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Where Everyone is Hamlet: Staging Shakespeare as Political Resistance in China

Vikram Nijhawan on the Bard's Role in 20th Century China

By Vikram Nijhawan November 13, 2023

On January 7, a young Chinese filmmaker named Xin Shang was arrested for an act he had committed two months earlier, that his country's government had deemed "an endangerment to public safety". What exactly did he do? He recited the world's most famous love poem.

On November 27, 2022, at the height of widespread protests against the country's draconian COVID-19 lockdown policies, the 29-year-old Xin appeared at a protest in Beijing, joining dozens of other dissenters on the city's Liangma bridge. In front of police officers, he held out a white sheet of paper, the adopted symbol that had given the White Paper Revolution, a nationwide movement, its name. But Xin's sheet wasn't blank, as he made clear when he read an immortal line of English verse in Mandarin Chinese: "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?"

William Shakespeare's Sonnet 18 may appear an unusual choice for a revolutionary chant. James Shapiro, the esteemed American Shakespeare scholar, was similarly surprised; he described it to me as a "clean sonnet" with a clear positive message, compared to the occasional innuendo and potentially subversive hidden messages in the writer's other famous poems. But when Xin recited those lines of poetry, he partook, unknowingly or not, in a longstanding national tradition of using Shakespeare as a symbol of political resistance.

The Bard's words, in one form or another, have appeared at almost every major political turning point across China's turbulent 20th century. The famous English writer, known through translation as "Shashibiya", has played many roles for the country's leadership. Shakespeare's words have been both derided as a "weed-like" cultural import by Mao Zedong during the Cultural Revolution, but also appropriated as a charm offensive tool by Xi Jinping during his 2015 trip to England, where he cryptically quoted Antonio's line from *The Tempest* to the British Parliament: "What's past is prologue". As Murray Levith wrote in 2004, "To a large extent modern China has not met Shakespeare on his own terms, but rather has used him to forward a national political agenda."

But as Xin's sonnet recital demonstrates, the story of Shakespeare in modern China has been largely written by those on the margins of power. Eighty years before China's current leader quoted *The Tempest*, those same lines spoke deeply to a far humbler compatriot who read them: an English-educated writer named Zhu Shenghao. Beginning in 1935 with *The Tempest*, Zhu made it his life's calling to translate all of the plays from English into Chinese, and in doing so, wrote the most important "prologue" for his country's shared history with the Bard.

Zhu started this as the "rough winds" of change swept across his country. With the downfall of the Qin Dynasty and the end of a centuries-old tradition of rule, China was at a crossroads between tradition and modernity – grappling with emerging ideologies, cultural unrest, and geopolitical threats from a changing outside world. As the country searched for a new guiding light, Zhu found it in Shakespeare. Living in dire poverty, and under the shadow of Japan's wartime invasion, he couldn't even afford an oil lamp. But despite losing his translations twice in the struggle to evade danger, he persevered in his mission. Zhu died penniless at the age of thirty-two of tuberculosis, having translated thirty-one plays. As he wrote to his beloved wife about his patriotic mission to share the Bard's works: "I am very poor, but I have everything."

As different Shakespeare translations became popular throughout the country, performing his plays would become an act of defiance against the state. The beginning of Communist rule soon marked the end of Shakespeare productions in the country for over a decade. In 1964, nationwide plans to celebrate the Bard's 400th birthday coincided with the start of the Cultural Revolution and ensuing state censorship. Those who dared to stage Shakespeare plays, like Nanjing University professor Chen Jia, were publicly humiliated.
In 1977, only after Chairman Mao's death, did the country's national embargo on Shakespeare end. As China appeared to embrace modernization and progress under Deng Xiaoping's rule, the English Renaissance's most famous writer experienced his own national rebirth, with Shanghai hosting the country's first Shakespeare festival in 1986.

But when those hopes for progress collapsed during the government's bloody crackdown on Tiananmen Square, staging Shakespeare once again served as cultural resistance. In 1989, an upstart director named Lin Zhaohua staged a workshop performance of "Hamulaite", a postmodern adaptation in a small rehearsal room at the Beijing People's Art Theatre. His play's most notable feature was having three different actors portray Hamlet at various parts of the story, with all three jointly delivering his "To be or not to be" soliloquy. As the scholar Alexa Alice Joubin interprets in her 2021 book *Shakespeare and East Asia*, the production reflects a

distinctly post-Tiananmen perspective in China – a world of greater cultural uncertainty and pessimism about the prospect of change, “where everyone is Hamlet”.

Zhou Fenguso, a student at Tsinghua University in 1988, took this message to heart. Alongside like-minded classmates, he attempted to stage and star in a production of *Hamlet*, which was quelled by the school authorities. A year later, he led student protesters on Tiananmen Square. For his rebellion, Zhou became the fifth most-wanted man by the Communist government, and was eventually imprisoned. He emigrated to the United States in 1995, and for decades now, has continued his life-long Chinese human rights advocacy from abroad.

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In December of 2022, from his home in New York, Zhou came across the video clip of Xin Shang’s Sonnet 18 recital online.

“I was in tears when I first watched the video,” he told me. Zhou shared the clip on his sizable Twitter following, and with English captions provided, the footage gained mainstream attention.

A young local woman named Rachel (who has chosen to go by a pseudonym) came from a generation of Chinese youth who had never known the power of *vox populi* until the winter of 2022. As a student and activist, she had known Zhou Fengsuo for years. Rachel attended a memorial gathering that Zhou organized at Central Park on February 6, honoring the three-year death anniversary of Dr. Li Wenliang, the suppressed whistleblower and first victim of the COVID-19 virus. She had performed Shakespeare for most of her life, and at the event, honored the broader movement in the most impromptu yet appropriate way she knew how: by reciting Sonnet 18 in English.

“The basic nature of art is that it derives life from freedom,” Zhou told me, reflecting on the 400-year-old tribute to enduring love and beauty. “There’s an innate connection between freedom and beauty.”

Zhou has yet to meet Xin Shang. He provided Twitter updates on the young man’s status in China early in the year, and shared news of his eventual release from custody on February 11. Although separated by generational and geographic distance, both could relate to Hamlet’s lament in the middle of his play, when the prince recognizes an uncomfortable truth – that his homeland is a prison.