



# 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.

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Y.-J. Lo (✉)

Wenzao Ursuline University of Languages, Kaohsiung, Taiwan  
e-mail: [earthlo@hotmail.com](mailto: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.<sup>1</sup> 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,<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup> 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).<sup>5</sup> 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

jobs, seeing all members in one exhibition is a rare phenomenon. The fact that all members work in different industries reinforces the trait of multiplicities of the body without organs concept that argues that one organ can have various functions.

Liu Koa-Ann is the key designer of the troupe. His major in art facilitates his puppet designing. Since 2011, he has created more than 160 puppets that represent four major religion sects: Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism, and Legalism. Originally, his creations were inspired by traditional cultures. Eventually, he also explored Japanese motifs, which did not come as a surprise due to the connection between Taiwanese and Japanese cultures.

Furthermore, the same character has different editions such as the sealed edition and the holistic edition of Sakra (see Figs. 17.1 and 17.2<sup>6</sup>)

**Fig. 17.1** The sealed edition of Sakra (Di Shi Tien)



**Fig. 17.2** The holistic edition of Sakra (Di Shi Tien)



and the secular edition and the official version of Gong Sun Chang Ger. The second editions of these two characters were created for different reasons. Liu first created the sealed edition of Sakra in which the character is a kid. Fans of the troupe insisted on seeing an adult Sakra, following which the holistic edition was created. As for Gong Sun Chang Ger, the secular edition was created first. However, eventually, Samadhi Tang started conducting performances with Gong Sun as the protagonist. Xiaojing, who used to be a college assistant professor but resigned now, wrote a story in which Gong Sun is an official who often switches to the secular edition to see how people live (Web, Xiaojing, September 10, 2013). Thus, an official edition of Gong Sun was created. To summarize, following the creation of its characters, Samadhi Tang assimilates opinions to create various editions of the characters. These puppets, in observance



of the concept of body without organs, are not bound by limitations but accept and adjust to all possibilities to become increasingly stronger.

### 17.3.2 *Deconstruction and Reconstruction*

The existence of Samadhi Tang Creative Puppet Troupe eyewitnesses the trait of reterritorialization after deterritorialization in the concept of body without organ. At the beginning, Samadhi Tang Creative Puppet Troupe only produced beautiful puppets for exhibition but never had any performance. They definitely have been questioned whether it is a puppet show since, after all, narration and manipulation are essential in a Taiwanese puppetry. However, their exigencies puppets have attracted more and more attention. It seems they have opened up another possibility for the development of puppetry. Yet, at the request of their fans, Samadhi Tang starts to have performance. In 2018, they released a short film of their performance. Also that year, they started to cooperate with Echo Music and add classic music in their performance. Samadhi Tang started the troupe in a different way—puppet for exhibition. This is a deconstruction of puppetry. Little by little, they start to have performance. It seems they have been back to the traditional puppet show. Yet, with the addition of Echo Music, Samadhi Tang again explores another new way of performance of puppet shows. In deconstruction and reconstruction, Samadhi Tang is stepping forward steadily.

The creation of characters of Samadhi Tang Creative Puppet Troupe again asserts its attempt to deconstruct for its reconstruction. A famous example can be seen in Samadhi Tang's creation of Zhu Bajie, the Pig from *Journey to the West*. A traditional Zhu Bajie of course looks like a pig. However, the Pig in Samadhi Tang Creative Puppet Troupe is very handsome as in Fig. 17.3. Teacher Xiaojing has explained that the Pig is said to be very fickle and dissolute, especially he loves pretty girls a lot. Therefore, it is not a surprise that the Pig would change himself into a handsome person to attract more beauties. Another example is Samadhi Tang's creation of Iron-Crutch Li. In the traditional image, Iron-Crutch Li used to dress like a beggar. However, Samadhi Tang changes him into a stout warrior (Fig. 17.4) since they deem Iron-Crutch Li, as a God of Protection, definitely should be a warrior. One more example is the creation of the Four Buddha Kings.<sup>7</sup> Again, Samadhi Tang creates the four kings by different colors (Fig. 17.5). Guan Jiang Shou perhaps is one of the most creative puppets. With their colored facial expression, these

Fig. 17.3 Zhu Bajie—the Pig



Fig. 17.4 Iron-crutch Li



underground protectors look terrible but with heroic spirit. In a speech on October 5, 2016, Teacher Xiaojing (Yen Ren Hong) has explained the design and indicated they are quite afraid that they may intrude convention and irritate some religious people in the making of Guan Jiang Shou puppets. One day, there really came some members from the temple. To their surprise, these members requested if they could put the design of Guan Jiang Shou in their real human parade. The design of Guan Jiang Shou firstly demonstrates that Samadhi Tang does not follow the tradition—Guan Jiang Shous are the underground protectors and they are not as famous as Ba Jia Jiang (the Eight Generals).<sup>8</sup> Not many people would be interested in them. Secondly, in their design, Samadhi Tang dares to be



Fig. 17.5 The Four Buddha Kings

away from the traditional concept, making Guan Jiang Shou magnificent and awfully dignified. The troupe thus finds their own way in the development of Taiwanese puppetry. Like a body without organ, it is only in terms of deterritorialization that a self-relocation can be uncovered. Samadhi Tang finds its own way thanks to their rebellious innovation.

### 17.3.3 *Being Rooted with Rootlessness*

As the aforesaid, a body without organ is like a rhizome that can be rooted in various places. Nameless, even though there is no center, still a growth and development is possible. Samadhi Tang's promotion management can be a good example.

Like Pili, the most famous puppet troupe/company in Taiwan, Samadhi Tang Creative Puppet Troupe has its own fans. The troupe opens all possible creation to fans—their fans can re-make Samadhi Tang's characters as in Fig. 17.6. Besides, different from most puppet companies that would ask for copyright and seldom helps with fans' creation, Samadhi Tang even helps their fans to make their own creative puppets and expect “the blooming of more creative puppets” as said by Teacher Xiaojing (January 25, 2017). In all the exhibitions of Samadhi Tang in Shin Kong Mitsukoshi Department Stores, the troupe always opens a column for



Fig. 17.6 A column for fans

fan creation. It resembles a body without organ that attempts to get rid of subjectification and aspire for freedom. The way to extend itself for Samadhi Tang is never to put itself as the subject but to allow fans to establish fans' subject. Interestingly, due to their open-mindedness, Samadhi Tang becomes stronger and explores the path to tenacity.

Among Samadhi Tang's creation, some are quite abrupt—they are neither inspired from classics nor from fans. The first example is Miss Shin Kong Mitsukoshi which is created to appreciate the invitation from Shin Kong Mitsukoshi. Next, Princess Taiping (Fig. 17.7) is created to memorize Samadhi Tang's visit in Peking. From Miss Shin Kong Mitsukoshi to Princess Taiping, it seems there is no rule in the creation of Samadhi Tang but in fact, it shows how Samadhi Tang is like a body without organ that can find its way of birth (i.e. creation) everywhere. Samadhi Tang can create a puppet based on the change of a classic, based on fans' request, and even based on the friendship between Samadhi Tang and other company or place. Again, Samadhi Tang's growth eyewitnesses the pattern of rooting with rootlessness of a body without organ. It is because Samadhi Tang never sets things stereotypically that they can find inspiration everywhere and thus grows everywhere.



Fig. 17.7 Princess Taiping

#### 17.4 CONCLUSION

Nowadays, creative produces are innovated day after day. Unfortunately, with so many different products, the quality is not well controlled. Particularly, it is often criticized that a lot of products may emphasize upon its culture essence with innovation forgotten. Stepping into the twenty-first century, Taiwanese puppet shows are right now encountering two problems: on the one hand, facing the burden of tradition, a little adjustment may receive critical comment. When moving puppet show from outdoor stage into a TV station, Master Huang Junxiong has received tons of criticisms, deeming Huang to deviate from the tradition. Interestingly, Huang's son, Huang Wen-Zer promoted a new type of puppetry—puppet animation, Huang Junxiong also criticized his son's innovation. However,

facing the advancement of technology in the twenty-first century, if we do not ponder upon how we can catch up with the time, we are doomed to be eliminated. Samadhi Tang Creative Puppet Troupe's creative puppetry may find a new path for Taiwanese puppet show.

Samadhi Tang Creative Puppet Troupe made its first shot in the exhibition in Cultural Affairs Bureau of Chiayi City in 2011. The beautiful puppets caught attention instantly with many visitors visiting the exhibition. The successful step encouraged the team. They then accepted invitation from Shin Kong Mitsukoshi Department Stores and gathered their fans. Without performance and no narration in a puppet show, the definition of a puppet show is thus questioned. Perhaps perceiving many similar questions, Samadhi Tang started to perform by having Gong Sun Chang Ger as their protagonist. So, Samadhi Tang has stepped back to the tradition. However, body without organ does not mean a deviation from the tradition. A true essence of body without organ is open up to all kind of possibilities even including the tradition. Samadhi Tang goes back to performance but exhibitions are kept on. In their exhibition, "all our puppets are touchable" said Teacher Xiaojing (2016). Even though the troupe needs to spend time cleaning the puppets, the troupe still continues their tenet. In the development of puppetry, Samadhi Tang Creative Puppet Troupe, in terms of Body without Organ, rejects traditional puppet performance and on the other hand, uncovers the possible growth with tradition.

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## NOTES

1. In Chinese operas, roles are strictly classified. Shen denotes male characters, Dan signifies female characters, Jin refer to characters with extreme personalities, such as those who get irritated easily, Mo indicates old males, and Chou are clowns. All these characters have special facial expressions and can, thus, be easily identified.
2. In 2002, Pili Company's *The Legend of Sacred Stone* was released in Japan. In 2006, a series of Pili's *Wulin Warriors* was broadcast on Cartoon Network in America.

3. In 2014, Pili released a movie, *The Arti: The Adventure Begins* in which every character had his/her spokesman. However, this only received criticism such as “It is neither fish nor fowl” (March 15, 2015, *Liberty Times Net*).
4. These three strata have a fixed focus in common. Organism ascertains the fixed functions of organs. Significance claims to be the focal point, and thus, insignificance is forgotten. By virtue of excluding non-subjectification, subjectification becomes the focus. Because all these strata seek a focus, they exclude differences, thereby hindering possible growth facilitated by differences.
5. Case Play (or Box play) earns its name from the puppets being put in a case.
6. All of the photos of puppets of Samadhi Tang are taken by the researcher in the exhibitions Shin Kong Mitsukoshi Department Stores in different districts of Taiwan in 2016. The researcher would like to show her appreciation for Samadhi Tang’s approval of sharing these puppet pictures in the paper.
7. The Four Buddha Kings are protectors of the earthly world. They are in charge of four different directions with different tools: Dhritarastra is in charge of the east direction by music; Virapaska, east, with a red rope; Vaisramana, north, with an umbrella; Vidradhaka, south, with a sword (Online, Angel Heart 2008). They have different looks in different areas and normally, they look like aged Buddha. However, Samadhi Tang makes them handsome men in different colors of outfit.
8. Jiang in mandarin means generals. Ba Jia Jang refers to the eight protectors beside gods. Guan Jiang Shou are also protectors of gods. However, Guan Jiang Shou is like the police of the underground world while Ba Jia Jang is like the police of the earthly world. Therefore, believers in Taiwan seldom worship Guan Jiang Shou.

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