

China

The Bard in Beijing: how Shakespeare is subverting China

Forty years after the lifting of Mao's ban, the plays herald a new kind of cultural revolution

Yuan Yang in Beijing OCTOBER 5, 2018



In many classrooms around the world, it is Shakespeare who breaks the bad news. Humans are weak, immoral, lustful, deceitful, murderous, jealous, decrepit and insane — and in the pursuit of love and power, death and disaster are all too common.

But in modern China, the story of human frailties, as timelessly told by an Elizabethan playwright, is not the only enlightenment that schoolchildren and theatregoers stand to gain. New, creative ways of teaching the plays in schools and performing them in theatres, coinciding with a surge of interest in Shakespeare, are stretching Chinese families' experience of art and education under an otherwise increasingly censorious regime.

During the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s and 1970s, Shakespeare was banned along with all forms of drama except revolutionary plays and operas. But the Bard is now experiencing the latest and most intense of several revivals in recent decades.

When a new Royal Shakespeare Company translation of *The Tempest* opened in Beijing this summer, the tickets sold out within days — as they did for the RSC's Chinese-language version of *King Lear* last year.

In the southern Chinese city of Fuzhou, [a replica of the house in Stratford-upon-Avon](#) where Shakespeare was born will be built next year, as part of a deal with the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust. A whole new town will be built at the same time, its main draw the new "Stratford quarters". (When the then prime minister Wen Jiabao came to the UK in 2011, he even paid a visit to the original dwelling.)

Shakespeare sells well in China, says Duncan Lees, who researches drama at the University of Warwick, because his work is seen as "safe, revered, and as respectable 'high culture'".



British director Tim Supple talking with actors ahead of a performance of a Chinese production of Shakespeare's 'The Tempest' at the National Centre for the Performing Arts, Beijing, in August © Gilles Sabrié

That, conveniently, can make Shakespeare seem more anodyne than he is, he adds. “Shakespeare often flies under the radar politically in China today, yet the plays and poems actually contain a lot of potentially very contentious material. There’s a space for subversive education through Shakespeare everywhere.”

In Xi’s closely controlled China, *The Tempest’s* themes of liberty and identity clearly carry political ideas at odds with the ruling party — “thought is free”, the sprite Ariel sings. The implicit challenge to the status quo extended from the ideas to the production itself at the National Centre for the Performing Arts in Beijing. It offered new freedoms to the Chinese actors from the centre’s in-house theatre ensemble. Under the guidance of director Tim Supple, this was the first time they had been invited to experiment with performance and alter the text.

“Chinese theatre productions are planned, like building a block of flats. But Tim gives us the raw construction materials — we don’t know what the building will look like,” says Dong Wenliang, who plays Ariel. “Tim has made us braver.”

A member of the production team said she had at first felt thrown by Supple’s approach: “Traditional Chinese directors will tell you exactly what line to walk across the stage.”

The Tempest is part of the RSC’s project to translate Shakespeare’s plays into Chinese, at the same time as translating Chinese classics into English, aided by £1.8m in UK government funding. Greg

Doran, the RSC's artistic director, said he was inspired to commission the translations after speaking to a Chinese friend. "They said that existing translations were rather archaic, young people don't understand them, and actors find them difficult to perform."



Actors, musicians and the director put their hands together before the start of the performance © Gilles Sabrié

Zhao Han, a freelance playwright translating *Macbeth* for the RSC, says that existing translations are "for the page, not the stage".

As a result, the RSC has tried to produce "theatrically viable, actor-friendly, and audience-accessible" translations. *The Tempest's* translator So Kwok Wan says: "Modern Chinese language and modern Chinese theatre have changed over the past 100 years. It is time to address the accessibility of Shakespeare in China with some new translations."

Under Xi, the opportunities for creative expression in the arts have shrunk. Two theatre directors complained of the increasingly stringent censorship process — all scripts, alongside videos of rehearsals, must be submitted to the Ministry of Culture and Tourism's Department of Art. "The department is not staffed by people with an arts background, and even if they have one, they are not free to use their own judgment," says one director.

"The censorship board's tastes operate rather like the US evangelical church," says Joe Graves, artistic director at Peking University's Institute of World Theatre and Film. He diplomatically highlights that theatre is often socially censored in the west, too, "by the politics of theatre leaders



People taking souvenir photos with a poster for the performance at the National Centre for the Performing Arts, Beijing © Gilles Sabrié

Plays in China that have been censored in the past year involve swearing, homosexuality and corrupt police — although directors are left to decipher the reasons from a vaguely worded ministerial notice, which usually simply states the play has too much profanity.

China's theatre world, like many of its realms, is separated into two spheres. "Inside the system" is the sphere of government-funded theatres, such as the NCPA, which usually stage classics according to a canonised style, and have in-house directors and actors. Because of its government links, the NCPA receives a greater level of censorship scrutiny than most private theatres, which thrive "outside the system".

A government official attended the dress rehearsal of *The Tempest*, but only asked for three changes to the text: to remove three instances of the word "f***", according to a member of the

production. “We changed it to ‘screw’, so every time someone says ‘screw’, please just imagine they said ‘f***’”.

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Joe Graves, artistic director at Peking University’s Institute of World Theatre and Film

That distinction will hardly matter to Chinese millennials, whose new-found leisure spending and curiosity for all things foreign and novel have led them to become a booming market for theatre tickets. Graves estimates 1,800 new theatres have been built in the past three years across China, helped by government incentives for property developers.

Although government scrutiny over drama is increasing, the Chinese audience Shakespeare’s

drama can reach is growing too, in staged translations and in classroom workshops. On the question of Shakespeare’s influence in contemporary life, Doran quotes from Sonnet 66 — “art made tongue-tied by authority” — and adds, “that is something we have to challenge wherever we find it. Theatre is a way of doing so.”

Liu Peiqiao, a 10-year-old from the central Chinese city of Zhengzhou, this summer put aside his holiday homework to become the prince of Bohemia. “It was fun. The teachers let us run around the room like crazy.”

Liu took his starring role in *The Winter’s Tale* at the Globe theatre in London, where he joined a study group of primary school children for a week-long Shakespearean drama course. His mother, Li Yan, said she wanted her son to “experience different cultures and forms of education”. She herself has never left China.



Actor Yu Mengchao waiting to go on stage as Trinculo © Gilles Sabrié

Although the reverse is rarely true, Chinese students are familiar with the classics of English literature. Many first read Shakespeare in the form of Charles and Mary Lamb's adaptations for children, which were translated into Chinese in 1904. The Chinese version of *The Merchant of Venice* is on the compulsory Chinese curriculum for year nine, translated by Zhu Shenghao, the most famous Chinese Shakespeare translator, who began his work in the 1930s.

In the typical Chinese classroom, teachers can find themselves marshalling 50 or more pupils. Lines from books are chanted in unison and poetry is recited; an efficient form of rote learning. Dramas are rarely acted out. But over the past few years, fashions have started to shift.

"There is a drive in some [Chinese] schools to have more creative education," says Lees. "As a result, they're flying in specialists on drama in education from the UK."

Graves adds: "Teaching drama for performance has barely existed in Chinese universities since the Cultural Revolution, with the exception of a very few performing arts colleges." Over a decade, the national Chinese Universities Shakespeare Festival grew from 40 participating universities to more than 1,000, offering many students their first opportunity to act.

"Because of the fierce competition of the educational system, kids may have good grades but they don't have an opportunity to develop their characters or interests," says Yu Haiyang, who quit his job as a secondary school teacher last year to set up Zhengzhou Future Youth Education, the non-

opportunities for them to do so. Otherwise they would just be very obedient, very hard-working kids, but suppressing their personalities.”



Olivia Mace, of the Globe, with school teachers in Zhengzhou, China, during a week-long theatre workshop in August © Gilles Sabrié

At a workshop for primary schoolteachers organised by Yu at the Zhengzhou Dandelion Primary School, Olivia Mace, from the Globe, breaks two classroom taboos in one go. She sits her trainees in a circle, rather than in rows, and on the floor so they can move easily, rather than on chairs. “We are allowed to ask, to think, to question, because that’s what playing is, and that’s what we’re doing,” she says.

Mace is teaching interactive formats inspired by Shakespearean drama to tell Chinese stories, such as *The Butterfly Lovers* and *Journey to the West*. “It can be difficult for participants to realise they can learn through play,” she says, “but I think drama should be part of education, not additional to it.”

In the break, the teachers reflect on this new way of thinking. “The trainer’s body language and ways of making things interactive are great,” says Sally Wang, an English teacher from the Erqi Foreign Language Primary School. “I think many Chinese teachers are worried about being too expressive and open. They’re afraid of losing face in front of the students, or worried that if they open up their students, they won’t be able to put a lid on them!”

Class sizes in Zhengzhou can stretch to over 70, but there are increasing time pressures, too. Over

burden of “non-teaching” activities, such as Communist Youth League meetings and teacher training sessions organised by the Ministry of Education. Several teachers estimated non-teaching meetings and associated work takes up as much as 30-60 per cent of their total working time.



Refayili being made up for his part as a spirit © Gilles Sabrié

Although officially organised teacher trainings can be helpful, they can also be an ironic reflection of the classroom format. Sessions often involve hundreds of teachers listening to a presentation online or in a hall, then submitting an essay as homework. It is not hard to understand why some teachers can be puzzled to walk into the Globe’s workshops to find no podium, projector or even chairs.

“Given the global nature of Chinese society now, and the number of students who come into western universities, I would think the kind of self-led, critical thinking we teach is vital for them to feel comfortable within other organisations,” says Georgia Ellinas, head of learning at the Globe. “The Chinese teachers we work with welcomed the fact that children would have to do a lot more of the thinking and the work, rather than relying on the teacher for an answer.”

As Liu says of his brush with *The Winter’s Tale*: “I like drama because I can only live one life. But through plays I can live many.”

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