

Impersonation, Autobiography, and Cross-Cultural Adaptation: Lee Kuo-Hsiu's *Shamlet*

Alexander C. Y. Huang

Lee Kuo-Hsiu's 1992 Shamlet is a "sham" Hamlet that possesses three palimpsestical levels of signification as it rearranges Shakespeare's play. The first level is the parody of the Shakespearean text, where scripted technical errors and confusion prevail when a fictional Taiwanese theater company rehearses and performs Hamlet. The second level is (auto)biographical: the stories of the characters of the company portraying Hamlet reflect the chaotic condition of theatre making and living in contemporary Taiwan, where the economics of the arts are vexed and the political future of the island is unclear. At a third level, where the parody of the Western classical text and the autobiographical rendition of contemporary East Asian reality confront each other in scripted improvisations, a new Asian modernity emerges in the articulate voice of Lee Kuo-Hsiu.

Alexander C. Y. Huang is assistant professor of comparative literature at Pennsylvania State University. He has a PhD in comparative literature and a joint PhD in humanities from Stanford University. His research focuses on modern Chinese literature, transcultural performances, Shakespeare, and interactions between writing and other forms of cultural productions.

The 1990s saw cross-cultural adaptations for the Taiwanese theater in new ways in parody, autobiographical performance, and scripted "improvisation" in *Shamlet*, a ten-act comedy conceived and directed by Lee Kuo-Hsiu (1992; revived in 1994, 1995, 1996, and 2000).¹ Interestingly, the piece was not confined to small audiences, as many experimental works are, but was immensely popular and toured internationally. This article examines the emergence of this new performing genre through *Shamlet*. Some other representative works of this genre include Wu Hsing-Kuo's *Li'er zaici* (Lear Alone) and Lee's *Zhenghun cishi* (Personal Ads). A *huaju* (spoken drama) play inspired

by *Hamlet*, *Shamlet* stages Shakespeare's play within autobiographical impersonations: that is, it connects fictional characters in *Hamlet* to the theatrical careers of the performers of *Shamlet*. Impersonation in this context means both the dramatic representation of a character and the act of superimposing one's own offstage life on the character one is performing.

Visualize an empty stage in the Novel Hall in Taipei with a pseudo-medieval European chair. A backdrop of painted pillars, backlit with an azure light, creates the illusion of a colonnade. Before the show, the following newspaper "review" (complete with a headline) credited to *Xiaoniao bao* (Little Bird News) is projected onto a screen above the stage. The lines are written against a green and pink background:

Fengping Theater Company Performs *Shamlet*

Shamlet premiered last night in the Novel Hall in Taipei to critical success. The audience stood up and applauded for half an hour at the curtain call.

Presenting *Shamuleite*, also known as *The Revenge of the Prince*.

[. . .]

As the light goes on, the audience sees *Shamlet* (as Prince Hamlet is called in this adaptation) sitting in the chair and talking to Horatio. Both wear pseudo-medieval royal dress resembling Laurence Olivier's outfit for Hamlet in the 1948 film. The duel scene soon follows, and *Shamlet* dies entreating Horatio to "live in this world and tell the story of [*Shamlet's*] revenge." The curtain falls.

What has just been shown on the stage is the last scene from the "première" of *Shamlet* in Taipei. As the curtain rises again, the audience is whisked from Act 5, Scene 2 of *Hamlet* to Act 1, Scene 5. This time a chaotic rehearsal unfolds with the actors squabbling and going in and out of character. The confusion is heightened as stagehands interrupt, cell phones ring, and the actors' lines get mixed up with their conversations on and off the phone. The action appears to be improvised, but it is scripted. The "rehearsal" devolves into a counseling group where each cast member vents and brings personal problems to bear on the play they are "rehearsing." The lines projected above the stage comment on this chaos: "Rehearsal in Taichung. This is a topsyturvy and confused age." The comedic effect earned laughter from the audience.

Shamlet parodies *Hamlet* in the same way Henry Fielding's burlesque *Shamela* (1741) parodied Samuel Richardson's didactic novel *Pamela* (1740): as that was a sham *Pamela*, this is a sham *Hamlet*. *Shamlet*

also shares affinities with Ronald Harwood's *The Dresser* (1980), which chronicles the unsuccessful tours of a traveling company staging *King Lear*. Harwood's dresser—an effeminate assistant—struggles to convince a disillusioned veteran actor that the show must go on. Like *The Dresser*, *Shamlet* provides a behind-the-scene perspective on theater, and challenges the illusion that stage productions strive to create.

There are three palimpsestical levels of signification in *Shamlet* that coexist with one another.² The first level, production parody, is a parody of *Hamlet* through farcical “rehearsals” and “stage productions” bedeviled by mechanical failures. The second level, (auto)biographical performance, contains a satire of Lee Kuo-Hsiu, the playwright himself, and his theater company woven around key episodes from *Hamlet*. A third level emerges through the device of the play-within-a-play, which brings together the first and the second layers of meaning. This third level of signification can be called “local and personal responses to modernity.” It is characterized by scripted and rehearsed “improvisation” that juxtaposes *Hamlet* and *Shamlet*, the local and the “global,” stage and backstage, and the director's and actors' onstage and offstage personae. I argue that this third level is a sign that local and personal readings are gradually replacing Western experimental theater as models of artistic invention in the Taiwanese *huaju* theater. It is also a sign that multiple modernities have arrived and are exhibited in new Asian works such as *Shamlet*.

Production Parody

The first level is the parody in which the ill-fated theater company attempts to rehearse and stage *Hamlet*. The story of *Hamlet* is framed by a story about a group of second-rate actors who are touring Taiwan to stage the play in various cities. This fictitious tour gave the play an interesting frame of reference when it was actually being staged in different Taiwanese and international venues. *Shamlet* is a story of noncommunication and procrastination, and thus it is a parody of *Hamlet* and its protagonist, who delays action unduly. In the first act, Shamlet tells Horatio to “tell the story of [Shamlet's] revenge.” This line clearly parallels a passage in *Hamlet*: “Report me and my cause aright [. . .] / draw thy breath in pain / To tell my story” (5.2.338–349). It also parodies Hamlet's anxiety about his reputation and “story,” as the forgotten lines and disjointed actions in *Shamlet* prevent Hamlet's story from ever being told “aright.” But these forgotten lines and seemingly unchoreographed actions are actually part of the script. They are scripted “improvisations” and “accidents.” That a story can be told “aright” is an illusion for Lee. Moreover, as each performance text is always mutable, stage productions and adaptations produce an infinite number of “versions” of the original text.

Shamlet opens with a “production” of the closing duel scene in *Hamlet*—one in which the actors get all their lines wrong—and closes with the Fengping Theater Troupe’s “production” of the same scene that is just as disoriented as the “rehearsals.” In addition to the lapses on the part of actor-characters, technical errors also contribute to the chaos. Act 2 of *Shamlet*, for example, contains a technical error that causes an actor to forget his lines. The company is performing Hamlet’s encounter with his father’s ghost (*Hamlet*, Act 1, Scene 5). A steel rope is let down from the fly, which is intended to facilitate the Ghost ascending skyward while delivering his last lines to Shamlet. At this crucial moment, the Ghost realizes that a mechanical error prevents him from ascending as rehearsed. Literally stranded in the corner, the Ghost improvises and says to Shamlet, “Good boy, you shall go, since the day is about to break” (Lee 1992: 48). Both Shamlet and the Ghost are struck by this unexpected incident and are paralyzed. As Horatio enters and asks: “What news, my lord?”—a phrase that has become ironic now—Shamlet responds by sinking deeper and deeper into irony:

HORATIO: My lord! My lord! My lord! Anything wrong?
 SHAMLET: How strange! [*Looking at the stranded GHOST.*]
 HORATIO: Speak it, my lord!
 SHAMLET: Never ever tell what you see tonight.
 HORATIO: I will not tell. [*Improvises*] And I hope no one saw it! [*Looking at the audience and then the stranded GHOST.*]
 SHAMLET: Come! Swear by your conscience. Put your hand on my sword. (SHAMLET discovers that he does not have the single most important prop for this scene—his sword.)
 HORATIO: [*Filling in and improvising*] Use my sword, my lord!
 [. . .]
 SHAMLET: [*Soliloquizing*] Rest, rest, perturbéd spirit. I . . . [*Forgetting his lines*] I forgot what I have got to say!
 HORATIO: [*Prompting and reciting the lines for SHAMLET*] Perturbéd spirit, please remember that whatever historical period it is, you shall keep your mouth shut [*Referring to the stranded GHOST, who is ruining this performance*]. The time is out of joint. O what a poor soul am I that I have to set it right!
 SHAMLET: Yes, indeed!
 [*The GHOST, still stranded, keeps trying to see if he can be lifted up. Light dims.*]

—Act 23

Audiences will recognize familiar lines from *Hamlet* in this exchange, but they will also register the farcical accidents, from Shamlet’s missing sword to the stranded Ghost. In Act 3 of *Shamlet*, the “stage production” continues. The scene has been changed from the

battlements of the opening scene to Polonius's house, but the Ghost is still stranded hanging on the steel rope. Ophelia enters, listening to Laertes's advice to break with Shamlet. Frightened by the presence of the Ghost, she falls to the stage. Laertes, breaking out of his role, tells the Ghost to go away.

Act 10 is another instance where scripted technical failures give rise to the first layer of production failure humor in *Shamlet*. The Feng-ping Theater Company is "performing" the duel scene in Kaohsiung, the last stop of their tour. The duel scene was to take place indoors, in the palace; however, the forest backdrop for the gravedigger's scene is mistakenly lowered. Wang Juan, who plays the resourceful and quick-witted Wang Xiaojuan playing Gertrude, "improvises" and tries to cover up the mistake. She explains that Claudius has decided that the duel is to be held in the forest. The problem seems to have been solved until the backdrop of the painted colonnade is suddenly lowered. The reappearance of this otherwise correct stage set ruins the performance. The performers stare at one another blankly and start asking "Who am I?"

The cast is changed so frequently, often with last-minute alterations to accommodate mechanical and human failures, that the performers are now completely confused as to which parts they are supposed to play. Such errors undermine the illusion and tragedy, transforming the company's *Hamlet* into an entirely comic work.

Another force at work in the "production parody" level of signification is the playwright's relationship to Shakespeare's text. *Shamlet* operates as an extended fragmentary quotation from *Hamlet*—a quotation with typos. The title *Shamuleite* (or *Shamlet*) implies a sham to the English speakers. It is also a ludicrous combination of the first character of the Chinese transliteration of Shakespeare (Sha shi bi ya) with the last three characters of the Chinese transliteration of *Hamlet* (Ha mu lei te), carrying the sound of "sham," "shame," or "shameless" in English as noted above.

The Taiwanese audience may or may not be aware of the English pun, but Lee Kuo-Hsiu clearly wanted to exploit the cultural capital of *Hamlet* and write a satire on Taiwanese society. The comedic effect of the Chinese title was intended to create "an indelible impression . . . for the audience," since Lee believes that comedy makes "people think about serious things," something that "has always been [his] goal at Pingfeng [Theater]" (Tian 1996: 177). By turning the high tragedy of *Hamlet* into low comedy, Lee's central theme in *Shamlet* becomes the reinvention and recycling of classic texts:

RENWEI: I have written a song for you.

JUANZHI: Your sister has delivered the lyrics to me.

RENWEI: I envisioned your relationship with Zhenzhen as that between Hamlet and Ophelia on the stage.

JUANZHI: The relationship between us has not been that tragic and melancholic!

RENWEI: Yes, that's why I made it up. Just as the script is invented, so are the lyrics. . . . Would you sing with me?

—Act 9 (Lee 1992: 119)

This exchange between two actor-characters in *Shamlet* captures the essence of the play—to reinvent the script at all costs.

One might ask, to what purpose does Lee reinvent the classic text? Lee claims that he challenges the stature of Shakespeare in modern cultures and resists the bardolatry that has been nourished among Taiwanese and Chinese audiences. But is this characterization accurate? Has *Shamlet* really subverted a dominating cultural icon? Or has the play capitalized on that icon? In late twentieth-century Taiwan, “Shakespeare” was a commodified cultural good.⁵ Lee might or might not entertain this reading, but obviously what Lee is referring to as “bardolatry” has more to do with “Shakespeare” as a consumable cultural icon, rather than a model to be emulated, as the word “bardolatry” suggests in the eighteenth-century context.

(Auto)biographical Performance

To clarify Lee's intention, we must look at the second level of signification in *Shamlet*, the socio-biographical aspect of performance. In approaching the play on this level, I see two major themes: the first is the personal experience of the playwright and members of the company as struggling artists in a society that devalues the theater work they sacrifice to create. The second more subdued theme is the contemporary political situation of the island where the relationship to the People's Republic of China has made everyone a Hamlet of sorts; nothing is clear and procrastination seems to be the only option. Waiting and improvisation are the order of the day.

On the (auto)biographical level, *Shamlet* is a story about the misadventures of a theater company called Fengping. Word play and anagrams are as significant in Lee's play as in Shakespeare's work. The name *Fengping* transposes the name of the actual troupe, Pingfeng Performance Workshop. Pingfeng means “screen,” as in a piece of Chinese furniture with paintings on it. A screen divides the public living space such as a living room and the private space such as a bedchamber. In the context of a play, the metaphor of a screen divides the front stage and the back stage—two worlds not normally joined onstage during a performance though they are always physically joined and often

portrayed dramatically. If *pingfeng* is a metaphor for curtain on stage, then its anagram *fengping*, the screen put upside down, suggests that these two spaces are no longer divided. *Shamlet* revolves around the fictitious company's backstage rehearsals and onstage performances to an imaginary audience, which is played by the real audience. The actors move from their fictional identities as performers in *Hamlet* to their fictional identities as performers in *Shamlet* and to their real identities as Taiwanese actors. Confusion must rise out of this blurring space.

In this light, Lee's play is about theater making and living in contemporary Taiwan. He connected themes in *Hamlet* to his career as a playwright and a director. He envisioned the relationship among the actors and characters in Hamletian terms: miscommunication, noncommunication, hesitation, and skepticism. Unlike the "big-time" Shakespearean performance that wove "Shakespeare" into core narratives about politics, *Shamlet* used Shakespeare as a pretext and a theatrical device. Throughout the play one of the characters, director Li Xiuguo (a mirror-persona of Lee Kuo-Hsiu, the real playwright), was busy proving his talent to his doubting wife. This episode reflects Lee Kuo-Hsiu's anxiety and struggle to maintain the financial well-being and artistic integrity of his 1986 brainchild, the Pingfeng Performance Workshop. There, the real-life Lee is recruiter, director, manager, and actor.

Similarly, episodes in which the actors deal with last-minute role changes were inspired by a performance of a different play the year before. On 7 July 1991, the Pingfeng Performance Workshop staged Lee Kuo-Hsiu's *Songjin didai* (Elastic Zone) in the Social Education Hall in Taipei (Li Liheng 1998: 116–117). Zhang Fujian, an actor, performed a somersault from two tables stacked high on the stage and accidentally cracked his femur, causing him to retire backstage. Zeng Guocheng had to play Zhang's part, aided by the prompt book. This incident caused Lee to recognize the contingency of performance, contemplate the situation of Zhang and all his fellow actors who work under poor financial circumstances, and, for the first time, to purchase health insurance for every member of his theater company, a pioneering act for Taiwanese theater companies of the time (Lee 1992: 117). After the event he started playing with the idea of accident and scripted improvisation.

On the other hand, Lee also used his production to critique the lack of team spirit among actors in Taiwan. The quarrels among the actors and the dilemma for a small theater troupe in *Shamlet* are autobiographically based. As an influential figure in the experimental little theater movement in Taiwan,⁶ Lee launched a short-lived theater

journal in 1989, which was intended to promote independent productions and to unite various spoken drama theater companies.⁷ After three issues, the journal failed because of poor coordination among the theater companies, who were not used to alliances and to commercialized operations. The focus on self-interest and the lack of teamwork and professional management contributed to the demise of spoken drama theater in Taiwan. Lee lamented that two of the biggest problems of theater companies in Taiwan are that “i.) actors come and go, and ii.) theater companies can easily be disbanded.” The worst part is that there is no need to announce dissolutions, because “no one would even care” (Li Liheng 1998: 110). This phenomenon is satirized in *Shamlet* by numerous episodes in which actors squabble and pursue personal interest until they have no energy left.

Further, the names of the actors in the ill-starred company are anagrams of actual actors in Lee’s troupe. Gibes in the script point out the foibles of individual artists whom Lee has worked with as consistently as Shakespeare did with his actors. But identities, as *Shamlet* presents them, are interchangeable. In an interview, Lee said his first motive for staging *Hamlet* was quite simple: “The whole world is using Shakespeare, why can’t I?” The challenge is to “find a productive way to articulate your true self through Shakespeare” (Wang and Perng 1998: n.p.).⁸ Lee decided that the famous “to be or not to be” soliloquy could not be left out of his adaptation, and subsequently, the characters and actors of *Shamlet* repeatedly ask themselves the question: “Who am I?” In several scenes, this self-critique and questioning appears in the form of improvisation: for example, during a doomed “performance” of *Hamlet*, the confused actors try to find out who is playing which role after multiple role-switching:

QIANZI: May I ask a question? Who is Horatio now?

CHENGGUO: Everyone knows. Horatio is . . .

XIUGUO: Yes, I am Horatio.

CHENGGUO: Then who am I?

XIUGUO: [*Improvising and trying to smooth over the glitch*] Who am I?

Ha! What a great philosophical question. Who am I? Every person will experience this self-interrogation, often at the middle of the night, when standing in front of a mirror. He will ask himself: “Who am I?” . . . Now, let me tell you who you are.

—Act 10

In another scene, before the curtain opens, the line “to be or not to be” is projected in English on a screen above the stage. This question poses a second idea in this biographical level: *Shamlet* hints at the political question of contemporary Taiwan. This dilemma of iden-

tity that besets *Shamlet* and this confused cast is shared by most part of the Taiwanese society. If overtly Lee offers the comedy as a question about the uncertain future of theater in Taiwan as it competes with the television and film industries, he also implicitly connects the identity crisis in *Hamlet* and *Shamlet* to Taiwan's dilemma in choosing cultural or political affiliation with its powerful and hostile neighbor, the People's Republic of China.

Along these lines, several characters comment on the stagehand's "foreign" (uncostumed) appearance in the duel scene, when she brings two swords on stage:

GERTRUDE: Is that person one of us Danes?

HORATIO: Probably not, Your Majesty. She looks like one of those Chinese from the East.

GERTRUDE: Then take no more notice of her. I do not like foreigners meddling in our internal affairs.

KING: That's right! Danish affairs should be resolved by Danes!

—Act 10 (Lee 2000: 65)

The witty exchange reformulates and ridicules the most frequently used statements by the Chinese government on the Taiwan issue—that foreign powers should refrain from intervening in Chinese internal affairs and that Taiwan is part of the People's Republic of China. On the other hand, the last line of this exchange also simulates a stance favored by many Taiwanese, that is, whether or not Taiwan should be independent or become part of the People's Republic of China is to be resolved only by the Taiwanese people.

This emphasis on the autonomous participation of the audience is connected to Lee's tendency to privilege the living playwrights and actors. Lee asserts that "[he] has one advantage over Shakespeare: the great British playwright is dead, but he [a Taiwanese playwright and actor] is alive" (Wang and Perng 1998). Lee's argument has drawn the attention of some critics. Catherine Diamond believes that *Shamlet* repeats the final scene of *Hamlet* three times in order to underscore Lee's premise that "the living [actors and playwrights] always have primacy over the dead," because the living persons have the potential to "prevent tragic mistakes" (Diamond 1993: 322). This emphasis on contemporaneity and living the moment on stage is reflected by *Shamlet*'s improvisational structure.

Local and Personal Responses to Modernity

The third level of signification in *Shamlet* emerges when the first level (parody) and the second level (biography) are woven together in

scripted improvisations. This level shows the arrival of a new consciousness of multiple modernities in contemporary East Asia.

By means of improvisation, Act 10 breaks down the last boundary between the original and the translation, and between the reality on stage and what is supposed to be rehearsed off stage. During a performance of the duel scene, Li Xiuguo, who is switched into the role of Laertes, forgets every other line. Li has to take up the role because of earlier quarrels among the troupe members that triggered the newly risen emergencies. Li/Laertes cannot remember what to say in response to Hamlet's "Give me your pardon, sir. I have done you wrong" (*Hamlet*, 5.2.227). As Laertes struggles with his lines, Claudius, played by Chen Zongji, tries to smooth over the apparent glitch. A court lady prompts Li Xiuguo in full view of the audience, and, after a few unsuccessful tries, she takes out the prompt book from her pocket and starts reading Laertes's lines out loud, ruining the performance. Yet even this turns out to be a disaster. As the papers suddenly fall, Li picks up the scattered notes and says, "Let me finish this." But when Li continues reading, Laertes's lines are totally confused. Laertes introduces the line about the "envenomed [. . .] treacherous instrument" (*Hamlet*, 5.2.317) before the duel even starts. Linear time is crucial in theater, especially when certain information is revealed gradually, as it dictates logical characterizations.

The image of scattered and displaced pages of the original play text transforms the solemn tragedy of *Hamlet* into playful comedy in *Shamlet*. It also addresses the status of the original in adapted and translated drama. This production does not seek to reconcile the authenticity of the texts and the authority of performance, because these two poles do not exist for Lee. In *Shamlet*, Lee reinvents texts for his own ends, and what survives are a few central issues raised by *Hamlet* rather than anything that might be thought of as genuinely Shakespearian. Those metatheatrical moments in *Shamlet* construct dynamic relations between text and performance that resemble a reading of a palimpsest where earlier writing remains visible on a parchment though erasure has taken place. Such reading is usually not easy, though it can be rewarding, because the reader has to plow through several layers of handwriting, lines, and blurred ink. Through numerous failed rehearsals that turn the lines from *Hamlet* into a disorganized text and through characters who forget their lines, *Shamlet* questions the illusion of the stability of dramatic texts, especially those of Shakespeare.

Beyond the first two layers of signification—"production parody" and "(auto)biographical performance"—lines of *Hamlet* taken out of their sequence (and transposed in *Shamlet*) also point to editing problems that have long plagued critics and directors of Shakespeare's

texts. Set in the genre of parody-comedy, *Shamlet*, with its rehearsals and productions of *Hamlet*, stages the process in which Shakespeare's play gets transmitted from one rehearsal to another and from one actor to another. In *Shamlet*, the Fengping Theater's production of *Hamlet* turns out to be a total disaster, and Shakespeare's tragedy is transformed into what Lee calls "revenge comedy." Even the title for their play, *Shamlet*, was an accident, a typo:

YILING: Mr. Director, I received a letter from an audience member after our performance in Tainan City a few days ago.

XIUGUO: Has he got something to say about our production?

YILING: She said that Shakespeare wrote thirty-eight plays during his life-time, and there is none that is called *Shamlet*. It should be *Hamlet*.

ZONGJI: Doesn't this letter come a little too late?! We have had so many nights.

XIUGUO: We should respect our scriptwriter. When I went to get the play from Lee Kuo-Hsiu, I argued with him. I said the first Chinese character should be Ha and not Sha, but he insisted on Sha and not Ha.

ZONGJI: He phoned me and said it is Ha and not Sha. It was a typo.

XIUGUO: A typo? When did he call?

ZONGJI: This morning.

XIUGUO: This morning!?! And you are telling me just now?! I am the director, and I am the last one to know. Fine! Fine! Now go and get a pen. Get the program notes. Simply changing one word will do. . . . [Pause] Well, forget about it! No one ever buys our stage bills anyway.

—Act 9 (Lee 1992: 121)

As this scene asks what is in a name, it equally questions the authority of the original text. When the actor and director characters in *Shamlet* speak of Shakespeare in their witty exchanges about the authority of texts and about the typo on their program, they confront the idea of a stable play-text preexisting performance.

Although Lee highlights the instability of texts, he also reaffirms the significance of *Hamlet*'s themes by using them as frames of reference in *Shamlet*. Lee establishes the authority of *Shamlet* by proclaiming up front that there will be no fidelity to Shakespeare. In the program, Lee claims that *Shamlet* is a "revenge comedy" that "has nothing to do with *Hamlet* but something to do with Shakespeare," and such a claim seems to shift the focus from interpreting *Hamlet* to interpreting the playwright's career and works. In relation to Shakespeare what we see Lee demanding is localizing and personalizing the foreign drama.¹⁰

As a satire, *Shamlet* was well received, and it played to full houses in different cities in Taiwan throughout the 1990s. Once unplugged from its cultural location and connected with a different audience, the play's messages are unintelligible to the audience, as when performed at the second Chinese International Shakespeare Festival in Shanghai in 1994. Mainland Chinese audiences were at a loss and confused. Li Ruru, a native of Shanghai, recalled that "as a member of the audience [she] was often caught not knowing how to react." Although some lines were funny, the atmosphere was so solemn that she could "hardly force a laugh" (Li Ruru 2003: 220). This may be partly attributed to dual directorship of Liu Yun and Lee Kuo-Hsiu and the unsuccessful collaboration between the Pingfeng Performance Workshop of Taiwan and the Modern People's Theater (Li Ruru and Jiang 1997: 93–120; Li Ruru 1999: 364–365), but the fact that the performance of an adaptation is context-sensitive reaffirms the local position in any reading of literary and cultural texts. What worked for the Taiwanese audience would not necessarily work for the mainland Chinese audiences.

On the Way to Multiple Modernities

The significance of *Shamlet* lies in its innovative model of localization, in which the themes of a Shakespearean play inform the action of a native spoken-drama play. "Localization" is no longer merely a practice of performing foreign dramas in local acting styles or a strategy of repackaging the plot line of a foreign play in comparable local "equivalents." The focus of its localization is not a culture, but personality—that of its author/adaptor/director Lee Kuo-Hsiu.

Shamlet exemplifies a new model of localization that centers on the adapter and actors, rather than on language and cultural background. Similarly, the creation and performance of *Shamlet* suggests the emergence of a transcultural theater that diffuses and sustains the pastiche of multiple origins: the Shakespearean origin of the plot of *Hamlet*, the biographical origin of *Shamlet* in Lee Kuo-Hsiu's life and theater, as well as the political situation of contemporary Taiwan. Throughout Lee's reinvention of *Hamlet*, the directorial voice emerges from the text in the background (*Hamlet*) and from the text represented on the stage (*Shamlet*). His view is most clearly presented in the powerful image of scattered notes of confounded lines. Through imitation, improvisation, and parody, *Shamlet* mobilizes cultural differences to resist the late twentieth-century tendency to eradicate differences in cultural exchange. As a parody, *Shamlet* fuses two entities that are typically opposed—local representational practices and potentially authoritative texts. The dialectics between modern representational practices and such authoritative cultural texts has gained

increased scholarly attention. For example, Rustom Bharucha's *The Politics of Cultural Practice: Thinking through Theatre in an Age of Globalization* (2001) suggests that marginal practice of theater has the potential to oppose the homogenizing forces of globalization and media, while Arjun Appadurai's *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* focuses on theoretical implications of "the conscious mobilization of cultural differences in the service of a larger national or transnational politics" (Appadurai 1997: 15). Such forces and resistance are at work in this case.

Thus, *Shamlet* represents the new force at work in the Taiwanese theater as commercialization and experimentalism gained momentum. Lee found many connections between the characters of *Hamlet* and Taiwanese actors, represented by him and his theater company. In the modern tradition of parody and pastiche in the West, such as Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* and Mel Brooks's *To Be or Not To Be*, Lee's *Shamlet* as another parody may seem conventional. However, *Shamlet* differs from the Western avant-garde and experimental drama that reframes classical plays. Lee's plays, including *Ten Thousand Miles of the Great Wall* [*Wanli changcheng*] and *Shamlet*, are characterized by his favorite devices: play-within-a-play and superimposing performers' biographies and personal readings of the play text onto the text they are performing. *Shamlet* does not lean toward what Peter Brook heralded as "cosmopolitan theater," which contains elements that are universally vital and comprehensible by all known cultures, as in Peter Brook's *Mahabharata*. Rather, *Shamlet* reframes *Hamlet* in a mode specific to Lee and his career.

As an art form imbued with its creator's personal urgency, *Shamlet* transforms Shakespeare into dramatizations of intersecting identities that matter to Lee and to this audiences by fostering interconnections between modern performers and early modern texts, and between the personal and the fictional. This move decenters the performance texts, including the new play and Shakespeare's text on which that play superimposes itself. Rather than any performance text, the presence of the actor and playwright—the same persons in the case of *Shamlet*—is accorded primacy. Patrice Pavis observes that in experimentations with the classical work, the classical text—still used to some extent in contemporary *mise en scène*, is no longer the repository of meanings. Instead, the text has become "signifying matter awaiting meaning, an object of desire, one hypothetical meaning among others." That meaning, as exemplified by *Shamlet*, becomes tangible only in "a situation of enunciation resulting from the combined efforts of audience and *mise en scène*" (Pavis 1992: 61).

Lee Kuo-Hsiu emphasizes the modernity and contemporaneity of his plays. Michel Foucault characterizes modernity as an attitude rather than an epoch, “a mode of relating to contemporary realities” (Foucault 1997: 303–320). When Lee invokes the concept of modernity, he invokes an attitude and a desire to relate to his contemporary realities, the realities of *his* life. The divergent modes of relating Shakespeare to East Asian contemporary realities signal the arrival of “multiple modernities,” or multiple “modern” forms of cultural production in the new Asia that is currently in formation (Lau 2003: 3).

NOTES

1. *Shamuleite* [*Shamlet*], conceived and directed by Lee Kuo-Hsiu. The Screen Performance Workshop [Pingfeng biaoan ban] premiered in Taipei (1992), was revived with Modern People's Theater [Xiandai ren jushe] in Shanghai (1994), toured Taiwan (1995), and was staged again in Taipei (the “Millennium Edition” in 2000). If not otherwise noted, all quotations from *Shamuleite* are from the videotaped performance in the Novel Hall (Taipei) on 11 August 2000 and are my translations. In this article, the *pinyin* romanization system is adopted for Chinese names and phrases except in cases where the names are commonly known in the Wade-Giles romanization. In regard to the romanization of people's names, I follow their own preferences (for example, Lee Kuo-Hsiu, not Li Guoxiu).

2. I borrowed the idea from Ezra Pound (1998) who refers to a poem as a palimpsest. In the final section of the *Cantos* (Canto 116: 810), Ezra Pound refers to the unfinished poem as a palimpsest, a parchment on which former writing is erased to make room for later writing. On a palimpsest, writings of different times are simultaneously present in different layers. Rather than adding up as time passes, the meanings of the text depend on the relationship and dynamic between readers and the text. This characterization of the making and the afterlife of artistic works is especially true for drama. Allowed by the original but not bound to it, multiple meanings of a play arise from the consequence of the dynamic interaction itself.

3. When translating back into English a Chinese direct line-by-line translation of a passage from *Hamlet* (such as “The time is out of joint”), I use the original text from *Hamlet* rather than my own rendition of the Chinese translation.

4. Translations from Lee's *Shamlet* are my own if not otherwise noted. Renwei is the name for the character who plays Horatio in the play within the actual play.

5. A new apartment complex on Hsin-hai Road in Taipei has been named “Shashibiya mingxia” (Shakespeare Mansion) in order to invoke a sense of cultural sophistication. Shakespeare's name and image are also used in advertisements and names for tuxedo shops and wedding photo studios in

Taiwan. A more recent example of the commodification of “Shakespeare” is an advertisement from 2003 of Dawei (David) Wang’s English classes. The ad features the famous Shakespearean line, “To be or not to be.” In the advertisement, “Shakespeare” is used as an icon of Englishness and the global stature of the English language. The line from *Hamlet* is supposed to communicate a sense of cultural sophistication through English language education. However, it ironically connects the English classes to things irrelevant to that purpose, things evoked by the line “To be or not to be,” such as the image of Hamlet or Renaissance skepticism. The ad appeared in newspapers and online media in Taiwan including *Zhongshi dianzi bao* (China Times electronic version) and *Lianhe xinwen wang* (Online news network by United News) between April and November 2003 <<http://udn.com.tw>>.

6. The experimental drama is often called “the little theater movement” (*xiao juchang yundong*) in Taiwan. For an overview of its development in the 1980s, see Chung Ming-te 1992.

7. *Taipei Juchang (Taipei Theater)*, published by Association of Taipei Theaters, to which Lee Kuo-Hsiu was elected the second president.

8. I am grateful to Wang Shu-hua and Perng Ching-hsi for making the unpublished interview transcript available to me.

9. I am grateful to Lee for making this unpublished manuscript available to me. The translation is based on Lee’s 2000 play text and adapted from Yu Shiao-ling’s English translation (Yu 1999).

10. Yet, contrary to what Lee claimed, thematically *Shamlet* has a lot to do with *Hamlet*. For example, the comic plot of intrigues and intricate interpersonal dynamics among actors refers back, like an imperfect but legible copy, to the tragic plot of *Hamlet*. A parallel to Shakespeare’s revenge story is also woven into the comic plot of *Shamlet* when one of the actors puts laxatives in an actress’s drink to avenge his unrequited love.

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