

Chaotic Representation: Translating Gender in Cantonese Opera Performances

Authors : Kar Yue Chan

Abstract : Cantonese opera is a valuable heritage originated from South China, and started to span its influence across the area to Hong Kong, and became extremely popular back in the 1950s to the 1970s. It has also been honoured and recognized as one treasurable item on the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity on the Representative List of UNESCO since 2009. A certain level of difficulty is encountered when one identifies the gender roles and representations from a usual performance of Cantonese opera, as conventional practices of Cantonese opera display to the audience that many of the male hero roles are played by female upon the prior knowledge of all audience, and it is understandable for them as well because in the past there were insufficient male actors and performers on the market. Female actresses, in some senses, are more capable to sing near-male voices, and their appearances in heroic operatic attires are more appreciated by general audience. Therefore, perspectives of 'feminine representation' and the 'Reception Theory' in literature are conducive to analyzing such phenomenon. In spite of some 'normal' performances with romantic love stories or historical accounts involving often a talented intellectual and a beautiful wise lady (in Chinese caizi jiaren 才子佳人), in which the male role is actually male and the female role is actually female, there have still been some opera titles specifically manifesting these extreme gender associations by putting together displacement of gender roles in the same performance in view of such chaotic complication. On top of all other factors, translators dealing with any operatic texts face plenty of challenges upon transferring Cantonese operatic performances into English. It is found that translators need to deal with cultural elements embedded in the lyrics; the form (which is as delicate as those deriving from classical Chinese poetry); the gender misplacements that affect the mood and tone of the lyrics that much when they are in the process of translating. Some lyrics and tunes are specifically designed for a particular gender role to perform, while some others are more generic; both of which require different and specific translation strategies. After scrutinizing the various sources of reference, readers of this paper should be well informed of a significance which lies in the refined nature of the poetic form and content that signifies in the way the distinguished gender voice segregation of the discourse from which the lyrics are derived, and definitely also through the on-stage performability aspect of the task. In order to produce a relatively short and concise translated version which fits performance needs, all of the above factors will be looked at in this paper with relevant examples and analysis.

Keywords : Cantonese opera, translation, chaotic gender, performance

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