

Intermedial Representations in Asian Macbeth-s

I-Chun Wang

*National Sun Yat-sen University*

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**I-Chun Wang,**

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**Ed. Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek, Asunción López-Varela,  
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**Abstract:** In her article "Intermedial representations in Asian *Macbeth-s*" I-Chun Wang discusses three Asian versions of Macbeths that exemplify the cultural meanings through the interaction of landscape, body, and spectacles of power. Shakespeare remains one of the most popular playwrights in the Eastern world, and playwrights in the Asian world find Shakespearean plays attractive to the Asian audience. Among Shakespearean plays, *Macbeth* fascinates its Asian audience with its theme on kingship, territory of social relationships as well as moral and emotional development. These adaptations oftentimes become cross-cultural reproductions because each adapted text manifests not only cross-cultural interpretations but also highlights the ways that Shakespeare is read by audiences in other cultures. By probing into the meanings of spectacle and symbolic representations of landscape, I-Chun Wang analyzes how Asian directors, such as Akira Kurosawa, Vishal Bharadwaj, and Xing-guo Wu highlight cultural meanings of power struggle and territory through intermediality.

**I-Chun WANG**

### **Intermedial Representations in Asian *Macbeth*-s**

Shakespeare remains one of the most popular playwrights in the Eastern world (see, e.g., Chang; Huang; Hsieng). Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield note that the value of reproducing Shakespeare lies not only in the exchange of cultural authority between the text and the reproductions of Shakespearean plays but also in the projected delivery of cultural meanings (216). When Shakespeare is introduced to the audience of other parts of the world, the adaptations oftentimes become cross-cultural reproductions and this manifests not only cross-cultural interpretations but also highlights the ways that Shakespeare is read by audiences in other cultures. Once imbued with local cultures, the adaptations help illuminate in a cognitive process the universal meanings in Shakespeare. Claudia Strauss and Naomi Quinn postulate that humans interpret matters according to their inter- and extra-personal experiences (5-6) and Clifford Geertz stresses that the meanings of culture are shared intersubjectively and that social relations are determined by the interactions of cultural, social structural relations, and personal systems (*The Interpretation of Cultures* 10-3). When a writer or director adapts Shakespearean plays to cinema or to stage, he/she tends to capture the local symbolic or cultural patterns by representing the relations between landscapes and the body; landscape connotes territory and the body represents the agents implementing the desire. Geertz notes that public elements construct the meanings of culture (*The Interpretation of Cultures* 13); therefore, the landscapes and bodies as represented in the adapted visual productions provide not only cultural interpretations but also cultural transformation. The emotion lying behind these adapted works, however, helps construct new meanings to the spectacles of power originally propounded by Shakespeare. Following a brief theoretical discussion, in my article I discuss several Asian adaptations of *Macbeth* and postulate that these adaptations not only reinforce Shakespeare's universal themes but also restructure the representation of power from Asian perspectives. Further, I discuss the cultural meanings as represented in the three versions of *Macbeth* and analyze how the three Asian versions of *Macbeth* exemplify the cultural meanings through the interaction of landscape, body, and spectacles of power.

Shakespeare's *Macbeth* opens with thunder and lightning as three witches come into agreement that they will meet again to greet Macbeth. The witches make prophesy, hailing Macbeth as Thane of Glamis, Thane of Gower, and later "King hereafter." The prophecy of the witches is fulfilled when soldiers encamping in Birnam Wood camouflage themselves as they move, leaving slaughtered bodies scattered in the wilderness; it is a scene evoking both the loneliness of the castle and Macbeth's ruthless desire for power. The power in this play refers to not only sovereignty but also territory. Shakespeare's construction of the spectacle of power mingles with space and entangles both body and desire, bespeaking the truth that irrationality brings doom. In Asian theater, power struggle juxtaposing inner desire is a recurrent theme. Perhaps for this reason, represented by the body, landscape, and desire for power via cultural symbols, *Macbeth* became one of the most adapted plays in Asian countries and in each reproduction the protagonist Macbeth is represented in various media with local cultural perspectives. The localization of Shakespeare helps to establish a visual and cultural connection with the audience (Marcus 23); hence, watching reproductions of *Macbeth* becomes not only a process of visualizing the transformations but also a process of cognition of the tragic flaw of Macbeth in a local cultural context. Shakespeare through such mediation not only reinforces the practice of intermediality but also makes cultural translation possible.

The stage in the English Renaissance is characterized by the construction of images and spectacles where ideology behind the word "spectacle" is constructed and understood by the audience (Strong 1-12). Through the spectacle and its visual presentation the events, objects, or persons serve as a form of mediation between the eye and the sense of the spectator. Christopher Pye refers to the representation of political force as being connected to the power of visibility where the vulnerability and the terrifying power of the king's visible presence are inseparable (85). The core essence of the spectacle lies not only in the penetrating power of the "regal eye," but also in the theatrical symbol that the king represents. In the imperial ages, the spectacle of the king might inspire terror and awe (Pye 85-86). Stephen Greenblatt also argues that "invincible authority depends upon the privileged visibility" (57),

because the spectacle of power, through the gaze of the viewers, bestows its strength on the sovereign's legal prestige. Ernst Kantorowicz refers sovereignty to the king's metaphoric "body politic" (1-10) and Pye asserts that political mastery functions through spectacle: "the visible power" is sure to "frame their wills" (90). The spectacle is a prominent theatrical technique for early modern visual arts, particularly the courtly masque (i.e., a courtly form of dramatic spectacle; Goldberg 252). The spectacle is manifested in the theater of Shakespeare, Ben Jonson, and Inigo Jones, and the fashion lasted through the seventeenth century. The spectacle created by Jones is comprised of painting, architecture, mechanics, lighting, acting, choreography, dancing, and even music. Spectacle or scenic management becomes a way of visual representation that intermediates with spectacular imagery necessary for plot, action, and other substance of drama. Although body movement and scenery are the center of the spectacle, the function of intermediality through spectacle lies in its effectiveness of scenery and the process of cognition that signifies the role of the figure. Shakespeare's spectacle in *Macbeth* puts the protagonist at the center of audience's gaze, but adapted versions of *Macbeth* — through intertexts and intermedia — problematize Macbeth's political desire and emotional entanglement. Namely, the strategy of spectacle widely used in the early modern era, once captured in adapted versions, facilitates communication between the original text and its modern reproduction. Shakespeare's scenes of lightning and thunder, witches, ghosts, and apparitions together with the sleep-walking, and the final spectacle with "drumme and colours, enter Malcolme, Seyward, Macduffe, and their army with boughs" (V.iv) foreshadow the downfall of the transgressive hero. Macbeth's fear and his sleeplessness are the most significant motifs of the play. Macbeth's tortured body and his guilt for his own transgressive behavior are reinforced through the spectacle of the ghost. As a king — the center of power — Macbeth is supposed to be the focus of the spectacle and his image is supposed to draw the attention of those around him. However, the spectacle of the ghost demonstrates not only the failure of the monarch, but also generates a new fear — a process of cognition — for the audience. As Phyllis Rackin notes, the king was associated with the sun (268); the sunset was a typical image symbolizing death, adumbrating Macbeth's crime, his irrationality, and the disorder. The analogy between the rightful king and the sun in Shakespeare is a concept related to the concept of divine power. The framework of the story is based on the simple plot of Holinshed's *Chronicle of England, Scotland and Ireland* — "a Scottish thane Macbeth killed the King Duncane and the king's son Malcolme Cammore took revenge for his father and destroyed Macbeth" (Draper 207), but Shakespeare's play has manifested the trend of theatrical employment of the spectacle during the reign of King James. As Williams explains, the spectacular stage effect with the pageant of eight kings reinforces the fact that Macbeth is the one that committed treason (16-19), which means that Macbeth has violated the power of the king. His desire for imperial power encompasses every possibility of reaching beyond his assigned territory. The spectacle, visualizing the king's body, sleepwalking, the moving trees, and the downfall of Macbeth all reinforce the subtle relations between cultural codes. Such relations, as Asunción López-Varela and Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek contend, helps construct social values through cognitive patterns (77; see also Kattenbelt). In this sense, even when these cultural codes are represented in a cross-cultural context and educational function, cultural translation is achieved through intermediality.

The twentieth century witnessed televised cinematic mediation which produced a new type of awe and wonder, although the early modern concept of the spectacle does not fade away. It is worth noticing that the spectacle with cultural codes has been used by Asian directors interested in the theme of power struggle. As Geertz argues, the spectacle on stage bears dimensions of culture which include religion, politics, and a normative mode of personal conduct (*Negara* 98-110, *Interpretation of Cultures* 365-73). More importantly, the spectacle helps transform the relationship between art and the mundane world. Motion, human experience, or any other specific matter stressed by the director of either film or theater, gives primacy to visual sensory and symbolic codes (MacAloon 243). In the early modern world, the spectacle is almost equivalent to ritual. Through the spectacle, society affirms its wisdom and asserts its control of the world; therefore, the spectacle becomes a public display of a society's central meaningful elements, through parades, festivals, court performances, or even torture and execution. In this sense, the spectacle helps externalize psychological complexity. Although Jean Baudrillard claims that we are no longer in the society of the spectacle (21), the spectacle employed in

cinemas and on modern stage has brought new interpretations to drama and performance. By reinforcing the image of the transgressive body of Macbeth, theatre provides a cognitive paradigm that signifies collective experiences of transgressing the order of society.

Shakespeare is universal and the cultural meanings of Shakespeare transcend boundaries because modern reproductions of Shakespeare try to capture the collective cultural symbols represented in his drama. In most of the reproductions of *Macbeth*, the transgressive body and desire of Macbeth, as well as the gloomy landscape or the disordered tend to be the foci. Richard Courtney suggests that the deep level in *Macbeth* is based on the dialectical pattern of chaos and order and although Macbeth might be dressed differently, its dramatic progress, "a form of metaphoric and metonymic reasoning," provides a "holistic meaning" (Courtney 62-63). The desire for power, repressed emotions, and dichotomies of human behavior frame the core elements of *Macbeth*. Among the most important twentieth-century reinterpretations of *Macbeth* through the construction of the spectacle is Kurosawa's 1964 *Throne of Blood*. While in *Throne of Blood* plotlines from Shakespeare's text are retained, the film is noted for its indebtedness to the formal aspects of highly stylized Noh plays (Diamond 118). The spectacles that Kurosawa represents include landscape, bodies, ghosts, horses, and "moving forests." Kurosawa sets his film in a period of wartime when two generals, Washizu and Miki, are enchanted in the mist and come across a Forest Spirit. Piles of human bones foretell the tragedies of power struggles and the consequences of regicide. The fog in the forest signifies the labyrinth they will encounter and the eventual loss of their physical and moral strengths by burying themselves in desire for power. By combining the music and body movement characterized in Noh Drama, Kurosawa takes intermediality as his strategy while at the same time projects the transgressive protagonist onto the Japanese war period, which helps explain the transgressive behavior of the protagonist and the conflicts between Washizu and Miki.

Washizu's spouse Asaji is represented as a person whose coldness, stern demeanor, and compulsive gesture of the washing of hands foreshadow her tragic ending. With the predominance of spectacle and background music of Noh over dialogue, Kurosawa not only reinforces spatial significance and visual dimensions, but creates inner conflicts of the characters. Kurosawa's forest and wilderness is like a world of nightmares and the polarity between form and formlessness is demonstrated through the image of castles and the mist that signifies spatial disorientation. As Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto and Robert Hapgood suggest, the source of Kurosawa in Japanese history is the civil war period when the codes of feudal loyalty was seemingly respected (26; 253). Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood* echoes Japanese war literature and he readjusts Shakespeare's major elements to Japanese understanding about the relationships between the feudal lord and warriors. When the feudal lord disguises himself visiting Washizu, actually intending to attack another feudal lord, the contrasts between truth and appearance usher in betrayal and bodily conflicts. The cries of the crows followed by the spectacle of the troops of the lord entering Washizu's castle, the farmers kneeling in the fields, followed by the spectacle of the escape of the son and his request for help, the footsteps of the horses, the moving shadows of warriors, arrows shooting down from the castle: all these images signify the miserable situation of the betrayed heir of the murdered lord.

Kurosawa is interested in the expression of dreams, illusions, and deep-rooted dilutions of the human consciousness. He is also senses the metaphorical meanings of bodies as related to the use of the spectacle. Although Washizu is irritated and terrified by the presence of the ghost, he holds onto the desire to subdue his rival Miki in order to become king. By having Miki open the gate of the castle and bow to the imaginary effigy of their dead master, Washizu confirms his superior status by carrying the coffin of the dead feudal lord in the heavy snow. However, the gate is opened and Miki's most powerful rival, Washizu, subdues the other and the ceremonial procession itself becomes a ritual that dynamizes the desire of the corrupt warrior. The tragedy of the transgressive warrior at the end culminates with the restlessness of crows, the moving of shrubs and trees, and the flying arrows that share one target, Washizu. All these elements together with Asaji's madness manifest the externalization of psychological complexities. Unlike Shakespeare's virtuous Duncan, the lord that Washizu murders also gains power by murdering his own lord so that Washizu's transgressive action is merely a replication of the previous presumptuous behavior during a time of war.

In early modern times, regal power at court is to be seen, to be awed, and to subdued to. Theoretically, the function of the spectacle is a vehicle to create heroic roles for the leaders of society (Orgel 367). In modern theater, the "irresistible power to transform its viewers" as termed by Pye (99), has become a place for intermedial collaboration between the physical and technological embodiment of a story. *Macbeth* himself becomes a representative of misrule because the supposed heir of the throne and numerous warriors revenge themselves against him. Kurosawa's *Lady Macbeth* — Asaji — is a figure of unmitigated evil (Prince 143), while *Macbeth* himself embodies the desire for absolute power. Landscape in *Throne of Blood* seems desolate and gloomy and with the music and mask-like facial expressions of the characters the film would chill most foreign audiences to the bone (Richie and Anderson 9). Landscape, according to Kenneth R. Olwig, refers to environmental perception or a place of human habitation and environmental interaction (630) and the stark landscape in *Throne of Blood* suggests unstable territory and human relationships during the time of war. The representation of the castle wall symbolizes the conflicts and the barriers constructed by people while inside the wall intrigues go on and outside the wall soldiers fight and conquer, supporting their figurehead at the center of the spectacle. Human frailties are exemplified in the rebellion of Washizu's own troops and the flapping wings of the crows. By putting the grotesque transgressive body of *Macbeth* into the gloomy landscape, the film thus represents an intermedial form signifying cultural codes in social context (on "silence and sound" in *Throne of Blood* see, e.g., Jin). At the end of the film, the horrible landscape is reinforced by the crows flying to Cobweb Castle for refuge because the soldiers have destroyed the trees, using the branches for camouflage. Washizu's destiny is transferred into the hands of his own soldiers and his enemies. He falls into the snare that he has created himself, as the male chorus chants to the accompaniment of flutes and drums: "Behold this place now desolate / Once stood a mighty warrior / Lived a proud warrior / Murdered by ambition / His spirit is walking still / Vain pride then as now / Leads ambition to the kill."

An important adaptation of *Macbeth* in India is Vishal Bharadwaj's 2003 *Maqbool*. By localizing human conflicts and the power of desire in the metropolis Mumbai, *Maqbool* represents a cultural experience of contemporary India, the cityscape signifying a microcosm of a bigger world. Important is to note, as suggested by Ania Loomba that some adaptations of Shakespeare in India reflect the collective history of the colonial era and the development of Indian identity. Interesting is that Bharadwaj sets the perspective of power struggle of in Mumbai's underworld: the main character in the film is *Maqbool*, the adopted son of the criminal boss Abbaji. *Maqbool* embodies a global and multi-local identity because of his mobility, knowledge of cultures, and sophisticated ways of interpreting those around him. Nimmi, the main female character, is the mistress of Abbaji. The conflict between *Maqbool* and Abbaji is inevitable when *Maqbool* and Nimmi are trapped in passion, desire, and their misunderstanding of authority. Importantly, *Maqbool* is an Indianized film of Shakespearean thematics and the Indianization of each character is constructed upon the relationship between self and environment. Historical associations include the intertextual referencing that Abbaji's other name is Jahangir Khan, a name referring to an emperor of the seventeenth-century Mughal empire. While Kurosawa adapts Shakespeare's Scotland to the feudal society of Japan, Bharadwaj's film reminds us of the conflict of father and son in the Mughal empire (Orfall 5). Bharadwaj's Abbaji is not as fortunate as the Mughal prince: he is murdered by his surrogate son *Maqbool* and his own mistress Nimmi. In contrast to Shakespeare's *Lady Macbeth*, Nimmi is feminine, her suggestions are whispered softly, and her desire for children is the core of her plan. Her pregnancy eventually ignites the desire of *Maqbool* to shoot Abbaji and the couple arranges the murder to appear to have been done by Abbaji's personal body guard. Just like Kurosawa's *Lady Macbeth*, Nimmi kills the guard and pretends that it is done out of self-defense. After *Maqbool* kills Kaka (Shakespeare's Banquo) and inherits all that belonged to Abbaji, he realizes that it is never easy to escape the entanglements of power and business interests. *Maqbool* is set in an intercultural context about the circulation of power and tensions in the underworld society and these components are visualized for the contemporary audience. As Trivedi Poonam has observed, the film demonstrates not only postcolonial products with a Shakespearean text, but also a postmodernist re-imagining of literary heritage in replacing Scotland with Mumbai (151-52). Further, the dialectical binary of good and evil is problematized and the relationship between body and land-

scape is represented through family scenes, weddings, and festivities where music, dance, and local life style contrast with doings of gangsters.

Bharadwaj constructs spatial visuality with cityscapes and private spaces such as the home. This confirms the suggestions that space is perceived from the body outward and in that perception the physical and the mental are fused (Cook 551). Thus, living space in *Maqbool* is an emblem and it is a testimonial to the preciousness of security. In the early modern period, a castle symbolizes the authority of the owner and anyone who breaks into another person's castle commits treason (Wang, I-Chun 45-49). However, the city and the village represent different spatial meanings whereby the village suggests a more intimate space and thus Nimmi's love for Maqbool means in that context domestic rebellion. Conversely, when Abbaji is entangled in urban violence and international crime, the cityscape of Mumbai becomes a microcosm of the concept of the metropolis where the intimacy of the village — the domestic — is lost, replaced by the ambiguous dimensions where "in external nature everything can be considered connected and alienated at the same time" (Simmel 170). In the metropolis the uninterrupted transformations of material matters and energies bring everything into relationship with everything else and there is no guarantee of the intimate space for people in the metropolis (Simmel 170). The city as represented in *Maqbool* is a combination of a "practiced place" and a place involved with "complex and sensuous existence beneath the spatial codes of mapping and depiction" (Mitchell ix). In *Maqbool* the city demonstrates not only the collective way of life in Mumbai but also the business empire created by the underworld leaders, the nexus between the underworld and the film industry, where financing of films and the smuggling of illegal drugs construct the "king-making" process (Poonam 6). The desire for power and the motif of territoriality are stressed. The crows flying toward Washizu's castle at the end of Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood* is a spectacle foreshadowing the downfall of Washizu and in *Maqbool*, the cawing of the crows signifies the impending doom of the main characters: the gathering of crows refers us to the uttering of Nimmi who at that moment is planting seeds of rebellion into the mind of Maqbool. The episodes in which Maqbool hallucinates over the blood of the goat for the wedding feast, his shock when the eyes of the dead body open up suddenly and the frenzy found in Nimmi all suggest the horrific dimensions of crime. A further aspect of the visual intertextualization of Shakespeare in *Maqbool* is the use *jatra* performances, a popular form of folk theatre in the eastern region of India (see, e.g., Brown). Different from Shakespeare, in *Maqbool jatra* performance is constructed as a space of seeming peace, friendliness, and cooperation and the landscape formed by the interaction of people suggests prosperity and an atmosphere shared by the inhabitants.

In Taiwan, a stage popular adaptation of *Macbeth* is Xing-gou Wu's 1986 *Kingdom of Desire* in which the director employs reformed Beijing opera to expand the dimensions of imagination and intermedial phenomena (on Beijing opera in Taiwan, see, e.g., Wang, Anchi 110). *Kingdom of Desire* begins with a white-haired Mountain Spirit who prophesies the future. The lead characters include Aoshu and his deputy, General Meng, who as suspected by Aoshu's wife, will eventually kill her husband in a power conflict. Similar to Kurosawa's Asaji, Aoshu's wife takes an important role in making decisions and plotting the future. The fear of political conflict clashes with her ambition thus creating an internal struggle. Shakespeare's Lady Macbeth, Kurosawa's Lady Asaji, and Wu's Lady Aoshu share the same function in their husband's careers and they are instrumental in making their husband's dreams come true. In Wu's play, a spectacle constructed to represent the tragedy of regicide. While Kurosawa's restless horses signify the impending regicide, Wu employs acrobats to represent the difficulty of controlling an invisible leaping horse. Aoshu's mind is obviously in turmoil immediately afterwards and the next step in the fulfillment of the prophecy is the killing of his friend Meng. His hysterical confession to the ghost of Meng manifests his difficulty in coping with the fact that he is "gazed" not only by his fellows but also by the ghosts. The sovereignty he creates for himself is intangible. He has the power to control and to watch others but the gaze that reverses back to him are unbearable. In this tragedy, the moral order contrasts the inversion of natural order, an order constructed through human desire. The conflicts between Aoshu and the rebellious generals parallel the conflicts between Lady Aoshu and her husband. Theoretically the master is supposed to have the potential to manipulate the apparatus in order to induce respect and fear in them. However, the power to normalize and discipline in the imperial system has already shrunk to the level of appearance. The troubled minds of the

main characters and their hysterical reactions to the ghosts have degraded to the level of the sub-conscious. Lady Aoshu, in particular, represents the situation and problematics of the supernatural and subconscious: "dressed in a white gown, she (Lady Aoshu) flits about the stage bedeviled by the ghosts of those she and her husband have killed. Her mind wavers in and out of sanity ... and she suffers from punishment imposed on her body: the loss of her child" (Diamond 123).

The Mountain Spirit scene in the first part of the play foretells the destiny of the main characters and in order to underline this, Wu employs spotlights to create a shadowy atmosphere that does not belong to the real world. The bare stage, the interaction between the real and the apparent, and the inner and outer worlds convey implicitly the information that general Aoshu has a diminished sense of morality. The problematics of desire and power is further emphasized by general Aoshu's process of self-destruction and the spectacle that general Aoshu is killed by his own men.

In Korea, Han Tae-sook's 1998 *Lady Macbeth* is a play based on Shakespeare's *Macbeth* from its heroine's point of view: "The play puts emphasis on Macbeth's wife, a deeply ambitious woman who lusts for power and position. This play was produced by the Theatre Group Moollee and won the Korean Theatre Best Play Award for the year 2000 (Shim 64). Early in the play Lady Macbeth appears the stronger and more ruthless of the two, as she urges her husband to kill Duncan and seizes the crown. After the bloodshed begins, Lady Macbeth falls to madness, a situation even greater degree than her husband" (Chung <[http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/art/2008/04/145\\_19671.html](http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/art/2008/04/145_19671.html)>). Following Dmitri Shostakovich's 1934 opera *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*, Han's play is staged by "object theatre," a theater by means of puppetry and object manipulation where the manipulation of inanimate objects for social contexts or solitary figures reinforces the psychological tension of the main character. For example, Lady Macbeth talks to and object or a puppet, thus signifying Duncan's ghost; or, sleepwalking is treated by a court doctor but her somatic frame is crushed by psychic problems.

In conclusion, when Shakespeare's *Macbeth* is remediated into various forms such as the stage and cinema, Macbeth refers not only to the historical Macbeth, but also to cognitive metaphors in local contexts. If Shakespeare's *Macbeth* exemplifies an aspect of the Elizabethan environment with its cultural codes, Asian adaptations of *Macbeth* by remediating the universal codes of transgressive gestures and body emphasize the tragedy of individual and societal transgression. The morbid, pathetic body, and hysterical fear and varieties of transgression located in Asian spaces represent the core essence of the Asian adaptations of *Macbeth* I discuss. Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood* the spectacles of rain, mist, and strong winds reinforce the tragedy that a great warrior has come to power by murdering his feudal lord. The multicultural perspective in Bharadwaj's *Maqbool* warns against moral corruption in the underworld of Mumbai. And In Wu's *Kingdom of Desire* aspects of Beijing opera highlight the complexities of human desire that only the supernatural is able to transcend. No matter with which medium *Macbeth* is reproduced or adapted, the visual embodiment of each text not only represents its special aesthetic representation but also reiterates the unavoidable tragedy of transgression.

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Author's profile: I-Chun Wang teaches early modern English drama and twentieth-century British and US-American drama at National Sun Yat-sen University. Her fields of interests in research include early modern courtly masques, spatial discourse, and contemporary women playwrights. In addition to numerous articles, her recent book publications in English include *Ethnicity and Empire* (2010). E-mail: <[icwang@mail.nsysu.edu.tw](mailto:icwang@mail.nsysu.edu.tw)>