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## **Performing China on the Global Stage: Edinburgh 2012**

Tarryn Chun (Harvard University)

Having grown up on local amateur American theater and touring Broadway productions, my first true encounter with Chinese drama came when I cracked open the pages of Cao Yu's *Sunrise* for an undergraduate literature course. That semester, I wrote my essays on Yu Dafu and Bai Xianyong, but Cao Yu stuck with me as I began to clarify my academic interests and work through the canon of Chinese spoken drama. *Thunderstorm*, *Sunrise*, *Wilderness*, *Peking Man*, *Home*, *Metamorphosis*, *Bright Skies*: the same plays that shaped generations of modern Chinese drama came to define my own understanding of it. This summer, I had the privilege and pleasure of seeing two productions that both confirmed and challenged this understanding: the Beijing People's Art Theater 60<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Season revival of *Thunderstorm* and the Leeds Touring Stage production of *The Sun is Not for Us* at Edinburgh Fringe. Literally and figuratively worlds apart, these two productions nonetheless can be discussed together, and doing so not only reveals radically divergent paths in the afterlives of performance texts but also demonstrates the importance of a comparative perspective to comprehending twenty-first century international and intercultural performance and spectatorship.

Cao Yu's *Thunderstorm* is indisputably a classic of modern spoken drama and the BPAT version, along with its numerous revivals, the production standard. Exhibitions in the theater museum at Beijing's Capital Theater testify to the production's illustrious history, while the recordings sold in the theater gift shop encourage audience members to endlessly replay definitive productions in the comfort of their own homes. A cursory comparison of the cover of the 2005 *Thunderstorm* DVD to a nearly identical set in the 2012 live performance makes clear the primary characteristic of BPAT's productions: fidelity to past performances. The furniture may be reupholstered and the cast refreshed with the latest stars, but the design and staging of the play remain largely unchanged. Thunder still booms ominously at climactic moments, and Sifeng still gives a long, melodramatic pause before revealing her pregnancy to her mother. Of all of Cao Yu's plays, it is perhaps in *Thunderstorm* that a sense of predetermination most overshadows the lives of Cao Yu's characters, and the way in which the play's past lives determine its present and future performances makes it all the more uncannily faithful to the original play's themes of fate, indebtedness, and legacy.

If anything, the opposite is true of the Leeds production. *The Sun is Not for Us* not only breaks free of the mandate to perform Cao Yu in a very specific manner, but also throws off the shackles of several key themes that run throughout Cao Yu's oeuvre. The sets and costumes are minimalist, and the challenge of communicating four different stories in only an hour leaves little time for BPAT-esque melodrama. Instead, the actors create vivid, emotionally rich snapshots that capture carefully chosen aspects of Cao Yu's characters and plots: for example, the fraught love triangle between Sifeng, Ping, and Fanyi appears without the incest and pregnancy, and Chen Bailu's manipulations of her suitors occur separate from the

pathos of Xiaodongxi's prostitution. To some, the omission of key elements may seem radical or even sacrilegious, but in place of the larger-than-life natural forces – storms, sunrises, and primitive wilderness – that metaphorically batter characters with the vindictiveness of the ancient Greek Furies, the Leeds production focuses instead on those social forces that just as tightly bind its characters. In this sense, it remains quite faithful to the social concern of the original author. At the same time, the emphasis is not solely on oppression: when Chen Bailu steps backward out of her apartment window, she seems more dignified and resolute than distraught or driven to distraction. Thus, foregrounding the theme of binding and restraint – directly indicated with the opening foot-binding scene and the use of prop ribbons throughout – paradoxically frees the production to restore some agency to the female characters and infuses them with a contemporary feminist inflection that the original plays lack.

The above comparative analysis and its attention to issues of fidelity and transformation raise another set of questions. Must an audience member be familiar with the production histories of Cao Yu's plays and the BPAT performance tradition in order to appreciate the creativity and innovation of *The Sun is Not for Us*? Can an abbreviated adaptation and amalgamation of scenes from four of Cao Yu's plays possibly make sense to an audience largely unfamiliar with his work? Or, one could just as easily reverse the question: is such a production intelligible to Chinese audience members, who after decades of BPAT directed performance standards have come to expect a very particular type of performance of Cao Yu's texts? Exactly what kind of audience is anticipated by this unique production?

The reflections of the director, cast members, and production staff at the pre-performance workshop and post-performance seminar held at the Confucius Institute of Scotland revealed that these questions were very much at the fore of Sun's creative process. The lead actresses repeatedly mentioned the extent to which the production had changed over its long rehearsal period, and would likely change again for its November tour to China. It seems somewhat easier to draw conventional boundaries with these other performances: at Leeds, British students performed scenes from Chinese plays for a British audience, and in Shanghai, British students will perform their interpretation of Cao Yu for a Chinese audience. However, at Edinburgh, they performed for a diverse, multi-cultural, and international audience, and the show seemed perfectly pitched to it. For example, no concerted effort was made to add stereotypical visual or aural markers of Chinese-ness (other than the footbinding), Chinese names were pronounced with the actors' native British accents, and the selected scenes made little reference to specific times and places. The time restrictions forced the director and actors to distill the production to the most essential moments, and the resulting coherence of theme – aided by smooth transitions – brought the vignettes together with remarkable cohesion. At the same time, by excerpting and recombining the scenes, the production placed Cao Yu's characters into a liminal world all their own, and, in turn, I believe was best apprehended by an audience that was itself in an interstitial, festival space.

From a more theoretical perspective, a significant contribution of the Leeds production can be found in the way it provides a model for intercultural performance that differs from prevailing theories on the two-way exchange of cultures, which include visualizations such as sands sifting together in an hour-glass up-ended or on its side (as Susan Daniels

described in her summary of intercultural performance theories at our post-performance seminar). The Edinburgh production of Sun does bring together two national cultures, Chinese and British, but it does so through the mediation of a third, distinct Festival culture. Festival atmosphere overtakes Edinburgh in August; locals duck their heads (or open a B&B) while international visitors and performers of all stripes overrun the town. One can have a trio of British sketches for breakfast, the latest from the National Scottish Theater for lunch, Australian stand-up for dinner, and outdoor Polish Macbeth – with pyrotechnics, motorcycles, and stilts! – for a midnight snack. Reviewers and return festival goers encourage greater than average spontaneity by advising novices to leave time in their schedules to take chances on random show advertisements. Yet, revelry falls short of the anarchic energy of Bakhtin's carnival – tickets are required for most performances, and late-comers not admitted. It is precisely this festival culture, which values openness and diversity, but insists upon specific theater etiquette with which Sun resonates. By successfully triangulating among this festival culture, the Chinese culture embedded in Cao Yu's plays, and the British culture in which they are being educated, the student actors from the Leeds production have given us a unique example of a viable model for intercultural performance and spectatorship.

## **Performing China on the Global Stage: Edinburgh 2012**

Saffron Walkling (University of York)

The post-graduate element of the Performing China on the Global Stage project involved participation in a preparatory workshop with the two student troupes performing at the Edinburgh Fringe, attendance at their performances (The Sun is Not for Us by stage@leeds touring of Leeds University and I Am a Moon by Yesoo of Nanjing University), and a performance analysis and discussion at the seminar Cross-culturalism & International Experimental Theatre.

Golden haired girls dressed in creams and whites argue with tall English boys about their lives and their loves. The girls are sometimes desperate, sometimes stoic, sometimes strong, one time mad. The boys are by turn arrogant, angry or simply careless. Accent indicates class - here is a servant girl, there a young master, there the mistress of the house. Perhaps we are in an Edwardian costume drama, except the costumes are minimalist, without place or time. But then there are the names: Plum, Flower, Ping and, also, the disturbing black and white images projected onto the screen of toes broken and twisted under.

The University of Leeds students' intercultural appropriation of the women's stories from four of Cao Yu's major plays defamiliarised these early 20<sup>th</sup> century works by selecting thematic elements about the 'binding' of women (physically,

emotionally and through family ties) and, in the process, creating a brand new play in which their parallel stories combine to make a powerful indictment of patriarchal systems. It defamiliarised these canonical Chinese plays further through the largely colour blind casting, which, if it hadn't been for the broken, bound feet at the opening, and the culturally specific names, could have opened up the play to be located in any pre-feminist society.

I have opened with this performance description because this 'doubleness' of seeing, hearing and experiencing summed up the experience of the week's project for me.

From the workshops at the beginning of the week, with the two casts and the directors leading us in improvisational experiments, to the co-authored paper we postgraduates delivered at the Friday's seminar, which combined the ideas of six researchers from five countries and several disciplines, we were testing out in practice how intercultural and cross-cultural performance inhabits new liminal creative spaces. As an educator, I often find that cultural stereotypes of 'Eastern' and 'Western' students are still deeply ingrained in the minds of many university lecturers, who often perceive the Eastern students as passive learners in contrast to their supposedly innovative Western counterparts. So, I had to mentally applaud the young Leeds student who observed about the workshop that, whereas all the British groups had devised short plays tightly linked to their source material, every Chinese group had played much more freely with their prompt text, either choosing just one element of the plot to focus on, or inventing additional characters. Those of us who

were in multi-cultural groups were challenged to communicate bilingually, but also to explore and combine different conceptions and interpretations for performance. However, we also learnt that we needed to compromise, drawing on the strongest elements, and condensing the performance in terms of language and image to something that all participants could grasp and express. For example, because we performed bilingually despite some of us having much more limited language skills, we pared the dialogue right down. Likewise, not having time to explain the concept of the good and bad angels in Dr Faustus or to understand what lay behind a Chinese director's idea of the main character, a pig, dividing into five pigs before attacking his owner, we took the essence from each idea and our pig divided into two as he recited bits of Hamlet's 'To be or not to be' soliloquy!

The activities and discussion that grew out of the workshop in turn informed our later viewing of the plays. For example, my ear was attuned to listening out for multiple languages in Nanjing Yesoo's I am a Moon and thinking about what these different languages signified, because a cast member had commented that the play had undergone several intercultural and structural transformations on its journey to the Edinburgh Fringe. Originally written in English by a native Chinese speaker for an American audience, it had then been translated back into Mandarin for a Chinese audience. When a significantly smaller cast brought it here, they didn't only cut the dialogue, but they transformed it. Planning at first to deliver the play in Mandarin and English, they felt this opened the door to play with other languages. As a cast member spoke Cantonese, one of the characters spoke this. Another character even spoke a made up language, gibberish. In our



paper, we explored how these linguistic choices then foregrounded certain thematic ideas. Having each character speak a different language, sometimes to each other, underlined ideas about how impossible it is for two individuals to fully communicate and also heightened the sense of alienation in the production. Furthermore, the cutting of characters resulted in a layering of monologues, giving the play a filmic quality, linking it generally to 'city' films, but also perhaps more specifically to those films by directors such as Wong Kar Wai about exile and existential loneliness.

To conclude, the opportunity to participate in both academic and practical dialogues around intercultural theatre practice, allowed me to make many connections (intellectual and actual) that exploring these works individually would have limited.

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## **Intercultural Symposium Edinburgh 2012 Postgraduates' Presentation**

Tarryn Chun (Harvard University)

First of all, a big thank you to Li Ruru, the Leeds University students and the Nanjing University students for bringing us to Edinburgh this week and giving us two well performed and thought provoking plays to discuss today.

One of the questions that we found ourselves asking one another about these two plays is whether or not the pairing of the Sun and the Moon titles was purposeful. We suspect it is a coincidence, but nonetheless, we found it to be a powerful metaphor for the power of juxtaposition to throw into relief correlations and connections between otherwise unrelated theatrical works. In this case, for us, we found ourselves – perhaps thanks to Dr. Li's prompting – considering the similarities between the two performances and the ways in which they could be watched as examples of intercultural theater.

In fact, the juxtaposition of the two performances opens up a debate about the very definition and meaning of “intercultural theater.” As a group we are certainly engaged in cross-cultural exchange, but are the plays themselves acts of intercultural artistic creation? One point of view might hold to a very precise and narrow definition of intercultural theater: a hybrid combining different cultures and performance traditions. By this definition Sun can be considered intercultural, but Moon perhaps not. However, another side might argue that all spoken drama in Chinese is intercultural because it developed out of a non-Chinese tradition during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and, in this understanding, both could be considered intercultural, albeit for different reasons.

Thinking about these two plays through the lens of intercultural performance also opens up the question of the intercultural spectator. For British audiences of Sun, elements of the production like its emphasis on servant-master relations may call

to mind television shows like *Upstairs Downstairs* and local socio-economic history, while spectators from different backgrounds - in which class relations per se are not so prominent a part of national consciousness – may see the theme of binding by familial and social relations as more broadly applicable to women worldwide. In *Moon*, the references to Japanese adult video and Cantonese pop made the context of the play legible and relatable to audience members who have spent time in fast-growing Chinese cities, while the themes of alienation and isolation of the individual – as well as the feeling of watching and being watched – tap into more common cosmopolitan experience and our current Facebook- and Twitter-mediated era.

At the same time, while we were eager for threads to connect the plays to one another and to our own experiences of the world, we also found that our individual backgrounds led to unique – and very different – understandings of certain elements within them. With *Moon*, for example, the core symbolism of the moon seems deceptively universal (what culture doesn't have moon metaphors?), when in fact the moon has different classical referents in different cultures. Invoking the story of Chang'e and Ho Yi to those with Chinese cultural background, it is often read as a symbol of madness in British and European texts.

When it came to critical discussion of the pieces, their potential to generate multiple readings for a diverse audience became all the more apparent. Among our group of postgraduate/graduate students, we have researchers of intercultural theater, Chinese drama, Shakespeare, directing, gender studies, film, and a combination of the above. Our academic positions turned our gaze towards different details and colored our interpretations of them. For someone who studies film, one of the things that might be most striking about *Sun* was its theatricality: in combining vignettes from several plays, narrativity and character-building or plot-advancing scenes heavy with dialogue. Those scenes that do depart from classic dialogue-driven drama move towards dance and the kind of physical expression of inner psyche that has become a staple

of contemporary performance training. The Moon, in contrast, seems filmic not because of the use of multimedia – a trait that it shares with the Sun – but rather because of its structure. The characters are linked less by direct relation or confrontation and more by juxtaposition of monologue; as when watching a film, audiences feel compelled to draw parallels and connections between series of scenes that are not all immediately related. And when the characters do meet onstage, the encounters are brief, awkward, and comedic – in short, realistic. Like film, the filmic performance seems particularly suited to expressing the alienated, tenuously connected condition of modern city life.

Another thing that interested us was the contrast in the ways that the two plays chose to expose the motivations and desires of their characters. In Sun, women literally are denied exposure to the sun, and much is left shadowed and unsaid in the dialogue; in Moon, characters are as if illuminated (not concealed) by the moonlight and reveal themselves through direct address monologue. They stand alone before the audience, naked and exposed.

Nakedness and bodily exposure bring to light another connection between the two plays, especially for a spectator with a background in gender studies or gender performance: the focus on the representation of genders and bodies. As came up in discussion during the workshop, Cao Yu wrote his plays during a time in which women's liberation was a hot topic and Ibsen's Nora was a popular symbol for women in China. Sun is in many ways faithful to this basic theme, but filtered through the lens of contemporary liberal British feminism. The use of foot binding scene to open the performance also touches on the issue of the female body and the fact that for women (and not just Chinese women), restrictions and confinements were visceral. To be liberated from the traditional bounds of family and class also required physical liberation. In Moon, the body plays an even more prominent role, but in this case we see that the effects of certain kinds of liberation – the freedom to watch whatever films one wants, to select from a wide array of goods at the supermarket, to style one's own star persona – can lead to isolation and alienation at the fringes of society. In both cases, control and transformation of the body play a

role, and the emphasis on physicality helps to bring broad themes – liberation, freedom, isolation, alienation – out of the theoretical realm and grounds them in lived, embodied experience.

As intercultural spectators, we too have shared in a lived, embodied experience: that of being present for the live performance of these two plays. It has been a truly unique experience and for this we again thank you all. We look forward to exchanging more thoughts on the productions later during the discussion session.

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