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Shakespeare in Chinese Cinema

Abstract: Shakespeare's plays were first adapted in the Chinese cinema in the era of silent motion pictures, such as *A Woman Lawyer* (from *The Merchant of Venice*, 1927), and *A Spray of Plum Blossoms* (from *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, 1931). The most recent Chinese adaptations/spinoffs include two 2006 films based on *Hamlet*. After a brief review of Shakespeare's history in the Chinese cinema, this study compares the two Chinese *Hamlets* released in 2006—Feng Xiaogang's *Banquet* and Hu Xuehua's *Prince of the Himalayas* to illustrate how Chinese filmmakers approach Shakespeare. Both re-invent Shakespeare's Hamlet story and transfer it to a specific time, culture and landscape. The story of *The Banquet* takes place in a warring state in China of the 10th century while *The Prince* is set in pre-Buddhist Tibet. The former as a blockbuster movie in China has gained a financial success albeit being criticised for its commercial aesthetics. The latter, on the other hand, has raised attention amongst academics and critics and won several prizes though not as successful on the movie market. This study examines how the two Chinese *Hamlet* movies treat Shakespeare's story in using different filmic strategies of story, character, picture, music and style.

Keywords: Shakespeare, adaptation, film, *Hamlet*, Chinese cinema

In the many books¹ published in English that chronicle the century's history of Shakespeare on film, there is no entry on Chinese movies. The few introductory mentions, if any, are no more passing notes. As a result, the world is left to wonder if Chinese filmmakers have been silent about the Bard in the several waves of filmic adaptation of Shakespeare from the theater to the cinema,

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¹ These may be from the earliest Robert Hamilton Ball's *Shakespeare on Silent Film* (1968) and Jack Jorgen's *Shakespeare on film* (1971) and to the most recent companions or anthologies published by Cambridge University Press and other prestigious publishers and dedicated to Shakespeare on screen.

from the silent era to the sound era, from black-white to colored pictures, from the big screen to the small screen. Perhaps certain protocols or simply the language barrier is in the way of scholarly inclusion of Chinese adaptations of Shakespeare's plays, as they are little known outside China.

For sure, Chinese filmmakers' participation in re-imagining Shakespeare's works has not been heard of so glamorously until recently when Feng Xiaogang and Hu Xuehua launched their films of Shakespearean interest in 2006. However, Shakespeare's plays were adapted in the Chinese cinema even in the era of silent motion pictures, such as *A Woman Lawyer* (from *The Merchant of Venice*, 1927), and *A Spray of Plum Blossoms* (from *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, 1931). Both were made in pre-war Shanghai and are almost completely forgotten today. More recent examples include *One Time to Love* (2005) that is loosely connected to Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. To illustrate how Chinese filmmakers approach Shakespeare, this study focuses on the two *Hamlets* released in 2006—Feng Xiaogang's *Banquet* and Hu Xuehua's *Prince of the Himalayas* after a look into the history of Shakespeare adaptation in the Chinese cinema.

Toward a History of Shakespeare on Chinese Screen

Shakespeare has become a reliable source for Chinese filmmaking since the inception of the Chinese film industry. In the first couple of decades of the 20th century, when film was just introduced into China, what Chinese cinema goers would see were almost all Western faces, and almost all stories were told in foreign languages. The Chinese faces, occasionally appearing in a few frames in the early European and American films, were usually coarse, ugly and apathetic, and hardly ever did they look educated and civilized as Qin Xiqing observes. So far, China did not have its own film industry, but that was to change soon.

Chinese film adaptation can be traced back to 1913 when Alexandre Dumas' *La Dame aux Camelias* was used for a silent movie. The method of adapting domestic and foreign literature developed rapidly during the New Cultural Movement in the 1920s.² Not surprisingly, cosmopolitan Shanghai was in the front of the Chinese movie industry. Before China built up an infrastructure for the newly invented media, the earliest films were imported productions. But soon, China developed its own movie industry and movie market in a momentum as driven by national pride, cultural identity and an increasing demand for domestic media. As with early films in the West, Chinese filmmakers drew on literature for plots.

² This Enlightenment Movement was marked by the magazine *New Youth* published in 1915. It promoted democracy, science, new morals and modern Chinese instead of feudal autocracy, superstition, old morals and classical Chinese.

Shakespeare was one of the most welcomed Western authors. After the revolution of 1911, his humanistic plays were regarded as a weapon against imperialism and feudalism. Theatre artists and early filmmakers engaged in a double mission: to both develop the domestic cultural industry and change the backward society. In this context, Shakespeare's stories, albeit in slanted translation, were first adapted in Chinese films. The earliest record of such films is *A Woman Lawyer*, a 1927 silent film based on *The Merchant of Venice*. The film does not focus on love, religion and friendship as many Western interpretations do, nor on the conflict about *A Pound of Flesh*, which was the Chinese title of the literary version. Instead, it concentrates on Bao Qixia (Portia) and the trial scene, dramatically emphasizing the charming and intelligent female perspective throughout the story.

The adaptation of *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* into the film *A Spray of Plum Blossoms* from 1931 shows similar preferences. On the Chinese screen, the two gentlemen became "silent knights" (Huang 118), while the two ladies emerged as the leading characters. Especially Shi Luohua (Silvia) who was portrayed as a commanding general - a martial heroine, opposed to the traditional image of a virtuous wife and good mother. Qiu Qixiang and Pu Wancang, directors of the films, attempted to create new role models for Chinese women. "The cultural figure of the new woman is an integral part of the contested modern nation project, embodying an urban subjectivity in its new social image," as put by Huang, and the "new woman in the film and drama of the 1930s represents the fear, promise, and perils of Chinese modernization and nation-building" (114). Apart from the new conception of the women's role, both films still belong to the genre of "old citizen film" (Yuan 53). With its mixture of folklore, secularity, moral, common people and entertainment, it was very popular at that time. Undoubtedly, these features were direct results of the increasing commercialization.

Unfortunately, the development of the emerging Chinese film industry was interrupted by the Japanese invasion during the Second World War. Even then, there were a couple of film adaptations of Shakespeare in the Chinese cinema. In the 1940s, two more Shakespeare films were produced: *Cong Xin Cuo Yu*, based on *The Comedy of Errors*, by Zhao Shu-qin in Hong Kong, and *Da Fu Zhi Jia*, adapted from *King Lear* by Tu Guang-qi, who moved from Shanghai to Hong Kong (Wolte 24-29).

The absence of Shakespeare from Chinese view was prolonged for political reasons upon the founding of the People's Republic of China. Shakespeare was not seen on screen in mainland China until the early 1980s when the country started to open up again. However, Chinese filmmaking did not touch the Bard while Chinese studies of Shakespeare began to catch up with their equivalents elsewhere in the world. During the "Shakespeare Fever" in the 1980s, his plays were studied by Shakespeare scholars and their students, and

were frequently produced on the stage. On the other hand, the few Shakespeare movies shown in the Chinese cinema since the 1980s are Russian, British, or American productions. For the Chinese movie industry, it took a little longer to begin to do Shakespeare, who remained absent from the Chinese movies except in a few filmic allusions or references to his name, his works, and other filmic adaptations of his plays. One of the few examples is *One Time to Love*, which includes Shakespeare-related scenes where the protagonists are reading Shakespeare in Chinese translation, quoting Shakespeare in their reflection on their own life, and watching a Shakespeare movie, identifiably, Franco Zeffirelli's 1968 *Romeo and Juliet*. The fate of the Chinese Romeo and Juliet is determined by the hatred of their families during the so-called Cultural Revolution. Contrary to expectations, this version has a happy ending – the lovers eventually marry.³

Now Chinese film artists seem to be ready to embrace the Bard with conditions that are right for large-scale adaptations on screen. The market economy, the increasingly urbanized population, the consuming society, the political liberalization and the globalization have set the stage for such films. Moreover, adaptation means that a famous cultural brand, such as a classic work of literature, can help to promote the product. It refers to an imprinted memory of cultural symbols in the public mind and facilitates communication and advertisement of the subject.

Localizing the Bard's Universality: Comparison of two *Hamlet* Films

In the history of Shakespeare adaptations on film, there have been many *Hamlet* versions, such as the British *Hamlet* by Laurence Olivier in 1948, the Russian *Hamlet* by Grigori Kozintsev in 1964, the British-Italian *Hamlet* by Franco Zeffirelli in 1990, the British *Hamlet* by Kenneth Branagh in 1996 and the American *Hamlet* by Michael Almereyda in 2000. At first glance, it might seem that China also came up with a *Hamlet* movie as early as 1948. During the short period of recovery after the war, a studio in Shanghai released a black-and-white film called *Frailty, Thy Name Is Woman*. It is tempting to claim it as China's first *Hamlet* on screen. Nonetheless, apart from its title, it shows little connection with Shakespeare's monumental drama. It tells the story of a woman who marries twice and struggles for independence. Furthermore, it falls into the "new model woman" category and is rather an adaptation of Gertrude than of Hamlet.

The focus of this study is on the two *Hamlet* films, *The Banquet* and *Prince of the Himalayas*. Both re-invent the story and transfer it to a specific time, culture and landscape. *The Banquet* is a blockbuster movie in China, but

³ See discussions about these cross-cultural references in Yang, 87-110 and Burt, 49-86.

has received widespread criticism for its commercial aesthetics. *Prince of the Himalayas*, on the other hand, has raised attention amongst academics and critics and won several prizes at festivals in Morocco, Italy and the U.S. It has even been nominated for the Golden Globe, but was not so successful in the cinemas. Both films were based on *Hamlet*, but they are totally different in story, character, picture, music and style.

1. Story

To seek revenge or to forgive – that is the question. *The Banquet* represents a typical Chinese courtly struggle tragedy. It is set in a post-Tang kingdom in 907 AD, when a prosperous period was followed by turmoil. Prince Wu Luan (Hamlet) and Wan were lovers from their childhood. But when Little Wan grew up, her lover's father, the old emperor, married her. Later on, the new emperor Li (Claudius), who has murdered his elder brother, marries her (Empress Wan, now equivalent of Gertrude). While Empress Wan is getting physical satisfaction from her new husband, she still loves the prince and protects him from the new emperor - his uncle, who wants to kill him. Eventually, Li finds a way to get rid of his potential rival for power and love. Believing that the prince is dead, he holds a big banquet to celebrate what he thinks is his ultimate triumph.

But it will end in a catastrophe. Empress Wan intends to poison the emperor with a glass of wine and then to seize the throne. But instead, Qing Nü (Ophelia), who has loved the prince in her mind all along, drinks the wine by accident. Only then the prince uncovers himself – his life has been saved by general Yin Sun (Laertes), Qing Nü's brother. Realizing that the empress has never loved him, the emperor kills himself by drinking the poisonous wine on purpose. Then, Prince Wu Luan dies after touching the poisoned sword, again by accident. Finally, Empress Wan becomes the ruler, but soon after that, she is stabbed by an unknown dagger-man.

Prince of the Himalayas tells an ancient tribal tragedy which takes place in the western highlands of today's Tibet. Actually, the beautiful queen (Gertrude) and Kulo-ngam (Claudius), the king's younger brother, have loved each other for a long time. But the king takes her away from his brother and marries her. When he finds out that his wife is still thinking of her lover and that Prince Lhamoklodam (Hamlet) is not his son, but Kulo-ngam's, the king conspires to kill both of them. To save the lives of the queen and the prince, Kulo-ngam kills the king. After that, he becomes the new king and marries the queen.

The funeral and the wedding are held at the same time. Kulo-ngam becomes the new king of the Jiabo tribe in the remote and majestic highlands. He is the equivalent of Claudius, but quite different from any other version of

Hamlet. He has killed the king not for the throne, but to protect his lover and his son. His consciousness makes him suffer a lot from the murder of his brother and the secret about his son. As a thoughtful and responsible man, Kulo-ngam remains silent and endures all the sufferings by himself. He is a good husband and father, and not a bad king. That so many kind people have to pay the prices for their love is the real tragedy.

Parallel to that, Prince Lhamoklodam transforms into the Himalayan Hamlet. The ghost of the dead king asks him to take revenge, while a wolf-woman (a positive character, invented for the film) asks him to forgive. After knowing the whole secret, Lhamoklodam neither obeys the ghost nor the wolf-woman. He would rather die than suffer in this world. Finally he is killed by a poisoned sword in the duel, but for the first and also the last time, he calls Kulo-ngam “my father” at the end. The queen drinks the poisoned wine and dies as well. After saying “Let us be reunited in heaven!” Kulo-ngam eventually kills himself with his sword.

2. Character

Both films reinvent Shakespeare’s story in a unique way. They put the emphasis on the tragic love affairs. Although the relationships between the protagonists are different from Shakespeare’s play, both stories end in a catastrophe, and most of the leading characters eventually die.

In *The Banquet*, the empress becomes a leading character, played by Zhang Ziyi, a Chinese movie star. She has a close relationship with three men. The first one, who imposed the marriage on her and is much older than her. She is not happy although she is made the empress. The second one, with whom she has to marry because of fear and self-protection, is a murderer, but loves her deeply and even dies to fulfil her wishes. The third one, whom she really loves and wants to marry and support, is a prince and then becomes her “son.” Empress Wan is an ambitious woman with a strong will, experiencing constant conflicts between love and power. At last, she is disappointed in her lover and brave enough to challenge her destiny, but is destroyed by her desires.

On the contrary, Prince Wu Luan is never interested in power and even sick of it. Instead, he wants to become a great artist, a singer and dancer. In order to eschew the cruel and ugly reality, he becomes obsessed with classical Chinese music and dance. He loves Little Wan more than the empress Wan because their personalities and life values become more and more different. Here are a few lines of their dialogue as an example:

Empress Wan: *Why do you wear a mask when you perform?*

Prince Wu Luan: *It transports an actor to the highest state of his art. Without a mask, happiness, anger, sorrow and joy are simply written on*

his face, but with a mask, a great artist can convey to the audience the most complex and hidden emotions.

Empress Wan: *In that case, what do you see in my simple face?*

Prince Wu Luan: *Six parts arrogance, three parts disquiet and one part guilt towards your late husband.*

Empress Wan: *You are wrong. It is disappointment ... disappointment in you. I no longer look to you to fulfil my dreams ... You are incapable of even the most basic play-acting. Your sorrow, anger, bitterness and uncertainty are there for all to see ... You think hiding behind a mask can elevate your art. The highest level is to use your own face and turn it into a mask.*

(T.C. 00:52:18)

The empress knows how to survive deceitfully in the courtly struggle. While Wu Luan, an introverted artist with a pessimistic and melancholic character, is unfit for the network of intrigues that rules the court. And he is too weak to take revenge, even suspicious of it. When dying in his lover's arms, his last words are: "How good it is to die!"

In *Prince of the Himalayas*, there are actually two princes. The first one, Lhamoklodam, is the son of the queen and her lover, the Tibetan Claudius. His question is not "to be or not to be," but to seek revenge or to forgive. He is brave enough to take action. However, the man he wants to kill turns out to be his real father. At last, he yearns to die and departs for heaven with strong religious belief, while Prince Wu Luan in *The Banquet* longs for death because of his nihilism. - The second prince in the Tibetan film is the son of Lhamoklodam and his lover Odsaluyang (Ophelia), who gives birth in the river and then dies. The wolf-woman saves the baby. In the last moments of Lhamoklodam's life, the boy is put in his arms – the new Prince of the Himalayas.

3. Picture

As far as the aesthetics is concerned, both films appear very stylish. *The Banquet* is dominated by three colours: red, black and white, with red symbolising the empress's desires; black representing emperor Li's evil character; and white standing for the prince's innocence and purity. Occasionally, a little dark green signifies life and love, which expresses Qing Nü's good wishes. For instance, the last shot of the film shows the green leaves on the surface of water in a vase, and then the dagger with the blood of the empress is thrown into it.

The images of the palace enclosed with high and heavy walls and the ceremonies held in it show the worship of the royal power. The cameras quite often shoot from a bird's eye view so that the people in the palace seem to live in

a deep and cold well, though the decoration is elegant and luxurious. All this gives us an impressive example of ancient Chinese civilisation. The light effect is usually sombre and gloomy, evoking a rather depressing mood and creating a romantic, but tragic atmosphere.

Prince of the Himalayas takes us to an even more exotic environment. Instead of the state of Denmark, something is wrong in the kingdom of Jiabo. We plunge into an archaic world, brought to life by Tibetan professional and non-professional actors in their own costume and language. Most of the film takes place outside with strong light, bright colours, wide views and angles. While Feng Xiaogang identifies China with ancient civilisation, Hu Xuehua identifies Tibet with glorious nature. We witness not only its beautiful sceneries like high mountains with snow and crystal-clear lakes, but also its traditional rituals such as like sky, fire and water burials. People seem to live there in harmony with nature. In such a pure environment, noble thoughts can thrive.

4. Music

Music plays an important role in both films. Tan Dun, a world-class musician, is the composer of *The Banquet*. The prince in the film is himself both a dancer and a singer. He is especially favouring a rather sad and sentimental Yue Ren Song, based on a love legend from ancient times. So does his lover, who expresses her feelings by singing the same song:

What blessed night is this?
 Drifting down the River Qian.
 What auspicious day is this?
 Dreaming beside my Prince.
 Too bashful to stare,
 A secret I can't share.
 My heart fills with longing
 To know you, dear Prince.
 Trees live on mountains and branches live on trees,
 My heart lives for your heart but you don't see me.
 (T.C. 01:42:10)

While the old Yue Ren Song had a happy end, the Prince's is tragic. Its sorrowful melody, which is played on traditional Chinese instruments, echoes in the palace. Curiously, Feng Xiaogang also uses a modern song with a popular melody to summarize the tragedies at the end of the film, as most of TV dramas do.

The music for *Prince of the Himalayas* has been written by He Xuntian, professor at the Shanghai Conservatory and also a distinguished composer. He

uses traditional Tibetan music from monasteries, evoking archaic and spiritual spheres. The theme song “Holy Incense” with Buddhist incantations has even been called a “song from heaven” by some enthusiasts. The text is deliberately simple and repetitive:

A sea of faces
Hong-ma-ni-bei-bei-hong
(Om mani padme hum)
But I can not see my lover
He is gone
Hong-ma-ni-bei-bei-hong ...
(T.C. 00:12:30)

The music is lyrical and dynamic, particularly in the love and duel scenes. Besides heavy instruments, such as Tibetan drums and trombones, He Xuntian also uses electronic music, but based on ancient tunes that are consistent with tone of the filmic moments.

As with both films, music and color setting as well as other filmic details correspond to the general designs. In addition, such designs give more care to local cultures than to their “authentic” source, Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. Both adaptations not only have transferred Shakespeare’s play from stage to screen, but also from Europe into East Asia. Both films considerably changed the story, particularly when it comes to the question of justice and revenge.

The creativity of both *The Banquet* and *The Prince* is that they modify the plotline by rewriting the play’s structure and the relations of the protagonists. Both are essentially psychological studies. *The Banquet* puts the emphasis to the negative feelings and tempting power, whereas *Prince of the Himalayas* eventually overcomes hatred and teaches love.

Challenges of Adaptation

The challenge of borrowing foreign stories, however, goes beyond mere thematic modifications and plotline restructurings when Shakespeare’s universal image is transformed in the Chinese context. It demands localizing strategies for the filmmakers to re-create the originals and take them on a journey to the East. Let us look at a few examples of “easternizing” maneuvers as seen in the two films in question. In East Asian cultures, the inner struggle is more important than the fight against external forces. Both new films reflect Chinese philosophy and Confucian principles. For instance, in Chinese tradition, it is unthinkable that a son falls openly in love with his mother, or a man with his sister-in-law. As a result, dealing with the love relations between the male and female protagonists, the filmmakers have to adopt the motive of “eternal love” from

childhood on, which is common in classical Chinese literature. Feng has chosen a woman as the leading character to tell the story from an unusual perspective – just like his predecessors did in the silent films. This also allows him to turn his attention to female beauty, one of the classic characteristics of Chinese culture. Moreover, the film elaborates on the tragic fate of female beauty, as in the long feudal society, women hardly ever gained power or got involved in political matters. In a men's world, empress Wan can only have a tragic end.

While the director of *The Banquet* has to deal with the Confucian philosophy, Hu Xuehua has to handle the religious elements carefully in his easternizing of Shakespeare. These directors and their audiences may approach tragic ending and death differently from what the Bard offers. Hu, for example, adds the Buddhist concept of afterlife to the story so that Lhamoklodam decides to die instead of obeying the will of the dead king. In return, the baby prince is born. This treatment is akin to a typical Eastern concept of tragedy: instead of ultimate death, we see rebirth, hope and the return of life. When Shakespeare's Hamlet dies, the curtain falls. But in the Tibetan adaptation, the prince lives in his heir so that life is an endless circle, and love eternal.

Coda: Filmic Adaptations of Shakespeare and Entertainment Market

The two made-in-China *Hamlet* adaptations tell their stories with great virtuosity and show full mastery of film as a comprehensive, holistic media. In return, their audiences took equal pleasure in receiving the films. Primarily both the filmmakers and the audience must enjoy being attracted by something familiar (a piece of world literature). At the same time, both parties are exposed to something unfamiliar (remote cultures in contemporary cinema) that provides entertainment, inspiration and surprises. They are dealing with a dialectical relationship between the well-known and the unknown, between repetition and creation, between fidelity and innovation. Since both films refer to an author that is known worldwide, the innovation they demonstrate seems to be checked against the traditional criterion of fidelity. From that perspective, both films might seem to fall short of Shakespeare's literary genius and to abuse him for commercial purposes. Certainly, they do not show much fidelity to the author and his works.

However, since the cinema is “a product of the most sophisticated forms of industrial production” (Jameson xiii), according to Frederic Jameson, it relies heavily on the market. Both movies are examples of the commercialization and internationalisation of the Chinese cinema after mainland China has only recently entered the global commercial film market. As postmodern products of the post-modern era, both films show fidelity to the media, the audience and the market. The producers' big investment – fourteen and twenty million dollars respectively – was not meant to serve Shakespeare; nor have they made film l'art

pour l'art, but for economic success. Nevertheless, Shakespeare is not a loser in the postmodern game. At the same time the adaptations make a Chinese contribution to the global entertainment industry, they enrich and popularize the Bard's heritage. To attract both domestic and foreign viewers, they feature breathtaking landscapes, colorful cultural elements and exotic mysteries, catering to a mainstream audience with nostalgic or folkloristic curiosity. By successfully doing so, they once again prove Shakespeare's unbreakable universal genius. The myth must go on.

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