

Alexander C. Y. Huang, *Chinese Shakespeares: Two Centuries of Cultural Exchange*

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Reviewed by Ryuta Minami

The last decade witnessed a marked increase in academic as well as public interest in ‘Shakespeares in China’. Along with recent Chinese Shakespearean films such as *A Time to Love* (2005), *The Banquet* (2006) and *The Prince of the Himalayas* (2006), Shakespearean performances created by Chinese and Taiwanese theatre practitioners are familiar to many Shakespeareans and theatregoers. International Shakespeare conferences and forums are held in mainland China and Taiwan every year, and quite a few remarkable books have been published on the topic such as Ruru Li’s *Shashibiya* (2003) and Murray J. Levith’s *Shakespeare in China* (2006). Yet it is also true that non-Anglophone, or more specifically, ‘Asian’, Shakespeares are still regarded as a harmless occupation for non-Anglophone scholars, and that ‘the local knowledge that informed our contemporary performance has remained marginal in the scholarly inquiries into the meanings of “Shakespeare”’(p. 25).¹

In *Chinese Shakespeares*, Alexander Huang challenges conventional Anglo-centric ideas of non-Anglophone/Asian Shakespeares, avoiding providing a mere reportage of the latest or representative Shakespeares in China and Taiwan. Huang, instead, analyses Shakespearean productions of mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Chinese diaspora, and ascertains the nature of their critical reception. He illustrates both how Shakespeare’s plays have allowed Chinese artists and audiences to see China through the eye of the Other (Shakespeare), and how this has also made Chinese interpretations of Shakespeare a visual projection of the gaze of Shakespeare’s Other (Chinese perspective)(pp. 24 and 229).

In the prologue and the first chapter, Huang establishes his theoretical framework, not only by critiquing ‘the fidelity-derived discourse about cultural ownership’(p. 18) that regards local adaptations as secondary and derivative, but by rejecting the application of the post-colonial theoretical models to Shakespearean works in China, most of whose territories ‘were not directly influenced by European colonial forces’(p. 27). In expounding the meanings of ‘Chinese Shakespeares’, Huang defines ‘Shakespeare’ as ‘not only the works but also the reputation and values associated with William Shakespeare’(p. 40), and adds that by ‘China’ he means ‘a number of

¹ When referring to Huang’s Chinese Shakespeares, only the page numbers appear in the parentheses.

ideological positions' as well as a range of geo-cultural locations and historical periods that encompass late imperial China (1839-1910), Republican China (1911-1949), Communist China (1949-present), post-1949 Taiwan, Hong Kong and the Chinese diaspora' (p. 39). Huang develops what he calls 'local criticism', which focuses upon the dialectics of reciprocal exchanges between 'Shakespeares' and 'Chinas', and examines their context- or site-specific encounters 'as a transformative process', 'as a cultural practice', 'as texts', and 'as performances' (p. 39).

The following chapters present the case studies of two-century-long cultural exchanges between 'Shakespeare' and 'China'. Chapter Two, 'Shakespeare in Absentia', explores the prehistory of Shakespeare reception via praise and entries in reference books. Huang argues how and why Shakespeare, as an exotic symbol of western humanism and a moral paragon, established a hyper-canonical presence in nineteenth-century China in spite of the absence of Shakespeare's text. Chapter Three, 'Rescripting Moral Criticism', discusses Lin Shu and Wei Yi's classical Chinese rewriting of the Lambs' *Tales from Shakespeare* (1904) and Lao She's 'New Hamlet' (1936), a parodic short story written in the modern vernacular. Huang argues that Shakespeare and his plays had an important and sustained role in the formation of Chinese literary culture in the early twentieth century, and demonstrates how diverse forms of Shakespearean rewriting became the agent of mediation between Chinese and English cultural texts.

Chapter Four, 'Silent Film and Early Theater', focuses upon the oscillations of Chinese interpretations of Shakespeare between exoticization and localization, thus illustrating how Shakespeare's plays constituted the site of artistic innovation for directors and performers who sought cultural renewal and modernization. Huang examines two *huaju* (spoken-drama) Shakespeare productions in cosmopolitan Shanghai, the visually attractive, exotic and authentic realist performance of *Romeo and Juliet* (1937) and *The Hero of a Tumultuous Time* (1945), a *huaju* production inspired by *Macbeth*. He also expounds the two silent-film adaptations of *The Merchant of Venice* and *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, *The Woman Lawyer* (1927) and *A Spray of Plum Blossom* (1931) respectively, both of which rewrote Shakespeare's plays into a female-centred narrative engaging the concept of the modern girl and the new woman's movement. The next chapter, 'Site-Specific Readings', investigates three site-specific readings of Shakespeare in mid-twentieth-century China: Jiao Juyin's *Hamlet* (1942) performed in a Confucian temple during the Second Sino-Japanese War; Wu Ningkun's reading of *Hamlet* in a labour camp during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976); and a Soviet-Chinese production of *Much Ado About Nothing* (1957, 1961 and 1979). What is intriguing about these cases of Chinese site-specific interpretations

is that ‘the subject matter of a play is not necessarily always the reason for the choice of the play’ (p. 127). This is well illuminated by Huang’s eloquent argument on *Much Ado About Nothing*, the explicitly apolitical choice of which was more than a cunningly political action. The case studies in this chapter showcase how the politically charged times could encourage fruitful interactions between Shakespeare’s fictitious localities, the location of performance venues and the cultural location of performance.

Chapter Six, ‘Why Does Everyone Need Chinese Opera?’, challenges the simplistic and misleading contrast between visually luxurious *xiqu* (Chinese-opera) Shakespeare to be consumed by international spectators and *huaaju* Shakespeare to be attended by local, Chinese-speaking audiences. International spectators of *xiqu* Shakespeare are likely to *see* the text through the visualization of metaphors, verbal narratives and motifs, ignoring the mutual exchanges between the visual and the verbal. Yet through detailed analyses of Ma Yong’an’s *jingju* (Beijing Opera) *Othello* (1983), Huang demonstrates a fertile conversation constantly takes place between *xiqu* and *huaaju*, and that modern *xiqu* theatre is a hybrid form of representation, incorporating elements from different theatrical genres including *huaaju*. The final chapter, ‘Disowning Shakespeare and China’, discusses ‘the logics of exchange between local and global “cultural prestige” and the artist’s personal stake in the cultural market’ (p. 197). Huang examines the Taiwan-based *jingju* performer Wu Hsing-kuo’s *Lear Is Here* (2004) and the Hong-Kong-based artist Stan Lai’s *huaaju* production of *Lear and the Thirty-seven-fold Practice of a Bodhisattva* (2000) as notable examples of ‘small-time Shakespeare’, a Shakespearean performance that is framed by the artist’s autobiographical or religious discourse. Exposed to local and international market forces, their radically personalized local readings of Shakespeare turn out to be ‘new epistemologies that actively participate in the formation of knowledge about China and Shakespeare’ (p. 228). Huang concludes the book with an epilogue that addresses itself to ‘positive stereotyping’ in the tendency to see Asian theatre and film as pure spectacle and the influences that international cultural markets could have upon Chinese Shakespeares. He focuses upon *The Banquet* (2006), a transnational Chinese film critiqued by both Chinese and Western critics for transgressing cultural norms, so as to highlight the issues of Asian visibility as a global vernacular or new vehicles to carry new artistic ideas across different cultural locations.

Dennis Kennedy once wrote that ‘we have not even begun to develop a theory of cultural exchange that might help us understand what happens when Shakespeare travels abroad’.² Nearly twenty years after this remark,

2 Dennis Kennedy, ‘Afterword: Shakespearean Orientalism’, in Dennis Kennedy, ed., *Foreign Shakespeare: Contemporary Performance* (1993; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 300.

Alexander Huang has successfully advanced a theory of cultural exchange to expound various aspects of non-Anglophone Shakespeares. The 'locality criticism' that Huang develops in this book provides a theoretical framework that allows one to consider a cultural, political, historical as well as geographical location of a performance in Asia. *Chinese Shakespeares*, which shows great insight into intercultural performance and reciprocal exchanges taking place between two cultures, is indispensable to anyone interested in theatrical, filmic and textual representations of Shakespeare in Asia.