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“To Go ‘Into’ My Dialect”: Jane Lai’s Cantonese Translation of *King Lear* and the Historical Context of its Performances in Hong Kong

Abstract: The English performance of Shakespeare in Hong Kong during the early colonial governance period served partly to support the cultural security of the British expatriates, and partly the edification of the locals. However, the 1970s and 1980s witnessed an increase in Cantonese translations and adaptations of Shakespeare, which marked a new way of leveraging Shakespeare to resonate with the local culture and its sentiments. Within this wave of Cantonese productions, the translations by Jane Lai, a translator, professor, and native of Hong Kong, have garnered widespread acclaim within both theatrical and translation spheres. This article will focus on Lai’s Cantonese translation of *King Lear*, produced in the 1980s for stage performance, and conduct a comparative textual analysis of the Cantonese translation with its English source text and the corresponding Mandarin translations, with an aim to explore the translation strategies employed by Lai to ensure the Cantonese *King Lear*’s acceptability to the local culture on the page and stage. Moreover, the article will delve into the historical context of the play’s performance to unravel the elements that contributed to the success of the Cantonese *King Lear* on the stage during that specific period.

Keywords: *King Lear*, Cantonese translation, performance, Hong Kong, Jane Lai.

Introduction

In *King Lear*, when the disguised Earl of Kent, who is bravely loyal to King Lear as his subject and one-time councillor, confronts the Duke of Cornwall and explains his vigorous reaction to Goneril’s steward Oswald, he uses the phrase

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“to go out of my dialect” (2.2.103),¹ indicating a shift in his manner of speech. In this article, I borrow and adapt this line to the form, “to go ‘into’ my dialect,” to refer to the translation of Shakespeare’s play into Cantonese, a dialect of Chinese spoken by people in Hong Kong and in the southern region of Guangdong province, China. While Kent’s shift in dialect and direct speech fails to gain Cornwall’s trust and subsequently leads to his punishment of being placed in the stocks, the *King Lear* translated into Cantonese dialect by Lai in the 1980s has managed to win the confidence of both the academia and the local audience. This article conducts a textual analysis of the translation strategies and techniques employed by Lai in her Cantonese version, and explores the historical context of its performance, in the hope of uncovering the factors underlying its success as a Shakespeare transplantation.

Shakespeare’s name first appears in China in *Accounts of Four Continents*, compiled by Lin Zexu between 1839 and 1840 (Hao 14). During the late Qing dynasty, missionaries such as William Muirhead, Davelle Sheffield, and Timothy Richard, in the course of their work, also spread the name of Shakespeare as a literary master. Around the early 20th century, various esteemed Chinese literati referenced Shakespeare’s name as that of a literary master in many articles. Despite Shakespeare’s renown during this period, none of his plays were translated in full into Chinese until 1922, when the first full-text Chinese translation of *Hamlet* was made by Tian Han. Regarding *King Lear*, the story of the play was first made known to Chinese readers through Lin Shu and Wei Yi’s translation of Charles and Mary Lamb’s *Tales from Shakespeare* in 1904, entitled “The Transformation of the Lady.” In 1931, Sun Dayu published a translation of 3.2 of the play in the second issue of *Poetry Journal*. In 1936, the first full-text Chinese version of *King Lear* was published by Liang Shiqu. This pioneering effort was followed by another 11 translations from Cao Weifeng (1946), Zhu Shenghao (1947), Sun Dayu (1948), Bian Zhilin (1988), Fang Ping (1991), Daniel Shih-P’eng Yang (1993), Jane Lai (2015), Perng Ching-hsi (2015), Xu Yuanhong (2016), Fu Guangming (2019) and Li Qijin (2020).² Some of these full translations had a long time lag between their completion and initial publication: Sun Dayu’s version was finished in 1935 but

¹ Act and scene numbers and all line references are based on the conflated text of *King Lear* in *The Norton Shakespeare* (2nd edition), ed. Stephen Greenblatt, Walter Cohen, Jean Howard and Katharine Eisaman Maus, New York and London: Norton Company, 2008.

² The years used here refer to the first publication year of the translations. Some of the translations have been reprinted many times, such as Zhu Shenghao and Bian Zhilin’s versions. Li Cai also published a translation of *King Lear* in his *Shakespeare’s Tragedies and Comedies* (Beijing: Qunyan Press, 2017); but this version is a revision based on Zhu Shenghao’s translation.

not officially published until 1948 due to the war and the shift in his scholarly interests (Sun, “Translating Shakespeare” 236); Bian Zhilin’s version was completed in 1977, but only first published in 1988, in a collection entitled *Shakespearean Tragedies*; Jane Lai’s version was finished in 1982 as the script for performance and was officially published in 2015. Moreover, most of these translations were primarily intended for reading. Although a few of them, such as Zhu Shenghao’s, also include stage directions which suggest some consideration of the stage effect, performance does not seem to have been the translators’ main concern. Lai’s and Daniel Shih-P’eng Yang’s versions, however, were both commissioned for performance from the outset. Specifically, Lai’s translation, which is rendered directly into demotic Cantonese, exhibits significant differences in diction and rhythm when compared to other renditions.

This article focuses on Jane Lai’s Cantonese translation of *King Lear*, a vernacular Chinese version of the Shakespearean play in China. While vernacular renderings and performances of Shakespearean plays are not rare in China, most of them have taken the form of operatic adaptations. Examples include the Chinese Yue opera versions of *Romeo and Juliet* (1942) and *King Lear* (1946); the Cantonese opera version of *The Merchant of Venice* (1983) (Cao and Sun 140-148); the Chaozhou (Teochew) opera version of *The Winter’s Tale* (1989) (Xie 2020); and more. Most of these renderings tend to veer from translations in the strict sense, since certain characters are omitted and textual alterations or truncations are made to meet the demands of operatic performance. Lai distinguishes her version from these vernacular renderings by aiming to “use Cantonese to convey Shakespeare’s original meaning,” and ensuring that it would “not let the source text suffer from injustice since it is a well-written play” (“Jane Lai” 113). This translation objective earned praise from both audiences and scholars after they watched the performance. Her Cantonese *King Lear* was described as “[capturing] every nuance that Shakespeare had in mind” in a letter from the headmaster of the Hong Kong Diocesan Girl’s School. Vicki Ooi, director of the Cantonese *King Lear*, also praises Lai’s translations, noting that it “reads as though they were original texts written in Cantonese” (23). With an aim to examine the acceptability of the translated play on the page and how it resonates with local sentiment as to achieve its theatrical success on the stage, this article will first provide an overview of Shakespeare’s translation in Hong Kong. Going on from there, it will introduce matters related to the production of the Cantonese *King Lear*, and then in the following section, concentrate on Lai’s version of *King Lear* by conducting a comparative textual analysis of the Cantonese translation with its English source text and the corresponding Mandarin translations. As “translation cannot be separated from power relations, social setting, political context, and cultural paradigm” (Sun 92), the article will also discuss other possible political and historical factors that influenced the successful acceptance of the play in Hong Kong during the 1970s and 1980s.

Shakespeare Translation and Performance in Hong Kong

As in other regions that were once under the colonial governance of Britain, the early introduction and performance of Shakespearean plays in Hong Kong served to reinforce the cultural security of the British expatriates. “Doing Shakespeare” was an integral facet of British colonial life (Brandon 3). These performances were orchestrated either by local amateur groups or by visiting professional companies from Britain. According to Wong, a number of Shakespearean plays were staged by the Hong Kong Amateur Theatrical Society, Dramatic Club, and Mummers group in the late 19th century (*Shakespeare in Hong Kong* 46-47), with the first traceable play performed being *The Merchant of Venice* in 1867 (Wong, “Translating Theatre” 163). Primarily burlesque in nature, these performances provide a glimpse into Shakespeare’s initial role as entertainment upon his arrival in Hong Kong. However, for the purpose of colonial governance, the early exposure to and staging of Shakespeare swiftly shifted to a role of edifying the local populace. After 1882, Shakespeare gradually assumed an important position within the school curriculum and became a topic tested in college entrance examinations (Wong, “Domination by Consent” 46, 49). In the realm of local education, unlike within the British settlement, Shakespeare was deemed representative of “Western elite learning” (Levith 94). Studying and performing Shakespeare and other Western plays was a way for students to improve their English language proficiency and understand Western culture. As Lai states, “The primary purpose of performance was to improve students’ English, with the performance aspect being subsidiary” (“Jane Lai” 111). It can be asserted that the inclusion of Shakespearean performances on campuses before the 1950s served mainly as a mechanism for acclimating the locals to colonial governance, rather than fostering cultural exchanges between the West and the East.

Cantonese adaptations and performances of Shakespeare emerged in the mid-1950s, and their development was intricately related to the political and social climate in Hong Kong. Following World War II, there was a recovery of the theatre in Hong Kong. However, in contrast to the 1940s, when the majority of the staged plays carried strong social and political inclinations, a new directive emerged. This directive stated that “drama should no longer be related to politics,” and “plays from the mainland and Taiwan were prohibited from public performance” (Cheung and Hoyan 209). This unspoken directive by the then government led to a sharp decline in the number of local playwrights, as many were forced to abandon their craft or seek alternative forms of expression. In response to this cautious political atmosphere and the populace’s post-war yearning for theatrical experiences, English performances and translated drama began to thrive in the early 1950s. Among these alternatives, the archaic

Shakespeare and other non-politically themed playwrights emerged as the most popular choice.

The resurgence of theatre in Hong Kong also spurred a wave of Cantonese adaptations of Shakespearean works. On April 23, 1954, the Sino-British Club organized the first Shakespeare Festival, a tribute to the Bard’s 390th anniversary. On the same day, *Sing Tao Daily* published two articles, one by Ma Jian and the other by Chan Yao Hou, both extolling Shakespeare’s plays as exemplary models for Hong Kong’s theatre community. During this first festival, a scene from *Romeo and Juliet* was performed in Cantonese, marking the inception of the Cantonese adaptation and translation of Shakespeare in Hong Kong. In 1964, during the second Shakespeare Festival, the Drama Club of the United College of the Hong Kong Chinese University staged a complete production of *The Merchant of Venice* in Cantonese. In 1974, the Youth Art Amateur Drama Group presented Cantonese *The Taming of the Shrew*. Subsequently, in 1977, the Hong Kong Repertory Theatre, the first professional drama company in Hong Kong, was founded under the auspices of the Urban Council. The company quickly assumed a pivotal role in bringing translated and adapted Shakespeare plays to the forefront, a legacy that persisted until 1997. Their repertoire included productions such as *Hamlet* (1977), *Macbeth* (1979), *Romeo and Juliet* (1980), *The Taming of the Shrew* (1982), *The Merchant of Venice* (1984), *Measure for Measure* (1986), *Othello* (1986), *Twelfth Night* (1988), *Much Ado About Nothing* (1990), *King Lear* (1993), and *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (1997) (Luk 228-247). Beyond the Hong Kong Repertory Theatre and the aforementioned drama clubs, ten other campus drama societies, amateur theatre companies, or groups collectively staged around 19 productions of Shakespearean plays during this period (Wong, *Shakespeare in Hong Kong* 73-75; Luk 255-319).

The Cantonese Shakespeare plays produced during these decades were more akin to transplantations than translations. Some of them were intralingual translations that drew upon or were derived from Mandarin translations. Examples of this approach are evident in works like Ying Ruocheng’s *Measure for Measure*, staged by the Hong Kong Repertory Theatre in 1986, and Daniel Shih-p’eng Yang’s *King Lear* in 1993. The wording in these Cantonese versions remained largely congruent with their Mandarin counterparts, with only essential vernacular modifications to align with Cantonese linguistic norms. In addition, there were Cantonese versions that adopted the method of abridgement, such as Grace Liu and Julia Wan’s *The Tempest* in 1989, produced by The Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts. This version retained the sense of the lines, rather than their exact meaning, in colloquial Cantonese. Besides linguistic transplantation, certain adaptations took domestication a step further by incorporating Cantonese operatic conventions. One example is Rupert Chan’s *Twelfth Night* (re-titled as *Yuanxiao*), staged by the Chung Ying Theatre Company in 1986. This

production recontextualized the play within the Lantern Festival in Tang Dynasty Guangzhou (AD 618-907), and added elements such as Chinese costume and music into the play. In this version, the Tang Chinese seven-character poetic form was used for the versification, and singing sections were integrated to evoke the ambiance of Cantonese opera. However, even with these traditional Chinese elements, these Shakespearean productions strove to maintain a distinct separation from traditional Chinese theatre practices. So in the *Twelfth Night*, a curtain was used on the stage to create a dual-space effect, which is never seen on traditional stage. Similarly, in another of Chan's Cantonese adaptations, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, the stage design adopted a more abstract aesthetic, featuring white walls adorned with irregular black lines, even though the setting was supposed to be the late Qing Dynasty (A.D. 1840-1912). These unconventional stage designs aimed to induce a sense of hyper-realism and foster the potential for free association among the spectators (Wong, *Shakespeare in Hong Kong* 93-94). In other words, these productions bore the hallmarks of experimental theatre in the guise of Shakespearean works. Such a divergence from Shakespeare's original received divided response. Take Chan's *Twelfth Night* as an example, although being considered "successful" (Levith 103) and enjoying numerous performances, it was also criticized for not representing Shakespeare's classic lines. To enjoy this kind of drama, "one has to forget that it is a Shakespearean play" (Lai, "Jane Lai" 115).

In contrast to these adaptations, Lai's approach focused on using Cantonese to convey Shakespeare's inherent meaning, rather than merely encapsulating the play's plot and general themes.

Jane Lai's Translation Activity at the Seals Theatre Company

Jane Lai Chui Chun is a local Cantonese born in Hong Kong. She completed her secondary education at the Diocesan Girls' School and pursued her undergraduate education at the University of Hong Kong. Following her graduation, she spent a few years working at the University of Hong Kong before going to the University of Bristol for her master's degree in literature in 1967. She then returned to the University of Hong Kong to continue her career as a teacher. In 1990, Lai joined the English Department of the Hong Kong Baptist University, where she served as a professor of translation until her retirement.

At the University of Hong Kong, Lai collaborated closely with Vicki Ooi in teaching English and performance and started to translate drama for students in the Drama Club. However, it was the founding of the Seals Theatre Company (hereinafter as "Seals") in 1979 that truly ignited her prolific production of translations. This semi-professional theatre was dedicated to staging well-known Western plays in Cantonese translation. Unlike other

companies performing Cantonese translations of Western plays, Seals prioritized a faithful rendering of the source text’s language. Ooi elaborates such a mission as follows:

It was to attract actors and translators who wanted to work with words, as well as the audience who loved to hear the words spoken with consideration, meaning and aesthetic tone. (19)

Driven by this mission to be a theatre of words and to introduce good-quality plays to audiences, Seals adopted a style rooted in the integrity of language and rhythm found in the source texts and required its actors and actresses to master the right intonations, pitch, and rhythm during their performance. Throughout its 14-year existence (1979-1993), Seals delivered 56 translated plays, covering playwrights such as Neil Simon, Harold Pinter, Edward Albee, Tennessee Williams, Samuel Beckett, and William Shakespeare, among others. This rich array demonstrates the group’s versatility in performing different genres and styles, and contributes significantly to the theatrical scene of Hong Kong at the time.

Out of these 56 plays by Seals, 13 were translated by Lai. In addition to her work with Seals, Lai also translated plays for The Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts. In 2015, a collection of 18 plays she had translated was compiled and published as the “Jane Lai Drama Translation Series.” Her translation of *King Lear* stood out as one of Seals’ “great productions” (Che 8) and remains one of her masterworks. In 1983, the play was staged at both the Hong Kong City Hall and Tsuen Wan Town Hall and received positive comments on its production. Dominic Cheung, as the prompter for the performance, marvelled at Shakespeare’s lines, saying, “Shakespeare is sharp indeed. He is not just a playwright; he is a psychologist with an insightful grasp of human nature and psychology” (Cheung 86). This affirmation of the Cantonese performance is only possible when the translated version faithfully represents the linguistic features of the source text and allows Shakespeare’s wit to transcend from English to Cantonese, maintaining its impact on the audience. In fact, Lai’s faithful representation of Shakespearean texts has been widely acknowledged among her colleagues. According to Vicki Ooi, “[Jane’s] translations never read like translations.” Ooi says,

She [Lai] not only translated with a deep insight the cultural background of the play she was working on, working with expert knowledge of the language she was translating from and into, but she also breathed life into every line she translated. (23)

In her own reflection on the working experiences at Seals, Lai also shows that her linguistic considerations in drama translation are a conscious behavior:

When translating drama, I always read the script several times to experience the sound of the words—the sound of the words spoken by different characters in the drama. I also pay attention to the rhythm, syntactical structures and word choice in order to understand the mood, thoughts and situations of the characters. (“Drama, Translation, Seals” 61)

It can be seen that Lai is meticulous about the pace, rhythm, and word choice, both in the translated texts and in performances. While working with players at Seals, Lai insisted that the players strictly follow her translation during performances. Even altering the final modal particles of the lines was forbidden, as even the rising or falling tone of these particles was thoughtfully considered by Lai to align with the actors’ gestures and movements. Because of this unwavering commitment to linguistic details, Lai’s translations have also received positive comments from players. Lynn Yao, the then-actress with Seals, comments on Lai’s translation with the following:

The best translated scripts, which are hers, covertly support the actor in learning lines: the vocabulary, the rhythm of the lines, the punctuation, the ability to reveal the playwright’s subtexts, and yes, for Cantonese plays, the particles at the end of each line can either make or break an actor, the director and the play altogether, in that order. (77)

This comment from the player, as well as other comments from Lai herself, the audience or colleagues, highlights Lai as a drama translator who possesses a deep understanding of both Western and Chinese cultures and who is sensitive to the most nuanced linguistic features of both languages. These qualities are the preconditions for her to produce a play linguistically faithful to the source text, performable to the actors, and accessible to the local Cantonese audience. In the next section, I will take a textual approach and analyze how Lai has achieved these effects on the page.

Translation Strategies of the Cantonese *King Lear*

Shakespeare is known for his “unparalleled command of his verbal medium,” and it is “his control of language—more than plot, characterization, theme—[that]gives his work distinctive qualities and underwrites his demonstrated theatrical sovereignty” (McDonald 1). Written during his mature period, *King Lear* forms part of “an astounding succession of tragic masterpieces” (Greenblatt 2326). The play exemplifies Shakespeare’s artistic control of language to convey the extremes of physical and mental anguish. Committed to convey Shakespeare’s original meaning, Lai consciously and meticulously adhered to the linguistic essence of this play. At the same time, sharing the aim with Seals to “make good

plays accessible to them [the people of Hong Kong] in their own language” (Ooi 17), Lai also confronted the task of “localizing” the foreignness intrinsic to the original play for the local audience. In other words, translating Shakespearean plays means to balance the inherent tension between globalization and localization. Schleiermacher once proposed a solution to such a tension in textual translation, stating that “either the translator leaves the writer in peace as much as possible and moves the reader toward him; or he leaves the reader in peace as much as possible and moves the writer toward him” (56). However, drama translation is far more complex than textual translation. As Lai once stated,

It is a more complex process of transposition from the page to a different sort of page with its own semantic and linguistic rules and then to a different sort of stage which opens on to an audience with its own different sort of cultural stage background. (Lai, “Shakespeare for the Chinese Stage” 145)

To make Shakespeare’s linguistic essence accessible to the local audience means to allow the playwright’s work to resonate with the local culture while simultaneously placing that local culture within a global context. Therefore, rather than simply domesticating *King Lear*, i.e. “invisibly inscrib[ing] foreign text with [local] values” (Venuti 15), Lai adopts a localization strategy. This strategy, as Sun argues, “entails a more systematic, conceptual, dynamic interaction and exchange between two cultural systems compassing values, conceptions, and experiences” (96). In this specific case, Lai needed to consider the interaction and exchange of three groups of people: the playwright, who writes within another cultural context, the actors and the audience, who are from the local context and hold different values, conceptions and experiences. The goal is to ensure that the translated play can retain the prosodic patterns of Shakespeare to enrich the target culture, is performable and readable for the actors, and is instantly comprehensible to the audience. The fact is that the English Shakespeare used was considerably denser and more succinct than contemporary English. His audiences, compared with the modern ones, were “much more used than we are to listening to long and (to us) demanding passages of speech” (McEvoy 13). To reproduce such dense and concise English in Chinese, the translator must find a language that is characterised by succinctness and that is able to render the original meaning with similar prosodic patterns. At the same time, this language must also be performable for the actors and aurally comprehensible to the audience. To achieve the appropriate succinctness and comprehensibility of language, Lai turned to Traditional Chinese opera as a source of inspiration.

The style of Traditional Chinese opera Lai used to localize Shakespeare is Cantonese opera. This indigenous operatic form features two linguistic modes: vernacular prose and classical Chinese. Vernacular prose is characterized by

modal particles positioned within or at the end of a clause, which deftly expresses the speakers' different types of emotions, such as “*ge*” (嘅), “*tim*” (㗎), or “*laa*” (嘞).³ The classical Chinese used in Cantonese opera is basically built on groupings of two to seven syllables, similar to Chinese classical poetry and lyrical compositions, which creates a highly rhythmical effect for Chinese readers and audiences. The classical style of the language can also evoke a sense of the archaic, similar to that found in *King Lear*. Meanwhile, classical Chinese is also not restricted by excessive grammatical rules. This allows for flexibility, conciseness, and density lacking in contemporary spoken Chinese. Moreover, as Traditional Chinese opera is still performed on stages in China during festive occasions, its linguistic style remains aurally familiar to native Chinese ears. In her Cantonese translation of *King Lear*, Lai skillfully exploited these qualities of Chinese Traditional opera to produce a script that met the requisite demands of faithfulness, performability, and comprehensibility.

Faithfulness to Shakespeare's language requires accurate representation of his prose and verse, along with their role in character development. To represent these two forms of language in the Cantonese translation, Lai employs vernacular prose for Shakespeare's prose and classical Chinese for his blank verse. For example, in the opening of 1.1, the conversation between Kent and Gloucester, which is presented in prose, is rendered in vernacular Cantonese replete with modal particles to resemble daily conversations among Cantonese people. On the other hand, Lear's first formal speech in verse, on dividing up the kingdom, along with Goneril and Regan's responses, are elegantly translated into classical Chinese. In this translation, each clause in the passage has about seven syllables, organised into groupings of two to four; the words used in these lines are of high register and archaic style, so the passage, when spoken aloud, creates a rhythmical and ceremonious effect. In particular, in Goneril's passage eulogising Lear, Lai adopts an intentional overuse of rhythmically parallel structures in classical Chinese. This technique replicates the formal yet embellished style of the original text, revealing Goneril's insincerity and factitious enthusiasm to the audience. As seen in Example (1), the passage is organised with groupings of two to four characters/syllables.⁴ The second and third clauses have groupings of 4/2/4, and the fourth and fifth clauses 3/5/2 and 3/6/4. Both of these two pairs share identical grammatical structures, generating a rhythmic effect in sound and an antithesis effect in meaning. Apart

³ All the transcriptions of Cantonese sounds are based on *Correct Pronunciations of Cantonese Vocabularies*, ed. Ho Man Wui and Chu Kwok Fan (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Educational Publishing Co., 2012).

⁴ As each Chinese character has only one syllable, the number of characters equals that of the syllables. To focus on the form or pronunciation of the text, I will not translate the Chinese back into English but use slashes to indicate the groupings and rhythm of each clause.

from Fu Guangming’s translation, which subtly incorporates parallel structures to render this passage, the other Mandarin translations only remain faithful to the source text in terms of content.

Example (1):

葛：父王，我之/爱父王/非言语/能宣，
 贵则贵于/双目、/天下自由，
 重则重于/一切，/稀世珍宝，
 不亚于/福寿荣荣/嘅生命，
 不下于/天下至孝儿郎/之孝严亲。
 儿臣/厚爱/显得/辩才薄，
 禀于/父王/表我心。(Shakespeare 4-5)⁵

Vernacular prose and classical Chinese are also used by Lai to hint to the audience about Lear’s genuine dementia and Edgar’s feigned madness. In 3.2, when Lear is at the point of descending into madness, he rages at the storm denouncing his two daughters’ conduct. At this point, his language maintains its structure in refined classical Chinese, marked by precise groupings of 2/3/2. Likewise, when Edgar adopts the guise of “poor Tom,” his pretense is revealed through his use of structured classical Chinese, aligned in a pattern of 2/2/4. When it comes to depicting Lear’s loss of sense in 3.6, Lai shifts to use demotic Cantonese to render Lear’s utterances, despite the fact that Shakespeare still uses verse at this point. In 3.6, Lear’s line, “To have a thousand with red burning spits/Come hissing in upon’em—” (3.6.13-14), is translated into “千百妖魔拎住火红铁叉噉追佢地—” (72), literally meaning “thousands of monsters with red burning spits chasing them,” wherein the modal particle “gam” (噉) and the colloquial pronoun of “them,” “keoi dei” (佢地), rather than its Mandarin equivalent “ta men” (他们), are used to convey the colloquial feature of the language. Furthermore, “zeoi” (追), a verb meaning “chasing after,” is used to render “come upon.” In this way, the Cantonese lines impart a childlike tone to the audience, conjuring an image of monsters playfully chasing one another. Compared to other Mandarin translations, such as Fu Guangming’s “a thousand monsters spit fire to their bodies” or Zhu Shenghao’s “a thousand tongues of fire roll up their bodies with hissing sound,” Lai’s version more effectively conveys Lear’s deteriorating mental state. By rendering the line as an action using the verbal phrase “chasing after”, rather than as a description of state, as the other two translators did, Lai’s version is also easier for the actor to enact on the stage.

⁵ The original translation here is in prose in format. To highlight the rhythm and parallelism in the structures of the clauses, I have organized the passage into a verse format, and added slants to indicate the groupings. I have done the same in other examples in Chinese.

Attention to pace and rhythm is another hallmark of Shakespeare's language. Plain and loosely structured language is used to create a sense of bliss when Lear regains his wits and recognizes Cordelia (4.7.60-71). In contrast, clusters of coarse nouns are densely packed to mimic the rapid tempo of the quarrel scene between Kent and Oswald (2.2.13-21). To replicate this swiftness, Lai skillfully uses a string of local bawdy terms while omitting the superfluous articles like "a" and "an" found in the source text. For Lai, these articles, when translated into Cantonese, would slow down the speech and dampen the original pace ("Shakespeare for the Chinese Stage" 164). By condensing the passage into 116 Chinese characters/syllables, Lai closely mirrors the 132 syllables and the pace in Shakespeare's original text. In contrast, other translations, with Sun Dayu's 223 characters being the highest, average around 150 characters for this passage. Compared to these translations, Lai's version stands out for its brevity and nominal density. The pace of language is also affected by the syllable groupings. In Lai's version, most syllables are organized into groups ranging from two to eight syllables, with one clause containing 11 syllables being the longest. Xu Yuanchong, despite translating the passage with a similar total word count, organizes the passage into groups with an average of six syllables, with the longest clause consisting of 19 syllables. These lengthy clauses would certainly reduce the gusto in the hurling of abuse in this scene, and consequently hamper the actor's expression of rage. They also pose challenges for the audience to grasp the meaning aurally and potentially impede their understanding.

In addition to his rhythmical arrangement of the language, Shakespeare also employs the auditory qualities of his lexicon to create consonance within the play. The recurrent use of "Nothing" is particularly notable in this regard. After the word is first uttered by Cordelia, it is immediately echoed by Lear (1.1.86-88, 201), and then again later by the Fool in one of his jests (1.4.112-114). This creates an aural motif that contributes to the themes of this play—its sense of "emptiness, loss of respect, the extinction of identity" (Greenblatt 2328). Therefore, maintaining this aural motif is essential for preserving the stylistic effect intended by Shakespeare. In her translation, Lai shows her understanding of this by using "*mou jau*" (无有) to render "nothing" and repeating it throughout the text, wherever this word appears. While other translators, such as Sun Dayu, Zhu Shenghao, Fang Ping, and Perng Ching-hsi, also use similar methods to maintain repetition, but the words they select are not as aurally recognizable as "*mou jau*," making the aural motif less apparent. The stylistic use of sound can also be found in the case of the word, "howl" (5.3.258). The word "howl" is significant not only for its meaning but also for its onomatopoeic quality that captures Lear's cry of anguish after losing Cordelia. Lai translates "howl" into "*bei hou*" (悲号), recreating a sonic resonance similar to the sound of wailing. Other translators use words such as "*nu hou*" (怒吼) and "*ai hao*" (哀号) to capture the auditory effect. However, some, like Zhu Shenghao, Fang

Ping, and Xu Yuanchong, add the modal particle “*ba*” (吧) after “howl” and, regretfully, dilute the phonological impact of the word. Moreover, the juxtaposition of the soft modal particle “*ba*” with the repeated “howls” also places an undue strain on the actor to maintain emotional and vocal harmony.

Beyond concerns about the prosodic patterns of Shakespeare’s source text and performability for the actors, the language of a drama translation must also be aurally comprehensible and semantically accessible to the audience, so they can take in the new material without undue distraction. In this regard, Lai localizes modes of address. For instance, she lets Lear refer to himself as *zhen* (朕), a royal “I” reserved for kings in ancient China. The daughters address Lear as “father king” (父王), a typical form of address from children to their king father. Kent and Gloucester refer to themselves as *chen* (臣), a self-reference used by court officials when addressing themselves to the king or other members of the royal family. These modes of address are familiar to Chinese audiences from watching court-theme operas. Besides using the traditional way of address, Lai also uses pairs of antithetic lines to signal scene transitions or character exits; a practice common in Traditional Chinese opera and akin to Shakespeare’s use of couplets to conclude specific scenes. For example, Edmund’s final two lines in 5.1, “for my state/stands on me to defend, not to debate” (5.1.58-59), are rendered into two clauses with syllable groupings of 2/2/3, with the last two characters rhyming with the “o” sound, as in Example (2). When spoken in a relatively slow and rhythmic manner, these lines can signal the quick exit of Edmund and the shift in scene.

Example (2):

文：河山/图谋/尽在我(*ngo*)

天下/怨言/奈我何(*ho*) (Shakespeare 112)

Besides incorporating Traditional Chinese opera elements into the translation of *King Lear* to make the translation accessible to the audience, Lai also localizes foreign or unusual images or concepts in the play, ensuring that they would not become sources of distraction to the audience during the performance. When Lear and Kent swear by Apollo (1.1.159-160) or refer to “the barbarous Scythian” (1.1.116), these culturally specific names, if literally translated, could be obscure to a Chinese audience unfamiliar with Western mythology and culture. To avoid this, Lai opts for more general terms like “deity” and “barbarian” to replace these culturally specific names so as to facilitate audience engagement. Similarly, other images, such as the “hemlock” and “nettles” that Lear is crowned with are medicinal herbs to a Chinese audience. To mitigate any confusion arising from the mention of herbal medicines, Lai substitutes them with commonplace wild herbs from Hong Kong. Alongside this strategy of substituting local imagery for the original one, Lai also deletes some unfamiliar and unnecessary words.

A case in this point is Kent's verbal abuse of Oswald, where Lai deletes "three-suited" and "hundred pound" (2.2.14) to prevent potential confusion for the audience.

Another noteworthy aspect of Lai's strategy lies in her translation of puns. When Gloucester introduces his relation with Edmund, his son out of wedlock, to Kent in an indirect manner, Ken replies, "I cannot conceive you" (1.1.11), using "conceive" to mean "comprehension." Gloucester then exploits the word's polysemous nature by replying "Sir, this young fellow's mother could [conceive];" (1.1.12), a pun on biological conception. Lai translates Kent's word using "*m ming*" (唔明), meaning unable to comprehend, and Gloucester's word as "*sam zi tou ming*" (心知肚明), which idiomatically means "knowing it," or, when taken literally, word by word, means "her heart and belly can comprehend." Through the use of the four-character Chinese phrase, Lai creatively maintains the punning effect of the source text and the witticism of Shakespeare.

Translators are often likened to dancers constrained with chains. The textual analysis and comparison of Lai's translation demonstrate that, in her role as a theatre translator, Lai manages to dance elegantly within the restraints of those chains. By skillfully using the localization strategy to translate Shakespeare, she balances the semantic and prosodic constraints of the source text, the performance capabilities of the actors, and the need for comprehensibility from the audience.

The Historical Context of Cantonese Translated Plays

Lai's translation has demonstrated that her strategies enhance the acceptability of *King Lear*, both on the page and the stage. However, the confluence of cultural, social and historical factors also contribute to the success of this Cantonese version in the early 1980s.

Under the British colonial governance, the English language held a prestigious status in Hong Kong's official sphere, while Cantonese, though dominant in everyday life, remained on the outskirts of formal institutions and was rarely considered as a language for publication. Despite this, a convergence of factors in the late 1970s and early 1980s catalyzed a surge in Cantonese-translated dramas and performances, as exemplified by plays staged by Seals and the Hong Kong Repertory Theatre.⁶

⁶ According to Luk's statistics, Seals produced 60 dramas with 51 of them were translated ones (Luk 25); the Hong Kong Repertory Theater produced a total of 59 plays between 1977 and 1985, with 37 being translated plays, accounting for 63% of the total (Luk 22).

On an international level, the development of post-war drama in the West had had an impact on Hong Kong theatre through educational channels since the 1950s. Students at universities and colleges performed Western plays for the annual drama competitions of the Federation of Students; professors or directors with Western education backgrounds also initiated the staging of these Western plays. For instance, Vicki Ooi, associated with the University of Bristol, primarily staged productions of European playwrights, including Tom Stoppard’s *After Magritte*, Friedrich Dürrenmatt’s *The Visit*, and Harold Pinter’s *Old Times*. Chung King Fai, from Yale University, staged American plays such as Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman*, Edward Albee’s *Zoo Story*, and Thornton Wilder’s *Our Town*. These instances constitute only a fraction of this trend. The collective endeavors of students, professors, and directors helped to nurture a local passion and enthusiasm for Western drama.

Hong Kong’s evolving cultural policies and its escalating economic importance in the global setting also fueled the performance of translated Cantonese drama. During the 1960s, especially after the June 7th Riot in 1967, in which the locals raised to revolt the British colonial governance, the then Hong Kong government started to shift its governance approach. One change was to prioritize culture and arts and to legitimate Chinese (albeit without distinction between Cantonese and Mandarin) as an official language in 1974. This shift was accompanied by the construction of public cultural spaces, such as the Hong Kong City Hall, and the implementation of a “non-inference” policy towards cultural activities (qtd. in Luk 17). As the 1970s dawned, alongside economic achievements, subsidized theatre tickets were provided to make the art form more accessible to and more popular among citizens (Tian and Fong 135). In 1977, the Hong Kong Repertory Theatre was established with government funding to improve the quality of productions and popularize drama among the public (Tian and Fong 135). This helped to legitimize drama as a profession and endow it with the status of high culture. These policies and government actions effectively fostered artistic creativity and the development of a distinctive Hong Kong culture. As Cantonese represented the main dialect of the Hong Kong populace, reflecting their lifestyle and identity, it was gradually embraced as an emblem of Hong Kong culture. This trend was further underscored as Cantonese permeated newspapers, television, films and popular songs, coinciding with the city’s growing economic influence across the Asian region. Together with the then-developing but demanding theatrical scene in Hong Kong, it seems quite natural for Cantonese to play a key role in importing Western plays to enrich the local cultural landscape.

The changing political environment in Hong Kong also contributed to the rising status of Cantonese. As the British government and China were discussing the signing of the *Sino-British Joint Declaration*, Hong Kong residents found themselves confronted with the challenge of self-identification beyond their previous status. This led them to navigate the process of “seeking

the self, affirming the self, and defining the self” (Fong 5). In this context, Cantonese, a shared dialect within the community, emerged as a symbol of Hong Kong’s distinctive identity. Though people in Hong Kong were well aware that the market for Cantonese theatre would be confined to Hong Kong and a few other Cantonese-speaking areas, and was destined to “gain no exposure at all except for ephemeral performances” (Lai, “What do We Put” 250), yet, “[A]n assertion of belonging in and to a place, a people, a heritage” (Said 174) was much stronger than ever before. This motivated the establishment of a communal language, irrespective of the extent to which this dialect was prevalent. Translation, which is recognized as having the function of “identity formation in cultural context” (Sun 93), started to serve as the avenue to showcase the capabilities of this dialect. When Lai translated into Cantonese, one of her purposes was to rebut the viewpoint that “Cantonese cannot convey anything of substance” (“Jane Lai” 113), and to demonstrate that Cantonese was fully capable of “meeting the new market demands and new fashion” (Zhang 175). Through the efforts of Lai and other translators, Cantonese transcended its status as a marginalized spoken dialect and was gradually accepted as a legitimate written language, even deemed capable of capturing the complexity of Shakespeare.

In a broad sense, the excitement surrounding post-war Western drama, coupled with Hong Kong’s evolving cultural policy, economic growth, and the urge to forge a distinct identity in the lead-up to 1997, collectively contributed to the rise of Cantonese translation and performance in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Within this social and historical context, the Cantonese renderings of Shakespeare are just an inevitable phenomenon.

Conclusion

Translation is not performed in a vacuum, but rather emerges from social and individual choices. Therefore, besides focusing on the text of Lai’s Cantonese translation of *King Lear*, this article also discusses issues related to the production of this specific play, including the vernacular translation of Shakespeare in China, the production of Seals Theatre Company, and the historical milieu which witnessed the rise of Cantonese-translated plays in the late 1970s and early 1980s. It has demonstrated how vernacular rendition of Shakespeare could gain acceptance in both academia and theatre, how Shakespearean plays could foster local appreciation, and how their translation and appropriation contributed to elevating the status of the Cantonese dialect during a pivotal period in Hong Kong’s history. This inherent malleability allows Shakespearean plays to be localized by skilled translators such as Jane Lai, and thus, ultimately, globalized.

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