FROM YING XI TO 'THEATRE FILM': THE EVOLUTION OF STAGE-TO-SCREEN ADAPTATION AND CHINESE DIRECTORS' PRACTICE

ZHANG XUAN[*] and ANDIKA AZIZ HUSSIN

School of the Arts, Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM)

*Corresponding Author: xuan1991@student.usm.my

Abstract

Chinese film has developed for 117 years, from 1905 until 2022. As we all know, the theatre has had a close relationship with the development of film since the first Chinese film was produced. The influence of theatre is manifold; those have been adapted for film and as a concept that profoundly influences Chinese directors. From the early concept of Ying xi in Chinese film to today's new fusion of theatre and film, the author focuses on a specific genre of film that is heavily influenced by theatre and is constantly innovating and developing, known as 'Theatre Film.'

Keywords: Theatre Film, Ying xi, Adaptation

INTRODUCTION

The relationship between theatre and film has been quite close since the advent of film in China. In 1905, China produced its first film, Dingjun Mountain, based on the traditional Chinese Peking Opera. The first Chinese sound film appeared in 1930, with Mei Lanfang singing the songs in it. While early Chinese directors made films that relied on learning about theatre-making, early Chinese film theorists proposed the theatre-centered theory of 'Ying xi.' This theory, one of the first to emerge in Chinese film, influenced film directors to focus on the study of theatre and led many theatre directors to experiment with adapting stage art to screen. Some great theatrical stage productions were adapted into films and were very successful until modern times. In recent years, some scholars have proposed the concept of 'Theatre Film.' There is a growing discussion about the integration of theatre and film adaptations.

Theatre and film are two mediums that have widely influenced the spiritual life of human society. The researcher of this thesis considers 'Theatre Film' to be a transmedial combination. It does not refer to a theatre or a film alone. It emphasizes the need for theatre before the form of film. It is the emergence of a mature form and content from one medium into another. As Milan Pribisic (2010) says:

Theater film is a film based on an existing live theater show, a film recording of a performance that goes beyond mere record of what was put on the stage.

Therefore, 'Theatre Film' involves adaptation theory and emphasizes the relationship between the two mediums, theatre and film. Those further illustrate that the thesis's focus is not on the adaptation of texts such as novels but more on the characteristics of stage to screen adaptations. This research examines the creative and conceptual influences of theatre on early Chinese film directors, which have persisted in various ways until the present day. Further, through the above analysis and research, an attempt to find a correct approach to the relationship between the two arts of theatre and film. It will provide some valuable information for creators and researchers alike.

After all, there have been many failed adaptations, and a successful adaptation is still not easy.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The exploration of the relationship between theatre and film has been ongoing since the invention of film. As the Seventh Art, a film in its development has incorporated the best of the previous art disciplines, especially theatre. In the modern world, where technology is advanced, film has become more popular with the development of the industrial system. The traditional artistic elements and their scientific and technological aspects are popular. However, theatre is still an essential core of film, and films adapted from theatre have remained an important branch.

1. DEVELOPMENT OF PERSPECTIVES ON THEATRE AND FILM ADAPTATIONS

Since the birth of film, early theorists have been concerned, to varying degrees, with the issue of film and theatre adaptation. In the early stages of film development, theorists were more concerned with the differences between this new art form and traditional theatre. Adaptations at this time tended to be more receptive and learning. Traditional theatre-makers learned to use the camera language of film. Theorists were concerned with the difference between the same content on stage and camera. As Vachel Lindsay (1916) says:

When the veteran stage producer, as a beginning photoplay producer, tries to give us a dialogue in the motion pictures, he makes it so dull that no one follows. He does not realize that his camera-born opportunity to magnify persons and things instantly, interweave them as actors on one level, and alternate scenes at the slightest whim are the ample substitutes for dialogue.

It is worth noting that some of the early adaptation researchers were themselves playwrights directly involved in the scripting of plays and films and the production process, as was the case with the famous playwright George Bernard Shaw.

Bernard Shaw was quite interested in the relationship between theater or stage and films. As an experienced and professional theorist and writer, his beliefs include that films were a potential threat to the drama. Their simplistic mindset of Shaw changed in 1915; his beliefs included that cinemas are better when portrayed by stage actors.

Pen and pictures no. 6 – George Bernard Shaw

George Bernard Shaw already recognized that there were differences between theatre and film in terms of playwriting and that adaptation was not simply a matter of transplanting content but of focusing on the differences between the two.

He agrees that cinematography is a form of art, and the practice of transferring plays to the screen is impossible and superstition. He further clarifies that the stage is limited compared to the screen; hence, the writers should consider spate their stage writing and screenplay.

In a subsequent theory exploring the artistic status of cinema, Rudolf Arnheim analyses the feasibility of film and theatre adaptations from an art-theoretical perspective. With the advent of sound films, cinema and theatre have become more

similar in sound and language arts. He has studied the laws of aesthetics and has suggested that artworks can be based on more than one medium. Rudolf Arnheim (1938) points out that film and theatre rely on image and speech.

The theater successfully combines image and speech. —The two elements whose rivalry the motion picture cannot reconcile are, of course, image and speech.

Rudolf Arnheim argues that theatre in its development also relied on the continuous integration of the elements of action and language, which is consistent with the integration of elements in the films that emerged after it. From the point of view of the constituent elements of art, Rudolf Arnheim points to the possibility of transforming the theatre into a film.

There is, then, no difference in principle between the theater's visual action and the film's moving image. Therefore, the experiences with the "enriched image" in the theater directly apply to the talking film.

André Bazin analyzed the differences between stage drama and film from an ontological perspective. He began by citing the importance of the presence of actors in the theatre, a point emphasized by theatre theorists. André Bazin (1951) pointed out that the film does not embrace the real presence of the actors' bodies.

In the cinema world, the physical presence or the human presence is not essential, as the scope of cinema is quite broad. On the other hand, in stage plays, without the presence of actors, the stage does not exist.

Thus, he argues that film precisely refutes the view of some theatre theorists that actors are irreplaceable. At the same time, André Bazin also analyzed the contrast between the different audience perspectives of theatre and film, which emphasizes that the audience psychology is different between the two, for which he gave an example.

The main difference between theater and screen is that cinema is calming and theater is exciting. Hence, movies like Tarzan are possible in cinemas.

Because of this, André Bazin believes that cinema stimulates the audience's heart, while theatre can soothe the audience's tension. Both have their aesthetic characteristics for the audience and need to control by the director.

An unbridgeable aesthetic moat will no longer separate this theater and cinema; it tends to arise two different attitudes over which the director tries to gain comprehensive control.

When film has reached a relatively mature stage of development, theorists look back on the development process and lament a deep connection between the two elements of film direction, film performance, etc., from the theatre. Even the formation of well-known film companies and industries began with theatre. As Susan (2013) says:

Born millennia apart, theater and film are fraternal twins, children of common dramatic parentage. One twin is perhaps more verbal, the other more visual, but they have shared a deep symbiotic relationship from cinema's beginning. As early as 1897, Georges Melies filmed scenes from Parisian stage comedies; by 1900, Sarah Bernhardt was before the cameras starring in short scenes from Hamlet; in America,

theater pieces were filmed by Adolph Zukor when he founded Famous Players. The company eventually morphed into Paramount Pictures.

Theorists are also concerned that some successful directors have often been able to work in both film and theatre, such as Ingmar Bergman. The legendary director's talent for artistic creation is truly unique. He was more influential in the film than in the theatre, which may have something to do with the difference in the medium's distribution. However, the fact is that he also did a great job on the theatrical stage. He applied many unique techniques from the film to the stage adaptation, such as lighting techniques. Törnqvist, E. (1996) pointed out:

Due to the fast technical development, lighting has become an essential element in stage performances. Bergman's experience as a film director has worked closely with outstanding film photographers like Gunnar Fischer and Sven Nykvist. It has undoubtedly helped make him aware of the potential of light in the theater. Referring to Nykvist, he once told an interviewer, "Our shared passion - and I feel this even on the stage - is to create light: light and faces surrounded by shadows.

Studies like this one on individual directors like Ingmar Bergman provide much practical guidance for analyzing theatre and film adaptations. However, the number of such talented research subjects is, after all, limited. With the gradual growth of the film industry system, the number of film adaptations of plays has increased. However, the percentage of truly successful changes is still deficient, and even if they are artistically successful, they have no commercial recognition. Gianakaris (1985) says:

However, even in these instances, the acclaim typically is critical rather than popular in the commercial sense. While one lists successes such as these, one also must be conscious of the far greater number of disappointing movie adaptations made from hit dramas.

Overall, stage to screen adaptations has not become more accessible with the times, but rather with the increasing number of failed adaptations, making people realize that good adaptations are not easy to come by. Most domestic Chinese researchers have taken a combing approach, such as focusing on adapting traditional Chinese plays to film since the new century. Lu Ru. (2013) noted that some traditional Chinese plays had been adapted into films since the 21st century and their themes. More attention needs to be paid to the study of successful adaptations from stage to screen. And perhaps the best way to explore this topic is to start at the beginning of the birth of Chinese film.

2. YINGXI THEORY: A THEORY OF STAGE TO SCREEN ADAPTATION CONSTRUCTED BY THE CHINESE

The development of new things often does not go smoothly. When the film first appeared in China, the then ruler of the Qing government, Empress Dowager Cixi, did not like it and even feared it somewhat. In 1904, when Empress Dowager Cixi celebrated her 70th birthday, the British minister gave her a movie projector as a gift. Shortly after the screening at that time, the generator exploded. Empress Dowager Cixi was so frightened that she considered movies as something inauspicious and ordered that are in the palace. At that time, theatrical performance was deep-rooted in traditional Chinese culture compared to the new thing of film. At the same time,

changes have accompanied the emergence and development of local Chinese cinema, which influences people by the traditional theatre in terms of aesthetics and creativity. Zhong, Zhang and Zhang (1997) noted:

Until the end of the Qing, the most popular entertainment for ordinary Chinese were live performances by actors. However, the famous plays at the time started to depart from the traditional theatre.

To attract these audiences, the earliest film exhibition in China mainly took place in teahouses and theatre houses and often functioned as interludes during theatre performances or storytelling.

Zhong (1986) pointed out that 'Yingxi' was the common name for Chinese films in the first three decades of the 20th century. These three decades were the period when the film was introduced to China and took root, laying the foundation for Chinese film in all aspects of its art and business. The first generation of filmmakers gradually developed a system of cinematic concepts and means of expression during the exploration of creative practices. The theory of 'Yingxi' is the initial interpretation and summary of this concept and means of expression. Although this theory has never appeared in the form of a well-structured and well-documented theoretical monograph, as in some Western film theories, it is scattered in various film reviews, creative experiences, and discourses on film creation techniques. However, it does exist, and only its unique theoretical framework is present. EY Yeh (2015) pointed out that:

By defining yingxi exclusively as drama, thus excluding cinema's other properties such as photography and movement, Zhong argued that storytelling is core to Chinese film practice and criticism.

To Zhong and Chen, Chinese cinema does not organize itself around the prolific, objective presence open to perception. Instead of privileging Ying (the photographic image), Chinese filmmakers focused on xi fabrication, performance, narrative, valorized cinema's dramatic effects, and attending ethos (Zhong 1986, 76-77; Chen 1986, 85-87).

A tremendous significance of 'Yingxi' theory for the development of Chinese theatre and film lies in its establishment of a unique artistic system distinct from the situation in other countries. It is rather unfortunate that 'Yingxi' Theory did not last long in China, as the concept of filmmaking shifted and more and more directors focused on the ontological character of the film. The academic community has also proposed 'drop the crutch of theatre.'

However, in more than 100 years of filmmaking, Chinese directors have not completely abandoned a creative style with a dramatic character. Researchers have found that, in recent years, there has been an increase in the number of films in China that are similar to the theatre, namely 'Theatre Film.'

METHODOLOGY

The researcher conducted a qualitative study based on a literature review using a combination of observational and analytical methods. Whether viewed in a cinema or

on an electronic screen, 'Theatre Film' ultimately takes the form of a film. On this premise, the study of 'Theatre Film' focuses on how it can be more theatrical.

Aristotle argues that the components of tragic art are six - for tragic art is a unique art - (plot, character, theme, diction/dialogue, music/melody, and spectacle). Two of them are the medium of imitation, one is the manner of imitation; the other three are the objects of imitation and the composition of tragic art. It became the earliest theoretical basis for the uniqueness of theatrical performance.
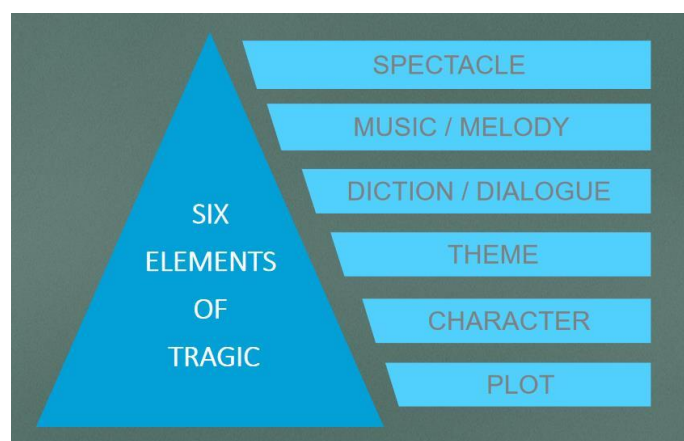

FIGURE1. ARISTOTLE'S SIX ELEMENTS OF TRAGIC

Unities, in theatre, is a set of three principles derived by the French classicists from Aristotle's Poetics; they require a single action for the play, expressed as taking place in one place and within the time of day. These principles are the unity of action, the unity of place, and the unity of time.
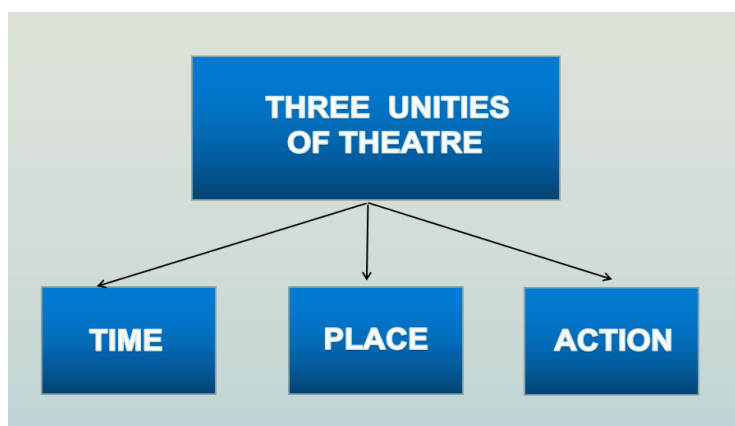

Figure2. Three Unities of Theatre

There is no denying that the shape and standards of theatre are constantly changing with people's practice and understanding. A negative view of the three unities of theatre has emerged over a long period of theatre practice as being too stereotypical. For example, Hugo did not favor the unity of place and time, but he favored the unity of action. Therefore, the author argues that the criteria of THREE UNITIES OF THEATRE can also be relaxed for 'Theatre Film.' Researchers believe that a film or

work of art in film form is a 'Theatre Film' if it has all of the above 1-6 essential elements of drama and has some or all of the unifying characteristics of 7-9.

Moreover, of course, and most importantly, it should at least seem to have something to do with theatre and not just be a film. Moreover, that necessary element is whether it has a staging label or is adapted from a stage show. In summary, the ten criteria for examining 'Theatre Film' are as follows:
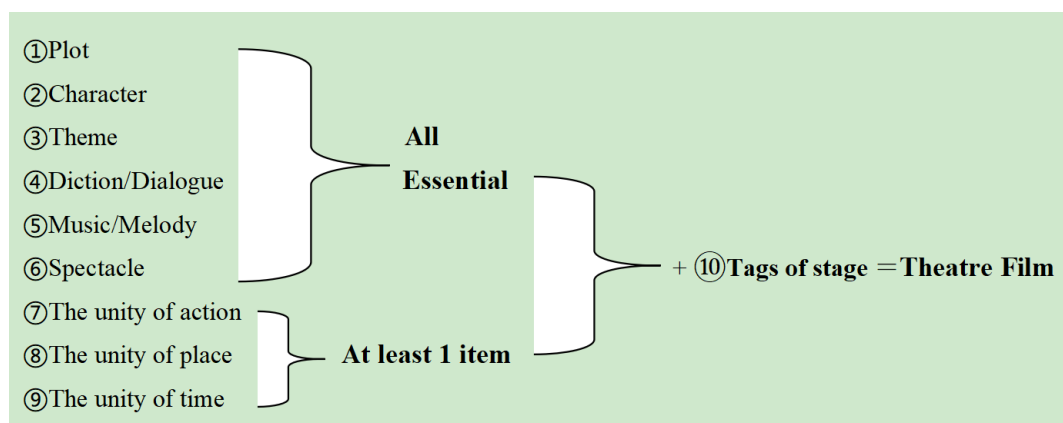

FIGURE3. THE FORMULA FOR 'THEATRE FILM'

RESULT & DISCUSSION

This study selected the release of three films in cinemas in mainland China between 2019 and 2021. They are all cases of films that have had a large reflection in the Chinese audience and are not niche cases. Since the COVID19 pandemic, The number of new films each year is greatly affected, but even so, some examples can be found, which are incomplete below. This study aims to define the characteristics and elements of 'Theatre Film.' In addition, it shows that this art form does not exist only in history and in some theoretical concepts but exists today and is constantly evolving.

CASE 1   WHITE SNAKE (2019)   IMDB: TT11151998

Release Date: 2021-05-20(Mainland China)

①Plot	√ A Love Story.
②Character	√ e.g. Bai Suzhen, Xu Xian
③Theme	√ Love
④Diction/Dialogue	√ e.g. Bai Suzhen: "Xu Lang, how does this tea taste?"
⑤Music/Melody	√ Cantonese Opera
⑥Spectacle	√ e.g. Water overflowed the Jinshan Mountain.

⑦The unity of action	√ Baisuzhen repays the favour.
⑧The unity of place	✕
⑨The unity of time	✕
⑩Tags of stage	√ An adaptation of the Cantonese opera The Legend of the White Snake.

CASE 2　HI, MOM (2021)　IMDB: TT13364790
RELEASE DATE: 2021-02-12 (MAINLAND CHINA)

①Plot	√ A Fantasy Story.
②Character	√ e.g. Jia Xiaoling, Li Huanying
③Theme	√ Family
④Diction/Dialogue	√ e.g. "She's not just my mother, she's herself."
⑤Music/Melody	√ Popular Music in China in the 20th Century
⑥Spectacle	√ e.g. Traveling through time.
⑦The unity of action	√ Save Mum
⑧The unity of place	✕
⑨The unity of time	✕
⑩Tags of stage	√ Adapted from a play written by the lead actors.

CASE 3   THE ELEVENTH CHAPTER (2019)   IMDB: TT10097436
RELEASE DATE: 2021-04-02 (MAINLAND CHINA)

①Plot	√ A Comedy Story.
②Character	√ e.g. Ma Fuli, Jin Cailing
③Theme	√ The Truth
④Diction/Dialogue	√ e.g. "In the setting sun, we saw a tractor struggling to make its way."
⑤Music/Melody	√ Film scores
⑥Spectacle	√ e.g. Stage Story
⑦The unity of action	√ Completing a theatre production.
⑧The unity of place	√ The Stage in Film
⑨The unity of time	✕
⑩Tags of stage	√ Most of the scenes throughout the film are on a single stage.

CONCLUSION

 "Content of any medium is always another medium." ——(Marshall McLuhan, 1964)

It is easy to see from the above research that the theatrical form is widely present in the present-day film, which does not refer to a simple record of a theatrical stage, but a fusion of the two mediums. According to communication scholar Marshall McLuhan, the content of one medium is in another medium. In the industrial age, humans conveyed explicit messages through newspapers and books and audio and video messages through television and radio. Without these mediums, who would have known that information could also be in graphic and audio, and video form; in the Information Age, humans conveyed all kinds of information through the Internet. Without the Internet medium, there would be no fun and exciting segments and no new communication content such as live interaction and VR virtual.

The common perception was that the theatre corresponded to the stage and the film to the screen in the past. This notion is no longer accurate today. With the development of new media, today's theatre and film are limited to the traditional confines of stage and screen. This thesis argues that the media landscape of theatre and film has shifted. As a result, the physical boundaries between stage and screen have also changed. People do not necessarily need to go to the cinema to see a film, and they

can choose to watch it on their computer or mobile phone. Computer screens and mobile phone screens can also take on the function of a cinema screen. Watching theatre is no exception.

There are now many online forms of theatre adaptations. In particular, since the COVID19 pandemic, theatre performances in many countries have not been able to function correctly, hence the emergence of 'Online Theatre.' As Andika Aziz Hussin (2021), says:

In Malaysia, the Movement Control Order (MCO) has opened the minds of local theatre players to be more creative in applying the suitable medium in displaying their creative performances. No one ever imagined theatre performances online, but now, it is a practical approach to ensuring the sustainability of the theatre art itself.

With 'Online Theatre', the creators have extended the traditional theatrical medium of theatre performance. It is in itself a stage to screen adaptation. Adapters need to use the features of the film to adapt the theatre. This adaptation process includes applying cinematic techniques such as camera language and editing. The 'Online Theatre' has the characteristics of 'Theatre Film' and is a form of 'Theatre Film.' Therefore, in the wake of the COVID19 pandemic, it is highly relevant to explore 'Theatre Film.' It is significant in that it reviews the shape of theatre in the changing and evolving medium and seeks a new creative possibility for when the offline theatre is not open.

Regarding technical updating and creative experience, 'Theatre Film' has become a widely available content worldwide, not just in China. For example, the film The Father (2020) won Anthony Hopkins another Oscar for Best Actor at 83. The film is an adaptation of the theatre of The Father by director Florian Zeller. The theatre was already very successful before it was adapted into a film. It is worth noting that the same idea exists in China and other countries as if a successful play adapted to film would be equally successful, but this is often not the case. Successful adaptations of The Father from stage to screen remain rare. The value of successful adaptations should therefore not be underestimated.

For this reason, the researcher has focused on the changing perceptions and practices of the Chinese director community, something that has existed since the advent of film in China and which it cannot avoid. For a long time, theorists seemed reluctant to address this elusive issue. However, this study illustrates the basics of the existence of this transmedial art. It gives it an unoriginal name, which at least shows that 'Theatre Film' exists in China today and has unlimited potential.

REFERENCES

1. Arnheim, R. (1938). A new Laocoön: artistic composites and the talking film. Film as Art, 47, 48-49.
2. Balodis, J. M. (2012). The practice of adaptation: turning fact and fiction into theatre (Doctoral dissertation, Queensland University of Technology).
3. Bazin, A. (2000). Adaptation, or the Cinema as Digest. The film adaptation, 19-27.
4. Bazin, A. (2004). Theater and cinema. In What Is Cinema? Volume I (pp. 76-124). University of California Press.
5. Blumenstein, E. The "content" of any medium is always another medium.—Marshall McLuhan, Understanding Media, 1964.

6.   Cutchins, D., Raw, L., & Welsh, J. M. (Eds.). (2010). Redefining Adaptation Studies. Scarecrow Press.

7.   Ferrari, R. (2008). Translation/transmedia/trans text: border-crossing from screen to stage in Greater China. Journal of Chinese Cinemas, 2(1), 53-65.

8.   Gianakaris. (1985). Drama into film: The Shaffer situation. Modern drama, 28(1), 83-98.

9.   Halsall, A. W. (2016). Victor Hugo and the Romantic Drama. University of Toronto Press.

10. Hussin, A. A., & bin Bianus, A. B.(2021). Hybrid Theatre; An adaptation of performing techniques in the efforts to preserve the art of theatre performance post covid19.

11. Hutcheon, L. (2011). A Theory of Adaptation (2006), trad. it. Teoria degli adattamenti.

12. Leitch, T. (2008). Adaptation studies at a crossroads. Adaptation, 1(1), 63-77.

13. Lu Ru. (2013). Film adaptations of classic operas in the new century. Film Review, (15), 88-90.

14. Tindemans, K. (2008). The Politics of the Poetics: Aristotle and Drama Theory in 17th Century France. Foundations of Science, 13(3), 325-336.

15. Yeh, E. Y. Y. (2015). Translating Yingxi: Chinese film genealogy and early cinema in Hong Kong. Journal of Chinese Cinemas, 9(1), 76-109.

16. Zhong Dafeng. (1986). The history of the theory of Yingxi. Contemporary Cinema, (3), 77-82.

17. Zatlin, P. (2005). From Stage to Screen: Strategies for Film Adaptation. In Theatrical Translation and Film Adaptation (pp. 169-202). Multilingual Matters.