

Jia-Wen Chen

Foot Drum Girl

Interview by Wen-Tsui Wu

In Taiwan, Jia-Wen is one of the few South Drummers. Her hands use drumsticks to beat as her foot slides along the surface of the drum. Our eyes, ears and hearts are attracted by her playing. Perhaps at first because of the special way of playing the drum, but finally we realise that it is her unique tune that touches our hearts.

Nankuan Opera is one of the traditional Chinese forms of performing arts that have existed for centuries and the South Drum is the instrument that leads the Nankuan Opera. The drummer lifts her heel on top of the drum and slides it along the surface of the drum's skin to change its tautness in order to change the tone and make sounds like water dropping on this special drum, also named "foot drum". Quan-Zhou (in mainland China) is the place where the art of the South Drum mainly survives. Some Nankuan troupes from Taiwan travelled to Quan-Zhou to learn how to play the South Drum or foot drum. Jia-Wen is one of them. Jia Wen is part of the group called Gang-A-Tsui Theatre (GATT).

How did you, Jia-Wen, get involved with the foot drum?

I specialised in percussion with the wrists. In high school I was a major in "Yang-Qin" (dulcimer, a particular kind of percussion instrument). At university I studied the North Drum, the leading instrument of Beikuan music. I had just left a puppetry group and was trying to get a new job, when I heard that Gang-A-Tsui Theatre was looking for a drummer. I decided to accept this new opportunity. Therefore my meeting with the foot drum happened by chance, but it was also the consequence of a choice I made.

I said to myself: "The dulcimer period was just to learn a technique, but with the South Drum I would like to approach the level of art". Now the South Drum has become a major and integral part of my life. If I remove the South Drum, I become nothing.

Through the South Drum, I can express my feelings, whether I accompany the opera, or just play the music or support the actors, to give a perfect performance together on stage is absolutely wonderful. I also enjoy very much just the practice of basic skills, training by myself, to achieve a continued focus and resistance. This is also a way of expression.



Jia-Wen Chen playing the foot drum.
Photo: Gang-A-Tsui Theatre archive

What does the foot drum give to you, Jia-Wen?

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The dulcimer was the bridge to the North Drum and then the North Drum became the bridge to the South Drum.

Ji-Min Chen was the first teacher who enlightened me in the use of a foot drum. He is from Quan-Zhou and is currently the main and best master for the South Drum. In 2000, after I started working with Gang-A-Tsui Theatre and thanks to their organisation, I went to Quan-Zhou and learned the South Drum and Gong Drum with Master Chen. From 2002 to 2004 another teacher, Meng-Sen Wu, from Quan-Zhou, was invited to Taiwan. I learned to play the Ma Gong Drum and the North Gong Drum from him.

The Ma Gong Drum and North Drum (Bei-Kuan Drum) are interlinked. The experience of learning Ma Gong Drum and creating *The Drum Prelude* for Gang-A-Tsui Theatre's performances gave Jia-Wen the idea of studying for a Master's degree. In her Master's thesis Jia-Wen wrote about the relation between Beijing, Nankuan and Beikuan Opera through the Gong Drum.

The process of creating *The Drum Prelude* was a very important experience for Jia-Wen. In 2002, the Gang-A-Tsui Theatre's production *The Chatter in the Garden* needed a drum piece for its opening. Jia-Wen was asked to create this prelude. Jia-Wen got guidance for this from the teacher of Yang-Qin, Dong-Heng Li, as well

other members of Gang-A-Tsui Theatre. Now *The Drum Prelude* is the main piece that Gang-A-Tsui Theatre performs.

In the summer of 2006, Jia-Wen participated in the new performance *Read Miss*, which was directed by Teacher Dong-Heng Li. After one month of rehearsals and three performances in Hong Kong and Taiwan, Jia-Wen felt that she had learned well how to control the speed and the beat as well as the flexibility in using her foot on the drum.

If writing a letter to herself, Jia-Wen would like to tell her past self: "Small Jia-Wen, you worked very hard, did a good job and enjoyed it... applaud yourself. This is a wonderful process and I am also somewhat lucky and grateful for this opportunity, to participate in Gang-A-Tsui Theatre and learn this exceptional musical instrument, and get to know many friends."

Jia-Wen would write to her present self: "Lack of confidence, a lot of uncertainties!" And to her future self she would write: "Hopefully I can continue to perform, but that seems very difficult."

Is there any expectation you have of the future?

Jia-Wen answered: "None!"

Why is your morale so low?

The first reason: I am unable to work like I did before with the satisfaction of learning and performing, because of some colleagues leaving Gang-A-Tsui Theatre for different reasons. I cherished my good meeting with those colleagues.

The second reason: the reality of life and art cannot find a balance. As I get older, the pressure grows as well: to make a living (a lot of my time is spent on working for subsistence and therefore I am unable to concentrate on performing); because of marriage (I will move away from Taipei and

my family has asked me not to stay on with Gang-A-Tsui Theatre).

Right now, my heart is in a mess and my South Drum playing is regressing! I cannot concentrate and enjoy rehearsals and performances as before, cannot maintain a 'pure' condition. Only recently when I participated in a workshop for a week could I concentrate on the work, but after that workshop I have no choice but to return to my everyday reality.

If you abandon the South Drum, what will you do?

I feel that my life will lose its focus.

What do you feel like when you are playing the South Drum?

Sometimes like painting, sometimes like making sculptures and sometimes like telling stories.

JIA-WEN CHEN (Taiwan) is a South Drummer (Nankuan) and percussionist, she is the lead musician of Gang-A-Tsui Theater of Taipei and has an M.A. from the Chinese Traditional Music Department of Taipei National University of the Arts.

WEN-TSUI WU (Taiwan) is a performer and the Artistic Director of Van Body Theatre of Taipei, and has an M.F.A. from the Performing Art Department in Taipei National University of the Arts. In 2006, she performed her solo *The Path* at the Magdalena International Contemporary Women's Theatre Festival in Singapore.