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# PERFORMING HYBRIDITY IN COLONIAL-MODERN CHINA

*Siyuan Liu*

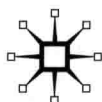


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*Siyuan Liu*



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*For Guoping and Patrick*

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# Note on Translation and Names ∞

Unless otherwise noted, all translations to English are mine.

Chinese and Japanese names follow their native convention, with family name first, followed by given name. The only exception is when a person has customarily chosen to use given name first, followed by family name.

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# Introduction: Modernity, Interculturalism, and Hybridity ∞

*Terms of cultural engagement, whether antagonistic or affiliative, are produced performatively. The representation of difference must not be hastily read as the reflection of pre-given ethnic or cultural traits set in the fixed tablet of tradition. The social articulation of difference, from the minority perspective, is a complex, on-going negotiation that seeks to authorize cultural hybridities that emerge in moments of historical transformation.*

—Homi K. Bhabha<sup>1</sup>

*Put simply, intercultural theatre is a hybrid derived from an intentional encounter between cultures and performing traditions.*

—Jacqueline Lo and Helen Gilbert<sup>2</sup>

In the first two decades of the twentieth century, in semicolonial Shanghai, emerged a hybrid theatrical form that was based on Western spoken theatre, classical Chinese theatre, and a Japanese hybrid form of kabuki and Western-style spoken theatre called *shinpa* (new school drama). Known as *wenmingxi* (civilized drama), this form has, until recently, largely been ignored by scholars in China and the West as it does not fit into the current binary “traditional / modern” model in non-Western theatre and performance studies.

Under this binary schema, “traditional” is a grab-bag term of all indigeneous performance genres while “modern” means exclusively spoken theatre since the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that adopt modern Euro-American dramaturgical (since Ibsen), performance (since Stanislavski), and production (since Duke Saxe-Meiningen) principles. However, this dichotomy is porous at best. To start with, what is considered traditional performance has often been active long past the onset of

modernity and the decisions to turn these active theatrical forms into icons of traditional and/or “national” theatres were often ideological responses to the indigenous countries’ modernity projects, as Joshua Weinstein has demonstrated in the case of *jingju* (Beijing opera) during the 1920s–1930s when it was turned into “national theatre,” or as James Brandon has argued concerning kabuki during WWII when it was an active cheerleader of the empire’s war efforts and in its immediate aftermath when the Shochiko company made a conscientious decision to claim kabuki’s museum identity to resist democratic reform pressures from the U.S. occupation authorities.<sup>3</sup>

Similarly, while most non-Western modern theatres did indeed result from the indigenous countries’ interaction with Euro-American powers, often as a result or in the shadow of global colonialism, these speech-based theatres frequently exhibit uniquely hybrid features reflective of indigenous performance even though they are often assumed to be based on the same modern dramaturgical, performance, and production principles. As Craig Latrell reported in the case of an Indonesian production of Arthur Miller’s *The Crucible* by a leading Jakarta company, the “acting departs so radically from what we recognize as realism as to constitute an entirely new genre, raising the possibility that each society deems for itself what can pass as realistic, depending on such things as societal attitudes toward emotion and pre-existing performance styles,” leading him to conclude that “the whole apparatus of realistic acting has been subtly transformed into something distinctly Indonesian.”<sup>4</sup> Similarly, as Miller himself discovered to his amazement while directing *Death of A Salesman* in Beijing in 1979, the Chinese spoken theatre form *huaju* (spoken drama) differed—from acting to design—from his experience with American companies, a difference he sought to compensate by asking his actors to speed up their delivery and by repeatedly turning down designs of prosthetic noses and flamboyant wigs aimed at making the Chinese actors look American.<sup>5</sup> While the Indonesian and Chinese actors had undergone training in Stanislavski and modern canons, Latrell’s and Miller’s experiences underscore the fact that even after a century of attempted integration, modern theatres in non-Western nations today are themselves hybrid theatres, a fact that is often ignored in contemporary studies of these forms.

Furthermore, the neglect of the hybrid nature of these non-Western modern theatres has left no room for their even less “pure” beginnings, as evidenced by the current practice that defines modern drama in Japan and China as socially conscious, speech-centric, and commercially untainted realistic plays, as opposed to a melodramatic and performance-based dramaturgy that also includes singing, dance, and female impersonation,

which happen to be the hallmarks of shinpa and wenmingxi. In the current paradigm, such dramaturgical and performance hybridity can in no way be considered as modern.

As Thomas Postlewait pointed out in relation to theatre history periodization, the idea of a unified period remains “our way of organizing history” where each era is “seen as an arrangement of power, formulated as a Zeitgeist, a reigning idea, an ideological construct, a dominate discourse, or a discursive formation. Whatever the approach, the age is given a stable, singular identity . . . Each concept then provides a way to fix in place what in fact is always changing, diverse, and complex.”<sup>6</sup> This observation explains why modern Japanese theatre is commonly believed to have started in 1909 with the production of Ibsen’s *John Gabriel Borkman* by the director Osanai Kaoru (1881–1928) in a little theatre called Free Theatre (Jiyō Gekijō), despite two decades of prior shinpa performance. After all, it was the work of a modern European master, directed by a literary director who was disillusioned by shinpa’s cavalier attitude toward European masterpieces, asked his kabuki actors to “become amateurs,” and staged it in a small venue literally modeled after André Antoine’s Théâtre Libre. Compared to this realistic dramaturgy, foreignizing translation, convention-free performance, and noncommercial pursuit for the sake of art and social involvement, shinpa’s melodramatic dramaturgy, domesticating translation, stylized performance, and commercial system were obviously incompatible with the modern zeitgeist. Similarly, the choice of Hu Shi’s one-act *The Main Event in Life* (*Zhongshen dashi*, 1919) as the beginning of modern Chinese theatre is largely based on its Nora-like ending in which a young woman leaves her parents, who prefer an arranged marriage, to join her true love. While several recent studies published in English have shed new light on shinpa’s literary, theatrical, as well as nationalistic roles in Meiji Japan’s modernization project,<sup>7</sup> China’s wenmingxi remains in a theoretical limbo in search of a paradigm that defines its place in modern Chinese theatre. While the 1907 production of *Black Slave’s Cry to Heaven* (*Heinu yutian lu*, an adaptation of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*) in Tokyo by a group of Chinese students called the Spring Willow Society (Chunliu She) has been credited as the beginning of modern Chinese theatre, the ideologically and theatrically hybrid decade that followed the production has continued to be seen as a failed experiment in modern theatre that is separate from huaju, a name that denotes the spoken theatre since the 1920s and is exclusively synonymous with modern Chinese theatre.

If the hybrid genres are a blind spot in the traditional/modern binary model of studying non-Western theatres, they are similarly excluded from the more recent models of theatrical interculturalism. In the 1990s and



2000s, several models of interculturalism attempted to theorize the rise of intercultural theatre, most notably Patrice Pavis's hourglass model that considers the broad process of intercultural exchange from a source culture to a target in 11 stages, Marvin Carlson's seven-step model of the possible gradations of interculturalism in a performance between the culturally familiar and culturally foreign, Anthony Tatlow's "intercultural sign" that focuses on the aesthetics of intercultural theatre, and Jacqueline Lo and Helen Gilbert's postcolonial representation of intercultural exchange as a two-way flow.<sup>8</sup> While some of these models are more popular than others,<sup>9</sup> almost all of them draw their inspiration from the flood of intercultural productions in the euphoric postmodern, postcolonial 1980s and 1990s with little regard to intercultural transactions of previous eras.<sup>10</sup> In addition, all these models view interculturalism as an exchange between two theatrical cultures, invariably termed as source versus target (Pavis), the culturally familiar versus the culturally foreign (Carlson), the culturally domestic versus the culturally other (Tatlow), or two more or less equal parts of two cultures (Lo and Gilbert). This tight range cannot account for more complicated situations of intercultural transfers such as *wenmingxi*, which hybridized literary and performance elements from Euro-American spoken theatre, Chinese theatre, and *shinpa* (both as a conduit of European theatre and as a hybrid of Western theatre and *kabuki*). In other words, all intercultural theatre models fail to explain the case of *wenmingxi* because of its multiple source cultures and the way *shinpa* acted as a medium for the transmission of European theatre to *wenmingxi*, a third component between source and target cultures.

If literary-focused model of theatre study and interculturalism have both failed to account for *wenmingxi*'s hybrid sources and identities, how about the concept of hybridity as used in postcolonial studies? Here, *wenmingxi*'s role may still not find a completely satisfactory explanation since the postcolonial usage of hybridity is either focused on its subversive power of resistance, as adopted by Homi K. Bhabha, or as a celebration of contemporary transcultural artistic fusion. However, a component-based theory of hybridity could very well provide a way toward understanding *wenmingxi* and, more broadly, other hybrid non-Western theatres that do not fit comfortably in the traditional/modern binary schema. Let me explain.

Due to China's historical status as one of semicolonial nations—as opposed to colonized non-Western nations such as India—in the age of global colonialism,<sup>11</sup> much of the postcolonial insight into hybridity, in particular Bhabha's writings, will need to be refracted through the theoretical framework of colonial modernity, which is designed for semicolonial nations such as China. For example, Bhabha's location of resistance by the

colonized in their doubletalk of mimicry and mockery is inevitably couched in the Indian experience of colonialism,<sup>12</sup> which was quite different from China's experience, as China was never fully colonized by Western powers except in concession areas in port cities and its only foreign occupation (for eight years) was by an Asian neighbor (Japan) with similar cultural and ethical (Confucian) traditions. Therefore, although Bhabha's insight of the interstitial spaces is definitely important to our understanding of hybridity, his arguments and sources are inevitably derived from the metropole/colony binary as well as the space in-between these two poles. In "Sly Civility," for example, he finds evidence of a tertiary system above the "second nature" of Western civility, "a map of misreading that embarrasses the righteousness of recordation and its certainty of good government. It opens up a space of interpretation and misappropriation that inscribes an ambivalence at the very origins of colonial authority, indeed, within the originary documents of British colonial history itself."<sup>13</sup>

While this ambivalence in the "third space" does represent a potentially effective way out of the Manichean binary discourse of the traditional and the modern, Bhabha's, and for that matter, postcolonialism's starting point of the power relations between the colonizer and colonized needs to be broadened by East Asia's (and other never-colonized, non-Western nations') experience of colonial modernity where the proponents of modernity were part of the nations' elite class who either wielded considerable clout over their governments' pursuit of modernity, as in the case of Japan and Siam,<sup>14</sup> or through a combination of political maneuver within the government and public pressure from without, as in the case of China. This is why my use of the term hybridity is qualified by the theoretical frame of colonial modernity developed by a group of postcolonial scholars familiar with the East Asian situation. Focusing on the effect of the global colonialism, colonial modernity "highlights how the context of colonial domination compelled the reorganization of institutions, technologies, and practices so as to address and negotiate its threat."<sup>15</sup> As such, colonial modernity bridges the gap between postcolonialism and its applicability to countries such as China. As Tani Barlow argues, what colonial modernity recognizes is that modernization and colonialism must be understood as an integrally connected process involving, "discursive powers that increasingly connect at key points to the globalizing impulses of capitalism":<sup>16</sup>

Because it is a way of posing a historical question about how our mutual present came to take its apparent shape, colonial modernity can also suggest that historical context is not a matter of positively defined, elemental, or discrete