

**Institution:** University of Leeds

**Unit of Assessment:** 28 Modern Languages and Linguistics

**Title of case study:** Influencing the cultural understanding and professional practice of performance across China and the West

### 1. Summary of the impact

Li's research into Chinese spoken and song/dance theatres, and particularly into the work of playwright Cao Yu, has influenced professional arts practice and enriched cultural understanding in the UK, Europe, North America and China. By creating and reinterpreting cultural capital, it has generated new ways of developing intercultural themes and strategies within performance and its promotion, and has directly influenced programming and education policy within the arts. The research has had an international and wide-ranging impact, facilitating cross-cultural understanding between the West and China and reaching a variety of sectors and social demographics. It has significance for user groups including lay audiences, professional practitioners and policy-makers.

### 2. Underpinning research

Appointed to Leeds as Lecturer in Chinese Studies in 1988, Li's research has focused on both modern (spoken) and traditional (song/dance form) Chinese theatre since 1993, foregrounding a critical set of questions pertaining to transnational relations:

- How is China 'performed' through intra/inter/cross-cultural productions?
- In what ways does this 'performing' of China inform and change perspectives?
- How can Chinese theatre be used as a cultural bridge between different societies?

This body of research explores how Chinese theatre has responded to tensions between tradition and modernity, and local and global dynamics. It also addresses stage conventions and innovation that cut across these contexts **(1, 2)**. It has shown how, through the negotiation and compromise made by practitioners at different times, Chinese theatre has undergone a re-examination of its inner artistic logic and a re-adjustment to the demands of the external world. Combining performance and socio-cultural perspectives, the research is original and distinctive in examining China and its culture through the lens of theatre **(1-6)**.

Li has carried out her research through analysing stage conventions, archives and live interviews with performers, arts administrators and audiences **(1, 2, 4, 5)** The current research network, *Staging China* (formerly *Performing China on the Global Stage*, 2011-12), for which Li is PI and Susan Daniels, Fellow in Arts and Cultural Education in the School of Performance and Cultural Industries, is Co-I, is supported by external funding **(ii)** and has involved academics, research students, theatre companies and general audiences in the UK, Europe, China, North America and Australia. The aim of this project is to examine how China is constructed and projected through intra/inter/cross-cultural stage productions in Chinese (including different dialects) and in English, and how theatre shapes perceptions of China and Chinese culture through performances, including language delivery, acting, directing, scenography and *mise en scène*.

While Chinese theatre is Li's primary object of study, the cross-cultural orientation of her work facilitates a more inclusive understanding of the arts in other contexts **(1, 2, 3, 5)**, as is evident in the collaborative, practice-led research projects for which Li was PI: *Shakespeare on the Chinese Stage 1979-89* (1999-2000); and *Continuity, Creativity and Regeneration: Li Yuru*

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and *Jingju's Creativeness in the Second Half of the Twentieth Century* (2010) (1, 2, 5, 6). Her expertise in traditional and modern forms of Chinese drama, and her background in theatre practice, has made her an invaluable consultant for theatre directors, writers and practitioners on a national and international scale. Her original research on the life and work of Cao Yu (4) led to her instrumental role in the planning, organisation and delivery of the Cao Yu inspired stage production, *The Sun is Not for Us*, and related events, which toured the UK and China between 2011 and 2013. Moreover, her advocacy of cross-cultural exchange and reception through drama and education has resulted in the facilitation of multiple collaborations between HEIs, theatre groups and cultural organisations in the UK, Canada and China since 2005, influencing working methods and policy, and deepening a reciprocal awareness of Chinese and Western forms of theatre.

### 3. References to the research

1. Li, R., *The Soul of Beijing Opera: Theatrical Creativity and Continuity in the Changing World*, Hong Kong University Press, 2010. This book contains a foreword by internationally recognised pioneer of theatre anthropology theory, Eugenio Barba, and was produced as part of a Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation-funded project (Senior Fellowship 2006-07, €25,600). (Listed in REF 2)
2. Li, R., 晶莹透亮的玉: 李玉茹舞台上下 / 家庭内外 (*Translucent Jade: Li Yuru on Stage and in Life*), Shanghai People's Publishing House, 2010. Parts of this book were later adapted into a two-series film documentary: *Li Yuru, a Celebrated Actress and Researcher of Beijing Opera*, Shanghai Documentary Channel, 'Old Stories'. (Listed in REF 2)
3. Li, R., *Shashibiya: Staging Shakespeare in China*, Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2003. (Available on request)
4. Li, R., (Area Editor), 'China: Modern', *Encyclopedia of Asian Theatre*, 2 vols, Samuel L. Leiter, ed, Westport, Connecticut and London: Greenwood Press, 2007. (Available on request)
5. Li, R., 'Market, Ideology and Convention: Jingju Performer's Creativity in the Twenty-first Century', in *The Drama Review*, 56:2 (T214) Summer 2012, 131-51. (Listed in REF 2)
6. Li, R., 'Singing, speaking, dance-acting, and combat; mouth, hands, eyes, body and steps from training to performance in Beijing Opera (*jingju*)', *Theatre, Dance and Performance Training*, 3:1, March 2012, 4-26. DOI:10.1080/19443927.2011.646293 (Listed in REF 2)

#### Indicators of the quality of this research include:

- i. Its contribution to Leeds's submission for both RAE 2008 and REF 2014.
- ii. Substantial HE, public and private financial support: £45,116 (full economic cost value) AHRC grant for *Staging China* (2013-14; 20 months); £12,234 Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation conference grant; and external funds of approx. £25,000 raised by University of Leeds Alumni, Sino-British Fellowship Trust, Seewoo Group, Shanghai Theatre Academy, Qianjiang Municipal Government, Beijing People's Art Theatre, Sichuan People's Art Theatre, and private donors from the Chinese community in UK (funds generated from the Cao Yu centenary events).
- iii. Positive peer reviews of publications: *The Encyclopaedia of Asian Theatre* has been named an 'outstanding reference' by the American Library Association in 2008; Constance Orliski comments that Li's Shakespeare book (3) 'offers a unique and stimulating resource for Chinese politics, society, and culture' (*China Information*, 2005, 19:345). Colin Mackerras points out that 'the richness of what the Beijing Opera book has to say about performance, gender, history, politics, and society also makes it a real contribution to the literature not only on Beijing Opera but also on China, theatre and performance in general' (*Chinese Oral and Performing Literature*, 2010, 29:268-69) (1).
- iv. Invitations to give keynote/plenary speeches: the 2013 International *jingju* Conference in Beijing; the 2011 Harvard international symposium, *Staging the Modern: Theatre, Intermediality and Chinese Drama*; and the 2008 international conference organized by Nottingham University Ningbo campus China, *Renderings: Shakespeare across Continents*.

#### 4. Details of the impact

Li's in-depth, specialist knowledge of Chinese theatre (modern and traditional), her unique methodology of combining theatrical and socio-cultural analysis in her research, and her background in theatre practice, has allowed her to work with a range of international audiences, theatre practitioners and arts professionals. Impact activities can be divided into two strands: (1) the promotion of cross-cultural awareness to general audiences through the Cao Yu centenary events; and (2) Li's collaborations with theatre companies on an international scale, through which she directly influenced programming and education policies.

##### **Strand 1: Promoting cross-cultural awareness to general audiences through the Cao Yu centenary project (2011-13)**

In the UK, Canada, USA and China, large audiences were drawn to exhibitions, public lectures, seminars, workshops, film screenings and a stage production – *The Sun Is Not for Us* – a newly created work based on four canonical plays by Cao Yu (1910-96), the pioneer of modern Chinese drama. Generated from Li's research on the playwright and inspired by Cao Yu's centenary in 2010, the project involved 17 venues (including the Edinburgh Fringe Festival and the Shanghai International Contemporary Theatre Festival) and attracted a combined audience of over approximately 25,000 across the UK, North America and China **(A)**. Li closely liaised with the company to develop the original script (regularly advising on content and staging), and wrote content for the production booklet and leaflet. She was solely responsible for curating the exhibition, delivering workshops and lectures at select venues, and was instrumental in securing funding to extend the geographic reach of the tour (part of the *Staging China* network, the project raised external funds totalling approx. £25,000). Li's approach to planning and delivering a Cao Yu themed workshop at the National Theatre of Scotland led the producer to see the value of working with academics in the development of cross-cultural productions **(B)**.

Western audiences rarely get the opportunity to see Chinese works on this scale, while Chinese audiences were enlightened by the stage production because it demonstrated Western young people's understanding and interpretation of Chinese classics. The Arts Manager of the British Council (Shanghai) commented: '*The Sun* leaves us an inspiring example of cultural exchange and hopefully a legacy in China' **(C)**. These activities have attracted large-scale media interest in the UK, North America and China, including: 5 reviews of the 2012 Edinburgh Fringe Festival; 3 Chinese language newspapers published in the UK/Europe (with circulation between 20,000-80,000, covering 12 European countries); 19 paper newspapers and magazines in China including Youth Daily (450,000); Daily News (500,000), Shanghai Evening Post (750,000), China Financial and Economic News (300,000) and Liaoning Daily (400,000); 52 online media reports; 2 online video reports; 6 detailed reports on organizations' websites including the Ministry of Culture; 3 TV reviews and a special report programme (in English and Chinese); and over 100 audience members' comments through Chinese mini blogs, including long reviews **(D)**.

##### **Strand 2: Changing theatre practice and informing cultural policy nationally and internationally**

In 2012-13 Li collaborated with the director, cast members, and publicity and education departments of the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) for its first production of a Chinese play, *The Orphan of Zhao*. Her specialist knowledge of Chinese theatre was highly valued by members of the company and she was consulted on several occasions by the director on matters of content and staging. Li led a 1-day method workshop with 20 company actors and contributed text for the production programme. As part of the project outreach she also delivered a talk to 100 A-level students at an international academy in Stratford-upon-Avon. In

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the words of the RSC's Artistic Director, Li's workshop with the acting company was 'revelatory, and had a profound impact on the development of the production' (E).

Li's expertise and research networks have also helped West Yorkshire Playhouse (WYP) to extend its programming to include Chinese theatre. In 2005 she facilitated the joint production of *The Dutiful Daughter* with London based Chinese Crackers (an organisation promoting links between British and Chinese theatres) and the Sichuan People's Art Theatre (SPAT). The original script was based on the experience of WYP practitioners during a visit to Sichuan, where Li accompanied the group and acted in the capacity of language and cultural interpreter, as well as research consultant. Based on the success of this initial collaboration, in 2010-11 SPAT received a grant from the Sichuan provincial government to work with WYP a second time. Daniels (Co-I) has since made a trip to Sichuan with the newly appointed Artistic Director of WYP, in preparation for a second cross-cultural production (scheduled to be delivered in 2014). The Associate Director of Young People's Theatre at WYP has noted that Li's research 'added a rigour to the relationship that had influenced the company's view of China, which is now spreading beyond professional areas directly related to productions, outwards to other areas such as Theatre in Education' (F).

Li was consulted by the organisers of the World Shakespeare Festival held at the Globe Theatre in London as part of the Cultural Olympiad in 2011-12 (G) resulting in the inclusion of two Chinese theatre company productions, *Titus and Andronicus* and *Richard III*, which Li was asked to review for the official Festival blog (H). To encourage future such collaborations and as part of the *Staging China* project, Li convened the international symposium 'Performing China' in March 2013, bringing together theatre researchers and practitioners in an open, interactive forum. After attending the event, the Executive Director of the newly-established cultural exchange company Performance Infinite wrote: 'This symposium made me realize the importance of research. Without a profound understanding and knowledge of both Chinese and Western theatre, you wouldn't have had such an excellent structure and components... we will do more research in order to run our business more effectively and more efficiently' (I).

## 5. Sources to corroborate the impact

- A. Venues involved in Cao Yu centenary project events from October 2011 to March 2013 (including stage production *The Sun Is Not for Us* and accompanying exhibition, film screening, workshop and lecture): London Confucius Institute; stage@leeds, University of Leeds; Horsforth Forum 2000, Leeds; Edinburgh Confucius Institute for Scotland; Newcastle Northern Stage; Frederic Wood Theatre, Vancouver; Cove Park Residential Artists Centre, Scotland; Ohio State University; Wycombe Abbey School and Eden College; London Meridian Society; Hyatt Hotel, Capitol Hill, Washington DC; Edinburgh Fringe; Kennesaw State University; Shanghai Dramatic Arts Centre, China; Jiangnan Art Vocational College, Qianjiang, Hubei province, China; New Space, Sichuan Normal University, Chengdu, Sichuan Province; Confucius Institute in Ann Arbor.
- B. Interview transcript, Producer, National Theatre of Scotland (*available on request*)
- C. Email correspondence, British Council (Shanghai) Arts Manager (*available on request*)
- D. Copies of printed reviews and links to websites and blogs (*available on request*)
- E. Interview transcript, Artistic Director, Royal Shakespeare Company; and feedback from workshop questionnaires (*available on request*)
- F. Interview transcript, Director, West Yorkshire Playhouse (*available on request*)
- G. Email exchanges with Festival Producer, World Shakespeare Festival, 15 and 30 November 2010; 18 and 20 December 2010. (*available on request*).
- H. See <http://blog.shakespearesglobe.com/titus-andronicus-by-li-ruru-university-of-leeds/>; and: <http://blog.shakespearesglobe.com/richard-iii-by-li-ruru-university-of-leeds/>
- I. Email from Executive Director of Performance Infinite to symposium organizers (*available on request*)