

Alexa Alice Joubin, *Shakespeare and East Asia*. New York, Oxford UP, 2021. xiii + 258 pp. ISBN: 978-0-19-870357-0.

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The title of this work showcases the unapologetic outlook of its author, Alexa Alice Joubin. While the obvious alternative title – “*Shakespeare in East Asia*” – reinforces the binaries of East and West, “*Shakespeare and East Asia*” indicates a continuous movement between “condensed cultural signifiers” (6). In her latest contribution to the field of Asian Shakespeares, Joubin analyses the cultural complexity of East Asian Shakespeare adaptations, focusing on theatre and film productions from the 1950s to the present day. Though these adaptations vary widely in language, genre, and thematic concerns, they each display a process of creative appropriation and subversion. In covering such a broad scope, Joubin creates a sophisticated work, characterised by her inventive interdisciplinary analyses. While this complexity can be a double-edged sword, it makes for a highly engaging work, one that undermines previously held assumptions whilst opening new research possibilities.

Joubin's work presents a comprehensive vision, blending intricate theory with extensive scope. In her “Prologue”, Joubin emphasises the liminality of Asian Shakespeares, which synthesise “Asian” and “Western” cultural influences in a “postnational space of exchange” (12). She then covers four broad geographical regions over four chapters: Japan, the “Sinophone” world (Hong Kong, Taiwan and China), South Korea, and Singapore. However, Joubin avoids national profiling, viewing these works in terms of the “aesthetic and social functions of performances” within site-specific cultural contexts (12). While the first chapter compares two Japanese interpretations of *Macbeth*, the remaining chapters cover

multiple issues and case studies. Alongside other themes, the chapters on Sinophone and South Korean productions emphasise gender and sexuality, while the last chapter focuses on themes of diaspora and multilingualism. These issues are framed within Joubin's central claim: Asian Shakespeares are "liminal spaces" in which concepts and boundaries are continually challenged (11). This liminality is not monolithic but varied; "remedial" uses of Shakespeare range from conservative earnestness to satirical scepticism, and Singaporean productions reveal different conceptions of multilingualism (64). Covering a period of almost seventy years, the book tackles a range of genres, from reinterpretations of Shakespearean tragedies to parodies that send up the playwright. The outcome is a broad scope necessitating complex methodology, a challenge adeptly managed by Joubin. Moreover, the book features a chronology of Shakespeare adaptations in relation to historical events, as well as a glossary of key concepts. These resources enable readers to find their bearings in a sprawling, but highly engaging, work.

From China studies to psychoanalysis, Joubin weaves complex analyses through a combination of theoretical insights. At the base of Joubin's theoretical framework is a "rhizomatic" approach to adaptation, a concept originating from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's work, *A Thousand Plateaus* (12, 199). This approach views adaptations as derivatives of each other, linked within a network of intertextual relationships that produces meaning. In addition to placing Asian Shakespeares on an equal footing with Anglo-American adaptations, this approach enables Joubin to explore the intercultural connections between productions. The parodying of *Romeo and Juliet* in Anthony Chan's *One Husband Too Many* is compared to a similar moment in Edgar Wright's *Hot Fuzz* (95), and Oh Tae-suk's production of *The Tempest* is set against previous postcolonial adaptations (130-1). Joubin builds upon this strategy by incorporating reception theory, considering how

site-specific contexts affect our understanding of Asian Shakespeares. This enables her to examine East Asian touring productions in a new light, showing how their success or failure rests upon the power dynamics of international festivals. Joubin thus uncovers the political structures affecting Asian Shakespeares, challenging notions of diversity on the global arts stage.

However, *Shakespeare and East Asia* is far from purely theoretical, with Joubin blending her knowledge of film grammar, theatrical techniques, music, and Asian languages to critically evaluate productions. This is most obvious in the chapter “Sound and Spectacle”, which compares Akira Kurosawa’s film *Throne of Blood* and Yukio Ninagawa’s touring production of *Macbeth*. While other authors may have approached these works in relation to film and theatre studies respectively, Joubin combines insights from multiple fields, linking Kurosawa’s film to Japanese Noh theatre and considering Ninagawa’s use of musical genres. In an engaging section, Joubin presents subtitles as “a heuristic and filtering device”, showing how *Throne of Blood*’s use of Japanese pronouns reveals important character dynamics that are lost in translation (40-1). Through her hybridised methodology, Joubin explores the intercultural process underpinning both productions, a strategy that she repeats throughout her book.

However, Joubin’s ambitious approach affects the book’s argumentative coherence, leaving key ideas insufficiently explored and research questions unanswered. In her “Prologue”, Joubin likens her chapters to a series of “concentric circles” (16). Despite its potential as a rhetorical device, this metaphor is never employed again beyond a brief mention at the start of chapter three (106). More crucially, the book’s emphasis on cultural interplay demands that Joubin look at Anglophone Shakespeare productions and their relationship with Asia, with the “Prologue” and “Epilogue” referencing the Asian-inflected

adaptations of Kenneth Branagh, Julie Taymor, and Peter Brook. Yet other than these references, this issue is almost entirely ignored. There is also a theoretical contradiction; while Joubin asserts the importance of cultural fluidity and interchange, her arguments are almost completely rooted in the theoretical frameworks of Western academia, with barely any connection to East Asian thought. Despite acknowledging the Buddhist dimension of *King Uru* (a Korean adaptation of *King Lear*), Joubin only engages with Buddhism descriptively, rooting her argument in psychoanalysis and Du Bois' notion of "double-consciousness" (89). While Joubin desires to move "away from the linear, one-way-street model" of the West influencing the East, her argumentative strategies reaffirm this model (6). Consequently, Joubin's ambitious vision backfires, paradoxically reinforcing the dichotomies of "West" and "East" she seeks to undermine.

These comments are not intended to diminish Joubin's insights, nor are the pitfalls entirely unexpected in a work of such inventiveness. In addition to addressing these issues in future editions, Joubin could embark on a second book that tackles unresolved research questions. It would be a welcome follow-up to what may become a classic work in the field of Asian Shakespeares.