

The Bard of China

Saihong Li considers how translators have moulded Shakespeare's plays to resonate with Chinese audiences

Shakespeare, one of the most enduring figures in global literature, continues to transcend barriers of time, language and culture. In China, he has captivated readers and audiences since *Macbeth* was introduced to the country in 1919, serving both as a gateway to Western literary traditions and as a complex challenge for translators.

As Alexa Huang notes, translating Shakespeare's works involves "not just a local adaptation of a global icon but a reciprocal exchange that reshapes both the source and the target cultures".¹ The question of translatability – how faithfully Shakespeare's language, poetic forms and thematic depth can be represented in a fundamentally different linguistic and cultural framework – lies at the heart of these efforts.

Though his works were popularised in 1919, the earliest introduction of Shakespeare to China often occurred through Western missionaries and relay translations. Notable examples include Lin Shu's *海外奇谭* (*Hai Wai Qi Tan*; *Strange Tales from Overseas*, 1903), an interpretive translation from Charles and Mary Lamb's *Tales from Shakespeare*, and Tian Han's relay translation from a Japanese version of *Hamlet*, which appeared in 1921.

Lin Shu's approach was shaped by his "aesthetic preferences" and desire to "ignite the curiosity and aspirations of readers".² This allowed him to transform Shakespeare's titles into entirely new names that captured the essence of the plays' main plots and conflicts while appealing to Chinese readers. For instance, *The Tempest* became 颶引 (*Ju Yin*; 'A tempestuous cause'), *Romeo and Juliet* was rendered as 铸情 (*Zhu Qing*; 'forged love') and *Twelfth Night* appeared as 婚诡 (*Hun Gui*; 'marriage tricks'). These early adaptations were

often abridged and simplified, focusing on certain themes while omitting complex poetic structures to ensure the tales were accessible and intriguing to Chinese audiences.

Direct translations into Chinese emerged in the 1920s, marking a pivotal moment in establishing Shakespeare's place within Chinese literary culture. Zhu Shenghao, a key figure of this period, translated 31 plays, 27 of which were published before 1949 despite wartime challenges. His translations skilfully balanced fidelity to the original language with readability, blending poetic elegance and Chinese literary sensibilities,³ and establishing Shakespeare's relevance in Chinese discourse.

The Maoist era marked a significant shift in Shakespeare's reception. His works were reinterpreted through a Marxist-Leninist lens, with plays repurposed to critique feudalism and capitalism. Productions of *The Merchant of Venice* emphasised class struggle and the moral corruption of the ruling elite, aligning with the political narratives of the time.

Translators and directors often adapted Shakespeare's language and themes to serve educational and propagandistic purposes, illustrating how ideological filters can shape the translatability of his works. These adaptations demonstrated the flexibility of Shakespeare's plays to take on new meanings in different cultural and political contexts.⁴

Oh, Luomiu, Luomiu: blending styles

In the post-Mao era, beginning in the 1980s, Shakespeare translation and scholarship expanded dramatically as China's cultural and intellectual landscape opened up. The Chinese Shakespeare Society, founded in 1984, and the *Journal of Shakespeare*

Studies, established in 1986, provided platforms for scholarly engagement.

New translations brought a modern linguistic perspective. Gu Zhengkun's translation of Hamlet's famous soliloquy, "To be, or not to be, that is the question", as 生存还是毁灭, 这是一个问题 ('to live or to die, this is a question?') concisely captured the existential dilemma using a modern Chinese idiom.⁵ Liang Shiqiu's rendering of Juliet's iconic "O Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou Romeo?" as 哦, 罗密欧, 罗密欧! 你为何是罗密欧? ('Oh, Luomiu, Luomiu, why are you called Luomiu?') reflected a poetic sensibility while preserving the line's lyrical beauty.⁶

This era also saw innovative performances that blended Shakespearean drama with traditional Chinese art forms. *Macbeth* was adapted as a Kunqu opera, where the haunting rhythms and stylised movements of traditional Chinese performance enhanced the play's themes of ambition and guilt.⁷

Such creative interpretations demonstrate how Shakespeare's works can be both translatable and untranslatable: while universal themes of power, betrayal and moral conflict remain intact, their expression undergoes profound cultural transformation. Chinese productions often incorporate local performance traditions, such as Peking opera or Kunqu opera, to present Shakespearean narratives in a familiar aesthetic context.

The texts are deeply rooted in Elizabethan England's social, religious and political contexts, which often make the references unfamiliar or irrelevant to a Chinese audience. Translators frequently replace biblical allusions or feudal imagery with references to Confucian, Daoist or Buddhist traditions. For example, Hamlet's "Something is rotten in the



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state of Denmark” was adapted by Jiao Juyin in 2016 as 天下大乱, 礼崩乐坏 (‘all-under-heaven is in chaos, rituals and music are in ruins’) under the late Qing Dynasty. This reflects Chinese concepts of disorder and moral decay, ensuring the line’s impact is preserved while its cultural frame is shifted.⁸

These adaptations illustrate the translator’s role not just as a linguistic intermediary but as a cultural bridge, reshaping Shakespeare’s works to speak meaningfully to a different audience. This blending of Eastern and Western elements allows audiences to connect with the stories on multiple levels, highlighting universal themes while celebrating cultural distinctiveness.

To be or not to be: differing approaches

Translators have developed creative strategies to address linguistic and cultural challenges. Translations of Hamlet’s infamous worm-eating conversation by Zhu Shenghao⁹ and Gu Zhengkun¹⁰ provide a fascinating comparison. Both translators engage with food-related imagery to convey the tone and meaning, but their stylistic choices highlight different aspects of Shakespeare’s universality and cultural specificity.

Zhu leans heavily into formal and poetic language. He renders “Your worm is your only emperor for diet” as 蛆虫是全世界最大的饕餮家 (‘Worms are the world’s greatest gluttons’), emphasising the worms’ unbridled consumption and symbolic role as equalisers in death. His use of 饕餮家 (‘gourmets’ or

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A Kunqu opera celebrating playwrights Tang Xianzu and William Shakespeare, who both died in 1616

‘gluttons’) invokes a sense of literary gravitas, maintaining the philosophical undercurrent of the text without veering into overt social or political commentary. This approach preserves the universal message about the inevitability of death and the cyclical nature of life.

In contrast, Gu adopts a more accessible and conversational style, embedding subtle political commentary into his choice of words. His translation, 蛆虫才是餐桌上的大王 (‘Worms are the true kings of the dining table’), not only conveys the original’s irony but also adds a layer of authority to the worms, presenting them as rulers over the ultimate feast. Gu’s simpler version ensures clarity while conveying the core theme of mortality’s levelling power.

By adapting Shakespeare’s works to fit the Chinese linguistic and cultural framework, translators and performers have demonstrated the universality of his themes across vastly different societies and historical periods. This underscores the adaptability of canonical texts, showing how literature can evolve and take on new meanings as it enters new cultural contexts. In turn, these reinterpretations enrich the global appreciation of Shakespeare, encouraging a more nuanced view of his plays, not as fixed relics of a particular time and place, but as living works that continue to inspire and challenge audiences worldwide.

Notes

- 1 Huang, A (2009) *Chinese Shakespeares: Two centuries of cultural exchange*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2
- 2 Ji, R and Feng, W (2023) ‘Shu Lin and the Earliest Image of Shakespeare in China’. In Saenger, M and Costola, S, *Shakespeare in Succession: Translation and time*, Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 286
- 3 Joubin, AA (2021) *Shakespeare and East Asia*, Oxford: Oxford University Press
- 4 Tian, M (2008) *The Poetics of Difference and Displacement: Twentieth-century Chinese adaptations of Shakespeare*, Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press
- 5 Gu, Z (2016) *The Complete Works of Shakespeare 《莎士比亚全集》*, Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press
- 6 Liang, S (1994) *The Complete Works of Shakespeare 《梁实秋译莎士比亚全集(全40册)》*, Beijing: People’s Literary Publishing House
- 7 Li, X (2020) ‘When Macbeth Meets Chinese Opera: A crossroad of humanity’. In *Multicultural Shakespeare: Translation, appropriation and performance*, 21(36), 55-68
- 8 *Ibid*; and Zhang, Z and Robertson, CA (2023) ‘Lyric Reflection: Translating the script of a kunqu *Romeo and Juliet* into English’. In Saenger, M and Costola, S, *Shakespeare in Succession: Translation and time*, Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press
- 9 Zhu, S (1978) *The Collected Works of William Shakespeare 《莎士比亚全集》*, Beijing: People’s Literary Publishing House
- 10 Op. cit. Gu 2016