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Edited by Michael Walling and Roe Lane



Border Crossings

The Orientations Trilogy

Theatre and Gender: Asia and Europe

Painted on a vast pan-global canvas of locations, characters and experiences, *The Orientations Trilogy* is a trio of separate but related plays exploring sexuality and performance in mythic and contemporary Asia. Seven years in the making, with artists from five countries, *The Orientations Trilogy* is theatre for the contemporary globalised world.

Orientations is set in India, and brings together European naturalism and Indian Yakshagana. In *Dis-Orientations*, a Chinese setting brings in the all-female Yueju from Shanghai. And in *Re-Orientations*, all the strands of the Trilogy are woven together.

This book, which complements Border Crossings' productions, includes the scripts of the three devised plays, together with extensive discussions of the complex intercultural processes through which they were made.

The book includes other plays on related themes by Veenapani Chawla and Mahesh Dattani, as well as discussions of related topics around *Theatre and Gender: Asia and Europe*.

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Introduction

Between January and March 2006, I was invited by Michael Walling to be Artistic Associate for Border Crossing's new production *Dis-Orientations* in its first, experimental version at the Central School of Drama and Speech in London. The production was then further developed for professional performances in September 2006. In this version, I played the role of the character Song myself. At the time of writing, the third play in the Trilogy is being made, with the role of Song being played by Song Ruhui.

This article explores the causes of clashes during the processes of creation at Central with the professional cast at later stages, in relation to the character Song. This article is a record of my personal experience in *Dis-Orientations* with regards to these cultural clashes between the West and China and a reflection of my personal understanding of how love between female partners is perceived and expressed differently in China and the West. I would like to stress at the beginning that although *Dis-Orientations* is a play exploring themes of homosexuality it does **not** imply that *yueju* should be read as a lesbian form. *Yueju* as an art form developed the cross gender role during the Chinese feminist movement period at the end of the 19th century, and beginning of the 20th century. It was both a commercial as well as social product, which will be discussed later.

I received my professional opera training from the age of 12 and was a professional *yueju* xiaosheng performer at Shanghai Luwan *Yueju* Company in the early 1990s. The character of Song draws on my understanding of *yueju*. The aim is to make a contribution towards bridging the understanding of art and its cultural forms between the West and China. I would like to thank Michael Walling for his immense encouragement in the creation of Song, and the writing of this article. Without him, this character, Song, would never have existed. I therefore thank him with all my heart.

Central School of Speech and Drama

It was a sunny winter's day in the Central School of Drama and Speech in London. A group of third year undergraduate students congregated in a large rehearsal room for the new project: an improvised production combining Shanghai *yueju*, the traditionally all female regional opera, with Western theatre forms. This would be a new piece in style and content. None of the students had ever had any exposure to Chinese opera, none of them had even heard of *yueju*. Nonetheless, everyone was excited about the potential of this project. My first task was to provide them with some *yueju* physical training.

It was fun at the beginning to work with the students. Everyone was extremely keen to learn the movements. There was much laughter in the rehearsal room as all the girls stood rigidly as masculine soldiers while the two boys posed in the feminine stances with surprising ease! I jokingly commented that this was proof that females in the West had become too masculine and were beginning to lose their feminine touch. In another exercise, the female students improvised female love scenes, which could have been used as the basis for the scenes in *Dis-Orientations*. There were six scenes in total, 10 girls acted in pairs, and another girl acted alone. However, it was disturbing for me to watch these scenes as each of them had some level of violence included. Nearly half of the improvisations had death as the ending.

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The student Rebecca is a very good actor with a calm, composed demeanour. Later she played Song's mother, a central role of the story. Her improvisation featured a lesbian trying to commit suicide by pricking needles into her own body countless times. It was a gradual, agonizing, and painful death expressed in an explicit and realistic style. Then, two students, Rebecca and Ailidh, created a scene of fighting between a young lesbian couple. They pulled each other's hair, cried, shouted, and then collapsed in exhaustion and reconciliation. One after another, all of the improvisations had degrees of explicit sex and violence in them. These love scenes were alien to me, they seemed to be less concerned with tenderness and were very raw. I felt puzzled, constantly comparing the difference between these scenes and *yueju*.

These feelings were compounded when the student Bodelle de Ronde, who would play the role of Song in this first version, improvised a scene with Tori Hart as Alex: Song falls in love with Alex in a park and she went over to kiss Alex on the lips passionately and sexually, as an expression of her love. It was at this point that I went to have a long talk to Michael. Sitting in a room at Central I tried to explain the difference between what was happening in these improvisations and the ways of expressing love in Chinese *yueju*. I remember Michael wrote in his blog on that night something along the line of what I had said needed great leaps to understand. Even with detailed explanation, this concept is difficult to fully comprehend. As a result of the conversation, Michael encouraged me to improvise Song in order to bring out the uniqueness of this *yueju* xiaosheng character. The formation of the character therefore took a sharp turn and became what the audience saw in this final *Dis-Orientations* production. Consequently, I was invited by Michael to perform Song in the original professional production in 2006, and the same character is to be performed by Song Ruhui in the final trilogy in Autumn 2010.

In order for the readers to understand the apparent problems which were encountered and how Song developed, it is necessary for me to firstly explain the strict *yueju* training regimes to which the performers were subjected and the lasting effect which these had on the behaviour of the individuals themselves. Secondly, there is a fundamental difference between the Western notion of the development and enactment of a lesbian relationship and the reality of such a relationship to the *yueju* performer, in both the role and as individuals developing against a particular social and political background. In the following section, I will articulate reasons behind my objection towards the original development of the character Song from *yueju*'s aesthetic as well as social formation.

***Yueju* Training**

A Codified Body Language

Physical training is an important process in Chinese opera and it is crucial to start the strict training process at an early age. China has over 300 different types of regional operas, but the training process is essentially the same. It usually uses the movements from *kunqu* (kun opera) or *jingju* (Beijing opera), since these forms have the most fully developed training methodology. Every movement from smiling, pointing, walking, riding a horse to opening a door, is a codified language, passed down from teacher to student directly. They are practised, repeated, and perfected by students until they become what French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu would describe as *habitus* (1984), a deeply ingrained habit of behaviour, feeling, and thought. Only with the ingrained codified language, does one's performance on stage become natural and expressive.

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The codified language is also used to express one's feeling – gentle love for the beloved one, which is transformed through gentle movements. The idealised xiaosheng (male) role in *yueju* is a man who treasures, cares, and respects his beloved woman. This is highlighted in Shanghai Yueju Company's most famous production *Dream of the Red Mansion*, in which the young gentleman Jia Baoyu is devoted to his cousin, the orphaned Lin Daiyu. The love between the two is often expressed in a highly stylised but gentle manner. For example, when one expresses tenderness, performers of male or female roles would form a circle with their wrists by gently touching each other's hands, or arms. Another way for the xiaosheng to express his feeling to the female would be to place his hands on the girl's shoulders and gently press her from left to right. A series of highly disciplined, controlled, and stylised movements form the love language of *yueju*. It is through this performativity that these codified movements become a 'natural' act. They are further ingrained into one's *habitus*.



Dream of the Red Mansion, Jia Baoyu devoting to Lin Daiyu, courtesy of Shanghai Yueju Company

Austin's concept of 'performativity' (1962) views gender behaviour in terms of similarly highly codified movements, and western feminists have long ago pointed out the performativity of gender as a socially constructed way to impose social and sexual repression on women. These codified movements seen in *yueju* had traditionally been ways of controlling the behaviour of women in Chinese society: women must walk in

small paces, they must avert eye contact, their arms can only move in small circles and so on. They also prevent Chinese women from expressing love in such a forward, physical way and this constraint still binds women in today's fast changing China.

This is the first reason why I objected to Central students' improvisation of the Song character as this intensive physical performativity would have been ingrained into Song and forbids her from taking on board physical ways to deliver her love. I do not think it is possible for Song to have the direct and physical sexual contact with Alex when kissing her passionately on her lips. Emotional communication with minimum physical contact, such as gently holding Alex's hands and looking into her eyes would seem closer to Song's familiar way of expressing love.

Music and Lyrics

Lyrics and music are central to *yueju*. *Yueju*'s lyrics are love words. But these words when sung by a skilful singer serve to heighten the listeners' emotions and longing. They are powerful mechanisms to control the singers' emotions as well as their physical movements. Below are some lyrics from the scene Private Meeting (Loutai Hui) from *Love of the Butterfly*; when Shanbo has met his beloved Yingtai, a girl formerly in disguise as his male classmate for three years. He was informed that she was due to marry under her father's orders. I am putting both lyric and music together to give the reader a flavour of the emotional content, although they are in a Chinese music score, which is maybe alien to some readers.

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英台说出心头话，
我肝肠寸断口无言。
金鸡啼破三更梦，
狂风吹折并蒂莲。
我只道有情人终能成眷属，
谁又知今生难娶祝英台。
满怀悲愤无处述！

无限欢喜变成灰。

Yingtai told me the words from the bottom of her heart,
The pain I feel stops me from uttering a word.
Golden rooster awoke me from my dream too early,
The gale broke the double budded lily flower.
I believed lovers would stay together forever,
But in this life I could not marry Yingtai.
I am filled with bitterness and anger but to whom could
I tell!
Countless joy only turned into colder ashes.

Towards the end of the aria when Shanbo sings 'I am filled with bitterness and anger but to whom could I tell!' he is distorted with anger and hate. However, this feeling is expressed in the codified manner discussed before and expressed in a trained (and stylised) singing fashion. When Yingtai tries to restrain Shanbo by shouting 'Liangxiong' (brother Liang), Shanbo turns to look at her, focusing a tender gaze on her and singing 'countless joy', while his gaze turns gradually away from her towards the audience with words 'only turned into colder ashes'. At the word "ashes", the tune begins to change into a more torrid style, expressing the inner disturbance Shanbo is experiencing. While the music is still continuing on the last word 'ashes', Shanbo turns up his sleeve and coughs blood onto it. Yingtai catches it together with Shanbo, crying 'this is all my fault' while helping Shanbo to move upstage and to sit down on a chair, where she kneels down by his side. After a short pause, Shanbo looks at her with deep affection before singing 'kind sister [a respectful way of addressing a young girl in ancient China], I will never blame you. But do you know' (starts singing) 'I ran all these miles, drenched with sweat, just wanting to see you!'

(慢板)

英台说出心头话，
我肝肠寸断口无言。

金鸡啼破三更梦，
狂风吹折并蒂莲。

我只道有情人终能成眷属，
谁又知今生难娶祝英台！

满怀悲愤无处述！

无限欢喜变成灰。

(转(轻下调) 2-5)

情怀悲愤，
何处诉啊……

无限欢喜
变成灰

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Scene of Private Meeting from Love of the Butterfly, 1952, courtesy of Shanghai Yueju Company

Throughout this aria, there is no shouting or exaggerated movements to express anger, disappointment, or love. All the movements are choreographed with the songs to deliver a heightened sensation, but in a highly controlled manner. Because of this, western viewers often consider Chinese opera to be cold or emotionless. The truth is that through controlled voice,

words, and song, a performer heightens the sensation and singing becomes an inner emotional space. This distances performers from the material, but it also creates the most intensified emotional communication through music and often moves the listener to tears.

This is the second reason that I objected to the initial Central improvisation of the Song character. As emotional communication is trained from an early age it would more likely become the innate behaviour of a performer like Song, even in her off-stage life. A student improvisation in which Song turned violent and started attacking Alex to express her frustration and confusion, seemed to me to be a Western approach, and was not being truthful to the Chinese character. Instead, it would be more likely for her to shed tears privately, or even to hum a familiar *yueju* tune to express her inner agony.

Yueju, Same Sex Love or Homosexuality?

Symbol of Love

Unlike Beijing opera, which draws inspiration from royal, historical stories, *yueju* has love as its central theme. This aesthetic aspect is directly linked with the social movement of the early 20th century.

In 1842, Britain imposed an unequal treaty on China through the Opium War and since then, China began to endure a century long period of international invaders. Nation state weakness forced the Chinese to confront their traditional values. From the end of the 19th century the May Fourth Movement swept China, seeking modernisation. Borrowing a concept from Mary Wollstonecraft ('build a strong nation through building a strong mother'), legislation on women was changed, including the abolition of the long tradition of binding feet. Fields, that historically were reserved for men were opened for women for the first time, including public schools, factories, the military, and entertainment. Women were allowed to enter the theatre both as actors and as audience after centuries of prohibition. The formation of an all female *yueju* was the result of this movement.

Early *yueju* was a male-oriented entertainment, portraying women as sexual objects. One of the examples is *Love of the Butterfly*. It is a folk tale depicting a woman in disguise in a male school who falls in love with a male student. When it was first performed in 1919, explicit sexual descriptions and references on Zhu, the female protagonist, were made to arouse male audience sensation. Yuan Xuefen performed Zhu in the original form of *Love*

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of the Butterfly. She led *yueju* reform in the 1930s and 1940s and later was appointed as the first director of Shanghai Yueju Company. She states her reason for reforming *yueju* as: 'it was shameful to sing, as lyrics were explicit and focused on women's sexual organs. Established performances often had scenes involving physical sexual flirtation with women' (2002: 50). The reform of *yueju* was to transform the women's figures in *yueju* from objective to subjective beings and to produce women's value in this new art form and to legitimatise it. After continuous reform, *Love of the Butterfly* is transformed into a tragic story of a woman pursuing love and knowledge in a highly repressive masculine dominated society. The lyrics changed to poetic references towards love and knowledge. Through this reform, a large number of young females were attracted to *yueju* and will remain a loyal audience for the rest of their lives. The *yueju* love theme was an aesthetic necessity that emerged through a critical historical social movement to represent the cultural identity of the newly emerged urban women consumer.

Love In Different Social Contexts

As I stressed from the beginning *yueju* should not be viewed as a homosexual art form, however, this does not mean same-sex love should be blindly dismissed in *yueju*.

Same-sex relationships are well documented in China since ancient times. The official histories list ten openly bisexual emperors during the first 200 years of different dynasties. In 1930s and 1940s Shanghai, same-sex relationships amongst the *yueju* audiences consisting of new professional women are reported as common (Jin, 2009: 205). The ambiguous relationship between famous *yueju* xiaosheng Yin Guifang and her early stage partner Zhu Shuizhao in pre-1949¹⁷ Shanghai is well known. However, the situation under the communist rule since 1949 became very different. Love themed *yueju* was regarded a decadent bourgeois art and underwent reforms in theme and style to educate the mass audience. Furthermore, sexual repression was severe and sex education was minimal. Even a decade after China's opening up during 1990s urban Shanghai, the mere mentioning of words like 'man' (nanren) and woman (nuren) was enough to embarrass many teenage girls. The word love was extremely rarely used. The word and concept of homosexuality are virtually absent in young people's minds. Instead, an ambiguous term dominated the eastern female relationship – sisterhood love (jiemei qing).



Left: Ying Guifang (in male dress) and Zhu Shuizhao in 1940s Shanghai. Right: Ying Guifang as Xiaosheng and Zhu Shuizhao in a *yueju* production in 1940s Shanghai

¹⁷ Chinese communist regime, the People's Republic of China was established in October 1949

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When the term homosexuality inevitably appeared in the country following China's economic reform in 1978, its meaning was altered through a subtle but important twist in translation. Homosexuality is translated literally as "same sex love" (tongxin lian), through this, 'same sex' becomes an adjective, describing the word 'love', so that the emphasis moved from 'sex' to 'love', and therefore it becomes subtle and safe to use in a Chinese context. Right up to the 1990s, most teenage girls were ignorant of the full gamut and range of sexuality, and ignorant of the full meaning of homosexuality. I remember the term "tongxin lian" was often used amongst my teenage female friends and *yueju* colleagues to tease one another when we had to share the same bed to sleep. This was often out of necessity rather than sexual desire, since there was limited space in crowded living conditions, or it was because we needed to keep each other warm in harsh winters.

Young girls I know who liked each other would joke with each other: 'if I was a man I would have married you'. This statement was termed by the girls as "love without desire" (youai wuyu). Looking back, the truth is that the majority of the young girls at the time had no idea what sexual desire was, whether same sex or heterosexual, and many did not even know sexual conduct between same sex individuals was possible! This 'love without desire' is of course a unique product that emerged under the strict sexual repression of Mao and Deng's China. If there was a more open social environment, which had better access to sexual information and education, this love may have turned into desire, and may have been explored further physically. In the West, experimentation was often carried out between young girls. This would entirely depend on the individual's choice when the choice was available.

In 1997, homosexuality was taken out of the category of 'hooliganism' under the Chinese criminal law, a *de facto* decriminalisation of homosexuality. On April 20th, 2001, the Chinese Classification of Mental Disorders formally removed homosexuality from its list of mental illnesses. With China's fast economic and social reform, not only are people more aware of the terminology and social context of same-sex love, there is more and more tolerance in accepting this relationship. Under these circumstances, as Song's improviser, I believe it is possible for the 21st century Song to take this choice in order to seek another possible way of expressing love, besides acting and singing.

In 2006, the character Song is in her 40s. She would have experienced highly intense emotional and sexual repression throughout her teenage years and early adulthood. It would not have been physically possible for her to express her same sex desire, either 'natural' or 'developed' on stage, and she may not even be conscious of the possibility at an early age. However, the forbidden social environment could not control Song's sexual awakening, either heterosexual or same-sex. She may have wondered if same-sex sexual love could intoxicate in the same way as the emotional love which she performed everyday on stage. After all, life is a performance, and sexual activity is another way to perform one's love towards the other. She may simply want to fulfil her inner desire, or to explore the inner missing half. This inclination towards same sex sexual conduct does not make Song a lesbian but is merely a journey of soul searching, a completion of one's mind and body. When the choice was available, she merely took it. This is my understanding of Song's sexuality and how and why I created it.

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It has not been a smooth process in the creation of *Song*. The Western performers find it difficult to fully understand the subtlety and sensitivity of *yueju's* love, and at the same time, the Chinese viewers are often dismissive the moment they hear the word 'homosexuality'. At times I felt extremely isolated and struggled to explain my views and to argue my opinions. I could not understand, with the deeper tolerance of Chinese society today, how the topic of homosexuality has become so well explored in many plays and films and yet it remains a taboo topic in the *yueju* world. I believe that *yueju* as a love art form could not be completely separated from its sexuality. Its social as well as aesthetic depth deserve to be explored in order for people both inside and outside the *yueju* circle could appreciate and understand this beautiful and unique art form. My interpretation of *yueju* *xiaosheng* throughout this process was intended 'to throw a brick to attract the attention of the jade' a Chinese saying meaning that its purpose is to welcome deeper and much more valuable discussions and debates from the audience and readers.

Soul Searching

Finally, I would like to say a little about the ending. As an improvised piece, no one foresaw the outcome of these two characters' relationship as the tragic, and yet natural ending, which developed. It seems that we long to have a choice to make a journey to understand ourselves, to complete ourselves. We blame the incompleteness of ourselves as the lack of choice. When the choice becomes available, in this case, Alex, like many Western people embarked on the journey to the East. Whereas Song, like many Chinese who could not gain a visa to leave the country freely would turn to the Westerners to seek what was unknown to them. Both Song and Alex are highlighted examples of Eastern and Western cultural and gender construction through performativity, representing their supposedly distinctively different social, and artistic conventions. Song is a *yueju* performer, an embodiment of one of the most refined, or repressed gender constructions and the same can be said about Alex, the Western ballet performer. They seem to be the extreme end of ourselves, when Song and Alex met and fell in love, the journey of soul searching seems to have been completed.

The question is asked 'is it love?' The mystery of love is finally reflected when Song speaks in her inner self in the final sex scene between Song and Alex: 'Do I love her? I don't know...' It soon became clear – Alex and Song could never fully understand each other, just like we could never fully understand ourselves. The love they have been speaking about is a mere metaphor for what we are hoping to find: the missing jigsaw piece within ourselves, something, which makes us feel complete. It is a journey of soul searching, to find what we feel we are missing from the unknown. Love seems to be used along the journey to convince ourselves that we have found the missing part, we are complete. However, the reality is that we could never be completed because humanity is flawed in nature. This, I believe, is why the ending emerged with Song uttering 'How could I love you? I do not understand what I am doing. I have been lying to myself,' and Alex admitting that 'I don't think I was in love with her [Song]'.

The ending also revealed another level of difference in how the West and East view 'the life journey'. Durkheim argued suicide as social rejection. Loneliness as a cause of suicide figures highly in the commercialised West, and increasingly so in urbanised China. The traditional Chinese religion Taoism believes life is a circle and when one completes the journey one goes back to the bosom of the mother earth. Family is key to holding

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individuals together. Again, in this improvised piece, towards the end of the show, it came out naturally for Song to say 'I am going home, to mother', whilst the character Alex improvised the suicide scene. The ending seems to have revealed that as humans we may all desire to embark on the journey to complete the incomplete self, but we take a very different social and cultural stance in dealing with our imperfect human nature – the Western attitude seems to be based on society and rights, whereas the Eastern view seems to embrace the family and the relationship. We take extreme soul searching journeys, only to find out that we are extremely limited in what we can understand and express ourselves through our familiar social and cultural upbringing.

Conclusion

Susan Powell, Professor in English at Salford University, commented on the broken-down relationship between Song and Alex as symbolising the 'irreconcilable relationship between the West and China', because we know so little of each other. This seems to be a rather strong statement. First of all, we are incomplete beings and it is impossible to try to completely understand oneself, or another. The important thing, to me, is to understand our difference, accept it, and respect it. Secondly, we are social beings; the more we are familiar with the social surrounding the more we live in it at ease. The West and the East may have many differences, but more so, there is still little exposure of the two cultural and social differences. Even when different cultures live in one location, they still seem to purposely separate themselves from the other: the Chinese abroad built China Town, and the Westerners in China live in their expatriate compounds. Change is painful as this rests on countless interactions and many clashes, before the formation of understanding. At the same time, change is crucial in understanding each other in order to understand ourselves. In changing, we lose and we gain; this to me is the true meaning of inner soul searching.

I am most grateful to the students of Central involved in the original improvisation. Without their most professional and dedicated contribution I would not have realised the extreme similarity between the West and the East and yet the complete difference. They forced me to look into myself – the original Song – in the strangest form. They provoked me and confused me, to the degree that I had to search my inner soul for understanding. It has been a journey of pain, disappointment, confusion, and disorientation along with periods of pleasure and a final fulfilment, shared by the production team and many audiences who have watched this production. It is through this painful journey that I gained some understanding of myself, and a world that is made by its opposite self: the West and the East.

I dedicate this article to bridging the understanding of the West and China.

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