

RESEARCH

Old Man Sha in the Middle Kingdom

How Shakespeare Changed Chinese Theater and Vice Versa

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Something's rotten in the state of Jiabo. The king has died mysteriously, his brother Kulo-ngam has inherited the throne and married the widowed queen, and Prince Lhamoklodan has gone off the deep end and is contemplating suicide. Sound familiar? William Shakespeare surely could never have envisioned this high-altitude Hamlet, set in the shadow of the Himalayas, with characters draped in snow leopard skins. Yet in 2006 the Bard's famous prince of Denmark found himself transported to ancient Tibet in Shanghai director Sherwood Hu's film and stage adaptations of Hamlet with a Buddhist twist.

Not to worry—"To be or not to be" turns out to be relevant in every language, says Alexa Alice Joubin, author of [*Chinese Shakespeares: Two Centuries of Cultural Exchange*](#) (Columbia University Press, 2009). Joubin, former associate professor of comparative literature at Penn State, makes a strong case for the cross-cultural malleability of Shakespeare's canonical works over centuries of performance history. Joubin's absorbing and detailed book challenges the traditional view that the world's pre-eminent dramatist and England's national poet belongs primarily to the English-speaking world. What's more, argues Joubin, Shakespeare has had a prominent role in shaping modern and contemporary Chinese theater—and China, Hong Kong and Taiwan have repaid the favor by bringing their own unique interpretations to the Bard's timeless tales.

"Shakespeare's work has long been traveling the world, even during his lifetime," explains Joubin. "Shortly after appearing on London stages, the plays migrated to foreign shores. English comedians toured Europe performing his works, and by 1607 Shakespeare plays were already sailing east." That September, "Hamlet" was performed on a makeshift stage aboard the Red Dragon, an East India Company ship anchored off Sierra Leone, with four local chiefs in attendance. The following year it was performed on the island of Socotra, now the Republic of Yemen. "From there, Shakespeare's name and works spread to other parts of Asia," notes Joubin.

Rising in the East

It took until the mid-nineteenth century for Shakespeare's plays to arrive at the trading ports of China—and it wasn't until the 1904 publication of Lin Shu's translation of Charles and Mary Lamb's *Tales from Shakespeare* that a wider Chinese audience became aware of the playwright. Interestingly, the author's reputation took hold well before his work. Explains Joubin, "In this case, we are looking at the reception history of a famous playwright without the plays. Very few people in China had read Shakespeare or seen the plays performed, and yet the name Shakespeare—or rather Shashibiya or Old Man Sha, as he was called in Mandarin—was on everybody's lips, especially the intellectuals and officials," and was used for varying purposes that ranged from social reform to conservative agendas.

Many Chinese first learned about the Bard of Avon from encyclopedias written by European missionaries promoting Western culture, and the playwright became an important icon to Chinese reformers advocating for development in their nation. Says Joubin, "Something fascinating happened there. Shakespeare had trans-historical appeal. The educated elite knew he was a Renaissance playwright but somehow he came to represent everything that was modern and progressive to them, and they saw in him a figure who cared for commoners and promoted the idea of democracy and human rights."

Each successive era in Chinese history has configured Shakespeare in its own image, Joubin emphasizes. From the 1920s through the '40s, China was concerned with women's rights, and that's one reason why "The Merchant of Venice" was popular then. "This play captured the Chinese imagination not because of the themes of religious tensions or the Jewish question, which were typically excised from the script," she explains, "but rather because of the appeal of the character of Portia, the beautiful young woman lawyer." During this era, China was beginning to open the doors of education (including the legal profession) to women, an important turning point in the country's history. "This movement informed Chinese readings of 'The Merchant of Venice'," Joubin says, adding that Chinese productions of the play are often called "The Woman Lawyer." A silent film with that title debuted in 1927.

Communist Block

When the Communists came to power in 1949, it became difficult—if not outright dangerous—for translators, intellectuals and theater artists to stage foreign plays, notes Joubin. "However, because Karl Marx cited Shakespeare frequently in his writings, for a period of time Shakespeare's plays were the only safe Western texts."

Shakespeare fell from favor during the Cultural Revolution, when he was branded a 'bourgeois counterrevolutionary' and almost entirely banned—along with other foreign works—for a decade. In this restrictive political climate, which lasted from 1966 to 1976, approved art was limited to propagandistic texts, posters and performances, such as the famous "little red book" of Quotations From Chairman Mao and eight "model dramas" with revolutionary themes.

Explains Joubin, the few Shakespeare plays that were performed during that era—mostly the comedies—were staged with "an emphasis on apolitical entertainment." Chinese actors performed plays such as *Much Ado About Nothing* with period costumes, wigs and prosthetic noses. "Usually artists want their work to feel relevant to audiences, but this was the opposite," she clarifies. "They denied the existence of any ideological meaning or relevance and thought they were on safer ground by sticking to bright and sunny comedies and a fetishized idea of historical authenticity."

However, says Joubin, quoting anthropologist Clifford Geertz, "The real is as imagined as the imaginary," and Shakespeare scholars have generally debunked notions of historical authenticity and purity. "We don't even know exactly how the Elizabethan English was pronounced," Joubin notes. Given the many unknowns, it can be argued that all productions of Shakespeare—whether in London or Laos—are culturally subjective works of imagination and interpretation.

Across Time and Space

With the fading of the Cultural Revolution and shift to the "open door policy" under Deng Xiaoping's leadership, the 1980s unleashed a prolific era of pent-up Shakespeare scholarship and performance in China. In 1983, Shakespeare Studies became the first Mainland journal dedicated to a non-Chinese writer. 1984 saw the birth of the Shakespeare Society of China, and the next year Chinese scholars were published for the first time in *The Shakespeare Quarterly*—a prestigious academic journal. In 1986, the renaissance culminated with the Shanghai Shakespeare Festival, thirteen days of twenty-four performances of sixteen Shakespeare plays, some of which were nationally televised. Only two of the productions were in English, one sign that Mainland scholars, theater professionals and audiences craved distinctly Chinese productions of Shakespeare.

One genre has emerged as perhaps the most adaptable to a unique Sino-Shakespearean aesthetic: "Jingju" or Beijing Opera, is a form of traditional Chinese theater, and combines music, vocal performance, dance, mime and acrobatics. Says Joubin, "Some of the most fascinating adaptations of Shakespeare have taken place in the rich realm of Chinese opera, which contains over 300 sub-genres, along with subtle role types and masks with beautiful colorful facial patterns." The Experimental Beijing Opera Troupe took their production of Othello on a successful national tour in the 1980s, and adaptations of this and other Shakespeare tragedies ("which fit Chinese opera better than his comedies," notes Joubin) have become modern classics in China.

Given the Bard's transformative Technicolor journey spanning centuries and cultures across the globe, can we safely conclude that Shakespeare is universal? "The notion of universality has often come under attack by literary critics," says Joubin, "because it's politically correct in our age to believe in the local rather than the global." However, she adds, "We have to understand the notion of universalism in a different way in an era of globalization. A sign of a great work is its openness that allows it to be read across time and space—and that's the most fascinating aspect of Shakespeare."

In the immortal words of Old Man Sha, "Shijie yi wutai." Or "All the world's a stage..."

Transforming the Bard

When American anthropologist Laura Bohannon lived among the Nigerian Tiv tribe in the 1950s, she brought along a copy of Hamlet. Sitting around a fire, she attempted to tell the tribal elders the tale, believing its archetypes and plot would hold together across cultures. As she recounts in her well-known 1961 essay, "[Shakespeare in the Bush](#)," the linguistic and cultural lenses through which the Tiv interpreted Shakespeare's tragedy brought a completely new meaning to the story. (Hint: Claudius acted honorably while Hamlet's was rude and bewitched into madness.) Bohannon's explanations left the tribe members puzzling over her blindness to the obvious truths in her own people's legend.

The same lesson about cultural relativity might be applied to the many and varied Shakespeare-inspired productions throughout Asia. These plays and movies are opening our eyes to new possibilities in the texts and are changing how we understand Shakespeare, notes Joubin.

Adds Joubin, "These interpretive and creative works serve as a forum for theater artists to deal with contemporary questions and are reshaping debates about the relation of East and West in the emerging landscape of global culture."

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