

Romeo and Juliet, Allegory, and the Ethnic Vocabularies of History

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Shakespeare's plays and their audiences have always encountered one another in disparate geocultural and historical locations. How these locations operate in performances is crucial to our understanding of Shakespeare, since such encounters cannot seem to escape binary oppositions. While *The Tempest* has been a popular source for dramatic adaptations in traditionally defined postcolonial locations such as the Caribbean or India — adaptations that channel and mock simultaneously the coercive authority of Prospero and the agony of Caliban, *Romeo and Juliet* has inspired new sets of allegorical vocabularies of history in locations without confrontations with the English heritage in colonial contexts, such as the local cultural markets of twenty-first century China and Taiwan. As Anthony Dawson rightly points out in his reading of Akira Kurosawa's interpretation of Shakespeare (*Throne of Blood*), if Shakespeare is global, "it is [only] because his work is able to inhabit so many different locals."¹ Readings of literary texts are always shaped by a reader's particular location and knowledge, but those locations are themselves defined by their histories.

I would like to revisit the old news from the local artists' unique perspectives that transform their task of rewriting and staging Shakespeare into an allegorical one. Why is the reading of a canonical text often said to authorize a meaning different from what it literally says when read cross-culturally? How do allegory and local histories develop and intersect on stage? In the present academic atmosphere that distrusts the idea of universality, allegorical reading may come across as a mechanical and homogenizing exercise.² However, as an integral part of the cultural practice of narrativizing local history, allegorical interpretation plays an important role in creating a sense of semiotic referentiality for theatre

¹ Anthony Dawson, "Cross-Cultural Interpretation: Reading Kurosawa Reading Shakespeare," *A Concise Companion to Shakespeare on Screen*, ed. Diana E. Henderson (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), p.157.

works that cater predominantly to audiences in local markets.

Before delving into two recent productions of *Romeo and Juliet* in Taiwan and southwestern China (in the forms of Taiwanese opera, *gezaixi*, and Yunnan flower lantern opera, *huadengxi*) characterized by their decidedly local networks of signification, it is useful to consider a series of historical antecedents that allowed Shakespeare to figure prominently in the theatres of Asia Pacific today.

Reading Locally and the Allegorical Plots

When Shakespeare's plays were staged in Hong Kong, Shanghai, and other cities, in the early twentieth century, the audiences developed a fixation upon the plot, prioritizing dramatic actions over presentational nuances in performances. The audience tended to be attracted to particular elements of the plot, such as the bond of human flesh in *The Merchant of Venice* or the fratricide in *Hamlet*. One of the well-known examples of allegorical interpretation of Shakespeare is the nineteenth-century idea that "Germany is Hamlet." Ludwig Börne identifies Hamlet with Germany "which can neither think nor act politically nor make up its mind to perform the deed of liberation" in his essay in 1828.³ In Germany as in China, the reception of the plays was informed by an allegorical reading of easily graspable elements of the plot. However, what held the attention of nineteenth-century Chinese intellectuals was the plot involving the Ghost in *Hamlet*. Productions in 1914 and 1915 used provocative titles that singled out what appeared to the Chinese audience to be the most striking plot element, such as *Murdering His Elder Brother and Marrying His Sister-in-Law* (a Sichuan opera). In Lin Shu and Wei Yi's 1904 collaborative translation and rewriting of Charles and Mary Lamb's *Tales from Shakespeare*, *Romeo and Juliet* is retitled to reflect implied moral judgments: *Committing the Crime of Passion*.⁴

An even more useful source for exercises in allegorical literary interpretation has been *The Merchant of Venice*. With its outlandish plot involving the transaction of a pound of human flesh, the play has remained one of the most popular Shakespeare plays in the Chinese-speaking world. Since the early

² Ania Loomba, "The Commitment to Shakespeare, or What Are We Celebrating Today?" *Shakespeare's World / World Shakespeares: The Selected Proceedings of the International Shakespeare Association World Congress, Brisbane 2006*, ed. Richard Fotheringham, Christa Jansohn, and R. S. White (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2008), pp.209–22; Fredric Jameson, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), pp.4–5.

³ Ludwig Börne, "Hamlet von Shakespeare," in *Gesammelte Schriften* (Leipzig: Hesse, 1908), 2:436.

⁴ Lin Shu and Wei Yi, *English Poet Reciting from Afar (Yingguo shiren yinbian yanyu)* (Shanghai: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1904).

twentieth century, many productions have used the contract of flesh in their titles or publicity materials, making expressions such as “a pound of flesh” and “a bond of flesh” synonymous with *The Merchant of Venice*. In particular, *The Merchant of Venice* held the interest of the Chinese audience who believed the play lent itself to allegorical readings in new contexts. Newspaper advertisements for *The Woman Lawyer*, a 1916 spoken drama (*huaju*) production of *The Merchant of Venice*, for example, focused on Portia’s wit in the courtroom and Shylock’s demand (detached from its context):

[A man] severs his flesh to get a loan; the heroine manages to become a lawyer. ... The subject is extraordinary, the story is wonderful, and the performance comes with exciting details.⁵

In 1925, the Custom Renewal Society staged a Shaanxi opera (*qinqiang*) production titled *A Pound of Flesh* in Xi’an.⁶ The production was designed in accordance with the Society’s mission to actively explore theatre’s role in moral education. Such graphic and cautionary Chinese titles for the play remained in wide circulation until the 1980s.

The most striking feature of the history of Chinese reception of the play is the disappearance of the Jewish question. While in the post-Holocaust Anglo-European world Shylock has evolved over time from a greedy clown into a victimized tragic hero,⁷ his image in China has remained consistently negative. Despite the large number of Jews who fled Nazi Germany to settle in Shanghai, *The Merchant of Venice* continued to be read in mainland China as an allegory about financial responsibility, the capitalist society, and the rise of women lawyers as a new social class.⁸ The presence of Jews among China’s urban residents who patronized performances of Western plays did not cause the Chinese interpretations to gravitate towards the central racial and religious questions that have dominated twentieth-century criticism of the play. Rather,

⁵ *Minguo ribao* [Republican Daily], May 25, 1916, p.5, quoted in Wang Yiqun, “Shaju yanchu zai woguo wutai shang de bianqian [The development of Shakespearean performances on the Chinese stage],” *Shashibiya zai Zhongguo* (Shanghai: Wenyi chubanshe, 1987), p.93.

⁶ This is probably the earliest Chinese opera adaptation of Shakespeare anywhere in the world. See Wang Fucheng, *A Pound of Flesh* [Yi bang rou], in *Qinqiang Opera — A Compendium of Shaanxi Traditional Theatre Repertoire* [Qinqiang — Shaanxi chuantong jumu huibian], vol. 23 (Xi’an: Shaanxi Provincial Bureau of Culture, 1959), pp.9023–108; for records of performances, see *Dictionary of Chinese Bangzi Opera Repertoire* (*Zhongguo bangzi xi jumu da cidian*) (Taiyuan: Shanxi renmin chubanshe, 1991), p.703.

⁷ Janet Adelman, *Blood Relations: Christian and Jew in The Merchant of Venice* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), pp.1–37.

Chinese interpretations of the play have reflected ideological investments in the concept of the new woman in the early twentieth century and debates about capitalism in the late twentieth century. In Lin and Wei’s widely-read rendition of the Lambs’ *Tales from Shakespeare* Portia is characterized as a woman “whose beauty is admired throughout her country.”⁹ The rewriting excises many religious metaphors and makes the trial scene the centerpiece, shifting the emphasis from Portia in male disguise to her femininity. Reading locally takes on a different meaning in the late twentieth century when the Chinese premier Zhu Rongji alluded to *The Merchant of Venice* in his endorsement of market law in 1999, again glossing over the religious and racial implications of the contract of a pound of flesh.¹⁰ The example of this play demonstrates neatly how the reader’s perception of the historical exigencies at his or her particular cultural location dictates the development of allegorical interpretation. How connections between a performance and its location are made is as important as where the connections are found.

Romeo and Juliet and Taiwanese Ethnic History

In 2001, another Shakespearean Italian love story was demonstrated to have contemporary relevance through allegorical reading that produced fictional yet powerful images of the readers’ localities. Directed by a mainland Chinese director based in Taiwan, Zhang Jian, and produced by a Taiwanese opera troupe in Taipei, *Flower on the Other Shore* (*Bi’an hua*) reads *Romeo and Juliet* through a vocabulary of ethnic history.¹¹ It explores conflicts between two ethnic communities in nineteenth-century Taipei before Taiwan was ceded to Japan by China after the first Sino-Japanese War.¹² Allegorical interpretation is a strategy of containment of local and foreign milieus of signification, compelling the audience to rethink both Shakespeare and the weight of Taiwanese history as cultural tokens outside the once familiar frame of reference. The play neglects the context of Japanese colonialism, since it

⁸ Jonathan Goldstein, *The Jews of China*, 2 vols. (Armonk, NY: 1999); Lois Ruby, *Shanghai Shadows* (New York: Holiday House, 2006); *Forever Nostalgia: The Jews in Shanghai* (Shanghai: Shanghai Municipal Tourism Administrative Commission, 1998); Berl Falbaum, ed., *Shanghai Remembered: Stories of Jews Who Escaped to Shanghai from Nazi Europe* (Royal Oak, MI: Momentum Books, 2005).

⁹ Lin and Wei, *Yingguo shiren*, p.33.

¹⁰ Zhu Rongji, “Interview with Reporters,” *China Daily*, March 16, 1999.

¹¹ *Flower on the Other Shore* was directed by Zhang Jian and staged by Holo Taiwanese Opera Troupe [Heluo gezixi tuan] in the National Theater, Taipei, Taiwan, from March 30–April 1, 2001. The play was adapted by Chiang Pei-ling and Hong Ching-hsue from *Romeo and Juliet*. The production starred Hsu Ya-fen (Li Jinlong; Paris), Kuo Chun-mei (Chen Qiusheng; Romeo), and Shi Hui-chun (Lin Xiulan; Juliet).

concentrates on the history of ethnic, rather than colonial, conflicts.

Several ethnic groups in Taiwan have been competing for primacy since the late nineteenth century. Most recently this rift has been articulated as an opposition between the Mandarin-speaking Mainlanders who arrived in Taiwan with the retreating army of the KMT party from China after 1949 and the Taiwanese-speaking locals who settled on the island prior to this period. In the context of *Flower on the Other Shore*, the root of the discord lies in conflicts in commercial interests. Linguistic barriers exacerbated the problem, since immigrants from different parts of mainland China could not communicate with one another. The southern Min and the Cantonese are among two of the notable dialects spoken. Militant dispositions of the immigrants, lack of familial bonds, and political oppressions have all contributed to frequent conflicts across different ethnic groups.

Prior to this adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet*, the Holo Taiwanese Opera Company had already staged another play that explored the theme of Taiwanese nativism, titled *Taiwan, My Mother* (2000). *Flower on the Other Shore*, written from scratch following a plot outline, was part of the company's trilogy of "Native Taiwanese Stories," a series of allegories about Taiwan's cultural identities. The company saw the production of *Flower* as another step to further its mission in promoting Taiwanese opera and the value of local culture. An earlier version of the script was given a more provocative title, *Records of Wind and Clouds between the Families from Quan and Zhang Clans*.¹³ Both the box office success and government awards testified to the currency of this allegorical approach. The play won the prestigious National Zhongzheng Cultural Centre Award in March 2000, and the production was awarded Taiwan's Golden Bell Award in 2001. The company has earned a reputation as the pioneering theatre group bringing Taiwanese opera, once a form of street theatre and low-brow entertainment, to a more diverse, high-brow audience. Over the past decade, the company has cultivated a large number of loyal fans who are open to new performance styles and unconventional music arrangement. In addition to traditional musical instruments, the accompanying orchestra now includes piano and cello. The company thus marketed *Flower* as "refined Taiwanese opera." *Flower* contains several extended scenes dramatizing the conflicts between the Quan and the Zhang clans. The director used disparate regional idiomatic expressions and

¹² Taiwan was under Japanese rule from 1895 to 1945. For more information about Taiwanese history and theatre, see Alexander C. Y. Huang, "Taiwan," *Encyclopedia of Asian Theatre* 2 vols. (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2007), Vol. 2, pp. 709–14.

¹³ *Quan zhang fengyun lu*.

superstitions to heighten the tensions, including a door stained by a black dog's blood sent by one clan as an ominous "gift" to the other at the occasion of a birthday party, a parallel to the masque ball at Capulet's house in *Romeo and Juliet*.

Zhang's *Flower on the Other Shore* follows the Chinese tradition of using Shakespeare to produce cautionary tales with applicable moral lessons, highlighting the themes of conflict and redemption through the figure of the flower on the other shore. Set in Mengjia in Taipei in the 1850s, the play opens with a brawl between the Quan and Zhang clans who immigrated to the island from the Quan and Zhang regions of southeastern China. The stylized performance and lengthy arias — along with the allegorical structure of the adaptation — dictate a condensed plot structure. *Romeo and Juliet* is presented, with revisions of select details, in eight scenes following the major events chronologically: (1) A Passionate Encounter, (2) A Birthday Party Disrupted, (3) Betrothal, (4) Arranged Marriage Defied, (5) Unfulfilled Wish, (6) Wedding-Turned-Funeral, (7) Intercepted Messenger, and (8) Flower on the Other Shore.

However, it is music, rather than this plot outline, that controls the rhythm of the production. The composer, Chou Yi-chien, maps ethnic conflicts onto different styles of music. Though all characters speak the same language (Taiwanese), the *nanguan* (southern winds) music with a mellow tune accompanies Jinlong's (Paris) arias, and *beiguan* (northern winds) music underlines Qiusheng's (Romeo) arias. The director and the composer believe that different tunes, loaded with cultural significance, can accentuate the characters' tragic difference.¹⁴ The genre of *nanguan* originated in China's Fujian province and is very popular in Taiwan, as testified by the success of the Han-Tang Yuefu Music Ensemble (founded in 1983). Though *beiguan*'s popularity has declined, it was widespread in Zhangzhou in Fujian (Qiusheng belongs to the Zhang clan). The common root of these two genres — despite differences in musical instruments and styles — accentuate the arbitrariness of the feud between the Quan and Zhang clans.¹⁵

Running through the play is the motif of a redemptive flower, desirable but hard, if not impossible, to attain. The figure of the flower on the other shore also alludes to the shore of enlightenment in the Buddhist context as well as to the shores of southeastern China and western Taiwan, a contact

¹⁴ *Minsheng Bao* [Minsheng Daily], March 8, 2001.

¹⁵ *Nanguan* uses instruments such as wooden clapper (*muban*), four-string pear-shaped lute (*pipa*), three-string snakeskin banjo (*sanxian*), and vertical flute (*xiao*), while *beiguan* features the Chinese shawm (loud and high-pitched oboe), woodblock (*bangzi*), large bossed gong (*dalu*), and high-pitched drum (*banggu*).

zone where cultural differences are negotiated. The Quan and Zhang clans immigrate to the other shore (Taiwan) from mainland China in search of prosperity, and their descendents (Qiusheng / Romeo and Xiulan / Juliet), desperate to resolve the feud, hope for the healing power of the lotus — a flower from the other shore in the Buddhist context. The pavilion in the middle of a “fragrant lotus pond” provides a secluded space where Qiusheng and Xiulan meet for the first time (Xiulan’s garden) and the last time. It also creates an allegorical structure for reading the young couple’s struggles. The seat from which Buddha is believed to preach, according to the *Lotus Sutra*, the lotus has a special place in the Buddhist and Taiwan’s cultural contexts, which is why the lotus lamp is used throughout the production to symbolize love and redemption.¹⁶

The allegorical nature of the production is especially evident in “Intercepted Messenger,” a prolonged scene dedicated to the episode in which Romeo misses the crucial message about Juliet’s feigned death. In *Flower*, the Buddhist Novice (a counterpart to Friar John) carries a lotus lamp from Master Huikong (Friar Lawrence) to Qiusheng (Romeo), with a critical message at a critical time.¹⁷ The message is hidden in a lotus lamp that never arrives in the hand of Qiusheng, because the Buddhist Novice is arrested by the Quans (the Capulets), being mistaken for a spy sent by the Zhangs. The entire scene is presented as a pantomime, with occasional filling in of music and rhythmic percussions. Their chance encounter and fight involves stylized and choreographed martial arts movements in the dark. The scene opens and closes with a dark stage with the lighted lotus lamp in the Buddhist Novice’s hands. The Quans and Zhangs enter with yellow and red lanterns on long sticks in their hands, which later serve as lances in the fight. Before the light comes up on stage, all that is visible is a pink lotus-shaped lamp floating in the air, joined by red and yellow lanterns, evading and defending the attacks from one another. The scene conveys a powerful sense of conflict through the cancellation of human bodies on stage, bringing the feud to a highly symbolic and impersonal level.

Even though *Flower* dramatizes the ethnic conflicts in symbolic terms, the connections between this scene and Taiwan’s identity politics were obvious enough to warrant suspicion and anxiety. When asked whether he worried about the possibility of *Flower* crossing the ethnic groups, the artistic director Chen Deli replied:

¹⁶ Kumārajīva, *The Lotus Sutra*, trans. Burton Watson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), p.133.

¹⁷ The Buddhist Novice is called *shami*, or disciple monk, in the play.

No, not at all. The Quan and Zhang communities reconciled a long time ago. *Flower* is set in nineteenth century Taiwan. *Zuqun yishi* [ethnic consciousness] is a sensitive topic in modern-day Taiwan. But I asked my actors whether they belonged [genealogically] to the Quan or the Zhang. No one could answer that question, which is a sign of ethnic fusion and reconciliation in the course of history. [...] Feud and hatred between different groups, as Shakespeare dramatized in *Romeo and Juliet*, are always arbitrary. The beginning of the feud can no longer be traced.¹⁸

Chen then proposed to rethink the constituencies and ramifications of ethnic identities. He was clearly referring to the “Taiwanese” and “mainlander” communities competing for primacy in the political and cultural arena. *Flower* was discussed in relation to contemporary issues in Taiwanese society and its significance in expanding the repertoire of the Taiwanese opera. The adaptation symbolically unites the two intrinsically divisive ethnic clans by presenting the remorseful Haiwang / Montague and Qinghong / Capulet reaching a truce as Master Huikong delivers a moralizing speech over the bodies of their dead son and daughter (revised and expanded from *Romeo and Juliet*, 5.3. 229–69).

Romeo and Juliet as Ethnic Allegory

While *Romeo and Juliet* was used as a venue to rethink local history in Taiwan, a recent adaptation of the play in Yunnan province, *Zhuo Mei and Ah Luo*, explored the Communist ideologies of a Chinese melting pot through an ethnic minority theatre. Like *Flower*, *Zhuo Mei and Ah Luo* targeted its immediate ethnic and dialect community rather than audiences at national or international festivals. Written by Ma Lianghua and premiered in Yuxi, a city of some two million residents, the play was performed in Yunnan’s flower lantern opera to critical acclaim in the province in 1996.¹⁹ Just as Taiwanese opera has been deployed as a cultural token of Taiwanese identity, flower lantern opera, best known for its diverse dance steps and performers carrying lanterns or fans, has seen its fair share of cultural essentialism. This theatre of dance and song has been used as an identity marker for Yunnan’s ethnic minorities, such as the Yi tribes in Mount Ailao. Before the 1950s, flower lantern opera performances relied heavily on folk dance and songs. The ceremonial framework prioritized ritual over aesthetic functions of the theatre. However,

¹⁸ *Bi’an hua* stage bill, p.4.

¹⁹ “Shakespearean Tragedy Re-interpreted in Yunnan’s Flower Lantern Opera [Yunnan *huadengxi* yanyi Sha weng beiju],” *Renmin ribao* [People’s Daily], November 20, 1998, p.10.

the “new lantern” style, established in the mid-twentieth century, added new concepts of plot development and performance to the ritual and ceremonial characters of the theatre. New non-repertory plays such as *Zhuo Mei and Ah Luo* have furthered the reform agenda and helped to create a new prism for re-reading local histories. In other words, the medium has become more self-conscious of its role in interpreting its own history.

As with *Flower*, *Zhuo Mei and Ah Luo* is set in a historical period with heightened ethnic conflicts. The popular image of *Romeo and Juliet* in contemporary China as the ultimate manifestation of an unlikely couple amidst collective difference has probably influenced the decision of the two productions’ directors to use the play as a pretext to work through their local histories of conflict.²⁰ Set in the fourteenth century, the seven scenes of *Zhuo Mei and Ah Luo* use traditional and innovative elements of dance and song of Yi. Interestingly, during interviews, the co-directors (He Ruifen and Yan Yuelong) and the lead actors (Shen Jiannan as Ah Luo and Yang Liqiong as Zhuo Mei) do not seem to have pressed the case for the production’s historical value.²¹ For the directors, topicality and the local audience’s approval were their primary concern. Their two principal goals were to “present the rich tradition of the local community” and to “enrich the presentational support of the art of flower lantern.”²² Local reviewers in Yuxi could not have agreed more. They were struck by the harmony between content and form, the vivacity of Yi cultural practices (such as wrestling), and the combination of an eclectic range of music components, including bass drum, electronically synthesized music, and Yi percussion instruments (e.g. cymbals and copper drums).²³ Part of the production’s message lay in its innovative form. The flower lantern opera performed a double duty of aestheticizing the Yi history of ethnic conflicts and historicizing the development of the local theatre form. Therefore, what the directors called the “unique ethnic characteristics” (*minzu tese*) of the performance helped to maintain an ambiguous relation between *Zhuo Mei and Ah Luo* and *Romeo and Juliet*.

The performance is unified by the image of fire, which plays an important role in Yi rituals and daily life. Bonfires and torches are used throughout the performance, alluding to the Yi worship of fire and to Romeo’s proclamation

²⁰ Jill Levenson, *Romeo and Juliet: Shakespeare in Performance* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987).

²¹ Shen Jiannan, “How I Performed Ah Luo [Wo yan Ah Luo],” *Ethnic Arts Quarterly* [Minzu yishu] (February 1997), pp.24–25; He Ruifen and Yan Yuelong, “The Aesthetic Pursuit of the Directors of *Zuo Mei and Ah Luo* in *Huadeng* Style [Huadeng ju *Zhuo Mei yu Ah Luo* daoyan de tansuo yu zhuiqiu],” *Ethnic Arts Quarterly* (February 1997), 22–23 (p.22).

²² He and Yan, pp.22–23.

in Shakespeare’s play: “O, [Juliet] doth teach the torches to burn bright!” (1.5.46).²⁴ The opening of the production featured the torch festival, a major cultural event of the Yi tribes that falls on June 24 of the lunar calendar. The curtains rose to reveal a dimly lit stage in the early morning hours, with the moon in the background. Zhuo Mei and Ah Luo entered with torches in hand. They lit a bonfire for the forthcoming festival. The flame was created by a red light and mute dancers in red Yi costumes. Their bodies and sheer cloaks formed palpable flames that engulfed Zhuo Mei and Ah Luo. Significantly the couple’s torches went out as cold blue light was emitted from below the stage and as the bonfire reached new heights. Suggestive of both passion and hatred, two extremes of human emotions shaped by each other’s presence, the flame was an effective visual citation of the Chorus’ speech in *Romeo and Juliet* (prologue, 1–14).

Several changes in the plot of Shakespeare’s play enable elaborate scenes dedicated to the interaction of Zhuo Mei (Juliet) and Ah Luo (Romeo). For instance, Romeo’s fleeting love for Rosaline is excised, and the general theme of love at first sight is replaced by the theme of the heterosexual bond as a redemptive power. After a courtship sequence, Zhuo Mei and Ah Luo demonstrate that even in love rationality transcends passion, though they try to use their bond to resolve the feud between their families to no avail. The production focuses on recasting Yi cultural heritage in a positive light, as evidenced by its transformation of Tybalt’s death and Romeo’s exile. There is no reference to Yi customary laws used to settle cases of homicide that require the perpetrator to commit suicide.²⁵ In contrast to the conscious departure from specific aspects of Yi history, other parts of the production highlight Yi colloquial and proverbial expressions to strive for ethnic authenticity, such as the line “planted in the same soil and the same field, the roots and heads of the wheat and the pea can never be separated” as a metaphor for lovers.²⁶

²³ Jin Chong, “Another Breakthrough in the Reform of Flower Lantern Art — A Review of *Zhuo Mei and Ah Luo* [Huadeng yishu xingshi gexin de you yici tupo — *Zhuo Mei yu Ah Luo* guanhou],” *Ethnic Arts Quarterly* (February 1997), 3–6 (p.5); Sun Jun, “An Exquisite Flower from Europe Blossoms in Mountainous Yunnan [Ouzhou qipa Yun ling kai],” *Ethnic Arts Quarterly* (February 1997), 10–12 (p.12). For the social implications of Yi wrestling, see Liu Yu, “Searching for the Heroic Age of the Yi People of Liangshan,” *Perspectives on the Yi of Southwest China*, ed. Stevan Harrell (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), p.112.

²⁴ All references to the play are from *The Riverside Shakespeare*, 2nd Ed, ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1997).

²⁵ Qubi Shimei and Ma Erzi, “Homicide and Homicide Cases in Old Liangshan,” *Perspectives on the Yi of Southwest China*, pp.94–103.

²⁶ Ma Lianghua, “*Zhuo Mei and Ah Luo: A Flower Lantern Play* [*Zhuo Mei yu Ah Luo: Yunan huadeng ju*],” *Ethnic Arts Quarterly* (February 1997), 44–57 (p.48).

Compared to *Romeo and Juliet*, Zhuo Mei and Ah Luo are presented as an unusually rational couple. Adolescent exuberance is replaced by rational calculation. This tendency is especially evident in their discussion after the wooing scene. Shifting from verse arias to prose lines, they evaluate their situation and their ambitious goal to resolve the family feud through love. In contrast to most contemporary productions of *Romeo and Juliet* in Chinese, no intimate scene between them is staged or suggested. They emerge as a heroic couple intent on saving the necessarily joint future of their clans:

Ah Luo: Maybe it is the gods' plan to have us born into two feuding families and to have us fall in love. Mei, why do you think the gods would ignite our love like the pit of fire at our houses that never extinguishes and always provides warmth?

Zhuo Mei: The gods must wish to resolve the feud through our love, to use the warmth of the fire of love to dissolve the ice of feud.

Ah Luo: We should not worry about the feud. I cannot wait to tell every one in the tribes that it's the gods' will.

It has been argued that *Romeo and Juliet's* tragedy is caused by the lovers' "intense and abrupt passion" rather than by the blind feud between the houses.²⁷ *Zhuo Mei and Ah Luo* turns the tables by creating an optimistic, if naive, couple believing in both the absoluteness of their love and their ability to resolve the senseless feud. Zhuo Mei and Ah Luo are cast as a manifestation of restrained passion and progressive rationality.

While sanitized and sanctioned violence and courtship takes many forms, the Yi torch festival scene is the most remarkable. Following the Yi wrestling customs, young men from various clans compete once a year for the all-around champion with the coveted title of "torchbearer." Tripping and throwing the opponent to the ground is the goal of the sport. Following the contest, festivities provide opportunities for courtship. The conflicts between the upper and lower Yi clans of the play (the Capulets and Montagues) unfold in this context. Here Ah Luo "earns" Zhuo Mei's love by defeating Kao Le (a character based on Tybalt), the torchbearer of the previous year, in the wrestling match. The condensation of the ball scene and Romeo's conflict with Tybalt serves to intensify the ever present tension between the two clans in *Zhuo Mei and Ah Luo*. It is not without irony when the young men and women of both the upper and lower clans sing in praise of the power of fire at the festival:

²⁷ Maurice Charney, *Shakespeare on Love and Lust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), p.87.

We, the Yi people, live high up in the mountains.
Fire is our father, ho! fire is our mother.
A torch leads the way as we step into the darkness at night.
A welcoming fire pit greets us when we return home in the day. ...
Raging fire, drive venom and malaria out.
Raging fire, keep out the wolves.
Each and every year the fire burns bright
Peace and good fortune descend upon all of us and the entire tribes.²⁸

The symbolic opening scene is further delineated by recognizable Yi artifacts and practices, including smoke-box dance, moon zithers, and Yi turban and cloaks that the directors use to create "engaging portraits of the life of Yi people in the mountainous area." When Zhuo Mei feigns unconsciousness to resist the arranged marriage, the shaman performs a soul-purging ritual to resuscitate her. Zhuo Mei and Ah Luo thus come to be identified strongly with Yi heritage.

In the eyes of the local audience, the personification of the history of ethnic conflict through the figures of Zhuo Mei and Ah Luo was as interesting as the dramatic events. The flower lantern opera thus rehearsed the history of its locality. In this allegorical structure, fire signifies hope and healing, but it also has the capacity to destroy communities. In the final scene in the graveyard, when the sympathetic *bimo* (shaman) enters to witness the death of Zhuo Mei and Ah Luo, he cries:

Unspeakable horror! Our gods in heaven, is this a scourge upon the feuding tribes?
Let me burn it all down to ashes with raging fire! [Throws his torch onto the stage.]

His torch creates a stage-wide fire represented by a huge red cloth covering the entire stage and the bodies of Zhuo Mei and Ah Luo. A group of dancers, clad in white, then appears on stage and dances with white fans to provide a strong visual contrast. Purged by fire, the graveyard is transformed from a desolate site to a dreamy one. Aided by white smoke created by dry ice, Zhuo Mei and Ah Luo stand up and dance hand-in-hand. Productions of *Romeo and Juliet* usually close with Prince Escalus' after-the-fact observation: "See what a scourge is laid upon your hate, / That heaven finds means to kill your joys with love" (5.3. 292-93), but this version emphasizes the agency of the shaman in instituting a new culture.

²⁸ Ma, p.48.

Another notable aspect is the ceremonial foundation of this scene, where Zhuo Mei and Ah Luo became part of a sacrificial ritual. As the sin of both clans is purged by fire, the flame reunites the couple just as it brought them together at the beginning of the play. The backstage Chorus's song at this point recycles the main features and lines from songs sung by *bimo* after he secretly marries Zhuo Mei and Ah Luo, by the couple themselves, and by the Chorus and other characters earlier in the play:

Heaven be the witness to the engagement between the Mountain and the River.
A couple seeking each other's hands in peril.
May the gods be with you.
Never shall you be separated in this life.²⁹

The co-directors of this adaptation were intent on maximizing the visual and aural impact of the tragic ending. The allegorical nature of these arias did not go unnoticed in performances aiming at creating a communal experience of history.³⁰

Conclusion

These artists read Shakespeare rather as Shakespeare read Plutarch or Ovid, containing and concealing the textures of the otherwise foreign contexts. As Shakespeare is read through local history and vice versa, the two adaptations of *Romeo and Juliet* also draw on Shakespeare's play to renew local theatre genres to produce new interpretations that expand the meanings of *Romeo and Juliet* in the twenty-first century. The allegorical structure of interpretation fuses an ethnic vocabulary of history with Shakespeare's perceived moral authority. Such uses of *Romeo and Juliet* suggest shifts in the relative familiarity of Shakespearean and traditional Asian theatres. Shakespeare's Chinese interlocutors in the nineteenth century were awed by the novelty of his plot design, but in the twenty-first century, it is Taiwanese opera and flower lantern opera that have become unfamiliar to audiences who are accustomed to mainstream forms of entertainment such as Hollywood-branded Shakespeares. Ethnic history is mobilized to redeem its representative theatre form.

While some Asian-Pacific Shakespeares seem to celebrate a progressive

²⁹ Ma, pp.56–57.

³⁰ Bao Pu, "New Horizons for the Transformation of Shakespeare by Ethnic Minorities [Sha ju minzuhua de xin chengguo]," *Ethnic Arts Quarterly* (February 1997), 7–9 (pp.8–9).

form of globalism (e.g., John R. Briggs's *Shogun Macbeth* in New York and Ong Keng Sen's pan-Asian *Lear* in Singapore),³¹ lesser-known rewritings have attended to various aspects of local histories, inviting us to ask not just what is being historicized but also what ideological work is being carried out in the name of history.³² The cross-cultural production of allegory expands rather than delimits the reader's locality and the cultural coordinates of Shakespeare, even as it is censored and shaped by local aesthetics. These works demonstrate that allegorical interpretation does not lead to unimaginative or passive application of the international cachet of foreign literature. The ideas of "Shakespeare" and "China" do not set up absolute opposites. Rather, they intersect and cross-fertilize in artistic creation.

(Pennsylvania State University)

³¹ Alexander C. Y. Huang, "Asian American Theatre Re-imagined: *Shogun Macbeth* in New York," *Weyward Macbeth: Intersections of Race and Performance*, ed. Scott L. Newstok and Ayanna Thompson (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), forthcoming; Alexander C. Y. Huang, "Asian Shakespeares in Europe: From the Unfamiliar to the Defamiliarised," *Shakespearean International Yearbook* 8 (2008), pp.51–70.

³² Cf. Hayden White's concept of the "poetics of history" and theory of tropes that delineate the "deep structural forms" of historical thought. The literary figures of metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony help to organize parts into meaningful wholes. *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press 1973).

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Special Feature
Pacific Shakespeare

Edited by
TOM BISHOP AND ATSUSHIKO HIROTA

THE SHAKESPEARE SOCIETY OF JAPAN
2008

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Pacific Shakespeare: An Introduction

Tom Bishop and Atsuhiko Hirota

"Is the Pacific Sea my home? Or are
The Easterne riches?"

— John Donne, "Hymn to God in my Sickness"

"Pacific Shakespeare" — not a vision of wrangling critics beating their pens into ploughshares in the name of the playwright, but the name of a possible conversation between a spatial category and a cultural one, each with its particular relation to several histories of space and culture. For to speak of that body of water which Magellan in 1520 first nominated "the Pacific Sea (Mar Pacifico)" is to enter, with Magellan, into a space marked irrevocably by the history of European exploration and colonization. A "Pacific" ocean exists only by contrast with some other ocean, implying a sufficient geographical knowledge to distinguish bodies of water of distinct temperaments. The "Pacific", long known, explored and settled by many peoples before Magellan ever set eyes on it, yet did not exist as a separate thing, an item within a totality, one of a set like the emerging "Seven Seas". Only the mapping imperatives and technologies of the sixteenth and later European centuries began to catalogue and denominate pelagic space in that exhaustive way. The modern Japanese name for the great body of water to the east of Japan, for instance, is "Taihei-yo", a translation of the Western name. There seems never to have been another separate name for it in the language. Likewise, in New Zealand Maori, the waters across which the great Austronesian voyagers sailed to settle the far-flung islands are called "Te Moana Nui a Kiwa" — the great ocean of Kiwa, Kiwa being an early explorer. But there is no notion of "Kiwa's Great Ocean" being only one among a number of oceans.

To speak of "Pacific Shakespeare" is therefore already to have accepted a segmentation of the world's places which is contemporary, very roughly, with

Shakespeare himself. Even though Shakespeare never speaks of “the Pacific”, or even uses the word “pacific”, “Shakespeare” and “the Pacific” are sharers in a history that unites them, not strangers speaking to one another from far-flung sides of the world. One cannot be in “the Pacific” without being already in a certain history of that place that begins outside it, in the same general place as “Shakespeare”.

At the same time, of course, “Shakespeare” has long since ceased to denote merely one man who died in England in 1616, or even a collection of writings for which he was largely responsible and to which his name is attached. His name now denotes, along with those things, a vast network of varied and contradictory historical enterprises, with roots in many places (some of which the dead man may indeed have objected to) and ramifications almost everywhere. As critics have been pointing out for some time, the appearance of “Shakespeare” in the Pacific was almost coterminous with the enterprise of British colonialism itself, beginning with the volumes of an unknown edition carried as part of his European cargo by James Cook aboard the “Endeavour”. In every corner of the colonial world that the British created, “Shakespeare” was present; he has infiltrated one way or another into the histories of the widely different cultures that variously opposed European expansiveness. As Alex Huang points out, the Chinese looked on coming to terms with “Shakespeare” as a significant aspect of their coming to terms with, and learning to resist, the challenge of imperialism itself.

To consider “Pacific Shakespeare” then, as we have invited the four essayists writing here to do, is not to bring together terms remote from one another, but to venture into a thick zone of overlap and mutual translation. The four essays included in this special section under this title all in one way or another pose the question of translation, whether from one language to another — even if another, more recent version of English — or from one place to another, or both. These acts of literary and cultural translation in turn frame a version of the question of “translation” which has accompanied issues of cultural authority and of temporal distance in Western letters since at least the Renaissance. Renaissance European writers, Shakespeare among them, reflected on their own heritage of classical culture through the twin concepts of the “translatio imperii” and the “translatio studii” — the westward momentums of power and of learning they took to have shaped their own history. Likewise, if not so self-consciously, the more recent adapters examined here, in taking up the challenge of “Shakespeare” as a gift and burden in their own cultural moment, confront their own questions of translation: how to at once access the power and authority of these writings and to frame that authority in such a way that it releases or enables an answering power in the moment in which it is made to speak.

Each of these essays, in an individually subtle way, explores some version of this inquiry. How does the turn to Shakespeare as an organizing choice in a new work of art open that work up to what is unexpected in its own point of origin? How does the new work speak in turn about the place of Shakespeare from that point of origin? For each instance, the essayist carefully measures what forces of local drama and of local self-recognition the invocation of Shakespeare can be made to release. Sometimes this release is productive of something new, so that Shakespeare becomes an enabling or catalytic presence. Sometimes, the addition of Shakespearean language and cultural authority proves distorting and disastrous. Between such polarities, some instances of the uses and disadvantages of a “Pacific Shakespeare” can themselves be named and mapped.

The four essays included in this special section also between them begin to construct a taxonomy of the deployment of Shakespeare by adapting directors and playwrights. One interesting distinction appears in the difference between what we might call “allegorical”, and “supplementary” styles of adaptation, a difference which may align with different relations to the history of colonialism. For instance, Alex Huang analyses how two Chinese versions of *Romeo and Juliet* provide what he calls an “allegorical” exploration of local history, translating Shakespeare’s plot into terms and dramatic procedures native to the stage languages and histories of audience communities in Taiwan and Yunnan, China. The distance, and perhaps the very externality, of authority perceived in “Shakespeare” in these two cases allows a purchase on the past of a distinct kind, such that European and Chinese styles of both history and story slip past and through one another in intriguing combinations. Shakespeare in these productions frames a story about the local community, and frames it in two senses: it both provides the inner skeleton of that story (like the frame of a house) and delimits the boundary within which the story unfolds (like the frame of a picture). The “otherness”, as we might call it, of Shakespearean authority seems to provide a strategic distance, even a sort of guarantee, that allows the history of the local both an enhanced dignity borrowed from the idea of Shakespeare’s universal authority and a leverage on itself. Such “allegory” thus affords local history the opportunity of a useful view of itself in a powerful, if potentially distorting, mirror.

Tetsuo Kishi’s essay expounds with his customary verve and clarity two notable instances of adaptation between remote cultural forms — Shakespearean comedy and Japanese kyogen — in the work of Yasunari Takahashi. Here, however, the relatively “one-way” process of allegorization that Huang discusses, gives way to something more strangely mutual. Kishi’s essay demonstrates how each of the participant cultural forms reshapes and

puts pressure on the other in a variety of ways through translations of spatial configuration and rhetorical convention, and, in *The Kyogen of Errors*, through a deeper mutual stylization. In the latter play, both comedy and kyogen are pushed beyond themselves at Takahashi's hands, so that a drama sharper, and indeed darker, than either emerges out of the discipline of their confrontation. Each form finds one possible essence of itself released through contaminative contact with the other. The kyogen assumes a complexity and embodiment of character that it normally does not support, while Shakespeare's comedy divulges an inner melancholy and philosophical bent in response to the sparer style of kyogen. As Kishi puts it, Takahashi has "approached two different theatrical traditions and produced a play which is at once dependent on and independent from them both". Fascinatingly here, each tradition can be said to allegorize the other, in the sense that each seems to reveal in the other something crucially implied but not quite realized. It is as though each tradition, through Takahashi's deep knowledge of both, had found an interpreter.

Mark Houlahan usefully adopts and develops from Joanne Tompkins the notion of "rehearsal Shakespeare" — a strategy in which a later play or novel embeds within itself, as one strand of its narrative, the rehearsal and performance of one of Shakespeare's works. Thus instead of an allegorical frame, Shakespeare plays the role here of a kind of internal symbiote — a separate literary organism contained within a host fiction which it both feeds on and contributes to. The grotesqueness of this image suggests the strangeness of the arrangement, which raises questions of uncanniness and discontinuity: a fiction that contains another fiction is always engaged in foregrounding some sort of struggle for its own authority and boundaries. It is perhaps unsurprising then that the works Houlahan discusses embed, contain, and wrestle with Shakespearean fictions that are themselves haunted by internal others, whether enticing as in *Antony and Cleopatra*, harrowing as in *Macbeth*, or both, as in *Othello*. For each of his examples, to confront the Shakespearean counterpart within is to name a crisis of selfhood that remains unresolved, the more so in that the Shakespearean presence remains so intact, so seemingly beyond assimilation, or assimilable only in the mode of disaster. And is it an accident that this mode of "Pacific Shakespeare" should have been so prominent in the chief settler colonies of the Pacific rim, New Zealand, as addressed in Houlahan's essay, and Australia, where — in works like Michael Gow's *Away* and Louis Nowra's *The Golden Age* — "rehearsal Shakespeare" is also alive and well?

Emma Cox also visits the category of "rehearsal Shakespeare" offered by Houlahan, but here something rather different happens. Cox's essay discusses Oscar Kightley and Erolia Ifopo's *Romeo and Tusi*, a play written in particular to and for audiences familiar with Maori and Samoan communities in New

Zealand. Though set in New Zealand, therefore, the play also looks to the wider arc of Polynesian Pacific cultures in their reception of the quintessentially Pakeha / Palagi (that is, European-settler) "author", Shakespeare. Like a number of other recent plays — Gow's *Away* or Joe Calarco's *Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet*, for instance — *Romeo and Tusi* uses the rehearsal of a high-school version of Shakespeare to scaffold an exploration of other topics, topics that might be harder to get at without the transformative availability of a Shakespearean language at once familiar, authoritative and rich. Cox asks to what extent *Romeo and Tusi* conforms to an established critical model of the "anti-canonical" or "resisting" work, that is whether it engages in "writing back" against the imposition of cultural hegemonies of various kinds. In contrast both to the "resisting" work and to the examples Houlahan gives of tragic "rehearsals" of Shakespeare, however, Cox shows how *Romeo and Tusi* neutralizes the menace of Shakespearean authority even as it uses that authority to speak of possibilities that seem otherwise almost beyond its primary setting. What is especially striking, in contrast to Houlahan's more tragic rehearsals of settler contact, is how Kightley and Ifopo's play can accommodate Shakespearean tragedy within its own vernacular comic explorations, untinged with either anxiety or mockery. To what extent this might be the product of a different, perhaps even more robust, response to the history of colonialism is a question worth considering at more length.

The essays gathered here offer an intriguing quartet of contrasting examples in which the authority of Shakespearean fictions, and of the frameworks that have sustained and propagated them, has been wrested, absorbed, accommodated and deployed by a variety of new and original theatres in and of the Pacific. These four essays reveal that the notion of "Pacific Shakespeare" — like the notion of the Pacific itself — must remain diverse. There is no unitary cultural sphere or space to be called by this name. This does not mean we can remain ignorant of the diverse and active negotiations with "Shakespeare" in this region. We hope this section will be a step in a continuing exchange among the various Shakespeares now inhabiting two hemispheres.

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