The Unspoken Translations of *Macbeth Does a Ritual*

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The summer of 2022 was the first time I "met" Baek Da-hyeon (백대현). We all call him "Back"—an English mis-pronunciation of his Korean surname. To say that I "met" him isn't quite accurate; I was staring at an old, tiny CRT television, watching *The North Defectors* (脫北者), a performance that might not be staged again. As I watched, I was struck by how theatre can cross distances and transgress borders, allowing histories that have been repressed in different places or nations in Asia, to resonate with and speak to one another. I was also moved by how, through the co-presence of performers and spectators, theatre can re-weave solidarity of struggle—solidarity that ideology has been cut apart for a long time—turning divisions into a rite that brings the dead back into the realm of the living.

Back's first rehearsal of *Macbeth Does a Ritual* in Taiwan was in December, 2024. I was lucky enough to look on, and ready to learn something new when he and Wang Mo-lin (王墨林, hereafter "Da-Mo") worked together. However, what I saw was mostly the difficulties of their communication: Back had studied English, but he was far more fluent in Korean; Da-Mo was not particularly comfortable in English, and had no Korean at all. When the two were alone together, they spoke only the simplest English words, or tried to rely on a bit of Japanese—though those exchanges were also fragmented and halting.

On top of that, Da-Mo set a deep form of interconnectedness between actions, texts, and bodies. He constantly emphasizes the political implications of improvisation. What may seem to be minor adjustments of movement or posture is actually spiritual or conceptual directives. Because of the language barrier, it was hard to know how much of Da-Mo's ideas Back truly absorbed. But judging from the formal performances this October, it is difficult to imagine that their communication was verbally as rough and incomplete as it actually was.

Da-Mo's *Shakespeare Solo Series* (莎士比亞單人表演系列) has always been rooted in interrogations of **power**. Jung Yun-jin's (鄭尹眞) *A Mother, King Lear* (母親‧李爾王) exposes the invisibility and erasure of women in history; Yang Chi-yin's (楊奇殷) *A Prince, Hamlet* (王子‧哈姆雷特) confronts the exhaustion and moral contradictions of those who resist. In these solo works, Yun-jin and Chi-yin are not "typical" Shakespearean actors. Working with Da-Mo becomes a kind of threshold experience—within and beyond the script, they are overloaded because of multiplicity of characters. The performance ripples outward like circles on water, conjoins into larger, more far-reaching and universal critiques. Watching Back rehearse, I wondered: without language, can we really expose something as abstract as "power"?

Yet *Macbeth Does a Ritual* did not lose its critical edge. Moving through the pond, the wooden platform, and the ramp, Back's body wove together cycles of stability and instability—two faces of

power itself. In one moment Macbeth chase the illusion of kingship; in the next, Lady Macbeth embody the cruelty of murdering infants without emotion. These figures allow, even direct, the violent scripts of Gwangju and Palestine to continue unfolding around the world. This makes us fear that our own heads would just like overripe fruit, might be harvested or even burst apart at any moment. And yet, in front of us, Back keeps "walking, walking," declaring the presence of the actor who can play both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. He stands here, in the theatre, and promises he will continue to stand here in the future. He offers what limited life-time he has to confront the so-called eternal, the eternal that he already sees through. Through this performance, we glimpse the hope of overturning the powerful rulers.

How, then, did Da-Mo and Back arrive at such a place without a certain degree of mutual understanding? Even before words are spoken, conversations are already happening. During a meal once, I asked Back about the script. He told me that in South Korea, Shakespeare's plays exist in many different translations. But this time, not only did he choose and arrange the excerpts himself, he also personally translated *Macbeth* from English into Korean, again. The Korean-to-Chinese translation was then done by Yen Kwang-sik (연광석), an alumnus of National Chiao Tung University. Thus, Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, first published in seventeenth-century England and first staged on the Korean Peninsula in the 1950s, crossed multiple linguistic barriers in twenty-first-century South Korea before finally arriving in Taiwan.

And we should not forget the subtler but more striking kinds of translation. Through the work of the creative team, the script became not just an enacted text but also the composition of scenery, music, lighting, imagery, and props. Holding tambourine but put on a crown by himself, allowed us to see Macbeth's delirium. A length of white cloth—whether draped over the shoulders or tied at the waist—differentiated Lady Macbeth's appearances. The gong that summons the masses, and the battered gong used as a mask, revealed both the arrogance and the fragility of power. The shallow pit before the ramp became the dry ground on which Palestinian footprints emerge. And through the "heroic sacrifice" (?) of a dragon fruit, we shared the common pain of being crushed and squeezed.

In theatre, an art fundamentally shared by everyone present, no one can stand outside the act of translation, this field makes everyone translator. The collaboration between Da-Mo and Back works precisely because theatre makes every participant a translator in some sense. More importantly, translation in theatre is not a one-way road where one language is irreversibly absorbed into another culture system. Like *The North Defectors*, the performance reminds us that from Northeast Asia to Southeast Asia, people living along Asia continent's borderlands have long treated violence as an inescapable part of our histories. Our task is to reopen the eyelids and mouths that violence has forcibly sewn shut, to glare back at power, to spit out a word. We are still searching for a language that allows us to stand here together and move forward together.

Cultural studies scholars such as Chen Kuan-Hsing (陳光興) have long proposed "*Asia as Method*," or more simply, cultural studies should more focus on the scale of "*Inter-Asia*." Those traumatic memories do not belong only to us. We must move beyond the logocentrism and Anglophone dominance inherited from Western colonialism. Through repeated acts of mutual

reference, we must seek a new “language” within and across (i.e. Inter-) Asia, overcome the division of our nations and borders—one we can use to name, challenge, and shatter power and the violences that sustain it. Seen this way, Da-Mo and Back’s performance seems to be telling us: among the many “languages” capable of weaving an Inter-Asia imagination, we should once again, take **theatre** more seriously.