

THE GREATEST LOVER: A POST-COLONIAL REWRITING OF *MY FAIR
LADY*
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Introduction

*Gungzi Docing*¹ [The Greatest Lover] (1988), directed by Fok Jiuloeng and written by Johnny Mak and Stephen Siu, is a very popular Hong Kong Cantonese comedy film². *My Fair Lady* (1956), developed from George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion*³ by Alan Jay Lerner, is, of course, one of the greatest musical romances of all times. The former is obviously a translation – in the sense of rewriting⁴ – of the latter. Whereas, in *My Fair Lady*, a male phonetics professor trains a cockney girl to be a high society lady, in *The Greatest Lover*, a female image consultant passes off a rough male illegal immigrant from China as a high society gentleman. In both stories, the trainee has to pass a major test by attending a large high-class gathering. In the process, the creator falls in love with his/her creation. Also in both stories, the trainee has another suitor⁵, to whom the trainee is initially attracted but whom the trainee eventually gives up for the love of the creator.

The purpose of this paper is *to examine the rewriting of the era, characters, plot, behavior, and illocutionary aspects of My Fair Lady in The Greatest Lover, and to explore how it reflects the gender politics, socio-political, and socio-linguistic ideologies of Hong Kong.*

2. Plot Summary of *My Fair Lady*

The 1965 musical film starring Audrey Hepburn and Rex Harrison evolved from the stage production, which was based on the earlier play, *Pygmalion*, written in 1914 by George Bernard Shaw⁶.

Professor Henry Higgins (Rex Harrison) is a cocky, sexist phoneticist who is convinced that speech is what really sets the classes apart. He wagers with his friend Colonel Pickering that through a change in accent and manners, he can transform the cockney flower girl Eliza Doolittle (Audrey Hepburn) into a lady that will fool high society. After six months, Higgins actually succeeds in doing so. But Eliza then runs away from him because he has treated her as an object,

rather than a fellow human being. At this point, Higgins realizes that he has fallen in love with her. In the end, Eliza returns to him.

3. Plot Summary of *The Greatest Lover*

Zau Cingzeon (literally, Advance Zau; played by Chow Yun Fat) and his buddies, Goulou Wai (literally, Tall Guy Wai) and Sogai (literally, Silly Chicken), swim across the ocean and sneak into Hong Kong from the Chinese Mainland. When they arrive in Hong Kong, Advance accidentally runs into a rich businessman named Daihau Si (literally, Big-mouth Si) at an “engagement” party. It turns out that Si’s “fiancée”, Lychee, who is an upper-middle class lady, is not really going to get engaged with Si. At the party, she and another upper-middle class lady, Soenggun Feifung (literally, Phoenix), openly ridicule Si. In order to avenge himself of these two women, Si hires Anita (played by Anita Mui), an idol-maker or image consultant, to train Advance to be a high-class gentleman. After undergoing a great deal of effort, Anita finally passes Advance off as a handsome, well-mannered young man who has just come back from his studies in the West. Advance’s Cantonese, which originally has a strong Chiu-chow accent, is now transformed into perfect Cantonese. He is also able to speak English phrases perfectly.

Following Si’s plan, Advance and Anita join a fund-raising party, at which both Lychee and Phoenix become infatuated with Advance at first sight. On the other hand, Advance and another high-class lady, Fiona, become attracted to each other at the same party. Afterwards, Anita reluctantly discovers that she is falling in love with her own creation. Advance then deceives Lychee and Phoenix, respectively, making them each believe that he will get engaged with them. At their engagement party, Lychee and Phoenix fight with each other for Advance, which is video-taped by Si and shown to the public. Subsequently, Si tries to pay Anita and Advance to make a fool of Fiona in a similar way because she has rejected his courtship. Anita and Advance refuse. Si pays Tall Guy Wai and Silly Chicken off to reveal Advance at Fiona’s birthday party, at which Fiona’s mother tries to engage her to Advance. Guilt-ridden, Tall Guy Wai and Silly Chicken go back on their promise to Si at the last minute. Despite this, Advance announces that he is an illegal immigrant, but argues that he is just as Chinese and as human as Hong Kong people. He furthermore confesses to Fiona the fact that he has just realized the girl he really loves is Anita, not her.

At this point, Advance then hurries back to Anita's place, only to learn that she is taking a train trip over the Silk Road because she thinks Advance is going to marry Fiona. Finally, Advance catches up with Anita on the train and successfully proposes marriage. Just when Anita is worrying that Advance will be arrested at the border because he has no Hong Kong identity card, he tells her that he has bought a Dominica passport, which enables him to stay in Hong Kong legally.

4. Theories

The Greatest Lover can be regarded as a translation of *My Fair Lady* and as revealing of Hong Kong ideology on the following theoretical grounds.

Andre Lefevere (1992: 4-9) argues that both translation and adaptation are rewriting that is informed and influenced by the rewriter's ideology.

Walter Benjamin (2000) compares translation to an afterlife of the original, which goes through a maturing process of transformation and regeneration.

In Chapter 3, "The Time-Sharing of Theatre Texts," of her book, *Time-Sharing on Stage Drama Translation in Theatre and Society*, Sirkku Aaltonen (2000) argues that *drama translation mirrors the actualities, ideologies, and sensitivities of the target society*, and the decision-making and rendition strategies divulge more of the translating ego than of the translated Other. Translated plays are compared by her to time-sharing apartments, the tenants of which are translators and theatre practitioners who try to renovate their living environments to fit their own habits, predilections, and requirements.

Furthermore, both Aline Rameau (1995) and Patrick Cattrysse (1992) argue that film adaptation is a kind of translation. As put by Aline Rameau (1995: 125-128),

Film adaptation also deals with the transformation of source texts into target texts, using the concepts of "text" in the broadest sense (Cattrysse 1992: 11-15). Yet, as in translation, this transformation is never a matter of source and target texts only. Film adaptation does not involve a transition from one semiotic system (a natural language), to another semiotic system (film), but also a transition from the literary system of a particular country and time to the cinematic system or "tradition" of that same, or a different culture... (Cattrysse 1992: 2-3).

It is tempting to see film adaptation as a process of two successive adaptations: first one from novel to screenplay and one from screenplay to film. The screenplay can thus be considered as an intermediary translation.

5. Temporality and Social Background

In moving between *My Fair Lady* and *The Greatest Lover*, there is a temporal change from Victorian London to Hong Kong in the late eighties.

5.1 Social Background of Victorian England

(i) Gender

Women were second-class citizens in the early Victorian period. They did not receive the same pay as men, did not have the right to vote and could not engage in the same vocations as men. Women were governed by men and did not have a voice until Queen Victoria was crowned. According to Perkin (1993: 31), there was one account of a woman married to a clergyman who said “the first thing of importance is to be content to be inferior to man, inferior in mental power in the same proportion that you are inferior in bodily strength.” According to Debbie Nash (2002), despite the fact that women’s rights began to be instituted in the early 1840’s, a male could still legally “lock his wife up and beat her in moderation.” Again, according to Perkin (1993: 31), there was no sense of disaster when a daughter was born, but parents always favored sons. The Victorian era was indeed a period that saw the beginnings of feminism and parents who were starting to allow their daughters to get proper educations. However, often this was only to help them find a richer husband (Perkin 1993: 32).

(ii) Class

People of different classes avoided intermingling, i.e., those of the upper class would go to the races or to the theatre for entertainment, while those of the lower classes would visit a pub or go to the public square. According to Debbie Nash (2002: 3-4), “To be upper class was a little more than material culture, especially during the Victorian period. *Refinement in speech was a matter of far more importance than it is today...* With all the money in world, you couldn’t change a person’s origin by what they wear. It all comes down to the way they speak and the culture they use.”

5.2 Social Background of Hong Kong in 1988

(i) Gender

Since the late 20th century, the status of women in Hong Kong has been very high. Women in Hong Kong have the same right and opportunity to receive education as men. According to Westwood, Mehraïn, and Cheung (1995), the ratio of male to female local university students in 1988 was 1.4:1. In the 1990s, tertiary education was further expanded and by 2000, women constituted 53.1 per-cent of the undergraduate students in local universities. Many important positions in the local government have been held by women. Let us take a look at the information provided by the Hong Kong Government (1988). In 1988, among the 1645 executive officers in the Hong Kong government, there were 752 women. And there were 119 female administrative officers among a total of 413. Quite a few of them subsequently became principal officials. For instance, in 1988, Anson Chan was already Secretary for Economic Services Branch, Government Secretariat. And she worked as Chief Secretary from 1993 to 2001. Mrs Regina Yip rose to Director of Immigration Department in 1995 and from 1998 to 2003 she was Security Secretary. Mrs Fanny Law Fan Chiu-fun joined the government in 1975 and was promoted to her present rank of Administrative Officer Grade A in 1997. She is now Permanent Secretary for Education and Manpower. Miss Denise Yue Chung-ye joined the government in 1974. She was Director-General of Industry from 1993 to 1995. In 2002, she took up the post of Permanent Secretary for Commerce, Industry and Technology. Moreover, it has become increasingly easier for women to find jobs than for men.

The number of cases of men abused by their wives has also been on the rise. According to statistical surveys of such cases conducted by The Social Welfare Department, Hong Kong Government, since 1997, the number of such reported cases had leaped from 47 in 1997 to 197 in 2001.

(ii) Politics

Hong Kong was occupied by Britain after the Opium War in 1840. On December 19, 1984, the Chinese and British Governments signed the Joint Declaration on the Question of Hong Kong, affirming that the Government of

the People's Republic of China would resume the exercise of sovereignty over Hong Kong effective July 1, 1997.

In 1988, the people of Hong Kong were deeply concerned that after 1997 the despotism and corruption of the Mainland Chinese government would carry over into Hong Kong; that, in the absence of British rationalism and tolerance, Hong Kong would not be able to govern Hong Kong well, even if the Chinese Communist Party were to leave Hong Kong alone.

In fact, according to the findings of the first territory-wide Social Indicators Survey conducted in the summer of 1988 as part of a long-term project undertaken collaboratively by researchers at The Chinese University of Hong Kong, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University and The University of Hong Kong (Lau et al. 1991: 176),

75.5 per cent of respondents thought that it was likely or very likely that after the return of Hong Kong to China civil rights would be abridged. In addition, 73.2 per cent anticipated a reduction of individual freedom, 66.9 per cent expected stagnation or even deterioration of the living standard, and 61.1 per cent envisaged the deterioration of the legal system... a mere 25.7 per cent were optimistic that the lives of Hong Kong people would be better and happier after 1997.

As a consequence, during this period, large numbers of Hong Kong people attempted to emigrate. According to Hannah (1997), in the decade preceding 1997, emigration from Hong Kong averaged 50,000 per year.

6. Rewriting of Characters

In *The Greatest Lover*, Henry Higgins, the male phonetics professor of *My Fair Lady*, is replaced by Anita, a female idol maker and image consultant. Eliza Doolittle, the flower girl, is replaced by Zau Cinzeon (Advance Zau), a male illegal immigrant from Mainland China. Freddy, Eliza's fervent suitor, is replaced by Fion, a young lady from an upper class Hong Kong family.

Therefore, *in the Hong Kong version, we have an empowered woman training a man instead of the other way around, and women chasing men instead of men chasing women.* This demonstrates the high status of women in Hong Kong.

7. Rewriting of Plot

7.1 Employer-employee Relationship

In *My Fair Lady*, Pickering bets Higgins all the expenses incurred that he cannot pass her off in six months as a duchess at the Embassy Ball. While Pickering always treats Eliza amicably and respectfully, Higgins arrogantly and disdainfully uses Eliza as a guinea pig. Nonetheless, when Eliza runs away from Higgins because he passes over her, Higgins does not seek revenge. In *The Greatest Lover*, Big-mouth Si is Pickering's counterpart. However, Si spitefully uses Advance and even Anita Mui as a kind of tool to avenge his unrequited love. When Advance refuses to be used by him any more and Anita ends their contract, Si exposes Advance. Thus, in *The Greatest Lover*, the role of exploiter is played by the employer (Si) in place of the trainer or experimenter (Anita/Professor Higgins). As a result, the relationship between employer and employee in a capitalistic society is satirically attacked more obviously and directly in *The Greatest Lover* than in *My Fair Lady*. This reflects the socio-economic ideology of the rewriters – *Hong Kong in the eighties was certainly much more capitalistic* than Victorian London.

7.2 Who Picks Up Slippers for whom in the Family?

At the end of *My Fair Lady*, Eliza returns to Higgins, apparently ready to become his maid-like wife, picking up his slippers, putting up with his tempers, and fetching and carrying for him anything that he may need. At the end of *The Greatest Lover*, however, Advance runs after Anita on a train in order to propose to her, even though she has said she regards him as a piece of shit. Like the rewriting of characters, this again shows female superiority in modern Hong Kong as opposed to the male chauvinism of Victorian England. In many a middle-class Hong Kong family, the husband has to not only work diligently in society, but also must pick up his wife's slippers, cook for the family, clean the kitchen and the toilet, help the children with their homework, etc. The husband may be scolded or even beaten by the wife should he dare to offend her (cf. BluesMax).

7.3 Rewriting of the Initial Setting of the Lower Class

In *My Fair Lady*, Covent Garden, Eliza yells at Freddy for accidentally trodding on her flowers in the rain, as well as at Higgins who she suspects is a detective collecting evidence to charge her with seducing Pickering on the street. Subsequently, in Tenement Section, Alfred Doolittle, Eliza's father, and his two lower-class friends are kicked out of a pub for trying to enjoy drinks there without paying.

In *The Greatest Lover*, when Advance Zau and his buddies are in their native village planning to sneak into Hong Kong, they are discovered by a Communist cadre, who takes away their color television set, food, and other resources for illegal emigration in return for keeping their plan secret. (That cadre is then arrested for trying to sneak out of China when he is leaving Advance's place with his loot). This reflects Hong Kong people's concern about the handover of Hong Kong to China, whose *Communist government has been notoriously corrupt, despotic, ignorant, and anti-intellectual*. This also needs to be recognized as a common trope – a parody, oftentimes – in Hong Kong film and television regarding mainlanders and this parodisation to some extent neutralizes the real danger.

8. Rewriting of Illocutionary Aspects

8.1 Cantonese in Hong Kong

Speech is perhaps the most important clue in determining caste or class. Higgins once tells Pickering that the right accent or speech is “the deepest gulf that separates class from class, and soul from soul” (Lerner 1980: 156). The rewriting of the illocutionary aspects of *My Fair Lady* in *The Greatest Lover* reflects the socio-linguistic ideology of the Hong Kong people. In fact, the story of *The Greatest Lover* cannot be performed in any Chinese language or dialect other than Cantonese unless it is rewritten to a great extent. This is because *Cantonese is the mother tongue and language used in daily life of the majority of Hong Kong people*. The thrust of the film story hinges on the use of language – conflicts between Mainland immigrants (who speak Cantonese with a strong accent) and local people of Hong Kong. The status of English and Putonghua in Hong Kong is also touched upon.

In *My Fair Lady*, Eliza, before her training, fails to pronounce the initial of words beginning with an “H”. For instance, “In Hertford, Hereford and Hampshire, hurricanes hardly ever happen” is pronounced by her as “In ‘ertford, ‘ereford and ‘ampshire, ‘urricanes ‘ardly ever ‘appen” (Lerner 1980: 136). She also pronounces “rain” as “rine” and “take” as “tyke” (Lerner 1980: 140). On the other hand, before his training, Advance tends to speak Cantonese with a *strong Chiuchow accent*, pronouncing “an” as “ang.” For example, “*Neidei nghou haa ngo hai san jimman* [don’t you bully me as a new immigrant]” is pronounced by him as “*Nidi nghou haa ngo hai sang jimang* [don’t you bully me as a new immigrant].” In Hong Kong, before the nineties, people who spoke Cantonese with a Putonghua accent or *any accent of a Chinese dialect other than Cantonese* were *instantly* recognized as someone from the Chinese Mainland and *despised* because Mainlandness represented for the Hong Kong Cantonese bad taste, unscrupulousness, ignorance, underdevelopment, corruption, etc., as partly aforementioned. However, starting from the nineties, quite a few new immigrants from Mainland China began to get rich by doing Mainland-Hong Kong business transactions, and a number of tourists from Mainland who became upstarts following the open and reform policy of China began to visit Hong Kong. As a result, mainlanders with their accent have been less looked down upon though they are still regarded as aliens by Hong Kong people to some extent.

8.2 English in Hong Kong

While in *My Fair Lady*, Eliza only has to learn the proper accent of her mother tongue, English, in *The Greatest Lover*, Advance Zau has to learn not only the correct Cantonese accent, but also English. Anita, in training Advance, tells him explicitly that in order to establish oneself in high society in Hong Kong, one simply must speak fluent English. This is because Hong Kong had been a British colony for 150 years up until 1997. *The ability to speak fluent English is an important asset* and is necessary for climbing up the social ladder. Moreover, English is an international and prestigious language.

8.3 Putonghua in Hong Kong

There is no mention of any dialogue between Eliza and people at the top of the society at the Embassy ball, e.g., the Ambassador or his wife or Queen of

Transylvania. On the other hand, when Advance Zau meets and has to converse with the Governor of Hong Kong at a fund-raising ball, he soon runs out of the few English phrases Anita taught him and has to switch to Putonghua. Unexpectedly, the Governor gladly replies in Putonghua that not many young people in Hong Kong speak such fluent Putonghua and urges Advance to stay in Hong Kong and serve Hong Kong. Obviously, this governor reminds us of *Sir David Wilson*, a sinologist that was governing Hong Kong in 1988.

This rewriting reflects the *growing importance of the ability to speak Putonghua on the part of Chinese in Hong Kong*. Since the Sino-British Joint Declaration, and especially after the Basic Law Drafting Committee was set up in 1985, interaction between Mainland and Hong Kong officials has increased rapidly. Hong Kong-Mainland business ties have also grown quickly since the Chinese government adopted the open and reform policy in the late seventies, as aforementioned. As a result, in Hong Kong the importance of Putonghua has been on the rise.

9. Rewriting of Behavior

9.1 Attack on the Upper Middle Class

My Fair Lady does not depict the ugly behaviors or buffoonery of the upper class or upper middle class; it only shows the self-complacency and snobbishness of Professor Higgins. But *The Greatest Lover* vividly exposes the contemptible conduct of the upper middle class. The upper-class ladies, Phoenix and Lychee, regard Advance as dirt when he first appears before them as a smelly illegal immigrant from Mainland China. However, when Advance subsequently appears before them as a high-class gentleman at the fund-raising ball, they instantly take a fancy to him. Phoenix even tries to rape him in the men's washroom. Later, they physically fight over him, which is video-taped by Big Mouth Si and played before the public.

9.2 Depiction of the Tasteless Manners of the Lower Class

In *My Fair Lady*, the tasteless manners of the working class are mainly depicted by Eliza's dirty hair and uncouth clothes, as well as uttering from time to time such unseemly sounds as "Aooooow!"

In *The Greatest Lover*, the tasteless manners of the Mainlanders are much more exaggerated. When Advance is asked by Anita to demonstrate how he would seduce a lady like her to bed, he simply shouts, “*Pokje* [Let’s go fucking]!” More than once, *Advance and his two buddies spit phlegm accurately into a spittoon* and sing the ridiculous Cultural Revolution song: “*Xiading juexin/ Bupa xisheng/ Paichu wannan/ Chu zibengqu shengli* [Let’s make a resolution/ Fear no sacrifice/ Conquer all obstacles/ And strive for the final victory].”

The rewriting confirms what the renowned Hong Kong columnist Tou Git (2002a; 2002b) says about the Chinese peasants and the conflict between Hong Kong Chinese and Mainland Chinese.

According to Tou Git’s (2002b) *Janbau Daai Gitkau* [The Grand Structure of the Population], *the Chinese peasants* are ignorant, dirty, and narrow-minded, though mostly diligent and simple. The peasant-personality of the Mainland Chinese forms the core of their racial spirit. Their history is a tragedy; their life a farce; their character a mime; and the details of their behavior when they encounter Western civilization, such as nosiness, nose-picking, and spitting, are an endless travesty. The Chinese peasants are already born without reason, and their post-natal humanity is castrated by the despotic authority weighing down on them. They are *both victimized and victimizing*; they are at once beggar and scoundrel; sheep and wolf.

According to Tou Git’s (2002a) *Janbou Daai Paaibong* [Draining off People as Floodwaters], during the colonial period, under the competent governorship (1971-1982) of Sir Murray MacLehose, with the Home Ownership Scheme, the Anti-Corruption Movement, and the Cleaning Campaign, etc., Hong Kong became so prosperous that a middle class that is knowledgeable, well-mannered, and possesses good taste and a sense of belonging, emerged. The people of Hong Kong despised the Chinese Mainland across the waters, deeply hurting the feelings of the Chinese Communist Party. The Communists then simply started to release people to Hong Kong and saw if Hong Kong could remain middle-class any longer. They have been making full use of the quota of 150 persons per day and draining off people into Hong Kong as if they were floodwaters. *The free education, public housing, and medical welfare policies of Governor MacLehose were quickly drained.* Meanwhile, Hong Kong men go northward to marry Mainland women, establishing “reproductive” relationships with the Mainland Chinese they despise.

Moreover, while in *My Fair Lady*, Higgins calls Eliza “squashed cabbage leaves” and “thing”, in *The Greatest Lover*, Advance mistakenly eats the tiger feces he carries to frighten off public security dogs when sneaking into Hong Kong; and Anita calls Advance a piece of shit. This demonstrates that, in the subconscious of the Hong Kong people, the Mainland Chinese are fixated in the anal stage. According to Syun Lunggei (1992: 93-97), the Mainland Chinese are anally fixated because their toilet training is too loose; in rural areas, children even wear split pants. As a result, their toilet conditions are appalling to tourists and they throw rubbish around in public places.

10. Conclusion

The Greatest Lover contributes something of Hong Kong to *My Fair Lady*. It *not only* offers a variation of the creator-creation love theme by *reversing the gender of Pygmalion and Galatea but also allows the audience to gain some understanding of the male-female relationship in Hong Kong, the political concerns of Hong Kong people, the importance of English, pure Cantonese, and Putonghua in Hong Kong, the conflict between Mainlanders and Hong Kong people, as well as the ugly side of the upper middle class of Hong Kong*. To borrow Walter Benjamin’s words, *The Greatest Lover* gives an “after-life” to *My Fair Lady*, and is in effect a reincarnation of *My Fair Lady*.

¹ Chinese words in this paper will be transliterated according to the Cantonese Romanization Scheme of The Linguistic Society of Hong Kong (Hoenggong Jyujin Hokwui 1997: xxi-xxii).

² According to “Sikjat Piufong [Box Office of the Past] (2003), *The Greatest Lover* was shown for 34 days in Hong Kong cinemas. The box office gross was HK\$23,566,173 (~US\$3,021,304) which is equivalent to HK\$43,854,291 (~US\$5,622,345) now. The box office gross of the best selling movie in Hong Kong film history – *Titanic* – was HK\$114,939,303 (US\$14,735,806) – equivalent to the same amount in contemporary terms. *The Greatest Lover* is the 100th best selling movie in the Hong Kong film market.

³ George Bernard Shaw’s prestigious and delightful play concerning Henry Higgins, the self-conceited professor of phonetics who turns Eliza, a lower-class flower vendor, into a lady, only to find out that he cannot do without her. Pygmalion is the name of a legendary king of Cyprus who fell in love with a statue of Aphrodite, or,

according to the Roman poet Ovid, fell in love with an ivory statue of his own making, expressing his ideal woman. The sculptor then prayed to Aphrodite for a wife like the statue, and the goddess accommodatingly brought it to life. At an unknown stage in the development of the story, Galatea, the name of a sea nymph, was given to the statue-woman.

⁴ We will return to this theoretical argument later on.

⁵ Freddy in *My Fair Lady*; Fiona in *The Greatest Lover* (see also the plot summaries below).

⁶ According to Richard Goldstone (1980),

My Fair Lady simplifies and conventionalizes the tortured relationship between the two principals. The requirements of a musical comedy result in the music and lyrics displacing half the dialogue of the play. Liza and Henry Higgins of the musical, consequently, lose some of their individuality, some of their humanity. Liza becomes Cinderella and Higgins is transformed into a slightly crusty prince. Shaw had maintained in his afterword that Higgins and Liza never marry one another because they both realize that they would make each other miserable. (1980: vii-viii)

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