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Article

From the Rock Mozart Controversy to the Upgrading of the Chinese Musical Theatre Industry: Forms, Dissemination Logic, and Social Impact of Multicultural Arts

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Abstract: This paper examines the reception and impact of Mozart, l'Opéra Rock in China to explore the development and upgrading of the Chinese musical theatre industry. As one of the most commercially successful imported musical productions in recent years, the show has significantly reshaped audience expectations and performance norms within the domestic market. The musical's popularity illustrates how imported productions, through distinctive musical styles, innovative stage aesthetics, and fan-based communication strategies, can expand audience engagement and introduce new performance conventions. Simultaneously, controversies surrounding audience etiquette, fan behavior, and the cultural limits of imported artistic forms reveal structural challenges within China's musical theatre ecosystem, including immature audience cultivation mechanisms, insufficient theatre management practices, and limited domestic creative capacity. Drawing on case analysis, textual analysis, and longitudinal industry observation, this study investigates four interconnected dimensions: artistic expression, audience reception, dissemination mechanisms, and social influence. The findings suggest that Chinese musical theatre must move beyond mere imitation by leveraging local cultural resources to develop original narratives, integrating diverse musical and stage styles, and cultivating professional production systems. Moreover, effectively managing fan engagement, establishing clear theatre etiquette norms, and promoting cross-cultural and educational functions can substantially enhance both artistic and social value. Ultimately, this paper argues that a sustainable industry requires harmonizing imported influences with domestic creativity, systematic audience cultivation, and meaningful social impact, enabling Chinese musicals to transition from market-driven popularity toward culturally and artistically robust productions.

Keywords: musical theatre; cultural adaptation; audience engagement; industry upgrading; multicultural arts

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1. Introduction

1.1. Research Background

In recent years, musical theatre has gained increasing attention in the Chinese cultural market, especially among young urban audiences. Compared with traditional stage performances, imported musicals often integrate music, drama, dance, visual design, and star-driven performance. Among them, French musicals have attracted particular interest due to their distinctive musical style, emotional intensity, and expressive stage language. A notable example is Mozart, l'Opéra Rock.

Mozart, l'Opéra Rock departs from conventional biographical musical formats. Rather than portraying Mozart solely as a classical genius, it reimagines his life and legacy

through rock music, stylized costumes, dynamic lighting, and emotionally charged performance. This artistic approach enhances accessibility for contemporary audiences, particularly younger viewers accustomed to popular music idioms and digital media engagement [1]. Its reception in China reflects broader shifts in cultural consumption, where musical theatre is increasingly experienced as an integrated theatrical, social, emotional, and media-mediated phenomenon.

1.2. Research Questions

The popularity of Mozart, l'Opéra Rock in China has prompted diverse audience responses. Topics of discussion include theatre etiquette, fan engagement during performances, encore practices, audience photography, intensity of fan participation, and varying expectations regarding appropriate viewing conduct. Some viewers consider energetic audience reactions integral to the live performance atmosphere, whereas others perceive such behaviors as potentially disruptive to narrative continuity and theatrical immersion. These differing perspectives indicate that the focus has shifted from assessing audience interest in musical theatre toward exploring pathways for cultivating a more robust and balanced musical theatre ecosystem in China.

Building on these observations, this paper examines the reception of Mozart, l'Opéra Rock as a case study to address three interrelated questions: How does an internationally produced musical acquire cultural resonance within the Chinese context? What distinctions emerge between participatory fan practices and established theatrical conventions? How might Chinese musical theatre development draw insight from cross-cultural productions while fostering original, contextually grounded artistic approaches? Collectively, these questions illuminate key characteristics of the current phase of musical theatre evolution in China [1].

1.3. Research Significance

This study does not aim to make a broad judgment on the entire Chinese musical theatre industry. Instead, it uses one influential case to examine several observable issues in industrial upgrading. First, the case illustrates how multicultural artistic forms are received, adapted, and negotiated within a local context. Second, it demonstrates how social media platforms and fan communities have reshaped communication patterns in musical theatre [2]. Third, it offers insights into pathways for enhancing original creation, audience development, and cultural resonance in Chinese musical theatre.

By examining both commercial dynamics and public discourse, this paper provides a more comprehensive understanding of musical theatre development. The popularity of imported musicals presents dual implications—opportunities for learning and challenges for domestic capacity building [3].

1.4. Research Methods

This paper employs case analysis, textual analysis, and industry observation. The case analysis centers on the reception of Mozart, l'Opéra Rock in China [2]. Textual analysis investigates its artistic form, encompassing music style, character construction, stage aesthetics, and emotional expression. Industry observation explores audience behavior, fan communication, theatre management, and developmental pathways for Chinese musical theatre.

Drawing on these methodological approaches, the paper examines artistic expression, audience reception, communication patterns, and broader cultural impact [2]. This analysis offers a measured perspective on advancing Chinese musical theatre from initial market growth toward more sustainable cultural and industrial development.

2. Artistic Features and Controversial Reception of Mozart, L'opéra Rock

2.1. Modern Reconstruction of a Classical Figure

Mozart, l'Opéra Rock departs from a conventional biographical framework. Rather than portraying Mozart exclusively as a classical composer, it reimagines him as a youthful, emotionally expressive, and iconoclastic figure. Through rock music, stylized

costumes, dynamic pacing, and vivid visual design, Mozart is rendered accessible and resonant for contemporary audiences [4].

This reinterpretation reshapes audience engagement with historical figures. Mozart is depicted navigating professional pressures, personal aspirations, interpersonal tensions, and public misperceptions [5]. His extraordinary musical gifts are presented alongside emotional intensity and challenges in social integration, forging connections between classical music heritage and present-day youth sensibilities. Audiences relate to him through shared emotional experiences, relatable personality traits, and compelling stage presence—not solely through specialized musical expertise.

2.2. Aesthetic Appeal of French Musical Theatre

The musical's appeal also stems from defining characteristics of French musical theatre: self-contained songs, distinctive visual style, heightened emotional expression, and performer charisma [6]. Songs often achieve independent circulation beyond the stage, while evocative stage imagery strengthens audience retention.

In this production, music, choreography, costume, lighting, and performance coalesce to generate an intensely emotional experience. Incorporation of rock and pop elements enhances accessibility, while stylized stage design establishes a unique visual identity [7]. For many young Chinese audiences, the work offers both cultural distance and emotional resonance: historically foreign, yet relatable through rhythmic vitality, expressive intensity, and contemporary aesthetic sensibilities.

Its popularity indicates that Chinese youth are increasingly receptive to cross-cultural performances marked by strong emotional impact and striking visual presentation, although engagement with the original cultural context often remains limited—frequently shaped by fragmented social media excerpts and performer-driven appeal [7].

2.3. Main Forms of Controversy

The musical has elicited varied audience responses in China, including enthusiastic cheering, encore participation, photography, strong expressive support, and differing interpretations of theatre etiquette. Some regard such engagement as integral to the live performance experience, deepening emotional resonance; others consider it potentially disruptive to narrative continuity and collective viewing focus [8].

These differences reflect divergent audience expectations: some approach the event as a communal cultural gathering, while others prioritize sustained artistic immersion. The discussion underscores the importance of balancing active participation with mutual respect for performance integrity and shared audience experience [9].

2.4. Industrial Issues Behind the Controversy

The debates reflect broader structural challenges within China's musical theatre sector. While imported productions and star-driven performances have expanded audience reach and box office revenue, foundational capabilities—including audience development, theatre operations, communication strategies, and original creation—remain underdeveloped [10].

Overreliance on fan-driven engagement risks marginalizing artistic merit [6]. Theatre operators must uphold balanced audience participation through clearly defined guidelines on photography, vocal expression, and onstage interaction. Moreover, sustained dependence on foreign works and celebrity appeal may constrain the growth of domestic creative capacity. The production of *Mozart, l'Opéra Rock* exemplifies an evolving phase: audience interest is demonstrably increasing, yet the industry continues to require robust original repertoire, professionalized production infrastructure, and a more mature theatrical culture.

3. Multicultural Artistic Expression and Content Upgrading in Chinese Musical Theatre

3.1. From Imported Works to Local Creation

The international success of productions such as Mozart, l'Opéra Rock demonstrates that imported musicals can serve as valuable aesthetic references for the Chinese market [11]. Their high production standards, distinctive musical structures, and dynamic performances reveal strong audience receptivity to theatre that emphasizes visual sophistication and musical intensity. Nevertheless, long-term growth in Chinese musical theatre depends on moving beyond adaptation toward the development of an original expressive framework—one that thoughtfully incorporates indigenous cultural narratives, traditional and contemporary musical idioms, and locally resonant performance conventions.

Authentic originality entails not only the creation of new libretti but also the cultivation of characters, musical language, and theatrical vocabulary that meaningfully connect with domestic audiences. Absent this cultural grounding, Chinese musical theatre risks prioritizing surface-level appeal—such as elaborate staging or star-driven casting—over substantive artistic and cultural engagement [2]. Figure 1 illustrates the interplay among imported models, audience response, and the evolving pathway toward homegrown creation, underscoring how external influences may inform, yet must ultimately yield to, autonomous creative development.

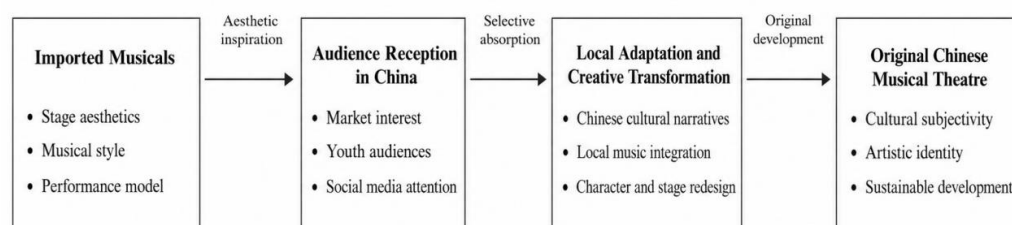


Figure 1. From Imported Musical References to Local Original Creation in Chinese Musical Theatre

3.2. Adapting Chinese Cultural Resources for Musical Theatre

Chinese musical theatre can draw extensively on national cultural resources, including historical figures, classical literature, folklore, urban life, and contemporary youth experiences. The key challenge lies in transforming these materials into stage works with dramatic intensity, well-developed characters, and strong musical potential. For example, historical or literary figures must be adapted with psychological depth, coherent narrative progression, and emotional resonance aligned with theatrical storytelling.

Effective adaptation requires careful selection and interpretation. Not all cultural references translate directly into musical drama; certain stories may require restructuring, condensation, or thematic refinement to achieve compelling stage presentation. By transforming familiar cultural elements into expressive theatrical forms, Chinese musicals can foster audience identification and emotional engagement while preserving artistic integrity.

3.3. Fusion and Innovation in Musical Styles

The integration of diverse musical styles is essential for modern Chinese musical theatre [12]. Traditional instruments and folk melodies can coexist with contemporary genres such as pop, rock, electronic music, or hip-hop. This fusion enhances narrative expression, enriches character portrayal, and intensifies emotional resonance. However, musical integration must go beyond superficial combination. Each musical choice must serve the story, support character development, and sustain dramatic coherence.

For instance, a folk-inspired motif may underscore a character's cultural background, while a rock-influenced sequence might convey heightened emotional energy or personal transformation. Carefully designed transitions between styles create a coherent auditory experience that feels both innovative and contextually grounded [13]. Such musical sophistication helps distinguish Chinese musicals from foreign productions while preserving broad audience appeal.

3.4. Modernized Stage Aesthetics

Beyond music, modern stage aesthetics are critical for industrial and artistic upgrading [14]. Lighting, set design, multimedia projection, costume, and spatial arrangement contribute not only to spectacle but also to narrative comprehension and emotional immersion. Contemporary Chinese musicals should balance cultural resonance with contemporary visual sensibilities, ensuring that stage language communicates effectively to present-day audiences.

Enhanced production values support the integration of complex choreography and dynamic stage movement, yielding more immersive experiences. Multimedia elements—including projections, interactive lighting, and digital scenery—enable flexible representation of time, space, and character perspective, expanding creative possibilities while reflecting current technological capabilities.

4. Communication Logic and the Musical Theatre Industry Ecosystem

4.1. The Dual Role of Fan-Based Communication

Fan culture has significantly expanded the audience base of musical theatre in China [15]. Through social media platforms, short video content, fan-generated creative works, and peer-to-peer recommendations, productions such as *Mozart, l'Opéra Rock* have extended their reach beyond traditional theatre-going demographics. Fans enhance visibility, foster public discussion, and stimulate interest among potential audiences, functioning as an effective supplementary marketing channel.

However, overly dominant fan-driven activity may displace substantive artistic discourse. When fan behaviors shape public conversation, attention often shifts away from musical composition, narrative construction, and stagecraft toward performer personas, trending topics, or viral phenomena. This dual function—broadening audience engagement while potentially constraining critical analysis—necessitates deliberate stewardship by producers and theatre management.

4.2. "Single-Song First" and Fragmented Dissemination

A notable feature of *Mozart, l'Opéra Rock* is that many of its songs can circulate independently of the complete narrative. This reflects the strategic value of modular content in contemporary musical promotion. Audiences may first encounter a character song or theme through social media posts, short video platforms, or music streaming services, and subsequently choose to attend the full production. Such targeted exposure helps build anticipation and lowers barriers to initial engagement.

For Chinese original musicals, this indicates that attention should be given not only to overall production quality but also to the intentional design of individual musical pieces. Theme songs, character solos, and curated performance excerpts can serve as strategic entry points for audience acquisition. Furthermore, supplementary materials—such as rehearsal highlights, creative process insights, or artist interviews—can enrich official releases, supporting a multi-layered communication strategy tailored to diverse audience segments. Figure 2 illustrates a typical content exposure pathway, from initial single-song engagement to full-performance attendance, highlighting potential routes for broadening audience reach.

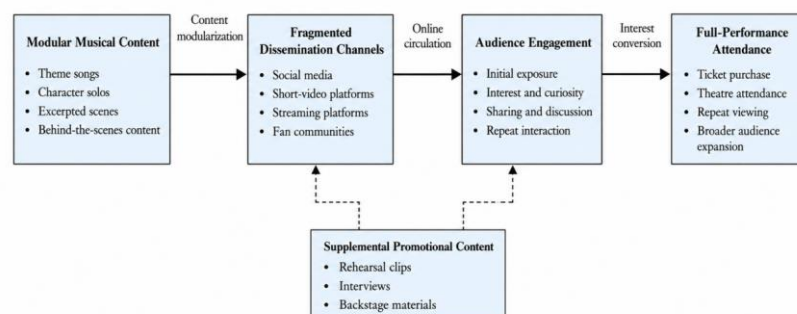


Figure 2. Content Dissemination Flow from Single-Song Exposure to Full-Performance Attendance

4.3. Theatre Consumption and Youth Cultural Identity

For young audiences, attending a musical extends beyond singular cultural consumption to encompass active participation in socially embedded and identity-affirming practices. Attending multiple performances, sharing experiences digitally, engaging with peer-led fan communities, and producing derivative creative content collectively reinforce a sense of belonging within broader cultural and social networks. In this context, musical theatre functions as a dynamic space for communal identity formation, enabling alignment among audience members, performers, narrative themes, and shared interpretive frameworks.

Such participatory engagement underscores the inherently social nature of theatre attendance. Effective audience development strategies must therefore move beyond transactional models—such as ticket sales or traditional marketing—and intentionally support the relational, interactive, and repeatable dimensions of theatrical experience. Facilitating sustained attendance, peer-mediated interaction, and cross-platform sharing enhances both long-term audience loyalty and deeper cultural resonance.

4.4. Communication Order and Audience Norms

Healthy development of the musical theatre industry requires balancing market enthusiasm with orderly theatrical practice. Producers, venues, and digital platforms should clearly define boundaries for photography, recording, and audience interaction [16]. Establishing codes of conduct, etiquette guidelines, and interaction protocols helps ensure that fan enthusiasm supports narrative immersion and enhances the experience of all viewers.

Maintaining this balance allows fan energy to enrich, rather than detract from, the theatrical experience. Clear communication of norms—such as appropriate moments for applause, designated areas for recording, and structured approaches to encore interactions—guides fans toward constructive participation [8]. By institutionalizing these norms, the industry can sustain both audience engagement and artistic integrity, supporting long-term growth and fostering a more mature musical theatre ecosystem.

5. Social Influence and Industrial Upgrading Pathways in Chinese Musical Theatre

5.1. Cross-Cultural Communication

The presentation of Mozart, l'Opéra Rock illustrates how musical theatre can function as a medium for cross-cultural understanding. Exposure to foreign musicals introduces Chinese audiences to diverse historical contexts, performance conventions, and aesthetic traditions. This engagement enhances audience cultural literacy and prompts domestic creators to consider how Chinese musicals articulate local narratives, musical idioms, and dramatic structures [5, 7].

Cross-cultural exposure may inspire creative adaptation, fostering innovations that harmonize international influences with indigenous artistic identity. Such exchanges support a dynamic interplay between global aesthetics and local storytelling, contributing to the development of a distinctive Chinese musical theatre tradition [15].

5.2. Youth Aesthetic Education

Musical theatre integrates music, drama, dance, literature, and visual design, delivering a holistic aesthetic experience. For young audiences, engagement with musicals fosters artistic appreciation, emotional intelligence, and interpretive competence. The convergence of multiple art forms introduces diverse expressive modalities—including musical themes, choreographed movement, narrative structure, and stagecraft—enriching perceptual and cognitive development.

Cultivating high-quality original Chinese musicals supports aesthetic education beyond formal curricula. Well-conceived productions stimulate critical thinking, promote reflective engagement, and nurture sustained interest in domestic theatrical creation, thereby reinforcing the cultural literacy of future audiences.

5.3. Urban Cultural Consumption and Cultural Tourism

Popular musicals hold significant potential to shape urban cultural consumption patterns and support local economic development. High-demand productions drive theatre attendance, stimulate commercial activity in surrounding areas, and encourage evening or weekend cultural participation. Moreover, musicals can elevate a city's cultural profile, functioning simultaneously as entertainment offerings and instruments of cultural branding.

Chinese musical theatre can strengthen its industrial and economic sustainability through touring performances, resident productions, and strategic integration with urban cultural initiatives. By aligning with local tourism development and city branding efforts, musicals contribute to cultural vitality while broadening audience engagement. Figure 3 illustrates the interaction among musical productions, urban culture, audience engagement, and cultural tourism, demonstrating how successful musicals generate multi-layered social and economic impacts.

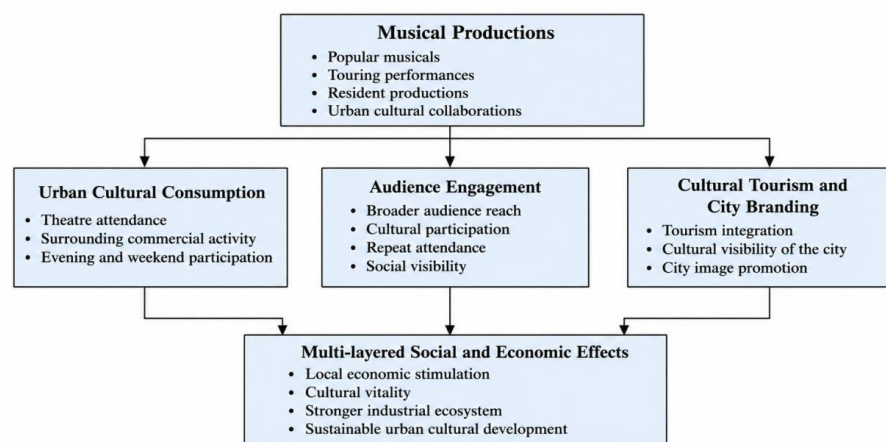


Figure 3. Interaction among Musical Productions, Urban Culture, Audience Engagement, and Cultural Tourism

5.4. Upgrading Original Production Mechanisms

For sustainable industry growth, Chinese musicals require comprehensive original production systems encompassing script development, composition, lyric writing, direction, choreography, stage technology, actor training, and market operation. Historically, certain productions have overemphasized star power or visual spectacle, prioritizing visibility over creative depth [6]. Strengthening these mechanisms ensures consistent artistic quality across music, narrative, and performance.

Investment in professional training programs, collaborative creative teams, and technical infrastructure elevates production standards. Enhanced capacity enables musicals to achieve both commercial viability and artistic credibility, establishing a resilient foundation for the domestic musical theatre industry.

5.5. Audience Communities and Industry Norms

Industry upgrading also depends on cultivating mature audience communities. Audience literacy, understanding of theatre etiquette, and critical engagement are as important as production quality. Guided experiences—including program notes, pre-show talks, interactions with creators, and educational workshops—can foster deeper understanding and sustained engagement.

By developing informed, participatory audiences, the industry can create stable demand for high-quality productions. Establishing norms for participation, including appropriate cheering, recording, and fan interactions, ensures that enthusiasm enhances rather than compromises the theatrical experience [4, 8]. Well-educated audiences support both artistic experimentation and commercial sustainability, contributing to a more robust and mature musical theatre ecosystem.

6. Conclusion

The reception of Mozart, l'Opéra Rock in China reflects broader dynamics shaping musical theatre development within the contemporary Chinese cultural market. On one hand, imported musicals have stimulated audience interest through refined musical structures, distinctive stage aesthetics, emotionally resonant performance, and digitally enabled fan engagement. They have introduced Chinese audiences to diverse theatrical traditions and enhanced the visibility of musical theatre among younger cultural consumers. On the other hand, discussions around theatre etiquette, vocal audience participation, photography practices, and intense fan engagement highlight ongoing challenges in the maturation of the sector. These include evolving audience expectations, developing theatre management standards, coordinating communication across platforms, and strengthening capacity for domestic original creation.

From the perspective of artistic expression, Chinese musical theatre needs to move beyond adaptation of foreign models and cultivate a locally grounded creative framework. Cultural resources—including Chinese history, literature, folklore, urban life, and youth experience—should not serve merely as decorative motifs. Instead, they must be integrated into stage narratives with dramatic coherence, emotional resonance, musical vitality, and relevance to contemporary sensibilities. Such integration supports the emergence of a distinct artistic identity while maintaining accessibility for modern audiences.

From the perspective of communication logic, the industry should acknowledge the constructive role of social media and fan communities. Fan engagement can broaden reach, support sustained attendance, and deepen audience connection. At the same time, it should complement—not supplant—artistic discourse or compromise the integrity of live performance. Producers, venues, and digital platforms therefore benefit from establishing clear, consistent guidelines regarding audience interaction, photography, audiovisual recording, and encore practices. A balanced musical theatre ecology integrates energy and structure.

From the perspective of social influence, Chinese musical theatre need not prioritize commercial metrics or transient popularity alone. It holds potential to support cross-cultural exchange, aesthetic education for younger generations, urban cultural consumption patterns, and cultural tourism initiatives. When developed as both an artistic practice and a public cultural resource, musical theatre may accrue wider societal significance.

Therefore, advancing Chinese musical theatre does not entail rejecting international works nor replicating their formats uncritically. Rather, progress depends on integrating global expertise while building an original ecosystem rooted in Chinese cultural context, equipped with contemporary stage language, supported by professional production infrastructure, and nurtured by informed, engaged audience communities. In this way, the field may evolve from reliance on imported appeal toward robust domestic creation and enduring cultural contribution.

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