



Sinophone Adaptations of Shakespeare: An Anthology, 1987–2007

Alexa Alice Joubin, ed. Nonfiction. New York. Palgrave. 2022. 288 pages.
\$129.99 USD. ISBN 9783030929930

Yu Min Claire Chen

To cite this article: Yu Min Claire Chen (2024) Sinophone Adaptations of Shakespeare: An Anthology, 1987–2007, Chinese Literature and Thought Today, 55:1-2, 112-113, DOI: [10.1080/27683524.2024.2321119](https://doi.org/10.1080/27683524.2024.2321119)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/27683524.2024.2321119>



Published online: 24 May 2024.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)




Article views: 3



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



demonstrates a keen eagerness to delineate the literary style of science fiction literature as distinct from contemporary mainstream literature, highlighting its avant-garde nature tracing from the 1990s, which is commendable, it appears to sidestep certain nuances in history sometimes. For example, Liu Cixin pointed out that he was deeply influenced by *kepu xiaoshuo* 科普小说 (popular science fiction) of the 1980s. This acknowledgment prompts reflection on how different types of novels influence each other. In any case, the book offers a commendable overview of contemporary Chinese New Wave SF, exploring how its epistemological dimensions help us understand “reality.”

Wenxi Hu

The Chinese University of Hong Kong

Sinophone Adaptations of Shakespeare: An Anthology, 1987–2007. Alexa Alice Joubin, ed. Nonfiction. New York: Palgrave. 2022. 288 pages. \$129.99 USD. ISBN 9783030929930

Sinophone Adaptations of Shakespeare, edited and translated by Alexa Alice Joubin, is a significant contribution to the fields of Sinophone, performance, and Shakespeare studies. This groundbreaking collection sheds a new light on the complex connections and interactions between Shakespearean tragedy and Sinophone culture. The book covers English translations of seven Taiwanese and Mandarin Chinese scripts for theatrical adaptations of *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, and *King Lear* in several genres,

including spoken drama, Kunqu opera, avant-garde theatre, and Jingju Opera. These adaptations originate from various regions across China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. The book presents these plays in three sections. Each section “focuses on a pair of striking adaptations of one of the tragedies” in order to offer “readers the opportunity to compare different approaches” in contrasting Sinophone locations and genres (2-3), such as “post-socialist China and post-martial-law Taiwan” (10). The thought-provoking general introduction as well as introductions to each play highlight and make connections between such themes as political theatre, censorship, the power of parody, cultural appropriation, religion, feminism, and self-identity.


The anthology provides a comprehensive exploration of the difficulties in translating Shakespeare’s original texts into Classical Chinese, modern Mandarin, Cantonese, and Hokkienese. Joubin and her team of translators further demonstrate their vigor and creativity when they translate those Sinophone plays into modern English. In addition to Joubin herself who translated Wu Hsing-kuo’s *Lear Is Here*, other translators in this anthology include such leading scholars and translators as Christopher Rea, Steven Riep, Siyuan Liu, and Dongshin Chang. Joubin also makes a point of including diverse voices beyond North America by recruiting scholars and translators based in Taiwan.

There is a short introduction before each play, which contextualizes the play for English

readers and elucidates culturally specific allusions. Joubin’s general introduction and the short introductions (four of which are written by Joubin) examine the constraints and potentialities inherent in the act of translation. Furthermore, the English translation of the Sinophone texts allows readers to delve into the complexity of Sinophone performance cultures. The book as a whole broadens the readers’ understanding of Shakespeare’s works in global contexts.

The emphasis on the Sinophone world is one of the anthology’s defining characteristics. China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, despite their common culture and language, have undergone distinct historical, political, and social transformations. Consequently, their respective adaptations of the Western canon reflect the political and social issues that accompanied these transitions. Through the utilization of a thematic and intraregional approach, this book transcends the tendency of national profiling. It offers wide-ranging perspectives on the cross-cultural and intercultural dissemination of Shakespearean tragedy in terms of theme, language, literary mode, and performance style. The adaptations also dramatize the power dynamics within familial structures and between genders.

Joubin’s general introduction examines the contemporary Sinophone world’s turbulent history from 1987 to 2007, noting that the year 1987 is a pivotal year (“Deng Xiaoping’s socialist market economic reforms,” 3). The lucid introduction surveys the cultural significance of



the two decades that followed (Hong Kong had its first competitive Chief Executive election in 2007).

The first part of the book introduces us to the context and English translations of two distinct adaptations: *Hamlet* by Chinese director Lin Zhaohua (1990) and *Shamlet* by Taiwanese playwright Lee Kuo-hsiu (1992). Both adaptations, the former as political theatre and the latter as stage parody, engage with the concept of existentialism in the contexts of *Hamlet* in post-socialist China and postmartial-law Taiwan. They serve as microcosms of each society.

The second part of the book juxtaposes two adaptations of *Macbeth*, with a particular emphasis on feminism and the development of female characters. Macbeth, a military figure hailing from Scotland, places his trust in the ambiguous words of the witches which leads to his downfall. Huang Zuolin's *The Story of Bloody Hands* (1987/2008) adapts *Macbeth* in the Kunqu opera style to explore toxic masculinity in military culture. Lady Macbeth is one of the most compelling characters in Huang's adaptation. In contrast, Taiwanese playwright Lu Po Shen's *The Witches' Sonata* (2007) amplifies the roles of the witches through a hybrid avant-garde and musical performance production in Taiwanese language. Both performances effectively engage

the spectators via their innovative reinterpretations of the characters of the witches and Lady Macbeth.

The third part of the book provides an insightful analysis of power, self-identity, and familial relationships in *King Lear*. Lear, an elderly monarch and father of three daughters, becomes consumed by his ego and subsequently partitions his kingdom based on sycophantic praise. Both the Shanghai Jingju Theatre Company's production of *King Qi's Dream* (1995) and Taiwan Contemporary Legend Theatre's *Lear Is Here* (2001) reinterpret the tragedy within the context of Jingju, often known as Beijing opera. The two allegorical plays integrate Taoist and Buddhist philosophy in *Lear* and invite the audience to weigh Lear's societal duties as a ruler and a father.

Serving as a coda to the book is Liu Qing and Tao Jun's collaborative work entitled *To Be or Not to Be*. The spoken drama play was staged in Beijing, and draws from all three tragedies discussed so far in the book: *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, and *King Lear*. The postmodern pastiche intricately interlaces the quotes and fragmented narratives from the three plays as well as *Othello*. The characters Hamlet, Macbeth, Lear, and Othello break the fourth wall to converse with each other about the dilemmas they have faced in their universes, and when they are not speaking, they turn back

into statues in a frozen frame. This relatively obscure play, which would have otherwise been lost to history, provides a perfect conclusion to this rich book.

Most of the plays discussed in the book can be viewed in performance on the *MIT Global Shakespeares* open-access website, which is co-founded by Alexa Alice Joubin and Peter S. Donaldson. The digital performance archive even features multiple versions of some plays, notably Lee's *Shamlet*. Another innovative feature of the book is the table of contents, which is presented in a concise, more traditional manner, as well as in the "Expanded Table of Contents" that provide greater details about each play, including titles and playwrights' names in the Chinese script (xi-xii).

The Sinophone Adaptations of Shakespeare paves a new path for Sinophone studies by comparatively analyzing seven historic yet hitherto inaccessible plays. The book also remedies the marginalization of performance studies in Sinophone studies by showcasing the value of Sinophone theatre. Each of the book's chapters demonstrates the contributors' evident enthusiasm for the subject matter, their thorough and detailed investigation, and a profound comprehension of cultural nuances.

Yu Min Claire Chen
University of Maryland, College Park