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**The end of the hour-glass: alternative conceptions of intercultural exchange between
European and Chinese Operatic forms**

Abstract

This article discusses the findings of a large EU-supported cultural collaboration project with an experimental intercultural performance laboratory between Europe and China at its heart. It draws on interviews with artists from Shanghai and the UK, performance documentation and process observations to propose an artist-centred and individualised conception of intercultural exchange, with specific reference to the traditions of Chinese indigenous song-dance theatre and European opera. Conceived as a series of layers, the article argues for greater recognition of the necessary intracultural core to projects such as this and proceeds to examine the methodological challenges faced by artists with diverse and sometimes opposing training. In doing so it offers a further critique of Pavis's hourglass model of intercultural exchange, placing this in a wider theoretical context, and concluding with some reflections and considerations for future exchange projects rooted in creative practice.

Keywords

Theatre Training, Europe, China, opera, interculturalism, intraculturalism, individualistic-conception

Introduction

Focusing on an experimental intercultural performance laboratory investigating traditions of opera and song-dance theatre, this article analyses the research findings of a large, EU-supported project entitled Operatic Encounters, Common Voices (OPENCOV). The project in question was a two-year, cultural collaboration programme (September 2008-September 2010, <http://www.opencov.eu>) and involved an extended, though punctuated,¹ laboratory of practical collaboration between two ‘sides’ representing European traditions of opera on the one hand and Chinese indigenous forms of song-dance theatre, including jingju or Beijing Opera and lüju, on the other. This laboratory ran in parallel with the project’s Cultural Contexts Group, made up of arts educators, managers and academics from Leeds University, Shanghai Theatre Academy, Opera North, Bregenz International Festival in Austria and the Sibelius Academy in Finland. The performance laboratory took the story of the ‘Chalk Circle’ as a starting point since the narrative had for hundreds of years been the foundation for creative work both in China and in Europe – and indeed in a complex cultural interweaving between the two.² The image of contested ownership and lineage so beautifully caught in this story, as two women fight for ownership of one child, remained as a latent metaphor of the collaboration itself and it is this process we are attempting to critique in this article, situating it in a wider context of intercultural theory and of training methodologies. In one sense our article is a response to Erica Fische-Lichte’s call in Theatre Research International for further work to be done on analysing: ‘the process of interweaving... yield[ing] something new that cannot readily be identified with any culture in particular’ and to address some of the many questions raised for theatre studies of a “globalizing world” (2010: 294). At the same time, it is a clear attempt to echo Claudia Nascimento’s argument in *Crossing Cultural Borders through the Actor’s Work* that: ‘a re-

examination of interculturalism on stage can only be valuable if it includes the rationales and processes of individual actors' (2009: 37).

The authors have collaborated on this article to reflect the central dynamic of the project, as well as their involvement in it. Li, a Chinese theatre specialist with a personal and professional connection to the jingju tradition, acted as the cultural bridge for the project, helping identify an appropriate Chinese partner, establishing the links between the European and Chinese institutions, and translating complex details of methodology across the two groups. Pitches, a Western performer training specialist, documented the collaboration on video, and witnessed some 200 hours of rehearsal in the two-year project.³ During this time data was gathered using several methods: process observations and recordings, interviews with the eight artists who made up the two Creative Arts Teams (CATs), final presentation recordings⁴ and photographs. What follows is a reflective analysis of OPENCOV, referencing some of the wider intercultural debates of the last twenty years and proposing a layered, individualised model of intercultural making processes rather than a linear and generalised one. We do this firstly by sketching the theoretical territory; secondly by considering the skill-base of the artists; thirdly by outlining what are the cultural practices associated with the training traditions of the artists and by outlining examples of methodological exchange in the performances; and finally by extrapolating some wider points for future collaborations.

The theoretical territory

For some critics it might be a bit late to be calling for the end of the hourglass model - Patrice Pavis's hotly disputed visualisation of intercultural exchange, first published in 1992. Rustom Bharucha (1992: 241), Jacqueline Lo and Helen Gilbert (2002: 31-53) and most recently Rick Knowles in *Theatre and Interculturalism* (2010), have already made cogent and persuasive arguments against the linearity and implicit hierarchy of Pavis's model of cultural mixing, one predicated on the idea of 'source' and 'target' cultures, and by extension on a belief that such bounded definitions of culture exist in the first place (1992: 4). But despite this well trodden critical ground - what Knowles calls 'the intercultural wars' (2010: 21) - the reference back to Pavis does help locate the OPENCOV project, by defining what it was not, that is to say as a counter-model to the idea of distilling cultures in a Western-designed melting pot. Lo and Gilbert make the point explicitly: Pavis's hourglass, they argue, 'cannot account for alternative and more collaborative forms of intercultural exchange' (2002: 41); it is essentially a model of one-way communication based on a semiotic model of signifier-signified.

With no director, nor designated workshop leader amongst the group of artists, OPENCOV placed collaboration at the heart of the intercultural process. As a laboratory project, there was no pressure on the artists to make a commercial product, or to produce any particular style of work, though forms of sung theatre were the focus. This was in keeping with the project's main aim, inscribed in the original EU bid: to avoid 'an easy "hybridisation"' and to search for 'a more difficult and mutual exchange which respects the real differences of the two traditions'.⁵ Central to this collaborative imperative and to the fostering of explicitly 'difficult' exchanges was a structural choice to shift territory and ground for each subdivision of the project. Thus the first creative session was in Shanghai, followed by Leeds, then Bregenz and finally a return to Shanghai 16 months later. The

latent power dynamics associated with one's 'home' territory were thus in constant flux and had to be renegotiated each time the CATs met. In effect, in these conditions the terminology of source and target was entirely redundant – as there was no source, nor target, either in directorial terms or in respect of a paying audience. For this reason, in other outlets we have proposed a 'toppling' of the hourglass model on to its side and an alternative view of intercultural exchange, tentatively called the shaker model:⁶

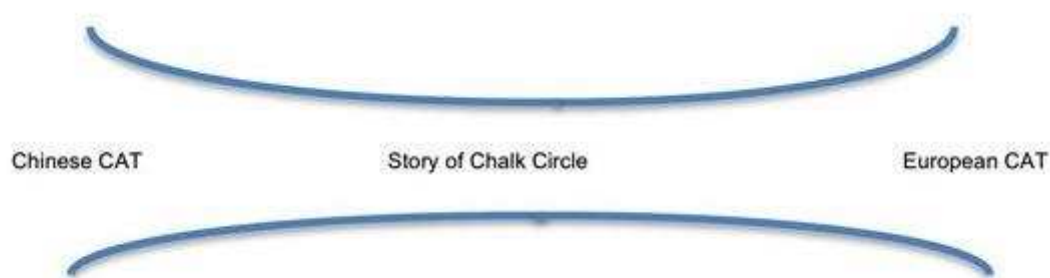


Fig. 1 A 'Shaker' model of collaboration

There are several advantages to this simple revision of Pavis's hourglass for this project: firstly it positions the Chalk Circle story as the central vehicle for exchange and, fittingly, this was a shared cultural resource as already stated; secondly it removes the sense of a top-down hierarchy directed towards the creation of a cultural product – in very literal terms it suggests an appropriate image of a 'level playing field' (Lo and Gilbert 2002: 42); thirdly and relatedly, it attempts to foreground process rather than visual aesthetics as the ground for intercultural analysis, the latter being a consistent criticism of Pavis's approach. In hindsight this shaker model is a kind of archetype of Lo and Gilbert's much more complex model - their 'template for an intercultural practice that encourages more mutuality' - also conceived as a critical response to Pavis's hourglass (Lo and Gilbert 2002: 45). Yet, it also suffers from the same tendency to shore up cultural binaries, one of the common pitfalls of intercultural analysis: two distinct and homogenous cultures, separated

by a creative project and ‘unified’, simply (if not simplistically) through work on that project.

As a counter to this tendency we would like here to explore a more individualistic conception of intercultural exchange (we are wary of using the term model for fear of promulgating a sense of fixity and scalability): it eschews such binaries in favour of layers. In this alternative view, the artists are placed centrally and cognizance is taken of the complexity of their own cultural backgrounds and trainings, before any intercultural exchange can occur. Thus our first layer is of intracultural exchange outlined in the following section on artists and their skill base. This is in keeping with Bharucha’s critique in *Theatre and the World and The Politics of Cultural Practice*, as Ric Knowles points out: “‘intra’ prioritises the interactivity and translation of diverse cultures’ between ‘cultures within the nation- state rather than between nations’ (2010: 32).⁷ Only then can we move to considering the meeting of traditions, expressed below as inter-methodological exchange as our focus is on process. Necessarily, this meeting point was not without tension because the CATs from both sides had to work collectively together to form a unique identity for each particular period of work (after a long time of working separately in their own culture). That new identity, often unstable and fleeting, and based on collective skills, was the crux of the intercultural exchange as we see it. We then turn to manifestations of this exchange with reference to some of the informal presentations or ‘sharings’ that concluded each period. We have illustrated this alternative conception below in a layered form and will follow this structure through the rest of the article.

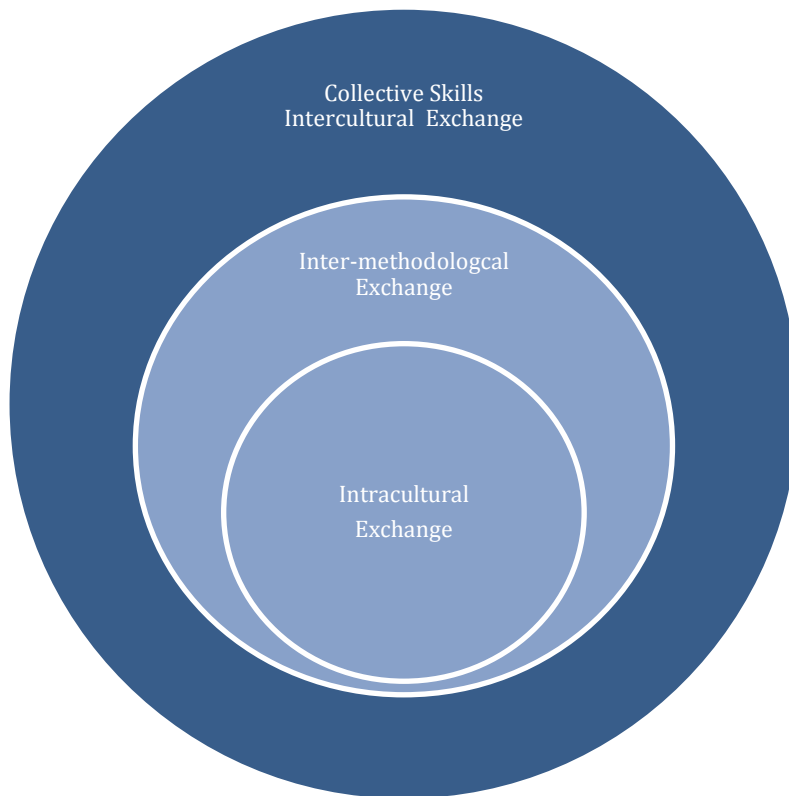


Fig 2: A layered model of experimental intercultural exchange

Intracultural exchange

The Chinese CAT

The OPENCOV organizer requested a singer, a dancer and a musician from the indigenous Chinese operatic theatre to match the European side, and it became the first difficult task that the Shanghai Theatre Academy (STA) faced because the indigenous theatre does not have such a rigid division between singers and dancers. Each performer is expected to acquire all the four basic skills of singing, speaking, dance-acting and combat (with certain emphasis of one or two aspects and such demands differentiating between operatic genres). Three artists were finally chosen from Academy's opera college and the two performers were both strong at movements. Between the two, one was trained in lüju (a regional opera in northern China) and one in jingju. Although both genres belong to the category of

Chinese indigenous ‘theatre [of] sung-verse’ (xiqu) and share some attributes, there are major differences. Firstly, lüju is a younger genre that did not emerge on the stage until the beginning of the twentieth century deriving from the local story-telling form and therefore it has a particular affinity for contemporary themes. Secondly, each genre employs an individual musical system based on the rising and falling of the tones of their dialects.⁸ Lüju’s music has also kept the strong flavour of the regional ballads. Thirdly, both contain similar role types, but all lüju female roles use natural voice while ‘false voice’ is adopted by jingju,⁹ a characteristic inherited from the tradition of male actors playing female roles using falsetto. Given the more ‘natural’ tendency and the contemporary themes with which the genre deals, lüju stands in contrast to the more explicitly stylized jingju. The nature of the specific genre determines how its performers are trained.

These differences between lüju and jingju demonstrate that even the Chinese CAT did not share identifiable training lineages. The artists’ own words, taken from interviews conducted during the project, evidence this most clearly:

Li Yan:¹⁰

I entered the school to study lüju at thirteen years old and had six years in training. [...] I was assigned to be an actress in the Shandong Provincial Lüju Company in 1990. [...] In 2006 I transferred to the Shanghai Indigenous Theatre School as a movement teacher. [...] I’ve never been to a workshop like this [i.e. the style of laboratory work] (Interview notes in Shanghai 1, Disc No. 10).

Trained for six years in a less-stylized theatre much influenced by folk entertainment, Li became more interested in dance and gymnastics. She also acted a few leading roles in TV plays and won a few awards for her TV acting.

Zhang Song:

Since I was a child, I was naughty. [...] My father thought he should send me to somewhere that specialises in movements and physicality (Interview notes in Shanghai 1, Disc No. 15).

Zhang specializes in the jingju's male warrior role. He had ten years of jingju training and has been teaching jingju male warrior role since his graduation in 2001. He won prizes for his own performance as a young teacher.

Yang Mei:

My father loves jingju and influenced by him I started being interested in it. [...] Father played the huqin¹¹ and he taught me first. Then father arranged a private tutor for me. At the age of twelve, I became a student studying huqin in the school attached to the National Academy of Chinese Theatre Arts (Interview notes in Shanghai 1, Disc No. 16).

Yang, the musician involved in the OPENCOV, describes herself as someone 'who ardently loves *jingju*', because she grew up with it. To her, the genre is not only a theatre, but is the absolutely sacred art for Chinese people.

For the final period of work Li Yan was replaced by Xu Jiali for health reasons. Xu trained in jingju but she also did a three-year course on the Theatre Training and Research Programme in Singapore, studying various Western acting methods and traditional theatre performances of India, Japan and Indonesia:

I have learnt Beijing opera since I was ten years old and I studied in the opera school for 7 years and in the Opera College for 2 years, and then I worked in the Shanghai Jingju Theatre for 2-and-a-half years (Interview notes in Shanghai 2, Tape No. 9).

This brief introduction to the four members of the Chinese CAT shows the diversity in their background. Zhang Song's ten years of training is now a norm for most jingju actors, who, guided by tutors, learn their essential skills in movement and voice through, sometimes arduous, training programmes. The precise position every part of the body should adopt (including how to work the lips, tongue and teeth together) is the prerequisite for articulation, and thus an objective of the training is to develop accuracy and perfection in the actor's stage habit. On the contrary, the training of the younger and less stylized genres like lüju is more relaxed and only needs six years. It was fascinating to observe both Zhang and Li execute the same movement: Zhang's training led him to demonstrate accuracy in every position of the body parts and of every minute gesture; while Li characteristically showed more fluidity.

Yet, they all share one strong feature: they trained in the indigenous theatre after the Cultural Revolution (1966-76) when many of stage conventions had already been lost together with the repertoire and many top rate masters either died or were not able to teach any more. In addition, the Communist cultural policy had already stably established its position in the indigenous theatre training and rehearsals.

The European CAT

The original choice by the OPENCOV organiser of a singer, dancer and a musician for each 'side' ostensibly mapped onto the European tradition of opera more readily, as the European model of a performer is a less integrated one than can be seen in China.

However, even here, the artists contributing to the project covered a broad range of interlinking skills, including movement direction and choreography, singing, writing, instrumentation and composition. In addition and as a contrast to the Chinese team all four artists had extensive experience of creative devising, improvisation and workshop leadership.

Jessica Walker was trained in the conservatoire sector of the UK as a mezzo-soprano at the Guildhall School of Music. Before taking on this project, she had completed several projects for Opera North, from conventional repertoire to newly devised solo pieces and this latter body of work, helps define the breadth of her skill base and her own trajectory away from a sole dependency on singing roles in the established repertoire. As Walker says:

I'm a classically trained singer. [...] I've worked a lot in opera, but I also work a lot in more cross-over repertoire and also devised work. [...] I first got involved in this project [...] because [the Projects Director of Opera North] knew that I was someone who liked more experimental work and because a lot of opera singers are quite rigid in the repertoire that they like to do and they wouldn't necessarily like to be taken away from their comfort zone and asked to improvise on the spot – you have to just have a little bit of courage I think in order to do that, it's not necessarily a skill, it's just a state of mind I think (Interview notes in Shanghai 1, Disc No. 11).

Currently Walker is a practice-led PhD student at the University of Leeds and is interrogating alternative models of artistic collaboration and creative autonomy that actively resist the often-disempowering commercial forces of the opera industry in the UK.

Lizzi Kew Ross, the movement specialist for the European CAT, trained both in the academy and in the conservatoire – at Roehampton University and London Contemporary Dance School. Her training involved performing, teaching and choreography, working in many different contexts: in theatre companies, choreographing musicals, in applied performance work in Uganda and on large collaborative projects involving different countries and operating across disciplines.

The composer and musician, Joe Townsend, provided the musical bridge with Yang Mei. A violinist with a particular interest in intercultural collaborations, Townsend had a wide knowledge of world music and was interested to construct meeting points between Yang's huqin and his own string instrument. Like Walker and Kew-Ross, the range of his project experience covers work beyond opera including large scale, professional theatre productions at some of the main stages in the UK – the National Theatre, the Young Vic, and Shakespeare's Globe – as well as collaborative work:

I'd done a few collaborative arts projects for Opera North [...] and currently am of looking to find new ways of expressing opera. [...] I've also got a strong interest in music from other cultures and for example, Romanian music. I play in Arabic bands as well, and my background is in English folk music; I've studied jazz so I've got a very sort of eclectic musical background and I'm absolutely fascinated by Chinese folk music (Interview notes in Shanghai 1, Disc No. 11).

Finally, Claire Glaskin was the movement specialist in the first chapter before she was tragically killed in a car accident. A movement director of international repute, Glaskin was trained as a dancer at Laban before developing a career as a performer, then teacher, then director. More than anything her own articulation of the skills necessary for work in European opera pinpoints the diversity of practices which characterise this section:

I have done everything from pole dancing to Flamenco, to tap routines, to big choral style movements to completely abstract, to absolutely naturalistic stuff, so the fact that I have a whole diverse range of styles is probably a good thing to come into this kind of project with, because you do have to be very open (Interview notes in Shanghai 1, Disc No. 11).

Inter-methodological exchange

The artists' individual training backgrounds in the section above indicate that they inevitably had different working habits and expectations of the OPENCOV project. Indeed creative conflict of some sort was virtually inescapable when the mix of artists from European and Chinese cultures was based on an imperfect model of easily-defined discipline boundaries and, as we have said, with no directorial lead or focus on a script to galvanise the group. So how might we analyse these skills in broader terms, in rehearsal methodologies for instance, and when can this inevitable conflict be beneficial for a project such as this?

From training to rehearsal – the Chinese side ...

What does six to ten years of training mean to the practitioners when they enter rehearsals?

How do performers create new plays and how do they inject life into the traditional repertoire learned through training or from individual masters?

One of the authors of this paper, Li, argues in her research of the jingju training that, among the objectives of the life-long basic training, two are primary: the establishment of the 'stage habit', and the accuracy and perfection in movement and singing. 'Habit' refers to a difficult and time-consuming transformation from a 'personal I' to a 'performer I' (2010:

71-4). Through many years of hard and rigorous drills, particularly through the tedious exercise of spending thirty to forty minutes keeping a stationary position (usually unnatural to one's own life habit),¹² performers execute gestures, postures or musical sentences to the satisfaction of 'the standard'. But counter-intuitively, this highly prescriptive training supplies performers with freedom on the stage so that they do not need to monitor where their arms, hands, fingers, legs or feet should reach, or how these body parts should synchronize. Accuracy has been deeply rooted in their mind and body (Fig. 6 illustrates the moment). Performers and acting skills thus stand in the centre of the Chinese stylized song-dance theatre.

Stylization means that conventionalization is the key guiding principle of the theatre. Any aspect of the performance – singing, speaking, dance-acting, combat, music, percussion, costuming and make up – has to follow certain modes, patterns or rules preconditioned by the role types. Solid training therefore plays an essential role in this type of theatrical art, because only the competent performers who are well-versed with acting skills can select existent conventions, rearrange them and fuse different styles to bring out either the new life for a traditional piece or to devise an acting vocabulary for a new piece of creative work.

The rearrangement or fusion of conventions is based on the specific characters and circumstances the play script provides. Dramatic literature was the centre of Chinese theatre; plays written from the fourteenth to the eighteenth centuries form an important part of the Chinese literary legacy. However, when the local theatres emerged in the mid-eighteenth century, performers started paying more attention to acting since there was such a huge 'literary reservoir' they could use. Written texts gradually gave way to the performance. Yet, at the beginning of the twentieth century, dramatic literature drew people's attention again, because radical intellectuals accused the indigenous theatre of

being too ornamental to carry out the noble mission of reforming Chinese society. As a response, many new jingju plays were written and the genre reached its golden age. Li Yuru, a veteran jingju actress researching extensively on the female role acting, commented: ‘repertoire and acting are complementary.’ (2008: 1-2).

During the past sixty years, the creative authority also changed and developed quickly. Due to both political and artistic reasons – Communist ideological correctness and a total theatre of singing, speaking, dance-acting and combat – every new creative work, especially of the strongly stylized theatre like jingju, now involves a big creative group to work together including primary musicians and performers, directors, playwrights, designers, composers, experts,¹³ theatre critics and arts administrators.¹⁴ All the four Chinese CAT were brought up in this theatrical environment. Yang Mei’s expectation of her role in the OPENCOV can be seen as an exemplar:

I thought there would be a script and as a musician I would need to compose the music for the script and never expected that I would be one of the creators for the whole project (Interview notes in Shanghai 1, Disc No. 16)!

...and for the European Side

Such expectations of a definitive role for each artist and a stable text were in stark contrast to the European CAT’s and it is worth reflecting briefly on why this might have been the case in cultural terms. The European artists’ training may be broken down into two phases: the first, as we have seen, is institutional and relates to a single artistic discipline – Laban or the Guildhall, for instance. Here, largely the same processes of skills development are in evidence as with the Chinese artists – a longitudinal, instrument-based training (including

voice and body) focused on the professional realisation of a classical repertoire. But the second phase (after the initial conservatoire preparation) is driven by a very different cultural context: a notoriously eclectic and fluid creative industry in the UK, which demands diverse skills and more creative autonomy from the individual artist. This might currently be termed creative entrepreneurship, but in terms of this project and the day-day processes in the creative laboratory, it was the capacity, if not the imperative, of the European CAT to devise and compose new materials on-the-fly which contrasted most clearly with the Chinese creative team. Claire Glaskin pointed out:

When I started to talk to Li Yan, she has no concept of creating from scratch which for me is absolutely always what I do and although I have a range of steps of different styles available to me, a kind of vocabulary, I certainly don't have any rules of how to use them or any format that is pre-written whereas she is always starting from a very set code of moves. [...] It would be very fascinating for me to be restricted to that and to see what that felt like (Interview notes in Shanghai 1, Disc No. 11).

After just a few days into the project, Glaskin had perceptively identified what became one of the key themes of the project: the negotiation between creative approaches: modes of selecting and reorganizing conventions and modes of free composition.

In *Making a Performance* (2007) Govan, Nicholson and Normington offer one explanation for this predilection in the European tradition for devising and improvised composition, rooting it in the Avant Garde movements of the early twentieth century and the 1960s/70s. They argue that this counter-cultural and resistant history to performance in a specifically European context radically influenced training and performance-making traditions: 'breaking the authority of directors and, in some instances [...] challenging the

authorial voice of the playwright’, whilst ‘signal[ing] a new interest in the power of spontaneity and improvisation’ (16). With over a year’s distance between the project’s completion and today it is possible to reflect on this state of play in terms of the balance of power in the intercultural project. Unwittingly, the decision to exclude a playwright, director and secure playtext, made by the European side at the proposal stage, was implicitly asking significantly more movement from the Chinese creative team away from their creative traditions than it was for the European CAT, whose own professional experience not to mention cultural history, was far more aligned with such a rehearsal methodology.

So how were these contrasting methodologies evident in the project? Different training backgrounds and different expectations produced two big questions for the Chinese and European artists from the very beginning of the project: ‘What to do?’ and ‘How to do it?’ The specific type of cross-cultural work for OPENCOV demanded mutual understanding between the practitioners through working together and from feeling each other’s training grounds and personal approach to the project. However, regrettably there was little space for this delicate process to develop fully given the project’s financial constraints.

Frustration undoubtedly occurred within and between the two CATs but, as an artist’s identity is so caught up in their training, it also arose within the individual. Zhang, for example, struggled with the fundamental question: what is the essence of Chinese theatre? Too much emphasis on the use of martial/acrobatic display, encouraged by the European CAT in the Bregenz chapter, resulted in an episode of the Hunter (Zhang) fighting with a tiger (Kew Ross) in what ultimately was an incongruent episode, pasted on to the work. It may have been eye-catching but it was not a logical part of the piece’s development, nor a justifiable use of Zhang’s physical repertoire.

Which aspects of his craft should Zhang offer up for experimentation and re-contextualisation, then, and which are necessary to hold onto and preserve? In the Leeds period of work, Zhang faced a similar dilemma. Artists from both sides created a fundamentally realistic scene using objects from everyday life, such as a table, three chairs, a wine bottle and glasses. How to drink the wine? Zhang employed jingju's wine drinking convention: holding the glass, looking at it and using his palm to cover the glass while drinking from it. However, Zhang asked himself: was it necessary to do so? Was he expected to display the jingju style of drinking because he was in OPENCOV as a representative of Chinese theatre? Or could he act in a more natural way even if he had never learned to drink in a naturalistic style. What, most fundamentally, was his performance task? Looking at how his European counterpart acted in the scene, Zhang said:

If my teacher was watching me doing that, I would be sworn out, yes, I'd be told off. But then later I began to understand, maybe in the West that is your way of expressing stuff on stage like a normal teenage child, he or she might be walking around like this at home; it's perfectly real (Interview notes in Leeds, Tape No. Shanghai-Leeds 11).

Such internal and external conflicts do also produce exciting moments of performance though - the moment when the artists, their training and their artistic approaches found a meeting point, overriding the conflicts and compromises. This is the layer of collective skills and intercultural exchange.

Collective skills and intercultural exchange

When the artists managed effectively this balance of approaches, a collective identity was created. It was no longer jingju, lüju, nor any specific style of Western Opera, musical, nor any particular school of dance either. It was an identity only belonging to the work these artists endeavoured to create.

Within the constraints of this article one piece of musical ‘echo’ produced between Jessica Walker and Li Yan will have to suffice to exemplify such an exchange and to illustrate a number of key points for this intercultural work. This episode took place when the artists first met in Shanghai in 2009, without knowing each other’s training background or artistic approach, and with different creative agendas in mind. The story of two mothers and a baby was first shaped with many uncertainties. One possibility was that the baby got lost in the forest. Perhaps the very cold working environment (no heating was supplied in the rehearsal room in freezing January) made Jessica Walker sing *Must the Winter Come so Soon*, by Samuel Barber (1910-1981). Everyone involved in the rehearsal (including the authors of this article and two other Chinese from the STA who together worked as the ‘chorus’ to the scene) were asked by Glaskin to feel the music. The lyrics were also translated into Chinese. Using physical movements, participants responded to the music, voice and words and more importantly to their own impression of the song. Gradually a forest, a ‘chorus of movement’ as Glaskin referred to it, was created among eight people. At this moment, Li Yan was encouraged to sing a song to respond.

Li first of all found it difficult, because none of the arias she could sing was anything to do with either the forest, the snow or the baby. She finally decided on a song from a traditional lüju repertoire in which the wife sings of her feelings for her husband who is a thousand miles away on the battlefield and her memory of their romance. It is understandable that Li felt awkward about singing such a song in scene. Yet, she

compromised, sang it and decided that ‘the feelings of thinking of one’s beloved husband could be transformed to thinking of one’s child’. To Jessica Walker, who lacked the language, her focus was simply on the melody and on Li’s voice, as Walker recalled in an interview conducted at the time:

[...] like today when she sang and I responded; she sang in Chinese and I responded with a vocalise because I have no words [...] and it didn’t seem to make any difference (Interview notes in Shanghai 1, Disc No. 11).

Walker’s response through a ‘vocalise’ that adopted matching notes and sound produced the connection in the scene, because the harmony suddenly emerged creating a specific identity – neither Chinese nor European but truly belonging to the scene. The music and voice eased Li Yan’s anxiety about the content of the Chinese aria. Subsequently the incongruity between the two cultures reduced. In interview, Walker called the moment ‘something quite special’, while Li Yan felt they were ‘developing a bridge between Eastern and Western opera and culture’.¹⁵ Li also found Walker’s voice ‘round, thick and broad’ and whenever she sang, Li would ‘subconsciously, somehow, follow her way of doing it’ (Interview notes in Shanghai 1, Disc No. 10), and subsequently her original identity with *lüju* blurred. For that particular moment she found a new position in the intercultural work.

A piece of musical response to songs that transcended the language barrier was kept for future workshops. In the final presentation in Shanghai again (April 2010) in the court scene, Xu Jiali used a *jingju* melody to sing ‘Your Excellency!’ (Chinese: ‘Daren a!’) to address the judge after a series of fierce pulling movements between the two mothers, who both attempted to pull the Judge (also representing the child) to their own side. In between

the sung Chinese syllables, Walker inserted the same sound with the melody created on the basis of a Western concept of harmony. The ostensibly incongruent duet surprisingly produced a type of strange harmony, which was no longer jingju but nor was it European Opera either, successfully producing the intense atmosphere when the two mothers faced the Judge/baby.¹⁶

Through creative responsiveness a collective skill-base was built around these moments and with it an identity that uniquely belonged to the working process. It was a result which aligns with Fischer-Lichte's description of intercultural work in a new globalizing context: 'It seems more likely that such a process of interweaving should yield something new that cannot readily be identified with any culture in particular, yet still resonates with members of different cultures' (2010: 294).

Conclusion

On an aesthetic level this final image of a tug of war between mothers helped evoke the Chalk Circle story. The Judge/baby conflation brought another dimension to this story, dramatically extending the time frame of the judgment to cover generations of maternal conflict. Interestingly, the ultimate decision made in this piece was for the mothers to share the child. At the level of process, though, it symbolised the methodological tussles discussed here, with both sides pressing their point and yielding in more or less equal measure, during the project. At the heart of that tussle of tradition are some quite pragmatic findings and we include these here, by way of brief conclusion, referring back to our layered conception of exchange above.

Firstly any intercultural project must initially consider the intracultural make-up of its artistic team and recognise the diversity of practice and training within traditions before looking outwards. Secondly the project structure and working assumptions must be

cognisant of and sensitive to different working methodologies that relate to the training and professional context of the collaborating artists. Thirdly, a period of orientation and awareness-raising of these latent methodological influences is highly beneficial; creative negotiations across cultures take more time than is ever budgeted for at proposal stage. Fourthly, the moments of genuine connection, as we have articulated them here, might only be fleeting and will be read differently by different audiences – in many ways the benefit of this way of working lies outside of any aesthetic product created and remains in and with the artists and their own processes. Finally and relatedly, each intercultural project must define itself on its own terms, naturally resisting any linear models of communication and instead negotiating the layers of cultural complexity uniquely each time.

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All the interview notes were recorded by Diane Myers and Jonathan Pitches:

Interview notes in Shanghai 1, Disc No. 10, interpreted by Li Ruru

Interview notes in Shanghai 1, Disc No. 11.

Interview notes in Shanghai 1, Disc No. 15, interpreted by Li Ruru.

Interview notes in Shanghai 1, Disc No. 16, interpreted by Li Ruru.

Interview notes in Shanghai 2, Tape No. 9.

Interview notes in Leeds, Tape No. Shanghai-Leeds 11, interpreted by Haili Heaton.

Biographies

Jonathan Pitches is Professor of Theatre and Performance in the School of Performance and Cultural Industries at Leeds University and is Director of Research for PCI and Music. He has research interests in performance documentation and the theory and practice of performer training, beginning with Russian approaches to actor training and expanding out more recently to the UK, US and China. His most recent large project on performer training - *The Russians in Britain* – was published by Routledge in December 2011 and his coedited introduction to *Performance Studies, Performance Perspectives*, (with Dr Sita Popat) came out in Palgrave in October of the same year.

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Li, Ruru is senior lecturer in Chinese Studies at Leeds University, UK. She has written extensively on Shakespeare performance in China (including a monograph *Shashibiya: Staging Shakespeare in China* 2003) and on Chinese theatre (modern/traditional). Her recent books include *The Soul of Beijing Opera: Theatrical Creativity and Continuity in the Changing World*, and *Translucent Jade: Li Yuru on Stage and in Life* (in Chinese). The latter is a pictorial biography of her jingju performer mother. Having received some basic training of Beijing Opera as a child, Li runs workshops and regards regular contact with the theatre as essential to her academic work.

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Notes

¹ The ‘punctuations’ were held as follows: Shanghai 1, China; 5-9 January 2009; Leeds, UK: 16^l-21^s April 2009; Bregenz, Austria: 31 July-2 August; Shanghai 2: 8-13 April 2010.

² Wenwei Du has tracked the fascinating circular route of this specific story (1995: 12:2:307-325).

³ The second documenter on the project was Diane Myers, a freelance film maker and producer

⁴ See the OPENCOV site for full versions of each practical response as video streams.

⁵ Aims of OPENCOV: EU Cultural Cooperation Project Document, 2008 (unpublished). Project Leader: Susan Daniels.

⁶ This was first proposed in another co-authored article by Pitches and Li (2010: 196-210).

⁷ Emphasis is given by the authors of this paper.

⁸ Jingju’s speaking language is more complicated, consisting both heightened and colloquial speeches. The former does not use any one particular dialect but an invented language appeared in the mid eighteenth century based on four different dialects. More information see Li Ruru (2010: 26-30).

⁹ Only the old female role type uses natural voice.

¹⁰ Chinese names are given in Chinese style, i.e. family name first, followed by given name, unless otherwise printed.

¹¹ The two-string fiddle as the main musical accompaniment in jingju, see Fig. 4.

¹² Taking ‘mountain-arms’ as an example: different role types have to follow the strict rules to stretch out their arms (in a curved shape) to both sides and at certain height.

¹³ They are mainly older and experienced actors who sometimes serve as the technique directors for a particular production.

¹⁴ Those who are interested in the general creative process of jingju can see Wichmann-Walczak 2000: 44:4: 96-119.

¹⁵ At the end of the work in Shanghai 1 when the piece was presented, Chinese audiences criticized the incongruence of the lyrics sang by Walker and Li.

¹⁶ These presentations can be viewed at <http://www.opencov.eu/video/>