

# Theatrical Hybridity, Thy Name Is Conflict: A Case Study on Holo Taiwanese Opera Troupe's *Tai Tzu Fu Chou (The Prince's Vengeful Plan)*

CHEN Jui-sung

Mingdao University, Changhua, Taiwan

LEE Shin-yi

China Medical University, Taichung, Taiwan

Holo Taiwanese Opera Troupe has produced a series of intercultural performances in Taiwanese Opera since the troupe adapted Nikolai Vasilievich Gogol's (1809-1852) *The Government Inspector* in 1996. In fact, there is a huge controversy over these intercultural performances which fuse western drama with traditional Taiwanese performing art because such a kind of theatrical hybridity lacks the spirit of the original and damages the aesthetics of native performing art practice. In 2002, Holo adapted William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* into a six-hour-long performance, *Tai Tzu Fu Chou (The Prince's Vengeful Plan)*, which the troupe tried to explore new source for traditional Taiwanese Opera and expected to bring something new to Taiwanese audience. However, *The Prince's Vengeful Plan* is considered "cultural collage" as well as an unsuccessful intercultural performance. Besides, *The Prince's Vengeful Plan* is accused to blaspheme Shakespeare because the performance merely maintains the frame of the original and distorts the spirit of the original. According to Rustom Bharucha, the most problematic aspect of intercultural performance is "de-historicizing tendency", and such a condition explains why Holo's *The Prince's Vengeful Plan* cannot transcend the original. In order to detect the problems of intercultural adaptation in Holo's *The Prince Vengeful Plan*, we cover the related issues in three aspects: (1) to discuss the development of Taiwanese Opera in Taiwan; (2) to explore the cultural conflicts when the text of the source culture is adapted into the performance of the target culture; and (3) to see how and why the spirit and aesthetics of Shakespeare's verses in *Hamlet* are distorted in Holo's theatrical adaptation. After that, we expect to conclude the impossibility of adapting Shakespeare's play into traditional Taiwanese Opera in the case of Holo's *The Prince's Vengeful Plan*.

*Keywords:* intercultural performance, Taiwanese Opera, theatrical hybridity, cultural collage, cultural conflict, Shakespeare

## Introduction

In 2002, Holo Taiwanese Opera Troupe adapted William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* into a six-hour-long intercultural performance, *Tai Tzu Fu Chou (The Prince's Vengeful Plan)*, which Pao-hui Chen (陈宝惠), the adaptor, tried to explore a new content for reviving the declining traditional Taiwanese Opera. As for *The*

*Prince's Vengeful Plan*, it is the third time for Holo Taiwanese Opera Troupe to adapt western drama into Taiwanese Opera, and such a kind of theatrical hybridity has caused a lot of controversies since the troupe adapted Nikolai Vasilievich Gogol's *The Government Inspector* in 1996. Holo's intercultural performances in Taiwanese Opera are considered, according to Patrice Pavis, "cultural collage" accused to blaspheme the original all the time. In order to detect the problems of Holo's intercultural performances, this paper focuses on examining *The Prince's Vengeful Plan* and discusses the related issues in three aspects: (1) to reevaluate the development of traditional Taiwanese Opera and to see how and why Holo Taiwanese Opera Troupe developed its intercultural Taiwanese Opera; (2) to explore the cultural conflicts when the text of the source culture is adapted into the intercultural performance of the target culture; and (3) to see how and why the spirit and the verses of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* are distorted in Holo's theatrical adaptation. After that, Lee and I conclude Holo's *The Prince's Vengeful Plan* in Taiwanese Opera considered cultural collage merely appropriates the sources of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* instead of giving the original new life.

### The Development of Traditional Taiwanese Opera in Taiwan

In our observation, the development of Taiwanese Opera can be observed in four stages: (1) the initial stage in the 17th century; (2) the development of Taiwanese Opera in the Japanese Era; (3) the period that the Kuomintang Government came to Taiwan after 1949; and (4) the decline of Taiwanese Opera after 1985. According to Su-Shang Lu (呂訴上), Taiwanese Opera, the only performing art originated in Taiwan, has absorbed different styles of formal Chinese operas, such as Peking Opera, Luan-Tan Opera (亂彈戲), Si-Ping Opera (四平戲), Li-Yuan Opera (梨園戲), and Gao-Jia Opera (高甲戲). The forerunner of Taiwanese Opera is Jin-Ge (錦歌) which was brought to Taiwan by Fujian immigrants in 1624.<sup>1</sup> After Jin-Ge was brought to Taiwan, it started to transform into a local ballad in Yi-Lan County. Initially, the ballads were sung by men and women in the country or village. Later, the composers of the ballads started to add some plots for the songs, and singers also had acting, makeup, and costumes to enrich the performances. After the ballads were turned out to be an opera, they were seen in the ceremony of the rituals in Taiwanese temples all the time. After that, the opera became popular and was formally performed on the stage in Taiwan. According to Lu, the first Taiwanese Opera was *Chen San and Wu Niang* (陳三五娘), and the second one was a well-known romance *The Butterfly Lover* (梁山伯與祝英台). After the performances, Taiwanese Opera gradually flourished, and several people also started to organize the opera troupes and toured in temple fairs in Taiwan.

The development of Taiwanese Opera was framed in Japanese Occupation Era (1895-1945). In 1937, the Second Sino-Japanese War took place, and the Japanese Colonial Government devoted its efforts to the *Kominka* Movement (*Kominka undo*) and tried to take theatre troupes as political propaganda. According to Lu, the Japanese Colonial Government forbade Taiwanese to study native languages of *Han* people because the Japanese authority wanted to brainwash Taiwanese to be loyal to the Japanese emperor. Taiwanese Opera full of local colors was definitely not allowed to be performed in public, but it was impossible for the Japanese colonial Government to ban this performing art which was deeply rooted in Taiwanese's minds. Aware that it was impossible to forbid the performances of Taiwanese Opera, the Japanese authority tried to "manage" or "control"

<sup>1</sup> Jin-Ge is a kind of music tune which can be sung in five or seven words, and it was very popular in Chang Chou (漳州).

these Taiwanese Opera Troupes. As a matter of fact, the more bans the Japanese authority wanted to interfere in the development of Taiwanese Opera, the more creativities Taiwanese Opera showed at that time.

After the Japanese Colonial Government surrendered and withdrew from Taiwan, the development of traditional Taiwanese Opera encountered another political oppression when the Kuomintang Government came to Taiwan in 1945. The Kuomintang Government, like what the Japanese Colonial Government had done before, employed Taiwanese Opera as political propaganda to broadcast the ideology of Anti-Communism and Anti-Russia. Such a condition had the themes of Taiwanese Opera were restricted to “political correctness”. For example, the Association of Taiwanese Opera Reformation (台灣歌仔戲改進會) had a Taiwanese Opera Troupe, *Lung Feng She* (龍鳳社), produce a new opera, *Yan Ping Wang Fu Kuo* (Prince of Yanping Recovered the Lost Territory of His Motherland/延平王復國), which implied that the Kuomintang government would recover the Mainland China some day. Later, the development of traditional Taiwanese Opera was influenced not only by the Kuomintang’s political propaganda but also by Peking Opera brought by the KMT Government. When the Kuomintang Government withdrew from the Mainland China, many Peking Opera troupes came to Taiwan and brought their performing skills to Taiwanese Opera singers as well. Under the influence of Peking Opera, the performing skills and the contents of Taiwanese Opera transformed as well.<sup>2</sup> However, the development of Taiwanese Opera started to decline because of the rise of mass media, such as broadcasts and TV programs. The worst of all, the lack of creative contents had the development of Taiwanese Opera decline in the 1970s.

In 1985, Chung-yuan Liu (劉鐘元), the founder of Holo Taiwanese Opera Troupe, had the performance of Taiwanese Opera in the broadcast show produce on TV. At the very beginning, Holo Taiwanese Troupe aimed at producing courtroom dramas. During the 1990s, Holo Taiwanese Opera Troupe guided by Yung-yi Tseng (曾永義), a Taiwanese scholar, produced a series of “Elaborate Taiwanese Opera”. According to Tseng, “elaborate” Taiwanese Opera concerns about six things, including the themes that conform to unconventional patterns, the well-knot plots, the spectacular stage designs, the witty language of the play scripts, the multiple musical tones, and the performers’ remarkable skills. After 2000, the troupe started to produce operas which concerned about the history of local Taiwan; meanwhile, the troupe also adapted western dramas into Taiwanese Opera to enrich the performances, such as *Imperial Envoy* (1996) adapted from Gogol’s *The Government Inspector*, *A Love Story of Love and Feud* (2001) adapted from William Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*, and *The Prince’s Vengeful Plan* (*Tai Tzu Fu Chou*, 2002) adapted from *Hamlet*. These theatrical adaptations definitely have enriched the contents of traditional Taiwanese Opera, but these adaptors have caused lots of controversies in postmodern Taiwanese operatic performances. In order to detect this issue, Lee and I take Holo’s *The Prince’s Vengeful Plan* as an example and examine the cultural conflicts between Holo’s adaptation and the original in the following section.

### **The Cultural Conflict Between Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* and Holo’s Adaptation**

In modern Taiwanese theatres and operas, there have been a lot of Shakespearean adaptations, but most of them are regarded as “cultural collage”. According to Rustom Bharucha, the main reason that these

<sup>2</sup> Performing skills of Peking Opera are called four skills and five methods (四功五法). Four skills are *chang* (唱/singing), *nien* (唸/chanting), *tso* (做/acting), and *ta* (打/stage combat). Five methods are *shou* (手/hand), *yen* (眼/eye), *shen* (身/body), *pu* (步/step), and *fa* (法/style).

Shakespearean adaptations regarded as cultural collage is related to the adaptors who arbitrarily distort the spirit of the origin text without concerning about the importance of the historical or cultural context of the source culture. In this section, we compare Holo's *The Prince's Vengeful Plan* with the original, Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, and see the problem of the cultural exchange between the source and the target culture.

As mentioned earlier, the themes of Taiwanese Opera influenced by traditional Chinese Operas can be mainly divided into four categories: loyalty, filial piety, integrity, and justice. Besides, Taiwanese Opera influenced by Chinese Operas has to apply their skills, such as singing, chanting, acting, and stage combat, to the performance. In the contrast with Taiwanese Opera, Shakespeare's play is a different kind of performing genre composed of blank verses. Because Taiwanese Opera and Shakespeare's spoken drama are different performing genres and share different cultural backgrounds, it is difficult to translate or adapt Shakespeare's play into Taiwanese Opera faithfully. In 1987, John Y. H. Hu indicated a similar problem when Shakespeare's *Macbeth* was adapted into the Contemporary Legend Theatre's *The Kingdom of Desire* (1986). Hu indicates,

Except for the negligence of the adapters, the conflicts of the theatrical hybridity are due to the great differences between these two performing genres... Peking Opera performers have to spend a lot of time on employing the skills of singing, acting, chanting, and stage combat, to stage *The Kingdom of Desire*. Even though the adapters attempt to present *Macbeth* faithfully, it is inevitable for them to cut the lines and even cast of the original. (Hu, 1987, p. 80)

Such a condition can be detected in Holo's *The Prince Vengeful Plan* as well. The tempos of Taiwanese Opera are slower than those in Shakespeare's spoken drama, and that is why Holo produced a six-hour-long performance in the case of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.

As for the de-historicizing tendency, the adapter of Holo's *The Prince's Vengeful Plan* ignores the importance of historical context of the original and its adaptation and arbitrarily sets up the background of the play in the unknown period in ancient Chinese society. Bharucha even indicates,

There may be rules for the understanding of "other" cultures, but these cannot be assumed through more readings of ethnographies and anthropological accounts by "experts"... I suppose that if one wants to understand another culture, there is no way out but to live there for long periods of time. (Bharucha, 1993, p. 155)

Holo's adapted *Hamlet* exposes the deep problem that the adaptor ignores the important meaning of culture background for the source and the target culture in the process of cultural exchange. In the original, Shakespeare based *Hamlet* on *Amleth* and set up time and space in the court of Denmark; however, the adapter of Holo's *The Prince's Vengeful Plan* could not specify the exact time and space and put the historical background of the whole story in the court of ancient Chinese society. In fact, Shakespeare's *Hamlet* has nothing to do with any related Chinese tales, and the adapter merely appropriates Shakespeare's story and revises it in her theatrical adaptation. Besides, the process of adapting the original text has the statuses of the source culture and the text of the target culture becomes unequal because the adapter can arbitrarily appropriate the elements of the source culture without concerning about the significance of its historical or cultural contexts. For example, the Denmark court and ancient Chinese court share different cultural backgrounds. In the western society, King's brother could inherit the whole kingdom after the death of the old king. However, such a condition was rarely seen in ancient Chinese society because the prince was the righteous inheritor of the kingdom. Thus, it's the first fault for Holo's adapter to place Shakespeare's *Hamlet* in ancient Chinese society. Besides, it is impossible for the new Chinese

emperor to marry the old emperor's widow because such a condition was hardly seen in the oriental culture, especially in feudal ancient Chinese society.

### **Distorting Shakespeare**

As mentioned above, restricted by four major themes of Chinese Operas, Taiwanese Opera can not faithfully present the highlights of the complicated structure Shakespeare's plays; instead, these theatrical adaptation or hybridity even "simplify" the original text. In the case of Holo's *The Prince's Vengeful Plan*, it merely maintains the structure of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, and the spirit and the poetry of the original are damaged as well. In Taiwanese Opera, the performers have to employ lots of time on singing, acting, chanting, and doing stage combat instead of speaking their lines, and that is why many details would be cut in the processes of theatrical adaptation. Furthermore, when Holo produced *The Prince Vengeful Plan* in Taiwanese Opera, the content is restricted in four major themes and the multiple layers of the original would be unavoidable simplified at the same time. In order to fit in traditional Chinese culture, the adapter added unrelated plots to rationalize or beautify the whole story. For instance, Ophelia drowned because she believed that she was deserted by Hamlet in the original, but in *The Prince's Vengeful Plan*, Shuei-lian He (賀水蓮), the Ophelia figure, becomes a water goddess after she suicides herself in the pond. Such a condition beautifies the plot of the death of Ophelia, but the plot has nothing to do with the development of the whole story.

As far as the distortion of the original in the case of Holo's adaptation is concerned, the ending of *The Prince's Vengeful Plan* is problematic because it ends up "poetic justice". In *Hamlet*, Hamlet and Laertes have the game of playing foils, and Hamlet and Laertes hurt each other in the duel. As a matter of fact, Hamlet died because he was hurt by a venomous foil. However, in Holo's adaptation, the prince survives, and the prince avenges his father against his uncle successfully and becomes a new emperor at last. Such an arrangement of the ending of Holo's adaptation is close to tragicomedy of traditional Chinese plays because the protagonist does not die for his tragic flaw. Obviously, the ending of Holo's adaptation is totally different from the tragic ending of the original because the Prince Huai-te Tuan (段懷德) seemingly suffers from the death of his girlfriend and his mother, but he successfully avenges his father against his vicious uncle and inherits the kingdom at last. In traditional Chinese theatre, such an ending can be regarded as a happy ending because all the villains are punished and the good win their awards at last. In Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, the audience would show their sympathy to the death of Hamlet because Hamlet suffers from his dilemma of killing or not killing his uncle; however, audience's perception of "pity and fear" in Holo's *The Prince's Vengeful Plan* would have descended because the protagonist who should be a tragic hero survives at last.

### **Conclusion**

As mentioned previously, Holo's *The Prince's Vengeful Plan* merely maintains the frames of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. In order to have the storyline of Holo's adaptation complete, the adapter has to cut several scenes and even adds new plots to the performance. Besides, it is seemingly impossible for the adapter to translate the poetry of Shakespeare's play faithfully because the adapter has to concern about the lyrics which can be sung in traditional Taiwanese Opera. In fact, it is unavoidable for the adapter or the translator to revise or even rewrite the script for its performance. On the one hand, this theatrical hybridity enriches the contents of descending

traditional Taiwanese Opera. On the other hand, Holo's intercultural performance of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* exposes the problem of the limitation in adapting western theatre into traditional Taiwanese Opera. Thus, we conclude that adapting Shakespeare's *Hamlet* into Holo's *The Prince's Vengeful Plan* is unsuccessful because they are incomparable performing gamers because they share different cultural backgrounds and the adaptor ignores the importance of cultural contexts in the process of cultural exchange.

### References

- Bharucha, R. (1993). *Theatre and the world: Performance and the politics of culture*. London: Routledge.
- Chang, C. (Director). Wang, C. Y., Kuo, C. M., & Shih, H. C. (Performers). (2002). *Tai Tzu Fu Chou* (The Prince's Vengeful Plan) [DVD]. Taipei: Holo Taiwanese Opera Troupe.
- Chen, F. (2012). *Sha Hsi Chu: Kua Wen Hua Kai Pien Yu Yen Yi* (莎戲曲: 跨文化改編與演繹) (Shakespearean opera: Intercultural adaptations and interpretation). Taipei: National Taiwan Normal University Press.
- Chen, J. S. (2010). O, Shakespeare and Peking opera mixed, reason in madness: When Wu Hsing-kuo's autobiographical *King Lear* encounters with William Shakespeare's *King Lear*. *Shakespeare Review*, 46(2): 331-49.
- Chen, J. S., & Lee, S. Y. (2013). Who steals the magician's art?: Intercultural interpretation of the contemporary legend theatre's *The Tempest*. In D. Boswell (Ed.), *Interculturalism: Meaning and identity* (pp. 195-206). Oxford: Inter-Disciplinary Press.
- Chu, F. H. (2012). *Kua Wen Hua Hsi Chu Kai Pien Yen Chiu* (跨文化戲曲改編研究) (A study on intercultural adaptations of Chinese opera). Taipei: Kuo Chia.
- Hu, J. Y. H. (1987). A problem of adapting western theater into Peking Opera: Exemplified by *The Kingdom of Desire* (西方戲劇改編為平劇的問題: 以「慾望城國」為例). In *Chung-Wai literary monthly* (中外文學). Taipei: Taiwan University Press.
- Hu, J. Y. H. (1992). Adapting Shakespearean plays into Chinese opera: Pitfalls as exemplified by *Hamlet*. *Studies in Language and Literature*, 95-104.
- Huang, C. Y. A. (2009). *Chinese Shakespeare: Two centuries of cultural exchange*. Columbia: Columbia University Press.
- LI, R. (1988). Chinese traditional theatre and Shakespeare. *Asian Theatre Journal*, 38-48.
- LI, R. (2003). *Shasibiya: Staging Shakespeare in China*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.
- Lu, S. S. (1961). *A History of Cinema and Drama in Taiwan* (台灣電影戲劇史). Taipei: Yin-hua Publishing.
- Mackerras, C. (2008). Tradition, change, and continuity in Chinese theatre in the last hundred years: In commemoration of the spoken drama centenary. *Asian Theatre Journal*, 25(1), 1-23.
- Mackerras, C. (Ed.). (1983). *Chinese theatre: From its original to the present day*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
- Pavis, P. (1989). Problems of translation for the stage: Interculturalism and post-modern theatre. In H. Scolnicov and P. Holland (Eds.), *The play out of context: Transferring plays from culture to culture* (pp. 25-44). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Pavis, P. (1992). *Theatre at the crossroads of culture*. (L. Kruger, Trans.). London: Routledge.
- Pavis, P. (2003). *Analyzing performance: Theatre, dance, and film*. (D. Williams, Trans.). Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Pavis, P. (Ed.). (1996). *The intercultural performance reader*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Shakespeare, W. (1997). The tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark. In B. Evans (Ed.), *The Riverside Shakespeare* (2nd ed.) (pp. 1183-1245). Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.
- Tseng, Y. Y. (1988). *Tai Wan Ge Tzai Hu De Fa Jan Yu Bian Chian* (台灣歌仔戲的發展與變遷) (The development and change of Taiwanese opera). Taipei: Le Jin BKS.