

Fresh Sentiment for the Home Country, Old Home Land, Single Sounds or Overlapping Voices? *13 Tongues*

By CHI Hui-ling (PAREVIEWS Resident Critic)

Performances: Cloud Gate 2 / Date : 2016/03/11 19:30 / Venue : National Theater, Taipei

Who is the person known as the Thirteen Tongues? “A legendary figure in the 1960s from Bangka, the oldest district and once the most prosperous area in Taipei, ‘Thirteen Tongues’ was a street artist lauded for his remarkable acts portraying multiple roles, imitating male, female, old and young characters, for telling stories and anecdotes of the past and present.”¹ As the words are finished, it has become a legend. Coming as black shadows, and gone with complex beauty, with dazzling light confusing the eyes, dreams spinning and souls transmigrating. The only thing to be said is that the suffering of sentient beings is all put to an end. The Buddha is present, as the sun and as reality.

As the dance begins, the sound of the Dharma ring knocks open the ordinary realm. We see people clothed in black looming in single file. The eye of the Heaven is now open and there is thunder and lighting. Creatures are given with souls and draw out the borders with their screams, and thus the ordinary world comes into existence. Choreographer Cheng Tsung-lung is from the ordinary world. In his eyes all sorts of men and women are special with their own unique features. Lim Giong, the music composer, separates himself from mundane matters, and his ordinariness comes from afar, with the voice of the past and future lives as tidal waves rolling into memory. Projection designer Ethan Wang calls himself a dummy, who dreams of love of the ordinary world, where a fish that can swim into the temple, squeezing itself toward the roof top, and soon sweeping up all sorts of colorful phenomena, indulging itself in song and pleasures.

This is a liberal and literary kind of sentiment for one’s home country. In sounds and sights, both the familiar and unfamiliar melted into one smell, with lusty dust, coming directly into your nose.

It’s hard not to associate the *13 Tongues* with Lin Huai-min’s work *My Nostalgia, My Songs* (1986), which appeared on the stage 30 years ago and also included songs with sentimental melodies describing the home town alongside Western classical music as a retreat. The ghost-like body deprived of its hometown was attached to the stage, uprooted. It continuously rolled over, jumped up and down, crouched, and kicked out the side of his skirt and trousers, showing distaste toward the so-called civilized city. Thirty years later, Cheng Tsung-lung, who was born in the 1970s Y generation, looked back to his home town only to discover that it had become a land in dreams, that the black-and-white life had turned into one of colors, sights and sounds and

smells; everything heard, touched, tasted, and felt had all become illusory shadows. What comes across his vision is as far-reaching as dreams, in which someone is calling—is it the soul of the self or of others? Is it the home town that has been defined or one that is reemerging? Is this the much-loved or loathed home town?

In the 21st century, home town means the earth, our planet. After all we are now starting to talk about relocating to Mars. The desolate and dry land is only suitable for growing potatoes. Even though more and more PM2.5 is covering our island country, it is still hard to just cast it away. Home land has thus become a dilemma that is difficult to write about, a forgotten legacy of civilization that is left far behind the pursuit of progress. One always has the feeling of redemption and gratitude, seeking to be embraced tightly. But the forgotten legacy of civilization is now only an empty shell, and there are no living people residing inside but the ghosts of history. Or, residing inside are the living people of the past history, who spoke a different language from city people, with different accents, different values, and different life experiences. Take the Thirteen Tongues; the traveling entertainers were talented both in literature and martial arts. Throughout generations in the Bangka, though, their quality deteriorated, and eventually subsided. However, is this glorious and glamorous end a burning fable, reflecting the death of the era or a coming-and-going of infinite romantic nature? Those extremely juvenile bodies jumping, singing, and shouting, how are they going to reside into the old souls, speaking for the home land they knew before? The *13 Tongues* is much too beautiful and too attractive. Only by having a dream once can we realize that we all owe something to the desires of the new generation, and that is why we create a dream land.

This dream land is not just an illusory vision. Cheng Tsung-lung and Lim Giong worked together to create the text. Various forms of activities in the streets in the Bangka: industrial workers, temple fair parade teams, open-air theater performance, guardian-deities of the shrines, consultants of spirits and mediums, funeral marching bands, prayer services, and even the traffic and stray dogs and cats, could all be seen in the dance. Dancers' bodies are the re-arrangements of these secular symbols, comprising sentences of symbolic codes of limited definition: the streets in the Bangka. Because the bodies are defined symbolic codes, planned and conceived by the choreographer, so maybe more are about variations in terms of form and style, rather than the physical motives of the dance. Compared to Cheng Tsung-lung's previous work *Beckoning*, which explores the possibility of energy mobility of more dual-body or multiple-body (or arrangement), *13 Tongues* falls into the text itself, where the body is no longer a master of itself, but only serves as a medium. However, compared to *My Nostalgia, My Songs*, performed 30 years ago, which is full of sentimental men and women expressing their repressive yet explosive feelings by applying Martha Graham's modern dance language, in *13 Tongues*, the dance language is fragmented and decomposed featuring post-modernistic language (by

using a mix of contemporary dance techniques, folkloric roles, daily life movements, martial art gestures, and Taichi), and yet, is not realized in the text-body itself. In other words, the text-body is in and of itself descriptive, complete, and the meaning in the language is fixated and composed. Right from the first act of *Guangzhou Street*, we know exactly that the choreographer is going to bring us into a scene of secular world, with all the clear and precise symbols, all through to the end of play.

This seemingly text of eight acts is tightly bound together by the music. Lim Giong collected and put together folk music and sounds, not only limited to that from the Bangka but also including the songs from the Hengchun Peninsula, scripture or sutra chanting from religious practice centers or shrines, the Bayin (“eight sounds”) Beiguan used in religious celebration parades, Taiwanese-Japanese nakashi music, and funeral music. In addition, with the electronic music accompanying Pop beat, the sense of illusory fantasy connects the story act after act, leading and guiding the choreographer to come up with secular imaginings. Sound, maybe the source to inspire the name of the Thirteen Tongues, it is just that the coverage of this folk voice is much too wide, and the modesty and simplicity of the farmers and nomads, the turbulent defilement of city hustles and bustles, the mystery of the spiritual and ghost realms, and the voice itself all become part of the text. Lines and lines of the mantra being chanted are no longer mere sound—just as all forms of music are not just mere sound and the sound-field. Rather, the sound has become the message in and of itself, which infuses meaning into the dance. Indeed, the dance movements are not always in line with or following the music. In *Walking through the Lanes and Alleys*, the simple and modest Manchurian minor-key melody is used, allowing dancers to pause right after clapping their hands, instead of having joy and pleasure all the time. In *Descent*, the elements of religious music are used, with the penetrating sound of suona fully expressing the flavor of temple fairs, the dancers transforming themselves into shining cloth puppet dolls playing and enjoying themselves in the air, and the fluorescent light becoming part of the background for the open-air theater stage, which is rather nice to look at (the only pity being that the aperture limits the range of the dance movements, compromising the sensation of surprise due to its sense of constraint, making the finale seem much too long) . In *Going Around*, the catchy electronic music fills the whole scene, with dancers shaking, running, punching, striking, and conversing with each other in a fierce manner. But there is also the “Niumuban” in *Remembering the Relative Making a Request for the Destiny* and the “Mantra Requesting the Deity” in *Requesting the Deity*, in which the music is rare and therefore dancing gives way to and follows the music. But at this time the formation features a distinct separation between men and women, and so indeed reflects the “convention.”

Dancers were not only moving, but also use their voice—first shouting, then singing, and finally chanting or reciting. Why was voice included? Maybe because the dancers

are the representatives themselves, a channel to voice out the souls of the old home country. It's only that the scene of sound is like fully loaded music, and you may wonder to which home land it is going to take us? In the chaos and confusion, does the voice represent rage or grief? We are not sure. Dancers kept moving their bodies, with their beautiful and exquisite gestures indeed showing "real dance", weaving the home land together act by act. However, it lead to some distraction because home land as a topic has been used much too frequently, especially this kind of encoded and modified home land. Right at the very moment boredom started to set in, the koi that appeared previously once again leaps up the stage as a big scene, fierce and powerful, full of vigor, crossing the stage, penetrating through the wings and the courtyard, looking down on the lower realm. Dancers, shouting "sha-sha", had their bodies twisted into whirls. Finally, the dancers changed into fluorescent costumes, resembling colorful belts springing out of the water with the koi, wrapping and flipping around against the overwhelmingly colorful stage. Dancers first in pairs, and then moved forward in a grid formation, continually piling up, rendering the stage extremely emotional. And the somewhat sad and sentimental cello music, mixed with the electronic funeral-style music, signified the final mercy before the end of the world. With the colored belts gradually fading away, the shadows emerged again. The koi penetrated through the human realm and instantly disappears into the universe. In the end it returned to all-silence, with all hustle and bustle becoming empty.

The climax in the final 15 minutes of the dance work turns around the first 55 minutes of calm description. I remember in *Walking through Streets and Lanes*, and in the passages of counting back *Secret Visit* and *Nakashiki*, dancers arranged to sit in a corner observing others. This observing perspective has a mysterious meaning, which has been especially explored in Cheng's previous dance work, *Beckoning*. In *13 Tongues*, however, it only appears for short moments. Observation and re-emergence are the perspectives representing the folk culture adopted by the choreographer when dealing with the topic of *13 Tongues*. The difference is that dancers no longer withdraw themselves, and their body and voice are both merged into a concrete representation of home land. It's only that the final 15 minutes turn this descriptive content into a text transcribing the desire, and turning the original irreversible negativity and visibility of the homeland into an intangible surreal experience, with elegance and wildness coming into one, beauty and the rotten smell of the flesh (fish) co-existing. The desires dominate, ferocious and uncontrolled—when the home land ends up like this, is the Thirteen Tongues dying for his despair or resurrecting from his dead soul?

Every individual has his or her own expression of sentiment for the homeland. *13 Tongues* allows people to enter into a maze of sounds and shadows, as if entering into an imaginary home land. Cheng Tsung-lung seeks to return to the origin that is beyond reach, and reality that is irreversible. Memories are never real, and they at

most serve to become part of our attempt to express ourselves. But what comes from our self should be more real. Benjamin reminds us that as long as we bring the past into the present, history will become reality. The point may lie in the present, where we need to find the connecting between the past and the present. If the physical body cannot become a symbol, how are choreographers to express their sentiment for their home land?

When I think of Akram Khan's *Desh*, and Tsung-lung's *Beckoning*, I'm triggering my own sentiment for my home land.

Note:

1. Excerpt from the electronic program for *13 Tongues*