

## Book Reviews

**Liu Yunyan and Zhu Anbo, *The Collective Misinterpretation of Shakespeare's Drama in Modern China* (Guangzhou: World Publishing Corporation, 2015. Pp. 140)**

Reviewed by *Xing Chen*\*

The new book by Liu Yunyan and Zhu Anbo is a welcome contribution to the study of Chinese translation of Shakespeare's plays. Striking a different path from the majority of Chinese writings on the subject, which tend to focus on *how* one should turn the Bard into accurate Chinese, Liu and Zhu concentrate on the *whys* and *wherefores*—why have the major translators of Shakespeare in China, though mostly working independently of one another, committed the same kind of “misinterpretations” of a number of Shakespearean lines?

Examining primarily the translated works of Shakespeare produced between 1919 and 1949, Liu and Zhu investigate the political and cultural forces that have shaped the translation of Shakespeare in China. Their thesis, reiterated in different forms throughout the book, is that through “collective misinterpretation,” which is usually a manifestation of traditional Chinese literary and ethical values in general and the *zeitgeist* of China between the 1919 May Fourth Movement and the founding of the People's Republic in 1949 in particular, the Chinese translators have created a subtly and uniquely “Chinesized” Shakespeare who has since become part of the country's literary tradition. Therefore, Liu and Zhu argue, by carefully examining the processes which forged this Chinese Shakespeare, one would gain a better insight into Chinese society, culture, and literature.

“Misinterpretation” in the context of Liu and Zhu's monograph refers not so much to any misunderstanding of Shakespeare's texts as to the “shifting of poetical emphasis” (Abstract, 1) in the translations which are otherwise faithful to the literal meaning of the English originals. It is roughly the same phenomenon in translation referred to by Voltaire as the process of “softening” (1). One typical example of a “misinterpretation” of this nature is the translation of Romeo's soliloquy in Act 2 Scene 2 of *Romeo and Juliet*, in particular the lines “But soft,

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what light through yonder window breaks? / It is the East, and Juliet is the sun” (2.2.2-3). In most Chinese translations, they are rendered into rhyming couplets, ending first with the Chinese word for “light,” *guang*, and then that for “the sun,” *yang*. As a result, while the rhythm of Shakespeare’s original iambic pentameter draws attention to “light” and “sun” as well as “yonder window” and “Juliet,” the force of the Chinese lines is concentrated in the rhyming *guang* and *yang*. Thus, “when Shakespeare’s Romeo is courting Juliet, our Chinese Romeo is really chasing after brightness and light” (19). Indeed, the words *guang* and *guang ming* (another Chinese word for “light”) recur so often in the translated versions—sometimes resulting in fairly bizarre combinations (69)—that they more or less become a leitmotif of the Chinese versions of the play.

According to Liu and Zhu, such reallocation or insertion of emphasis in the Chinese translation of Shakespeare perfectly illustrates some of the fundamental differences between Chinese and English literature and culture. The choice of adding end rhymes to Shakespeare’s original blank verse, for example, is a manifestation of the two cultures’ different take on what the basic elements of poetry should be. While poetry in English can happily suspend rhyme and rely solely on metre and line breaks to indicate its poetic status, in Chinese, which is a tonal rather than rhythmic language, poetry is primarily associated with end rhymes—“Without rhymes, there is no poetry,” as the old Chinese saying goes (20). As a result, when translating Shakespeare’s verses, the majority of translators have substituted end rhymes for line breaks and rhythm (20), thus introducing new nuances into the lines.

Liu and Zhu also point out that this impulse, even compulsion, on the part of the translators to add rhymes to make sure that Shakespeare would “sound like poetry” in Chinese illustrates the “heavy burden of Chinese reverence for poetry and the literati” (2). Unique to Chinese culture (and probably partly the consequence of the practices of its imperial examination system), the Chinese men of letters were often also at the heart of the Chinese political scene, making them the rule makers of Chinese society. Their elevated status means that the concept of “literature” as a serious reading experience has such a strong hold over the nation’s collective cultural consciousness that when it comes to translating Shakespeare, the majority of translators, either deliberately or unconsciously, have decided to turn the plays into texts for rigorous reading rather than lively entertainment. China’s tradition of drama and dramatic performance has always been dwarfed by its heritage of poetry and prose—and Shakespeare, England’s leading figure in the performance industry, was inevitably transformed into England’s leading man of letters in these Chinese translations.

Apart from reflecting the deep-rooted traditions of Chinese culture and literature, the Chinese translations of Shakespeare produced between 1919 and 1949 also bear the mark of the beliefs and ideas of their particular historical moment. 1919-1949 was a period in Chinese history in which the youth of the

nation struggled to cast off the shackles of feudalism and to embrace new concepts such as science, democracy, equality, and liberty. It is therefore unsurprising that the Chinese Romeo born of this period should thus demonstrate, albeit very subtly, more interest in the abstract idea of “light,” with all its connotations of truth, freedom, righteousness, and beauty, than in Juliet herself.

Other instances of “misinterpretation,” or “softening,” discussed in the book include the downplaying of slang and sexual language, the intensification of expressions reflecting hierarchy, the castration of the concept of “fate” (retaining the idea of its capriciousness but rejecting that of its inevitability), the quiet substitution of moral and ethical values for religious guidance, and, especially in the case of the histories, the reinforcement of the message of patriotism. These collective misinterpretations not only help to “express a distinctly Chinese interpretation of Shakespeare’s plays, thereby allowing its national spirit to have a voice in world literature” (84), but also in turn “enriches Chinese literature and culture” and should be looked on as “a great contribution to the forging of the modern Chinese mind” (84).

The idea of “forging the modern Chinese mind” was, as Liu and Zhu demonstrate in the last chapter of the book, part of the work ethic of the translators of Shakespeare in China. “Chinese men of letters have always believed in making a serious contribution to their country. From this grew the Chinese traditional theory of translation, which claims that translation may in fact be the means by which one’s nation could be saved” (85), the logic being that translating foreign works of science and the humanities would introduce new blood, so to speak, to the nation and its culture. Therefore, the translators of Shakespeare in the China of 1919-1949, as “active observers of society who were acutely sensitive to the winds of social change and trend of social development” (85), worked under the basic assumption that translation of foreign literature should ultimately offer society what it was in dire need of. The plays of Shakespeare, as the all-encompassing textbook of western humanism, were certainly what post-feudalistic China needed, as were the revolutionary ideas of the May Fourth Movement. Out of this combination—faithfulness to the richness of Shakespeare and faithfulness to the Chinese understanding of the purpose of translation, plus the irresistible forces of China’s cultural heritage—was thus born the Chinese Shakespeare that most of the nation have accepted and taken to.

Readers of Liu and Zhu’s monograph will learn a great deal, about Shakespeare, about China, about the turbulent period between 1919 and 1949 in the nation’s history, and about translation itself. It is perhaps of special significance to Chinese readers (after all, it *is* written in Chinese). For those who have only encountered Shakespeare in translation, it poses as a reminder that the Shakespeare they have known and loved is one who, though not entirely wrapped in Chinese trappings, has nevertheless donned quite a few Chinese trinkets; while

for those immersed in the study of foreign language and literature, it is a gentle nudge towards taking time to reflect on their own culture and history as well as identity and duty.

If there is one complaint that one might make about the book, it is that for a monograph with so ambitious a title as *The Collective Misinterpretation of Shakespeare's Drama in Modern China*, its selection of translated passages of Shakespeare for discussion is relatively narrow: only passages from *Romeo and Juliet* and *Hamlet* have received extensive analysis, with a few lines from *Macbeth* and *Othello* thrown in. The lucid style and invaluable insight of the book make its readers desire more from Liu and Zhu. Therefore, were a revised edition ever to be considered, one would love to see it with added materials for analysis, selected from the great range of all thirty-eight plays of Shakespeare and their Chinese counterparts.

#### WORKS CITED

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**Dai Jinhua and Sun Bai, *A Dialogue on the Film Adaptations of 'Hamlet'* (Shanghai: Shanghai People's Press, 2014, Pp. 254)**

Reviewed by *Tianhu Hao*\*

In *Shakespeare and the Book* (2001; Chinese edition, 2012; Hungarian edition, 2014) Professor David Kastan argues eloquently and elegantly for “the resiliency of the book itself as a technology and Shakespeare’s own extraordinary resiliency” (back cover). Likewise Shakespeare’s “extraordinary resiliency” is reassured in Dai Jinhua and Sun Bai’s learned and lively *Hamuleite de yingwu biannian* (*A Dialogue on the Film Adaptations of Hamlet*), the alternative title of which may be “*Hamlet and the Screen*.” Since the French silent film *Le Duel d’Hamlet* (dir. Clément Maurice, 1900), Shakespeare’s tragedy has undergone over a hundred film adaptations throughout the world. The variety of these film adaptations, which are symptomatic of the socio-political and cultural vicissitudes of the eventful past century, is succinctly demonstrated in celebrated film critic Professor Dai Jinhua and her student Dr. Sun Bai’s intellectual conversation, organized in eleven sections. *Hamlet* is alive in modern times essentially because of its extraordinary ability to survive the epochal changes in successive altered forms. Its flexibility and susceptibility to metamorphoses makes it a centerpiece of the English literary canon, or even the world literary canon.

The *Dialogue* makes a survey of the chronological development of the film adaptations of Shakespeare’s masterpiece since the early 20th century by concentrating on representative versions such as the twin peaks (75) of English director Laurence Olivier’s (1948) and Russian director Grigori Kozintsev’s (1964) cinematic works. The discussion is accompanied with a brief bibliography of further reading (242-252) and supplemented by a useful appendix of the major film versions of *Hamlet* (226-241). The book is richly illustrated with about 130 portraits, photos, posters, worksite pictures, and cinema stills—a lot of skulls and ghosts. The conversation is loaded with proper names, technical and critical jargons, and occasional in-text notes, but the dialogic form relieves and enlivens the weighty content. Overall the book is highly readable and quite attractive. The variety and diversity of the adaptations across time and space are adequately exhibited before the audience. In silent films Hamlet is a woman (36-39). Hamlet may be a selfish and reckless murderer, and Ophelia loves a driver in a Finnish production (*Hamlet Goes Business*, dir. Aki Kaurismäki, 1987). Rosencrantz and Guildenstern may be transformed from small potatoes into heroes (*Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, dir. Tom Stoppard, 1990). Hamlet may be a Tibetan prince and Ophelia is made to give birth to a son before her drowning in a Chinese

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adaptation (*Prince of the Himalayas*, dir. Sherwood Hu, 2006). This is a successful book of interesting and meaningful scholarship.

The *Dialogue* delves adeptly into the socio-cultural significance of the cinema productions of *Hamlet*. “*Hamlet* is not connected with politics, but it is also a masque of cultural politics,” as Dai aptly remarks (Preface, 3). The global film productions of *Hamlet* are concurrent with the globalization process and the construction of nation-states in modern times. The powerful capitalist logic, with the British Empire as the signifier, necessitates Shakespeare and *Hamlet* as the quintessential cultural sign of cosmopolitanism and modernity, from which the project of nation-state building cannot be escaped. Shakespeare becomes pivotal in the culture wars, from the two World Wars, through the cold war, to the post-cold war period. The ghost of Hamlet’s father haunts the world cinema, from Anglo-America and Europe to Russia, from India and Japan to China, from Australia to Africa and Latin America. Transcultural and translingual, *Hamlet* is a global phenomenon, a treasure contested internationally, a property appropriated universally. In the devastating aftermath of World War II Olivier reduces the political and historical elements of the tragedy to present a “dark fairy tale” of the modern individual (41). His skillful employment of the technique of counterpoint fully brings out Shakespeare’s black narrative of inner split (54-55). As a contrast, Kozintsev’s production foregrounds the socio-political aspects of the drama and achieves the aesthetic ideal of the sublime with the expressionistic epic-scale scenery. If Olivier’s *Hamlet* is a luxurious Freudian chamber play of individual psychology, then Kozintsev’s is a grand history play (91-92) and a political allegory (94). Kenneth Branagh’s full-length film *Hamlet* (1996) runs as long as 242 minutes and is described by both authors as dull and tiring (150-151). Not allowing their personal taste to interfere with their professionalism, nevertheless, they still pay tribute to the director with a lengthy discussion based upon Deleuze’s concepts of “fold” and “unfold” (151-167). Dai is very critical of Feng Xiaogang’s Chinese adaptation of *Hamlet*, *The Banquet* (2006), for its dehistoricizing, and thus hollow display of spectacular wonders following the negative example of Zhang Yimou’s *Hero* (2002). This and the other Chinese adaptation produced in the same year, Hu’s *Prince of the Himalayas*, are symptomatic of the cultural vacuum of today’s China—all that is solid melts into air—a fact that cannot be repressed by the lavish ritual aesthetics. The authors are familiar with the cinematic texts and the secondary sources, and they are also familiar with each other. The double familiarity ensures the success of the academic dialogue, which is frank and intense, controlled but not strained, full of pleasures of intellectual exchange. Dai’s structuralism and Sun’s post-structuralism (13) exquisitely complement each other.

In addition to the scholarly standard the authors, especially Dai, show a precious caliber of contemporary concern typical of a good humanities scholar. For one thing, Dai reveals the inherent cultural dilemma of 20<sup>th</sup>-century

international communism: as an alternative to modern capitalism, socialism has no precedent to rely on for its cultural construction; it has to resort to classical European culture (Renaissance to the 19<sup>th</sup> century) for help. For this purpose socialist countries including China and USSR disrupt the ongoing avant-garde modernism in literature and arts and internalize consciously the cultural values of the Western world. This cultural Westernization finally leads to Westernization in the realms of politics and economy (78-80). Dai accounts for the collapse of socialism after 1989 in this light. While the explanation might exaggerate the role of culture in the whole of state mechanism, it points to the extreme importance of culture to a nation-state. Dai's conclusion is derived from her lifelong observation and her constant care for the fate of her own country. For another, Dai critiques poignantly the media perspectival violence in the coverage of the Gulf War (1991), especially compared with that of the Viet Nam War (1961-1973). In the latter conscientious journalists such as Robert Capa exposed effectively the inhuman massacre of civilians by the American army with their furious but precise camera, for which they even sacrificed their lives (209). In the Gulf War, however, laser-guided bombs began to be equipped with portable minicams (202), and the pictures and videos produced thereby became the only source possible for the general public's knowledge of the war; the perspective of the mass-killing weapons usurped the place of the sympathetic journalist's eye. In the post-cold war period capitalism provides the only choice available for the global structure (208). Dai's moral and intellectual horizons reach to the evils of imperialism and the noble mission of world peace. The topic of Dai and Sun's dialogue is the history of film adaptations of *Hamlet*, but they show wider and deeper humanistic concerns. This is consistent with the spirit of Shakespeare and *Hamlet*.

At the end of the book Dai declares *Hamlet* to be "the allegory of the dilemma of the new century's world and culture" (222). Dai distinguishes herself from her student Sun, a representative of the new generation, with her characteristic "scholarly tension endowed by a strong sense of reality" (224). The new generation seems to be more detached and less involved. In the cooperation and conflict of the two generations the world moves forward. The only suggestion I have for the book is to document the sources by adding notes where the conversationalists are uncertain about where their citations come from (e.g. Sun, 83; Dai, 202). The improvisation of human memory is valuable in itself, but scholarly precision may be attained with inserted notes.

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**Li Yanmei, *A Comparative Study of Shakespeare's History Plays and Yuan History Plays* (Beijing: China Social Sciences Press, 2014, Pp. 220)**

Reviewed by *Xiaoling Wu*\*

It is always a pleasure to see literature as a charming mediator to approach the unknown or to recast the stereotype. Considering the inadequate scholarly attention to the comparison of Shakespearean plays and traditional Chinese plays, Li's *A Comparative Study of Shakespeare's History Plays and Yuan History Plays* (莎士比亚历史剧与元代历史剧比较研究) serves as a pioneering exploration into the generic common ground of these two kinds of culturally distinct dramas. This book keeps a record of historically crucial events and unique aesthetic particularities in history plays and is therefore worthy of sharing for the sake of cultural communication. The monograph is also valuable for its original attempt to examine the general literary features of history play as a genre, with plays of Shakespeare and the Yuan dynasty providing valid samples for the discussion. Thus it is a smart move to dissociate history play from Shakespeare's coinage and update our knowledge of plays of historical theme.

*A Comparative Study* presents a full extent of history plays of Shakespeare and the Yuan dynasty in China. The data for comparative discussion comes from 19 Shakespearean plays and 51 Yuan plays (11-15). Apart from the traditionally well-acknowledged 10 history plays as listed in the 1623 folio, *Julius Caesar*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Coriolanus*, *Timon of Athens*, *Macbeth*, *King Lear*, *Hamlet*, *Titus Andronicus*, and *Cymbeline* are also taken into account because of their historical source from chronicles. The same sampling standard is also applied to Yuan history plays, which include stories on the Three Kingdoms like *Guan Attends the Meeting Alone with a Single Sword* (关大王独赴单刀会), *The Zhao Orphan* (赵氏孤儿), *Autumn Nights for the Tang Emperor: Rain on the Parasol Trees* (唐明皇秋夜梧桐雨), etc. In content, the research covers the cause for history play's prevalence, the writing method and the style of history play, a thematic comparison of war plays, revenge plays, and love plays, the diachronic evolution of history play, and the tragic spirit of history play. In particular the thematic comparison is a point of importance in Li's argument, which presents various arguments with textual examples to highlight similar and different characteristics of these two groups of plays.

History plays offer a glimpse into the shared cultural values of the two nations. With the examples of 10 familiar history plays of Shakespeare and the Yuan history plays on the three kingdoms, Li demonstrates that both nations tend

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to emphasize legitimacy and hero worship in their dramatic works (88-95). Li notices that the legitimacy issue casts either justified confidence or gloomy anxiety for English kings' sovereignty. In the power struggle of the three kingdoms, legitimacy is also the fundamental reason for the favor won by the imperial descendant Liu Bei (刘备). Moreover, the vivid characterization of heroes in Shakespeare's plays suggests the idea of heroism in England, which is shaped as a man with the courage to shoulder the mission of leading the age forward. Li sees Prince Hal in *Henry IV* as more a hero in comparison with Hotspur. As for the Chinese concept of heroism, it is thought that courage must be combined with other virtues like wit, righteousness, and loyalty. For example, Liu Bei and Zhuge Liang (诸葛亮) are heroes, but Cao Cao (曹操) who is courageous without any kind heart should not be counted so.

What is more important, the book is remarkable for its revelation of differences in literary style and cultural awareness. Li finds that Shakespeare's history plays have inherited the epic narration in structure, content, and thought. The 10 chronical history plays of Shakespeare from *King John* to *Henry VIII* show a panoramic view of all estates in English society. In contrast, the Yuan counterpart does not emphasize historical progress as a whole but the fragments of history. The Yuan history plays are emotion- and aesthetics-oriented, as shown in the play *Autumn Nights for the Tang Emperor: Rain on the Parasol Trees*. The verbal delicacy of *Autumn Nights* fully conveys the exquisite sadness in the emperor's mourning for his lost concubine (84-87). The comparison of *Hamlet* and *The Zhao Orphan* is a case in point to illustrate the cultural nuances under the revenge theme (107-112). The story starting with family feud in *The Zhao Orphan* finally pinpoints the feudal moral values of good and evil, ending with an absolute resolution of the good people's survival. However, hesitation and questioning are esteemed in *Hamlet* to present a more complex struggle than traditional hatred. The recognition of humanity and life's significance is represented in the English tragedy. A similar theme of revenge carries divergent kinds of moral sense.

Li also seizes a good opportunity to examine the allowance for authorial fiction in history play. In her book, Li has repeatedly returned to the disputes on how much fictional invention based on historical record enhances acceptance. The flexibility of fiction of different history plays varies within three limits: historical fact, rhetorical process, and ideological distribution. From both groups of plays, Li detects details inconsistent with historical facts. For example, Arthur in the play *King John* is much younger than the historical one. According to Li, such an adaptation is conducive to a deliberate stress on the puppet image of Arthur (70). Examples can also be found in Yuan plays on the writer's amendments. In *Guan Attends the Meeting Alone with a Single Sword*, Guan Yu (关羽) is made a justified hero reproaching the general from the Kingdom of Wu, while historical records turn out to be the opposite (71-74). With the aid of choice examples, Li arrives at approval of the dramatic effects arising from the writer's artistic

processing of historical facts. Accordingly, her relatively tolerant definition of history play adds considerably to the current critical disputes.

Apart from the contributions through qualitative analysis on examples as mentioned above, this book is particularly recommended for its theoretical refining of history play as a genre. Li is sharp enough to capture the underlying tragic spirit of history play as the fundamental feature of evaluating the “realness” of history play (184-210). Two causal explanations are offered for the sense of tragic spirit: there is always a grave sense of national or familial crisis conveyed through history play by referring to its historical context; a sense of tragic sublime in the characterization of history play appeals to its dramatic theatricality. Li summarizes the tragic spirit as the meeting point of historical realness and dramatic realness, which is a vital factor for the artistic appreciation of the genre.

Although the study has touched upon worthy points in a field which is studied far from sufficiently, some shortcomings in the book should not be neglected, especially those major ones due to unreasonable design in structure. Two of the structural weaknesses are as follows.

First, the present distribution of chapters does not always conform to the aim of study as given in the Introduction. The current Chapter Three and Chapter Five are the actual execution of comparing texts from two groups of history plays in order to define the genre and its cultural attributes, whereas the other three chapters either on the discussion of history plays’ components or the diachronic evolution of history plays, do not effectively demonstrate how Sino-British history plays are similar or different as a genre. It would be more articulate if the discussion on history play’s definition can be presented in the Introduction prior to expositing the selection of 19 and 51 plays, especially considering the length of Chapter Two (only 9 pages) and its adherence to Chapter One in topical relevancy. As for Chapter Four, the one devoted to the evolution of history play, the common point seems less satisfactory that both groups of history play reflect epochal value. This argument is not plausible enough due to a premise that has been taken for granted, but the adaptation of a play is not the same text as Shakespeare’s or Yuan plays’ anymore. The supporting evidence deviates from the proper topic.

It is also regrettable that *A Comparative Study* has not thoroughly and impersonally carried out a project based on mutual illumination from a bilateral perspective. There is a portrait of Shakespeare but no any other figure on the cover of the book. The slight flaw happens to indicate the negligence in content of history play from a Chinese perspective. As mentioned in the book, partially but preciously, Chinese plays attach great importance to lyrical beauty (87). The difference in performing forms is largely neglected in this research. Li adopts the definition of history play very closely from Shakespeare’s source, whereas it should be treated with more care that this general concept of “history play” which the author scrutinizes is something more than Shakespeare’s history play. To examine Shakespeare’s history plays with Chinese criteria of drama, for

example, the singing-chanting-gesturing-fighting (唱, 念, 作, 打) standard, might shed some fascinating illuminating light.

To some extent, it is Li's expert performance in Shakespeare's history play study that dwarfs her achievement in the comparative study. This book is a derivation and extension on the basis of her doctoral dissertation on Shakespeare's history plays which has been brought out as a coherent monograph (*A Study of Shakespeare's History Plays* 莎士比亚历史剧研究, 2009), a convincing proof for her professional training in Shakespeare studies. Thus we have reason to expect an equally impressive comparative study. The present one is good, but not satisfactory enough.