

Judith T. Zeitlin, "The World as Stage"

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I want to begin with the warm congratulations that are so much due to all of you here today and to say how honored I feel to be called upon to address you on this historic occasion in your lives. These congratulations are due not only to those of you sitting here in cap and gown, but to everyone--mothers, fathers, husbands, wives, partners, children, other close kin and friends-- who have supported, loved, and nagged you through the arduous process of study, work, and discovery that has made this day possible.

As you wait for the conferring of the hard-earned degree that cements your full initiation into that "ancient and universal company of scholars," you can rest secure that whatever else may happen from now on, this accomplishment is permanent. Your degree will always be part of who you are, inalienable, something that cannot be taken away. But this permanence also marks the end of a specific stage in your lives and the beginning of a new unknown one. Embrace this unpredictability, for it is not only you as individuals who change and go through stages, but the world itself. Don't worry if you don't know exactly what you want to do or what will happen to you after graduation because by the time you can act on conventional wisdom, the world will have already changed in ways that no one could forecast anyway.

At the University of Chicago, it's always a current faculty member who's asked to deliver the convocation address. We're encouraged to speak about our own lives and research interests, so as I go on, it will become apparent why I stress "unpredictability" and why I take the multiple meanings of "world" and "stage" as my theme.

By profession, I'm a scholar of Chinese literature, cultural history, and theater. I was born in New York City and grew up there in the 1960s and 70s, in what strikes me now, looking back, as a remarkably homogenous world, culturally and ethnically, for such a cosmopolitan city. My contact with Asia (apart from protests against the Vietnam War) was almost nil. The wave of mass immigration from Asia, made possible after the Immigration

and Nationality Act of 1965 repealed quotas for national origins, was just beginning. There was only one Chinese-American student in my private high school class, and the main exposure I had to Chinese culture was through Chinese restaurants. In the time-honored fashion of Jews on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, my extended family would eat almost every Sunday night at a local Cantonese restaurant where I was initiated into the delights of otherwise forbidden foods like barbecued spareribs and butterfly shrimp, and my father taught me how to use chopsticks.

Food is certainly not to be sniffed at as an entry point into other worlds—it has always been one of the most important for me—but language learning takes you further. When I entered college in the late 70s, I decided, somewhat on a whim, that I would study Mandarin. I was a “foreign language person,” with several already under my belt, and the idea of a tonal, non-alphabetic language seemed almost unimaginable to me and sparked my curiosity. Then, too, Chairman Mao had recently died and the Cultural Revolution had just ended, so China was re-entering the world stage after more than a decade of isolation. I had no idea what exactly I wanted to study *in* college, and certainly no idea what I wanted to do *after* college, but with China opening up I figured that I might find a role for myself somewhere in this field, and that in any case the long and complex history of China would provide me with an infinitely fascinating world to burrow into.

As it happened, my reasoning was more correct than I could have guessed. Still it may be difficult for you to imagine what an unconventional and impractical choice studying Mandarin was at the time. Although relations between the US and the People’s Republic were normalized when Nixon went to China in 1972, it was still hard for Americans to study in Mainland China even in 1980, so I spent my junior year abroad in Taiwan instead. It was also the height of the Japanese economic boom, and all the practical people in college with a bent for difficult languages were taking Japanese, which boasted twice the enrollment of Chinese. Something like the reverse is true now—but in the late seventies and early eighties, nobody, but nobody, could have predicted the transformation of China into such an economic powerhouse and world power in the course of a single generation. We have only to look around us in this room today to see the profound effect this

transformation has had on higher education, scholarship, and the arts, not only in China, but in the rest of the world, very much including the University of Chicago.

When I was starting my own career, China was just barely beginning this whole process of claiming a central position on the world stage. I've been extraordinarily lucky, personally and professionally, to have witnessed a historical transformation of this magnitude and speed first hand, particularly in the city of Beijing, over the past 30 plus years. This is not to say that all of this transformation has been good or the speed wholly beneficial but rather that the globalization of China and the internationalization of the American university presents a compelling recent example of how the world too goes through stages.

So you'll forgive me if I propose this as one possible reading of the famous line "All the World's a Stage," though not precisely in the sense that Shakespeare intended it. The original speech from *As You Like It*, performed in Shakespeare's aptly named *Globe* Theatre, draws the parallel between life and the stage, with all of us merely actors playing different roles in successive acts of a play. That analogy seems particularly fitting at this moment as we perform in the great ritual pageant of graduation, clad in costumes of cap and gown, to mark your exit from the university and your entrance onto a new stage. (As someone cast in a lead role, my costume is of course particularly magnificent).

*As You Like It* was first performed at the Globe Theatre in 1603. Halfway across the *real* globe at roughly the same time, Chinese playwrights were likewise elaborating on the idea of life as a play. This conceit, the product of a high degree of self-consciousness, developed independently in China and Europe. The story of the interaction between these two distant theatrical spheres brings us to yet another possible meaning for the world as stage—namely, the idea of the world as a network of interconnected stages. Although this image leads in many metaphorical directions, I'd like to take you on a more literal excursion into this topic from the point of view of my own field, the history of Chinese theater (or as it's also known, Chinese opera).

The first translation of a Chinese play into any European language, *The Orphan of Zhao*, was done in the early eighteenth century by a French Jesuit priest at the Qing imperial court in Beijing. The Jesuits were the main cultural brokers between China and Europe at the time and they were particularly attuned to theater because putting on plays was an important component of the curriculum at Jesuit colleges; they also must have realized that theatrical performance held tremendous significance at the Qing court as it did throughout all echelons of Chinese society. This translation of *Orphan of Zhao* was incomplete—it included only the spoken dialogue and none of the verse to be sung required of all traditional-style Chinese drama—but the play was subsequently included in a massive compendium on China published by another French Jesuit in 1735, where it proved wildly influential. In 1755, Voltaire substantially rewrote it for the French stage; adapted into English, it became a hit on the London stage; in Italian it was transformed into a successful opera seria. These stage productions fed into the fashion for Chinoiserie then at its height all over Europe. To satisfy the public's taste for exoticism, new plays set in China were concocted. One of these was *Turandot*, best known today as the earliest source for Puccini's famous opera *Turandot*, which premiered at La Scala in 1926.

Originally reviled in China for its Orientalist portrayal of the cold and cruel Chinese princess Turandot, the importation of Puccini's opera back to China is a complicated story, but it culminates in 1998 with the film director Zhang Yimou's lavish production of *Turandot* at the Imperial Ancestral Temple in Beijing. The appeal of reclaiming this opera by restaging it at a site once part of the Forbidden City may seem evident, but at the time, the capital had no up to date grand opera house sufficient for such an ambitious undertaking.

I was living in Beijing in 1999 when the final plans were unveiled for a National Center for the Performing Arts to be built on the western edge of Tiananmen Square. The government had chosen a futuristic, fantastic design by the French architect Paul Andreu, which called for a huge sphere covered with titanium and surrounded by a large reflecting pool or moat. To access the building, theatergoers would have to cross through an underwater tunnel, as though entering another world. Like many others, I was astonished

by this improbable design, and predicted that the building would never be built. I was dead wrong. In 2007, not long after the building, nicknamed the Giant Egg, opened to the public, I went to see some production at one of the three theaters inside. I can't actually remember what performance I saw, probably a Peking opera; what I remember most is the inaugural exhibition in a gallery space in the lobby. The first part displayed large glossy photographs of famous grand opera houses around the world; the second part showed the same for grand opera houses already built or in the planning stages in major cities throughout China. There may even have been two maps, one international, one domestic, plotting the location of each opera house. In any event, the intention to situate the new National Centre of Performing Arts in Beijing as the central node in a global network of interconnected stages couldn't have been clearer. Like the other buildings in Tiananmen Square, the Egg is no less a political monument, but one that no one could have foreseen a generation earlier, or even ten years before it was built.

So, finally, I come to the last of my rhetorical sleights of hand linking world and stage. Let me exhort you—and you knew this was coming, didn't you?-- to take the world as your stage. We no longer operate solely within national borders but are all actors in an ever increasingly interconnected planet. As you go forth, keep the circuit of your curiosity broad and alive. Embrace unpredictability and the unknown. Remain awake to possibility and follow your own desires. After all, who knows what will happen?

Thank you.