

Sexuality and Silence: the Representation of Ophelia in a Tibetan Adaptation of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*

Yujing MA

It is commonly recognized that no Shakespeare play has generated more film adaptations than *Hamlet*.⁽¹⁾ Among these cinematic versions, the British *Hamlet* by Laurence Olivier (1948), the Russian *Hamlet* by Grigori Kozintsev (1964), the British-Italian *Hamlet* by Franco Zeffirelli (1990), the British *Hamlet* by Kenneth Branagh (1996) and the American *Hamlet* by Michael Almereyda (2000), have received more critical attention than others. It is thus clear that Anglophone Shakespeare on film has dominated the field until the end of 1990s, with the bulk of cinematic adaptations coming from Britain and America. However, with the global trend of localizing Shakespeare, as Alexander C. Y. Huang points out, “the first decade of the new millennium was for Asian cinematic Shakespeares” (12). Certainly, there have been a number of localized Shakespeare films produced in this period in Asia, such as *Chicken Rice War* (2000), a Singaporean adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet*, *Gedebe* (2002), a Malaysian adaptation of *Julius Caesar*, and *The Frivolous Wife* (2008), a Korean adaptation of *The Taming of the Shrew*. At the same time, two Chinese adaptations of *Hamlet* have contributed to this boom: one is Feng Xiaogang's *The Banquet*; the other is Sherwood Hu's (Hu Xuehua's) *Prince of the Himalayas*. Released in the same year, 2006, these two cinematic versions of *Hamlet* have different themes: the former is a revenge drama while the latter is a story of love and forgiveness. Significantly, both Chinese adaptations re-characterized female characters through the use of Eastern cultural elements.⁽²⁾ Moreover, while *The Banquet* had a wide distribution and enjoyed mass-market appeal because of its martial arts elements, it suffered a negative popular reception both at home and abroad. On the other hand, *Prince of the Himalayas* did not achieve commercial success, but has since attracted attention in the academic field.⁽³⁾ In fact, there are three alternative titles for the film, *King of Tibet*, *Prince of the Himalayas*, and *The Legend of A Prince*. It is striking that the first choice *King of Tibet* was not approved by the Chinese film authorities. Subsequently, the title of *Prince of the Himalayas* was at first denied and finally approved.⁽⁴⁾ Presumably, this may have been because Tibet is a sensitive area in China. According to Burnett, the title of *King of Tibet* renders it easy to “connote a separate entity” whereas *Prince of the Himalayas* “points to extraordinary natural phenomena” and to “a vague set of regional meanings” (140). Another reason for the film's lack of popular success might be because all the actors in the film are native Tibetan and are not known to the Chinese audience.

Prince of the Himalayas is set in ancient Tibet. There are various local registers used, such as the local resonances of Buddhism. In this cinematic Tibetan *Hamlet*, there are a number of interesting and significant departures from Shakespeare's plot. As a sub-plot, the young Nanm (Gertrude) is forced to leave her lover Kulo-ngam (Claudius) to marry Kulo-ngam's brother, King Tsanpo (old Hamlet). Being faithful to love, Nanm gives her virginity to Kulo-ngam before her marriage. Kulo-ngam is Lhamoklodan's (Hamlet's) biological father. Thus, King Tsanpo desires to kill Kulo-ngam and Nanm. Such a recreation of Gertrude not only helps to solve the problematic idea of Gertrude's immediate marriage with Claudius, but also makes it reasonable that Kulo-ngam kills his brother because he wants to protect Lhamoklodan and Nanm. In this way, Nanm becomes a typical female character in Chinese folklore and literature who suffers from unhappy marriage and endures hardships. Differing from the original work, the film shows that the ghostly father lies to the indecisive prince and demands a cruel revenge. Finally, Odsaluyang (Ophelia) drowns after giving birth to a baby. Additionally, there is a newly created character, the Wolf Woman⁽⁵⁾ who is a mysterious figure with supernatural power. She is both a narrator and a prophet for what happens in the story. Such alterations to Shakespeare's plot are intriguing, especially in the representation of Odsaluyang.

The character of Odsaluyang is not delicately portrayed as a speaking subject, but her sexual relationship with Lhamoklodan partly indicates her silent protest against a patriarchal system. Furthermore, the depiction of her giving birth to a baby in the river is striking, and contributes towards making her an attractive heroine, underlining her significant role in changing the tone of the tragedy. In the film, Odsaluyang's silence remains the center of attention. Especially when she confronts her ultimate silence in death, she is in perfect harmony with the vastness and tranquility of nature.

In *Prince of the Himalayas*, the director Hu used Chinese culture to challenge both Shakespeare's authority and Western culture. The hybridization of this production directly related to his family and educational background. Raised in a family of dramatists in Shanghai, Hu received a traditional theatrical education in China. Subsequently, he pursued his MA and Ph.D degrees in America. Having lived in the U.S. for twenty years, Hu became familiar with Western culture and theatre traditions. In my interview with him on *Prince of the Himalayas*, Hu said he had a special affection for Hamlet.⁽⁶⁾ Interestingly, Hu practiced Hamlet's monologue "To be, or not to be" for his entrance exam for theatre academy following his parents' suggestion. More importantly, filming Shakespeare is not only his ambition but also his father's will.⁽⁷⁾ Eventually, the idea of filming *Hamlet* in Tibet came to him when he was chatting with a friend in a coffee shop in New York. In his notes about the film, he mentions, "If I move Hamlet to a place which is the closest to the sky, and ask him to ponder over the questions about life and death there, what effects would I have?"⁽⁸⁾ In *Prince of the Himalayas*, Hu thus considered the balance between Western and non-Western

cultures and sought to provide a film to the taste of both Western and non-western audiences.

In this paper, I will develop an understanding of the representation of Odsaluyang from a sense of how the director, Hu, breaks away from the conventional depiction of Ophelia through her sexuality and silence. In my analysis, I will refer to other film productions of *Hamlet* between 1948 and 2000 directed by Olivier, Kozintsev, Zeffirelli, Branagh, and Almereyda. Additionally, I will relate the representation of Odsaluyang to the Ophelia tradition in painting, especially the drowning scene. My analysis is also based on an interview I conducted with the director Hu, and I will thus include his responses and ideas about the film. Although Odsaluyang is not completely a self-determined figure, the audience may still notice how she shapes the plot, themes, conflicts and movement of the film.

The majority of modern cinematic renditions of Ophelia expose the enduring influence of “the ideological alignment among femininity, docility, weakness” (Rooks, 475). Popular films such as those directed by Olivier, Zeffirelli and Almereyda “treat Ophelia in a similar fashion by infantilizing her, limiting her intelligence, and eradicating, both her spoken and sung vocality” (Leonard, 65). Indeed, there are certain inner connections between Olivier’s *Hamlet* and Zeffirelli’s. Both Olivier’s and Zeffirelli’s Ophelias appear to be simultaneously childish and sexualized.⁽⁹⁾ Conceived as a “radical alternative to Branagh’s” (Crowl, 128), Almereyda’s *Hamlet* represents a young Ophelia struggling against the “alienation, imprisonment, and hypocrisy associated with a cultural landscape of hostile corporate takeovers, Blockbuster Videos, and the commercial products of relentless digitization” in New York (Rooks, 476). According to Rooks, this modern Ophelia distinguished herself from the character seen in other films as she has less potency as “a repressed figure” (477). In fact, Ophelia is misunderstood by people around her and consequently her subjectivity is denied by the “determined patriarchy” (Rooks, 477). In sum, all these renditions of Ophelia focus on her beauty, innocence, eroticized madness and victim status.

In *Prince of the Himalayas*, there is not much change from the Ophelia in Shakespeare’s play. Odsaluyang still conveys the impression of a girl who is gentle and innocent and she loves Lhamoklodan. But differing from Ophelia, Odsaluyang’s love is more outspoken. When Lhamoklodan returns from Persia, she embraces him. Typically, this version of *Hamlet* depicts Ophelia as a paradoxical character through her controversial sexual relationship with Hamlet. Suspecting his uncle’s succession to the throne after the death of his father and suffering from the announcement of his mother’s remarriage with his uncle, Lhamoklodan is overwhelmed with sorrow and he runs to meet Odsaluyang in her bedchamber. He attempts to reveal his innermost feelings and agony, but he cannot confess his suspicion to her because “he knows he is being watched” and “he has more important matters to attend to” as Jan Kott describes the similar scene in Kozintsev’s 1964 *Hamlet* (quoted in Cartmell 31).

Facing her beloved, Odsaluyang has no choice but is duty bound to console the grief of Lhamoklodan.

Therefore, their sexual relationship happens naturally under this condition. There are also continual flashbacks of “Hamlet and Ophelia in bed” in Branagh’s film. Michael Anderegg argues that these scenes are problematic due to “the ambiguities of Hamlet/Ophelia relationship” (131). In addition, Rutter criticized that the flashbacks of love-making scene of Ophelia and Hamlet create a “dumbed down Ophelia-for-our-times” (253). Differing from many films that “use[s] Ophelia’s scripted role and her body to serve what each constructs as a resolutely masculinist *Hamlet*” (Rutter, 299), the semi-explicit love-making scene is depicted purely as the result of the mutual love between Lhamoklodan and Odsaluyang. At the beginning of the film, we observe Odsaluyang’s deep love for Lhamoklodan and Lhamoklodan’s affection for Odsaluyang. Additionally, Lhamoklodan gives Odsaluyang an ivory-handled blade that stands as a remembrance for their love. In this point, the director happens to hold identical views with what Kott has observed in Kozintsev’s *Hamlet* that “Hamlet loves Ophelia” (quoted in Cartmell 31).

Following this scene, the shot cuts to a naked Lhamoklodan on a horse, galloping across the plain, which straightforwardly symbolizes the sexual liberation of Lhamoklodan, but there is no concern for Odsaluyang here. Obviously, silence may be the typical response from Odsaluyang in this situation; that is to say, she has no alternative. However, Odsaluyang has never regretted this because she remains steadfast in her love with Lhamoklodan. When her brother, Lessar (Laertes) expresses his concern about her love for Lhamoklodan by saying “if he [Lhamoklodan] gets your love but cannot be with you, your sorrow will be endless,” Odsaluyang answers him firmly, “I’ll let love keep my heart”. On one hand, her silence is doomed owing to the fact that female sexuality is a dangerous thing under the patriarchal system. On the other hand, as Harvey Rovine points out, “In tragedy the silence of woman may not suggest consent but often connotes fear, despair, or confusion” (41).

Nevertheless, it is apparent that Odsaluyang’s sexual relationship with Lhamoklodan liberates her sexuality from her conventional female roles, namely, that of an innocent and obedient daughter and sister, since in the original text, both Polonius and Laertes have warned Ophelia of keeping her “chaste treasure” (*Hamlet* 1.3.30). Thus, Odsaluyang’s conscious submissiveness in her sexual relationship with Lhamoklodan, could be interpreted as her silent protest against the patriarchal system. From this point of view, she does not suffer the sexual oppression and unrequited love as Elaine Showalter asserts. In addition, such factors are also regarded as the reason for her madness and death, not only by literary critics, but also by some film directors. For instance, in her “Representing Ophelia: Women, Madness, and the Responsibilities of Feminist Criticism,” Showalter reveals the representational connections between female sexuality and madness through analyzing the play’s reproductions and suggesting that Ophelia has “a story of her own” (233). Moreover, according to Gulsen Sayin Teker, both Kozintsev and Zeffirelli suggest in their versions of *Hamlet* (1964 and 1990 versions) that Ophelia’s sexual and social oppressions contribute to her

madness (117).

In contrast to such a stance, Sherwood Hu seems to be similar to Branagh, in his 1996 *Hamlet*, in associating "Ophelia's madness with her confinement within the patriarchal order" (Teker 117). As Harvey Rovine points out, "in tragedy and comedy, women are often presented in dramatic situations which depict their obligations in three major areas for human relations: family, love and duty to the state" (37). Odsaluyang is placed in such a dilemma that she has no alternative, facing the clash between the death of her father and the self-imposed exile of her beloved. Due to her filial duty to her family, she could not marry the murderer of her father and she must replace her affection toward Lhamoklodan with hatred. Her behaviour of throwing the ivory-handled blade given by Lhamoklodan to the ground dramatically shows her decision to put an end to their relationship. Lhamoklodan does not take back the blade and leaves it where they part from each other. The scene in which Odsaluyang goes back to where the blade is left shows explicitly that she does not abandon the remembrance of Hamlet. It is more significant that such details demonstrate that she could not stop her love. Finally, she uses the blade to cut the umbilical cord of her child in her labour in the river.

In the scene following Lhamoklodan's leaving, Odsaluyang's strong affection towards him makes her suffer a lot. Consequently, she behaves as a crazy woman, singing strange songs. The leaving of Lhamoklodan might be interpreted as the main reason for her madness. For her, the leaving is permanent because Lhamoklodan's murder of her father forces her to bury her love deep in her heart forever. The film shows clearly that Odsaluyang is pregnant and she is about to give birth. At this point, Odsaluyang's madness is more receptive of being analyzed as a kind of self-defense rather than what Carol Thomas Neely interprets as "protest and rebellion" (quoted in Teker 114) since her madness will be a means of escaping from the patriarchal surveillance and avoiding the moral punishment from a male-dominated society for the pregnancy of an unmarried woman. Being asked for the name of the father of her child by Kulo-ngam (Claudius), Odsaluyang replies, "I cannot tell you. This is a secret between him and I". This time she chooses to be silent in the disguise of her madness. In this way, the reputation of Lhamoklodan will not be damaged, or more probably, her choice of silence is motivated by her purpose of protecting her coming child.

In considering the representation of her pregnancy, the image of Odsaluyang in a white dress and with a flower wreath on her loose hair symbolizing innocence and purity, forms a strong contrast with her condition. Such a contrast does not deny her pure nature. Instead, the feminine aspects of Odsaluyang are sufficiently embodied in the gentle disposition of a mother, and there is no hatred but joy in her gentle eyes. Such a depiction of Odsaluyang underlines the theme of the film: love and forgiveness. Additionally, the dramatization of Odsaluyang's role as a mother emphasizes the importance of succession in Chinese

culture and history. The baby is the hope for Jiabo and he is going to assume the throne, establishing the importance of heredity in imperial succession. Although the baby is born illegitimate, there is no problem for him to succeed to the throne. First, the Wolf Woman, rescues the child and names him “Prince of the Himalayas”. Then, she brings the child to Lhamoklodan, fainted after the duel with Odsaluyang’s brother, and tells him, “This is your son”. Lhamoklodan opens his eyes and announces “King of Jiabo”. Thus, the child becomes a legitimate monarchical successor. It is significant for the Chinese to have a son to carry on one’s family name, especially for the royal family. Instead of being criticized for her immorality as an unmarried mother, her deed of giving birth to a successor of the state will be magnified. This point shows that there are much more focus and sympathy on the representation of Ophelia in the film than is to be found in the original text.

Ophelia’s invisibility in Shakespearean critical texts forms a sharp contrast with her visibility as a subject in literature, popular culture, and painting. For example, Odilon Redon produced a pastel named *Ophelia among the Flowers*; Bob Dylan placed her on “Desolation Row” in his song in 1960s; Cannon Mills, has named a flowery sheet pattern after her (quoted in Showalter 221). Additionally, as outlined above, many cinematic versions have offered a variety of representations of Ophelia. In spite of some innovations in the representation of Ophelia on the stage, in film or in painting, the theme of her beauty, madness, and death is invariable. From these aspects, the visual image of Ophelia, especially her drowning, is deeply rooted in the audience’s consciousness.

The scene of the drowned Ophelia is described in Act 4, Scene 7 of the play in a speech by Gertrude. Gertrude relates the details of Ophelia’s tragic death (which occurs off stage) to Ophelia’s brother, Laertes. Over the years, Ophelia’s drowning has been the subject of several important paintings.⁽¹⁰⁾ One of the most famous works is Victorian artist John Everett Millais’s *Ophelia* (1851-52), a canvas known for its attention to detail, its symbolism, and the model’s striking facial expression. In film adaptations, Ophelia’s drowning scene has been depicted in different visual modes. In his 1948 *Hamlet*, Olivier followed the representation of Millais’s painting to represent Ophelia. Olivier’s dead Ophelia is part of nature, her visual depiction highlights Gertrude’s description of her as “... a creature native and indued / Unto the element”. Branagh’s dead Ophelia is recognized as the most reminiscent of Millais’s painting while the death of Ophelia in Almereyda’s film is one of the most special renditions, where she lies in a large, semi-circular urban fountain. Following Rooks’ analysis of this scene, Ophelia’s death is not only “deliberate,” but also “undoubtedly premeditated” (482). That is to say, Ophelia actively asserts her subjectivity by her suicide. However, instead of being part of nature, Almereyda’s Ophelia is confined to the fountain, which implies her victim status.

Since Ophelia’s death is a constricted composition in what Davies specifies as a replication of “the Millais

painting" (45), the representation of the drowned Odsaluyang in *Prince of the Himalayas* might remind the audience of Millais's work. Indeed, Hu sought inspiration from Millais.⁽¹¹⁾ The scene of Odsaluyang's drowning in the river is one in which childbirth is most powerfully portrayed. Feeling the pain of labor and bleeding, Odsaluyang approaches the river calmly. She lies on her back in the river, singing and calling Lhamoklodan's name. Immediately, the water runs red with her blood, which is striking and powerful. This scene is a partial fulfillment of the Wolf Woman's prophecy at the beginning of the film: "a river of blood will flow". After Odsaluyang cuts the umbilical cord of her child, she gives a cry of relief. At the very last instant before a jump cut to the next scene, a baby figure appears.

In contrast to Millais's Ophelia who lies narrowly confined in a brook, the Tibetan Ophelia floats on a broad river. In addition, her gesture is quite different from that of "mermaid-like" Ophelia in Millais's painting (*Hamlet* 4.7.174). There is a change from a close-up to a long shot in the representation of Odsaluyang after the childbirth: with a garland worn on her head, she stretches her arms out horizontally; the lower part of her white dress is fully covered with blood; the baby can be seen drifting away on her left side.



Odsaluyang's giving birth to a baby in Lake Manasarovar in *Prince of the Himalayas* (Courtesy of Hus Entertainment)

Hu's visual representation of Odsaluyang's death is haunting, especially the moment when Odsaluyang confronts her ultimate silence of death. Just as Teker argues that Ophelia's death scene in Zeffirelli's *Hamlet* makes "Ophelia's dead body as a part of nature" (117), the same effect has been achieved in *Prince of the Himalayas*. In the interview, Hu explicates that he wants to show the visual beauty and the sense of mystery of the Tibetan highlands in the film. Additionally, he regards human being as a part of nature. Indeed, Odsaluyang is in perfect harmony with the vastness and tranquility of nature. Although Odsaluyang's selfhood is denied from the beginning, eventually, the silent Odsaluyang becomes part of nature as an individual. Additionally, in her funeral scene, Odsaluyang is put on a raft with several lights around it,

flowing away with the water, which could be regarded as a symbol of her gaining freedom. In Buddhism, death is not the end. Instead, it is one part of samsara – the eternal cycle of life, death and birth. In stark opposition to the depiction of the death of Ophelia drowned in a drain in Almereyda's *Hamlet* (2000), the death of Odsaluyang in *Prince of the Himalayas* seems “a natural momentum toward release” rather than “the result of the weight of her grief” (Howlett, 46). Thus, her death is naturalized.

In considering the representation of Ophelia in the original text, it is clear that Shakespeare diminishes her voice and identity. Concerning the adaptations, Rutter argues that there used to be “the tendency to deliver the story as a one-man-show, a celebration of heroic masculinity” (299). Unlike such interpretation, *Prince of the Himalayas* highlights culture-specific questions about female agency. As an example of hybrid Shakespeare, Hu challenges Shakespeare's characterization of Ophelia. In *Prince of the Himalayas*, Odsaluyang (Ophelia) is placed in close relation to Lhamoklodan (Hamlet): she is Lhamoklodan's beloved and their child's mother. Odsaluyang's choice of silence does not indicate her tragic acceptance of her condition, but helps her to protect herself and her beloved, and even helps her achieve her motherhood, which is one of the most remarkable things in this version. What is more, the multiplicity of roles and obligations Odsaluyang has to undertake may lead to her subordination and obedience, but she is not depicted as a victim or doomed to a nunnery. Additionally, Hu's *Prince of the Himalayas* also reflects Chinese culture, such as the concept of reunion and the eternal cycle of life and death. Sloboda suggests that, “One of the fundamental challenges of adapting a literary masterpiece like *Hamlet* to the screen is justifying the reinvention of the original work, persuading audiences that they need a new version of it” (150). Asian cultural factors in *Prince of the Himalayas* thus provide audiences with several reasons to appreciate the new version of *Hamlet*.

Notes:

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- (1) In his “The Films of *Hamlet*”, Neil Taylor mentioned that there had been forty-seven film versions of *Hamlet* or part of the play by 1994. In addition, there were at least ninety-three other films which derived from the Hamlet story.
- (2) In my article “Empress Wan in Feng Xiaogang's *The Banquet*: Differing Cinematic Representation of Shakespeare's Women”, I have argued that Feng produced a re-imagining of notions of gender that appear in the original text and his adaptation of *Hamlet* challenged inherited canonical notions of Shakespearean women.
- (3) *Prince of the Himalayas* received numerous awards including best picture, best director and best actor in several international film festivals, such as Best Film Award from Calabria International Film Festival in Italy and Best Direction in Monaco Film Festival in 2008. This film entered the running for the Golden Globe Awards in 2007 and won awards in the 22nd Napa Sonoma Wine Country Film Festival.

- (4) See *A Sherwood Hu Film: Prince of Himalayas* (2006), p11.
- (5) In my interview with Hu on March 4, 2013, Hu mentions that the Wolf Woman is a key figure to solve the mysteries in the story. He further explains that there is such a kind of figure like the Wolf Woman in the Tibetan legend.
- (6) Based on my interview with Hu.
- (7) Also from my interview with Hu.
- (8) See more details in *A Sherwood Hu Film: Prince of the Himalayas* on the rehearsals and shooting of *Prince of the Himalayas*.
- (9) See detailed analysis on different versions of *Hamlet* in Samuel Crowl's *Shakespeare's Hamlet*.
- (10) In her "Framing Ophelia: representation and the pictorial tradition", Kaara Peterson surveys a series of visual models of Ophelia's drowning ranging from 18th century classic paintings to contemporary pop art.
- (11) This is confirmed in my interview with Hu.

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