

The Politics of Chinese Dissident Drama

By Zhang Xian. Translated by Tang Ying

I began my struggle as an individual playwright upon learning the tragedy of my situation some 20 years ago. Politically, I was being buried alive. To be told to say nothing, I felt, was the same as dying. At the onset of the Cultural Revolution in 1966, my family became Red Guard targets and were ostracized. I was exiled to remote Yun'an in southwest China until 1978, when college entrance exams were reinstated and I entered Shanghai's drama academy. After a couple of years, I was sent back to Yun'an, where I was assigned to work in a sweater factory. Nevertheless, I continued to write stories, poetry, and plays until I drifted back to Shanghai in 1986.

Unsatisfied in the 1990s with writing fable plays, which simply related a collective weariness, I wrote new works that ran the gamut of styles. None of them have ever been produced in China. Are these political plays? They are, in the special environment of Chinese culture. Beyond reflecting vague rules of conduct, Chinese artists are supposed to act as agents who contribute to expanding China's advanced productive forces and toward raising the people's ideological and moral standards. Moral lessons, the Chinese government believes, should be contained in any theatrical production: if something is deemed illegal in social life, it is frequently deemed illegal on stage. Chinese officials constantly worry that a subculture of disaffected communists might arise from the underground and enter the mainstream, so the Communist Party's exertions of its political power and control always reflect its fear that any audacious production or any freedom shown on stage might cause some political risk.

When I was arrested 20 years ago in the library of Shanghai Theatre Academy, I suddenly understood that everyone in China is living a "National Drama." While in jail I realized that, ever since we were children, we have been actors playing our parts in this Super-theatre; we have all been arranged to play faceless roles, the action has to follow the director, and everyone speaks and moves in accord. This "National Drama" is directed by a powerful and mysterious will. It requires us to attend the same national ceremony and say the unified actor's lines. All of our expressions look alike; we wear facemasks. Our bodies operate like wooden figures.

At first I thought of this National Drama as a tragedy, but then later I came to understand that it was a comedy, a kind of farce, and I pledged that I should start writing my own drama when I got out of jail. It was a drama that would belong only to myself. It would be an individual theatre that exists inside and yet is in opposition to the National Drama. Because I want my theatre to be a weapon against the autocracy and injustices of my society, it would be a kind of anti-drama under the National Drama.

The subject matter of China's endless and everlasting National Drama shifts and changes, according to the winds of political movements, ranging from Communism and Cultural Revolutions to economic reforms. Today the subject is Money. Because they are viewed as commercial gambits, some degree of boldness and sexual frankness are allowed—every once in a while—to be shown on stage. State-owned theatres mimic shows that are initiated and produced by small independent groups, belonging to what I call a "civilian theatre," a notion that is deliberately alternative and counterpoised to "the

people's theatre." For in China, companies that are routinely described as "the people's" are not truly "the people's" at all, and those who are conscious of their "civil rights," "individuality" and "civil society" are derided as *xiao shi min*, or "little citizens."

Some people say I am a loser. Others consider me a success. But for me, success and failure are no different from each other. I would rather spend my all life as a kind of "special society performer"—a dissident actor playing his unofficial part in China's National Drama. I write plays with the knowledge that they will be forbidden. I am like a social performer always acting on society's stage and always clinging to my theatrical role in the individual struggle against the National Drama.

In the beginning of 2004, the news from Beijing is that newer reforms will be instituted, and all Chinese theatres, which have been owned by the state for 50 years, will return to private ownership. This year, central government has cut off all subsidized funding for state-owned troupes. Theatrical workers will be thrown to the mercy of market forces and no longer belong to any work-unit—they are to become self-supporting.

Will the theatres still play their part in the National Drama or become the independent players? Who knows what will transpire in the next act? Thousands of Chinese theatre workers, of course, will do anything for their art, which is also their livelihood, and as they explore the borders of the commercial market, and advance to the last realm—politics—they will come to understand that the political realm is full of commercial potential.