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Endeavours to introduce **drama** in **education** in **primary education** in **China**

Miao Bin

Introduction

In 2018, a top-performing Chinese student participating in the “Epidaurus Lyceum – International summer school for ancient drama”¹ approached me and recounted his story, revealing his ambitious or, I dare say, bold plans. In addition to his artistic activities, Miao Bin used to work for a shipping company in Shanghai, which announced the opening of a branch in Greece in 2013. He and his musician wife moved to Greece, where they enthusiastically began to study the Greek culture and language. They became travel bloggers, published travel books, studied the history of Greek music and theatre and set up Muse Academy και Meetculture, the companies through which they organised numerous high quality cultural exchange projects, concerts, performances and summer schools in Greece and China.

Impressed by the academic standards of “Epidaurus Lyceum” and wanting to delve into theatre/drama teaching, Miao shared his desire to study at the Department of Theatre Studies of the University of the Peloponnese. I recommended that he should attend the department’s MA programme in Drama and Performing Arts in Education and Lifelong Learning. In this context, he was able to come in contact with the magic of theatre pedagogy, at both practical and theoretical level. He also found a framework to experiment further on the osmosis of the two cultures and intercultural performances. Through the Hellenic Theatre/Drama & Education Network (TENet-Gr), of which he became a member, and then the International Drama/Theatre and Education Association (IDEA), he discovered the work and research carried out in the field.

Returning to China in 2019–2020, he was equipped with knowledge, passion and the powerful vision of a new theatre/drama educator. Drawing on his robust experience in cultural management, he has been implementing innovative projects, which are deemed quite remarkable not only by China’s standards but also from an international perspective. These projects often have a research-reflective aspect and are undertaken by small research groups of educators, which can serve as a true breeding ground for novel ideas. As a PhD candidate at the University of the Peloponnese, he maintains his close bond with Greece. Despite living in China, Miao continues to be a full member of the Hellenic Theatre/Drama & Education Network and a recipient of our journal, *Education & Theatre*, which, as he claims, has been a useful source of inspiration for his activities.

We, as the journal’s Editing Committee, asked him to share his experience of the past two years in China in the context of a wider framework of institutional changes and endeavours undertaken by older and young facilitators to introduce drama at all formal education levels. After all, China has shown considerable progress in the field of theatre/drama in education since the 2000s and in particular, following the 2007 IDEA World Congress in Hong Kong. We are witnessing here the inspirational activity of a new colleague driven by vision, knowledge, consistency and intercultural flexibility. We sincerely hope he will be able to achieve his goals.

Christina Zoniou



Abstract

Drama in education has been developing faster in recent years in China, and its value has been recognised by schools, parents and education authorities. Nevertheless, its integration into the school curriculum is still difficult due to various reasons such as the beliefs of principals and the lack of qualified teachers, amongst others. In this article, I will outline the efforts I have made as a theatre/drama educator to help change this situation. I will present the initial positive results of my endeavours, which have resulted in drama becoming a compulsory subject for all students at Tianfu No.7 High School Primary Section and leading other arts subjects, including music, fine arts and dance, to build an integrated arts education. These practices are valuable and worthy to be held up as an example for schools willing to add drama in education into their curriculum in China and beyond.

Keywords: *drama in education, school curriculum, compulsory subject, integrated arts education*

Theatre and drama in education in China

In China, theatre and drama in education have been developing for around 30 years, however the interest in this field has significantly increased only in recent years. Especially since October 2020, when the State Council (2020) published their policy about arts education, in which theatre/drama was for the first time listed in the curriculum together with music, fine arts, etc. This can be seen as a signal for the national educational system to adopt theatre and drama in school education. Another positive sign came from the revised curriculum standards, which emphasised an integrated arts curriculum to replace single-subject classes such as music and fine arts in the first and second grade of primary schools.

It was not easy to promote theatre/drama in education or generally arts education in schools, as most children are pushed to focus on the subjects of Chinese, mathematics and English. For this reason, national education authorities introduced the so-called “double reduction policy” to reduce the burden of excessive homework and after-school tutoring for compulsory subjects. Therefore, at a policy

level, theatre and drama received enough support to become integrated into school education.

But at a practical level, there are still several significant obstacles. Based on the large population in China, the number of students per class is normally 45–55 in public schools and 30–40 in private schools. So, drama activities become more difficult with so many children in one classroom, especially when they have had little experience with theatre and drama. This presents challenges for teachers, and even teachers with a relevant educational background need to adjust their teaching methods to such class sizes. But the reality is that most schools have no qualified teachers, which makes an effective drama class impossible. As a result, in most schools, there is no class time dedicated to drama.

It is more common to have drama as an elective subject, either taught by teachers of Chinese, English or music or teachers from theatre groups and companies. These classes are supplementary to regular classes, so they can be easily cancelled for various reasons. In such classes, children normally perform a play under teachers’ guidance. Just as with other



art training, most theatre companies prefer to offer courses in acting, singing, etc., which can be easily turned into a performance to render adults satisfied.

Along with the introduction and spreading of drama in education in China, some schools and parents have become aware of the disadvantages of “acting” courses, which might lead children to act in a “fake” and superficial manner. On the contrary, improvisation, which is emphasised in drama in education, can be more effective in training children in performing arts more naturally (Davies, 2011). Several new theatre companies offer drama in education courses, and most of the founders and teachers have attended MA programmes in drama in education in countries such as the UK and Ireland. They in turn have provided training to their staff or whoever has shown interest in training more drama teachers. Sometimes they have collaborations in place with universities in Europe, such as Trinity College Dublin and University of Warwick, among others, to offer training materials or certification.

In 1995, Ms Li Yingning participated in the World Congress of the International Drama/Theatre and Education Association (IDEA) in Brisbane, Australia, and then studied for an MA in Drama/Theatre in Education with David Davis at the International Centre for Studies in Drama in Education of the University of Central England from 1996 to 1998 (Li, 2016). In 2005, the Shanghai Academy of Drama established a Department of Drama Education, which still focused on performing without introducing the concept of drama in education. In 2007, around 100 Chinese drama educators and practitioners participated in the 6th World Congress of IDEA in Hong Kong,² and drama in education started to become known in China. Li Yingning introduced her course, titled “Theory, development and practice of drama in education”, at the Shanghai Academy of Drama in

the same year. From 2009 to 2013, several drama in education groups appeared in China, such as Drama Rainbow in Beijing. In 2014, Li Yingning started to organise summer schools offering training to drama teachers, who gradually became the seeds of drama in education in different cities in China. In fact, the vast majority of them chose to set up commercial entities. In 2015, the Ministry of Education for the first time listed theatre/drama alongside music and fine arts in the arts syllabus, and the State Council also asked schools with necessary resources to organise drama activities. However, these policies or guidance did not change the situation for drama in education, which still remained absent from formal school education.

Following Shanghai, the Central Academy of Drama in Beijing also established a department of drama education, and certain other universities started becoming aware of the difference between drama in education and traditional drama education. Since 2015, organisations and events such as IDEC and CTLACDE³ have generated a wider discussion about drama in education across various parts of society. However, as presented by Professor Ma Wenqi at the IDEC conference in Beijing in December 2020, there were still no dedicated and compulsory drama classes in the primary schools of China.

Drama in education in the school curriculum

The Affiliated Elementary School of Chengdu University was an exception and as of September 2020, all students have had one drama class per week. So drama became a compulsory subject in this school, and I became the first drama teacher to be assigned to teach it in Chengdu.⁴ This happened after my graduation from the MA programme in Drama and Performing Arts in Education and Lifelong Learning at the Department of Theatre Studies of the University of Peloponnese in Greece.

In collaboration with Professor Manolis Papagrigorakis from the University of Athens, I designed “Myrtis”, a drama in education project for fourth-grade pupils based on the story of a girl who died in the plague in ancient Athens (Papagrigorakis et al., 2021). The project was implemented for one semester and integrated Greek culture with the evolution of the COVID-19 outbreak, leading children to consider their roles in the pandemic and combining applied drama with moral education (Winston, 1998). It was a success, reported by both Greek and Chinese media. It also served as an attractive factor for the diplomatic visit of the Greek ambassador to the primary school and Chengdu University. A performance titled “Myrtis” was presented by the students at this event. In the meantime, drama classes

became well-known across the city along with these activities. As part of the National Teacher Training Project, I presented “Prometheus”, a public drama class, and a lecture about drama in education for around 100 school principals in Chengdu.

A further step was made when I was invited to become head of arts education at Tianfu No.7 High School Primary Section. Apart from retaining drama as a compulsory subject for all students, I became head of an arts education team, consisting also of teachers of music, fine arts and dance, to create an integrated arts curriculum centred on drama in education. The Chinese Ministry of Education (2011) clearly stated in the Arts Curriculum Standards that the arts curriculum integrates music, fine arts, drama, dance, etc. The course from the absence of drama in the school programme to drama leading arts subjects can almost be seen as a revolution in arts education. As an integrated art itself, theatre/drama has been considered an ideal carrier for other arts, but making theatre/drama a leader of arts subjects is still a pioneering act.

A mature drama in education system has been established during this past year, which includes three levels: compulsory, elective and special drama classes. The compulsory class is based on drama in education, with one class per week for all the students. The elective drama class is based on dramatic art, with two to four classes per week for students who are interested in drama. The special drama class is based on performing arts, and there is one class per week for the students who have shown potential in performing on stage. These three levels clearly show the different functions to match different needs and educational purposes. Taking into consideration all pupils in one class, drama classes not only concern the uniqueness of each child but also aim at developing teamwork and group creation (Özbek, 2014).

On top of the aforementioned, the Zhiren Theatre Festival is organised in December every year. Different from traditional school performances, this festival is innovative in content, form and venue. Created by the children, the content derives from their daily drama classes to reflect the real teaching and learning experience, whereas it is not specifically designed and rehearsed for the festival. There are four parts: environmental theatre, cultural heritage, experimental theatre and future world. The forms are diversified, such as improvisational theatre, dance theatre, readers’ theatre, environmental theatre reading, giving students a comprehensive experience with theatre. Apart from the traditional stage, various venues are used in the Zhiren Theatre Festival as theatrical spaces, such as the lobby, the library, the square, and even the grassland under a tallow tree to promote theatre across campus. The



festival proved influential on parents, the community and education authorities, offering a fresh concept and a new form of school theatre festival for other schools as well.

Throughout the past year, drama has developed into one of the most important school subjects, which is inspiring progress since only few drama classes have been so far included in the curriculum of different schools. In Tianfu No.7 High School Primary Section, drama is not only a compulsory subject similar to other subjects of the national curriculum but is also leading arts subjects to build an integrated arts education.

Traditionally in school education in China, Chinese, mathematics and English have been the basic subjects and decisive factors in evaluating students’ academic performance. Especially since Chinese, being the native language, is the most important part of the school curriculum. Can drama be integrated with the Chinese language, just as is the case with English language learning in the UK (Baldwin & Fleming, 2003)? To explore how drama can be applied in Chinese language teaching and literacy, I set up the “Miao Drama Education Workshop” in cooperation with a work group of four art teachers and six teachers of Chinese in the school. Weekly meetings were held to discuss and record the project’s progress. In one semester, three classes of the Chinese language were the topic of research and discussion in terms of how drama could be helpful in making Chinese language teaching more creative and effective. In the past, Chinese language teaching emphasised standard answers and results, simply centred on knowledge transfer. In the classroom, teachers would be



at the centre, as opposed to drama in education which advocates for teachers to step back and trust their students to share different artistic expressions (Tsichli, 2009). The Ministry of Education has started reforming the Chinese language curriculum, focusing on holistic literacies. It is good timing for drama in education to join hands with Chinese language teaching. In addition to benefitting the teaching methods of Chinese language, the position of drama in education will improve in connection with its increasing effect on this most important subject.

Theatre and drama in education in the communities

Drama was not limited within the school but was also linked to social entities such as theatres, galleries, museums, bookshops, etc. (Landy, 1982). Based on the three-level drama classes and the theatre festival, the school collaborated with A4 Gallery to co-produce "Youxi" Children's Theatre, an event featuring performances by the school's theatre groups. In the after-talk, children shared their thoughts and feelings about studying drama with the audience, who were impressed by drama's influence on children.

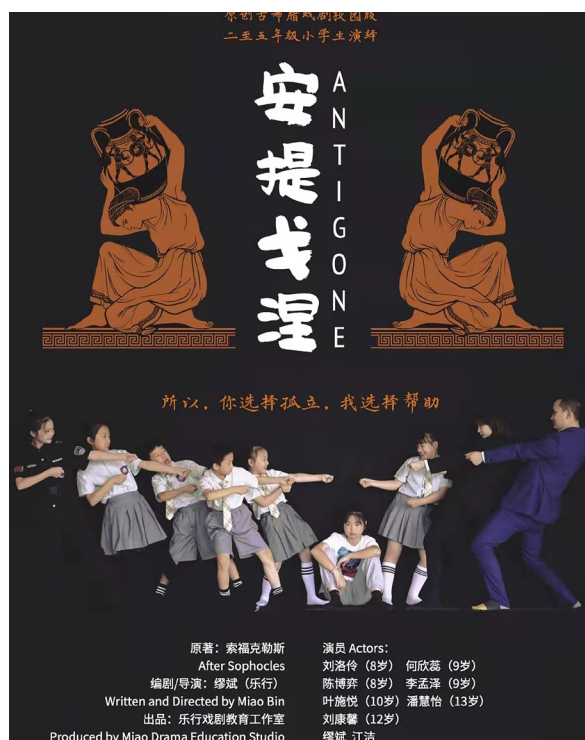
When drama in education is introduced as a daily class for all pupils, theatre in education also becomes essential for children. "Antigone" performed by second to fifth-year primary pupils was the finalist of Daliangshan International Theatre Festival, which is a well-known theatre festival in China. It was the first time that primary pupils had performed in such a formal theatre festival. Upon an invitation, the "Du Fu, the Poet in Chengdu" performance was presented at the Du Fu⁵ Museum in Chengdu. In addition to performing, pupils accompanied by their teachers

and parents had the opportunity to attend theatre performances and sometimes meet with directors and actors. Children need to experience theatre, but good quality performances for children are still not enough in China.

Lack of qualified drama teachers and no drama subject in the school curriculum. These are the main problems faced by children in terms of their school education, although they are willing to receive drama education, especially since they are aware of the importance of drama. So attention turns to the communities. In collaboration with Yizhou Community in Chengdu, we organised several drama in education workshops for children living in that community, so they could have a chance to experience drama even if their schools did not offer drama classes.

Discussion

At a macro level, drama in education has attracted significant interest from schools, parents and education authorities in China, even though this trend started much later than in Europe. More schools are expected to have drama classes in the coming years, offering not only elective but also compulsory classes. More teachers with a professional background will work or collaborate with schools and in the meantime, more teacher training programmes will be organised to secure enough teachers to teach drama classes. The general attitude towards drama in education development in China in the coming decades is positive, because it is in line with the national strategy of school education, which is in the process of reforming and innovating.



The beliefs and attitudes towards innovation of school principals are decisive factors to make drama a part of the school curriculum. Without the courage and support of principals, it is not possible to add drama into the school programme, not to mention to regard it as the leader of arts subjects as Tianfu No.7 High School Primary Section has been working on. A drama class could be easily abandoned once a principal or a drama teacher left the school. To have theatre and drama integrated into school education, apart from policies by governmental departments, the stability of principals and drama teachers cannot be ignored.

Another fact that needs to be emphasised is that drama in education should be introduced in higher education with an expanded focus going beyond acting and directing. Until now, most drama in education teachers have studied abroad, in countries such as the UK, Ireland and Greece. To have more qualified teachers, teacher training by theatre companies will not be enough, therefore universities need to set up degrees in drama in education.

We need to be aware that the cultural background of children differs significantly, so promoting drama in education in China should adapt to local children's characteristics and conditions. In the present phase, various practices are introduced across China, and communication among these practitioners is increasingly strengthened.

Introduction and notes: Christina Zoniou



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Notes

1. An international programme of the Athens & Epidaurus Festival, certified by the Department of Theatre Studies of the University of Peloponnese and led by Georgina Kakoudaki. It run for three years, from 2017 to 2019.
2. For the 6th 2007 IDEA World Congress in Hong Kong, entitled "Planting ideas: Global Vision in Local Knowledge", a detailed report can be found in Issue 8 of our journal (available in Greek), which was written by Mary Kaldi and Nasia Choleva, who attended the congress along with other members as representatives of the Hellenic Theatre/Drama & Education Network. <https://tinyurl.com/y7bh97hx>
3. The International Drama Education Congress (IDEC) is an IDEA member located in Beijing. CTLACDE was a conference on the application of drama in education, hosted by the Chinese Drama Literature Society.
4. With 18 million inhabitants, Chengdu is the capital of the province of Sichuan in Southwest China and one of the most important economic and cultural centres across the country.
5. Du Fu (712–770 AD) is a well-known Chinese poet.

Miao Bin is a PhD candidate and MA holder in Drama in Education at the Department of Theatre Studies of the University of Peloponnese, Greece, and a drama teacher and head of Arts Education at Tianfu No.7 High School Primary Section in Chengdu, China. He is a member of the International Drama/Theatre and Education Association and a member of the Hellenic Theatre/Drama Education Network. He was the first dedicated drama teacher in the primary schools in Chengdu to have made drama a compulsory course in the school curriculum.