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**EAST MEETS WEST AT TIANANMEN SQUARE:  
DOES LIN ZHAOHUA'S POST-TIANANMEN *HAMLET*  
CATCH THE CONSCIENCE OF BEIJING?**

*Yvonne Nicolle Stafford-Mills*

**Abstract**

Prompted by the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacres, Chinese *avant-garde* director Lin Zhaohua directed China's first modern, *avant-garde* approach to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, rejecting the Soviet-inspired standard of period pictorialism and "Westernization" of the Chinese actors. Through Lin's *avant-gardist* role-sharing between characters commonly perceived as opposites, such as Claudius and Hamlet, he strove to blur the perceived lines between moral opposites and wrestle with the complexities of truly understanding an event beset with conflicting accounts and mitigated by a strict governmental control of information. However, the control and flow of information was clearly not Lin's only concern with the events surrounding Tiananmen. He plainly saw within the unfolding of events in *Hamlet* the symbolic enactment of the same inevitability, espoused by political theorists, that led to the government's crackdown of protestors in Tiananmen. It is, therefore, through the lens of this inevitability that Lin's *Hamlet* must be understood, and through this reflexive reading of Lin's *Hamlet*, a greater understanding of the clouded Chinese perspective of the events that led up to the Tiananmen massacres can be attained. The production thus serves as not only a distinct break from the previous tradition of Chinese Shakespeare performance, but actively comments on the complexity of the socio-political context from which the production emerged, firmly situating Shakespeare not only as China's "contemporary" (à la Jan Kott), but as a vehicle for political discourse.

**Keywords**

*Hamlet*, Lin Zhaohua, Tiananmen, *avante-garde*, adaptation, Shakespeare, performance

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CARRIED from the time of British imperialism and global trade expansion in printed texts and the oral narratives of sailors, Shakespeare's works spread across the globe and were assimilated into cultures separated from Early Modern England by religion, race and cultural tradition. His works found their way into the vernacular

of lands as foreign to England as the Middle East and China, and onto their stages as well. In China, Shakespeare became an iconic figure, hugely influential in the modernisation of Chinese drama, and a driving force of the emerging *huaju*, or “spoken drama,”<sup>1</sup> of the People’s Republic of China. As in the Soviet Union and other emerging Communist nations, Chinese writers of the twentieth century paid homage to the greatness of the foreign playwright and revered English Renaissance humanism and the model of the “New Man,” with its focus on the individual and his place in society. Production of Shakespeare’s works on the Chinese stage, however, saw a more tenuous and uncertain progression, largely influenced, and thereby restricted, by the adoption of Soviet theatrical adaptation practices and by the fear that subversive politics might be dropped into productions, either intentionally or carelessly.

While Shakespeare’s works were used as models for the emerging *huaju* of the Chinese theatre, such performances were often mitigated by Soviet theatre practices that precluded politicised Shakespeare and excluded production of *Hamlet*, as Stalin had during World War II because, according to Dennis Kennedy, “its political allusions [were] too sensitive for a supreme dictator” (Kennedy 1993, 4). Even when a modern adaptation of *Hamlet* finally premiered in 1984 it was mounted in traditional, Soviet-inspired style – featuring Renaissance costumes, wigs and prosthetic noses (used to “westernize” the appearance of the Asian actors) – creating “a universe of fairy tale and legend, comfortably remote” (Esslin 1964, xix), within a performance space that was symbolically neutral and politically non-threatening. Still in the 1980s, as China emerged from the deadly and isolating Cultural Revolution, Shakespeare was not perceived to be China’s “contemporary” as he had been re-imagined, via Jan Kott, in so many Eastern European post-Communist capitals.<sup>2</sup> Shakespeare’s Eastern European “indigenization,” to borrow the term from Arjun Appadurai (1990), was so complete that the Polish critic, Jan Kott, wrote the treatise *Shakespeare Our Contemporary* to illustrate a Shakespeare that absorbs the concerns and culture of the time and location in which he finds himself produced. Kott writes that “through Shakespeare’s text we ought to get at our modern experience,

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<sup>1</sup> *Huaju* is translated as “spoken drama” and marks a break with earlier Chinese theatrical traditions such as Beijing opera, that predominantly featured music and text that was sung and/or chanted.

<sup>2</sup> The Germans, for example, coined the phrase “*unser Shakespeare*” as Shakespeare was indigenised and put to political use on the stages of the German speaking world. The German use of the phrase, ‘our Shakespeare,’ points to the existence of a Shakespeare that cannot be fixed or located solely within one nation or culture. The phrase also indicates that Shakespeare becomes the cultural property of the societies into which he is introduced, be it Germany, Poland or, as in the case of Lin’s production, China. Each culture develops a concept of ‘our Shakespeare.’

anxiety and sensibility” (Kott 1964, 59). Despite Eastern Europe’s embracement of Shakespeare as its contemporary, before Lin Zhaohua’s 1990 production, Shakespeare, and especially *Hamlet*, was still performed as a champion of humanism in China, distanced from the perils of the People’s Republic and the everyday life of the Chinese people. However, in 1989, in the aftermath of the student uprising of Tiananmen Square, the detachment between Shakespeare’s Danish scholar-prince and the Chinese people was to abruptly end.

In the aftermath of the socio-political upheaval of the Tiananmen disaster, Lin Zhaohua’s 1990 production of *Hamlet* situated Shakespeare both as a vehicle for emerging Chinese *avant-gardism* and as a medium through which to navigate and comment upon the political and social atmosphere of post-Tiananmen China. Lin’s choice to share roles traditionally viewed as moral opposites between actors, humanizing villains and villainizing heroes, effectively depicted the moral sphere in shades of grey, and further emphasized the tragedy and death that loomed over China after Tiananmen. The events leading up to Tiananmen, according to Lin’s politically sensitive adaptation, were therefore too complex to be viewed as black and white or through a formulaic interpretation of simple cause and effect. Similarly, Lin’s adaptation portrays the events that lead up to the climactic carnage of *Hamlet*’s conclusion as a complex network of causes prompted by deep philosophical thought on the part of characters traditionally, and often simplistically, viewed as moral opposites.

The political immediacy of Lin’s play is made manifest through a reflexive reading of both the events surrounding the Tiananmen massacres and Lin’s adaptation of *Hamlet*. Alexander C. Y. Huang, in his book *Chinese Shakespeares: Two Centuries of Cultural Exchange*, espouses the critical framework of “presentism” to understand the interplay between Shakespeare’s historicity and that of the foreign culture producing his works. He explains:

Questions about the politicalization of artistic works, historical accuracy, and authenticity, as well as ideological authority, revolve around the idea of rewriting as a venue where the present is seen in the art of the past and vice versa. [...] Presentism, a critical operation that brings contemporary events to bear on premodern works, privileges the extended presence in time and space of artistic works and foregrounds the historicity of contemporary readers and critics. (Huang 2009, 143)

The politicalisation of Lin’s *Hamlet* is thus an inextricable reaction to the events of Tiananmen. Shakespeare’s time was one of significant socio-political flux, a background transmuted thematically into much of his work, and it is the reflection

of this political uncertainty that Lin transmuted into his vision of a distinctly Chinese *Hamlet*. Huang adds that it is no surprise, therefore, that in China and elsewhere, “the most dramatic transformation and urgent transmuting of Shakespearean valences (both positive and negative) occurred during revolutions” (Huang 2009, 142), as the works of Shakespeare hold a remarkable ability to comment on contemporary society. Similarly, the difference in location (and time), and thereby socio-political atmosphere, between Shakespeare’s Early Modern England and the locality of performance allows political engagement through performance in repressive and censored regimes such as the PRC. Such temporal and physical separation provides a perceived level of political correctness that can be easily and subtly manipulated in the production of politically charged foreign works.

Lin Zhaohua’s interpretation of *Hamlet* can be seen as a form of intercultural revision, according to the definition provided by Dennis Kennedy and Yong Li Lan in *Shakespeare in Asia*, in which Shakespeare’s plays become estranged

in a Brechtian manner in order to create a new text, a third text, which is neither the original nor the estranging device but the result of their performative interaction. Thus the mode is heavily dependent on the director as intervener or auteur in the modernist tradition, itself imported from the West. (Kennedy and Yong 2010, 10)

While such theatre tends “to move away from political applications into more self-consciously aesthetic realms [...], we must keep firmly in mind that the aesthetic never loses political nuance” (Kennedy and Yong 2010, 10). As Huang asserts, “[w]hen history has been held hostage, theater artists found ways to speak through dramas disconnected from local circumstances. Theatre speaks through its new locality in the play” (Huang 2009, 128). Thus, through the process of localization, Lin’s production of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* was given immediacy in the rapidly evolving socio-political atmosphere of pre and post-Tiananmen China.

Within the text of *Hamlet*, as within the climate of his contemporary China, Lin saw a fatalistic inevitability in political conflict and death. He interpreted Hamlet and Claudius’ contemplation and eventual enactment of violence toward each other in light of the violence of Tiananmen and concluded that violence for political gain is a losing situation all around. Chinese Shakespeare performance scholar, Ruru Li, explains that “the way Lin read [Hamlet] was plainly conditioned by the social, political and economic changes that were taking place in China” (Li 2006, 4). As Gary Shiu and Daniel Sutter explain in their article “The Political Economy of Tiananmen Square,” “while the Communist Party leaders desired economic reform, they

never favored a political liberalization which would weaken their hold on power” (325). Protestors mistakenly interpreted the government’s growing economic liberalisation as the starting point for further social and political liberalisations. However, Shiu and Sutter explain that “[t]he regime would not tolerate political opposition and acted accordingly” (325). The rhetoric used by Shiu and Sutter analyzes the decision to violently suppress student uprisings in terms of a “game between the central government and a province” and the central government’s reaction as one necessary to squelch illusions of provincial autonomy (326). Their rhetoric further analyzes the events of Tiananmen in terms of “strategy” and a “fight.” As a monopolist “challenged by an entrant in any one of its markets [...] fights the first entrant to establish a reputation for toughness,” the government of the PRC responded violently to the protestors in order to dispel any future attempts by groups to undermine its central authority (Shiu and Sutter 1996, 326). Similarly, political scientist Melanie Manion, also analyzes the events of Tiananmen in terms of a contest, or “duel,” between the opposing protestors and central government in *Beijing Spring, 1989: Confrontation and Conflict* (Manion 1990, xiii–xlii). The imagery of this description, whether intentional or not, clearly connects the protests and their aftermath to the climax of Shakespeare’s tragedy, when the Danish royal family and all those closest to it are similarly pressed into an inevitable and tragic denouement. Such rhetoric further illustrates the elements of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* that Lin saw so clearly connected to Tiananmen and highlight the sort of reflexive reading of history and performance that Alexander C. Y. Huang asserts.

The fatalistic readings of such theorists as Manion, Shiu and Sutter, suggest an inherent distrust of the government of the PRC and assert a sort of inevitability to its actions in Tiananmen. While China was in a period of political growth and evolution, the demands of Tiananmen protestors for democratic reform came too fast and threatened the social stability of China and the hegemonic control of the central ruling party. Xiaobo Su explains that the protest movement forced the government to suspend “the call for a radical political reform” (321). The government interpreted the actions of the protestors as a direct threat to its political power and authority, just as Claudius interprets Hamlet’s “madness” as similarly threatening to his regime.

Randolph Kluver’s analysis of the climate that led to the Tiananmen crackdown further indicates the socio-political atmosphere to which Lin responded in his production of *Hamlet*. His rhetoric, like Manion’s, provides startling insight into the appropriateness of Lin’s instinct to approach Tiananmen theatrically through Shakespeare’s masterpiece. Kluver writes that “the drama that played out in Tiananmen Square was indeed an epic battle over the future of China” (73). Again, Kluver

like many other theorists, represents the events surrounding Tiananmen as a dramatic battle between opposing forces, only Kluver's analysis takes on a more complex and balanced nuance as he analyzes three main perspectives on Tiananmen – the CCP's, the protestors' and the Western world's – to demonstrate “how collective political action flowed in the subsequent events” (73). While many theorists have focused their analyses on the inevitability of the violence in Tiananmen, Kluver's analysis highlights the continuing control of information on the part of both the Chinese government, and to an extent the American government, that has slanted the public's understanding of the events. Kluver writes that to this day in China, “[t]here is no public acknowledgement of any government culpability, and the government steadfastly refuses to allow any public consideration of what actually transpired” (94). Kluver's analysis focuses on the flow of information and the rhetorical devices utilised by all players in the events surrounding Tiananmen, but even his broadened analysis contains an underpinning of inevitability in its final conclusions.

*Hamlet*, as envisioned by Lin Zhaohua, is similarly concerned with the flow of information and the inability of the players involved to distinguish fact from fiction or clearly and honestly express their intents. Hamlet's quest for vengeance is plagued by doubt, and he is stunted by his inability to publicly reveal the truth of Claudius' actions. Lin Zhaohua's decision to share the roles of Hamlet and Claudius and employ other doubling devices throughout his work, clearly indicates Lin's awareness of the complexities of truly understanding an event beset with conflicting accounts and mitigated by a strict governmental control of information. However, the control and flow of information was clearly not Lin's only concern with the events surrounding Tiananmen. He plainly saw within the unfolding of events in *Hamlet* the symbolic enactment of the same inevitability, espoused by political theorists, that led to the government's crackdown of protestors in Tiananmen. It is, therefore, through the lens of this inevitability that Lin's *Hamlet* must be understood, and through this reflexive reading of Lin's *Hamlet*, a greater understanding of the Chinese perspective of the events that led up to the Tiananmen massacres can be attained.

Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is not only a play about the inevitable conflict that results from contended power, it is also a play about the inevitability of death. Death is the force that ignites the central conflicts of the play and several of its characters contemplate man's fraught relationship with it. By framing his adaptation within the dialogue of the gravediggers, Lin asserts a fatalistic interpretation of *Hamlet* and, by extension, of post-Tiananmen China, where the deaths of hundreds to thousands of protestors loomed as specters in the collective consciousness. From the moment that Claudius seized control of Hamlet's kingdom, to the play's final duel, inevitable

forces were set in motion that would lead to one or both of their deaths. As Shakespeare's tragedy teaches us, when there is contention over the rule of a monarchy, that contention is only solved through the death of at least one of the contenders. Similarly, the scholar-protesters of Tiananmen Square were deceived by a false sense of security and a belief that they had freedoms that they clearly did not. From the moment they marched on Tiananmen, to the moment the army rolled into the Square armed with tanks and automatic rifles, the duelists had been pressed into a battle in which retreat was a possibility neither side was willing to entertain. This must have been a most troubling and fearful reality for protesters and hardliners alike. The protesters felt certain that they could not back down from their demands without their movement being considered an abject failure, and hardliners knew that they could not be embarrassed by these public demonstrations of disapproval. Those protests would surely lead to revelations about the corruption and inherent flaws within the government.

In the aftermath of the massacre, the people of China desperately sought "relief from the sense of anger, impotence, and frustration" that all were feeling (Hicks 1990, xv–xx). To Lin Zhaohua, China's premier *avant-garde* theatre practitioner, loneliness dominated the national mind-set in the aftermath of the Tiananmen massacres. So it was in early 1990 that the Lin Zhaohua Drama Studio (LZDS) staged a production of *Hamlet* – a play focusing upon the character that could certainly be perceived as the most lonely, alienated and disenfranchised in the entire Shakespeare canon. Lin founded the LZDS in 1989 in order to escape the constraints imposed upon government-funded theatre companies. This artistic and political move gave the director the freedom to pursue his *avant-garde* approach to his dramatic work and allowed him to work outside of the government mandated quotas "for presenting plays with modern or revolutionary themes" (Li 2006, 4). Furthermore, the stylization of the production represented a definitive break from archetypal Chinese characters, a break enhanced by the naturalised speech patterns and behaviors of the actors, which moved away from the more traditional declamatory style and gestural cues that defined character types in traditional Chinese theatre.

Lin's *Hamlet* was no longer a pensive European prince in Western Renaissance clothing, a wig and a prosthetic nose. Instead, Lin's *Hamlet* appeared on a post-apocalyptic set, with debris and billowing gray fabric covering the walls and floor, wearing no makeup, and dressed in plain, contemporary Chinese attire. The costumes were largely monochromatic in shades of black and grey, with a few splashes of red in the costumes of Gertrude and Laertes, arguably two of the most passionate characters of the play. Two rows of ceiling fans rotated above the set and served as



a reminder of the contemporary setting of the play. They were lowered during the final duel, and thus became a vital scenic element of the fight scene. An old barber's chair served as the monarch's throne and was the only set piece (Lin 2007).

The existential angst that permeated post-Tiananmen Chinese society greatly influenced Lin's production. "I liked the loneliness of Hamlet," Lin said. "During that period, people had lost their vitality completely" (Li 1999, 356). Metaphors such as "prison, nightmares, a sterile promontory, a foul and pestilent congregation of vapors, and so on" contributed to this sense of loneliness that pervaded post-Tiananmen China, and, as Li Ruru asserts, "might have sounded like allusions to the Communist regime, with its strict control of dissent" (Li 1999, 357). The government of the People's Republic of China had effectively isolated its people from one another. Its use of unrestrained and unspeakable violence against the protesters, much like Claudius's decision to send Hamlet off to England for execution, made it clear that any union of people organising themselves against the Communist regime could not be tolerated. The censorship of the event in the public discourse of the PRC effectively isolated the populace and ensured that no solace would be found through unbiased investigation into the event or communal sharing of grief.

The populace was fragmented and frustrated, and with strict government censorship of any public discussion of the events of 4 June, the people were left with nowhere to turn but inward. This was a self-reflexive instinct that Lin also saw in Hamlet, which led to the sharing among Claudius, Hamlet and Polonius of Hamlet's most self-reflective speech in which he queries "To be or not to be." Of this self-reflection, Lin said, "What we are facing is ourselves. To face oneself is the most active and bravest attitude modern people can possibly assume" (Li 1999, 357). It was from within this inwardly reflective movement that Lin's *Hamlet* emerged. By taking on the lines of others and witnessing their lines spoken by opposing characters through Lin's use of role doubling, Lin's characters literally had to face themselves. Through the production, Lin's audience was able to look into the events of the Beijing Spring and find their own moralistic questioning and search for truth reflected, not only in the play's hero, but in its villain as well.

In its avant-gardism and highly eclectic approach to Shakespeare, represented both visually and through Lin's unique choice of sharing the role of Hamlet with the actors playing Claudius and Polonius, the project was a hugely revolutionary,<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> "Revolutionary" is here used with a multiplicity of meanings. The production represented a break with traditional Chinese stagings of Shakespeare, and thus opened up new possibilities of meaning and interpretation both of *Hamlet* itself, and Shakespeare in general. The play was also politically active, as it emerged in direct response to the Beijing Spring, and while it does not incite physical revolution, it does represent a potential revolution in how to think about the historico-political events that lead to its creation.

innovative form of Chinese theatre. The text was adapted by translator Li Jianming with the intention of adhering to Lin's overarching vision of Hamlet as "one of us," and rather than a painstaking attempt to remain true to Shakespeare's original script, the tradaptation brought Prince Hamlet directly into the chaotic world of 1989 China. The gravediggers opened each act of the play with snatches of their dialogue from Act 5, emphasising the image of Denmark, and life in general, as being haunted by death. If "Denmark's a prison," then China before and after Tiananmen had similarly found itself entombed, not only by stark governmental control, but by the deaths of vast numbers of protestors. The jovial laughter and distance between the gravediggers' perceptions of death, and the stark reality of it revealed by Tiananmen, served to highlight the indiscriminate nature of death. This alignment of contemporary China with a graveyard emphasises the restrictive and life-threatening environment of the People's Republic. The repeated appearances of the gravediggers also provided greater weight to the play's inevitable and grim conclusion. In the struggle for power and revolutionary regime change under authoritarian rule, both in the PRC and in Lin's *Hamlet*, all actions, whether for good or ill, lead to death. The prison that China was before the Tiananmen crisis, followed by the graveyard it became in the wake of the massacres, was a stark and horrific image, the responsibility for which, according to Lin Zhaohua's political *Hamlet*, could not be so clearly and absolutely assigned to the government hardliners who ordered the military suppression in Tiananmen and subsequently controlled the public discourse surrounding the events of 4 June.

Just as Shakespeare's Claudius manipulates his brother's court into accepting his questionable ascension to the throne, Chinese government hardliners censored damning news coverage of the Tiananmen massacres and spun a web of rhetoric to extricate themselves from blame. Such gerrymandering only furthered Lin's desire to examine the complex socio-political and emotional factors that resulted in the massacres. His production deftly drew parallels between the Chinese people's search for truth and Hamlet's own desperate search for validation of his fears surrounding his father's death and Claudius' usurpation. However, Hamlet is not solely a victim of Claudius' treachery or the ghost's damnable demand for vengeance, and Shakespeare's play actively examines the question of Hamlet's free will and his culpability in his own demise and in the deaths of those around him.

According to Lin, Shakespeare's Prince Hamlet, "was lucky. He could represent justice and put justice into practice. He could also die bravely like a man. But in modern theatre [as in modern life] [...] there is only despair. It is true that, except for facing up to ourselves, we have no way out" (Li 1999, 358). In Lin's modern *Hamlet* there was to be no brave death for the Prince, just as there was no justice for victims of the atrocities perpetrated by the Chinese government. Hamlet, as analogue to Chinese hardliners and protestors alike, was destroyed by the folly of his

own plotting and, as Li Ruru explains, “revenge became an act of self-destruction” (Li 1999, 356). As soon as Tiananmen protestors escalated their demands beyond greater freedoms in the press and academia and labeled the current governing regime their enemy, the state positioned itself into the duel, willing to take decisive and violent action to maintain a semblance of control over its populace. Similarly, as soon as Hamlet’s “madness” appears to be a direct threat to the safety and sovereignty of Claudius, and by extension the realm, Claudius takes steps to ensure Hamlet’s destruction. Claudius’s attempt on Hamlet’s life only prompts Hamlet to return from his banishment ready to enact his mission of revenge, and the dual/duel plots of each man only leads to their collective demise. Hamlet and Claudius, like Beijing protestors and hardliners, learn too late that dissent against authoritarianism too easily results in violent suppression that is destructive to both the regime and its dissenters. As Lin expresses through his *Hamlet*, when violence meets violence, as when protestors armed with homemade weapons met government troops, it only further incites the authority to quell dissent absolutely. Lin thus strove to blur the line between guilty and innocent, demonstrating that when power is contested through violence there can be no winners.

In one of the most controversial and daring dramatic choices, Lin Zhaohua shared the roles of Hamlet and Claudius between two different actors. Horatio, the loyal friend, doubled as the treacherous friend Rosencrantz, and Laertes doubled as Marcellus. By employing this doubling device, according to Li Ruru, in his study “Shakespeare in China: Old Man Sha in the Middle Kingdom,” Lin strove to “blur the lines between the moral opposites in apparently opposed character roles” (4). Each actor had his primary role, but at several key moments during the play the actors playing Hamlet and Claudius would exchange roles, thus recognising the connections between apparent opposites and “suggesting that the characters *all* shared elements of good and evil, honesty and falsehood” (Li 2006, 4). This blurring of moral distinctions further emphasises the production’s ties to Tiananmen, as depending on the rhetoric the Chinese were listening to, the protestors were either dissidents and traitors or martyrs for freedom and democracy. The government of the PRC argued that they were taking appropriate measures to quell what they viewed as a threat to the stability of the PRC, their ideology, and the safety of its people.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, Claudius argues that Hamlet’s “liberty is full of threats to all” (Lin 2007) and concludes he must be shipped to England and put to death.

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<sup>4</sup> Xitong Chen, Mayor of Beijing during the student protests, wrote in a report to the National People’s Congress (NPC), “To safeguard the social stability in the city of Beijing, to protect the safety of the life and property of the citizens and ensure the normal functioning of the party and government departments at the central level and of the Beijing Municipal Government, the State Council had no alternative but to declare martial law in parts of Beijing” (quoted in Chen 1990: 75).

As the world has come to note, the government's violent suppression of protestors during the Beijing Spring was excessive and unnecessary. However, at the time the government of the PRC acted out of fear for the safety of its own survival, much as Claudius came to the conclusion that only through Hamlet's death would his rule, and thus the realm, be safe. The manipulative rhetoric of officials such as Mayor Chen clearly mimics that of Claudius as he justifies his swift ascension to the throne in the second scene of the play. As Claudius explains the apparent threat of Fortinbras, he implies his decisive actions will dispel Fortinbras' "weak supposal of our worth" (Lin 2007), thus protecting the safety of the nation and its people. Claudius' language even implies his court, and by extension his kingdom's, unquestioning support of his decisions. He declares, "nor have we herein barred / Your better wisdoms, which have freely gone / With this affair along" (Lin 2007). His speech, just as that of Chen and other hardliner supporters, clearly leaves no room for debate and asserts that his actions have been solely for the protection of, and at the will of, the people. The Tiananmen event, and the attempts to justify it afterward, represented the most extreme form of censorship that the government could have perpetrated against its people, crushed the democratic hopes of its populace, and rendered the people, like Hamlet, voiceless and isolated.

In Lin Zhaohua's adaptation of *Hamlet*, he strove to highlight the confusion and chaos that ensued following the Tiananmen massacres. Citizens and government officials alike strove to make sense of the unfolding events, but instead of finding definitive answers, censorship only further confused the situation. All of those involved in the incident were left with innumerable unanswered questions and a certain level of shared responsibility. Thus Lin employed the *avant-garde* adaptive device of role doubling to further highlight the confusion and shared culpability of the event, and to point to the very human decisions that were made on the parts of all involved. Hamlet, like the protestors, fought for what he ultimately came to believe, through intense analysis and moralistic reasoning, was right. Similarly, Claudius lashed out at Hamlet because Hamlet had become a danger to him, and, thereby, through extension, a danger to the state.

The actor playing Claudius also played a significant role in *The Mousetrap*, the play-within-a-play performed before the court. Through Claudius' physical participation in *The Mousetrap* in the dual (doubled) role as the murderer Lucianus, the psychological process of Claudius envisioning himself performing the murder, so similar to his own murder of King Hamlet, is made tangible for both Claudius and the audience. However, this does not appear to be another situation of doubling. Instead, Claudius's actions seem to represent his psychological progression as he

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witnesses, and participates in, a representation of his own foul deed. The scene plays like a mental double-take, as it takes Claudius imprinting himself in the action twice before he demands lights and the scene dissolves into chaos. Instead of maintaining Claudius as a passive observer in the presentation of *The Mousetrap*, Lin chooses to externalise Claudius' reaction to the play by making him an active participant. Although the Player King and Player Queen present the play in a highly stylized comedic fashion, utilising a representative gestural vocabulary, Claudius' reaction to, and participation in, the scene demonstrates its real and dangerous consequences.

The play begins as in Shakespeare's original, with the court gathered to witness the play-within-the-play. The throne has been moved upstage right to accommodate the King. As Hamlet introduces Lucianus, the actor who plays Horatio enters, in another characteristic Lin doubling, and crosses behind Claudius. The positioning of the two actors, with the murderer poised above the King, clearly aligns the two characters in intention and identifies them with each other for the audience. The suggestive tone of Lucianus' voice, as he begins his lines, "Thoughts black, hands apt, drugs fit and time agreeing" (Lin 2007), emphasises Claudius' reaction, rather than representing the literal scene that the rest of the court witnesses. The other actors' eyes remain fixed on the action in the center of the stage where the Player King and Queen perform, so it is only Claudius who feels the ominous weight of Lucianus' lines. As Lucianus continues his speech, Claudius rises hypnotically and moves toward the Players, miming poison in hand. In a daze, Claudius pours the poison into the Player King's ear and removes the Player's crown as he dies. As Hamlet narrates Lucianus' murder of Gonzago for his estate, Claudius rises, eyes fixated on the crown now in his hands. Ophelia cries out, "The King rises," and Polonius commands, "Give o'er the play!" (Lin 2007) All freeze momentarily, and then the scene moves backward, with each actor reversing his blocking as a VHS set to rewind, to begin again with Claudius' pantomimed poisoning. The repetition of this scene represents Claudius' inability to avoid the acts that it depicts, and only by having to repeatedly deal with the reality of his crimes does Claudius' guilt and fear boil over into the chaotic scene that ensues.

In the play-within-the-play's reenactment of the murder, Polonius' command is shouted directly at Claudius. This time the words seem to represent a warning – something in Claudius' reaction to the murder on stage leaves Polonius fearing that his (re)actions will reveal more than is safe. Polonius' words pull Claudius out of his solitary moment of reliving the murder, and he is suddenly aware of his guilt and the possibility that others are also now aware. Claudius looks at the crown in his hands, the haze in his eyes clears into understanding, and his eyes grow wide in fear

and disbelief at the realism of his 'pretended' action. He throws the crown from his hands in horror, and as Claudius' reaction builds, his body visibly trembling, Lucianus/Horatio sneaks back into his place in the play, picks up the fallen crown, holds it for a moment, and places it on his head. The King is left center stage, as Gertrude asks, "How fares my lord?" (Lin 2007), Claudius looks down at Lucianus with the crown now in the actor's hands and begins calling for lights with increasing intensity. The scene dissolves into chaos, as all take up the cry for lights and run off stage in various directions.

For Claudius, *The Mousetrap*, forces him to envision himself within the action, witnessing and psychologically participating in not only the pretend action on stage, but his own real actions that the play-within-the-play dramatises. When Claudius momentarily pauses to take in Lucianus poised with the crown in his hands, Lin situates Claudius as an observer and the scene that preceded as an externalisation of Claudius' own internal psychological wrestling with the real actions represented in *The Mousetrap*. Through the play, Claudius not only has to re-experience his horrific crimes of fratricide and usurpation, but also comes to fear that his actions have come to be known by at least Hamlet. The scene is repeated twice, once to allow for the psychological reliving of Claudius' crimes, and a second time for that reliving to crystallise into a reaction of guilt and fear. The fact that his actions can be so tangibly re-enacted before him through *The Mousetrap* demonstrates the inescapability of his crimes and also reinforces that memory, both personal and collective, can haunt the guilty as it does the victims.

Just as Claudius was unable to forget his crimes, both because of his own conscience and because of its representation through *The Mousetrap*, the governmental hardliners who ordered the violent suppression of Tiananmen protestors could not deny or escape their actions as they were televised across the globe. Thus hardliners, like Claudius, were forced to wrestle with the televised representations of their actions and the internal psychological retelling of their horrific crimes that memory commands. While Polonius' command to end the play was too late to censor the apparent revelation to Hamlet of Claudius' guilt, the Chinese government was able to censor the video captured of Tiananmen within their own borders. They were unable, however, to control its distribution throughout the world. Lin further complicates the notion of censorship and its relationship to truth by moving the scene of Claudius' failed confession to after Hamlet is sent to England. Thus, although Hamlet can interpret Claudius' reaction to *The Mousetrap* as an admission of guilt, he is prevented from gaining absolute certainty by Lin's dislocation of scenes. Claudius' direct admission of guilt thus becomes private knowledge between Lin's audience

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and Claudius, much as the televised depictions of state-endorsed violence in Tiananmen provided the global audience with hard truth of the Chinese government's guilt while denying similar knowledge to the Chinese people themselves.

During the play-within-a-play, Polonius emerges as a more commanding character, able to direct the king and those around him with his startlingly pointed command, "Give o'er the play!" (Lin 20047) This command, although intended in its original Shakespearean version to stop the Players, functions in Lin's reimagining as more of a command to Claudius. It almost appears that Polonius is trying to prevent the king from inadvertently admitting he is guilty of a similar crime, which prompts Claudius to throw the crown from his hands. The audience is left wondering how much Polonius knows and where he really sits within the political hierarchy. Polonius may have his own motives and ambitions to power, motives that the audience and the other characters can only guess at by observing his actions. Was he, actively or passively, part of the assassination of the former King, or at least involved in its concealment? Lin's interpretation certainly makes this a real possibility. This moment may also shed light on the decision for Polonius to double as Fortinbras at the end. Fortinbras is passing through Denmark under the pretense of a war with the Polacks, but ends up gaining his original intent of conquest of Denmark. Does this dual casting hint at a deeper political involvement for Polonius, or a hidden involvement in Claudius' usurpation as well? Certainly, his role in this scene as the mouthpiece of the king aligns him with officials like Chen Xitong, who was paraded as an ostensible outsider to justify the actions of top-ranking government hardliners. Such lower-ranking officials, while not directly involved in the decision-making process that led to the massacre of Tiananmen protestors, became implicated when they acted as the mouthpieces of the government and justified the heinous crimes as necessary for the safety of the nation. Such spectacles of complacency added to the complexity and confusion surrounding the events at Tiananmen and Claudius' reaction to the representation of his own evil deeds. There were so many players involved with conflicting personal or state-mandated agendas, that motivations and actions were difficult to identify with any level of certainty.

Lin's choices of role doubling are deliberate and methodical. Although the various roles that one actor embodies are intended to be distinct from one another, each character the actor plays informs and complicates the others. This adaptation of the play's casting further separates Lin's production and approach to Shakespeare from traditional Chinese conceptions of character as absolute. The role sharing between Polonius, Claudius and Hamlet solidifies this play's connection to the psychological and moral

confusion from which the production emerged. By giving the morally ambiguous Polonius, and the traditional villain, Claudius, a share in the character of Hamlet (and Hamlet a stake in Claudius' role) and, most importantly their own roles in the "To be or not to be" speech, Lin highlights his theme of Hamlet as "one of us" (Li 1999, 356). Hamlet is just steps away from being Claudius, as his bloody actions at the end of the play indicate. Likewise, Claudius is not free from moralistic musings or a conscience, as his role in *The Mousetrap*, his failed confession and his contemplation of "To be or not to be" illustrate. Here in Beijing, at least, Hamlet was no longer the humanist Renaissance hero, and Claudius was no longer simply the usurping villain.

Hamlet, the scholar-prince, can be aligned with the politically active scholar-protesters of Tiananmen Square, and Claudius with Beijing hardliners. However, what was left intentionally ambiguous in Lin's production was the assignment of blame, complicated by the inability to locate the truth about the tragedy that unfolded in Beijing only months before. Each player in Lin's cast was a "reluctant duelist" (Manion 1990, xiii), struggling with much the same thoughts, fears, doubts and the moralistic uncertainties, of Hamlet. Each actor queried, "To be or not to be?" and each raised doubts over his own role in the world in which he found himself. In the ultimate moment of confrontation between the prince and his uncle, after Hamlet's duel with Laertes, Lin, had his actors switch roles for one final time. After Hamlet's fatal thrust at Claudius, the pair become locked together in a final fatal embrace. The sound of blood dripping on the canvas-covered floor enhances the tension of the prolonged moment. When they finally separate, it is Hamlet, not Claudius, who falls. Claudius, now speaking Hamlet's lines, implores Horatio to "report my cause aright" (Lin 2007) and then names Fortinbras as his successor as ruler of Denmark. The death of Hamlet thus occurs within the physical body of Claudius. Hamlet has become, in the literal sense of the word, King Claudius; ironically and tragically, the ruling monarch only long enough to pronounce this one final command to Horatio and appoint a successor. Just as government hardliners reasserted the faultlessness of their reaction to Tiananmen, and continue to deny any culpability through their censorship and manipulation of the evidence from Tiananmen, Hamlet's final words become a reassertion of Claudius' right to rule and hegemonic order. It will not be Hamlet's cause that is reported to the people of Denmark, it will only be Claudius'. Thus both Hamlet and Claudius, like hardliners and protestors, fall victim to their own delusions of power and control. The true tragedy is that the reality of Tiananmen, much like the reality of Hamlet's plight, has become obscured in the complexity



of conflicting ideologies among its many players. Hamlet and Claudius' grandest 'dual/duel' delusion is re-enacted and symbolized by their shared death.

As suggested by the theories of Bertolt Brecht, one can surmise that Lin's decision to split the roles of Hamlet and Claudius is part of a technique to "dislocat[e] our stock associations" because "we have a horrible way of taking all the characteristics of a particular type and lumping them under one single head" (Brecht 1964, 11). This production, through various Brechtian distancing effects, challenges its audience to engage primarily critically, and only secondarily emotionally, with the material being presented. It does not allow a complacent and inactive audience to simply be swept up in a thrilling tale of intrigue, but rather forces a self-reflective and critical reaction that is at once commentary on China's socio-political climate and representative of Lin's interpretation of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* within a distinctly contemporary Chinese context.

Modernising Shakespeare in this manner was something that was nearly entirely unknown in China prior to this production, but it was Lin Zhaohua's desire that his audience see Hamlet as "one of us" (Li 1999, 356) a true contemporary in Jan Kott's use of the word. Lin thus moved away from traditional socialist interpretations of *Hamlet* as the great champion of Renaissance humanism, and brought the play into direct communication with the chaos and confusion of post-Tiananmen China. As Kott writes, "*Hamlet* is like a sponge. Unless it is produced in a stylized or antiquarian fashion, it immediately absorbs all the problems of our time" (Kott 1964, 64). Although Lin's *avant-garde* approach perplexed and confounded audiences unfamiliar with the more Western interpretive and aesthetic devices employed by the director – such as modern dress, *avant-garde* textual and casting manipulations, and the non-pictorial, time-period ambiguous set – in retrospect his production cannot be separated from the political atmosphere from which it emerged.<sup>5</sup> As the PRC's populace strove to understand the tragedy they had so recently endured, the visual and moral chaos created, intentionally, in this production directly commented on the atmosphere of the times. The loneliness and isolation that followed the putting down of the student uprising was encapsulated in Lin Zhaohua's *Hamlet*, which, by blurring the lines that separate villain and hero, fact and fabrication, dramatically and artistically expressed the unending struggle to discover truth in the chaos and censorship of post-Tiananmen China.

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<sup>5</sup> While the first iteration of this production was met with mixed criticism, Lin's enormous success as China's premier *avant-garde* director is testament to the evolution and acceptance of increasingly experimental *huaju* within China. His production of *Hamlet* has become a favorite of audiences, as it has seen revivals in 1994, 1995 and, most recently, in 2008.

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## *East Meets West at Tiananmen Square*

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