

Cultural Promotion Strategies for the 2024 Chinese Tour of the Musical *Elisabeth*

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Abstract:

Against the background of globalization, German-language musicals are accelerating into the Chinese market. However, they face the challenges of historical narratives and cultural barriers, as well as the challenges of adapting to the local market. Existing studies are still insufficient in exploring the targeted strategies. This paper takes the 2024 China tour of the musical *Elisabeth* as a case study to analyze its cultural promotion strategy. It is found that the project has successfully realized a win-win situation for both the arts and the market through three main paths. Firstly, by building a cross-platform niche communication matrix to precisely reach the audience. Secondly, by activating the contemporary resonance of historical IPs to weaken the cultural barrier. Thirdly, by innovating cross-industry ecological cooperation to extend the consumption chain. Based on this, it is suggested that the promotion of minor-language musicals in China should: build a niche communication system that matches audience preferences, tap into the universal value of translated historical IP, and build an immersive “culture+” consumption ecosystem to operate the fan economy in depth.

Keywords: German musical; cultural discount; cross-platform communication; historical IP

1. Introduction

In the context of globalization, German-language musicals, as an important vehicle for German and Austrian cultural exports, are rapidly entering the Chinese market. German-language musicals have to face not only language barriers, but also the collision between European historical narratives and Eastern cultural contexts while confronting the dual challenges of adapting to Chinese audiences' aesthetic expectations and commercial market. In 2014, classic German-language musicals had their debut in China

with a 40-show run in Shanghai. 10 years later, it has returned to China with a brand new Schönbrunn Palace Concert edition, performing in Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou. German musicals have an increasing influence in China. Some of its works even have a greater impact than many works from Broadway and the West End, breaking the monopoly of British and American musicals in China's musical import market.

Existing research indicates that the primary audience for Chinese musicals consists of young white-collar

workers and students, necessitating the provision of works that align with their aesthetic preferences [1]. Yu Haiying emphasizes the importance of regional social capital in cultivating audiences [2]. Xiao Zhikang and Zhang Ting's research also highlights the significance of market cultivation, proposing the adoption of a '4P marketing mix strategy' tailored to market demands in response to the current state of the Chinese musical market, which is characterized by unclear positioning and ineffective integration of the industry chain [3]. Internationally, the German musical theatre market faces supply reductions due to operational model transformations, the pandemic, and other related factors, while marketing and promotion significantly influence audience choices [4,5]. Few existing studies have targeted the promotional strategies of minor-language musicals for emerging markets such as China. Especially in the context of the cultural misunderstanding about European court history with local culture and the increasing digitalization and experientialization of audience's consumption behavior in the post-epidemic era, the research on how to break the dilemma of Cultural Discount remains in-depth.

Based on this, this study adopts literature research, case study and virtual ethnography to sort out the promotional practice of Elisabeth 2024 China Tour, and explore how to realize the dual success of artistic value and market benefit through cross-platform communication, offline experience design and cross-industry cooperation, to provide actionable insights for the promotion of German-language musicals in China.

2. Case Development

2.1 Origin and International Influence

The German-language musical *Elisabeth*, which premiered in 1992 at the Theater an der Wien in Vienna, Austria, is a classic masterpiece of the new modern genre of musical theater born outside of Broadway and London's West End. It inherited the expressionist theater tradition pioneered by the Swedish dramatist August Strindberg, and realized the fusion of "musical" and the traditional theory of drama [6]. At its debut, the play was not accepted by the audiences. Influenced by the 1955 film *Sissi*, starring Romy Schneider, Queen *Elisabeth* was portrayed as a pure and fortunate fairy-tale princess. While playwright Michael Kunze pierced this romanticized veneer of the fairy tale to show the joys and sorrows of her life to the world, the sickly image of hypocrisy, selfishness, and struggling in pain in the play is unfamiliar and unwilling to be accepted by audiences. However, its reputation underwent a gradual transformation. A revival of this play was staged in Vienna from 2003 until the end of the public run in 2005. To

date, the play has been adapted and performed in Japan, Hungary, the Netherlands, South Korea, and many other countries, hitting the stages of 11 countries in 8 language versions, and has generated enthusiastic responses all over the world. As the first German-language musical with global influence, *Elisabeth* has accumulated more than 7,500 performances so far [7]. During international tours, it has cultivated a large fan base by its exploration of humanity, fate, and historical reflection, forming a unique cultural IP and laying a brand foundation for the 2024 China tour.

2.2 Preparation for the 2024 China Tour

The preparation for the 2024 China tour of *Elisabeth* presents two characteristics: retaining the artistic essence of the original musical, while streamlining the costs and adapting to the aesthetic needs of the Chinese audience from a practical point of view.

First, simplification and localization. The tour adopts the new stage presentation of "Musical-Version Concert". Director Gil Mehmert emphasizes that this is not a traditional concert, but more like a "director's cut" version of a movie: retaining over 30 core songs and dances of the original play, and highlighting the universal psychological conflicts such as free will and obsession with death by cutting down on the political aspects of the play that are difficult for Chinese audiences to comprehend. The orchestra is placed in the center of the stage, and the actors perform around the musical space, highlighting the narrative function of the music itself and breaking the traditional division of "orchestra pit-stage" [8]. For the Chinese stage, the creative team has made special adjustments.

Secondly, the novel performance form. The China tour replicated the orchestration and set design of the 20th anniversary performance of *Elisabeth* in 2022, the 2022 version of the open-air performance was set at Schönbrunn Palace, with large LED screens on both sides displaying the background of the story, and a skeleton wearing a crown and the double-headed eagle, the national emblem of the Habsburg empire, hanging over the stage. Since Schönbrunn's scenery could not be fully recreated, Michael Balgavy was invited to create a new video design: the newly designed LED screens can be moved, light effects can be presented, architectural spaces can be reproduced, and fog and atmosphere can be laid down. He tried to evoke historical and architectural styles of the era on stage, reproducing on stage the magnificent and elegant castles and gardens. In addition, he tried some more creative means, more to fit the melody, choreography, and dance. For example, when it comes to some rock-style scenes, the images become sharp and dramatic. It's as if the images have their own life and consciousness, and will react to the plot - when *Elisabeth* faces the temptation

of death, an eerie mist rises, foreshadowing the oncoming gloom and uncertainty. He hopes to support and activate the whole scene through the presentation of images and visually set the tone for the audience.

2.3 Tour Schedule and Venue Distribution

The tour's selection of Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou as destinations reflected the precise positioning of the market with high cultural consumption potential. However, the process was not smooth, from the initial cold reception to the fermentation of word-of-mouth to the box office explosion in the later stage, the core lies in the audience's acceptance of the innovative form of "Musical-Version Concert".

The tour kicked off on August 29, 2024, in Shanghai, and then landed in Beijing and Guangzhou. Before the opening, the audience generally had doubts about the "concert" form, believing that the show was just a "standing and singing" and that the Austrian team lacked sincerity about the tour, leading to a stagnant sale of tickets in the early days of the tour, which was much lower than expected. This shows the challenge of acceptance of a new form when entering an unfamiliar market and the problem of initial promotional orientation deviation.

The turning point at the box office came after the premiere. The creative team won the audience's praise for their excellent performance. The positive word-of-mouth spread rapidly through spontaneous social media sharing by the audience, creating a powerful publicity effect. Fei Yuanhong, General Manager of Shanghai Culture Square, revealed in the "Sino-Austria Musical Culture and Industry Salon": "The sales before the show did not meet the expectations, but after the show, the audience's word-of-mouth and the diffusion of the self media made the entire box office quickly warmed up, and the number of members who purchased tickets reached 11,179, and the per capita purchase of tickets by members was 2.1 tickets, and the sales situation after the opening of the tickets set a new high in recent years [9]." It can be seen that the high-quality performance itself is the most powerful marketing tool, successfully breaking the doubts and igniting market enthusiasm.

Benefiting from the continuous fermentation of word-of-mouth, ticket sales for subsequent shows often showed a "sold-out" situation. In the end, the tour was highly recognized by the industry for its market response and artistic standards, and won the "Best Imported Production of the Year" award at the "2024 Beijing • Tianqiao Musical Annual Festival", which provided strong evidence of its success in the Chinese market.

3. Innovative Practices

3.1 Multi-Platform Differentiated Promotion

The three theaters have differentiated their publicity on different platforms for this tour. The WeChat platform is the most used social media in China. Compared with other social media, the number of people browsing, sharing, and liking the WeChat public number is the largest. The three theaters tend to post more in-depth and longer articles on WeChat, containing detailed descriptions of the plays and actors, the spirit and artistic values conveyed by the plays, interviews with the creative team, and so on. For example, Beijing Tianqiao Performing Arts Center has published several articles on WeChat, using in-depth analysis and emotional narratives to attract deep fans of musicals and dispel the audience's misconceptions about "Musical-Version Concert". These tweets not only introduced the show itself, but also conveyed the cultural value of the musical and strengthened the brand image by telling the story of the creators and sharing the creative process. At the same time, the content of the tweets focuses on the transmission of cultural values and provides ticketing services to facilitate the audience in buying tickets.

The users of Red Note are mostly young people, and there are more female users. The theater's promotional materials on this platform are more focused on life-oriented sharing and "hit-up activities", such as publishing high-definition photos, behind-the-scenes glimpses of the creative team, activity review, highlights, etc. The image content and text are also more youth-oriented, often using popular Internet terms and "slang" of the fan circle to bring users closer to each other. In order to promote the tour, Annemieke van Dam and other main actors opened their personal Red Note accounts, posting personalized and life-oriented content that is not part of the official publicity, and often replying to fan comments and responding to fans' emotional expressions, thus narrowing the distance with fans.

Shanghai Culture Square also focuses on publicity on the Bilibili long-video platform. A special documentary was released on this platform - "For a play, to a city", recording the process of the Shanghai Culture Square team's trip to Vienna to observe the concert of *Elisabeth* at the Schönbrunn Palace, exclusively revealing the process of creation and rehearsal before and after the stage and the brand new upgrade for the Shanghai stop. The video has received 327,000 views. In addition, the "Greeting Video from the Producers & Creative Team of Elisabeth and Rebecca" was released. The greetings from the producer and creative team increased the authority and professionalism of the show, letting the audience feel the sincerity of the production team and the importance they attached to the show, and further enhancing the attractiveness of the

show. Bilibili is a platform primarily used by young users who have a high interest in and acceptance of cultural and artistic content. By releasing these videos, it can accurately reach the younger generation of musical theater enthusiasts and potential viewers. These audiences are often one of the main forces of cultural consumption, which is of positive significance for promoting the dissemination and popularization of musicals.

3.2 Diversified Offline Activities

Through differentiated activity design, the three theaters try to integrate historical IP with local culture and build immersive experience scenes. For example, in terms of professional exchanges, the Beijing Tianqiao Performing Arts Center held a meet-and-greet with the lead actors of *Elisabeth* and Rebecca, inviting Annemieke van Dam and Mark Seibert to share their experiences of characterization, teach some simple musical performance skills such as vocalization and dance movements, and sing classic arias to ignite the audience's enthusiasm in advance. In terms of knowledge and popularization, the Drama Art Hall invited Tobias Jagdhuhn, the Production Manager of the concert version of *Elisabeth*, Micky Duncan, Technical Director, and Josefine Lenschau, Costume Supervisor, to conduct two guided stage tours, leading the audience to explore the mysteries behind the stage of *Elisabeth*. In terms of fun, the Beijing Tianqiao Performing Arts Center launched the "Looking for Princess Sissi's New Limited Outfit" activities, which enhanced audience participation and fun through the reward mechanism of limited cards and surprise gifts, enabling them to gain a deeper understanding of the play, as well as stimulating the audience's desire to collect and willingness to share, which further strengthened the emotional connection between the audience and the play; in terms of cultural exchanges, the Guangzhou Grand Theater invited the lead actor to visit the Cantonese Opera Art Museum to gain a deeper understanding of the local culture and to show the lead actor's respect for the local culture.

3.3 Cross-Industry Cooperation and Brand Linkage

During the performance, Shanghai Culture Square, in collaboration with Pao GO Coffee and SHALA Restaurant, created an exhibition of photos and limited products themed on *Elisabeth*, forming a cross-industry cooperation matrix of "Theater + Catering + Retail". This model breaks through the single-viewing experience of traditional performances and extends cultural consumption to daily life. Shanghai Culture Square invited Lukas Mayer, who plays the character of Tod (Death) in the play, to be the "shopkeeper for a day" of the photo exhibition, providing limited meals and lyric cards for the consumers. Through

the interaction of the celebrity shopkeeper, the image of the character in the drama is extended to the consumption scene, enhancing the emotional resonance of the fans. "Emotional investment" is a core driver in East Asian fan culture, and the campaign reinforces fans' loyalty to the actors and the drama through close interaction [10]. Pao GO Coffee and SHALA Restaurant attracted fans to consume with the popularity of the play, while the theater expanded its reach through the offline scenes of the partner brands.

4. Enlightenment

4.1 Cross-Platform Communication Matrix to Accurately Match Audience Preferences

From this case, it can be seen that the key to overcoming cultural barriers lies in accurately matching user preferences and connecting with target audiences. The first step is to decide the content promotion strategy based on the platform characteristics. Content is customized according to the core user profiles (age, interest, cognitive level, consumption habits) of different social media platforms. For deep enthusiasts and professionals (e.g., WeChat), the content focuses on in-depth excavation, professional interpretation, and detailed background introduction. The content published for young pan-entertainment platforms (e.g. Red Note, Bilibili) focuses on short-term visual impact, emotional resonance, connection with hot spots and life-oriented interaction. This kind of segmented communication allows effective information to be accepted by different circles of users with the highest efficiency.

At the same time, the online and offline promotion should also establish the communication chain of "rational cognition - emotional resonance - personal experience". Through professional and reliable content to establish users' rational cognition and trust, through emotional narrative to trigger resonance, and ultimately make users willing to participate in the activities, purchase tickets and consume peripheral goods. Relevant publicity units in charge need to respond quickly to public opinions and concerns (e.g., questions about the format of the performance) and provide precise, targeted answers or responses promptly. This is a key aspect of improving communication effectiveness and avoiding the amplification of cultural differences.

4.2 Activating the Contemporary Resonance of Historical IPs

The key to making historical themes appeal to and resonate with modern audiences is to explore and emphasize their modern core beyond time and space. Visual elements such as gorgeous character modeling and exquisite stage

design have a strong enough cross-cultural attraction, which can quickly attract viewers from different cultures and make them feel the weight of history and cultural atmosphere more intuitively, lowering the threshold of initial acceptance. To weaken the influence of “cultural discount”, it is necessary to appropriately streamline the plots that are overly regional or time-limited (e.g. complicated court politics), and focus on the core themes of universal human concern (e.g. women’s awakening, the pursuit of individual freedom, the search for the meaning of life, and the resistance to bondage in *Elisabeth*). These universal themes are actively emphasized in the promotional process and are linked to contemporary social trends or hot topics in their target markets. This can effectively stimulate the audience’s emotional resonance and identity, and weaken cultural differences.

4.3 Cross-Industry Ecological Construction and Fan Economy Operation

The ultimate goal of cultural consumption is to establish deep connections. This case demonstrates the scenario extension of “Culture+”. Breaking through the limitations of traditional theater space, through cooperation with catering, retail, and other different industry brands, the elements of the play (characters, props, visual symbols, music) are integrated into daily life scenarios (e.g., themed coffee shops, flash stores, exhibitions). This not only extends the chain of theater consumption and increases non-ticket revenue. In addition, by continuously reinforcing the IP image in informal, high-touch settings, the symbols and images penetrate the audience’s lives, and perhaps generate interest in the show from “outsiders,” which in turn feeds back into ticket revenues.

The promotion makes full use of the “emotional investment” of fans in the East Asian cultural circle. It creates an opportunity for fans to interact with the actors up close and provides a unique experience for fans to establish an emotional connection with their idols, which greatly enhances their loyalty and sense of belonging. Related theater tours, lectures, workshops, and other activities will enhance the audience’s artistic knowledge and appreciation of musicals through interaction, and cultivate a more mature and sticky audience base. Organizers and creative teams should also actively encourage and support secondary creation by fans. This kind of fan creation not only enriches the connotation and extension of the IP but also further stimulates the enthusiasm and creativity of the fans and enhances the cohesion and activity of the fan group.

5. Conclusion

Elisabeth 2024 China Tour in Beijing, Shanghai, and

Guangzhou has successfully solved the dilemma of cultural discounts of European court history themes through diversified online and offline publicity as well as cross-industry cooperation, activated the contemporary resonance of historical IP, and realized a win-win situation for both art and market. The tour utilized WeChat, Red Note, Bilibili, and other platforms to release in-depth analyses, high-definition stills, and behind-the-scenes tidbits etc. to accurately reach different circles of audiences. Offline activities, such as meet-the-actor sessions, stage tours, and workshops, enhanced audience participation and emotional connection. Cross-industry cooperation creates the scenario extension of “Culture+”. Innovative thematic expressions resonate historical stories with contemporary values. These strategies not only enhance the popularity and box office of the show, but also provide valuable insights for the musical theater industry and promote the prosperity and development of the musical theater market.

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