

## CHAPTER 54

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‘IT IS THE EAST’

*Shakespearean Tragedies in East Asia*

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The best actors in the world, either for tragedy, comedy, history, pastoral, pastoral-comical, historical-pastoral, tragical-historical, tragical-comical-historical-pastoral, scene individable or poem unlimited.

(*Hamlet* 2.2.397-400)

FOLLOWING the sounds of Japanese temple bells, Gabriel Fauré’s *Sanctus* swells softly as two elderly women pray at a gigantic set resembling a blown-up version of a *butsudan* Buddhist household altar which takes up the entire stage and dwarfs the performers and audiences. When the light comes on, witches played by Kabuki female impersonators (*onnagata*) dance to falling petals behind the semi-translucent screens in a cinematically inspired slow-motion scene. The massive shutters are opened to reveal Ninagawa Yukio’s landmark 1985 stage production of *Macbeth* in Japanese (UK premiere) that seamlessly blends theatrical, cinematic, Japanese, and Western genres of presentation and music. The performance is in conversation with multiple early modern and modern Japanese stage genres, as well as with Western music, and Akira Kurosawa’s (1910–98) film adaptation of *Macbeth* as *Throne of Blood* (1957). The rich audio and visual landscape of the production brings to the fore the metaphoric structure of *Macbeth*. We are witnessing one of the most innovative fusion approaches to Shakespearean tragedy in East Asia.

Fast forward to 2000. Tragedy is turned into parody. On screen. In a high-school rehearsal of *Romeo and Juliet*, a stuttering student, Fenson Wong (Pierre Png) asks his drama coach if he can play Romeo. The young lady playing Juliet, Audrey Chan (May Yee Lum) rolls her eyes and challenges her classmate: ‘What makes you think that you can

*Note:* Part of this chapter is a revised and expanded version of the author’s ‘Comical Tragedies and Poly-generic Shakespeares in Contemporary China and Diasporic Chinese Culture’, in *Shakespeare and Genre*, ed. Anthony Guneratne (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 157–72 and ‘Yukio Ninagawa’, *Brook, Hall, Ninagawa, Lepage: Great Shakespeareans* (London: Arden Bloomsbury, 2013), 79–112.

play Romeo? You don't have the looks, and you can't even speak properly.' She is quick to point out that the other student, originally cast for the male lead, is eminently more qualified even if he cannot remember his lines: 'Nick, on the other hand, looks like Leonardo DiCaprio. That's why he's Romeo.' Her protégé promptly supports her cause and leaves the aspiring thespian speechless. The Singaporean film *Chicken Rice War* (dir. Cheah Chee Kong, aka CheeK, 2000) parodies Hollywood rhetoric and global teen culture by commenting on the popularity of Baz Luhrmann's 1996 film *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet*, which starred Claire Danes and Leonardo DiCaprio and brought the classic tale of power and passion to modern-day Verona Beach.

Eventually, Fenson wins the role and gets rid of his stutter through reciting and performing Shakespeare. While recitation of Shakespearean passages seems to have 'cured' Fenson of his stuttering, other scenes expose the instability of any illusion of Shakespeare's universal utility. One family member asked during the bilingual performance: 'Hey, aren't they supposed to speak in English?' As Mark Burnett theorizes, such scenes 'demolish the illusion that Shakespeare constitutes a universal language'.<sup>1</sup> The text of *Romeo and Juliet* is part of the texture of the narrative in *Chicken Rice War*, not only because rehearsals and a final performance of key scenes of the play parallel the action of the film, but also because these reenactments critique the popular belief in Asia that enacting Anglo-European civilization is a staple of global progressive modernity.

So too does linguistically marked cultural difference play an important role in the film. The older generation converses in Cantonese, while the younger generation speaks mostly Singlish. Thus the feud between the two families appears both arbitrary and historically rooted: English, Singlish, and Cantonese serve as reminders of both the 'Global West' and the 'New Asia' that Singapore embodies, 'New Asia' being part of its government's slogan for tourism development. The characters are made reflexively aware of the cultural crossroads where they stand and where Singapore finds itself.

The Japanese adaptation of *Macbeth* on stage and Singaporean take on *Romeo and Juliet* on screen are but two examples of hundreds of Asian adaptations of Shakespearean tragedy. *Romeo and Juliet* has also provided raw material for cinematic parodies—aided by the device of the play-within-a-play—in Anthony Chan's *One Husband Too Many* (Hong Kong, 1988), for example, and Huo Jianqi's *A Time to Love* (China, 2005). Shakespearean tragedies have played an important part in modern and contemporary East Asian engagements with Western cultures. Japanese, Korean, Chinese, and Singaporean translations, rewritings, films, and theatre productions have three important shared characteristics, namely hybridization of genres, intra-regional and trans-historical allusions, and spirituality.

First, East Asian adaptations tend to present the plays in hybrid performative genres, sometimes turning tragedy into comedy or parody, echoing Polonius' musing on the cross-breeding of genres in his gleeful announcement to Hamlet that 'the actors are come hither'. The process of blending conventions often inspires metatheatrical takes on the Shakespearean play and on the performance itself, turning a 'big time', larger-than-life

<sup>1</sup> Mark Thornton Burnett, *Shakespeare and World Cinema* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 134.

tragedy into a ‘small time’ comedy, and turning a tragic hero writ large into part of the fabric of the quotidian.

Secondly, intra-regional borrowing forms and reinforces a network of allusions that matter to each cultural location and to East Asia as a region. Some plays or characters have a special place in East Asian performance history because of their perceived topical relevance (female empowerment, as well as notions of Confucian duty to the family and to the state in *Hamlet*, issues of self-identity and filial piety in *King Lear*, generational gaps in *Romeo and Juliet*, and the inevitable passing of generations in *Macbeth*). East Asian adaptations of these plays tend to explore such themes in unique visual and musical presentations building an intra-regional network of trans-historical cross-references.

Last, but not least, twenty-first-century East Asian adaptations tend to interpret Shakespearean tragedies through issues of spirituality and through the artists’ personal, rather than national, identities. For example, in the dramatic traditions of East Asian cultures with a Confucian inheritance, while women’s agency is often undermined, women gain an upper hand when they return as ghosts or mediators in religious contexts. Along with the rise of Korean feminism in the 1990s, several South Korean adaptations of *Hamlet* recast Ophelia as a shaman who serves as a medium to console the dead and guide the living. Since a shaman is outside the Confucian social structure, she has greater agency.<sup>2</sup> The action of Kim Jung-ok’s *Hamlet* (1993) takes place under an enormous hemp cloth that is suspended from the ceiling to resemble a house of mourning. It is customary for a mourning son to wear coarse hemp clothing, because hemp cloth is associated with funerals. Appropriately enough, the play begins with Ophelia’s funeral. Possessed by the Old King’s spirit, Ophelia conveys the story of his murder.<sup>3</sup> Kim Kwang-bo’s *Ophelia: Sister, Come to My Bed* (1995) also opens with Ophelia’s funeral. Caught between the incestuous love of Laertes and the romantic love of Hamlet, Ophelia is eventually abandoned by both men: there is no future with Laertes, and Hamlet must carry out his revenge mission. Ophelia is possessed by the dead king’s spirit: she urges Hamlet to avenge his father’s death. When the ghost of Old Hamlet appears, in the form of a large puppet operated by three monks, Ophelia moves in unison with the ghost and changes her voice to that of an old man. The use of shamanism as a thematic device reminds us, also, that *Hamlet* was perhaps used as a way to exorcise the painful loss of a son by its author.

In everyday parlance, the word tragedy often invokes inevitable suffering, moral weight, and sometimes an indifferent universe. People use the word tragic to refer to the kind of loss and suffering that they believe to have a universal valence that goes beyond its times. When something becomes a tragedy, it often carries with it a transhistorical moral tone. In other words, something of grandeur, endurance, and universality. As a dramatic genre, tragedy however, as Raymond Williams points out, is far from transhistorical or stable.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Janice C. H. Kim, ‘Processes of Feminine Power: Shamans in Central Korea’, in *Korean Shamanism: Revivals, Survivals, and Change*, ed. Keith Howard (Seoul: Seoul Press, 1998), 113–32.

<sup>3</sup> Alexa Huang and Peter Donaldson, eds., *Global Shakespeares* (<http://globalshakespeares.org>). Korean co-editor Hyon-u Lee. Accessed May 2013. Another example is Bae Yo-sup’s *Hamlet Cantabile* (2005, 2007, 2008).

<sup>4</sup> Raymond Williams, *Modern Tragedy*, ed. Pamela McCallum (Peterborough, Canada: Broadview, 2006), 1–35.

Studying non-Western interpretations of Shakespearean tragedies helps us gain a deeper understanding of the genre's cultural specificity.<sup>5</sup> What, then, constitutes a contemporary East Asian tragedy, and how are Shakespearean tragedies interpreted within that context? Why do tragedies seem more transportable from culture to culture than other genres?

As in almost all instances of transnational borrowing, a select, locally resonant group of 'privileged' plays has held continuous sway. In modern times, tragedies such as *Hamlet* are more frequently adapted around the world because of their malleability and capacity to be detached from their native cultural settings. The plays seem elastic because—as opposed to comedies that latch on to more culturally specific reference points (such as the truce between England and France in *The Comedy of Errors*, 3.2)—tragedies can be reconstructed to deal in broad strokes with more generalizable, hence transportable, issues (such as a prince's duty to his dead father and to his country). There have been more than fifty translations of *Hamlet* in India alone, while *Henry V* and *Richard II* are the only history plays to have been translated into Hindi, each translated only once.

## FROM TRAGEDY TO PARODY

Such welcome and unwelcome things at once,  
'Tis hard to reconcile.

*Macbeth* (4.3.136-9)

Are Asian dramatic genres, as more stylized, hybrid tragic-comic forms, reconcilable with Shakespearean tragedy as a mode of narrative? The emergence of parody can be an indication that a translated genre has matured. It is also a sign that Shakespeare's global afterlife has reached a new stage in which the *fabulae* of his plays have become so familiar to the 'cross-border' audiences that the plays can be used as a platform for artistic exploration of new genres.

One example is an adaptation of *Hamlet* in Taiwan entitled *Shamlet*. Spared the devastating Cultural Revolution and aided by its economic and political alliance with the United States (expressed formally in the 1960s and culturally since the 1980s), Taiwan has a slightly longer history of sustainable theatrical experimentation with Shakespeare than mainland China. Experimental stage works can be both mainstream and avant-garde, commercially viable and artistically interesting. In writing a critically acclaimed *huaju* (Western-style 'spoken drama') play called *Shamuleite*, or *Shamlet* (1992; continuous revivals on stage ever since), Lee Kuo-hsiu, one of the most innovative playwrights and directors to emerge in the 1980s, turned high tragedy, or what was known to Renaissance readers as 'tragic history', into comic parody. He suggests in the programme that *Shamlet* is a revenge comedy that 'has nothing to do with *Hamlet* but something to do with Shakespeare'.<sup>6</sup> His

<sup>5</sup> Helene P. Foley and Jean E. Howard. 'The Urgency of Tragedy Now', *PMLA* 129:4 (October 2014), 617-33; see esp. 618, 627.

<sup>6</sup> Lee, *Shamuleite*, 119.

purpose is twofold: to resist the hegemonic power of ‘Shakespeare’ in a global context and to offer a new way to read *Hamlet*.

Bearing a certain resemblance to Ernst Lubitsch’s *To Be or Not to Be* and Kenneth Branagh’s *A Midwinter’s Tale*—both chronicling fictional theatre companies’ comical efforts to stage *Hamlet*—Lee’s seven selected scenes from *Hamlet* appear as plays within plays that document the activities of a theatre troupe named Fengping (itself a play on words pertaining to the company founded by Lee in real life, Pingfeng). The production has a playful title combining the first character of the Chinese transliteration of Shakespeare (*sha* from Shashibiya) and the last three characters for *Hamlet* (*muleite* from Hamuleite). *Shamlet* also plays with the sounds of ‘sham’ and ‘shame’. Having no direct access to an English version of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, Lee worked with the Franco Zeffirelli–Mel Gibson film version and two popular twentieth-century Chinese translations by Liang Shiqiu and Zhu Shenghao. As with the Singaporean *Chicken Rice War*, there are some genealogical links between *Shamlet* and the Hollywood film. Lee indicates in an interview that the film inspired him to stage *Hamlet* on his own terms. An opponent of staging straightforward literary translations of foreign plays, he claims that if one chooses to stage a ‘translated foreign play’ and to ‘follow it slavishly line by line’, one will be ‘deprived of the opportunity to create and re-write’.<sup>7</sup>

*Shamlet* is an example of how East Asian playwrights and directors present Shakespearean tragedies in hybrid performative genres. Actors move from their real identities as the persons putting on the play *Shamlet* for the real audience, to their identities as actors in the story of the play, and to their phantom identities as Hamlet, Ophelia, Gertrude, and other characters in the play-within-a-play (i.e. the failed production of *Hamlet* in *Shamlet*). The framing device is a possible evocation of Tom Stoppard’s award-winning play and subsequent film, *Rozencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. Moving among these four different sets of identities, the characters explore their local identities as actors from a typical Taiwanese theatre troupe. They are tormented by the difficulties facing all small and experimental theatre companies. These problems echo the difficult situations that Hamlet himself faces.

*Shamlet* is rife with cunningly scripted errors. These range from malfunctions in the routine mechanical business of the theatre to forgotten lines and accidentally switched roles. An example of how the production embraces the contingency of theatrical performance, while highlighting the perils of translation, is the Fengping presentation of the ramparts scene from *Hamlet* (1.5), which takes place in Taichung, the second stop of their round-the-island tour of Taiwan. After informing Shamlet of his assassination and urging vengeance, the ghost prepares to ascend on a steel rope as he delivers his last lines ‘Adieu, adieu, adieu. Remember me’ (*Hamlet* 1.5.91). A mechanical problem traps the ghost on the stage. The actor playing Shamlet is paralysed, and Horatio enters, as directed by the script, and delivers lines of weighty irony.

HORATIO My lord! My lord! My lord! Anything wrong?  
 SHAMLET How strange! [*Looking at the stranded Ghost.*]  
 HORATIO Speak to it, my lord!

<sup>7</sup> Shu-hua Wang and Perng Ching-hsi. Interview with Lee Kuo-Hsiu, Taipei, 13 November 1998. Unpublished manuscript.

SHAMLET Never ever reveal what you see tonight.  
 HORATIO I will not tell. [*Improvise*] And I hope no one sees it! [*Looking at the stranded Ghost and then the audience.*]  
 SHAMLET Come! Swear by your conscience. Put your hand on my sword.  
 [*Shamlet discovers that he lacks this most vital of props*]  
 HORATIO [*Filling in and improvising*] Use my sword, my lord! ...  
 SHAMLET [*Soliloquizing*] Rest, rest, perturbed spirit. I ... [*Forgetting his lines*] I've forgotten what I had to say!  
 HORATIO [*Prompting*] Perturbed spirit, please remember that whatever historical period it is, you shall keep your mouth shut [*indicating the stranded Ghost*]. The time is out of joint. O what a poor soul am I that I have to set it right!  
 SHAMLET Yes, indeed!  
 [*The lights dim as the stranded Ghost keeps trying to see if he can ascend*]

The scene calls to mind Stoppard's transformation of the sometimes-omitted minor characters, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, into the leads of his play. From the perspective of these two characters without memories, the performance of *The Murder of Gonzago*, the consequent turn of events, and even their own mission do not make much sense and appear farcical. If accidents and the advent of the unexpected lead to tragedy in *Hamlet*, in *Shamlet* they are turned into comedy, which is as challenging to native theatrical forms—particularly in the treatment of the bumbling director Li Xiuguo (the alter ego and the anagrammatical name of the playwright Lee Kuo-hsiu)—as they are to Renaissance antecedents. By Act 3, when the ghost still cannot ascend offstage, Laertes, seeking to impart advice to Ophelia, demands that he leave. While existentialism as a theme runs through Stoppard's play, theatrical contingency informs Lee's design. The scripted mechanical failures serve to highlight the inner workings of a stage genre, inverting the process of theatrical illusion, and inviting the audience in Stoppardian fashion to reflect on their familiarity with an editorialized, modernist *Hamlet*.

## HEARING AND SEEING THE TRAGEDY

There are, of course, performances of Shakespearean tragedies that do not bend or blend genres but instead focus on innovative strategies of visual and audio presentation, such as Ninagawa's *Macbeth*. While Western audiences may expect, say, a Japanese adaptation of Shakespeare to offer something uniquely Japanese or be representative of Japanese performance traditions today, intra-regional borrowing and fusion of Asian and Western motifs are part of an increasingly common approach.

Japanese director Ninagawa Yukio's productions show that he is both a visual director and a sound engineer. It is therefore not an overstatement to say that one goes to the theatre to hear, as well as to see, his plays. Both the visual and sonic elements make important contributions to his signature metatheatrical framing devices, and his works often feature intra-Asian thematic and transhistorical allusions to styles borrowed from traditional Japan, as well as from other Asian and Western cultures. This is especially evident in the music in his productions. Over the past decades he has used atmospheric, classical music and strong visual motifs in many of his productions to blend elements

of familiarity and strangeness. His theatre thus offers both visceral and intellectual experiences.

In the *Ninagawa Macbeth*, the first thing the audience heard were sounds of the gongs typically heard in temples. The gongs initially gave an impression of coherence between visual and aural motifs around the Buddhist altar. Christian music soon joined the scene. The three-minute ‘Sanctus’ of Gabriel Fauré’s *Requiem* (1887–1900) accompanied the appearance of the two elderly women in ragged clothes praying at the Buddhist altar. An eclectic mix of music from different eras and cultures echoed Ninagawa’s hybrid visual strategies. The opening scene featured temple bells and Fauré, and later on a lone flute accentuated Macbeth as he persuaded the assassins to go after Banquo. Some British theatre critics found the *Ninagawa Macbeth* ‘intensely religious’<sup>8</sup> and appreciated the effect of the ‘specifically Christian music.’ Michael Ratcliffe believed the music ‘made an effect of heart-breaking pathos against the dark and glittering splendor on stage.’<sup>9</sup>

In fact, *Sanctus* opened and closed Ninagawa’s production along with the visual framing device. Following Macbeth’s collapse silence ensued. The *Sanctus* swelled softly as the two old women proceeded to close the shutters. Based on the Roman Catholic Mass for the Dead, the Requiem introduced new religious elements into the otherwise Buddhist landscape, as the chorus sang:

Sanctus, sanctus, sanctus	Holy, holy, holy
Dominus Deus Sabaoth	Lord God of Hosts
Pleni sunt coeli et terra	Full are the heavens and earth
gloria tua	with the glory of you,
Hosanna in excelsis.	Hosanna in the highest.

In contrast to Verdi’s *Requiem* and other compositions that are accompanied by strong vocal and instrumental expression, Fauré’s *Sanctus* is simpler and more intimate in form. Its musical minimalism matched the simple visual beauty of Ninagawa’s production. *Sanctus* opens with a dreamy, soft harp figure and violin, and the sopranos sing a rising and falling melody of only three notes which is repeated by male singers. The sopranos and male singers engage in a duet, responding to each other and building to the *forte* on ‘excelsis’ and the triumphant ‘hosanna’. Towards the end of the piece, powerful major chords are joined by a horn fanfare, before the sopranos answer in diminuendo as the music softens. The dreamy harp arpeggios re-emerge to close the piece.

The gentle and shimmering *Sanctus* echoed Ninagawa’s visual motif of cherry blossom. Inspired by Motojiro Kajii’s (1901–32) widely circulated phrase, ‘dead bodies are buried under the cherry trees’, the production associated death with a cherry tree in full blossom. Cherry blossoms symbolize both beauty and death (and the repose of the soul), something which may not register in the minds of British audiences, but Ninagawa’s decision to use a direct translation rather than a localized adaptation of the script of Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* also introduced unfamiliar narrative patterns into the Japanese audiences’ horizon of expectation. Ninagawa’s rehearsal notes for 5.6 usefully sum up the significance of the

<sup>8</sup> Peter Whitebrook, Review of *The Ninagawa Macbeth*, *The Scotsman*, 23 August 1985.

<sup>9</sup> Michael Ratcliffe, Review of *The Ninagawa Macbeth*, *The Observer*, 25 August 1985.

Requiem and cherry blossom as the dominant visual and sonic frameworks: ‘memories of cherry blossom at night [morph into] a sensuous invitation to death.’<sup>10</sup>

Silence is also an important element in Ninagawa’s work. Komaki Kurihara’s *Lady Macbeth* is a tour de force. A great silence envelops her sleepwalking scene as her high-pitched hysterical laughter fades into sobbing and as she rubs her hands in an imaginary stream. A profound silence frames the moment when she dies, only to be punctuated by Macbeth’s remorse: ‘She should have died hereafter./There would have been a time for such a word.’

Ninagawa uses the musical landscape of *Sanctus* out of context in order to contrast with the eastern spirituality represented by the *butsudan* altar. His strategy undermines both the postwar Japanese emulation of Western high culture and the stereotypical motif of ‘lost’ Westerners finding peace in Buddhism. It also highlights the conspicuous flaw of post-Second World War intercultural imagination in stressing either homogenizing cultural sameness or irreconcilable difference.

Another way in which Ninagawa uses music is to create varying pathways to language and sonic relations between the soundtrack and the lines delivered by his actors. In *Romeo and Juliet*, the first Shakespearean play he directed in 1974, he used music as a tool to address the shortcomings in his commercial actors who could not remember their lines and, when they did, delivered them without authenticity. Ninagawa reminisced about how he used Elton John’s music to shape his strategy of appropriation, to ‘drown out’ the actors’ awkward speech:

When they read a line, it sounded like stereotypical samurai speech. The lines just didn’t mean anything. So I thought I should submerge them under Elton John’s music. Then you wouldn’t hear anything when the play started, only sound. I wanted strong contrasts, such as people running, with music coming from everywhere—a sort of visual rhetoric. Otherwise, it would need a rhetoric that comes from Europe or Greece that we don’t have naturally.

Ninagawa commented on the lack of agency and a ‘self’ in his culture, and argued that one of his most important goals is to discover a more assertive self:

I’m still struggling with this disadvantage in our culture—we don’t have a definite ‘self’, ‘self’ as an agent, an assertive, aggressive self. The core of my artistic struggle is actually to discover such a self.<sup>11</sup>

Ninagawa’s sonic strategy is always part of his visual strategy. One of the most prominent examples is his *Macbeth*. By considering the possibility of parentless children, *Macbeth* as a historical tragedy dramatizes attacks on the order of time. Parentless children as a trope is a paradox. Macbeth pins his hope on compensating for the inevitable passing of generations through one’s offspring. However, the possibility of parentless children takes this last hope away. What Macbeth fears is not fate or death, but time. Time that cannot be

<sup>10</sup> Yukio Ninagawa, *Note 1969–1988* (Tokyo, 1988), trans. Ryuta Minami; quoted in Ronnie Mulryne, ‘From Text to Foreign Stage: Yukio Ninagawa’s Cultural Translation of *Macbeth*’, in *Shakespeare from Text to Stage*, ed. Patricia Kennan and Mariangela Tempera (Bologna: Cooperativa Libreria Universitaria Editrice Bologna, 1992), 136.

<sup>11</sup> ‘Interview with Ninagawa Yukio’, *Performing Shakespeare in Japan*, 211.

turned back, and cannot be manipulated. How might one go about staging this discourse about time? Like Peter Brook who regarded theatre as iconographic art and Kurosawa who combines Noh, American Westerns, and Japanese scroll-painting in his *Throne of Blood*, Ninagawa often works from a set of compelling images for each production as if he were a designer.<sup>12</sup> He does this to simultaneously spark the audience's interest and to introduce them to the play-world in the first few minutes of the performance.

This factor of surprise is certainly part of the success of many of his works. *The Ninagawa Macbeth* was the first Shakespearean play the director transposed to feudal Japan, seamlessly combining modern and traditional, Western and Japanese elements. Ninagawa found inspiration for the striking set that I discussed at the beginning of this chapter in scenes from Japanese daily life:

When I went back home and opened up our family *butsudan* [ancestral altar] to light a candle and pray for my father, at that moment, I thought, 'this is the right image [for *Macbeth*].' I had two overlapping complex ideas: ordinary people watching *Macbeth*, and a Japanese audience looking at the stage and seeing through it to our ancestors.

He elaborated on his synaesthetic experience of a trans-temporal dialogue across different spaces:

When I was in front of the *butsudan*, my thoughts were racing. It was like I was having a conversation with my ancestors. When I thought of *Macbeth* in this way, I thought of him appearing in the *butsudan* where we consecrate dead ancestors. Then we could change the setting when the witches appear, as in the Japanese expression, 'To be tempted by time.' We could create a setting like dusk, neither night nor day, when, according to a Japanese tradition, one often meets with demonic beings.<sup>13</sup>

Ninagawa was quite specific about his vision of this dialogue not only with the dead in general but with the spirits of his father and brother. Like Wu Hsing-kuo's solo Beijing opera *Lear*, which I will discuss in the next section, the *Ninagawa Macbeth* is on some level deeply personal, as the director confided:

While I was praying [at our family altar] I recalled my dead father and elder brother and I felt as if I was conversing with them. At that time it occurred to me that if the drama of *Macbeth* were a fantasy which developed from a conversation with my dead ancestors, then this could really be my own story. Those warrior chieftains who shed so much blood could so easily be my ancestors, or they might even be what I might have been.<sup>14</sup>

This imaginary conversation informed a set that was evocative of a sense of spirituality. Giant sculptural warrior-god figures served as the backdrop to Malcolm and Macduff's meeting. A family Buddhist altar the size of the proscenium greeted the audience as they walked into the theatre. The screen doors were still closed. Larger shutters further divided the audience from the dimly lit stage. While the visual framing device suggested a Buddhist interpretation of *Macbeth*, the aural landscape was more complex.

<sup>12</sup> Peter Brook, *The Shifting Point, 1946–1987* (New York: Harper Collins, 1987), 78.

<sup>13</sup> 'Interview with Ninagawa Yukio', *Performing Shakespeare in Japan*, 208–19.

<sup>14</sup> Yukio Ninagawa, Programme for *The Tempest*, trans. Stefan Kaiser and Sue Henny, Edinburgh International Festival, 1988.

Throughout the performance, the two old women sat on either side of the altar that served as a stylized curtain. They watched the play with the audience. They served as stagehands and as mostly detached gatekeepers. They ate, drank, sewed, and even nodded off. They played the role of a silent chorus. They wept when Macbeth said ‘my way of life | Is fallen into the sere, the yellow leaf’ and at his ‘Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow’ speech.

The two anonymous women may have been praying to comfort their ancestors, to appease evil spirits like those in the ensuing performance within the altar, or to find spiritual shelter from their traumatic past. They may have been hallucinating or dreaming, bringing us what amounts to an old wives’ tale or even a tale of their ancestors. They served as witnesses, in a similar fashion to the character of the *waki* in Noh theatre, to the heinous acts on stage, and as mediators between the audience and the play. Given that most actions were confined within the Buddhist altar, the action of *Macbeth* could be seen as made up of dreams based on their memories or their experience of divine revelation. Their utter disregard of the *Requiem* and their aloofness served as an important contrast to the earnestness and gravity of actions inside the screen doors of the altar. As Malcolm delivered the play’s final lines, the old women began to close the shutters. However, they did not close the play. They merely separated the worlds of *Macbeth* and the audience and returned the performance space to the same state it had had before the show started. Their existence outside the play’s narrative time paralleled *Macbeth*’s attacks on the order of time.

In conjunction with the lighting, the sliding shutters and the screen doors separated the stage into two venues for physical and allegorical actions. Action that was farther removed from the mundane took place behind the screens. The witches initially appeared behind the semi-transparent screen doors, visible through lighting and lightning. Banquo was murdered there and that was where the apparitions were seen. When Banquo’s ghost appeared at Macbeth’s banquet, it replaced the warrior-god statue on a pedestal upstage, and the entire banquet scene, including the courtiers, was encased behind the screens. Jolted by Banquo’s ghost out of the semblance of guilt-free peace he worked so hard to maintain, Macbeth opened the screen doors to step ‘outside’ and therefore downstage. Fleance escaped the assassins to this area that seemed disconnected from the violent world behind the screens. Intimate scenes and casual discussions also took place in front of the screen doors; Lady Macbeth followed Macbeth there and urged him to return to the banquet to entertain his guests: ‘You do not give the cheer: the feast is sold’ (3.4.32).

One of the most striking visual strategies was the use of candles in Act 5 Scene 5, which opened with a single flickering candle on a dark stage, reminding the audience of Lady Macbeth’s candle in her sleepwalking scene. As Macbeth mourned the passing of Lady Macbeth and the passing of time, more candles were lit on the stage floor, accentuating Macbeth’s important moment of self-discovery. Macbeth lit the candles around him methodically in order to (according to Ninagawa) ‘conquer his fears,’<sup>15</sup> only to engage in futile attempts to extinguish the ever-burning candles later on. This circle of inextinguishable candles created an ironic distance between redemption and Macbeth’s speech: ‘Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow.’ He was encircled by the candles as he

<sup>15</sup> Ninagawa, *Note 1969–1988*.

spoke ‘Out, out, brief candle! | Life’s but a walking shadow’ (5.5.23–4). Evident here again was Ninagawa’s signature approach to creating a sense of estrangement through what would otherwise be quotidian objects. The candles might represent lost souls, including the Macbeths, soldiers who would die in the next scene, and those Macbeth had already killed. Ninagawa elaborates on Macbeth’s feverish collection of the candles: ‘His behavior appears just like that of a child who cannot feel at peace until he gathers all his toys around him.’<sup>16</sup> The visual arrangement of the candles also evoked the thousands of stone statues of Buddha at Adashino Nenbutsuji Temple, an eighteenth-century Buddhist temple on a hill overlooking Kyoto. From the Heian (794–1185) to Edo (1603–1868) periods it was the site where those who could not afford proper burial rites dropped their dead. The stone Buddhas tend to the dead without graves and pray for their souls.

There was something for everyone in this production when it was staged in Japan and abroad, but it also challenged audience members to grapple with their own limitations. Self-motivated audiences may gain a passing acquaintance with a wider array of performance idioms and cultural themes when enough clues are available, but audiences may also force new meanings on the works that cannot be ignored. The framework of *Macbeth* offers spectators who are familiar with the play some semblance of control over the exotic performance event. On the other hand, the sheer grace of a backdrop of cherry blossoms can create shocking contrasts with the dark tragedy and blood. Playgoers who are unfamiliar with the connotations of cherry blossoms might see the set as an expression of beauty and a marker of Japanese identity. *Macbeth* thus becomes a twice-told and doubly removed story. This is not unusual in East Asian adaptations of Shakespearean tragedies that try to balance Asian and Western elements.

Visual framing devices play an important part, surprising the audience with delight and unexpected spectacles. For example, Ninagawa’s 1999 *King Lear*, an English-language intercultural work co-produced with the Royal Shakespeare Company in England, featured a rising sun in the backdrop, and made use of techniques from *noh* and *kabuki* styles; the cast included Nigel Hawthorne in the title role, and Hiroyuki Sanada as an androgynous Fool. The scene of the blinded Gloucester being led by his disguised son Edgar evoked a Japanese watercolor. Both his 1985 *Macbeth* and 2001 *Macbeth* were likewise full of visual surprises and symbolism, with many perfect painterly moments and photogenic scenes. Cherry blossoms and snowstorms are among Ninagawa’s visual trademarks.

Ninagawa’s *Hamlet* at the Barbican in London in May 2015 featured—as is typical of his painterly approach—a blown-up tiered *hina* dolls cabinet with actors as human-sized dolls in the play-within-a-play scene. According to the handout, he drew inspiration from the Japanese Girls’ Day (Dolls’ Day). The Doll’s Day is a festival celebrating girls’ development and offering good wishes for their future.

Like Lee Kuo-hsiu, Ninagawa often draws on metatheatricity as a theme in his productions. He prepares the audiences to take on the play-world through pre-show action (e.g. in *The Tempest* and *Titus Andronicus*) and through creative visual framing devices (*Hamlet*). Before curtain time for *Titus*, audiences rubbed shoulders with actors in Roman costumes who were warming up and walking in the aisles. In the 1995 *Hamlet* (similar to the 2015 *Hamlet*), the audience saw actors busy preparing for the performance in cubicles

<sup>16</sup> Ninagawa, *Note 1969–1988*.

in the dressing rooms on stage before the show started. Ophelia followed the Japanese custom of arranging ornate *hina* dolls—a pastime for ladies at the court and now part of the Dolls' Festival in March celebrated by Japanese families. The dolls will eventually be set afloat to carry misfortunes away so that the family's daughters can grow up healthily and happily. Since the dolls represent hope, Ophelia's giving away dolls rather than flowers in her mad scene carried a grave suggestiveness. The metaphorical connection between drowning—dolls adrift—and despair was also evident. In the play-within-a-play scene, performers sat on a tiered platform resembling a *hina* dolls cabinet. They formed a human tableau and drew attention to the artificiality of the performance. The audience's attention was redirected away from the representational aspect of theatrical realism to the presentational aspect of Ninagawa's metatheatrical narrative.

## SPIRITUALITY, EAST AND WEST

In addition to adaptations that blend genres and to visual and audio strategies of adaptation that fuse Eastern and Western aesthetics, East Asian directors have also engaged with various notions of spirituality in the twenty-first century. The self-problematizing nature of *King Lear* allowed space for Buddhist interpretations of the meanings of spiritual life. Within the realm of global Shakespeare, from Jean-Luc Godard's metacinematic film *King Lear* (1987) to Wu Hsing-kuo's Buddhist-inflected *Li'er zaici* (*Lear Is Here*, 2007), discourses of the making and unmaking of the self that echo religious formulations have played a key role in remixing Shakespeare's play as contemporary performance. Deployment of Eastern spirituality and life narratives can also be found in other directors' works, such as Michael Almereyda's film *Hamlet* in 2000 (where the Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh's scene draws upon the director's interest in Eastern spirituality); Taiwanese playwright Stan Lai's three-man production in Hong Kong in 2000, *Lear and the Thirty-seven-fold Practice of a Bodhisattva* (where Jigme Khyentse Rinpoche's recitation of a fourteenth-century Tibetan Buddhist scripture reflects Lai's interests as a practicing Buddhist); Ong Keng Sen's multimedia stage work *Desdemona* (2000) in which the Singaporean director addresses social oppression and *Desdemona*'s endurance; the Ryutopia Noh Theatre's Japanese *Hamlet* (dir. Kurita Yoshihiro, 2007) in which the titular character's costumes and mannerism call to mind a Buddhist monk; and Akira Kurosawa's Japanese film *Ran* (1985), a re-telling of *Lear*. Ophelia is recast as a shaman in several South Korean productions. As a medium between two worlds, she comforts the dead and guides the living.

How has the theatricalization of religion been used in cross-cultural readings of Shakespeare that are flirting with postmodernism?

An example of the autobiographical approach to self-knowledge and the use of Shakespearean text as a source of spiritual wisdom is Wu's solo Beijing opera *Lear Is Here* in which he plays ten characters. At centre stage stands a dispirited King Lear after the storm scene on the heath (3.2), who has just taken off his *jingju* (Beijing-opera) headdress and armour costume in full view of a packed audience. Following his powerful presentation of the scene of the mad Lear in the storm and his on-stage costume change, the actor—now dressed as if he were backstage—interrogates himself and the eyeless head-dress in a somber moment while touching his own eyes, evoking Gloucester's blinding

and the Lacanian gaze in a play about sight and truth. ‘Who am I?’ he asks. ‘Doth any here know me? Why, this is not Lear. | Doth Lear walk thus? speak thus? Where are his eyes?’ (1.4.217–18). Here, the performer is self-conscious of the ways in which his own eyes become Lear’s eyes.

These two pairs of eyes represent the necessary split many performers experience on stage, a process of making null the performer’s self identity so that he or she becomes the part being performed. This scene turns out to be somewhat controversial because it complicates the popular understanding of acting in traditional Chinese operatic theatre—which is often regarded as highly stylized and sophisticatedly coded for aesthetic appreciation by the connoisseurs, but lacking any sense of interiority and depth of character development in the Aristotelian sense. Here, perhaps for the first time in the history of Beijing opera, the process of embodiment is laid bare by Wu in a metatheatrical exposé.

Presented by the Lincoln Center Festival and produced by Taiwan’s Contemporary Legend Theatre (an intercultural Beijing opera company founded by Wu in 1986, with input from his wife Lin Hsiu-wei who is a renowned modern dancer), this fine example of East Asian Shakespeare took place at the Rose Theatre in New York on the evening of 12 July 2007, with revisions of its earlier incarnations (the production was first conceived in Paris when Wu was leading a performance workshop on the invitation of Ariane Mnouchkine in 2001).

As Wu begins his transformation from ‘Lear’ to himself (or: ‘the actor’ as the programme lists this character), he removes and methodically joins the stage beard to the hairpiece, making it a faceless puppet. His work with this prop makes clear that the empty eyes raise questions about his own identity as well as that of the character whose costume he no longer inhabits. Raising it above him and pondering it intently, he asks ‘Who am I,’ before shifting his gaze to the audience and asking the same question, slightly revised, in the third person: ‘Does any here know him?’ and then answering that question himself: ‘He is not Lear.’ The prop thus functions as an emblem of the emptiness of stage representation and also for the actor’s emptied self when not inhabited by the character. Wu’s performance of Lear and the ‘actor playing Lear’ resonates with several metatheatrical moments in other Shakespearean plays—among them Macbeth’s evocation of the ‘poor player’ who struts and frets and is heard no more and Hamlet’s comparison of the fates of Yorick and Alexander the Great. The face sans eyes is, like ‘Lear’s shadow’<sup>11</sup>, a figure for death. When it is held aloft and gazed upon by Wu, the hollow face, like Yorick’s skull, symbolizes self-knowledge through a meditation on death and embodiment, reminding the audience of his previous works that examine the meanings of death and ritual. For example, Wu has adapted *Hamlet* before and played the Prince in *The Prince’s Revenge* (*Wangzi fuchouji*, 1989) and the Greek Tragedy *Medea* (*Loulán nǚ*, 1993).

*Li’er* suggests that Lear is questioning the construction of the self, a process that is similar to the meditative practices of both Christian and Buddhist traditions. As James Howe suggest in *A Buddhist’s Shakespeare*, there is rich material on meditation within the Shakespearean canon which has not been explicitly defined as Christian. The meditation therefore lends itself to Buddhist interpretations. When Lear asks ‘who is it that can tell me who I am’, and the Fool answers ‘Lear’s shadow’, the exchange moves close to well-known *memento mori* discourses and practices, as framed by the wisdom of the Fool’s suggestion. Wu’s manipulation of the faceless puppet parallels the ghost of Old Hamlet

in Kim Kwang-bo's *Ophelia: Sister, Come to My Bed* (1995). Old Hamlet appears as a large puppet operated by three monks to signal a tug of war between different forms of human and spiritual agency and identities.

Wu's characters (Lear and the actor) initially reject the possibility of religious redemption. His 'decision' to return to the stage after a hiatus and the near disbandment of his company 'is tougher than entering some monastery' as he tells us on stage. Presumably it is a tougher decision to keep the show going despite seemingly insurmountable challenges because the monastery is seen as a form of escapism. Interestingly, as soon as that decision is taken, religious tropes surface again, more explicitly in the scene in which Wu as Gloucester 'looks' to Dover as a site for his redemption. In a deliberate slip of tongue during his continuous chanting of 'Dufo',—the Mandarin Chinese transliteration of 'Dover' (which rhymes with 'many Buddhas')—Gloucester conflates Dufo with Amitufo (Amitava Buddha, or Buddha of Light). Gloucester moves from contemplating suicide to seeking refuge in the Buddha and in the Buddha of Light (Amitufo). The slide from Dover to the Buddha of Light is significant because it hints at Wu's and Gloucester's wish to seek refuge in Buddhist redemption, which explains the slide later in his chant that includes a series of additional names of Buddha. The production as a whole concludes with a meditative scene in which Wu, dressed in a Buddhist monastic robe, circles the stage as himself, as Lear's ghost, as a transcendent being, or perhaps as a personification of the *jingju* tradition in crisis. The scene evokes again the performer's conflicting identities on and offstage, as a Taiwanese. His performance echoes the Buddhist circumambulation meditative practice, an act of moving around a sacred pagoda or idol. Wu as monk asks: 'Who am I? I am me.' He continues: 'And I am looking for me! I think of me; I look at me; I know me.... I kill me. I forget me! I dream about me again', thereby laying a strong claim to the centrality of the artist's self within Eastern spiritual traditions.

The Buddhist meditation highlights the contradictory nature of identities that can only be constructed in opposition to others. Eastern spirituality has also been appropriated in adaptations outside East Asia. Wu's question 'who am I?' in *Lear* parallels the performance of Hamlet's 'to be or not to be' soliloquy in Michael Almereyda's Buddhist-inflected film *Hamlet* (2000; starring Ethan Hawke). While set in modern day New York City, the film contains multiple references to Buddhism, including a clip from Ulrike Koch's documentary about a pilgrimage, *Die Salzmannen von Tibet* (*The Saltmen of Tibet*, 1998), which appears on the back-seat video monitor of Claudius' limousine. In the moment when the tribesmen pass through the boundary between the secular world and the sacred territory of the salt fields, Claudius, who has been praying, covers the screen with his hand and laments the failure of his words to reach Heaven ('what if this hand be blacker than it is with brother's blood') as he is jolted by a nasty and dangerous swerve. Hamlet is driving the limousine as Claudius' chauffeur without his knowledge.<sup>17</sup>

The most sustained infusion of Buddhism in the film is the appearance of Thich Nhat Hanh in a rendering of the 'to be or not to be' scene. Thich Nhat Hanh is a prolific author of Buddhist works and leader of the Engaged Buddhism movement. He appears on a video

<sup>17</sup> Alexa Huang, 'Global Shakespeare 2.0 and the Task of the Performance Archive', *Shakespeare Survey* 64 (2011), 38–51 (49).

monitor in Hamlet's apartment. His teachings on 'interbeing' ('We have the word "to be", but I propose the word "to 'interbe". Interbe. Because it is not possible to "be" alone. We must "interbe" with everything and everyone else—mother,

Father ... uncle ...'). His words echo repeated video loops of Hamlet reciting the half-line 'to be or not to be' while actively making suicidal gestures. Engrossed in his own footage of an erotic encounter with Ophelia on the hand-held monitor, Hamlet is not looking at the television or listening to Thich Nhat Hanh. Interestingly, the book Ophelia is reading, and with which she partly covers her face, is Krishnamurti's *Living and Dying* with a big photo of the sage on its cover. Even the video, however, encodes Eastern spirituality as an alternative source of wisdom.

As in Wu's *Lear*, Eastern spirituality is deployed in the film to signal the possibility of redemption and an alternative philosophy of life. The conversation that emerges between Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Koch's *Saltmen of Tibet*, and Thich Nhat Hanh's *Peace is Every Step* video parallels Wu's Buddhist litany of contradictory states of the self at the end of his production. Both works juxtapose Buddhist teachings on the illusory and shifting nature of the self with Hamletian scepticism and with secular elements drawn from Shakespeare. Almercyda's *Hamlet* posits that the Buddhist ideal of 'interbeing' can counteract Hamlet's despair and scepticism, while Wu's *Lear* moves from rejecting the monastery as a site of redemption at the beginning of the production to the embodiment of the role of a monk at the end, when he literally dons the Buddhist robe. The final scene heals Wu's own identity crisis as a Taiwanese actor specializing in Beijing opera and simultaneously resolves the tension between Taiwan's need to assert its own cultural identity and the implicit demands of an art form commonly seen as an embodiment of the Chinese nation (*jingju*).

While the examples discussed in this chapter do not exhaust the rich range of interpretive possibilities of Asian adaptations of Shakespeare, they represent the three major approaches of directors: generic hybridization, intra-regional and trans-historical allusions, and the infusion of spirituality. In many ways, Wu's performance points to the future of Asian Shakespeares. He gives primacy to his personal life stories and to the interaction between his personae and his audience, rather than attempting 'authentic' representations of the Shakespearean tragedy or of 'Asia'.

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