

Shakespeare
IN CHINA



Murray J. Levith

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MURRAY J. LEVITH

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And again, for Tina

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‘why do you dress me/ In borrowed robes?’ (*Macbeth* I, iii, 108–09)

‘I was quite sure that *Hamlet* had only one possible interpretation, and that one universally obvious.’ (Laura Bohannon, ‘Shakespeare in the Bush’)

‘Every nation, every race, has not only its own creative, but its own critical turn of mind; and is even more oblivious of the shortcomings and limitations of its critical habits than of those of its creative genius.’ (T.S. Eliot, ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’)

Preface

The globalization of literature is not a new phenomenon, but its pace has surely quickened with modern technological advances in transportation and communication. Cultural 'commodities' like Shakespeare are sometimes considered socioeconomic export products from an imperialist West bent on the explicit or implicit exploitation, depreciation, and/or assimilation of unique local cultures. On the other hand, various peoples – the Han Chinese, for instance – have happily interpreted, shaped, and adapted Shakespeare to their own needs and desires, appropriated and expropriated the Bard to serve their own particular ends. Shakespeare in the Chinas, as we shall see, is very much intertwined with Chinese politics, traditions, and societies.

Even today many People's Republic Shakespeare scholars, translators, and theatre people still begin with ideological assumptions and dated models, and tailor their analyses or productions to these assumptions and models. But now there is an important distinction to be made between older generation Shakespeareans, who remember campaigns against intellectuals and the Cultural Revolution and are understandably cautious, and the younger generation with a freer and more global viewpoint. The PRC is changing rapidly in many areas – even when it comes to Shakespeare. Chinese theatre festivals and international conferences, together with scholars and directors travelling abroad, have

brought foreign approaches and new ideas to recent Chinese Shakespeare activity. In addition, more and more young Chinese Shakespeareans study in the West or with foreign Shakespeare 'experts' at home, and have access to recent scholarship and accounts of productions via imported books, journals, and, of course, the Internet.

And Shakespeare is popular beyond the mainland. As might be expected, the Bard arrived in Hong Kong with the colonizers, at first for their own cultural security and then to edify the 'barbarians'. Shakespeare soon became part of the island's school curriculum. With Hong Kong now reunited with the mainland, the issue of Shakespeare involves Sino-cultural pride, and repressed, suppressed, and expressed anti-colonial sentiments. But increasingly Hong Kong theatre companies are staging Shakespeare with ever more professionalism, and mostly in Cantonese. In Taiwan, Shakespeareans exhibit a more general, global interest in the Bard, and are sometimes daring in their recent stage productions. Scholars and critics participate in the current international conversations, and theatre people feel free to use Shakespeare as a jumping-off point for exploring current social issues. In short, Chinese Shakespeare is various and interesting.

* * *

My curiosity about Shakespeare in the Chinas began when Skidmore College granted me a sabbatical leave for the academic year 1987–88, a year I spent with my family in Qufu (Confucius' 'home town'), Shandong Province. This curiosity was prompted by a graduate course I taught to two wonderful students, Yi Yong and Ju Yumei, at Qufu Teachers University. Some of my fondest memories of this time include discussing Shakespeare weekly over green tea, and walking to town in a light December snow to see Sergei Youtkevich's version of *Othello* at a local theatre – a 1955 Russian film of a seventeenth-century English play dubbed in Mandarin! (I was impressed that Shakespeare was showing at one of only two theatres in the small provincial town of Qufu, and to a full house.)

This book is aimed specifically at Shakespeareans interested in learning about the Bard's history and reception in China in the twentieth century. I envision mostly a Western readership, but I trust that even Chinese Shakespeare scholars and theatre people might learn new things from my study. Much of the previous scholarship I build on is not readily available in the West, and some has not been translated before. When appropriate I use previously published translations, including ones that I have had a hand in.

The task of rendering Chinese words and names has presented real challenges throughout. Most are spelled in standard *pinyin* or the Wade-Giles style of romanization, but some few are not. I kept the authors' names mostly as they appear in their publications (but not in Chinese characters), and use the *pinyin* system for words. I strove always for clarity.

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CHAPTER ONE

The Early History of Shakespeare in China

‘What light through yonder window breaks?’ (*Romeo and Juliet* II, ii, 1–2)

Confucius asks, at the beginning of *The Analects* [*Lun yu*], ‘Is it not a joy to have friends come from afar?’¹ And China has warmly welcomed her foreign friend Shakespeare for much of the twentieth century and into the new millennium. The playwright guest, however, born in the forty-third year of Emperor Jiajing’s Ming Dynasty reign, apparently knew little about the country that has recently adopted him enthusiastically. Shakespeare did know that China produced fine porcelain, the expensive and newly fashionable English import, as he notes in *Measure for Measure*: ‘they are not china dishes, but very good dishes’ (II, i, 94).² He is also aware of the fearsome Mongolian Emperor Kubla Khan, who ruled in the Yuan Dynasty. It was a monumental task, as Benedick affirms, to ‘fetch . . . a hair off the Great Cham’s beard’ (*Much Ado About*

¹ Trans. D.C. Lau, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1979: 59. Note that full bibliographic references are given at first mention; subsequent references appear in short title or abbreviated form in parentheses in the text.

² All Shakespeare quotations noted in the text are from *The Riverside Shakespeare*, 2nd edn, textual eds. G. Blakemore Evans and J.J.M. Tobin, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997.

Nothing, II, i, 268–69). The playwright seems to use ‘Cataian’ to mean ‘Chinese’ (the word derived from *Cathay* for ‘China’), employing it as a term of abuse, suggesting ‘rogue’, ‘scoundrel’, ‘cheater’, or ‘liar’ (see OED). This can be observed in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* when Page so labels Falstaff: ‘I will not believe such a Cataian, though the priest o’ th’ town commend him for a true man’ (II, i, 144–46). Sir Toby, too, in *Twelfth Night*, uses the word to describe Olivia in one of his explosive outbursts: ‘My lady’s a Cataian’ (II, iii, 75).³ But these very few references are all one finds concerning China or Chinese in Shakespeare’s work.

Shakespeare might have read about China in, for example, Montaigne’s *essais* ‘Of Coaches’ or ‘Of Experience’. In the former, the Frenchman acknowledges China as the inventor of artillery and printing a thousand years before the Europeans, and in the latter he writes, ‘In China the policy, arts and government of which kingdome, having neither knowledge or commerce with ours; exceed our examples in divers parts of excellency; and whose Histories teach me, how much more ample and divers the World is, than eyther we or our forefathers could ever enter into.’⁴ The playwright/poet may also have caught wind of Queen Elizabeth’s and King James’s several unsuccessful attempts to instigate trade with the Middle Kingdom. In any case, my subject is not Shakespeare’s knowledge of China or his view of the Chinese, but rather China’s knowledge of Shakespeare – specifically in this chapter, the early history of the Bard and the Dragon to late 1949, the year of the communist victory on the mainland. After a brief introductory section, I consider three main subjects: early translations, productions, and commentary.

³ The Oxford editors spell the word ‘Cathayan’ in their edition, and cite Gustav Ungerer’s contention that it does not refer to Chinese at all, but is rather Sir Toby’s slur for ‘Catharan’, the medieval Latin for *pure*. See *Twelfth Night*, eds Roger Warren and Stanley Wells, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994: 127, n.71.

⁴ *The Essayes of Montaigne*, trans. John Florio, New York: The Modern Library, 1900: 820, 969.

* * *

Shakespeare arrived in the Middle Kingdom long after the Tang Priest, Monkey, Friar Sand, and Piggy took their 'journey to the West', as narrated in the famous sixteenth-century Chinese epic of that name, to bring back to China the Buddhist sutras, those other sacred texts. The first discovered reference to Shakespeare is contained in a book of British history translated and published in 1856. Between 1877 and 1879 Guo Songtao (1818–91), the Qing minister in England, notes the Bard thrice in his diary. He includes mention of a Henry Irving *Hamlet* seen at London's Lyceum Theatre on January 18, 1879. With only a few other passing references to Shakespeare by educated Chinese and in books written, translated, or edited by Christian missionaries in China, the poet/playwright was virtually unknown to the Chinese before the turning of the twentieth century.

During this century past, China, to be sure, has fluctuated between xenophobic isolationism and openness to other cultures and ideas. The waning and fall of the Qing Dynasty and events leading up to the democratic revolution of 1911 brought with them calls by intellectuals for an end to traditional feudalistic ways and an engagement with Western art, thought, and science. In 1907 Lu Xun, considered by many the father of modern Chinese literature, mentions Shakespeare in passing, in three essays written when he was a student in Japan. In 'The History of Science' Lu insists, 'a society needs . . . not only Newton but also Shakespeare [because] a writer like Shakespeare can make people have a sound and perfect human nature [that is, become more human].'⁵ In 'On Cultural Bias', and using the crowd reactions to Antony's and Brutus' forum speeches as illustrations, he makes the Nietzschean point that the masses should never be trusted with the truth, and that world peace depends on political supermen (a position he was

⁵ Quoted in Zhang Xiaoyang, *Shakespeare in China: A Comparative Study of Two Traditions and Cultures*, Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1996: 101–02.

later to revise). Lastly, in 'On the Function of Poetry', Lu hopes 'for the emergence of a Shakespeare-like Chinese writer to give voice to China's national spirit'.⁶

Early Translations

In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Tom Snout and Peter Quince, shocked and frightened by Bottom's bizarre transformation, exclaim: 'O Bottom, thou art changed! . . . Bless thee, Bottom, bless thee! Thou art translated' (III, i, 114; 118–19). Shakespeare came to China similarly transmogrified and through the 'back door'. At the beginning, in 1903, he was introduced by way of Charles and Mary Lamb's *Tales From Shakespeare*. Ten of these children's stories were anonymously rendered into *wenyan wen*-style classical Chinese in a volume whose title translates *Strange Tales From Abroad* [*Xiewai qitan*]. The author's 'Preface' had this to say about Shakespeare:

He was a world-renowned actor, an accomplished poet, an extraordinarily popular playwright, and is considered a literary giant in England. His works have been translated into French, German, Russian, and Italian, and are read by almost everyone. Our own contemporary literati who specialize in writing verse and fiction have also joined the chorus in his praise *without even having had the opportunity to read his work* [italics mine!]. To remedy this unfortunate situation, I have undertaken this translation with the hope that it will add color and splendor to the world of fiction (quoted in Meng, *Survey*: 6).

The unnamed translator arranged the Lambs' *Tales* as traditional Chinese classical fiction (*zhanghui xiaoshuo*), in chapters with couplet head notes anticipating the plots. Thus, *The Two Gentlemen of*

⁶ Quoted in Meng Xianqiang, *A Historical Survey of Shakespeare in China*, trans. Mason Y.H. Wang and Murray J. Levith, Changchun: Shakespeare Research Centre of Northeast Normal University, 1996: 4.

Verona becomes 'Proteus Betrays His Good Friend For the Sake of Gratifying His Lust', *The Merchant of Venice* becomes 'Antonio Borrows Money by Agreeing to Have His Flesh Cut [If He Defaults]', 'Olivia Makes a Mistake in Love With the Twin Sister of Sebastian', 'Hamlet Takes Revenge by Slaying His Uncle', and so on. With the exception of *Hamlet* and two romances, all the translations were of comedies.⁷

One year later, a comprehensive version of *Tales From Shakespeare* appeared with the title *The Mystery Fiction of the English Poet*. This time the author acknowledged his work. Lin Shu (also known as Lin Qinnan), helped by Wei Chunshu (Wei Yi), rendered the play stories, again setting them down in classical Chinese.⁸ Incredibly, Lin didn't know English, and so Wei summarized the plots for him before he wrote them out. These so-called 'translations' happened accidentally according to Lin's account: 'When free one night, Mr. Wei picked up some Shakespeare by chance; I started scribbling away by the night lamp. Twenty days later we have a book of Shakespeare's poetic tales.'⁹ Just as did the anonymous author, Lin gave his narratives new titles – for example, *Fated Love* (*Zhuqing*) for *Romeo and Juliet*, *Flesh Bond* (*Rouquan*) for *The Merchant of Venice*, and *A Ghost's Summons* (*Guizhao*) for *Hamlet*. This practice of changing Shakespeare's traditional play titles subsequently became typical for many Chinese translators. Lin's 'Preface' praises Shakespeare's poetry, comparing it to the great Tang Dynasty poet Du Fu (712–70), but, as a good Confucian and perhaps to anticipate criticism for choosing Shakespeare to translate in the first place, he also castigates the playwright for his non-scientific 'superstition'.

⁷ The others were *The Comedy of Errors*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, *All's Well That Ends Well*, *Measure for Measure*, *Cymbeline*, and *The Winter's Tale*.

⁸ A noted scholar who taught at various prestigious universities, Lin Shu (1852–1924) rendered almost two hundred works of Western literature into classical Chinese.

⁹ Quoted in Faye Chunfang Fei, *Chinese Theories of Theatre and Performance from Confucius to the Present*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999: 115–16.

Lin writes of Shakespeare that 'he often conjures up images of gods, fairies, ghosts, and demons. If the Westerners are so civilized, then maybe these works mentioned should be banned and burned so as not to interfere with scientific knowledge' (quoted in Fei, *Theories*: 114–15).¹⁰ Strange sentiments for a translator! Lin rendered one of the Lambs' stories each day, and his versions are still regarded as excellent models of elegant Chinese prose. The Lambs, of course, included only twenty plays in their *Tales*, and none of the histories. After a few more years, however, Lin, this time with Chen Jialin, offered five other play stories, among them *Richard II*, and *Henry IV, Parts 1 and 2*. Lin also published the three parts of *Henry VI* in 1916, and *Henry V* was printed posthumously in 1924.¹¹ But even then China's encounter with Shakespeare's plots was still obviously incomplete.

It should be noted further that Lin's 'refinements' of the Lambs' already streamlined tales also included significant departures, as did some of the Lambs' stories, from Shakespeare's original plots. In Lin's *Hamlet*, for instance, the prince is married to Ophelia, blames himself for killing his father-in-law Polonius, composes the entire *Gonzago* play, etc. The tale also has a decided Confucian flavour, emphasizing the important relationships between king and subject, parent and child, brother and brother, and husband and wife.¹²

* * *

¹⁰ There was at this time a movement that advocated modern science as a way for 'backward' China to catch up with the West.

¹¹ Chang Chen-Hsien writes that after seeing Gounod's *Romeo and Juliet* in 1910 Lin also translated the balcony scene into a 'rhymed ballad' ('Shakespeare in China', *Shakespeare Survey* 6, ed. Allardyce Nicoll, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953: 114). The modern vernacular version of the Lambs' *Tales* was translated by Xiao Qian and published in 1956.

¹² For these observations, I am indebted to Ching-Hsi Perng's lecture, 'Chinese *Hamlets*: A Centenary Review', delivered September 2000, at De Monfort University, Leicester, UK.