



CHAPTER 17

The Combat and Compromise in Taiwanese Puppets as a Body Without Organ: Samadhi Tang Creative Puppet Troupe as an Example

Yi-Jou Lo

17.1 INTRODUCTION

The concept of body without organs was first conceived by Antonin Artaud—a European avant-garde dramatist. Artaud had been sick since his boyhood days. For his entire life, he spent battling his illness, both mentally and physically. His struggle inspired the idea of body without organs. This concept was later popularized by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus*. Simply put, body without organs literally views a body as an entity with no organs inside. To this extent, the body can take on the form of an animal, a voice, or even a thought (Deleuze and Guattari 1988: 127). Deleuze and Guattari thus promulgated an esthetic principle that advocates for continuous change and deterritorialization and celebrates differences, otherness, and multiplicity.

Y.-J. Lo (✉)

Wenzao Ursuline University of Languages, Kaohsiung, Taiwan
e-mail: earthlo@hotmail.com

Based on the literary definition, Taiwanese puppet shows, also elected as the representative image of Taiwan in 2006, perfectly exemplify body without organs. In the literal sense, Taiwanese puppets are indeed bodies without any organs—there is nothing but hollowness inside a puppet. Metaphorically, these puppets' and the puppetry's evolution also signify the concept of body without organs. In the beginning when puppet shows were introduced to Taiwan from Mainland China, the puppets were approximately 30-cm tall. The shows strictly followed the performance rules of Chinese opera characterized by the presence of Shen, Dan, Jin, Mo, and Chou.¹ Thus, the audience could identify a puppet's personality from its appearance. Over time, the puppets increased in size to 120 cm tall, thereby resembling human beings. Currently, the puppets still look like humans, with hands sufficiently long to reach knees (in Chinese tradition, this bodily feature predicts a person's great future). Additionally, these body-without-organs puppets travel overseas to countries such as America and Japan,² where they start to speak in foreign languages. Originally, the same narrator's voice was used for all puppets; however, presently, each puppet has his/her own spokesperson.³ Subsequently, in 2011, Samadhi Tang Creative Puppet Troupe broke more rules of Taiwanese puppetry—at least, at first, the team had intended to create beautiful puppets only for exhibition and not for performances—an innovative idea in Taiwanese puppetry.

When Taiwanese puppets began talking with the employment of different voice actors, part of the essence of traditional Taiwanese puppet shows was lost. When a puppet does not need a manipulator to perform but only needs to stand still for an exhibition, the puppet show seems to stop firing audience's imagination in a show. Currently, the Taiwanese puppetry industry is apparently affected by practitioners' differences—they fight against each other to compete. However, it is in these disturbing times that Taiwanese puppet shows are discovering different channels for creativity and possibilities for future cooperation.

In reference to Deleuze and Guattari's philosophy, this paper begins with a history of Taiwanese puppetry. Particularly, the new trends in puppet shows are discussed by citing Samadhi Tang Creative Puppet Troupe as an example to demonstrate how the Taiwanese puppetry industry has evolved from mutual fighting to finding a new territory for individual expansion.

17.2 BODY WITHOUT ORGANS

Despite the fact that the concept of body without organs emerged from Artaud's attempts to escape bodily torture, this concept does not entail a complete rejection of the body—nor does it promote the destruction of the body. On the contrary, it signifies the pursuit of a body's eternity. Therefore, Deleuze and Guattari emphasized that body without organs does not constitute a rejection of a body's organs but an objection to the presence of an organism in the body (Deleuze and Guattari 1988: 30). Particularly, body without organs attempts to abolish all chains and handcuffs for liberation. Therefore, Deleuze and Guattari explained the following:

Is it really so sad and dangerous to be fed up with seeing with your eyes, breathing with your lungs, swallowing with your mouth, talking with your tongue, thinking with your brain, having an anus and larynx, head and leg? Why not walk on your head, sing with your sinuses, see through your skin, breathe with your belly: the simple Thing, the Entity, the full body, the stationary Voyage.... Psychoanalysis says, 'Stop, find yourself again.' We should say instead, 'Let's go further still, we haven't found our Body without Organ yet, we haven't sufficiently dismantled our self.' Find your body without organs. Find out how to make it. It is where everything is played out. (167)

In this long quotation, Deleuze and Guattari have highlighted the limiting viewpoint of a body as a holistic unit in which everything is unchangeable, including the appearance and the functions of the body. For example, eyes can be used only for seeing while lungs only for breathing. Owing to these nature-introduced constraints, on the surface, the body is moveable; however, in reality, it is stagnated without any possibility for innovation and transformation; that is, it is a dumb, dead shell. Therefore, Deleuze and Guattari proposed to dismantle the body. Dismantling the organism does not mean suicide (177). On the contrary, it is only through body dismantlement that a body stands the chance to meet with different polymeric materials and establish contact with different fields and domains (177).

Deleuze and Guattari explored three dangers associated with the concept of body that is referred to as three strata, namely, "organism, significance, and subjectification" (159). These three strata contribute

to the stereotypical concepts concerning the body that stagnate evolution. Among these strata, organisms hinder the purified existence of body organs, significance inhibits insignificance, and subjectification leads to a narrowed over-self-centeredness.⁴ It is only by means of deterritorialization, dismantlement, and dismemberment that the stagnation can be annihilated and the body can be activated again. Deleuze and Guattari asserted that what humans need now is nomadology (26) through which the territory of the human body can be deterritorialized for a new territory to be reterritorialized (421).

Based on body without organs theory, to dismember or dismantle every organ is to accentuate its individuality through which multiplicities can be identified. Second, this theory stresses on not being bounded by individual organs. For example, plants can become rootless, a rhizome. Normally, a plant can only stem from one root; however, a rhizome plant can sprout from different stems, thereby extending its growth to different places. This constitutes the second trait of body without organs—the state of being a rhizome. Third, a body without organs does not reject its surroundings. On the contrary, such a body assimilates and accepts more possibilities. This reterritorialization after deterritorialization constitutes the third trait. Overall, a body without organs leads to deconstructive combat; however, this combat enables the body to find a way to connect with all beings and explore its identity.

17.3 THE TRANSITION OF SAMADHI TANG CREATIVE PUPPET TROUPE AS A BODY WITHOUT ORGAN

Taiwanese puppetry presents one of the best exemplifications of Deleuze and Guattari's body without organs concept. Literarily, without a manipulator, a Taiwanese puppet only has a body with no organs. After years of evolution and transformation, this once-tiny puppet has now become a significant image of Taiwanese culture. The potential of this body-without-organ-puppet stands uncontested.

The history of the development of Taiwanese puppetry is indeed a history of combats pertaining to body without organs. Taiwanese puppetry originated from Fukien and Zhangzhou in Mainland China. Originally, the puppets were called marionettes (a puppet with string for manipulation) and puppetry was called Case Play (or Box Play).⁵ In the Ming dynasty, a scholar, Liang Bing-lin, from Quanzhou is said to have a dream in which an old man revealed to him that success lies within one's

hands. Motivated by his dream, he then invented a 30-cm puppet without strings, and the puppet show was highly popular along the Mainland China coastline. Surprisingly, puppets became increasingly popular after being introduced to Taiwan. Compared with Chinese Opera or Taiwanese Opera, puppetry does not require too many human laborers. Only one manipulator (who is also the narrator) and several tiny puppets are sufficient for an entertaining performance. Due to the convenience, a puppet show can be performed almost anywhere, thereby puppet shows turn into a major form of entertainment early in Taiwan.

Eventually, the 30-cm puppets could not satisfy audiences because they were too tiny for the audience sitting far away to clearly see the performance. Thus, the tiny puppets increased in size to 50 cm, and, presently, they can be 150 cm or even taller. When they were tiny, they could be manipulated using one hand. However, at their current size, they need two or even three manipulators. During early days, one man was sufficient to perform special tricks—for example, the puppet could be thrown from the right hand and caught by the left hand to make the puppet fly. This became impossible after the puppets increased in size. However, through multiple manipulators and postproduction (currently, puppets often have their own shows on TV), the more delicate movement could be performed. Additionally, the larger puppets resemble humans and are usually exquisitely made. In fact, thousands of dollars have been paid on creating some puppets. Therefore, in addition to watching a puppet show, appreciating the making of puppets, and even collecting beautiful puppets have become another popular trend in Taiwanese puppetry. This is another transition in Taiwanese puppetry.

In 2011, a brand new team was established—Samadhi Tang Creative Puppet Troupe. In the beginning, there were only seven members, of which only one, Duo Duo (Wang Wen-Chi), had performed in real puppet shows because his family had been involved in the industry for generations. The remaining members, including a teacher, a designer, a factory worker, and a puppet-costume designer, were only indirectly associated with the puppetry industry. However, encouraged by their shared interest in puppets, they decided to make beautiful puppets for their own collections. Their puppets were so beautifully made that they attained fame and were invited for puppet exhibitions by city/county cultural centers and specifically the Shin Kong Mitsukoshi Department Store. They have also been invited to exhibit their puppets in several countries, including China, Japan, Germany, England, and Holland.

Following are some important facts about the Samadhi Tang Creative Puppet Troupe:

1. Their aim is to make beautiful puppets without mass-producing them (therefore, each puppet is one of a kind);
2. In the beginning, they only made puppets and did not engage in performances. Recently, they have started delivering performances;
3. Their puppets can be touched—different from puppets in other troupes;
4. Inspiration for making the puppets can be found everywhere.

Overall, these traits make it possible to constantly develop body-without-organ puppets. Samadhi Tang Creative Puppet Troupe is indeed evolving and developing on the basis of the concepts pertaining to body without organs, namely multiplicities, deconstruction and reconstruction, and being rooted with rootlessness.

17.3.1 Multiplicities

Anyone familiar with Taiwanese puppetry would know the new trends introduced by Samadhi Tang Creative Puppet Troupe. Traditionally, performance is essential and the primary reason why Taiwanese puppetry is appreciated. However, Samadhi Tang Creative Puppet Troupe originated from a completely different objective—they were not interested in performances at all. This was because they had only one member who knew how to manipulate puppets. Another reason was that they had started the troupe purely out of their love for beautiful puppets. They originally sought to collect beautiful puppets and producing a show was definitely not their aim.

In terms of group organization, Samadhi Tang is not following the usual way. In all puppetry troupes, the mentor–mentee system is highly respected, and members should take performance as their primary profession. However, all members of Samadhi Tan have other day jobs, and making puppets is a leisure activity for them (however, since 2019, some members have decided to turn this leisure time activity into their primary job because two members have retired from their respective jobs). In this troupe, members are neither mentors nor mentees—they are friends brought together by a common interest. Because all members have major