



Project
MUSE[®]

Today's Research. Tomorrow's Inspiration.

Chinese Shakespeares: Two Centuries of Cultural Exchange

Charles Ross

Comparative Literature Studies, Volume 47, Number 3, 2010,
pp. 384-387 (Review)

Published by Penn State University Press
DOI: 10.1353/cls.2010.0021



 For additional information about this article

<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/cls/summary/v047/47.3.ross.html>

with Japanese compounds" (149). There are other gems as well. Thornber's nuanced readings of the many versions (Korean and Japanese) of Nakano Shigeharu's poem "Shinagawa Station in the Rain" (183–89, 231–32, 322–26) are wonderful, as are her discussions of Korean adaptations of Suehiro Tetchō's political novel *Plum Blossoms in Snow* (158–61, 238–39) and Taiwanese writer Yang Kui's reconfigurations of Natsume Sōseki's *The Miner*. Thus, Thornber's work introduces a huge array of lesser-known authors and, equally important, sketches new ways of approaching even the most canonical of authors, reading, for instance, Kawabata Yasunari's *Snow Country* through the lens of its adaptations and translations in transwar Korea.

Empires of Text in Motion will be of great interest to scholars of colonial and postcolonial culture, world literature (particularly as it pertains to East Asia), and historians of twentieth-century Asia. Further, the book should be very high indeed on the reading lists of anyone (graduate students, take note!) who needs a thoroughgoing introduction to major and minor artists, journals, literary societies, and genres of East Asia, as well as the multiple ways these were networked to one another in the modern transwar period. Thornber has left an amazing trail of breadcrumbs, leading through archives from Manchuria and Hong Kong to Taiwan and South Korea. At the very least, the fields of Asian studies and comparative and world literature owe her a debt of gratitude for pointing the way to a wealth of understudied materials.

Charlotte Eubanks

The Pennsylvania State University

Chinese Shakespeares: Two Centuries of Cultural Exchange. By Alexander C. Y. Huang. New York: Columbia University Press, 2009. 361 pp. Cloth \$84.50; paper \$26.50.

Chinese Shakespeares is a critically sophisticated study that is grounded in firsthand knowledge of every major stage production, film, and critical article on the subject of Shakespeare in China. Alexander Huang has established himself as a driving force in archiving records, organizing conferences on Shakespeare in Asia, and formalizing the history of the subject. Much of this book is the result of that extensive, original research.

A critical approach is necessary to complement this archival work because the issue of Chinese Shakespeare is vastly complex and cannot be adequately addressed merely by reviewing a few full-length productions in Beijing. Shakespeare has been subtly exploited by various movements, including the Cultural Revolution, and so his function in China must be understood in terms of changing historical circumstances. Both “Shakespeare” and “China” signify even to people who know little about them. Both conjure a reputation and values. Shakespeare was famous in China before he was translated, just as China retains a certain magic despite ever-changing fortunes. But then, the “West,” according to Huang, is also a shifting category, sometimes local, sometimes global (40).

The first chapter of the book corrects the critical neglect of Shakespeare’s reception in China. It argues that the textual migration of Shakespeare to China by way of references, performances, translations, and drastic rewritings in which a large element of parody figures, challenges our underlying assumption of an ethics of fidelity. What China gives back to us is an image of Shakespeare that helps us more fully appreciate the richness of interpretive possibilities of his work and a new way of looking at theories of cross-cultural appropriation. The clash of aesthetic principles creates an important bridge between two worlds at a time when understanding is needed more than ever.

After the introductory chapter outlining the theory of intercultural exchanges, the book divides into three sections. Case studies form the heart of these sections. In the first, Huang concentrates on the need to move away from a morality of correctness; in the second, he details the dynamics of localization; and in the third, he makes a case for rejecting the notion of “Shakespeare and China,” arguing that it obscures the dialects of exchange. Despite his refusal to draft a history of performance, Huang manages to show how Chinese theater practices are influencing Chinese film versions of Shakespeare. Many of these practices were originally part of attempts to adapt Shakespeare to older cultural forms, but often both stage and screen versions owe much to particular, influential artists whose names are just now becoming more familiar in the West. Lu Xun appears in every anthology of Chinese literature, but many of the names Huang discusses will become equally familiar in the future, such as Lin Shu, who translated Lamb’s *Tales from Shakespeare* (a work that was also an important influence in Korea) and the amazing Wu Hsing-kuo of Taiwan’s Contemporary Legend Theater.

For China in the nineteenth century, Shakespeare offered a clue to the nature of Englishness, making his fame for many years more important than his works. For early twentieth-century authors and for cultural reformers, he was an example of Western literature and a model for the

creation of a national literature. China in Chinese means “middle kingdom” [*zhongguo*], and a look at the map reenforces this self-perception. The country is surrounded by deserts to the west, cold Siberia to the north, tropics to the south, and an ocean to the east made unsuitable for surfing because Korea and Japan calm the swells. Since except for small enclaves China was never colonized, Shakespeare was not appropriated but instead served a model for identity, not least because he had a reputation for genius [*xiancai*, “genius from heaven”]. Given the richness of Chinese culture, it has not been hard to identify Tang Xianzu’s late sixteenth-century romance drama *The Peony Pavilion* with *Romeo and Juliet*.

It was the Chinese fascination with ghosts and demons and the outlandish more than anything else that accounted for the popularity of Shakespeare beyond intellectual circles. *Hamlet* was the first play to be translated line for line, by Tian Han in 1921; before that readers had only the synopses by the Lambs (indeed the only Western work that had been directly translated before that was Dumas’s *La dame aux camélias* in 1899 [*Chahua nü*], “a milestone in translated literature in China” [72]). *Macbeth* is titled *Bewitched Omens* (*Gu zheng*) and *King Lear* is *The Daughter’s Mutiny* (*Nü bian*). Huang suggests that the moral appeal of Shakespeare is a constant in the constantly changing exchange between China and Shakespeare, and to illustrate this point, he offers a case study of Lao She’s rewriting of *Hamlet* (1936).

Localization resulted from cultural change, such as, for example, the role of the new woman, one of the themes developed in the Chinese theater of the 1920s and 1930s. As Huang puts it, quoting Constantine Stanislavsky, “spectators come to the theatre to hear [and see] the subtext,’ [because] they can read the text at home” (26). Huang takes as his case study a 1937 production of *Romeo and Juliet*. Silent films were already making an appeal to women in versions of *The Merchant of Venice* (Portia was a role model for female lawyers) and *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, which “became a bildungsroman about two modern women” (120). But the war changed the subtext, and Huang’s next case study is of a production of *Macbeth* in wartime Shanghai, which the Japanese had taken in 1937. (C. S. Lewis’s brother was still stationed there in 1939.)

A further localization is illustrated by a 1942 performance of *Hamlet*. The play is generally thought to be about universal values, but because it was set in a Confucian temple, a familiar building, it conveyed the revolutionary spirit the Chinese audience needed to get through war against Japan without asking the audience to identify with Hamlet. Huang teases out the dialectics of local and universal in further “site-specific readings” (the title of chapter 5) involving a labor-camp reading of *Hamlet* (1950s) and a Shanghai production

of *Much Ado About Nothing* (1957), where Soviet Maoism complicates matters greatly. The Bard's home seemed closer to Moscow than Stratford in that time, in that place. Huang deftly untangles these various legacies, surprising meanings, and hidden contexts while eschewing easy moralism. (One is reminded of the fact, passions aside, that England's closest competitor as a colonial power was always ... Turkey.)

And so China and Taiwan have always taken what was needed from Shakespeare, even if it was only a title, often to transmit their own cultural myths, none richer than those of the Chinese opera, the subject of chapter 6. A tradition of painted-face performances naturally welcomed *Othello*, especially after the Soviet film by Sergei Yutkevitch was shown (it won the best director award at Cannes in 1956). Not Shakespeare. Not exactly China. It's all part of what Alex Huang calls "Chinese Shakespeares," the mutual interplay between what by now has to go in scare quotes: "Shakespeare" and "China."

This theoretically astute book examines Chinese Shakespeares from a wider array of genres and localities associated with imaginaries of China than have previous studies. It situates Chinese Shakespeares within the critical discourse of global Shakespeares, demonstrating an awareness of China's ambiguous relationship with the European West. Finally, instead of simply evaluating how successfully a given appropriation represents either the source text or the host culture, Huang successfully locates the logic of representation within collective cultural memory, politics, history, and individual artistic creativity. The book includes a useful bibliography and a selected chronology of worldwide Shakespeares and Chinese Shakespeares.

Charles Ross
Purdue University

The Comparative Journeys: Essays on Literature and Religion East and West.
By Anthony C. Yu. New York: Columbia University Press, 2009. 427 pp.
Cloth \$50.00.

The categories given in the subtitle of this volume reflect the cross-disciplinary and cross-cultural proficiency that lies behind the work for which Anthony Yu is most well known: *Journey to the West*, a four-volume English