

Huang, Alexander C. Y. *Chinese Shakespeares: Two Centuries of Cultural Exchange* New York: Columbia University Press, 2009. 350 pp. ISBN-13: 978-0-231148498.

Does Shakespeare “belong” to the British, or to all the English-speaking countries? Or to the West? Or to the world? Generally, to those who answer “yes” to the first of these questions, Shakespeare’s art is essentially an art of language, and his plays cannot be fully appreciated without a full, flexible command of English. To those who think of Shakespeare as Western, Shakespeare’s plays express a particular cultural perspective, without which they lose all but their most superficial meaning. Even to those who think Shakespeare can have significance throughout the world, it may come as a surprise that his work has a long and dramatic history in Asia.

Alexander C. Y. Huang’s excellent new book, *Chinese Shakespeares*, tells the story of Shakespeare in Asia—a story which began virtually during Shakespeare’s lifetime—with an emphasis on Mandarin-speaking China and Taiwan, while also making reference to Cantonese-speaking China and Hong Kong, as well as to other countries whose fates are inextricably linked to the Chinese world, such as Korea and Japan. In this setting, Huang brings to the fore the complex concerns that necessarily emerge in any serious consideration of the intersection of Shakespeare and China.

“All the world’s a stage, And all the men and women merely players”—some would say these famous words from *As You Like It* are among the most beautiful in the English language. The sequence of liquid sounds, for example *l, l, n, l, m, n, n, m, n, m, l* flirt with the tip of the tongue and the lips, and explode with irony on the hard, spitting initial *p* and the closing, teethgnashing *z* of the word “players.” This delicious movement of sounds in the mouth is animated by an inner pulse created by the perfect alternation of stressed and unstressed syllables. Some say such lines in Shakespeare are to be spoken in rhythm with the human heartbeat. Shakespeare not only gave the English language over 1600 words and countless expressions, but also gave listeners sounds, rhythms and images of such richness that they routinely captivate the reverent and the skeptical alike.

So, how is the native English-speaker to appreciate these same lines, stripped of their mouth-feel and pulse, used to open a 1931 Chinese silent film based loosely on *Two Gentlemen of Verona* (*A Spray of Plum Blossom*)?

“All the world is a stage.
And men and women merely players.”

Huang sets about answering the question of what can make these wooden lines take flight, providing historical and social context for understanding the entirely different aesthetics offered by Chinese Shakespeare. His methodical explication introduces us to Shakespeare as his work has been variously employed for both liberal and conservative social transformation; as it has been read during various periods of political revolution or upheaval; as it has engendered narratives about cultural specificity and universality; as it has served the Asian countries to communicate not only with the rest of the world, but with one another. Huang also gives us the perspective that fixed ideas of China are nothing but highly inaccurate constructs—that instead there are many Chinas to be found in different historical periods, with different ideologies and geocultures, as well as in Taiwan since 1949, in Hong Kong and in the Chinese diaspora. His book, then, works meticulously to give us these more dimensional views of Shakespeare and China in the first place, and then to show the results of their multiple synergies. In the process, Shakespeare becomes “Shakespeare,” and China becomes “China.”

Dr. Huang’s concern is that discourse on Shakespeare and Asia has gotten bogged down in observations about the incompatibility of their aesthetics, which produce foreseeable counter-observations about their universality. He suggests “the development of a theoretical model for global Shakespeare” and his method is derived from cultural and performance theories. His first chapter takes on the notions of “authentic” Shakespeare and cultural ownership. The next chapter describes the Shakespeare-inspired works made in China in the nineteenth century based on the Lambs’ prose versions, *Tales of Shakespeare*—that is, before an actual translation of any play text of Shakespeare’s had been done. Chapter 3 shows how translation of the plays brought with them moralistic and allegorical readings in the name of cultural reform, and attitudes towards the plays that were hard to shake off. Chapter 4 focuses on the new women’s movement of the 1930s and 1940s, and the resulting “cosmopolitan” interpretations of Shakespeare’s female characters on stage and in film. Chapter 5 looks at the larger meanings of *Hamlet* as performed in a Confucian temple and in a forced labor camp, and of an ostensibly apolitical Soviet-Chinese *Much Ado*. Chapter 6 treats the contributions that Chinese opera has made to international Shakespeare, while underlining the part that worldwide market forces have played in forming profoundly misleading impressions in the West that Chinese theater is far more visual than verbal. Chapter 7 analyzes important, more recent productions in which a Chinese *auteur* director has seen a Shakespeare play

through an intensely personal lens—for example, *Lear* in a Buddhist frame, or as a one-man show—part of a current of adventurous, experimental Shakespeare-inspired productions in Asia. The epilogue looks at the post-modern and the post-dramatic, along with the tangle of cultural threads that knot around Chinese productions that aren't "Chinese" enough for Western audiences, but are too Westernized for home. The text is followed by ten pages of detailed chronological charts and thorough end materials.

It should be noted that this admirable work is theory, not theater. Those who are used to thinking of Shakespeare as a man of the theater will encounter him here in the theorist's language of "Othering" and "interstitial space." Practitioners who know the plays from the inside may puzzle over the "epistemological distance" between *Lear* and *Cordelia* (14), or the passing statement that *Beatrice* forces *Benedick* to choose between male friendship and female love (156). Actors might be surprised to see *Stanislavsky's* notion of interior "subtext" referred to with regards to revolution and nationalism (26). Nevertheless, Dr. Huang writes dazzlingly in his own context, states his theoretical intentions clearly and defends them forcefully. Still, his topic is so interesting, and he handles it so interestingly that, selfishly, one can hope his future writings will be in language rather less diligently academic so as to be enjoyed by, and to benefit, many outside his immediate field.

Today, with phrases such as "global market," "cultural product" and "aesthetic commodity" looming over theater debates, the intercultural matters addressed in Huang's *Chinese Shakespeares* are surely relevant everywhere. Countries are now importing shows they used to export: productions of *Faust*, *Godot*, *Medea*, *Salesman*, *Seagull* and *Tartuffe* roam the globe, performed as a matter of course by companies that do not share the heritage of the playwright or his original audiences, with texts that have more or less proximity to their originals. As this trend continues to increase, Huang's new book will no doubt serve all of us as a model for inquiry.

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THE TEXT STRIKES BACK:
THE DYNAMICS
OF PERFORMATIVITY

GRAMMA
ΓΡΑΜΜΑ

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