

# ***The Dilemma and Countermeasures of the Transformation of Western Drama into Chinese Drama: Taking the Adaptation of Shakespeare's Plays as an Example***

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**Abstract:** The transformation of Western drama into Chinese drama often presents the common values of humanity with the unique stylistic techniques and aesthetic tendencies of China, aiming to combine the Western humanistic spirit with the Chinese national performance system through various methods, showing unique innovation. However, in the process of transformation, the different cultural development forms and historical accumulations between countries lead to many obstacles in the "performance of Western dramas in the Chinese way". This article takes the works adapted from Shakespeare's plays on the Chinese opera stage as examples to analyze the dilemma and countermeasures of the transformation of Western drama into Chinese drama. The integration of Western and Chinese dramatic elements not only revitalizes the traditional art form but also fosters a deeper understanding of global narratives through a Chinese lens. By overcoming the challenges of cultural translation and aesthetic adaptation, these works contribute to a rich tapestry of theatrical expression, enhancing cultural exchange and artistic diversity.

**Keywords:** Chinese opera, Western drama, cross-culture, cultural differences, cultural identity

## **1. Introduction**

This thesis takes Shakespeare's adaptation as a case study to explore the cultural challenges in the transformation of western drama into Chinese drama. It explores the dilemmas and strategies in this cross-cultural shift, focusing on how traditional Chinese operas like Qinqiang, Sichuan Opera, and Cantonese Opera have integrated Western content since the early 20th century. The research method involves analyzing cross-cultural adaptation practices such as "appropriation," "hybridization," and "crossing," to understand their impact on performance style and thematic interpretation. This study is significant for uncovering innovative avenues in Sino-Western dramatic cultural exchange, modernizing Chinese opera, and engaging new audiences. It highlights the need for adaptors to draw from diverse cultural backgrounds to innovate and express new artistic forms, influenced by political and cultural factors, thus contributing to the rich tapestry of global theatrical expression.

## 2. The Current Situation of Drama Transformation

### 2.1. Communication and Historical Evolution

Early Chinese opera was composed of three art forms: folk rap, song and dance, and farce. Early opera was based on primitive song and dance. Starting from the pre-Qin period, through continuous integration and development in the Han and Tang Dynasties, a relatively complete opera art was formed in the Song and Jin Dynasties. Opera art is highly comprehensive. It integrates more than 360 art forms such as literature, music, and dance, and develops a unique style in the process of integrating many art forms. After a long period of development, it gradually forms the core Chinese operas of "Beijing Opera, Yue Opera, Huangmei Opera, Henan Opera".

Since the 15th century, cultural exchanges between China and the West have become more frequent. Chinese opera and actors have been introduced to Europe and appeared on the European stage. Westerners have begun to appreciate the unique charm of Chinese opera art. Since the 17th century, a large number of works about China have appeared in Europe, and oriental culture has provided fresh materials for the creation of Western drama art. While selecting Chinese themes, Western artists have more often used Chinese techniques in performance forms and stage setting practices, resulting in a mixture of Chinese and Western dramas with Chinese things as the background and using Chinese opera costumes and props. In modern times, many Chinese playwrights have embarked on the path of drama creation by adapting foreign plays. [1] Hong Shen's "Zhao Yan Wang", Wang Youyou's "The Profession of Grandma Hua"... Some have been successful, while others have failed. However, this kind of adaptation and transplantation has injected fresh blood into early Chinese drama literature.

From the period of the Republic of China to the contemporary era, Shakespeare's plays have remained the most significant source for adaptation and transplantation within Chinese opera. There are numerous versions of adapted plays derived from Shakespeare's works, such as Sichuan Opera's "Lady Macbeth," Huju Opera's "Stealing the Country and the Sister-in-Law," Yue Opera's "The Prince's Revenge," Kunqu Opera's "The Bloody Hand," and Hui Opera's "Soul-Stirring Tale." When these Shakespearean plays are fused with traditional Chinese operas, the profound and generous spirit of tragic songs and the solemn nature of tragedy are vividly displayed.

### 2.2. New Interpretation of the Theme

In the study of the adaptation of "performing Western dramas in the Chinese way", concepts such as "appropriation", "hybridization", and "crossing" have repeatedly appeared, summarizing the phenomena in the practice of cross-cultural drama adaptation. "Appropriation" refers to the adoption of foreign cultural elements into the local culture. "The target culture is in a dominant position, and everything starts from this perspective, using the culture of others for one's own use." [2] This is an open attitude towards various cultural performances and a recombination of cultures. "Hybridization", from a cultural perspective, means "the blending and mixing of two or more elements, with a smooth transition between them. If a new entity is established, it implies new cultural creation".[3] The "crossing" of drama cultures has brought a new performance style, enabling in-depth interaction between different drama traditions and creating a new stage form.

The "performance of Shakespeare's plays in the Chinese way" adopts a comprehensive localization adaptation strategy. The actors are all in traditional opera costumes, following the traditional orchestration and costume box. The drama plot locations are transplanted to an ancient virtual country in China, and the characters in the play are named with Chinese surnames respectively. The classic dialogues and monologues are adapted into beautiful opera recitations and singing. Moreover, when

adapting, most of the time, characters are deleted, side plots are removed, and the plot is refined to conform to the performance means of traditional opera. [4]

*The Blood-Handed Note* is divided into nine acts: General Ma Pei and veteran Du Geban return victorious from the expedition[5]. Passing through Ghost Shadow Beach, the fairy maiden appears and tells Ma Pei that he will be conferred the title of the equal king with the king of Zheng and enjoy the supreme power of the emperor. She also warns him in the form of a prophecy that he needs to beware of Du Ge. Ma Pei believes the fairy's prophecy and is instigated by his wife, Mrs. Tie, to commit a series of bloody crimes and finally obtains the imperial robe. However, he faces the revenge of the son of the king of Zheng. Mrs. Tie is in a trance and is claimed by the ghosts and dies. The popular belief is that ghosts leave the underworld and appear in the world for a reason. Hamlet tells the prince that, far from being silent extras on stage, they are given their proper lines.[6]

*The Lady* is boldly innovative in perspective, elaborating on the fundamental reasons why a female character of this status and position falls into the abyss of fate from the perspective of Lady Macbeth. On the basis of streamlining, it further blurs the plot line of the story and attaches importance to the inner world of the character. The adaptation focuses on the inner monologue of Lady Macbeth, telling the whole process of her being devoured by love and fear and losing her sanity, allowing her to freely vent her emotions and express the sad fate of women at all times and in all countries.

The script of *The Revenge of the Prince* is reduced to only one story line. Applying the traditional opera's linear dramatic structure, it is divided into seven scenes, Play the story of Uncle Yong killing the king and usurping the throne, marrying his sister-in-law Jiang Rong, and the prince Zidan avenging his dead father, Uncle Yong.[7] The Ghosts of the stage show are often "Rendered by the actors who play Hamlet It's a fear-mongering, fear-mongering thing." [8]

In the process of adapting Western dramas into Chinese dramas, with the help of the commonality of the connotations of Chinese and Western drama cultures, the stage performance naturally integrates into the Chinese context. The stage images of the traditional opera professions are hybridized and recombined with the character shaping in the original play, and Western culture and Chinese culture are cross-performed, making it conform to the thinking mode and aesthetic habits of Chinese audiences without violating the character characteristics of the original play.

### 3. The Dilemma of Drama Transformation

#### 3.1. Cultural Barriers and Aesthetic Differences

As one of the representatives of Chinese traditional culture, Chinese opera has great differences in performance forms, artistic characteristics, and historical backgrounds from Western culture. This cultural difference often becomes a major problem in the spread of opera. First, it is manifested as the conflict brought about by the different aesthetic methods and expression techniques of Chinese opera and Western drama. As a new thing, the adapted drama in the local area has attracted wide attention in China, and Western themes, costumes, and scenes have also been borrowed by the Chinese literary and art circles. However, the evaluation of "performing Western dramas in the Chinese way" by the traditional opera audience is not all positive and active. "The singing is very difficult for Europeans to understand. These lyrics encompass unfamiliar concepts and challenging language imagery. The translator of *The Orphan of Zhao* once made such an evaluation of Chinese opera. The same is true when the context is replaced.

How to transform the values and cultural connotations of Western drama into content acceptable to Chinese audiences is a problem that needs to be solved in "performing Western dramas in the Chinese way". That is, to transform the creative characteristics and stage styles of Western drama into the unique virtual, stylized, and freehand performance styles and unique aesthetic orientations of China. Different from the realistic style of Western drama, opening the door, sweeping the floor, and

getting on a horse in Chinese opera are all expressed through certain stylized symbols. The fixed professions and formulas in Chinese opera have increased the difficulty of adaptation invisibly. If it leans towards traditional opera, young audiences may not appreciate it and cannot achieve the purpose of attracting young people; if it leans towards the foreign original work, it may not be well integrated into traditional opera. It remains challenging to strike a balance between the two and undergo technical transformation.

Another difficulty in understanding comes from language translation. Although the art form of opera can overcome language barriers to a certain extent and enable the audience to understand the psychological emotions of the characters and the development of the story, this understanding is fuzzy. Language is essential to deeply understand the plot and the emotions conveyed by the characters. How to convert the long-winded drama language into opera language and formulas, translate the meaning of the opera libretto, neither translate word for word nor completely ignore the original meaning of the words, while also taking into account the audience's understanding habits. The translation of opera libretto requires translators to have solid language skills, superb translation techniques, a comprehensive understanding of Chinese and Western cultures, and a familiarity with opera culture. An urgent problem in the in-depth cross-cultural communication of Chinese opera is how to improve the level of opera translation and enable the audience to better appreciate it.

### **3.2. Communication Difficulties and Economic Influences**

As an important part of Chinese traditional culture, Chinese opera has strong regional cultural characteristics and national cultural connotations, resulting in differences in the performance forms and styles of operas in different regions, making it difficult for opera to be popularized and promoted nationwide. For example, there are obvious differences in the performance forms and styles of Beijing Opera in the northern region and Cantonese Opera in the southern region, which makes the promotion and acceptance of Beijing Opera in the southern region relatively low. How to attract young audiences to understand opera and then expand the market is also a problem that Chinese opera has yet to solve. With the process of modernization and the trend of cultural diversity, some young audiences may be more inclined to accept Western culture and popular culture and lack interest and a sense of identity in the traditional opera performance forms and styles. When Western drama is transformed and adapted in Chinese drama, it is more necessary to strengthen the innovation and localization of opera and pay attention to the cultural inheritance and historical value of opera.

Economic factors are also an important factor that cannot be ignored. The spread and promotion of opera nationwide also face economic and market limitations. The cultural market is becoming increasingly commercialized, and the market competition for literary and artistic works is becoming more and more fierce. In such market competition, opera often faces competition in box office and market share and is restricted by commercial interests and market demands. Some opera works with local characteristics and historical and cultural values may be ignored or eliminated due to a lack of commercial interests. Also, due to insufficient market demand, investors are generally on the sidelines of the opera market, which also makes the funding sources of opera more difficult. The income of Chinese opera actors is generally low, which makes the lives of opera artists under great pressure. Many excellent actors have to change careers or resign from performances. The different economic development levels in different regions also make people's attitudes towards foreign new things different. In wealthy regions, people are often willing to understand different cultures and experience the process of cultural integration. In contrast, in economically backward regions, people are often busy making a living and have no time to understand new things. Because of the influence of economic factors, even if people are interested in watching opera performances, their economic conditions do not allow it.

## 4. Solutions to the Problem of Drama Transformation

### 4.1. A Mixture of Chinese and Western with a Greater Emphasis on Local Culture

The adaptation of foreign classics in opera is an attempt for opera to move closer to the modern, popular, and universal aesthetic psychology and is one of the means of opera reform. Through the absorption and reuse of culture in "performing Western dramas in the Chinese way", some flowing water is injected into the river of opera. In the process of impact and flow, a wonderful chemical reaction is gradually produced.

Using the adapted version of *Macbeth* as an example, the storyline largely mirrors the original work, with minimal modifications to the main contradictions and character personalities. Instead, it focuses on localizing the background, culture, and language of the story in China, adapting the long lyrical lines in the original work into rhyming and catchy singing passages full of traditional images.

With the exception of a few adapted plays that adhere to the original work's time, place, and character design, most Shakespearean plays in China localize the characters' names into Chinese. In *The Kingdom of Desire*, Macbeth becomes 敖叔征(AoShu zheng).敖叔(AoShu) is an ancient surname, and 敖(Ao) is also pronounced as “傲”, which means proud and complacent. *The Bloody Frightening Tale* is named 孟昶(Meng Yang). 孟(Meng) can be a homophone of 麦(Mai), The Chinese writing for Macbeth is “麦克白”. The combination of the character “日” and “易” forms “昶”, which means the sun. Implying that Meng Yang has an extraordinary status and great significance. Sir Cawdor becomes 耿忠(Geng Zhong), suggesting the straightforward loyalty of a courtier. In *The Blood-Handed Note*, Lady Macbeth is given the surname 铁(Stone), clearly indicating her character trait of having a heart of stone.[9]

In the shaping of character images in opera, it not only requires the authenticity and vividness of character portrayal, but also emphasizes highlighting the character's inner traits, and further demands the externalization of these inner traits. [10] The lyrics of "Western plays performed in Chinese theater" are mostly well-paired, melodious, and rhyming, highlighting the rich inner thoughts of the characters. By incorporating a variety of colloquialisms and allusions, the language of Shakespeare is transformed into the form of ancient Chinese poetry, aligning with the ideological concepts and character images appealing to Chinese audiences, achieving an effect of localization and regionalization.

In addition to the background and language, Western drama must also strive to integrate traditional Chinese folk culture when being localized for China. The Huangmei Opera "Much Ado About Nothing" combines the Anhui folk tradition of "Chizhou Nuo Opera," adding elements of ancient Chinese wrestling and lantern playing movements. It also creatively employs the use of masks, transforming the indispensable Western masquerade ball from the original play into a richly theatrical song and dance performance with a distinct opera flavor. Furthermore, it adapts the church wedding into a Chinese-style wedding ceremony with the "lifting of the veil" tradition, among other changes.

### 4.2. The Acceptance Psychology of Sinicization

The traditional stage form cannot meet all the needs of the transformation and adaptation of Western drama in Chinese drama, so it is necessary to carry out cross-innovation in the formula to break through the limitations of the professions. The division of labor in traditional Chinese drama professions is very clear. Actors can only play the professions they belong to, which limits the expressiveness and innovation of drama. In order to break through this limitation, Chinese drama adaptors have begun to try to integrate the performance forms and techniques of Western drama into Chinese drama, creating some new performance forms and styles.



The images of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth in the original work are both three-dimensional and their characters are relatively complex, which is very different from the relatively simple characters in traditional opera. Therefore, it is difficult to represent them with only one profession. Therefore, in the opera adaptations, actors have begun to challenge the limitations of their professions to better serve the characters. For example, in *The Kingdom of Desire*, AoShu zheng is a combination of a martial male role, an old male role, and a painted face male role; the lady is a combination of a young female role, a vivacious female role, and a shrewish female role, making the characters blend more smoothly and naturally into the adapted scene. When AoShu zheng heard the reward, he first knelt and showed himself from the inside to the outside, and then stared at Meng Ting with wide eyes, showing his surprise at this time; when the reward was increased again, he knelt and turned around and fell to the ground, and the stage seemed to freeze at the moment when AoShu zheng was surprised. The subtle expressions of opening his mouth, staring wide-eyed, and not daring to breathe added more color to the stage performance. Therefore, when adapting Western plays, one should not only adapt the plot, character image, or thematic philosophy, but also visually present the entire creation on stage.

Masks are a typical formula in Chinese opera. They are usually worn on the front to distinguish by color and shape, playing a role in portraying the character's personality. However, in *The Blood-Handed Note*, the three witches are dressed with masks on both the front and the back, becoming "two-faced people", implying the two-sidedness of mistakes. In *The Grand Banquet*, in addition to the masks on the dancers' faces, each dancer holds a mask in each hand, with different expressions on the masks, representing the new king, the new queen, and the mountain ghost respectively, metaphorically implying the tragedy that fame and fortune will eventually turn into dry bones. The dance movements also incorporate elements of modern dance instead of the traditional opera dance, dazzling the audience and bringing a visual impact. In terms of costumes, the martial costumes have improved the traditional armor and flags, and redesigned the use of "helmet head". Some generals are changed to wrap their heads with cloth and add headdresses, and some generals' helmet heads are also improved into the helmet head shapes of civil officials in traditional operas, which are very different from the performance costumes in traditional operas. The lady's skirt extends to the ground, resembling the body of a snake, while the layered design further subverts the traditional performance costume form. With the eyes looking left and right following the rhythm of the clapper, showing uncertainty and suspicion, it renders the great fear when she is an accomplice in the murder. In the process of washing the blood-stained hands, the function of expressing emotions with water sleeves is utilized, and the constantly changing water sleeve movements show the inner turmoil. "Drama must combine speech, action, and singing to perform a story."

When transforming Western drama into Chinese drama, "misreading" and innovation should be allowed, and experience should be summarized from practice. The process of transforming Western drama into Chinese drama is essentially a reflection of the historical culture, political economy, and national beliefs of the whole country and nation. This type of cross-cultural adaptation often leads to misinterpretations of the original work. The diverse growth environments of the translators, the audience, and the original author contribute to this. Therefore, "performing Western dramas in the Chinese way" cannot simply copy Western plays as they are. As the director of "The Kingdom of Desire", Wu Xingguo said: "We don't want to do 'pasting'; what we want to do is 'drawing out the source', hoping to absorb various heterogeneous performance systems." The choices and rejections of the adaptors regarding the theme, connotation, characters, and plot settings of the original play exactly reflect the attitude of the creators towards opera.

## 5. Conclusion

The "performance of Western dramas in the Chinese way" has the innovation in artistic form and the uniqueness in performance content, which plays a great role in inheriting the artistic tradition and

cultivating new-generation opera audiences. Even though the transformation of Western drama into Chinese drama faces various difficulties and challenges, as long as the common ground between Chinese traditional ethics and morality and the spirit of Western drama is found, it will lay an ideological foundation for the mutual appropriation, hybridization, and crossing of dramas in different cultural backgrounds, and also bring a brand-new cultural visual feast to audiences at home and abroad.

The successful improvement and localization of cross-cultural drama can promote the spread and acceptance of Western drama in China, focus on innovating performance forms, improve the artistic value and appreciation of opera, and enrich the development of Chinese drama. "Instill the national spirit into the Westernized people and bring the Westernized people back to the local culture." Only through various efforts can Chinese opera radiate new vitality and vitality in the context of the current cultural diversity in the world.

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