

# 6 Review & Analysis

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## Chinese theater seeks out new ways to go global

### LITERATURE

By CHEN AIMIN

Chinese theater is a comprehensive art form synthesizing a series of artistic elements such as singing, performance and music, and it is playing a unique role in spreading Chinese culture and telling Chinese stories to the world. So far, Chinese theater has made great achievements in international communication, but problems remain. Therefore, it is necessary to search out more effective ways for Chinese theater to go global.

#### Overseas Chinese writers

*The Orphan of Zhao* is a thirteenth-century Chinese revenge drama, classified in the *zaju* genre of theaters. The play made its first appearance in Europe in the 18th century and was well received during its debut. If we count the debut of *The Orphan of Zhao* as the starting point for Chinese theater to go global, Chinese theater has been disseminated to the outside world for more than 300 years. Among these disseminated works, plays created by overseas Chinese writers in Western languages are an important form for Chinese theater to gain fame abroad.

The China-themed plays created by overseas Chinese writers are more easily accepted and recognized by the West, given that they face no language barrier and that these writers are familiar with the aesthetic tastes of Western audiences; meanwhile these plays still maintain the unique twists and turns of their plots from the East.

Overseas Chinese writers not only are deeply influenced by Chinese tradition but also have a profound understanding of Western theater and culture, so they can integrate Chinese and foreign cultural elements in their creation. With a passion for Chinese culture, they praise Chinese civilization and show the life of Chinese people and overseas Chinese. Such plays enable local people to understand Chinese culture, which contributes to the spread of Chinese culture in the world arena.



*The White Snake*, adapted from the Chinese folktale about a white snake spirit falling in love with a human, proved that a story of love, loss and longing can transcend layers of historical and cultural complexities. Photo: CHINA DAILY

Overseas Chinese playwrights represented by Frank Chin and David Henry Hwang have produced a considerable number of excellent plays about China in the United States. *The Chickencoop Chinaman* by Frank Chin in 1972 was "the first play by an Asian American to have a major New York production," according to Robert Lee's *Multicultural American Literature*. In 2011, Hwang's *Chinglish* saw an official opening on Broadway and set out for more than 170 consecutive performances.

In the past few decades, many plays by overseas Chinese playwrights have been popular among overseas audiences. For example, *The Chickencoop Chinaman* and *The Year of the Dragon* by Chin, *Paper Angels* and *Bitter Cane* by Geny Lim, Hwang's *Trilogy of Chinese America*, namely *Fresh off the boat*, *The Dance and the Railroad*, and *The Family Devotion* as well as *M. Butterfly*, *Yellow Face*, *The House of Sleeping Beauties*, *Rich Relations*,

*The Voyage* and *1000 Airplanes on the Roof* all won mainstream American recognition.

At the same time, it must be noted that the plays created by overseas Chinese playwrights are relatively few and it would be difficult for them to produce a large-scale cultural effect. Western scholars and audiences still know little about overseas Chinese writers and their works.

In addition, some of the new generation of overseas Chinese playwrights, such as Paul Stephen Lim and Dmae Roberts, are mostly second-generation and third-generation immigrants who lack in-depth understanding of Chinese culture, so they have created few China-themed plays.

Nevertheless, overseas Chinese writers are familiar with the Western culture and lifestyle, and they have unique advantages in creating and performing plays in Western languages. Therefore, they are ideal ambassadors for Chinese theater culture, which in turn can arouse overseas audiences' interest in authentic Chinese theater.

#### Contribution of translated works

Translation is another important way to promote Chinese theater. For a long time, thanks to the efforts of translators, playwrights and performing artists at home and abroad, many Chinese theaters have become hits in the overseas market.

Since the 18th century, popular Chinese plays such as *The Orphan of Zhao*, *Romance of the West Chamber*, *Snow in Midsummer*, *Dreams in The Peony Pavilion*, *Autumn in the Palace of the Han*, *Tale of the Pi Pa*, *The Palace of Eternal Life*, *The Circle of Chalk* and *Love Amongst War* have been circulated widely across

many countries. Among them, the opera adapted from *The Orphan of Zhao* in the 18th century has played an important role in promoting Westerners' understanding of Chinese culture and national spirit.

In addition to classical theater, many contemporary Chinese theater works have been translated into other languages and spread abroad. In the 1970s and 1980s, Lin Zhaohua, Meng Jinghui and other avant-garde experimental playwrights ushered in the golden age of small theater performances in China.

Since 1979, there have been nearly 70 well-known works, most of which have been created in theaters in Beijing and Shanghai. They draw on the artistic techniques of Western modernism and postmodernism to reveal the living conditions and inner worlds of ordinary people.

All of these excellent pioneering plays, such as Xu Xiaozhong's *The Story of Sang Shu Ping*, Meng Jinghui's *Rhinoceros in Love* and Stan Lai Sheng-chuan's *Secret Love in Peach Blossom Land*, have been disseminated overseas through translation, which is of great significance for the learning of global audiences about the development of contemporary Chinese theater.

Since the 21st century, Chinese plays have actively participated in international theater festivals such as the Avignon Festival in France or staged Chinese plays in foreign theaters, promoting Chinese theater to go global in a new way. For example, Huang Ying's *Cooking a Dream*, an adaptation from the legendary Tang Dynasty novel *A Story of a Dream*, Zhao Miao's *Aquatic*, adapted from the famous Qing Chinese writer Pu Songling's *Strange Stories from the Chinese Studio*, and *Rhinoceros in*

*Love* all were staged in French theaters and were well received by local audiences.

However, China has a large number of excellent plays that have not been introduced abroad due to the lack of high-quality translation and effective promotion.

Going forward, we can participate more in large international theater festivals and tours, as well as official or folk drama exchange activities, and promote Chinese theater abroad through various channels.

Theater troupes in universities and society can also invite Western playwrights and directors to participate in the creation and rehearsal of Chinese theaters, so as to integrate Western aesthetic and cultural elements into Chinese plays. In this way, the artistic expression of Chinese theater can be updated, which is helpful for foreign audiences to better accept and recognize Chinese theater.

#### Western adaptation

In recent years, more and more sinologists and theater troupes are trying to create plays based on Chinese stories or to adapt existing Chinese plays. In this way, they introduced Chinese culture to the West and let the West know about China and Chinese theater.

*The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, by the German modernist playwright Bertolt Brecht, was adapted from *The Chalk Circle*, a Yuan Dynasty Chinese classical *zaju* verse play by Li Qianfu, which has been successfully staged in India, Greece, Italy and other countries.

Since the 21st century, Mary Zimmerman's adaptation of the legendary tale of the white snake has ranked as one of the most influential Western adaptations of Chinese plays. *The White Snake* utilizes a set of dolls and paper props, creating a gorgeous impressionistic tableau. It is said that the visual design makes *The White Snake* an extraordinary theatrical achievement. Parents are often encouraged to take their children to see it.

All in all, more translation and adaptation done by sinologists and Western troupes will promote Chinese theater to go global. Therefore, it is necessary to stir up their enthusiasm.

It is also worth noting that their translation and adaptation of Chinese plays should not be judged solely on fidelity to the original content. Adaptions of Chinese plays may not follow the original Chinese-style tone and manner, and foreign actors may not be required to wear traditional Chinese costumes; rather, details should be dealt with in a more flexible way, which will help foreign audiences better understand and accept Chinese theater.

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Stan Lai Sheng-chuan's *Secret Love in Peach Blossom Land* wowed audiences with its magical blend of tragedy and farce when staged in a regional theater in the United States. Photo: CHINA DAILY