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Analysis of the Modern Aesthetic Implications of the Translation and Dissemination of Chinese Tragedy: The Musical Orphan of Zhao as an Example

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Abstract

During the Song and Yuan Dynasties, Ji Junxiang wrote the play *The Great Revenge of the Orphan of Zhao* based on Sima Qian's *Historical Records – The Family of Zhao*, which became one of the four great classical Chinese tragedies. Later generations used this version as a blueprint for various renditions of the play in southern opera, drama, and film. The musical *Orphan of Zhao*, directed by Xu Jun and adapted from the script of James Fenton's play, is the latest adaptation of *Orphan of Zhao* and has attracted much attention since its premiere. After touring, it has gained a high reputation and has been hailed as “the pinnacle of Chinese musicals in recent years”. This essay explores how the aesthetics of traditional Chinese tragedy can be revitalized and disseminated to the general public through the modernization and reshaping of the play from the perspectives of plot adaptation, characterization, production, and marketing.

Key Words

Orphan of Zhao, tragic aesthetics, modern adaptation, traditional culture

Introduction

One of the Four Great Classical Tragedies, the traditional Chinese drama *The Great Revenge of the Orphan of Zhao*, is based on the story of the relationship between Duke Ling of Zhao and his courtier Zhao Dun as recorded in Sima Qian's *Historical Records – The Family of Zhao*. Inheriting the chivalrous spirit of Sima Qian's writing and emphasizing the Confucian spirit of loyalty and righteousness, Ji Junxiang played on the story of the Zhao orphan as an adult, thus creating an intricate revenge drama that has become a representative work of the aesthetics of classical Chinese tragedy. During the Ming and Qing dynasties, the translated version of *Orphan of Zhao* was introduced to Europe. Because of Voltaire's favor, it was adapted many times in Europe, leaving behind various versions, such as that of William Hatchett.

The musical *Orphan of Zhao* is adapted from the play of the same name by James Fenton of the Royal Shakespeare Company. The Western interpretation of the original play is once again scrutinized from a Chinese perspective and ultimately adapted in a Chinese and modernized way. Since its premiere on May 27, 2021, the musical *Orphan of Zhao* has completed over 100 performances, including a residency tour, and has been critically acclaimed, making it a phenomenal piece of musical theatre in recent years. As a musical featuring a classical Chinese tragedy, the success of *Orphan of Zhao* may provide new ideas for revitalising and disseminating China's traditional culture and the aesthetics of classical tragedy.

1. The Ethical Beauty of Classical Chinese Tragedy and Its Modern Adaptation

China's classical tragedy is quite different from the Western classical tragedy system, mainly followed in creating current tragedies.

Aristotle, in his *Poetics*, gives the following definition of classical Western tragedy: "A serious, complete imitation of the action of a certain length"¹ and "the need to arouse pity and fear so that this emotion may be cultivated (Cataclysms)"². This means that tragedy needs to show the noble qualities of the characters through the sudden change of situation, and then deliver the tragedy through the sublime and fear to purify the heart. In terms of content, Aristotle requires that there be a sudden change in the situation of the characters and that the protagonist should be a person of noble character, high status, high reputation, or with no outstanding merits, who, under the direction of his free will, performs mixed actions. These actions ultimately produce agonizingly bad results, which puts the protagonist in a predicament, achieving the tragic effect through the actions of the characters instead of through the narrative method. Such a thesis was supported by Hegel in later times, who made the following statement: "The Absolute Spirit, by its absolute power, deals with the one-sidedness of the ends and the one-sidedness of the passions that are each in its way, and achieves self-reconciliation by eliminating the wrongful one-sidedness from the individual characters who are engaged in the struggle."³ This view emphasizes the absolute spirit as the driving force, and the characters take the initiative to end the arrangement of actions under the absolute spirit and use it as a motivating reason for conflict and guilt, thus producing sublime effects.

2. Classical Chinese Tragedy is More Practical, Complex, and Hopeful

Classical Chinese tragedy has a lineage within Chinese culture—it trends toward "practical rationality"⁴ as put forward by Li Zehou in *History of Ancient Chinese Thought*. China has permanently attached great importance to the tradition of contact with reality and summing up experience, causing the ancient Chinese people to experience the inertia of pragmatizing things in their artistic creations so that they can serve reality. Therefore, classical Chinese tragedy has the function of improvement, and the happy ending—that good and evil will be rewarded in the end—has also been created as a result. Although both Chinese and Western classical tragedies are characterized by the conflict between

"the natural desires of the human heart and its moral responsibilities, or simply the conflict with insurmountable obstacles", as Belinsky said,⁵ Chinese classical tragedy is characterized by the ethical and moral principles of "endurance" and "sacrificing one's life for righteousness". However, classical Chinese tragedy is distinguished from Western self-resistance by ethical patience and sacrificing one's life for righteousness. Under the guidance of such ideas, the "bitter situation" unique to classical Chinese tragedy was created. It was fully embodied in Yuan miscellaneous dramas, explicitly in the following: "First, the pain of parting with one's life and death; second, a misfortune that cannot be avoided; third, a true hatred that will be avenged."⁶

At the same time, by emphasizing the significance of fate itself, the characterization of classical Chinese tragedy often shows a kind of singularity and passivity. Scholars Cheng Chaoxiang and Fu Zhengming believe that Yuan miscellaneous dramas such as *Orphan of Zhao* are more inclined to be tragedy-like political or historical stories rather than tragedies. They give the following reasons: "To show a single emotion, to show a person in defeat or victory, in guilt or innocence, similar to politics and history", for "tragedy to show multiple emotions, to show a character's triumph in defeat, to let the guilt and innocence intertwine, similar to religion and mythology"⁷. Such an assertion does have its truth. Still, the authors believe that in the era when Confucianism was the mainstream of worldly thinking, the plot of the characters serves the fixed theme of "benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom and faith". It is the inevitable trend of tragedy creation to play the role of educating the public with the apparent antagonism between good and evil and the treatment of the face of the character. As Wang Guowei classified the classical tragedy, "The first kind of tragedy is composed of extremely evil people and all their abilities. The second kind of tragedy is due to blind fate. The third kind of tragedy, due to the position and relationship of the characters in the play, has to not necessarily have the nature of the snake and the accidental changes, but by the ordinary characters, ordinary circumstances, forced to be like this; they know the harm, and hand over and hand over to receive, and each with the force but not to be blamed for it."⁸ It can be seen that the aesthetics of classical Chinese tragedy do not detach the fate of the characters from the social environment. Hence, the passivity and singularity brought by fate are more similar to the helplessness of being unable to ignore ethics and resisting unsuccessfully, which is not different from what Hegel advocated: "It is not the might of the

outside world and its oppression that man should fear, but the power of ethics, which is a provision in man's free rationality."⁹ Therefore, many characters with different faces play their roles in the tragedy, and together they form a Chinese tragedy with a profound theme and complex twists and turns.

Classical Chinese tragedy always carries the pathos of facing up to fear and the hope of survival. Zhu Guangqian, in *The Psychology of Tragedy*, said that the tragedy brings the decisive factor of fear to the root of the tragedy, as follows: "I can't discern the shape of it,' which is the essence of the fear of the tragedy. If the object of fear is recognizable, it does not become the fear of tragedy."¹⁰ However, classical Chinese tragedy often visualizes and realizes fear, using symbols such as emperor, magistrate and other symbols that symbolize power, money, desire, and other primitive motives to present the source of fear directly, thus eliminating the sense of fear and highlighting the unavoidable plight of the characters. In this way, while eliminating the sense of fear, the character's sublime pathos of "not to be but to be" is emphasized. At the same time, unlike the Western concept of tragedy, in which the end of a tragedy must be "the destruction of the most precious hope of a person's heart and the loss of his life's happiness",¹¹ the end of a classical Chinese tragedy often contains the faint hope of continuing to live. Whether it is the *Orphan of Zhao* in which Cheng Bo (the Orphan of Zhao) kills Tu'an Gu and is rewarded, or the *Dou E Grievance* in which the injustice is finally resolved, to a certain extent the aesthetics of classical Chinese tragedy also includes the people's expectation of a happy ending, and therefore attaches importance to the use of conflicts in the course of the plot to create a tragedy rather than to highlight the tragedy with a dismal ending, emphasizing the use of competition to create tragedy in the course of the plot rather than emphasizing sadness. Such an approach is inextricably linked to the need to achieve a better function of education by rewarding good and evil in the end, and it also implies the Confucian pragmatism of applying oneself to the world. Ethics rather than the sublime has become the core of China's classical tragedy.

In modern domestic adaptations, most opera versions follow Ji Junxiang's original script with fewer changes. In 2003, Chen Yongquan's version of the Yu opera emphasized "loyalty and righteousness", with more twists and turned at the end of the revenge, and it was only when Cheng Ying died blocking the sword for Zhao's orphan that the orphan made up his mind to kill his father. Yu Qingfeng's version of the Vietnamese opera the *Orphan of Zhao* in 2002 emphasized love and mercy more prominently; the sword of justice fell from the sky

and finally completed the revenge, and benevolence is more emphasized. In these two modern versions, the protagonist has been changed to Cheng Ying, with the values of repaying grudges with kindness and the urgency of revenge weakened by generosity.

Adaptations of the play and movie versions are even more daring. The version directed by Lin Zhaohua and scripted by Jin Haishu is the most provocative, deconstructing the original dichotomy of loyalty, sycophancy, goodness and evil. Zhao Dun uses the Empress Dowager as a backer to form a party in an attempt to overthrow the new ruler, Tu'an Gu—who is loyal to the new ruler and immensely talented—is dispatched to the Western Regions, and Zhao Linggong has become a politician with political aspirations. Although such a bold adaptation makes the slaughter of the Zhao family more reasonable and the characters more complex, it eliminates the justice of revenge, the original ethical and moral struggle is downgraded to a battle for power, and the subject of the tragedy is changed from Zhao's orphan to Cheng Ying, Tu'an Gu, and others. Under this logic, in the end, the orphans who do not understand the hostility of their predecessors and have become playboys are taken away by Linggong without vengeance. However, it is logical and has a substantial practical value, but it eliminates the original "loyalty and righteousness" ethical and moral values, and lacks the importance of historical reflection. Tian Xinqin's version is bold and innovative but focuses on following history. Its adaptation mainly lies in the narrative structure of flashbacks and the ethical conflicts arising from adultery. The Princess of Jin's lust and lies become the beginning of the tragedy, Zhao's orphan's revenge is no longer out of ethical justice but out of blood, and Tian's version also emphasizes its own confusion and self-tangled powerlessness in the face of choice; the motivation of the character's behavior is no longer centered around loyalty and righteousness and out of the honor, although the good and the evil are also boldly innovative but focus on the value of reflecting on history. Although the dichotomy of good and evil still exists, the moral theme has changed to integrity. The movie version directed by Chen Kaige is also a structure of traditional loyalty and righteousness, where destiny becomes the dominant force and the characters' struggle is passively driven by destiny. From the moment the Princess of Jin entrusts the orphans with her wish for the safety of Zhao's orphan instead of revenge, the importance of revenge itself is gradually dissolved, and in the end, Cheng Ying helps Zhao's orphan to commit suicide out of a sense of meaninglessness in his own life.

The James Fenton and Korean National Theater Com-

pany versions typify modern adaptations abroad. The Korean version has made very few changes to Ji Junxiang's version, with only two changes to Cheng's wife's resistance and eventual suicide at the time of their son's sacrifice and to Cheng Ying's sense of emptiness after her vengeance at the end of the play. Fenton's version is the one that is respected by the international mainstream, which recognizes the necessity of revenge while advocating honesty, takes the theme of equality and dignity of life, introduces the role of Cheng Ying's son's soul for the first time, and allows Cheng Ying to commit suicide at Cheng Zi's grave at the end of the play to increase the sense of pathos. The musical version is based on Fenton's version.

Regardless of the kind of adaptation it can be seen that only by following the basic value orientation of the ethics of loyalty and righteousness in classical Chinese tragedy, respecting the spiritual core of traditional Chinese culture and taking loyalty and righteousness as the main theme and goodness as the basic, can we make its adaptation retain its Chinese characteristics and not become a cliché.

3. Plot Adaptation: Presentation of the Beauty of Self-Awakening

In terms of plot adaptation, the musical version digs deep into the original Zhao's Orphan plot, which is based on the underlying logic of loyalty and righteousness. It incorporates the modern emphasis on self-awareness while retaining the ethical constraints specific to the era.

The musical is divided into two halves: the first half is based on the theme of "how can a parent die?" with the story of Cheng Ying's offering of his son, while the second half centers on the story of Cheng Bo's revenge, showing the theme of "how can an adoptive father be killed?" For the first time, the musical version of Orphan of Zhao allows Cheng Ying to refuse the request of the Princess of Jin to smuggle out the Zhao orphan at the beginning. Such an adaptation is closely related to the alteration of Cheng Ying's characterization. In the original script, Cheng Ying was the doctor in the palace of the emperor's son-in-law, "who was treated very favorably by him, unlike ordinary people." Therefore, according to the logic of the traditional Chinese humanistic society, he was responsible for repaying the favor when the princess entrusted the orphan to him. However, in the musical version, Cheng Ying's identity changes to a temporary folk doctor, a stranger to the Zhao family. Under such a setting, it would be unreasonable to say yes as he did in the previous script,

so director Seo Jun arranges a solo song for Cheng Ying, *Never Can* to show his inner conflict and change of attitude. "I can't see the darkness oppressing the starlight, because my heart has to be lit up all the time... I can only lift my chest and hold on to the weaker light like a thick, high solid wall." The lyrics of the song show Cheng Ying's inner fear as an ordinary person and his entanglement due to his goodness and intolerance. Eventually, his sense of justice overcomes his fear, making Cheng Ying accept the princess's request. This plot change has greatly weakened the coercion of loyalty, filial piety, and righteousness on individual choice in feudal society, and achieved the intangible characteristic of tragedy explored by Karl Jaspers in his book *The Transcendence of Tragedy*,¹² i.e., transcending personal desires to make choices so that the final result follows the will of the self. Such a treatment makes Cheng Ying's choice a choice made out of instinct and goodness under the guidance of free will, which is more in line with modern people's perception of self-awareness, and at the same time does not depart from the call for justice in traditional culture. "No matter how the phenomenon changes, the life in the foundation of things is still indestructible and full of joy",¹³ and such an approach is consistent with the spirit of transcendence with the spirit of the wine god, insisting on respect for life and hope, and even more so for the aesthetics of classical Chinese tragedy. It also continues the tradition of reverence and hope for life in the aesthetics of classical Chinese tragedy.

The second major plot adaptation took place at the juncture of the first and second halves, adding the episode of Cheng Bo's solo trip to the palace, which was originally presented in the form of a scroll opened in Cheng Ying's room, where Cheng Bo witnessed the harsh life of the people, thus logically generating suspicions about the true image of his righteous father. At the same time, it prevents Jin Haishu's version from eliminating the motivation for revenge due to peace and happiness, thus paving the way for his acceptance of his identity as Zhao's orphan and his patricidal behavior. The musical version of the play is more convincing than the original version of Cheng Ying's elaborate entrapment and Tian Xinqin's version, in which the two fathers each tell the story from their point of view to convince the audience. By supplementing God's perspective on folk life and Cheng Bo's first-perspective observation of the feelings brought about by the long picture scroll, Cheng Bo's subsequent choice is more inclined to the self-awareness of the awakening of the choice, rather than being the moral hostage to the destiny, and therefore more in line with the modern

emphasis on the logic of empirical evidence, to better communicate with the master of the public sentiment, to better relate to the master's public sentiment, and rationalize the act of vengeance for the "patricide", providing the premise for the answer to the core question "Is the foster father killable?" It is also more conflictual and dramatic because of the gap between fate and free will bias, and more likely to resonate with modern audiences.

The last major adaptation that differs greatly from the original text is presented at the end. It differs from the original script: "[Cheng Ying Say] Master, after you have avenged your wrongdoing and restored your original name, but me, the poor old man's family, will have nothing to rely on!"¹⁴ and the 'happy ending' of the original script, which is 'Now he will be rewarded with a title' and 'Cheng Ying will be given ten hectares of land'.¹⁵ The musical version of the play retains the tragic ending of Fenton's version of the Western classical tragedy, in which Cheng Ying kills himself in front of Cheng Zi's tomb. At the play's end, Cheng Ying freed himself from the sense of mission and responsibility entrusted to him by fate, and answered the question raised in the first act, "How can you kill your son?" Self-determination presents the final result of the struggle with the devil and a choice of free will. It avoids the transfer of the tragic theme and the structure of traditional Chinese values as in the Lin and movie versions, and does not focus on the theme of faith as in the Tian version. Instead, the original script retains the theme of righteousness. At the same time, Cheng Ying no longer suffers from the common typecasting problem in the portrayal of classical Chinese tragic characters, and his noble identity as a loyal and righteous man always contains the helplessness and sadness of being a father, which is more humane. Such an adaptation allows the grand narrative of national hatred and family feuds to return to the level of personal values and universal love of mortals, thus showing the core of tragedy from a perspective closer to life.

Chernyshevsky once said, "Tragedy is the great suffering of man or the death of great men."¹⁶ The musical *Orphan of Zhao*, through the questions of "Can the adoptive father be killed?" and "Can the son be killed?" elevates the common man of the times to the level of a great man through his great suffering, and this kind of adaptation blends the Western perspective with the modern perspective, i.e., the Western emphasis on fatal suffering and the Chinese focus on the specific common man. This adaptation combines the Western perspective with the modern perspective, i.e., the Western emphasis on the suffering of destiny and the Chinese tradition of

focusing on specific common people. It weakens the struggle and desire of the Han Chinese people to resist the Yuan-Mongolian domination brought about by the background of the Song and Yuan dynasties in the original script, as well as the Confucian culture of loyalty and righteousness that was held in high esteem during the feudal era. As director Xu Jun said, "I believe they (European audiences) saw our Chinese spirit, the determination, goodness, righteousness, and the noble spirit of daring to make sacrifices in the bones of the Chinese people. When a work of art presents such spiritual values, audiences must recognize it worldwide. As a revenge drama, its anchoring point and mother theme is love instead."¹⁷ It is because of this creative concept that the adaptation of the script pays more attention to the reiteration of individual memories, and the characters are no longer just pawns serving the theme of loyalty and righteousness and the arrangement of destiny but become flesh and blood people; the game and conflict between free will and the choice of destiny has the universal significance of transcending space and time with the theme of love. The self-consciousness of the characters resonates with the audience, thus naturally displaying contemporaneity and modernity.

Therefore, at the level of plot adaptation, the musical *Orphan of Zhao* retains the general structure of Chinese classical tragedy and inserts Western tragedy and modern comedy to supplement the character's behavioral motives, which may be a reference for other adaptations. Based on retaining the framework of Chinese tragedy, the details and plot adjustments are made from a modern perspective.

4. Character Symbol Remodeling: Rediscovering the Beauty of Multiple Flavors

The musical version complements and rediscovers the role of the witness and the female perspective, often sketched in classical Chinese tragedies, at the level of character symbols. The musical version is a contemporary interpretation of the deep-rooted love in classical Chinese tragedy from a modern perspective.

The musical version of *Orphan of Zhao* focuses on the expression of individual will under the grand narrative and is more inclined towards the expression of different identities and perspectives under the same story than the original script, which takes loyalty to the king and love of country as the common value goal of characterization. Therefore, when setting up the characters only the main characters are enriched with group portraits, the storyline is supplemented, and characters often neglected in forgotten stories are also introduced.

The most colorful character in the entire adaptation of the play is the role of Cheng Zi's ghost. Before the musical version was created, Cheng Ying's sacrificed son was only an instrumental character in promoting the plot and solving the plight of Zhao's orphan, and only existed as a symbol under the theme of the righteousness of the family and the nation. Even in James Fenton's version of the play, the ghost of Cheng Ying's son only appears in the play's last act in a role similar to that of the ghost in *Hamlet*. However, the musical version gives the ghost of Cheng's son the status of the "Big Other"¹⁸ throughout the play, and it has the qualities of the wronged soul in classical Chinese tragedy. Lacan, the proposer of the Big Other, explains its meaning: "The aggressiveness that the subject experiences here is completely different from the aggressiveness of the animal nature that arises from the frustration of his desires. ...The subject ultimately recognizes that his existence is only a product of the imagination, a product that prevents him from affirming anything,"¹⁹ i.e., the Big Other is the sum of the default rules of human relations that are produced by and constrain the subject, and that has the quality of the subject's residual alienation, and can be seen as the witness of the events from God's point of view and the second personality of the main character. The ghost of Cheng Ying's son plays a role in the musical version. The opening song, *Song of Destiny*, introduces the whole play, and is sung by the ghost of Cheng Ying's son, who then appears at the side of the stage on top of a boulder watching the development of the whole play from a third-person point of view. However, the ghost of Cheng Ying's son, slightly different from the traditional Big Other, is still very much a mortal, existing only as an observer, unable to persuade the other characters in the play or to change the original direction of the play, and thus is unable to play a full other role.

However, introducing the role of the ghost of Cheng Ying's son is the key to presenting the theme of love and answering the question, "How can you kill your son?" At this level, the ghost of Cheng Ying's son can be regarded as a manifestation of Cheng Ying's guilt over his biological son and his entanglement in his responsibilities and choices. His incomprehension when confronted with his biological father's sacrifice of himself, his reluctance to leave when his mother sings *The Flying Dragon Sleeps on the Tile*, and his questioning of his father and eventual reconciliation in the final scene are all the result of modernized thinking about the sacrifice of the family and the nation that is taken for granted in the original text. It is also because of the existence of the ghost of his son that Cheng Ying,

Cheng Ying's wife, and others are no longer just flat characters serving "benevolence, righteousness, and morality", but are also torn, helpless, regretful, heartbroken, and possessed of their personal feelings. More importantly, the wandering of Cheng Zi's ghost on stage is a constant reminder of the unanswered question of whether a parent or son can die, and that for Cheng Ying, "even if he has made a 'great sacrifice' in the objective sense, he must face the crime he has committed",²⁰ which is pursued until the final scene of the play when Cheng Ying kills himself in front of the tomb of Cheng Zi. Complementing the audience's unknowable perspective and asking, "How can an adopted son be killed?" prevents the deconstruction of the motivation and reasonableness of the revenge in the Lin and the movie versions. Also, it prevents the theme of the play from being skewed from traditional righteousness to justice in the Tian version.

It can be seen that the role of the ghost of Cheng Ying's son at the beginning was similar to that of the ghost in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, as a supplement to the audience's unknowable perspective. However, in the musical version, the ghost of Cheng Ying's son has taken on the qualities of the ghost in classical Chinese tragedy, not only as a witness and questioner of what has happened but also as a witness and promoter of what has not happened. The rediscovery of the role of the ghost of Cheng Ying's son can be regarded as an excellent adaptation of the musical *Orphan of Zhao*.

Another character that has been rediscovered is Cheng Ying's Wife. From a contemporary perspective, where feminist thinking is flourishing, the original text of *Orphan of Zhao* is collectively invisible to women, and even the two mothers, the Princess of Jin and Cheng Ying's Wife, who are directly related to the fate of the Zhao's orphan, are given little coverage. In the Lin version, the two women remain symbols. In contrast, the Tian and film versions stigmatize them, portraying the Princess of Jin as a lecherous adulteress and Cheng's Wife as a stupid and passive woman with no sense of loyalty and righteousness. The musical version of *Orphan of Zhao* not only takes into account the complementary female perspective, showing the gentle strength of traditional Chinese women, but also depicts the powerlessness of women in the feudal era.

Firstly, the solo song *Flying Dragon Sleeping on the Tile* was written for the role of Cheng's Wife. She is given two opportunities to sing solo. She has many instances where she gives her inner monologue throughout the play, which fully demonstrates her reluctance as a mother to give up on her child, and show her dedication to righteousness and sacrifice, either

helplessly or voluntarily from a mother's point of view. A mother's perspective shows a woman's dedication to righteousness or forced or active sacrifice, better fitting contemporary audiences' diverse perspectives.

Regarding women's status, Fenton's version is still an Oriental fantasy with a Western approach, giving women a greater right to speak out and fight back. Still, director Xu Jun, who grew up in a Chinese context, recognizes the low status of women in feudal society more profoundly. Take, for example, the classic dialogue with Gongsun Wujiu, which in Fenton's version reads as follows:

Gongsun Wujiu: His sacrifice was greater than Mt. Tai. Give me the child. I kneel before you.

Cheng's wife: You are an elder and a nobleman; you cannot kneel to me. It would be a disgrace to me. It would be like turning black and white upside down. Please rise, old man.

Gongsun Wujiu: Look! I'm prostrate on the ground.

Cheng's wife: I do not invite you to degrade yourself. My child will die; I know it. I do not understand why, but I know it will happen. I am a woman, and in the end, I can do nothing about it.

Gongsun Wujiu: My daughter.

Cheng's wife: (Handing over the child) How could there be such a person? He wants to kill me, but he still calls me his daughter.²¹

The musical version of this dialogue, on the other hand, is as follows:

Gongsun Wujiu: His sacrifice weighs more than Mt. Tai. Give me the child. I kneel before you.

Cheng's wife: You are an elder and a nobleman; you must not kneel to me, for you will dishonor me. Please rise, old man.

(Cheng's wife helped Gongsun to get up.)

Cheng's wife: My child will surely die. I know, I know this will happen. I am a woman, and in the end, I can do nothing about it.

(Cheng's wife hands the child to Gongsun Wujiu.)

Gongsun Wujiu: My daughter.

At this point in the dialogue, the musical version has omitted the questioning of Cheng's Wife, changing "I don't understand the reason, but I know it will happen" to "I know it will happen". This weakening of the questioning of the rationalization of sacrificing her son to save the orphan better reflects the powerlessness of women in a feudal and patriarchal society. In the original play, Cheng Ying's wife is resistant to and angry about the offering of her son to save the orphan and directly expresses this by questioning it. Still, the musical version deletes the questioning. It expresses her dissatisfaction, sadness, and helplessness in silence, thus highlighting the

ineffectiveness of women's actions under the hegemony of male discourse and the fact that they can only express their dissatisfaction in silence.

In the musical, Cheng's wife's two solos are both lullabies: the first time when Cheng Zi's ghost is at her side, the scene is warm and peaceful; the second time when Cheng Zi's ghost is taken away to be sacrificed, and when the lullaby is sung again, the whole scene is no longer warm, but only full of sadness. Lu Xun once said, "Tragedy is the destruction of beautiful things for people to see."²² The interaction between Cheng Ying's Wife and Cheng Zi's ghost and the solo song presents a deep understanding of this theory, which creates a gentle Chinese tragic atmosphere. The introduction and adaptation of the role of Cheng Ying's Wife gives a female perspective to the originally all-male revenge drama. Through the female characters in the play who are wrapped up in fate and have no choice, the tragedy of the female group in the great age is shown, enriching the theme of the play and making the play's core heavier and more universal.

The addition of these two characters did not lead to a subversive adaptation of the plot and theme of *Orphan of Zhao*, but rather, it illustrated the theme of loyalty and righteousness from a more comprehensive perspective, thus highlighting the ethical aspect of China's classical tragedy and letting the eternal and universal call for goodness it contains be heard by the world again.

5. The Beauty of Language in Stage Art: An Organic Combination of Tradition and Modernity

Classical Chinese tragedies are often characterized by heavy plot description and light environmental portrayal, so how to present the scenes in their stories has become a difficult point in modern visual adaptation.

As a kind of artwork, the musical has the characteristics of "the dissolution and reconstruction of the world art ecology, the linear narrative structure of the traditional literary language is replaced by the splicing of the visual space",²³ so it can achieve the effect of disassociating from the familiar artworks through the means of strangeness. The musical version goes to the audience more youthfully through excellent choreography, modernized music, and exceptional performances.

The fragmented nature of the musical narrative puts forward the requirement for the symbolic treatment of many intentions in the original text, which needs to be transformed from "high context" to "low context".²⁴ In response to such a need for transformation, the musical version presents a large amount of linguistic information

in the original text in various forms through more explicit and straightforward symbolic coding. For example, the environment and psychology are shown through lighting—the black and white checkerboard grid under Tu'an Gu's feet, the colorful light behind Cheng Bo as a teenager, and the increasingly intense red light behind Cheng Bo as an adult, the high symbolic use of color to show the contrasting concepts of good versus evil, goodness versus wickedness, and life versus death, Cheng Ying's life and death, and so on. The use of colors is highly symbolic to show the concepts of good and evil, goodness and evil, life and death, etc. The costumes and posters of the righteous side, such as Cheng Ying and Cheng Bo, make extensive use of white and red, while Tu'an Gu's is mainly in black and brown; small items are chosen as the concrete objects that link up the plot, i.e., the bell on Cheng Ying's son's body, from Cheng Ying's son's murder to Cheng Ying's suicide, is taken out again to represent Cheng Ying's son in the human world throughout the play. With the help of various modern media technologies, such symbolic processing allows much textual information that needs to be memorized and processed in advance to be presented more intuitively, thus lowering the threshold for appreciation, increasing the degree of enjoyment, and better adapting to the expectations of and acceptance by modern audiences.

At the same time, such an approach also considers the Hegelian aesthetics of tragedy to highlight the somber character and loyalty of classical Chinese tragedy. The use of broken elements such as mountain villages, palaces, courtyards, tombs, deserted countryside, cliffs, etc., as the stage set is a way of transforming the complex verbal information of the original text into more straightforward stage symbols, which can be regarded as the stage practice of Hegel's theory of the division of the ethical entity.²⁵

In terms of music production and performance, the musical *Orphan of Zhao* adopts a half-text, semi-vernacular language lyrics production, to better show the essence of the original text of Ji Junxiang's version of *The Great Revenge of the Orphan of Zhao*. At the same time, in terms of song style, the musical *Orphan of Zhao* combines rock, metal, and other modern musical styles to be closer to the preferences of young people, who are also the main consumers of the musical market.

As for the choreography, traditional Chinese elements such as orchid finger, sword finger and other movements are integrated with modern dance elements. The final choreography is based on modern dance while retaining the charm of Chinese dance. In the design of the dancers' costumes, it is considered that the water

sleeve element, which is characteristic of Chinese dance, can be added. Merleau-Ponty once pointed out: "The unity of the body can be described not only in a new way but also the unity of the senses and the unity of objects through body iconography. My body is the site of the expression of phenomena, and more precisely of the reality of phenomena itself. ...My body is the common structure of all objects, and, at least for the perceived world, my body is the general instrument of my 'comprehension'."²⁶ The musical version is a more sensory and impactful way of handling the song team in Fenton's play, which shows the fate of the characters from God's point of view, visualizes the characters' inner struggles and conflicts in their destinies, and expresses the conflict in the story through very tense body language.

To summarize, the dramatic tension of classical Chinese tragedy mainly exists in the plot, which is fascinating because of the twists and turns of the textual story and the white space of the environmental description. However, modern visualization requires the construction of scenes to attract attention, so it is necessary to transform abstract symbols into concrete ones. The musical version provides us with a new idea of transformation, i.e., to synthesize modern technological means and use traditional Chinese cultural elements that are already well known to us, to transform textual symbols into visual symbols, and to translate the textual information of classical Chinese tragedies with Chinese visual expressions.

6. Conclusion

The adaptation of classical Chinese tragedy requires the adaptor to retain its excellent spiritual core while removing the parts that lag behind the times, to rediscover the original text with a new interpretation and supplement content from a contemporary perspective, and to reinterpret the text in a way that is consistent with contemporary popular forms, which is the key to revitalizing classical Chinese tragedy. Every repertoire adaptation and form renewal are what Gadamer called the "fusion of horizons",²⁷ i.e., the interpreter when interpreting, starts from his or her present situation, engages with the horizons of the text, and grasps the meanings that the text reveals. This fusion of horizons is a fusion of history and reality and a confluence between the source material and the interpreter. "I see things with me, so everything has my color"; the adaptation of historical plays needs to respect the history, but it does not require us to copy history completely. The musical version of *Orphan of Zhao* is the dusty history and its

modern perspective and way of adapting, and it is very good to achieve the integration of historical traditions and modern thinking. The musical *Orphan of Zhao* is a success in revitalizing China's classical tragedy aesthetics and provides a model for the modernized translation and mass dissemination of subsequent tragedy aesthetics. Its combined integration of history, modernity, literature, and artistry shows us the greater possibility of China's traditional tragic aesthetics being revitalized again in contemporary times and going global.

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中國悲劇轉譯與傳播的現代美學意蘊分析——以音樂劇《趙氏孤兒》為例

魏心萍

摘要: 宋元時期紀君祥根據司馬遷《史記·趙世家》的記載，寫成了《趙氏孤兒大報仇》一劇，成為中國古典四大悲劇之一，而後人以這一版趙氏孤兒為藍本，改編成南戲、話劇、電影等多種形式的演繹。而由徐俊導演執導，改編自詹姆斯·芬頓話劇劇本的音樂劇《趙氏孤兒》，則是《趙氏孤兒》改編的最新形式，且自首演以來便備受關注，巡演後收穫極高口碑，被譽為“近年中國音樂劇天花板”。本文意從劇情改編、人物塑造、劇碼製作和行銷方式的角度來探索現代化改編下，中國傳統悲劇美學如何重新煥發生機、大眾化傳播。

關鍵詞: 趙氏孤兒；悲劇美學；現代改編；傳統文化