Kai Tuchmann (ed.)

POSTDRAMATIC DRAMATURGIES

Resonances between Asia and Europe

[transcript] Theatre Studies
This book compiles lectures by the world’s leading practitioners of postdramatic theatre from East Asia and the German-speaking world, which were given at Asia’s only dramaturgy degree program at The Central Academy of Drama in Beijing 2018/19. It includes first-time English-language scripts of the discussed plays. The material is complemented by contextualizing essays by the program founder Li Yinan and its co-developer Kai Tuchmann. Hans-Thies Lehmann contributes the foreword to this volume. This rare compilation enables the reader to gain a unique insider’s impression of postdramatic theatre’s artistic thinking and working methods and informs about its manifold manifestations.


Kai Tuchmann graduated in directing from Hochschule für Schauspielkunst Ernst Busch in Berlin. He works as a dramaturge, director, and academic. He is a visiting professor at The Central Academy of Drama in Beijing – for which he has developed, together with Li Yinan, the curriculum for the first dramaturgy program in Asia. He is also a member of the Theatre Management Faculty at Frankfurt’s University for Music and Performing Arts. He has held fellowships at The Graduate Center, CUNY (Fulbright), the Academy for Theatre and Digitality, Germany, and the Mellon School of Theater and Performance Research at Harvard University.

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If, over the last few decades, one had given credence to the Cassandras among the clan of theatre critics, one would have had to conclude that “good theatre,” “theatre of value,” in which the text—spoken by well-trained actors and displaying “literary quality”—demands concentration, attention and patience in the audience, was terminally ill. The disease took the form of a many-headed Hydra, diagnosed as postmodern and performance, physical theatre, abstract theatre, theatre of the real, and many other supposed ailments. Evidently, this was a conflict in the tradition of the age-old struggle between young and old. It is important to remember these polemics, because they tend to be overshadowed by the very positive and enthusiastic response that my book *Postdramatisches Theater* found among theatre people right from the start. Nevertheless, this critique accompanied the book’s immediate reception like a constant chorus for roughly a decade following its publication in 1999. Then these voices quietened down a lot, especially since the book was a success in Germany. This was paralleled by an unexpectedly intense resonance in a multiplicity of divergent milieus of theatre discourse and practice: Latin America and the US, Russia as well as Eastern Europe, even in Iran and India. Kai Tuchmann’s book deals with one especially fascinating aspect of this worldwide reception: the resonance *Postdramatisches Theater* found in East Asia.

In fact, the Japanese version was the first translation, even before the French, and Li Yinan’s Chinese translation came out only a few years later. This translation was welcomed by young Chinese theatre people, though there was also a certain academic resistance towards the book. (I remember the moment in Shanghai Theatre Academy on my first visit to China, where I taught about *Rimini Protokoll* and all the students were very interested. But after the lecture two teachers from the Academy came to me and said: “But this is only presentation—not representation.”)

Li Yinan has played a great role in the reception of postdramatic theatre. She even introduced some of the pedagogical aspects of Germany’s Giessen School to China, thereby expressing guiding principles for postdramatic theatre practice that have given rise to interesting debates and changes. One was the tendency to stay close to the real of experiences in society. The notion of the “real” here should not be mistaken for the concept of realism, but rather has everything to do with a
Lacanian notion of the Real: that which evades both the symbolic structure and the imaginary. So even Hans-Werner Kroesinger, for example, and his documentation of the real, digs into the underground of the society. It is less his intention to inform the spectator at the level of consciousness, but rather to create an awareness of the Real, which is always concealed.

Another important element is of course the dimension of the political. Whenever postdramatic theatre is held, debate is created. Postdramatic theatre took on the role of opposition to depoliticized theatre. But soon it became clear that theatre as such cannot be judged as politics. It remains true that theatre is never directly political, it has a specific relation to the political dimension. This dimension is carried out in postdramatic theatre essentially by opening theatre space to the audience—thus redefining theatre as something that is not representation for spectators but an event created with the spectators. In this respect, the artists, many of them groups, have displayed remarkable creativity in developing postdramatic dramaturgies. I here allow myself to adapt the definition given by Kai Tuchmann, who understands dramaturgy not as a traditional craft of adapting drama to the stage but rather a practice and a theory for enlarging, opening, and transforming the theatre.

Hans-Thies Lehmann

Athens, October 2021
POSTDRAMATIC RESONANCE BETWEEN EUROPE AND ASIA
Introduction

*Kai Tuchmann*

From the clay of life abandoned on the ground grow no lofty trees, only wild grass. [...]  

Wild grass strikes no deep roots, has no beautiful flowers and leaves, yet it imbibes dew, water and the blood and flesh of the dead [...] As long as it lives it is trampled upon and mown down, until it dies and decays.  

But I am not worried; I am glad. I shall laugh aloud and sing.  

Lu Xun, Wild Grass

The contributions to this publication originate in the *Beijing Topography* project, which was held under my co-direction at the Faculty of Dramaturgy and Applied Theatre at the Central Academy of Drama in Beijing in the winter semester of 2018/19. The *Beijing Topography* project, initiated by Li Yinan, gives BA Dramaturgy students the task of exploring the past and present of Beijing. The project promotes the general goal of understanding how theatre performances can be generated from real materials. I invited several Asian and European artists who are pioneers of the postdramatic theatre in their specific theatre landscapes and have worked in this field for decades. I asked them to give our students an insight into their work and working methods in the form of impulse lectures, panels, and workshops. At the center of every invitation stood my request to the artists to share the fundamental convictions underlying their dramaturgies and working methods. Most of the invited artists began their seminars with introductory lectures and then presented and commented on some of their most influential works. They encouraged the students to conduct their own experiments along the lines of the questions posed in the *Beijing Topography* project and evaluated the students’ scenic experiments together with them. The structure of the project is reflected in the form of the contributions published here. Most of the invited
artists are represented by a transcription of their opening lecture (together with a video link) and a script of a performance piece that is representative of their approach. It is essential to be aware that the latter are not classical drama texts and that they thus only acquire their actual function when performed.

By making these lectures public, I wish to provide a broader audience with a unique insider’s impression of postdramatic theatre’s artistic thinking and working methods together with a sense of the variety of its manifestations.

The theatre-thinking of all the invited theatre-makers originates from a dramaturgical impulse because it has been developed, defended, and matured against the established theatre landscapes in their countries. These works utilize one dramaturgical field of action in particular: the development of performance situations. This is an original dramaturgical activity that deals with the questions of who gathers where, with whom, and—above all—how. Each performance creates a theatrical public sphere in its specific way, one whose members are produced by the design of the performance situation. The works of the artists collected in this book are typified by the utilization of this ephemeral theatrical public performance sphere to de-familiarize the everyday public sphere, which is constituted through media representations of social and political processes. This everyday public sphere is considered less as a place than a specific set of rules that individuals who want to appear and act publicly must fulfill and reproduce. These rules are de-familiarized through the performance situations of the works represented in this volume.

The development of performance situations is one of the most important fields of dramaturgical activity, especially if, like us at the Beijing Dramaturgy Department, one understands dramaturgy as an artistic practice primarily concerned with expanding the possibilities of theatre. The permanent search for extensions of our understanding of theatre differentiates dramaturgy from the practice of directing, which rather tries to exert effects on an audience derived from an already existing canon of performance and reception.

One thing the artists presented in this book have in common is that all their works seek to break the cycle of reality construction, within which “nature” and “history” are constantly confused. By such a motion, their theatre produces aesthetic procedures that grasp reality in a complex way that classical dramatic theatre cannot create. The theatre-makers presented here do not stop at a mere gesture of deconstructing reality but rather attempt to turn beyond it—towards the fragile and non-subsumable particular of the lived experience. This attempt

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1 The theatre scholar Jochen Kiefer argues for a conception of dramaturgy as a practice that expands the possibilities of theatre and encompasses five fields of action. In addition to the mentioned practice of developing performance situations, Kiefer also lists narration, economics, curation, and knowledge critique as dramaturgical fields of action. Cf. Jochen Kiefer, “Re-Vision Dramaturgie” (Zurich, February 21, 2019).

resonates with the program of postdramatic theatre, as described and developed by Hans-Thies Lehmann in his 1999 publication *Postdramatisches Theater.*\(^3\) The non-mimetic approaches towards reality discussed in Lehmann’s book became the starting point for the experiments of numerous theatre-makers and theatre-thinkers in Europe and Asia. While the book has meanwhile been translated into many languages, the 2002 Japanese translation of *Postdramatisches Theater* by Michiko Tanigawa and Masaya Honda was among the first. It came out even before the English translation by Karen Jürs-Munby in 2006. The Chinese translation by Li Yinan appeared only four years later, in 2010. It has become a point of reference for all those theatre-makers and theatre-thinkers who felt not entirely at home in their national aesthetics, which have been strongly influenced by Western-style mimetic theatre.

Initially, postdramatic theatre grew out of a critique of the dramatic assumption that reality can be unambiguously depicted, narrated, and morally evaluated. This dramatic assumption and the theatre that emerges from it, stretching from Aristotle to Hegel, has set up a particular regime of representation and dramatic literature that historically has privileged certain artistic strategies and political perspectives in unambiguous ways. Thus, most drama has been constructed and performed from the center of a heteronormative, Western-colonial gaze, which expresses itself in a dramaturgy that centers around the conflicts of dramatic characters. The postdramatic dramaturgies of the works presented here attempt to break free of this assumption and its techniques—and to do so in different places and times. For this very reason, they have been produced outside the mainstream, and are usually associated with the foundation of their own groups, new forms and modes of production, and the emergence of their very own audience structure.

By archiving the lectures given at the Central Academy of Drama in Beijing, this volume seeks to show that the concept of postdramatic theatre is not a static one. Rather, it changes over time and is also highly dependent on its translation into the specific situations of different theatre cultures. Dramaturgy is of decisive importance for this translation process, since it is essentially identical to expanding the possibilities of theatre.

As dramaturgy scholar Jochen Kiefer points out, such an emphatic understanding of dramaturgy appears for the first time in Lessing’s *Hamburgische Dramaturgie* (Hamburg Dramaturgy), in which “dramaturgy” becomes a signifier for a theatre that has yet to be developed. Lessing’s aim in setting up a discourse around an entity he called “dramaturgy” was to turn actors into independent artists who critically distance themselves from the prevailing rules of the drama and performance canon. Thus, even at this early stage, dramaturgy is already closely interlinked with performativity and can therefore not exclusively be related to

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how theatre texts are constructed. Saying this is not to deny the existence of dramaturgies before Lessing’s *Hamburgische Dramaturgie*. But these belonged rather to the world of poetics, and their primary purpose was the codification of certain narrative patterns. With Lessing, however, dramaturgy emerges as an independent realm of artistic thinking that starts precisely with the absence of any poetological rules. Dramaturgy is no longer the reflection of an existing *dispositif* but rather transforms itself into one.\(^4\) Dramaturgy, as I understand it, is an action that expresses itself in the practices of narration (selection and montage of materials, discourses, and texts) and the development of performance situations. These dramaturgical practices are then aligned with the needs of the respective theatre form in which they are situated. Thus, roughly speaking, dramatic, epic, and postdramatic theatre each have their very specific modes of narration and performance development. Particularly in dramatic theatre, but also in epic theatre, the development of performance situations is not the focus of dramaturgical activity, since both strongly adhere to the classical proscenium situation (often parodied in German as the *Guckkastenbühne* or “peep-show theatre”) and display of dramatic characters as a means of theatrical communication. By contrast, postdramatic theatre, because of its explicit emphasis on the reality generated between spectators and performers in the course of a performance, is permanently required to reflect on and experiment with the performance situation. Since the works and lectures gathered here repeatedly problematize theatre as a site of visualization as much as the idea of drama based on dramatic characters, the works of the artists presented here can be described as postdramatic dramaturgies.

With this collection, I wish to provide the framework for exploring the resonance that postdramatic dramaturgy has created between Europe and Asia.

**On the Structure of this Book**

The book is divided into three sections. The first section sets out to unpack the resonance of the postdramatic theatre. It contains the panel discussion *Rethinking Theatricality—A Conversation on Postdramatic Theatre and the Chinese Juchang*, held on October 13, 2018, at the Goethe Institute Beijing and Li Yinan’s essay *Hans-Thies Lehmann’s Postdramatic Theatre and the New Aesthetics of Juchang*. These two texts point to the resonance that the translation of Lehmann’s *Postdramatisches Theater* has had on Chinese theatre scholarship.

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\(^{4}\) Kiefer thus suggests reading these earlier dramaturgies “as representations of prevailing social *dispositif*.” He defines the concept of the *dispositif*, in reference to Foucault, as a network between heterogenous elements, which encompasses linguistic and non-linguistical realms, such as discourses, institutions, laws, philosophies, etc. Cf. Jochen Kiefer, “Re-Vision Dramaturgie” (Zurich, February 21, 2019).

\(^{5}\) Cf. Jochen Kiefer, “Re-Vision Dramaturgie” (Zurich, February 21, 2019).
The second section includes the artists’ lectures, which are followed by a script representative of their work, supplemented with a QR code linking to a video excerpt. Since Wen Hui gave a physical dance workshop instead of a lecture, the script of her dance piece RED is not introduced by means of a lecture but rather followed by a postscript written by the author of RED, Zhuang Jiayun.

Since none of the materials in this section have been published before, I aim to place the foundation stone of an archive of postdramatic resonance between the German-speaking theatre landscape and that of Asia. Of course, such an archive will be a living one, and the resonances have already started to reinforce themselves mutually. Productions of Wen Hui’s RED, Zhao Chuan’s World Factory, and Kyung Sung Lee’s Love Story are touring worldwide. In addition, students of the Beijing Topography seminar have now started to pursue their MA degrees in Europe. Among them is Gao Yinfu, who studies at the Institute for Applied Theatre Studies of the Justus Liebig University Giessen. These performances and students will alter the initial sound of the postdramatic.

Since the discourses about theatre and its relationship to reality are in constant flux, the materials collected here cannot be more than a still image from a certain place at a particular time. However, to deal with this situatedness, this book’s third and final section invites its key contributors to reflect on their lectures and works at a temporal distance. To this end, I asked them in May 2021 to reevaluate their contributions from 2018. This final conversation, titled Shame and Power. A Critical Conversation on the Postdramatic Condition, explores how the postdramatic aesthetic itself is subject to changing interpretations. Through an algorithmically controlled digitization of our communication, common reference points of reading and understanding reality are becoming more and more contested. Under this quite new condition, contemporary configurations of the postdramatic tend to overemphasize the role of the individual—often by highlighting the performer’s identity as the only possible framework of meaning. This anthology seeks to intervene in the course of this development by archiving modes of postdramatic theatre dramaturgies that still value the idea of difference. Only through this approach of difference can a theatre refer to what is not there: the dead, the other, the past, the future. This perspective of difference is essential for facilitating an aesthetics that allows the audience’s perception to swing back and forth between the irreducible individual and reality—as something historically grown and thus something that is contingent and alterable.

To ease the reader’s access to the lectures and scripts printed here, I will now introduce each artist and their work with a specific focus on what kind of relationship the dramaturgies of the discussed performances have with the
postdramatic paradigm. In particular, I will highlight how their working methodologies and aesthetics are situated in the (recent) history of their theatre landscapes and how their underlying dramaturgies set out to develop performance situations that intervene in the routines of the public sphere. In the second part of this introduction, I will give a very brief overview of the emergence of postdramatic theatre in Germany and the context of its resonances in China.

CONTRIBUTORS

Zhao Chuan, born in 1967, is one of the most important juchang theatre-makers in China. His lecture *There Is No Empty Space on Earth* was held on November 6, 2018, at the Dramaturgy and Applied Theatre Faculty of the Central Academy of Drama in Beijing. This was the first time that he had conducted a seminar in a Chinese state-run theatre academy. In his lecture, Zhao Chuan described the guiding ideas underlying the work of his theatre collective *Grass Stage* (*Caotaiban*), which is an independent amateur theatre group that has been operating in Shanghai since 2005. Their theatre performances are created under simple conditions and with limited financial means. Since the collective was founded, it has been engaged in creative work in a range of alternative spaces, where it has given free performances and held discussions. Over the years, *Grass Stage* performances and other artistic projects have become meeting points for people from different social milieus; they represent a public space that is constantly in motion. This artistic flexibility in dealing with space is one of the most outstanding features of *Grass Stage*. The change of performance venues typical of the collective has to do, on the one hand, with their idea of bringing theatre to communities away from the large and developed cities of the east coast, and on the other hand, the refusal to perform within institutionalized theatres is the only way to undermine the censorship system, to the degree that this is possible. An important term in the context of Zhao’s approach to theatre is “post-performance theatre”. This concept, coined by Zhao, means that the discussion that also unfolds within the audience after the performance has the quality of a play itself. One could say that Zhao conceives *Grass Stage* performances as a trigger for these discussions between its audience members.⁷ The production of a discursive public sphere in the works of Zhao Chuan thus becomes a counterweight to consumerism, which is currently being transfigured in the form of the ideology of the *Chinese Dream* as propagated by Xi Jinping. Since the amateurs in the cultural sector are freed from this production order, they have the opportunity to renegotiate hegemonies. It is this opportunity that the theatre of Zhao Chuan wants to make radical use of. Thus

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one could speak of his theatre as an amateur practice with the aim of awaking from the Chinese Dream.

As a theatre-maker who is working in Shanghai and has many international contacts, Zhao Chuan is repeatedly confronted with the canonical thinking of the European theatre avant-gardes. Moreover, their concepts are often copied without hesitation in the institutions of the Chinese cultural industry. In his contribution, Zhao Chuan sharply criticizes the basic assumptions of Eugenio Barba’s theatrical anthropology and Peter Brook’s idea of an empty space. He sees in them the expression of a typical Western theatre of the 1980s that appropriates non-European theatre cultures to produce aesthetic innovations. Above all, Zhao Chuan refuses the construction of a universal performative body that lacks historical and social dimensions—something that is constitutive of Barba’s theatre anthropology. Criticism of the same de-historicizing premise of human socialization lets Zhao also reject Brook’s concept of an empty space. The central theme of the theatre Zhao Chuan creates is precisely the filling of spaces with experience and history and the constant struggle for public spaces. He contrasts the utopian ideas of an empty space and a timeless human expressiveness with his concrete way of working, which has developed from collective production to a process that focuses especially on the individual and contradictory solos of the group members. This method, which Zhao Chuan calls the “comprehensive method,” is characterized by the fact that it does not reconcile the conflicting solo performances of the group members into a single narrative but combines them in such a way that a complex panorama of Chinese society becomes visible.

Aesthetically, Grass Stage attempts to revive, among other things, the performative aspects of the marginalized traditional Chinese opera. Recently, Grass Stage has also been experimenting more and more with circus-like techniques.

World Factory (Shijie gongchang) is one of Grass Stage’s most important productions. It critically intervenes in the foundational myth of the Chinese Republic, according to which the workers are an essential element of the nation and its history. By focusing on the living conditions of migrant workers, the production questions the actuality of this foundational myth. At the beginning of their research for World Factory, Zhao Chuan and Grass Stage gave theatre workshops for the Foxconn workers in Shenzhen, which has given rise to a number of Foxconn worker theatre groups that continue to operate and self-organize to this day.

The starting point of the production was Zhao Chuan’s visit to the city of Manchester, formerly known as the “World Factory,” and his assumption that although capitalism has entered the age of consumerism more than 200 years after its emergence, the phenomenon of the “World Factory” has not yet disappeared.

To develop the performance of World Factory, Grass Stage used, in addition to the workshops already mentioned, a variety of classic documentary sources, from historical and sociological material to first-person testimonials, such as the personal story of Grass Stage member Wu Jiamin, who is one of the tens of millions
of children who left their rural homes to find a paid job in urban industry. The
staging and design of the script are not limited to the gesture of presenting docu-
ments. Rather the classical strategies of documentary theatre are complemented
by other theatrical means, ranging from clown play to revue-like musical num-
bbers and Beijing *xi'qu* opera parodies.

The spirit of collaboration directly impacted the performance situation of the
Shenzhen showcase of *World Factory*, which was held in November 2014 at the
OCAT Contemporary Art Terminal in Shenzhen as part of a symposium organized
by Zhao Chuan. The performances of *World Factory* were attended not just by the
usual middle-class theatre-going public and students from the local university,
but also by the very workers from Foxconn who participated in the workshops.

Since 2010, Foxconn, the company that does much manufacturing for Western
companies such as Apple, has repeatedly been mentioned in connection with in-
stances of suicide among its workers, who are often poorly paid migrant workers
and students. Right at the beginning of this performance, two clowns enter the
stage, grotesquely exaggerating the suicides of the Foxconn workers. One of the
two clowns slips into the role of the (invented) psychology professor Lü, who
evaluates the psychological resilience of Foxconn workers and makes prognoses
about how many of them will commit suicide in a given period. The Shenzhen
showcase exemplify the strong *juchang* quality of Zhao Chuan’s work, which is
almost always aimed at creating temporary public spaces rather than simply pre-
senting the group’s latest theatre works. If one further considers Zhao Chuan’s
conception of performance as a trigger for what he calls “post-performance the-
atre,” *World Factory* is decidedly about creating a performance situation in which
theatre-goers of different classes are supposed to meet: The class of the middle
bourgeoisie, significant for the Chinese cultural industry, confronted with the mi-
grant workers, otherwise banished from society’s sight. The performance
situation of *World Factory* thus offers a possibility of confrontation and dialogue
between these classes that does not occur in the protocols of everyday public life.
However, I would like to point out that the political circumstances that led to the
symposium in Shenzhen were extremely favorable. Nowadays, censorship and
other state interventions into the work of Zhao Chuan (and other Chinese *juchang*
theatre-makers) have become more frequent.

8 For the concept of *juchang*, see Li Yinan “Hans-Thies Lehmann’s Postdramatic Theatre and
the new aesthetics of *juchang*” in this volume.
9 For example, guest performances curated by *Grass Stage* in Beijing planned for the spring
of 2019 by Foxconn workers’ theatre troupes, which were established in the course of the
work on *World Factory* and were directed by *Grass Stage* members, could not be shown
there. This probably has to do with the interest of the authorities in keeping the degree of
organization of non-governmental workers’ organizations as low as possible and, above all,
in preventing them from forming networks between different cities.
Hans-Werner Kroesinger and Regine Dura have been working together since 2000 and are considered among the most important independent documentary theatre-makers in Germany. They were both invited to the Central Academy of Drama, but Regine Dura had to cancel her participation at the last moment. Given the permanence and intensity of their collaboration, however, Kroesinger and Dura are nevertheless consistently discussed here as an artistic duo. Their productions are created after extensive material research, undertaken together with their actors as part of play development, on topics such as the genocide in Rwanda, the European border agency Frontex, and the South-Eastern European front of the First World War.

To this book, Kroesinger/Dura contribute the lecture How to Work With Things That Really Happened, which provides a detailed description of the techniques and contexts of the documentary theatre play Q&A—Questions & Answers, which Kroesinger made in 1996, and which was completely based on documents related to the Eichmann Trial. This lecture about the foundation of their documentary way of working is deepened by the script of their joint work Stolpersteine Staatstheater.

Hans-Werner Kroesinger was born in Bonn in 1962. He studied drama, theatre, and media from 1983 to 1988 with Andrzej Wirth and Hans-Thies Lehmann at the Institute for Applied Theatre Studies of the Justus Liebig University Giessen. While still a student, Kroesinger began working as assistant director and dramaturg to Robert Wilson, who held a guest professorship at the Giessen Institute. Another formative encounter for Kroesinger was with Heiner Müller, who also taught as a guest professor in Giessen. Kroesinger worked as an artistic collaborator in Müller’s legendary 1989 production of Hamlet/Hamletmaschine at the Deutsches Theater in East Berlin. This production is significant, not least because the state of the GDR dissolved during its development. This intervention of reality and history in the rehearsal process had a lasting effect on Kroesinger’s aesthetic search. In his 1996 work Q&A—Questions & Answers, which Kroesinger developed while he held a scholarship at the Akademie Schloss Solitude in Stuttgart, he succeeded in translating this search into his later typical style. This work also marks the revival of the tradition of documentary theatre in Germany and its continuation under the entirely new conditions of the turn of the century. Since then, he has directed his own productions at prestigious municipal and state-funded theatres and on the independent scene, above all at Hebbel am Ufer (HAU) in Berlin.

10 Stumbling blocks (Stolpersteine), also sometimes referred to as “stumbling stones,” are gold paving or cobble stones set into the pavements of cities in Germany, Austria and throughout parts of Europe where the Nazis once ruled that mark where Jews and other victims of the National Socialists lived before being persecuted, transported to concentration or extermination camps and/or murdered. The project was initiated by the artist Gunter Demnig in 1992.
Regine Dura studied political science, theatre, film and media studies, German language and literature, and art education in Marburg and Frankfurt/Main, as well as video at the Berlin University of the Arts. Since 1996 she has been working as a freelancer in the field of feature and documentary film, including for the European Film Academy and Wim Wenders Produktion in Berlin. Kroesinger/Dura’s theatre projects usually focus on political issues and events—especially violent conflicts—and consider the role of theatre in such contexts to be one of facilitating negotiation within society.

Their work is deeply connected to questions that are constitutive to the discourse of history and their aesthetics follow the canonical definition of documentary theatre, as laid down by Erwin Piscator. For Piscator, documentary theatre is theatre in which “the political document forms the sole basis, both textually and scenically”\(^\text{11}\) of the performance. Peter Weiss defined it in the same spirit:

> Documentary theatre is a theatre of reportage. Records, documents, letters, statistics, market-reports, statements by banks and companies, government statements, speeches, interviews […] are the basis of the performance.\(^\text{12}\)

Kroesinger/Dura’s performances and dramaturgy deeply connect with the protocols and procedures of this tradition of documentary theatre, but they also alter them to a significant extent. In contrast to Piscator’s and Weiss’s theatre, the document is no longer exclusively regarded as a truthful and trustworthy account of the past but rather as something that co-produces the past to the same extent as it records it. From this perspective, Weiss’s formulation of a documentary theatre that “presents authentic material unchanged in content but edited in form”\(^\text{13}\) can no longer be maintained. Kroesinger/Dura articulate their doubt about the document’s neutrality through the act of montage, which in their work always facilitates a bringing together of conflicting truth claims. In contrast to Peter Weiss’s documentary theatre, in which various documents are assembled to generate one consistent (counter-)narrative of a historical issue, Kroesinger/Dura are concerned with developing a multi-perspective view on historical or current facts.

The disbelief in the document’s capacity to represent the historical truth “as it was” is typical of representatives of the third period of documentary theatre.\(^\text{14}\)

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14 Documentary theatre in Germany is divided into three periods. The first period is dated 1924–1929 and is closely linked to the works of theatre director Erwin Piscator. The second
While most of the third period theatre-makers, as a consequence of this disbelief in the document, have banished trained actors from their stages, Kroesinger/Dura stand out in so far as they are the only ones who vehemently adhere to the use of professionally trained actors. That is very much in contrast to the works of Rimini Protokoll, perhaps the most famous representatives of this third period, in whose works all actors are replaced by actual people (“experts of the everyday”) who tell their personal stories on stage. The documentary truth claims in their works are thus usually limited and legitimized by the emphasis on the subjective perspective of the performers. Instead of textual documents, the individual bodies of the performers and their memories, stories, movements take the place of documents. Kroesinger/Dura, by contrast, want to demonstrate how precisely the linguistic composition of documents reflects power relations and constructions of reality. For this work on language, they need actors who can work out the linguistic peculiarities and argumentations of documents and offer them to the audience for critical reflection.

For their play *Stolpersteine Staatstheater*\(^\text{15}\), commissioned by the Staatstheater Karlsruhe, and invited to the 2016 edition of Germany’s most important theatre festival “Theatertreffen,” Kroesinger/Dura have reconstructed the details of how anti-Semitic discrimination worked after 1933 from the personnel files of the Staatstheater Karlsruhe. Jewish actors, a Jewish prompter, and the artistic director were dismissed, arrested, driven into exile, or committed suicide in Karlsruhe. In this performance, actors sit together with the audience at a large work table and read files, newspaper reports, memoirs, and interviews with contemporary witnesses. Again and again, the actors enter and—after a short period—exit the characters they portray. The bureaucratic procedure that legally regulated social exclusion transforms the performance into a lesson about the functioning of state bureaucracy. The performance situation conceived by

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\(^{15}\) Stumbling blocks (Stolpersteine), also sometimes referred to as "stumbling stones" are gold paving or cobble stones set into the pavements of cities in Germany, Austria and throughout parts of Europe where the Nazis once ruled that mark where Jews and other victims of the National Socialists lived before being persecuted, transported to concentration or extermination camps and/or murdered. The project was initiated by the artist Gunter Demnig in 1992.
Kroesinger/Dura in *Stolpersteine Staatstheater* transforms the history of the performance site into an essential element of the performance. The history of the Karlsruhe theatre’s involvement in National Socialism, reconstructed from archival material, thus becomes an omnipresent frame for the encounter between spectators and performers, who meet in the very institution whose collaboration with the NS regime is elaborated in the performance. Dramaturgy thus also reveals itself here as a specific way of thinking about theatre art, in this case as a reflection on its history, since dramaturgy in German theatre owes much to the widespread introduction of dramaturgical offices at German municipal theatres during the Nazi period. These dramaturg positions were established with the sole purpose of bringing theatres into line with the Reich Ministry of Propaganda.16

The selection of the play *Stolpersteine Staatstheater* for this book is also due to the fact that this production was invited to the 2017 edition of “Theatertreffen in China” and thus led to a strengthening of interest in documentary forms in Chinese theatre.17

At this point, it might be interesting to speak about the very different starting points of Kroesinger/Dura’s and Wen Hui’s documentary theatre. Kroesinger/Dura’s documentary theatre rejects the discourses on authenticity of the first two periods of German documentary theatre. Yet, the contemporary theatre-makers share with the practitioners of these two earlier periods their stock of material, which consists mainly of published texts from newspapers, essayistic articles, or archive material. Thus, the material backbone of Kroesinger/Dura’s work consists of the products of the free press and freely accessible archives. Wen does not find this kind of material in the People’s Republic of China. Her documentary theatre cannot be text-based, since neither counter-narratives nor multi-perspective reflections would arise from published texts in China. Archives are not easily accessible to the public in China either. Furthermore, the official relationship of the People’s Republic to its history is a very special one: For example, in the opening ceremony of the 2008 Olympic Games, there is not a single reference to any event of the 20th century.18 This absence of a published historical discourse almost inevitably leads to a preoccupation with personal and embodied histories, as these are the only freely accessible, uncontrolled archives in China. The two documentary approaches of Kroesinger/Dura and Wen thus stand almost crosswise to each other: Kroesinger/Dura are taking textual documents but believe in their


17 The “Theatertreffen in China” was founded in 2016 as a cooperation between the Goethe-Institut China and the Berliner Festspiele. As part of this program, which is curated by experts from the culture sector, two to three productions from the Theatertreffen are invited to China each year.

18 I owe this observation to Peter Eckersall.
representational possibilities only to a limited extent, while Wen regards the body and its experiences as a document, and she follows its claim to truth without reservation.

**Wen Hui** was born in 1960 and is regarded worldwide as the leading representative of modern dance in China. She studied dance and choreography at the Beijing Dance Academy and was especially influenced by her collaborations in the 1990s with Trisha Brown and Pina Bausch. As a form of increased liveliness, her understanding of art is the focus of the *Living Dance Studio* (*Shenghuo Wudao Gongzuoshi*) that she founded in 1994 in Beijing.

The documentary dance performance *RED* (*Hong*) serves as a paradigmatic example of Wen’s theatrical approach. *RED* premiered on December 25, 2015, at Shanghai Power Station of Art and takes its point of departure from *The Red Detachment of Women*, which was one among the eight model operas (*yangbanxi*) during the time of the Cultural Revolution in China (1966–76).

*The Red Detachment of Women* takes place on the southern Chinese island of Hainan. It tells the story of the peasant girl Wu Qinghua, who is kept as a slave by the landowner Nanbatian. Wu manages to escape and joins the battalion of an army led by General Hong Changqing, which consists only of female soldiers. After some entanglements, the all-decisive battle between the women’s battalion and Nanbatian’s army takes place on the island. The battalion wins. It is worth mentioning that a battalion stationed on Hainan Island consisting exclusively of women very likely did exist in the 1930s. Liang Xin wrote a novel about this army, which again became the basis for a film adaptation under the personal aegis of Prime Minister Zhou Enlai. Novel and film were then the sources from which the plot of the ballet, which premiered in 1964, was assembled. Interesting discoveries can be made by comparing these different representations of history, such as the fact that the figure of a male commander of the Women’s Army was only developed for the model opera version. *RED* has dealt with all these different historical representations of the material and has incorporated them in the rehearsal and staging process.

I want to give some brief remarks on the historical context and concept of the model opera, as they will deepen the understanding of an existing dramaturgy *avant la lettre* in mainland China. In 1963, in reaction to the de-Stalinization that was taking place in the Soviet Union under Khrushchev, Mao gave a speech in which he expressly warned against a “counter-revolutionary restoration” in China that would completely change China’s essence and, of course, threaten his power base. ¹⁹ To counter this fear of China’s “drifting” into capitalism, Mao, in the

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same year, launched the socialist education campaign, whose battle cry was “Never forget class struggle!” This campaign became the starting point of cultural production on a massive scale, especially of works that were later called “Red Classics,” such as The East is Red (Dongfang Hong, 1964) and The Red Detachment of Women (Hongse Niangzi, Jun also 1964). This state-controlled planning and execution of artistic production that goes hand in hand with the intertwining of political campaigns and cultural production can be very well described with the term “dramaturgy in the mode of policing” [polizeiliche Dramaturgie], a phrase coined by the theatre scholar Nikolaus Müller-Schöll. Such dramaturgy safeguards narratives that privilege a few groups in society while simultaneously preventing the entry of certain other groups and their experiences into the public sphere. Opposed to such police dramaturgy is political dramaturgy that seeks to use theatre to change the dynamics of public space by initializing a new “distribution of the sensible”. Chinese theatre has been deeply affected by the approach of police dramaturgy since the founding of the People’s Republic in 1949, as it has assured the state authorship and control over the products of the theatre. RED rejects this claim of police dramaturgy and sets out to use the production and performance of theatre to collect, interpret, and publish alternative perspectives on the Cultural Revolution.

The Cultural Revolution itself had one of its starting points in a controversy over Wu Han’s play Ha Rui Dismissed from Office, which was published in 1961 and then read years later by Yao Wenyuan as a critical commentary on Mao’s responsibility for the Great Famine. In defense of Mao, Yao published an article criticizing the play. This criticism led to the imprisonment of Wu Han and the first campaigns against so-called right-wing extremists. This circumstance alone shows how relevant theatre was in the political debates of the 20th century in China. The model operas that emerged from the Cultural Revolution probably reflect an attempt to regulate performances that was unprecedented in theatre history. The selection and dramaturgy of these model operas was carried out by Mao’s wife Jiang Qing, who herself had been an important actress in the 1930s and who, in the context of the introduction of socially critical naturalism and spoken theatre in China, played the leading role in Ibsen’s Nora, among others. The dramaturgy of these plays, typical of the Cultural Revolution, is based on the “Three Prominences” concept. This concept states that of all the characters, the positive ones should be emphasized; among these positive characters, in turn, those with a heroic character should be highlighted; and among the heroic characters, the most heroic figure should be emphasized. Overall, the dramaturgy of


Revolutionary Model Theatre aims to create beautiful, fully developed worker-peasant-soldier figures. In terms of staging, the positive figures brought into focus by the dramaturgy should be further emphasized by being presented in the middle of the stage with full lighting. In contrast, the negative characters should be placed in the corners of the stage in the shadows. The dramaturgy of the model opera was fixed. Acting, sets, and costumes were so detailed that they hardly offered the performers any room for improvisation.

It is important to emphasize that Chinese society in 1966–76 was largely a rural society, and that media such as radio and television were not widespread at that time. For ten years, therefore, the state-directed performance practice across the whole country, from urban factories to village communities, made these model operas the privileged tool of political propaganda and the cultural-ideological symbol of the Cultural Revolution period. It is estimated that 36 million people were sentenced alone in rural areas, of whom between 750,000 and 1.5 million were killed. The same number of people suffered life-long injuries during this time. Phenomena of denunciation, self-incrimination rituals, and even public torture/killing characterized the public life of the Cultural Revolution, as shaped by the Red Guards. The Red Guards were usually composed of young urban men and women who had never experienced a political period other than Mao’s China. Taking Mao’s doctrine of the permanent revolutionization of all cultural institutions literally, these young people rebelled violently against any form of authority, both Confucianist and right-wing. It was thanks to the emergence of the Red Guards that Mao’s rule could be maintained after his disastrous experiment of the so-called Great Leap Forward (1958–62).

In the decade after Mao’s death in 1976, the Cultural Revolution became an important subject of literature, art, and cinema. Still, these unofficial historiographies of the arts always remained controlled by censorship and were therefore never able to deal with the essential questions of guilt and responsibility. The increasing criticism of the effects of China’s market reforms under Deng then even prepared the ground for a posthumous Mao cult in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and commodification of the memory of the Cultural Revolution period began. At the same time, the Central Propaganda Department in Beijing had explicitly prohibited the publication of further works on the Cultural Revolution. This has resulted in the absence of debate about the reasons for the Cultural Revolution, marked by censorship and commodification of memory.

RED opposes this absence of debate about the reasons for the Cultural Revolution by publicly discussing the different experiences of the performers. In

22 See the script of RED in this volume.
contrast to the Scar Literature\textsuperscript{25} of the 1980s, however, the focus is not exclusively on the personal accounts of eyewitnesses but also includes how the time of the Cultural Revolution is interpreted in the cultural products of \textit{The Red Detachment of Women} and their equivalents in popular culture. This question is all the more relevant because our current moment marks the time in which, in Aleida Assman’s terms, the communicative memory of the Cultural Revolution is transformed into cultural memory.

The performance situation of \textit{RED} is significantly shaped by the casting practices underlying the dance performance. Thus, with the dancer Liu Zhuying, who danced \textit{The Red Detachment of Women} several hundred times during the Cultural Revolution, a person enters the stage whose specific experiences with the Cultural Revolution hardly receive any attention in today’s China. In addition, Li Xinmin, a migrant worker, tells her life story by unfolding it in associative proximity to the title heroine of \textit{The Red Detachment of Women}. In the context of this cast, Wen Hui’s choreography technique is significant. It understands the dancer’s body as an archive of forgotten stories and suppressed history—and attempts to tap into these memories to facilitate their public communication to an audience.

Despite all the influences of modern dance, Wen Hui’s relationship to dance is strongly influenced by the physical imprint of Maoism on her body. She has talked about this ambivalent relationship to Maoism on several occasions.\textsuperscript{26} For Wen Hui, this experience of a body that is the agent of her own identity and yet at the same time is always ideologically overwritten becomes the starting point and the aesthetic foundation for all her productions. Wen Hui tries to discover personal and social stories from her body and its memories. Her rehearsal design and theatre work are derived from exactly this understanding—diametrically opposed to the dramaturgy of the “Three Prominences.” In the \textit{Living Dance Studio}, the guiding principle is that no characters are embodied, no roles are played, and

\textsuperscript{25} The term \textit{Scar Literature} refers to works written immediately after the Cultural Revolution, in which the crimes of the Cultural Revolution are settled/recounted. It is often claimed that the name for this literary movement is derived from the story \textit{Scars (Shanghen)}, by Lu Xinhua.

\textsuperscript{26} “Back in the 1960s and 1970s, it was a common sight for us kids to express our admiration and appreciation for various political leaders through our bodies; it was even a source of pride. As a kid, I remember, in our yard each morning and evening, young and old alike gathering around a portrait of Chairman Mao to pay our respects. After we gathered in front of that portrait and reflected on all the bad things we had done that day, we would then perform an affectionate song in Mao’s honour. And that’s how I began dancing, with this ‘Loyalty Dance’. At that time in China, everyone danced more or less the same type of dance; there was no real distinction between the individual sense of body and the collective body [...] In other words, any sense of an individual body vanished.” Wen Hui, “Female Memory Begins with the Body,” in \textit{The Body at Stake: Experiments in Chinese Contemporary Art and Theatre}, ed. Jörg Huber and Zhao Chuan (Bielefeld: transcript, 2013), 133.
therefore no one is highlighted. Everyone brings their identity, memory, and personality equally onto the stage. Performing means sharing the rehearsal experience with the audience.

The script of RED will be followed by the essay *From the Red Detachment to the Women: A Postscript* by the author of RED, Zhuang Jiayun. The impulse for this postscript was Zhuang’s regret that the last part of RED “could not be developed as planned, due to inadequate initiatives, opportunity, budget, and rehearsal time”. In her text, Zhuang especially highlights the feminist potential associated with the afterlife of *The Red Detachment of Women*.

Boris Nikitin, born in 1979 in Basel, where he is also currently based, is the son of Ukrainian-Slovakian-French-Jewish immigrants. He is active as a director within the international independent theatre scene and at German-language municipal theatres. As an author, director and essayist, he has been exploring the representation and production of identity and reality since he graduated from the Institute for Applied Theatre Studies in Giessen in 2008. His production *Hamlet* received the greatest acclaim and toured worldwide. Nikitin is also the founder and curator of the international festival “It’s the real thing,” which devotes itself to exploring documentary works. In his contribution, *Don’t Be Yourself. Notes on the Impossibility of the Documentary*, Nikitin is primarily concerned with how mutual observation generates reality in everyday life and theatre. I see Nikitin’s aesthetic importance in the unique way his theatre criticizes and plays with what Roland Barthes calls “reality effects,” which are a fundamental constituent of certain branches of documentary art. Barthes defined this notion, with regard to literature, as follows:

> By “effect of the real” I mean: language fading into the background, to be supplanted by a certainty of reality: language turning in on itself, burying itself and disappearing, leaving bare what it says.27

As characteristics of this transparency of linguistic signs, Barthes mentions their brevity and simplicity as they are given in the form of the haiku. Through its literary means, the haiku virtually forces the signified to flash. The reality effect is understood by Barthes as a specifically receptive experience: The certainty of an evident given. Applied to the theatre situation, the reality effect can be understood as a moment of reception in which the sign system of the theatre seems not to represent something else (a fictitious role, historical figure, place, etc.), but recedes in favor of “real” being (the concrete performer, this concrete place here and now, etc.). The relevant theatrical means of producing this reality effect are hardly different from the literary means discussed by Barthes in connection with

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the haiku: Brevity, simplicity, and above all, focus on details (not essential to the plot). Therefore, in documentary theatre works, detailed accounts of intimacy are often shared between performers and spectators.

Nikitin’s works create performance situations that intervene in the naïve belief in reality as something self-evident by displaying reality construction as an effect of perceptual biases. Nikitin expresses this very clearly when he puts documentary theatre and illusionary theatre in a surprisingly direct relationship:

Every reality report reproduces its own premises. Premises and norms are collectively recognized fictions, which in their repetition create the illusion of reality. Precisely when documentary theatre claims to represent reality, it must be considered a radical form of illusion theatre, even more so than fictional theatre, in which the fictional character of what is shown and said is always revealed.

So for Nikitin, there is no doubt that human perception, and thus aesthetic experience, is determined by social and historical factors. Therefore, reality effects are always socially and historically situated experiences and depend on a sensibility shared by the theatre-makers and the audience. It is this sociological foundation of perception and aesthetic experience around which Nikitin’s theatre circles.

The premiere of Hamlet took place on September 24, 2016, at Kaserne Basel and it has since been performed over 60 times worldwide. Hamlet is not a retelling of Shakespeare’s material but rather an attempt to develop a theatrical vision concerning identity, illness, and reality. At the center of this vision is the performer and electric musician Juliana Meding, who, as the dazzling Hamlet figure, exposes themselves, their body, and biography to the audience’s gaze. For the spectator, the central experience in Hamlet is usually one of initially rejecting Meding because their address is perceived as a never-ending, self-referential monologue by a weird, narcissistic person. According to Nikitin’s statements, this beginning leads almost a third of the audience to mentally or even physically drop out of the evening. For the rest, after about 45 minutes, something gradually sets in that even they had not expected: Namely, empathy and identification. Hamlet stages a temporal experience that gradually turns something foreign into something familiar. The same reality—that of Meding—is experienced twice. Hamlet

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intends to create permanent doubts about the authenticity of its performer and their biography.

*Hamlet* creates a performance situation that questions the general condition of the possibility of communication situations and investigates the dynamics of stepping into the public eye, the breaking of social taboos, and the vulnerability that arises when people start to make themselves visible and audible. It is not least a plea for a utopia of a vulnerability that is not a deficiency of being human but a revolutionary ability.

Lee Kyung-Sung was born in Basel in 1983 and studied directing at Chung-Ang University in Seoul before completing his postgraduate studies at the Central School of Speech and Drama in London. In 2007, he founded the theatre company *Creative VaQi* and has been its artistic director ever since. He and his troupe are among the most influential representatives of the “younger” South Korean theatre-makers that have increasingly drawn attention to themselves since the turn of the century. This generation has permanently shifted the coordinates of South Korean theatre by clearly breaking away from the questions and working methods of their predecessors, whose works were primarily determined by the struggle to reconcile the concept of drama imported from the West with traditional Korean performative practices, such as the *gut* (shamanic rites). Lee’s artistic generation has replaced this approach, which revolves around one’s own artistic identity, with a rigorous exploration of contemporary issues. Lee explains his artistic approach in his contribution *Practice of Theatre—Rehearsal of Life* and comments on some of his works, such as *Let Us Move Your Sofa* (2010), which deals with the commercialization and anonymization of Seoul’s public space, and his examination of the Sewol ferry disaster in *Before After* in 2015. This work focuses not so much on a documentary re-enactment of the ferry disaster but rather on the question of how pain turns into narration and eventually ends up being a commodity. The tragedy, in which 304 people lost their lives in April 2014, becomes a starting point for investigating the specific vulnerability of the modern human condition, which results from its increasing entanglement with technological agencies. The production pays special attention to the impact the mass media’s handling of such technological catastrophes has on the social consciousness. In *Before After*, a fundamental component of Lee’s work becomes visible: It repeatedly deals with questions of the ethics of perception and representation—especially in the face of the pain of others.

Lee’s first works took place at sites of everyday life, such as pedestrian crossings, public squares, and hotel rooms. Since the production *Namsan Documenta* in 2014, which was based on research into the history of the Namsan Arts Center, he has increasingly conceived his works for the more concentrated situation of the theatre. A salient characteristic of these works is the intensive research that the *Creative VaQi* collective undertakes in developing their plays. This research goes far beyond desk work. It almost always involves the entire ensemble and takes the form of long-term on-site visits. The impressions gained in this way are
evaluated as autonomously as possible by the performers and processed aesthetically by them trying to develop a personal attitude to the material. In this way, the rehearsals become a process in which an attempt is made to work out the lines of connection between the different materials and the performers’ views of them. The rehearsal thus becomes a method that is not concerned with developing a generalized reading but, on the contrary, with discovering the contradictions in the material and finding ways to let them coexist unreconciled. The aim is thus to produce a social panorama of contradictions rather than a smoothed-out reading. Lee understands his role as that of a mediator, which is very similar to Zhao Chuan’s working method.

Love Story by Lee and his collective dates from 2018. It illustrates very well how the collective research work leads to the development of a performance piece. Moreover, Love Story shows how Lee never relies merely on the reality effect but always irritates or intensifies it through revealed acts of imagination and fiction. Love Story tells the stories of relationships among North/South Korean couples from the time when South Korean companies were still operating in the Kaesong Industrial Complex. The Kaesong Industrial Region in North Korea served as a symbol of collaborative economic development with South Korea. In 2016, this park was closed in protest against a North Korean missile launch, and all South Korean companies had to leave. The play tells the story of the suddenly separated tragic couples, who are also a symbol for the situation of the two Koreas. Developed from research and interviews with South Korean business people, among others, the play attempts to bridge the irreducible distance between the couples and states by means of the imagination. A central aspect of this is the invention of North Korean characters with whom the audience is supposed to empathize on a personal level. To do this, the cast members have developed a performance style that constantly enters and exits the characters to provide information about how their background knowledge of the characters was researched and where their own fantasies were incorporated into the performance.

The performance situation of Love Story is that the South Korean actors demonstrate to their audience in South Korea how they imagine their neighbors in North Korea. The transformation of the actors into their North Korean characters is revealed, and the research underlying this acting process is also made visible. Through this performance situation, which relies on strong alienation effects, the very mechanism of projecting oneself onto the other is made visible and placed in the context of the South’s North Korea policy.
RESONANCES

In physics, the term resonance (from Latin *resonare*: to reverberate) refers to the relationship between two bodies, where one excites the other to vibrate. The essence of the resonance phenomenon is that the reverberation of this other body takes place in its *own* frequency. Resonance is therefore a response to another *expressed in a body’s own frequency*, as opposed to an echo, where the body would reverberate in the same frequency of the body that excited it.

This volume aims to depict a specific theatrical resonance by tracing how the ideas of the postdramatic and dramaturgy stimulated the theatre scenes in Korea and, especially, in mainland China. I will show that the institutional and aesthetic beginnings of discourses around dramaturgy and postdramatic theatre in China and Germany are closely interwoven.

When it comes to postdramatic theatre in China, the Faculty of Dramaturgy and Applied Theatre at the Central Academy of Drama in Beijing is the driving force of its practice. Li Yinan founded the faculty in 2015 and oriented it from the beginning towards a German model of dramaturgy that would work radically on expanding the possibilities of theatre. That is very much in contrast to the Anglo-Saxon understanding of the dramaturg, which is identified with the figure of a literary manager. Since Li, as the translator of Lehmann’s book into Chinese,\(^3\) introduced the concept of postdramatic theatre into the Chinese theatre discourse, postdramatic dramaturgy played a leading role in the faculty from the very beginning. This concept of a specifically postdramatic dramaturgy has been translated into Chinese theatre studies and theatre practice by Li with the term *juchang*. *Juchang* has thus become the central term of resonance of the postdramatic in China. Li originally established the term in the course of her translation of Hans-Thies Lehmann’s *Postdramatisches Theater*. In 2010, she translated the title and term as *Houxiju Juchang*. The word *juchang*, which was neglected in mainland Chinese theatre studies at the time, served primarily as a counter-term to the established term for drama, *xiju*. The term *juchang* thus had the purpose of pointing to the dimension of theatricality/performativity. Since then, Li and I have also repeatedly emphasized the dramaturgical practices of narration and the development of performance situations as crucial aspects of *juchang* within our artistic and academic activities. In this regard, certain Chinese theatre-makers working since the late 1990s, such as Wen Hui and Zhao Chuan, have been a particularly prominent point of reference for us. Our pedagogy results from an experiment with a certain form of German theatre that has resonated with artists, scholars, and students from China.

In physics again, resonance can also lead to mutual amplification of vibration, and in fact, such amplification of postdramatic thought is what has been going on

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in the last decade between Europe and Asia. The appropriation of postdramatic dramaturgical thought by Asian theatre-makers will surely significantly alter the sound of postdramatic practice in the world.

**Postdramatic Theatre in Germany**

The beginning of the institutionalization of postdramatic theatre in the German-speaking world is, on the one hand, linked to the revival of the genre of documentary theatre in the 1990s and, on the other hand, to the foundation of the Institute for Applied Theatre Studies at the Justus Liebig University Giessen in 1982 by Andrzej Wirth and Hans-Thies Lehmann. Lehmann highlighted the Institute’s basic aesthetic assumptions in dialogue with a detailed analysis of avant-garde theatre in the 1980s and 1990s in his publication *Postdramatisches Theater* in 1999. It is no coincidence that the representatives of the latest period of documentary theatre in Germany are mostly graduates of the Giessen Institute for Applied Theatre Studies. This Institute has made a significant contribution to expanding the formal language of classical documentary theatre. This can be traced back to the specific research practiced at the Giessen Institute, which sought to discover “theatre forms beyond drama and beyond acting”.

This research approach was accompanied by an absence of actors and classical theatre repertoire during training. The students in Giessen were therefore referred back to themselves as material and performers from the very beginning, and they experimented early on with alternative forms of text and authorship. Schlewitt and Brenk write about the methods used by the students of the Giessen Institute:

> Early on, experiments were carried out with documentary material, among other things; pieces were developed on the basis of specially collected interview material; the students, as performers, used their biographies as material. Rimini Protokoll’s theatre, which can function entirely without actors, is rooted in the structures of the Giessen rehearsal stage.

This educational practice explains the paradigmatic concept of the body as an archive of personal memory that took the place that documents had in the classical documentary theatre of Piscator and Weiss.

These developments, strongly connected to changes in theatre education, have found buyers in the theatre market and have thus been able to spread. In the Berlin HAU under the directorship of Matthias Lilienthal (2003–2012), the grad-

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32 Nikitin, Schlewitt and Brenk, “Vorwort,” 8.
uates of the Giessen school have found a production and performance venue that has effectively implemented their new way of dealing with reality. Lilienthal’s dictum of the “hysterical addiction to reality”\textsuperscript{33} has been the programmatic guideline that has bound groups and artists such as Hans-Werner Kroesinger, Rimini Protokoll, She She Pop, and Boris Nikitin to itself for a long time. The networking of production sites on the independent scene then led to a multiplication of these forms. In addition to the HAU, this network consists of TAT (Frankfurt/Main), Mousonturm (Frankfurt/Main), Kampnagel (Hamburg), Podewil Berlin, Sophiensäle (Berlin), FFT (Düsseldorf), and Gessnerallee (Zurich) as well as a diverse range of festivals. However, this narrative only represents one (if probably the most powerful) line of tradition in Germany’s younger postdramatic theatre. Since then, new theatre schools such as Hildesheim have joined the Giessen Institute. Furthermore, the history of theatre in the GDR also provided important impulses for the development of postdramatic theatre. In the production Dreamland (Traumland, 1985), the East Berlin theatre group Zinnober presented their dreams—after months of dealing with them—as a personal document, an “imprint” of their subjective state of mind with all the anxieties typical of GDR society\textsuperscript{34}.

The presence of postdramatic theatre on the stages of the independent theatre scene in the last twenty years has also had a major impact on the German municipal theatre system (\textit{Stadttheater}). This influence is manifested in the rapid increase in documentary procedures and the exploration of new ways of collaborating, such as play development (\textit{Stückentwicklung}). The critique of representation, which is constitutive of postdramatic theatre, is also moving into the municipal theatre system, which is reflected in the increase in debates about diversity and inclusion in theatre.

One can conclude that in Germany, postdramatic theatre works have long since found their way out of the independent scene and embarked on a march through the institution that eventually will lead to new hybrid forms. Even the aesthetics of realism, and the ways of acting based on it, have been lastingly changed by the arrival of postdramatic theatre in Germany.

\textbf{Dramaturgy in China}

Dramaturgy \textit{avant la lettre} in China started already with the Movement for a New Culture (\textit{Xin wenhua yundong}), which was active in the 1910s and 20s. The movement’s affection for and involvement with Western spoken theatre was an important building block for the modernization movement in China. As early as 1918, the movement dedicated a special issue of its journal to Ibsen’s realism. Further important marks in the development of dramaturgical practice in China

\textsuperscript{33} Nikitin, Schlewitt and Brenk, “Vorwort,” 11.
\textsuperscript{34} Cf. Nikitin, Schlewitt and Brenk, “Vorwort,” 7.
are Mao’s *Talks at the Yanan Forum on Literature and Art* in May 1942, as well as the activities of Tian Han after the founding of the republic in 1949 and eventually the theatrical practice of the model operas (*yangbanxi*) in the Cultural Revolution. In all these cases, as with Lessing, dramaturgy can be understood as a *dispositif* that, after the collapse of the rules of art of the imperial era, attempts to redefine the relationship between art, war, revolution, and people. Shanghai theatre scholar William Sun also assumes the existence of a dramaturgy *avant la lettre* in China in his article “Official and Unofficial Dramaturgs: Dramaturgy in China.” However, he dates its beginnings a little later, with the foundation of the state in October 1949:

> It [dramaturgy] was badly needed by the new regime eager to overhaul the entire theatre system. Without knowing the term “dramaturgy,” or the exact meaning of the word, they usually set up an office, or a department called the Artistic Office or Office of Artistic Creation, into which they assigned playwrights, directors, and critics/editors.\(^\text{35}\)

In this context, the activity of the playwright Tian Han, who headed the Bureau of Chinese Opera Improvement shortly after the founding of the People’s Republic, is of particular importance. Mao commissioned Tian Han to reform the Chinese Opera. This project, which is enormous in significance and scope, made Tian’s activity very influential. Sun describes him as China’s chief dramaturg and compares his work with that of Goethe at the court of Weimar. However, during the Cultural Revolution, Tian Han was politically persecuted, and he died in prison in 1968. After the end of the Cultural Revolution, developments from the pre-revolutionary period were revived, and the decision-making authority then united in Tian Han was decentralized. The chief dramaturgy of China, formerly linked to his person,

> has been loosely taken over by various Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and government officials. Their work includes conceiving and announcing dramatic themes periodically according to the needs of the CCP and governments on different levels, oftentimes to coincide with specific anniversaries.\(^\text{36}\)

Although Sun acknowledges the existence of such an “unofficial dramaturgical activity”\(^\text{37}\) in China, he concludes that dramaturgy is still not an established profession in China, and he implies pretty much that it shouldn’t be one, since the dramaturgical activity could still be carried out by the unofficial dramaturgs,

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37 Sun, “Official and Unofficial Dramaturgs: Dramaturgy in China.”
working mostly in state-administered organizations as “archivists, critics, playwrights, directors, and/or administrators.”

Such a claim is what the training approach at the Dramaturgy Faculty in Beijing under Li Yinan’s aegis contradicts. It is symptomatic that Sun, very early on in his article, claims that Lessing’s Hamburg Dramaturgy is “no longer a relevant use,” whereas it is precisely Lessing’s approach to dramaturgy as a questioning of power structures that underlies the work of the Beijing Dramaturgy Faculty.

**Juchang as a Specific Mode of Postdramatic Theatre in China**

As in Giessen, it was also true of the faculty in Beijing that the theatre training was intended for a theatre that did not yet exist, i.e., one that had to be significantly shaped by the (later) works of the students. In the field of theatre education, it was the Faculty of Dramaturgy and Applied Theatre at Beijing’s Central Academy of Drama that was the first training institution in mainland China to include aesthetic discourses and creative procedures around a postdramatic theatre practice in its curriculum, especially by relating to the tradition of the German documentary theatre. To understand the massive resonance that the postdramatic theatre eventually created in mainland China, I want to focus on the practice of the so-called juchang theatre-makers and their situatedness within the Chinese theatre history of the early 20th century, when spoken theatre (huaju) reached China via Japan.

The already mentioned *Movement for a New Culture* (*Xin Wenhua Yundong*), supported by young intellectuals, saw in spoken theatre (huaju) a means of reforming the old “feudal” culture, which it held partly responsible for China’s lack of modernity. In 1918, the magazine of the *Movement for a New Culture* published an issue on theatre reform as well as on Ibsen, which shows how much the movement’s focus was based on the aesthetics of Western realism. The movement’s attacks were directed against the traditional xiqu opera—in the West also often referred to as “Chinese opera”—which they accused of being distant from life. In contrast, the movement ascribed to spoken theatre a potential for social renewal. The actors of the *Movement for a New Culture* overlapped in many ways with those of the so-called *May Fourth Movement* (*Wusi Yundong*), which has been described (including by Mao himself) as the forerunner of the Communist Party.

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38 Sun, 84.
39 Sun, 82.
40 In 1907, the *Spring Willow Society*, founded in Japan by Chinese foreign students in 1906, staged the first spoken theatre play in Chinese theatre history in Tokyo: An adaptation of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* entitled *The Black Slaves Sigh to Heaven* (*Heinu Yutian Lu*).
41 This movement, which called for a radical modernization and democratization of China, arose from the protests of Chinese students against the transfer of German concession areas to Japan, which began on May 4, 1919.
of China (CPC). This intertwining of the two movements with the founding history of the CPC shows how important the form of realistic spoken theatre has been and continues to be for nation-building in China.

The distinction between spoken theatre (*huaju*) and the aforementioned *xiqu* opera was then institutionalized after 1949 by the founding of training schools and companies that kept the two practices separated. Realism of Western European provenance mixed with Soviet realism of the Stanislavski style was implemented as the educational norm for theatre education. Li Yinan’s translation of *Postdramatisches Theater* has intervened in this aesthetic and ideological dominance of realistic spoken theatre. She expressed the difference between the words “drama” and “theatre,” which is constitutive for the translation of Lehmann’s text, with the words *xiju* and *juchang*. The term *xiju* represents the dramatic with its focus on text and literature, whereas *juchang* emphasizes, among other things, the reality of performance. The term *juchang* has been heavily criticized because, in its last consequence, as intended by Li, it aims to represent an understanding of theatricality as performativity that did not exist in the academic discourse on the theatre in China before Li’s translation. In this context, it is important to emphasize that the term *juchang* was not invented by Li but is linked, on the one hand, to academic theatre discourse in the 1930s and 1940s in China, and on the other hand, to the self-descriptions of independent Chinese contemporary theatre-makers.

In defining *juchang*, Li builds extensively on statements by contemporary Chinese theatre artists. These artists use the term *juchang* for self-designation or to describe their theatrical work to distinguish themselves from *xiju*, which is connected with textuality and thus, due to a censorship practice that focuses mainly on text, with ideology and suppression. Among these artists are the founding figures and exponents of experimental theatre in China (Mou Sen, Wu Wenguang, Wen Hui, Zhao Chuan, and Zhang Xian) and the generation that followed them (Li Jianjun, Li Ning, and Wang Mengfan). Li emphasizes that the spatial dimension is crucial for the performance practice of these *juchang* artists. She highlights this spatial dimension through her translation of theatre with the word *juchang*, since the semantic field of the Chinese character “chang” is formed around the term “space.” Space has always been a contested resource for *juchang* artists, as the majority of resources have been put at the service of the aesthetic practice of spoken theatre. As a result, the struggle for public space for performance has become a central theme of *juchang* theatre. Quite a few of the *juchang* artists have therefore founded their own studios on the outskirts of Beijing, for example, Wu Wenguang and Wen Hui’s *Caochangdi Workstation/Living Dance Studio* (*Cao-changdi Gongzuozhan/Shenghuo Wudao Gongzuoshi*) and Tian Gebing’s *Paper Tiger Studio* (*Beijing Zhilaohu Xiju Gongzuoshi*),\(^{42}\) or *Grass Stage* (*Caotaiban*) around Zhao Chuan, who developed theatre forms that make repeated brief in-

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\(^{42}\) The workshops and studios of these groups no longer exist.
terventions in state-controlled space. In view of China’s enormous size, the number of juchang theatre-makers is remarkably small, and they are mainly concentrated in the metropolises of Beijing and Shanghai. The catalog of the MCAM Museum in Shanghai, published in 2015 for the special exhibition on *30 Years of Experimental Theater in China*, lists 29 names of experimental theatre practitioners—and this includes Danny Yung from Hong Kong.43

Since juchang works are largely determined by their positioning beyond the official theatre landscape, it is appropriate to briefly sketch this official theatre landscape here to provide the background against which juchang theatre stands out in its specific modes of production.

The official Chinese theatre landscape is clearly marked by the state’s influence. This influence takes two main forms: first, the form of censorship (shencha), which denotes the direct intervention of official authorities in creative work, and second, the mode of state-led commercialization. Shannon Steen gives a very good description of how censorship is situated within the Chinese theatre system. I quote her here in detail:

Contrary to popular accounts in the international mediascape, censorship in China is at once more institutionally specific, inconsistently practiced, and deeply internalized by its artists than is easy to comprehend from the outside. Expressive controls are primarily content-driven (in other words, they tend to be exercised over certain topics, leaving formal experimentation largely open), and operate largely within state-sponsored arts organizations and training schools. Artists learn to avoid certain topics (the Tiananmen protests, Tibet, ethnic separatism, sexually explicit material, and so forth) while training for their prospective fields, with the result that they often self-censor when creating new work. In this way, the operation of censorship in China looks more like the forms of Gramscian soft power that we generally associate with liberal democracies than we might expect, and even the top-down organization of expressive control is more inconsistent than is often understood. The state censorship office will sometimes allow performances of shows that might fall foul of taboo topics, but that they think generate a useful discussion: They will sometimes, for example, send a representative on the closing night of a performance who, after the show, will declare the production out of bounds and closed—but only after the run has been completed, thus retaining the external impression of state control while also allowing distribution of nonexplicitly endorsed ideas.44

However, in recent works that deal with the Chinese theatrical landscape, as well as in the words of the independent theatre-makers themselves, the state influence in its second form is increasingly emphasized: namely the state-controlled commercialization of the theatre. To make this specific “connection of state, market

and culture in China”,45 which began after the end of the Cultural Revolution (1966–76), nameable, the cultural journalist Mark Siemons uses the term “culture industry”.46 He argues that, in contrast to the rather pragmatic use of the term in English, the term culture industry, as the Communist Party of China uses it, takes on exactly the polemical meaning that Horkheimer and Adorno gave it, namely that of “a plan condensed into a seamless system.”47 The term culture industry was first used officially in 2001 in a five-year plan. Subsequently, research institutes for the national culture industry were established at Beijing University and Shanghai Jiaotong University. Since 2005, Shenzhen has hosted several culture industry fairs, and the eleventh five-year plan in 2006 gave the culture industry paradigm almost hegemonic status.48 It calls for the “continued transformation of state cultural institutions into commercial enterprises,”49 regardless of whether they are “film studios, television production facilities, theatres or intermediary organizations”.50 Siemons interprets the emergence of a Chinese culture industry as a necessary consequence of the erosion of central political concepts associated with the Cultural Revolution. The Cultural Revolution produced an ideological nominalism that made everyone who did not use the right words a victim of the political elite that was currently ruling. In particular, this nominalism eroded the term “people”, which, due to its career in the Cultural Revolution, has lost its compelling nature and brought the party into a troubling situation, since it conceives of itself as the representative of the people. By implementing the concept of a “culture industry,” the Party enabled itself to redesign what formerly was “the will of the people” as the will of culture consumers in the new millennium. That can be seen especially in statements like that of the former deputy minister of culture and vice president, Li Yuanchao: “It is popular culture that makes culture accessible to ordinary people and that really puts the right to consume culture in the hands of the people.”51

Purely in terms of production, one could characterize the juchang theatre workers as trying to escape the influence of the culture industry described above. Many juchang works are therefore inevitably created as international co-productions. In the 1980s, international co-productions were still being made mainly within the framework of highly official bilateral cultural programs without the participation of juchang theatre professionals. Today's theatre cooperations are

46 Siemons, 62.
47 Siemons, 62.
48 Cf. Siemons, 71–73.
49 Siemons, 72.
50 Siemons, 72.
51 Siemons, 65.
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highly dynamic compared to those of that earlier time and have been supplemented by various new formats. The residency programs of national cultural institutes, cooperation between Chinese theatre-makers and international theatre festivals, or directly with municipal theatres or theatre academies and universities are only the most important phenomena showing how much cultural exchange with China has changed. The diversification of formats has been accompanied by rapid growth in the number of collaborations. In terms of production, the juchang works thus oscillate between the extremely limited performance opportunities granted by the Chinese culture industry and the international theatre market, mainly European and Asian theatre festivals.

Bibliography


Rethinking Theatricality
A Conversation on Postdramatic Theatre and Chinese *Juchang*

*Li Yinan, Boris Nikitin, Wang Mengfan, and Kai Tuchmann*

TUCHMANN: The book *Postdramatisches Theater* by Hans-Thies Lehmann was published in 1999 and translated into Chinese in 2010. Together with the translator of this seminal text, Prof. Li Yinan, and two outstanding theatre-makers working in China and the German-speaking theatre market, namely Wang Mengfan and Boris Nikitin, I want to discuss what kind of traces this text and the concept of postdramatic theatre have left in the European and Chinese theatre landscape. I am particularly interested in the controversial debates that have been and are still being conducted about it. A recapitulation of these controversies is especially relevant now, as the third edition of the Chinese translation is being prepared.

Perhaps we can first try to define the term. What is this “postdramatic theatre”? I will give you some keywords and invite you to add to this.

According to Hans-Thies Lehmann, postdramatic theatre is characterized by the fact that it favors the so-called theatrical axis over the inner-stage axis. The postdramatic theatre thus understands the act of communication between stage and auditorium as the central artistic material. This theatre is no longer primarily concerned with arranging a text invented by an author on stage. The focus on the process of communication is accompanied by a dramaturgical abandonment of the focus on drama/action/imitation that had previously existed in theatre. Instead of this triad, there is what one can describe an emphasis on the ceremonial. In terms of staging, this leads to a dehierarchization of the theatrical means: the performers’ bodies, the light,
the sound, the atmosphere stand on an equal footing with the text. Historically, Lehmann locates the beginning of postdramatic theatre in the 1970s. He sees it as a reaction to the world as it was being changed by information technologies.

Yinan, as a theatre scholar, would you like to supplement this first attempt at a definition and tell us why and how you translated this text?

LI: You are right. The postdramatic theatre pays special attention to the audience’s gaze. The mechanism of art is thus extended and becomes one of the social mechanisms. Literature/text descends from the top of the theatrical hierarchy to an equal position alongside other elements. This is partly a result of the development of aesthetics (in the sense of a “science of perception,” which is the original meaning of the word) in the new media age. The postdramatic theatre becomes rather an art of performativity instead of an art of representation. Lehmann not only provides us with a way of describing and analyzing new theatre but also gives the possibility of rethinking theatricality.

In the Chinese context, dramatic theatre used to be exotic, an intruder. The performative aspects of traditional Chinese theatre, on the other hand, were overlooked or despised, which led to a historical record full of ruptures, self-deprecation, and contradictions. Chinese scholars have been using terminology imported from 19th-century Europe to describe and analyze theatre, which is not only inaccurate and insufficient but also led to a decline in the quality of Chinese theatre, which was only copying the Western “masters.” Today, when global theatre cultures are getting to know each other much more deeply and are interweaving with each other in a more complicated way, introducing Lehmann’s terminology (which is the opposite to the 19th-century European understanding of theatre) seems necessary, even urgent.

TUCHMANN: In his work, Lehmann makes a strict distinction between the terms “drama” and “theatre.” You translate these terms with “xiju” and “juchang.” What is the difference between the two concepts xiju (drama) and juchang (theatre) in the Chinese context? What is the relationship between them?

LI: Until now, Chinese scholars have had a very narrow understanding of theatre, namely as huaju (spoken drama), which was introduced into China from Europe via Japan at the beginning of the 20th century with the experiments of the Spring Willow Society. On the other hand, Chinese traditional theatre has been excluded from the theoretical theatre discourse. The focus of Chinese Theatre Studies has lain upon the dramatic text, which is closely related to China’s particular way of modernizing by following the 19th-century European model.

Another focus has existed almost from the very beginning of modern Chinese theatre but has not received widespread attention. In 1923, Song Chunfang first noticed the difference between the notions of “drama” and “theatre” when introducing Edward Gordon Craig’s understanding of theatri-
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In The actor and the Über-Marionette⁴ to China. During the 1930s and 1940s, Zhou Yibai and Dong Meikan also made efforts to differentiate two aspects in theatre studies—the dramatic and the theatrical—and laid particular stress upon theatricality as opposed to literature/textuality. They used various terms for the opposing pair of concepts—wenxue vs. wutai (literature vs. stage), antou vs. changshang (on the desk vs. mise-en-scène) as well as wenxue vs. yanju (literary text vs. performance). When translating Postdramatisches Theater, I preferred accuracy to interpretation (for example, interpretively translating “drama” as “literature” or “text” is, for me, inappropriate.) And I would rather use existing Chinese words, not create new ones. Xiju and juchang both have lived in the Chinese language for a long time. In “Zhongguo juchang shi”,⁵ Zhou Yibai uses juchang as a term that corresponds almost exactly with what Lehmann means by “das Theater.” In Hongkong and Taiwan, the term juchang is also used widely to translate “theatre.”

Since the publication of my translation of Lehmann’s book, it has encountered acclaim as well as denunciation. Criticism is concentrated on my choice of using the term juchang (rather than xiju) to translate “theatre.” At one conference, I was even scolded for “blindly copying the trendy jargon of the ignorant Hong Kong and Taiwan scholars.” This made me start my deeper studies of this particular term juchang more consciously. As I discovered, not only Zhou Yibai and the (for some Mainland scholars) “ignorant” Hong Kong and Taiwan colleagues, but quite a few independent theatre-makers in Mainland China itself, such as Wen Hui, Wu Wenguang, Zhang Xian, and Tian Gebing have been using the term juchang to define what they do, while resolutely rejecting the more common term xiju, whose stress on text (which is closely related to ideology) means for them, oppression.

TUCHMANN: Mengfan, I would like to know from you, as a Chinese artist, whether and to what extent Lehmann’s concept of postdramatic theatre has influenced you?

WANG: I don’t think I understood the book at all. Later, I went to Germany to continue my studies in art history, and for some reason, I started making theatre. I began to understand the book after I did my first piece, 50/60-Old Ladies dance juchang (50/60-Ayimen De Wudao Juchang) . So I cannot say that the book or this notion itself has influenced my creative work. But when I started creating, it gave me a standpoint to define my work. I began to understand where my work stands in the context of contemporary Western theatre and

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in history. I also started thinking about what theatre I’ll make in contemporary Chinese theatre in the future.

TUCHMANN: Yinan, you say that this term “juchang” is, above all, a term used by Chinese artists who, as independent theatre-makers, stand outside the system to talk about their work. Can you explain to us: What is the official system, the Chinese theatre system, to which juchang is in opposition? And how exactly does it enter into this opposition? Who are these artists?

LI: As I said, the controversy the book aroused seemed to be about the translation of the term “theatre.” However, as time went by, I realized it was not so. It was because of the notion of theatricality, in German “Theatralität”. I translated it into juchangxing (theatricality), while the mainstream theatre study has always translated it as xijuxing (dramaticism). Tan Peisheng wrote a book in 1981, “Taolun juxing” (Discussing dramaticism), which is still part of the canon at The Central Academy of Drama. He translated theatricality into xijuxing (dramaticism). However, what independent theatre-makers like Mengfan do does not conform to the principle of dramaticism.

You might ask what this dramaticism is. I believe most of you here are active in theatre circles; you are probably not unfamiliar with the term. The book Tan wrote drew mainly on three Western theorists, all from the 18th and 19th centuries. One is Schlegel; one is Baker, the founder of the School of Drama at Yale University, from around the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century. The third is Archer, who wrote Play-Making. All three writers focus on drama, especially Baker, who talked about how to write the particular form of well-made plays. These theories are all about dramaticism, and they are identical to what Lehmann calls the dramatic theatre of Europe in the 19th century. Back then, the characteristics of drama were identical with the characteristics of theatre because the dramatic theatre was a very popular art form at that time. Later in the 20th century, though, some features of theatre became different from those of dramatic literature. The characteristics of theatre received greater emphasis. From this perspective, theatricality stands opposed to dramatic literature. With the growing emphasis on performance in new theatre works, the characteristics of theatre are changing. However, in what are considered “theatrical circles” in China, people are still making plays according to the principle of well-made plays in the 18th and 19th centuries. Xiju is an apt translation for this. Lehmann and I both think that it’s a good equivalent for “drama.” And at the center of dramaticism is actually what Kai mentioned: dramatic action. Dramatic action is emphasized to prevent the audience from being bored, to arouse their interest. This is still the principle of

making drama, but not of theatre works like Mengfan’s at all. This is one reason this book is looked upon with skepticism in China.

TUCHMANN: Boris, could you describe the effect of the term and the text Post-dramatisches Theater on your work? And more generally, how would you describe the influence that this term has had on the German-speaking theatre scene?

NIKITIN: I was born and grew up in postdramatic theatre, so to speak, because I studied at the Institute for Applied Theatre Studies, which was more or less co-founded and decisively influenced by Hans-Thies Lehmann. In this context, it is very important to note that, in Giessen, the concept of postdramatic theatre is not only reflected in what happens on stage but is fundamentally part of the structure of the training and development of this institute. This is manifested above all in the fact that, in contrast to almost every other theatre school in Germany, if you study at Giessen, your training is not compartmentalized by specialization: Some study directing, others study acting, others study stage design, and others study lighting design; but rather: Everybody does everything. The theatre is understood there as a multimedia art discipline, where everyone should be informed about all the different means of artistic expression. One consequence of this, however, is that there are no real actors or no people who are trained for this purpose. That was a crucial premise in the founding of the institute: A theatre without the hegemony of the actor or of the canonical dramatic text.

In other words, one had to solve a problem first: Who do you now work with on stage and what should happen there? What is the alternative to the classically trained actors and actresses who have a trained speaking technique, who have learned to use different acting techniques to portray characters and not be themselves? The solution, of course, was not to let amateurs play Shakespeare, but rather to look for completely different forms of text and content that could be performed by people who are not amateurs. In other words, it was a question of a new constellation: of people on the stage, content, and the space in which this takes place. This led directly to the development of forms of documentary theatre or performative theatre. Here, people are on stage who no longer represent a character but who go on stage as themselves and negotiate themselves, their biography, their body.

TUCHMANN: There is this famous sentence by the theatre critic Gerhard Stadelmaier, who speaks of Giessen as a site of disaster for German theatre. Nowadays, the dramaturg Bernd Stegemann is strongly critical of postdramatic aesthetics, whose documentary variants he accuses of serving the ideology of capitalism by uncritically reproducing its surfaces. Both examples indicate that the idea of the postdramatic has always been—and probably still is—very controversial. From this perspective, would you like to talk again
about the influence of postdramatic theatre on the German-speaking theatre scene?

NIKITIN: I would say that Lehmann did not, of course, invent the postdramatic theatre with *Postdramatisches Theater*, but he described it and made certain phenomena understandable that had begun to be effective since the 1970s. It also has a great deal to do with emancipatory movements that have impacted the theatre and strengthened the independent scene. After the appearance of *Postdramatisches Theater*, which is part of this development, especially from the 2000s to the present day, there was an extreme expansion and strengthening of the independent scene in Germany. Even though there have been repeated attempts to neutralize them, I believe there are huge differences in production methods and aesthetics between theatre and dance productions in the independent scene and the municipal theatre.

TUCHMANN: That’s quite exciting; it means that, for the German context, you would say that this publication is something like the grammar of the independent scene. A point that follows almost seamlessly from what Yinan said about the term *juchang* in China. Mengfan has brought along short video clips documenting her *juchang* work: Excerpts from her works *50/60-Old Ladies dance juchang* and *The Divine Sewing Machine* (Shensheng Fengrenji). Maybe you will now show us these excerpts and tell us a bit about these projects.

WANG: As you can see, I’ve always chosen to work with unprofessional actors. Both pieces start from my focus on people’s bodies, specifically Chinese people’s bodies, how they are shaped under the socialist ideology and aesthetics, and how they speak. I think when they are presented as a group, as you see here, a group of square dance aunties or a group of kids—when they are presented as a group, something hidden will surface, something physical perhaps. Something else the two pieces have in common is a relationship with performativity. *50/60-Old Ladies dance juchang* is about square dancing, while *The Divine Sewing Machine* is about speech intonation (which is the preferred method of elementary education in China). The second piece may not seem to refer to speech intonation, but in the beginning, I started working out of interest in the way kids speak. So what we are trying to do in theatre is to create a
different body from the body of our daily lives. Kai asked me earlier about making theatre in China and our relationship with the academies. After showing this piece, the question I most often get is: “What does this mean? Can you sum up in one sentence what you are trying to express?” I think this is a common question the ordinary Chinese audience has, and this is related to drama as it is taught at the academies. They need a work to have a plot so that they can understand it. Quite on the contrary, my work has no story or plot whatsoever. What the kids say on stage, as you might have heard a little in the video, has no meaning, and delivers no information. By presenting such a piece in the Chinese theatre, I mean to pose a question to the audience, that without anything to grasp, how do we read the bodies themselves, and why do we look at such bodies?

NIKITIN: I think it’s very similar in Germany and Switzerland. A far greater diversity of people is visible on stage: people with diseases, people with disabilities, and migration backgrounds. Representation has been broken up as a result, and this is a very central concern of the developments that Lehmann describes as postdramatic. These developments have only been enabled by breaking up the drama, because the drama has been synonymous with the canon. The canon is a historical, literary canon that has only made available a certain repertoire of roles with an apparent division of race, gender, and gender hierarchies and an evident typecasting: Who plays Romeo, who plays Juliet? Who plays Lady Macbeth and who plays Macbeth? The guidelines were very clear as to who was represented on stage at all. So you first had to thwart the drama to make room for other forms.

Just one more short thing that is of concern to me: When you postulate things like “postdramatic theatre,” it often has the character of: “This is the new theatre now and what was before it is bad!” I think it is crucial to point out that it is not about destroying dramatic theatre. It’s about expanding the theatre as a space of possibility. It is not per se about completely displacing the old. That won’t work because then you end up provoking reaction, and that’s what Bernd Stegemann is. Many traditionalists feel very strongly threatened. Then I always say: Don’t panic! It’s not about destroying dramatic theatre but about expanding it.

TUCHMANN: Now Boris has just made the point that there is a decidedly political dimension in postdramatic theatre; for example, documentary procedures give people a stage who are otherwise not represented in the dominant public discourse; the aesthetics of postdramatic theatre thus quasi creates a new public sphere around these people. How would you see this point for China? Are there correspondences?

LI: I think that promoting theatre without dismissing drama is an important principle of postdramatic theatre. Boris said this well. Bringing up the postdra-
matic theatre is actually expanding theatrical art. Theatre is inclusive. In China, the concept of the theatre arts is more general. The kind of non-dramatic theatre that Mengfan does, makes up less than five percent of all performances in China. These works are more often shown in the relatively marginal, less grand theatre spaces. They won’t be shown, for example, in the National Theatre. They are put on in the smaller theatres, even in specific sites, in the irregular spaces, and receive no governmental financial support. So really, these theatre theorists are saying that drama is now in crisis, that Chinese drama today is not good, not well-written, and young people like Mengfan are to blame, that their existence poses a threat to drama? I don’t think such a threat exists. Mengfan’s existence threatens no one. But allowing them to live is a great thing. And I think allowing young creators like Mengfan to exist is one very political aspect of postdramatic theatre. Not that what they do is political in the sense of propaganda slogans, but to allow their existence to supplement or co-exist with the dramatic canon, this is very political.

WANG: Professor Li introduced to us the political aspect in this sense. I’ll talk about another layer – the political element of presenting unprofessional ordinary people in the theatre. When I was making the piece about square dance aunties, some say that they are affected by, as we know, stuff like zhongzi wu (the dance of loyalty) from the Cultural Revolution, which is undoubtedly seared on this generation. For me, however, the political meaning of this work is not so simple. These people, who have no claim to any space in the Chinese cities, can, for an instant, claim the public space of the theatre, where they present their actual bodies and express what they wish to say. This, for me, is a political expression. And the kids. I’ve realized that kids are deemed inferior animals in Chinese education, whose education consists of sermons and who are not supposed to think for themselves. I wanted to discuss this. In the process of working together with these children, I somehow found myself to be the student, learning from them. And I wanted to share this kind of experience with others. The groups of people with no voice, no freedom or space to express themselves gain the right to speak in such a public space as theatre. This, for me, is political.

TUCHMANN: Mengfan, what kind of audience does your theatre attract? And, more generally: Who is the juchang audience? Especially if this theatre has such a political dimension, what’s the difference to the audience of the so-called official theatre?

WANG: As for my expectation of the audience, who I want them to be? Well, I want them to be Chinese. This is the first thing. I think my plays are not made for foreigners. They are made for Chinese people. This is the general expectation. And this play, it’s true, is very difficult to describe in the creative environment today. After all, even Lehmann used a whole book to describe the postdra-
matic theatre. So, I often encounter questions during promotion: what is this that I’ve made. Ultimately our audience is quite varied. Since I’m working with ordinary people, we first get a whole bunch of relatives. I think this is a great thing, though I didn’t expect it, we can have more discussion with people who don’t usually show up in theatres. How do they think of an art form that has nothing to do with their lives? They might not even know what dramatic theatre is. They probably never go to the theatre. I find this very interesting—and how do kids understand it? Apart from this, the audience is more like people who pay attention to independent theatres and marginal artists, who are long-time small-theatre-goers. But we can hardly reach the audience that routinely visits, say, Beijing People’s Art Theatre. We can’t even pass any message to them.

TUCHMANN: Then I would now ask the last question before we open the conversation to the auditorium. This last question has to do with the future. At the beginning of our discussion, I mentioned that Lehmann dates the beginning of postdramatic theatre to the 1970s and that he sees it as an answer to the challenges of an emerging information society. Well, the information society and the mechanization of our lives have not stopped. We live in a world where a handful of tech companies colonize everyday life, the public sphere, and politics. We are meeting here in a state where the so-called social credit system will soon be introduced, i.e., in a state that produces its inhabitants as digital subjects in an unprecedented system. What could be the potential of postdramatic theatre there? Precisely if one thinks of its origins as a form of, I don’t want to say criticism, but as a form of behavior in the face of a profound change in the media.

LI: I think in the West, a trend is beginning to show at the start of the 21st century, as mainstream theatre is opening up to creators of the postdramatic theatre. Rimini Protokoll, for example, has staged works in some huge theatres. Hans-Werner Kroesinger, who graduated from Giessen, has received an invitation to the Berliner Theatertreffen. In China, the trend is similar. At first, the independent artists outside the system and “theatrical circles” within the system were totally incompatible. For example, Caochangdi was, in the beginning, a center of independent theatre arts. The hosts, or owners of the place, Wu Wenguang and Wen Hui, were very opposed to the drama establishment. So theatre and drama became two incompatible worlds. In the recent four or five years, however, as far as I’ve observed, many mainstream theatre festivals have started to welcome works by artists like Mengfan. For example, the Divine Sewing Machine was shown at the Beijing Fringe Festival. Festivals like the Wuzhen Drama Festival, and the Nanluoguxiang Drama Arts Festival—festivals with “drama” in their name—are opening doors to the new theatre. Another important reason is the gentrification of cities. As rents go up, theatre artists like Mengfan have to find opportunities to stage their works in ordin-
ary spaces. It is this process that brings drama and theatre together. The old generation welcomes the new, and the new reaches out to the old. So it’s a gradually mixing world. This is an optimistic trend that I’ve seen.

NIKITIN: I would like to point out another aspect. I would say that the strength of the theatrical and perhaps postdramatic theatre is actually the theatre space. The theatre space has the special characteristic that it is a space in which we gather as individuals who at the same time form a community, without necessarily sharing the same views. It is a space in which—and this is very important for postdramatic theatre—dissent is possible. It has something to do with co-presence, that we are together in a space in which this dividing line between stage and audience is present and in which we have to negotiate this dividing line permanently. In contrast to digital space, which is a space simulation, the theatre space is physical and sensual. Therefore, it is a space of vulnerability, of possibility, a space of the alternatives, which fundamentally means: of disagreement. I can be in a space together with others who, at the same time, I can be in disagreement with. That’s what makes this space political. That’s what its modernity consists of today.

WANG: Although I’ve always shown my works in theatres, I’ve still been thinking about this question—how to think in a theatrical way? If we can be clear on this question, we don’t have to restrict ourselves to the space of theatres or even the form of theatre. What I wish to share more with people is this way of thinking: how to think about all kinds of things theatrically, and not only artistically. This is my thought about the future.

TUCHMANN: Let us now direct our gaze into the auditorium and wait for questions, comments, or other reactions!

AUDIENCE MEMBER A: Hello, I’m a beginner at theatre and have two questions. The first is for director Nikitin. I wonder about the role of identification in postdramatic theatre. Can I understand it this way—just like an audience of traditional drama, we watch a postdramatic play, and because we are moved, we start to think. First, we are passive, and then we become active. Is it a process like this?

NIKITIN: The audience doesn’t always have to be passive. I have not dealt with this in my practice, but in the varied approaches of the postdramatic theatre, some artists have already completely broken the principle of a passive audience. Some immersive plays, for example, totally wipe out the clear division between the stage and the audience. Some present their works in public

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7 This is a selection of audience questions.
spaces. There are many experiments. Some, for example, give the audience a set of headphones through which you hear a performative text. Then you walk across the city and participate in composing a new text. There are a lot of possibilities.

Personally and artistically, I prefer to highlight and use that line between the stage and the audience and to play with the difference it creates. I very often play with the role of the spectators, their position, their expectations. It’s crucial for me.

Anyway, in my eyes, the audience is never passive. The gaze or the seeing of the audience is a frame. And every kind of seeing is active, never passive. And clearly, the presence of the audience is active. It changes everything. A spectator who is sleeping is quite an active event in a performance.

AUDIENCE MEMBER A: The second question is for director Wang Mengfan. The director has the job of delivering a message. But what do you do if the audience fails to understand the message? It might be its problem if they don’t understand. But, I want to ask, the work you do, when you are rehearsing, the actors, kids, aunties, do they understand what you want them to do? Or do you just ask them to play and perform according to your instructions?

WANG: We work collectively. I pose questions for them, or we accomplish missions together. In this process, I accumulate materials, some of which end up on stage. But what appears explicitly on stage is for me to decide.

AUDIENCE MEMBER A: Sorry, but I suddenly have an idea, as a beginner. If I, say, find two strangers, let them sit on stage and start drinking. With drinking, they get familiar. They start chatting. So, in the end, I think, perhaps it shows the strangeness among people and how they talk after letting down their guard, getting drunk even. This, of course, cannot compare with your work. But I want to know what the difference is.

WANG: Nikitin has talked a lot about the problem of whether we need professional actors at all. Your question is similar to this, right? What’s the division between creation and non-creation?

AUDIENCE MEMBER A: I mean could I stage this kind of situation and call it art?

NIKITIN: A conversation? Sure, you just have to frame it well as an artistic work and somehow organize an audience to watch it, then it could work well as a theatre product. And I would always be careful about thinking of postdramatic theatre or performance as easy, that it’s just about putting something authentic on stage without directing it, and then it automatically becomes postdramatic theatre. There’s always the possibility that it just becomes a postdramatic something else. Of course, it still has a lot to do with staging, with
work, with forms, with dedication, and the investment of time and of one's own vulnerability.

AUDIENCE MEMBER B: I have a question for Professor Li. I’m reading Houxiu juchang⁸ (Postdramatic Theatre) and have read only a small part so far. In the translator’s foreword, you wrote why traditional Chinese opera is not well known to the present Chinese audience. You say it’s because the “chang, nian, zuo, da” (singing, dialogue, acting, and acrobatics) are theatrical, and the audience lacks the general cognition to understand this. I would like to know more about this subject.

LI: In fact, this is not only my opinion but Lehmann’s as well. He thinks his book Postdramatisches Theater rightly describes the Chinese traditional theatre, which we call traditional opera. In the beginning, our Academy of Drama didn’t think it was drama at all and only included it in recent years. This bias is related to wholesale Westernization during the May Fourth Movement. When drama was introduced from the West at the beginning of the 20th century, people thought it was a superior art form. This causes a massive gap in our own theatre culture. It’s Lehmann’s book, however, that tries to raise our attention to our own tradition. Of course, there are stories and characters in our traditional opera that are the same as in drama. But in the 20th century, we moved our emphasis almost entirely to storytelling and characterization. Even the famous Opera performer Mei Lanfang said that the emotions he expressed on stage were genuine. He became more and more loyal to the genuineness and building of real characters, which were ideas from drama.

AUDIENCE MEMBER C: My question is not so theoretical. I want to ask one of the theatre-makers here, do you know clearly from the beginning what you are doing, or not so clearly, but rather make decisions out of intuition? I think this is a question faced by artists in all art forms. Thank you.

NIKITIN: It depends. When I do a theatre project, I often have an idea; I have a hunch. I often have the idea of an effect. And then, of course, it’s the process of artistic work, this remaining in a space, in a time, in which you influence the raw material, in which you try to bring it into a form, during which the understanding of what you’re dealing with is then sharpened: and I think that’s also what artistic work is. I refuse to say: “No, I never know the answer! It’s just a question.” Sometimes I have an answer, but I don’t know how to formulate it, and that’s the work.

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⁸ Lehmann, Houxiu juchang
Bibliography


