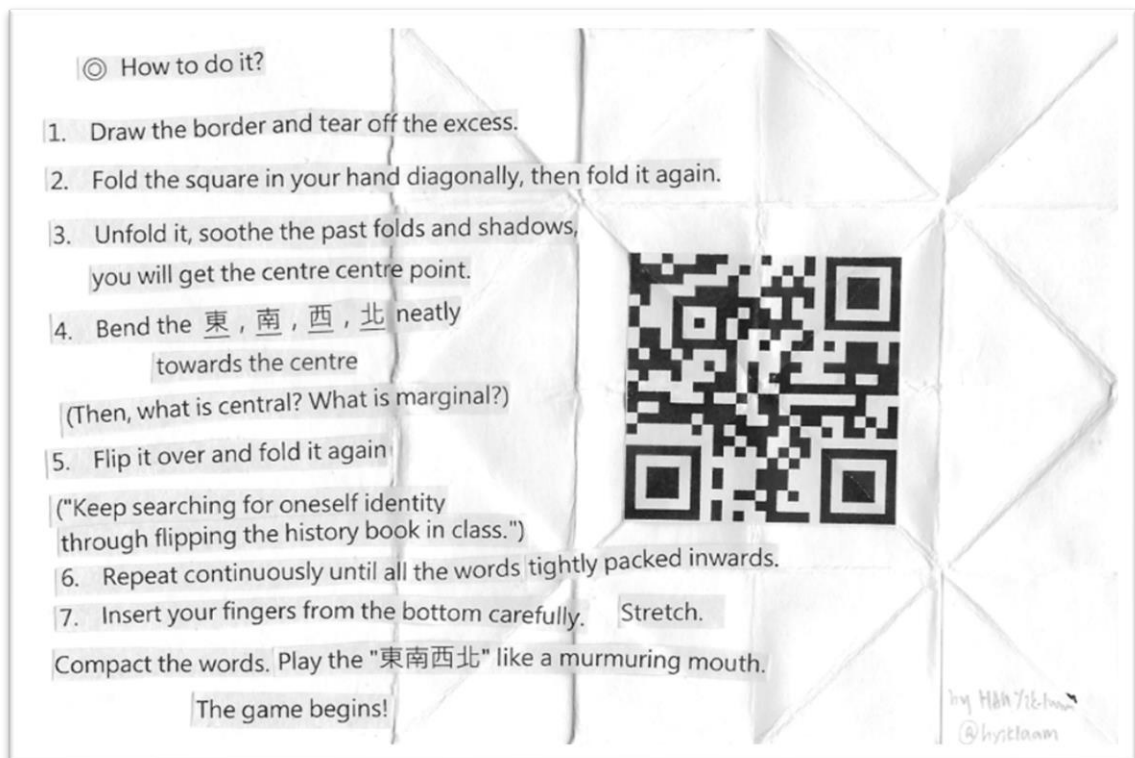
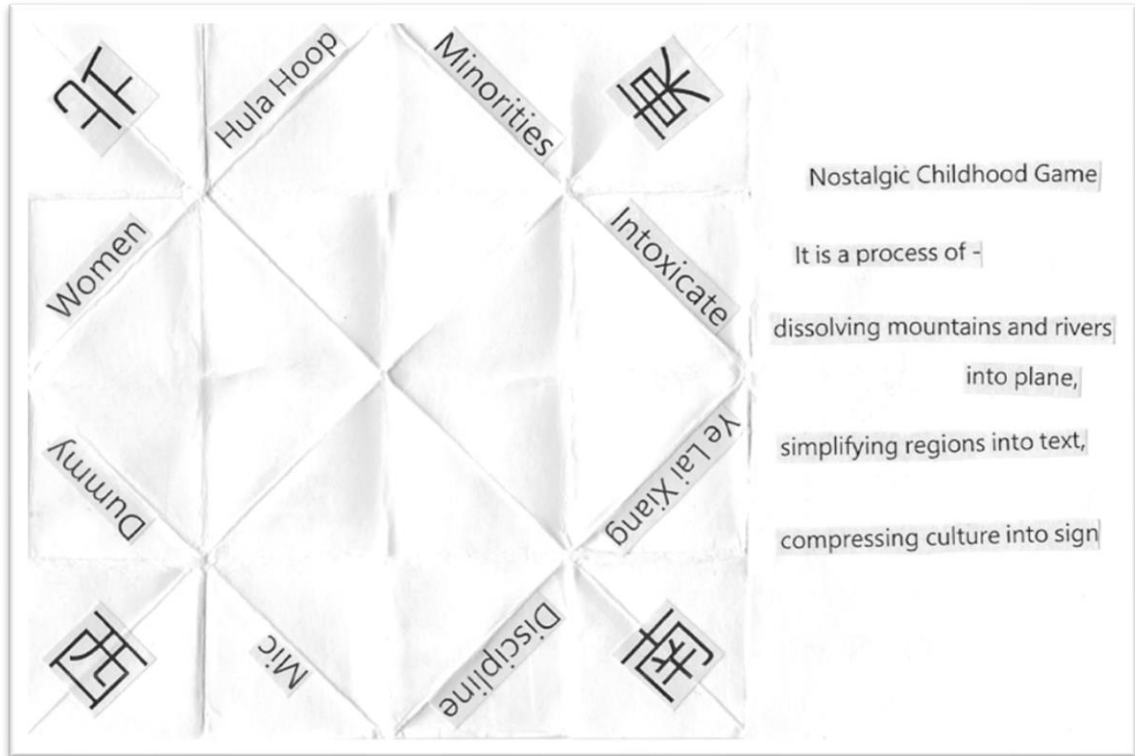


The Game Spirit in Yang Zhen's "Minority"

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"Minority" is the third installment in Yang Zhen's "Revolutionary Game" series. The upcoming Hong Kong performance will mark the end of this work. Through a conversation with Yang Zhen and reviewing previous interviews, I have extracted three keywords - "game¹, empathy², and proximity³" - for further creative development.

From China's Territory to the 'East, South, West, North' Game

When we mention ethnic minorities, our mind presumes a cohesive core, namely the dominant ethnic group. Looking back at China's long history, the Han (漢) ethnic group formed a community since the Han Dynasty and developed a unique "Tian Xia" (天下) perspective (Tan, 1991), further solidifying the Han people as the dominant ethnic group in China's territory.

In ancient times, the Han people regarded their territory as a chessboard (Qin, 2010), with their own homeland as the center of geography and culture. The minority ethnic groups located in the four corners were respectively the Southern "Man" (蠻), Northern "Di" (狄), Western "Rong" (戎), Eastern "Yi" (夷). This imagination reminds me of the childhood game "East, South, West, North" which has a strikingly similar setting. The handheld "East, South, West, North" game brings the grand "Tian Xia" perspective closer to personal, everyday, and childlike interactive game. It also evokes collective nostalgia or fond memories of the past. These somehow echo with Yang Zhen's recent thoughts on the distance between performance art and the audience, and the empathetic power of dance.

The Challenges of Modernization

Speaking of China's development process, after 1840, China began to modernize with the influence of Western civilization. The Chinese traditional "Tian Xia" perspective was replaced by the Western concept of "nation-state", while the ethnic frontier was changed into a substantive national border (Qin, 2010). As a result, ethnic minorities transformed from "ethnic other" to "internal other" being included in Chinese culture as the "56 ethnic brothers and sisters who are one family"⁴. At the same time, ethnic minorities have been repeatedly represented by contemporary media as a complex "internal other" (Qin, 2010): First, ethnic minorities are portrayed as primitive and backward. This stereotype helps the Han people to highlight their own modernity. Second, China perceives ethnic minority culture as a valuable cultural asset that can be marketed to the Western market. This resonates with the development of Yang Zhen's "Minority". His work has been toured in Europe and America, however, it appears that he has encountered prejudice from Western audiences⁵. They hold the belief that Chinese artists shall be

critical of their background and produce provocative artworks. They somehow perceive his creations as lacking pure artistic value. Whether it is the depiction of the "minority" by China or the "Minority" created by Yang Zhen, both aspects benefit from the cultural distinctiveness dividend on a global context, but they also fall into the dilemma of emphasizing differences in the context of modernization and the underlying power imbalance in discourse.

The Use of Symbols

Lastly, I would like to touch upon the extensive use of symbols in "Minority", which serves to represent the relationship between the identity composition of minorities and historical progress. What do we mean by symbols? Ferdinand de Saussure explains that symbols are fundamental elements of language, consisting of the signifier and the signified. The connection between the two is fluid, and different historical periods give rise to corresponding socio-cultural meanings. Likewise, we can construct and produce reality through symbols. In this regard, I would like to invite you to play with the "East, South, West, North" card in your hands - play it freely and explore the potential interpretations of the eight symbols inserted:

#Minorities

Minorities refer to groups within a community which have different national or cultural traditions from the main population. Benedict Anderson sees nation as a social construct and an "imagined community". China is a nation-state consisting of the Han ethnic group and 55 other minority groups. "Minorities" is a contemporary dance performance, featuring five female dancers from different ethnic groups. Its previous versions were performed by dancers from the Korean (in China), Tibetan, Mongolian, Uyghur, and Macanese (without ethnic classification but with colonial history) ethnic groups.

#Discipline

Yang Zhen graduated from the School of Dance, Minzu University of China. While studying in Beijing, he noticed a significant transformation in the dance styles, language, and rhythm of his ethnic minority classmates⁶. Meanwhile, his teachers attempted to bring folk dances back to the university and integrate them into a systematic educational system. When the dancers perform "uniform, orderly, and embellished" folk dances, what turns individuals into docile bodies?

#Dummy

Yang Zhen shared a dirty yet thought-provoking joke: a Chinese man visited a "multi-ethnicities" sauna. When the prostitutes stood naked in a row, awaiting to be chosen, the man yelled, "How could I know their ethnicity without those fucking costumes?"

When the performers in "Minorities" take off their ethnic costumes and put on rhythmic costumes, following the popular American disco rhythm of the 1980s, it reminds me of the rise of foreign trade garment factories during the era of Chinese economic reform. Not only the characteristics of clothing, but also the individuality of workers is lost in the mass production of "Made in China" garments. This alludes to the multifaceted relationship between modernization, capital, and identity, all within the thematic context of clothing.

#Women

Yang Zhen highlights the element of "Women", which is one of the keys to his creations. Based on his previous version of "Minorities" and interviews, it seems that we can discern how he views women. Here, let's look at the common female characters represented in the media as an entry point:

Women - Witches/Mad women

The five dancers would at times flail their arms and perform exaggerated bodily movements, evoking a sense of madness. How could women express their own power? Or how could they provoke public attention towards the female expression of power?

Women - Prostitutes

A dancer on stage instructs others to wink and flirt with the audience, blending the graceful postures and the charm of ethnic dance in order to please the public. This bold portrayal of so-called femininity raises the question of what meaning lies behind the emphasis on the tutorial process within this choreographic piece.

Women - Sacrifices

Ethnic minorities are often portrayed in the media as primitive and colorful Others (Schein, 1997), especially young, beautiful, innocent, and singing-dancing female images (Tan, 2010). Their ethnic costumes are essential as the conceptual extension of identity materiality. It visually enhances the

portrayal of ethnic minorities, conveying their marginalized position akin to the social status of women (Gladney, 1994; Blum, 2001).

Women - Mothers

Yang Zhen focuses on female circumstances when observing (social) events, which originates from his personal concern for his mother's marriage and destiny. "I pay attention to women's pain⁷," he said. By 2023, when Yang Zhen mentioned his relationship with his mother again, he smiled, "We now share an intimate bond." Throughout the past six years, he has been exploring the issue of identity and now feels that he has discovered the answer within himself, recognizing that "We are all human beings⁸". He no longer intends to pursue this topic and hopes that the final performance in Hong Kong will present a softer version to the audience.

[#Ye Lai Xiang](#)

In the previous version, the female Macau dancer would undress in the melody of 'Ye Lai Xiang' (夜來香). 'Ye Lai Xiang' has been banned from broadcasting and singing twice in the context of Chinese history. Yang Zhen described it as bringing vibrant colors to the gray China of the 1980s and showcasing the female power.

[#Intoxicate](#)

Two patriotic songs are woven throughout the performance, which are respectively 'The Train is Heading Towards Shaoshan' (火車向著韶山跑) in the early Cultural Revolution and 'Love My China' (愛我中華) at the Fourth Traditional Sports Games of Ethnic Minorities. Moreover, the footage of Li Yang's 'Crazy English' is displayed on stage. Since 1989, Li Yang's 'Crazy English' has swept across China, and in 2008, he was appointed as the Chief English Training Coach for Beijing Olympics volunteers. In the footage, we could see Li Yang holding a microphone to lead an enormous crowd in English oral practice, "Open your mouth!" The importance of pronunciation is emphasized in 'Crazy English,' considering it as the foundation of confidence (and even elevating it to "the cornerstone of patriotism"). The pronunciation exercises, such as 'Round mouth shape - A-A-A,' blurred the demarcation between Mandarin and English, skillfully generating a harmonized language within a capitalism framework.

#Mic

On the stage, there stand five microphone stands, each with a woman positioned behind. Yet, only one woman could speak up. Whose microphone could be joined with the sole speaker? Whose voices shall be intentionally forsaken, lost amidst the echoes of time? Towards the end of the performance, the sixth performer—a singer—makes her debut. She holds her own microphone, singing enthusiastically like in the Spring Festival Gala. Behind the performers, fireworks sparkle, sparkle, and sparkle.

#Hula Hoop

Four ethnic minority dancers gather in a circle, exchanging experience and laughter, while the Macau dancer alone twirls her hula hoop with a hint of loneliness. The concept of 'majority' (ethnic minorities dancers) and 'minority' (Han dancer) deftly interchange. The performance integrates playful elements, evoking memories of childhood games, including the shared joy of spinning hula hoops with friends. Interestingly, hula hoop is like an individual game played collectively. The hula hoop, marking a circular border that surrounds and defines the self, forms a flowing yet untouchable boundary while in motion. Witnessing the moment that hula hoops drop one by one from the dancers' bodies, could this signify the peeling of the "inner other" experienced by ethnic minorities?

Footnote

1. Yang Zhen's approach to the ideology pervading daily life is to "recognize it and maintain a playful and equal relationship with it, so as not to be manipulated by the environment" (see Reference 1 for details).
2. "Dance initially taught me about self-awareness, but now I appreciate the shared energy more. The self is not utmost important. The relationship between one's own energy and that of others is crucial" (see Reference 1 for details).
3. This work has strong interactivity with the audience, and in this adaptation, Yang Zhen deliberately emphasized bringing the dancers and the audience closer. "In the initial version, the distinction between the dancers and the audience was very clear. But I wanted to provide everyone with some performance training, so that the sense of distance could be reduced. I also wanted to make the dancing, the interaction more natural as well as the dialogue more lifelike. I hope that a close and intimate connection could be forged between the dancers and the audience during the performance" (see Reference 2 for details).

4. From 'Love My China' lyrics, which is repeatedly used in "Minorities" .
5. See Reference 2 for details
6. See Reference 1 for details
7. See Reference 1 for details
8. See Reference 2 for details

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