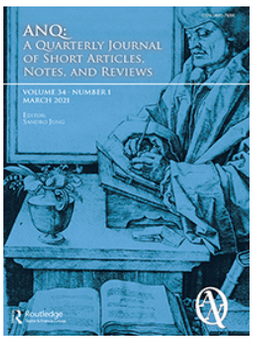

ANQ: A Quarterly Journal of Short Articles, Notes and Reviews

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/vanq20

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To cite this article: William Baker & Tianhu Hao (2021) Shakespeare in China: The Case of Zhu Shenghao, ANQ: A Quarterly Journal of Short Articles, Notes and Reviews, 34:1, 26-30, DOI: 10.1080/0895769X.2019.1613341

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/0895769X.2019.1613341

Published online: 05 May 2019.

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ANQ: A QUARTERLY JOURNAL OF SHORT ARTICLES, NOTES, AND REVIEWS
2021, VOL. 34, NO. 1, 26–30
https://doi.org/10.1080/0895769X.2019.1613341

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Shakespeare in China: The Case of Zhu Shenghao

William Baker and Tianhu Hao

Frequently performed and written about, Shakespeare's works are loved in contemporary China. The man behind the most commonly used and most warmly received translation has a fascinating story. Working tirelessly in the days during the destructive Sino-Japanese war (1937–1945), Zhu Shenghao (1912–1944) is today credited with reviving his country's interest in and knowledge of the Bard.

In a special issue of *Comparative Literature Studies* (2012) Tonglin Lu wrote on "Zhu Shenghao: Shakespeare Translator and a Shakespearean Tragic Hero in Wartime China." Lu movingly wrote that "at the age of twelve [she] fell in love with Shakespeare's plays because of [Zhu's] translations; they were my friends during the Cultural Revolution, a difficult time in my life" (531). Furthermore, according to Lu, "Zhu has made Shakespeare a part of Chinese culture through his lively translations, which are loved not only by highly educated scholars but also by ordinary amateurs of literature, including children" (531). Lu's statement is representative of several generations of Chinese readers' experience with Shakespeare, another example being Lingui Yang, a Shakespearean scholar at Donghua University, Shanghai (Yang, 63-64).

The canonization of Zhu's translation of Shakespeare is the subject of – in addition to several articles – a Chinese monograph by Duan Zili, *A Study on the Canon Formation of Zhu Shenghao's Translation of Shakespeare's Plays* (2015). Following "both essentialism and constructionism of literary canonization theories," Duan investigates quantitatively and qualitatively "such internal factors as aesthetic quality and such external factors as culture, poetics, and politics" (Preface, 4). He argues that the canonization of Zhu's Shakespeare may be attributed to external factors such as wide circulation and popular reception combined with its intrinsic quality. Duan regards Zhu's translation as a model of intercultural communication that spreads successfully the cultural other (Preface, 4, 9). In a recent article published in the *Journal of Tianjin Foreign Studies University* (2018) Zhu Anbo and Yang Yi propose, through analysis of Zhu Shenghao's reception and influence, that "poetics and sponsors are the major factors contributing to the canonization of Zhu's translation" (105). According to these studies, Zhu Shenghao's monopolized place in textbooks contributes considerably to the promotion and popularity of his version of Shakespeare.

Murray J. Levith adds in his *Shakespeare in China* (2004) that Zhu has not been immune from being used politically – portrayed as something of a culture hero. Sentimentalized into a "model comrade" story, Zhu's life and work has been "held up as an example of selfless devotion to the revolution for his Shakespeare translation!" (Levith 130) Further, "contemporary Chinese literature, too, is full of peasants and workers labouring for and often sacrificing their lives in the interests of the 'people'." Both Zhu "and his wife would have us believe the Shakespeare translator was just such a martyr" (Levith 130). Levith cites a contemporary commentator who observes that Zhu's unwavering dedication to his task was remarkable and calls him a "heroic" figure, with his translation "a tremendous achievement" (130).

Zhu Shenghao began translating Shakespeare's works just before World War II. By the time he died of tuberculosis in 1944, he had translated into Mandarin thirty-one and a half of the thirty-seven plays in the First Folio, including *1 and 2 Henry IV, Richard II* and *King John*. Levith calls *The Complete Works of Shakespeare* (*Shashibiya quanji*, Beijing, 1978), based on Zhu Shenghao and supplemented and edited by various scholars, the most significant event marking the revitalization of

CONTACT Tianhu Hao haotianhu@zju.edu.cn Zhejiang University School of International Studies, Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, Hangzhou, China
The authors wish to thank Professor Zhu Xiaolin, Minzu University of China, and a relative of Zhu Shenghao for inspiring this essay.
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Shakespeare after the Cultural Revolution. He adds that although somewhat expurgated, the edition represents the first translated complete works of any foreign author to be published in mainland China. Initially scheduled to appear in 1964 to commemorate the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare's birth, the book's publication was canceled as the Cultural Revolution loomed (Levith 12–13). The actual publication 14 years later also coincided with "the Chinese mainland's re-entry into the world of global Shakespeare activity" (Levith 56). Both before and after the expiration of copyright in 1995, Zhu's Shakespeare, first published posthumously in 1947, have frequently been reprinted and republished. Among others, in 1998, the Yilin Press published the revised *Complete Works of Shakespeare* based on Zhu's translations. In his introduction to the eight-volume collection, Li Funing (1917–2004) commented (to use Tonglin Lu's translation) that "faithful to the original, Mr. Zhu's translation does not only capture the spirit of the original and express its meaning accurately and fully but also recreates and preserves its natural flow. The elegance and vivacity of his stylistic language have especially been praised" (Lu 521). Although Zhu's translation is largely in prose rather than in blank verse, according to Levith, "Zhu's translations… are considered by many to be the very best due to their fluency and sensitivity to Shakespeare's nuances of diction and word play. His versions of the tragedies are especially celebrated" (12).

Zhu was born and grew up in Jiaxing, a large town on the Grand Canal linking Hangzhou and Beijing – the Chinese Communist Party is said to have been founded in 1921 on a boat on its South Lake. The former residence of Zhu in Jiaxing was rebuilt and opened in 2007, with Zhu's only son Zhu Shanggang as custodian. Orphaned when he was twelve, Zhu Shenghao completed his secondary and tertiary education both in American missionary schools. He started reading Shakespeare at Xiuzhou School in southeastern China. In 1933, at the age of 21, he graduated in Chinese from Hangchow Christian College (one of the recognized predecessors of today's Zhejiang University), with English as his minor. An avid bilingual reader and a talented poet and composer, Zhu outshone his peers both in Chinese and English. On his graduation, his professor Hu Shanyuan recommended Zhu for a position at the World Book Company in Shanghai. His professor recalled that Zhu was bored and silent in his position as an English editor: "During the several years of his work at the World Book Company, Zhu and I sat face to face. All these years I had never heard more than ten sentences from him. When others talked to him, he responded by nodding, shaking the head or smiling" (Wu and Zhu 42–43; Lu 528–29).[1]

His love letters to Song Qingru (1911–1997), a fellow student whom he married in 1942, reflect the monotony of his working existence. He wrote to her: "To live is so tiring. Imagine that every day after my work, I only want to read, but I don't have enough energy or interest. I feel so confused that I can hardly be at peace with myself – not even during a single day. Even though my life is quieter than dead water, I still feel tired without any plausible reason. What scares me most is that this life remains forever unchanged" (qtd. in Lu 523). Transformation occurred when he began to translate Shakespeare. In the spring of 1935, encouraged by Zhan Wenhu, a colleague at the World Book Company, Zhu began his absorption with Shakespeare, who almost replaced Song Qingru – she became the lonely one. His favorite plays were the comedies and not the tragedies; he started with *The Tempest*, completing its translation in 1936.

After finishing half of his initial translations, he wrote that his existence was no longer like stagnant water but had been transformed into poetry. He was now sleeping and was no longer bored although he didn't receive sufficient financial assistance for translating Shakespeare. Later on he even became jobless, and his poverty prevented him from basic necessities such as seeing a dentist. He lived under the same roof as his mother-in-law or his aunt. Yet he still enjoyed life. Song Qingru wrote concerning her husband, "when he worked, he was so concentrated that he forgot there were differences between him and Shakespeare or between him and the characters in the play" (Wu and Zhu 286; Lu 532). Shakespeare became more important than her and their one-year-old son. He told his newly wed, long-suffering wife: "I am very poor, but I have everything" (Wu and Zhu 192; Lu 523). He declared that he could do without food, but he could hardly dispense with the translating of Shakespeare. Completely absorbed in what he was doing, he refused to take breaks and ignored what

was going on around him, such as the war and the deprivations under Japanese occupation. A month before his death at age thirty-three, he said to his wife: "If I had known that I would never recover from this sickness, I would have exhausted every possibility in order to finish all translations" (Wu and Zhu 203; Lu 524).

In his "Translator's Preface," Zhu confessed that he "led a vagabond's life for many years, driven from place to place and struggling to survive, with little time to work on the translation project. As the world situation became more desperate in the spring of 1942, I decided to lock myself up at home and concentrate solely on my project" (Wu and Zhu 264; Levith 11). He added: "Despite poverty and illness, I continued to work at my desk, and expect to accomplish the task within 10 years [an earlier plan was within two years]. Ten years to complete the difficult art of translating Shakespeare cannot be regarded as overly long, but I have expended all my energy and strength on it" (Wu and Zhu 264; Levith 11).[2] Sadly he never completed his task.

Zhu's efforts tell us much about the period in which he lived. The translation effort brought joy to his life in spite of impoverishment and constant movement due to the Sino-Japanese war. In his "Translator's Preface," Zhu wrote that, with the Japanese occupation of Shanghai beginning on 13 August 1937, "all my editions, critical works, and textual studies collected over a long period, more than one hundred volumes, were destroyed. What I was able to carry away in haste were the one-volume Oxford Shakespeare and a few of my draft translations" (Wu and Zhu 264; Levith 11).[3] Actually the Japanese conflict consumed Zhu's translation manuscripts twice and he had to repeat his work again and again.

Zhu's engagement with Shakespeare gave him solace during a difficult traumatic time in his country's history. The Japanese invasion increased his determination to translate Shakespeare, and the task was closely interrelated with his sense of "patriotic feeling." Between 1939 and 1941, he was employed to write brief articles for the *Chinese and American Daily* newspaper, attacking the Japanese invaders and the German Nazis. Following his marriage in 1942, he could have left for Hong Kong or elsewhere to find a position not under Japanese occupation, yet he considered his patriotic obligation, his "patriotism in action" (Lu 526–30), to work translating Shakespeare. He was reacting to a perceived need to Westernize Chinese culture. His translations were also an act of national rivalry with his Japanese counterpart as well as patriotic defiance to the Japanese invaders. Early in 1935, his brother told him that a Japanese author had written that "China is a country without culture, it doesn't even have Shakespeare translations" (Wu and Zhu 108; Lu 526). The complete Shakespeare in Japanese had long been available (by Tsubouchi Shōyō [1859–1935], published in 1928, previously in separate volumes since 1884 and first collected in 1909), but the Chinese version was wanting. Many Chinese literati were ashamed of this fact, including Zhu. He intended to equal or even excel the Japanese in the domain of translating the Bard.

In preparation for his grand translation project, Zhu purchased from bookstores in Shanghai various works by and about Shakespeare. Nevertheless, he believed that he didn't "have any scholarly knowledge. I could have learned it; but my weakness is that I look down on scholarly knowledge" (Lu 524). He regarded "the expression 'literary studies' [as] laughable. All the literary theories are also meaningless. I believe that only two kinds of people can relate to literature: authors and admirers; there is no room left for so-called literary studies" (Lu 525). In his "Translator's Preface," he wrote of Shakespeare "transcending temporal and spatial limits," surpassing what he regarded as the other great authors of world literature: Homer, Dante, and Goethe (Wu and Zhu 263; Lu 525). His translation principles were based on the attempt to conserve "the flavor and features of the style of the original." Zhu would "try to communicate the ideas … clearly and faithfully in an elegant and comprehensible Chinese" considering it "indecent to translate word for word without expressing the ingenuity and vigor of the original" (Wu and Zhu 264; Levith 11–12). Furthermore, he strove "to reveal the English poet's ideas clearly, risking a completely different rearrangement of the words of the original sentence" and looking at the passages he had translated

from the perspectives of both a reader and "an actor for examining if the tone of the version was harmonical [sic] and the rhythm was agreeable" (Wu and Zhu 264; Levith 12).

Although most characters created by Shakespeare belonged to an aristocracy of the past, Zhu observed that what Shakespeare tried to depict was "the human nature shared by all, be they ancient or modern, Chinese or foreign, aristocrat or commoner, rich or poor." After centuries, not only is Shakespeare read studiously by admirers of literature, but his plays also continue to attract large audiences on stage and on screen throughout the world. Because Shakespeare's works are "eternal and universal, they still touch people's hearts deeply" (Wu and Zhu 263; Lu 525). To spread and convey the sense of Shakespeare's "universality," Zhu translated him, and his translations have reached innumerable Chinese readers and audiences via a variety of media.

Of course, Zhu's translation was not the only attempt to render Shakespeare into Chinese during the twentieth century. For instance, initiated by Dr. Hu Shih (1891–1962), the Harvard-educated Liang Shiqui's (1903–1987) prose translation started in 1930 and began to be published in 1936. Liang was politically on the wrong side: he fled to Taiwan with the defeated Nationalist forces in 1949 and his edition, replete with annotations, was published in Taiwan in 1967. His translations and commentary were criticized as paraphrases, and they fell afoul of Mao Zedong, a powerful poet and literary critic, for their opposition to the class struggle. Whatever the politics underlying Zhu's canonization, his translation remains very popular in contemporary China. Indeed, Joseph Graves, the English-born and educated artistic director of the School of Foreign Languages in Peking University, wrote and acted *Revel's World of Shakespeare* in which he praised Zhu's achievements. This play has frequently been staged since its world premiere in Beijing in the summer of 2005. Recent performances of this play took place in the Longfu Theatre, Beijing on December 21–22, 2018 (https://www.chinaticket.com/beijing/view/37987.html). Its popularity is further demonstrated by ticket sales for performances in May and June 2019 in Hangzhou, Nanjing, and Shanghai (https://www.moretickets.com/topic/shakespeare/). So the legend of Zhu Shenghao continues.

Notes

1. We have revised Lu's English translation. For the facts of Zhu Shenghao's life in this essay, see mainly Wu and Zhu's *Biography* and Lu's article.
2. We have revised Levith's English translation.
3. We have revised Levith's English translation.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

This work was supported by the The Fundamental Research Funds for the Central Universities, China.

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