

Chapter 8

Comical Tragedies and Other Polygeneric Shakespeares in Contemporary China and Diasporic Chinese Culture

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What country, friends, is this?

— *Twelfth Night* 1.2.1

Great works of art are strangers at home. They defamiliarize what is part of everyday experience while offering something recognizable through the conventions of a genre, and new genres often herald new cultural formations. The Renaissance in Europe revived tragedy and transformed it from a narrative form into a dramatic genre. The Enlightenment and the emergence of the reading public led to the rise of the novel as a dominant form of cultural expression.¹ In turn, twentieth-century postcolonial consciousness is deeply ingrained in the European novel, African oral traditions, and myths. In Asia, the I-novel (*shishoōsetsu*) is not only a striking form of autobiographical fiction but also the hallmark of early twentieth-century, Taishō-era Japanese literature. The birth of modern, industrialized China coincides with that of translated literature, spoken drama (*huaju*), and other new genres—both literary and performative. With the technologically sophisticated film studios in Shanghai, for instance, modern

Chinese aesthetics emerged through the cinema as a dominant form of entertainment in the twentieth century.

By the same token, a society's aversion to a genre is equally revealing of the exigencies of an age. Comedy—playful yet laden with moral concerns and even political implications—remains challenging to grapple with in the scholarly discourse, while tragedy was censored and mostly banned during China's "Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution" (1966–1976) in order to promote visions of a utopian future of the socialist state.² At other times, specific works are singled out for scrutiny. Stalin effectively banned *Hamlet*, for a play about a police state was too close to home. At the core of the rise and fall of genres lie the many guises of the literary canon. The cultural capital and currency of a canonical author such as Shakespeare could in such a context transform entire genres.

To appreciate how genres serve as a vital force in Shakespearean interpretation, we need to understand the important connections between Renaissance genres and contemporary cultures. This chapter focuses on these transhistorical and intercultural connections in a number of cases from China and the Chinese diaspora in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and the United Kingdom. Many of the productions discussed here can be viewed on the open-access digital performance archive *Global Shakespeares* website.³ My purpose is to advance the argument that a world increasingly driven by a market economy rather than ideological differences (Appadurai, 1–23) has led to the coexistence and confluence of multiple Chinese and diasporic genres to form the polygeneric Shakespeare at the margins. We will use locality criticism to examine the patterns of interpretations of Shakespeare in the two dominant performance genres of *huaju* (spoken drama) and *xiqu* (Chinese opera), along with subgenres such as stage parody and bilingual theater.⁴ As Stuart Hall points out, "the return to the local" is one way to respond to and assess the globalization process.⁵ In the performing arts, the local often plays a major role in the formation of culturally specific implications of indigenous theater. The locality also determines the new political meanings a touring production acquires when it arrives at an international festival.

A Shakespearean play, like a genre originating in China, is embedded in its particular locality and thus determined by particular historical, cultural, political, and aesthetic coordinates. For example, *Hamlet* frames English Renaissance imaginations of medieval Denmark within the issue of dispossession and the moral imperative for revenge. When the play is performed onstage, additional localities are brought into view. Since the early nineteenth century, when *Hamlet* was first staged in Copenhagen, the play has always had visceral—in addition to historical and mythological—connections with Denmark thanks in part to Kronborg, the famed

"Hamlet's castle," where the play is set and summer festivals of performances of the play now take place.⁶ The meanings of a production can be determined by the significance of the venue (e.g., the reconstructed London Globe), the setting of the production (e.g., a modern-day authoritarian country), the cultural location of the performance (e.g., postwar Germany), the performance style (e.g., twenty-first century audience's relation to the "original practice"), and the other specificities inherent to the play and its performance. Locality criticism considers these factors in tandem with the forces within the plays. It also allows us to think independently about such iconic figures as Shakespeare and the grand, monolithic narratives associated with them about a country such as China in light of their internal plurality and incommensurability.

Shakespearean Genres at Work Transnationally

Some of the most commonly asked questions about global Shakespeare include: "Which play is the most popular?", "Why do the tragedies seem more universal and transportable from culture to culture than other genres?", and "Can the comedies be enjoyed in another language?" The answers to these questions vary both from one location to another and from one historical period to another. In modern times, tragedies such as *Hamlet* and comedies such as *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are more frequently adapted around the world because of their capacity to be detached from their native cultural settings. For example, *Hamlet* and *The Merchant of Venice* have more than fifty translations each in India alone, while *Henry V* and *Richard II* are the only history plays to have been translated into Hindi, each translated only once.⁷ But this should not be taken as a sign that the tragedies and comedies alone dominate the global circulation of Shakespeare's work and reputation.

While translations of Shakespearean tragedies and comedies and the Sonnets seem to fuel his global reputation and reach, the history plays have their own, if lesser known, histories of global transmission.⁸ British performances are more frequently geared toward constructing a coherent national identity in relation to Britain's friends and foes on the European continent.⁹ Translations of history plays, on the other hand, often use the plays to interrogate notions of national history. One of the recent examples is *Richard III: An Arab Tragedy* by Anglo-Kuwaiti stage director Sulayman Al-Bassam, a production that has toured widely around the world.¹⁰ Plays such as *Henry V* that place English interests in opposition to those of the French can serve as a forum for the formation of national identities, artistic

experiments, and political debates in the United Kingdom and Europe. Still farther ashore, plays from both the first and second tetralogies, excluding *King John*, found new homes in nationalist projects of modernization in many parts of East Asia. While the Asian adaptors' interest did not always lie in Shakespeare's Renaissance reenvisionings of such cruxes as the feud between the Houses of York and Lancaster, they drew parallels to inspire analogous reflections on local histories. This is exemplified by Kinoshita Junji's translations of *Henry VI* and *Richard III*. They echo *The Tale of the Heike*, a thirteenth-century Japanese literary masterpiece chronicling the clashes between the Heike and Genji clans. In early twentieth-century Shanghai, *The Short Story Magazine* serialized, in prose form, stories taken from the two parts of *Henry IV*. These tales were subsequently published as a volume and prominently advertised. Part of the appeal of this collection was due to the Chinese quest for a modern national identity. As the country was threatened by Japanese and European colonial powers and the impending civil wars, the history plays were read as allegories of another nation's fate in times of crisis. As the threat of war receded in the 1950s, these plays gradually lost their urgent appeal. But they continued to serve as platforms for identity formation in Taiwan, an island nation off the southeast coast of China to which the Nationalist forces retreated that has remained a capitalist democracy since the 1980s. Both parts of *Henry IV* were adapted into a play for the Taiwanese glove puppet theater, an indigenous hybrid genre that asserts both cultural identity with and difference from mainland culture and that blends elements of Chinese opera, marionette theater, and street theater.

As in almost all instances of transnational borrowing, a select, locally resonant group of "privileged" plays has held continuous sway in the Chinese-speaking world. *The Merchant of Venice* is the first Shakespearean play known to be staged, and it continues to fascinate Chinese audiences today. The reception of the play exemplifies the complex processes of reading between, with, and against the genres of comedy and tragedy. In fact, the early modern printers and readers were uncertain about the play's genre. The 1623 folio placed it under "comedies" as simply *The Merchant of Venice* (rendering the titular character ambiguous), but the entry in the Stationer's Register on July 22, 1598—the first mention of the play—focuses attention on Shylock by calling it "A Book of the Merchant of Venice, or Otherwise Called the Jew of Venice." The later generic ambiguity carried over when the play came to China, where it has often been staged and received as a romantic comedy rather than a tragedy fuelled by religious tensions (as has mostly been the case since the twentieth century in the democratic West). The play has also been parodied on stage. A travesty by Francis Talfourd entitled *Shylock, or, The Merchant of Venice*

Preserved, was staged in Hong Kong in 1867 for British expatriates. The Hong Kong Amateur Dramatic Club revived the production in 1871, as the mercantile-themed play proved relevant to the social milieu of a trade colony. The trial scene from *The Merchant of Venice* was performed in 1896 by the graduating class of St. John's University, a missionary college in Shanghai, followed by another student performance in 1902. In time, Mandarin-language performances began to dominate the stage, and today, the play remains a staple of high school and college curricula and is often chosen for the graduation *huaju* productions of Chinese and Taiwanese universities.

The Chinese reactions at different times to Shylock's insistence on the "bond of flesh" determined whether the play was received as a tragedy or comedy. When the play was first filmed in China, gender roles, rather than religious or racial tensions, guided the adaptation. A silent film entitled *The Woman Lawyer*, also known as *A Bond of Flesh*, premiered in Shanghai in 1927. It treats the play as an unproblematic comedy, the issue of conversion and Christian references having been dropped. The play provided material for an exposition of the concepts of contracts and capitalism. Further, as an attractive and intelligent modern woman, Portia commands the center of attention. The film reflects the Chinese urbanites' anxiety and curiosity about the presence of the so-called liberated "new women" in their midst, particularly in the legal profession, which was itself in a nascent state in metropolitan areas such as Shanghai.

Chinese and Sinophone Genres at Work

The transformations of *The Merchant of Venice* are part of the history of Chinese and Sinophone genres. For most of China's history, the musical theater, featuring singing, dancing, and acrobatics, dominated the stage and the public entertainment industry. Commonly known as Chinese opera in the West, there are in fact over three hundred local genres defined by songs, acting styles, and dialects, including such regional subgenres as Beijing opera (*jingju*), Sichuan opera (*chuanju*), Hakka opera (*kejia cai-chaxi*), and Cantonese opera (*yueju*). In the early twentieth century, various forms of modern drama and theater developed in China with strong Anglo-European (e.g., Ibsenian realism, Shakespearean psychologism) and Japanese influences (e.g., *shinpa* drama). The new forms of performance manifested themselves at different levels of performance, including playwriting, directing, acting, and scenography, and these were inflected by the synthesis of narrative patterns and themes drawn from traditional Chinese

theater (*xiqu*). These new forms—*wenmingxi* (civilized drama), *xinju* (new drama), and *aimeiju* (amateur drama)—eventually merged to form what is known today as *huaju*, or spoken drama. Since the early twentieth century, there have been two major forms of performance in Chinese theater: spoken drama, which is closer to Western-style theater, and the various genres of Chinese opera, which has been perceived as a symbol of Chinese identity and purveyor of traditional cultural values.

In the early twentieth century, reformers and dramatists advanced the argument that the Western-style stage performance based on realism—*huaju*, spoken drama—contrasted sharply with traditional, stylized musical theater (*xiqu*, also known as Chinese opera). Therefore, *huaju* was regarded as the preferred vehicle within a modernizing Chinese culture. The dialectical nature of English Renaissance tragedy attracted the attention of Chinese intellectuals, though comedy was also perceived to be a useful platform for social satire.¹¹ Tragedy held sway when new theatrical forms were introduced into China in the early twentieth century. As the playwright Ouyang Yuqian (1889–1962) observed, most of the plays staged by the Spring Willow Society in Shanghai were predominantly allegorical tragedies designed to rouse the spirit of the audience, as exemplified by Zeng Xiaogu's *The Black Slave's Cry to Heaven*, a 1907 adaptation of Harriet Beecher Stowe's antislavery novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. The Spring Willow Society was an organization of Chinese intellectuals who studied in Japan with the intent of promoting the nascent forms of *huaju*. Such performances in realistic theater—then diametrically opposed to *xiqu*—were designed to delight and instruct through the novelty of the contents (e.g., legal discourse, bonds of flesh) and form (e.g., dialogue-driven rather than aria- or soliloquy-driven stage actions). Shakespearean repertoire, themes, and characterization provided some of the key ingredients for the reinvention and reforms of Chinese genres.

Over the course of the twentieth century, both genres have undergone a sea change and have become hybrid forms of entertainment that fuse a variety of media, cinematic techniques, and elements taken both from each other and from Asian and Western traditions. Theatrical presentations have also become part of the language of Chinese cinema in such scenes as those involving plays within plays. The most striking contrast between spoken drama theater and Chinese opera, and between what was perceived as new or old, is the reduction and even elimination of singing, dancing, and stylized gestural codes in the former. These forms coexist and can be seen on stage in China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, and with added “local” flavor, such as Cantonese innuendo.

It bears reiterating that these genres are Chinese not simply because they originated in the Chinese-speaking communities, as they have been

categorized in the traditional, territorial approach to genre. It is not productive to mark the spoken drama and the operatic genres as “modern” versus “traditional” theaters either, since they represent sets of coexisting performance practices. Rather, it is what these forms of performance embody at the level of ideological and dramatic contents and their roles within national cultural histories that make them Chinese or Sinophone.¹² For our present purposes, we will examine the conventions within these genres, as well as how productions deploying them react to new conventions and cultural identities, through well-known adaptations of *Hamlet*, *Lear*, and *Macbeth*.

Shakespeare's Tragic History to Lee's Revenge Comedy

The emergence of parody can be an indication that a genre has matured. It is also a sign that Shakespeare's global afterlife has reached a new stage in which the *fabula* of his plays have become so familiar to the “cross-border” audiences that the plays can be used as a platform for artistic exploration of new genres.

Spared the devastating Cultural Revolution and aided by its economic and political alliance with the United States, expressed formally in the 1960s and culturally since the 1980s, Taiwan has a slightly longer history of sustainable theatrical experimentation. Experimental stage works can be both mainstream and avant-garde, commercially viable and artistically interesting. In writing a *huaju* play called *Shamuleite*, or *Shamlet* (1992), Lee Kuohsiu, one of the most innovative playwrights and directors to emerge in the 1980s, turned high tragedy, or what was known to Renaissance readers as “tragic history,” into comic parody. He suggests in the program that *Shamlet* is a revenge comedy that “has nothing to do with *Hamlet* but something to do with Shakespeare.”¹³ His purpose is two-fold: to resist the hegemonic power of “Shakespeare” in a global context and to offer a new way to read *Hamlet*. Bearing a certain resemblance to Ernst Lubitsch's *To Be or Not to Be* and Kenneth Branagh's *A Midwinter's Tale*—both chronicling fictional theater companies' comical efforts to stage *Hamlet*—Lee's seven selected scenes from *Hamlet* appear as plays within plays that document the activities of a theater troupe named Fengping (itself a play on words pertaining to the company founded by Lee in real life, Pingfeng).

The production has a playful title combining the first character of the Chinese transliteration of Shakespeare (*sha* from *Shashibiya*) and the last

three characters for *Hamlet* (*muleite* from Hamuleite). *Shamlet* also plays with the sounds of “sham” and “shame.” Having no direct access to an English version of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, Lee worked with the Franco Zeffirelli-Mel Gibson 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 inspired him to stage *Hamlet* on his own terms. An opponent of staging straightforward literary translations of foreign plays, he claims that if one chooses to stage a “translated foreign play” and “follow it slavishly line by line,” one will be “deprived of the opportunity to create and re-write.”¹⁴

Among the new version’s more interesting generic potentialities is its treatment of genres of performance. Actors move from their real identities as the persons putting on the play *Shamlet* for the real audience, to their identities as actors in the story of the play, and to their phantom identities of Hamlet, Ophelia, Gertrude, and other characters in the play-within-a-play (i.e., the failed production of *Hamlet* in *Shamlet*). The framing device is a possible evocation of Tom Stoppard’s award-winning play and subsequent film, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. Moving among these four different sets of identities, the characters explore their local identities as actors from a typical Taiwanese theater troupe. They are tormented by the difficulties facing all small and experimental theater companies. These problems echo the difficult situations that Hamlet faces.

Shamlet is rife with cunningly scripted errors. These range from malfunctions in the routine mechanical business of the theater to forgotten lines and accidentally switched roles. An example of how the production embraces the contingency of theatrical performance, while highlighting the perils of translation, is the Fengping presentation of the ramparts scene from *Hamlet* (1.5; as it takes place in Taichung, the second stop of their round-the-island tour of Taiwan). After informing Shamlet of his assassination and urging vengeance, the Ghost prepares to ascend on a steel rope as he delivers his last lines “Adieu, adieu, adieu. Remember me” (*Hamlet* 1.5.91). A mechanical problem traps the Ghost on the stage. The actor playing Shamlet is paralyzed, and Horatio enters, as directed by the script, and delivers lines of weighty 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 reveal what you see tonight.

Horatio: I will not tell. [*Improvise*] And I hope no one sees 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 lacks this most vital of props*]

Horatio: [*Filling in and improvising*] Use my sword, my lord!...

Shamlet: [*Soliloquizing*] Rest, rest, perturbèd spirit. I ... [*Forgetting his lines*] I’ve forgotten what I had to say!

Horatio: [*Prompting*] Perturbèd spirit, please remember that whatever historical period it is, you shall keep your mouth shut [*indicating the stranded Ghost*]. The time is out of joint. O what a poor soul am I that I have to set it right!

Shamlet: Yes, indeed!

[*The lights dim as the stranded Ghost keeps trying to see if he can ascend*]

The scene calls to mind Stoppard’s transformation of the sometimes-omitted minor characters, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, into the leads. From the perspective of these two characters without memories, *The Murder of Gonzago*, the turn of events, and even their mission do not make much sense and are farcical. If accidents and the advent of the unexpected lead to tragedy in *Hamlet*, in *Shamlet* they are turned into comedy, which is as challenging to native theatrical forms—particularly in the figure of the bumbling director Li Xiuguo (the alter ego of the playwright Lee Kuohsiu)—as they are to Renaissance antecedents. By Act 3, when the Ghost still cannot ascend offstage, Laertes, seeking to impart advice to Ophelia, demands that he leave. While existentialism as a theme runs through Stoppard’s play (and its subsequent film version), theatrical contingency informs Lee’s play. The scripted mechanical failures serve to highlight the inner workings of a stage performance genre, invert the process of theatrical illusion, and invite the audiences in Stoppardian fashion to reflect on their familiarity with an editorialized, modernist *Hamlet*.

Another genre to which *Shamlet* belongs is the genre of plays within plays that go awry. There are a number of subgenres, but all of them blur the boundaries between dramatic genres (i.e., tragedy/comedy) and performative ones (i.e., theater/film). One approach is to mold performances of a Shakespearean play into a larger, usually comical story, as is the case of Alan Johnson’s 1983 remake (starring Mel Brooks) of Ernst Lubitsch’s *To Be or Not to Be* (1942). The action centers on a Warsaw theater company in Nazi-occupied Poland and on the comic effect of the lead actor who is never able to finish the “to be or not to be” soliloquy without interruption. Another form is the self-reflexive performance of select scenes from Shakespeare to comment on situations outside the play’s world, as is common in a number of versions of *King Lear*. Kristian Levring’s Dogmé 1995 film *The King Is Alive* features performances of *King Lear* as a “desperate diversion” by a group of tourists stranded in the Namibian desert.¹⁵ In other instances, new motives or information is provided to expand the world of Shakespeare’s play. The award-winning

Spanish playwright Jacinto Benavente recasts the events of *Hamlet* in tragicomic tones in his *El bufón de Hamlet* (*Hamlet's Jester*, 1958), which is a prequel to the Shakespearean tragedy with the young Hamlet engaging in a power struggle with Claudius.¹⁶ *Romeo and Juliet* provided raw material for cinematic parodies—aided by the device of the play-within-a-play—in Anthony Chan's *One Husband Too Many* (Hong Kong, 1988), Cheah Chee Kong's *Chicken Rice War* (Singapore, 2000), and Huo Jianqi's *A Time to Love* (China, 2005).

Like other postmodern playwrights who parody *Hamlet*, Lee takes particular delight in playing with iconic lines. As the mounting pressure of swapped roles paralyzes the “production,” the line “to be or not to be” is projected in English on a screen above the stage. Rather than invoking the image of Hamlet the thinker, it initiates a series of dialogues among the characters in search of their true identities.

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: [trying to cover up] 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.

Having emerged from half a century of Japanese colonization and been drawn immediately into political whirlwinds that led to the “two Chinas problem,” Taiwan has struggled for a viable, coherent identity since the mid-twentieth century. *Shamlet* captures a part of that struggle. Fortinbras's footsteps allegorize the militaristic and ideological threat from mainland China that Taiwan faces. Not unlike the eternally distracted Joseph Tura in *To Be or Not to Be*, the actors in *Shamlet* find themselves becoming souls adrift without meaningful identities; they remain at once in and out of their characters. With a close link to the European avant-garde and American postmodernism, *Shamlet* thrives on improvisation and pastiche while remaining anchored in the *huaju* style.

Bilingual and Multilingual Manifestations

While *Shamlet* exemplifies one form of *huaju* Shakespeare, bilingual and multilingual theater is another form of performance informed by the concerns of late capitalist society as cultural globalization and Westernization

pick up the pace. As directors and theater companies move ever more freely across national boundaries, linguistic difference is called upon to be the marker of the contentious space between cultures. Intercultural theater is not a trouble-free undertaking, as international festivals tend to suggest. The use of two or more languages in a single production, often with super-titles in the local language where the performance takes place, can signal its transnational network of funding and artistic collaboration (e.g., a multinational cast), but it can also suggest ways in which intercultural theater creates an exaggerated expectation of cultural assimilation and reconciliation and so undermines its own purposes. Performing in a foreign tongue while touring (e.g., a Zulu *Macbeth* in London) offers an opportunity to address some of these issues, but performing in two or more languages reveals that intercultural performance is far from uncomplicated.¹⁷

Multilingual Shakespeare is of course not exclusive to China or the contemporary period. Shakespeare and his contemporary dramatists used foreign speech for comic effect. Notable twentieth-century examples of multilingualism include Karin Beier's multilingual *Midsummer Night's Dream* in 1995—with fourteen actors speaking German, Hungarian, French, Italian, Polish, Russian, and three other languages and performing in several styles including the commedia dell'arte—and a multilingual and multistylistic pan-Asian production of *King Lear* (1996) directed for Singapore's TheatreWorks by Ong Keng Sen. In the United States, New York's Pan Asian Repertory Theatre staged an English-Mandarin production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in 1983, once again using languages as markers of emotions and characters' personalities. In China, the Shanghai Dramatic Arts Center recently produced an adaptation entitled *Romeo and Zhu Yingtai* (2008, directed by He Nian), which was billed as a “romantic tragicomedy.” Like Lee's *Shamlet*, His adaptation stages the comical encounters of two cultures by setting “Romeo” against Zhu Yingtai, Liang Shanbo's mistress in the iconic Tang Dynasty tale of a pair of lovers. Reflecting the multicultural setting of *Romeo and Zhu Yingtai* in early and late twentieth-century Shanghai, New York, and Paris, the actors spoke Mandarin with liberal sprinklings of Japanese, English, and French.

As a play about the emptiness of words and the failure of language, *King Lear* is a useful platform for experiments with this growing international genre. Since selected scenes from *King Lear* were first performed in English in Chowringhee Theatre, Calcutta, in 1832, the play has had a special place in Asian theater history and Asian interpretations of filial piety. The problematic of cultural reinlection through linguistic deferral continues to resonate as in Chinese British director David Tse's 2006 English-Mandarin production of *King Lear* set in Shanghai and London

in 2020. It brought established and budding actors from China and the United Kingdom to perform in their native tongues. Coproduced by Tse's London-based Yellow Earth Theatre and the Shanghai Dramatic Arts Centre for the Royal Shakespeare Company's Complete Works festival, this production fuses the Buddhist notion of redemption and reincarnation—as evidenced by its design elements and presentational styles—with a slice of offstage reality hinting at the exhilarating but challenging collaboration between artists from completely different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Not being entirely bilingual, members of the cast performed in their mother tongues with bilingual supertitles projected during the production's tour to Chinese and British cities. On rare occasions, the actors even switched between two languages, inserting a foreign phrase or sentence here and there.

The production opens and closes with video footage projected onto the three interlaced, floor to ceiling reflective panels showing the birth of a baby. Images of the faces of suffering men and women dissolve to show a crying newborn being held upside down and smacked. A reimagined “division-of-asset” scene follows, set in the penthouse office of Lear's transnational corporation overlooking a panoramic backdrop of cosmopolitan Shanghai.

The most thought provoking scene is the first conversation between Lear and Cordelia. The epistemological gap between them is articulated through linguistic difference. Cordelia can never measure up to Goneril and Regan in Lear's public test of love because she is a London-born member of the Chinese diaspora and no longer a native speaker of her father's language. She is both physically and culturally remote from the rest of the characters at the meeting where family affairs and business coalesce. The play is close to Tse's heart, as he believes that *Lear* speaks strongly to diasporic artists and audiences who maintain links, but are unable to communicate fully, with their families residing in their home countries. Heritage and filial piety form the conceptual core of this production, as they do for many other Asian interpretations of *Lear*. Appropriately, the bilingual tag line for Tse's production reads “Which of you shall we say doth love us most?” (*King Lear* 1.1.51) Love is expressed as a form of interpersonal connection and as emotional and cultural connection, and can only be perceived by both parties through a common channel. Lear is unable to understand Cordelia's love expressed through silence and interprets it as a sign of defiance. Born and raised in Shanghai, Regan and Goneril are fluent in Chinese and are therefore capable of convincing their father of their unconditional love for him through ornate speeches. Not only is Cordelia unwilling to compete with her sisters, she is also unable to communicate with her father. Her silence, therefore, takes on new meanings. Appearing

via video link, Cordelia resorts to the only Chinese word at her disposal, *meiyou*, which means “nothing”:

Cordelia: Nothing, my lord.

Lear [in Mandarin]: *Meiyou?*

Cordelia [in accented Mandarin]: *Meiyou*

Lear [in accented English]: Nothing will come of nothing. Speak again.

In the tense exchange between Cordelia and Lear, the word *nothing* looms large as Chinese fonts are projected onto the screen panels, behind which Cordelia stands. Uninterested in the ontological significance of nothingness, Lear urges Cordelia to give him something. Bilingualism onstage is deployed as a symbol of the failure of assimilative Westernization as the dominant form of globalization, sensitizing the audience to various assumptions of Anglo-universalism. The majority of its audience could only follow one part of the dialogue with ease and had to switch between the action onstage and the supertitles. Translation thus acts as both a metaphor and a plot device, such a multilingual Shakespeare being no less effective than plot parody in laying bare the process of relocating Shakespeare within local theatrical cultures.

Operatic Pursuits

While monolingual and bilingual *huaju* productions may challenge the notion of universalism, Chinese opera productions often seek a visual common ground to connect the ancient genre and its contemporary audiences in Chinese and international venues. Despite the proliferation of *huaju* Shakespearean productions and *huaju*'s close ties to Western dramatic innovations, Chinese opera performances of Shakespeare have toured to more international venues and festivals. Wu Hsing-kuo's critically acclaimed solo Beijing opera production, *Lear Is Here* (Taiwan-based Contemporary Legend Theatre), for example, has toured to London, Berlin, Prague, and Rotterdam as well as major cities in Asia, Australia, and the United States since its premiere in Paris in 2000. Wu's *Kingdom of Desire* (1986), an adaptation of *Macbeth*, not only has become part of the repertoire of his troupe but is also one of the most widely toured contemporary Beijing opera plays, one that has been performed with increasing frequency on a number of continents since its 1986 premiere in Taipei. More recently, the Hamlet Sommer festival in Denmark commissioned the Shanghai Jingju Company to stage an adaptation of *Hamlet*. The Jingju

genre's rich color symbolism, kinetic energy, and operatic elements capture the international audience's imaginings of the Chinese performing arts. Lavish costumes and music are, of course, not unique to Chinese opera. Sir William Davenant's "musical theatre" adaptations of Shakespeare held the English stage from 1663 to 1744, and such visions as dancing, singing, and flying witches continued to hold sway for generations. Yet notably, the visual feast in Chinese opera is not just an expression of Shakespearean metaphors but also an enactment of the metaphors themselves.

Global mass culture tends to feed into universal visual images that are perceived to transcend linguistic borders with ease. Such pervasive image flows predicated on cultural consumption lend themselves to such forms as *jingju* (Beijing opera), in which performers and directors often promote a universal visual language via stylization. Indeed, stage directors working in the West, notably Ariane Mnouchkine, have incorporated Chinese opera techniques and motifs into their works. This form of Chinese opera has thus emerged as a theater genre inflected by transnational cultural flows and a cultural symbol framed by popular understanding of Chinese aesthetics.

What is unique about this genre? Stylized gesture, makeup, and musical elements (e.g., arias, bursts of percussion, chorus) are some of the characteristics that distinguish it from other forms of theater, although as previously noted, these elements have occasionally been appropriated and deployed in *huaju* productions and films as well. Shanghai Kunju Opera's adaptation of the *Macbeth*, entitled *The Story of Bloody Hands* (1986), for instance, uses masks to highlight the three weird sisters' ambiguous nature and double-talk. Three androgynous "mountain spirits" dance onstage with grotesque masks on the backs of their heads. As they swirl and turn, their faces and the grotesque masks are shown alternately. Stylized movements and masks have also been appropriated in *huaju* productions. Lu Po Shen's *Macbeth Unplugged* (2007), a Taiwanese-language *huaju* adaptation, features three actresses with grotesque masks on the backs of their heads wearing identical trench coats and holding black umbrellas. Likewise, Wu's *Kingdom of Desire* uses *Noh*-inspired masks to highlight the tensions between visual and verbal expositions of truth.

One of the most striking scenes in *Kingdom* is the famous dance (as found in Akira Kurosawa's film version, *Throne of Blood*) during General Ao's (Macbeth's) banquet. In a costume and style imbued with Japanese elements, Lin Hsiu-wei, a renowned female dancer, offers to entertain the newly anointed ruler and the lords of the court. She holds two masks in her hands and alternately covers her face with them as she swirls, bends, and crosses the stage. When the dance is over, she reveals a third mask on her face, hitherto concealed by the others. With the Duncan figure murdered

and the usurper's ambition revealed, this dance interlude becomes an appropriate footnote to Duncan's remark about treachery: "There's no art / To find the mind's construction in the face" (1.4.10–11). The dance itself is also a stylistic intervention because it represents a pronounced departure from the Beijing opera style that dominates the rest of the production. Lin's dance combines ballet steps and *Noh*-inspired masks. Likewise, in *The Story of Bloody Hands*, important transformations of the characters are sometimes expressed physically. As the three witch figures dance, they dominate the stage. In the scene where Ma Pei, the Macbeth figure, seeks advice from the spirits, he dances with them as prophecies are delivered. His dance gradually synchronizes with that of the spirits, which implies that his thoughts are being contaminated and controlled by them.

As in Kurosawa's film, a key influence throughout, Shakespeare's metaphors and plot lines are given local contexts and restaged with little concern for word-for-word accuracy or precise transformations of Shakespearean metaphor. Color symbolism acquires local flavors so that in turning "multitudinous seas incarnadine" (2.2.60–62) and invoking the glow of an imagined dagger at night, the subdued light of dawn, or the unnatural pitch of black night, Shakespeare highlights the metaphorical meaning of color in the course of the play. In Chinese opera performances, colors of the stage and costumes call attention to themselves in similar ways, albeit with culturally mixed symbolism; red, which dominates the costume, lighting, and stage design in *The Story of Bloody Hands*, signals both life-giving joy and the fear of a bloodbath.

Conclusion: Traditions and Cultural Accommodations

The uses of Shakespeare's plays in spoken drama and Chinese opera are informed by a paradigm shift from seeking authenticity to foregrounding artistic subjectivity in modes of cultural production that reproduce global texts and local contexts. Changing modes in representational practice have also induced changing attitudes to Shakespeare and to Western classics. While the polygeneric Shakespearean performances in Chinese did not create an unprecedented genre, they have transformed both Shakespearean and traditional Chinese aesthetics, making significant, formative contributions to one of the thriving art forms of our times. In an age of rapid transnational flows of (often fetishized) commodities and even mindless consumption of cultural goods, engaging the "strangers at home"

can help focus attention on vital issues of human development and cultural substance. Recent innovations springing from traditional Chinese aesthetics have offered a multitude of adaptations of Shakespeare in less familiar genres, each retuning local situations and charting new paths for interpretation of the plays in the context of world culture and global interdependence.

NOTES

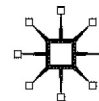
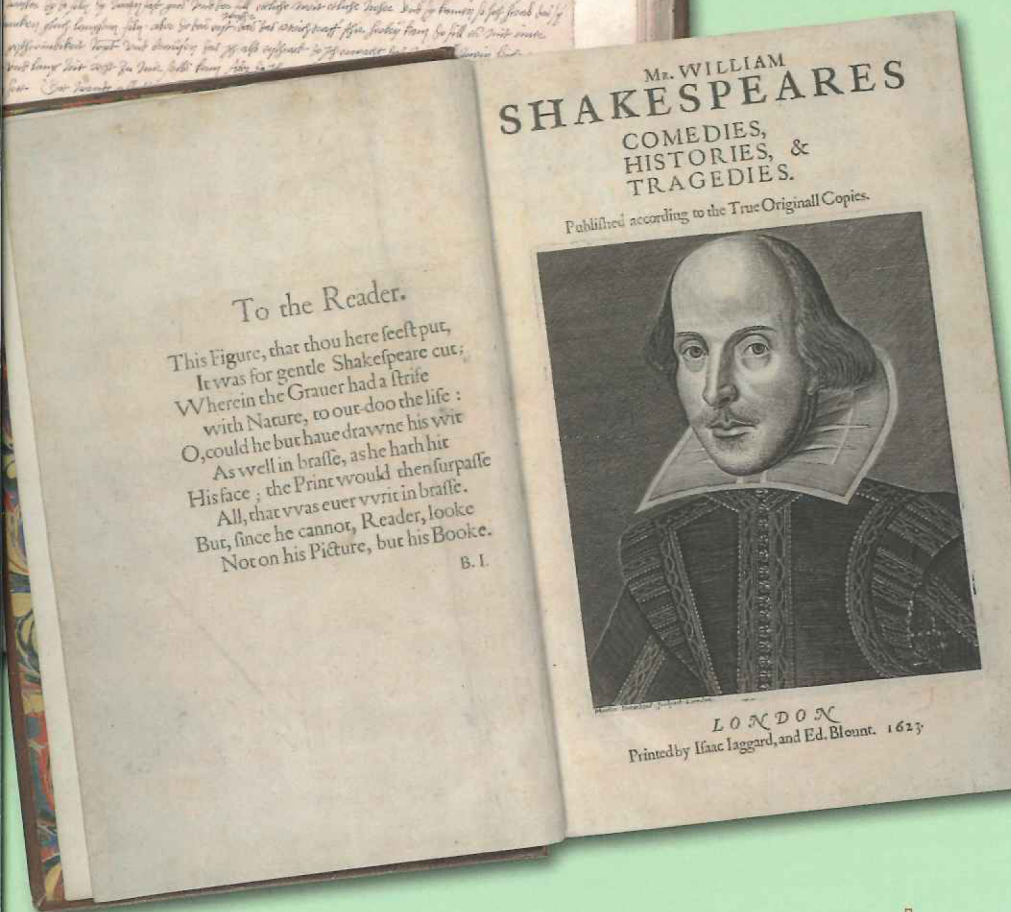
1. See Fowler, "The Formation of Genres," 185–200; and Watt.
2. Relevant studies include Rayner, *Comic Persuasion*, 5–23; and Ryan.
3. To view this website consult <http://globalshakespeares.org/>
4. For introductions to *xiqu* theater, see Mackerras, "China," 104–06; for *huaju* theater, see Noble, "Modern Theatre," 111–17.
5. Hall, "The Local and the Global," 308.
6. Hansen, "Something is Rotten," 153.
7. Trivedi, "Hindi Translations," 83.
8. See for example, Hoenselaars, ed.
9. Hoenselaars, "Introduction," to *Shakespeare's History Plays*, 9–34.
10. Litvin, *Richard III*, 85–91.
11. The intellectuals played a central role in the artistic culture of pre-Communist China, hence the periodic purging of them during various Communist regimes.
12. There are other factors at play also, as when Jinhee Choi (taking a "functional approach" to defining the concept of "national cinema"), illustrates how "product differentiation" has helped to define a national performance genre (see 311–12).
13. Lee, *Shamuleite*, 119.
14. Shu-hua Wang and Perng Ching-his, Interview with Lee Kuo-Hsiu.
15. Guneratne, *Shakespeare*, 64.
16. See, for example, Tronch.
17. Note, for instance, Morse, "Reflections," 519–38; and del Sapio Garbero, "Translating *Hamlet*," 519–38.

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to
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