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978-0-521-51552-8 - Shakespeare in Asia: Contemporary Performance

Edited by Dennis Kennedy and Yong Li Lan

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## CHAPTER I

*Introduction: Why Shakespeare?**Dennis Kennedy and Yong Li Lan*

This book treats contemporary Shakespeare performance in Asia from theoretical and historical perspectives: it is interested in how and why Shakespeare operates on the stage, in film, and in other performative modes in regions of the world that have no overwhelming reason to turn to him. The essayists represented here offer questions about cultural difference and cultural value, appropriation and dissemination, corporeal and intellectual adaptation, and the ways in which Asia is part of and simultaneously stands aloof from global civilization. Much has happened on planet Shakespeare since 1990. For our purposes the most important development has been a notable increase in Shakespeare performance in surroundings alien to the traditions of the main English-speaking nations, some of which has been exported to the West, prompting corresponding expansion in the international critical attention those productions have received in the popular press and in the academy. The collapse of the former Soviet empire and its satellite states, a major increase in globalized communications and marketing, political and economic migration, business and touristic travel, and the internationalizing of stock exchanges, among other issues, have combined to make many parts of the world aware of cultural products previously unknown or undervalued, or prompted re-evaluations of work already known.

Some of this has been connected to the result of the globalizing of American movies and television, but it has affected Shakespeare as well. The surprising number of major Shakespeare films, starting with Kenneth Branagh's *Henry V* in 1989, many of them produced by Hollywood or with Hollywood money, relying on noted stars, and achieving wide international distribution, vastly expanded audiences for the works of the most famous writer in history. On the theatrical level, despite reductions in public subsidy, arts festivals have expanded in number and in the quantity of non-western Shakespearean productions, playing on a double marketability for their international audiences: the name brand of

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Shakespeare and the performance of the exotic. We will have more to say about these conditions of globalized postmodernity shortly; for now we only need to highlight that these years have seen intense changes in the reception of Shakespeare around the world.

SHAKESPEARE AND ASIA: LANGUAGE, TRANSLATION,  
DISLOCATION

Kennedy's collection *Foreign Shakespeare: contemporary performance* (1993) was an early part of that trend, a work that set out to investigate the circumstances and paradoxes of representing Shakespeare's plays in theatrical, critical, and cultural conditions substantially different from the traditions and tendencies of performance in the 'home countries', the major English-speaking nations.<sup>1</sup> Its main argument was that the anglo-centric approach to the dramatist has been a serious limitation to understanding his larger significance in world culture. Of course Shakespeare was an English writer, who appeared at a crucial moment in the foundation of England as a modern nation-state, then busy expanding its markets and its borders, and as long as England and the English language last he is likely to be claimed by some people as indicative or illustrative of Englishness, whatever that may mean. Given that the care and feeding of Shakespeare's reputation in the twentieth century and beyond have chiefly been in the hands of scholars located in university departments of English, and in the hands of university-educated theatre directors (like those at the Royal Shakespeare Company) with an equal commitment to English literature and the English language, it is not startling that Shakespeare would continue to be valued for his linguistic virtues. Nothing wrong with that; there is no disputing that the marvels of his vernacular dialogue, even in heavily edited versions of the plays, grant a special, originary status to their performance in English. But the patterns of the institutionalization of Shakespeare usually imply, even when they do not directly state, that converting the texts into other languages – not to mention theatrical conversion to other cultural milieus – results in a lesser product, imperfect, if not aberrant, in tongue. To put this another way, for many commentators the value of Shakespeare is essentially contained in the words he wrote, even when it is recognized that those words were written as notes for actors with humanly imperfect memories to deliver as personages in a dramatic action, and were often received in unreliable printed forms.

What happens when Shakespeare is performed without his language? Whatever the linguistic losses that accompany translation, for theatre and

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film there have been significant gains. Conversion of the plays into contemporary English is not really tolerated in English-speaking countries, an issue that deserves more theoretical attention, but translation into contemporary dialogue is the norm elsewhere, the usual starting point, resulting in a much more direct audience understanding. When actors speak Shakespeare in a language colloquially shared with spectators – the condition of the performance of most plays and films in history – his archaic verse is transformed into new writing, without the interruption of archaic English, which demands that we engage in a form of mental translation in order to comprehend. In English *Hamlet* is a series of well-known quotations, in Chinese it is a new play. Further gains include a more easily achievable social and political topicality, often leading to radical appropriation in acting or setting (once the language has been translated, it seems easier to adapt Shakespeare to overtly contemporary circumstances or local history); and the replacement of the original cultural context with sometimes remarkable inventions, often visual in nature (perhaps in part as compensation for the loss of the original language). As Salman Rushdie has written, ‘It is normally supposed that something always gets lost in translation. I cling obstinately to the notion that something can be gained.’<sup>2</sup>

Despite Rushdie’s proposal, not all commentators and spectators admire substantial Shakespearean amendments and some worry that when his text is aggressively transformed into a new language and a radically unfamiliar performative mode, something essential in Shakespeare disappears. A more disturbing worry is the idea that there is something essentially ‘Shakespearean’ in Shakespeare: putting aside the tautology, what do we mean when we cite his name? Do we refer to the man, the actor, the theatre manager, the writer, the cultural entrepreneur, the financial speculator, the country landowner? Or to the printed text and its reproduction in history? Or to a nationalist application, an imperial product, an ensign of high culture? Or to live performance, film, TV, the internet, popular usages, and commercial appropriations? An academic enterprise, an industrious system of interpretation, an object of study, examination, and certification? A touristic and saleable commodity? These potential meanings combine to make a signifier that is greater than their sum: when we call on Shakespeare to do us service we speak of a phenomenon rather than a man and his works, and almost necessarily allude to an icon, even an idol. Are the meanings the same across the globe? Does Shakespeare on stage, on film, in a book, in a lecture, or in an advertisement invoke the same referent everywhere?

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Obviously not. Nowhere is the difference more apparent than in live shows, where local cultural and social conditions extensively affect the nature of representation. The condition of the bodies of actors, the styles of costuming and *mise-en-scène*, the pre-existence of indigenous forms, the habits and social circumstances of the audience, the cost of attending a presentation, the position of theatre in the larger culture – all of these variants play a large part in how we define and understand Shakespeare, and they are remarkably changed by place. One of the results of the universalizing inclination in Shakespeare criticism in the past was the obscuring of reception difference; in an urge to make Shakespeare appear accessible, instructive, and edifying, critics sometimes ignored or seriously underestimated the chasm that opens up in geographic transference. No one doubts that even in England the meaning of Shakespeare is vastly different today than in London in the sixteenth century, and the greater the cultural difference the greater the reception difference. It is one thing to produce *Romeo and Juliet* in Berlin, where despite the altered language and dissimilarity in political history the German audience is likely to read the ending as appallingly tragic, in a manner similar to an English audience, based on shared ideas inherited from the Judeo-Christian tradition and a common European history. But it is quite another to produce the play in Tokyo, where the dual suicide might well be seen as socially acceptable, an admirable solution to an impossible problem, not so much tragic as honourable, and, since there is a long Japanese tradition of suicide plays, unsurprising or expected. In Christian Europe suicide is, historically speaking, a mortal sin, a terrifying betrayal of God's will that brings eternal damnation, as Ophelia's death is treated by the 'churlish priest' in *Hamlet*. But in Buddhist Japan suicide can be an optimistic act, the lovers killing themselves in the hope of rebirth in a better world, as in Chikamatsu's *Love Suicides at Sonezaki* (1703), his *Love Suicides at Amijima* (1721), and a number of other plays by him and others.

That is where this volume starts. If German or French or Russian versions of Shakespeare necessarily call upon a cultural context different from and sometimes at odds with the English context or a wider anglophone one, then how vastly different Shakespeare will appear in Asia, where much of the reference of the plays is strange, incomprehensible, or even spurious. Except in some countries with heavy colonial histories, which create separate and complicated issues of transmission and cultural struggle, in Asia the foundations of Shakespeare's work will be imperfectly perceived or irrelevant. Christianity, early modern humanism, theatrical methods, rhetorical verse, character psychology – not to mention the

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antiquated English of the original and the history of its reception – are not matters to be taken for granted. Of course some of these issues are imperfectly perceived in the West too, even in England, but with Shakespeare in Asia the degree of difference is so great that it constitutes a distinct level of understanding. Yet despite the disparities, in the period since the Second World War Shakespeare on stage and in the study has steadily grown in importance in Asia.

The natural question is why. Before we can consider that it is necessary to mark further distinctions, this time among the myriad nations and billions of people who make up what we call Asia. Not surprisingly, even the term Asia is challenging, having effectively been created by Europeans to signal difference. ‘Asia’ and ‘Orient’ have a deeply problematic history, as Edward Said has taught us, and even terms like ‘West’ and ‘East’ are both imprecise and fluid in meaning, their usage as dependent on political conditions as geographical ones, and their cartographic point of reference usually European. The helpful three-fold subdivisions in common use, East Asia, Southeast Asia, and South Asia, were invented in the Cold War period to assist US foreign policy seeking to define and control spheres of influence. (Interestingly the term ‘West Asia’ commonly used in South Asia to describe the Middle East, has not been adopted in most western countries.) A cursory glance at an atlas will show that the areas that make up the continent of Asia do not form a single landmass and are much, much larger than other continents. Asian countries contain almost three-quarters of the world’s population. Using estimated statistics for the year 2007 provided by the United Nations, out of a total world population of about 6.671 billion, China (1.329 billion) and India (1.169 billion and growing rapidly) together held approximately 38 per cent of the world’s people. For comparison, the next largest nation, the United States, had 306 million, followed by Indonesia at 232 million, Brazil at 192 million, Pakistan at 164 million, Bangladesh at 159 million, Nigeria at 148 million, Russia at 142 million, and Japan at 128 million.<sup>3</sup>

This is hardly news, but it helps us to see that ‘Asia’ is enormous in size and, even as it will be used in this book, partly a fiction. Harish Trivedi gave a valuable reminder about the issue of magnitude when he noted that perhaps only five per cent of the people of India can read English with sufficient competence to understand Shakespeare, a minuscule and highly elite minority – but that amounts to 50 million people, the approximate population of England.<sup>4</sup> We hasten to add that ‘India’ itself is a bit of a fiction as a nation. A land of twenty-three official languages (none of them, including Hindi, universally spoken) and copious ethnic groups,

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religious communities, and cultures, India cannot be said to contain a unified approach to Shakespeare any more than it does to theatre in general. And one could extend this point to other nations as well, including China and Indonesia, where numerous cultural traditions frequently clash with nationalism or innovation and where some social structures are in tension with global commerce. Similarly, it is important to say that, unlike the European Union, Asia does not comprise a single market of competing regions. Its countries definitely do not share a cultural economy except as part of an international one, as in arts festivals. Though until recently Japan dominated Asia financially, and though Japan, only one-ninth the size in population, produces more Shakespeare than India, its productions are more likely to be seen in the West than in the rest of Asia and thus cannot be said to dominate an Asian market or exert a greater influence on other Asian practitioners than western models.

We do not attempt here to be all-inclusive or balanced in terms of geographical coverage. That would be impossible in a single volume and a number of recent studies have looked in detail at specific national uses of Shakespeare in Asia.<sup>5</sup> There is, however, a further and more compelling reason to avoid the appearance of the kind of comprehensiveness associated with the academic 'area studies' model that has dominated comparative thinking about Asian literature and art. As applied to non-western Shakespeare performances, area studies derive from a set of assumptions which are part of a cultural anthropology of theatre that shuttles between two fixed poles: a) the south pole, as it were, which presents 'foreign' cultures as pre-modern essence, as fixed cultural entities; b) the north pole, which presents 'Shakespeare' as institutionalized and mediated through western canonical values pertaining to theatre and textuality. Such an approach seeks to capture significant moments of individual and cultural reproduction of Shakespeare yet is fundamentally limited to the western imperialism underlying anthropology. The mapping of an area in terms of its culture, authors, or directors, and artistic works is predicated upon a supposedly objective overview position, which in this case is actually an anglocentric outlook that the centre is Shakespeare's original text, whatever 'original' might mean these days. An area studies approach consequently can lead commentators inappropriately to extend accepted forms of Shakespeare's meaning and meaningfulness into modes of production in other cultures, and to annexe the initiatives of contemporary directors as a corollary of Shakespeare's authority (as W. B. Worthen<sup>6</sup> has shown in the case of anglophone productions).

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## A TOPOGRAPHY OF ASIAN SHAKESPEARE

So if Asia presents us with a large set of nations, languages, and cultures that are marked by difference from the West and from each other, what caused so many of them to discover or stumble upon Shakespeare? The answer is not simple nor are the reasons even roughly the same, but while resisting any universalizing thinking, we present three ways of looking at the question. They are not mutually exclusive, nor are they necessarily identified with particular locations; some of them make sense only when seen in the light of others. The explanations we propose are nationalist appropriation, colonial instigation, and intercultural revision.

By *nationalist appropriation* we do not mean that a government imported Shakespeare for affairs of state, but rather that a nationalist agenda existed that found profit in the dramatist. The most obvious example of this actually occurred in Europe, in the German-speaking lands in the late eighteenth century, when Goethe and Schiller, among others, saw an opportunity to create a German literature, a national theatre, and ultimately a unified nation through Shakespeare. In Asia, the first case of the appropriative mode occurred in Japan at the end of the nineteenth century. Here the state's authority was more intrusive, though in the end the reforms were carried through by persons committed to artistic development. After the Meiji Restoration of 1868 the government pursued an active policy of westernization that affected many aspects of life, including cultural affairs, the object being to create a Japanese version of European high culture not so much in imitation, as is often mentioned in the West, but rather as an edifying parallel that would demonstrate that Japan was ready to join the club of powerful nations.

With the exception of Noh, which had been for centuries supported by aristocratic interests but now had fallen on hard times, Japanese theatre was a thoroughly popular, unsophisticated affair with a set of unruly spectator conventions that were considered tasteless by officials and the upper classes. The first moves to align the theatre to what government interests thought was respectable European playgoing were reforms to Kabuki, but at about the same time the idea of drama as reputable art began to enter the minds of some reform-minded people, chiefly through the work of Tsubouchi Shoyo (1859–1935), a university lecturer who published a pioneering essay in 1885 claiming high-art status for literature and drama.<sup>7</sup> Though he was a little slow to realize his own radical implications, Tsubouchi, Osanai Kaoru (1881–1928), and others, created the Shingeki or 'New Theatre' movement that brought European plays,

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staging methods, new acting, and the idea of the director to Japan in the early twentieth century. Shingeki remained the dominant modern mode until the 1960s. Along with an early interest in the realist and symbolist plays of Ibsen, Chekhov, and Gorky, Shakespeare became a major dramatist of the new theatre, chiefly through the translations by Tsubouchi, who began with *Hamlet* in 1909 and published the first complete Japanese translation of the plays in 1928. Thus unlike Europe and America, where Shakespeare remains the ultimate classic playwright, in Japan his introduction was part of the reform movement, allied with industry and open markets as an exemplary ‘contemporary’ writer, driven by the national project of modernization.

In China the use of Shakespeare was considerably different; nonetheless it directly followed the political fortunes of the nation. Though some minor examples of translation and theatrical adaptation occurred in the early twentieth century, an anti-western policy ensured that Shakespeare was ignored until after the Communist Revolution of 1949. Literary scholars then began to attend to his work because ‘the elder brother’, the Soviet Union, had established his importance as a prevision of socialist humanism. Chinese scholars, taking a parallel Marxist approach, were concerned chiefly with audience. Bian Zhilin, the leading Shakespearean of the period, concluded in 1956 that Shakespeare ‘had written for the people, not for the ruling class, and that Shakespeare opposed the feudal system in the early part of his career and exposed the evils of capitalism in the later part’.<sup>8</sup> Political urgency at the onset of the Cultural Revolution in 1966 caused Shakespeare to disappear completely, along with all foreign literature and art which was banned as ‘feudal, bourgeois, or revisionist’. Shakespeare did not reappear until after 1976, and then slowly, his rehabilitation complete in time for the first Chinese Shakespeare Festival in 1986, which took place in Shanghai and Beijing. His Chinese fortunes have continued to be deeply affected by official political and economic policies.

*Colonial instigation* is clear in India, where Shakespeare arrived in the baggage of empire. But it would be misleading to imply that the colonial power somehow commanded its subject people to appreciate the English national poet; as with most colonial cultural affairs, Shakespeare was more subtly, less deliberately, and not very deeply inserted into local life.<sup>9</sup> Further, because of India’s size, variety, and the strength of its religious and caste systems, centralized control was always less than successful on both the political and social levels. If a single mandate existed in the two centuries of the British Raj – and there is considerable doubt that it ever did – it was connected more to a policy of integration



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and interdependence than to military or imperial rule. The Empire began with and maintained a ruthless mercantile purpose, and, putting aside Victorian belief in progress and moral responsibility, the imported legal, social, economic, religious, educational, bureaucratic, and military procedures were designed to maintain and protect British interests in trade and industry. Yet despite subcontinental complexities, we can make a few generalized comments about Shakespeare's entrance that reveal huge differences from the Japanese and Chinese situations. First, Shakespeare was not presented as a conductor of modernity but as part of a general project of edification, of more use in schooling than as entertainment. Second, because of the significance of English in the process of dominance, Shakespeare was a conduit of the stability of the conqueror's mental landscape, a splendour that could be properly accessed not through translation but through knowing his language. Third, there being no stable movement to modernize (i.e. westernize) Indian theatre, Shakespeare was made available as an example of English culture, and by implication of its superiority, for those Indians who saw some form of profit in its performance.

The first importations of Shakespeare were imperialist, with British actors, often amateur, performing for the ruling class and educated subalterns in Bombay and Calcutta as early as the 1770s. But interest soon widened to the Indian bourgeoisie, who adopted the colonists' edification initiatives, securing their dominance. For example, the Hindu Theatre of Calcutta, the first Bengali playhouse, opened in 1831 with a double bill of scenes from *Julius Caesar* and an English translation of a classic Sanskrit play, and European forms of theatre began to spread widely, chiefly through the commercial 'Parsi theatres' that originated in Bombay and toured widely, performing in English or one of the Indian languages. The fact that these and other theatres often performed Shakespeare, according to Ania Loomba, 'is merely another of colonial India's many ironies'.<sup>10</sup> Intriguingly this kind of colonial Shakespeare continued well after independence, most famously with the 'Shakespeare wallah', Geoffrey Kendal, who performed Shakespeare with British actors all over South Asia and across all classes until the early 1960s; and then with various instances of Indian productions in a neocolonial mould, some of which survive today. Some of the most provocative negotiations with this history of Shakespeare performance were conducted by situating the new medium of Indian cinema in tension with the Shakespeare in the theatre or in schools, as in James Ivory's *Shakespeare Wallah* (1965) and Aparna Sen's *36 Chowringhee Lane* (1981), as discussed in chapter 5.

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We must also mention the politically appropriative method of Utpal Dutt, a Bengali actor and director who began with Kendal in 1947 but soon rejected his own western education. ‘The fact that he could recite Virgil and Shakespeare dismayed him’,<sup>11</sup> so starting in 1951 Dutt created a revolutionary popular theatre for working-class and rural audiences, relying upon the lively Bengali folk theatre called Jatra, adapting Shakespeare to the mythic life of villagers who had never seen themselves as part of the colonial world. If the variety of approaches to Shakespeare in India resists a clear-cut summary, it shows at the same time the double-edged nature of imperial practice: hybridization causes changes in both directions: the conqueror is equally enslaved by the indigene. Whatever may have been in the minds of those early English colonists who first brought Shakespeare to the subcontinent, it certainly would not have been Dutt’s radical amendments that sought, albeit idealistically, to reconnect to the pre-colonial state.

*Intercultural revision*, the most innovative type of contemporary Asian Shakespeare, attempts to move away from political applications into more self-consciously aesthetic realms, though we must keep firmly in mind that the aesthetic never loses political nuance. It can be argued that all productions of an early modern dramatist in the present are cross-cultural in some way, even in London, but by intercultural revision we refer specifically to those Asian performances that have deliberately chosen to highlight the difference between the Shakespearean material and the time and place of its current representation, adapting the text to a foreign mode of performance or a signified meaning that in the West would normally be considered outside the concerns of the plays. Intercultural revision estranges the Shakespeare play in a Brechtian manner in order to create a new text, a third text, which is neither the original nor the estranging device but the result of their performative interaction. Thus the mode is heavily dependent on the director as intervener or auteur in the modernist tradition, itself imported from the West. With regard to Shakespeare the best-known practitioners have been European, the most influential being Ariane Mnouchkine and Peter Brook in Paris. Their work, admittedly powerful and revelatory, has been often criticized for its insensitivity to the politics of cultural appropriation: in both cases the director has assumed the right to acquire, essentialize, alter, or distort the attributes of traditional (and sometimes religious) performance modes of Japan, China, India, or certain African countries, ignoring the unequal power relationships behind their actions, dismissing accusations of cultural imperialism on the grounds that art is exempt from such charges.