

## Book Review

Drama and life. A review of *Legal contest* [斗法] by Shih-Phin Ho [贺世平]. C-Ampy Enterprise Kajang, 2020, 239 pp.

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*Doufa* (斗法) comprising the scripts of four plays is a welcome addition to the unique genre of Malaysian Chinese literary works of drama and stage plays. Drama is an excellent medium that integrates acting, dancing, music and songs, and at the same time incorporating history, values and insights of life to create awareness of issues that concern society and the average person. Rare it is for the Malaysian Chinese literary scene to encounter a publication of plays to supplement the equally rare occasions of stage acting for general consumption. The Malaysian fraternity of playwrights and associated enthusiasts such as stage directors, producers, actors and actresses, backup artists and others is small, “invisible” and low-key. Yet members of the fraternity are united in their faithful pursuit of an art form that is part of life and that adds to the tapestry of local culture.

The author, Ho Shih Phin, is a talented Malaysian theatre and film director. True to his dedication to this literary form, Shin Phin has devoted his talents and thoughts to come out with four of his creations in print. Over the years, these plays have been performed in different venues and times. The author is to be congratulated for having accomplished a project purely inspired by a personal pursuit of self-fulfillment and devotion to his passionate interest and specialisation.

*Doufa* contains the scripts of four plays with titles that may be literally translated as Legal Contest; Three Children; The 18th Floor: Sharing the Same Roof with a Ghost; and My Dad is Li Xiaolong.

“Doufa” implies a form of legal contest in the interpretation of laws and, figuratively, the battle of wits between opponents wielding their magical spells on each other. In a situation when the powers of the opposing sides are unequal, it implies a struggle against draconian rules by the weaker party.

The play traces its origin to the presence of a dead person sprawling on the compound of a tall government building. The immediate cause of death was a fall from an administrative office situated on the upper floor. The incident shocked the nation but the official “investigations” failed to reveal the cause of the death and no one was subjected to legal action. The incident has since been conveniently classified as due to unknown causes, and both suicide and murder were ruled out. The dead person remained as a victim of injustice while the real culprit continued to go free.

This narrative is coupled to the Chinese legend of Lady White Snake to expose the victimisation of ordinary people from the abuses of the rich and powerful. The narrative begins with the involvement of a cause-of-death-unknown investigator to search for the cause of the death of the legend’s principal protagonist Xu Xian. This led him to trace the past of the White Snake that had succeeded in acquiring a human form and married Xu Xian. Then came a pretentious monk with potent magical power. He regarded the snake as an “other” species and attempted forcefully to subdue it to break up the union. Xu Xian had died once out of fright of the snake. But behind his second death was a hidden secret. This was because he had rejected and resisted the monk’s advice and paid for his life. The death concealed suspicious circumstances of the misuse of power. Ordinary folks who dared to resist could be sacrificed but the result was a serious damage to the reputation of the powers that be.

The play is a reminder of the numerous cases of legal injustices involving the loss of lives in various forms of custody and which have rarely been explained to the satisfaction of the families of the victims and society in general. The play resonates with the audience and reveals the dark side of politics and social injustices and the challenges faced by the people.

“Three Children” is inspired by a play of the same name in English by Leow Puay Tin (廖培珍). It is the story of three young persons who grew up in Petaling Street of Kuala Lumpur, popularly known as “Chee Cheong Kai” by the Chinese. It is regarded as the symbolic and spiritual centre of the Chinese community which had pioneered the development of the city. Under the influence of modernisation, the façade of “Chineseness” of this historic street is gradually diminishing.

Through interspersing acts and scenes of separate periods of history, these youths were seen to revive memories attached to the street. They recalled the days of the arrival of their forefathers and their way of life and associated changes by which the community gradually blended into the multicultural setting. Thrown into focus were the living conditions of the pioneers, their struggles, sacrifices, and contributions to making the city of today.

The play features feelings ranging from joy, sufferings, and frustrations to portray how the “historical truth” is being subjected to alterations and re-interpretations. The persistent efforts in upholding mother tongue education and the uncertainties surrounding the pursuit of self as well as community identity are emphasised. Highlighted too is the transition from the initial intention of temporary sojourn to eventual permanent settlement as citizens. This process saw

the gradual infusion of Chinese culture with local flavour and colour but also the maintenance of emotional ties with the ancestral village.

The attempts to maximise commonalities and minimise differences between their origins and new identities are inseparable from issues of national loyalty and cultural affinity. In short, this is a play that combines the elements of the search for the cultural roots of a community, the attempts to understand its historical origins, and reflections on the realities of life in the contemporary setting. Over a ten-year period, “Three Children” was staged in 13 states and two municipalities in Malaysia as well as in Beijing, Nanning, Macau, Taipei, Kaohsiung and other places in a total of 135 performances.

“18th Floor” is a play about the daily life of a few families of lower-class origin living in a city apartment. The members include a coffee shop operator and his wife and a son with dreams of being a singer; a granny suffering from stroke and a grandson inflicted by syphilis, and an oppressed foreign maid. Each family has its own but hidden problems.

The play highlights the spectrum of feelings and emotions of daily life to focus on the love and care played out in the midst of inter-generational differences. The elderly revisited memories of the past and spent time idly yet still disagreeing and confronting with their housemates and suffering from misfortunes. They had contributed much to the prosperity of the nation and deserved a better life. They were a neglected lot, saddled with economic pressure to live under difficult conditions. This changed when a young female scriptwriter rented the supposedly haunted unit. Her active interaction with the families began to influence and changed their life in a positive manner. The play is a reminder of the plight of the lower class and to draw the attention of society on the need for action.

The last play, “My Dad is Li Xiaolong” or “My Dragon Papa,” derives its inspiration from the life of Bruce Lee, regarded as the greatest exponent of Chinese martial art. The story is set in a small town in the 1970s involving the caretaker of the local cinema hall and his daughter. His hard life was a stark contrast with the make-belief glamour of the movies.

The caretaker was dedicated to his poorly paid job, self-disciplined and single-handedly shouldered the responsibilities of feeding the family. The Bruce Lee movies inspired Chinese to fight for their rights and helped to restore their confidence. The caretaker began to protest against his meagre pay. But he soon lost his job when the cinema hall was destroyed by fire. He had to take up hawking to fend for his family. Soon confronted by the harassment of law enforcers, he had to bribe his way to keep his livelihood. This drew the ire of his daughter whose idealistic view of life was opposed to this dishonest habit.

The play depicts the helplessness of ordinary folks as they navigated the injustices of society. It was after undergoing the difficulties of life that the daughter began to appreciate the father’s sacrifices and realised the value of fatherly love. As they idolised Bruce Lee, the differences between father and daughter narrowed as they gradually built up rapport to tighten their relationship. This play combines the stage and cinematic images to create visual effects to convey to the audience a new form of artistic presentation and enjoyment.

Ho Shih Phin was a graduate of the Drama Department of Malaysian Institute of Arts and has since devoted his energies to film and television work. He has directed numerous TV programmes featuring music, children's events, TV magazines, business, talent shows, among others. He had also served as the editor-in-chief of *Ping Stage Magazine*, hosted a regular column on movie reviews for *Sin Chew Daily*, and published cartoons to illustrate the meanings of proverbs in *China Press*. He also ventured into writing and directing for film and TV drama series. During the past 30 years, he has contributed to the development and promoted the popularity of theatrical plays and performances and in the process sharpened his skills in directing plays and films. He is among the most distinguished member of the local performance arts community and has won numerous ADA Drama Awards in an annual event organised by the ASLI Drama Alliance including the Best Director Award on four occasions and Best Original Script three times.

Ho Shih Phin is active on the regional movie circuit. He attended the Asia meets Asia 98' in Japan; ATEC International Forum in Beijing; Macau Asia Youth Theatre Festival; Okinawa International Theatre Festival; China-Asean Theatre Week, Nanning; and the Let's be together Arts Festival in Taiwan.

He is currently a senior lecturer of the Department of Drama and Visuals in New Era University College; the artistic director of the O Puppet Theatre; and also the chairman of the Angkatan Seni Lakon Interaksi KL & Selangor (ASLI). He is committed to promoting the drama activities for secondary school students across the country, actively holding drama camps and cultivating many elites. In short, he is a certain influence on the development of domestic theatres and truly an inspiration to young and aspiring talents in the performance art.

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