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BOOK REVIEW

Chinese Shakespeares: Two Centuries of Cultural Exchange. *Alexander C. Y. Huang*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2009. Pp. xi+350.

Chinese Shakespeares: Two Centuries of Cultural Exchange combines historical research with theoretical insights into what happens when culture icons travel far and imbed themselves into a new context. Alexander Huang also addresses the marginalization of Asian Shakespeares in contemporary studies of the bard in performance and popular culture. The old problem of recognizing and analyzing the difference of the Other and using this as a lens through which to look at the self becomes what Huang terms a “location-specific decoding” (43), which also complicates the often-unexamined assumption that hybridity is always progressive. Huang states clearly that without understanding the meanings produced by hybridity under various conditions that are local and global in various mixtures, one cannot understand its politics. These questions occur in part 1, “Theorizing Global Localities.”

Interest in Shakespeare predates any Chinese performances or translations, and the question of why that is so, or the “deferral to an absent authority” (47), motivates Huang’s second chapter, which with chapter 3 falls under the heading “The Fiction of Moral Space.” Another more provocative way of stating the question is to ask why China was willing to appropriate the “national poet of an invading country” (54). The answer is that Shakespeare was a portal into a modern national identity—a performance of the nation—and thus was readily taken up by intellectuals, who initially fixated on the plot of Shakespeare’s plays and regarded the celebrity, as Lu Xun so aptly puts it, as a “warrior of the spirit” (64) who could rejuvenate a flagging nation.

As chapter 3 describes, this spiritual national agenda takes on ethical dimensions as prose stylist Lin Shu rendered (through translation by Wei

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Yi into vernacular Chinese) Charles and Mary Lamb's 1807 *Tales from Shakespeare* into classical Chinese in 1904, launching a twentieth-century approach that saw Shakespeare as an educational linchpin for young modernized Chinese, a paradoxical result considering Lin's conservative desire to preserve ancient Chinese culture. His reputation as well as his categorization of Shakespeare as a writer of ghost tales boosted the popularity of this text as well as other Shakespearean plays, and he liberally altered the language and plot in an antimodernization bid to universalize Confucian values. Lao She's satirical and humorous "New Hamlet," a 1936 novella written in the vernacular, as well as his 1942 play *Homecoming*, pick up a well-ingrained modern tendency to mock Chinese intellectuals for their indecision and backward-looking nature and their indiscretion in adopting things Western.

Chapters 4 and 5, under the title "Locality at Work," analyze gender meanings, cosmopolitanism, and various site-specific performances. Praising the new theater that had the potential to remake "uncivilized" Chinese customs (103), in 1904 Chen Duxiu, a founder of the Chinese Communist Party, elevated the social position of actors and of the theater at large; in 1912, Wang Guowei inserted Chinese literature into a global context in his *History of Song and Yuan Dramas*. Fu Sinian even argued that the only legitimate theater was Western theater, anticipating a movement toward realism. According to Huang, performances followed two routes: staging plays in Victorian finery, thereby preserving their foreignness, or contextualizing Shakespeare within local environments, such as the anti-Japanese war. Although many silent film adaptations of Shakespeare have been lost, Qiu Yixiang's 1927 *The Woman Lawyer*, based on *The Merchant of Venice*, focuses on Portia as a wealthy and intelligent woman, demonstrating both the rise of the new woman and the legal and financial complexity of modern life. Throughout the twentieth century, the site of performance, as well as the location of reading, became almost a character in the plays, forming and directing local interpretations and enhancing topicality and social relevance. For example, in his memoir *A Single Tear* (1993), Wu Ningkun found that he understood *Hamlet* differently when he saw the play performed in a Confucian temple as opposed to reading it in a labor camp, where suddenly "Elsinore loomed like a haunting metaphor of a treacherous repressive state" (140). Contemporary productions, such as a performance of *Much Ado about Nothing* under the Monument to the People's Heroes in Shanghai's Huangpu Park in 1995, also turned the site into meaning specific to Chinese history and contemporary life.

Chapters 6 and 7, under the heading "Postmodern Shakespearean Orientals," look at the ascendance of "Asian visibility" (167) and global mass culture's openness to images that cross linguistic borders. This tendency, which took off in the 1980s, falsely essentialized a division between *huaju* (spoken drama for local Chinese-speaking audiences) and *xiqu* (Chinese

drama for international festival audiences). *Xiqu* Shakespeare, often criticized by *xiqu* aficionados as a destructive take on an ancient art form, is nonetheless perceived by both Chinese and global audiences as uniquely Chinese. *Huaju* Shakespeare, on the other hand, with its Western theater motifs, is perceived as a hybrid form. Although Huang regards this separation as mistaken, he recognizes its productivity as it spawns various maddening but powerful understandings of cultural exchange. For example, Dennis Bartholomeusz's claim that Chinese, Japanese, and Indian productions brought out forgotten mythic dimensions in Shakespeare's plays led Jane Tso Fang, a Beijing University professor, to claim that "Shakespeare is sick in the West, and much in need of traditional Chinese medicine" (172). Huang is dismayed by this inadvertent feeding of Chinese national pride and the mistaken assumption that the value of intercultural performance is in its influence on the source or host culture, a view endorsed by many critics. The underlying structural implication is that "traditional China is an ultimate Other" (174) set off against the constant of Shakespeare's texts, an even more damning proposition. Another damaging simplification is the idea that "Western theater verbalizes; East Asian theater visualizes" (175), as Antony Tatlow has claimed. Fortunately, some directors have broken through the stylistic rigidity and collaborate to combine *xiqu* and *huaju*.

Given that the twentieth century saw Shakespeare to some degree representing Western culture, Huang asks what has happened in the twenty-first century. Has the focus on national politics been replaced by an approach that casts aside the big-time Shakespeare in favor of a small-time perspective that both possesses fictional elements and projects and highlights a personal urgency? Huang answers in the affirmative and is delighted with this trend, also pointing to the relative creativity and freedom in productions that are inspired, but not limited, by Shakespeare's plays. He argues that Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore, which are immigrant societies undergoing identity crises, favor this "Who Am I?" approach (200). One example is the work of Stan Lai, who grew up in the United States (until age 12) and Taiwan and makes use of pastiche and hybridity in his plays. Lai's *Lear*, commissioned in Hong Kong in 2000, brings in Tibetan Buddhist themes that focus on cause and effect. Many other plays also bring in the personal to displace the national. Wu Hsing-kuo's *King Lear* (first performed in 2001), for example, problematizes Wu's strained relationship with his *jingju* master's rigid classical training, which guides the play's structure.

Chinese Shakespeares is a deeply researched book that brings together historical excavation with an intense desire to find theoretical interpretations that encourage us to schematize and understand the complexity of cultural exchange under modern conditions. Alexander Huang has done a masterly job in pulling together disparate strands, many of which are fleeting

in time (performances) and thus difficult to access. The book gives us an excellent picture of the various takes on Shakespeare, as well as inroads to understanding the complicated national, global, and personal meanings that are part of the Shakespeare phenomenon. My only complaint is that I would have liked to see him contextualize the personal turn of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries within a discussion of this trend in other cultural areas ranging from popular to elite. Such analysis may put the tendency of Stan Lai, Wu Hsing-kuo, and others who hope to look inward in a different light, and may point not to the marginalization and identity crises of Taiwan and Hong Kong but to a powerful Western discourse of self and mind.

I hope that Shakespeare scholars around the world will take a look at this book and consider the global affect of Shakespeare outside the West, but I am not optimistic that this will occur. To his credit, Alexander Huang has not shied away from the specific historical detail that makes his investigation so compelling but that, in combination with the specificity of names and place, most likely will send anyone not familiar with things Chinese running. Let's hope I am wrong.

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