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Performing Commemoration: The Cultural Politics of Locating Tang Xianzu and Shakespeare

Introduction by Alexa Alice Joubin

Cultural memory is actively constructed through embodied and political performances. Tang Xianzu and William Shakespeare, two “national poets” of unequal global stature, have recently become vehicles for British and Chinese cultural diplomacy and exchange during their quatercentenary in 2016. The culture of commemoration is a key factor in Tang’s and Shakespeare’s positions within world theatre. Performances of commemoration take a wide range of approaches from grass-root events to government-sponsored festivals. With a comparative scope that explores the afterlives of the two dramatists, this cluster of essays examines commemorative practices, the dynamics of artistic fame, comparability of different dramatic traditions, and transformations of performance styles in socio-historical contexts.

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In commemorative performances, place is often more important than temporality.¹ Site-specific or site-inspired performances and activities cement the primary imagination of cultural figures in

commemoration. As opposed to the temporal setting (time period), the cultural setting of a production (the place of dramatic narrative), the geopolitical site of performance (its habitat, a theatre of special significance, a birthplace, etc.), and trajectories of the artists (where they are from, where they are going) are primary signifiers of commemorative value, for, after all, a cultural figure is considered “timeless” and relevant beyond their time period in the first place in order for them to be worthy of being remembered and monumentalized in collective cultural memory. Festivals and productions dedicated to commemorating cultural figures, therefore, emphasize the place of performance and its attendant significance, such as the birthplace of Shakespeare (inspiring site visits to the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust), the home country of Ibsen (justifying significant Norwegian governmental support for festivals), or the hometown of Tang Xianzu (inspiring site-specific productions and even replicas).

In some instances, places of origin are not only alluded to in a metaphorical sense but also being actively reconstructed. In 2018, the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust and Fuzhou Culture and Tourism Investment Company Ltd. entered into an agreement to allow recreation of Shakespeare’s Birthplace and the New Place (his adult home) in Tang’s hometown, Fuzhou in Jiangxi Province, China. The recreation will be situated in a 220-acre replica of parts of Stratford-upon-Avon itself, complete with Tudor architecture. Interestingly, the architecture of New Place itself, where Shakespeare resided until his death there in 1616, was demolished in 1702. Only a commemorative site and garden remains today in Stratford-upon-Avon. Its recreation in China brings a new layer to the traditionally rooted notion of place. The Chinese replicas are part of San Weng (Three Masters), a new tourist attraction celebrating Shakespeare, Cervantes, and Tang Xianzu, three writers who died in 1616. This marks the first instance where the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust, an independent charity, authorizes a recreation of its iconic buildings. Conversely, a replica of “Peony Pavilion” as depicted in Tang’s eponymous play will be built in Stratford-upon-Avon. Built in China, the six-meter high wooden pavilion will comprise of ten square meters. It was shipped to the UK to be assembled on site.

In international festivals, places of origin of a narrative or troupe is given the same level of attention in a similar fashion to how athletes in international sporting events become *de facto* flag carriers of their countries (often in a literal sense) in the arena where nation-states compete for efficacy of soft power. National flags featured prominently in the “Cultural Olympiad” during the 2012 London Olympics, sometimes against the will of the festival organizers. National flags were brought onstage while enthusiastic crowds of expatriates cheered on. A

12 × 4.5-inch image of a crowd waving flags of the Republic of South Sudan (est. 2011) adorns the Globe's Web page advertising the South Sudan Theatre Company's *Cymbeline* in Juba Arabic. At the curtain call of Dhaka Theatre's *Tempest* at the Globe on 8 May 2012, one of the actors wrapped himself in the Bangladeshi flag. The gesture connected an artistic achievement with national pride. The 2012 World Shakespeare Festival at the London Globe seemed to have sidelined individual artistic identities in favor of their nations of origin. We see promotions of, for example, a Bengali *Tempest*, rather than a *Tempest* directed by Nasir Uddin Yousuff; a Chinese *Richard III*, rather than a *jingju-huaju* hybrid production directed by Wang Xiaoying. By contrast, much more information is readily available for the Globe's own productions in English. The Globe's strategy of emphasizing the languages of the productions suggests that the main selling point is the perceived sites of origin of these works rather than the backstories of artists, for which festival audiences may not have patience.

In intercultural co-productions, place remains an important denominator but is fluid. An example is the physical theatre piece *Dreamer* (dir. Rich Rusk and Chris Evans, Gecko and the Shanghai Dramatic Arts Center) which moves its characters between the real world and dreamscape. Inspired by Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and Tang's *Peony Pavilion*, the piece is commissioned by the British Council for the 2016 Shakespeare Lives program to commemorate the four hundredth anniversary of Shakespeare's and Tang's death. One of the memorable features of this piece of physical and dance theatre is how place and space is constructed. The timid Helena (Yang Ziyi), a hybrid character drawn on one of the four young lovers in Shakespeare's comedy and the derogatory notion of "left-over women" in China (*shengnü*, women who remain unmarried in their late twenties and beyond), moves between her world of a dead-end job and her dream world where she encounters Du Liniang (Wu Jingwei), the heroine of Tang's tragedy. Like Du, Helena pines for someone to be found only in dreams. Helena pines for Demetrius (Lan Haimeng). While her dramatic point of origin is Shakespeare's early modern imagination of Greece, her embodiment is structured around the cultural milieu of contemporary Shanghai. The modulized, flexible set and industrial scaffolding help to create a sense of a floating, interstitial place. Fluid movements between places correlate to the identities of the collaborative production. The Essex-based Gecko provided choreography, theatrical conception, and music, while the nearly wordless sequences were performed by actors from the Shanghai Dramatic Arts Center. In one scene, Helena's bed dissolves seamlessly, having been taken apart swiftly by Oberon, Titania, and stagehands who remind us

of Shakespeare's fairies. In the blink of an eye, Helena emerges in a new place. Invisible trickster transport Helena back and forth between the two worlds, and in the process, she gradually breaks free of her overbearing parents and, by extension, breaks free of the constraints imposed upon her by a cultural position. The props are fluid as well. For example, a telephone receiver cable morphs into an umbilical cord. This umbilical cord connects different places, disparate dreams, and ultimately the different cultures.

Productions such as *Dreamer* point to a larger phenomenon. Tang Xianzu and William Shakespeare, two national poets of unequal global stature, have recently become vehicles for British and Chinese cultural diplomacy and exchange. On June 26, 2011, during a three-day visit to Britain, China's premier Wen Jiaobao visited the birthplace of Shakespeare. He alluded to his boyhood love of Shakespeare in his speech to British Prime Minister David Cameron. International economic relations and political capital were also at stake. British Culture Secretary Jeremy Hunt 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. During Chinese President Xi Jinping's 2015 state visit to Britain, he quoted *The Tempest*, "what's past is prologue" (2.1.253), to British Prime Minister David Cameron, and urged the two countries to "join hands and move forward" despite the antagonistic history between them including the Opium Wars. Commemorative activities of cultural figures are often organized with an eye toward political and economic returns, rather than simply celebration of aesthetics.

Governmental support is often key to intercultural collaboration. In 2014, the Royal Shakespeare Company announced a £1.5 million pound government-backed initiative to commission a new Mandarin translation of the *Complete Works*. It is a one-of-a-kind translation project funded by a foreign government. Meanwhile, the RSC is also planning to translate "Chinese classics" from 1564 to 1616 into English, and toured Gregory Doran's *Henry IV Parts 1 and II* and *Henry V* to China in 2016. Events in China have been arranged under the pretext of cross-cultural communication: the National Centre for the Performing Arts launched a festival entitled "Drama Legends and an East-West Dialogue: When Shakespeare Meets Tang Xianzu." In 2014, the same center hosted the "Salute to Shakespeare" series in Beijing, suggesting a new interest in site-specific commemorative events and a new Chinese "assertiveness." In Shanghai, the city's Drama Art Center staged the two playwrights' works entitled *Tang and Shakespeare: A 400-Year Dream of Plays*; while Guangzhou initiated the "Cultural Year of Tang Xianzu and Shakespeare." Leaders of both countries

consciously deploy the cachet of select cultural figures as their representatives on the world stage. From festival organizers' point of view, what makes Shakespeare commercially viable and politically attractive is not anything particularly Shakespearean but rather what the artists—on behalf of the nation-state—bring to the body of works.

One of the reasons why there is a flurry of commemorative activities is that 2014 marked the 450th anniversary of Shakespeare's birth, and 2016 marked the quatercentenary of the death of not only Shakespeare but also Tang Xianzu and Miguel de Cervantes. Among the most prominent strands of commemoration are activities linking Shakespeare and Tang. The rediscovery and marketing of national poets becomes culturally urgent and politically expedient. The exchange value of Tang and Shakespeare is reflected in uses of their works and motifs in appropriations, cultural diplomacy, and venues where nation states project soft power. In the post-imperial and post-colonial age, the rise of the modern nation depends all the more on soft power and cultural diplomacy. The opening and closing ceremonies of the Beijing and London Olympics in 2008 and 2012 are recent examples of how nation states construct and market national cultures to international communities.

This special cluster features essays that explore the organizing principles and unspoken assumptions about intercultural theatre as exemplified by the commemorating projects. Mary Mazzilli analyzes the reception of festivals in China and in the UK in the names of Tang and Shakespeare, and critiques the use of cultural universalism to commemorate the playwrights. Such jointly-sponsored festivities such as the Shakespeare-Tang Project in Leeds and Shakespeare Lives (British Council in China) do not promote cultural exchange on equal terms. Mazzilli questions the valence of a comparison between these two playwrights. Her case studies show that Chinese *huaju* theatre is undergoing a process of self-Orientalization despite the festival organizers' stated goal of promoting on equal terms the cultures of both China and Britain.

Does the fact that both playwrights died in the same year constitute a compelling intellectual reason for drawing other parallels between their careers and works as festival organizers did? This cluster of essays is not in pursuit of commonalities between Ming Chinese and early modern English dramatic cultures, but to further understand the organizing principles behind the commemorative activities examined by Mazzilli, we need to consider the valence of comparison. Letizia Fusini examines perceived connections and parallels between Tang's and Shakespeare's dramas. In the popular discourse, Tang's *Peony Pavilion* has often been considered the "Chinese *Romeo and Juliet*." Her essay delves into shared themes between Tang and Shakespeare, such as

the usage of dream and vision, and contrasting approaches to the comic mode. Works such as *The Peony Pavilion*, *A Dream of the Southern Bough*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and *The Tempest* are drawn upon to formulate a methodology for comparative drama that links Shakespeare's comic imagination and Tang's dramatic romances.

The phenomenon of mining Tang and Shakespeare for artistic synergy is hardly new. Shanghai Kunju Troupe (Shanghai Kunju Tuan, SKT), renowned for its widely toured 1986 *kunqu* adaptation of *Macbeth*, *Story of Bloody Hands*, has been at the forefront of artistic innovation. Shanghai itself, a cultural site of appropriation, has also curated new identities. Not surprisingly, the SKT played a key role in the quatercentenary celebrations for Shakespeare and Tang. Focusing squarely on how Shanghai Kunju Troupe rebrands *kunqu* through Tang Xianzu and Shakespeare, Liana Chen argues that performing Shakespeare and Tang is a vehicle for innovation for Shen Yili, Zhang Jun, Luo Chenxue, and their fellow actors at the SKT. *The Story of Bloody Hands* and Zhang's reinterpretation of Tang's *Four Dreams* reveal that these encounters led the artists to re-examine what was previously construed to be the quintessential quality of *kunqu*. This article on the transformations of *kunqu* provides a useful contrast to Mazzilli's argument about the state of *huaju* theatre today.

Questions raised by the three essays acknowledge that both Tang and Shakespeare have a special place within their national literary histories, but these questions also direct our attention to how their names are evoked in festival planners' coordinated efforts to construct dreams about literary universalism. These dreams are based on commodified commemoration. Commodified commemoration is a paradoxical genre, because these festivals serve the cultural legacy best when they innovate and in fact depart from perceived "essence" of Tang, Shakespeare, *kunqu*, or *huaju*.

As we examine the unspoken assumptions behind these dreams of universalism—belief that these playwrights are the spokesperson for their countries of origin and for the humanity, we find that the coincidental and coordinated effort to commemorate the playwrights and their cultures are a manifestation of current international consensus of economic and soft power of the UK and China.

NOTE

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