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Ecologies of Translation: Chinese Classical Opera
and Spanish Golden Age Theatre
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ECOLOGIES OF TRANSLATION: CHINESE CLASSICAL OPERA AND SPANISH GOLDEN AGE THEATRE

It is too soon to talk of a consolidated English-language performance tradition of Spanish Golden Age theatre. Individual productions—in the main of a limited number of canonical plays—and several dedicated seasons have, nonetheless, helped it to stutter towards some sort of generic recognition, so that a 2017 production of Lope's (unknown in English) *Las bizarrías de Belisa* (performed here as *The Agony and The Style*) was, for example, deemed able to be offered on trust to Cardiff theatre-goers as «another gem from the Spanish Golden Age».[1] While there have been a number of performance-based analyses published in and around Hispanic Studies, the mainstream discipline itself has tended to produce close-readings of text, their discourse rooted in the literary and

[1] Lope de Vega, *Las bizarrías de Belisa,* translated by David Johnston as *The Agony and the Style,* opened 30 November 2017, Richard Burton Theatre, Royal Welsh College, Cardiff.

their interpretive methods geared towards the inevitably invariant. Unsurprisingly, this relentless reading of plays in terms of notionally fixed constituent elements and agglutinating themes has derived from and contributed to a seminal strand of criticism that has tended to insist on formal differences, its uniqueness by another name.

It was precisely this absolute quality, indeed, that Arnold Reichenberger had claimed to identify when he put forward his theory that the uniqueness of the *comedia*, apparent in the complexity of its polymetric forms along with its seemingly arcane obsession with honour, effectively precluded any meaningful connection with audiences beyond the Spanish-speaking world (Reichenberger: 1959: 303-316). The effects of this critical corralling, reinforced by a generation of studies deriving from A. A. Parker's strictures about the so-called principles governing the priorities—and, in turn, the performance options—of the form, have been both far-reaching and interconnected (Parker: 1958: 42-59). Variations on this theme of untranslatability have, accordingly, informed the working assumptions of many theatre scholars that these plays are but pale reflections of Elizabethan drama,[2] assumptions reinforced both by the continuing insistence of specialists on the inviolable qualities of the originary text (a position that prompted the heated debate in the Royal Shakespeare Company about the use and abuse of surtitles in their Spanish Golden Age tour to Madrid's Teatro Español in 2004),[3] and by the contention of some recent scholarly translators that polymetric form is a particular *non plus ultra* beyond which traduction lies.[4]

Spanish Golden Age theatre in English-language translation has been progressively obliged to free itself from this debilitating tag of formal

[2] Oscar Brockett and Franklin Hildy, in their widely-read *History of the Theatre*, write, for example, of Golden Age drama that «Its preoccupation with a narrow code of honor and failure to probe deeply into human destiny are limitations which make it less universal than the best English work» (Brockett and Hildy: 2008: 139).

[3] For further details, see David Johnston, «Historicising the Spanish Golden Age: Lope's *El perro del hortelano* and *El caballero de Olmedo* in English», in Catherine Boyle and David Johnston (Eds), *The Spanish Golden Age in English* (2007: 50-51).

[4] A characteristic view is expressed by A.K.G. Paterson in the Preface to his translation *of The Painter of His Dishonour*, where he notes that «The presence of poetry in the original is acknowledged by translating into English verse, that of polymetry by engaging in a variety of forms» (1991: v). See also Victor Dixon, who notes in the Introduction to his translation of *The Dog in the Manger* that not to opt for a verse translation «would be a betrayal» (1990: 6).

uniqueness. The opening salvo in this confrontation came from theatre practitioner and critic Eric Bentley, who countered Reichenberger's protectionist assertion of uniqueness by pointing to an equally implausible universality at the heart of playwrights like Lope de Vega, Calderón and Tirso, an apparent guarantor of their easy translatability (Bentley: 1970: 147-173). But as a translator himself, Bentley was referring not simply to an ill-defined potential for relatedness as a constant within this theatre, but more completely to the dynamics of complementarity that are rooted in the act of translation itself. His characterisation of a play as «a river of feeling in which reason, will and feeling always act together, simultaneously and in close dependence on one another» (Bentley: 1964: 3) not only captures the baroque spirit of Spanish Golden Age theatre in general, with its intuition of the flow of an unstable and inconstant life overlaid, perhaps even held together, by the poetics of the multiple representations of self to other, but also suggests the qualities that attract new audiences today to these plays in translation. What they bring to the stage, perhaps first and foremost, is an embodiment of Raymond Williams's «structure of feeling», which he insisted «operates in the most delicate and least tangible parts of our activity» (Williams: 1998: 53). In the here and now of twenty-first-century performance, when emotion is increasingly understood as central to cognition, these plays, like the theatre of García Lorca, reinforce the value, subjective and aesthetic, to be gleaned from emotional experience and sensuous art. The plays of the Spanish Golden Age have an extraordinary capacity to generate energies and forces rooted in the physical that connect the stage powerfully with the spectator, and emotional responses through which the translator might engineer, in turn, the extratextual connections that are the heartbeat of audience complicity. It is in this intense space of connection between source play and target audience, where, to use David Hare's memorable phrase, «theatre happens in the air», that the affordances of stage translation lie (Hare: 1991: 24).

Affordances, Ecology and the Big Work of Translation

To talk about the affordances of translation suggests the seeking of an accommodation between the new context of reception and the text to be translated. Developed from its original meaning in evolutionary biology, where the verb «to afford» refers to the effects of the features

through which a given environment sustains—or renders extinct—a particular life form, James J Gibson's pioneering study *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* was the first to coin the nominal usage as a way of conceptualising the dynamics of a complementarity between object and context that is rooted in the particular energies of the contingent (Gibson: 1979: 127). Applied to translation, this understanding of affordance allows us to move beyond oppositional considerations of the translated text as either second or first order creation, beyond the parameters of the notionally fixed and free that together circumscribe translation decision making. Instead, it prompts us to turn our attention to the source text not as the original against which the target text is measured, but as a potential site of current translatability—for better, but also sometimes for worse. A simple example of such translatability, where affordances made a palpable difference, was Joan Littlewood and Ewan MacColl's 1936 Theatre Union production of John Garret Underhill's translation of *Fuenteovejuna,* geared to connect class divisions in Britain to the ideological divides of the Spanish Civil War. MacColl himself succinctly articulated the affordances of the moment that enabled the play's meaningful performance: «In every respect *Fuenteovejuna* was the ideal play for the time. Its theme, the revolt of a village community against a ruthless and bloody dictator, was a reflection in microcosm of what was actually taking place in Spain» (MacColl: 1986: xi).

Both Littlewood and MacColl famously placed participation at the heart of their aesthetic, primarily for political reasons in order to forge a community of purpose. But all theatre depends on the community of audience, so that by extension in translation for any mode of performance the securing of spectator complicity, the forging of connections between the context of reception and the material world on stage, is the goal of the translator, a first-order objective by any standard. If theatre indeed happens in the air, then the spectator needs to be enabled as a participatory presence, not solely a critical or rational observer but a co-creator of the full range of potential meanings and experiences that the stage world offers. In that sense, although translation itself inevitably exposes meaning as unstable and individual experience as shifting and contingent, it is by anchoring the translated text to the affordances of the receiving context that the translator reconstitutes the possibility of communicating meaning and shaping experience—not in any permanent way but for as long as the complementarity afforded remains visible on stage.

In this way, translator agency becomes primarily geared towards the generation of a created relation between the text and the new environment; this conception of translatability as complementarity derives from the consideration of this environment—whether public space or cultural moment—as an ecosystem to which the translated text will contribute, to some degree at least, by instantiation of its own interests, assertion of its own values, and enrichment through its own forms, but also to which it will necessarily adapt in order to survive. The affordances of the reception context of 1936 served to anchor this production of *Fuenteovejuna* into the generation of new meanings and practices, political and artistic, and ultimately to restore a new materiality to the text afforded.

The translated text in general moves forwards, in this way, towards a clearly grasped destination, sustained by the network of practices, readings and uses that it excites in its new environment. Similarly, *Las bizarrías de Belisa*, in its temporary guise as *The Agony and The Style*, while still set in seventeenth-century Madrid, evoked in performance the powerful tensions between interior worlds sustained by fantasy, desire and subterfuge, and a world outside characterised by competition and danger—reminiscent in this way of the oppositions embodied in Stephen Daldry's memorable staging of *An Inspector Calls*. Put simply, the translation is recognisably itself, but also enriched by the connotative dimensions it now accrues to itself.

This developing capacity for relatedness and meaning-making does not somehow obscure our view of what the original was, but rather ushers us into the excitement of an evolutionary space generated by an old text meaningfully reborn to a new audience. The implications of this evolution are clear: the act of translation is not simply a production concept to which the text is subjected, but a writing forward of the text as a whole, a breathing of new life into an old form. Which is why a broad spectrum of theatre writers, like Dennis Kennedy, and theorists of adaptation, like Linda Hutcheon, coincide in their core argument that translations written forward in this way are effectively plays in their own right (Kennedy: 1993: 2; Hutcheon: 2012: 21). There is an echo here as well of Archibald MacLeish's statement of first-order ontology that «a poem should not mean / but be» (MacLeish: 1952: 40), and of Susan Sontag's later campaign against over-determining practices of interpretation of original meaning and context (Sontag: 1966: 10), and of

Rita Felski's (later again) postcritique, its gaze fixed firmly on the materiality of the text, whether translation or not (Felski: 2015: 34).

But there is also something missing here: and that is that the translated text itself may afford a special type of connection, access into what we might think of as a created relatedness across cultures and times. The full impact of *Fuenteovejuna*, for example, derived from the way it spoke simultaneously to the experience of class difference in the recession of 1930s Britain, and also of the country where those differences had flared into the ideologically-charged confrontation of the Civil War. It is this evolutionary interaction between old text and new environment that is central to this discussion.

The consideration of affordances, when applied as a tool to understand both the potential and the actual work of translation, brings into play a complete range of such interactions—systemic, institutional, cultural, critical, social and aesthetic—between the text and the new conditions of performance, just as they do in Gibson's initiatory discussion, where the object and receptor environment are only fully understandable when viewed in full conjunction. It is what might be called «seeing the bigger picture». And it is one of the central contentions of this article that it is precisely this bigger picture that is often absent from discussion of translation. It is the wide frame of evolutionary process that we need to envision if we are to understand how translation organises itself and is organised around what defines it most fully. This is the big work of translation—its function as a generator of created relatedness, of what Octavio Paz described as the «convergences» that animate «a network of relationships, or more precisely a circuit of communication» (Paz: 1987: 218).

It is always tempting to focus critically and theoretically on discrete elements or partial outcomes of translation practice, but to do so is to diminish its contribution to cultural transmission, just as swathes of Golden Age criticism have over the years tended to misunderstand and to decry the *comedia*'s potential for valid performance in translation because of the perceived difficulties of translating constituent elements of its aesthetic. Philosopher Peter Sloterdijk mounts a broad-based attack on reductionist attitudes, noting with characteristically aphoristic precision that «modernity is the self-fulfilment of the analytical myth that gives the smallest parts precedence over their composites» (Sloterdijk: 2014: 370). His—again characteristically—acerbic analysis of the failed project

of modernity, that he contrasts sharply with the natural order of things, proposes a movement away from practices whose perspectives reflect the national and the solely rational, and towards what he calls a «wider horizon at once ecological and global» (Sloterdijk: 2011: 4). In that regard, Spanish Golden Age theatre in translation, in its movement towards that wider horizon, has had to work not in conjunction with but rather against the analytical myths of criticism that give «the smallest parts precedence over their composites».

Ecosystems of Performance

These are the terms in which this article considers that translation works: that is, by establishing circuits of contact in and across what we might think of as an ecology of affordance spaces within a global (but not globalising) frame. Put this way, different performance traditions, such as those referenced in the title of this essay, whether in the original language or in translation, function within affordance spaces. We could also think of them as ecosystems. Theatre, even within its different national systems, is characterised by a dazzlingly rich variety of forms and practices that are singularly endowed with a vivifying ability to spawn worlds elsewhere, nuclei of performance activity that have the potential to attract new audiences. And translation, in this guise, is the global ecology in which such spaces interact, and which brings these nuclei into the ambit of different audiences. It is now happening in the case of the Spanish Golden Age in English, but there are other performance traditions, located within their own systems of performance, bulwarked by their own accrued critical capital, that are similarly encased in the failure of their own analytic myth.

One such dazzlingly rich performance tradition is that of Chinese classical opera (*xiqu*). Indeed, *xiqu* is undoubtedly one of the world's greatest but least explored (outside China) theatre repertoires. To think of Chinese classical opera as an ecosystem of performance acknowledges both its internal evolution and its organic diversity within its current pool of performance in China. Beijing opera (*jingju*) is perhaps the best known of a wide variety of classical opera forms that still survive and are regularly performed in China today. Although Beijing opera itself has its origins in the late eighteenth-century, many of these other forms date back to the Yuan Dynasty of the twelfth century, and their huge proliferation (there are around three hundred and sixty of them) is rooted in the number of

regional languages and cultures that have appeared and, in some cases, disappeared, over the last nine centuries. At the heart of this living network of forms are a number of common features—what we might think of, in the context of ecosystems, as their DNA sequencing. Ruru Li succinctly describes *xiqu* in general as a theatre that emphasizes «stylisation over realism» (Li: 2010: 2), with an emphasis on staging codes and prescriptive rules of performance that are, in essence, historically-rooted conventions developed or accumulated through the long history of opera in classical Chinese culture. And while variations in musical discourse are evident across these forms, all promote the same distillation of the actor's art into the four core skills of singing, speaking, dancing-acting, and acrobatic combat. In that sense, in terms of the evolutionary process of *xiqu*, the codified forms of Beijing opera represent the most recent stage of a long process of stylisation through which it has absorbed and intensified this emphasis on the formal and, indeed, the formulaic.

Beijing opera as an ecosystem of performance still flourishes today—although contemporary Chinese audiences struggle to some degree with its intricacies of form. Within the broader ecology of translation, however, it is caught in a different stranglehold; on one hand, its largely uncontested status today as the quintessential art form of a new China increasingly concerned with the expansion of its soft power, embeds it within a national space of affordances that are institutional, critical, financial and, of course, cultural. But on the other, its potential to attract new audiences across the world is confined within a political and cultural project concerned to harvest symbolic capital from its undeniable power in performance.

Today's state-sponsored maintenance and dissemination of the form is designed as a key cultural narrative in the construction and propagation of Chinese national identity. Officially-funded activities, such as recent Chinese-language performances in places like Sadler's Wells, the Lincoln Center, and the Kennedy Center, as well as a lavish—if unsustainably literalising—translation project led by two Chinese universities,[5] are in this way central elements of a nation-building strategy, a *translatio studii et imperii* by another name. The upshot of this is that Beijing opera is presented to the world through the discourse of a complexity

[5] For further details, see http://www.china.org.cn/arts/2012-10/24/content_26888597.htm.

whose unique constituent elements, it is implied, inevitably resist translation that aspires to be anything more than a simple *vade mecum*. Moreover, a range of gate-keepers—politically appointed cultural officials, practitioners, critics and academics—is centrally concerned to assure the inviolability of the form as the unique expression of this cultural quintessence.

In that regard, Beijing opera is encased in China in a culturally and critically policed self-containment, and accordingly regarded by many as untranslatable in any meaningful way. Reviewers of these highly-polished Chinese-language performances abroad tend, almost without exception, to regurgitate the content of their press packs in a bid to instruct their audiences on the complexities of the form and, through that, to laud the perceived authenticity of the show on offer. In spite of—or perhaps because of—their overall loyalty to the prestige of the form, however, reviewers' assessments also adumbrate a set of perceptions immediately reminiscent of the discourse of Chinoiserie. Terms cognate with charm, delight, enchantment, elaboration and intricacy abound, but jostle with professions of puzzlement about the music—for example, «the ear-piercingly loud high notes, the hugely repetitive percussion, explorations of tonalities we're just not used to» (Selman: 2019: online) as well as misjudgements of narrative impact (the intensely tragic *Farewell, My Concubine*, for example, is characterised in performance as a melodrama by the *Washington Post*, in which «a spurned consort did a tipsy but demure Rockettes chorus-line number with her ladies-in-waiting. And there were some terrific acrobats…» (Battey: 2014: online). There are complex issues of language-specific interpretants and modes of cultural cognition at play here, as *Guardian* reviewer Laura Barnett begins to imply in her brief analysis of international critical responses to a Spanish-language performance of *La verdad sospechosa* in Almagro (Barnett: 2013: online). It is a topic that merits further consideration, although unfortunately not within the confines of this essay.

Evolution or Niche Conservatism

Non-translation, as these examples from Chinese-language productions suggest, frequently fuels a misrecognition bulwarked by stereotypes. In that regard, Beijing opera is to all intents and purposes an international theatre phenomenon that trades in clichés, viewed,

consciously and unconsciously, by many of those outside the circle of its art as the quintessential product of a Chinese imaginary. It is relegated to the level of showcase, gridlocked in a performance culture that is increasingly museological and that, with the brief exception of the inglorious experiments of the Cultural Revolution when «model» operas were written to an agitprop specification, has increasingly ossified over the years under the carapace of state-sponsored promotion and the claims of exclusivity made by its cultural guardians. It has been a long-standing process of appropriation. When, for example, S. I. Hsiung adapted *Lady Precious Stream* for his critically-acclaimed all-spoken production in London and New York in the 1930s,[6] he was quickly savaged in the Chinese press, one well-known dramatist in particular pouring vitriol on the «*Lady Precious Stream* that humiliates China» (Hong: 1959: 244: our translation). Interestingly, in obeisance to this barrage of critical abuse, Hsiung's next translation of a Beijing opera—the erotically powerful *Romance of the Western Chamber*—was mired in a literalness that seemed to sound the death-knell of the form in translation.

The new Chinese republic had been established in 1912, its modernising politicians signalling its clear distance from the feudal structures that had been supported by Confucianism for nearly two millennia. And it was in response to the New Culture Movement's attack on Beijing opera in the first decades of the twentieth century as an irrelevant anachronism (a *jiuxi*, or «old play») that defiant critics began to defend the uniqueness of Beijing opera in the articulation of the first principles of a critical campaign that has culminated in the metonymizing of Beijing opera as «nationalistic message» (Goldstein: 2007: 178). And in the last three or four decades, even as the form has grown more distant from younger audiences, there has been considerable resistance on the part of its powerful gatekeepers to sanction any tendency towards new accommodations (Wichmann: 1990: 146-178). The essential unchangeability -–and therefore untranslatability— of Beijing opera is firmly established within an autotelic discourse that emphasises its «unique singing, exquisite appearance, sonorous music [and] self-contained performance styles» (China Cultural Centre: 2019: online). In that regard, returning to Sloterdijk in a way that directly parallels the cosseting of

[6] For full details of both this production and Hsiung's life in general, see Diana Yeh *Happy Hsiungs: Performing China and the Struggle for Modernity* (2014).

Spanish Golden Age theatre within its own critical protectionism, Beijing opera's apparent untranslatability is sustained by insistence on the radical difference, the essential incommensurability, associated with its own constituent elements. But, of course, the recognition of difference is the point at which real translation starts, at which the translator searches for a meaningful correspondence between text and the contingent affordances of the receiving moment. Any act of meaningful translation will, of course, bring change to Beijing opera; but there again, translation, trafficking as it does in difference, inevitably brings change to whatever it touches.

Much, of course, depends on what we think such change entails. If translation is practiced not as an action that deracinates, but a mode that promotes convergences through its «interweaving of performance cultures without negating or homogenizing differences but permanently destabilizing and thus invalidating their authoritative claims to authenticity», (Fischer-Lichte: 2014: 12) then we begin to understand how translation may be considered an ecology in which different ecosystems interact to assert their characteristic differences as well as their commonalities. In other words, translation at its best opens up new spaces from and for different ecosystems of performance, and in doing so promotes what in global terms we might think of as the biodiversity of performance practice. As this conception of translation as interweaving suggests, it is the translator's ability and willingness to refuse the discursive authority of both source text and target context, and accordingly to work within the provisionality of the different spatial and temporal domains inhabited by text and new spectator alike, that enable translation's capacity to generate productive new spaces. Complementarity by another name. But while this concept of translation underpins an evolutionary sense of theatre practice, Beijing opera, like Spanish Golden Age theatre in translation until relatively recently, is effectively marooned in what ecologists would term a niche conservatism, an encircling claim to uniqueness that refuses even the possibility of any translation that is anything other than second-order writing at its most subservient. It is a principle of self-containment that stands in stark opposition to evolution, convergence, and the attainment of those wider horizons upon which certainly our wellbeing but also perhaps our very survival as a species depends.

How, then, might the translator pick their way through this daunting barrier of cultural untouchability to write a stage-worthy

translation of a form that deserves to be seen and enjoyed by wider audiences, a translation that dispels the aporia of misrecognition and clichéd interpretations? Part of the answer to that might be found in the evolution of the plays of the Spanish Golden Age, particularly in terms of the tension between the affordances of translation and the denials of cultural protectionism. Moreover, although at first sight Chinese opera in general and Beijing opera in particular, with their blending of stylised dialogue and singing, might seem to have more in common with the *zarzuela*, the *comedia* and *xiqu* share a number of strikingly similar shaping elements: principal among them are the perceived inseparability of multi-layered form and meaning, a concern with performance as a trope of being, and a commitment to an aesthetic whose pretensions to harmony, neo-platonic and Confucian respectively, nonetheless strain under the delectation of the materiality of language and the powerful life of the senses.

The Structure of *Qing*

It is not that Chinese opera and the theatre of the Spanish Golden Age have existed in entirely non-communicating chambers. The recent collection of essays *Faraway Settings: Spanish and Chinese Theatre of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* attempts to «allow us to think in a global manner as we confront the theaters of Cervantes, Lope de Vega and Calderón de la Barca as they have become interlocutors in a transcultural dialogue that shows China's closeness then and now». The book references a (disappointingly) small number of instances where Spanish plays have been «appreciated in modern China» and «plays written in a Chinese mode» have been produced successfully in the United States (Gil-Osle and de Armas: 2019: 12). In doing so, it sets out across its constituent essays a range of comparative positions between Ming theatre (*chuanqi*, one of the sources from which Beijing opera developed) and Spanish Golden Age theatre that, however, underplays the transformative and renewing effects of translation as an ongoing generator of shifting relatedness, as much comparative literature still tends to do. But within the instances of convergence it describes, there are unmistakeable (although not explicit) echoes of Bentley and Williams's foregrounding of affect. Among them is Frederick A. de Armas's essay, which picks up on the force of *quing* (in our transliteration, *qing*) as «strong feelings that foreground love as

overpowering» (de Armas: 2019: 68-69) in plays such as *The Peony Pavilion* (*Kunqu* in origin, later assimilated by Beijing opera). The idea of *qing* as a vehicle for affect is further refined by contributor Carmela V. Mattza Su, who writes that «an emotion is not just an image or affect situated only in the mind, but also leads to action […] a disposition to act» (Mattza Su: 2019: 112). Bentley's metaphor of river and Williams's figurative use of structure, however, suggest more than just the presence of affect, the generation of emotion through plot points, but rather imply sustained directional energy, a concerted pattern of feeling and thinking and doing (or aspiring to do) driven forward by both the actor and the translator in their work to humanise character as subject. Such work is only in part hermeneutic enquiry, an attempt to read the human mind through its reflection in language, but is more completely concerned with the materiality of language itself—Sontag's «erotics» of form (Sontag: 1966: 10). Acts of translation may spring from translator understanding; but understanding in the complex transactions of translation as a writing practice is no less about generating patterns of connection through emotional impact as it is with acknowledging the conditions of original context.

What would it mean to think about Chinese opera in terms of points of possible convergence, particularly if we think of this form too as a river of feeling, a structure of *qing*? What sort of translatability would this affordance bring to the form? It is instructive, in this regard, to return to the *comedia* in terms of its relationship with the affective baroque, to think of it as a form that both pre-empts, connects with and, through translation, extends seminal thinkers like Descartes, Hobbes and Spinoza who wrote about the relationships between the passions, rational thought, and the conditions of gesture and embodiment. These are plays that emphasise theatre as an exploration of the turning point where emotion impels action; whether that emotion an outworking of desire, love, jealousy, fear or the yearning for revenge, it is on the interaction between passions and behaviour that the focus of these dramatists lies. As artists who both prefigure and belong to the baroque, they work to a clear aesthetic of the sensuous in which emotions are the dominant motivators of action onstage and the prime channel of complicity off.

This is key. It is in the luxuriant aesthetic of the baroque that theatre liberates itself from its primitive sermonic purpose, or, more accurately in the case of the Golden Age playwrights, folds routine

didacticism into the much more potent charge of affect. Art historian John Rupert Martin, writing of the European baroque generally, speaks of an aesthetic whose «urge [is] to expand the range of sensual experience and to deepen and intensify the interpretation of feelings» (Martin: 2018: 73). Lope, of course, meditated profoundly on how best he might manipulate and process the complicity of his spectators, while Calderón's theatre became increasingly experimental in terms of the machinery of such manipulation. In consequence, as Gregg Lambert argues in his study of the return of the baroque in modern culture, «the emotional body of the baroque spectator, animated by anxieties and the creative violence of the producer, becomes a central topic and even a primary ground, one which prepares for a distinctly modern conception of aesthetic experience» (Lambert: 2004: 13).

At the heart of this idea of the returning spirit of the baroque is a sense of a contemporary, increasingly self-consciously exuberant aesthetic so that, as Monika Kaup puts it, «the value of baroque stock, as it were, has risen another notch» (Kaup: 2018: 19). In our context, we might think of this return as an affordance, both for the comedia and *xiqu*, an affordance in which both forms may not only thrive, but also one which they can also contribute to and enrich. The presence of the emotional body of the spectator was one that playwrights like Lope, Tirso and Calderón, for example, were intuitively quick to exploit, seeing the liberating quality of the passions on a stage that offers not simply a corollary of the mind, but another dimension of experience in a carnivalesque world that exists in opposition to daily life and social order «animated by anxieties». The rhetorical and technical strategies of their theatre-making are directed towards the representation and stimulation of self-conscious emotions, articulated most completely through the *comedia*'s characteristic pairings of humour and tragedy, madness and sanity, dishonour and honour restored, pairings that in themselves straddle the tensions of the baroque, where passions, it was feared, may all too easily blind critical reason and engender the monstrous acts of characters who will become liars, frauds, and, in some cases, murderers.

The stirrings of a phenomenological consciousness (as one might indeed expect in the concerns of early modern playwrights) are evident in this dramatic depiction of the structures of feeling and corresponding resistances of thought as not simply influences on the individual life, but as states which, at different times, come to possess characters in their

entirety. Actors and translators today, of course, will seek to kit out their *comedia* characters in the nuances of psychological realism, but what drives these plays is a stage language that in its rich use of figurative forms means that characters speak from the heart of their being. It is this poetry of the intimate, what Herbert Marcuse thought of as «non-reified language», that directs the energies of the play (Marcuse: 2007: 38). For that reason, it is a mistake to shroud such energies behind imitative polymetric forms that in English serve more to alienate than indulge audiences, that most translators lack the talent to secure without laborious intervention and metrical implosion, and that, finally, ride rough-shod over the very different constructions and workings of rhyme and meter in Spanish and English. In the context of this discussion, these observations might be considered in sum as a poetics of translation for a Spanish Golden Age theatre that attempts to stake its claim as a stylised form capable of soliciting from its audiences deep levels of emotional response. Each individual play will, of course, anchor itself to different affordances at different times, but the form in general offers a space where words signify intensely within the heightened dynamics of a created relation between stage and auditorium that brings spectators to confront the workings of codified authority while simultaneously plunging them into maelstroms of desire externalised in scheming, pretence, masks, and disguise. In this way, the dangers and attractions of the liminal become the great underlying reality of these plays, where chaos vies with order, collapse with structure, sin with retribution, desire with denial, and sex with death. And these are no less the narrative poles of the world of Chinese classical opera, where the force of *qing* as simultaneous animation and threat is both released and simultaneously constrained within the strictly codified aesthetic of the form.

Liminal Worlds

Before returning to the translational challenges of form, it is important to ask how *qing* operates liminally within the structure of the narrative elements of the opera. One of the most frequently performed scenes of both *Kunqu* and Beijing opera is Scene 10 of *The Peony Pavilion*, where the world of dream is presented as an enticing counterpoint to an ordered but lonely existence. It is the pivotal scene of the piece, in which in a young girl, Du Liniang, conjures a lover from her imagination and

loses her virginity to him in her garden in a dream sequence over which a veil is eventually drawn by a spirit figure, a *duende* or faerie, who sings about the stirrings of spring and the girl's right to sexual fulfilment. In many ways this depiction of female desire is perhaps more explicit than anything Spanish Golden Age dramatists might have permitted themselves, although such allusions to the sustaining vitality of fantasy are found in many plays, not least in *Dog in the Manger* where the Countess of Belflor (note the heavy-handed symbolism of her name) refers at the very beginning of the play to the «real» rather than imagined intruders in her house, and in doing so inadvertently references the intensity of her dream world: «That was no ghost, no fantasy/conjured from some deceitful dream» (Vega: 2004: 4). In *The Peony Pavilion* the intensity of the scene builds as Du (in Cyril Birch's translation, Bridal) dreams that the young man, Liu, is undressing her:

> BRIDAL (in a low voice): But, sir, what do you mean to do?
> LIU (also in a low voice): Open the fastening at your neck,
> loose the girdle at your waist,
> while you, screening your eyes with your sleeve,
> white teeth clenched on the fabric as if against pain,
> bear with me patiently a while then drift into gentle slumber
> (Tang: 2002: 48).

He leads her into a secluded part of the garden, while (in this translation) the Flower Spirit explains that he or she (in Chinese the gender is unspecified) has come «to cherish in compassion the «jade-like incense ones» […] the special concern of a flower spirit, and that is why I am here to watch over her and to ensure that the «play of clouds and rain» will be a joyous experience for her» (Tang: 2002: 49). The translation is excessively literary: the two embedded phrases in quotation marks are subsumed into a self-conscious poeticising which, although conveying some flavour of Chinese stylisation, rely on obscurantist imagery in English that invokes merely a sense of moral reticence. In Chinese, the referential element of these phrases is quite clear: «Jade-like incense ones» evokes the fragrance and innocence of the female body, while the «play of clouds and rain» is a common image of sex. Moreover, Liu's words, as imagined by Du (but written and translated by men, let us remember, and masquerading here as female fantasy), fail to capture the more breathless

nature of the Chinese: in Birch's translation, «screening your eyes with your sleeve, / white teeth clenched on the fabric as if against pain, / bear with me patiently a while then drift into gentle slumber». Classical Chinese relies on elision and imagistic implicature more than the contemporary language (and certainly more than English), so that effectively the reader or spectator is drawn into the meaning-making act, supplying his or her interpretation to the core elements of bare syntax. Accordingly, a literal version of the Chinese reads «Sleeves; sweep / teeth or buds; fabric or grass / tolerate; warm tenderness; while; sleep /», where teeth and buds are homophones, so that there is deliberately engineered scope for interpretation here, which will condition in turn the choice of meaning ascribed to the ambiguous character which translates as either fabric or grass. Birch's translation chooses to create an image of a young woman covering her eyes shyly while she bites into the fabric of her clothes—the literary trope «as if in pain» serving to emphasise further a sense of embarrassed passivity through an image of traditional reticence that the male author (and largely male audience) might well have found appealing (and which, to be fair, is perhaps more in keeping with the stock character of the young virgin, the *guimendan*).

But the lingering effect of such moral reticence remains at odds with the play's overall evocation of the eroticising power of the natural world. In the Prologue, the Narrator declares to the audience that «No-one knows where *qing* comes from, but when it does, it rises uncontrollably like water in a deeply-dug well» (our translation), so that the force of *qing* courses throughout the play in the same way that, for example, desire energises *Dog in the Manger*. How might a translator structure the words above to evoke this flow of *qing* both onstage and towards the audience? One possible translation might read «sleeves pressed / onto flowers, into grass, / you fold into my warmth, and then sleep» (our translation). But while in Lope's comedy, desire is rewarded, at least temporarily, through the artifice of fraud, Du dies shortly after her dream, only to be revived from her portrait by the force of the real Liu's desire three years later. Both plays are in this way very different, but both are also animated by this potent structure of feeling; so much so that the Chinese classic has long been subjected both to official censorship and bowdlerisation into the cloying forms of clichéd romantic drama.

But in 1998 (the 400th anniversary of the first writing of *The Peony Pavilion*), the *Los Angeles Times* reported enthusiastically on two productions apparently intent on breaking that mould:

> One of the most compelling arts stories at the end of the 20th century was the escape of *The Peony Pavilion* from the iron grip of China's cultural authorities. The great 55-scene *Kunju* opera, often called China's *Romeo and Juliet*, found a new, glorious life in the West in two competing versions, radically different--but both profoundly important. The 400-year-old opera got a controversial updating by Peter Sellars for the Vienna Festival, and a rare rendering in its complete 18-hour form (with subtle but telling modernizations) for the Lincoln Center Festival last summer. Together, these versions have so significantly enriched the notions of what world culture can be, and what opera can be, that neither genre is likely to ever be the same again. (Swed: 2000: online)

Sellars's version of the play draws on Birch's translation, quoted above, but from it develops a stage language that one reviewer described as «difficult, erotically provocative and laced with complex imagery» (Swatek: 2002: 147)—non-reified language in every sense. The Chinese-language production for the Lincoln Center Festival was, however, in the event severely delayed when the Shanghai Bureau of Culture seized its costumes and props on the basis that the production was, among other things, «pornographic»—interestingly, the Chinese characters that represent the erotic are «qing+colour» (*qingse*), while the pornographic is «colour+qing» (*seqing*—in Buddhism «colour» tends to refer to the material world in general and, by extension, to physical beauty), but the fact remains that in contemporary Chinese the erotic and the pornographic are very often indistinguishable. What these two influential productions have in common is a restoration of the sensuous to *xiqu* performance, the re-establishment of the stage as a liminal place, a portal between a world of constraint and the realm of the passionate intimate.

In terms of their commitment to high drama set within an elaborate aesthetic, these are productions that embody Lambert's return of the baroque. In that regard, in their depiction of a world where passions threaten to overwhelm reason, they have much in common with the structure of feeling that operates both within other Chinese operas and, significantly, the Spanish *comedia*. It is in this territory that we argue that the affordances for both forms lie. These are worlds where the whole is

felt in every part, where flows of feeling are all pervasive, and where private experience and the life of the senses are at the very least an alternative source of compelling knowledge about the world. It is on this basis that translators of operas like *Romance of the Western Chamber* and *Farewell, My Concubine* might elaborate the materiality of their stage language, infusing their imagery with the elaborations of the senses as perceptual systems, so that *Farewell, My Concubine*, for example, becomes less of a stirring example of a warrior-king's nobility in defeat and more a profound lament for a deep love destroyed by the insanities of war. The underpinning idea for all of this, namely that these operas might be performed in translation today through the affordances of a contemporary sensibility and corresponding culture of performance ever more attuned to Lambert's return of the baroque, has been notably explored through translational processes that explore a range of other media. In a new performance context for Chinese opera, where the multi-modal may well assume increasing importance, two such explorations are worth looking at, albeit necessarily briefly.

The first one is musical. German composer Karsten Gundermann has written a number of works in which Beijing opera is brought into the ambit of the European baroque tradition—most interestingly in his 2010 production of Gluck's *Le Cinesi (The Chinese Women)*, in which four Italian opera singers and two Beijing opera performers interweave languages and performance styles while two orchestras alternate between the music of Gluck and Beijing opera.[7] The interweaving of musical forms, counterpointing the melodic lines of Gluck with the percussive rhythms of Beijing opera, point to one possible (although in production terms costly) resolution of the issue of how one might translate the formal aesthetic of Chinese opera. But it is only one possibility among many; just as different translators of the *comedia* have variously approached the issue of the polymetrical form of the original, a whole range of production-specific solutions present themselves within this rich panorama of the interweaving of musical styles and instruments. They include bilingual performance (with singing, for example, in Chinese and the narrative spoken in English), simplified musical notation (for instance, reduced to percussion and cymbals), or the use of non-Chinese instruments (for

7 See https://www.lartedelmondo.de/index.php%EF%B9%96id= 87&L=1&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=20&cHash=7c596773fd3087e9f828d32518e26b83.html.

example, the Irish bodhrán and harp) to create a fusion soundtrack. In many ways, of course, these are production decisions that some may feel properly fall outside the remit of the translator, although others will consider the translator as a key collaborator within the entire mise-en-scène. One remaining solution, of course, to which Hsiung resorted in his notable production of *Lady Precious Stream*, is to present the opera in terms solely of its spoken narrative, relying on a number of *xiqu* performance conventions and costume, as well as stylistic inflections, so as to convey a sense of the original form and context.

The other example of translating Beijing opera is more fully intermedial. Yao Yuan's traditional brushstroke (*gongbi*) painting, dating from 2013, depicts Scene 10 of *The Peony Pavilion* as a tension between two worlds.[8] In the left-hand half of the picture (from the viewer's perspective), Du sits at her dressing table, gazing at herself in a hand-held mirror—a trope, surely, of yearning beauty. The room is mathematical in design, an oblong table resting on a square-tiled floor behind straight balustrades, above it a large rectangular painting depicting a traditional pastoral scene with a pair of mandarin ducks at swim (in China, the symbol of everlasting romantic love). This painting within the painting forms a sort of barrier between this world of measured containment and the exterior garden which occupies the right-hand side of the painting, where we now see Du and Liu graphically depicted in an act of explicit love-making. This world is evoked, baroque-style, in terms of movement and texture: the waterfall at the entrance to the garden is embedded in a cascade of pitted rocks that seem to swirl in the eye of the viewer, while beyond the couple is a rippling lake that rises to a sky full of scudding clouds. The *gongbi* painting is, in that way, a reflexive depiction of two aesthetics, one contained within regular forms and traditional characterisations of the natural world, but ultimately swept aside by the vibrancy of another aesthetic that is violent, infinitely mobile, and spectacularly visual. In these terms, the painting captures not only the tensions of the world of *xiqu*, its powerful dissonances between duty and embodiment, especially in the world of women, but also suggests that what lingers most in the memory and imagination of the spectator is its capacity

[8] See https://artist.artron.net/yishujia0007065/2-7970.html.

to communicate the strongest of emotions in a richly luxuriant aesthetic setting.

By Way of Conclusion: the Theatricality of Life

What the *comedia* and *xiqu* hold out is the offer of passionate intensity, embodied and aesthetic. In both forms such intensity is frequently leavened by comic interludes or comedic characters—in Chinese opera the stock character of the clownish *chou* is immediately identified by a Chinese audience because of their characteristic make-up resembling a small mask of white chalk, just as the *gracioso* is immediately identifiable to a Spanish audience as the servant usually wise beyond their station. In terms of affordances, while the *gracioso* is frequently performed in English within the familiar framework of the male double-act, the *chou* character would work well in terms of the typically exaggerated characterisations of situational comedy—bumptiousness, empty bravado, sheer stupidity etc. Comedy, verbal and knock-about, stems in both cases from rebellious emotions, common sense at a bravado gallop, so that the resulting humour simultaneously offsets and prefigures the stirrings of resistance within the body and the body politic to the perceived dangers of passionate excess—a resistance articulated through the binary oppositions that codify the human tensions of the respective universes of *xiqu* and *comedia*.[9]

There are key moments, however, in the emotional mapping of both forms where such stirrings overflow into statements of sublime baroque despair. These are moments of extraordinary reverberation, even within the performatively-rich style of both sets of plays where the fourth-wall is regularly and powerfully breached. Here performers appeal directly to audiences with all of the emotional force of human despair and revolt. Two such speeches, iconic in their intensity, occur in *The Injustice to Doue,* a frequently performed Yuan opera written around the end of the thirteenth century, and *The Painter of Dishonour*. They occur in very different contexts and are both validated by very distinct consequences, but nevertheless communicate a shared sense of the ultimate hollowness of the theatricality of life, of selfhood played out to ultimate emptiness. The

[9] See especially Georges Bataille *Death and Sensuality. A Study of Eroticism and the Taboo* (1962), 19.

opera depicts the wrongful execution of a young woman, falsely accused of poisoning her husband. Just before her execution she voices a bitter complaint on behalf of suffering humanity against an uncaring and unmoved heaven. In the published translation of Xianyi and Gladys Yang:

> Through no fault of mine I am called a criminal,
> and condemned to be beheaded –
> I cry out to Heaven and earth of this injustice!
> I reproach both Earth and Heaven
> for they would not save me.
> The sun and moon give light by day and by night,
> mountains and rivers watch over the world of men;
> yet Heaven cannot tell the innocent from the guilty;
> and confuses the wicked with the good!
> The good are poor, and die before their time;
> the wicked are rich, and live to a great old age.
> The gods are afraid of the mighty and bully the weak;
> they let evil take its course.
> Ah, Earth! you will not distinguish good from bad,
> and, Heaven! you let me suffer this injustice!
> Tears pour down my checks in vain (Guan: 1958: 27).

The translation is overlong, excessively rhetorically ornate (the rhymes are much more colloquial and punchy in the original), and because the implied performance style is already emotionally elevated, such writing pushes it into melodrama. The writing must work as a powerful portrayal of angst, allowing the performer to portray Doue as larger than life, not solely an embodiment of the desolation of baroque theatricality but more completely of human existential crisis. The speech's emotional intensity now prepares the way for a series of supernatural disturbances that follow her execution, including her return as a ghost to persuade her father to restore justice to her name. It is precisely this echo of revenge tragedy that served as a theatrical affordance for the Royal Shakespeare Company's 2017 production of *Snow in Midsummer* (this particular version of the title refers to one of the supernatural occurrences that mark the miscarriage of justice), in which Doue herself returns to wreak vengeance on the guilty. These supernatural interventions, of course, suggest a return to patterns of meaning in life, but what matters at the moment of delivery is that the

speech communicates to the audience a final sense of weariness, revolt against an order of things that imposes on the self the motions of predetermined performance in this great theatre of the world.

Performance is not only felt but also understood according to its affective qualities. This intuition of meaninglessness lurking at the heart of apparent purpose is not only eminently theatrical, but also offers an audience—any audience perhaps—a moment of deep emotionally-fired insight. It is at this level that Don Juan Roca's speech questioning the sanity of the all-pervasive honour code also works. He is the gentleman painter whose honour has been irredeemably stained by the kidnapping of his much younger wife, wandering now through Italy, a man of no name, in hapless search of stolen wife and lost honour. Like Giorgio Agamben's *homo sacer* (Agamben: 1998), he is now cast adrift from society, stripped of rights, bereft of protection. His speech culminates in the bitter questions:

> What madness dreamt up laws like these,
> these shameful rites the world accepts,
> where another's shameless intent
> visits such punishment on me? (Calderón: 1995: 106)

As in Doue's speech, the painter's complaint is directed at the emptiness of a life lived merely theatrically, of a self driven to constant performance by forces that assume all the appearances of the natural order. The great empty theatre of the world is one of the baroque's abiding intuitions, the despair perhaps that comes in the wake of sensory overload, and its articulation touches us when the writer, or the translator as writer, casts it in the language of contemporary affect.

It is here, in the liminal space between the two halves of Yao Yuan's painting, between the interwoven counterpoints of melody and percussion in Gundermann's production of Gluck, between the yearning for surplus and the experience of denial, and between the deeply-rooted apprehension of final absurdity and stern reminders of the architecture of social being, that the real art of *comedia* and *xiqu* performance lies. These are the motor forces of the inner life, and it is the translator's ability—and willingness—to bring them to intersect and then interact with the emotional responses of real theatre audiences that, in the final analysis, determine the translatability of *comedia* and Chinese opera alike. In the final analysis, this is how translation functions most completely as an ecology,

as a cultural mode that connects across time and space, that brings key human cultural practices into meaningful encounter with each other, and that, perhaps most importantly, imagines and engineers spaces in which such practices may survive and develop, and which, ultimately, they may enrich.

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