Tamkang Review 50.1 (December 2019): 87-93.
DOI: 10.6184/TKR.201912_50(1).0004

The Outlook of the Asian Shakespeare Association

Bi-qi Beatrice Lei
Founding Chair of the Asian Shakespeare Association

Scholarly interest in Asia's Shakespeare—from historical research to performance criticism, from theoretical exploration to case-studies—has gained momentum in the past two decades. Asia is both vast and diverse, comprising multiple races, languages, cultures, beliefs, economies, and theatres. Varied experiences of Western colonialism and imperialism and current politics also affect Asian communities' encounters with and interventions in Shakespeare. The understanding and appreciation of Asia's multifaceted Shakespeare demands a collective effort. International conferences offer a most conducive platform for those who share similar interests to exchange ideas and to develop collaborative projects across national, cultural, and disciplinary borders. In particular, a few events at the dawn of the new millennium left a lasting impact. "Shakespeare in Non-Anglophone Countries," a seminar held at the 2001 World Shakespeare Congress in Valencia, resulted in the volume *Shakespeare without English: The Reception of Shakespeare in Non-Anglophone Countries*, co-edited by Sukanta Chaudhuri and Lim Chee Seng, in which Asian Shakespeare figures in most of the chapters. "Shakespeare Performance in the New Asias," a conference hosted

Bi-qi Beatrice Lei is Founding Chair of the Asian Shakespeare Association. She received her PhD in English from New York University, and has published on Sidney, Shakespeare, early modern culture, intercultural theater, films, television, and popular culture. She has taught at National Tsing Hua University and National Taiwan University, and is Founding Director of the Taiwan Shakespeare Database, an open-access online performance archive hosted by NTU's Research Center for Digital Humanities. Lei serves as Trustee of the International Shakespeare Association and Assistant Director of the Shakespeare Association of America, and is co-organizing, with Yong Li Lan, the 2021 World Shakespeare Congress in Singapore. Email: biqilei@gmail.com.
(Received 25 August 2019; Accepted 22 November 2019)

airiti

by the National University of Singapore in 2002, gave birth to *Shakespeare in Asia: Contemporary Performance*, co-edited by Dennis Kennedy and Yong Li Lan. "Shakespeare and China," a panel held at the 2004 annual convention of the Modern Language Association in Philadelphia, engendered the publication of *Shakespeare and Asia*, a special issue of *Shakespeare Yearbook* co-edited by Douglas A. Brooks and Yang Lingui. "Re-playing Shakespeare in Non-Western Theatre Forms," a seminar held at the 2006 World Shakespeare Congress in Brisbane, developed into *Re-playing Shakespeare in Asia*, co-edited by Poonam Trivedi and Minami Ryuta. These trailblazing studies not only showcase Asia's Shakespearean theatres but also approach them with historical awareness and theoretical sophistication.

The field of Asian Shakespeare has continued to grow, attracting more Asian and non-Asian scholars to collaborate, often meeting at international conferences held in Europe or North America. Starting in 2007, the scene gradually began to change. First realized as a one-day event in 2004, the National Taiwan University Shakespeare Forum was revived in 2005 as a research group. It sponsored research projects as well as talks, workshops, colloquia, and performances, and its annual symposiums eventually expanded to international conferences. With this stable platform for exchange, the strength of Taiwan's Shakespeareans became consolidated. An informal society was formed, which later morphed into the Taiwan Shakespeare Association. The Forum's annual conferences have also attracted international scholars and theatre artists to visit and revisit over the years, especially those from China, Hong Kong, India, Japan, Korea, Macau, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Singapore. The conferences have continued to grow in size and diversity. The 2010 conference "Orienting Shakespeare in East Asia," a joint effort of the NTU Shakespeare Forum and Shirayuri College, presented world-class performing artists from China, Japan, Korea, and Taiwan. The 2012 conference "Shakespeare across Media" included two full-scale performances, from the Philippines and Taiwan. As it turned out, Taipei evolved to be a hub for Shakespeareans based in Asia.

This geographical shift proved significant. For Shakespeareans based in Asia, Taipei is obviously closer and more affordable compared to Valencia, Philadelphia, or Brisbane, so more are encouraged to participate. Beyond mere convenience, Taipei is also more friendly. Here, unlike in major Shakespeare conferences held in Europe or North America, Asians are not minorities, and feel comfortable communicating in English with various accents. East-West binarism, which remains prominent in academia, naturally dissolves among fellow Asians. Inter-Asian understanding, friendship, and comradeship developed and deepened, and an Asian consciousness emerged. As Chen Kuan-hsing

airiti

insightfully argued, Asia can indeed be a "method" that transforms the existing knowledge structure and ourselves (212). Based on this realization, the idea of a formal association dedicated to researching, producing, teaching, translating, and promoting Shakespeare from an Asian perspective was proposed in 2012. The initial call for participation received a warm response, and in December a preparatory meeting was held in Tokyo to discuss the name, mission, government, membership, and constitution of the organization. With thirty-nine founding members, the Asian Shakespeare Association (ASA) was officially established in 2013, incorporated as a non-profit organization in the Philippines. Its membership quickly grew and diversified, with currently over four hundred members from more than forty countries.

ASA Conferences

A fundamental purpose of the ASA is the facilitation of inter-Asian communication and mutual understanding. Thus, the ASA holds biennial conferences at Asian locations. There have been three ASA conferences, held in Taipei (2014), New Delhi (2016), and Manila (2018) respectively. The 2020 conference will be held in Seoul. Each of these conferences engages international and local scholars, teachers, students, and artists, and exhibits the hosting community's unique theatre and culture. ASA conferences accommodate all subfields of Shakespeare studies and welcome all relevant topics, but Asian Shakespeare always figures strongly in the program. It is hoped that our collective work can advance the field, expanding, challenging, and revising established concepts, practices, theories, tools, and methodologies. At each conference, academic sessions—keynote speeches, paper panels, and seminars—are supplemented by hands-on workshops, live performances, film screenings, and exhibits. Delegates also savor the varied social events offered by the hosts, including receptions, banquets, excursions to local attractions, and karaoke and dance parties.

The inaugural ASA conference took place at National Taiwan University and National Taiwan Normal University over four days in May 2014. Talks and forums affiliated with the conference were also held at six other universities across Taiwan. Leadership from the ASA's sister associations—the Chair of the International Shakespeare Association, the Executive Director of the Shakespeare Association of America, and the President of the Australian and New Zealand Shakespeare Association—brought their blessings. The packed academic program incorporated six keynote speeches, ten panel and roundtable sessions, and eight seminars. The conference theme "Shakespearean Journeys"

airiti

was liberally interpreted, with papers on young Shakespeare's venture from Stratford-upon-Avon to London, the physical, psychological, and spiritual voyages taken by Shakespearean characters, source and influence studies, adaptation and appropriation, linguistic and cultural translation, traveling theatre companies, international arts festivals, and transnational and transmedia migration. Filling out the program were four live performances, two film screenings, and three acting workshops led by local artists and those coming from Ireland, Korea, the Philippines, and Thailand.

A plenary session was convened to reexamine the established concepts of Asian Shakespeare. Many questions were asked. For example, why is Shakespeare from Southeast Asia largely excluded from discussion of "Asian Shakespeare"? How does an Orientalist imagination of Asia and Asian theatres affect the type of Asian Shakespeare visible on the global stage? From markedly Asian perspectives based on Asian experiences and histories, alternative ways of thinking about Asia, Shakespeare, and Asian Shakespeare emerged. Many other papers presented at the conference also joined this conversation, culminating in the volume *Shakespeare's Asian Journeys: Critical Encounters, Cultural Geographies, and the Politics of Travel.* Co-edited by Bi-qi Beatrice Lei, Judy Celine Ick, and Poonam Trivedi, the book goes beyond a showcasing of Asian adaptations in various languages, styles, and theatre traditions, and beyond introductory essays intended to help an unknowing audience appreciate Asian performances, but further develops a more inflected interpretative dialogue with other areas of Shakespeare studies. This is done by forgoing the myth of the Bard's universality, bypassing the authenticity test, avoiding merely descriptive or even ethnographic accounts, and using caution when applying Western theoretical frameworks. New methodologies and approaches—across the disciplines of history, philosophy, sociology, geopolitics, religion, postcolonial studies, psychology, translation theory, film studies, and more—are introduced as well. This volume reflects both the vast diversities and the interconnecting strands that comprise the idea of Asia, refuting and demolishing an essentialism which has developed around the notion of Asia. It aims to demonstrate how Shakespeare helps articulate Asianness, unfolding Asia's past, reflecting Asia's present, and projecting Asia's future.

The second ASA conference was held at the Indira Gandhi National Centre for Arts in New Delhi in December 2016, comprising three keynote speeches, nineteen panels, and three seminars, supplemented by three live performances, two film screenings, and a workshop. Delegates also enjoyed sightseeing tours in and around the historically and culturally rich New Delhi. Under the theme "All the World's His Stage: Shakespeare Today," papers at the conference

explored Shakespeare's global presence and his contemporaneity. In recent years, the Bard's once celebrated "universality" has been modified or replaced by the idea of his "malleability." Around the world, Shakespeare is a recognizable brand, serving diverse cultural, artistic, political, social, educational, and commercial agendas that the early modern playwright would never have imagined. Beyond the traditional formats of page and stage, films, television, graphic novels, popular music, and the many forms of online media have created new kinds of Shakespeare which can be more easily spread and reproduced, and have thus made the world smaller. Many papers from this conference examine how to negotiate past and present, local and global Shakespeares.

Intriguingly, Asia's Shakespeare both contributes to and subverts this process of globalizing Shakespeare. On the one hand, the translation, adaptation, appropriation, and localization of Shakespeare in Asia facilitates the dissemination of Shakespeare. On the other, Asia's transformation of Shakespeare also resists and alters the very templates through which Shakespeare becomes globally legible. Co-edited by Poonam Trivedi, Paromita Chakravarti, and Ted Motohashi, *Asian Interventions in Global Shakespeare: All the World's His Stage* furthers the interrogation of global Shakespeare from distinctly Asian perspectives. Essays included in the book cover a wide range of stage performances and films across Asia, as well as Shakespeare's presence in *manga*, *anime*, advertisements, newspaper headlines, and popular songs. In addition, the last section of the book considers global Shakespeare in the light of world literature. To what extent can we read Shakespeare as exemplifying the ideas proposed by Goethe, Marx, and Tagore?

The third ASA conference "Shakespeare, Traffics, Tropics," the biggest to date, was a collaboration between the University of the Philippines Diliman and Ateneo de Manila University. Spread out over 7,641 tropical islands speaking seventy-eight languages, the Philippines has a rich history combining Asian, European, and American influences. Is an island an isolated entity, or part of an archipelago? Is the sea a means of separation, segregation, and protection, or of transportation, commerce, and communication? This unique island country setting prompted some deep questions about identity, colonization, migration, integration, and assimilation. Themes of seafaring journeys, wandering players, shipwrecks, and the European colonization of Asia and the Americas, figured strongly at the conference. The full program, spanning three days in May 2018, incorporated the keynote speech, ten panels, six seminars, two workshops, three live performances, and a film. Not surprisingly, *The Tempest* received ample critical attention among the Shakespearean works.

The conference illustrates the ASA's mission to engage Shakespeare in local history and politics. In particular, the live performance *RD3RD*, an adapta-

airiti

tion of *Richard III*, shook the audience with its exploration of tyranny, violence, and terror. Following the conference, a special issue of *Kritika Kultura*, a peer-reviewed journal published by Ateneo de Manila University, was initiated, to present selected papers from the conference along with interviews with theatre artists.

Looking Ahead

Though relatively small and still very young, the ASA is making a difference for Asia, Asian Shakespeare, and Asian Shakespeareans. Research interest in Asia-related topics is accelerating: translation and performance of Shakespeare in Asian languages; adaptations in Asia's traditional and innovative genres; Shakespeare in Asia's colonial history and postcolonial negotiation; teaching Shakespeare in non-Anglophone communities; Bollywood; *manga*; etc. Both the discussion and the discussants of Asia's Shakespeare are becoming increasingly inclusive and diverse. In addition to performance traditions and aesthetics, growing attention has been paid to Asia's geographies, histories, philosophies, and politics. The prominence of Asia's Shakespearean scholarship is on the rise.

It is thus opportune that the International Shakespeare Association is committed to organizing the 2021 World Shakespeare Congress in Singapore, a return to Asia thirty years after the 1991 Tokyo Congress. A historical nexus in global economies for Shakespeare, Singapore offers an ideal meeting point for the international aims of the Congress and for emerging cross-border practices and perspectives. Once again, the ASA serves as a platform for transnational collaboration. For the first time the Congress is not just organized by a city or a country, but by an international team. ASA core members from Korea, Japan, Taiwan, and the United Kingdom joined the local organizing committee led by Yong Li Lan of the National University of Singapore. The weeklong Congress will proffer a full plate of live performances from Asia and attract Shakespeareans from across the globe.

Works Cited

Brooks, Douglas A., and Yang Lingui, editors. *Shakespeare and Asia.* Edwin Mellen, 2010. *Shakespeare Yearbook* 17.

Chaudhuri, Sukanta, and Lim Chee Seng, editors. *Shakespeare without English: The Reception of Shakespeare in Non-Anglophone Countries.* Delhi, Pearson Longman, 2006.

Chen, Kuan-hsing. *Asia as Method: Toward Deimperialization.* Duke UP, 2010.

Kennedy, Dennis, and Yong Li Lan, editors. *Shakespeare in Asia: Contemporary Performance.* Cambridge UP, 2010.

Lei, Bi-qi Beatrice, et al., editors. *Shakespeare's Asian Journeys: Critical Encounters, Cultural Geographies, and the Politics of Travel.* Routledge, 2017.

Trivedi, Poonam, and Minami Ryuta, editors. *Re-playing Shakespeare in Asia.* Routledge, 2010.

Trivedi, Poonam, et al., editors. *Asian Interventions in Global Shakespeare: All the World's His Stage.* Routledge, forthcoming.