



林思齊東西學術交流研究所  
David C. Lam Institute for East-West Studies (LEWI)

**Working Paper Series** 研究報告系列

Paper Number: 50

April 2006

**Adaptations and Translations of Western Drama:  
A Socio-cultural Study of  
Hong Kong Repertory Company's Past Practices**

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## **Adaptations and Translations of Western Drama: A Socio-cultural Study of Hong Kong Repertory Company's Past Practices <sup>1</sup>**

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### Abstract

The overwhelming number of productions of western plays in translation or their adaptations on the Hong Kong stage reflects a very active level of acculturation, and in a sense, interculturalism, very becoming to a place like Hong Kong. Not only does it not suggest cultural imposition, rather, it brings about artistic/theatrical invigoration, and opens up potential for open dialogue between cultures. However, these productions are not without their problems, cultural, social and linguistic, etc. This paper purports to look at the Hong Kong Repertory Company's past productions, with a view to addressing some important issues in the theatre, concerning adaptation and translation. These are:

1. How does the theatre of translation and adaptation in Hong Kong serve as an intercultural transference, "a unique machinery for overcoming cultural differences and reaching out towards other cultures" (Scolnivic, Hanna and Peter Holland)
2. The dynamics or mechanics of transferring a play from one culture to another.
3. What are the criteria, aesthetic, cultural, linguistic, for transfer?
4. What is the purpose of choice and aim of putting on a play in translation for a local audience?
5. How is meaning to be conveyed or adapted to a new cultural environment, or create new meaning?

In its twenty seven years of operation, Hong Kong Repertory Company has evolved from a translation dominated production company to one that celebrates Hong Kong featured productions as well as occasional production of translated western work. It is time to take stock of some of its major productions of translated plays, in order to investigate how these works on the stage have helped forge contemporary Hong Kong theatre, constructed its hybrid identity integral to Hong Kong as a meeting place of cultures, East and West.

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<sup>1</sup> Presented as part of a series, "The In's and Out's of East-West Translation and Adaptation", organized by David C. Lam Institute for East-West Studies, Hong Kong Baptist University, October 14 2005.

Adaptation and translation of western drama has been a long standing theatrical practice on the Hong Kong stage by leading theatre companies, such as Hong Kong Repertory Theatre, Hong Kong Academy of Performing Arts, Chung Ying Theatre, the former Seal Company, and others. The number of translated plays, mostly from English and European languages, put on the stage each year compares favorably and at one time overwhelmingly with that of local original plays. The first and foremost professional theatre company in Hong Kong, the Hong Kong Repertory Theatre, best demonstrates this theatrical phenomenon. In the past twenty seven years, it has produced 91 plays in translation, as compared with 56 in original plays, from Thornton Wilder's *Skin of Our Teeth* in its inception year, 1977 to the most recent David Auburn's *Proof* in 2005, produced both in Cantonese and Mandarin.

Hong Kong Rep's Productions from 1977-2005:

year	genre			total no.
	<u>Translation &amp; adaptation</u>	<u>Local &amp; original</u>	<u>Chinese drama</u>	
1977	4 (80%)	0 (0%)	1 (20%)	5 (100%)
1978	3 (60%)	1 (20%)	1 (20%)	5 (100%)
1979	5 (71%)	1 (14%)	1 (15%)	7 (100%)
1980	4 (67%)	0 (0%)	2 (33%)	6 (100%)
1981	5 (71%)	1 (14%)	1 (15%)	7 (100%)
1982	4 (57%)	3 (43%)	0 (0%)	7 (100%)
1983	3 (38%)	4 (50%)	1 (12%)	8 (100%)
1984	5 (71%)	1 (14%)	1 (15%)	7 (100%)
1985	4 (57%)	2 (29%)	1 (14%)	7 (100%)
	<b>37 (63%)</b>	<b>13 (22%)</b>	<b>9 (15%)</b>	<b>59 (100%)</b>

year	genre			total no.
	<u>Translation &amp; adaptation</u>	<u>Local/original</u>	<u>Chinese drama</u>	
1986	4 (57%)	1 (14%)	2 (29%)	7 (100%)
1987	1 (17%)	2 (33%)	3 (50%)	6 (100%)
1988	4.5 (56%)	3.5 (44%)	0 (0%)	8 (100%)
1989	3.5 (39%)	4.5 (50%)	1 (11%)	9 (100%)
1990	5 (62%)	1 (13%)	2 (25%)	8 (100%)
1991	4 (45%)	2 (22%)	3 (33%)	9 (100%)
1992	4 (57%)	2 (29%)	1 (14%)	7 (100%)
1993	5 (56%)	2 (22%)	2 (22%)	9 (100%)
1994	4 (57%)	2 (29%)	1 (14%)	7 (100%)
1995	4 (57%)	1 (14%)	2 (29%)	7 (100%)
1996	3 (43%)	3 (43%)	1 (14%)	7 (100%)
1997	1 (17%)	3 (50%)	2 (33%)	6 (100%)
	<b>43 (48%)</b>	<b>27 (30%)</b>	<b>20 (22%)</b>	<b>90 (100%)</b>

year	genre			total no.
	<u>Translation &amp; adaptation</u>	<u>Local/original</u>	<u>Chinese drama</u>	
1998	1 (14%)	4 (57%)	2 (29%)	7 (100%)
1999	2 (33%)	2 (33%)	2 (34%)	6 (100%)
2000	3 (43%)	4 (57%)	0 (0%)	7 (100%)
2001	2 (25%)	6 (75%)	0 (0%)	8 (100%)
2002	0 (0%)	4 (80%)	1 (20%)	5 (100%)
2003	1 (13%)	6 (75%)	1 (12%)	8 (100%)
2004	3 (27%)	7 (64%)	1 (9%)	11 (100%)
2005	3 (43%)	4 (57%)	0 (0%)	7 (100%)
	<b>15 (25%)</b>	<b>37 (63%)</b>	<b>7 (12%)</b>	<b>59 (100%)</b>

This study was harbored to coincide with marking Hong Kong Repertory Theatre's 25<sup>th</sup>

anniversary in the year 2002, focusing upon its productions of translated plays over the past twenty five years. It was purported with the following eight conceptual blueprints in mind:

1. HKRep serves to me as a case study to explore possibilities of transferring a play from one culture to another. This feasibility assumed, I investigate what are some of the features of the relationship between the play and its historical and cultural contexts vis-à-vis its transfer to a target culture?
2. What are some of the criteria, aesthetic, cultural, theatrical, for transfer? How could the transfer be construed as a bridge between East and West? What governs the choice of putting on a play in translation for a local audience? What is the rationale of selecting these plays?
3. How is meaning to be conveyed or adapted to new cultural environment, or create new meanings? Is this necessary or possible? The answer is of course affirmative. But to what degree is adaptation or localization/domestication appropriate and necessary for local audience consumption and comprehension?
4. How can the adaptations overcome cultural differences through theatre? Do Cultural and Linguistic Gaps constitute untranslatability? What are the obstacles and opportunities? Can cultural and gestural parallels be achieved in translation and adaptation as compared with seeking Linguistic Equivalence?
5. I want to compile a survey on the practice of translating and adaptation for the HKRep not so much on its linguistic translation, but the hitherto neglected aspects of the production process: i.e., the translated text for the stage, namely, the performance text (which may be altered by the artistic director), and the target audience's reception. This will take into consideration how translator and artistic director mediate between source

text, performance text and target audience. Hence, the role of the translator vs. the role of the artistic director: With a few noted exceptions, where famous translators are involved such as Grace Liu, Lawrence Wong, Yu Kwang-chung, Jane Lai and Rupert Chan, etc., translated texts to be used for the performance text are normally subject to the artistic director's scrutiny and emendations on account of the theatre. They function more as a vehicle for the director's vision than the translator's interpretation. The translator's role stops at being a conveyer of textual meanings of the original text. Such is the case in most productions of translated plays in Hong Kong.

6. The practice of translating for HKRep, as most other theatre companies, pay special attention to performability in translated text with regard to textual/linguistic, theatrical and ideological perspectives. That is to say: Textual/linguistic perspective concerns how the translated text can be uttered without difficulty by performers, a kind of fluid and fluent text. Theatrical viewpoint entails the need to appeal to audiences by way of certain strategies: employing either foreignization or domestication. This concerns textual strategies (e.g., local dialect) or audio-visual signs (e.g., body language, design, sound and music). In most circumstances, theatrical ideology of the company and its status tend to determine the style of performability, and affect negotiations of performability, making speakability (of the text) and breathability (of the actor) relative to it. Hence, the choice and outlook of materials to be adapted and translated for a particular company. In the case of HKRep, there is a certain rule of thumb to follow with regard to decorum, presentation format and substance.
7. I want to ascertain the HKRep's translated plays' impact on the construction, and self-reflection of local cultural identity, and to what extent, together with local original plays, how their presence forges contemporary Hong Kong theatre, through its flagship status and example-setting.

8. Finally, I want to argue that these translations and adaptations are intercultural theatre in the context of glocalism, and embody Hong Kong as truly “Asia’s world city” and a window to the rest of the world, besides the usual characterization of Hong Kong as “window to China.”

#### Purpose

My purpose is to prove that with its record of translation and adaptation of western plays, both from the past and on-going, Hong Kong Repertory Theatre has mapped a contour of contemporary Hong Kong theatre, and constructed its hybrid identity integral to Hong Kong as a meeting place of cultures, East and West.

#### Key Issues

As mentioned earlier, the overwhelming number of productions of western plays in translation or their adaptations on the Hong Kong stage reflects a very active level of acculturation, and interculturalism, very becoming to a place like Hong Kong. Not only does it not suggest cultural imposition and colonialism, as some post-colonially sensitive critics would assume, rather, it brings about artistic/theatrical invigoration, and opens up potential for dialogue between local and western cultures. However, these productions are not without their problems, cultural, social and linguistic, etc. By looking at the Hong Kong Repertory Theatre’s past productions or other theatre groups, I would like to call attention to the aforementioned issues concerning adaptation and translation for the theatre.

In the following lecture, I hope to touch on some data, cultural, social, linguistic, and theatrical, and demonstrate the play in translation and its relationship or relevance to the target-audience, or target society like Hong Kong. Through explanations of how these transfers are made possible, Hong Kong theatre of adaptations and translation of western drama may be beyond the rather limited phenomenon of the interlingual translation of the dramatic text.

It is to be expected that analyses and discoveries of the dynamics of transferring a play



from one culture to another will help audiences to see these productions' social relevance, and to find their cultural and social identities, with a value-added mindset of "act local but think global". Adaptations of western drama, in this sense, help contribute to a cultural globalization by Hong Kong Repertory Theatre, and takes on the aura of a metropolitan culture, which the Hong Kong government has, of late, so encouraged.

### Significance and Value

In the decades leading up to the 1997 hand-over, Hong Kong theatre, like other local art forms, has prospered as a medium for its citizens to reflect on issues ranging from identity to other aspects of post-colonial existence. Related to this quest, is the issue of localism and globalism, among others.

In the post-colonial age, it would seem the balance would tip to the former. In practice, it is a combination of both that serves as the norm of the day. Original productions of local talents have grown in proportion, but adaptations of western drama on local stage still go on unabated as ever. To my knowledge, only scattered comments have been concerned with the role and impact adaptations of western drama have played and created, aside from the demand for putting on more original works of local talents. My present project has enlisted the cooperation of the Hong Kong Repertory Company for direct access to their past productions' videotapes and textual materials for research analysis and setting up an archival database. They are not held responsible to any flaws I may incur. If there's any small stake this project can lay claim to, it will be the project's academic aspects vindicating Hong Kong Repertory Theatre as the flagship of Hong Kong theatre, promoting the quality of theatre of translation and adaptation as an art-form for scholars to conduct further study, and also fostering in our readers or audiences an awareness of the theatre as an important bridge between disparate cultures as well as a means of reaching out towards other cultures, in a fulfillment of the really metropolitan and globalised characteristics of Hong Kong's culture.

In the post-handover era, there is an increasing outcry for more national and Hong Kong based assertiveness, which is also expressed in the theatre. Often one hears theatre critics say

they want to see more original work produced with local relevance, and that they see less significant relevance in the production of works in translation.

One can, of course, sympathize with this sentiment for local relevance and cultural assertiveness. However, one would caution that this sentiment should not get too narrowly defined as to suggest that a stage production lies solely in the language it is written, and neglect its hermeneutic applicability, which is and should be regardless of linguistic or cultural origin. A production of a universally meaningful work in translation on our stage contributes positively to the enhancement of our theatre, even in the face of its strangeness and defamiliarization, than that of a locally created work with a superficial façade of indigeneity.

In response to the valorization often associated with adaptation and original, local and foreign, I would like to suggest that there is no necessary relation of devaluations or irrelevancies between original and adaptation in the case of productions of western drama in translation on the Hong Kong stage, and that in view of HKRep's corpus over the past twenty seven years (See statistics and the Chinese handout about the various stages of development I have already provided), the time is ripe to take stock of these productions, so long at the center of theatrical activities of contemporary Hong Kong theatre, and yet so under-discussed and under-theorized, to be the object of academic consideration.

In addition to the previously mentioned issues on adaptations/translations, I have borne in mind implications and inspiration derived from terms or concepts such as "offshoots", "abridgment", "version", "reduction/emendation", "adaptation" or "transformation" (Ruby Cohn), "imitations", "alterations" (Laura Rosenthal), "Spinoff"(Dennis Salter), and most particularly "tradaptations" (Michel Garneau). These concepts associated with translation and adaptation by and large will offer interesting angles to the analysis of translated western drama on the Hong Kong Repertory Company's productions.

In this connection, the HKRep's works tip more toward translation than adaptation. The idea of originality as opposed to second-hand value, not second hand love, in the case of these productions can be understood in the light of "the very nature of cultural production as

a remaking of existing material.” (Daniel Fischlin and Mark Fortier). In this phenomenal activity of adaptations, there are some factors conducive to this trend. In other words, I would like to explore if there is a politics of adaptation involved, thanks to Hong Kong’s political status as a former British Crown Colony, an entrepot of East and West, or to a sheer functional view of cultural and political practice, i.e., “all translation implies a degree of manipulation of the source text for a certain purpose (Theo Hermans). Viewed in this light, a recent Hong Kong Repertory Company’s production of Arthur Miller’s *Crucible* (2001) may seem a case in point, against the ripples raised then by the local *Falun Gong* controversy. To study these productions with these objectives in mind, these western dramatic works in translation on our local stage may provide an infinity of new contexts and artistic invigoration to our local theatre explorations and our unique brand of hybridized and dynamic culture in Hong Kong, and that productions of plays in translation in general point to the inevitable direction of cultural globalization.

As pointed out earlier, the number of translated plays for HKRep over the years is significant in quantity and quality. However, the majority of them had been translated or adapted with a dilemma over the issue of faithfulness(原汁原味), one that is torn between source-oriented translation, which strove on the one hand for normative and prescriptive methodologies of translational equivalence, and on the other the inevitable target-oriented translation, which naturally took due considerations of the function, process and production of the target-text. On the whole, the productions of the HKRep demonstrate an overwhelming adherence to faithfulness in style and content of production, but very little agentic adaptation or translation in the sense of rewriting or re-scribing. Seldom did they offer a counter discourse or critique of the original texts, their Euro-American ideologies or worldviews, which should be amenable to revision in the context of a transposition for a foreign audience. The adaptations/translations of Richard Ho’s *Hamlet* or Rupert Chan’s *Twelfth Night* for the Chung Ying Repertory and Fred Mao’s *Visions of Simone Machand* for the Hong Kong Academy of Performing Arts do not count, in spite of their sinicization of setting, characterization and plot. Their latent discourse remains intact and un-problematized.

Perhaps such a demand might have been too much to ask of the HKRep, that is, to produce a work like rewriting western-constructed imaginary in the fashion of Yuri Ng's Suzie Wong opera that featured Eason Chan a few years back. In translation and adaptation of western drama, the typology one often expects is a search for equivalence of periods between source and target cultures, a re-perception of the original works or relocation of the plays into new, non-Euroamerican transmutations, by way of a few surgical operations such as omission or supplants, example changes, literal translation and annotations, etc.

In connection with HKRep's faithful adherence to the original western work, a word on the meaning of adaptation and translation of drama is in order here.

On the whole, theatre adaptation or translation is unfairly living under the shadow of the original. The original sets the example in terms of authenticity and authority, a frame to which all adaptations and translation are subjected for their existential worthiness. But one should recognize that, right from the outset, changes in adaptation and translation are inevitable; these changes are more the result of medium change and are as mutational as movies adapted from novel or drama; they observe a new set of rules other than those of the original. The process of adaptation and translation of drama is a process of changes, involving different stages from writer, actors to *mise-en-scene*. In other words, these are changes of medium too. Each live performance is another mutation from the original. Adaptation and translation of drama is bound to be a metamorphic art, of which faithful to the original, either in meaning or spirit, is relative rather than absolute.

In adapting and translating western classics for the stage, it entails not only the above mutational process, but cultural transfer. The latter poses some difficulties, but should not be overstated. As each original work contains its cultural or social specificity, it also contains universals or commonly shared features transcending national boundaries, appreciable by and accessible to all, and the channel through which this is made possible in drama adaptation and translation is localization, through which is made accessible what is globalizationally meaningful to the target audience. Hence, globalization meets localization to produce a glocalization. This is the function and mission of translation and adaptation for the theatre. In

fact, not all western dramatic work need large scale overhaul in terms of localization or adaptation to reach a target audience other than the minimum linguistic translation. Take for example, HKRep's *A Small Family Business* (2003) by Alan Ayckbourn.

Rupert Chan's change of the setting of a British society to Shenzhen where a Hong Kong family live creates new meanings and relevancy to a Hong Kong audience, as the two places are economically and culturally getting more interlocked and symbiotic. Even without setting changes, the original work's universals are not that hard to transfer to a target audience, as it is a morality play of sort, appealing to everyman in matters of moral choice between good and evil. The different kinds of evils take on local colors such as corruption and blackmail. Legal and political jokes strike too close to home with their ring of familiarity. As a result, the audience hardly finds it a foreign play translated and adapted for the local stage. Understandably, it testifies the ingenuity of the adaptation and the translator and director as well as the universalism of the original play.

#### The Western Plays of the HKRep from 1997 to the New Millennium

Since the corporatization of the HKRep in 2001, the tide has changed. There is an increase in the productions of original works and by comparison, the number of western classics has been reduced to two in that year or it remains more or less the same thereafter: Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* and Anton Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya*. In the year 2002-03, the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the HKRep, Frederic Mao, the artistic director, announced the theme of "Chinese Affection" as a mission to explore culture and heritage on the stage. In spite of this new artistic trend, one could not but notice that translations and adaptations of western plays continue to recur on the Hong Kong Rep stage: These include: Tennessee Williams's *Eccentricities of a Nightingale* and Alan Ayckbourn's *A Small Family Business* in the years 2003-2004; a revival of Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Ernest*, Brian Clark's *Whose Life Is It Anyway?* And Maxim Gorky's *Vassa Zheleznova* and D. L. Coburn's *A Gin Game* in 2004-2005. And then, last but not least, the most recent production of David Auburn's *Proof*, which toured both Hong Kong and Shanghai, and the Hong Kong production featured both

Cantonese and Mandarin versions. If I were to do full justice to the topic of my talk today, I would have to cover my trail from the 1977 to the present. However, it would be wise for me to concentrate on some recent ones instead of going into a long-winded rundown of every single previous work in the past twenty seven years, as these works by the HKRep demonstrate a certain typology of translation and adaptation for the stage in general and for HKRep in particular. This typology calls for certain operations, i.e., text simplification, refashioning of texts, localization; omission/deletion and adherence to the original. As a whole, not all translation and adaptation of the HKRep are flawless rendering of the original texts; some follow a certain adherence to fidelity to both form and content for translation productions while others more to content for adaptation works, and make allowances for concession for loss of information, for modifications, additions and subtractions as might be dictated by the targeted format.

Of these seven translated plays produced by HKRep since its corporatization in 2001, they can be characterized into the following typologies of translation and adaptation: Adherence to faithfulness on the one hand in form and content: *The Crucible*; *Uncle Vanya* (by Russian director); *Eccentricities of a Nightingale* (by American director); *Vassa Zheleznova* (by Russian director); *The Importance of Being Ernest*; *A Gin Game*; *Whose Life Is It Anyway* and *Proof*. Three of these even employed American or Russian directors to direct. *Eccentricities of a Nightingale* was directed by David Kaplan, who produced two casts for the play's leading roles, with one female lead played by a male actor in one of the casts. The dual gendered casting of a female role underlines the universalism embedded in the original character of Williams' play. The two Russian plays by Chekhov and Gorky were directed by Vsevolod Shilovskiy, and Alexander Bourdonskij respectively, and both were designed by the same pair of Russian designers, Victor Volski and Raphael Volski. This practice culminates in an utmost effort at truth to the original in both form and content.

Contrary to this practice, *A Small Family Business* in 2004 is, however, an example of tradaptation (translation cum adaptation), being more faithful in form, but less in content; it is an end product of English culture meeting Hong Kong culture: a glocalization. Chan's

modifications were informed by traditional Chinese family ethics and moral and social values, which provide an angle of reading meanings into the production and coincide with the etymology of clan and family of the name of the main character, McCracken. It boils down to the dilemma of how to be a patriarch in a situation that pits family well-being against moral dictates. Chan's transcribing of McCracken into Mak Chai-Kar (literally to manage family affairs) is revealing and suggestive in that to be one taking care of family affairs is a big business in both the domestic and moral sense of the word.

All said and by way of a hasty conclusion, let me point out one thing I have observed: there is little or no production in the manner of re-scribing or re-writing as I can recall of the HKRep's translation and adaptation of western works other than adaptations with sinicized setting and characterization. This may sound a bit of a caveat, finding bone in a boiled egg. Perhaps, this will be an area worthy of further exploration, as it bears testimony to the fruition of glocalization I mentioned earlier, by combining the distant and the near and by lending credence and relevancy to its works of translation and adaptation.

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