

An analysis of the deconstruction and interpretation of literary masterpieces by stage plays: Mainly focusing on Dream of the Red Chamber

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Abstract:

This article uses the stage play adaptation of Dream of the Red Chamber as a case study to explore how contemporary dance productions interpret, deconstruct, and innovate upon the original literary work. It examines the challenges these adaptations face in the context of modern literary transformation, focusing on aspects such as narrative deconstruction, visual design, ideological reshaping, and audience reception. Through the above analysis and research, it is confirmed that a successful adaptation should achieve three breakthroughs—constructing a multi-part dialogue structure at the narrative level, completing the creative transformation of cultural symbols at the visual level, and forming an open interpretive space for audience participation at the meaning level. These findings offer methodological insights for the contemporary translation of classic literary works and open up new paths for the international dissemination of Chinese stage art.

Keywords: A Dream of Red Mansions, stage drama, Adaptation

1 INTRODUCTION

The “14th Five-Year Plan for Artistic Creation” (hereinafter referred to as the “Plan”) was proposed in 2021. The plan proposes to fully promote the creation of artistic masterpieces in the new era. Against the backdrop of the 14th Five-Year Plan promoting the development of the arts and culture, stage plays as a comprehensive art form are undergoing a transformation from the periphery to the mainstream (Guo, 2018).

People’s pursuit of spiritual culture constantly promotes the self-criticism and innovation of stage plays. However, stage plays that mainly adapt literary masterpieces face the challenge of “whether they are faithful to the original”. The translation mechanism of the visual symbols of the stage play constitutes an important dimension of adaptation: the minimalist stage installation completes the semantic transformation from everyday objects to power symbols through the topological deformation of the rosewood chair array; Deconstructivist costume design transforms tra-

ditional official robes into mechanical devices that devour human nature, subverting the magnificent image of the royal guard in the original work with the sound of metal friction. At the ideological level, the adaptation presents a significant feminist shift, resonating with contemporary gender issues through collective physical theater and meaning co-creation with the audience, depicting the predicament of women in the feudal narrative. According to the research data, 85 percent of the audience rethought the criteria for “faithfulness to the original” after watching the performance, and 62 percent of the respondents believed that the abstract expression of body language was more emotionally penetrating than textual narrative.

Therefore, through this study, this paper hopes to dig deeper into the profound connotations and patterns of *Dream of the Red Chamber* after its cross-media translation from three aspects: plot structure, visual symbols (design), and theme reconstruction, and on this basis, summarize experiences and draw lessons.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

In recent years, due to the impact of the pandemic, there has been less research on ballet in China. However, with the support of the country's 14th Five-Year Plan policy, people's pursuit of spiritual culture, and the emergence of various types of ballet since 2014, scholars' research on ballet has shown a gradual upward trend. As a comprehensive stage performance art, ballet is composed of four artistic elements: drama, music, dance and stage art. Therefore, most scholars' research on ballet has revolved around these four aspects, as one of the main forms of narrative in ballet, Xiao Suhua pointed out in “No matter what kind of dance is choreographed, it must have the foundation of Chinese culture” that although Chinese ballet reached a peak in the 20th century, no work has surpassed it after sixty years, indicating that there is a problem (Liu, 2024; Xiao, 2022). She found that in order to present a good effect, Chinese ballet often focuses on “beauty” rather than on the structure of the drama, and does not think about the inner meaning and ideological connotation. The second reason is the lack of local choreographers and the lack of cultural background in some of them. As expressed in Zhang Lin's “On the Art of Dance Drama”, dance needs to have both movement and emotion.

Scholar Liang Danyu once again reflected on this phenomenon and expressed in The ‘Neglected’ Era: A Re-examination of Chinese Ballet Creation in the 1990s that in ballet creation, there should be a pioneering consciousness to break the traditional structure of ballet, while also retaining distinct national characteristics (Liang, 2024; Mu,

2019). It is evident that choreographers need to focus on both the modernization of dance and the preservation of China's cultural essence and emotional expression when choreographing.

In The Intertextual Expression of ‘Drama’, ‘Theatricality’ and ‘Physicality’-From Dance Drama to Dance Theater, Mu Yu points out that when dance drama is to transform into dance theater, it needs to change from the three perspectives of “drama”, “theatricality” and “physicality”, that is, to transform the previous use of dance as a narrative tool into a “body-theater symbiosis” (Wang, 2010; Wang, 2025). This further indicates that the four elements contained in a ballet cannot be independent, but are interconnected in dialogue, subject to each other and interact with each other.

In this context, how should a playwright innovate while maintaining their national character, Dong Jingjing in Breaking and Establishing Together: In “Ontological Inquiry, Contemporary Reflection and Innovative Conception of Ballet, it is pointed out that ballet should break the existing traditional performance paradigm and aesthetic framework, break the shackles of a single linear narrative and stylized body language, achieve a comprehensive upgrade in stage space construction, movement vocabulary innovation and emotional expression dimension, and at the sametime build a new artistic expression system (Dong, 2025). Through the integration of cross-media art and the empowerment of digital technology, the expressive dimension and aesthetic territory of stage art should be expanded (Wu, 2001). Through the research of the above-mentioned scholars, it can be found that the view of the dance drama is no longer just focused on the dance, but through the integration and interaction of different dimensions, it presents works of art with national characteristics that are popular among the masses.

3 THE DECONSTRUCTION STRATEGY OF PLOT ADAPTATION

3.1 The Flower Burial” finale of the ethnic dance drama” Dream of the Red Chamber

In the final chapter of the ethnic dance drama *Dream of the Red Chamber*, titled “Flower Burial”, the traditional narrative of the dance drama is structured as the body poetics of twelve plain-clad women. Through the mutual coding between spatial narrative and body symbols, the choreographer has completed the criticism of feudal ethics and expressed the inner struggles of women. Cao Xueqin's tight linear tragedy is dissected into finger-like fragments, and the individual life histories of the twelve beauties

collapse into repeated falls and on a synchronous stage. The fading of the love myth between Bao and Dai forces the audience to confront the more essential predicament of survival-how the female groups obscured by feudal family narratives complete collective tributes amid the tug-of-war between religious discipline and self-awakening. The mechanical repetition and improvisational outbursts in the dance vocabulary form a polyphonic dialogue, “the huge robes, the loose long hair, the high chair backs, the powerless bodies, the jerking postures, the difficult climbing, every detail is an inescapable cage, every movement is a silent cry (Derrida et al, 1999).” Is a metaphor for the regulatory mechanism of the female body by the ritual system, and also implies the breakthrough of subjectivity from the perspective of modernity.

3.2 The combination of reality and illusion in Nanjing Yue Opera Troupe’s “Weaving Mansion”

In terms of narrative, the ballet breaks away from the traditional narrative structure and constantly innovates through non-linear narrative poetry, interweaving multiple threads and other techniques, making the plot compact and full of ups and downs. In the stage of the Nanjing Yue Opera Troupe’s “Weaving Mansion”, Cao Xueqin’s quill pen tip hovers over the yellowed Xuan paper, and the moment the ink drips, Jia Baoyu’s crimson pearl fairy grass emerges from the inkstone. This spectacle of the creator and the subject being in the same time and space is by no means a mere stage gimmick, but constitutes a deconstructivist theatrical practice. When Cao Xueqin engages in a cross-dimensional dialogue with her characters, the declaration that “the author is dead” is broken in the interwoven time and space of reality and illusion, and in the closed narrative of traditional opera, the author is like an all-knowing deity hidden behind the curtain.

The breakthrough of “The Weaving Mansion” lies in bringing the creative process itself onto the stage: Cao Xueqin sometimes plays chess and sipping tea with Lin Daiyu, and sometimes argues with Xue Baochai about the direction of fate. The power relationship between the creator and the creator is completely overturned when the characters question the author, “Why do you insist that I die in tears?” This intertextual dialogue, as Derrida puts it: “There is nothing beyond the text,” the creative subject constantly splits and reassembles in the dialogue and eventually dissolves into the folds of the text (Derrida, 1999).

The breaking of traditional narrative plots makes the stage expression more innovative, while visual design adds more possibilities to the narrative of the plot.

4 SYMBOLIC TRANSLATION OF VISUAL DESIGN

4.1 Installations and body symbols for ethnic dance dramas

In the center of the stage, twelve high-backed rosewood chairs are arranged in a staggered manner, creating physical oppression with their exaggerated backrest heights. The lotus pattern engraved on the top of the chairs stretches out slender shadows on the ground under the light, just like the embodiment of “gold hairpin buried in the snow” in the “Dream of the Red Chamber” judgment. The specially treated wooden structure of the backrest takes on the form of a monument at a specific Angle, and when the dancers attach themselves to the backrest in an upside-down position, the installation immediately transforms into a group of tombstones, completing the semantic transformation from everyday objects to symbols of death. The spatial arrangement of the chair formation is in line with the hierarchical structure of feudal ethics: the six upright chairs symbolize the legitimacy of the liturgical discipline, while the six inverted chairs suggest the absurd nature of institutional violence. When the dancers penetrate the hollowed-out backrests with their bodies, the wooden frame and the curves of the human body form a visual metaphor of confinement and breakthrough, and the materiality of the installation and the fluidity of the body form a confrontational dialogue.

4.2 Minimalist aesthetics

In the classic scene of Yuanfei visiting her family, the creator deconstructs the traditional official robes into giant mechanical devices. When the actors hide in the mechanical robes embroidered with gold thread, the stereotyped prostration is replaced by the mechanical movement of gears and levers, and the devouring of human nature by the power system is concretized. The design, like a golden cage, deliberately stripped away the gracefulness of traditional opera costumes, turning the elaborate brocade into a metal frame that binds life-every pleat conceals precise gears and every patchwork is made of mechanical components, transforming the feudal hierarchy into an industrial machine that devouring human nature.

The mechanical official robes are always accompanied by a shrill sound of metal friction, which contrasts brutally with the royal ceremonial guards, with the sound of the sheng and xiao in the original work. When puppet-like actors perform standardized prostrations in mechanical devices, the hymn “The Great Grace of the Emperor” is sent out through electronic voice changers with cold mechani-

cal sounds, and the alienation of personality under the discipline of power is doubly confirmed. This postmodernist satirical treatment deconstructs the worship of power into absurd mechanical performances, allowing the audience to catch a glimpse of the devouring nature of feudal ethics in black humor.

The audience, as recipients, needs to break away from the role of passive acceptance and complete the contemporary interpretation of literary imagery in resonance with the aesthetic of the stage, thereby perceiving the ideology presented in the stage play from a modern perspective.

5 THE IDEOLOGICAL INTERVENTION OF THEME RECONSTRUCTION IS CO-CREATED WITH THE AUDIENCE

5.1 Collective destiny from a feminist perspective

In the vast narrative woven by the patriarchal civilization, *Dream of the Red Chamber* is like a broken diamond-shaped mirror, reflecting the collective predicament of the female community under the feudal code system. Contemporary feminist critics catch a glimpse of the sense of community of life hidden beneath the splendid robes through the cracks in this mirror. This consciousness, transcending the barriers of time and space, has gained new vitality in the modern interpretation of the Yue Opera "Weaving Mansion", achieving a rebirth from the classical text to the contemporary spirit. From the lament of "all beauties share the same sorrow" in Zhiyanzhai's comments to the collective awakening of female consciousness in contemporary theaters, the modern interpretation of *Dream of the Red Chamber* has been engaged in a dialogue across time and space.

When the modern workplace metaphor of "exploring the spring and managing the household" is reborn on the screen, and when Xiangyun's drunkenness is interpreted as a declaration of bodily autonomy, the classic text constantly releases new interpretive possibilities through deconstruction and reconstruction. The process of transformation itself constitutes a vivid practice of feminist criticism. Just as the theatrical version of "The Weaving House" allowed Baochai to break free from the golden shackles in the lyrics of "good wind frequently borrowing power", contemporary interpreters are constantly breaking the shackles of traditional narratives. In the artistic dimension where the real and the illusory interplay, the daughters of the Grand View Garden are given a second life. They are

both sacrificial offerings of the feudal system and beacons of modern gender dilemmas.

In this cycle of deconstruction and reconstruction, feminist criticism is not a simple transplantation of theories, but a transformation based on the combination of classic texts and modern consciousness. When Xue Baochai breaks a tea cup on the stage of Yue Opera, the crisp cracking sound not only proclaims the death penalty of the feudal marriage system, but also foretells the awakening of the female subject consciousness that has been suppressed for a thousand years in contemporary civilization. This spiritual resonance across time and space is the secret to the enduring vitality of literary classics.

5.2 Audience participation in meaning co-creation

The sit-in scene becomes a mirror theater of the living conditions of contemporary women. The audience in the front row noticed the actor's overlapping hands trembling slightly, which was interpreted as a leak of suppressed emotions from a working woman; The middle audience saw the imprint of social discipline in the uniform sitting posture; Some viewers caught a fleeting smile on the third actor's lips at a certain moment, seeing it as a covert declaration of rebellion. These differentiated interpretations confirm Kristeva's "symbolic state" theory-that body language always swings between symbolic order and instinctive impulse.

In the blank space of "Return to the Great Wilderness", people witness a revolutionary shift in the paradigm of artistic acceptance. When the twelve silent figures are transformed into countless prisms, the theater is no longer the terminal of meaning, but the emitter that initiates thought. This postmodern way of meaning production not only deconstructs the authority of the author, but more importantly, it reflects the folds of The Times in collective interpretation-the unspoken predicaments of existence, the cries of life that lie dormant beneath silence, will eventually gain the power of redemption in the echoes of the viewer's soul.

6 CONCLUSION

From the above analysis, it can be seen how some current dance dramas, when adapted, use tangible dance drama performances to express the intangible emotions in the text. But in the process of adaptation, "whether it is finally original" has always been a hot topic of discussion. On this basis, the following question needs to be discussed: how can the playwright grasp the core of the original work with a ballet mindset when dissecting the original work.

When it comes to innovation, how can the original work not lose its essence? How should the original author and the screenwriter balance their positions? These questions have never been solved. Therefore, the creation of stage plays should adhere to the dual concept of “preserving the essence and opening up the new.”

In conclusion, when a stage play changes a literary work, it needs to understand its content and choose the appropriate way to express it. A successful adaptation requires a trinity artistic community of scriptwriting, dancers and audience: the scriptwriting needs to have cross-dimensional creative literacy, having solid literary interpretation ability to accurately grasp the spiritual context and contemporary value of the original work, and breaking through the limitations of traditional dance genres to construct a new narrative system by absorbing dance vocabulary from various countries; Dancers need to become physical incarnations of literary characters, and through the secondary coding of body symbols, they can materialize the emotions of the words into tangible stage language. The audience, on the other hand, needs to break away from the passively accepted role and complete the contemporary interpretation of the literary image in the aesthetic resonance with the stage.

This approach of adaptation, which retains the “original flavor” of literature while highlighting the aesthetic standards of The Times, may promote stage plays to become an important artistic bridge connecting classic literature with modern audiences and local culture with the world stage.

Authors Contribution

All the authors contributed equally and their names were

listed in alphabetical order.

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