

Intercultural and cross-cultural encounters during the quatercentenary of Tang Xianzu  
and Shakespeare

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*Many productions were staged to celebrate the 2016 quatercentenary of Tang Xianzu and Shakespeare's death. Shakespeare-Tang Project celebrated both playwrights through the production of Midsummer Night's DREAMING Under the Southern Bough (Zhongxiaye Mengnanke), staged both in UK and in China. As part of a separate festival taking place in China, Shakespeare Lives, Britain's Gecko and the Shanghai Drama Art Center worked on a production that combines Shakespeare's A Midsummer Night's Dream with Tang's The Peony Pavilion. Do these international festivals cement an already well-established imaginary of a transnational global Shakespeare and his theatre in both China and UK? By investigating the reception of these productions, this article argues that Chinese theatre undergoes a process of "othering" and "self-orientalization" and there are hidden political agendas at play.*

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Part of 2016 quatercentenary of Tang Xianzu and Shakespeare, the Shakespeare-Tang Project in Leeds celebrated both playwrights through a series of talks, workshops, and performances from March 2016 to September 2016. The highlight of this project was *A Midsummer Night's DREAMING Under the Southern Bough (Zhongxiaye Mengnanke)*, which saw students from Leeds and Beijing respectively working on *DREAMING Under the Southern Bough* and *A Midsummer Night's DREAMING* – these were performed in the summer at the University of Leeds Intercultural Theatre Festival, at Edinburgh Festival Fringe and in September in China. The exchange with Chinese partners and parallel events taking place in China are intercultural and cross-cultural in both intent and execution. A separate festival taking place in China, *Shakespeare Lives* comprised a series of cultural and educational activities, organized by the British Council in China. This festival saw *Henry IV* and *Henry V* touring in Beijing, Shanghai, and Hong Kong from February to April, together with mid-June Shakespeare film season taking place in Shanghai. Like

the Leeds main show, with a similar intercultural and cross-cultural intent, Britain's Gecko and the Shanghai Drama Art Center worked on a production that combines Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* with Tang's *The Peony Pavilion*.

Considering the terms cross-cultural and intercultural, the question to be asked is on whether these festivals, especially their main cross-cultural performative events have succeeded in bringing attention to the valence of a comparison between these two playwrights, while strengthening cultural links between China and Britain. On the contrary, it could be argued that these festivals are, instead, favouring and cementing an already well-established imaginary of a transnational global Shakespeare and his theatre in both China and UK. Taking into account recent initiatives, such as the “World Shakespeare Festival” in 2012 as part of “Cultural Olympiad,” and the “Globe to Globe” that have seen British productions touring China and Chinese productions of Shakespeare’s plays touring UK, this paper addresses concerns about the comparison and the connection between these two playwrights as underlying principles and motivation behind the collaboration between these countries. In particular, it questions whether these might lead Chinese theatre to undergo a process of “othering” and “self-orientalization<sup>1</sup>” or to a process of global soft power being negotiated and promoted through the arts and theatre, what Alexa Alice Joubin implies in her definition of “Boomerang Shakespeare,” a twentieth-century British phenomenon that has been “fuelled simultaneously by globalized economic and cultural developments.”<sup>2</sup> The idea of “Boomerang Shakespeare” in defining an afterlife for postcolonial Shakespeare highlights the not so-hidden agenda of festivals and theatrical events connected to Shakespeare, that of soft power being negotiated and promoted globally through the arts and theatre. With the Tang-Shakespeare commemorative events, this phenomenon is not a one-way stream, of British culture

being promoted abroad, but implies also a Chinese response, promoting its culture and exporting its soft power globally. In this regard, the idea of a Boomerang Shakespeare and soft power mechanism change the terms and conditions of intercultural and cross-cultural theatre, reduced to a pretext for the promotion of cultural exchange and soft power.

An assessment of *Shakespeare-Tang Project* and *Shakespeare Lives* will focus on *A Midsummer Night's DREAMING Under the Southern Bough* by Gecko and the Shanghai Drama Art Center's *The Dreamer*, looking, in particular, at their reception, artistic intent and how they have succeeded or failed as “cross-cultural” and “intercultural” performative events in their attempt to celebrate Tang and Shakespeare equally. This will generate a discussion on unspoken assumptions about world theatre at work in festivals celebrating quatercentenary of Tang Xianzu and Shakespeare, and by and large in intercultural and cross-cultural festivals. As far as the term “intercultural theatre” is concerned, I will refer to Patrice Pavis’ original definition as a form of hybridization of theatrical forms where “the original forms can no longer be distinguished” (Pavis 1996:8); the term cross-cultural theatre, instead, encompasses “public performance practices characterized by the conjunction of specific cultural resources at the level of narrative content, performance aesthetics, production processes, and/or reception by an interpretive community” (1996: 31).

### ***Shakespeare-Tang Project***

Starting with the *Shakespeare-Tang Project* in Leeds, it is important to note that this was part of a much larger project “Staging China,” an international practice-led research network with its hub in Leeds bringing together academics, research students and theatre practitioners to reinvigorate Chinese theatre as a practice-

led/cross-disciplinary subject (<http://www.stagingchina.leeds.ac.uk/>). The *Shakespeare-Tang Project* comprised of a series of talks, stage-readings from 2015 culminating with *Midsummer Night's DREAMING Under the Southern Bough*. The latter saw two theatre companies, one in China and one in UK working simultaneously on William Shakespeare and Tang Xianzu's works. The creative team at the University of International Business and Economics in Beijing, *ST@UIBE* worked on a piece inspired by the mechanicals and fairies from Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The students and staff at the University of Leeds with *stage@leedscompany* worked on a contemporary response to Tang Xianzu's *A Dream under the Southern Bough*. Both companies exploited the overarching motif of the "dream." However, even though the project was presented as a complete whole, "only to be fully appreciated when viewed as a single piece of theatre"<sup>3</sup> each story was performed in two separate slots, back to back, at the 2016 Edinburgh Fringe, *A Midsummer Night's DREAMING* at 10 a.m. and *DREAMING Under The Southern Bough* at 10:55am.<sup>4</sup> The same double-bill format has been used also in the Chinese tour of these productions in Shanghai, Beijing and Fuzhou (Tang Xianzu's hometown) in September of the same year.

Both shows are re-interpretations of the two playwrights' work adapted for a contemporary set. *DREAMING Under the Southern Bough* follows the story of one man's search for enlightenment in the kingdom of the ants. Charles "Chunny" Fen, an ex-soldier unsure about his future and haunted by the memories of his past ends up on an isolated island, with his two closest friends. He embarks on a surreal journey that will change his life. In this regard, it is worth mentioning that Ansell opted for adopting some elements of Chinese culture and theatre within the context a production that uses mainly spoken drama: a crowd of what looks like Buddhist

monks chanting at the beginning of the production, the intermission of Chinese traditional music, the use of masked characters (they use Chinese *xiqu* masks), representing Chunyu Fen's rivals, and some stylised embodied movements. These rare moments of Chineseness are implanted in a production that also uses medievaesque western costumes, Irish songs and Western opera. *A Midsummer Night's DREAMING* presents a group of mis-matched suitors that examine love, gender politics and the changing role of women in contemporary Chinese society. They opted for a modern and rather Westernised take on Shakespeare with some rapping and popular music.

Speaking to Steve Ansell,<sup>5</sup> artistic director of stage@leedscompany and director of the Leeds show, it was revealed that a mash-up of the two shows was made impossible not only by the difficulties in rehearsing with two companies based in two separate countries but also by differences between the two plays. Ansell who has genuine interest in propagating Chinese theatre to the West has met scepticism towards Tang's classic both in UK and China. At the Edinburgh Fringe his adaptation has received lukewarm reviews while showing more enthusiasm for the Chinese Shakespeare. The *Scotsman* review highlights the ineffectiveness of the modern framing, the story of the soldier's story, which seemingly could have added a political dimension to the piece with its resonance of present-day war zone conflicts: "While the modern framing device is soon forgotten, scenes of political intrigue do little other than give a talented young cast the opportunity to mouth swathes of exposition without ever providing an engaging narrative" (Ford 2016). Another review condemns the modernization of the language:

Of more concern is the modernisation of the language, which turns the potentially potent Chinese into a bland soup of fantasy tropes. There's

courting, there's war, and nothing's very special about it. There are poetic insights, but they don't cohere with the more pedestrian dialogue. Blanketing all this is Southern Bough's least inventive facet: its direction. Primarily "enter, walk to spot and speak dialogue," it's upsettingly static for a play about warring ant colonies (Simmonds, 2016)

The tone of the reviews, mostly in the two stars-category (five stars being the highest scoring), highlights a lack of narrative cohesion, the failure to modernise the piece by adding clear references to present-day war conflicts. Most importantly, conforming to the Western expectation of seeing an Orientalist imagination represented on stage, the second review criticizes that the language used in this production was a much more diluted version of what was expected a more lyric and "potent" Chinese play.

The reviews of the Chinese show were more positive and are in the three-star category. One review appreciates the supposedly Chinese elements of the production and celebrates its entertainment value:

The comedy of the original is very much in evidence in this adaptation, and fights, characters and the script are all aptly grounded in Shakespeare's play—with some of his language also employed—showing the strength of the creators and director of the piece. Three poles with stiffened flags, associated with the elemental Spirits, are the only set and move easily to create different parts of the hotel, while costume reflects contemporary as well as traditional China. There is a great deal of fun in this production, which lightly looks at gender politics as well as love, and traditional Chinese theatre techniques mix beautifully with modern ideas, bringing a flavour of nature to this hotel well in

keeping with Shakespeare's original woodland setting. Fine entertainment!

(Farrow 2016)

Another review, again, praises the Chinese insights into this Shakespeare's classics:

"Though still maintaining an amount of student-level execution, the insight these Chinese young people provide through their script is provocative, relevant and culturally eye-opening" (Kressly & Guest Writers , 2016). The above reviews reveal a paradox. First of all, the Chinese troupe performed in English. Secondly, in the Chinese production, the Chinese elements in the production are far and between if not at all present—possibly the reviewers saw elements of Chinese culture in some of the female characters holding fans and even in the use of poles with stiffened flags.

Thirdly and most importantly, Western elements seemed to have been favoured: as said above, the rare moments of singing cannot but be recognised as western musical tunes and rapping is even used in place of poetic expositions. The reviewers' response can be seen as a case of misreading cultural representation and a form of orientalisising cultural outputs, prompted by the fact that they only considered the origin of this production and not its actual execution. The supposedly recognizable Chinese flair seemed to be recognizable enough to fulfill the expectations—that this was indeed a Chinese production—thus making the reviewers less critical.

In China, there was a more sober sentiment towards the two productions. However, as shown by an online article featuring on the two productions as staged in Beijing, more praise seems to be given, again, to the Shakespeare's adaptation. At first, the choice of a lesser known Tang's classic, the *Southern Bough* is questioned, secondly the stylistic adaptation, the abandonment of Kunqu opera is not totally welcome: "Kunqu opera cannot be easily changed, even if the adaptation is usually accompanied by the 'repair old as the old' principle, but since huaju is used mainly, we are invited through

adaptation, to see "Kunqu opera" from a different perspective" (Xinhua News Agency 2016). As mentioned above, Ansell adds snapshots of an orientalisng spectacle within a rather Western iconography (the medieval costumes and the Irish songs) that does not convince either the Chinese or Western audiences.

More positive and enthusiasm, again, is shown towards the Chinese production: "It showed the Chinese young people in the pursuit of love and self-choice and hope. Edinburgh Fringe comment: 'This is a group of talented young actors for the *Midsummer Night's Dream* wonderful adaptation'" (Xinhua News Agency 2016).

The praise here is less to do with the final product but comes from the pride the Chinese take in having Chinese talent being shown abroad. Again similarly to the British reviewees, the emphasis is what this production represents and less what it does. In both cases, it is Chineseness that triumphs over all: first, the supposedly misunderstood Chinese flair expressed by the British press; and second, the pride of Chinese press of being able to showcase their talent abroad.

In assessing the success of these two productions, another element to be considered is, however, the disproportionate stature of Tang Xiangzu versus Shakespeare. Ansell explains that in UK the fact that Tang's work is not very well known made it difficult for audiences to appreciate his adaptation. Moreover, he was surprised that in China while there was an interest in his own work as a theatre-maker coming from Britain, Tang's work is not popular among theatregoers and Chinese theatre-makers alike. In this regard, Li Ruru, eminent Chinese theatre scholar from University of Leeds and one of the initiators of *Staging China*, admits in an interview that Tang is not that popular in China, thus a popular response to the British adaptation was not expected: "Li Ruru admits: 'In fact, many Chinese people do not know Tang Xianzu. We must have cultural self-confidence, but we cannot understand



our own culture.” She believes that this show is also an opportunity for the Chinese audience to rethink how to look at their own culture” (Xinhua News Agency 2016). Shakespeare is by far more part of the popular imaginary than Tang has ever been. In this regard, one cannot fully evaluate Ansell’s comments but one should question whether an adaptation and transformation of a Chinese classic by a non-Chinese company has added cultural layers that has made the supposedly familiar more unfamiliar. In the case of UK response, due to the little knowledge of Tang’s work, Ansell’s work of adaptation, opting for spoken drama and some elements of Chinese theatre, has also done very little to bridge cultural gaps by presenting the unfamiliar as a supposedly contemporary Western version of itself, confused among elements of the “other” culture that have little effect on both British and Chinese audiences. It is the “other” emptied of specific cultural references that remain the “other” in the attempt to make it more familiar and recognizable to Western contemporary audiences, while also promoting Britishness in China.

Both companies, to some extent, have used the strategy that Joubin calls of localization, where the plot and setting of a play, is assimilated into local performance genres (Joubin et al 2016: 514). This is used in different ways and, as we have seen thus far, producing opposite results. Most importantly when we talk about local performance genres, in contrast with Joubin, I am not talking about genres related to the country of origin of its makers but the genres related to the expected country of reception, which in this case do not always correspond to one another. The Chinese production opted for what they thought to be a good modern version of the Shakespeare’s play that would be appreciated in the West and would be representative of the international breath of their work once back in China. In this regard, one could argue that Shakespeare is re-localized into his own original culture, yet through a

process of adaptation and defamiliarization, which makes his work less recognizable as original and one that can generate misreadings of cultural representations. As mentioned above, elements of the culture of the “other” are found even where there are hardly any and re-coded as being representative of the exotic other. Among cultural assumptions, seemingly in a process of spectralization, these cultural elements are like ghosts presumed to be there, even these can be really seen.

The British production opted for an adaptation that could “localize” Tang’s work by, at the same time, introducing an unknown literary figure to British audiences and reviving it for Chinese audiences. While using more consciously cultural topoi from Tang’s source culture, one can talk about a form of localization, which was trying to please both British and Chinese audiences. The result, however, could be considered as a form of parody, what Joubin calls “dramaturgical collage” (Ibid). By dramaturgical collage, Joubin is talking about parody of Shakespeare’s work that has “become so familiar to the “cross-border” audiences that the plays can be used as a platform of artistic exploration of new genre” (Ibid),), which is not exactly the case of this production. I refer here, more specifically, to the accidental usage of cultural elements of the original source culture (from where the work originates) interwoven with elements of local culture (of those making the work and those receiving the work in the first instance). It is not only the accidental nature of this approach that makes the cultural output, at once ineffective and parodic, but it is also the unfamiliarity of the work itself, the source material of the adaptation, in this case Tang Xianzu’s theatre, that confuses, bedazzles, and undermines the cultural effort to bridge between traditions. In this case, one can talk of a failed parody whose terms of references are lost and remain uncovered thanks to the audience’s lack of familiarity with the source material from which they originate.

In both productions, there is misunderstanding of intentions where localization fails because it is a form of localization that feeds audience's expectations, whose multilocality makes it difficult to assess the point of origin and reception. If we consider especially Ansell's production as being intercultural in its intent, this failure passes a judgment on a form of intercultural theatre that considers creation and reception as monolithic entities and cannot see the complexity of agencies at play, such as audience's multilocality, cultural misreadings, etc.

Moreover, if we consider this production as cross-cultural in its intent to combine the work of Tang and Shakespeare, in fusing "specific cultural resources at the level of narrative content, performance aesthetics, production processes, and/or reception by an interpretive community" (Lo and Gilbert 2002: 31), the project has failed from the outset. We cannot talk of one interpretive community, as the project toured two different countries. Mentioning practical difficulties in arranging combined rehearsals and also problems in finding a common thread between the narratives of the two works, the Beijing and Leeds adaptations have remained two separate productions that require audiences to make own narrative links to find a real connection. Besides problems in realizing the full intent of this project, one could argue that the Beijing Chinese Shakespeare adaptation by a Chinese company has operated within patterns and parameters set up by other events such as the "World Shakespeare Festival" in 2012 as part of "Cultural Olympiad" that have seen Shakespeare's work interpreted by non-British companies and a long history of Shakespeare's plays being played globally. Joubin talks about the global statue of Shakespeare's work, "his canonicity, connection to Englishness, and a history of worldwide performance that is longer and richer than that of any other dramatist"(Joubin 2016:1094). I would concur with Joubin when she argues that Shakespeare has been part of Chinese modernity:<sup>6</sup> "The

uses of Shakespeare' plays in spoken drama and Chinese opera are informed by a paradigm shift from seeking authenticity to foregrounding artistic subjectivity. Shakespearean themes and characterization have enriched, challenged and changed Chinese language theatres and genres" (Joubin et al 2016: 514). Ansell's production operates outside this context, and Tang being by far less known than Shakespeare and lacking the global standing has not helped his cause.

Finally, there are inherent contradictions in both intent and execution as both productions adapt Shakespeare and Tang's work. On one hand, both show the intent to modernize old classics through a process of adaptation. On the other hand, the reception of both productions recognised forms of theatre that crystallise both Western and Chinese theatre to two separate recognizable "others," constructs that have not moved over time and that fulfil the expectations of cultural tourism, what Joubin calls "the circuits of global politics and tourism in late capitalist societies" (Joubin 2016: 1095). As explained above, while this works better for the Chinese production, this does not work as well for the British production. When Li Ruru says that Ansell's production "is a very pure, a Western perspective interpretation of Chinese classical literature, in an attempt to understand Chinese culture" and they resorted to Irish songs and Western opera to highlight the Britishness of the adaptation (Xinhua News Agency 2016), there are several contradictions at play. First of all, her statement marginalizes the Chinese topoi present in the production to a secondary position versus a superior Western perspective. Second, she has forgotten the context in which these productions were conceived, which is the *Staging China* project, whose aim is "to reinvigorate Chinese theatre as a practice-led/cross-disciplinary subject" (Ibid). Third, via a strategy of localization, understanding another culture through pure de-contextualisation is forcing familiarization on artistic

work that is not familiar at all to its audiences. While, again, there is a strong history of Shakespeare being adapted in China and globally, the same cannot be said about Tang, foreign to both Western and Chinese audiences. In this regard, the work of Tang, in particular, is both de-contextualized from its historical origins in form of contemporary setting and re-contextualized in a crystalized imaginary that has not fully been formed. Moreover as the Chinese press recognizes, the passage from China to West cannot be totally fulfilled: “The drama structure of “Southern Bough” is contrary to ancient Greek drama tradition. To a certain extent, the logic of this drama implies the aesthetic of oriental classical literature”

(<http://www.stagingchina.leeds.ac.uk/about/>).

I would argue that Chinese or not, Ansell’s *Southern Bough* produces a pseudo cross-cultural experience, placing Tang’s play within a Western context, that reveals what is defined as the “gap between knowledge of a culture and ignorance of another” which over time had, instead, been “a site for productive reading of both Shakespeare and contemporary cultures” ( Joubin 2016: 1099).

Going back to the central concern of this paper on whether these two performative events have succeeded in bringing attention to the valence of a comparison between Shakespeare and Tang Xianzu, the positive response to the Beijing production and the less positive response of the Leeds production in both UK and China show this project has favoured and cemented an already well-established imaginary of a transnational global Shakespeare and his theatre in both China and UK. As explained above, this is not only due to the fact that Tang is less well known than Shakespeare in both China and UK. This is also due to the fact that the use of cultural topoi, especially in the Leeds production, which can be described as part of a process of localization, has further de-familiarised Tang’s work both in China and

UK. Tang has not only been self-orientalised but also “othered” in the process of fusing different cultural sources. On a more positive note, in response to Joubin’s idea of Boomerang Shakespeare, and the possible hidden cultural and political agendas of such projects, envisaged as part of a larger academic project aimed at reinvigorating “Chinese theatre as a practice-led/cross-disciplinary subject”,<sup>7</sup> (<http://www.stagingchina.leeds.ac.uk/about/>), one can argue that this project has been conceived as a genuine passion to promote Chinese theatre in its richness and complexities. However, reliant on academic funding and the support of institutions with strong political links, such as the Confucius institute, is not totally immune to cultural and political agendas of using the arts and theatre as a form of promotion of soft power. Paradoxically, the project has failed in its original intent as it has again confirmed Shakespeare as a transnational export rather than creating a cross-cultural encounter and promoting Chinese theatre.

### ***2016 Shakespeare Lives***

Moving now to *the 2016 Shakespeare Lives*,<sup>8</sup> a worldwide initiative launched by the British Council, rather more overt cultural and political agendas are at play in this particular festival. These underpin the production of *The Dreamer* by Gecko, which was part of this festival. The physical theatre company based in Essex, Great Britain was commissioned to create a new piece in collaboration with Shanghai Dramatic Arts Center that combined Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* with Tang Xianzu’s *Peony Pavillion*. Staged Oct 7-23 at Shanghai Dramatic Art Center, *The Dreamer* was directed by Rich Rusk, Gecko’s long-standing associate director and choreographed by Chris Evans from Gecko Theatre but all the performers were from the Shanghai Drama Arts Center. Opting for a creation that was

not merely a mash-up, Rusk created a new story, that of Helena (in the Shakespeare's play she is one of the four young lovers but not the real protagonist), a 30-year-old contemporary single woman escaping parental pressure, in love with her co-worker who, however, prefers her best friend. Failing in her love ambition, similarly to Du Liniang in *Peony Pavillion*, Helena finally finds love in a dream, but unlike Du Liniang, her love-story can only be lived in the dream. In the helpless effort to keep her love/illusion alive, she falls victim to her subconscious. She lives her illusions, terrifying nightmares and splendid memories also populated by the dream appearances of Du Liniang, who fights for her love in *The Peony Pavilion*. The result is a visual spectacle of episodic snapshots, echoing both Shakespeare and Tang's work, all tied together by the narrative of the dream, which is the added third narrative element, the story of Helena. All is performed physically with very little spoken language being used, switching between the reality (Helena working in an office, for instance) [Figure 1] and the dreaming (Helena inhabiting surreal dimensions and meeting several characters in her path) [Figure 2].

The director Rusk talks about the overlap between dream and reality and moral behind this creation: "Her dream world and real world start to overlap, and her daily routine, friendships and family life start to fracture and blur [...] It's about taking control of your life in a world that pulls you in different directions. [...] The only person who can make Helena happy is Helena" (Peleggrini 2016). Unlike Tang's play, it is not love that triumphs over death. Concurring with the comedic tone of the two plays, the story has a happy ending with Helena finding spiritual guidance and a renewed sense of fulfillment in her re-discovered self-assurance. According to the director, the inspiration for this new creation was the dream scene in *The Peony Pavilion*, where the lady falls asleep to meet her loved one, making the obvious

connection between the Shakespeare and Tang's work in the dream motif: "One minute, she'd be in the office and then the next scene, she will fall into the sea. It's like when you have a dream, but nothing that happened remains in her memory when she wakes up. We'll have many things happening simultaneously to have the audience fully focused and engaged."<sup>9</sup> Zhao Yanxiang from Shanghai Drama Arts Center concurs with Rusk, saying that "In dreams, the brain edits various materials of the real world with a mysterious logic. It is a kind of creation driven by subconsciousness," (Zhang 2016). Testament to their tradition, with very few lines Gecko have created a visual experience that exploits the dream motif: "Audiences may find odd scenes like floating bed, cracking floor, stream in the bedrooms and storm in the bar as illogical, just as they would have themselves dreamt" (Ibid). In China, the work has been defined "a fluid, cross-cultural fantasy making" (Pellegrini, 2016), praising the non-textual imprint of this production.

However, one of the reviews reveals that despite the non-textual nature of their work, Gecko creation did not totally overcome problems with accessibility and linguistic differences: "'The Dreamer' is a physical play with very limited character lines, which makes it accessible to all audiences. [however] it is even difficult for some Chinese audiences to identify the limited lines as many of them are intentionally delivered as sleep-talking with vague pronunciation" (Zhang 2016). This is not the first work that Gecko has brought to China. *Missing* toured China in early 2016 (Zha 2016), which is possibly one of the reasons why they have been invited to collaborate. And the physical nature of their work is another reason. This is, however, their first collaboration with a Chinese partner.

The Chinese press has been keen to stress how Rusk "takes great care to note that The Dreamer is not a Gecko-leading play, but a work that's 'made by locals and



for locals.’’ (Ibid.) Not only all the performers were Chinese but also most of the creative team. Most of Gecko’s work is mainly devised and requires the collaboration of all the members involved in a system that attempts to avoid a hierarchal structure and single authorship. This would justify the sense that their production was made by locals, for locals.

However, among the challenges in the collaboration Rusk mentions how the process in China did not always translate into a shared experience of the work:

Our team is very used to working together, collaboratively through a very organic openly artistic way. I think the Chinese chain of “command” is much more formal, the directors are not used to being challenged by the performers or indeed led by them—we thrive on challenge and encourage our performers to take ownership of their work. We broke the boundaries down and made sure our rehearsal room was a place of equal expression as it is in the UK. It’s the only way we know how to work and I think this method was a pleasant, liberating surprise for their team.<sup>10</sup>

Differences in work ethics reflect differences in cultural and social structures, which still reproduce an order of command. This could have led to a truly local production infused by local aspirations and a possibly genuine collaboration between practitioners coming from two different cultures. This could have been a sort of homecoming for both Shakespeare, who is part of the Chinese cultural imaginary, and Tang, as a local traditional author. Whether true collaboration between artists involved was achieved in the end is difficult to gauge, especially as the final product has a strong Gecko stamp in execution. The tone of the local press emphasizing the

intense physical training that the performers had to endure does not really point out to a total liberating artistic regime, but one that has its rules and expectations.

Moreover, if we talk about artistic freedom, once again we should consider the context in which the work was conceived. In the words of the British director, this production and the process leading to it aimed to create a free and liberating space for both British and Chinese teams to create together. However, the structures in which they operated, the organization, were part of a political mechanism that has exploited the incidental contemporary death of these two playwrights. Other events in China have been arranged under the pretext of cross-cultural communication: the National Centre for the Performing Arts festival entitled “Drama Legends and an East-West Dialogue: When Shakespeare Meets Tang Xianzu;” in Shanghai, the city’s Drama Art Center performances of the two playwrights’ works entitled *Tang and Shakespeare: A 400-Year Dream of Plays*; while in Guangzhou initiated the “Cultural Year of Tang Xianzu and Shakespeare” (Wu 2016). More events had been arranged around the Globe via diplomatic institutions celebrating the Tang-Shakespeare anniversary.

Behind the cross-cultural celebration was a strong political backing that goes back to Chinese President Xi Jinping’s visit to UK in October 2015.

Even Chinese President Xi Jinping himself has called for a celebration of the unwitting couple as a means to further cultural understanding between China and the United Kingdom. Back in October 2015, Xi told guests at a dinner hosted by the mayor of London: “Tang was a contemporary of Shakespeare, and both died in 1616. [2016] will be the 400th anniversary of their passing. China and the U.K. can join in celebrating the legacies of these two literary

giants, to promote interpersonal dialogue and deepen mutual understanding.”

(Ibid.)

Not in a dissimilar tone Joubin talks about China's premier Jiabao Wen's visit to Shakespeare 's birthplace on June 26, 2011, and the fact that he alluded to his love for Shakespeare in his speech to British prime minister David Cameron (Joubin 2016: 1099).

Political motivations behind artistic festivals and art creation are nothing new and can lead to the flourishing of cultural encounters, but going back to the Gecko production, one should question whether the result has really led to a cross-culture encounter between Shakespeare and Tang. Similarly to the *Staging China* project and production, the Gecko opted for the obvious dream motive, one that connects the obvious Shakespeare's play *Midsummer Night dream*. Like the *Staging China* project and production, this was a contemporary adaption, which arguably was even more extreme as they opted for a true contemporary story reflecting the changes for women in contemporary China, dealing with familial/filial pressure versus love and passion. Moreover, and unlike *Staging China* project, by reproducing a Gecko imprint this production attempted to avoid resorting to typically recognizable theatrical forms, Chinese or Western, thus avoiding a process of orientalising the material and the contradictions inherent in the *Staging China* productions. I stress here the word “attempt” as Gecko still resorted to some orientalising topoi, those of shadow plays [Figure 3] (we are not talking here of shadow puppetry as the shadows are made by the performers themselves) , which poignantly was only used to represent the Peony Pavillion's narrative in the production. Even though that the orientalising motif was also present in the Shakespeare's play narrative stream—the characters were seemingly

wearing traditional Chinese costumes, the marginalising effect of the shadow device puts the Tang's play into a secondary seat: for a starter the sequences are far and between and secondly, the *Midsummer Night's Dream* narrative actively interacts in the unfolding of the main character's dream versions. Puck's love potion is seemingly mimicked in the dance sequences where the performer wearing Chinese traditional costumes spreads magic powder on the rest of the dancers [Figure 4]. The shadow play sequences, narrating Du Lingniang's love, are left as beautiful background story till the very end where we see Helena character, finally, interacting actively with them. At one level, Tang's work is marginalised and orientalised as beautiful exotic other as rendered in these brief sequences. In this case one can concur with a comment mentioned in a quite critical review:

*Midsummer Night's Dream* narrative is rather flawless,, but the story of *Peony Pavilion* does not fit as well. Although the *Peony Pavilion* narrative of light and shadow is technically stunning, , and absolutely clever, these cannot conceal the fact that this narrative was intentionally added on. So, the suggestion is clear: this narrative should actually be deleted. In fact, *Peony Pavilion* is reduced to a silhouette. On the one hand, of course, technically it is very powerful and relevant; on the one hand, it lacks an understanding of Chinese traditional culture (Weixin).

On another level, the result is quite far away from both Shakespeare's or Tang's work especially if we consider an almost total lack of language, which disregards the lyrical and poetic nature of Shakespeare and Tang's work. One could argue that both plays have been emptied of their essential qualities and the production is the mirror of an "unfamiliar other," one that cannot be totally traceable to the original work. Hence, in

this case, the collaborative nature of the project does not really translate into either an intercultural or a cross-cultural experience but into a work of transformation and adaptation, beyond what Joubin defines the intercultural strategy of “pastiche, dramaturgical collage and extensive, deconstructive rewritings”(Joubin et al 2016: 514). It is not really a hybrid form of theatre, neither a combination of theatrical forms. The claim “theatre made by locals for locals” is also far-fetched as this work of adaptation bears the imprint of the theatre-makers that have conceived this production.

Furthermore, going back to the framework in which this production was conceived, the British Council project, one should not forget that this was part of a bigger project *Shakespeare Lives* that can be identified sharing features with “Boomerang Shakespeare” phenomenon in that it was “an integral part of Britain's campaign for soft power and self-identity in a postcolonial global age” (Joubin 2016: 1100). Hence the fact that Gecko company, as a British company, were given the opportunity to take the lead in adaptating and fusing the work of two different authors, is not insignificant and it shows that the British soft power might still have the license even in adapting and reinventing the work of a Chinese playwright. Going back to the main concern of this paper, the valence of a comparison between Tang and Shakespeare, Gecko’s production, like the Leeds/Beijing project, failed in their cross-cultural/intercultural intent, and to really create a dialogue between the two authors and the two cultures. Furthermore, within the context of *Shakespeare Lives*, led by the British Council, political and cultural agendas confirm a process of global soft power being negotiated and promoted through the arts and theatre, as implied in the definition of Boomerang Shakespeare. In this case, again, building on the transnational appeal of Shakespeare, it is the British soft power that has seemingly led

the way and capitalised on the coincidence that both playwrights died in the same year.

### ***Productions from China in UK***

As mentioned in early parts of this paper, it is also China that is promoting soft power through the arts as they also capitalised on the common commemorative celebrations. This is true of other productions that have tried to celebrate the Tang and Shakespeare's quatercentenary by bringing Chinese shows to the UK. A small UK-based Chinese promoter *Performance Infinity* ([www.performanceinfinity.org](http://www.performanceinfinity.org)), enabled Chinese companies, students, and professional to tour UK. Part of their programme included the *Staging China* production, and another cross-cultural mash-up, which, with a similar purpose to the Gecko's production, combined another Shakespeare's play, *Coriolanus*, with *Peony Pavilion*. *Coriolanus and Du Liniang* was a revisiting of Shakespeare's play and Tang Xianzu's classic *The Peony Pavilion*, presented by *Zhejiang Xiaobaihua Yue opera* from Hangzhou, a famous all-female Yue opera troupe in China. This run at the Peacock Theatre in London before moving to Paris and Vienna in July 2016. Unlike the *Staging China* and Gecko production, this production avoided the obvious connection of the dream motif and opted for a Shakespeare's play other than the *Midsummer Night Dream*. They also made a more successful attempt to combine Shakespeare and Tang's work almost in their entirety and gave great attention to Tang's classic. The choice of contemporary setting, especially in the case of *Coriolanus* being in army clothing, is pushed into the background in a production that is lyrical in its operatic style. In the production, there was a constant switching between extracts from the two plays with some rare moments in which *Coriolanus* and *Du Liniang* meet and ask each other questions,

confronting their situations and motivations, which, according to the director, Guo Xiaonan, are led by hate (Coriolanus) and by love (Du Linniāng) (Mazzilli 2016).

Having visited the opening night at the Peacock theatre, I could have a first-hand experience of the theatrical event and the political frame in which it was constructed. The combination of the two works did not translate into a coherent theatrical experience but in a long fragmented production that was over three and half hours long. The presence of the Chinese cultural attaché in London that opened and closed the event gave an official stamp to the production as promotion of Chinese soft power. The heavy-handed operatic style and the length ended up alienating the small number of Western members of the audience—some of them left in the interval (this could also have been due to the fact that it was an incredible hot day for London and the Peacock theatre was not air-conditioned). However, the very few reviews talk quite favourably of the show praising the impressive staging and its Chineseness (Middleton, Hilpott, Kasner 2016). The respect and attention given to the original work, in some cases interspersed with references to contemporary cultures (they mention Google and in some cases they use more popular tunes), as well as its root in traditional operatic modes both alienate and impress Western audiences.

Again, in terms of political and cultural agendas in connection to soft power, the diplomatic presence at the event clearly shows the political and cultural agendas at play in the promotion of Chinese soft power through the arts and theatre. In this regard, this production, like many others, is not very dissimilar to the Gecko production, which was part of the British Council project. It is interesting to note, however, that, at least in UK, unlike their British counterparts, Chinese productions touring the UK, did not attract the mainstream media<sup>11</sup> and could not be staged on main British stages. These facts show some resistance towards Chinese soft power,

and possibly some scepticism towards Chinese theatre, which cannot be totally assessed at this stage and in the context of this paper. Beyond the motivations behind these productions that have come from China to UK, going back to the idea of intercultural/cross-cultural theatre, we can talk about a process of self-orientalisation, which, to some extent, has fulfilled Western cultural expectations of the exotic other. It is no coincidence that most of the productions that toured to UK from China were using forms of traditional Chinese theatre.

### ***Concluding Remarks***

Having investigated the contexts and the receptions to some of the productions, part of the Shakespeare–Tang anniversary, we have discovered that contradictory forces are at play in the process of creating, promoting and touring what are presented as theatrical events part of cultural exchange programmes. On the one side, there is an artistic ambition to make the unfamiliar familiar, to create cultural connections; on the other, some strong political and economic global interests affect cultural exchange and artistic creations. The idea of Boomerang Shakespeare is a useful concept that reveals how intercultural and cross-cultural theatres are a vehicle for the promotion of soft power, which, in the cases here analysed is a two-way stream involving both UK and China. However, as it was the case of the Beijing *Staging China* production, and the *Coriolanus Du Lingniang* show, in order to negotiate its soft power, China still has to resort to its “oriental” past to fulfill cultural expectations, as the critical response to these productions has demonstrated. With the Gecko company, a British company, being able to use its own work ethics and style in China and recreating their own version of what they understood to be fusion of Tang and Shakespeare’s work, one can deduce that, when it comes to Shakespeare, the



British soft power might still have the upper hand in a subtle but systematic way (the work of British Council over the years is witness to this). One could go even further and argue that in all these productions the bigger loser has been Tang Xiangzu, as none of the productions discussed here have really managed to make his work the focus of their creation. This is also connected to the fact that these productions have failed in their intercultural and cross-cultural attempt. Within the context of Boomerang Shakespeare, these productions have confirmed Shakespeare's primary position as a transnational export not only of the UK but also of China. The latter have exploited the coincidental death of one of the world's great playwrights to celebrate their own great and to promote their own soft power. One could even go as far as to state that the very act of writing the essay can be considered as act of tribute to Shakespeare as a transnational export.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The concept of self-orientalization, which can be traced to Rey Chow's study of Fifth generation film-makers, is a kind of Orientalism, and othering, played out by the Oriental subjects themselves in order to meet the expectations of western Orientalist imagination. "It is a kind of Orientalism that requires a re-packaging of the "ethnicity" in glossy images of its own *primitivism*, the resorting to "mythical pictures" to which the "convenient label of otherness" can be easily attached". (Chow 1995: 170-71)

2. "Shakespeare has become a boomerang business in the twenty-first century- a phenomenon that is fuelled simultaneously by globalized economic and cultural developments. Plays that have been traveling the world since his lifetime are now returning to Britain with many different hats. The meaning of this 'return' is ambiguous because tour productions make the familiar strange and bring home the exotic. Boomerang Shakespeare encompasses a range of events, including non-Anglophone productions, co-productions by British and foreign artists, local events celebrating Shakespeare's global afterlife, and British productions that incorporate elements from more than one culture in their cast, style, or set" (Joubin 2016: 1094).

4. This took place at theSpace @ Niddry St (V9) from Friday 5 August to Saturday 13 August 2016

5. All the information from Mr. Ansell was given in an hour-long phone conversation with Mr. Ansell.

6. She mainly talks about Hong Kong theatre, but I would argue this can be applied to mainland China as well.

8. This included a major partnership with UK-based charity Voluntary Services Overseas (VSO) to reach out to the poorest communities, a digital collaboration, and a six-month "Shakespeare Lives" online festival, brand new productions of Shakespeare's plays, film, exhibitions, public readings, and educational resources through partnerships across the globe.

9 Richard Rusk. November 2016. Interview by Mary Mazzilli. E-mail..

10 Richard Rusk. November 2016. Interview by Mary Mazzilli. E-mail.

<sup>11</sup> The Stage published a feature on *Corolanius and Du Linian*, but when I contacted them. they were not interested in having an article on the events happening in UK. The Peacock theatre is off-branch of Saddlers Wells, by far not a major venue. Joanna Dong, managing director of *Performance Infinity* explained that it was very difficult to promote these shows to bigger stages.