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**Day 2 | 19<sup>th</sup> December 2019 | Cross Cultural Synergies – Connections and Overlaps |  
Zuleikha Chaudhari | Zhao Chuan | Moderator: Kai Tuchmann**

**Kai Tuchmann:-** So our next panel has the title: Cross-Cultural Synergies- Connections and Overlaps, and, actually, this all about switching the perspective. So, in the last panel we listened and learned from the curators and producers. And now we want to discuss the process of art-making rather from the inside, from the perspective of art practitioners. And, unfortunately I have to tell you that we will not have Kiran with us. He feels not so well. And we decided that he uses this time for having a rest, because we want him fit for his performance tonight, which will take place from six till seven in the space below. So we would just keep the conversation among the three of us. And let me tell you a little bit what this panel is about.

It is connected to a very personal belief that I have. I want to test out this belief with my two panelists here. So, I believe that art could be understood as something like a Traveling Homeland. This name of a *Traveling Homeland* was coined by Talmud scholar, Daniel Boyarin, who wrote a book with this title. I think it has been published in 2015, and in this work he confronts the phenomenon of diaspora, which signifies a constellation, where one is permanently not being at home, where one is permanently expelled from the promised land. And throughout the history of cultural criticism this state of the diaspora was mostly framed as a lack, as a loss. But Boyarin argues very differently. He says, every single time when one reads the Talmud, every single time when one tries to understand the Talmud, then you are at home no matter where you read it. And I'm very much interested in the question: Could we understand art and art historiography as such a *Traveling Homeland*? As something which transcends the borders of nation states and alleged cultural identities. I know, this is very idealistic. Because, of course the encounters that we have in this Homeland are mostly not the result of our agency, since we are embedded in all this framework of funding institutions. I mean, without the Goethe Institute, for example, I would have never met Zhao Chuan. And although Zhao Chuan and me are traveling for quite a while now in this homeland of art, it was not included in our agency, to meet each other. So there were other people making this decision for us. So there is this reality of cultural politics. I'm pretty much aware of this framework and we are not totally free in it. But I more and more getting interested in the freedom that we can claim within these frameworks, especially in these particular times. So that's a little bit the context of this panel on *Cross-Cultural Synergies, Connections and Overlaps*. We decided for the following order: Zhao Chuan now will talk us through his own artistic practice with regard to the topic of the Cross-Cultural, and then this will be followed by Zuleikha's presentation, and afterwards, we will engage in a conversation, that we also intend to open up for questions. So, Zhao Chuan, would you please start?

**Zhao Chuan:** Thank you, Kai. Yeah. You started with saying something which is not easy to respond to. People normally recognize me as a Chinese, but actually I travel with an Australian passport and I am living in China as a foreigner. For the past 20 years, most of my work is very focused on issues in China. And when we talk about the culture I experienced when I was little

-- is it still there? Today Chinese has already developed into something quite different. One hundred years ago, Chinese was articulated and written in quite a different way. Now Chinese has been "modernized". We are all in this process of modernization. A very well-known Chinese writer whose name is Wang Xiaobo said, that we are actually already influenced by the translations of foreign languages, rather than by Chinese itself. All these books we read when we were in our twenties, a big amount of which were translated from other languages. So the language itself already carries different ideas of how we should exist. We are already under this kind of condition and now I come to the theater I make. It is also very different to the so-called traditional Chinese theater, but we still try to find a way to connect it to people.

My collective is called Grass Stage. Grass Stage is a direct translation of the Chinese words Cao Tai Ban. It's used to describe those amateur people, who are living mostly as farmers in the rural area. They have some hobbies and skills. During the time in winter they are not too busy, they gather and do some performances to entertain themselves or to play for weddings or funerals. Then when spring comes, everybody gets busy working in the field again. Those people are called Cao Tai Ban. We borrowed this name and directly translated it to Grass Stage. But again, the artistic forms we borrow are really far away from this kind of past practice. Mostly these people were musicians. They were very much into this kind of folk arts. They are doing local operas. But this kind of theater I'm interested in is very much on the other side, I would say, it is very westernized. I am heavily influenced by the German theatre. Not just since I met Kai, but even before, and all the other contemporary theatre literature I read during the eighties when I was an art student. I was in the radical art movement in the middle of the eighties, the so-called 85' New Wave Movement. So back then, we were the earliest people doing this so-called "performance art" in China at that time. Being radical means, you really break up with your tradition. And this relates to the May Fourth Movement one hundred years ago in China, when we wanted to rapidly change. We wanted to change from the Confucianism, from whatever the past, that we were tied to, because we feel like this past is the reason why we were defeated by all these Western countries. So, throughout Chinese culture, it's not really a new scene. It's a reality. It's the way we live, actually. Especially I come from Shanghai. It's also a port city. Now, I'll show some visual clips for you to have a better idea of what I'm doing.

Since 2005, I work with my collective. Most of its members are from different backgrounds, almost nobody has a theater background. They all work in different professions. I also understand that those people who went to the theater academies don't really see the future in this kind of stage. Every time we have a show, there's always a post-theatre-talk. This has become the main character, or, at least, a very important part of my theatre practice. Quite often the theatre piece could last for one hour, or one hour and 20 minutes. Then there is 40 minutes of this kind of "post-theatre-talk" conversation. Sometimes we perform in some theatre festivals. They don't want to have these conversations after each show, and only allow to have one post-talk. But otherwise, we always keep this after-talk. This is so important to the production. The production itself just becomes the trigger for this post-theatre-talk that follows, which really opens people up and makes connections. And, we normally work collectively to create a collective work. Because of the situation in China, one needs to have permission for being able to stage a theater play in a theater. For that reason, most of my productions never actually go through this process of applying for permission. Because it's no point, we will not get through. So we just rather find an alternative way to do it. We try to find a free space or whatever space people can provide to us. Mostly I will say, I'm a theater maker, but actually I am not really able to perform in the theater at all. And then we use all kinds of

spaces, whatever space can accommodate some audience. Since we do not have permission, we cannot sell tickets. So, for many years now, our theatre is a free theatre. I cannot charge. If I charge, then we immediately have a problem. But even with this, we still have to be very carefully watching lines. Then there is always the question coming up: where we get our funding from. There is no funding, no money. Instead I got a lot of freedom. I can decide what to do tomorrow, because there is no funding process, no applications, nothing. Yeah. I got lots of freedom from that. This is another major work we did from 2014. It's called World Factory. I actually spend quite some years, four years, to research this piece. And also, during the same time, I started to get very interested in documentary theater, so it gave me a great influence.

This work led us into a new direction after the work was showed at several places. There were workers among the audience who said during the post-talk: "It has been some years for us to really see a production like that. It's so much connected to us. But it's still really far from us. Are you able to actually come to us?" Because they are living in Shenzhen, but mostly these factories are in the outskirts of the city. It is more than an hour of travel to get there. With our own efforts the year after, Grass Stage went there: we spent 10 days there to showcase, to give a talk, and to have a workshop with them. Since then we collaborate very closely with the workers who made all these: iPhones, iPads and Apple computers. They are working for Foxconn. And we worked a lot with them. Only since this year, we are kind of forced to stop, we cannot continue this line of work. But then again, this relates to this issue, maybe quite different to the way Kai mentioned it: Are we in the same culture? I would understand, some people are very different to us. Are we speaking the same language? I think in India this is maybe even more complicated than in China. Do urban people and villagers speak the same language? Nowadays with Hong Kong: do we speak the same language? It's all problematic. So how we deal with it? We had some major experience from making this production in the 2014. We continued working with Foxconn workers. Actually, my wife Wu Meng, who is also here, she put big efforts into this collaboration in the past years: Basically, we did workshops for them, to support them in having their own theater collective, making their own theater productions, telling their own stories and eventually to show themselves on the stage. Another very special project we made last year was located in a mountain village of Chongqing. A friend of mine, Yao Bo, she's a ceramic artist using the old technique of wood firing. She had a studio there. Kai and our collective went there to work together with the people there to make ceramic. The whole process from the start of the burning until the end of it takes like 10 days. This project we made, it's also self-funded. No, we have partially the support from Goethe Institute Shanghai. It lasts for 78 hours continuously, which is the duration of the most important part of the burning process. At the same time, along with the burning process, there's always performance. There's always some sort of interaction. We had the script, but no rehearsal. We always had audience. Sometimes in the middle of the night we had one audience, but at the peak time, during the day, we maybe had like 20 some audiences. And quite often we eat together, cook together. So, it's about a theater that also becomes a way of living together. Nobody actually could see everything, the whole performance. Even myself, I slept six hours a day, so I don't really see everything.

**Kai Tuchmann:** Thank you, Zhao Chuan, for this presentation. You already got an idea how crucial it is for Zhao Chuan's practice to claim space under the framework of this very

particular situation in mainland China. So you really can see that he works at different sites and that he shifts one work to different sites as one of the few possibilities to keep expressing and producing. Maybe for our further conversation I would really like to investigate a little bit together with you, how this still connects to cross cultural phenomenons and problems, like funding. But right now, I would like to invite Zuleikha on our panel.

**Zuleikha Chaudhari:** I'm going to talk about *the project Rehearsing the Witness: the Bhawal Court Case*, which I already brought up in the morning, and which is based on the Bhawal Court Case. For those who were not here, the Bhawal Court Case is a pre-independence court case about an impostor. In 1909, Kumar Ramendra Narayan Roy, who was one of three brothers, who owned a very large estate in undivided Bengal, went to Darjeeling, ostensibly to recover from an illness and apparently died there. Twelve years later, a sanyasi, an ascetic was found wandering around Dhaka, which is now in Bangladesh and recognized to be this man. In the meantime, the other two brothers had died. So the property had elapsed to the British Court of Wards. When he came back, there were many people who said it was him. There were many people, who said it wasn't him. His wife, who's also the first defendant in the case, said it was not him. She said that he died in front of her eyes, because she had been an eye witness to this death. His sister claimed that it was him. So in 1920, in 1921, this plaintiff, the *sanyasi* went to the collector of Dhaka to record his claim that he was, in fact, this man. The collector of Dhaka said that it was an impostor. So in 1930, the case went to court. And wasn't caught for 16 years. There were 1800 depositions. It went from the Lower Court in Dhaka to the High Court in Calcutta and finally to the Privy Council in 1946, that was just before independence. He won the case all three times and actually after the final verdict came out, he died two days later. So I came across this case because of photographs in an archive in Delhi. The Alkazi Foundation for the Arts has an album of 90 photographs that we used in evidence in the case. One set of 20 photographs is very interesting to me, because it is about the Kumar before his death and then subsequently of the *sanyasi* dressed slowly to resemble the Kumar. So these were photographs taken in evidence, you know, to prove identity. My project started in 2015 and had two iterations, which were in the form of exhibitions, open auditions, open rehearsals, a small performance, that was looking at questions of rehearsal as a sort of a repetition in order to point to the phenomenon that one is constantly rehearsing to produce the real. So my connection to the case was actually in the figure of the impostor, in the question of whose narrative can you believe, the plaintiff's, or the wife's, because they're diametrically opposite to each other. The question of how do you produce a believable real, what does believability mean in the theater? What does it mean in a court of law? Because both require a certain kind of belief.

Believability in the theater becomes credibility in a court of law. I became very interested in how narratives are created, and this happens a lot in court with two lawyers. I'm bringing this up in the context of this panel because actually the third version of the project is in the form of a retrial with lawyers and a judge and was invited to the Dhaka Art Summit. And I agreed to do it there of course, because the case involves Dhaka, involved Dhaka. And I really, I was interested in the question of how does one make something work in a site specific way. I selected an X amount of testimonies. And then it was a question of where am I going to produce witnesses? So the case actually, going from the original material, is a case of an individual versus the state, the plaintiff and the British Court of Wards, on the question of identity. So as I said this morning, it's really about, how one understands identity as an individual and articulates it and what the state demands of you. Back at the time, which was

in 2017, I was trying to find links between the question of identity in theater and what it largely means. And so I framed it as something performative: citizenship as something performative. It is that you're always on trial because you have to prove it. It's not something that is already yours and can be taken for granted. So this was of what I went to Dhaka with. One of the first steps was to make a petition. My petition for this project was made by a lawyer in Dhaka and asks for identity papers. He's asking the state for identity papers, and that's sort of one of the critical things. I have eight minutes to show. So in the examination in chief, each expert witness is given an edited version of the original examination in chief of a particular expert witness. In the cross examination, the expert witnesses are examined as themselves, to their own opinion. And by this, I wanted to address the distance of time and so you get a sense of what was an opinion then. What was an original opinion in the case and what is a contemporary opinion? The process with this work has always been in terms of how you translate this material to now. It's archival, it's historical material. If it does resonate, how does it resonate? What does it make you think about? So, there were two things that happened in Dhaka.

One was that I asked to be introduced to a range of people: academics, I asked to meet a historian, an anthropologist, photographers, one actor. The Dhaka Art Summit introduced me to some people. I got two very different sets of introductions, though the set of people I ultimately went with all turned out to be activists. And the reason I went with them was the way in which they responded to the material. They were, they were very precise. So actually, I gave everybody a testimony and I said, I'd like to meet and if you could read the testimony beforehand, the original full testimony, and if we could just talk about it when we meet. I went with people actually, who spoke quite critically to the material. They had something that they were thinking about and something that they had to say and so the piece actually begins to form out of this. I'm also talking about this project, because I'm just in the process of trying to translate this project for Melbourne. The decision I've made is that it will actually have expert witnesses from there. I will not be taking anyone with me. And so again, it's a question of how does one translate the material and what becomes of the piece, because in a way, what remains is sort of the original historical context, the archive, but the readings of it can be completely and entirely different. And so it's eight minutes that I want to show now. I've just tried to go through it because it's about two and a half hours long. So, I mean, what was interesting to me was how people, the expert witnesses, responded to the material. My task was how to kind of structure it together, how edit it down and pick up on singular points and connectivity between what everybody was saying. So what's going to happen in Melbourne, I'm very curious about, because it's a completely different context. In Dhaka everybody knew the material more or less. Everybody was familiar with this case. It's kind of taken on mythological proportions. It's still sort of in the news very much. When I was googling it, I found that, you know, the estate still belongs to a Court of Wards in Dhaka. It doesn't belong to anyone. A lot of the conversations in the project were also about colonial law and the legacy of that. Now, when I'm doing this translation to Melbourne, I have to think, really. There are two things: how does somebody there respond to the material, and, in how they respond-- is that also a story I'm interested in? I have to balance these two aspects. So I've been speaking to one of the lawyers over there, who turns out to be a lawyer for refugees. Actually he's a judge for refugees, but he's also a lawyer. The original testimony of the plaintiff is very evocative: It talks about journeys, it talks about coming home, it talks about forgetting, it talks about the need for papers. And so the lawyer from Melbourne was talking to me about how much the material resonated with him on that score. Now, I have to say that a lot of the

research I try to do is, of course, talk to a range of people, look at the news, but I also go and see what's happening in performances. What are people responding? What is everyone talking about in the visual arts? And, you know, these are different perspectives. The same story can be told from multiple perspectives. There may be a perspective that somebody who's outside a context might want to hear, might make them feel good. However, that may not be the story I want to tell. And that's something that I'm really struggling with in terms of how to do the translation. So, I mean, there are many things I can pick up: this undocumented person is one strand, colonial history and law, particularly colonial law is another strand. Of course, the material speaks so much today with whatever's happening here. Is that the story I want to tell? And it's a question. So I'm really, kind of, trying to figure out what is a story that will not lose its specificity, not lose my specificity, but we'll speak across. Like this whole *sanyasi*, I have been asked, what is the translation into English, for example, is it monk? Now the whole question of identity is very interlinked with who the *sanyasi* is. And, you know, so for example, how does one translate that. Is it important? You know, because these are actually things that deeply speak to the material itself. So how does one translate material across time? That's one job. How does one translate material across contexts -- is another translation one needs to do. And, I'm not sure that one can necessarily be naive about things, to say that, you know, everybody will get it, the nuance doesn't matter. I'm realizing there's a lot of translation and I'm happy to be dealing with it now, because my next project is also a trial, which is the trial of Bahadur Shah Zafar. And I'm already thinking about how does one form the piece, who is it speaking to? I'm trying to stage it at the Imperial War Museum in London. I'm very keen that it happens at the Red Fort in Delhi where the trial originally happened. I want to anticipate, because currently these projects take me like months. Everything has sort of specificities all the time. If one chooses to show work outside of one's own context, one has to spend as much time as one does on the actual project. One does have to really think very hard about how one is positioning the story.

**Kai Tuchmann:** Zuleikha, thank you. Thank you both for sharing your works, your art practices, that transcendent spaces, bodies, times. They create encounters that might not happen in society, if these works would not be there. Just one question from my side, before I open it to the house: since the framework of our conversation is the cross-cultural, I would like to know from both of you, how do you connect to the cross cultural reality of funding within your work. And how as an artist, do you claim agency while being confronted with this necessity of funds?

**Zhao Chuan:** Yeah, of course, there is always some dirty job I have to do, to get the money, especially when we need to travel. And, yes, quite often there are institutions like the Goethe Institute and also the Zurich foundation, the Pro Helvetia, which supported me a lot in the past years. Also, back to some years ago, there was the British Council. I also had quite some support from them. But, I hope, this is really not the driving force for you to make work. Or, for us at least, this is how I understand it, it should start from the needs. Then we figure out how we work with it. We do not start with thinking about the funding of a project.

**Zuleikha Chaudhari:** Well, with *Landscape as evidence. Artist as witness* I was invited by Khoj. And as far as the Bhawal material is concerned, I've done two earlier versions and they were small. The first version actually was tiny, it was at the Mumbai Art Room, which is a tiny room and actually, I just invited people to talk and I structured it in a way that it didn't require money, because actually I wasn't quite sure of the project. I wasn't really sure what I was doing. It ran for a month and a half. And I used it as a, literally, a rehearsal. The Dhaka invitation

came later and actually, in retrospect, I feel like, I just allowed it to happen. It was a big project, because I went to Dhaka a lot. I stayed there for long periods of time. I was hosted over there, so, of course, in the end, the project cost a lot, I'm sure. And the setup, etc. It was that everybody who was on the project actually refused to take the small honorarium I offered to them, including the lawyers, which, you know, I was intrigued about why they would do that. And they said, they doing it for themselves. And I, I was a bit overwhelmed with that. Regarding Melbourne, the way I see it, is that somebody has seen the project. Somebody wants to invite it. They have a sense of what the logistics involved are. And I work with the assumption that there are no strings attached. As when strings come up, I have honestly made it a policy not to argue with people, or have a fight. I navigate around. I do what I want. I'm just not going to have a confrontation because actually I don't feel it's productive. I go with the belief that everybody wants the project to work well, they may agree or disagree with the content of it. But according to me, and I make it clear, that's what they take on, otherwise they don't need to invite the project then. The Bahadur Shah Zafar project, I'm sort of breaking it down into parts. So it's the research which actually takes very long, is separate to the actual work itself. And it's in collaboration with SOAS, they seemed more than happy to fund the research. They're interested in the project. So, I mean, in a way, actually, I've slowed myself down in my own head to say I'm not in a hurry. I don't need to be in a hurry. I'm doing, as he said, the work for different reasons and whoever's interested in it can be a part of that work. The work is a collective work. Once I invite somebody to be an expert witness, I'm not going to shut them up or change what they're going to say. Everybody's saying what they want to say and it's for that. It's to allow for that. So if projects disturb people, it's not what they really want to hear, well, I think then by that time, it's too late for them to back out, because they've bought into what the platform is and I'm not unclear about it. But I think the thing that I'm for myself, I'm not in any hurry. Actually, the longer things take the better it is for the project. So, that's actually how I deal with it. My not being in a hurry is helpful.

**Kai Tuchmann:** Yeah. So, like I said, now I would like to open it up to the house. So if there are questions, comments, remarks from your side, then let us know.

**Audience Question:** My name is Hannah. I come from Switzerland, Basel where I work as a curator at a performing arts venue, Kaserne Basel, and I wanted to get back to you, Zuleikha. You were talking about the translation of your artistic projects into another context and I'm specifically interested in the translation towards the other context besides your own. And my question would be maybes: how do you see the responsibility of the host who was inviting you to present the work? And how do you work with them on the translation or the positioning?

**Zuleikha Chaudhari:** I was asked, for example in Melbourne, who do you want to meet? And I try and give a huge range of people I want to meet. I asked them to respond to the material. I realized that not everybody that I'm introduced to is interested in the material at all. Those who are, tend to introduce further and the ambit grows bigger and bigger. I walk into the situation, trusting that they will do all they can to help the project. I've asked to meet immigration psychologists. My contact person in Melbourne is trying really hard to make that possible. I go in thinking we're all working on this together. The project is clear in what it's doing because, you know, one writes notes and whatever. Of course the project will change a little bit and mutate, because it depends so much on who I talk to and what their response to

the material is. And the long process and the hard process is to make that balance of how someone responds to a text and what my kind of focus is? What conversation can that have?

**Audience Question:** Regarding China? How is the artistic expression? There is tight censorship. How do you respond to the tight censorship and that there is no freedom at all. How do you stage theater plays?

**Zhao Chuan:** You are asking, how, in this controlled situation, how artistic expression can work. Basically, this is how we worked for the past 15 years. We started from 2005. It's getting more and more difficult. One of my colleague, actually, she was a university student, studied Chinese literature and she finished early this year. Then she went back to Guangdong where she came from and she was involved with social workers organization. And, I just heard that she's got arrested yesterday. I feel very sad. But we will keep working. That's how this is supposed to be. And I think arts may be the way to overcome all these issues. For me to make work is not about challenging censorship, but to go beyond.

**Audience Question:** I wanted to know, in your context in China, what were your influences when you arrived at this way of doing theater, where the spectators are very, very important? The dialogue, the post show discussion, I think that's very important for your work. What was some of your influences? What made you think we need to go in this direction?

**Zhao Chuan:** I was born in 1967, so I had my education in the late seventies, early eighties. So we were still in this old form of socialism back in that time. At least that is true for the education. This is how I was trained and this left something on me. There were a lot artistically influences from different places, from different artists, this is obviously and you can see this from my productions. But for the meaning of why I'm doing this, I think this is the education I went through and we believed a revolution has its rights. It's possible.

**Audience Question:** Hello. My question is to Zuleikha actually. And I don't know if you've addressed this prior to I walked in. As with regards to the Bhawal Court Case, I mean, there have been a lot of narrative interpretations of it. So while you were doing the piece, was there any sort of seduction, for the lack of better word, to do a certain dramaturgical reorganization of the case, in a way that it sort of unfolds like, let's say, in a way the novel which Partha Chatterjee wrote about the case. I mean, was there any?

**Zuleikha Chaudhari:** Well, I did, of course make some, because you know, I have to edit down from 1800 testimonies and that's a huge edit down to seven. I made that decision partly based on, how dramatic the material is or not, because, of course, there are some testimonies that are just tedious and boring. And it's fine, if it's tedious and boring, but does it offer up something to think about? And so a lot got edited in that way. I read Partha Chatterjee's book. It was extremely useful because in a way it very neutrally sets the material out, which I really appreciated and offered up in some way, sort of things that one could think about, so there is no anthropologist expert witness, for example. But there's a lot in Partha's book which actually made me think about, you know, should there be philosophers, should there be an anthropologist, etc. He also has a particular way of reading the case. And I have to admit, it wasn't that I disagreed with it, I just didn't know if I wanted to make that translate into the work. There's lots that my retrial leaves out. So my effort is to kind of keep focusing and to see if the focus shifts. So in this next shift, will the focus shift? Because as I said in Dhaka, it

was one particular focus, which is very much about colonial law and it was a lot about the state and the conversation came very much from the specificity of the people involved. What that will be now in the next translation, it took me a year to decide that, okay, I could edit it without feeling guilty, that it wasn't encompassing everything.

**Kai Tuchmann:** I would suggest that we close it here. Thank you all.