

Asian Shakespeares on Screen: Two Films in Perspective, special issue, edited by Alexander C. Y. Huang, *Borrowers and Lenders* 4.2 (Spring/Summer 2009).

Interiority, Masks, and *The Banquet*

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Abstract

The Banquet (2006), the first Chinese feature film based on Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, explores and reformulates the nature of self and identity. Director Feng Xiaogang makes a clear distinction between the outer and inner selves, interpreting the outer self as a mask that is used to conceal one's emotions or inner self. On the other hand, the film challenges the binaries of interiority and appearance and suggests that behaviors can be internalized and gradually inhabit the inner self. The theatrical self and the inner self therefore can no longer be clearly differentiated.

Hamlet proposes that theater is capable of stirring the soul — "The play's the thing" (2.2.604).¹ He suggests that a good player does not artificially perform his role, but in fact "forces his soul so to his own conceit" (2.2.553). *Hamlet* draws our attention to a world with blurry divisions between the internal and the external, being and performing. Instead of being two distinct states, the external performance often induces inward change. These concepts of selfhood and identity, which remain among the most important concerns of the current critical debates surrounding *Hamlet*, are reconceived in *The Banquet*, the first Chinese feature film based on Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, directed by Feng Xiaogang and released in 2006.

The film relocates *Hamlet* to ancient China during the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms period, an era plagued by widespread turmoil. A key feature and motif of the film is a dance with white masks that purportedly originated in the Yue region of southern China. The opening scene of *The Banquet* portrays the melancholic Prince Wu Luan (Daniel Wu) and other players dancing with white masks in a bamboo compound. The dance movements bear traces of Japanese *noh* conventions. The masks not only create an illusion of multiple Hamlets, but also conceal the characters' emotions by projecting an outward dimension of the self. This is revealed again in a dialogue between the prince and Empress Wan (Zhang Ziyi) after a staged duel:

Empress Wan (Gertrude): Why do you wear a mask when you perform?

Prince Wu Luan (Hamlet): It transports an actor to the highest state of his art. Without a mask, happiness, anger, sorrow and joy are simply written on his face. But with a mask, a great artist can convey to the audience the most complex and hidden emotions.

Empress Wan (Gertrude): You are incapable of even the most basic play-acting. Your sorrow, anger, bitterness, and uncertainty are there for all to see. You permit danger to follow you everywhere. You think hiding behind the mask can elevate your art? The highest level is to use your own face and turn it into a mask.

Assuming that private and public selves are discrete and separable entities, there is a clear distinction between individuals' feelings and their theatrically expressed behaviors. One of the paradoxes of the mask is its capacity simultaneously to conceal and reveal, to hide and show. The mask that conceals the characters' emotions also calls attention to them. While the mask protects its wearer from a discerning gaze, it nevertheless attracts attention by creating an air of mystery. The mask's double function of disguise and allure creates in the prince at once a desire to be seen and not to be seen. The mask is a soul-portrait, an outer casing that is a sensitive reflection of the inner life, and it possesses the capability of expressing deeper emotions and states of mind. More specifically, the mask signifies two contradictory forms of positionality and conflicting constructions of subjectivity in Feng's film. The white masks are used to hide the identities of the dancers so that the prince could escape the assassins. They hide the characters' sentiments by giving them a different persona. The mask hides an actor's facial expressions and at the same time forces the audience to divert attention to the actors' body movements to detect emotions that cannot be seen on the face.

Feng's film, just like *Hamlet*, invites its audience to consider multiple layers of meaning in the actors' actions and words. Even within the text of the play, the characters frequently doubt what they see and hear, and Hamlet constantly reminds Ophelia that appearances can be deceptive. In "The Mousetrap" scene in *Hamlet*, for instance, Claudius' guilt is obvious, and he explicitly reveals his guilty conscience when he runs off shouting, "Give me some light. Away!" (3.2.269). On the contrary, though shocked by the performance of this play-within-a-play, Emperor Li (Ge You) in Feng's film conceals his emotions and his guilt. He remains calm and walks slowly to the stage to praise the actors for their performance. As the empress suggests earlier, he masks his emotions with his own face.

The white mask in *The Banquet* also enables its wearer to observe without being watched. In *Hamlet*, the atmosphere of the court is defined by surveillance and spying. The characters spy

on each other to protect themselves or to achieve their aims. Claudius and Gertrude solicit the help of Horatio, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and then Ophelia to spy on Hamlet in order to learn the true cause of his madness. In *The Banquet*, the prince frequently hides behind his white mask. In the fighting scene that opens the film, the masked dancers do not resist the assassins at all, but remain immersed in their own world. In other scenes, the characters are unaware that they are being clandestinely observed. For instance, when the prince first appears before Empress Wan, he secretly looks at her from behind his white mask while she is taking a nap. He also spies on Emperor Li to learn his reactions to the play-within-the-play. In terms of dramatic experience, the white masks also suggest a converse relationship between the actors and the audience. The actor, instead of being viewed by the audience, has moved from being the focus of attention to focusing his attention on others as an observer, whereas the audience has now become the object of the the prince's gaze.

Masks are also given other functions in the film. The ghost of Old Hamlet is represented by the dead emperor's helmet. When the prince returns to the palace, he comes face to face with his father's helmet. At the same time, the audience could hear the erotic conversations of Emperor Li and Empress Wan. Upon the prince's return, bloody tears flow through the helmet to signal the presence of the ghost of the wronged father.

Film versions of Shakespeare's plays often use a voiceover for soliloquies. However, the inner thoughts and feelings of Wan are expressed through her long soliloquy in *The Banquet*. In the final confession scene, after the deaths of Emperor Li and Prince Wu Luan, Empress Wan recalls her life and the loss of her position and identity:

When was it that I started to forget my name? Perhaps it was the day your father married me. You left, and nobody used my name anymore. Gradually, even I forgot what it was. Then your uncle married me, and again I was called the Empress. But from now on, nobody will call me Empress anymore. Instead, they will call me Her Majesty, the Emperor.

Initially, Wan put on a mask to hide her true interior feelings, but as time passes, her mask becomes her face and creates a new self.

Feng's *The Banquet* explores the connections and unexpected disjunctions between the outer and inner selves, interpreting the outer self as a mask that is used to conceal one's emotions or inner self. But the film also challenges the binaries of inwardness and outwardness, interiority and appearance, suggesting that merely superficial behavior can gradually internalize and penetrate to the inner self. The theatrical self and the inner self can therefore no longer be clearly distinguished. As suggested by the multiple adaptations of *Hamlet* over the centuries, not only is the Renaissance

conception of self, as found in Shakespeare's drama, relevant to the current debate, but it is open to interpretation in a contemporary and cross-cultural context.

How to cite this article: Tien, Yuk Sunny. "Interiority, Masks, and *The Banquet*." In *Asian Shakespeares on Screen: Two Films in Perspective*. Special issue, edited by Alexander C. Y. Huang. *Borrowers and Lenders: The Journal of Shakespeare and Appropriation* 4.2 (Spring/Summer 2009). Available online: <http://www.borrowers.uga.edu/>.

Notes

1. All references to *Hamlet* are to *The Riverside Shakespeare*, second edition (1997).

References

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