

The Power of Communication:
Intergeneration, Intermediality and Transculturality in Documentary Theatre *About*
My Parents and Their Child

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On 23 July 2016, a play titled *About My Parents and Their Child* premiered at the Gulouxi Theatre in downtown Beijing, as part of the seventh Nanluoguxiang Performing Arts Festival. It was brought on stage again a year later as part of the thirteenth Shanghai International Theatre Festival in Shanghai.¹ The play received positive feedback from the live audience and later from some theatre reviewers (Ding 2016; Push 2016). Apart from those, information about the play was soon lost online and amid the countless events in China's booming creative and cultural industries. Only through the scattered information and film clips on Vimeo and the Ibsen in China website can people learn about the existence of the play and imagine what the play might have been like. These scattered pieces of information function as "traces" (Derrida 1976) that reveal the fleeting presence of the play in history. Perhaps such is the nature with all performance arts which are primarily anchored in time and space but whose spectral impact can only be felt later on through ephemeral traces.

Despite its ephemerality, the play is still well worthy of remembrance and critical analysis. It marked one of the first times that documentary theatre as an art form has been practiced experimentally in the PRC. It also serves as a fine exemplar of how intermediality and transmediality are used in China, especially in the context of creative arts. Assembling together photos, videos and writings surrounding the play, in tandem with my interviews with the play's production team, I hope to reconstruct the shapes and meanings of the play in this chapter.²

In his study of new media and digital culture, Henry Jenkins (2006) notes that we live in a transmedia and interconnected world in which multiple platforms are used to communicate

messages. Jenkins identifies a new mode of storytelling, transmedia storytelling — the act of “integrating multiple texts to create a narrative so large that it cannot be contained within a single medium” (Jenkins 2006, 95) — as an innovative way of engaging audience or users in an environment of media convergence. Since Jenkins, media studies as a field has witnessed a surge in the study of transmedia storytelling (e.g. Gambarato and Tárca, 2016; Freeman and Gambarato 2018; Freeman and Proctor 2018). This also speaks to the increasing use of transmedia storytelling in media industries. Transmedia storytelling often involves three aspects: multiple media platforms, content expansions, and audience engagement (Gambarato and Tárca 2016). While much attention has been paid to the technological, narrative and industrial aspects of transmedia storytelling, there have been few explanations regarding why this form actually matters. Transmedia storytelling is often regarded as a technological innovation and a new method of audience engagement in creative and cultural industries (e.g. Evans 2011). In other words, there is a strong commercial incentive attached to the use of transmedia storytelling in the entertainment industries; its purpose is to shape an “experience economy” (Pine and Gilmore 1999) and generate profit. Researchers have also identified the pedagogical use of transmedia storytelling in different educational settings (e.g. Warren, Wakefield and Mills 2013). How transmedia storytelling functions as artistic and activist practices to draw attention to particular social issues and contribute to specific political purposes remains underexplored. This chapter therefore examines how creative individuals and groups in China use intermediality and transmedia storytelling to explore critical social issues such as LGBTQ rights, historical trauma, in addition to inter-generational and cross-cultural communication. I argue that transmedia storytelling can function as an important form of communication that brings people together to engage in critical dialogues, and thus contributes to the construction of a public sphere in China. I use *About My Parents* as a case study to illustrate this point.

About My Parents and Their Child

About My Parents and Their Child (*Guanyu wo fumu he tamen de haizi*, *About My Parents* hereafter) is a play about China’s parent-child relationships. “Their child” in the title takes a singular form, suggesting the issue of China’s one-child policy. The one-child policy, officially introduced in 1979 and removed in 2015, had a huge impact on Chinese society and human relations in China (Jacka 2013). But what has also affected the relationships between children and their parents was China’s rapid transformations from a Maoist and socialist

society to a post-Mao and post-socialist society. Because of different educational and growing-up experiences, parents and children in China often have contrasting values and views, and some of these differences cannot be easily reconciled. The widening gap between parents and children is usually referred to in Chinese as *daigou*, or generation gap. These differences are intensified by China's continuing censorship, under which issues including homosexuality and China's historical trauma such as the Cultural Revolution cannot be openly discussed. This seems to reinforce the cultural stereotype that the Chinese people are an emotionally restrained nation, reluctant to communicate with family members because of the deeply embedded power hierarchies and the hard work over "face" (*mianzi*) maintenance. The generation gap has thus become a serious issue in Chinese society, especially within the family.

Considering the family-oriented kinship and social structure in Chinese society, where home/family (*jia*) is often seen as a priority, the widening generation gap within Chinese families is indeed concerning. Many young people feel that they cannot have an in-depth conversation or even a frank discussion with their parents over intimate matters such as their own sexuality or political issues such as the Cultural Revolution (1966-76). They feel that the older generation's ideas are too traditional or conservative; or that they are too uncritical about the state. Growing up with the Internet and in a more open society, the younger generation often have a better grasp of contemporary issues in China and in the world. The older generation seem to have difficulty coping with the demands of a digital economy and the information age. Having experienced significant historical turbulence, the older generation hesitate to associate themselves with politics, and they appear to conform more easily to social norms and official ideologies. Some also tend to be conservative, and less likely to accept new ideas and take risks. The generation gap in China is therefore not simply related to individual issues; it is social, cultural and deeply embedded in China's historical experiences in a postsocialist world. Bridging the generation gap is thus a fundamentally contemporary issue.

About My Parents is essentially a play about the difficulty and possibility of intergenerational communication between children and parents in contemporary China. By putting parents (in pictures and videos) and children (in real life performances) on the same stage, the play marks an effort to engage in inter-generational dialogues. On the stage, we see four actors narrating their experiences with their own parents and expressing their frustration and pain using body language. At the back of the stage and as a background for the

performance, we see old family photos and video interviews with parents and children, focusing on the parents' perspectives and the historical context, projected onto the wall. The "frontstage" performance and the "backstage" image projections form interesting dialogues. Together, they tell a story about how to communicate inter-generationally, and question whether inter-generational understanding is possible at all.

The dramatic form used in this production is documentary theatre, a non-fiction and fact-based genre of theatrical performance. Including and sometimes referred to as verbatim theatre, documentary theatre consists of plays "based on edited interview material or personal testimony" (Forsyth and Megson 2011, ix). The materials and storylines of documentary theatre are usually drawn from real events and real lives, frequently without altering their words in performance. The director and dramaturge construct the play based on the interviews with real people on specific topics. The actors then act out these scripts on stage, and sometimes incorporate stories based on their own experiences. Biography and autobiography play an important part in a documentary theatre, primarily because of the genre's "emphasis upon witnessing and the intimate" (xii). Contemporary documentary theatre has its root in agitprop theatre practices in Eastern Europe in the 1920s and 30s and has persisted throughout the twentieth century. It has often been used to engage with historical and political issues such as war, revolution and disaster. As an art form attentive to people's narratives and experiences, documentary theatre helps to uncover or problematize the notion of "truth" in history by revealing hidden narratives and memories. Although *About My Parents* is not the first time that documentary theatre has been practiced in China, it is still an important piece of work showcasing how documentary theatre as a form of avant-garde theatre engages with China's social issues.³

In contemporary China, although the Stanislavski school and the classical operatic (*xiqu*) type of dramatic performance are still the mainstream for professional training at elite theatre academies, avant-garde (*xianfeng*), or experimental (*shiyuan*), forms of theatre has emerged in the post-Mao era (Ferrari 2012; Li 2014). In urban China, there are avant-garde theatres such as the Penghao Theatre in Beijing and the Grass Stage Theatre in Shanghai which experiment with innovative forms (Li 2014). There are also numerous small theatres, or "black box theatres" (*heixiazi juchang*), that host these performances. These performances usually attract a young, urban, university-educated and middle-class audience, sometimes nicknamed "literary and art-loving youth" (*wenyi qingnian*) or even jokingly "petit bourgeoisie" (*xiaozi*). They are members of China's rising "middle class" (Chen and Goodman 2013). Many young

people are not satisfied with the status quo of China's state-sponsored performances and market-oriented creative and cultural industries and they therefore turn to independent productions and avant-garde theatres instead. With their bold engagement with contemporary political and social issues, in tandem with their radical forms and aesthetics, avant-garde theatres offer the audience a space for critical reflection and discussion. In a way, it functions as a "public sphere", not unlike the coffeehouses and salons in the eighteenth-century Europe described by Jürgen Habermas (1992), designed for social engagement and civilian participation, however limited or elitist this may be.

Beijing and Shanghai are two major centers for theatre and performing arts in China. Both cities are home to leading theatre academies and national theatre companies; and both host international theatre or cultural festivals. While state-sponsored performing arts festivals or cultural festivals dominate the cultural sections of major newspapers, there are also fringe festivals such as Nanluoguxiang Performing Arts Festival, an annual international performing arts festival hosted by Penghao Theatre, a private theatre based in central Beijing. The vibrant theatre scene also attracts private investment and the participation of international institutions. Goethe Institut and Ibsen International are two institutions frequently involved in theatrical productions. Both promote transnational collaborations between Chinese and European creative professionals, and both supported the production of the play *About My Parents*.

About My Parents has a relatively complex narrative structure. The Beijing version of the play consists of three major components: first, the solo performance of four actors (Hio Meilou, Wang Hailin, Zhang Jiahui and Zou Xueping), narrating and enacting their own experiences with their families through monologues and dance; and second, the actors' reenactment of parent-child relationships based on materials from the interview footage; third, the digital projection of photos and video footages on the wall in the background, showing family photos and interviews with parents and children from different parts of the country. The live performance and the digital projection often interact with each other and constitute fascinating dialogues. But what is presented on stage is only part of the play. The production of the play also involves the director Jochmann and two Chinese filmmakers (Fan Popo and Zou Xueping) travelling to five Chinese cities between February and April 2016, covering 8207.7 kilometers and interviewing parents and children from different social backgrounds (Ibsen in China n.d.). The director and the dramaturge then constructed the scripts for the play based on 58 hours of video interview footage. The project did not end

with the play. After the Beijing performance, Fan Popo made a twenty-two-minute documentary, recounting the process of making the play by assembling footage from rehearsals to performance and interviews with the people involved in the play. The project ends with the finished documentary, now available on Vimeo (Fan 2016). In many ways, this production goes beyond a conventional documentary theatre and becomes a story utilizing multiple media platforms and narrative strategies. It combines intermediality and transmedia storytelling to narrate a story about communication between generations, media and cultures.

Generation Gap and Intergenerational Understanding

As the title of the play suggests, this is a play about parent-child relationships in China. Family is thus a keyword for the play. Home, family and house all translate as *jia* in the Chinese language, and it is thus more appropriate to see them as a home-family-house semantic constellation and ideological construction. Fei Xiaotong's (1992) classic sociological study of Chinese society highlights the importance of the family in social relationships in China and supports the popular argument that a large part of the social relationship in China revolves round family and kinship. Although there has been an "individualization of Chinese society" (Yan 2009) with Chinese economic reforms and social transformation, the centrality of family has not declined in the post-Mao era. Instead, with the privatization of public sectors and the erosion of a publicly-funded social welfare system, families have played crucial roles and have come to replace the state in some key areas such as education, medical care, childcare and elderly care. In "socialism from afar" (Zhang and Ong 2008), the family has become a terrain where a state-led neoliberalism exerts its power and influence on ordinary citizens' lives.

In Fan Popo's documentary about the play, Director Matthias Jochmann explains the rationale for the play as thus:

If we see families as consisting only of parents and children, there are so many things going on in this small circle of people. They can give each other a lot of love, but a lot of pain as well. And pains are such a bad thing in a family. It's not like in a relationship, when you break up with someone, it hurts for a while and then you move on. You have to deal with your family throughout your life. (Jochmann quoted in Fan 2016)

Jochmann explains a strange phenomenon he has observed in China: many children usually live away from their parents when they grow up and mostly contact their parents through phone calls, and the topics of these phone conversations tend to be quite banal and even appear superficial. There is rarely real emotional communication and “private talk” between people from the two generations. Even while young people visit home during festive seasons, the conversations with their parents do not go deep either. There seems a huge generation gap between the two generations. Instead of seeing this as an individual issue, Jochmann relates this phenomenon to social factors and situates the problem in China’s rapid transformations during the past fifty years, when political and social change, together with the state-led one-child policy, shaped family relations in specific ways. In the play, Jochmann contextualizes parent-child relationships in modern Chinese history from 1949 to 2016, and identifies some key historical, often politically sensitive, issues including the famine and the Cultural Revolution, in shaping the older generation’s experience. Jochmann seems to suggest that the lack of communication between the two generations results from historical traumas: without addressing these historical issues, it is difficult to have obstacle-free dialogues between the two generations. The play thus marks an effort to start addressing these issues, with the two generations talking and listening to each other in an attempt to achieve mutual understanding. Communication is often key to achieving such an inter-generational understanding.

For many actors and interviewees, participation in this project marks their efforts to understand and communicate with their own family members. A girl who was interviewed in the video footage comments that she really wanted to know about her mother’s thoughts on their relationship and that was why she participated in this project in the first place. Video artist Zou Xueping performed double roles in the play: both as an actor on stage and as a filmmaker interviewing people in preparation for the play. She also has her own aims: “Through this play, I also want to know more about my parents’ way of thinking. I would like to stand in their shoes.” (Zou quoted in Fan 2016) A parent also remarks that he would like to take this opportunity to understand his child better; otherwise, he would not have agreed to do the interview. It seems that many participants in this project have strong personal connections to the topic and individual motivations to communicate with their family members. Video cameras and stage performances were used to mediate the participants’ own experience and their subjectivity and inter-subjectivity with their families. The project is performative insofar as it communicates, influences and shapes parent-child

relationships for those who participated in the play, be they actors, interviewers and interviewees, or the audience.

In a solo performance, actor Hio Meilou uses monologue and dance to reflect on her relationship with her own mother. A stage re-enactment of her childhood experience shows that the mother did not take an interest in, and even expressed disapproval of, her taking up dancing and acting as a hobby and later as a career. She wished her mother would come to see her perform and feel proud of her, but this never happened. Hio confessed in Fan's documentary that she missed her mother while rehearsing and performing this play: "if it was not for this project, I would not have thought about these things. I would not have had a better knowledge of my parents and myself. This is what I have gained from the project." (Hio quoted in Fan 2016) In Fan's documentary, Actor Wang Hailin also talked about his mixed feelings about the play during the rehearsal period when his father fell ill and had to be taken to hospital; this experience established his deep emotional connection to the play and to his father. Participation in the theatrical production was therefore a transformative experience for many children and parents involved in the production.

Transmedia Storytelling and Intermediality

Utilizing multiple media platforms and incorporating different narratives (including the stage performance of children's experiences, the video interviews about parents' experiences and the historical background; and a documentary film about the experiences of those who participated in the production), *About My Parents* effectively uses the technique of transmedia storytelling to construct a narrative about intergenerational misunderstanding and communication between parents and children in contemporary China. How this technique differs from many conventional forms of transmedia storytelling is that the stage performance and the video interviews are brought together in the same theatre space to create a synergy. The physical proximity of the two media and cultural forms makes it possible for them to interact with each other, thus representing communication and dialogue between the two generations. In other words, the two narratives—the children's narratives represented by the stage performance and the parents' narrative represented by video interviews and projected on the stage wall—are brought together. This represents efforts to start the conversation and to bridge the generation gap. The intermedial nature of the storytelling thus makes this play particularly interesting.

Intermediality is a way to understand the relationship between different forms of medium. It recognizes the fact that we are living in a mediated world and multiple forms of medium work together to shape our perceptions and experiences of the world. Different forms of medium do not simply exist in isolation or parallel in a physical space; they also interact with each other and produce specific effects. As media studies scholar Klaus Bruhn Jensen points out, “as means of expression and exchange, different media refer to and depend on one another, both explicitly and implicitly; they interact as elements of various communicative strategies; and they are constituents of a wider social and cultural environment” (2016, 1). The ways in which different media interact with each other differ from case to case. In this section, I focus on the interaction between stage performance and video projection in *About My Parents*.



Figure 1. Actors stand in front of a house. (Courtesy of Ibsen International)

The play has minimal stage design with no stage props: four actors stand on the stage; in the background, a house-shaped pattern is projected on the wall through lighting, indicating that the story takes place in a family home (Figure 1). After a sequence of random and almost meaningless dialogues between actors, symbolising the everyday phone conversations between parents and children, the scene of actors talking to and across each other suddenly comes to a grinding halt. A scanline that resembles one from an x-ray scanner starts to appear in the background. The scanline moves from top to bottom, and then from bottom to top. As

it moves past the actors' bodies, the scanline bends its shape and changes brightness, following the outlines of the actors' bodies. As soon as the scanline reaches the actors' heads, the actors start to stumble, as if they were struck by lightning (Figure 2). This seems to suggest that the actors' thoughts will be closely examined in the play, in the same way as their brains would be scanned in an MRI (magnetic resonance imaging) scan. While a house representing the idea of home is a commonly used technique on the theatre stage, the scanline hitting the actors is nonetheless innovative. Here we see the interaction between the light (i.e. scanline) and the actors' stage performance. Stage lighting functions a stage prop (in the case of the house) and as a metaphor (in the case of the scanline). Lighting seems to have a life and mind of its own; it is able to trigger a reaction from the actors. This is intermediality in its simplest form: lighting and stage performance as two forms of medium are not independent from each other; they work together and interact with each other to create dramatic effects and generate meanings.



Figure 2. A scanline hits the actors. (Courtesy of Ibsen International)

Yomi Braester emphasizes the “in-between nature” of intermediality and describes its functions thus:

[intermediality] may refer simply to conveying similar content through various media (an extension of intertextuality), to the mediation inherent in communication (emphasizing social gaps and institutional interstices), or — in the sense closest to recent studies of

mediality — to the elective affinity between paradigms of communication across technological practices. (2017, 3)

While the “intertextuality” between projected images and the stage performance is self-evident, each supplying a different part of the story told from a particular perspective, the “elective affinity” between projected images and stage performance warrants more attention in this case. Both images and stage performances represent the mediation of identities; both are representational and performative. Together, they mark the human efforts to communicate. This mode of communication is demonstrated by the combination of image projection and stage performances in the actors’ solos.

As part of the play, each actor delivers a five-minute long solo performance, narrating their own family stories and relationships with their own parents. The actors mostly use monologue, assisted by stage performance. While they are performing, pictures of their families or videos interviews with their parents are projected onto the stage wall. For example, while Actor Zhang Jiahuai is talking about his father, a picture of the father in his youth appears in the background. Standing in the middle of the stage, Zhang then spreads and gazes at his white T-shirt, as his father’s face is projected onto the shirt (Figure 3). This scene seems to suggest that Zhang is talking to his father in an introspective and yet intimate manner, pouring all the words and emotions out of his heart, or ‘opening the door of the heart’ (*changkai xinfei*), as a Chinese idiom says. From Zhang’s monologues, we get to know that in real life, the father seldom talks to the son or answers any questions from the son, leaving Zhang feeling confused about his identity and the growing-up experience. The interactions between Zhang and the projected image of the father thus facilitate an intimate conversation between the son and the father.

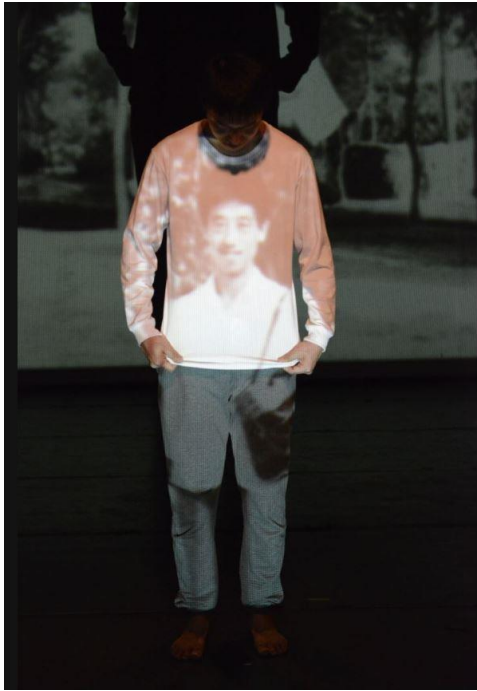


Figure 3. Zhang Jiahui talks to his father. (Courtesy of Ibsen International)

Another actor Zou Xueping's solo is moving and even heart breaking. Zou is a famous filmmaker and video artist from China; she is also an important figure in the village documentary project led by Wu Wenguang. Most of Zou's video works are about her hometown in Shandong; they feature oral histories of old villagers, documenting and narrating the village history and the older generations' historical trauma. Zou has attended many film festivals and won some international recognition of her works. However, her career choice is not understood and supported by her mother living in the countryside. Her mother insists that Zou should take on "normal" employment like other people instead of leading a precarious life as an artist. In the interview video posted on to the wall, Zou has disagreements with her mother and the mother seems quite angry with her. Whilst her mother is talking on screen, Zou is trying to reach her image on the wall, as if to beg for her forgiveness or to seek a reconciliation (Figure 4). Zou's twisted body frame and the mother's angry face are juxtaposed with each other, revealing the pains and struggles of each individual involved in a complex parent-child relationship, as well as highlighting the efforts and difficulties involved in inter-generational communication.



Figure 4. Zou Xueping talks to her mother. (Courtesy of Ibsen International)

In his study of intermediality in theatre and performance, Chiel Kattenbelt (2008) compares the concept of intermediality today to the *Bühnenkompositionen* (stage compositions) of Wassily Kandinsky as opposed to the *Gesamtkunstwerk* of Richard Wagner. The reason, according to Kattenbelt, is that Wagner tries to unify all other artistic elements under the primacy of music, whereas Kandinsky strives to create a theatre that can function as a “hidden magnet” that makes different art forms affect each other (2008: 26). If this analogy is appropriate, then *About My Parents* is certainly a Kandinsky type of stage composition, in which there is no hierarchy between the projected images and the actors’ performance. Here the image and the performance are treated with an equal importance and given the emphasis they each deserve. The equality between different forms of media, together with the penetration of their boundaries on stage, serves as a trope for a more egalitarian type of parent-child relationships.

The play pays meticulous attention to the specificity of each media form. The production design goes against a commonly perceived stereotype that the younger generation are more dependent on digital technologies whilst the older generation tend to engage more with physical forms of communication. In *About My Parents*, the parents’ words and images are primarily mediated in digital formats, through slide shows and video projections; whereas the younger generation — represented by the four actors — use their spoken words and physical bodies to communicate on the stage. Digital technologies, in this context, unsettle conventional power relations and hierarchies of knowledge between older and younger

generations; they point to new promises and unpredictable potentials. The older generation are empowered by digital means of communication, and the younger generation are also encouraged to explore embodied and physical means of communication. Digital media and technologies, therefore, not only bring the two generations together and enable them to communicate with each other in one physical space; they also point to a myriad of possibilities for individual and generational empowerment through strategic, differentiated and often combined uses of media and technologies.

Transculturalism in Creative Arts

The term “transculturalism” is often used in media and cultural studies to describe “how an unequal encounter between cultures—colonial and colonized, imperial and globalized—creates new social and cultural forms, styles or practices” (Chakravartty and Zhao 2008, 12). The term has increasingly been used to replace “interculturalism” or “cross-culturalism”, both of which assume clear boundaries between cultures and the relative integrity of cultures in international communications. Transculturalism recognizes that all cultures are mobile, contingent, and subject to transformations when interacting with each other. No culture can stay static and isolated from others, and that hybridity is the nature of all cultures under colonialism and globalization (Bhabha 2004). Transculturalism thus acknowledges permeability and mutual transformations of cultures during cultural encounters and international communication.

About My Parents is truly a transnational coproduction developed by a team of international professionals. The play was commissioned by Ibsen International, a Norwegian institution, as part of Ibsen in China 2016 and co-produced by Goethe-Institut China, Nanluoguxiang Performing Arts Festival and Shanghai International Theatre Festival. The play was produced by Fabrizio Massini from Italy. The director was Matthias Jochmann from Germany and the dramaturge was Vilma Štritof from Slovenia. All other staff and actors involved in the play were Chinese, including the executive producer Jennifer Zhang, filmmakers Fan Popo and Zou Xueping, and of course the actors: Hio Meilou, Wang Hailin, Zhang Jiahuai, Zhu Sujie and Zou Xueping (Ibsen in China n.d.).⁴ Although the play was performed in the Chinese language and was about the parent-child relationships in China, the international and transcultural nature of the production team transformed the play into one that speaks to many cultures and experiences.

With the producer, director and dramaturge coming from Europe, and the rest of the production team coming from China, transnational coproduction of this nature can risk reproducing cultural imperialism, in which Western cultures dominate cultures from other parts of the world (Tomlinson 1999). From the video interviews, the producer and the director are seen to be keenly aware of the issue. Producer Massini insists that the interviews and videos must be completed by Chinese artists, so that the play could have “a Chinese voice and Chinese eye” (Massini in Fan 2016). This led to Fan Popo and Zou Xueping’s participation in the production. Fan is a leading queer filmmaker from China, specializing in making queer community documentaries. Before this play, he has made the “queer family trilogy” — three documentaries titled *Chinese Closet*, *Mama Rainbow* and *Papa Rainbow* — exploring queer children’s relationships with their parents. Fan’s participation in the production brought a queer sensibility into the play, as many interviewees are LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer) people and their parents. In a way, the play becomes a queer play because of its bold portrayal of issues of sexuality and coming out. As a video artist, Zou Xueping’s documentary films primarily deal with lives in rural China, thus counterbalancing Fan’s urban-centrism and providing important perspectives into the parent-child relationships in the Chinese countryside. Together, Fan and Zou, as well as other Chinese participants in the production, give the play a “Chinese voice” and “Chinese eye”. The format of documentary theatre effectively brings in Chinese voices to avoid possible Eurocentrism and the Western cultural hegemony.

In Fan’s documentary, all the Chinese artists and performers feel that they have learned a lot from the play, especially because documentary theatre is a relatively new dramatic form in China and the topic of parent-child relationship has seldom been explored in such a critical and in-depth way. Director Jochmann also remarks that he has learned a lot from the Chinese crew. Executive producer Jennifer Zhang describes Jochmann in the following words: “In spite of language barriers, he [Jochmann] is very patient when communicating with others. He is always inspired by their feedback.” (Zhang quoted in Fan 2016)

A good example to illustrate the transcultural nature of the theatrical production is the controversy over a kiss scene, which reflects how the team worked together to overcome cultural differences. The director and the dramaturge had originally designed a kiss scene for the actors — on which actors kiss each other on stage at the end of the play — to symbolize emotional intensity and final reconciliation between the two generations. The proposal was met with a strong resistance from the Chinese actors. According to the director assistant Liu

Xuemeng who was interviewed in the documentary: “When he [Jochmann] asked actors to kiss each other, everyone froze. There was a bit of panic and shock. Each had a different response”. Zou Xueping describes her feeling as: “Kissing in China is still taboo. We are not that open about it although it is normal abroad.” The dramaturge Štritof describes the process in this way: “It looks like a deadlock, but it’s actually a very active process going on for all the participants.” (Zou in Fan 2016) The seemingly unproductive deadlock functioned as an important moment through which the director and the actors negotiated their own cultural positions in order to reach a mutual understanding. Such a deadlock was therefore crucial to the process of transcultural communication and understanding. After the deadlock, Jochmann compromised and agreed to the actors’ proposal of hugging each other instead of kissing. This small scenario yields a better understanding of cultural differences, which do exist but are not static and therefore can be negotiated and transformed. It also demonstrates the team members’ willingness to take on board suggestions, explore alternatives and accommodate cultural differences.

To what extent is this play a play about a unique Chinese experience? Producer Massini has the following to say:

Presenting Chinese family relationships is difficult, not only as a foreigner, but for Chinese people too! Family relationships have changed (and keep changing) so fast that it’s impossible to explain them in a comprehensive way. This project departs from a few pieces of this complex puzzle and explores it through the honest testimony of some extremely open people. So it’s not a “presentation of the Chinese family”: there is no such thing as “the one” Chinese family. Families now are diverse, multiple, and in continuous change. (ACT 2017)

In other words, instead of seeing the play as about something uniquely or essentially “Chinese”, it is important to realize that family relationships are common issues in all cultures. It is also necessary to recognize the constructedness and the heterogeneity of “Chinese culture”, which defines over-generalization and clearly-cut definitions. Through transnational and transcultural communication, a less essentialized understanding of cultures and cultural differences can be established.

Avant-Garde Theatre as a Dialogic Public Space

About My Parents is a form of postdramatic theatre, a type of avant-garde theatre which emerged in the late 1960s and later was given its name by the German theatre researcher Hans-Thies Lehmann (2006). Unlike a traditional form of theatre, which focuses on dramatic events and tensions in storytelling, postdramatic theatre is more fragmentary and impressionist in presenting its narratives. In mimicking the unorganized nature of the everyday life, postdramatic theatre strives to create an impression and effect on the audience. If a traditional theatrical production primarily centers around scripts, postdramatic theatre challenges the hegemony of the written text by emphasizing the performance and performative elements of the theatre and by offering “a simultaneous and multi-perspectival form of perceiving” (Lehmann 2006, 16). Through the use and combination of heterogeneous styles, postdramatic theatre places an emphasis on the role of actors; that is, the “performer as theme and protagonist” (25). The director of *About My Parents*, Jochmann, studied theatre at the Institute for Applied Theatre Studies in Giessen, Germany, where he was influenced by theatre directors and researchers such as Heiner Goebbels, practitioners of postdramatic theatre (Jochmann n.d.).

The postdramatic nature of *About My Parents* is evident from its narrative, or its lack of a coherent narrative. Indeed, postdramatic theatre is not aimed at creating good stories; it strives to represent the complexity of social issues from different perspectives. It refuses to offer solutions to problems; rather, it presents problems and perspectives as they are in order to trigger discussions and critical reflections. In other words, the departure from a coherent narrative and a dramatic effect can potentially disrupt illusions, fantasies and ideologies; this can create a “distancing effect” (Brecht 1961), under which people can critically reflect on and discuss problems and explore possible solutions. It is worth noting that Brecht invented the term “distancing effect” (*Verfremdungseffekt*, also known as alienation effect or estrangement effect) from his study of classical Chinese theatre, wherein “the audience was hindered from simply identifying itself with the characters in the play. Acceptance or rejection of their actions and utterances was meant to take place on a conscious plane, instead of, as hitherto, in the audience’s subconscious” (Brecht in Willett 1964, 91) The focus and aim of the distancing effect is therefore to trigger critical reflections and shape revolutionary consciousness.

With fragments of dialogues, in combination with old photos, video clips and modern dance, *About My Parents* presents parent-child relationships in all their complexities, seen from the parents' perspectives, the children's perspectives, and even the perspectives of Chinese history and society. It creates a critical discursive space in which some social issues can be discussed freely and constructively.

One of the most important critical insights gained from the play is that the parent-child relationship is a historical and social issue, rather than an individual one. The play has contextualized the generation gap between parents and children in the history of the PRC and in the drastic political and social changes in China in the past seven decades. In one sequence, digits indicating the year number from 1949 to 2016 appear one after another on the wall. The projection of the year numbers resembles a slideshow of black-and-white newsreels, with the sound of each slide change magnified. At the same time, actors act out various gestures and movements, at times in unison and at times in chaos and even in defiance (Figure 5). The audience who are familiar with modern Chinese history usually pay special attention to watershed years such as 1976, 1978, 1989, 1992 and 2001. Yet these year numbers are given equal time length and equal treatment, as if to show the mundaneness of history, with only one exception: a heightened emphasis is placed on 2016, the year when the play was performed, and this emphasis is achieved through the extended time and repeated flashes of the number 2016 on the wall. The whole sequence seems monotonous and even repetitive, but a dramatic effect is created through the intense and even rigid movements of the human bodies against a cold and "objective" presentation of Chinese history. The otherwise monotonous slideshow sequence becomes dramatic, fraught with tensions between objectivity and subjectivity, individual and society, and past and present.



Figure 5. Actors experience modern Chinese history. (Courtesy of Ibsen International)

About My Parents has opened up a critical space for the discussion of and critical reflection on many social issues in China, which would otherwise have been difficult to articulate in other public spaces outside the theatre context. The play's treatment of homosexuality is a good example. Due to China's media censorship, LGBTQ issues cannot be openly discussed in mainstream media or in commercial cinemas. Independent film or avant-garde theatre therefore provides an important means for queer representation (Bao 2019). As a queer filmmaker, Fan has brought the issue of sexuality and his queer perspective into the play. The video interviews projected on the wall feature interviews with queer children and their parents discussing issues such as coming out, family and marriage. Wang Hailin's solo performance, showing himself covered in and struggling with a red stocking on his head, can be read as a queer trope of "mask" or "closet"; that is, hiding one's own sexual identity (Figure 6). While Wang is acting his solo on stage, the video interview shows him saying: "I have been trying to persuade them [my parents] to respect my decisions. After all, it's my life, and I have the right to choose my own life" (Wang quoted in Fan 2016) Although the stocking may suggest love, abuse and suffocation, it also conjures up an association of erotic fetish and conveys an ambivalent attitude towards love and desire. In addition, it references Chinese rock singer's Cui Jian's public performance of *A Piece of Red Cloth* (*Yikuai hongbu*) at Tiananmen Square in 1989 as an act of defiance (Keane 2016). Sexuality and politics are thus closely intertwined in this context, making the play potentially politically sensitive. Yet the play is also ambiguous enough to refuse the pinning-down of meanings. It is the polysemy and ambiguity of the red stocking that opens up a space for critical reflection.



Figure 6. Wang Hailin's solo performance. (Courtesy of Ibsen International)

In video interviews projected on the wall, some parents talk about their childhood and youth, together with the historical trauma they experienced, including the famine and the Cultural Revolution — topics that people seldom discuss openly in contemporary China due to the continuing media censorship and the traumatic nature of these memories. The video camera thus offers an opportunity for these interviewees — most of whom are from the parents' generation — to articulate their hidden memories and traumatic experiences. Although the parents only appear in the play in the form of digital mediation, their narratives have been facilitated by such a mediation. In an interview, a parent points out that a mutual understanding between the two generations is needed: “The older generation know that life is not easy for the younger generation. To improve the relationship relies on mutual understanding and empathy.”

Lack of communication is often cited as a problem in inter-generational understanding. As a girl in a video interview reflects:

I did not have a habit of communicating with my parents when I was a child. After I have grown up, I still lack these skills. In fact, I really want to talk to someone, but when I feel that my parents cannot understand me, I simply give up. That's why I seldom talk to them about my own life.

A mother also pinpoints the need for intergenerational dialogues:

There are indeed a lot of problems with parent-child relationships, especially now with developed social media and a fast pace of life. Young people absorb information quickly; and some pick up things that they shouldn't pick up. Parents are completely helpless in dealing with these situations. This leads to the lack of communication and even possible misunderstandings.

For Jürgen Habermas (1986; 1992), rational and critical communication is not only emancipatory for those involved in the process but is key to the formation of a civil society. In this light, we can see *About My Parents* as a project that can potentially emancipate those who participated in the theatre production, and the production of the play as contributing to

China's emerging civil society. The play affects the audience with its emotional intensity and encourages people to relate to the play and reflect on their own experiences. In this sense, it is possible to talk about the play as starting a conversation and engaging in debates about social relationships in China. As Jochmann describes the aim of the play:

With documentary theatre, it appears possible to me to open up windows to broad and real topics that are just out there. Working on and with this reality in a performative way gives me some possibilities to take in real information and widen it up onto more metaphorical and atmospheric levels. The idea of doing conventional theatre gets less interesting to me in recent times as I feel a rising need to open up new discourses on what we are doing, feeling and thinking. Coming to China gives me the sensation that there are so many undiscussed stories that are worth reflecting about. The beautiful thing about theatre is there are still people coming together and creating a common space. There is thus a chance for real interpersonal exchange. This is of greatest importance to me, especially while digital media is eating up our attention more and more. (Jochmann in ACT 2017)

The structure of *About My Parents* is illustrative of the main theme of the play. From presenting the problem through phone conversations and the actors' solo performances, to trying to account for the reasons for inter-generational gaps through video interviews, solo and group performances, together with the slide projection of Chinese history, the structure of the play resembles a problem-solving process. The play ends with two thought-provoking questions: "who are my parents? Am I their child?" Although the play does not provide answers or offer solutions to these questions, it raises pertinent questions and opens up critical spaces for reflection and discussion. Reflection and discussion are often the first steps for action and change. As the Massini remarks on the goal of the play: "We are not here to tell anyone about anything, or to learn any lessons or new concepts; we are here to stimulate reflections. I think this goal has very much been achieved." (Massini quoted in Fan 2016)

Conclusion

This chapter has explored the use of intermediality, transnational story-telling and transculturality in the documentary theatre *About My Parents*. By effectively making use of transmediality, intermediality and transculturalism, avant-garde theatre such as *About My*

Parents engages with important social issues and opens up a space for critical discussions in urban China. This chapter has also gestured towards the potential of non-linear, de-centered, post-dramatic and open-ended forms of storytelling. Informed by poststructural and postmodern epistemologies, postdramatic theatre such as *About My Parents* does not strive to create a coherent narrative. By bringing together various forms of medium and different narratives told from multiple perspectives, *About My Parents* refuses to offer a “true” and “objective” picture, let alone to point to a fixed solution. This formal choice corresponds with the purpose of the play: to challenge dominant narratives and hegemonic power relations, to look at things from fresh perspectives, and to start important conversations. The transmedial, polyphonic and dialogic nature of the storytelling attests to the complexity of the social world, as well as the potential for human beings to change things through the power of communication.

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¹ The play was performed in Beijing in 2016 and Shanghai in 2017. The two versions were slightly different. I use the Beijing version in this chapter for analysis.

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³ The first examples of locally-developed documentary theatre in China were the Living Dance Theatre series directed by Wu Wenguang and Wen Hui, including “Report on Giving Birth”, “Report on the Body”, and the performances connected to the “Folk Memory Project”. Professor Li Yinan from the Central Drama Academy in Beijing directed some plays using the form of documentary theatre in the 2010s.

⁴ Hio Meilou was from the Beijing production and Zhu Sujie was from the Shanghai production. Wang Hailin, Zhang Jiahuai and Zou Xueping participated in both productions.