

# EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



**Adele Lee, *The English Renaissance and the Far East: Cross-Cultural Encounters*  
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Despite the methodological trends of past decades that diversified Shakespeare studies in the West, and the corporate globalisation of Shakespeare as both brand and field of study, the discipline remains stubbornly Anglocentric at its core, populated with what we might term appropriate accents — appropriate areas of concern that are fundable, and usually shorn of radical politico-theoretical stances, and appropriate voices that not only dominate debate, but, just as importantly, set the agenda for what is to be debated. In *The English Renaissance and the Far East: Cross-Cultural Encounters*, Adele Lee takes up the challenge of re-evaluating the relationship between the Far East and Britain in both the early modern period and our own. Consequently, Lee situates China and Japan as Shakespearean sites in their own right, equal producers of ‘Shakespeare’ rather than the marginal, exotic or fetishized offshoot from the central (and therefore more appropriate or correctly accented) modes of performance, textual scholarship, criticism and study found in British and American cultural spheres.

Lee gives two particular examples that are strikingly representative. The first is Shakespearean productions and scholarship in China in the middle of the twentieth century after the Communist Party came to power and before Mao’s cultural revolution. Filtered through China’s relationship with Russia and, therefore, taking its cue from Russian dramaturgy and Soviet-Marxist literary theory, the performance, reception and study of Shakespeare was politically motivated long before the political turn took place in Shakespeare studies. Lee puts it best: ‘Chinese scholars in the 1950s were paying attention to class issues long before Western scholars [...] had developed the new historicist and cultural materialist approaches’ (p. 99). The second comes in 2012 when, as part of the Cultural Olympiad that went alongside the London Olympics, a First Folio from the British Library was flown to Tokyo for display. Lee explains that the text —

enclosed in a glass case for protection and introduced by British scholars despite the large number of Shakespeare scholars in Japan — was presented as a unique, almost sacred, opportunity. Yet Tokyo's Meisei University already possesses twelve First Folios. Moreover, the enclosing of the text in glass, while intended to protect the Folio, also struck the wrong chord with enthusiasts keen to play with the concept of Shakespeare and the Shakespearean text, rather than isolate the Folio as if it were a religious text to be revered. A religious text over which Britain — or the nexus of concerns that constitute British cultural concerns — have ownership, guardianship, as well as final say over how it should be presented and encountered. Despite the global political, economic and cultural presence of Japan and China in particular, misconceptions about how Shakespeare has been or should be received in the Far East still inflect a) the characterisation of relations between Britain and the Far East, and b) how Shakespeare is used to facilitate those relations.

The first half of Lee's book examines early modern English attempts to establish trade relations with China and Japan. In the case of China, *The English Renaissance and the Far East* begins with the double commitment of gaining material wealth from interacting with China, focusing on the magus John Dee, whose support for voyages in search of Cathay was based as much on a desire for the philosophical or magical knowledge also associated with China. The snake in the grass is that Dee was a prototypical British Imperialist, advocating the inherent right of British expansion in *Brytanici Imperi Limites* (c.1576). However, the kickback to this is that although exploitation of China is formed as a British right, it is precisely the perceived superiority that guarantees access to, and exploitation of, China that unsettles the very hierarchy that structures arguments for exploitation and expansion. In other words, China is set up as a necessary supplement to Britain, but this unwittingly reveals the British lack that requires supplementation — economically and culturally — from without. Indeed, as Lee argues, the binary racial hierarchies that would go on to underpin colonialism are always already under threat in the relationship with both China and Japan because of this foundational paradox, with both countries resisting the proto-colonial relationship articulated by Dee and which travelling merchants were in place to develop. As Lee informs us, the merchants themselves on arriving in Macau, found both Portuguese Jesuits already in place and eager to undermine their efforts, and a cultural and political environment not only alien to them, but which — sometimes knowingly in the case of performances and stage trickery — played on and unnerved preconceived assumptions about the effeminate East open to invasion by the rough-hewn adventuring men of mercantile Europe.

In the second half of the book the modern cultural and political relationship with China becomes the key area of study, with Lee arguing that, in a similar way to the early modern period, encounters 'are characterized by misunderstanding, frustration and distrust' (p. 93). Highlighted is the promotion of Shakespeare in China, which rather than being an avenue to facilitate two-way exchange has instead been 'inadvertently [...] deployed to spread Western values, beliefs and dogmas' (p. 94). Similarly, adaptations of Shakespeare in Chinese theatrical traditions have often been misunderstood. This can be wilful or mendacious but is more often due to British audiences lacking the knowledge of Chinese literary or theatrical practices they nevertheless assume others to have of 'global Shakespeare' and the attendant codes and norms associated with its production and consumption in the West.

Assumptions are also undone in the case of Japan, in which the encounter between the merchant on the one side and the unexpected complexities of a diverse and indifferent Japanese society on the other side 'challenged the Orientalist hypothesis of a unified European Self in opposition to a non-European other' (p. 70). Indeed, Lee details the various conflicts that demonstrate that it is the Spanish and Portuguese who are often positioned as the problematic other. Lee's careful examination of these encounters also challenges traditional disciplinary assumptions, such as the influence of William Adams in Japan, primarily on shōgun Tokugawa Ieyasu, an influence diminished by Lee's careful reading of events. The subsequent emphasis on the modern, Shakespeare-based relationship between Britain and Japan centres on the various artistic and theatrical forms in Japan, from manga to canonical Shingeki theatre and the ways in which they parody and pastiche Shakespeare. This seems most true in the case of the New Wave and beyond, where Lee identifies a long-standing Japanese artistic tendency towards exploring and revelling in the possibilities of the simulacrum, an effect of destabilisation that is traced back through Japanese encounters with Western Shakespeare, encounters of decentring and subversion that symptomatise Japanese and British cultural and political encounters.

There are a couple of observations to make. First, the rationale in *The English Renaissance and the Far East* that the relationship between Britain and China and Japan in the early modern period reflects our own — because we are 'discovering' the Far East anew — did raise an obvious methodological question. (For the sake of brevity I'll leave aside the issue of when, since then, the West has not been 'discovering' the Far East.) The early modern period marks the first flames of European and British colonialism for which the struggles described in the first half of the book are an initially frustrated trial run. On the one hand, Lee explains our current moment not as a replication of that period, but a bookend, where British global influence continues to

radically diminish post Empire, while Chinese influence especially has ever-greater cultural and geopolitical traction. On the other hand, these relationships are framed as a series of direct connections that link our concerns with early modern ones. Although the text is not always clear on when or whether the tropes it examines are being revisited in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries or are transhistorical concerns, Lee's book nevertheless demonstrates the benefit of breaking out of the early modern period in order to offer serious, considered literary perspectives on the concerns of our moment. That we are not in the habit of doing so is largely due to convention, the diminution of radical theoretical and political readings, and the ease with which, despite the artificiality of periodisation, accusations of anachronism can be made. *The English Renaissance and the Far East* shows us the value of doing this more.

Also, despite its evident concern, particularly in the case of China, with the global political context in which Shakespearean exchanges take place, the text does not always fully engage with the complexities of that relationship now, both in terms of Britain's increasing genuflection in the direction of an ever-dominant China and the problems that raises given the illiberal and abusive nature of the Chinese state. Too often it portrays China as a very different yet largely benevolent cultural and political sphere which the West has misunderstood or misrepresented. Clearly, liberal and democratic values are Western paradigms to which China offers a powerful alternative, but that sort of relativism is no different from explaining away the proto-colonial attitudes and mindsets of early modern travellers and writers as of their time. If we are to fully critique one, then we ought to fully critique the other as well.

Still, Lee takes us a step beyond the recent antiquarian trends in the discipline, shorn of the politics or theory that have been consigned to the dustbin of critical history in favour of more conservative forms of scholarship. That Lee does not always interrogate the cultural politics she identifies rigorously enough is also due perhaps to the bifurcated structure of the book and its relatively short length, but *The English Renaissance and the Far East* is a deft and very welcome step towards more politically-minded approaches to the areas — geographical and methodological — that can potentially be focused on in the discipline; it is a unique and hugely valuable study of the cultural relationship between Britain and the Far East, then and now.