

# On the Translation Strategies and Communication Paths of Shanxi Traditional Opera-Take the Jin Opera The Orphan of Zhao as an example

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**Abstract:** Opera is a key carrier for preserving traditional Chinese culture and an important way to tell China's stories and spread Chinese culture. Currently, China is in a crucial phase of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation, and opera plays a significant role in shaping China's discourse system and image. Shanxi, the origin of the "The Orphan of Zhao" story, deeply connects with this classic Yuan zaju. The play has been widely translated and disseminated in the West since the 17th century and is a vital part of Jin Opera, a type of Shanxi Opera. This paper explores strategies for translating and disseminating Shanxi traditional opera abroad, focusing on The Orphan of Zhao, aiming to contribute to the global promotion of Chinese culture.

**Keywords:** Shanxi traditional opera; Translation strategy; Communication path; The Orphan of Zhao

## Introduction

Chinese opera, an essential component of traditional Chinese culture, is characterized by its aesthetic qualities and ethnic attributes, thereby functioning as a significant conduit for the preservation of cultural heritage. Shanxi, one of the cradles of Chinese opera and a region with ancient cultural roots, has developed a distinct regional culture, fostered by its unique geography and long history. Opera in Shanxi is deeply intertwined with the life and culture of its people. The Orphan of Zhao is a renowned tragic work and a representative of China's classical opera culture. It has endured over time and is recognized as a starting point for cultural exchange between Eastern and Western theatrical traditions. This year marks the tenth anniversary of the Belt and Road Initiative, aimed at promoting Chinese culture internationally and showcasing Shanxi's traditional culture. Shanxi, the backdrop of The Orphan of Zhao, is integral to the classic Yuan zaju The Orphan of Zhao's Great Revenge by Ji Junxiang. Since the 17th century, this play has been extensively translated and disseminated in Europe and America. Within China, it has inspired numerous local adaptations and performances, making it a key representative work in Jin Opera due to its strong connection with Shanxi. The paper discusses strategies for translating and propagating traditional Shanxi opera, using The Orphan of Zhao in Jin Opera as an example, to explore cross-cultural transmission methods and build a communication bridge between Shanxi and the world, furthering the global reach of Shanxi and Chinese culture.

## 1. Shanxi traditional opera and the story of The Orphan of Zhao

Wang Guowei pointed out in Opera Examination of the original, "opera, called song and dance to play the story." Chinese opera, a synthesis of music, dance, aesthetics, and literature, is a significant creation of the Chinese working people and opera practitioners. Shanxi, located in the middle reaches of the Yellow River, is rich in intangible cultural heritage and recognized as a major province of opera. Its diverse opera repertoire is summarized as "three more and one wide," indicating a wealth of opera relics, types, and renowned artists, widely distributed. Among these plays, Clapper Opera accounts for the largest proportion, with more than 2,000 operas. Shanxi's four famous Clapper operas are Jin Opera, Pu Opera, Shangdang Clapper Opera, and Beilu Clapper Opera, which have rich historical accumulation and unique artistic styles. It is also the intangible cultural heritage of Shanxi in the peak period of culture and economy.

The legend of The Orphan of Zhao first appeared in ancient books like Zuo Zhuan and Historical Records - Jin Family. It was later recorded in various historical chronicles like Chronicles of the States of Eastern Zhou, Chronicles of Taiyuan, Comprehensive Chronicles of the Great Ming and General Chronicles of Shanxi. As a classic work by Yuan Dynasty playwright Ji Junxiang, The Orphan of Zhao is not only a distinguished Chinese classical tragedy but also acclaimed by Wang Guowei as "one of the world's great tragedies, but also worthy of color". The story is set during the Spring and Autumn period and tells of the Zhao family in the Jin state, who were massacred by the general Tu'an Gu, leaving only one infant survivor. This infant was saved by Cheng Ying and Gongsun Chujiu. Cheng Ying sacrifices his own child to save the Zhao infant, falsely accuses Gongsun Chujiu of harboring the Zhao orphan, leading to the death of the fake orphan. Gongsun Chujiu commits suicide, and Cheng Ying endures humiliation to raise the Zhao orphan. Eventually, the grown Zhao Wu, with assistance, avenges his family. The tale, embodying loyalty, patriotism, and self-sacrifice, vividly represents Confucian ethics, resonating more than doctrinal Confucian classics.

As the earliest Chinese classic known to the West, The Orphan of Zhao is the earliest translated and most widely spread traditional Chinese opera story in Europe.

In the late 17th century, French Jesuit Marjoseph translated The Orphan of Zhao into French. Only dialogue was maintained in this translation, which removed all lyrics to resemble French dramas. After Voltaire adapted the narrative, it spread throughout French-speaking countries. From the mid-18th century, English-speaking countries noticed the play and adapted it. In 1741, William Hatchett satirized the British Prime Minister with "The Chinese Orphan". The Orphan of Zhao, rewritten multiple times by Irish playwright Arthur Murphy, focused on national oppression and was more political in 1759. In 1912, American writers George Hazleton and Harry Benrimer developed Yellow Jacket based on The Orphan of Zhao, which was performed in Philadelphia utilizing Chinese opera traditions but remains a Chinese story in American eyes. Since the 21st century, The Orphan of Zhao has been remade and performed worldwide. The most recent adaptation of The Orphan of Zhao, directed by Wang Xiaoying, and was performed at the Greek National Theatre in Athens in both Chinese and Greek.

Shanxi is the place where *The Orphan of Zhao* takes place. Because of its close connection with Shanxi, *The Orphan of Zhao* has become one of the important representative plays of Jin Opera. The Yuan zaju *Orphan of Zhao* in overseas enduring circulation shows that this drama works across time and space with eternal vitality.

## 2. Strategies of Shanxi local opera translation to foreign countries

However, in the current media era, traditional Chinese culture, and especially opera, is increasingly being neglected by the public. This trend is exacerbated by a lack of cultural promotion, leading to a diminishing audience for operas like *The Orphan of Zhao*, whose connection with Shanxi is little known. In recent years, the Chinese government has increasingly emphasized the role and status of national traditional culture. In Shanxi's development, a priority is to promote its opera culture, rich in both Chinese tradition and Shanxi's unique characteristics. This study focuses on effectively telling Shanxi's story and elevating Chinese culture globally. The Yuan Dynasty's *The Orphan of Zhao* provides insights into cultural exchange, highlighting Western adaptations often shaped by their own perspectives. This calls for authentic representation of Chinese culture in its global dissemination. The study focuses on the need to promote Shanxi's rich opera culture, which embodies the essence of Chinese traditions, and to find suitable ways to translate and disseminate it globally. The adaptation and transmission of *The Orphan of Zhao* in the West provides insights, highlighting the need for a genuine representation of Chinese culture in its global propagation.

How to translate the opera on the premise of standing firmly in China, and at the same time reflect the unique characteristics of Jin Opera, problem needs our further consideration. In the external translation of Shanxi traditional opera, we should pay attention to the translation of Sanjin culture presented in it, the dialect art of Jin Opera and the values of Shanxi children displayed on the stage, so as to help overseas audiences appreciate Shanxi traditional opera. In translation, there are three difficulties that need to be paid attention to and overcome.

### 2.1 Maintaining a firm stance on China's perspective

Drama, an artistic form for expressing emotions and cultural ideas, finds a unique expression in Shanxi traditional opera, rooted in the Loess Plateau's rich cultural soil and distinct local dialects, and drawing from the region's rich folk songs. This can present challenges for overseas audiences unfamiliar with its historical and cultural nuances. Moreover, the content, often based on China's feudal society and ethics, differs significantly from Western social structures and beliefs. Thus, understanding the ethics and cultural elements in plays like *The Orphan of Zhao* can be challenging for foreign audiences. For example, in the Jin Opera *The Orphan of Zhao*, Cheng Ying's act of swapping his own child for his lord's and later committing suicide after Zhao Wu's success, is rare in Western drama. This expression of love and vengeance reflects cultural differences between East and West. The play embodies themes of valuing promises over life and illustrates Chinese moral values of loyalty and filial piety. Promoting Chinese culture globally requires a dialogue-based approach, deeply understanding its essence, and considering historical and social contexts for meaningful cultural exchange.

### 2.2 Reflecting Shanxi characteristics

Shanxi has been significantly influenced by various religions like Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism since the Northern Wei Dynasty, imparting a strong religious essence to its opera. The operas, rooted in local dialects, reflect the region's cultural identity. The principle "the song follows the speech" emphasizes the importance of dialect in opera singing. For example, performing Jin or Pu operas in Mandarin would lose their unique local characteristics. Translating such a linguistic system is not easy, as theatrical texts are created for performance. Translation must be carefully considered, ideally combining both domestication and foreignization techniques to maintain cultural and linguistic equivalence between the original and the translated text, facilitating understanding for readers of the target language while preserving the essence of the source culture. (P75) In Shanxi traditional opera, some linguistic expressions are uniquely created to fit the local culture. For instance, in the passionate and straightforward Jin Opera *The Orphan of Zhao*, interjections like "na", "ya", "hei", and "de'er" are used extensively. These words, though not central to the content, vividly convey the performers' emotions and the ambiance of the scene. Such language systems require translators with deep cultural knowledge and understanding of the cultural nuances and intentions to effectively translate the Shanxi dialect, enabling foreign audiences to appreciate the diverse cultural aspects of Shanxi.

### 2.3 Focusing on stage expression

In theater performances, non-verbal symbols in addition to the script's dialogue convey significant meanings, suggesting historical backgrounds, displaying life scenes, and revealing character relationships. In Shanxi traditional opera, characters from different social classes and backgrounds wear distinctly different clothing, serving as an important means to analyze gender and social relationships. Moreover, the arrangement of stage settings also embodies the traditional culture of Shanxi. This aspect aids translators in accurately conveying the stage culture of Shanxi traditional opera. However, in the overseas translations of *The Orphan of Zhao*, versions by Marjoseph and Voltaire made significant edits, employing a "cut and condense" approach. This was done to make the story and its spirit understandable to the target audience, but it did not represent the uniqueness of Chinese opera in the translated language. From a Chinese perspective, this resulted in the loss of the original's stylistic charm and aesthetic value. Chinese opera, a highly stylized theatrical art, places great emphasis on audience participation and interaction. This engagement is a key enjoyment for those familiar with opera conventions. Therefore, in translating Shanxi traditional opera, it's crucial to maintain its original local characteristics and focus on stage expression. This approach ensures active audience participation and interaction, accurately conveying the essence and significance of the opera's stage art to overseas audiences.

## 3. The ways of Shanxi local opera to spread abroad

Opera stories contain complex human nature, lyrics and music arrangements reflect the elegance of Chinese poetry, and the narration is interspersed with ancient and profound human history and customs of China. Under the premise of retaining core values, changing the translation, performance and communication forms according to the characteristics of the audience of *The Times* is the key to the inheritance and success of Shanxi traditional opera. The process of translation is the process of cross-cultural communication. Based on this, this paper

proposes the following strategies for external communication.

### 3.1 Translation and publication

Classic long narrative translations no longer fit the modern fast-paced lifestyle and fragmented reading habits. To attract a broader audience beyond academic circles, opera texts need new translations aligned with contemporary trends. However, catering solely to entertainment-driven public tastes might diminish the language's charm and aesthetic value of opera. Translators thus face a significant challenge: how to rediscover the irreplaceable aesthetic significance of language. The concise and vivid lyrics in Chinese opera classics contain profound connotations, which lead the audience to immerse themselves in the spiritual world of literary imagination and think about the deep cognition of the subject's mind. There are many excellent models for the foreign translation of classical drama classics, such as Xiong Shiyi's *Wang Bao Chuan*, Yang Xianyi's *Dou E Yuan* and Xu Yuanchong's *Story of the Western Chamber*, etc. These works are the highlights in the history of modern Chinese drama and have also become good stories in the history of cultural exchange between China and the West. The common feature of these translations is that the original plays are condensed into a modern drama of about two hours. To suit the tastes of Western English audiences. Although there are many changes in the content, it does not affect its spiritual core, based on loyalty and smoothness, so that the translation is easier for the audience to accept. The performance based on such a translation can deepen the audience's understanding of the performance, and the wonderful stage performance also leads the audience into a new literary world.

### 3.2 Overseas performances

Nowadays, the traditional Chinese opera culture is still in a weak position in the world, and Shanxi opera, as a representative, is not only conducive to the construction of Shanxi's international image, but also conducive to the promotion of China's soft power, and reflects the peace-loving values of the Chinese people. As for Shanxi's traditional opera "Going Out", in addition to the translation and publication, it is necessary to find the spiritual core and moral character in the repertoire that can resonate with foreign audiences, to achieve successful overseas performances. So far, three classic cases of Chinese drama communication to the outside world. Mei Lanfang's performance in the United States, Bai Xianyong's performance of the youth version of *The Peony Pavilion* in Europe and the United States, and Zhang Huoding's series of artistic activities in the United States,(P124) all adopted different degrees of adaptation of art forms. Although they are far from the original appearance of the original opera art, they all met the aesthetic needs of the current audience. The spiritual core of the opera was not damaged, and while presenting the elements of the opera appropriately, it aroused the Western audience's further yearning for Chinese culture, especially the art of the opera. Through overseas performances, we can not only show the traditional Chinese opera represented by Shanxi Opera, but also reflect the outstanding achievements in the field of traditional Chinese art, and enhance the international community's respect and recognition of Chinese culture.

### 3.3 Online dissemination

Liveness is a fundamental characteristic of all opera arts. The premise for audiences to appreciate and spread its charm is their voluntary attendance at theaters. However, modern communication media like the internet and smartphones, which impact people's lives and leisure, bring new opportunities and challenges for the dissemination of Shanxi traditional opera. Based on the principle of multi-directional interaction on social platforms, with Shanxi traditional opera as the center, the audience, actors and creators are allowed to participate in the process of drama performance, and the audience is intimately communicated through the singing script, performance communication, content interaction, activity publicity and other ways. Through media and interpersonal means, the concept and method of media and marketing are fully utilized. Carefully design each business strategy link to attract the audience's consumption. With the help of new media such as Tik Tok, Youtube and streaming media such as Netflix, the opera is promoted abroad and the influence of Shanxi traditional opera is expanded, which is conducive to the inheritance and development of Sanjin culture.

## Conclusion

Shanxi, with its rich cultural heritage and opera resources, holds a significant place in Chinese opera. In the context of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation, promoting Shanxi's traditional opera, as a representative of Chinese opera, is key to effectively telling China's story and spreading its voice globally. In introducing Shanxi opera to international audiences, it's crucial to focus on cross-cultural communication, avoiding cultural conflicts and aligning with the emotional and value orientations of foreign audiences. This approach aims to gain favor and recognition for Chinese moral thoughts and national culture in the target language and culture.

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