

An exploration into the possibilities of intercultural theatrical adaptation of Racine's *Andromaque*

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Abstract. Taking Jean Racine's *Andromaque* as the research object, this paper explores its adaptive possibilities within the contextual framework of traditional Chinese opera based on intercultural theatre theories. To begin with, this study excavates the universal themes embedded in *Andromaque*, a work adapted from ancient Greek tales, and demonstrates the textual foundation supporting its intercultural adaptation. Centering upon indigenization and nationalization as the core adaptive mode, it further elaborates concrete adaptation blueprints tailored for Peking Opera and Sichuan Opera respectively. Finally, this paper dissects three pivotal hurdles emerging throughout the adaptation process, namely cultural filtering, poetic linguistic transformation and reception by contemporary audiences, before proposing targeted balancing strategies. This research argues that through creative textual transposition framed by the aesthetic principles of traditional Chinese opera, the human predicaments and dramatic momentum contained in *Andromaque* can acquire brand-new expressive forms, thereby enabling effective intercultural theatrical practice.

Keywords: *Andromaque*, intercultural theatre, *Andromache*

1. Introduction

Amid deepening globalization and intensified civilizational exchanges, theatrical stages have long transcended geographical and linguistic boundaries to evolve into a frontier for civilizational dialogue and ideological confrontation. Rather than a standalone dramatic genre, intercultural theatre serves as a crucial research methodology and analytical perspective. The definition of intercultural theatre adopted herein originates from the theoretical framework put forward by Chen Rongnü in *A Study on Intercultural Theatre Practice of Ancient Greek Tragedies in China*, which provides a theoretical lens to categorize and examine stage productions that adapt foreign literary materials into the formal conventions of traditional Chinese opera [1].

Composed by Jean Racine in 1667, *Andromaque* stands as a pinnacle of French neoclassical tragedy. Rooted in rigorous inheritance of Euripides' ancient Greek tragedies, strict compliance with the Three Unities, and profound exploration of the internal struggle between reason and passion inherent to human nature, the play earns its canonical standing in world drama. Nevertheless, its literary value extends far beyond being a mere specimen in literary history. The core dramatic conflicts unfold around a string of human dilemmas borne out of extreme circumstances: *Andromaque*'s ethical predicament of sacrificing her personal integrity to secure her infant son amid the collapse of her kingdom and the death of her spouse; Pyrrhus's internal

fragmentation torn between sovereign authority and carnal desire; Hermione's self-destructive descent from passionate love to vengeful hatred. Such depictions of human plight resonate universally across temporal and cultural divides, constituting the fundamental prerequisite for intercultural adaptation: an adaptable text must encapsulate shared human experiences recognizable, interpretable and recontextualized across disparate cultural landscapes.

Departing from pure textual exegesis and comparative literary analysis of *Andromaque*, this research shifts focus to its practical potential as an adaptable literary source and investigates its feasible transposition within the aesthetic system of traditional Chinese opera. It raises a core research question: how can the meticulously structured framework, restrained emotional undertones and culturally-specific symbolic markers of this 17th-century French courtly poetic tragedy be deconstructed, translated and reconstructed under the stylized and freehand aesthetic norms of traditional Chinese opera? Guided by intercultural theatre theories and referencing existing adaptive precedents, this paper systematically maps viable adaptive routes, addresses inevitable cultural discount and creative obstacles in cross-cultural transformation, and discusses the practical feasibility of staging *Andromaque* on Chinese opera platforms.

2. Textual core and adaptation foundation

The starting point of any intercultural theatrical adaptation lies in accurate identification and re-evaluation of the original work's intrinsic spiritual core. Such comprehension covers not only plotlines and character portrayals but also core thematic motifs, creative reconfiguration of interpersonal relations across eras, and subsequent verification of the text's adaptive malleability. Derived from ancient Greek dramatic traditions, Racine's *Andromaque* itself represents a cross-civilizational and cross-temporal adaptive revision of Euripides' identically titled tragedy.

2.1. From euripides to racine

Featuring tightly condensed plots in full observance of the Three Unities, *Andromaque* revolves around a singular core conflict: widowed Trojan royal consort *Andromaque*, displaced by war and regime collapse, is forced into an impossible ethical tradeoff between preserving her young son's life and abiding by her marital chastity amid political coercion. She pledges a sham marriage to Pyrrhus with a premeditated plan to commit suicide after the wedding. Driven by overwhelming jealousy, Hermione manipulates Orestes into assassinating Pyrrhus and subsequently takes her own life out of overwhelming remorse, leaving Orestes trapped in permanent madness. *Andromaque* emerges as the sole rational survivor amid the catastrophic outburst of unbridled passion. The entire drama is built upon a tight four-way relational network consisting of *Andromaque*, Pyrrhus, Hermione and Orestes. Instead of direct replication of singular mythological narratives, this character configuration is artistically refined by Racine from multiple disparate legends and fuels all subsequent dramatic clashes.

The thematic upgrading and character refinement undergone by the narrative from Euripides to Racine vividly illustrate the iterative developmental potential of canonical literary texts.

In terms of formal construction, Euripides' original work features loose constraints on temporal and spatial setting. As a neoclassical French dramatist bound to the Three Unities, Racine compresses all dramatic confrontations within a short span of time at the royal palace of Epirus, opening the narrative with Orestes' diplomatic mission to seize *Andromaque's* son and instantly igniting conflicting interests and emotional entanglements among all characters for heightened dramatic tension. Meanwhile, he simplifies the intricate interpersonal ties in Euripides' prototype and condenses all conflicts into a unidirectional desire-driven chain

linking the four core protagonists. In respect of plot propulsion, Racine eliminates divine intervention and fatalistic supernatural forces prevalent in ancient Greek tragedies and advances the storyline primarily through abrupt inner psychological shifts of characters. Pyrrhus' drastic attitudinal reversals in Acts Two and Four constitute pivotal turning points propelling the plot toward two successive dramatic climaxes. Structurally speaking, this neoclassical five-act tragedy maintains rigorous rational arrangement with clear hierarchical progression: Act One establishes character relationships and contextual background; Acts Two through Four depict fragmentation and collapse of the obsessive desire chain; rather than staging bloody murders directly onstage in Act Five, Racine narrates the slaying via terrified, remorseful monologues delivered by surviving characters. This arrangement complies with neoclassical aesthetic taboos against explicit onstage violence while reserving ample imaginative space for audiences.

Thematically, Euripides' version centers on domestic ethical conflicts revolving around the survival rights of defeated widows, maternal obligations and political oppression. Enslaved after Troy's fall, *Andromaque* is passively dragged into a feud with Hermione, with her core motivation confined to protecting her child Molossus sired by her enslaver. Functioning largely as a victim doomed by fate, the original character archetype anchors the tragedy's critique of wartime atrocities and collective female suffering. Racine restructures the four-way character bond into an irreversible unidirectional chain of unrequited longing, trapping every protagonist in inescapable frustrated love and amplifying psychological confrontations to the extreme. Transformed from a helpless enslaved victim into a tragic heroine who rationally makes proactive choices amid desperate straits, Racine's *Andromaque* combats predetermined fate through calculated reason. External familial conflicts and fatalistic destiny recede into the background, replaced by internal confrontations between rationality, personal honor and irrational passion. Pyrrhus, Hermione and Orestes all succumb to self-destruction induced by overwhelming irrational desire, whereas *Andromaque*'s triumph of rationality stands as an ode to sublime reason in neoclassical aesthetics.

2.2. The basis for adaptation: Universal core and adaptable model

The successful cross-era revision spanning ancient Greece to neoclassical France corroborates the text's inherent cross-cultural malleability and furnishes a valuable reference template for its creative transformation into traditional Chinese opera today. Any successful intercultural adaptation hinges on precise extraction and appropriation of the original text's core dramatic energy. Far beyond a simplistic romance of love and hatred, *Andromaque* encompasses three transplantable universal layers of conflicting dynamics:

First and foremost, the perpetual tug-of-war between rationality and passion underpins Racine's tragic conception. Tragedy originates not from sheer selfish craving but from collisions between individual affection and ruthless political accountability. King Pyrrhus exemplifies such a dilemma: a valiant warrior and competent sovereign torn by obsessive infatuation for enslaved Trojan noblewoman *Andromaque*. His inner torment and final decision to abandon a politically strategic betrothal out of personal affection epitomize such contradictory struggles. Practically all major character actions in the play are dictated by runaway emotion rather than sober rational judgment.

Second, the irreconcilable opposition between individual survival and political ethics forms the second core conflict. As Hector's widowed spouse and a remnant of defeated Troy, *Andromaque*'s marital fidelity collides irreconcilably with the conquering nation's demand for political submission. Such clashes between individual free will and collective sovereign authority strike resonant chords across all cultural contexts marked by warfare, colonialism and oppressive power politics.

Third, no wholesome romantic affection exists throughout the entire play. Pyrrhus' fondness for *Andromaque* amounts to possessive domination rooted in sovereign privilege; Hermione's attachment to

Pyrrhus degenerates into obsessive resentment stemming from wounded self-esteem; Orestes' love for Hermione is a distorted amalgamation of diplomatic assignment and personal infatuation. Love is perverted into instruments of control, retaliation and self-actualization, culminating in a string of fatal killings. Its nuanced portrayal of love's destructive complexity bears profound contemporary psychological implications.

Detachable from 17th-century French neoclassical cultural specifics, these three tiers of conflict can be abstracted and reinterpreted within diverse cultural and philosophical frameworks.

3. Creative transformation within the context of traditional Chinese Opera

Having verified the text's adaptive feasibility, this paper constructs concrete adaptive pathways guided by intercultural theatre theories. Chen Rongnü's three-tier cultural coding transformation theory provides clear methodological guidance for the operatic localization of *Andromaque*, which requires sequential shifts in translation, dramatization and stage performance to realize cross-cultural conversion of linguistic codes, genre-specific cultural connotations and performing conventions.

The earliest Chinese translation of *Andromaque* was completed by Chen Mian and published by The Commercial Press in 1936. Subsequent Chinese renditions include the 1957 version translated by Qi Fang (People's Literature Publishing House, with multiple reissues) and Zhang Qihong's 2001 translation. Nevertheless, linguistic conversion merely constitutes the preliminary step far from the core of intercultural theatrical practice; the crux lies in dramatization. Two primary adaptive modes proposed by Qi Shouhua are available for reference: indigenization/nationalization and hybridization (original text: bybridization). The latter hybrid mode blends two disparate theatrical traditions into a unified stage event, yet carries higher adaptive risks, as mismatched cultural fusion easily triggers audience aversion without seamless cultural cohesion [1]. For this reason, this research prioritizes discussion on the indigenization mode, which borrows core inspiration and source materials from the original play to craft an entirely new Chinese operatic work.

3.1. Adaptation scheme for Peking Opera

Distinguished by rigid role categorization, intense dramatic pacing, stylized acting techniques and a longstanding performing heritage, Peking Opera excels at depicting grand-scale political confrontations, sharp ethical clashes and fierce interpersonal antagonism, making it inherently compatible with the dramatic tension and profound ethical connotations embedded in *Andromaque*'s conflicts between individual survival and political morality.

From an artistic perspective, Peking Opera's integrated performing system of singing, recitation, acting and martial combat, particularly stylized spoken lines and gestural acting, is well-suited to dramatize onstage diplomatic negotiations, coercive emotional blackmail and fierce clashes of will featured in the original tragedy. Typified facial makeup and fixed role types enable instant establishment of core character dispositions. For instance, Pyrrhus can be cast as an elderly warrior or painted-face martial male role with pale facial pigmentation symbolizing cruelty and tyranny; performers embody his obstinate, violent disposition through expansive stage blocking, resonant arias and crisp, forceful spoken lines to shape a monarch enslaved by lust and sovereign greed. *Andromaque* falls into the Qingyi (vergent female) archetype, whose plain stage costumes, plaintive vocal delivery and constrained bodily gestures externalize her unyielding chastity and spiritual resilience amid crushing adversity. Hermione is first portrayed as a vivid Huadan (floral female) with ornate attire and brisk movements highlighting her fiery passion and aristocratic arrogance, shifting later toward Pojidan or Daomadan roles; feather-flicking, robe-kicking and foot-stomping stylized routines visualize her raging grievance and vengeful collapse. Orestes is best suited for senior male or red-faced male

roles, with trembling artificial whiskers and fluttering robe sleeves embodying his noble lineage and the heavy burden of vengeful diplomatic missions.

Regarding scene layout design, free from fixed act divisions, Peking Opera arranges scenes flexibly according to plot fluctuation. The original five-act tightly structured tragedy compliant with the Three Unities can be restructured into five corresponding Peking Opera scenes following its narrative logic: Scene One – Diplomatic Mandate: Orestes arrives on diplomatic commission to seize Hector's son and explains contextual background while struggling with lingering affections for Hermione; Scene Two – Coerced Betrothal: Pyrrhus blackmails *Andromaque* with her son's life to force her into marital compliance; Scene Three – Sham Consent: *Andromaque* feigns acceptance of the marriage contract while plotting postnuptial suicide; Scene Four – Sword Oath: the emotional climax unfolding on the eve of the ceremonial wedding; Scene Five – Sacrificial Bloodshed: grand altar wedding sequence where Pyrrhus swears to protect *Andromaque's* child before being stabbed by Orestes; Hermione commits suicide amid mental breakdown, and *Andromaque* stands alone on an elevated platform holding her infant to close the performance.

Onstage performance aligns with Cheng Yanqiu's viewpoint: "Rooted fundamentally in song and dance, traditional Chinese opera conveys extensive historical and contemporary realities across confined stage space through integrated singing, recitation, acting and martial combat to deliver aesthetic satisfaction to spectators" [2]. As a highly expressive performing art, Peking Opera relies heavily on performers' virtuosity, with distinct vocal modes and rhythmic tunes assigned to varied plot segments by role type. For example, *Andromaque's* mourning arias for deceased husband Hector and impending mortal peril of her son in Scene Two adopt drawn-out Erhuang Manban or Fan Erhuang melodic modes. After textual localization into operatic libretto, stylized performance constitutes another core localized adaptation. As an outward-oriented performing genre, every sound delivered on the Peking Opera stage bears lyrical musicality and every bodily movement carries choreographic features without strict realistic mimicry [3]. Specific routines externalize inner mentality: *Andromaque's* preservation of marital chastity is visualized via kneeling glide steps, scattered hair swinging and sleeve-shielded facial expressions; Hermione's vengeful fury materializes through pheasant-plume manipulation and robe kicking. "Operatic characters' inner psychological activities must be externalized through dynamic physical acting" [4], and such stylized gestures and movements outstrip literal text in expressive potency, enabling audiences to intuit protagonists' surging emotions and personality traits and amplifying onstage dramatic tension.

In terms of stage design, conventional Peking Opera adopts minimalist decor dominated by the canonical one-table-one-chair prop setup, with performers' physical movements implying contextual environments. The adaptive production of *King Oedipus* for Peking Opera serves as a valuable reference for *Andromaque*. The basic one-table-one-chair prop set can be rearranged to signify altars, elevated platforms, palace gates or prison cells, supplemented by coloured drapes and lanterns to hint at spatial-temporal shifts. Innovative lighting design featured in *King Oedipus* further inspires visual arrangement [1], as chromatic lighting modulates narrative atmosphere and emotional progression: cool tonal lighting sets a sombre mournful ambiance, warm glow illuminates hypocritical wedding vows, and blood-red spotlight locks onto the altar during the fatal stabbing. Lighting flicker and strobing are deployed matching narrative rhythm: flickering stark white beams in Scene Four's sword oath episode simulate nervous palpitations of characters on the verge of rational collapse and build suspense before emotional breakdown.

3.2. Adaptation scheme for Sichuan Opera

Celebrated for grounded folk flavour, bold uninhibited performance and exclusive stunt techniques including face-changing, fire-spitting and hidden-blade manipulation, Sichuan Opera boasts prominent expressionistic

and symbolic potential ideal for visualizing abrupt, drastic inner mental shifts of dramatic characters. Focused on clashes between rationality and carnal desire, *Andromaque's* psychologically intense characterization dovetails naturally with Sichuan Opera's strength in externalizing inner emotion via distinctive stage gimmicks.

Artistically, the iconic face-changing stunt offers an intuitive medium to visualize drastic psychological metamorphoses, with the adapted Sichuan Opera *Tide of Lust* providing a vital adaptive template. The production invents a demon figure named Lust marked by split yin-yang facial makeup to materialize unpredictable seductive inner craving [5]. Borrowing such design logic, facial variations can map psychological evolutions of *Andromaque* protagonists: cast as the embodiment of rationality, *Andromaque* retains fixed plain facial makeup etched with faint hidden tear streaks to reflect outward composure masking suppressed inner agony. Psychological turbulence is concentrated on the three passion-trapped core roles: Orestes, Hermione and Pyrrhus. Tasked with political assassination yet trapped in unrequited love for Hermione, Orestes' face shifts sequentially from pale white for lovesickness to fiery crimson for frenzied rage and ashen grey for posthumous insanity after Hermione's suicide. As reigning monarch torn between royal duty and private infatuation, Pyrrhus alternates between gilded facial paint symbolizing regal dignity, soft pale complexion for romantic infatuation and half-gilded half-pale split makeup visualizing perpetual conflict between political obligation and personal passion. Hermione's volatile emotional swings from ardent affection to murderous rage fit perfectly with sequential face-changing transitions: pink complexion for infatuated fondness toward Pyrrhus, scarlet red for furious abandonment, cyan green for bloodthirsty vengefulness while instigating assassination and deathly pale blank features for hollow despair upon witnessing Pyrrhus' murder. Her lightning-fast emotional reversals are translated into onstage facial shifts functioning as wordless inner monologue.

Beyond face-changing, Sichuan Opera's high-pitched vocal mode featuring integrated ensemble chant, percussion accompaniment and solo singing balances lyrical expression and atmospheric construction. Piercing collective vocal cries deliver instantaneous emotional impact; a desolate prolonged ensemble wail as Hermione's features drain of all colour carves her soul-shattering despair onto auditory perception without stylistic dissonance. Pyrrhus' volatile disposition is highlighted via hidden-blade stunt: he reveals a concealed dagger from under his robe sleeves to intimidate *Andromaque* with sovereign dominance before hiding the weapon again to embody erratic coercive manipulation. Contrasting with the three stunt-reliant passionate characters, *Andromaque's* rational steadiness is conveyed solely through elaborate high-pitched singing and subtle eye acting; her static fixed stage imagery forms a sharp counterpoint to the others' constant metamorphosis, symbolizing rationality anchoring against raging tidal waves of irrational craving.

Stage layout of Sichuan Opera allows flexible scenic transformation aligned with plot development, referencing the set design of *Tide of Lust*, which prioritizes psychological visualization and emotional rendering through integrated contemporary lighting and stage installations to materialize subjective inner visions and hallucinations. As its director Xu Fen remarked, "It remains authentic Sichuan Opera without rigid adherence to antiquated traditional formats; reformed yet rooted firmly in Sichuan Opera's intrinsic essence" [5].

With polished performer interpretation and modern stage technologies, the climactic finale of adapted Sichuan Opera *Andromaque* achieves stunning theatrical effect: lighting dims abruptly and dense fog surges into a swirling vortex the instant Orestes stabs Pyrrhus, as blood-like scarlet light spills across the stage and three altered facial masks hover mid-air under focused spotlight rotation. The scene transitions into Hermione's deathly pale close-up and piercing suicidal lament, followed by Orestes' ashen numbness after witnessing his beloved's demise. As mist gradually dissipates and orchestral tempo slows, *Andromaque* stands

solitary atop an elevated lifting platform amid empty stage space, concluding the tragedy of rationality versus lust with her successful preservation of herself and her young son.

4. Core challenges in intercultural adaptation

The aforementioned two adaptive drafts constitute merely preliminary conceptual planning, and intercultural operatic transformation encounters multifaceted practical hurdles. Rather than superficial formal replacement, cross-cultural adaptation entails nuanced negotiation amid perpetual tensions between fidelity and innovation, native culture and foreign source text, traditional aesthetics and contemporary taste. This section elaborates three core restrictive obstacles alongside corresponding balancing strategies based on previously outlined adaptive blueprints.

4.1. Cultural filtering

Detached from its original Greco-French cultural matrix, *Andromaque* inevitably undergoes cultural filtering during localized adaptation. Instead of eliminating such filtering, adaptive practitioners ought to convert potential comprehension barriers and resultant cultural discount into newly enriched connotations to realize cultural value increment. For instance, the original European conception of honour rooted in medieval chivalry and court etiquette appears abstract and incomprehensible under Chinese cultural norms and therefore needs rephrased as integrity or moral rectitude recognizable for domestic spectators. Similarly, mythological symbolic markers and culturally-specific character naming conventions carry embedded ancient Greek legendary connotations unfamiliar to Chinese audiences and risk becoming opaque ornamental elements without proper adjustment. Adaptors select between two localized approaches: retaining original mythological symbols via brief introductory contextual narration or stripping exotic mythological underpinnings to substitute with indigenous phrasing such as heroic lineage or ancestral karmic enmity consistent with Chinese cultural cognition.

4.2. Difficulties in transforming poetic diction

Racine's neoclassical tragedy is architected upon refined Alexandrine twelve-syllable poetic verse, whose intrinsic rhythmic cadence, metrical rules and rhetorical devices constitute core aesthetic carriers of textual meaning. Converting such metric poetry into operatic arias and stylized spoken lines represents the most technically demanding adaptive link prone to severe aesthetic loss.

Restricted by fixed tonal patterns and melodic frameworks of Chinese opera, poetic lines compressed to fit operatic libretto risk oversimplification of layered logical progression and intricate inner psychological contemplation featured in Racine's original verse. Two prominent linguistic challenges emerge: restructuring lengthy internal soliloquies into sustained operatic arias retaining original speculative depth instead of superficial emotional outbursts; preserving sharp rhetorical tension embedded in original French conversational repartee after semantic shift into Chinese stylized recitation. Adaptors must prioritize selective revision to leverage operatic strengths: condense core philosophical deliberation and lyrical articulation into pivotal aria segments without verbatim literal translation, capturing essential imagery and emotional kernel of original poetry to recompose operatic verse with indigenous poetic cadence. Verbal duels and confrontational exchanges are amplified via rhythmic patterned spoken lines, with supplementary gestural acting, eye expression and stage blocking compensating for semantic losses incurred in cross-linguistic conversion.

4.3. Reception among contemporary audiences

As noted in Chen Rongnü's interview with Professor Sun Huizhu, Chen raised a core question regarding target readership and viewership, to which Sun responded: "Primary target recipients of such intercultural theatrical productions are Chinese domestic audiences" [1].

All adaptive revisions must accommodate Chinese aesthetic customs and ethical expectations to secure favourable domestic reception while integrating Western canonical literature into traditional Chinese opera without arbitrary textual deconstruction. For example, director Luo Jinlin revised the Hebei Bangzi adaptation of *Medea* to rationalize Medea's infanticide for Chinese spectators by amplifying Jason's ruthless power-driven betrayal of his spouse and stylizing the child-killing scene via symbolic stage artistry [1]. Nevertheless, such plot design still encountered civilian audience resistance: despite warm rural reception of the Bangzi *Medea*, senior female rural spectators consistently rejected the maternal infanticide plot inconsistent with Chinese ethical norms. Another adapted Peking Opera *King Oedipus* suffered poor box-office performance during countryside touring. Against such precedents, optimizing plot arrangement for nationwide Chinese audience acceptance remains a persistent adaptive difficulty for localized *Andromaque*.

5. Conclusion

As Professor Sun Huizhu observed in the aforementioned interview, "Adaptive revisions are not bound to replicate ideological connotations of canonical source texts; newly generated interpretative content constitutes legitimate creative output" [1]. Heterogeneous foreign cultural elements generate distinctive alienated aesthetic charm through deliberate creative misreading during localization. Rooted in reverence for original spiritual essence, either indigenized or hybridized adaptive revision enables foreign classics filtered through native cultural lenses to gain domestic audience recognition, with finished adaptive productions possessing independent artistic merit. *Andromaque* demonstrates robust adaptive elasticity across divergent localized transformation routes. Successful operatic adaptation hinges not on replicating 17th-century French neoclassical aesthetics but on capturing eternal humanistic tension embedded in its core human predicaments and recoding such dramatic momentum via the most expressive theatrical vernacular of Chinese traditional opera. Reborn with refreshed artistic value within China's operatic ecosystem, the completed localized production fulfils the full circular intercultural journey spanning translation, dramatization, stage performance and cultural inheritance to facilitate bilateral civilizational communication and mutual learning.

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