Remaking *Romeo and Juliet*—A Case Study in Yue Opera*

LIU Fang

Yuanpei College, Shaoxing University, Shaoxing, China

Romeo and Juliet is a world-known classic that centers on a love tragedy in the patriarchal society. Similarly, *The Butterfly Lovers* (《梁祝》) in Yue opera (越剧) repeats the same tragedy. By comparing *Romeo and Juliet* with *The Butterfly Lovers*, the author finds that there are similarities as well as differences between the Western theatre and the Chinese one. Thus, this thesis focuses on the remaking of *Romeo and Juliet* in the form of Yue opera, applying the methodology of medio-translatology. The remake adopts the western style while adding the Chinese touches, which broadens the research on both the Western and Chinese theatre while promoting cross-cultural communication.

Keywords: *Romeo and Juliet*, Yue opera, remaking

Introduction

The Shakespearean drama is the heritage of the whole world and its cross-cultural remaking has become a worldwide research topic. In China, Shakespeare has been the most popular foreign dramatist since 1919, and there are thousands of papers and books on Shakespearean research. On the whole, these researches mainly focus on the textual and translational analysis; only a few shed light on the remaking practice on stage.

CAO Shu-jun and SUN Fu-liang explore the history of the Chinese remaking from the artistic perspective in “Shakespeare on the Chinese Stage” (1994); CAO’s other book *The Spring of Shakespeare in China* (2002) concludes the Chinese remaking achievements in the 1980s and 1990s; LI Wei-ming analyzes Shakespearean features on both Chinese and Western stage theoretically in “Shakespeare in Both Chinese and Western Cultural Context” (2009); SUN Yan-na (2010) compares the Shakespearean theatre with the Chinese one, and calls for a comprehensive theorization of introducing Shakespeare to the Chinese audience. However, their researches mostly concentrate on the Chinese modern drama, leaving few pages to cover the practice in Chinese traditional operas.

The History of Remaking Shakespearean Plays in China

The Chinese remaking of Shakespearean plays boasts a long history. Early in 1911, *Merchant of Venice* and *Othello* were put on stage; Shakespearean stage plays had been very popular until the 1940s. Meanwhile, some pioneers started to try remaking Shakespearean dramas in traditional Chinese operas. In 1914, WANG Guo-wei

* **Acknowledgements:** This paper is part of the result of the two provincial research programs the author hosts: “Remaking *Shakespeare* in the Chinese Traditional Opera” (2014) No.14NDJC079YB and “Remaking *Shakespeare* in Yue Opera” (2013) No. 2013B121.

LIU Fang, lecturer, master, English department, Yuanpei College, Shaoxing University.

first remade *Hamlet* in Sichuan opera (川剧)—*Killing Elder Brother and Marrying Sister-in-Law* (《杀兄夺嫂》); then, YUAN Xue-fen and FU Quan-xiang successfully remade several Shakespearean dramas in Yue opera in the 1940s and 1950s; JIAO Ju-yin made another splash while remaking *Romeo and Juliet* in Peking opera (京剧).

During the early years, the remaking of Shakespearean dramas was based on the translated versions. Not until the first Shakespearean Festival in 1986, had the original Shakespearean versions been adopted. During this festival, five remade plays were unveiled: *Othello* in Peking opera, *Twelfth Night* in Yue opera, *Winter's Tale* in Yue opera, *Macbeth* in Kun opera (昆曲) and *Much Ado about Nothing* in Huangmei opera (黄梅戏).

Up till now, 12 Shakespearean plays have been put on stage in the form of 16 Chinese traditional operas, among which, Yue opera accounted for nine.

The Remaking Practice of *Romeo and Juliet* in Yue Opera

Yue opera stems from Shengzhou, Zhejiang Province. It has its unique style and local flavor, influenced by Shengzhou dialect, folk music, Shaoxing local opera, Kun opera, and stage plays, etc.. It is rich in language expression and is listed as the most popular Chinese traditional opera to remake the Shakespearean drama. In 1942, YUAN Xue-feng made a splash while performing *Romeo and Juliet* in Yue opera which retained Shakespearean themes and plots but changed the details to adjust to the Chinese context. In the 1980s, another *Romeo and Juliet* was premiered in Shanghai Hongkou theatre, which became a sensation as well.

Generally, there are two approaches to remake Shakespearean dramas in the form of Yue opera. One is “the Chinese Style”, which means the English drama is adapted to the Chinese context and the details, such as names and places, are changed accordingly. The other is “the Western style”, which means the Shakespearean drama retains its original color completely, only adopting the form of the Chinese traditional opera. Meanwhile, the Chinese performers wear the Western costumes and adhere to the western customs. Moreover, the Western scenery is transferred to the Chinese stage. Thus, the former style concentrates on retaining the traditional aestheticism of the Chinese traditional opera, while the later one focuses on representing the exotic flavor of the Shakespearean drama.

Recently, the application of the methodology of medio-translatology, which pays special attention to the cultural exchange, is widely supported. In his book *Medio-translatology* (1999), XIE Tian-zheng points out that the creative treason in remaking lies in the style and form rather than the content. Therefore, “the Western style”, which is more faithful to the original Shakespearean drama, is supposed to be profound and lasting.

Strategies of Remaking *Romeo and Juliet* in Yue Opera

By comparing *Romeo and Juliet* with *The Butterfly Lovers*, the author discovers lots of similarities in themes, plots, etc.. Therefore, this paper explores strategies of remaking westernized *Romeo and Juliet* in the form of Yue opera creatively, keeping the Shakespearean flavor while adopting the Chinese form. During the remaking, the following four aspects should be paid special attention to: plot, characters, language, and culture.

Plot

Both Shakespearean plays and Chinese traditional operas share a free deployment in time and space, frequently applying dramatic techniques to indicate the shifts. For example, the exit and entry of characters on stage suggest time and space conversion in Shakespearean plays, while character movement on the stage in

certain stylized formation tells the audience the arrival of the intended destination. These similarities make the Shakespearean plays less alien to the Chinese audience. However, the Shakespearean drama always lasts more than three hours, and since the procedures in Yue opera are complicated, it will certainly take more time to complete. Therefore, plots refining is very important. As to which content is deleted, it requires careful consideration in remaking. The essence should be retained and the round characters and climax should be highlighted while the flat characters and routines should be neglected. The five-scene *Romeo and Juliet* could be arranged like the Chinese traditional opera highlights (折子戏), and the impressive ending of flying butterflies in *The Butterfly Lovers* could be added in the remaking when Romeo and Juliet died together for love. However, the Chinese audience may not catch the plot and structure at ease through these highlights. It is necessary to adopt the Western style to give informative descriptions and commentary during the performance.

Characters

The traditional characters in Yue opera are based on the traditional figures in feudal society, and are simply “good” or “bad”, which are fixed from the beginning to the end. However, we appreciate complexity in the characters (for example, their struggle in making choices and fighting against the feudal bondage), a theme that touches our hearts, and something that resonates in Shakespearean plays. Deep exploration of the characters in *Romeo and Juliet* is required. Romeo gave up Roselyn when he saw Juliet; Juliet gave up Paris for the love of Romeo. They fell in love despite of the family feud and tied the knot bravely. However, in *The Butterfly Lovers*, LIANG Shan-bo and ZHU Ying-tai were trapped in the feudal rituals and restrained their deep love towards each other. Compared with ZHU Ying-tai’s repressed undermeaning on the 18 courses on her way home escorted by LIANG Shan-bo (十八相送), Juliet sincerely and frankly confessed her love on the balcony the night she saw her Romeo while Romeo broke into Juliet’s house and climbed up to the balcony merely to hug his love. What’s more, different from Chinese obedient nurses, Juliet’s nurse serves as a bridge between the lovers and she is a liberal and enlightened figure to be liked by all. Therefore, a meticulous comparison and analysis on psychology of the characters is necessary. The theatrical convention of aside and soliloquy in both Shakespearean drama and Yue opera are critical means to shape the characters, and the synthesis of singing, reciting, and dancing in Yue opera will help to build the images as well.

Language

Shakespeare is a master of the English language and his plays are written in prose and verse. He often places verse in noble men and arranges prose for the uneducated servants. In *Romeo and Juliet*, there are plenty of poetic lines; some are rhymed verses, and some are blank ones. Likewise, the language of Yue opera is like melody, full of seven-word sentences (七字句) and ten-word sentences (十字句). So the poetic Shakespearean language could be interwoven with the Yue opera language. Nevertheless, there are lots of puns, slang, and paronomasia in Shakespearean dramas that can not be replaced by adoptable Chinese expressions. And the humor in the Western context can not be appropriated in the Chinese context easily. So, it is a great challenge to the translation, which is supposed to be faithful to the original content and the “tone” (the spirit, the implication, the meter, the rhyme, etc.).

In addition, we should be aware of the differences in the expression of love: Westerners tend to be romantic and outward while Chinese are more conserved. Juliet fell in love with Romeo at first sight and asked her nurse to

ask for his name, “If he be married, my grave is like to be my wedding bed” (Evans, 2010, p. 100). Then, when she knew Romeo was a Montague, she cried, “My only love sprung from my only hate, too early seen unknown and known too late. Prodigious birth of love it is to me that I must love a loathed enemy” (Evans, 2010, p. 101). Differently, in *The Butterfly Lovers*, LIANG Shan-bo and ZHU Ying-tai lived and studied together for three years. But LIANG Shan-bo did not realize ZHU Ying-tai was a female and ZHU Ying-tai only suggested her love by pointing to a couple of mapies (birds that symbolize love and happiness in China).

Culture

The Western theatre and the Chinese one all stem from the religious ceremony. However, due to the different cultural context, the Shakespearean drama is philosophical while Yue opera is expressive. Furthermore, the Shakespearean drama represents the western spirit, character, custom, etc., in the Renaissance England which is quite different from that of the feudal China. Both *Romeo and Juliet* and *The Butterfly Lovers* are tragedies on love and death. But the cultural differences lead to the characters’ different behaviors, which reflect the different cultural background and national psychology.

In addition, there are many artistic features in Yue opera, as well as in other Chinese traditional operas. The most well-known is the type of roles (行当), which is fixed and formalized. For example, the clown always has a white spot painted on his/her nose. This facial make-up (脸谱) is an indicator of the character’s type of role. And the clown is supposed to make comic gestures and remarks, serving the stage function of entertainment, adjustment, and remonstrance. Every character in Chinese traditional operas has a corresponding type of role. However, this unitary type of roles is not appropriate for some of the complex and flexible characters in the Shakespearean drama. The combination of some types of roles is required. For example, Juliet’s nurse corresponds to the old, staid and composed female type of role (老旦), as well as the funny and exaggerated female go-between—a kind of clown (彩婆) in Yue opera.

Moreover, hair-swinging dance (甩发), long sleeves dance (水袖), the fan work (扇子功), foot coverlet (腿毯功), artificial whiskers’ work (髯口功), and martial arts (把子功) are all characteristic Chinese elements which could be applied reasonably in the remaking of *Romeo and Juliet*.

Conclusion

The Shakespearean drama is the heritage of the whole world and is closely related to the life of the common people. Shakespeare’s insight into the generality and individuality of the human beings transcends space and time. In China, traditional operas are widely spread among people from all walks of life, which offer possibilities of the national remaking and popularization of the Shakespearean drama. By comparing the Shakespearean drama with the traditional Chinese opera, this thesis focuses on the remaking of *Romeo and Juliet* in the form of Yue opera, applying the methodology of medio-translatology. The remake adopts the western style while adding the Chinese touches, which broadens the research on both Western and Chinese theatre while promoting cross-cultural communication.

References

- Erne, L., & Kidnie, M. (2004). *Textual performances—The modern reproduction of Shakespeare’s drama*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Evans, G. (2010). *Romeo and Juliet* (pp. 100-101). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- CAO, S. (2002). *The spring of Shakespeare in China*. Shanghai: Tianma Publishing House.
- CAO, S. J., & SUN, F. L. (1994). *Shakespeare on the Chinese stage*. Harbin: Harbin Press.
- HE, C. Z. (2012). *Globalization and intercultural theatre*. Nanjing: Nanjing University Press.
- LAN, F. (2008). *Comparative studies on Western and Chinese theatres*. Shanghai: XueLin Publishing House.
- LI, W. M. (2009). *Shakespeare in the Chinese and Western cultural contents*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.
- LU, A. (2000). *Comparative studies on Western and Eastern theatres*. Shanghai: Shanghai Social Science Press.
- SUN, Y. N. (2010). *Shakespeare in China*. Kaifeng: Henan University Press.
- XIE, T. Z. (1999). *Medio-translatology*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.