

In Search of a Happy Ending: The Afterlife of *Romeo and Juliet* on the Asian screen¹

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This essay takes as its starting point the view that the afterlife of *Romeo and Juliet* in several Asian Shakespearean film adaptations is characterised by the presence of a happy ending. The film corpus used consists of adaptations set in countries such as India (*1942: A Love Story*, *Issaq* and *Ram-Leela*), China (*Qing Renjie*), Singapore (*Chicken Rice Wars*) and Japan (a Japanese TV adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet*). The first section explores how the ending is actually altered and the second provides a brief historical overview of *Romeo and Juliet* in these countries and considers why all these adaptations feel the need to transform the tragic *dénouement* for a happy resolution. As post-colonial—and hybridised—works, or simply works aiming to resist Western hegemonic power, the purpose of the adaptations considered is two-fold: to challenge the Western authority of Shakespeare and to offer a new way of reading the play via the use of mimicry, parody or the burlesque. The last section then demonstrates the strategies used by all these adaptations to advance an inauthentic ending; they all “cheat” and play with the audience. All the modern-day adaptations explored highlight the need to have popular appropriations of the play—beyond straightforward literary productions—which reinterpret and rewrite the Shakespearean play in an Asian context in order to make it their own. Following a postcolonial framework, this essay shows that it becomes necessary to understand the rewriting of *Romeo and Juliet* in some Asian countries. Experimentation, recreation and parody abound in all these adaptations, with clear political implications.

Keywords: Shakespeare; *Romeo and Juliet*; adaptation; happy ending; cinema; Asia

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Buscando un final feliz: La recepción de *Romeo y Julieta* en el cine asiático

Este artículo parte de la idea de que la recepción de *Romeo y Julieta* en determinadas adaptaciones se caracteriza por la presencia de un final feliz. El corpus fílmico utilizado para este artículo consta de adaptaciones realizadas en diferentes lugares, tales como India, (1942: *A Love Story, Issaq* and *Ram-leela*), China (*QingRenjie*), Singapur (*Chicken Rice Wars*) y Japón (una adaptación televisiva japonesa de *Romeo y Julieta*). En primer lugar, el artículo explora cómo se modifica el final. La segunda sección profundiza en una breve historia de *Romeo y Julieta* en estos países y las razones por las cuales estas adaptaciones necesitan transformar el desenlace trágico en una resolución feliz. Como obras post-coloniales—e híbridas—o simplemente obras que intentan resistir el poder hegemónico occidental, su propósito es doble: desafiar la autoridad occidental de Shakespeare y ofrecer una nueva lectura de la obra a través de la imitación o la parodia. La última parte muestra las estrategias utilizadas por estas adaptaciones para avanzar un final falso; todas engañan y juegan con la audiencia. Todas destacan la necesidad de reinterpretar y reescribir la obra shakespeareana en un contexto asiático para hacerla propia. Siguiendo un marco teórico post-colonial, parece completamente necesario devolver la mirada a Oriente para comprender la reescritura de *Romeo y Julieta* en algunos países asiáticos. Experimentación, recreación y parodia abundan en todas estas adaptaciones, con claras implicaciones políticas.

Palabras clave: Shakespeare; *Romeo y Julieta*; adaptación; final feliz; cine; Asia

I. INTRODUCTION

The Hong Kong marital comedy *One Husband Too Many* (Chan 1988), an off-shoot of *Romeo and Juliet*, opens with a performance of *Romeo and Juliet* which cheaply imitates Franco Zeffirelli's famous adaptation. The lead roles of the play are played by the leading characters of the film: Hsin/Romeo and Yuan Tung/Juliet, but the performance is a total failure since it does not "engage the attention of rural audiences" (Lee 2009, 199). Some of the negative responses and objections from the audience, such as "Tight pants!," "It's taboo" and "Get on" (to Romeo in reference to him killing himself) at the end of the play-within-the-film simply suggest rural mockery and parody of the Shakespearean play. Hongkongers are not interested in *Romeo and Juliet*, which can be understood as resistance to British cultural hegemony (Lee 2009, 199). This contempt on the part of the audience and the impossibility of finishing the performance mirrors the scene in the Singapore based *Chicken Rice Wars* (Cheah 2000), where an experimental performance of *Romeo and Juliet* is taking place, and the audience becomes distracted. The performance highlights that Shakespeare is not important for the Wongs and Chans (the two main families in the movie), who do not even know whether the leading actors are speaking English or not and the performance is finally disrupted by the endless arguments between the two families. *One Husband Too Many* and *Chicken Rice Wars* both establish the parameters of the appropriation of Shakespeare on the Asian screen, where traditional renditions do not strike a chord with the spectators and thus the play has to be radically reworked.²

"To avoid the indifference his work can arouse" (Nogueira Diniz 2005, 263), Shakespeare's plays are popularised, and adapted to the specific Asian locations. Besides the straightforward literary performances, there are other modern-day Asian Shakespeare films addressed to youngsters and, yet, are not exempt from political implications. Asian filmmakers exploit Shakespeare's cultural weight to subvert the text. Some of the *Romeo and Juliet* adaptations included in the film corpus used here are set in post-colonial hybrid cultures, such as India (*1942: A Love Story*, *Issaq* and *Ram-leela*) and Singapore (*Chicken Rice Wars*), clearly characterised by ambivalence (Bhabha 1994) towards the former coloniser culture. The other two adaptations considered here (*Qing Renjie*) and a TV movie version, set in China and Japan respectively, belong to cultures that aim to challenge Western hegemony and authority. All the adaptations examined rewrite the original text and in doing so move away from the tragic Shakespearean space.

It is the aim of this paper to analyse and explore Asian *Romeo and Juliet* film adaptations which illustrate a wider interpretation of the Shakespearean text. According to Michael Anderegg, *Romeo and Juliet* is the Shakespearean play that has

² The audience's negative reactions when watching the performance of *Romeo and Juliet* in *One Husband Too Many* and *Chicken Rice Wars* are reminiscent of the scene of the play-within-the-film in *Shakespeare Wallab* (Ivory 1965). When the lead characters in this work are performing *Othello*, the play is greeted with indifference. What is more, just after Desdemona's death, the audience is distracted by the entrance of a Bollywood actress in the theatre, and the actors are not even able to finish the production.

received the greatest treatment tending to the burlesque (2002, 58), the situation reaching unexpected limits on the Asian screen. In spite of the fact that Asian Shakespearean stage productions have lately been explored in different volumes such as Trivedi and Minami (2009) and Kennedy and Yong (2010), Shakespeare on the Asian screen is still rather a forgotten space. With the notable exception of Akira Kurosawa's Shakespearean adaptations—*Throne of Blood* (1957), *The Bad Sleep Well* (1960) and *Ran* (1985)—Shakespeare on the Asian screen has, to date, provided scarce pickings. Indeed, research has been restricted to a handful of articles, such as the special edition of *Borrowers and Lenders* edited by Alexander Huang (2009), single chapters within monographs, namely *Shakespeare in Hollywood, Asia and Cyberspace* (Huang and Ross 2009), *Shakespeare and World Cinema* (Burnett 2013) and a recent volume devoted to the presence of Shakespeare in Bollywood cinema entitled *Bollywood Shakespeares* (Dionne and Kapadia 2014).

The purpose of this article is to add to the exploration of the field of Asian Shakespeare on screen, taking as its main purpose the analysis of adaptations of *Romeo and Juliet*. Common to all the Asian adaptations under study is the erasure of the tragic ending and its substitution by a happy ending. Despite being low-brow projects targeted at youth culture, they are all also cinematic parodies with political implications. All the adaptations shed light upon the importance of re-interpreting and re-writing the Shakespearean body of works in an Asian context. Regardless of the Asian country where each film is set, they are all characterised by ambivalence of the film itself towards the original Shakespearean text. On closer analysis, all the films can be seen to subscribe to experimentation with Shakespeare.

2. CHANGING THE ENDING

In all six films, *Romeo and Juliet* is marshalled to expose a parody through several modifications, transforming the ending, and re-interpreting, or rather, changing, the genre. The Indian adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet* entitled *1942: A Love Story* (Chopra 1994) explores the relationship between the colonialist bred Narendra Singh and the daughter of the freedom fighter Rajeshwari Pathak in the context of the Quit India movement.³ The similarities between Naren/Rajjo—these are diminutives of the two names mentioned earlier—and Romeo/Juliet emerge from the beginning, since they fall in love at first sight, but the parallels are made more explicit when, at the library, Naren gives a copy of the well-known Shakespearean play to Rajjo. But the articulation of *Romeo and Juliet* goes beyond the plot, since there is also a play-within-the-film (*Romeo and Juliet*) addressed to an insolent British Raj chief called General Douglas. The first half of the movie reifies the inevitable link between Shakespeare

³ *1942: A Love Story* paved the way for other anti-colonial films, such as *Lagaan: Once Upon a Time in India* (Gowariker 2001) and *Rang De Basanti* (Mehra 2006).

and colonialism in India because the British Raj general will be honoured with a Shakespearean performance, as if he were the epitome of highbrow English culture, the culture of the colonisers.

The second half of the adaptation is characterised by the articulation of nationalistic ideals and, above all, by the transformation of a tragic *dénouement* into a happy one. When the play-within-the-film does not in the end take place due to an attack by the freedom fighters, Rajjo's father commits suicide, thus expanding the Shakespearean play, and Rajjo escapes with Shubhankar, the main nationalist leader, who is the Paris counterpart. She is thus seen to be willing to sacrifice her love for Naren for the sake of the longed-for independence of her country. It is only when Naren realises the importance of the liberation of his homeland and decides to fight for the freedom of his country that love is introduced again in the story. The movie's climax turns Naren into a hero in the fight against the British Raj and colonialism. When the audience is feeling that everything is lost and tragedy is inevitable, General Douglas is killed, freedom is attained and the two star-crossed lovers are able to reunite. This ending highlights that romance here goes hand in hand with nationalism; once the legacies of the past are over, love for the country immediately leads to the realisation of the love felt for another person. This alteration of the ending to one with no elegiac tone and which is extremely positive and affirmative serves a clear function: the promotion of Indianness and the appropriation of Shakespeare as an Indian icon.

The latest Indian acknowledged adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet* is Sanjay Leela Bhansali's *Goliyon Ki Rasleela Ram-Leela* (2013). Bhansali transposes *Romeo and Juliet* to a Gujarat town where the Sanedas and the Rajadis stand for the Capulets and Montagues respectively. The setting is characterised by the presence of guns, weapons and bullets; the air is tainted with the violence of these two criminal gangs. The most interesting rewriting affects the Sanedas, whose household is governed by an intimidating matriarch instead of a patriarch. Ram (Romeo) and Leela (Juliet) meet and instantaneously fall in love during Holi, the Hindu festival of colour. After Kanji's death (Tybalt's death), Ram and Leela elope and get married but, before the consummation takes place, Ram abandons the hotel where they are staying in order to go drinking with his friends. In a paring down of the Shakespearean text, Leela is found by her family and brought home.

To begin with, Ram's decision to leave Leela alone in their honeymoon hotel room while he drinks with his friends triggers a considerable number of consequences. Had he stayed with Leela that night instead of succumbing to peer pressure, she would not have been abducted by her mother's gang. Unlike Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, the audience cannot blame fate or destiny for what happens to the star-crossed lovers, but can do nothing but blame Ram, for his childish and immature decision. From this moment on, the couple are parted, become the heads of their respective households and are not reunited until almost the end of the film.

The ending scene differs considerably from the Shakespearean tragedy. Instead of each one individually taking their lives, Ram and Leela commit suicide together,

with guns, after kissing each other. In contrast to Romeo's horror at finding Juliet (supposedly) dead and committing suicide, this adaptation has the two lovers willing to make the sacrifice of dying together in a suicide pact in order to promote happiness in their village. Curiously enough, it is one of the few moments in the movie where we see them relaxed, enjoying each other's company, as if death was actually a blessing for them. In fact, Leela's swimming pool—clearly based on the swimming pool that appeared in Juliet's house in *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet* (Luhmann 1996)—plays a crucial role at the end of the film. When the lovers commit suicide, the camera zooms in on the corpses as they fall into the swimming pool so that the audience can see their smiling faces. Water is associated with purification, hence their souls become pure once they are in the swimming pool. Thus, the double suicide should be interpreted in this movie as something positive.

The Chinese Shakespearean off-shoot released in 2005 *Qing Renjie*—a.k.a. *A Time to Love* (Huo Jianqi 2005)—also deals differently with *Romeo and Juliet's* ending.⁴ With the Cultural Revolution as its background, the story revolves around a pair of lovers, Hou Jia and his childhood sweetheart Qu Ran, whose families have long felt a profound hatred in the style of the Capulet-Montague rivalry. A detailed examination of the film is required to understand that the presence of *Romeo and Juliet* is integrated at two different levels: one intertextual and the other cinematic. *Qing Renjie's* finale is, to say the least, shocking. After Hou Jia and Qu Ran's initial encounter, they get married, but the expressions on their faces in the wedding photos show their worry and insecurity about their future, and alienation. "Coloured with mourning, the closing moment of togetherness—a montage of Hou Jia/Romeo and Qu Ran/Juliet for a wedding photograph—sounds the dominant notes of loss and regret" (Burnett 2013, 223). In spite of the fact that the end is neither sad nor tragic, it has sometimes been criticised for its lack of a "happily ever after" message. But the most salient idea behind this finale is that the protagonists do not commit suicide and do not die. The implication is clear: dying for your beloved is out of the question in present-day Chinese society, and so this movie is deprived of the tragic Shakespearean ending.

Unlike other Asian off-shoots, the happy ending in *Chicken Rice War* (Cheah 2000) does not come as a surprise, but can be imagined throughout the film. The middle shot of Fenson Wong and Audrey Chan looking at the camera, holding hands and announcing their love as well as the reconciliation of the two families inevitably reifies the trajectory of Asian adaptations of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* with happy endings.

The most provocative Asian rewriting of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* was released in 2007.⁵ *Romeo and Juliet* (Otani 2007) is a Japanese television movie shown on Nippon

⁴ While the presence of the Shakespearean *oeuvre* on the Chinese stage has been explored in depth, the adaptations and off-shoots on the Chinese screen have not been the object of research in any monography yet. For Shakespeare on the Chinese stage, see Huang (2009), Levith (2004) or Li (2003).

⁵ The year 2007 witnessed the release of two more Japanese adaptations of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, an anime version (Appignanesi 2007) as well as a manga appropriation of the play (Oizaki 2007).

Television Network Corporation (NTV) as part of the Shakespeare Drama Special season. Starring Takizawa Hideaki as Morita Hiromichi and Nagasawa Masami as Kihira Juri, the cinematic adaptation is an insurrection on the part of the Japanese director Taro Otani. The movie casts a clear ironic shadow over the play at the end. The audience learns that a year has gone by since Hiromichi and Juri's last meeting when they had promised not to see each other again until certain problems were resolved and, in a circular movement, the camera ends with the first shot of the film. A pale Juri with her head bowed is sitting on a bench in the park where the couple always used to meet and she is holding a suspicious number of white tablets in her right hand. Upon seeing her, Hiromichi rushes towards her, shouting her name desperately on three occasions. For the audience, and for Hiromichi, Juri is dead. Nevertheless, in pursuit of reinvention, this Japanese *Romeo and Juliet* does not imagine the expected tragic ending, but rather a happy finale; like the previous Asian adaptations of the Shakespearean play discussed here, the film constitutes a still evolving Shakespeare. After Hiromichi's three loud cries, Juri smiles, awakes and asks the Japanese Romeo if he thought she was going to commit suicide like Juliet. Then, in an ironic and parodic mode, Juri gives one of the tablets to Hiromichi to try, and he and the audience discover they taste of lemonade: not drugs, but gumdrops. In this imagining of the play, Juri ends up laughing at Hiromichi, at the audience and at the Shakespearean text. The audience learns at this point that the cinematic "prologue" in the TV film cheated. The Japanese Juliet subverts the text, parodies Shakespeare and finally claims that they are not Romeo and Juliet after all. Thus, there is a parody of the Shakespearean text at the end in all these adaptations.

3. REASONS FOR REWRITING THE TEXT

How is the transformation of the ending in all the aforementioned adaptations to be understood? According to Jennifer Wallace, some post-colonial scholars have endorsed the view that "the subaltern response to classical, Western tragedy should be one of comic resistance" (2007, 88). While Western tragedy was exported to the empire as part of the colonial discourse, there was later a counter-discourse in which post-colonial writers aimed to dismantle "that canon through various strategies, such as mimicry, burlesque, carnival," and so on (88). When it was the empire's turn to write back, they had to appropriate this canon and make it theirs; a dialogue had to be forged. Thus, post-colonial adaptations of Western tragedies or even contemporary productions of traditional texts constantly invert the genre; it is frequent to see a tragedy transformed into a comedy and vice versa. In the same way that, for instance, a considerable number of productions of *The Tempest* have shed light on Caliban's tragedy, Derek Walcott's play *A Branch of the Blue Nile* (1986) becomes a parody of *Anthony and Cleopatra*. Parody is then one of the postcolonial tricks used, and should be regarded as subversive. Not only can it function "as a weapon against the original narrative" (Wylie 2009, 16) but it can also rewrite or even produce new works.

Parody is not only a postcolonial technique and trick. As can be seen throughout this paper, parody can also operate as a crucial strategy used to deconstruct Western canonical texts such as *Romeo and Juliet* in other (Asian) countries, which were not under the yoke of Colonialism. Shakespearean plays were banned in China from 1966 to 1976 during the Cultural Revolution, created to restore communist fervour, since Shakespeare, and the Western canon in general, did not have the required ideology and represented values which the Chinese government loathed, such as capitalism. During the same period in Japan, the reception of Shakespeare was complex due to the political tensions between Japan and some Western countries. Even in present-day Chinese and Japanese society, Western globalisation appears as something to challenge and defeat. Pop Shakespearean adaptations targeted at young audiences transform high tragedy into comedy via parody, which is inseparable from political attitudes. Thus, these films demystify the Bard and show the struggle between received cultural authority and local aspirations.

Parody was one of the tricks used during the colonial period in India to deal with the Western canon in general and Shakespeare in particular. Parsi theatre—established by Zoroastrians in Bombay in 1850—has always been considered archetypal of hybrid theatre. “Unlike the English performances of the bard’s plays staged by the educated elite” (Thakur 2014, 32), Parsi theatre simultaneously appropriated Shakespeare’s plays and localised them by inserting song and dance sequences and by staging them in Indian vernacular languages. According to Homi K. Bhabha, “mimicry is at once resemblance and menace” (1994, 123), and Parsi theatre would seem to be its ideal epitome because it used the Western canon, but Indianised the plays. On the one hand, the performances resembled the Western canon but, on the other, they strongly challenged the English-language Shakespeare productions designed by the colonial regime by changing the texts. In the case of the tragedies, tragic endings were usually modified, echoing the method used in the Restoration period by Colley Cibber in *Richard III*, George Granville in *The Jew of Venice*, Nahum Tate in *King Lear* and Otway in *Caius Marius*, based on *Romeo and Juliet* (see Sen 1964, 90-104). Ahsan, an Urdu dramatist of the Parsi stage, appropriated *Romeo and Juliet*—*Bazm-e Fani*, also known as *Gulnar Firoz* (1890)—turning the tragic grandeur and sublime status of the original ending into a happy resolution, “completely running the original upside down” (Gupta 2005, 92). Adaptations of *Romeo and Juliet* in different vernacular languages also introduced a mode of representation of the play in which the happy ending was present. Mirza Kalich Beg, the most famous translator of Shakespeare’s plays into Sindhi, transformed his translation/adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet* entitled *Gulzar and Gulnar* (1909) so that it had a happy ending under popular pressure. Moreover, such adaptations of Shakespeare’s tragedy became *agitprop* in a society where love marriage was not conceived of, and premarital love was out of the question. In the Kannada language, *Romeo and Juliet* was translated—or rather, reinterpreted—by Ananda Rao as *Ramavarma-Lilavati* (1889), and the tragic ending eliminated. *Ramavarma-Lilavati*’s

finale elaborated a surrealistic Disney-like context in which Friar Laurence prayed to God that the lovers might be saved, they were revived from the dead and lived happily ever after. Since its origins in India, the modification of *Romeo and Juliet*'s ending has been associated with political subversion and defeat.

Parody when dealing with Shakespeare has also been crucial in Japan since its relationship with the Bard is based on a strange blend of reverence and irreverence. Apart from the westernised representations of Shakespeare in Japan that replicate "as close a copy as possible of 'authentic' English Shakespeare" (Minami 2010, 78) and the successful high culture adaptations of Japanese directors such as Ninagawa and Kurosawa, Shakespeare also resides in Japan in B class productions or "tacky Shakespeares" in which parody and burlesque play a central role: "[p]op culture in Japan has been keen to make Shakespeare tacky, trashy, sleazy, and gaudy, as well as cute and queer" (Yoshihara 2013, 84). Parodies of Shakespeare in Japan reach unsuspected limits. Given that Shakespeare is simply one more cultural artefact in Japan, popular culture experiments with him as much as with any other.

Romeo and Juliet, adapted to Japanese culture as *Romeo to Jurietto* (a.k.a. Romijuri), has enjoyed a successful trajectory in the sense of the number of parodies emerging from it, which may affect the whole play or just the ending; "unshakespearing" and recycling Shakespeare is tantamount to success in all these burlesques aimed at young people. Despite the fact that not all Japanese people have read Shakespeare's *oeuvre*, everybody is aware of the term *romijuri*, which stands for a love story, and does not allude specifically to Shakespeare's works. Interestingly, as Yoshihara claims, parodying *romijuri* has "become part of Japanese youth culture" (2013, 92). Instances include Yasuko Aoike's manga, *Sons of Eve* ([1977-1979] 1995), with an effeminate Romeo that makes love to a drag queen and the animation *Romeo X Juliet* (Oizaki 2007), dealing with a girl dressed as a boy, with the aim being to take advantage of the global brand of *Romeo and Juliet*. Perhaps one of the most interesting adaptations is *Go!* (Yukisada 2001), which traces the love story between Sugihara/Romeo—a *zainichi*, which refers to those "individuals of Korean descent who can track their dispersion to Japan's 'occupation' of Korea, 'the period of colonization'" (Burnett 2013, 204)—and Sakurai/Juliet, its ending emphasising a new beginning for the protagonists solving Sugihara's identity problems and the union of the star-crossed lovers.

The development of the performance history of *Romeo and Juliet* in China is worth exploring. The story named *Butterfly Lovers* (Fan 2000) is known as the Chinese *Romeo and Juliet* but with a significant change, a happier ending. Although the lovers die, they are transformed into butterflies and can enjoy their love forever. The movie entitled *Love Blossoms from Bloodshed* (Hanping 1930) is one of the early instances of a silent appropriation of *Romeo and Juliet* with a happy ending. The Miao and the Yao people, the Capulets and Montagues respectively, had a deep-seated resentment that lasted for many years, which is only resolved through the wedding of their respective daughter and son. As Ruru Li has claimed, "*Romeo and Juliet* has been one of the most

frequently performed Shakespearean tragedies” (2005, 44). Even though Shakespeare was one of the most welcomed Western authors at the beginning of the twentieth century, his plays were banned for political reasons in mainland China during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), for Shakespeare was associated with evil Western capitalism. Later, in the new People’s Republic of China, the situation changed. Influenced by Soviet scholarship, Shakespeare came to be regarded as “the spokesman of Renaissance humanism, which triumphed over the old Medieval feudalism” (Li 2005, 44). Subsequently, Chinese scholars rejected the Western interpretation of the play as a tragedy about star-crossed lovers and instead contrived of it as an optimistic tragedy, because even though the lovers died, their story won through. They were willing to sacrifice their love for the sake of their principals. In 2004, for instance, David Jiang directed a production of *Romeo and Juliet* in which the “death of the young lovers is no longer seen as a cruel sacrifice demanded by a feudal society, or as the result of social conflict, but as a voluntary decision, as an expression of the lovers’ own development” (Li 2005, 45). In the 1980s, while there was a Shakespeare boom in China with academic articles and stage performances, the Chinese screen still remained aloof until 1988, the year in which *One Husband Too Many* was released, closely followed by *Chicken Rice Wars* (2000) and *Qing Renjie* (2005). It cannot be a coincidence that after a period of oblivion and prohibition, the only Shakespearean films that existed in China until 2006 were three cinematic parodies. Thus, via the historical overview of *Romeo and Juliet* in several Asian locations where the transformation of the tragic dénouement into a happy ending is paramount, the Shakespearean text emerges as a political work.

4. ADVANCING THE (AUTHENTIC?) ENDING

Romeo and Juliet starts with a prologue that advances the ending. In keeping with this beginning, the Asian *Romeo and Juliet* adaptations equally start by advancing a dénouement. Yet, the main difference resides in the fact that all these films play with the audience, either in the promotion of the films or in the movies themselves, and often cheat so that the alteration of the ending is more than shocking.

The beginning of *1942: A Love Story* (Chopra 1994) is distinctive in the ways in which it purposefully frustrates hope on the part of the audience. With close-ups and medium shots of Naren/Romeo, the film suggests that this colonialist bred Romeo is going to be hanged during the disquiet of the “Quit India” movement, obviously differing considerably from the Shakespearean intertext in the way he dies. The audience identifies with the protagonist, feels empathy and suffers with him during the first five minutes. Then, the backstory is told in flashback. When the audience is prepared for the worst, “in a bad, sensational ending that also cheats, it is the English General who is hanged” (Burt 2011, 97) and the audience realises that their expectations have been toyed with. The film, while appropriating Shakespeare’s play, rewrites it to a different context. Vidhu Vinod Chopra’s *1942: A Love Story* (1994) offers an insightful example

of the concept of mimicry as theorised by Homi K. Bhabha (1994) whereby colonised people, and even postcolonial people, mimicked the Western canon, but, at the same time, produced a new and different work.

The adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet* named *Issaq* (Tiwary 2013) localises Shakespeare and provincialises Bollywood, as well as toying with the audience's expectations regarding the ending.⁶ It transposes the story to Banaras, Uttar Pradesh (UP), and its neighbouring areas, which are witnessing extreme violence by sand mafia and the bloody and violent retaliation on the part of Naxalite armies.⁷ The Capulet-Montague feud is reinterpreted in the rival families of the Mishras and Kashyaps. A week before the release of the film (26 July 2013), Prateik Babbar—the actor playing Romeo in the film—announced with much fanfare that Romeo and Juliet would not die in this adaptation (News18 2013, n.p.). Yet, when watching the movie, the audience is disappointed at the discovery that they do die. The last cinematic image in the movie shows the souls of Bacchi (Juliet) and Rahul (Romeo) on a motorbike in heaven, as if their love was only possible there. But why did Prateik tell an ending which was not exactly what he had announced? The happy ending has long figured in the cinematic imagination of Bombay and, in order to clearly encourage the spectators to watch the movie, Prateik previously advanced the transformation of the ending. Prateik's announcement and the subsequent finale both serve two different purposes. On the one hand, they generated a considerable interest in cinemagoers to watch the movie. On the other hand, they inevitably hinted at the importance happy endings have in India. Although it is certainly true that the finale of *Issaq* is not as tragic as in the Shakespearean play because the main characters continue living and loving each other in heaven, death does occur.

In *Chicken Rice Wars* (Cheah 2000), Shakespeare is used as a satirical and parodic tool from the outset. In fact, as Burnett argues (2013, 132), publicity for *Chicken Rice Wars* even shed light upon the fact that the movie is a classic parody of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. A reporter introduces the prologue changing "a pair of star-crossed lovers take their life" to "choose their chicken rice" while the female producer complains because his language sounds too Shakespearean "when I told you not to speak in Singlish, I didn't ask you to sound like Shakespeare" (Cheah 2000).⁸ Shakespeare is not elevated, but rather is considered the perfect tool for mockery. For instance, Fenson Huang introduces his mother in mock-Elizabethan language: "Insult is foreign to my mother, she does hurt when pricked and she does speak to herself, aye loudly too"

⁶ According to Akshaya Kumar (2013), the recent trend in Bollywood cinema consists in placing the movies in regional and rural settings.

⁷ The term *Naxalism* alludes to the communist groups within India, who call themselves Maoists in the southern states. They were declared terrorist organisations and a real threat to India's national security by Manmohan Singh. By introducing such a crude political issue, the film seems to follow in the footsteps of another Shakespearean film adaptation, *Omkara* (Bhardwaj 2006), which revolved around corruption closely connected with politics in the state of Uttar Pradesh. To read on *Naxalism*, see Singh (2006) and Tater (2012).

⁸ The term *Singlish* is a patois that mixes local languages in Singapore with English.

(Cheah 2000). The film is characterised by the presence of a play-within-the-film, *Romeo and Juliet*. From the moment Fenson becomes Romeo in the play, he is also constructed as a real life Romeo for Audrey. Fenson and Audrey are equally ridiculed by their respective families for spouting Shakespeare. When Audrey arrives late because she has been rehearsing, she is called “stupid” by her father, and Fenson’s mother even says: “What’s with all this Shakespeare rubbish? Eat your rice.” As Juanita Kwok and Lucinda McKnight remark, *Chicken Rice War* corrupts Shakespearean verse and transforms it into Singlish, “exaggerating the characterization and transforming the tragedy into comedy to a soundtrack of commercial pop” (2002, 3). Unlike the other adaptations, *Chicken Rice Wars* does not cheat and Shakespeare is presented from the beginning as a parodic weapon.

Otani’s TV movie advances a fictional tragedy, which is later subverted. Just as Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* starts with the prologue that advances the ending, the beginning of the Japanese *Romeo and Juliet* equally prepares the audience for the worst. The shot of a “dead” Juliet/Juri sitting on a bench with her half-open hand showing a number of white pills that match her white coat is outrageous and serves the purpose of the prologue. The close-up of Kihira Juri’s pale face in the middle of the park and the subsequent middle shot of Hiromichi, the Japanese Romeo, giving three horrendous loud shrieks, advance a fictional tragedy, since the real ending of the movie dismantles the source text together with the audience’s expectations.⁹ Some of these *Romeo and Juliet* adaptations explicitly construct an imagined ending at the outset of the films to shock the audiences.

5. CONCLUSIONS

During an episode of *Warai no daigaku (University of Laughs)*, a 2004 Japanese movie based on a play set in 1940 which contains a performance of *Romeo and Juliet*, the protagonists—a young playwright named Tsubaki Hajime and a government censor called Sakisaka Mutsuo—deliver the following dialogue during the balcony scene:

Sakisaka: ‘Why write a romance about the western barbarians with whom your country is at war?’ Tsubaki answers that the romance is set in Italy, with whom they recently signed a treaty. Sakisaka replies that the author is English. ‘If Churchill made sushi, would you eat it?’ Tsubaki: ‘No, because neither Hitler nor Churchill would make it properly.’ Sakisaka then suggests some cuts: ‘Place the action in Japan. Get rid of the British influences.’ (Burt 2009, 239)

⁹ This shocking beginning is immediately followed by a flashback which allows the viewers to understand the whole story. A strange sense of familiarity floats fleetingly, quite *déjà vu* since the Japanese *Romeo and Juliet* is clearly based on Baz Luhrmann’s *William Shakespeare’s Romeo + Juliet* (1996). The marketing campaign is in fact literally copied from Luhrmann’s film. The close-up of the lovers in the background, the gun, the cross and the presence of the Virgin show the similarities between both movies. The only difference is the title itself, since the Japanese version removes William Shakespeare from the title. In the TV series, the first image after the hypothetical finale focuses on a place named St. Verona’s Church and on a Virgin, which remind the audience of Luhrmann’s film.

This episode sheds light on the particular construction of *Romeo and Juliet* in an Asian country. The reception of the English author *par excellence* is inevitably associated with the political situation that Asian countries have with Britain. The link between Shakespeare and politics in 1940 is highlighted by the government censor, who claims that the play should be removed from its European influences.

All the adaptations analysed in this paper “confirm the play’s status as a mobile representational resource” (Burnett 2013, 226). This paper spotlights the Asian fascination with *Romeo and Juliet*, which has become the target of endless parodies and rewritings. The choice of play is not random, as it seems to be the Shakespearean text most prone to changes. The transformation of the tragic *dénouement* into a happy ending in all the *Romeo and Juliet* adaptations explored and, even in others that have been mentioned in passing, has a *raison d’être* associated with politics. Given that some of the works are post-colonial or hybrid, whereas others are set in countries that also aim to resist and challenge Western authority, the modification of the ending has political implications. Targeted at popular audiences, they aim to popularise serious drama. The presence of the happy ending and the parody of the Shakespearean *oeuvre* force us to think, or rather, rethink, our views on “pertinent questions of fidelity, authorship, authority and evidence” (Burnett 2013, 14). These cinematic products stimulate awareness of Shakespeare’s multiple incarnations, contribute to the afterlife of *Romeo and Juliet* and constantly highlight the necessity for dialogue with the Eastern tradition, characterised by parody and experimentation. The different Asian rewritings of *Romeo and Juliet* certainly explore and develop Shakespearean horizons and, most importantly, they help us to see *Romeo and Juliet* as a political and subversive text. Shakespeare can no longer be a fixed object of worship, but has to be mimicked, absorbed, popularised and needs to find a niche beyond straightforward productions.

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