

Multicultural Shakespeare: Translation, Appropriation and Performance
vol. 10 (25), 2013; DOI: 10.2478/mstap-2013-0003

Weimin Li *

Shakespeare on the Peking Opera Stage

Successful Peking Opera adaptations of Shakespeare¹ have attracted interest of theater-goers, both enthusiasts and connoisseurs, who have been able to approach Shakespeare in the form that they like and are used to. For the intermingling elements of traditional Chinese opera and Shakespearean themes or stories, on another level, some adaptations have received applause from Shakespeare lovers, who enjoy the formal attractions of Peking Opera through the familiar Shakespeare stories. For such contrastive elements as Shakespeare and Chinese opera to co-exist in the end product, the adaptation must be a transforming process, in which for each element to be valid in the product, it must also be malleable. In all the adaptation cases, transformation has taken place on both sides of the adaptation: the “source” text and the adapting form. Thus, our concerns about such adaptations should go beyond the traditionalist suspect about Shakespeare’s adaptability in Peking Opera or the bardolatrist doubt that Peking Opera adaptation of Shakespeare can still be Shakespeare. What we want to ask is in what ways transformation can be viable in the intertextual practice of cross-cultural, cross-generic, and cross-media adaptation.

Intertextuality in Chinese Adaptation of Shakespeare

Here I would see an adaptation as a text and borrow the Kristeva’s term of intertextuality as any text is “a permutation of texts, an intertextuality” (36) and appropriate the term in evaluating Shakespeare adaptations in a traditional Chinese opera form. On the one hand, the key notion in the Kristevan term of intertextuality is applicable to inter-cultural adaptation. The notion must be elaborated, on the other hand, in order for it to be fully usable in a cultural

*Weimin Li is Professor of Literature, Sichuan International Studies University, China.

¹ There have been notably successful Peking Opera adaptations of Shakespeare in recent years, and the most adapted plays on the Peking opera stage are *The Tragedy of Hamlet*, *King Lear*, *The Tragedy of Macbeth* and *Romeo and Juliet*, such as *Luanshiwang (King in Troubled Time*, adapted from *Macbeth*), by Wuhan Peking Opera Troup, *Dream of Emperor Qi (King Lear)* and *Hamlet* by Shanghai Peking Opera Theater.

context in which cultural forms, such as Chinese drama and especially Peking Opera, have been influenced by hetero-philosophical conceptions of life and drama. When we read adaptations as texts, we detect both axes² of the textual formation in Peking opera adaptations: the author-reader connection through the bridging by the adapting artists between Shakespeare's foreign text and Chinese audiences and the text-to-text connection between Shakespeare's work and the Chinese product in a different genre. The gap between the "author" and the text, as translated or adapted, has been bridged by the adapter, who is actually the speaker to contemporary audience in the Peking opera theatre. This essay will examine how the Chinese adaptations transform both the Shakespearean text and the opera form.

To begin with, Peking Opera adapters must deal with the contrastive notions in Shakespeare's drama and Chinese opera before they look for the common ground or similarities for a viable way of integrating these hetero-natured elements. They demonstrate diverse understandings of the relationship between life and drama and thus use different dramaturgical ways of representation. The Peking Opera tells stories and represents life by exteriorizing the interior, that is, emotions of characters while Shakespeare's plays are comparatively more realistic and mimic life in a closed structure. This contrast reflects the different notions of drama. The Chinese dramatic aesthetics stresses poetic expressions of life. As a result, ways of expression or formal nuances are more important than the content or what is expressed; whereas, western drama as influenced by Aristotle's poetics, with Shakespeare as the best exemplar, imitate life in realistic representations. A Chinese tragedy, for example, is not to engender fear and pity, but teaches a moral lesson with or without the hero's death. Accordingly, death and sadness or other strong emotions are symbolically represented with dances, singings, acrobatics, and martial arts so that audiences are always fascinated by the artistic performances. As put by Lan, "in Chinese tragedies, the emotions are excited by the outer style (the exquisite techniques) so that formal aesthetics is more appreciated than the content" (591). Consequently, when Shakespeare is adapted with the highly aesthetic performances of Peking opera, emphases are put on physical expressions of psychology through symbolic gestures by the characters, and audience members, who are very familiar with Peking Opera, pay more attention to the performers' nuanced treatments to the form than to the plot. Often Shakespearean elements in the adapted text are made more akin to Chinese context and the genre of Peking opera.

In this way, Shakespeare's text is transformed in the Chinese context,

² Kristeva's axes of the textual reading include a horizontal axis that connects the author and reader of a text and a vertical axis that connects the text to other texts (69). It takes the coordination of both axes for the text to make certain sense.

particularly in the Peking Opera theatre so that the ideal aesthetics of both Peking opera and Shakespeare drama connect and complement each other. As the Peking Opera form is informed with Chinese philosophical understanding of life and drama, elements of hetero nature in the same entity can be seen as conflicting with each other. In the case of Chinese adaptation of Shakespeare, the local form of Peking opera and Shakespeare's foreign content can be identified as the contrastive factors of *yin* and *yang*, with the local form as *yin* and the foreign content as *yang*. Thus, when the contrastive factors of Shakespeare and Peking opera are intermingled, transformation is necessary³. This transformation, however, goes beyond *yin-yang* dichotomy and takes multiple forms when the local form and foreign content operate on both intertextual axes in coordinated intermingling⁴.

Intertextual Dialogue between Shakespeare and Peking Opera

Two dominant approaches have been used: domestication and alienization in Peking Opera adaptations. The former engages strategies that localize Shakespeare's story with its supposed humanist thought and characters into a Chinese setting while the latter contains some of Shakespeare's linguistic and dramatic features by keeping the foreign setting and character's foreign names. Localized practices give a full play to features of the local opera form while alienizing adaptations take Peking opera audiences closer to Shakespeare. Though in contrastive ways, both approaches provide means for Chinese audiences to approach Shakespeare so that they have cross-cultural readings of Shakespeare's texts through the reworking of the adapting artists.

In post-structuralist terms, a cross-cultural translation or adaptation of a literary text can be considered a form of reading and may have a place in a history of readings in other languages and cultures. As Eagleton put, all "literary works... are 'rewritten,' if only unconsciously, by the societies which read them" (12). In the Chinese context of Shakespeare reading, his works talk not only to their own history (Samoyault 10), but also engage in a dialogue with reality and works of different cultural background. In other words, when Shakespeare's works are rewritten for Peking Opera performances, Shakespeare is localized

³ This notion is deeply rooted in Chinese philosophy: "The coordination of *yin* and *yang* results in transformation" (*Book of Change* 《周易·采辞上》).

⁴ Brandon also takes the terms of *yin* and *yang* in his discussion of Japanese adaptations of Shakespeare. However, we see more interesting and complicated working of the contrastive elements in Chinese adaptations. What're more, the superficial matching of *yin* and *yang* with local form and Shakespeare are not adequate to explain the multiple forms of coordination among the contrastive elements. The multiplicity of transformation is embodied in philosophical notion behind the simplified dichotomy, and can be better explained in post-structuralist terms, particularly Kristeva's intertextuality.

through the filtering of the adapter in a Chinese form. At the same time, the Chinese form is renovated with the content from Shakespeare, what we may term as Peking Opera being Shakespeareanized. It is in this sense that we consider Shakespeare adaptation of Shakespeare drama for Peking Opera as an intertextual practice. This is to say that the adaptation may be claimed as a Shakespearean drama localized with features of Peking Opera or the local form being alienized with characteristic of Shakespearean drama.

Either way, transformation in Peking opera adaptations for contemporary audience takes place on both sides: Shakespeare and Chinese opera. At the same time the Chinese form transforms Shakespeare, Shakespeare reforms the genre. Both Shakespeare and the Chinese form have been transformed in a new context. While weaving Shakespearean elements into the Chinese form or using Shakespeare to renovate the local form, the adaptations have inter-mingled the domestic and the foreign, or the *yin* and the *yang* factors. On the following pages, I will examine some specific Peking Opera treatments to Shakespeare's text to illustrate intertextual features in Chinese adaptations.

1. Operatic Grappling of Shakespeare's Tragedies

It is curious that till now, all Peking opera adaptations of Shakespeare are exclusively his tragedies. For one thing, Chinese adapters believe that the tragedies represent the best of Shakespeare's humanist spirit. The Great Tragedies, namely *Othello*, *Macbeth*, *King Lear*, and *Hamlet*, have been received in China as the summit of humanist achievements so that the possibility of grappling with the tragedies is seen as an important test to adapting artists. As Peking opera features the roles of characters in established protocols as *sheng*, *dan*, *jing*, *mo* and *chou*. The *sheng* and *dan* roles are equivalents of the hero and heroine. Accordingly, Chinese artists are eager to look for these equivalents in Shakespeare's tragedies and highlight these roles by designing operatic actions around them, sometimes ending up with a slanted interpretation. Othello in Experimental Peking Opera Troupe's adaptation, for example, is presented as masculine and more importantly, incredulous, while Desdemona as femininely tender but resolute.

The directorial design attempts to capture the realistic depiction of the tragic hero but at the same time bend him to fit into the operatic format by revealing his psychology as in the intensity of emotion. One of the key intertextual features of this treatment lies in the relationship between the adapted text and its prototype (Samoyault 120). Through such relationship, with the combination of Shakespeare drama and Peking opera on the philosophical and aesthetic levels realized in stage presentation, the adaptation maintains the light of thought, the foundation of artistic imagination and of humanist idea. Ma Yong-an, the performer of Othello, makes an elaborate use of his Peking opera

skills to present the inner struggles of a tragic hero so as to depict a convincing image of Shakespeare's Othello to opera audiences.

The Peking Opera *King Lear* makes more domesticating maneuvers so as to display the fortes of the opera form. However, the adapters still face the question of handling the humanist concerns of Shakespeare's play or how to integrate them into Peking Opera performance. Therefore, Shang Changrong, performer of the King in *Dream of King Qi*, adopts imaginative skills of Peking Opera to present the King's emotional tempest and vehement struggles of the soul in the storm scene, offering a sensational exteriorization of the mind. Although Peking Opera is good at depicting kings or emperors, presenting a foreign king or Shakespeare's Lear still remains challenging to performers. Especially, Shakespeare's mixing of features of tragicomedy is difficult to handle. While attempting to be faithful to Shakespeare's *King Lear* to the most, the adaptation emphasizes the phases of the King's psychological development, portraying him as a political madman first, and then a pitiful old man, who has regained sanity and humanity when he takes the perspective of the suffered as he is mentally tormented. To present such an interpretation, the performers make the best use of the particular artistic appeals of Peking Opera to deepen the audience's understanding towards the internal world of the character. For example, when expressing his feelings, several special laughs are used, including arrogant laughs, laughs after being humiliated and suppressed, mad smiles after mind going insane, and laughs after disillusionment.

As such, *Dream of Emperor Qi* offers a cross-cultural interpretation of Shakespeare's *King Lear* with an emphasis on its humanism in the characterization of Lear in the Peking Opera form. It is in this way that the adapters and their Chinese audiences understand Shakespeare's humanism as they find congruent to some degree with the Chinese conception of humanity—an embodiment of the ideals about the true, good and beautiful. The adaptation thus praises honesty, integrity, filial piety, and compassion, and in turn, teaches a moral lesson against extreme egoism.

Likewise, the Peking Opera *Hamlet* attempts to reconfigure the spirit of Shakespeare's drama into an operatic performance. The adaptation elaborates on two assumed Shakespearean themes: the conflict between crime and order and Hamlet's problem. The criminal taking of the throne throws the prince into a mission to restore order or set right time and a dilemma, as reflected in the "to be or not to be" soliloquy. Prince Zidan's external action is to kill his uncle Yong, who killed Zidan's father for the throne and who got his mother by cheating. But behind this thread is Zidan's hesitation of action. The focus of the play is the suffering of the prince's mind and the struggle of his soul. When Zidan is informed with the truth, he is disillusioned and thrown into the abyss of confusion by the evil in human world and his own reflection on life. He even begins to doubt about his love as he asks, "Are you honest?" (3.1). He is also

skeptic about the meaning of his task to set right the time. As a result, he is hesitating in taking responsible actions. With this understanding of humanism as in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, the director sets out for an intertextual design of the performance. In a discussion about his design, Shi Yukun explains that "we want to tribute to the spirit of Shakespearean drama, but we do so through displaying the forte of the Peking Opera." Therefore, no matter what approach, foreignizing or localizing, adapters adopt, they tend to tilt toward the local form while attempting to strike a balance between the *yang*, the foreign or Shakespearean elements, and the *yin*, the local or Peking Opera features.

2. *King Lear* in Peking Opera: Shakespeare Intertextualized in Peking Opera through Symbolic Presentations

Thematic presentations of the Chinese operatic drama are usually realized through symbolic devices that feature song and dance protocols. To show respect or loyalty to Shakespeare's authority, sometimes adapters purposely alter the formal protocols to fit into the foreign content or a Shakespearean theme. But most of the time, performances are designed to display the advantages of the local form for local audiences, who are more familiar with Peking Opera than with Shakespeare. In both situations, adapters must be creative in re-inventing Shakespeare's drama with such a key feature of Peking Opera as metaphoric presentation of the theme using music and dance.

It is for this reason that *King Lear* has become the most difficult one to handle. However, Peking Opera artists overcome difficulties by making the best use of the symbolic, suggestive features of the operatic form so that intertextuality between Shakespearean drama and Peking Opera is attained through metaphoric performances. As fundamentally an operatic form, or what is called a singing and dancing drama, Peking Opera relies on music and dance for presentation. In other words, it is to tell a story in the form of singing and dancing. Accordingly, *Qiwang Meng (The Dream of Emperor Qi)* places its emphasis on several Shakespearean scenes whose artistic forms are similar to those in Peking Opera. It integrates the exquisite description of character's psychology with special features of the opera form. Through singing and dancing, the story is told to reveal the intricacy of humanity so that the theme is presented metaphorically. For example, when Emperor Qi finally realizes how he has been fooled by his "good" daughters, he sings out his mind in lines with a rhythm that highlights his anger. Shang Changrong's playing of Emperor Qi maintains the fundamental features of Peking Opera in his use of symbolic protocols of the singing form in uttering non-symbolic lines, thus integrating the directness in lyrical and narrative lines with indirect means of the operatic protocols. For another example, in his remorseful soliloquy, Emperor Qi reflects on the hard lessons he has learned from his own mistakes. Shang offers a

prolonged singing that is simple, forceful, and rhythmical that fits into the sad tone. Meanwhile, Shang's stage presentation mixes choreographic techniques that belong to different stereotypes of operatic characters. Shang's creative use of techniques is crucial to his successful performance as he integrates renovated operatic protocols into the presentation of the plot, character and dramatic conflict of *King Lear*. Thus, this kind of Peking Opera adaptation is both of Peking Opera and of Shakespeare as it brings the audience a novel enjoyment of the Shakespearean drama in a traditional form. In a sense, however, it domesticates Shakespearean elements for the local audience, who enjoy the aesthetics of Peking Opera more than the retold Shakespearean story.

3. Prince in His Revenge: Modernizing Peking Opera with Shakespeare's Story

If *The Dream of Emperor Qi* falls into the category of domesticating, *Wangzi Fuchou Ji (Prince in Revenge)* tilts toward the foreignizing end from most Chinese audience's perspective. For its "loyalty" to the tragic spirit of Shakespeare's drama, or the *yang* element as of the foreign content, the Peking Opera Prince has been identified as representative of foreignizing practice of traditional Chinese operatic adaptation of Shakespeare. Notwithstanding the arguable claim of faithfulness, however, the adaptation raises questions in other aspects as it also juxtaposes or even dichotomizes what is traditional and modern. Actually, what the Chinese prince does is another way of localizing Shakespeare but with more "foreign" or "modern" elements that traditional Chinese operatic works have barely touched.

Wangzi Fuchou Ji emphasizes Hamlet's revenge and his mental process, and reduces the number of characters to concentrate on the story and highlight conflicts. It also maintains the much celebrated monologue of the original play in a way most fitted to Peking Opera so as to provide enough room for displaying four traditional skills of song, dance, speech, and combat. Music is an important means of expression in this show: traditional ensemble of Peking Opera is variegated to match the various tunes, such as *erhuang* and *xipi*, as used by different role types. Though distinguished from the spoken drama, this adaptation adds modern sensitivity to the traditional form of stage performance. The result is clear: the performance provides a feast to the eyes and ears of both Chinese and non-Chinese audiences. The Chinese audiences approach *Hamlet* through Peking opera while the foreign audiences experience the charm of Peking opera through *Hamlet*. The stage design is exemplary of impressionistic and simplistic style: the different arrangements of four folding screens and five chairs alternatively illustrate the scenes of the court, battlement and graveyard. The chairs are not only the axis around which performers play their roles but props for various purposes. The lighting is in a similarly simplistic vein—not

too much not too little, but good enough as finishing touch to appropriate scenes. The makeup and costume follow the tradition of Peking Opera, making them fit for the roles' positions and personalities, along with consistent use of color to fully demonstrate the characteristics of the combination of splendid costume of Peking Opera and the actors' performance.

This adaptation claims to be faithful to Shakespeare's main themes, major plots, characters, and conflicts as it uses lines from the "standard" Chinese translation of Shakespeare⁵. In particular, many wonderful original monologues (some adapted into arias) are kept. In Peking Opera presentation of the monologues, which the adapter considers as representative of Shakespearean drama, stylized rhyming lines and Peking dialect are used in handling the contrastive states of the prince's being "normal and mad," a challenge that the Shakespearean drama brings to the Peking Opera style. The Peking Opera prince, for example, seeks to combine the Shakespearean style and Peking Opera style in his most important soliloquy. The prince presents these lines in Peking dialect:

To be or not to be,
 To die, to sleep,
 No more; and by a sleep to say we end
 The heartache, and the thousand natural shocks
 That flesh is heir to. 'Tis a consummation
 Devoutly to be wish'd. To die, to sleep.
 To sleep, perchance to dream: ay, there's the rub!
 For in that sleep of death what dreams may come
 When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,
 Must give us pause.⁶

This is obviously not all the lines of the soliloquy, but the shortened version is already long enough for the *nianbai* (speech) in Peking Opera, and the *dan* (hero) role, as the Prince is in, barely uses long speeches or Beijing dialect.

In this way, the adaptation maintains the original spirit of Shakespeare while localizing the monologues in Peking dialect. The so-called "poetic style" is to handle the musical rhythm, including lines, singing, performance, dialogues and the pace of the whole play. The stage performance follows the spirit of traditional Peking Opera and pursues the free and natural style with innovative

⁵ The script of the adaptation is based on Zhu Shenghao's Chinese translation as in *Shashibiyi quanji* (*Complete Works of Shakespeare*). Adapting lines from this translation, in addition, is usually considered following Shakespeare's "original" lines in the Chinese discourse of loyalty to Shakespeare. The diction of "*shengcun*" (to be) and "*huimie*" (not to be) is typical of Zhu's translation.

⁶ Though without the poetic form, Zhu's prose translation of these lines have been seen as faithful to the "spiritual" essence of Shakespeare's original. See Zhu, Vol. 9. 63.

stage design and in traditional costumes so that Shakespeare's text is interpreted in a Chinese way. It becomes an intertext between Peking Opera and Shakespeare's play in an integration of the form of Peking Opera and the Shakespearean theme.

Conclusion

All in all, the Peking Opera adaptations of Shakespeare's tragedies are intertextual dialogues between Shakespeare and the traditional Chinese theatrical forms. Such intertextuality of cultural and dramatic elements of heterogeneous natures is realized through transformation and integration of the self and the other elements so that local audiences approach Shakespeare's stories and themes with ease. Chinese audiences are able to understand the foreign story in a familiar form and appreciate innovative changes to the form with the introduction of the Shakespearean content. These successful performances, especially in the presentation of the tragic hero's suffering from mental plight, have provided a heightened experience in a new understanding of Shakespeare through Peking Opera.

WORKS CITED

- Brandon, James. "Kabuki and Shakespeare: Balancing Yin and Yang." *TDR* 43.2 (1999): 15-53.
- Eagleton, Terry. *Literary Theory: An Introduction*. Blackwell, 1983.
- Kristeva, Julia. *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1980.
- Lan, Fan. *Comparative Drama: East and West*. Shanghai: Xuelin Press, 1992.
- Samoyault, Tiphaine. *Intertextuality*. Trans. Shao Wei. Tianjin: Tianjin People's Press, 2003.
- Shi, Yukun, "Xiangfuxiangcheng hunranyiti (Director's Words on Peking Opera Prince in Revenge)." Web. 1 May 2011. <<http://www.pekingopera.sh.cn/detail>>.
- Zhu, Shenghao, trans. *Shashibiya quanji (Complete Works of Shakespeare)*. Beijing: People's Literature Press. 1st ed., 1978. 11 vols.