Ideas

How translating Shakespeare's plays reveals new ideas — from China to Afghanistan

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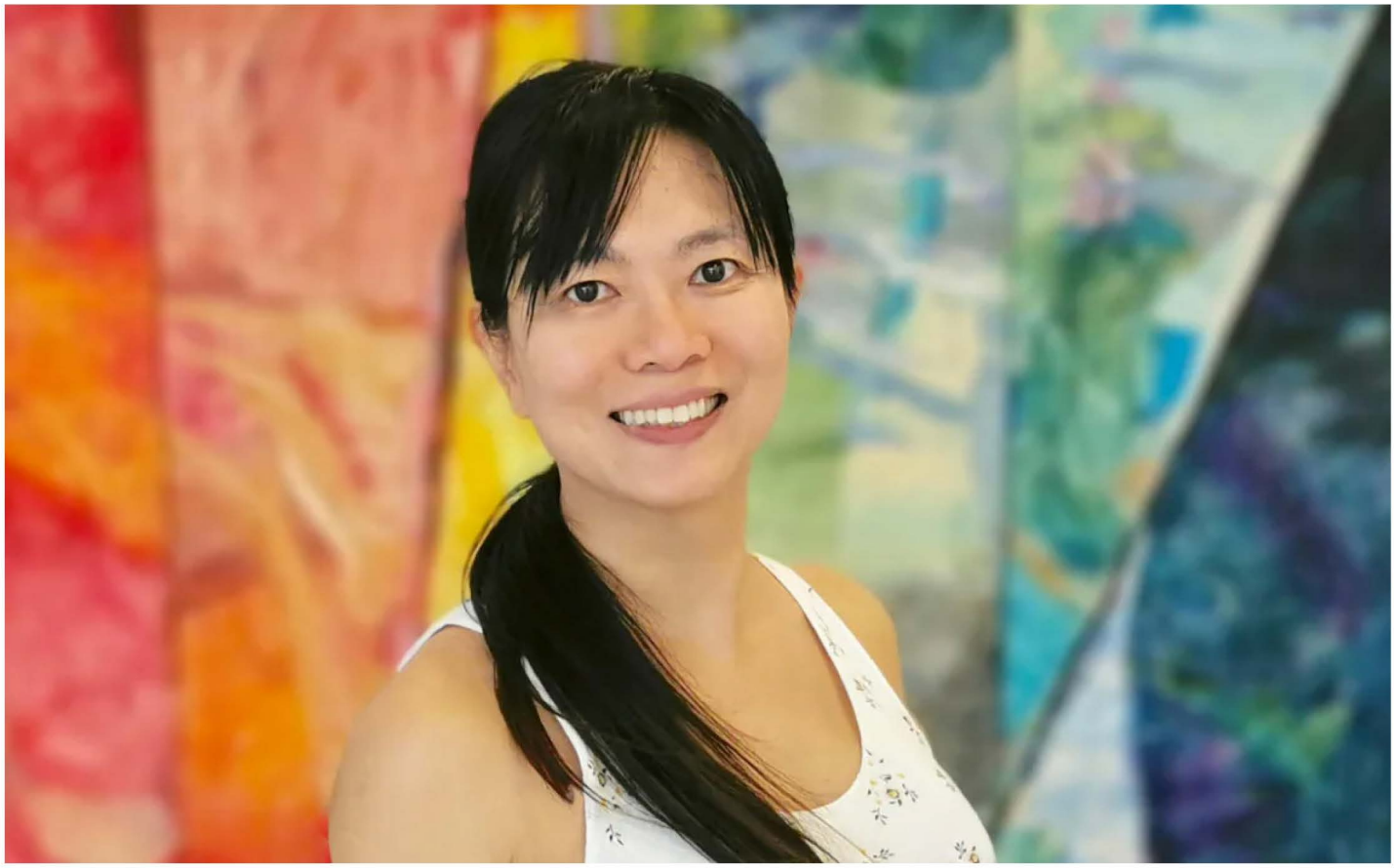
Pauline Holdsworth · Posted: Nov 03, 2021 5:00 PM ET | Last Updated: November 3



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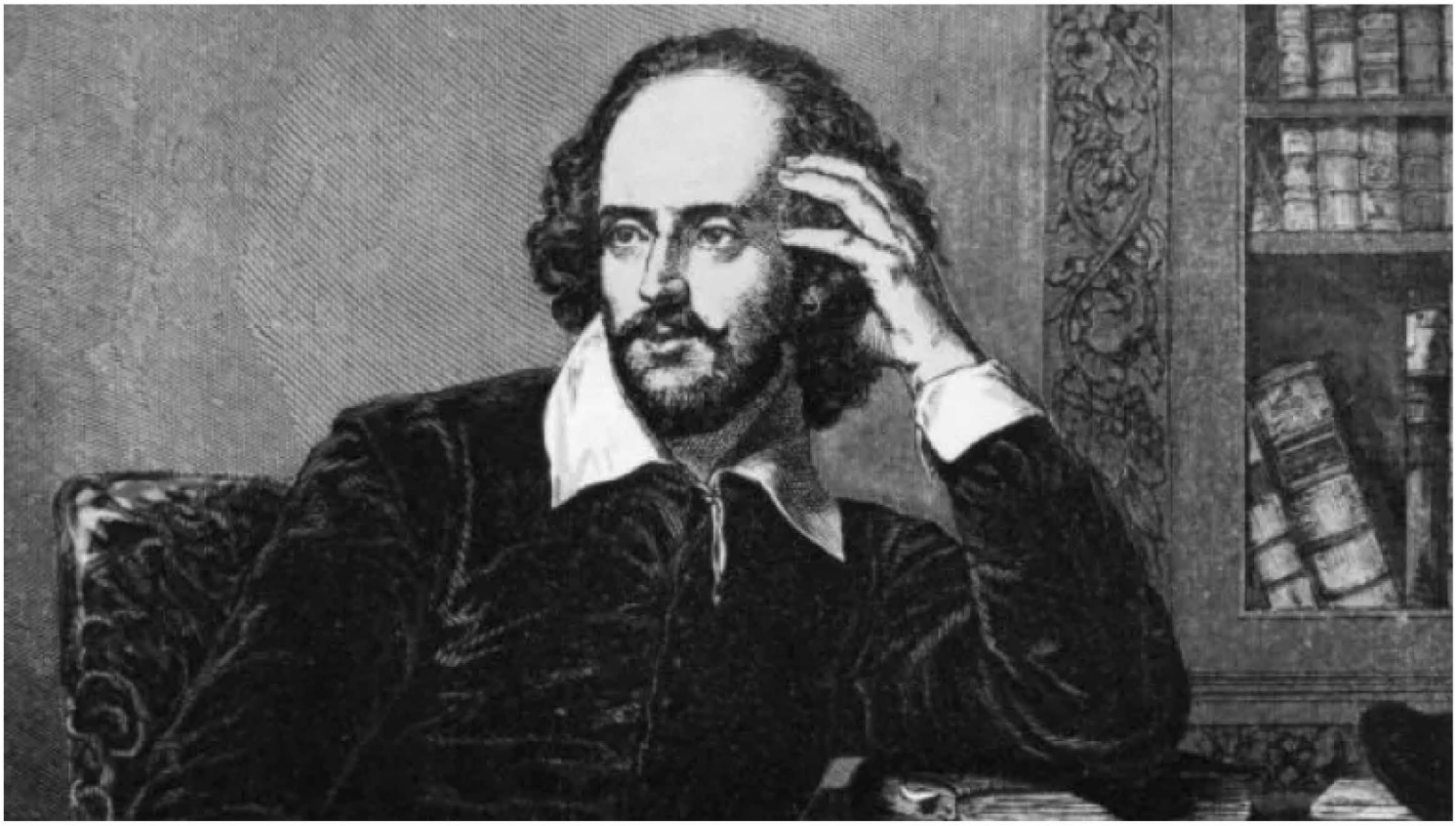

Experts of Shakespeare's work examine what's lost in translation and how translation can shine a new light on the ideas in a familiar story, as part of our series called IDEAS at Stratford. (Hulton Archive/Getty Images)

Shakespeare in Translation

Irena Makaryk calls translation a form of "resurrection."

And in the four centuries since Shakespeare died, he has been resurrected too many times to count.

"With resurrection, we think of becoming something else in an afterlife," said Makaryk, an English professor at the University of Ottawa.

"Essentially, resurrection for Shakespeare means that he has become a global writer. If he weren't translated into all these languages, he would remain an English writer, but he belongs to the world now."

Translation can offer escape and solace, especially during wartime, says Irena Makaryk, editor of Shakespeare in Canada: Remembrance of Ourselves — a collection examining the role that Shakespeare has played in Canada over the past 200 years. (University of Ottawa Press/Yaro Zajac)

A translator has to reach beyond the words to access the ideas and emotions contained in a text, and try to reconfigure them in a new language.

"The task of the translator is, many times, to leave the text aside and then rewrite it with other instruments," said Argentine-Canadian translator and writer Alberto Manguel.

"But that is the essential impossibility of translation, because thinking in one language is not the same as thinking in another," he said.

- **If you watched Squid Game in English, did you really watch Squid Game at all?**

"In fact, the language that we use dictates our thoughts, creates our ideas. We think that we speak a language, but it's the language that speaks us."

So in the process of translation, Shakespeare's plays often take on new resonances and meanings. According to Alexa Alice Joubin, a professor at George Washington University and the author of *Shakespeare in East Asia*, that means translation opens up space for a global conversation about the ideas in Shakespeare's plays — such as political legitimacy, tyranny and justice.

Alexa Alice Joubin says translating literature can feel like a love affair, 'a hot pursuit of a lover's elusive, nodding approval.' (Submitted by Alexa Alice Joubin)

"Through a translation, we can learn a great deal about how others think about the same topics or stories, and we can find kindred spirits. We can actually also rediscover ourselves through translations," said Joubin.

"Very often, the classics need to be re-translated for each generation, because each generation has different concerns, a different understanding of the world."

Hamlet in post-Tiananmen China and occupied Ukraine

To illustrate how different generations and cultures translate the same text in different ways, according to the concerns of the day, the *IDEAS* panel examined Hamlet.

In translation, Hamlet has the potential to become a more politically-charged play, said Joubin. "In English language traditions, people tend to think it's about procrastination," she said.

"In China, the play has been used as a platform to talk about sensitive topics of succession, of revolution, particularly [after the] Tiananmen Square massacre."

A student protestor asking soldiers to leave as crowds of pro-democracy supporters flooded into Tiananmen Square, June 3, 1989. Chinese troops forcibly marched on the square, June 4, 1989, using lethal force to remove protesters. (Catherine Henriette/AFP via Getty Images)

She points to a 1989 translation and production of Hamlet by renowned Chinese theatre director Lin Zhaohua. In his production, three actors played the titular character.

"Essentially, [it was] to say that 'we are all Hamlet '... Every man is interchangeable," she said. "It's a very bleak view of history. No matter which side you are coming from, you [end up] as a victim of larger forces of history."

Lin Zhaohua was able to use a translation of Shakespeare's classic play to send a covert political message — one that might slip past the censors — in a moment when a contemporary play that directly addressed the Tiananmen Square massacre would have been much riskier.

Irena Makaryk pointed to a 1943 production of Hamlet in western Ukraine, which was under Nazi occupation — and simultaneously facing the threat of Soviet occupation.

Soviet artillery and tanks cross a river in advance toward L'viv, Ukraine, circa 1943. (Keystone/Getty Images)

"The actor ... decided to translate ["To be or not to be"] as, "Is it good or evil," because this was an allegorical moment," said Makaryk.

"Ukraine was stuck between the two ideologies of Nazism and the Soviet system, and everyone knew that the country wouldn't survive. Hamlet represented that moment and questioned whether it was better to survive and do nothing or to actively fight."

It's not the only Shakespeare play that has been repurposed and retranslated for political ends.
"Macbeth is a play that lends itself perhaps even more than Hamlet to be performed to the outrage of dictators," said Manguel.

"[During] the Perón dictatorship in Argentina, it was censored. Macbeth was performed in Tunisia very recently."

Argentine-Canadian translator and writer Alberto Manguel sits at the table in the Hotel Dora in Buenos Aires where he used to have dinner with Jorge Luis Borges. 'Borges declared the translator to be the best of readers, because the translator has to go deep into the work and find mechanisms and secrets that the writer perhaps does not know,' Manguel told Ayed. (Philip Coulter/CBC)

- **AUDIO** **Borges' Buenos Aires: The Imaginary City, Part 1**

- AUDIO **Borges' Buenos Aires: The Imaginary City, Part 2**

'The world is rich and beautiful'

Joubin says translation offers a new way to think about Shakespeare — as well as about the world we live in.

"The world is rich and beautiful. Very often people are more entrenched, maybe because of linguistic and cultural limitations. They simply stand at the same spot and look at the world," she said.

"[Then] they figure, maybe I can move an inch. What would it look like from this point of view?"

This is the final episode in this year's edition of *IDEAS* at Stratford, a long-running project produced in collaboration with the Stratford Festival in Ontario. This year, we're exploring what happens when you take classic Shakespeare plays and transport them across time and space.

Guests in this episode:

Alexa Alice Joubin is professor of English, Theatre, International Affairs and East Asian Languages and Cultures at George Washington University. Her books include *Shakespeare in East Asia*. At MIT, she is co-founder and co-director of the open access Global Shakespeares digital performance archive, which includes Shakespeare performances in translation from around the world.

Alberto Manguel is an Argentine-Canadian translator and writer, and a former director of the National Library of Argentina. He now leads the Center for Research into the History of Reading in Lisbon.

Irena Makaryk is Distinguished Professor of English at the University of Ottawa. She studies how different cultures and periods reinterpret, revise, transform, and employ Shakespeare's work, especially in times of political upheaval such as the Russian Revolution, World War Two

and the war in Afghanistan.

** This episode was produced by Philip Coulter and Pauline Holdsworth.*

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