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THE SHAKESPEAREAN
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3 The site of burial in two Korean *Hamlets*

Yu Jin Ko

When it comes to global Shakespeare, the rhetoric of universality remains stubbornly universal, especially among theatre practitioners. Even as “foreign” practitioners appropriate Shakespeare in intercultural productions that go far beyond merely reproducing the Shakespearean original, many continue to view Shakespeare as the vehicle that enables access to the universal. The history of *Hamlet* in Korea is representative in this regard. Since the so-called Shakespeare boom began in the 1990s in Korea, Koreans have performed *Hamlet* more often than any other Shakespeare play.¹ Many reasons can account for this fact, but one clearly stands out: with its meditations on life and death, *Hamlet* exemplifies more than any other play for Koreans what Yoon-taek Lee, the founding artistic director of the company Yonhuidan Gureepae, calls a “universal text.”² The way in which Lee talks about his aspirations for the series of *Hamlet* productions that he directed is further telling. On the one hand, mutuality underpins his vision of universality in intercultural encounters, as seen in his desire to “universalize the culture of East and West in a comprehensive . . . way” (195); thus he emphasizes the need to preserve “Yonhuidan Gureepae’s unique theatrical grammar” (195) and its “own contemporary Korean theatre style” (202) in its productions of Western drama. On the other hand, however, he clearly positions Shakespeare as the source of the universal when he talks of “learning how to incorporate the contemporaneity and Korean uniqueness that we have pursued . . . into the dimension of the universal” (195) through Shakespeare; he further adds that interpreting *Hamlet* in Yonhuidan’s theatrical grammar “was possible thanks to the archetypal theatre form in Shakespeare plays that transcends the barrier of East and West and allows cultures to be interchangeable.”³ One can see why Yeeyon Im would say of Lee’s *Hamlet* that “Shakespeare presides in the cultural encounter between Korea and the West not as a participant, but as a governing agent [who] guarantees the

delivery of universality.”⁴ After all, as Sonia Massai has pointed out, even radical reworkings of Shakespeare can reinforce “the omnipresent image of the dominant other as its ultimate point of origin.”⁵

For Youn-taek Lee’s company in particular, the idea of using Shakespeare as a vehicle to “achieve”⁶ universality can be even more fraught: the company’s mission is indicated in its name (Yonhuidan Gureepae), which the company conveniently translates as Street Theatre Troupe, but which refers more specifically in Korean to *traveling* troupes of street players (like minstrels). For Lee’s theatre, travel is both metaphorical and literal; the company seeks to traverse cultures while producing works that travel domestically and abroad. And in fact the company’s *Hamlet* has traveled abroad extensively over a period of years. Shakespeare acts a vehicle indeed for this company, though this carries the danger that their unique “contemporary Korean theatre style” could become merely local trappings to what lies within – the supposedly universal soul of Shakespeare’s play. Something similar might be said of a *Hamlet* production by another Korean theatre company that has received international recognition, the Yohangza, or “Traveller,” Theatre Company. This company’s founder (Jung-ung Yang) similarly speaks of harmonizing the “universal” with uniquely “Korean aesthetics” in intercultural productions while including international travel in the company’s mission.⁷ True to form, its production of *Hamlet* has also traveled abroad (though Westerners may be more familiar with the company’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, which was performed at the Globe in London as part of the World Shakespeare Festival in 2012). With the possibility that “Korean aesthetics” function merely as ornamental dress for the universal core that makes Hamlet’s plight “our story” (4), Yohangza’s *Hamlet* also risks engaging in what has been called “complicit colonialism,”⁸ as the local strengthens the global brand by corroborating and reinforcing the brand’s universality. The center could simply grow stronger as an increasingly wider periphery circulates around it.

However, in thinking about intercultural productions, one should recognize that a gap often exists between practitioners’ rhetoric and their actual productions. As this chapter argues, the theatrical practices of the two productions noted above transcend the rhetoric in ways that – intentionally or not – challenge traditionally post-colonial critiques. Of particular focus will be the ways in which both productions foreground burial grounds that come to define the local *place* – the local hamlet (with a lowercase “h”) – and serve, by means of shamanistic rituals, as gateways to other, sacred worlds. Those other worlds that are accessed only through, and intersect with, distinctly local or Korean spaces, come to stand, I will argue, for the universal. That is, the local and the universal undergo reconfigurations and reversals as the ground underneath the play shifts, as it were, and in the process repositions the center.

The opposition between the local and the universal that I deploy here aligns of course with related binaries like familiar and foreign, target and source, local and global, adaptation and original, even East and West, among others. However, these terms, and the positions that they occupy in the polar oppositions, are relative, as many have pointed out. One may certainly agree enthusiastically with Li Lan Yong and Dennis Kennedy that intercultural revisions produce a “new text, a third text, which is neither the original nor the estranging device but the result of their performative interaction.”⁹ However, one should remember that Yong also emphasizes, not only the degree to which “perceptions” of an intercultural production’s “meaningfulness”¹⁰ depend on one’s relative cultural position, but also how individual, fluid, complicated and even “performative” (532) one’s location is in the range of cultural “positionalities” (531). With productions traveling abroad and spectators occupying an array of culturally hybrid positions, an intercultural production’s “project of bridging cultures involves a spectator in intermingling, partial identifications and alienations that are porous to one another” (539). The vexed issue of authenticity can also be considered in this light. As Elaine Ng has pointed out, the rhetoric of authenticity that continues to permeate discussions of Shakespearean performance often intensifies in the case of intercultural productions as the authenticity of local theatrical traditions enters the field of assessment. However, the perception of authenticity is complicated by not only the “performativity of the authentic” – as a performance tradition is cited through dislocated performances – but also “spectatorial positionality.”¹¹ This is all to say that any argument like mine about the disruptive force of an intercultural production will inevitably be inflected by the particular spectatorial position underlying the argument.

Hence, though I have to apologize in advance for taking pains to situate myself in some detail, it seems to me necessary to explain where I am coming from. I should first note that I will be writing about the two *Hamlet* productions as they exist in digital form in the Asian Shakespeare Internet Archive (A-S-I-A-web.org). Practical reasons as well as theoretical motivations account for this. I live in the United States, to which neither company has yet traveled, and during my recent visits to Korea, unfortunately neither company performed the play. Still, accessing the performances digitally, especially with the features (like subtitles) available through the A|I|S|A portal, does offer its advantages. Although I am conversationally competent in Korean (having lived in Korea until I was nine), some of the dialogue – especially at moments when the Korean, though modern, becomes dense, poetic, and heightened – would be inaccessible without subtitles, much as some Shakespearean dialogue in performance can go by in a blur for even native English speakers. On the other hand, my training in Shakespeare has made me pretty familiar with the text, which makes the Korean resonate with

additional nuances, as chimes and dissonances echo in continual interplay. In this respect and in my case, watching a recorded performance can, as Li Lan Yong has written, “strengthen the definition and depth of an intercultural engagement with the performance,” because “both interculturality and mediatization” are “aspects of the globalization of performance.”¹² The productions travel to me digitally, in other words, and create a particular intercultural encounter.

Even more important, however, is how my idea of Korea filters the image of Korea that the performances assume and to which the discourse surrounding the performances (e.g., in Program Notes) directly alludes. Hyonu Lee has suggested that the popularity of *Hamlet* in Korea has to do with the play’s capacity to express what Koreans call *han*.¹³ Some near equivalents of the word *han* are “heartbreak,” “pain,” “sorrow,” but it is the kind of deep heartbreak that issues from generational history and even defines a fatalistic world view. Having suffered colonial conquest, civil war, the division of the country, military coups, and dictatorships – all in one century – *han* remains a pervasive presence for Koreans, both abstractly and deep within people. Lee has further suggested that the presence of shamanistic exorcism rituals in so many Korean *Hamlets* attests to the desire to exorcise *han* by means of the play (106). And indeed the Program Notes for Yohangza’s *Hamlet* use the word *han* explicitly and repeatedly, while numerous essays by the Street Theatre Troupe’s director evoke the concept. Yohangza’s Jung-ung Yang, for example, calls Hamlet a “being stuffed and bruised with *han*,” who, therefore, shows us “our form” in “our own time” – in modern-day Korea, that is, with the word “our” meaning Korean, which is how Koreans routinely use the word.¹⁴ Yang further notes that he chose to incorporate the exorcism ritual of *gut* into his production because of his conviction that “we” need, as we live in “conflict and the loneliness born of turmoil,” to “comfort” and to “release” *han* (4). Similarly, in relation to the scenes of madness that motivate gestures of exorcism in his production, Street Theatre’s Youn-taek Lee speaks of the “loss of self” while living in a “chaotic reality.”¹⁵

Although *han* may be considered Korea’s “national sentiment,”¹⁶ what it means specifically differs for individuals, and thus that individual understanding partly defines the spectator’s position when watching *Hamlet*. For me, dynamic discord defines Korea. Most obviously, as a walk through nearly any part of Seoul today reveals, tradition and globalized modernity come crashing together in every aspect of life. Surrounding a Buddhist temple or even ramshackle homes with ceramic tile roofs will be gleaming skyscrapers with pulsating LED displays that advertise the latest electronic gadgets in the mongrel language that has become ubiquitous (especially in marketing) but which has been a source of national embarrassment for some: Konglish, which often takes the form of simply but awkwardly transliterating an English word phonetically into Korean (not just, say, common words of global commerce like “computer” but even terms for which

there are perfectly adequate Korean terms, such as “flower shop” – transliterated into something like “pooh-rah-wuh shap”). A part of what gives the country its hectic energy is the extraordinary pace of change, which is exhilarating, dizzying, but also cruel. The race to keep pace in an overcrowded nation of 50 million packed into an area about the size of Maine (one of the smaller states in the US) can be seen not only in ferocious economic competition but also in groups of the elderly on subways with their heads buried in their Samsung smartphones. From one perspective, this energy keeps the country’s spirit buoyant, especially as a communitarian ethic with a shared cultural memory reinforces a sense of a nation’s being in it all together. People above a certain age – including the vast majority of those who have prospered economically from the country’s boom – still remember, for example, when they and the country were poor. No one thinks twice about stepping out of a luxury department store and sitting down at a rickety food stall to eat a poor man’s lunch (say, what’s called “barracks stew,” made originally from the scraps scavenged from trash bins outside US military barracks during the Korean War).

On the other hand, and paradoxically, extreme status consciousness (a legacy of Confucianism) combined with rampant consumerism (the consequence and engine of global capitalism) fuels a cutthroat competition for survival and success in which losers far outnumber winners. The win – or simply survive – at-all-costs mentality can thus be corrosive and does lead to regularly recurring national traumas that shake the country. One recent, devastating, and tragic example is the Sewol ferry disaster of April 2014, when a ferry capsized while carrying mostly high school students from one small city, 304 of whom died. From top to bottom, at each level at which personal responsibility and integrity were required, a categorical failure occurred that the public experienced as a profound betrayal. The ferry was illegally overlaid with cargo at the instruction of the shipping company’s corrupt owner, who routinely bribed maritime inspectors and government officials; the captain abandoned ship with the passengers still trapped inside; the crew was untrained in disaster response and thus, before themselves abandoning ship, gave the trapped students the wrong instruction to remain below deck. The Sewol ferry disaster reminded Koreans that, despite all the progress, suffering remains existentially insurmountable and fundamentally inseparable from even the current condition of relative prosperity. The moral breakdown that was perceived as betrayal clearly issued, as the country collectively acknowledged, from a modern, globalized socio-economic reality that motivates an unhinged form of excess desire. The word *han* sums up for Koreans the searing emotional pain associated with this tragedy.

Such events in modern Korea are not rare, however, which accounts in part for the presence of shamanistic exorcism rituals in the two productions of *Hamlet*

under discussion. The ritual that most permeates both productions is *gut*, the name for a broad category of rites that involve communication, mediated by a shaman or *mudang*, between inhabitants of this world and of the afterlife or the invisible spiritual world. In one particular kind of *gut*, which both productions make use of, the spirit of a dead ancestor possesses either the shaman or a living relative to communicate its suffering (its continuing experience of *han*) and to appeal for appeasement or release. For the directors, *gut* clearly opens up possibilities for intercultural transposition: the ghost of Hamlet's father returns, after all, to expose betrayal and corruption beneath the new reality to inspire his son to revenge. Nonetheless, Yeeyon Im, for example, has argued that "many westernized Koreans" – principally, Koreans living in Korea with westernized sensibilities, rather than Koreans living in the West – "would have found" the shamanistic rituals in Youn-taek Lee's *Hamlet* to be "archaic and superstitious – more foreign than Shakespeare's *Hamlet*."¹⁷ I suspect she would argue the same for Yohangza's *Hamlet*. I find her assertion misdirected for two specific reasons. First, as historians of shamanism and religious practices in Korea have pointed out, shamanism is syncretic in its outlook and therefore has evolved over centuries through its contact with "official" religions and philosophies like Buddhism and Confucianism. This means that shamanism has absorbed elements of other practices, but its own elements have also been integrated into other practices. Hence, although many do regard shamans as charlatans who trade in disreputable superstition, most still recognize some overlap between shamanism and other creeds and thus regard it as being part of a continuum of sacred practices.¹⁸ The vast majority of Koreans, including Christians, still practice the Confucian ancestor-worship ritual of *che-sa*, for example, which has continuities (and vast differences) with shamanistic rituals.¹⁹ Many shamans also engage in the continually popular practice of divination (for a fee), though they sometimes disguise their status as shamans while signaling it as an open secret with coded professional pseudonyms.²⁰ My late uncle, an evangelical minister in Korea, would say of shamans that you cannot underestimate their occult powers.

Perhaps more importantly, many shamanistic rituals intersect, as Jung-ung Yang emphatically underscores, with communal folk activities like song, dance, feasting, drinking (lots of it), and even "theatre," and hence hold significance "beyond the religious dimension."²¹ This near-Rabelaisian but at the same time distinctly Korean mingling of the sacred with the physical in a communal rite of cheer, release, and consolation is regarded by Yang as an essential element of *gut* and an answer to *han*. At the same time, Yang links the exorcism of *gut* with festive play and theatre in an interestingly self-conscious way. He ends his Director's Notes with a phrase that translates literally as something like "Let's play *Hamlet* as a *gut*" (4), but which has a particular resonance in Korean: the

verb phrase recalls the English phrase “Let the good times roll,” or better yet the Cajun expression “Laissez les bon temps rouler.” Let *Hamlet rouler* as a *gut*! is essentially what is said, though without the awkward phrasing. If there is one thing one can say about Koreans, it is that they pursue *les bon temps* with the same intensity as they pursue survival and success in the global marketplace. Yang tries with his *Hamlet* to create a tragic theatrical form that harnesses the intensity of ritual play to release *han*. Somewhat similarly, Street Theatre Troupe’s Youn-taek Lee speaks of incorporating *gut* rituals into his production to enact “purification” or “release” and to realize the theatre’s potential for “catharsis.”²² In this respect, though the two productions differ significantly, including in their uses of the *gut* ritual, the two can be said to originate from a similar vision of Shakespeare’s play; namely, that Hamlet the character remains fundamentally incomplete in his spiritual journey and *Hamlet* the play remains incomplete as a vehicle of release. By means of a distinctly Korean version of shamanism, the productions envision how completion might become more possible.

To trace the ways in which *gut* lays the foundation for release to be enacted, we can return to the ground on which the play is set. I will begin with Street Theatre Troupe’s production, because it is chronologically earlier, having started its continuing series of revivals and revisions in 1996, though the video recording I am using is of a 2009 production at the Nunbit Theatre in Seoul. This *Hamlet* begins with a funeral procession onto a dark stage that has at the rear a scrim onto which is projected the image of a large horse, more specifically, the mythical flying horse Chunma, which the wall of a historic earthen royal tomb in Korea called Chunma-chong depicts. While the audience is not to confuse the fictional setting in Denmark with Chunma-chong, the image conveys the sense immediately, as Youn-taek Lee has written, that the world is “a huge grave.”²³ The sound of loud ritual wailing, which we discover comes from Gertrude as the lights come on, thus feels entirely appropriate for the sweeping funereal atmosphere of the setting. After the pallbearers lay the Old Hamlet’s body into the grave, Claudius launches into his speech from 1.2 (“Though yet of Hamlet our dear brother’s death”²⁴); however, upon announcing that he has taken his sister-in-law to wife, he and Gertrude engage in a long, romantic kiss, which leads Hamlet to look in astonishment at the audience and walk downstage. The royal couple, along with the mourners and courtiers who take their cue from them, then throw off their black cloaks of mourning, revealing more courtly regalia of an unspecific but modern period, and begin to dance as Renaissance music plays in the background.

Because Gertrude’s shift from mourning to erotic festivity occurs so abruptly, and punctuates a sudden change in the scene’s momentum, it clearly stands out as something remarkable and raises questions about her emotional authenticity and the authenticity of stylized rituals of mourning in traditional Korean funerals.



I am reminded here of a story that circulated about my cousin in Korea, whom we idolized in fear when we were children because of his tendency towards rebellious waywardness. At the funeral of an uncle, my cousin is said to have surprised everyone by the intensity of his mourning, engaging in the form of ritual wailing that goes by the name of *koksori*. Then suddenly, the story goes, he turned to his mother and very ostentatiously asked in front of all the gathered mourners, “Was that enough?” In exposing how insincerely theatrical mourning rites can be (and how he was forced into performing them as simply a social obligation), he appears to have wanted to expose hypocrisy and moral fraudulence more broadly. Because Gertrude’s behavior itself exposes her mourning to be insincere, Hamlet is left to distinguish himself from the court and to articulate his disgust and disillusion, as he does in the immediately following exchange (while drunk) that leads to the “I know not seems” (1.2.76) speech. The Korean departs subtly from Shakespeare here to emphasize how the issues of authenticity and individuality come together. Lee’s Hamlet dresses like the others, but demands of Gertrude what he might do or wear to express a sorrow that goes beyond both seeming and conventional expression: “No shape of grief can truly show my sadness. What do you want to see? Inky cloak of mourning? . . . Fruitful river in the eye?” The questions indicate that he is searching for a unique vocabulary – whether in language or other signs – that is at once self-authenticating in its expression of sorrow and expressive of what he uniquely, as an individual beyond conventional signs, can feel.

At the same time, and metadramatically, the scene – whether intentionally or not – raises the question of authenticity with regard to intercultural Shakespeare productions. How can a production be “faithful to the original,”²⁵ as Lee himself asks, while retaining the unique theatrical grammar of the company’s particular contemporary Korean style? In this connection, one might be tempted to say that the court attire in Lee’s production is western, especially since a character dressed in a semblance of Renaissance motley appears, but of course the pervasive style of contemporary Asian attire is very much global western. In fact, within the production at large, an eclectic mix of periods, cultural styles, imagistic and auditory allusions, protocols of mourning, and more resists binaries like east and west or domestic and foreign or traditional and modern. What’s at issue is not simply Koreanizing Shakespeare. As Jan Creutzenberg has rightly pointed out, Youn-taek Lee seeks a Korean element for his *Hamlet* that is unique to his company: “an individual interpretation of *Hamlet* rather than a mere localisation based on national culture.”²⁶ For Lee, the question is: What kind of distinctly Korean theatrical grammar can be authentic to Shakespeare while also being self-authenticating?

The next sequence in the opening scene suggests a possible but troubling answer. After Gertrude flirtatiously and rather seductively convinces Hamlet to stay in Denmark, and the courtiers leave the stage, Hamlet delivers a short version



of his soliloquy from 1.2 (“Frailty, thy Name Is Woman,” 146). Afterwards, as a bell chimes midnight, the doors of the grave open and a hand slowly reaches up from it. Eventually, the body – or rather the ghost – of the Old King emerges and an encounter follows that takes the form, as Lee has pointed out and many have commented on, of a *gut* in which *jeop-shin*, or the possession of one’s spirit by the spirit of an ancestor, takes place.²⁷ More specifically, after Hamlet addresses the ghost, an elaborately choreographed mime follows that indicates the onset of possession, after which a one-sided dialogue takes place in which only Hamlet delivers lines – “Murder?” “My uncle?” – in response to mimed actions and gestures by the ghost. One is to understand that the ghost communicates directly to Hamlet and resides therefore as much inside as outside of him. Koreans would also recognize that the ghost returns because he remains “perturbed” (2.1.182), or afflicted by some form of *han*. In possessing the son’s spirit, that perturbation also passes to the son, whose mission it then becomes to appease the ghost. For Lee, the incorporation of *jeop-shin* is central to developing a “unique narrative structure”²⁸ that enables Street Theatre to harmonize his company’s individual Korean aesthetics with Shakespeare’s original. For Hamlet the character, the fact of possession becomes the ground that accommodates and authenticates a range of actions that variously have elements of, or are interpreted by others as, madness, crafty madness, play-acting, melodramatic over-acting, or simply outrageous rudeness. It should be noted that Hamlet’s lines about putting “an antic disposition on” (1.5.172) are entirely cut: his often maniacally antic disposition becomes an outcome and expression of possession. *Jeop-shin* produces, to borrow Jan Creutzenberg’s vocabulary, a productive “semiotic ambiguity” in this production.²⁹ Neither Ophelia nor we know precisely whether Hamlet is mad, pretending to be so, in the throes of a manic passion, or is experiencing possession when he approaches her in her closet and affrights her (a scene that gets staged here). When he engages in caustic sarcasm with Polonius in the equivalent of 2.2 (“fishmonger”), we don’t know whether possession empowers him to defy decorum, or whether he simply exploits his perceived lunacy as license – in the manner of a court jester – to heap unmitigated scorn on the court and its betrayals and corruption. Though possession remains the foundation that drives Hamlet’s actions in Lee’s production, that foundation accommodates a constellation of other extraordinary “wild and whirling words” (1.5.133) and behavior. At the same time, the question of authenticity with regard to human action gets absorbed into this foundation of possession. One might further say that Lee’s choice to employ *jeop-shin* provides the objective correlative that T. S. Eliot famously lamented the absence of in this play.

However, the first scene of ghostly possession noted above creates a spectatorial position that is decidedly curious and potentially disturbing. Though one might

guess at the ghost's words through his actions and Hamlet's responses, the silence surely echoes loudly with Shakespeare's text – for those who are familiar with it. The ghost delivers the truth that will drive the action forward, and yet the text remains conspicuously absent, which thus requires a prior, and rather intimate, knowledge of Shakespeare for the fullest understanding. The A|S|I|A website takes the extraordinary step of providing that text, in brackets, so that the viewer can have access to that absent presence. Metadramatically speaking, one might say that the ghost acts as a figure for Shakespeare, and, by requiring prior knowledge of the text, reinforces the essential primacy of the Shakespearean text. In this respect, it is as though through the portal of the grave – the gateway to the eternal and the universal – Shakespeare appeared, bearing silently the absent text as a secret “eternal blazon [that] must not be / To ears” (1.5.21–22) untrained in his text. Only we in the know can “list” (1.5.22), only we who have prior access to Shakespeare. And that “we” is more likely to be western than Korean.

The importance of access to that absent text gets reinforced as the play goes on, especially in relation to the process of *jeop-shin*. As with Hamlet's manic behavior, Ophelia's madness has its origins in possession, though as a viewer can see, and as Lee reaffirms, the madness has many sources: her “painful” love for Hamlet, her brother's departure, her father's death, and, in this production, as hinted at briefly in a scene of hurried dressing, an “improper affair” with Claudius.³⁰ These causes collectively define the “chaotic” and morally unmoored world that she experiences and which leads her to “lose” herself (197–98). However, the words and songs she gives voice to in madness are simultaneously meant to be understood as flowing from possession, as when a possessed shaman delivers the words of the possessing spirit in dialogue and ritual song. Further, the production highlights a specific moment as crucial to the process of *jeop-shin* – the interpolated scene in her closet when Hamlet comes to her, and speaks lines to her from the ghost's absent text: “But that I am forbid / To tell the secrets of my prison-house. . . . To ears of flesh and blood” (1.5.13–22). For someone familiar with the text, this is a chilling moment that resonates in numerous ways, literalizing Ophelia's description of Hamlet in this scene as a ghost just “loosed out of hell” (2.1.80). More importantly, as Dongwook Kim, the dramaturg for the production, confirms, this “repetition” of the ghost's silent lines enacts the first moment of possession, as possession passes as if infectiously from Hamlet to Ophelia.³¹ But how is an audience member who is not familiar with the text to understand all this? The structural reworking of the narrative with *jeop-shin* as the spine extends the experience of possession to others and even lends more dramatic plausibility to some of the actions, but the sense of Shakespeare as the source of a ghostly master text that possesses the production also intensifies.

A counter-action can also be sensed, though it remains unclear whether it was intended or not. This centers again on the grave, though the setting is the

play-within-the-play. In Lee's production, Horatio is a female character who leads the players. During the first movement of the play-within-the-play, Horatio acts almost as a narrator in the Korean folk genre of *pansori*, in which a single narrator/singer (or *sori-kkun*) provides the narrative while also enacting and voicing the characters to the accompaniment of a percussionist. In this particular instance, the Player King and Queen, both in traditional masks, mime their actions in a manner reminiscent of folk drama, or *madang-guk*, while Horatio gives voice very dramatically and beautifully to the characters. I would add that the evocation of older traditions here clearly befits the linguistic mode of the play-within-the-play in Shakespeare. However, the feel of the aesthetic rightness of this scene ultimately derives from the fact that the style does not try simply to replicate traditional modes, but integrates those modes into a still recognizably modern aesthetic. The costumes and music, for example, evoke traditional forms but depart from them. Here, authenticity is indeed "performative"; aesthetic fitness to a moment of performance, not fidelity to a tradition, defines authenticity in a way that is inevitably tautological, as anything that is self-authenticating can only be. In the event, after the first sequence, Hamlet plays the role of Lucianus and speaks his own lines, though in a mask, and violently kills the Player King by stabbing him with a knife in the ear. The Player King writhes but continues now as the ghost of the Player King, and, with Hamlet, re-enacts the scene of their encounter that we saw at the beginning of the play itself. However, the grave remains closed throughout it all: the dead Player King simply transitions into the ghost, while Hamlet, having shed the mask of Lucianus, essentially plays himself. Further, after Hamlet mimes the process of possession, he again speaks the lines he had earlier spoken, but Horatio, again as narrator, gives voice to the words of the ghost – to the authentic absent text. At this point, the necessary information gets revealed and shared, if retroactively, and thus different spectatorial perspectives align. Because the grave remains closed, however, it is as though, at least in this dramatic representation, Horatio usurps the ghostly figure of Shakespeare in the guise of a *sori-kkun*, the narrator bard of *pansori*. Put another way, a contemporary figure rooted in Korean history takes over the narrative function from the ghost of Shakespeare.

Tellingly, Youn-taek Lee gives special attention to Horatio as a central figure in the drama. Taking a cue from Hamlet's admiration for Horatio for not being "passion's slave" (3.2.72), Lee highlights Horatio's special ability to maintain a "distance"³² from the action, in both the plays s/he enacts and within the fiction. This posture affiliates her with a "court jester" and a "poet" (199), both of whom use their distance to tell the truth about their worlds. In this, s/he also resembles a shaman in that a shaman experiences possession and gives full dramatic voice to the spirit, but remains unperturbed after the possession passes. Hence, though Lee traces the roots of Horatio-like narrators back, for example, to a Greek chorus, it

is clear that Horatio also stands as a figure for Lee himself – the Korean dramatist who can be possessed by Shakespeare but who can also remain authentic to himself.

The figure of Horatio can be contrasted with those who die from different forms of possession. After the play-within-the-play, Hamlet becomes more and more unhinged. Not only does he kill Polonius unwittingly in a manic fit, but he also kills, in this production, both Rosencrantz and Guildenstern on the way to England, one by repeated stabbing (which recalls the killing of the Player King by Lucianus) and the other by strangulation. In his continual attempt to appease the ghost, Hamlet becomes even more discomposed and in need of purification. Of course Ophelia goes mad and drowns. Possession by the force that comes through the grave leads, in this production, to madness and destruction. But that is not the only possession in this production. As Lee notes himself, characters are also possessed by something in this world – “worldly desire” (198). Indeed, this more mundane and figurative possession leads to torment in the afterlife and the inability to complete the journey to the other world. Worldly desire initiates, that is to say, the perturbation that afflicts the afterlife and motivates the perturbed spirit to possess the living. This desire most visibly afflicts Claudius, of course, who murders his brother for power and seeks to possess the bodies of not only Gertrude but also Ophelia. Gertrude herself is portrayed as overcome with desire, often but not exclusively figured in some way as sensual in nature. The desire for vengeance undoes Laertes. Fortinbras, whose voice booms overhead as he claims his “rights” in the kingdom (5.2.389) at the play’s end, will simply perpetuate, the production seems to suggest, the cycle of possession.

Thus it is that after the play proper, a white hemp cloth that resembles a cerement covers the entire stage, and the dead emerge again through the grave to break through a slit in the cloth to “wander”³³ in a ghostly dance in their continuing state of *jeop-shin* on their long and uncertain way to the other world. As a requiem continues to be sung from offstage, Hamlet emerges, and as he makes his way upstage to exit, he turns around and stares at the audience as the lights fade. That stare presumably reminds the audience that the “sad” ghosts of all these souls, as Lee tells us, continue to keep this world “dizzy” (198). One spotlight does remain on, however, and focuses on Horatio, who, by one wing of the stage (which is the space that folk and shaman musicians occupy), sings the final notes of the requiem that has been playing throughout the dance of ghosts. Horatio acts as the final voice of propitiation, underscoring in the end the effort to offer release and catharsis through drama.

Lee’s allusion to Horatio as a “clown” might be considered again in this light. Among the characters who enter the grave during the play, two stand out: the gravediggers, or clowns. As the lights come up in 5.1, we hear singing and see two

skulls being held up by two homespun, and very Korean, bumpkins who stand in the grave. Curiously, the A|S|I|A site gives Shakespeare's song from the scene ("In youth when I did love," 5.1.61), which the gravediggers sing later in the scene. Their song at the outset is as follows (in my inelegant translation):

So sad, the ways of the world, like a dream
 If you go now, when will you come back?
 Everything of the world comes to nothing
 Love, romance, comes to nothing
 Pretty girls, ugly girls, not much difference
 Strip them down and the skulls are the same
 Beautiful, ugly, who can tell?

What's exhilarating as well as poignant is that the gravediggers sing the song in the style of music that accompanies folk play and communal, drunken cheer – the kind of play that might begin with the Korean equivalent of "Laissez les bon temps rouler." As it is in Shakespeare's play, this yoking of oppositions in the gravediggers represents an attitude or even philosophy towards life and death. This attitude contemplates the emptiness that death induces, but also embraces it with cheer. As Lee writes about the gravediggers, death "materializes the tragedy of living," and yet in "our people" (my emphasis), an "optimism" survives that accepts with "playfulness" this "craziness in life" (199). These clowns, as well as the "clown" that is Horatio, are hopeful representations of Koreans. The clowns are the only characters in the production who remove actual soil – red soil that looks fertile – from the grave. This red soil has special meaning for Lee, as seen in what he writes of the stage design that keeps the earthen tomb of Chunma-chong continually in mind. He notes that "as Alexander can become a stopper for a beer barrel, love, truth, and all human feelings become materialized" (201) in their return to earth through death; thus he asks where he can find solace in "living" (201). His answer: "our beautiful soil" itself, for it gives him a sense of "familiarity, peace, and even a warm despair" that makes him want to "love the world even more" (201). That soil embodies not despair and nihilistic pessimism, but the kind of peace that comes with accepting the pain of finitude with cheer and philosophical distance. In this, there is the suggestion that the gravediggers' acceptance of finitude contrasts with the excessive desire that ultimately initiates the cycle of worldly possession and chaos that produces *han*. Finitude here does not mean absolute finality, however, for the grave always remains a permeable portal between this world and the afterworld. In their cheerful attitude towards the grave, the gravediggers illustrate the attitude that looks to "our" soil, laden with the spirituality of shamanistic theosophy, for consolation for the universal



condition of mortality that afflicts even Alexander. That attitude also contains the posture of distance in the production's stand-in for Lee himself – Horatio, the Korean bard who has the philosophical distance to materialize Shakespeare in and on Korean soil, and make drama an authentic vehicle of consolation and release.

* * *

Jung-ung Yang's 2009 *Hamlet* for Yohangza (Myeongdong Theatre, Seoul) picks up where Lee's left off. Yang similarly incorporates *gut* rituals into the production, most visibly in the three sequences listed in the Program Notes: Hamlet's encounter with the ghost, dramatized as a *jinogigut*, which seeks appeasement for a spirit; Ophelia's burial, during which a ritual for those who died by drowning, *sumangut*, is performed; and the end, when a ritual that prepares a person for the afterlife before his death, *sanjinogigut*, is performed for Hamlet as he nears death after the duel. However, as Hyonu Lee has demonstrated, Yohangza's production might be thought of as an extended *gut* that incorporates different varieties of *gut* rather than a play that incorporates *gut* at discrete moments.³⁴ Indeed, at many other moments, shamanistic elements enter the dramatization. When the players enter the play for the first time, they play music from a *gut* that is offered to the guardian spirit of a village. The play-within-the-play is similarly staged as a *gut* with shaman musicians playing. At the start of the closet scene, Gertrude appears with a basin filled with water to perform a ritual in honor of the dead. And this list does not exhaust the ways in which the production comes across as a *gut* performance that happens to follow the narrative thread of *Hamlet*. It is almost as if the production were declaring that it will seek to provide the release that neither the original play nor even Youn-taek Lee's production provides.

I should say at the outset that, compelling as Yohangza's production is, I do not find it as powerful as Street Theatre Troupe's for a simple reason. The production never quite sufficiently establishes the chaotic world of corruption and emptiness evoked in Yang's Notes in the Program, even as a certain excess theatricality in this *Hamlet* makes his suffering seem too much the result of his own predisposition. The production begins, for example, with a somewhat manic version of the "To be or not to be" speech (with Hamlet's white warm-up track suit befitting the feverish delivery) before we have any chance to understand the context in which it is delivered. As the scene continues, Gertrude and Claudius enter in mourning dress, carrying a table to perform a ritual in honor of the 49th day after King Hamlet's death. They end up not speaking any words at all during the scene, however; Claudius's unctuously effective speech ("Though yet of Hamlet"), his political dealings, the exchange between Hamlet and Gertrude – all get cut in favor of Hamlet launching another soliloquy ("Frailty, thy name is woman") from upstage



with ferocious indignation as the ritual gets performed. Given the narrative details about the hasty marriage that the soliloquy provides, we are presumably to distrust what seems a pious and sincere show. Because the scene gets so compressed, we are continually left without a concrete enough sense of the social reality and the ruptured relationships behind Hamlet's extreme state of anger.

A recognizable method to this cutting and compression does exist, however. Opening with "to be or not to be" establishes an emotional crisis in Hamlet without clearly revealing a cause, and thus initiates a process where the cause reveals itself through shamanistic logic. In this logic, the false mourning performed by Gertrude and Claudius raises the possibility that Hamlet's deep perturbation is not only a response to hypocrisy, but is also induced (though unawares to Hamlet) by Old Hamlet's continuing suffering as a ghost because of something rotten in the state of Denmark. It thus follows that immediately after Gertrude and Claudius exit the first scene, shamans in traditionally bright colors enter to perform the *jinogigut* for Hamlet's father, which begins with a festive dance as the shamans chant a song to call back the "poor soul." The shamans then alternately speak in the voice of the departed, intoning, chanting and singing lines that express hope in jubilant and earthy tones and rhythms: "I see you'll release all my *han*," or, embodying the syncretic nature of shamanism, "Buddha, be merciful." However, as one shaman enacts the ghost's journey in the afterlife by slicing through a hemp cloth that's stretched out and held up, she abruptly stops and suffers a paroxysm of possession, symbolizing the ghost's inability to continue that journey towards release. She then delivers lines that echo the ghost's from the play, while other shamans deliver more information about the murder and issue an order of revenge. The *gut* thus partly explains Hamlet's preceding crisis (again, affliction issuing unawares from the ghost's perturbation) but equally importantly provides him with a dramatic motive and establishes the narrative direction for what follows. This entire opening sequence captures the dramatic logic and rhythm that persist through the entire play: a compressed, or distilled, textual moment (a soliloquy, a streamlined dialogue) becomes the occasional cause or motivation for a *gut* or some other shamanistic ritual, which in turn motivates or produces more textual moments in a mutually reinforcing or contrapuntal structure.

Indeed, immediately following the *gut*, Hamlet collapses and kneels in the throes of seeming uncertainty, but concludes by imploring Horatio, "Do not be too surprised if I do some crazy things." The phrase Hamlet uses, 미친 짓, might be translated as "crazy acts," because "acts" captures some of the ambiguity in the Korean; the phrase in this context could refer not only to actions but to strategic play-acting. However, in the subsequent early scenes, Hamlet does not perform any crazy actions but simply acts crazy. Thus, these scenes lead, in the dramatic logic of Yang's production, to another *gut*, more specifically the Pyrrhus scene

with the players. After a raucous and whirling entry (during which *gut* music is played), the players stage the speech about Pyrrhus as something resembling a *gut*, with actors alternately taking on the *sori-kkun* narrator's role, as if possessed by the voice of the characters, while others mime the actions with dramatic, stylized intensity. It is a commonplace of Shakespeare criticism that Pyrrhus serves as a foil to Hamlet in going from hesitation ("Did nothing," 2.2.482) to action ("Now falls on Priam," 2.2.492). In Yohangza's production, the narrative voices serve as a stand-in for the ghost, while the mimed actions reinforce the sense of the ghost's presence and his call for vengeance.

Fittingly for Hamlet, however, the action he chooses in response is another act – the play-within-the-play, which again gets staged as a *gut*: a *sori-kkun* narrator voices the characters in a manner reminiscent of shamans under possession, while the Player King and Queen mime their actions in (beautifully) stylized gestures. In response, both Claudius and Gertrude experience the kind of fear and possession appropriate to encountering a ghost. Claudius eventually prays in a shamanistic style while Gertrude, as noted earlier, appears in her closet performing a ritual in honor of the dead. In this way, once again, textual moments and shamanistic ritual revolve together, motivating and issuing from each other. Dramatically striking as some of the *gut* scenes are, they perform emotional and spiritual work at the expense, sometimes, of the dramatic work that the text performs in establishing the emotional needs that are addressed by those rituals. Put another way, the symbolic work of *gut* forms the spine of the production.

It is nonetheless in this symbolic dimension that I would like to consider the special value of this production. To return to the scene of the *jinogigut* for Old Hamlet, as Hamlet kneels on the ground after the *gut*, he picks up some soil and says, "O earth, help me stand straight." But the earth that he picks up is composed of rice. The stage design is remarkable in this respect. First, illustrations of shaman spirits, or *mushindo*, cover the walls on all sides. These are illustrations that furnish the walls inside the houses or halls of shamans, and thus the stage itself recalls a place of ritual. The stage is a low, rectangular platform covered with straw mats, but a broad border of rice several meters wide surrounds the entire perimeter of the stage. It has been pointed out in connection with this production that rice – Korea's staple food – is Korea's symbol of life as well as a talisman against misfortune.³⁵ Hence, the earth represented on stage becomes both burial ground and a space (like a rice paddy) of regeneration. Even more importantly, given the setting of a ritual space, the combination of a rectangular platform and rice evokes a *che-sa* or other ritual table with rice as an offering.³⁶ What this ultimately suggests is that the play itself – its enactment as a *gut* – serves as a kind of offering to the spirits.

The place evoked by the stage is both an abstract and highly material realization of Korea and its indigenous forms of spirituality. Shakespeare gets transformed into



a radically different form and becomes an instrument – akin to food on a *che-sa* table – of appeasing or releasing the *han* of those souls who live in the eternal or universal dimension envisioned by the indigenous religion of shamanism. As Hamlet lies dying at the play's end, shamans enter and, along with both the dead and living characters, sit Hamlet up and perform a *sanjinogigut*, a ritual for those approaching death to release their sorrow and prepare their way for a state of peace in the afterlife. The living and the spirits of the dead wander together as a community, offering consolation through their participation in the *gut* in a way they were not able to in the chaos of a social reality filled with *han*. It is as though they can now offer each other compassion as they are linked by a shared memory of the hectic reality they experienced together. They all seem to remember that they were at some point filled with corrupt desires and engaged in betrayal. The space in which this occurs is a liminal space, neither here nor there, but somewhere in between two worlds, and permeable to both. This space, once again, is accessible through a ground that acts at once as a burial ground, a fertile field, a yard for play, and a portal to a place of rest. This is the ground where the universal resides. In the production, rice literally composes the ground, defining it as uniquely, authentically Korean.

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In both *Hamlet* productions, the drama of releasing *han* takes place in an eclectically contemporary world that reflects the evolving, hybrid character of social reality in Korea. Even Konglish makes an appearance in Youn-taek Lee's production when Hamlet asks a player (Horatio) for a taste of his quality: "What *repertory* did you bring today," Hamlet actually asks in the Korean, phonetically sounding out the word "repertory." When Jung-ung Yang's Hamlet says to Ophelia, after explaining the "paradox" (3.1.113) of beauty transforming honesty into a bawd, "Such is the world now," he uses an often-repeated phrase among contemporary Koreans to refer with resigned lament to the state of the world today. Shakespeare in translation itself reflects this world: Shakespeare still remains decidedly foreign in today's Korea, and yet that foreignness paradoxically marks it as a part of the cultural fabric of contemporary life. Ironically, then, Shakespeare in translation exemplifies the kind of world that the productions seek spiritual delivery from. In this respect, the effort to locate something authentically and fundamentally Korean in Shakespeare does not so much signal complicit subjugation to Western cultural hegemony as it reveals a desire to recover balance and a deeper center that both productions figure as *our soil*. To continue with the figurative ideas that both productions materialize, only when Shakespeare has been grounded in *our soil* can it offer access to the universal – that spiritual dimension in which the unique history of a national culture exists as a living story.



NOTES

- 1 The phrase “Shakespeare boom” comes from Hyon-u Lee, “Introduction,” *Glocalizing Shakespeare in Korea and Beyond* (Seoul: Dongin Publishing, 2009), 3. For the popularity of *Hamlet* in Korea, see Hyon-u Lee, “Shamanism in Korean *Hamlets*: Exorcising *Han*,” *Asian Theatre Journal*, 28, no. 1 (2011): 104–28.
- 2 Youn-taek Lee, “The Director’s Note: Facing *Hamlet*,” in *Facing Hamlet*, ed. Youn-taek Lee (Kimhae: Doyo Art Books, 2010), 202. The quotation comes from the English translation of Lee’s Korean text, which is also included in the volume. At other points, I will use my own translations, or combine it with variations from other translations that differ slightly, in part because Lee’s text in Korean evolved over the years and thus exists in several different versions.
- 3 Lee, *Hamlet Il-ki* (Miryang: Urigeuk Yeonkooso, 2001), 20, translation quoted from Yeeyon Im, “The Location of Shakespeare in Korea and the Mirage of Interculturality,” *Theatre Journal*, 60, no. 2 (May 2008): 273.
- 4 Im, “The Location of Shakespeare in Korea,” 274.
- 5 Massai, “Defining Local Shakespeares,” in *World-wide Shakespeares: Local Appropriations in Film and Performance*, ed. Sonia Massai (New York: Routledge, 2005), 5.
- 6 Lee, *Facing Hamlet*, 195.
- 7 Program for *Hamlet* (Myeongdong Theatre, Seoul: October 30–November 11, 2009), 5.
- 8 Im, “The Location of Shakespeare in Korea,” 273, quoting Vijay Mishra and Bob Hodge, “What is Post(-)colonialism?” *Textual Practice*, 5, no. 3 (1991): 407.
- 9 “Introduction: Why Shakespeare?” in *Shakespeare in Asia: Contemporary Performance*, eds. Dennis Kennedy and Li Lan Yong (New York: Cambridge UP, 2010), 10.
- 10 L. L. Yong, “Shakespeare and the Fiction of the Intercultural,” in *A Companion to Shakespeare in Performance*, eds. W. B. Worthen and Barbara Hodgdon (Hoboken: Wiley, 2008), 539.
- 11 E. Ng, “Performing Shakespeares: (Dis)locating the Authentic in a Korean Intercultural Dream,” *Shakespeare*, 10, no. 4 (2014), 429.
- 12 L. L. Yong, “Of Spirits and Sundry Other Phenomena in Intercultural Shakespeare: Text and Performance,” *Anglistica*, 15, no. 2 (2011), 48.
- 13 See Lee, “Shamanism,” esp. 104–6.
- 14 *Hamlet* program, 4.
- 15 Lee, *Facing Hamlet*, 198.
- 16 Lee, “Shamanism,” 124.
- 17 Im, “The Location of Shakespeare in Korea,” 269–70.
- 18 For succinct accounts of shamanism in Korea, see Chai-shin Yu and Richard Guisso, eds. *Shamanism: The Spirit World of Korea* (N.p.: Asian Humanities Press, 1988), esp. “An Introduction to Korean Shamanism” and “Shamanism and the Korean World-View.”
- 19 See James Huntley Grayson, *Korea: A Religious History* (New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2002), esp. “Confucianism: The Residue of a Great Tradition” and “*Musok-kyo*: Folk Religion in Modern Society.”
- 20 See Maria K. Seo, *Hanyang Kut: Korean Shaman Ritual Music from Seoul* (New York and London: Routledge, 2002), 52–3.
- 21 *Hamlet* program, 4.
- 22 Lee, *Facing Hamlet*, 201.
- 23 Lee, *Facing Hamlet*, 207.
- 24 G. Blakemore Evans, ed. *The Riverside Shakespeare* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974). All references to Shakespeare will be to this text.

- 25 Lee, *Facing Hamlet*, 195.
26 J. Creutzenberg, "To Be or Not to Be (Korean): Lee Youn-taek's *Hamlet* and the Reception of Shakespeare in Korea," *Shakespeare Seminar*, 7 (2009): 29.
27 Lee, *Facing Hamlet*, 197–8.
28 Lee, *Facing Hamlet*, 197.
29 Creutzenberg, "To Be or Not to Be (Korean)," 33.
30 Lee, *Facing Hamlet*, 197–8.
31 Kim, "Glocalizing Hamlet – A Study of Youn-taek Lee's productions from 1996 to 2005," in *Facing Hamlet*, 101.
32 Lee, *Facing Hamlet*, 199.
33 Lee, *Facing Hamlet*, 198.
34 M. Lee, "Gut and Korean Shakespeare" (in Korean), *Shakespeare Review*, 49, no. 2 (2013): 251.
35 Lee, "Gut," 252.
36 Lee, "Gut," 252.

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