Love and Empire: The Transnational Logic of Feng Xiaogang's *The Banquet*

Jinhua Li

Abstract This paper investigates the cultural logics that justify the typical marketing decision that opts for a complete localization of the original materials and thus the minimization of foreign literary source in transnational Chinese film adaptations. I will use Feng Xiaogang's *The Banquet* as a case study to investigate the cultural logics and politics of transnational Shakespeare adaptation in contemporary Chinese cinema. I argue that Feng Xiaogang's appropriation of the Shakespearean text is a re-production of a textual cultural identity that situates the narrative in the continuum of the Chinese visual and literary traditions through thematic displacement, structural gender politics, and visual signifier re-configuration.

Key words *The Banquet*; Shakespeare adaptation; cultural logics; gender; transnational cinema

Author Jinhua Li is a doctoral candidate in the Comparative Literature program at Purdue University. Her research interests include transnational film remakes, Chinese language cinema, and gender and politics in popular media. Email: li193@purdue.edu.

Just as Marjorie Garber unerringly observes that "Every age creates its own Shakespeare" (3), every culture imagines its own Hamlet, and each version of film adaptation inevitably offers its own interpretation of Hamlet through literary and cinematic translation of the Bard's text. For Chinese audience, the most vivid imagination of *Hamlet* exits in Feng Xiaogang's adaptation of Hamlet, *The Banquet* (夜宴). Yet not every audience is aware of the fact that *The Banquet* is a Chinese version of Shakespeare's Hamlet due to a thorough localization strategy in this transnational adaptation. Feng Xiaogang transplants the Shakespeare's narrative from sixteenth century Denmark to tenth century China to give the story an authentic historical background in the turbulent years of the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms. This film's allegiance to Shakespeare is further masked by the absence of its Bard-connection in both the standard and the international trailers. Apparently, the cultural re-imagination of prince Hamlet calls for an amnesiac disregard of his previous life in a foreign culture.

In fact, this minimization of foreign literary source in transnational Chinese film adaptations is a typical marketing decision that opts for a complete localization of the original materials. Many transnational film remakes choose to transplant the original materials to a time-space that is characteristically Chinese. Li Shaohong's *Xuese Qingchen* (《血色清晨》) (*Bloody Morning*) transposes Gabriel García Márquez's

Crónica de una muerte anunciada (Chronicle of a Death Foretold) to a village in south China in the 1980s; Xu Jinglei's *Yi ge mo sheng nv ren de lai xin* (《一个陌生女人的来信》) (*Letter from an Unknown Woman*) re-imagines Stefan Zweig's name-sake novella in the hutongs of Beijing in the 1930s; Hu Xuehua's *Ximalaya Wangzi* (《喜马拉雅王子》) (*Prince of the Himalayas*) is another transnational Shakespeare adaptation that renders Prince Hamlet a royal man in an ancient mythic Tibetan kingdom; and *San qiang pai an jing qi* (《三枪拍案惊奇》) (*A Simple Noodle Story*) is Zhang Yimou's transposition of the Coen Brother's *Blood Simple* to the mountainous inland province of Gansu in a historical past. Such ubiquity of cultural localization forms an industrial pattern that raises the question: What is the cultural logic of localization in a transnational adaptation? In other words, why is localization and hence assimilation of foreign texts the trade standard for cross-cultural cinematic translations of foreign literary texts? *The Banquet* offers a case study of the cultural logic and politics of transnational Shakespeare adaptation in contemporary Chinese cinema, because of the way Feng Xiaogang appropriates a Shakespearean text. His method is to reproduce a textual cultural identity that situates the narrative in the continuum of the Chinese visual and literary traditions. To do so he displaces themes, restructures gender relations, and configures visual signifiers.

If the "moral complexity, psychological depth, and philosophical power" in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is somehow impossibly encapsulated within prince Hamlet's famous "to be, or not to be" soliloquy (Greenblat 289), such thematic intricacy is effectively displaced in *The Banquet* by a theme familiar in ancient Chinese literary tradition—kingdom and beauty, or *jiangshan meiren* (《江山美人》). The political ambition of the emperor and the sexual desire of a man have always been at odds in traditional literatures of imperial love. Surrounded by wives and concubines, the emperor is ironically expected not to fall in love with these women but instead treat them either as hostages of political allegiance or mere producers of legitimate heirs for the empire. This can be partly explained by the polygamous tradition in ancient China, where more wives means more sons to carry out the royal family line and further secure the succession of the throne within the family. Therefore, emperors who give love priority over politics invariably witness the tragic downfall of themselves or their government. For centuries, emperors are cautioned against the feminine hazard of *femme fatale* in the narratives of Emperor You (周幽王) in the West Zhou Dynasty, who entertained his favorite concubine Bao Si (褒姒) by lighting fire beacons to trick his vassals, and Emperor Xuan Zong (唐玄宗) in the Tang Dynasty, whose devotion on his Concubine Yang (杨贵妃) led to a political riot that eventually caused the Dynasty to decline. [1] Such sentiment seems absent in the Western tradition, which instead finds romance in the Duke of Windsor's decision to abdicate the throne in order to marry his love. Chinese history recognizes the female threat to a regime of patriarchal power. The name it gives to this the moral snare is *jiangshan meiren*.

Instead of foregrounding Hamlet's dilemma, *The Banquet* centralizes the theme of *jiangshan meiren* in a feudal patriarchy in several significant moments throughout the film. Wu Luan's romantic involvement with Wan is audibly juxtaposed with a tumultuous historical background in the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms by the authorita-

tive voiceover at the beginning. Circumscribed by national disquietude and political unrest, Wu Luan's escapist tendency to isolate himself in the south and immerse himself in the trivial art of music and dance effectively disqualifies him as appropriate candidate for the throne despite his legitimate claim to the sovereignty. As "Wu Luan" literally means "no masculinity" in Chinese[2], Prince Wu Luan is symbolically effeminate because his tender feelings for the Wan prevent him from fighting for power. Like prince Hamlet, Wu Luan expresses an aversion to the throne; but unlike Hamlet, Wu Luan's revenge is tinted with a sexual desire for Wan, the beauty who could endanger the kingdom.

In Feng Xiaogang *The Banquet*, the motif of *jiangshan meiren* is significantly articulated by Emperor Li during his first sexual encounter with Wan. With an anxiety to outdo his brother to please Wan in bed, Emperor Li manifests his willingness to satisfy Wan sexually even beyond what is deemed appropriate for a "wise and valiant man," as Wan refers to her late husband, the previous Emperor. "The tug between power and love has tormented past emperors for centuries," Emperor Li says as he lusts over Wan's feminine body, "but when there is you, Sister-in-law, what need do I have of a kingdom?"[3] Apparently, Emperor Li has made a choice between the kingdom and beauty—he chooses love over power. This bedroom conversation foreshadows a tragic ending for a self-indulgent ruler, as history repeatedly proves.

The antithesis between power and love, politics and sexuality, and kingdom and beauty is also represented through the blurred boundary between the political discourse of the royal court and the private discourse of the inner chamber. In what appears to be Emperor Li's first court meeting after coming into power, Governor Pei attempts to reveal Emperor Li's usurpation of the throne by addressing Wan as Empress Dowager, hinting at Wu Luan's legitimate position as the Emperor. Wan's proper position in the royal family, therefore, becomes the focal point of contention that determines the political climate of the court. When she kneels to Emperor Li and calls herself "Empress," Wan acknowledges Emperor Li's identity as her husband as well as his position as the emperor. To Emperor Li, the tug between power and love seems to temporarily reconcile when he jokingly says that the sculpture that has been made to present his reign should look like a dragon and a phoenix, the traditional metaphor for sexual intercourse and marriage.

Unless we recognize the Chinese theme of the conflict between kingdom and beauty, Emperor Li's mythic propensity toward an erotic conquest of Wan is rather baffling. Audiences wonder, for example, why Emperor Li drinks the poisoned wine at the end of the film, when, unlike in *Hamlet*, he is not physically forced to do so. His cruel assassination of Wu Luan and iron-fisted rule of his court seems reasonable approximations of Shakespeare's Claudius, but his doting devotion to Wan distinguishes him from Hamlet's lustful uncle (1.5.45, 55) and makes him seem more like Emperor Xuan Zong, who is politically condemned in official historic discourse but widely popular throughout Chinese folk literary tradition as a symbol of undying love.

The similarity of Emperor Li to Emperor Xuan Zong is most revealingly manifested in the climatic sequence of the night banquet. After Qing Nü, having taken a sip of the wine that Wan toasted to Emperor Li, dies of poison, it dawns on the Emperor

that the poisonous wine is meant for him. Now the camera noticeably invites a sympathetic identification with Emperor Li by using extreme close ups. It peruses his face. But in this scene, words speak for themselves:

Emperor Li: You poisoned the wine?
Wan: Yes.
Emperor Li: You want me to die?
Wan: Yes.
Emperor Li: And all along I thought I was warming your heart.

This emotional moment dramatizes how the Emperor comes to terms with his painful reality. Shot in a slow, internal rhythm, this scene serves as the Emperor's reconciliation with Wan and his own death. But the last blow is yet to come: Emperor Li is decisively crushed when Wan urges Minister Yin to initiate the coup. The Emperor's emotional devastation feasibly explains why he calls off the Imperial Guards from Wu Luan and his otherwise baffling decision to drink the poisoned wine, to the obvious incredulity of Wu Luan. The missing piece of the puzzle that renders the apparent irrationality of the Emperor's actions sensible is his love for Wan. The Imperial Guards are ordered to protect Wan from the rage of Wu Luan at Qing Nü's death, but when Wu Luan specifies the target of his revenge, Emperor Li immediately dismisses the Guards and hence exposes himself in danger, while he could quite easily have Wu Luan killed, who is hopelessly outnumbered. As the Emperor lies dying on Wan's lap, his final words crystallize his suicidal decision to drink the wine, "You offered me a toast, how can I refuse?" When Wan wants him dead, Emperor Li embraces death.

This unShakespearean resolution is prepared for earlier in the film, when Emperor Li knowingly ignores a premonition of his impending death. Against Lord Chamberlain's suggestion that it is not auspicious to receive guests, Emperor Li insists on giving the banquet not only on an extremely ominous day, but also at midnight, a most sinister time in the Chinese imagination, which happens to coincide with the sinister quality Shakespeare gives to the clock striking twelve in the first scene of Hamlet. We can see how cultures overlap even as they differ. The choice of time, which echoes the time of the first appearance of Hamlet's father's ghost (a scene from the film) is significant as an indication of the Emperor's violation of customs: midnight is not customarily chosen for a royal banquet in ancient China, and the in-betweenness signified by this unearthly hour possesses an "uncanny quality" that is generally feared (Belsey 114). In addition, Emperor Li's order infringes the hospitality and social harmony that is demonstrated by the activity of banqueting: everyone must attend on pain of death.

Looked at retrospectively, Emperor Li, rather than Wu Luan, is portrayed in a tragic light. Emperor Li's suicide and death is justified by a familiar allusion to "centuries of emperors" who are "tormented between the tug between power and love" that he self-reflexively meditates in the scene of his first sexual encounter with Wan. This portrayal finds in Claudius something that is not absent from Shakespeare but not usually stressed: a man perhaps less driven by a lust for power than by Gertrude's

beauty. In the Chinese imagination, Emperor Li is historically re-configured as one among many emperors who choose love over power, beauty over kingdom and pay dearly for politically incorrect decisions.

The re-characterization of Claudius as a stereotypical passionate Chinese emperor caught between love and power is coupled by a portrayal of Gertrude in the upwardly-mobile figure of Wan. Despite Wan's narrative function as a "structural focal point" that hinges the film (Chapman 2), she also embodies a disruptive feminine resistance to the male gaze that must be suppressed. If Emperor Li dies for moral and political reasons, Wan must die as the usurper of not only the throne, but more importantly, because she usurps the male role.

In the final scene, when the Empress is celebrating her victory, a mysterious dagger penetrates her from behind, much to the surprise of audience and critics. This unexpected turn of events at the end of the film has been described as "magical" (Ross 7). Indeed, this dagger (presumably the Sword of the Yue Maiden) is almost comparable to the fantastic reincarnation of Hermione in *Cymbeline* for its magic power to solve the apparently unsolvable problem: the superiority of the feminine over the masculine. While a female ruler may sometimes not pose a predicament for Western sentiments, as for many in 1590s England under Queen Elizabeth, an Empress, especially at the historical moment against which the film is set, connotes an entire history of catastrophes caused by women in China.

The warning against women can be traced back as early as *The Book of Songs*, which says, "disorder is not come down from Heaven, / Rather it is the spawn of these women. (乱匪降自天,生自妇人)." (trans. Allen 284).[4] Women, especially beautiful women, are often seen as hongyan huoshui (红颜祸水), literally, "the beautiful woman who brings havoc," who will bring calamity to both herself and the world. The Tang Dynasty, the most powerful and prosperous Kingdom in ancient Chinese history, is popularly believed to be brought down by a beautiful woman, the favorite concubine of Emperor Xuan Zong, Concubine Yang. In a historically accurate mimetic symmetry, Emperor Xuan Zong's cinematic proxy Emperor Li and Concubine Yang's proxy Wan both have to follow the historically designated trajectory of fate. That the film chooses such a moment in history is hardly innocent of an allegorical meaning.

Having suffered during the slow decaying of the Tang Dynasty, the Chinese have come to associate the feminine more closely with an alien and dangerous Otherness, a subversive evil force. This is precisely what Fredric Jameson, in his discussion of romance as a magic narrative, has observed when he writes that

> it is becoming increasingly clear that the concept of evil is at one with the category of Otherness itself. ... The point, however, is not that in such figures the Other is feared because he is evil; rather, he is evil because he is Other, alien, different, strange, unclean, and unfamiliar. (140)

Such thinking suggests why in the film the alien feminine world should be kept strictly apart from the masculine world, and women should not be allowed to interfere with

politics and national affairs. In the Chinese imagination, particularly in the post-Tang era, if the masculine world is ever tinted by the feminine, disaster threatens. So, what matters at the end of the film is not who kills the Queen, but that the Queen must die.

The death of Wan is a visually doubled Other of that of Wu Luan. Wu Luan's final words, "it is so good to be able to die," most explicitly answer Hamlet's question in his celebrated soliloquy (3.1.58 – 90). However, the opportunity to speak is significantly denied to the Queen, who dies a silent death. In her final soliloquy, Wan, for the first and only time in the film, calls herself the Emperor instead of the Empress. It is also here that the Empress uses the royal pronoun *zhen* instead of "I" to refer to herself.[5] Hence, this is a climactic moment when she believes that she has finally reached the zenith of her life and succeeded in her most audacious transgression, which is why she must die—the feminine should absolutely not be enthroned.

The Queen's silence, in addition to its apparent symbolism of her lost power of discourse, gives a final comment to the film's gender politics. The last scene therefore begins with a shot of the fabric of qiansu hong (茜素红), a particular red that Wan loves. As the red fabric is falling down from a high roller, Wan reaches in vain to catch it, only to find that the fabric is falling through her fingers to quickly for her to reach. Grabbing vainly in the air for nothing, her empty hands become a visual metaphor that foreshadows the futility of her attempt to triumph over men and the masculine territory of politics. As Wan speaks of her transformation from the innocence of the traditional feminine figure embodied in Little Wan to the sophisticated calculating Emperor Wan, this visual metaphor continues to interrupt the verbal narrative. Wan's changes, although verbally represented as success and victory over the patriarchal system, is therefore visually negated by the image of her empty hands.

Colors rehearse the theme of sexual attraction and power. The redness of the fabric is compared to the burning fire of human desire, out of which Wan emerges as a phoenix that is reborn from fire and ashes. But this red is also the color of blood, as Emperor Li observes in his redecoration of the palace. As Wan holds the red fabric close to her heart, the mysterious dagger tints the color of her desire with her own blood. In this scene, the camera takes a spectatorial position that is eye-level with the flying trajectory of the dagger. But when the camera cuts back to Wan, who slowly turns and points directly at the audience, the spectatorial position is decisively incriminating. Pushed to face the accusing finger of Wan, the audience is the partner in crime with the mysterious killer, whose execution-style stabbing sentences Wan to a visual oblivion. The disembodied counter-shot, supposedly from the point of view of the dagger, is a collective if unconscious condemnation of Wan's feminine threat to the masculine power regime.

The Banquet's gendered localization of Shakespeare's Hamlet relies heavily on symbolic cultural and visual signifiers to re-constitute the discourse of a historical exorcism of the feminine Other. In its homage to Zhang Yimou's famous *Hero* (英雄), *The Banquet* exploits symbolic use of color, especially prime colors, to emphasize the clash between the feminine and the masculine. Colors can be invested with symbolic meanings, which is increasingly popular with the Fifth Generation Directors in China.

This tendency finds its aesthetic reference in the colors that are used to paint Beijing Opera masks, which visually label the characterization of the performers. But different from the rigid color symbolism strictly followed in Beijing Opera, what different colors symbolize is more of an idiosyncratic decision on the part of the director rather than based on conventions. The court, a decisively masculine world, is symbolized by black, whereas Wan, emblematic of the subversive feminine power, is associated with red. The confrontation between black and red is therefore a symbolic battle fought between the masculine and the feminine, the realms of public duties and private passion. When asked if the pillars in the palace should be painted in vermilion or ink black, Emperor Li, though not explicitly, indicates that vermilion is his choice. This decision to allow the feminine red to be mingled with the imperial and masculine black foreshadows a dangerous feminine contamination of his reign, which finally results in his demise. For the majority part of the film, Wan is seen either in black or in red, a metaphor that she is oscillating between the two worlds that should be kept tenaciously separate. In her is embodied the "unregulated woman" who "was a disaster for the collective" (Cass 2). This almost melodramatic use of color is essentially a system of demarcation, a "function of drawing the boundaries of a given social order and providing a powerful internal deterrent against deviancy or subversion" (Jameson 140). The strong visual impact created by the juxtaposition of red and black therefore marks the inviolability of the boundary between the two worlds.

Compared with red and black, the other two symbolic colors, white and green, are less easy to be linked to any particular character with similar certainty. Simultaneously the color of all colors and the color of no color, white is employed in no less sophisticated manner. Used traditionally as the color of mourning, white is, above all, a color of true emotion and paradoxically the concealment of it. This is why Wu Luan is first seen in white, wearing a white mask; both express his mourning to lost love and the death of his father. While on stage, both Wu Luan and Qing Nü wear white gowns, because for Wu Luan, the best performance is blank, devoid of any facial expression of emotions. Both Wan and Qing Nü are seen in white, but for them, white is invariably a foreshadowing of the loss of their chastity/virginity. Defying any attempt to pin down its exact symbolization, white intimates what remains illegible to both the feminine and the masculine, designating the necessary but enigmatic boundary between the two worlds.

Green is used conspicuously only at the beginning and the ending of the film, which creates a symbolic visual envelope structure that seems to suggest a spiral development: the green world at the beginning is reduced to a smaller green in a fish tank, which, despite its much smaller magnitude, communicates a hopeful rejuvenation of a clean world that is free from dangers inflicted by the feminine. The last shot of the film, an extreme close up of the green grass floating on the water in the fish tank, is the longest shot in the film, lasting two minutes and forty-eight seconds. During this shot, our gaze is forced to fixate on the green surface, a microcosm that undergoes the circle of change from quietude to disturbance caused by the dropping of a blood-stained sword, to its rippling aftermath, and finally back to its original stillness, as if nothing ever happened. What little turmoil that has been caused by the in-

trusion of an alien subject is quietly assimilated to the system, and the world goes on as usual. Within this single shot, the discourse of gender politics is remarkably visualized with great economy. The intrusion of an alien Other is only temporary no matter how dangerous the Other appears to be. The dagger, although apparently a masculine weapon, is significantly called the Sword of the Yue Maiden. Hence, that Wan is killed by the feminine dagger unmistakably attests to the truth of what has been thought about women: by trespassing into the masculine world, they do not only bring disaster to the world, but also their own destruction.

Cinematic hybridization also distinguishes *The Banquet's* visual stylization. Synthesizing folk dance, ancient song, and fighting scenes that border on modern dance and kung fu choreography, *The Banquet* does not hesitate to resort to any available resources in its visual localization of the foreign narrative. *A Song from Yue* (越人歌), the earliest extant love song, takes over the voiceover's expository narration that sets the background as the imagery of war and rebellion is suddenly taken over by that of the serenity of Wu Luan's artistically architected theatre surrounded by woods. The extreme long shot of the woods quickly changes to an extreme close up of Wu Luan's face, hidden behind a white mask. The exploitation of Wu Luan's masquerade throughout the film echoes the anxiety of not being able to see or to know conveyed by the first line of the play, "Who's there?" (1. 1. 1). A Song from Yue, stunningly delivered vocally by a man's voice, registers the film's investment on traditional Chinese culture.

While the song is distinctively ancient Chinese, Wu Luan's troupe performs a dance that is transnational. With movements that apparently mimic the externalization of hidden identity, Wu Luan's performance is reminiscent of Japanese noh drama, and its sophisticated physical movements seem to invite a comparison with Chinese acrobatics. The intricate layers of exotic elements within localization further pacify the original text's cultural resistance to be completely localized.

The most significant visual signifier of this cultural localization is the employment of kung fu spectacular to enrich the already glamorous cinematography of the film. Apart from exciting fight scenes in the green woods that reminds audience of Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (《卧虎藏龙》), and combats in the snowy desert that alludes to King Hu's *Dragon Gate Inn* (《龙门客栈》), the swordplay and dance between Wan and Wu Luan in her bedchamber attracts most critical attention and interest. To accommodate the innovative combination of kung fu and dancing, the camera uses slow motion, extreme close-up, and bird's eye view to highlight the stylized postures and dynamic shapes created by the fluidly synchronized movement of Wan and Wu Luan. Choreographed in a manner not unlike that of a loving dance, their swordplay is visually presented in a style that unmistakably alludes to the classical Chinese love story *Butterfly Love* (《梁祝》), a story of doomed lovers. The smooth motion created by their flowing clothes eliminates the dooming danger typically felt in a sword fight, but the cold sensation of a sharp sword grazing one's face just by a hair's breadth is made keenly sensible with the camera's strategically placed close-ups.

The addition of kung fu to dance in *The Banquet* also exploits an intertextuality

easily associated with the wuxia pian (武侠片) and kung fu tradition in Hong Kong cinema in the globalized cinematic context. This textual reference further enhances the inter-connectedness of different regional traditions that share visual and aesthetic similarities under a common national cultural rubric. Thus, the localization of Shakespeare's Hamlet facilitates the formation of a diversified and inclusive national cinematic tradition that transcends historical, cultural, and national boundaries.

【Notes】

1. The official historical account of Bao Si 褒姒 can be found in Shi ji <史记>, written by Sima Qian, in the section "the Chronicle of Zhou 周本纪." Documented in such official historical texts as Jiu Tang Shu 旧唐书 (The Old Book of Tang History) and Xin Tang Shu 新唐书 (The New Book of Tang History), the love story between Emperor Xuan Zong in the Tang Dynasty and Concubine Yang can also be found in many popular narratives in ancient and modern literatures, such as the long poem of the Tang Dynasty poet Bai Juyi 白居易's The Song of Everlasting Sorrow 长恨歌, the kunqu play of Changsheng Dian 长生殿 in the Qing Dynasty, and transnationally in Japanese writer Inoue Yasushi's 杨贵妃伝.
2. Luan 鸾 means the male phoenix, so Wu Luan 无鸾 is "no male phoenix," and therefore no masculine power.
3. All quotes from The Banquet are adopted from the film's English subtitles.
4. This is actually a poem that criticizes Emperor You of the West Zhou Dynasty for his doting indulgence of Bao Si that leads to the corruption of his court and indignation among his people. The Chinese original of the entire poem and its modern Chinese translation can be found in this website <http://www.paiai.com/Article/guoxue/jing/shij/200703/5289.html>.
5. There is no exact equivalent for this royal first person pronoun 朕 in English, but the royal plural "we" might come closer to this word.

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