consequence of emotions having turned extreme. We can see, however, that whether it be Chan Ping-chiu's "boulder" that is capable of contemplating various historical moments, Chong's repeated "crystallisation" that is required to attain a state of clarity, Fong's "growth" that appreciates multiple possibilities, or Chan Kwun-fee's "thorough and attentive cultivation" that takes things one step at a time, what Hong Kong playwrights who "exist in reality" bear constantly in mind, quite at odds with mythologies and grand narratives that reduce time to a totem and subordinate exceptions to rules, is a kind of life experience that flows in an endless stream and is full of ups and downs and transformations of the self and the other into one another.

(Translated by Ernest Wan)

## Loi Ho-man Felix

received his Bachelor of Arts and Master of Philosophy in Cultural Studies from the Chinese University of Hong Kong and his Master of Arts in Theatre Studies from the University of Munich. His interests lie in the performative and theatrical nature of local and overseas performing arts as well as the intricate and contested negotiation between aesthetics and ideology in theatre.

# 香港戲劇概述 2019・2020

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香港九龍石硤尾白田街30號賽馬會創意藝術中心L3-06C室

L3-06C, Jockey Club Creative Arts Centre, 30 Pak Tin Street, Shek Kip Mei, Kowloon, Hong Kong

電話 Tel (852) 2974 0542

傳真 Fax (852) 2974 0592

網址 Website [www.iatc.com.hk](http://www.iatc.com.hk)

電郵 Email [iatc@iatc.com.hk](mailto:iatc@iatc.com.hk)

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