

Gateway to Chinese Arts and Culture

THE CONFUCIUS INSTITUTE

at the University of Michigan

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Chinglish, A Roundtable Discussion

关于话剧《中式英语》的讨论

January 13, 2012



Above: Henry Hwang, playwright

Right: Joanna Lee, Henry Hwang, and Ken Smith at the roundtable discussion of "Chinglish"



Authored by Tony Award-winning writer David Henry Hwang, *Chinglish* is a drama heralded by Time Magazine as one of 2011's best plays. At the height of the show's popularity on the Broadway stage, CIUM invited Hwang, and his cultural consultants, Dr. Joanna Lee and Mr. Ken Smith to U-M to discuss the creative process behind this captivating and globally relevant tale. In relating the long process of confronting, understanding, and dramatizing the cultural, linguistic and sociopolitical complexities generated by the interactions of Chinese and Americans, the trio gave a personal and witty account. They also posed a critical question for U-M students groomed to become international leaders and cosmopolitans: How should Chinese and Americans communicate with each other—with Chinese, English, Chinglish, or what?

由东尼奖得主、著名剧作家黄哲伦创作的话剧《中式英语》被《时代》杂志喻为2011年最佳戏剧之一。正值该剧在百老汇卖座之际，密大孔院邀请黄哲伦及其文化顾问李正欣和肯恩·史密斯作客密大讲述这部话剧的创作历程。三人从亲身体会出发，幽默地讲述了漫长的创作历程中的种种遭遇和认识，以及如何将中美交往中所产生的文化、语言和社会政治的复杂性搬上舞台。他们也向未来将成为世界性公民和国际领袖的密大学生们提出了一个深刻的问题：中国人和美国人该如何交流：用英语、中文、中式英语，还是其他语言？

Right: A Scene from the U-M student production "Chinglish"



"Featured Student Production: Chinglish"

代表性学生活动: 话剧《中式英语》

October 3 - 5, 2013

Chinglish: A Production Report

Theatre is, at its most fundamental essence, a medium for understanding life and exploring what isn't found in our own worlds. This exploration works at its richest, I believe, when we work with people from different paths of life, from different cultures, and certainly from different nationalities. The exploration becomes especially powerful when the performance ensemble's dynamic reflects that of characters in the story being staged.

That was very much the case with *Chinglish* by Chinese American playwright David Henry Hwang, a dramatic performance presented at the University of Michigan's Duderstadt Video Studio by the Confucius Institute and the Transcultural Theatre Troupe (formerly the Chinese Drama Club) in collaboration with a team of international and interdisciplinary students.

Chinglish is a story about the struggles of communication and human interaction, and the universal human desire to understand and be understood. The play follows an American businessman desperately seeking to land a lucrative business contract to fix the terribly mistranslated English signage in the city of Guiyang, China. After continuous linguistic misunderstandings, shady arrangements, and an affair with a secretive Chinese woman from the Ministry of Culture, he learns that there is much to be lost and found in translation.

Having heard of the play during its Broadway run, I found the premise interesting and highly relevant at a macro-level, given the increasingly interdependent and complex relationship between the US and China, and at a micro-level where globalization initiates contact between people around the world, making them more and more alike. Failing to remain close to what's fundamentally human, globalized and homogenized individuals are more often than ever losing touch with their roots and finding themselves as foreigners even in their own homes. With the prospect of producing the drama becoming a reality, I questioned myself, as many others did: how could a play like this speak to the student body of a public university in the US Midwest? I then approached the question by asking: how could it not?

Forty-one percent of international students at the University of Michigan come from China, one of the highest percentages in the nation. There is a gap in the relationship between Chinese and American students that needs to be bridged. Since my arrival at this university, I have seen uncanny interpersonal interactions represented in the student body. There is an under-spoken divide between these two "bands" of Chinese and American students. In my early weeks at Michigan, and in the most quotidian of Michigan activities - commuting on the MBus - I witnessed a vivid, almost theatrical, tableau of the divide. Students on the bus had instinctively partitioned themselves into the Chinese faction and the American faction, all in vivid conversation within themselves yet with indifference to the other side of the vehicle. Recalling this experience, my wish to stage *Chinglish* became more than a curiosity, but a necessity to initiate a conversation on an unfortunate disconnect.

A scene from *Chinglish*A scene from *Chinglish*

However, undertaking a project like *Chinglish*, was more of an experiment than an exercise in political commentary. What would the theatre bear out of this collaboration? What kind of life would inhabit the stage when bringing together people from very different sensibilities, disciplines (theatre, film, public policy, chemistry, math PhDs, etc.) and cultures and ethnicities (Americans, Chinese-Americans, Chinese-Indonesians, ethnic Chinese, Japanese-Mexicans, and...)

The reception went far above what any of us could've expected. Audiences of the most diverse kinds were eating it up, with every performance filled overcapacity. In fact, the audience rate for performances was so high that we felt compelled to hold a screening

of the recording later in the year. It is impossible to attribute the performance's success to marketing or artistic execution, regardless of their quality. The success comes from the content of the play which had an audience it could speak to. It was not theatre for the thespian's sake (as often happens in student productions). It was theatre for a diverse and underrepresented audience who sought to see a bit of their world on stage. Often we attempt to shape people around art, but in fact, it is art that should be shaped around people.

There is a richness born from a work like *Chinglish*, which courageously informs our humanity. It does not resemble any previous form, trope, or archetype; it is a bit unorthodox, but it will definitely cause some sparks. Regarding the U-M production of *Chinglish* I have nothing but gratitude for our collaborators and supporters, and especially the Confucius Institute, which had the courage to say yes to a highly ambitious and unconventional proposal, and stood behind it every step of the way, opening doors, and most importantly believing in the power of transcending culture through art. *Chinglish* gives us answers that bring us closer to a mutual understanding, but also prompts us to go on asking and

exploring. As the play's closing statement says, "we don't quite understand one another entirely, not yet" and thus, we'll surely continue to keep struggling with the various "chinglish-es" of the world. How? When we accept that we are irrevocably different, we will embrace the richness of perspective and experiences that will one day, through empathy and understanding, bring us to a more complete humanity.

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在密大孔院的支持下, 密大音乐戏剧舞蹈学院三年级本科生赫克托·福雷斯·小松将著名剧作家黄哲伦的话剧《中式英语》搬上密大舞台, 剧组成员是一群具有不同国籍和学科背景的学生。《中式英语》讲述了人际沟通互动的困难, 以及大众普遍渴望理解他人和被他人理解的心态。故事是关于一个美国商人在中国做生意的体会, 在经历了一连串语言上的误解之后, 这位商人明白了在翻译的过程中有太多信息被丢失, 又有太多信息被发现。

一次乘坐校车的经历推动小松将该剧搬上密大舞台的动力: 他看到车厢里中美学生各自坐成一拨, 两拨学生内部展开着热烈交谈, 而中美学生之间却没有对话。这次经历让他觉得有必要将《中式英语》搬上密大舞台, 从而推动不同文化间的对话。演出反响远远超出了剧组想象。具有不同文化背景的观众们一致为该剧喝彩, 演出场场爆满。由于希望观看演出的人太多, 小松他们不得不增加放映了一场演出录像。小松认为, 不能把演出的成功仅仅归功于宣传推广手段或演员们的精彩表演而忽略了作品本身的质量。该剧在内容上就能吸引一批观众。



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