

The Poetics of Difference and Displacement

Twentieth-Century Chinese-Western
Intercultural Theatre

Min Tian

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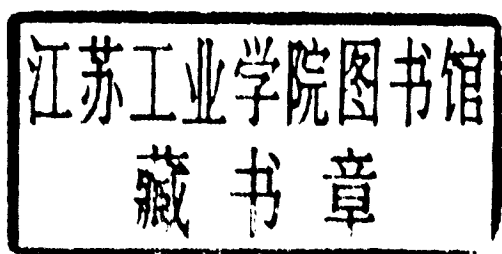


МЭИ ЛАНЬ-ФАН

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Hong Kong University Press is honoured that Xu Bing, whose art explores the complex themes of language across cultures, has written the Press's name in his Square Word Calligraphy. This signals our commitment to cross-cultural thinking and the distinctive nature of our English-language books published in China.

"At first glance, Square Word Calligraphy appears to be nothing more unusual than Chinese characters, but in fact it is a new way of rendering English words in the format of a square so they resemble Chinese characters. Chinese viewers expect to be able to read Square word Calligraphy but cannot. Western viewers, however are surprised to find they can read it. Delight erupts when meaning is unexpectedly revealed."

— Britta Erickson, *The Art of Xu Bing*

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Introduction

Intercultural theatre is one of the most prominent phenomena of twentieth-century international theatre. With the rise of European avant-garde theatre, the interest in Asian theatrical traditions has been instrumental in changing the orientation and complexion of the twentieth-century Western theatre. Antonin Artaud's experience and interpretation of the Balinese theatre and his seminal conception of "Oriental Theatre" had significant bearings not only on the formation of Artaud's own theatre aesthetics but also on the ways Western avant-garde theatre (since Artaud) has encountered and used Asian theatres. Chinese and Japanese theatres inspired Vsevolod Meyerhold's efforts to "re-theatricalize" the theatre and to redefine the course of twentieth-century theatre both in Russia and in the West. Edward Gordon Craig was keenly interested in Asian theatres in the first two decades of the twentieth century while he was waging a battle against naturalism in European theatre. Bertolt Brecht's experience of Mei Lanfang's performance helped to define and articulate his concept of the "Alienation-effect" — one of the most circulated and influential ideas in the twentieth century world theatre. Of our contemporary practitioners of intercultural theatre, Jerzy Grotowsky, Peter Brook, Ariane Mnouchkine, Eugenio Barba, Richard Schechner, Robert Wilson, and Peter Sellars have made great contributions to the development of the twentieth-century international theatre. Grotowsky had maintained a spiritual connexion with Asian theatres and cultures throughout his theatrical career. Brook's production of the Indian epic *Mahabharata* is not only a milestone in his search for a "universal language of theatre" but has also triggered heated debate on the practice and theory of contemporary intercultural theatre. Drawing on her own intercultural experiments with various Asian theatrical forms, Mnouchkine reasserts Artaud's position that "the theatre is Oriental"

(Mnouchkine 1996, 97). In his study and experiments of Theatre Anthropology, Barba, perhaps the most ambitious and dedicated artist in contemporary intercultural theatre, has conducted field studies in a number of Asian countries and has long been engaged in direct experimental collaboration with artists from Bali, China, India, and Japan, leading to his vision of a “Eurasian Theatre.” The postmodern intercultural experiments by Wilson and Sellars have proven highly innovative and controversial and have opened up new vistas for the development of intercultural theatre in our postmodern age.

In Asia, at the turn of the twentieth century, the necessity of social and economical changes brought intellectuals and theatre artists in Japan and China to Western realist theatre. The introduction and practice of realism fundamentally transformed the composition of Asian theatrical scenes in the first half of the twentieth century. In recent decades, under the impact of Western avant-garde theatre — represented by Artaud, Meyerhold, Brecht, and others — Asian theatres have been undergoing even more profound changes with revived interest in Asian traditional theatrical forms as well as interest in Western avant-garde theatre.

With the flourish and fruition of twentieth-century intercultural theatre, critics, theorists as well as practitioners have advanced theories and models explicating the making and working of this international phenomenon. These theories and models provide critical insights, sophisticated analyses as well as utopian visions. However, because of their cultural and geographical location and placement, they are often culturally and geographically centralized or re-centralized positions in spite of their universalist presumptions that often ignore or downplay the social, historical, cultural, political, and ideological factors of twentieth-century intercultural theatre.

In contrast, this study of the twentieth-century Chinese-Western intercultural theatre views intercultural theatre as a process of displacement and re-placement of culturally specified and differentiated theatrical forces, rejecting any universalist and essentialist presumptions. But prior to presenting and positioning my arguments, it is necessary to place some of the current leading theories and models in a critical perspective.

Erika Fischer-Lichte is among the first critics who have attempted to assess contemporary intercultural theatre with a theoretical and critical awareness. She notes that in intercultural theatre like Brook’s “cosmopolitan theatre,” theatrical interculturalism “is not concerned with specific cultural identities, but is aiming towards the ‘universal,’ the whole human homogeneity beyond the differences determined by one’s own culture.” She is fully aware that this desire for universality could be “an opportune revival of cultural imperialism and cultural exploitation” and that “the intermelting of all differences is legitimized by a ‘universally valid’ centralized culture, which is actually defined and dominated by Western culture.” But she does not investigate this aspect of intercultural theatre, even though “a political aspect concerning the actual power relationships between cultures which should not be

overlooked." Instead, she defines "the aesthetic function of interculturalism" in contemporary theatre as "the revitalization of traditional theatre forms and in general as the re-creation of theatre" (Fischer-Lichte 1990, 280), a process of "*productive reception*" (Fischer-Lichte 1990, 284; Fischer-Lichte's emphasis) which "allows any elements of any number of foreign cultures to undergo cultural transformation through the process of production, thereby making the own theatre and the own culture productive again" (Fischer-Lichte 1990, 287).

What seems to me most problematic in Fischer-Lichte's view is that she does not question the assumption of "a universal language of theatre" (Fischer-Lichte 1996, 37–38) in contemporary intercultural theatre and that she looks at the aesthetic function of intercultural theatre only as a revitalizing and productive process and ignores its destructive effects on different theatrical traditions, which inevitably erode or redefine their cultural and aesthetic identities, therefore simplifying the inherent contradiction and complexity of intercultural theatre as a result of its displacement of different theatrical forces. In Brook's *Mahabharata* and Mnouchkine's *L'Indiade*, Indian culture and theatre are displaced, transformed, and re-placed in accord with the domestic needs of Brook's and Mnouchkine's experiments and reinventions of their theatrical identities. In adaptations of Shakespeare in traditional Chinese (or other Asian) theatrical forms, while certain aspects of both Shakespeare (in terms of theatrical and acting stylization) and the Chinese theatre (in terms of in-depth characterization and philosophical content) are supposed to be enriched or revitalized (by way of displacement), other aspects (for example, the integrity of both Shakespeare's text and Chinese acting) are subject to displacement and deconstruction. Fischer-Lichte believes in the role of contemporary intercultural theatre in "the creation of a world culture in which different cultures not only take part, but also respect the unique characteristics of each culture and allow each culture its authority" (Fischer-Lichte 1996, 38). But the realities of contemporary intercultural theatre and the debates it has generated are rather mixed and complicated and in effect necessitate a critical and self-reflexive approach on the part of contemporary practitioners and theorists of intercultural theatre.

Patrice Pavis is well aware of the role of ethnocentrism in the practice and theory of intercultural theatre. Like Fischer-Lichte, Pavis cherishes a utopian vision of intercultural theatre, arguing that "[t]he fact that other cultures have gradually permeated our own leads (or should lead) us to abandon or relativize any dominant western (or Eurocentric) universalizing view" (Pavis 1992, 5–6). But his theory does not transcend entirely the limits of its Eurocentric placement because it is of and for the Western theatre's interculturalization of foreign cultures, as Pavis' statement attests: "We will be studying only situations of exchange in one direction from a source culture, a culture foreign to us (westerners), to a target culture, western culture, in which the artists work and within which, the target audience is situated" (Pavis 1992, 7). Such a discourse tends to valorize the target (Western) culture's

appropriation of its source cultures because it fails to look at intercultural theatre necessarily as an *inter-* or *mutual-*negotiation and displacement of different theatrical and cultural forces.

Although Pavis senses that the current definitions of culture “tend to isolate it from its sociohistorical context” and their need to be completed by “a sociological approach, better grounded in history and ideological context,” and although he emphasizes the “sociological premises” of his theory of “the hourglass” (Pavis 1992, 12), Pavis nevertheless sticks to his semiotic approach and does not consider fully its social and political aspects. Instead, he chooses to “put those contradictions in brackets for a moment” (Pavis 1992, 212). Thus, methodologically, Pavis’ proposal of “a materialist theory of intercultural appropriation” (Pavis 1992, vi) is in its application far short of fulfilling its premises. Pavis writes: “We must avoid two exaggerations: that of a mechanical and unreconstructed Marxism that neglects the importance of cultural phenomena and their relative autonomy, and that of a culturalism that turns the economic and ideological infrastructure into a form of unconscious discursive superstructure” (Pavis 1992, 183). Pavis’ caution against methodological exaggerations is well justified, but his approach more often than not runs against the premises of materialism.

To some extent, Pavis is self-conscious and self-reflexive of the pitfalls of contemporary intercultural theatre (Pavis 1992, 211–12). He is keenly aware of the political and economic roles in contemporary intercultural theatre. While endorsing Richard Schechner’s conception of “the culture of choice,” Pavis cautions that “[a]t the same time external contemporary reality is somewhat less radiant and optimistic; economic and political conditions probably play a rather more devious and destructive role than Schechner suggests” (Pavis 1996, 41). This reflexive voice, however, never rings through the narrative of Pavis’ theory and is constantly stifled by his vocal approval of contemporary Western intercultural theatre’s desire for “universality.” With regard to Wilson’s use of “Japanese traces” in his postmodern experiments, Pavis argues that “[t]he values of these traces is not on the level of ‘proof’ or ‘authenticity,’ for they are constructed from the spirit of Japanese culture rather than its detailed reality” (Pavis 1996, 105). While Pavis’ first assertion is true, questions should be raised concerning his second assertion: How can we conceive “the spirit of Japanese culture” without attending to “its detailed reality”? The fact is that those traces, as displaced from the specific context of Japanese theatre and culture, are no longer, and cannot be, in the spirit of Japanese culture; they are displaced and re-placed or re-constructed in conformity with Wilson’s own aesthetic. Affirming Wilson’s transcultural universal approach, Pavis nevertheless acknowledges that “it does continue the Western tradition of the director as *author*” (Pavis 1996, 106). *The Intercultural Performance Reader* framed by Pavis’ short introductions to the included articles is as a whole fundamentally affirmative of the theory and practice of Western intercultural theatre. Dissenting voices of “another point of view” are negated by the

structure of the book that first presents “the Western point of view” of intercultural performance and that concludes the debate by reaffirming the views of Barba and Grotowsky.

In response to modern and contemporary Western theatre’s interculturalization of Indian theatrical and cultural traditions, Rustom Bharucha has provided the first major critique of Western intercultural theatre as represented by noted theatre practitioners and theorists such as Artaud, Craig, Grotowsky, Barba, Mnouchkine, Brook, and Schechner (Bharucha 1993; 1996). First and foremost, Bharucha questions the ahistorical and universal assumptions of contemporary intercultural theatre and its ahistorical approach to Asian, primarily Indian, theatre and cultural traditions. He accuses contemporary Western interculturalists of imperialist and neo-colonialist appropriations of Indian theatre and cultural resources. He proposes an “intracultural” approach as an alternative to intercultural theatre, which takes into full account the social, historical, and cultural contexts and immediacies of India’s multicultural. Bharucha’s project of intracultural theatre as a reaction and resistance to what he considers the neo-colonialist practice of Western intercultural theatre certainly has its own legitimacy and it may well apply to intracultural theatre in other countries of the Third World with multiple indigenous theatrical traditions. But with the inevitable advance of globalization, intercultural theatre will continue to have an inevitable and even greater impact on the survival and development of indigenous theatres and intracultural theatres in countries of the Third World.

While arguing for intracultural theatre as a counter-discourse, Bharucha seems to believe that the pitfalls of interculturalism can be avoided and its logic reversed so long as interculturalists have sufficient respect for the Other in its social, cultural, and historical context and assume their ethical responsibilities. It seems to me that Bharucha’s desire for “a genuine exchange” and a fair negotiation (Bharucha 1996, 208), effectuated by the moral and ethical accountabilities and sensitivities of interculturalists, is ironically at odds with the premises of his critique of Euro-American intercultural theatre, which stress the importance of social, political, and economic determinants. My argument is that, given the significant and sometimes decisive role of social, political, and economical factors, it is the *differences* in cultural, social, ideological, political, economical, and ethnic dimensions that serve as a common denominator determining the mechanism of intercultural exchange. So long as such differences exist, we cannot avoid the Other being perceived differently, displaced, and re-placed from different, centralized, and re-centralized perspectives.

Like Bharucha, John Russell Brown emphasizes the determining significance of social, economical, and historical factors in the practice of contemporary intercultural theatre. In the West, Brown, who has done field studies in India and South Asian countries, is perhaps the most outspoken critic of Western intercultural theatre as represented by Brook and Mnouchkine. Brown likens Western intercultural practitioners to “raiders across a frontier”: “They bring back strange clothes as their

loot and try to wear them as if to the manner born" (Brown 1998, 9). According to him, "Exchange cannot work equitably in two directions between two very different societies and theatres: West and East, modern and ancient, economically advantaged and disadvantaged" (Brown 1998, 12). The practice of intercultural theatre — exchange, borrowing, trade, or looting — inevitably "diminishes any theatre because it transgresses its inherited reliance on the society from which the drama takes its life and for which it was intended to be performed." Therefore, in spite of the practitioners' intention, "intercultural theatrical exchange is, in fact, a form of pillage, and the result is fancy-dress pretence or, at best, the creation of a small zoo in which no creature has its full life" (Brown 1998, 14). Brown's argument may appear extreme to intercultural universalists, it nevertheless forcefully underscores the destructive effects of intercultural theatre as a displacement (exchange or pillage) of traditions and cultures. But Brown admits of no real creative or constructive influence of intercultural theatre on the development of Western and Eastern theatres.

As an alternative, this study approaches the twentieth-century Chinese-Western intercultural theatre both from an aesthetic-artistic perspective and from a cultural-social-historical-political perspective. It attempts to examine both the Western theatre's interculturalisation of the Chinese theatre and the Chinese theatre's interculturalisation of the Western theatre and approaches intercultural theatre as a phenomenon, both constructive and deconstructive. Homi K. Bhabha has proposed to focus on the "inter," the "inbetween," the "borderline," or the "Third Space" in the study of cultural engagement and exchange. He argues that it is in the "inter" or the "inbetween" space — "the overlap and displacement of domains of difference" — that the difference, value, and meaning of culture are articulated and negotiated (Bhabha 2004, 2, 56). I believe that Bhabha's argument has a significant relevance to the study of intercultural theatre in general and, in particular, to my study of the twentieth-century Chinese-Western intercultural theatre, which focuses on the "inter" space of engagement, exchange, and displacement of the Chinese and Western theatres. I hope to demonstrate that what is central to the making of the twentieth-century Chinese-Western intercultural theatre is what I call the poetics of difference and displacement, which underlies its most significant aspects.

Aesthetic and Artistic Displacement

In intercultural theatre, aesthetic and artistic interculturalisation of the Other necessitates displacement in the sense that the Other is inevitably understood, interpreted, and placed in accordance with the aesthetic and artistic imperatives of the Self pertaining to its own tradition and its placement in the present, irrespective of the extent of the Self's true knowledge of its Other. In her explanation of the reason that the audience in West Germany enjoyed the Peking Opera although they were innocent of

understanding it, Fischer-Lichte notes that in the German audience's reception, "the code underlying the Peking Opera is simply displaced by the code brought to the performance by the members of the audience" (Fischer-Lichte 1985, 87). In this case, it is the code of the circus and the code of Western postmodern theatre that displaced the codes of the Peking Opera. According to her, the audiences understand the non-verbal acrobatic body movements and gestures of the actor in terms of the familiar non-verbal code of the circus and the familiar code of anti-illusionistic and anti-psychological postmodern theatre, dissociating them from the special dramatic character the actor is impersonating both physically and psychologically. She concludes that

The aesthetic pleasure the Peking Opera gives the spectators who come to them with premises drawn from our Western culture can be said to have arisen from a deep misunderstanding. A total lack of knowledge of its underlying theatrical code makes possible the application of codes which are found in our culture. (Fischer-Lichte 1985, 90)

But in my view, even if the spectators bring true knowledge and understanding of the code to their experience, displacement cannot be avoided. First of all, intercultural knowledge and understanding inevitably involve displacement and re-placement of the Other by the Self. Western audiences understand traditional Chinese theatre in terms of their own theatrical and cultural tradition and contemporary reality, the latter determining the understanding (displacement as re-placement) of not only the Other but their own tradition. In most cases, Western audiences understand and appreciate traditional Chinese theatre in terms of the Greek theatre, the Elizabethan theatre, the *commedia dell'arte*, and modern and contemporary anti-realist avant-garde theatre; traditional Chinese theatre is displaced and re-placed in the Western imagination of those lost non-illusionist traditions and in the anti-realist discourse of modern and contemporary avant-garde theatre. In this process of displacement and re-placement, the imaginative and anti-realist reconstruct both the Chinese theatre and those Western traditions is subject to the conditions and needs of modern and contemporary avant-garde theatre.

In the twentieth-century Chinese-Western intercultural theatre, displacement is central to its aesthetic and artistic construction. In its interculturalisation of traditional Chinese theatre, Western avant-garde theatre displaced the Chinese theatre in conformity with its own aesthetic and artistic needs of re-positioning itself against naturalism. Mei Lanfang's art did not influence contemporary Western theatre (especially the avant-garde) through shared affinities and principles but rather through a mechanism of displacements of the different (the art of Mei Lanfang and the Chinese theatre) in terms of the familiar (the avant-garde). Such seminal concepts as Brecht's "Alienation-effect," Meyerhold's "Conventional Theatre," and Barba's "pre-expressivity" have less to do with the essence of Mei's art (and the Chinese

theatre) than with their displacements of it in the context of the twentieth-century Western theatre.

In Brecht's and Meyerhold's interpretations of traditional Chinese theatre, stylization and other conventions of traditional Chinese theatre were displaced out of their aesthetic and artistic context and were re-placed as anti-illusionistic techniques and devices in Brecht's and Meyerhold's aesthetic and artistic constructs, notably Brecht's theory of the "Alienation-effect" and Meyerhold's idea of the "Conventional Theatre," which are fundamentally European. The property man in *The Yellow Jacket* and its different stage versions by European and American avant-garde directors was displaced and re-placed as an over-accentuated anti-illusionistic theatrical device. In Barba's idea of "Eurasian Theatre" or in his construct of the idea of "pre-expressivity," ideas, principles and techniques of various Asian theatres were eclectically displaced out of their aesthetic and artistic contexts and were re-placed in conformity with Barba's anthropological vision of the universal and the essential underlying different theatrical forces. Theatrical interculturalisation is not an organic fusion or integration, but rather a clash and displacement, of different theatrical forces.

Likewise, modern and contemporary Chinese theatre displaced Western realism and avant-garde in the service of its aesthetic and artistic necessities of self-invention and self-re-placement in its negotiation with its own tradition. The New Youth of the May Fourth Movement displaced Western realism as represented by Ibsen in their displacement of China's indigenous theatre; in its re-placement of the indigenous theatre, the National Theatre Movement displaced Western avant-garde theatre. In contemporary Chinese theatre, the displacements of Stanislavsky, Brecht, and Meyerhold involve a re-placement of the Self (traditional Chinese theatre). Such displacements are not a one-way affair starting from the Other (as the source) to the Self (as the target) or from the Self (as the source) to the Other (as the target), but are often an inter-displacement of both the Other and the Self, as exemplified in those adaptations of Shakespeare and Greek tragedy in traditional Chinese and other Asian theatrical forms.

Cultural and Ideological Displacement

Intercultural theatre is not a purely aesthetic and artistic meeting of different theatrical forces; nor is it a purely professional exchange between individual artists, as Barba would like it to be. Theatre is essentially a social, communal, and cultural event. Any theatre aesthetic, whether it concerns a time-honoured tradition or is representative of the vision of an individual artist, is influenced and conditioned by the cultural givens of a society. Even representations of the bodies of individual artists, physical or biological, are informed and imprinted by the specificities of the cultural and