

Study on the Current Popularization Situation of China's Theatre Industry and Means to Improve the Future Promotion Mode: A Case Study Based on the Means of Theatre Promotion in Western Countries

Zhiyu Liu

University of California, Santa Barbara, Santa Barbara, United States.

zhiyuliu@ucsb.edu

Abstract:

Theater performance is a long-standing and diverse art form, which usually includes musicals, dance dramas, plays, physical dramas and so on. In recent years, with the creation of more mature scripts, the excellent performance of actors, the introduction of foreign drama tours to China and the emotional resonance between the audience and the stage content, more and more people choose to learn about the culture of drama and enter the theater. However, compared with the popularity of foreign theater to the public, the popularity of domestic theater is still relatively low at this stage. One of the reasons for this situation is that theater companies do not promote their productions enough, thus failing to reach a wider range of people. By analyzing and comparing the marketing methods of Chinese and Western theatre production companies, this study finds that Chinese theatre companies should focus on international exchange performances, theatre branding and positioning, as well as finding more diverse and comprehensive marketing and promotion methods to reach a wider audience than the current level of marketing.

Keywords: Promotion Strategies; Comparative Study; Theatre Promotion.

1. Introduction

Theater is a route of national culture transmission, which provides a platform for citizens to experience and inherit their culture traditions [1]. In recent years, China's cultural industry has developed significant-

ly, among which the theater industry, as one of the communication carriers of cultural expression, has received widespread attention. However, compared with the current situation of the theater industry in Western countries, the Chinese theater industry still faces many challenges in popularization and promo-

tion. Although theater has a long history and deep cultural heritage in China, its influence and popularity in modern society is relatively low.

Western countries have accumulated a wealth of experience and effective models in theater promotion, such as branding, establishing performance seasons and other marketing strategies, which have successfully increased the social influence and attention of theater. These experiences have important reference significance for the development of Chinese theater industry.

This thesis aims to understand the operation logic of theatre companies, such as the capital supply, business model, project management and staff composition, analyze the cases of theatre promotion, compare the promotion methods of western and Chinese theatre companies, explore the shortcomings of the Chinese theatre industry, and propose specific means to improve the promotion model in the future, in order to promote the further development and popularization of the Chinese theatre industry.

2. Theater Company's Operational Logic

2.1 Theater Company's Capital Supply

Theater company operating costs come from a wide variety of sources, most of which include performance costs, creative costs, actor accommodation and transportation costs, etc. In some cases, it is necessary to consider the publicity costs of the company's performances, such as the advertisement placement in the mall, self-media promotion, advertising insertion [2]. These costs require a large amount of capital to maintain the normal operation of the theater. Common sources of funding are performance tickets revenues, for example, 73% of the revenues of the Royal National Theater Ballet in Amsterdam, the Netherlands, come from the audience [3]. The price of Chinese performance ticket version ranges from 80 to 880 RMB, which can cover most of the company's expenses. Policy support from local governments, such as the Jiangsu Art Fund grant program in Jiangsu, China, and the National Art Fund program. Of the National Art Fund projects declared in 2022, 31.7% originated from the creative needs of stage art [4]. These funds not only help theaters cover their basic operating costs but can also support theater companies to innovate and better serve citizens and cultural promotion.

2.2 Theater Company Business Model

The first is the most common group operation, mainly represented by China Poly Group Corporation Ltd. and CPAA Theatres. This mode of operation allows popular performances to tour under their own theaters, thus at-

tracting more audiences and gaining more profits. Second is the independent operation, usually with the theater that can undertake the performance of the direct interface. Independent operation is usually resident performances, but in recent years this form of operation is fading out of the public's field of vision. The main reason is that the business model is more traditional, some theater facilities cannot undertake large-scale installations or special venues needs of the troupe, such as lifting the stage, the complex lighting and curtain installations [2].

2.3 Theater Company Project Management

Artist project is usually a work created by a theater company with its own script, such as *The Phantom of the Opera* created by Really Useful Group in the UK, *Gone with the Wind* created by Takarazuka Kabuki Dance Company in Japan, and *Confucius* created by China Opera and Dance Theatre, etc. These art projects are the main source of expenditure and income for theater companies, so the production team needs to create new productions frequently to stimulate the market and gain more audiences. Secondly, production project which is responsible for the scenario and construction of the play, and territorial elopement project are also part of project management [5].

2.4 Theater Company Staff Composition and Responsibilities

The theater group is organized essentially into four departments: First, the management department, which is responsible for creating and executing the overall operation strategy, ensuring the coordination and cooperation of all departments, monitoring the budget usage, allocating resources effectively, maintaining relationships with outside partners--such as government agencies, sponsors and community organizations--to guarantee the sustainability and social impact of the company's operations. The second is the technical department, which is in charge of building the stage, installing equipment and adjusting the lighting and sound. The third one is the promotion department, which takes charge of finding the target audience and promoting the program by using a multi-platform approach. Last one is the cast department [5].

3. Marketing Analysis of Theater Companies

3.1 Marketing Methods of Western Theater Companies

3.1.1 Branding and Positioning

Studies have shown that theater companies in western countries focus on branding and have a clear positioning

for their own performances. By branding their plays, they can deepen the audience's memory points and expand their market influence [6]. This study also supports this perspective, and these positioning can include special cultural geographic locations, representative logos of the plays and so on. Mentioning the element of mask the audience will think of the musical Phantom of the Opera, this mask is full of mysterious colors, behind which not only hides the face that does not want to be seen, but also has the Phantom's heart that does not want to be peeped into. As a result, this representative element of the mask is deeply imprinted in the hearts of the audience, and the production company behind it as well as the Broadway theater can extend more marketing through the mask itself. Japan's Takarazuka Revue Company was founded in the late Meiji Restoration, and therefore the plays are positioned as national acting plays whose purpose is to present a new image of Japan [7]. This targeted type of theater can appeal more directly to enthusiasts in the field. Overall, by analyzing their unique local cultures, theaters in different regions can incorporate these cultural elements into their performances. This approach gives more audiences the opportunity to learn about regional culture and delve into regional life. Whether it is to promote the

theater or to fulfill the duty of the theater itself, branding positioning provides a larger space for development and marketing.

3.1.2 Performance Season

Compared to the Chinese theater market, Western countries have a deeper understanding and use of the concept of performance season. The New York City Ballet in David H. Koch Theater in the United States is divided into four seasons, and in different seasons, different resident works are launched in anticipation of the audience to enter the theater, so that a long season gives the audience more opportunities to watch performances and optional performances of the repertoire [8]. The variety of content enriches the audience's life and promotes the link between the audience and society. It is worth mentioning that Chinese theatre companies have also begun to realize the great achievements brought by performance seasons, for example, every theatre has its own performance season. However, these performance periods typically last for a year, leading to issues such as lengthy performance cycles, an overly broad range of repertoire, and a lack of continuity for audiences in following productions. As a result, the Chinese theater market should further explore the concept of seasonal performance (Table 1).

Table 1. New York City Ballet Performance Schedule in David H. Koch Theater

SEASONS	SEASON PERIOD	PERFORMANCE	PERFORMANCE DATE
FALL 2024	SEPT.17-OCT.13	MASTERS AT WORK	SEP.17-SEP.26
		ECLECTIC NYCB	SEP.19-SEP.22
		ALL PECK	SEP.24-OCT.13
GEORGE BALANCHINE'S THE NUTCRACKER	NOV.29-JAN.05	GEORGE BALANCHINE'S THE NUTCRACKER	NOV.29-JAN.4
		SENSORY-FRIENDLY PER- FORMANCE	JAN.05
WINTER 2025	JAN.21-MAR.2	ALL BALANCHINE I	JAN.21-FEB.1
		ALL STRAVINSKY	JAN.22-FEB.4
		SWAN LAKE	FEB.19-MAR.2
SPRING 2025	APR.22-JUN.1	ALL BALANCHINE I	APR.22-APR.29
		ALL RAVEL	MAY.14-MAY.24
		A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM	MAY.27-JUN.1

3.1.3 Transnational Marketing Strategies

Theater companies need to take into account diverse cultures, economic conditions, market settings and audience needs when it comes to global marketing. Transnational marketing strategy can be the most effective in the limited resources to expand the market, increase the influence of the play and attract potential audiences. This study con-

cludes that transnational marketing plays an important role in promoting theater. Nowadays, there are many plays introduced from western countries into the Chinese theater market, such as Mozart, Chicago, and Notre Dame de Paris, etc. In recent years, these plays have attracted a large number of Chinese musical theater fans, and the introduction of classic plays allows the audience to enjoy stage

performances locally. Chinese theater companies often use social media to promote their productions, which gives western theater companies greater platform for cross-border marketing. Actors and theater officials can create accounts on social media to interact with the audience, effectively reducing the language barrier and enhancing the audience's emotional connection to performances. In this cultural exchange era, transnational marketing has become a key strategy for theater companies to expand their markets and increase their influences.

3.2 Marketing Methods of Chinese Theater Companies

3.2.1 Social Media Marketing

The widespread popularity of social media in China makes Chinese theater companies usually use social platforms for promotion. For example, in 2023, Xiaohongshu had 312 million monthly active users, with a high percentage of users in first-tier cities, new first-tier cities, and second-tier cities. Similar to Xiaohongshu, the social platform Weibo has reached 598 million monthly active users in 2023. The large volume of usage of these social platforms can increase the exposure and viewership of performances. Studies have shown that the emergence of new media has made the dissemination of theater no longer limited to a specific time and place [9]. The arrival of the digital era has made people more dependent on the Internet, so the promotion information is faster and more comprehensive than ever before. Theater companies can release trailers, interviews with actors or backstage information of performances through websites such as TikTok, Weibo, and Xiaohongshu to attract the attention of the audience, stimulate their interest, and raise expectations. For example, in recent years, the popular dance drama *A Dream of the Red Mansions* attracts tons of audiences due to the viral success of a promotional video clip. After that, the audience spontaneously posted photos, curtain call video on social media, further elevating this trend of attending theater performances to its climax. At the same time, because of the application of big data in the new era, both book lovers and theater lovers can get the first time to get the play information. As a result, theater companies can reach their target audience more precisely and improve their marketing efficiency.

However, existing studies tend to ignore the frequency of social media use by audiences of different age groups. In a previous study by the authors of this study, 224 out of 229 people got the latest information about performances on the Internet, yet only two of the 229 people who filled out the questionnaire were over 40 years old. Therefore, it can be concluded that younger viewers are more receptive to the internet and therefore will be more actively involved

in the play's interactions on social media and get updates more quickly. Older audiences rely more on traditional media, such as magazines and newspapers, which leads to incomplete promotion and loss of target audience. Therefore, Chinese theater companies should not limit their promotion mainly on social media platforms but should look for diversified ways to reach out to their target groups.

3.2.2 Audience Interaction

Interaction has become an essential part of Chinese theater companies. Through interaction with the audience, the distance between the audience and the play itself is brought closer, so the theater company can enhance the audience's motivation as well as participation from it.

Online interaction comes first. Usually, the audience will post their own theater reviews on social media platforms or theater review websites. Whether it's the intuitive experience of ordinary audience members or the in-depth analysis of professional theater critics, these reviews will be widely spread on the Internet, thus expanding the influence of the performance itself. In some of the reviews, the audience will suggest plots that can be modified, which is extremely helpful to the new production of the theater company. Producers can discover existing problems from a new perspective, and then make timely modifications and adjustments.

The second kind of contact is offline interaction, such as arranging for a play-related photo area for the audience or organizing a signing by the actors following the performance. These interactive methods give the audience a personalized and diverse experience, which in turn improves audience satisfaction, establishes a closer connection, and enhances the brand image of the theater.

Another special kind of offline interaction is the creation of theme stores, such as the China Oriental Performing Arts Group, which has built a theme store called Qinglyu Space. The store is mainly arranged to sell drinks, food, and peripheral publications that are extended by *The Journey of a Legendary*. Customers can also pick autographed photos of the actors after spending a certain amount of money. The main target group of this kind of offline marketing is the loyal audience and fans of the actors, so this kind of theme store can maintain the enthusiasm of the audience and their love for the performance.

However, it is worth noting that some negative play reviews may diminish the marketing effect of the theater company. When these negative reviews spread on the Internet, the potential audience's expectation of the play will also be reduced, so how to face these negative reviews and make timely adjustments is also a problem that Chinese theater companies need to consider nowadays.

3.2.3 Co-Branding

Co-branding has become a mature means of promotion,

usually with brands in different fields, which not only expands the potential audience, but also improves the popularity and influence of the play. In co-branding cooperation, it is necessary to focus on the degree of brand fit between them; if it is a product co-branding, the product itself should have a corresponding association with the play. For example, the co-branding of the dance drama *A Dream of Red Mansions* with *Sexy Tea* and Luckin coffee is related to the drama itself or the plot and main characters in the drama.

Co-branding cooperation also faces some problems, one is whether both brands have enough influence. Insufficient influence of one brand may lead to weakened publicity and marketing efforts, and the other brand will not be able to obtain the expected benefits. The second is whether the brand images of the two co-branding companies are compatible. Third, the theater company should consider whether there is enough money to support the co-marketing. Combining these factors, the theater company should do enough market research and analysis before the cooperation and formulate a reasonable and effective cooperation plan to ensure that the co-branding cooperation is carried out smoothly and completes the expected marketing effect.

4. Comparative Analysis and Future Development Suggestions

Chinese theater companies tend to focus most of their marketing on social media platforms, targeting both existing and potential audiences. In contrast, theater companies in Western countries concentrate on building the brand itself, emphasizing how to create a strong brand or image for the play and attracting audiences by highlighting the play's strengths.

In the future, the marketing departments of Chinese theater companies can firstly focus on perfecting their brand image, finding the right brand positioning, and creating plays that align with unique positioning to better target their audiences. Secondly, looking for more international performance opportunities and cooperate with international theaters to globalize Chinese stories. Thirdly, enhancing the theater experience by improving seating facilities, as well as the management and professionalism of the staff, can elevate the overall audience experience and help build a long-term loyal audience. Fourthly, theater companies and theaters can collaborate to offer actor master classes, giving audiences the opportunity to interact closely with the actors and learn insights about the show, thereby enhancing their experience and engagement. Finally, Chinese theater companies should not limit themselves to marketing campaigns on media platforms but should look for diversified marketing methods to reach a wider target

group.

5. Conclusion

In summary, Chinese theater companies widely use social media platforms for marketing and communication, building a bridge to strengthen the connection between productions and audiences, thereby increasing their influence. These marketing methods contrast sharply with those of theater companies in Western countries. Therefore, in terms of diversification of marketing methods and marketing scope, Chinese theater companies still need to explore new directions until they achieve the desired results. However, there are still some shortcomings in this study, as it is only based on the existing literature in the database, and the amount of data is not representative enough. Moreover, the author's previous research questionnaire mentioned above was only completed by 229 people, which is an insufficient sample size to generalize the conclusion. Secondly, when discussing the different marketing models of Chinese and Western theater companies, this thesis assumes that the Chinese and Western market environments are the same, however, this is not the case. Therefore, in future discussions, it is necessary to explore the differences between Chinese and Western market demands at a deeper level to obtain more precise conclusions.

References

- [1] Yanping Xu. "On how to effectively manage and operate a theater and provide services." *Northern Music* 36.13(2016):209.
- [2] Yandong Liu. "Research on the Operating Model and Cost Management of National Centre for the Performing Arts." *Accounting studies* .25(2020):137-139.
- [3] Kleppe, Bård. "Regulating Autonomy : Theatre Policy and Theatre Management in Three European Countries." Doctoral Dissertations at the University College of Southeast Norway, 2017. University College of Southeast Norway.
- [4] Chunhong Xia. *A Study of the U.S. Government's Cultural and Artistic Funding System (1930s-2020s)*. 2023. Shandong University, PhD dissertation.
- [5] Bonet, Lluís, and Héctor Schargorodsky. "Theatre management: models and strategies for cultural venues." *Policy* 23.2 (2018): 159-173.
- [6] MacDonald, Laura. "Marketing Musical Theatre."
- [7] Jun Fang. "A Study on the Relationship Between Japanese Theater Companies and Their Exclusive Theaters." *Cultural and Artistic Studies* 11.04(2018):71-77.
- [8] Bing Liu. "Exploration of Development Strategies for the Dance Theater Industry in New York." *Art Management (Chinese and English)* .02(2019):138-144.
- [9] Liu, Shanshan, and Nur Qasdina Jeeta Binti Abdullah. "The Impact of New Media on the Development of Chinese Theatre and Opera." *Art and Society* 2.5 (2023): 11-14.