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DECONTINENTALISED SHAKESPEARE: REIMAGINING TWELFTH NIGHT THROUGH QIONG OPERA ON HAINAN ISLAND

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ABSTRACT

The article adopts an archipelagic critical framework to examine *De Yi Yuan* (translated as *A Felicitous Union*), a Qiong opera (Hainan opera) adaptation of William Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, demonstrating how it challenges Eurocentric paradigms that privilege the Anglosphere as the source and interpretive authority of Shakespeare. By localising the Shakespearean text through the idioms, performance conventions, and ethical worldviews of Qiong opera, *De Yi Yuan* enacts a process of aesthetic reconfiguration that repositions cultural agency within an archipelagic network of exchange, where meaning emerges through relational dynamics rather than hierarchical inheritance. Grounded in the fluid and connective logic of island performances, the study demonstrates how an archipelagic perspective challenges centre-periphery models and offers an alternative decentralised mode of understanding Asian intercultural Shakespeare. Additionally, it highlights alternative modes of cultural expression rooted in the archipelagic landscapes of Asia.

KEYWORDS: Shakespeare; Asia; Qiong opera; Archipelago; Decontinentalisation

1. INTRODUCTION

The dawn of the 21st century has witnessed a scholarly shift in Shakespeare studies toward new historicism and cultural materialism [1,2], which places a critical focus on how different generations and cultures recontextualise Shakespeare [3]. As the earliest non-Anglophone performative system to interact with Shakespeare [4], Asian theatre provides theatrical practitioners with diversified artistic, cultural and religious spectra to reimagine Shakespeare [5].

However, such “borrowing” from and “exchanging” with Asian cultures risks devolving into cultural exploitation, thereby perpetuating the logic of colonialism [6]. Rustom Bharucha contends that Western directors, such as Peter Brook and Ariane Mnouchkine, have drawn inspiration from Asian cultures without giving them equivalent interpretive authority [6]. These intercultural theatrical productions by Western practitioners reinforce a Western-centric logic that positions the Anglosphere as the authoritative centre of Shakespeare interpretation while relegating Asian performing forms to a decorative role [7].

This Anglocentric perspective also pervades intercultural Shakespeare adaptation studies, since critics tend to rely on Western perspectives, which frequently obscure the subjectivity of Asian practitioners and dismiss their intercultural productions as mere derivations of Shakespearean canonical authenticity [8]. Yet, Hutcheon and O’Flynn’s adaptation theory, which criticises the authority of textual fidelity, offers a pathway for Asian Shakespeare adaptation studies to move beyond a canon-centric model [9]. Increasingly, Asian scholars continue to enrich this research trajectory by exploring how local cultures write back the centre to challenge the dominance of the Shakespeare canon [10], and by examining how Asian practitioners strategically erase Shakespeare in adaptation to question the myth of his universality [11].

Asia is distinguished from other continents by its possession of the world’s largest archipelago, a region characterised by ecological and cultural traits that greatly differ from those of the continental mainland. Despite their distinctive local traditions and hybrid cultural formations, the performing arts of island communities have often been marginalised in mainstream scholarship [12]. This marginalisation is particularly evident in the study of Shakespearean adaptations, where limited attention has been paid to the dynamic interactions between the

playwright’s works and the performance cultures of tropical islands in Asia. To address this gap, this article, grounded in an archipelagic perspective, conducts a content analysis of the *mise en scène* [13] and a close reading of the scripts of *De Yi Yuan*, examining how Qiong opera on Hainan Island reimagines Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night* to challenge the authority of textual fidelity and authenticity, while articulating a distinctly indigenous tropical cultural subjectivity.

2. METHODOLOGY

An archipelago is a relational landscape centred on a shared sea, where dispersed islands and coastlines are woven together through maritime practices and cultural exchanges [14]. This notion encourages moving from viewing the archipelago as a purely geographical entity to recognising its inherent relationality and connectivity.

Indeed, the modern archipelagic perspective is intellectually indebted to Édouard Glissant’s rhizomatic thought [15], which is grounded in the principle that “every identity is extended through a relationship with the Other” in *Poetics of Relation* [16]. Building upon this relational logic, Glissant later develops the more spatially and poetically resonant concept of archipelagic thinking in *Philosophie de la Relation: Poésie en étendue* (2009). He defines it as an inherently connective and non-systematic mode of thought that stands in opposition to the systemic and homogenising impulses of Western-centred continental thinking [17]. Such a mode of thought foregrounds the dynamic interrelations, mobility, and transformations of mainland/island and island/island relations, thereby destabilising centre-periphery binaries and static spatial imaginaries [18]. In this sense, the archipelagic perspective provides a postmodern, relational, and differential epistemological alternative.

In *Archipelagic Performance: Scenes from Maritime Southeast Asia* (2019), Paul Rae further combines archipelagic thinking with performance studies by conceptualising performances as an archipelagic mode of knowledge production. Rae highlights the particular significance of performances in understanding archipelagos, because “they are able to contain, in concentrated form, many of the characteristic complexities of the formation that are otherwise distributed in space and time” [19]. In other words, archipelagic performance does not simply mirror archipelagic culture; rather, it constitutes an archipelago in its own right, because it enables audiences to sense and experience the intricate, dynamic, and vibrant networks that unfold

within its temporal and spatial dimensions.

Significantly, he also identifies a paradox inherent to archipelagic performances. Western colonisers used to treat them as objects of classification, preservation, and documentation [19]. For local artists, instead, performing is a way to maintain and inherit culture, build social relationships, and understand the world [19]. In this sense, performances function as a site for exposing the epistemological divide between imperial forms of knowledge production and locally grounded ways of knowledge production [20].

To conclude, a performance is essentially an archipelago [19]. Its meaning is not generated from a singular centre or source, but is constructed through relational interaction and negotiation. Adopting this archipelagic mode of thinking to examine Asian Shakespearean performances, where Western and indigenous epistemologies contend for discursive authority, will provide an alternative perspective grounded in indigenous performance practices and interpretive traditions.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Qiong Opera's Archipelagic Sensibility: Mobility and Hybridity in a Cultural Network

The origins and development of Qiong opera were closely intertwined with the history of migration and cultural exchange on Hainan Island since the Ming dynasty. According to *Hainan Dao Zhi* (or *Hainan Island Gazetteer*), large-scale migration to Hainan took place in the Jiajing reign (1522-1566). In addition to exiled officials and displaced commoners, a significant number of organised military settlers were relocated to the island for strategic purposes. To defend against coastal raids and suppress indigenous uprisings, the Ming government implemented the garrison system, stationing over ten thousand soldiers on the island and instituting a military-agricultural mode of settlement that combined defence with cultivation. As migrants from Fujian increased, Minnan *xiqu* (or Minnan opera) gradually entered Hainan. Owing to the linguistic proximity between Hainan dialects and Hokkien (Southern Fujian dialect, or Minnan dialects), local audiences readily embraced these imported theatrical forms. Through these Minnan *xiqu* troupes, *yiyang* tune, a vocal style that originated in Jiangxi and later spread through southern Fujian, was introduced to Hainan, profoundly influencing the musical and performative structures of local folk drama and contributing to the emergence of Qiong opera [21].

Following the Wanli reign (1573-1620), the broader landscape of Chinese theatre underwent a major transformation: *nanxi* (Southern drama) rose to prominence while *zaju* (Northern drama) declined [22]. During this period, various *nanxi* genres from Fujian and Guangdong, such as Liyuan opera, Teochew opera, Gaojia opera, and Zhengyin opera, were brought to Hainan by merchants and travelling troupes. The adaptation of classic *nanxi* such as *Pipa Ji* (translated as *The Story of the Lute*) and *Jin Yin Ji* (translated as *The Story of the Golden Seal*) into Qiong opera, and their subsequent circulation on the island, initiated a sustained process of artistic synthesis. Through this sustained process of adaptation and integration, Qiong opera gradually absorbed external influences into a distinct local idiom, transforming imported forms into an indigenous aesthetic system and asserting its own artistic identity. Emerging from the local performance traditions of Hainan Island, Qiong opera has never been a self-enclosed or insular cultural form. Rather, from its earliest development, it grew out of borrowing, reshaping, and negotiating with neighbouring theatrical practices. What makes Qiong opera distinctive is not merely its repertoire or staging style but the kind of openness that island societies often nurture: an instinctive readiness to absorb and reinterpret influences from elsewhere.

Although it spreads to mainland coastal towns such as Xuwen, Haikang, Hepu, and Lianjiang, Qiong opera's domestic presence remained relatively limited. Its most significant expansion occurred instead across the South China Sea [23]. From the late nineteenth century onward, warfare in China and the growing demand for labour in the Nanyang region prompted large-scale waves of Hainanese migration to Southeast Asia [24]. During this process, Qiong opera was carried abroad and took root among Hainanese diasporic communities across Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, and the Philippines [23]. In these diasporic communities, Qiong opera functioned not merely as a form of theatrical performance but as a vital cultural medium through which migrants articulated collective identity and preserved ancestral memory.

More importantly, this overseas dissemination was not a unidirectional export from Hainan but a dynamic process of reciprocal exchange that gave rise to a cross-cultural performance network encircling the South China Sea. Since the 1980s, sustained interactions between Qiong opera troupes in Hainan and those in Malaysia and Singapore, through company exchanges, joint performances,

and shared repertoires, have formed a vibrant maritime theatrical corridor [25]. This network has allowed Qiong opera to transcend Hainan Island's physical boundaries, maintaining its artistic vitality through circulation and intercultural encounter.

Qiong opera's archipelagic sensibility signals a form of cultural agency that challenges the centre-periphery structure. Its development is characterised by crisscrossing and network-like trajectories of cultural flow rather than a unilinear model from a Han cultural core. It continuously absorbed mainland influences, which were then disseminated and sustained via diasporic transmission across the South China Sea, resulting in a process of intercultural hybridity through its sustained engagement with Nanyang societies. In this process, Qiong opera was not a passive recipient but actively selected, adapted, and reconfigured external artistic forms to achieve continuous renewal of its own aesthetics. Viewed through an archipelagic lens, Qiong opera is no longer a marginal local opera as defined by continental-centric perspectives, but an active agent within the South China Sea cultural network, continuously engaged in creative transformation.

Admittedly, the distinctive geographical conditions of islands render them particularly vulnerable to external forces such as ocean currents, maritime incursions, piracy, and smuggling [19]. These forms of instability have shaped the vulnerability of archipelagic performance traditions [26]. Regrettably, Qiong opera, essentially an island performance form, has inevitably followed this development trajectory, experiencing a steady decline in active troupes, a diminishing pool of skilled practitioners, and a weakening system of training and transmission [25].

3.2. *De Yi Yuan's Archipelagic Praxis: Localisation and Decentralisation*

Since the 1980s, a new wave of artistically self-conscious Shakespeare adaptations has emerged in *xiqu* (Chinese opera), fueled both by the climate of ideological liberalisation in the post-Reform era (the period following the 1978 China's Reform and Opening-up) and by the market-driven imperative to innovate in the face of declining audiences [27]. Within this trend, the Haikou Qiong Opera Troupe (now Haikou Qiong Opera Troupe Performing Arts Co., Ltd) adapted and produced two adaptations in the late 1980s and early 1990s: *Wu Shi Sheng Fei* (*Much Ado About Nothing*) and *De Yi Yuan*. While the production of *De Yi Yuan* acknowledged its debt to a prior Yue opera *Twelfth Night*, it rejected Yue opera version's strategy of intercultural mimesis, which

was characterised by Western costumes and makeup. The production aimed instead for a deeper localisation, transposing the Shakespearean narrative and characters into Qiong opera conventions and the local cultural semiotics of Hainan Island. In this light, *De Yi Yuan* established a new reference point for demonstrating a paradigm for synthesising Shakespearean drama with the aesthetic conventions of Qiong opera.

The adaptation performs a cultural translation of the play's title, shifting it from a Western religious festival to a narrative of romantic union familiar to Chinese audiences. Although the recorded premiere of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* was on Candlemas Day (2 February 1602), which formally concludes the Christmas season, the title evokes the peak of that festive period, the Eve of Epiphany on January 5 [28]. In Shakespeare's time, the season of *Twelfth Night* unfolded in an atmosphere of revelry, disguise, and ultimate revelation, so does the play embody this spirit through its themes of celebration, transformation, and the unmasking of true selves [28]. However, for audiences outside the Christian cultural framework, such associations rarely evoke a sense of familiarity. To avoid the need for explanations of the Western context, the adaptation changes the original title *Twelfth Night*, enabling it to resonate more naturally within the adapted cultural and aesthetic setting. By invoking the meaning of auspiciousness and romantic harmony, the adapted title *De Yi Yuan* (or *A Felicitous Union*) aligns itself with local sensibilities and expectations for Qiong opera performance.

Additionally, the story is relocated from Illyria to Qiongzhou (the historical name for Hainan) during the Qing dynasty, a move that grounds the narrative in recognisable geography and history. The character of Duke Orsino, for instance, is localised as Fang Yunshan, a regional military intendant on Hainan Island. His reputation rests on his administrative competence and proven courage in safeguarding the island against pirate incursions. Among his admirers is Xiao Yihong (Viola in *Twelfth Night*), who, accompanied by her twin brother Xiao Yizhong (Sebastian in *Twelfth Night*), crosses the Qiongzhou Strait from Leizhou to visit Fang Yunshan. This narrative transformation not only provides a culturally and geographically coherent rationale for the plot elements of the shipwreck and the siblings' dispersal in the original play, but also vividly reconstructs an archipelagic landscape of the Beibu Gulf and the broader South China Sea region, where the circulation of population and cultures has historically been frequent and dynamic.

Despite the profound melancholy following the shipwreck and the separation from her brother, Xiao Yihong finds herself gradually captivated by the undeniable allure of the landscape before her:

*Green plantains glisten, jewelled with dew;
Warm winds bear forth the gentle scent of betel.
A pair of butterflies flutter round the blossoms in grace;
A cowherd's song echoes through hills and woods.
The sweetness of coconut stirs my wandering soul –
This, at last,
Is the paradise I have long dreamed to find.*

Local flora, such as plantain, betel, and coconut, evoke a distinctly tropical sensory landscape. Upon meeting the disguised Xiao Yihong, Fang Yunshan, compares “him” to the crisp sweetness of jackfruit, the heady scent of durian. At this moment, the narrative and dialogue are filtered by a tropical imagination that differs sharply from the temperate climate and sensuality of Shakespeare’s England. It establishes a Hainan-centred worldview that asserts aesthetic independence through its grounding in the local sensory experiences of taste and smell.

Intriguingly, this combination of local imagery and narrative reconfigures the gendered humour of the original play as well. In *Twelfth Night*, Malvolio teases Cesario (the cross-dressed Viola), claiming “his mother’s milk were scarce out of him” [29]. On one hand, the line plainly indicates the character’s youth and immaturity. The reference to “mother’s milk”, on the other hand, inevitably evokes a mockery of Cesario’s femininity by revealing traces of maternal instinct that remain with “him”. However, in *De Yi Yuan*, when Liao Nansheng (Qiu Yanxia’s cousin) comments on Xiao Yihong’s appearance, he links “him” to a half-ripe sour pineapple. This local simile redirects the humour from gendered connotations toward an emphasis on symbolic and ecological notions of immaturity within the Hainan cultural landscape.

At the level of cross-gender performance, *xiqu* itself embodies a long-established tradition of gendered theatricality. The artistic practices of *qiandan* (male actors performing female roles) and *kunsheng* (female actors performing male roles) have long formed self-contained systems of performance [30]. Like other regional *xiqu* forms, Qiong opera defines each *hangdang* (role type) through distinctive *chengshi* (codified patterns of movement, gesture, and vocal delivery). Thus, the transformation of gender on stage can often be achieved through the precise adjustment of performative conventions.

In order to get close to her beloved Fang Yunshan, Xiao Yihong disguises herself as a male attendant. To sustain the masculine identity, she deliberately displays a codified repertoire of *sheng* (male role

type) gestures, including steadier footwork, along with open, firm, and upright hand positions, which are executed with restrained wrist movement to project an aura of masculine composure. In Act III, when she conveys Qiu Yanxia’s (Viola in *Twelfth Night*) refusal of Fang Yunshan’s marriage proposal, Fang, overwhelmed by dejection and frustration, drinks himself into a stupor and collapses on the table. As he sleeps, Xiao Yihong gazes at him, resting her chin on her hands with a look of tenderness and longing. When Fang murmurs “Miss Qiu” in his sleep, Xiao feels wronged and frustrated. She recovers her feminine *dan* (female-role types) role, moving with light and swaying steps, and curling her fingers into the graceful *lanhuazhi* (orchid-hand gesture) to communicate to the audience her own sense of grievance. The moment Fang wakes up, Xiao resumes her disguise of a masculine attendant again. Through its highly stylised conventions, Qiong opera stages gender disguise and performativity with potent immediacy and dramatic force.

To concentrate on the main plot as a romantic comedy, *De Yi Yuan* strips away the comic subplot regarding Malvolio. Another significant deviation in the adaptation is the introduction of the supporting character Qiu Daotai (Qiu Yanxia’s father). He has long regarded Fang Yunshan as the most suitable choice for his daughter. Thus, in Scene VI, when he discovers Qiu Yanxia’s private meeting with her beloved Xiao Yizhong, Qiu Daotai condemns her with fury, decrying her behaviour as unfilial and shameless. Set against the backdrop of Qing-dynasty imperial China, the historical setting of this adapted work, this rendering lays bare the moral machinery of patriarchal ethics embedded in the feudal social order. Nevertheless, this adaptation does not remain confined within the patriarchal constraints of traditional conservatism or feudal ideology. In the climactic wedding scene, Qiu Yanxia definitively rejects her father’s patriarchal authority, declaring that she would prefer death to accepting the arranged marriage with Fang Yunshan. At this moment, she becomes a defender of her own desire and will, standing in opposition to feudal patriarchy and emerging as a potent symbol of modern female subjectivity.

Taken together, this adaptation enacts a twofold rejection. On the one hand, it refuses the patriarchal authority embodied by the father figure and the feudal ideology that underpins it. On the other hand, it resists the authority of textual authenticity and the normative structures that the Shakespearean source is conventionally held to represent. While retaining

the original narrative trajectory of misunderstanding, revelation, and reconciliation, *De Yi Yuan* employs adaptive strategies, ranging from its retitling and narrative condensation to the reconfiguration of characters and linguistic texture, that reveal a conscious attempt to recontextualise Shakespeare's emotional and psychological core within the cultural and performative milieu of the tropical island of Hainan.

According to Rae, "[i]sland conditions produce distinctive communities inhabiting unique environments, and performance is a common means of expressing and transmitting the resulting identities, worldviews, and ways of life" [19]. In this adaptation, meaning is not simply transmitted from the original text to the adaptation; instead, it is constructed through the dynamic negotiation between Shakespearean texts and the performative conventions of Qiong opera. This intercultural negotiation exemplifies Hutcheon and O'Flynn's notion that adaptation is not a product but a process [9]. Through this intercultural negotiation, the adapting process yields a third text with independent aesthetic and psychological connotations. *De Yi Yuan* thus provides locally grounded and detailed evidence that supports Hutcheon and O'Flynn's theoretical insistence on the non-derivative and non-secondary character of the adaptation. This challenges the binary thinking pattern that positions the source as the centre and the adaptation as the periphery. It thus proposes and advocates a dynamic and relational thinking for analysing adaptation. In this sense, archipelagic perspectives and adaptation theory converge at a mutually reinforcing resonance in this adaptation.

4. CONCLUSION: TOWARD AN ARCHIPELAGIC POETICS

Unlike much of the existing scholarship on Asian Shakespeare, this article shifts the analytical focus toward the performative and cultural specificities of peripheral and tropical island-based traditions that have long been marginalised in academic discourse. The article traces the historical development of Qiong opera, situating it within a theatrical tradition

profoundly shaped by Hainan Island's maritime geography. It argues that Qiong opera's enduring vitality stems from centuries of cultural exchange with mainland China across the Beibu Gulf and with the Malay Archipelago via the maritime circuits of the South China Sea. It is precisely these archipelagic characteristics, foregrounding rhizomatic and relational modes of thought, that make the Qiong opera adaptation *De Yi Yuan* a compelling case to examine the challenge it poses to continental modes of thinking that privilege rigid distinctions between centre and periphery, origin and derivation in adaptation.

By preserving the narrative structure, *De Yi Yuan* expresses its homage to Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*. On the other hand, by erasing Shakespeare's language and lines and re-situating the aesthetic and psychological core of the original play within the historical, cultural, and artistic framework of the tropical island of Hainan, *De Yi Yuan* consciously distances itself from Shakespearean textual authenticity, and resists Western-centric interpretive paradigms and ontological assumptions about *Twelfth Night*. This process of intercultural negotiation exemplifies the dynamic, hybrid, and decentring logic inherent to archipelagic performance. Approaching intercultural adaptation through an archipelagic perspective offers an alternative lens through which to engage with Hutcheon and O'Flynn's concept of adaptation as a practice that decentralises fidelity and destabilises the presumed authenticity of the source.

Within the dynamic and open networks of global cultural exchange, island cultures actively participate rather than passively await definition. They speak with agency, engage in negotiation, and continually reshape the contours of global cultural dialogue through their own distinct and evolving expressive traditions. The intellectual transition from a continental to an archipelagic sensibility signals a deliberate ethical and aesthetic reorientation, a commitment to foregrounding polyphony over central authority.

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