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Rhetoricising and poeticising gender performativity in English translations of Cantonese opera

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Cantonese opera, as an item on the Intangible Cultural Heritage list, gained widespread popularity in Hong Kong from the 1930s to the 1980s. However, the limited translation of Cantonese opera into English from this period onwards has been rather fragmented. The small number of translators working in this area encounter challenges in managing huge differences in language, rhetoric, and culture. Literary and performance rhetoric should be examined in a gendered context while considering the intimate relationship between on-stage translation (i.e., surtitles) and the translation of printed opera libretti. Gender also plays an important role in translation strategies aimed at capturing various gendered rhetorical elements that convey vivid operatic effects. Following this principle, the renowned 'gender performativity' theory should be applied to any analysis of the rhetorical grids of the scripts. Translators of Cantonese opera into English should be particularly attentive to literary formats that resemble classical Chinese poetry, gender metaphors and performativity in the theatrical context, and the cultural elements that subtly penetrate the lines. The rhetoric in a libretto can be categorised into 'literary' and 'performance' concepts, and thus insights can be drawn from an analysis of how such gendered features should be rhetoricised and poeticised in translation, especially in terms of the classical Chinese poetic features and cultural elements within the text. Appropriate translation strategies must also be selected to accurately represent cultural nuances and capture the subtle differences in gendered representations.

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Introduction

The art of Cantonese opera originated in South China and was listed in the Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2009. It had a major influence on Hong Kong society from the 1930s to the 1980s. In the mid twentieth century, some enthusiasts already started to think about promoting this treasurable performing art to the global context by translating popular plays into English. However, Cantonese opera has only infrequently been translated into English since this time, and in a somewhat fragmented fashion. The very few translated versions of Cantonese opera libretti suggest that translators have tended to prioritise communicating the messages in the plays over any consideration of other aspects underlying the operatic lyrics. This approach is logical, as the majority of the audience are native speakers of Chinese (Cantonese) and are able to interpret the lyrics based on their understanding of issues they encounter in daily life. These local audience members may not be concerned about how the lyrics in the plays are translated, as they typically need not to refer to the English versions. Thus, there has been little impetus to create a complete collection of translated Cantonese operas. In addition, it may not be preferable for the lyrics to be translated into a singable version, as the constraints can be both musical and linguistic, and thus the results may well be unsatisfactory. However, transforming these performance texts into English is essential, as this will make them more accessible to a global audience, including those who do not speak fluent Chinese but who want to learn more about Chinese culture (especially classical culture). East-West cultural exchange and dialogue should be encouraged and facilitated by strengthening the sense of belonging among children of the Cantonese diaspora, attracting new enthusiasts, boosting international interest in the art form, and thus preserving the art itself for contemporary audiences both locally and overseas, especially the younger generation (including those of the diasporic community whose native language is Cantonese). What is more, given a general declining proficiency in the classical Chinese language, local bilingual audiences may not be aware that it may even be easier for them to understand the lyrics (and thus the essence of classical Chinese culture) when they are translated into English, as they have been written in classical Chinese with extensive cultural allusions and poetic rhetoric. To put this in a realistic scenario, working in the performing arts field can present translators and translation researchers with various difficulties: the few translators working in this area also encounter major challenges in terms of managing the huge differences in language, rhetoric, and culture, such as determining how 'to balance music and words and how to prioritise meaning over style. The truth is that retaining the meaning, the culture and the style all at once should be undoubtedly challenging, if not impossible at all' (Yuan and Qian, 2021, 46–47). Thus, balance appears to be the key, but this depends on the medium in which the opera lyrics are delivered and the types of audiences the translated versions are aimed at.

The differences in the reception and comprehension of the ideas conveyed in the narratives of the opera libretti are witnessed: the general audience for Cantonese opera performances can be divided into the older generation, who may only know the source language (i.e., Cantonese, which is their native language), and the younger generation, who aim to engage with both the original Cantonese culture and the new perspectives on it that have arisen from translations into English. Although such generational differences have been detrimental to the promotion of Cantonese opera in Western environments, more translated and adapted versions of specific operas have been made available in the last decade, and attempts to translate this genre into English have usually come in the forms of on-stage surtitles and complete libretti scripts. Surtitles help audiences comprehend the operatic

piece as it is performed, while script translations are often prepared for the benefit of researchers, translation students, operatic practitioners and musicians. However, the approaches to reading them are largely similar, as libretti pieces are basically composed of all surtitles along with detailed stage directions and Chinese musical notations. For easy reference, all of the textual examples discussed in this article are from various available Cantonese opera libretti, but as the surtitles projected onto the screen in real-life on-stage performances are extracted from the libretti with most of the stage directions excluded, the examples below are referred to as 'surtitles' when the translation is analysed from the performance aspect. Fragments of some of these plots are available online and through local Cantonese opera troupes and communities, and most of the examples quoted in this article are based on these sources.

The role of gender is also important in guiding translation strategies, which must capture various rhetorical and poetic elements that are designed to have vivid operatic effects. What I call 'gendered dialogues and lyrics' (those pertaining to the characteristics or aspects of gender) in Cantonese opera also signal gender roles, in the context of the unique practices of cross-dressing and cross-gender impersonation. These practices are not unusual in Cantonese opera and other forms of Chinese opera performances, and they serve to produce male roles played by women and vice versa (with the former called *nü wenwusheng* 女文武生 [male civilian roles played by actresses] and the latter *qiandan* 乾旦 [female roles played by male actors]). Thus, when translating Cantonese opera into English, translators should be attentive to literary formats that resemble classical Chinese poetry, gender metaphors and performativity in the theatrical context, and the cultural elements that subtly penetrate the lines. To focus on the gendered aspect of Cantonese opera libretti translation, the libretti sources can be considered to contain numerous facets of gender rhetoric from the feminine perspective, in terms of the storyline and/or within the lyrics. Appropriate translation strategies must be selected to accurately represent cultural nuances and capture the subtle differences involved in gendered representations.

As the structure of Cantonese opera is largely based on that of classical Chinese poetry, the compositional arrangements of the lyrics illustrate a traditional aesthetic that captures the attention of the audience. In addition, the poetic metre, rhyming schemes, and level/oblique tonal structures (*pingze* 平仄), which were derived from classical poetry, are all meticulously aligned by the composers. In this article, the challenges involved in translating the complex and highly codified modes of gender representation in Cantonese opera are explored. First, the gendered rhetoric in poetic form in the operatic scripts is considered, then how such lyrics can be rhetoricised and poeticised in the translations, and finally how cultural concerns should be mediated in the translation process.

Gender performativity as a theoretical framework: gender metaphors in the operatic context

Gender distinctions should be considered in translations of Cantonese opera libretti, as numerous literary rhetorical features are embedded in the original lyrics. These usually serve circumlocutory functions and are aimed at demonstrating subtle twists or subtexts in the dialogues. The basic framework for understanding how the gendered voice is reflected in translation is through 'gender performativity,' based on Judith Butler's notion, which refers to 'the fact that gender is a certain type of enactment, or action, as it is prompted by obligatory norms that dictate what gender should or should not be' (qtd. Gould and

Tahmasebian, 2020, np). Douglas Robinson considers ‘translation to be performative, because it does something to its audience; it produces effect on the receivers of the translation’ (qtd *ibid*). Gender performativity does return to ‘ostentatious iterability’, which is also relevant to translation when ‘the citational potential of its mode[...] can exaggerate, highlight, displace, and queer normative expectations across genders and cultures as well as languages’ (Bermann and Porter, 2014, np). Coincidentally, gender is also a kind of ‘enforced cultural performance’ and individuals ‘can only negotiate their gender identity with the styles of language available to them within a specific communicative context’ (Meng, 2019, 39).

Examining gender and cultural rhetoric is key in the process of translating Cantonese opera libretti and lyrics, as an understanding of the broader literary tradition is required for many of the nuances involved. Classical Chinese poetry is typically characterised by ‘equivalence’ between lines in terms of words, poetic phrases, parts of speech, and content. Traditional Cantonese opera also involves numerous characters who impersonate those of the other gender, a theme that remains extremely popular today in Hong Kong and South China. Assessing how this tradition of impersonation moves the audience’s affection for and attachment to a character is worthy of investigation. These effects are partially driven by a gendered tendency in the operatic lyrics, consisting of subtle hints and rhetorical representations. For example, some opera libretti composed from the mid-twentieth century onwards were mainly from the perspectives of female characters, and poetic lines related to female sentiments and performativity were used to intensify the operatic effects. What scholars have referred to as ‘feminist discourse’ may explain the idea that it ‘encircles verbal constructs[...] (imagery, arguments, perspective) that contribute to an expansion of messages in which the individual and the collective experience originate from a critical stance against the social contexts of patriarchy and its language’ (Díaz-Diocaretz, 1985, 46). The following opera plot synopses illustrate an expression of feminine passion through poetic dialogue:

Butterfly Shadow and Red Jasmine Flower [*Dieying hongli ji 蝶影紅梨記*], in which a pair of lovers, Zhao Ruzhou 趙汝州 and Xie Suqiu 謝素秋, a scholar and a courtesan, reunite after some misunderstanding by the signal of the red jasmine flower (Art-mate, *Butterfly Shadow*, nd, translation mine).

The Dainty Gallant [*Qiao Pan An 俏潘安*] in which the heroine named “Wan Siu-pan [雲小顰] [who] dressed as a man and made a mess upon her switched gender by attracting a lady who falls for her (34th Hong Kong Arts Festival synopsis, 2006, 18)

Forty Years of Cherished Love [*Mengduan xiangxiao sishinian 夢斷香銷四十年*] describes the heartbreaking love story of Lu You 陸游 and Tang Wan 唐婉, who are forced to separate due to resentment from Tang’s mother-in-law. (Art-mate, *Forty Years*, nd, translation mine)

Scent of a Lady [*Nüer xiang 女兒香*], in which a strong-minded lady named Mei Anxiang 梅暗香 avenges her fiancé’s betrayal and fought together on the battlefield against their enemies (Art-mate, *Scent of a Lady*, nd, translation mine).

The gender representations in the quoted opera libretti deviate from grammatical gendered language as in the gender-marked prefixes and suffixes in some European languages, and there is no such distinction in Chinese. Scholars began ‘reinvesting gender-markers

with meaning. The meaning which they wish to make manifest is both poetic and, especially, ideological’ (Simon, 1996, 17). According to Leonardi (2017), the ‘differentiated use of language by males and females is more than just a matter of linguistic forms; it is the use of these forms in society and is ideologically constructed’ (qtd Leonardi, 2017, 10). The gendered voices in an operatic language, therefore, are presented in a more sentimental style that demonstrates a character image of strong womanly desire and a yearning for love, freedom, and willpower, so that the female characters’ lyric lines can best be uttered by ‘real’ (i.e., not impersonated) female performers. In terms of the mechanisms of performativity, an actress becomes and is ‘constructed’ as another female body and character, following the opera plot, synopsis, and descriptions of how that character should be formed on stage. Although a female actress typically performs a female character, there are nuances regarding how the character should be interpreted. As Judith Butler remarks, ‘gender is not a fact, the various acts of gender create the idea of gender, and without those acts would be no gender at all’ (2003, 418). This is especially true when the idea is extended not only to the bodily performances of daily life but also to the specific scenario of opera performances. Thus, some scholars believe that ‘a strong explanation for how styles of femininity and masculinity become established through cultural and theatrical experiences, and how they might be challenged by modifying or exploding those styles in representation’ (Donkin, 2007, 313). According to Guild, ‘feminists experimented to produce feminine texts in an “other” language, i.e., to “produce” discursive spaces, in and from which feminine difference and desire may be creatively articulated’ (qtd Yu, 2015, np). These ‘performed genders’ are generally correlated with verbal and bodily discourses on stage. For example, as Tse remarks, ‘the timbre of *pinghou* [平喉 male voices in opera] alone does not signify the gender of the characters. It is the theatrical components—dramatic roles and plots, costumes, makeup, gesturing—that inform the audience whether it is a male or older female character’ (2017, 124). Godard notes that such ‘feminist discourse presents transformation as a model for translation’ (qtd Simon, 1996, 12). Following the same logic, the gendered rhetoric thus generated can be fine-tuned to suit the refined flow of and interaction between certain characters in the translation process of the operatic genre.

A poetic aura is revealed in the on-stage performances, which can be expressed in the form of singing, dialogues, gestures, or acrobatics, through the depictions of poetry that are common to these libretti, such as the exchange of poems between the couples in *Butterfly Shadow and Red Jasmine Flower* and *Forty Years of Cherished Love*. The poetic structure has particular requirements that must be satisfied: metre, antithesis, and couplets that intensify the dramatic effects, especially when the poetic notions are gender-correlated. According to Simon, ‘[g]ender difference has been played out not only in the metaphors describing translation, but in actual practices of translation, in the specific social and historical forms through which women have understood and enacted their writing activities’ (1996, 2). By the same token, the enactment of a performance can be further enhanced by appropriate gender rhetoric that signifies the feminine aura, along with the semiotic elements that appear in the actual play. Objects as gender metaphors, such as flowers, tears, and poems, can be regarded as being bilaterally related to the orderly structure of operatic lyrics, which is especially evident when a female character experiences a surge of affection for and attraction to a male character. In *Butterfly Shadow and Red Jasmine Flower*, the images of flowers and butterflies that reflect the title of the play are evoked in the following regional folk melody (*xiaoqu* 小曲), entitled ‘Blossoming Peach Flowers’ (*Xiaotaohong* 小桃紅), sung by the heroine Xie Suqiu:

素秋 (唱反線小桃紅) 好花伴扇端, 暗香襲冷筵, 輕盈步步嬌似飛燕玉盤轉, 妙舞輕輕為君扇, [.....] 問堂客可記花間蝴蝶怨, 花悲蝶怨便惹便惹惹蝶緣, 學你瘋癲逐撲

不相見，休要為了情顛君須愛紅梨豔 (Act VII; as quoted in Wang, nd, 11)

Tse: (snaps two red jasmine flowers and hooks one to the top of each fan; starts to dance, sings) Nice flowers appear on the top of the fans.

A subtle fragrance encloses a cold banquet. Languid, in steps of elegance.

Like a swallow encircles a jade tray.

I dance softly with fans over my darling. [...] May I ask the guest?

Do you recall the romance of the butterfly over the flowers? The flowers were in pain and the butterfly sad.

Try catching the butterfly, it ended in a fateful encounter. You were after the butterfly like crazy and could not see it. You were after love indeed!

My dear was passionate about the beauty of red jasmine.

(Act VI: Misunderstand thrice in the up and down of official career, translated by Ng, nd, 97–98)

In both the original song excerpt and Ng's translation above, the flower image serves important figurative and metonymical functions in the short account of the appearance of Suqiu 素秋 ('Tse Suchiu' in Ng's translated version) before she and Ruzhou 汝州 ('Chiu Yuchau' in Ng's translated version) can be reunited. Numerous related phrases are used to describe her graceful, delicate figure and her silhouette when dancing, including 'subtle fragrance' 暗香, 'the romance of the butterfly over the flowers' 花間蝴蝶怨, 'flowers were in pain and the butterfly sad' 花悲蝶怨, and '[m]y dear was passionate about the beauty of red jasmine' 君須愛紅梨豔. This connection between the human emotions of melancholy or sorrow and inanimate objects, animals, or plants is common in Chinese, and such terms are especially prominent in sentiments expressed by the female gender. In relation to the main motifs in the play of the butterfly and the jasmine flower, the translation communicates the sentimental phrases uttered and 'performed' by a woman falling in love—the heroine is using imageries to lament her 'fateful encounter' with Zhao Ruzhou and the pain of the misunderstanding they have suffered. The creator of the original song cross-applies the red jasmine flower (which emits a 'subtle fragrance,' signifying understated feminine emotion) and the butterfly to enhance the melancholy of the feminine voice in the narration.

However, the above translation of this opera tends not to reflect the poetic structure of the original text, that is, it is not 'poeticised' (affected by poetic characteristics). The basic meaning of the operatic lines is rendered to afford a general understanding of the libretto, which can be regarded as good practice for the purposes of stage-based surtitles, but in terms of academic research and off-stage libretti reading and study, more attention to the poetic and literary structure is necessary. Including poetic elements such as rhyme and metre will help enable audiences and libretti readers appreciate the aesthetics surrounding the male/female binary representations of the subject.

The line '妙舞輕輕為君扇,' which is sung by Suqiu while she is performing a dance, is found to be of considerable interest when closely examining issues of translation. To enhance the poetic sentiment, the translator could, for example, change the translated version from 'I dance softly with fans over my darling'

to 'over my darling, with my fans I am softly dancing' (translation mine). Reversing phrases in this way (so that the line is subtly split into two) emphasises the romantic moves of Suqiu: it is her 'dancing' that attracts her 'darling.' In contrast, the two lines '問堂客可記花間蝴蝶怨' and '花悲蝶怨便惹惹撲蝶緣' cannot be separated, as they have a cause-and-effect relationship. Additionally, when the lyrics are sung, they sound far more pleasant because of the rhyme at the end of each segment: '怨' *yuen* (in the third tone in Cantonese), meaning 'laments' and '緣' *yuen* (in the fourth tone in Cantonese), meaning 'destiny.' These rhymed words can be viewed as an indispensable element implied in female psychology, especially in terms of 'destiny' between the two genders. However, the translated version, 'Do you recall the romance of the butterfly over the flowers? The flowers were in pain and the butterfly sad. / Try catching the butterfly, it ended in a fateful encounter' (in Ng's translation above) does not enhance the feeling of an intimate relationship between the two lines, although it does restrict the line length to afford quick and easy reading and understanding (a more simplified version could be 'Do you recall that the butterfly laments upon the flower?'). The melancholic 'laments' result in the destined 'encounter,' and the two lines are of a more readable length and can be more readily interpreted by the audience. The partial rhyme of 'flower' and 'encounter' in the two line segments not only fits the metre of the shorter line lengths but it also reflects a concerted effort to link the two ideas by repeating 'lament.' The revised version is sufficiently clear to represent the dualistic ideas, while also being much shorter than the first translation and thus more fit for stage performances, despite a slight loss of content. The gendered rhetoric can be demonstrated and performed sophisticatedly through the poeticised discourse in Cantonese opera if the visual codes and verbal expressions (inclusive of dialogues and singing) of feminine appeal are incorporated into the motions and gestures of the performers. The images of these women have consequently been strengthened through 'supercilious beauty,' which has 'captivated audiences and listeners with poetic repartee and musical duets' (Cheung, 2017, 105).

Gender impersonation may be a unique element highlighting rhetorical representation, such as in the Cantonese opera *Scent of a Lady*, in which the female leading character is disguised as a man and charges onto the battlefield. The actress playing this character has previously played only female roles, unlike in *The Dainty Gallant*, which is a play discussed in the following section.

暗香 (撲燈蛾白攬) 燕鵲焉知鴻鵠志，舉國盡無人，肉食者何鄙。誰家有寶刀，誰家有駿驥。莫謂女兒無膽識，彩鳳也可化鵬飛。(as quoted in Chu, 2018, 131)

Anxiang (recites "Swarming moths"):

How does a sparrow know a swan's aspiration?

Now being sacked is the whole nation!

So despicable is the one initiating invasion!

Who has swords and shields?

Who has steeds on the battlefields?

Are ladies cowards? That we never say!

A phoenix could ever become a bird of prey.
(translation mine)

In the style of lyric recitation (*bailan* 白攬), the above narration describes Mei Anxiang 梅暗香, the heroine of *Scent of a*

Lady, who defiantly declares that women can be just like men and charge into battle without fear. Four bird-related visual images: ‘sparrow,’ ‘swan,’ ‘phoenix,’ and ‘bird of prey’ are evoked in this piece, and these are contrasted to highlight the heroine’s determination to defeat enemies on the battlefield alongside men. The firm and vigorous cadence of the speech, which is embellished with intentional rhymes in almost every pair of lines, displays Anxiang’s feminine willpower, even though she is impersonating a man so she can take revenge on the heartless man who betrayed her. The statement can be viewed as a blend of the hope of a lady who wishes for a satisfying marriage (similar to Chu Yun’s in *The Dainty Gallant* below) and a feminine heart that resists being undermined by traditional Chinese perceptions of gender segregation. This somewhat masculine aspiration is embedded in a female body, thus standing in sharp contrast to the aspirations of a traditional woman who cares only about her family obligations. In response to claims that consideration should be given to formats resembling classical Chinese poetry, cultural elements that subtly penetrate the lines, and the poetic structure of the lyrics, my strategic efforts in the translation to keep the lyric lines short (like a poem) and enhance the exclamations aim to intensify the heroine’s emotional expression, thus achieving the notion of gender performativity. The additions of ‘shields’ (the concept was only represented by ‘swords’ in the Chinese lyrics) and ‘on the battlefields’ after ‘steeds’ also offer manifestations of feminine speech by this character wearing male garb. In addition, transforming *peng* 鵬, literally meaning a mythical bird or Roc (‘[t]he back of the Roc was big enough to cover thousands of miles. When Roc flew away irritated, its wing hung in the air like clouds’. Hu, 2020, 163) into ‘bird of prey’ does not alter the original meaning. In the performance context, the sentiments of this impersonated voice in the opera have been strengthened by the immediacy of the rhetoric thus created. Again, the rhetorical device of using different types of bird images is worthy of translation in an operatic script, for the readers’ contemplation. With surtitles, the audience faces a shortage of time, as they must digest the representative elements behind each surtitle in just a few seconds, and thus there is little room for exchanging ideas between the two languages from a spatial perspective.

Rhetoricising and poeticising gender in Cantonese opera

The classical definitions of rhetoric do not typically include a detailed consideration of gender aspects. ‘In classical texts, the purposes of rhetoric were commonly declared to be to inform, to persuade or move, and to entertain or delight’ (Walkley, 2010, 163). To explore the role of rhetoric in a performance art such as Cantonese opera, the distinction between the ideas of ‘literary rhetoric’ and ‘performance rhetoric’ must be made. This is particularly important in the context of gendered Cantonese opera performances, as the binary representation of figurative elements in these operas often intensifies their gendered meaning. My interpretation is that ‘literary rhetoric’ could be broadly described as applying rhetorical features in literary texts, while ‘performance rhetoric’ refers to rhetorical devices specifically applied in on-stage performances. In the following section, I will explore how they are articulated in Cantonese opera and how this relates to gender representations.

‘Literary rhetoric’ can be divided into ‘rhetoricising’ and ‘poeticising.’ How such gendered touches should be rhetoricised and poeticised in the translation to better reveal the subject can also be analysed. “To ‘rhetoricize’ a text means to implement a first reorganization of its pattern of signs, while to ‘poeticize’ it means to proceed to a reorganization of the second degree [while the first degree means ‘everyday speech’]” (Hankiss, 1981, 70). To put it simply, the organisation of the verbal and written language codes is

interpreted figuratively in a ‘rhetoricised’ (incurred by or affected by rhetorical representations) way, while a ‘poeticised’ discourse might have sublimed to a level of incorporating poetic elements. Thus, rhetoricising a literary piece usually pertains to the functions of ‘poeticising,’ as the extravagant speeches and discourses of Cantonese opera may be intimately related to poetry creation, which is especially pertinent to any analysis of this subject. The notion that ‘writing poetry was “to rhetoricise artfully,” in the sense of rendering the subject adequately—the beautiful as beautiful and the ugly as ugly—and in a realistic way’ (Spies et al. 1999, 59) could well be extended to the performance field.

In the larger sense of ‘performance rhetoric,’ opera audiences usually understand or interpret the content of the performance on a literal level, also due to the limited time they have to read and digest the surtitles (not all Cantonese opera performances are equipped with surtitles, as this is regarded as a more modern practice). To persuade them may therefore require the enrichment of the content and structure by poeticising the lyrics. According to J. C. Scaliger, persuasion means that ‘the hearer accepts the words of the speaker. The soul of persuasion is truth, truth either fixed and absolute, or susceptible of question’ (qtd Plett, 2010, 49). Thus, it depends heavily on the opera audience’s interpretations of how these poeticised discourses are made convincing (i.e., the extent to which the audience is ‘persuaded’) by the performers’ skills in narrating and expressing the opera content. Therefore, including a scrutiny of the poetic features in operatic lyrics is explicitly persuasive, as audiences then have more time to read the scripts and their translated texts (if they are proficient in both the source and target languages).

As mentioned, closely examining the gender transformation of the characters is important when analysing Cantonese opera, whether the focus is on literary rhetoric or on performativity. In some plays, characters may perform roles of the opposite gender for comedic or other effects. In addition to the *Scent of a Lady* discussed above, this role reversal occurs in *The Dainty Gallant* when the heroine disguises herself as a man. The major difference between the two is that the actress in *The Dainty Gallant* always plays male roles:

楚雲 (白) 只見花迎人笑, 鳥欲投懷, 少女思春, 我也不禁怦然心動。眼睇纖纖麗影楚楚可人, 倘我是男兒呀, 便立刻將她迎娶。(Yip, nd, 5)

Chu Yun (speaks):

She’s like flowers smiling at me,

Swarming to my bosom like a bird that won’t flee.

A girl who yearns so much for affection,

How do I control my heart in this sudden passion!

She’s delicate, graceful, lovely, and charming,

I’d ask for her hand if I were a man. (translation mine)

楚雲 (中板) 呢個粉面俏潘安, 生性自負不凡, 我願配美男兒, 怕伴虬髯漢; 心欲會英豪, 一睹人中傑。(Qiao Pan An, nd, 6)

Chu Yun (sings in mid tune):

“Pan An the Charm” is the name people are calling

Feeling that I’m self-fancied and outstanding.

I wish I could be married to a man of decency—
Instead of a rascal from whom I hope to be free?

Meeting an exquisite gentleman is my dream,

Who's no wonder from the hierarchy supreme.
(translation mine)

The poetic, structural, and gender-correlated aspects of the original lyrics have been considered in the above translation, in which the rhymes in some pairs of lines enhance the poetic aesthetics of the lyrics. A certain kind of whimsical rhetoric is achieved while also capturing the rhymes and voicing the feeling of inner hope, especially when Chu Yun 楚雲 is disguised as a lady, as described in the original libretto (i.e., literary rhetoric), while the actress is also chaotically arranged to impersonating a man in the opera setting (i.e., performance rhetoric). The effects of the literary representations lack some strength when the actress transforms herself from a lady into a gentleman and then back to a lady, because the off-stage scripts generally blur the sharp contrast between the adopted genders. However, during performances, various types of non-verbal performativity skills are used to signal the metamorphosis between the genders, and thus the dichotomous relationship of the shift becomes more apparent.

Certain gendered aspects of speech play a role in determining whether some of the utterances come from a man or a woman. In the opera *The Dainty Gallant* for example, the actress must manage both the impersonated self and the 'real' self in a performance. From her perspective, it is like a

gender-blending figure [that] seems to represent, among other things, for many female audiences throughout the ages an ideal imaginary of 'man'. A larger than reality concept of the male sex that is apparently more desirable than the men in real life—a woman's man instead of a man's man, maybe? (Li, 2006, 33)

Therefore, there are multiple layers: the actress, who frequently plays the male role in her other performances, has to 'pretend' that she is a man in most of the play (thus, an impersonated performable man), while returning in some scenes to portray her true gender, i.e., the 'gender-blending' in Li's quote above. She also has to draw on another important skill in her performativity: to shift between male and female singing pitches so she can match both her character and her embodied gender, which in my opinion is also a method of demonstrating a performance rhetoric. Specific terms and phrases can be used in the translations with such an interpretation, to highlight the character's frustrations about being treated as a man while remaining a woman. Her wish to marry a 'man of decency' (presented as 'a handsome gentleman' or 美男兒 in Chinese) rather than a 'rascal' (presented as 'a man with a curled beard' or 虬髯漢 in Chinese) shows a sharp distinction between these two kinds of men, reflecting a yearning deep in her heart. The changes in her appearance and temperament suggest temporal significance, which could be more thoroughly expressed in script translations, because of the time constraints imposed on surtitles. Readers of the original libretto can experience her metamorphosis by referring to the script lines without time restrictions. As the Chinese language expressed in classical or poetic formats is much more condensed than that used in daily life, the translated versions of operatic surtitles tend to be shorter and to include only the simplest possible meaning, without attention given to the allusions and cultural implications in the original lyrics. In contrast, translation tasks regarding off-stage scripts have extended the spatial possibilities to reflect more subtle and literary subtexts.

Gender metaphors in translation and the 'gendered aspects of languages reflect and structure a society's conception of gender relations, [and] reveal the powerplays involved in both the operations of text transfer' (Von Flotow, 2010, 132). Also, Lefevere regards 'discrepancies between [textual and cultural] grids' as challenges for translators, as some 'cultural patterns cannot be mapped coherently onto another' (Bassnett, 2019, 72). In terms of the cultural transfer of these specific rhetorical items, considerable effort must be expended by translators to preserve their originality during translations into another language. The following example shows a homophonic situation in which the main subject and motif of a 'red jasmine flower' in *Butterfly Shadow and Red Jasmine Flower* functions in the context of a juxtaposition between the flower and the feminine persona of Xie Suqiu, the leading female character:

素秋 (白) [.....] 但話梨花梨花, 原本係離別之花, 人固不忍別離, 花亦不忍分枝, 故此梨花泣血, 久染成紅, 就變紅梨花。(汝州濛濛然不會意介)

素秋 (乙反中板下句) 一枝紅梨花, 休猜作枯枝杏, 花離猶泣血, 人別怎勝情。[.....] (Act V; as quoted in Wang, nd, 5)

Tse: (speaks) [...] An older gardener once told me that jasmine is a flower about separation. We humans feel sad about separating; flowers are the same when it comes to branching out. So jasmine would bleed turning into red jasmine. (Yuchau remains clueless)

(sings) A stem of red jasmine flower. It is hard to be by itself separated from others. When the branch snaps, it bleeds. When humans are separated from one another, emotions well up! [...] (Act IV: An encounter while drunk; A date under the Pavilion; Poetry of Jasmine Flower, translated by Ng, nd, 65–66)

The image that 'jasmine would bleed turning into red jasmine' (梨花泣血, 久染成紅) is a poignant and powerful symbol for a woman whose sorrow and melancholy turn into a bloody reality, and the flower image is a perfect reflection of the heroine herself. This is intensified by the idea that 'jasmine is a flower about separation' (但話梨花梨花, 原本係離別之花). However, the homophonic element in Chinese has not been rendered in English, due to cultural gaps and the great difficulty of matching both the sound and the meaning of the original lyrics. The playwright used a homophonic pun involving the first syllable of the phrases *lihua* 梨花 (literally 'pear blossom' and 'jasmine' in the translation) and *libie* 離別 (literally being apart' and 'separation' in the translation) to highlight the symbolic tie between the two elements. Due to the enormous cultural and linguistic gaps between Chinese and English, communicating the original pun in exactly the same fashion in the target-language text is typically impossible. What is virtually a cliché in Chinese needs much more explanation in English, but this is not desirable because the succinct poetic format would be lost completely.

Suqiu makes this comment because of her low social status as a courtesan (*guanji* 官妓), which means that she is 'objectified [*wuhua* 物化] just like a gift presented to others, deprived of her own free will' (Lau, 2019, 56). In the pun of the translated version quoted above, what she lacks translates into the homophone 'li' 梨 / 離 (in '*lihua*' 梨花 and '*libie*' 離別 as described above), while 'jasmine is a flower about separation' does not readily suggest even a thread of the original pun. Translators should attempt to incorporate as many aesthetic nuances of the original as possible. In this section of the opera, one way of achieving this is the adoption of a reversed pattern in the pun:

Suqiu: (speaks) [...] People called this the *pear blossom*— but how could we be a *pair*? We humans cannot stand the feeling of parting; flowers are the same when they branch out. When the pear blossom bleeds it gradually turns red! (translation mine, amended from Ng’s translation)

While the original joins together the ideas of synchronising the two homophones suggesting separation, the above amended version includes a reversed homophonic pun in which the direct homophonic meanings are partly abandoned and the literal name of ‘pear blossom’ is linked with ‘pair’ instead of the original ‘separation,’ yielding another pair of homophones (i.e., ‘pear’ and ‘pair’) in English, which is immediately accessible to the target reader. Here, the original statement ‘jasmine is a flower about separation’ is changed into the question ‘but how could we be a pair?’ in the hope of strengthening Suqiu’s presentation as a woman seeking love. As this can be considered a symbol of feminine wish that is deep in every woman’s mind, it is therefore preferable that the homophonic pun be preserved, even in a partial sense. This can maintain an intact representation of feminine concern, so as to ‘valorize the signs of the feminine in the translated text’ (Simon, 1996, 32). Despite the fact that the readers of the libretto are unable to explore how semiotic and non-verbal signs affect the aura of the scene, some comprehension can be established through the imagination and interpretation, and the translation must thus be of assistance. Here, the question is whether any pun in these lyrics is to be translated. Translators have long and painstakingly dealt with this issue, and most puns cannot be rendered into another language with their meaning and features intact. Fortunately, however, the translated versions can sometimes be as smooth and understandable as the example above, and other instances have used a certain degree of distortion of the original meaning to achieve the purpose of the pun. As easy and useful communication is generally expected for surtitles, very few successful examples of puns are found in opera.

Flowers are used as literary rhetorical symbols for women in many literary works and Cantonese opera, and both *Butterfly Shadow and Red Jasmine Flower* and *Forty Years of Cherished Love* are representative of the depiction of the gendered context in a cultural setting. In addition to the homophonic puns discussed above, the section ‘Separation of the Firebird and the Phoenix’ (‘Luan feng fenfei’ 鸞鳳分飛) in *Forty Years of Cherished Love* demonstrates the use of figurative poetic images of flowers and birds:

唐琬 (絳珠淚) 並蒂花開寒露浸, 簪折瓶沉。雙棲燕, 悲不幸, 轉眼長分襟。(Chen, nd)

Tang Wan (sings “Crimson Pearl Tears”):

Soaked in chilled dew although in pairs the flowers grew,

A broken hairpin and a pitcher drowned underwater they are resembling,

Just as a pair of swallows are sorrowful about their parting,

In no time our separation becomes so long!
(translation mine)

Several metaphorical representations are embedded in this example. Playwrights frequently use imageries involving flowers and birds to describe women and loving couples, and certain flowers are used to communicate specific features of female characters and subtly reflect their destinies (Wang, nd, 4). In this example from *Forty Years of Cherished Love*, two birds from ancient Chinese myth that are often used to represent a married

couple are identified in the title of the piece ‘Separation of the Firebird and the Phoenix.’ The mythical bird *luan* 鸞 is typically representative of one in a couple, so the concept of separation is implied in the phrase *guluan* 孤鸞 (lonely firebird), for example (Xu et al. 1985, 562), while *feng* 鳳 suggests ‘an extremely long lifespan and having to die in order to be reborn’ (Bane, 2016, 258). As it can be difficult to distinguish these two birds, one common method is to attach a colour to each, with ‘green’ attached to *luan* (thus ‘qingluan’ 青鸞 in Chinese) and ‘red’ to *feng* (as in *huo fenghuang* 火鳳凰 [phoenix on fire, suggesting the idea of rebirth]). The section ‘Separation of the Firebird and the Phoenix’ was adapted from the Tang dynasty (618–907) poem ‘For Concubine Zhao’ 寄妾趙氏 by Fang Qianli 房千里 (fl. 840): ‘The phoenix and the firebird separate on an autumn day, / Aching in my heart are the drums and gongs across the imperial tower’ (translation mine).

Flowers growing in pairs (*bingdi hua* 並蒂花), as described at the very beginning of the lyrics, are recurrently used allusions to conjugal relationships, as are two flowers sharing one stalk (Zhang, 1992, 140). For example, ‘a broken hairpin and a pitcher drowned underwater’ (*zan zhe ping chen* 簪折瓶沉) in the second line and a ‘pair of swallows’ (*shuangqi yan* 雙棲燕) in the third refer figuratively to cultural discourses about couples and their fates. This condensed poetic expression is a traditional Chinese practice, originating from the poem ‘Drawing a Silver Pitcher from the Bottom of the Well’ 井底引銀瓶 by the Tang dynasty poet Bai Juyi 白居易 (772–846): ‘Drawing a silver pitcher from the bottom of the well— / The silver pitcher is about to come up when the silken string breaks. / Grind the jade hairpin on the stone— / The jade hairpin is about to take shape when it snaps in the middle. / The pitcher sinks, the hairpin snaps: what is to be done? / It’s just like the way I bid you farewell today’ (Hsia et al. 2014, 334). Referencing this poem, the clause ‘a broken hairpin and a pitcher drowned underwater’ signifies a ruined relationship between a husband and a wife.

As with the earlier examples, all of these metaphors represent a feminine personae voice that has either been restrained due to the feudal restrictions imposed on women (as in *Forty Years of Cherished Love*, when Tang Wan has no choice but to be divorced because of her mother-in-law’s scorn), or a bold statement from a woman who is unwilling to accept the perceived unworthiness of women in a patriarchal society (as in *Scent of a Lady*). If possible, the subtleties of Chinese culture and their representations in poetry should be either partially or fully preserved in the translation. Most current translations focus on capturing the meaning for communicative purposes, so that the operas can be readily interpreted by the audience. However, the cultural elements are also worthy of preservation; if they are not, the significance of the poetic ideas in the lyrics will vanish in the translation process.

Conclusion

In translating Cantonese opera libretti, the nuanced application of rhetorical features and the preservation of poetic structures alongside the gender dynamics portrayed by actors is crucial. These elements should be carefully considered by translators and scholars alike, not only during the translation process but also in subsequent analyses. This multifaceted approach distinguishes Cantonese opera from other genres, as the rhythmic delivery of lines and the portrayal of characters through gender-specific nuances are central to the audience’s experience. The ability of performers to play characters of different genders using a range of expressive techniques (i.e., performance rhetoric), highlights the importance of gender consideration in operatic performances and their translations. The audience will then feel strongly that the characters portrayed are convincing in the literary or

performance sense, whether a character has been transformed from male to female or vice versa. The performers emphasise making their performances *real*—not being their real selves but being *embodied* on stage—and that is why rhetoric with gendered concerns is of such importance in the operatic context. For instance, when writing the leading female characters in some of the above examples, the playwrights made choices regarding the style and other aesthetic features, matching the lyrics to the performers' female identities, and the content and form to the expression of dialogues and monologues, from which they sing (i.e., literary rhetoric). Thus, references to flowers and birds work neatly as ways of incorporating nuances regarding feminine language, psychology, and performativity. These elements are reinforced when the poetic structure is woven into every line of the lyrics. They are also exemplified by the careful crafting of female characters by playwrights, who make stylistic and aesthetic choices that resonate with the characters' sentiments, including the use of floral and avian imagery to subtly convey femininity.

In terms of cultural mediation derived from classical poetry, traditional Chinese allusions are perhaps one of the thorniest issues that translators face. Allusive expressions are based on past literary or cultural references that are difficult for people who are not familiar with the culture to understand. A translator's task is then to allow audience members to instantly become 'immersed in' the performance, as if they are sharing the feelings of the performers on stage. For example, it would be a great loss if the homophonic 'pair/pear' pun noted above was not spelled out. Some translators may choose not to include such rhetorical figures, as they can overcomplicate the resulting text. Any translation would clearly be impossible if a translator attempted to tackle all of the above-mentioned issues related to Cantonese opera. However, judicious attempts to integrate these issues should be encouraged. Many of the works in this genre are yet to be translated, and some of the reference materials are not readily available, either physically or online. Translators and researchers in the field must therefore intensify their efforts to bring the original meaning of the scripts to life and to increase the proportion of translated works in the repertoire. Through such concerted efforts, the valuable 'Intangible Cultural Heritage' art of Cantonese opera need not remain local and can be effectively preserved and promoted elsewhere.

Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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Additional information

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