



From Opera Film Text to Cinematic Presentation – A Case Study of the Cantonese Opera Film *White Snake*

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Abstract. *White Snake (Baishezhuán qīng)*, China's inaugural 4K panoramic-sound Cantonese opera film adapted from the folktale the *Legend of the White Snake (Baishezhuán)*, has been met with widespread acclaim since its release. By skillfully incorporating the narrative strengths of its operatic source while harnessing the expressive power of cinematic techniques, the film stands as a distinctive work within the opera film genre and charts innovative pathways for its future development. The process of adapting traditional opera for the screen necessitates careful consideration of several key aspects: the transformation of the text and its translation into cinematic language, and the filmic presentation of modern stage art. Furthermore, as a genre film, the opera film must resonate with audiences to achieve commercial viability. It shoulders the dual responsibility of inheriting and disseminating the Chinese opera art, while also contributing to the development of the Chinese film system.

Keywords: Opera Film; *White Snake*; Textual Transformation; Cinematic Presentation

1 Introduction

The advent of the media convergence era has fostered a profound interpenetration of content and form across different media, leading to transformative shifts in the creation and dissemination of Chinese opera. As a standout opera film of 2021, China's inaugural 4K panoramic-sound Cantonese opera film *White Snake (Baishezhuán qīng)* skillfully incorporates the narrative strengths of its operatic source while harnessing the expressive power of cinematic techniques, resulting in a distinctive opera film. Its remarkable commercial success - surpassing ten million Yuan at the box office within merely sixteen days - set a new historical record for Chinese opera films and sparked extensive social response.

This paper investigates how the opera film creatively addresses the challenges of transcending established paradigms in the media convergence era, utilizing new technologies to deliver a fresh experience. Through this lens, it aims to explore the textual innovation within the opera film genre. Drawing upon relevant scholarship and the analysis on the Cantonese opera film *White Snake*, this study will examine the

creative transformation from operatic text to cinematic presentation through three primary dimensions: the transformation from operatic to cinematic text, the creative cinematic presentation of opera, and the successful implications of the Cantonese opera film *White Snake*.

2 The Transformation Presentation from Operatic to Cinematic Text in the Cantonese Opera Film *White Snake*

As one of China's most well-known love stories, the folktale the *Legend of the White Snake (Baishezhuàn)* has been continually recomposed and reconstructed through various adaptations in opera, teleplay, and film. In May 2021, the Cantonese opera film *White Snake*, directed by Zhang Xianfeng and screen-played by Mo Fei, was released. The adaptation implements significant transformations and adjustments in narration, characterization, plot, and theme, aligning the classic tale more closely with modern audience aesthetics.

2.1 Narration Transformation

A scholar observes that “the process of adapting opera into an opera film is not an abandonment of the original text, but a fusion and reshaping of narrative modes [1].” Departing from the chronological storytelling typical of traditional opera, the Cantonese opera film *White Snake* innovatively employs a reverse narrative structure. The film opens with Bai Suzhen's (the White Snake) reminiscence, weaving with flashbacks and supplementary scenes. This technique powerfully compares the sorrow of her eventual imprisonment in the Leifeng Pagoda with tender moments of her romance with Xu Xian, immediately capturing the viewer's emotional engagement. Furthermore, the film incorporates a flashback to the lovers' past-life connection in its fifth act, enhancing the narrative's coherence.

2.2 Characterization and Plot Transformation

In previous classic texts and films, the characters all follow images and forms in traditional classic literary works [2]. A significant achievement of the Cantonese opera film *White Snake* lies in its nuanced characterization and refined plot, the transformation and shaping is more in line with the reality and the younger generation.

In terms of characterization, the Cantonese opera film *White Snake* deliberately diminishes the episode of Bai Suzhen stealing the sacred lingzhi mushroom, shifting the narrative focus toward the compassion shown by the Crane and Deer Immortal Attendants. This reframing highlights pregnant Bai Suzhen and graceful attendant, deepening the story's emotional and ethical resonance. Meanwhile, the figure of Fahai (the Buddhist monk) undergoes notable reinterpretation. In this adaptation, he embodies a more nuanced authority - devoted to Buddhist law yet tempered with humanity. He allows Bai Suzhen to confess her identity to Xu Xian, offer Bai Suzhen and

Xiao Qing(the Green Snake) a path to survival, and ultimately releases Xu Xian. Fahai reflects, “It is human obsession and demonic ignorance that prolong this karmic entanglement”. While adhering to the principle that “the law permits no mercy”, he does not impose his will by force, stating instead that he will “refer the matter to the Buddha for final judgment”. In the rescue sequence, Fahai’s disciple initially obeys the order to maintain the spiritual barrier but eventually relents, moved by the lovers’ profound devotion and Xu Xian’s pleas. When the young disciple seeks forgiveness, Fahai responds with gentle wisdom: “A kind heart is not to be blamed”. Through such nuanced portrayals, each character is endowed with psychological depth and emotional authenticity, transcending archetypal representations. In terms of plot, the film streamlines the conventional operatic repertoire by reducing stylized conventions(*chengshi*) and eliminating extraneous plot elements. This concentrated structure intensifies the central conflicts and accelerates dramatic momentum, aligning the classic tale with contemporary cinematic rhythm.

2.3 Ideological and Thematic Transformation

Centering its narrative on the theme of “love(*qing*)”, the film boldly reinterprets this core concept based on the traditional Chinese opera, infusing it with contemporary annotations and connotations. Bai Suzhen’s active and courageous pursuit of love, albeit with Xiao Qing’s encouragement, mirrors modern ideals of romantic agency. Her unwavering devotion and Xu Xian’s essential “humanity” offer a poignant exploration of love’s complexities in a modern context. In the end, having witnessed Bai Suzhen’s desperate struggle for him, Xu Xian renounces his earlier intention to forsake love for Buddhist asceticism, pledging himself to her regardless of her identity. Bai Suzhen enters the Leifeng Pagoda as a voluntary act. As the finale’s theme song poignantly expresses: “Though unseen, I feel your presence near; our vow unchanged, echoing through a thousand years; before the tower, I keep my vigil, never far; until the day the Buddha’s lotus blooms, and we reunite”. Thus, the film elevates the theme of “love” to a transcendent and emotionally resonant crescendo.

Guided by both modern artistic concepts and contemporary spirit, the textual transformation in *White Snake* demonstrates a high degree of artistic consciousness. It realizes respect and reservation to the source material and perfection adaption for a new era, providing a template for future adaptations in the opera film genre.

3 The Creative Cinematic Presentation of the Opera Film

Chinese cinema has shared an inextricable bond with opera since its inception. A perennial creative challenge for opera films has been reconciling cinematic realism with operatic abstraction. The Cantonese opera film *White Snake* proposes an innovative and elegant resolution to this tension, fully leveraging the narrative power of the filmic image while striving to achieve a cultural pursuit consistent with the spirit of traditional opera.

3.1 Cinematographic Translation of Operatic Language

Limited by the spatial constraints of the stage, traditional opera often relies on relatively straightforward narrative lines, spatial changes and plot progress are based on the actors' abstract performance [3]. This film actively mobilizes the language of cinema to translate this operatic essence. By applying sophisticated cinematographic techniques to the operatic text, it achieves more dynamic control over narrative rhythm and enhances the story's expressiveness.

This cinematographic approach significantly enriches the film's narrative texture. The Cantonese opera film *White Snake* moves beyond the static long takes or simple following shots traditionally used for arias in opera films. Instead, it streamlines lengthy lyrical passages and intercuts them with a carefully curated sequence of images that enhances the texture of opera performance. During dialogues, it employs cinematic close-ups shot/reverse shot. For instance, the extreme close-up on Bai Suzhen's face during her first encounter with Xu Xian at the Broken Bridge (*duanqiao*) masterfully captures a fleeting cascade of emotions - love, shyness, yearning - with exquisite delicacy. Such techniques align with cinematic composition principles, allowing audiences intimate access to characters' inner worlds and heightening the emotional impact at key narrative junctures. Similarly, the use of overhead shots in action sequences like "shuidou"(Battle in the Water) magnifies the visual expression.

3.2 Cinematic Reimagining of Stage Art

The film offers novel solutions for harmonizing operatic abstraction with cinematic concreteness. It brilliantly integrates the "virtuality" of digital visual effects with the "virtuality" inherent to opera, presenting them as a cohesive and immersive visual whole. This synthesis elegantly dissolves the apparent divergence between filmic realism and operatic stylization [4].

The film's overall aesthetic is firmly anchored in a Chinese classical sensibility, using the Chinese traditional ink-wash painting(*shuimohua*) as its foundational visual tone, complemented by modern cinematic art. Drawing upon the "idealized scenery"(*xieyixing*) expression of traditional poetry and painting to create an aesthetic world where emotion and landscape are seamlessly fused. The art team employed a palette inspired by traditional mineral pigments, such as azurite(*shiqing*) and landscape green(*shanlv*), to render flora, architecture, and vistas in a fresh, elegant tonality. Elements evocative of Ming and Qing dynasty garden aesthetics - white-washed walls, gray-tiled roofs, arched bridges over placid water - are woven throughout.

In its pursuit of a compelling screen reality, the film strategically harnesses modern special effects technology. Spectacular sequences like "Flooding the Jinshan Temple"(*shuimanjinshan*), with its towering, digitally-rendered waves, and the fantastical battle of spells between the snakes and Fahai, employ a heightened realism to give tangible form to the imagined wonders of the operatic stage. These visually concrete scenes render the story's conflicts more intense and the plots more intensely focused.

3.3 Visual Synthesis of Traditional Cultural Essence

A further hallmark of the film's cinematic presentation is its visual integration of traditional cultural motifs. The team skillfully infused the cinematography with aesthetic concepts and expression methods from classical Chinese painting. The film is adorned with resonant imagery - clouds, the Leifeng Pagoda, the Buddha's lotus, the bamboo umbrella - each element whispering of Chinese traditional artistic charm. It also pays meticulous attention to the specific geographical and cultural milieu of the legend, faithfully depicting the iconic landscapes of Hangzhou's West Lake, Zhenjiang's Jinshan Temple, and the Leifeng Pagoda. The film also showcases and restores authentic cultural practices, such as boating to pluck lotus seeds or the Dragon Boat Festival ritual of drinking realgar wine(*xionghuangjiu*). In the "Falling in Love by the West Lake" sequence, a lyrical montage of misty rain, a drifting boat, and fish dancing among lotus leaves poetically visualizes the burgeoning, tender romance between Xu Xian and Bai Suzhen. In summary, the film strives to reconstruct not just a story, but the traditional cultural ecosystem that nurtured it, reflecting the contemporary creators' refined aesthetic vision and a strong identification with China's culture.

4 Contemporary Implications from the Success of the Cantonese Opera Film *White Snake*

"The space of opera is tangible, while the space of the film is illusory, leading to directors' fundamentally different principles for handling space [5]." As scholar Li Yuchun notes, "The transition from 'opera' to 'film' hinges on a transformation in creative thinking, which is key to enhancing cinematic sense [4]." The development of opera film, therefore, lies in disseminating operatic art while harnessing the unique expressive capacities of cinema, ultimately forming positive and effective interactions between the two forms.

4.1 Broadening the Audience

A prevalent contemporary challenge is that many young people retain a perception of traditional opera as "boring," "dull," or "obscure." Attracting younger generations is thus imperative for developing the opera business. As a cinematic genre, opera film represents a powerful medium for integrative creation of opera art within a cinematic framework. This plays a crucial role in expanding opera's reach among youth demographics, fostering its propagation within new generations, and significantly widening its overall audience base.

4.2 Lowering the Barrier

By streamlining complex stylized performances and replacing obscure arias and acting with more nuanced, lifelike expressions and movements, opera film shifts the audi-

ence's engagement from stage "spectatorship" to cinematic "experience". This approach preserves the essence of opera while innovating its presentation. Created in a mode closer to mainstream cinema, it reduces the emotional and cognitive distance for the audience, rendering opera more comprehensible and approachable.

4.3 Strengthening Cultural Identity

As a film genre bearing distinctive Chinese cultural characteristics, opera film constitutes a significant contribution to world cinema and a vibrant embodiment of the "creative transformation and innovative development" of China's traditional culture [4]. For opera film creation, steadfastly pursuing and elevating the path of "cinematization" is a vital artistic imperative. The popularity of *White Snake* extended beyond the cinema, sparking trends like online makeup tutorials inspired by the actors' exquisite looks. This phenomenon demonstrates how content that feels both authentic and aesthetically appealing can bridge cultural gaps, attracting attention from diverse communities and fostering acceptance among audiences with varying backgrounds. This mutually beneficial relationship between film and opera wins new admirers for the traditional art form. More operatic works can find wider circulation and artistic enhancement through cinematic adaptation, thereby strengthening the public's sense of cultural identification with the opera art.

The Cantonese opera film *White Snake* successfully negotiates a delicate balance between the film and the opera. It embraces new cinematic technologies with an open attitude while mediating operatic performance stylization and symbolism. It recreates the imaginative space of the opera stage within the immersive flow of cinematic space-time, allowing audiences unfamiliar with opera to step into its world, to understand it and appreciate it with a novel experience that is simultaneously operatic and cinematic. The film stands, therefore, as a successful case study in fulfilling market and audience expectations without compromising artistic and aesthetic values.

5 Conclusion

As scholars have articulated, "The opera film is a creative screen reproduction of Chinese operatic art through cinematic form, which not only documents the unique performative modalities of opera but also facilitates a meaningful fusion between the two aesthetic systems of film and opera, a unique genre of Chinese films [1]". Indeed, traditional opera can glean valuable insights from the trajectory of opera film, to further the creative evolution and innovative dissemination. The cinematic adaptation of traditional opera is a response to the currents of our time and resonates with public appetite. This practice is instrumental not only for the inheritance and promotion of traditional opera art but also for ensuring its sustainable development in the present era. As traditional Chinese opera practitioners in the new era, we must embrace the responsibility of inheriting and propagating operatic culture. We must uphold its core principles while daring to innovate, leveraging technological advancements to breathe new life into traditional art forms. By doing so, we can open expansive horizons for

the creation and dissemination of opera films, thereby actively contributing to the creative transformation and innovative development of China's profound and enduring cultural tradition.

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