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# Intersemiotic Translation in Adaptation: The Case Study of the Adaptation of Narrative Poem The Tale of Kiều (Nguyễn Du) to Cải lương Film Kim Vân Kiều (Nguyễn Bạch Tuyết)

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## Abstract

We are living in the age of adaptation. In contemporary art, the power of adaptation is evidenced by the fact that a textual semiotic system is continuously passing through the different genres and means to establish new texts. Adaptation is also an intercultural translation as each work adapted experiences a cultural shift so as to adapt to the target culture. Although The Tale of Kieu (Nguyen Du) made use of the plot of Kim Van Kieu, written as the pseudonym Qingxin Cairen (青心才人, Pure Heart Talented Man), in the Vietnamese artistic context, the tale can be considered as the “original text” that provides superabundant materials for other adaptations. The Tale of Kieu is one of the Nom poetries that has been most adapted to other art forms, particularly “cải lương” (reformed theatre). In this study, we analyze the case of video-cải lương Kim Van Kieu (directed by Nguyen Bach Tuyet), to determine modes of semiotic transposition from the narrative (narrative poem) to the performance/showing (video cải lương). This intersemiotic translation process requires that the author adapts, selects, renounces, transforms as well as encodes/decodes, as semiotics, genre, and materials belonging to the verbal semiotic system to the nonverbal semiotic system, or vice versa. To concretize this, we analyze factors that were involved or omitted during the adaptation of The Tale of Kieu to Kim Van Kieu.

*Keywords:* The Tale of Kieu, Kim Van Kieu, inter-semiotic, adaptation, Cải lương

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## Introduction

In the article “On Linguistic Aspects of Translation,” Roman Jakobson mentioned three types of translation; intra-linguistic translation, interlinguistic translation, and intersemiotic translation. Intra-linguistic translation is defined as “an interpretation of verbal signs by means of the same language.” In the case of interlinguistic translation, “an interpretation of verbal signs” is conducted “by means of some other language.” The third type, intersemiotic translation, underscores the “interpretation of verbal signs of signs of nonverbal sign systems” (Jakobson 114). It is evident that the semantic amplitude of the inter-semiotic translation has already embraced the field of adaptation, and adaptation itself, as well as the transformation, have become a typical, vivid example of intersemiotic translation. Furthermore, in his book *A Theory of Adaptation*, Linda Hutcheon discusses the mechanism and process of adaptation:

In many cases, because adaptations are to a different medium, they are re-mediations, that is, specifically translations in the form of intersemiotic transpositions from one sign system (words) to another (images). This is translation but in a very specific sense: as transmutation or transcoding, that is, as necessarily a recoding into a new set of conventions as well as signs.

(Hutcheon 16)

No doubt, Jakobson exerted a strong influence on Linda Hutcheon's notion of intersemiotic transfer. Adaptation involves the process of translating aesthetic and cultural codes from the source into the adaptive text, that is to say, between a source sign system and a non-source sign one. However, adaptation is also fathomed as a creative process owing to the constant need for re-interpretation of artists.

Alternatively, "adaptio" literally means adaptive, changing, fitting with another type/form, so the concept itself carries "the idea of transformation, adjustment, and appropriation." Therefore, the translation process also deals with appropriate "options," "alternatives," and "innovations," thereby clearly demonstrating the author's behaviors with the adapted materials. The adapted material, when "entering / going through" another sign system, will be governed by certain characteristics of the system, repertory, and model according to Even-Zohar's theory (Even-Zohar 1990, 1997). Hence, the same source material, in different systems, may be "expressed" in its own "languages."

Some terminologies, namely "source / original text," and "adapted text" are customarily applied in studies of adaptation, translation, and semiotics. To some extent, the borderline between the "source text" and the "adapted text" is fragile at times, so it seems challenging to visualize the adaptive process along with the innovations and differences among adaptive versions without any temporary separation. As Julia Kristeva noted, no text can remain "alone, as an absolute creation." In stark contrast, every text tends to "be a transposition of texts in which voices from other texts meet, dissolve into each other and neutralize each other's colors" (Quốc 2005). Thus, the adaptation studies must compare the source text and the adapted one from the angle of intertextual relationship.

In the Vietnamese artistic context, the most typically outstanding illustration among successfully adapted works, from our perspective, could be the masterpiece *The Tale of Kiều* by the great poet Nguyễn Du. Nguyễn Du made use of the plot of a seventeenth-century Chinese novel, *Jin Yün Qiào* known as *Kim Vân Kiều* in Vietnamese. The original, written by another unknown writer under the pseudonym Pure-Hearted Man of Talent or Thanh Tâm Tài Nhân, was a candid romance, by which Nguyễn Du conveyed numerous social and political upheavals at the end of the 18th century in Vietnam. *The Tale of Love* is deemed a source text abundant in materials for other adapted compositions. Comparison between the source text - *Kim Vân Kiều* (Thanh Tâm Tài Nhân) and the adapted text - *The Tale of Kiều* (Nguyễn Du) has become common practice when it comes to studying adaptation. Over more than 200 years of research, this issue in *The Tale of Kiều* has been thoroughly discussed by many scholars, especially the argument against its origin as a translation version. Conforming the essence of translation which gives prominence to the faithfulness of the translated text to the source, *The Tale of Kiều* does not merely serve as a translation. Instead, it can be seen that this is an adapted chef-d'oeuvre by Nguyễn Du due to its unique creativity imbued with national /identity, all of which help to turn it into a more prominent masterpiece, compared with the original. What is

more, this “marriage” also brings such a great honor to “the authentic” Kim Vân Kiều. From a “middle-ranked” composition, from a state of being abandoned, nearly sinking into obscurity, this piece of work has suddenly become a renowned one.

However, even more interestingly, The Tale of Kiều was not only folklorized and popularized in numerous forms, namely vịnh Kiều, hát Kiều, đố Kiều, bói Kiều, lầy Kiều, tập Kiều, dẫn Kiều, etc. but also rewritten and adapted to many other art genres. The Tale of Kiều has been transformed and adapted into a great number of forms from traditional arts to modern ones (see Hiếu 2016). Taking the adaptations to performances into account only, each of them in turn marks the moment when the original text is reborn, regenerated, rewritten, and de/re-contextualized into a new version. Therefore, there exist many regenerated texts – the afterlives of the source text.

We selected cải lương (or reformed theater) film Kim Vân Kiều for the following reasons: 1) This is a collective art form that contains a complex and dynamic sign system right from the the drama script, the director, actors/dancers, art designs, lighting, costumes, music, audiences, etc. to the stages of performances. Each of the aforementioned stages can be considered a sub-sign system within an extensive one - a play/movie; 2) the adaptation of The Tale of Kiều from telling to performing/showing is one of the most favourable forms (clearly shown in the overwhelming number of adapted versions). Simultaneously, these adaptative phenomena also vividly reveal many sophisticated transformations taking place in the most distinctive semiotic systems, for instance, a verbal system versus a non-verbal system. More specifically, we study the case of Kim Vân Kiều to explore some methods of inter-semiotic translation from the telling mode (poetry) to the performing/showing one (cải lương film).

The process of inter-semiotic translation to the performing/showing mode forces the adapters to translate, and to encode the signs and materials which inherently belong to the verbal system into the non-verbal or vice versa. To be more specific, we analyze some factors involved or denied in the adaptation of The Tale of Kiều from the epic poem to cải lương film.

## Translating Genres

In terms of genre, cải lương film is a unique mix, a combination between cải lương theater and cinema. This feature bears a striking similarity to the epic poem due to a natural hybrid of poetry and story, lyrical genre and narration. This mixture, on the one hand, helps the hybridized genre take full advantage of the other genre’s merits to overcome inherent limitations, and at the same time, the hybrid itself also generates some new interpretations. Cải lương film is a combination of theater and cinema which is one of the innovative variants of traditional cải lương.

Kim Vân Kiều, directed by Nguyễn Bạch Tuyết, is the first cải lương film in Vietnam. The scenes were filmed outdoors; thus, the director and cameraman are able to utilize cinematic techniques to convey the story to the fullest, and at the same time overcome/resist previously unsurmountable constraints pertinent to space and time, compared to traditional cải lương. This is such a valuable effort of spatial and temporal lengthening for the readers’/spectators’ enjoyment. Correspondingly, the particular characteristics and semiotics of traditional cải lương have been changed to meet diverse aesthetic needs among the audiences, especially under the pressure of fierce competition between conventional and modern art forms.

For a traditional theater text, the 'absolute present' is always emphasized since each

performance is considered as “a specific and separate work” and “the relationship between the signs of the play is closely linked and created by actors, and exists only in their creative moments” (Fischer-Lichte 30). Nevertheless, some types of arts always evolve and transform to break through the traditional genre frame with the aim of establishing new regenerative and derivative genres. By way of illustration, the transformative progress of traditional *Cải lương* into new formats such as *cải lương* film, radio broadcast, and television, has witnessed the extraordinary transformative ability of a traditional Vietnamese art form dealing with technological challenges as well as conflicts between conventional and modern art genres. Some adapted versions of *The Tale of Kiều* such as *Trăng Thề Vườn Thúy* (directed by Xuân Phước); *Kim Vân Kiều* (by Nguyễn Bạch Tuyết) are a “hybrid” product between the reformed stage and cinema, television, thereby revitalizing a new genre: *Cải lương* film. In addition to transferring intersemiotic systems from the telling form to performance/presentation, the director must create a system of theater and cinematic signs and apply some filming techniques (albeit still limited). In traditional reformed theater, the inherent limitations of the rule of three unities, “which specified that plays should concentrate on single situations which might (in real life) have occurred in one place in a time span not exceeding one day” (Banham and Brandon 258), have more or less been surmounted by the tactics of staging and cinematography. However, despite the genre hybrid between cinema and theater, *Kim Vân Kiều* (Nguyễn Bạch Tuyết) has not optimized cinematography techniques such as montage, *mise-en-scène*, close-up, jump-cut, flashback, flashforward, and has not resolved to create more narrative frameworks, which could bring more interpretative capabilities. To *Kim Vân Kiều*, a pioneering piece of work directed by Nguyễn Bạch Tuyết, this defect seems to be unavoidable.

### **Translating Theme, Subject, and Plot**

Themes and subjects are the most translatable aspects of the adaptation of *The Tale of Kiều*. In general, the adapted versions still retain essential manifestations of the themes and subjects, compared to the original text. The interdisciplinary, inter-thematic relationship between several adaptations of *The Tale of Kiều* is the most noticeable link between the “afterlife” of *The Tale of Kiều* with itself. The common theme of “*tài mệnh tương đố*” or People are talented, Destiny is often unlucky (“A hundred years – in this life span on earth / Talent and destiny are apt to feud” (Thông and Du 2)) and the relationship between Mind and Talent (“Inside ourselves there lies the root of good / The heart outweighs all talents on this earth” (Thông and Du 167)) have been emphasized by the adapters. However, the shades of expressing these two themes are also different among various adapted versions.

Along with the original *The Tale of Kiều*, the adapted versions have constantly “revived” the topic of “*Tài tử Giai nhân*” (Fine men and Beautiful women) which are very familiar in literary countries - the cultural area using Chinese ideograms. As a result, the inter-semiotic transformation from the verbal system to the non-verbal one is encoded into other semiotic systems, but the theme and subject of the “source text” *The Tale of Kiều* are still represented in virtually all the film and theatre adaptations.

According to Linda Hutcheon, “Most theories of adaptation assume, however, that the story is the common denominator, the core of what is transposed across different media and genres, each of which deals with that story in formally different ways and, I would add, through different modes of engagement - narrating, performing, or interacting” (Hutcheon 10). The epic

poem *The Tale of Kiều*, by its very nature, has some certain genre features, including Fine Men - Beatious Women - The Small-Minded motif, natural images, kỹ nữ (roughly prostitution), and the system of characters along with the lyrical lục bát verse (six-eight) However, compared to the original *Kim Vân Kiều*, on the one hand, Nguyễn Du retained the plot of the novel, but on the other hand, he constantly simplified and limited the coverage of actions and events that were meticulously described in the original. Therefore, long passages depicting close-up events in *Kim Vân Kiều*, Nguyễn Du only transform and transmute into lục bát verse in a condensed and compendious manner. The plot of *Kim Vân Kiều* manifests itself to be only the core, but the “flesh” created in the highly polished lục bát form by Nguyễn Du truly turns *The Tale of Kiều* into a masterpiece.

When translating into a performance/showing, the problems related to content and form of *The Tale of Kiều* will be dominated by genre, cultural, age and stylistic codes and new expressive method. Thus, the adaptation of *The Tale of Kiều* is often associated with drastically reducing textual amount, dismantling and restructuring the source text, refining and retaining the thrilling, sensational, and spectacular climaxes that are soaked in “dramatic” and “cinematic” quality. However, these selected passages are also not allowed to be performed exactly the same on stage by adapters. Based on our survey of some adaptations from *The Tale of Kiều* to *Cải lương*, there are very few lines of verses that are kept intact in the scripts for actors.

Investigation into a number of texts for *cải lương* and films, we conclude that adapters predominantly choose to keep the “core” and structural model: the meeting - the breakup - the reunion of *The Tale of Kiều*, and simultaneously dramatically reducing the events and details unprofitable/inappropriate for the transformation, limiting the supplement of main events. Some typical *cải lương* and films have “behaved” with adaptative materials *The Tale of Kiều* using the above method such as *cải lương Kim Vân Kiều* (1918, Trương Duy Toản); *cải lương Trăng Thề Vườn Thúy* (1973, Quy Sắc), *cải lương film Vương Thúy Kiều* (1988, directed by Nguyễn Bạch Tuyết), *cải lương film Kim Vân Kiều* (1924, directed by Famechon) and so on. On the one hand, simplifying details and events can meet special requirements of the stage genre - a synthetic art form which is, by nature, quite restricted in terms of acting time and space (adheres to the theater rule of three unities). On the other hand, this method helps to concentrate further on the dramatic and climactic episodes where the characters’ tragedy and its message are most clearly revealed. The benefit of this division, as noted by Kim Xuân, an actor who twice acted as *Thúy Kiều* onstage: “...the play can be deeply exploited into details, outpainting character traits, and promoting drama conflict. Concurrently, the main actor only has to live in a consistent mood.” (Kim Xuân 94) In general, most of plays tend to focus on the tragic destiny of *Thúy Kiều* which then becomes a red thread running through the whole story.

### **Translating Language and Characters**

Nonetheless, when maintaining the plot only, the authors have to create many other stage and cinematic signs such as auditory signs (sounds, music) and visual signs (facial expressions, gestures, movements, masks, costumes, space, decorations, props, lighting). Based on a *cải lương* passage in *Kim Vân Kiều*, which describes *Kim Trọng* and *Thúy Kiều* meeting in *Thúy garden*, then getting engaged and making a vow to each other, we will analyze the process of inter-semiotic transferring in more detail.

In *Kim Vân Kiều*, when it comes to the form, director Nguyễn Bạch Tuyết still adheres to the structural model of the original but re-arranges the order of some sections to be suitable for performing. It can be clearly seen that in lieu of being an intra-linguistic or interlinguistic translation according to Jakobson's notion, this is, in fact, an intersemiotic one. Because of shifting from the telling form to the performance/showing (from the print to performance), the typical strengths of verbal narration will be subject to some adjustments and transformations in the new form. The adapters even conducted the process of dismantling the textual structure, choosing and arrange what has been adapted in a very subjective manner. Cinematic and theater adaptations of *The Tale of Kiều* are thence always at risk of being disordered, re-contextualized and re-arranged to shape appropriate texts, for both singing and acting.

The Tale of Love's lục bát verse being so profound, rhyming, and songful that can touch readers' hearts seem to be almost entirely rejected in the adaptations onstage. When adapting performances/showings, the adapters have certainly implemented a thoroughly rigorous and subjective selection. The uniqueness, novelty, and skillfulness of lục bát verses all contribute to turn *The Tale of Kiều* into a pre-eminent literary masterpiece, compared to the source text *Kim Vân Kiều* by Thanh Tâm Tài Nhân which has been almost completely eliminated in movies and cải lương. The lục bát verse is almost not translated into cải lương film *Kim Vân Kiều*. Instead, the core content of lục bát verse is recreated and transformed into the lyrics and melody. For example, in *The Tale of Kiều*, verse segments from 243 to 260 and from 323 to 330 express Kim Trọng's fond remembrances of Thúy Kiều. However, when translated into performance, this state of mind of Kim Trọng was transformed into cải lương lyrics and melody in accordance with the mood and circumstance of the characters. Undoubtedly, the lyrics of cải lương *Kim Vân Kiều* in general and this passage in particular, are relatively haunting, mellifluous, profound, rich in poetry especially when it is combined with melody. To a certain extent, it has more or less conveyed lyrical quality and Kim Trọng's confidence as presented in the original text. Evidently, the transition to a new semiotic system with soulful lyrics along with the direct appearance of actors and actresses (gestures, manners, shapes, voices brings some certain esthetic effects and opens many interpretative possibilities. Besides, the lục bát verse itself of *The Tale of Kiều* has become an inspirational source for the adapters, making the cải lương lyrics and melodies romantic, polished and mellifluous. The elimination of lục bát verse in cải lương film *Kim Vân Kiều* is probably one of the most regretful but inevitable changes of the adaptation from *The Tale of Kiều* in particular, and some of Nôm epic poems in general (chữ Nôm - the vernacular chữ Nôm script of the Southerners, as opposed to the script of the "Northerners" or the Chinese). The reason could be that the verbal signs are unsuitable for staging and performing, and then are "encoded" into other nonverbal signs. What is more, *The Tale of Kiều* encompasses a wide range of cultural, literary and historical điển tích and điển cố (or classic references) that are relatively difficult to understand and utterly inappropriate in folkloric performances and staging/showing onstage and onscreen. Therefore, the transition will attempt to simplify and transmute the meaning of the lục bát verse in such an adaptable, perceptible, and singable way.

When appreciating *The Tale of Kiều*, readers will conjure up what is evoked in the poetic language, but in theatre and film texts, all the viewers' feelings must be attached directly to characters in the flesh who are acting vividly onscreen or onstage. Moreover, the passages depicting nature - a type of character in *The Tale of Kiều* are almost rejected in the theatre script because of inevitable limits of stage decoration, which is challenging to convey the aesthetic meaning of this unique image/character. However, in terms of cinema, the expression of natural

images can be more or less fulfilled by the advancement of cinematography techniques that are unavailable to the theatre. *Cải lương* film *Kim Vân Kiều* was filmed primarily in the interior, so the natural scenery was very faint.

Interior monologue is the outstanding art of *The Tale of Kiều* that is transformed into actions, gestures, carriage, outfits, voices, singing of the actors. The characters' actions in the epic poem must be "dramatized" onstage with the most direct performance. *The Tale of Kiều* is inclined to express the characters' mood, whereas the play and the film focus on the characters' actions, by which convey the mood. Thus, language should be translated and performed directly via the semiotic system of lyrics, music, dialogues, facial expressions, voices, smiles, clothes, etc. This adaptation method is explicitly explained by the author of *A Theory of Adaptation*:

In the move from telling to showing, a performance adaptation must dramatize: description, narration, and represented thoughts must be transcoded into speech, actions, sounds, and visual images. Conflicts and ideological differences between characters must be made visible and audible.

(Hutcheon 40)

Another noticeable feature is that the storyteller in *The Tale of Kiều* is an implied author who tells in the third person. This omniscient narrator has to fulfill his task of to both introducing, explaining, describing characters and landscape, commenting and analyzing, and simultaneously change his narrative point of view (outside/inside). However, when shifting to stage mode, the storyteller disappears to make room for the direct appearance of actors and actresses. There is nobody else except for characters who accomplish the mission of storytelling by themselves. *The Tale of Kiều*'s verses were transformed into *cải lương* songs, appropriate to sing, act, and communicate, thereby conveying more or less the content of the original text.

Regarding the system of characters, the adaptation versions of *The Tale of Kiều* have partly "revived": *Fine Men - Beauteous Women - The Small-Minded*. They appear directly and vividly with specific actions and personalities, leaving a deep impression on viewers. By way of illustration, *cải lương* film *Kim Vân Kiều* spotlights the image of *Kim Trọng* with the "gentlemanlike" and "graceful" appearance, who suffers from a sorrowful heart due to fond remembrance of *Thúy Kiều*, wandering in *Thúy*'s garden.

Besides, the subject, theme, and plot, character system is also one of the primary reasons why *The Tale of Kiều* has been adapted to the theater form the most. Remarkably, the character system in *The Tale of Kiều* is entirely commensurate with the complicated cast of *đào, kép* (actors and actresses) of *cải lương* film *Kim Vân Kiều*: *đào chín, đào lẳng* (*Thúy Kiều, Thúy Vân, and Đạm Tiên*); *mụ ác* (*Tú Bà, Bạc Bà*), *mụ thiện* (Buddhist nun *Giác Duyên*), *kép văn* (*Kim Trọng*), *kép vó* (*Từ Hải*), *kép độc* (*Thúc Sinh*), *kép đều* (a mob of bailiffs, *Mã Giám Sinh, Sở Khanh, Bạc Hạnh*) (*Tuần Giang 316–320*)... These *đào, kép* visually represent and re-generate the images of the source text.

## Concluding

The adaptation studies of *The Tale of Kiều* clarify the intercultural and intertextual relationship between the source text and the adapted versions. The case of *The Tale of Kiều* is a bright testimony of performing motifs, plot, and system of characters, themes, subjects not only

in East Asian cultural sphere (a group of countries and regions that were historically influenced by the Chinese culture) but also worldwide. However, it should be noted that the process of adaptation and reception is not invariably smooth, or even worse with full of disreputableness and dissidence. Because the adapted texts are always prone to be despised and compared to the original text, “terms like “infidelity,” “betrayal,” “deformation,” “violation,” “bastardization,” “vulgarization,” and “desecration” proliferate in adaptation discourse, each word carrying its specific charge of opprobrium.” (Stam 3) In general, the article merely analyzes briefly the characteristics of intersemiotic translation from epic poem to theatrical and cinematic forms through the case of cải lương film Kim Vân Kiều.

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