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# Research on the Local Reconstruction and Contemporary Transformation of Chinese Literary Classics: A Case Study of the Wu Opera 'Three Times' Beating the White Bone Demon

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**Abstract:** In the early Qing Dynasty, Li Yu proposed in Occasional Notes with Leisure Motions that “changing the tune means changing the old tune into a new one. Change brings freshness, while unchanged leads to staleness; change brings vitality, while unchanged results in rigidity<sup>[1]</sup>”. Its core emphasizes that artistic creation should not be rigidly constrained by ancient methods, but should innovate on the basis of inheritance, endowing tradition with contemporary vitality<sup>[2]</sup>. Six hundred years later, Three Times' Beating the White Bone Demon created by the Zhejiang Wu Opera Art Research Institute, with its creative transformation of the classic masterpiece, confirms the contemporary value of this aesthetic proposition<sup>[3]</sup>. This paper puts forward the core concept of “local reconstruction”, and holds that the success of the play is not a simple formal innovation, but a systematic aesthetic reconstruction of Journey to the West based on the artistic characteristics of Wu Opera itself.

**Keywords:** Wu Opera; classic adaptation; local reconstruction; contemporary transformation; opera aesthetics

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## 1. The Dimension of Reconstruction: The Aesthetic Reinvention of Text and Performance

The adaptation and reconstruction of traditional Chinese opera encompass both textual and stage aspects. Adaptation enables traditional Chinese opera to reach all strata of society through widespread dissemination and reception, keeping pace with the times and maintaining its vitality—not only for its survival but also for the continuous refinement of the art form. It can be said that both the process of canonization and the modernization of classical Chinese opera are inseparable from adaptation and reconstruction<sup>[4]</sup>. Textual reconstruction serves as the cornerstone of classic opera adaptation; it is by no means a simple process of streamlining, but rather a creative transformation from literary thinking to theatrical thinking. Jiang Chaogao, the playwright of the Wu Opera “Three Times' Beating the White Bone Demon”, deeply understands this principle. His reconstruction strategy can be summarized as “trimming the branches to strengthen the trunk, refining the meaning to capture the spirit.” While preserving the spiritual core of the original work, he carries out a comprehensive transformation of the narrative structure, character development, and thematic expression to adapt them to the conventions of opera.

The restructuring of the narrative reflects a deep respect for the principles of opera. Although the original chapter “Three Times Beating the White Bone Demon” features a concentrated plot, it is interspersed with numerous detailed descriptions and supporting characters; a direct adaptation would likely result in a cluttered stage narrative. The Wu Opera version decisively eliminates subplots such as the enlightenment by the Star of the North and the appearances of mountain gods and local deities, focusing the drama entirely on the core conflict of “Three Strikes and Three Transformations.” This focus is not merely a matter of subtraction, but a return to the essence of drama—by constructing a cyclical, progressive structure of “transformation—unmasking—conflict,” each “strike” becomes a pivotal moment in the evolution of the master-disciple relationship, and each “transformation” drives the escalation of dramatic tension. What is particularly ingenious is that this structural reconfiguration aligns deeply with Wu Opera’s traditional narrative aesthetic of “one person, one story; one thread, all the way through.” The opening establishes the background of the pilgrimage through concise lyrics, immediately cutting to the White Bone Demon’s first transformation. The three successive metamorphoses—from a village girl to an old woman and then to an old man—are intricately linked, forming a tightly woven dramatic unit. This linear narrative progression preserves the aesthetic qualities of traditional opera while subtly aligning with contemporary audiences’ preference for fast-paced drama, building a bridge between the classical and the modern. In particular, the opening lyrics not only carry forward the traditional characteristics of Wu Opera’s soaring and impassioned high-pitched melodies but also use concise language to establish the dramatic context—just as Li Yu observed: “At the very beginning of the play, one should captivate the audience with striking lines, so that they are astonished at first sight.”

**【Opening Aria】**

(Demons Dance, lead singer of the White Bone Demon)

**【High-pitched voice】**

云雾锁山崖，灵光透九垓，  
取经人将至，机缘天上来。  
且看我千变万化设迷阵，  
管教他师徒生隙两分开。

The reimagining of the characters demonstrates contemporary theatre’s profound understanding of the complexities of human nature. In the original text, the characters of Sun Wukong, Tang Sanzang and the White Bone Demon all possess stereotypical traits, whereas the Wu Opera adaptation endows them with richer psychological dimensions and greater emotional depth. The reimagining of Sun Wukong is the most groundbreaking. In the classic scene where he is cast out by Tang Sanzang, actor Lou Sheng employs a series of stylised movements—such as ‘kneeling and retreating’ and ‘flicking his sleeves’—combined with the heartrending lyrics, ‘If Master were to cast this humble monk out, who would protect the great mission of obtaining the scriptures?’, to portray the character’s loyalty and sense of grievance, as well as his fortitude and vulnerability, to the fullest effect. This interpretation transcends the mere portrayal of a hero, allowing the audience to see not merely a Monkey King of immense power, but a flesh-and-blood pilgrim on a quest for the scriptures, deeply loyal and true to his word. As the creative team stated, their aim was not to portray a symbolic ‘Victorious Buddha’, but rather a ‘traveller through life’ who is tenacious and striving. The reimagining of the White Bone Demon is equally commendable. The scriptwriters eschewed simplistic demonisation, instead using carefully crafted lyrics and spoken lines to reveal the character’s ‘intelligence’ and ‘allure’. When she first transforms into a village girl, the lyrics ‘Though the bamboo basket is small, it harbours danger; her cheerful laughter conceals a trap’ contain a subtle edge; during the transition of changing her face and attire, the inserted inner monologue ‘Look at Tang Sanzang’s compassionate face; I am sure I can lure him away from the Buddha’s presence’ lends psychological logic to the character’s cunning. This portrayal avoids the stereotypical portrayal of the villain, endowing her with a more three-dimensional character. The character of Tang Sanzang likewise breaks free from the one-dimensionality of traditional narratives, creating a contrast between the tranquillity of ‘reading scriptures by night’ and the agonising struggle following his ‘mistaken belief in slander’. In the remorseful aria, ‘Mortals’ eyes cannot discern demons; I have mistaken the loyal for the source of calamity’, the character’s compassion and naivety, as well as his resolve and hesitation, are portrayed with striking clarity. Such characterisation ensures that Tang Sanzang is

no longer merely a moral symbol, but a spiritual seeker brimming with human contradictions. This innovation in character development is not a simple departure from tradition, but rather a profound exploration grounded in contemporary aesthetic sensibilities and humanistic concern. It represents the evolution and continuation of traditional opera character creation methodology within a modern context, allowing this classic figure to radiate with new artistic brilliance.<sup>[5]</sup>

**【The Aria of Sun Wukong's Expulsion】**

(He knelt and moved forward, his voice choked with emotion)

**【Strumming】**

师父啊！

火眼金睛识妖貌，反遭疑忌心内焦。

取经路远艰险多，岂可忠奸不辨分毫？

今日里棒打妖魔反遭逐，

痛只痛一片丹心付滔滔。

**【the White Bone Demon face-changing recitation】**

(As she applied her make-up before the mirror, her voice took on a seductive tone)

“人说白骨无情物，我偏要假作真时真亦假。

变、变、变，变作个娇滴滴女娃娃，

管叫那唐僧慈悲心动，孙悟空火眼昏花。”

The reinterpretation of the thematic essence reflects the contemporary aspirations of this adaptation of a classic. Whilst retaining the core spirit of the original work—‘distinguishing between good and evil’ and ‘upholding one’s convictions’—the drama elevates the theme to the more universal concepts of ‘trust and perseverance’ through the reimagining of the plot and the deepening of the characters. Each of the three confrontations in the play revolves around ‘trust’: in the first, when Wukong strikes the village girl, Tang Sanzang questions him, citing a monk’s duty to ‘harbour compassion’; in the second, when he strikes the old woman, Zhu Bajie’s sowing of discord deepens the rift between master and disciples; and in the third, when he strikes the old man, Tang Sanzang severs ties entirely and writes a letter of dismissal. The progressive escalation of these three conflicts skilfully transforms the original work’s religious narrative into a game of trust within human relationships, endowing the ancient tale with a powerful contemporary resonance. When Sun Wukong is banished, his line “I offer my whole heart to the masses” stands in stark contrast to Tang Sanzang’s stubbornness, expressed as “a mortal’s eyes cannot discern the truth”; the White Bone Demon’s soliloquy cuts like a sharp blade, precisely dissecting the root of this crisis of trust. She understands human frailties all too well, exploiting the Monk’s compassionate vulnerability and Wukong’s impetuous sharpness to sow seeds of suspicion between master and disciple. This dramatic amplification of the conflicts found in the original text not only preserves the classic sequence of ‘Beating the White Bone Demon Three Times’, but also, through the distinctive vocal rhythms and physical language of regional opera, transforms the abstract theme of ‘trust’ into tangible emotional tension on stage. It allows the audience to glimpse, through the melodies of Wu Opera, the universal predicament of trust that pervades contemporary social interactions.

All innovations in the play’s techniques strictly adhere to the principle that ‘the play is built upon the characters, and technique serves the play’. Whether it be highly demanding martial arts sequences or dazzling face-changing stunts, each has undergone rigorous dramatisation to become an integral part of character development and plot progression. This fundamental commitment to the art of performance ensures that innovation does not stray from the essence of traditional opera, resulting in an artistic effect where ‘tradition remains fresh, and innovation avoids ostentation’.<sup>[6]</sup> The modernisation of vocal artistry similarly demonstrates the wisdom of creative transformation. The distinctive vocal style of Wu Opera, characterised by the ‘convergence of six vocal styles’, is fully showcased in this production, whilst being appropriately adapted to meet contemporary aesthetic demands. Sun Wukong’s arias are predominantly in the high-pitched and impassioned Luantan style, matching the character’s bold and resolute nature; Tang Sanzang’s singing blends the melodiousness of Kunqu with the rustic simplicity of Gaoqiang, reflecting his dual traits of compassion and

naivety; whilst the White Bone Demon's lyrics incorporate the depth of Huizhou Opera and the gentle charm of Tanhuang, using vocal variations to reveal the character's multifaceted nature. In terms of musical arrangement, whilst preserving traditional vocal techniques, the production has made moderate adjustments to the vocal delivery of certain arias to suit the listening habits of contemporary audiences, resulting in a brighter, more crystalline timbre that is more accessible to modern audiences. These subtle adjustments to the vocal style reflect a respect for audience expectations and adhere to the principles of the living tradition of opera<sup>[7]</sup>. In the lyrical passage 'Wukong's Expulsion', the poignant melody of the traditional erhu, combined with the bass-line provided by the low-pitched instruments, creates a rich sonic texture that heightens the character's emotional tension; whilst during the White Bone Demon's transformation, the combination of the suona's urgent melody and electronic sound effects evokes a mysterious and eerie atmosphere. This fusion is not a mere superimposition of elements, but rather the result of rigorous artistic refinement; it preserves the distinctive vocal style of the opera genre whilst enhancing the expressiveness of the music.

## 2. The Path of Transformation: Cross-cultural Transmission from Regional Opera to Contemporary Cultural Symbols

The success of the Wu Opera production "Three Times' Beating the White Bone Demon" lies, fundamentally, in its creative transformation from a local aesthetic experience into a universal artistic expression. This transformation does not erode local characteristics; rather, by incorporating contemporary modes of expression, it enables local knowledge to attain an aesthetic value that transcends geographical boundaries.

The aesthetic transformation of this production is primarily reflected in its contemporary interpretation of the distinctive characteristics of Wu Opera. The performance philosophy unique to Wu Opera—'portraying martial scenes with theatrical movements, and singing martial scenes with theatrical delivery'—has been creatively applied throughout the play. In the dramatic scenes, subtle emotional expression is often enhanced by stylised movements, such as the 'kneeling retreat' and 'swinging sleeves' performed when Sun Wukong is banished, which externalise the character's inner anguish into a deeply moving stage presence. In the martial arts sequences, the production moves beyond a mere display of technique, focusing instead on using martial arts techniques to portray the characters' inner lives, thereby transforming the fight choreography into an extension of emotional expression. This contemporary adaptation of the performance philosophy has breathed new life into traditional skills. For instance, in the 'Pursuit and Killing of Tang Sanzang' scene, actress Yang Xiyun, playing the White Bone Demon, employs a fluid sequence of movements—'rapid double-leg kneeling, stumbling, followed by a 360-degree aerial flying kneel in the Tiger Transformation'—to transform the character's ferocity and urgency into a visually striking image. The application of these highly demanding techniques has transcended mere technical display, becoming an effective means of externalising the character's emotions and perfectly embodying the contemporary essence of 'singing the narrative through martial arts'<sup>[8]</sup>.

The transformation of stage aesthetics also reflects an organic fusion of tradition and modernity. The production breaks away from the minimalist 'one table, two chairs' format typical of traditional opera, constructing a multi-dimensional stage space through the concept of blending the real and the imaginary. The set design, based on 'ink-wash landscapes', not only carries forward the spirit of freehand brushwork found in Chinese opera but also enhances the narrative function of the scenes through modern stage technology. The combined use of elevating sets enables rapid scene changes, catering to contemporary audiences' preference for fast-paced theatre. Particularly commendable is the 'restraint' and 'ingenuity' with which technology is employed. The design of drones 'transforming' into bumblebees not only echoes the plot of the original work but also enhances the magical atmosphere of the scene through technological means; innovations in lighting technology serve character development and atmosphere creation; the instantaneous colour shifts during each face-changing sequence of the White Bone Demon use variations in light and shadow to heighten the contrast of the character's image; whilst the use of projection technology achieves fantastical effects that are difficult to realise in traditional opera<sup>[9]</sup>. All these technical elements have been filtered through a 'theatrical' lens, becoming a valuable complement to traditional

performance rather than a substitute for it.

The success of the Wu Opera production *Three Times' Beating the White Bone Demon* is attributable to the comprehensive promotional ecosystem it has established and its precise cultural positioning. The production has keenly captured and incorporated the contemporary context of the rising 'national trend' culture. Within the play, the spectacle of the White Bone Demon's 'instant costume and face-changing' is a traditional art form, yet it is presented at 'lightning speed' in a manner that aligns with the dynamics of modern short-video dissemination; The character of Sun Wukong embodies the spirit of the traditional martial artist whilst, through his 'flying through the heavens' feats, exuding the agility and power favoured by contemporary aesthetics. This fusion of a 'traditional core' with 'modern expression' aligns perfectly with the younger generation's pursuit of cultural identity and their desire to embrace the 'trendy' aesthetic. At the performance venue in Chengdu, many young audience members attended the show dressed in Hanfu; after the performance, they eagerly posed for photographs with the actors in costume, transforming the experience of watching the play into an active form of cultural expression and social sharing. The emergence of this cultural phenomenon demonstrates that the production has transcended mere artistic performance to become a cultural symbol open to participation, consumption and dissemination.

Innovation in dissemination models has been key to the production's cultural transformation. The closed-loop system of 'online promotion—offline performance—secondary dissemination' has skilfully broken down the barriers to traditional opera's limited appeal. As early as a week before the performance, clips such as 'The White Bone Demon's Face-Changing and Costume-Changing' and 'Zhu Bajie's Dance' had already gone viral on short-video platforms, with related videos garnering over a million likes and a total of 300 million views. This dissemination was not merely a matter of editing clips; rather, it precisely captured the aesthetic preferences of contemporary audiences, adapting traditional opera content to the characteristics of new media dissemination through formats such as 'highlights compilations'<sup>[10]</sup>. More significantly, the production's success has redefined the connection between opera and contemporary life. Through initiatives such as 'Wu Opera in Schools', pupils at Dongjie Primary School spontaneously choreographed a simplified version of the 'White Bone Demon's Face-Changing' scene after attending a performance; through initiatives such as taking opera to rural areas and integrating it with cultural and creative industries, elements of Wu Opera have been woven into modern life. This heritage, rooted in the community yet evolving with the times, offers new possibilities for the survival of traditional opera in the contemporary world.

The Wu Opera production "Three Times' Beating the White Bone Demon" has achieved a transformation in value, evolving from a single artistic work into a comprehensive cultural industry chain. This transformation represents a new pathway for the sustainable development of traditional opera in contemporary society. It has established a virtuous industrial cycle encompassing 'creation, performance and derivative products'. Since its premiere in 2023, the production has been performed over 100 times domestically and has toured more than 20 countries and regions, successfully uniting social and economic benefits. Particularly noteworthy is that, whilst maintaining its artistic quality, the production has demonstrated remarkable market vitality, with tickets proving hard to come by, thereby proving the competitiveness of carefully crafted traditional opera works in the contemporary cultural market. The realisation of this industrial value is attributable to an innovative operational model. The Zhejiang Wu Opera Art Research Institute has pursued a dual-pronged strategy of 'going out' and 'reaching out', enhancing its international influence through overseas tours whilst expanding its reach through initiatives such as taking opera to rural communities and developing cultural and creative products. Activities such as the 'Wu Voice · Tales' merchandise design competition have integrated Wu Opera elements into modern life, creating a diverse model for value generation.

The success of the production is also attributable to the dual support of policy and the market. The formal implementation of the 'Jinhua Municipal Regulations on the Protection, Inheritance and Development of Wu Opera' has provided institutional safeguards for the contemporary development of this ancient theatrical form; whilst the exploration of market-oriented operational models has laid the economic foundation for the troupe's sustainable development. This development model—characterised by 'government guidance, market operation and art as the foundation'—offers

valuable insights for the reform of local opera troupes. The success of its international dissemination is a key manifestation of the play's value transformation. Having toured more than 20 countries and regions, "Three Times' Beating the White Bone Demon" has demonstrated remarkable vitality in its global reach. Its success lies in retaining the core elements of traditional Chinese culture whilst circumventing the barriers to understanding caused by cultural differences. Visual elements such as face-changing and costume transformations, alongside high-difficulty martial arts sequences, have served as breakthroughs for cross-cultural communication, whilst themes such as the 'struggle between good and evil' and 'upholding one's convictions' possess universal appeal, resonating emotionally with audiences from diverse cultural backgrounds.

### 3. Conclusion

We are currently at a pivotal juncture in the revival of traditional culture. Only by fostering a profound dialogue between tradition and the contemporary world, and allowing the classics to take root anew in the cultural soil of our time, can we truly achieve the living transmission of traditional culture. The path pioneered by the Wu Opera production Three Times' Beating the White Bone Demon can guide the contemporary transformation of many more traditional art forms. Such transformation is neither a compromise nor a pandering; rather, it is a form of leadership and a positive act of construction.

### Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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