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The Canon and Shakespeare's Plays on the Contemporary East Asian Stage

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Abstract: In her article "The Canon and Shakespeare's Plays on the Contemporary East Asian Stage" I-Chun Wang argues that although globalization often refers to the phenomenon of international trade and (im)migrants, globalization has made strong impacts in all aspects of culture and literature. Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* and *Julius Caesar* have attracted attention of East Asian playwrights and directors in the last several years. By juxtaposing the trends of local cultural performing arts with representations of local cultural legacies, Wang discusses the staging of these two Roman plays in Japan, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. By probing into the imperial themes represented through performing arts and highlighting how recent East Asian theatrical productions represent Shakespearean heritage, Wang also examines the increasing importance of local voices and cultural aesthetics in East Asian theater.

I-Chun WANG

The Canon and Shakespeare's Plays on the Contemporary East Asian Stage

In the past two decades, Shakespeare's plays have been defined as a platform of cultural exchange, an arena for the dialogue between the English and the European cultures, and a mediator of cultural discourses (see Tosi and Bassi; Huang and Ross). Recent Shakespearean study has involved multifarious concepts such as hybridity (see Navarro), globalization (see Robertson), innovation (see Brickhill; Hedley), and transformation (see Worthen) owing to the fact that performing Shakespeare in multilingual form has been an off-and-on phenomenon in East Asia. The basic formula, however, is the blending of the local cultural context with Shakespeare's themes and motifs. Scholars and critics have found that appropriations and adaptations of Shakespeare involve paradoxical concepts and fragmentary interpretations (see Im, "The Lure") and that experimental forms tend to destabilize the "authentic" interpretation of Shakespeare (see French). T.S. Eliot once said that "Dante and Shakespeare divide the modern world between them; there is no third" (Eliot qtd. in Bloom 51). At the turn of the twentieth century, when the new trends of aesthetic choices helped shape the transformation of Shakespearean legacy, some of the recreated Shakespearean plays on non-English stages have brought new light on intercultural negotiations resulting in new perspectives. For example, Li-Lan Yong (楊麗蘭) examines Shakespearean plays performed by Asian actors and issues of intercultural spectatorship so as to raise such issues as cultural implications of performance forms, the ways to define a spectator's cultural disposition, and the possibility of intercultural allusions. However, intercultural perception is mostly constructed on shared feelings and archetypal elements in the human world; with new theatrical aesthetics and cultural identities developing in East Asian countries, Shakespeare's popularity becomes more tangible, especially when his plays assume various forms on stage. As a result, globalization in East Asia signifies not only East Asian intercultural communication and cross-cultural dialogue with the west but also refers to a changing East Asia where people tend to interpret Shakespeare according to their own social and political phenomena. What, then, does the fascination with Shakespeare's Rome on the East Asian stage betoken?

Re-staged history plays such as *Julius Caesar* and *Antony and Cleopatra* are either imbued with political implications or re-presented with local cultural legacy and in the recreation of the Roman plays in East Asia, each director mirrors and re-interprets empire building, the nature of conquerors, the scheming of politicians, the sites of contestation, and the perception of conflicts or highlights the local art forms with modern dramaturgy to create a dialogue with Shakespearean plays. In my study, I examine East Asian versions of *The Tragedy of Julius Caesar* and *Antony and Cleopatra*. These plays were staged recently in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Japan (on Shakespeare's plays in Asia, see, e.g., Su <<http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.2634>>; Wang <<http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.2234>>). In addition to the themes of political conflict and Roman leadership, these versions of Shakespeare's plays also show the social and political consciousness of a changing East Asia. As Barbara Parker notes, Shakespeare's core theme of the Roman plays is "factiousness," which she claims precipitated "the sundering of the state" and battles for supremacy and perpetual strife (21). *Coriolanus* elaborates plotting that leads to civil war, *Titus Andronicus* represents the issue of succession of the emperor, *Antony and Cleopatra* reveals power struggle, and *Julius Caesar* debates the difference between tyrants and kings. Both Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* and *Julius Caesar* manifest an important phase of Roman history. The entangled relation between Rome as a colonial authority and Egypt as its client kingdom (Blits 113), suggests the tragedies of individuals under imperialist power. These two Shakespearean plays show the contrasting themes of political struggle and partisan furies of the rise and the fall of politicians and of problems of disorder. Rex Gibson contends that the traditional way to represent the Romans on stage is to stress the magnificence of the Roman empire through retinues and soldiers. To promote the reception of Asian audiences, the representations of these plays on East Asian stages not only emblemize the features of the empire, but also stress the gap in values and behavior between Egypt and Rome. Each re-staged version of *Julius Caesar* and *Antony and Cleopatra* reveals perspectives of empire management, as well as codification of queenship and kingship in each theatrical performance.

The director of the Taiwanese version of *Antony and Cleopatra*, Wei-Jan Chi (紀蔚然), one of the winners of the Taiwan 17th National Award of Arts and Letters in 2013, reveals the relationship between the Roman conquerors and conquered Egypt by letting his characters meditate upon their positioning in the power struggle and the values of life. Chi's play *Cleopatra and Her Fools* (艷后和她的小丑們) was staged in 2012 by the Guoguang Opera Company (國光劇團), one of the leading Peking Opera Troupes in which Hai-Ming Wei (魏海敏), a leading actress in Taiwan, plays Cleopatra. Instead of demonstrating the full play by Shakespeare, Chi included a meta-dramatic structure, effeminization of Antony and his special stress on the fools around the beautiful Cleopatra, queen and enchantress of Egypt. With traditional Peking Opera music and costumes tinted by Egyptian style, the director molds the play into a reminiscence of Roman and Egyptian history through the eyes of the present-day characters.

Shakespeare began *Antony and Cleopatra* with Philo's condemnation of the situation he saw: eunuchs fanning Cleopatra, amorous and lustful Antony embracing his lover, and the Egyptian customs different from those of the Romans. Following Shakespeare, the queen and her lover Antony are the main characters in *Cleopatra and Her Fools*. The play is divided into ten scenes. The main plot remains the story about Cleopatra and Antony, but the storyline is cut into several parts by a parallel plot in which the director, actors, and actresses are expecting a minor actor to show up in their dress rehearsal for a play about Cleopatra. Ironically, in the first scene, "Prophecy," Cleopatra shows up in dim light, uttering the unbearable situation that the beautiful homes of her people are crushed by the conquerors of Rome and she worries that the true love between Antony and herself will be regarded as exotic and lustful. Dressed in a long white robe with a headdress and shiny decorations on her neck and wrists, Cleopatra, with a tender falsetto voice, foresees that Antony will be reduced to a drunkard and she to a whore. With a play-within-a-play format, Chi employs dialogue between the leading clown-eunuch and a messenger from Rome to describe her beauty and nature of a femme fatale: "Her charms have many faces. She's elegant and saucy; she is gentle and quick-tempered" (82). According to the eunuch, Cleopatra is able to switch from tears to laughter, and she knows how to play dead (Chi 85-6). Although in history Antony appears to subordinate Roman interests and power to the imperial claims of Cleopatra (Huzar 108), in Chi's version, Antony himself admits that he has abandoned his duty causing an imbalance of power in Rome and the civil war.

The aesthetics of Peking Opera lies in its symbolic gestures, body movements, glances, a simple stage, and spectacular face painting and costumes, as well as its verse recitation (see Xu). By employing Peking Opera, Chi uses an ironic tone to stage Antony's passion and Cleopatra's flirtations. To fit into the music, Shakespeare's lines are often changed. For example, in the original Antony's high ranking officer, Domitius Enobarbus, says that "the oars were silver, / Which to the tune of flutes kept stroke, and made / The water which they beat to follow faster, / As amorous of their strokes" (*Antony and Cleopatra* 2.2.201-04). In Chi's version, Enobarbus's depiction of the scenery highlights Antony as a romantic lover who will soon be reduced to the butt of joking and teasing since he allows Cleopatra to put her scarf on him. The Effeminization of Antony is the core theme of Chi's *Antony and Cleopatra*. At the beginning of the play, Antony has already stunned the messenger who comes to Egypt, finding this general drunk in his love nest. Although the messenger reveals that the Romans see Cleopatra as a cunning fox and a seducer of men, Antony has indeed lost his Roman self until he finds that the power struggle has already been initiated by Octavius. The Roman self, as represented in the imperial history of Rome, refers to an awareness of not only collective identity, but also intellectual ideas as related to the political community in space and time (see Mastrangelo). However, Antony flees from the naval war and thus Egypt is at the mercy of Octavius. Realizing that he has lost his position as a commander, Chi's Antony therefore laments that "Life is a stage on which stands I the puppet, handled and manipulated" (864). In Chi's *Cleopatra and Her Fools*, Antony realizes too late Octavius's ambition after he returns to Rome. However, Octavius not only wages a sea battle against Antony, but also finds an excuse to extend his power to Egypt making Egypt his subordinated kingdom. The Battle of Actium was a decisive battle between the Egyptian navy and Rome. In Shakespeare, the naïve Cleopatra abandons the fight, causing indirectly the death of Antony and the destiny of Egypt. The main plot of *Cleopatra and Her Fools* follows Shakespeare's design: Chi's metadramatic design criticizes tactically each main character of the play. The treacheries of Octavius, the fickleness of Cleopatra, and

Antony's unstable personality as a military leader are revealed by both the storyteller and his actors who are dressed up like the fools of traditional Peking Opera taking the roles of chorus in Chi's play.

On the stage of the Peking Opera, the fools fall into traditional category of the Chou (丑), a male clown role literally meaning "ugliness." Other roles include Sheng (生), a male role; Dan (旦), a female role; and Jing (淨), a male role in which the character has a painted face. Each of the main categories of roles can still be divided into the old, the young, and martial roles. Compared to the highly stylized leading male and female characters, the function of the Chou is to amuse, to contrast, and especially to criticize. The two fools appearing in Chi's *Cleopatra and Her Fools* are mainly chorus members, who together with the story teller, criticize the foolishness of the politics found in the Roman Empire. In one scene, the stage is divided into two spheres in one of which the soldiers led by Octavius and Antony fight with each other. On the part of the stage closer to the audience, the chorus members have a dialogue with the story teller who follows the script telling the story being performed in front of them: "Chorus Member A: Where are we now? / Story teller: The part about the treachery of politics. Octavius shows his true face, and takes down his opponents one by one. / Chorus Member A: The stuff of an emperor" (Chi 805; unless indicated otherwise, all translations are mine). The meta-dramatic structure of the play reinforces the theme of destruction and mutability of life. The storyteller explains that Antony is wise, but foolish at the moment and thus admits that he himself is the pawn of the playwright, being without fully understanding of the whole play. The storyteller even suggests that his bewilderment is owing to the fact that Shakespeare's script was lost implying the play gets too complicated with postmodern theatrical tactics. In the scene when Octavius walks into Cleopatra's palace to claim his authority and guarantee Cleopatra will thereafter live in luxury, Cleopatra retorts cursing the imperialist who has never taken notice of the lands he has trampled (Chi 1163). *Cleopatra and Her Fools* ends with a late-entrance actor who, at a lower platform, watches Cleopatra confessing her loyalty to Egypt and drinking poisonous wine to end her life. She confesses her indulgence in love and her devotion to her country; therefore, she will leave people of the later generations to make further comments upon her. In his play, Chi looks on these Shakespearean figures from a different perspective. To Chi, there was no real hero in his play, since all characters have lost their original identities for one reason or another. As Chi's title *Cleopatra and Her Clowns* shows, most of his characters are clownish including Antony who meets his tragic fate because of love; Octavius, the one who never cherishes human relationship; and Cleopatra who manipulates Antony and destroys herself. When Chi's storyteller finds it hard to represent Shakespeare's historical figures, Cleopatra and Antony recreated by the storyteller also fail to keep up their dignified identities.

In Japan, the appropriation of Shakespeare's plays in Japanese contexts dates at least to the 1970s, when *Antony and Cleopatra* was staged by Senda Koreya (千田是也) originally named Ito Kumiyo (1904-2004) (see Ryuta 13). However, one of the most discussed versions of *Antony and Cleopatra* was directed in 2011 by Yukio Ninagawa (蜷川幸雄) (the script was written by Kazuko Matsuoka [松岡和子]) (see Im, "Review"). Compared to Chi's version in the form of Peking Opera, Ninagawa's version uses sensuous body movements and gigantic props to depict passion and tension. In the past twenty years, Ninagawa has directed further Shakespearean plays including *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, *Pericles*, *Titus Andronicus*, and *Romeo and Juliet*. Michael Neill wrote about Ninagawa's *Antony and Cleopatra* that the historical and geographical sweep of the action is unmatched and that each representation of the locales manifests the hegemonic structure and the underlying resistance to the power system. Ninagawa's characters seem to be vulnerable when they are shown alongside the gigantic stage props. When the main characters love wildly, lose temper easily, and move rapidly under pressure, the gigantic stage props seem to be witnesses, looking at the characters coldly. With these stage props, Ninagawa emblemizes the locales. For example, he uses a gigantic white replica of a white wolf together with the statues of suckling Romulus and Remus to represent Roman scenes and a huge replica of the Sphinx and a jackal-headed god Anubis to represent the Egyptian palace and dungeon. It is in the palace where Antony makes important decisions and in the dungeon that Cleopatra meets her death. With regard to the problematics and contexts of space, Yeeyon Im observed that as the props help alternate between Rome, Alexandria, Athens, and Actium, the production creates a geo-political dimension when the events are presented ("Review").

Following Shakespeare, Ninagawa employs Philo to foil Antony's behavior. As a Roman soldier, Philo cannot imagine that a general like Antony would lose his role as a model to his troops and "become the bellows and the fan to cool a gypsy's lust" (*Antony and Cleopatra* 1.1.9-10). In Ninagawa's version, debauchery or wanton behavior mentioned by the other characters refers to the physical relationship between Antony and Cleopatra. The gleeful maids and eunuchs at Cleopatra's palace also reinforce the femininity of Egypt. Ninagawa's Roman generals are all dressed in white robes with belts, decorated with sizable gold necklaces and white wristlets, while his Cleopatra wears luxurious sheath dresses of various colors, a style similar to that of the Egyptian *kalasins*, but the pleats of the dresses oftentimes reveal her long legs while her high heeled shoes reinforce the image of her slenderness. This style provides a sensual appearance of the beautiful queen. In Shakespeare, Cleopatra reveals her versatile identity: she is a queen conscientious of the threats from Rome, a voluptuous woman in love, an enchantress from the perspective of the Romans, and an Egyptian leader who chooses to perish in her homeland instead of as captive, paraded in Octavius's Rome (see Kleiner). Philo condemns the queen as a "strumpet" by indicating that Antony, "the triple pillar of the world," has been transformed into "a strumpet's fool" (1.1.13). Another character in this play, Domitius Enobarbus, describes how Cleopatra and her country people indulge in sensual pleasure. It seems that the material life shared by the beautiful queen and the enchanted Antony hereafter foreshadow the fates of the two empires. As Martin Rosenberg and Mary Rosenberg stress, Cleopatra was a woman with a sexual past and she wanted to use her magnetic power to entrap Antony in order to safeguard her empire (43). Ninagawa's version represents the latter part of the play with skirmishes of the sea battles and the death scene of Cleopatra: the queen is seen dressing up in her armor and the soldiers rush on and off the stage to represent the critical moment of the wars. As Im finds, the plot by Ninagawa is rapid and has some Japanese cultural influences (4); in Cleopatra's death scene, however, Ninagawa creates more dramatic tension which reinforces not only the sense of dignity yearned for by Cleopatra, but also her remorse over the past. Ninagawa also arranges rituals to reinforce Cleopatra's status as a queen. Setting up her mind to die, she goes into a dungeon where there is a large replica of Anubis, the protector of the dead. Then a peasant-like person sends in a bamboo basket with a viper inside; before leaving, he keeps reminding her that the viper is poisonous and that she should be careful with it. Cleopatra then puts on her crown, comforts her maid, and eventually takes out the black and white striped six-foot long snake. As the snake bites her bosom, the fall of her crown signifies the fall of her empire. Cleopatra lives her passion in full intensity, but Octavius seems to subordinate his emotion to political purposes. At the end of the play, with Ninagawa's grand panorama of Octavius's troops, Ninagawa not only represents the Roman military code, but also the Roman empire full of treachery, betrayal, and on-going power struggles.

Julius Caesar is another Shakespearean play that has fascinated the Asian world because of its powerful language, subtle relationships among the politicians, and its representation of anxiety over monarchy and leadership. As Peter Ure notes, Shakespeare reveals his genius in his treatment of Plutarch's material, especially when he makes the murder of Caesar the core element of the play. According to Ure, the other elements such as the conflicts among politicians, the omens, the Battle of Philippi, and the oration of Antony all fuse together to create the horrible tragedy on the stage. In this Roman play, Julius Caesar is the main character, but the pivotal character to reflect both the crisis of the aristocracy and the party politics is Brutus—Marcus Junius Brutus in Roman history. According to Coppélia Kahn, Brutus's mother Servilia Caepionis was the mistress of Julius Caesar and eventually Brutus came to Julius Caesar's circle before the civil war. Although Brutus was regarded as a kind of idealistic person somewhat deluded by his imaginary political ideas, Brutus is not politically naïve nor unable to understand the emotion of the mob; the only way to reproach Caesar is for his desire for the crown (Schanzer 2). Critics might be interested in the Brutus who confesses after the assassination of Caesar that "in all my life /I found no man but he was true to me" (5.5.34-5), but the Asian audience seems to be more interested in seeking an interpretation for the problems of real life.

Sik Cheong Tsoi (蔡錫昌), the Art Director of Hong Kong Theatre Works, produced his version of *Julius Caesar* in October of 2012 and the performance was conducted in Cantonese. This version of the play has a more complicated structure in which Tsoi dares to reinterpret the present life of Hong Kong. The first three acts of the first part deal with the Roman scenes and the fourth and the fifth acts focus

on the relationship between Cassius and Brutus, as well as on their conspiracy against Caesar. The second part is entitled as "Dolce Vita" which represents the present-day of Hong Kong from the perspective of a news reporter. Hong Kong is represented through the corrupt life of the upper class and the suffering the lower classes. According to Tsoi, representing a serious Shakespearean drama needs courage because a serious drama creates historical significance and at the same time discusses critical issues as involved with moral problems (Tsoi

<<http://www.101arts.net/viewArticle.php?type=journal&id=940>>).

Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* became known to the Chinese people in the late nineteenth century owing to a Protestant missionary, William Muirhead's translation of Thomas Milner's *The History of England: From Invasions of Julius Caesar to the Year A.D. 1852*, Shu Lin's (林紓) translation of *Tales from Shakespeare* by Charles Lamb and Mary Lamb, Shenghao Zhu's (朱生豪, 1912-1944) and Shiqiu Liang's (梁實秋, 1902-1987) translations of Shakespeare's plays. Their translated texts of *Julius Caesar* have been the most significant material for Chinese readers to approach Shakespeare. In Japan, Tsubouchi (坪内雄藏, 1859-1935) was the most well known translator of Shakespeare's plays. He not only translated with the traditional language used mainly for Kabuki, but he also organized a literary society, Bungei Kyokai (文藝協會), introducing Western literature to Japan (see Kishi 1). His translation of *Julius Caesar* is entitled *該撒奇談：自由太刀余波鋭鋒* (*Shiizaru Kidan: Jiyu no Tachi Nagori no Kireaji*, 1884), literally meaning "Strange Tale of Caesar or the Lingering Taste of Sharpness of the Sword of Freedom" (see Kishi 110). Tsubouchi's translation created a great impact in Japan, but several versions of *Julius Caesar* on the Japanese stage brought more attention: in 1925 Kaoru Osanai (小山内薫, 1881-1928) and Sadanji Ichikawa (二代目 市川左團次, 1880-1940) staged *Julius Caesar* in Kabuki (see Brandon 44). However, an earlier version of *Julius Caesar* was performed in 1901 when Toru Hoshi (星亨, 1850-1901) was assassinated. Hoshi was an influential statesperson, the chairperson of the House of Representatives and a person associated with Itō Hirobumi (伊藤 博文 1841-1909), a four-time minister of Japan. Hoshi was in this sense compared to Julius Caesar by the Japanese audience (see Fukahori 89) and some people took Hoshi as a representative of the corrupted figures (see Scalapino 264). In 1961, Tsuneari Fukuda (福田恆存 1912-1994) staged another *Julius Caesar*. As Etsuko Fukahori (深堀悦子) writes, this performance was produced after the signing Japan-U.S. Security Agreement, which was interpreted as "a betrayal of the Pacifist 1946 Constitution" (89). The staging of *Julius Caesar* exemplified the distrust of politicians and it responded directly to the campaigns against the treaty. After the 1970s, *Julius Caesar* was staged for cultural purposes and Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* was even made into a musical.

The musical, entitled *曉のローマ* (*Akatsuki no roma*; Rome at Dawn), was produced by the Takarazuka Revue (寶塚歌劇團), an all-female Japanese musical theater troupe founded in 1913, and it was directed by Shinji Kimura (木村信司) in 2006. With the trends of modernization and globalization, the marketing strategies of this long-standing troupe began to adopt Broadway musical styles to represent stories from the West. In Rome at Dawn, the major motifs includes a festive mood in the amphitheater, the people's suspicion of Caesar's desire for the crown, conspiracy plotted by Cassius and Brutus, the fortune-teller's warning of tragedy, the assassination of Caesar, and Antony's final oration and Octavian triumph. However, imperial Rome is represented ironically with a carnivalesque mood and grand spectacles were created through high-tech lighting, elaborate costumes, and dance. The most memorable parts include Brutus's wedding ceremony in front of a huge image of the Colosseum where Brutus, in extravagant clothing, dances with Portia, and we see Octavius's celebration parade signifying the impending power struggle between the new triumvir and Mark Antony. It is noteworthy that *Julius Caesar* has been among the most popular Shakespearean plays in the Asian world. Experiments with the play abound and it is not rare for directors to present versions according to something different from their own cultural background. For example, Stephen Coleman staged a Kabuki *Julius Caesar* for 1988 Three Rivers Shakespeare Festival in Pittsburgh in which the self-righteous Brutus and his misguided idealism bring disaster to Caesar and confusion in Rome (see Rawson). Gregory Doran, an artistic director of the Royal Shakespeare Company, set his version of *Julius Caesar* in East

Africa. With his main characters played by Black actors, Doran's "politically astute" play tackles the everlasting question—whether or not Brutus was a respectable hero (see Brown <<http://www.interviewmagazine.com/culture/gregory-doran-julius-caesar-bam>>). Doran's version of *Julius Caesar* not only reflects Africa's political turmoil caused by notorious dictators, but also arouses terror and pity when he represents Brutus's violent stab of Caesar.

In conclusion, many scholars and critics regard *Antony and Cleopatra* as the most cinematic play (see, e.g., Male 15) and see *The Tragedy of Julius Caesar* as a play about the nature of kingship and the ideology of the public and the private (see Garber 3-6). In East Asia, the staging of Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* and *Julius Caesar* has been a way for playwrights to carry a dialogue with Shakespeare across time and space. Chi's metadrama is a discourse on ethics via fools and clowns. Ninagawa, by using his gigantic props, narrates the rhetoric of passion with geo-political tension. Japanese versions of *Julius Caesar* reveal Japan's political upheavals beyond the interpretations of kingship and Tsoi's version of *Julius Caesar* not only repeats political rivalry, but also reflects civilians' yearnings for political rights in Hong Kong. The directors discussed here not only re-examine the themes of imperialism and expansionism with experimental strategies of stagecraft, but also probe into their own cultural or local identities through matters Roman and thus history using their adaptations and reproductions as a site for displaying local cultural aesthetics, dramaturgy, and social and political consciousness.

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