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Translating Peking Opera for the Screen: Gender and the Didactic Politics of Legibility

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Abstract

As a flagship institution in China's international cultural engagement, the China National Peking Opera Company (CNPOC) plays a pivotal role in presenting Chinese theatre for transnational audiences. Its theatrical production *Female Generals of the Yang Family*, accompanied by English subtitles and widely circulated as a representative work, foregrounds a central tension between the imperatives of translatability and the aesthetic logic of Peking Opera, a highly codified form of Chinese theatre that resists semantic transparency. Taking this mediatised production as a case study, the research examines how live broadcast theatre complicates prevailing assumptions about liveness in theatre translation by relocating theatrical presence within regimes of mediation and captioned legibility. It argues that subtitles in such contexts prescribe spectatorship and direct attention, shaping how audiences perceive theatrical presence. In *Female Generals of the Yang Family*, this prescriptive clarity reorients gendered meaning by transforming collective expressions of martial solidarity into private emotion and moral virtue, thereby participating in a remediation that de-historicises and re-anchors female heroism within globally portable frames of empowered femininity.

Keywords: Live broadcast theatre, mediatisation, gender, Peking opera translation, liveness

Introduction

The multifaceted nature of theatre has always rendered translation a fraught undertaking. The 'synchronic confrontation of signifying systems' in performance and the interplay of mise-en-scène, text, and embodiment, seem to resist translation altogether, as the final coherence of a production depends less on authorial intention than on the spectator's interpretive horizon, as observed by Patrice Pavis in *Theatre at the Crossroads of Culture*.[1] To grapple with this multiplicity, David Johnston reminds us that

> The theatre translator needs to eke out language in its performative context, to write forward, to bring the potentials for performance that are encoded in the original explicitly into the temporal and spatial

[1] Patrice Pavis, *Theatre at the Crossroads of Culture* (Routledge, 1992), 24, https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203359334.

> purview of the audience—in short, to engage on behalf of the new receiving context with the sweep and scope of the text's possible meanings.[2]

In their recent dialogue in *Writing Forward*, Johnston and Lawrence Venuti return to the question of theatre translation as bound to ephemerality.[3] While ephemerality is undoubtedly constitutive of theatre, is this to mean that theatre translation rests only upon it, even upon the co-presence of performer and audience? What, then, if theatre translation is for a mediatised theatre, where performers and audiences no longer share the same space, or even the same time?

It is against the problem of stabilising theatrical immediacy under conditions of mediatisation, where translation comes to function didactically to sustain legibility across distance, that the long-standing privileging of ephemerality in theatre theory requires reconsideration. Theatre theorist Peggy Phelan famously argued in 1993 that live performance 'honors the idea that a limited number of people in a specific time/space frame can have an experience of value,' regarding its very rootedness in time and space and in the creation of a sense of community as to what makes performance exceptional and powerful.[4] In this widely cited book, she contended that performance sets itself against commodification precisely through its vanishing, transforming its own disappearance into a mode that 'eludes regulation and control.'[5] This celebration of ephemerality has since become a cornerstone of theatre theory, elevating transience into a defining, even redemptive, feature of performance. Yet the privileged status accorded to ephemerality, as an ontological quality of theatre, appears far less secure. In a recent special issue of *Amodern* on 'Ephemera and Ephemerality: Media, Archive, Performance,' Lindsay Brandon Hunter stresses that the 'seeming constitutive liveness of theatrical performance' requires interrogation, noting: 'The popularity of such [live broadcast] productions give[s] them considerable—and growing—power to shape the customs and standards by which theatre is assessed, produced, consumed, and even defined.'[6] Martin Barker argued that liveness is not merely constituted by ephemerality in time and space, nor by co-presence of audiences and performers as '*sine qua non* for theatre and performance studies'; rather, it must be understood through the interrelationship between embodied perception and lived experience of the world.[7] In *Liveness*, by referencing Eric Bogosian who speaks of theatre's value in its ostensible existence of 'in the moment' and its putative ability to create community among its participants, Philip Auslander challenged this idea of ephemerality as a defining characteristic of live

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[2] David Johnston, 'Professing translation: The acts-in-between,' *Target: International Journal of Translation Studies* 25, no. 3 (2013): 366, https://doi.org/10.1075/target.25.3.04joh.

[3] David Johnston and Lawrence Venuti, 'A Conversation about Theatre Translation: Issues, Cases, Prospects,' in *Writing Forward: Translation, Performance, Creativity* ed. Susan Bassnett and Piotr Blumczynski (Routledge, 2025), https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003547006.

[4] Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (Routledge, 1993), 149, https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203359433.

[5] Phelan, *Unmarked*, 148.

[6] Lindsay Brandon Hunter, 'Digital Theatricality: Flickering Documents in Unsteady Archives,' *Amodern*, 7 (2017), https://doi.org/10.1353/shb.2006.0057.

[7] Martin Barker, *Live to Your Local Cinema* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 57, https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137288691.

performance through a consideration of mass media including cable and broadcast television, DVDs, radio, film, augmented reality technologies, or digital formats.[8] He writes:

> The default definition of live performance is that it is the kind of performance in which the performers and the audience are both physically and temporally co-present to one another. But over time, we have come to use 'live' to describe performance situations that do not meet these basic conditions. With the advent of broadcast technologies—first radio, then television—we began to speak of 'live broadcasts.' … The phrases 'live broadcast' and 'live recording' suggest that the understanding of liveness has expanded well beyond its initial scope as the concept has been articulated to emergent technologies.[9]

In the contemporary mediascape, stage work increasingly circulates in mediatised form: the NT (National Theatre) Live broadcasts in cinemas across the United Kingdom (UK), BroadwayHD's livestreams of Broadway and Off-Broadway productions, initiatives such as Pilot Theatre in the UK that support digital streaming for other companies, or the nonprofit HowlRound in the United States, whose HowlRound TV platform streams performances, discussions, and events.[10] During the COVID-19 pandemic, the internet itself became an essential infrastructure for live performance.[11] Chinese Opera has long been bound up with processes of mediatisation. What is often identified as the first Chinese film was in fact a static recording of the opera sequence *Ding Junshan*, produced in 1905 by the Beijing Fengtai Photograph Studio.[12] Before its destruction by fire in 1909, the studio continued to capture short operatic excerpts, embedding from the outset a dynamic interdependence between stage and screen. In the UK, the first Outside Broadcast of a stage production was J. B. Priestley's *When We Are Married* in 1938, which similarly blurred theatrical and filmic conventions. For director Basil Dean, the significance of this broadcast lay in its capacity to approximate what he called 'a genuine theatre condition,' distinguishing it from studio excerpts and implicitly elevating its cultural status through the claim of 'liveness.'[13] If liveness itself is being redefined in and through mediatised forms, then all of these developments have a substantive bearing on how translation scholars might 'read' digital renderings of theatrical production across cultures. In this sense, subtitles constitute the conditions under which

[8] On the mediatisation of spectacle, particularly in relation to new technologies such as virtual reality, intermedial projects, and social media, see Gabriella Giannachi, *Virtual Theatres: An Introduction* (Routledge, 2004), https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203500033; Jennifer Parker-Starbuck, *Cyborg Theatre: Corporeal/Technological Intersections in Multimedia Performance* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230306523; Sarah Bay-Cheng, Jennifer Parker-Starbuck, and David Z. Saltz, *Performance and Media: Taxonomies for a Changing Field* (University of Michigan Press, 2015), https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.5582757.

[9] Philip Auslander, *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture* (Routledge, 2023), 31–32, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003031314.

[10] See Lauren Hitchman, 'From Page to Stage to Screen: The Live Theatre Broadcast as a New Medium,' *Adaptation: The Journal of Literature on Screen Studies* 11, no. 2 (2018): 171–85, https://doi.org/10.1093/adaptation/apx029; Miguel Flores, et al, 'Hold, Please: Addressing Urgency and Other White Supremacist Standards in Stage Management,' in *Off Headset: Essays on Stage Management Work, Life, and Career*, ed. Rafael Jaen and Christopher Sadler (Routledge, 2022), https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429321672-13.

[11] Benjamin Gillespie, Sarah Lucie, and Jennifer Joan Thompson, Global voices in the time of Coronavirus,' *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 42 3 (2020), https://doi.org/10.1162/pajj_a_00532.

[12] Cartoni Animati, 'Feature Films, Operas and Cartoons/Lungometraggi, Film-Opera,' *Griffithiana* 54 (1995).

[13] Victoria Lowe, *Adapting Performance between Stage and Screen* (Intellect, 2020), 68, https://doi.org/10.1080/01439685.2021.1949123.

aspects of performance are foregrounded, meaning is stabilised, and specific interpretive pathways become available to distant viewers. It is within this configuration that gender emerges as a particularly revealing site for examining how meaning is reorganised. Precisely for this reason, the habitual framing of theatre translation as a question of liveness and ephemerality seems insufficient: not all modes of theatre translation are governed by co-presence and transience, nor should the field be reduced to a single, monolithic problematic.

I make a case, then, in this article for encountering live broadcast theatre on its own terms, according to its unique valences and affordance, in the hope that a robust curiosity regarding such a mediatised theatre might expand the remit of translation studies beyond the entrenched binaries of presence and absence, liveness and mediation. This is not merely abstract provocation. The 2022 production of *Female Generals of the Yang Family* (*Yangmen Nüjiang*) presented by China National Peking Opera Company (hereafter CNPOC) offers a telling example in point where mediation itself becomes the condition of performance. The production presented a story set during the Northern Song dynasty (960–1127 CE), depicting how the women of the Yang family rise to defend their country after the young general Yang Zongbao dies in battle. Under the command of his mother, the venerable matriarch She Taijun, and the leadership of his widow, the courageous Mu Guiying, they advance to the frontier to repel the invading forces. Staged as part of the Chinese New Year celebrations in January 2022, this Peking Opera performance was live streamed for audiences in Panama, explicitly framed within the protocols of cultural diplomacy and supported by national institutions including the Ministry of Culture, the National Tourism Authority, and the National Council on Ethnic Affairs.[14] As the pandemic rendered an international tour impracticable, the theatrical production instead reached its audience through live broadcast on television and online platforms, bringing Peking Opera to the internet with Spanish and English subtitles.[15] If live broadcast theatre or what Sarah Bay-Cheng termed 'theatre squared' attests that temporal/spatial liveness, ephemerality and co-presence of actors and spectacles are not indispensable for something to be recognised as theatre, then what calls for attention is how translation participates in the broadcast of the reconfiguration.[16] For if such digital, mediatised productions desire to claim the ontology of theatre when the conventional conditions of liveness are displaced, translation is also drawn into a new task of prescription and didacticism: to render theatre legible across distance and culture, to explicate its workings for spectators who are not physically co-present, and to foreground the processes through which theatrical meaning is generated. The present study argues that in

[14] Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Republic of Panama, 'Preview of the 2022 "Happy Spring Festival" Series of Events in Panama,' 23 January 2022, http://pa.china-embassy.gov.cn/lmbf/dbcxx/dbcxw/202201/t20220123_10632191.htm.

[15] Opera (and more generally theatrical) titles are often referred to as 'surtitles' or 'supertitles' because of the common practice of projecting them above the stage. However, in this case, the Peking Opera performance was delivered to audiences through live broadcast on television and digital platforms, meaning that the translation appeared on individual screens. What the viewers encountered, accordingly, corresponded more closely to the features of subtitles rather than sur- and supertitles.

[16] See Sarah Bay-Cheng, 'Theatre Squared: Theatre History in the Age of Media,' *Theatre Topics* 17, no. 1 (2007): 37–50, https://doi.org/10.1353/tt.2007.0001. Bay-Cheng conceptualises 'theatre squared' as the transformation of live performance once it enters the frame of the screen, whereby the theatrical event is literally 'squared' and reconfigures as both theatre and its mediated double. In this context, 'mediated theatre' refers to performances originally created for live audience but subsequently transmitted through reproducible medium as two-dimensional moving images.

such circumstances and in seeking the experience of theatre as made explicit for dispersed audiences, theatre translation acts didactically, delineating and elucidating theatre and its affects, during which gender narratives could be reshaped. Particularly, in Peking Opera, meaning does not proceed by narrative or psychological realism but through codified gesture, vocal technique, and stylised corporeality, within which gender is enacted as semiotic form rather than expressive identity. In CNPOC's *Female Generals of the Yang Family,* when live broadcast overlaid the performance with a system privileging a sense of the theatre's apparent liveness continuous with the notion of 'being here,' translation assumes a didactic inflection. In doing so, the Yang women warriors, long rooted in Chinese cultural memory as exemplars of filial loyalty and chastity, were transformed into a more universalised and legible iconography of female heroism, abstracted from their historical inscription within a patriarchal order and recast as a portable trope of empowered femineity for transnational spectatorship.

Reasserting a theatre aesthetic

As noted by Lindsay Brandon Hunter, audiences in live broadcast theatre are assigned no seat that could ever exist in a playhouse but are instead positioned within carefully orchestrated vantage points that direct their gaze and magnify theatrical moments, 'a form of distortion and emphasis masquerading as immediacy, or at least as benign enhancement.'[17] The translated verses in CNPOC's *Female Generals of the Yang Family* also participate in ensuring audiences have the best seat from which to enjoy a live-like experience, not by copying any one spectator's view but by prescribing where to look, when, and why.

This is nowhere more apparent than in the birthday banquet scene of Yang Zongbao in *Female Generals of the Yang Family*. The stage is visually dominated by a single, monumental character '寿' (longevity), flanked by heavy drapery and framed by red-and-gold ritual décor. Yet the entire spectacle rests on a tragic concealment: Yang Zongbao has already died on the battlefield. To shield his elderly mother from grief, the family colludes in sustaining an act of mourning. Within this context, the line '愿征人青春常在' (literally, 'may the expeditionary soldiers remain forever young') carries a profoundly layered meaning. The wish for eternal youth becomes a lament: He is forever young only because he has fallen in battle, fixed in memory as a figure of heroic sacrifice. The translation of this line sung by Mu Guiying emerges as 'May my husband stay forever young,' with the high-definition camera isolating the dan role (female role in Peking opera) in close-up.[18] Her voice subtly is amplified with a faint echo. Her gaze hovers towards the camera yet never directly meets it. The flutter of her water sleeves and the oblique incline of her body do not merely decorate the scene but intensify an atmosphere of restrained sorrow, a visual and acoustic choreography where translation, performance, and mediation converge. The subtitle 'To please my mother-in-law we hold a family celebration,' (original Chinese: '阖门庆寿慰高堂,' literally 'the whole household celebrates a birthday to comfort the honoured elder') is aligned with the long shot that foregrounds symmetrical formation and ritual choreography, produces a prescriptive clarity that orients the viewer toward a legible reading of the birthday celebration as an

[17] Lindsay Brandon Hunter, '"We Are Not Making a Movie": Constituting Theatre in Live Broadcast,' *Theatre Topics* 29, no. 1 (2019), https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/tt.2019.0002; Barker, *Live to Your Local Cinema*, 14.

[18] *Female Generals of the Yang Family*, presented by China National Peking Opera Company, 2022, 00:05:50.

invented festivity to spare the elderly mother.[19] However, with this regime of legibility the gendered stakes of translation surface. The original line invoking '征人' ('expeditionary troops') refers to the expeditionary troops on the frontier—not to her husband alone—and thus articulates Mu Guiying's patriotic grief on a collective, civic horizon. Yet in translation, this expansive horizon is contracted into the insistence on 'my husband,' narrowing a collective lament into conjugal fidelity and converting the voice of a warrior-matriarch into that of a dutiful wife. The close-up and the possessive pronoun conspire to shrink this collective grief into a readily intelligible scene of private sorrow. A similar contraction occurs with the translation of another lyric line, '瞻目边关心向往' (literally, 'casting my gaze toward the frontier with longing and concern') as 'My heart stays with my husband who is defending our frontier.'[20] The possessive pronoun again individualises the sentiment, narrowing a gesture toward all soldiers on the border into an expression of wifely devotion.

Additionally, in this birthday celebration scene, gender is articulated through spatial distinctions: the women remain in the domestic interior, gathering in a setting of kinship and festivity while the men are imagined elsewhere, on the battlefield against the Xixia (Tangut) regime, a space both militarily and historically inscribed. This differentiation makes the household a locus of intimacy and ritual, whereas the battlefield becomes a stage for national struggle and masculine duty. When the play is transmitted through live broadcast, however, the historical and political frame begins to dissolve. As Alison Stone stresses, 'while the house audience could see the characters against the set, the broadcast audience sees them "flattened" against a blank background.'[21] Such flattening erases the scenographic markers that situate the men in a historically charged, militarised site, leaving only the abstract contrast between interior and exterior, feminine and masculine. Gender codes therefore persist, but they appear detached from the Chinese dynastic imagination that originally conferred meaning upon them, suspended instead in an ahistoric and placeless visual field.

In a way, translation is baked into this televisual grammar for live theatre, which 'mixes' continuous camera feeds in real time to direct attention and reduce interpretive work for the viewer.[22] Once the picture has decided the object of attention, the English line on screen tends to caption what is already visible—heroism, sacrifice, prowess—as opposed to sustaining the contextual ambiguity that Chinese phrasing often carries (ritual kinship, household hierarchy, collective address). As a result, subtitles reoriented toward legibility and de-historicisation render Peking Opera readily and immediately consumable, a tendency that resonates with CNPOC's broader institutional outlook. Operating under the supervision of the Ministry of Culture and entrusted with 'strength[ing] the nation's cultural soft power and the international influence of Chinese culture,' CNPOC has increasingly foregrounded the opera's identity as a national emblem.[23] It is in this spirit that Huiqin Yuan, vice-president since 2018

[19] *Female Generals of the Yang Family*, 2022, 00:06:38.

[20] *Female Generals of the Yang Family,* 00:05:04.

[21] Alison Stone, 'Not Making a Movie: The Livecasting of Shakespeare Stage Productions by The Royal National Theatre and The Royal Shakespeare Company,' *Shakespeare Bulletin* 34, no. 4 (2016), https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/shb.2016.0055.

[22] John Wyver, 'Screening the RSC Stage: The 2014 *Live from Stratford-upon-Avon* Cinema Broadcasts,' *Shakespeare* 11, no. 3 (2015), https://doi.org/10.1080/17450918.2015.1048280.

[23] 'Xi Makes Instruction on Work of Public Communication, Culture,' *English.gov.cn*, 8 October 2023, https://english.www.gov.cn/news/202310/08/content_WS65229548c6d0868f4e8e006b.html.

and leading actress in *Female Generals of the Yang Family* at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées in Paris, has observed that 'to best engage audiences overseas, Peking Opera does not require an in-depth understanding of Chinese history and culture.'[24] Such a stance conveys an assured sense of the form's authority: the canon comes to be treated less as something to be interrogated or violated than something to be 'safeguarded' and affirmed.[25] In other words, this view endorses a model of cultural circulation that treats contextual density as expendable and accessibility as the primary horizon of value. Translation, under this logic, is encouraged to be abstracted from its historical and social determinations and repackaged as universally legible. The problem, then, is not accessibility per se, but the epistemic premise that replaces historically situated encounter with immediate recognisability, thereby foreclosing interpretive plurality and stabilising the canon as a self-evident, already-authorised cultural object.

Intimacy and exchange promise

Fabiola Scarpetta and Anna Spagnolli write that in their study of stand-up comedy, in order for a sense of immediacy and co-presence to be produced, comedians often embed their performances in a local context through commenting on the venue, drawing attention to particular audience members, or tailoring jokes to local peculiarities.[26] Their analysis demonstrates that liveness is discursively constructed rather than simply given by shared physical presence. Subtitling in live broadcast Peking Opera performs a comparable function, as it works to sustain channels of communication for distant viewers, an act of communicative labour that reconstitutes the conditions of 'being there' for those otherwise excluded from the immediate, virtual community.[27] This demand is especially acute in Peking Opera whose stylised codes and symbolic minimalism rely on audiences' imaginative participation, making translation constitutive of their resonance beyond the native cultural milieu.[28] In CNPOC's *Female Generals of the Yang Family*, this work of mediated immediacy becomes tangible when Minister Wang rejects the enemy's envoy not in stylised Chinese verse but in blunt English, 'No, no, no,'[29] and when moments of heightened spectacle elicit audible 'wow' reactions and bursts of applause, televisually echoing the traditional practices of 'jiaohao' (audience calls for approval) in Peking Opera and soliciting intimacy across distance.

It is within the fabric of intimacy that subtitling does not merely clarify but actively redirects gendered meaning. When the aging matriarch of the Yang family, She Taijun—at

[24] Ruohan Wang, 'Artist Yuan Huiqin's Lifelong Dedication to Peking Opera,' *Beijing Review*, (4 March 2024), https://www.bjreview.com/China/202403/t20240304_800358461.html.

[25] Lisha Xu and David Johnston, 'Between safeguarding and translating: Chinese classical opera and Spanish Golden Age theatre,' *Translation Studies* 15, no. 3 (2022), https://doi.org/10.1080/14781700.2022.2120906.

[26] Fabiola Scarpetta and Anna Spagnolli, 'The Interactional Context of Humour in Stand-Up Comedy,' *Research on Language and Social Interaction* 42, no. 3 (2009), https://doi.org/10.1080/08351810903089159.

[27] Daniela Schlütz, 'Contemporary Quality TV: The Entertainment Experience of Complex Serial Narratives,' *Annals of the International Communication Association* 40, no. 1 (2015), https://doi.org/10.1080/23808985.2015.11735257.

[28] Patricia Sieber, 'Whither Theatricality? Toward Traditional Chinese Drama and Theatre (Xiqu 戲曲) as World Theatre,' *The Journal of Chinese Literature and Culture* 9, no. 1 (2022), https://doi.org/10.1215/23290048-9681228.

[29] *Female Generals of the Yang Family*, 00:42:43.

once the household's commander and its grieving mother—recalls '众儿郎齐奋勇冲锋陷阵' (literally, 'all the sons/men charged forward bravely into battle') the phrasing suggests both filial-military solidarity (儿郎 means 'sons of the family' as well as 'men-at-arms').[30] In performance, her declaration carries the weight of family-military metrology, affirming the Yang lineage's sacrifices on the battlefield. Subtitled, however, it is pared down simply to 'the boys charged forward boldly,' recasting a register of martial-ritual remembrance into maternal pride for her 'boys.' The tactical self-assertion '我乘风举火' (literally, I ride the wind and raise fire) is rendered as the impersonal 'Let the flame burn in the wind,'[31] and compact stratagems such as '以逸待劳' (literally, rest while the enemy exhausts itself)[32] or '奇袭智取' (literally, launch a surprise raid and seize victory through stratagem) flatten into managerial paraphrase ('analyse the enemy's situation,' 'be cautious').[33] In translation, the matriarch's strategic agency, her command of action and cunning, is displaced by an advisory tone that domesticates her military authority into the neutral idiom of prudence. The gendered voice of command yields to the affect of care. Allegory likewise thins out: an adversary sneers, '光杆牡丹也枉然' (literally 'a peony without supporting stems is in vain,' here deriding the Yang women generals as a futile force without male support), is translated as 'A peony without green leaves is also useless.'[34] In context, the line is hurled at the Yang women generals, implying that a company led only by women is as futile as a flower without support. On stage, it dramatises the gendered stakes of succession: who may carry the family's banner in the absence of sons? Yet the English translation softens the insult about women's incapacity into a definitional statement about plants. The sting of gendered exclusion collapses into the banality of common sense.

By this means, to build a synchronous public by promising closeness, subtitling keeps that promise through smooth historical density and cultural specificity into a register that reads as instantly receivable. What reaches the global audience is therefore not simply Peking Opera 'as it is,' but a mediated version where the gendered meaning is inseparable from a commitment of accessibility. The cost is not simply a loss of nuance but a shift of voice. The female general's speech returns to the remote viewer in the idioms of care, courtesy and moral reassurance. Although not a sign of failure, this transformation exposes the bargain through which the form travels. For Walter Benjamin, translation belongs to the afterlife of the work, not its life; it is the stage of continued survival through transformation.[35] Barbara Johnson highlights something similar when she explains: 'What translation allows us to see is also a fantasy language uniting the two works, as if all translation were falls away from some original language that fleetingly becomes visible.'[36] This process of translation involves an operation of fantasy, which reconciles different orders (whether of language, time, being)

[30] *Female Generals of the Yang Family*, 00:55:43.

[31] *Female Generals of the Yang Family*, 01:31:00.

[32] *Female Generals of the Yang Family*, 01:25:37.

[33] *Female Generals of the Yang Family*, 01:26:35.

[34] *Female Generals of the Yang Family*, 00:48:04.

[35] Walter Benjamin, 'The Translator's Task,' translated by Steven Rendall, *TTR: traduction, terminologie, rédaction* 10, no. 2 (1997), https://doi.org/10.7202/037302ar.

[36] Barbara Johnson, *Mother Tongues: Sexuality, Trials, Motherhood, Translation* (Harvard University Press, 2003), 16, https://doi.org/10.4159/9780674274242.

through the revisions of positive law. It also, as Barbara Johnson hints to us, involves a type of reading whereby translation seems to fulfil the fantasy of wholeness and unifying disparities in language.[37] Such a make-believe aim is both teleological and defensive since fantasy functions as a way of coping with what appears alien(ating) to *langue*. Live transmission, accordingly, offers a shared 'now'; CNPOC's subtitles make that 'now' feel common by conjuring precisely such a fantasy of immediacy and togetherness.[38] The result is an afterlife in which Peking Opera remains audible across screens precisely because its non-referential layers are stripped down and its gendered speech reoriented toward household intelligibility, an exchange in which accessibility is granted in return for a partial revoicing of authority. The critical question, then, is not whether to translate, but what kind of closeness we are willing to build: can a broadcast cultivate co-presence without requiring the female martial voice to speak primarily as private sentiment?

Remediation of Peking Opera as a composite translation

In Peking Opera, gender is not anchored in the performer's biology but in a semiotic system—role types (*行当 hangdang*), gesture vocabularies, vocal timbres, make-up, costume, gait, and props—through which masculinity and femininity are rendered legible.[39] *Dan roles* (female roles) are signalled by the water-sleeve technique, restrained footwork, and a particular vocal placement; a *wudan's* (*武旦* martial female role) martial prowess by spear routines and armour (*靠 kao*) with pheasant plumes (*翎子 lingzi*), as when Mu Guiying enters in *The Women Generals of the Yang Family* in full long armour and pheasant plumes, embodying at once martial strength and female heroism.[40] Male roles, by contrast, project authority or vigour through chest voice, upright carriage, and weapon choreography. Performers frequently cross these boundaries: the celebrated male dan (*男旦 nandan*) tradition, exemplified by Mei Lanfang, demonstrates how male actors embody female dan roles so persuasively that 'woman' became a function of stylised gesture, timbre, and costume rather than biology.[41] These signs were themselves distilled from social customs and ritualised behaviours, which, over generations, crystallised into the symbolic conventions of the operatic stage.[42] In this respect, the gendered body that comes into presence in Peking Opera through the codified processes of these operatic gestures is not simply a signifying-body, a corporeal sign or marker of sex.[43] What is also constituted in and through performance is a further 'etcetera,' 'a kinesthetic, proprioceptive, and somatic experience that exerts a force

[37] Johnson, *Mother Tongues*, 18.

[38] Johnson, *Mother Tongues*, 62.

[39] Shutan (Rita) Ren, 'Gender Performance on the Stage of Chinese Opera,' *Performance Research* 29, no. 1 (2024), https://doi.org/10.1080/13528165.2024.2408112.

[40] Junhua Song, *中国古代戏剧服饰研究*[*On Costumes in Traditional Chinese Opera*] (Guangdong Education Publishing House, 2011), 223

[41] Lisha Xu, 'Feminism and Androgyny: Gender Politics in Contemporary Classical Chinese Opera,' *The Journal of Specialised Translation* 43 (2025), https://doi.org/10.26034/cm.jostrans.2025.6941.

[42] Elin Diamond, 'Brechtian Theory/ Feminist Theory: Toward a Gestic Feminist Criticism,' *TDR: Drama Review* 32, no. 1 (1988), https://doi.org/10.2307/1145871.

[43] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (Routledge, 1990), 129, https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203824979.

on language all its own.'[44] It is an 'en-gendered' body that may not have existed in that form prior to the performance.

Equally crucial is the suppositional nature of the theatre. Only two chairs may stand for a mountain pass; a whip evokes a cavalry charge.[45] Minimal scenery and emblematic props redirect attention from mimetic realism to signification, so that gender emerges not so much as a 'natural fact' as a style of movement and sound.[46] The pleasure of watching, thus, lies in recognising how a sleeve flick, a glance, or a step completes the sign. The actor's performing body is the 'subjunctive body,' neither naturalistic nor illusory but hovering in the subjunctive mode, 'as if' real yet insistently artificial.[47] This highly stylised quality then requires an unwritten contract between actors and audiences, as the actor offers stylisation instead of realism, while the audience consents to read and be moved by the code.[48] At this point, narrative per se in a Peking Opera performance has always been present but rarely decisive. Stories provide a framework, yet they are continually interrupted, deferred, or even hollowed out to make room for the 'showcase moment,' the point at which the art most fully declares itself, or the actor most fully demonstrates their ability to 'depict a role within the conventions laid down for it.'[49] As Haiping Yan puts it, the fictional construct of narrative and the flexible framing of space and time in Chinese Opera rely on the actor's kinesthetic gesture, singing, verbal articulation, and interaction with the audience; that is, suppositionality is embodied through performance itself.[50] *The Jewelry Purse* (*Shi Yuzhuo*) presents the discovery of a bracelet less as a story than as an occasion for sprightly song and coquettish gesture. *The Crossroads Inn* (*San Chakou*) likewise stages misunderstanding, but the misunderstanding is little more than an excuse, as the performance turns on the virtuosity of combat in darkness, and the resolution is compressed into a single line from a bystander. In these cases, plot serves more than as a pretext for moments of stylised intensity. Even a full-length work such as *The Fourth Son Visits His Mother* (*Silang Tanmu*) proceeds less through causal storytelling than through sequential vignettes, pausing for moments of song and gesture that outweigh narrative continuity. Opera thus enacts stories without depending on them, allowing stylisation and affect to eclipse plot. This spectacle-centred mode is akin to what Russian formalist critics call 'laying bare the device' wherein fleeting spectacles and moments of

[44] Carrie Noland, *Agency and Embodiment: Performing Gestures/Producing Culture* (Harvard University Press, 2009), 194, https://doi.org/10.4159/9780674054387.

[45] Wang-Ngai Siu, and Peter Lovrick, *Chinese Opera: The Actor's Craft* (Hong Kong University Press, 2014), 3, https://doi.org/10.5790/hongkong/9789888208265.001.0001.

[46] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, viii.

[47] Weihong Bao, 'The Politics of Remediation: Mise-en-scène and the Subjunctive Body in Chinese Opera Film,' *The Opera Quarterly* 26, nos. 2–3 (2010), https://doi.org/10.1093/oq/kbq031.

[48] Emily E. Wilcox, 'Meaning in Movement: Adaptation and the Xiqu Body in Intercultural Chinese Theatre,' *TDR: Drama Review* 58, no. 1 (2014), https://doi.org/10.1162/DRAM_a_00327.

[49] Roger Howard, *Contemporary Chinese Theatre* (Routledge, 2022), 12, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003170006.

[50] Haiping Yan, 'Theatricality in Classical Chinese Drama,' in *Theatricality*, ed. Tracy C. Davis and Thomas Postlewait (Cambridge University Press, 2003).

'artistic motivation' compel audiences to confront the performance itself rather than the linear, cause-and-effect drive toward narrative resolution.[51]

However, in live broadcast theatre, this hierarchy is reconfigured. As the mediation of live broadcast theatre seeks to guide viewers' attention and sustain legibility across screens, narrative comes to occupy a more central place. Camera choreography, subtitles, lighting shifts and sound cues stitch together martial routines and lyrical pauses into a recognisable story arc, leading coherence where the stage would once have offered emblematic suspension.[52] In CNPOC's T*he Female Generals of the Yang Family*, this shift is palpable: traditional devices such as characters' self-introduction and the presence of a propman on stage, which once foregrounded the suppositional contract of opera, are excised in the livecast version. What remains is a streamlined performance that comes across less emblematic and more 'realistic,' its martial display and lament reconstructed into narrative progression.

Martial routines, once sufficient to delineate the female general through statements of gesture, armour, and weaponry, are in live broadcast reframed in tracking or medium shots so that they propel the story forward. Likewise, to recall Susanne Greenhalgh's point, close-ups are 'generally kept in reserve as signature effects for pivotal moments of action,' their employment on tears or pauses intensifies momentary 'showcase' emotion into plot-driven affect, shifting the work of gendered characterisation from stylised codes of the performing body to the affective legibility of narrative.[53] In this remediation, the subjunctive body is not effaced but reorganised by televisual grammar that recast operatic stylisation into narrative coherence. If gender, sex, body and materiality are a matter of consistently reiterating the same performative speech acts, in Judith Butler's sense, then indeed, it is not movement alone but the confluence of gestural codes, camerawork, narrative framing that performatively reconstitutes the operatic body in live broadcast.[54] The result is a composite translation: part theatre, part screen, in which female heroism becomes newly legible to dispersed audiences, articulated less through martial display than through the story it is made to carry.

As Sophie Nield observes when reflecting on the moment a performance draws to a close, the 'curtain call is an odd moment in many ways. Actors, who have often spent the last few hours pretending that the audience simply were not there, now come forward, smiling and laughing, to acknowledge their presence.'[55] The space before the curtain belongs simultaneously to the stage and the auditorium as an in-between. What Nield highlights is the collision of distinct realities and spatial dimensions: the reality of the performance, the reality of the people beyond their roles, and the reality of the spectators. In live broadcast theatre, the audience is not acknowledged directly, at least not by the performers, who cannot even

[51] Linda Williams, 'Melodrama Revised,' in *Refiguring American Film Genres: Theory and History*, ed. Nick Browne (University of California Press, 1998), 57.

[52] Linda Hutcheon and Siobhan O'Flynn, *A Theory of Adaptation* (Routledge, 2006), 49, https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203957721.

[53] Susanne Greenhalgh, 'Guest Editor's Introduction,' *Shakespeare Bulletin* 32, no. 2 (2014), https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/shb.2014.0035.

[54] Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (Routledge, 1993), 11–12, https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203828274.

[55] Sophie Nield, 'Are curtain calls a clapped-out convention?' *Guardian*, (3 April 2012), www.theguardian.com/stage/theatreblog/2012/apr/03/curtain-calls-clapped-out-convention.

see them. Nevertheless, following Jinsil Choi, Kyung Hye Kim and Jonathan Evans, streaming does not generate the cohesive national publics or Benedict Anderson's 'imagined community' secured by print capitalism or traditional broadcast but convenes dispersed audiences through affective bonds with the material.[56] This attachment thereby is more situational, shaped by the recognition that theatre now operates within a society structured by networked digital technologies and real-time media, saturated with myriad 'social gestures' and 'sites of gesture' induced by communication devices.[57] It is within this context that the CNPOC deliberately retains markers of 'theatrical ceremony' in its livecast productions. To give remotely located audiences a sense of 'being there,' *Female Generals of the Yang Family* preserves explicitly the drawing and closing of the curtain in its mediatised production, just as in a live event. The logic behind such a choice is not dissimilar to what David Sabel, creator and executive producer of NT Live, once remarked about the broadcasts being 'not making a movie': recalling his first encounter with a broadcast opera, he admitted that 'it felt ridiculous to applaud at the screen, but actually this idea felt like it retained something of the DNA, something of the magic of live theater.'[58] Therefore, much as audiences are reminded before live performance to silence their mobile phones, CNPOC reproduces such framing gestures in the streamed medium. In doing so, it stages what Richard Schechner describes as 'ticket-taking, passing through the gate, performing rituals, finding a place from which to watch,' as to frame the threshold of theatregoing in the live broadcast landscape.[59] As a result, it transposes the forms of theatrical encounter into circuits of mediation where the codes of liveness are rearticulated in another register.

Conclusion

Nick Kaye in his study *Site-Specific Art: Performance, Place, Documentation* emphasised that 'the site functions as a text perpetually in the process of being written and being read, [… and] the site-specific work's very attempt to establish its place will be subject to the process of slippage, deferral and indeterminacy in which its signs are constituted.'[60] In this 'live broadcast site,' subtitles while providing access also function prescriptively and comprise a kind of pedagogy, exerting a formative power that propagates particular priorities, inflects interpretive habits, and shapes the expectations through which Peking Opera is made intelligible. Gender, too, is drawn into this economy of legibility, as subtitles and broadcast technology reorganise the conditions of performance. Its representation is actively reshaped, reoriented, and recontextualised by the dual forces of subtitling and broadcast technology, which together reorganise the conditions of performance and the very terms through which gendered identity and agency are perceived by transnational audiences. As this case demonstrates, gender that once indexed a collective lament or martial solidarity can be reframed, and the operatic female voice can be recast within intimacies that appear globally understandable yet historically attenuated. Translation here is not ancillary but constitutive

[56] Jinsil Choi, Kyung Hye Kim and Jonathan Evans, 'Introduction: translation and streaming in a changing world,' *Target: International Journal of Translation Studies* 35, no. 3 (2023), https://doi.org/10.1075/target.00020.cho.

[57] Andrew Eglinton, 'Reflections on a Decade of Punchdrunk Theatre,' *TheatreForum*, no. 37 (2010).

[58] Stone, 'Not Making a Movie.'

[59] Richard Schechner, *Performance Theory* (Routledge, 2003), 189, https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203426630.

[60] Nick Kaye, *Site-Specific Art: Performance, Place, Documentation* (Routledge, 2000), 185, https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203138298.

as it is also one of the media through which theatre's afterlife acquires shape, setting the terms by which Peking Opera may be apprehended across screens. The reconfiguration enacted by subtitles in CNPOC's *Female Generals of the Yang Family*, from dynastic guardianship to a codified image of resilient femininity set against weakness, in this sense, needs to be read as a deliberate intervention. This shift reflects the prescriptive labour of remediation, where operatic stylisation is rendered into affective legibility for distant spectators. Yet it should also be clarified that audiences are by no means passive recipients of such didactic gender framing, as the live broadcast also accentuates a dispersed 'feeling-I' that relocates theatrical affect into the realm of sensorial perception, inviting translation to account for the ways attention and emotion are structured across mediated space.[61] Furthermore, live broadcast theatre itself may also be grasped as a mode of translation in its own right. Its remediation always depends on what the stage production seeks to communicate and the form in which that message must be delivered. To read it as translation is to move beyond the familiar preoccupation with questions of liveness and ephemerality, and instead to reckon with how mediation scripts patterns of attention, affect, and recognition. The stakes are not confined to Peking Opera. They speak more broadly to the conditions of theatre within a mediascape where performance is most often encountered through screens, and where translation becomes indispensable to its survival. What comes into view is a continual remaking of theatrical meaning that reenvisions what it means to translate, to witness, and to negotiate theatre in an age of mediation.

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[61] Heidi Liedke, 'Emancipating the Spectator? Livecasting, Liveness, and the Feeling I,' *Performance Matters* 5, no. 2 (2019).

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