"For ne'er was a story of such wit" Nostalgic Tragicomedy in Chinese Romeo and Juliets

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“For ne'er was a story of such wit”
Nostalgic Tragicomedy in Chinese Romeo and Juliets

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement
for the degree of Bachelors of Arts in English from
The College of William and Mary

by

Megan Ammirati

Accepted for ___________________________________
(Honors, High Honors, Highest Honors)

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Williamsburg, VA
April 28, 2010
“For ne'er was a story of such wit”
Nostalgic Tragicomedy in Chinese *Romeos and Juliets*

… the world is broad and wide.
*Romeo and Juliet*
III.3.17

...这是一个广大世界
<<罗密欧与朱丽叶>>
第三场 同前 十七
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Acknowledgments

This paper would not be possible without the wonderful counsel of Professor Paula Blank. Her many hours of guidance and countless helpful suggestions made the process of writing this thesis delightful. Professor Roy Chan was gracious enough to support this project with a great deal of feedback and time. Thanks to Professors Erin Minear and Colleen Kennedy for agreeing to serve on my thesis committee and assisting me with their valuable opinions. Professor Yanfang Tang also provided invaluable feedback and advice. The primary resources provided by Professor Alexander Huang of Penn State were indispensable.

Selection and Presentation of Texts

I have accessed the artifacts in the following pages through a variety of methods. I had the pleasure of seeing Romeo & Zhu Yingtai live in Shanghai in the Summer of 2008. After this production peaked my interests in Romeo and Juliet, Professor Alexander Huang provided a DVD of the Yunnan Opera Zhuo Mei yu Ah Luo from his archive. Yi qi liang fu is readily accessible on DVD. I happened upon the song Liang Shanbo yu Zhu Liye when one of my Chinese classmates requested it at a karaoke bar in Beijing. Unless otherwise noted, the English translations for citations from these works are my own.
Introduction

One of the most universally praised playwrights of the Western world, William Shakespeare has been transformed into a global commodity, transplanted and produced “in states unborn and accents yet unknown” (Julius Caesar, 3.1.127). In the “unknown” Chinese-speaking world, Shakespeare's texts have been performed with increasing frequency for one hundred years (Huang, Chinese Shakespeares 2). Yet the meaning of “Shakespeare” in East Asia has varied over a number of decades and localities. The playwright has been upheld as a model of Marxist study in one decade and banned outright by Maoists in the next. Some Chinese cities celebrate Shakespeare for his humanist ideals while others associate him with colonial imposition. Regardless of the breadth of Shakespeare's applications, tracing the reception of a single text reveals that many Chinese adaptors interpret his works in a more cohesive manner that it first appears.

Most interestingly, Sinophone Romeo and Juliet productions are predominantly tragicomic. That is to say that Shakespeare's original tragic tone is mitigated by a comical tone or a happy ending. This general trend is universal across production styles.

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1 In a monolithic region like China each municipality has experienced history and built a culture in a manner that is separate from the whole. In Transnational Chinese Cinemas: Identity, Nationhood, Gender Sheldon Lu describes the unified cultural identity of China as “transnational,” meaning the concept of being Chinese spans numerous countries, cities, and governments. In the modern era a singular “China” does not even exist politically. The term actually refers to a group of provinces fragmented by history and defined by unique cultural identities. For want of a better term, from here on the words “Chinese” and “China” can be assumed to refer to “Greater China” (The People’s Republic of China [PRC], Hong Kong, and Taiwan) unless otherwise specified.

2 Artifacts from Renaissance England were carried to China by missionaries as early as 1582 but Shakespeare was not specifically mentioned until Lin Zexu's volume on world cultures was published in 1839 (Huang, Chinese Shakespeares 2-3). The stories themselves entered Chinese society in 1903 with the introduction of Charles and Mary Lamb’s Tales from Shakespeare. In another eighteen years, Gu Zhongyi’s translation of The Merchant of Venice introduced China to the first original text performance. Zhu Shenghao’s prose translations of twenty-seven plays in the 1930s took further steps to increase the accessibility of the foreign author (Levith 10-13).
and geographic locations, indicating that the genre shift is motivated by a specific cultural experience.

As I will argue in the pages that follow, nostalgia is the underlying societal attitude that unites the disparate regions of the Chinese-speaking world and motivates the genre shift in *Romeo and Juliet*. Sinophone interpretations of *Romeo and Juliet* cast historical or temporal juxtapositions as the play's primary subject matter. In some adaptations, protagonists are separated by a temporal divide and in others the text is interpreted as an icon for universality that can transcend time. Whenever nostalgia becomes the focus of a production, adaptors are engaging a postmodern anxiety about time.\(^3\)

Nostalgia is intrinsically related to the genre-shift central to the Chinese reception of *Romeo and Juliet* as it provides both the motivation and methodology for the rejection of tragedy. These Chinese productions lighten the tone by fixating on an idealized past or comically reliving history with the benefit of contemporary hindsight. No matter what methods of adaptation are used, all of these productions employ nostalgia in order to achieve the same genre shift.

The temporal tension in Chinese *Romeo and Juliets* is unique in comparison to most Western 20\(^{th}\) century interpretations of Shakespeare's play. Anglo-American adaptations often place the societal tensions in the text along a cultural axis; they define

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\(^3\) Applying theories of postmodern society to China is a delicate task. It is true that many of the attitudes expressed in these interpretations subscribe to postmodern structures of feeling. For example Fredric Jameson's description of the postmodern experience of time is a valuable interpretative tool to analyze these sources (*Jameson, Postmodernism Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*). However, there is strong support for the assertion that Chinese society cannot be analyzed by way of a Western philosophy. While I am not trying to take a position on this debate, I have tried to strike a balance between avoiding broad generalizations and producing useful and specific interpretations.
the two dueling families through racial or cultural categories. For example, the 1956 comedy Romanov and Juliet sets the play in the cold war (Ustinov and Hopkins), a South African production locates the love story in apartheid (Quince), and the highly influential musical West Side Story casts Puerto Rican and Polish gangs as the feuding groups. However, Chinese society is largely homogenous and does not openly debate ethnic tensions. If Chinese productions were to subscribe to the relatively globalized expectation that Romeo and Juliet are members of an intercultural relationship, it would not necessarily relate well to the Chinese-speaking world. Sinophone productions instead focus on the ever-present societal concern about the progression of time to interpret the conflict in Romeo and Juliet.

The following four works have been selected as representations of tragicomic adaptation in four Chinese theatrical genres. Liang Shanbo yu Zhu Liye is a 21st century pop song that references Shakespearean and Chinese folk tale protagonists to prevent a progression of time from dividing the singers (Cao and Zhou, 2006). Yi qi liang fu (One Husband Too Many) is a loose 1988 Hong Kong screen adaptation of Shakespeare's text that makes light of the female lead's choice between an old-fashioned Romeo figure and his modern business-minded friend. The Yunnan flower-lantern opera titled Zhuo Mei yu Ah Luo historicizes the source material to place it during an idealized past where ethnic differences are integrated into everyday life. Finally, the Shakespearean spinoff Romeo & Zhu Yingtai tempers the play's tragedy by contrasting a grandmother's modern life with her Shakespearean affair seventy years in the past. Each adaptation of the source text

communicates a nostalgic experience of time. It is this nostalgic imagination that softens
the tragedy in *Romeo and Juliet* and transforms it into a redemptive tragicomedy.

In summary, Chinese adaptations of *Romeo and Juliet* are not necessarily
nostalgic for Shakespeare, but rather nostalgic through Shakespeare. To metaphorize this
process, an adaptation of any source material involves layering multiple pieces of
information as if adaptors are stacking microscope slides. Each slide contains a unique
type of information but the degree to which it is visible to the audience is variable; some
slides are more transparent than others. In the case of these four artifacts, these slides
may include Shakespeare's source text, Baz Lurhman's *Romeo and Juliet*, a Chinese
opera, a specific incident in Chinese history, or numerous other lenses that comprise the
adaptation. Occasionally, an adaptor will "look through" the Shakespearean lens and
erase the playwright's cultural difference in order to produce an end-product that is
purportedly more Chinese. In other cases, productions will overlay and balance the
Shakespeare lens with Chinese sources to amalgamate a blended performance. For some
adaptors, Shakespeare will become highlighted so it rises over the additional levels of
background material.

Nostalgia is the force that determines the opacity of each lens. It is the
compulsion that tints the content of these sources and transforms them into appealing
illusions. Some influences are attractive only when they are transparent and others
require a spotlight to fulfill the nostalgic desire. In the final step of the process, a
nostalgic appropriation will stack one lens on top of the other and produce one, final
product.
In the following pages, four productions, or rather four stacks of lenses, will be interpreted with a dual perspective. First they will be analyzed in terms of their specific reception of Shakespeare's original *Romeo and Juliet*. The subsequent step will be to decipher their overall statement about the nostalgic desires of Chinese society.

**i. Adaptation and Fidelity**

These four productions are adaptations of original source material, many of which have yet to be explored in depth by scholars and critics. For this reason it is important to place them within a suitable theoretical framework. Of course this task is complicated by the wide range of performance media that can be categorized as Shakespeare adaptations. While many Western directors can produce radical reinterpretations and still escape accusations of textual betrayal, Chinese adaptations are inextricably tied to accusations of misinterpretation. Before using my own methods to analyze these interpretations, I would like to challenge the validity of using fidelity as a test for an adaptation's value.

The authors in James Naremore's collection of essays titled *Film Adaptation* combat the traditionally moralistic language employed to assess adaptation. Robert Stam's essay “Beyond Fidelity: The Dialogics of Adaptation” explains the problem of using traditional adaptive terms:

> The notion of “fidelity” is essentialist in relation to both media involved. First, it assumes that a novel “contains” an extractable “essence”... hidden “underneath” the surface details of style...But in fact there is no such transferable core: a single novelistic text comprises a series of verbal

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6 Interestingly, the anxiety over textual fidelity in the Western world is a different sort of “temporal anxiety,” namely nostalgia over the 16th century rejuvenation of the English language. Because Shakespeare is considered a paragon of English literature and has been employed as a tool to champion his culture, Elizabethan England has achieved an idealized position in the narrative of literary development. The nostalgia in Chinese productions has far more relevance to East Asian modernization. However, Anglo-American adaptations do engage a type of nostalgia when they privilege fidelity.
signals that can generate a plethora of possible readings, including even readings on the narrative itself. (57)

Film Adaptation's dismissal of these valuations and emphasis on adaptive techniques as more than just inferior tools of imitation is invaluable to the analysis of intercultural reception studies.

In relation to Shakespeare in particular, Naremore speaks of the power well known authors have to create a national mythology:

> The most highly “adaptable” authors - Twain and Shakespeare - are preeminent examples in the Anglo-American world- have been especially important to the formation of national myths... But this mythic or ideological dimension of adaptation... is often overlooked because of what Bazin refers to as “a rather modern notion for which the critics are in a large part responsible: that of the untouchability of a work of art.” (14)

This theoretical background begins to explain the different approaches to authorial authenticity found in the East Asia and the Anglo-American world. Shakespearean appropriation in China is not as bound to the myth of Shakespeare's reputation.

Dennis Kennedy supplements Naremore's dismissal of the standard of fidelity in his essay “Shakespeare Without His Language,” contending that Shakespeare may be appreciated without a textual adherence to his plays. Kennedy explains that “almost from the start of his importance as the idealized English dramatist there have been other Shakespeares, Shakespeares not dependent upon English and often at odds with it” (134). He suggests that cultures that do not speak English are in some ways benefited, rather than impeded, by the process of translation. In his opinion the privilege of modernizing Shakespeare though translation prevents the audience from perceiving the text as an alienated and antiquated piece of literature. Chinese audiences thus have a
“more direct access to the power of the plays” (136). They hear Shakespearean characters speaking in the same register of language that they use on the street. Anglo-American audiences are distanced by the gap between their own speech patterns and the dialect in the Elizabethan text.

**ii. Chinese Nostalgia**

One of the first concepts that requires a definition here is nostalgia. Susan Stewart's *On Longing* and Fredric Jameson's *The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* explain how the expression of nostalgia is a reaction to contemporary society. Stewart begins by defining the concept of nostalgia, or what she calls “longing.” She explains it as a desire to reconnect with an imagined Utopia that is the past:

> Nostalgia is a sadness without an object, a sadness which creates a longing that of necessity is inauthentic because it does not take part in lived experience. Rather it remains behind and before that experience... the past it seeks has never existed except as narrative, and hence, always absent, that past continually threatens to reproduce itself as a felt lack. (23)

According to her interpretation, nostalgia is a rather desperate and hopeless ritual:

> “Nostalgia is the repetition that mourns the inauthenticity of all repetition and denies the repetition's capacity to form identity” (23). If this experience is so negative, why is it so frequently practiced?

Stewart begins to explain the appeal of longing with a metaphor that she names “the souvenir.” Just like a postcard or toy figurine from a trip, Stewart's metaphor condenses a complex reality into an idealized form. Through narrative, a souvenir “substitutes a context of perpetual consumption for its context of origin. It represents not the lived experience of its maker but the “secondhand” experience of its
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possessor/owner” (135). The desire to rediscover an origin is an important quality of nostalgia. How does the Chinese choice to express nostalgia through the adaptation of a foreign work reflect this same yearning? Stewart's theories justify Chinese Shakespeare adaptation by asserting that “[t]he souvenir seeks distance (the exotic in time and space), but it does so in order to transform and collapse distance into proximity to or approximation with, the self. The souvenir therefore contracts the world in order to expand the personal” (xii). Although Stewart almost certainly was referring to an abstract sense of spatial and temporal distance, the statement can still be applied to the span between Elizabethan England and modern China, or contemporary audiences and the fictive pasts to which Shakespearean adaptations journey.

Fredric Jameson is less concerned with defining nostalgia; instead he explains why contemporary society is committed to this practice and describes what it feels like to function in a nostalgic atmosphere. To Jameson, one of the primary symptoms of the postmodern world is its dependence on pastiche, or “the imitation of a peculiar, or unique, idiosyncratic style, the wearing of a linguistic mask, speech in a dead language” (17). What Jameson terms “nostalgia films,” or for our purposes nostalgic appropriations, “...restructure the whole issue of pastiche and project it onto a collective and social level where the desperate attempt to appropriate a missing past is now refracted through the iron law of fashion change and the emergent ideology of the generation” (19). The “colonization of the present by the nostalgia mode” (20) can be observed in the Chinese imagining of pasts by use of “stylistic connotation.” For example the audience is taught to understand Shanghai in the 1930s as it is expressed
through its “1930s-ness.” Jameson's application to Chinese *Romeo and Juliet* yields a very useful analysis, but both he and Stewart wrote theories that were meant to interpret broad societal behaviors.

Recent scholarship specifically focusing on the People's Republic of China has picked up on a common trope of nostalgia running through post-Mao consciousness. The relationship between the contemporary Sinophone world and its history is a tumultuous one. East Asia has been blazing down the roads of modernization and revolution for over one hundred years, producing a populous with complicated interpretations of their loyalty to their history and the past's place in the construction of the future. A vision of time as an active force that can violently change the course of individual lives is a product of an understanding of history unique to the Chinese culture.

In “Nostalgia as Content Creativity,” Wu Jing theorizes that the temporal ache in the PRC is shaped by three social forces: political, cultural, and popular pressure. Wu's interpretation of nostalgia returns to the historical origins of the word. The first citation of the term “nostalgia” (or in Chinese *xiangchou* 乡愁) dates to the 17th century, when it referred to a “kind of disease, occurring in people traveling far from home” (Wu, 360). China is suffering the same symptoms because the intense pace of industrialization has robbed the concepts of location, meaning, belonging, and values of their origins.

**iii. Shifting Genre**

One of the fundamental layers of background knowledge in any Chinese

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7 Although the last century has brought unprecedented changes to East Asia, the premise of societal rupture is actually very familiar to China. The Chinese concept of a “Mandate of Heaven” (*tianming*) justifies a successful rebellion with the premise that heaven will bless a just ruler and curse a tyrannical one. Because China also boasts an extended and uninterrupted record of the accession of rulers, the numerous examples of political upheaval are well-known. What is unique in the 21st century is the frequency and magnitude of revolution (Leung, 1).
Shakespeare adaptation is the reception of the source material in both the Western and Sinophone worlds. Most Shakespeare interpretations in China will diverge from the standard reception in Anglo-American culture. However *Romeo and Juliet* is significant because performances in both hemispheres are consistently separated by divergent understandings of genre.

The production history and worldwide reception of *Romeo and Juliet* meet a number of important criteria for a discussion of tragicomic adaptation. First, the frequency with which the play is performed guarantees a wide spectrum of interpretations. *Romeo and Juliet* also has an international performance history that includes globalized expectations for what a typical performance should contain: Romeo reaching toward an elevated balcony and the lovers draped over a tomb. On the other hand, the text and audiences worldwide still welcome bold departures from precedent. Finally, the mixture of comic and tragic elements that already exist in the text have aroused questions of genre for decades. This scholastic and theatrical history has paved the way for scholarship on the global reception of this source material.

Two specific elements of *Romeo and Juliet* appeal to the nostalgic imagination. First, the youth of the lovers has often been treated as a souvenir for sentimentality throughout the world. Romeo and Juliet have a passionate, spontaneous, and irrational affair that represents a common Western understanding of what it is like to fall in love for the first time. Although this viewpoint does not match the traditional Chinese perspective on love, the recent influx of Western media has changed the East Asia conception of love. Secondly, the play emphasizes the conclusion of societal strife. The Prince promises that
the two teens will be the final victims in a bloody conflict. To a culture that has been entrenched in endless waves of revolution and modernization for a century, this promised stability is a natural focal point for the nostalgic imagination.

Shifting the genre of *Romeo and Juliet* is not unique to China; it is instead the motivations and methods of the transformation that separate the two cultures. When Westerners occasionally make light of *Romeo and Juliet*, they do so at the expense of the play's inherently tragic ending. Chinese productions will try to rewrite the conclusion or mitigate the source's violence but Anglo-American productions over-emphasize the inevitability and savageness of the conclusion until it becomes comical. This pattern is epitomized in the naive predictions of similarly doomed teens in the Broadway musical *Reefer Madness*. Mary and Jimmy compare themselves to Shakespeare's lovers before they have finished reading *Romeo and Juliet* in English class, comically guessing that “...Romeo marries his Juliet / They have a baby/ And make lots of friends!/ That's prob'ly the way the play ends!” (Fickman, 12:20). The characters' violent deaths are also the site of comedy in the Reduced Shakespeare Company's parody. Performers make a point of exaggerating the death scenes: stabbing themselves an excessive number of times and throwing themselves around the stage in the throes of death (Reduced Shakespeare Company, 4:01). In the Anglo-American world, tragicomedy is achieved by juxtaposing frivolity with Romeo and Juliet's inevitably horrific conclusion; Sinophone productions produce tragicomedy by masking the violence or stressing an aspect of the text that is more positive.

Yet when Western directors imagine a Sinophone reception of *Romeo and Juliet*,
the assumption that the play must end in tragedy prevails. From the title alone, it is clear that the producers of *Romeo Must Die*, a 2000 Hollywood film that equates Asian gangsters to the Montagues, assume that the play must end tragically regardless of the locality where it is performed. Of course, the Western focus on the tragic elements of *Romeo and Juliet* is only one of many possible interpretations of the play.

While many of Shakespeare's tragedies undergo radical transformations when relocated to the Chinese-speaking world, *Romeo and Juliet* is unique in that the fatalistic love story is frequently transfigured into a comedy or an uplifting narrative. The directors and actors of *Romeo & Zhu Yingtai* all stressed in a 2008 interview with "City Beat" that the re-imagining of this tragic tale simply could not end in death:

> A person's life is full of pressure and stress. We don't want to add in any more from our play. So we don't want our audience to think about sad thoughts. It's already existing all around us so we should learn to think about happiness...Originally the hero died at the end of the story. The audience will feel bad about this happening. So we decided to keep him alive in the end. (City Beat, 5:06)\(^8\)

Why exactly do Chinese *Romeo and Juliets* so directly conflict with the Hollywood assertion that “Romeo Must Die?” Do adaptors desire to repress unpleasant truths about mortality or are they expressing a unique understanding of the text that does not rely on the deaths of Juliet and Romeo?

China has played host to numerous Shakespearean satires so the assumption that the Chinese theatre scene favors comedy is easily supported.\(^9\) However many other

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\(^8\) English translation from the subtitles provided by “City Beat”

\(^9\) One of the best examples of a Chinese Shakespearean parody is *Shamlet*, a drama about a fictional Taiwanese theatre troupe's botched attempt to produce *Hamlet*. Although the characters take the text quite seriously, actors quit their parts mid-scene, props go missing, and the title itself is a well-intentioned typo. The result is an uproarious comedy that questions *Hamlet*’s relevance to Taiwanese society (Huang, “Impersonation, Autobiography, and Cross-Cultural Adaptation”).
Shakespearean tragedies, such as *Macbeth*, *King Lear*, and *Hamlet*, have been produced with an emphasis on tragedy while the production history of the story of the star-crossed lovers has been more uniformly tragicomic.\(^\text{10}\) China's struggles with the tragic genre cannot be the only reason for this particular text's reception in the Sinophone world.

This inclination is at least partially explained by Chinese theatrical precedent.\(^\text{11}\) At the crux of the genre dispute is the assertion that Chinese dramas cannot be tragic. William Dolby explains that many traditional Chinese plays lack the “pure earnestness and flawlessly attained, ineluctable, unmixedly sad destinies” (47) expected in Western tragedies. Instead, many iconic Chinese dramas veer away from a purely tragic conclusion by mitigating sorrow with scenes that offer justice and reunion to injured parties. The necessity for an optimistic or redemptive conclusion was then perpetrated for different reasons in the socialist era. In the 1960s, theatrical discourse began to assert that tragedy would soon be replaced by comedies and *zhengju* (meaning “positive dramas” or tragicomedies). In the opinion of the Communist Party, tragedy was only appropriate in plays that depicted class struggle prior to 1949. However in the Post-Mao era, tragedy made a comeback when theatre was permitted to address individual tragedies.

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10 Chinese adaptations of Shakespeare's tragedies appear in all sorts of incarnations. One of the most common adaptive trends is translating his tragedies into Chinese Operas. Shakespeare's tragic protagonists have gelled well with Chinese Opera conceptions of a hero. For example, Wu Hsing-kuo and his Contemporary Legend Theatre has made a career producing and touring his Shakespearean operas *Kingdom of Desire (Macbeth), Lear Alone* (a one-man *King Lear*), as well as other tragedies. Chinese full-text adaptations of Shakespeare's tragedies engage avant-garde methods and ideas. Beijing director Lin Zhaohua is known for his apocalyptic *Hamlet* and playfully corrupt *Richard III*. Singaporean director Ong Keng Sen produced a Shakespearean trilogy where he melded “Pan-Asian” traditional performance styles to interpret *King Lear, Othello, and Hamlet*. The tragedies in these avant-garde productions often comment on political or cultural issues.

11 Chinese drama originated out of the strife in the literary world of the Yuan dynasty (1271-1368). When China was under the rule of the foreign Mongols, the literati class was deprived of jobs. This upheaval inspired China's writers to find new outlets to comment on life under the new reign. The dramatic genre grew out of the comparatively formal and prestigious tradition of poetry, but never attained the respectability of other forms of artistic expression (Liu, 10). The debate over the genres in this medium started at the inception of Chinese drama and continues today.
instead of societal problems (Chen, *Acting the Right Part* 316). This history of rejecting or modifying tragedy established a precedent for tragicomic appropriations.

**iv. Chinese Equivalent Texts**

Another layer of background knowledge contributing to Chinese *Romeo and Juliet* productions is the collection of equivalent texts from the Sinophone culture. Chinese production teams work off of Shakespeare's original text (after translation) and are even exposed to some of the same popular culture references as their Anglophone colleagues. At the same time the Chinese culture works with additional intertextual references. Many of these cultural citations have been constructed by Chinese folk stories, popular songs, high literature, movies, or television shows. In particular, one pair of Chinese lovers have dominated the perception of *Romeo and Juliet* in the Sinophone world.

Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai are known as the “butterfly lovers.” The story of their love is a folk tale that was widely popular throughout China for centuries and continues to influence popular culture (Børdahl, 109). In fact, some scholars assert that it is the most commonly referenced work of Chinese folk culture in China and East Asia (Altenburger, 166). To summarize the general plot of the story, Zhu Yingtai was an uncommonly bright young girl who convinced her father to allow her to dress as a boy and attend school. While pursuing her education she met Liang Shanbo, the love of her life. Although the pair developed an unrivaled friendship over a period of a few years,

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12 The folk tale has enjoyed a long history of adaptation into various mediums. *Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai* was performed as a song-drama text in the Yuan (1271–1368) and Ming (1368–1644) dynasties. During the Qing dynasty (1644–1912) the story was adapted into a number of various forms of prosimetric oral performance. The 20th century continued this adaptive pattern from early stage *yueju* performances to China's first color movie in 1954. Finally in contemporary China, Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai has been adapted in multiple cartoons, feature films, and TV series (Altenburger, 168-70).
Liang never picked up on Zhu’s hints about her identity. Both students were upset when Zhu Yingtai was called home, but the smart girl made Liang promise to visit and marry her “sister.” Upon arrival, Liang Shanbo realized that his classmate was a woman and immediately confessed his love for her. He subsequently learned that her family had arranged a marriage for her and died of grief. On the day of Zhu's wedding to the groom that her family had chosen, gusts of wind stopped the bridal procession from moving past Liang Shanbo’s cemetery. Zhu Yingtai ran away and killed herself by jumping into her lover's grave. The two lovers had such pure and everlasting feelings for each other that they were reincarnated as a pair of butterflies so they could live together forever (Hung, 100). Compared to the last act of *Romeo and Juliet*, this conclusion is considerably more redemptive. Regardless of the positivity of the ending, the story is firmly defined as a tragedy in China.

The most significant difference between the romantic story lines in this folk tale and *Romeo and Juliet* is that the former offers a happy ending, or at least an emotionally satisfactory one. Both stories feature tragic deaths, but while Juliet and Romeo become solemn examples of the perils of blind hate, their Chinese companions are resurrected to enjoy an eternity together. Shakespeare does hint at the possibility of a reunion in the afterlife. Romeo briefly describes a dream that introduces the potential for resurrection:

If I may trust the flattering truth of sleep,  
My dreams presage some joyful news at hand...  
I dreamt my lady came and found me dead,  
Strange dream that gives a dead man leave to think!  
And breathed such life with kisses in my lips  
That I revived and was an emperor. (5.1.1-2, 6-9)\(^\text{13}\)

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\(^{13}\) All citations from *Romeo and Juliet* are taken from the Shakespeare Classics bilingual edition published by 中国国际广播出片版社.
However, because the audience does not witness such an event, the tone of the conclusion is considerably more depressing. The Sinophone audience (and reading public) is reassured that love really can overcome all obstacles.

v. A Second Star-Crossed Relationship: Romance and the State

Political influence is generally not overtly referenced in contemporary Chinese Romeo and Juliets. It is one of the pieces of background information that generally remains transparent in relation to other layers. However, any vision of love cannot help but respond to the interpretation of romance disseminated by the government and culture. While it is important to reveal the influence of state interpretations of love in all regions of China over literature and theatre, it is equally valuable to resist over-politicizing a play that has generally not attempted to engage politics. This balancing act is best represented by Liu Jianmei's monograph Revolution Plus Love.

Liu identifies two extreme interpretations of the relationship between romance and politics. On one hand, some theorists assert that revolution represses elements of an individual's personal life such as romantic, sexual, or friendly love. Other critics identify love and sexuality as the undercurrent for all revolutionary activities. Liu attempts to complicate these simplistic examinations by intertwining them, theorizing that “...neither of these interpretations...takes into account that no single model can adequately explain the often overlapping relationship between revolution and love” (2). The end result of her examination is a complicated vision of love and revolution as forces dependent on historical and geographic interpretations that can interact without always
falling into the same hierarchy of power.

As a romance, *Romeo and Juliet* is subject to the same ideology as the works covered in Liu's survey of Chinese texts. For this reason, many of the basic structures she uses for understanding romantic and political discourse illuminate what qualities of the following four adaptations are uniquely Chinese. For example, the turn of the century conceit that “[e]ven if free marriage was pursued, it was for the sake of the whole nation...”(12) play out almost one-hundred years later by the heroic lovers in the Yuxi opera *Zhuo Mei yu Ah Luo*. True to Liu's description of the interplay between love and the state, the couple from *Romeo & Zhu Yingtai* is an example of the opposite trend; the two lovers discover the political benefit of Chinese unity only after they have entered into the very personal experience of a romantic relationship.\(^\text{14}\) While it is important not to blindly follow the typical assumption that every artifact from modern China has been directly influenced by politics, the precedent of the various associations of love and revolution are an important inspiration for Chinese interpretations of *Romeo and Juliet*.

### vi. A History of the Chinese Reception of Shakespeare

Chinese scholars and Shakespearean critics alike have been drawn to the accelerating pace of Shakespeare adaptation in Chinese communities. Xiaomei Chen's exploration of Occidentalism places Shakespeare adaptations in a socio-political context. Wang Hui's political analysis of Chinese society suggests that these adaptations depoliticize the act of interpreting foreign works. Alexander Huang's survey of

\(^{14}\) Emphasizing marriage and romantic pairing is in itself an ideological statement. It is these moments that the positive elements of life such as mutual understanding and the reproduction of the human race repress negative qualities of life such as loneliness and death. Chinese productions of *Romeo and Juliet* similarly emphasize the love and subvert the deaths in the lives of their characters. This form of repression will be discussed in further detail later on.
Shakespearean adaptive techniques in China raises questions of genre and chronology located at the core of the nostalgic productions in the following pages.

Deciphering the methods through which Chinese adaptors bridge the cultural gap between themselves and an English playwright is a delicate task. Xiaomei Chen's book *Occidentalism* considers the trend of Shakespearean appropriations as a small fragment of her investigation of the Chinese construction of the West during the Post-Mao era.

Occidentalism, a discursive practice that, by constructing its Western Other, has allowed the Orient to participate actively and with indigenous creativity in the process of self-appropriation, even after being appropriated and constructed by Western Others. As a result of constantly revising and manipulating imposed Western theories and practices, the Chinese Orient has produced a new discourse, marked by a particular combination of the Western construction of China with the Chinese construction of the West, with both of these components interacting and interpreting each other. (Chen, 2)

Chinese Shakespearean adaptation is an example of this method of self-identification. Through the act of appropriating the voice of a Western author, Chinese Shakespeare adaptors turn their focus inwards to their own society and attempt to find a national voice.

Chen interprets Shakespeare's texts as available tools for expressing a counter-discourse in the 1980s. Because Western works had only recently become available after the Cultural Revolution, the choice to adapt Shakespeare already signified a comment on the relationship between the past and the present (*Occidentalism* 44). The cultural statement summarized by these 1980s Shakespeare performances can be interpreted in two ways. On one hand they strove to achieve an improbable degree of fidelity to Shakespeare's spirit and purportedly Western values. However the plays were applied to uniquely Chinese circumstances. Chen expresses this dichotomy as a fusion of an
“official” party discourse that employed Occidentalism to support nationalism and an “unofficial” discourse of intellectuals who wished to challenge the current structure of power (45). In Chen's first example (The Central Drama College 1980 performance of *Macbeth*) and in many of the following productions, performances of Shakespeare's Western text serve a purpose related to Chinese history:

By acting the roles of the Occidentalist Other on stage, the Chinese people experienced a catharsis. The memory of the past was cleansed and a reconciliation with the present was at least temporarily made possible during the limited time and space of the theatrical experience. Here the Occidentalist theater played an important role in the Chinese people's recovery from the tragedy of an immediate cultural past (46).

These Post-Mao productions are fixated on the opportunity to resurrect Shakespeare and elevate the playwright to a status he possessed in an imagined past. In reality, they are rewriting the texts and endowing them with a new Chinese meaning. For example when the Yunnan Flower Lantern Opera company chose to adapt Shakespeare, they paired the rehabilitation of the playwright with their own resurrection as an ethnicity. While Shakespeare is theoretically the focus of this celebration, it is the distinctly Chinese redemption story that is really at the center of the performance.

The important conclusion rising out of *Occidentalism* is that the decision to adapt Shakespeare is not entirely motivated by the playwright's membership in the Western canon, but his cultural identity still lies under the surface. Because many of the adaptations in this thesis were produced in later decades, the spirit of Occidentalism is a powerful force but not as pervasive as it was previously. However, Wang Hui has identified a separate but related trend in Chinese society that is taking the place of Occidentalism, depoliticization.
In “Depoliticized Politics, From East to West” Wang Hui asserts that post-Cultural Revolution China has been plagued by depoliticalization, or a dissolution of the political party system. In China this trend is a “negation of China's whole “revolutionary century” (29). In response to the ideological struggle of the 1960s, China “sought only to suppress this type of argument in the name of party unity... This not only resulted in a thoroughgoing suppression of the political life of the party, but also destroyed the possibility of exploring the relationship between the party and democracy” (33). In short, China is currently in the habit of removing ideological significance from those objects and actions that would usually warrant political analysis.

When tragicomic Shakespeares are analyzed through this political perspective, the nostalgia that has colored their interpretations is revealed to be depoliticizing Shakespeare. While the playwright was an icon of Occidental literature in the 1980s, these contemporary productions are attempting to read Shakespeare's texts without referencing his cultural background. As these adaptations attempt to rethink Chinese history through nostalgia, they are simultaneously struggling with the history of the source text. Alexander Huang's work elaborates on the interactions between this Elizabethan author and Chinese history.

In *Chinese Shakespeares*, Alexander Huang traces the shifting relationship between “China” and “Shakespeare” as signifiers over the last few centuries. Huang identifies three general trends in the adaptive attitudes applied to Shakespeare in Sinophone productions. Productions in the first category choose to value the universal over the local and attempt to reference other “authoritative” productions: “If the play
seems foreign, according to advocates of this approach, that only guarantees its aesthetics have been preserved in a way that benefits the audience” (16). This rather antiquated approach was more common in previous decades, but *Romeo & Zhu Yingtai* includes a parody of the style.

Taking the opposite approach, a production in the second category “assimilates Shakespeare into the fabric of worldviews and representational practices” (16). For example the Yuxi flower opera *Zhuo Mei yu Ah Luo* envelopes Shakespeare's Elizabethan themes with regional rituals and Chinese morality. This adaptive strategy is motivated by a desire to eradicate the distance between the adapting culture and the source text: “At the heart of this approach is a moral evaluation of the utility of the ideas contained in literature and arts – local or foreign... Some Shakespeare allusions emphasized the moral lessons allegedly contained in the plays; others invoked a sense of cultural belonging and a shared recognition of values that were in an unspecified sense 'universal' in the public life” (16). This sense of “universality” asserts that the text can be transformed to apply to an individualized human experience. However the “universality” in the first category attempts to identify themes in the text that are so truthful that they will transcend any one culture.

Finally, some productions significantly rewrite Shakespeare in order to relate his texts to Chinese culture. For example *Romeo & Zhu Yingtai* and *Yi qi liang fu* do not concern themselves with textual fidelity. They prefer to cut and paste Shakespeare's text to place it in contexts where it can comment on contemporary Sinophone culture. While no adaptive method should be privileged above another, each approach raises different
vii. Analytical Process

The first level of my analysis will look at how the productions respond to Shakespeare and *Romeo and Juliet* in relation to the various other thematic levels that are being engaged. Underneath the holistic surface of each Chinese Shakespeare adaptation are multiple layers of source material and inspiration. The previous sections listed a few common planes of background knowledge and philosophical attitudes that can penetrate the complexities of the following productions: fidelity, Stewart's “souvenir,” Jameson's “pastiche,” Chinese nostalgia, conceptions of genre and love, Chinese equivalent texts, and the history of Shakespearean adaptation in East Asia.

These perspectives apply to every Chinese production of *Romeo and Juliet* to some extent. Depending on the adaptation, these background layers may be integrated consciously or unconsciously, conspicuously or transparently. Nostalgia then assembles the final product for the benefit of the audience. This final revision will be the focus of the second part of my analysis for each production. The precedents the texts draw on for inspiration and the nostalgic method of composition both transform Shakespeare's romantic tragedy into a tragicomedy.

*Romeo and Juliet in Popular Music: Liang Shanbo Yu Zhu Yingtai*

I will begin this exploration by conducting an analysis of an artifact that is more condensed and streamlined than the three other full-length productions. This paradigmatic adaptation, the 2006 Taiwanese single *Liang Shanbo Yu Zhu Liye*, imagines Shakespeare's source text as a successful romance rather than an iconic tragedy because
the play has the ability to suspend time's progression. This tragicomic point of view is produced by the singers' reception of *Romeo and Juliet* as a universal, timeless symbol and the music video's anxiety over the chronological progression of time.

**Romeo and Juliet: A Timeless Souvenir**

*Romeo and Juliet* has influenced elements of Chinese culture ranging from elite May Fourth discussions about literary reformation to 21st century pop culture. However this Shakespearean spin-off can be found in karaoke rooms instead of theaters. *Liang Shanbo yu Zhu Liye* (*Liang Shanbo and Juliet*), a 2006 popular single performed by Gary Cao and Genie Zhu, pairs the butterfly lovers with Shakespeare's teens. These literary couples are appealing because their referential universality allows them to transcend time and the issues it inflicts upon the song's protagonists.

The song's response to *Romeo and Juliet* is straightforward; the lyrics directly establish a connection between the protagonists and Shakespeare's lovers. The two singers express their love through literary allusions. Genie Zhu identifies Cao as her Romeo and says she is willing to become his Zhu Yingtai. Gary Cao reciprocates with the same pattern; Zhu is his Juliet and he wishes to become her Liang Shanbo.15 These lyrics take two deeply complex characters and transform them into placeholders for a simplified type of emotion. In this context, *Romeo and Juliet* is functioning as what Stewart would term a “souvenir.” The text is an entrance point into a vast realm of connotations; the choice of love over family, the play's identity as a product of English

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15 Original Lyrics:

曹：我愛妳 妳是我的茱麗葉 Cao: I love you, you are my Juliet
(卓:茱麗葉)我願意變成妳的梁山伯 (Zhu: Juliet) I am willing to become your Liang Shanbo

卓：我愛你 你是我的羅密歐 Zhu: I love you, you are my Romeo
(曹:羅密歐)我願意變成你的祝英台 (Cao: Romeo) I am willing to become your Zhu Yingtai
culture, and of course the gruesomely tragic conclusion.\textsuperscript{16} However the souvenir represses these dangerously negative meanings in order to emphasize the omnipresence of love.

The souvenir abbreviates the source text so it only references positive romantic experiences, not loss or rejection. If this adaptation were following the example of Shakespeare's tragic source text, any allusion to the lovers would imply eventual destruction. However, in keeping with the model of tragicomic adaptations, Cao and Zhu maintain focus on the positive elements of the two romantic tragedies. Romeo, Juliet, and the two butterfly lovers are lauded for their exemplary devotion while their troublesome conclusions are ignored.

In the case of the Shakespearean allusion, when everything else in society is developing at a breakneck pace, this artifact looks toward “universal” romantic archetypes to fulfill a desire for unchanging love. When the singers pair themselves with their supposedly timeless predecessors, they remove themselves from a historical setting. While time is frozen, Cao and Zhu are suspended in the happy moments of both love stories. The couple has achieved romantic success, but because of the allusions to intertextual precedents we know that the lack of temporal development is the only thing holding them back from a presumably tragic precipice.

\textit{Nostalgia for Stagnancy}

The song as whole has also been motivated by a nostalgic concern over the rapid

\textsuperscript{16} Interestingly, these lyrics (and the title of the song) resist pairing the characters with their correct mates: East must pair with West. This insistence on cultural hybridity suggests another idealistic gaze, this time towards a universalism that will purportedly arise out of the inter-literary couples. If Liang Shanbo can be paired with Juliet, then Shakespeare and Chinese folk tales both become havens of mutual national understanding that the singers and audience can access without boundaries.
societal change in East Asia. In response to China's constant modernization, the music video for *Romeo yu Zhu Liye*'s emphasizes the omnipresence of a stationary chronology. The visual assault of temporal signs indicates that the singers have constructed a world where they cannot be influenced by time's changes. The first few seconds focus on a line of antique, broken clocks stretching into the distance (0:05). Their hands run rapidly in different directions simultaneously, their pendulums swing uncoordinatedly, and the sound of ticking clocks echos before the melody even starts. Zhu and Cao stroll through a graveyard of clocks draped in a layer of fog. Many of the destroyed timepieces have cracked faces with limp cogs hanging inside; others are strewn over the backdrop on their sides or at odd angles. All of these visual references carry temporal significations that are tinged with a degree of anxiety. Their potential to signify the passage of time threatens the singers unless the timepieces have obviously been destroyed.

The singers are content once this world has been stripped of a historical background. The only moment of distress comes in the climax of the song when the large central clock spontaneously reassembles (3:07). Gary and Genie are split apart in the foreground while silhouettes of other lovers in historical attire zoom by in the background (3:05). The explosion of the clock forces the protagonists backwards into clouds of clocks that appear to be swallowing them. However they are quickly reunited and returned to the timeless world of destroyed clocks. When timepieces are functioning correctly, time is interpreted as a destructive force that threatens to unravel the universal romantic world that the singers have constructed within the web of their

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17 See Illustration 1, page 60
18 See Illustration 2, pg 60
The reception of *Romeo and Juliet* in this Taiwanese video is an excellent template for the three works that will follow. Each work can be split into a specific commentary on the source and a more comprehensive analysis on the process of nostalgic genre shifting. Of course this adaptation's attitude toward the text is unique. For example while *Liang Shanbo yu Zhu Liye* associates *Romeo and Juliet* with a sense of timelessness, the subsequent Hong Kong film is inspired by the island's relationship with Shakespeare to use the text as a marker of outdated tradition.

**Stratford Upon Hong Kong: *Romeo and Juliet* in Cantonese Cinema**

*Yi qi liang fu* (*One Husband Too Many*) is a 1988 Hong Kong comedic film loosely based around the plot of *Romeo and Juliet*. Two men, Hsia and Hui, move in together to recuperate from their divorces. Over the course of the film they must overcome numerous slapstick situations as they attempt to woo the same woman, a Juliet-type ingénue named Frances. After the Juliet-figure falls in love with both men, the film is faced with the less dire problem of romantic excess. This love triangle structure prevents *Yi qi liang fu* from becoming a true tragedy; two out of three protagonists are guaranteed to find love.

In the film, members of Hong Kong society narrowly define Shakespeare as a signifier for antiquity. His canon is segregated from the lives of the protagonists, elevated and contained from the other layers of background knowledge. Nostalgia further organizes the storylines of the characters who come into contact with his text. Because Shakespearean performance is categorized as a past mode of expression, its

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19 See Illustration 3, pg 61
tragic deaths are also seen as outdated. In this new modern world, the choice to follow
Juliet and Romeo's lamentable path is the most unfashionable option out of many.
Frances, Hsia, and Hui can decide to remain faithful to Shakespeare or to move on and
join the contemporary world.

*Romeo and Juliet: A Souvenir Stuck in Time*

It is not coincidental that this Hong Kong adaptation takes great strides to
differentiate Shakespeare as opposed to the other productions who wish to universalize
him. The film's interactions with Shakespeare have been mediated by the island's
previous relationship with his works. Hong Kong experienced a radically different
introduction to Shakespeare than many other cities in China. Shakespeare was first
imported to Hong Kong to satiate the British colonists' taste for home and his canon was
used for English cultural education after 1882. The philosophy of a cultural exchange
between native islanders and expatriates especially flourished in the 1950’s when the
Lamb’s *Tales From Shakespeare* became the standard bill of fare for exams and curricula.
Even after Hong Kong was handed back to China in 1997, the island has continued to
associate Shakespeare with their era of colonization (Levith, pp. 93-113).

Although *Yi qi liang fu* is not concerned with paralleling the plot of *Romeo and
Juliet* with any degree of fidelity, the characters and themes of Shakespeare's text are an
important reference point. The most obvious connection between this screenplay and
Shakespeare's text is the protagonist's attempt to produce *Romeo and Juliet*. Beyond the
text's presence as a play-within-a-play, *Romeo and Juliet* becomes a touchstone for
characterization. Essentially a Hong Kong citizen's relationship with the text determines
his or her place in relation to the developing society.

The play-within-a-play the begins the movie is the most obvious reference to *Romeo and Juliet*. Hsia's theatre troupe attempts to entertain an impatient audience with a globalized Shakespeare adaptation that fulfills every expectation for what a production of *Romeo and Juliet* should contain. Hsia and his second wife are dressed in typical Elizabethan costumes complete with ruffles and unnaturally bright colors (Part A, 1:01). They arrange themselves on the tomb in a painfully precise tableau, gesture wildly, and speak with stilted patterns of speech (1:46). Hsia's performance exemplifies Alexander Huang's first category of adaptation: a performance that attempts to reference a distant Other in order to classify itself as authoritative. Not only does this directorial choice look to an Elizabethan past for inspiration, “authoritative” productions themselves are relics of a Chinese past in colonized regions such as Hong Kong.

Unsurprisingly, the troupe's lack of creativity is greeted with an unenthusiastic response. The rural onlookers adamantly vocalize their discontent when Romeo sings histrionically. Ultimately, Hsia and his wife are forced to flee from the incensed audience and end up arguing on a commuter bus where their Elizabethan garb indicates that they are out of place in modern society (Part A, 7:15). This conservative adaptation is a reminder of Hong Kong's colonial history. As Hong Kong is surging into an age where it is a global economic capital, it is leaving behind Shakespeare because it comprises a part of the city's previous colonial identity. However Hsia represses the reality of the colonial power structure and continues to Anglicize his production in front of a Chinese audience. His blind allegiance with Shakespearean performance establishes him as a hopeless

20 See Illustration 4, pg 61
devotee to unfashionably outdated ideas.

Hsia's inability to leave *Romeo and Juliet* in the past where the film seems to believe it belongs stretches into other areas of his personality. He cannot give up theatre and focus on supposedly modern values such as making money and paying bills. After the unsuccessful performance that opens the film, Hsia launches a revival that indulges in the purportedly more modern value of sexuality. However this change is only designed so Hsia can enjoy a more sexually liberated performance with the woman who has replaced his wife in the role of Juliet, Frances. Even while pursuing a new romance, Hsia is never able to adapt in order to fit in with modern society.

Frances and Hsia subsequently enter into a brief affair while they are simultaneously performing as Juliet and Romeo. For this reason, these characters find it difficult to discriminate between the love stories they are portraying as actors and the love stories they are living out in real life. The confession of their feelings coincides with rehearsals and each sentence warrants clarification; are you speaking as your character or as yourself? *(Part B, 10:18)* Under the circumstance, *Romeo and Juliet* brings confusion to the pivotal issue of identity rather than clarity.

Even though they are devoted to his works, the actors in Hsia's troupe suffer no illusions about Shakespeare's place in Hong Kong society. To Frances and Hsia, *Romeo and Juliet* is a “souvenir” of the past. Hsia connects the play to his previous relationship with his past wife. Of course this association contains his marriage and messy divorce within a tight, happy framework. Because Hsia has defined love using this souvenir, he

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21 Frances: 你是不是喜欢我呀? Are you in love with me?
Hsia: 呀,排戏了? Oh, this is rehearsal?
Frances: ... 我是问你自己是不是喜欢了我? I mean, do you (yourself) love me?
finds it difficult to look for love outside of the “Romeo and Juliet” archetype. In this instance, the nostalgic souvenir is a symptom of a hopeless romantic problem that promises to plague Hsia for the rest of his life.

The object of his affections associates *Romeo and Juliet* with a type of nostalgia that is not as damning. Frances claims that she loved the character of Romeo as a child (Part B, 10:32), indicating that her interest in the play is also grounded in nostalgia for her youthful interests. Once Frances falls in love with Hsia's roommate it becomes clear that her relationship with Hsia was only based on an infatuation with the past. She realizes that Hsia was a layer plastered on top of the fictional character that she had fallen in love with as a child. Frances diagnoses the source of her dysfunction: what Jameson would call a preoccupation with pastiche, the surface stylings of emotion. Once she conquers the emotions that Jameson would term “depthless,” she progresses onward to an affair that is less preoccupied with Shakespeare and artifacts from the past. Hsia, ever the unyielding figure, makes no such discovery after the relationship falls apart.

*Nostalgia and Moving On*

The Hong Kong spectrum of tradition and modernity is laid out in the two roommates: Hsia and Hui. These male leads are emblematic of Frances' choice between stagnation and progression. Hsia is always the first husband or boyfriend and Hui is the man who inevitably replaces him. In contrast with his old-fashioned roommate, Hui has a job where he is surrounded by state of the art commercial products. Although he has knowledge of traditional Chinese theatre from his previous amateur performances, Hui...
Ammirati has moved on and devoted himself to achieving a more industrialized position in society. Ironically, his focus on the business world instead of his personal life was the catalyst for his divorce but he learns his lesson and steals the heart of Juliet from the Romeo prototype. Hsia represents an excess of traditional values and Hui is an icon of the dominance of modern industry over individuality.

_Yi qi liang fu_ is exceedingly specific when it comes to placing _Romeo and Juliet_ in a historical context. Shakespeare, and all of the accessory objects that are associated with him, are tied with a negative view of a stagnant past. Those who practice Shakespearean performance are doomed to alienate themselves from a Hong Kong audience. Anyone who looks for love within the pages of an archaic book is fated for similar failure. This is not to say that the incorporation of _Romeo and Juliet_ into the film is entirely negative. In fact, the contrast between the hectic contemporary society and the idealized past alleviates some of Shakespeare's tragedy. Frances is able to balance between two extremities instead of rushing to embrace her first pangs of romance as her predecessor Juliet did. The historical balance of past and present in _Yi qi liang fu_ eliminates the tragic consequences from a “Romeo-and-Juliet” type relationship.

While the nostalgic force in _Yi qi liang fu_ maintains distance between a Shakespearean valuation of tradition and modern Hong Kong society, the nostalgic imagination influencing the next production desires a collapsing of difference between Shakespeare, a centuries-old past, and modern audiences. _Yi qi liang fu_ consolidates Shakespeare and asserts that it can only represent a limited number of colonial and archaic meanings; _Romeo and Juliet_ is so elevated above contemporary societal concerns.
that it is almost quarantined. Instead, *Zhuo Mei yu Ah Luo*, attempts to blend together Shakespeare's plot and the locality of the audience until the two are indistinguishable. The ethnic Mainland decision to broaden and disseminate Shakespeare contrasts with the Hong Kong determination to categorize and segregate the playwright. What distinguishes these two attitudes is the societal vision of Shakespeare and history.

*Romeo and Juliet on the Frontier: Yuxi Flower Opera*

*Zhuo Mei yu Ah Luo* is a flower-lantern (*xin deng*) opera from Yunnan, a Southwestern province of the People's Republic of China noted for its ethnic diversity. This 1996 production targeted local audiences by setting the conflict amongst two tribes of the regional Yi ethnicity in the 14th century. When it is judged as a reception of *Romeo and Juliet* this production purports to be aggressively faithful, but in reality the opera uses Shakespearean textual fidelity to communicate regional concerns. The plot of *Romeo and Juliet* is overlaid onto a narrative that escapes into an ethnic past and the localized layer is the one that receives the most attention. When the production is judged as a complete whole, a nostalgic view of historical community overshadows the tragic elements of Shakespeare's cultural conflict. This sense of ethnic nostalgia imbues the tragedy with a few hopeful elements such as the spectacle of tribal exoticism, the benefit of communal living, the selfless diplomacy of teen lovers, and the potency of ancient ritual.

*Romeo and Juliet: Exotic Compatriots*

Two contrasting attitudes emerge when *Zhuo Mei yu Ah Luo* is analyzed purely as an adaptation of Shakespeare's source material. First, out of all of these tragicomic
adaptations, *Zhuo Mei yu Ah Luo* is the production that attempts to follow Shakespeare's plot with the most concern for fidelity. The performance even stresses the presence of the source text by subtitling the production as “an adaptation following Shakespeare's drama *Romeo and Juliet.*” Following the expectations established in this subtitle, *Zhuo Mei yu Ah Luo* deserves a more textual consideration than the other works.

On the other hand, the basic premise of a Chinese opera adaptation promises a significant departure from the text. To conform to the regulations of a different genre, Shakespeare's prose has been replaced by translated operatic lyrics. The streets of Verona have been transformed into the mountains of Yunnan and the traditions and ethos of the Yi people take center stage. Despite the adaptors' instance on the importance of their Shakespearean source, they are not confined by a singular definition of *Romeo and Juliet.* Instead *Zhuo Mei yu Ah Luo* takes an Occidental perspective and uses a Western play as a tool that can reconcile the Chinese ethnic past with the present. *Romeo and Juliet* is adapted in order to relate to Chinese drama and Chinese ethnicity.

The most fundamental adaptation in *Zhuo Mei and Ah Luo* is the translation of *Romeo and Juliet* into a different genre. Chinese Opera is the art form that traditionally represents Chinese theater to the world. The phrase “Chinese Opera” is an umbrella term for a number of regional performance traditions, the most famous being *jingju* or Peking (Beijing) Opera, but they all share similar traits. Opera actors aim to showcase four skills: song, speech, dance-acting, and combat. These talents optimally unify to fulfill an overall aesthetic aim, conveying the essence of life rather than the reality of living.

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23 根据莎土比亚<<罗密欧与朱丽叶>>改编

All citations from this production are my personal translations of Chinese subtitles from an official performance DVD
Shakespeare has been a reinvigorating force to this ancient theatrical profession, providing new characters and stories to a business running out of audiences.

The next reception decision was the choice to incorporate the Yi society into the plot of *Romeo and Juliet*. The fascination with ethnic history in *Zhuo Mei yu Ah Luo* is well described by Ralph A. Litzinger. In “Memory Work: Reconstituting the Ethnic in Post-Mao China,” Litzinger examines nostalgia in China's minority communities. The article juxtaposes the concept of nationalism with “memory work,” a process he defines as the practice of remembering and forgetting. More specifically “[Litzinger's] notion of memory work points to how the past is at times objectified in different cultural forms such as the land memorials, material artifacts, and bodies” (226). Memory work is particularly relevant to ethnic cultures who are now being encouraged to illuminate their differences and traditional values that were seen as feudal and backward only a few decades ago. In this context, nostalgia surfaces as a method to return to an imagined past of purity and innocence; the historical setting is a time where the Cultural Revolution had not yet threatened to unify all ethnicities for the benefit of the whole. Of course the element that problematizes this simple summary is the state support of ethnic performance and tourism:

In post-Mao China, then, the displacement of a discourse on unity based on class struggle has occurred through a new incitement to discourse, one which calls on a member of the ethnic minority to define his or her identity through an accounting of his or her cultural difference. (Litzinger,

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24 The Yi ethnicity is composed of approximately 7.8 million people who live in the provinces of Sichuan, Guizhou, Guangxi, and Yunnan (“The Yi ethnic group”). The Yi language is actually a collection of 14 dialects that are related but by no means comprehensible to each other (Harrell, 63). Members of this culture practice monogamy and form nuclear families after marriages that are often arranged by parents. Fire is an important cultural symbol especially in Yunnan where the Yi celebrate a Torch Festival around communal bonfires (“The Yi ethnic group”). Many of these basic societal features are referenced in this Shakespeare's adaptation.
The Yuxi Flower Opera adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet* is emblematic of the tensions between a communal desire to view ethnic differentiation and spectacle and the state's view of how and why such a project should be undertaken. Shakespeare's presence as a third party from an outside culture further complicates the enactment of nostalgic desire.

*Zhuo Mei yu Ah Luo* is a vibrant display of ethnic culture. The two Yi tribes are made up of joyful young men and women who frequently showcase exotic skills and talents in front of a scrim lit with bright colors. Every aspect of Yi society from costumes to customs is paraded before an audience so they can be tourists within their own culture.

While recent years in Chinese history have emphasized the unity of the Han people (China's overwhelming ethnic majority), this play allows local audiences to return to a past where cultural conflict was not waged on the scale of dominant culture over minority ethnicity. In “No World Without Verona Walls,” Alexander Huang notes the impact of the cultural and historical setting on the performers:

> As [Zhuo Mei and Ah Luo were] identified strongly with Yi heritage, they were regarded as personifications of the history of ethnic conflict. The production thus operated as a form of performative ethnography, one in which the ethnographer-performer not only constructed knowledge about the characters' and their own ethnic identity but also became part of the cultural experience. (259)

This particular production of *Romeo and Juliet* is actually motivated by a desire to be faithful to the original Yi source material. Shakespeare's text is more of a vessel for the message and less of the point of fixation.

Of course it would be valid to ask why Shakespeare was chosen instead of another Chinese playwright. In some ways, the collapsing of the distance between Shakespeare
and 14th century China represses the cultural identity of the text. However it is precisely Shakespeare's identification with an exterior culture that opens his plays up for ethnic adaptation. Shakespeare is unquestionably from a foreign culture, and the Yi see themselves as outsiders in Han society. For this reason Romeo and Juliet can become the unlikely site of an exploration of Chinese minority cultures.

To summarize, Zhuo Mei yu Ah Luo is attracted by what Naremore terms the “national myth” (14) of Shakespeare. The adaptors capitalize on Shakespeare's reputation to draw audiences and pull from his identity as an exoticized Other to discuss their own minority; it is not a close reading of the text that is alluring. However this production also rejects the notion of “the untouchability of a work of art” (14). Zhuo Mei yu Ah Luo makes considerable alterations to the genre and setting of the source text without any regret. This philosophy is contrary to what Naremore expects of a “faithful” performance. So what has motivated adaptors to remain loyal to a source text while simultaneously refashioning the core tenets of the original? Yet again the catalyst can be traced back to a nostalgic desire.

Nostalgia for Ethic Difference

Zhuo Mei yu Ah Luo fulfills the state's wishes that minority cultures showcase their unique qualities. According to Litzinger's investigation of “memory work,” an ethnic discourse that threatened the ideology of a collective culture would have been considered reactionary a few decades before. Therefore the opportunity to showcase difference is imbued with the nostalgia of a rediscovered political activity. However this production is explicit in its decision to return to a distant past, not a date a few decades
before the CCP disallowed the exhibition of ethnic difference. The choice to set *Romeo and Juliet* in 14th century Yunnan preserves the past as a destination for escape. Fredric Jameson would categorize this choice as a “stylistic connotation” that focuses on the idiosyncrasies of the past. Fourteenth century Yunnan was surely not inhabited by crowds of youths in bright costumes who have a perfect working knowledge of rituals. Nonetheless the force of nostalgia imagines that the setting is defined by tribal spectacle, community, selflessness, and powerful ritual.

*Zhuo Mei yu Ah Luo* first highlights the positive features of a past society by emphasizing the uniqueness of regional customs. All violence is repressed by glossing physical attacks with a nostalgic privileging of spectacle over realism. For example, duels are waged with traditional Yi wrestling. The social conflict is expressed through song, and the battles are displayed through dance. Acknowledging that this past era was also fraught with the contemporary social diseases of bias and physical conflict does not preserve historical Yunnan as a location for escape. Consequently, the play's tragedies are not mourned for their physical impact, but rather their symbolic significance. The operatic genre allows the negative themes of *Romeo and Juliet* to be explored symbolically while still leaving room for the idealism of its historical setting.

The opera exaggerates the sense of community in Shakespeare's source text to heighten the pleasure of nostalgically imagining the past. The first act of *Romeo and Juliet* begins with a small brawl between servants from the two dueling families. True to the original, *Zhuo Mei yu Ah Luo* establishes an atmosphere of conflict between two different communities of the larger Yi ethnicity. However in this adaptation, the
Capulet-Montague feud is always waged on a group scale rather than an individual one. A communal song and dance commences the brawl scene, imagining the past as idyllically harmonious. Subsequently, the crowd stands and witnesses the course of the fight and the official consequences that follow. The course of action in the adaptation and the original are identical: two individuals spar in the name of the two dueling groups and incur the wrath of a political leader. However, the establishment of group identity in *Zhuo Mei yu Ah Luo* balances the malicious messages that the two communities disseminate.

The collective force of the Yi community in the production continues to dominate the narrative. Zhuo Mei’s ebullient love song is accompanied by a deafening chorus of unexplained offstage voices (20:35). The Romeo-Tybalt confrontation and the young lover’s exile are also performed in the public arena (51:43). Even Zhuo Mei and Ah Luo’s purportedly illicit relationship is privy to the gaze of the members of the society.

In this nostalgically communal society, the Juliet and Romeo figures provide an example of cooperation for the benefit of their group audience. While the romance is still controversial in the eyes of their society, the teens’ desire to reveal their love far overwhelms their inclinations to keep it a secret. Once both the protagonists confess their love, Ah Luo immediately wants to share his new relationship with his father, friends, and the greater society (34:13). In the peak of their joy, the two lovers shout the facts of their heavenly-ordained love so all in the vicinity can hear (34:33). The lovers’ desire to give back to the community that is playing a role in the unraveling of their love is emblematic of a vision of a cooperative past.

25 See Illustration 5, pg 62
The selfless love between Zhuo Mei and Ah Luo is the third quality exemplified in the depiction of this utopian past society. Shakespeare's Juliet and Romeo can easily be interpreted as individualistic dissidents who reject the standards of their respective communities in order to enact their own personal desires. However the nostalgic rituals in *Zhuo Mei yu Ah Luo* require their cast to demonstrate a different relationship between the individual and the group.

One of the reasons Ah Luo and Zhuo Mei overcome the social taboo forbidding their relationship is that they feel that heaven has planned their love as a lesson to the community. At first they are reluctant to proceed with their affair and ask why they have been stricken with such dangerous emotions. However once the pair reasons that their love is blessed by heaven, their passion is even greater than it was before (33:55).26 They imagine that their romance is a redemptive fire that will spread to the communal fire pits throughout their societies. Just as Liu explicated in *Revolution Plus Love*, these two characters enter into a romantic relationship for the sake of the state; Zhuo Mei and Ah Luo desire to heal the wounds in their culture almost as much as they desire each other. This characterization places a positive spin even on the most questionable qualities of the protagonists. Additionally, this selflessness finds a reason to compliment the Yi culture even when the characters are following the Shakespearean path to demise at the hands of social unrest.

Ritual plays a powerful role in *Zhuo Mei yu Ah Luo*. Shakespeare's script is bookended by two ritualistic fire performances unique to the Yi culture. Ritual itself is a

26 天神是想用爱情的火塘, 来温暖那冰冷的家放世仇, 是想通过我俩的爱. The gods must wish to resolve the feud through our love, to use the warmth of the fire of love to dissolve the ice of feud. Translated by Alexander Huang (“No World without Verona Walls?” 257)
kind of nostalgic performance as it creates an entryway into mythic time. Regardless of when a ritual is enacted, the performers will be connected to an unchanging higher power. The Yi ethnicity is gradually incorporating some of its rituals back into modern society. Therefore audience members could conceivably replicate the rituals from the performance and forge a mythic connection with the fictional characters of Zhuo Mei and Ah Luo.

The nostalgic perspective of ritual begins in the play's first seconds. Shakespeare's fatalistic prologue has been replaced by a fire ritual with Romeo and Juliet at the center of a group of their peers. Drums set an ominous tone and the technique of foreshadowing has been preserved, the bloody predictions so central to conceptions of Western tragedy have been dispelled. Zhuo Mei yu Ah Luo follows the letter of Shakespeare's law by including a preface, but it finds relevance in the distinct spirit of ritualistic imagination.

The Yi rituals are glorified to such an extent that they almost overshadow the drama itself. It is ultimately this desire to view the ethnic rituals that were previously repressed by the CCP policies that literally resurrects Romeo and Juliet from the tragic genre. The prologue and the conclusion bookend the performance as a type of ritual in and of itself. It has the power to literally transport the audience and only demands the figures of Ah Luo and Zhuo Mei as sacrifices. However, in this positive reading even these deaths resist becoming tragedies. After Zhuo Mei and Ah Luo die, the actors are resurrected by their communities in a fire ritual. Their reunion in the afterlife returns to the Chinese theatrical tradition of finding justice after an untimely death. However, it
also perpetuates the myth of the power of the mystical Yi past that the production
struggles to maintain.

Zhao Mei yu Ah Luo is a unique example of nostalgic appropriation. The
performance as a whole is a sentimental ritual that conjures up memories of the past for
the audience's pleasure. Juliet and Romeo are not the only ghosts who are revived; the
shadows of a lost Yi ethnicity are presented as unscathed. The final production, a
Shanghai huaju, also dreams of a reunion with the past. However while the Yuxi Opera
wishes to leave the present and escape to a previous decade, the huaju wishes to bring the
past closer to contemporary society.

**Huaju spin-off in Shanghai: Romeo & Zhu Yingtai**

*Romeo & Zhu Yingtai* is a huaju tragicomedy that was performed at the Shanghai
Dramatic Arts Center in the summer of 2008. The plot centers around a grandmother,
Zhu Wanying, in present day New York who is recalling her love affair with the witty
rickshaw driver Luo Guo in 1930s Shanghai. Both her flashbacks to an idealized past
and her contemporary narration pulsate with a sense of fantasy that mitigates the tragedy
of the source texts. As suggested by the title, the central love story is a combination of
two iconic texts from opposite hemispheres: Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* and the
Chinese butterfly-lover folk story. *Romeo & Zhu Yingtai* draws on the plots and motifs of
both romantic tragedies that serve as its ancestors, but resists following the example set
by their genre. The adaptation instead turns to a new postmodern affliction: nostalgia.

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27 See Illustration 6, Page 62

The protagonist's journey to New York is another example of an effort to depoliticize a gesture. Many
Chinese citizens fled Shanghai due to World War II or the 1949 ascent of the Communist Part. The fact
that the motivations behind a former Shanghai socialite's move to the US have been elided indicates that
the production is struggling with the repression implicit in nostalgic productions.
This production is classified as a *huaju* or a spoken drama. It is a genre created with Western influences in order to offer an alternative to traditional Chinese operas.\(^{28}\) That being said, while the *huaju* form of drama walks and talks in the Western clothes of Stanislavski realism, the themes and emotions that *Romeo & Zhu Yingtai* works with are distinctly Sinophonic. The ancient Greek notions of theater point to the benefit of group catharsis. According to Western theatrical tradition, tragedies allow audiences to live through chaos vicariously and release emotions. The audiences at the Shanghai Dramatic Arts Center went to the theatre to relive some of the city's memories that have been handed down through generations: the humiliation at the hands of foreign law enforcement, the cultural imposition of the Japanese, and the corruption of local gangs. However, the release is executed through laughter instead of tears.

The sense of nostalgia enveloping Shanghai's recent reinvigorating economic boom has been well documented. Because the PRC has recently decided to focus on developing industrial centers, Shanghai has been allowed and even encouraged to luxuriate in memories of a fashionable and capitalist past. During the 1990s, China's nostalgic peak, remembrances of the 1930s were commonplace (Lu, 170). However this celebration of the government and the new relaxed atmosphere usually represses negative aspects of the 1930s Shanghai society: gangs, inflation, and a tense cultural conflict between colonizing forces just to name a few. A decade after the nostalgic pining had died down, *Romeo & Zhu Yingtai* is just as homesick for this temporal landscape.

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28 Chinese intellectuals began experimenting with new models of theater during the turn of the 20th century; their efforts evolved into an amalgamation of ideas from the East and the West. This category of drama includes plays by Western playwrights as well as performances that subscribe to European tenets of theater such as realism. Despite the obvious Western influence of the medium, the performance topics of a *huaju* are usually issues of Chinese concern, including family and social unrest (Banham and Stanton, 174).
Surprisingly, the drama offers a frank look at Shanghai's past without the gloss of high fashion or silent movie glamour.

The nostalgia for Shakespeare emphasizes *Romeo and Juliet's* ability to transcend history over the tragic ending. Additionally, the re-enactment of the past redefines *Romeo and Juliet's* genre in three ways. First, the production fulfills the audience's desire to gaze on artifacts from 1930s Shanghai. Secondly, the modern pop citations within an historical setting build a humorous bridge that bonds the contemporary audience with the time period they idolize. Finally, the communal sense of sentimentality disseminated by a grandmother reliving her past foregrounds reunion rather than separation.

*Romeo and Juliet: Third Time's the Charm*

While *Romeo & Zhu Yingtai* plays with the idea that the collaboration of two opposing cultures can produce a new, truer expression of love, the Shakespearean text is not ostracized as a representation of a foreign ideology. Instead, the text of *Romeo and Juliet* is depicted as a text that may be performed in any time period. The three appearances of *Romeo and Juliet* link the protagonist with her former self and find applications for the work beyond its tragic conclusion.

The play opens with a musical version of Juliet's final monologue over Romeo's body as portrayed by modern New York actors (精彩片段(1), 0:54). This 21st century production stays true to the original English language of R&J, but strays from its formalistic structure; Juliet bids farewell through song instead of prose. The lavish costumes and gauzy fabric draped over the tomb add to the layers of spectacle and garnish. It is this contemporary production that opens the door to the grandmother's

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29 See Illustration 7, page 63
memories (2:38). She recites Shakespeare, and returns us to her very own story of “star crossed love” in an almost ritualistic procedure.

The second play within a play is an excerpt of a 1920s Shanghai huaju production at the Lyceum that Luo and Zhu attend on a date. The actors wear false wigs and noses to make them appear more European, act with a stiff and comically exaggerated style, and fulfill every expectation for the balcony scene (精彩片段(7), 0:16). Romeo kneels in the spotlight and extends his arms passionately up toward his lover who pretends not to see him as she links her hands angelically and gazes ahead. Even though the script has been translated into Chinese, the actors fall into the standard patterns of speech dictated by years of performance history and bad acting. The audience laughs at this comic duo for subscribing to the performance methodology of the times. Nowhere is the understanding that these traditional actors would be praised in their own era; they are expected to conform to the needs of the 21st century audience.

The third Chinese couple to perform Romeo and Juliet is the pair of protagonists. Luo interrupts the comically insincere rendition at the Lyceum by jumping on stage and replacing the Western imitators with himself and Zhu (精彩片段(7), 1:23). These young lovers stand onstage without special costumes, training, or blocking. They have forcefully reclaimed the stage and present a Juliet and Romeo who look Chinese and speak Mandarin. Luo is wearing shapeless pants and a vest and all we can see of Zhu is her white blouse and a simple skirt. Without any specific historical accessories, Luo and Zhu are indistinguishable from any couple in the audience.

30 See Illustration 8, page 63
31 See Illustration 9, page 64
In this final allusion, Shakespeare is not a source of artificiality but instead a tool to transgress the historical boundaries between characters and their audiences. Because the audience has already seen a 21st century musical and a 1930s huaju they are aware that this text is accessible to people across decades. The third play-within-a-play is the ideal adaptation: a performance that is free of historical signifiers and barriers so it can be enjoyed by everyone.

Luo's intrusion into this performance creates many waves of impact both inside and outside the story. Within the facts of the plot, he has invaded an elite part of the city and revealed the fact that a poor rickshaw driver is just as capable of commanding Shakespeare's text as a trained actor. His brashness is the catalyst for a rather harsh beating from the actors and production team.

His emergence from the audience also problematizes the temporal location of the audience. Are they witnessing a performance of Romeo & Zhu Yingtai in 2008 or Romeo and Juliet in the 1930s? Luo's subsequent requests for the audience to participate and cheer on the performance results in a cross pollination of the fictional past and the reality of the present. The gift the couple is offering to the spectators is an ability to decenter themselves from time. Modern audiences in China are filled with nostalgic longings to return to a better past. Witnessing the past becoming more intimate and connected to their own lives fulfills a deeply rooted psychological desire.

The benefits Zhu and Luo take away from their detachment from time are separate from the audience's pleasure at witnessing this feat. Because the elderly grandmother is attempting to reconnect with her lover across decades, it is clear that this pair of star
crossed lovers have been divided by temporal obstacles. It is not coincidental that Zhu is first able to confess her love on the stage where date and time are ambiguous. Once she has confessed her love, the music, pink lights, and rolling fog that indicate fantastical flashback sequences accompany another short dance interlude (精彩片段(7), 5:34).

The related postmodern quality exemplified in the Shakespearean references in *Romeo & Zhu Yingtai* is the blurring of the lines between imitation and original. In this theatrical context, the relationship at stake is that between adaptation and source text. Beyond the overt play-within-a-play interactions with Shakespeare's text, the characters speak words that are eerily similar to those in the balcony scene. When Luo bashfully admits that his name is Luo Gou, Zhu giggles and says “Why are you called Luo Guo?” (精彩片段(3), 7:06). Although this interaction predates their trip to the theatre, the line matches the translation of the balcony scene: “*Ni weishenme yao jiao Romeo ne?*” (Wherefore art thou Romeo?) These interactions encourage a feeling that the lives of the protagonists are somehow the original and Shakespeare's text is the imitation.

**Nostalgia as a Bridge Over Troubled Water**

* A) Nostalgia for Shanghai

Beyond the reception of *Romeo and Juliet*, *Romeo & Zhu Yingtai* engages numerous nostalgic references. The production appeals to the Shanghai audience by asserting that the location of the plot is identical to that of the theatre. Actors speak in the distinct Shanghai dialect, reference local history, and travel to the city's iconic landmarks. The audience's involvement with the story is so important that Zhu tells Luo that she lives

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32 *Ni weishenme yao jiao (Romeo /Luo Guo) ne?*

你为什么要叫(罗密欧/罗锅)呢?
at 288 Anfu Lu, the address of the Shanghai Dramatic Arts Center where the audience is currently sitting (精彩片段(2), 3:18). Although the audience forms a geographic bond with the characters, *Romeo & Zhu Yingtai* is presenting them with a vision of 1930s Shanghai distinct from usual nostalgic visions of the time period.

The production is attempting to peel back layers of nostalgic depoliticization and reveal a Shanghai that is purportedly more authentic. While politically sensitive truths about the city's past are brought to life, the trade-off is that Shakespeare's cultural identity becomes politically neutral. On the other hand, this atmosphere of uncommon nostalgia is crucial to the reception of *Romeo and Juliet* because it establishes a definition for 1930s Shanghai that is comprised of non-sequiturs such as Shakespeare performance. It is also a decision that interprets Shakespeare's canon not just as a tool for the expression of cultural identity but a cultural identity that has been rewritten or lost over the years.

Because *Romeo & Zhu Yingtai* constantly flickers between two distinct localities and eras, the set was designed to indicate each scene with the minimal amount of scenery that can convey a condensed meaning. The Lyceum theatre comes to life by way of a red curtain and a glittering sign, Zhu's apartment building is represented by an ornate gate, and the city itself is suggested with an arched proscenium made up of the skyline of glittering buildings. The main playing space is a rotating turntable. When Luo is supposed to pull his rickshaw around the city, he simply runs in place and allows the stage to circle through the array of signs and fire hydrants affixed to the edges.

Many of the iconic symbols of 1930s Shanghai are missing. The sepia tones of the era's signature advertising poster aesthetic are nowhere to be seen. The fashionable
buildings of the Bund and Nanjing Road are alluded to, but never appear. 1930s Shanghai women are often pictured with tight, curled bobs and slinky Shanghai dresses called qipaos. However Zhu wears a wide swishy skirt and long hair. The only typical object of nostalgic appropriation is Zhu's mother who has subscribed to every fashion rule of the era (精彩片段(8), 1:45). As an isolated example of “typical nostalgia,” Zhu's mother emphasizes the divisive force of the time period on the couple. She is one of the few outside figure that actively protests their relationship. Once Luo and Zhu have severed themselves from her control, they solve problems as a unit instead of as two individuals.

*Romeo & Zhu Yingtai* balances the amount of historical specification in their return to Shanghai. On one hand, the production includes enough references to incur sentimentality. On the other hand characters that are too closely bound within a temporal context, such as Zhu's mother and the politicians involved with the colonial period, are the enemies to the “Romeo and Juliet” relationship. Following this equilibrium, the resistance to the depoliticized imagining of Shanghai's past leaves room for an alternative form of nostalgia.

One of the purposes of returning to 1930s Shanghai is remembering the process of unification in China. Instead of highlighting the forces that threaten to push the lovers apart, *Romeo & Zhu Yingtai* reveals that the two societies they represent should naturally cooperate. The principal lovers belong to two opposite ends of one nationality. Luo is a rickshaw driver from Beijing University who decided to labor in Shanghai rather than cooperate with the Japanese occupiers. Zhu is a fashionable young member of the
Shanghai elite whose relationship with a foolish Japanese youth has been arranged by her parents. These two characters overcome their differences and forge a united Chinese identity in relation to those that threaten it.\(^{33}\) Their relationship connects what could be seen as disparate forces in the many territories that comprise China. Northerners, as symbolized in Luo and his Beijing accent, have traditionally been contrasted with Southerners like Zhu.\(^{34}\) They come from two different socioeconomic classes and have taken very different positions in relation to the Japanese involvement in Chinese territory. These Juliet and Romeo figures are reconvening after the political atmosphere of Shanghai has driven them apart. The reunion of Chinese identities is predestined, but the exterior culture wars struggle on.

Many contemporary flashbacks to Shanghai ignore the reality that the city was a society bound by allegiances to foreign governments. The form of nostalgia in this production invokes an atmosphere of linguistic extremity to illuminate a new form of nostalgic appropriation in Shanghai. True to the historical period in which they live, the characters of *Romeo & Zhu Yingtai* speak Mandarin, English, French, Japanese, and the Shanghai dialect. Comprehension is not assisted with subtitles, so the languages remained as alien to the audience as the societies from which they originated.

The female lead is shadowed by a needy Japanese suitor whose loud arguments

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33 On a political level of analysis, this teamwork resembles the “United Front,” an alliance between the Chinese Communist Party and the Nationalist Party. Two groups, entirely dissimilar in ideology and identity, collaborated to defeat a common enemy (warlords and then Japan).

34 The cultural divide between Northern and Southern China is a precedent based upon historical generalizations and stereotypes. In terms of geography, these two cultural regions are approximately split by an imaginary line that would fall between the Yangzi and Yellow rivers. As described by Richard Gunde in *Culture and Customs of China*, “North China [is] traditionally credited with being the cradle of Chinese civilization and the political heart of the country – a dry, dusty, conservative region in which people sustain themselves on wheat noodles. On the other side lays South China, a wet, verdane, dynamic region where people feed on white rice” (8).
with the witty hero result in a visit from a British policeman. This incompetent authority figure speaks English punctuated with poorly pronounced Chinese, and is instantly marked as a comical figure. The meager rickshaw driver speaks smooth English and tricks the slow officer into attacking the innocent Japanese gentleman. The two Chinese characters leave the scene victoriously while the foreigners, historically figures of power, are left in a pointless conflict of misunderstanding. The policeman beats the Japanese dupe into submission while yelling “Say English!” (精彩片段(1), 9:54) True to the tragicomic method of adaptation, the brutality of semi-colonial life is transformed into a joke.

To conclude the discussion of nostalgia for Shanghai, *Romeo & Zhu Yingtai* discusses Shakespeare's text within a context of new nostalgic objects. The act of gazing at Shanghai, one of China's favorite sentimental objects, is balanced between a desire to conjure the past by referring to familiar signifiers and a need to depict historicization as an oppressive force over the lovers. New locations for nostalgia open up the discourse to included Western texts such as Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. Finally, the conflict in the source text is directed toward an exploration of unification rather than separation

B) Comedic Juxtaposition of Citations

*Romeo & Zhu Yingtai* brings the world of 1930s Shanghai closer to the audience by inserting modern popular culture references into its historic setting. Luo, Zhu and her compatriots reference Gwen Stefani, martial arts video games, *Phantom of the Opera*, and *Dirty Dancing* to name a few. While Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* is granted a much more detailed and reverential treatment from the adaptors than these artifacts of

35 See Illustration 10, page 64
“lower” culture, its purpose is the same. The source text joins this web of cultural references in order to lift the 1930s characters into a structure where they can interact with audiences seventy years in the future.

One of the central gags parodies another gaze directed at the era of Shanghai’s peak, *Kung Fu Hustle*. This 2004 Hong Kong movie concerns a young man and a community of misfits that battles a malicious axe gang. The glamorous vision of Shanghai’s underworld of criminals is symbolized by the eerie axe gang dance that celebrates the criminals' dominance over the city. In the context of *Kung Fu Hustle*, the display is one of prowess and confidence. However, *Romeo & Zhu Yingtai* mocks the juxtaposition of violence and grace with the inclusion of their very own axe gang. The brief quotations of *Kung Fu Hustle* are humorous because they contrast a historical setting with a contemporary reference.\(^ {36} \) The audience takes pleasure in the recognition of the joke and in their subsequent participation in the society that they idealize. This reference once again draws a line between the Shanghai that is the standard depoliticized object of nostalgia and this interpretation’s vision that attempts to illuminate the grittiness of the city while still preserving it as a location for nostalgic escape.

*C) Nostalgia for Youth*

At the very center of the drama is the danger that the culture of just a few decades ago can be lost in the fog of time. As the grandmother remembers her past in Shanghai, her age and dementia fuses the past with the present. However her granddaughter is not able to appreciate or envision Zhu's pictures of the culture she once enjoyed. These are

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\(^ {36} \) 1930s Shanghai axe gangs are not entirely fictional. Reports from the era speak of an abundance of “armed marauders” and “axe slayings” (Wakeman, 6).
private reveries lost on the young.

The production fantasizes about a human being's control over time. As the grandmother remembers her past life, her reveries are brought to life in front of her eyes. Zhu is privileged in that her memories are so powerful that she can bring them to life for the benefit of an audience. Subsequently, all of the characters and audience members are united in the act of reliving the past.

The grandmother's memory additionally allows her to emphasize the moments hindsight has decided were the most important. Zhu and Luo's first meeting is not exactly an example of love at first sight. He interrupts her carefully arranged pose in front of the Bund to ask her where he can find a bathroom. Zhu's reaction to this banal moment in the 1930s is naturally one of slight irritation. However, the memory takes on a very different tint decades later. At the very moment of the interaction, the grandmother moves her wheelchair to the front of the apron. When the couple's eyes meet, the stage is covered in fog colored a soft pink by the fairytale lights. The turntable slowly rotates to a light music-box theme that will soon be identified as the lovers' melody. Zhu and Luo are frozen in a similarly nostalgic manner whenever the grandmother identifies a particularly poignant moment (精彩片段1, 5:05). At times, the couple will dance with remarkable skill when the same pink fog of nostalgia rolls in. This glossy veneer of the banalities of a first meeting is the textbook definition of the nostalgic gaze.

Finally, the flashback format ensures the ending will focus on reunification rather than separation. The play concludes with a fantasy sequence that clears the stage of any historical markers. Rolling fog, pink lights, and the music box melody flood the stage as
Luo twirls the grandmother around in her wheelchair. Zhu joins them in an ideal fulfillment of nostalgic desire (“City Beat”, 7:01). The grandmother has re-envisioned her days of love and achieved a reunion with her lost love as well as her lost self.

*Romeo & Zhu Yingtai* ends on a bittersweet note. Although the performance has successfully suspended the differences between Zhu and Luo as well as between past and present, the adaptors do acknowledge that the happiness will be transitory. The moments of reunion are achieved through flashbacks and fantasies, never concrete resurrections. Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* eases the nostalgic ache for the evening but never promises that the transformation will be permanent.

**Conclusion**

The frequency with which Chinese tragicomic productions of *Romeo and Juliet* address temporal dissonance suggests that a regional anxiety about the progression of time is central to the Sinophone reception of the text. While Chinese adaptors perform a nationally revered text of one past culture, they attempt to seek comfort in the appeal of their own distinctive historical imagination. Sinophone cultural identity by way of William Shakespeare? Interestingly enough, it is precisely Shakespeare's identity as a foreign, deceased author that primes his texts for interpretations that search for an ideal China in the past. His canon has passed through so many centuries, so many localities, and so many adaptors' hands that Shakespeare's identity as an Elizabethan Englishman has dissolved into that of a “world” author. His texts are in danger of becoming “souvenirs” or producing a pastiche of “Shakespeare-ness.” When Chinese adaptors latch onto the idea of Shakespeare's omnipresence or universality they are inherently
excising concepts close to the text's meaning and identity. This depoliticization is a violence that is difficult to overlook.

However I would argue that Chinese adaptors are not producing *Romeo and Juliet* because they interpret the play to be a blank slate ripe for theatrical experimentation. Rather, to return the metaphor of stacking slides at the core of this examination, I believe they see an opportunity to work with a wealth of responses to the text. When *Romeo and Juliet* is transported to China it engages parallels with equivalent works in East Asia, questions of genre and theatrical history on both sides of the globe, and perspectives of love in relation to individuals and communities, not to mention the nostalgic resonances in the text's treatment of first love and the end of civil strife. The tragicomic method of adaptation is the end result of the shifts and augmentations requisite in this adaptive mode.

Of course this abundance of connotations must lead to a series of choices. Some sources will be raised to the surface and others will invariably be reduced and simplified. The depoliticization in Chinese interpretations walks a fine line. On one hand, adaptations often gloss over Shakespeare's British origins and the colonial sentiments he invariably represents. On the other hand, his foreignness is still highlighted as it is the precise quality that allows adaptors to analyze Chinese culture. At times the nostalgic view in these interpretations simplifies Chinese history and flattens ideological debate. However, Shakespearean adaptation also opens the door to a new kind of nostalgic imagination in which ethnicities reinvigorate their previously censored traditions and Shanghai reanimates the reality of living in a violently colonial city. As the era of globalization continues onward, the balancing act between this erasure and amalgamation
is only beginning. Nostalgic tragicomedy in Chinese *Romeo and Juliets* is an excellent starting point for an exploration of this tenuous interaction.
Appendix: Selected Images

Illustration 1: Mise-en-scène of "Liang Shanbo yu Zhu Liye"
http://tieba.baidu.com/%D7%BF%CE%C4%DD%E6/tupian/item/39cd87013eca72c3267fb54d.html

Illustration 2: Progression of the Romance in "Liang Shanbo yu Zhu Liye"
http://www.pt80.com/thread-138070-1-1.html
Illustration 3: Advertisement for "Yi qi liang fu"

http://bk.pplive.com/movie/28643

Illustration 4: Performance of "Romeo and Juliet" followed by a bus-breakup - "Yi qi liang fu"

http://tieba.baidu.com/%C3%B7%D1%DE%B7%BC/tupian/item/fb5509236945106d92580752.html
Illustration 5: The romantic protagonists in "Zhao Mei yu Ah Luo"

http://www.chinaculture.org/library/2008-02/18/content_41359.htm

Illustration 6: Zhu WanYing narrating from modern New York - "Romeo & Zhu Yingtai"

http://yule.sohu.com/20090306/n262649053.shtml
Illustration 7: R&J adaptation 1, English language musical - "Romeo & Zhu Yingtai"


Illustration 8: R&J adaptation 2, Westernized huaju - "Romeo & Zhu Yingtai"

Illustration 9: R&J adaptation 3, performance by ordinary Chinese citizens, "Romeo & Zhu Yingtai"


Illustration 10: United Front against foreign influences, "Romeo & Zhu Yingtai"

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