

# “Our Shakespeare”: The Foreignness of Intercultural Theater in China and Japan

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The adaptation and performance of Shakespeare in foreign contexts is fraught with cultural dissimilarity, historical complexity, and impossibilities of translation. This paper examines various aspects of the cross-cultural tension inherent to adaptations of Shakespeare into the indigenous theatrical forms of Beijing opera and Japanese Noh. It calls for a greater awareness of the complexities of adaptation across barriers of artistic form, language, and culture.

Shakespeare's interactions with Chinese and Japanese dramatic traditions consist of an elaborate dance between vastly different forms and cultures. Formal and cultural parallels bridge a gaping cross-cultural divide, connecting Shakespeare's work to foreign dramatic traditions. Such parallels enable intercultural performance, but the chasm of dissimilarity between traditions never disappears. Glaring cultural and formal differences challenge adaptors and translators at every turn, shaping intercultural performance in myriad ways. This issue affects all modern performances of Shakespeare; contemporary European culture bears little resemblance to Shakespeare's early modern society. The difficulty intensifies, however, as one begins to cross historical, geographical, and linguistic lines. This fascinating dynamic can be found in the flourishing interactions between Shakespearean drama and traditional dramatic forms in China and Japan.

As Shakespearean drama has migrated into the theater traditions of Beijing opera and Japanese Noh, adaptors and translators have addressed these issues of parallel and dissimilarity in a variety of ways. No matter how vibrant, creative, and self-

conscious the theater production, it is impossible to transplant the literary work of Shakespeare from its original home to new soil without affecting its cultural significance. The cultural and religious environments of early modern Europe and of China and Japan over the last few centuries are foreign to each other. This foreignness, which manifests itself linguistically as well as culturally, cannot help but shape the adaptation of Shakespeare in Asian cultures. The way in which Shakespearean drama entered cultural conversation in China and Japan further changes the significance of Shakespeare in these respective cultures and artistic traditions, particularly in China. A study of intercultural theater in China and Japan must consider both formal technicalities and historical context. Adaptations of Shakespearean drama into traditional dramatic forms contribute unique and valuable perspectives on Shakespeare's work, but such adaptations never transfer simply across cultures. Rather, adaptors and translators must delicately balance considerations of culture, history, religion, and language as they adapt Shakespeare into indigenous dramatic forms.

In her article “Adapting Shakespeare from Western Drama to Chinese Opera”, Hui Wu examines

the formal parallels between Shakespeare's drama and the traditional structure of Chinese opera. In her consideration of performance similarities between the two, she points out that elements such as misunderstanding, disguise, buffoonery, and farce are strikingly similar in execution in both traditions (Wu 4). Likewise, both operate in simple scenes with interactive and poetic dialogue, and exhibit certain characteristics of modern drama such as independence between scenes, the mixture of tragic and comic elements, and monologues and asides addressed to the audience (Wu 4). These shared characteristics allow a great deal of flexibility and facility in adaptation. This relative ease of adaptation is an example of a bridge across the cross-cultural chasm. It facilitates the performance of intercultural theater.

After Hui Wu finishes laying out this formal bridge clearly for her readers, she moves to cross the chasm of dissimilarity in a different area. She attempts to build a cultural bridge, arguing that common moral values between Shakespeare and traditional Confucianism also facilitated the transition (Wu 3). She then states, "[Shakespeare] found his true audience in China" (Wu 3). This conclusion, however, fails to incorporate the excessively complex history of Shakespeare in Chinese society. She jumps from her partially completed cultural "bridge" to the other side of the chasm as if the chasm did not exist. This statement draws attention to a need for a consideration of the sociopolitical context of the interactions of Shakespeare with Chinese culture.

Shakespeare and China share a complex political and cultural history. China has exhibited many different attitudes towards Shakespeare, using him to criticize or validate Chinese culture, to reinforce political or social arguments, or to revive dying cultural traditions (Li 15). Shakespeare was never resisted as an import of British colonization, which many argue is because he has transcended his original British context and become truly a part of the Chinese theater tradition (Huang 11). However, as Alexander Huang points out in the prologue to his book, *Chinese Shakespeares: Two Centuries of Cultural Exchange*, this perspective lacks an adequate consideration of the historical conditions surrounding early performances of Shakespeare

(Huang 12). Radical shifts in national ideology in the twentieth century likewise changed the shape of Shakespeare in China (He 153). The complex interactions between political and cultural forces and Shakespeare's works since they first appeared in China warrant a thorough consideration.

Historically, sociopolitical conversations have shaped Shakespeare's involvement with Chinese culture. Even before Shakespeare was translated into Chinese, Chinese writers used his name to boldly legitimize their viewpoints, often with little or no understanding of his work. This indiscriminate use of Shakespeare before he had been seen or studied, Li Ruru argues in *Shashibiya: Staging Shakespeare in China*, carried implications for the development of Shakespearean scholarship and performance in the decades to come (Li 15). The first significant literary appearance of Shakespeare came in Lin Shu's translation of *Tales from Shakespeare* by Charles and Mary Lamb in 1904, which he used to advocate for the value of traditional Chinese culture and literature. He believed Shakespeare could be easily assimilated. His opponents, however, valued Shakespeare for his otherness, promoting him in the name of progress and the adoption of Western learning (Li 14). "From the very beginning, different faces of Shakespeare have been created by Chinese people to accord with their own needs" Li Ruru notes (Li 15). This history of Shakespeare in China in the early twentieth century complicates the relationship between the Bard and Chinese audiences. Rather than naturally finding a home in China, the work of Shakespeare was adopted by various parties and adapted to their needs.

With the founding of the People's Republic of China, Shakespeare enjoyed an increase in popularity as the favorite playwright of Marx and Engel. State-enabled Soviet influence during this period resulted in the dominance of the Stanislavski system of performance (Li 42). Chinese theater practitioners ascribed to the belief that "Shakespeare's real home is in the USSR" (Li 43). The state officially supported the performance of Shakespeare's work, but discouraged experimental productions, including those that involved alternative cultural interpretations. Theater was a medium for propaganda, a method with which to encourage those throwing off the "old China", and a platform

for public denunciation or political machinations (Li 44). The advent of the Cultural Revolution in 1966, however, brought Mao Zedong's condemnation of Western literature (Shakespeare implicitly included) as part of a wider criticism and subsequent banning of foreign "capitalist art" (Li 50). For twelve years, Shakespeare functionally disappeared from Chinese scholarship (He 154, 155). Shakespearean literature diametrically opposed the spirit of the age of Mao's Cultural Revolution, providing another complicating factor in the narrative of Shakespeare's relationship with Chinese culture.

Shakespeare did not remain alien to the Chinese people for long. After the end of the Cultural Revolution, Shakespeare quickly began to flourish. Ninety percent of Shakespeare productions in China have taken place since 1979, three years after the Cultural Revolution (Li 51). Chinese practitioners of theater began turning to the development of intercultural theater, specifically in adaptation of Shakespeare's plays to Chinese language and traditional form. They worked independently from the global movement of intercultural theater because of cultural isolationism, but often took similar approaches to those employed by foreign counterparts (Li 164). This process of localization, relatively independent from the rest of the world, continued Chinese culture's engagement with Shakespeare. Here Shakespearean drama was used not as a political tool, but as a means to rejuvenate Chinese cultural heritage after the devastation of the Cultural Revolution. Shakespeare did not become part of Chinese theater without the bridging efforts of enthusiastic (and in some cases, desperate) adaptors actively drawing him into the sphere of Chinese artistic culture.

Throughout the history of Shakespeare's interactions with Chinese culture, the common theme of usage emerges strongly. Various writers, regimes, and movements have used Shakespeare's name, work, and reputation to support a wide spectrum of political and philosophical stances. Even the flourishing relationship between Beijing opera and Shakespearean drama of the past few decades stemmed from a practical desire to use Shakespeare

to revive a dying art form. However, the productions that have stemmed from this desire have given new life to both Shakespeare and Beijing opera despite, or even because of, the cultural and historical chasm between the two traditions.

Whereas Beijing opera shares formal similarities with Shakespearean drama that facilitate adaptation, the performance methods of Japanese Noh theater appear to oppose Western drama almost entirely. Noh employs a fundamentally narrative mode, in which the voice of the narrator (or the chorus) chants scenic descriptions, explanations of the characters' actions and emotions, and passages which in Western drama would be delivered by the characters themselves (Kishi and Bradshaw 9). Often the narrating voice also renders judgment on the content of the drama, telling the audience what they ought to think or feel of the situation unfolding before them (Kishi and Bradshaw 6). Shakespeare, on the other hand, uses a perspectival method, in which he shows the emotions, thoughts, and opinions of his characters to his audience without revealing his own point of view (Kishi and Bradshaw 6). The soliloquy, through which Shakespeare's characters voice their thoughts and internal struggles, seemed both awkward and unpolished to Japanese audiences and actors of the nineteenth century (Kishi and Bradshaw 7). This fundamental dissimilarity creates significant challenges for translators and adaptors.

One clear example of the function of the Noh chorus comes from the play *Atsumori*, written by Zeami<sup>1</sup>, the greatest author, theoretician, and reformer in the history of Noh drama (Kishi and Bradshaw 9). In one moving passage toward the end of the work, the ghost of Atsumori, a young warrior, confronts Rensho, a priest who once was the warrior Kumagai no Jiro Naozane, who had fought and killed Atsumori years ago. Atsumori reenacts the scene of his death, sometimes voicing the description of the account himself, sometimes dancing and miming the actions being described by the chorus (Kishi and Bradshaw 10). In an English translation from Royall Tyler, *Atsumori* begins, "Then, in time, His Majesty's ship sailed", and the chorus immediately picks up the narrative, saying, "with the whole clan

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<sup>1</sup> Zeami was also a great dancer as well as an accomplished actor (which is more than anyone has ever claimed for Shakespeare). His revolutionary dramas developed extremely complex interactions between poetic and musical measures (Kishi and Bradshaw 9).

behind them in their own. Anxious to be abroad, *I sought the shore*" (emphasis added) (qtd. in Kishi and Bradshaw 10). Atsumori picks up a further two lines of past-tense narration in the first person before the chorus returns to narrating in his voice for three lines. They then continue with, "At this *Atsumori* wheeled his mount and swiftly, all undaunted, drew his sword. *We* first exchanged a few rapid blows" (qtd. in Kishi and Bradshaw 10) (emphasis added). The chorus switches from first person narration to third person and then back again in the space of six lines. This fluidity of voice in narration creates a method of characterization radically different from Shakespeare's perspectival narrative.

Another prominent formal difference between Noh theater and Shakespearean drama is the nature of time within the confines of the stage. With his translation of the *Atsumori* passage, Royall Tyler includes this stage direction, obvious to educated Japanese but less so to those unfamiliar with the conventions of Noh: "Atsumori continues dancing and miming in consonance with the text" (qtd. in Kishi and Bradshaw 10). Atsumori's ghost reenacts the battle in which he died, experiencing the past again within the present. Adding to this temporal ambiguity is the fact that in the original Japanese, the distinction between past and present is far less clear than in English translations (Kishi and Bradshaw 10). This contrasts with the clear sense of forward motion that comes from Shakespeare's narrative style, in which he uses the speeches and actions of his characters to unfold his plots. By their very nature, Noh adaptations of Shakespeare must completely change the means of storytelling.

Those adapting Shakespeare into Noh performances face an important question: what elements must a theatrical work retain if it is to be considered Noh? To answer this question Ueda Munakata Kuniyoshi, Emeritus Professor of English at Shizuoka University, who has adapted several works of Shakespeare into Noh, draws upon the theoretical work of Zeami (Ueda 68). Zeami repeatedly emphasized song and dance as the two essential elements of Noh, calling them "the two basic arts" (qtd. in Ueda 68). Zeami turned Noh into both a poetic and a musical dramatic form (Kishi and Bradshaw 9). The inherent integration of these

two aspects, which has been carefully preserved since Zeami's death in the fifteenth century, demands careful and selective adaptation of Shakespearean text into a formal Noh performance.

Along with the treatment of Shakespearean text comes the consideration of cultural and philosophical adaptation. Because of the careful preservation of the form of Noh drama since the reforms of Zeami, the aesthetics of Noh have not shifted greatly since Japan first encountered Shakespeare. However, the cultural and religious differences between Shakespeare's context and the context of traditional Japanese theater are notable, to say the least. For instance, Noh drama contrasts with Shakespeare's work in its distinctive focus on ghosts and the subconscious world of dreams. Noh, particularly "*mugen* Noh" involves a reflective approach to narration in which a ghost recounts and reenacts the climactic moments of his or her life (Ueda 69). While certain Shakespeare plays do involve visiting ghosts (namely, *Hamlet*), the parallel is not, in fact, straightforward. The resolution of a Noh play is drastically different from that of a Shakespearean drama. Western tragedy typically ends with the death of the hero or heroine, which in the Judeo-Christian context represents a closed book. Within this paradigm, humans live once in the world and then move on to their eternal destinations. In Noh, death takes on a very different meaning with the Buddhist doctrine of rebirth at its center (Ueda 73). This fundamental difference in attitude toward suicide must be navigated by translators and adapters of Shakespeare into Noh drama.

Self-slaughter historically carries vastly different connotations in Japanese society than in culturally Christian Europe. In Noh, joint suicide between lovers does not inspire the same horror it would within the early modern European context of *Romeo and Juliet*. Rather, within a Japanese Buddhist context, the decision to forsake the world and continue together into the afterlife would evoke reflections upon the transient nature of life and the beauty of human love. It would leave its audience with a sense of reverence for the transcendent and noble. Through suicide, it would attempt, in the words of Zeami, "to serve as a means to pacify people's hearts and to move the high and low alike" (qtd. in Ueda 74). Noh adaptations of Shakespeare's tragedies, by their very

nature, treat suicide more hopefully and favorably than the originals. This fundamental difference in attitude toward suicide must be navigated by translators and adaptors of Shakespeare into Noh drama.

Any adaptation of Shakespeare into Noh must cross lines of language, culture, and religion. To enter into this poetic and musical dramatic form, Shakespearean drama must change its narrative form as it is translated from English to Japanese. To align with the carefully preserved and upheld aesthetic of the style, it must also shift its perspective from that of Christian, early modern Europe to that of Buddhist Japan. Adaptors navigating this shift are, in a sense, building linguistic and cultural bridges between two art forms where no bridges originally existed. This enterprise is exciting and dangerous. The nature of Noh dictates the maintenance of an aesthetic toward life very different from the one espoused by Shakespeare himself. This tension between alien cultures and religions remains a constant in the process of cross-cultural adaptation.

Culture, history, language, and dramatic form all contribute to the considerations faced by adaptors of Shakespeare into traditional theatrical forms as they bridge gaps between dramatic style. Each case of intercultural theater has its own unique complexities. While the formal similarities between Shakespearean drama and Beijing opera allowed for more fluid adaptation into traditional dramatic forms, Noh theater and Shakespeare's work are fundamentally and formally different. Attempts at translation and adaptation only reinforce for Japanese audiences that Shakespeare is foreign to their culture (Kishi and Bradshaw 27). In the case of Chinese opera, some have argued that Shakespeare "found his true audience in China" (Wu). This claim, however, is simply not true. The extent to which political and social voices bent Shakespeare to their own ends characterizes the history of Shakespeare in China. These voices used Shakespeare to validate countless causes, many contradictory, and the Cultural Revolution cut off all study and performance of Shakespeare for more than a decade. Shakespearean literature did not organically take root in Chinese soil. The work of Shakespeare was drawn into Chinese artistic culture by a host of bridge-building adaptors

and translators, some more careful and balanced in their architectural approaches than others.

Both Japanese and Chinese adaptors find unique challenges as they take Shakespeare's English, Christian, early modern literature and adapt it across art forms, languages, and cultures. Adaptors face the task of weaving bridges that connect the two art forms that stand on either side of a chasm of cultural and linguistic differences. In crossing these delicately constructed bridges, performers must remain aware of the peculiar pitfalls and leanings of the adaptations they present to their audiences. The dissimilarities between traditions never disappear. They haunt adaptors and translators, drawing out tension between the two sides of the chasm. The bridges built amid this tension, though, appear more delicate and beautiful because of it.

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