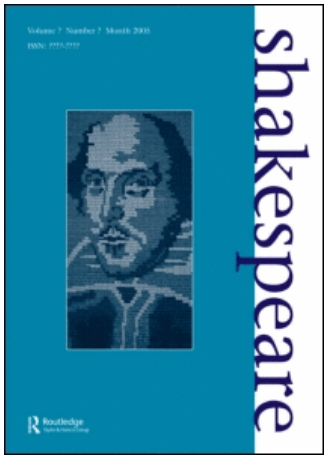

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Review of *King Lear* (directed by David Tse for Yellow Earth Theatre and Shanghai Dramatic Arts Centre) at the Royal Shakespeare Theatre, November 2006

Alexander C. Y. Huang

Multilingual or bilingual performances of Shakespeare were a rarity until the 1990s. These productions feature extensive use of two or more languages—usually with surtitles in local languages—to highlight the processes of late capitalism and globalization, and to redirect the traffic in intercultural theatre. Their juxtaposition of different languages on stage often produces very different aesthetic and political meanings that go beyond *both* those in national Shakespeares (German, Indian, Japanese and so forth) and those of the liberally sprinkled foreign phrases in the plays of Shakespeare, Thomas Kyd (*The Spanish Tragedy*), Thomas Middleton (pidgin English as Dutch in *No Wit, No Help Like a Woman's*), and other Renaissance playwrights. While such early modern cases as the well-known language lesson scene (3.4) and the wooing scene (5.2) in Shakespeare's *Henry V* have generated extensive commentaries for centuries (Steinsaltz; Williams), our contemporary directors' treatment of the theatrics of multilingualism remains undertheorized. Though the presence of foreign languages in early modern English drama was passed off for comic effect, bilingual or multilingual performances of our time tend to put the languages to question, challenging at once Anglo-centred Shakespeare and intercultural Shakespeare.

This new breed of intercultural performance raises many questions. Shakespeare's King Henry V tells Princess Katherine of France in the wooing scene, "It is as easy for me . . . to conquer the kingdom as to speak so much more French" (*Henry V* 5.2.184–5). One might ask whether it is as easy to conquer the global marketplace as to employ performers who speak different languages. Does

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watching Shakespeare with surtitles—especially at high-profile festivals—overcome or reinforce cultural boundaries? What do such encounters with foreign-language Shakespeares entail?

Several such performances have taken place, though some were better toured or more memorable than others. In 1983, Pan Asian Repertory Theater staged a Mandarin–English bilingual *Midsummer Night's Dream*, directed by Tisa Chang, in New York. Members of the royal court and Puck spoke Mandarin, and other characters spoke English with occasional use of Chinese when under stress. In 1996, Ong Keng Sen staged a pan-Asian multilingual *King Lear* starring performers from several Asian countries. The power-thirsty Goneril spoke only Mandarin and employed Peking opera chanting and movements. She confronted the Old Man (the counterpart to Lear in this adaptation) who spoke only Japanese and performed in the Noh style. The production has toured to Tokyo, Singapore, other parts of Asia, and Europe.

One of the most recent was a Mandarin–English bilingual British-Chinese coproduction of *King Lear* adapted and directed London-based David Tse. This was Tse's second engagement with *King Lear*. In 2003, he directed *Lear's Daughters* (for Yellow Earth Theatre), a play co-authored by Elaine Feinstein and the Women's Theatre Group. *King Lear* and the moral questions it poses hold great interest for Tse, who explores the play's capacity to comment on troubled father–son, and by extension local–global, relationships (Tse). Other Asian intercultural directors, such as Ong Keng Sen and Wu Hsing-kuo (solo Peking opera performance of *King Lear*, 2001), have been equally intrigued by similar issues in Shakespeare's *King Lear*.

Tse's 2006 *King Lear* was part of the RSC Complete Works festival. As the first bilingual production to be picked up by a major festival in England, it marked a new milestone in both the RSC's history and in what might be called "post-national" global Shakespeare industry. While major venues in Britain, including the Edinburgh festival, the London Globe, the Royal Shakespeare Theatre and the Barbican Centre, are no strangers to such Asian directors as Ninagawa Yukio (whose most recent Shakespearean production was *Titus Andronicus*, also part of the RSC Complete Works festival), Tse's production provides a different experience than the one available through more traditionally defined "foreign" Shakespeares. Playing to full houses throughout the UK and in China, Tse's *King Lear* stages several contradictions and precarious conditions of globalization. It was staged in Shanghai and Chengdu in October 2006 before touring the UK.

The intercultural exchange in Tse's *King Lear* highlights one of the key themes of the play, miscommunication and intergenerational conflicts. Through bilingual dialogues, coupled with and—at times crippled by—bilingual surtitles, a mixed cast of Chinese and British performers explore the promise and perils of cultural translation in the context of a domestic tragedy.

Tse's *King Lear* is set in London and Shanghai of 2020, the same locations where it was performed. The play opened with an "updated" division-of-the-assets scene. Lear is a Shanghai-based business tycoon who solicits confession of

love from his three daughters. The scene is set in the Shanghai penthouse office of his transnational corporation. Lear (Zhou Yemang, a Chinese film star), Regan (Xie Li), and Goneril (Zhang Lu) spoke fluent Mandarin Chinese, but the English-educated Cordelia, a member of the Asian diaspora no longer proficient in her father's language, could only say nothing. She joined the conversation from behind a semi-transparent screen that represented a video link from London. From the beginning to the end, Zhou Yemang's Lear commanded a powerful presence on stage. Immersed in ''oppressing'' Confucian family values of hierarchy, Lear insisted upon respect from his children and the virtue of filial piety. As Goneril and Regan carried on their confession of love, Chinese fonts projected onto the screen panels and onto Cordelia's face.

In the brief but tense encounter between Cordelia and Lear, the word ''nothing'' (*meiyou*) emerged as something that was disruptive dramaturgically. It was the only Chinese word Cordelia used; and yet it signified ''nothing''.

> CORDELIA Nothing, my lord.
> LEAR *Meiyou?*
> CORDELIA *Meiyou*.
> LEAR Nothing will come of nothing. Speak again. (1.1.87–90)

In its Stratford performance where the majority of the audience did not know Chinese, the word *meiyou* created an ontological hollow space that embodied ''nothingness'', key to the conflict in this scene and to Tse's Buddhist interpretation of Lear's redemption later in the play. In its performances in China, where the majority of the audience could not easily follow the English part of the dialogue without the surtitles, *meiyou* stood out as a powerful signifier of the scene.

The stage design and future-retro costumes, along with the use of two languages and hybrid performance idioms (Buddhist-themed music, an ensemble, mobile phones, text-messaging, flip knives and swords, aerial work, multimedia elements, and Peking opera percussion pattern and movements), helped to foreground the metaphor of translation. Performed in the Cube at the Royal Shakespeare Theatre, an innovative makeshift black-box theatre constructed in the auditorium while RST was undergoing renovation, Tse's *King Lear* took advantage of the intimate stage. Entering the performance space, the audience saw a brightly lit open stage with sparse scenery, suggesting Taoist simplicity and postmodern minimalism. At centre stage stood three interlaced floor-to-ceiling screens made of rectangular reflective panels, evoking both contemporary skyscrapers and ancient armour. Videos of a crying newborn, awash in techno-blue light, projected onto these panels. The panels were transformed through lighting from a regal façade to a semi-transparent video screen to the wilderness for the storm scene, and most action took place in front of these screens. The costumes fused Chinese and Western elements. Lear wore a velvet regal robe with a white shirt underneath. His crane was used to symbolize his authority and frailty. The Fool was replaced by a chorus in white cloaks. The chorus chanted

rhythmically when delivering their lines, dramatizing Lear's conscience. Goneril and Regan were sharp-suited, evoking figures of femme fatale in a global boomtown (Shanghai). Edmund (Matt McCooey) wore a leather skirt, but Edgar's (Daniel York) costume contained explicit elements of traditional Chinese robes for the gentry class.

In addition to the division-of-the-kingdom scene that embodied the anxieties of diasporic artists and the uneasy coalition among different cultures, another memorable scene was the duel between Edgar and Edmund. Following the rhythms of Peking opera percussion beats, the actors engaged in a highly stylized fight using swords. Reminiscent of the stylized fights, staged to the videogame rhythm, in the RSC's *Romeo and Juliet* directed by Nancy Meckler during the same season in Stratford-upon-Avon, this arrangement typified a common postmodern strategy to stage otherwise out-of-place duels.

It is worth noting that, throughout the performance, the actors spoke their native languages most of the time, which both emphasized the theme of miscommunication in an age of global migration and ensured strong delivery of the lines. Some dialogues can be challenging to follow because actors switched between the two languages in the same block of lines or even mid-sentence. The audience was forced to switch between the bilingual surtitles and action on stage, which served as a constant reminder—even to those who are proficient in both languages—that translation is by necessity a fragmented cultural process.

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