

FEATURES

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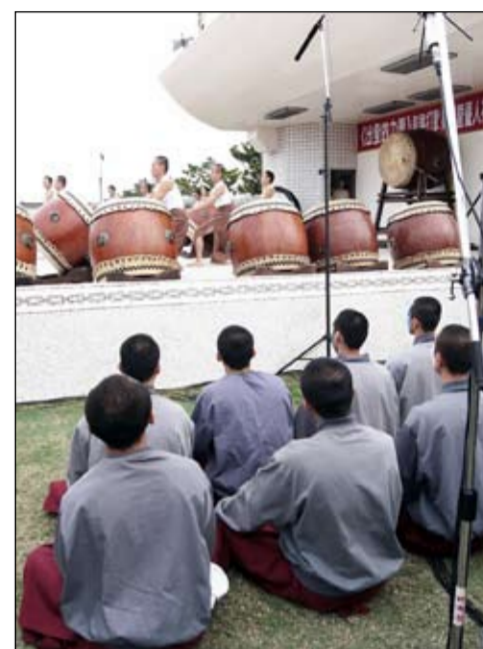
13



Prisoners drum up self-confidence

Thanks to an arts program at Changhua Prison, a group of inmates is discovering the benefits of drumming and meditation with the help of percussion troupe U-Theatre. The two perform together tomorrow at Changhua County Stadium

BY DAVID CHEN
STAFF REPORTER



Members of The Guwu Percussion Troupe, composed of Changhua Prison inmates, have been studying percussion with U-Theatre, which is celebrated for its unique Zen drumming technique. The Guwu drummers performed last week for an open house event at the prison.

PHOTOS: DAVID CHEN, TAIPEI TIMES

A group of 15 male inmates at Changhua Prison (彰化監獄) is learning that there is more to percussion than just beating a drum.

For the past three months, the men, chosen through a prison-wide audition, have been studying with the Taipei-based performing arts group U-Theatre (優人神鼓), which is renowned for its unique combination of drumming, Zen meditation and martial arts.

"In studying with U-Theatre, we've learned to concentrate and focus," said Hsiao Tsai (小蔡), a 21-year-old inmate serving a 10-year sentence for robbery who is up for parole next year. The prison requested that the prisoners' real names be withheld.

In addition to drumming, Hsiao Tsai and his fellow inmates, aged 18 to 25, have been learning meditation and qigong from U-Theatre member and instructor Ibau (伊包), who visits the prison once a week.

She says her students have made "extremely fast progress." Dubbed the Guwu Percussion Troupe (鼓舞打擊樂團), the inmates demonstrated their newly acquired skills last week at an open house event at Changhua Prison, which the *Taipei Times* attended along with a contingent of guests that included prison wardens from central Taiwan and Minister of Justice Wang Ching-feng (王清峰).

The Guwu drummers were granted permission last week to perform their first concert outside of the prison with U-Theatre. Tomorrow, the two groups will hold a free show at Changhua County Stadium (彰化縣立體育場).

"With this performance, we want people to know that even though [these inmates] committed crimes in the past, this doesn't necessarily mean they will do wrong things for the rest of their lives," said Changhua Prison warden Tai Shou-nan (戴壽南). "We hope to let society understand that prisons [are actually like] a school, with an educational structure."

FERTILE GROUND FOR THE TRADITIONAL ARTS

U-Theatre was invited to teach a drumming class under a Changhua Prison program that encourages inmates to study traditional art forms such as *nanguan* (南管) and *beiguan* (北管) music and *budaixi* (布袋戲) puppetry.

The program was started two years ago by Patrick T.F. Lin (林田富), Director-General of the Changhua County Cultural Affairs Bureau, as a response to declining interest in traditional arts among youths.

Lin realized that a pool of potential talent could be found at Changhua Prison, where many of the inmates are young first-time offenders.

"Here you had a group of young people who couldn't go anywhere," he said. "And they had a lot of time to study whatever [the cultural bureau] could provide and arrange. Many of the inmates in the prison had nothing to do — they were bored."

Lin received a positive response when he proposed the program to Changhua Prison, which had been looking for a way to accommodate a campaign by the Ministry of Justice for each of the nation's prisons to possess "one distinctive characteristic" (一監所一特色).

In addition to music, the prison also offers courses on traditional handicrafts such as bamboo weaving and making paper lanterns, with all classes taught by established teachers from the area. The inmates' work is available for sale at the prison.

Ideally inmates serving longer terms can eventually serve as teachers, said Lin, who hopes "one day this prison will become a center for the passing down of culture."



A 'TURNING POINT'

Tai, the prison warden, says "self-confidence" is one of the most valuable benefits inmates can gain from the traditional arts courses. As for the Guwu Percussion Troupe, he believes its members will look back at their experience with the U-Theatre class as a "turning point when their lives changed for the better."

During their 15-minute outdoor showcase at Changhua Prison last week, the Guwu drummers proved themselves as highly capable performers. In spite of the cold and blustery weather, they displayed a sense of self-assuredness and composure in front of an audience made up mostly of the prison's 2,700 inmates.

On stage, dressed in sarongs, the drummers looked like warrior-monks, leaping into the air and pounding thunderous beats on barrel-sized *taiko* drums as they landed in perfect unison. It was a fitting tribute to U-Theatre's philosophy of maintaining calm amid chaos.

But even more striking was watching the drummers offstage after their performance. Underneath their face paint, which they wore to obscure their identities from the media, I saw expressions of pride mixed with youthful wonder and humility.

As they listened intently to U-Theatre artistic director Liu Ruo-yu (劉若瑀) and drumming director Huang Chih-chun (黃誌群) give them a post-performance pep talk and offer a few pointers for their upcoming show, it was easy to forget that they were prison inmates.

Ibau, the U-Theatre instructor, praised the Guwu drummers' "diligence" and enthusiasm. Although they only have access to drums once a week, several inmates said that they practice whenever possible, often rehearsing rhythm patterns by beating on newspapers and magazines with chopsticks.

Hsiao Tsai says the classes have also taught the drummers the value of group unity. "When we first started, it sounded like 16 people beating 16 different drums," he said. "Now, it sounds like 16 people beating one drum."

PERFORMANCE NOTES:

WHAT: U-Theatre (優人神鼓) and the Changhua Prison Guwu Percussion Troupe (鼓舞打擊樂團) performing *Sword of Wisdom* (勇者之劍)

WHERE: Changhua County Stadium (彰化縣立體育場), 1 Fusing Rd., Changhua City (彰化市健興路1號)

WHEN: Tomorrow at 7:30pm

DETAILS: Entrance is free

GETTING THERE: A taxi ride is the quickest way to get to Changhua County Stadium from Changhua Train Station. The fare should cost around NT\$150

ON THE NET: www.chp.moj.gov.tw; www.utheatre.org.tw

