

Hong Kong Xiqu Overview



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主編、行政統籌
蔡啟光

Editor and Administration Coordinator
Choi Kai-kwong

原文審訂
羅麗

Original Text Reviewer
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英文翻譯
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版面設計及排版
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An Exploration of The Asura Judgment: From Traditional Interpretation to Monodrama

Written by: Ng Ngok-Ching (Cantonese Opera researcher)

1. Preface

Over the past hundred years, we have seen foreign masterpieces and movies being adapted into Chinese operas, marking a wave of cross-cultural adaptations in modern *xiqu*. In 1986, Shakespeare's *Macbeth* was adapted by the Contemporary Legendary Theatre into the Peking Opera, *The Kingdom of Desire* (starring Wu Hsing-kuo) and by the Shanghai Kunqu Opera Troupe into *The Story of Blood-stained Hands* (starring Ji Zhenhua and Zhang Jingxian). Another Shakespearean play, *Hamlet*, was adapted by the Shanghai Yue Opera House, the Shanghai Peking Opera House and the Contemporary Legend Theatre into three different versions. Other famous Shakespearean plays have also been interpreted by different *xiqu* groups.

In Hong Kong, the new Peking Opera *The Great Belfry* (1999), jointly performed by Tang Yuen-Ha's Jingkun Theatre of Hong Kong, Shandong Peking Opera Theatre and Beijing Peking Opera Theatre, was adapted from Victor Hugo's masterpiece *Notre-Dame de Paris*. Unlike the original version, which features the Hunchback as the protagonist, the adaptation highlights the female protagonist, Esmeralda. Abandoning the traditional Chinese opera costumes, the performers appeared in traditional Chinese clothing, with the performance primarily based on singing, similar to that of a play. In 2001, Tang Yuen-ha collaborated with the Peking Opera Theatre of Hubei Province to adapt Jin Yong's *wuxia* novels, releasing a new Peking Opera titled *The Return of the Condor Heroes*.

As for Cantonese Opera, Law Ka-ying has also adapted Shakespearean plays into Cantonese Opera in recent years with the productions of *Rebellious Hero* (1996) and *Emperor Lee Kwong* (2002). Many Cantonese Opera productions have incorporated foreign themes, such as Yip Shiu-tak's play *Duel of the Heroes* (2004), which was adapted from the Western film *Gladiator*, and Alexandre Dumas' masterpiece *Le Comte de Monte-Cristo* was reimagined as *Surfing the Sea of Blood* in 2019 by young playwright, Jason Kong.

2. The Concept of *The Asura Judgment*

Famous Japanese director Akira Kurosawa turned Ryusuke Akutagawa's novel *Rashomon* into a world-famous movie by combining it with another novel *Yabu no Naka* (In a Grove). Law Ka-ying admitted his admiration for Kurosawa's film, and the idea of adapting it into a Cantonese Opera had been brewing for more than a decade. Over the past 50 years, the film version of *Rashomon* has had a wide range of influences and has been adapted into plays, musicals, dances and other forms of art,

with the National Taiwan College of Performing Arts (TCPA)'s version of *Rashomon* being the pioneering version performed in the form of a Chinese opera.

In 1998, TCPA presented a new Peking Opera, *Rashomon*, performed by Wu Hsing-kuo, Cao Fu-Yong and Huang Yu-lin. The director and playwright used seven scenes to depict the complexity of human nature, of which the three scenes, *Testimony of the Man*, *Testimony of the Bandit* and *Testimony of the Woman*, stood out as highlights. Wu Hsing-kuo played the role of the bandit, while Cao Fu-yong played the man and Huang Yu-lin played the woman.

The opera differed from traditional Chinese opera in that it did not focus on describing the plot of the story, but only on the three main characters, interpretations based on their individual narratives. In addition, the *xiqu* version of *Rashomon* incorporated the participation of outstanding contemporary Taiwanese artists in the creation, including lighting design, costume styling, stage design, and the voice of *xiqu* arranger-composer, which helped distinguish the play from traditional Peking Opera.

Scenes of the Cantonese Opera *The Asura Judgment*:

The Asura Judgment was presented by the Leisure and Cultural Services Department at the Hong Kong Cultural Centre on 22 June 2021. Law Ka-ying, who was both the Artistic Director and the playwright, adapted the play from the movie version of *Rashomon*, with the following scenes:

- (1) Accusation in the Rain: A monk, a farmer and a merchant talk about a murder case in a bamboo forest. A warrior dies, and his wife and a bandit flee the scene. (Law Ka-ying, Lui Hung-kwong, Chan Hung-chun)
- (2) Bandit's Statement: The life and death of a true hero seems trivial. (Li Qiuyuan, Wang Zhiliang, Li Pui-yan)
- (3) Woman's Statement: Feeling humiliated, she cursed the heavens. (Cheng Wing-mui, Ng Chin-fung, Vong Seng-pan)
- (4) Spirit's Statement: The warrior killed himself out of shame. (Ng Chin-fung, Chan Ka-ming, Vong Seng-pan)
- (5) Swords and daggers, witness statement of a farmer: The woman instigates a duel between her husband and the bandit. Human intentions are often the hardest to fathom. (Lui Hung-kwong, Chong Yuen-sin, Wan Yuk-yu, Hong Hai)
- (6) Love filled the Asura Palace: The merchant alleges that the farmer's statements, as well as everyone else's, are unreliable, fail to tell the whole truth, and conceal their true meanings. The monk laments that the lack of mutual trust among people is akin to living in hell. Have faith in the innate nature of humanity. (Chan Hung-chun, Lui Hung-Kwong, Law Ka-ying)

In developing the script, Law Ka-ying admitted that he could not set aside the traditional *xiqu* model. He mentioned that the performance could end up feeling like a musical lacking the cultural heritage of Cantonese Opera. He hoped that the audience would be able to enjoy traditional Cantonese Opera reinterpreted through a new stage setting and innovative techniques. Still, everything should progress gradually, aiming to guide the audience forward step by step.

3. The Groundbreaking Approach of the Full-length Cantonese Opera, *The Asura Judgment*

3.1 The Audience is the Judge

Cheung Man-wai points out that *The Asura Judgment* is not an authentic drama about a talented young man or a beautiful woman; nor is it a play about a man in armour or one about martial arts. It retains the elements of Cantonese Opera but also incorporates the use of lighting (designed by Siu Kin-bong) and set design (by Ho Chun), alternating between time and space. This creates a very cinematic effect, with the trial and events interspersed with analepsis, evoking the impression of a single stage functioning as a split screen.

The story is adapted from the chaotic post-war period in Japan to the late Ming Dynasty in China, when people suffered from the turmoil of roving bandits. It begins with a warrior, Dongfang Yu, whose wife is assaulted by a bandit, leading to his death. At the trial, each of the parties gives a different statement, and even the spirit of the warrior recounts the events through a medium, resulting in several versions of the testimony. The bandit, the warrior and his wife are in groups of three, with three groups of nine actors reenacting different versions of the scene. The actors include *hualian*, *xiaowu*, and *sheng*, while the actresses portray *huadan*, *qingyi* and a shrewish *dan*. These roles represent a blend of various interpretations in *xiqu*, showcasing the personalities and emotions of the characters in the play.

She also mentioned that in traditional *xiqu*, the magistrate of the public court often sits at the back of the stage facing the audience, while the prisoner kneels at the entrance of the stage and sings in front of the audience. The late renowned film researcher Lin Nien Tung analyzed that the audience had “two camera lenses” at the same time — one on the judge and the other on the prisoner — which is a clever use of “cinematic split-screen” staging technique of ancient Chinese operas.

Film Critic Sek Kei praised the new stage design of this Cantonese Opera, which flexibly “cuts” and alternates scenes from the temple, to the forest, to the public hall, and to the underworld. As pointed out by Cheung Man-wai in her review the beauty of the public hall scene lies in the prisoner and the confessor facing the audience, as if the audience were the judge. In contrast to the public hall scene in traditional *xiqu*, the direction of the public hall scene is reversed, yet the effect remains highly effective.

Additionally, the three men in the case are divided into three groups of actors: Li Qiuyuan is the boldest, Ng Chin-fung has the best vocals, and each of the three female roles expresses delicacy, sorrow, or anguish, with Cheng Wing-mui performing the trick of “spitting out blood”. Moreover, Chan Ka-ming plays the role of a psychic witch, who travels to the netherworld like Zhong Kui with a martial arts master doing somersaults, creating a spooky effect within the play..

3.2 Guiding the audience to ponder over the theme

Chan Kim Mui noted that the main theme of the narrative of *The Asura Judgment* is the monk’s perspective. In the movie version, this narrative function is not delegated to the monk, but to the farmer, who is “guilty” as implied at the end of the movie. The monk, played by the playwright Law Ka-ying, becomes a much more important character than in the movie version, as he projects his feelings and evaluates the good and evil at different stages throughout the play. Some of the effects of the

movie, such as the desolate scene of *Rashomon*, are conveyed through the monk's chanting.

Cheung Man-wai believes that it was a bold attempt to use a new expression and unfamiliar style, requiring the audience to understand the plot, judge right and wrong, and search for the ending on their own. The play is titled *The Asura Judgment* — what is intended by it? What is the moral and revelation regarding the cultivation of happiness and karma for all beings? To what extent will it be acceptable to the regular Cantonese Opera audience? How the playwright and director took the bull by the horns demonstrates their courage and anticipation, hoping that this attempt can broaden the horizons of Cantonese Opera audience and even attract new viewers, so that Cantonese Opera can evolve and move forward.

Sek Ki mentioned that *Rashomon* is a pioneering work that satirizes the evil of human nature through peculiar cases; undoubtedly many works in the following decades have explored even stranger and darker themes. In terms of characterization, the coquettish wife is the most complex character. She is not only the aggrieved victim but also the betrayer, the instigator, and even the *femme fatale* of the whole case. Ironically, she proves to be the strongest of all, while the men and the robbers are exposed as cowards. However, the changes to the young lady's role in the play feel rather abrupt and could have been more detailed to make it more believable. In any case, *The Asura Judgment* deserves to be performed again and again, with continuous refinement.

Chen Fang, a scholar from Taiwan, China, suggests that adaptations possess a “self-independence” and should no longer be bound by the critical theory of whether they are faithful to the original, but should be free to meet the critical eyes of modern audiences. The incorporation of “local” and “traditional” characteristics into cross-cultural *xiqu* works can result in styles distinct from the original.

4. Monodrama in *xiqu*

Wu Hsing-kuo, Artistic Director of Contemporary Legend Theatre, is one of the few performing artists to have worked across television, film, traditional Chinese opera, modern theatre and dance. In 2001, he adapted Shakespeare's *King Lear* into a monodrama.

In 2016, *I, Hamlet*, a contemporary *kunqu* monodrama commemorating the 400th anniversary of Tang Xianzu and Shakespeare, was performed at the Chinese Art Palace in Shanghai, attracting much attention and buzz. It was soon invited to appear at the Southbank Centre in London and the Asia Society in New York. *I, Hamlet* was performed at the China Art Museum, Shanghai in 2017 as the grand finale of the opening season of the Contemporary Kun Opera Week 2017.

The monodrama *The Asura Judgment* was commissioned by the Black Box Chinese Opera Festival 2022 for a series of ten performances from 24 November to 3 December 2022. Law Ka-ying wrote, directed and co-starred in the solo production with the team from the Xiqu Centre, West Kowloon.

5. The Artistic Characteristics of the Monodrama *The Asura Judgment*

5.1 Multiple roles in a monodrama

In the *kun* Opera *I, Hamlet*, Zhang Jun portrays the roles of Hamlet, Ophelia, the father's dead spirit and the gravedigger — four roles covering *sheng*, *dan*, *mo* and *chou* to complete the *kun* Opera monodrama.

Instead of following the sequence of the original Shakespearean play *King Lear*, the monodrama version alters the narrative strategy of the original play, allowing the characters to emerge one by one for monologues, transforming them into individual narratives. The play is divided into three acts, with the same actor playing different roles, interpreting various roles in Peking Opera. Wu Hsing-kuo played ten roles, including King Lear, the Fool, the loyal Earl of Kent, the eldest daughter Goneril, the second daughter Regan, the third daughter Cordelia, the blind Earl of Gloucester, the illegitimate son Edmund, the madman Edgar, and Wu Hsing-kuo himself.

Lum Man-yee observed that although both Wu Hsing-kuo's and Zhang Jun's monologues are adaptations, they do not follow the original sequence of events, introducing new ideas in how the stories are told and the themes they are based on.

Lee Siu-yan mentioned that Law Ka-ying played a number of roles, including a merchant, a monk, a businessman, a medium, a bandit, a warrior and the warrior's wife. Through live performances and pre-recordings, Law Ka-ying acted out his own roles against the different characters. This unique method of interactive performance deviates from the usual tradition of Cantonese Opera and delivers a unique experience to the audience.

Law Ka-ying said that he had never seen a solo performance by Wu Hsing-kuo and others, so he was not influenced by them or other stage productions. This time, while working with the team from the Xiqu Centre of the West Kowloon Cultural District, he constantly thought about which parts of the opera and which lyrics he wanted to sing. He also needed to be precise about what close-up eye movements and facial expressions he wanted to use to align with the stage performance in the video. This stage of meticulous planning proved essential in shaping a unique performance in the Cantonese Opera sector.

5.2 Interaction with Audience in Small Theatres

The performance of the Cantonese Opera monodrama *The Asura Judgment* at the Tea House Theatre also demonstrated the exploration of time in Cantonese Opera production. In recent decades, the duration of Cantonese Opera performances has typically lasted around four hours, becoming a conventional format.

In the 2021 Cantonese Opera production of *The Asura Judgment*, the performance ran for three and a half hours. In contrast, the Cantonese Opera monodrama, *The Asura Judgment*, was condensed to one and a half hours, yet still retained a rich content and effectively conveyed the development of the plot.

Lee Siu-yan pointed out that the intimate space of the Tea House Theatre (with a seating capacity of about 200) brought the actors closer to the audience. From

such proximity, the audience could clearly see the actors' make-up, movements and expressions, while the actors could also sense the audience's immediate reaction. Taking the Cantonese Opera monodrama *The Asura Judgment* as an example, Law Ka-ying's performance on the small stage of the Tea House Theatre allowed the audience to appreciate his eye movements, singing and recitation, figure, hand movements and steps in detail. At the same time, Law Ka-ying could directly experience the audience's on-the-spot reactions more directly during the performance.

In October 2016, *I, Hamlet* premiered at the Chinese Art Palace in Shanghai with four performances. The 400-seat theatre and the 80-minute performance were well received by the audience. Zhang Jun's *I, Hamlet* was first conceptualized by the director, and the script was honed step by step in collaboration with the playwright. In the opening and closing scenes, Hamlet delivered bilingual dialogues several times, revealing a different interpretation of the play.

Wu Hsing-kuo's interpretation of *King Lear* in Peking Opera did not aim to create any dramatic conflict or suspense for the audience. The play lasted about 125 minutes, including a 20-minute intermission.

Law Ka-ying explained that certain stage play techniques could complement traditional *xiqu* performances, such as "weeping vocals", *shouban* and *banghuang* for transitions, where scene or costume changes occur. In this way, the audience's emotions could be sustained, ensuring they remained engaged.

5.3 Artistic and technological support

Lee Siu-yan believed that actors in monodramas are not alone in the performance process, nor do they perform arbitrarily. Instead, they need to accurately grasp the time and rhythm of the performance while collaborating with the production team. For instance, Law Ka-ying was able to change his make-up and costumes quickly thanks to the design and operation of the make-up and costume teams, demonstrating the support team's thoughtful effort.

The use of various modern art elements, including video, sound effects, lighting, scenery, props, was seamlessly integrated into the production. For example, the stage design departed from the traditional mirror-like stage by using a triangular layout. The curtain and backdrop not only represented the role of the traditional *hudumen*, but were also adapted for image projection, scene division, and lighting and sound effects, enhancing the stage's depth and dimension while creating a broader spatial and temporal effect. The use of sound, light and electricity effects in the Tea House Theatre was just as intricate as the production of a grand theatre performance. The creativity of *The Asura Judgment*'s production team reflected their professional cooperation while exploring traditional Cantonese Opera performances.

As a playwright, director and actor, Law Ka-ying effectively combined traditional Chinese opera figures and skills and artfully matched them with artistic technology to create the monodrama *The Asura Judgment*. He mastered the timing and rhythm of the whole performance while seamlessly transitioning between different characters. When asked about the factors contributing to Law Ka-ying's success, he shared that he did not have any previous models to follow and relied solely on his own experience. He was familiar with the inner workings of the play, including how to coordinate the reactions of the husband and wife during psychological struggles and conflicts, as well

as the fluidity of water sleeves, hand movements, and gestures.

5.4 Unique Music Design

Cheung Man-wai was most impressed by Tam Siu-wai's musical design, which connected orchestral variations with musical transitions and interjections of gongs and drums, enhancing the atmosphere of the scenes.

Lee Siu-yan pointed out that a group of Cantonese Opera musicians with young percussionists and melodic instruments not only performed live but also synchronized their ensembles with pre-recordings. This non-traditional performance method served as valuable training for Cantonese Opera musicians. Percussionist Mai Jiawei introduced non-traditional arrangements for the gongs and drums, such as adapting the horror-style of gongs and drums, or some non-traditional gongs and drums beats, which effectively conveyed the characters' emotions and intensified the atmosphere of the scenes.

In terms of musical design, the one-act play *The Asura Judgment* incorporated various musical elements commonly used in Cantonese Opera, including the *bangzi* and *erhuang*, *qupai* and narrative speech, and tunes from different eras. On the other hand, Tam's specialized music enriched the performance. He used chromatic or polytonal compositional techniques to create the intro, background music and theme songs. He revealed that his theme song was based on a large piece of lyrics given to him by the scriptwriter. He emphasized the lyrics' importance to the plot, ensuring he composed appropriate melodies and musical phrases. Perhaps due to his deep involvement in Cantonese Opera music accompaniment, he was able to infuse a distinct traditional Cantonese operatic ambience into the melodic lines, phrasing, and rhythmic coordination of the lyrics.

5.5 Costume Changing and Scenario Matching

Law Ka-ying explained that as some of the performance sequences were pre-produced, he personally recorded the singing of the two female roles (the wife and the medium) using his own voice. Considering the costume change, the video clips were arranged in accordance with the plot to express the symbolic meanings or connotations of the play, much like a movie's scene-by-scene sequences linking the development of the story. Audiences should pay attention to the video and sound effects on stage and try to understand the connotation.

Annie Chow believes that contemporary theatre technology's multimedia interactions — acting with pre-recorded opponents, lighting, and sound, constantly switching between time, place, and people, fighting with oneself in a suspenseful atmosphere — successfully distilled the essence of traditional *xiqu*.

Lum Man-yee has also pointed out that costumes in *xiqu* are generally more elaborate than contemporary fashion. However, when performing their one-man shows, Wu Hsing-kuo and Zhang Jun would adjust their costumes on stage by simply altering their beards, hair, coats and capes, making the changes quick and manageable. In these cases, they did not need to change costumes from head to toe. The gender and personality of the characters were primarily presented through body movements and voice changes.

In addition, she mentioned that in the monodrama of *The Asura Judgment*, Law Ka-

ying always went to backstage to change his costume, which took considerable time when transitioning from the role of *sang* to *dan*. There was once, when he went backstage to change his costume during the playback of a pre-recorded clip, leaving only the video projected on stage with no actors present. On another occasion, he changed costumes during the 15-minute interval midway through the show. Law Ka-ying fully changed into his complete costume each time, a practice that departs from the usual approach in one-act plays.

6 Conclusion

The concept of cross-cultural operatic works is an interesting topic, rich with possibilities for appropriation, parody, distortion and inversion. Looking ahead, what is the significance of discussing cross-cultural adaptation? How should creative teams — including writers, directors, and performers — approach such creations? What strategies should performing groups adopt? These questions could guide future discussions on cross-cultural adaptation.

Is adapting an internationally renowned text or film into a full-length drama and then into a monodrama a viable “creative formula”? A monodrama tests the performer’s individual acting skills, physical endurance, and memory, especially their ability to control the performance’s timing and tempo. Could it serve as a “remedy” for opera performers? Since performers differ in artistic level, a full-length opera may allow them to master their profession or role. Would it be considered a failure if an actor struggles to perform multiple roles in a one-act play? Would performing across different genres in a one-act play pose an overwhelming challenge?

Additionally, we can consider the perspective of the scholar, Chen Fang, who argues that a successful cross-cultural adaptation should address five key points: “cultural transfer, preservation of the characteristics of the genre, addition and deletion of plot, focusing on language, and transformation of the formula,” to fulfill the performance objective of the “subjectivity of the opera.” Moreover, the key to cross-cultural adaptation and interpretation may lie not in how closely it adheres to the original text, but rather in how the adapted and interpreted work reflects its own cultural traditions while showcasing innovative ideas and creativity.

Poster for the Cantonese Opera *The Asura Judgment*



Leaflet for the monodrama *The Asura Judgment*



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