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1616. Shakespeare and Tang Xianzu's China

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Tian Yuan Tan, Paul Edmondson and Shih-pe Wang, *1616. Shakespeare and Tang Xianzu's China*. xxii, 326pp. London: Bloomsbury, 2016. \$29.95. ISBN: 9781472583413

The editors of the recent book, *1616: Shakespeare and Tang Xianzu's China* add to the recent appearance of books released to coincide more or less with the year of Shakespeare's death, four hundred years prior, in 1616. Thomas Christensen's *1616: The World in Motion* and James Shapiro's *The Year of Lear* are the most recent, following Shapiro's earlier *1599: A Year in the Life of William Shakespeare*. In terms of Chinese history, we have the much earlier (in 1982) chronicle by Ray Huang, *1587: A Year of No Significance*. Shakespeare and Tang Xianzu both died in 1616. As exemplary dramatists of, respectively, England and China, this coincidence invites a search for other comparisons, but the editors caution that they do not seek to make a simple comparison but rather to use the two authors as "visible markers to help us understand the different yet interestingly comparable and equally vibrant worlds of theatre of China and England around the year 1616" (1). Thus, their project seeks both to place "the study of Chinese and English drama in a comparative and global perspective" (2) and to "challenge the homogeneous repercussions of the concept of the 'global' and instead focus on particularities and differences, the better to find complementary (and some overlapping) synergies" (3).

1616 is part of the Arden Shakespeare series, that has been producing critical editions and auxiliary critical works about Shakespeare for more than a century. This may account, therefore, for the lack of parallelism in the book's title. To some extent, the subtitle "Shakespeare and Tang Xianzu's China" already suggests a pre-existing imbalance of knowledge in the English-reading world about the relevance of Tang Xianzu with respect to Shakespeare. As Wilt Idema points out in his foreword, the first French translation of a Chinese play did not appear until 1735, and a direct to English translation from the Chinese did not appear until a century after that, in 1839. Similarly, the Lamb plot summaries of Shakespeare's works were

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not translated until 1904 by Lin Shu (xx). The book therefore looks at two thriving, and very

different, theatrical traditions in parallel, noting that the playwrights were each operating

independently and unaware of each other, and asking what might be gained from examining

them side by side.

1616 produces the results of a conference in which scholars from each tradition were paired on topics and wrote corresponding essays to share and revise collaboratively. The ten pairs of essays cover a variety of subjects that will supply a good deal of background information for students of each individual tradition, as well as for those who might seek some contextual background to explain the resonances or dissonances between texts in a more comparative project. The first pair of essays provide biographies of Tang Xianzu and Shakespeare with an emphasis on their “geographies,” by which the authors, Paul Edmonson and Yongming Xu, mean their relationship to locales. Other essays address the historical circumstances surrounding the production of these plays. For example, essays by Tan and Clare in “The State and the Theatre” discuss the role of the state, and especially censorship, in the writing of the plays. The fifth pairing, “The Circulation of Dramatic Texts and Printing,” by West and Scott-Warren address the material culture of the published play texts, revealing the effects of business decisions on theatre at this time.

The paired essays are most intriguing when they respond to each other. The second pair of essays details thematic preoccupations in the plays of the period, aiming to contextualize precedent plays as well as Tang’s and Shakespeare’s legacies, and Nick Walton reflects on a shared receptivity from audiences for the traditional resolution with a wedding in both Renaissance period comedies and in the “scholar beauty” romances described in Wei Hua’s

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essay. Essays in the third section discuss the subject of “making history” in *The Crying Phoenix*,

in an essay by Ayling Wang about the dramatization of contemporary politics, and a similar

push towards dramatizing Tudor history after Elizabeth’s death in 1603 in Helen Cooper’s

chapter (3.2).

Four pairs of chapters regard practical aspects of drama from Renaissance England and

Late Ming China: the writing, staging, and reception of plays. In “Dramatic Authorship and

Collaboration,” Sieber stresses the crucial aspect of authorial intent in relation to the

production of plays which informed the text’s relationship, not only to its author but to its

reader, thus serving as a “contested site fraught with new possibilities for authorship and the

corollary literary identity formation” (159). Kirwan’s complementary chapter demonstrates how

collaboration in 1616 would “blur, rather than reinforce, the distinctions between

collaborators, authors and ‘co-authors’” (165). The pair of essays on ‘Music and Performance’

extends the discussion on collaboration in text-making to the role of music as part of (Sun), or

separate from (as imported songs, as described by Lindley), their respective theatrical

traditions. The pair of essays on “Audiences, Critics, and Reception” discusses the effect of

audience reception on the writing and performance of plays, as summed up by Chouhan:

“Whereas in China adaptation and revision were matters for learned argument, they were, in

England, an ongoing dialogue between playwright and audience” (204). “Theatre in Theory and

Practice” offers an essay on an emphatic concern with language and music, as exemplified by

Xu Wei’s writings on Chinese theater (Llamas), and an essay on how the development of the

Cockpit playhouse (Tosh) could affect a cultural shift to a fashion for indoor playing. Finally, in

“Theatre Across Genres and Cultures,” Ling Xiaoqiao discusses the effect of dramatic texts on

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other forms of prose fiction, and McLuskie concludes the volume with an essay that

contextualizes the purpose of a collection such as this one: “we might thus identify [the two] not as ‘the Chinese Shakespeare’ or the ‘English Tang Xianzu’ but as the products of distinctive and equally complex literary and theatrical cultures” (292). Overall, this collection of essays presents an excellent resource on individual topics relevant to each field, and inspiration for future studies.