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The search for stability when one tradition supplants another

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BECKET — As one enters the Doris Duke Theater for the collaboration titled, "Empty Traditions, City of Peonies," at Jacob's Pillow this weekend, one sees the stage floor paved with open books printed vertically with three-inch mock-Chinese characters. Above is a canopy of white banners, similarly block-printed. On one of these books, is a smaller one, Mao Zedong's "Little Red Book," as we later learn. Based on an ancient Chinese legend about a spoiled, peremptory empress who makes foolish decrees, "Empty Traditions" is also about the destruction of that old China and the rise of communism in its stead.

The set, designed by MacArthur genius award winning installation artist Xu Bing, ritually draws you into the conundrum posed by this work. Its elegant simplicity underscores the aesthetic ideas of a Chinese elite that cast an austere shadow through centuries of world history. The smallness of the Red Book, superimposed on the ranks of larger, imposing volumes, suggests the immensity of Mao's task in yoking that culture and populace to his Communist goals. And the banners, as loud and peremptory as the German swastika, state an unconditional mandate that seems to block out the sky.

Xu Bing and choreographer Yin Mei came of age during the scurrilous years of Mao's Cultural Revolution, when books and the intelligentsia represented the most fearful challenges to a doctrine designed to equalize all classes and stamp out capitalism. To execute his decade of cultural purification by search and destroy, death, surveillance, and imprisonment, Mao targeted children, who were dumbed down with propaganda and enjoined to spy on their own families.

What is the cost of such a regime, this piece asks. Paranoia, distrust, detachment, and anomie are the fruits of repression; in short, the meaningless of every tradition, and everything.

"When I was a child, we lived our lives entirely inside the four walls of our institute's compound," Mei says in a voiceover recording. "There were guards at the gate to stop people coming in, and to make a list of who went out, (pause), I carry a wall inside me, now. And I stop people coming in and I keep a list of who goes out. It is getting harder to tell the difference between the emptiness that is within and the emptiness

As Batoto Yetu's unfettered renewal of African culture sparks audiences in the Ted Shawn Theater, here in the Doris Duke is a kind of eerie silence. The map of political repression, this piece says, is one of emotional numbness and disorientation. Oh yes, there is the periodic voiceover, and also profoundly rich and exotic musical backup composed by Indonesian Tony Prabowo and delivered live by the gifted New Jakarta Ensemble. (Prabowo is also the child of a chaotic era. He was 10 years old at the time of an attempted coup of Indonesian leadership in 1965). Combining western and eastern musical instruments and traditions from Indonesia, the Middle East, China, Pakistan, the Caribbean, and Africa, his score seems insinuated from the bodies of the dancers, sounding the emptiness within and the emptiness without, as a sigh is both breath and wind.

This metaphor leaps to climax in the opening moments of this piece. Winds, generated by fans offstage, blow the pages of the pavement books on which Yin Mei stands, and her body is slowly overcome by a paroxysm of trembling.

The lights dim, a new day begins, and workers arrive with brooms to sweep the books away, the tattered detritus of parade, and the banners collapse. It is like war footage on a flickering television, matter-of-fact and slo-mo at once.

There are no classic "steps" to Mei's choreography, but there is much evidence of classical training in the stylized genre of eastern dance. We also see the remnants of her professional upbringing in the propagandistic ways of the Cultural Revolution. Her upraised index finger is indisputable sloganeering. In her hands, a red fan becomes a flowering peony, the Red Book, a life chattered out, or a shy child's cover. Just the way she walks barefoot, toes raised until each set of carpal joints has articulated through the step, announces how finely tuned is the awareness and discipline of her body.

For this work about the demands and denials of a culture's underpinnings, she alternately assumes the stretched, poised poses of a dancer, and dissolves them limply. Other players carry her forward with the dance from time to time, or she falls alone into obsessive patterning that suggests life moving retrograde, the undoing of evolution.

spraddles a chair on the lap of Tibetan dancer Sang Ji Ja. He controls her like a puppet, raising her collapsed arms and holding her head, as she repeatedly slips from his grasp. It is not outright protest or resistance. At times, it expresses yearning, a sinking into such exquisitely tender intimacy as to suggest yielding or entreaty.

Nor is the powerful and compelling Ji Ja an explicit torturer. Holding her face gently between his palms, shielding her eyes, lifting her gently from contorted crumples, he also seems to share her suffering.

In a tale about her young dreams of marriage in that world gone mad, Mei says she dreamed she would love a soldier because "they are never wrong, would never leave, are the only heroes." It is the longing for the old militaristic tradition that is sliding away, and for stability and safety in the one taking its place. Di Ghanwen, a figure representing her brother, performs the breathtaking sword maneuvers of wushi, and we see the why of her conviction. He steps smartly forward, somersaults and flips, tucking his sword adroitly, and lands abruptly in meditation pose, palms together in prayer. Modeling and falling victim to his charm, Mei takes the sword and wraps it between her legs, winding compulsively round and round it, until she ends a quiver, her suspended legs jangling. In sexual ecstasy? Or the last twitches of death? Every act and movement in this piece holds ambivalence and ambiguity. Just so did the minds of the people ebb and flow to Mao's reforms; just so, is the mind at peril of insanity.

It is a beautiful and well-crafted piece with frequent stunning pictures, the whole package wrapped round with Prabowo's sinuous music. If it were a tightly edited collection of these images, Empty Traditions would come off stronger. Mei has, perhaps, gone to unnecessary lengths to fill action to the music and to fully showcase the exceptional talents of her colleagues. As is, ample unforgettable moments stretch the mind and concentration for a mesmerizing evening.