

THE TRAGIC PRINCE AS CONFUCIAN HERO:
HAMLET, 'BARDOLATRY,' AND THE GREAT CULTURAL REVOLUTION

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Expos 20.041: Why Shakespeare?

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Legend has it, as J. Philip Brockbank writes, that only hours after the death of Mao in 1976 lines were forming in the streets for copies of Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*.¹ That Shakespeare should figure into China's popular tradition comes as no surprise to the modern reader acquainted with Chinese culture: like their Western counterparts, Chinese academics and the reading public have elevated the Bard above all Western writers, judging him a "god of art."² The public affectionately and respectfully calls him 莎翁, or "father Shakespeare." Critics such as Cao Yu know him as the "literary giant who maintains as much prestige in human history as Karl Marx"—a singular distinction coming from the Chinese, as Qi-Xin He noted.³

Of Shakespeare's works, two plays in particular have captured the Chinese imagination: *The Merchant of Venice*, mentioned above, and *Hamlet*.⁴ Though Brockbank and some others have said that *The Merchant of Venice* is the most popular play in China, that honor rests squarely with *Hamlet* (see Figure 1). The play was the only tragedy translated from Charles and Mary Lamb's *Tales from Shakespeare*, was translated once more before any of the Histories were translated at all, was the first Shakespearean play used for significant political demonstration, was the first Shakespearean play translated into the vernacular modern Chinese in 1921, was the first to receive a bilingual treatment in 1984, and was the first to reach nationwide cinema audiences via screenings of Laurence Olivier's film adaptation.⁵ Moreover, Figure 1 demonstrates that *Hamlet* is not only more popular than

¹ J. Philip Brockbank, "Shakespeare Renaissance in China," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 39, no. 2 (1988): 197, <http://www.jstor.org/> (accessed November 19, 2014).

² Xiao Yang Zhang, *Shakespeare in China: A Comparative Study of Two Traditions and Cultures* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1996), 13.

³ Qi-Xin He, "China's Shakespeare," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 37, no. 2 (1986): 149-159, <http://www.jstor.org/> (accessed November 19, 2014), 155. Cao Yu, of course, was not only the Chairman of the Chinese Dramatists' Association but also widely considered the foremost Chinese playwright of the twentieth century.

⁴ Murray J. Levith, *Shakespeare in China* (London: Continuum, 2004), 117.

⁵ Levith, 4-16. The anonymous translation of the Lambs' work was the real start of Shakespeare's presence in China. As to the political appropriation of Shakespeare: in 1915, "when the powerful warlord Yuan Shikai (1859-1916) declared himself emperor, an adaptation of *Hamlet* was offered in Shanghai with a title that translates *Usurping the Throne and Stealing a Sister-in-Law*...In the same year, another *Hamlet*, with the

Merchant of Venice among the Chinese academia but is also proportionally more popular in China than in other cultures around the world, suggesting a sort of elemental connection between *Hamlet* and China.

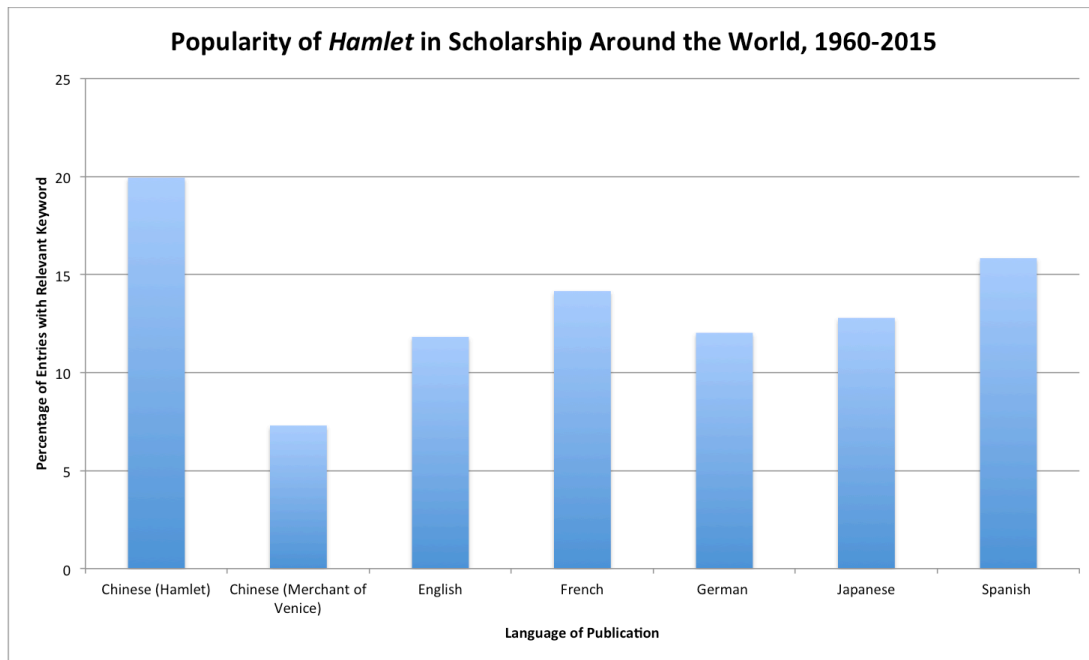


Figure 1: Comparison of the proportion of scholarship and theatrical productions listed in the *World Shakespeare Bibliography Online* corresponding to the keyword “Hamlet” across the literature in select major Western languages, Japanese, and Chinese. The percentage of entries in the database corresponding to the keyword “Merchant of Venice” is also shown for the Chinese language as a point of reference—clearly *The Merchant of Venice* is far from being (at least in the academic sphere) the most popular Shakespearean play in China, and *Hamlet* occupies not only a special position within China itself but also in China as compared with the rest of the world.

It is important to note, however, that this popularity, both of *Hamlet* and of Shakespeare more generally, is a recent phenomenon (see Figure 2). Shakespeare was not really introduced to China until the twentieth century, and lived mostly in obscurity from 1903-1949, with China’s high rate of illiteracy and the strong nationalist fervor in the wake of the Opium Wars limiting his relevance to the academic sphere.⁶ From 1950 to 1966, limited Marxist analysis dominated Shakespeare criticism, and from 1966 to 1976 the Cultural Revolution turned China into a “cultural

title *Arch Usurper of the State...was advertised*” (16). *Macbeth* was used to the same end. See also: Zhang, “Shakespeare in China,” 196.

⁶ He, 151.

wasteland,” where all literature was meant first and foremost to further the revolution and the political interests of the Communist Party.⁷ Shakespeare, deemed a bourgeois and capitalist apologist during the latter period, was hardly to be seen. This complicated — and often far less than glorious — history of Shakespeare’s reception in China of course invites several questions: Why, hours after death of Mao and after the Cultural Revolution, did the Chinese people reach out to Shakespeare? And why, in 1976 and in the years that followed, did their attentions focus on *Hamlet*?

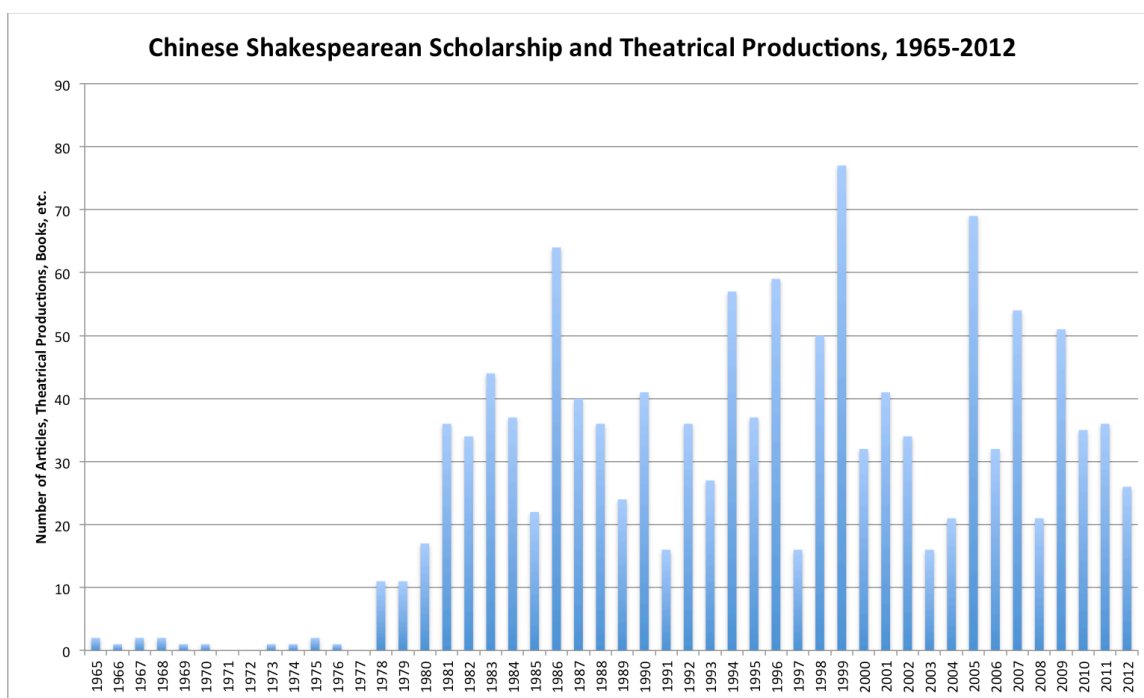


Figure 2: Number of Chinese language entries by year listed in the *World Shakespeare Bibliography Online*. The data suggests a relatively firm start date of 1978 (two years after the death of Mao) for Shakespeare’s modern popularity among Chinese academics. Note that the years 1965-1977, despite being nearly a quarter of the timeframe examined, account for barely one percent of the total entries in the period considered.⁸

There are two main approaches that the Chinese have traditionally taken in reading and analyzing Shakespeare, and correspondingly two main ways in which we can interpret Shakespeare’s

⁷ Xiao Yang Zhang, “The Chinese Vision of Shakespeare (from 1950 to 1990): Marxism and Socialism,” in *Shakespeare in the Worlds of Communism and Socialism*, ed. Irena R. Makaryk and Joseph G. Price (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), 278.

⁸ The years 1960-1964 and 2013-2015 are not shown. The year 1964 contains a misleading thirty-two entries, twenty of which are part of a collection of plays translated by Shiqiu Liang.

popularity in China. The first, and still dominant, approach is a Marxist reading of Shakespeare, interpreting his plays, and in particular *Merchant of Venice* and *Timon of Athens*, through class analysis and historical materialism.⁹ This political approach was reinforced and developed by Mao, who argued in his 1942 “Talks at the Yenan Forum on Art and Literature” and his 1957 “On the Correct Handling of Contradictions Among the People” that literature must first and foremost have political ends.¹⁰ If we accept this approach, then Shakespeare is popular in China because China is a revolutionary country and Shakespeare is either a revolutionary writer or an exemplar of anti-revolutionary bourgeois corruption. Moreover, *Hamlet* is popular because Shakespeare’s mistreatment of female characters like Ophelia and Gertrude exemplify his promotion of a feudal social order and because the story of *Hamlet* reveals how political leaders are “doomed to fail” if they do not harness and appreciate the “power of the people.”¹¹

If the first and more popular approach to Shakespeare in China is a Marxist approach, a second and more recent approach is a *formalist* one — that is, one that analyzes the similarities and differences between the form and structure of Shakespearean drama and that of traditional Chinese theatre. This approach, exemplified by Xiao Yang Zhang’s work, examines the “intersection between Shakespeare and Chinese culture,” comparing Asian and Western conceptions of comedy and tragedy in order to understand and analyze the creation of a “Chinese Shakespeare” in the twentieth century.¹² In this approach, Shakespeare is popular in China because of similarities or differences in Western and Eastern forms of literature and life: there is either some natural affinity between the artistic structures of the two cultures that facilitates the assimilation and appropriation

⁹ Zhang, “The Chinese Vision of Shakespeare,” 273-274.

¹⁰ Mao Tse-Tung, *Selected Works of Mao Tse-Tung* (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1967), 3:86.

¹¹ Wang, Shihua, “From Maoism to (Post) Modernism: *Hamlet* in Communist China,” in *Shakespeare in the Worlds of Communism and Socialism*, ed. Irena R. Makaryk and Joseph G. Price (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), 290.

¹² Zhang, “Shakespeare in China,” 14-15.

of Shakespeare, or there is some sort of attraction, curiosity, or desire to learn created by the insurmountable divide between the two societies.

In the years since the Cultural Revolution, a third and particularly promising approach has emerged: a *Confucian* one that seeks to understand and interpret Shakespeare through China's unique and longstanding cultural tradition, combining the cultural and social lens of the formalist approach with the content-based focus of the Marxist literature. Though seemingly a natural line of interpretation, Chinese criticism, as Levith notes, has "shied away from this approach," at least in part due to the "chaos of war, politics, and ideological turmoil" China has been in since the late nineteenth century.¹³ But it is easy to see the potential of such a line of inquiry: Confucius' emphasis on filial piety, justice, and integrity, for instance, all resonate strongly at least in theme if not in content with what Shakespeare explores in *Hamlet*, as does the Neo-Confucian delineation of the proper relationships between sovereign and subject, father and son, husband and wife.¹⁴ It is this sort of macroscopic or situational affinity that the existing scholarship in English on this topic, as detailed by Levith and Xiao Yang Zhang, has mentioned, examining the play's family relationships and seeking to understand Hamlet's morality in relation to his loyalty to his father and, by contrast, Claudius' immorality in relation to his disruption of "just succession."¹⁵ Some others, like Zhang Si Yang, have proposed an alternate psychological approach, classifying Hamlet as the exemplary Confucian politician who recognizes the social problems of his society and is thrust into melancholy not because of nihilism but rather due to a pressing sense of "political responsibility."¹⁶

¹³ Levith, 127; Levith, 114. As discussed earlier, for much of the twentieth-century Shakespeare criticism in China — when it was tolerated at all — was "handicapped" and limited to political interpretation (Wang, 284). Moreover, during the Cultural Revolution both Confucius and Shakespeare were condemned as "feudalistic poison," and even owning a Shakespearean text was grounds for persecution (Zhang, "Shakespeare in China," 212; Levith, 44).

¹⁴ Levith, 116.

¹⁵ Levith, 118.

¹⁶ Zhang, "Shakespeare in China," 215. See also my notes on Zhang's "tragedy of the society" below.

Looking at *Hamlet* with Confucius in mind, or looking at Confucius' foundational *Analects* with Shakespeare in mind, as has been suggested by scholars thus far, can yield great insights — but only by engaging with both texts simultaneously at a microscopic level can a truly rigorous Confucian reading of *Hamlet* be achieved. In this paper, I will attempt to do so, arguing that Shakespeare's popularity stems mainly not from political nor from formal reasons but rather from cultural ones. More specifically, I assert that *Hamlet* assumed the role of a Confucian text in China and thus offered a way for the Chinese, devastated by the Cultural Revolution, to reconnect with the heritage of their country and recover the damage done in the 1960s and 1970s. Just as the Communist Party turned back to Marxism and Maoism to reunite China and “reaffirm and re-establish cultural roots that had been dug up during the ‘cultural’ revolution,”¹⁷ the Chinese people turned to Confucius — via Shakespeare — to “reaffirm and re-establish” the culture that had been destroyed, but with a modern, Western twist.¹⁸

The Prince and the Master

One of the major themes Shakespeare explores in *Hamlet* is the conflict between the superficial, or what appears to be true on a surface level, and the real, or what actually is. When the Queen asks Hamlet to “cast [his] nighted color off” (1.2.68), remarking that he has well exceeded the expected ceremonial mourning for the old king, Hamlet retorts that there is nothing ceremonial about his mourning. “I know not ‘seems,’” he remarks: although the signs of grieving he has displayed may “indeed seem, / For they are actions that a man might play,” his grief is that “within which passes show” (1.2.76-86). Hamlet here of course contrasts himself with Claudius and Gertrude, who engage in mourning only as long as they are obligated to, as long as the kingdom is

¹⁷ Zhang, “The Chinese Vision of Shakespeare,” 271.

¹⁸ One of the major political propaganda campaigns conducted by Mao was the 批林批孔 (Anti-Lin [Biao], Anti-Confucian Movement). The Cultural Revolution also saw the destruction and sacking of Confucian temples, among other cultural artifacts and relics.

“contracted in one brow of woe” and it “befit[s them] to bear [their] hearts in grief” (1.2.1-1.24; emphasis mine). For Hamlet, two months of mourning is too little — let alone the unforgivable, “wicked speed” of Gertrude in forgetting his father’s virtue and love (1.2.155). This opposition between the real and the superficial is further explored via the recurring references to painting, drama, and speech: Claudius’ “wicked wit” and seductive oratory is decried as “traitorous” witchcraft (1.5.43-45), as is the ability of the Player to thrust himself into vivid emotion and tears on the basis of nothing, a mere “dream of passion” (2.2.508-509), as are the “paintings” of women who, “given one face...make [themselves] another” (3.1.139-140).¹⁹

This same opposition is explored in very similar terms in Confucius’ *Analects*. In fact, one of the very first sayings presented in the text is that “fine words and an insinuating appearance are seldom associated with true virtue” (1.3).²⁰ For Confucius, as it is for Hamlet, “ceremonies performed without reverence[,] mourning conducted without sorrow” (3.26), words without thoughts, are, to put it simply, shameful (5.25): one must be, not ‘seem.’ Authenticity reigns supreme, and the painted mask, as in Shakespeare, is condemned. Moreover, in mourning in particular Confucius remarks that “it is better that there be deep sorrow than...minute attention to observances” (3.4); Hamlet’s mockery of Claudius and Gertrude’s purely ceremonial and formal mourning, lasting only exactly as long as prescribed by the “contract” of keeping up appearances, echoes this sentiment. Finally, Hamlet of course can be interpreted as the model of Confucian filial piety: like the Master, he mourns for “the dead, as if they were present” (3.12),²¹ and, unlike any of

¹⁹ This motif of painting and masks that plays into the duality of the superficial and the real resurfaces several times in the text. See especially the Claudius/Polonius dialogue before Hamlet’s “to be or not to be” soliloquy: “That with devotion’s visage / And pious action we do sugar o’er / The devil himself...The harlot’s cheek, beautied with plast’ring art...” (3.1.44-55).

²⁰ I adopt the standard citational practice for the *Analects* here. The translation is from Confucius, *Analects* (The Internet Classics Archive), <http://classics.mit.edu/Confucius/analects.html> (accessed November 28, 2014).

²¹ Although in Hamlet’s case, the dead are of course present.

those around him, seems prepared to maintain the remembrance and “way of his father” for three years (1.11).²²

And so, in many ways Shakespeare’s tragic hero is also a Confucian one, representing virtue and authenticity in the face of a world valuing appearance over substance. But *Hamlet’s* correspondence with the *Analects* extends far beyond Hamlet himself. Consider, for instance, the text’s characterization of the monarchy: Rosencrantz remarks that “the cress of majesty / Dies not alone, but like a gulf doth draw / What’s near it” (3.3.15-17), an idea shared by Polonius, who says to Ophelia that on the prince’s choice “depends / The safety and health of this whole state.” (1.3.20-21). In the *Analects*, Confucius uses an image strikingly similar to Rosencrantz’s to describe the role of the monarch, saying that “He who exercises government by means of his virtue may be compared to the north polar star, which keeps its place and all the stars turn towards it” (2.1). The monarch, both in the Shakespearean and Confucian context, controls the honor and fate of the entire country; when the monarch falls from virtue, the country falls into “boist’rous ruin” (3.3.22).²³

And so we not only have Confucian characters, but arguably Confucian imagery. Moreover, we have a thoroughly Confucian setting. In the *Analects*, Confucius writes that “brotherly duties...constitute the exercise of government” (2.21), and says that “there is government, when the prince is prince, and the minister is minister; when the father is father, and the son is son” (12.11). Additionally, harmony is disrupted and failure is guaranteed when “language be not in accordance with the truth of things,” when names are not correct (13.3). Hamlet, of course, famously finds himself in a Denmark “out of joint” (1.5.186), and these Confucian propositions easily explain why. In *Hamlet*, we have a king, Claudius, who achieved the throne via fratricide — thus not “brotherly

²² “The Master said, ‘While a man’s father is alive, look at the bent of his will; when his father is dead, look at his conduct. If for three years he does not alter from the way of his father, he may be called filial’” (1.11).

²³ See also 1.4.17-20: “This heavy-headed revel east and west / Makes us traduced and taxed of other nations. / They clepe us drunkards, and with swinish phrase / Soil our addition.”

duties” but rather the killing of one’s brother constitutes “exercise of government.” Moreover, in *Hamlet* the son is no longer a son, having lost his father, the king is not a King,²⁴ the wife is no longer the wife.²⁵ What can the world be, then, other than “out of joint”? In setting up the “play within a play” Hamlet shows us what an ordered world should look like: “The adventurous knight shall use his foil and target; the lover shall not sigh gratis; the humorous man shall end his part in peace; the clown shall make those laugh whose lungs are tickle o’ th’ sere; and the lady shall say her mind freely” (2.2.301-304). The world of *Hamlet*, of course, is the exact opposite; language cannot be “in accordance with the truth of things,” names mean nothing and what should be is often not what is.

The ending of *Hamlet* has often been highlighted as incompatible with Chinese tragedy, which traditionally has a “happy ending” that “punish[es] the evil force and, accordingly, [reaffirms] the supremacy of the moral order.”²⁶ Although Hamlet’s end can not be called happy by any stretch of the imagination, the events of the final scene do in some ways reaffirm the “supremacy” of the Confucian moral order, which emphasizes above all the ethic of reciprocity: “what you do not want done to yourself, do not do to others” (15.24).²⁷ The entirety of Act 5 Scene 2 is a reaffirmation of the ethic of reciprocity in the sense that everything intended for others is inflicted on the self: the King’s poisoned wine, for instance, is consumed by his wife and Laertes falls victim to his own

²⁴ Both in the sense that old King Hamlet no longer sits on his throne but also that the undeserving usurper Claudius occupies it in his place. “The body is with the king, but the king is not with the body. The king is a thing.” (4.2.23-24).

²⁵ “You are the queen, *your husband’s brother’s wife*.” (3.4.14; emphasis mine).

²⁶ Zhang, “Shakespeare in China,” 33. Zhang argues that the reason for this difference in characters’ fates lies in the difference between the tragedy of the two forms: Western tragedy focuses on the “tragedy of the individual,” on some internal flaw or error in judgment (what Aristotle called *hamartia*) that leads to catastrophe, while Chinese theatre focuses on the “tragedy of society,” on external corruption that lead a perfectly moral character to unfortunate circumstances. Western characters thus to some extent deserve their tragic end, whereas Chinese characters, Zhang maintains, do not.

²⁷ Tsze-kung asked, saying, “Is there one word which may serve as a rule of practice for all one’s life?” The Master said, “Is not Reciprocity such a word?”

poisoned rapier.²⁸ The ethic of reciprocity is present earlier in *Hamlet* as well: Ophelia asks Laertes to “not as some ungracious pastors do, / Show me the steep and thorny way to heaven / Whiles...Himself the primrose path of dalliance treads” (1.3.47-50.)

I have highlighted three examples where a Confucian reading of *Hamlet* is particularly appropriate, but such instances are indeed to be found everywhere in the text. Just as Confucius says that a superior man (君子) may “be imposed upon, but cannot be fooled” (6.26), Hamlet remarks to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern that though they “can fret [him, they] cannot play upon [him]” (3.2.336-338). Just as Confucius says that “He who offends against Heaven has none to whom he can pray” (3.13), Claudius of course finds himself unable to repent and pray,²⁹ and later ironically tells Laertes that “no place should murder sanctuarize” (4.6.125). Just as Confucius remarks that he has never seen a “firm and unbending man” that is free from the “influence of his passions” (5.11), Hamlet challenges Horatio (and the audience) to “Give me that man that is not passion’s slave” and promises to hold him in his “heart of hearts” (3.2.62-64).

There are, however, certainly problems with this line of interpretation. Hamlet lacks the courage and decisive action of what Xiao Yang Zhang calls a “Confucian hero” and certainly does not possess infallible morality by any measure.³⁰ Moreover, there is of course the “problem of the ghost” in a demystified, secular society that totally rejects the supernatural, both from a Confucian and Communist standpoint.³¹ But there is clearly a compelling case for reading *Hamlet* as a play that not only has a Confucian protagonist, but Confucian imagery, a Confucian setting, and even — though perhaps not in the usual sense — a Confucian resolution. And, as Xiao Yang Zhang argues,

²⁸ “I am justly killed with mine own treachery” (5.2.286). That this ethic (the so-called “Golden Rule”) is not unique to Confucianism on a global scale is not necessarily a problem. All that matters is that this ethic is indubitably linked with Confucianism in the Chinese context and that therefore a Confucian reading of *Hamlet* is possible there.

²⁹ Levith touches on this particular analysis on page 118.

³⁰ Zhang, “Shakespeare in China,” 213; Levith, 119.

³¹ Wang, 284.

equally compelling cases can be made for Shakespeare's other plays as well. *The Merchant of Venice*, a staple in China's high school and university classrooms, can for instance be read as an illustration of the opposing Confucian moral forces *yi*, "loyalty to one's friend," represented by Antonio and Portia, and *li*, selfishness and "personal profit," represented of course by Shylock.³²

But if Shakespeare — as we have seen — can be interpreted as a Confucian author, and if *Hamlet* is popular primarily for these cultural reasons, why didn't the Chinese people skip the middleman and turn to Confucius proper instead? Why did the Chinese need *Hamlet* and not just Confucius? What could *Hamlet* represent and achieve that Confucius couldn't? These are not only fair questions but also pressing ones, and answering them requires a basic understanding of the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution. After Mao's death and the arrest of the Gang of Four, the country, exhausted by Mao's relentless drive forward, looked to the past and to the West — the very sources of "feudalistic poison" Mao despised — to understand the cultural and socioeconomic destruction of the Cultural Revolution. The country and its people needed to recapture the past and their cultural heritage — but they needed to do so *with a difference*; they had to make up for decades of technological and cultural stagnation, and sought to combine Eastern tradition with Western technology and individualism. The problem, however, was that the two seemed utterly incompatible: Westernization and modernization had caused the decline of Confucianism, Confucianism had in the past facilitated a "rigid and autocratic society" limiting the personal freedoms that formed the basis of Western individualism, and it seemed almost certain that a choice between the two had to be made for survival.³³

³² Zhang, "Shakespeare in China," 221.

³³ Schwartz and Zhang, 203; Zhang, "Shakespeare in China," 212. While Confucianism may promote moral behavior on an individual and societal level, it also demands unwavering loyalty to emperor and family alike, severely limiting personal freedoms and completely counter to the basic premises of Western individualism (See Levith, 116).

Shakespeare solved that problem and bridged that seemingly unconquerable divide — that’s what accounts for his singular popularity in China. He was a Western writer that, as discussed, encapsulated the Confucian tradition in *Hamlet*, a transcendent combination of the Oriental and the European. *Hamlet*, as a Confucian text, upheld and validated the tradition and cultural heritage assaulted by the Cultural Revolution;³⁴ *Hamlet*, as a Western play, offered a new way forward to modernity and the rise of the individual.³⁵ Moreover, it is particularly fitting that of Shakespeare’s plays it should be *Hamlet* that is most popular in China: the play’s central struggle between filial obligation and individual identity is almost an allegory for the very same struggle the Chinese people faced after the Cultural Revolution, between rigid Confucianism and Western individualism. Lines formed for Shakespeare the day of Mao’s death, and lines formed for *Hamlet* in the years to come, then, because the playwright and his signature work powerfully united *and* represented the Chinese people’s search within and search without.

³⁴ Schwartz and Zhang, 205. Schwartz and Zhang describe the public’s reception and embrace of Confucianism but the sentiment is quite applicable to *Hamlet* as I consider it.

³⁵ Zhang, “The Chinese Vision of Shakespeare,” 279. According to Zhang, “Shakespeare’s appeal to audiences and readers alike” in China had long been due to “the individuality of his characters.”

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