World Factory

Grass Stage, *Little Society*.
PC: Grass Stage.

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This essay posits a new period designation in reform-era China, the WTO years, from roughly 2005 to 2010, and considers some of the political, intellectual, and cultural developments therein. The primary focus is on the Shanghai-based Grass Stage theatre troupe, and its history of theatre work centred on social investigation and inquiry. The author has been a member of the group since 2010, and uses participant observation to discuss various political and cultural possibilities and impasses during the period in question.

The decade from roughly 2005 to 2015 might one day prove to have been one of those distinctive periods in Chinese social, political, and cultural history—one with clear demarcations marking its before and after, a time of possibilities explored and foreclosed, when other futures could have been imagined. Unlike the 1980s, with its burst of new subjectivities, new politics, new cultural forms, new relationships to the state, and its singularly abrupt ending, the originality and distinctiveness of what I call ‘The WTO Years’ may not have been experienced as such at the time. But today, eight years into the Xi Jinping regime, we can see more clearly what set it apart.

The economic forces that gathered steam after Deng Xiaoping’s ‘Southern Journey’ in 1992 came unthrottled after accession to the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in 2001,

when China's role as world factory was secured, accompanied by an ever more rigid and steadily polarised class structure, inequality, and the exploitation of migrant labour that had also begun in the previous decade. Capitalists and entrepreneurs enjoyed unprecedented influence and prestige. The countermovement was equally distinctive: a steadily growing frequency of better and better organised labour actions, with significant political, intellectual, and social strength behind them. Worker activists, supported by labour NGOs—the latter in more than a few cases supported by factions in local governments and unions—helped forge worker identity and an embryonic class politics. Worker actions continue to this day, albeit in smaller numbers than during the WTO years, but what only a few years ago seemed to be a nascent alliance of leftist intellectuals and students, worker activists, and workerist NGOs has met ramped-up state repression, and passed into quiescence.

Although the WTO years were not marked by the higher-profile intellectual debates that raged through the 1980s and 1990s—alienation, humanism, etc.—there was considerable critical intellectual activity in a number of different camps. The New Left saw its profile rise, not only in China but internationally. It was not a particularly radical left. Aside from fairly eclectic brands of Maoism, and isolated voices on the margins calling for social revolution, most of the more visible academic leftists leaned toward social democracy—their one-time hope and champion Bo Xilai flourished in the middle of the WTO years (for a critique of the left's embrace of Bo Xilai, see Connery 2019a). Liberals and neoliberals outnumbered them in the media and the academy, where they were dominant in many university humanities and social science departments. Unlike the United Kingdom, most of Europe, and the United States, there was considerable intellectual depth on what could be called the 'right'. In the work of Qin Hui and Yu Jianrong, for example, one would find cogent, clear, and socially engaged critiques of state policy, not

the unthinking embrace of the agnotological urges, or of the 'entrepreneurial spirit' that so gripped the many epigones of successology elsewhere in the neoliberal universe.

Both camps were legible through the lens of the state: after all, the liberals were only advocating a better version of what the state continually referred to as the decisive factor—the market—while the leftists argued for greater fidelity to the values of what was still purportedly a workers' state. At least in terms of appeal to independent-minded urbanites and youth, the liberals and neoliberals had the advantage of dissident status: the better world lay in the reduction of state authority. But especially as the WTO years wore on, the leftists could build on nostalgia for a once egalitarian society. By the end of the WTO years, both groups would be in tatters, but that's another story. Nationalism, a state project pursued in earnest beginning with post-Tiananmen patriotic education, and signalled in periodic anti-Japanese demonstrations and in imitative screeds such as the books *China Can Say No* (中国可以说不) or *China is Not Happy* (中国不高兴) reached a symbolic high point with the Beijing Olympics, and though it was ubiquitous during the WTO years, only with Xi Jinping did it become a true ideological dominant.

It was not a decade marked by iconic, universally-referenced cultural production. Sixth Generation filmmakers like Jia Zhangke and Wang Xiaoshuai continued their work into the WTO years, as did the best-known novelists and poets of the reform period. WTO era culture was more diffuse, smaller in scale, more subcultural, more democratic. The feverish fixation on culture that erupted in the 1980s had given way to the new affect of the recently arrived 'cultured youths' (文艺青年), a figure akin to the hipster but more mainstream. A major force shaping the new period was the Internet and digital culture, which came of age at that time. Facebook, Twitter, and Google were widely available as the WTO years began, though not commonly used, but more important were homegrown platforms such

as QQ (2002), Douban (2005), and the many bulletin board systems and chat rooms that sprang up early in the period, joined later by Weibo (2009) and WeChat (2011).

WTO-era Internet culture, as crass and commercial as it was and is elsewhere in the world, also allowed a range of critical voices that were more ephemeral than those in earlier decades, but also more varied. In the WTO years, if you were a Trotskyist, a Hayekian neoliberal, queer, a Maoist nationalist, or a devotee of successology, there was a place on the Internet for you. Han Han, whose career as social critic/iconoclast coincided with the WTO years (he has since focussed on car-racing and commercial film), embodied one end of the era's spirit. But the new digital technologies also lowered the entry bar for socially-engaged experimental film, and most importantly, independent documentary film, perhaps the most significant medium for social criticism during the entire reform period, which flourished during the WTO years. With the end of the Beijing Independent Film Festival in 2014 and the Nanjing-based China Independent Film Festival, which was not held for several years and finally terminated in 2019, that opening too has closed.

People's(?) Theatre

Theatre has played a distinctive role in China throughout its modern history. It was perhaps the major cultural medium during the revolution, in village productions and in filmed adaptations. The Cultural Revolution productions, limited in absolute number but widely and repeatedly performed, shaped sound- and memory-scapes throughout the population. Traditional theatre had never disappeared, and flourished once more after the lifting of Cultural Revolution restrictions on 'feudal' culture. Television would of course drastically erode the popular audience for live performance, as it did elsewhere in the world, but in Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou

particularly, 'serious' theatre flourished once again in the 1980s and 1990s, and this included, later in the period, a return of 'social theatre', which in form and in content looked both to earlier Chinese traditions of politically-engaged theatre, as well as to post-war traditions of social theatre in Europe (Brecht and documentary theatre), Latin America (Agosto Boal), and elsewhere in Asia.

The single production that gave to many in reform-era China a sense of the critical possibilities of social theatre was Huang Jisu, Shen Lin, and Zhang Guangtian's 2000 *Che Guevara* (切·格瓦拉) (Liu 2001). *Che Guevara*, a somewhat loosely-connected set of vignettes on the life of Che Guevara, filled with direct and oblique references to pre-revolutionary, revolutionary, and capitalist China, posed questions about the legacies of socialism, authoritarianism, and the transition to capitalism. The play's references to revolution-era forms and rhetoric were simultaneously serious and ironic—an affective combination that would recur in Chinese social theatre—and although critical of contemporary capitalist society, it was less polemical than it was deliberately thought- and question-provoking. Its force was in the questioning, and it proved again the capacity of theatrical space to be a space of dialogism, discussion, and social interrogation.

Shanghai-based theatre troupe Grass Stage (草台班) took its place within the small but discursively and politically important tradition of social theatre. In a series of productions throughout the WTO years, it sought to expand the idea of theatrical space, and strengthen the capacity of social/theatrical/political space to allow for an interrogation of contemporary society and its historical sedimentations, and function as a live, social space for argument, discussion, and exchange. Grass Stage began somewhat fortuitously. Zhao Chuan (b. 1967) had written a critically acclaimed novel, *Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies* (鸳鸯蝴蝶)—the title refers to a fashionable popular literary genre from pre-war Shanghai, the 'Mandarin Duck and Butterfly' school, which

counted among its most prominent authors Zhao Chuan's grandfather Zhao Shaokuang (1892–1953). Zhao's novel, a first-person, loosely-connected chronicle of daily life in Shanghai narrated by a young man recently returned from abroad, was published in 2001 in Taiwan and 2003 in China, and won its author a Taiwanese literary prize and an artist's residency in Taiwan. While in Taiwan, he got to know experimental playwright Wang Molin, as well as Zhong Qiao, a prominent writer and director of social, 'people's' theatre. He wrote his first play there, *The Toilet's Face* (厕所的脸), concerning cross-straits relations. In 2005, the Korean playwright Chang Soik, founding director of the Namoodak Movement Laboratory, invited Zhao to participate in the 2005 Asian Madang Theatre Festival, featuring social and 'people's' theatre from all over Asia. Zhao often tells the story that Chang Soik turned to him after finding very little of the 'people' in productions he saw at the Beijing People's Art Theatre. At the Festival, Zhao Chuan, Liu Yang, Hou Qinghui, Liu Nian, and others—none professionally trained actors or directors—began work on what would become *38th Parallel Still Play* (三八线游戏), and Grass Stage was born (for the best scholarship in any language on Grass Stage, particularly during its first five years, see Ferrari 2020; on the topic see also Ferrari 2012 and Connery 2019b).

Grass Stage takes its name from a style of Qing-dynasty itinerant theatre, performing popular, often religiously-themed productions in villages on makeshift stages often made of straw, hence the name. By choice and by necessity, Grass Stage, like other small, experimental, or social theatre groups in China, operates at the margins of the cultural sphere. The group's lack of official registration means that it cannot perform in most theatres, cannot be reviewed in many official publications, and cannot sell tickets in the normal fashion. These were choices Grass Stage might have made in any case, since one of its aims has been to create and transform social space. The group has performed in factories, schools, community centres, and museums, as well as a few

unofficial or underground theatres. Foremost among the latter was Shanghai's Downstream Garage (下河迷仓) founded in 2004 by theatre aficionado Wang Jingguo, and the venue for hundreds of experimental performances and exhibitions. When it closed in 2014, there was a pervasive sense in Shanghai that the cultural landscape had changed.

Grass Stage occupied a distinctive space within the cultural landscape in Shanghai and beyond. It kept a distance from state and commercial theatre, naturally, and from both commercial and non-commercial 'art' theatre, eschewing the styles of acting, directing, and set-design typical of the drama academies as well as the well-wrought stylisations of avant-garde artistic productions. Grass Stage also largely avoided identification with 'dissident' art and theatre, whose productions, often focussed on censored topics such as the Cultural Revolution or the Great Famine, could easily find financial support from Europe or elsewhere in the West. Grass Stage took no one from the theatre academies—its members were drawn from society at large. The group's weekly meetings consisted of discussion, physical exercises, theatre exercises drawn largely from the Agosto Boal tradition, and improvised or revised small skits. Anyone who came, and kept showing up over the next many months, became a member.

38th Parallel Still Play was followed by *A Madman's Story* (狂人故事), a play that focussed on contemporary consumer society and its discontents and dislocations, with a number of performances in 2006 and 2007. The group's early connections with social and people's theatre groups across Asia, particularly Taiwan, Japan, Hong Kong, and South Korea—ties that continue to this day—resulted in *Lu Xun 2008*, featuring actors and directors from each of those locations in a non-narrative physical-based depiction of the kinds of social degradation portrayed in Lu Xun's story *A Madman's Diary*. It was performed in multiple versions with different casts in China and elsewhere. With the next major work, *The Little Society* (小社会), performed in three

very different versions in 2009, 2010, and 2011, Grass Stage had developed a compositional, rehearsal, and performance practice that it has used ever since, with variations: social investigation done by all members of the group, along with reading and discussion, group composition over many months during the weekly meetings, with the performance version edited, compiled, composed, and shaped by Zhao Chuan.

The various versions of *The Little Society* were products of Grass Stage members' investigation of lives among the poor and precarious, including life stories, language, body practices, and habitus. It was also an interrogation of practices of representation—in the political and aesthetic sense—that link lives across the social and intellectual spectrum. Central to Grass Stage's performances was what Zhao Chuan called the 'post-performance theatre' (演后戏). These were discussions and arguments between the cast and audience, and often lasted longer than the performances themselves. They were invariably heated and passionate, and were the most exciting public participatory events I ever saw in China.

The Struggle for Critical Space

I became a member of the group in 2010, through an irregular process. I had first met Zhao Chuan in the spring through a mutual friend, and I had seen and much enjoyed a performance of *The Little Society* at the Downstream Garage. Members of the group had seen some of the public lectures I had been giving in Shanghai, including a notorious one where the audience erupted in chaos over disagreements about my remarks about the Cultural Revolution, resulting in the abrupt cancellation of the Global 1960s lecture series I had been scheduled to give. I gave another public lecture in Grass Stage's popular lecture

series, a programme known as the Culture Station (文化站), and was getting closer to the group.

Many Grass Stage productions take inspiration from readings of particular texts. Earlier it had been Lu Xun; in *The Little Society* it was the *Communist Manifesto*. Feeling that the actors were not sufficiently connected to the animating spirit of that text—obligatory courses in Marxism in high school and college seem to have as an ulterior motive the deadening of Marxism's appeal to impressionable youth—Zhao Chuan asked me to give the cast a seminar on the book, which I agreed to do. A few days later, he called and said that he was rewriting *The Little Society* with a part in it for me, and asked if I would be willing to join the cast. I replied that although I never had the slightest acting ambition, I felt that the Grass Stage project was less about performance than the creation of critical space, and that this was a commitment we shared. If as a director he could guarantee that I would not shame myself too much in front of an audience, I would do it.

The cast members who had attended my 1960s lectures had pegged me as a revolutionary romantic, someone oblivious to the tragic dimensions and the countless victims of China's revolutions, from the 1940s through the 1970s. My exposition of class struggle in the *Communist Manifesto* seminars had not significantly altered that view—class struggle remains a taboo topic in China. Zhao Chuan, in taking the raw material of individual members' personalities, political positions, and life histories as compositional elements, often likes to make the cast's interpersonal ideological or political tensions an element of the play. My character was a sort of Marxist revenant, who opened the play with multi-lingual recitations of the *Communist Manifesto* while sitting in the audience, and who later, from slightly offstage, read letters interrogating several of the main characters—aspiring or marginalised members of ordinary society—with appeals to socialist ideals and revolutionary principles. My

character's Marxism was more impassioned, heartfelt, and utopian than the Party's version; it was far from bureaucratise. Even then, its distance from the lives and histories of the main characters gave the play a productive tension, and provoked post-performance discussion of singular intensity.

On one national tour, we had two performances in Huaihua, western Hunan. One cast member also taught at the university in Huaihua, and had started a theatre troupe there hoping to alleviate what seemed to him to be an epidemic of depression that had already resulted in several suicides among the faculty. Huaihua was not the normal venue for a Shanghai theatre production, and several members of the civic elite, including one from the Party Office, came to the performance. The Party official criticised our Marxism, saying that we had a faulty understanding of surplus value appropriation. The Party had determined that surplus value appropriation was not exploitation, but a necessary prerequisite for national development. That discussion continued for some time.

Theatre of Social Investigation

In 2011 Grass Stage began an investigation into the theme of work—its existential, political, social, and psychic dimensions—and this eventually grew into *World Factory* (世界工厂), performed from 2014 to 2016. In 2012, Zhao Chuan had gone to Manchester, visiting scenes from its early industrial history and learning about Karl Marx's time there. This proved to be an important catalyst. A vision gradually arose of a work that would reflect on the birth of the world factory and its current incarnation in China. It would also reflect on the global journey of the workers' movement, from the Peterloo massacre to the victory of the Communist Party in China. Grass Stage's

typical focus on the lives and bodies of the socially marginalised remained intact, but this was joined for the first time to a broader and more explicit geopolitical economic context.

Grass Stage often incorporated music into its productions, and for *World Factory*, Zhao Chuan was able to enlist the participation of Xu Duo, one of the founding members of the New Workers' Art Troupe (新工人艺术团), a group of worker activists and musicians based in Picun, a village on the outskirts of Beijing. Xu Duo's music commonly reflected the lives and struggles of migrant labourers, or, as the Picun crowd referred to them, the 'new workers' (新工人). The music was poignant, somewhat reminiscent of Woody Guthrie, albeit with punk edges.

Hovering in and around the play was the recent history of the Foxconn worker suicides that began in 2010 and continued for the next few years, including the 2014 suicide of the worker-poet Xu Lizhi (see Sorace's essay in the present issue). Most had jumped from factory or dormitory roofs, and these falling bodies became a motif in the play. Like many Grass Stage productions, it was a series of connected vignettes—a group of assembly line workers were positioned to one side of the stage, cutting out blue paper dolls (the colour of workers' uniforms), which were used intermittently in the play as emblems of the workers' disposability or interchangeability. Other characters in the play included factory workers, many of whose lines came from workers' printed or recorded testimonies, an industrialist, and a 'left-behind youth' (one of the many millions of young children left behind in villages while their parents worked in the cities). Typical of Grass Stage productions, it was physical theatre too. A common trope was the hand: hands of the assembly line, hands crushed in workplace accidents, hands of connection and disconnection. In one scene, one of the actors purposely wore herself into exhaustion while rapidly jump-roping in place, reciting lines from crushed woman workers who had been driven to despair.

Grass Stage, After-theatre theatre. PC: Grass Stage.

A masked clown—*commedia dell'arte* in the Dario Fo tradition formed one strand of Grass Stage's influence—served as a kind of bourgeois chorus, treating worker suicides with blithe indifference in the play's first scene, and at the end of the play reminding audience members that the products of the factory system—among other things, the factory where the Foxconn suicides took place made iPhones and iPads—were, after all, among our most valued possessions, so we should not get too upset about workers' lives. From her first scene:

Masked Clown: ... How about I act out a scene called 'Healthy and Wealthy in Eight Easy Steps' [note: 康 *kang* 'healthy' and 富 *fu* 'wealthy' are two of the three characters in Foxconn]. Healthy and Wealthy! 8 8 8 8 8, making the leap to wealth!

(This and all the following translations from the play are by Lennet Daigle and Christopher Connery)

One member who had joined Grass Stage during the composition of *World Factory* was nominally a policeman but worked mostly as a psychotherapist and psychotherapist trainer, both professions that at the time had remarkably low barriers to entry. He had a deep commitment to acting, but shared few of Grass Stage members' social concerns, and thus seemed a strange fit in the group. Zhao Chuan, as was his wont, had him play a version of himself, in this case a not very flattering one:

Masked Clown: Professor Lü, welcome. Last time I saw you, you were in pyramid sales. So tell us, in a factory with ten thousand workers, why do some commit suicide while others do not? What kind of person commits suicide?

Psychologist: Well, that's a very good question, and you've come to the right person. In psychology we use the special term 'psychological resilience', which refers to a person's ability to deal with setbacks.

Grass Stage, Assembly line, *World Factory*.
PC: Grass Stage.

Some of the young people who work in factories are raised by loving parents, they are physically healthy, and they have broad knowledge of the world. So when they encounter some difficulty they are able to put it behind them and move on. Other people do not get enough love from their parents, and they're physically and emotionally unwell, so when something bad happens they just can't take it and throw themselves off a building. HaHaHa—

Near the end of the play, a character based on an idealistic environmentalist gives his vision of a reformed economic system, emphasising workers' control, sustainability, shared ownership, etc. The Clown addresses the audience directly:

Masked Clown: Haha, if you do things his way, will you still have iPhones? Will you still have name brands to wear? Will you still be able to play mahjong, watch your

stocks and wait to die? If you listen to him your lives will have to change. Scary isn't it? Is that what you want? Are you scared? Is that what you want?

The play ends with the assembly workers storming off the line, hundreds of the blue paper dolls filling the air above the stage, with the cast dancing to and singing along with Xu Duo's song 'We Quit':

In this world factory, you're nothing but a component

And they're slowly grinding you down,
grinding away your youth

And they want to kick you out

And then you realise, your rage has no
place to go

How do you like being a piece of dust?

How do you like floating in the wind?

How do you like having them above you?

How do you like them babbling?

How do you like the incurable ignorance?

How do you like not caring whether or not
you even exist?
How do you like feeding on illusions?
How do you like living in a dream?
We quit—we quit—we quit!
Wherever there is oppression there is
resistance
'A single spark can start a prairie fire'
The true path is always world changing
Marching boldly forward for the sake of
those who follow ...

Politically, *World Factory* represented a mutation for Grass Stage. On tour with *The Little Society*, Zhao Chuan once said to me that he was glad that the play appealed to liberals and leftists alike. He sought a 'questioning' theatre, rather than one of straightforward advocacy: the plays were to open a conversation that would hopefully last well beyond the performance. *The Little Society* demanded that viewers confront the actuality of social class, and examine their relationship to the precarious and the marginal. But it avoided coming down firmly on the side of the more explicit political directions outlined by my character. I ended up seeing this as a strength. *World Factory* was more firmly on the side of the workers and more resolutely anti-systemic.

Grass Stage had always pushed against the political detachment of the 'cultured youths', but in *World Factory* the stakes—and the discomfort—were higher. Not all viewers welcomed that. The post-performance discussions were heated and intense. On a few occasions, fights broke out among the audience. There were those who identified with the masked clown's position—I like my things, and if this is the labour regime necessary for me to get them, that's fine. I was surprised by their willingness to air those views, although they were sometimes shouted out of the performance space. Audiences got involved, and they appreciated that, but they were not reticent in their critiques. One academic upbraided the director and cast for the finale

song: 'Are you really advocating a mass strike? Don't you think it might be irresponsible to goad people on to actions that could get them killed?'

Impasses

The performances at the OCAT Art Terminal in Shenzhen 21 and 22 November 2014 were transformative for Grass Stage. My role there was an odd one as well. In addition to the two performances, there were to be talks on the play by Wang Hui (see his essay in the present issue), Pun Ngai, and other luminaries. After helping organise and plan the series of events, I belatedly realised that like many privately-sponsored art spaces that have opened in China in the last decade or so, the venue was founded by a real estate corporation, in this case the Huaqiao Company, one of China's biggest real estate firms. The Huaqiao company had been behind a development on East Lake in Wuhan to which a broad spectrum of Wuhan activists—students, faculty, artists, plus key members of the Wuhan anarcho-punk community—had organised a popular opposition movement. I was close to many of them and had participated in some of their activities. I told Zhao Chuan I could not in good conscience participate in an activity that Huaqiao sponsored. It was a painful exchange, but I agreed to go to Shenzhen anyway and to speak at a forum, provided I could mention why I was not on stage (it is still a matter of debate whether or not it was my criticism of the Huaqiao company that resulted in the artistic director's dismissal shortly thereafter).

The OCAT budget for the event was quite generous. Importantly, the staff agreed to our request to have factory workers at the performances, and each night several busloads of workers—from Foxconn and elsewhere—were delivered to the theatre. In the post-performance discussions, several workers

shared stories about the intersections between their lives and what they had seen on stage. During one post-performance discussion, a graduate student raised the question of representation: was it really politically fine to have a group of Shanghai artists representing assembly-line workers? Shouldn't you be more forthcoming about the inherent class contradictions? She was expecting some postmodern meta-reflection on the politics of representation, and we were prepared to respond. But a young woman worker immediately rose to our defense, speaking about how proud she felt when she saw the large posters in the Shenzhen metro stations advertising the event, when she saw that people cared about who she was and what she did.

While in Shenzhen in late 2014, the group spent considerable time among worker activists and NGOs from all over the Pearl River Delta, mostly at the Foxconn site. We saw a level of political awareness and commitment that was hard to find in Shanghai, and several of us were impressed and inspired by the possibilities that this opened up. Some Grass Stage members, their political convictions clarifying and deepening, involved themselves more and more with the workers scene over the next few years. Others, not happy with what seemed to be a change in the group's political and aesthetic direction, grew more and more distant, and a few eventually left the group.

The Fall 2016 tour of *World Factory* included performances in Hangzhou, Chongqing, Sichuan, Guangdong, Shenzhen, Hong Kong, and Shanghai. For most of those performances, the group was joined by a Foxconn worker who was interested in organising a theatre troupe with other Foxconn workers. His presence gave the post-performance discussions a distinctive character. When an audience member commented—and this happened more frequently than one might imagine—that assembly-line workers deserved their fate because they had not studied hard enough in school, this worker would calmly and clearly

speak of the Dickensian sequence of events—family financial trouble, near imprisonment in and then escape from a rural social-marketing scheme—that led him to the line. It stopped many arguments.

Several members of Grass Stage became deeply committed to development of workers' theatre, and spent considerable time in Shenzhen doing workshops, training sessions, rehearsals, and facilitating group compositions. It was difficult work, since worker/actors' ability to work on the theatrical pieces was affected by their work schedules. But eventually the North Gate Theatre Troupe was formed, found enough time to rehearse, and eventually won an award for its production 'Our Story' (我们的故事). I saw a performance in Shanghai and it was very moving, not simple testimonial, but also meta-reflective of the transformation of the workers' stories into art. Given the short rehearsal, I was also very impressed at the workers' ability to get beyond the self-conscious 'acting' phase of the performance trajectory and return to the bodily, vocal, and affective character of their real lives. As I watched, I was mentally making plans to arrange for a US tour if they were willing. I imagined US audiences would rush to a performance opening onto the real lives and bodies of those who had spent years on the line, making their iPhones and iPads.

This could have been a beginning, or at least a happy ending, but it was not. The crackdown on labour activism and on cross-class activist alliances that intensified over 2018–19 took the Bei Men theatre troupe down with it. Any activity that had a hint of worker activism became dangerous. *The World Factory* would not be performed again, at least for a while. The WTO years were over, and as they ended, so did a phase of Grass Stage's existence. Whither Grass Stage? Whither China? Now more than ever, it is difficult to see. ■

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