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Shakespeare and East Asia

By Alexa Alice Joubin

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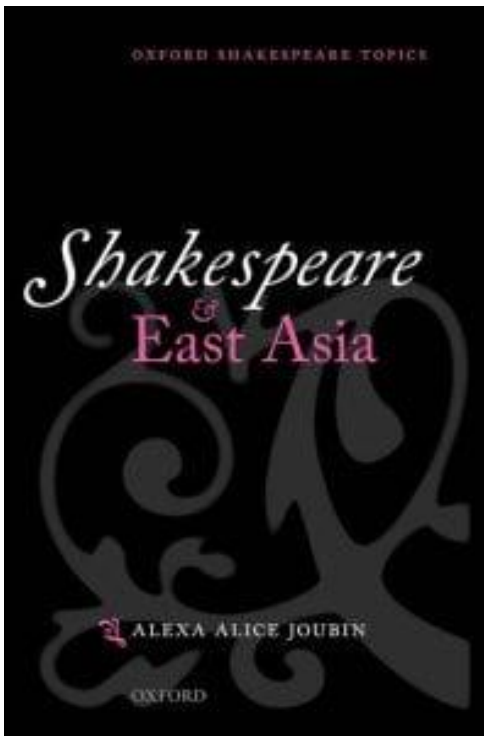
Alexa Alice Joubin, *Shakespeare and East Asia*

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As one of the most frequently performed playwrights in East Asia, Shakespeare has constituted an exemplary site to observe modes of cross-cultural exchanges and cross-media appropriations. Alexa Alice Joubin's new book, *Shakespeare and East Asia*, is a scholarly masterpiece that contributes a nuanced and critically sophisticated understanding of these issues. Situating Asian adaptations of Shakespeare and Western performances with Asian themes in a post-national space of exchange, this book traces "shared and unique patterns in post-1950s appropriations of Asian and Western motifs across theatrical and cinematic genres" (4) and focuses on both the aesthetic and social functions of performances.



Studies of cultural globalization have often been bound by the pattern of linear, one-way transplantation of western cultural products into a colonial or postcolonial cultural context. However, Joubin aims to break down "the false dichotomy between the native and the foreign" and departs from the nation-centered approach to emphasize "the connections between distinctive and often conflicting interpretations of 'Shakespeare' and 'Asia' in different cultural and visual contexts" (12). In addition to describing global Shakespeares in Asian and inter-Asian contexts, Joubin also draws attention to how Asian interpretations of Shakespeare have had an impact on American and European performance cultures. As the author cogently points out, "[t]he clashes

and confluences of Asia and Shakespeare give a ‘local habitation’ to the ‘airy nothing’ of globalization” (6). Moreover, Joubin uses “Asian Shakespeare” as a critical category to develop “a site-specific critical vocabulary to address the epistemological foundation of histories of cultural globalization” (10). The book treats cross-media and cross-generic adaptations of Shakespeare’s plays from Japan, Korea, the Chinese Mainland, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, as well as the US and UK, as “a body of works” rather than separate, individual stories about cross-cultural encounter. Therefore, Asian Shakespeares constitute a complex and coherent system of signification that can contribute to global cultural studies.

The phrase “Asian Shakespeares” is also useful for characterizing “the second phase of global Shakespeare performance,” which has entered “a post-national space” in which identities are often blurred by international performers, tourist audiences, transnational corporate sponsors, and organizers of international festivals. The deterritorializing and reterritorializing effects of performance has rendered notions of cultural origins and politically defined geographies less and less relevant, because neither could speak to “the realities of globalized art” (11). Joubin’s argument about performance in post-national spaces leads to her critique of the notion of “Compulsory Realpolitik,” which calls for an understanding of non-Western works that goes beyond interpretations of the testimonial value of their engagement with local politics.

Shakespeare and East Asia consists of an introduction, four thematic chapters, and an epilogue, moving from formalistic and sociological criticism to reception studies and the politics of multilingualism. Chapter 1 focuses on the Japanese filmmaker Akira Kurosawa’s incorporation of the traditional Japanese theatrical elements into his cinematic adaptations of Shakespearean works and the Japanese director Yukio Ninagawa’s use of cinematic quality in his stage productions of Shakespearean works. This chapter highlights “formalistic innovations in sound and spectacle” through developing new methodologies to analyze the aural, musical, and visual components and compositions in Kurosawa’s and Ninagawa’s works. Both directors have played vital roles in internationalizing Asian Shakespeares, and their works represent aspects of intraregional cultural flows within East Asia and in East Asian–Western cultural exchanges.

Chapter 2 examines the ideological investments in art’s remedial functions in the Sinophone world through case studies from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and China. These case studies include two adaptations of *Hamlet*, Feng Xiaogang’s 冯小刚 *The Banquet* (夜宴, 2006) and Lee Kuo-hsiu’s 李國修 stage parody *Shamlet* (莎姆雷特), which has been performed continuously since 1994. This chapter also shows how theater operates within the cinematic space of the Hong Kong comedy film *One Husband Too Many* (一妻兩夫, 1988, directed by Anthony Chan 陳友), which includes a performance of *Romeo and Juliet* that showcases the negotiation of divergent cultural values. In this chapter, Joubin highlights the intersections of form and ideology, namely, how formalistic features were brought to bear on the ideological purchase of adaptations.

Chapter 3 builds on the foundation of formalistic and ideological criticism in chapters 1 and 2 to examine the metacritical question of the production and reception of adaptations. Turning to South Korea, this chapter employs polyphony as a theoretical framework to interpret parallel and conflicting voices from shamanistic traditions, Shakespearean narratives, and global receptions of Korean productions. Comparing intercultural performance to “listening to interweaving parts in a fugue, a contrapuntal musical piece that introduces a melody through one instrument and then develops that same melody through other instruments successively” (106), Joubin suggests echoes between cultures and what Umberto Eco calls “aberrant decoding—the phenomenon where the receiver interprets a message differently from the intention of the sender” (120)—can be productive and instructive in adaptation studies. One of the case studies is *The King and The Clown* (dir. Lee Joon-ik, 2005), a film that features a Hamletian narrative of two fifteenth century traveling players in Korea. Joubin argues that the film creates a reflexive space to observe the filmmaking on its own terms as well as traditional Korean puppetry and cross-gender theatrical performance. Moreover, the chapter also analyzes the

British reception of Oh Tae-suk's South Korean productions, *Romeo and Juliet* (2006) in London and *The Tempest* (2011) in Edinburgh. Joubin highlights the rise of Shakespearean theatre as a global genre when Asian theaters were made legible at international festivals through Shakespearean performance.

Chapter 4 continues this line of inquiry about multilingualism in diasporic adaptations by focusing on a Singapore comedy film, *Chicken Rice War* (dir. Chee Kong Cheah, 2000), which parodies the theme of an ancient feud in *Romeo and Juliet* and thematizes vocal disability. Set in twenty-first-century Singapore, the film dramatizes the rivalry between two families who own adjacent chicken rice stalls and the romance between their son and daughter, who end up dating at the same time as they play Romeo and Juliet in a college production. In her analysis of the tension between stage craft and film craft in *Chicken Rice War*, Joubin critiques Singapore's appropriation of multilingualism and global teen culture in its multiracial policies. This chapter further explores the dilemma of intercultural identity in the Asian diaspora and in the interstitial space among languages.

Shakespeare and East Asia is notable for its open-ended thinking. Joubin encourages other types of interpretation: "[t]here are a multitude of approaches to Shakespeare and East Asia, and this book offers but one possible path through the historical material. Readers are encouraged to explore the connections across these works and languages" (16). The book also offers several reader-friendly features, such as a Chronology, Glossary, and Further Readings, as well as both a concise and expanded version of the Table of Contents. Furthermore, the Table of Contents usefully lists all the texts and films under discussion.

This thought-provoking, meticulously researched, and thoughtfully constructed study maps the richness and complexity of the East Asian contributions to the rise of global Shakespeare as a prominent genre and offers a renewed and illuminating understanding of the tension between cultural homogenization and heterogenization in global communities and calls for "unsettling assumptions about the stability of Shakespeare as a textual and verbal presence and about Asia as a privileged, unified visual sign" (20). Joubin has done a marvelous job in combining archival research and acute cultural analysis with sophisticated theoretical insights. Covering a wide array of genres and localities, this wonderful book will further enable a deeper understanding of the complexity, diversity, dynamics, and dialogue, as well as the ambiguity and instability, within cross-cultural encounters in various locations and sites in the age of cultural globalization and post-national conditions. Moreover, Joubin also recently edited *Sinophone Adaptations of Shakespeare* (Palgrave, 2022), an anthology of English translations of seven Sinophone versions of Shakespeare's tragedies *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, and *King Lear*, which will serve as an engaging teaching resource for Sinophone studies. *Shakespeare and East Asia* will make an intellectually stimulating read for those who are interested in Shakespeare Studies, East Asian performance culture, adaptation and film studies, Sinophone studies, inter-Asia cultural studies, as well as cross-cultural studies in general.

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