

Michael Dwyer Australian journalists in China

Melinda Harvey Rachel Cusk's new novel

James Ley Lemon-squeezing criticism

Benjamin Huf Cassandras and Covid

Jolley Prize The shortlisted stories

ABR

AUSTRALIAN BOOK REVIEW

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Contested grounds

On *Dark Emu's* view of pre-colonial history

by Stephen Bennetts

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Page 31: Locked bicycle on a Melbourne street, (Dinodia Photos/
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Page 61: Belinda Giblin as Winnie in *Happy Days* (photograph by
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The Bard in East Asia

Exploring the world of non-anglophone Shakespeare

Brandon Chua



Shakespeare and East Asia

by Alexa Alice Joubin

Oxford University Press

£16.99 pb, 272 pp

Shakespeare and East Asia is one of the latest titles released in the Oxford Shakespeare Topics series. Edited by Stanley Wells and Peter Holland, the Oxford University Press series is pitched at the elusive general reader who is seeking a primer on one of the many topics proliferating within the bustling industry of Shakespeare studies. Written by one of the directors of the MIT Global Shakespeares Archive, this book invites readers to think about the significance of Shakespeare's continuing influence on cultural production in the Far East, and how Asian adaptations of his corpus participate in creating a contested image of Asia for audiences both in the region and in the anglophone West. Assembling a varied body of cinematic and theatrical reworkings of Shakespeare from countries like Japan, Korea, China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore, Joubin tells a story about Asian Shakespeares that is also a story about how a particular region has negotiated the imperatives of globalisation and the tacit anglicising effects of global culture.

Joubin deliberately avoids a narrow focus on a particular national tradition or a single language, sacrificing the cohesiveness that a study of, say, Japanese Shakespeares, would have provided. Instead, Joubin proposes a comparative regional approach, assembling a varied body of works from multiple locales, cultures, and languages. Joubin's approach does risk a complacent assumption of continuity and correspondence between the three dominant core cultures of East Asia. As Joubin herself acknowledges, the idea of the region as inherently global and intercultural could be seen as an uncritical endorsement of an 'Asian century' that reduces the region to the interests of finance markets. Joubin's central premise, however, that disparate Asian adaptations of Shakespeare share common ground in that they all stage collective anxieties around processes of globalisation, is a compelling one. It brings cohesion to her analyses of a varied body of films and theatre productions that bear the dual burden of representing Asia back to an anglophone audience frequently

assumed to possess cultural ownership of Shakespeare, as well as of importing the bard as an emblem of Western modernity to viewers within Asia. Asian Shakespeares, for Joubin, inevitably raise questions over the impact that a global modernity has had on local cultures; the terms that enable and constrain intercultural exchange; and the norms that govern how Asia is represented on an anglicised world stage.

Of the intimidatingly long list of productions that Joubin cites, only a handful of adaptations are selected for extended analysis. Joubin's tour of Asian Shakespeares opens in Japan, which Joubin regards as the first major Shakespearean site in East Asia, with the Western canon having circulated among Japanese and foreign students from Korea and China since the early twentieth century. The first chapter surveys the Shakespearean adaptations of Akira Kurosawa and Yukio Ninagawa, paying close attention to their versions of *Macbeth*. Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood* should be familiar to most intermediate students of Shakespeare, and Joubin gives a compelling description of it, through a close comparison with Ninagawa's much-toured stage production of *Macbeth*. Joubin's comparative reading foregrounds the ways in which Shakespeare comes to serve as a catalyst for postwar Japanese directors to revive certain local and traditional performance

practices for a modern audience far removed from these theatrical histories. A second chapter deals with how Shakespeare is used to negotiate national and personal identities in the Sinosphere, and features a compelling account of Anthony Chan's *One Husband Too Many*, a film from pre-handover Hong Kong's golden age of slapstick comedy, about a local director's quixotic attempts to stage *Romeo and Juliet* in the contested spaces of the British colony. Another chapter dwells on Korean cinema's blending of theatrical traditions with elements from a youth-dominated mass culture, including a fascinating account of how gender norms are negotiated through this blend in Lee Joon-ik's Hamletian *The King and the Clown*. The final chapter deals with multilingualism in Asian diasporas and the elevation of English as a marker of progressive modernity, with a reading of Chee Kong Cheah's film *Chicken Rice War*, which retells the story of the clash between the Capulets and the Montagues as one between an anglophone modernity and various non-English linguistic identities in multi-ethnic Singapore.

The book contains many more accounts of productions not mentioned here, although this reader did wish for a more detailed justification of what texts were included. A study like this will inevitably have to make exclusions, but the terms on which they are made could be further elaborated, especially given this book's potential conferring of new life on these productions in the markets of tertiary study. The inclusion of Singapore within 'East Asia', for instance, risks taking the city-state's belonging



Production of Akira Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood* (*Kumonosu-jō*), 1956. (Wikimedia Commons)

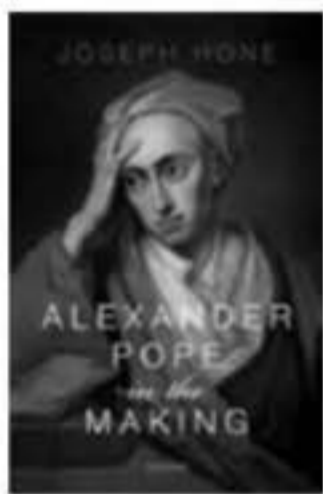
in the Sinophone world for granted and downplaying its contested efforts in establishing a national identity inclusive of its sizeable non-Chinese minorities. The exclusion of other South-East Asian Shakespeares (though *Chicken Rice War's* director was born in Penang), especially given high-profile productions like *Shakespeare Must Die* from Thailand and *Sintang Dalisay* (a Filipino reimagining of Romeo and Juliet in a Muslim community), misses the opportunity to critique claims of Singapore's exemplary representative status in South East Asia made on its behalf by the interests of global financial services. A few mistakes need correction: Otway's *Venice Preserved* dates from 1682, not 1796, which is the publication date of a much later print edition, and the lead character Audrey in *Chicken Rice War* is played by May Yee Lum, rather than May Yee Lam.

LITERARY STUDIES

'This long disease, my life'

A deep dive into the archives

Robert Phiddian



Alexander Pope in the Making

by Joseph Hone

Oxford University Press

£60 hb, 234 pp

If you are looking for the perfect command of voice, Alexander Pope is your poet. It is not just desiccated eighteenth-century rationalists who say this, my Keats-scholar friend Will Christie thinks so too. This is despite the fact that there is zero negative capability in Pope, 'when man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason'. His ironies are precise riddles to be sprung, his judgements instant aphorisms. Pope writes exactly what he means, and it lands exactly on target.

Take Pope's former friend, Joseph Addison. He may have transformed the literary essay in English with the *Spectator*; he may have risen from relative obscurity to be secretary of state under George I; he may have ruled literary London for two decades. All this is as chaff before one of Pope's most clinical couplets: 'Damn with faint praise, assent with civil leer, / And without sneering, teach the rest to sneer' (*Epistle to Dr Arbuthnot*). It has been hopeless triage for Addison's reputation ever since. Perhaps one could admire a proper villain, but so sneaking an Iago can never recover. Any basic primer in poetry will tell you never to repeat a word where you might vary it, but Pope's 'leer, sneer, sneer' riff defies that rule with lethal force. He claims earlier in *Arbuthnot*, his autobiographical epistle of 1735, that he cannot help it:

Why did I write? What sin to me unknown

Joubin ultimately provides a compelling initiation for those seeking a journey into the world of non-anglophone Shakespeares. Asia, where ongoing political, cultural, and economic contestations continue to reshape definitions of the global, will no doubt continue to use Shakespeare to express new self-images to its inhabitants and the rest of the world. The forms of cultural diplomacy between Asia and the rest of the world that the Bard both enables and constrains should be the topic of further study, for which Alexa Alice Joubin provides an accessible entry. ■

Brandon Chua, a PhD from the University of Melbourne, teaches in the School of English at the University of Hong Kong. His research interests include eighteenth-century drama and Shakespearean adaptations. ❖

Dipt me in ink, my parents' or my own?
As yet a child, nor yet a fool to fame,
I lisp'd in numbers, for the numbers came.

Poor Alexander, cursed with the original sin ('my parents' or my own') of genius in poetry! Even as a baby, he 'lisp'd in numbers'. It would be ridiculous vanity if he could not demonstrate its truth in the poise and energy of every line. When Grace Kelly avers in *High Society*, 'I'm sensational, everybody says so', it only works because she palpably is. Thus also for Pope. He was subject to various stigmas – a Catholic born in the year of the Glorious Revolution (1688), with his tiny frame and tubercular spine held up by prostheses throughout 'this long disease, my life'. In poetry he could demonstrate his vigour as one fated to be a literary Achilles, dipped in ink rather than the Styx, by a muse mother rather than Thetis. Only supreme performance vindicates such vanity, and you are only ever as good as your next couplet, but Pope was very, very good.

He wrote nothing serious except in heroic couplets. That looks like a restriction until you experience the tonal range of what Pope can do with those twenty or so syllables. We've seen the easy, personal tone in *Arbuthnot*, capable of being tinged with venom – this was his Horatian voice. From there you can go up to the full Wagnerian symphony and choir of the *Dunciad's* conclusion:

Lo! Thy dread Empire, Chaos! is restor'd;
Light dies before thy uncreating word:
Thy hand, great Anarch! Lets the curtain fall;
And Universal Darkness buries All.

or to the pastoral serenity of *Windsor Forest*:

Here hills and vales, the woodland and the plain,
Here earth and water seem to strive again,
Not Chaos-like together crush'd and bruis'd,
But, as the world, harmoniously confus'd.

Then there is the orientalist parody in Belinda's powder room in the *Rape of the Lock*: