

Cultural Fluidity in Global Literary Pedagogy: Teaching *Hamlet* in China with *The Banquet*

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Introduction: From Nanjing to Wenzhou

[SLIDE] During the 2008 spring semester, I developed and taught a research writing course for the new joint-venture between the New York Institute of Technology and the Nanjing University of Posts and Telecommunications. This was my first time teaching in a global setting, and I relished the opportunity to engage students who were just as curious about me as an American professor as I was about them as Chinese students. Early in the semester, there seemed to be a damn separating the Eastern and Western waters. As much as I tried to connect with these students, they grasped very few of my cultural references and humorous asides. Moreover, they were struggling with the Western literary texts that dominated the syllabus. I needed to find a way to facilitate greater cultural fluidity.

I decided to watch recent Chinese films to see if I could connect through their popular culture. I bought several DVDs in downtown Nanjing and began my viewing with an historical drama titled *The Banquet* (also known as *Legend of the Black Scorpion*). I started with this film simply because I recognized the actress Zhang Ziyi from *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, which was a popular hit in America. About ten minutes into the film, I realized I was watching a Chinese remake, appropriation, and reinterpretation of *Hamlet*. Perfect! I just so happened to be teaching *Hamlet* that semester, and I was struggling with how to make this Shakespeare play relevant to the Chinese students. I shifted my pedagogy and had the students engage comparative cultural analysis of Western and Eastern cinematic representations of the play: we watched and discussed Franco Zeffirelli's *Hamlet* and Feng Xiaogang's *The Banquet*.

[SLIDE] Were it not for the COVID-19 pandemic that postponed this conference, I would have given a very different presentation last year, one focusing on my teaching

experiences in Nanjing. As it so happens, in January I took a new position as the Executive Director of the School of English Studies at Wenzhou-Kean University (WKU) in Wenzhou, China, located southwest of Shanghai in Zhejiang province. It has been exactly 12 years since I first taught *Hamlet* and *The Banquet* in Nanjing, and just two weeks ago we finished a unit on Shakespeare in my World Literature course at WKU, closing our study of *Hamlet* with a comparative discussion of these two films. Because of COVID travel restrictions, I have not yet been able to make it to China, and I have been teaching the course online through Blackboard and Zoom.

In my paper, I had planned to provide analysis of various student responses to different discussion questions, explain what I learned about intercultural global education, and propose questions for further research. However, one student's rather powerfully disappointed and frustrated response to the Chinese cinematic appropriation and intercultural translation of *Hamlet* caught my attention. Therefore, I have changed the focus of my paper and will, instead, analyze this student's fascinating response along with two other students' replies to his post. I took for granted that Chinese students would value Xiaogang's intercultural translation of key *Hamlet* themes into a uniquely Chinese historical and cultural context, thus expanding the cross-cultural significance of this core Western text. I did not expect some Chinese students to express a curious Orientalist canonical protectionism that shows deep concern over losing the Western authenticity of Shakespeare's work and bemoans what some scholars have called the erasure or disappearance of the original text when translated into another language and cultural context. In this presentation, I will provide brief background on higher education in China, discuss some challenges teaching liberal arts in China, describe the activity, share and analyze the student responses in terms of theories related to global Shakespeare studies, and then close with some observations and questions about global education that I hope to explore further.

Challenges of Teaching Liberal Arts in a Sino-American Context

[SLIDE] Rui Yang, a scholar of Chinese higher education from the University of Hong Kong notes that during the 1950s following the civil war, China adopted a Soviet model of higher education, creating universities devoted to specific aspects of industry and emphasizing science and technology. The place and role of the humanities, liberal arts, and the social sciences were greatly diminished. Then, during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), most colleges and universities were suspended altogether, thus leaving a whole generation largely uneducated. However, after the rise of Deng Xiaoping and the gradual reopening of China in the 1980s, the central government devoted significant resources to revitalizing Chinese higher education, restructuring the university systems, inviting Western specialists to teach in Chinese universities, and establishing Sino-Western university joint ventures (Yang 460-61). Ruth Hayhoe, a professor of education at the University of Toronto who specializes in Chinese higher education, explains in her article “China in the Center: What Will It Mean for Global Education?” that a key component of this strategy to increase and improve higher education in China is to develop Sino-Western collaborations and create world-class universities, such that China can increase its higher ed global profile, learn from Western university paradigms, and eventually export its own models of higher education to other developing nations.

Even as China imports Western specialists and introduces student-centered, constructivist educational principles to enhance and develop Chinese higher education, students raised on an authoritarian and pragmatic view of education struggle with this Western educational paradigm, and they have great difficulty understanding the value of non-major specific general education curricula and liberal arts courses. A unique challenge for our students at Wenzhou-Kean University, which is an English immersive Sino-American partnership between Kean University in New Jersey and Wenzhou University in China, is to read and study English literature in

English. These students generally struggle with reading poems and short stories in English, not to mention an entire Shakespeare play. I am not convinced that the students actually read the whole play (and, to be honest, I do not think all of my American students read the full play either).

Therefore, most of my class activities focus on exposition of key soliloquys. However, I do want the students to at least experience a performative element of Shakespeare, and so I incorporate film. I specifically use Zeffirelli's *Hamlet* and Xiaogang's *The Banquet* because I also want them to contemplate the intercultural connections as well as differences between how themes in *Hamlet* are constructed and thus understood in culturally specific ways.

Assignment Description

[SLIDE] Because I am teaching this course remotely, I translated the original in-class small group activity into an online discussion board assignment. Students can choose one question from two sections and write an initial post of about 200 words. Then, they go back and write at least two replies to other student posts, each reply being about 50 words. Here are the questions:

Part I

1. Explain, analyze, and discuss how *Hamlet* and *The Banquet* treat the theme of how we can know truth and reality. Be sure to indicate points of agreement and/or disagreement between the films.
2. Explain, analyze, and discuss how *Hamlet* explores the power dynamics of succession of throne and how *The Banquet* explores the power and dynastic control of clan politics in ancient China. What issues and concerns are similar? In what ways are these issues culturally different?
3. How do these two films represent love? What kinds of love do we see? What do we learn about the importance of human love?

[SLIDE] Part II

1. What do these two films say about the nature and dangers of revenge? Discuss any similarities and differences you notice.
2. Discuss how the films represent justice. Analyze how Shakespeare explores mercy, forgiveness, and grace. To what extent do we see mercy and grace in the Chinese context? Explain.
3. Discuss the function of art and artifice in these two films. Point out and discuss any similarities and differences you see.

Through such questions, I am trying to encourage students to engage intercultural thinking by comparing similar themes as constructed in a Western and an Eastern cultural artifact. The responses demonstrate that the students are certainly striving to engage intercultural analysis, but most of the posts demonstrate fairly superficial engagement, and the peer interaction rarely probes deeper intercultural thinking. However, this activity revealed a transcultural anxiety of influence that I was not expecting at all.

An Unexpected Concern for Preserving Western Authenticity

[SLIDE] After writing thoughtful responses to the questions related to succession of power and revenge, thus fulfilling the requirements of the assignment, a student launched into the following response:

If you feel uncomfortable reading any part of the remaining post, don't push yourself.

Just leave this post, it really doesn't matter.

It's not about this unit's DQ... it's just...I have to try to ease my pain after watching these two films somehow. I watch Hamlet from Tencent. And the translation is basically garbage. Imagine translating "rest ghost, rest" as "the remaining of ghost, the remaining" ("剩下的鬼魂! 剩下的") and still feels it's right. I really need to have a talk with this

translator. Such error that's... beyond my imagination is countless in the film and the only part I get to enjoy fully is the dual at last, during which few words are spoken. And the banquet is... *I sincerely hope this film can be taken out from the recommendation list for any college students.* [SLIDE] We are all born with some rights, like the right to live, to love, and to laugh. It's inhumane for anyone to watch this film through devotedly. It's more than a torture to watch all those excellent actors and actress doing something that's almost humiliating the audiences' wits. It's f**king Shakespeare! How could anyone adapt a f**king Shakespeare's drama into this b*****t? . . . Pointless dancing inserts into the film so many times that I even wonder if I'm watching an Indian film. No, Indian film knows how to make the dancing and singing serve the main plot development. These dancing is a command from the director to his simps: praise me now, I know how to make good-looking dances.

I can go on and on talking about how shitty the banquet is till the next dawn. I was expecting this adaption is a Pepsi to Coke transformation, but what I get is Pepsi to pee and I still have to drink it. Bravo.

[SLIDE] The student characterizes his experience of watching these film versions of *Hamlet* as painful, torturous, and inhumane. Indeed, some of his discontent is related to the quality of filmmaking and the incongruity of certain plot elements in *The Banquet*. However, there is a clear subtext of concern regarding cultural harm enacted against the English Bard and those forced to watch the films:

- Poor translation of the Shakespearean English into Chinese evacuating the Zeffirelli film of its original dramatic authenticity.
- The appropriation of Shakespeare into the contemporary Chinese film not rising to the artistic and literary equivalence of Shakespeare's original play.

- This cultural translation that devalues Shakespeare is ultimately insulting to audiences who deserve the original *Hamlet*.
- The Chinese artistic elements of dance and pantomime that serve as a cultural analog to the Shakespearean play within a play is ridiculed by being compared to another post-colonial, non-Western cultural production—Bollywood cinema.
- This intercultural appropriation has reduced the timeless purity of Shakespeare's original text to biological waste that is not only distasteful but also potentially poisonous.

This Chinese student expresses what appears to be an Orientalist outrage over the ways in which the original Shakespeare is diminished through such cultural appropriation and intercultural translation, and he wishes to preserve the authenticity of the original *Hamlet* and to safeguard Shakespeare from being colonized by the other, which happens to be his own culture. Moreover, two other Chinese students interacted with his post, supporting him in his outrage, thanking him for seeking to preserve the original literary spirit of Shakespeare, and describing *The Banquet* as a “clumsy imitation” that shifts focus away from the Hamlet figure onto the Empress [a fascinating gendered reaction that warrants analysis in itself], thus failing to express the same emotional and spiritual content as Shakespeare's original. In short, these students conclude that *The Banquet* is not worthy of comparison with *Hamlet*. How are we to make sense of these responses?

[SLIDE] Significant scholarship continues to be produced examining such reactions to transcultural adaptations of Shakespeare; however, the dismissiveness analyzed comes from Western critics and scholars. Poonam Trivedi observes that much of the criticism characterizes intercultural Shakespeare, that is non-European appropriations, translations, and reproductions, as “impenetrably different and foreign” and thus rejects it as inauthentic and even detrimental to

the original English, canonical Shakespeare instead of recognizing ways in which this Asian intercultural recasting of Shakespeare may actually imbue Shakespeare with new artistic vitality and cultural relevance (5). For example, John Gillies states, “It seems not just strange for Shakespeare to be performed in Asia, but somehow unfit” (259). And Gary Taylor suggests this strangeness of Asian countries and other former British colonies performing Shakespeare is rooted in a desire to “assert their connection to a cultural legacy that makes them feel superior to other people.”

These dismissive, even patronizing characterizations of intercultural performances of Shakespeare reveal an ongoing colonialist Orientalism that positions the Eastern other as inferior to the English culture that gave rise to Shakespeare and that remains the caretaker of his literary authenticity. Interestingly, this Chinese student and two of his peers express a similar critical concern over what happens to the authenticity and integrity of Shakespeare when his works are appropriated into a different culture and translated into a different medium, namely Chinese film. I am fascinated by these responses, and I’m not quite sure what to make of these Chinese students seemingly appropriating a Western Orientalist perspective on preserving the English purity and authenticity of Shakespeare such that they cannot comprehend or even consider the value of translating Shakespeare into their own culture and language.

[SLIDE] In the article “Shakespeare’s Cultural Capital Made in China,” Lingui Yang notes that “the ideological shift from monolithic Marxism to humanism in the literary sphere in the 1980s has informed the Chinese reception of Shakespeare, and Chinese Shakespeare now encapsulates, to some degree, the Shakespeare myth in the West” (91). Yang further notes that those who lived and worked in the upper echelons of Chinese society during the 1980s, like party officials, college teachers, students, and other intellectuals, were the ones who had access to Shakespeare’s texts, and these people “decided how the general populace should receive the

English playwright” (91). Could it be that my students’ teachers, who were most likely educated in the 1980s or 1990s, presented Shakespeare from a Western elitist perspective, thus encouraging students like the ones in my class to be (hyper)sensitive towards safeguarding the cultural integrity and Western authenticity of the English Bard? Of course, this is pure speculation, but it certainly is a plausible explanation for the presence of this Eurocentric concern to protect the linguistic, literary, and cultural integrity of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* from intercultural appropriation.

Conclusion: Some Initial Reflections and Further Questions

[SLIDE] Trivedi and the other scholars in her edited book *Re-Playing Shakespeare in Asia* seek to interrogate the Eurocentric notion that translations of Shakespeare into other languages, particularly Asian languages, represents “Shakespeare without his language,” arguing that all translation, “which is linguistic, performative, and cultural, instead expands, not narrows, the range of reference for Shakespeare” (15). However, not only is this Eurocentric view of Shakespeare translation an element of some Western critical discourse, but such a paternalistic perspective has entered into the cultural other as well. These Chinese students have essentially embraced and internalized this Orientalist view that Shakespeare is only authentic in English and that great harm is done to the canonical Shakespeare cultural construct when translated into other languages, cultures, histories, and media.

[SLIDE] What does this Eurocentric Orientalism expressed by these Chinese students ultimately say about the goals and perceived outcomes of global education and intercultural pedagogy? What issues are raised by their responses to *Hamlet* being appropriated for Chinese cinema? To what extent does a certain type of global education perform pedagogical colonization? What should we do to be more self-reflexive in how we teach the Western canon in China and other global contexts? Note that in the Chinese context, the Western canon is “world

literature,” and it represents cultural diversity for these students. **[SLIDE]** But what happens when Westerners teach the Western canon as diverse literatures to Chinese students? Do we engage in an unacknowledged educational colonization, such that we may be communicating an impression of the superiority of the Western text such that it can only be authentic if experienced in the original language and cultural context? Or, maybe I’m making too much of these students’ reactions. Could it be that they just happen to deeply believe in the importance of preserving cultural authenticity, be it Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* or *The Analects* of Confucius? I don’t know, but I do think these are important questions about the goals and paradigms of global education that I hope to pursue further.

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