

Challenges and Opportunities: Musicals in China in the Era of Covid-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

The emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic undoubtedly affected every single aspect of human life, resulting in devastating socio-economic challenges across the world. After the Covid-19 pandemic outbreak, China's performing arts market has shrunk as a whole, the performance market has repeatedly stopped, and the musical industry in China has been in trouble. This paper, however, discusses not only the challenges but also the opportunities of musicals in China in the era of the Covid-19 pandemic. The pandemic provides opportunities for the development of Chinese musicals. Before the Covid-19 pandemic, the lion's share of China's musicals market is dominated by imported Western musicals such as *The Phantom of the Opera*, *Chicago*, *Cat*, and *Rent*. During the normalization stage of prevention and control of the pandemic, there has been a window of opportunity for Chinese original musicals and Chinese adapted musicals with the rapid recovery of the domestic performance market and the lack of competitive foreign musicals. The strong momentum of producing popular Chinese original musicals like *The Orphan of Zhao* and Chinese adapted musicals like *Apollonia* has brought great confidence to the musical industry in China. Through historical research, data analysis, and interviews, this paper will comb the history of musicals in China, analyze the resilience of Chinese musicals during the pandemic, and provide possible solutions for Chinese musicals' further development.

Keywords: Chinese Musical, The Covid-19 Pandemic, Chinese Original Musical, Chinese Adapted Musical

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Introduction

A musical is a form of theatrical performance that combines songs, spoken dialogue, acting, and dance. The story and emotional content of a musical—humor, pathos, love, anger—are communicated through the words, music, movement, and technical aspects of the entertainment as an integrated whole. Modern western musicals emerged during the 19th century and the most famous venues that present musicals are the big-budget Broadway in New York and West End in London.

Musicals have been introduced into China for over 30 years. Western musicals open the Chinese musical market and introduce the marketing system to China. However, the negative impact is that they impair the growth of Chinese original musicals in the long term because western musicals take the lion's share of the musical market, leaving little room for Chinese musicals to develop.

The Covid-19 pandemic, however, also provides opportunities for the development of Chinese musicals. During the normalization stage of prevention and control of the pandemic, With the rapid recovery of the domestic performance market and the lack of foreign musicals, Chinese original musicals have ushered in a window period of creation and market cultivation while also facing various challenges.

The 30-year history of Western musicals spreading in China

The introduction of western musicals into China could not be separated from the efforts of the older generation of Chinese artists. In the early 1980s, writers and artists who had the opportunity to visit or study abroad came into contact with musicals and introduced them to China. As one of the pioneers of Chinese musicals, Mr. Shen Chengzhou visited the United States in 1980 and spent a year investigating American musicals. In 1981, the first national opera conference was held, where Shen Chengzhou showcased an investigation report on Western musicals, arousing a warm response from the participants. Its significance lies not only in introducing western musicals to China but also in initiating the single mode of Chinese musicals and into a diversified world of Chinese musicals.

The year 1987 is special and memorable in the history of Chinese musicals. For the first time, two famous Broadway musicals *The Music Man* and *The Fantasticks* were introduced into China. The Chinese version of the musicals was produced by the China National Opera House and guided by American artists of Eugene O'Neill Theater Center. (Liu 1987, p.61) After the premiere in Beijing, *The Fantasticks* went to Hangzhou, Shanghai, and Nanjing on a tour, which was also the first musical tour in China. For China, the dissemination of these two American musicals represents the introduction of the Broadway marketing model.

The early dissemination of the original western musicals in China was mainly for cultural exchange, so both the number and the scope of the musicals were limited. It was not until 2002 that the Shanghai Grand Theatre introduced the original musical *Les Misérables* that many original musicals began to be introduced into China, including *The Sound of Music*, *Lion King*, *Rent*, and other famous western musicals. From then on, musicals have become a familiar sight in Chinese big cities. In recent years, the domestic musical market has become increasingly prosperous. According to the data released by the Beijing Trade Association for Performances, in 2018 Beijing alone had 775 musical performances performed in major small, and medium-sized theaters in the whole year, an increase of 16.9% over the previous year.

An audience of 429,000 people watched musicals in 2018, an increase of 26.7% year-on-year. (Li 2019)

The spread of the original western musicals in China not only enriches Chinese audiences' cultural life but also helps to cultivate the Chinese musical market. In recent years, many Western musicals have been introduced to China, some of them covering a large number of Chinese audiences and hitting high box office in China. Take the year 2015 as an example, according to the data of Dao Lue (2016), 2,088 musical performances were performed nationwide, 570 more performances than in 2014, which is an increase of 37.5%. The audience number of national musical performances was 1.24 million, an increase of 41.5%, with a box office growth of 44%, yearly growth of 230 million yuan. In 2015, the box office revenue of the original musical increased by 110% and reached 145 million yuan. Most foreign musicals spreading in China are market-tested musicals, so they are exceedingly popular in China. However, the box office growth of domestic original musicals is relatively small, and the box office of Chinese-version musicals is bad. Therefore, the growth of the musical box office in China mainly relies on the introduction of western musicals.

Take American musicals as an example. Before the pandemic, from 2004 to 2019, there were more than 30 original American musicals introduced into China. The author of this paper collects part of the original American musicals introduced into China at this time in the following table:

Year	Part of the Original American musicals introduced into China
2004	<i>Chicago</i>
	<i>The Sound of Music</i>
2006	<i>Rent</i>
	<i>The Lion King</i>
	<i>West Side Story</i>
2007	<i>The King and I</i>
	<i>42rd Street</i>
2008	<i>Aida</i>
	<i>Hairspray</i>
	<i>Cinderella</i>
2009	<i>High School Musical</i>
2011	<i>Kiss me, Kate</i>
2012	<i>Shrek the Musical</i>
	<i>Man of La Mancha</i>

2013	<i>The Little Mermaid</i>
2014	<i>Robinson Crusoe</i>
	<i>Chicago</i>
2015	<i>Sister Act</i>
	<i>I Do! I Do!</i>
2016	<i>Ghost – the Musical</i>
	<i>My Fair Lady</i>
2017	<i>Ghost – the Musical</i>
	<i>West Side Story</i>
	<i>Wicked</i>
	<i>The Bodyguard</i>
	<i>The Producers</i>
	<i>Jersey Boys</i>
	<i>Sister Act</i>
	<i>Legally Blonde: the Musical</i>
2018	<i>Rent</i>
	<i>Chicago</i>
	<i>Kinky Boots</i>
	<i>The Producers</i>
2019	<i>The Wizard of Oz</i>
	<i>An American in Paris</i>
	<i>PAW Patrol</i>
	<i>Chicago</i>

Table 1: Part of the original American musicals introduced into China (2004-2019)

Take the musical *Rent* as an example, it was introduced into China more than one time. It has been performed in more than 150 cities in nearly 50 countries and has been translated into 25 languages, receiving more than \$1 billion in box office revenue worldwide. *Rent* is a typical American musical, reflecting the lives of ordinary Americans who persist in their dreams despite their lives of adversity. The composer Jonathan Larson suggested setting the play “amid poverty, homelessness, spunky gay life, drag queens and punk” (Tommasini 1996, p. 7) in the East Village neighborhood of Manhattan, which happened to be down the street from his Greenwich Village apartment. On the one hand, it brings socially sensitive topics such as

poverty and disease onto the stage; on the other hand, it shows a ubiquitous passion for life. The belief in being brave and not bowing to fate shapes the spirit of a generation of Americans. The thematic concerns of AIDS, homosexuality, and impoverishment are relatively new to Chinese audiences. Nevertheless, *Rent* arouses the same sympathetic response from the Chinese audience by depicting the struggles and triumphs of young people whose hearts are filled with love, hope, and a thirst for life. What's more, the music style of this musical is a novel and interesting one for Chinese musical fans. In addition, *Rent* expands the limits of its sub-genre known as rock opera. The small orchestra of *Rent* includes keyboards, synthesizers, drums, a bass guitar, and two electric guitars, which fulfills all of the requirements of rock music set for the stage. It also attempts to mix other genres of music, ranging from the soul in "I'll Cover You" to techno in "Today 4 U" to Latin rhythms in "Tango Maureen" to funk and gospel. In 2006, it was introduced to China for the first time and received a warm response. At that time, this musical was performed only in three or four first-tier cities. However, in 2018, the 20th Anniversary Tour of *Rent* expanded its stages and performed in seven Chinese cities: Shanghai, Nanjing, Hangzhou, Guangzhou, Shenzhen, Beijing, and Chengdu.

The introduction of classic Broadway musicals to China guarantees the box office but it affects the growth and the reputation of domestic musicals. The introduction of classic western musicals has become such a trend that they squeezed out a lot of original Chinese musicals. Take the year 2017 as an example, the introduction of nine western musicals this year reached a record high, among which there were seven American musicals. Among the top ten box office musicals, 50% of them are original foreign editions, and there is only one Chinese original musical on the list (CAPA & Da Mai 2018).

The Rise of original Chinese musicals

In general, Chinese musicals follow a three-stage development: the first stage is the introduction of the original western musicals. The second stage is the localization of western musicals, followed by the third stage of the creation of the original Chinese musicals. When various western musicals have been introduced into China, attempts at localizing western musicals began in 2008 when *Fame* was produced in Mandarin with a full Chinese cast at The Central Academy of Drama. Since then, other western musicals have been staged in China in Mandarin with a Chinese cast.

The Gold Sand is the first large-scale original Chinese musical. Premiered in 2005, the musical created a public sensation. Hailed as the first modern fusion musical in China, the show has inspired a new wave of creativity in Chinese original musical creation and production. With its successful premiere, the show created a new model for promoting Chinese original musicals. The musical was inspired by the ancient Shu culture and the discovery of the Jinsha Ruins in Sichuan Province. The show, with stunning backgrounds, magnificent battlefield scenes, beautiful music, and excellent performances by its energetic young cast, was created by famous Chinese artists and composers San Bao and Guan Shan. Its touching storyline features a legendary romance between Jin and Sha; the two main characters of the play. Performed every night at the Chengdu Jinsha International Theatre, the musical has become a regular addition to the city of Chengdu's tourism trade.

Compared with western musicals, Chinese musicals are relatively young. The good news is that the national and local governments, cultural companies and groups, and musical practitioners have contributed a lot to promote the development of Chinese musicals. Under

the stout support of the National Art Foundation policy, nearly 20 Chinese original musicals with different styles have been created in 2018. Besides, On November 2, 2018, musicals entered the public horizon through “Super Vocal”, a Chinese TV talent contest for opera singers and musical performers. According to iQiyi, a Chinese online video platform, up to June 2022, over one hundred thousand people rated “Super Vocal” and the show scores 9.1 points out of 10 on Douban, a review aggregation platform for Chinese TV shows and movies. This new type of televised singing contest in China that showcases the vocal prowess of classically trained singers is not only taking the country by storm but also fueling the Chinese audience’s interest in musicals. Zheng Yunlong, a rising musical star in China who won the 2018 Musical Academy Awards in China, said that “I think Super Vocal is a way to communicate with a broader audience and this is what I should do as a Chinese musical actor for the development of musicals at this stage of time.” (Wei, 2019) After “Super Vocal” season 1, season 2 started to broadcast on July 19, 2019. In 2022, another competition TV show “The City of Musical” is produced and it seeks to introduce musicals and the musical industry to the audience. The show not only shows the respect and love of musical actors but also presents numerous stages of high quality, attracting more and more talents and audiences to the musical industry and promoting the prosperity of the ecology of Chinese original musicals.

As musical TV programs attract more audiences towards musicals, governments have also made great efforts to promote Chinese musicals. Since the original musical *Les Misérables* was introduced to Shanghai in 2002, Shanghai has grown into a city with the biggest musical market in China, leading the national musical industry with the ambition of becoming China’s Broadway. The membership of SAIC Shanghai Cultural Square grew to 30,000 in the first quarter of 2019; the six sets of original Chinese original musicals sold out in an hour, and the sales revenue of environmental protection bags designed from the image of a musical star amounted to 400,000 yuan. The growing enthusiasm of the audience for cultural consumption contributes to Shanghai’s efforts of promoting high-quality musicals over the years. In December 2018, Shanghai International Musical Festival opened as the first professional and systematic musical festival in China, attracting attention from all over the world. In 2019, there were 6 performances in the exhibition season of the original Chinese musicals, which reached a new record in terms of quality and quantity of performances. Since the beginning of the “2019 Musical Singing Contest” and the “Original Chinese Musical Cultivation Project” proposed by the Shanghai International Musical Festival, they have attracted more than 150,000 people online and offline (Wang 2019). Since February 2019, the “Original Chinese Musical Cultivation Project” provided an incubation platform for the majority of musical creators, and actively supported and cultivated the new strength of the original Chinese musicals. The “2019 Musical Singing Contest” has received contributions from nearly 400 applicants from all over China, and the related videos have accumulated 100,000 viewings on the network’s platform, which significantly expanded the talent reservoir of Chinese musicals (Wang 2019). The contestants have different backgrounds in their ages and occupations. Among them are students from art colleges, students from ordinary high schools and colleges, workers such as dessert makers, environmental supervisors, and business managers. Grace Chen Rui, the winner of the first prize of the 2021 Musical Singing Contest, spoke out what many musical practitioner’s hearts at the award ceremony, “I wish that one day, Chinese musical would be on equal terms with Broadway musical.” Besides, the Musical Development Forum of Shanghai Spring International Music Festival has been successfully held since 2012. Over the past years, this professional forum focusing on the development of Chinese original musicals and the operation of professional musicals theatres has become a platform for communication between musicals practitioners

in China and around the world. Thus, Shanghai has attracted the attention of musical's producers both at home and abroad. In other Chinese cities, many parties also support the development of original Chinese musicals. For instance, in Chengdu, the original Chinese musical *Golden Sand* was supported by Chengdu Municipal Bureau of Culture, Chengdu Radio and Television Administration, and Chengdu Daily Press Group. The musical exhibits idiosyncratic Chengdu culture and the local government expects it to become one of the cultural symbols of Chengdu city.

Opportunities of Chinese Musical during the Covid-19 pandemic

On the one hand, the domestic musical market becomes increasingly prosperous; on the other hand, the Covid-19 pandemic restricts the introduction of foreign musicals as musicals' world tour involves the mobility of actors and stage properties. Both give more room for Chinese original musicals to develop. "In the absence of imported musical dramas due to the pandemic, domestic musicals have grown up, bringing a certain number of original works into the musical market and increasing its confidence," said Zhang Zhilin, an original musical producer and founder of Shanghai C-Musicals Cultural Communications (Ji 2022).

After experiencing the impact of the epidemic in 2020, the domestic musical industry witnessed a recovery and a blowout in the number of works in 2021. Taking Shanghai, the industrial center of Chinese musicals, as an example, the "2021 Shanghai Theater Performance Data Summary" released by the Shanghai Performance Industry Association shows that a total of 148 musicals were performed in Shanghai in 2021, with 911 performances, a year-on-year increase of 142%, and 524,000 performances, a year-on-year increase of 129%. The original musicals have gained a good reputation and cultivated a group of audiences. According to data from the Damai.com ticketing platform, there are 15 original Chinese musicals to be staged in 2021. Chinese original musicals such as *The Orphan of Zhao*, *On the Road*, and *No Longer Human* as well as many IP adapted musicals of Chinese versions such as *Romeo and Juliet*, *Apollonia*, *Flowers for Algernon* appeared in major theaters, ranking at the forefront in performance times, audience times, and box office revenue. According to Shanghai Culture Square 2021 Musicals Annual Report, among the average single-performance box office top 10, 6 are Chinese original musicals (*No Longer Human*, *The Orphan of Zhao*, *On the Road*, *Into the White Night*, *Spirit of Life*, *Hangover*) and 4 are Chinese-version adapted musicals (*Fanletter*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Agatha*, *Flowers for Algernon*). Among the top 10 in the box office of large and medium theater performances, 7 are Chinese original musicals (*The Orphan of Zhao*, *The Orphan of Zhao*, *On the Road*, *Hangover*, *The Long Night*, *A Dream of Two Cities*, *Spirit of Life*) and 3 are Chinese-version adapted musicals (*Romeo and Juliet*, *Flowers for Algernon*, *Interview*). Among the top 10 in the box office of small theater performances, 4 are Chinese original musicals (*Want to Sing Me to You*, *Drunk Heart*, *The Murder of Hanging Garden*, *Waiting for You*) and 6 are Chinese-version adapted musicals (*Apollonia*, *Thrill Me*, *Santa Lucia*, *Flames*, *Light Keepers*, *Superstar*).

Average single-performance box office top 10	Top 10 in box office (Large and medium theater performances)	Top 10 in box office (small theater performances)
《人间失格》 <i>No Longer Human</i> (2021.12)	《赵氏孤儿》 <i>The Orphan of Zhao</i> (2021.5)	《阿波罗尼亚》 <i>Apollonia</i> (2020.8)
《赵氏孤儿》 <i>The Orphan of Zhao</i> (2021.5)	《罗密欧与朱丽叶》 <i>Romeo and Juliet</i> (2021.11)	《危险游戏》 <i>Thrill Me</i> (2020.12)
《粉丝来信》 <i>Fanletter</i> (2022.1)	《隐秘的角落》 <i>The Bad Kids</i> (2021.8)	《桑塔露琪亚》 <i>Santa Lucia Mio Fratello</i> (2021.4)
《罗密欧与朱丽叶》 <i>Romeo and Juliet</i> (2021.11)	《在远方》 <i>On the Road</i> (2020.11)	《FLAMES 火焰》 <i>Flames</i> (2019.12)
《在远方》 <i>On the Road</i> (2020.11)	《醉后赢家》 <i>Hangover</i> (2019.11)	《灯塔》 <i>Light Keepers</i>
《阿加莎》 <i>Agatha</i> (2021.12)	《沉默的真相》 <i>The Long Night</i> (2021.9)	《想把我唱给您听》 <i>Want to Sing Me to You</i> (2020.11)
《白夜行》 <i>Into the White Night</i> (2018.11)	《献给阿尔吉侬的花束》 <i>Flowers for Algernon</i> (2019.12)	《芳心之醉》 <i>Drunk Heart</i> (2021.7)
《献给阿尔吉侬的花束》 <i>Flowers for Algernon</i> (2019.12)	《双城环梦记》 <i>A Dream of Two Cities</i> (2021.6)	《宇宙大明星》 <i>Superstar</i> (2021.5)
《当爱已成往事》 <i>Spirit of Life</i> (2021.11)	《面试》 <i>Interview</i> (2020.1)	《空中花园谋杀案》 <i>The Murder of Hanging Garden</i> (2012.7)
《醉后赢家》 <i>Hangover</i> (2019.11)	《当爱已成往事》 <i>Spirit of Life</i> (2021.11)	《等你爱我》 <i>Waiting for You</i> (2014.12)

Table 2: Shanghai Culture Square 2021 Musicals Annual Report¹

More and more musical practitioners are joining the ranks of original Chinese musicals, telling Chinese stories with their works. In general, there are three kinds of Chinese original musicals: the first kind of musicals derives from Chinese classic stories. For example, the musical *The Orphan of Zhao* is based on an ancient Chinese play paying homage to sacrifice and loyalty. The play *The Orphan of Zhao* was the first Chinese play to be translated into a European language and it was adapted by English poet and playwright James Fenton in 2012.

¹ The date in the table represents the premiere date of the musical.

The musical version of *The Orphan of Zhao* is developed from Fenton's adaptation and the director Xu Jun said that the ghost role that appeared in Fenton's play is further developed in musical to "build an emotional rapport with audiences." (Ma, 2021) The show will premiere at SAIC Shanghai Culture Square on May 27, 2021. After its premiere, it will go on a nationwide tour for 50 performances in 14 theaters. The second kind of musicals tells contemporary stories that show the spirit of the times. For example, the musical *On the Road* tells a story of the dramatic fortunes of an ordinary deliveryman Yao Yuan over 20 years starting in the late 90s. The producers of this musical have taken a Western style of entertainment but made it quintessentially Chinese. The third and the most common kind of musicals are IP (Intellectual Property) adapted musicals because a popular IP is a safe bet at the box office — it already boasts a considerable fan base. For example, the musical *The Bad Kids*, *The Long Night*, and *The Pretender* adapt from popular Chinese TV series while *Into the White Night* and *No Longer Human* adapts from famous Japanese novels.

Overall, watching a musical has become one of the leisure choices for more and more people, which not only drives a substantial increase in the box office revenue of musicals, but also drives Chinese musicals to seek innovation and breakthroughs in content and production. The outcome of 2021 makes Chinese musical industry insiders and fans optimistic about the development of Chinese musicals, because musical industry is exploring ways to grow.

Challenges and Solutions

The performance industry is greatly affected by the pandemic. The most severe challenge for Chinese musicals during the pandemic is that many performance markets have to be shut down due to the pandemic. In general, the performance industry in China has been shut down twice from the year 2020 to the year 2022. The outbreak of Covid-19 in early 2020 suspended the performance industry, and the performance industry gradually recovered in 2021 but was halted again in the first half of the year 2022. If the year 2020 is regarded as "the first cold winter of China's performance industry", then the first half of 2022 is regarded as "the second cold winter". As for the musical industry practitioners, the vast majority of the income comes from live performances, so the delay or cancellation of the performance hit the crew particularly hard. According to Zhao Jiayan, a musical actor, there is a big gap between rehearsal income and performance income of domestic musical actors, and the daily rehearsal fee is only 200-250 yuan. During the epidemic period, actors can't even have rehearsal income (Cheng 2022).

Take Qingdao Performance Industry Association as an example. On March 21, the Association released the appeal for social assistance of Qingdao Performance Industry Association on its official platform, saying that the operating cost pressure was huge, the performance market shrank as a whole, and the zero-income situation of enterprises was common. Data shows that after the epidemic in 2020, more than 60% of Qingdao's performance brokerage enterprises were closed, more than 35% of cultural and media enterprises were closed, and the main body of the cultural performance industry shrank by about 45%. In March 2022, a new round of pandemic broke out in Qingdao, and all the cultural and performing arts industries in the city were closed in mid-March.

Since March 2022, outbreaks of the pandemic have occurred in many Chinese cities. The outbreak caused by the Omicron variant and became the most widespread in Shanghai began on February 28, 2022, and authorities responded with mass COVID-19 testing and a strict lockdown of the city, which marked the largest one in the country since the lockdown of

Hubei in early 2020. From March 11, 2022, to June 2022, all song and dance entertainment and game entertainment venues in Shanghai have been closed, and theater performances in 16 districts have been stopped. Shanghai is the hub of musicals in China that gathers a large number of musical production companies, actors, and audiences. The outbreak caused substantial economic disruption across Shanghai with consequences felt elsewhere. According to the China Association of Performing Arts, from mid-February to mid-March of 2022, more than 4000 performances have been canceled or postponed, and in late March, 80% of the performances (about 9000 performances) have been stopped or postponed. As of March 18, the number of performances in the first quarter of 2022 decreased by 25% compared with the same period in previous years, and the box office revenue decreased by 35%.

Fortunately, the vacuum caused by this physical shutdown did not stop performances. Instead, productions went online, showcasing the potential of modern technology to bring theatre to wider audiences despite a lack of traditional performance spaces or funding. After the cancellation of the performance, many theaters and troupes began to move to the “cloud” and meet with the audience online. In order to survive during the pandemic period, theatre needs to adapt, and notable examples of genius such as online performance and pre-recorded theatre productions reinvented the genre entirely. For example, the company Shiji Duoyun united with the company Haoxi to launch a series of activities of “cloud appreciation of good drama” from March 31st to April 29th in the form of online script reading and crew communication, introducing five original works (two plays and three musicals) born in Shanghai. For instance, in the last activity of introducing the Chinese original musical *Light Keepers*, the director, the music director, and actors gathered together online to share the bits and pieces behind the musical.

Conclusion

The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic severely hit the musical industry in China as the lockdown breaks the continuity of conventional proscenium theatre. Seen from another viewpoint, however, the pandemic provides opportunities for the development of Chinese original musicals and Chinese adapted musicals. Before the Covid-19 pandemic, the lion’s share of China’s musicals market is dominated by imported Western musicals, but during the pandemic, there has been a window of opportunity for Chinese original musicals and Chinese adapted musicals with the rapid recovery of the domestic performance market and the lack of competitive foreign musicals. More and more musical practitioners are producing original Chinese musicals and modern technology helps bring theatre to a wider audience online despite the controlled conditions during the pandemic.

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