**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 20th 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.

Saffron Walker

Doctoral candidate, University of York, UK