

The Localization Path of Korea Original Musicals “Fan Letter” in China

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Abstract:

Many Chinese musical theatre producers blindly introduce foreign productions and lack the ability to independently produce original musicals. However, in the process of introducing Korean musicals, localization adaptations often suffer from the problem of “not used to the local environment”. This study aims to explore the localization adaptation of the Korea musical “Fan Letter” according to different national conditions after its introduction to China, and through questionnaire surveys and in-depth interviews, to summarize the audience’s attitudes towards the localization adaptation and to analyze the reasons for the audience’s different attitudes. The study found that the Chinese version of “Fan Letter” transplanted the original story background to the “isolated island” period in Shanghai, which resulted in a rigid plot logic about “literary salvation”, an empty character characteristic about “pure literature”, and a controversial “refinement” of stagecraft and costumes. This study reveals the root emptiness brought about by the unsuccessful localization of cultural products and provides new ideas and perspectives for the localization adaptation of imported plays in the future.

Keywords: Musicals; localization; fan letter; Korean musical.

1. Introduction

In China, musical theatre, as a new cultural industry, has been loved and sought after by many audiences in recent years. However, while the Chinese musical market continues to expand, it has not gone hand in hand with its institutional construction. At present, domestic musicals are still dominated by imported musicals, with box office revenues from imported original musicals accounting for 45.67% in 2023. Many musical theatre producers blindly introduce

foreign productions and lack the ability to independently produce original musicals, believing that “luxury” is easier to achieve “success”, but ignoring the uniqueness of China’s musical market and the difficulty of forming more applicable industry norms in a short period of time. Compared with European and American musicals, Korea musicals have greater similarities with Chinese musicals in terms of audience structure, narrative characteristics and emotional expression. Therefore, Korean musicals account for a larger proportion of the imported repertoire. Since

the premiere of the first Korean-adapted musical “Finding Destiny” (formerly “Finding Mr. Destiny”) in 2013, more than 50 Korean musicals have been introduced into China for domestic adaptation and re-enactment in the past ten years.

However, in the process of introducing Korean musicals, localization adaptations often suffer from the problem of “not used to the local environment”, such as the story background does not conform to the process of China’s historical development, the character portrayal does not conform to the universal values of China, and the stagecraft and costumes do not conform to the traditional aesthetic habits of China, etc. Therefore, how to effectively localize the musical works has become an urgent problem to be solved. This study explores the localization process of “Fan Letter” in the Chinese market, focuses on the transplantation of the story background, the shaping of character characteristics, and the design of stagecraft and costumes, and summarizes the reasons for the hollowness of the characters due to the rigid historical background. Through the case study of the introduction of Korea original musicals into the Chinese market, it provides new ideas for the successful introduction and localization of cross-cultural musicals, thus providing useful insights for the sustainable development of the musical theatre industry.

2. Literature Review

In the era of continuous expansion of globalization, musicals, as “imported products”, continue to absorb Chinese local culture in the process of introduction into the Chinese market, so as to make them cultural products that meet the aesthetics of Chinese audiences. Zhang Qingna in “An Analysis of the Localization of Musicals in China in the Context of Globalization” puts forward that “the word ‘-ization’ in ‘localization’ embodies a process, so the localization of musical does not refer to a single state, but rather a dynamic process in which the local elements change from less to more [1].” With the explosion of Chinese musicals and the introduction of more and more outstanding foreign musicals, Hou Yingying suggests that “audiences will tend to choose those programs that are more closely related to their own culture [2].” This requires Chinese musicals to be localized in the process of adapting the introduced plays, both in terms of story background and performance style. Only by incorporating more local Chinese elements into musicals can the artistic and commercial value of Chinese musicals be continuously improved.

Taking the Korean musical BBALLAE as an example, Yang Hongyu analyses the localization process of BBAL-

LAE in China from three aspects: script translation, character characteristics and stage aesthetics. The paper proposes that “there is a large demand for Korean small theatre musicals in the Chinese market, but in the process of exporting to the Chinese market, Korean musicals need to consider the cultural differences between China and South Korea to better adapt to the tastes and cultural background of the Chinese audience, and localized adaptation has become the key to its success [3].” Zhang Jiwen analyses the localization of the musical “The Piano in a Factory” from three aspects: stage design, music style, and localization intention, and proposes that “only local musicals that write Chinese stories, Chinese spirit, and Chinese characteristics can be more deeply rooted in the hearts of the people than works on Broadway and London’s West End [4].”

As an important work in the history of Korean original musicals, the musical “Fan Letter” won the first prize in the 2016 Global Musical Live, a competition for Korean original musicals and has been on the top of the list of all major musicals. Since its premiere in Korea in 2016, it has been widely acclaimed by audiences, media, and professionals, and has been hailed as “a work that rewrote the history of Korean original musicals”. What is special about “Fan Letter” is that it is based on famous writers Yi Sang and Kim You Jung during Japanese Korea period. Therefore, the transplantation of historical background is particularly important in the process of localizing “Fan Letter”. In this study, based on the audience’s feedback, we will focus on analyzing the three aspects of the localization process of “Fan Letter”, the historical background, character characteristics, and stage costume design, and explore the changes made in the introduction of “Fan Letter”, as well as the impact of the changes.

3. Research Methods

This study mainly collected the audience’s attitudes and evaluations on the localization adaptation of the Chinese version of “Fan Letter” through interview method and questionnaire method. It mainly investigated the audience’s views on the background setting of the story, the shaping of character characteristics, and the design of stage costumes.

3.1 Interview Method

3.1.1 Focus Groups

Because of the tight schedule, the author planned an online focus group interview on 10th September. The total number of participating members was nine, and the duration was three hours and 48 minutes. Table 1 lists the

primary information of the group interviews.

Table 1. Group interview information

Number	Gender	Age	The number of times spoken
Respondents 1	Female	20	3
Respondents 2	Female	19	1
Respondents 3	Female	21	2
Respondents 4	Male	25	2
Respondents 5	Female	22	3
Respondents 6	Female	26	4
Respondents 7	Female	27	3
Respondents 8	Male	23	1
Respondents 9	Female	29	4

3.1.2 In-Depth Interviews

After the focus group interviews, the author observes that more and more in-depth views and comments were need-

ed. Thus, on 11th September, the author interviewed five senior fans online. The primary information of the interviewees and the interviews is listed below in Table 2.

Table 2. Information of interviews and interviewees

Number	Gender	Age	Interview Method	How long the process lasted
Respondents A	Female	21	Phone	1h32min
Respondents B	Male	23	Phone	1h18min
Respondents C	Female	22	Phone	1h52min
Respondents D	Female	19	Social Platforms	
Respondents E	Female	31	Social Platforms	

3.2 Questionnaire Method

In addition to discussing the localization process and issues of the musical “Fan Letter” with specific audience members, the paper also wanted to understand the audience’s general attitudes towards the localization of the Chinese version of “Fan Letter” and how much they liked it. In this context, the author developed a set of questionnaires to conduct a basic investigation on the story background, character relationships, costumes and stagecraft of the musical “Fan Letter”. The survey started on 12th September and completed on 15th September. A total of 442 valid questionnaires had been received.

4. Research Findings and Discussions

The story of the original “Fan Letter” took place during the Japanese Korea period on the Korean Peninsula, and the prototype “Nine People’s Association” pursued pure literature in order to fight against Japanese colonial rule and protected the Korean language and literature. The young writer Jung Se Hun used the pseudonym “Hikaru”

to correspond with Kim Hae Jin a member of the “Nine People’s Association” and became deeply affectionate because of literature. “Literature to save the country” and “literature to save the people” have thus become the core of the play. Therefore, in the process of localizing the musical “Fan Letter”, story background, character creation and stage costumes should be in line with the basic core of the original “Fan Letter”. However, in the Chinese version of the musical “Fan Letter”, the audience has different evaluations and opinions on the story background, character building, and stage costumes.

4.1 Background: About “Literature to Save the Country”

The Chinese version of “Fan Letter” sets the story background in Shanghai during the “isolated island” period, when The War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression broke out in full swing and resistance against Japanese aggression and national salvation became a topic of national concern. Wang Pengfei said in “On the Literature periodicals Published During Gudao (1937-1941)”: There

has never been a historical event that has had such a profound impact on the entire group of intellectuals and writers as the outbreak of the War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression in 1937 [5]. Thus, it can be seen that the Chinese version of “Fan Letter” has a similar national emotional tone as the original Korean version, which is based on the era of ‘Japanese Korea’ and “Against the Aggressor”.

However, in the process of investigation, the author found that many viewers did not feel the emotion of “Literature to Save the Country” in the course of watching the play. Five of the 9 focus group members agreed that there was room for improvement in the setting of “Literature to Save the Country”. Four out of 5 audience members interviewed in-depth thought that the will to “Literature to Save the Country” was not well reflected in the roles. In the questionnaire survey, 68.9% of the audience also believed that the concept of “Literature to Save the Country” was not set up well in the Chinese version of “Fan Letter”. 22-year-old female interviewee C proposed that “the ‘Seven Members’ sang about how everyone is unmotivated to create while the country is in crisis and they want to ‘Literature to Save the Country’, but there is no reflection of this aspect of the story that follows, and most of the plot is about describing the Haiming, Weilan and Guang’s relationship.” A 20-year-old female college student interviewee I believes that “the part of the Seven Members that mentions the literary revival and ‘writing in Chinese’ would seem slightly empty and more difficult to empathize with, and the depth of the plot is indeed a bit shallower than the original version.”

During the period when the original “Fan Letter” story took place, the Korean Peninsula was occupied by the Japanese army, and because Chinese culture was widely spread in Korea, Chinese and Japanese literature was especially prevalent in Korea. And the Japanese colonial government did not allow the people of the Korean Peninsula to write in Korean. Therefore, both the country and the culture of the Korean Peninsula were in a precarious situation during the Japanese Korea period. The “Seven Members” determined to create in the language of their own country, tried new things, broke through bottlenecks, and circulated valuable literary works. Touching deeper emotions, changing the national character, maintaining the unique sensitivity of the Korean nation, and preserving artistic independence are the literary patriotism they advocate. Each creation of the ‘Seven Members’ was a protest against the Japanese occupation forces and the identification with the national culture, and each writing risked being banned and arrested.

In the Chinese version of “Fan Letters”, there is precisely no such history, and the literati in Shanghai can still use

Chinese to run journals, and Zheng Weilan’s confusion, talent and literary pursuit of studying in Japan alone are not valued. Without this historical background, it would seem to be no different from the necessary stage of adolescents “to write new verses with a false despair”.

The original aesthetic ideology and national cultural creation, in China, can only become an embarrassing disease-free moan, and even have the feeling of a mandarin duck butterfly who does not talk about national affairs. The prototype that was taken out of the story has also left a huge hole underneath the story, causing the original solid historical background to become suspended and empty.

4.2 Characterization: About “Pure Literature”

In the Korean version of ‘Fan Letter’, writers such as Jung Se-hoon and Kim Hae-jin advocated “theory of art for art” during the Japanese Korea, advocating “pure literature that is detached from social reality, detached from political concepts, and expresses the essence of pure art and life”. During the “isolated island” period in Shanghai, there were many periodicals waving their flags and shouting “pure literature and art”, among which writers Wen Zhaotong, Zhu Tianfan, Wang Geyi, etc. were also believers in “theory of art for art”. Therefore, no matter the Korean writers in the Japanese Korea, or the Shanghai writers who stayed in the public rented area in the “isolated island” period, there are some of them who insisted on pure literature.

Regarding pure literature, some of the audience have deep feelings in the Chinese version of “Fan Letter”. 19-year-old female college student interviewee 2 said, “In the singing section of ‘Number 7’, there is a line ‘Although we are considered to have no ideas and to be idle / But we are willing to do it for the sake of pure art!’ was very impressive, and it made me feel that the ‘Seven Members’ is focused on pure literature.” As a veteran drama fan, 31-year-old female interviewee E pointed out that “pure literature has always been pursued by the Chinese version of the ‘Seven Members’, and no matter how the situation changes, Li Ling and Jin Haiming have continued to publish magazine Chao Hua. And I really like the atmosphere of the seven of them discussing literature together, which makes me feel like they are real.”

At the same time, however, there are also some viewers who do not recognize the purely literary expression in the Chinese version of “Fan Letter”. 23-year-old male respondent B thought that “the Chinese version ends by sublimating to the idea that literature can redeem people, but no one in the whole show is redeemed because of literature. Strip away the veneer of ‘writer’ and put on just about anything else: musicians, painters, scientists, and

the story remains the same as before, the core remains the same.” A 27-year-old female focus group member 7 mentioned that “The ‘Seven Members’ in the play, I don’t see these people really doing anything with literature. Maybe they did, there were indeed people in history who did something with literature in the midst of war, but all I see in the play is a group of people, in slate suits and polished shoes, drinking and partying every day, where they talk about what kind of doctrine there, like literature, or whatever else, is just a tool for them to express their ideals.”

Two out of five audience members interviewed in depth expressed dissatisfaction with the localization of “pure literature”. Five out of nine focus group participants agreed that the Chinese version of “Fan Letter” promoted the slogan of “pure literature”. Overall, the audience was equally divided between those who were satisfied and those who were dissatisfied with the localized protagonist’s “pure literature” qualities.

In the original “Fan Letter”, Kim Hae Jin “has no research of ‘isms’ or anything like that, he just writes”, which reflects Kim Hae Jin’s pure pursuit of his country’s literature, and that’s why he was so fascinated by the words in Hikaru’s letters. And Jung Se Hun, who studied in Japan, was expelled from school for picking up Korean literature that had been thrown to the ground and beating the person who threw the book. This plot shows that Korean literature was in danger of extinction, and the independence of Korean literature is suppressed by Japan colonialism. Jung Se Hun was deeply attracted to Korean literature, especially the writing of Kim Hae Jin, which is why he corresponds with Kim Hae Jin and exchanges words. The love between the two started because of the words, and their soul resonance is also because of the emotional connection underneath the words. The “Hikaru” in the original “Fan Letter” seems to be a product of Jung Se Hun’s split personality, but she carries the complex emotions of her mother tongue, ethnicity, and literature. In addition, under the tense and oppressive environment, the way in which the characters place their hopes is bound to be more intense and crazier. The text of the letters is only the result, but the real object of the emotions is the character of Hikaru.

However, in the Chinese version of “Fan Letter”, rather than Zheng Weilan’s fervent admiration and love for Jin Haiming, he likes the creative energy he is stimulated in that state, which results in the output of better literature, thus creating a positive cycle that solves the dilemmas of his life, that is, literary creativity gives him purpose, and excellent works allow him to be seen. This is the same for Jin Haiming, suffering from a serious illness and being able to make full use of his creative talents to write monumental works in the little time available is another kind of

immortality. As for who Xia Guang is, it’s all up to preference and imagination, it does not matter, what matters is inspiration and works.

The original Korean version of “Fan Letter” is a complete account of the survival, struggle and redemption of literary youth in the horrific era when they were not allowed to use their mother tongue, and the focus falls on redemption. However, in the localized Chinese version of “Fan Letter”, Xia Guang became no matter who it was, what matters is my creative inspiration muse, which pushes me to create better works, and it’s all about ‘me’.

4.3 Costume and Stagecraft: About “Refinementism”

In order to match the oppressive and tense atmosphere of the Japanese Korea period, the stagecraft of the original “Fan Letter” was only a few simple sets of tables and chairs placed in a cramped Japanese-style room. The characters are also dressed in simple suits. In the Chinese version of “Fan Letter”, because the story location was transplanted to Shanghai, and it was also moved from a small theater to a large theater, the stage was changed to a more luxurious European-style double-decker library with a spiral staircase and leather sofas. The actors uniformly wore clean three-piece suits.

During the investigation, it was found that most of the audience were satisfied with the stagecraft and costumes of the Chinese version of “Fan Letter”. Of the five audience members interviewed in depth, four were satisfied with the Chinese version of the stagecraft and costumes. In the focus group of nine audience members, seven preferred the Chinese version of the stagecraft and costumes. In the questionnaire survey, 94.2% of the people were satisfied with the localized stage costumes of “Fan Letter”.

Respondent A, a 21-year-old female college student, said “I really want to give 99 points to the stage art alone, I just like some luxurious and delicate rich sets with hidden mysteries, the light and shadow effects are very different from the original, but I also like it, the use of a lot of shadows is too wonderful, the design of the mirror looks more cyber, and I like the letter wall so much, especially after the confession singing, the letter paper wall is broken and scattered all over the place, it is so beautiful. There are also letter papers, flower petals, and glowing steps floating down from the top, every design is so beautiful. As for what some people said about the actors not being able to hold up the big set, I didn’t feel that at all.” A 21-year-old female interviewee 3 proposed that “The Chinese version moved the small theatre productions to the large theatre, expanding the scope of activities, and redesigned actors’ positions, but it does not have the usual ‘small to large’

feeling of an empty stage, which is great.”

However, a small number of audiences also made some suggestions on the stagecraft and costumes of the Chinese version of “Fan Letter”. E, a 31-year-old female interviewee in an in-depth interview, thought, “In the 1940s, China was full of wars, and the country was in deep trouble. But the picture of a luxurious editorial room where the ‘Seven Members’ was talking about literary ideas with high bouncing drinks as if they are completely unaware of the picture of the external disaster, which made me feel cut off and reduces the impact and credibility.”

The lavish stagecraft and costumes bring wonderful visual shock to the audience, but they also do not help to make the show localization better. In the scene of the “Seven Members”, the editorial office is as magnificent as a five-star library, with neatly arranged books, spacious and convenient stairs, and soft and comfortable sofas, which are not only several times more luxurious than the ordinary Japanese-style rooms in the Korean version, but also not at all in line with the writing environment of well-known writers during the “isolated island” period in Shanghai.

5. Conclusion

In the process of studying the localization of the Chinese version of “Fan Letter”, based on audience evaluation and text analysis, it is found that due to the failure of story background transplantation, it leads to the deviation of character image building. The localization of “Fan Letter”, which transposes the story setting of the Korean Peninsula during the Japanese Korea Period to “isolated island” period of Shanghai, weakening the sense of emptiness and urgency generated by the literati in the torrent of the era of national salvation and survival. The country is in danger, the individual is small, and the powerlessness of the literati is further magnified, because they are destined to do nothing, they are more willing to burn themselves out in the hope of making a difference in literature. The loss of this layer of padding has led to the slogan of “Pure Literature” shouted by the “Seven Members” in the play being hollow and feeble, and the highlights of the characters’ pursuit of their literary beliefs also appear dim.

Moreover, the localization of “Fan Letter” is the top of domestic musicals in other aspects. The delicate singing of the top actors and actresses enhances the emotional concentration between the characters, and the elaborate

stage set adds to the emotion and atmosphere, so that the audience can experience the true and good feelings of the literati and the pure and unchanging pursuit of literature through the Chinese version of “Fan Letter” which has made the Chinese version of “Fan Letter” a well-known Korean-adapted musical in recent years.

This study makes an in-depth discussion on the localization adaptation of “Fan Letter” in China, focusing on three key elements: historical background, character building, and stagecraft and costumes. The study finds that these elements have a significant impact on enhancing audience acceptance and reveals the challenges and problems in the localization process of musicals. It is hoped that through this study, it can provide a broader perspective and deeper thinking for the introduction and adaptation of overseas musicals in the future, to maintain the unchanged foundation, adjust the variable factors, and constantly adapt to the development to keep pace with the times. Nowadays, the musical theatre market is booming, but to gain a foothold in China, musical theatre as an art form needs to be supported by ‘localized’ content. Through the continuous injection of local elements into musicals, the artistic aesthetics of traditional Chinese culture in terms of themes, plots, characters, stagecraft, costumes, etc., it is hoped that, in the future, Chinese musicals will not only develop towards standardization and commercialization, but also carry the spiritual connotation of Chinese.

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