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Shakespeare and East Asia by Alexa Alice Joubin (review)

Andrew Hui

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theater technologies can be used to forward our current understanding of Shakespeare's multivocality.

Shakespeare and East Asia. By ALEXA ALICE JOUBIN. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021. Illus. Pp. xiv + 258.

Reviewed by ANDREW HUI

K-pop “flower boys,” Kabuki, Noh, *anime*, samurai legends, the shamanistic ritual of *keungut* in Jeju island, Cantonese comedy, Chinese *wuxia* and Indonesian *pencak silat*, Tibetan bardo, Beijing opera *jing ju* and *huaju*, the Korean masked-dance *t'alch'um*, hawker centers with their plump chicken-rice: traversing a grand arc of the Pacific rim, Alexa Alice Joubin's *Shakespeare and East Asia* examines Shakespeare adaptation and reception in China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan, South Korea, and Singapore. This authorial and regional conjunction is centrifugal and centripetal. As she explains: “This book is titled *Shakespeare and East Asia*, rather than *Shakespeare in East Asia*, to signal the interplay between the two condensed cultural signifiers and to emphasize a shift away from the linear, one-way-street model of tracing the transplantation of a British ‘giant’ into a colonial cultural context” (6).

In the book's ample engagement with other scholars and current theories of adaptation, it is the very model of synthetic work. The tone is accessible, the scholarship up-to-date, the materials kaleidoscopic, the ideas clearly articulated. Even if at times the book veers toward potted Wikipedian summaries (inevitable, given its immense range) and is studded with loads of self-citations, teachers and students alike will find an abundance of materials to enrich their understanding. In short, for folks interested in the global circulation of Shakespeare and East Asia, this is it: make this your first-stop reference. Reading its numerous citations will send you on many amusing quests of endless googling.

The story of Shakespeare and East Asia, Joubin writes, is “a nonlinear, rhizomatic, transgenre network of transcultural flows” (193). That said, her presentation is for the most part admirably linear and lucid. The sign-postings start with an analytic table of contents, which clearly identifies the plays, media and genres, and directors to be discussed in each chapter. Chapter 1 launches with Japan, treating two major players: the cineast Akira Kurosawa and the theater director Yukio Ninagawa. Joubin examines how Kurosawa in *Throne of Blood* (1957) and *Ran* (1985) transplanted *Macbeth* and *King Lear* to the honor-soaked landscape of feudal Japan. Ninagawa is equally celebrated at home and abroad: he has directed all of Shakespeare's plays. Joubin indeed shows how

cultural exchange can be a two-way street: as Kurosawa was inspired by Shakespeare, in turn, he inspired Steven Spielberg, Martin Scorsese, and George Lucas. In Ninagawa's use of stylized Kabuki, Noh, and Bunraku, Joubin recognizes a Shakespeare that has undergone a "naturalized filtration through realism and naturalism" (58).

Chapter 2 uses "remediation" in two senses: first, as translating the "media" of theater to film and to other genres, and second, as the reparative mission of social justice—addressing personal trauma and political dissent. In *The Banquet*, for example, the Ophelia character displays a more powerful sense of agency than in its source, while Michael Almereyda's *Hamlet* (2000) has a video clip of Thich Nhat Hanh teaching "interbeing" played in the background of the prince's dingy apartment. In her account, *The Prince of the Himalayas* (2006)—made in Tibet, played by Tibetans, and in Tibetan, directed by a Chinese-American—probes deeply into the region's independence movement. Likewise, the realpolitik in *Cymbeline* is allegorized as Sino-Taiwanese frictions during the 2014 Sunflower Student Movement. "Sinophone Shakespeares have become strangers at home" (105).

Classics are classics because they are malleable: they are products of their time and yet transcend it. This basic proposition is reaffirmed in Chapter 3, which considers the "polyphonic ecosystem" (106) of South Korean productions in Seoul, London, and Edinburgh. *King Uru* (2001) fuses narrative elements from the shamanistic myth of an abandoned princess and Cordelia. The 2005 sensation *The King and the Clown* is an experiment to explore transgender sexuality of K-pop epebes (*kkonminam*) refracted through the fluid erotics of *Twelfth Night*. When it comes to multicultural Shakespeare, the question of language is paramount. A pearl-clutching purist might decry: but what would happen to Shakespeare when he is divested of the glories of the English language? Chapter 4 examines directors who confront this question head-on. In the rather demotic *Chicken Rice War* (2000), a petty feud between two hawker stalls selling the beloved Singaporean dish while their children rehearse *Romeo and Juliet* is an occasion to think about sociolinguistic differences on the island. Ong Keng Sen's multilingual *Lear* (1997) has the king scold in Japanese while the daughters reply in Mandarin and Thai. For Joubin, Ong sets up a multilingual *Lear* to correct the misconception that Asian languages are all mutually intelligible. It seems to me that Ong is highlighting the intelligibility of *any* communication—from actor to actor, actors to audience, Shakespeare and Ong, and Ong and us. This is very much like what Wong Kar-wai does in his films *Happy Together* (1997) and *In the Mood for Love* (2000), where the characters speak Mandarin and Cantonese to each other, Chinese dialects that are almost mutually unintelligible. Erotic sentiments are hard to decipher, yet how much more so when there is a dialectic

gulf that separates lovers? Joubin's polyglottal skills are displayed most impressively when she performs deft close-analyses—one only wishes there were more. At one point, she says that the 1992 Taiwanese parody "*Shamlet* is rife with ingeniously scripted errors" (99). It would have been helpful had she been able to unpack a little more of its *calembours*.

Unity *and* diversity, traditional *and* innovation, center *and* periphery—these are the oppositions that govern any literary tradition, whether they be Russian, Mongolian, or Korean. What Joubin has shown—with brilliant virtuosity—is how constructed, fluid, but nevertheless necessary these categories are. In sum, much depends on the conjunction "and." *Anthony and Cleopatra, Romeo and Juliet, Troilus and Cressida, Venus and Adonis . . . Shakespeare and East Asia*. In short, the metaphysical sandwich that encloses "and" is the driving dialectics of thinking itself. Joubin has proposed for us a dazzling itinerary across these unpathed waters, undreamed shores, traversing states unborn and accents yet unknown.

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