

The Exploration of Adaptation: A Cross-cultural Case Study of the Experimental Small Theatre Yu Opera *Resurrection*

Yuhui Zhang¹, Xihuai Zhao¹

¹ Department of Dramaturgy and Dramatic Criticism, National Academy of Chinese Theatre Arts, Beijing, China

Correspondence: Xihuai Zhao, Department of Dramaturgy and Dramatic Criticism, National Academy of Chinese Theatre Arts, Beijing, China.

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Abstract

Experimental small theatre Yu Opera *Resurrection* organically adapts a renowned Western literary work with a regional Chinese opera, embracing further possibilities for the modernization, rejuvenation, and globalization of contemporary Chinese opera. Utilizing Yu Opera, one of China's famous traditional operas as its medium, this production combines the essence of Western literary classics with the expressive techniques of Chinese opera, presenting unique artistic charm and cultural value. This essay focuses on the experimental small theatre Yu Opera *Resurrection*. It first reviews the exploratory history and research background of cross-cultural adaptations in Chinese opera and subsequently identifies the successful aspects of the adaptation in the Yu Opera *Resurrection*. In the end, the experiences and insights gained from cross-cultural opera adaptation are summarized by considering audience reception.

Keywords: experimental small theatre, Yu Opera, *Resurrection*, cross-cultural adaptation

1. Introduction

Yu Opera, a regional opera in the Henan province, is primarily performed in Henan, Hebei, Shandong, and local communities. This opera is rendered by the West as *Oriental Arias*, which emphasizes performance and the virtuosity of actors. With a history spanning over 300 years, Yu Opera remains one of China's most prominent and enduring theatrical traditions. The experimental small theatre Yu Opera production *Resurrection*, newly produced by the Zhengzhou Centre for the Preservation and Development of Dramatic Arts, premiered as the opening show of the 11th Xiqu Opera Black Box Festival at Beijing's Fanxing Theatre Village in October 2024. The play was written by young scriptwriter Zhang Lingyu, and starred Zhang Yanping, a national first-class actress and the winner of 27th Plum Performance Award.

The experimental small theatre Yu Opera *Resurrection* is adapted from the eponymous novel by the renowned Russian author Leo Tolstoy. The narrative centers on the central plains of China during the 1920s. It tells of Liu Daofu, a wealthy elite man returning from overseas studies, who falls in love with Qiu Hua, a maid in his aunt's household. Their affection swiftly blossoms into a brief yet passionate romance. Yet, once the fervor subsides, Qiu Hua finds herself cruelly abandoned. With nowhere else to turn, Qiu Hua descends into a life of prostitution, adopting the name Ruo Hua. Several years later, at the trial of the "Jeweler Murder Case" in the Central Province High Court, Liu Daofu, now a jurymen, unexpectedly reunites with Ruo Hua, the woman he once seduced and discarded. By this time, Qiu Hua had been framed and wrongfully sentenced to death, facing dire circumstances. This torment weighted profoundly on Liu Daofu's conscience. He began to reflect on his transgressions and resolved to save Ruo, seeking redemption for his past wrongdoing. The story unfolds through the intertwined fates and mutual redemption of these two protagonists.

The practice of adapting Western classics for Chinese opera has a long history. Since the Peking Opera Production of *Twentieth Century Camellia* (adapted from Alexandre Dumas film *La Dame aux Camélias*) premiered at Shanghai's New Stage Theatre, such cross-cultural adaptations have undergone over a century of exploration (Zhu, 2007). Among these adaptations, the works of Shakespeare, ancient Greek tragedies, and modern European playwrights such as Ibsen have consistently been focal points. This approach has yielded numerous outstanding productions, including Kunqu Opera *Macbeth*, Peking Opera *The Revenge of Prince Zi Dan*, Peking Opera *Waiting for Godot*, and Sichuan Opera *The Father, Son and Widow*. The rise of experimental small theatre opera in the 21st century has injected fresh vitality into this creative endeavor. In 2000, the experimental small theatre Peking Opera *Pouring Water Before the Horse* gained

popularity among younger audiences for its innovative form (Gao, 2022). Subsequently, works such as the experimental Peking Opera *King Oedipus*, Kunqu Opera *The Chair*, Yu Opera *Miss Julie*, and the experimental small theatre Peking Opera *The Death of a Government Clerk* have continued to emerge. Relying on its unique advantage of bridging China and the West, connecting past and present, experimental small theatre cross-cultural opera has developed into an important direction in contemporary opera creation and experimentation.

Within this context, the emergence of the experimental small theatre Yu Opera revival production *Resurrection* represents both a continuation of this creative tradition and a proactive exploration infused with contemporary consciousness. Historically, this classic was adapted for stage by Chinese playwrights Tian Han and Xia Yan (Ni, 1986). This marks the first complete adaptation of the work in the form of traditional Chinese opera. Created and staged by the Zhengzhou Centre for the Preservation, Inheritance and Development of Dramatic Arts, this Yu Opera version of *Resurrection* represents a bold and innovative cross-cultural adaptation within the realm of experimental small theatre opera. The production strives to achieve a Sinicized translation and theatrical reconstruction of the spiritual core of Tolstoy's original work through the vocal style, formal conventions, and narrative logic of Yu Opera. Its stage presentation not only broadens the expressive scope of traditional Yu Opera but also employs novel small theatre techniques and avant-garde artistic concepts. This approach has attracted many young audiences to the Fanxing theatre, where they observed this experimental Yu Opera production, concentrating the essences of Chinese and Western literary and artistic traditions with keen interest. Moreover, the successful staging of this production holds significant innovative and promotional value for cross-cultural adaptations of representative opera genres in the new era.

Based on the above background, this paper employs a case study approach grounded in cross-cultural adaptation theory to analyze the experimental small theatre Yu Opera production *Resurrection*. The analysis centers on meticulous textual examination and interpretation of stage presentation, exploring how the adaptation negotiates between the source text's themes and the theatrical traditions and aesthetic sensibilities of the target culture (China). Primary data sources include: (1) live performances observed and recorded in Beijing in October 2024 (Hu, 2024); (2) the production's performance script (Zhang, 2024) and Leo Tolstoy's *Resurrection* (Tolstoy, 2021); (3) official promotional materials (Xiqu Opera Black Box Festival, 2024); and (4) existing theatre reviews and academic research concerning cross-cultural adaptations of traditional Chinese Opera. This methodological framework facilitates a detailed discussion of its adaptation strategies in plot and theme, narrative structure, characterization, and stage presentation, while situating this case study within the broader academic discourse on the modernization of traditional opera and cross-cultural performance. This analysis offers a Chinese-centered perspective on approaches and pathways for addressing pertinent practical issues.

2. Adaptation strategy

2.1 Plot and Theme

The experimental small theatre Yu Opera production *Resurrection* setting has stripped away the Western religious overtones and reimagined the characters' identities to mitigate the jarring effects of cross-cultural adaptation, thereby aligning with the aesthetic sensibilities of Chinese audiences. While remaining faithful to the core themes of the original novel, the opera has skillfully transformed the temporal and spatial setting, character identities, and plot into a distinctly "Chinese flavor." The story unfolds in a modest teahouse within Kaifeng. The male protagonist Nekhlyudoff from the novel is reimagined in the Yu Opera as Liu Daofu, the young master of the Liu household who, after studying in the West, gained experience serving under northern warlords. Maslova, the maid in the original novel, becomes Qiu Hua, a servant girl in the household of Liu's aunt. Leo Tolstoy's *Resurrection* profoundly explores the fall and redemption of humanity through the fates of Nekhlyudoff and Maslova, revealing the awakening and elevation of human spirit amidst suffering (Tolstoy, 2021). The Yu Opera adaptation thematizes elements from the original novel and builds on the relationship trail between Liu and Ruo (Qiu Hua). Through their emotional journey and ultimate self-redemption, the performance portrays the inherent kindness, warmth, and capacity for self-reflection within human nature.

2.2 Narrative Structure

Unlike most Chinese operas, which follow a linear narrative structure based on chronological order, the Yu Opera *Resurrection* largely retains the framework of the original work, employing a flashback narrative structure. The script commences with Ruo Hua (Qiu Hua) undergoing interrogation, a pivotal moment nearing the narrative climax, swiftly immersing the audience in the tense plot. Subsequently, through the characters' recollections, the pasts of the protagonists are gradually revealed, interwoven throughout the unfolding drama. Divided into six scenes, the entire play comprehensively and thoroughly portrays the development of Qiu and Liu's character structures and their journey towards moral redemption.

For instance, the opening scene commences with Ruo's interrogation in prison, gradually unfolding her past with Liu through her recollections. This flashback technique not only facilitates pacing control, conflict development, and narrative focus, but also transforms inner monologues into visualized physical language through theatrical performance,

endowing the story with potent dramatic intensity. Subsequent scenes, through repeated prison visits and recollections, progressively reveal Qiu's journey from abandonment and descent into prostitution to her ultimate self-redemption. Furthermore, the play employs flashbacks and interludes to enrich the narrative architecture, rendering the story more compelling and emotionally resonant.

2.3 Characterization

As some scholars argued that the true value of an artistic work lies in creating aesthetically significant characters (Chen, 2016), the Yu Opera *Resurrection* revival primarily focuses on the characters of Ruo Hua and Liu Daofu, with particular emphasis on the portrayal of the female protagonist Qiu Hua (Ruo Hua). Through intricate lyrics and nuanced performance, the production successfully reveals the character's inner world and emotional evolution, rendering her portrayal remarkably lifelike. In Chinese cultural, the suffering and resilience of women have long been central themes in literary and artistic works. Unlike the original novel, which centers on Nekhlyudoff, this adaptation prioritizes the development of Qiu Hua (Ruo Hua) as its principal protagonist. This choice aligns more closely with the cultural context and aesthetic sensibilities of Chinese audiences.

The Yu Opera production *Resurrection* vividly portrays, within the confines of a compact theatre performance, a woman's decade-long journey from purity and innocence, through despair and betrayal, into self-destructive abandon and unhinged madness, before ultimately finding release and achieving a spiritual resurrection. The focal point lies in Ruo's journey of spiritual rebirth; once an innocent young maiden, she descends into despair after being abandoned and humiliated by her lover, forced into prostitution, and wrongfully imprisoned. When Liu first visited her in prison, she failed to recognize the man before her. Instead, she greeted him with her habitual, fawning smile, even asking him for "a good cigarette to smoke 好烟抽抽" (Zhang, 2024). Only after he revealed his identity in astonishment did "Ruo stared at Liu for a long moment, a brief silence falling 若花盯着柳道甫良久，短暂的沉默" (Zhang, 2024). In that moment, the long-buried depths of Ruo's heart seemed to stir once more, touching upon painful memories. Yet she was no longer the "weak" woman she had once been. She quickly composed herself. When Liu offered the envelope again, she eagerly tore it open, just as she had once searched for love letters. This time, however, finding only documents inside, she blurted out in confusion: "No money, not a single penny 不是钱，一分都没有" (Zhang, 2024). She tied Liu's tie with detached indifference; her words laced with ambiguous innuendo. Accepting the money, she hastily tucked it into her clothes. Now merely a woman who habitually used her body to please men, Ruo's mind was solely occupied with seizing opportunities for gain. It was only when Liu uttered, "Don't do this anymore 别再这样了" (Zhang, 2024), that the resentment and pain long pent up within Ruo poured forth in an instant. She sang bitterly: "Stop what? What exactly?...You think yourself so noble....but know this: retribution never fails 别再这样是哪样？你自视高尚.....可知报应不爽" (Zhang, 2024). Yet what choice did she have? As a woman of the lowest class, she had no option but to bow to society. Defiled and discarded, she could only cling to life in this manner.

The second encounter between Ruo and Liu quickly unfolds. At first, she still received Liu with professional courtesy, until Liu frowned repeatedly. Here, the technique of irony is skillfully employed, using direct speech to reveal Ruo's inner turmoil:

You are a gentleman of the highest order,
It has nothing to do with me, rootless duckweed.
First, I blame my own ill fate and misfortune,
making it hard to be matched with you in equal station.
Second, I resent maid's station, unworthy yet full of spirit,
Reaching for the moon with a ladder, unaware of my place.
Third, I blame my ears loving your sweet words,
Pretending to be sated by love's sweetness, though hunger gnaws within,
Fourth, I blame my heart moving too easily,
Why couldn't I keep your dangling in suspense,
Clinging to you, holding your hand, accompanying you, teasing you,
Flattering you, coaxing you, teasing you,
Only for you to take me for granted once you've got me.
Fifth, I blame my pride when left with nowhere to turn,
Even when I angered the lady, she refused to bow her head for an abortion.

Sixth, I blame my rush into the bitter wind and cold rain,
Only to be left with a fever that won't break and blood flowing freely,
Let our little child died as soon as he was born.

...

I know you truly meant to marry me,
I know your affection was genuine when stirred.

...

But I want to say sorry to you,
In my life, however hard, however rough the road, I shall never complain.

你是个翩翩君子贵无比，
和我这无根的浮萍啥干系。
一怨我投胎失误命运不济，
难于你门当户对并论相提。
二怨我当丫鬟不本分偏有心气，
搬梯子摘月亮不知高低。
三怨我爱听你的甜言蜜语，
道有情饮水饱假装不饥。
四怨我动心咋能恁轻易，
咋不会把你的胃口高吊起，
缠着你牵着你伴着你闹着你，
夸你哄你迷你逗你，
才让你一旦得手就不珍惜。
五怨我穷途末路还讲什么骨气，
惹恼了太太也不肯堕胎把头低。
六怨我愤然冲进凄风冷雨，
才落得高烧不退血淋漓，
连累了小娇儿生下来就咽气

.....

我知道您是真心要把我娶，
知道您动情时也是真的

.....

我向您说声对不起——

这辈子再苦再难再难再苦我绝不叫屈。(Zhang, 2024)

Long-suppressed emotions within Ruo's heart poured forth in an instant. The extended aria revealed her tortuous inner journey, ostensibly praising Liu's nobility yet subtly laced with sarcasm and scorn, exposing her anguish and indictment of societal injustice. Comparing herself to rootless duckweed 无根浮萍 hinted at the vast, insurmountable gulf between their stations. Subsequently, she lists out blame using self-mocking tones to satirize her own credulity in believing Liu's sweet words, the anguish of being discarded so easily once he had achieved his ends, while also dissecting her own helplessness within this tangled affair. Still, she would drown herself in drink, unable to forgive Liu's betrayal and indifference, left to wallow alone in anguish and despair.

As the story moves into early 1923, where a subtle detail is introduced: her cellmate, Grandma Zheng, gives her a bottle of wine, but Ruo shakes her head to refuse. Then, Grandma Zheng lights a cigarette and hands it to Ruo, yet she declines again. This reveals how profoundly Ruo had changed from her former self: "I don't want to live like this anymore 我不想再这样活着了" (Zhang, 2024). At this point, Ruo was moved by Liu, and her spirit began to revive. After Liu secured her release from prison, she hoped she would accompany him back to the Liu residence. However,

facing the prison warden and Mrs. Zheng's kind words of her persuasion, Ruo remained calm and resolute, unmoved. Instead, she wished to go where she ought to go and realized her own worth. She sang:

I wipe the tears from your eyes,
 The embrace I've yearned for, in dreams, how often I clung to it, only to wake in despair,
 Up to now, it is truly the gentle taste of a dream.
 I want to love but dare not, I want to embrace but push.
 ...
 We are separated by a mountain,
 We are separated by the ocean,
 We are separated by the Milky Way,
 A distance decreed by fate, which we cannot defy.
 I have countless regrets,
 Only to follow you in the afterlife.
 After leaving you, I will go to a faraway place,
 I must seek the light, find peace of mind, and be reborn like a phoenix.
 为君揩去眼角泪,
 这眷恋的怀抱啊, 多少次梦中紧依偎, 醒来复心灰。
 到如今真真切切是梦中温柔滋味,
 我欲恋却不敢、欲拥又推

 咱二人隔着山一座,
 咱二人隔着海蔚蔚。
 咱二人隔着银河水,
 天地之遥意难违。
 千般遗憾万般悔,
 只有来世再相随。
 拜别少爷远走高飞,
 我定要、逐光亮、心归宁静、涅槃重生活一回。 (Zhang, 2024)

Snowflakes drifted down as Easter Day returned once more. Ruo and Liu exchanged heartfelt sentiments: "You are a gentlement, sincere in purpose, upright in heart, and disciplined in self-cultivation. Thank you for saving me 您是一位君子, 诚意、正心、修身, 谢谢你救了我...It is you who have saved me 是您拯救了我" Liu replied (Zhang, 2024). Thus, Ruo rekindled her hope for life, achieving a complete spiritual rebirth and self-reception. She resolved to return to the countryside, walking toward her new life.

Thus, emerges a complex and multi-dimensional female character who struggles and resists amidst suffering, ultimately achieving self-redemption. She becomes the core and soul of the entire drama. Although Ruo's experiences are steeped in tragedy, she is no longer a mere victim as in the original novel but a figure of profound contemporary relevance. Her trials and awakening mirror the suffering and defiance of society's underclass, while simultaneously revealing humanity's inherent kindness and resilience, inviting deep reflection on humanity, society, and morality.

2.4 Stage Presentation

As an experimental small theatre production, the Yu Opera *Resurrection* focuses on generating contemporary aesthetic through the combination of innovation and tradition, integrating diverse artistic expressions in its stage creation, including the time and space from spoken drama, the innovative fusion of song-and-dance elements from musical theatre and the profound interweaving and flexible application of Eastern and Western artistic elements in set design, music, and lighting. These elements contribute to the creation of this artwork to some extent that endows both depth and breadth.

The production's stage design is unique and ingenious. The theatre stage employs a cross-shaped layout symbolizing

life's crossroads, enhancing spatial depth while dividing the performance area into four distinct sections. This configuration allows for maximal utilization of space and props, setting up many different scenes like the train station, Liu's house, and prison. Unlike traditional proscenium stages, the intimate theatre setting offers more possibilities for theatrical experimentation. This Yu Opera version establishes a novel spectator-performance dynamic through an immersive, participatory viewing environment; close proximity allows audiences to discern actors' gazes and expressions, while seated spectators assume the role of jurors, fostering heightened interaction and emotional resonance between audience and performers. As the report puts it, "Yu Opera *Resurrection* breaks from conventional flat viewing modes, reconstructing a multidimensional, comprehensive performance system. Audiences are immersed in the experience, engaging more frequently and deeply with performers, resulting in a more vivid perception of the era's atmosphere and the story's backdrop" (Xiqu Opera Black Box Festival, 2024). This quote offers insight into the creative team's understanding and attempts of the experimental small theatre.

Lighting serves as a vital medium for conveying emotion on the theatrical stage. Lighting shapes the atmosphere of various environments and externalizes characters' inner worlds. For example, when depicting prison scenes, stage lighting predominantly employs cool tones to accentuate Qiu's predicament, inner anguish, and detachment. Through continuous flickering and shifting effects, an enigmatic atmosphere is cultivated. In contrast, warm-toned lighting in flashback sequences allows the audiences to better perceive the characters' emotional shifts, employing soft illumination to foster a cozy, comforting ambience. Furthermore, the swaying and flickering lights during the railway station scene, the stark contrast in lighting during Qiu and Liu's confrontation, and the gradual transition from darkness to brightness during Ruo's spiritual awakening all play vital roles in amplifying the emotional impact of the characters.

Music and dance constitute another major highlight of the Yu Opera *Resurrection*. The aria design incorporates modern musical elements into Yu Opera's traditional singing style, making the play both traditional in charm and fashionable. For instance, the duets between Qiu and Liu frequently incorporate Western string instrumentation, which not only serve to flesh out the characters, but also heighten the music's emotional resonance. Furthermore, as Wang Guowei defined broadly Chinese opera as a form that "combined song and dance in the service of performing a particular story 合歌舞演一事者" (Wang, 1998, 43), in addition to the conventional, stylized song and dance, the production frequently incorporates modern dance forms, such as ballroom dancing and tango. This approach enriches the stage performance, making it diverse and uniquely captivating. Such bold innovation and experimentation have resulted in an experimental small theatre that seamlessly blends tradition with contemporary flair, uniting the essence of Chinese opera with contemporary aesthetic sensibilities.

3. Conclusion

There are still aspects within the Yu Opera *Resurrection* that are worth further exploration and improvement. For example, the initial plot development may feel somewhat drawn-out and could be polished and adjusted to enhance overall fluidity and narrative pacing. Take the disguise sequence in Act One as an example. This segment ingeniously blends elements of traditional opera with pantomime, showcasing the creative team's exceptional ingenuity and expressive power. Whether the fusion achieves a perfectly balanced equilibrium here may warrant further consideration. Regarding character development, the emotional shift experienced by Qiu upon being abandoned in Act Three could benefit from revision. According to the script, she has not yet seen Liu in person at this point, having only heard secondhand accounts of Liu describing her as 'big trouble.' Since she has neither seen nor heard this statement directly, it might be more compelling and believable to make the character more three-dimensional and boldly seek an answer for herself. Furthermore, the narrative arc for the male protagonist, Liu Daofu, lacks clarity, and his character development is not distinct enough. This ambiguity may confuse audiences regarding his motivations or the plot's progression, rendering pivotal story turns rather abrupt and jarring.

The essence of innovation lies in reflecting upon the logic of characters' destinies and actions. Such reflection not only imbues works with a distinct contemporary spirit but also resonates with modern audiences' expectations for dramatic humanistic depth (Zhong, 2023). In today's era of flourishing theatrical creation and increasingly discerning audiences, the question of how to captivate and move spectators with high-quality, heartfelt productions has become an imperative challenge for opera practitioners. The Yu Opera Production *Resurrection* offers a significant and positive case study. The script underwent meticulous refinement, with characters crafted with exquisite detail. Through Qiu Hua's journey from suffering to rebirth, audiences witness the elevation of the human spirit. Zhang Yanping, recipient of the Plum Performance Award, delivers a masterful performance, bringing the complex character of Qiu Hua to life with profound authenticity. On stage, the production masterfully blends traditional opera conventions with contemporary creative expression, truly embodying the creative philosophy of unlocking the essence of world literature through the beauty of Chinese opera (Zhengzhou Municipal Bureau of Culture, Radio, Television and Tourism, 2025). This fusion of traditional resonance and strong contemporary expression endows this experimental small theatre Yu Opera with rich artistic layers, leaving a lasting impression.

The post-performance audience discussion further attested to the production's artistic resonance. Several attendees remarked that the Yu Opera adaptation of *Resurrection* not only preserved the distinctive “hands, eyes, body, method, and steps 手眼身法步” movements and emotional expression characteristic of Chinese opera, but also ingeniously incorporated contemporary experimental small theatre techniques such as immersive theatre (Zhang, 2024). Within an hour and a half, the performance fully conveyed the profound essence of this world literary classic. Audiences experienced a tumultuous life journey within the theatre walls, encountering not only the spiritual power of Tolstoy's work but also the artistic allure of Yu Opera, the spatial tension of the experimental small theatre, and the contemporary vitality of Chinese opera.

In conclusion, the Yu Opera *Resurrection* is an experimental small theatre adaptation of traditional opera that possesses avant-garde, experimental, and modern characteristics. Both its exploration of the theme of redemption and its innovative staging techniques demonstrate a high standard of artistic creation. By interpreting a foreign literary classic through a distinctly Chinese lens and theatrical approach, this adaptation stands as a masterful and exemplary experiment in the realm of experimental small Chinese opera adaptation.

Note

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Authors' contributions

Yuhui Zhang was responsible for research design, data collection (including live observation and audience interviews), manuscript drafting, and revision. Prof. Xihuai Zhao, as the supervisory author, provided guidance on the theoretical framework, and critically reviewed and revised the manuscript. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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