

# CHINGLISH by Pangdemonium! Productions

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## “Chinglish’s Mistranslations Test Preconceived Notions”

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**Reviewer: Isaac Tan**

**Performance: 15 October 2015**

If one were to ask, “What is the central principle that China abides by?” It would not take long before someone replies, “关系 (guān xi).”

At its most benign, it refers to the cultivation of interpersonal relationships that is based on trust and mutual affection. At its most insidious, it refers to corruption and nepotism. If explaining the concept is difficult, dealing with it in a social context is nothing short of a minefield.

Playwright David Henry Hwang drops his main character, signage business owner Daniel Cavanaugh (Daniel Jenkins), into said minefield as he tries to land a business deal with the Chinese authorities. Hilarity ensues when he tries to navigate social mores and overcome the language barrier at the same time.

Like the hilariously mistranslated Chinglish signs, Hwang’s script plays to audience’s expectations by presenting the Chinese characters as stock characters. From the traditional Culture Minister Cai Guoliang (Adrian Pang) to the steely ambitious Vice Minister Xi Yan (Oon Shu An), one expects Cavanaugh and his business consultant, Peter Timms (Matt Grey), to use all their cunning to score that business deal.

However, the audience soon finds out that the Americans are not exactly angels and the intentions behind the Chinese are not as it seem. By playing to the audiences’ expectations and then subverting it, *Chinglish* tests one’s preconceived notions about other cultures.

Contrary to what Pangdemonium thinks, the play stops short of being transformative.

While Hwang is excellent with his word play that sparks uproarious laughter, he does not manage to get a grip on the unravelling of the characters’ intentions. The occasional revelatory monologues by Cavanaugh and Xi appear out of place and certain cultural differences, such as the interpretation of marriage, are underdeveloped.

Despite these flaws, the audience will not be demanding a refund in a variety of languages due to wonderful performances by the cast and brilliant designs by the creative team.

Daniel Jenkins excels as the earnest but naïve Cavanaugh as he probably got the most sympathy from the audience. Adrian Pang manages to nail the mannerisms of the old-fashioned and tad boorish Culture Minister Cai. Oon Shu An strikes a good balance by playing Vice Minister Xi with a keen sense of comic timing in her scenes with Jenkins while managing to evoke a slight sense of pathos as a woman struggling to do what is best for her future.

Matt Grey, along with Pang and Oon, must be commended for overcoming the difficulties of learning the Mandarin script in such a short time. His role as Timms, the foolishly ambitious professor turned “business consultant,” is a wonderful foil to Cai.

Audrey Luo as the various translators, or more accurately mis-translators, is a riot of laughs. Her performance is complemented by Guo Liang as Judge Xu Geming due to their palpable chemistry.

Set designer Eucien Chia marries form and aesthetics with a revolving stage and half of it is visible to the audience. This allows for a smooth scene transition as the crew can dress the set backstage. The tilted rectangular screens become a canvas for multimedia designer Brian Gothong Tan as he projects images traditional Chinese architecture onto them to signify a traditional Chinese restaurant. He also projects bustling street scenes to capture the gritty vibe of rising China. Tan must be commended for being able to capture the aesthetics of Chinese movies in the ending sequence.

Overall, *Chinglish* makes for an entertaining night out at the theatre and, for once, the audience can revel at being lost in translation.

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## **ABOUT THE PRODUCTION**

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### **CHINGLISH by Pandemonium!**

9 – 25 October 2015

Drama Centre Theatre

## **ABOUT THE REVIEWER**

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**Isaac Tan** is a current contributor to The Kent Ridge Common, an NUS publication, and an aspiring poet whose poems have appeared in Symbal, Eunoia Review, Eastlit, and Malaise Journal.