

From the Paper to the Stage: a New Life for Novels?

The Adaptation of Bestsellers in Contemporary China

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This paper studies the evermore widespread phenomenon of the adaptation of novels for the stage, focusing on prizewinning contemporary Chinese novels. The first part provides the theoretical approach that is adopted in the second part, where two cases studies are discussed, i.e. the stage adaptation of the novel *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow* by Wang Anyi and of the novel *To Live* by Yu Hua.

Starting from the perspective of “horizontal relations” among texts (Hutcheon 2013), the analysis of the adaptation process takes its distance from the fidelity/infidelity discourse, in order to investigate the network of echoing versions (trans-media, trans-language, etc) it is able to produce. This network is much more interesting to explore than supposed vertical hierarchies. Nevertheless, not every version is a text able to live independently from its source: the analysis shows that today's phenomenon of trans-media adaptation is fostered by a cultural industry that aims at exploiting all profits from a best-selling prizewinning novel. The role played by this industry in the adaptation process needs to be fully considered.

In his milestone book *After Babel*, George Steiner provided a definition of culture as ‘a sequence of translations and transformations of constants’ (Steiner 1998: 449): starting from this idea, it is becoming more and more evident in the world of contemporary literature or World Republic of Letters (Casanova 1999), that translation is the tool that keeps a text alive. Here I use both these terms, translation and text, in their broader sense: translation includes all the three categories described by Jakobson (Jakobson 1959: 233) that are interlingual, intralingual and intersemiotic, and text includes literature, film, performance, etcetera. Following this broad approach to the concept of translation and text, in recent years a number of scholars have studied and underlined the common points between translation and adaptation studies: pursuing Steiner’s train of thought, we can consider them as ‘invariance within transformation’ (Steiner 1998: 448) or transformation within invariance. ‘All adapters are translators, and all translators are creative writers of a sort’ (Sanders 2006/2016: 9). Nevertheless, translation and adaptation still remain separate both in academia as well as in cultural industry: as Lawrence Venuti underlines,

Translation and adaptation are carefully distinguished by publishers and translators, filmmakers and screenwriters, even if copyright law classifies both cultural practices as 'derivative works' (Venuti 2007: 29).

This paper studies the evermore widespread phenomenon of the adaptation of novels for the stage, focusing on prizewinning contemporary Chinese novels. The first part provides the theoretical approach that is adopted in the second part, where two case studies are discussed.

The question of transborder, transmedia, intersemiotic, translation and adaptation are nowadays hot topics in academia. Nevertheless, in the discussion over translation and adaptation, we are still faced with the question of "fidelity." The old adage "traduttore traditore" is still very powerful, even if Derrida's deconstruction theory has already dismantled the hierarchy of original and copy, demonstrating that the prestige of the original is created by the copies, or if the intertextuality and transtextuality theory, from Kristeva to Genette, has already demonstrated the close relationship between texts inside and outside a certain culture, and the powerful influence this network of mutual echoing texts exercise over the blooming of literature, arts, and culture in general. In the rich corpus of critical articles, comments and evaluations of translations (from one language to another, from one media to another, or both translingual and transmedia) the lexicon of fidelity is still at the centre of the stage. But fidelity to what?¹

I wish to take distance from this discourse, that both translation and adaptation studies overcame long ago: as Robert Stam underlines,

The fidelity discourse [...] assumes that a novel "contains" an extractable "essence," a kind of a "heart of the artichoke" hidden "underneath" the surface details of style [...] But in fact there is no such transferable core: a single novelistic text comprises a series of verbal signs that can trigger a plethora of possible readings. An open structure, constantly reworked and reinterpreted by a boundless context, the text feeds on and is fed into an infinitely permutating intertext (Stam 2005: 15).

I will anchor my analysis to the point of view, shared by many scholars today, of translingual practice and adaptation to different media as being one of the infinite interpretations of a text, as one of the many intersemiotic and interlingual suits that a text can wear.² In this inclusive view, that considers

¹ In Desmond and Hawkes (2005: 34) view, to look for fidelity in comparing source and adaptation is like comparing apples with oranges: they will never be alike.

² The perception of translation and adaptation as the same transformative process (transformation of a source into different language/medium/culture) is shared by many researchers, eventually proposing a difference in stages or grades (Johnston

the different aspects a text can assume as a precious wealth, defending the “original essence” is much less important than tracing the network and the echoes a text may interlace and produce. In today’s more fluid network environment, ‘multiple versions exist laterally not vertically’ (Hutcheon 2013: XV), and it is more interesting to explore the “horizontal” relations than the supposed vertical hierarchies.³

I used the word “wealth” to refer to a cultural value, but we need to underline that the contemporary culture industry is well aware of the economic value of the multiple versions of a text.

Adaptation into another medium becomes a means of prolonging the pleasure of the original presentation, and repeating the production of a memory (Ellis 1982: 4-5).

Adaptation trades upon the memory of that text (Ellis 1982: 3).⁴

In her interesting study on the adaptation industry, Simone Murray investigates the economy that underpins the multimedial and translingual adaptation, with particular reference to the film adaptation, analyzing all the actors (media conglomerates, literary agents, festivals and prizes, screenwriters, authors, etc) and the entire production chain of a winning title: as she shows, the film adaptation often is not an after product, but is conceived at the same time as the book.

In contemporary globalised media conglomerates, book publishing is typically of relatively minor commercial significance in terms of its contribution to overall corporate revenues. Yet publishing divisions continue to enjoy a high profile within such conglomerates as a source of prestige [...] Cultural hierarchies [i.e. books carry more prestige than films] are, paradoxically, kept alive by the same industry that pushes audiences to consume near-identical content across multiple media platforms (Murray 2012: 18).

As royalties are subtly fragmented according to use or media, it has become evident that the “derived products” have already become a “money machine:” Murray argues, in a quite polemic tone, that

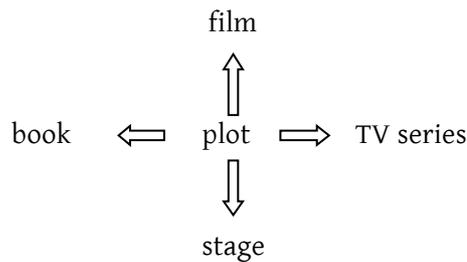
1996: 66 ‘The distinction between translation and adaptation [for the stage] is one of which is difficult to understand fully, unless is to refer to translation as the first stage of linguistic and broadly literary interrogation of the source text, and adaptation as the process of dramaturgical analysis.’) About the discussion on merging and/or diverging points of translation and adaptation discourse, see Krebs (2014 chapters 1 and 2).

³ This is particularly true in today’s fluid framework where old and new media are merged together (Jenkins 2006).

⁴ About the relationship between adaptation and memory, see the interesting perspective offered by Laera, who underlines that ‘in adaptation logic, time is no linear progression, but a spiral that keeps turning on itself, causing cyclical reoccurrences while ensuring evolution’ (Laera 2014: 3).

academia needs to take this economic factor into consideration when analyzing the relation between text and derived text.

Murray describes the Anglo-American adaptation industry: the chain production mechanisms she describes are obviously very similar in a globalized world; and the very same mechanism is already well established in China, with both its consequent positive and negative effects. In the Chinese cultural frame, we witness that the following map of multiple development depicts what is already a common practice:



The core is what I have called “plot” that is a nuclear story, which generates different products through different media and/or languages.⁵ This working and reworking of a certain plot has been there for centuries; nevertheless, the appearance of the concept of intellectual property has dramatically changed the relations between the source and the so-called derived products.

For the last 10-15 years, it has become a common practice in the Chinese cultural market to reshape a prize-winning book/ bestseller at least into a film, TV series, or play or even into many other myriad products, like mangas, cartoons, gadgets, and so on. Chinese academic literature, together with Chinese media in general, takes this phenomenon for granted, however I have found little analysis on it and its effects on cultural production.

How has this industry changed the approach to adaptation? In the West many studies on novel adaptation for the screen emphasize the relation of mutual profit behind this operation: the prize-winning novel guarantees both prestige and cultural value, together with reader/audience numbers. On the other side, the screen amplifies the reception of the novel, enlarging its audience and therefore enhancing both the prestige of the author and the sale of their books. Stage adaptation can enjoy the same benefits as the novel (cultural value + audience). But, traditionally, it enjoys a higher position in the common cultural hierarchy than that of film and TV. Moreover, it can offer the author a new platform to speak, space in the newspapers, interviews, etc.

⁵ In this map we can add translations in different languages, playing a fundamental role in enhancing the international prestige of the author, and through it internal prestige.

My research aims at analyzing the relationship between stage adaptation and contemporary Chinese prize-winning novels, focusing on the economic factor and the cluster I just described. Therefore, I have chosen as case studies novels that have at least been adapted for the stage, the screen and TV, in order to try to understand the role of the stage adaptation in this frame. The second question I wish to investigate is the quality of the adaptation itself, and in particular its capacity to become a real, independent text.⁶ If it is true that some productions clearly are there to take advantage of a successful plot, nevertheless I would pose the question is it always correct to simply classify this kind of operation as “culture industry subproducts”?

Just by going through the list of the prize-winning novels numerous examples appear: the novel *Massage (Tuina, 推拿)* by Bi Feiyu 毕飞宇,⁷ published in 2008 by the People’s Literature Publishing House clearly represents a typical literary prize pushed cluster: Mao Dun Prize winner in 2011, in 2013 it was adapted for the stage and the TV series,⁸ in 2014 for the screen.⁹ In only three years following the prize, a full “production line” was born, although with differing results in terms of quality and public.

Both the TV series, broadcast in prime time on CCTV1, during audience peak, as well as the movie, with its rich carnet of national and international prizes, enjoyed tremendous public success. Following up the triumph of the TV series, Chen Ping published the screenplay with the Xiyuan

⁶ While describing the right method to evaluate a translation, Antoine Berman lists as the first point the fact that a translated text has to be an independent text that can stand by itself and “works” (“tient”). ‘*Tenir* a ici un double sens: tenir comme un écrit dans la langue réceptrice, c'est-à-dire essentiellement ne pas être en deçà des «normes» de qualité scripturaire standard de celle-ci. Tenir, ensuite, au-delà de cette exigence de base, comme un véritable *texte* (systématicité et corrélativité, organicité de tous ces constituants)’ (Berman 1995: 65).

⁷ Born in 1964, he is well-known for his ability in the portrayal of the feminine psyche. His works have received several national and international prizes, they are translated in many languages and they are appreciated both by the critics and the readers. The novel *Massage* is his most successful long novel. It narrates the everyday life of a group of blind masseurs working at the Sha Zongqi Tuina Massage House in Nanjing. Organized in 21 relatively autonomous chapters, each following the action of one or more masseurs, the novel presents a rather loose structure constantly fragmented by flashbacks narrating the past life of the masseurs, the story of their blindness, their fears and their hopes. The massage house is the centre connecting the numerous isolated stories of the characters, and the trivialities of their everyday life become the occasion to dig into the inner life of the masseurs, and through their anxiety and their dreams to reflect ironically on contemporary society and the meaning of life.

⁸ 30 episodes, each being 42 minutes long, director Kang Honglei 康洪雷, screenwriter Chen Ping 陈枰, first aired the 15th August 2013 on CCTV1 in prime time.

⁹ Directed by Lou Ye 娄烨, it won the Silver Bear award for Outstanding Artistic Contribution. It received seven nominations at the 51st Golden Horse Film Awards and won six, namely Best Feature Film, Best New Performer, Best Adapted Screenplay, Best Cinematography, Best Film Editing and Best Sound Effects. Very successful at the box office in China, with 7.68 million Yuan.

Publishing House, but Bi Feiyu and the People's Literature Publishing House brought a successful action against them, claiming they did not sell any rights for the printing of adaptation products: the Xiyuan Publishing House had to pay compensation and withdraw the book from the market.¹⁰ This kind of example demonstrates the mechanism of the cultural cluster, the complex thicket of conflicting authors' interest rights and the economic value of the derived products.

As far as the adaptation for the stage is concerned, a big coproduction project between the Beijing NCPA (National Centre for Performing Arts, Guojia Dajuyuan 国家大剧院) and the Shanghai SDAC (Shanghai Dramatic Arts Centre, Shanghai huaju yishu zhongxin, 上海话剧艺术中心), was launched; the prominent playwright Yu Rongjun¹¹ and the well-known director Guo Xiaonan.¹² both from SDAC, were invited to work on this project, supported by the author Bi Feiyu himself: he granted the rights for free, and set no limits on the playwright and director; his pictures appeared in many of the articles announcing the play as well as the leaflet. In spite of this big investment and its promotional campaign,¹³ the play met neither the public nor the critics' favour: only 26 performances in total, in Beijing and Shanghai of course, plus Nanjing, in a single run. The book was unable to guarantee an audience for the play. Pointing out the widespread phenomenon of bestselling novels

¹⁰ See Wang Xiaoyi 王晓易, "Bi Feiyu tan *Tuina* zao qinquan" (毕飞宇谈《推拿》遭侵权, Bi Feiyu speaks about the infringement of *Tuina*'s rights). *Dongfang Jinbao* (东方今报, Orient Today), April 1, 2014.

¹¹ Yu Rongjun 喻荣军, one of the most prolific contemporary playwrights, based at SDAC, where he plays important managing roles in publicity, marketing and programming. He combines his creative work with work on the translation of plays and he has adapted a number of foreign and Chinese novels for the stage. Despite a few controversial judgments (too prolific, writer of white-collar plays, too superficial, too commercial, too "Shanghaiese"), his works have won a number of national and international prizes and have been performed both in China and abroad. Among the most famous titles we mention *www.com*. For an analysis of his dramaturgy see Conceison (2011: 311-321).

¹² Designated as one of the most prominent theatre directors of this century in 2006 by the journal *Chinese Theatre* (*Zhongguo xiju*, 中国戏剧), Guo Xiaonan 郭小男 is listed among the first level directors of SDAC. His work as a director is combined with his academic work, both at the university (Central Academy of Drama, Shanghai Academy of Drama, etc) and in research associations (like the Shakespeare Society of China, *Zhongguo Shashibiya yanjiuhui*, 中国莎士比亚研究会). He has directed a large number of successful plays, Yueju (越剧) opera plays, Kunqu (昆曲) opera plays, Jingju (京剧) opera plays, thus creating a very personal and particular stage aesthetic which combines East and West, tradition and modernity.

¹³ The news of the stage adaptation was announced already in March posting big pictures of the writer Bi Feiyu (Shi Jianfeng 石剑峰, "Bi Feiyu *Tuina* huajuban jinnian jiu yue shouyan" (毕飞宇《推拿》话剧版今年9月首演, The stage adaptation of *Massage* by Bi Feiyu will be staged in September). *Dongfang zaobao* (东方早报, Oriental Daily), March 6, 2013); the big promotional campaign about this "North-South product" played in particular on the social topic of the play: Many local newspapers report with emphasis that this is the first time a play speak about blind people's lives, and that during the shows in Shanghai, the 15th of October, for the Blindness day, a group of blind people was invited to "listen" to the play (Zhu Guang 朱光, "Daomangquan pei 'mama' ting huaju *Tuina*" (导盲犬陪"妈妈"听话剧《推拿》, The guide-dog brings its "mum" to listen to the play *Massage*), *Xinmin wanbao* (新民晚报, Xinmin Evening News), October 16, 2013). Local Shanghai newspapers (i.e. *Xinmin wanbao* October 18, 2013) write in their titles that this play was "successful on stage" (*reyan* 热演), nevertheless they are but brief notices, without any data, centered on the Bi Feiyu bestselling novel.

being adapted for the stage, the reviews¹⁴ denounced the common problems shared by this kind of commercial operation: the plot lacks a clear cut dramatic action line, the relation between the characters and their reactions appear sometimes awkward or unjustified, and the characters themselves have no clear-cut identity. Qiao Zongyu was particularly harsh:

To be honest, this is not a very bad play, it's just one of those mediocre works circulating nowadays. [...] I encourage artists to calmly ponder on which direction they really do wish to see theatre develop in.¹⁵

In condensing the original plot, the adaptation chose the line of the love stories as its main topic, thus diluting and oversimplifying the multilayered content and the numerous social issues of the novel. Actually, this emphasis on romance is a trademark of SDAC white-collar productions, that normally brings to the targeted audience (25-30 years old white-collars) success. In this simplification process - that is by the way very common in the adaptation operations - some important episodes of the original novel were kept although the action chain that produced them was cut off. For example, the scene in which the cook puts more meat into the bowl of one of the masseurs, and is found out by the secretary: the cook and the secretary are the only two staff members who are not blind and can see what's happening. While in the novel this episode is produced by a long chain of events leading up to it and is based on a relationship of friendship or antagonism between the characters, in the play, however, it stands alone, with nothing leading up to it, keeping the meager signifier that blind men can be easily cheated by able-bodied people.

Over exploitation of multimedia and stage effects is another major criticism shared by the reviews: as Xu Jian underlines, many Chinese directors nowadays make abundant use of multimedia, as essential elements in all performances, but in many cases these effects do not merge with the play, do not help it to bloom.¹⁶ In this play, multimedia effects are used to express the complex inner life of the characters. Both the playwright and the director took on the challenge to depart from a traditional dramatic structure and chose to rebuild the fragmented structure of the novel, pivoting around individual characters along their own time line as they move back and forth from past to present, making them both coexist and superpose. The flux of the action is cut by numerous

¹⁴ See Xiang Rong (2013) and Xu Jian (2013).

¹⁵ Qiao Zongyu 乔宗玉, "Huaju Tuina bu chenggong, bi zai gainianhua" (话剧《推拿》不成功, 弊在概念化, The flop of the play *Massage*. The problem is the conceptualization.). *Zhongguo yishu bao* (中国艺术报, China Art News), September 13, 2013.

¹⁶ Xu Jian (2013: 128).

flashbacks and monologues, during which the widespread usage of video and multimedia effects has the aim to reignite the character's emotions, to give a visual or sounded form to his feelings. This is probably the reason why the targeted audience, probably expecting a more "traditional" action line, felt uneasy and could not immerse themselves into the play. A good example is the scene where one of the main characters, Sha Fumin, blind from birth, tries to understand beauty: this is a crucial passage in the novel, where long pages focus on Sha Fumin's efforts and his longing to understand and come to grips with the concept of beauty. On the stage, Sha Fumin stands up on a chair behind his beautiful employee Dou Hong, touching the air instead of touching her body: this non-contact is more powerful than any mimetic representation of the real contact in suggesting the violation of the girl's intimacy together with the dramatic quest of the man. In the background, colors cross the screen giving a visible form to the sensation of touch. But these interludes are over abundant, and they keep on cutting the action line, thus disturbing the audience reception. In the critics' view, they are too profuse and chaotic and have a cunning way of concealing the weakness of the script as well as its direction.

These are commented again as common problems shared by the plays produced from this "adaptation phenomenon:" the simplified plots of adaptation works focus on only one aspect of the characters pushing it to its extreme, and making it undergo a process of conceptualization (*gainianhua* 概念) and abstraction that separate it from real life. Taking *Tuina* as an example, the stage version is nothing but a multiple love story with a happy end, where the main characters happen to be blind. I do share these objections of the Chinese critics, this play cannot stand alone as an independent text, although some ideas and scenes, together with the aesthetics of the stage, are worth a mention¹⁷.

In spite of its failure to meet audience expectations, the stage production has nevertheless contributed to Bi Feiyu's prestige (what Murray calls the building up of "the celebrity author"): a series of interviews, articles, pictures on newspapers and blogs, websites, etc. have been published, enhancing the whole production.

On the bases of the cluster and the example I just described, I wish to examine two case studies that, in my view, can be placed at the two extremities of a line that runs from very close connection or dependency to a quite relaxed connection or independency: dependency or independency of the stage adaptation from the conglomerate cluster and of the adaptation from the source text.

¹⁷ My analysis is based on the video recording of the performance, courtesy of SDAC.

The Song of Everlasting Sorrow (*Chang hen ge*, 长恨歌), published in 1996,¹⁸ 2000 Mao Dun prize winner, was adapted for the stage in 2003 by the SDAC, for the screen in 2005 by the well-known director Stanley Kwan¹⁹ and for the TV in 2006.²⁰ Again, in a few years after the prize, a cluster of products came to life. As we underlined, this is a very typical phenomenon that is easy to trace on the Chinese market: it seems that literary prizes are the key to the production of the cultural cluster.

This successful stage adaptation is still enjoying a long life²¹ today, and has been warmly welcomed by the Shanghai public, who have been partially involved in the creation process. The promotion campaign started already in 2001:²² a few months after the Mao Dun prize, the SDAC announced they would stage the masterpiece by Wang Anyi and the adaptation work was entrusted to Zhao Yaomin.²³ Very well-known for his comic drama and beloved by his Shanghai public, Zhao Yaomin became from the very beginning the star of the project together with the author of the novel Wang Anyi. Actually, at the very beginning, Wang Anyi made no declarations: rumours circulated about still unsolved authors' rights questions.²⁴ In 2002 the SDAC kept the news of the novel adaptation in the public eye through various means including: the suspense over the selection of the

¹⁸ Written by Wang Anyi 王安忆 (1954), this famous bestselling prizewinning novel (listed as one of the 100 excellent Chinese books from 1900 to 1999 by *Asian Week* in 1999, Mao Dun prize in 2000) exploits the title of a famous poem by Bai Juyi 白居易 (IX century) narrating the romantic and tragic destiny of the imperial beauty Yang Guifei 杨贵妃. Wang Anyi's novel centres around the main character of Wang Qiyao, a beautiful, young, typical Shanghai alley-girl. Divided into three parts corresponding to three different epochs (Republican China of the 40s, Maoist China of the 50s-60s, and China under Reforms of the 80s), the novel follows the story of this woman through the XX century history of China and the story of her town, Shanghai: the powerful portrait of this female character stands out against the portrait of the city, that in many parts becomes itself the main character of the novel.

¹⁹ Coproduction Hong Kong/China, the film stages many Hong Kong stars like Sammi Cheng and Tony Leung. Director Stanley Kwan, screenplay by Elmond Yeung. It participated in the Venice International Film Festival.

²⁰ 35 episodes, 45 minutes long, director Ding Hei 丁黑, screenwriters Jiang Liping 蒋丽萍, Zhao Yaomin 赵耀民 and Wang Anyi herself, first aired the 26th March 2006 on two local TV-stations, the Shanghai TV channel and the Jiangsu City channel. The series is defined as "romantic," focusing on the main character's love stories.

²¹ Total 92 shows till now, on 8 runs: two runs in 2003 both in Shanghai, 2 runs in 2004, one in Shanghai and Beijing and one in Ireland, one run each in 2005, 2006, 2015 and 2016, all of them in Shanghai.

²² See Zhou Xiangyang 周向阳, "Chang hen ge yao shang wutai" (《长恨歌》要上舞台, *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow* is going to be put on stage). *Zhongguo wenhua bao* (中国文化报, China Culture Daily), February 24, 2001.

²³ Very skilled and productive Shanghai comic drama playwright. Born in 1956, he has been building his career since the 80s writing comedies. He has been collaborating with SDAC for many years while teaching at the Shanghai Academy of Drama. His works have been very well received both by the public and the critics, and he has been awarded several national and international prizes.

²⁴ See Qiu Lihua 邱丽华 "Wang Anyi Chang hen ge banshang huaju wutai: jiegou bianpai nan sha bianju" 王安忆《长恨歌》搬上话剧舞台：结构编排难煞编剧, *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow* is going to be put on stage: it's very hard to write a play using the structure of this novel). *Xinwen chenbao* (新闻晨报, Morning News), February 13, 2001.

leading actress (Who is going to be Wang Qiyao?)²⁵ and a symposium in October on the adaptation work. From the beginning of 2003, a long series of articles followed the beginning of the rehearsals and the preparation of the play: Wang Anyi became the centre of attention with numerous interviews, in which she expressed her full support for the project.²⁶ The press campaign emphasized the huge effort to build a story about Shanghai and old Shanghai; the public was asked to give its opinion about some issues, in particular the language (local dialect or mandarin?). The attention focused on the playwright, Zhao Yaomin: he would write a comedy, and it would be about the life of a Shanghai alley girl in a “popular story.” In order to fit the performance time, he declared he would reduce the numerous plot lines and topics of the novel to one: the love stories of Wang Qiyao. The director Su Leci 苏乐慈 from SDAC, despite her well-established reputation, was kept at the margin of the debate which focused on the two authors (of the novel and of the play). The play was announced to have English subtitles, and therefore reviews began to appear on the local English language newspapers²⁷ which is quite rare in a stage production. The evident commercial intention was to appeal to the local expatriate, English-speaking audience too; the promotional campaign could not rely on the cultural value of the novel, but could take advantage from the fact that this community too is very sensitive to the fascination of the “old Shanghai.”

Thank to this active promotional campaign, tickets sold out long before the première and after it, dozens of critical articles locally enflamed a heated debate about the play: numerous the critics against the main actress, too young, too lively, not enough of a “Shanghai girl.” The reconstruction of old Shanghai (music, costumes, setting, etc) was greatly appreciated, but the play was judged to be too long (3,5 hours), and if the commentators and audience liked the second act for its sparkle, the first and third did not keep the pace. The review on the *Southern weekly*²⁸ suggested that probably SDAC was aiming at building a “Shanghai classic” on the Wang Anyi novel, that could compete with the Beijing classic masterpiece *Tea-house (Chaguan 茶馆 1957)* by Lao She (老舍 1899-1966). From this perspective, the business operation of adapting a bestseller became a much more far reaching and longer term project.

²⁵ See Yuan Yuan 袁媛, “Jixu xunmi Wang Qiyao” (继续寻觅“王琦瑶”Looking for Wang Qiyao). *Qingnian bao* (青年报, Youth Daily), November 22, 2002, and Zhang Jihong 张计红, “Wang Qiyao jiu ta le” (“王琦瑶”就她了, She will be Wang Qiyao). *Xinwen chenbao*, November 15, 2002.

²⁶ See Jiang Xiaoling 姜小玲, “Wang Anyi jieyuan huaju” (王安忆结缘话剧, Wang Anyi is now committed to the theatre). *Jiefang ribao* (解放日报, Jiefang Daily), October 18, 2002.

²⁷ See Zheng Susan, “Staging a Shanghai Original.” *Shanghai Daily*, March 20, 2003.

²⁸ Wang Yin 王寅, “Chang hen ge tuidao chonglai?” (长恨歌推倒重来?, The *Song of Everlasting Sorrow* makes a new start?). *Nanfang zhoumo* (南方周末 Southern weekly), May 1, 2003.

The attitude of SDAC confirmed this hypothesis: according to the critics and audience's comments and suggestions, the play "hui lu" (回炉, went back to oven):²⁹ in autumn 2003, for its second run, a new play went on stage. Thanks to generous cuts, the new play was reduced to three hours. In particular, the first and third acts were significantly changed, in order to speed up. The play "make a big leap forward"³⁰ were the newspapers headlines, and Wang Qiyao changed completely, despite the actress being the same. A second "big operation" on the play was made for the third run, in Shanghai and Beijing. The box office success however did not escape negative reviews, in particular on the Beijing newspapers: the audience was disappointed, they did not find the Wang Qiyao of the book on the stage, etc. The "Shanghai wei" 上海味 (Shanghai flavour) seemed not to meet the favour of the Beijing public.³¹ The situation in Shanghai was different: the play is warmly welcomed, becoming quickly a "Classic" in SDAC repertoire: it is restaged after years in 2015 to celebrate the 20 years of the SDAC, and then the year after a brand new cast reignited the "Wang Qiyao fever." The key point of the success was exactly the local atmosphere: with its faithful reconstruction of old Shanghai (dresses, furniture, objects), the play exploited not only the fame of the novel, but the nostalgia for the old Shanghai that had long been blooming in a huge industry (old Shanghai objects, gadgets, stories, etc). The critical reviews praised the theatrical character (*xijuxing* 戏剧性) of the script,³² and the solid structure in three acts, one act one epoch, one epoch one love story. Nevertheless, I do agree with some of the critics' opinion that lamented the flatness of the play.³³ Of the all-round, multilayered fresco of the novel, the stage version keeps only the tearful sentimental story of Wang Qiyao, building on it a romantic comedy that exploits the lively Shanghai humour. Therefore, in my opinion, this play is not a new text, but a subtext dependent on its source. Focusing only on the love plots, the play deprives the main character of Wang Qiyao of her complex psychology: her ambition to climb the social ladder; to become rich, her romantic passion tightly bound to her greediness, her difficult relationship with her daughter, indeed all this fades away in the play. The play is alive (and Wang Qiyao, too), because the book is there. Therefore, I would classify it

²⁹ Zhang Jihong 张计红 "Chang hen ge dingfeng huilu" (《长恨歌》顶峰回炉, After its success on stage, the *Song of everlasting sorrow* goes back to the drawing board). *Xinwen chenbao*, April 22, 2003.

³⁰ "Xin ban Wang qiyao de da yuejin" (新版王琦瑶的"大跃进", The big leap forward of the new Wang Qiyao). *Shishang Shanghai* (时尚上海, Fashion Shanghai), November 8, 2003.

³¹ Tao Lan 陶澜, "Chang hen ge jiaozuo wei jiaohao" (长恨歌叫座未叫好 The *Song of Everlasting Sorrow* attracts a large audience, does not attract applause). *Beijing qingnian bao* (北京青年报 Beijing Youth Daily), July 4, 2004.

³² See Sun Qinghua and Dong Limin (2007).

³³ Zhang Xudong 张旭东, "Chang hen ge cong xiaoshuo dao wutai" (《长恨歌》: 从小说到舞台, The *Song of Everlasting Sorrow*: from the book to the stage). *Wenhui bao* (文汇报 Wenhui Daily), June 2, 2004.

as strongly dependent both on the cultural cluster and the original source. This adaptation clearly hit its target of exploiting the best seller in order to attract the public, although I would not affirm it met the high expectation from SDAC to become the “great Shanghai classic.”

To the other extreme of the line of dependency/ independency from the cluster I have just depicted, I wish to present the case of the stage adaptation of the novel *To live!* (*Huozhe* 活着) by Yu Hua 余华.³⁴ Published in 1993, when this cultural industry was still germinating in China, the following year its well-known adaptation for the screen by Zhang Yimou 张艺谋 won the Palme d'or and the Grand Prix at the Cannes Film Festival. This event reinforced the celebrity of the director himself,³⁵ and offered an international platform/audience both to the book and its author. The TV adaptation was not until 2005,³⁶ and the stage adaptation was in 2012. I believe that a gap of nearly twenty years between the book and the stage adaptation is a time span long enough to suggest this was not a media conglomerate operation.

The director Meng Jinghui 孟京辉 enjoys his own fame:³⁷ director of the National Theatre of China (NTCC Zhongguo guojia huajuyuan 中国国家话剧院), he runs at the same time his own Meng Jinghui's studio (Meng Jinghui gongzuoshi 孟京辉工作室) where he produces smaller and more provocative plays. Since 2008 he has been running his own theatre in Beijing (Fengchao juchang 蜂巢剧场) where he stages his studio productions: his name on the billboard is enough to guarantee sell

³⁴ At that time (1993) still a young and promising writer, Yu Hua (1960) enjoys today a worldwide reputation and his novels are translated in many languages. The fame of Zhang Yimou's adaptation played a role in launching his fame worldwide and promoting the translation of his books. The novel *To Live* narrates the story of the main character Fugui, the spoiled son of a landlord who gambled away his family fortune: against the background of the last 50 years of Chinese history, Fugui with his family manage to survive through the civil war, the Maoist political campaigns, the famine, etc. His wife and his kids die one by one, through a tragic destiny of hardship that nevertheless is narrated with a poetic smile. A long song to the tough, hard and fast attachment to life.

³⁵ Since 1987, when he won the Golden Bear at the Berlin Film Festival with his adaptation of the novel *Red Sorghum* (*Hong gaoliang jiazu*, 红高粱家族) by Mo Yan 莫言, Zhang Yimou obtained worldwide fame as one of the most important Asian film directors of his generation. In the following years, his works kept on winning international and national prizes.

³⁶ 33 episodes, 40 minutes long, director Zhu Zheng 朱正, screenwriter Xie Lihong 谢丽虹 first aired in 2005. Interestingly enough, the TV series does not exploit the fame of the title of the movie and of the book, but rather prefers to use the name of the main character, *Fugui* (福贵).

³⁷ Born in 1968, he gained his international reputation thanks to his first avant-garde, provocative and repeatedly censored productions. The unexpected, popular success of the play *Rhinoceros in love* (*Lian'ai de xiniu* 恋爱的犀牛) written by his wife Liao Yimei 廖一梅 brought him great fame among the young Chinese public. Premiered in 1999, it has already become a classic, at its 17th version, with more than 2000 shows till today, it is constantly sold out. Criticized for his “commercial turn,” Meng’s position is at the same time inside and outside the mainstream, on a border that Ferrari defines “pop avant-garde.” See Ferrari (2012).

out, his works “both challenge and become the mainstream” (Conceison 2017: 16), and are followed by a very loyal, young audience.

As he declared in interviews, Meng wished to stage another novel by Yu Hua, *Chronicle of a Blood Merchant* (*Xu Sanguan mai xue ji*, 许三观卖血记, 1995), but after a long discussion with his friend Yu Hua and then with the main actor Huang Bo 黄渤, he finally got the rights for *To Live*. Yu Hua participated in the press conference to promote the play in May 2012, together with Meng Jinghui and Huang Bo, but he made it clear he was not involved in the stage adaptation: ‘Meng can change it at his ease!’³⁸ Actually, Meng Jinghui gained a reputation of being someone who manipulates, destroys and shatters the texts he approaches, be they classic or contemporary, foreign or Chinese. He adopts any kind of trans-forming strategies (transculturation, intentional misreading, hybridization, etc) in order to dismantle, rebuild and offer to his audience his own text, his own reading or interpretation of the original text. Interestingly enough, the two playwrights, Zhang Xian 张先 and Xu Lulun 许绿伦, did not play a prominent role either in the promotion of the play or in the following up interviews, as for example Zhao Yaomin did for *The Song of Everlasting Sorrows*: the press spotlights were always pointed towards the director and the main actor. Yu Hua himself disappeared soon after the first press conference announcing the adaptation project.

A big production by NTCC, with a troupe totaling 50 people, *To Live* enjoyed huge success on the Chinese mainland, in Taiwan and in Germany. More than 59 performances around China in fewer than two years,³⁹ applauded both by the public and the critics. This play is at the same time the adaptation of the famous novel by Yu Hua, as is clearly conveyed by the use of the original title and the name of Yu Hua himself in the credits as “original author” and, at the same time a new, independent, imaginative text.

Compared to other adaptations by Meng, this is among the most conservative ones, and maybe because of this, the critical reviews, in this case, have been very positive.⁴⁰ This has not been always the case for Meng Jinghui adaptations: Chinese critics – but not only Chinese – lean towards fidelity and value closeness and proximity as fundamental (Ferrari 2012: 251). The adaptation has the same narrative structure as the novel: the main character, Fugui, narrates his life to a guy strolling around the countryside collecting popular ballads. The same actor who plays the main role, Fugui, plays that

³⁸ Zhao Chen 赵忱, “Yu Hua, gei Meng Jinghui *Huozhe* juedui ziyou” (余华,给孟京辉《活着》绝对自由, Yu Hua gives total freedom to Meng Jinghui for *To Live*). *Zhongguo wenhua bao* (中国文化报, China Culture Daily), June 5, 2012.

³⁹ The play toured to Tianjin, Shanghai, Chongqing, Chengdu, Hangzhou, Xi'an, Guiyang, Qingdao, Shenzhen plus Hong Kong, Taipei and Berlin.

⁴⁰ Zhang Lihong (2012: 18-20).

of this guy too: the guy appears only at the beginning and at the end to close the play, Fugui's role accompanies the public throughout his story. Fugui, a contemporary story-teller, narrates his life to the public: the rhythmic flow of the narration is constantly interrupted by the arrival of the different characters he mentions, the short dialogues between him and them and then the action originating from it. These episodes, that are true theatrical action and dialogue, balance the slow motion of the one voice narrator with frequent actions and movements.

The script of this play is simply a composition of some of the main episodes of the original novel; the narrative parts generally follow Yu Hua's text word for word, only in the dialogues are the lines by Yu Hua blended with new ones.⁴¹ Of course, the source text is abbreviated so as to limit the play to 3 hours.

The simple setting (a small house at the back of the stage, mirrors on both sides of it, some chairs) together with the videos, the cartoons, the strange clothes and make up draw the audience into a sort of "fairytalelike" or "naïf world." Brilliant the stage design, a platform crossed by four channels parallel to the public. These channels are primarily the ways in and out for the actors, that pop up here and there, appearing and disappearing along the channels. They play varying roles too: they become the furrows of the fields where the peasants work, the barricades where the soldiers hide, the line of desks at school, the hospital aisle, and so on.

The sorrow, the pain, the struggle to live and the emotions that the novel depicts in a lively way arrive on stage through the action and the gestures of the actors: these are not mimetic but aim at arousing, igniting a feeling, an emotion, a sensation in the spectator.

In Meng's method the theatrical experience must produce an electric current that flows from the artist to the audience and from the stage to the social sphere (Ferrari 2012: 240).

Exaggerated physicality, multirole acting, multimedia and sound devices all have to contribute to awakening the emotion of the audience. Let's take the big scene of Fugui grieving his son's death: no tears or crying, being the mimetic figuration of the desperation of a father. Instead the actor, in a corner, kneeling down on the stage takes plastic bottles full of water and beats them one by one again and again against the stage emptying them of their water. A red light illuminates the actor, that

⁴¹ During the press conference, Meng Jinghui declared that to maintain Yu Hua's language was one of the principles they followed during the creative process, together with avoiding rousing emotions in the most moving moments. See Zhang Yue 张悦, "Huoze de 'yishu': 'zhai ru shouzhang, kuan ruo dadi'" (《活着》的“艺术”：窄如手掌宽若大地, The "art" of *To Live*: as minute as your palm, as big as the earth). *Zhongguo yishu bao* (中国艺术报, China Art Daily), August 7, 2013.

gasping for breath keeps on smashing the bottles. In that violence, in that repetition of a useless gesture there is all the tragedy of a father that cannot do anything. The water floods the stage as a flood of tears, or as a flood of blood, the same blood the son donated and that caused his death. All the reviews underline this as a crucial scene in which Meng Jinghui has successfully built the sense of tragedy and desperation (Zheng Xinwendi 2014: 30).



Fig.1. From the scene "Donating blood at the hospital". The desperation of Fugui after the death of his son Youqing. Courtesy by Meng Jinghui Studio.

The stage design itself plays a role in this flux of emotion towards the audience: the inner urge to struggle for life that Yu Hua builds up throughout the novel is very well depicted in a scene where the four main characters madly run up and down the channels. They cannot meet each other, they do not arrive anywhere, they do not know why, but they keep running, running, running: if you run, it means you are alive.



Fig. 2. From the scene “The execution of Long’er.” Courtesy by Meng Jinghui Studio.

Brief clownesque interludes, together with the projection of naïf cartoon, from one side solving the technical question of tidying up the stage without closing the curtains (for example, to dry up the water poured out by Fugui in the scene of the death of his son). On the other side, they play a key role in suspending the tragic flow of events, giving a breathing space to the public. At the same time, they do not forget to interweave the core topics of the play: for example, the clownesque interludes focusing on the fight for a small piece of bread, Fugui always finds a way to eat. To stay alive, you have to fight for food, and in fact food and starvation are main topics of the novel as well as of the play. All these flashes of fairytale interrupt the narration of Fugui’s tragic destiny, opening the breach that gives the true meaning to the entire play: to live!

The play is closely connected to the novel, but can stand as a text in its own right:: despite the scattered structure as a montage of action scenes that flow alongside the long monologue of the protagonist, the play successfully weaves the multiple threads of the tragic story of Fugui: through love, destiny, death, hardship and starvation, the fight for life becomes a powerful celebration of it: of the happiness of life. The adaptation does not simplify the story, does not choose a single plot line to

concentrate on, cutting off all other threads in order to fit the time limit, instead it becomes a work of concentration and distillation (*jinghua* 精华). We do not read comments about the “fidelity” of the Fugui of the stage to the Fugui of the novel, as we have read for Wang Qiyao: the Fugui in the play is a well rounded character able to ignite emotions in the audience by himself, he stands on his own two feet, and is not the double of anyone.

In conclusion, it would be very easy to compress these observations on the two case studies in a scheme in which conglomerate production produces sub-products and vice versa a product with artistic value is the result of non-conglomerate actors’ operation. The position of the product on the line that runs from close connection to a quite relaxed connection to the conglomerate cluster can eventually suggest a plausible expectation of the dependency or independency of the adaptation from the source text. But the frame is very complex, and it would be too simplistic and misleading to come to a rigid schema. Many commentators lament the lack of good playwrights in the contemporary world of Chinese theatre: in recent years, the increasing and overwhelming number of novel adaptations would therefore be caused by the lack of good scripts.⁴² The TV and screen industry are much more fruitful and attractive for young creative writers. Another factor at play in this complex game is the increasing visibility and main role of the theatre directors in the creation of the play, overriding the playwright’s role: in the everlasting controversy over the priority of the text or of the theatrical performance, it seems that the creative role of the directors is now the focus of attention, they are the stars. Nevertheless, I do think that the schema combining quality and economic value produces a very useful analytical tool that allows us to better understand the actors involved in the cultural production today as well as the reasons why a certain artist in a certain society in a certain period produces a certain kind of adaptation/interpretation of a text.

Going back to my premise, the net produced by a text is the germination of its life: maybe some fruits are not excellent, nevertheless its ability to produce different echoing voices deserve our attention. In Yu Hua’s words, “Only idiots are faithful to the original!”⁴³

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⁴² Chen Xihan 陈熙涵, “Huaju: gaibian mingjia xiaoshuofanchen yuanchuang quexi” (话剧: 改编名家小说 反衬原创缺席, Theatre: the stage adaptations of famous writers' novels highlight the lack of original playwrighting). *Wenhui bao*, July 5, 2013.

⁴³ Zhao Chen, “Yu Hua, gei Meng Jinghui Huozhe juehui ziyou.” *Zhongguo wenhua bao*, June 5, 2012.

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