

The New Biology of Collaborative Production

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After the performance, Toshiki Okada talked about a similarity between Thailand and Japan, “There are societies where people believe that they can change the world through their own efforts, and societies where they don’t. Thailand is a society where they don’t have that belief. Japan’s the same. In France, for example, they do have that belief, in Korea too, and maybe America. There are people, and countries, that think that way. But Thailand isn’t like that. They’ve given up. That’s what I’ve come to understand. Probably because I’m Japanese. Because Japan’s similar. A real feeling of resignation flows through the novel.^[1]” What is this “feeling of resignation” that Okada describes as shared?

The reception of *The End of the Special Time We Were Allowed* in Thailand

The publication in translation of Toshiki Okada’s *The End of the Special Time We Were Allowed*, which collects two short novels, in Thailand was born out of the social atmosphere in a country where people are searching for a new form of intelligence.^[2] The book was published in translation for the first time in Korea, in August 2016, followed by Thailand in November of the same year, with an English edition in September 2018.^[3] Okada’s collection has reached readers in Korean, Thai, and in the English-speaking world.

Uthis Haemamool (author of *Silhouette of Desire*, the original novel on which *Pratthana – A Portrait of Possession* based) is one such reader, and commented of Okada’s work that, “The narrative approach in this work is distinctive and unique, like the movement of a body. It’s like watching performance art. The author has a real skill for blending performance art and literature. It’s a book that opens up a new frontier in narrative style.”^[4] Uthis also said of *Five Days in March*, included in the same collection, “It brought to mind my personal memory of the Shibuya (Dōgenzaka) area. I went to Shibuya the first time I went to Tokyo. Whenever I come to Japan, I stay in the Shibuya area. I like the atmosphere there. This story shows the uglier side of Shibuya, usually hidden and not captured in photographs—the smell of garbage in the morning there.”^[5]

Taking Uthis’ remarks into consideration, it would seem that in Okada’s works, through the mutual influence of novel and theater, new territory is being opened up, overturning the fixed ideas we had held about language in novels. I think this is bringing something fresh to Thai readers, including Uthis.^[6] Perhaps Okada chose *Pratthana* for dramatization not simply because of its narrative that deals with sex and politics, but because he felt a shared sensibility, in the way personal memory flows through the works of both writers, and how various boundaries are crossed freely.

- 1 From an interview with Okada in Bangkok before he headed to a performance in Paris, in December 2018.
- 2 Entering the 2010s, a wide range of Japanese literary works have been published in Thailand in this era, from contemporary works such as Abe Kazushige’s *IP/NN* (2014), Tawada Yoko’s *The Bridegroom Was a Dog* (2014), Matsuura Rieko’s *Opposite Version* (2016), and Murata Sayaka’s *Convenience Store Woman* (2018), to works by authors of the Modern era such as Dazai Osamu, Natsume Soseki, and Tanizaki Junichiro. It is notable that in recent years the original novels behind films, or novelizations of films, have been published in translation, such as Dorian Sukegawa’s *Sweet Bean Paste* (March 2018), Shinkai Makoto and Nakagawa Naruki’s collection of short stories *She and Her Cat* (August 2018) and Kore-eda Hirokazu’s *Shoplifters* (February 2019). There was also the release of Thai film *Homestay* in 2018, which was based on Mori Eto’s novel *Colorful* (2003).
- 3 Publication of the translated Thai edition was made possible by the Japan Foundation’s Support Program for Translation and Publication on Japan, with assistance from Thai publisher Gamme Magie Editions.
- 4 Uthis suggested *The End of the Special Time We Were Allowed* for the English-language newspaper Bangkok Post’s *The Gift of Reading* (a feature in which celebrities recommend a book as a New Year’s gift), in the 12 December 2016 edition.
- 5 From *Art and the Nation State – Considering Thailand*, a discussion between Okada Toshiki and Uthis Haemamool held at in June 2017, at the 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, Kanazawa.
- 6 One can see the sense of the impression of a Thai reader on the review site Goodreads, “The fatigue and malaise felt by the characters appearing in this collection, and the accompanying desire to escape, really reflects the mood of modern people living in the 2000s. *Five Days in March* in particular has an interesting story and narrative style, with the boundary between characters and narrator obscured by shifting use of person and shifting viewpoints. The peculiar and absurd dialogue is reminiscent of a

Beckett play, and you find yourself wanting to see a stage version.”

- 7 He states, “It’s about the artist having the power of his gaze. But, that takes as a pre-requisite the model having the power to be gazed upon. Most people aren’t aware of that. Maybe it’s not that they’re unaware, but that they don’t think it’s important. They think that the result of the artist’s gaze is what’s left in the picture. But the model’s endurance of that gaze is there. Most people don’t look at pictures that way. But the gaze is always bidirectional. From time to time the model will transmit a message to the artist, absorbed in his gaze on the model, asking whether he’s aware that the model’s endurance of that gaze, of being drawn, is essential to his art. The model is not simply a being that is gazed upon, the model has eyes capable of their own gaze, and the right to return the artist’s gaze. Sometimes it’s good to show one’s own power to endure observation.”
- 8 A scriptwriting camp was held in Kumamoto in January 2018. Based on feedback on Okada’s first draft script from assistant director Wichaya Artamat as to sections to cut and sections which should be emphasized in performance, the Japanese and Thai scripts were brought together and polished to as to enhance conformity of nuance in the respective languages. Then, after a second draft, rehearsals began with a third draft, and there was a continual process of editing based on how lines felt when they were performed on the actual stage by the actors, and asking the performers’ opinions about lines (e.g., whether something feels unusual in Thai). The lyrical expression of the original novel, and the lines as delivered by the actors on the actual stage were scrutinized. In a sense, they were working towards a closer interlingual mutual intelligibility, between Thai and Japanese, and between the novel and theater.

The gaze in *Pratthana: A Portrait of Possession*

Describing concepts in a text he wrote to audition performers in Bangkok,^[7] in April 2017, Okada said, “By talking about how the relationship between an artist and model viewing and being viewed is in fact a mutual relationship, I want to trigger the realization in the audience that the same is true of the relationship of viewing/being viewed with performance and audience.” The gaze is always bidirectional in *Pratthana*, giving a clear sense of the mutual relationship of viewing and being viewed. From the audition-text stage, emphasis has been placed on the viewer/viewed relationship, and giving the audience an understanding that this is a representation of being viewed has been stressed consistently. What is the significance of making the audience aware of the party “being viewed?”

The central protagonist’s name, Khao Sing, is a verb meaning “to possess,” in the sense of a spirit moving into a person and taking control of his actions. In the naming ritual scene (hazing new students), “He is dragged forward and told to open his eyes. Blinding white light blasts in his face, he recoils and falls down. The upperclassmen push him back upright”; he’s given his new name by his seniors when they ask, “Have you been possessed by a ghost or something?” Throughout this ritual, he has to follow the orders of his seniors, and by being given the new name Khao Sing, the protagonist ultimately becomes accustomed to discipline, regardless of whether there are any more senior people around. He comes to feel that he is being observed, even if there is no one in particular observing him. During the play, Khao Sing is repeatedly possessed by a *pee am* (sleep ghost), and Watee gives a graphic account of Khao Sing’s state of despair when he says, “You want something that you can’t see to come and taste your flesh, letting yourself be done to, in whichever way it wants. So you won’t feel guilty of the restrictions or limits you’ve set up for yourself if you fall into the state of being tied down and helpless.” And when Khao Sing is “lashed countless times by the scourge of memory and the repeating circumstances which we call the present, until [his] whole body and heart are completely beaten and numb,” interjections from the narrator such as, “You don’t feel it anymore,” introduce a form of direct second-person address not found in the original, carrying the dual-meaning of addressing Khao Sing and the audience, and one might even imagine a gaze directed from self to self.

Meanwhile, a stepladder stands towering in the center of the stage from which one can look down over everything, but the time goes by with the actors and audience hardly looking up at it. On the importance of setting to *Pratthana*, assistant director Wichaya Artamat comments that, “The way that feet are emphasized: the figure of Khao Sing massaging Watee’s feet; the discussion of anatomy, the size of feet and faces; Jarunan Phantachat’s narration about the weight of feet, and feet and legs marching to the city; and the way a lot of people lie face up on the ground and lift their feet—it made me think of the grass-roots Red Shirt movement in 2010.”^[8] Highly durable feet form the towering stepladder’s base, and emphasizing the feet recalls Okada’s “power of those who endure observation,” that is to say, an awareness of individual rights.

This is how the significance Okada described when he said through the creative process that he wanted to “make this a work able to give people the important experience of living the life of another” has been brought to life. As for the “feeling of resignation” felt in both Thailand and Japan, I think a creative note from Okada may shed some light on the matter, “It’s relevant for all of us forced to live and think within the framework of a nation state... Because the things portrayed here are related to us at an essential level.”

(Translated from Japanese by Ben Cagan)

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