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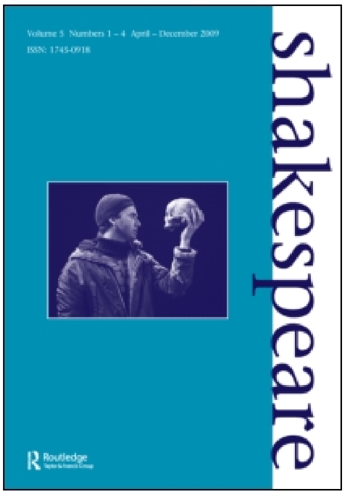

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Review of *Imagining China: the view from Europe: 1550–1700* (curated by Timothy Billings with Jim Kuhn; video curator Alexander C.Y. Huang) at the Folger Shakespeare Library, 18 September 2009–9 January 2010

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According to current scholarly understanding, Shakespeare's drama was first performed in Asia when the employees of the Dutch East Indies Company presented *Hamlet* in Jayakarta, Indonesia in 1619 (*Imagining China*). More recently, countless productions have been mounted across this region. Nevertheless, the extended period of limited contact with China has left considerable gaps in many scholars' knowledge of China's interactions with the early modern west and many academics are just beginning to become aware of the lengthy history of Sino-European relations and Sino-Shakespearean theatre. Numerous current scholars express interest in gaining more expertise in these areas, but opportunities traditionally have been limited, particularly for those lacking relevant linguistic skills or significant international experience.

From September 2009 to early January, 2010, the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington, DC took steps to facilitate the presentation of materials and discussions designed to make this knowledge more accessible. Through an interrelated series of exhibitions, lectures, musical presentations and readings – many of which are now available on the Internet (*Imagining China*; *Contact and Exchange*) – the Folger opened up an impressive array of resources for both scholars and laypeople interested in Chinese history, international performing arts and early Sino-European communication. The actual, virtual and print conversations begun through this effort are likely to inspire substantial new and exciting work in these areas.

The increasing number of critical analyses already focused on Shakespeare and China suggests that this burgeoning field will only grow in stature. John Russell Brown's *New Sites for Shakespeare: Theatre, the Audience, and Asia*, which looks at how Asian theatre could influence western Shakespearean performance, appeared a decade ago; in recent years, scholarship on Shakespeare being performed in Asia has proliferated. Alexander C.Y. Huang, Murray Levith, and Li Ruru, for example, have published volumes detailing both current and early Chinese productions of Shakespeare. Each of these books makes excellent companion pieces to the Folger materials. Alexander Huang, in fact, curated the Sino-Shakespearean video collection that premiered as part of the Folger's larger exhibition: *Imagining China:*

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The View from Europe, 1550–1770. Although none of the Folger's artefacts, film clips, talks or essays can create expertise in their viewers, they offer a rich set of resources for scholars beginning to delve into this exciting realm.

For the readers of this journal, Huang's video kiosk is a particularly informative section of the larger exhibit. As an editor of the valuable *Shakespeare in Asia* video archive hosted at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, in addition to the author of the recent monograph cited above and a germane co-edited collection (*Shakespeare in Hollywood, Asia, and Cyberspace*), Huang is a major disseminator of cinematic resources in this field, as well as a key contributor to its scholarly discourse. The video kiosk at the Folger necessarily presents only a small percentage of the filmed productions emanating from this region, but it does provide a succinct overview of the ways that directors are drawing from Shakespeare and their own local theatrical traditions in order to revive the Sino-Shakespearean relationship that flourished before the Cultural Revolution. In conjunction with the MIT archive and Stanford University's *Shakespeare in Asia* website, the Folger display offers scholars an introduction to texts and performance styles that can lead Shakespearean criticism in a variety of innovative directions.

The video exhibit presents 16 clips, generally ranging from two to four minutes in length, with genres ranging from serious adaptations to comedies, parodies, opera and a short interview segment. Several of Shakespeare's plays are included, although *Hamlet* and *King Lear* appear most frequently and with the most diverse productions. *Hamlet*, for instance can be viewed as a Beijing Opera, on the Tibetan Plateau or in the realm of Kung Fu. *Romeo and Juliet* is presented as a parody, a provincial tale and in Shangri-la. Other segments, of plays such as *Richard III*, *Macbeth* and *The Taming of the Shrew,* highlight jazz, multilingualism and avant-garde theatrical practices. None of the excerpts are long enough to provide an in-depth understanding of these varied stage and cinematic productions, but they provide sufficient content to encourage scholarly and lay audiences to learn and view more. With the exception of Feng Xiaogang's 2006 *Ye Yan* or *The Banquet* (the kung fu adaptation of *Hamlet*), the films are not readily available to Anglo-American audiences. Accordingly, Huang's video kiosk at the Folger, in conjunction with the MIT and Stanford websites, is increasing access to significant productions that have previously reached only limited audiences.

As various scholars describe, Shakespeare's presence in early twentieth-century China resulted largely through the dissemination of Charles and Mary Lamb's famous adaptations (Levith 14–15) and through Zhu Shenghao's (1911–1944) ambitious, but unfinished attempt to translate all of Shakespeare's plays into Chinese (Levith 10–11). Li notes that the first professional Shakespearean production in China, an adaptation of *The Merchant of Venice*, took place in Shanghai in 1913 (Li, *Shashibiya* 18), as part of the "civilized drama" movement:

> Civilized drama (for civilized read modern), also referred to as new drama, was the product of the political and social situation at the turn of the century ... and was the precursor of huaju or spoken drama (modern Chinese theatre). (18)

In a separate essay, Li provides a useful distinction between this type of Chinese Shakespearean performance and those "adapted to suit the conventions of a regional type of Chinese operatic theatre" (Li, "Negotiating" 40). Since many of the films highlighted at the Folger contain significant plot or characterization changes, the contextualization presented by Li and others is crucial for those unfamiliar with the cultural and stage practices guiding and complicating such performances. Li describes, for example, the challenges of presenting a character such as Beatrice from *Much Ado About Nothing* in conjunction with Chinese theatrical traditions and expectations:

> The main problem for Jiang [the director] was how to culturally translate a young aristocratic woman, full of social confidence and verve, who demands to be treated like the other young aristocratic men in the play, into a character compatible with the traditional Chinese stage. (41)

Li notes that if Beatrice were disguised a male, her character would be a better fit for Chinese conventions, but that this kind of theatre "had never accommodated the direct challenge presented by a figure like Beatrice" (41).

The Chinese opera tradition, which has included numerous Shakespearean adaptations in recent years, collides with a range of similar obstacles when encountering this drama. I was fortunate to receive an immersion in regional Chinese opera at the Baiyun Temple Festival in the Shaanxi province of China in 2008. During the lengthy hours I spent watching the operas with a couple of thousand farmers and other local temple worshippers, the audience explained, through interpreters, how to "read" the characters, the costumes, the stage settings and the music. Recalling many Shakespearean comedies, for instance, cross-dressed characters were common, although the women playing men's roles were not presented as being in disguise. The audience indicated that women's voices were simply better suited for some of the male roles. Unlike Shakespearean drama, moreover, where characters often defy specific ethical labels, make-up and costumes frequently make the moral nature of operatic characters unmistakable to an audience. Accordingly, the deviousness of a character like Iago would traditionally be marked by his white facial makeup if presented in Chinese opera. Since these types of conventions are presumably largely unknown to the general community of Shakespeareans, the contextual materials now being provided by Huang, Li and others are invaluable.

Huang, for example, offers an astute and helpful accounting of Shakespeare in this opera tradition in his chapter entitled "Why Does Everyone Need Chinese Opera?". As Huang remarks:

> As an art form caught between modernity and tradition, Chinese opera is already traversed by the demands of nonlocal spectators and the criteria of various interpretive constituencies. Shakespeare in Chinese opera [is] a new form of fusion theater [that] has attracted both local audiences and global spectators. (169)

He rightly notes that "major venues and theater festivals in the West, such as the Lincoln Center, Edinburgh, Stratford-upon-Avon, and Paris are no stranger to performances in full *xiqu* (operatic) dress" (170). At the same time, however, it seems premature to assume that all audiences with interests in international Shakespeare could view the opera clips in Huang's video exhibit without the sort of detailed explanation of the art form offered in his book. The short clips of *Hamlet* in Beijing Opera or of Wu Hsing-kuo's 2007 solo opera performance of *King Lear*, for instance, may not speak for themselves as articulately as he seems to suggest. Nonetheless, they provide enough of a glimpse to spark interest, and the scholars in the field offer important background for those who are new to "how Shakespeare's plays functioned in Chinese opera and how Chinese opera has been transformed through its [Shakespearean] encounters" (Huang 193). Although Wu Hsing-kuo's masterful presentation of multiple roles in the complex story of *King Lear* is likely to captivate an audience regardless of any familiarity with Chinese opera traditions, viewer enjoyment and scholarly understanding are only going to be enhanced after audiences learn more about the theatrical conventions that contribute to this magnificent performance.

Some of Huang's other operatic selections offer additional challenges, as they incorporate Chinese political history and culture into their adaptations. The 2004 Beijing Opera version of *The Tempest*, for example, casts a member of the Taiwanese Paiwan aboriginal group as Caliban. During the production, Caliban shifts from performing Paiwanese folk songs to chants associated with Chinese opera in order to represent the colonization of Taiwan by mainland China. The fraught historical relationship between China and Taiwan presumably will be familiar to international audiences of this production, but American and European scholars are unlikely to possess much, if any, knowledge of the Paiwan people. Like other Shakespearean performances including little known populations, however, the juxtaposition of classic texts with unfamiliar people and traditions fuels the considerable interest such productions often attract. More work is needed, however, to fully integrate these types of performances into widespread Shakespearean discourse.

Some directors deliberately amplify the intercultural clashes that occur during mergers of diverse theatrical conventions. Many twenty-first century audiences in the UKand India encountered this manoeuvre, for instance, through Tim Supple's production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, which featured South Asian performers speaking seven different languages. The production also drew on disparate theatrical traditions from the regions represented by the cast. The similarly multicultural 1997 film of *King Lear* by Singapore director Ong Keng Sen, however, has only recently become widely known, through such venues as the Folger exhibit and the 2008 Shakespeare Association of America's annual meeting. In this adaptation, individual actors also speak different languages and perform in styles drawing from multiple theatrical traditions. Just as Supple's typical audiences (and cast) were able to understand few, if any, of the linguistic and theatrical languages proffered in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, viewers of this *King Lear* cannot be expected to possess fluency in the film's plethora of styles and languages. Clearly, this type of performance raises complicated questions about the nature of collaborative and intercultural productions. Many of the clips found in the Folger video kiosk present more "conventional" interactions between Shakespearean drama and Chinese theatre, but this *King Lear* indicates that increasingly multivalent international productions are demanding new modes of critical and cultural interpretation. Although viewers or scholars might claim expertise in some of these languages and theatrical traditions, this expanded representative realm openly defies the easy applicability of any notion of interpretive cultural competence to these performances. As "insider knowledge" eludes even the performers, scholars are being challenged to develop appropriate critical and analytical perspectives for such work. Current and forthcoming books by Huang and others, including Dennis Kennedy (*Shakespeare in Asia: Contemporary Performance*) and Poonam Trivedi and Minami Ryuta (*Replaying Shakespeare in Asia*), suggests that many scholars are responding to this challenge; this is likely to remain a thriving area of inquiry for some time.

Hopefully, this growing body of written material and the interest it generates will expand the accessibility of the Asian productions themselves, since the resources currently available limit the pedagogical and scholarly application of these performances. This is unfortunate, since many of the Folger clips represent films with great academic potential. I am particularly intrigued by the possibilities presented by the Tibetan *Hamlet*: Sherwood Hu's 2008 *Prince of the Himalayas*, for instance, since His Holiness, the 14th Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso, is Presidential Distinguished Professor at my institution (Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia). The film boasts beautiful cinematography, so even the brief clip at the kiosk is sufficient to inform viewers that this production is worth exploring further. Such a fleeting introduction to the film cannot, however, illustrate the range of Hu's intriguing interpretive decisions. Like Feng Xiaogang's *Hamlet* film, *The Banquet*, Hu's adaptation differs strikingly from Shakespeare's text. It is reminiscent, for example, of John Updike's *Gertrude and Claudius*. The film has clear pedagogical value even without deep familiarity with Tibetan culture, but I look forward to discussions with my numerous Tibetan colleagues about the cultural implications of the film's narrative changes. Still, such ventures cannot claim a secure place in modern criticism or pedagogy if their usage is dependent upon scholars having colleagues or personal experience with the appropriate background for each unusual new Shakespearean adaptation. The range of cultures thus represented continues to proliferate, as illustrated by productions such as Don Selwyn's 2002 *Maori Merchant of Venice*, the Perseverance Theatre Company's 2007 *Tlingit Macbeth*, The Amaryllis Theater Company's 2006 American Sign Language *Twelfth Night*, and Vishal Bhardwaj's recent Indian *Othello* (*Omkara*) and *Macbeth* (*Maqbool*). Individual scholars, however, are unlikely to become expert in each emergent Shakespearean realm.

Such productions, therefore, demonstrate the growing importance of multivalent responses to multicultural Shakespeares. Huang understandably calls for critical interpretations of such performances to go beyond appreciation for the "exotic" (170), but we have yet to establish how best to incorporate this broad range of global productions into rigorous, yet manageable scholarly rubrics. Multicultural Shakespeare films thus provide the impetus for developing new critical paradigms. In addition, as Huang rightly remarks: "China occupies a transitional, multiply determined space, [and] the differing faces of Chinese Shakespeare signal the arrival of multiple forms to engage a global text and local consciousness in the new Asia that is in formation" (193). Chinese and other global Shakespeares clearly offer a host of transformative critical and cultural challenges and opportunities.

Not only is the content of the Folger exhibition video kiosk likely to prove particularly valuable for Shakespeareans, but also the related events and materials illuminate additional topics of interest for early modernists. The one-day conference (26 September 2009), entitled "Contact and Exchange: China and the West", for instance, offered an erudite assortment of useful presentations. Although these talks cannot be found in print currently, the Folger website contains abstracts and their inevitable print publication will make accessible a rich resource. The conference featured learned papers by an international panel, including Liam Brockey, Laura Hostetler, Benjamin Elman, Haun Saussy, Craig Clunas, Eva Ströber, Walter Cohen and Mordecai Feingold. According to the conference materials, the panel was convened to introduce "scholars of western European cultures to cutting-edge topics in fields outside their normal ken. … Broadly defined, the four session topics include literary traditions; ethnography; travel writing, and cartography; science, technology, and instrumentality, and economic trade, especially the developing Western market for decorative arts" (*Contact and Exchange*).

The conference thus further reflects increasing scholarly interest in exploring Sino-European cross-cultural topics. The greater access to China now available to western scholars, broader linguistic fluency among academics, and a growing influx of Asian scholars into Anglo-American and European universities have coalesced into the intellectual curiosity these papers addressed. Some of the topics, such as Laura Hostetler's "Cartography and Ethnography: Early Modern Practices of Representation in Qing China", connect well with important research already done on related issues in early modern European studies. Others, including Eva Ströber's fascinating "A Ewer in the Shape of a Crawfish from Southern China and Globalisation", demonstrate the unexpected, yet fruitful, directions scholarship can take when confronted with artefacts prompting surprising questions about cultural exchange. In this instance, similar objects found in such far-flung locations as Germany and Borneo prompted Ströber (from the Museum Princessehof in The Netherlands) to investigate the international distribution of these items. Apparently crafted in the sixteenth century, these ewers were "given to the Saxon court by the Medici in 1590 and used by the Kelabits [in Borneo] for head hunting ceremonies" (*Contact and Exchange*). Although Ströber's conclusions about the ewers and globalization were speculative, the audience (predominantly historians and literary specialists) gained important perspectives on early modern Sino-European trade that few scholars outside Art History are like to have considered.

The Folger website contains limited materials from this conference, but includes numerous images, text and audio guides from the Chinese exhibit, as well as podcasts and transcripts from a series of 2009 lectures devoted to more recent Chinese topics. Since the exhibition did not produce a printed catalogue, the website is invaluable, amply demonstrating how modern technology advances international scholarship. In fact, the text from the exhibit is probably best absorbed outside its original context, since crowding, lighting and time constraints become irrelevant. The exhibit covered topics that become links in the electronic guide: "Europeans in China, Mapping China, Strange Wonders, Chinese Medicine, Chinese Commodities, Reading and Writing, Imperial Letters, A New Dynasty, and Shakespeare in China". The last segment currently offers a synopsis of the video kiosk materials detailed above, but promises to add video stills "from these and other Chinese adaptations of Shakespeare" in the near future (*Imagining China*).

The main exhibit, curated by Timothy Billings with Jim Kuhn, provides an excellent introduction to relevant Chinese history and to Sino-European interaction during what is called the early modern period in Anglo-European scholarship. Gathered from items in the extensive Folger Shakespeare Library, Library of Congress and Walters Arts collections, as well as from artefacts provided by the curator, the exhibit offers an in-depth and informative account of the ways early European explorers, missionaries and writers viewed China and displays important facets of Chinese culture across several centuries. Given the exhibit's location, it is not surprising that it includes a number of artefacts of particular interest to Shakespeareans; both authentic and forged correspondence between Queen Elizabeth and the Emperor of China appear, for instance. The fake letter, described as a "literary prank", purportedly refers to "the challenge posed by China's historical records which predated the beginning of the world as it was understood from the bible" (*Imagining China*). This missive is juxtaposed with an illuminated manuscript letter the Queen sent to the Emperor, which never reached its destination. In addition, there are images reminiscent of Othello's tales of Africa and familiar texts, such as early modern maps, now placed in a revised context. As scholarship continues to expand its scope internationally, exhibits such as this offer welcome correspondence with more localized historical and critical discoveries.

As this overview suggests, the Folger exhibit and ancillary events provide a welcome, albeit limited, introduction to Chinese Shakespeares and to Sino-European relations during England's early modern period. Presumably, more relevant historical and cultural material will emerge as global academics delve further into the questions nurtured by cross-cultural scholarship. The increasing visibility of archival resources in these areas promises to generate numerous important scholarly projects on Sino-European relationships. In addition, scholars and theatrical practitioners will need to examine further the theory and practices supporting Shakespeare performances in China and around the world. Since the global spread of Shakespeare is often construed as problematic, the appearance of these early modern English plays in disparate, often surprising, international venues will continue to prompt serious discussion. It remains unclear, for example, whether alliances between local practices and Shakespearean drama constitutes a savvy strategy for revitalizing traditional arts or whether it marks a wave of cultural colonisation. The Folger exhibit promises to enliven scholarly discussions yet to emerge in the realms of current and historic Sino-European interactions. Furthermore, its presence on the Web provides a welcome globally available electronic analogue to the international interactions it reports upon. This exhibit deserves the increased longevity and expanded access enabled by the Internet and scholars throughout the world will benefit from its offerings.

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