Being a Rebel: Translating Against the "Official" Peking Opera Translations

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Abstract:

Most recently, as China seeks to promote national identity and nation branding, the Peking Opera has been promoted as a critical art form closely tied to conceptions of national identity. Therefore, the Chinese government makes a considerable effort in promoting an "official" model of translating Peking Opera plays. However, the "official" translations do not guarantee a high quality of popularising Peking Opera abroad. The primary issue is that Chinese officials responsible for state-sponsored cultural programmes insist on a policy of protectionism, which overlooks the fact that the classics must be enlivened by the impact of interpretative and adaptive processes within a theatre translation, to render the play performable on a stage in a different time and space. Arising from this, this article talks about the limitations of the Chinese "official" translations of Peking Opera by analysing one specific translation, Farewell My Concubine in the series: English Translation Series of A Hundred Peking Opera Classics, which are sponsored by Chinese government and led by Chinese scholars, by which to improve the current translation practices further and render the translation of the play can function in performance.

Keywords: Peking Opera, translation for performance, "official", ***Farewell My Concubine***

1. Introduction

Peking Opera is a Chinese stage art that is commonly regarded as a cultural product embodying "Chineseness" in the eyes of the Chinese government (Thorpe, 2013). As China seeks to promote national identity and nation branding, the Peking Opera has been promoted as a critical art form closely tied to conceptions of national identity. Therefore, the English Translation Series of A Hundred Peking Opera Classics programme was launched with government support to provide "official" translations based on a scientific model.

However, the Chinese government's sponsorship does not guarantee a high quality of popularising Peking Opera abroad. The primary issue is that Chinese officials responsible for state-sponsored cultural programmes insist on a policy of protectionism, or cultural 'safeguarding' (Xu and Johnston, 2022).

Arising from this, the article talks about the limitations of the Chinese "official" translations by analysing one specific translation, Farewell My Concubine in the series, and conclude that the classics must necessarily be enlivened by the impact of the interpretative and adaptational processes within a theatre translation to render the play performable onto a stage in a different time and space.

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2. China's "Official" Peking Opera Translation

2.1 Peking Opera and its Chinese identity

Peking Opera is a blend of theatre and opera, featuring performance codifications that differ significantly from those commonly found in the Anglophone theatre system (Zhang, 2021). Such is the degree of codification that it is argued that this form, so closely linked to articulations of classical Chinese identity (Evans, 2011), can only be understood as a theatre form by those who have studied it either on the page or on stage. The keyword here is 'understood', because what these cultural authorities in China are seeking to elaborate is a translation model that ensures foreign audiences understand the form rather than its intrinsic performability.

The reason for this is the clear status of Peking Opera in China: Peking Opera is widely regarded as one of the most representative forms of Chinese art, hence its reputation as the "quintessence of Chinese culture" (Xiao and Xiong, 2016). This sense of Chinese identity, or in some Chinese scholars' words, its "Chineseness" is intrinsically bound to what it seen as the "uniqueness" of the form, both formal and in terms of the classical Chinese stories it retells (Cao, 2011), so that Peking Opera becomes a key element within nation-branding (Goldstein, 2007). Put simply, in a China where the ancient past and its classical forms are considered both reflections and key determinants of the contemporary country, Peking Opera is generally regarded as the most refined and intricate of the various formal variations encompassed under the umbrella term Chinese opera.

It is under this canopy that Peking Opera and its translation, in which the form – the codifications or other elements that contribute to the aesthetic complexity – are safeguarded, are protected by both the Chinese government and many Chinese scholars (Fu, 2018; Huaxia, 2021). Their central tool in this safeguarding – the reasons for which this article will outline shortly – is the development of a "scientific" model of translation, to which all translators would conform. In other words, at the heart of this gatekeeping is the desire to ensure that Peking opera is translated in an optimal way that seeks to maintain the sameness of performance.

2.2 The incurrence of the "official" translation

Although this article focuses on the "official" translations of Peking Opera, the word "official" is always in quotes because it is fairly baffling in the context of translation for performance, a field concerned with the specific coordinates of an audience, the here and now context in which performance takes place. In other words, one can easily pose a question about whether it is meaningful to brand a translation as official; that it has somehow been done, once again in quotes, "the right way".

The Chinese authorities and professionals are not so ignorant as to overlook the confusion that the "official" translations can cause; so, what is their logic behind doing this? Over the last two decades, particularly in recent years, China has sought to strengthen its national economic position by promoting national identity and, in essence, nation branding (Tian, 2023). Peking Opera has been simultaneously promoted and protected as a key art form closely tied to conceptions of national identity (Evans, 2012), with state lobbying contributing to its inclusion on the UNESCO list of Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2010 (Wang, 2018). The 2015 government document, "Policies on Supporting the Inheritance and

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Development of Traditional Chinese Operas," shows how the Chinese government is attempting to both sponsor and sustain the process of re-popularising classical Chinese theatres (The State Council of the PRC). From the policy, we can see that Peking Opera plays are to be translated as part of an aspiration to spread Chinese culture as a key element within the country's attempts to garner soft power; however, there is no indication that making the plays work on foreign stages is a concern. The official policy reflects a determination that Peking Opera should be performed by Chinese troupes and its "Chineseness" and "the ancient China flavour" should be protected as an untouchable component of any stage performance. This intention is reflected in the Belt and Road Initiative, whose mission statement reads: "The stories of China should be well told, voices of China well spread, and characteristics of China well explained" (Xu, 2025); through this the construction of China's cultural soft power might be strengthened, and Chinese identity be preserved in the age of globalization.

3. The Invalidity of the "Official" Translation

In this context, that of China's image building and the expansion of Chinese soft power, the most potentially far-reaching and the most ambitious to date Chinese-written translation project, English Translation Series of A Hundred Peking Opera Classics programme, coordinated by two top Chinese universities, was launched in 2011 (Wang, 2012). The Chinese government also supported this project financially and provided facilities, and an official government event was held to celebrate the launch of this series. A host of domestic and foreign guests were invited to the Diaoyutai State, a diplomatic complex in Beijing, where the Chinese state leadership offers receptions to visiting foreign dignitaries (Jia and Li, 2015). During the event, ceremonial gifts of books were presented to foreign ambassadors.

Interestingly, one of the foreign guests told journalists that he greatly enjoyed Peking Opera and believed that China should protect the culture of Peking Opera as the country expanded economically (Jia and Li, 2015). The use of the word "protect" here is striking: the ambassador was perhaps being characteristically diplomatic. For the Chinese government, however, the idea of protection is underpinned by a very serious narrative that has at its heart the concept of intangible heritage in its most literal sense – that of the untouchable. This official approach is echoed in the work of many contemporary Chinese scholars, who argue that Peking Opera and other traditional Chinese theatres should be performed exclusively in the Chinese language to avoid the inevitably interventionist effects of contemporary stage translation (Cao, 2015). Peking Opera translators tend, therefore, to be specialists assigned by the Chinese government or foreign sinologists whose academic concern is that of protecting the original from translation as a writing practice that inevitably traffics in difference.

On the one hand, there is a significant tradition of Western cultural appropriation of Chinese writing, often through racial stereotyping (Morrison, 2010), which was the accusation levelled at the Royal Shakespeare Company for its production of The Orphan of Zhao in 2012. The overt appropriation can be a partial excuse for China's state control, but such official sponsorship, constituting as it does the explicit cultural strand of a nation-branding strategy, is a translation of studii et imperii for our times. Paradoxically, the more challenging a form is, such as Peking Opera, which is, as we've seen, characterised by a complex of integrated performance codes, the more complex a response is required from the theatre translator. Tony Harrison, a renowned translator of classical Greek and Roman works,

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argues that classical texts often arrive at us in a form that hinders their effective staging (Hall, 2007). They need to be rendered workable on the contemporary stage through the interpretive and adaptive processes of theatre translation, by which the play can be performed in a different time and space.

Tradition in this conception is a flow rather than a stagnant pool. In the case of Peking Opera, an emphasis on traditional codification as an unchanging essence has resulted in turgid "official" translations, which are oblivious to the contingent conditions of specific productions. The reliance of such translations on spurious notions of "uniqueness" and "Chineseness" has, ironically, turned these translations into trophy outputs rather than working pieces of theatre.

4. Case Study of the "Official" Translation

Besides the disagreeable mindset of treating one version of translations as "official", the end product of the translation is de facto hard to regard as a "textbook" standard. To elaborate, this article draws on examples from the translation of Farewell My Concubine in the Hundred Translations project – the so-called "scientific model" for translating classical Chinese opera, which prioritises understanding of the source over dramatic intensity or theatrical stage-worthiness. In other words, this is a translation written through a strategy of preservation rather than extension.

> Excerpt One
>
> Xiang Yu (speaks) What did you say?
>
> Stable boy A (speaks) The flagstaff has been broken by the wind
>
> Xiang Yu (speaks) Aiya! (xipiyaoban) Suddenly a gust from a storm wind arose Why did it break the flagstaff? The horse Wuzhui is neighing and refusing to go onward (speaks) Yu (xipiyaoban) Neighing loudly, it is trembling all over
>
> (Sun, 2012)

The excerpt illustrates a characteristic issue with this entire set of translations, in that the source text's classical Chinese is rendered in a distinctly archaic style of English, deemed perhaps more suitable for the perceived high culture of the form. The word 'flagstaff', for example, is chosen over the more commonly used flagpole. It is a small example, but when taken in conjunction with other self-consciously poeticising discourses – such as the bedroom routinely becoming "boudoir", for instance – the stage language effectively distances a new audience from the emotional resonance of the tragedy unfolding before them. This reflects the Chinese performance system today, where classical theatre, once popular in its time, is increasingly perceived as elitist, leading to a concomitant crisis of audience intelligibility. In other words, when attending a Peking Opera performance, the spectators are fully aware that they are about to see a performance spoken in classical Chinese, which is increasingly challenging. There is, of course, a parallel with Shakespeare here, in the way contemporary English-speaking audiences find his English challenging, while the transformative processes of translation can bring his work to new audiences in fresh ways.

However, to be clear, this article does not advocate a domesticating approach to translation. It is essential that the flavour of the original context, its place within Chinese history, is preserved. Of

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course, theatre is perfectly capable of creating hybrid worlds that allow audiences to travel through the medium of rich stage languages. However, in this excerpt, the word "Yu" is confusing semantically and in terms of its English homonym, "You". It is a sound from the distant past, in Chinese, when people wanted to stop or control a horse. Peking Opera is not a naturalistic art form, so the horse, like any other physical element within the story, is suggested through a delicate performance metonymy. Performers evoke the horse through the use of a fringed baton, suggesting a horsewhip, indicating the actor is riding a horse (though the actor does not make any action of riding) (Zhang and Zou, 2023). In other words, much of the complicity that Peking Opera achieves with its audiences lies in the way in which spectators collude to complete imagined stage actions. 'Yu' in this sense is a stage sense that, in English translation, is rendered virtually meaningless.

Excerpt Two

Xiang Yu (speaks) Waiyaya!

Yuji (speaks) Give me the sword. Be quick!

Xiang Yu (speaks) Never! Impossible!

Yuji (speaks) The songs of the Chu Kingdom are heard again, Your Highness!

Xiang Yu (speaks) Let me listen to them

Yuji (speaks) All right!

Xiang Yu (speaks) Aiya!

(Sun, 2012)

Again, words such as "Waiyaya" and "Aiya" are unintelligible in English, whereas in Chinese performance, these sounds are closely connected with the generation of stage emotion. The reason why Chinese performers adopt the "a" sound as one of the most common ways of expressing particularly male emotion is that the "a" sound is more consistent with the vocalising method of the male characters; also, in Peking Opera, it is customary to prolong certain sounds, and the "a" sound is easily extended – "wayaya" (Wichmann and Ma, 2015), yet none of this works in English. The lack of intratextual thickening, likely in the form of performance notes or stage directions, makes it challenging to leave space for new practitioners to decide how they wish to express the emotions and feelings of the characters for their audiences.

5. Conclusion

What is clear is that there are limitations in the "official" version of the translation of Farewell My Concubine. This is not to ignore the good intentions of these cultural gatekeepers in relaunching Peking Opera to new audiences, in a way that is tailored for non-Chinese speaking practitioners and audiences. But the failure to offer performable translations of what is one of the world's greatest repertoires of masterpieces unknown outside China, the failure to understand the translational mindset of writing forward for actors to speak to audiences more familiar with the Anglophone theatre system, these central failures will unavoidably lead to the translation being unable to function in performance.

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Ironically, given official insistence on understanding the source, it will be unintelligible as a piece of performance art in its own right.

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