

African Theatre 15
China, India
& the Eastern World

Volume Editors

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China Meets South Africa in the Theatre

Some recent South African work about China &
in China & the Year of China in South Africa, 2015

YING CHENG

Introduction

The intensification of China's involvement in Africa over the last ten to fifteen years has been the subject of close attention. Major discussions about China–Africa relations have focused on questions of trade, investment, aid and the exploitation of natural resources. In this discussion, the perception that China's interest is a 'curse' has been countered by the suggestion that China is a friend, a cure, a partner, even a saviour. While the economic impact of China has often been bemoaned, the country has sometimes been seen as providing a healthy counterbalance to European and American influences.

This position has been articulated by Robert Mugabe, the recipient of the Confucius Peace Prize, who greeted Xi Jinping and his wife, Peng Liyuan, on a state visit to Harare at the end of 2015, as 'true and dear friends of the people of Zimbabwe'. On the same visit, Mugabe said: 'I am glad that Zimbabwe and China speak the same language on many issues', and added: 'We share the same conviction that only a fair, just and non-prescriptive world order, based on the principles of the charter of the United Nations, can deliver the development we all need' (Agence France-Presse 2015).

The debate about China's economic impact on Africa has tended to drown out consideration of the ways in which

ties are being developed through cultural exchanges; some of these are bland, engineered and barren, others carry hope for cross-fertilisation and growth. Below I look at examples of interactions through theatre between China and South Africa some of which show that a more nuanced discussion about China–Africa relations is taking place. This discussion involves productions and collaborations in the visual and the performing arts. It finds expression in exhibitions and it reflects the mobilisation of powerful cultural agencies, ministries and institutions. Despite a government-heavy presence, it includes roles for individuals, choreographers, directors and writers. In looking at the cultural exchanges and the results – expected and unexpected – that may come from them, it is helpful to keep in mind one of the proverbs Chinua Achebe used to good effect: ‘A man who brings home ant-infested faggots should not complain if he is visited by lizards’.

2015 was the ‘Year of China in South Africa’. In this article, I look at the immediate context for that ‘country year celebration’ and provide an indication of relevant performances in South Africa and China during the last six years, the background to them and the responses to them. In covering relevant ground, I will have occasion to refer to work by Namela Nyamza, Ruth Simbao, Laura Foot, and Brett Bailey in South Africa and to plays by Yael Farber and Athol Fugard performed in China. In Fugard’s (perhaps optimistic) words the productions enabled him to ‘join the exchange of ideas and values between’ China and Africa.

Regarding the Year of China in South Africa, I respond to the rhetoric about ‘partnership’ that accompanied the cultural events, and the export of performance traditions. I seek evidence of South African responses to presentations of ‘intangible culture’ and describe collaborations by dancers and puppeteers. The final note is struck by looking at the example of the excerpt from a Chinese/ South African production of *War Horse* that was part of the closing ceremony of the ‘country year celebration’. That venture brought Chinese puppeteers together with the South African Handspring

Puppet Company in a partnership that contained promise of fruitful cooperation. I also draw attention to the way the ‘example of *War Horse*’ has been discussed in the University of Peking where courses in African Theatre are being taught.

Amafongkong and *Making Way*: Part of the background

During the 2011 National Arts Festival held at Grahamstown, South African choreographer Namela Nyamza presented *Amafongkong* with the Adugna Dance Company. Invaluable background to the title is provided by Yoon Jung Park’s paper “‘Fong Kong’ in Southern Africa: Interrogating African Views of China-Made Goods’ (2013). The abstract for that paper provides an explanation of *fong kong* that sketches in the situation that Nyamza addressed:

Goods made in China and sold in Africa in many ‘China shops’ have acquired local names in southern Africa; in South Africa and Lesotho, they are referred to as ‘fong kong’; ... ‘Fong Kong’ means ‘made in China’, but it also connotes cheap, low-quality, and counterfeit. [The term] has become so widely accepted that local rap songs, journalists and marketing firms often use it. Even as China continues to be criticized for ‘dumping’ these outmoded, cheap, and copy goods on African markets, Africans are increasingly involved in their importation. In South Africa, large retail chains are the biggest importers of consumer goods from China. (Park 2013)

The title of Nyamza’s choreographed piece responded to China as a manufacturing power that is seeking markets and incorporating Africa into its economic expansion.

Amafongkong was a collaborative production that showcased the skills of Adugna, a company of mixed ability performers from Ethiopia. It explored the possibilities and limits of collaboration, played with stereotypes, spiced comment with humour, and made a statement about China’s conduct that resonated throughout the continent. Indeed, reviewer Hannah Loewenthal suggested that it ‘might just as well be called “China in Africa”’ (2011). Johan Myburg went into some detail about the production, drawing attention to the

way it commented ‘on the growing expansion of Chinese influence on the African continent’, and describing the performance in such a way as to foreground the sinister suggestion that the dancers were marionettes controlled by a master puppeteer.

Dressed in silky Chinese robes the Ethiopian dancers mimic the movement of elderly Chinese women shuffling along on incredibly tiny feet. In an overtly coy manner they flirt with the audience, exaggerating customs traditionally connected to the Chinese until they seem to become puppets reacting to strings being pulled by an invisible hand. And the spotlight offers one, right at the back of the stage, a brief glance of a dancer wearing some knock-off sneakers. (Myburg 2011)

He then recorded the final action of the theatre experience that added a last-minute twist: ‘As the audience leaves the theatre, aided by ushers with torches, they pass the cast eating pap and chicken with chopsticks.’

Myburg felt that ‘Nyamza’s light-hearted approach (served) to draw attention to an issue of great concern to some Africans’, and judged the performance ‘gripping and challenging’. *Amafongkong* clearly played off widely held perceptions of the way China is interacting with Africa, and the choreographer’s apparently casual approach should not blind one to the sinister dimensions of the material staged or to the disconcerting final image of the cast eating.

Further background to the context for the Year of China in South Africa is provided by cultural analyst and exhibition curator Ruth Simbao. In a contribution to the ‘China as curse or cure debate’ in *African Arts*, she drew attention to the Sinophobic way China was perceived by some and to the Sinophilism of others (Simbao 2012). This perception fed into the exhibition entitled *Making Way: Contemporary Art from South Africa and China* that she curated in June 2012, and that addressed experiences of migration in a world that was being ‘rearranged’.

For the first ‘edition’ of the exhibition, Simbao took over several spaces in Grahamstown – the Alumni Gallery, the Provost Prison, Fort Selwyn and the Observatory Museum –

and involved artists in street performances, interactions and interventions. A second version of the exhibition opened at the Standard Bank Gallery in Johannesburg six months later where the performance pieces ‘on video’ included work by Doung Anwar Jahangeer, Hua Jiming, Qin Ga, Athi-Patra Ruga, Randolph Hartszenberg and Brent Mestre. The exhibition prompted a reviewer to reflect on the position of China in relation to Africa and on ‘new conversations about cultural diversity’. Once again China’s manufacturing muscle was referred to, as was the current level of debate.

A critical example of contemporary social rearrangement is the rise of China on the economic landscape. Rapid change is underway as the ‘old China’ makes way for swift construction, large-scale global reach and multiple variations of hybrid traditions. While revived China–Africa relations have piqued the interest of economists, little cultural understanding exists, and Sinophobia is hot on the heels of Afrophobia. This exhibition seeks ways of opening up new conversations about cultural diversity, social tolerance and human understanding at a time of intense movement and change in the Global South. (*Making Way* 2012)

Reflecting on the material presented, a critic writing on a Rhodes University site felt able to say that some of the performance projects embedded ‘the action of “making way” in personally, culturally and locally intimate ways’ (*media update* 2012).¹

Issues of Sinophobia were picked up and staged in Lara Foot’s *Fishers of Hope* (2014) in which the involvement of China in Africa could be linked to that of an ‘inedible alien fish’. That play, set (perhaps) on a lake-shore in Kenya, but embodying a wider dimension, opens with a welcome from a tour guide who complains about the species of ‘inedible alien fish’ which has obliterated the local species and threatens the livelihood of fishermen. Commenting on the Baxter Theatre production, David Fick cut through layers of subtle storytelling to write that the production ‘takes us into a land that has freed itself from the shackles of socio-political colonialism by the British, only to face socio-economic colonialism by the Chinese fifty years later’ (2014). The expression ‘socio-

economic colonialism' could have been used in relation to *Amafongkong* and reminds the audience that this is both a fact of life and a persistent concern.

Another production that commented on China in Africa is Brett Bailey's *Macbeth: the opera* (2014). Strikingly designed, the production is based on Verdi's opera and presented by Third World Bunfight. It reflects briefly but tellingly on the role played by super powers and Chinese imports in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.² The complex, provocative production has been seen at several festivals and has already been taken to Asia – to the Gwangju Asian Arts Festival, South Korea (2015). It will be performed in Macao during 2016 in what could potentially be an important encounter for China-South Africa theatre.

Some South African plays have already been seen in China. These included a touring production of Yael Farber's sensational and award-winning *Mies Julie* that was presented at the Hong Kong Academy for the Performing Arts during February 2014³. The 'post-apartheid' reworking of the drama showed how Farber was writing back to Europe, and continuing the tradition of engaged theatre that was one of the legacies of the decades of struggle against apartheid. The sexualised poster suggested why some regarded the version as sensationalist.

Mies Julie was followed during September/October of the same year by a season of plays by the doyen of the South African theatre: Athol Fugard. *The Island* (1973), *My Children, My Africa* (1990), and *The Train Driver* (2010) were put on at the Peng Hao Theatre, Beijing. The composition of the texts spanned more than thirty-five years and represented Fugard's responses to startlingly different phases in South Africa's history.

Fugard was delighted that his plays were being staged in China, and recorded the following:

A message to my Chinese friends

Dear friends, let me first of all say how honoured and humbled I am that I have been given the opportunity to share my work with you. I have

always believed that theatre, like all art, is a celebration of the common humanity that links all people and cultures in the world. China is now a hugely significant presence in Africa and the fact that my plays can join the exchange of ideas and values between us gives me, in my 83rd year, immense satisfaction.

Fugard does not spell out the 'ideas and values' in this message but they are embodied in his work and life, and prompt thought about the ants imported with the faggots and of the lizards that may, by the law of (un)intended consequences, accompany them.

Much of the credit for putting on the Fugard Season must go to Chen Wencong, a 'director, producer, artist, photographer, filmmaker and counsellor for at-risk youth' who is still in his twenties. He is described on the website of his *alma mater* as having 'spent two years backpacking around Europe and Asia, and studying glass-making, pottery and painting in Norway' before undertaking graduate work at Emory University (Atlanta, GA). From this it can be seen that he brought diverse experiences to directing Fugard, to his thinking about the relationship between China and Africa, and to his awareness of the direction in which China is heading.

The Island has a capacity to generate discussion about the nature of theatre and, even in a theatre culture that is rooted in non- and anti-naturalistic traditions, this may prove fruitful. It also represents the protest tradition – to use a convenient term – that has contributed a vital strand to the South African theatre. It remains to be seen whether such engaged theatre will be a fruitful source of ideas – or create a space for dialogue – in China.

A dramatist of uncompromising artistic integrity, Fugard has persistently contributed to national debates through the powerful medium of theatre. Like *The Island*, *The Train Driver* is a two-hander and had its roots in fact: it was prompted by the report that a black woman clutching her three children had thrown herself under a train. It is clearly part of Fugard's continuing desire to comment on national issues. In this

instance, he explores the reaction, particularly the sense of guilt, of the Afrikaner train driver.

Fugard's plays have been variously interpreted, speaking to directors and audiences in different countries, and it is intriguing to try to anticipate what they mean to audiences in China. Chen's interpretation, perhaps his reduction, is worth pausing to ponder, particularly in the light of the teacher/ student interaction in *My Children, My Africa*, and of the central image of *Train Driver*. In taking on board Chen's regret that 'there are not many free intellectual discussions or dialogues' in China, it is easy to feel Fugard's, perhaps unrealistic, hope that his play 'can join the exchange of ideas and values between us'.

In talking about Fugard, Chen reflected on the direction China is moving in and the way the country is being 'driven'. He said:

We chose the safe development, which brings us a thriving economy, but what did we forget? People aren't passionate about ideas; people believe in money. And *Train Driver*, what a metaphor – a train running so fast it can't stop. Who are the nameless people hit on the way? Is anyone trying to find out?

In reflecting on his own country, Chen is quite precise about one of the lessons he thinks South Africa can teach:

The magnificent thing South Africa has done for humanity is their 'Truth and Reconciliation' movement. People confessed their atrocities and traumas on both sides, and the state recorded this as national history. This is unprecedented. China has had so many different wounds, but we never talk about them, not even in families. Look at it psychologically – those experiences, unexamined, will affect how people raise their kids, how they deal with each other. It's poison in the blood that never gets filtered. To be an artist in China, [you have to] understand the history, and I think [even] the nation itself will be haunted by these experiences for a long time. (Pellegrini 2015)

Chen has a tiny audience and had difficulties in staging Fugard in Beijing. His resources are puny in comparison with those rolled out by China in Pretoria, Durban and Grahamstown, but he has contributed to starting a discussion about theatre, and about the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. He has found a response among students of

African theatre and it is relevant to note that the literary consultant on his team is a student writing about Fugard for an MA thesis at Peking University. When the plays were performed, the Department of Asian and African Languages and Literatures of Peking University organised a seminar at which scholars, students, and interested members of the public talked through the implications of them. A space for discussion was created.

An example of the difficulties Chen experienced is provided by the fact that one of the three actors in *My Children, My Africa* was refused a visa and could not take part in the Peng Hao Theatre performance. In this situation – and in the absence of understudy arrangements – Chen himself stepped into the role. For those familiar with the way theatre operated in the ‘bad old days’ in South Africa and the way (politicised) bureaucrats hobbled artists, this anecdote has a sadly familiar ring.

The Year of China in South Africa, 2015

In launching the diplomatic and cultural engagement represented by the Year of China in South Africa, President Xi Jinping spoke of starting ‘a new chapter in China-Africa cultural and people-to-people exchanges’, and initiated a programme that sought to characterise this ‘new chapter’ by promoting the image of China as South Africa’s ‘partner’ (Xi Jinping 2015).⁴

Scheduled events included a concert at the State Theatre in Pretoria, the screening of Chinese films, performances of Peking Operas and participation in the 41st National Arts Festival, held in Grahamstown (2015). The first film screened in the Chinese Film Showcase event was appropriately entitled ‘Chinese Partners’, and the organisers of the event repeatedly emphasised that ‘China and African countries [were] good friends, good partners and good brothers facing the same development tasks’ (Chinese Ambassador in

South Africa Tian Xuejun 2014). The official analysis and rhetoric was insistent in Durban where Chinese officials distributed speeches by the Minister of the Chinese Embassy, Li Song, and by the Chinese Consul General in Durban, Wang Jianzhou. These speeches included the assertion that ‘holding country year celebrations respectively symbolizes the high level of China-South Africa comprehensive strategic partnership and provides an important platform for the two peoples to enhance mutual understanding, deepen friendship and promote cooperation.’ (Chinese Embassy 2015). The ‘understanding’ and ‘cooperation’ were illustrated by Cultural and Arts Festivals, including *Beautiful Tianjin*, an exhibition of China’s ‘Intangible Cultural Heritage’.

The event was heavy with official rituals. It was hosted by the Ministry of Arts and Culture of South Africa, and involved the Ministry of Culture of China, the Chinese Embassy in South Africa, the Chinese Consulate General in Durban, the Tianjin Municipal Bureau of Cultural Broadcasting and Television and the Confucius Institute at Durban’s University of Technology (DUT). The rituals involved with cultural engagement are recorded by photographers and key moments that are caught on camera and posted online can be accessed and analysed.

The items displayed in the Intangible Culture Heritage exhibition were diverse and included

the nine folk arts typical of Tianjin, namely, Yangliuqing woodblock New Year paintings, Yangliuqing paper-cuts, Yi Decheng medicinal snuff, Xu’s Chinese opera helmets, calabash containers, dough figurines, *maohou* (literally ‘hairy monkey’, tiny humanoid figures made from furry magnolia buds and sloughed off cicada shells), leaf paintings, and the straw weavings and willow weavings of Jingwu Town. (Confucius Institute 2015)

Chinese performing arts were represented by Peking Operas characterised by stylisation, elegance, precision, discipline, panache, and the welding together of several arts. *Havoc in Heaven* was performed with its classic *gongfu* athletic dance in which Sun Wukong (Monkey) confronts

Nezha 哪吒 (a protection deity). The selection policy of the Chinese Government seems to have been against exporting the productions using ‘revolutionary’ opera conventions that emerged during the Cultural Revolution, reflected Mao Zedong’s ideas about political theatre, and were in some cases the work of his wife, Jiang Qing.

The presentation and reception of ‘Peking Opera’ were described in an official document that included:

In a medley show, the quintessence of Peking Opera was fully shown through magnificent costumes (such as changkao – a helmet, heavy-bottomed boots and long-handled weapons for a fighting role), diverse facial masks, impressive dances (such as Chinese ribbon dance and flag dance), and fighting performance by wusheng (a male fighting role) and wudan (a female fighting role). In the performance of *Where Three Roads Meet: Fighting in the Dark*, one actor in black and the other in white fought each other in a very humorous way, which drew rounds of laughter from the audience. *The Deep Night* by a Peking erhu (a two-stringed bowed musical instrument) player accompanied by an orchestra offered the audience a chance to be enchanted by the music of Banqiang-style Peking Opera (performed in metrical couplets) with its harmonious rhythm and beautiful melodies. In the performance of *Autumn River*, the performers gave a vivid and appealing portrayal of different characters by simulating the reality through movement-based performance. In the grand finale *Havoc in Heaven*, the rendering of the Monkey King, the protagonist of wisdom, courage, humor and cuteness brought the whole house down. (Confucius Institute 2015)

Continuing to focus on the performing arts while moving on from Durban, the ‘country year celebrations’ promoted the participation of the Guangdong Provincial Puppet Art Theatre Group in the 41st Grahamstown Festival. In an illustrated article in *Cue* under the heading ‘Ribbons in Silks and Warriors on Sticks’, Darsha Indrajith, Sarah-Rose de Villiers and Heather Cameron enthused about the show and the interaction between puppets and people.

The production included a tale of a fisherman and a sneaky crane, a fire-breathing devil, two sad lovers and a drunken emperor:

It was as magnificent to watch the puppeteers perform as it was to watch the puppets themselves. The skill of the performers at conveying emotion

was nothing short of magical. Towards the end of this captivating show, audience members were invited to play with the puppets and get a feel for what it takes to be a world-class puppeteer manipulating ribbons of silk and warriors on sticks. (Indrajith et al. 2015)

The inclusion of interaction between people and puppets may have been intended to dramatise the aspirations to partnership and cooperation that featured in the diplomatic rhetoric. But it is a situation that is capable of various interpretations.⁵

A number of productions in the Year of China in South Africa included collaborations between Chinese and South African performance companies. Most of these were ‘collages’ that lacked genuine dialogue or genuine interaction: the national strands remained separate. The production of *Swan Lake* was a case in point. The venture brought twenty-one dancers from the Liaoning Ballet of China to Johannesburg in April 2015, where they joined forces with Joburg Ballet and a cast that included Brazilians, Cubans and Americans. Commenting somewhat heavy-handedly on the symbolism of the partnership, Dirk Badenhorst, CEO of Joburg Ballet, said the group of dancers from China were ‘symbolic of the 21 years of democracy being celebrated ... in South Africa’. He added:

We are honoured to be partnering with the contingent of dancers from the Liaoning Ballet to mark the Year of China in South Africa. Our ties with the international ballet community, and in this case with the Liaoning Ballet, help us to achieve ever higher standards in our vision of presenting Joburg Ballet as a world class African ballet company. (Joburg Ballet 2015)⁶

Critical reception of the production included acknowledgement of Badenhorst’s role in maintaining the position of ballet in a post-1994 dispensation climate in which the privileged position previously enjoyed by Europe-derived arts was being challenged. However, criticism of leading dancers suggested that there were shortcomings in the performances. Pinto Ferreira’s review carried by *Independent Online* (South Africa) included the following: ‘Yu Chuanya as

Odette-Odile and Ma Ming as Prince Siegfried impress with commendable technical prowess, but certainly disappoint with lacklustre performances' (Ferreira 2015).

It may be that these somewhat 'rigid' collaborations will facilitate fruitful follow-up dialogues between those involved. When I asked Zheng Wen, culture counsellor at the Chinese Embassy in South Africa, about the joint project he said he considered it one of the most important elements in the Year of China in South Africa. It was certainly striking that two very different operations, one state owned, the other a private company, were able to work together. To ensure better exposure, the Liaoning Ballet added extra shows to their scheduled performances so that, in addition to *Swan Lake*, they also put on *Jasmine Flower* from their classical Chinese repertoire.

The future holds considerable promise since Joburg Ballet and the Liaoning Ballet have drawn up a Memorandum of Understanding about long-term cooperation. This document was signed by Iain MacDonald (Artistic Director, Joburg Ballet), Qu Zijao (Director, Liaoning Ballet), Dirk Badenhorst (CEO, Joburg Ballet), John Mogashoa (Director of International Relations, SA, Department of Arts and Culture), Xu Hong Ying (Deputy Minister of Culture in Liaoning Province, China) and Zheng Wen (Counsellor, Cultural Affairs, Embassy of the People's Republic of China in South Africa).

Cape Town was also a venue for a collaborative dance venture, a thirty-minute performance entitled *Echo*. This was choreographed by Johannesburg-born, Brussels-based Moya Michael who worked with dancers from Jin Xing Dance Theatre, Shanghai. Michael spoke about working in China and about challenging expectations. She said:

I wanted to work with women because of all the stereotypes of Chinese women who are seen as being subservient. I wanted to show the strength of women. The seven women dancers (in *Echo*) all look very beautiful and elegant. But when they move it's just raw power. (*SmartShanghai* 2014)

The focal point of this piece is a group of women, occupying space. Each of the performers has an individual story that is intertwined with the group, yet all these women have their own voice. This is not a form of isolation. Recognition is placed on the female gaze and specifically on how change can be experienced through each of their lives (Kamaldien 2015).

Michael's work and this production make an illuminating comparison with Nyamza's experience and *Amafongkong* in several respects. These include the operation of strong-minded South African choreographers whose training includes expertise in European dance in collaboration with performers from other traditions.

The complexity of collaboration: The case of *War Horse*

The closing ceremony of the Year of China in South Africa was held in December 2015. It was part of a Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) event and involved the presidents of China and South Africa as well as several other African heads of state. As might have been expected in view of the programmes described above, groups presenting 'traditional' genres took part. There were, for example, martial arts (performed by both Chinese nationals and South Africans), acrobatics and classical dancing. There was also a more nuanced offering: an excerpt from *War Horse* performed by actors from the National Theatre of China and from the Handspring Puppet Company of South Africa.

This performance drew attention to a major and sustained interaction between artists in the two countries that had its origin outside the sometimes questionable 'partnership' dialogue that characterised the Year of China in South Africa. *War Horse*, it might be remembered, was first staged in 2007 at the Olivier Theatre in London and then moved to the West End (2009) where it won a raft of awards. Many of these awards reflected the power of the remarkable puppets,

the War Horses, at the centre of the production. These had been created by the Handspring Puppet Company of South Africa.

In August 2011, Li Dong, a producer with China's National Theatre, was greatly impressed by the London production and determined to take it to China, or to put it another way to create a 'Chinese version' with a Chinese cast and crew. In 2013, he returned to London to discuss a major collaboration between the two national theatres and firmed up a proposal to create a Mandarin *War Horse*. Preparations were very thorough. For example, co-directors Wang Tingting and Liu Dan, puppetry director Liu Xiaoyi, and a team of technicians travelled to London in January 2014 for training. Chinese puppeteers were selected and each was given a handbook entitled *How to Think Like a Horse*. In addition each had to live on a farm for two weeks observing how horses moved and breathed (Chen Jie 2015). The translation of the text into Chinese involved established specialists, and the rehearsal period, under director by Alex Sims, was protracted.

When, in September 2015, the Chinese version of *War Horse* opened at Beijing's National Theatre, it provided a model for theatrical collaboration. While it shared some elements with the joint ventures described above in South Africa, it was notable for the wealth of resources put at its disposal. The respect shown on both sides to conventions with which they were unfamiliar was palpable, and the result – the Chinese *War Horse* – was both a profound learning experience and a commercial success.

The production was widely regarded by audiences in Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou as a local version of a West End stage play, and part of an engagement with the franchised production of a 'world hit'. Some in the audiences, notably a group of Chinese theatre and literature students, had a more complex response to the productions. They were, for example, interested in the way the production reflected the 'revolutionary transformation' of the art of puppetry

in post-1994 South Africa. In discussing the production, these students made constant reference to the history of the Handspring Puppet Company, and attributed the success of the war horse puppet itself to, in the words of Mao Shian, ‘the modern transformation of traditional African puppet art’ (*Literature Newspaper* 2016). In the same discussion, the group used the example of Handspring, as they apprehend it, to urge Chinese theatre practitioners to reflect on the ‘outlet’ for traditional Chinese performance genres. They reflected on ways in which the ‘intangible cultural heritage’ of their nation, including the regional operas and traditions of puppetry, could inspire Chinese ‘contributions to global theatre’ (Zhu Guang 2016).⁷

Conclusion

The inclusion of an extract from *War Horse* in the closing ceremony of The Year of Africa in China along with genre performances showed the complexity of the interaction between China and South Africa. During the cultural onslaught of 2015, China showed off all kinds of tangible and intangible performance conventions, and it also included – in *War Horse* – an example of far more nuanced cross-cultural collaboration. Like Chen in his interaction with Fugard, the puppeteers trained to operate the Handspring horse had looked to South Africa and South African theatre, prepared to learn. Like Handspring Puppets, Fugard, Ntshona and Kani have lessons for China both as regards exploring the most pressing issues confronting a nation and as regards operating in the global theatrical market-place. It will be fascinating to follow the impact of the Year of China on South Africa, and to observe whether Chinese theatre people respond to the kind of profound exchange Fugard might have hinted at in a message that, in the light of the persecution of artists in China and with its assumption of exchange, deserves a second or third reading:

Dear friends, let me first of all say how honoured and humbled I am that I have been given the opportunity to share my work with you. I have always believed that theatre, like all art, is a celebration of the common humanity that links all people and cultures in the world. China is now a hugely significant presence in Africa and the fact that my plays can join the exchange of ideas and values between us gives me, in my 83rd year, immense satisfaction.

NOTES

- 1 For pictures of performances see www.youtube.com/watch?v=EvP9FAV6L_8 (accessed 3 February 2016). For the aspirations of the exhibition see www.ru.ac.za/fineart/latestnews/standardbankgallerytohostmakingwaycontemporaryartfromsouthafricaand.html. For background to this debate see, for example, Andrew Malone (2008), 'How China's taking over Africa, and why the West should be VERY worried', 18 July, *Daily Mail*, www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1036105/How-Chinas-taking-Africa-West-VERY-worried.html#ixzz3zCBABBmd (accessed 3 February 2016).
- 2 www.ukarts.com/Shows/macbEth-the-opera (accessed 23 June 2016).
- 3 For reviews, poster and clips, see, for example www.timeout.com/hk/stage/features/64548/review-mies-julie.html and www.youtube.com/watch?v=W3lfS4fvIj4 (both accessed 23 June 2016).
- 4 See also Chinese Ambassador in South Africa Tian Xuejun 2014.
- 5 During the Cape Town International Dance Festival, Vuyani Dance Theatre and Jin Xing Dance Company put on a double-bill of full-length works. Vuyani presented work that had recently been presented at the National Arts Festival, SIVA (Seven) and Jin Xing brought *Echo*, choreographed by South African Moya Michael.
- 6 See also videos made during the rehearsal process <http://bodymindballet.com/going-behind-the-scenes-for-joburg-ballets-swan-lake> (accessed 23 June 2016).
- 7 For a closer examination of the evolution of Handspring and its distinctive expertise in puppetry see the article by Basil Jones in *African Theatre: Companies*.

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