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WOMEN AND VISUAL REPRESENTATIONS OF SPACE IN TWO CHINESE FILM ADAPTATIONS OF *HAMLET*

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***Abstract:** This paper studies two Chinese film adaptations of Shakespeare's Hamlet, Xiaogang Feng's The Banquet (2006) and Sherwood Hu's Prince of the Himalayas (2006), by focusing on their visual representations of spaces allotted to women. Its thesis is that even though on the original Shakespearean stage details of various spaces might not be as vividly represented as in modern film productions, spaces are still crucial dramatic elements imbued with powerful significations. By analyzing the two Chinese film adaptations alongside the original *Hamlet* text, the paper attempts to reinterpret their different representations of spaces in relation to their different historical-cultural gender notions.*

***Keywords:** film adaptation, *Hamlet*, Shakespeare, space, women.*

This paper studies visual representations of spaces allotted to female characters in two Chinese film adaptations of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Xiaogang Feng's *Ye Yan* (2006) and Sherwood Hu's *Prince of the Himalayas* (2006). The former was released in Asia with an English name,

The Banquet, yet marketed with an alternative title, *The Legend of the Black Scorpion*, in the West. It is generally accepted as the first Chinese *Hamlet* film adaptation (and will hereafter be referred to as *The Banquet*). The latter was released a few months later than *The Banquet* and is hence generally known as the second Chinese *Hamlet* film adaptation. The paper focuses on the gender and space dynamism represented in these two films, which, I argue, makes feminist reinterpretation of the films not only plausible but also interesting.

It is generally known that the stage in Shakespeare's time was rather bare and simple. There might be some props and settings, but these were limited when compared with what modern theatres might have. In the semi-open amphitheatres, the plays were performed in daylight; in the indoor theatres, candles supplemented light from the windows (Ichikawa 2013:1). To create the illusion of particular spaces, much depended on the imagination of the audience. "A verbal reference to the scene's place-setting," as Mariko Ichikawa writes, "could establish the scene's locality" (2013:154). A representation of place and time in the popular theatre in Shakespeare's time, as D. J. Hopkins contends, was "at a remove from the empirical place and time" (2008:185). The Prologue of *Henry V* famously apologizes for the limitations of the theatre:

But pardon, gentles all,
The flat unraised spirits that have dar'd
On this unworthy scaffold to bring forth
So great an object: Can this cockpit hold
The vasty fields of France? Or may we cram
Within this wooden O the very casques
That did affright the air at Agincourt? (Prologue 8-14)

This apology for its own imperfection in representing space foregrounds the theatre's entanglement with space.

Space may be defined by philosophers and scientists in different terms or using different formulae, but it always remains essential and comprehensible to most people because all subjects, as Henri Lefebvre writes, “are situated in a space in which they must either recognize themselves or lose themselves” (1991:35). This interesting description of the relationship between space and subjects can be appropriated to examine the significance of space in the theatre. Once inside the theatre, the audience directs their gaze towards a platform on which spaces are fictionally constructed. Hence, within the space of the theatre, the audience may temporarily lose their awareness of the space they occupy because they recognize that they are in a special space that requires their participation (in terms of attention) in the imaginary spaces put forth on the platform. In other words, for the audience, the space within the theatre, which requires them to lose themselves to the space on the platform, already constructs a conceptualization of space not just as physical or geometrical, but also as imaginary, metaphysical and metatheatrical. With this sense of space, the audience can hardly overlook the significance of the imaginary spaces on display, despite the bareness and limitations of the platform.

“Theatre is a spatial art,” as Steven Mullaney claims, “and the social is one of its deeper or additional dimensions” (2013:34). Space, in fact, was central to many of the social and political issues in Renaissance England, and these were dramatized on the stage. The enclosure debate is a typical example. The “reappraisal of London’s spatial organization,” as Andrew Hiscock suggests, due to “the growth of proto-capitalist economic practices,” also foregrounded spatiality with a socio-political dimension (2004:7). In addition, the zest for exploring new territories across the seas represented a shared desire in England for spatial expansion.

Theatre was sensitive to spatial issues because the need to have a physical space for a stage and enough room to accommodate the audience was the basic requirement for operating a theatre business. Moreover, a variety of spaces for the audience within the theatre that are differently

priced, such as the pit below the stage, balcony seats, and stools on stage, signifies the correlation between space distribution and wealth and is hence suggestive of social status. Furthermore, laws and regulations related to theatre people in Renaissance England had already drawn attention to the significance of spatiality and its social dimension. A 1572 Act for the Punishment of Vagabonds set forth by the Parliament, which includes in the category of vagabonds players not belonging to any nobility, categorizes its targets as “having not Land or Maister” (quoted in Chambers 1923:270). This stress on land, reinforced by the social reality of the privileges enjoyed by landed nobility and gentry in Renaissance England, suggests a commonplace understanding of the significance of land and hence space. The prohibition issued by the city mayor in 1594 against adult players playing inside the city, authorizing them “to play exclusively in the suburbs” (Gurr 2004:26-27), was an important space issue for the theatre. “The inherent spatial character of theatre as an art form,” as Russel West puts it, “mediate[s] between the larger space of social reality in its most concrete space, and the plays with their thematic treatment of issues of spatiality” (2002:3). Looked at from this perspective, with the saturation of space-consciousness in both a physical and a social sense in the theatre, dramatic representations of space cannot be overlooked.

When we speak of space, the temporal dimension inevitably intrudes because space and time are always linked in our basic understanding of the phenomenal world. The theatre is a space, as generally understood, that can warp time to create dramatic illusions. However, this paper will focus mainly on the spatial dimension to explore the significance of the spaces represented, such as the platform with which *Hamlet* begins, and the closet spaces for women. The temporal dimension will be my secondary consideration. From an analysis of the representations of spaces on the stage, the paper will explore analogous representations of spaces in the two Chinese film adaptations.

Not unlike three-dimensional stages, films also need to construct

spaces for their characters and action. Modern films have an uncanny ability to represent spaces because during filming they are not bound like stage plays to the limited space of the theatre. They may go beyond the bounds of the studio with its sophisticatedly built sets to outdoor spaces. Moreover, multiple cameras placed in a variety of locations are capable of rendering encompassing bird's eye views as well as close-ups of spaces from different angles. In addition, post-filming editing, with cinematographic techniques such as montage and juxtaposition, can also create special effects with special meanings. Beyond a shadow of doubt, the ability of the two-dimensional screen to reproduce three-dimensional spaces with a vividness that exceeds what real life visual-spatial experiences can achieve renders spaces in films significant. In other words, filmic representation of spaces constitutes a cinematographic semiotics that can yield interesting meanings.

Let us begin by going back to the first space in *Hamlet* - a platform of the castle in Denmark. Barnardo and Francisco, both sentinels, enter. "Who's there?", uttered by Barnardo, is the first line of the play, after which Francisco responds, "Nay, answer me. Stand and unfold yourself." Then Barnardo says, "Long live the King!" (1.1.1-3) These first three lines manifest the masculine atmosphere of the play. The two sentinels are carrying out duties under the king to protect his territory. Not long after this, with the entry of the ghost in the form of old Hamlet, his exit, and Horatio's retelling of the story of how this late king of Denmark defeated and killed King Fortinbras of Norway and by their sealed compact seized Norway's lands, we are given an overview of the history of Denmark in this very first scene that takes place on the platform.

"Why did Shakespeare choose the platform?" is a question worth our contemplation. The platform is supposedly an elevated space that allows an all-encompassing view of the areas below. The stage in the theatre is conveniently a platform that requires no props to simulate the platform for sentinels. Hence, the play begins with a highly convenient space representation that requires no apology. The spatial vantage point of the

platform for keeping watch over what is happening around the castle is made to converge in a convincing manner with a chronological vantage point. As the sentinels on the platform converse, they provide us with an overview of what has recently happened within and without Denmark. The platform with its vantage point is not just the information hub in the castle, it is also a control hub for the country. The sentinels are on duty because they need to forestall invaders. When Marcellus asks, “Why this same strict and most observant watch / So nightly toils the subject of the land,” Horatio tells him that he thinks it is because Fortinbras of Norway is stirring to seize back the land old Hamlet had taken from old Fortinbras (1.1.74-75). It is noteworthy that the platform for this opening scene is a space for men, who discuss men’s activities of battle and invasion. Even the ghost that invades the platform is in the form of the late king. The platform is a space symbolizing the male dominance of the country. Thus seen, this opening scene featuring the space of the platform already foreshadows the marginalization of women in the play.

Interestingly, neither *The Banquet* nor *Prince of the Himalayas* begins with the platform scene as in the original *Hamlet*. *The Banquet* begins with a space that seems to manifest male dominance before it takes a twist and brings a female figure centre stage. With a male voice-over narrating background information in story-telling style, *The Banquet* begins by showing old drawings on yellowed paper of men in ancient Chinese costumes. This instils an ancient Chinese atmosphere into the story. The first live object in the film is a man in armour with spear raised galloping on horseback against a darkening sky streaked with purple and orange. The camera follows the man to a large group of soldiers holding spears, banners and torches. Then we are given a close shot of some soldiers. They are clad in fur and are wearing black masks over the upper half of their faces. These reveal their moustaches and beards. After that, the camera glides upwards to take in a bird’s eye view of battalions of soldiers in the background. They spread all over the dark mountains with torches, while fires burn here and

there. Rising grey smoke blurs the faraway mountains and the sky in the background. This shot featuring thousands and thousands of men on horseback all over the mountains is a portrayal of the vastness of the country and of men's activities.

The voice-over tells us that the time backdrop is around AD 907. This was a time known as the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms and was plagued by rebellions, treachery, power conflicts and turmoil. The voice-over says that in imperial families, fathers, sons and brothers kill each other. It is important to note that no woman is mentioned in this background information about the era. The visual representation of the vast spaces of the land with its mountains covered with soldiers, and the close-ups of soldiers with moustaches and beards, demonstrate the male dominance in this world. This male dominance is reinforced by the male voice-over commanding an authoritative tone. Thus viewed, this opening scene with its representation of male warriors all over the space of the mountains creates an atmosphere of male dominance rather similar to the scene of sentinels on the platform in the original *Hamlet*.

In spite of this similarity, *The Banquet* sophisticatedly introduces feminine influence in the next scene and diverges from the original Shakespearean plot. The camera shifts to a green bamboo forest that contrasts with the dark mountains of the previous scene. In the midst of the bamboo stands a weird brownish bamboo building resembling an amphitheatre. Several human figures in beige robes and white masks are dancing to the lyrics of a song. The voice-over tells us the story of Prince Wu Luan (counterpart of Hamlet). He falls in love with a maiden, Wan Er, but his king-father marries her. Desperate, the prince runs away to Wu Yat, the south of China, to seek solace in dance and music. Hence, even though we have not seen any female characters at all, we already know from the voice-over that Wan Er is the very reason why the prince is at this institute of the arts. Then we also learn that this woman sends her messengers to inform the prince of his king-father's death and his uncle's usurpation.

When we see soldiers on horseback galloping through the wilderness to deliver the message, even though we do not see the queen, we understand her influence on the political scene.

Gertrude, as generally understood, is usually subservient to Claudius. The only time she disobeys Claudius is when she drinks the wine during the duel against his wish, which causes her death. Wan Er, by contrast, is shown from the beginning, even before she appears on the screen, as a woman capable of dispatching messengers in secret behind the new king's back. *The Banquet* has endowed this counterpart of Gertrude not just with an individualized consciousness but also with feminist awareness. On the death of her first husband, she marries her brother-in-law who is obsessed with her, but eventually she seeks to poison her second husband so that she can be free from male dominance. The whole plot, which gives great prominence to queen Wan Er, can be considered extremely feminist.

Prince of the Himalayas begins with a scene that seems to be the prelude to the main plot. The scene has no counterpart in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. It begins in an open space in the wilderness covered in snow. Kulo-ngam (counterpart of Claudius) walks to a lake with a small dog covered in a blanket in his arms. When he reaches the shore of the lake, he says, "Spirit of Heaven, he is dead. I beg the shelter of your forgiveness." He releases the dog by the shore of the lake, after which he takes off his gloves, drops them onto the ground, and washes his hands in the water. From about twenty meters behind him there suddenly appears an old woman. The old woman says in a loud, calm voice as if she is narrating a story, "The king is dead. With a new king, a river of blood will flow." Kulo-ngam sees the reflection of the old woman in the waters of the lake. He turns around and the camera shifts to the old woman. She has a wrinkled face and long white hair, and holds a staff in her hand. Then we are given a far shot of this whole space-water in the foreground, a snowy country in the middle distance, and a majestic snow-covered mountain reaching up to the sky in the far back. This landscape of natural beauty is imbued with a mystic atmosphere by the

presence of the old woman.

Even though this opening scene does not tell us what Kulo-ngam is doing, we eventually piece together the puzzle as the story progresses; he is releasing the poisonous lapdog with which he has murdered his king-brother. In the scene, the murder of the king by his younger brother seems to be no secret to the old woman, who assumes a role rather similar to that of the witches in *Macbeth*. Samuel Crowl correctly observes that she is “like a deity out of Greek tragedy,” who is determined to “guide the plot away from the Ghost’s call for revenge to a more ameliorable outcome” (2014:135). But he is incorrect in depicting her as “an aged crone” (2014:135) because although she is old, she is not ugly or thin. In fact, she has a full round face and a full-figured body held in an upright posture. Apart from her long white hair and her staff, she is very much like an ordinary old woman. By placing this feminine character in the space of the wilderness with the lofty Himalayan mountains at the back, the scene not only creates a mystical atmosphere for the ancient Tibetan kingdom of Jiabo but also associates woman with the mystic powers of nature.

This association constitutes an important theme in the film. Unlike the original Shakespearean play, which begins with the scene of sentinels on a platform, thus suggesting a male dominance of the whole territory, the first scene in *Prince of the Himalayas* already brings to the fore female influence. Whereas in *Hamlet* the two main female characters, Gertrude and Ophelia, are given only limited representational spaces and convey a strong impression of being subservient, *Prince of the Himalayas* endows the counterparts of these two female characters, Nann and Odsaluyang, with a relatively large number of representational spaces in which to express their thoughts, feelings, love and hatred. In addition, instead of Fortinbras, Prince of Norway, who serves as a foil to Hamlet, the film invents a female warrior, Princess Ajisuji of Subi, to serve as a foil to Prince Lhamoklodan of Jiabo (counterpart of Hamlet). Clad in armour, this determined woman leads soldiers to seize a strip of land from the Persians in order to open up a trade

route for her mountain-girt country. This character can be regarded as a symbol of women fighting against spatial constraints. There is no counterpart to such a fearsome female figure in *Hamlet*. The only character who could serve as her prototype is Joan of Arc (Joan la Pucelle) in Shakespeare's *Henry VI*. Yet this woman warrior in *Prince of the Himalayas* is not linked with supernatural forces. She is sympathetic and kind to the prince. Hence, what appears to be essentially a men's conflict in *Hamlet* is transformed by the replacement of Fortinbras, a prince, with Ajisuji, a princess.

Despite the limited representational spaces given to the two female characters in *Hamlet*, there are two architectural spaces belonging to them that remain unforgettable for most audiences/readers. These are Gertrude's and Ophelia's closets. Remarkably, Ophelia's closet is not even presented on stage. We learn about it from her narration when she reports to her father Polonius how Hamlet has intruded into it and has behaved bizarrely. Gertrude's closet is a space to which Hamlet is summoned. But when he gets there he acts in the fashion of an intruder as he reprimands his mother, threatens her, and finally uses violence against someone hiding behind an arras. Hamlet's wild behaviour in the two closet spaces, together with Polonius's eavesdropping in Gertrude's closet, signify that men do not respect the supposedly private spaces of women.

In *The Banquet*, the private space of Wan Er is her chamber. Even though the film does not locate a murder in this private feminine space, its importance cannot be overlooked, as the advancing of the king into this space manifests the new power configuration in the kingdom under which she must find a way to survive. When this space first appears on the screen, its spaciousness and the elaborate hollowed-out woodcarvings on the walls convey a sense of majesty. Heaviness generated by the black colour of the walls and the floor dominates the chamber and is enhanced by the time setting - it is night. Even though there are many candles burning in tall candelabra set here and there on the floor, the light is too dim to brighten the

space. There are several red decorative draperies, but this redness, which usually symbolizes happiness, luck and life in Chinese culture, is outweighed by the blackness of the space. Against this backdrop we see Wan Er in white. She is holding onto a white scarf that is being pulled from her hands. The camera shows a man behind her. It is the new king. He is pulling the scarf away from Wan Er, after which he throws it ruthlessly away. Landing on a nearby candelabrum, the scarf quickly catches fire. Maids and eunuchs run to extinguish the fire by stamping on it. This wordless act already manifests the power of the king over this lone widow within the space of her chamber.

The camera returns to the king, who puts his hand on Wan Er's shoulder. He rubs her gently while she is removing her hairpins and makeup. We are given close-up shots of trays holding an array of hairpins and combs, a sophisticated bottle with a flower-shaped lid and a flower-shaped base, and containers of various shapes. All of these small items add a touch of femininity to her chamber despite the overwhelming black colour. When she extends her hand and is about to take a bottle, the king stops her hand and picks it up for her. After that he hands her another bottle. She asks him how he knows about the procedure of her makeup removal. He replies that he knows not just her makeup removal, but also the way she enters her bath. These lines reveal that even in spaces that are supposedly most private, the queen has been spied upon.

The man, who has no scruples about admitting that he has been spying upon her, soon makes his sexual advances. He slides his hand towards her breast. She holds on to it to stop it, asking whether the king can let the prince go free. He replies, "Will you let my hand go free?" She closes her eyes as if completely helpless. We are not shown what happens next but our imagination allows us to infer it, especially as the immediately following scene is highly symbolic. The camera shows us an arrow shooting through space, going through a bamboo leaf and then splitting a bamboo stem. This is phallic symbolism that resonates with what happens in Wan

Er's chamber. The arrow is in fact shot by one of the king's assassins. It marks the beginning of a massacre at the prince's arts institute carried out by the king's assassins in their mission to kill the prince. What happens outside in a faraway land closely parallels what happens within the space of the queen's chamber. The arrow clearly reveals the king's power and Wan Er's helpless condition under her ambitious brother-in-law.

In *Prince of the Himalayas*, the private chamber of the queen, just like Gertrude's closet in *Hamlet*, becomes a site where the prince reprimands his mother and eventually impulsively kills an eavesdropper. When this space is first shown, we see Queen Nann sitting at a dressing table, which is an indication of the femininity of the space. There is a four-poster bed in the middle of the room with hanging draperies, furs for bedding, and a carpet in the foreground. This room is not as spacious as the Queen's room in *The Banquet* or as black. It is, on the contrary, rather warm and cosy. But there are two objects that spell out the queen's discomfort in this feminine space. On one side of the room, there is a portrait of the late king hanging on the wall. In front of the portrait is a small table on which are flowers in vases and candles burning. This arrangement supposedly shows her respect for her late husband. But on the opposite site of the room hangs a portrait of the new king. In front of this portrait there is a table on which are several bronze pots, which seems to be tea or wine pots for everyday use. With the two portraits, one on each side, and with the bed in the middle, her chamber is a space that reminds us of her former widow's status and her second marriage.

When we compare this arrangement of portraits with that in the *Hamlet* film adaptations by Laurence Olivier (1948) and Franco Zeffirelli (1990), both of which have a pendant picture of Claudius round Gertrude's neck and of old Hamlet round that of young Hamlet, we will find the sheer size of the framed portraits of a late husband and a second husband rather heavy and even stifling for a remarried woman's chamber.

When Nann wants to escape from her own room, her son

Lhamoklodan extends his arms in front of her door to stop her. He pushes her to her bed, orders her to sit down, and chides her for not having eyes. But Nann is not a weak woman. She fights back. She slaps her son hard on the face, commanding him to say no more. Then she touches his face to turn it toward her. She says, “You don’t know the truth. You don’t know the power of love and the insanity of despair.” Lhamoklodan says, “Love? You call this your love?” In his anger, he steps up onto her bed. This is an act symbolizing the utmost disrespect for his mother.

It is for this reason that at this very moment the ghost of the late king appears and walks past the room. Just as it happens in *Hamlet*, the queen sees nothing, so she comments to her son that the ghost is “a figment of your imagination.” When her son asks her to confess her crimes and to throw away the bad half of her heart and keep the other, the queen tells him of her feelings: “You are wrong, so wrong. The half that you want me to throw away is that which I hold most dear.” She then divulges the true story of her love to her son: “Lhamoklodan, hear me well, I love your uncle. I loved him before you were born. It was your late father the king who left me bereft of love.” Unable to accept her story, the prince says, “Quiet. Woman, you affront the memory of your murdered husband.” But she will not be quiet just because her son orders her to be so. She says in a determined voice: “Lhamoklodan, listen, my son. I will tell you the whole truth. Your uncle Kulo-ngam and I truly love each other. Your father the king took me in marriage by force. 17 years. 17 years. A life without love is death.” She cries and puts her head on her son’s shoulder. But her son says, “Woman, hear me. The murderer of your husband is the one you love.” By repeatedly calling her woman, not mother, he is wielding his superiority as a man over her as a woman.

The queen calls Lhamoklodan’s accusation of Kulo-ngam “madness.” Upon hearing this, he draws his sword impulsively and heads for the door. This time, instead of her son stopping her, it is Nann who stops him by extending her arms in front of him. She wants to stand in the way of

his desire to kill Kulo-ngam. Angered, he points his sword at her. The queen says, “What are you doing?” She moves back and looks at the sword in fear, but he continues to move towards her holding the sword to her neck. “I am mad. You said so.” The queen says in fear, “Do you mean to kill me?” She falls back onto her bed. The prince shouts, “I wish to be mad.” The queen screams for help. At this moment, Po-lha-nyisse (counterpart of Polonius), who has been hiding behind a black arras in the queen’s chamber, calls, “Come help!” Lhamoklodan runs to the arras to thrust his sword through. When Po-lha-nyisse pulls down the arras in his death fall, the shocked Lhamoklodan says, instead of the dead man’s name, “Odsaluyang,” the name of his love whose father now lies dead in front of him. By having Lhamoklodan utter Odsaluyang’s name, the film makes us realize the prince’s immediate thoughts about the web of human relationships he is in. Hamlet in Shakespeare’s play only calls Polonius a “wretched, rash, intruding fool” and says farewell to him when he discovers that it is Polonius instead of Claudius he has killed (3.4.31). He never links this dead old man to Ophelia in the scene.

This marks one of the major differences distinguishing this Chinese adaptation from the original *Hamlet*. Within the imagined ancient world of Tibet, clan and family relationship is critical. So when Lhamoklodan kills Po-lha-nyisse, his immediate reaction is his realization that this man is the father of his love and that this is therefore a huge mistake that he has made. This is why his next reaction is to draw a short sword to kill himself. At this critical moment, Nann bravely stops him by seizing the blade of his sword with her bare hand. This is the courage of a mother in her desperate need to save her son. Diverted from its course, the sword lands in the prince’s lap. A jet of blood spurts up. The chamber space of the queen ends up holding a corpse and two people hurt - one in the lap and the other in the hand.

Ophelia’s representational space in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, though limited, remains impressive. As mentioned, her closet space remains remarkable, yet instead of having it represented on stage the play puts it in

her report to her father. It is a place where she supposedly locks herself away from Hamlet's resort in obedience to her father's orders but into which Hamlet still intrudes. The public spaces that Ophelia appears in show her subservience to males. These include the lobby where Claudius and Polonius spy on her while Hamlet tells her to go to a nunnery, and the space for the performance of the play within the play, where Hamlet puts his head on her lap. Only in her madness does she finally break free from spatial constraints and move into and out of the court at her own will, but eventually she wanders into the wilderness, where she drowns. It is noteworthy that even her drowning is narrated, which means the space of her death is not represented.

In *The Banquet*, the counterpart of Ophelia, Ching Nu, is endowed with enormous representational spaces. Instead of a narrated closet space that never appears on the stage, her chamber is vividly represented. It is a bright room represented in daytime as a contrast to the queen's room at night-time. With windows looking into the inner courtyard where green plants grow, Ching Nu's room is a comfortable little space. There is a huge painting of green trees and white herons on the wall that softens the dark furniture. When the room first appears in the film, Ching Nu is at an embroidery table embroidering a phoenix on a piece of red fabric, which is for the queen's robe to be worn at the coronation. This picture of Ching Nu absorbed in needlework reminds us of Ophelia sewing in her closet when Hamlet bursts in. In the film, Prince Wu Luan never bursts in. Yet there is a patriarchal figure in her room - Ching Nu's father, minister Yin. Just like his counterpart Polonius, he asks his daughter to sever her relationship with the prince. He says: "From now on it is best if you stopped seeing the prince." Instead of the "I shall obey" reply from Ophelia (1.3.136), Ching Nu asks her father why. He replies, "When the late Emperor was alive, this match was our family's blessing. Now that he is gone, I fear it may be our downfall." But Ching Nu's reply is "My heart will never change." Thus, despite the feminine touch of this private space, which reminds us of

Ophelia's closet, Ching Nu is a determined character with her own thoughts.

Two of the most remarkable plot elements pertaining to Ching Nu, which have no counterpart in Shakespeare's play, are her sex with the prince and her death on stage in the middle of the king's court. Ophelia never has an intimate connection with the prince except on two occasions, the first of which is, as she reports to her father, when Hamlet intrudes into her closet with "his doublet all unbrac'd" and takes her by the wrist and holds her hard to peruse her face; and the second is Hamlet's putting of his head on Ophelia's lap during the play within the play. Unlike her prototype, Ching Nu does not seclude herself in her room even though her father asks her not to see the prince. She visits the prince alone in his private chamber, where the two young people finally start a quarrel over Queen Wan Er whom she knows he loves. Their quarrel begins when he expresses his dislike of Ching Nu's sympathy for him. He says that she is just like Wan Er who sympathizes with him. He comments, "You are her." She denies, "I am not her." Enraged, he holds her by force and rips her clothes off, while she tries in vain to escape. After the shot of him holding her down, we are given a shot of the aftermath. He is in her arms and she, despite looking rather sad, is gently caressing him like a caring mother. By venturing into the space of the prince's private chamber, Ching Nu is definitely different from Ophelia in terms of their relation to spatial constraints.

The most remarkable space allotted to Ching Nu is the stage on which she dies. It is in the middle of the king's court during the king's banquet. She intrudes into the court demanding to be allowed to perform a song and dance for the king to commemorate the prince, whom she mistakenly believes to be dead. Moved by her deep love, the king honours her with a cup of his wine, which, without his knowledge, has already been poisoned by Wan Er in her wish to murder the king. After drinking the wine, Ching Nu starts to sing and dance but then dies there before the eyes of all those present at the court. This death in the centre of the stage is what sharply distinguishes her from Ophelia, whose death in the wilderness,

though impressive for the audiences/readers, is not shown on stage.

By assigning the space of the stage to Ching Nu, a space which supposedly belongs to the prince, who has spent years learning music and dance, *The Banquet* displaces him in order to foreground Ching Nu. This special design creates a feminist theme that resonates with the plot of Wan Er succeeding to the throne immediately after the death of the king, the prince and Yin Zun (counterpart of Laertes). The final scene depicting the assassination of the female monarch in her inner court also reinforces the feminist theme of *The Banquet*. Despite her death, this ending creates the impression that the story is about her rather than about the king or the prince. Hence, instead of there being a male-centred plot, the movie shifts to pull female characters onto centre stage.

Not unlike *The Banquet*, *Prince of the Himalayas* also provides vivid visual representations of Odsaluyang's room. It is a candle-lit room with a dressing table. On the dressing table are a small hand mirror, a necklace and some containers, which flavour the room with femininity. There is also a maid in the room to whom Odsaluyang gives an order to withdraw. As the maid walks to the door, the camera follows her to reveal in the middle of the room a four-poster bed with warm thick brownish draperies and a brownish fur rug in front of the bed. There are also furs hanging on the wall. After the initial outdoor shot of snow and mountains, and the wilderness through which Lhamokloda rides to get back to Jiabo, this feminine space with warm furs and draperies is an inviting, comfortable space. Odsaluyang even has a small dog on her lap, which jumps down when she stands up. This ambiance makes her room feel like home to a man who has just returned from his long journey.

When Lhamokloda enters, she stands up from her dressing table and calls his name. The two run towards each other to embrace. Odsaluyang says, "At last you've returned, my love." These are the words of a woman in love, not those of a coy girl waiting to be wooed. He offers her a small knife with beads dangling from it. She says, "An ivory blade from Persia like your

love. This will always be with me.” The interaction between them shows us that Odsaluyang is a woman who expresses her feelings directly. They move a few steps to the side of her bed and sit down. He says, “From this day you shall be my only beloved.” Moved by his words, she buries herself in his embrace. This initial introduction of Odsaluyang’s space manifests its readiness to accommodate the prince. Drastically different from Ophelia’s closet space that Hamlet intrudes into, Odsaluyang’s chamber is eventually where the two young lovers have sex in a romantic atmosphere. Their sexual relationship is one of the major features that distinguish the plot of this film from that of *Hamlet*.

In fact, women’s love and desires are significant elements in *Prince of the Himalayas* because they contribute to the main cause of conflict in the film. Nann’s love for Kulo-ngam is the cause of the late king’s desire to murder his wife and his brother. Desperate for the safety of Nann and himself, Kulo-ngam resorts to murder. Nann’s premarital sex with Kulo-ngam is employed as the most significant dramatic element as it changes the prince of the Himalayas from the son of the late king to the son of his supposed uncle. Remarkably, this transgressive sexual act takes place in a green meadow on a hill and it is Nann who takes the initiative. Within the space of the palace she is under constraint, but out in the meadow she creates a space for her true love and desire. The visual representation of the meadow with the two lovers in it is shown as a short flashback while the old woman is telling Lhamoklodan the story. What Nann does in this space of wildness changes the kinship in the story and eventually renders the revenge of the prince on his uncle impossible.

In a similar fashion, the wilderness in which Odsaluyang gives birth to a baby is a space of significance. Even though her love is consummated in the confines of her chamber, its nature as premarital sex is still a burden. This is why when the pregnant Odsaluyang wanders down the street in Jiabo, passers-by stare at her protruding belly. Only in the wilderness does she find solace. Just like Ophelia, this mad woman wanders alone into the

wilderness and enters the water. But instead of drowning herself, she begins her labour in shallow water. We are given close-up shots of blood from her body reddening the river, after which she gives birth to a baby, who is the son of Lhamoklodan. In her pain, she manages to use the ivory blade from Lhamoklodan to cut the newborn's umbilical cord before she dies. As a new prince of the Himalayas symbolizing regeneration and hope, the newborn transforms the pessimistic tone at the end of the film. The space of the river is a space of regeneration out from which the old woman who appeared in the first scene lifts the baby as he floats in the water and hails him prince of the Himalayas.

Ajisuji, the woman warrior riding across mountains, further accentuates women's link with spaces of wilderness in the movie. The final scene of the film features an open space in the wilderness at night in which Ajisuji holds the baby prince of the Himalayas in her arms in a motherly manner, while the old woman stands nearby with others. In this open outdoor space where a great pile of wood is burning, supposedly to cremate all those killed in the final bloodbath scene, the conflict of the older generation is symbolically done away with, while new hope is nurtured by female characters whose motherly image resonates with that of mother nature.

The visual representations of spaces for women in these two Chinese film adaptations of *Hamlet* generate new meanings that distinguish them from Shakespeare's play produced in Elizabethan England, where women in general were expected to be much more subservient than those in late twentieth century China. In the history of Chinese Shakespeare productions, stage renderings have usually reflected not only producers' or directors' ideas but also the changes in "social environment" in China (Li 1995:366). As H. R. Coursen observes, "production occurs in space;" "the historical moment is itself a space that invites certain interpretations, that reinterprets the script for us" (2002:5,7). Their shared interest in endowing female characters with more representational spaces that depict their activities in

the architectural and topographical spaces of private chamber, home, palace, stage, and wilderness endows the two Chinese *Hamlets* with a feminist dimension.

The feminist dimension can be understood in terms of the cultural circulation of feminist awareness. Remarkably, the beginning of the twentieth century was a time in China when new cultural ideas about rights and freedom prompted a revolution against the feudal Ching Dynasty, while Confucian teachings that had dominated society for thousands of years with their notions about women being inferior to men, and women's proper place being in the home, were openly criticized by many female intellectuals. After a century of revolution and reform, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the time of the appearance of the two Chinese *Hamlet* films, feminist awareness can be considered to be quite prevalent. Remarkably, *Hamlet* is the play that imported a highly resonant misogynistic quotation into China: "Frailty, thy name is woman." It is my contention that the unanimous attention paid in the two Chinese *Hamlet* films to revisiting the limited spaces belonging to the female characters in *Hamlet* is not a coincidence. The gender and space dynamism represented in the two films, just like other cultural productions of our time, will be re-circulated into our cultural and social imaginary.

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