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Exhibit Review

IMAGINING CHINA: THE VIEW FROM EUROPE, 1550–1700. Exhibition curation by Timothy Billings with Jim Kuhn and video curation by Alexander Huang. 18 September 2009–9 January 2010.

This exhibit at the Folger Shakespeare Library (2009) was a testament to how views of China changed and developed during the 150 years concerned, as Europe learned about the country, as well as how balances are shifting in the United States today. It included information on how Shakespeare performance has developed in Chinese film and theatre, especially since 1986, via video examples selected by Alexander Huang that were available in a well-developed media kiosk. Though the artifacts in the exhibit reflected Elizabethan and Jacobean views of China, as a viewer I left thinking how presenting China has complexified in contemporary American museum display and how China—the "bamboo curtained" other of my childhood—has shifted from periphery of American consciousness toward China's historically self-conceived place, the center of things, culturally, economically, politically.

The Folger library sits at the head of the national mall close to the Supreme Court, US legislative buildings, and Library of Congress. Henry Folger of Standard Oil established the library in the 1930s to plant Shakespeare firmly in the head of the American nation. His dream is alive and well in today's Washington: for example, the NEA's Shakespeare in American Communities program (http://www.shakespeareinamericancommunities.org), established in 2003 under the Bush administration, continues, sending teachers free DVDs featuring American teens of all ethnicities enraptured as they play Shakespeare and funding groups to crisscross the nation with Shakespeare performances. Paul Collins's lecture at the Folger, which greeted my

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arrival in Washington, included readings from his *The Book of William: How Shakespeare's First Folio Conquered the World* (Collins 2009) detailing his pilgrimages to the first folios in Japan. So I went to the Folger with visions of a literary-industrial complex dancing in my head. Was this a celebration of Shakespeare appropriating China, and did not the current debt economics have something to do with China being featured here? (Contemporary politics indeed "made this exhibit very easy to fund," as one staff member volunteered when we chatted during a break at a conference associated with the exhibit.)

But the display was not a case of finding "new sites for Shakespeare" (to borrow John Russell Brown's (1999) enthusiastic phrase regarding his Asian theatre adventures). Rather, the display showed Timothy Billings's careful choices of books, images, and historical figures to clarify sixteenth- and seventeenth-century European perceptions of and encounters with China. Huang's video choices likewise convince us that, while there is definite West to East influence going (especially British to Asia) in film or theatre, it would also be productive to spend time researching inter-Asian influences (mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Singapore were all included here) and seeing how different Chinese Shakespeares reflect the variety of Chinese relationships to Shakespeare (and of course other areas of Asia, notably Japan), historically and at present. This review will briefly consider the exhibit and then discuss Huang's video kiosk, inset near the entrance to the display.

Billings selected a number of themes, and I will only hit on a few. The exhibit started with Jesuit-inflected images and writings on China, including those of Matteo Ricci (1552–1610) and Athanasius Kircher (1622–1680). It continued with early maps and images and then explored oddities that struck the European imagination—cormorants, medicines (including rhubarb and musk, as well as *moxa*), sail coaches ("cany wagons light" mentioned by John Milton in 1667, small vehicles which used wind power to move over flat beaches in the windswept south)—and showed an undelivered letter from Elizabeth I to the "Emperour of Cathaye." Versions of Voltaire's 1755 *Orphan of China,* the theatre text that introduced China to Western theatre audiences, with a plot from Jesuit accounts of Chinese tales, was the only true theatre-related object. Overall, the material clarified how the Jesuits became interpreters of China to the West and the West to China. The display impressed upon visitors how Europe (at least England and France), despite growing power, were lacking the wares and curiosities to lure Chinese markets while Europe found musk, tea, pots, and other aspects irresistible. One left the exhibit thinking that Europe was a peripheral place then and China was a center.

The video kiosk was partly hidden behind a panel and seemed underutilized as a result. This is unfortunate because it contained work that might have most interested the visitors who were looking for Shakespeare in the exhibit. Huang included a time line of Shakespeare in Asia and China (including the first mention in Chinese by Lin Zexu in 1839, the first student production in English in 1896, and the first professional and the first student Chinese-language performances in 1913). There was a well-done slide show that included around fifty images, from a picture of an 1896 production at St.

John's University to the multiple productions of recent years. Visual evidence of a good number of *Lear*s, *Hamlets,* and so on allowed viewers to compare the staging choices. Huang's introduction to the film clips saw three categories for productions: universalizing productions (direct translations of the Bard), localizations (Shakespeare assimilated into local life), and truncated and rewritten versions (associated with postmodern experiments and pastiche).

The clips showed only two clear productions of the universalizing category that I could discern. A 1986 *huaju* (spoken drama) production of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* with Falstaff and company in doublet and hose as China was readjusting after the Cultural Revolution, and a 1997 *Midsummer's Night Dream* (dir. Dan Yang), which looked (aside from Chinese language) like it might have been staged in any world capital.

Half of the productions appeared to be in the "localization category": the plots seemed relatively unchanged, but Chinese features were prominent in the historical setting of the play, the use of minorities' local color, or the adaptation of various regional opera genres. Films such as *Banquet* (*Ye Yan,* also *Legend of the Black Scorpion,* 2006, dir. Feng Xiaogang), despite its kung fu film style, jumps from roof to roof and its *butoh*-inflected movement in plays within the film, seemed to stay relatively close to Shakespeare's plot while making adjustments to set the story in tenth-century China. Sherwood Hu's *King of the Himalayas* (*Ximalaya wangzi,* 2006) puts *Hamlet* in a Tibetan court, one of two "ethnic" Shakespeares that were presented. The other was a 2002 *Romeo and Juliet* story in Yunnan Flower Lantern Theatre [*huadeng*] style. The melodrama aesthetic and staging were reminiscent of model opera (*yang-banxi*) of the Cultural Revolution. There were productions in various opera styles, such as *Revenge of the Prince* (Shanghai Jingju Company, 2005) in *jingju* (Bejing opera) style, with Claudius cast as the painted face and the Hamlet and Laertes characters complete with flags on their back in the final fight scene done in *wu* (military) movement style. In Wu Hsing-kuo's Taiwanese *Lear Is Here* (*Le Er zai ci,* 2007 [2000]), this Taiwanese performer played all the roles in beautifully physical *jingju* style. In this cutting, the production seemed quite true to Shakespeare's plot and characterizations. Hence, I put it in the localization category, despite the fact this was a solo performance and it references Wu's relationship with his teacher, with whom he had to break to do his innovative explorations of *jingju* Shakespeare with Contemporary Legend Theatre (*Dangdai chuanqi*) (see Huang 2006a). Wu's mastery of all the roles was evident; the emotional power of his reading was palpable. Lear *was* there, even if Wu Hsing-kuo was too.

The postmodern and pastiche productions included the intercultural productions. There was an English-Hong-Shanghai production of David Tse's *Lear* in which a modernistic, Mandarin-speaking Lear "phones up" his Anglophone daughter Cordelia. She (an actress from London's Yellow Earth Company) answers in English with the Shakespearean text—culture clash personified (see Huang 2006b for discussion). There was the inter-Asian *Lear* (1997) of Singaporean Ong Keng Sen in which a Japanese actor played Lear using techniques from *nō* with some *aragoto*-style kabuki vocals added. Meanwhile

the Goneril was a *jingju* female impersonator and Cordelia was a male Thai dancer who, in the scene displayed, was doing a generally naturalistic portrayal. A gamelan played behind. The clips helped clarify the controversies that Ong's work attracts. While the concepts and production values are present, the piece seemed fragmented. Funding helped leverage a number of multicultural projects in the 1990s (of the "let's put top artists of different national genres together" variety). The pieces, while interesting, did not seem to make a whole. There was a German-Beijing *Richard III* (2001, dir. Lin Zhaohua, presented at the Berlin Asian Pacific Cultural Festival) with lighting, movement, and sound that could have come from Robert Wilson or any director of postmodern cool. The production, using children's game structures for the murder of Clarence and showing the playful cruelties participated in by those who later became the victims, proposed general responsibility for Cultural Revolution atrocities: "Murders took place in most impossible circumstances, and those who were killed would never know how and why they were murdered" (Lin Zhaohua, quoted in Li 2010: 179).

While the tragedies impressed with technology and auteur-ness, the comedies—the Singapore *Chicken Rice War* (2000) and the Hong Kong *Troubled Couples* (1987)—were fun. In *Chicken Rice War* children of two feuding food stall families are cast as Romeo and Juliet in a school play. The clip started with a newscaster giving Shakespeare's text: "Two houses divided . . ." His producer breaks in asking him to cut the pretensions—Singlish and Shakespeare are two poles of Singapore experience, that the film plays between. Soon we are at the warring food stalls (using Cantonese opera singing to continue the introduction about the divided houses). The clip concludes with parents in action as they disrupt the play their children are acting when "Romeo" kisses "Juliet" and the families go ballistic.

The hypothesis I took from the postmodern, pastiche, and parody group was that where Shakespeare has been around for a long time as a major function of the education system (i.e., Singapore, Hong Kong), today one sees more people who may say, like Japanese director Noda Hidekai, "Shakespeare is interesting, but the plots are known to everyone. Naturally I feel obliged to add a new story or two while adapting his play. So I think it's OK to 'smash up' Shakespeare" (quoted in Hilberdink-Sakamoto 2010: 137). Smashed up Shakespeare, as in the West, can come both in serious avant-garde high art or playful parody.

By contrast a greater number of productions from the mainland (and to an extent Taiwan), where Shakespeare has perhaps not been so totally indigenized, seemed to be exploring if Shakespeare is a new site for *jingju*. Mainland filmmakers were also presenting the plots as good stories and adapting Shakespeare to Chinese history to bring new audiences into the cineplex. The Hong Kong and Singapore film examples presumed viewers knew the story and played loosely with the material. A wider sample of course would be needed to test if my hypothesis holds.

The productions were clearly chosen for the significance of the companies, including groups that have received much discussion in recent West-

ern critical literature for their Shakespeares (especially Ong Keng Sen and Wu Hsing-kuo). But there was also an attempt at geographical distribution, as well as covering the canon (fifteen productions of nine plays: three of *Lear* and *Romeo and Juliet,* two of *Hamlet* and *Macbeth,* and one each of *Merry Wives, A Midsummer's Night Dream, Richard III, Taming of the Shrew,* and *Tempest*). A number of the clips are available on the *Shakespeare Performance in Asia* website (http://web.mit.edu/shakespeare/asia/), of which Huang is the co-founder and coeditor. Those teaching about or researching Shakespeare in Asia should use this resource.

After my first visit, I returned for one of the walkthroughs with a volunteer docent. This well-aged former theatre manager lingered at the stage replica of the Globe and the first folio display, but expressed consternation with the exhibit: China had little to do with his favorite author. It may be true that Shakespeare made little reference to the Middle Kingdom, but it is clear that, if Shakespeare is to keep his place as central to American culture, paying attention to how he is retooled in China is important. As we watched Japanese-language Shakespeare flourish and tour widely in the economy of the 1980s as Hondas replaced Fords on the road, so we should expect to see more sino-Shakespeares in Washington, New York, and beyond. Those Shakespeares may have more to do with other Chinese, Korean, or Japanese models than British or American ones. If current trends continue, I suspect that someday when I say I am going to see *Dream* at the Folger, it will be *Dream of the Red Chamber.* The Folger and Shakespeare in this exhibit led us toward imagining China; what we do not have to imagine is that Americans will be seeing more Chinese performance—center stage.

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