**Perceptions of and visions for Shakespeare in early twenty-first century Vietnamese schools**

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Judy Celine Ick has demonstrated the overwhelming lack of attention to Shakespeare in South-East Asia, within English-language publications (206). The situation she highlights is borne out by the paucity of publications on Shakespeare in Vietnam (Việt Nam) beyond brief overviews of theatre in Vietnam, recordings and analysis of particular productions, and some coverage of Shakespearean translation issues (Brisbane, Chaturvedi, Majumadar, Pong and Tanokura; Wetmore, Liu and Mee; Bullfrog; Asian Shakespeare Intercultural Archive; Yong Li Lan; Van and Kim). Ick’s statement is truer still of attention to teaching Shakespeare: the above publications do not address Shakespeare in the everyday, Vietnamese classroom, let alone ask young people about their visions for Shakespeare in the schools of Vietnam’s future. Vietnam did feature in the British Council and Royal Shakespeare Company 2010 survey of international Shakespeare teaching, which grew into a WikiShakespeare for the World Shakespeare Festival website in 2012 (unfortunately the wiki is no longer publicly available). The British Council provided the following information for the wiki: all pupils follow a core curriculum; all secondary pupils study Shakespeare at least once in their school career; texts are usually translated into Vietnamese; Shakespeare is generally taught as literature (as opposed to drama); and ‘Class discussions are uncommon and students are expected to be studious and passively attentive to the classroom’ (RSC). While their summary reflects much of what I found, I contend below that not all secondary students recall having studied Shakespeare – suggesting either that they were not taught it, missed those classes, or found them utterly forgettable – and that some secondary school teachers do encourage students’ to form, share and discuss their own interpretations.

Aiming to redress the dearth of research in English on Shakespeare in Vietnamese schools, I travelled to Hanoi (Hà Nội) in September 2016, followed by HCMC in April 2017, on a British Academy funded project to explore the teaching of Shakespeare in early twenty-first century Vietnam. I have written about Shakespeare in the Vietnamese university sector elsewhere (Olive forthcoming), so this article focuses on schools alone and explores, with former pupils, the following research questions: What practices of studying Shakespeare exist in Vietnamese schools? What visions for studying Shakespeare in the future exist in Vietnamese schools? Where I have gained permission to identify an individual or organization, having also given them sight of this article to approve or amend references to them, I have used their real name. Otherwise, I have used pseudonyms. In writing Vietnamese names, I have used each individual’s way of writing their name in communication with me to determine the format (including word order, spacing and diacritical marks). Where I have not communicated with them in writing, I have used the rendering of their name given in the publications, website or theatre programmes through which I encountered them. I use Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC) rather than Saigon (Sài Gòn) throughout. However, in everyday conversation in English, there is much slippage between the two. I am (largely) an outsider researcher on the topic of Shakespeare in Vietnam: I deal with the ethics of my researcher position in a blog post on the topic (2017).

**Students’ perceptions of the teaching of Shakespeare**

Thirty-four current university English literature students, who began attending school in the first years of the new millennium, mainly studying in Hanoi and HCMC participated in a vox pop for *Teaching Shakespeare* (Olive 2017: 3-4). One student is a Vietnamese undergraduate student at a UK university. In terms of probable bias – and to delimit how representative the following experiences and perceptions are of the Vietnamese student population – it is important to bear in mind that these students have all learnt English as an Additional Language (EAL), chosen to study English at university, and had previously – or were currently engaged in – studying or performing Shakespeare. Facility in English is highly valued by the middle-class population these students are drawn from for its perceived effect on employability: working in law or management, for example, was held to be dependent on having English. The students are all currently living in cosmopolitan big cities, although some grew up outside these. These demographics are also true of the teachers, lecturers and the professionals in the media and arts whom I talked to, contextualising the students’ responses. While the students’ perceptions cannot be generalised to represent those of their peers nationwide, one of the benefits of seeking their views was that they are emerging experts in English literature and Shakespeare with informed opinions about his works, his relative place in the curriculum and canon as well as his educational and cultural value, particularly in relation to the long legacy of the French colonial period and war with the United States.

The first part of the vox pop was devoted to the students’ recollections of early encounters with Shakespeare within and/or outside school. The majority had encountered Shakespeare at school, although just below one third of respondents answered that they had not studied Shakespeare prior to university (two with a ☹ sad-face emoji, which could be read as expressing their dissatisfaction with the situation and/or apology for it). Most had done so at high school, followed by those who had done so in their undergraduate degree, with only one respondent saying that they first studied Shakespeare at primary school. Shakespeare overwhelmingly features in school attenders’ lives as part of Literature classes, usually translated into – and with instruction in – Vietnamese, although other subjects and languages of instruction including English, compulsory from the first grade, age 6-7: respondents told me that it is the main, if not only, foreign language offered at school (n.b. over 90% of children are enrolled in primary school; this drops for secondary school, for example, only 63% of 15-year-olds are enrolled, according to the BBC; across all levels enrolment is often on a half-day basis). Shakespeare encounters in Drama and Psychology classes were mentioned by a handful of students. A couple of students had received teaching and texts in both Vietnamese and English languages, two noting plaintively ‘but the language in the original/English version is quite difficult to understand…[it’s] different from what we’re using today’. Such sentiments are not without parallel among UK pupils, teachers and resources targeted towards them: the revised Cambridge School Shakespeare, Longman, and RSC education publications all emphasise their contributions to making his language familiar and accessible. However, while there might be a degree of globalization and cosmopolitanism at play here, rendering the experience of young people in twenty-first century, global cities more homogenous, it is important to also keep in mind the distinctiveness of approaching the texts as an English as an Additional Language learner suggested by a recent glut of ‘how to’ books (including Lau and Tso). School Shakespeare involves studying excerpts such as the balcony scene from *Romeo and Juliet* in ubiquitous-seeming textbooks, often in eleventh grade (age 16-17), as part of a unit of work named ‘love and hatred’ or ‘love and revenge’ (depending on individuals’ different recollections or translations). The play’s love theme was widely seen as important to motivating young adults to engage with the text (unlike representations of it being off-putting, particularly to teenaged boys, in Western narratives, see Semenza 61). School students become familiar with the plot of the play and the feud between the families, but not so much the detail of the play. Only three other plays were mentioned: *Hamlet, Macbeth* and *Twelfth Night* (which some students were currently working on at university, and may have erroneously mentioned in this section of the vox pop). Like *Romeo and Juliet*, *Hamlet* was described by the student who invoked the play as relevant and interesting to young people universally because of its representation of a ‘young man’s struggle, his internal conflict’. Shakespeare at school is likely to occupy just a couple of periods in total, perhaps three hours of class time, despite, I was told, Shakespeare being part of preparation for university entrance examinations; despite deputations from theatre professionals to the government department responsible for education requesting an increase in official hours allocated to study of the playwright centrally. It was suggested that Shakespearean contact time varies depending on the teacher’s own interest in Western versus Vietnamese literature. He is read as one among several world authors from the US, India, Russia and China. Despite the creation/rebranding of numerous teacher resources for Shakespeare Lives!, the what, when and why of Shakespeare in Vietnamese schools is described by students as a fairly homogenous affair: usually one scene from *Romeo and Juliet*, done at high school, in a matter of hours, with an emphasis on young love and family feuds.

The teaching methods for Shakespeare recalled involve giving a brief overview of Shakespeare’s life and the play, students reading aloud the scene in the textbook, students reading printed materials from which to extract information about the play – including storybooks (additionally one student recalled using an e-book and their smartphone), class discussion (which might include whether or not they liked the text, suggesting something loosely akin to the personal response approach sometimes favoured in the UK school system), asking questions of the teacher, and listening at length to the teacher’s analysis of the extract supported by their use of a chalkboard or slides, taking copious notes on this (Olive 2015a: 58). One anonymous student mentioned the privileging of facts that the teacher thinks it’s necessary for the students to know for their examination. Another recalled the class being asked to give presentations on the play in small groups, adding that ‘the presentations were unsatisfactory so teacher had to go through each works and left some comments’. It was ambiguous as to whether the student wanted to highlight here the value of their teacher’s feedback or the dispiriting experience for the class of being deemed not up to scratch. Active methods for Shakespeare, involving using techniques from drama, rehearsal room, performance and other practical activities to explore the plays, popularized in the UK by the work of Rex Gibson, James Stredder and theatre education department’s such as the RSC’s were invoked in the vox pop. The word ‘role-play’ was entered by several respondents, without further detail on the activities involved. One student recalled the way in which playing scenes with her classmates fed into some oral, whole group, performance criticism: ‘My teacher asked us to divide class into many small groups, practice and perform any part of *Romeo & Juliet*. After that, he asked groups performing the same scene what differences and similarities were, what aspect we focused on’. Some teachers would set preparatory work of reading through the Shakespearean text in advance of class or ask ‘students to write an essay to express their comprehension/feeling about the text they learned’. None of the students could recall going to the theatre or on other excursions as part of studying Shakespeare, although some of them will have seen peers perform in class or DVD recordings of these and one recalled watching a film of *Romeo and Juliet* in high school (*which* film was not detailed). Among the university students I met, Zeffirelli’s film was favoured for its perceived ‘authenticity’ and ‘fidelity’ to Shakespeare’s play). Some high school students might be involved in staging productions of plays like *Romeo and Juliet*. Indeed, three respondents named drama clubs as places they first encountered Shakespeare, but journalist Minh told me that parents tend to emphasise the importance of succeeding in subjects such as mathematics, chemistry and English over dramatic endeavours (at university, the popularity of sports and dance societies outshines drama ones – one third-year student who had played Romeo in public, student Tu, suggested that an English drama society would need to overcome most students reluctance to perform in public, particularly to speak English in public). In summary, reading an extract of Shakespeare from a printed textbook – aloud or silently, in class or independently – dominates experiences of Shakespeare at school; the teacher has the main mediating role in the students’ interpretations of the text, exacerbated by the perceived need to teach to the test, although students are likely to be asked to make oral, even dramatic, contributions to class. Descriptions of teaching methods displayed most variation once the set scene has been read. Pieces of this picture of teaching Shakespeare in school will be recognizable to readers internationally: using a Shakespearean passage in a textbook or anthology, reading through the text, construing meaning led by the teacher, gaining students’ participation through discussion, role play and performing scene. It should be remembered, however, that this is almost always done in Vietnamese at school rather than as EAL.

**Students’ visions for Shakespeare going forward**

The second part of the vox pop concerned the students’ vision for Shakespeare in Vietnam going forward further into the twenty-first century. A clear majority of students thought that Shakespeare should be taught. Among the students’ envisaged rationales for teaching Shakespeare, the idea of young people gaining vicarious experience of and preparation for ‘romantic love’ was popular, predicated on the verisimilitude of Shakespeare’s characters, relationships and situations, especially the ubiquitous *Romeo and Juliet* (Olive 2016b). Additionally, one student’s rationale for Shakespeare consisted of exposing ‘Asian teenagers’ to ‘moral values’. Although the student did not further define ‘moral values’, their vision fits neatly alongside other respondents’ treatment of Shakespeare as a universal, humanizing force. Balancing this, a handful of students argued for the value of studying Shakespeare in ‘help[ing] students to know more about’ the culture, literature and history of England (Shaaban): they instead conceived of Shakespeare as specifically English, as a form of linguistic, educational and cultural capital that would enable them to communicate transculturally. In terms of operational details, three thought he should be taught to primary school students, the rest divided almost evenly between high school and university students. Two said that ‘age doesn’t matter’, it could be studied as a child or an adult. One student raised considerations of the appropriate age to learn Shakespeare as it relates to (lack of) life- or ‘personal experience’ – as a factor in their vision, linking the experience of ‘complicated feeling’ to being able to ‘relate to’, ‘understand deeply the work’ and ‘the various messages that exist’ therein (see also Korean students in Olive 2015b). Two more suggested that it be optional, guided by the student’s own interest and readiness. Three suggested that Shakespeare should be encountered outside of class as well as within: one of them – in favour of teaching older primary students – suggested drama club as an appropriate space. Such encounters were seen by this student to be more inspirational, encourage independent learning about Shakespeare (and other fields of knowledge), and enable young people to have the chance to ‘grow fond’ of, ‘remember and continue to study’ Shakespeare. There was a discernible emphasis here on stimulating students’ intrinsic motivation to engage with his works, perhaps informed by still fresh memories of which sort of motivation worked best for them at school. Only two students named particular plays as part of their vision. Both identified *Romeo and Juliet*; one added *Hamlet* and *Much Ado About Nothing*. The first two plays have seen professional or amateur theatre productions and films screened in Vietnam in the twenty-first century, which may have contributed to their identification by these students. In terms of what Vietnamese students identify as hurdles for a positive vision and experience of Shakespeare, one specified methods whereby teachers ‘teach everything in the textbook’ as ‘very boring and students are eas[ily lulled]… asleep’. Another commented that ‘in Vietnam, they focus too much on tragedy features which may bore’. It is ambiguous as to whether this is criticism of a perceived dominance of genre studies or in the choice of plays. The latter seems likely given the same student’s praise for the ‘diversity’ of Shakespeare’s writing ‘in a wide variety of genres’. These criticisms foreground the way in which the students’ visions for Shakespeare, their do’s or don'ts, were strongly informed by their own experiences of encountering Shakespeare in formal education.

The considerable, first-hand, usually positive experience of Open University of HCMC students in rehearsing and performing Shakespeare similarly appeared to influence their general approbation of active methods, or ‘creative methods’ as one respondent described them, in the vox pop (Gibson, Stredder). Active methods dominated the students’ visions for Shakespeare in Vietnam. The majority believed that ‘students’ need to play’ Shakespeare’s works, ‘to act out their interesting scenes’, to ‘dramatize’ them or to engage in role play. The rationale for the latter drew strongly on its potential to develop students’ literary critical processes, arguing that it would help students ‘discover his secrets’. This might perhaps be the ‘secrets’ of his success, although a later mention of ‘the main points of his work’ is suggestive of a New Critical emphasis on Shakespeare as yielding up ‘hidden treasure’ under close-reading (McEvoy). Playing scenes was almost unanimously invoked in relation to predicted visceral experiences underpinning or combined with learning: students having or gaining motivation and/or enjoyment, ‘put[ting] themselves into the characters, [to] learn about their feelings’ and forming an ‘emotional connection’ to the works (another student wrote that ‘his amazing story is always full of emotions’.

Somewhat behind active methods in terms of popularity in the students’ visions was a considerable emphasis on Shakespeare’s language and its relation to English today. Students wrote: ‘It’s very interesting to know that many expressions we’re using today are from Shakespeare’s works’; ‘finding Shakespeare in everyday language’ is one of the ‘best way’ to study him, alongside role play; and ‘his creativity in using language… express[es] a master mind’; and ‘his most famous words should be prioritized’ (there could be a spelling mistake here – ‘works’ for ‘words’ – but such errors did not characterize the student’s writing). For another student, ‘analys[ing] his language in his works’ was envisaged as the most desirable and appropriate ‘first’ approach to Shakespeare. This phrase has echoes of early twentieth-century philology and New Critical approaches to the plays (Olive 2015a 58). However, I think these students are less likely to have been directly influenced by their works than via Shakespeare Lives! events and resources. These include the Shakespeare Lives in Words exhibition in Hanoi and HCMC (at the launch of the latter, some of them performed the balcony scene from *Romeo and Juliet*). This contained some material identifying Shakespeare’s supposed facility for neologisms (billed as ‘his most famous words’). Several other activities organized by this English language learning behemoth had a similar focus on Shakespeare’s words: Shakespeare Lives in Sonnets called for Vietnamese competitors to translate Shakespeare’s English into Vietnamese, while Shakespeare Lives in Me centered on self-writing activities, with each competitor submitting a few hundred words describing their feelings and thoughts about a favourite Shakespeare quotation. These students’ emphasis on Shakespeare’s language is also explained by their identity as English as an Additional Language learners: they are gifted and inquisitive multilinguists, taught by yet more talented multilinguists – some of whom, like Trúc Dương (a lecturer at the Open University HCMC, graduate of the MA TESOL at the University of York), have postgraduate degrees in linguistics. Shakespeare’s genius with language is admired and he is widely perceived as having a practical role to play, for these students and their counterparts in East Asia, in their acquisition and use of English which enables them, in the words of one respondent, to ‘recognize his value’ (Lima 2016, Olive 2015b, 2015c, Smyth, Lau and Tso). However, these university students’ visions of pupils getting to revel in Shakespeare’s English implicitly call into question the continued practice of teaching Shakespeare at school with Vietnamese-language instruction and Vietnamese-language texts; positing it as, if not redundant, a starting point for studying Shakespeare rather than the desirable sum experience of him at high school.

In summary, the lack of English-language coverage of teaching Shakespeare in Vietnamese schools should not be mistaken for lack of activity or interest: Shakespeare (read: *Romeo and Juliet)* is routinely, if fleetingly, experienced in Vietnamese high schools. Predictably, where a core curriculum and common textbooks create some consistency in what is taught, in what language, teaching methods offer the main evidence of variety. The university English students cited above envision Shakespeare continuing to be taught (usually) at high school, preferably foregrounding the dramatic and everyday linguistic qualities of the texts. For future researchers, there is great scope to explore the experiences of and visions for Shakespeare of those not subsequently specializing in English literature and language and those living outside the metropoles of Hanoi and HCMC. Such attention would usefully nuance an otherwise easy and attractive conclusion that unhelpfully homogenises Vietnamese experiences and perceptions of studying Shakespeare along global and cosmopolitan lines.

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