

## SHAMLET: SHAKESPEARE AS A PALIMPSEST

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This chapter investigates one of the most traditional yet uncanny literary recursions in recent practices of cultural translation<sup>1</sup>—the turn to Shakespeare. It explores a range of questions regarding the mediated nature of transnational experiences. How, for example, does this mediation articulate a diverse range of ethnic and cultural identities in the visible, palpable and audible world of theatre? Why Shakespeare? How do stage translations of Shakespeare evince very specific ways of adapting culture in, say, the postmodern Taiwanese context? What is the relationship between cultural translation and national imperatives?

The case in point is an adaptation of *Hamlet* produced in Taiwan that has successfully toured several different cultural locations: Lee Kuo-Hsiu's<sup>2</sup> *avant-garde* play, *Shamlet*.<sup>3</sup> As a dynamic event in the field of transnational cultural production,<sup>4</sup> this performance constitutes 'an act of violence' against the cultural Other it attempts to 'translate'.<sup>5</sup> It manipulates and parodies the Other—as represented by *Hamlet*—through displacement of the foreign. This strategy to engage the Other is both an initiation and a result of changes in postmodern Taiwanese literary sensibility.

From this central set of questions and theoretical engagements emerge more precise topics for exploration. The supposedly self-contained meanings and signifying milieus of a complex early modern play like *Hamlet* are hard to reconcile with a performer's impulse to re-invent these meanings. What is the relationship

between the formation of transnational culture and canonical foreign texts? How does Shakespeare—a form of early modern English cultural consciousness—operate in this multicultural and increasingly globalised world? What are the peculiar conditions and forces in the making of this cultural constitution? As Li Ruru notes, since the inception of modern Chinese theatre, 'Shakespeare has served as a powerful external force propelling [it]'.<sup>6</sup> However, standing at the turn of the twenty-first century and witnessing, what W.B. Worthen calls, the 'dramatic performativity' of global Shakespeare,<sup>7</sup> we must also ask what are the forces behind such performances and the Taiwanese signifying practice rooted in transnational cultures.

One of the most important forces is not the deconstruction of canonical texts but their parodying. In the late twentieth-century Taiwanese literary scene, improvisation and parody grew as new strategies to translate items of non-Taiwanese cultural capital that are identifiably foreign yet not exotic enough to qualify as truly such—for instance, *Hamlet*. The play, like the name of Shakespeare, constitutes internationally circulating cultural capital; it has formed a global cultural institution. Audiences of *Shamlet* are familiar with the themes and story of *Hamlet* through its circulation in popular culture, the educational system and Hollywood films. This awareness constitutes a very different dimension in the engendering and reception of a cultural translation of the play. While the study of modern Chinese appropriation of non-Chinese literary texts (almost exclusively fiction) and its relationship to the engendering of modern Chinese literature is relatively well-developed, the dynamic role and regulating position of cultural translation in postmodern representational practices (such as drama and film), have not been adequately studied.<sup>8</sup> *Shamlet*, among other reframings of non-Chinese texts, is an intriguing site for further exploration.<sup>9</sup>

This operation naturally calls into question a prevalent critical perspective known as presentism, a critical operation that brings contemporary events to bear on pre-modern works. Rewritings of canonical texts—a phenomenon that existed for centuries—are often met with sceptical eyes and historically conscious criticism, because these performances are perceived to be evading

the historical specificity of the texts they seek to represent. However, the situatedness of the practice of literary interpretation and the reader's localities and temporalities should be acknowledged and confronted. The urge to privilege the present and to re-invent the repertoire of meanings is a response to the urge to restore literary works to their earliest historical circumstances. As opposed to the approach to read Shakespeare historically according to an exclusive set of knowable 'facts', presentism is invested in the validity and value of contemporary critical responses. It also brings to light the intricate relationship between history and epistemology, past and present, and text and performance. History can never be reduced to a series of 'facts', preserved in a pristine state, as it were. Similarly, texts do not and cannot mean anything by themselves. As Terence Hawkes points out, texts have to be represented and connected; we mean, by the texts we choose.<sup>10</sup> Lee's reading of *Hamlet* clearly espouses some of the corollaries of presentism.

#### SHAKESPEARE AND THEATRICAL INTERCULTURALISM

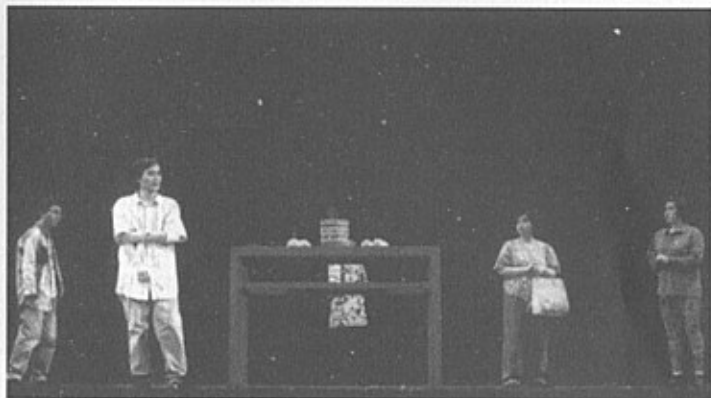
Performing styles further complicate this presentist approach to Shakespeare. I would like to begin by taking a closer look at the palimpsest-like nature of dramatic translation and intercultural performance. Rather than blending foreign sources into a reframed master narrative in the sense of 'classical' translation, intercultural theatre exposes the cracks and traces of cross-cultural encounters, in Walter Benjamin's terms.<sup>11</sup> By such exposure, it repositions literary and cultural texts. The key to theatrical interculturalism is the conscious process of exhibiting 'incongruent' foreign elements, or the simultaneous juxtaposition of the local and the foreign. The *fabula* of the foreign play—or its cultural location(s)—is recycled and reassigned to a new local context through theatrical (re)production. Bewildered and annoyed at one moment or another, the audience sees the concealment of old lines and the revelation of new ones. In this sense, cross-cultural stage translation resembles the making of a

palimpsest. It is also a frequently adopted strategy to perform a hegemonic text.

Further, because of the multiple layering of texts, contexts, translations and performances that grows larger every year, 'Shakespeare' has become a palimpsest on which performers constantly erase, re-write and gloss. These performances present a layered intertextuality and refer to one another, as well as to the barred 'original'. On a palimpsest, new writings can never quite conceal the old writings that have been partially erased. The point at issue is how new layers permeate the old, and how all these new texts refer to the original Shakespearean text and to the Elizabethan field of reception, which is referenced but intentionally lost.

The process of the making and reading of the intercultural theatre work, *Shamlet*, is a good example of Shakespearean palimpsest. The play is wittily titled *Shamlet: A Revenge Comedy*, which signifies not only its genre, i.e. satire, but also its genealogy from Shakespeare. Intertextuality, theatrical interculturalism, and the readers' location(s) are intertwining threads that contribute to the complexity of producing and reading a performance. On top of the layering of cultures and signifying milieux, patchy fragments of plot and speeches are other features that stand out in *Shamlet*. Intercultural theatre, more so than writing, often represents only one narrative out of the infinite narratives that are possible in a written play. This kind of theatre works like a fragmentary quotation of the play-text and of the author's world, while always extending beyond that quotation and its pretext. Intercultural performance inevitably quotes fragmentarily from foreign and domestic contexts and play-texts. It challenges audience members to step down from the comfortable saddle on which they ride daily. Intercultural theatre, as Robert Wilson characterises it, is not something that is 'finished, put in a box and wrapped up with a bow'.<sup>12</sup>

Not surprisingly, with a close link to Western experimentalism and American postmodernism, *Shamlet* opens as a quotation—a quotation with typos to be more precise—from *Hamlet*. The title of the play, *Shamuleite (Shamlet)*, combines the first character of the Chinese transliteration of Shakespeare (*sha*) and the last three



(a)



(b)

PHOTOGRAPH 2.1 (a) & (b): SCENES FROM *SHAMLET: A REVENGE COMEDY* WRITTEN AND DIRECTED BY LEE KUO-HSIU

characters for *Hamlet (muleite)*. Set in a playful tone, *Shamlet* also contains the sounds of 'sham' and 'shame'. The multiple layers of the title itself reveal Lee's intention to use comedy and farce to impart social commentaries that can be read on different levels.

By turning high tragedy into low comedy, the director of *Shamlet* claims to have deconstructed Shakespeare and resisted the hegemonic power that Shakespeare's plays hold in a global context. The question then becomes whether *Shamlet* has really subverted the cultural 'hegemony' represented by global Shakespeare. Further, in the name of what authority has the interpretive license been acquired? In whose terms and to which end does Lee translate and perform Shakespeare? If the performance, informed by presentism, could not and would not communicate the meanings prescribed by Shakespeare's text, what do Shakespeare's plays *do* in the theatre? What are their functions? What are they *for*?

The play offers no easy answer, but I would like to extrapolate a few principles behind the creation and circulation of the new international currency of Shakespeare suggested by this play.

#### READING A PALIMPSEST

- Renwei: I have written a song for you.  
 Juanzhi: Your sister has delivered the lyrics to me.  
 Renwei: I envisioned your relationship with Zhengzheng 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 ... Will you sing with me?

—*Shamlet*, (Act 9)<sup>13</sup>

This witty exchange sums up Lee's understanding of the uneasy relationship between script and stage representation. *Shamlet*'s structure disrupts and reverses the hierarchies of text/performance, past/present, and dead masters/living actors. Yet at the same time, it demonstrates an unusual affinity with Shakespeare and with modern performances of Shakespeare. Lee did not have direct access to the English texts of *Hamlet*; he worked with Mel Gibson's film version and two popular twentieth-century Chinese

translations by Liang Shiqiu and Zhu Shenghao. The genealogical link between *Shamlet* and the Hollywood film remains unclear, but Lee indicates in an interview that the film has inspired him to stage *Hamlet* in his own terms. Attracted by Shakespeare's treatment of death scenes, Lee focused on a few scenes from *Hamlet* that either deal with death philosophically or visually represent death and violence. Lee does not regret not being able to read Shakespeare in English. On the contrary, he is against staging straightforward literary translations of foreign plays, because he believes that spin-offs and adaptations offer more exciting creative possibilities. He claims, 'If one chooses to stage a translated foreign play and follow it line by line, s/he will be deprived of the opportunity to create and re-write'.<sup>14</sup>

Thus, Lee does not use any readily available Chinese versions of *Hamlet*. He creates a play that rests partly on *Hamlet* and partly on the transnational culture in Taiwan. He envisions the relationship among its actors and characters in *Hamletian* terms: miscommunication, non-communication, hesitation and a skeptical attitude. Here, I would like to offer a reading of the production and the matrix of textual relations it entails. The actors on the intercultural stage move back and forth between the invisible realm of *locus*, the imagined locale of the story, and *platea*, a platform where the play is being performed before spectators. The exchange, quoted above from *Shamlet*, showcases how the actors freely move between the story being staged and the stage that sustains that story. Actors often break out of their roles in *Hamlet* and step into their roles in *Shamlet*. This movement is especially evident vis-à-vis the play-within-a-play, which enhances the multiple layering and framing of the plot of *Shamlet* within Shakespeare's plot. The play manifests a strategy of intervention in the global politics of Shakespearean performance.

The characters in *Shamlet* are no Chinese counterparts to those in *Hamlet*. The story of *Hamlet* is framed by the story of a second-rate and ill-fated theatre company rehearsing and staging *Hamlet* on a tour of Taiwan. The play is titled *Shamlet* because of a printing mistake. The *fabula* of the tour itself formed a very interesting layer when the play was actually being staged in different Taiwanese and international venues.

There are at least two signifying milieux in *Shamlet*: of the story of non-communication and procrastination in *Hamlet* (which is being parodied), and of the story of the failure of the theatre company (which is framed by their rehearsals of *Hamlet*). The play moves back and forth between the actors' quarrels, affairs, life offstage, and the moments in which these actors bring private matters onto the real stage while rehearsing or staging *Hamlet*. As selected scenes from *Hamlet* are rehearsed, the motifs and *fabulae* of these scenes are also echoed in incidents happening in the theatre company. Actors move from their real identities, as the persons putting on the play *Hamlet* for the real audience, to their identities as actors in the story of the play, to their phantom identities of Hamlet, Ophelia, Gertrude, etc., in the play-within-a-play (the failed production of *Hamlet* in *Shamlet*), and finally to their identities as actors in the dumb show (a play-within-a-play within the play-within-a-play) that Hamlet arranges for Claudius.

Moving among these four different sets of identities, the characters explore their local identities as actors from a typical Taiwanese theatre troupe. They are tormented by the difficulties facing all small and experimental theatre companies. These problems echo the difficult situations that Hamlet faces. *Shamlet* presents Hamlet's procrastination and difficult choices through the framework of a dull-witted theatre company called the Fengping Theatre Troupe. The name parodies that of the real company putting on the play, the Pingfeng Theatre Troupe. Word play, anagrammatism and acrostic puzzles of names are as significant in Lee's play as they are in Shakespeare's. The plot revolves around Fengping Theatre's backstage rehearsals and onstage productions. The success of this production is their only hope of rescuing the theatre company from its financial straits after years of poor performance, especially a catastrophic spell three years ago.

Whether or not the company's luck will turn for the better depends solely on the success of this production and, more importantly, on resolving the entangled relations and negative emotions its members have towards one another. For example, the 'director' is preoccupied with proving his talent to his sceptical wife, who is having an affair. The 'director's' name, Li Xiuguo, is

an anagram of the playwright's name and a mirror-image of him. The 'director' takes theatre as a profitless venture and seeks a career in film and television. The contingencies of their lives and comedic accidents dictate the contingencies of performance.

#### REHEARSED 'IMPROVISATION'

In addition to characters bringing private matters to bear on the play they are performing, *Shamlet* lays bare the process of the mechanical reproduction of literary texts. 'Improvised' scenes are rehearsed prior to the actual performance. The fact that scenes with mechanical failures are also rehearsed, gives *Shamlet* an unmistakable aura of theatre that challenges established modes of reading. It brings to light a key paradox of live theatre that stages a well-rehearsed illusion of a 'life' that is taking place for the first time on stage. Marvin Carlson calls this capacity the 'ghostliness', one of the 'universals of performance'.<sup>15</sup> Richard Schechner refers to this phenomenon as 'twice behaved behaviour' in theatre.<sup>16</sup> While *Shamlet* bears out an important front of this theoretical engagement with rehearsed 'improvisation', it also complicates the issue of the stage being haunted by experiences of previous productions of the same play. It might be true that, for the Western audience, *Hamlet* has always already begun, far before the performance is staged. The motifs and story of *Hamlet* have been circulating in print, on stage, on the screen, in the education system and in popular culture for centuries. For the Asian audience, this part of collective literary memory is more distant and vague. Therefore, *Shamlet* is not haunted by previous productions of *Hamlet* but by Lee's preoccupation with creating a new theatre that invites the actors and audience to 'write' and 'read' between the lines of the play. *Shamlet* opens with a 'rehearsal' of the duel scene in *Hamlet*—in which the actors get all the lines wrong—and closes with Fengping Theatre Troupe's 'production' of the same scene that is as disoriented as previous 'rehearsals' (Photograph 2.2). Malfunctions in the routine mechanical business of the theatre, like the failure of the mechanism for the ghost to

PHOTOGRAPH 2.2: THE DUEL SCENE IN *SHAMLET*

ascend or actors forgetting or accidentally switching lines, exhibit a translation in process.

These 'errors' diminish the tragic sense in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. The character of the director keeps worrying about his wife who is having an affair, while wanting to prove to her his capability and talent in performance. The troupe members also have troubled relationships with one another involving love, hatred and jealousy. Unfortunately, the director is not the person to solve these discords within his troupe and their ill-fated production. Rather, the contingency of life is woven into the contingency of improvised performance. The audience reads the palimpsest on stage where Shakespeare, the actors' lives, *Hamlet* and *Shamlet* meet in various narrative frames, so that neither centre nor structure is left. The working process of cross-cultural staging is laid bare, since *Shamlet* dramatises the failed rehearsals and ridiculous productions of a third-rate theatre troupe trying its hand at Shakespeare's revered masterpiece, *Hamlet*.

Reading the production thus comes to resemble the act of unpacking Russian dolls: each one is empty, but serves as a frame for the others inside. This production, like many intercultural performances, does not seek to reconcile the authenticity of the text and the authority of performance. These two poles do not exist for Lee. Performance is his way of interpreting himself to himself.<sup>17</sup> In *Shamlet*, Lee reinvents texts for his own ends and

what survive are a few central issues raised by *Hamlet*, rather than anything that might be thought of as genuinely Shakespearean, or a residue from Elizabethan and Jacobean cultural contexts.

*Shamlet* also refers to editing problems that have long plagued critics and directors of Shakespeare's texts. Set in the genre of parody-comedy, *Shamlet*, with its triptych of rehearsals and productions of *Hamlet*, stages the process by which Shakespeare's play gets passed from one rehearsal to another, one actor to another. In *Shamlet*, the Fengping Theatre's production of *Hamlet*—the play-within-a-play—turns out to be a total disaster, and Shakespeare's tragedy is diminished, or reborn if you will, into a revenge comedy. Even the title for their play, *Shamlet*, is an accident, a typo:

- Yiling: Mr. Director, I received a letter from a spectator 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 38 plays during his lifetime, but there is none that is called *Shamlet*. It should be *Hamlet*.  
 Zongji: Isn't this letter somewhat 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 now?! I am the director, and I am the last one to know. Fine! Fine! Now go and get a pen. Get the programme notes. Simply changing one word will do... [Pause] Oh, forget about it! No one ever buys our programme notes anyway.

—*Shamlet*, (Act 9)<sup>18</sup>

This scene questions the idea of 'what's in a name' and deconstructs the authority of the original text. The joke about the typo

actually identifies one of the core problems in Shakespeare's texts. As has been noted by various modern scholars like Leah Marcus, the notion of a printed text as a site of materialised and fixed authorial intentions is foreign to the Renaissance playhouse. Just as there are many provisional, and sometimes, bad versions of fragmentary scenes of *Hamlet* in the rehearsals in *Shamlet*, there is no single authoritative version of Shakespeare's plays—contrary to what Shakespeare's first editors hoped for. Marcus pictures the conditions of theatrical production in Renaissance London as follows:

Rather than flowing effortlessly and magically from Shakespeare's mind onto the unalterable fixity of paper, the plays were from the beginning provisional, amenable to alterations by the playwright or others, coming to exist over time in a number of versions, all related, but none of them an original in the pristine sense promised by [John] Heminge and [Henry] Condell.<sup>19</sup>

Heminge and Condell believe that an author's 'mind and hand [go] together'. Further, commenting on the 'stolen' quartos, they wish in their prefatory epistle that 'the Author himself had liv'd to have set forth, and overseen his own writings'. There is a pristine sense of a self-sustained and perfect original. Heminge and Condell go on to condemn the 'surreptitious copies, maim'd and deformed by the frauds and stealths of injurious impostors, that expos'd them'.<sup>20</sup> When we speak of the 'original' Shakespeare, though assuming some degree of stability, we inevitably have to specify which Shakespeare: First Folio, Second Folio, First Quarto or modern synthesis like the Arden or Riverside Shakespeare. The conditions of editing the problems of *Hamlet* relate directly to the typo from *ha* to *sha* in the title of the production. Its strategy of reading and writing the palimpsest is an aggressive one. The play establishes its authority by proclaiming up front that there will be no fidelity to Shakespeare or to Elizabethan cultural contexts. It does so by writing forcefully on the palimpsest, though it is not able to conceal everything.

The title *Shamlet*, and the multi-layering of plots that repudiates the integrity of the Hamletian plot—all parody *Hamlet*. Lee claimed that *Shamlet* is a 'revenge comedy' that 'has nothing

to do with *Hamlet* but something to do with Shakespeare'. Interestingly, Shakespeare's revenge story is intricately woven into the plot of *Shamlet* when one of the actors puts laxatives in an actress's drink to avenge his unrequited love. The conspiracy is successful: she rushes off the stage during a performance, ruining her reputation and the production. *Pace Lee*, *Shamlet* has everything to do with *Hamlet*. Much in the manner of postmodern productions such as Stuart Sherman's 18-minute dumbshow *Hamlet*,<sup>21</sup> *Shamlet* has four actors (characters) for the title character, Hamlet. Both plays feature a carousal display of a number of different Hamlets. The 'stage upon a stage' in *Shamlet* presents the making of the theatrical. The real actors are telling the stories of the actors in *Shamlet*, who are enacting the story of *Hamlet* with misreadings and accidents. Multiple layering and multiple narrative frames are characteristic of postmodern productions like *Shamlet*, but they are inherent in any theatrical production. In this sense, the play is not so much a parody of *Hamlet* as a parody of Taiwanese society, seen through the lens of a theatre practitioner.

The absurdity of the title *Shamlet*, engendered by the accident of a typo, repudiates the dichotomy of centre and periphery in cultural bodies on the one hand; but it also explores, on the other, the possibility of intercultural theatre as a hybrid yet integrated form of artistic expression. A multitude of possible meanings are woven into many confusing layers of signification. Its witty title and plot-development parallel those of *Hamlet*. The biographies of the actors make *Shamlet* resemble a palimpsest that unfolds itself, page by page, in front of the audience. Meanings are constantly being inserted through improvisational acts on stage. As such, the play destabilises the conceptual hierarchies of play-texts and performances, and past playwrights and contemporary directors.

Act Ten is Lee's most pertinent effort to foreground the contemporaneity and contingency of theatre-making and live performance. Fengping Theatre (the name of the theatre company in the play) is in Taichung, one of the cities they are touring. During a stage performance of the duel scene (adapted from *Hamlet* 5.2.224ff), Li Xiuguo, who plays the role of Laertes, forgets

almost every other line, since he is forced to take up the role without preparation owing to quarrels among the troupe members and last-minute emergencies. The one who was assigned the role has left the scene at the last minute, thereby engendering chaos. The troupe has to cover up the absence of several actors, either by having doubles or through improvisations. Li, playing Laertes, cannot remember what to say in response to Hamlet's speech, translated from Shakespeare's line 'Give me your pardon, sir. I have done you wrong' (*Hamlet* 5.2.225). As Laertes struggles with his half-forgotten lines on stage, Claudius, played by Chen Zongji (the character of an actor within the play), improvises and tries to smooth over the apparent glitch. A court lady prompts Li and tries to help him remember his lines. Unfortunately, all attempts fail and she is forced to take out the prompt-book from her pocket and start reading Laertes's lines out loud. However, even this desperate attempt to rescue the production does not work. Halfway through her reading, she accidentally drops the prompt-book. The pages fall and scatter on the stage. Stunned, Laertes and other characters deliver lines that are now out of order. This improvised play-reading disrupts the performance of *Shamlet* and intervenes with the otherwise linear progression of the plot line of *Hamlet* that actors in *Shamlet* are performing. The scattered prompt-book pages—filled with 'facts' and prescribed lines—constitute a powerful image that simultaneously questions the viability of historical knowledge and transforms a tragedy that relies on rehearsed chronology into a playful comedy that espouses a new concept of authorship.

The collective authorship in *Shamlet* can be found on another level. In several scenes, the actors reflect the absurdity and 'logical errors' of Shakespeare's plot. They travel across the stage to find and present the 'real' *Hamlet*—only to find themselves and a projection of their world. They seek revenge on their fellow actors for trivial matters and ironically, by the end of Act 10, their fate and the theatre company's failure almost completely express Hamlet's dilemma. They are players and spectators at once, both on and off the virtual stage in the play. What they see as 'universal' in the text of the Other—Shakespeare and all cultural contexts connected with the name—turns out to be the particular in the

context of their little theatre in Taipei, a bustling city in late twentieth-century East Asia.

The overwhelming pressure of swapped and switched roles eventually paralyses the production. According to Lee Kuo-Hsiu, this is his way of deconstructing Shakespeare, an icon much revered by the Taiwanese audience. Lee questions this reverence and asks 'what Shakespeare's plays have to do with Taiwanese [actors and audiences]'.<sup>22</sup> In a number of scenes, the sentence 'To be or not to be' is projected in English on a screen above the stage, forming a backdrop of confused yet interchangeable identities. While the 'To be or not to be' soliloquy forms a central theme in *Shamlet*, its presence does not evoke the image of the philosophical Hamlet or Shakespeare's reputation. It serves to initiate a series of dialogues among the characters, who tackle the question: 'Who am I?', from different vantage points. This is done in an improvisational mode involving multiple role-switching.

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

Chengguo: Every one 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 in 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.

—*Shamlet* (Act 10)<sup>23</sup>

Being a commercial production for entertainment rather than political theatre, *Shamlet* is not saturated with direct political comments. However, the comedy does offer a few political comments on at least two different levels. In the duel scene, when an uncostumed stagehand brings two swords on stage, several characters comment on her 'foreign' identity.

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!

—*Shamlet* (Act 10)<sup>24</sup>

It should be noted that this witty exchange was added in the 'Millennium Edition' produced in 2000, four years after the Taiwan Strait crises in March 1996, when the People's Liberation Army (PLA) launched missiles and carried out military exercises on the sea, in close vicinity to Taipei. The exercises were meant to demonstrate the People's Republic of China's military prowess and its readiness to use military force to subdue the pro-independence voices within Taiwan and even to take over Taiwan. The United States ensured a heavy naval presence in the area near the Taiwan Strait to ensure that the situation did not escalate into an invasion. After the reversion of Hong Kong (1997) and Macao (1999) to China, Taiwan became the focus of the Chinese government's imperial project to recoup territories 'lost' in the nineteenth or twentieth century. Whether Taiwan had been, or should be, part of the jurisdictional or political map of China, has been a hot topic of debate. The crises in the Danish court in *Hamlet* and Hamlet's escape from the clutches of the English power can never be read in Asia after 1996 in quite the same way that the play could be read before 1996.

The exchange in this scene simultaneously comments on the foreignness of the Taiwanese actors to the scene being represented and on China's thinly veiled threats against Taiwan and other countries such as the U.S. that might intervene. The dialogue echoes the Chinese government's statement that foreign powers should not intervene in the 'Taiwan problem', which is China's internal affair. This dialogue also dramatises the Taiwanese government's retort that the political future of the island can and should be determined by the will of the Taiwanese people alone. On yet another level, this exchange brings out the irony of a Taiwanese troupe performing a foreign play. Taiwan, with its geographical and cultural location in the Pacific Rim, is very receptive to foreign cultures and prides itself on being able to assimilate them. *Shamlet* questions the relevance of some of these

cultural parameters for Taiwan, such as a Western cultural icon represented by Shakespeare. Commenting on cultural hegemony, Lee asserts that '[he] has one advantage over Shakespeare: the great British playwright is dead, but he [a Taiwanese playwright and actor] is alive'.<sup>25</sup> This emphasis on contemporaneity and living the moment on stage becomes a principal force behind the making of *Shamlet*.

## NEW MODES OF CULTURAL EXCHANGE

Reinventing Shakespeare, as Gary Taylor cogently argues, is the business of reinventing an author to support 'a series of conflicting values' in societies of different periods.<sup>26</sup> To that end, I would add, reinventing Shakespeare in the intercultural theatre is also a business of setting up a venue to establish a cultural identity, as epitomised in *Shamlet*. In the process of making Shakespeare Taiwanese, Shakespeare is there and not there. Throughout the performance, the directorial voice of Lee emerges from the text in the background and the 'text' represented on the stage, through the spontaneity and improvisation of Lee's theatre. On another level, transparent at one moment and powerful at another, there is Shakespeare's presence. On yet another level are the dynamics particular to Taiwanese society, perhaps best summarised as short-sightedness in pursuing immediate profits. In *Shamlet*, the characters that are actors engage in conflicts with one another both on and off the 'stage', and thereby upset the production of *Hamlet* they are staging.

Regarded in this light, to stage intercultural performances is not only to stage the difference; it is about containing these issues in various frames. The interculturalism of theatrical transformation has to be connected to the phenomenon of globalisation and to Shakespeare's global presence. If, targeting the illusion of origin and Shakespeare-ness in performance, *Shamlet* has successfully framed *Hamlet* and contemporary Taiwan in a postmodern pastiche, it suggests the emergence of a globalisation that both diffuses and sustains the pastiche of various origins.

*Shamlet* presents a pastiche of Shakespearean and Taiwanese cultural locations through postmodern, monotonous repetitions. For example, the duel between Laertes and Hamlet appears three times in a rehearsal and in stage performances: in the first, fifth and seventh scenes. The fact that the actors take turns in playing different roles in the play promotes a postmodernist reading of both plays, *Hamlet* and *Shamlet*. 'Mediocre' and 'ordinary men' are key words in the stage performance of *Shamlet*, suggesting that every one is a 'Hamlet'. The long shadow of a larger-than-life tragic protagonist is dissolved in dry runs of actors and comic rehearsals by common men. *Shamlet* tells a story of intrigues and trivial love affairs among members of a theatre troupe, through the rehearsals of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. It incorporates declaredly autobiographical traits of its director Lee.

In addition to the aforementioned repetitions that diminish the solemnity of the tragic dénouement, *Shamlet* also enacts a Hamletian culture of accidents through mechanical errors and switched roles, all of which contribute to its deconstruction of theatre as an unfolding one-time event experienced in forward linear time. Act 2 of *Shamlet* is set on the stage-upon-the-stage where the Fengping Theatre is performing Act 1, Scene 5 of *Hamlet* in Taichung, the second stop of their tour of Taiwan. The mechanical failure in this scene problematises the illusion that the naturalist theatre with a proscenium stage strives to contain. After informing Hamlet of his grievances and urging Hamlet to avenge him, the Ghost is supposed to ascend on a steel rope as he delivers his last lines 'Adieu, adieu, adieu. Remember me' (*Hamlet* 1.5.91). A mechanical problem prevents this from happening, and the Ghost is stuck on the stage. The actor playing Hamlet is paralysed, and Horatio enters, as directed by the script. His comments carry heavy irony.

Horatio: My lord! My lord! My lord! Anything wrong?

Shamlet: How strange! [Looking at the stranded Ghost]

Horatio: Speak to 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 stranded Ghost and then the audience]

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: [Soliloquising] *Rest, rest, perturbed spirit. I...* [Forgetting his lines] I've forgotten what I had to say!

Horatio: [Prompting and reciting the lines for Shamlet] Perturbed 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.]

—*Shamlet* (Act 2)<sup>27</sup>

Snatches of familiar dialogue from *Hamlet* are transmogrified by errors and accidents. In Act 3 of *Shamlet*, when the scene has been changed to Polonius's house, the Ghost is still stranded by the malfunctioning steel rope. The uncalled-for presence of the Ghost complicates this 'stage production'. Not without irony does Laertes tell the Ghost to leave them alone as he imparts advice to Ophelia. These accidents—while rehearsed and scripted—undermine the theatrical illusion that naturalist theatre is supposed to sustain. Accidents and the advent of the unexpected lead to tragedy in *Hamlet*; whereas in *Shamlet*, these elements contribute to its comedic overtone.<sup>28</sup> The character of the director, Li Xiuguo, is as indecisive as Hamlet, but his indecisiveness only leads to a comedic staging of the play.

As a comedy, *Shamlet* marks a departure from such practices of cultural translation as adapting the original play to a contemporary setting. In *Shamlet*, only seven selected scenes from *Hamlet* are represented in an improvisational manner, inserted into scenes about the Fengping Theatre Troupe in *Shamlet*. Thus whisked back and forth between the beginning and ending of *Hamlet* and between the frames of *Shamlet* and *Hamlet*, the

audience follows the actors' hastened steps. Identities become interchangeable: one man often plays many parts. The actor playing the character of an actor in *Shamlet* attempting the role of *Shamlet* recognises different levels of consciousness in all these identities.

In this sense, *Shamlet* has most curiously enacted *Hamlet's* central theme of accident by employing interchangeable identities, a purloined letter, and switched lines for characters. *Hamlet* is filled with accidents. In a significant number of stage and film interpretations, Hamlet kills Polonius in an accident. He is supposed to die in another planned 'accident' when being sent off to England by Claudius, only to be saved by his capacity for counter-espionage. He switches crucial lines in the secret letter and sends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to death in his place. In his feigned madness, Hamlet takes up various roles, from a bookish intellectual to a solemn avenger, a melancholic prince and a self-proclaimed pirate. Even though Lee starts out with the proclaimed goal of deconstructing *Hamlet*, his adaptation features the Hamletian motif of accidents through the actors' daily life.

Through Lee's distinctive style of palimpsestical play-within-a-play performance, *Hamlet* is ruptured by quarrels among the actors and discussions between the characters of the director and actors. The audience finds itself looking into the box of the proscenium stage, looking at a play within a play, with an acute awareness of the contingencies of performance. The life inside the theatre (i.e. rehearsal) and outside the theatre (i.e. love affairs) of this group of mediocre actors is presented through Lee's production, in which the emotions of the Shakespearean Danish prince are retained. The audience is offered the opportunity to undergo similar emotional upheavals and disturbances through *Shamlet*.

As a new model of localisation, *Shamlet* shares some similarities with Ronald Harwood's *The Dresser* (after *King Lear*, 1980) in terms of form. However, *Shamlet* retains a sense of scepticism toward scripted performance. Actors and actresses are at once in and out of their characters, and the gist of the play-within-a-play, metaphors of dilating, and the manifested culture of accidents in *Hamlet* has been preserved in a most peculiar way. Ironically, in

creating *Shamlet*, Lee transplanted the original play into his context and enhanced the canonicity of the original play. The relationship between this transnational performance and the Shakespearean play is at once symbiotic and mutually resistant, operating on a level of newfound cultural semiotics.

#### CONCLUSION: SHAKESPEARE AS A PALIMPSEST

What Lee did to Shakespeare, the changed contexts of presentation could do to Lee's own text. In Taiwan, *Shamlet* was popularly received as a topical satire. But at the second Chinese International Shakespeare Festival in Shanghai in 1994, the precise point of its jests and allusions was lost to the alien audience. This may have been partly due to dual directorship and lack of coordination between the Pingfeng Acting Workshop of Taiwan and the Modern People's Theatre of Beijing.<sup>29</sup> But the anomaly indicates how any adaptation of a text, like the original it adapts, is attuned to a particular context of composition and reception.

Local (Asian) readings of a relatively global (or Western) text induce a counter-discourse to Orientalism. Through rehearsed improvisation that brings the actors' multiple identities to bear on the careers of Shakespeare's characters, *Shamlet* encourages the fusion of local and personal perspectives and a global text. Thus, *Shamlet* demonstrates a very different force of transnational culture. On the pragmatic level, *Shamlet* fuses fictional characters with the vita of the performers (e.g., parallels between the fate of Hamlet and the life of the actor-character performing the role); on the philosophical level, it adapts the identity politics in *Hamlet*.

In cultural transference, Shakespeare has become a parchment on which modern cultures write. *Shamlet* showcases Lee's admittedly uneasy relationship with Shakespeare's play while capitalising on the global economy of Shakespeare. In *Shamlet*, the act of questioning the logic of the plot of *Hamlet* becomes a critique of contemporary experimental theatre. After enjoying years of popularity and becoming part of the theatre's repertory, *Shamlet* embodies a new force of transnational culture in Taiwan.

and a new aspect of the international currency of Shakespeare. It continues to complicate the horizon of inquiry.

### NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. I use the term 'cultural translation' to refer to modes of cultural production (such as performance) that re-produce and manipulate contents of foreign literary and cultural texts. The term is used in opposition to various parameters associated with 'literary translation'. While printed translations of literary texts share similar features with cultural translation, their material existence usually lacks the *performative* aspect of cultural translation. Theatre often represents the cultural Other in visual and theatrical terms.
2. In this chapter, Chinese names in English follow the convention of placing family names first. All Romanised transcriptions of Chinese are in *pinyin*, except for the cases in which the Wade-Giles system was originally adopted. All translations are my own unless otherwise stated.
3. *Shamuleite: yige fuchou xiju (Shamlet: A Revenge Comedy)*, a 10-act comedy, was written and directed by Lee Kuo-Hsiu and staged by the Pingfeng Acting Workshop (Pingfeng biao'yan ban, set up in 1986). Pingfeng means the screen that divides the front stage from the back stage. While being experimental and aesthetically innovative, *Shamlet* has been a commercially successful production since it premiered in Taipei in 1992. It was revived several times. The play toured Taiwan in a revised version in 1995, and Toronto, Canada in 1996. It was also staged in Shanghai on 16 September 1994 at the second Chinese Shakespeare Festival, through collaboration between Pingfeng Acting Workshop and the Modern People's Theatre (Xiandai ren jushe). A 'Millennium Edition' of the play—the third version—was staged in Taipei to full houses in August 2000, testifying to its unflinching popularity in the local communities that fostered it.
4. The concept is adapted from Pierre Bourdieu's characterisation of the structure of the modern French literary field as a 'field of cultural production'. See Pierre Bourdieu, 'The Field of Cultural Production, or the Economic World Reversed', *Poetics* 12 (1983), pp. 311–56; Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993, p. 164.

5. I am invoking Victor Hugo's concept in a different way. In his preface to his son's Shakespeare translations, Hugo points out that a translated text will almost always be *received* by the local culture as 'an act of violence against itself', because 'such a widening of the horizon [of one's] own national poetry' constitutes a 'rebellion': quoted in André Lefevere, *Translation/History/Culture: A Sourcebook*, London: Routledge, 1992, p. 18.
6. Li Ruru, 'Shakespeare on the Chinese Stages in the 1990s', *Shakespeare Quarterly* 50 (1999), p. 367.
7. Worthen uses the concept of 'performativity' to explore the relation between Shakespeare's text and meanings of modern performance, including international and intercultural performances that are vested in a 'global performance economy': W.B. Worthen, *Shakespeare and the Force of Modern Performance*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, pp. 117, 148.
8. Important studies of the connections between *literary* translations of foreign literature and Chinese modernity include: Lydia H. Liu, *Translingual Practice: Literature, National Culture, and Translated Modernity—China, 1900–1937*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995; Torbjörn Lodén, 'World Literature with Chinese Characteristics: On a Novel by Gao Xingjian', *The Stockholm Journal of East Asian Studies* 4 (1993), pp. 17–39; and Michel Hockx (ed.), *The Literary Field of Twentieth-Century China*, Surrey: Curzon Press, 1999. All the essays in this last collection deal with ways in which foreign elements have been incorporated or resisted in modern Chinese literary practice.
9. Dramatic translation and stage representations of non-Chinese cultures have traditionally received less scholarly attention, with the exception of a few recent studies that deal with dramatic Occidentalism, viz., Chen Xiaomei, *Occidentalism: A Theory of Counter-discourse in Post-Mao China*, 2nd edition, Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002, especially the chapter on Chinese productions of Shakespeare, Ibsen, and Brecht; Claire Conceison, *Significant Other: Representations of the American in China*, Honolulu, University of Hawai'i Press, 2004.
10. Terence Hawkes, *Shakespeare in the Present*, London: Routledge, 2002, p. 3.
11. Walter Benjamin, 'The Task of the Translator', *Illuminations*, trans. Hannah Arendt, New York: Schocken, 1968, pp. 69–82.
12. Robert Wilson, 'Theatre That You Have to Rethink', *The Chronicle of Macbeth Programme Notes*, 1992.

13. Lee Kuo-Hsiu, *Shamuleite*, Taipei: Shulin Publisher, 1992, p. 119. English translation from Alexander Huang, 'Impersonation, Autobiography, and Cross-Cultural Adaptation: Lee Kuo-Hsiu's *Shamlet*', *Asian Theatre Journal* 22.1, Spring 2005, pp. 126-7. Renwei (the name of the character playing Horatio) and Juanzhi (the name of the character playing Gertrude) are rehearsing the play in this scene. Renwei and Juanzhi bring their love affairs to bear on *Hamlet* when they step out of their characters.
14. Wang Shu-hua and Perng Ching-hsi, Interview with Lee Kuo-Hsiu, Taipei, 13 November 1998. I am very grateful to the authors for making the unpublished transcript of the interview available to me.
15. Marvin Carlson, *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001, p. 173.
16. Richard Schechner, 'An Intercultural Primer', *American Theatre* (Oct. 1991), pp. 36-7.
17. See Liheng Li's biography *Oh? Lee Kuo-Hsiu!*, Taipei: Shibao, 1998, p. 105.
18. *Shamuleite: Fuchou xiju*, p. 121. Huang, p. 132.
19. Leah Marcus, *Puzzling Shakespeare: Local Reading and Its Discontents*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988, p. 44.
20. John Heminge and Henry Condell, 'To the great variety of readers', *Mr. William Shakespeare's Comedies, Histories, and Tragedies*, London: Printed by Tho. Cotes, for Richard Hawkins, 1632.
21. See Elinor Fuchs, 'Presence and the Revenge of Writing: Rethinking Theatre After Derrida', *Performing Arts Journal* 36 (1984), p. 170.
22. Liheng Li, p. 105.
23. Huang, p. 129.
24. Huang, p. 130.
25. Wang Shu-hua and Perng Ching-hsi, 1998 interview.
26. Gary Taylor, *Reinventing Shakespeare: A Cultural History from the Restoration to the Present*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989, pp. 3-6.
27. *Ibid.*, pp. 48-9. The use of Shakespeare's original text in my English translation here is intended to alert the reader to the fact that this passage in *Shamlet* is a direct line-by-line Chinese translation (such as 'perturbèd spirit').
28. A representative work on the Renaissance conception of accident and contingency is Michael Witmore's cultural anatomy of accidents as philosophical problem and theatrical conceit: Michael Witmore,

*Culture of Accidents: Unexpected Knowledge in Early Modern England*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001.

29. Li Ruru and David Jiang, 'The 1994 Shanghai International Shakespeare Festival: An Update on the Bard in Cathay', *Asian Theatre Journal* 14 (1997), pp. 104-9. See also Li Ruru, 'Shakespeare on the Chinese Stages in the 1990s', *Shakespeare Quarterly* 50 (1999), pp. 364-5.

# SHAKESPEARE WITHOUT ENGLISH

The Reception of  
Shakespeare in  
Non-anglophone  
Countries



*Edited by*

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