



Ms. Ping Heng  
Artistic Director, National Chiang Kai Shek  
Cultural Center R.O.C.

## Data

Taiwan's National Chiang Kai Shek  
Cultural Center R.O.C



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# Presenter Interview

プレゼンターインタビュー

## Taiwan's new cultural policy— The Taiwan National Theater now semi-NPO

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台湾の新文化行政～  
半NPO化した台北国立劇場

In 2004, Taiwan's National Chiang Kai Shek Cultural Center R.O.C, which combines the National Theater and National Opera House and has long been one of Taipei's prominent sites, was re-launched as a third-sector organization that is now responsible for earning a third of its operating budget. The woman who now serves as artistic director is in charge of seeing that everything from programming to budgeting and personnel operations run smoothly. We spoke to artistic director Ping Heng about the job of creating a competitive performing arts facility.

(Interviewer: Yoko Shioya, Director of Japan Society, New York)

First, please give us a brief introduction about the National Chiang Kai-Shek Cultural Center of which you became the Artistic Director recently.

It was founded in 1987 and we will be celebrating our 20th anniversary next year. We have four theaters: two big ones and two small ones: the Concert Hall (2000 seats), a Recital Hall (350), the National Theater (1500) and our Experimental Theater (180). To run them, our yearly budget is US\$30 million, including maintenance costs such as electricity for chandeliers and air conditioning. Our programming budget is somewhere between US\$8-9 million. All together, we present about 350 performances of our own programs per year, and rentals for about 650 performances.

It used to be a government organization and the government owned the performing arts center. But in March 2004, a new system was adopted and we changed to a "Public Corporation" format. That is, Government provides only 2/3 of the budget and we need to make the remaining 1/3 by ourselves. In return, we have much more freedom for budgeting and personnel matters. For instance, when it was government-run, if someone wanted to apply for a fulltime position, he just had to go through a certain government exam. As a result, the organization got staffs who were good at the exam but not necessarily familiar with theaters and arts administration. And once they got employed, they could stay as long as they wanted. But under the new system, it is possible for us to hire anyone we need; both for part-time and full-time positions. We even have the liberty to hire someone on a contract basis at the beginning and later give them an opportunity to become a fulltime staff member. So, 17 years after the birth of the Center, we finally have the chance to get new blood coming in. In fact, 90 people have chosen early retirement or other alternatives and left this organization. I think it's a very good change for the organization. However, two years after the new system was introduced we are still the only Public Corporation in Taiwan.

Why are you still the only one?

The government wants many organizations to change because they think the new system should enable the organizations to provide more and better services to the public. It's good for competition. At the same time, I think there are a lot of

## Presenter Interview

Taiwan's new cultural policy—  
The Taiwan National Theater now semi-NPO  
台湾の新文化行政～  
半NPO化した台北国立劇場

universities or galleries and museums that actually want to change themselves because they would then be able to make their own decisions on their management and directions. But they also know that the change is a very difficult challenge. When you are a government organization, you just sit and wait for people to come to you. But for a Public Corporation, you have to go and reach out.

### Could you tell us about your career?

I studied ballet when I was six, and I did a lot of performing when I was in college. Then I went to New York University's graduate school, the Tisch School, to study dance for one year. Then the 2nd year I took dance classes as well as Labanotation (dance notation) and all kinds of related subjects. I was 23 – and that was when I realized that I was not meant to perform, not to be a professional dancer but an administrator.

After I returned to Taiwan, I started the Taipei Dance Workshop. That was a time when Taiwan did not yet have such terminology in Chinese. I started my own experimental theater: the black box theater "Crown Theater," which was also very new at that time in Taiwan in 1984. I invited a lot of guest teachers, mainly from the U.S., to give workshops and then give a performance at the end of the year. That kind of structure was very much like DTW in New York at that time. I invited choreographers from New York, such as Jim May from Limon Company and Lisa Steinberg. Those days, since the Graham technique was *the only* modern dance technique in Taipei, I tried to introduce different kinds of technique.

I also started composition workshops because there was no way at the time for people who were interested in choreography to work with a living composer. Every summer I invited a teacher from Juilliard to provide workshops, through which young choreographers in Taipei could at least have an experience of working in composition or improvisation. After holding those kinds of workshops for 5 years, I started my own company, Dance Forum Taipei. So, before becoming the artistic director of this Center I had run my own dance company and an experimental theater for almost 10 years. I was the administrative director, so I hired a choreographer.

### But running the gigantic National Cultural Center must be quite different from running those groups you used to run.

Dance Forum Taipei, together with its school, theater and dance company, had only 20 people. Here at the National Cultural Center there are 230 staff members (aside from the 300 people at the National Symphony Orchestra (NSO), which operates on its own.). Yes, the size is very different. But before I came here, I was also a chairperson of the Performing Arts Alliance (PAA) which is the first not-for-profit performing arts organization in Taiwan for four years from 1996 to 1999. There I dealt with more than 200 members, mainly consisting of performing arts company members and individual performers, and also lobbied the government concerning the interests of the industry. The experience at PAA had given me some ideas about how to deal with cultural policy and how to deal with different organizations.

Another helpful thing for me was my experience of serving as a dance panel member for the Center for many years.

### You said the Center is responsible for earning one-third of its entire budget. How do you do that?

Through the income from box office, retail stores, the parking lots, and theater rentals. Plus, a small amount of donations from corporations.

## Presenter Interview

Taiwan's new cultural policy—  
The Taiwan National Theater now semi-NPO  
台湾の新文化行政～  
半NPO化した台北国立劇場

### How have you re-structured the management since you arrived here?

Putting NSO aside, the Center now has 10 departments. I think it is very important under the new system that each department should be motivated to make their own plans. When the Center was under government control, the staff members just listened to what their directors said.

So, I have divided the whole staff into three sections: artistic, marketing, and administrative sections. I think the biggest change is the marketing department, because the entire operation should be directed toward the audience in a customer-friendly way. For instance, the marketing section is responsible for recruiting more tenants for the Center—not in ways that just help bring in rental revenue but also to provide public services in the best way.

The Marketing section used to focus only on promoting programs. But now they also have to focus on building the image of the entire Center. In fact, we are now thinking about changing the CI for next year to celebrate the 20th anniversary, and we overhauled our monthly magazine, *Performing Arts Review*. Instead of spending too much energy to provide program notes, we use this magazine to give in-depth information about what is happening at the Center. For instance, this July issue has 40-page special featured article about jazz, including Q&A because we will have a big jazz festival in August.

### Please explain how the Center's programming is planned.

Before the new system, we would be informed of our budget only in April or March for the year which had already started in January. That means we had only two-thirds of the year to go. And we could not allot any carry-over: we had to finish the budget at the end of the year. It was very difficult for program planning, especially if you wanted to invite guest companies from other countries.

But now under the new system, we can make much longer-term plans. Starting from last year, the government gives us a steady budget for three years. Then, they will make a 3% cut for the following three years. After that, they will evaluate the results. This means that currently we know the budget for the next six years.

As for the National Theater, 70% of the programming consists of our own presentations of local companies, including theater, dance and traditional arts. Only 10 big companies can regularly/annually do a large-scale production suitable to this theater. Cloud Gate gets two productions per year. The Neo Classical Dance Company is given one slot a year. Others are theater groups or traditional theater groups such as the National Peking Opera Company, which mounts two productions here per year.

That provides steady opportunities for large-sized local companies to regularly develop new productions. The remaining 30% is foreign companies—we present dance more than theater because of the language issue. Rentals are rare for the National Theater.

During the Center's early days, it used to present big theater groups from abroad. But soon, the government realized that those kinds of productions forced them to lose money. So they shifted to a more conservative approach of presenting only dance and other kinds of money-making popular productions. For long time, they did not invite foreign companies. That was not good because it cut us off from the connection with the outside world.

When Mr. Ju came in, he started to try to build relationships with foreign companies. Still, the National Theater did not have much space to invite foreign companies. For the 2002-03 season, we presented three dance companies from abroad, and in 2004-05 we had four. They ranged from the Nederlands Dans

## Presenter Interview

Taiwan's new cultural policy—  
The Taiwan National Theater now semi-NPO  
台湾の新文化行政～  
半NPO化した台北国立劇場

Theater, the Cullberg Ballet Riksteatern from Sweden, Saburo Teshigawara's Karas from Japan, Compania Nacional de Danza from Spain. Last year we presented DV8 from the UK and Maguy Marin from France. This year's program includes Rosas from Belgium, Marie Chouinard from Canada, and later in the year will be Sacha Waltz.

### All of those are big companies. How are the ticket sales?

Getting better. But since few agencies in Taiwan try to bring in contemporary dance, as they think ballet is much easier to sell tickets for, the general public in Taiwan are not yet familiar with the big names in foreign contemporary dance companies. We are the main, or only presenter that presents foreign contemporary dance. Even for the big names, it takes time for us to make people understand.

A very special case was DV8 last year. It was their first appearance in this country and it was a new work, so we did not know about any audience reaction outside of Taiwan. So, we tried to create advance exposure for them as much as possible, in order to introduce them to our audience. That is, we presented a film screening of their work two weeks in advance. Also, we collaborated with Public Television to have the film shown in their TV program. So people were prepared for the live performance. As a result, all three performances were sold out and the audience reaction was remarkably positive.

Other foreign companies' ticket sales were: 75% of the available tickets sold for Cullberg Ballet, which performed Swan Lake in 2003; 85% for Saburo Teshigawara in 2003; only 60% for Compania Nacional de Danza, which surprised me because it sold 92% at the Zurich Ballet and 95% for Maguy Marin. In recent years, I think the box office is really getting better and better for dance programs.

I want to show diversity, and that is important for the Taiwan audience. However, diversity makes it difficult to build one cluster of audience. It also challenges us to build up the habit of coming to the theater. In Japan, Pina Bausch and Nederlands Dans Theater visit quite often. So people have expectations: "What will the next piece be?" But since we have very limited slots available to introduce foreign companies, we can only try to build up a long-term cycle.

### How about the programming for the biggest theater, your 2000-seat Concert Hall?

That is quite different from the National Theater. Only 25% of the year is used for our own programming and 75% is rentals. And half of that 25% is saved for NSO, for their regular seasons. So our own planning is only for 10% or so.

Since music has the biggest audience in Taipei, the demand is very high, so we have to save enough days to respond to the demand.

Having said that, though, our "rentals" are not simply a rental in the normal sense. We set the rental fee at 30% lower than what it actually costs us. This means that we subsidize and support those rentals. The applications for rental requests are received twice a year. Then members of our selection panel make the selections based on quality and artistic merit, and then make the decision who can rent. One third of the applicants will not be given the space. Once the application is approved, we set dates—but the dates are not necessarily the same as what the applicants requested.

Also, at least for one-third of those whose applications have passed the selection process, we hire a specialist to go to their concerts to give us an evaluation. This policy was seriously undertaken only last year to keep high standards. Also, we started to produce a six-month calendar of our own programs, through which the general public will know which programs are our own. In addition, last year I started to provide free playbills for all programs of our own programs.

## Presenter Interview

Taiwan's new cultural policy—  
The Taiwan National Theater now semi-NPO  
台湾の新文化行政～  
半NPO化した台北国立劇場

### How do you set the programming for your 180-seat Experimental Theater?

Since next year is our 20th anniversary, we have been researching the influence the Center has had in the past on the performing arts in Taiwan. We've found that all the existing mid- and small-size experimental theater groups and local contemporary dance companies have presented their work here at the Experimental Theater. That is, for the past 20 years we have maintained a program series that has encouraged local companies to present their new work here—and now we have given the series a new name, “New Idea.” Especially for experimental groups, they mostly started out presenting their works at the theater I used to run (i.e. Taipei Dance Forum). And then as their careers develop and mature, they are given opportunities to present their work at the Experimental Theater. In this series, about five dance programs and five theater programs are presented every year. As for music, we have another program for young talent, where six to ten artists per year are presented.

My intention in running the Experimental Theater is to give as many opportunities as possible to smaller local groups. And, we encourage them to do experimental productions. They cannot afford rentals, and the box office income is never enough to cover their production costs. So, trying to do work that is self-produce is impossible.

### How about the line-ups of the Center's own productions?

For instance, last March we produced a program that linked a puppet theater with the National Symphony Orchestra. It was a production of *Firebird*. This kind of collaboration for the puppet company would never have been available without our support. Also, it was a rare experience for the NSO. Their concerts are popular and always sell out, however, they had rarely had a chance to accompany another company's live performance. We presented five performances at the National Theater – and the tickets all sold out.

Again for next year, Peking Opera Company will also perform with NSO—incorporating Western instruments, of course. I don't know what will be happening yet (laugh). But I think this kind of collaboration encourages artists to seek new experiences and may inspire them in new directions.

### Do you program year-round, or more like season by season, or in a festival format?

It used to be a simply year-round programming. But, when I came here, I started trying to do more in the way of thematic or focused programming. For instance, since last year we have started “Dancing in Spring,” a kind of a dance festival. I found that it got us more media coverage than usual. Also I try to focus on new productions in spring, and classical productions in autumn. We also have a “World Series” every year, focusing on one country each year. This started before I came, and I did not like the idea first. However, after reviewing the whole program, I realized it was a good opportunity to grab the attention of the general public. In 2003, we had a UK theme, in 2004 it was France, last year it was Russia, and this year it is Germany. I think programming is easier when it focuses on one area. Since we will focus on our 20th anniversary next year, we will skip the World Series but resume it the following year, probably focusing on Finland or Sweden.

## Presenter Interview

Taiwan's new cultural policy—  
The Taiwan National Theater now semi-NPO  
台湾の新文化行政～  
半NPO化した台北国立劇場

Please tell us about the opportunities for Japanese artists to be invited to your Center.

Before I came here, there was a project called “Little Asia.” When it started in 1997, it was a theater exchange project between experimental theaters in Tokyo, Hong Kong, China, and us in Taiwan. In that series, several Japanese theater groups came to perform in Taiwan, such as Rukaden, Black Tent Theatre, Shuji Terayama’s film and theater work, and the Condors.

Later in 1999, the project expanded to include a dance network, involving Tokyo, Taipei, Hong Kong, Melbourne or Sydney, and later Seoul joined. Each year, a curator/presenter of each city made a recommendation of a solo artist, and one curator takes responsibility—in rotation in each year—for making a showcase production by providing a lighting designer. The curator also takes responsibility for organizing an international tour by providing a tour manager to have the production travel to each of the participating cities. Akiko Kitamura, Aki Nagatani, Kaiji Moriyama, Shigemi Kitamura and Mizutake Kasai were among the participating artists in the past.

In 2004, participating artists from each city spent three weeks together in Taipei and collaborated to create one piece. Since they enjoyed that experience so much, the artists have kept in communication with each other and, as a result, the artist from Melbourne has gotten a grant to enable all the artists to get together again to further pursue the collaboration next spring for three weeks. That new work to be created during this residency is scheduled to tour, starting in Melbourne, then Hong Kong, and then coming here to our Experimental Theater. This is one of the kinds of things that are happening.

How about Japan?

Hum. I don’t know why we have not done Japan. I think Japan would be really interesting. Actually the Novel Hall, which has 930 seats and Cloud Gate’s founder/choreographer Lin Hwai-Min serves as Artistic Director, has a dance series called Novel Dance. They must have had a Japan year before, with Leni-Basso and dump type. Anyway, Japan is very interesting—but I also have an impression that Japanese productions are very expensive?

Today they are more conscious about preparing for the possibility of touring abroad so that the cost for foreign presenters would not be so outrageous than it used to be.

If we can settle all the cost, we should think about featuring the Japanese productions.