

Kurosawa's Throne of Blood and East Asia's Macbeth

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Abstract: Yuwen Hsiung presents in her paper, "Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood* and East Asia's *Macbeth*," a comparative study between Kurosawa's film *Throne of Blood* and a contemporary Taiwanese play, *Kingdom of Desire*, both of which are adaptations of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. Stepping from Eastern cultural background, both show similar orientation towards the original play, for instance the sizing down of the number of witches and the decreasing of Macbeth's heroic status. Gilles Deleuze's theory of movement image provides an insightful look into Kurosawa's filmology, which emphasizes the interrelatedness of every individual under the same condition. The idea of collectivity could be examined in two ways, diachronically and synchronically: *Kingdom of Desire*, although it resembles *Throne of Blood* in terms of plot, brings our attention back to individuality by focusing on the transformation of the protagonist. Macbeth, the character, would never appeal to the traditional Chinese theater; however, it is made accessible in Chinese culture by centering on individual responsibility towards one's own action.

Yuwen HSIUNG

Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood* and East Asia's *Macbeth*

Akira Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood* made its first debut in 1957. Even though some have criticized the film for being too westernized, it has established itself as the most internationally recognized adaptation of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* not only in terms of Japan but also in terms of East Asia or an even larger geographical area. Needless to say, Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood* remains a profound influence upon later adaptations of *Macbeth*. This legacy might be particularly apparent in East Asian countries that have a cultural closeness to Japan and therefore would interpret the English play in similar ways. Having this in mind, I would compare an adaptation of *Macbeth* entitled *Yuwang chengguo* (Kingdom of Desire) with *Throne of Blood*. *Kingdom of Desire* is a stage performance by Dangdai chuanqi juchang (The Contemporary Legend Theatre) from Taiwan. I choose *Kingdom of Desire* because it not only gains relatively wide international acceptance than others, but it also blends the traditional Beijing opera style beautifully with the modern theatre. In a similar way, Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood* brings traditional Japanese theater, the Noh conventions, into modern film. Keeping in mind that one is film and the other is stage performance, I will compare *Throne of Blood* and *Kingdom of Desire* to show how each envisions *Macbeth* from a particular cultural orientation. My discussion on *Kingdom of Desire* will be primarily based on its book publication in 2000, which includes script, stage directions, critical reviews, and many photos of the original performance. I focus on the role of the witch in order to argue that the heroic status of Macbeth in both works has been decreased considerably but in opposite ways. *Throne of Blood* asserts an experience of collectivity, whereas *Kingdom of Desire* shifts our attention back to individuality, like the original Shakespeare play. What they have in common is the Buddhist idea of relinquishing secular ambition and desire; otherwise, we lead ourselves into self-destruction and fall into a ceaseless, vicious circle of nothing.

The Contemporary Legend Theatre, which flourished during the later years in the 1980s, is one of the leading theatrical troupes in Taiwan. It has distinguished itself from all the other troupes for its special artistic approaches. Contemporary Legend Theatre attempts to incorporate some particular elements from the traditional Beijing opera, such as certain ways of speaking, singing, and performing, and especially acrobatics. This troupe not only makes the traditional more accessible, but also brings a new atmosphere to the multiplicity of contemporary Taiwanese theatre. Hsing-kuo Wu, the founder as well as the director of this troupe, exerts a shaping influence on the theater company. Many of their performances are adaptations of Western dramas, especially Shakespearean plays. Another famous adaptation is *Revenge of the Prince*, based on *Hamlet*. The most recent one is *King Lear*, in which Wu, as an actor himself, not only plays King Lear but also the fool. So we can see that the significance of Wu to this troupe also lies in his being the leading character in most of the plays. Needless to say, in *Kingdom of Desire* he plays the role of General Aw as Macbeth.

Historically, Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood* came in 1957 and *Kingdom of Desire* was first performed in 1986, some thirty years after. Because Kurosawa's film had become such a landmark in Taiwan's theatrical circles, *Kingdom of Desire* resembles *Throne of Blood* quite extensively in terms of plot. We can even argue that *Kingdom of Desire* is an adaptation of Kurosawa's film rather than Shakespeare's play. However, because it is a stage performance like Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, *Kingdom of Desire* shares some similarities with the original in terms of theatrical qualities, for instance, the opening scene features witches but also comic relief. As a result, we might claim that *Kingdom of Desire* comes closer to *Macbeth* than *Throne of Blood* does. Historical background has to be carefully scrutinized when we translate a text from one culture into another. The time setting in *Throne of Blood* is sixteenth-century Japan, a period called *gekoku-jo* ("overthrown-by-underlings"), when the moral order started to get dissolved. Daisetz Suzuki reminds us of the traditional Japanese idea of a warrior: "Zen is indeed the religion of the samurai warrior" (84). Samurais believed in the Zen ideas of loyalty and sacrificing one's life for a worthy cause. Hence a treacherous warrior like Macbeth would be inconceivable in this early period of

Japan. The sixteenth century, when the plot is set, was, however, the beginning of a feverous period leading to turmoil and eventual downfall. *Throne of Blood* illustrates this period. The lord before Washizu and Washizu both commit illicit killings in order to get the throne and they themselves die in struggles for power. Although some scholars see new trouble brewing at the end of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, in general it seems that Seward's forces are going to establish a new and unified sovereignty. *Throne of Blood* picks up Shakespeare's hint of irresolution because the film ends with a marching troop, which indicates that more fighting and killing would come even will follow the death of Washizu.

Kingdom of Desire sets the play in the period of the Three Kingdoms (220-277) in Chinese history. It is also a period of political degeneration, after the stability and unity of the Han Dynasty. The country is separated into three main kingdoms and will be divided into more for another long period of time. After quelling a rebellion in the country, General Aw (Macbeth) and General Meng (Banquo) meet the mountain ghost on route back for court. Their official positions are then promoted by the emperor, just as the mountain ghost prophesies. Aw's title changes from general to prime minister. Meng's decedents are promised power. In addition to the cutting off the second half of the play drastically, as *Throne of Blood* does, *Kingdom of Desire* adopts some significant and similar changes in plot. For instance, Kurosawa's Asaji cautions Washizu against the credibility of Miki and schemes for the killing of the lord. In *Kingdom of Desire*, Lady Aw (Lady Macbeth) similarly arouses Aw's disbelief in Meng, too. The relationship between Aw and Meng is further linked by their sworn brotherhood. Another resemblance is that between Asaji and Lady Aw. In both cases their pregnancy fuels the necessity of killing of Miki or Meng and accelerates hallucinations. Aw, like Washizu, is shot to death by multiple arrows fired by his own troops, instead of fighting with Macduff in the field as Macbeth does. After the moving forest quickly covers the whole stage, the play ends with the wild laughter of the mountain ghost while the curtain falls.



Witches have always been a question asked of *Macbeth*. Some scholars attempt to explain witchcraft by way of history. Garry Wills even suggests that the staging of witches as well as the necromancy scene (4.1) delighted theater goers interested in the supernatural during Renaissance. Others read more symbolic meaning into the role of witches. Terry Eagleton sees the witch figures as the unconscious, subversive force in the play; Peter Stallybrass associates witchcraft with female rule, which leads to killing and confusion, and therefore is eventually suppressed by the patriarchal order. These same interpretations fit *Throne of Blood* and *Kingdom of Desire*, but they become more complicated when transferred to Asian ways of thinking. The role of witches allows us make certain generalizations, in particular about how attitude toward what it means to be human illustrates a hermetical difference between ideas about collectivity and individuality. Neither

the Japanese nor Chinese perspectives allow multiple witches. Rather than a collective group dedicated to malevolent acts against humans, Kurosawa's film and the Taiwan theater present figures closer to the shamans in East Asian culture, who function between the human world and nature. These shamans practice witchcraft like witches, but their status is that of intermediary between the human community and the laws of nature; they are not, of themselves, makers of discord and disharmony. The adaptations therefore size the number of witches down to one, and also change the role of witch into that of a forest spirit in *Throne of Blood* and a mountain ghost in *Kingdom of Desire* while retaining the suggestion that they control human affairs. The archetype of Kurosawa's forest spirit is probably the Noh play, called *Kurozuka* (Black Tomb), which depicts the encounter of a traveling monk with a demon in the guise of an old woman, spinning on her wheel.

Many critics attribute the success of *Throne of Blood* to its borrowing Noh conventions, and the connection between Noh and the film is apparent, since Kurosawa himself reveals his deep appreciation for this special type of performing arts and mentions the use of masks as well as the traditional Noh story particularly in the scene of forest spirit. But should the forest spirit in *Throne of Blood* be essentially evil in light of the original story, where the demon eventually eats the travelers? In his thorough analysis of the meeting between Washizu, Miki, and the forest spirit, Jack Jorgens draws a link between the forest spirit and Nature by concluding that the forest spirit is "an embodiment of an ironic, amoral Nature" and Nature itself, like the forest spirit, "is neither benign nor harmonious, but amorphous, changing shape, sex, and tone" (170). Following Jorgen's idea that forest spirit is neither good nor evil, we must ask why the forest spirit appears herself in front of Washizu and Miki. The answer to why a neutral spirit should appear to the two warriors can be seen by looking at the sequence of shots in the film. This sequence suggests that it is the unbalanced relationship between nature and men that gives rise to this encounter. Before we see the forest spirit, we hear a lord propose to use the Cobweb Forest as a weapon and we see Washizu and Miki's shooting arrows at the forest to carve their way out. It is men's misuse of the Forest and their empty arrogance in their own power over the Forest that brings out the forest spirit, its guardian spirit. It may be that the moving of the Forest to the castle symbolizes the power of nature over man in the end, but I agree with Peter Donaldson that Washizu's enemy uses the Forest as "a cultural artifact planted as a weapon of defense" (72). The trees are, in fact, cut down to cover human ambition, expelling the ravens and even the forest spirit from where they belong. Eventually humanity and nature should have returned to harmony, however, what we see in the film's first and final scenes are not only the disappearance of humans but also the barrenness of the land.



Like *Macbeth*, *Kingdom of Desire* begins with the supernatural, but like *Throne of Blood*, it transforms the agent, in this case to a figure called the mountain ghost. According to the stage directions, first, a high-pitched sound of *hu-qin* (Chinese violin) blasts out of the open, then a series of rapid drum bits indicates a war going on before the curtain rises. The stage curtain, which did not exist in the traditional theatre and a clear import from Western drama, is adopted in *Kingdom of Desire*. Normally, the actor would get to his position or leave the stage in his particular movement according to the beats of the percussion. The first scene is particularly important in the traditional theatre, because the first character on the stage is responsible for *bao jia men*, a special term used by Chinese theatre. It literally means to report your family. After reciting a short poem, the character is supposed to not only identify oneself, but also give a brief introduction in the opening scene of the play. This is the function of the mountain ghost. She states: "I am the spirit of the mountain. Because the fire of Ji's (country name) civil war is going to be ceased, tomorrow, General Aw will return to the palace. This forest will he pass by. I shall wait for his arrival to make fun of him. Behold!

The wind blows; the rain shouts; the light flashes; the thunder cracks. Let me take the cloud, ride the thunder-blast, pass the dark, and cross the light. This is what's on my mind. This is what's on my mind ... he" (22; my translation, here and elsewhere). So she begins by telling about herself and what she intends to do afterwards. This introduction not only makes the audience aware that what is being presented is a performance but also turns the attention of the audience to the transition that the main character is going to experience. Although we do not find ghosts in traditional Chinese theatre, it is common, especially in the beginning of short novels, for a ghost to play tricks, whether light or serious, upon humans. In the particular historical background of the Three Kingdoms, the lack of order in the human world easily conjures up the force of the supernatural, the negative force in nature. Moreover, the mountain spirit was also associated with the kind of abnormal weather that begins Shakespeare's play. As Garry Wills explains the opening storm scene in *Macbeth* as "not just a matter of stage atmospherics or dramatic imagery. It is the necessary condition of the witches' abnormal activity by day" (54). We find the same association in *Kingdom of Desire*. In addition to her special function in the opening scene, the mountain spirit's symbolic meaning is embodied in her image and body movement. First of all, the degree of white on the face indicates the degree of evilness. The mountain spirit's face is painted white, as is Aw's face before his death. Moreover, each hand gesture has its designated meaning and varies according to the identity of the character. The basic hand gesture of a female role is called "open hand," with the third finger and thumb lightly touching each other. The much opener "open hand" symbolizes that something is "lacking." Here the suggestion is that the political ruler has lost control and also that there is a lack of controlling power over one's own behavior. These ritual gestures suggest a crisis in the individual's relation to the collective, a crisis that is also present in Washizu's reaction to the supernatural.

The reaction of Washizu and Aw to the supernatural illustrates how Asian directors find cultural equivalents, in theater and cinema, for the language and sentiments of Shakespeare's play. *Macbeth* is theatrical script, of course, and its concepts must be given equivalents. According to Gilles Deleuze language gives rise to concepts and "Concepts are the images of thought" (xi). These concepts, not simply actions or language, determine the narrative structure of a film, by which Deleuze means its sequence of shots, or montage. Deleuze characterizes two different modes of image movement. In one case the camera focuses on one individual and then moves on to a broader frame that contains the individual. The second reverses this process: "One does not move from an unknown woman to the givens capable of determining her: one starts off from all the givens, and one moves down from them to mark the limits within which the unknown is contained" (188). *Throne of Blood* illustrates this second procedure. The film begins with a long prelude, a barren and waste land. No forest is in sight. There is chanting, and the camera lingers to show the scattered ruins of walls, perhaps the ruins of a castle. The camera then moves a little further down the slope. Through the mist, a deserted memorial statue is found. A fairly close shot is used to show the characters on the wood statue one by one: *Zhi-zhu-chao-cheng-zhi* ("the historical site of the Spiderweb Castle"). After this long exposition -- a distinct characteristic Deleuze detects in Kurosawa's films -- Spiderweb Castle finally reveals itself. Nevertheless, the sight of the inside of the castle is not available for the viewers directly. It is by way of the desperate messenger's repeated knocks on the gate door that we find a group of people sitting inside the limits of the castle. Through all these givens in the beginning, the shot zooms in on the specific. The givens, Deleuze states, "must be a complete exposition, are not simply those of the situation" (189). Thus, we have to pay attention to both Washizu and the whole community, who are enwrapped within the same condition, which is exposed at the beginning, before any individual appears. Consequently it is important to observe how everyone involves and revolves around the challenge thrown down by the forest spirit.

Who is influenced by the riddled prophecy? Is it just Washizu? Richie suggests that there is a contrast between Washizu and Miki through the emblems they carry on their backs. He observes that, "Washizu's banner carries the totemic emblem of the predatory centipede; the flag of the innocent Mike holds a rabbit" (120). However, I will suggest that this difference is blurred after the two men meet the forest spirit in the woods. Miki's eagerness to know his future is no less than

Washizu's. Miki refrains Washizu from stopping the forest spirit after she spins out Washizu's future, in hope of getting a hint of the future for himself. If their cracking down the hut indicates an entering into another dimension as Peter Donaldson suggests in "Surface and Depth," then both of them are there. Both Washizu and Miki cross into the space full of desire and death. Contrasted as they might have been from the different characteristics represented by the emblems of centipede and rabbit, they show the same ambition. After meeting the forest spirit, they are no longer seen with the banners. No matter how different they are before, they share the same destiny: death, because each of them falls for the prophecy, falls for his selfish desire. Although Miki does not have bloodstains on his hands, he countenances Washizu's succession to the crown because of their secret deal that Miki's son will be Washizu's heir. Like a touch on the surface of water that propagates, waves the prophecy, will not stop at Washizu. Every line is interconnected, as the image of the spider web suggests.

In addition to the effect on Miki, we can detect the influence on Washizu's troops in terms of a synchronic connection. Two instances particularly disclose the influence. Washizu moves to another castle twice. The first castle he moves to is the North Castle, his reward for success in the battle. The second one is the Spiderweb Castle, where he replaces the lord. Each time he moves, we see a scene of his men chatting to one another. In the first gathering of Washizu's troops in the North Castle, they discuss how life is relatively comfortable in the new place. The second time, in the Spiderweb Castle they ridicule the shallowness of the North Castle down the hillside. Up on the hill, they are in the position higher than before. Their attitude changes as they get more and more tempted by the worldly power. The various castles in *Macbeth*, according to Charles Ross in *The Custom of the Castle*, can eventually be purged of the sins and behaviors of the humans who inhabit them: "Macbeth's castles, once haunted by foul crimes, stand open to new master, new customs" (119). Similarly, in *Throne of Blood* castles become the image of human ambition itself. So we see the troops becoming more and more ambitious when they move to a higher-positioned castle. Also, in the beginning of the film, the lord and his councils prefer sticking to the castle till death rather than coming out of the castle to fight the enemy. Therefore, men's pertinence to the castles is shown here, and castles, in turn, become inseparable from men's destiny. That is Washizu's castle does not remain in the end, except as a ruin, yet that ruin is intimately connection to the fate of those who inhabit it. By contrast, a castle is just one property in *Kingdom of Desire*, a static sign that is only important for its position. It does not function as a symbol of social behavior but of the individual, although these functions are really two sides of the same coin. The generals in *Kingdom of Desire* are rewarded with higher positions, and the emperor is willing to desert the castle at any minute and would have fled to the other castle for protection if he were not afraid of being looked down as a coward, whereas in *Throne of Blood*, they are rewarded with a different castle as a sign of the change in their official position.



The castles in *Throne of Blood* operate diachronically as signs of the continuity of killing. Asaji (Lady Macbeth) rationalizes killing by referring to the impropriety of her victim, who obtained his throne by murder too. History repeats itself when Washizu is shot to death by his own troops rather than by his enemies. The killing would not end at the death of Washizu. One killing leads to another in a way that is cinematically rendered, as Ana Zambrano points out, the a forbidden room in the castle: "By placing Washizu and his wife in a room which bears signs of death and treachery, Kurosawa foreshadows Tsuzuki's murder and implies that Washizu and Asaji have also fallen under the influence of this treachery, thus strengthening the film's supernatural tone" (269). I might not go so far to explain the influence as "supernatural," but I do think that it is precisely the invisible connection of evilness in the community that Kurosawa makes it visible before our eyes. What is "supernatural" is the unstoppable repetition of killing and the insatiable desire of human beings. It is this danger of collective mentality that Kurosawa warns us against when, almost without explanation, he shows Asaji dancing abruptly, as in *Noh*, in the forbidden room while Washizu kills the lord. Following Zambrano's referring the forbidden room as the sign of "death and treachery" (269), Asaji's dance could be regarded as the actualization of that influence. During that scene, we see Asaji in a medium shot that focuses closely on her facial expression. She sits with her back to the wall but turns her head back twice to peek at the stain on the wall. Something seizes her attention there. Suddenly, the percussive *Noh* music starts as she draws herself to the wall and dances. Finally the shot rests on her close and attentive look at the bloodstain. She kneels down before the wall as if she succumbs herself to the power of past treachery. She is less an individual than a victim of social customs and the ways of warriors.



Rather than illustrating collective guilt, *Kingdom of Desire* emphasizes the idea of individuality, of one person's response to a set of social conditions. Like *Throne of Blood*, *Kingdom of Desire* is set in a situation of decay and warfare, but it stresses the theme of individuality by depicting Macbeth as a character, as in traditional Chinese theatre, and in the way it structures his transformation. In Chinese culture, theatre is directly linked to people's everyday lives. Its impact upon audience feeling is considered to be of practical value and importance. Therefore moral lessons are straight forward in every traditional play. The distinction between a hero and a villain is clear, not to mention any abnormal mental condition should occur to a hero, because a good man is believed to be essentially different from an evil one. More often than not, only heroes could be the main characters. Afraid of arousing ambiguous response, a figure like Macbeth, is not unconceivable, but unacceptable traditionally. In Shakespeare's play, Macbeth's moral character is ambiguous and Shakespeare has him come on stage relatively late, for example, to stress his social situation. *Kingdom of Desire* manages to give its Macbeth figure, Aw, a sense of individuality by the way it focuses on his transformation. I will explore this change of Aw in three scenes: the meeting with the mountain ghost, the banquet

scene, and Aw's death scene.

Both General Aw and General Meng appear in the image of *wu-sheng* (a warrior). They dress in thick costumes and heavy armor, with four flags on their back, signifying their high position in the military. Upon their meeting with the mountain ghost, their reaction is different from that of Washizu and Miki in *Throne of Blood*. The mountain ghost equally prophecies each one's future; however Meng is able to pull himself out of the mire by saying to Aw, "General, why shall we get angry at her. If we are frank, a laugh at this would be enough" (37; my translation). Their different responses to the same situation not only reveal the differences in their natures but also

foreshadow what they do next. That is why the mountain ghost tells to Aw and Meng: "The moment between one move and one pause determines your future" (37). Aw moves. Haste and impatience is always negative in Chinese thinking. After Aw succeeds to the position of emperor, his costume is changed into that of *lao-sheng* (an old man), for he possesses more power now. His



hat, with beaded curtains in the front and back ring, symbolizes his position. During the banquet scene, a three-mask dance is performed. The three masks not only make visible the sharp comparison between each stage of Aw's transformation but also foretell the destiny of Aw, as the dancer reveals the last face, a face painted white as Aw shall be in the future. This focus on Aw's individuality is not only shown by a change in imagery but also by the changes in his relationships with Meng and Lady Aw. Aw becomes more and more isolated and distant from other characters. Unlike Miki, Meng does not assume any complicity in Aw's crime. What makes Aw's killing Meng worse is their sworn brotherhood, which is considered sacred traditionally. So Aw not only discredits trust, upon which friendship builds, but also his own vows. As to the relationship between Aw and Lady Aw, Lady Aw precipitates Aw's action in the beginning. However, as Lady Aw more and more hallucinates, Aw distances himself away from her. Washizu relies on the support from Asaji, but Aw counts more and more upon himself. He becomes more arrogant than before. His addressing to himself changes from *wo* to *gu* (from I to an addressing of a king to himself), and towards the end he uses, from time to time, *an*, a reflexive of vulgarity and conceit. His increasing isolation and evilness is symbolized by the white paint on his face until at last he looks as white as the mountain ghost.

The historical transition from *Throne of Blood* to *Kingdom of Desire* may be due, in part, to a shift away from the social feelings of collective guilt felt in Japan in the early 1950s to the capitalist focus on individual responsibility that characterizes, to whatever extent, later Taiwanese society. The result of this shift from the collective to the individual is, arguably, is a more positive feeling. To conclude my study, I take one last scene as an example to explore that whether Kurosawa provides us any way out of the mire of collectivity. Few audiences will fail to remember the death scene of Washizu, especially when the fatal shot of the arrow transfixing his neck stops him shouting. The frame is frozen for a second, no movement seen, no sound heard. Although too late, Washizu finally comes to understand himself and the situation he faces. Clumsily he steps down the stairs and stands before his men. Many critics argue that Washizu attempts to fight with those who killed him by drawing his sword. On the contrary, I think that because he has a sudden realization, he actually seeks to commit *hara kiri* (suicide for samurais). Like the brave samurai he once was, he hopes to achieve his own integrity in accordance with the samurai code of honor. Here, ultimately, Kurosawa blurs the lines between the collective code and the individual, and it is this blurring that the Taiwanese theater may have found so ultimately attractive. Representing Shakespeare's ambiguity rather than a Western notion of tragedy, in which a man essentially no better or worse than we are is undone by his own best qualities, the Asian versions of *Macbeth* draw on and twist their cultures' codes of heroism. But the final effect is quite different. Shakespeare's *Macbeth* fights with the enemy to death, whereas both Washizu and Aw are killed by their own men. This dramatically decreases the heroic status of both of them. Judging from the closed form of this film, Kurosawa does not provide any answer as to how to be a hero free from the vicious circles imposed by society. Richie concludes that "for Kurosawa, the pattern of repetition is destructive and it is this pattern which his free heroes attempt to destroy" (115). But

the Chinese believe that good will be rewarded with good, and evil with evil. The stress on individuality in *Kingdom of Desire* allows a way out of the problems of performing a play like *Macbeth*. Although in *Throne of Blood* it seems there is no escape from the collectivity and repetition as implied by Kurosawa, *Kingdom of Desire* suggests that justice has to be done to the individual who cannot hold himself together.

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