

A NEW LITERARY  
HISTORY *of*  
MODERN CHINA

EDITED BY  
DAVID DER-WEI WANG



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"Thou art translated."

*Encountering Shakespeare's Plays in the Sinophone World*

On June 26, 2011, during a three-day visit to Britain, China's premier Wen Jiabao (1942–) visited the birthplace of William Shakespeare (1564–1616). The event drew much media attention. He alluded to his boyhood love of Shakespeare in his speech to British prime minister David Cameron (1966–). Wen's state visit was planned with the goal of projecting China's newly acquired soft power, but international economic relations and political capital were also at stake, as well as tourism revenue. British culture secretary Jeremy Hunt (1966–) was blunt: "I am hoping that a billion Chinese might see some pictures on their TV of their premier coming and visiting the birthplace of Shakespeare" and flock to Britain in droves. Art is political.

Numerous Chinese and Sinophone performances of Shakespeare have already been staged in Britain since the 1980s, and the Royal Shakespeare Company toured Loveday Ingram's *Merchant of Venice* to Beijing and Shanghai in 2002. The cultural capital of Shakespeare is evoked in tandem with Chinese modernity. As in other areas of the arts, the involvement of nation-states helped to reconfigure the relationships between Chinese, Sinophone, British, and global localities.

Along with a number of Japanese and Western canonical poets and writers, Shakespeare and his works have played a significant role in the development of Chinese and Sinophone cultures in mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. The encounters between "Shakespeare" as a cultural institution and the values represented by the icon of "China" have enriched Chinese-language traditions, as well as global Shakespearean performance history.

The transmission of Renaissance culture in China began with the arrival of the first Jesuit missionaries in 1582, followed by the Dominicans and Franciscans in the 1630s. Illustrated British travel narratives record the experience of British emissaries, including those attached to the mission of Lord George Macartney (1737–1806), attending theatrical productions in Tianjin and Beijing during the reign of the Qianlong Emperor (r. 1736–1795). One of the emissaries' diary entries briefly comments on

the similarity between an unnamed Chinese play and Shakespeare's *Richard III*. With the decline of the Qing empire in the nineteenth century, Chinese interest in Western modes of thinking and political systems intensified. Both Shakespeare and China were "translated"—to use the word to mean "transformed" or "metamorphosed," as Peter Quince does in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*—in the late nineteenth century, under the influence of clashing ideologies of modernization and the revalidation of traditional Chinese values. Shakespeare's name was first mentioned in passing in 1839 in a compendium of world cultures translated by Lin Zexu (1785–1850), a key figure in the first Opium War. By the time Chinese translations became available and substantive critical engagements with Shakespeare were initiated, there was already over half a century of reception history in which Shakespeare was frequently evoked to support or suppress specific agendas.

There are several recurrent themes in Chinese-language adaptations of Shakespeare. Chinese directors and translators have largely preferred to view Shakespeare's plays, in their original forms and settings, as works of art with universal appeal, rather than attempting to localize the characters, storyline, and setting for the domestic audience. This strategy has produced plays performed "straight," with visual and textual citations of what were perceived to be authoritative classical performances (such as Laurence Olivier's [1907–1989] versions). Early performances in Shanghai tended to follow this pattern, such as *Woman Lawyer*, the first Chinese-language performance of Shakespeare, adapted by Bao Tianxiao (1875–1973) from *The Merchant of Venice* and performed by students from Shanghai Eastern Girls' High School. If the play seems foreign, according to advocates of this approach, that only guarantees its aesthetics have been preserved in a way that benefits the audience.

A second strategy is to localize the plot and setting of a play, assimilate Shakespeare into local worldviews, and fold Shakespeare into local performance genres. An example is Huang Zuolin's (1906–1994) *The Story of Bloody Hands* (1986), a *kunqu* opera adaptation of *Macbeth*. The complex idioms of Chinese opera forms were increasingly seen by performers and their sponsors not as an obstacle but as an asset in creating international demand for traditional theater forms.

The third strategy involves pastiche, dramaturgical collage, and extensive, deconstructive rewritings. It sometimes changes the genre of a play

by accessing dormant themes that have been marginalized by centuries of Anglocentric criticism and performance traditions. The emergence of parody is a sign that Shakespeare's global afterlife has reached a new stage. The stories have become so familiar to the "cross-border" audiences that the plays can be used as a platform for artistic exploration of new genres. For instance, in writing a play of spoken drama (as post-1907 Western-influenced spoken drama theater is known within China) called *Shamuleite*, or *Shamlet* (1992), Lee Kuo-hsiu (1955–2013), one of the most innovative Taiwanese playwrights and directors to emerge in the 1980s, turned high tragedy, or what was known to Renaissance readers as "tragic history," into comic parody. He suggests in the program that *Shamlet* is a revenge comedy that "has nothing to do with *Hamlet* but something to do with Shakespeare."

This strategy has been used to counter stereotypical constructions of local and foreign cultures. It has also been used by artists seeking to build their brand for intercultural theater works in international markets: Wu Hsing-kuo (1953–), for example, inserts his own life story into his Buddhist-inflected solo Peking opera *Lear Is Here* (2000). Playing ten characters from Shakespeare's tragedy, Wu takes the play's themes of domestic conflict, construction of selves and others, and notions of duty to family and duty to the state and mingles them with his autobiography. One of the most powerful scenes is "Lear in the Storm." At center stage stands a dispirited King Lear, who has just taken off his Peking opera headdress and armor costume in full view of a packed audience. Following his powerful presentation of the scene of the mad Lear in the storm and on-stage costume change, the actor—now dressed as if he were backstage—interrogates himself and the eyeless headdress while touching his own eyes, a somber moment that evokes Gloucester's blinding and the undirected gaze of the viewer in a play about sight and truth. "Who am I?" Lear asks in Shakespeare's play, "Doth any here know me? This is not Lear. / Doth Lear walk thus? speak thus? Where are his eyes?" Here, the performer is self-conscious of the ways in which his own eyes become Lear's eyes. These two pairs of eyes represent the necessary split many performers experience on stage, a process of making null the performer's own identity so that he or she becomes the part being performed. Wu's adaptation of Shakespeare enriches our understanding of acting in traditional Chinese theater.

These three strategies coexist throughout the history of Chinese and Sinophone Shakespeares. As in almost all instances of transnational borrowing, a select, locally resonant group of "privileged" plays has held continuous sway in the Chinese-speaking world. *The Merchant of Venice* is the first Shakespearean play known to be staged, and it continues to fascinate Chinese audiences today. In the midst of the early twentieth-century "New Women's Movement," Portia ("the female lawyer") took center stage as a symbol of the debate about the admittance of women into the legal profession and higher education. The play has also been parodied on stage. A travesty by Francis Talfourd (1828–1862) entitled *Shylock; or, The Merchant of Venice Preserved* was staged in Hong Kong in 1867 for British expatriates. The Hong Kong Amateur Dramatic Club revived the production in 1871, as the mercantile-themed play proved relevant to the social milieu of a trade colony. In time, Mandarin-language performances began to dominate the stage, and today the play remains a staple of high school and college curricula and is often chosen for the graduation spoken drama productions of Chinese and Taiwanese universities.

In terms of performance style, Shakespeare has figured prominently in the shaping of contemporary Chinese theater, where the genres of traditional Chinese opera and performing arts (stylized theater, often including operatic elements, with more than 360 regional variations) and spoken drama coexist. The earliest documented Shakespeare in traditional Chinese opera, *Killing the Elder Brother and Snatching the Sister-in-Law*, was based on *Hamlet* and performed in Sichuan opera style. In 1925, the Custom Renewal Society (a progressive organization founded in 1912 to promote social reform through new *qinqiang* operas) staged *A Pound of Flesh* in the *qinqiang* opera style in Shaanxi Province in northern China. Although performances of Shakespeare in different genres of Chinese opera have existed since the early twentieth century, the 1980s were a turning point. Shakespeare became more regularly performed in different opera styles in China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and elsewhere, and entered the collective cultural memory of Chinese opera performers and audiences. The revived interest in Chinese-opera Shakespeare was encouraged by increased exchanges among performers based in mainland China and in the Chinese diaspora.

Beyond Chinese opera, Sinophone performances of Shakespeare frequently highlight linguistic differences. Languages serve as markers of

ethnic differences in *Yumei and Tianlai*, a bilingual Taiwanese-Mandarin *Romeo and Juliet* staged at the Shakespeare in Taipei festival in May 2003. The Montagues and the Capulets are each assigned a different language, complicating the experience of artists in the Chinese diaspora and the play's capacity to serve as a national allegory. Key scenes from *Romeo and Juliet* were staged in two plays-within-a-play in Ning Caishen's (1975–) *Romeo and Zhu Yingtai*, directed by He Nian (1980–) and produced by the Shanghai Dramatic Arts Center (May 2008), in which French, Japanese, English, and Mandarin Chinese were spoken. In what Ning called “a tragedy told in comic manners,” the star-crossed lovers traverse 1937 Shanghai and present-day New York in search of new personal and cultural identities.

The presence of Shakespeare at theater festivals in Taiwan in the 1980s and 1990s took a different form from mainland China's postrevolutionary Shakespeare boom, which was initiated by state-endorsed and government-sponsored Shakespeare festivals in 1986 and 1994. The month-long Shakespeare in Taipei festival in 2003, for instance, focused more on providing a platform for artistically innovative and commercially viable experimental works. As a multilingual society (Mandarin, Taiwanese, Hakka, and aboriginal languages), Taiwan has produced a significant number of mainstream performances entirely in a dialect, in a mixture of Mandarin and a local dialect, or in English. Some of these works reflect Taiwan's multiply determined history, while others question that history and the much-contested “Chineseness” of the island's identity. These tendencies provide interesting contrasts to the ways in which mainland Chinese artists imagine China. By the same token, while mainland China is certainly multilingual, it is Taiwan and Hong Kong that have established strong traditions of Shakespeare performances in one or more dialects. The linguistic diversity of Taiwan and Hong Kong theaters fosters distinctive views of “Shakespeare” and what counts as “Chinese.”

With strong dual traditions of English and Cantonese Shakespearean performances in spoken drama and Cantonese opera, Hong Kong theater reflects the tension between southern Chinese culture and the British legacy. After Hong Kong was ceded to Britain for 150 years in the 1842 Treaty of Tianjin, “Englishness” was given significant cultural weight throughout the social structure. Under the British government, theater was supported and encouraged as “a wholesome diversion from the tedium of military life.” English literature was established as a subject of study in

Hong Kong's school system, and in 1882 students began studying Shakespeare for exams, initiating a form of colonial "domination by consent." Shakespearean drama became part of the repertoire of the Hong Kong Amateur Dramatic Club, a theater society active in the 1860s and 1870s. Since the 1980s, as the "handover" of Hong Kong after 1997 became an increasingly pressing topic, a considerable amount of energy has been directed not toward the postcolonial question but toward Hong Kong's global status and its Chinese heritage, as evidenced by the productions of the Hong Kong Repertory Theatre (founded in 1977), the largest professional theater in Hong Kong, and performances by students of the Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts and other universities.

Despite the association of Shakespeare and Englishness, Shakespeare was not resisted as an image of colonization. Political changes have hardly affected him. Some contemporary Hong Kong scholars are surprised to find that "local experimentations with Shakespeare in post-modernist and Chinese styles have continued to flourish [in Hong Kong]." This continued prominence, they argue, shows that "Shakespeare has transcended his British heritage and become part of the Hong Kong Chinese tradition." While partly true, this view blurs the historical conditions surrounding early performances. One crucial reason why Shakespeare seems to transcend his British heritage is that Britain never colonized Hong Kong the way it did India. This special historical condition—an indirect colonial structure that Mao Zedong (1893–1976) later called "semicolonialism"—informed Hong Kong's performance culture in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. If the practitioners of the new theater were resisting anything, it was the Chinese past. The same is true of other treaty ports, such as Shanghai, that were home to a host of European concessions but had no overarching colonial institution.

The uses of Shakespeare's plays in spoken drama and Chinese opera are informed by a paradigm shift from seeking authenticity to foregrounding artistic subjectivity. Shakespearean themes and characterization have enriched, challenged, and changed Chinese-language theaters and genres. Chinese and Sinophone Shakespeares have become strangers at home.

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ALEXA HUANG

2012

Mo Yan wins the Nobel Prize in Literature.

“Length, density, and difficulty: these are the hallmarks of a novel, and it is in these qualities that the dignity of the great art form resides.”

### *Defending the Dignity of the Novel*

[Excerpted from the postscript to the Chinese edition of Mo Yan’s 2006 novel *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*]

When I say length, naturally I mean the literal length of the novel. If a novel is less than two hundred thousand characters long, it lacks the gravitas it ought to have. A novel that doesn’t reach that length is just like the character Tang Long from *Outlaws of the Marsh*. Although he too is brave and powerful, although he too is quick and fierce, in the end, because he is small of build, he could only have become king of the mountain fortress with great difficulty. Of course, I know that there are many short novels that are more powerful and are of greater value than certain overstuffed longer novels, and I know that there are many short novels that have already become classics, but even in those exquisite short works that are as beautiful as the surging waves and dramatic bends of the Yangtze River, there is something missing. A novel should be long; if it’s not long, how can it be a novel? To write a full-length novel is certainly not an easy task. We are accustomed to hearing calls to make long novels shorter, but I, on the other hand, want to issue the following call: novels ought to be longer.

If one insists on the importance of length for the novel, it’s very easy to find ready-made counterexamples of writers who did not write long novels: Lu Xun, Shen Congwen, Eileen Chang, Wang Zengqi, Chekhov, Borges. I of course do not deny that the above-mentioned are important,

Alexa HUANG teaches in East Asian languages and literatures, English, theater, and international affairs at George Washington University in Washington, DC, where she is founding codirector of the Digital Humanities Institute. She was former vice president of the Association for Asian Performance and specializes in Sinophone and Chinese intercultural film and theater.

Hsinya HUANG is professor of American and comparative literature and former dean of the College of Arts and Humanities, National Sun Yat-Sen University, Taiwan. She is the author or editor of books and articles on Native American and indigenous literatures, ecocriticism, and postcolonial and ethnic studies. Her research projects respectively investigate radiation ecologies in Native American and Pacific Islanders' literatures and Chinese railroad workers in North America.

Theodore HUTERS is emeritus professor of Chinese at University of California, Los Angeles, and editor of the translation journal *Renditions*. His work is focused on modern Chinese literature and literary history of the period between 1890 and 1925, as well as the intellectual background to that writing. He is working on the crisis of modernity in early twentieth-century China.

Wilt L. IDEMA taught Chinese literature at Leiden University and Harvard University. He specializes in the study of traditional vernacular literature (drama, fiction, and narrative ballads) and late imperial women's literature. His publications include *The Metamorphosis of "Tianxian pei": Local Opera under the Revolution (1949–1956)*.

Heather INWOOD is university lecturer in modern Chinese literature and culture and a fellow of Trinity Hall at the University of Cambridge. Her research focuses on interactions between contemporary Chinese literature, popular culture, and media. She is the author of *Verse Going Viral: China's New Media Scenes*.

Tsuyoshi ISHII researches Chinese modern intellectual history and philosophy at the University of Tokyo. His publications include *Dai Zhen and Chinese Modern Philosophy: From Philology to Philosophy* and *Philosophy of the Equalization of Things: Zhang Taiyan and the Experience of East Asia in Early Modern Chinese Thought*.

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