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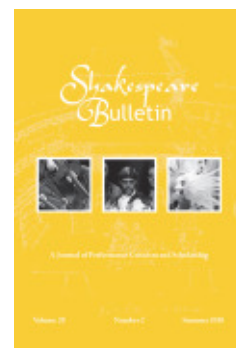
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## **Shakespeare and Chinese Performance at the Folger Shakespeare Library**

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match for our contemporary attempts to turn lead to gold, the audience definitely got the joke, and it was good to see *The Alchemist* revived on a major American stage.



## Shakespeare and Chinese Performance at the Folger Shakespeare Library

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The Folger Shakespeare Library's recent exhibition, "Imagining China: The View from Europe, 1550–1700" (September 18, 2009—January 9, 2010), offered a fascinating glimpse into the history of intercultural exchanges. Curated by Timothy Billings with an interactive touchscreen video installation by Alexander C. Y. Huang, the exhibition usefully underscored the profound distance between sixteenth- and seventeenth-century views of China and those most prevalent today. Viewers learned, for instance, that China was known in Shakespeare's day not for porcelain but for musk deer, and that Europeans made an effort to learn the Chinese language, rather than the reverse. By portraying early modern Europe as foreign and unfamiliar, the exhibition destabilized modern racist assumptions that posit the centrality of the West and the naturalness of its cultural beliefs. The exhibition also successfully undermined the popular notion that globalization is a recent phenomenon. A chronological table incorporated into the video kiosk taught viewers that the first documented performance of Shakespeare in Asia took place in 1619, when employees of the Dutch East Indies Company staged a version of *Hamlet* in Indonesia. Another display case featured rare editions of *The Orphan of China*, Voltaire's 1755 adaptation of a Chinese play that was later revived in English for David Garrick at Drury Lane.

Most relevant for readers of *Shakespeare Bulletin*, however, are the exhibition's contributions to understandings of modern performance. The video installation of excerpts from recent Sinophone stage and film productions of Shakespeare's plays offered a number of useful interventions in common narratives about cultural difference. (Those who missed the exhibition can view some of these amazing performances at *Shakespeare Performance in Asia*, <http://web.mit.edu/shakespeare/asia/>, co-edited by Alexander C. Y. Huang and Peter Donaldson.) By carefully juxtaposing particular selections, Huang's contributions to the Folger exhibition challenged essentialist ideas about Chinese and Western modes of dramatic

representation and gently drew attention to spectators' potential complicity in these discourses. Because the political and aesthetic implications of these performances can be seen most clearly in the clips from the comic film *Chicken Rice War* (2000), I will begin by discussing these excerpts in more detail, before moving on to show how similar concerns informed the other video selections.

*Chicken Rice War* revolves around a conflict between two Singapore-Chinese diaspora families whose teenage children land the title roles in an English-language production of *Romeo and Juliet*. When both sets of relatives attend the culminating performance, the ensuing scene evokes visions of Francis Beaumont's *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*: hostilities between audience members, expressed loudly in Chinese during the show, finally come to a head when the star-crossed lovers kiss on stage. Mistaking fiction for reality, one family accuses the other of trying to steal their recipe for chicken rice by having daughter "Juliet" seduce son "Romeo." The resulting fight brings the play to a standstill and is only resolved when the young male lead chastises his parents for their breach of decorum. That his speech takes place in English is significant. Literacy in the conventions of representational theatre is here imagined as essentially Western. The parents, unable to appreciate this dramatic mode, continually interrupt the performance event and eventually destroy the suspension of disbelief required for it to work.

Instead of acquiescing to such Eurocentric performance paradigms, however, other selections from *Chicken Rice War* undermined both their centrality and their validity. The film opens with the Chorus, here part of a frame narrative, holding a reporter's microphone and speaking a witty revision of the Prologue to Shakespeare's play. He is interrupted by an outraged woman, apparently his supervisor, who accuses him of being incomprehensible: "What are you saying?" she cries in Singaporean colloquial English. "Do you think Mr. Tan in Ang Mo Kio can understand you? When I told you not to speak in Singlish, I didn't ask you to sound like Shakespeare! Do it again! Do it again!" Immediately thereafter, the film cuts to a woman in modern dress giving more of the back-story, but this time speaking in a stylized mode reminiscent of *yueju* (Cantonese opera). Describing the long-standing feud, she repeatedly intones the Chinese phrase "I don't know" in a rhythmic fashion punctuated by gongs. The juxtaposition of the two scenes calls attention to the subject position of the spectator: Shakespeare may be unintelligible to someone living in Ang Mo Kio; if the inclusion of *yueju*-style performance in the medium of film feels jarring or unexpected, viewers should question the

supposed naturalness of their own dramatic conventions. What you “don’t know,” the film suggests, may be precisely what another culture takes for granted.

The themes mapped out in *Chicken Rice War*—that theatrical intelligibility depends upon cultural literacy, that spectators may be complicit in racist discourses—informed the Folger video installation as a whole. Several performances juxtaposed the familiar with the unfamiliar by employing Elizabethan-style costumes and set design. A clip from a 1997 Hong Kong production of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, for instance, depicted a smitten Titania foolishly adoring Bottom in his ass’s head. The conventionality of the interpretation highlighted the fairy queen’s eloquent use of Mandarin, especially when contrasted with Bottom’s crass “hee-haw” which apparently transcended linguistic differences. Another excerpt, from a 1986 Beijing production of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, showed a rotund Falstaff appareled in doublet and hose against the backdrop of a Tudor-style house. The strangeness of seeing the fat knight represented by a Chinese actor was accentuated by situating him within the familiar tavern setting. Similar concerns were evident in clips from the Shanghai Jingju Company’s 2005 production of *Hamlet*, which staged the play’s final duel in a *jingju* (Beijing opera) idiom, with gongs clashing, sticks banging, and actors twirling in dance-like movements. This stylized fighting contrasted markedly with the production’s graveyard scene, where Hamlet addressed Yorick’s skull in a manner so iconic as to be startling. The incongruity of seeing recognizable Shakespearean characters and scenes played by Chinese actors generated a productive tension. Theatrical legibility, the exhibition implied, comes into being through the citation of performance history itself.

If a play’s legibility depends upon the viewer’s familiarity not only with certain dramatic texts but also with a canon of past productions, then the subject position of the spectator is crucial. In excerpts from several productions dealing with colonialism and transnational migration, the Folger exhibition complicated the perceived foreignness of Sinophone Shakespeares by de-centering the Anglo-American spectator. For example, a 2006 Mandarin-English bilingual production of *King Lear*, presented jointly in Shanghai and London, foregrounded the experience of global diaspora essential to contemporary, urban Chinese audiences. Against a stage set of mirrored panels suggestive of skyscrapers in a modern Asian metropolis, Lear commands that the absent Cordelia be contacted by telephone for her declaration of love: “Call London,” he says in English. Another production of *King Lear*, by Singaporean director Ong Keng Sen in 1997, invoked the specter of World War II imperialism

when it depicted Lear as a Japanese-speaking father compelling obedience from his Chinese-speaking daughters. A different take on similar issues was evident in several clips emphasizing Chinese colonization of other peoples. In a 2004 production of *The Tempest*, for instance, Caliban was presented as a native of one of Taiwan's indigenous tribes, with the Mandarin-speaking Prospero representing twentieth-century mainland Chinese settlers on the island. The film *Prince of the Himalayas* (2006) offered a Tibetan version of *Hamlet*. Juxtaposed against other productions, the film's radically different aesthetics underscored the cultural distinctiveness of this ethnic group. By foregrounding East Asian experiences with colonialism, these excerpts undercut notions that imperialist histories are necessarily the sole property of Europe and the U.S.

This consideration of the cultural situatedness of the spectator was complemented by the exhibition's attention to the subject position of the actor in a fascinating clip from Wu Hsing-kuo's solo performance, *Lear is Here* (2000). The production deploys *jingju* conventions when it presents Lear shaking his beard and somersaulting through the air to signify his rage and the storm. In a striking departure from this performance mode, Wu then takes off his opera headdress and robe in full view of the audience. As he reveals the short-haired actor beneath, dressed in the trousers and vest that serve as the *jingju* performer's traditional undercoat, the thematic concern with nakedness in Shakespeare's play is mapped onto the semiotics of dramatic representation. The layered, flowing robes of Chinese opera performance are here imagined as merely costumes; the actor beneath is the true self. Yet, as the original playtext suggests, without "superfluous" things such as clothing, "Man's life is cheap as beast's," and "unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare, fork'd animal." Calling attention to the material means through which actors come to be understood as characters, Wu's onstage disrobing underscores the performative nature of identity as well as the value of theatrical practice.

Wu's production articulates in microcosm many of the Folger exhibition's most important contributions to studies of performance. Combining Sinophone and Western dramatic idioms, it meditates on the process through which theatrical conventions produce meaning. Moreover, it stresses the fact that interpretations of performance exist only in relation to different subject positions. When culturally distinct performance paradigms come together, they produce a complex dramatic lexicon through which meaning is both altered and enriched. The Folger exhibition thoughtfully demonstrated that it is precisely at the point where such differences intersect that a strange and unsettling friction produces new ways of experiencing theatre.