
Transmediation, Transgression and Popularization: A Study of the Cantonese Opera Film *White Snake*

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The preservation of declining *xiqu* heritage through remediation and transmediation has often been ineffective in attracting a wider audience. The Cantonese opera film *White Snake* (2021), with its unusual utilization of computer-generated technology and transgressive combination of various media, offers a fresh approach to popularizing *xiqu* among younger audiences. To overcome aesthetic differences between cinema and *xiqu*, the film transforms medium specificities and transmedial potentials of Song landscape paintings and martial-arts film, adapting them to a new scenic and choreographic setting. By altering the original play's sensory and semiotic modalities, *White Snake*'s transmedia aspects blaze a new trail for popularizing *xiqu* heritage for a new generation.

Introduction

The marriage of *xiqu* (Chinese opera) and cinema was a quintessential characteristic of early Chinese cinema, present in the first silent film (1905), first sound film (1930), and first colour film (1948) in the early twentieth century. This inclusion of *xiqu*, then the most popular performing art form, helped popularize cinema. A century later, in a more diverse media environment, cinema instead preserves and popularizes *xiqu* through the transmedia rendition of stage plays. The transmedia *xiqu* film (opera film) flourished in the 1950s and early 1960s, and then gradually declined. Since the 1980s, *xiqu* has also increasingly lost audiences to forms of media such as cinema and

television. Once a universal presence, *xiqu* now exists as cultural heritage protected via the recording of performances for preservation and the cinematizing of plays for popularization.

In their study of cultural heritage and popular culture, Robinson and Silverman (2015: 9) posit that ‘mediated forms of culture and the media itself as part of culture are being materially reassembled’ to create new expressions for heritage. This has been the case for *xiqu* since the invention of sound and image recording devices. While early recordings have proven useful for preservation and dissemination,^a cinematization is more complicated. As a practice of transmediation which addresses ‘the interplay between medium specificity and transmediality, asking how transmedial concepts and structures of a source media product are reconstructed in the target media products in a media-specific way’ (Bruhn and Schirmmacher 2021: 104), adapting *xiqu* plays into films means reconciling the new and the old media and their divergent medium specificities. According to Bruhn and Schirmmacher, medium specificity refers to the ‘possibilities and limitations of media’ (2021: 12) while transmediality ‘denotes the possibilities of transgressing media borders’ (2021: 13). In other words, being transmedial means something is expressed or found in several media types. While transmedial dimensions such as plot, dialogue, and moving bodies enable transmediation from a stage play to a film, other medium specificities of *xiqu* and film have proved more troublesome.

The dissonance between *xiqu*’s non-realistic aesthetics and cinema’s innate connection with realism presents the biggest challenge to transmediating *xiqu* film. Like ancient Greek or Renaissance English plays, *xiqu* pieces often employ an empty, minimalist, instead of elaborate, stage set; exaggerated and unnaturalistic performing tactics such as singing, dancing (or dance-like movements), acrobatics, and face paint are used to enhance stage–audience communication. Cinema, in contrast, is considered to be a more realistic genre in terms of scenery and acting style. Yet, throughout the variety of film styles globally and the more than 300 genres of *xiqu*, stylized films and realistic *xiqu* pieces are also legion, calling into question the validity of a static and wholistic understanding of the ‘essence’ of either film or *xiqu*.

With this in mind, Berry and Farquhar (2006: 47) regard *xiqu* film, in addition to martial-arts film and costume film spectacles, as a form of ‘cinema of attraction’ as defined by film historian Tom Gunning, situating *xiqu* film alongside other early Western films that were uninterested in realism. This observation affords a belated justification for Chinese directors to ‘nationalize’ cinema – i.e., to infuse traditional Chinese aesthetics into the new media for a new style distanced from realism. Because *xiqu* filmmakers sometimes took a similar path, we can place their works in this lineage. Haunted by the entrenched *xiqu*/film binary and the underuse of film technologies, *xiqu* film has become a special Chinese film genre with established aesthetic conventions, and has fallen out of favour with audiences who embrace other film genres. Continuous efforts at *xiqu*/film transmediation have been made, but to no avail.

***White Snake's* Reconceptualization of *Xiqu* Film**

Fortunately, a recent *xiqu* production became a box-office success and won critical acclaim for its new approach to negotiating the medium specificities of *xiqu* and film through introducing more transmedial factors. In 2021, Pearl River Film Group produced a Cantonese opera film version of the classic legend *White Snake*, one of the most popular and most adapted folktales in China. Before detailing innovations of this production, it is necessary to familiarize readers with the story. The most common variation of the tale features a legendary love between a snake spirit called White Snake and a man named Xu Xian, who, in a previous life, saved White Snake's life. White Snake then seeks Xu Xian out to repay her debt. Using magic to deceive him, White Snake ensures that Xu Xian falls in love with her. Though voluntary, their marriage is deemed by Fa Hai – a Buddhist abbot and self-appointed defender of the heavenly order – as having run afoul of nature. Fa Hai reveals White Snake's true nature to Xu Xian, and the suspicious husband tests his wife. He offers White Snake wine which makes her reveal her serpentine form, shocking Xu Xian to death. White Snake revives Xu Xian using magical herbs from Mount Kunlun, at which point Fa Hai again lures Xu Xian to the Golden Mountain Monastery. In desperation, White Snake and her sworn sister Green Snake attempt to forcefully reclaim Xu Xian at the monastery, flooding the monastery with a huge wave. In the end, the pregnant White Snake is defeated and imprisoned. Despite variations in retellings of the tale in various historical media, its motifs of thwarted, forbidden love and its reflection on what humanity means remain salient.

Cantonese opera, a form of popular theatre from South China, thrives on its persistent practice of crossing borders of nation, genre and media. The basic storyline and cast of the *White Snake* stage play remain nearly intact in the 2021 film. The stage production won Zeng Xiaomin, who plays White Snake, the Plum Award (2017), the highest award for *xiqu* actors in China, and the Wenhua Prize (2019), the highest prize of stage art. This acclaim gave rise to the 2021 film. The 2021 film, however, was neither the first *xiqu* film production of the story, nor the first Cantonese opera film. Before this work, Guangdong Cantonese Opera Institute (GCOI), which produced the play, had made several less successful renderings of their works into films, adding to a corpus of more than a thousand other Cantonese opera films.

Based on the existing concept of transmediation, GCOI made further attempts to renegotiate the seeming tension between *xiqu* and film and reach wider audiences. Claiming to create China's first 4K Cantonese opera film, GCOI increased its *White Snake* budget and envisioned the production not as a remediated stage production, but a high-quality concept film with popular appeal marked by visual spectacles generated with advanced film technology. Because of the visual dimension's dominance in film, the 2021 *White Snake* production redirected the sensory configuration and emphasized the visual rather than the aural attractions seen in most *xiqu* films. At 100 minutes long, the film is also 30 minutes shorter than the stage play, due to the omission of many non-narrative songs (particularly solo

numbers). The abridged plot foregrounds key moments from the play to maintain momentum. This change of the media frame generates a fast tempo and uninterrupted narrative replete with conflicts – key characteristics of feature films. In other words, in terms of structure and aesthetic orientation, the film leaned more into the medium specificities of film than of *xiqu*.

Despite the adaptation to cinematic conventions, the visual attractions of the *White Snake* film maintained some distance from the modern emphasis on realism, but incorporated transmedial elements of classical Chinese culture. This indicates the creative agency of the film's director Zhang Xianfeng, who obtained a BA from the Mural Department of the Central Academy of Fine Arts of China. Because he had neither experience directing *xiqu* films nor constraining preconceptions of how those films should look, Zhang made thoughtful, bold stylistic choices for the *White Snake* film. After a failed attempt to render the play into a Hollywood-style fantasy, he decided to create a fresh aesthetic frame that would accommodate and negotiate the peculiarities of both Cantonese opera and film. The frame he chose rests on the dynamic of two classical Chinese concepts – *xu* and *shi*. This pair permeates nearly every aspect of Chinese life and art, but defies literal translation, for *xu* could mean 'void, empty, unreal, absent, figurative, insubstantial or imaginary', and *shi* 'solid, full, real, present, concrete or substantial' (Kuo 2015: 329). Their interplay, suggested in some of the Chinese elements Zhang merges into the film – performance, martial arts, literature, painting, Chan Buddhism and Confucianism (Zhongshengzhisheng 2021) – prevails in the overall visual design and action sequences of the film, as will be discussed below.

The *White Snake* film's exquisite visuality is a result of the transmedia collaboration of the original play, Chinese fine art elements and computer-generated (CG) effects crafted by Suberashi VFX, one of the companies behind the *Lord of the Rings* film trilogy. In line with the cinema of attractions, *White Snake* foregrounds 'showmanship', including spectacular visual effects, 'acrobatics, dance, musical performance, [and] magic', to quote Jenkins and Karnick's (1994: 150) perception of highlighted non-narrative performance in a film, which transmedially pertains to *xiqu* as well. The interplay of medium specificities and transmediality maximizes each medium's potential, contributing to the popularization of *xiqu* heritage.

The *White Snake* film became extremely popular. Before its official release, the film received several domestic and international film awards,^b despite its very limited initial theatrical run: few cinemas in major cities would venture to screen *xiqu* films, not to mention those cinemas in smaller cities. The filmmakers' promotion of the film on TV, online press and social media,^c however, increased its popularity, with young audiences flocking to theatres. The film grossed over 23,739,000 RMB at the domestic box office during the Covid-19 pandemic, becoming the highest-grossing *xiqu* film ever.^d According to the Maoyan app, which offers statistics of films, of 610,000 listed moviegoers, 78.3% were under the age of 35. The film also has a rating of 9.9 on a 10-point scale on Bilibili, a video sharing website particularly popular among young users, with more than 16 million hits. Notwithstanding its technical weaknesses compared with renowned blockbusters, the film reconceptualized

previous patterns of *xiqu* film, not only in its aesthetic adjustment, but in its success in captivating a youth-oriented market.

White Snake's popularization of Cantonese opera – and by extension, its *xiqu* heritage – owed much to transmediation, which expanded channels of transmission, but also incorporated the key strengths of several different forms of media. After seeing *White Snake*, Gao Xiaojian (2021), author of *History of Chinese Xiqu Films*, reasonably commented that, with the right approach, traditional and indigenous culture could captivate young audiences in China. *White Snake* exemplifies this by combining traditional heritage with popular culture – as Robinson and Silverman (2015: 10) observe, 'the articulation of popular culture by individuals and social groups in ways that are novel, multiple, and mobile is instrumental in disturbing and disrupting the grand narratives of tradition that have so dominated our understandings of heritage.' While young people often consider *xiqu* old-fashioned and thus take no interest in it, GCOI managed to bring *White Snake* into closer contact with popular culture. Instead of targeting older audiences, it set out to entertain the youth by actively responding to their recent enthusiasm about traditional culture and integrating this with commercial film culture by featuring romance, fantasy, martial arts and disaster elements. This redefined *xiqu* film, which had until that point existed largely as a cultural product for *xiqu* goers specifically. Aware of contemporary young audiences' high aesthetic expectations due to their exposure to artworks of variegated media (Zhongshengzhisheng 2021), Zhang synthesized several media types. On the one hand, he turned to traditional artwork (painting in particular) to frame the film's aesthetics; on the other, he utilized cutting-edge film technology to exhibit quintessential traits of Chinese traditions and foreground action sequences. With the shift of the sensory modality, the meaning of the original work and its semiotic modality also changes.

Cinematic Scenery Informed by Song Landscape Painting

Scenery has been a major concern in *xiqu* film transmediation since the early twentieth century, with film demanding a tangible set which *xiqu* often does without. Generations of filmmakers have attempted to address this contradictory medium specificity, either by simply using picturesque real sets, or by employing stylized painted backdrops or LED wall animation to accommodate scenes of varied subject matters. Owing to insufficient funding or technological deficiencies, few of these films are on par with an average non-*xiqu* genre film in terms of visual appeal. Instead, they appear constrained by the established conventions of *xiqu* film, which often prioritize actors' performances over scenery. *White Snake*, nonetheless, highlights scenery by fully exploiting advanced film technology. Although the story takes place largely outdoors, 90% of the film's scenes were shot in the studio and based on computer-generated VFX (visual effects) rather than being shot on location. Through its significant reliance on CG technology, *White Snake* transgresses the

aesthetic boundaries of previous *xiqu* film and steps closer to other contemporary film genres.

Despite this transgressive move, the overall style of the film seeks not mainstream cinematic realism, but an aesthetic mediated by Chinese tradition. Regarding the aesthetic framing of *White Snake* to transmedially accommodate *xiqu* and film, the director maintains: ‘You can’t overwrite one art form with another; you have to find a medium in which they both blend together, and space can be that medium’ (Yang, 2021). To create the space he envisioned, Zhang returned to the historical setting of the story – the Song dynasty – and situated the work within the frame of Song aesthetics, which are characterized by deliberate blanks in painting, ethereality and minimalism (‘Zeng Xiaomin’ 2019). ‘The Song aesthetics’, Zhang encapsulates, ‘accommodate many art forms, . . . which can easily contain *xiqu*. Besides, the story takes place at the West Lake, and its vapour and mist are akin to Song aesthetics, hence the choice of such an aesthetic frame’ (Yang, 2021). The scenery and cinema shots in *White Snake* are picturesquely ‘abstract and inky, mimicking the traditional painting style’ (Dager 2021). Thus framed, the props, sets, costumes, physical movements and the overall outdoor scenes all align with Song aesthetics. Given the focus on scenery, we will examine Song landscape painting, which provided an inspirational style and philosophy for the combination of the medium specificities of *xiqu* and film.

In principle, *xiqu* and Song landscape painting transmedially share an expressionistic nature, which, unlike realism’s emphasis on verisimilitude, has less concern for the superficial appearance than for the capturing the *idea* of the object and the creative agents’ subjective feelings, ideals and sentiments. A dominant tradition in Chinese landscape painting, concludes Sturman (2015: 189), ‘emphasized inner substance over outer lifelikeness’. Here, the insubstantial interiority (*xu*) is superior to the substantial exteriority (*shi*). The intervention of an experiencing subject in the meaning-making process further rejects the unnecessary constraints of pursuing formal resemblance. As Cheng (1994: 65) explains in his discussion of Chinese painting: ‘emptiness [*xu*] is a living entity. The motive force of all things, it is found at the very core of fullness [*shi*], which it infuses with vital breaths.’ In this sense, the subject’s experience of the substantial dimension and the insubstantial dimensions of the object are vital for animating the characteristic *xu/shi* interplay within Chinese literature and art. *Xiqu*’s expressionism, for instance, involves empty stages with few props, and stylized, symbolic movements to visualize the scenery in the audiences’ mind’s eye. All of this has little to do with verisimilitude. Although realism and expressionism constitute the ends of a spectrum that transmedially contains disparate schools and genres of painting and *xiqu*, expressionism often dominates. The same is true of (*xiqu*) films informed by classical aesthetics.

To elucidate landscape painting’s influence on the sensory modality of *White Snake*, I have conducted a case study of the film’s creative use of atmospheric mist, clouds and vapour, all of which derive from painting. Using CG technology for ‘softening the environment, making it more expressive, more vaporous’ (Dong 2022), Zhang followed Fei Mu’s (2015: 59) vision: ‘to achieve the cinematic framing in the style of Chinese painting’, which requires spectators to be immersed in ‘a condition of

vagueness'. Distant mountains, which fill all 'blank' background areas in the frame, characterize the overall setting, but far from photographic verisimilitude, these mountains appear highly stylized, in line with the expressionistic tradition of Song landscape painting: no precise contours, loose and free brushwork with contrast and colour shading (Hesemann 1999: 144). Real sets are often used for the middle ground of scenes, which foregrounds characters. To quote Sturman's (2015: 185) words on Fan Kuan's Song landscape masterpiece *Travelers Among Mountains and Streams*, the exterior scenery creates 'a world of the fantastic', and its sense of reality also 'makes the fantasy all the more enjoyable [and] sublime'. In *White Snake*, the remote, mist-shrouded, and nearly monochromatic mountains create an otherworldly and dreamlike mood that mesmerizes audiences.

A quote from Cheng (1994: 37) illustrates the philosophy of the reciprocal *xu/shi* dynamic behind Zhang's creation:

emptiness, represented by clouds, circulates between mountains and waters, which constitute its two poles. The cloud, born from the condensation of water but also taking on the forms of the mountain, is an intermediary form between the two apparently antinomic poles, drawing the two, mountain ⇌ water, into a process of reciprocal becoming.

Here, cloud, mist and vapour become a life force from *xu*, which also functions as an intermediary between *xiqu* and cinema to bring audiences into a particular state of mind, activating their imagination of the story world.

This attempt distinguishes *White Snake* from many *xiqu* films that employ static two-dimensional (though often stylized and picturesque) backdrops. These backdrops often have an alienating effect on audiences in combination with the added immobility of the medium shots used in *xiqu* film to foreground actors' performances. In contrast, VFX in *White Snake* appears more authentic than previous immobile backdrops, although not overly or entirely realistic, which could complicate the *xu/shi* dynamic. As Lin Niantong (1985: 191) argues, '[i]f the arrangement is too imaginary [*xu*], no meaning will emerge from the images on the screen. If too concrete [*shi*], the meaning lurking beyond the picture will be destroyed'. *White Snake*'s CG visual effects strike an ideal balance between the two.

The transmedial incorporation of Song landscape painting into the film also influenced its semiotic modality, entailing significant changes to the original plot. Within the larger frame of Song aesthetics, the film's composition produces the effect of handscroll painting using extremely long shots rarely seen in *xiqu* films. If one were to describe Song landscape paintings in cinematic terms, they would align most closely with the long shot. Unlike *xiqu* documentaries that record performances with several fixed cameras, or the medium or close-up shots typical of most *xiqu* films, human figures in *White Snake* are often marginalized, especially during scenes that express characters' sentiments with songs and stylized physical gestures. Also important here are cinematic shots in the film wherein characters' costumes fade into the background due to the costumes' muted colours (unlike the bright colours used in the stage production), thereby unifying these figures and nature. In this sense, *White*

Snake embodies Hesemann's (1999, 144–145) observation about landscape painting: 'Landscapes are no longer merely the setting for narrative, but are depicted in their own right'. *White Snake*'s design thus provokes further reflection on the meaning of landscape in the film.

The pervasive vapour and de-emphasis on characters' presence in the cinematic frame in *White Snake* express the transmedial idea of the unity of nature and humanity as embodied by landscape painting, but also underline the story's border-crossing motif. According to Paul Freeman, *White Snake*'s VFX director, the design 'remains faithful to the aesthetic of the traditional artworks but uses the photographic look to make the actors both stand out from and become enveloped in this created world' (Dager 2021). Indeed, the story concerns itself more with the balance between culture and nature than with romance between animal spirits and humans. One scene in *White Snake* that diverges from all previous adaptations exemplifies this subtle change. When Fa Hai witnesses the Green Snake flying in the bamboo grove, instead of crushing her as any self-righteous monk would, he simply utters, 'A nonhuman spirit, she has her own place'. This is in keeping with the film's tone, which delivers the non-anthropocentric message that every being has its own place in the world. While Fa Hai does not object to animal spirits, he does reject transgressive marriages between animal spirits and humans. The film's critique of Fa Hai is, therefore, not only revealed by emphasizing love that can easily cross the porous borders between heaven and humans or between humans and spirits, but also in the *mise-en-scène*, which stresses non-discriminatory coexistence. The landscape painting that valorizes the unity between humanity and nature offers a subtle frame for this interpretation.

Action Sequences Mediated by Martial-arts Film

In addition to creating elaborate scenery in accordance with Song aesthetics, *White Snake* also incorporates elements of commercial film. The director took a big step forward in cinematizing visual attractions from the stage play, adding what he considered a cinematic tone or character. Rather than deviating from *xiqu*'s emphasis on actors' virtuosity, he mediated the gracefully choreographed bodies with martial-arts filming styles during combat sequences, spotlighting key medium specificities of both media types.

Martial-arts film, a characteristic Chinese film genre, has been influenced by *xiqu*, especially *jingju* (Beijing opera). Boasting vast expressive possibilities, *xiqu* has lent many techniques to film. *Xiqu* benefits martial-arts film by 'highlighting the action/body of the actors' (Yung 2006: 29) as well as by using basic props to 'show off [actors'] acrobatic and stunning actions' (Yung 2006: 30), lending real martial-arts movements a dance-like quality. In fact, many action film stars, such as Jackie Chan, and choreographers, such as Yuen Woo Ping, originally trained in *xiqu*. Yung (2006: 29) has traced how the combat training skills in *jingju* and Cantonese opera influenced Hong Kong martial-arts films, contending that 'the aesthetics of Hong

Kong action cinema are also applicable to, if not derived from and rooted in, the Chinese operatic art'. Given this transmedial connection, reciprocation between martial-arts film and *xiqu* as evidenced in *White Snake* seems natural. Shifting the sensory and semiotic modalities of the original play's combat scenes, transmediation makes them more spectacular and meaningful in the film version.

In the climactic combat scene at the Golden Mountain Monastery where the Snakes fight a group of opponents, stage actors demonstrate supreme and spectacular acrobatic skills to thrill audiences. Because real stage acrobatics are less thrilling if transferred wholesale into stylized films, Zhang choreographed the scene, combining *xiqu*'s medium conventions with those of martial-arts films. To illustrate the transmediation of spectacles, I will focus on *White Snake*'s combat with the *arhats* and the wave-battle sequence.

The first scene in the original piece is intended more to display Zeng Xiaomin's physical prowess than to advance the plot. In her previous fight with the Crane and the Deer, White Snake showcases her swordplay skills, while during the scene in which she is reclaiming Xu Xian, she demonstrates her skill by kicking away enemy spears. Entering the monastery, White Snake finds herself surrounded by an infinite number of heavenly soldiers, and has to defend herself by launching the spears that are thrown at her back at her opponents using her feet. Far from a realistic presentation of combat, this episode symbolizes the tension of conflict in an eye-catching way, for good spear performances 'require not only manipulation of the weapon, but acrobatic skills as well' (Siu and Lovrick 2014: 93). To present her splendid stage-fighting skills, the actor kicks the flying spears back at her opponents from all directions and in various ways, either standing, leaping or lying on the ground, 26 times in total. In a traditional *xiqu* piece, such acrobatic displays are 'elegant, and appreciated for the ease in which the actor incorporates them into the action of the play' (Siu and Lovrick 2014: 21). In this sense, theatre audiences valorize demonstrations of physical virtuosity, disregarding the resultant slowed pace of the play.

Putting this prolonged scene on screen, however, runs counter to White Snake's impatience and would affect the film's pace (Dong 2022). As a result, none of these *xiqu* conventions are present in the film, which instead features close contact and fast editing in a typical kung-fu rhythmic pattern where a sword and sticks are employed. As White Snake enters a hall to search for Xu Xian, she is obstructed by a wall formed by 14 black-robed *arhats*, each with a heavy stick in hand. To penetrate the wall, she unsheathes her sword and is soon surrounded by *arhats*. A fierce fight begins – dispensing with scenes such as spear tossing and kicking, employing instead a sword and sticks. Like other combat scenes in the film, the shot is reminiscent of Hong Kong action films. Rather than using long takes to track combat sequences, the director employs typical constructive editing, which 'builds up a sense of the entire action by showing only parts of it' and, according to David Bordwell (2010: 133), is 'central to Hong Kong action films'. Although the actors' physical skills differ from real practitioners of martial-arts combat, they display stylized forms of the movements, which easily become cinematic attractions. As such, the camera in

this sequence captures several punctuating moments of stylized posing during combat. This is not to display the actors' combat skills, but instead highlights the energy in their poses. On the one hand, this strategy resonates with the stylized poses seen in a stage performance, which 'brings in an element of sculpture, suspending the moment in time for the admiration of the audience' (Siu and Lovrick 2014: 23). On the other hand, the 'pause/burst/pause' pattern is typical of Hong Kong action film (Bordwell 2010: 140). In this respect, this combat scene in *White Snake* looks both fresh and familiar.

When *White Snake* is disarmed, in desperation, she stretches out her white water sleeves that extend up to three metres, weaponizing them to repel surrounding *arhats*. 'Water sleeves' refers to white silk extensions to the cuff of the sleeves of the actor's costume, which resemble rippling water when extended. In the spear scene, *White Snake* also occasionally fights the heavenly soldiers with various configurations of the water sleeves, which are choreographed in her fight with the *arhats*. To spotlight Zeng's water sleeve skills, Zhang divided the intermingled spear play and water sleeve play into two sequences, filming them with distinct styles. Unlike the previous combat scene that contained multiple moments of frozen antagonism, this sequence features seamless editing of the shots of various water sleeve styles. *White Snake* casts them sideward to repel the *arhats*, uses them to manipulate a lamp or the sticks for a counterattack, and swirls them to discharge her magic power and cause some *arhats* to somersault, tumble or leap away from her. Highlighting the appeal of Zeng's dazzling water sleeves and the *arhats*' physical prowess, which are on full display in the extended stage performance, the cameras frame them in slow motion, magnifying them through close-up, side and overhead shots. The multiplicity and nuances of these dance-like conventions, which would be lost on a stage spectator, thus manage to impress screen audiences from different angles. The diverse use of shots actually expands and enriches the audiences' perspective, whereas previous *xiqu* films tended to position the camera from the frontal and level angle of the audience, supplemented by close-ups and zooming in and out. Mediated by martial-arts film conventions, the heightened sensory experience that *White Snake* exemplifies stems from cinematic technology's amplification of the performers' bodies with rapid editing of various shots, wirework and special effects.

These sequences impress audiences visually and semiotically. Moreover, in a stage play, meaning often yields to style, which is not the case in the film. The spectacular scene, when transmediated into a film sequence, assumes a clearer narrative task and affective potential. In contrast to the sword, the water sleeves – resembling two white snakes – aptly symbolize female soft power that aims less at destroying than at repelling opponents. Conventionally, a stage play discourages physical contact between combatting actors, and thus all movements seem make-believe; here, *White Snake*'s water sleeves rarely touch the *arhats*' bodies, which exhibits her non-violent intention. Although the scene maintains *xiqu* qualities, it transcends a histrionic display, and while it is also cinematic, the scene diverges from typical kung-fu violence: in other words, movements 'escap[e] from violence into aesthetics' (Barry 2021: 304). Often used to 'express sorrow, distress, fear and protest' (Siu and Lovrick

2014: 159) on the *xiqu* stage, the graceful water sleeves in the film suggest White Snake's sorrow, desperation and non-aggressiveness more than in the original stage play. The slow motion, in combination with a female singing voiceover, helps to add poignancy, while the twisting, waving, and swirling of the water sleeves, like two struggling white snakes, visualize the character's struggle. The audience, like the onlooking Xu Xian, can easily empathize with White Snake, rather than being distracted and excited by a dramatic display of her virtuosity as in the stage production. All in all, due to its attention to plot progression and characterization, the film, although equally appealing, becomes more impactful and more realistic.

While the previous combat sequence in the film exhibits the real – if also symbolic – aspects of a typical martial-arts scene, the scene in which the two Snakes attempt to flood the monastery presents the surreal aspect thereof. This climactic scene often employs a large ensemble to heighten the experience of variegated and well-organized stage dance, combat and acrobatic conventions. All these visual attractions would certainly enchant a live-performance spectator with the flow of energy, but, when framed in a film, their abstraction might confuse audiences. Therefore, rather than performing the wave using actors' physical performances, the film's wave-battle sequence relies substantially on CG images to enhance the visual impact of the wave's destructive power, also bringing *White Snake* closer to a disaster film.

Although stemming from international collaboration, the VFX for the wave sequence did not curtail the creative style of the director, who insisted on blending in traditional East Asian aesthetics. As the VFX directors recall, the Chinese filmmakers 'brought a clear vision for the film', and showed them many traditional Chinese paintings (Dager 2021). The final outcome is the extremely expressive style (*daxieyi*), which 'strongly emphasizes the application of calligraphic techniques to painting' (M. Cheng et al. 2017: 172). The black-and-white colour scheme for the wave derives from ink-wash, and the shape of the mountainous wave is inspired by Katsushika Hokusai's woodblock print *The Great Wave off Kanagawa* (1831). Moreover, because he was a *garuda* in his previous life, when engulfed by the wave, Fa Hai extends and flutters two huge flaming black wings to repel the wave. Visualized with CG animation, the wings are inspired by Chinese ink painting, their form exactly mimicking ink's diffusion into water in the style of splashed-ink painting.

CG's technical power also enhances the expressivity of White Snake's water sleeves, fully displaying their emotional and narratorial efficacy. An extension of White Snake's fury, the wave and water sleeves are indexically correlated: White Snake manipulates the waves' movement and shape through performing various water sleeve configurations: the tide rises, rolling towards the monastery when she casts the water sleeves forward; when Fa Hai forces back the flood tide, White Snake flies into the air, spins her body and the water sleeves, and causes a giant vortex; to target Fa Hai alone, she tosses the water sleeves to make an upsurging wave, and twirls them to trap Fa Hai in the vortex. These water sleeve conventions are mined from the stage play, but blended with CG enhancements, they appear here more breathtaking than graceful.

This wave-battle scene is visually appealing and sensational, not unlike recent martial-arts blockbusters that take advantage of CG technology. Different from these other films, however, the VFX is heavily informed by traditional Chinese aesthetics mediated in painting and theatre. This gives the film a unique transmedia and intercultural flavour, something that was never present in previous *xiqu* films.

Conclusion

A milestone of new-age *xiqu* cinema, *White Snake* actively responds to the changing circumstances of emerging technologies and young people's zeal for traditional culture, blurring the boundary between revered heritage and popular cultural product. Advances in cinematic techniques and technology offer new means by which to reassemble and reframe *xiqu* elements for extended use and undertake creative encounters with historical artistic traditions. This transmedia convergence of varied artistic vocabularies – the necessary adjustments and reconciliations of medium specificity and transmediality notwithstanding – has also given rise to illuminating and exciting aesthetic experiences. The director's vision, augmented by the language of the camera, replaces the stage aesthetics centred on actors. This new aesthetic in turn provides the audiences with an experience unavailable in the theatre. Both the sets and scenes produced by special effects and the actors' bodies captured in multiple shots are precious and rare, even for *xiqu* fans.

Additionally, thanks to the abundance of traditional resources, *White Snake* has heralded rather than restrained other transmedia attempts in *xiqu* film. The production designer of the film articulated that they might experiment with other Chinese painting genres for different plays, such as adapting *Romance of the Western Chamber* using the meticulous heavy colour painting style.⁶ Whether or not this vision is eventually realized, *White Snake* has set an exemplar for other practitioners by transgressing existing boundaries and popularizing cultural heritage among not only younger audiences, but those of various age and regional demographics.

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Notes

- a. I use this term more in the sense of 'repeated mediation', than of its broader formulation by Bolter and Grusin (2000).
- b. Including, for example, Best Artistic Contribution at the Hainan Island International Film Festival in 2019, Best Opera/Musical at the Golden Maple International Festival in 2019, and the People's Choice Award at the Pingyao International Film Festival in 2019. It also won several other awards in 2020 and 2021.

- c. The company created a Bilibili account and uploaded 126 promotional short videos from 4 April 2021 to 16 July 2022, which received more than 11 million hits in total. See <https://space.bilibili.com/628764790>.
- d. The second is *Li Sanniang* (2014), a flower drum opera film, with a box office total of 13,476,000 RMB. Other *xiqu* films never exceeded 10 million RMB at the box office, and many were far below 1 million.
- e. See the interview at https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1eB4y1M74z/?vd_source=5b8c1e2c4dc9aa14635b873fd14fbc.

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