

*Asian Shakespeares on Screen: Two Films in Perspective*, special issue, edited by Alexa Huang, *Borrowers and Lenders* 4.2 (Spring/Summer 2009).

## Introduction

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### Abstract

The introduction to this collection of multimedia essays on *Maqbool* and *The Banquet* argues that close examination of the films through a truly global array of appropriative strategies and cultural contexts can help combat the tendency to report on rather than analyze non-Western works and thus can also prevent Asian films from being seen as merely exotic and disconnected from Shakespeare scholarship. Especially valuable for Shakespeareans are the ways in which the two films refashion Hamlet, Gertrude, Macbeth, Lady Macbeth, and other characters to shed new light on the visceral and political experiences enabled by these Shakespearean tragedies.

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The past decades have witnessed diverse incarnations and bold sequences of filmic re-imaginings that gave rise to productive encounters between the ideas of Asia and of Shakespeare in the global cultural marketplace. The beginning of the new millennium is for Asian cinematic Shakespeares (Huang and Ross 2009, 1-3) as the 1990s were for Anglophone Shakespeare on film — a "citationally rich intertextual environment" (Cartelli and Rowe 2007, 2). Shakespeare has been a part of the film and popular cultures of various Asian countries, with *Romeo and Juliet*, *Macbeth*, and *Hamlet* at the center of cinematic imaginations. Akira Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood* (*Macbeth*, 1957) and *Ran* (*Lear*, 1985) are far from the earliest or the only Shakespeare films from Asia.<sup>1</sup>

Among other locations, Shakespeare films have been produced in India, Malaysia, Tibet, Hong Kong, Singapore, China, and Japan. Around the time that Asta Nielsen's cross-dressed *Hamlet* (1921) was filmed, gender-bending silent film adaptations of *The Merchant of Venice* and *Two Gentlemen of Verona* were being made in Shanghai and marketed to the European expatriate and Chinese diasporic communities there and in Canton and Southeast Asia. Since 1927, the Indian cinematic tradition has engaged Shakespearean motifs in diverse genres ranging from silent film and theatrical cinematization to feature films that localize the plays. Films such as *Angeer* (dir. Gulzar, 1981; based on *The Comedy of Errors*) and *The Last Lear* (dir. Rituparno Ghosh, 2007)

suggest that the cultural flows no longer travel unilaterally from the West to the "rest." In 2006, Chinese director Feng Xiaogang adapted *Hamlet*, Hollywood visual language, and the martial arts genre in his feature film *The Banquet*. Films such as Baz Luhrmann's *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet* and John Madden's *Shakespeare in Love* have also inspired creative reinterpretations of these films and of *Romeo and Juliet* in Anthony Chan's Hong Kong film, *One Husband Too Many*, and Cheah Chee Kong's Singaporean film, *Chicken Rice War*. A Tibetan film entitled *The Prince of the Himalayas* (*Ximalaya wangzi*, China, 2006) with an all-star cast, reframes *Hamlet* in terms of ancient Tibet and local customs. Following the success of *Maqbool* (*Macbeth*, India, 2003), the first Indian film adaptation of Shakespeare to gain international recognition, director Vishal Bhardwaj drew on *Othello*, caste politics, and gang culture to explore specifiable universals in human emotions in *Omkaara* (2006). If the collapse of Shakespeare's status in mid-twentieth-century India in the narrative of the Merchant Ivory film *Shakespeare-Wallah* (1964) signals "the end of cultural colonization" (Singh 2008, 233), the advent of Bhardwaj's internationally acclaimed films suggests a renewed rivalry between Shakespeare's globally circulating text and local representational practices (Bollywood and beyond) in the post-national cultural marketplace.

The rash of new Shakespeare films from Asia may be the result of increasingly aggressive trans-nationalizing strategies since the 1990s (Burt 2009). Asian audio-visual idioms have been appropriated, along with Shakespeare's text, on stage and on screen. Therefore, we need to ask: On what terms do international Shakespeare films reframe the relationships between different geo-cultural or virtual localities? In turn, what is entailed in the cultural practice of screening, in both senses of the verb, Shakespeare in transnational audio-visual idioms in modern times? How does Shakespeare become a necessary signifier against which popular and world cultures define themselves on screen?

These are some of the questions that have inspired the present collection of essays on Asian Shakespeares on screen, a collaborative effort to bring into productive dialogue studies of Shakespeare and both Asian and Western forms of cultural production. A few words about the rationale and design of the collection are in order. In 2008, at the Shakespeare Association of America's (SAA) annual meeting in Dallas were screened two provocative, visually stunning Asian films from China and India, respectively, with contrasting approaches to Shakespearean tragedy. Despite the less than ideal screening conditions in a ballroom, the films impressed the conference delegates with deeply moving story-telling and astute reflections on Shakespeare's place in today's world.

*The Banquet* (*Ye Yan*, or *Legend of the Black Scorpion*, dir. Feng Xiaogang, China, 2006), a martial-arts film in Mandarin Chinese, gives Gertrude and Ophelia, traditionally silenced women

characters in *Hamlet*, a strong presence, though the centrality of the Gertrude figure in the film's narrative has been seen as problematic by some critics (Hand 2008, 430-31). As a bold period epic, the film is informed by rich intertextual traces of diverse themes from Shakespearean and Chinese sources. *Maqbool* (dir. Vishal Bhardwaj, India, 2004), hailed as a "*Macbeth* meets *The Godfather*" film, defies convenient categorization because it combines Bollywood gangster film, Muslim social drama, ethnography, and postmodernist artwork. The set design in one scene in *The Banquet* evokes Franco Zeffirelli's *Romeo and Juliet* (1968) and *Hamlet* (1990), while the closing scene in *Maqbool* is connected to Luc Besson's *Léon* (1994) through its visual strategies. (A film clip is available in the HTML version of this document.) (A film clip is available in the HTML version of this document.) (A film clip is available in the HTML version of this document.) (A film clip is available in the HTML version of this document.)

The Macbeths inhabit both the present-day Mumbai criminal underworld and India's film industry in an environment reminiscent of the world of the Scottish play. As national films with transnational networks of funding and artistic collaboration, *The Banquet* and *Maqbool* are self-conscious about their local as well as their international audiences. Both filmmakers engage productively with the inevitable tensions between different narrativized spaces and cinematic strategies. As a result, the films compel us to reconsider assumptions about the kinetic energy of Asian visual media and the textual foundation of English-language Shakespeare films. The screenings at the SAA set in motion a process of canonization by raising awareness and initiating debates about global Shakespeare. These two films were featured in the seminar on "Shakespeare and World Cinema" at the 2010 SAA in Chicago. Some of the most exciting conversations are captured in the thirteen essays in this collection.

Enhanced by film stills and clips, the multimedia essays in this special collection are also designed to be a teaching tool to advance the study of Shakespeare on film — informing, but also initiating, critical debate. Despite these two feature films' popularity, there is a dearth of open-access scholarly resources that do justice to the films as visual and textual feasts. Bringing together a film from India, a country with postcolonial entanglements with Britain, and a film from China, a country with a different, ambiguous relationship to the values represented by Shakespeare, enables us to ask new questions and to seek approaches that are attuned to the intricate dynamics between different localities. As an interdisciplinary forum that thrives on contrasting perspectives on *The Banquet* and *Maqbool*, the collection not only creates new pedagogical possibilities, but also demonstrates how the field can move beyond journalistic familiarity with new films. The contributors represent a number of different fields, including Shakespeare, English, performance, comparative literature, and Asian studies. As a corrective to the prevailing reportage mode that

is often deployed when non-Western works are discussed, and to avoid relegating these films to predictably exotic objects that are newsworthy for their immediacy only (Huang 2009, 36), the collection offers concise, accessible essays on a truly global array of appropriative strategies rather than a review of each film. It opens with a comparative essay on both films by Mark Thornton Burnett, which is followed by seven essays on various aspects of *The Banquet* and six essays on *Maqbool*. While the cultural and historical contexts of *Maqbool* are readily available in English, the same could not be said of *The Banquet*, a film with equally rich allusions. Therefore, a glossary is provided for readers interested in exploring the imaginations of local history in *The Banquet*.

### Cast of Maqbool

Irfan Khan	Maqbool
Tabu	Nimmi
Pankaj Kapur	Jahangir Khan (Abbaji)
Naseeruddin Shah	Inspector Purohit
Om Puri	Inspector Pandit
Piyush Mishra	Kaka
Masumi Makhija	Sameera (Abbaji's Daughter)
Ajay Gehi	Guddu (Kaka's son)
Abbas Tyrewala	Sadik Chikna
Deepak Dobriyal	Thapa
Gyanchand Rikki	Mughal
Manav Kaushik	Asif
Ankur Vikal	Riyaz Boti
Pubali Sanyal	Boti's wife
Raj	Boti's son
Murli Sharma	Devsare
Firdous Irani	Usman
Vinod Nahardi	Chinna
Vivek Mishra	Tavde
Shammi Narang	Bhosle
Mohini Mathur	Badi Bi

Rakesh Pandit	Qawwals at Dargah
Sabir Khan	Qawwals at Dargah
Musharraf Khan	Qawwals at Dargah
Jaywant Wadkar	Palekar
Jitendra Shriamali	Palekar's PA
Bhupinder Sharma	Mohini's secretary
Jagdish Kansara	Producer
Shweta Menon	Mohini
Vinay Shukla	Professor
Rajeev Acharya	Architect
Anoop Joshi	Caterer
Ramratan Sen	Ahmed
Shankar Nihate	Kaka's Murderer
Dibyendu Bhattacharya	Chinna's Killer
Nadeem Khan	Badi Bi's Killer
Sanjay Bhutiani	Custom Officer
Richa Nayer	Doctor
Daya Shankar Pandey	Masterji

Director: Vishal Bharadwaj

Screenplay: Vishal Bharadwaj and Abbas Tyrewala

Kaleidoscope Entertainment Pvt. Ltd.

Bobby Bedi	producer
Puja Bedi	associate producer
Rekha Bharadwaj	co-producer
Laurens C. Postma	executive producer

Original Music by Vishal Bharadwaj

Cinematography by Hemant Chaturvedi
Film Editing by Aarif Sheikh
Casting by Honey Trehan
Art Direction by Jayant Deshmukh
Costume Design by Payal Saluja

*Cast of The Banquet (Ye Yan)*

Zhang Ziyi	Empress Wan (Wan'er or Little Wan)
Ge You	Emperor Li
Daniel Wu	Prince Wu Luan
Zhou Xun	Qing Nü (Master Yin's daughter)
Ma Jingwu	Master Yin (Yin Taichang)
Huang Xiaoming	General Yin (Yin Sun; Master Yin's son)
Zhou Zhonghe	Chamberlain
Zheng Qiusheng	Governor Pei (Pei Hong)
Xu Xiyan	Ling'er
Liu Yanbin	Messenger
Ma Lun	Pharmacist
Xiang Bin	Imperial Guard
Zheng Chunyu	Imperial Guard

Director: Feng Xiaogang
Screenplay: Sheng Heyu and Qian Yu
Huayi Brothers

John Chong	producer
Wang Zhongjun	producer
Wang Zhonglei	executive producer

Yue Woo-ping	executive producer
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Original Music by Tan Dun
Action Choreographer, Yuen Woo-ping
Cinematography by Zhang Li
Film Editing by Liu Miaomiao
Art Direction by Timmy Yip

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### Notes

1. Throughout this collection of essays, Asian names are kept in their original order (family name first, e.g., Feng Xiaogang), except for names better known in other forms, such as Akira Kurosawa. Many actors take on single-word screen names in Indian cinema and are known as such (e.g., Tabu).

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- Ran*. 1985. Director Akira Kurosawa, performers Tatsuya Nakadai, Akira Terao, Jinpachi Nezu. Japan. Greenwich Film Productions.
- Romeo + Juliet*. 1996. Director Baz Luhrmann, performers Leonardo DiCaprio, Claire Danes. USA. Bazmark Films.
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