Drama is a field of activity so deeply associated with and embedded in translation that its metamorphosis, from its source language and culture to other manifestations which may, occasionally, be almost unrecognisable, is something that theatres and audiences take for granted. Drama translation is, however, a complex business: the adaptor more often than not is given credit for work that the translator has done, and the wording and mise en scene of the original may be radically altered. Translators of drama are scandalously under- or unrecognised (Hale and Upton 2000; Espasa 2000; Bassnett 1991; Brodie 2012), yet they underpin international creative industry. Johnston has written of the ‘infinite Shakespeares’ (2007: 84), and most of the world’s core, established drama has been subject to varied and innovative treatment, starting, of course, with translation of the script into a target language.

Academic discussion of drama translation often hinges on the ‘literary’ versus ‘performance’ dichotomy, and Bassnett notes that ‘a notion of theatre that does not see written text and performance as indissolubly linked, will inevitably lead to a discrimination against anyone who appears to offend against the purity of the written text’ (Bassnett 1980/2002: 120). That kind of discrimination ignores the fact that plays in their original language are written to be spoken, and ignores the fact that speech varieties are part of the literary canon. Bartlett, interviewed by Johnston, said ‘I don’t translate plays to get them onto the page. I translate plays to get them into the mouth’ (Bartlett 1996: 68).

There is a wide spectrum of adaptation, re-writing and borrowing in the theatre, and variety is not necessarily undesirable: Johnston suggests that perhaps, ‘as English-speaking audiences’ own ability to understand Shakespeare’s language continues to erode, the future of vivid and meaningful Shakespeare productions lies within the cultural and post-colonial re-animations of translators abroad’ (ibid.: 84). The business of theatre is to make ‘the strange familiar and the familiar strange’ (Hale and Upton 2000: 8). Drama is by its very nature creative, and to deny breadth of vision in its transfer from one culture to another would be to imprison that creativity; to encourage innovation and difference may be to preserve and enhance the original.

Cameron (2000: 17) takes up Lepage’s coining of the term ‘tradaptation’ applied to old texts in new contexts. Cameron, discussing English productions
of Indian and Pakistani dramas, calls into question the assumption that cultural borders are to do with national borders and geography, and that some received notions of indigeneity exclude the contexts of migration (ibid.: 19). In an increasingly globalised world, drama in translation can belong to everyone. Bowman, seeing no distinction between translation and adaptation, claims that ‘the practice of theatre rules’ such that translation or adaptation, for example into a vernacular language, is perfectly possible (2000: 28). Bowman illustrates through examples of culture-specific items how some (such as Lucozade and Scottish Football Today) may be kept, and some (such as Coca-Cola and baloney) have to be jettisoned (ibid.: 30).

The issues that beset any translation work are compounded in drama translation by the destination of the target text: production on stage. Bassnett (1980: 121) shows how the translator of drama is faced with a multiplicity of considerations not found in the task of translating texts that are designed purely for reading. While actors must first read a script, it is only once they have internalised it and begun to act it out that the meaning of the script takes shape. Hale and Upton note the ‘several dimensions’: the visual, gestural, aural and linguistic signifiers that have to be integrated into the translation and ultimately the production (2000: 2). Beyond these relatively graspable aspects of an actual stage situation, which is a tangible representation of an implied reality, is the suspension of disbelief that the actors aim to provoke in the audience. The dialogue exists in a world of sound and vision, rather than text; the inaudible, invisible stage directions contribute to a new three-dimensional and visual reality into which the audience is transported by means of the dialogue and the action.

In terms of working practice, these considerations force the translator into certain decisions about rendition. The work of the great dramatists of the world (Aristophanes, Shakespeare, Racine, Molière, Goethe, Chekhov, Ibsen, Lao She, Havel, Pinter) is usually regarded as literature, and studied by school and university students in its written form. It is very often held in worshipful respect by theatre audiences, who would be horrified by the thought of a translation that was anything less than ‘faithful’. This is the great dichotomy in drama: it is thought of as literature, yet it is intended to be a transient, malleable and provocative entertainment in the hands of the actors. A translation presents a new ‘framework for mise en scene, guiding director, actors, designers and finally audience towards a particular spectrum of interpretation’ (Hale and Upton 2000: 9).

**Culture-specific items, cultural markers and realia in drama**

As Hale and Upton point out, theatre ‘embodies and enacts cultural markers’ in a ‘cultural milieu’ (ibid.: 7). Yet, how is the translator to bring a drama ‘faithfully’ to an audience whose language and idiom, clothes, artefacts, religion and humour may not coincide with that of the play? Should we foreignise or domesticate, to what extent, and in what way? Bowman also suggests that
languages have their own ‘emotional laws that cannot be transgressed in the act of translation’ (Bowman 2000: 31). To what extent this is true (are human beings so emotionally diverse?) and to what extent this idea problematises translation are moot points. It turns out that Bowman’s argument hinges on grammar, in the gender of derisory terms, and Latinate forms, which are colloquial in vernacular French, but formal in Scots (ibid.: 32). Yet Bowman uses the ‘c’ word, which is undoubtedly ‘feminine’, in his translation of expressions of derision (ibid.: 26). If one were seeking for a ‘literal’ translation this could be construed as a problem, but at the level of speakability or performability (see later sections) it would probably be ironed out in discussion with actors. The very roundedness of drama supports the translator or adaptor. Even when Chinese characters are speaking on stage in English (or vice versa) the culture-specific items – the non-verbal signifiers – will provide the required ‘otherness’ (Hale and Upton 2000: 8). Rozhin discusses the possibility of providing a glossary of ‘realia’ in theatre programmes, as frequently practised in Polish theatres (Rozhin 2000: 140). She suggests that substituting items in the target culture for very specific items in the source culture (for example ‘English scones’) ‘simplifies the play’, depriving the audience of the ‘true depth’ (ibid.: 141). She further proposes literal translation, loans or calques, but her examples seem invalid, in that they have religious connotations that are not restricted to the Polish context (ibid.: 142). As we discussed in the Introduction, it may be dangerous to assume ignorance on the part of the audience. A great deal depends on what ‘true depth’ is conveyed through the play. Rozhin claims that she has ‘neutralized’ her translation of Greenpoint Miracle (ibid.: 149), but it is probably not possible truly to neutralise language at all, particularly in translation.

Drama often treats universal themes, but is usually set in a particular time frame and a particular cultural, historical or political situation. Given that playwrights addressing a historical theme are dealing with the past, translators dealing with a historical playwright have at least two time perspectives to consider: that of the period in which the dramatist created the play, and his or her intentions relating to that period, and the period in which the play is set.

**Performability and speakability**

Our discussion so far has dwelt upon the rather special and complex nature of drama translation. It is a vehicle that enables the dramatic conventions and messages of the stage to be performed, usually through the medium of speech, in another culture and language. While for centuries, the scripts of great plays have been regarded as literature, it is now recognised by drama translation practitioners that a key quality of drama in translation is performability. The notion has been famously rejected by Bassnett (1991) and is championed by Johnston (2000) and Espasa (2000), among others. Once we have a definition, we have a tool for practical use, and Espasa provides a reasoned discussion of how performability may be defined. Espasa’s method is to ‘look at what theatre directors and performers do to the text so that it becomes performed,
and then look at the criteria that make it performable’ (2000: 49). Johnston states that translation of a play is ‘reconcretization’ or ‘transubstantiation’ rather than a mere translation of words (2000: 86) and cites his experience of working in radio drama as a way of producing ‘verbal visibility’ (ibid.: 92).

**Translation, adaptation and collaboration**

We noted above that theatre practice is often to commission a translation, then hand it over to a monolingual adaptor, often a well-known poet or playwright, who will make it ‘performable’ (Bassnett 1991: 101). The big name is associated with box office takings, but the monolingual adaptor may have at best a limited understanding of the source culture of the play. This is what Perteghella calls ‘collaborative translation’ (2004: 11). An excellent example of the way in which collaboration works in theatrical adaptation is the 2012 Royal Shakespeare Company production of *The Orphan of Zhao*. James Fenton acknowledges three individuals who contributed the basic translations of Chinese sources for his English language adaptation of the play, and two individuals who gave theatrical advice (Fenton 2012: Acknowledgements). In dealing with Bassnett’s remarks on the growing collaboration required to realise performability, Espasa notes that a ‘complex chain of participants … need not be an obstacle to translation. … but is a specific feature of theatre’ (2000: 58). A dramatic text needs the participation of the agents involved: playwright, director, actors, back-stage crew and, ultimately, audience. Anderman suggests that ‘the combined effort of director and actors working together on a play in their own language tends to result in an authenticity of expression to which the audience responds’ (1996: 181).

**The development of modern Chinese drama as revolutionary tool and political critique**

The stereotypical Chinese drama is the Shanghai opera *kungfu* (昆曲) or Beijing opera *jingju* (京剧), the highly costumed, symbolic drama sung to musical accompaniment, either in theatres or in the open. These forms and their regional variants use archaic language and traditional stories, often to express political or ideological notions, but in themselves are not necessarily ancient or unchanged. Chinese drama over the last few centuries has developed and expanded the range of forms and themes employed. Chan (1973) notes that the Yuan *tsa-chu* (杂剧) play, which developed in a period when China was ruled by an oppressive foreign regime, ‘opened up a whole realm of experience not previously explored in Chinese literature – the secrets of the heart without the sanction of custom or the rationalization of orthodox doctrine. It was, moreover, deeply rooted in common life … ’ (Chan 1973: 14). Society, politics and styles change, and, as Chang notes, in the eighteenth century, literary drama gave way to popular mixed repertory: ‘acrobatics and spectacle ousted the text’ (Chan 1973: 17).
In the early years of the twentieth century, the *baihua* movement for language reform and the New Culture Movement provided a background against which writers and dramatists rejected the traditionalism of the stylised opera and injected literary form and content with earthy realism. They rejected the stylised, unchanging language, conventions and costumes of the traditional ‘opera’ (戏曲 *xījù*), along with its lofty themes and historical characters. Revolutionary writers aimed to write as ordinary Chinese people spoke, in order to pave the way for universal literacy, and to reveal the social and political injustices of the period. While heavily costumed musical drama in archaic language may equally well carry social and political messages, the contemporary dialogue, modern settings and costume of modern spoken drama (话剧 *huājù*) leave no doubt as to what its messages are.

The pioneers of the *huājù* (spoken drama) form were the revolutionary student groups inspired by Japan’s embrace of modern Western drama. The Spring Willow Society first performed *huājù* in Japan. Modern Chinese drama was initially grounded in translation. At the time of the May Fourth Movement, the plays of Ibsen were seen as models for the new revolutionary form that would enable Chinese playwrights to develop an authentic dramatic style through the medium of colloquial language (Song 1999: 19). Hu Shi translated plays by Ibsen, and wrote his own vernacular Chinese versions based on the Ibsen model. He was followed by playwrights such as Hong Shen and Tian Han (Song 1999: 20).

The first three decades of the People’s Republic altered the course of this new drama, as stage productions of all kinds were pressed into the service of the state, channelling the Party message through ‘socialist realist’ dramas (Gunn 1983; Cheung and Lai 1997). Predictably, plays of the 1980s depicted the new social situations and problems associated with reform and opening up. ‘Slice of life drama’ (生活切片戏剧) typified by Lao She’s *Teahouse* (茶馆 1957), once more became a popular, well-developed vehicle of social criticism in the years following the Cultural Revolution. Drama, the most public of literary genres, was more susceptible to scrutiny, yet still benefited from the increasing relaxation of controls on creativity.

With this expansion of creative effort, came adventurous dramas, known as ‘exploration plays’ (探索剧) equivalent to ‘experimental’ in English: the term ‘exploratory’ being less ideologically loaded (Cheung and Lai 1997: xvi). Cheung and Lai point out that these plays may not seem very avant-garde to Western audiences (ibid.: xvii), but were part of the development of realistic, modern, apolitical drama in the twenty-first century. By 2000, Chinese television had adopted and developed soaps and historical drama, a trend that almost certainly contributed to stage drama.

**Choice of drama**

The selection (or de-selection) of any text, whether it is fiction, non-fiction, drama, or poetry, entails not only overt, conventional artistic decisions, but
also assumptions of a social and psychological nature about the intended audience, and political concerns about the audience and the authorities under whose aegis it is to be written, read, performed or translated. Meech points out that a play, in contrast to a novel, is a public activity: ‘a thousand people in one place applauding a comment spoken by an actor is a powerful force’ (Meech 2000: 129). Drama is a sharp socio-political weapon, and in translation must retain that sharpness. The great plays of global renown have almost always carried a political message, either support of a regime, or barbed attack that has sometimes sent the regime tottering to destruction.

Lefevere illustrates how the very act of selection of dramas for an anthology is an act driven by ideology and power structures. The same applies to selection of drama for staging and translation. Lefevere notes that the ‘hidden makers’ of anthologies have ‘hidden agendas’ that create a living canon (Lefevere 1996: 140). He poses the question: on what authority does the anthologist base his burden of selection (ibid.: 141)? This is a profoundly important question, not only for the creation of anthologies, but for any publication, and in the case of drama, is especially relevant: the translation and staging of a play is an overt sign that those responsible for its selection, translation and staging condone, support and promote the message of the play. They do so in the expectation that the target audience already condone and support the message, will do so in the future, or will react to the provocation of the drama. Lefevere notes an ‘inbuilt weighting toward the conservative’ (ibid.: 142): selectors, either of individual plays or anthologies, prefer what is accepted by the general public and the authorities; all the better if it is tried and tested, and is recognised as ‘establishment’. This approach is probably universal among publishers, governments and education authorities, but more strict and extreme in regimes that may be regarded as authoritarian or paternalistic. Choosing a play to translate is a political act: the decision reflects the translator’s or agency’s knowledge of the market and the audience, and also reflects their desire to influence the views of the audience.

Selections may not always be conservative: new plays are sometimes added to the repertoire, but in these cases, the editor or preface writer may edit out politically undesirable content, or provide ‘judicious introduction’ and ‘judicious interventions’ (ibid.: 147), which have the effect of adapting or toning down the intent of the drama. Lefevere notes how in the United States, at the time of his study, anything that was French or could be made to sound French was considered ‘high culture’ and thus made its way into anthologies alongside the broadly English-language repertoire (ibid.: 148). This general tendency to conservatism, albeit exoticist, does not stop progressive, activist and simply creative, innovative drama companies selecting for their repertoire plays that are new and provocative.

In the case of choice of Chinese play for anthology, staging or translation, attitudes and approaches inside and outside China have swung between extremes over the last century. Cao Yu and his near contemporaries Hu Shi (1891–1962) and Lao She (1899–1966) were writing in a form that was at the
same time familiar and foreign for Chinese audiences. They brought to the theatre-going public familiar everyday scenes and issues, expressed in normal, colloquial Chinese (白话 baihua), spoken for centuries, yet eschewed by the reading intelligentsia. High drama at the beginning of the twentieth century was still the traditional jingju, a stylised form in archaic language, transmitting old tales of morality and virtuous romance. Hu Shi introduced the harsh realism of Ibsen and Chekhov through translation and adaptation, as part of the baihua movement to provide ordinary Chinese people with accessible literature and drama. The content of Cao Yu’s Sunrise and Savage Land and Lao She’s Tea House does not shock a modern audience, who have benefited from a century of literary and political revolutions and change, but at the time of their publication they were literary dynamite. There are now, in spite of China’s modernisation, themes that shock and provoke, and there is a role for translation of provocative drama.

One hundred years after Cao Yu’s birth, we have the luxury of being able to choose his dramas for historical, literary and celebratory purposes. Once rejected by the Chinese authorities for being too ‘bourgeois’, they are now a part of the literary canon and are studied in school. They can re-kindled in young Chinese audiences the decadence and hopelessness, the political will and optimism of pre-revolutionary China. To a Western audience, they are a window on the transition of Chinese culture from the traditional to the modern, and reveal the normality of Chinese people’s emotions, reactions and behaviour. They are also exciting, funny and poignant, qualities essential to any play, regardless of its political intent.

Once the decision to stage a play has been taken, the deeply controversial issue of translation approach takes over. We are by now well accustomed to the complementary notions of domestication and foreignisation, and the spectrum of balancing strategies between them. The debate over which approach to take becomes all the more fierce in the case of drama, when the actor literally speaks through the translation. Some actors and dramatists would opt for no translation at all. Curran cites cases from her Japanese experience, of plays being performed for Japanese audiences by foreigners in the source language, or performed in the source language by Japanese actors. In the first case the audience might not understand the words, but might understand the acting, and in the second case, the actors themselves might not know what they were saying (Curran 2008: 3). Certainly in the staging of drama there is a physicality that transcends the text of the play, and some translators have tried to achieve this ‘embodiment’: the ‘rhythm and tempo that will be expressed on stage through the actor’s body and vocal chords’ (ibid.: 1).

The very centrality of speech in drama exacerbates the foreignisation versus domestication debate. Curran notes Futabatei’s obsessive attention to punctuation (ibid.: 3) in the translation of drama: a notable approach, considering that punctuation cannot be seen or heard on stage, and in addition, differs between languages. These decisions are not so much those of the translator,
but the dramatist or director, who will have strong ideas about how the play is
acted and produced. A crucial factor is the intention of the playwright, and
the ideology to be conveyed. Translators, directors and actors have to face the
fact that the original language will be lost in any case, and translation decisions
hang upon the messages the playwright appears to convey via the dialogue
and stage directions.

The paratext of drama: Translating stage directions

Dialogue spoken on a stage can only provide a fraction of the information
available in, for instance, a novel. A film can provide flashbacks and imagined
or remembered sequences in ways less feasible in drama, though multi-media
productions may overcome displacement of time. The dramatist depends on
his or her own skill of implication in writing the dialogue, and on the power
of the audience to infer from what they see and hear. The paratext of stage
directions aids the producers and actors in their visual, aural and dramatic
production of the play.

Genette defines paratext as ‘a zone between text and off-text, a zone not
only of transition but also of transaction’ (1997: 2). In the case of drama, it is
a medium of control the playwright has on interpretation of the work, once it
has passed into the hands of readers and actors. From the dramatist’s point of
view, the paratext can provide a bridge between script and actors, and
between actors and audience. With the help of paratext, the actors are given
enough information to enable them to create a new enacted world, such that
the audience suspends its disbelief. The paratext of a play may consist of an
introduction, a list of characters, scene setting, a prologue, stage directions
and possibly even an epilogue. Most, if not all, playwrights provide paratext
in the form of scene-setting and stage directions. In cases in which the play-
wright wants the actors and audience to use their imagination and creativity
to re-create the action, plot and theme, this may be minimal, reduced to the
indispensable instructions required to get actors on and off the stage, move
them around and ensure that they are using the correct props. Chan describes
a very overt form of paratext, the prologue kai chang (开场) of the Southern
play, or chuan qi (传奇), in which the characters can explain themselves and
give their version of the story (1973: 16). Dramatists frequently use devices
such as prologue, epilogue or asides to the audience to provide information
which might not come across in the dialogue.

Many forms of drama rely heavily on symbolism of make-up, costume,
props, back-drop and language to convey a wide range of concepts, from
character and action to notions such as the passage of time. The playwright
uses stage directions to prescribe the physical elements of the production.
Since the advent of widespread literacy, the immediate paratext of the play,
and metatext in commentaries and manuals, often deal with symbolism. In a
sense, everything in a drama is symbolic or iconic, and the playwright’s stage
directions are crucial to every staging, and every translation.
Dramatic paratext such as introduction, prologue and the list of dramatis personae, is used to prescribe a number of abstract notions and concrete properties, as follows:

- narrative or historical background to the play and its characters;
- costumes, props and sets that indicate a time frame, social setting or economic background;
- the personality, attitudes and age of a character.

Stage directions deal with all the physical context of the acting, apart from the dialogue, such as:

- facial expressions and make-up required to convey character traits;
- facial expressions and non-verbal noises required to convey emotions of the moment;
- actions and gestures required to convey character, plot and themes;
- movements across the stage;
- clothes and props that a character uses to convey these abstract traits.

Some playwrights are more prescriptive than others, and some directors may ignore the stage directions, preferring to stage an adapted version that lifts the play out of time or place constraints, or aims it at a new audience. Whether a director chooses to use the stage directions or not, a translation must provide them, in order that the director may make appropriate choices as to how to direct the play.

One of the impressions one has on first sight of a Cao Yu script (juben 剧本) is the overwhelming presence of paratext. This is part of Cao Yu’s weapon: he was attacking the traditional values and habits prevalent at the time, revealing the awkward transition from old to new, and suggesting a way forward. The highly detailed prescription serves these purposes. Beijing Ren (北京人) was written as a contemporary play: it depicted society as Cao Yu perceived it at the time of writing. At the time the play was written, there would have been no problems dealing with the props, costumes and behaviour of the characters, for the audience would have been familiar with them. Now, however, Cao’s directions depict a China that is unknown to many, except through television, films and old photos. The unfamiliarity of the China of seventy years ago is even greater for an international audience, and the translator needs to avoid any risk of using or provoking orientalist notions.

**Speakability**

While selection, publication, paratext and culture-specific items are of great concern to the translator, the core of the task is, of course the series of spoken exchanges that constitute a play. Speakability and playability are constituent
parts of performability. However elegant, poetic or accurate a drama translation is, it is only fit for purpose if it can be spoken by the actors. From a pedagogical point of view, drama translation could be regarded as a link between interpreting and translation: while the rendition is not contemporaneous, simultaneous or spontaneous, it must seem so. An interpreter speaking the words of a speechmaker from a soundproof booth is under an obligation to reflect the live energy of the speech, an obligation that also applies to the translator of drama.

Not only must the dialogues be rendered accurately, but all the implications and subtleties of the source text must be relayed to the audience. Like the soundproof booth of the simultaneous interpreter, the stage allows no space for anything other than the spoken exchanges. The audience usually sit in a darkened auditorium, and cannot consult their programmes during the performance; they require optimal, but not necessarily overt, information delivered through the words and actions of the characters on the stage.

**Register in drama**

Of central interest to drama translators, register is culture-bound and sometimes very hard to convey in another language. Register indicates relationships, within a family, among a social or working group, and between ethnic or national groups. It also indicates states of mind and character, and is a strong cultural marker of time setting. The way in which a translator renders register in a play can have great impact upon the messages conveyed. An insult such as ‘你无赖’ could be playfully or flirtatiously translated as ‘you rascal’. Translated as ‘you useless bastard’ it changes not only the attitude of the speaker, but also the relationship between the interlocutors.

Register includes terms of address, one of the thorniest of the translator’s problems in any language. The absence of terms of address (Madam, Sir, Mr So-and-so, etc.) and polite second person pronouns in normal British English conversation is often mistakenly seen as ‘informal’ or lacking in courtesy. But the formality and courtesy of English lie in its verb forms. In the case of Chinese to English, the translator may have to displace the degree of formality or cordiality from the term of address in the source language to the verb or some other part of speech in the target language. Addressing one’s in-laws in Chinese is simple and there are conventions: there is a whole set of terms of address for one’s own family and one’s in-laws. In English, to call one’s mother-in-law ‘mother-in-law’ might be so polite as to be sarcastic: first names, nicknames or alternatives to ‘mother’ (ma, mum or mam) would be more courteous by virtue of their very informality. Every family differs in the terms it uses.

In both the pilot study and the core study reported below, not only the translator-actors, but also their audiences, found that register was at the heart of speakability and performability. When the register was not right, it was uncomfortable for the actors and noticed by the audience.
Case studies of collaborative drama translation

This review of issues in drama translation reflects the practical challenges and problems faced in two translation projects we carried out with students. In 2011, a group of student translators re-translated and carried out a rehearsed reading of Cao Yu’s *Beijing Ren*, and in 2012–13, another group translated a new play culminating in a rehearsed dramatic reading. The first, informal project was used as a pilot study on which to base the second, more adventurous project. Both involved collaborative translation.

The pilot study: Translating *Beijing Ren* by Cao Yu

The playwright Cao Yu was one of the greatest proponents of *huaju* in the middle years of the twentieth century. As a young man he was a member of the Nankai New Drama Troupe, and played the part of Nora in an early Chinese production of the play, continuing the Chinese tradition of female impersonation, but in a new context. He is credited with bringing the *huaju* form to maturity, and is known variously as the Shakespeare, the Chekhov, or the O’Neill of China. The impact of his *huaju* play *Peking Man* (北京人 *Beijing Ren*) is attested to by its popularity and celebration in the 1940s and 50s, its banning in the 1960s and 70s, and its re-emergence since the 1980s. By the time it was written in 1941, modern drama was no longer quite so shocking, but it was still a powerful means of conveying pointed criticism. *Beijing Ren* is a typical, perhaps model *huaju*, performed in everyday vernacular Chinese, with no music, and based on contemporary themes of the 1930s. The scene is set in the home of a noble Chinese family, whose power and wealth have declined. The family is deeply in debt, and there is a great deal of domestic friction. The domestic story is set against the background of the discovery of ‘Peking Man’, (*Homo erectus pekinensis*) near Beijing in 1929.

The collaborative project of translation and dramatic reading of *Beijing Ren*, became the pilot study for the more structured collaborative translation of *Poison* by Wan Fang (the core case study, see below). The decision to translate *Beijing Ren* arose serendipitously. Through the good offices of Li Ruru, we were able to bring to Newcastle a series of centenary events celebrating the life and work of Cao Yu. In order to involve students, a play reading was organised. A major decision was whether we should read it in the original Chinese, for the benefit of Chinese students and students of Chinese, or whether we should read it in English, for the benefit of the broader community of students and general public. Good translations exist, created by highly respected translators. Using an existing translation, would, however, have deprived our students of translation of a golden opportunity. We therefore embarked upon a translation of our own.

It is a long play, taking about three hours in total. Owing to time constraints, both in the preparation of the translation and in the staging of the final reading, only the first act was translated. Not all the actor-translators
were familiar with the piece, but some had studied it at school. Each ‘actor’ translated his or her own part, with some assistance being given to the student who translated and read the part of Zeng Siyi, the matriarch, and the core and dominant character in the first act. Translation of their own parts created an uneven work load among the group, but it meant that each translator-actor translated his or her part ‘in character’, and had intimate knowledge of that character’s language and expression. Two students translated and summarised the relevant stage directions (a mammoth task when dealing with Cao Yu’s writing) in order to provide background for the audience. Their summaries were read out just prior to curtain-up. Although each student translated his or her own part, it was necessary to collaborate and co-ordinate in order to achieve a coherent dialogue. Two members of staff helped with final editing. Our main problem was time, as we had only three weeks to translate the text and rehearse the reading. Students gave up their free time to translate and perform the dramatised reading, and we administered pre- and post-activity questionnaires to find out how they had approached and ultimately how they reacted to the translation activity, and the sensation of reading their translation aloud in public.

All the 18 students who were involved in the translation, production and reading were Chinese native speakers enrolled on a master’s degree course in Chinese translation, and had at least some experience of translating from Chinese to English. They were all aged between 20 and 30. Nine students returned the pre-activity questionnaire. Out of these, seven had been involved in some kind of drama activity either at school or at university, but only four had read or acted in a Chinese play. Six had read a play or plays by Shakespeare, but none had read a modern English-language play. Five of them had engaged in some kind of collaborative translation work. Most of their experience of translating was in business, technical, scientific and academic texts, and only one of them had ever translated a play. All of them admitted to being nervous about speaking in public, including those who had some experience.

Fourteen post-translation questionnaires were returned, and showed that all of the students enjoyed doing the translation of the play, and one of them regarded it as good preparation for subtitling work. All of them enjoyed reading the play, though one pointed out that it would have been even better to perform it as a drama. Only two of the students said that they would not want to translate the whole play, and all of them said that they would be interested in translating and performing another play, especially a more modern one that would resonate with their lives and interests.

The questionnaire responses showed that generally speaking it was a positive experience, but the key questions for us were those to do with collaborative translation, actors translating their own parts, improvement of skills, and the open-ended invitation for comments and suggestions. Collaboration was a controversial issue: all the respondents felt that the interactive process was helpful and made it easier to ‘understand the hidden information’, but there
was a feeling that ideally more time and effort would be required to create a really productive collaborative environment. The students all enjoyed the teamwork. They were overwhelmingly in favour of actors translating their own parts because it helped them to understand the role and create an individual. One or two of them, however, pointed out that it might lead to incoherence of dialogue (which we overcame through co-ordination and editing), and the major problem in translating their own parts was the uneven workload. All the students felt that they had improved their language skills, translating skills and public speaking skills through their involvement with the project, one specifying that they had learned ‘diction improvement; sense-for-sense translation required in a play with a different culture; voice projection and interaction with the audience’. One of the more experienced students felt that they had gained additional experience rather than improved.

The most difficult aspects of the translation were culture-specific items and concepts; register and daily language; and terms of address for family members, illustrating that drama may be one of the most challenging types of translation. All the students involved would have liked more time, more discussion, more rehearsal and more preparation. Some would have preferred to perform the play rather than read it, and there were two innovative suggestions of multi-media presentation with dubbing and/or subtitling. One student suggested that the Chinese students should translate the play, and British students perform it.

We decided to stop translating towards the end of the first act, and when the translators performed the dramatised reading, they reverted to a bilingual style, in which very obvious utterances (such as swearing and quarrelling) were left in the original Chinese. This was a slightly controversial choice. Reactions to the bilingual nature of the later parts of the reading were unexpected. On the whole, fewer translator-readers were in favour than the audience, who enjoyed the novelty and challenge of the bilingual dialogue. We have to bear in mind that literary works, including drama, are often bi- or trilingual. Well-known examples are Tolstoy’s novel War and Peace and the drama productions of Robert Lepage: any multi-lingual society will produce multi-lingual works of literature. Feedback from our audience suggested very strongly that when confronted by bilingual dialogue, members of the audience used their powers of inference, and enjoyed doing so. While one or two found the bilingual switching strange, the remaining audience (many of whom were English-speaking students of Chinese) found the bilingual approach stimulating. They found that the English side by side with the Chinese provided sufficient context for the Chinese to be understood, and were able to practise their listening skills. One native Chinese speaker member of the audience said that it was a ‘rather fantastic way for the audience to appreciate the rhythms and beauty of both languages’.

Seventeen members of the audience (approximately one-third of the total) returned a questionnaire. All the respondents were very positive about the quality of the translation, the reading and their own enjoyment. All the
audience respondents asked for more of the same play or more plays to be translated and read or performed, suggesting that there is probably a market for more accessible Chinese drama in the UK. The choice of *Beijing Ren* proved successful: this drama, dating back more than 70 years, still strikes chords, perhaps the more so since China has reformed and reverted to Confucianism as orthodox state ideology. Through the misery, anguish, frustration and anger of the characters, and the high comedy of their interaction, Cao Yu sends forceful messages about hypocrisy, snobbery and stagnation which are eternally relevant. His plays were revolutionary and became establishment, but are still fresh.

This small pilot project highlighted some of the challenges associated with the translation of drama, felt keenly by the student translators, and noticed by the audience. How could we convey a dysfunctional family in 1920s China to a 2011 British audience? The discussion that surrounded the project led to a second project to which we were able to devote more time and a more structured approach. We moved on from Cao Yu’s great family drama to a family drama of the twenty-first century written by Wan Fang, which reveals the same degree of familial tension and friction, in a more modern context.

**The core project: Translating Poison by Wan Fang (万方)**

In October 2012, we worked with a group of 31 Chinese-speaking students to produce a translation of Wan Fang’s *有一种毒药* (A Kind of Poison), which we entitled *Poison*. The play is in a sense a ‘slice of life’ drama, but is also ‘exploratory’ in that it uses lighting and sound effects to create surreal dream sequences. The playwright, Wan Fang, is also a screen writer. The play was first performed in Beijing in 2005, and focuses on another dysfunctional Chinese family. It updates the social and economic concerns of the family to the twenty-first century, yet retains a continuity with *Beijing Ren* in its focus on a strong, yet embittered matriarch, a weak, ineffectual husband and a younger generation who deal with their lives as best they can. It is a play that, like *Beijing Ren* before it, smashes the stereotypes.

Bearing in mind that the translators were students, and neither professional actors nor professional drama translators, we began with a drama workshop. The workshop, led by Sarah Kemp of Theatres sans Frontières, centred around notions of conflict, fortuitously, as our chosen drama centres around the underlying frictions in families and couples. The aim of the workshop was to draw the student translators away from words to actions, and the word ‘translation’ was not mentioned. The student feedback showed how fruitful it can be to move away from words into images and action, and how this can ultimately aid the translation process.

The gradual move towards the notion of performability was continued in a workshop given by Professor David Johnston of Queen’s University, Belfast, an acknowledged expert on drama translation. He demonstrated the variability in approach that is possible for a translator of drama, always bearing in
mind the demand for a work that can not only be read as literary text, but performed on stage before an audience. As Chinese speakers, the students were inevitably forced away from the Chinese word to a wider consideration of drama. One student remarked that this talk said everything anyone needed to know about any kind of translation!

The third link in the chain between the physicality of acting and translation of the script was a workshop on modern Chinese drama, led by Dr Li Ruru, of Leeds University, a specialist in Chinese drama. Feedback indicated that even those who had studied play scripts as part of a literature syllabus had not, until now, appreciated the implications and impact of performance.

With the lessons of the pilot project to support our decisions, and the drama context provided by the workshops, we embarked on this project with a new set of strategies. This time round, the translation was done collaboratively: rather than each member of a pre-selected cast translating their own part, the whole team worked in groups of three on chunks of the play, giving everyone a more or less equal workload. Casting took place when the translation was finished, and everyone had a solid understanding of the characters in the play. Certain characteristics of the text, such as names of characters, currency, and colloquialisms were discussed by the whole team, and where necessary, translation decisions were made by vote. The whole text was edited and checked for consistency by a native English-speaking teacher, and throughout the project, the single English native-speaking student in the group provided advice on points of language and performance. The aim of the translation team was a rehearsed reading with possible publication. The project did not end with the completion of the translation: the team were involved in setting up the theatre event, the publicity and the production of a programme and audience questionnaire. In this way, in both the pilot project and the core project, the translators had an opportunity to see how their translation worked with reader/actors and with an audience.

**Performability in action**

At the point where the translation was finished, but had not been edited, the team watched a stage performance of the play in Chinese. This was a revelation: the same words that our translators had used as their source text were spoken on stage, but produced a very different effect from that they had experienced reading the source text. Our Chinese student team, unanimously, had read the relationship between the middle-aged couple as fraught, bitter and antagonistic, but they saw it played on the Chinese stage as affectionate and even flirtatious. By contrast, the relationship between the young married couple, which they had read as warm and romantic, they saw played as less warm, perhaps even aggressive. The student who took the role of the young wife in our students’ rehearsed reading said that in the stage production ‘Xiao Ya was always indifferent, thoroughly, and I hated her.’ In reaction to this, she decided to play the role as warm and sincere. This contrast was a perfect
example, first, of how schema affects a reader, and second, of how perform-
ability and speakability work on the stage. Members of the student translation 
team suggested that the nature of the Beijing audience played a key role in the 
Chinese director’s and actors’ decisions to play the couples in the way that 
they did. Just as in the UK, Chinese theatre-going audiences tend to be 
middle-aged or older; they are the discerning intellectuals who appreciate live 
performance because it has always been a part of their culture, whereas their 
children enjoy a digital culture. It was, perhaps, a concession to a somewhat 
more senior Beijing audience that the older couple’s relationship was cast in a rosy 
glow, while the younger couple’s relationship was tense and frictional. The 
decision of the students to take a different approach from that of the Chinese 
staging was evidence of performability in action.

Ultimately, the student translator-actors semi-performed and semi-read the 
play, aggressively, physically and to great acclaim from their audience, which 
was aged from three years old to late sixties. The majority of the respondents 
to the audience questionnaire were in their twenties, and made such inspiring 
comments as ‘it rocks!’

The challenge of register

The biggest challenge relating to translation of the dialogue was register. It 
was necessary to find up-to-date idioms that were appropriate to a middle-
aged businesswoman/mother, a middle-aged alcoholic man, and six younger 
adults. The team, of similar ages to the younger characters in the play, had to 
think about how members of a somewhat less-than-loving family would 
address one another: solutions emerged through the rehearsals, as the whole 
team watched, listened, commented and corrected. There was a realisation 
that beautifully constructed sentences don’t happen in real dialogue, especially 
of the emotional kind.

Stage direction: A hidden tool of control

Whereas Cao Yu’s stage directions are long, complex and detailed, Wan 
Fang’s are brief and to the point, and relate overwhelmingly to sound and 
action on the stage. In the seemingly constant bickering that characterises the 
Gao family, tone of voice is crucial to the performance. ‘In a low voice’ (低声 
低声自语) does not always convey the tone that the characters would 
use, and the team held lengthy discussions on the relative functions of muttering, 
mumbling, and whispering. A good idiomatic rendering of the ‘contemptuous 
sniff’ or ‘snort’ (不由嗤之以鼻) perpetrated by one character throughout the 
play, also stimulated intense discussion. Reactions of the characters to one 
another’s remarks were often related to facial expressions of surprise, shock or 
bewilderment. Stage directions such as ‘panic stricken’ (惊慌) and ‘with a dull 
expression’ (神情呆滞) could not simply be translated as the dictionaries pre-
scribed; they needed to be contextualised according to situation, character
and dialogue. Making use of the initial workshop on ‘action’, the team supported arguments with demonstrations.

The fierceness and naturalness of insults can be lost irrevocably if the wrong synonym or register is chosen. The general tone of the translation was youthful, and candid. While we did not feel obliged to warn the audience of ‘strong language’, many of the insults chosen by the translator-actors were rude, and sounded natural and appropriate in the context of a warring family.

**Cultural considerations**

At first glance it seemed that *Poison*, given its modern setting, with mobile phones and camcorders as props, would not present too many cultural challenges. There were, however, features that provoked discussion. The importance accorded to a bag of instant noodles, for example, was felt to be culture-specific. The significance of the noodles was conveyed by the actor through intonation and facial expression, rather than any marking of the translation. Frequently mentioned large sums of money posed another challenge, which was overcome by not mentioning a unit of currency: it was obvious from the context that it was money, and the audience was left to infer pounds, dollars or yuan, as they saw fit. There were at least two cultural allusions, the first of which was the implication that ‘hairdresser’ is seen in China as a euphemism for the sex trade: the equivalent in the UK would be massage parlour or sauna. The team felt that it was not necessary to highlight this implication, since the context was, in any case, about extra-marital sex. A second allusion was to birth: when asked where he came from, one of the characters responds ‘I didn’t jump out of a stone’ (我不是从石头里蹦出来的), a literary allusion to the story of Sun Wukong in the Chinese novel *Journey to the West* (西游记). It was felt that it was not necessary for an English-speaking audience to know the allusion, since the context was clear, and translators opted for the equivalent ‘I wasn’t found under a gooseberry bush’.

**Reactions to the core project**

Feedback from the student actor-translators and the audience provided clear evidence that our collaborative approach to drama translation, backed up by the principles of performability and speakability, resulted in a workable translation and a successful, stimulating dramatic reading. In addition to a standard feedback questionnaire, the students were able to react to the module through the reflective portfolio by which the module was assessed. The students all found it a formative, stimulating, if sometimes unsettling experience. Their reactions ranged from the prosaic ‘an insight into drama translation which I have never had before’ and ‘relevant theory’ to the evocative ‘opening the magical door of the translation world’. Students found that the collaborative translation was ‘an efficient and effective work model’ and that the final version was ‘much better than a single person’s work’. They
said that they had learned about word choice, sentence structure and also about new ways of thinking. Not all were happy with two important decisions made by majority vote: the decision to domesticate the names of the characters (for example, Xitian became ‘Tim’, Lanhong became ‘Linda’, etc.) and the reversal of the decision to stage a performance rather than a rehearsed reading of the play. Most of the group were concerned about imminent exams and came to realise through the Christmas vacation, that a performance was not feasible, and that a rehearsed reading would still enable them to test out the notions of performability and speakability, which had been hotly debated throughout the translation process. By the time we reached the staging, the dialogue was so familiar that the readers were, in fact, acting, rather than reading. Staff members, delivering the module, editing the translation and seeing the play through to its public reading, also learned very valuable lessons – not least the idea that democracy is not always popular, and that authority must occasionally be exercised!

A number of interpreting students joined the module and found the experience fruitful: like the translation students, they felt that they had benefited from an intensive honing of judgement with regard to spoken language, and the performance skills they had practised would enhance their interpreting delivery.

The fact that the project received funding enabled us to work towards a more sophisticated staging, in which all the translators were involved as directors, producers, actors, understudies, or dealing with lighting and sound effects, publicity, photography or front of house. The increase in audience interest was commensurate with the increased effort we put into the production. In total 36 of the audience of 70 returned a questionnaire, and these were 100 per cent positive and supportive. All those who responded said that they would come to see another Chinese play performed in translation.

In the words of Edney, ‘the translator is not only a writer but also a theatre person, working with other theatre practitioners … to create a stage piece’ (1996: 229). In the case study presented here, this was what we aimed to achieve, and the evidence of our surveys indicates that it was achieved. We have no doubt that our next foray into the world of drama translation will not yield a perfect product, but we are convinced that it will be a rich, formative experience for students and teachers alike.

**Practical 8.1 Staging a translated play**

Take an exciting, interesting play in a foreign language. Add a suitable number of student translator-actors who translate the play. Stir in some directorial and production talent. Sprinkle with back-stage and technical skills. Allow to ferment for several weeks. The result may not be perfect, but it will be delicious and intoxicating.