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Modernity and Tradition in Shakespeare's Asianization

Abstract: Do Marjorie Garber's premises that Shakespeare makes modern culture and that modern culture makes Shakespeare apply to his reception in Asian contexts? Shakespeare's Asianization, namely adaptation of certain Shakespeare elements into traditional forms of local cultures, seems to testify to his *timelessness* in *timeliness*. However, his statuses in modern Asia are much more complicated. The complexity lies not only in such a cross-cultural phenomenon as the Asianizing practice, but in the Shakespearization of Asia—the idealization of him as a modern cultural icon in a universalizing celebration of his authority in many sectors of modern Asian cultures. Yet, the very entities of Asia, Shakespeare, modernity, and tradition must be problematized before we approach such complexities. I ask questions about Shakespeare's roles in Asian conceptions of modernity and about the relationship between his literary heritage and Asian traditions. To address these questions, I will discuss this timeliness in Asian cultures with a focus on Shakespeare adaptations in Asian forms, which showcase various indigenous approaches to his text—from the elitist legacy maintaining to the popularist re-imagining. Asian practices of doing Shakespeare have involved other issues. For instance, whether or not the colonial legacies and postcolonial re-inventions in the dissemination of his works in Asian cultures confirm or subvert the various myths about both the Bard and modernity in most time of the 20th century; in what ways Shakespeare has been used as at once a negotiating agent and negotiated subject in the processes of the prince's translations and adaptations into Asian languages, costumes, landscapes, cultures and traditions.

Keywords: Shakespeare, adaptation, Asian tradition, modernity

Few will contest Marjorie Garber's premise in *Shakespeare and Modern Culture* that Shakespeare makes modern culture and that modern culture makes Shakespeare, as she garners vivid cases to evidence Shakespeare's roles in modern western culture although his modernity can be diversely defined in

different contexts¹. However, for many the final words of her book that “[t]he timelessness of Shakespeare is achieved by his recurrent timeliness” remain an untested assertion or suggestion rather than a conclusion of the brilliant work. While we cannot be sure if there is a global form of modernity, we see manifestations that are claimed as modern in Shakespeare reception both in the west and the east. Of course, eastern modernities have much to do with the western ones and with Shakespeare. In this sense, we may complement Garber’s thesis by suggesting that Shakespeare helps make modern Asian culture and that modern Asian culture makes Asian Shakespeares.

Shakespeare’s timeliness in Asian cultures is manifested in the plurality of the Asian and the Shakespearean and is reflected in the process of interaction between his universal icon and variegated Asian traditions. In other words, Asian Shakespeares speak to his timeliness in various cultural moments of modern Asian history, whether or not with colonial and postcolonial registers. In the western regions of Asia, India, for example, Shakespeare plays or has been made to play different roles in indigenous conception of modernity. Trivedi identifies five Shakespeares in the Bard’s interaction with India, namely “the English language Shakespeare, the localized Shakespeare, the universalized Shakespeare, the indigenized Shakespeare and the postcolonial Shakespeare” (Trivedi, par. 2).² Even the “indigenized Shakespeare” may appear in conflicting images in the conflicted indigenization of *Macbeth* in the 19th Bengali translation and adaptation, as Chaudhury and Sengupta show in their essay in this issue of *Multicultural Shakespeare*. In this case, both Shakespeare and the indigenous tradition have been used as means through which his indigenizers position their literature and theater in their struggle for a modern identity.

Shakespeare’s negotiations with local traditions reveal different characteristics of his modern status in other parts of modern Asia. In some East Asian places, such as China and Japan, he has been introduced by reforming intellectuals as a representative figure of modern culture. Although he did not come to these countries along with colonial projects in the way he did in India, colonial and postcolonial ideologies have been in currency. In his reception within some Enlightenment discourses of the past century, his modern icon has been unconditionally embraced in a way, in which colonial masters used to impose their cultural hegemony on the colonized, colonized politically or ideologically or in both ways. Such reception confirms various myths about both

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¹ Even in the Euro-American context, that modernity can be problematic as we see in the periodization of modern society and of Shakespeare’s presence in modern times in the collection of essays edited by Hugh Grady a decade earlier. Shakespeare’s modernity in Asian contexts can be more complicated.

² About Shakespeare in India, also see Singh, 445-458.

Shakespeare and modernity in most time of the 20th century. In other aspects, he has been used as a new force to challenge some traditional values that his localizers attempt to renovate or expel through adapting Shakespeare. Still sometimes, the ideological accents Shakespeare is made to speak with serve the local purposes so that his works are re-interpreted, re-constructed, and re-invented radically or subversively in certain Asian cultural contexts. In that sense, what is Shakespearean in Asian cultures makes Asian Shakespeares.

Yet, both old and new cultural forms exist in any period of history in his Asian reception. Thus, Shakespeare lives in Asian cultures with multiple identities, and his modernity has to be defined interactively with the local traditions in old and new (modern) Asias. Here the very entity of Asia as well as the concept of modernity must be problematized as there is no unified Asian identity in old or new Asia. The adjectives, *old* and *new*, if put in a historical-political context, are reminders of the colonial and postcolonial presence of Shakespeare in some Asian nations as briefly mentioned earlier. Furthermore, if the oldness of Asia may mean the traditional, and newness the modern, we see both tradition and modernity in contemporary Asian reception of Shakespeare; tradition and modernity are present in various forms in the lively Asian re-inventing of the Bard.

Essays in this issue of the journal address the newness and oldness, and the multiple possibilities, of Asian Shakespeares. The plural form of both entities—Asia and Shakespeare—enables us to explore a great array of topics, such as Shakespeare's localization/globalization, transnationalism, cross-media and cross-cultural adaptability, and modernism and postmodernism in popular media spinoffs, in addition to coloniality and postcoloniality in his Asian history. Multiplicity of Shakespeare's identities as well as that of our own is performed in the various Asian Shakespearean practices. Accordingly, authors of essays in this issue examine intertextuality and interculturalism in the cinema as well as theater within and beyond the geo-cultural circles of Asia. For some, Shakespeare through Asian eyes means singling out differences and similarities in cultural values and forms between the western of Shakespeare and the eastern of Asia.

Shakespeare's Asianization, however, has a wider range of connotation and richer signification than such simplified, superficial comparison may delineate. For example, Li Weimin's study of intertextuality between Shakespeare and Peking Opera shows us possibilities of Shakespeare's localization and his resourcefulness to the renovation of the indigenous operatic form. Hyon-u Lee compares the yard techniques used on the Korean stage and that of Shakespeare, and examines how the local performing artists make use of the techniques in producing Shakespeare in the traditional Korean theater. As Li argues, the Shakespearean negotiations take place in a process of transformation in which both the borrowed content and the local form have to be changed. To be

sure, the theater is a site of cultural, if not political, negotiations between the Shakespearean and the Asian, and sometimes is an arena for local practitioners to air conflicting voices through adapting Shakespeare. Moreover, to attract young audiences to the traditional theater, Shakespeare's Asian localizers often integrate the traditional form with strategies particularly used in popular culture into their re-inventing the high cultural icon. In that, they actually also consider skills developed in the popular venue of the cinema.

In both venues of contemporary culture—the theater and the cinema—as in Asia and elsewhere, the boundaries between high and low spheres of culture, between the traditional and the modern are often blurred. Performing practices in Asian theaters and cinemas explore the interface between the Bard's high culture and pop culture in a globalizing era and more importantly, exemplify his timeliness in modern Asian cultures. This timeliness is more vivid than the pithy lines from his works as quoted by celebrities or political figures of high profile and pop stars. Shakespeare's modernity, and perhaps postmodernity, is especially ostensible in the cinema. Shakespeare movies have become a genre in the film industry as well as in Shakespeare performance studies since the last quarters of the 20th century. Shakespeare films have been made in studios of the global village from Hollywood and Bollywood to test the validity of Shakespeare's cultural capital on the globalized market of commercial and niched cinemas. As observed by Ronan Paterson in his review of Shakespeare's history in worldwide cinemas, Shakespeare films have been growing although most productions in the commercial movie sector fail investors' expectations from the box office in the Cineplex. It is encouraging and promising in the Asian cinema, however, that we have opportunities to watch Asian Shakespeare films, from Kurosawa's early adaptations of *Macbeth* and *King Lear* in the Japanese landscape and culture to the recent *Hamlet* in traditional Chinese and Tibetan ethnic costumes. The recent *Hamlet* film adaptations in Asia, such as Feng Xiaogang's *Banquet* and Sherwood Hu's *Prince of the Himalayas*, provide us with examples of how a young generation of Chinese directors begins capitalizing on Shakespeare's global icon. Wu Hui's essay offers a focal study of the movies in a review of Chinese Shakespeare films from the silent era to new millennium. These studies reflect recent scholarly interests in the burgeoning area of research in Shakespeare films, in which critics and scholars examine his moving images in the data bank of ever increasing practices in Asian cinemas and beyond.

It has already notable, though not similarly much noticed in circles of Shakespeare scholarship, that the braver and wilder world of popular Shakespeares are way beyond the cinema. We need to consider how the Bard's cultural capital is appropriated, parodied, disseminated, recycled, and re-invented in the popular sphere and think of Asian Shakespeare's timeliness on another level by touching less covered territories in scholarly discourses. Yukari Yoshihara's essay presents cases of Japanese "tacky Shakespeares" that tell of

Asian postmodern conditions. As she observes, Shakespeare has become a commodity to be capitalized on not only in the theater, but in other media—cinema, DVD, advertising, cartoon books, and graphic novels, comics or *manga*. The Japanese cases are tips of the iceberg of the Shakespearean modern culture in Asia and in other communities around the globe, which is worth noticing by scholars of Shakespeare and cultural studies. New media use of Shakespeare is a postmodern phenomenon and demonstrates features in Asian recycling of Shakespeare's cultural capital for contemporary consumption in the popular world.

Studies of the phenomenon have engendered scholarly interests in topics on Shakespeare in Asia. Nevertheless, practical and scholarly engagements in different parts of the wide geo-cultural region of Asia are imbalanced. Some areas have received intensive scholarly attention, for example, India, China, Japan while others are less talked about. This volume includes studies focusing on a few under touched places, for instance, Indonesia. Michael Skupin's essay on Shakespeare's introduction to Pacific islands nation through linguistic strategies as in translation, another less interested area of Shakespeare studies in the mainstream of Shakespeare scholarship. The translator's approach to the Bard is rooted in personal and cultural history of the nation, in which the translator has been raised. Sumardjo's Indonesian translation is informed with exigencies in national-cultural contexts as well as in personal linguistic background. To render Shakespeare's texts into one's own language means much for Asian translators and their countries. The translator's choice of words or translating strategies, thereof, have significance beyond translators' treatment of details in linguistic and formal differences, and reveal specific cultural concerns, even struggles, in the negotiating process of linguistic and cultural identities through translating Shakespeare. In this sense, Shakespeare translation into Asian languages is not merely linguistic, but cultural, if not more often political. Even the translator's presumably a-political stance is not a practice that is in a political vacuum. The creation of a Shakespeare text in a language changes established views of the canon of one's national literature and provides new cultural vocabulary through which people understand their life and Shakespeare's work. On the other side of the coin, the action of adding an Asian tongue to Shakespeare's canon indicates the expansion of his universal icon in new linguistic and cultural forms.

Shakespeare in Asian tongues, costumes, landscapes, cultures and traditions is part of the postcolonial, postmodern phenomenon of his global reception, and his Asianization seems to testify to his timeliness. As shown in the essays, his timeliness is especially showcased in intercultural practices—in theater, cinema or any other media—in various ways from the elitist legacy maintaining to the popularist re-imagining, from the literary translation and interpretation to performances and adaptations in multimedia. Shakespeare and

Asia are put in a mutually reinforcing process by artists, critics and scholars who chart both entities in a great array of political and cultural topics that are across critical boundaries and conceptual domains. On the one hand, Shakespeare has always provided insights into issues that Asians have to confront on their way of modernization and in their conception of modernity. On the other hand, Asian adapters conflate contemporary concerns with those evident in the works of Shakespeare. In all the processes of the Shakespeare's Asian negotiations, our imaginations of modern Asias are coincidental with our re-inventing of the western Bard so that he exists in multilingual, multicultural Asian communities with protean identities.

As a final note, such a small volume cannot blanket all the past and current concerns of Shakespeare's multiple Asian identities, and essays in this issue cannot be all sweeping about the phenomenon of Asian Shakespeares. I have to close, unfortunately, by regretting that many significant contributions cannot be included for space and other reasons. In putting together this volume, however, I hope to engage more interested scholars in topics about Shakespeare and Asia. The selected essays have in different ways addressed some current questions of scholarly interest, such as about Shakespearean and Asian conceptions of modernity, Shakespeare's literary heritage and Asian traditions, and colonial and postcolonial legacies, and Shakespeare's intercultural negotiations. Hopefully we explore all these and other questions further and include more pieces in another volume dedicated to studies of Shakespeare in Asian cultures.

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