Hermeneutic Shakespeare

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Introduction

Feng Xiaogang's high-profile film *The Banquet* (2006), which premiered at the Venice and Cannes film festivals, is generally considered to be within the genre of traditional Chinese martial arts (knight-errant) period films, inspired by the commercial success of the Academy Awards reaper *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (Ang Lee dir., 2001).[1] Following the success of Ang Lee's masterly reinvention of martial arts cinema, renowned Chinese filmmakers, such as Zhang Yimou (*Hero, House of Flying Daggers*) and Chen Kaige (*The Promise*), all shot ancient Chinese costume epics in the hopes of winning an Oscar. To achieve this goal, Feng Xiaogang[2] assembled a world-class behind-the-scenes team – including Yuen Woo-Ping[3] for martial arts design and Tan Dun[4] for the soundtrack – to present a poignant legend in an exquisite palace created by Timmy Yip.[5] With the participation of notable performers, such as Zhang Ziyi[6] and Ge You, a battle of royal politics was brought to life. Feng made his intention to produce a *Hamlet* adaptation explicit by remarking upon the release of the film,

> A thousand people will have a thousand *Hamlets*. It does not make much sense for him to be merely changed into a Chinese prince speaking the Chinese language. Therefore, I want to have a huge shift; I want to "pay tribute to" Shakespeare; I want to create a new Hamlet.
>
> (Feng, 2006)

The dual tradition – that is, the martial arts filming tradition and the Shakespearean tradition – that the film is situated in, and the intersection of Eastern and Western tradition, render it intriguing for research. Alongside the acknowledgement of the dual traditions (Shakespearean revenge genre and Chinese martial arts genre) that the film represents, critical attention is drawn to the film's dual identities. Zhang Ying observes that the application of the Chinese Nuo (傩) mask and its variations effectively transforms a Western play into a Chinese film, displacing the

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Western cultural elements with Chinese cultural ideology and principles (95–102). Yu Jin Ko examines how Feng refigures masculine identity in *Hamlet*, thus confronting the issue of Asian masculine identity as represented in global cinema (Ko, 1). Further, Alexander C.Y. Huang identifies the hybridity of postnational cultural spaces and the tendency to reinscribe the nation into cross-cultural dialogues (Huang, 33). In addition, Lee Huishu observes how Shakespeare's cultural authority is borrowed to create complex intertextual webs of cultural signs, thus opening new spaces for the discussion on the current statuses of the American and Chinese film industries (1055). Finally, the representation of desire in the film is intriguing. Rebecca Chapman highlights the queenly desire of Empress Wan, counter to the Hollywood adaptation tradition, which uses Gertrude as a structural device (Chapman, 1). Niamh J. Leary points out that Feng places Empress Wan as the emotional centre of his film, which changes all the fault lines of desire in *Hamlet*, thus revising the most filmically marginalised Shakespearean woman (O'Leary, 63).

However, Philip Kemp's argument that Feng followed Ang Lee's masterly reinvention of the once cheesy genre of martial arts cinema to an ever-emptier effect (Kemp, 49) does not do the film justice. This article, through the lens of cultural hermeneutics – in particular, the intersection of locality studies and hermeneutic principles – explores the cultural mobility of Shakespeare as exemplified in the film. Meanwhile, it also attempts to develop an approach to adaptation studies that incorporates both temporality and locality. This analysis reveals that the film is greatly shaped by global critical interpretations of *Hamlet*, particularly, the structure of emotions in the play. Although foregrounded by the revenge genre tradition, the restructuring of emotions by incorporating the knight-errant (*wuxia*) genre in the foreground demonstrates how the local and typical Chinese elements can be mixed with Western dramatic tradition, thus resulting in new implications and potentials for the global Shakespearean community. Further, this analysis demonstrates the tenacity of literary effects between text and performance, even in the radical moments of change, and how Shakespeare can be reinvented as part of a global cultural repertoire. It also demonstrates that the transcultural reworkings of Shakespeare attest to how the generic, formal, and media boundaries of "literature" continue to merge and complexify.

This chapter consists of six sections. First, it provides an account of the fusion of two traditions: the revenge genre and the Chinese knight-errant genre; it then discusses the similar, yet ultimately different, consciences that hinder the revenge of Hamlet and Prince Wuluan (the Hamlet figure in *The Banquet*). The following section addresses the acting motif concerning the Chinese knight-errant spirit of truthfulness and uprightness. The penultimate section explores the emotional structures to reveal a lack and self-negation of the male protagonists in *The Banquet*, followed by the concluding remarks.

Hermeneutics and Locality

For Gadamer, our understanding is essentially a historically effected event. That is, our historicity is ontological, constitutively involved in any process of understanding – as Gadamer writes, "history is not only not at its end, but we, its interpreters are situated within it, as a conditioned and finite link in a continuing chain" (204). Consequently, a hermeneutic approach that is adequate to the subject matter would have to acknowledge the reality and efficacy of history within understanding itself (Gadamer, 310). History is always seen and understood through a consciousness of the present, that is, we cannot help but interpret history through our own modern-day lens. As Palmer states, "there is no pure seeing and understanding of history without reference to the present" (Palmer, 176). Our own historicity informs our relationship with tradition. Moreover, "the present is seen and understood only through the intentions, ways of seeing, and preconceptions bequeathed from the past" (Palmer, 176). Tradition is not a permanent precondition, rather, we produce it ourselves as we understand and participate in its evolution, and hence further determine it ourselves (Gadamer, 305). Understanding, therefore, "is to be thought of less as a subjective act than as participating in an event of tradition, a process of transmission in which past and present are constantly mediated" (Gadamer, 302). Thus, hermeneutics should reflect "the interplay of the movement of tradition and the movement of the interpreter" (Gadamer, 305).

Our historical consciousness is filled with a variety of voices through which the echo of the past is heard (Gadamer, 296). As a result, multiple voices and pluralities of understanding exist. This is not simply because all understanding bears reference to the present, but also because different aspects of a subject matter become apparent at different times or when viewed from different standpoints. These aspects do not cancel one another out as research proceeds. Rather, they are like mutually exclusive conditions that combine only in our interpretations. Furthermore, understanding or the discovery of the true meaning of a text or a work of art is an infinite process, because "the temporal distance that performs the filtering process is not fixed but is itself undergoing constant movement and extension" (Gadamer, 310). Not only are errors constantly excluded as we filter out the things that obscure the true meaning, but new sources of understanding are continually emerging that reveal previously unsuspected elements of meaning (Gadamer, 311). Hence, for Gadamer, temporal distance is indispensable and desirable; it is a positive and productive condition that enables understanding: "Temporal distance [...] lets the true meaning of the object emerge fully" (Gadamer, 310). Therefore, the task of understanding is to expand the understood meaning centrifugally, while the criterion of correct understanding is the harmonising of all the details into a whole (Gadamer, 302).

Diana Henderson's research on Shakespearean adaptations echoes Gadamer's ideas. She argues that recontextualising Shakespeare's plays for the modern stage or screen necessitates an awareness of the various layers of time and history. This includes the historical era represented within the Shakespearean text (i.e., the Elizabethan moment of its composition), the present moment of performance, and the theatrical and screen history of intervening productions (Henderson, 253). In addition to these historical dimensions, perhaps a history of the plays' critical reception should also be included. William Maurice Hawley emphasises another historical component: "histories speak 'from', 'towards', as well as 'about' distinct historical or historiographical places" (Hawley, 5). By using "towards", he highlights that our interpretations are future oriented as well. To summarise, in interpreting and adapting Shakespeare, one must be simultaneously aware of the "now", the "then", the "tradition" (i.e., the historical reception), and even the "future".

Despite this critical focus on temporality, locality is generally ignored in hermeneutic studies. This is partly because of Gadamer's Eurocentric position, or his limited scope, as globalisation had not taken shape when he wrote *Truth and Method*. However, like temporal distance, an understanding of geographical distance is necessary and desirable as it allows the true meaning of an object to emerge fully. Its inclusion in hermeneutics is productive as it furthers the continuity of custom and tradition, reflecting multifarious voices. This is substantiated by Huang's argument that "the relation between cultural texts and representations should not be a mimetic one, but an enabling relation between two mutually imbricated subjects".[7] The inclusion of locality, according to Huang,

> opens up the notions of Shakespeare and China to new temporalities and locations. As representations of Shakespeare multiply, so do the localities where these representations themselves are appropriated. These localities constitute a set of historically significant practices—the practices of locating global Shakespeares and transmitting such location-specific epistemologies as the idea of Chinese opera.
>
> (Huang, 26)

On this basis, he proposes three related lines of inquiry united by what might be called "locality criticism" – that is, analyses that focus on the shifting localities that cluster around artists, their work, and their audiences (Huang, 16–17). However, even locality studies that place the artist at the centre of inquiry betray a sense of Anglocentrism. For one thing, the artist is still assumed to be Anglo. For another, the underlying presumption is that an ahistorical or unchanging Shakespeare can be used as a reference point. Nevertheless, just as it is senseless to speak of perfect knowledge of history, it is not possible to speak of an "object in itself" towards which research is directed (Gadamer, 296). Previous locality studies often fail to take into consideration the intertwined relationship between Shakespeare and us, yet "the Shakespeare we create is a Shakespeare that has, to a certain extent, created us" (Garber, 1). Instead, they often take for granted the clear distinction between artists, their work, and their audiences, when, in reality, they are mutually constitutive.

While Huang's argument intends to expand understanding centrifugally, with the artist and his works at the centre of inquiry, this study proposes a different approach to the expansion of understanding. This method is informed by Michel Foucault's ideas, in which the discourses initiated by the artist are at the centre of inquiry. Foucault attempted to examine the empty space and endless possibilities of discourses left by the disappearance of the author: "They cleared a space for the introduction of elements other than their own, which, nevertheless, remain within the field of the discourse they initiated" (Foucault, 132). This idea is assimilated into the Arden Shakespeare "Preface":

> Shakespeare can be said to have passed the survival test, but perhaps it is not "the same Shakespeare" now as four hundred years ago, and not "the same Shakespeare" in Berlin, New York, or Tokyo as in London or Stratford-upon-Avon. One of the secrets of Shakespeare's success may be his changeability, the openness of his works to take on new meanings in contexts he cannot have anticipated.
>
> (Proudfoot, 2–3)

The statement points out the problematic nature of clustering interpretations around the artist or their original texts, as artists and their works are as fleeting as the audiences.

To counteract the historical and hierarchical nature embodied in these proposed locality studies, while not abandoning their illuminating ideas, this article proposes a hermeneutic locality study to give a fuller fledge to locality studies while substantiating hermeneutics with the ideas of locality. Questions such as what discourses can be elicited from Shakespearean texts, how they are celebrated or contested in different times and places, and what new visions these interactions create for the global community are explored through a close examination of the film *The Banquet*.

Fusion of Traditions

Shakespeare is first and foremost a theatrical tradition. *Hamlet* the play is set in the remote times of a Nordic saga, with the Senecan formula of murder, madness, and revenge. It is considered a continuation of the Senecan revenge genre, which centres on a figure who conceives himself to have been gravely wronged, and who, overcoming internal and external barriers, eventually exacts retribution, becoming in the process as vile as those who have wronged him (Ribner, 15–16). Broude contends the general critical trend to read revenge plays in terms of the above model. Tracing the changing connotations of the word "revenge" and "vengeance", he categorised renaissance revenge types into "divine vengeance", "public vengeance", and "private vengeance", and argued that these reflect the tensions prevalent in Tudor England – that is, self-government vs civil justice (Broude, 41). Moreover, defining England's law as a reflection of God, Tudor theorists explained crime as an offence against God. It was a source of communal pollution, which, should the criminal long remain unpunished, threatened to bring divine death down upon the entire commonweal (Broude, 41): "To me belongeth vengeance and recompense" (Deuteronomy 32:35). Thus, his conclusion is that

> In *Hamlet*, both blood revenge and divine justice work toward similar ends, but the claims of the former, which would be satisfied with Claudius' death never completely reconciled with those of the latter, which require Hamlet's death as part of the providential program for Denmark's regeneration. This tension contributes to Hamlet's tragic dimension, leaving an uncomfortable awareness of the price in suffering and life, which Providence sometimes exacts for keeping the cosmos in order.
>
> (Broude, 56)

Therefore, Hamlet's hesitation and his constant contemplations on the afterlife must be viewed in light of these tensions.

Other than understanding Hamlet's revenge in the above framework, for adaptation study, it is crucial to realise the translation from a play to other media would have much impact on both the understanding of the play and its adaptations. There are multiple levels of "translation" happening to *Hamlet*. In addition to the translation from a live performance medium to a textual one, the twentieth century witnessed several translations of the play to films.[8] *The Banquet* is more daring than most, as the translation involves cultural mobility, in addition to a change of medium. In *The Banquet*, the Chinese imperial court culture features as the main realm of the film. This stands in stark conflict with the Chinese knight-errant spirits (*wuxia* spirit), as embodied by the bamboo forest, clean gurgling streams, and the helmet hut where Prince Wuluan shelters at the very beginning of the film. In traditional Chinese culture, bamboo symbolises sincerity and straightforwardness, as the plant is tall and upright and hides nothing inside. The song that Prince Wuluan likes most is "The Maiden of Yueh", a song that occurs in the *Annals of the Kingdoms of Wu and Yueh* by Chao Yeh (first century A.D.). In it, a maiden in Yueh is talented in swordsmanship, and no one can surpass her. When consulted, she explains that the mystery of swordsmanship involves a combination of the principles of *yin* (calmness or the feminine principles of all life) and *yang* (activeness or the masculine principles of all life). Therefore, a good swordsman must be capable of being calm yet able to strike with swiftness and speed when necessary (Liu, 85).

The knight-errant world is a Chinese utopian vision of a non-conforming community, referred to as "Jiang Hu". This world embodies the spirits of protest and subversion, coupled with heroic and romantic elements. The origin of this knight-errant world can be traced to the Warring States period (403–221 B.C.). The political instability and social unrest of the Late Zhou dynasty led to the decline and impoverishment of the old aristocracy. This too led to a decline among the men of special talents and skills (ritualists, musicians, astrologers, etc.) formerly retained by the aristocracy. They became socially displaced and roamed from one state to another (Liu, 1). The knight-errant world, as an imagined community, is united through a chivalrous temperament and the pursuit of justice. The ideals cherished by this community include altruism, justice, individual freedom, personal loyalty, courage, truthfulness, mutual faith, dignity,[9] generosity, and contempt for wealth and rank (Liu, 1–4). Although there are contentions over the relationship of these knights to the court, they are generally considered as serving only justice, or a court of justice, and not personal wealth or rank. Moreover, they fight for their ideals, including a just society, instead for personal fame.

The trespassing of the imperial court into this knight-errant world is signified by a troop of assassins dispatched by the new king to kill Prince Wuluan. Wuluan's masked escape causes the assassins to commit forced suicide on the bridge leading to the imperial court. The crossing of the bridge marks the transition from the knight-errant world to that of an imperial court, where conspiracy, betrayal, and killing prevail. The streaming blood from the suicidal assassins contaminates the gurgling stream, signifying the entanglement of the two worlds – in particular, the contamination of the *wuxia* world by the corrupted imperial court culture. The tension between the *wuxia* world and the imperial court constitutes the framework of *The Banquet*, and consequently, is indispensable for discussions of the emotional structures of the protagonists.

"Conscience Does Make Cowards of Us All"

The Banquet continues the Shakespearean tradition with its contemplations on humanism and the emotional structures of the protagonists. As illustrated, any understanding of the protagonists' emotional structures, in both the play and the film, must consider the revenge and knight-errant genres to which they respectively belong.

The play text of *Hamlet* highlights Hamlet's hesitation by contrasting him with various other male characters, such as Pyrrhus (Aeneas tale to Dido), Laertes, and Fortinbras. Pyrrhus, crouched in the Trojan horse under the scorching sun for a day – "*With blood of fathers, mothers, daughters, sons / Bak'd and impasted with the parching streets*" (2.2. 459–60) – is determined to take revenge on Priam, whose feebleness and seniority aroused no sympathy from Pyrrhus. He strikes in rage at the milky head of Priam and minces Priam's limbs with swords. Laertes claims that he will give to negligence both the worlds: "To hell, allegiance! vows to the blackest devil!/ Conscience and grace, to the profoundest pit!", (4.5, 131-2) "only I'll be revenged/Most thoroughly for my father" (4.5, 135–6). By contrast, Hamlet can only act "like a whore, unpack my heart with words,/And fall a-cursing, like a very drab, /A scullion!" (2.2. 587–9).

At the very beginning, the Hamlet tradition features him as a prince of mystery and misery. In the nineteenth century, through the criticism of Romantic geniuses such as Coleridge, Hamlet became a hero of moral sensitivity and insightfulness. His delay, previously considered a hole in the plot, is endowed with a humanistic spirit. For Coleridge, Hamlet's hesitation is a result of his "being constantly occupied with the world within, and abstracted from the world without", a manifestation of his "overbalance of the imaginative power" (qtd. in Bloom, 157). Nietzsche uses him to exemplify his conceptions of a Dionysian man: "it is not reflection, it is true knowledge, insight into the terrible truth, which outweighs every motive for action, both in the case of Hamlet and in that of Dionysian man" (Nietzsche, 40). In the twentieth century, Hamlet's hesitation turned pathological through critics such as Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan. His hesitation is considered a symptom of melancholy by Bradley (Bradley, 108-9), a sign of his repressed Oedipus complex (Freud, 282), the dependence of his desire on that of the Other, and his subjection to the signifier of this desire, the phallus (Lacan, 12–17).

Many of these interpretations highlight Hamlet's moral sensitivity or his perverse desire, which may be justified to some extent. However, failure to place Hamlet's hesitation within the framework of the revenge genre, which is the main inspiration of the play, renders these interpretations only partial. Hamlet's hesitation, as his soliloquies reveal, partly comes from his "Bestial oblivion", or "Of thinking too precisely on th' event-" (4.4.41), as revealed in his lamentation when seeing an "army of such mass and charge" led by Fortinbras: "Rightly to be great/Is not to stir without great argument, /But greatly to find quarrel in a straw" (4.4. 53–5). More significantly, his dread for "the undiscover'd country", and his incapacity to contemplate on an afterlife after revenge and suicide also account for his hesitation:

> But that the dread of something after death,
> The undiscover'd country from whose bourn
> No traveller returns, puzzles the will……
> Thus conscience does make cowards of us all;
>
> (3.1. 78-80, 83)

His revenge violates civil justice first and foremost, as his uncle is now the agent of both civil and divine justice. Resorting to the law would not bring him revenge; yet, by carrying out revenge himself, he is trespassing against both laws. Suicide can answer the retribution of civil justice, but by this act, divine justice is further impaired. Hence, Hamlet's conscience, or fear of his trespassing of both civil and divine justice, makes him a coward.

In *The Banquet*, although the foil characters, except for Laertes, are downplayed, Prince Wuluan's hesitation is still an important undertone of the film. The scene that corresponds to Hamlet's hesitation when his revenge is stalled by his uncle's praying is the scene in which Prince Wuluan, stealing into the court after his narrow escape from the assassins, catches his uncle and stepmother in their incestuous bed. Instead of revenge, only the tears falling from the iron mask (an embodiment of the ghost) betray his sadness and heartbreak. This may be interpreted as what Freud terms, "the loathing which should drive him on to revenge is replaced in him by self-reproaches, by scruples of conscience, which remind him that he himself is literally no better than the sinner whom he is to punish" (Freud, 282–3). Wuluan's incestuous desire, as much as Hamlet's, constitutes the undertone of his emotional structure.

Moreover, Wuluan's revenge is elevated to civil justice. How Claudius is received or behaves in court or handles state affairs is not revealed minutely in the play. In contrast, the king in *The Banquet* is portrayed as a ruthless tyrant, the incarnation of evil and cruelty in almost all aspects, except for his doting on the queen. He asks, "Which glorious dynasty has not been forged with blood?" (35'26–35'30). Therefore, to secure his throne, he ordered ruthless assassinations and beheadings, forced suicides, and the whipping of innocent Qingnü (the Ophelia figure). His indulgence in extravagance and ignorance of his people are also demonstrated when he ordered the ceiling to be covered in gold leaf, which is in stark contrast to the thriftiness of the late emperor.

Regarding Empress Wan, he uses schemes and threats to subdue even her. This is typified in the "snow leopard carving", which is used to convey to his courtiers the message that one must act like the leopard, who "knows about changing with the weather, this is a clever beast" (36'20). When an old courtier refuses to kneel to Empress Wan and calls her Dowager Wan, the emperor orders the courtier to be flogged to death, and his entire clan is executed. Even worse, he puts on a show of this, demanding all his courtiers, including Empress Wan, watch the brutal scene of execution, to threaten and humiliate them.

Wuluan, for personal reasons as well as for the state, has the motivation to exact revenge and dethrone the king. However, although both Hamlet and Wuluan are tortured by pangs of conscience other than incestuous guilt, Prince Wuluan bears his tortured conscience rather differently. Shakespeare's *Hamlet* contemplates Christian ideas about the afterlife and divine justice. By contrast, Prince Wuluan's conscience rests more on the conflict with the spirit of a martial knight, which is against murder and assassination. For Wuluan, to murder or not to murder, that is the question. As a man who has long practised martial arts, the last resort is revenge through assassination or murder. Revenge should be carried out through sword-to-sword battle, not through subterfuge or poisoning. Justice must be obtained through fair play. Hence, Wuluan is characterised by his struggles to determine whether the ends can justify the means, and whether to abandon his scholarly and martial principles to exact revenge.

The last scene of *The Banquet* sees a competition between these two ways of obtaining revenge, namely, poisoning conducted by Empress Wan, and the face-to-face sword combat demanded by Wuluan: "This man murdered my father like a coward, this is a matter (revenge) between the two of us, it is nobody else's concern"(1:54'28). However, to discredit Wuluan, the king chooses to drink the poisoned wine offered by Empress Wan rather than face Wuluan in combat. Justice is done, but not in the way desired by Wuluan. Wuluan's loathsome look at Empress Wan not only shows his resentment towards her, whose wine is responsible for Qingnü's death, but also his contempt towards her method of revenge.

"All the World's a Stage"

Masks feature prominently in the film, serving different purposes for different occasions or characters. The assassins wear masks to disguise their identities and emotions, turning themselves into killing machines. Prince Wuluan escapes assassination, partly because of the masks. The new king has a new helmet made to signify his newly gained sovereign power, a grand object designed to make up for his otherwise obscene body. Moreover, the masks relate to another central motif of the film: acting. It connects the Shakespearean tradition to that of the Greek and Chinese acting traditions (with Luo masks).[10] Attempts to integrate temporalities and localities are manifested in the frequent appearance of masks. Elements of Chinese opera are also typified by the drumming and postural movements of the players on the stage at the coronation ceremony for Empress Wan.

More importantly, binary ideas between disguise and straightforwardness, and between conspiracy and sincerity, are contemplated through the use of masks. The central questions that unite the film are concerned about what is best acting. Should we live a life of straightforwardness and sincerity or live with a mask on to hide our true self? In the film, Wuluan is called an expert swordsman, which is true, as he alone can combat several imperial guards. However, he dismisses the craft of swordsmanship by remarking, "Mere childish endeavours, I have not practiced in years" (49'27) and "… performance is my specialty" (49'40). His uncle, the king, also praises his acting expertise: "Unlike my nephew, who only knows to Changxi (play-acting)" (35'50).[11] The rehearsal for the coronation is a sword combat show in which only wooden swords can be used, but one of the combaters stealthily takes out a real sword while the king pretends to doze. Wuluan would have been killed had Empress Wan not stepped in at the last moment: "He, … mistook a deadly combat for a show" (53'39).

Wuluan is not oblivious to his uncle's ill intention towards him; yet, at the coronation ceremony, he stages a mousetrap show to catch the conscience of the king, rather than seeking revenge or protecting himself. Instead of pricking the king's conscience, the play betrays Wuluan's knowledge of his uncle's crime instead of catching the king's conscience, which ultimately puts him in further danger. When the king offers to let Wuluan take off his mask to wipe off his sweat, Wuluan answers straightforwardly that the drops are tears, and he states, "your sleeves are soaked with Erysipelas. They reek of black scorpions" (1:10'). Verbal and situational ironies predominate the conversation in which everyone, including the audience, knows that Wuluan is an awkward actor, yet he is praised by his uncle as "a talented artist" (1:10'35) after the "mousetrap" show. Empress Wan, quick-witted, saves Wuluan from immediate execution by saying that Wuluan is too devoted to the play.

However, in Wuluan's bedroom, Empress Wan and Wuluan argue over the art of acting. For Wuluan, the mask "transports an actor to the highest state of his art. With a mask on, a great artist can convey to the audience the most complex and hidden emotions" (54'25). Empress Wan, however, accuses Wuluan of being incapable of acting, betraying all his emotions, and putting himself in danger: "Your sorry, anger, bitterness and uncertainty are there for all to see. [...] You think hiding behind a mask can elevate your art? The highest level is to use your own face, and turn it into a mask" (55'). She thinks of herself as a much better actor and is able to conceal her emotions without the assistance of a mask. Wuluan, instead, points out that all her emotions, such as arrogance, disquiet, and guilt, are written on her face. Even people as innocent as Qingnü (the Ophelia figure) seem to be able to see through Empress Wan: "Empress Wan's eyes are sometimes soft and charming, and sometimes frightening" (47'). This is confirmed by Minister Yin (the Polonius figure), who asks Qingnü to paint Empress Wan as "a phoenix with a steady gaze is what would please the Empress most" (47'04). Thus, Empress Wan does not seem to be a better actor than Wuluan.

Ironically, Wuluan gives up his martial arts practice and lives a secluded life in the bamboo forest to practice acting for years, and yet still finds himself an incapable actor, and has to wear a mask to elevate his art. Empress Wan credits herself as the best actor, and yet her eyes still betray her emotions. The unsophisticated acting of Prince Wuluan expresses a longing for truthfulness and sincerity, as embodied by the bamboo tree, which is one of the true spirits of the Chinese knight-errant. As Chinese historian Sima Qian points out, "They always mean what they say, intend to accomplish what they set out to do, and fulfil their promises" (qtd. in Liu, 5).

Truthfulness, together with the "respect for justice and insistence on 'fair play"' (Liu, 4–5), guided by altruism, constitute the core of the *wuxia* spirit. To a certain extent, this also comprises the Chinese version of humanistic spirits, which are typically incarnated in Prince Wuluan. While Hamlet is strangled by his meditations on the Christian idea of divine justice, Wuluan is tortured by justice and fair play, and by personal integrity and truthfulness in revenge. Underneath these differences, however, are common concerns regarding whether the ends can justify the means. Though situated in a different cultural tradition, *The Banquet* restructures the humanistic conception by fusing Chinese *wuxia* spirits into it, posing questions that are still relevant to contemporary pragmatic politics.

"Thy Beauty Hath Made Me Effeminate"

This section explores the restructuring of the desires of the two main female protagonists Qingnü (the Ophelia figure) and Empress Wan (the Gertrude figure), as well as the male protagonists Wuluan (the Hamlet figure) and the New King (the Claudius figure). The explication reveals an apparent reversal of gender hierarchy – in particular, the dissoluble masculinity. Traditionally, Ophelia in *Hamlet* is related to a deficit or a void.

> Ophelia might confirm the impossibility of representing the feminine in patriarchal discourse as other than madness, incoherence, fluidity, or silence. ... the feminine or "Woman" is that which escapes representation in patriarchal language and symbolism; it remains on the side of negativity, absence, and lack.
>
> (Showalter, 78)

Hamlet's disgust at the feminine passivity in himself is translated into violent revulsion against women, translating into his brutal behaviour towards Ophelia. Leverenz argues that Ophelia's suicide becomes "a microcosm of the male world's banishment of the female because 'woman' represents everything denied by reasonable men" (Leverenz, 7).

In contrast, the Ophelia figure Qingnü in *The Banquet* is the incarnation of purity, which is of great concern to her father, who thinks it renders her incapable of surviving in the imperial court culture. However, unlike Ophelia, her innocence is not equated to negativity, absence, and lacking, but rather, is represented as having an essence, signification of devotion, consistency, and sacrifice. Her purity sustains the world, while everything else seems to have been contaminated. She is devoted to her fiancé Prince Wuluan and is willing to sacrifice her life for him. When his fortunes turn upside down, her father, Minister Yin, asks her to reconsider her decision to marry Wuluan, as the marriage would now bring more ill fortune to the family rather than blessings. However, she refuses to change her mind. Her consistency and determination in her love for Prince Wuluan are further manifested when Wuluan is to be banished to Khitan as crown prince hostage and she decides to go with him. She participates in Wuluan's revenge plan by bringing him to court. She drinks the poisoned wine in order not to ruin Wuluan's revenge plan, even though her father and brother hint that she should not do so. Her loyalty and devotion finally win her the heart of

Wuluan, though this occurs only just before her death. She is portrayed, to a certain extent, as the female swordsman Yueh in the song, "The Maiden of Yueh". For one thing, her altruism, loyalty, the pursuit of justice, and disregard for wealth and rank are the very incarnation of swordsmanship. For another, her deep love for Wuluan, which is constantly ignored by him until the last moment of her life, conforms to the description in the song, "My heart lives for your heart, but you do not see me". Furthermore, she fulfils the *wuxia* ideal, "Not to belie another's trust and not to break one's promises".[12]

The other female protagonist, Empress Wan, is also portrayed as comprising essence, endurance, and tactics. However, her lack of truthfulness is more prominent. She disguises herself as a woman of change, a victim herself, while at the same time victimising others, for instance, Qingnü. She imprisons Qingnü and uses the love of Qingnü's father and brother to force them to save Prince Wuluan. She lies to the king about his sexual potency – "You give me what the late emperor could not give" (44'12) – to relieve him of his doubt so that her revenge plan can be carried out smoothly. She does not stop Qingnü from drinking the poisoned wine, as she does not want her plan of murdering the king to be hindered. She is a woman who can bear humiliation and is a crouching tigress awaiting the best timing for the execution of her plan. Though a woman of strategy and purpose, she is portrayed rather negatively. She is murdered before her coronation ceremony, mirroring the murder of the king. The murder serves as a sign that conspiracies will continue.

The female characters in the film all tend to possess a strong essence, though of two discrete polarities, with one having an essence of purity and principle, and the other a sophistication characterised by tactics and purpose. The male protagonists in the film, however, suffer from a fear of feminisation or castration to a certain extent. Prince Wuluan's favourite song is "The Maiden of Yueh". He compares himself to the boat girl in the song, a very conspicuous act of self-feminisation, despite the unhappiness of Qingnü who tearfully denies this comparison and tries to identify herself as the boat girl who has a crush on him. He considers himself betrayed and victimised, in particular, by his stepmother, and projects his anger onto Qingnü: "You think I am pitiful. She pities me too. Both of you use my suffering to lure me into your embrace" (59'20–1:12'). This is followed by his subsequent raping of Qingnü. His raping of Qingnü is significant for two reasons: first, it symbolises his contamination of purity and principles to achieve his purposes, which relates to his aforementioned crisis of conscience. Second, it betrays his fear of being effeminate and his wish to exert masculinity through this act. Ironically, his uncle, before drinking the deadly wine, disparages Wuluan's courage and dignity, saying to him with contempt, "Was it your melancholy that touches the hearts of women, so that their tenderness wove a web of protection around you"(1:55'), as if saying, after all, you are still a "mama's boy".

The new king harbours this fear of feminisation or castration in equal measure. Despite his securing of power through crooked means, he unconsciously harbours the fear of being consumed by women. While Empress Wan is applying makeup, he murmurs to himself: “Who cares about losing a kingdom when in the presence of such rare beauty?” (48’09). Empress Wan’s reply pulls him back to his consciousness, “You can be hardly more secure on your throne. I can’t ruin you” (48’20). “In the heart of hearts, do you not trust me” (48’40). He dismisses this unconscious fear and accepts Empress Wan’s implication that he does not trust her, which is easier to cope with than his masculine anxiety. His masculine anxiety is felt and used by Empress Wan to manipulate him. On one occasion, she eases his doubts about her feelings towards him by praising his masculinity, “You give me what the late emperor could not give” (44’12). On another occasion, when the banquet starts, she offers a toast and murmurs to the King, “Tonight, I want your life”. Ironically, the King mistook it as a sexual invitation and is greatly delighted. In the end, he drinks the poisoned wine, “You offered me a toast, how can I refuse” (1:57’30). His suicide not only signifies his self-retribution of his sins, but also shows his unconscious self-negation.

Conclusion

Situating the play *Hamlet* and the film *The Banquet* within the revenge and *wuxia* genres, respectively, this article discloses the different dilemmas faced by Hamlet and Wuluan. Meditations on divine justice under Christianity hinder Hamlet’s revenge. In comparison, Wuluan’s revenge is deferred by his contemplations on truthfulness and the means of achieving justice. However, paying critical attention to *Hamlet* reveals his frustration with revenge, to the extent of de-emphasising the disturbances to civil justice in the play. *The Banquet*, in contrast, highlights Wuluan’s feelings of being caught between idealism and pragmatism through the introduction of the *wuxia* tradition and by addressing the acting motif. Wuluan’s tragic ending conveys the irreconcilable conflict between the aims of justice and the means of achieving it, bringing back the Machiavellian motif, which is prominent in the Shakespearean tradition.

Moreover, *The Banquet* provides a rethinking of gender roles by endowing female characters with a strong essence, while at the same time, placing male protagonists in the realm of lacking, and living with fears of feminisation and castration. Wuluan is discredited as still being a “mama’s boy” and living under the protection of women, despite his pursuit of ideals and integrity. The king, with his sovereign power in court, still suffers from this lacking and self-negation. However, neither Qingnü nor Empress Wan, representing two polarities, seem to have found a way out – one is subsumed in sacrifice, and the other perishes from scheming and calculations.

Through the intersection of the Western and Eastern play-making traditions, and via the integration of the revenge genre with the *wuxia* genre, *The*

Banquet extends the *Hamlet* tradition, in terms of revenge and emotion. It highlights the bewildering pictures of political idealism and pragmatism, as well as the frustrating images of gender dissatisfaction that characterise both men and women. The tensions between idealism and pragmatism – between the regimes of masculinity/femininity and individual lacking – constitute the sources of human tragedy. Thus, a decentred hermeneutic locality approach that takes into consideration the efficacy of history and tradition, bringing Shakespeare across temporalities and localities, proves profoundly illuminating.

Notes

1 Critics such as Huang consider the film to have "produced a highly elastic vision of ancient Chinese imperial court culture; at the same time, it reinterpreted the structure of emotions in *Hamlet* through the stylization enabled by the knight-errant (wuxia) film genre" (Huang, 35). Yu Jin Ko's article, "Martial Arts and Masculine Identity in Feng Xiaogang's *The Banquet*", also situates the film in the martial arts genre.

2 Feng Xiaogang is remarkable among modern Chinese directors for his combination of productivity and popularity. Most of his films, including *Party A, Party B* (1997), *Be There or Be Square* (1998), *Sorry Baby!* (1999), *Sigh* (2000), *Big Shot's Funeral* (2002), *Cell Phone* (2003), *A World Without Thieves* (2004), and *The Banquet* (2006), have made substantial profits in the domestic film market (R. Zhang 3). In addition to reflecting China's changing social-political background, Feng's films exhibit national cinematic trends and exert influence on the country's expanding yet vulnerable national film industry (R. Zhang 2). However, one criticism levelled against Feng is that his works appear shallow and light-hearted in comparison to the stunning visuality, exotic autoethnography, and uncompromising criticism of the dark side of Chinese history, culture, and politics in films by fifth and sixth generation directors. It is most likely in response to this criticism that Feng decided to film *The Banquet* as a *Hamlet* adaption – that is, to demonstrate his capacity for serious and scholarly film-making.

3 Yuen Woo Ping is known for his masterly martial arts choreography work in *Crouching Tiger*, *Hidden Dragon* (2000), *The Grandmaster* (2013), and *Fearless* (2006).

4 Tan Dun is highly sought after by directors. His film scores include the Academy Award-winning soundtrack for Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger*, *Hidden Dragon* (2000), and Zhang Yimou's *Hero* (2002) [http://tandun.com/about/].

5 Timmy Yip is the 73rd Academy Award winner for best art direction and a nominee for best costume design.

6 Zhang Ziyi gained international recognition for her role in Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger*, *Hidden Dragon*.

7 According to Huang, this claim is based on Jacques Derrida: Mimesis … is not the representation of one thing by another, the relation of resemblance or identification between two beings, the reproduction of a product of nature by a product of art. It is not the relation of two products but of two productions, and of two freedoms (qtd. in Huang, 261).

8 Seven post-war *Hamlet* films have been released: Laurence Olivier's *Hamlet* of 1948; Grigori Kozintsev's 1964 Russian adaptation; the John Gielgud-directed 1964 Broadway production of *Hamlet*; Richard Burton's *Hamlet*; Tony

Richardson's 1969 version (the first in colour) featuring Nicol Williamson as Hamlet and Anthony Hopkins as Claudius; Franco Zeffirelli's 1990 version starring Mel Gibson; Kenneth Branagh's full-text 1996 version; and Michael Almereyda's 2000 modernization, starring Ethan Hawke.

[9] Liu entitled this "honor and fame". However, the explanation points more to personal dignity. As fame is more associated with personal gain, I changed the subtitle to "dignity" instead.

[10] Zhang Ying relates the functions of masks in the film to Chinese mask traditions (Y. Zhang, 95–102).

[11] The Chinese subtitle is "Changxi" (唱戏). The English subtitle translates this to "song and dance". However, "acting" is a more appropriate translation, as suggested by many scenes in the film – in particular, the "Mousetrap" scene – although it is true that Chinese opera, as represented by the Beijing Opera, tends to use singing and shifting postures as well as masks to convey conflicts and emotions.

[12] Qtd. in Liu (14). The original words are from Sima Qian's *Shi Ji*, in the section "Biographies of Knight-errant", translation by Liu.

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