

Ya-Ling Peng

Rivers in the Dark Night



Shei Yuei-Sha and Tsio Ya-Lain in *Echoes of Taiwan (8): My Journey*
Photo: Lee Ming-Shang

When I was little, I was surprised to find that a certain Peking opera singer named Chen Yang Ling was extraordinarily handsome. At the time, I did not know that Chen was actually an actress playing male roles. I just thought that she had a certain quality men did not usually have. I secretly wished that my future boyfriend would be like him. Later, thanks to Young Li Hwa, Taiwanese opera became very popular on television. Each time my grandmother, mother and I watched her performance, we were like teenage girls in love. We were crazy about her. So many times, mother said she wanted to go to Taipei to see Young because she could not believe the "rumour" that Young was a woman.

In 1991, I watched Taiwanese opera singer Shei Yuei Sha on stage for the first time. She always played the handsome young men who had their way with women. I was so fascinated by her that I visited her soon after the performance. When the door opened, I saw an old woman in her pyjamas. The vision in front of me could hardly match the passion in my heart. Yet, after we started talking, I was charmed. I could

not help but think that I was actually talking with a handsome man. When I excused myself to the rest room, I found my face flushed like a love-crazed woman with moisture in my eyes. When I finally had the chance of working with the opera crew, I realised that many male musicians were also enchanted by Shei - a man in our eyes on stage or off. These men all blossomed around her and wanted to take her out for a date. I was so surprised. How did she do it? How could she play both genders so well? Could it be that we all have both Yin and Yang inside us so that we have the ability to call out either character at will?

In April 2002, I produced *My Journey*, a play based on Shei's story. Shei started her training at the age of five. She studied all kinds of different roles. When she turned sixteen, she became, officially, an actress playing male parts on stage. Now she is sixty years old. Remembering the inner struggles and conflicts involved in playing the male roles, remembering how the teachers asked her to behave like a man and how other actresses treated her as a man and flirted with her, she still harbours some regrets.

That young woman could not express her feminine side either on stage or in her everyday life. She used to sit in front of the mirror in her room, secretly playing out the most beautiful female roles. With the use of long sleeves, fans, spears and scarves, she switched back and forth between male and female characters. After seeing the most beautiful side of herself, she saw the many possibilities within. She was no longer scared or hesitant. She courageously played the complex characters on the stage of her real life.

Female characters in traditional Chinese theatres have always been stereo-typical. They are mostly good women who follow the social doctrines. A century ago, the Peking Opera used actors to play the female roles

simply because people could not imagine actresses playing bad women such as Pang Zhin Lein, who was mean, had affairs with other men and commits murder. How inappropriate it would be for a woman to play this kind of role. Those actors who played female roles all relied on their stereotypical impressions of women. In the past fifty years, fewer and fewer actors dedicated themselves to traditional operas and actresses got the chance to go on stage, sometimes even playing male roles. Women finally had an opportunity to portray the "ideal male character" according to their own wishes. No wonder my grandmother, my mother and I were so enchanted by these male-like actresses.

Women wanted their men to be just like the male characters played by actresses, with their looks and charisma. An ideal man ought to be just as smart and charming as these make-believe men on the stage. These



Chio Fan-Shian and Tsio Ya-Lain in *Echoes of Taiwan* (8): *My Journey* Photo: Lee Ming-Shang

actresses created the image of an ideal man in women's hearts. The audience was pacified and satisfied. Subsequently, they could go back to reality and continue being ruled by the ordinary men in their lives.

What kinds of relationships exist between female characters in plays? Half of them are supposedly loving mothers and daughters who are actually in a controlling relationship. The other half are mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law with hateful interdependent relationships (for example *The Peacock Flew Southeast*). This is art mimicking reality.

In November 2001, I produced a play about five generations of mothers and daughters. Researching in the field, I discovered that each generation of mothers repeated the behavioural patterns of their own mothers in their relationships with their daughters, even though they resisted this behaviour at the time. There were few mothers able to break this cycle. In the play, I gave words to the daughters: "She is like my guardian angel, but sometimes she is like a witch. In some ways I am so much like her and in some ways I wish not to be like her. I like to cuddle up in her arms but more often, I want to cut loose from her and fly away." When possible, women often wanted to "fly away", but where to? Where is the place for them to express themselves? In reality they could not just play idealised males like these actresses in Taiwanese Opera, could they?

The new generation of females is still torn between traditional responsibilities and self-fulfilment. They are like candles burning

at both ends, or clowns walking on high wire. The divorce rate in Taiwan has reached 25%. There is still a long way for us to go in exploring new images of women and the new perceptions that men have of women. We no longer consider Mei Lang Fang the image of a modern Chinese beauty. We do not like the image of Gong Li, a movie star created by Western consumerism. The new generation of women in Taiwan is still feeling and searching for their way out, like the rivers in the dark night.

Translated from Taiwanese by Balas King

YA-LING PENG (Taiwan) began her work in theatre in 1981 when she founded the Square-Round Theater, writing, directing and acting in its stage productions. Between 1988 and 1991 she studied acting in London with the Animate Theatre and the London School of Mime and Movement, and she joined the Tragic Carpet Theatre Company. She returned to Taiwan in 1990 and worked for the Chinese Public Television whilst continuing her experimental theatre work and collecting stories from women and the elderly in rural Taiwan. In 1995 she started Modern Form's sister ensemble in Taipei, the Uhan Shii Theater Group with actors over the age of 60.