

Rich and Strange

One of the best-known modern examples of "Chinese Shakespeare" is *Ye Yan*, a 2006 film first released under the English title *The Banquet* and more recently marketed under the more alluring title *The Legend of the Black Scorpion*. A Hollywood teaser might tout the film as "lush and luxurious, framed against the backdrop of the opulent court of the Emperor of China." A sinologist would be more likely to draw out the film's setting at the collapse of the Tang Empire in a time called the period of five dynasties and ten kingdoms. Those in film studies might begin by classifying the film as a Hong Kong film in the *wuxia* genre. And a Shakespeare scholar would immediately classify the film as a *Hamlet* derivative set in 10th-century China.

The literary theory Alexander C. Y. Huang develops in *Chinese Shakespeares: Two Centuries of Cultural Exchange* questions the fragmented nature of these approaches, arguing for a more synthetic approach. Even the terminology should be carefully considered to avoid a fractured or unbalanced interpretation. The phrase "Shakespeare in China" has implications that go one direction only. By contrast, Huang argues, "Chinese Shakespeares" promotes the idea that Shakespeare has an effect on China and that China likewise affects Shakespeare—and that is a key component of his approach.

When China and Shakespeare meet, each of them is transformed into something rich and strange—or, less ideally, something merely strange (to both Western and Chinese audiences)—and Huang's book attempts to navigate and negotiate the waters of this sort of transformation. He notes the dissatisfaction that can arise when a particular instance of Chinese Shakespeare is erroneously classified as "too Shakespearean" or "too Chinese." Instead, Huang maintains, the entities themselves must stand on their own merits.

The value of Huang's book is twofold: it offers and expands the literary theory necessary to approach the intersection(s) of China and Shakespeare, and it provides accounts of the past 200 years of such intersections. The book tends to stress the former, launching into the scholarly, critical apparatus that Huang develops to provide a solid foundation for the rest of his study. He convincingly displays the necessity for critical language that will be dismissive of neither Shakespeare nor China, and he rightly objects to the attitude that he describes as "This is how they do Shakespeare over there; how quaint," a mentality too often brought to bear on the subject.

Huang's theorizing gives his study weight, substance, and significance. He posits an inclination in the audiences of Chinese Shakespeares to search for the "authentic"—whether we mean by that "authentic Shakespeare" (which may mean minute attention to the text or its historical setting or a desire to see the plays performed in Elizabethan or Jacobean garb) or "authentic Chinese" (which may mean different things to Western and non-Western audiences). When audiences search for this authenticity, they tend to have an exclusivity complex, an approach that Huang dismantles:

Much of this work will undermine the fantasies of cultural exclusivity of both "Shakespeare" and "China," attending to the fact that even though every reading is a rewriting, more rewritings of a canonical text do not always translate into more radical rethinking of normative assumptions.

Instead of expending energy with issues of "authenticity," an all-encompassing perspective is necessary "to dislodge what China means and how Shakespeare is customarily interpreted." If critics and audiences are able to do so, both "China" and "Shakespeare" will be freed from constraints that Huang views as unnecessary, and the borders between China and Shakespeare will be more open and more transparent.

Integrated into his presentation of a critical approach to Chinese Shakespeares, Huang provides intriguing accounts of Shakespeare's arrival in China, the uses to which he has been put during the past 200 years, and some possibilities for the future. *The Legend of the Black Scorpion* is only one recent connection between Shakespeare and China in a nearly 400-year history of Shakespeare sailing East. At first, this sailing was very literal—one of the ships of the East India Company, the *Red Dragon*, carried *Hamlet* and *Richard II* at least as far as Indonesia by 1609, seven years before the death of Shakespeare. Even though translations of "Shashibiya" (the standard transliteration of Shakespeare's name) would not be available in China for nearly 300 years, the very name of Shakespeare began to be used for political and moral agendas by the early 19th century.

The complexity of engagement in the early stages derived in part from the attempt to find a national poet who could do for China what Shakespeare had done for England and the British Empire. At this stage in the interaction between the two constructs, more attention was given to biographical sketches of Shakespeare and the penumbra of his reputation than to his works themselves.