

***Forging Resilient Theater:
Zuoying Elderly Care Center as a Site for Memory Re-collections and Story Narrations***

Ching-pin Tseng, National Sun Yat-sen University, Taiwan

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Abstract

Having been an aging society, Taiwanese authorities have widely set up community care centers and related courses to assist elders with care, so as to achieve the goal of delaying aging. The old Zuoying district in Kaohsiung city is an early historical settlement, rich in historical sites and multiple cultures. In the process of modernization, the district has been an aging society due to the migration of young generations. Studying on resilience and inhabitability of old Zuoying district, this research chooses Zuoying Elderly Care Center as a tentacle for discovering local problems and living potentials. From the viewpoint of humanistic innovation and social engagement, this research project has run some courses in artistic practice to share local humanity and environmental ideas with community elders. In the course of “Multimedia Creation”, an issue of ‘My Ideal Home’ is firstly proposed for participants to rebuild their identification with old Zuoying. Elders could thus share their stories and narrate relevant histories of the community in co-working on scene models related to the places. Based on interactive experiences in the courses, which evokes participants’ story-telling and re-builds their identification with local places, this paper argues that this caring center can be regarded as a medium for forging resilient “theater” due to potential cognitive therapies for elders. From the viewpoint of the city as theater and through the process of memory recalling, this article will finally explore how the notion of theatrical therapy and the mode of resilient theater can be projected to urban scale.

Keywords: Memory Recalling, Resilience, Resilient Theater, Local Identification, Cognition

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Introduction

Because of the progress of medical science and technology as well as the decline of fertility, population aging has become a wide-ranging and serious problem in many developed and developing countries. According to the populational statistics of Executive Yuan of Taiwan, the percentage of elderly population over 65 years old is 17.56% of the total Taiwanese population in 2022. (Executive Yuan, 2023) Especially, in many traditional communities and suburban district, the migration of younger generations has accelerated the forming of aging population. Take the old Zuoying (左營) district as an example. It is located on the peripheral area of Kaohsiung city and is a traditional settlement that has been facing problems of aging population, cultural preservation and environmental regeneration. The percentage of elderly population over 65 years old in old Zuoying district is higher than 25% of the total population in old Zuoying in July 2023. (Civil Affairs Bureau, Kaohsiung City Government, 2023)¹ Care-taking of elderly persons has thus been an urgent issue especially in the district that is formed by traditional settlements and is full of historical and cultural importance.

The preservation of cultural heritage, many historical buildings, natural environment, Taoist temples and military dependents' villages in the old Zuoying may contribute to elderly inhabitants' recollection of their past memories as well as their identification with these places. Moreover, in terms of the study of how local elderly inhabitants can identify with the old Zuoying district, it is essential to outline the relationship between the district's urban development and its historical and political background. In Taiwan's early history, the southern part of the island was occupied by the Dutch since 1622, and later the Ming loyalist – Zheng Cheng-gong (鄭成功) expelled the Dutch and governed the island in 1662. Zuoying (左營), previously was named as Xinglong settlement (興隆莊) and was part of the area of Wannian county(萬年縣), which was named because Zheng C-g and his son established a military fortress here after 1662. (Wang, 2012)² As Taiwan was later governed by Ching dynasty (清朝) and was included in the prefecture of Fujian (福建) from 1684 to 1895, the early construction of old Fengshan city (鳳山舊城) in Zuoying was dominated by Ching government.

In the early period of Ching's governance of Taiwan, many groups of local bandits rose in rebellion against Ching's officers. The process of constructing fortifications in several cities of Taiwan thus illustrates the island's political and cultural histories in the 18th and 19th century. The most important cultural heritage in Zuoying district is the relics of the fortification of old Fengshan city and which is also a national monument that was constructed by stones and bricks for preventing from the attack of local bandits during the governance of Ching Dynasty. The Zuoying military port was built and regarded as an important military base during Japanese colonial period. Many military communities and facilities for national defense had been established in Zuoying by Japanese government for Japanese southward policy, and they were transmitted to and further developed by Chang K-s's government after 1949. From historical and environmental context, the old Zuoying district has possessed of cultural importance and multiplicity since the governance of Ching Dynasty as well as later Japanese government and Chiang K-s's ruling period.

¹ According to Civil Affairs Bureau, Kaohsiung City Government, the percentage of elderly population over 65 years old is 15.339% of the total population in Zuoying in July, 2023. Moreover, according to the statistics of population in every town of Zuoying, the elderly population in old Zuoying is higher than 25%.

² Wang, U-f (2012), p. 10-1.

For studying the inhabitability of old Zuoying district in Kaohsiung, this research considers that elderly persons and communities can be important subjects for exploring the relationship between cultural resilience and the forging of aging friendly environment for elders. Thus, Zuoying Elderly Care Center has been chosen as a site for having some dialogues with local people about their living environment. In order to have a more direct conversation with and to learn responses from elders, participant observation method is used for this research. Accordingly, this research project run a course of ‘Multimedia Creation’ to discuss local humanities and environmental issues with community elders. In addition to the making of multimedia works, elderly residents narrate their stories and memories of living in old Zuoying and share their ideas about making an inhabitable Zuoying.

Finding Cultural Resilience Embedded in the Old Zuoying District

The notion of ‘resilience’ has been a widely studied issue in various disciplines, such as physics, architectural structure, environmental protection, psychological analysis, art practice, social and cultural studies ...etc. To study cultural resilience, it is essential to clarify the meaning of resilience from tangible and intangible perspective. According to Merriam-Webster, the first meaning of resilience is ‘the capability of a strained body to recover its size after deformation caused especially by compressive stress.’ The second meaning is ‘an ability to recover from or adjust easily to misfortune or change.’ (Merriam-Webster, 2023) The former is about physical capability of returning to its previous state or form. As to this meaning of resilience, its synonyms can be ductility, flexibility and pliability ... etc. The latter can be related to the potential of psychological recovery. The key verb for an object to achieve resilient state is to ‘recover’ from being compressed or from suffering adversity. That is, the object may revert to original structure or to normal state of strength, health or psyche through recovering process. However, in regarding resilience as a sustainable system or process to absorb disturbance, Cornelius Holtorf states:

Recent conceptions of resilience de-emphasize notions of ‘bouncing back’ to a previous state and place more emphasis on processes of ‘bouncing forward’ involving absorption, learning, adaptation and transformation than on specific outcomes in relation to a previous status quo. (Holtorf, 2018, p. 639)

From the above quotation, aspects related to a person and a physical place’s (an object’s) resilient capability can be discussed. That is, in terms of a person’s resilience, it may be formed by innate endowment or can be caused by acquired education. Thus, the process of forging capability of a person to resist adversity can focus more on the stimulation of the sufferer’s potential to adapt changes or to learn from sufferings and to step forward than on recovering from physical distortions and psychological misfortune. In terms of the resilience of a place (a physical object), the process or system of resisting adversity may need to emphasize the place or object’s capability of adapting changes or transforming negative sufferings into positive actions and to sustain systematically, rather than merely recovering from physical distortions.

As this section focuses on finding cultural resilience embedded in the old Zuoying district, it can be argued that in terms of incubating cultural resilience in a traditional district, both physical and psychological facets could play important roles. In relation to physical facets, it is essential to discuss the preservation and conservation of tangible cultural heritage; while, psychological facets may be related to inhabitants’ intellectual cognition and ideological belonging. The paper thus suggests that the shaping of cultural resilience is closely related to

governmental policy and local inhabitants' cultural ideology, as well as their identification with the places and related cultural heritage. In relation to the conservation and preservation of cultural heritage in the old Zuoying district, political and ethnic factors have strongly shaped the historical fate and present environment of old Zuoying district and related cultural heritage. From the aforementioned history of old Zuoying, it can be discovered that part of the city walls and gates were destroyed by Japanese authority and later by KMT government due to the modernization of historical area as well as the construction of military communities. That is, the cultural heritage of old Fengshan city had experienced a series of changes and had been fragmented in the course of Taiwan's political transitions. Whereas, due to the historical and cultural importance of old Fengshan city, the fortification has been registered as a national monument since 1985 with the chance of being preserved, conserved and restored in several periods of time.

Moreover, because of Kaohsiung government and the public's awareness of the importance of cultural heritage, several military villages in old Zuoying district, which were inherited from Japanese colonial authority, have also been preserved and conserved. With rich cultural heritage as well as multiple ethnic and environmental features, the old Zuoying has been an important tourist area with lower urbanized development in comparison with the surrounding urban areas. (Figure 1) Meanwhile, this might have caused the formation of aged communities with more elderly people than younger generations to live in this traditional area. According to WHO, 'healthy aging is about creating the environments and opportunities that enable people to be and do what they value throughout their lives' (WHO, 2023)³. Thus, from the perspective of healthy aging, it is essential to build up an ageing-friendly environment for local elderly inhabitants. Aung, Koyanagi, Ueno, Tiraphat and Yuasa also state that '[m]ost older people wish to live in the home and community where they grew up safely, independently, and comfortably, regardless of age, income, or functional ability level - a phenomenon known as "aging in place"' (Vanleerberghe et al., 2017, Aung, et al., 2022) Aung et al. emphasize that '[a]longside their home, the immediate neighborhood, public spaces, and supporting activities are important to cope with everyday life and social participation.' (2022, p. 90) To build up elders' identification with their home places, it is thus important to reinforce the association between local cultural environments and elders' everyday lives. In the light of the aforementioned facets of shaping cultural resilience, this paper intends to explore how elderly inhabitants in the old Zuoying district identify with this historical area environmentally, as well as studying how living resilience of local elders can be built up through interactive courses held in a community care center.

³ WHO (2023, August 11), *Healthy Ageing and Functional Ability*. Retrieved from <https://www.who.int/news-room/questions-and-answers/item/healthy-ageing-and-functional-ability>. In WHO (2023, August 11), it also indicates that 'Age-friendly environments are better places in which to grow, live, work, play, and age. We can create them by addressing the social determinants of healthy ageing and enabling all people, irrespective of their level of physical or mental capacity, to continue to do the things they value and live dignified lives'. Retrieved from <https://www.who.int/initiatives/decade-of-healthy-ageing>



Figure 1. The historical area of old Zuoying district. Source: Google Map.

Imagining an Ideal Home

Prior to the investigation of cultural resilience embedded in local communities and inhabitants, this research pondered over who and where could be the subject for study. In addition to existent cultural heritage in a traditional settlement of Han immigrants, it can be discovered that folk religions are influential to the spiritual aspect of local people in the old Zuoying district. However, it would be difficult for a temple to organize a regular program for caretaking local elders and to cooperate with an academic group for proceeding research. Due to governmental long-care policy and to engage with activities of local elderly people, this research utilizes participant observation method by taking part in the courses that held in an elderly activity center in the old Zuoying. The elders who take part in the courses for aging delaying are intellectually different from other senior inhabitants who will congregate in front of Taoist temples, the shore of Lotus Pond and front porches of traditional houses ... etc. in old Zuoying. Being outsiders of old Zuoying, this research group intends to build up a friendly relationship between elders and instructors by using interactive and discussive way to work with elderly participants, so as to learn from their responses. The course of 'multimedia creation' was run by the author for the purpose of stimulating elders' interests in sharing their personal living experiences and stories with others, as well as in making somethings physically by hands.

Due to Taiwan's complex political history and its diverse ethnicity, issues of cultural and ethnic identification play important roles in the formation of local people's home places and their social relationships among others. Therefore, the first class utilizes a lot of photos of landmarks and important cultural heritage that I took from specific places in old Zuoying and in foreign countries (Japan, U.K., France and Greece...etc) as samples for elderly participants to imagine and select for shaping their ideal homes. (Figure 2) Meanwhile, I classify these native and foreign photos into three classes, i.e., most favorite, favorite and dislike, according to their cultural importance and conservation of natural environment, such as green land, river or pond. Elderly participants willingly explained why they chose those photos and delivered what stories might have been related to the chosen photographs. (Figure 3) In the end of the class, each participant was asked to put stickers (i.e., most favorite, favorite, and dislike) on chosen photos and to enclose them in his/her given envelop in which everyone could deposit his/her source images for making an ideal home in the next class. The paper discovers that there are more than half elders mark local photo images as most favorite and favorite ones. It can be stated that elderly participants' identifications with local places,

cultural heritage and natural environment are stronger than the expectation of implanting foreign images in their mind and in their home places.



Figure 2. Photos of landmarks that I took from local and foreign countries. Photograph: Tseng, C-p.



Figure 3. An elderly participant shared his stories about the photos he chose. Photograph: Tseng, C-p.

Making Stage Models for an Ideal Home

In the class of ‘multimedia creation’, elderly participants are all retired persons who attend the classes may not only intend to build up their different social relationship with other elders, but also wish to delay their aging through interacting with others or doing somethings they may enjoy. In terms of interacting and sharing each participant’s stories with others by selecting native and foreign photos, the class can be regarded as a process of ‘narrative therapy’ for possibly delaying elders’ aging. Especially, the photographs and issues utilized for narration and discussion in this class are closely related to their home places and living environment, the focus will be on ‘how people interact with one another’ and on proposing ideas about how ‘to construct, modify, and maintain what their society holds to be true, real, and meaningful’ (Freedman and Combs, 1996, p. 27). From a social constructionist viewpoint, Kathy Weingarten states that ‘the self continually creates itself through narratives that include other people who are reciprocally woven into these narratives.’ (1991, p. 289) Through imaging and proposing ideas of shaping elders’ home town, the self of the participant can be re-discovered and re-invented by means of intimate sharing and interaction.

After the first class, I encouraged elderly participants to bring some photos (native or foreign) they appreciate to the second and the third class for making stage models. The main issue of

the following classes is ‘making stage models for an ideal home’ through two stages of model making. To allow participants to exchange ideas about improving old Zuoying’s environmental quality, firstly I assigned every group to project their imagination of an ideal Zuoying by sticking photos that I provided or they had collected, on each group’s map board. (Figure 4) In the second class, some elders enjoyed changing and adjusting the landscape of old Zuoying by sticking foreign images on the map. For example, a park near Lianchi Tan (蓮池潭, Lotus Pond) was replaced by a Japanese garden and river, and a Greek museum was set beside a traditional Taiwanese house. Because the map isn’t shown with a realistic background and its scale isn’t correspondent with the selected images, an imaginative potential is embedded in this exercise. Elders could thus propose their ideas of constructing an ideal home through both imaginative and realistic propositions, although one elder was stubborn about realistic conditions of the site. In the third class, there is no realistic map or indication of exact site, but a platform for participants to make stage models for their ideal homes in the old Zuoying. (Figure 5) In the way of narrating, discussing and making, elders enjoyed sharing their everyday experiences and memories of living in public places, such as Taoist temples, markets, Lotus Pond and the relics of old Fengshan city...etc., in the process of making their stage models. Two elderly participants naturally stated that ‘we have experienced the course of brainstorming and creative thinking, thus our minds could be young and energetic.’ One gentleman even said that ‘I have tried very hard to figure out our ideas of making age-friendly environment for old Zuoying every night during these days. I definitely think I will not have dementia after these classes.’

Although elderly participants didn’t expect to make artistic works in the course of ‘multimedia creation’, they were happy to reveal somethings about themselves and to speak out stories about their home places in the process of narrating and making. As art therapist Pat B. Allen states in *Art is a Way of Knowing*, ‘my direct participation in art making guided by the idea that art is a means to know the self.’ (1995, p. xv) Furthermore, Allen suggests that ‘[t]he process of using materials, struggling with their inherent qualities and limitations, has been and continues to be a wonderful arena in which to work things out.’ (p. xv) Allen also argues that ‘[a]rt making is a way to explore our imagination and begin to allow it to be more flexible, to learn how to see more options.’ (p. 4) The paper thus suggests that through the process of making and narrating, the elder might have experienced a similar process of art therapy as well as recollecting their memories of living at his/her home places in old Zuoying. Because of the potential effects of activating elderly participants’ minds and projecting their stories of old Zuoying that shown by stage models, a resilient social construction in the group and in the Zuoying Elderly Care Center could have been generated.



Figure 4. Making models for an ideal home. Photograph: Tseng, C-p.



Figure 5. A stage model shows a team's co-working for an ideal home. Photograph: Tseng, C-p.

Conclusion

Most of elderly participants in Zuoying Elderly Care Center are retired intellectuals who willingly join the classes and actively intend to restart their new lives as well as reinforcing their aging delay. From the senior inhabitants' story narrations and their future viewpoints projected for the old Zuoying, a spatial-temporal construction of theatrical imaginations could be suggested in these three classes. The interactions and discussions among elderly participants could not only build up their mental resilience, but also contribute to the author and younger participants' identification with the old Zuoying district. In association the preservation, conservation and regeneration of cultural heritage with the inhabitability of old Zuoying, the cultural resilience and sustainability of local environments could be continuously built up, so as to transfer the sense of places and local stories to younger inhabitants. Through the course of 'multimedia creation', elders' identification with the old Zuoying could have been stimulated, and thus this sense of identification would contribute to the formation of a resilient theater in the elderly care center. Furthermore, from the viewpoint of the city as theatrical places or venues for holding festivals, (Carlson, 1989)⁴ the notion of resilient theater could be developed to the city scale of old Zuoying through the exhibition/performance of/at cultural heritage, the guided tour by a local association of literature and history, and religious festivals held by communities of Taoist temples ...etc. Following the classes aforementioned, some of the elders also joined the course for theatrical performance from March to June 2023. Being directed by Yeh, J-s and scripted from the history of old Zuoying and stories of senior participants, the community theater – 'Living in old Zuoying together' (共度舊城) was held on June 15, 2023. (Figure 6) In the feedback of participating in the show, a senior lady stated that 'I had a brainstorming and made every effort to imitate the actions and thoughts of the actress in the play', thus 'I think I become younger and younger since then.'

⁴ The notion of 'The City as Theatre' is proposed by Marvin Carlson in *Places of Performance*. Carlson suggests that 'Cities offered a variety of richly significant locations for the performance of religious drama' from historical studies, and states that '... almost any identifiable space within the city may become a performance space' from studies of modern cases. See Carlson, Marvin (1989), *Places of Performance*, New York: Cornell University Press, p. 17 & 36.



Figure 6. A community theater – ‘Living in old Zuoying together’. Photograph: Tseng, C-p.

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Contact email: chpin@mail.nsysu.edu.tw