

Asia, Shakespeare, and the World

Digital Resources for Teaching about Globalization

By Alexander C. Y. Huang



Promotional image for *Chicken Rice War*. © 2000 MediaCorp Raintree Pictures Pte Ltd.

In the marooned rehearsal of a school play in an urban comedy, a stuttering student asks their drama coach if he could play Romeo. A young lady rolls her eyes and challenges her classmate: “What makes you think that you can 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 quali-

fied even if he cannot remember his lines: “Nick, on the other hand, looks like Leonardo DiCaprio. That’s why he’s Romeo.” Her protégée promptly supports her cause and leaves the aspiring thespian speechless. Her argument about dramatic verisimilitude is obviously flawed, but her identification with select embodiments of the global “West” (including Shakespeare’s soft power and Tiffany jewelry’s sway in commencing a romantic relationship) compels us to consider cultural globalization from a local perspective. Cheah Chee Kong’s film *Chicken Rice War* (Singapore, 2000; director known as CheeK) 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. The audience of *Chicken Rice War* witnessed globalization at work through witty appropriations of globally circulated, but locally consumed, cultural icons that included DiCaprio’s star power, *Romeo and Juliet*, and Singaporean government propaganda about the city-state’s identity on the global stage: “New Asia.”

A similar story of cultural globalization unfolded at the 2011 Edinburgh International Festival that featured Asian performing arts ranging from theater to ballet. Renowned South Korean stage director and playwright Oh Tae-suk mounted his version of *The Tempest* to critical acclaim in Edinburgh. Master Oh’s adaptation brought the play, born at the “dawning moment of British colonialism” and inspired by “the wreck of a ship bound for Virginia,” to the shore of traditional Korea and back to the UK.¹ Since the traditional theater (*changguk*) and national history of Korea tend to draw their energy from a plot structure and narrative that “focused on resistance to foreign penetration,” a play such as *The Tempest* worked well for Oh’s theater project that aimed to construct and popularize a coherent Korean identity based on traditional cultural values.²

Opening with the music of the horizontal Korean bamboo flute (*taegum*), Oh’s production evoked Korean myth, music, and the Confucian tradition. Throughout the storm scene, music that



The Tempest, directed by Oh Tae-suk. (Courtesy of Mokwha Repertory Company, Edinburgh International Festival, August 2011)

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drew on Korean rural percussions provided the rhythmic foundation for the actions, and some characters, such as the spirits, took on animal roles, echoing the traditional mask dance drama. A work that has routinely been politicized by artists in nations that were formerly colonized, *The Tempest* was transformed by Oh into a play infused with a sense of lightness and Oh's wit. Like Prospero, the Daoist magician King Zilzi rules the island and orchestrates the shipwreck out of revenge. But he brings the men to his island partly because it is high time his fifteen-year-old daughter "met somebody." The Korean Miranda later reminds her suitor that the question about her purity is ridiculous; after all she has grown up on "a desert island." The Euro-

pean premiere of Oh's *Tempest* demonstrates that although works that criticize global inequalities receive more attention from Western critics, the genre of productions critical of resource inequities or the geopolitical status quo represent but one perspective. Oh's version is not exactly a rollicking comedy but extrapolates something extraordinary from both the Elizabethan genre of romance and the Korean tradition of hybrid theatrical genres (such as *ch'anggük* and the masked dance drama *kamyongük*).

Many people have seen Asian or Shakespearean performances. Some of these works have become canonical and well-rehearsed success stories of cross-cultural ventures, such as *jingju* (Beijing opera) actor Mei Lanfang's tours to Moscow and the US and Japanese director Kurosawa Akira's films, but few people are aware that there is a rich and complex history of Asian and Asian-themed performances of Shakespeare that complicates the notion of globalization as necessarily just "global Westernization."³ An effective way to teach about globalization is to consider this history of cultural exchange. Examining Shakespeare's place in Asian cultures and the impact of Asian theatrical traditions on Shakespearean performance can serve the double duty of addressing the marginalization of theater within Asian studies and the lack of understanding of Asian transformations of key Western texts.

The two cases of *Chicken Rice War* and Oh's *Tempest* in Edinburgh also demonstrate that the center of creativity in Shakespeare performance is shifting from the UK and the US to Asia, where directors such as Ninagawa Yukio, Suzuki Tadashi, Ong Keng Sen, Wu Hsing-kuo, the late Kurosawa Akira, and many others experiment with combinations of traditional and contemporary theater, new strategies for working across languages and genres, and new ways of reaching diverse audiences. Oh's production received the 2011 Herald Angel Award in Edinburgh, and CheeK's film received the 2001 Volkswagen Discovery Award at the Toronto International Film Festival and Special Jury Prize at the 2002 Miami Film Festival. Further, contemporary artists such as Oh and CheeK are more interested in carving a space of their own and establishing their artistic styles in the teeming global cultural marketplace than in speaking on behalf of their nations.

All this is a result of a complex network of cultural exchange that makes the paradigm of West-to-East cultural flows or any "built-to-order" model meaningless. Shakespeare's plays performed with Asian motifs (by either Asian or Western artists) form a body of work that defies existing conventions based on nation-state divisions of cultures. CheeK's film is a sly commentary on the politics of manufactured multiculturalism and ethnic "harmony" in Singapore, even as it engages in a dialogue with Shakespeare's global West. Oh is more interested in using Shakespeare to revive a sense of traditional Korea that is distant even to his hometown audience and to polish his signature style of bringing contemporary sensibilities to bear on traditional aesthetics. Ultimately, at stake is not how best to preserve Shakespeare's text but reconnecting Oh's Korean audience with the lost realm that is traditional Korea.⁴

These works provide rich material for the classroom. It has become irresponsible not to teach about globalization and localization through this body of work. We can no longer assume insularity of Asian cultures. They are thought-provoking, hold students' interest, and offer a window into a history of cultural globalization that can otherwise be difficult to grasp. Globalization and digital culture are two of the catch phrases for our time, but they remain imprecise terms in the classroom and in popular discourse about cultural difference and assimilation. Asian theater's engagement with Shakespeare—a globally circulating text and icon—provides a fertile ground for exploring the history of East-West cultural exchange on concrete terms. With new online video resources, instructors and students can compare and critique different performances and share their findings with each other.

Unlike most playwrights in traditional Asia of comparable stature, Shakespeare's global career began in his lifetime. Performances in England in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries had a global flair. European visitors such as Thomas Platter left behind diary records of plays they saw at the Globe in London in 1599. Shortly after appearing on stage in London, Shakespeare's plays traveled to Europe through polyglot performances mounted by touring English players, which helped to initiate translations of the plays into vernaculars, such as Dutch, German, and French, and to spread the plays to Russia and other

parts of the world.⁵ Take *Hamlet* for example. The play was performed under varying conditions on board the *Red Dragon*, a vessel of the East India Company, near what is now Sierra Leone in 1607, on the island of Socotra in 1608, and possibly in a Dutch fortress in Jayakarta in colonial Indonesia in 1609.⁶ As the centuries wore on, Shakespeare was made to speak in a diverse range of tongues for and against the same political causes in Asia and beyond, such as Communism and imperialism. Both Asian-centric and Asian-inspired performances of Shakespeare have taken center stage as we enter the second decade of the twenty-first century. There are traditional productions such as Oh's *Tempest* that use Shakespeare to rethink Korean history. There are also performances that are inspired by Asian elements such as Kenneth Branagh's film *As You Like It* which deal with values that are believed to transcend cultures.

With the rise of Asian economic power came bold reimaginings of both Shakespeare and Asian cultures. The past decades in particular saw diverse incarnations of Shakespearean comedies and tragedies onstage and on-screen. While well known, Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood* (*Macbeth*, 1957) and *Ran* (*Lear*, 1985) are far from the earliest or the only Asian Shakespeare films. Around the time of Asta Nielsen's cross-dressed *Hamlet* (1921), gender-bender silent film adaptations of *The Merchant of Venice* and *Two Gentlemen of Verona* were made in Shanghai by Qiu Yixiang and Bu Wancang.

Shakespeare's global career is far from a simple story of Western colonial expansion and Asian postcolonial reorientation. Japan was an Asian colonial power, and that history informs Otojiro Kawakami's 1903 adaptation of *Othello*. Set in Taiwan, the play features indigenous Taiwanese dancing in praise of the Japanese colonizers. Singapore—an English-speaking Asian city-state—has emerged as a hybrid cultural location

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not only between British and Asian cultural legacies but also between traditional and modern values, as shown by Ong Keng Sen's works that mix the performance techniques from traditional theaters of several East Asian countries. In the other direction, Singapore's self-conscious insertion of its hybrid identity into the global marketplace provides a ready framework for parody in CheeK's *Chicken Rice War*.

Asian culture has, as I have argued elsewhere, also seeped into Western performances of Shakespeare.⁷ The global economy and Hollywood techniques have brought Asian elements and genres into the mainstream Western cultural register. Kenneth Branagh's *As You Like It* (2006) is a film set in Meiji Japan with Shakespearean language. A self-professed “dream of Japan” articulated through the renowned director's concept of “English men abroad,” this film opens with a kabuki performance disrupted by ninja assassins and closes with a lavish wedding ceremony with ornate kimonos. Michael Almereyda's polished postmodern take on the “to be or not to be” speech in *Hamlet* (2000) is informed by Eastern spirituality and the Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh's teaching of “interbeing.” In theater, the British director Peter Brook rescued *Titus Andronicus* from oblivion—due in part to the foregoing tradition of heavy-handed and therefore ridiculous portrayal of horrors—by using abstract Asian-inspired stylization and minimalism in his 1955 production. Scarlet streamers flowed from Lavinia's mouth and wrists to symbolize her rape and mutilation, for instance. Brook's “Asian symbolism” made *Titus* into “a piece of visual virtuosity.”⁸ There are also Western productions that use multiple Asian languages. Tim Supple's multilingual *Midsummer Night's Dream* in 2007 was lauded by the *Times* as the most original take on the play since Brook's 1970 version. The production used a Sri Lankan and Indian cast speaking Hindi, Bengali, Malayalam, Marathi, Tamil, Sanskrit, and English. Supple recast the relationship between the play and “India” as a layered concept. These works are evidence of the power of performance in an age of globalization and offer both positive and negative lessons for us.

In terms of translation, Shakespeare in Asia is not a linear process of transmission from Shakespearean texts to foreign-language performative texts. Many languages and performance traditions often filter the plays. Ideological requirements and marketing considerations further complicate the picture. Significantly, the dissemination of Shakespeare was “not coextensive with the advance of English” as a colonial or global language.⁹ Shakespeare's original text was often relegated to the backstage. For example, East Asian cultures first encountered Shakespeare through local translations of Charles and Mary Lamb's Victorian prose rewritings in *The Tales from Shakespeare* (1807).¹⁰ In 1957, one Chinese commentator remarked that “Shakespeare's real home is in the Soviet Union.”¹¹ Soviet theater practice and criticism were highly influential in China because of the then-intense cultural exchange between the two countries that made Soviet tastes into a significant filter through which Shakespeare was received in China. Even Shakespeare's fortunes in colonial India do not follow a linear narrative. As University of Delhi English professor Poonam Trivedi points out,

*while the study of Shakespeare [in India] was an imperial imposition, the performance of Shakespeare was not, because he was regarded first and foremost as an entertainer and not a representation of English values.*¹²

It is also useful to bear in mind that Shakespeare in Asia is not always a rosy undertaking. Touring a Japanese production of *Macbeth* to London entails a higher level of cultural prestige for the Japanese company than translating Korean playwright Yi Kangbaek into English for the American publisher. *Macbeth* has been packaged as “universal” and is a widely read canon, but Yi’s plays are not. Wars, censorship, and political ideologies can suppress or encourage particular approaches to selected Shakespearean plays or genres.

Global Shakespearean performances in our times often move across various media (such as incorporating cinematic elements into stage productions and vice versa) and reference other adaptations. CheeK’s *Chicken Rice War* develops both the melodramatic and tragic elements of Shakespeare’s play and brings them into stark relief against modern media history. Likewise, the strange echoes of lines from Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, *Hamlet*, and other plays in Oh’s production of *The Tempest* engage in the kind of polyglot conversation that makes reading across cultures so compelling today.

From Fieldwork to Digital Collections

For these reasons, I have spent the past decade building several fully open-access digital video archives for educational and outreach purposes with colleagues in the US and elsewhere. All of these web-based tools and projects are freely accessible and are built on a nonhierarchical structure that enables international collaboration. I started with the *Stanford Shakespeare in Asia* initiative (<http://sia.stanford.edu/>) with Patricia Parker and Haun Saussy’s support in 2004 and expanded it into *Shakespeare Performance in Asia (SPIA)*; (<http://web.mit.edu/shakespeare/asia/>) with Peter Donaldson at MIT (launched in 2009). We soon transformed *SPIA* into a more ambitious project that covers worldwide performances—*Global Shakespeares* (launched in 2010; suite of teaching tools launched in 2011). Based at MIT, <http://globalshakespeares.org/> offers full videos of recorded performances and video highlights of select productions, many of which have English subtitles. At present, the archive covers Shakespeare in India, East Asia, Brazil, the Arab world, the US, and the UK. Given the interests of the readers of this journal, in what follows I focus on *SPIA*, the “Asian wing” of *Global Shakespeares*.



The Team Behind *Global Shakespeares*: Project collaborators at the World Shakespeare Conference, Prague, July 18, 2011 (left to right): Peter Donaldson (editor-in-chief and co-founder), Margaret Litvin (regional editor, Arab World), Celia Ams (Brazil), Liana Leao (Brazil), Alexander Huang (co-founder and co-editor), Anna Camati (Brazil), Nick Clary (HamletWorks editor), Poonam Trivedi (India), Alfredo Modenessi (Mexico), Jesus Tronch-Perez (Spain), and Ryuta Minami (Japan). Source: *Global Shakespeares*.

The importance of digital video in the classroom has been widely recognized, but reliable and vetted video resources remain elusive. YouTube videos are often amateurish, duplicates, and transient. While one may find pleasant surprises on YouTube, there is no guarantee that the user-generated contents will remain available long enough to be cited in scholarly publications or used in the classroom. Asian Educational Media Service (AEMS), based at the University of Illinois (<http://www.aems.illinois.edu/>), is primarily a catalog. It aims to help “educators find multimedia resources for teaching about Asia” but does not offer digital videos online. Further, many resources listed there are not readily accessible even if the user treks down to the libraries.

To address the urgent need in research and the classroom, Peter Donaldson and I work with an international team of scholars and performance artists to collect and process video records of key productions of Shakespeare in Asia. *SPIA* is the first component of a global collection, and *Global Shakespeares*’ website (<http://globalshakespeares.org/people/>) currently includes more than fifty hours of video recording of complete performances of Shakespeare plays and adaptation in a wide variety of genres, forms, and languages. *SPIA* documents the diversity of Asian approaches to Shakespeare over the past twenty years.

With an extensive collection of full video records and video highlights of theatrical performances (many with English subtitles); stage photos; and play scripts and interviews from Asia, the US, and



Home page of "Shakespeare Performance in Asia." Source: <http://web.mit.edu/shakespeare/asia/>.

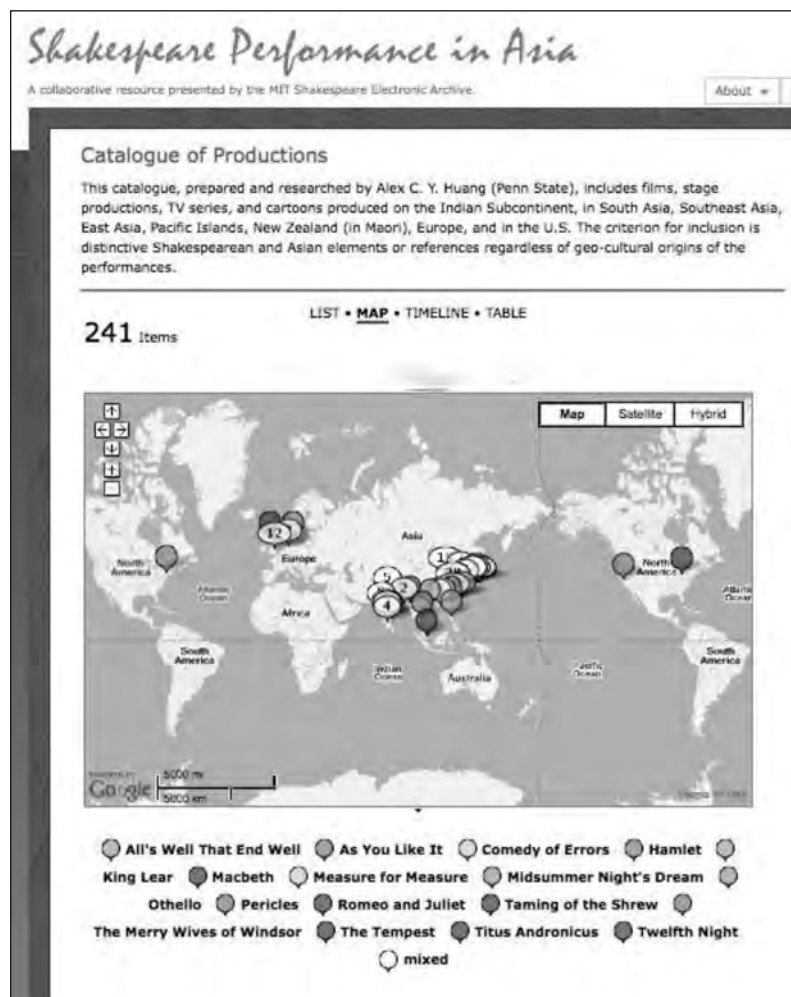
Europe, *Global Shakespeare* is designed to serve as a core resource that is free for students, teachers, and researchers. "Asian Shakespeare" often falls through the crack between the disciplines of Asian studies, Shakespeare studies, and performance studies. Even worse, theater is marginalized within Asian studies because it is ephemeral and not seen as a crucial component of Asian social life. Institutionalized in the mid-twentieth century, the discipline of Asian studies is informed by the traditional logic of area studies that focus on politics and social sciences. Peter Donaldson and I, as co-founders of *SPIA* and *Global Shakespeares*, recognized that the first step to change this is to make the fascinating materials more widely available. The digital archive shifts the mode of passive viewing into active engagement with performances through robust video, image searching, and tools for composing multimedia essays.

The main components of the web project include the following:

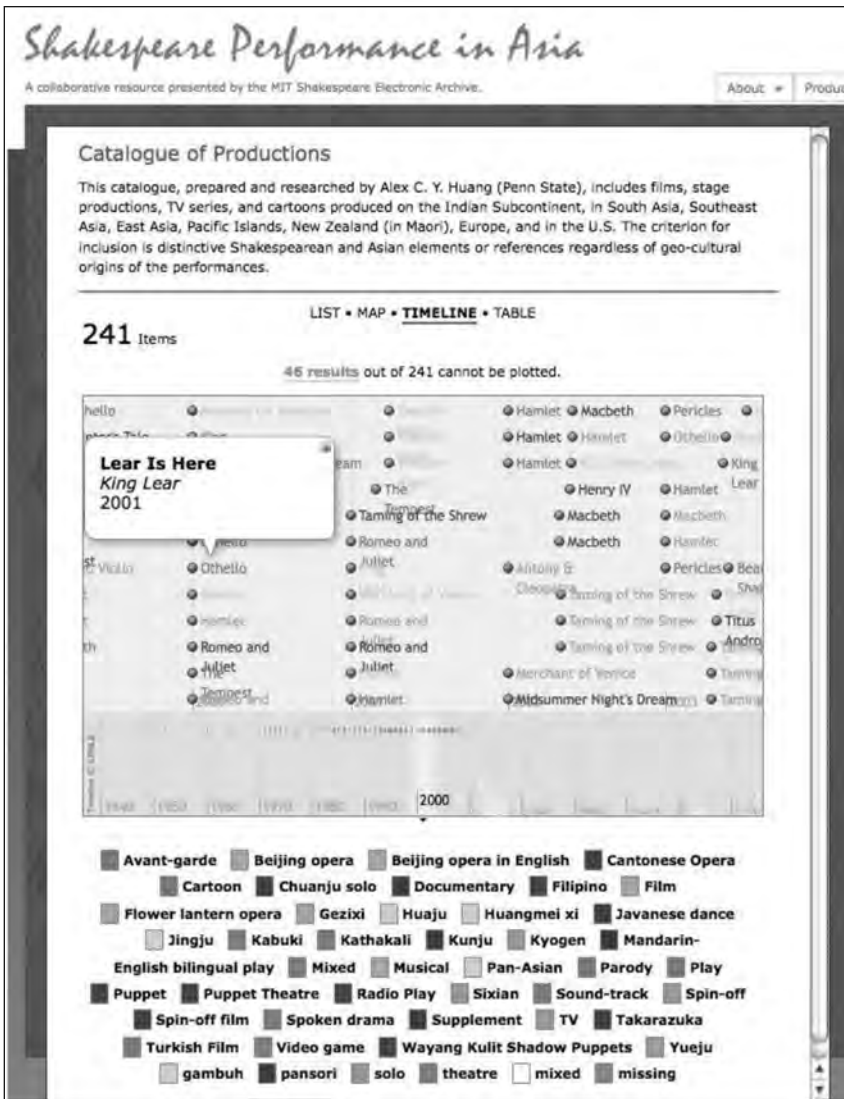
1. CATALOGUE OF PRODUCTIONS

Since 2001, I have researched and compiled a growing catalog with meta-data and annotations for more than 340 twentieth- and twenty-first-century Asia-related performances in Asia and the Asian Pacific, North America, and Europe. Users can locate titles through fuzzy search or faceted browsing. They can also narrow the search results by selecting one or more choices from Shakespeare's play titles, directors, genres, cities, and so forth. In the next phase of development, we are planning several levels of user-created tags. The project promotes collaboration. Specifically, it uses "crowd sourcing," a form of collaboration that taps into the collective wisdom of a group (in this case a group of researchers and educators with specialized knowledge of a subject). There will be tags created for individual use by researchers, which may or may not be added to what is publicly available for searching, depending on whether their creator wishes to publish them. The results obtained can be viewed as a table, plotted on a world map with satellite and hybrid map-satellite options, or timeline.

To promote a historical awareness of the local and international trajectories of theatrical productions, we offer dynamic timelines and maps.



Users can track productions in the map view on "Shakespeare Performance in Asia." Source: <http://web.mit.edu/shakespeare/asia/collections/>.



Users can track productions through a dynamic timeline on "Shakespeare Performance in Asia."
Source: <http://web.mit.edu/shakespeare/asia/collections/>.

Used in conjunction with faceted browsing and tagged videos, the timelines and maps allow users to trace the paths of production and diffusion of Asian and touring productions. Maps and timelines of the large number of productions for Asian Shakespeare can suggest new questions and unexpected relationships, and—especially important for the study of worldwide performance and emerging forms in a global context—help students examine the common assumption that Asian intercultural performances necessarily originate in Asia or that Shakespeare's original texts travel in one direction from England to the world.

2. FULL VIDEOS AND CLIPS WITH SUBTITLES

SPIA includes full videos of important Asian productions by directors who have played a key role in Asian and international theater movements such as Ong Keng Sen's *Desdemona*, *King Lear*, and *Search: Hamlet*; Wu Hsing-kuo's *Kingdom of Desire* (based on *Macbeth*), *Hamlet*, *Lear Is Here* and *The Tempest*; *Shamlet* (a long-running Taiwanese Hamlet spoof); Deguchi Norio's *Timon of Athens*; the Ryutopia *Hamlet*; and other titles.

We also offer annotated and subtitled clips. Short video excerpts offer an introduction to the larger archive and play a role in creating a video-centric environment in which the playtexts are not always the default center of attention but rather the performance videos themselves and in which one can choose between searching in familiar text-driven ways or moving from one video to another more freely throughout the video matrix.

3. FLUID LINKAGES BETWEEN VIDEOS

It is important to explore the performative and cultural contexts by browsing through video materials not only by traditional categories (such as the Japanese Noh, Chinese jingju, or *kathakali*—an Indian dance-drama) or concept-driven data structures, but by more fluid linkages among the performance videos themselves, aided by tags, brief descriptions, metadata, and thumbnail images. We may have no ready discursive label for the salient features, performance choices, and relationships between different performances when we study them in a comparative context, but the fluid linkages can liberate us from these restraints.

To achieve the goal of providing fluid linkages within the archive, we have designed a number of video-centric interfaces for both SPIA and *Global Shakespeares*. For example, users can choose among



The video matrix as part of the user interface at *Global Shakespeares*; <http://globalshakespeares.org/>.

the videos arranged in a video matrix. As the user moves through the archive, the matrix will change, depending on what the user has chosen and reflecting the user's interest. Having chosen a first video to view, the user can continue by clicking on another in the matrix as suggested by the system or by filtered or free fuzzy search.

Shakespeare Performance in Asia

HOME ABOUT PERFORMANCES PEOPLE ESSAYS LINKS CONTACT

ng elit. Maecenas nisl. Nulla mauris lectus, egestas a, consectetur adipiscing elit lobortis in, faucibus vel, nisi.

Learn Tse: Act 4, Scene 7

I am back again.
Just now...Lear was dreaming!

Play: Fool
Play: King Lear
Genre: Jingju

Company: Contemporary Legend Theatre Company, Taipei, Taiwan (Peking opera)
Venue: Taipei, Taiwan
Production Title: Lear is Here
Date: 2001
Director: WU Hsing-kuo
Players: Fool

Page showing the video matrix and metadata of a production selected by the user. Source: <http://web.mit.edu/shakespeare/asia/>.

The annotations for each clip and production include brief, user-created tags. Currently, these include a wide range of categories such as genres, motifs, artistic forms, and references—allegory, jingju, cross-dressing, ghost, voice-over, water sleeves (in *xiqu*, Chinese opera), and *yueju* (Yue opera) are just a few examples. Tagged videos can be retrieved by full search or faceted browsing. Our team of researchers created the first tag sets, but users will be able to add more tags to extend the knowledge base. This is both a significant way to move toward an archive in part created by its users and supports the user creation of ad hoc pathways through the video information space.

4. VIDEO INTERACTIONS FOR TEACHING AND LEARNING

In addition to being able to tag videos, users are able to create their own clip definitions (that is, they can make virtual video clips), playlists, and sets of annotated clips and contribute videos, metadata, and multimedia essays to the archive. They can do this on Video Interactions for Teaching and Learning (VITAL), a web-based learning environment built by Columbia University and appropriated and configured by MIT (now located at <http://vital.mit.edu/>). The open source web-based software has been used by MIT, Boston University, George Washington University, Penn State University, Amherst College, Menlo School (a private high school in Palo Alto, California), University of Bern in Switzerland, Vassar College, Shanghai American School, Middlebury College Bread Loaf School of English (a summer graduate program), and universities in Taiwan, Brazil, South Korea, and elsewhere. On the surface, VITAL may look like a variation of such course management systems as Blackboard, or simply YouTube on steroids, but it is neither. VITAL is a video-centric learning environment that fosters excellence in writing and close reading, as well as distance reading—an important mode of learning that develops historical awareness and contextual knowledge.

VITAL enables students to view, analyze, and communicate ideas with video. Students will be able to watch full-length performance videos and make as many clips as they like, much like a curator in charge of a treasure trove of materials. They can tag, annotate, and critique the videos and video clips; use the clips to illustrate their arguments; draw attention of the class to overlooked details in the



The benefits of a video-centric learning environment. Scheme by Alexander Huang.

performance; and circulate their work for feedback and to inspire others. They can write multimedia essays that cite and compare several versions of the same scene in a Shakespearean play, and the entire class can view their submissions. More writing assignments and in-class activities can be designed on VITAL that require students to consider a set of preselected videos or video excerpts.

Our goal is to provide both a video-driven and a more familiar catalog and filtered search method of moving through the collection, with the option to switch modes at any time. We believe that a digital, video-based global Shakespeare archive, beginning with a substantial body of work in Asia, with new tools for annotating, replaying, and sharing user-defined video segments has the potential to transform how we think about Asia, Shakespeare, and the world, and how we use performance materials. ■

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NOTES

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