



Culture

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The Theatre and US-China Relations: An Interview with Claire Conceison

China Focus gives special thanks to guest contributor **Rachel Leng** for this interview. Rachel spoke with Professor Claire Conceison (康开丽) when she was Visiting Professor of Drama at Harvard University 2014-2015. Claire Conceison is a scholar, translator, director, and author of several books and articles. She is Professor of Theater Studies and Asian & Middle Eastern Studies at Duke University and and Visiting Professor of Theater Arts at MIT. She earned her A.M. in Regional Studies—East Asia from Harvard University and her PhD in Theatre Studies from Cornell University. Her areas of research and teaching are contemporary Chinese theater, cross-cultural exchange and performance, Asian American theatre, translation, and sport as performance. Below is Rachel's interview with Professor Conceison about her perspective on the role and impact of theatre and performing arts on Sino-US relations.

Your first book, *Significant Other: Staging the American in China* analyzes representations of Americans that emerged onstage in China between 1987 and 2002 and explores their significance as racial and cultural stereotypes, political strategy, and artistic innovation. In the book, you identify this American figure as China's "significant Other" in the long history of Sino-Western relations and post-colonialism. Since 2002, what major shifts and changes have you seen in representations of China's "significant Other" onstage and how do you think this reflects the present Sino-U.S. relationship?

The cultural landscape in China regarding foreigners and representation of foreigners (particularly Americans) has definitely evolved and shifted in the past decade since the book was published. For one thing, there are many more Americans living in Beijing and Shanghai (the two cities that have been my research bases since 1990)—Americans are more integrated into Chinese residential, employment, and entertainment sectors of society, while at the same time, an increasing number of Chinese citizens travel abroad as tourists or students. So, the novelty of seeing a live foreigner has worn off a bit, but images and stereotypes of foreigners and Americans still persist in China. And nationalism is still a strong public sentiment, particularly since Xi Jinping's proliferation of the "China Dream" concept. An interesting side note: the 1987 production of *China Dream* that I wrote about in the book was revived this past year after President Xi gave

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Theatre companies in China and individual artists from China and the US continue to collaborate on productions, some of which are bilingual, so this type of cross-cultural theatre activity is no longer an anomaly. And a significant contribution in the past decade has been the international theatre festivals established by playwright and theatre manager Yu Rongjun (Nick Yu) in Shanghai and director Meng Jinghui in Beijing that feature many cross-cultural and translingual productions and audiences. Contemporary Chinese plays still do not tour outside of China very often—it would be nice to see this activity increase so that Americans in the US can be exposed to Chinese theatre and social issues reflected in that theatre.

In recent years, many countries have begun to feel anxious about the rise of China. As a result, the Chinese government has promoted its agenda of a “peaceful rise” by emphasizing cross-cultural communication and soft power. In your experience as a Chinese studies scholar while also an active translator and theatre practitioner, what do you think have been the most significant developments in the US-China cultural diplomacy?

The most significant developments in the 21st century have been the increased flow of information in both directions (via internet, other forms of media, and direct human interaction) and China’s increased agency in disseminating Chinese culture, especially in terms of financial resources. During the 20th century, artists and intellectuals were mostly dependent on foreign capital and channels to travel or experience intercultural collaborations (via organizations like the Goethe Institute, British Counsel, or USIS, for instance), and the Chinese Ministry of Culture or individual theatre companies and academies had little funding to contribute. That has all changed—China now invests considerable funds in “soft power” to disseminate Chinese culture and ideology, and this leads to more balanced and well-funded Sino-American collaborations.

This increased internationalism that is less dependent on the financial resources of the foreign countries is a significant development, and I think it means that China will be able to do things more on its own terms or on mutually decided terms, revising the culturally imbalanced (and somewhat colonialist) model of the revered “foreign expert” brought to China to enlighten the locals.

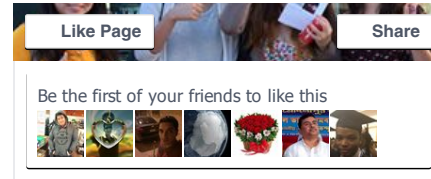
One example of China’s financial investment in these efforts is the proliferation of Confucius Institutes around the world and their influence (the pros and cons for all parties involved are much-debated). There are also projects funded by individual theatres and theatre academies in China, such as the annual Winter Institute at the Shanghai Theatre Academy (funded by the academy via grants from the municipal government) that gathers faculty and students from China and the US (and beyond) for a series of workshops, lectures, and performances every January. And theatre companies like the Shanghai Dramatic Arts Center devote large funds to inviting foreign directors and designers to stage foreign plays (a current annual series hosted by SDAC featured a Russian director directing *Uncle Vanya* in Chinese in 2013, a French team staging *School for Wives* in 2014, an American director to direct *Glass Menagerie* in 2015, and a British director will be invited to stage *Romeo and Juliet* in 2016).

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Another one of your books, *Voices Carry: Behind Bars and Backstage during China’s Revolution and Reform*, is an autobiography of the late Ying Ruocheng, who was a beloved Chinese stage and screen actor, theatre director, translator, and high-ranking politician as Vice Minister of Culture from 1986–1990. Ying was imprisoned during the Cultural Revolution and is probably best known for being a founding member of the Beijing People’s Art Theatre, bringing Arthur Miller to China to stage *Death of a Salesman* in 1983 and playing the role of Willy Loman in his own translation of the play. Ying Ruocheng played a critical role in Sino-American exchange with his work at the Beijing People’s Art Theatre, but was also a “spy” for his own government and a cultural ambassador. What was your experience working with Ying on his autobiography and could you share some keywords regarding his perspective on the role of culture and politics in China-US relations and mutual understanding?

As I explain in the introduction to *Voices Carry*, it was an honor and a delight to collaborate with Ying Ruocheng on his autobiography and make its existence possible for both Chinese and international readers (there are two versions of the book, one in English and one in Chinese called 水流云在). Mr. Ying and I worked on the project

Ying made great strides in bringing cultural circles of the US and China (and UK and China) together and fostering mutual understanding and appreciation—we sorely need people like Ying Ruocheng in the US and China today, and sadly they are extremely rare.



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together from 2000 until his death in 2003 and then I continued the project, completing it for him over the next five years and publishing the two books in 2009. While collaborating in China, I met with him daily during summers, first at his home and then in his hospital room (he was dying of cirrhosis of the liver the entire period we worked on the project) and I asked him to narrate stories about his life while I audiotaped, videotaped, took notes, asked questions, did research, and interviewed family and colleagues to verify and clarify information. Through this process, I learned a great deal not only about Ying's rich and colorful life experiences, but about Chinese cultural and political history from his grandfather's era (the late Qing dynasty) to the early 21st century.

Ying's story is a very moving and entertaining way for readers to learn about China from a very unique perspective, and from a cross-cultural perspective since Ying was a renaissance man with command of Western language, values, education, and art and culture. Ying made great strides in bringing cultural circles of the US and China (and UK and China) together and fostering mutual understanding and appreciation—we sorely need people like Ying Ruocheng in the US and China today, and sadly they are extremely rare.

In terms of his work as a spy, that is something he was understandably reluctant to speak about in any detail in his autobiography, but he does mention it briefly and I discuss it at greater length in the introduction. He and his wife Wu Shiliang did gain material and political advantages by writing reports for the Chinese government about conversations with their many influential foreign friends and colleagues for many years, beginning back when they were college students at Tsinghua University in the 1950s, but that activity also indirectly landed them in prison for three years during the Cultural Revolution when Beijing's mayor Peng Zhen fell out of favor.

You have been working on an introduction to Arthur Miller's *Death of A Salesman in Beijing*. Could you share your perspective on the significance of the play being brought to China, and specifically to Beijing, and how it might have impacted cross-cultural understanding? Have other foreign plays had similar impact or resonance when performed in China?

Indeed, a new edition of Miller's book *Salesman in Beijing* (first published by Viking Press in 1984 and then republished after Miller's death by Methuen in 2005) is being produced by Bloomsbury this year commemorating the centennial of Miller's birth, and it is retitled *Death of a Salesman in Beijing*. It is the same book: Miller's first-hand account of his experience directing his own 1949 play *Death of a Salesman* at the Beijing People's Art Theatre in 1983. It was quite an honor to be asked to write the new introduction and to reflect on the impact of that ground-breaking production and also the influence of Miller in China overall.

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Because China was just emerging from the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution and Sino-American exchanges were just emerging too, a high profile artist and public intellectual like Arthur Miller going to China to direct his first play was certainly newsworthy in both countries and drew a great deal of media and public attention. In addition to that, some of China's greatest stage actors—Ying Ruocheng, Zhu Xu, Zhu Lin and others—were cast in the production, and the play itself was translated by Ying, who made the whole project happen. It had been one of Ying's dreams since he first read the play in college (soon after it was published in English) to see it staged in China one day.

The 1983 production introduced Chinese audiences and artists to a new kind of realism, a new kind of tragic hero (the same basis on which the play was path-breaking in the US), and to a new way of depicting foreign people and lives onstage. After a long tradition of impersonation of foreigners through wigs and heavy makeup, Miller rejected this approach in favor of a more hybridized effect—that of an American family that may or may not be Chinese or Jewish living in a Brooklyn that may or may not reflect personal relationships or social mores of Beijing. Theatre people in China still often make reference to the production and its impact, though they also have varying opinions on the overall influence of the play itself or of Miller in China. Certainly in theatre circles, Miller's work is well known—in terms of American playwrights assigned to theatre students, Miller would rank third behind O'Neill and Williams.

His plays *The Crucible* and *All My Sons* were also staged in China, both decades ago and again more recently: Wang Xiaoying's Beijing production of *The Crucible* several years ago entitled "Witches of Salem" and Lei Guohua's recent co-production with University of Kansas of *All My Sons* in English that was performed in US and in Shanghai were both very successful. In 2013, *Death of a Salesman* was restaged at Beijing People's Art Theatre for the first time since 1983 in a new production by director Li Liuyi, who adopted a more expressionist approach.

When I teach about 20th and 21st century Chinese plays, I include *Death of a Salesman* because it was an important play and production in Chinese theatre history. I also teach George Aiken's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, both of which had a huge impact on the development of modern drama in China when they were staged (again, in both early and more contemporary productions). Today, there have been countless foreign plays staged in China in Chinese by Chinese artists, ranging from Shakespeare to Gurney, and they have all had significant impact on the theatre community, but I would say that in terms of mainstream audiences it is Shakespeare that is most influential and in terms of experimental artists, it is people like Brecht and the absurdist dramatists of the mid-20th century like Beckett and Genet that have had the greatest impact.

You founded an Asian American theatre group in college yourself and helped Duke students start one two years ago as well. Could you speak more about what motivated you to get involved with such a theatre project as well as what impact on the community you believe the group has in facilitating cross-cultural communication?

The reason I founded AACT (Asian/Asian-American Cooperative Theater) at Wesleyan University in 1987 and the reason we founded DAAT (Duke Asian American Theater) in 2012 at Duke—and the reason most Asian American theater companies in the US were founded—was very practical. In my case as a college student, I wanted to direct a production for my senior thesis (a stage adaptation of Shanghai writer's Bai Hua's controversial novel *Unrequited Love* that had landed him in prison in 1981) and I needed to cast more than 30 actors of Asian ethnicity, and there was no Asian American acting pool visible at Wesleyan at the time. So, I went to a monthly meeting of the Asian and Asian American student group, introduced myself, and told the membership that I wanted to cast everyone who was interested in my play—and I did.

DAAT's mission is to provide opportunities for these students, to cultivate more interest in the general Asian American student body in theater courses and activities, and to assure that the stories and lives of Asian Americans and Asians are told and reflected and embodied on our stages.

Even when students came to auditions to volunteer to make props, I put a script in their hands, asked them to read a few lines, and then posted their names when the cast list went up. Everyone stayed in the cast and it was an exhilarating experience—it was the first time the Asian American and Asian communities at Wesleyan (a small liberal arts university of about 2,500 students) had ever participated in or seen a show that reflected their population and a story from their culture. The group was born out of that production, very much out of necessity, and it still exists today and I would say its continued existence—and the emergence of the group at Duke—is also out of necessity.

At Duke, Asian Americans make up a third of the student body, but are underrepresented on stage in our productions. Some Asian and Asian American students who audition are not cast, and this is discouraging. The situation only improves if students have opportunities to develop more skills in acting, directing, playwriting, and design. And this only happens if students take courses in the theater studies department and also have welcoming outlets for trying out their work. DAAT's mission is to provide opportunities for these students, to cultivate more interest in the general Asian American student body in theater courses and activities, and to assure that the stories and lives of Asian Americans and Asians are told and reflected and embodied on our stages. I am very proud of what the students are accomplishing at Duke, beginning with Rachel Whitney who started the group and served as its first president, organizing events and staged readings and a 24-hour play festival, and now Kathy Zhu and Harmony Zhang who mounted DAAT's first full production this year (Lauren Yee's *Ching Chong Chinaman*) and another 24-hour festival.

Change does not always happen overnight, but dedicated students with passion can transform the cultural landscape at universities and leave important and lasting legacies for future students—now, when Asian and Asian American freshmen arrive at Duke, a theater group for them exists as if it has always been there... but it was a long time in coming and it serves a very important purpose. I think students and faculty at Duke are now much more aware of Asian theater, Asian American theater, and the creative talents of their Asian and Asian American peers and students as both part of a broader "American" theater milieu and as part of cross-cultural and intracultural energy and dialogue on campus.

It has been more than three decades since the U.S. and China have resumed diplomatic relations. What do you think will be the biggest unifying components and the largest obstacles in U.S.-China relations in the coming decades, specifically in the realm of cultural diplomacy and arts exchanges?

I believe that ignorance and arrogance are always the largest obstacles to diplomacy and exchange of any kind. Those who engage in cross-cultural work need to first recognize that, whether American or Chinese, they have been socialized to believe certain "truths" or

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subscribe to misconceptions regarding the other nation, culture, political system, and its people. One can never truly know another person, or group of people, or nation—but one should not use that as an excuse to walk into cultural diplomacy and exchange without learning as much as one can beforehand and during the process.

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I am amazed when foreign theatre artists agree to work in China but do not read anything about China or learn anything about its modern theatre, its playwrights, its theorists, its theatre companies and productions etc. This information is all available in English now, where it was not two decades ago. Chinese artists and scholars know a lot more about American theatre history and culture than their counterparts know about China's. Both sides of these exchanges are responsible for educating the other, and we need more cultural consultants who not only can translate linguistically (a very important aspect of diplomacy and exchange that is often glossed over or taken for granted) but can also transmit cultural knowledge, be it historical, economic, political, and/or artistic.

The greatest unifying component is that we all want to produce successful projects and effective productions that move and enlighten international and domestic audiences. But unfortunately, as of now, I think the obstacles outweigh the “unifying” factors and that in spite of the rhetoric that all participants employ about lofty ideals and even positive results, the actual fruits of these collaborations are not bringing us as close to mutual knowledge and appreciation as they should be by now.

I do not mean to sound pessimistic—because of the factors mentioned previously, the landscape is changing and cultural exchange is improving, but not at the level that one might expect in a transnational world. People outside of China still do not really take the time to learn in depth about Chinese history, society, and culture beyond what they see in the mainstream media (which is often distorted and misleading). This will remain an obstacle to progress as long as it persists, especially if the participants at the center of the projects sustain this kind of willful ignorance.

Rachel Leng is a Research Associate and English Editorial Program Officer at the Asan Institute for Policy Studies in Seoul, South Korea. She graduated from an MA in Regional Studies – East Asia at Harvard University, and BA with double distinction in Public Policy and Economics from Duke University. At Harvard, she was a 2015 Graduation Commencement Marshall, Editor-in-Chief at the Harvard Asia Quarterly, and President of the Harvard East Asia Society (HEAS). For her research work on Chinese culture, literature, and society, she was a “25 Under 25 Leaders in U.S.-China Relations” honoree of China Hands Magazine and has won several awards including an Honorable Mention for the 2015 Joseph Fletcher Memorial Award and the 2014 Lowell Aptman Prize.

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Peter Larson is the Editor in Chief of the China Focus Blog. He is a second year student at GPS, studying International Economics with a regional focus on China. Peter's research interests include China's politics, economy, foreign policy and US-China relations.

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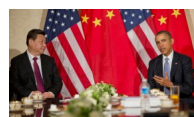
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