Shaking the Rope of History

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In 1991 while Lin-Ching Hsia was studying at Harvard University, she saw a flyer announcing an event on social therapy led by Fred Newman. She attended, and so began a thirty-year political friendship-love affair between two development communities—one in Taiwan and the other in the US, that share the goal of democratizing and humanizing not only their respective countries, but the entire world. Another thing these communities share is the willingness to be ridiculous and throw themselves into doing the impossible. Societally speaking, these communities are of the East and of the West, but in history they are global citizens—revolutionary comrades in the business of shaking things up.

I couldn’t be more proud to be here with you today and participate in this wonderful seminar on the contributions of Lin-Ching Hsia. I thank you for inviting me, as you have so many times over the years, to be among you, to learn from you, and to support you. I am grateful for this opportunity to share with you how I see Lin-Ching’s practices and the processes through which they have been created. I do so as a builder of the development community Newman led from its beginnings in the late 1960s until his passing in 2011, as his intellectual partner and co-founder with him of our East Side Institute.

When Lin-Ching immersed herself in our community in 2003 with a three-month sabbatical at the Institute, our community—which originated on the streets of New York City—had spread out across major US cities and and was beginning to become international. Our initial grassroots organizing in labor, welfare rights and among the urban poor had expanded to electoral politics with the goal of transforming the culture of politics; to youth development and education to dismantle the acquisitional learning model and system that failed the poor and the children and communities of color; to the arts and theatre so as to create culture with and for working class and poor people; to psychology and psychotherapy to challenge with a viable alternative the individualized, bio-medical and diagnostic approach to emotional distress and subjectivity and the destruction it generates. That alternative was social therapy, the radical approach to emotional development Fred Newman created in the early 1970s. It was not only flourishing as a postmodern Marxist therapy, but in environments outside the therapy office as well. Today the approach is referred to as social therapeutics. It is a 40+ year-old methodology for reinitiating the development of persons and communities through activating their capacity to play, perform, philosophize and, in that process, create new ways to be and see and relate. It is, at the same time, a social change effort rooted in the belief that the activity of creating ongoing social-emotional-cultural-intellectual development is an essential component of world-changing. In other words, to paraphrase Marx, the changing of the world and of ourselves is one and the same task.

Lin-Ching experienced social therapy firsthand during her stay at the Institute, as a member of therapy groups led by Fred. In her essay, “A Critique based on Decolonization,” she describes its impact: “To the credit of this group of social therapists cum comrades, I was able to transform the heavy burden, fatigue and pain that I was carrying from my activism in the Taiwan Autonomous Labor Movement and the Struggle of the Taipei Licensed Prostitutes to something light and manageable, as a result of our interactions and activities together.” Her presence among us was precious. Here was this passionate, open, brilliant Taiwanese revolutionary sharing her history with us Americans, wanting us and being wanted by us. It was lovely to participate in the relationship she and Fred built. It was transformative for us to learn from Lin-Ching about the importance of re-invigorating one’s energy and building body and spirit practices into the community’s daily life, and to see her perform how she maintained balance. This integration was new to us then and I’m happy to tell you it has, many years later, taken hold in our community. Thank you, Lin-Ching!

And thank you also for your partnership in bringing our two communities together to learn from and inspire each other many times over the years. Let’s take a look at some of the ways our two communities have worked and played together in Taiwan and the US. These photos span 18 years—from the first visit by our community to yours by social therapist and community organizer Joyce Dattner to help with Fang Ping’s campaign in 2002; then my first visit to Taiwan and meeting with labor organizers, aboriginal children, and the staff and students at Ludi; here are Lin-Ching, Fang Ping and me in Nanjing for the 2009 conference of the International Society for Theoretical Psychology, where I got to experience Lin-Ching facilitating a student group; and us again in 2011 at the Third International Conference on Contemporary Capitalism Studies in Hangzhou; then a trip I made to Taipei with my comrade Cathy Stewart, one of our leading electoral politics organizers, to speak with you about our history of political campaigns and learn about yours, and where I delivered a speech at the conference on healing society and meet the translation and translators of my book *Schools for Growth*; next is the most recent trip to Taiwan I made with Dan Friedman, our leading theatre organizer and unofficial historian of our community, where Nancy Lien hosted us in Hualien at the university, in an aboriginal community, and where we organized an impromptu performance workshop at the center for immigrant women; and then Dan spoke at the International Conference on Social Learning and Recovery; next up are photos of some of the many presentations members of your community have made at our bi-annual Performing the World conferences; finally, a few photos of members of your community who have graduated from the Institute’s International Class—Fang Ping in 2017, Peiyu and Weishuan in 2021. Other International Class graduates from Taiwan include Powpee Lee, Yuan Sheng (Tiffany) and Jing-Wen Tseng.

In the essay I mentioned earlier, Lin-Ching tells of engaging in other aspects of our community and of meeting the concept of development community itself. She quotes Tang, Li-Quan on how “field” opens up the mind, body, spirit, soul and energy: “The field is the location where dialectic relationship of things are found, it is also the location that allows such dialectic relationship to exist.” I was so excited to read this! Listen to how it resonates with Fred and my description of the dialectic of a development community as sia met it met it ma new kind of social unit capable of sustaining itself across borders of all sorts while continually re-inventing itself. It is fluid and always emergent, a rhizome of relational activity that supports the building and development of community and, thereby, the people who participate in it.

The handful of organizers, therapists, intellectuals, artists and poor people who Newman organized decades ago is today an international development community consisting of tens of thousands of people from a wide range of cultures, histories and walks of life on every continent.

Since Lin-Ching’s sabbatical long ago, we have deepened our political friendship. As I look back, I am struck by how much I share with this Taiwanese political leader whose country’s history, culture, rituals, language, traditions and landscape are so different from mine.

* She and I both became politicized in the 1960s-70s.
* We liked the same music that accompanied the youth rising up in the US and Britain.
* We both studied mainstream western psychology, were very unhappy with it and became determined to create a psychology of and by and for the people.
* We had in common our dislike of hierarchy and its methods of dehumanization,
* We both understood alienation as not merely psychological, but as a sociological, cultural, and political accompaniment to capitalism

I like to think that we somehow recognized ourselves in each other and that this has played a role in our desire to bring our communities together. One of things we discovered is that as different as our two countries are, we’ve both tackled similar broad issues that keep people oppressed, passive, separated and hopeless.

* Like bipartisanship in politics and how having two major parties locks people into the-lesser-of-two-evils trap.
* Like engaging the dehumanization of psychology and the so-called helping professions by building something more human and developmental to help people with emotional pain and distress.
* Like responding to social injustices in non-traditional, radical and (to mainstream eyes) often outrageous ways.
* And like developing non-identity politics practices and activities that bring together different kinds of people— people who the authorities-that-be want to keep apart—to support each other’s causes, in the process building new activities and organizations.

Our communities have been engaging in many activities that give us firsthand experiences in each other’s organizing, discovering the unique historical circumstances that catalyze each other’s tactics, rejoicing in our shared values and learning of and from our differences with great respect and enthusiasm. Both you and we are committed to taking risks to intervene on this historical moment and organize people to participate with us in creating institutions and activities that challenge the way established institutions do things. Committed to transforming the inhumane systems of oppression, alienation, and violence to body, mind and spirit by supporting people to reorganize the past and use it to become makers of new emotions, new ways of doing politics, new understandings, new kinds of relationships, and a new culture.

Lev Vygotsky, the Soviet psychologist who has been one of the most important influences on my development and that of my community, once said, “A revolution solves only those tasks raised by history: this proposition holds true equally for revolution in general and for aspects of social and cultural life.” I think this statement is profound, especially so because of the times we live in. They are not revolutionary times. And neither you nor we are going to make a revolution with a capital R. But we can and we are relating to people as revolutionaries, that is as people capable of transforming themselves and the world—of shaking the rope of history and making revolution every day.

This is perhaps what I feel closest to with regard to your community and to Lin-Ching’s contribution as an activist-scholar—that, under her leadership, you have seen, heard, touched, smelled and deeply felt the tasks history has raised for you, and you have found ways to shake its rope, as Taiwanese, as world citizens, as people who care deeply about others, as revolutionaries. As I have come to understand it, a development community is committed to reorganizing the determining and destructive totality of the human life space to produce development that produces development and community that produces community. Your community is a community that produces community. And I deeply love you for it.