

# Performing Reparative Solidarity: The Politics and Poetics of *Pān-toh* in *Twelve Dishes Ballad*

FAN-TING CHENG

---

*Pān-toh* is an ancient practice of collaborative roadside banquet in Taiwan, in which participants temporarily occupy a public space, arrange the meal and enjoy the anarchic feast. Although this custom has declined in frequency as a result of capitalist developments, the idea has seen a nostalgic revival in the past decade amidst international military tensions and domestic ideological battles. It has been appropriated into artistic productions to demonstrate an activist gesture of minority alliance that reflects the (post)colonial histories and reticent survival tactics therein. This essay takes Gather Theatre Group's *Twelve Dishes Ballad* as an example, to see how the *pān-toh* performance allegorized a reparative solidarity that departed from the paranoid interpretation of political scenarios and moved forward to a non-violent practice that emphasizes underground mutual dependence and intervulnerability. This apparatus of solidarity, nourished by Taiwan's experiences, contributes to a critique of the currently prevalent tendencies of defensive protectionism.

## The activist revival of *pān-toh*

On a glittering temporary stage built in the middle of Liberty Square at Chiang Kai-shek Memorial Hall, performers dressed in clothing from 1960s Taiwan sang old Minnan and Japanese pop songs,<sup>1</sup> re-enacting a melodrama depicting the lives of common people on the island. Behind the beaded curtain hanging on the upper stage were nearly 100 audience members eating *pān-toh* (辦桌) and watching the show at the same time. Food was included in their tickets, thus making them an integral part of the performance. *Pān-toh*, which literally means 'arrange tables' in Minnan, is a traditional and affordable open-air roadside banquet in Taiwan. It is often collaboratively organized by the common people to celebrate significant life events such as weddings, funerals, housewarmings, newborns, farewell parties, year-end parties, marriage anniversaries, religious festivals and even political elections.<sup>2</sup> During a *pān-toh* event, all the neighbours, families and friends are usually invited by the host to join the banquet, participating in the preparation and enjoying the food.<sup>3</sup> Most of the food is prepared on site using temporary stoves and countertops and is enjoyed by all participants. Usually joyful and lively, sometimes even chaotic and anarchic, *pān-toh* showcases one way in which community solidarity may be achieved through a group of local dwellers occupying a public space together, arranging an open banquet, sharing food and resources, and celebrating for hours. However, traditional *pān-toh* has declined as a result of pervasive capitalist developments. Not only has the urbanization of cities eliminated the available space for *pān-toh*, but also

the transformation of eating and consumption patterns towards diversity and neoliberalism has reinforced a contemporary atomic social apparatus, which emphasizes individualist self-sufficiency. Consequently, *pān-toh* has largely disappeared from urban spaces and is now predominantly found in rural areas.

Astonishingly, at that moment, the *pān-toh* took place in Liberty Square, a politically charged space that symbolizes Sinocentric ideology and the dominant presence of the Kuomintang at the centre of Taipei City. This space generally does not permit large-scale civic activities without formal permission, let alone the festive, noisy and messy *pān-toh* that appeared entirely incompatible with the stately ambience.<sup>4</sup> The enticing aroma of the food being prepared on the stage wafted through the air, leaving many pedestrians passing by stunned. They stood next to the audience seats below the stage, observing the performance as well as the audiences onstage. Some even sat down on the ground as though at a picnic, joining the event with their own meals (Fig. 1).

This *pān-toh* performance in Liberty Square – Gather Theatre Group’s *Twelve Dishes Ballad* (2019) – was indeed pioneering. However, this production did not emerge suddenly but rather embodied a political and poetic revival of *pān-toh* in the last decade that allegorizes a reparative alliance against the precarious status quo of Taiwan.<sup>5</sup> A prominent *pān-toh* trend happened in the theatre industry from 2018 to



FIG. 1 Some of the audience sat behind the stage’s beaded curtain to enjoy *pān-toh*, while others sat in the audience seats offstage. Since the entire theatre was open, even pedestrians without tickets could see the performance. On the right side of the photograph is the arch of Liberty Square. Gather Theatre Group’s *Twelve Dishes Ballad* (2019). Photographer Wang Pi-Cheng (王弼正). Courtesy of National Theater & Concert Hall, Taiwan.

2019,<sup>6</sup> including productions such as National Chinese Orchestra Taiwan's *Formosa Roadside Banquet* (2018), Momomono Tool Box's *Sayonara* (2019), Itini Kami's *Ina Karaoke* (2019), Möbius Strip Theatre's *100 Ways of Missing Home* (2019), Luxury Logico's *Flowing Feast* (2019), Chin Jia-uan's *A Sa Puh Luh* (2019) and Gather Theatre Group's *Twelve Dishes Ballad*.<sup>7</sup> While staged diversely, these productions have developed a theatrical aesthetics of *pān-toh* that opts for non-traditional theatre spaces, as well as improvisational and participatory performances. In the name of performance, *pān-toh* has returned to cities, occupying restricted spaces and time frames. As *pān-toh* can be chaotic and occasionally uncontrollable, *pān-toh* performance has introduced wild spatial and temporal tactics by playing with and against the official, normative, and governmental strategies of urban planning that usually serve political and economic interests. Rather than presenting elite, completed works of theatre, these productions provided grass-roots, unrefined, sensuous, sometimes even kitschy performances. They highlighted the production processes, exposing the research, casting, rehearsals and even follow-up discussions of the production to reflexively probe into the contemporary signification of the *pān-toh* revival. The participants – crew, performers, audiences and even passers-by – were usually invited to collaborate in the performance, leading to positive acceptance of untrained performing skills and hybrid languages/accents. As *pān-toh* is a collective activity involving sharing and support, these *pān-toh* performances have embraced participation in diverse forms and emphasized the connections among all participants.

This theatre trend can be traced back to the revival of *pān-toh* that had actually begun earlier, in the film industry. In 2013, Chen Yu-Hsun's blockbuster Minnan film *Zone Pro Site*,<sup>8</sup> a melodrama about *pān-toh* being revived by the local young generation, became a sensation soon after its release, revitalizing *pān-toh* as a new local hipster activity that resonated with the movement towards Taiwanization.<sup>9</sup> Later, Chen Hsin-wei's independent Hakka film *Pan Zhog* premiered in 2016,<sup>10</sup> narrating a story of a woman mourning for her lost girlfriend through hosting a *pān-toh*. This award-winning film stimulated renewed interest and sparked in-depth discussions on *pān-toh*. On the turbulent wave of *pān-toh* revival, activities and events themed with or staged through *pān-toh* have blossomed alongside theatre and film productions. One notable example is the Human Rights Pān-toh, an annual activist movement first launched in 2015 that addresses issues of transitional justice through the practice of *pān-toh*, rather than employing traditional forms such as a protests or forums. This movement invited various participants, including homeless people, White Terror victims and their descendants,<sup>11</sup> human rights activists, sponsors and anyone interested in joining, to partake in an open banquet. By engaging in free and open conversations while enjoying a shared meal, participants were able to contribute to political reformation in a more relaxed, informal and even healing manner.

The revival of *pān-toh* seemed to be a peculiar cultural phenomenon due to its apparent incongruity with the overall urban planning and economic trajectory of recent Taiwanese governments. However, this phenomenon was actually a resilient

reaction to the ongoing trauma, conflict and distrust on this island resulting from the eternal debates over Taiwan's sovereignty that have become entangled with the fights over local issues of race, nationality and gender/sexuality. Prior to the COVID-19 outbreak in late 2019, Taiwan had, in fact, experienced a series of setbacks. In 2018, several countries suddenly cut diplomatic ties with Taiwan,<sup>12</sup> and Taiwan's overseas missions were forcibly renamed from 'Republic of China (Taiwan)' to 'Taipei, Taiwan' under pressure from the People's Republic of China (PRC) and its 'One China Principle'.<sup>13</sup> On the one hand this crisis represented Taiwan's continuous diplomatic setbacks since 1947, while on the other hand it symbolized the PRC's constant annexation attempts. In 2019, the people of Hong Kong protested against the Fugitive Offenders Amendment Bill, sparking one of the largest series of demonstrations in its history.<sup>14</sup> The movement sent out a great number of pictures, images, sounds and records of all kinds of the catastrophic situation. The viral slogans 'Please step on our bodies to figure out your future, Taiwan' and 'Today Hong Kong, tomorrow Taiwan' reinforced the already mounting criticism of the PRC's political authoritarianism in Taiwan. At the same time, the PRC's escalating military manoeuvres have exhibited a growing disposition towards intimidation and provocation, compounded by the imposition of numerous economic sanctions on the island.

Apart from the troubles regarding international relations, domestic battles between various ideologies have reached a climax. In terms of LGBTQ rights, for example, Taiwan's Constitutional Court announced Interpretation No. 748 on 24 May 2017, which declared the ban on same-sex marriage in the existing Civil Code unconstitutional. Subsequently, supporters demanded an amendment of civil law, while conservative groups collaborated with various religious organizations and initiated a referendum, resulting in over seven million votes against same-sex marriage.<sup>15</sup> This outcome deeply injured LGBTQ communities and led to the suicides of over ten young queer individuals.<sup>16</sup> Whereas the Act for Implementation of J.Y. Interpretation No. 748, passed in 2019, finally legitimizes same-sex marriage, the trauma inflicted by the referendum has never faded away. In that referendum, besides gender issues, proposals concerning air pollution, the official name of Taiwan and nuclear policy also reflected the huge ideological differences in Taiwan's precarious yet *de facto* sovereignty. Throughout the entire referendum process, people on the island, spanning different regions and generations, engaged in incessant quarrels and experienced heightened paranoia.

Even earlier, the 2013 death of young Corporal Hung Chung-chiu and the subsequent White Shirt Movement, which opposed the military bureaucracy and political ideology established by the Kuomintang, followed by the Sunflower Student Movement in 2014, which protested the out-of-order passing of the Cross-strait Service Trade Agreement by the ruling party at the time, stirred up tensions within Taiwan, resulting in long-lasting opposition and distrust among citizens. It is against this intense social ambience that *pān-toh*, an almost lost grass-roots practice, has been consciously revived and appropriated into theatre, film and cultural events to manifest an activist gesture of reparative alliance across generations and ideologies that appreciates vulnerability and solidarity.

*Twelve Dishes Ballad*

Among the *pān-toh* performances premiered in recent years, *Twelve Dishes Ballad* was the largest-scale production, with the most audiences and touring to the most cities.<sup>17</sup> The name of the performance was borrowed from the ‘Twelve Dishes Ballad’, a group of ancient ballads recorded in *kua-á-tsheh* (歌仔冊), which is the libretto of a type of opera widespread in Taiwan and other Minnan-speaking areas.<sup>18</sup> Since the original version of ‘Twelve Dishes Ballad’ has been lost, the available version now is *The Updated Twelve Dishes Ballad*, which was collected, organized and digitally archived by Yang Yun-ping.<sup>19</sup> In this latest version, *The Updated Twelve Dishes Ballad* portrays a scene of a hostess preparing a Taiwanese twelve-dishes feast for her guests.<sup>20</sup> The hostess carefully instructs the chef on arranging the dishes. Once all the guests have taken their seats, all the dishes are served in courses. As gastronomes, the guests compliment the food while eating. Satisfied with the meal, the guests all leave with gratitude, except for one – secretly, the hostess’s lover decides to stay the night.<sup>21</sup>

Usually sung within five minutes, *The Updated Twelve Dishes Ballad* can be inserted into any bridge plot of *kua-á* (歌仔) or creatively developed into an independent performance without the need to match the food details. It is the sensuous, melodramatic and grass-roots ambience of the ballad that adds the finishing touches to the performance. For example, *The Updated Twelve Dishes Ballad* can be incorporated into the *kua-á* performance of *Butterfly Lovers* as a relaxing intermezzo that alleviates the heartbreaking tone of the tragic romance.<sup>22</sup> Flexible as *kua-á* has always been, it works as a tactical art and entertainment that signifies the collective survival of the Taiwanese people. During the time under Japanese rule, the Kōminka Movement – a colonial programme that banned local languages and customs – forced local *kua-á* practitioners in Taiwan to tactically and tacitly switch to a non-Minnan mode to avoid punishment when colonial governmental officials and military personnel arrived for inspection.<sup>23</sup> The result of these practices is the emergence of a novel performance genre called *opela* (胡撇仔), a hybrid performing methodology that incorporates a diverse range of cultural elements.<sup>24</sup> While Gather Theatre Group’s *Twelve Dishes Ballad* did not adopt the lyrics, melody or format of traditional *kua-á* performance but appropriated the name recorded in *kua-á-tsheh*, the performance still inherits flexibility from the genealogy of *kua-á* history. It selected twelve renowned Minnan and Japanese pop songs as material to create a folkloric, melodramatic musical that resonates with the common touch of citizens’ everyday lives and their collective survival histories. Although not explicitly referring to any specific food, these twelve songs metaphorically echoed the cuisines mentioned in the play.

The story focused on the intense relationship between a *pān-toh* chef father and his son.<sup>25</sup> The generous *pān-toh* chef, O Hué-sai, always shared food with or provided help to neighbours in need. O Hué-sai’s son Bān Lí, however, resented this behaviour as he believed that his sick mother was not receiving adequate care. After his mother passed away, Bān Lí left home and cut off communication with O Hué-sai. The disconnect lasted for a decade until Bān Lí suddenly returned and showed up at O Hué-sai’s final

*pān-toh* service. Bān Lí's original intention was to obtain the recipe for sticky rice, but he ended up quarrelling with his father, just as they used to in the past. Due to the intense fight, O Hué-sai suffered a serious heart attack, leaving Bān Lí in deep distress. All the neighbours came, providing abundant support, and told the truth of Bān Lí's birth. In fact, Bān Lí's mother had suffered from a lack of breast milk due to malnutrition, which had put baby Bān Lí in danger. It was the help of the neighbours that saved the family. It was actually Bān Lí's mother who asked O Hué-sai to share and provide assistance throughout their lives as a gesture of returning the favour. When O Hué-sai finally woke up, the father and son still did not really make any conversation. Rather than clarify the misunderstanding through words, the two chose to rebuild their intimate connection through cooperation during the practice of *pān-toh*. Along with support from neighbours, the father and son ultimately compromised their distinct thoughts on resource distribution and envisioned a society of solidarity that could alleviate the distrust between them and the trauma experienced throughout the generations.

Echoing the reunion and reconciliation between O Hué-sai and Bān Lí that were achieved through the *pān-toh* in the story, audiences of diverse generations also gathered for *Twelve Dishes Ballad*, particularly for the physically held *pān-toh* in the production. With the renowned *pān-toh* chef Lin Min-tsan cast as one of the characters that literally cooked for the audiences,<sup>26</sup> the performance has attracted a significant number of elderly audience members, who declared themselves lifelong fans of Lin Min-tsan.<sup>27</sup> 'Dishes Ballad was a nostalgic experience for us!' expressed a seventy-six-year-old man after watching the performance. Touring throughout Taiwan, *Twelve Dishes Ballad* was staged in non-theatre locations, including Guiren Renshou Temple in Tainan, Dulan Sugar Factory in Taitung, Hu Guo Temple in Taoyuan, Checheng Fu'an Temple in Pingtung, and Liberty Square in Taipei. These places, which include prominent local temples, a theme park converted from an abandoned mill, and a public square that is highly controversial due to its association with Kuomintang tyranny, are popular and frequently visited by locals of all generations. This accessibility makes the performance relatable for those who rarely attend traditional theatres, while also subtly connecting the event to the ongoing fierce debate on transitional justice. Approximately 70 percent of the audience members were elderly individuals aged over sixty.<sup>28</sup> During the performance's tour in Liberty Square, many audiences were moved to tears. A sixty-five-year-old woman passionately expressed that she had never watched any performance except traditional outdoor *kua-á*, which has almost become extinct, and that she felt as if she was 'reliving her life again by participating in the event with so many young artists'. There was also a couple over eighty-five years old who were too emotional to speak immediately after the performance. After taking a moment to catch their breath, they shared that they had thought of their families and friends with opposing political ideologies and had finally felt able to let go of these battles. Accompanied by her grandmother to the performance, a ten-year-old girl said it was her first time seeing her grandmother cry and the first time the two had hugged each other. The seventy-year-old grandmother wept and said she was too touched to put her emotions into words. Since the venue where the performance took place was not a traditional



theatre space, the audiences did not have to leave immediately after the performance. Rather, many of them stayed at the site, forming connections with one another and spending time with Lin Min-tsan and the crew.

Modern musicals have yet to be part of local culture in Taiwan, whereas *Twelve Dishes Ballad*, promoted as a ‘Taiwanese original musical’, has successfully captivated audiences across generations, making it a milestone in Taiwan’s theatre industry. As the playwright and director Fan Chung-chi stated, ‘*pān-toh* is such a “*renqingwei* (人情味)” activity that you can always *pān-toh* to share or to be shared’, and many audiences also expressed that it was the *renqingwei* of the performance that moved them to tears.<sup>29</sup> The term *renqingwei*, which literally means ‘the taste of human affect’, is a unique concept in Taiwan that describes the supportive affect among people.<sup>30</sup> Sometimes inaccurately translated as ‘human touch’ or ‘favour’, *renqingwei* actually connotes a distinct local affect that plays within and against the established laws, norms and various institutions with inclusivity, flexibility and solidarity. While resonating with notions such as ‘tactics’ or ‘the weapons of the weak’ to a certain degree, *renqingwei* does not aim for an individualist advantage but orients itself toward collective survival among people.<sup>31</sup> In this sense, *renqingwei* focuses on sharing and supporting, especially among minorities in need, to prevent those who receive help from suffering disproportional disastrous consequences during temporary difficulties. Different from communism or communalism, which advocate for common ownership, the concept of *renqingwei* retains the operation of private property while highlighting the voluntary act of community collaboration without the assumption of equivalent return or payback – a contribution is never compulsory. This form of sharing and support often takes place discreetly or in a low-key manner to protect the dignity and feelings of those in need, embodying an unspoken yet critical comradeship that defies description.

However, *renqingwei* has recently been underestimated as a commercial gimmick and thus even stigmatized as a negative description of Taiwanese sociality. Ever since *New Weekly* published the special issue on Taiwan with the striking wording ‘In Taiwan, the most beautiful scenery is people’ on the cover in 2012, this slogan has gone viral and is frequently tied to the term *renqingwei*, as the latter has been used to describe the passion and hospitality of Taiwan people towards international visitors.<sup>32</sup> Yet the slogan and its associated term *renqingwei* have also faced sharp criticism as biased rhetoric that eclipses the actual racism against non-white visitors and other social issues such as hygiene concerns.<sup>33</sup> While acknowledging the intricate operation and performative impact of this terminology, the criticism predominantly pertains to the interaction between the Taiwanese people and international visitors and overlooks the historical genealogy of *renqingwei* as a crucial network of solidarity among marginalized citizens on the island.

At the beginning of *Twelve Dishes Ballad*, instead of directly entering the story, the two actors, Yang Lie and Tsai Chang-Hsien,<sup>34</sup> stepped forward, facing the audience, and asked everybody, ‘*Tsiāh-pá-buē* (食飽袂)’, which literally means ‘Have you had enough food?’ in Minnan. They then reflexively explained this opening gesture: “‘*tsiāh-pá-buē*” is a unique Taiwan way of greeting that comes from the past age while food and resources were extremely limited.’<sup>35</sup> Following this brief opening, a group of men and women in

vintage costume sang and danced, and at the same time prepared *pān-toh*. In a joyful tone, they sang lines to one another, such as ‘However I hate you ... I will lend you chairs’ and ‘Even though our personalities don’t match, I will still help you prepare the ingredients.’<sup>36</sup> These lyrics later described how limited resources were affected by typhoons and floods and highlighted survival tactics of community solidarity. It is worth noting that the characters’ costumes distinctly evoked the styles of the era before the lifting of martial law, but the lyrics of this overture only mentioned natural disasters, completely omitting any reference to the political factors that were more likely to result in food and resource scarcity, namely the historical context of the White Terror. After the Kuomintang’s failure during the Chinese Civil War and the retreat to Taiwan, conflicts between the government/mainlanders and the local islanders escalated due to institutional inequity, political corruption and cultural differences. These tensions eventually culminated in the infamous 228 massacre in 1947. Declared two years later, martial law led to the period of the White Terror, which endured for over half a century. During this period, in addition to the ongoing unequal distribution of power and resources, the social ambience was severe and sensitive, as political subjects were forbidden and anyone could easily be suspected and reported as a communist without concrete evidence, resulting in imprisonment or death sentences. Amidst this pervading atmosphere of distrust among people, the intimate, festive and collective *pān-toh* worked as a necessary local practice that contributed to relieving social tension.

Nevertheless, *pān-toh* is not always harmonious. In the story, the conflict between O Hué-sai and Bān Lí stemmed from their differing perspectives on *pān-toh* – O Hué-sai prioritized the community while Bān Lí placed his family first. The divergence in opinion resulted in their separation. The main story began after Bān Lí’s return home after years of disconnection. Although the father and son were reunited, they still struggled to communicate and fell into serious quarrels once again. It was their neighbours, Lê Tsuí and O Guát, who calmed Bān Lí down by asking him to assist with O Hué-sai’s final *pān-toh* service before retirement. When O Hué-sai suffered a heart attack during the quarrel, they offered free medical treatment and expressed their gratitude for O Hué-sai’s generosity. The story then flashed back to the moments when O Hué-sai had helped his neighbours. Giók Lân and Bùn Tsài recalled their *pān-toh* wedding night, during which O Hué-sai helped relieve the just-met couple’s anxiety by offering the special dish called ‘Flirty Chicken’,<sup>37</sup> which evoked the taste of the bride’s nostalgic memory. O Íóng also remembered how O Hué-sai’s signature dish, ‘Braised Pork Liver’,<sup>38</sup> brought joy to his hastily arranged remarriage, helping the newlyweds break the ice and find the courage to face the future together. O Thóo recalled the time when O Hué-sai offered ‘Pork Knuckle Stew’ free of charge to celebrate his father’s birthday during a difficult harvest season.<sup>39</sup> Ông remembered an incident during a year-end party years ago when he accidentally spilled the main dish, ‘Buddha Jumps over the Wall’, which could have offended his business partners. At that time, O Hué-sai shared his ingredients and averted the crisis. O Huat recalled how O Hué-sai gave him a fish as a gift when he shockingly found his *guining* party to be lacking in any fish dish,<sup>40</sup> a required one that signifies conjugal harmony.



All of these stories of O Hué-sai's beneficence embodied the notion of *renqingwei* that resonates with the currently still growing critiques of contemporary neoliberalism in a Taiwanese context. Since the 1990s, scholars such as Wendy Brown and Lauren Berlant have argued against neoliberalism, highlighting how it on one hand legitimizes institutionalized dependence that problematically portrays minorities as helpless and in need of governmental protection and, on the other hand, compels individuals to pursue the illusion of a better life and relinquish the agency to challenge the rigid circulation of that pursuit.<sup>41</sup> While neoliberalism in the US context may not represent the situations of other regions, it clearly exemplifies a contemporary social model that is nearly antithetical to the concept of mutual sharing and supporting. Despite the abundance of criticisms surrounding neoliberalism, the scenarios of unequal distribution of power and resources have only got worse, especially after the outbreaks of COVID-19 and the Russo-Ukrainian War (2022). The prevalence of defensive protectionism – government policies or measures aimed at protecting domestic agricultural production and food industries from foreign competition – hinders the implementation of any transnational solidarity. Targeting this issue, Josh Gabert-Doyon has appealed for new forms of solidarity that arise from shared experiences of isolation and social distancing, replacing conspiracy theories about military bioweapons.<sup>42</sup> His discussions indeed reveal that the paradigm of adversarial competition is no longer applicable in the present world, shedding light on a much-needed perspective that emphasizes minority solidarity through productive accounts of traumatic histories and negative affects. Nevertheless, it is important to note that, while generally echoing this ongoing critique, the *renqingwei* performed by *Twelve Dishes Ballad* did not operate through open appeals but worked as shadow and reticent tactics stemming from Taiwan's layered (post)colonial histories.

Since 1624, the island of Taiwan has endured colonial rule by various powers, including the Dutch Republic, the Spanish Empire, the Qing Dynasty of China, Japan, and the Kuomintang after their retreat from China, constantly striving to survive under economic exploitation, political oppression and various forms of unfair treatment imposed by different colonial governments.<sup>43</sup> It was in these intense scenarios that local islanders were forced to develop different forms of underground solidarity to dodge any possible harm from official agencies. For example, during the White Terror, local leftist activists formed underground support networks in mountain regions to help each other dodge the brutal arrests carried out by the Kuomintang.<sup>44</sup> Due to the constant risk of being reported and apprehended, their actions were often characterized by silence, flexibility and adaptability. They employed implicit understanding to assist one another rather than engaging in direct confrontation with the objects of their resistance. Unlike the concept of reticent poetics theorized by Liu Jen-peng and Ding Naifei as a dominant rhetoric that disguises disciplinary forces as 'traditional virtues' in a modern 'democratic' context,<sup>45</sup> these shadow and reticent tactics operated as a teamwork approach aimed at collective survival.<sup>46</sup> In *Twelve Dishes Ballad*, characters such as Giòk Lân, Bùn Tsái, O Ióng, O Thóo, Ông and O Huat never have to publicly confess their difficulties in words to seek help. Rather, the support network within the community was built on tacit

mutual understanding, sometimes conveyed through body language or facial expressions.

When O Thóo encountered trouble celebrating his father's significant birthday due to the year's poor harvest,<sup>47</sup> he felt too embarrassed to communicate this situation to O Hué-sai and instead talked about unrelated matters. Yet O Thóo's trembling voice, awkward posture and nervous facial expression revealed his underlying difficulty to O Hué-sai. Instead of explicitly addressing O Thóo's life struggle, O Hué-sai provided assistance in a subtle manner, gently teasing O Thóo for overlooking the importance of the birthday *pān-toh* and offering the much-needed help. Similarly, the fact of Bān Lí's mother suffering from insufficient breast milk years earlier never became a topic of gossip within the community. When O Hué-sai's family faced a crisis, Lê Tsuí and O Guát silently offered their breast milk in support without any words exchanged. This secret only came to light due to the conflict between the father and son. As O Guát later explained to Bān Lí, 'Your mother was in need, and of course, we helped raise you together / no one needs to say anything / it was simply understood between us', showing that the reticence of the support has never aimed for any homogenized ideology but worked as a safe and efficient method for mutual survival. Emphasizing unspoken and underground solidarity, *renqingwei* highlights a resilient shared affect to expose one's own vulnerability while empathizing with the situation of others. All of these practices take place outside the confines of formal documentation or prescribed modes of expression. It is through the shared sensibility and agility developed from collective historical traumas that people on the island have managed to transform accumulated negative feelings and impacts of enduring political oppression into a potential turning point towards reparative solidarity as a new way out for the future. This notwithstanding, if the presentation of Taiwan's context of solidarity solely relies on theatrical narratives, it is conceivable that all activist efforts may merely be confined to the stage. The crux of *Twelve Dishes Ballad*, however, lies in the *pān-toh* performance it constructs, a theatrical *mise en scène* that serves as a performative event with reflexivity at its core.

### A performative occupation

During the performance held at Liberty Square in Chiang Kai-shek Memorial Hall, the massive stage was set up temporarily at the square's centre, occupying a public space originally designed for citizens to rest, walk or engage in small activities. One passer-by stated,

I caught a whiff of the alluring scent of *pān-toh*, and it was impossible to ignore the presence of a performance unfolding before me. It was a peculiar blend of familiarity and strangeness to witness people occupying the Chiang Kai-shek Memorial Hall. It felt familiar because *pān-toh* has always been associated with the occupation of public spaces, yet it felt strange because the space it occupied was supposedly not occupiable.<sup>48</sup>

Certainly, *Twelve Dishes Ballad* was not an occupation *de facto* but an authorized event that reflexively metaphorizes a performative occupation, as any unauthorized

occupation of that space would be swiftly expelled in a few minutes, as per the current Assembly and Parade Act in Taiwan. Yet the performance, instead of launching a violent and confrontational occupation that would likely result in conflict and deadlock, gently occupied the space through its registration as an Art Walk Project under the National Theater and National Concert Hall.

In fact, Chiang Kai-shek Memorial Hall has been one of the fiercest battlegrounds for conflicting political ideologies in Taiwan recently. Following the lifting of martial law in 1987, a surge of criticism emerged targeting the memorial hall as a symbol of Kuomintang authoritarianism.<sup>49</sup> In 2007, the hall was renamed the National Taiwan Democracy Memorial Hall. However, in the following year, the plaque on the memorial hall was abruptly replaced with the original one bearing an inscription praising Chiang Kai-shek, reading 大中至正 (*da zhong zhi zheng* – ‘just, without bias’).<sup>50</sup> This back-and-forth battling over the interpretation of Chiang Kai-shek Memorial Hall manifested the sensitivity and tension surrounding Liberty Square, particularly when it was utilized as a performing space. Despite undergoing multiple changes related to the debates over transitional justice in Taiwan, the hall, as a worship space, still retains the remnants of past authoritarianism – its orderly, grandiose and square Chinese design serves as a reminder of the enduring disciplinary governmentality. By being labelled ‘art’, the wild, tacky, down-to-earth, chaotic and even anarchic *pān-toh* performance brought chaos, mess, noise and probably unwanted smells into the solemn, grave, national-level space that was originally designed to honour the controversial figure of Chiang Kai-shek, who is widely held responsible for the casualties of the White Terror. The performance thus forged a contemporary activism of non-violent, tactical occupation, which was able to intervene and trouble the long-term exploitation of Neo-Confucianism by the Kuomintang regime since the 1950s.<sup>51</sup>

*Pān-toh* has always been a liminal scenario in which social and interpersonal tension can potentially be relieved. It temporarily occupies and transforms a designated public space into a realm of an open and festive banquet. Whether it takes place on a street, in a temple square, on a school playground or in a community centre, the usual regulations and guidelines governing these spaces are momentarily suspended. In these liminal *pān-toh* settings, individuals or groups with potentially conflicting interests can temporarily set aside their differences and work together to ensure the success of *pān-toh*. It is an activity based on a shared vision of mutual dependence and collective survival without necessarily requiring unanimous ideological agreement among participants. As *pān-toh* symbolizes a joint willingness of and a shared commitment to mutual dependence, the gesture of participating in *pān-toh* more or less expresses this vision of solidarity, making itself an act speech. In contrast to ‘speech act’, in J. L. Austin’s sense,<sup>52</sup> which is an utterance that performs action according to a specific context, act speech works as an action that performs a certain manifesto that is unspeakable due to, for example, political reasons.

To collaborate in this act speech, the audiences seated onstage actively participated in improvising each *pān-toh* scene within the play. Given that most of these audiences were not professional performers, their involvement in the performance created a

sense of alienation – while some earnestly performed and interacted with the cast, others were engrossed in devouring the food, using their phones, taking photographs, stretching or simply wandering around. All of these chaotic and uncontrollable scenarios were exposed to the audiences, dissolving the sentimental ambience of the realistic performance and prompting all participants to engage in reflexive contemplation of the event in which they were involved. Staged as part of a fictional narrative, the true-to-life depiction of *pān-toh* onstage transgressed its literal form and became a performative gesture of cultural signification. The audiences seated beneath the stage observed those engaging in *pān-toh* and the latter observed the former observing them performing, while everyone observed the main performance at the centre. Through this multilayered theatrical apparatus of observation, this metatheatrical event highlighted the process and the effect of the act speech *pān-toh*.

An audience member seated on the stage said

Initially, I felt too old to sit on the plastic stool and considered leaving halfway ... But I decided to stay at the thought of myself performing one of the *pān-toh* guests and there were so many people watching me performing. I had to show them Taiwan's *renqingwei*, especially in this ... 'tyranny' memorial hall.

It was the *mise en scène* of layered observation that transformed the performance from a well-made play that praised solidarity unilaterally into a theatrical event that critically performed the way in which solidarity was mourned to fashion activist reflection (Fig. 2).

### Aftermath

Unlike the prevailing trend of experimental and avant-garde performances in Taiwan, the story of *Twelve Dishes Ballad* stood out for its remarkable simplicity, and its dénouement was undeniably satisfying. Throughout the performance, there were almost no elements that were difficult to comprehend. However, it was precisely this seemingly accessible work that brought together audiences of different ages from various cities and counties, allowing them to cry, laugh, eat and heal together. And from that point of view, various sensitive topics such as (post)colonial trauma, transitional justice and Taiwan's sovereignty issue can be introduced into the public discourse agenda in a more non-confrontational manner. By narrating how the underground network of the sharing and supportive organism of *renqingwei* has worked as a minor transnational alliance that does not necessarily depend on common ownership or authoritarian governmentality,<sup>53</sup> *Twelve Dishes Ballad* exemplified an attempt to ease hostilities and repair mutual trust among different generations within the local community. Through staging the entire process, including the context, preparation and effect of the performative *pān-toh* in politically contentious or atypical locations, this metatheatrical event has further allegorized an artistic occupation that fosters non-violent interactions between the arts, politics and grass-roots practices of everyday life.

Performing reparative solidarity, *Twelve Dishes Ballad's* *pān-toh* performance indeed resonates with Judith Butler's theorization of non-violence. Concerning the



FIG. 2 The audience on the stage also become part of the performance, exchanging glances with the audience seated in the seating area offstage. Gather Theatre Group's *Twelve Dishes Ballad* (2019). Photographer Wang Pi-Cheng (王弼正). Courtesy of National Theater & Concert Hall, Taiwan.

inevitable harm that violence entails within the exacerbation of unequal distribution of power and resources in the pandemic era, they advocate for an epistemology of non-violence that values the interconnected construction of subjectivities between individuals and further emphasize the necessary recognition of every life worthy of mourning.<sup>54</sup> In support of those in distress, *pān-toh* and its performative derivative embody this sense of mourning. The reticent politics and poetics of sharing and supporting nurtured from Taiwan's context also realize Dean Spade's pressing for mutual aid – a creative support-sharing model aimed at reforming society.<sup>55</sup> In his description, participatory mutual aid not only rescues those in need but also aims to expose systemic issues that contribute to social injustice, ultimately fashioning novel models of collective survival. However, even though non-violent and oriented towards mutual aid, Taiwan *pān-toh* is not a solemn activity; it is not about sitting in silence or public speeches but an anarchic form of festive celebration. The lack of control is built upon a foundation of reticence on which the opportunity for overturning restrictions has arisen. The philosophy of *pān-toh* is also distinct from Spade's emphasis on opposition to the charity model as it represents a more flexible and compromisable form of collaborative effort that even incorporates charitable resources. Therefore it is a more down-to-earth practice that literally welcomes everyone, without the need for critical theoretical backgrounds.

Nevertheless, neither *pān-toh* nor *pān-toh* performance is a utopian fantasy. The transient moments of joy invariably come to an end, and the entanglement of power



and materiality involved in the activities never truly dissipates. However, the concept of *pān-toh* has been ingeniously reworked to offer an alternative form of solidarity-worlding, signifying a diverse range of reparative survival tactics in response to historical adversities and current international tensions. It is especially within the volatile, precarious, protectionist and defensive scenario in which people currently live that Taiwan *pān-toh* plays a substantial role in fostering a sensibility of reparative solidarity, one that is enriched by the tears and blood shed on the island.

## NOTES

- 1 Minnan is a sinitic vernacular language mostly spoken in Taiwan and Fujian Province of China. It is now one of the most popular languages in Taiwan.
- 2 Chen Yu-jen (陳玉箴), *台灣菜的文化史：食物消費中的國家體現* (The Cultural History of Taiwan Cuisine: National Embodiment in Food Consumption) (Taipei: Linking Publishing, 2020), pp. 126–37; Tseng Pin-Tsang (曾品滄), 'Banzhuo: Banquets and Han Society in Qing Taiwan', *New History*, 21, 4 (2010), pp. 1–55; Huang Wang-ling (黃婉玲), *總舖師辦桌：再現老台菜的美味記憶* (Chef Pān-toh to Represent Delicious Memories of Old Taiwan Cuisine) (Taipei: Chienhsing Books, 2012).
- 3 Participants usually help each other, sharing ingredients, tables, chairs and utensils. When the party ends, the chef collects all the leftovers and makes them into the famous *tshài-bué* (菜尾), a stewed medley soup. All pots and bowls are filled with *tshài-bué* as a gift when returned to their owners.
- 4 According to the Regulations for the Use of Outdoor Spaces by the National Chiang Kai-shek Memorial Hall Administration, events held in the hall mainly focus on government policy advocacy, artistic and cultural exhibitions, and public-welfare activities. Activities such as carnivals, vendors or excessive noise, or those that may damage the historical site and its facilities, are not permitted to be held here. More details at [www.cksmh.gov.tw/information\\_197\\_97239.html](http://www.cksmh.gov.tw/information_197_97239.html) (accessed 1 January 2023).
- 5 I borrow the term 'reparative' from Eve Sedgwick's theorization of reparative reading. She has pointed out that mainstream queer criticism has long approached texts and activism through what she calls as a paranoid reading. While recognizing the traumatic histories and negative affects/emotions experienced by minority communities, the paranoid reading nonetheless leads to a defensive, protectionist perspective that hinders the reparation of the wounded subject. Sedgwick therefore proposes the notion of a reparative reading, which views paranoia as a shared experience among minority communities and values various negative affects as triggers for possible solidarity. See Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002).
- 6 In the years following 2019, the production of *pān-toh* performances significantly decreased due to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- 7 Taiwanese names in the essay follow the Taiwanese standard order of family name first, except for those who have Western given names. To meet the requirements of international indexing, the author's name listed before the beginning of the essay and after the reference section is arranged in Western order. All translations from the script and interview are the author's, unless noted otherwise.
- 8 The film title *Zone Pro Site* means '*pān-toh* head chef' in Minnan.
- 9 Without a strictly consistent definition, the Taiwanization movement generally aims to decolonize the island, with a strong focus on the local history and culture of Taiwan. Starting during the time of Taiwan being under Japanese rule, the movements accelerated after the lifting of martial law in 1987.
- 10 The film's title, *Pan Zhog*, is the Hakka pronunciation of *pān-toh*.
- 11 The White Terror, which spanned from 1949 to 1991, refers to the period of political repression inflicted upon Taiwanese civilians by the government under the rule of the Kuomintang.
- 12 These countries include the Dominican Republic, Burkina Faso and the Republic of El Salvador.
- 13 According to the Constitution of the PRC, there is only one sovereign state under the name 'China', with the PRC serving as the sole legitimate government of that China, and Taiwan is a part of China.



- 14 These demonstrations were part of the Anti-extradition Law Amendment Bill Movement.
- 15 Also founded in 2013, the Coalition for the Happiness of Our Next Generation is an organization that advocates against same-sex marriage and boycotts the advancement of gender equality education.
- 16 Wang Ya-Ching, Chang Shiow-Ru and Miao Nae-Fang, 'Suicide Attempts among Taiwanese Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Adults during the 2018 Taiwan Referendum on Same-Sex Issues', *Journal of Nursing Scholarship*, 54, 3 (2022), pp. 388–95.
- 17 According to the playwright and director Fan Chung-chi, each individual performance had an audience of 100 people onstage, with an additional 1,000 to 2,000 viewers in the offstage audience.
- 18 In Minnan, *kua-á* means 'ballad' and *tshéh* means 'book'. I italicize Gather Theatre Group's work and put the ancient *kua-á-tshéh* in quote marks for clarity's sake.
- 19 Tseng Pin-Tsang, '從歌仔冊《最新十二碗菜歌》看台灣早期飲食' (Cuisine in Early Taiwan through *Kua-á-tshéh* The Updated Twelve Dishes Ballad), *Taiwan Folkway*, 52, 3 (2002), pp. 9–18.
- 20 Yang Yu-jun (楊玉君), 'The Theme and Rhetoric of Food in Kua-á', *Journal of Chinese Literature of National Cheng Kung University*, 45 (2014), pp. 339–71.
- 21 十二碗菜歌 (Twelve Dishes Ballad), in *Folk Literature: Materials in the Collection of the Institute of History and Philology*, 365 (2004), pp. 13–25.
- 22 Tsai Hisn-hsin (蔡欣欣), 'On the Foundation of Improvisation in Taiwanese Koa-á Opera: "Genuine Koa-á," Shanbo and Yintai', *Journal of Chinese Ritual, Theatre and Folklore*, 131 (2013), pp. 97–166. *Butterfly Lovers* is a Chinese legend of a tragic romance and has been adapted into diverse Chinese performance genres, including Huangmei opera and Yue opera.
- 23 The Kōminka movement, which literally means 'to make people subjects of the emperor', was proposed by Seizō Kobayashi in 1936.
- 24 Hsieh Hsiao-mei (謝筱玫), "'Opera": Its Definition and Historical Development', *Chungwai*, 31, 1 (2002), pp. 157–74.
- 25 Fan Chung-chi, unpaginated script of *Twelve Dishes Ballad*, made available by courtesy of Gather Theatre Group.
- 26 Lin Min-tsan is currently one of the most renowned *pān-toh* chefs in Taiwan. His father Lin Tien-sheng (1934–2010) was also a representative Taiwan cuisine chef.
- 27 Unless otherwise indicated, comments are from my interviews with anonymous participants and the discussion following the performance at Liberty Square, 14 November 2020.
- 28 Fan Chung-chi, personal interview, 20 October 2021.
- 29 Chen Shu-ying (陳淑英), Lin Shao-an (林韶安) and Chang Chen-chou (張震洲), '做夥鬧熱來辦桌搬演古早味與人情味' (*Pān-toh* to Perform Nostalgia and *Renqingwei*), *PAR*, 323 (2019), pp. 68–71.
- 30 '人情味' (Taste of Human Affect) (2021), *Ministry of Education Mandarin Chinese Dictionary*, at <https://dict.concised.moe.edu.tw/dictView.jsp?ID=36122&la=o&powerMode=o> (accessed 1 January 2023).
- 31 Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011); James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985).
- 32 Right after the magazine issue came out, the *New Weekly* also published the traditional Chinese version of it in book format. *New Weekly* (新週刊) team, '最美的風景是人' (The Most Beautiful Scenery Is People), *New Weekly*, 375 (2012), p. 27.
- 33 Lee Tuo-tzu (李拓梓), '什麼？台灣最美的風景是人？' (Seriously? The Most Beautiful Scenery in Taiwan Is People?) (14 December 2012), *Thinking-Taiwan*, at [www.thinkingtaiwan.com/content/364](http://www.thinkingtaiwan.com/content/364) (accessed 1 January 2023); Eric Chen (陳仁豪), '台灣最美的風景是人？還是因為台灣沒太多觀光價值，只好拚命用人情味來炒作？' (The Most Beautiful Scenery in Taiwan Is People? Or Is It because Taiwan Lacks Tourist Attractions and *renqingwei* Becomes a Gimmick?) (13 March 2015), *News Lens*, at [www.thenewslens.com/article/13767](http://www.thenewslens.com/article/13767) (accessed 1 January 2023); Yixian, '「台灣最美麗的風景是人」，這句話其實是非常狹隘的世界觀' (The Saying "The Most Beautiful Scenery in Taiwan Is People" Is Actually a Narrow World View) (13 September 2015), *News Lens*, at [www.thenewslens.com/article/24066](http://www.thenewslens.com/article/24066)

- (accessed 1 January 2023); Yeh Ryh-wu (葉日武), '台灣最美麗的風景是人? 您說笑了' (The Most Beautiful Scenery in Taiwan Is People? Give Me a Break) (9 September 2021), *Storm Media*, at [www.storm.mg/article/3923429?page=1](http://www.storm.mg/article/3923429?page=1) (accessed 1 January 2023).
- 34 Yang Lie, aged sixty-eight at the time of the performance, is a renowned singer and actor in Taiwan.
- 35 Li Chia-chi (黎家齊), '「你呷飽未?」' (Have You Had Enough Food?), *PAR*, 323 (2019), p. 2. Besides natural disasters, the regulations on rice and other foods promulgated by the government general of Taiwan and the Taiwan provincial government during the 1940s created collective memories.
- 36 Fan Chung-chi, unpaginated script of *Twelve Dishes Ballad*.
- 37 'Flirty Chicken' is a signature dish invented by chef Lin Min-tsan.
- 38 'Braised Pork Liver' is a renowned local dish that signifies a successful career, as the pronunciation of 'pork liver' in Minnan sounds similar to that of 'to be a government official'.
- 39 It is a significant custom in Taiwan that the one who is having a birthday eats 'Pork Knuckle Stew' to wish for longevity.
- 40 In Taiwan, after the wedding, the newlywed couple would visit the bride's family and host a *guining* – literally meaning 'return home to wish good health' – party to celebrate with the bride's families, relatives and friends.
- 41 Wendy Brown, *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism: The Rise of Antidemocratic Politics in the West* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019); Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995); Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (New York: Zone Books, 2015); Lauren Berlant, *The Anatomy of National Fantasy: Hawthorne, Utopia, and Everyday Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991); Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).
- 42 Josh Gabert-Doyon, 'Paranoia and the Coronavirus: How Eve Sedgwick's Affect Theory Persists through Quarantine and Self-Isolation' (17 March 2020), *Verso Book Blog*, at [www.versobooks.com/blogs/4597-paranoia-and-the-coronavirus-how-eve-sedgwick-s-affect-theory-persists-through-quarantine-and-self-isolation](http://www.versobooks.com/blogs/4597-paranoia-and-the-coronavirus-how-eve-sedgwick-s-affect-theory-persists-through-quarantine-and-self-isolation) (accessed 1 January 2023).
- 43 Taiwan was partly under colonial rule by the Dutch Republic from 1624 to 1662 and from 1664 to 1668, by the Spanish Empire from 1626 to 1642, by the Qing Dynasty of China from 1683 to 1895, and by Japan from 1895 to 1945.
- 44 Lin Chuan-kai (林傳凱), *The Revolutionary Struggles of the Underground[sic] Party in Postwar Taiwan (1945–1955)* (Taipei: National Taiwan University, 2018), pp. 144, 167, 185, 256, 386.
- 45 Liu Jen-peng and Ding Naifei, 'Reticent Poetics, Queer Politics', *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, 6, 1 (2005), pp. 30–55.
- 46 Cheng Fan-Ting, 'Visioning a Queer Documentary: Huang Hui-chen's Small Talk', *Continuum*, 34, 4 (2020), pp. 530–42.
- 47 In the story, O Thóo's father was having his fiftieth birthday. In Taiwan, major celebrations accompany every decade starting at fifty, to help bring about longevity and happiness.
- 48 Anonymous, personal interview, 14 November 2020.
- 49 Chang Sheng-Ching (張省卿), 'Transitional Justice in the Spaces of the Humboldt Forum in Berlin and Freedom Square in Taipei', *Sculpture Research Semiyearly*, 22 (2019), pp. 1–78.
- 50 *Da zhong zhi zheng* was a Chinese term used by classics scholars starting during the Han Dynasty to describe the virtue of a real gentleman mentioned in the *Book of Documents*.
- 51 Neo-Confucianism, a moral and ethical philosophy stemming from traditional Confucianism that upholds principles of moderation and duty, was utilized to bolster cultural legitimacy of China through a more rationalist lens. With Taiwan being compelled to function as a military base for the Kuomintang's endeavours to 'reconquer China', Neo-Confucianism has been co-opted as the state apparatus that has regulated the island and provided the ideological foundation for official doctrine.
- 52 J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962).

- 53 The minor transnational is a theoretical framework introduced by Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih, referring to innovative alliances among marginalized groups that extend beyond the traditional binary distinctions of minority versus majority. See Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih, *Minor Transnationalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).
- 54 Judith Butler, *The Force of Nonviolence: An Ethico-political Bind* (New York: Verso, 2020).
- 55 Dean Spade, *Mutual Aid: Building Solidarity during This Crisis* (New York: Verso, 2020).

FAN-TING CHENG ([fantingcheng@ntu.edu.tw](mailto:fantingcheng@ntu.edu.tw)) is Associate Professor in the Graduate Institute of Taiwan Literature at National Taiwan University. She received her PhD from the University of California, Los Angeles, in theatre and performance studies, and has published widely on queer theatre and literature in Taiwan. In addition to academic journals, she also writes regularly for contemporary art and literary publications, such as *Unitas Literary*, *Fountain*, and *Art Collection + Design*.