

# The Politics of an "Apolitical" Shakespeare: A Soviet-Chinese Joint Venture, 1950-1979

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## Abstract

In the postcolonial and global era, appropriation of canonical works has frequently been seen as an act of political intervention. In the history of Shakespearean appropriation, however, there have been a few unusual cases that thrive on a vision of apolitical productions. The popular Chinese *Much Ado About Nothing* (1957, 1961; carbon-copy revival in 1979) is a case in point. Under the historical circumstances of Soviet-Marxist-Maoism in the mid-twentieth century, China witnessed a Soviet-Chinese joint venture to appropriate *Much Ado* for both practical and aesthetic purposes: to familiarize Chinese actors with the Stanislavskian method; to offer the Chinese audience a glimpse into what was perceived to be authentic theatrical realism and authentic Shakespeare; and, finally, to provide "apolitical" entertainment in a time when ideologies shifted as frequently as policies changed. The Soviet-Chinese joint venture manufactured desirable histories and memories. As such, the trajectory of this particular adaptation over time contradicts the present understanding of historicist and presentist approaches to premodern texts. The creation and reception of this supposedly apolitical Shakespeare are fraught with complications, because at work are the politics of "apoliticization" in the advent of Communism and political prosecution.

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## Beyond Presentism and Historicism

In the diasporic transfer of "Shakespeare," Shakespeare's texts have been transmitted from the early modern to the modern age, and from Elizabethan England to Marx's Germany to the Soviet Union, and from there to Maoist China, among many other cultural locations. As Dennis Kennedy observes, "Almost from the start of [Shakespeare's] importance as the idealized English dramatist there have been other Shakespeares" (Kennedy 1993, 2).<sup>1</sup> In the transmission and transformation process, the dual canonicity of Shakespeare as a text being widely read and globally performed raises questions germane to the transformative process from text to representation. In an Asian context, the most dramatic transformations and urgent transmissions of the Shakespearean valence (both positive and negative) have occurred during revolutions. One such example is a Soviet-

Chinese appropriation of *Much Ado About Nothing*, first staged in Shanghai in 1957.<sup>2</sup> One of the notable features of this stage rendition is its insistence on interpreting *Much Ado* as an "apolitical" comedy portraying only "the bright aspect of life" in the New China (Mao 1990, 828). Its unusual claims for the apolitical nature of its representation of *Much Ado* and its historically conditioned motives invite speculation about the roles of history and memory in cross-cultural appropriation.

Questions about the politicization of artistic works, historical accuracy and authenticity, as well as ideological authority, revolve around the idea of appropriation as a venue where the present is seen in the art of the past and vice versa. Therefore, revisiting the politics of various claims about the political capital of appropriation (or lack thereof) would be a useful way to re-enter the debate between historicism and presentism, as both critical approaches and appropriative strategies.

Walter Benjamin famously defined the work of art as possessing a unique "presence in time and space" and an "existence at the place where it happens to be" (Benjamin 1999, 214). Drama's unique presence in time and space would include its presence in textual forms and stage representations. Further, any performance would have to wrestle with three distinct times and spaces: those of the current stage performance; those of the *fabula* or story; and the time when and space where the drama was written. Tensions and relationships among these entities inform most appropriative strategies. Presentism, a critical operation that brings contemporary events to bear on pre-modern works, privileges the extended presence in time and space of artistic works and foregrounds the historicity of contemporary readers and critics.

On the other hand, rewritings of canonical texts — a phenomenon that has existed for centuries — are often met with skeptical eyes and historically conscious criticism, because these performances are perceived to be evading the historical specificity of the texts they seek to represent. We should, however, acknowledge and confront the situatedness of the practice of literary interpretation and of the reader's localities and temporalities. The urge to privilege the present is a response to the urge to restore literary works to their earliest historical circumstances. As opposed to reading Shakespeare historically according to an exclusive set of knowable "facts," presentism is invested in the validity and value of contemporary critical responses. It also brings to light the intricate relationship between history and epistemology, past and present, and text and performance. History can never be reduced to a series of "facts," preserved in a pristine state, as it were. Similarly, texts do not and cannot mean by themselves. As Terence Hawkes points out, texts have to be represented and connected: "We mean by the texts we choose" (Hawkes 2002, 3).

The Soviet-Chinese *Much Ado About Nothing* espouses some of the corollaries of, but at the same time transcends, the presentism vs. historicism dichotomy because it is both a diachronic

and a synchronic adaptation that simultaneously evokes historical authenticity and claims to deny the presence of any ideology — in either historical or present time. The creation and reception of this supposedly apolitical Shakespeare are fraught with complications, because at work are the politics of "apoliticization" in the advent of Maoism, as it is filtered through Lipkovskaya's theatrical philosophy. How can a performance and its carbon copy, re-run more than a decade later, be the site of collective memory about the revolution and, at the same time, be said to deny the presence of any ideology? Part of the answer, for this particular production of *Much Ado*, lies in the play's supposed capacity to evoke an imagined Shakespearean history that is distant enough to lose its immediacy for the Chinese censors, which in turn creates a politically safe performance text for the actors and audiences.

The 1957 *Much Ado* manufactured desirable histories and memories. As such, the trajectory of this particular adaptation over time contradicts the present understanding of historicist and presentist approaches to reading premodern texts. Under the historical circumstances of Soviet-Marxist-Maoism in the mid twentieth century, China witnessed a Soviet-Chinese joint venture to appropriate *Much Ado About Nothing* for both practical and aesthetic purposes: to familiarize Chinese actors with the Stanislavskian method; to offer the Chinese audience a glimpse into what was perceived to be authentic theatrical realism and authentic Shakespeare; and, finally, to provide "apolitical" entertainment in a time when ideologies shifted as frequently as policies changed. First directed by Yevgeniya Konstantinovna Lipkovskaya, a Soviet director recruited by the Chinese Communist government, *Much Ado* was staged in Shanghai in 1957, with scenes cut and rearranged. Don John's role was marginalized.

In the absence of Lipkovskaya, the 1957 production of *Much Ado* was revived in 1961 by the same cast as an equally well-attended carbon-copy production, and, once again in 1979, after the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). This production and its revivals were perceived to be apolitical and non-topical, and hence safe in revolutionary times. At the same time, the adaptation became a locus for nostalgic feelings, motivated by the positive valence conferred by the actors and audiences on absolute fidelity to the histories of *Much Ado*.

This fidelity is two-fold. The actors and their audiences from the pre- and post-Cultural Revolution generations believed that this *Much Ado* was loyal to the "historical" Italy, as recorded by Shakespeare, and also to the earlier, paradigmatic production from 1957. On the one hand, this adaptation historicized *Much Ado* by resorting to realist representations with prosthetic noses, Italian wigs, and Stanislavskian psychological realism. On the other hand, because of the fear of political prosecution, every effort was made to avoid the slightest hint of any use of history to inform the present. The directors and actors understood "history" in very particular ways —

namely, as an imagined Shakespearean authenticity, the world that Shakespeare conjures up in his plays, and also as the specific history of the 1957 Chinese *Much Ado*. Yet despite its reputation as being "apolitical," this production also claimed to present the "bright aspect" of Chinese society under Communist reform, a Maoist requirement for arts and literature. Under unusual historical circumstances, an extreme version of historicism collided with the allegorical mode of presentist reading.

This contradiction is less frequently seen in performance practice, but in academe, a similar contradiction has emerged in the presentism/historicism debate over meaning-making processes. Seeking to bridge the continuing divisions between textual scholarship and performance studies (King 2005, 7), Ros King, professional dramaturg and textual editor, recently has argued that to solve the problems associated with realizing Shakespeare's 400-year-old texts in relevant modern performances, it is "not enough to read Shakespeare historically," as demanded by Lisa Jardine (1996) or David Scott Kastan (Kastan 1999; King 2005, 13). One needs to analyze "with an eye and an ear to how the language functions" and to how other signs function on stage (King 2005, 13). She goes on to suggest that dramaturgy may be a useful critical tool for transcending the presentism/historicism dichotomy because dramaturgy is the "holistic analysis" that is simultaneously historical and performative (King 2005, 7). A dramaturgical analysis of the Chinese *Much Ado* will illustrate how the Chinese *Much Ado* contradicts both presentist and historicist modes of reading, suggesting the need for a more holistic analysis.

### Background: Communist China and the Soviet Union

After the People's Republic of China was established in 1949, Communist China developed close ties with the Soviet Union. The 1950s saw a significant number of "Soviet experts" from all fields, recruited by the Chinese government to transfer their knowledge to the Chinese. Under extremely unusual historical circumstances before and after the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), the Chinese and Soviet artists worked closely with each other and created Shakespearean productions that made a difference. In many cases, the difference marked the line between life and death. The production gave the artists a *l'art pour l'art* cause and a rare opportunity to concentrate on acting and not politics. It also saved most of its cast from being prosecuted. The political implications of repositioning certain dramatic works are often inseparable from the broader concerns of the world at large. The 1957 *Much Ado About Nothing* had a lasting impact on the Chinese performers and audiences. Its *mise-en-scène*, and the unusual revival in 1979 as a carbon copy of the "original" production in 1957, also created sites of collective memory.

One of China's most beloved and influential Soviet directors was Yevgeniya Konstantinovna Lipkovskaya (1902-1990), an experienced acting teacher from the A. N. Ostrovsky Drama Institute in Leningrad. Lipkovskaya's two-year residency at the Shanghai Theater Academy culminated in two productions that she directed: Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing* and Boris Andreevich Lavrenov's *Razlom* (1927) [Break up].<sup>3</sup> Over a period of two years in the late 1950s, she worked with a group of students who were to become the core group of the 1957, 1961, and 1979 production and re-runs of *Much Ado About Nothing*.

In the history of twentieth-century China, the most brutal force to reshape the landscape of culture and theater was the ten-year Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) that, ironically, had more to do with destroying rather than with revolutionizing performance culture; yet this is also the most productive and intriguing period for Shakespearean performance in East Asia. Launched in 1966, the Cultural Revolution attacked bourgeois remnants, bureaucracy, vested interests, and, above all, "foreignness" and antiquity. (Both foreignness and antiquity are evident in the production; see, for instance, figure 1.) In this peasant-centered culture, there was no place for Shakespeare or any non-Chinese playwright. Shakespeare's perceived moral preoccupations (such as an anti-feudalist tendency and humanism) are ironically not those of the Chinese Communist revolutionaries. The only plays performed on stage during the Cultural Revolution were eight state-endorsed model plays [*yangban xi*] that uniformly portrayed an imaginary bright future of China under the leadership of the Communist Party. It is of interest to note that the power struggle and mass campaigns during this period were masked by ideological debates about the functions and values of literature and art, especially theater (cf. Tung 1987, 12). As Martin Esslin cogently argues, all drama is "a political event" because it either asserts or undermines the codes of conduct of a given society (Esslin 1981, 29). As such, live theater — a public forum and event — is often seen as an avenue of cross-cultural negotiation and political intervention. The Chinese Communists have capitalized on the propagandistic, pedagogic, and political capital of theater.

### Envisioning *Much Ado About Nothing*

Four years after a Western-style spoken-drama *huaju* production of *Much Ado About Nothing* in 1957, which was translated into Chinese as *Looking for Trouble in Trivial Matters* [*Wushi shengfei*] during its premiere in Shanghai, a group of Chinese actors revived the earlier production on a summer night in Shenyang in 1961 without changing even the smallest detail. As the curtain rose, the audience saw a half-height wall set in a recreated medieval Italian city: Messina (figure 2). A group of victorious warriors returning on horses from a battle appeared behind the wall, so that the audience saw the upper halves of their bodies as they rode past the stage behind

the wall. The actors wore period doublet-and-hose costumes with prosthetic noses, blue eyelids (representing blue eyes), and wigs that imitated Caucasian hair color and styles. Thus opened the play, which critics described as "magnificent," realistic," and "grand" (Sun 1961; see figure 3). In April 1979, eighteen years later and three years after the end of the Cultural Revolution, the same director and cast staged in Shanghai yet another carbon copy of the earlier production. Most of the original cast managed to stay in or return to Shanghai after the Cultural Revolution to reunite and stage this *Much Ado*, in part because their involvement in the state-approved, pre-revolution production of 1957 had shielded them from political persecution.

In an interview, Hu Dao,<sup>4</sup> the director of the 1979 re-run, proudly commented on two identical photos that he possessed from the 1961 and the 1979 performances (Interviews with Ruru Li, September 1998 and January 2001, quoted in Li 2003, 60). In these two photos, the actress playing Beatrice and the actor playing Benedick — the same individuals in 1961 and 1979 — were in identical costumes and identical poses in the same scene, which corresponds to 5.4 of the original play. Peilitesi (Beatrice) was played by Zhu Xijuan, and Baidini (Benedick) was played by Jiao Huang (*Wushi shengfei* 1979). The 1979 performance preserved every single detail of its predecessor (figures 4 and 5). As 1.1 ended, on an empty stage with two curtains (with a three-foot gap in between) and an arch reaching up to the proscenium, roughly twenty servants of all body types appeared in front of the closed inner golden curtain.<sup>5</sup> They were preparing a feast. Each servant entered with her or his distinct step and pace, carrying wine barrels, a roast goose on a huge plate, and other dishes. Their action provided the backdrop of hustle and bustle for the scene that corresponded to *Much Ado About Nothing*, 1.2.1-27. Leonato and Antonio carried on their conversation as the servants went on and off the stage. The servants crossed the stage with mouth-watering dishes in preparation for the feast. However, the feast was not shown. After a while, the servants returned to the stage with empty oval platters, signifying that the party was over (Liu 1961). The stage soon returned to its previous state: empty and quiet. Then, the inner curtain drew again to reveal Don John sitting in a chair, plotting with Conrade and Borachio against Claudio and Hero. The lighting for the conspiracy scene changed to a cold tone, and the lively music immediately changed into a grave tune.

The swift and smooth scene changes afforded by the double curtains impressed the critics and audience in the original production and subsequent re-runs that toured different Chinese cities. Cao Shujun and Sun Fuliang noted enthusiastically how the two curtains opened slowly with percussion beats, creating the illusion of a wide-open stage (Cao and Sun 1989, 116-17). Lu Hai

was impressed by the verisimilitude of the "medieval castle" on stage (Lu 1962); Sun Yu lauded the 1961 production's achievement of "realism" and the power of the grand setting (Sun 1961).

However, there was much more to this production and its re-runs than the "magnificent" stage set, realism, and double curtains. It reflected a new "Chinese Shakespeare" produced in a Sino-Soviet workshop of realism and Stanislavskianism. Having seen the 1957 *Much Ado*, Dong Youdao, a lecturer at the Shanghai Theater Academy, noted that "Shakespeare's real home is in the Soviet Union. We found this statement to be true after having seen Lipkovskaya's *Much Ado*" (Dong 1957).

The transplantation of Shakespeare from his "real home" in the USSR to New China [*xin Zhongguo*, a term deployed by the Chinese Communist Party to describe the new socialist state founded in 1949] was a complicated process. One of the most intriguing questions was why certain plays were chosen and others were not. Other than *The Merchant of Venice*, very few Shakespearean comedies were staged in China before the 1950s. However, in the period 1956-1979, *Much Ado About Nothing* and *Twelfth Night* were two of the most frequently staged non-Chinese plays. The 1957 *Much Ado* was revived in 1961 and 1979, as has been noted. Under similar conditions, the *Twelfth Night* staged by the Shanghai Film Actors' Theater Company in 1957 was also revived in 1958 and 1962, with the same translation and the same director.<sup>6</sup>

### In Search of a Safe Text

Several factors contributed to the popularity of *Much Ado About Nothing* in this particular historical period, when Marxist-Maoism controlled all aspects of public cultural life. First, the political upheavals and overt politicization of art sent theater practitioners and their audiences searching for safe texts that did not contain political messages that were in any way ambiguous.<sup>7</sup>

A review of the political conditions before and during the 1950s will illuminate this point. The 1930s and the 1940s were marked by the subservience of art and literature to the propaganda of the Chinese Communist Party and the Nationalist Party. The Communist and the Nationalist cadres promoted with equal vigor the censorship of translated authors and native literature. Mao Zedong delivered two lectures to Yan'an political cadres on May 2 and 23, 1942. In the famous "Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art," Mao reaffirmed the necessarily grass-roots and political character of cultural production:

In our fight and struggle [*douzhen*] to liberate the Chinese people, there are two fronts: the cultural front and the military front. Since the May Fourth, an army [this metaphor was

taken in its literal sense] of cultural [figures] has been formed in support of the revolution in China. (Mao 1990, 804)<sup>8</sup>

In this context, stage productions were designed to be not merely entertainment, but rather, important sites that served to educate the proletarian masses about the revolutionary cause and its future. When a theater group wished to concentrate on "art for art's sake" and avoid addressing the revolutionary cause, it would have to negotiate the associated risks. The director would have to find a safe text. *Much Ado About Nothing* emerged as a text that was safe for the actors and appropriate for the masses because it was perceived to be a romantic comedy of love, friendship, and trivial matters. It had much to do with "nothing." The director of this *Much Ado* deleted some scenes and restructured others to highlight the Beatrice-Benedick plot and marginalize Don John's role. Beatrice is no longer compelled to ask Benedick to kill Claudio (4.1.289) and force him to choose between male friendship and his love of her, so that *Much Ado* was turned into a comedy of lovers' wordplay. More importantly, the play was a safe text because it was chosen and designed as such by a respected Soviet expert recruited and approved by the state. Lipkovskaya brought to Shanghai Theater Academy the prevalent interpretations of Shakespeare in the "model" Communist country — the USSR, China's "Soviet Big Brother."

### In Search of an Apolitical Fantasy World

The second factor that contributed to the popularity of *Much Ado* was the actors' and their audiences' need to escape to a fantasy world removed from contemporary politics. The 1957 production of *Much Ado About Nothing* is a case in point. During the 1950s, theater companies were given the mission to propagandize the Party ideology, to promote "progressive" ideas among the people, and to fight "class enemies." The monotonous practice of staging plays with the same theme ground down actors' enthusiasm for the stage. *Much Ado* therefore provided a rare, state-approved opportunity for the actors to try something different. The actors and the director were not at all interested in making the play relevant. Therefore, they did not modernize or sinicize the plot, costumes, characters, or stage set. The 1957 and 1961 production and revival of *Much Ado* were approved before the Anti-Rightist campaign; it was staged during the campaign without causing a stir. Only a very small number of the cast were persecuted, not because they were involved in the production of *Much Ado*, but because they had committed other anti-revolutionary "crimes" in the past. After the Cultural Revolution, *Much Ado* was still a safe text, which allowed the play to be revived once again in 1979.



Lipkovskaya gave the production a goal: to illustrate that men can "create a beautiful life through their struggles" (Hu 1961, translated into English by Ruru Li [2003, 61]). She also appropriated Stanislavsky's concept of dramatic action. For her, drama always meant "fighting," because "without fighting, there is no action" (Lipkovskaya 1956b, 13). In an acting class, Lipkovskaya urged the actors to first "observe life" and understand "how people live" (Lipkovskaya 1956a, 8). Stanislavsky believed that "There is no such thing as actuality on stage [. . .] The aim of the actor should be to use his technique to turn the play into a theatrical reality" (Stanislavsky 1972, 51).

Odd as it might seem, the level of attention the actors and audience paid to characterization and psychological realism drew them into the remote world of the play and made the play appear irrelevant to contemporary China. In addition, after a series of incidents, *Much Ado* became a haven sealing the actors off from the political persecution outside the theater. The rehearsal room, "a sacred place" in Lipkovskaya's word, existed in sharp contrast to the world outside (Lipkovskaya 1956a, 8). The student cast members at the Shanghai Theater Academy, eager to learn new acting techniques from the state-endorsed Soviet expert, gave her their attentive ears. They also received direct orders from the Party committee of the Shanghai Theater Academy that prohibited them from engaging in anything other than their assigned task: rehearsing with Lipkovskaya. Outside the quiet rehearsal room, by contrast, a new movement was feverishly underway. Mao Zedong announced the new policy of "hundred flowers" on May 2, 1956 at the seventh Congress meeting [zuigao guowu huiyi]. Mao encouraged people to voice their discontent and criticize any aspect of the new socialist society, because debates promoted progress and "even Marxism had to be developed through fight and struggle [douzheng]" (Mao 1959, 475). This incident, known as the "hundred flowers" campaign, nevertheless proved to be a short-lived period of free speech. In 1957, the political climate changed overnight. An anti-Rightist campaign was launched, and those who disagreed with Mao were persecuted. The group working with Lipkovskaya to stage *Much Ado* turned out to be extremely lucky, since they were prohibited by the Party from participating in any political activities in order to concentrate solely on perfecting their acting skills.<sup>9</sup>

To protect herself and her students, Lipkovskaya was reported to have eulogized Engels (Li 2003, 56). She also quoted Engels's (by then canonical) interpretation of Shakespeare. She also quoted Mao's words in public.<sup>10</sup> Lipkovskaya's comments participated in an emerging discourse about Shakespeare's significance by the extreme Marxists (the Maoists) in China. Engels lauded the European Renaissance as "the greatest progressive revolution that mankind has so far experienced, a time which called for giants and produced giants — giants in power of thought, passion,

and character" (Engels 1960, 2-3). Marx and Engels also highlighted Shakespeare's vivacity and "realism." In their letters, they criticized the German socialist Ferdinand Lassalle (1825-1864) for not using Shakespeare as a model for his historical drama, *Franz von Sickingen*. In a letter to Lassalle dated May 18, 1859, Engels championed Shakespeare:

The realistic should not be neglected in favor of the intellectual elements, not Shakespeare in favor of Schiller [. . .] What wonderfully distinctive character portraits are to be found during this period of the breakdown of feudalism — penniless ruling kings, impoverished hireling soldiers and adventurers of all sorts — a Falstaffian background that, in an historical play of this type, would be much more effective than in Shakespeare! (Engels 1973, 109)

According to Marx and Engels, *Sickingen* was abstract and didactic, lacking the kind of convincing realistic representation of the action found in Shakespeare. They believed that Lassalle followed Johann Friedrich von Schiller (1759-1805) too closely and turned historical characters into mouthpieces for revolutionary causes.<sup>11</sup>

This rhetoric was appropriated by the Soviet critics and then replicated by the Chinese theater circle, so that Shakespeare became a realist writer of the Soviet people. Alexander Anikst, for instance, observed that Soviet criticism was based on "Marx's and Engels's letters to Lassalle" (Anikst 1966, 113) and repeated Marx's and Engels's argument that "Shakespeare was no preacher, it was not in character for him to transform his heroes into 'mouthpieces' for his own views" (Anikst 1966, 113). Anikst concluded that "Shakespeare the artist and Shakespeare the writer of the people are identical" (Anikst 1966, 138). At about this time, Soviet interpretations of Shakespeare were translated and influenced the reception of Shakespeare in China. Meng Xianqiang noted that among the standard Shakespeare criticism available in China were Chinese translations of Alexander Anikst's *Shakespeare and His Plays*, published in 1957, and Anikst's *Concise History of British Literature*, published in 1959 (Meng 1994, 35).

The Soviet mode of performing and understanding Shakespeare was dominant in China. Works by leading Soviet Shakespeare scholars, such as Morozov and Anikst, appeared in more than one version. Moreover, key texts of Stanislavsky's system were translated and widely circulated in China; *An Actor Prepares* was translated in 1956. One of the most important Soviet works translated into Chinese was Mikhail Mikhailovich Morozov's (1897-1952) *Shashibiya zai Sulian [Shakespeare in the Soviet Union]* (Wu Ningkun 1953), as translated from David Magarshack's English translation (Morozov 1947). Morozov's influence in China was visible from

the 1950s through the 1980s, during which time Morozov's influential biography of Shakespeare was translated and widely read by students and scholars (Morozov 1984).

### Portrayal of the Brightness of Life

The third factor contributing to the popularity of *Much Ado* was, surprisingly, its political correctness. One might expect that, when a safe performance text means an ideologically neutral play, very little room is left for political interpretation in its performance. But while a safe performance text does not transgress boundaries, it necessarily contains its own ideology — one that, in this case, is not incompatible with the official discourse. Despite a conscious move toward apoliticization, the theme of *Much Ado* was interpreted in a way that conformed to Mao's other requirements for art. The thrust of Mao's argument in the *Talks* is that works of art and literature should only "portray the bright aspect of the society and the revolution" (Mao 1990, 828). For Mao, artists can only achieve this goal through a realistic exposé of life and portrayal of love in a class-free, socialist society. Thus, he argues: "The point of departure in literature and art is love, the love of mankind. Classes divide our society into antithetical entities [. . .]. After the class [enemies] are destroyed, there will be wholesome love of mankind. We do not yet have it now" (Mao 1990, 827).

*Much Ado* presented rural life, with its strife over trivial matters, and the merry wars between lovers. It also projected the bright aspect of social life and thus, by extension, fulfilled the requirement that theater should serve an educational purpose. The moral lessons imbued in both literature and stage works during this period invariably held that brightness defeated darkness and that love and friendship could overcome all obstacles. Following Mao's doctrines, Chen Shouzhong characterized Shakespearean comedies as "opposing the new capitalists' evil forces." More importantly, Shakespeare's comedies glorified "the victory of prevailing love and genuine friendship over all obstacles." They reaffirmed the positive, optimistic, and "happy aspects of life" (Chen 1961, 3). The predominant perception of Shakespearean romantic comedies as "celebrating love" aligned itself with Mao's guidelines for art (*Shashibiya quanji* [Shakespeare's Works], Editorial Committee 1978, 9). From this point of view, Shakespeare's comedies projected the bright future of a new society of the revolution, which unfortunately remained an unattainable dream in a series of destructive extremist movements that cumulated in the Cultural Revolution.

### Merry England on the Chinese Stage

Along these lines, Lipkovskaya introduced the metaphorical concept of "merry England," a theme that she appropriated from Engels. Around the 1840s, Engels had invoked the idea of "merry England," the manners of the good old days, in an article entitled "Landscape" (Engels

1975, 95-101) and in "The Industrial Proletariat," the second chapter of *The Conditions of the Working Class in England* (1958). Written in 1844 when he was living in Manchester, Engels's accounts of the working class in England used the idea of "merry England" to analyze the condition of the working class in urban centers where the concentration of property had reached its highest point. In his usual style of using literary works to support his argument, Engels linked the theme of "merry England" to Shakespeare's comedy:

You who complain of the prosaic dullness of railways without ever having seen one should try traveling on the one from London to Liverpool [. . .]. It often seems as if one were still in the golden days of merry England and might see Shakespeare with his fowling-piece moving stealthily behind a hedge on a deer-poaching expedition, or you might wonder why not one of his divine comedies actually takes place on this green meadow. (Engels 1975, 100)

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the idea of "merry England" originated in the Middle Ages. As shown by examples cited in the OED, the meaning of "merry" (or "merrie") in this phrase has evolved from the pleasant atmosphere of a place or country to an adjective "expressive of merriment," cheerfulness, or gaiety.<sup>12</sup> As Engels's appropriation shows, it refers to an England "characterized by its pleasant landscape," a nostalgic picture drawn by Engels at the advent of the Industrial Revolution (OED 1989). By having "merry England" represent a nostalgic reversion to the idyllic past and pastoral life, Engels used the metaphor to extol the pre-industrialized world. The ideological construct referred to a state of life and a state of mind that was idyllic, pastoral, and utopian.<sup>13</sup> The inhabitants of England allegedly enjoyed this way of life in a forgotten golden age. The idea that people could live as contented peasants in an egalitarian society was not at all foreign to the Chinese Communists' idea of learning from the peasants, who were considered to be uncontaminated by post-industrialized capitalism. For Lipkovskaya as well, "merry England" represented the central theme of *Much Ado*. In the production, the theme was connected to the ideal of the socialist state.

In relation to the theme of "merry England," the structure of Lipkovskaya's adaptation is illuminating in a number of ways. Rather than following his usual comic formula, which begins with a journey from an urban to a rural setting and back to the urban with order restored, Shakespeare set the action of *Much Ado* in a town that was conducive to carnival, eavesdropping, and courtship. While all of the actions of *Much Ado About Nothing* take place in the town Messina, the town has a rural and pastoral character. To create this atmosphere according to the theme of

"merry England," Lipkovskaya made an important decision to re-organize the structure of the play's acts and scenes (*Wushi shengfei* 1961):

<i>Shakespeare</i>	<i>Lipkovskaya</i>
Act 1 Scene 1, 2, 3	Act 1 Scene 1, 2, 3
Act 1 Scene 4, 5	Act 2 Scene 1
Act 2 Scene 1	Act 2 Scene 3 and Act 3 Scene 1
Act 2 Scene 2	Act 2 Scene 2
Act 2 Scene 3	Act 3 Scene 2
Act 3 Scene 1, 2, 3	Act 3 Scene 3, 4, 5
Act 3 Scene 4	Act 4 Scene 1
Act 4	Act 5

*Wushi shengfei [Much Ado About Nothing], dir. Lipkovskaya.*

From the chart above, it is clear that the scene transposition highlights the Beatrice-Benedick plot and marginalizes Don John. The production, based on the widely circulated mid-twentieth century translation by Zhu Shenghao, made changes to Zhu's text, which did not cut speeches or restructure the scenes. This emphasis on the lovers, however, is not at all unfamiliar in the history of *Much Ado*'s reception in the West. King Charles I gave the play a new title, *Beatrice and Benedick*, and Berlioz also titled his 1861 opera *Béatrice et Bénédict*. Don John was omitted in Berlioz's opera adaptation, and Charles I was more interested in the witty lovers than in "their romantic opposites" (Barton 1997, 361). However, Lipkovskaya's emphasis on the Beatrice-Benedick plot line came at the expense of flattening the couple's journey in love and misunderstanding. Without the deceit and misunderstanding Don John contrived against the couple, Beatrice and Benedick's bond is impoverished. When Beatrice has no need to ask Benedick to kill Claudio (4.1.289) and thereby force him to choose between male friendship and love, her nature and commitment are not revealed.

Hu Dao, one of the assistants to Lipkovskaya in 1957 and the director who revived the production in 1961 and 1979, followed Lipkovskaya's conception of "merry England" and viewed *Much Ado* as a comedy that countered feudalism. For Hu, the play shows how people can "control their lives" (Hu 1961). Lipkovskaya's structural reorganization likewise suppressed the emphasis on Don John as an "evil force." Act 1 does not end with the conspiracy scene in which Don John

plots against Claudio and Hero (1.3 in the original). Instead, Act 1, now entitled "The two arches of Cupid," ends with Don Pedro's words to Claudio and Leonato: "I will teach you how to humor your cousin, that [Beatrice] shall fall in love with Benedick, and I, with your two helps, will so practice on Benedick that [. . .] he shall fall in love with Beatrice. If we can do this, Cupid is no longer an archer; his glory shall be ours, for we are the only love-gods" (2.1.380-86). In the play, two tricks were set up one after another, one by Don John and another by Don Pedro. The new Act 1 ends with the more hopeful and brighter moment.

The transposed scenes were very well received. Wang Qibang's review comments at length on the rearranged scenes, particularly in Act 1. He writes: "Had they [the theater company] staged the play according to the original scene division, act one would have ended with Don John's conspiracy and hatred [. . .] It would have emphasized that plot line [. . .] Now the performers re-organized the original five acts into four acts, the plot line of the love between Beatrice and Benedick was accentuated" (Wang 1961). Following the same guideline, that no gloomy scene should end an act and therefore blemish the gaiety of the play, Lipkovskaya deleted the prison scene (5.2). This transposition created a different flow of action, highlighting again the play's positive and bright aspects. Don Pedro's line at the end of the new Act 1 ("We are the only love-gods") echoes Hu Dao's and Lipkovskaya's interpretation of *Much Ado* as a comedy that works against the idea that "everything is dominated and determined by God" (Hu 1961). It also conforms to Stanislavsky's principle on how to end an act. Stanislavsky held that the change of scene should take place at a "moment of heightened impression" so that the "interval produces not a minus leading to subsidence, but a plus." Consequently, the change of scene attempts to heighten "the spectator's interest" (Stanislavsky 1963, 6).

### The Revival of the 1957 *Much Ado About Nothing* in 1961 and 1979

This production of *Much Ado* demonstrates that Chinese directors and actors were not only recycling the Shakespearean classics as filtered through the Soviets, but also recycling their own productions. Rarely in world theater history has a production been revived as a carbon copy of the original (down to every single detail); amazingly, in China this was done not once, but twice, over a time span of more than twenty years.

The 1957 production of *Much Ado About Nothing* marked the end of Lipkovskaya's residency at the Shanghai Theater Academy. She returned to the Soviet Union after the production, but actors and students fondly remembered her as the Madame Lipkovskaya who taught them how to "live" on the stage. Their Madame Lipkovskaya did not return to China to direct other plays because political conditions between the Chinese and the Soviets deteriorated rapidly. Due to a

series of complex political circumstances, the relationship between China and its most important socialist ally declined in 1960, and the Soviet Union recalled some 1,400 scientists and experts from China (Spence 1990, 589). Even though the Chinese government tried to gloss over the rift with such statements as "the imperialists will never succeed in their hopeless scheme to split the unity between the Chinese and the Soviet Parties and between the two countries," the situation did not improve (Hudson, Lowenthal, and MacFarquhar 1961, 42-45). In China, Mao's extremism created unprecedented famine and suffering during the Great Leap Forward campaign [*da yuejin*] in 1958-1960. Some 20 to 30 million people died "through malnutrition and famine" (Fairbank and Goldman 1998, 368). There was no room for theater, not to mention Shakespeare or his comedies.

In 1961, the Communist Party adjusted its extremist policy, after having witnessed its destructive force during the Great Leap Forward. The control over art and literature loosened briefly. Hu Dao revived *Much Ado* with the same group, now named The Experimental Theater Company of the Shanghai Theater Academy [*Shanghai xiju xueyuan shiyan jutuan*]. He preserved every detail of Lipkovskaya's *mise-en-scène*. There was certainly a degree of nostalgia involved, as staging Lipkovskaya's *Much Ado* invoked memories of the relatively peaceful time spent rehearsing with the Soviet director in the Shanghai Theater Academy. The same nostalgic feelings could also be identified in the audience's response (Hu 1961, Sun 1961, Liu 1961). Several reviews, for instance, mentioned the 1957 production, indicating that the audience was aware that this version reproduced the earlier production.

In 1979, three years after the devastating Cultural Revolution, Hu Dao revived Lipkovskaya's *Much Ado* once again, with the same cast. After the torment of the Cultural Revolution, Zhu Xijuan (who played Beatrice), Jiao Huang (who played Benedick), and other actors were all old and out of shape. However, in the eyes of the audience, they looked beautiful. As a first-year student who entered the Shanghai Theater Academy in 1978 (when higher education was re-established), Ruru Li saw the 1979 production with her cohort of students. She recalls that the performance was exciting and refreshing to them, particularly after ten years of being sealed off from anything outside China. Further, to the generation emerging from the devastating Cultural Revolution, the Chinese title of *Much Ado* was an apt and "beautiful expression" of what they hoped for: that the nightmarish Cultural Revolution was much ado about nothing and that China could be rehabilitated. They hoped that *Much Ado About Nothing* would "excise [their] bitter experience with the easy and confident wisdom that the title implies" (Li 2003, 59).

## Conclusion

While escapism, accompanied by the rhetoric of art for art's sake, ran rampant in the 1957 production of *Much Ado*, strong nostalgic sentiments could be found in the 1979 re-run. When the nightmarish Cultural Revolution ended in 1976, many people had a similar experience of waking up from slumber, hastening to pick up what they were forced to leave off ten years before. Therefore, Hu Dao intentionally preserved the costume, performing style, stage design, set, and all other details from Lipkovskaya's 1957 production, in which Hu had also been involved. Reviving a production that had had a decisive effect on their acting careers seemed the most apt statement against politicization that the actors could make. It was as if Chinese theater history were starting up again. Reviving the 1957 production — preserved in a pristine state, as it were — rehabilitated the actors' work and satisfied their nostalgia. Zhu Xijuan wrote in reminiscence: "Eighteen years after the first performance [of *Much Ado*], I can finally understand the play better and know how to play Beatrice" (Zhu 1980, 29). In a similarly excited tone, the director discussed the re-run in relation to the ten-year gap between the first production and its post-Cultural Revolution revival. Hu Dao, in an effort to rehabilitate Chinese spoken-drama theater after the Cultural Revolution, indicated that his revival of *Much Ado* in 1979 was meant to show audiences "what a *huaju* production should look like and what a real Shakespeare play should look like" (Letter to Ruru Li, September 22, 1998; quoted in English in Li 2003, 58).

The irony in this pursuit of Maoist "realism" is that Lipkovskaya's *mise-en-scène* actually had deleted any connection with the contemporary world, which probably was the only safe way to respond to Mao's call for socialist realism. This not only made *Much Ado* a safe text, but also turned it into a purely fantastic world that was irrelevant to the present. As lecturers and students such as Hu Weimin were being arrested for their "ideological crimes," the rehearsal room for *Much Ado* literally became both a physical haven from persecution and an intellectual oasis apart from the harsh reality of ideological oppression.

On the other hand, in 1979 Hu's "real" realist Shakespeare was very much part of the post-revolutionary Chinese imaginary of humanism and the Soviet version of world culture. This Soviet-Chinese joint venture created a Marxist-Maoist canon by adapting a Shakespearean play. During this period, Shakespeare's plays were given several cultural functions: as a state-approved ideological apparatus, a foreign — hence safe — text filtered through the "Soviet experts" recruited by the Chinese government, and as a text that had been banned during the tumultuous years of Cultural Revolution. Interestingly, the "local" Chinese communist ideologies that dictated this transformational process were themselves filtered through other discourses, including Marxism, Soviet Communism, and Maoism. As Clifford Geertz observes in his study of the Balinese Negara,



"[T]he real is as imagined as the imaginary" (Geertz 1980, 136).<sup>14</sup> The perceived use value of "Shakespeare" in support of Chinese ideologies engendered a reality for both the Chinese audience and the Chinese authorities. That reality proved to be so desirable and attractive that a carbon-copy revival was staged eighteen years after the original Soviet-Chinese collaborative production. The unique case of this Soviet-Chinese *Much Ado* testifies to the presence of multiple levels of discourse embedded in Shakespearean appropriation, which go beyond the basic dichotomy between presentism and historicism (figures 6 and 7). The way in which this Chinese production of *Much Ado About Nothing* envisioned "Shakespeare" and "China" generated enough nostalgic sentiment to prompt the Chinese audience to go see an otherwise dull carbon-copy reenactment of an event that had taken center stage almost two decades earlier.

In the postcolonial and global era, the appropriation of canonical works has frequently been seen as an act of political intervention. However, in the history of Shakespearean appropriation, there have been a few unusual cases that, like this Chinese *Much Ado*, thrive on a vision of apolitical theater. The etymology of the term "appropriation" suggests an act to make something one's own. Ironical as it might seem, the popularity and forte of the Soviet-Chinese *Much Ado* came from its denial of any possible connection between the contemporaneity of the Chinese and the historicity of Shakespeare. It was precisely because there was no perceived connection — on either the personal or political level — that it was a safe and desirable production for tumultuous times. Its curious insistence on interpreting *Much Ado* as an apolitical comedy that is irrelevant to mid-twentieth century Chinese realities, however, contradicts its other claim, that this comedy portrays the "bright" and hopeful aspects of Communist China. This was not perceived to be a problem or a contradiction by the production's audiences, because realities and histories were manufactured to frame the entire cultural event.

### Notes

1. I thank the two anonymous reviewers for their generous and insightful comments. I am also indebted to the input from the organizer (Irena Makaryk) and members of the seminar on "Wartime Shakespeare" at the 2005 Shakespeare Association of America annual meeting in Bermuda, where an earlier form of this essay was first circulated. In particular, Dieter Mehl's and Barry Gaines's responses proved to be invaluable. Field research for this essay, which is part of a book project, was made possible by a number of grants from the Institute for Arts and Humanities, President's Fund for Research, and the Global Fund at Pennsylvania State University. I am grateful to these sources for supporting my work.

2. *Much Ado About Nothing*, directed by Yevgeniya K. Lipkovskaya, was translated by Zhu Shenghao and staged by the Shanghai Theater Academy (1957); it was revived by Shanghai Theater Academy's Experimental Huaju Theater Company, directed by Hu Dao and Wu Li (1961), and revived by Shanghai Youth Huaju Theater Company, directed by Hu Dao (1979). The production was staged by graduates of the *biaoyan shizi jinxiu ban* [Program for Acting Teachers] of the Shanghai *xiju xueyuan* [Shanghai Theater Academy]. The 1957 production was very popular. It was performed from June 19 to July 1, and again from September 1 to 10, in the Experimental Theater of Shanghai Theater Academy. The performances in June and September of 1957 were attended by a total of over 16,000 people, a very large audience considering that the small theater seated only some 500 people. That same year, the production was staged for thirteen nights in Huairan Hall, Youth Arts Theater [*Qingnian yishu juchang*], and People's Theater [*Renmin juchang*] in Beijing between September 25 and October 27. It was staged for eleven nights in the People's Grand Theater [*Renmin da wutai*] in Shanghai between November 23 and December 1, 1957. *Shashibiya da cidian* [Encyclopedia Dictionary of Shakespeare], eds. Zhang Xixiang et al. (Beijing: *Shangwu yinshu guan*, 2001), 1377. The 1961 production was staged in the Shanghai Art Theater [*Shanghai yishu juchang*] from May 16 to June 12 and from July 1 to July 9, 1961. The revived production toured Dalian and Shenyang in northeastern China in July and August, 1961. It was staged in Shanghai again from November 11 to November 16, 1961. The 1979 production was performed on April 21, 1979. This final production was broadcast live by Shanghai Television.
3. Boris Andreevich Lavrenov (1891-1959) wrote *Razlom* in 1927 in honor of the tenth anniversary of the Great October Socialist Revolution. This heroic-revolutionary play remained in continuous production in Moscow for some fifty years.
4. The Chinese convention is followed. All family names precede given names, unless the person has published in a Western language, using her or his name differently.
5. Hu Dao recalled that the double curtains acquired a "life [of their own]" in Lipkovskaya's hands. The design afforded a great variety of ways to open, close, and utilize the curtains and the stage space (Li 2003, 64). No first-hand material is available for this particular comment from Hu Dao.
6. *Twelfth Night*, translated by Zhu Shenghao and directed by Kazansky, *Beijing dianying zhuanke xuexiao* [Beijing Polytechnic School of Film Art], graduating class, 1957; *Twelfth Night*, translated by Cao Weifeng, directed by Ling Zhihao, *Shanghai dianying yanyuan jutuan* [Shanghai Film Actors' Theater Company], 1958; revived in 1959 and 1962 with the same translation and director.

7. In the earlier phase of Chinese Shakespeare (in the Republican China period, 1911-1949), *Macbeth* was staged as a political allegory against Yuan Shikai, who restored the imperial government and crowned himself emperor.
8. Mao Zedong's "*Zai Yan'an wenyi zuotan hui shang de jianghua* [Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art]" was delivered at a congregation of the Chinese Communist Party cadres in May, 1942. Mao spoke twice at the historic meeting, Forum on Literature and Art, in Yan'an, an ancient city that was the location of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party. Mao's lectures were published in *Jiefang ribao* [Liberation Daily] 19 October 1943; reprinted in *Mao Zedong xuanji* [Selected works of Mao Zedong] (Beijing: *Renmin chubanshe*, 1990).
9. Hu Dao, the assistant to Lipkovskaya and the director of the 1961 and 1979 re-runs, indicated that the young actors were eager to break out of their isolation from the political world ("Interview with Hu Dao on September 1998 and January 2001," Li 2003, 254 n. 3).
10. Karl Marx's writings include lengthy quotations from Aeschylus, Sophocles, Shakespeare, and Goethe. For example, Marx quotes the Schlegel-Tieck German translation of *Timon of Athens* (4.3) to support his argument about the power of money in bourgeois society (Tucker 1972, 80-81). Marx's daughter, Eleanor Marx, recalled in 1895 that "Shakespeare was the Bible of [their] house, seldom out of our hands or mouths." By the time she was six, she "knew scene upon scene of Shakespeare by heart" (E. Marx 1973, 147). "Mohr" was Marx's nickname. In *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* (1844), Marx cited passages from *Timon of Athens* to support his argument about the alienating power of money. Elsewhere, Marx venerated Shakespeare, along with Homer and Honoré de Balzac (Marx and Engels 1988; 1956).
11. The phrase that Marx and Engels used on this subject in their letters was "Shakespeare's vivacity and wealth of action" ("Letter," April 19, 1859, quoted in Baxandall and Morawski 1973, 145).
12. In 1398: "[Armenia] is most merye londe, with herbes, corne, wodes and fruyte" (J. Trevisa, trans., Bartholomaeus Anglicus's *De Proprietatibus Rerum*) f. 172; in 1596: "To mery London, my most kindly Nurse"; Spenser, "Prothalamion" 128; in 1816: "Their moonlight walks and merry evening games"; Jane Austen, *Emma* 1.4.52, cited in Oxford English Dictionary, 2d ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).
13. Julian Barnes's novel, *England, England*, is a recent example. In the novel, a series of circumstances returns modern England to a pastoral, pre-industrialized state (Barnes 1998).
14. Geertz sets out to write a poetics, not a mechanics, of power. His study emphasizes "spectacle, toward ceremony, toward the public dramatization of the ruling obsessions of Balinese culture: social inequality and status pride" and concludes that Negara was "a theatre state." Contrary to the case of Chinese Shakespeare in this period, in Geertz's case, the elaborate productions were

"not means to political ends." They were "the ends themselves," because "power served pomp, not pomp power" (Geertz 1980, 13).

### Online Resources

Shakespeare in Asia [cited 29 January, 2006]. <http://sia.Stanford.edu>. Online database that provides researchers, instructors and students of Shakespeare free access to visual and textual materials on Shakespearean performances and adaptations in Asia.

Shanghai Dramatic Arts Centre (English and Chinese) [cited 29 January, 2006]. <http://www.china-drama.com/>.

Shanghai Theatre Academy (English) [cited 29 January, 2006]. <http://www.cinaoggi.it/shanghai-theatre-academy/index.htm>.

Shanghai Theatre Academy (Chinese) [cited 29 January, 2006]. <http://www.sta.edu.cn/>.

Shanghai Cultural Information & Booking Centre (English) [cited 29 January, 2006]. [http://www.culture.sh.cn/allvenue\\_en.htm](http://www.culture.sh.cn/allvenue_en.htm).

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