

Sojourning: a study of audience experience of Chinese theatre in the UK

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Abstract

With an increase in international cultural exchange and an extended global arts market, more and more cultural productions are presented outside their cultural contexts. It is not unusual to find a Japanese version of *Macbeth* in New York or to attend a Russian ballet in China. The audience experience of theatre productions which are entirely “culturally foreign” (Carlson, 1990) is different from intercultural or co-produced theatre, let alone local productions.

Sojourning, a concept from cross-cultural tourism, refers to a temporary stay or residence in another culture (Sobre-Denton and Hart, 2008). The concept has been borrowed here to explain the audience experience in the cross-cultural context of Chinese theatre. Under the circumstance of cross-cultural theatre experience, audiences could be considered as sojourners who temporarily travel to a foreign culture. The cultural productions (theatre in this paper) supplied by Chinese performing companies in theatre venues in the UK create a profound cross-cultural experience for audiences, performers, and producing teams, and even Chinese audiences play the role of host for the British audience—the guests—in this short term journey.

This paper, through the methodology of action research with other ethnographic methods (interviews, observation, deep hanging out), tries to understand audience experience in the cross-cultural context based on analysis of three Chinese theatre productions in the UK. The study is based on a number of core audience research theories, such as audience reception (Bennett, 2006), audience motivation (Walmsley, 2011; Pitts, 2005; Nicholson and Pearce, 2001; etc.), experience (Pitts, 2005; Reason, 2000), in this specific circumstance.

The study finds that audience motivations and experiences as sojourners are different from those of regular theatre-goers. The most significant findings point to the enthusiasm for new cultural experiences, and the interactions between the stage and the auditorium and among the audience, especially between the British and Chinese audience groups, also highlight the distinction of alternative cultural experience in theatre. This paper proposes to understand audience experience in foreign theatre production through the sojourning experience; also to call for more attention from academia in this area in a globalized world. Based on a more robust and nuanced understanding of audience behaviour and motivation, marketing strategies and cross-cultural communication could be developed from a more solid foundation, and help to achieve a more balanced cultural exchanged between East and West in the future.

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