The Greatest English Dramatist in the Largest Asian Country: A Complex Cross-Cultural Encounter

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Abstract

Along the Expansion of Western civilization, Shakespeare's works have influenced China, the largest Asian country, for more than a century; on the other hand, Chinese also appropriated Shakespeare's plays for certain purposes. During the initial contacts, Shakespeare's works were translated only indirectly into Chinese as tales, rendered in classical Chinese, and such narrative literature served as sources for a number of stage productions. The translation of Shakespeare's plays started after the New Culture Movement, which aggressively introduced ideas from the West and had facilitated the spread of Shakespeare's influence in China, though Ibsen was promoted more fervently than Shakespeare then. The post-1949 Communist China manifested a contradictory vision about Shakespeare. While Chinese Shakespeareans upheld Marx's and Engels's positive appraisal of Shakespeare, Mao Zedong's utmost class ideology negatively confined the interpretation of Shakespeare's works; furthermore, Russia's Stanislavsky system strictly dictated the stage performance then. It was in China's contemporary era that Shakespeare enjoyed a golden age, when Shakespeare industry flourished both in

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Chang Gung Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences 2:1 (2009)

study and extensive performance of various forms. Overall, while Shakespeare witnessed China's shifts of politics, literature and culture over the last century, the popularity of the greatest English dramatist in China signifies the penetration of Western influence in the largest Asian country.

Keywords: Shakespeare, Shakespeare Industry, Chinese Drama and Theatre, Modern China

"Globalization," to some degree, is a global expansion of English language and culture, though such expanding civilization itself has also somewhat absorbed different cultures of the areas it has reached. With this global expansion of the Western civilization, English has virtually become an international language. William Shakespeare (1564-1616), the greatest English dramatist who has a dominant position in the history of English language literature, as such has been known and admired worldwide. For instance, even the poor quality portrait of Shakespeare, which was made by Martin Droeshout (1601-1651) in 1623, 1 is now one of the most influential icons of Western culture, frequently appearing in many modern Asian countries.

Unquestionably, the abovementioned global trend has also affected China, the largest Asian country. For decades, Shakespeare's works have been translated into Chinese in different ways, his plays have been performed on China's stages and taught in China's schools, and a large number of Chinese scholars have devoted considerable time and effort to the study of his works. Through discussion of the increasing popularity of Shakespeare in China, one could perceive not only the particular ways in which Shakespeare plays are appropriated by China for certain purposes, but also the global expansion of Western culture. Thus, instead of aiming to discuss China's Shakespearean studies (such as specific translations of plays), this article will analyze the various shifts in China's attitudes towards the greatest English dramatist through the special ways in which China contacted with the West in different historical periods.

1. Initial Contacts: Miraculous Tales from Overseas

The first Chinese documented mention of Shakespeare was in 1853 (Wang, 2005: 35), though it is more commonly known to date from 1856. In 1853, Shakespeare's name first appeared as one of the four English writers.² It is in 1856 when William Muirhead, a British missionary, published his Chinese translation of an English history

It is not likely that Martin Droeshout ever personally saw William Shakespeare. Moreover, the portrait is an inadequate piece of work, with head out of proportion to shoulders and eyes out of alignment. For specifics, see Palmer (2000): 71.

These four writers are William Shakespeare, John Milton, Edmund Spenser and John Dryden. For more information, see Wang Jiankai (2005): 35.

book that Shakespeare was briefly introduced to the Chinese reader (Qiu, 1992: 387). Nevertheless, the subject matter of Shakespeare's dramatic masterpieces was not imported into China until almost fifty years later. Moreover, initial Shakespearean translations were not based on Shakespeare's own/original plays; but deriving from Charles and Mary Lamb's *Tales from Shakespeare*, and made into classical-Chinese, the official written language in China then. To most Chinese readers at the beginning of the twentieth century, Shakespeare's masterpieces were narrative rather than dramatic literature.

The first of those translation efforts found to date is by an anonymous translator. S/he translated ten pieces from Lamb's Tales from Shakespeare, and her/his translations were published in 1903 (Zhou, 1992: 390). In the following year, the complete "Tales" was published. The translators in this case were Lin Shu 林紓 (1852-1924). a forerunner to translate Western Literatures into Chinese, and Wei Yi 魏易 (?-?) (Yang, 1982: 905). Amusingly, such narrative literature became primary source for those of the early Chinese productions of Shakespeare's plays. For instance, the New People's Company 新民社 adapted Lin's The Flesh Bond (Rou quan 內券), namely The Merchant of Venice, and staged the play in 1913 (Cao, 1994: 71). 1913 to 1916 was considered to be the first thriving period for the adaptation and performance of Shakespeare's plays, based mainly on Lin's classical translation of the "Tales". Though some had shown concern about the barrier of language and culture between China and England (Wang, 2005: 36), the twenty plus Shakespeare plays performing on Chinese stage then showed their popularity—a token that Shakespeare was well received in his initial contact with China even only the adapted "plots" or "tales" of his plays were introduced to Chinese audience.

2. The May Fourth Period: Shakespeare VS Ibsen

Such purely performance-oriented approach to Shakespeare did not last for very long. Shakespeare's plays were translated into Chinese for the first time after the New Culture Movement 新文化運動 (1915-1919), also called May Fourth Movement 五四

運動, viewed as China's Enlightenment. Tian Han 田漢 (1898-1968), one of the founders of modern Chinese drama and theatre or spoken drama (huaju 話劇), published his translation of *Hamlet* in 1921 and that of *Romeo and Juliet* in 1924 (Cao. 1992: 44). Following Tian Han's effort, the literary approach to Shakespeare gained more currency. Some Chinese scholars began to view free adaptation of Shakespeare's plays as irresponsible, and serious study of Shakespeare took place (Fei/Sun, 2006: 123). A number of scholars translated and published several of Shakespeare's plays, such as The Taming of the Shrew, The Merchant of Venice, As You Like It, and The Merry Wives of Windsor (Zhang, 1996: 104). The New Culture Movement was a campaign driven by Western influences, and its leaders were Westernized Chinese intellectuals who sought to promote various Western ideas and thinking while fiercely attacking traditional Chinese culture. These intellectuals also desired to establish a new form of modern Chinese theatre, a kind of "Western style" theatre, radically different from indigenous Chinese theatre (xiqu 戲曲).4 It was natural that these trends promoted by the New Culture Movement facilitated the spread of Shakespeare's influence in China. However, the most influential Western dramatist in China at that time was Henrik Ibsen (1828-1906) rather than William Shakespeare.

There were historical reasons for this preference. From the middle of the nineteenth to the early twentieth century, China had been defeated by several developed Western countries as well as by Japan. To rescue China, the Chinese elite intellectuals continuously made great efforts to learn from the West in many different ways, including borrowing ideas from the West. The May Fourth was one of those movements of learning from the West, and it sets goals to strengthen China, such as Western-oriented individualism, freedom, democracy, science, and literature; literature, above all, was largely used by intellectuals to carry out their mission of rebuilding a new and modern China. At that time, drama and theatre were considered an effective vehicle for conveying and spreading new thoughts, and even a powerful weapon to

The May Fourth, under which Chinese modernity arose—broadly referring to the period from 1917 to 1927 as well—marks the turning point of Chinese intellectual, political, social, and cultural history.

For details of *xiqu*, see Sun Mei (1998): 1-12.

attack old morality. Consequently, Ibsen's so-called social problem plays (shehui wentiju 社會問題劇) like A Doll's House and An Enemy of the People were regarded as both representative of Western drama and perfect model for modern Chinese theatre in the making. For this reason, the leaders of the New Culture Movement could be said to be more concerned with drama and theatre as social and political tools than as arts per se. A typical example of this attitude is reflected in New Youth (Xin qingnian 新青年), a periodical edited by the leaders of the New Culture Movement and fascinated a large number of young intellectuals. New Youth published a special issue on Ibsen in June 1918, in which Hu Shi 胡適 (1891-1962), one of the leaders of the New Culture Movement, advocated the so-called Ibsenism (Yibusheng zhuyi 易卜生主義). Thus, it is not too difficult to understand why at that time Ibsen's plays exerted more obvious influence than those of Shakespeare.

Noticeably, Ibsen was more or less a contemporary to May Fourth intellectuals while Shakespeare, who lived in the sixteenth and seventeenth century, around the late Ming dynasty (1368-1644) in China, was a historical figure. No doubt, Ibsen's plays touch the crude social issue of the time and were positively promoted by the modernizers. The escape of Nora from the sheltered home in A Doll's House, for instance, called for Chinese women's emancipation, the pursuit of individual freedom, and set forth a series of heated discussion about Chinese Nora. Shakespeare's plays, though not as radically targeting on social problems of the time as Ibsen, also appealed to the early twentieth century audience with their modern spirits. As Faye Chunfang Fei and William Huizhu Sun remark, "The perception was that Shakespeare's plays conveyed a definitively modern spirit in comparison with the so-called feudalistic old Chinese operas" (122). For instance, the images of "new woman" advocated by the New Culture intellectuals were vividly perceived in Portia, the woman lawyer who apparently outwitted all the men in *The Merchant of Venice*, as well as in the outgoing young couple, especially the female character, in comedies like Twelfth Night and Much Ado About Nothing. Nevertheless, Shakespeare's plays then were most highly praised by their artistic value. In regards of the debate concerning the criteria for dominant translation of Western literature during the May Fourth period, though translating works that reflected pertinent social problems like Ibsen's were in upper wind, considered to be more urgent than "classical literature" like Shakespeare's (Wang, 2005: 38), a number of scholars were still inspired to translate the complete works of Shakespeare. Taking Zhu Shenghao 朱生豪(1912-1944) for instance, he made it his life goal to translate all Shakespeare's works into Chinese. He did it with a mission. In one of his letters to his wife, Zhu even anticipated himself to be a national hero after successfully translating the whole works of Shakespeare (Wang, 2005: 38). Thus, his effort to translate Shakespeare's complete works was tinted with nationalism.

From the late 1920s to the 1940s, China was a war-torn country. Shakespeare's plays were adapted to serve the needs of the country, such as highlighting the issue of anti-repression or fight for freedom (Wang, 2005: 40-41); moreover, the performance was carried out in urbane centers as a means of boosting "national morale," and proving that "China was still a part of the civilized world" (Li, 2003: 33). The chaotic social environment, however, more or less obstructed the development of education and culture in the country, including the research, performance and translation of Shakespeare's plays. For example, though Zhu Shenghao devoted all his energy and time to the translation of Shakespeare's complete works into Chinese, he was interfered by war, and suffered poverty and sickness as well. As a result, he could not fulfill this ambition, and he passed away after he translated thirty-one and half of Shakespeare's plays (Qiu, 1992: 405). Zhu, nonetheless, achieved himself as one of the most prominent translators of Shakespeare's works.

3. Post-1949 China: Contradictory Attitudes

After Communists taking power in 1949, there was a shifting or even contradictory view toward Shakespeare in China. In the 1950s, China at last entered a peaceful period that should theoretically have favoured Chinese Shakespeareans. However, Chinese Communist ideology confined the development of Shakespeare industry in the newborn communist country, and also obstructed Chinese Shakespeareans to study Shakespeare in depth.

From the 1950s on, Chinese Shakespeareans themselves were in a contradictory position. On the one hand, they had a protective talisman: Karl Marx (1818-1883) and Friedrich Engels (1820-1895), the founding fathers of Communism, were enthusiasts of Shakespeare's plays, explicitly appraising the dramatist in their own writings. In fact, as

early as 1930s, Mao Dun 茅盾, one of the well known modern Chinese writers, already made an effort to translate Russian commentary of Shakespeare to Chinese, mainly, the very positive view of Marx and Engels (Li, 2008: 134). When commenting on a play by Ferdinand Lassalle (1825-1864), Marx and Engels named Shakespeare as a successful example of dramatists respectively. In a letter to Lassalle, Marx suggested he "Shakespearize more" rather than "transforming of individuals into mere speaking tubes of the spirit of the time" (Marx, 1974: 798). By the same token, in a letter to Lassalle, Engels advised him to pay more attention to the significance of Shakespeare in the history of the development of the drama (Engels, 1974: 780). For their own security, in a political sensitive time, Chinese Shakespeareans frequently quoted Marx's and Engels's commentary on Shakespeare, and often underlined the historical fact that the two founders of Communism were clearly in favour of the great dramatist.

On the other hand, Chinese Shakespeareans were confronted by the doctrine of Mao Zedong 毛澤東(1893-1976). Shakespeare's dramatic literature was full of the humanistic spirit of the Renaissance, and was enlivened by reference to an extraordinary variety of human experiences. The universal humanity displayed in Shakespeare's dramatic literature has been discussed and explored by Shakespeareans throughout history. However, for a long time, the very ideas of universal humanity, as well as human value were taboo subjects in the People's Republic of China. In his "Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art (Zai yan'an wenyi zuotanhui shang de jianghua 在延安文藝座談會上的講話)," Mao Zedong asserted:

In a class-based society there is only human nature defined by class; there is no human nature capable of transcending social class. ... As for the so-called love of humanity—there has been no such all-comprehensive love since humanity was divided into classes.

在階級社會裡就是只有帶著階級性的人性,而沒有甚麼超階級的人性。…… 至於所謂「人類之愛」,自從人類分化成爲階級以後,就沒有過這種統一的 愛。(Mao, 1967: 827)

Mao's "Talk" was once the Bible for all Chinese writers, critics and scholars. Since he emphasized the role of social class (*jiejixing* 階級性), and absolutely denied the

existence of any human nature transcending social class, Chinese Shakespeareans were unable to acknowledge much of the vision which Shakespeare's works render as this was an offence to political conventions.⁵

In this historical and political climate, Chinese Shakespeareans attempted somewhat awkwardly to use "the theory of class struggle" to interpret Shakespeare. In their analyses of Shakespeare's plays, they conventionally mentioned the social and economic changes of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and frequently emphasized the victory of the new and progressive bourgeoisie over the old and backward feudal class. Nobody could escape from such an ironic context, including those who had been educated in the West, and had full understanding of Shakespeare. Taking Chen Jia 陳嘉(1907-1986) as an example, in his interpretations of Shakespeare's plays, the MA of Harvard and the PhD of Yale talked about something like "the feudal ruling class", "the feudal system" and "the feudal-bourgeois society", and he even expressed the view that Shakespeare held contempt for the common people, and spoke disparagingly of peasants' risings and riots (Chen, 1982: 172-173).

Regarding the performances of Shakespeare in China during this period, one can see the apparent influence of the Soviet Union. In the 1950s, following the Soviet Union was a trend. A number or Soviet theatre experts were even invited to teach Stanislavsky method in China. In theatrical circles, this influence was rather powerful: the Stanislavsky method imported from the Soviet Union was revered as Marxist-Leninist doctrines. Under the direction of Russian experts, Chinese artists enthusiastically staged Shakespeare's plays dictated by "the prevailing realistic style of modern Western drama;" as stated by Fei and Sun, "the in-depth reading and literary analysis of the play text was applied to all spoken drama, which the government proclaimed should be modeled after Ibsen's realistic drama and performed in Stanislavsky's representational style" (123). Under such guideline, for instance, the Central Academy of Theatre 中央戲劇學院 produced *Romeo and Juliet* in 1956, and the Shanghai Academy of Theatre 上海戲劇學院 produced *Much Ado About Nothing* in

Additionally, Mao Zedong was conservative in his artistic tastes and aesthetics. He liked traditional Chinese literature and arts, but he was not interested in Western literature and arts very much. For details, see Li Yinqiao (1989): 64.

1957 (Zhou, 1992: 408). Stanislavsky's directorial plan for *Othello* in Chinese translation, moreover, was required to read by Chinese directors and actors (Fei/Sun, 2006: 123). Russian direction certainly helped the Chinese to enhance their productions technically and politically, but on the other hand it also restricted the development of Chinese creativity. Russian opinions on the selection of plays and the interpretation of scripts, and their realistic style staging were extremely respected and strictly followed by Chinese theatrical circles. The Chinese Shakespearean repertoire was, as a result, extremely narrow. In addition to the two plays mentioned above, only *Hamlet* and *Twelfth Night* were performed nationwide in the 1950s and 1960s (Cao, 1994: 111). Like almost all Shakespeare productions in China at that time, these productions employed a realistic set in the Renaissance style arches and high pillars, for example, and artificial make-up such as wigs and false noses (Li, 2003: 42-44).

Equally relevant is the fact that, in the 1950s and 1960s, to further promote such realistic, literary approach to Shakespeare, a number of movies adapted from Shakespeare plays were imported into China from abroad, including films made in Soviet Union. Among those movies, Laurence Olivier's *Hamlet* in 1948 with lines dubbed in Chinese by well-established actor Sun Daolin 孫道臨 was most influential (Fei/Sun, 2006: 123). Considering that a movie usually had a larger audience than a theatrical production, it is highly likely that these imported movies would have played a vital role in the increase of Shakespeare's popularity in China.

Although the teaching, research and performing of Shakespeare's plays in the 1950s and the early 1960s were reined in finite scope, all of these activities were still ongoing. They were, however, violently criticized in the Cultural Revolution 文化大革命(1966-1976), during which not only Shakespeare's plays, but all masterpieces of world art and literature were completely banned. During the early years of this period, spoken drama entirely disappeared, and stages throughout China were dominated by only a handful of "model revolutionary plays" (geming yangbanxi 革命樣板戲)—modern plays of Beijing opera with Western style ballets. Comparable with the Dark Ages, the Cultural Revolution was indeed an era of ignorance, superstition, repression and social chaos, in which few advances in art and literature were made.

4. Contemporary Era: A Golden Age of Chinese Shakespeareans

When things are at their worst, they begin to mend. After the Cultural Revolution, more precisely, from the end of the 1970s, China gradually re-opened to the West; at the same time both spoken drama and xiqu enjoyed a long awaited prosperity. Meanwhile, Shakespeare was renascent in China. Theater artists, especially those exposed to the Western trends, were seeking new resource for Chinese drama, and they once again turned to Shakespeare (Fei/Sun, 2006: 124). As a symptom of the renaissance, The Complete Works of Shakespeare (Shashibiya quanji 莎士比亞全集) in the Chinese-language was published in 1978. This eleven-volume book included contributions from many Chinese Shakespeareans. The translation of Shakespeare's plays, for example, was a result of co-operation amongst a group of scholars who revised Zhu Shenghao's work and then translated what Zhu had left undone. In 1979, the Old Vic theatre company from Shakespeare's homeland visited China, and performed Hamlet in Beijing and Shanghai. In December 1984, the Shakespeare Society of China 中國莎士比亞研究會 was established. Before long, China's first Shakespeare Festival 首屆中國莎士比亞戲劇節 was held in April 1986. Simultaneously, twenty-nine Shakespeare productions were presented in Beijing and Shanghai, which drew an audience of almost 90,000 in total (Zhou, 1992: 411-412).

Diversity was a noticeable feature of Shakespeare productions in the Chinese festival. Comedies (Love's Labour's Lost), tragi-comedies (All's Well That Ends Well), and tragedies (King Lear, and Antony and Cleopatra) were staged. In the past, never have so many different styles of Shakespeare's plays been performed together in China. Furthermore, Shakespeare's plays were mounted not only as spoken drama but also in various forms of xiqu from different areas and historical periods. For example, Macbeth was adapted and performed in the style of kunqu 崑曲, and A Winter's Tale in that of yueju opera 越劇 (Zhou, 1992: 411-412). Kunqu is a xiqu form with a history of around 500 years, while yueju opera is a young sub-genre of xiqu emerging at the beginning

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On 18 May 2001, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization for the first time awarded the title of "Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity" to nineteen outstanding cultural spaces or forms of expression from the different regions of the world. *Kunqu* was one of the nineteen granted the title.

of the twentieth century.

The attempts and efforts to stage Shakespeare's plays in various *xiqu* forms were applauded by Shakespeareans inside and outside of China, for whom the universality of Shakespeare's plays was certified once again. Indeed, it is rather clever to present Shakespeare's plays in a *xiqu* form. The similarities between Elizabethan theatre and traditional Chinese *xiqu*, such as the dramatic devices of dealing with time and space, provided Chinese with convenience for them to interpret and perform the Elizabethan dramatist's plays. Moreover, Chinese incorporation of the aesthetics and techniques of *xiqu* into Shakespeare productions enriched the theatrical practice of the English dramatist's plays, and mapped out a new space for the Shakespeare industry.

Nevertheless, some Chinese exaggerated the impact of Shakespeare on *xiqu*, and even regarded the English dramatist as the savior of the indigenous Chinese theatre. For instance, Xiao Yang Zhang claimed:

Shakespeare has replaced traditional Chinese drama to become the most important and authoritative dramatic form in Chinese cultural circles today... There are indications that some actors of traditional drama try to tailor their performances to the taste of contemporary Chinese with new methods that are apparently influenced by Shakespeare's dramatic ideas. (Zhang, 1996: 129)

This seems to reflect the psychological state of some Chinese in the post-Mao era–everything from the West is advanced, and everything Chinese is backward. Actually, the roots of the psychological state can be traced back to the nineteenth century when China was constantly defeated by developed Western countries and Japan. As discussed before, the Chinese elite intellectuals once made great efforts to learn from the West in different ways, and May Fourth intellectuals cruelly attack traditional Chinese culture, including *xiqu*, on the grounds that traditional Chinese culture is hampering China's modernization.

Speaking of theatre or performing arts (in a broad sense) in the 1980s, a variety of pop entertainments imported from the West indeed kept drawing a large audience away from *xiqu* everyday. Some Chinese theatre people did hope to increase *xiqu* audiences through adapting and performing Shakespeare's plays. Ironically, the reality is that the

Shakespeare productions of *xiqu* were only favorites in those Shakespeare festivals that were financially supported by the government. Compared to traditional *xiqu* repertoire, Shakespeare productions of *xiqu* are short-lived, and they could never hold a central place in the day-to-day box-office receipts of *xiqu* performances. In one word, it is not realistic to promote the influence of *xiqu* by performing Shakespeare's plays.

5. Conclusion

Apparently, it is impossible in the context of an article to comprehensively analyze all aspects of the Shakespeare industry in China. As indicated at the beginning of this paper, we have chosen to focus on Chinese responses in different historical periods to Shakespeare, the most influential Western dramatist.

In the twentieth century, Modern Chinese drama, theatre and literature were closely associated with politics for a long time. Within such a historical framework, studies and productions of Shakespeare were naturally affected, and sometimes were even rather sensitive because of Shakespeare's Western identity. Having experienced a series of dramatic changes, nevertheless, Shakespeare eventually enjoyed a golden age in China.

The variation in Chinese' attitudes towards Shakespeare demonstrates the tortuousness of China's politics, literature, and theatre over the last century; on the other hand, the extent of Shakespeare's popularity in China reflects the penetrating influences of the West on the largest country outside of Western culture.

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英語最偉大的劇作家之於亞洲最廣大的國家 —— 跨文化的複雜遭遇

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摘 要

隨著西方文明的擴展,莎士比亞的著作已影響中國百年有餘;而中國也為了某些目的,以不同的形式「化用」了莎士比亞的戲劇。最初,莎翁的名著不是以戲劇文學,而是以敘事文學的形式被譯介到中國;有趣的是,中國最早是依據這類敘事文學而非莎翁的原劇本排演莎劇的。莎翁原劇的翻譯始於新文化運動之後,大膽引進了西方思潮,也擴大了莎士比亞的影響,儘管當時在中國最有影響力的西方劇作家不是莎士比亞而是易卜生。一九四九年以後,莎士比亞在中國開始處於一種矛盾尷尬的境地。一方面,中國的莎學研究者們時常援引馬克斯和恩格斯對於莎士比亞的褒揚,另一方面,毛澤東的極端的階級鬥爭理論卻禁錮著莎劇的詮釋。此外,蘇俄的斯坦尼斯拉夫斯基體系也限制了莎劇的演出。「文革」結束以後,一九八零年代,中國出現了「莎士比亞熱」,莎學研究和莎劇演出蓬勃發展。總之,莎士比亞在中國一個多世紀的接受、傳播和「歸化」,既見證了中國現代政治、文學和文化的變遷,也顯示了西方文化對於中國這一亞洲最大國家的強勢影響。

關鍵詞:莎士比亞、莎士比亞產業、中國戲劇、現代中國

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