

*Chinese Shakespeares: Two Centuries of Cultural Exchange*, by Alexander C. Y. Huang. New York: Columbia University Press, 2009. 350 pp. ISBN-10: 0231148496; ISBN-13: 978-0231148498. \$84.50 (cloth); \$26.50 (paper).

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As I state in my commentary on the book in a recent state-of-the-field essay, Alexander Huang's *Chinese Shakespeares: Two Centuries of Cultural Exchange* hinges on plurals. It is about Chinese Shakespeares, and not Shakespeare in China; performance idioms, rather than a single tradition; and localities, rather than a single site or cultural identity. It is this central, fundamental emphasis on plurality that is the book's richest contribution to the currently booming scholarly field of global Shakespeare.

Huang sets out to familiarize his audience with more than two centuries of Chinese adaptation of and engagement with the Shakespeare canon, beginning his history with the first opium war in 1839 and continuing through the first decade of the twenty-first century, as Asian Shakespeare films have become increasingly popular internationally. In presenting this considerable history, Huang differentiates between mainland China and other parts of the Chinese-speaking world, emphasizing that "China" is a large and diverse set of geocultural localities. The book looks at traditional Chinese opera performances, Chinese interpretations of theater productions, and Chinese cinema that engages Shakespeare. Huang's book is a sweeping recounting of Chinese Shakespeares, not just in China, but globally. These performances either defamiliarize Shakespeare by presenting him to Western audiences through a foreign performance, or familiarize Western audiences with different theater traditions and practices through the familiar lens/catalyst of Shakespeare.

*Chinese Shakespeares* is both a helpful primer and an impressive scholarly critique. Huang provides a very helpful outline of performance history in China, laying out the differences between performance traditions in different regions of the vast country. He claims there are three different ways of "engaging ideas of China and Shakespeare": to 'universalize' Shakespeare through more traditional, Westernized performances; to localize the plot and performance, making Shakespeare local; and to truncate and rewrite Shakespeare's plays so as to relate them to images of China" (16-17). The book undertakes to study all three types of performance in relation to

locality criticism, which Huang defines as emphasizing "the physical and geocultural dimensions of the processes of rewriting" (28). Thus, the book is comprised of a series of case studies of representative performances from throughout the Chinese world and across each of the three modes of engagement mentioned above. These case studies "examine the interplay between the locality where authenticity and intentionality is derived and the locality where differences emerge" (17-18). The first chapter lays out the book's underlying theoretical grounding; Chapter 2 undertakes a history of Shakespeare in China prior to the twentieth century; the third chapter looks at translation in the twentieth century as it "turned into ethical acts of interpretation"; Chapter 4 looks at silent films of the 1930s and 1940s; Chapter 5 examines three specific performances in terms of "the intricate interplay between presentism and historicism" and their emphasis on locality; Chapter 6 focuses on Chinese opera in the 1980s; Chapter 7 "delineates the theoretical and political consequences of disowning 'Shakespeare' and 'China' in the present time" (18-19). Finally, an epilogue considers twenty-first century Chinese Shakespeare cinema and theater. As one can see from this brief recounting, Huang's book is a work of staggering scope.

To best examine a book of such massive depth and breadth, I will focus on a representative chapter: Chapter 5, which provides an excellent example of how this locality-criticism works. Huang begins the chapter by pointing out that what is at stake is "the dynamics between the locality where various conventions of authenticity is derived and the locality where the performance or reading takes place" (125). The chapter addresses a 1942 production of and a labor-camp reading of *Hamlet*, and a Soviet-Chinese production of *Much Ado About Nothing*, which premiered in 1957 and was revived in 1961. These productions resist what Huang calls the "new internationalism" that has defined theater since the middle of the twentieth century. Unlike productions that can be exported easily or tour widely outside of their original performance spaces, these productions "are defined by their local specificities, specificities that would be lost on a different audience in a different performance venue or context" (127). Discussing a June 1942 performance of *Hamlet* directed by Jiao Juyin and staged in a Confucian temple in the Sichuan province, then revived during December of 1942 in Chongqing, Huang analyzes the performance's many unique, locality-driven aspects. First, this was a wartime production, performed during the Sino-Japanese War. Second, it was the first time that *Hamlet* was staged in a Confucian temple. As wartime theater, in part the production's goal was to showcase the resilience and cultural prestige and legitimacy of the Chinese people. But beyond entertaining and demonstrating dignity, the production also sought to teach a lesson about the Chinese national character. Thus, Huang claims that the production's "ideological purposes — although at times self-contradictory — were to uphold Hamlet's moral integrity as a positive model and to use Hamlet's hesitation as a negative lesson" (134). Huang's

analysis here makes clear how a locality can possess exigencies, and how a performance can respond to these exigencies in enlightening and original ways. Huang then discusses Wu Ningkun, a Chinese intellectual, who writes in his memoir about his experience of reading *Hamlet* while incarcerated in a labor camp. Ningkun's memoir speaks of how the context of this reading changed his interpretation of his favorite Shakespeare play, and Huang argues that Wu's memoir reflects the interaction between Chinese settings and history and Shakespeare.

Moving on to discuss a 1957 Soviet-Chinese production of *Much Ado About Nothing*, Huang notes the production's unique claims to be "apolitical" during a highly politicized time in China's history. Discussing this production of *Much Ado*, Huang provides a history of how Soviet understandings of Shakespeare influenced mid-century Chinese Shakespeares, attending in particular to how a unique melding of historicism and presentism helped to make this particular production apolitical and therefore "safe." The production of *Much Ado* was revived twice, in 1967 and 1979, indicating its popularity and underscoring and enriching its local nature. With each revival, the play took on an enhanced nostalgic quality — now nostalgic not just for a Shakespeare-imagined, far-off Italy, but also for the original production, which was staged just before the most brutal of Maoist restrictions were imposed. Huang explains how each of the revivals was affected by the locality of its particular performance.

According to Huang, the idea of locality, although central to sociological theory, is only now beginning to assert a presence in literary and cultural theory. We need an awareness of locality theory, however, because "[w]hile it has now been recognized that Shakespeare has occupied an international space for centuries, the theoretical implications of this international space remain unclear" (27). Particularly in China, the concept of the local vs. the global takes on an unusual meaning. At times, the global is seen as "a potential space for liberation," while the local can be "coercive and oppressive" (28). Thus, Chinese engagements with Shakespeare interpret locality differently than we may expect.

Huang is in good company in calling for a theory of intercultural performance. Both Dennis Kennedy and Yong Li Lan's *Shakespeare in Asia* (Cambridge 2010) and Poonam Trivedi and Minami Ryuta's *Re-playing Shakespeare in Asia* (Routledge 2010) echo this call. All three volumes speak in response to Patrice Pavis's concern that it was as yet "too soon to propose a global theory of intercultural theatre," claiming that now is the time to do so.<sup>1</sup> Each of these three volumes does an excellent job of paving the way for just such a theory. Huang's book does not present this theory fully-formed, and that is one of its strengths. Instead, through detailed case studies, excellent theater and translation history, and compelling questions, Huang provides the Western scholar with

a body of evidence not easily or immediately available before now. In the wake of these three excellent recent publications, it will be fascinating to see how this properly plural, locality-aware theory of intercultural performance takes shape, and to what extent it is influenced by this most rich field of global Shakespeare: Asian Shakespeare(s).

One reason why we have not yet formed an agile and effective theory of intercultural performance is that we lack "in-depth critical histories of these events" (29). Huang's book seeks to rectify lack. Because of what Huang calls "the ephemeral nature of live theater," it has been difficult to combat "the marginalization of non-Anglophone Shakespeares" (35). The evidence we have of these ephemeral performances tends to be "reports" rather than critical engagement and "theoretical reflection" (36). These reports emphasize the exoticism of the performances without rigorous critical consideration. According to Huang, Asian theater is even marginalized within American theater studies departments. So, too, is Chinese film, which is studied far less than Japanese film and almost never studied in terms of cinematic Shakespeare.

Huang's call for attention to this set of performances is timely, as the field of global Shakespeare continues to grow, aided by materials made available through the expansion of digital archives. Huang himself has been involved in developing these archives. His work on *Global Shakespeares* and *Shakespeare Performance in Asia* has made many materials newly available and accessible. And in *Chinese Shakespeares*, he includes a very helpful appendix consisting of a chronology of selected historical events, worldwide Shakespeare performances, and Chinese engagements with Shakespeare. In combination with the richly detailed descriptions of performances throughout the book and his digital humanities work, these tools show Huang to be a major figure in promoting and supporting an academic turn toward nonwestern engagements with Shakespeare. This book offers a wonderfully balanced and rigorously theorized approach to the question of Shakespeare in China, a question that grows ever more urgent, for, as Huang argues, considering China's ascension to the global elite, in our cultural moment we *ought* to be learning more about China, in all contexts.

### Notes

1. Patrice Pavis, "Introduction: Towards a Theory of Interculturalism in Theatre?" (1996), 1; quoted in Huang 2009, 29.

## References

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