

Hans-Thies Lehmann's Postdramatic Theatre and the New Aesthetics of *Juchang*¹

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Translated by Kai Tuchmann and Jo Riley

I first encountered the book *Postdramatisches Theater (Postdramatic Theatre)* by Hans-Thies Lehmann in 2000.² Back then, I was studying for a master's degree in Theatre Studies, and had only recently moved from the US to Germany. There I saw some theatre performances of a kind I had never seen before. Reading this book resolved much of the confusion I had felt when I first saw these new forms of theatre. Lehmann distinguishes between "theatre" and "drama." In order to describe the very recent phenomenon of postdramatic theatre, he divides the whole development of theatre into three periods: predramatic theatre, dramatic theatre, and postdramatic theatre. In defining these distinct periods, Lehmann points to a major shift in theatre that occurred after the 1960s, which he implicitly expects to become a driving force in its further development. I thought that this work of theory would be a great help for Chinese theatre scholars and theatre-makers, so I decided to translate it into Chinese.

The process of translation, which took about four years, was full of hardships, but also delights. Professor Lehmann is a theatre scholar, but to describe and analyze the new form of theatre, he applies terms from literature, linguistics, philosophy, psychology, and even from physics, biology and other fields. The translation of some words, such as *juchang* ("performance art"), *zhanyan* ("performativity"), *cunxian* ("presence"), and others, presented me with considerable challenges, and I repeatedly had to reconsider my translation practice. A particular difficulty was that the theatrical phenomena of the 1980s and 1990s that

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- 1 This essay is a revision of a text that was first published under the same title in: Li Yinan, *Juchang Performance in Contemporary Chinese Society (1980–2020)*, Münchner Universitätsschriften, Theaterwissenschaft 34 (München: utzverlag, 2020).
 - 2 Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatisches Theater* [Postdramatic Theatre] (Frankfurt/Main: Verlag der Autoren, 1999). English translation by Karen Jürs-Munby: Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

Lehmann described in his book were still unknown in China, which meant that no corresponding Chinese terms existed. I had to use literal translation and refer to other scholars' perspectives and translations. Sometimes I even had to construct a new word by expanding on the meaning of a Chinese character. For example, expanding on the context of the character *chang* (space), I constructed *juchang* to convey the term "performance art"; from *zhanshi* (presentation) and *yanchu* (show), I constructed *zhanyan* to mean "performativity," which follows Shen Lin's literal translation practice from the 1990s. Expanding on the context of the characters *cunzai* (existence) and *xianzai/xianchang* (now/on the spot), I constructed the word *cunxian* to convey the word "presence."

Since Lehmann's book came out in China, it has become the target of concentrated attacks by scholars and the Chinese theatre world. Mainly the accusations are that Lehmann's postdramatic theatre is a kind of formalism. The criticism levelled at Lehmann's postdramatic theatre in China was not based on the fact that the examples he analyzed were aesthetically incompatible with Chinese taste, but because his theory attacked the basic foundations of *huaju* (spoken drama), *xianshizhuyi* (realism) and *xijuxing* (dramaticism).

Western drama was introduced to China via Japan at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century. This imported form was called *huaju*, and it was based on text and plot. Under the specific historical conditions of the time, the Chinese reformers regarded Western naturalistic *huaju* drama (bourgeois plays from France in particular, and from all over Europe in general) as something that could be opposed to traditional Chinese opera (*xiqu*). The reformers thought of *huaju* as something advanced, something that represented the ideas of Western Enlightenment and the West's wealth and technology. They felt *huaju* could become a weapon for resisting feudal autocracy. In addition, during the Communist revolution, the creative principles of Russian socialist realism were introduced to China. They became an important factor in revolutionary propaganda. After 1949, the new Chinese government drastically reformed *xiqu* and established a nationwide opera movement, while also creating, with the help of local governments and the army, a large number of *huaju* troupes that would instrumentalize realistic drama to create a totalitarian perspective on reality and history by propagating the policies of the new regime. At the heart of this understanding of dramatic arts was the principle "take from life to elevate life." This creative principle matched Confucian morals, which upheld that writings are for conveying truth. Confucianism was an important cultural tool for the consolidation of the new regime.

During the Cultural Revolution, literary and artistic creation was extremely limited because government controls were constantly drawn tighter. There were only eight model operas performed in the whole country. Although their stylistic form had changed, the creative principles they followed were still socialist-realist ones, which demanded that playwrights apply their skills to express content and present perfect heroes on stage. After the Cultural Revolution ended in 1976, there was a rise in dramatic production: political satires and critical reassess-

ment of realistic forms thrived for a few years. But this wave very quickly fell prey to the economic reforms of the time. China's drama academies, embedded in a national system, faced structural challenges; and they had to seek a way to survive between commercial needs and national propaganda tasks.

Since the 1980s, under the impact of television and the internet, the once-popular dramas have lost mass appeal; at the same time, they have slipped under the radar of the national propaganda organs. Although *huaju* and *xiqu* have long since lost their important position in the cultural lives and minds of Chinese people, the creative principles of dramatic realism have not changed at all. In the drama academies, these principles are still widely taught, alongside the principle of *xijuxing* (dramaticism). Under the impact of these principles, form and content are strictly separated from each other. The purpose of form is to express content. This creative rule is not only applied in mainstream national propaganda drama but also in the commercial context of comedies and melodramas. In recent years, following the crisis in the system of mainstream drama, the voices that criticize the principles of classical dramatic creation have become louder and louder. But in the Chinese theatre world, the crisis in drama has not been profoundly examined in the manner of Szondi, who analyzed the crisis in European drama.³ It is commonly asserted that the failure in playwriting is the main source of this crisis.

This is the context in which my translation of Lehmann's *Postdramatisches Theater* landed in China in 2010. While it caused a lot of discomfort and aggression within the mainstream world of drama, at the same time, it won great interest among some creative practitioners. Li Jianjun,⁴ an independent director of the *New Youth Theatre Group (Xin Qingnian Jutuan)*, said:

This book had quite an impact on me. It sketched the map of the postdramatic. I began to think about Western contemporary drama according to this postdramatic map. This process of thinking helped me to find my own creative methods.⁵

These sentiments are echoed by others. Li Ning⁶ comments:

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- 3 See Peter Szondi, *Theorie des Modernen Dramas* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1963), (Peter Szondi, *Theory of the Modern Drama. A Critical Edition* [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987]).
 - 4 Li Jianjun (born in 1972 in Jingchuan) is a Chinese director who studied Stage Design at Beijing's Central Academy of Drama. After three years working at *China Youth Art Theatre (Zhongguo Qingnian Yishu Jutuan)*, he began to work independently in 2007. He is the founder of the *New Youth Theatre Group (Xin Qingnian Jutuan)*.
 - 5 All quotes from artists reproduced in this text are from unpublished WeChat interviews Li originally undertook for her book *Juchang Performance in Contemporary Chinese Society (1980-2020)*.
 - 6 Li Ning (born 1972) is the founder of the physical arts collective *J-town Physical Guerrillas (Lingyun Yan Zhiti Youjidui)*, which has been producing *juchang* performances since 1997. He studied sculpture at Shandong Art School and modern dance and performance with the

Before reading *Houxiju juchang* [*Postdramatic Theatre*], I had no sense of belonging. The biggest feeling after reading was: For the first time, I could really determine my own position, it was like opening the Baidu map on the App and recognizing one's own position.

Wen Hui⁷ said:

I read this book around 2012 in mainland China and it is one of the rare ones about contemporary theatre. I remember that this book excited me and it felt really fresh. I bought a copy for a friend in Hong Kong as well.

Wang Mengfan⁸ said:

I read this book for the first time in the Winter of 2011 after attending Li Yanan's class on Western contemporary theatre arts at the Central Academy of Drama in Beijing. But I only understood fully what this book is about after I started my own creative productions. I think that the emergence of this book provides European and domestic practitioners with a name for our own productions; or to put it in another way, it allowed me to understand more clearly my own productions in relation to the Western theatre.

The concept of *juchang* is my invention, arising from my translation of *Postdramatisches Theater*, by Hans-Thies Lehmann.⁹ It takes its point of departure from the meaning of the Chinese character *chang* (space). I use this term to describe something that is not a linear and narrative-based *xijuxing* (dramaticism), but rather to emphasize the performative and spatial dimension of the performance creation. In this understanding, *chang* does not refer to physical space alone, but it points to the organism that is created through the mutual interaction between the performers and the audience. This emphasis on the Chinese character *chang* represents a new aesthetics that declares war on the concepts of text, pro-

renowned choreographer Jin Xing.

7 For information on Wen Hui please see the *Introduction* and *Biographies* in this volume.

8 For information on Wang Mengfan please see the *Biographies* in this volume.

9 Li Yanan re-established the term *juchang* in the course of her translation of Hans-Thies Lehmann's *Postdramatisches Theater*. In 2010, when she translated the book title and term as "*Houxiju Juchang*," the word *juchang*, which was unfamiliar in mainland China's theatrical discourse at the time, served primarily as an opposing concept to the established concept of drama, *xiju*. The concept of *juchang* thus had the purpose of pointing to the dimension of theatricality/performativity. For the conceptualization of this term, Li Yanan was able to draw on both the theatrical discourse of China before the foundation of the People's Republic in 1949 and the self-designation of independent Chinese theatre-makers since the 1980s, who refer to their work as *juchang*, in contrast to *xiju*. See also the panel discussion "Rethinking Theatricality. Hans-Thies Lehmann's Postdramatic Theatre and Chinese *Juchang*" in this volume.

fessionalism, dramatic nature, linear narratives and logos. This term has also been used by Chinese independent theatre-makers to describe their own works. Choreographer and author Tian Gebing,¹⁰ founder of the *Paper Tiger Theatre Studio Beijing* (*Beijing ZhilaoHu Xiju Gongzuoshi*), commented:

The Paper Tigers have used this word *juchang* since the 1990s. *Xiju* is a concept that is driven by assumptions of text and literature, but the term *juchang* emphasizes the spatial and live elements. The Paper Tiger Theatre Studio was founded in order to oppose literalization; that's why we use the term *juchang* to describe our practice.

Wang Mengfan adds:

My personal aesthetics and creative methods are deeply influenced by the German dance theatre tradition, but this statement alone is not so important, because I do not work together with professional dancers and actors, but with ordinary people—with groups whose social identity is not classified into one category. Under the current domestic discourse and practice, it is not important to discuss if something is dance or *juchang*, but to pose the question: how should we present and perceive the bodies of these people, and why should we watch them at all? In the theatre, their bodies are much more linked to their actions than to their language. This is why I would prefer my work to be described as *juchang* instead of *xiju*.

A preference for the term *juchang* over the word *xiju* for defining one's own performance work is connected to the position of being outside the mainstream drama system that owns all the discursive power. Li Ning comments:

I uphold a strong rejection of the term *xiju*, and perhaps this is because when I was a child, I lived in a military compound and when the cultural workers' groups came to perform *huaju*, I was never allowed to enter the auditorium. Afterward, as I started to become involved in performing and creating, some people told me: Your works are the opposite of *xiju* drama, and I started to notice it too, and then there came a time when I consciously affirmed it.

Zhang Xian,¹¹ one of China's earliest experimental theatre-makers, agrees:

I call almost all of my works *juchang*, including many of the rebellious interview texts that are called Speech-Action-Theatre. I subsume my non-artist, life-based creation projects under the term *juchang*, too.

10 Tian Gebing (born 1963 in Xian) is a Chinese director, choreographer and author, who graduated in 1991 from the Central Academy of Drama in Beijing. In 1997, he founded his own company *Paper Tiger Theatre Studio Beijing* (*Beijing ZhilaoHu Xiju Gongzuoshi*).

11 Zhang Xian (born 1955 in Shanghai) is a playwright and director. He is considered to be one of China's earliest experimental theatre-makers. In 2013 he was visiting professor at the University of Giessen.

Wen Hui says: “We should call our *Living Dance Studio* works *juchang*, they are definitely not *xiju*.”

In the beginning, the new *juchang* aesthetic was related to the difficult position of being outside the official theatre system. Due to a lack of funding, the *juchang* practitioners had to use unconventional spaces outside city centers: tent theatre was performed in temporarily erected structures; Beijing’s *Caochangdi Workstation* operated beyond the Fifth Ring Road and performed in their own spaces; Shanghai’s *Grass Stage* performed in any possible space (auditoriums, hotel lobbies, art museums, schools, etc). Li Ning performed in an unfinished building on the outskirts of the city of Jinan; Zhang Xian extended the definition of *juchang* by calling all forms of public intervention *juchang*. He included interviews, online texts and flash mobs because his scripts had no chance whatsoever of being performed. The production of *juchang* became a way for theatre-makers outside the system to seize public space.

The independent theatre practice of *juchang* probably emerged in the 1980s at the latest. In this post-Cultural Revolution era, the first *juchang* experiments were led by young artists. The most representative artist within this context is Mou Sen and his *Frog Experimental Theatre Company* (*Wa Shiyan Jutuan*).¹² Mou Sen explained:

My productions in the 1990s such as *The Other Side* (*Bi An*), *Zero Archives* (*Ling Dangan*), *Related to AIDS* (*Yu Aizi Youguan*), *Red Herring* (*Hong Feiyu*), and others should all be understood as *juchang* practices.

Yi Liming, who often collaborated with Mou as a scenographer, also stated:

Much of my work back then was very close to the essence of *juchang*, for example, my collaboration with Mou Sen on *Zero Archives*, and *Related to AIDS*, and others.

The performance space of *The Other Side* was a small classroom in the performance department of the Beijing Film Academy. *Related to AIDS* was performed in the Yuanen Temple Theatre, which was under construction at the time, and Yi Liming wanted to change the traditional form of theatre space. During the performance, he had thirteen migrant workers build a wall around the crowd in the performance space, thus emphasizing that performers and observers were sharing the same space at the same time. In these works, the emphasis on space and the stress on and application of the concept of *chang* are obvious.

After 2000, the *Living Dance Studio/Caochangdi Workstation* (*Shenghuo Wudao Gongzuoshi /Caochangdi Gongzuozhan*) became one of the first independ-

12 Mou Sen (born in 1963) graduated from the literature faculty of the Pedagogical University Beijing. In the 1980s he founded his company *Frog Experiment Group* (*Wa Shiyan Jutuan*).

ent Chinese centers for producing *juchang*. Wen Hui and Wu Wenguang,¹³ inspired by having performed in several of Mou Sen's performances, opened up their private living space and turned it into a performance space. They then brought practitioners from all over China together. One such group of practitioners established a commune with shared living facilities. They ate together, rehearsed together, and thus formed the active *juchang* ensemble at *Caochangdi*. This space extended artistic creation into the spaces of everyday life, and the ensemble was united by a sense of family. This specific mix of familial behavior and public life, which is closely related to the concept of *chang*, strongly opposed the control of public space by the authorities as well as the powerful system of *xiju* that dominated cultural life. In 2007, I collaborated as a dramaturg with *Caochangdi Workstation's* Young Choreographer Project and also introduced the fundamental concepts of postdramatic theatre to China by giving lectures. Since then, I have discovered the important nature of the *juchang* concept. In his documentary film workshop, Wu Wenguang gave the participants two topics: A self-portrait and public space. Recording with a video camera is a means to amplify observing. If observing is the essence of *juchang* art, then people who are powerless in their normal life can gain the initiative by observing daily life and thus turning it into theatre. I still remember how one participant of the Choreographer Project videoed on a public bus. Many years later, this student, Li Jianjun, created a piece of work called "25.3km", which turned the bus into a performance space.

Suffering from the pressure of sharply rising rents, many *juchang* practitioners were forced to give up their performance venues. In 2014, the *Caochangdi Workstation* was destroyed by the power of capitalism and fell prey to the dynamics of urbanization and gentrification in Beijing. Wu and Wen lost their studio space. Since then, *juchang* practitioners have had to compete for performance spaces in the cracks between the state and the commercial market. In the National Cultural Centre of Beijing, the *juchang* artists have no choice but to search for a tiny space of their own. Some venues that have the spatial capacity for performance, such as the Nanluoguxiang Theatre Festival, Wuzhen Theatre Festival, and the Beijing Youth Theatre Festival, have expressed a more open attitude towards the *juchang* artists.

After the publication of my Chinese translation of *Postdramatisches Theater*, Professor Lehmann took up an opportunity to visit China and gave direct and powerful support to independent Chinese *juchang* artists. In Wuzhen, he saw works by Li Jianjun and Li Ning. He was very appreciative and encouraging and was instrumental in helping these once marginal theatre-producers to gain a place within the Chinese mainstream theatre industry. This year, Professor Leh-

13 Wu Wenguang (born 1956 in Yunnan province) studied literature theory at University of Yunnan. He worked for Chinese State Television to fund his production of independent documentary films. From 1994 until 2014 he collaborated with the dancer Wen Hui, with whom he set up the *Living Dance Studio/Caochangdi Workstation*.

mann also served as an academic advisor to the Laiwu Factory Theatre Festival. Chen Tian, a young scholar at Nanjing University, responds to the baseless criticism by mainstream drama practitioners with which postdramatic theatre and China's new *juchang* artists were confronted:

If so many mainstream national drama ensembles, who enjoy national financial support, are not able to prosper commercially in the drama market, why shouldn't a minority of non-mainstream and financially oppressed artists attempt to play a bigger role? If we do not start to spread the theory of postdramatic theatre, how can we ever harvest a prosperous mainstream drama?¹⁴

The year 2019 marked 20 years since the publication of *Postdramatisches Theater*. Since it has been in print, the theatre community in the West has discussed it in a very intense way. Some scholars have doubted the argument expressed in the book that theatre will continue to develop in a non-expressive, non-mimetic direction. I believe that the context of postdramatic theatre in China is quite different from that in the West. Contemporary China is characterized by the pressure on space for independent art practitioners, and also the phenomenon of aphasia is increasingly severe. From a broader perspective, once-colonized Asia is looking for a way to find its own voice and find a place within a world still largely dominated by concepts derived from Western Enlightenment. In the struggle for public space, postdramatic theatre can provide us with many useful insights.

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14 Chen Tian, "Yingguo guojia juyuan xianchang yu xiju juchang de weiiji—jian yu fei chunfang jiaoshou shangque" [The National Theatre Scene and the Crisis of Dramatic Theatre in the UK—A Debate on Professor Fei Chunfang] *Xiju Yingshi Pinglun*, no. 2 (2018).