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The Banquet: A Glossary

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Abstract

While parallels between *The Banquet* and *Hamlet* and other Shakespearean plays seem easy to spot for viewers with an eye for them, the Chinese intertexts are opaque and more challenging to grasp, as several contributors demonstrate in this collection. Furthermore, while the cultural and historical contexts of *Maqbool* are readily available in English (through essays here and elsewhere), the same could not be said of *The Banquet*, a film with equally rich allusions. This section examines the Chinese literary and historical traditions that inform director Feng Xiaogang's interpretation of *Hamlet*, focusing on three key elements in the film: Empress Wan as a parallel to Empress Wu Zetian of the Tang Dynasty; the film's allusion to the sword of the Maiden of Yueh; and the banquet as a redaction of the historical "banquet in Hongmen." As an extended glossary, this section is designed to elucidate these connections for readers interested in the Chinese background of the film.

Empress Wan and Empress Wu Zetian

At a press conference, Zhang Ziyi (the actress playing Empress Wan in *The Banquet*) associated her character with the historical Empress Wu Zetian (624-705 A.D.), the only female ruler in imperial Chinese history.¹ Wu Zetian was a spouse of the Emperor Taizong, Li Shimin (599-649 A.D.), of the Tang Dynasty. In the film, Empress Wan is also the first emperor's spouse. Historically, Li Shimin's son fell in love with Wu Zetian; in the film, the first emperor's son, Prince Wu Luan, also falls in love with Empress Wan. Like Wu Zetian, who was a concubine for two emperors, Empress Wan marries both the first emperor and Emperor Li. Last, but not least, Wu Zetian turned herself into a female ruler; Empress Wan follows her path. Interestingly, "Wan" is the given name of Wu Zetian's favorite female court official: Shangguang Wan'er (664-710 A.D.), a talented poet serving in the court who drafted imperial edicts for the empress.

The Sword of the Maiden of Yueh

Historically, it was not uncommon for women in the Tang Dynasty to study martial arts,² and the film portrays Empress Wan as a woman who excelled in martial arts and swordplay. In this context, the film's use of the *yuenü jian* (the sword of the Maiden of Yueh) as a central symbol of the forces of history draws on King Goujian of Yue's campaign to preserve his country in the Spring and Autumn Period.³ According to folklore, a young woman from the State of Yueh meets a mysterious old man and is given a sword. An ape in the forest fights with her and in so doing teaches her the skills of swordplay. Later on, this woman passes on her skills to King Goujian, who names the sword "Maiden of Yueh."⁴ The story has been reworked into many genres, including Jin Yong's (Louis Cha) popular martial-arts novella, "The Sword of Yueh Maiden" . (For a brief discussion, see Rebecca Chapman's essay in this collection.) King Goujian is best known for his quest for vengeance; having lost his nation to King Fuchai of Wu in 494 B.C., he suffered a great deal of shame and physical travails before defeating Fuchai and reclaiming his lost lands. Although historical records do not show clearly the connection between the legend of the sword of the Maiden of Yueh and the historical King Goujian, refined weapons, including "The Sword of the King of Yue" (*yuewang jia*; 55.7 cm in length and 4.6 cm in width) were excavated in Hubei, China in December 1965. Prince Wu Luan's sojourn in the Yue region in *The Banquet* clearly draws on this widely circulated legend of revenge.

The Banquet in Hongmen

The Banquet draws on another event in Chinese history, the *hongmen yan* (the banquet in Hongmen) in 206 B.C. Towards the end of the Qin Dynasty (221-206 B.C.), Liu Bang (247-195 B.C.) and Xiang Yü (232-202 B.C.) were two of the most influential military generals vying for control of China. Xiang invited Liu to a banquet in Hongmen and attempted to kill him. Arrangements were made for swordplay entertainment; the dancer was charged with the mission of killing Liu while entertaining him. Despite his knowledge of the scheme, Liu attended the banquet, ultimately using a bathroom visit as an excuse to leave the dining hall and escape. The murderous swordplay, disguised as entertainment, in the film brings to mind this ill-begotten banquet.

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Notes

1. Wu Zetian was originally a low-ranked concubine of Li Shimin, the Emperor Taizong of the Tang Dynasty (599-649 A.D.) and became a nun after Li Shimin's death. Yet her beauty amazed Li Shimin's son, Li Zhi, the Emperor Gaozong of the Tang Dynasty (628-683 A.D.) when he visited the temple where she was a nun. Li Zhi fell in love with her and brought her back from the temple to the royal palace. He turned her into his concubine and later into his queen in 655 A.D. Wu Zetian gave birth to two emperors who inherited Li Zhi's royal throne, Li Xian and Li Dan. After her degradation of Li Dan, she proclaimed herself a female ruler and named her short-lived dynasty "Da Zhou," "Wu Zhou," and "Nan Zhou" in 690 A.D. See Jonathan Clements, *Wu: The Chinese Empress Who Schemed, Seduced, and Murdered Her Way to Become a Living God* (2007) and Dora Shu-fang Dien, *Empress Wu Zetian in Fiction and in History* (2003).
2. Chen Dongyuan, *Zhongguo funü shenghuo shi (History of Chinese Women's Life)* (1984), p. 118.
3. Paul Cohen, *Speaking to History: The Story of King Goujian in Twentieth-Century China* (2008).
4. The English subtitles use "Yueh," while standard *pinyin* Romanization of the Chinese characters should be Yue.

References

- Chen, Dongyuan. 1984. *Zhongguo funü shenghuo shi (History of Chinese Women's Life)*. Shanghai: Shanghai Bookstore.
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