THE ADAPTATION OF ENGLISH PROFESSIONAL DRAMAS IN MODERN CHINA

Feifei He, Zan Zou, and Ling An*

Abstract: Modern Chinese drama is developed based on adaptations and performances of Western dramas. The adaptation of English professional dramas enriches the types of modern Chinese dramas and, to a certain extent, increases the Chinese audience's understanding of modern professions. Although differences in social development and the professional gaps they create limit the number of performances and yield unsatisfactory results, the adaptation of professional dramas remains a valuable reference for enriching genre classification in modern Chinese dramas and scriptwriting practices.

Introduction

The so-called "adaptation" refers to the creative translation of foreign works. "The adapted drama mainly refers to the adaptation of the characters, time, place, plot, and spirit of the original script, and it also takes into account some scripts adapted from foreign novels or stories, both of which include the foreign-language versions and the existing Chinese translations. Some people call the two types of adapted drama above. (Liu, 2010, p. 91) The modern Chinese adapted drama has appeared since the adaptation and performance of "*Uncle Tom's Cabin*". It can be said that modern Chinese drama evolved and developed through the adaptation of foreign dramas.

In the early 1920s, concerning the issue of learning from Western dramas in the theatrical circle, the People's Theatre Society launched a discussion in *Drama*, a monthly journal. One important suggestion was to adapt Western dramas, making them "sinicized" to meet the needs of Chinese audiences. Subsequent drama practices have shown that adaptation indeed serves as an effective means to transplant and draw inspiration from foreign dramas in the early stage of modern Chinese drama.

The "exotic" nature of modern Chinese drama makes it closely related to foreign dramas. Adapted dramas emerged during the process of translating and introducing a large number of foreign dramas. Adapting Western dramas by drawing on and learning from the creative ideas and techniques of foreign dramas has become a method for Chinese dramatists to improve their scriptwriting. Chinese drama has found its unique way through the study, comprehension, and imitation of Western dramas. (An, 2015, p. 1) Among many adaptations, the adaptation and performance of professional dramas introduce new themes and creative perspectives into modern Chinese dramas. Although there are few English-language professional dramas adapted from original scripts, they enrich the types of modern Chinese drama and expand Chinese audiences' understanding of modern drama.

I. The Background of the Adaptation of Professional Dramas in China

Adaptation has gone beyond the meaning of general writing. It has become an organic part of the Chinese drama movement and a force, overt or covert, in shaping its development. It has tempered and nourished the Chinese drama art, and it has indirectly promoted the nationalization process of Chinese drama, which has an important position and significance in the development of Chinese drama". (Tian, 1993, pp. 640-641) Through adaptation, modern Chinese drama has produced numerous collaborative scripts that have fostered the development

* Dr. FEIFEI HE, associate professor, School of Chinese Language and Literature, Xinjiang University; ZAN ZOU, professor, School of Chinese Language and Literature, Xinjiang University; Dr. LING AN, professor, doctoral supervisor, School of Chinese Language and Literature, Xinjiang University.

of theatrical movements. The dramatists learn creative skills from foreign dramas, and the types of modern Chinese drama have been enriched through adaptation.

There are many types of adaptations of Western dramas by Chinese dramatists. In the 1920s, the adaptation of English dramas mainly focused on melodramas and well-made dramas, and won the favor of some audiences. From the 1930s to the outbreak of the War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression, British genre comedies achieved success in adaptation and performance. During the eight years of the War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression, most dramatists adapted English dramas, incorporating themes of the War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression and conforming to social reality. The number of adapted dramas is growing, and Chinese dramatists are increasingly influencing English professional dramas.

The professional drama is a specific form in the field of art. It aims to truly reflect the field's overall appearance and the mental state of its employees by deeply exploring the typical life phenomena of the industry. Specifically, it draws on a specific industry or occupation as its core content and creates stage plays or film and television works for audiences to enjoy (Fan, Zhang, 2024, p. 68). The professional drama in the English-speaking world has a long history, especially in the United States, where it emerged alongside early drama. The highly developed Western social economy in modern times has contributed to the trend toward detailed division of labor and has also provided characters and dramatic material for artistic creation. In American society, professions such as university professors, doctors, and lawyers have a long history and have reached a relatively advanced stage of development. These professions, with high income and social status, have become the envy of ordinary people, making doctors, lawyers, and other professionals the protagonists in American professional dramas to a certain extent. The mature industry system and the strong audience reception have promoted the development of American professional drama. In the United States, people can find ways and means to realize the value and ideals of life through their own careers in society. People can find common ground and a point of convergence between the characters and themselves by watching high-level, professional dramas in life (Zhang, 2011, p. 6).

There is no so-called professional drama in Chinese traditional opera. Even if some professional characters appear, they usually exist as “miscellaneous roles”, which are neither the protagonists nor have a dramatic function. That is to say, although such characters have certain professional identities, such as doctors, litigators (similar but different from lawyers), secretaries, and military personnel, their occupations and professional characteristics have almost no relationship to the composition of drama plots or the development of drama conflicts. They cannot and will not play a role in advancing the plot. They do not shape their own characters or help form and develop other characters. In essence, Chinese opera characters can be roughly categorized into “officials” and “ordinary people”. The essence of dramatic conflict lies in the clash between the positions represented by the two types of individuals, which is closely related to China’s feudal political system and the political-ethical culture it fostered. Although after the abolition of the imperial examination, many occupations began to have independent social significance, and gradually gained the social value that other occupations in modern society cannot replace, the reflection of these values, professional ethics, and honor through literary and dramatic works has been pretty delayed.

As an important and special phenomenon in the history of Chinese drama, the adaptation of foreign dramas provides a template for modern Chinese dramas to imitate, helping address the “script shortage” to some extent. Modern professions and related character images that never existed in China before have also been introduced. During the period of crude stage play, the images of lawyers, judges, and doctors appeared in the adaptation and performance of Shakespeare’s dramas, and the images of detectives appeared in the adaptation and performance of detective dramas. Unfortunately, there weren’t any scripts because they were often performed

as scenario plays. At the time, audiences paid attention only to the drama's conflicts and did not want to understand the profession portrayed in the play; in the view of Chinese audiences, the lawyers in these plays were "officials." At the same time, the lines failed to convey the play's characters' professional ideals because they were adapted and temporary. From the perspective of the full-length adaptation of English dramas in the later period, adaptations of professional dramas were relatively limited, and there were fewer performance records and professional reviews. To a certain extent, cultural differences, professional barriers, and social realities have affected the adaptation of professional dramas in China and influenced their acceptance and recognition.

Unlike the successful localization of political figures in adaptations of historical and political dramas, adapters tend to make few changes to the portrayal of characters in modern professions, and they generally maintain their original professional attitudes and personalities as depicted in Western dramas. This is mainly because, although some modern professions appeared in China at that time and many professions gradually gained independence, due to the poverty and backwardness of Chinese society, the masses and these professions were rarely connected. The adapters are not from a related industry, and they have no time to conduct in-depth research on these modern industries. Moreover, they are unfamiliar with the life of the characters in the related industries and their professional ideals. Therefore, they cannot and will not rewrite the content related to professional aspects in professional dramas for the Chinese context. The adapters treat the professional images of lawyers, doctors, and others as general moral archetypes and do not highlight the specific influence of their professional traits on the characters. The above problems persisted until the 1940s. Chinese drama has entered a period of gradual maturity and nationalization, but it has not been well addressed. It can even be said that this problem has remained so far.

II. The Adaptation of Three English Professional Dramas in China

The practice of adapting English professional dramas dates back to the 1930s. This paper analyzes the dissemination and reception of professional dramas in modern China by examining adaptations of three works: *Counsellor-at-Law* by American playwright Elmer Rice, *Men in White* by Sidney Kingsley, and *The Show* by British playwright John Galsworthy. The first two American dramas are relatively popular professional dramas on Broadway. They have won the Pulitzer Prize and have been adapted into films. They have strong box-office performance in the United States and China. They are respectively adapted into "Shanghai Barrister" and "Work Hard" in China. Galsworthy's *The Show* is also popular in the UK, and it has been translated into "A Bustling," "Storm in the City," or "Doubts in the Sea of Love" in China.

Rice's *Counsellor-at-Law* takes the lawyer industry as the theme, and the scene is set in the law firm of New York's Empire State Building. The story of the whole drama and the social problems it exposes are closely related to the legal industry, revealing the dark insides of the American legal system: speculation and opportunism, cheating and fraud, corruption and misconduct, and the unscrupulous pursuit of success in any way (Guo, 2011, p. 201). American professional dramas not only depict people's work and lives in a specific industry but also represent their expertise, reflect professional culture, and showcase industry malpractice. However, although there was a legal industry in China at that time and several famous barristers, the legal system was extremely imperfect. The general public was not familiar with this occupation. Multiple laws mentioned in Counsellor-at-Law had not yet emerged in modern China, and Rice, who was familiar with legal subjects, wrote legal terminologies and provisions in a very detailed and professional way. Therefore, the adapter had to copy the legal professional contents of the original drama. "Shanghai Barrister" almost put the law firm of the Empire State Building directly on the bank of the Huangpu River in China, and changed the names of people and places in the source text into Chinese, literally translating American legal terminologies and provisions. Therefore, neither the adapter nor the audience knew which laws the play referred to, and these laws were closely related to the whole plot. This made it difficult for the

audience to have a deep insight into the long lines, grasp plot points in "Shanghai Barrister", and to empathize with the professional ideals of lawyers. To align with China's social reality, the adapter revised the source text's ending to give the hero a stronger sense of professional mission in handling bail procedures for the release of the "seven gentlemen" from prison. While it superficially seems to link the lawyer's personal sense of mission with the future of the country and the nation, the actual performance was unsatisfactory, and the number of performances was very limited. Because this change isolated the integrity of the theme of the source text, the end of the grafting and the overall development of the plot were incompatible, leading the Chinese audience to understand that the hero's wife was cheating, but could not comprehend the confusing ending of his life by rescuing the seven gentlemen from prison.

Sidney Kingsley's *Men in White* takes the hospital as the background, "focusing on the great sacrifice made by individual doctors for the medical profession and the sacred glory added to this sacrifice by personal professional ideals" (An, 2015, p. 196). Familiarity with the medical industry has become the key to the drama's success or failure. Kingsley has long been concerned about the medical industry and has observed and worked in hospitals to understand its development. The drama focused on issues such as illegal abortion, medical progress, clinical trials, and deep contradictions between employers and doctors. However, these problems were too advanced for the state of Chinese medical development at the time. It can even be said that they were not the main problems faced by the Chinese medical community at that stage. Dramatic conflicts and an inappropriate theme created a significant gap between the adapted version of "Hard Work" and the adapter and the audience. In addition, differences in gender morality across countries led the male and female protagonists in the script to be perceived as "morally deficient" in Chinese culture. Meanwhile, what was more significant than the differences in social and cultural concepts was the disparity between traditional Chinese medicine and Western medicine in their concepts of medical ethics. The adapter obviously ignored this difference, failed to address the drama's plot and professional ethics, and copied the original script literally, which ultimately led the adapted version to fail to be recognized by the Chinese audience. In the 1940s, the female doctor in Cao Yu's drama "Metamorphosis" was recognized by the audience as a three-in-one image of "mother, doctor and soldier", showing that "the professional ideals and enthusiasm of the intellectuals who supported the soul of the whole drama in the source text must be supplemented by other ethics in the adapted version in order to truly shine the stage" (An, 2015, p. 201). The lack of performance records or reviews of "Hard Work" illustrates this point.

"The Show" by Galsworthy tells the story of a couple who appear to be an excellent match but are separated. After the husband's sudden death, the wife becomes the biggest suspect. Throughout the case, the detective gradually uncovers the couple's secrets and the involvement of their respective families. Finally, the truth of the case is revealed: the husband committed suicide because he fell into a political scandal. The earliest full translation of the drama in China is the English-Chinese version named "A Bustling" published by Kaiming Book in 1932. According to "A Bustling", Yu Ling adapted "The Show" into "Storm in the City" and later changed it to "Doubts in the Sea of Love" for performance at the Xuangong Theatre, showcasing the profession of a detective for Chinese drama audiences. In the adapted version, the adapter further highlighted the detective's role and used "detective drama" as a gimmick to promote the play. Poddy regarded the play as a very good detective drama and thought it a typical detective drama in "Doubts in the Sea of Love performed at Xuangong." At the beginning of the drama, suspense was deliberately organized to keep the audience guessing. It is only when the letter was released to the public at the end that the truth dawned on them. However, "A Storm in the City" lasted only a week, with 13 performances, before its abrupt closing. (Mu, 2021, p. 316). Chinese audiences' understanding of "detective" has, to a certain

extent, affected the show's performance. In the West, detectives "investigate crimes and other illegal activities that have happened or are likely to occur". Western detectives have the right to investigate criminal and civil cases, parallel to the development of the country's police department. However, in China, detective agencies mostly operate as "civil affairs investigation office" and "social security consulting investigation company". The investigation is limited to civil affairs, and its findings cannot be used as evidence in a trial and do not have legal effect. What's more, in the era of this drama adaptation, the detective industry did not exist in China at all, and Chinese people had little knowledge and cognition of detectives and the profession, which confined the audience's understanding of the detectives' pursuit of the truth step by step.

In China, the adaptation and performance of professional dramas show a markedly different acceptance effect from that of social problem dramas, historical dramas, and love dramas. The main reason is that China's modern professional systems haven't been established. Both the adapters and the audiences lacked a comprehensive understanding of modern professions, such as those of lawyers and doctors. They examine them with the general ideals of universal value in the whole society, and they couldn't understand the independence of their professional ideals. Therefore, in the main line of the drama, the conflict arising from this left them unable to acknowledge the characters or empathize with them. Social problem dramas, historical dramas, and love dramas convey the conflict and resolution of good and evil that almost all mankind can recognize in a community. Whether tragedy, comedy, or drama, it is highly compatible with the themes and aesthetics of traditional Chinese opera and easier for Chinese audiences to accept.

In addition, there is a certain ambiguity about the identities of the protagonists in the adapted versions of professional dramas. They are neither ordinary people, with whom the audience can share their struggles, nor heroes to be admired. In fact, they are upper-class figures, i.e., "officials", who are almost unrelated to the audience. What's more, the protagonists in the dramas are mostly faced with abnormal emotions, such as estranged marriages and extramarital affairs. It is difficult for Chinese audiences accustomed to thinking in terms of general moral requirements to identify with the protagonists' positions, and it is also difficult to have sympathy for them, let alone respect. Instead, it is easy to be classified as "adultery" or "fraud". Therefore, Chinese audiences cannot understand the strong irony and social criticism in "Shanghai Barrister" and "Hard Work". They show no interest in the stories that have nothing to do with the drama and cannot arouse emotional resonance.

III. The Dilemmas and Reasons for the Development of Professional Dramas in China

Drama adaptation is not only a language conversion, but also a dual process of cultural reconstruction. The adaptation of professional dramas not only requires the adapters to have a certain language ability but also a certain understanding of the professions in the adapted scripts. However, in China, where the modern professional division of labor is not well-developed, in the case that the adapter is not familiar with the professional characteristics, the adaptation of professional dramas will inevitably lead to emotional estrangement and value alienation between the adapted version and the Chinese audience, and further lead to the difficulty of accepting the adaptation in China.

First of all, a professional drama requires that the dramatist must have the cognition and familiarity of a certain profession, which is not only reflected in the use of certain professional terms, but also in the deep understanding and recognition of the professional ethics and ideals of a certain profession. Otherwise, the plot is unreasonable, the character is not credible, and the audience cannot obtain empathy. If we do not understand the plots and characters of professional dramas from the perspective of professional ethics rather than general social ethics, then the choices and behavior of practitioners may seem unreasonable to ordinary people. In modern society, professional ethics and ideals are not contrary to general social ethics and ideals, but they also have connotations that cannot be fully covered by general social ethics and ideals. Therefore, many excellent professional dramas in Western theatres are created by dramatists

who are either practitioners themselves or have conducted long-term research in a professional setting and have finally identified with the ideals of the profession, such as the authors of the two American dramas above. However, given the short, high-performance needs, the adapter does not have time to understand some professions in depth and does not conduct sufficient research or observation. Therefore, the adaptations often reveal the unreasonable conflicts in dramas and the "discomfort" of characters' behavior.

Secondly, based on the above reasons, the logical progression of the plot, the development of the characters' personalities, and the establishment and evolution of the relationships between the characters in the original work must be reconsidered and reset in the adapted version. Sometimes the adapters can find relatively appropriate alternatives. Even if they are a little blunt, they can justify themselves, and the audience can basically understand the dramas. Sometimes, if the adapters cannot find a suitable alternative, it can create many doubts about the plot's development, erode the foundation of the characters' personalities, and make the relationships between the characters rigid, making it difficult for the audience to understand. For example, the adapter often attributes the dramatic conflicts and the relationships between the characters to the national cause, major issues of principle, and the conflicts between good and evil. Whether the protagonist in the drama is a lawyer or a doctor, he or she will eventually attribute his or her professional ethics to patriotism, which is a helpless ambiguity. Although this treatment is easy to elicit the audience's understanding in the specific context of a certain era, this ambiguity will also undermine the themes of the original to a large extent, making the adapted version lose credibility in its themes.

Thirdly, the ultimate resolution of the drama conflicts, that is, from conflict to harmony, should be able to meet the aesthetic expectations of the audience. Whether this harmony is the reality smashing the ideal, or the ideal defeating the reality, in short, it establishes a new balance. In professional dramas, this kind of harmony embodies the professional ideal. This kind of professional ideal goes hand in hand with human goodness, the kindness and beauty of human nature. However, if the kindness and beauty are reflected but have nothing to do with the professional ideal, then it is not a real professional drama. It can be said that the theme of the professional drama is rearranged, leading to an end that is "within expectations but beyond sense", which may destroy the audience's aesthetic feelings and even cause the audience to dispel the social value of a certain profession. Therefore, ensuring the dialectical unity of professionalism and theatricality in professional dramas is key to gaining audience recognition.

Although there were some occupational divisions in the early stages of modern Chinese society, most were the modernization of occupations from ancient times. Most modern professions emerged alongside social modernization. Therefore, the early professional dramas could only exist as "exotic imports". The process of its localization is also a microcosm of the process of modernization of Chinese society. The adaptation, performance, and reception of professional dramas also reflect the public's process of forming cognition of professional ethics and ideals, starting from scratch.

Conclusion

At present, the division of professions in Chinese society has become relatively specialized and clearly defined, with strong professionalism across various industries. Most people have a clear understanding of the occupational rules and professional ideals. However, the themes of professional dramas remain biased towards universal values such as benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and faith, as well as conflicts between virtues and vices, the beauty and kindness of human nature, and so on. The industry's representation of professionalism is insufficient, and its reflection of the professional spirit is inadequate. Most of them are

emotional dramas masquerading as professional dramas. The characters' images are not fully developed or complex enough, their personalities are not prominent enough, and most of them are idealized elite figures from certain occupations, which are not in line with the actual employment situation. And to a certain extent, it leads to a biased sense in professions among audiences. In other words, the problems in the above-mentioned adapted professional dramas still persist and are closely related to the traditional aesthetics of Chinese culture, which has endured for thousands of years. At the same time, it also shows that Chinese professional dramas are still seeking breakthroughs in their exploration of nationalization, which not only restricts their development to a large extent but also paves the way for the maturity of authentic Chinese professional dramas in the future.

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