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## **Compilting a Shakespare Dictionary for Chinese Students\***

Shakespeare is a great topic, about which I can only speak from the point of view of a Chinese teacher of English literature.

Shakespeare has been introduced to China for more than a hundred years. We have now two Chinese prose versions of Complete Shakespeare. A Chinese poetry version of Complete Shakespeare appeared at the end of the twentieth century. Our people usually read Shakespeare through these Chinese versions, and Shakespeare has become one of the favourite Western writers and dramatists among our readers and audience. But, so far as the study of Shakespeare is concerned, translation cannot take the place of the original. It is unthinkable to make a serious study of Shakespeare without the careful reading of his original plays and poems. But that is still a question sometimes puzzling us at present.

May I take my own experience to illustrate how an ordinary Chinese scholar has been groping his way in studying and teaching Shakespeare. My first play of Shakespeare was *Roneo and Juliet* which I read at middle school through the beautiful translation made by Cao Yu, the most famous playwright in modern China. The happy impression encouraged me to read the play in the original as soon as I studied English at university. I embarked on this pleasant task with a little pocket edition of the original play. At

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\* Two Editors: Prof. Liu Bingshan's essay is written in a personal style without any scholarly apparatus.

first, the peculiarities of Shakespeare's language appeared very interesting and I brushed aside all obstacles with youthful high spirits. Then I planned to read over "The Oxford Shakespeare" from cover to cover with the help of *The Concise Oxford Dictionary*. But I could only get over the first two or three plays before I put down the big volume with a strong feeling that the language gap between Shakespeare and me was unsurmountable in spite of my warm love of him.

Many years later, when I taught English literature at university, I tried by all means to get reference books about Shakespeare, and succeeded in buying from second-hand bookshops in Beijing and Shanghai, in early sixties, *Hamlet*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *As You Like It*, and *Henry IV*, edited separately by E. K. Chambers, K. Deighton, and A. W. Verity. The greatest acquisition in my search of books was an Arden *Hamlet* which was borrowed from an old professor of our department. Armed with these good editions, I could better understand Shakespeare and prepare my lecture about him with greater confidence. I also wanted to get some Shakespeare dictionary or grammar, but it was then nowhere to be obtained.

The Cultural Revolution played havoc with academic researches. Our Shakespearean studies revived after the end of the Cultural Revolution. But its calamitous effect is deep-going. For one thing, the second-hand bookshops where we could formerly pick a few good old editions of Shakespeare are no more. Meanwhile the rising of prices in the international book market has made it impossible for ordinary Chinese scholars to buy up-to-date publications about Shakespeare. Universities in Beijing and Shanghai may be better furnished with stocks of books about Shakespeare. But, as far as I know, it is verging on impossibility, even now, to find in our provincial universities and local colleges, any indispensable Shakespeare dictionary and grammar, and whole sets of authoritative editions of Shakespeare. Under such conditions, the study of Shakespeare's original remains the business of a very limited number of learned scholars who either studied Shakespeare in Britain and America long ago, or have in recent years the chances of making advanced studies abroad. Meanwhile, most of our students can only rely on Chinese translation, or mere stories from Shakespeare, to satisfy their ardent desire to study Shakespeare. For them, the original Shakespeare is still a closed book.

Shakespeare wrote in Early Modern English, which is now four centuries old. From the days of Shakespeare, the English language has changed greatly. "Time has placed an ever-increasing cloud before the mirror he held to life." Anyone who tries to read Shakespeare's original without any preparation in advance can only "see through a glass, darkly." A British Shakespeare dictionary compiler has pointed out bluntly: "The Shakespearean language is, to an extent greater than is sometimes supposed, a dead tongue

to us, and can be thoroughly mastered only by study with the aid of grammar, dictionary and comment.” (R. J. Cunliffe: *Preface to A New Shakespearean Dictionary*, 1910). So the study of his language becomes a pre-requisite for the study of his drama. “An accurate apprehension of a poet’s meaning is a condition precedent to a full appreciation of his poetry.” (*Ibid.*)

The same is true of the drama of Yuan dynasty (1271–1368), one of our treasures of classical Chinese literature. Yuan drama used a language which, on the one hand, inherited ancient literary Chinese and, on the other, absorbed a large amount of contemporary vernacular with numerous words and expressions which represent the particular customs, fashions, institutions and ways of life belonging exclusively to that period of Chinese history. These peculiar words and expressions constitute the language difficulties for present-day readers. So dictionaries of Yuan drama have been compiled by Chinese scholars to solve this problem.

It is said that even the students of Britain and America today find it hard to read Shakespeare owing to language difficulties. Then the difficulties will be twice or thrice as great to Chinese students, because for them Shakespeare’s language is not only a foreign language, but also an ancient one.

As a teacher of English literature, I have long been thinking of how to make Shakespeare easily accessible to our students. A chance obtaining of *A Pocket Shakespeare Lexicon* struck me with the idea of translating it into Chinese. But I gave up the thought because the little book is not enough for us. How about other dictionaries published abroad? Neither of them is completely suitable for our special needs. A Shakespeare dictionary for Chinese students can only be compiled by a Chinese scholar. Such a dictionary should explain all the difficult words and expressions in the Complete Works of Shakespeare so that every Chinese student with adequate English foundation can read and understand Shakespeare’s original from whatever cheap paperbacks he could get from the library, with the aid of this dictionary. After a few years’ consideration, I have drawn up the following plan:

## A SHAKESPEARE DICTIONARY FOR CHINESE STUDENTS

- I. Aim: Popularizing Shakespearean studies in China.
- II. Users: Students of English language and literature, young scholars of foreign literature and lovers of Shakespeare with adequate English foundation, in China.
- III. Languages used: English and Chinese.
- IV. Size: Smaller than Schmidt, larger than Onions.

V. Scope of Content: Covering 38 plays, 2 narrative poems and the Sonnets.

VI. Contents of an Item: Headword – English definition(s) with Chinese translation – Examples from Shakespeare's original with Chinese translation – Supplementary remarks if necessary.

VII. General Introduction.

VIII. Appendices.

IX. Main Sources: Drawn from the abundant fruits of researches outside and in China during the past centuries (rewritten and simplified so as to be easily understood by Chinese students).

X. Working Process: Vocabulary cards – Arranged in alphabetical order – Synthesized – Computerized – Complete MS. – Published in China.

XI. Working Method: Starting from scratch; working like a Marathoner, slowly, incessantly and determinedly; doing by learning, and learning by doing, combined.

This is a work of compilation on the basis of the researches made by forerunners of past centuries and by learned scholars of our own time. I shall enumerate all the authorities I have consulted in a list of acknowledgements in my Dictionary.

William Tyndal, the hero of Bible translation, once declared that he "will cause a boy that driveth the plough shall know more of the scripture." In compiling my dictionary, I work with a sincere hope that more and more young scholars, translators and lovers of Shakespeare will arise among our students in the soon approaching 21st century, thus raising the studies of Shakespeare to a higher level in China.

Above-mentioned are the motives, ideas and project of my "Shakespeare Dictionary for Chinese Students". Now this English-Chinese Shakespeare dictionary has been published in China as a handsome volume of 1,283 pages with general introduction, appendices and all (*A Shakespeare Dictionary for Chinese Students*, Henan People's Publishing House, 2002). I think it would be suitable for me to say a few words about some of the most prominent impressions concerning Shakespeare's language, which have been left in my mind during twelve years' compilation and publication of my dictionary.

Shakespeare's language is a world of wonder by itself. A compiler of Shakespeare dictionary is face to face with an ocean of words used by a cultural giant, totalling 21,000 to 28,000 in number according to recent estimations. The compiler's work of studying, and choosing among, various explanations of each word and making his decision about its meaning should be carried on all the year round. A sense of dual responsibility to the Bard on the one hand and to the young learners on the other lies heavy like a millstone on my back while I work at my desk every day. The task is unspeakably arduous. But fortunately I can rely on the fruits

of researches of those learned scholars of Britain, America, Germany and other Western countries, who have laboured for three centuries in their efforts to have every word “chewed and digested” left behind by the great poet in order to make it rightly understood and pleasurably appreciated by the world’s readers and audience.

Among the Shakespeare dictionaries published in late 19th and early 20th centuries the most authoritative are undoubtedly C. T. Onions’ *A Shakespearean Glossary* and Alexander Schmidt’s *Shakespeare Lexicon*. *A Shakespearean Glossary* was compiled by an editor of *The Oxford English Dictionary*. Its original aim “is to supply definitions and illustrations of words or senses of words now obsolete or surviving only in provincial or archaic use, together with explanations of others involving allusions not generally familiar, [...]” The definitions of this world-famous Glossary are precise, pithy and terse. But, regrettably, its criterion of inclusion of Shakespeare’s vocabulary is too strict for general readers. Schmidt’s *Shakespeare Lexicon* bears the sub-title “A Complete Dictionary of All the English Words, Phrases and Constructions in the works of the Poet.” He declares in the Preface: “The present work, as differing from the existing Shakespearean glossaries, the object of which has been to explain what has become obsolete and unintelligible in the writings of the poet, is to contain his whole vocabulary and subject the sense and use of every word of it to a careful examination.” As a user of the Lexicon, I should say that old Schmidt is a veritable gold mine of Shakespeare’s vocabulary upon which every scholar of Shakespeare may draw much information. But the first edition of the Lexicon was published in 1875, and its third edition with a supplement of 30 pages by Sarrazin was published in 1901. So it is impossible for both its editor and reviser to utilize the new results of the studies of Shakespeare’s language made during the 20th century. Although the Lexicon is still very useful, some of its definitions seem now indistinct, and once in a while you may find no explanation for some difficult word which should be explained.

E. V. Lucas’s essay put me in mind of the fact that W. J. Craig (1843–1906), the Irish editor of *The Oxford Shakespeare* and *The Arden Shakespeare*, had devoted his lifetime to compiling a new Shakespeare lexicon instead of old Schmidt, but left it unfinished. (“His own *magnus opus* he left unfinished; he had worked at it for years, until to his friends it had come to be something of a joke. But though still shapeless, it was a great feast, as the world, I hope, will one day know. If, however, this treasure does not reach the world, it will not be because its worth was insufficient, but because no one can be found to decipher the manuscript; for I may say incidentally that our old friend wrote the worst hand in London.” – “A Funeral”. I hope that W. J. Craig’s manuscript is safely preserved somewhere in Britain. – Quoter.)

The completion of *The New English Dictionary on Historical Principles* in 1928, and that of *The Oxford English Dictionary* in 1933, furnished scholars of the world with enormous linguistic material and enabled them to make new researches into Shakespeare's language. They could now explain those words and phrases of Shakespeare which had long remained unexplained, with the aid of the great Oxford Dictionary. But the fruits of their harvests have been scattered here and there in various editions of Shakespeare published during the 20th century. The time seems ripe for the scholars of the world to compile and publish a new Shakespeare dictionary to meet the demand of the readers and audience of the 21st century.

Shakespeare mastered a large vocabulary which he used with an unprecedented flexibility that may never be seen again. Virginia Woolf once mentioned "how many words Shakespeare used and how much grammar Shakespeare violated" (*The Patron and the Crocus*). So far as the violation of grammar is concerned, the first irregularity you will find at a glance of Shakespeare's text may be the free interchange of the parts of speech. Here is a classical description given by E. A. Abbott: "In the first place, almost any part of speech can be used as any other part of speech. An adverb can be used as a verb, 'They *askance* their eyes (Rape of Lucrece); as a noun, 'the *backward* and abysm of time' (Sonn.); or as an adjective, 'a *seldom* pleasure' (Sonnets). Any noun, adjective, or neuter verb can be used as an active verb. You can 'happy' your friend, 'malice' or 'foot' your enemy, or 'fall' an axe on his neck. An adjective can be used as an adverb; and you can speak and act 'easy', 'free', 'excellent': or as a noun, and you can talk of 'fair' instead of 'beauty', 'a pale' instead of 'pale-ness'. Even the pronouns are not exempt from these metamorphoses. A 'he' is used for a man, and a lady is described by a gentleman as 'the fairest *she* he has yet beheld'" (Introduction to *A Shakespearean Grammar*)

The Elizabethan was a period of transition in the history of English language, in which new-emerging things and ideas called for the invention of new terms of expression. This inspired writers and poets with great enthusiasm for coining new words. Shakespeare and his contemporaries enjoyed a linguistic licence which later writers and poets can never enjoy. Vigour of expression was preferred to rules of grammar, and there was no authoritative grammar or dictionary to restrict them. So, during the 25 years of his writing career, Shakespeare brought about a miracle in the history of English language and produced a large number of new coinages of his own. As a busy actor, playwright, poet and share-holder of a drama troupe, we can imagine, he had neither the time to compile a glossary for his plays and poems, nor the patience to define the exact meaning of every

word in his works. That is the task of later scholars. And from the 18th century onward, one generation after another of scholars, since Pope, Johnson and Malone, have investigated into Shakespeare's text so meticulously that they left no single word, nay, not even a punctuation written by him untouched, so that we may now understand Shakespeare's language tolerably well, with the exception of a small number of "cruxes" over which scholars should still cudgel their brains hereafter.

Shakespeare often used a word in such a way that, basing on its etymological root sense, he adopted it to various contexts and endowed it with various meanings, thus changing it into a polysemous word. Hence arose a peculiarity in Shakespeare's language, i.e. the interchangeability of the multifarious significations of a single term. Here is an example in *Othello* IV. ii. 201: "O, 'tis foul in her." The word "foul" may be defined as "dirty", "shameful", "wicked", "criminal", and the four definitions are all relevant to the context. Two better known examples are "love" and "will" in the Sonnets, either of which has four or five significations. There is, sometimes, no unbridgeable gulf between the different meanings of a word used by Shakespeare. Of crucial importance is, of course, a careful study of the context.

The copious polysemous word provided Shakespeare with plentiful occasions of playing with words, and Shakespeare was fond of wordplay. The first words of Hamlet, "A little more than kin, and less than kind" (I. ii. 65) constitute a play on *kin* (i.e. relation) and *kind* (i.e. member of the same family united in natural feeling), which implies the unnatural relationship between Claudius and Hamlet. Again, a line in *Love's Labour's Lost*; "Light, seeking light, doth light of light beguile," according to Harry Levin, plays on the four significations of the word "light", which are separately "intellect", "wisdom", "eyesight" and "daylight".

Punning is the kind of wordplay profusely used by Shakespeare. "Puns may be homophonic or semantic." (N. B. Blake, *Shakespeare's Language: An Introduction*) A homophonic pun consists of "two words that agree in sound, while differing in sense." In *Richard the Third* I. i. 1-2: "Now is the winter of our discontent / Made glorious summer by the sun of York," the word "sun" is punning on the word "son", i. e. the son of Richard, Duke of York. A semantic pun indicates a polysemous word 'which has at least two meanings, one of which is sometimes obscene. There is an example in *The Comedy of Errors* IV. i. III: "She is too big, I hope, for me to compass." The word "compass" is punning on both the meaning "achieve, obtain" and the meaning "embrace".

Malapropism is wordplay extending to the sphere of learned terms easily misunderstood and mispronounced by less educated but self-asserted people. Dogberry, the self-important constable of *Much Ado about Nothing*, in his

attempt to command respect, shouts “Dost thou not *suspect* my place? Dost thou not suspect my years?” (IV. ii. 71–72) thus mixing up the two opposite terms and causing a laughable effect on the stage.

It is easy for the compiler of a Shakespeare dictionary to handle Shakespeare’s wordplays or puns. He needs only to arrange the different meanings of quibbling words one by one in parallel, and let the reader to appreciate Shakespeare’s wit for himself. But it is much more difficult for a translator to deal with the Bard’s quibblings. He may once in a while be able to find two words with the same sound but different meanings. But in most cases, I am afraid, he could only drop the attempt because the language he uses in his rendering is quite different from the English language of Shakespeare.

Harry Levin writes: “In reading and studying Shakespeare, at best we merely approximate the actual condition of his art.” As the compiler of “A Shakespeare Dictionary for Chinese Students”, I have personally experienced the weight of this verdict. After swimming in the ocean of Shakespeare’s language for twelve years, I feel I have only gathered a few seaweeds from his “multitudinous seas”. But I wish that they might be useful to our students as if they were “Sesame, open!” before the gate of Shakespeare’s golden treasury.