

**The Musical Theatre Encounter:**  
Chinese Consumption of a Western Form of Entertainment

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**Declaration**

I (Xiao Lu) hereby declare that this thesis and the work presented in it is entirely my own.  
Where I have consulted the work of others, this is always clearly stated.

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## **Abstract**

The genre of western musical theatre resembles the collaborative style of traditional Chinese theatre, and this has led to its increasing popularity among Chinese audiences. A growing number of Chinese emerging middle-class consumers demonstrate their economic and cultural capacities for cultural consumption, and thus they have become significant consumers of western musical theatre since the twenty-first century. The aim of this thesis is to study the behaviour and consumption patterns of Chinese audiences attending musical theatre performances. The study has found that 69% of Chinese respondents are willing to watch a musical theatre production with a British or American origin. Participation in digital platforms stimulates Chinese audiences to co-create meanings and experiences with musical theatre, and Chinese engagement with online communities demonstrates their behaviour as fans, and as theatre-goers who value the memory of a particular performance. This thesis recommends a collaborative strategy for audience engagement between theatre producers, arts marketing professionals, and Chinese cultural policy-makers. Theatre producers could create musical theatre productions by appropriating theatrical content and new technologies to deliver hybrid experiences for a broader audience; arts marketing professionals could make the most of social media tools to enhance the audiences' digital engagement. Furthermore, marketing should be directed effectively to foster a confident and active audience for long-term musical theatre attendance. The government policies should highlight the role of arts education through online and offline platforms and deepen the autonomy of arts and cultural organisations to import and stage musical theatre productions in China. This thesis offers an insight that Chinese audiences' experiences are a key feature showing how musical theatre becomes a popular entertainment choice.

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## **Glossary**

Chinese market: China's urban markets.

Chinese audiences: all young people who attended musical theatre in China.

Younger generation: the adults who were born after 1980.

### **PRC's RMB Converted to British Pound**

Figures in PRC's RMB, such as theatre ticket prices, are converted to British Pounds at the exchange rate of 1 PRC's RMB to 0.11, as in 2019.

## Preface

I was not born in Beijing but I was exposed to this city's famous opera when I moved to the city to study as an undergraduate in 2010. A friend told me: "Beijing has the best opera and this is an experience you must see." I thought it would be interesting to see it, and when I did I began to understand the beauty and complexity of Peking Opera. Perhaps somewhat optimistically I hope to encourage more people to appreciate Peking Opera. The findings of my bachelor's dissertation are that Peking Opera is a form of heritage rather than a commercial art form, and that it is hard to fit it into the contemporary entertainment industry. This dissertation then inspired me to further explore the art form in peoples' daily lives. At the same time, I was working in a part-time job as an artistic programme coordinator at the National Centre for the Performing Arts in Beijing. This provided me with the opportunity to observe overseas performances and to become involved in cross-cultural issues in the performing arts sector. Meanwhile, I was motivated to enquire into the cross-cultural relationship between international performances and local audiences.

I came to England to study for an MA in 2014. During that year, I watched my first live musical theatre performance, *The Sound of Music*, at Leicester Curve Theatre. It was an exciting night and it became clear to me that such was the strength of this genre that the audiences became so immersed in the performance that they left the theatre reluctantly. This recalled my childhood experience of attending a Chinese opera in my grandmother's home town during a summer holiday. The open-air venue was more like that used for hosting a festival show. Audiences did not have an actual seat, so that meant I was able to move around with friends around the venue. I even went through the crowd and my curiosity led me to see what the backstage was like. This was really a spontaneous thing

and nothing I had paid my attention to during the performance at that night. It was an experience that was somewhat different from my other experiences with musical theatre. In China I observed that audiences left the venue quite quickly and did not appear to be emotionally attached to the performance, in the way that their counterparts in the West had. This set me to ponder why audiences appear to act so differently in response to different theatrical forms or in different cultural contexts. My abiding interest has enabled me to watch more musicals and develop my curiosity for understanding the relationship between art forms and diverse audience experience. I envisaged researching this topic for a doctoral study.

The idea of this thesis was produced in such an environment. A series of policy initiatives such as the Belt and Road scheme in China have brought a sense of a wider opening in the country for cross-cultural exchange. The political and economic environment is now more open for staging international performances. An emphasis on cultural consumption is at the forefront of government thinking in leveraging the import of overseas musical theatre productions to the domestic market. China is a vibrant market for the performing arts, where musical theatre is a commercial genre with high-level marketability. With the rapid expansion of urban middle-class consumers, the domestic market possesses massive commercial opportunities. China is becoming a culturally active market in the world, with the aim of evolving to a consumption-oriented economy in the twenty-first century. By 2014, China had 69% of respondents in a total population of 323.4 million who expressed a willingness to go to a theatrical event (Malde, 2016). In 2015 60% of the Chinese population who had engaged in a variety of cultural activities (ibid.). The statistics evidence a growing demand for consuming cultural events, and a great deal of potential for the consumption of theatre. A survey reports that 73% of Chinese audiences

polled expressed an interest in seeing live performances from the UK (Morris Hargreaves McIntyre, 2014). The domestic market appears to show a strong interest in consuming overseas theatrical products. Market demand enables a large number of productions to be introduced to China from the United Kingdom, the United States and further afield.

Finally, this thesis comes from my strong wish to inform theatre practitioners, arts marketing professionals and cultural policy-makers to achieve the artistic, commercial and social goals of cross-cultural theatre exchange between China and other countries. In doing this I am pursuing not just a professional but a personal ambition. My previous experiences have allowed me to acquire the appropriate knowledge and a continuous passion for working on this thesis. When I was 7 years old I started learning the piano-keyboard accordion. When I was 18 years old I started to travel and by now have been to over 19 countries for visits and academic activities. Throughout my studies, I hope more people and organisations can benefit from the opportunities and realise a win-win result from a cross-cultural context. The initial idea of this thesis is to apply theoretical strategies, tools and experiences to cross-cultural practices in the performing arts. There are few journal papers and essays which discuss musical theatre audiences, and the need for a deep and rich research into the role of Chinese audience members in musical theatre. This thesis aims to fill in this gap by creating a systematic theoretical framework and practical analyses for investigating theatre audiences in cross-cultural practices.

## Chapter 1: Musical Theatre in China

For thousands of years human curiosity and desire have led to interaction with external people, cultures and goods. Different countries have different ways of breaking down geographical and cultural boundaries to reach outside. Since the Han-dynasty China, the Silk Road has been a cross-border network for trading and cultural exchange, linking people and goods between Asia, Europe and Africa. These routes were not referred to as “the Silk Road” until 1877 when the German term *Seidenstraße* (“the Silk Road”) was created by Ferdinand von Richthofen (Frankopan, 2018), but since then the term has been adopted widely. In European history approximately from the fourteenth to seventeenth centuries, the Age of Discovery shifted the world deeply in international relations, global trades and cultures and was the beginning of globalisation.

There has been a marked increase in global trade in the twentieth-first century, which is a result of developments in public transport, mass migration, media, telecommunications and financial technologies (Appadurai, 1996). The world has been connected closely and facilitated the free flow of goods and people across cultures. This has fostered a new type of cultural relations and networks of international exchange over land and sea. The world is now globalised and people have more opportunities for interacting with overseas cultural forms and entertainment. Mike Featherstone (1990, p. 9) argues that: “The intensity and rapidity of today’s global cultural flows have contributed to the sense that the world is a singular place which entails the proliferation of new cultural flows for encounters”. The convenience and efficiency of this world stimulates new markets for art galleries, film studios, and theatre companies, and grows demand in different types of art forms and entertainment in a cross-cultural context.

With ongoing transnational businesses of cultural goods, the Chinese market has attracted a great number of world theatrical classics that have been staged in Chinese theatre venues. Examples range from Shakespeare's spoken drama *Coriolanus* to Mozart's opera *Magic Flute*. Local audiences appear to have an insatiable appetite for overseas theatrical experiences. In particular, musical theatre performance is circulated globally to Chinese audiences through media and digital technologies. China has witnessed the popularity of musical theatre primarily transferred from the United Kingdom and the United States for decades, as entertainment behemoth *Nederlander* states: "China will be a very dynamic market for musicals and the company will continue to enhance the exchange of quality productions between China and the world" (Zhang, 2016). Statistics from local press: *Mamma Mia!* has been staged more than 400 times (HAIBAO News, 2014); *Cats* had been presented to Chinese audiences more than 200 times by 2018 (Sohu News, 2018); and *The Lion King* had staged 200 shows by 2016 (Li, 2016). These numbers show an increasing number of transcultural practices consolidate the aesthetic, technological and commercial sophistications of musical theatre.

Audience interest and curiosity in external art forms can be found in many historical contexts. These can be seen as cultural encounters of investment in overseas cultural products that are attached to "a faraway, foreign country or civilisation" (Staszak, 2009, p. 1). These kind of audience interest may entail travel to another cultural environment; these cultural experiences outside the local culture can be actively or passively received; or audiences can seek to explore new cultures and unique experiences. For instance, Italian-style opera was an elite entertainment form catered for British audiences during the eighteenth century (Horton, 2015). The magazine *Spectator* comments that "Our great grandchildren will be curious about why their forefathers used to sit like an audience for



foreigners in their own country to hear plays acted in a tongue which they did not understand” (quoted in Marek, 1957, pp. 567-569). Since then, Italian opera has symbolised a type of cultural power among British audiences for showing off attendees’ wealth and social status, which accounts for its popularity among British business people and entrepreneurs. Conversely, the peculiar sounds of the Peking Opera as experienced by European audiences has been described as being “like someone strangling a cat” (Tang, 2016). One American theatre critic described, cross-dressing Peking Opera performers as looking like “a gentlemanly ‘leading lady’”, adding, “although our own theatrical form is enormously vivid it is rigid, and never lives so freely in terms of imagination as this one does” (Tian, 2012; Wu and Mei, 1981). These descriptions demonstrate that audience responses can vary widely and each audience brings its own cultural reference points, life experience, knowledge, political views and sexual preferences to their interpretation of a production (Freshwater, 2009). Understanding the art form is the first step to appreciating a foreign theatrical production. When a theatrical performance presents to an audience outside its original culture, theatre-makers need to consider how the use of the foreign language, exotic stars and breathtaking staging can be attractive to local audiences.

In the postmodern market, rapid flows of cultural goods have created an audience with a changing, fluid, and hedonistic need for choosing a cultural and aesthetic experience (Ellis et al., 2011). In a contemporary context, we could ask what is the audience response, experience and expectation towards an international performance? The fast pace of life can cause people’s senses to numb, can lead to social isolation and high stress. When this is the case an audience tends to be keen to consume overseas arts and entertainment forms that offer easy emotional and hedonistic satisfactions. This thesis specifically focuses on studying Chinese audiences who watch global productions of musical theatre.

Understanding Chinese audiences is central to explaining the recent phenomenon of musical theatre “fever” in the Chinese market. Investigating the cross-cultural practices of musical theatre productions can lead to an understanding of how musical theatre can be artistically and commercially successful in an overseas marketplace. Accordingly, this study begins by delving into examining the art form of musical theatre and considers how this art form can be performable for cross-cultural audiences.

### **1.1 The art form context**

This study has chosen musical theatre as a specialised art form to examine the role of audience experience in cultural consumption and arts marketing in a cross-cultural context. Along with musical theatre, traditional Chinese theatre is examined as the most popular theatrical entertainment in Chinese history to provide a historical insight for demonstrating how a Chinese existing theatrical form influences audience value judgements and aesthetic preferences. The following paragraphs introduce the cultural and social significance of traditional Chinese theatre, notably Peking Opera as an iconic theatrical form, with a longstanding influence on the aesthetic and behavioural orientation of Chinese audiences.

China has a long and influential history in theatrical arts which dates back to the thirteenth century. As the Chinese scholar Wang Guowei (1915) points out in *Chinese Theatre Studies of the Song and Yuan Dynasties*, traditional Chinese theatre spans 800 years. Traditional Chinese theatre (*xiqu*) literally means “drama and music”, and its form has more than three hundred styles varying in dialects from place to place. Chinese theatre emerged for rituals and religious purposes, including festivals and celebrations of

agricultural events (Fu, 2012). This nurtured a symbolic style of traditional Chinese theatre with rich symbolic meanings derived from rituals, praying for agricultural harvests, a commemoration of ancestors, and promoting morals and personal edification. Antonin Artaud observed and noted his experience of watching Eastern theatre (notably Balinese) in Paris and found that Eastern theatre demonstrated a kind of symbolic aesthetic, as it is highly symbolised and ritualised in relation to its origin in ancient religious events (Hitchcock and Norris, 1995). In particular in China's rural areas, traditional theatre architecture was usually built opposite to the temple of the dragon king, the deity in charge of weather, which is associated dragons with rainfall and agricultural fertility.

Theatre attendance evolved from ritual practices to social events, as local communities and family units celebrated agricultural harvests and traditional festivals. Chinese writer Lu Xun (1922, p. 166) in his essay Village Opera (*She Xi* in Chinese) recalls his experiences of attending a Chinese opera performance in his mother's village: "Chinese opera is so full of gongs and cymbals, shouting and jumping, that it makes the spectators' heads swim. It is quite unsuited for presentation in a theatre but, if performed in the open air and watched from a distance, it has its charm". Theatrical performances have become important social events for Chinese people across the nation. The community is a fundamental construct of theatre audiences in China as it enabled this form of entertainment to engage with a broader audience spanning many social classes. In Village Opera, Lu Xun (1922, p. 402) continues to describe other audience members: "The families of the local rich were still there in the boats, but they were not really interested in the opera. Most of the audience had gone to the foot of the stage to eat cakes, fruit or melon seeds. So it didn't really amount to an audience". Lu Xun's observation reflects

theatre attendance is a sociable moment for the mass of Chinese people in their daily lives, and it has become a convention saying “listening to theatre” by audiences rather than going to the theatre (Li, 2002). For Chinese people, theatre and performances play a vital part not only in entertaining but also in providing a physical space for linking cultural experiences, memories and social interactions.

In this study, the researcher specifically refers to Peking Opera as a representation of traditional Chinese theatre because the status of Peking Opera is viewed as the quintessence of Chinese culture (*guo cui*). Drawing on the generic distinction, Peking Opera is one of the Chinese indigenous musical theatre genres that had been the most popular entertainment form dating back to China’s mid-Qing dynasty. In 2010, Peking Opera was inscribed as an element on the UNESCO World Intangible Cultural Heritage List. According to a definition provided by Wu and Mei (1981, p. 2), Peking Opera is “a comprehensive art form of drama and musical theatre in China with roots going back to the early periods, and it combines various elements including traditional Chinese music, poetry, singing, recitation, dancing, martial arts, and acrobatics, all blended into one great theatrical art without a trace of affectation.” This notion along with contemporary theatre scholars believes that music and song are dominant parts of traditional Chinese theatre which resembles the theatrical expression of western musical theatre (Mackerras, 2008; Li, 2002; Lei, 2011).

The composition of singing, spoken dialogue, dancing, and musical accompaniment suggests that Peking Opera is a collaborative art form. The use of the term “Opera” implies that Peking Opera appears to have stylistic expressions with fixed tunes, rhythms, and traditional melodies, which occasionally vary depending on the instrument players’

teachers. However, the adoption of “Opera” (as a term for a genre of musical theatre) is more or less used in a western sense, and it ideally should be translated to “musical theatre”. The term “Peking Opera” to denote the Chinese form of traditional theatre has been adopted into common use and thus will be used here.

### **1.1.1 Musical Theatre across cultures**

Hall (2015, p. 3) defines musical theatre as “a combination of music and drama in a modern form distinct from traditional opera”. As same as Peking Opera’s collaboration with music and drama, musical theatre seems to have a different path for evolving towards an integrated theatrical form. The integration of different art disciplines in Europe can be traced back to “*Gesamtkunstwerk*” termed by Richard Wagner, which refers to the aim “to create the total work of art, fusing all the arts in one work” (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1944; Taylor, 2012a). Wagner’s theory laid an aesthetic foundation for composers and artists to make artistic works with many art forms in the Western world. A large number of artistic practices evidence Wagner’s notion which has achieved great influence on artists, composers and writers, innovating artistically beyond Renaissance tradition. The notion of *Gesamtkunstwerk* allows theatrical genres more creatively unify and fragment different types of arts within one piece of work (Wolfman, 2013). The practice of *Gesamtkunstwerk* has reformed Italian opera which used to create a continuous melody and now opera and drama can be re-united, and also can incorporate dramatic mime and elaborate dance within a single play. Since the nineteenth century, the practice of Italian Opera has combined classical ballet, fashion, acting, as well as libretto and music on stage.

Musical theatre formed its style through absorbing Greek theatre, Italian opera and spoken drama, and especially it reflects a huge appetite for Italian opera. During the seventeenth century, British merchants decided to invite local composers such as Henry Purcell to develop a particular style of opera which combined the sung and spoken word in English (Hume, 1998). Italian opera as a foreign theatrical genre inspired British composers to reform musical elements and create dramatic meaning in their plays. In 1728 the first musical comedy *The Beggar's Opera* was created in London and premiered at Lincoln's Inn Fields Theatre (Gordon and Jubin, 2016). This play gently mocked Italian operas with their mythological subject-matter and signified the thematic transformation of British theatre from high political satire to a reflection of the lives of ordinary people (ibid.). *The Beggar's Opera* represented early-stage British musicals that dealt with matters of social hierarchy and politics through irony and black humour. *The Beggar's Opera* built an identity for a British theatre that was deeply inspired by the Italian-style opera. Subsequently, British theatre has used musical language to create physiological responses and appeals to the audience by unifying tight formatting of songs, dance, comedy, specialty acts and drama (Walsh and Platt, 2003).

During the Second World War, British musicals were influenced by American productions. Minstrelsy, burlesque and vaudeville were forerunners of musical theatre in the United States dating back to the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries. With the growth of immigration and subcultural communities, musical comedy, vaudeville and burlesque drew on multicultural themes that dealt with ethnic conflicts, social justice and political satire (Knapp, 2006; Lundskaer-Nielsen, 2008; Platt et al., 2014; Taylor, 2012b). The themes and performing styles were strongly shaped by American multiculturalism and the politics of race and gender issues. Meanwhile, jazz, blues, rock'n'roll and black

music were emergent musical styles integrated within American musicals in the 1950s and 1960s (Gordon and Jubin, 2016). According to Knapp et al. (2011), the unification and combination of different musical elements makes musical theatre performances accessible to audiences from across wider social groups especially catering for middle-class taste (ibid.). The adaptation of various musical and dramatic elements has enabled musical theatre to display what musical theatre could look, sound and feel like (Gordon et al., 2016). As Taylor (2012) believes that the expression of musical theatre has been delivered by authentic and kinaesthetic emotion, and is capable of providing voluptuous sensation and a live experience to the audience.

From the 1950s to 1960s, the expanding urban middle classes became the major consumers for musical theatre in North America and Europe (Lundskaer-Nielsen, 2008). Later on, London's West End and New York's Broadway theatres have maintained an international recognition for the production and consumption of theatrical entertainment. Musical theatre has sustained a stable growth of audience numbers through combining updated artistry and audience-focused commercial operation which design for worldwide audiences (Walsh and Platt, 2003). The image of musical theatre has been portrayed as relevant to modern aesthetic identity, cultural memory and socio-political trending topics (Taylor and Symonds, 2014). An investigation by the Society of London Theatre (SOLT) has shown that musical theatre makes major contributions to box office profits, with an audience of 63% compared to 5% for modern drama by 1996 (Lee, 2008). Even though the French playwright Molière suggests the separation of art and entertainment (Knapp et al., 2011), musical theatre is an exception, in which there is a combination of art, entertainment, and innovation.

Multi-language translations, the musical films, DVDs and original soundtrack CDs have facilitated musical theatre to achieve successful cross-cultural practices and audience development (Taylor, 2012). Western musical theatre has made most use of screen, popular singers, stars and TV programmes as promotional vehicles to create worldwide theatre encounters. In particular, musical theatre had been travelling to Hong Kong and then expanded to Taiwan and mainland China. Musical theatre has sought ways to ensure a successful cross-cultural transfer for profit-seeking and market growth after the 1980s, especially looking at Chinese audiences who may never have previously experienced the art form.

Within the process of contacting Chinese audiences, musical films were crucial in representing the Western musical genre in the post-war Chinese speaking world. From the 1960s onwards, musical films became an influential form for global reach, as some shows moving from the stage to the screen, and vice versa. After the trauma of two world wars, Hong Kong as the British colony had a greater degree of economic and political freedom to develop an entertainment industry. Hong Kong quickly became a powerhouse of entertainment across East Asia and Southeast Asia for an overseas and domestic audience. From the 1950s to the 1960s, musical films became a major genre of Hong Kong cinematic outputs. At the same time, Hong Kong entertainment companies were urgently building a cultural identity for this multicultural city. Thus, it is vital for entertainment companies to make Chinese traditional as well as modernised and westernised cultural outputs to deliver the values of localism, multiculturalism and metropolitanism. Two giant entertainment companies Shaw Brothers and MP&GI competed for building a strong cultural icon in British Hong Kong, and thus the two companies transformed and produced a large number of cinematic products that



represented Hong Kong as a vibrant and multicultural cosmopolitan city. These screen productions had an appropriate combination of urban modernity and elements from traditional Chinese theatre, offering locally-tuned melodramas as well as British-style and American-style musicals, and creating female stars and fashion icons (Wing-Fai and Willis, 2014).

Musical theatre genre was widely adopted by Shaw Brothers and MP&GI to brand their studios and expand audience members (Hu, 2010). Show Brothers and MP&GI studios had seen the value of western musicals as the art form could synthesise singing, dancing and acting, attracting “worldly” audiences who appreciated this style of entertainment. Most Hong Kong musical films featured female leads who received awards from international film festivals and quickly won transnational recognition for high quality performance and international acting experience. In Hong Kong’s musical films, Grace Chang and Linda Lin Dai were two representative female stars, recognised as famous singers, dancers, comic and dramatic actresses. Grace Chang starred in *Mambo Girl* (1957), *The Wild, Wild Rose* (1960) and *It Blossoms Again* (1954); and Linda Lin Dai starred in *Les Belles* (1961), *Love without End* (1961) and *Diau Charn* (1958). Grace Chang was born in Nanjing, the capital of Republic of China (1912-1949), and was trained as a Peking Opera performer in Shanghai before moving to Hong Kong with her family. Similarly, Linda Lin Dai moved to Hong Kong in 1949 and had trained in Japan and the United States. Their cinematic performances showed the professional skills of acting for the musical genre and “stars’ cosmopolitan skills” (Hu, 2010, p. 186), but they were also marketed as “beauties” cultural ideals.

Hong Kong's musical films play a pioneering role in making and popularising Western musicals and melodramas in Chinese language. The cross-cultural adaptation of musicals made it possible to create hybrid forms of musical theatre which mixed "performance traditions traceable to distinct cultural areas" (Pavis, 1996, p. 8). As Canclini (1995, p. 207) points out, "hybridisation is the breakup and mixing of the collections that are used to organise cultural systems, the deterritorialisation of symbolic processes, and the expansion of impure genres." Hybrid art form is an irresistible result of modernisation and globalisation in the colonial Hong Kong. The form of hybridisation of content and style within works is also reflected in the producing systems. There are a large number of Hong Kong films that mixed different cultures and multiple art forms. A discussion of Hong Kong's musical films has been adopted both to demonstrate the principle of aesthetic connection that occurs, from kitsch to high culture, from western culture to Chinese tradition, and to address the construction of identity in a context of cross-cultural communication. After the colonial period, Hong Kong's first live musical production *Snow. Wolf. Lake* (1997) starred Cantonese and Mandarin pop singer Jacky Cheung (also known as Zhang Xueyou). Along with his stardom, the musical has captivated numerous Chinese-speaking audiences across Hong Kong, mainland China, Taiwan, Singapore and Malaysia.

After China's open-door reform launched in 1978, overseas productions flooded into China. In 1987, China's National Opera House staged the musical *The Fantasticks*, originally directed by Word Baker and Tom Jones (Thomas, 1995). *The Fantasticks* was a low-budget Off-Broadway production which enjoyed a decades-long run in the United States. In the following years, *West Side Story* was another Broadway production introduced to Chinese audiences. This production had a tight storyline that reminded

Chinese audiences of the plot of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. In this production there are plenty of dancing performances and jazz music that typifies a style of American musical. Furthermore, the Chinese TV programme *Yang Lan Sight* made series for introducing western musical theatre productions. The programme first broadcast a Broadway-trained performer Fei Xiang who presented classic American musical theatre productions to Chinese audiences in 1996. This remarks musical theatre was officially introduced by a Chinese media platform. The Broadway-trained performer Fei Xiang is well-known as a Taiwanese-American pop singer, performed on the Spring Festival Gala, a nationwide television show produced by China Media Group. His performances on Spring Festival Gala quickly made him become the most influential pop singers in mainland China during the 1980s. In 1991, Fei Xiang won a role in *Miss Saigon* and then he moved to the United States to develop his singing and performing career in Broadway theatres. Fei Xiang is also a featured soloist with Sarah Brightman in *The Music of Andrew Lloyd Webber* (Liberty Daily, 2001). Fei returned to mainland China in 1997 and became a skilled musical theatre performer who collaborated with Elaine Paige, Andrew Lloyd Webber and other prestigious musical theatre artists from New York and London, who were launching tours of Asia. Fei Xiang's acting experiences in Broadway theatres entail him to become the most appropriate spoken-person of musical theatre for Chinese audiences.

Since the 2000s, international marketing campaigns have promoted a series of mega-musical productions in China. The shows of Cameron Mackintosh, accompanying British musical artists were experienced as breath-taking by Chinese audiences. The British producer Cameron Mackintosh's international marketing campaigns have been extremely successful within new media especially, which makes it possible to stage live

musical performances in China's major cities. In 2002, *Les Misérables* arrived at Shanghai Grand Theatre and stimulated the growth of the Chinese market for transferring and staging mega-musical productions. China's large cities have become new destinations for international tours of musical theatre. In 2003, musical theatre imports were still rising and British theatre companies produced the Chinese productions *Mamma Mia!* and *Cats*.

In addition, the pop music of Taiwan has had a great influence on the popularity of Chinese-speaking musical theatre productions since the 1970s. Taiwan's pop music strongly shapes the forms of making musical theatre in Chinese language and musical elements. One of the leading figures is Teresa Deng (also known as Deng Lijun), a Taiwanese pop singer who was active from 1967 to 1995 across East and Southeast Asia. Her sweet voice and the romantic lyrics of her songs swiftly gained her millions of fans from mainland China and other Asian countries. Deng's artistic talent made her become a timely popular icon in Asia's pop music world. Deng has performed thousands of songs that are remain popular among Chinese audiences. This fact facilitated the creation of a jukebox musical *Love U Teresa* in 2014 for Chinese fans as a memorial to Teresa Deng, who died in 1995. After the hit of *Love U Teresa* in Beijing, another jukebox musical *The Secret* (2016) is based on Taiwanese pop singer Jay Chou's songs, which evoked his fans' memories of school romance and his back-catalogue. This musical is also significant in terms of international collaboration in which the creative teams mainly came from Broadway or London's West End.

Since the 2010s, China's major cities have become a rising market with active local audiences. From 2018 to 2019, there have been two seasons of *Super Vocal* (*Sheng Ru*

*Ren Xin* in Chinese) on Hunan Television, which is an all-male singing competition for opera singers and musical performers. *Super Vocal* sets out to introduce classical opera and contemporary musicals to a wider audience in the Chinese market. The TV show *Super Vocal* increases the Chinese audience for watching musical theatre performances as well as social media followers for Chinese local musical theatre stars. According to *iQiyi* (a Chinese media production company), this show has been ranked “the fifth most watched reality TV show in China” (Wei, 2019). Featuring 36 male singers, contestants such as Zheng Yunlong and A Yunga have performed a number of musical pieces from the productions including *Man of La Mancha*, *Jekyll and Hyde* and *Murder Ballad*. Inasmuch as the consumption of musical theatre is growing in the Chinese marketplace, western musical theatre is still a new arts experience for local audiences.

Ongoing governmental interest is reflected in cultural policies for importing original musical theatre productions from the West, widening theatre participation, and nurturing new audiences. Two state-funded companies, China Arts and Entertainment Group and the Shanghai Media Group, play vital roles in transferring musical theatre to Chinese audiences. As O’ Connor and Xin (Wei, 2019) suggest, China has traditionally had the strict purview of culture under the control of central government. The central government has committed to accelerate the growth of the domestic consumption in theatre attendance through policy stimulation. Government policy plays a part in supporting cultural development for achieving social and economic benefits, as well as tackling the relationship between the mission of cultural organisations and audience participation. The examination of governmental policies is important in understanding how cultural policy works to guide the growth of musical theatre consumption in the Chinese market.

## 1.2 The policy context

China has had a centrally-administrated culture through much of its history. The policy context is fundamental for providing a comprehensive understanding of China's policy environment in terms of the objectives, structures and formation of cultural policy at a national level for today's consumers, arts managers, and theatre practitioners. The relationship between cultural policy and arts management has its own characteristics to shape the economic, social and artistic objectives of cultural organisations in the Chinese context.

Since 1978, the opening up of China's economy has enabled the country to become a more market-oriented economy, also characterised as a socialist free market economy. At the same time, the central government has started launching cultural system reform<sup>1</sup>, a nationwide institutional reform in the arts and cultural sectors over the last three decades. The reform aims to boost domestic cultural production and consumption in line with the free-market economy (Keane, 2013). At the initial stage, cultural system reform introduced the concept of cultural market to stimulate market-driven cultural production across arts and cultural organisations (Liu, 2017). From 1990 to 2000, the central government has guided to deepen the marketisation of arts and cultural organisations, and

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<sup>1</sup> Cultural system reform refers to a series of cultural policies that especially influence institutional change in the cultural and arts organisations. The reform has been launched for three stages: 1978-1992, 1993-2002, and 2003-present. Through the three times of the reform, it builds up appropriate social and policy environments to facilitate China's cultural development in the free-market economy (Keane, 2013).

has further stimulated the privatisation of arts and cultural organisations to develop a certain kind of capitalism (Jiang, 1994). After 2000, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the State Council issued *Several Opinions on Deepening the Reform of Cultural System* (hereafter referred to as the *Opinions*) on 12<sup>th</sup> January 2006. The *Opinions* document states the goal of cultural system reform in re-evaluating the role of the state in appropriating the government intervention and market-driven freedom in arts and cultural organisations. The continuing engagement with China's cultural system reform shows the ways in which the central government addresses a series of institutional and administrative efficiency to achieve the economic, social and artistic goals of cultural policy, including the marketisation of the arts and the conglomeration of arts and cultural organisations and their related businesses.

Since the premiership of Li Keqiang in 2013, the idea of cultural and creative industries has been paid more attention to by the central government, as the term is largely an import from the United Kingdom (Keane, 2009a). Cultural and creative industries<sup>2</sup> are central to the nation's overall economy for both national and local administrative units. China's cultural policies are conjoined to social and economic development policies anchored in the 13<sup>th</sup> Five-Year Social and Economic National Plan (2016-2020) (hereafter to referred

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<sup>2</sup> According to the Ministry of Culture and Tourism of the People's Republic of China, in 2012, China's National Bureau of Statistics published the National Classification System on Cultural and Related Industries to define the seven categories of "creative and cultural industries", including news services, publishing and copyright services, broadcast, television and film services, culture and art services, internet and culture services, culture, leisure and entertainment services, and other cultural services (culture and art agencies, rental and sales of cultural goods, advertising and convention services) (Hui, 2006).

to as the 13<sup>th</sup> “Five-Year Plan”), which fosters humanistic development, social cohesion and economic sustainability in the domestic market. The 13<sup>th</sup> “Five-Year Plan” highlights cultural and creative industries as a strategy of upgrading the economic growth and transformation (Keane, 2016), as well as “boosting cultural industry and exploring new avenues of cultural exchange” (Rong and O’Connor, 2018, p. 5). On 13<sup>th</sup> March 2016, China’s Minister of Culture and Tourism Luo Shugang in the Ministerial Channel claimed that “the ministry will keep building the cultural industry system as the supporting role of national economic development by the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> Five-Year Plan. The expected contribution of cultural industry to national GDP will increase to 5% and above by 2020”.

The 13<sup>th</sup> Five-Year Plan supports China’s economic and social development within many different policy areas, and is a tool for achieving political, economic and social goals through cultural development. It guides governmental administration to carry out classic artistic productions that contribute economic, social and public value to China’s overall economic growth. Developments in the cultural industry have demonstrated the necessity of promoting the consumption of services to upgrade China’s domestic economy growth. The continuing growth of Chinese people’s annual income allows more individual spending on cultural products and services (Li, 2016). In common with developed countries, the cultural and creative industries have become central to China’s economic transformation and the upgrade of domestic consumption. The Ministry of Culture and Tourism of the People’s Republic of China has adopted administrative strategies to manage cultural resources and institutions, public cultural assets and overseas liaisons. The ministry has emphasised the significance of the culture industry in adjusting



economic structure, boosting the domestic demand, creating jobs and promoting the social and economic development.

### **1.2.1 Cultural Policy on the performing arts**

China's culture industry policies reflect on the performing arts sector and highlights an important trend for developing theatre audiences and facilities in the cities. The central government policy-makers have identified the existing challenge, i.e., a lack of original performances is a major reason leading to the decline of theatre audiences in the domestic theatre market, according to 2018's *Performing Arts Market Report* (Lei, 2019). In terms of performing arts' audience development, the government has drafted and launched public policies for stimulating the marketisation of theatrical productions, boosting audience attendance, and improving theatre facilities and venue experience.

In 2015, China's Ministry of Culture and Tourism developed "Regional Development Strategy" (Li, 2018), which has stimulated the experimental formation of the Performing Arts Alliance (PAA), a cultural development scheme situated within a region and between the Beijing - Tianjin - Hebei megalopolis. The alliance of the Beijing - Tianjin - Hebei megalopolis aims to facilitate the mobility of cultural resources, public subsidies and creative talents. More specifically, the goal of the alliance is to mobilise cultural resources across regions and to boost the exchange of cultural products, creative services, innovative ideas and financial investment within the regional market. Beijing plays a leading role as a research and innovation base in sharing and exchanging high-quality performances as well as offering policy advantages and funding opportunities within the alliance. Li (2015) comments that this Regional Development Strategy is intended to construct a united, sharing and complementary operation platform, including a purchase

platform, brand building and media publicity for enhancing regional collaboration and competition, to increase cultural mobility, and to strengthen the marketisation of the performing arts. There is potential to generate added value for arts organisations as the Regional Development Strategy is an attempt to achieve the goal of economic, artistic and social sustainability through coordinating regional advantaged resources.

With the ongoing cultural system reform, public subsidies are no longer applied to support so-called “iron-rice-bowl”<sup>3</sup> employees in China’s arts and cultural organisations and institutions that used to rely heavily on government funds leading to employees’ low work efficiency (Hughes, 1998). Due to the reduction in public subsidies, government funding such as the China National Arts Fund (CNAF) has become a market-oriented and competition-driven financial resource for supporting traditional and creative artistic productions. Competitive public subsidies reinforce the need for arts organisations and artistic individuals to face the market and to create original artistic productions for financially sustainable operation over the long-term. With the deepening of the marketisation of arts and cultural organisations, governmental administration has allowed arts and cultural organisations to subsidise audiences in the performing arts and to leverage theatre attendance and related consumption activities. Public subsidies tend to consider funding an arts and cultural organisation with potentially profitable box office performance. For example, arts organisations can be subsidised RMB 100 (£11.38) for each ticket scale, and the total number of subsidised tickets can account for 10% of theatre’s attendance rate (XinhuaNet, 2012). Subsidised tickets encourage performing

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<sup>3</sup> ‘Iron rice bowl’ is a metaphor that refers to an occupation in Chinese state-owned enterprises and institutions with guaranteed life-long employment as well as steady income and benefits.

arts organisations to offer affordable tickets and to gradually cultivate audience tastes and consumption habits. This public subsidy scheme drives an equitable distribution of the performing arts as part of a modern society's humanistic needs.

As the Beijing Municipal Bureau of Culture (2016) reports, the intention of the public subsidies is to boost urban residents' consumption of arts and cultural activities. This strategy has been introduced to many cities and regions such as Beijing, and the provinces of Tianjin, Shanxi, and Hainan. The public subsidy policy varies in local administrative units. For instance, the Tianjin government subsidises unfamiliar arts such as opera, ballet, and traditional Chinese theatre to develop audiences, and it is a sign that high art forms and traditional genres have been funded by the governmental subsidy. Government funding facilitates the widening of audience participation in attending less familiar theatrical forms. For arts organisations, offering affordable tickets encourages them to combine pricing and marketing strategies for long-term audience development in China's free-market economy.

Moreover, the policy-led improvement of cultural infrastructure is a benchmark for facilitating cultural engagement and leisure consumption. The construction of creative and cultural infrastructure shows the economic and social need to address public services and social equality (Evans, 2002). The 13<sup>th</sup> Five-Year plan (2016-2020) suggests that resources in culture, finance, lands, and knowledge should enhance the construction of technology-led, culture-led and service-concentrated cities (China Internet Information Centre, 2016). The introduction of a creative and cultural infrastructure organises residents, visitors and cultural resources to increase cultural participation and consumption at national, regional and city levels.

By 2018 there were 1,236 performing arts venues across the nation; the total number of performing arts venues in China has grown 1.1 times compared to 1978, according to *China's Performing Arts Market Report* in 2018. The increase of performing arts venues indicates the physical capacity to influence audience participation through from accessibility to artistic experience. As McAuley (1999, p.1) highlights, theatre is a social space because theatre is the only art where “the name given to the place where the artistic event occurs is the same as that of the art form itself.”

### **1.3 Research questions**

Previous sections have introduced the art form and China's policy environment in relation to musical theatre attendance in the Chinese market. Yet data and knowledge are limited in the investigation of contemporary Chinese audiences and how they participate in and consume musical theatre experience. With theatre companies paying increasing attention to the Chinese market, there are still a number of questions: how do Chinese audiences understand and respond to musical theatre and its marketing materials; what social and entertainment activities do Chinese audiences engage with before, during and after attending musical theatre performance; in what ways do Chinese audiences consume musical theatre; which musical theatre productions travel well in China; and how do Chinese audiences perceive the post-experience of musical theatre performances in Beijing? This PhD research fills the gap by offering a detailed understanding of China's musical theatre audiences and also by examining how musical theatre producers and arts marketing professionals can understand audience differences in a cross-cultural context in order to reach a wider audience and provide an authentic and positive live experience

for cross-cultural audiences. By exploring these questions, the focus of this thesis provides a deep insight into the expectations of Chinese audiences towards musical theatre, and the willingness of Chinese cultural policy-makers and international theatre producers seeking to introduce musical theatre to local audiences.

#### **1.4 Structure of the Thesis**

The thesis begins by introducing the popularity of musical theatre in China, focusing on a recent phenomenon of Chinese audiences attending western live musical theatre performances. **Chapter 1** introduces Chinese audiences' appetite for experiencing a western theatrical performance, looking at a relationship between the western art form and the Chinese audience. Throughout this thesis, the idea of encountering musical theatre is specifically referenced with regard to Chinese audiences, who have limited experience of attending western live musical theatre performances. This chapter looks into art form specialism from a historical perspective as Chinese people have a longstanding tradition of attending theatre for entertainment and social experiences. The theatrical aesthetics of traditional Chinese theatre and the experience of going to the theatre have a profound influence on Chinese audiences. The eighteenth century witnessed western musical theatre as an art form that has gradually become popular entertainment in the United Kingdom and the United States. Musical theatre excels when it draws on various popular as well as classical art disciplines, and makes it more apt to meet culturally different entertainment and social expectations. It has successfully evolved into a global genre that has been transferred to entertain a variety of audiences across cultures. Cross-cultural transfer of musical theatre to China dates back to the 1950s – the concept was adopted by Hong Kong's giant film studios to produce musical-genre

cinematic productions. With the deepening of China's open-door policy, the national media platforms have continually staged and broadcast Western musical theatre productions, which can be attributed to the government policy highlighting the impact of cultural exchange and theatre attendance on local people's lives. Chapter 1 then goes on to examine China's cultural policy context by considering the overall policy environment, including cultural consumption policy, audience development and theatre planning policy.

Built upon consumer culture theory, the literature reviewed in **Chapter 2** draws on cultural consumption studies to analyse the social, cultural and experiential aspects of Chinese cultural consumption. Social class, community and experience provide three focuses for identifying and understanding the role of consumers and for enriching the evidence of predicting the patterns of musical theatre consumption in today's Chinese market. The rise of middle-class consumers, live experience and online engagement is a focus for this study in considering the involvement of digital technologies and the internet, which profoundly reshapes the trend of musical theatre distribution and audience consumption on global and local scales. These trends have allowed this research to raise associated questions: who is the consumer and how do they consume musical theatre in China? Based on the theories of Veblen and Bourdieu, cultural consumption is socially distinct and the patterns of cultural consumption are strongly related to social class. Peterson has advanced Bourdieuan analysis to assert the existence of a cultural omnivore. This chapter contextualises these key theories to examine the Chinese trend of cultural consumption by integrating a consideration of China's economic transformation, domestic consumption upgrade and socio-cultural changes in the twenty-first century. The subsequent expansion of middle-class consumers features a well-educated, urban,

young Chinese generation with an economic and cultural capacity to consume cultural and experiential products.

In **Chapter 3**, the researcher sets out to explain the role of audiences through various definitions from a socio-cultural perspective. Arts marketing has gradually evolved to a new discipline that draws an increasing number of researchers and practitioners. Arts marketing literature has shown the evolution from a product-focused approach to an audience-focused approach. This shift demonstrates the importance of focusing on audiences in arts marketing research. The role of audiences becomes active and participatory with the empowerment of global consumerism and digital technologies. The role of audience has been paid attention to in the field of the performing arts, which interplays with the knowledge of audience development and arts marketing. The reviewed literature tends to shed light on audience engagement and experience from this perspective, focusing on from widening audience participation to enriching audience experience. Musical theatre as experience is more suited to explore how local audiences perceive global theatrical experience. By reviewing the literature in arts marketing, audience development and experiences in audience research, the existing literature reveals a lack of research which addresses musical theatre audiences' experiences and reactions from a Chinese context. This chapter identifies a significant gap in the study of Chinese audiences attending musical theatre performances and has the aim of contributing to the knowledge of Chinese theatre attendees' behaviour and consumption patterns in the modern society.

**Chapter 4** introduces the setting of this research. This chapter provides an ethnographic account highlighting the aim of those in Beijing's theatre district to create openness, comfort and capacity to attract a wider audience. It explains the key reasons for choosing Beijing as a location for study and for recruiting respondents, and also specifies characteristics of policy advantages, tradition of performing entertainment and theatre infrastructure for an overview of Beijing as a city – and as one of the China's foremost destinations for importing and staging musical theatre productions from the West.

**Chapter 5** describes the research methodology adopted to study Chinese people attending global musical theatre productions. First of all, the chapter discusses the initial presumptions and methodological framework for the methods selection. The cross-cultural perspective allows this study to employ an ethnographic overview combining multiple methods. Secondly, the complexity and diversity of audience responses allows the research data to draw from three main sources: focus groups, online questionnaires and web ethnography (also known as netnography). The collected data are then used for conducting a further in-depth analysis and discussion of three case studies of musical theatre productions. Finally, this study considers of ethical issues in conducting the research to ensure the protection of the dignity of research participants and the publication of this information.

**Chapter 6** analyses how Chinese audiences understand the art form and their expectations of live productions, which affects the ways in which they consume musical theatre. This chapter explores how musical theatre negotiates meaning with the local audiences, and a relationship with traditional Chinese theatre, and how musical theatre productions are expected to perform to local audiences. The investigation identifies the



gap in understanding the art form of musical theatre among Chinese audiences and explains the possible reasons for the existing gap. This chapter also presents Chinese audience responses to musical theatre in some detail and considers how arts marketing professionals and theatre producers can deliver a precise meaning of musical theatre to satisfy local audiences.

**Chapter 7** addresses case studies of three musical theatre productions - *Cats*, *The Phantom of the Opera* and *Wicked*. The case studies have evaluated Chinese audiences' responses to each different production drawn from online reviews, the local press reports and marketing materials. Each case has been contextualised to analyse how the production has been transferred to China and how audiences react to it. The results provide a deep and comprehensive understanding of audience response and experience in each case for audience researchers, arts marketing practitioners, and theatre producers.

**Chapter 8** presents the findings of the netnographic research, pointing out four key themes of online audience reviews: online communities and its freedom of audience expressions, the fan behaviour of Chinese audiences, audience memories to the past experience and the response to the features of musical theatre. This chapter reveals why Chinese audiences post musical theatre reviews through social networking websites and how they behave online. This study emphasises the audience's experience after the performance, and aims at achieving an understanding of how Chinese audiences perceive musical theatre experiences through online engagement. Finally, analysis of online reviews reflects the memorability of childhood and teenage experiences that maintains a relationship of Chinese audiences with a specific musical theatre performance.

**Chapter 9** concludes that this research has addressed an academic gap in Chinese audience research in the field of musical theatre. There are implications for theatre producers, arts marketing professionals and cultural policy-makers of how to understand Chinese musical theatre audiences in a deep and holistic way, and how to marketing the musical theatre products appropriately to the Chinese audience. First, this chapter reflects on the methodology that offers rich and informative findings but which also include possible weaknesses and challenges in data-handling from multiple sources. It pinpoints out the critical position of using the internet and online platforms for data collection. Second, the conclusion chapter suggests implications in terms of broadening the participant-base through the mechanism of online and offline arts education. Finally, future research envisions the impact of digital technologies on audience studies and comparative studies of musical theatre audiences in China's other cities as well as other part of the world.

## **Chapter 2 Chinese patterns of cultural consumption**

Chapter 1 has introduced what is special about the art form of musical theatre and how musical theatre engages with Chinese people's entertainment-going from a cross-cultural perspective, showing how a Chinese audience experiences and understands western musical theatre. Musical theatre as a cultural product tends to coexist with other elements of audiences' arts-related consumption experience when staging in a public venue. This Chapter will build upon consumer culture theory to examine the Chinese contemporary consumption pattern, along with the arrival of cultural consumption in the 1980s to consider the social and cultural aspects of consuming a western form of theatrical entertainment. Focusing on the expansion of China's emerging middle-class consumers, the middle-class population characterises the profile of musical theatre audiences in China, as educational level highlighted is a crucial factor in shaping the consumption patterns and behaviour of musical theatre attendance.

### **2.1 Consumer culture theory**

Regarding the exploration of consumption activities, Bauman (2001, p. 12) states that "Like all living creatures, people had to consume to stay alive, even though being humans and not mere animals they had to consume more than sheer survival would require: being alive in the human way set demands which topped the necessities of 'merely biological' existence with more elaborate social standards of decency, propriety, and 'good life'". Consumption is an essential human behaviour to satisfy daily basic needs and maintain life, but everything cannot be commodified and consumed by a mass market until the eighteenth century's industrial revolutions. In anthropological studies, consumption is defined as "the behaviour that connects economic activity with the cultural symbols people use to build their lives" (Carrier and Gewertz, 2015). According to this perspective, the purpose of consumption is no longer about survival, and once people's physical needs

are met, social, cultural or symbolic demand is exaggerated to pursue distinction and self-reassurance in a society. Another influential consumption theorist, Thorstein Veblen (2007), demonstrates that consumer behaviour is shaped by positions of social class, and consumers' preferences are determined by (their) social position. Veblen argues that "individuals emulate the consumption patterns of other individuals situated at higher points in the hierarchy" (Trigg, 2001, p. 99). His opinion suggests the relationship between consumption and social status but overemphasises the wealthy who purchase leisure, services or luxury goods in order to display their privileged background. His theory did not foresee the rapid expansion of a global middle class and internet-mediated communities that cannot be fully explained by the conspicuous pattern of consumption. Another consumption theorist Baudrillard (1998a, p. 9) stresses the symbolic significance of consumption, arguing that consumption is "an order of significations in a 'panoply' of objects; a system, or code of signs"; "an order of the manipulation of signs", and "the manipulation of objects as signs". Baudrillard's argument stresses the cultural and symbolic meanings of goods through consumption despite its common usage in everyday life. Baudrillard also shows a practical approach to interpreting "the micro-social process of consumption" embedded in consumer culture (Askegaard and Linnet, 2011), as this is a new academic direction to articulate the relationship between society and individual by examining the role of consumption.

Building upon previous research in consumption studies, Arnould (2019, p. 605) has suggested that contemporary consumer culture mainly reflects "the experiential, social and cultural dimensions of consumption" in which consumption practices are closely linked to consumers' sensory, emotional needs and self-expression in the commodity economy. With the rise of consumer society, the theorisation of consumer culture was

therefore constructed in an interdisciplinary approach to exploring the system of cultural meanings that the market inscribes in commodities up until the 1980s. Arnould and Thompson (2005) continue to argue that consumer culture theory is a new theoretical and methodological discipline for studying consumers in a culturally oriented approach (Fitchett et al., 2014). Thus, consumer culture theory incorporates multiple disciplines to deal with contemporary emergent consumption practices.

Prior to consumer culture theory, consumer research is paid a great deal of attention to by economic and psychological analysis. Consumer research has involved a wide range of topics, such as culturally different consumer behaviour (Venkatesh, 1995), cultural segmentation (Usunier and Lee, 2000), cross-cultural consumption choice (Davies et al., 2003), and the symbolic value of foreign products (Zhou and Hui, 2003). Cultural economists shed light on value, supply and demand within cultural production and consumption. This reflects on Throsby (1990)'s research that quality judgements in the arts has influenced both demand and supply in the performing arts. From a psychological perspective, Tashakkori and Teddlie (2010) highlight that perceptual processes continue to include recognition of that environmental stimulus and finally some action or behaviour. Charles Sanders Peirce also posits the psychological term "cognition" as "a process of knowledge and meaning generation through signs" (Mick, 1986, p. 199). Needs, motivations and experience are indicated to explore psychological factors that influence consumer's purchasing behaviour and emotional needs. Consumer psychologists tend to explore how consumption activities are driven by people's needs and motivations in relation to happiness and mental health seeking. The views of consumption engagement is a psychological phenomenon (Holt, 1995), and it emphasises

the pursuit of experiential and emotional purchases - rather than *material* purchases - in fostering positive feelings and healthy social relationships (Van Boven, 2005).

In conjunction with the rise of consumerism, the theorisation of consumer culture addresses the relationship between consumers and consumption activities to extend the understanding of why consumers do and what they do, and indicates the process of selecting, locating, and buying cultural products to construct public presentation and individual identities (Featherstone, 2007). Faced with the expansion of cultural production and consumption in the mid-twentieth century, consumer culture theory has drawn insights from cultural studies, which has become more directly engaged with and incorporated into the central analysis of cultural consumption. The social, cultural and experiential aspects of cultural consumption have been highlighted to create a series of scenarios of hedonic expectation, adventure, challenge and immediate gratification (Mano and Oliver, 1993). The adoption of cultural studies in consumer culture theory enables researchers to examine services, entertainment, cultural and artistic experiences as emerging consumption items in the global experiential economy. It also enables the cultural analysis of relevant subjects such as groups, collective identity and cultural symbols to reshape today's consumption practices (Westjohn et al., 2012). Research into consumer culture theory is aimed to explore the heterogeneous distribution of meanings and the multiplicity of overlapping cultural groupings that exist within the broader socio-historical frame of globalisation and neoliberal economy (Arnould and Thompson, 2018). Based on the social, cultural and experiential meaning of consumption activities, Slater (1999, p.20) argues that consumer culture research looks into "the mediated relationships between lived experiences, more specifically between meaningful ways of life and the symbolic and material resources". According to Featherstone (2007), consumer culture

theory emphasises the interplay of social context and cultural meaning that shapes consumer needs and actions, and especially interprets the purpose of consumption that inevitably entails a richer meaning associated with lifestyles, experiential purchases and social relationships (Moisander et al., 2009).

The application of consumer culture theory provides a more inclusive analysis of the globalised phenomenon of cultural and experiential consumption practices. Drawn from multi-disciplinary knowledge, consumer culture theory is advantageous for applying a variety of socio-cultural approaches which can explore the real behaviour of real consumers (Arnould et al., 2019). In the twenty-first century, consumer culture theory research has been widely involved in the studies of the services, tourism, entertainment, cultural and arts sectors where the experiential, social and symbolic aspects are commonly discussed in terms of cultural consumers' choice and behaviour (Freshwater, 2012; Zhang and Hitchcock, 2014). In this thesis, consumer culture theory is contextualised in these emergent sectors due to a recent growing demand in consuming cultural and experiential goods among consumers.

Consumer culture theory is seen as a broad analytical and theoretical framework, as Askegaard and Linnet (2011) posit, there is a need to consider the phenomenology and the context. Hence, context is important in conducting consumption-related research as social and cultural variables embedded in the local context play a vital role. This chapter attempts to answer why and how consumer culture theory throw light on the Chinese context. Contextualising consumer culture theory can provide a global insight for understanding Chinese consumers' behaviour by integrating up-to-date consumption studies and practical cases. Exploring consumer culture theory in the Chinese context,

shows us that Chinese consumers are key in shaping the growth pattern of the domestic economy, with a recent focus on seeking cultural and experiential purchases, given the fact that the consumer expenditure on live experiences and events has increased by 70% since 1987 (Yaffe et al., 2019). More specifically, the global transmission of musical theatre can be identified as an exchange of the experiential product that helps to reshape Chinese consumers' lifestyles, leisure patterns and social interactions.

In addition, the adopted methodology is also reviewed to understand how consumer culture theory research is conducted in academic discourse. With the expansion of a global market reinforced by the internet and technologies, consumer research is no longer limited to applying a single method. Consumer culture research is interdisciplinary, which is able to consider internal and external factors that affect meaning interpretation and individual behaviour. Some consumer culture research papers have used quantitative and qualitative methods to measure perception, attitude and behaviour. The centrality of consumers provides ample spaces for researchers to shed light on trending topics, such as consumer co-creation of value in goods and services (Carù and Cova, 2006, 2005), and the consumer as the participatory spectator (Walmsley, 2013). A cross-cultural dimension of consumption has become aware of the associations with global reputation and symbolic value of quality. The use of "consumer ethnocentrism" and "ethno-consumerism" have been used to understand general practices of cross-cultural consumers. For example, the application of ethnocentrism illustrates how the symbols and values attached to foreign products are perceived by people within an ethnic group (Zhou and Hui, 2003). The rising role of consumers are allowed to employ anthropological and ethnographic methods for examining cultural dimensions of consumption in marketing and business areas, and are especially applied by business



practitioners from many Fortune 100 corporations (Denny and Sunderland, 2016; Sunderland and Denny, 2003). Through applying consumer culture theory, this thesis focuses on social class, online communities and consumer experience to tackle the questions of who consumers are, and why and how they consume musical theatre productions in the Chinese context.

### **2.1.1 Social class**

The focus on social class is a pivotal factor that has been involved in consumer culture research for decades. Social class lies within consumer research and has been applied to explore how sociodemographic factors such as social class influence consumption choices and consumer behaviour. Previous research demonstrates that consumption is seen as a creative, productive process that marks social position and promotes social competition (Baudrillard, 1998b; Slater, 1999; Veblen, 2007). The meaning of consumption is always linked to social status and social position, as McRobbie (2005) explains, Bourdieu's theory demonstrates that social class is a result of the power of fields to institute specific social groups. In contemporary societies, Bourdieu (1984)'s consumption theory has been complemented by Appadurai (1990) and Miller (1987) to investigate mass consumption, especially in a global trend of gentrification of the working class. Miller (1987)'s work regarding mass consumption which is written in relation to material culture, argues that consumption is a relational social and active process. It means consumption is part of the making and unmaking of social categories, such as class. Social class is thus seen as a timely and influential indicator for exhibiting the distinction of consumer tastes and consumption patterns. In contrast, Max Webber (1978)'s theory demonstrates class is more associated with social status that is relevant to occupation, social relationship and lifestyle in a much earlier industrial society. The

patterns and preferences of consumption reflect the different combinations of economic, social, cultural and symbolic resources in a society. Therefore, studies into social class have shown that consumption is an attempt to facilitate interactions between social groups. In the same vein, Holt (1995) illustrates social class affects consumption practices and patterns, showing strong preferences among a specific social group. Also, Allen (2002) asserts that consumer choices are shaped by similar social conditions, and Wallendorf (2001) predicates that consumption activities are associated with social class and literacy access. These studies are evidence of how social class can be a factor in predicting potential consumers and the patterns of their consumption practices.

### **2.1.2 Online communities**

The rapid marketisation of the domestic economy and the internet penetration have caused ongoing change in Chinese consumption patterns since the 1980s, and continues to stimulate the emergence of new market orders in China. Subsequently, Chinese consumer behaviour is changing rapidly and has been strongly influenced by the free market system and new digital platforms. In addition to the socio-demographic segments, individual interests and hobbies have become emerging and dominant factors in re-organising social groups. Kwon et al. (2014) argue that “the attitude and perceptions are constructed by ‘socially relevant others’, who are identified based on their network position relative to the focal actor”. The thoughts of Maffesoli (1996) on modern day “tribes” have been widely used to engage the discourse of consumer culture theory. The creation of communities is built upon the power of tribalised consumers, which reshapes ways of consuming and marketing arts and cultural products. Similar to social class, online communities are another way of classifying consumers into different groups, which are based on individual interests, lifestyles, shared hobbies, and so on, with less

relevance given to social and economic backgrounds. The online platforms such as *WeChat*, *Weibo*, *Douban*, and *QQ* have empowered Chinese consumers to create their own “stories” of leisure and entertainment activities. Online communities have become high-profile forms of internet-mediated participation and a growing number of consumers, especially for younger Chinese consumers who are familiar with the type of website for social and cultural engagement.

According to Maffesoli (1996), the concept of consumption tribes holds that market segments are based on people’s sharing experiences, common interests, and leisure pursuits. His notion has been applied to suggest the formation of hyper-individualised and increasingly fragmented communities in the globalised marketplace. Consumption tribes have been generally recognised as a new format of communities, and consumer research has been attentive to these kind of communities (Cova and Cova, 2002; Goulding et al., 2013; Kozinets, 2002; D. O’Reilly, 2012). The ways of tribalism appear to adapt to a large number of commercial elements, which have been introduced to the contemporary consumer society, in ways such as branding. Arvidsson (2006) suggests that a brand is able to gather like-minded individuals in both the online and offline communities. The concept of the brand enriches marketing theory and practice to symbolise the ethos of specific communities, and to discuss the use of brands as commercial and cultural symbols in building consumer communities and product loyalty (Hume et al., 2006). A number of researchers have explored the application of brand communities in the arts and cultural field, such as artists’ brands (Schroeder, 2005; Sjöholm and Pasquinelli, 2014), stars’ fames (Caldwell and Nicholson, 2014a), events’ brands (Ober-Heilig et al., 2014; Rentschler et al., 2014), and venues’ brands (Mencarelli and Pulh, 2006).

With deeper penetration from the internet and digital technologies, the concept of online communities has been helped increase the consumer participation. The formation of online communities tends to reshape the organisation of market segments in a variety of overlapped groups and subgroups. The forms of online consumer participation stimulate ways of studying market and consumer segments more relevant to personal interests, individual experiences and fan engagement. McAlexander et al. (2002, p.76) suggest that “a group of member entities with relationships among them who were brought together by a brand or consumption activities”. Online communities take advantage of the internet to draw and reach wider participants beyond regions and borders. The online platform increases “participation and activity of the consumer within acts of consumption” (Beer and Burrows, 2010, p. 4). Consumers have more freedom not only in consuming products but also in producing personalised content on the website. Moreover, consumers are more proactively engaging with products than ever before because the global mobilities of products and consumers allow consumers to acquire richer information and knowledge to practise diverse tastes. In so doing, consumer culture researchers such as Arnould and Thompson (2018) also draw the postcolonial theory of “hybridity” to explain the phenomenon of cultural fusion that results in new cultural forms through ongoing transnational exchange and online engagement. Ileana Rodriguez (1997, p. 135) argues that “hybridity is a strategy of absorption, adaptation, reconversion, and replacement; it seeks to dissolve the oppositions between modern and traditional, modern and postmodern, anthropological and sociological, as well as external and internal market structures”. The notion of hybridity suggests the adaptation of two or more cultures demonstrates “the principle of aesthetic connection that occurs from kitsch to high culture, and to address the construction of identity” (Papastergiadis, 2018, p. 169). As a result,

hybridity represents a growing trend of creating distinctive cultural forms that fits into consumers' rapidly changing tastes and multicultural preferences.

Regarding the formation of online communities, moreover, contemporary consumer culture features the internet as a function that provides unlimited access to content producers and consumers in various communities. In order to respond to the new order of market segmentation, much of the literature on ideas of online communities has addressed the emergent issues of consumer online engagement and the role of consumers in co-creating online content. In recent years, online communities in the discourse of consumer culture theory have been further discussed to highlight broad associations with subcultures (Bennett, 1999; Hodkinson, 2002; Willis, 2014), lifestyles (Featherstone and Tamari, 2006; Üstüner and Holt, 2007), fan communities (Baym and Burnett, 2009) and branding (Baumgarth, 2009; Ober-Heilig et al., 2014; Sjöholm and Pasquinelli, 2014). More specifically, Kozinets (2001) defines *Star Trek's* audience as a subcultural construction for the fan clubs and this study addresses how fan community works for engaging popular cultural consumption. Other researchers also use consumer culture theory from a cultural studies perspective, dealing with the relationship between online communities and cultural consumers. For example, Fung (2009)'s study of fandom and Chinese consumption of pop music demonstrates that Chinese fan clubs establish a community with their own attitudes, lifestyles and values to fulfil an obligation to their society. Likewise, Yang (2009) also focuses on the pop music industry and its fandom phenomena, examining the conglomeration of pop music singers that relates to the exploitation of the unpaid fan labour in co-producing the content of the entertainment industry. Online communities have generated a wide range of fan clubs and fans' engagement in the arts and cultural sector. Online environments give participants the

freedom that increases the opportunity to personalise communications, social interactions and internet-mediated consumption activities.

### **2.1.3 Experiences**

With the rise of experiential purchasing behaviours, experiences are central to people's consumption practices on a global scale. The attention of consumer researchers on experience has established the foundations of an experiential view of consumption. Consumer experiences and the experience of individuals have also been involved in consumer culture research to tackle the meaning of consumption. The understanding of consumer experience is seen as the set of positive and negative consequences of purchasing goods or services (McKinsey & Company, 2017). A growing number of researchers have investigated the importance of experience in relation to the experiential economy in today's consumption practices. B. Joseph Pine and James H. Gilmore (2011, p.3)'s book *The Experience Economy* claims that "Experiences have always been at the heart of entertainment offerings from plays and concerts to movies and TV shows". Experience is defined as "the apprehension of an object or emotion through the senses or mind" while experience as a verb refers to "to participate in personally" (Joy and Sherry Jr, 2003, p. 259). Contemporary economists suggest that the experiential refers to the intangible aspect of products that requires high involvement to identify quality (Towse, 2011), which is commonly introduced by the creative and cultural industries.

Previous research has been specifically focused on topics such as consumer experiences and value co-creation (Holbrook and Addis, 2008; Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982; Radbourne et al., 2009). The emphasis on experience in consuming cultural products throws light on how consumers spend their pastime as a distinctive lifestyle. The

experiential aspect is sought by contemporary cultural consumers who pursue emotional satisfaction from entertainment, arts and cultural goods. Mano and Oliver (1993) and Van Boven (2005) elaborate the function of experiential purchases that produce a positive feeling towards happiness, wellbeing and mental health. Recent works have established that experience is more progressive in the field of consuming cultural heritage, experiential products and services (Carù and Cova, 2006; Otnes and Maclaran, 2007). These studies convincingly demonstrate a reflection of consumer culture theory that has a wide application in analysing cultural consumption and marketing. Together with Arvidsson's arguments, Rentschler (1998) introduces brand as a sense of community to address consumer engagement in the field of cultural and arts marketing. She suggests that experiential ties become important to emotionally bond consumers, which is also related to the practices of relationship marketing and emotional marketing.

In the theatre context, Walmsley (2013, p. 382) argues that theatre is an experience rather than a product. The live experience mobilises people's common emotions with other audience members or consumers. Carù and Cova (2005) believe that the live experience has a series of processes from immersion, imagination to satisfaction. The experience of individuals is closely related to live interactions and social experiences because theatre attendance is an attempt to socially connect with performers and other audience members at a specific venue and time. The experiential value of foreign theatre performances requires audiences' investment in time, effort, money and knowledge to co-create a holistic positive theatrical experience, and further provides a series of new aesthetic resonations (Füller et al., 2011). As Chong (2010) suggests, the process of knowing, selecting and consuming a theatre experience is also an important part of consumer experience that constructs people's desires and motivations of re-attendance.

## **2.2 Patterns of cultural consumption**

Since the twenty-first century, the ongoing marketisation of arts is driven by the political economy of states, leading that global socioeconomic environment has shifted rapidly. Cultural consumption is deeply related to “emerging or contemporary forms of commercial consumption or commercial products and activities” (Bennett et al., 2009, p. 63), ranging from services, tourism, and entertainment to high-tech. Arts and culture have also been considered in the category of cultural products addressed in both public policy and academic research. The role of cultural policy has been highlighted to facilitate equality in cultural consumption and to increase audience participation. The main task for cultural policy-makers is to remove class-related distribution in cultural competence for widening cultural participation, which has become one of the primary objectives in most developed economies. For instance, opera is an elite art form which originates from a more traditional perspective. The Royal Opera House, London, has a strategy of promoting low-price tickets in order to heighten the impact of cultural participation for social and commercial purposes (Guachalla, 2017).

A large and growing number of academic studies have investigated cultural consumption in relation to social class, social relationships and taste formation in the Western context. Class-based approach is used to analyse consumption patterns by cultural sociologists. As Bourdieu (1984, p. 53) suggests, cultural consumption has a relationship with social position and it acts to reinforce those positions. In his view, cultural consumption has been shown by sociologists and anthropologists “to fulfil a social function of legitimating social differences”, which has provided a prevailing instruction to cultural consumption researchers who view the behaviour of consuming arts and culture among a wide population (Alexander, 2010). In this stance, cultural consumption activities seek



symbolic, aesthetic and hedonistic dimensions more than the utilitarian aspects of the product (Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982). In so doing, the relationship between cultural consumption and social stratification is an influential way in which social scientists attempt “to divide a potential audience for marketing or funding opportunities” (O’Brien and Oakley, 2015, p. 5).

Bourdieu’s arguments on cultural consumption play a crucial role in enhancing social distinction and hierarchies. He has pointed out the significance of cultural capital in cultural consumption, which has a profound influence in identifying and understanding (potential) audiences (Bennett et al., 2009; Wright, 2015). Bourdieu (1984, p. 42) suggests “the different genres being defined in terms of their use and their users”. By drawing on Bourdieu’s opinions, DiMaggio (1987) has been able to show that artistic genres are classified on the basis of perceived similarities, and the distinction between artistic genres is affected by social structure and the organisation of educational systems. The system of cultural classification has been widely applied to provide a basis for understanding how consumption patterns reflect and reproduce status relations between social groups (Chan and Goldthorpe, 2007, 2005; DiMaggio, 1987; DiMaggio and Mohr, 1985; Peterson, 1983; Peterson and Kern, 1996). Therefore, the variety of artistic genres and forms have been classified into “highbrow”, “middlebrow” and “lowbrow” categories by surveys in relation to cultural taste among different social classes, which essentially aims at identifying and understanding potential arts audiences segmentation in terms of consumption or participation patterns in the arts (Peterson, 1992). Up to now, researchers have adopted the classification system of culture to divide people’s social position, or in other words, cited by Bourdieu (1984, pp. 468–469), “a sense of one’s place” in the social world, and the way in which people participate in or consume arts

and cultural activities. The hierarchy of art forms suggests the value of one form that is related to public perceptions. Bourdieu has also confirmed that the categories of traditional art forms are associated with elite forms of cultural capital, such as opera attendance. In response to the idea of cultural hierarchy, Knapp et al. (2011) and Savran (2009) argue that musical theatre is a middlebrow art form as it is determined by the feature of the art form and consumer profile.

Continuing engagement with Bourdieu's work is necessary to deal with the relationships between cultural consumption and social distinction, but his assumptions on class and gatekeepers have been questioned by other researchers (Alexander, 2003; O'Brien and Oakley, 2017; O'Reilly, 2011), especially given its lack of relevance in the era of untrammelled internet access and social media exposure. Technology has increased the accessibility of cultural consumption opportunities. The theories of sociologists and anthropologists have a positive involvement in scoping the market of audiences in the arts and cultural field, which builds evidence of audiences' demographics and social segmentation, but the advancement of information and transport technology has moderated the significance of social class. There are some reasons that the theory of classifications is threatened. With the convenience of transportation and internet access, global mobilities between internal and external cultural forms have eroded the construct of a cultural hierarchy system within a single society (Emmison, 2003). It also stimulates the proliferation of new entertainment, popular genres, and the emergence of hybrid art forms that gradually replaces the single aesthetic orientation. Changes in public perceptions are driven by the global information flow, which is invariably caused by media exposure, technological innovation and popular aesthetic taste. The emergence of popular aesthetics appeals to people's increasing appetite for leisure and greater

accessibility in a fast-changing world. Other key factors are attributed to the expansion of higher education for the masses, and policy-driven cultural participation to mitigate social inequality and nurture audiences' knowledge and appreciation levels of cultural activities.

Based on Bourdieu and Veblen's consumption theories, Peterson (1996, p. 900) has found that high-status persons have supported art forms across highbrow, middlebrow and lowbrow categories and shifted from "snobbish exclusion to omnivorous appreciation". This increasing omnivorous taste signifies "an openness to appreciating everything" (Peterson and Kern, 1996, p. 904). Peterson's theory of omnivorousness cuts across established categories of "high culture" and "low culture", and the patterns of cultural consumption tend to combine the artistic and leisure functions (Van Eijck, 2000). Other researchers have developed Peterson's omnivore theory, which outlines the relationship between art forms, patterns of cultural consumption and social stratification, and thus have provided important insights into the functions of cultural consumption. Like Colbert and St-James (2014, pp. 567–568), they have argued that "the omnivore effects are not mutually exclusive and that a combination of these perspectives may offer a rich interpretation of cultural consumption". Peterson's omnivore theses have inspired many researchers to examine cultural consumption patterns beyond social distinctions. His view is acknowledged by other researchers who have confirmed that middle-class and upper-middle-class people have become omnivorous audiences in terms of going to theatre, dance, cinema and visual arts (Chan and Goldthorpe, 2007, 2005; Emmison, 2003; Sintas and Álvarez, 2004). The findings show that how the middle-class consumes arts and cultural activities in contemporary consumption practices. This perspective is better adapted to an increasingly growing middle-class population in the world.

In the twenty-first century, academic research has focused attention on a variety of cultural forms, such as music, theatre and museums. Cultural consumption relies heavily on accumulated experience and skills and also on available time (Bianchi, 2008). Further topics have mainly investigated the question of access to cultural consumption, for example the cost of time (Becker, 1965; Garboua and Montmarquette, 1996), venue location (Brook, 2013; Martinez et al., 2018; Rogers, 2012), and prices (Kolb, 1997). Bourdieu (1984, p. 246) further says that “time free from economic necessity is the precondition for the initial accumulation”. The cost of time is based on a sufficient accumulation of economic capital. It has been demonstrated by the cost of time to search relevant information, to accumulate relevant knowledge on a particular genre and to attend live performances or art exhibitions (Colbert et al., 2007). As Veblen (2007) claims, the leisure class participates in intellectual and artistic endeavours to display their freedom from economic need. Holman (1980) also illustrates, “products as symbols” for the sake of individual distinction .

The blurring of cultural production and consumption stresses the rising role of consumers whose individual experience of culture is increasingly mediated and publicised by technology-based social networking sites (Collins, 2010; O’Brien, 2014). More recently, cultural sociology researchers have started to focus on the role of online platforms that shift not only on the patterns of cultural consumption but also on the role of consumers who have been transformed to “prosumers” – a term coined by Ritzer and Jurgenson (2010) - in participatory web cultures. In so doing, consumers are recognised as active agents involved in the total art-making process (Boorsma, 2006). The global cultural flows empowered by media technologies have blurred the boundaries between highbrow,

middlebrow and lowbrow cultural forms, which leads to a growing desire to consume external and hybrid cultural forms across the globe initially through digital media engagement. As Featherstone (2007) argues, the desire to discover new goods and experiences motivates consumers to embrace the consumption of foreign and external cultural forms. External cultural forms are able to appeal to consumers' changing tastes and experiential expectations. In the context of globalisation, multicultural capital becomes a new form of capital (aligned with Bourdieu's cultural capital) that emphasises people's ability to understanding transnational cultural products and experiences appropriately and to make sense of how they appreciate them in their entertainment lives (Alexander, 2003; Featherstone, 2018). High media exposure and frequent overseas travelling have become the vehicles for cultivating consumers' multicultural capital regarding purchasing and appreciating external cultural forms.

### **2.3 Arrival of cultural consumption in China**

Both Veblen (2007)'s and Bourdieu (1993, 1984)'s arguments, however, are rooted in a capitalist society where the economic environment shapes the composite nature of social class. Their works are very much a product of their time, and inform many social scientists who have discussed the need for a more up-to-date version of a class-based approach in consumption studies. The concept of cultural consumption can be remarkably different between countries and societies, where social class is distinct from composition, characteristics and social relationship (Bacque et al., 2015). The examination of cultural consumption in the Chinese context allows the researcher to analyse how the historical traditions of China's cultural production and consumption took place and evolved to a

modern pattern, along with the socioeconomic transformation, policy and growth of commercial forces.

Historically, China's cultural production and consumption were embedded in its agricultural society and later on in a manufacturing-based economy (Fei et al., 1992). The long-time dominance of an agricultural economy deterred the widespread use of machines and the improvement of production efficiency. The majority of cultural and arts professionals such as craftsmen, artisans, and actors came from underprivileged social backgrounds working as cultural or artistic labourers. Knowledge of cultural refinement was very much part of the examination system that was the entry to the highest tiers of the society. Moreover, cultural production has for a long time been under the control of central government in a historical sense (O'Connor and Xin, 2006). Under the government surveillance, China's scholar-administrators were restricted to cultural expression that impeded the production of arts and culture efficiently and creatively (Jiang, 2010), so that China's cultural production was far behind industrial societies for about a century and lagged behind in achieving a bourgeois economy in terms of cultural production and consumption.

Chinese aesthetic theorists such as Zong Baihua (2005), Zhu Guangqian (1980), and Li Zehou (1988) assert the influence of economic and social conditions on the emergence and development of the arts. Li Zehou, a prestigious Chinese aesthetic studies' scholar, argues that artistic creation is inevitably related to the proliferation of material production (Cauvel, 1999). His opinion is based on a close observation of a post-war Chinese society and he stresses the importance of prioritising a material production that is fundamental to cultural and artistic creation. Material production has gradually recovered from the

simultaneous impact of wars and the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). Following the end of the Cultural Revolution and the inauguration of Deng Xiaoping as Premier of the People's Republic of China in 1978, China began to move forward towards a more market-oriented economy. The state embraces a free market economy under the socialist regime, and this economic reform has facilitated the emergence of private sectors and entrepreneurial businesses. Since the 1980s, the concept of "cultural consumption" has been introduced to China and its adoption by China's Ministry of Culture aims to popularise a variety of entertainment forms such as TV programmes and cinema (Lv, 2015). The conceptual employment of cultural consumption has enhanced the commodification of cultural products and marketisation of arts organisations (Keane, 2016).

The domestic economy maintains a stable and continuous increase, reflecting on GDP growth that sustains the annual figure of around 6.5 percent over the past three decades (Hornby and Wildau, 2018). With China's ongoing economic growth, the role of the middle class is crucial in shaping Chinese patterns of contemporary cultural consumption. From 1949 to 1976, Chairman Mao defined class struggle as the socialist movement to demolish exploitation between the peasant class and the landowner class, which has a great influence on Chinese society for tackling social equality and highlighting the socialist ideology. Following Deng Xiaoping's administration, the government advocated the national viewpoint of 'the rich first pushing those being rich later' on the Fifth Plenary Session of the Thirteenth Central Committee of the Communist Party of China in 1989. Since then, China's economy has drawn the world's attention to examining the dominant group of consumption in the domestic market. Continuing

economic growth has doubled the population of China's middle class, also known as "middle stratum" or "middle-income group".

A large and growing body of literature in cultural consumption has postulated economic power that is a significant differentiator of social class (Bourdieu, 1984; Weber, 1978). Social class is defined by Karl Marx (2004) to indicate social stratification in a capitalist society over the centuries. American sociologist C. Wright Mills also stresses the status of the middle class in society, and claims it as "the rearguard of politics and the vanguard of consumption"(Marsh and Li, 2015, p. 96). Bourdieu's studies also reflect the role of middle class that is a fundamental and dominant social group in theatre attendance, which is demonstrated by many developed economies. This is not only because the middle class holds a certain number of economic, cultural and social resources but also because of the growth of middle-class groups, especially in the world's emerging economies.

City of residence is another important factor in deciding the styles in which the middle-class consumers make most of their everyday entertainment choices. The concentration of urban markets attracts a robust consumption power which travels to China's megacities. The so-called first-tier cities: Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou and Shenzhen comprise 13% of China's total population (Lau et al., 2015). In light of China's urban population structure, Zhang (2012)'s investigation has pointed out that urban residents have obtained growing disposable incomes, discrete living spaces and diverse lifestyles. The new middle-class consumers seek to consume new experiences and acquire conspicuous goods for securing their social identity.



Awareness of the need to explore Chinese consumption patterns is growing, as China has become a fast-growing economy and one of the largest middle-class markets. In particular, consumption which makes formation of the middle class is an important identifier of middle class, according to anthropological studies (Chua, 2002; Miller, 1987; Yao, 2006). A report from the China National Bureau of Statistics in 2018 shows evidence for change in China's consumption patterns, with a national population accounting for approximately 25 percent of the world's middle class and which has reached £7,607 to £63,260 in annual disposable income per capita. The statistics suggest the relative autonomy of consumption is based on an individual's spendable income.

Specifically, a report from *China Daily* (Zhang, 2016) claims that with the constant popularity of musical theatre in the recent years, could be understood through the concept of middle class as applied to segment audiences in the Chinese market. The international and local press, as well as commercial bodies, have highlighted the role of the middle class which functions as a tool for entry to the emerging market. Linking China's social class with musical theatre consumption – and its expanding middle-class population - is key for identifying potential consumers/audiences for musical theatre, as there is insufficient relevant data in academic and commercial publications. The lack of accurate information leads to a great deal of need for a cross-cultural understanding of the Chinese market and the continued expansion of middle-class consumers in the arts and cultural sector (Caird, 2013; Hatton, 2013). Understanding the middle class is a significant prerequisite for identifying musical theatre audiences in China, in order to foresee the consumption and marketing viability of musical theatre and other related leisure activities during a show-time in the Chinese market.

However, the current make-up of Chinese middle-class still remains complex, as social scientists have an optimistic assumption that the Chinese middle class will account for 55 percent of the Chinese population by 2020, with 78 percent city residents and 30 percent rural residents (Chua, 2002; Li, 2010; Marsh and Li, 2015; Zhang, 2012). Data from previous research has shown that China's middle class is predicted to be the major population by 2025 (Barton et al., 2013; Farrell et al., 2006; Hatton, 2013). But right now China's middle class is less than 16 percent of the total population compared with developed countries by 2010 (Zhang, 2012), which is still a large number roughly composed of 200 million people. Farrell et al. (2006)'s report shows a Chinese middle class population with an age range of 25 to 44 years old, which is younger than the middle-class group in most developed countries. Generation 2 (G2) has been used to describe China's emerging middle class who grew up after the 1980s as the only-child generation in the majority of Chinese households. Chinese emerging middle-class consumers have more spending power than preceding generations who insist on the traditional Chinese virtues of thrift and frugality (Doctoroff, 2015). The majority of the emerging middle-class population grow up in the digital age when computers and internet technologies are widespread. They are of the digital generation or could be described as digital natives. The improvement of living standards allows these people to hold disposable money for education, digital and experiential products (Barton et al., 2013; Chua, 2002).

With the rise of Chinese middle-class consumers, the central government has launched a series of public policies to boost domestic cultural production and consumption in line with the ongoing free-market reform. The central government policy initially introduced the concept of cultural market to public organisations in 1988 (Lee and Lim, 2014), which

led to the emergence of cultural economy and industrialisation (Liu, 2017). During the mid-1990s, the central government encouraged individual artists and private companies to produce cultural and artistic works, which aimed to deepen the marketisation of the arts. Meanwhile, it further stimulated the privatisation of arts and cultural organisations to strengthen China's free market economic model (Atherton and Newman, 2017). These public policies involved re-evaluating the role of the state in exercising the government intervention and market-driven freedom in arts and cultural organisations. The introduction of cultural consumption essentially responds to China's free-market economy reform and emphasises the role of the market applied to guide arts and cultural organisations to achieve economic, social, and artistic goals.

Since 2010, the Chinese central government has emphasised the role of cultural consumption in domestic economic upgrade. Li Keqiang, Premier of the State Council, presided over the Executive Meeting of the State Council on 14<sup>th</sup> October 2016, to determine the policy measures which aim "to further expand domestic consumption, to promote the development of services and upgrade the economy" (China Internet Information Centre, 2016). The deployment of consumption policy continues "to deepen the reform of the marketisation system and greatly reduce the institutional cost of entrepreneurship innovation" (China Government Website, 2016). The central government policy has significantly marketised and commoditised cultural goods and services. The 13<sup>th</sup> "Five-Year Plan" focuses on the direction of industrial innovation and economic upgrade, claiming that the aim of policies need "to spur rapid growth in spending on recreational travel, online shopping, and information goods and services". By 2020, the subsequent adoption of a consumer-oriented economy drives an increasing emphasis on domestic consumption due to the increase in Chinese people's disposable

wealth. Government policies put domestic consumption at the forefront of social and economic transformation, in particular, highlighting the importance of cultural consumption as a core of economic growth and sustainable upgrade. At a national level, the policies on consumption are made at the heart of the national social and economic plan to upgrade and increase the domestic economy.

On entering the new millennium, the adoption of cultural industries and creative industries (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1992; Lash and Lury, 2005) has advanced and the Chinese free market has been enabled to supply a great number of arts, entertainment and cultural products to consumers. According to the National Bureau of Statistics of China, the national urban resident's per capita consumption of culture and entertainment in 2018 has grown 34.3% compared with 2013. By now, Chinese consumption patterns have shifted from material products to cultural and experiential products. It shows a growing tendency for cultural consumption among Chinese households which is based on the improvement of individual income. Consumption activities tend to emphasise social, cultural and symbolic meanings rather than material needs in Chinese people's everyday lives. Cultural production caters for contemporary demand that pursues sensory and instant happiness within a fast-paced workload and individualistic lifestyle. Patterns of Chinese consumption are characterised by social and cultural variables but they are deeply influenced by global consumerism and technological advancements.

Furthermore, there has been an expansion of a middle-level income population with more economic flexibility to consume arts and cultural products as everyday leisure. The increase of personal income and a middle-income population makes it possible to drive consumption growth. A continuing development of China's economy enables goods and

services to meet people's basic necessities, and the proportion of material needs is minimised while the consumption of cultural, experiential and symbolic goods is expanding in non-essential consumption activities. Even though China is transforming to a consumption-efficient market, there are local and regional differences in Chinese consumption patterns. However, the economic growth also causes different income levels in Chinese cities and provinces. The motivation of cultural consumption may be affected by multiple factors, such as China's traditional values, long-term savings for deficit pension, medical insurance and expenditure on the next generation's education (Wang, 2017).

In light of the big picture of Chinese patterns of cultural consumption, many published academic papers have explored the socio-cultural variables that influence how Chinese consumers consume in some areas, such as travel and luxury brands. It remains a gap that academic papers have rarely explored and discussed Chinese consumption in the arts and cultural field. Relevant research outcomes have examined and contextualised variables that shape the practices and patterns of consumption in China. Chan et al. (2006) explore the traditional values of "face" that shapes Chinese consumption patterns in relation to respect, dignity and status in the contemporary society. Chinese consumers' attitudes to luxury fashion brands have been examined to suggest the social influence that defines the meaning of consumption among Chinese consumers (Zhang and Kim, 2013). Wang (2017)'s study is based on the Chinese values of thrift that suggests deficit pension, medical insurance and educational loans are restricted factors for the growth of cultural consumption. Yeung and Yee (2012)'s study reflects on a contemporary trend of pursuing cross-border consumption for Chinese consumers and has explained that international tourism, overseas residency and e-commerce facilitate the popularity of cross-border

consumption, which explicitly illustrates the imbalance of supply and demand in the domestic market. Clearly, these studies indicate that cultural values such as face, thrift and status have an influence on Chinese consumer behaviour.

Above all, Chinese patterns of cultural consumption differ from the Western context, instead, the Chinese response is embedded in China's socio-cultural system and the deepening of China's open-door market policy. The rise of China's middle class indicates a diversity of modern lifestyles and an emphasis upon new experiences. Consuming luxury, fashion, education, and healthcare has shown that non-material products are a growing area in contemporary Chinese consumption. It is widely agreed statistically and supports that China has begun to construct a consumption-based economic model and has become one of the fastest growing consumer markets in the world (Barnett, 2013). The arrival of cultural consumption stimulates the commodification of arts and cultural products and the construction of China's emerging middle class as today's cultural consumers. The next section will focus on emerging cultural consumers who are recognised as a potential population for the consumption of musical theatre in China.

#### **2.4 Chinese emerging cultural consumers**

Discussion of Chinese middle class lifestyles is linked to Bourdieu (1984)'s elaboration of cultural capital and Featherstone (2007)'s view of consumer culture in the context of globalisation and postmodernism. Zhang (2012) further investigates the features of the Chinese middle class from an ethnographic study in which she explains that the ownership of houses and cars can no longer predict the habitual behaviour of Chinese middle class, because the desire for the good life and consumption power leads to a so-

called modern lifestyle: decent jobs, fashionable clothing, professional training and overseas holidays are sought to achieve a middle-class identity in everyday life. The Chinese free-market economy leads to privatisation and increasing social stratification, but the emerging middle classes reflect the transformation of China beyond merely economic considerations. Drawn from the notion of social class, Chinese cultural consumers has been a large group with economic and consumption power as well as cultural competency (Li, 2010; Zhang, 2012; Marsh and Li, 2015), which shows a special consumption interest in non-essential products, such as arts, culture and technologies. Emerging cultural consumers feature young, well-educated residents concentrated in the megacities. Lifestyles, neo-aesthetics, and experiences are sought by Chinese emerging middle-class consumers, whose educational capital and cultural capital are important for confirming their social class identity.

Table 1 The profile of China's emerging middle class	
Variables	Features
1. Proportion of population	Approximately 25%
2. Education	University attendees (especially with overseas education experience)
3. Locations	First-tier cities (e.g. Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Shenzhen)
4. Generation	G2 (the only child generation; born after the 1980s)
5. Consumption patterns	The pursuit of non-essential goods with a huge appetite for fashion, arts, travel, technologies and professional trainings.

Education is crucial in shaping the choices of cultural consumption. Higher education attendees can exercise their cultural competency to consume arts and cultural products. Educational background is fundamental for cultivating a cultural competency that shapes the taste and choice of cultural consumption. Bourdieu (1993, p. 37) stresses that “the education system plays a decisive role in the generalised imposition of the legitimate mode of consumption”. Zhang (2015) continues to argue that urbanisation and international education are two key factors that shape the formation and identity of China’s middle class. Reviewing China’s education system, urbanisation and generational differences indicate a direction towards understanding musical theatre audiences through scoping and profiling the Chinese emerging consumers. However, China’s higher education system shows a lower level of privatisation compared to those of the U.S. and the U.K..

From a historical perspective, China’s traditional education system known as the Examination (*Ke Ju*) was aligned with the ancient political system, which tended to create equal opportunities in order to advance the exam candidates’ social status. Similarly, contemporary university attendance is a way to elevate an individual’s value and social position in a contemporary context. Wang et al. (2006) believe that education is a precious resource accessed by an upper class who accounts for a small proportion of the population. To achieve educational attainment, Chinese families become dominant social units which spend soaring amounts of money on their children’s education. This derives from the traditional cultural values that see education as the pathway to succeed in transforming social status. The expansion of higher education has laid a foundation for expanding young people’s cultural interests and knowledge in forming the tendency of modern cultural consumption, which represents a rise of neo-aesthetic taste (Zhao, 2006).



Western literature, music, fine art and theatre are introduced to students at an early stage in China's modern education system.

Education is a way of transmitting cultural consumption through adopting economic capital to advance Chinese students' cultural capital. For Bourdieu (1984), cultural capital indicates how much you are familiar with legitimate culture, or so-called "high culture". The idea of cultural capital is adopted here to explain how Chinese middle-class consumers apply economic capital to advance their cultural capital through education. Most of the Chinese younger generation is educated through higher education where they have developed skills such as computing and foreign language skills to a higher proficiency than their seniors in the job market. In particular, the provision of digital technologies helps develop children's intelligence, and introduces a variety of new models of e-commerce and online purchasing technologies from the beginning of the twentieth-first century (McKinsey, 2015). Cultural capital is also related to people's digital proficiency through education. Schooling cultivates people's ability to use digital technologies to access knowledge and enlarge vision. Rather, the consumer is endowed the new characteristic of "information reader" who sends and receives a large number of words and images spread over a digital media platform (Gabriel and Lang, 2008).

The new middle-class consumers have gained cultural capital through the broadening of higher education in China but also from overseas institutions. There has been a trend towards overseas education that enables many Chinese people to advance their education abroad, which has been confirmed by statistics – the number of Chinese students abroad had reached half a million people by 2015 (The Economist, 2016). International education is a key channel, reinforced by economic availability, for realising academic

and cultural achievement at an international level. Moreover, reputable institutions and overseas education play an important role as a benchmark for broadening students' vision and interest in Western art forms (Zimdars, Sullivan and Heath, 2009). The emerging cultural consumer is a signal that indicates Chinese modern social values, lifestyles and everyday consumption associated with different forms of modern education and digital advancement. Empowered by digital technologies, educated individuals emulate the consumption patterns of celebrities and social media influencers rather than that of other individuals situated at a higher social hierarchy. It demonstrates the middle-class identity has a little influence on shaping the patterns of cultural taste, but it enables the consumer to take advantage of their economic resources to accumulate cultural capital for seeking new social experiences.

### **Chapter 3 Marketing musical theatre to Chinese audiences**

Ending with a theoretical discussion, Chapter 2 examined consumer culture theory and the construct of cultural consumption in China. The review of literature in Chapter 2 profiled current and potential audiences in musical theatre, recognised as emerging middle-class consumers, for whom having a university educational background is a pivotal indicator in consuming musical theatre in the Chinese market. As discussed in Chapter 1, the characteristics of musical theatre reveal the attributes of the global productions necessary to successfully marketing to the Chinese audience. This chapter will summarise and synthesise the literature and Chinese state policy documents in arts marketing and audience development, in conjunction with a socio-cultural profile of Chinese audiences in musical theatre consumption.

#### **3.1 Understanding Chinese audiences**

Patricia Martin (2007) suggests the people who consume art, books, music, and live cultural events may be defined as cultural consumers. According to this notion, theatre audiences belong to a more specific category of cultural consumers involved in theatre attendance and engagement (Heim, 2010). Theatre audiences as a distinct group of cultural consumers are especially linked to theatrical activities. Theatre audiences have been described as “spectators” by Deutsch (1975), “scene makers” by Schechner (1994) and most recently regarded as “consumers”, who avidly consume a wide array of art forms and cultural activities within a given society (Martin, 2007). With the rising role of audiences in the arts and cultural sector, arts organisations and cultural policy-makers have developed audience-focused or audience-centric approaches to re-examine the role of audiences who have harnessed economic resources as well as rich product information in today’s owner and buyer relationships. Theatre audiences represent a niche market and

they have a near-professional knowledge of the products in order to meet their aesthetic and hedonistic pursuits. Scholars in cultural consumption, such as Bourdieu and Peterson, are also keen to classify arts in order to help specify who the audiences are and how they use the arts (Alexander, 2003). Most importantly, these questions are rarely engaged with by many scholars and researchers beyond the Western context, and even many research outcomes are faced with theoretical and practical constraints that make it difficult to directly apply them to other social and cultural contexts.

The rapid change of the contemporary commercial environment pans out in different ways in terms of conducting audience research in the arts and cultural field. Previous researchers have developed an interdisciplinary perspective of audience engagement for arts organisations and cultural policy-makers, but cross-cultural studies in the field of audience research is scarce. Relevant literature such as Pitts and Gross (2017) introduces the method of “audience exchange” to investigate arts audiences who are less familiar with specific art forms. Although this research does not involve a cross-cultural factor, it concludes cultural variables may affect the level of knowledge of the art form, in relation to audiences’ experiences and value judgements. The study of “audience exchange” provides a wisdom insight for exploring first-time encounters with live arts, which allows an investigation of Chinese audiences, who have little knowledge or experiences of musical theatre. Kirchberg and Kuchar (2014)’s study focuses on examining international studies in cultural consumption and visitor attendance for evaluating research motivation, choice of theoretical frameworks and methodology, and the quality of data collection. Their study highlights a comparative methodological approach for understanding audience consumption and theatre attendance from an international perspective, which

provides a comprehensive insight into studying audiences on behalf of cultural institutions.

From an empirical perspective, there is a growing trend in cross-cultural consumer research that employs ethnographic methods (Malefyt, 2009). Pitts and Gross (2017) discuss participant observation is one of the ethnographic techniques commonly used for studying arts audiences. Another investigation titled *Chasing a Chinese audience* featured in the book *Navigating difference: Cultural diversity and audience development* has examined how arts organisations understand culturally diverse audiences for targeting different ethnic groups in the UK (Maitland, 2006). The analysis provides a new insight into understanding the diversity and complexity of arts audiences, and it emphasises the importance of examining differences between audiences, based on their personal experiences and cultural influences, from an ethnographic aspect. The outcomes of this research suggest the diversity of arts audiences shapes ways of producing artistic experiences and cultural policy-making.

The diversity and complexity of audience research is a feature of the arts and cultural sector. Other methodological approaches have been developed to facilitate arts organisations to shape, compare and combine audience data and research outcomes, such as “Audience Finder”<sup>4</sup>, a cross-sector database funded by the *Arts Council England*.

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<sup>4</sup> Audience Finder is a brand name. According to the Audience Agency, it is the free national audience data and development tool, enabling cultural organisations to understand, compare and apply audience insight. See the website of the Audience Agency:

<https://www.theaudienceagency.org/audience-finder>

Statistical methods have started to offer useful insights for studying arts audiences as the methods used to yield more predictable results. A recent study applies “Audience Finder” to tackle more empirical questions for identifying and understanding audiences’ purchase and cultural consumption behaviour (Price et al., 2019). Together, these arts audience studies have analysed the practical and methodological approaches for arts organisations and cultural policy-makers, and have indicated there is a trend for building the audience data in order to seek more reliable solutions in audience development.

In terms of the literature pertaining to Chinese theatre audiences, the researcher has examined topics related to arts marketing and audience development published in international academic journals with a focus on audience research in the field of arts and culture. Journal papers, government policies and marketing agency reports in this field are included to explore the topic of audience research. The keywords “Chinese audiences”, “Chinese consumption of theatre”, or “musical theatre audiences”, however, have not been widely used in the field of theatre audience research. This absence means that there is not yet a reliable basis for a meaningful critique of the field. Much of the literature about audience research is contextualised within the global north, especially in the UK, Australia, Canada and the US. Meaningful discussions about Chinese theatre audiences therefore have to be grounded in self-revealed data (e.g. national statistics and commercial reports), which is sometimes abstracted and questionable in methodology. Clearly, there is a growing need for researchers and theatre practitioners to profile and understand Chinese consumers/audiences in musical theatre, identified as a rapid growing market.

The literature has been reviewed for examining the role of Chinese audiences defined as the emerging middle class which shapes the ways in which the consumers/audiences consume live musical theatre performances. With the international mobilities of musical theatre, market segmenting requires a sharper division of audiences in the arts (Mooij, 2010). On one hand, the importance of identifying and understanding audiences has been confirmed by policy-makers and arts marketing researchers. *Arts Council England* has suggested understanding audiences is at the forefront of audience engagement in arts organisations. Arts organisations are encouraged to “enable and support quality in artistic practice; to increase the number and diversity of their audiences” (Keaney, 2008). On the other hand, Stuart Hall (1973) argues that two readers have vastly different cultural and personal experiences so their reading of a text will vary greatly. Hall’s view is that different audiences in interpreting theatrical productions may lead to totally different and diverse interpretations. These topics become even more complex when applied to studying a cross-cultural audience of musical theatre. Questions such as who are Chinese audiences, and why and how they consume musical theatre, however, remain contested and unresolved. To tackle these questions, the existing literature on audience-focused arts marketing, audience experience and audience engagement have been synthesised to gain a systematic understanding of Chinese audiences’ consumption behaviour and artistic experience of musical theatre embedded in a Chinese sociocultural system. As the researcher pointed out in Chapter 2, a theoretical investigation of cultural consumption patterns has supported a macro-level understanding of how Chinese audiences perceive the artistic quality, marketing materials and post-performance experiences of live musical theatre performances.

### **3.2 The conceptual development of arts marketing**

A review of theories and methods in consumer/audience research, draws upon the insights from existing research papers undertaken in the *Journal of Consumer Research*, *Journal of Consumer Culture*, *Journal of Customer Behaviour* and *Journal of Marketing Research*. Papers with topics relevant to “consumer research” or “consumer behaviour” have also been published in the journals of: *Arts and the Market*; *International Journal of Arts Management*; *Journal of Arts Management, Law and Society*; *Asia Pacific Journal of Arts and Cultural Management*; *International Journal of Cultural Policy*; *Journal of Cultural Economics*; *Poetics*; and *Cultural Trends*. These international journals provide an interdisciplinary insight into studying Chinese consumers/audiences in order to heighten the impact of arts marketing practices, briefing on the history, definitions, evolutions and key debates in arts marketing and arts management. Based on the ongoing academic research, arts marketing is generally understood to mean “the art of reaching those market segments likely to be interested in the product while adjusting to the product the commercial variables – price, place and promotion – to put the product in contact with a sufficient number of consumers and to reach the objectives consistent with the mission of the cultural enterprise” (Colbert et al., 2007, p. 14).

From a more traditional perspective, “arts” and “marketing” are broad yet independent disciplines. They have been merged to form a new discipline known as “arts marketing”, a term originated and widely used in North American countries and Western Europe since the late 1960s (Colbert, 2017; Fillis, 2011). Much of literature has examined the social and historical condition that stimulates the emergence of arts marketing in capitalist markets (Lee, 2005). The initial stage of arts marketing aims to raise funding and donations for non-profit, philanthropic organisations in 1970s’ Britain (Bennett et al.,



2013). Since the 1970s, arts organisations have sought to increase market opportunities by employing commercial advertising across North America and Europe (Boorsma and Chiaravalloti, 2010).

In the 1980s, arts and cultural organisations gathered “marketing” ideas to try to identify, attract and develop audiences, in order to achieve artistic, social and financial objectives in arts organisations (Rogers, 1998). With the development of the marketisation of arts organisations, *Arts Council England* has aimed to improve the commercial experience of the arts and cultural organisations since the 1980s. The topic of market performance has been studied and applied, resulting in successful marketing within the arts and cultural domain (Fillis, 2006). Since 1995, researchers and arts practitioners have witnessed a wider interest in the integration of arts marketing across different social sciences, arts and humanities. Fillis (2011) suggests that debates on “arts marketing” have reshaped the integration of the discipline, to absorb two or more different disciplinary fields and this has gradually built a relationship between artistic products and markets. The evolution of arts marketing has combined aesthetics, sociology, anthropology, economics and politics for generating appropriate and complementary approaches, which are now available to deal with emerging issues in relation to arts business, cultural consumption, cultural industry and the creative economy (O’Reilly, 2011). Arts marketing research has shown the potential complementarity of various disciplines and evolving approaches (Hadley et al., 2019). The rise of arts marketing has created a new academic circle that attracts interdisciplinary researchers to analyse trending topics, fill academic gaps and examine pitfalls.

Through ongoing academic and practical explorations, there are theoretical and methodological weaknesses and challenges that have been identified and understood in the field of arts marketing. The marketisation of the arts has stimulated a longstanding debate on aesthetic versus social, beautiful versus useful, in the western world. The interplay of arts and marketing questioned the position of arts and its way of engaging with marketing knowledge. There is an ongoing debate about the function of art and the purpose of artistic creation. The most popular doctrine of “Art for Art’s sake” (“*L’art pour l’art*”) states that ‘any purpose will denature art’ and writers should produce the literary works into a perfect artefact (Bell-Villada, 1986, p. 426). Art for Art’s sake was posited by French intellectual Theophile Gautier, and this slogan was made against the backdrop of a continuing industrialised market for producing artistic works. The economic need for artistic creation emphasises an economic, social or financial function of the arts, which is opposed to the slow production of artistic works. With the expanding of the industrialised cultural and arts market since the 1980s, Art for Art’s sake has been widely adopted as a new manifesto known as “Art for Business sake”. Its philosophy reflects on an insight to making arts, which adopts a product-oriented innovation to locate the role of artists and arts organisations in cultural production (Fillis, 2006). According to this debate, marketing philosophy is grounded in market orientation and profit-seeking, which, to some extent, is contradictory to Art for Art’s sake. In other words, marketing may not match an arts-led approach to creating artistic works (Walmsley, 2019a).

One criticism of arts marketing is that arts organisations should not only appeal to the economic need and utilitarian value (Caust, 2003; Hirschman, 1983; Voss and Voss, 2000). This opinion insists that marketing tools emphasise on commercial goals and this exerts influence on artistic creation, so that artists and arts organisations tend to cater for

popular tastes. However, marketing researchers provide evidence to demonstrate that marketing is a relatively holistic approach for considering artists and arts organisations' internal and external environments (Chong, 2010; Kotler and Armstrong, 2010). Arts marketing is an integrated approach that is designed specifically to inform the masses and to increase people's participation in the arts (Evrard and Colbert, 2000; Fillis, 2011; O'Reilly, 2011). Although a considerable portion of arts marketing research does focus on the transposition of marketing models, concepts, and approaches applied to the specialism of arts and cultural field. As Kotler and Armstrong (2010) suggest, marketing is a scientific and educational process rather than a simple interpretation of profit-motives. Marketing is effective for providing evidence for the impact of artistic works among a wider population, and it is evidently useful for guiding funding and investors to sponsor potentially profitable artistic programmes. Sufficient financial flows can promise artists and arts organisations the capacity to produce quality arts without economic limits. As Chong suggests (2010), marketing helps artists and arts organisations to attract economic, social and cultural resources for developing a long-term value exchange.

With this conceptual evolution, Rentschler (1998) divides arts marketing research and practice into three periods that are referred to as the "Foundation Period (1975-1984)", the "Professionalisation Period (1985-1994)" and the "Discovery Period (1995-2000)". These Periods have shown the evolution of arts marketing from emergence to gradual sophistication, and the influential shift to arts marketing research that focuses on a collaborative mode of arts marketing and the rising role of audiences in the Discovery Period (Rentschler, 2002). Walmsley (2019b) argues that the "Rediscovery Period (since the late 1990s)" of arts marketing has begun and that it tends to respond to existing and emerging modes and techniques of audience engagement. Meanwhile, arts marketing

research has a focus on arts and cultural consumption that explains the inherent connection between arts marketing and cultural consumption. This relationship stresses the distinctive nature of arts and cultural products and indicates that trending consumption practice has evolved from material demand to experiential and symbolic direction in contemporary societies. As Colbert (2007) suggests, arts commodities have highlighted their experiential and symbolic values and this drives consumers' motivations to purchase.

Rapid changes in political and economic environments stimulate the emergence of these sub-topics in arts marketing research, including cultural consumption (O'Brien, 2014; O'Reilly, 2011), arts branding (Baumgarth, 2009; Colbert, 2009; Colbert and St-James, 2014), audience development (Walmsley, 2011), cultural planning (Evans, 2002; Fung and Erni, 2013; Keane, 2009a) and cultural policy (Caust, 2003b; Grodach and Silver, 2013; Lee and Lim, 2014b). Each topic is clearly delineated yet there is strong interplay with each other in the field of arts marketing. These are increasingly substantive issues that have enriched the context of arts marketing and are directly and indirectly necessary to any discussion of arts marketing in a detailed examination of a policy-led and market-oriented audience development approach (O'Reilly, 2011).

In a Chinese context, a research focus on arts marketing is slightly different from that of western countries. Arts marketing was imported to China in the early 1990s along with the rise of cultural consumption in the domestic market (Wang and Wang, 2013). It is a fact that China was a latecomer to arts marketing but in this discipline its stage of development has moved directly to the Rediscovery Period, because the state has been transforming to a market-oriented, technology-involved, consumption-driven economy

for the arts and cultural sector since 2000 (Keane, 2013). In this sense, China is different from the western world, where arts marketing went through the Foundation Period, Professionalisation Period and Discovery Period. Another distinction lies in the direction of arts marketing has more engaged with market orientation of the arts in response to China's free-market economic policy and technological innovation. The deepening of the free market economy in China results in the commodification of the arts and a consumer-oriented model of marketing interwoven with the global trend of consumerism and digitalisation (Wang and Wang, 2013). At the same time, arts marketing tends to focus on market orientation, as institutional change in arts and cultural organisations has stimulated the commercial aspect of making and selling arts in order to meet market need in China.

As a young academic field, arts marketing has been integrated with Chinese aesthetic theories. One of China's renowned aesthetic theorists Li Zehou, suggests that the role of art can be to transform artistic experience to human development, an approach which sheds light on how artistic enjoyment contributes to the construction of social commitment (Cauvel, 1999). He explains the function of art and aesthetics - social and humanistic values in opposition to the creation of commercial value. In addition to the function of art, the promotion of exchanging cultural and artistic works across nations provides another academic and empirical focus, in conjunction with China's open-door policy and soft power strategy (Wang, 2013; Wu, 2017; Xie, 2003). Arts marketing is linked to promoting the country's cultural values and international identification, and to building cultural confidence in international communication and friendship building within the state's policy framework (Huang and Ding, 2006).

### **3.3 Arts marketing towards an audience focus**

Based on the three-period development of arts marketing, this section has a narrow focus on the literature in audience research through the lens of arts marketing. Relationship marketing and emotional marketing have been applied to attracting and maintaining audiences in the arts, and looks to build a long-term relationship between audiences and arts organisations (Rentschler, 1998). Philip Kotler asserts that arts marketing has evolved into an audience-focused stage to deal with cultural participation, audience co-creation and brand building in theory and practice (Chong, 2010). Arts marketing has moved towards an audience-focused approach in the Rediscovery period, which means that arts institutions need a strong focus on attracting, maintaining and engaging audiences (Walmsley, 2016). According to Colbert and St-James (2014), audience-focused arts marketing leads artistic creation to emphasise on consumers' needs and wants.

Audiences who consume arts and cultural experiences have increasingly drawn the attention of researchers in marketing, sociologists and anthropologists who have explored live experiences, lifestyles, and attitudes (Malefyt, 2009). Research into audience reception (Bennett, 1998; Olsen, 2002) has stressed the ability of audiences to decode and interpret information autonomously, but it ignores the role of audience member as a consumer central to the consumption of arts and cultural offerings. As Merrington et al. (2019) suggest, audience reception studies focus less on the marketing aspect of cultural consumption. Moreover, this approach also places less emphasis on the role of audiences who have moved from passive recipients to active participants, and who live in a digital age in which online content can be produced which deepens the level of engagement of their experiences.

Bernstein (2014) argues that arts marketing is a practice for “a product in search of an audience (or a market)”. Boorsma (2006) also highlights that the consumer is central to arts marketing and at the heart of a successful artistic programme. She believes that a consumer-focused approach is a holistic idea that fulfils the customer experience and the value that the consumer places on their experience. This view is supported by other researchers who suggest that a consumer-focused approach is a more straightforward way to judge the excellence and appeal of artistic performances and the experience of arts consumption (Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982; Holbrook and Addis, 2007). Varbanova (2013, p. 157) has pointed out that the key for arts marketing is to “leading audiences and communities, shaping their tastes and creating new needs and wants, and not simply satisfying existing ones”. The *Scottish Arts Council* (2004) suggests that developing audiences is seen as a planned and targeted management process that combines programming, education and marketing to help arts and cultural organisations to achieve their overall objectives. The *Council* also stresses that effective marketing and audience development should provide relevant information that can be of interest to different communities.

To better understand the audience-focused approach, Lee (2005) suggests that arts marketing practice is not far from the traditional idea of audience development in terms of broadening public accessibility to the arts. Research in audience-focused arts marketing has involved to include a wide range of discussions, such as ticket pricing (Colbert, 2009; Kolb, 1997), arts education (Rogers, 1998) and community building (Halliday and Astafyeva, 2014; Kozinets, 2001; O’Reilly, 2011). These researchers have examined possible factors that may hinder audience participation in the arts in order to

increase access to the arts. These studies reflect on a comment from Heather Maitland (Virk, 2008, p. 9) in *A Guide to Audience Development*, and suggest that “Audience development involves breaking down the physical, psychological and social barriers which stop people participating in or attending the arts”. Audience focus not only involves the audience as a potential beneficiary, but also aims to understand the varieties of participation and the ways in which audiences interact with the arts (McCarthy and Jinnett, 2001; Walmsley, 2019a).

Kemp and Poole (2016, p. 56) argue that “creating engagement in an artistic context is essential to arts participation and audience development”. As mentioned before, the Rediscovery Period focuses on the fact that arts marketing is deeply influenced by the explosion of internet and digital technologies. Arts marketing has evolved to an audience-focused approach, which hinges on consumers’ engagement, reflecting on their experience as well as meaning co-creation (Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982; Holbrook and Addis, 2007; Radbourne et al., 2009). Walmsley (2016) stresses that digital technologies can facilitate audience engagement: to foster a communicative culture between arts organisations, audiences and artists; and to remove information obstacles for arts audience attendance. Contemporary commercial modes locate the outcomes of marketing activities in the digital era when current consumers have more freedom to access extensive information on internet-mediated platforms. Digital technologies provide extensive cultural products information and online interactive opportunities, as well as showcasing audience-generated content related to their artistic experience (Hook et al., 2015). Thus, digital engagement shifts audiences from traditional spectators to remote interactive participants.



A growing number of online forums and communities can be viewed as examples of an effective model for audiences gathering and active engagement. Online platforms have shifted the role of audiences to providers of digital content, and consumer-created content is used to suggest and persuade purchasing. Cowen and Tabarrok (2000) suggest that the concept of arts consumer is reinterpreted as arts producers; an audience-focused approach emphasises the rising role of audiences as arts co-producers. The accessibility of internet and digital technologies further deepens the role of audiences in co-creating the meaning and experience of the arts. As Boorsma (2006) argues, the audience experience is of core value for artists and arts organisations; and therefore the core value for artists and arts organisations is to place the audience experience at the forefront of arts marketing.

### **3.4 Audience experience and engagement**

With this change of the role for audiences, practice is important for researchers and arts marketing professionals to advance the knowledge and implications of arts marketing discipline. Recent topics involve discussing how audiences play an active role in reacting and responding to arts-related experiences (Colbert and St-James, 2014). The audience experience is central to facilitate the engagement of arts audiences with artists and arts organisations. The impact of arts marketing can be measured by the extent of audience participation and the reflection of audience experience. Meanwhile, case studies from professional practices have provided richer information in evaluating the effectiveness of audience development through investigating the audience experience in an empirical context.

Scollen (2009)'s research compares two audience development programmes called *Test Drive* and *Talking Theatre* in Australia. The two programmes were targeted to develop new audiences with a focus on exploring reactions to live performances from non-attenders. *Talking Theatre* places audience experience at the centre of producing and promoting the organisation's products, in order to engage with local communities and reach new audiences. In contrast, the case of *Talking Theatre* was developed as a practical tool for identifying and understanding audience experience; it seeks to identify deterrents to potential audiences in the field of performing arts. Similarly, another research project suggests that by removing financial barriers to offer free theatre tickets can help an arts organisation to transmit its organisational operation towards an audience-centric mode (Bollo et al., 2017). Another study conducted by The Wallace Foundation has employed a case study evaluation system called an audience-building programme, to build familiarity with potential audiences' interests, lifestyles and general attitudes towards the art forms and arts organisations. This programme has outlined a methodological approach to expanding and engaging with arts audiences and provides "a variety of engaging experiences to introduce the target audience to your organisation and art form" (Harlow, 2014).

Accordingly, a number of studies have begun to examine how audience experience plays an increasingly dominant role in artistic consumption, especially in terms of the immersive feeling and understanding of specific art forms in contemporary academic and practical contexts (Boorsma, 2006; Radbourne et al., 2009; Reason, 2010a; Sedgman, 2018). Faced with fierce competition in the theatre market, the audience experience has become more closely related to the quality of art and how arts organisations evaluate the impact of a performance (Radbourne et al., 2009). Reason (2010a) has investigated the

audience experience after shows and has also raised concerns about the complexity of “experience” that relates to different moments, such as before, during or after a live performance. Audiences’ responses to a performance vary and their experiences are always personalised by an individual’s interpretation (Freshwater, 2009). Kant and Walker (2007) argue that the experience of art is a core function of art, and activates a special kind of pleasure and sensory enjoyment. Aesthetic experience is a constituting part of a holistic artwork, and it is a necessary element that is seen to encompass personal desire, moral conduct and societal harmony (Bell-Villada, 1986). These arguments on artistic experience illustrate that experience is central to the value of arts and is closely related to people’s consumption patterns, emotion, mental health and well-being. Therefore, the investigation of audience experience is essential to build a mutual understanding and communication between audiences and arts organisations.

Kolb (1997, p. 78) claims that the cultural and artistic products are the total package of an experience. With an increasing attention to studying the audience experience in theatre, performing arts organisations tend to broaden and diversify their reach to both potential and existing theatre-goers; and this is achieved through understanding the motivational behaviour for theatre attendance and offering unique and positive experiences for affecting audience perceptions. The central role of audience experience in arts marketing has drawn the researcher’s interest in investigating the quality of theatrical experiences perceived by audiences and their reactions to art forms. In a musical theatre context, theatre companies offer theatrical experiences to audiences at their own venues, or tour their productions to other venues. In particular, the knowledge level of a Chinese audience has become engaged in the process of knowing, searching and purchasing musical theatre experiences. Bateson and Hoffman (1999), Colbert (2007), and Hill and

Hill (2003) believe that, the characteristics of musical theatre are ascribable to the social and cultural aspects of consumption. Hill and Hill (2003) argue the process of producing musical theatre takes place at the same time of its consumption, which decides the essentially experiential nature of musical theatre and its distinct form of consuming live performances (Walmsley, 2013).

Regarding marketing musical theatre to Chinese audiences, Knapp et al. (2011, p. 370) note that “Demographic identity markers influence some of our cultural competencies but it does not mean that spectators will have the same or even similar responses”. Research into audience experience in musical theatre is a significant gap, which requires sufficient studies to explore how live experience functions to attract and maintain audiences. Musical theatre boasts a characteristic that is “a multi-authored, highly collaborative, eclectic, star-driven commercial product in which roles are performed in the most artificial of modes” (Knapp et al., 2013). This notion reveals the capacity of musical theatre to be available for launching international tours and offering an audience-focused experience, which is able to address the relationship between an adaptable genre and a local audience.

### **3.5 Conclusion**

This chapter has reviewed audience research in the field of arts marketing in order to locate the study of marketing musical theatre to Chinese audiences. Research into Chinese audiences, audience engagement and the audience experience has been summarised and discussed based on the existing literature in arts marketing and audience development. Through reviewing the literature, the examination of the role of audiences

in the digital era has identified as an academic direction to study Chinese musical theatre audiences in response to theoretical and practical demand. This direction allows this study to develop an understanding and exploration of Chinese audiences' experiences and responses to live musical theatre performances transferred from the UK and the US. In this way, it is possible to appreciate that musical theatre is all about a cross-cultural experience for Chinese audiences. The cross-cultural transmission of musical theatre aims to understand how Chinese audience members react to musical theatre experiences in a cross-cultural context. A consideration of the characteristics of Chinese middle-class consumers as outlined in Chapter 2, and tapping into China's emerging middle-class market would provide a suitable direction for theatre producers and arts marketing professionals, as these potential audiences are keen to pursue modern aesthetics, fashion, and new cultural experiences as part of their lifestyles. In terms of achieving the goal of understanding and engaging Chinese audiences within the context of musical theatre, this chapter suggests a thorough understanding and consideration of Chinese audience responses and experiences is a prerequisite for entering the Chinese market; and for launching successful, audience-focused marketing campaigns for musical theatre consumption.

## Chapter 4 Research Setting: Beijing

Beijing was the chosen location for this study as a research setting for contextualising musical theatre audience research in the market of urban China. Fieldwork was conducted for data collection with a geographical focus on Beijing, as this city has been China's capital for most of the past eight hundred years, and its political, economic and cultural advantages decide the city of being a preferred destination for western musical theatre productions. This chapter will assess the strengths of Beijing as a foremost destination for musical theatre transferred from western countries to explain how musical theatre is finding a new home in China and examine the city's population of potential audiences, theatrical infrastructure, and its policy advantages impacting on the Chinese market of musical theatre.

### 4.1 Beijing as a world city<sup>5</sup>

With China's rapid urbanisation, the classification system (see Figure 1) of Chinese cities has become influential with academics, policy-makers and the general public, ranging from a variety of tiers, i.e., Tier 1, 2, 3 and 4. The system of city tiers is commonly used to indicate China's urban difference, closely related to politics, populations, income levels, local trends and consumer behaviour (He and Qian, 2017). The National Bureau of Statistics of China (2018) reports that, Beijing is classified as a first-tier city with a higher cost of land rent. The housing market in Beijing is far more expensive than that of

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<sup>5</sup> According to GaWC, Beijing is listed as alpha + city in the world city classification system in 2018. The tier alpha + refers to highly integrated cities that complement alpha ++ cities including London and New York. Alpha + cities are largely filling in advanced service needs: <https://www.lboro.ac.uk/gawc/index.html>.

any other Chinese cities. The increasing commodification of Beijing's urban space accelerates the emergence of global consumer culture integrated with local consumption preferences.

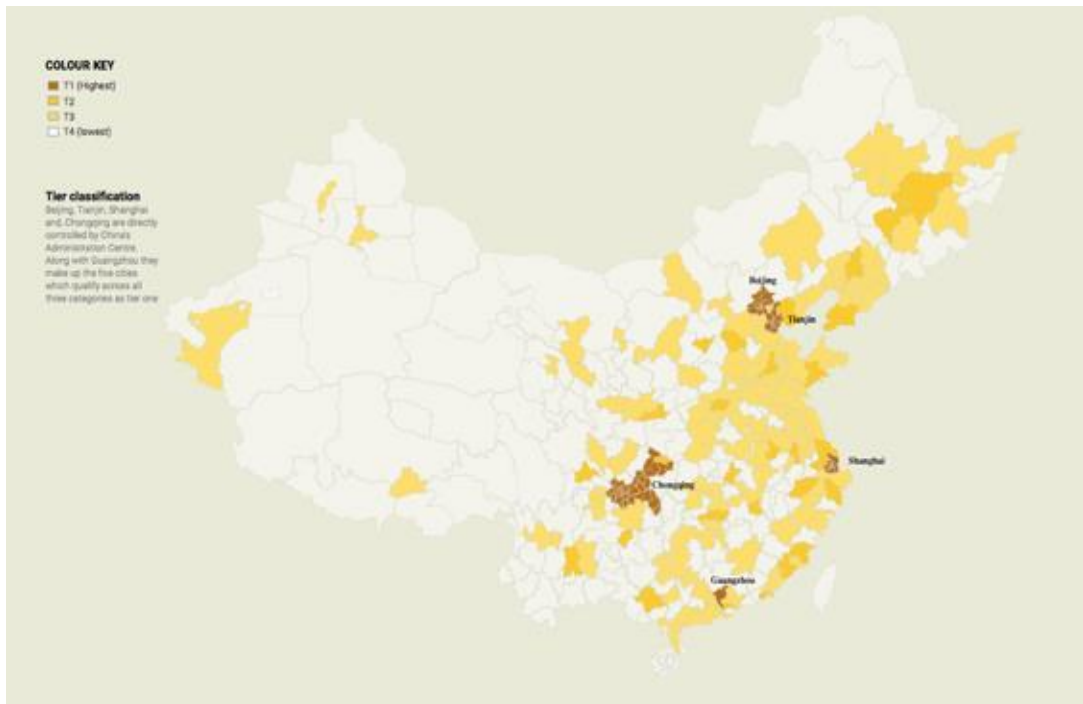


Figure 1 Tier classification of China's cities (Hernández, 2016)

Fastly moving economic and social transformations catalyse Beijing to become a world city. Since the foundation of People's Republic of China in 1949, Beijing has undergone an urban transformation that deepens its policy advantage for economic development. The economic advantage of Beijing reflects on its strong industrial base for the nation available to produce and sell tailored goods and services for the domestic consumer market. The economic and political advantages of Beijing have particular effects on the positioning of a high-income economy and the growth of emerging middle-class consumers.

The city is composed of a large mobile population. Since the admission of China to the WTO<sup>6</sup> in 2001, the subsequent relocation of large foreign enterprises has become a significant factor for an influx of a large number of residents and visitors as the composition of China's middle-class consumers. According to the statistics, up to one third of Beijing's population is now classified as migrant or 'floating populations' (Dutton, 1998). As Chen (2004, p. 54) describes, "Beijing is cool like New York and London, you can praise and deride the Beijing-ers. They just don't care.", and that now "It is not strange to ask 'where is your hometown?' or 'where are you originally from?'" "Melting pot" is a metaphor used for describing what the city is like – a destination for national and international travellers and domestic migrants who are dominant group of urban consumption. Besides, Beijing's higher education institutions, especially the top-ranked universities such as Peking University and Tsinghua University, have become important organisations in gathering Chinese emerging middle-class consumers. Beijing has thus confirmed its regional and national significance in leading economic policy development and residing a vast number of middle-class consumers.

Beijing has host various arts and cultural events which stimulate the city's pioneering role in developing creative districts at national and international levels. Doreen Massey (2013, p. 462) argues that "The continually altering spatialities of the daily lives of individuals, make up something of what a place means, of how it is constructed as a place". Historically, Beijing has been an ancient capital city, in particular, for the Yuan, Ming and Qing Dynasties from the twelfth to the ninetieth centuries, during which Beijing has been designed as an imperial capital that has become a prominent symbolic

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<sup>6</sup> WTO is an abbreviated term for World Trade Organisation.



manifestation of Chinese culture. Hence, the city is the site for a vast number of traditional Chinese cultural heritage and legacies, providing opportunities for residents, as well as visitors, to access diverse cultural experiences.

Beijing's historical sites and cultural experiences have guaranteed the city's status as one of the most attractive tourist destinations in China and beyond. Since the launch of the 2008 Summer Olympics, Beijing has attracted world attention and built a global recognition (Friedmann, 2002). In 2016, 285 million tourists visited Beijing surveyed by the Beijing Tourism Report (BJTA, 2017). The city has also been a cultural base with the distinct feature of combining Chinese traditional and contemporary cultures. For example, the spatial integration of Beijing reflects the existence of ancient architecture and modern square buildings as well as skyscrapers. The sense of contest between "tradition and modernity", "local and global" and "folk and elite" has become a new city impression for Beijing, which indicates the fused style of cultural and entertainment experiences. In this sense, Beijing is an ideal place for creating new and syncretic cultural expressions through its heterogeneous cultural characteristic.

Beijing has been positioned as China's political, cultural, international communications, and scientific and technology innovation centre since 2016 (Liu, 2017). However, Beijing faces the challenges that a large population demands leisure and entertainment activities to fulfil people's daily cultural and entertainment lives in the ongoing process of urbanisation and globalisation. In other words, there is a tension between the increasing demand of cultural and entertainment experiences and the capacities of arts and cultural facilities for serving the residents and visitors. A certain number of cultural infrastructural facilities no longer meet people's leisure and cultural needs owing to the large number of

residential and mobile populations in Beijing. According to the statistics of *Demographia World Urban Area* (2018), the scale of urban Beijing is 1,600 square kilometres, that is close to the 1,738 square kilometres of Greater London. In contrast, the population of urban Beijing (21.45 million, 2017) is nearly three times that of London (9.787 million, 2017). The statistics demonstrate that Beijing needs to build a larger number of arts and cultural facilities for satisfying a high demand of public wellness, arts and leisure opportunities as compared with London. The quantity and quality of cultural infrastructure are needed to improve to fulfil people's growing demand for leisure and entertainment as an important part of arts and cultural participation and consumption.

#### **4.2 Navigating creative and cultural districts in Beijing**

Continuing urbanisation enables Beijing to construct a range of high technology, sports and contemporary art districts. These culture-led or creativity-led districts are fundamental for fostering collaborative practices between different types of industries and sectors, and for developing new models of business development. China's *Cultural Industry Development Index* confirms "the premier position of Beijing in leading the nation's cultural and creative industries" (Keane, 2009b, p. 82). Beijing has become home to large cultural infrastructural facilities for hosting world-class events, including knowledge exchanges, arts and technology exhibitions, fairs and festivals. In 2019, the International Horticultural Exhibition is an example of Beijing's capacities to host world cultural events. Avant-garde art and rock music have also contributed much diversity to the urban culture of Beijing. Landmark venues have been involved in the field of technology, sports, arts and cultural sectors, including the National Centre for the Performing Arts, the National Olympic Sports Centre, the Workers Stadium and the

Tianqiao Performing Arts Area. By 2017 the official website “China” reported that Beijing had hosted 3,047 technology-based and culture-based enterprises (China.org.cn, 2017). This data indicates that the city of Beijing has a vast potential for developing a centre of entrepreneurial and artistic innovation in the creative and cultural sector.

Krost-Kumpf (1998) maintains that each cultural district is unique and should reflect the specific historical, cultural, social, and economic needs of the city. Beijing first scheduled a creative and cultural district in the technology sector in the 1980s, which is called Zhongguancun Science Park in Northwest Beijing, regarded as “China’s Silicon Valley”(Tan, 2006). This technology park is a typical cluster model with a strong tie to education and research institutions for achieving an efficient knowledge and technology exchange between research and commercial development (ibid.). The technology-focused park is a primary district for technological innovation, featuring a concentration of top universities, research institutions and technology companies. Another prominent creative and cultural district is the 798 Art District, known as a contemporary art cluster. In the 1990s, the 798 Art District saw the reinvention of a decommissioned military factory in Northeast Beijing; and by now it has become a landmark of contemporary art and art commerce in China (McCarthy and Wang, 2016). Additionally, the Olympic Park was built to serve the 2008 Beijing Olympics in North Beijing. After hosting the Olympics competition, the venues have been used for public sports, a healthcare centre and for tourism. The subsequent concentration of new technologies, creative workers, industrial chains, and material resources in this fashion, boosts the development of new forms of creative business within the concentrated districts.

These venues have shown the increasing collaboration of leisure and entertainment spaces for a wider audience. However, there is a gap in founding venues and spaces for theatre and performance. The rise of commercial influence draws on the city's cultural gene in theatrical entertainment through the making of new arts venues and spaces. Since 2010, theatre districts have attracted the attention of Beijing Municipal government. The establishment of Tianqiao Performing Arts Area represents a concentrated district for performing arts, and especially aims to introduce and stage worldwide classic theatrical productions.

#### **4.3 Theatre venues and spaces in Beijing**

Evans (2002, p. 69) argues that “urban life is nothing if not theatrical”. The resourcefulness of Beijing's traditional and modern cultures potentially enables the capital city to provide diverse theatrical activities. The majority of Beijing's venues for theatre entertainment (e.g. Zheng-Yi Temple Theatre) were more like a social space for multiple purposes, such as rituals, business meetings and festival celebrations. No matter whether a traditional theatre or a one-off event venue, Iain Mackintosh (2004, p. 172) suggests that theatre architecture is a place “to provide a channel for energy”. Theatre and performance is different from other entertainment forms, as it requires a high standard of a space or physical environment to increase an impact on creating a distinctive and authentic arts experience for the peripheral engagement of audiences with live performances. Theatre venues and spaces can primarily enhance, disrupt or blend audience experience into the performance (Pitts and Price, 2019). In this way, physical space is an essential channel for audiences to obtain direct engagement and artistic experience within the performance.

There is evidence that commercial shows work differently in different types of venues. In 2012 the executive producer of *Mamma Mia!*, David Lightbody, claims that an established theatre venue's capacity decides whether it can stage a global production. Theatre capacity is a prerequisite for successfully staging global musical theatre productions in China. Venues and spaces greatly influence audience engagement for musical theatre performances. In 2015 a brand new venue, the Tianqiao Performing Arts Centre has the physical capacity specifically for staging western musical theatre performances. This theatre complex is designed to link other surrounding venues within the Beijing Tianqiao Performing Arts Area, previously a location used as a centre of traditional entertainment from the late nineteenth century to the early twentieth century. This area can be seen as an indigenous model that performers lived and worked in a concentrated area.

Tianqiao Performing Arts Area is located in Tiaoqiao literally meaning Heaven (Tian) Bridge (Qiao) in Southwest Beijing. In China's Ming and Qing Dynasties, Tianqiao was the place where Chinese emperors had to pass in order to reach the Temple of Heaven, where the emperors and their mandarins committed to the annual praying ceremony for a good harvest (see Figure 2). Tianqiao was a notorious and underdeveloped area due to poor living conditions. *Shiba Yu*, which means Eighteen Prisons in Chinese, is a vivid portrayal of the slum in Tianqiao area. The narrative describes a multi-purpose courtyard consisting of 43 people from 18 households. The houses were built with broken bricks and wood, and the residents were made up of buskers, groomsmen, peddlers, peasants and beggars (Cheng, 1990). With the expansion of the city in the Ming Dynasty (1368 – 1644 A. D.), Tiaoqiao area gradually to become a traffic node, which enabled traders and

crafts people to run businesses in this area. Thus this area also attracted stop-over passengers, local traders and entertainers, and boasted a variety of restaurants, hotels, and teahouses. A story from Tianqiao describes the local businesses and entertainers in this area, which says that a man named Fool Chang selling pills can chop a big cobblestone by using his palm, and use his fingers to smash the stone (Cheng, 1990).

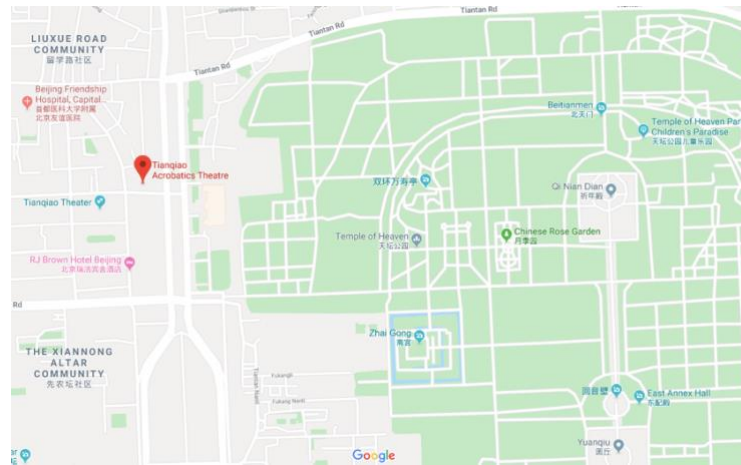


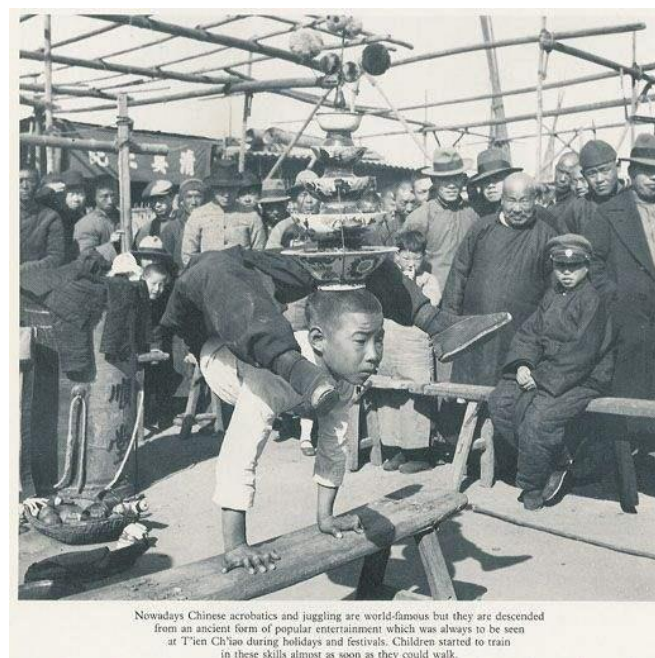
Figure 2 The map of Tianqiao © Google Map screenshot

In the early twentieth century, theatres and funfairs became popular in local people's entertainment lives. By 1950 with the prosperity of entertainment businesses, this area concentrated more than five hundred entertainers from a wide range of folk forms, including martial arts, circus, shadow plays, acrobatics, street magic shows, crosstalk shows (Xiangsheng)<sup>7</sup> and so forth (Wang, 1993). This area can therefore be regarded as a highly-concentrated location for various entertainment activities since the late nineteenth century. This diversity of art/entertainment forms allowed audiences to develop their potential interests in new forms of entertainment. Audiences were

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<sup>7</sup> Xiangsheng is one of the best-known traditional performing art types in Chinese comedy.

spontaneous and could attend performances when they passed through this area while going to market or travelling to another place. These kind of open-air venues (see Figure 3) encouraged audiences to try new entertainment experiences, and also created more commercial opportunities for performing art troupes and entertainers to reach a broader audience. For entertainers it meant focusing on the quality of their performance in order to compete with other entertainers. Such an environment also facilitated entertainers to develop professional training, but businesses were still small and they did not achieve large scale performance production and management.



*Figure 3 Audience watching boy acrobat performing a balancing act at Tianqiao Market*

© *President and Fellows of Harvard College*

In contemporary times, the Tianqiao Performing Arts Area has been regenerated as a centre for modern theatre venues and management teams. The Tianqiao Performing Arts Area comprises six venues: the Tianqiao Performing Arts Centre, the Beijing Deyun Comic Assembly, the Chou Xiao Ya Children Theatre, the Tianqiao Acrobatics Theatre, the Tianqiao Theatre and the Capital Cinema. This theatre district is also linked to the

tourist sites within walking distance, including the Temple of Heaven, Tianqiao Cultural Square and the Beijing Museum of Natural History. The Tianqiao Performing Arts Area has applied the integration of traditional and modern styles by adopting traditional decoration to design modern theatre architecture. Culture is seen as a key asset for upgrading the attractiveness of the theatre cluster through services and entertainment activities. For instance, West Gate (see Figure 4) combines modern theatre design to restore outdoor entertainment venues. Its design embeds Chinese cultural references organically in a modern building.



*Figure 4 West Gate, Tianqiao Performing Arts Area © Xiao Lu*

Physical environment is a peripheral factor which is strongly associated with the experience of theatre attendance (Mencarelli and Pulh, 2006). Theatre venues and spaces as a peripheral focus can produce a direct and tangible experience which relates to how audiences perceive the value of theatrical performance. Theatre is often central to the culture of a city, and many famous global cities embrace these performance venues, such as London and New York. For centuries the West End and Broadway have built strong



ties with adjacent businesses, such as restaurants, lodging, parking, shopping and site-seeing (see Figure 5 and Figure 6). Dating back to the seventeenth century, London developed the West End for creating an elite lifestyle location with a series of expensive houses, cultural venues, fashionable shops and entertainment venues. Since the 1990s, London's tourism industry has led to an ongoing boom in the West End's musical theatre industry (Hughes, 1998). Tourists are attracted to musical theatre that has become the most popular commercial genre in the society of London's theatres. The West End therefore has become a component of distinct identity for the city. Commercial theatre performances have maintained a successful business operation for a long term in both London's West End and New York's Broadway.



*Figure 5 Cambridge Theatre, London West End © Xiao Lu*



Figure 6 Minskoff Theatre, Broadway, New York © Xiao Lu

Beijing is no exception to this rule. In common with London, Beijing has a certain number of ancient theatre venues and heritage locations. Since 2015 the Tianqiao Performing Arts Area has staged diverse art and entertainment forms, ranging from crosstalk shows (Xiangsheng), acrobatics, to musical theatre and traditional Chinese theatre. By 2017 it had introduced and presented 19 musical theatre productions, including *The Phantom of the Opera*, *Wicked*, *Jersey Boys*, *the Producers*, and *Man of La Mancha* (Hu, 2017). The hit show *The Phantom of the Opera* facilitated the venue to win a considerable reputation and gradually become a fast-growing place for attracting new audiences who want to explore diverse and unfamiliar cultural experiences. The Tianqiao Performing Arts Area is not only for the curation of Chinese traditional culture, but also as an emerging powerhouse for staging a wide range of performing arts from around the world.

For theatre districts, arts experience is vitally related to the total impression of a physical space. When drawing audiences to explore a restored new district, experience is core to

building an accessible space for theatre attendance. As compared with London's West End and New York's Broadway - both of which go back for centuries - Beijing is still at a young and experimental stage in developing modern theatre venues and spaces for presenting different types of performances. The Tianqiao Performing Arts Area has a relatively weak connection with hospitality facilities and leisure services (see Figure 7). The future challenges will lie in upgrading the theatre district's add-ons such as restaurants, bars, coffee shops, gift shops and the improvement of public transport system in the area.



*Figure 7 Tianqiao Performing Arts Area, Beijing © Xiao Lu*

Through the mapping and assessment of Beijing's position and its economic, political and cultural advantages, this chapter suggests that the capital city is distinguished by playing a vital role in planning, expanding and modernising arts and cultural venues and spaces. Beijing's emerging theatre venues and spaces experiment through blending modern and traditional styles and content, in terms of making physical environment and

introducing new theatrical performances. For many people, arts and cultural experiences have become a reason for staying in, or travelling to, Beijing. Not only is Beijing the home town to a nationwide famous opera, but also has an inclusive environment, a higher level of residents' income and sophisticated arts and cultural facilities which allow the city to become a foremost destination for musical theatre performances.

Researching audiences is fundamental when considering city-specificity for recruiting prospective study respondents who have had an experience of watching a musical theatre performance; moreover, Beijing is a city with entertainment-going tradition and huge potential audiences who expect a novel experience for consuming live musical theatre from the West. The planned concentration of theatre venues in Beijing provides a new space, linking multiple venues and tourist resorts, which ideally creates an opportunity for audiences to explore multiple arts and cultural consumption experiences.

## **Chapter 5 Methodology and data collection**

Important perspectives on cultural consumption, arts marketing and audience engagement have been gained from a wide range of disciplinary viewpoints, including consumer culture theory, marketing, and arts management studies, as outlined in the previous chapters. This chapter aims to explain and justify the methodology used in this research and the integration of multiple theoretical and methodological paradigms in Chinese audience research. The chapter is divided into five sections. The first section reflects on my considerations of the appropriateness of the research approach and method for the study. As illustrated in the second section, each method is discussed in detail to show the data generation process. The third section then records and describes the sampling strategies and the fieldwork schedules for data collection. Based on the application of the research methods, ethical issues are raised to consider the potential risks, and methodological challenges that might occur before, during and after this research in the fourth section. The final section suggests that to probe into the production side of musical theatre, the secondary data from the international marketing promotion, the local media publicity and market survey reports was used to analyse three case studies throughout the research.

### **5.1 Qualitative versus quantitative**

There is an ongoing debate on the division between quantitative and qualitative methods in academia, social and professional practices. The tradition of methodological division between quantitative and qualitative methods was derived from the arguments of Emile Durkheim (1982) and Max Weber (Finch, 2011). The epistemological positions of both qualitative and quantitative approaches have been a great influence on the methodological tradition for a long time. The origin of quantitative methods is

historically associated with positivism and this approach adopts “certain assumptions about truth and reality” (Travers, 2001, p. 11). The objectives of positivism would be to build techniques into studies on the basis of measuring variables in different settings.

For interpretivists, research is interested in the comparisons between “insiders” and “outsiders” from a “humanistic” viewpoint to explore social behaviour (Travers, 2001). “Motivation research” and “interpretive research” often use qualitative methods such as interview and the ethnographic method in order to understand “why” and “how” people act in a certain way (Hudson and Ozanne, 1988; Tadajewski, 2006). The qualitative researcher tends to engage with the argument of how people understand their own actions within the social group. By contrast, “positivist” research tends to focus on the prediction or explanation of consumer/audience engagement through using large scale statistics and quantitative methods; it aims to “produce generalisations about what kinds of behaviour a given population of people will engage in” (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 25). As discussed, “positivism” and “interpretivism” offer insights into epistemological choices about the philosophical worldview. This is also important because the paradigm chosen will influence on real-life practices in social sciences and humanities research.

These two epistemological positions have produced the distinction between qualitative and quantitative methods. First, both ask different research questions at the level of data. Qualitative methods tend to generalise social life providing “thick” descriptions from small to big pictures (Geertz, 1973), whereas quantitative researchers pitch at experimental paradigm - seeking for numerical differences to predict and explain a logical link between individuals or groups (Becker, 1996). Second, qualitative methods require a researcher to collect many information, whether they feel this is necessary or

not. The resulting conversations, field-notes, photographs, audio and video recordings and digital archives comprise massive information, some of which might be less relevant to the research question. This information might be seen as a kind “noise” which permeates the research. However, quantitative methods offer a clearer sense of what data and information researchers might want to acquire. The advantage of quantitative methods is that they offer a more efficient and accurate way to find the typical, the average and the trend that can generalise large populations throughout processing data; while, to some extent, the challenge of qualitative techniques lies in being able to interpret people’s experiences, meanings and behaviours. In contrast to the qualitative approach, quantitative methods focus on assigning numerical meaning to the phenomena under study, and seeks to use statistics to answer the questions of “how often” and “how many” or “how much” (VanderStoep and Johnson, 2009).

Peter and Olson (2010) and Anderson (1986) advocate that consumer research should embrace multiple paradigmatic positions rather than limit itself to one approach. The use of mixed or multiple methods are “a means of beneficial social transformation and of promoting greater social justice” (Fielding, 2012, p. 125). Tashakkori and Teddlie (2010) define mixed methods as the utility of both qualitative and quantitative methods, or the use of two different types of either qualitative or quantitative methods. According to this definition, research can be carefully accompanied by a wide range of techniques, including case studies, ethnography, surveys, quasi-experiments and so forth, to employ complementary strengths in relation to a given set of research problem (Greene et al., 1989). A basic characteristic of mixed-methods or multi-methods design is it can answer the questions that a single method cannot. Mixed methods offer “better and stronger

inferences and give both greater depth and breadth” (Tashakkori and Teddlie, 2010, p. 15).

Scholars of methodology believe that mixed-methods / multi-methods approach is still in its infancy. Mixed methods have been applied to the restrictive requirement that employs both qualitative and quantitative elements (Fielding, 2012). Meanwhile, methodologists have noticed the potential challenge which remains in the mixed-methods design: how research integrates and interrogates the data from qualitative and quantitative methods and makes them mutually informative (Bryman, 2007). For the researcher the difficulties of data analysis and interpretation will require skilful techniques for bridging, coordinating and evaluating the data appropriately. Debates on triangulation demonstrates the inherent biases and limitations of different methods, but also support the idea of combining qualitative and quantitative methods to functionally complement each other rather than seeing them as oppositional.

In conjunction with audience research, Walmsley (2019) suggests that a deep and rigorous audience research in the performing arts needs to draw on a range of complementary methods, including positivist techniques, as well as anthropological and interpretivist methods. Based on the literature review in the previous chapters, for this study qualitative methods are fundamentally suited to understand and explore the richness of audiences’ experiences and to answer the question of how Chinese audiences respond to musical theatre performances. Qualitative data provides a detailed and specific view to look for exploring audience engagement with the art form, and in-depth knowledge about Chinese audiences’ experiences with musical theatre; thus it fits the requirements of the research questions. Considering the complexity of audiences’



experiences and responses for musical theatre, qualitative data is limited in representing a general voice of musical theatre audiences in the Chinese market. The quantitative method is applicable for providing sufficient information to examine broad data and generalise qualitative data (Merrington et al., 2019). Thus, the researcher has employed an online questionnaire to examine audience trends and to explain what are the important and less important factors affecting consumption choices (Creswell, 2014). Added to this are the transformative perspectives which provide a holistic picture of how Chinese audiences respond to the experience of the art form and to touring global productions.

The qualitative nature of this research has decided the core purpose of the methodology, which is directly engaged with Chinese audience members of musical theatre. It leads also to this research employing an ethnographic overview as a methodological framework - or a research direction for collecting data. Studying Chinese audiences requires the researcher to observe and talk directly with people in the local cultural context in order to reach an in-depth understanding. Ethnographic overview pertains to the field of anthropology and thus audience research is about telling “credible, rigorous and authentic” stories from the perspective of local people, and then interpreting these stories in the context of people’s daily lives and culture (O’Reilly, 2012, pp. xi, 1). Creswell (2014, p. 14) suggests that ethnography is a flexible and efficient method “to study peoples and cultures within the shared patterns of behaviours, language, and actions in a natural setting over a prolonged period of time”. Forsey (2010) argues that ethnography relates to the nature of qualitative research but it is not limited to using qualitative methods, instead it also can be applied to quantitative methods in social sciences and humanities. Ethnography can embrace various methods and methodological techniques, and especially its flexibility to adapt to the online environment for data collection (Caliandro,

2017). A major advantage of ethnography is that it is a more holistic way to observe and describe “the functioning of cultures through social interactions and expressions between people and groups” (Berg, 2009, p. 201). Ethnography is a context-based epistemological methodology, appropriate for this study in which the Chinese context is central to the discussion of musical theatre audiences and their consumption trends.

## **5.2 Research methods**

In terms of the methodology applied to research Chinese audiences, the goal of this research is that it needs to capture the multiple dimensions of understanding Chinese audiences. Combining multiple research outcomes provides a systematic understanding of the diverse and complex experiences of different audiences (Hadley et al., 2019). The complexity of making sense of an overseas audience’s experience and its active engagement requires the researcher to obtain a detailed and deep view, as well as a generalised sense of the population within the Chinese market. The multiple dimensions of musical theatre attendance lead to interactive effects between artistic expression, marketing campaigns and audience experience. A comprehensive interpretation of Chinese audiences is needed to understand audience-focused arts marketing and a more consumption-oriented model of musical theatre experience. Integrating different methods fits these requirements, and thus a multi-methodological and integrated approach has been applied to explain qualitative results with numerical data. Thus, this research has involved focus group discussions, online questionnaires and an online ethnographic method to collect data in order to understand the responses of Chinese audiences to musical theatre; these data will support the analysis of three musical theatre productions by a case studies method.

Table 2 Research design: multi-methodological approach

<b>Data sources</b>	<b>Applied methods</b>	<b>Nature of research</b>
Data source 1: Participants' responses	Focus group Online questionnaire	Qualitative study (although some quantitative data was collected using online questionnaires to map out audience choice trends)
Data source 2: Online reviews	Netnography	
Data source 3: Online reviews, promotional materials, news, photographs, and reports.	Case studies	

### 5.2.1 Focus group

Focus group interviews, or interchangeably group interviews have lengthy history. The focus group method aims to answer what happens, why it happens, and what it means, broadly through contextualised conversations in research (Rubin and Rubin, 2005). The method has been employed in a vast range of social research, and in particular has commonly used in the field of marketing research (Axelrod, 1975; Morgan, 1996; King and Horrocks, 2010). Focus groups in marketing research use “stimulus materials” such as titles, logos, posters and adverts to probe participants during the discussions. Morgan (1996, p. 12) suggests that the focus group is “an identified approach to explore and illustrate depth through the information in marketing research”. But this method also has weaknesses – in particular the fact that people who are dominant socially can also be

dominant in focus group discussions. In other words, socially dominant people might be able to influence other participants and control the pace of the conversation.

Burton (2000) argues that focus group interviews are for answering questions about people's feelings, experiences and attitudes on a given topic. Based on the literature review, there is a gap in knowledge and empirical data in studying Chinese theatre audiences. Focus group discussions are an effective way to gain this information and generate ideas about Chinese audiences' likely reactions. In this way it can provide an understanding and analysis of cultural codes and the symbolic meanings of musical theatre productions in China. Focus group discussions are used in order to capture audience reactions to global musical theatre productions and identify which highly recognised Chinese productions of western musical theatre are available for collecting sufficient data by other selected methods. Besides verbal information, during the focus group the researcher recorded non-verbal expression such as body languages, paralanguages and silence, as well as ways of mutual communication and interaction, which were also applied to analyse the data.

Interactions took place between participants more than participants and facilitator. Drawn on the theories of "symbolic interactionism" (Blumer, 1986), group interactions stimulate participants to reflect and identify whether the group consists of "people like us" or "people with overlapping kinds of distinctions" (Eliasoph and Lichterman, 2003). Participants make these meanings in relation to other participants, and thus the focus group method is appropriate for preparing information relevant for capturing possible meanings and reactions to musical theatre through interpersonal interactions. Norman Denzin (1989) suggests that, group interviews create their own structure and meaning

through views and opinions. The participant-defined nature of the focus group interview replaces the interaction between the interviewer and the participants. Instead, the interaction is in the hands of the participants. Focus group discussions are a suitable way to collect ideas about Chinese audiences, who may have individual attitudes, knowledge and past experiences of musical theatre.

### **5.2.2 Online Questionnaire**

The questionnaire survey is often used to measure attitude and behaviour, and can obtain a large number of random samples as a result of generalising populations (VanderStoep and Johnson, 2009). The types of questionnaires are various and questionnaire methods tend to integrate computer-mediated tools to reach a broader section of respondents. The advantages of statistical research are based on the steady and continuous supply of easily accessible quantitative data (Bryman, 2007). It provides relatively simple and straightforward approaches to providing precise and numerical outcomes for the study. With the spread of the internet, web-based surveys are commonly applied to audience research by arts marketing researchers. These can easily achieve a far-distance reach and make it possible to approach a large body of potential participants. The website layout of questionnaires is convenient to create and to present multiple materials such as images, sounds and videos; an online version can efficiently include important information for enriching the presentation of questionnaires. The online questionnaire is an effective way to access target respondents, but an apparent pitfall is that the online questionnaire may lead to a lower response rate compared with in-person or face-to-face types of questionnaires, given some people's inability to access the internet (Robson, 2011). Another pitfall is considering that an in-person type of method may jeopardise useful interaction with total strangers in a metropolis such as Beijing. The online questionnaire

lacks engagement with the respondents who may have non-verbal signals and gestures and makes it difficult to know whether the respondents feel comfortable with the questions and in what way they take time to think about the answers.

The deployment of an online questionnaire allows this research to confirm a generalisation of a Chinese audience response to the art form of musical theatre productions. The main reason for using an online questionnaire is to attempt to reach a wider musical theatre audience and to be able to generalise the findings to combine the data collected from other employed methods. The online questionnaire method aims to obtain numerical data in order to explain the meaning of musical theatre co-produced by Chinese audiences.

### **5.2.3 Case studies**

Case studies are a popular method available for integrating with both quantitative and qualitative methodologies, because they functionally reveals “the essential nature of society at large” (Burawoy, 1991). Case studies are more advantageous for employing narratives, and to extract events and stories. Yin (2009) suggests that the case-based approach is an important means for providing persuasive, rational and logical analysis of the real world. The use of case studies aims to increase the “generalisability” that can be applied to broader empirical conditions in other cases (Small, 2009). The purpose of the case-study method is to describe, compare and analyse opinions and also to learn from the differences and similarities of the studied cases (Ellet, 2007). Case studies have been widely used to deal with arts marketing and audience research, covering a variety of research subjects such as arts organisations, artistic productions and artists (Brown, 2010;

Ghauri and Grønhaug, 2005; Schroeder, 2005). This case-study research suggests how and why research findings have been used to consider the implications for arts marketing.

Case studies are more appropriate for discussing context-based issues in the field of arts marketing and management (Ghauri and Grønhaug, 2005). In this research, the case-study method is applied to contextualise global musical theatre productions within a Chinese context. The ongoing debate on global and local recognitions of musical theatre productions has made evaluating artistic quality in relation to audience reaction and experience in a complex process. The evaluation of Chinese audience responses avoids using terms such as “good” or “bad” to judge the performance of the international transfers of global musical theatre productions. The evaluation of case studies looks into audience reactions for specific musical theatre productions, along with secondary information from the media, press and marketing reports.

This research follows a criterion for the case selection on the basis of the principle of “exemplary” and “replication logic” (Yin, 2009). Mitchell (1983) suggests that “statistical representativeness is an irrelevant criterion” for finding representative cases. The multiple case study design is employed to minimise the impact of less statistically scientific generalisation. Therefore, multiple cases are seen to be more reliable and to more strongly represent phenomena and practice than a single case design. It produces “complementary” results where each case can be a “mirror” for the others, and investigates the comparative relationship between and among the selected cases (Small, 2009). In this study, each case unit is defined by a single musical theatre production, which aims to generate sound criteria for further analysis and evaluation between and among each musical theatre case. The selection of musical theatre cases is based on focus

group discussions and it is also considered that these productions have a certain level of recognition among Chinese respondents. High recognition and reputation are key to capture audiences' understandings of musical theatre experiences, and this attracts larger number of audience reactions to the productions and therefore promises rich data.

#### **5.2.4 Netnography**

With the penetration of the internet, web ethnography or online ethnography noted by Kozinets (2002) and Rokka (2010) has been characterised as netnography. Netnography is primarily based on the observation of textual discourse with the involvement of the internet and social media. Since 2000, ethnography as an epistemological methodology has reached new heights in consumer research. Kozinets (2002) and Rokka (2010) continue to argue that netnography is a new branch of ethnography and is specifically used as an adaptation to the rise of transnational online communities and digital consumer networks in the ever globalising and tribalising consumer culture. Compared to focus group interviews and online questionnaires, netnography is triangulated to provide the trustworthiness of consumer insight and online social interactions. Thus, netnography is used in this research to express, describe and articulate the function of ethnography in the set of an online environment.

Netnography is an anthropological method that views groups and places with local knowledge and practices via the internet. The online mode has effectively removed geographical barriers for accessing a specific group and online group-based consumers (Desmond, 2014). Chinese audiences are demonstrably a specific group of people who may share a common interest in musical theatre. Netnography is thus applicable for understanding and identifying Chinese audiences' experiences and expectations of



musical theatre performances in the form of online community. A set of individuals culled together on the basis of shared social and cultural attributes underlines online consumer decision-making in relation to the specific consumer interests and hobbies. One of the earliest studies to apply netnography in a Chinese setting was Zhang and Hitchcock (2014)'s paper on the "female gaze" among tourists to Macau and there are parallels between that study and this one as both focused on young middle-class consumers.

This research employed netnography as one of its research methods to capture data in order to understand and identify musical theatre experiences perceived by Chinese audiences. The data from ethnographic fieldwork tends to describe a system of relations in peoples and mutual cultures, showing "how things hand together in a web of mutual influence or support or interdependence or what have you, to describe the connections between the specifics the ethnographer knows by virtue of being there" (Becker, 1996, p. 56). However, the ethnographic method has a relatively narrow focus as people who do not access the online community under investigation are excluded from the study (Salmons, 2015). Thus, the data from netnography have the limitation in generalising results to broader groups outside the online community sample. With the convenience and efficiency of digital platforms, online users frequently check their mobile devices and engage with online forums on which users' texts, pictures, videos and mutual interactions are recorded. Online community pages provide free and open content and information, which enables the researcher to efficiently "grasp complex and fast-paced online cultural production" (Rokka, 2010, p. 381). The communicational open atmosphere of online communities or forums allows the researcher to approach a Chinese social networking website which specialises in films, books, music, theatre performances and events reviews.

Moreover, multiple layers of commercial and government surveillance, self-censorship, conscious performances and cultural pressures shape how the reviewers portray their thoughts and experiences in Chinese cyberspace - this characterises China's online social world (Hine, 2016). The circumstance of government censorship may trigger online reviewers or the internet supervisors to remove the content that might be against the government censorship requirements. Reviewers may consciously or unconsciously avoid topics that will anger government as well as commercial bodies such as company owners, advertisers and investors in order to protect reviewers themselves. The complexity of online spaces leads to difficulties in identifying people's motivations and modes of participating in online community discussions. In particular, the generation of fake reviews that can sway public opinion or drive purchases is an unavoidable phenomenon in today's online world.

### **5.3 Sampling and data collection**

Sampling is an important issue when conducting this research to answer the research questions. The aim of sampling is to minimise the sample bias in the research results (Creswell, 2014). This section looks at identifying a demographic focus and accessing potential respondents in a certain location, and explains the sampling strategies and the process of data collection applied to this research. This research, in particular, employs an online approach for sampling and data collection, which provides a great accessibility to enormous information and data. It also delimits the physical barriers from external environment and in-person interventions when accessing and interacting the potential respondents. Before sampling, this research considered the advantages and disadvantages of the online sample, which are discussed in the following paragraphs.

Table 3 Research strategies of sampling

<b>Research Methods</b>	<b>The Profile of Samples</b>
<i>Schedule 1.</i> Focus group	Chinese students in Goldsmiths, University of London
<i>Schedule 2.</i> Online questionnaire	Chinese students affiliated with a Beijing higher education institution
<i>Schedule 3.</i> Case studies	<i>Cats, The Phantom of the Opera</i> and <i>Wicked</i>
<i>Schedule 4.</i> Netnography	Online reviewers in Beijing

According to Table 3, Schedule 1 and 2 both focus on the sample of Chinese university students. University students act as a rising power of cultural influence in terms of forming surrounding people’s cultural consumption trends and choices via online and offline channels. As Chapter 2 has discussed, university education is a key source to enhance the accumulation of cultural capital, which can help identify the Chinese potential future consumers of musical theatre. Attending higher education prepares university students to acquire cultural capital for theatre attendance and with a huge potential they embark on middle-class occupations after graduations to guarantee economic flexibility. Their higher educational background enables them to accumulate relevant cultural knowledge for familiarising musical theatre and may possess great persuasive power to influence other people. Thus, the target respondents of focus group interviews and online questionnaires recruit university students as they represent the ideal aspirational audience which can expand. In particular, the focus group interviews approached Chinese students in Goldsmiths, University of London where many arts-related courses are provided across the nation and the world. These students also have a greater chance of having attended musical theatre in London and have a strong potential to become the audience for western musical theatre in China when they return home.

*Schedule 1: Focus group (From 01/03/2018 to 01/04/2018)*

As was discussed in section 5.2.1, the focus group method is applied to marketing research, which aims to generate interactions and new opinions between participants. The focus group is an identified research method to gain a sense of the ways in which Chinese audiences react to global musical theatre productions and receive a general impression of the art form. The researcher attempted to discover the current composition and demographic profile of Chinese audiences for musical theatre in Beijing. However, the information of theatre audiences is confidential and undisclosed, which is always kept by the third party such as ticketing companies for commercial purposes. It was not possible to access the demographic information and purchase patterns of Chinese audiences attending musical theatre. In response to this situation, the prospective participants for focus groups are required to answer the qualifying question: “Whether they have had experience of watching a musical theatre performance?”.

The recruitment strategy employed Chinese social media *WeChat* to circulate the participant form in a Goldsmiths Chinese students group with 384 members. Potential participants were required to have experience of musical theatre and could fill out the form to express their interest in attending a focus group. Meanwhile, the demographic information was collected once they completed an online form (see Table 4). Focus group discussions arranged 16 participants into three groups with 4-6 participants for a 70-minute discussion, which were recorded for transcription. The sample of Goldsmiths students gained the rich information, however, this may also lead to a significant variance between the participants and Chinese audiences for musical theatre more broadly. Therefore, data generalisation was needed to understand Chinese audiences in a deeper and richer way.

<i>Table 4 Background information of focus group participants</i>				
Participants	Gender	Year of Birth	Educational Level	Departments
1. Alice	Female	1988	Postgraduate	Theatre & Performance
2. Tina	Female	1991	Postgraduate	Media & Communication
3. Joan	Female	1994	Postgraduate	ICCE
4. Sue	Female	1995	Postgraduate	ICCE
5. Jane	Female	1988	Postgraduate	Sociology
6. Alex	Female	1993	Postgraduate	ICCE
7. Wendy	Female	1993	Undergraduate	Media & Communication
8. Grace	Female	1998	Foundation	Media & Communication
9. Julian	Female	1994	Postgraduate	Media & Communication
10. Daisy	Female	1995	Postgraduate	Art
11. Ben	Male	1994	Postgraduate	Media & Communication
12. Frida	Female	1998	Undergraduate	Media & Communication
13. Anne	Female	1992	Postgraduate	Design
14. Livia	Female	1991	Postgraduate	Theatre & Performance
15. Vicky	Female	1988	Postgraduate	Theatre & Performance
16. Jessica	Female	1993	Postgraduate	ICCE

\* ICCE refers to the Institute for Creative and Cultural Entrepreneurship.

Focus group discussions were efficient in exploring the interactive influence between the participants and generating specific ideas about musical theatre attendance. The researcher as a facilitator was to listen to participants' opinions, to enhance interactions and to smooth dialogues between participants. The questions for the focus group

interviews were structured in order to explore how Chinese audiences responded to the art form, to marketing materials and to Chinese productions of western shows (see the focus group guide in Appendix 2). During the discussions, focus group participants were shown 20 posters of Chinese productions. The presentation of musical theatre posters aimed to identify the degree of visibility and recognition for these productions among Chinese respondents. Meanwhile, it also attempted to recall participants' previous knowledge and experiences in relation to musical theatre. In this way, it helped to understand and identify the recognition of global musical theatre productions in China. Finally, *Cats*, *the Phantom of the Opera* and *Wicked* were selected to conduct case studies, as these fitted into the aim of case studies research as discussed in *Schedule 3*.

Productions Items	<i>Cats</i>	<i>The Phantom of the Opera</i>	<i>Wicked</i>
<b>Year of Premiere</b>	1981	1986	2003
<b>Years of Chinese tour</b>	2018; 2012; 2008; 2003	2020; 2015; 2004	2017
<b>Language(s) of the Chinese production</b>	Performed in Chinese and English	Performed in English, with Chinese subtitles	Performed in English, with Chinese subtitles
<b>Tour Itinerary of Chinese Cities</b>	Beijing; Shanghai; Guangzhou;	Beijing; Shanghai; Guangzhou	Beijing; Shanghai; Guangzhou
<b>Commercial Outputs</b>	DVD/CD	DVD/CD; Film	Souvenir gifts

*Table 5 The list of musical theatre productions in China*

Through the researcher's participatory observations, each respondent potentially played the role of expressing their own opinions and interacted with the facilitator and other respondents. In so doing, each respondent stimulated other people's opinions and

continued to follow up conversations in the group. Based on observation, conflicts of opinion or differences did sometimes occur throughout the discussions. For example, one respondent said that she liked *Billy Elliot*'s poster because "the jumping boy made [her] interested in this show", whereas another participant said "[she] was really not into *Billy Elliot* because the poster looked like a stupid and bratty boy". These kind of discussions became a strength of the focus groups as it efficiently stimulated respondents to generate new and different ideas, which allowed the researcher to obtain an understanding of how the participants dealt with different opinions while also feeling free to express themselves. During the focus group discussions, it was interesting to explore how participants express different opinions and attempted to influence other people and negotiate with ideas and opinions.

*Schedule 2: Online questionnaire (From 01/10/2018 to 12/02/2019)*

After focus group discussions, the findings allowed the researcher to shape a questionnaire and generalise the opinions found through focus group interviews. An online questionnaire (see the questionnaire sample in Appendix 3) was set up and comprised three sections to supplement the findings of the focus groups. The target respondent group was Chinese students based in Beijing where there is a more authentic market setting, in terms of musical theatre consumption and marketing. Most of the university-student respondents (including undergraduate and postgraduate levels) grew up in the era of the internet boom. They can be recognised as digital natives or the "internet generation". They have frequent usage of digital devices and social media in their daily lives. Thus, the use of online questionnaire can efficiently approach the potential respondents. A trial round was deployed and pre-tested the questionnaire. 37 responded questionnaires were collected to reshape and examine the questions and to

decide whether respondents were comfortable with the online questionnaire. The aim of questionnaire survey (N = 200) was to achieve a larger number of responses from university students in Beijing. After the adjustment of the questions, the questionnaire was sent out via *WeChat* platforms assisted by a Chinese survey software called *Wenjuan Xing* (equivalent to *SurveyMonkey*). The questionnaire had also been re-posted via the researcher's social network sites, including friend circles on *WeChat*, in order to reach a larger cohort of respondents.

Online questionnaire data were collected from 13<sup>th</sup> January 2019 to 12<sup>th</sup> March 2019. The online questionnaire respondents were identified by answering the question of: whether or not they had the experience of watching a musical theatre performance? It has received 173 out of 225 responses, which have met the criterion of the qualifying question. Of the 173 respondents, more were female (72.25%) than male (27.75%) and their ages ranged from 18 to 31 years old, with a higher percentage (97.11%) in the age range between 18-24. They came from Beijing's 15 universities. In terms of academic qualifications, 85.55% had Bachelor's degrees, 12.72% had Master's degrees and 1.16% had Doctoral degrees. The internet-assisted questionnaire survey achieved the access of university respondents in Beijing. The advantages of the online platform such as *WeChat* were that it provided an efficient way to access the target samples. However, these data appear to be accidental samples that have limitations of knowing what the larger musical theatre audiences might be. The data are restricted to generalise the results to the large Chinese musical theatre audiences as a whole. In spite of this disadvantage, the data were collected to analyse how audiences may agree or disagree with the opinions generated by focus group participants in terms of understanding, participating in and consuming musical theatre in the Chinese market. Above all, the data from focus groups and online questionnaires are



analysed and interpreted to explore Chinese audiences' understanding of the art form and trends in consuming musical theatre performances in China.

*Schedule 3 Case studies (From 08/08/2018 to 31/01/2019)*

The purpose of using multiple case studies is to gain an insight into an evaluative comparison that helps to describe, identify and analyse how Chinese audiences react to specific musical theatre performances from an empirical perspective. Combining multi-source data from company reports, news, audience online reviews and marketing materials, these three case studies represent different theatrical expressions in terms of themes, musical styles, stories, and ways of Chinese adaptation, which offer a relatively comprehensive understanding of how Chinese audiences react to different global musical theatre productions and what makes a touring production well received.

*Schedule 4: Netnography (From 01/03/2018 to 01/08/2018)*

Online reviews are more accessible and contain a large amount of content for the researcher to explore how Chinese audiences respond to the post-performance experience. Netnography research focuses on the observations of the members of online communities, and their meaning-creation, as well as how these members respond to the experience of musical theatre genre and performances. Netnography research was conducted based on a Chinese review website called *Douban*, a social networking website which is equivalent to *IMDb*. *Douban* is a well-known online community in China, providing ratings and reviews about food, literature, cinema, music, TV drama, and city events for users. *Douban* has a high traffic of postings, statistics showed that by 2016 there were 100 million registered users and approximately 150 million unregistered users who can access the content (He, 2016). Another important statistics are that the internet users in China

totalled 731 million by December 2016 with a rate of 53.2% internet penetration across China (China Internet Watch, 2017).

The characteristics of *Douban* include a wide range of user-generated content categorised by themes, locations and popular bloggers. *Douban* was chosen for this study because it is an online community which provides user-generated content across Chinese cities. One feature of *Douban* is it has attracted a large number of users who are interested in culture, arts and entertainment activities. Location is related to the variety of cultural events and whether potential audiences can physically access to the events. Events location has become a common factor that brings people together for a city's cultural activities. City is one of the categories on *Douban* to launch offline events, which drive urban online users to participate in real-life activities or communities, such as film societies, book clubs, and live theatrical events. The size of online communities is vitally important and that decides the impact of a social networking website available for reaching wider audiences. *Douban* has also set up incentive strategies to keep generating audience-centric content and interaction. For example, the users who make contributions to the online content could win free tickets of cultural events.

*Douban's* own research report shows that, the age group of users ranges from 20 to 39 years old and up to 50% of users are 20 to 29 years old (*Douban Report*, 2016). The site has a wide range of categories that are convenient for searching under a specific "community page". For instance, using the title of a musical theatre production can find a description of the show and user-generated comments, reviews and ratings. The participation of specific discussion groups on musical theatre productions potentially meets the characteristics of the research subject. *Douban* is user-friendly – there is an on-

site search engine and no word limits for reviews. Audience reviews for a musical theatre production can be found in *Douban's* communities where there are a deal of users' comments and discussions.



Figure 8 The Cats' online community on Douban

This study defines *Douban's* online content of *Cats*, *the Phantom of the Opera* and *Wicked* as communities comprising titles, reviews, ratings and introductions to the shows. The community appeared to have up to 60 comments for *Cats* until August 2018. *Douban* has proved to be a rich source of material that fits the criteria of the research in terms of user-size, quality of the content and the influence of reviews. In terms of the selection of online reviews, some of the posts did not provide information about “reviews”, “comments” or “recommendations”, and these were excluded, as these posts shared original lyrics and storylines. The final samples turned out to comprise 21, 21, and 24 posts for *the Phantom of the Opera*, *Wicked* and *Cats*, respectively, which were analysed with the help of a qualitative software known as Nvivo 8. The texts and pictures were selected and downloaded in a sequence based on time, with the latest first.



Figure 9 Audience reviews on Douban

The subsequent encoding is divided into two hierarchies. The narratives were analysed by using a Grounded Theory approach as a research paradigm in order to explore the specific context of the social world directly (Glaser and Strauss, 2009). As analysis progressed, reviewers' posts were first coded using an open coding technique (Moghaddam, 2006) and were then imported into Nvivo 8 for coding by theme unit and for the high frequency of "experience-related" words, such as reactions to music and songs. Here, these reviews were assigned to a total of 83 nodes, categorised into four key topics that reflected on Chinese audiences' experiences of watching live musical theatre. These posts have been gathered and have generated a growing community for Chinese musical theatre audiences who are active and keen to share post-performance experiences. These nodes were established in advance based on word frequency and a word cloud to categorise these reviews into different themes. Next, these free nodes were subjected to create subcodes that helped to organise the free codes into categories of negative and positive comments on experience-related commentaries in the data (Glaser and Strauss, 2017). In the view of Chinese audiences, the experience of musical theatre varies,

depending on how they receive the theatrical expressions in relation to their previous knowledge and experiences.

In terms of the sample of musical theatre online reviews, it contains little demographic information. In order to discover the demographic information about the potential user, the researcher uncovered the data that reports the users' profile from the website company's surveys, which provide the users' information such as gender, age, occupation, etc. But this information is limited to identify the demographics of reviewers and the authenticity of review content in the musical theatre community. Moreover, the sample of online reviews has the possibility of containing fake reviews, which means, these reviewers are on behalf of theatre companies or marketing agencies to conform to the expectations of the market. The reviewers on behalf of marketing companies may post highly positive reviews or rank "five stars" to improve the visibility of a particular musical production in the marketplace.

Throughout the schedules, these methods produce the following data:

3 x focus group interview transcripts (with 16 respondents / 210 minutes)

173 x online questionnaires

66 x online audience reviews

3 x case studies

#### **5.4 Ethical considerations**

There are opportunities and limitations in conducting audience research in a cross-cultural context. Throughout the research, the researcher can gain a sense of the reality

of audience thoughts and actions by adopting multiple methodologies. With careful consideration, this research has weighed the ethical issues involved. The purpose of ethical considerations, essentially, is to ensure the maximum benefit of the research whilst minimising the risk of actual or potential harm to the research subject. There are some concerns with which my involvement in the research project and this subject should tackle appropriately: 1) What is the researcher's role in this study? 2) How can the researcher deal with data privacy, confidentiality, anonymity and the appropriation of using the stories of others? 3) How can the researcher translate the data between two languages? 4) How can the researcher treat and use the data after this study for the future dissemination?

First of all, as this study is located in a cross-cultural context, it means that the researcher needs to carefully consider the role in conducting this research in a given cultural setting (Tashakkori and Teddlie, 2010, p. 115). The researcher selects and approaches the research topic from a particular cultural perspective and this is influenced by the normative systems of the researcher's native culture. The fact that the researcher acts as a cultural native enables the research to benefit from the convenience of shared language, social and cultural norms, customs and sense of identity. The location of this research chosen Beijing to conduct the fieldwork considers the city's policy advantage, larger cultural consumers and long-established theatre attendance tradition, which were examined in previous chapters. However, the location of data collection may impact on the results because of the identification of personal values, assumptions and biases at the outset of the study. Throughout this research, the researcher has been in a privileged position of being bilingual, and being able to interpret information in an open-ended, and comparatively objective perspective. That the researcher identifies herself as an insider

of this culture, meanwhile, it may lead to limitations in treating the culture from a native perspective. The researcher could record the voices and engage in conversations, without language and habit barriers. Alternatively, the thesis is located in cross-cultural considerations that reflect on local culture and society through an in-depth emic perspective (Headland et al., 1990). This means that the researcher's position in this study can be defined as an internal angle, which decides how the researcher would look and treat the data and findings for the following analysis and interpretation. During the thesis writing, the researcher in undertaking this research is to listen to the voices and opinions without prejudices and preconceptions. The researcher makes sure to analyse all the collected data, even if some of them do not seem useful. Meanwhile, the researcher's supervisors also checked the data to avoid bias during the research phrase of data analysis.

Secondly, the process of collecting data has considered to the principle of the Research Ethics Framework that researchers should be respected to the participants' dignity, anonymity, and confidentiality. The fieldwork of this research was mainly conducted in Beijing and respondents had to reply to a qualifying question to meet recruitment criteria. The use of internet-based tools to collect data raised concerns regarding the access, authenticity, disclosure, recording and presentation that were constantly negotiated through and between the researcher and the research participant (Sharf, 1999). The focus groups and online questionnaires were required to collect personal information including age, educational level, and contact information in order to access the respondents' demographic information and meet the sampling criteria. The respondents were asked to sign a consent form as evidence of their approval (see Appendix 4), which permitted the researcher to record the discussions and use the data for the study. The transcripts of focus group interviews were stored on a laptop with a password protection. Online

questionnaire respondents have been paid for their contributions to ensure the quality of their answers. Meanwhile, the research offered confidential and anonymous participation and the data collected was only used for this research, which were only accessed by the researcher and for discussions with the supervisors. In terms of the ethical procedures of netnography (Eysenbach and Till, 2001), reviewers' preferences for being cited were solicited. Permission to use the texts and pictures found on the *Douban* community was requested by sending messages to the reviewers or webpage managers. All reviewers gave permission for the researcher to use their posts shown on the *Douban* community.

Thirdly, the research was conducted in Chinese Mandarin and all the data from the interviews, questionnaires, and online reviews were originally collected in Chinese. The translations have been undertaken by the researcher and the translations were checked by English native speakers, which ensures the information and data clearly presented and understood by readers. Many Chinese idioms, colloquial words and abstract expressions are tricky to translate into English due to the difficulty in meaning equivalence and complex connotations. Online reviewers tended to use colloquial, popular, abstract or personalised phrases and concepts for expressing their feelings and post-performance experiences. The translation has tried to keep the meaning clear and simple in order to allow readers to make sense of the translated texts.

Finally, the data from the respondents should meet the requirements of individual's privacy under the UK Data Protection Act 2018, where individuals are potentially identifiable through data linkage. Regarding the ethical considerations, the research outcomes will become a document for reference and the research outcomes can be shared equally and legally with individual practitioners, theatre companies and government



policy-makers. The research outcomes will be offered for appropriate purposes, which is also ethically important for this research in dealing with the relationships between academic, commercial and policy-making purposes.

## **5.5 Conclusion**

This chapter has explained the reasons why the research has applied multiple methods to tackle the research questions. It has clearly shown the importance of deploying a multi-methods research to conduct data collection. To apply the notion of Geertz (1973)'s "interpretative anthropology", as the meaning of symbols can be understood in many different ways as the resources of cultural renewal, it has speculated that a mixed methodological approach is more proper for understanding the responses of Chinese audiences to musical theatre experiences deeply and comprehensively through applying different methods. The triangulation of using different methods was a major concern and it was important to appropriate and integrate the data via multiple methods. As outlined, a multi-methods research approach has allowed the researcher not only to hear the "voice" in the widest sense but also it has given time to think and understand the deeper reasons behind the "voice". To reflect this, the following chapters will present the data in a way that the researcher thinks how audience responses frame theatrical experience and engagement through interpreting collected data. The findings will be presented in Chapter 6, Chapter 7 and Chapter 8 in conjunction with the data from multiple methods. In particular, Chapter 7 intertwines this with the data interpretation in the case studies. The description and analysis from case studies become important sources and references for the future practical implications.

## **Chapter 6: Framing Chinese audience views on musical theatre**

As the world becomes more connected, audiences have been afforded vast opportunities to experience a wide variety of art forms in their home countries. Although frequent international communications have opened audiences' minds, appreciating new and authentic art forms has become a common desire for audiences to try new arts experiences. According to Knapp et al. (2011), musical theatre lies outside the distinction of high art and popular art and thus it is defined as a middlebrow art form. This positioning of musical theatre means that audiences have no need to acquire a great degree of knowledge to appreciate its performances. This has enabled the art form of musical theatre to increasingly involve diverse audiences, but it still requires cross-cultural audiences to understand the distinct artistic and entertainment experience of the genre.

With the expansion of the global musical theatre industry, there remains a gap in understanding the views of audiences in the Chinese theatre market. This chapter attempts to investigate audiences' views on both western musicals and Chinese indigenous musicals (also known as traditional Chinese theatre), to provide insights into the perceptions that shape the artistic and commercial value of musical theatre, and the ways in which Chinese audiences engage with musical theatre in their entertainment lives. The argument is organised as follows: in the first section the researcher examines Chinese audience views on western musicals and traditional Chinese theatre; next, the researcher analyses audience responses that frame their expectations to making global productions in terms of theatrical expression and marketing campaigns. The third section of the chapter investigates the routes to engagement of Chinese audiences with musical theatre. Finally, the findings offer a comprehensive understanding of Chinese audiences' views

on the art forms and global productions, especially musical theatre in terms of its experience exchange and enrichment.

## **6.1 Audience views on art forms**

When musical theatre travels to China, the art form has a translation literally meaning music and drama, which shows how the art form negotiates its meaning with local audiences and enable a direct presentation of its artistic and emotional expression. In a cross-cultural context, the communication of art forms decides whether or not a theatrical production is accessible to a wider audience through its totality of theatrical expression. The focus of musical theatre in this section aims to explore the impact of art forms on audiences' theatrical entertainment experience and choice.

Understanding audience views on art forms is rarely discussed in relation to audience experience and theatre attendance behaviour. How audiences understand the art form shapes audiences' theatrical experience and thus the investigation of audience views is vitally important to know how an individual perceives an art form leading to an overall theatrical experience. In this regard, the section argues audience understanding of the art form strongly decides their choice and experience of the performance. Audience views provide reactions to art forms and are engaged with the art form by attending the performance, discussing and recommending their experiences with other people.

### **6.1.1 Audience understanding of musical theatre**

The examination of the art forms in Chapter 1 suggests that what musical theatre and traditional Chinese theatre have common is theatrical expression that integrates singing,

dancing, acting and storytelling within a single performance. Compared to traditional Chinese theatre, 71.67% of questionnaire respondents believe that musical theatre is an accessible art form in terms of its artistic presentation and aesthetic expression. According to the focus group responses, Chinese audiences briefly express their understanding of musical theatre and capture the key features of the art form, using terms such as “dynamic artistic elements”, “the singing and dancing part”, and “performance with songs”. Audience expressions demonstrate the capacity of musical theatre to integrate various art disciplines and this feature empowers the art form with potential to appeal to broader audiences with different tastes and entertainment expectations. Some focus group respondents point out that the singing and the songs evoke emotional interactions, with one respondent describing an experience where “the singing part drew me to the performance”, and “the performance made me excited”. The use of music is key in musical theatre to creating an emotional exchange with audiences.

Extract 1: I knew musical theatre from Bollywood movies. They were very attractive to me as they had singing and dancing parts. I thought musical theatre had dynamic artistic elements. So I thought it was more interesting to me, and especially I felt the singing part was lyrical and drew me to the performance. (Grace)

Extract 2: I used to know about musicals from Disney cartoons but I hadn't known that it was called musicals. I felt it was a performance with songs that made me feel excited. (Jane)

Chinese audiences' views on musical theatre are demonstrably influenced by media outputs, and media plays a major vehicle for experiencing musical theatre. The above descriptions from the focus group respondents indicate the development of mass media contributing to the cross-cultural transmission of musical theatre for reaching international audiences. Disney, Bollywood and Hong Kong's prolific film studios portray musical theatre as popular culture, and bring it to a wider audience through the screen or digital platforms. The entertainment value of musical theatre stimulates a

growing number of productions that have been made by media and entertainment companies such as the Walt Disney Studios. Since 2000, there has been a worldwide Indian film ‘fever’, which has also grabbed the attention of Chinese audiences. Bollywood-themed musicals have stylised the Indian performative genre with song-dance elements (Creekmur, 2013). As one focus group respondent comments, “Bollywood films are attractive to me because there is a lot of singing and dancing”. The singing and dancing of Bollywood musical films are non-verbal theatrical languages which appeal to a universal audience. Singing and dancing are a more direct language for communicating the emotion of performances and connecting audiences than textual and verbal expression on the theatre stage. Based on the views of focus group respondents, the meaning of musical theatre has been generically used to refer to Disney musical productions and Bollywood musicals.

Musical theatre is capable of employing popular media to reach overseas audiences and promote its entertainment value. Even though mass media offers multiple channels to popularise musical theatre across cultures, Chinese audiences seem to be appreciative and actively negotiate and redefine the meaning of musical theatre to serve their artistic imaginations and entertainment expectations. The global film companies - or entertainment brands – relied heavily on commercial drive so have developed a standardised global distribution system. Global distribution of musical theatre pays more attention to selling the production to the international market, than considering an understanding of how local audiences relate to a particular art form. In this regard, Chinese audiences have understood the art form that has embraced a wide variety of world entertainment forms for its popularisation. The original meaning of musical theatre has been effectively erased and homogenised in the process of global distribution and the

artistic expression of a global perspective that leads to different understandings of musical theatre.

As one focus group respondent said: “I don’t even know what musical theatre is exactly like and how does it differ from Italian Opera”. Chinese audience members appear to have a gap of understanding the concept of musical theatre, and especially fail to distinguish musical theatre from other western theatrical forms. The art form recognition of musical theatre has been received by Chinese audiences through mass media and recording devices, such as films. Media is one factor, but a major tool for providing opportunities to experience overseas entertainment forms among mass audiences in China. Chinese audiences received musical theatre from various channels such as Bollywood films and Disney cartoons, which cannot provide a direct experience of appreciating an authentic theatrical performance. The perceptions of Chinese audiences about musical theatre seem differ from the original meaning of the art form as their views have been formed through media platforms. In this way, musical theatre has been received and interpreted by borrowing, modifying, mixing or rejecting materials and meanings from the original context. Consequently, a diversity of media exposure has allowed Chinese audiences to employ a mischaracterised notion of musical theatre in the context of global distribution. Despite its industrialised exposure on the media, musical theatre has been popularised as an international entertainment form. Chinese audiences have learned some theatrical concepts to comment the performance.

Extract 3: When I was in junior school, I really liked a Japanese musical theatre troupe, called Takarazuka Revue – I am not sure you guys are familiar with it – it is an all-female troupe. At that time, I was a fan of Takarazuka Revue and was star-chasing. I have watched many of the performances from this troupe and it made me interested in musical theatre. So I often watch musical theatre performances from overseas theatre companies. (Vicky)

Moreover, the trajectory of musical theatre's global distribution also demonstrates the influence of neighbouring countries and regions on fulfilling the needs of the consumption of musical theatre in the Chinese market. According to Disney Entertainment Manager David Lightbody (2012), Japan, Hong Kong and South Korea were preliminary and key destinations for New York and London musicals in Asia. These countries and regions have embraced and nurtured western-style musicals since the 1980s, or earlier. Prior to the introduction of musical productions from the United Kingdom and the United States, Hong Kong, Japan and South Korea's entertainment companies, such as Takarazuka Revue and the Shiki Theatre Company, played an instrumental role in exposing musical theatre as a modern theatrical narrative to Chinese audiences. Earlier in the 1970s, Japan's theatre entertainment companies found commercial success by staging western musicals and later on started producing Japanese-language musicals. Until the 1980s, the formation of Hong Kong and Japan's entertainment industries still had a great influence on localising and popularising western-style musicals across Asia. As their musical productions deliver similar cultural and aesthetic values leading for the successful entry of musical theatre productions to the Chinese market. These musical-genre productions have been dedicated to the introduction of western musical theatre to Chinese audiences and to the cultivation of a certain number of early audiences and fans.

### **6.1.2 Audience understanding of traditional Chinese theatre**

The explosion of popular cultural and art forms appears to offer more opportunities of social and entertainment experiences. Entertainment choices are growing to feed into audiences' different needs and expectations. Focus group respondents indicate that popular entertainment such as TV shows, animations and pop music provides a more direct, amusing experience for relaxing their lives. Regarding traditional Chinese theatre,

in contrast, focus group respondents are finding it difficult to make sense of the artistic expression of the art form. According to the questionnaire data, only 4.62% of questionnaire respondents went to a traditional Chinese theatre performance (e.g. Peking Opera) in their last theatre visit, whereas 29.48% of questionnaire respondents chose a musical theatre performance.

The artistic expression of traditional Chinese theatre can be related to the taste of older generational audiences, which reflects on the minimising of contemporary audiences for traditional Chinese theatre attendance. Based on the views of focus group respondents, traditional Chinese theatre is associated with old-fashioned and traditional tastes, and this opinion is especially popular among young Chinese audiences who become adults under the growing influence of western culture. Focus group respondents describe traditional Chinese theatre as “a cultural heritage” and “a symbol of Chinese culture”. They also believe that traditional Chinese theatre is an art form for “the older generation who are enthusiastic about the performance”. Focus group respondents also describe themselves as “young people” and “the younger generation” whose entertainment choice is distinct from the older generation. These expressions reveal that contemporary Chinese audiences select entertainment that can socially interact with their shared demographic. The younger Chinese generation keeps up with popular entertainment activities and “trendy” cultural taste. This also reflects on young Chinese audiences who are not familiar with the experience of traditional Chinese theatre. As is illustrated below:

Extract 4: I think traditional Chinese theatre as a heritage drama is popular in China because it is unique and is a gorgeous legacy of Chinese culture. (Livia)

Extract 5: I just think that the younger generation are less interested in it whereas the older generation is still very nostalgic for the traditional theatre. I think the government should probably spend a little bit of time to introduce the traditional genre to young people. (Joan)



In terms of traditional Chinese theatre, there is an aesthetic and thematic distance with contemporary Chinese audiences. As one focus group respondent describes: “In my memory, traditional Chinese theatre is loud and noisy. Performers sing in a high pitch and they speak an ancient, weird dialect.” The artistic style is rooted in traditional Chinese agricultural society – the performances were staged in an open-air venue without any microphone devices (also see discussions in Chapter 1), which requires the artistic expression to be high pitched and loud. High pitch is also considered to be positive aesthetic value and singers are encouraged to deliver their performances at the top of their range. However, this artistic expression no longer represents modern theatrical performance in an indoor venue and meet the expectations of contemporary audiences to understand the traditional theatrical style. The artistic expressions of traditional Chinese theatre are far away from contemporary aesthetic orientation, daily existence and a construct of modern values. As the artistic expression of traditional Chinese theatre is rooted in ancient Chinese life that forms the entrenched aesthetic system and the cultural references, but it limits the extensive employment of contemporary elements. The fixed traditional performative system of traditional Chinese theatre results in vastly smaller audiences.



*Figure 10 Picture of the Peking Opera Performance 'All Red the River' (© Lily Sun China Tours)*

The features of traditional Chinese theatre either directly or indirectly alienate the audiences who have learned little relevant knowledge to understand its stylised artistic expression. The performance of traditional Chinese theatre is associated with dialects, traditional costumes, role types, which are barely linked to modern daily life. For instance, its costume and make-up are designed more closely to resemble traditional Chinese daily presentation (see Figure 10). The performing style is symbolic as the action of “horse riding” does not mean there is a horse on the stage. This action can only be achieved through an actor’s stylised performance, which requires audiences to be familiarised with the codes of the performance. These symbolic expressions in most traditional Chinese theatre performances can be explained by using programme notes or subtitles in modern theatres. One audience response to traditional Chinese theatre is illustrated below:

Extract 6: The audience didn’t quite know why the actors perform in this way as Peking Opera is a symbolic theatrical art. The theme and aesthetic expression of traditional repertoires are too far away from our current lives. I think appreciating Peking Opera requires a high-level of understanding of the art form, and the art form seems not that down-to-earth. Young people are not willing to accept this art form nowadays. When you watch Peking Opera, you should acquire lots of background knowledge and professional skills in terms of appropriate appreciation. For example, the roles in the performances are all in relation to a specific period in history and aesthetic techniques. If you don’t have relevant knowledge of Peking Opera, it’s hard to enjoy the performance. (Livia)

Traditional Chinese theatre (notably Peking Opera) needs the audience to deeply understand each component of the performing and to be able to make sense of the symbolic meanings. Knowledge of traditional Chinese theatre is a decisive factor affecting how audiences access the performance and achieve better arts experience. The understanding of the art form is vitally important for appreciating its performance. According to the focus group discussions, audiences find it is a slow learning process and has less opportunities to practise their knowledge of appreciating traditional Chinese theatre via either media or live theatre, which becomes an obstacle for motivating

audiences to enjoy a performance. The rise of mass media seems not increase the opportunities of understanding the art form for audiences, as media companies and theatres are likely driven by commercial goals and thus they have less interest in presenting the traditional performances. Lower exposure of traditional Chinese theatre has further led to there being scarce chance of learning the performative style and artistic codes and a maximising audience size. Therefore, audiences are restricted in their approach of the knowledge and experience of traditional Chinese theatre.

Extract 7: I remembered that I was in Beijing watching a classic traditional theatre performance in Mei Lanfang Grand Theatre. I went to see the performance with my friends and the ticket was very expensive. I felt the performance was so beautiful. It impressed me but I can't remember the name of the performance. It was a long time ago. I saw a couple of foreign audience members in the theatre. For some reason, I haven't understood the performance deeply. If I have chance, I will try to experience it again. After all, it needs a learning process in which you are able to understand a beautiful art form. (Grace)

The description of the focus group respondent (Extract 7) demonstrates traditional Chinese theatre communicates the art form with audiences insufficiently, as audiences are less engaged with the performance. A high level of relevant knowledge is needed to access traditional Chinese theatre performances, which has become a potential barrier for theatre attendance. Audiences feel they need to “experience it again” but there might be limited time, knowledge and motivation to enrich their experience with traditional Chinese theatre. As a result, it allows audience members to have inadequate emotional exchange with the performance by creating a moment that makes audiences memorising the performance.

There are, however, positive voices with regard to appreciating traditional Chinese theatre. Some focus group respondents claim their interests in Chinese theatrical performances and are in search of different entertainment experiences. Attending

traditional Chinese theatre is seen as a new experience which differs from the experience of popular entertainment produced for the mass audience. One focus group respondent shares her experience of watching a traditional performance, and insists that “this performance offered [her] an entirely fresh artistic experience”. The experience of traditional Chinese theatre becomes a niche choice that has different experience compared to popular entertainment. See the response describes below:

Extract 8: I bought a ticket for a traditional theatre performance because I haven’t had this experience before. I am curious to discover a new experience that can offer me a unique entertainment experience. I am tired of mass entertainment. (Joan)

Optimistic views on traditional Chinese theatre also reflect on the experiments in reinventing the art form while maintaining its performative rule. Traditional Chinese theatrical expressions have started to tap into popular culture, digital technologies and merchandising techniques for the creation of commercial content (Thorpe, 2010). There are various types of contemporary experiments, including the adaptations of Shakespeare’s plays to traditional Chinese theatre. Theatrical experiments attempt to explore how traditional materials can be re-mediated with relevance to contemporary Chinese audiences and ensure a wider audience to enjoy the performance. Another respondent (see Extract 9) was inspired to take in an example of Chinese Pili Opera, which was originally based on one of the traditional Chinese theatre styles, known as *Boo Dei Hi* (literally means clothing-made puppetry). This focus group respondent explained that she knew *Boo Dei Hi* from a TV drama that was successfully adapted from a traditional genre. In this way, audiences are motivated to explore how traditional theatre relates to contemporary expressions that may offer new entertainment experiences. As she illustrates below:

Extract 9: China has a very traditional theatrical form known as *Pili*, a glove puppetry opera in Fujian province and Taiwan. I didn’t know its traditional form at first but I watched some TV shows and animations made by Pili International

Multimedia and then I have known about traditional puppet performances originally from Fujian. The dialogues were spoken in Fujian dialect which is really beautiful. I learned the traditional opera after I watched the TV shows. (Alice)

Audience responses to the art forms demonstrate that Chinese audiences show a lower interest in attending traditional Chinese theatre, because the art form has limited space for reinvention to engage with socially diverse audiences for offering direct arts experience, relating to people's contemporary existence. In contrast, musical theatre is close to the style of modern theatre that breaks conventions of traditional European art forms to explore the fusion of new musical styles, dance and physical movements, and means of theatrical expression. In particular, the art form of musical theatre is more flexible for communicating emotions with broad audiences through combining multiple performing arts genres and styles. The data of online questionnaires shows that almost one third of respondents (27.17%) attempt to enjoy a new experience for their theatre attendance. Audience responses have acknowledged the experiential value of new art forms, this represents a voice of Chinese audiences who are keen to experience a new entertainment form while attending a theatre.

Throughout the discussions of this section, it articulates major reasons that make art forms (in)accessible to audiences. Art form plays an essential part in shaping people's entertainment choices and keeping engagement with existing audiences. With globalisation, international art forms can be accessed through media exposure, direct artistic exchange and diplomatic communications. The origin of art forms has less influence on the familiarity with audiences in people's modern life. Native art forms become not a guarantee for making accessible performances in the global cultural flows.

This section also identifies challenges for musical theatre to introduce the art form to a Chinese audience. The focus group findings reveal audience understanding to art forms that suggests the potential understanding gap for choosing and enjoying a particular art form for theatre attendance. Audience views are decisively important in forming the meaning of the art form, which requires marketing campaigns to consider the specificity of an art form that can be clearly understood by audiences. The next section will examine Chinese audiences' views that shape making and marketing global musical theatre productions from an audience-focused perspective.

## **6.2 Audience views on global productions**

The Chinese market has witnessed the effects of social and economic transformation, including urbanisation and globalisation, which shift people's cultural tastes on art form choices. The market orientation of arts and cultural organisations stimulates the employment of promotional materials appealing to audiences' interests and desires. For international musical theatre companies, promotional materials for global productions have widely adopted the concept of "the original production" to step into the Chinese market. International marketing practices make use of the mark of the original version that seems to root the production in its source. This is the tactic of experienced theatre producers who deploy appropriate cultural practices to engage audiences in an overseas market. "Original version" has been printed on posters and published in the local press to inform the authenticity of musical theatre productions, which means a direct transfer from its home country to China. Capitalising authenticity can be seen as added value for the branded production but it does work with audience expectations for their enjoyment of truly western musicals. Audience expectation of an authentic cultural experience is

linked to hearing a foreign language that has become a commercial means for promoting a global production to a local audience, because original language productions are billed as a truly authentic taste of musical theatre. The result of this is to provide Chinese subtitles to accompany an English-speaking production, which is deemed to be an authentic and accessible experience by Chinese audiences.

Furthermore, audiences prefer to enjoy a musical theatre performance that is fully transferred from its home country with an authentic language. British or American cultural elements appeal to audiences' enthusiasm for watching an authentic theatrical performance that is different from the experience of traditional Chinese theatre. The use of original language is seen as an important part in the attractiveness of an overseas production, as 69.36% (34.1% agree and 35.26% strongly agree) online questionnaire respondents believed that the English-language version is more appealing than the Chinese-speaking version. Behind the preference of original language, audience expectation for a production showcases the way in which each character embeds in its original cultural context. In other words, audiences believe roles in a western story setting should be played by European actors, which fits into the original social and cultural settings. This opinion will be shown by discussing the case of Chinese production of *Cats* in Chapter 7.

Interestingly, more than half of questionnaire respondents (67.63%) express their expectations to see a musical theatre production integrated with Chinese elements. This data indicates audience expectations of the embedment of Chinese references in a global musical theatre production, aiming to create familiar codes related to local audiences' social and cultural background. Chinese cultural references enable Chinese audiences to

build a close connection with a particular performance and enhance audience experience by relating characters, themes, plots and emotions to a local context. In cross-cultural theatre transfers, fusing local materials has become a common tool employed by international theatre tours for facilitating emotional communication with local audiences (Novak-Leonard and Brown, 2011). Local cultural references can remove audiences' anxiety about appreciating a new, foreign-speaking art form. The employment of local materials, however, seems to be a contradictory response to audiences' expressed preference for watching an original version, but it shows the taste of Chinese audiences who seek authentic experiences, as well as intimate experiences from international productions. Therefore, global productions need to hybridise an authentic and familiar experience in order to appeal to Chinese audiences.

Advertising and visual promotional materials are an effective means to overcome language and geographical barriers for reaching global audiences in this digital era. In the Chinese marketplace, audiences express a sense that visibility is an essential component to achieve a higher level of product recognition for informing potential audiences. 42.86% of online questionnaire respondents said that production information on posters evoked their curiosity. As one focus group respondent provides a description, "the 'green woman' is used for *Wicked* standing out from other posters of musical theatre shows, because the colour and design have provided informative clues that evoked my curiosity and interest to explore the whole story in the theatre". Using recognisable visual materials offers a direct approach for previewing the highlights of a global production. In particular, visual materials can portray a public image on a poster-scale size to inform and attract a potential audience. Along with image exposure, international fame (40.46%) is another key component in terms of visibility because it promises a guarantee of the



experiential quality of a production. For instance, the theatre awards culture in North America and Europe represents an acknowledgement of artistic quality as evaluated by theatre experts. As one focus group respondent states, the text of “12 Tony Awards” on a poster is impressive about the production of *The Producers*.

To enhance the visibility of a production in the marketplace, most musical theatre productions create video clips on social media. The endorsement of stars and celebrities also gives an indicator of quality credibility for audiences who expect to see a world-class theatrical performance. Stars and celebrities can be a hook for enlarging the impact of marketing campaigns and bring added value to a production. But the star-driven commercial mode of musical theatre do not guarantee transcultural audiences as Chinese audiences may be not willing to purchase high-price tickets for the star or celebrity cast. Only 11.43% of online questionnaire respondents believe that stars can be a factor of driving theatre attendance; and almost a half of online questionnaire respondents (42.78%) are not willing to pay more money for a celebrity-casting production. It reflects that musical theatre stars have not fully merged into the local celebrity culture to add value to a production. Ticket prices do decide the popularity of a global production, especially for a new art form experience. As the online questionnaire data show that a price between £31 to £54 is preferred to attend a theatre performance by more than a half of respondents (57.80%). Affordable ticket prices may turn an occasional theatre-goers into a frequent attender of musical theatre performance.

### **6.3 Audience routes to engagement with musical theatre**

As the Chinese younger generation grew up under China's open-door policy and the wave of western cultural influence, they have more possibilities to engage and promote the experience of watching musical theatre performances. The initial idea of this section is inspired by Holt (1995, p. 1)'s query: "What do people do when they consume"? As Alexander (2003, p. 181) argues that "Art never stands alone, but must be understood in relationship to the people who consume it. The meanings people take from art, and the type of art that they choose to consume, are based on their backgrounds and their social networks". Both scholars suggest that how Chinese audiences' perception of musical theatre is related to their social experience and the way of consuming the art form.

Asking experienced audiences "What other activities do you engage in when going to watch musical theatre performances?" can help us to understand their routes of engagement with musical theatre in a local cultural context. Focus group respondents describe their activities taking place in parallel with theatre attendance before, during and after the performance. The behavioural model of these three periods while attending musical theatre has been adopted to understand the engagement of Chinese audiences with musical theatre performances, and to reveal how Chinese audiences conduct other leisure and social activities in parallel.

Before a theatre attendance, the majority of focus group respondents mention that they usually go to websites to search for relevant information about the performance, to deepen their understanding at show-time. They attempt to use "accurate" and "professional" vocabularies to confirm their cultural competencies and demonstrate they are knowledgeable enough to understand the performance appropriately. Meanwhile,

these respondents show serious attitudes towards investigating relevant information and making adequate preparation before attending a performance. As the online questionnaire data show, social media (71.43%) is widely used to search for relevant information about musical theatre performances, compared to the use of traditional media (14.29% voted for newspapers and 11.43 % voted for magazines). Most respondents believe that they could benefit from this information to obtaining a ticket with a reasonable price, to improve their live experience and to exchange information and views with companions before and after the performance. Experienced audiences can make informed decisions on ticket prices and what to attend. As one respondent describes:

Extract 10: *Cats* was staged in 2008, and all VIP tickets were priced at 2008 yuan. However, student tickets were set up on a first come, first served basis. I was lucky to win the 218th special offer ticket at 280 yuan (about £25.45). At that time, it was a pretty good memory of buying the tickets for the performance. (Alice)

Musical theatre performances can create special memories for Chinese audiences during and after the show-time. The live interactions are major opportunities for audiences to have direct contact with actors and a particular performance. Audiences gather impressions of the art form and familiarise themselves with the style of the performance. Show-time is the most important moment for building engagement with on-site audiences. As one audience member notes:

Extract 11: During the show, I saw the cats running off the stage and they grabbed your wallets or touched you, which surprised me. It was a funny experience. (Tina)

After a performance, some respondents are able to recall and clearly describe specific theatre highlights and their memories about a specific moment during the live performance. The post-performance interaction between the audience and the performer creates a “know more” opportunity about artists and a specific performance. This also enhances the experience of theatre-goers who are seeking an emotional and experiential

exchange, as well as satisfying personal curiosity at a specific venue and time (see Extract 12). The descriptions of focus group respondents also detail their participatory experiences through purchasing tickets and by-products merchandise - primary routes to post-performance engagement. The data show that 28.33% of online questionnaire respondents are willing to purchase merchandise such as T-shirts, DVDs and programmes. According to focus group discussions (see Extract 13), possible barriers to buying related products can be attributed to the unappealing design and poor quality. More creative and delicate tie-in products and immersive activities can still be compelling to audiences and, meanwhile, facilitate audiences' participatory experience.

Extract 12: I remembered that the show *Sister Act* transferred to China and it arranged a special event after the performance. That was all the audiences lined up to interact with the actors. The actors sat in front of the table waiting to sign programmes. I saw that their make-up had melted because they were sweating. They were wearing the original costume. Very real scenario, very good. (Joan)

Extract 13: I usually buy programmes which have an introduction to the casting actors and many commemorative photos. I felt that the related products of musical theatre didn't have too many choices. I only consider buying the programmes and sometimes will consider T-shirts. I won't buy most of time, because I felt that they were not attractive enough to me. (Julian)

Chinese audiences intend to renew their previous performance experience by listening to show music and songs via the internet. This is also because the experience of musical theatre might not happen often in audiences' daily cultural lives. Musical theatre performances have been occasionally staged in China – the live performances have not yet run for long terms. Chinese audiences seek to gain a different experience from a western musical theatre performance, as one focus group respondent stresses that theatre companions help them find common topics and shared emotions for exchanging experiences after the performances. 11.43% of questionnaire respondents tend to spend time with family and friends when attending a theatre. Most respondents (73.51%) said

they are not willing to go with a person who will have less interest and enjoyment of the performance, because it limits their post-performance experiences, as they cannot exchange mutual ideas and feelings.

Chinese audiences tend to emphasise the experience of communicating with companions once the show is over. Sontag (1966) explains that theatre creates a real space that is static and fixed, where it not only offers an aesthetic experience but also social experiences of live interactions between stage actors, companions and other audience members. There is also quite a lot of non-verbal communication among friends in China as they turn to face their companions during performances to share their appreciation – it is often very much a shared experience that is reinforced after the show by verbal discussions on their memories of what they have seen. The communicative expectation of audiences has been extended to utilising social media. A majority of respondents (71.68%) report that they share their experiences regarding watching musical theatre on social media. Social media posts are relevant to their interactive experiences with companions, the performance and making and maintaining social media friends' contacts. Social media is useful for reaching emerging audiences but the limitations on the length of texts restricts descriptive and detailed information for existing audiences highly involved in theatre. The provision of professional newspapers and magazines can target enthusiastic attenders who want to deepen their post-performance experience. Audiences' social media posts stand from a consumer's perspective and provide trusted and convincing content to reach people in an individual's social network. The use of social media expands peer influence and introduces the experience of musical theatre to people's social networks. In this way, theatre companies can seize the opportunity to organise proper interactive activities via

social media before, during or after theatrical performances in order to increase audience participation.

#### **6.4 Conclusion**

The gathering and understanding of audience perceptions to art forms are core to improving arts experience and engagement. Chinese audiences' responses provide a holistic understanding of audiences' experiences and expectations in terms of musical theatre attendance. This chapter has presented findings to provide insights and recommendations from the focus group and the online questionnaire studying audience views on art forms, the touring productions, and musical theatre engagement. The findings suggest that the taste of Chinese audiences has gradually moved from a stylised aesthetic to a modern theatrical expression that can communicate a mix of singing, dancing, acting and storytelling in a more straightforward and realistic way. Chinese audiences are resistant to appreciate an art form that requires them to make more efforts to acquire relevant cultural knowledge for appreciation. The prerequisite for media and theatre companies is to introduce the art form in a way that embodies different cultural traditions and judgement of aesthetic and entertainment value, to positively impact on the audience's understanding of a new theatrical experience.

China's ongoing social and economic transformation shifts the ways in which audiences are building new routines and habits to engage with musical theatre, especially for the young generation. "Knowing more" about the art form, artists and storylines has become a feature for Chinese audiences, who try to engage with an overseas theatrical experience, especially using social media for archiving and enhancing their experiences. In a

commercial setting, marketing materials have become an important reference point for Chinese audiences making choices. Audiences rely on international reputation and high-level visibility in the marketplace and they might not even have a sense of their real needs.

Audience preference of the original version and familiar cultural elements shows a paradox that seeks the combination of authentic as well as familiar content in musical theatre performances. With a growing number of western exports of musical theatre, the tension between original and culturally-hybrid productions suggests that theatre producers and arts marketing professionals need to facilitate audience understanding of new art forms in order to improve audience experience of watching a live musical theatre performance. Meanwhile, Chinese audiences need to develop confidence in choosing a performance based on an individual's real taste that is not driven by promotional materials.

From a practical perspective, there is optimism, as Chinese audiences are trying to develop new attendance habits and entertainment choices. Overseas theatre producers need to realise the fact that Chinese audiences have different levels of musical theatre knowledge as they have directly and indirectly learned the art form from a variety of channels. There is, therefore, a need to find an appropriate marketing language and media publicity approach to introduce the idea of a clear and authentic potential experience of musical theatre for Chinese audiences. A star-driven model of musical theatre does not work well with a Chinese audience unless the star comes from an art form they are familiar with, and thus it requires significant time to build a strong relationship with local audiences. Peer influence on social media platforms plays a rising role in introducing a new arts experience to a Chinese audience. This requires theatre producers to engage

existing audiences and develop new audiences who have not yet fully cultivated a loyal taste for musical theatre performances via social media platforms.



## Chapter 7 Case studies of Chinese productions

With the frequent transfers of musical theatre productions into the Chinese market, many international companies have started to make tailored services catering for Chinese aesthetic, thematic and marketing preferences. This chapter analyses the specific characteristics and cross-cultural practices of *Cats*, *The Phantom of the Opera* and *Wicked* through reviewing media publicity, marketing materials and Chinese audience responses to these shows. It aims to respond to evaluations of how well musical theatre productions transfer to the Chinese market. The case study of the Chinese production of *Cats* (2012) discusses the issue of adopting local cultural elements; *The Phantom of the Opera* (2015) introduces a romantic ghost story to appeal to a Chinese audience, and considers how Chinese audiences co-produce musical theatre stars which reflect on their interests in stars' personal lives; *Wicked* (2017) as a fairy tale delivers modern themes and values which targets audiences from various age ranges. The case studies will provide a better understanding of Chinese audience responses to specific musical theatre shows when staged in China.

Since 2000, *Cats*, *The Phantom of the Opera* and *Wicked* have toured China's megacities including Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou. After the initial transfer across these cities, the flow of global musical theatre productions has begun increasingly moving eastwards from Beijing to Shanghai and Guangzhou, and it also has expanded to China's emerging large cities, such as Nanjing, Suzhou, Chongqing, Xi'an, Hangzhou, Ningbo and Shijiazhuang. These cities have common in highly concentrating university graduates and the population with increasing incomes and spending power compared to other Chinese cities, which stimulates the demand for arts and entertainment (Zhou, 2019). The expansion of the China tour indicates the previous success of global musical theatre

productions that has reached wider audiences from China's first-tier cities to the emerging large cities. These three musical cases are representative in terms of the long-term development of brand recognition and influence in the Chinese domestic market and attempts to run long term as these shows have been transferred and staged across Chinese first-tier cities for years.

### **7.1 *Cats* (2012)**

*The Times* comments on T.S. Eliot's poetry: "there is a relentlessness about his patrician diction that is hard for modern listeners to take" (Hardyment, 2018). Even so, his poems showcase a distinct style of musicality and the auditory experience. The musical *Cats* was inspired by T.S. Eliot's *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats*. Lloyd Webber transferred this story to the musical *Cats* as a stage performance and it has been known as the first British-born dance-musical - premiered in London's West End in 1981 and since then it has enjoyed great success across the world. The Really Useful Company website remarks that "*Cats* is a magical musical". The company's official website has continued to announce that, *Cats* has been staged in more than 50 countries from Europe, North America, to Asia, Oceania and South America in 19 languages; and has drawn audiences of 8.1 million. This British musical has maintained the record of "the fourth longest-running show of all time" (TodayTix, 2018). Its global influence and commercial success made *Cats* an inevitable choice for a Chinese production. This case study discusses how *Cats* has achieved a cross-cultural transfer and considers a Chinese audience's cultural competency to receive a British musical.

In 2012, the stage version of *Cats* was produced in the Chinese language. The creation of the Chinese production *Cats* positively made musical theatre more accessible to Mandarin-speaking audiences. The production attempts to remove language and cultural barriers for the local audiences that possibly enabled audiences to have a high-quality experience of a global production. In particular, the popularity of international tours has more opportunities for musical theatre makers to create foreign-language productions. The concept of Chinese production is used to imply the use of Chinese language in musical theatre performances. It usually refers to the musical theatre productions translated or transferred from English to Chinese, whereas the original production refers to the English-speaking plays known by a Chinese audience. Another Chinese production *Mamma Mia!* is a modern story that addresses the domestic family life, and humorously reveals a series of life challenges. Compared to *Cats*, the plot and dialogue of *Mamma Mia!* are more straightforward in revealing modern marriage and family relationships. Without language barriers, the audience is no longer distracted from watching the subtitles and can more easily enjoy the performance. In the field of theatrical productions, language is a constituting part of the whole performance that conveys artistic and emotional expressions throughout the performance. Without proper translation, the Chinese production may disrupt the authentic feelings and emotions of the original production and fail to rouse the audience. The use of a local language may allow productions to reach a wider audience and create a close audience-performance relationship.

### **7.1.1 Cross-cultural marketing campaigns and promotional materials**

The musical *Cats* tells of a tribe of cats holding an annual Jellicle ball where the tribe leader will make the “Jellicle choice” that decides which cat can come back to a new life.

The musical consists of chorus work without leads and its revue style possesses poetic expressions. In 1998, the Really Useful Films produced direct-to-video musical film *Cats* and the release of the film version in China was one of the prominent outputs, which allowed the successful cross-cultural distribution of the production to China. The original sound recording especially received greater distribution in the Chinese market, which not only commanded high profits in sales of DVDs and CDs but also potentially cultivated loyal audiences who were emotionally attached to the memory and the childhood experience. The image of *Cats* in the eyes of a Chinese audience has been firmly established by musical records such as CDs and music videos, which were known as the Chinese audiences' consumption of western entertainment.

The poster for *Cats* in China uses yellow and black colours that are as simple as the story to create a mysterious cat's image. The visual design used on poster and publicity highlights a pair of eyes, along with the marketing slogans "Let the memory live again" and "UK-origin production". The words such as "memory" and "UK" signify the original and memorable experience for the audience in response to Chinese preferences for authentic English musicals. The promotional texts, such as "UK", "the West End", and "Lloyd Webber" as symbolic language, demonstrate a quality guarantee of the performance and a strong British identity to entertain audiences. The identity of "Britishness" and "Anglophone-ness" is sought by Chinese audiences who believe that the original productions provide a new artistic experience. The Really Useful Company staged Chinese *Cats* in 2012 and the musical has launched China tours for four times by 2018. The Chinese production recruited Chinese actors who were able to present integrated Chinese dialects and customs as a commercial and entertainment experiment

that aims to minimise cross-cultural differences and make a positive audience-performance connection.

### **7.1.2 Chinese actors as a culturally adaptive test**

Chinese *Cats* employs local actors, but there is a distinguishing type of theatrical performance: the show employs the animal characters, which is not traditional in style and the characters are costumed as the animal cats. The musical *The Lion King* shares similarities with *Cats* as it comprises the animal characters that display an African wildlife scenario. However, this is distinctly unusual in traditional Chinese theatre, although such animal characters have existed historically, such as the monkey and other animals in *Journey to the West*, a Chinese novel dating from the sixteenth century. The Chinese production of *Cats* evoked the audience doubt: whether a company of the Chinese actors could authentically cast western-style animal characters, as their figure training might be different to act the roles from a different culture with a specific theatrical style or language. This can be reflected in audience reviews:

Chinese actors could not be appointed to play the roles in the global productions as they were not trained in a western theatrical style, especially the performance of each cat portrayed in the British culture. (Jagger)

The orchestra pool is located at the side of the stage so the actors need to see the conductor through the screen, which increased the difficulty for the actors' performance. Perhaps it has considered the difficulty that transformed to the Chinese version. I don't appreciate the performance such as Grizabella as the actor's singing part still had the pitch problem though. (Xi Xia)

Audience reviews reflect on the opinions that the Chinese cast is selected from home-grown musical theatre actors, and it is a challenge for them to play animal roles in the context of British culture. The doubtful voices come from the audiences who think that the Chinese actors are not culturally appropriate to a British musical theatre performance,

as their physical performance style is different from the original cast, even though they are trained in prestigious international entertainment companies. It is a challenge for *Cats* to employ local actors as this show has a strong British style in the aspects of the animal character and the style of physical performances. This reflection is illustrated as below.

Localising the musical theatre products expected to make Chinese actors closer to the original characters that have been portrayed by the British and American actors. I heard the Chinese cast of *Cats* was regarded as absorbing the best Chinese actors, especially some of them were trained in the overseas institutions. Overall, the actors had good acting skills. However, it still has limits, for example, the power of physical stretch and the skill of singing. (Stellyn)

All-animal characters in *Cats* are seen as being somewhat experimental in a Chinese theatrical context, but this musical theatre production seems to be more creative to stage all-cat characters for international audiences. Chinese audiences tend to compare the stage performance with the recorded version as the stage version allowed them to easily observe the detail of the actors' performance. The reviews used "scared" and "surprising" to describe the stage image of cats and how the actors behaved as real animals on the stage. In western culture cats are seen as enigmatic creatures, adopted by poets for companionship, affection, whereas Chinese audiences thought cats should be a cute, tiny and have a soft image, so that they found it difficult to relate to the characters of *Cats*. The make-up of the cats is based on western aesthetics and the behaviour of the animals is not that expected by a Chinese audience. There are some reviews:

I first watched *Cats* on DVD. It was surprising when I watched the stage-version of *Cats*. The interval arranged interactions with the cats to take photos etc. It seemed I was watching a circus performance, which was not a musical show. (Yunyun)

I doubted the popularity of the musical *Cats* that was over-exposed by the media. In the Chinese kids' understanding, the image of cats should be cute in contrary to the figure that is shaped by adult actors, which made people scared. (Iarain)

### 7.1.3 The use of local customs and languages as an audience-focused approach

The Chinese production *Cats* appears to show local characteristics in the form of Chinese cultural and linguistic codes in a British musical. It employs Chinese customs, language and even dialects as a modest and tolerant way of reproducing and presenting *Cats* with an emphasis on empowerment and respecting local cultures and audiences' possible preferences. The creation of the Chinese production also incorporates local customs and dialects, such as the adoption of Beijing dialects to present a British musical theatre with Chinese features. A selection of audience reviews shows reactions to these adaptations:

It was hard to appreciate the Chinese production of *Cats*. In the context of a western narrative, the show was not appropriate to engage with Chinese elements such as adding Beijing Roasted Duck, Maotai liquor, Laobaigan liquor, and Jingba (a kind of dog). I noticed the props on the stage included Beijing-licensed cars, the Beijing streets' names. That was so weird.” (Zimeng)

When the audiences were amazed by these Chinese elements, one of the cats jumped up from the trash mountain and then a group of cats with various styles came off the stage and sat with the audiences singing songs. These were forms that did not appear in the original version. (Zhangyu)

When the curtain opened, a huge trash mountain came into my view. The Aristocratic Cat ate Chinese hotpot and drank Maotai in Chinatown. I was asking myself was it true that the story originally happened on the streets of Britain? I was just surprised by these Chinese elements. (Wuyuzi)

According to the above descriptions, the Chinese *Cats* offers a unique cultural experience that presents a cross-cultural journey for local audiences. However, audiences express a critical perception of the Chinese-version *Cats*. The reviewers use the words “weird”, “confused”, “surprised” and “inappropriate” when they notice the presentation of Chinese elements on the stage. The use of Chinese hotpot, Beijing's vehicle number plates, Beijing Roasted Duck and local dialect is integrated with the British cultural codes such as: London, Thames and pubs throughout the performance. The reactions are illustrated as the following comments:

Last night's performance employed idiomatic jokes. I couldn't understand it any

more. It allowed me to rethink the process of localisation. Do audiences need authenticity or cultural proximity? Personally, I strongly believe the artwork should keep authenticities. It was not an informed decision to employ idiomatic English jokes in the Chinese *Cats*. (Caihong)

Specifically, what I was disappointed with was the localisation of the musical. Localisation is crucial and controversial but this issue was not handled properly in the last night's performance. Even if the musical creators have tried their best to produce Chinese-version musical theatre, my feeling was still complicated when the Chinese elements were interplaying with the lyrics and melodies, which was a bit weird. (Xidamo)

From an audience perspective, the use of Chinese elements seems critical and strives to address the issue of either identity construction or empowerment of the spectatorship. The integration of local customs, dialect and other cultural elements attempts to create emotional bonds with the audience. The use of various Chinese elements mobilises emotional resources to produce “closeness” to the audiences. However, the audiences are not favourably disposed to the Chinese production; it cannot fully represent the authenticity of a British musical as the characters and stories are set in a specific culture. Although the use of local customs and dialect is an audience-focused approach, the reflection of this type of employment enjoys less approval from Chinese audiences. The cultural integration seems unable to represent the quality of a truly British musical. The Chinese *Cats* is a controversial test as it lacks a consideration of the audience appeal of an authentic British musical. As one review describes:

The *Cats* was still full of western styles, and some dialogue did not sound colloquial in Chinese translation. It was obvious the language styles were not consistent. This story was embedded in a Western context and Chinese elements were added artificially. (Hahaguai)

Chinese reviews of the musical *Cats* have shown an audience experience described by the words “surprising” and “shocking”, because of the mix of Chinese elements. It assumes that Chinese audiences have compared the Chinese production of *Cats* to the original version as English *Cats* is already so well known by them. Other audiences use



the words “artificial” and “not consistent” to describe the experience of watching the Chinese stage version. The intention of using Chinese elements seems positive but it appears to demonstrate a superficial integration that makes it difficult to represent the authenticity of a unique cultural experience delivered by Chinese *Cats*.

As a global production, *Cats* has been staged in many languages, such as Japanese, German and Korean. The use of a local language makes *Cats* understandable to international audiences. *Sina* Entertainment (2012), a Chinese global media company, reports the process of staging a Chinese production between the UK and China - translating the script into Chinese took about three years. It is a challenge to find equivalent meanings between two languages. Some audience reviews are illustrated as below:

The lyrics’ translation was basically accurate and flowing. The most famous theme song *Memory* has been adapted to the Chinese language and it became weak – the melody was familiar but the emotion was empty. It did not live up to my expectation. (Langweixian)

The Aristocratic Cat ate Beijing hotpot in Chinatown saying ‘*hui jian le nin*’ (see you again). When the Pirate Cat was surrounded by other cats, he shouted ‘*ai ya wo de ma ya!*’ (Oh, my God!). These lines were very down-to-earth and close to the audiences. Was it true that the story moved between Britain and Beijing? (Lingyu)

The Chinese production not only demonstrates cross-cultural adaptation of musical theatre, but also proves that the translation of the script is about a process of negotiation. Some reviewers who have watched both English and Chinese productions expressed different experiences, and they write commentaries on the use of the local language or dialect. *Cats* is based on classic English literature, which creates cultural and linguistic challenges in terms of balancing different cultural elements within the show. Chinese audience reviews appear to be critical with regards to the use of the local custom and language, such as Chinese audiences’ negative feelings reflecting on the song *Memory*

performed in Chinese language. The use of translation may affect the authenticities of the theme song because it may lead to different emotional exchanges between the Chinese *Cats* and the audiences. The Chinese production seems unable to deliver the same or even a similar experience, as Chinese audiences have perceived *Cats* from recorded versions.

#### **7.1.4 Concluding remarks on *Cats***

This case study has examined the ways in which the Chinese *Cats* that tends to employ local actors, customs and dialects as audience-focused tools. Chinese audience reviews have shown a critical opinion on Chinese *Cats*. The production removes, to some degree, the language and cultural barriers of watching western musical theatre by combining local elements, which can be seen as an audience-focused aesthetic and marketing strategy. The practice of cross-cultural transfer has an artificial and contrived quality, with the specific purpose of attempting to cater and appeal to local audiences. Audience reaction appears to show less interest in the “Chinese flavour” and disapprove any distortion of the original identity of a British musical.

#### **7.2 *The Phantom of the Opera* (2015)**

The French writer Gaston Leroux creates *the Phantom of the Opera* in 1911, which is a romantic story portraying a ghost-like man and a beautiful woman in Paris Opera House. Lloyd Webber has made the story become one of the most long-run shows in London’s West End (since 1986) and on Broadway (since 1988). He is not the first person to remake the story. There are various adaptations on the stage or the screen, such as *Phantom of the Paradise* (1974), *Murders in the Rue Morgue* (1971), and the horror movie *The Phantom of the Opera* (1998). But Lloyd Webber is the most successful producer who

adopts the novel *the Phantom of the Opera* to a musical theatre production. The musical has been running for 32 years in Her Majesty Theatre, London and won an Oliver Award in 1986 and a Tony Award in 1988.

The story is as simple as a clichéd romance between an ugly music genius and a chorus singer, as *The New York Times* Theatre Review comments, the musical is simply a “beast-meets-beauty”, “loses-meets-beauty” story. The show tells romantics between the chorus girl Christine Daaé and the “opera ghost” known as the phantom. The phantom is mysterious, and he is known as an invisible “Angel of Music”. His musical talent strikes Christine’s heart but romance does not happen between them. The dramatic emphasis retains an integral sense of love and adds a thriller element to the show, and the story is tight and organised by the characters, the themes and the plot in a harmonious sequence.

In 2004, *the Phantom of the Opera* launched its China tour in the Shanghai Grand Theatre. By 2015 it had been staged in China for 160 shows and launched the tours in Beijing and Guangzhou (Liu, 2015). Since 2004, Lloyd Webber’s *the Phantom of the Opera* has been adapted in American director Joel Schumacher’s film which has reached international audiences around the world. Subsequently, the stage musical has seen live versions in 16 languages, including in Chinese and the China tour production has been performed both in Chinese and English.

### **7.2.1 Titles and logos in the Chinese market**

Regarding the translation, the title *the Phantom of the Opera* has two translated versions in Chinese: it is literally known as “the ghost in the opera” (*geju meiying*) and “the ghost in the theatre” (*juyuan meiying*). The first translation shows the operatic style of music

composition whereas the latter translation is closer to the plot, implying that the possible story happened in a Paris theatre. Therefore, they are the most recognisable titles for Chinese audiences. The production's image on the poster is symbolically recognisable. The combination of a mask and a rose used for the promotional material has created an endless imagery information in the commercial theatre setting, which indicates the show involves suspense, romance, and love. From a semiotic perspective, the poster shows a white mask and a red rose that directly imply the theme, the character and the story. The presence of a mask symbolises the world of theatrical culture, where the mask is an important tool on stage, and acknowledged as a classic theatrical trope. Additionally, the use of black stands for a common tone that is mysterious background colour to the red and white colours of the foreground images, which provide a bright contrast to the black background. This visual design enables the show to gain high visibility for potential marketing success.

### **7.2.2 Audience co-creation of musical theatre stars**

With the popularisation of the media communication, the audience's role becomes dominant in consuming and co-producing musical theatre stars. The narrative of audience experience and opinion is more attractive to other potential viewers/ consumers because the audiences-generated content is seen as more accessible and authentic. Audience co-created content assists in marketing campaigns across the world and allows audiences to keep track of a particular musical theatre production. Lloyd Webber's name has received great acclaim and commercial value, and it is acknowledged as a global brand. Lloyd Webber and his company the Really Useful Group have become global trademarks in facilitating the circulation, distribution and consumption of musical theatre, in particular his mega-musicals which are inherently suited for long runs and international tours.

Chinese media have dubbed Lloyd Webber as “the King of musical theatre” and this has raised public awareness of Lloyd Webber and his productions. Audience reviews show that Lloyd Webber has built a close relationship with Chinese audiences, even though some reviews are critical. One comment says that:

Webber’s characteristics did not always bring good luck for him. The audiences did not pay for his other works, such as *Jeeves*. Luckily, he started writing *Evita* under the persuasion of Tim Rice. But Webber was a persistent person who revised *Jeeves* and renamed it to *By Jeeves* in the 1990s. It was still not that popular for the audiences (I still like this musical and I performed it when I was a college student). (Xiaoyu)

Chinese audiences talk about Lloyd Webber in relation to his musical talent and artistic achievement as well as his personal life. Lloyd Webber’s personal stories have been co-created by the local media and audiences. The audience has used words such as “persistent”, “childlike” and “the style of Lloyd Webber” to create a personalised understanding of a musical theatre star. It has demonstrated that not only his artistic style but also his early life has drawn the attention of a Chinese audience as entertainment content to consume. Other reviews discuss Lloyd Webber’s personal life, with one commenting that says:

Webber’s childhood undoubtedly has had an important influence on his artistic creation. Many of his works have shown a sense of childlike expression. These works are not too difficult to understand. Instead, they are very suitable for beginners of musicals. His commercial success also proved his characteristics and styles that have brought him good luck most of the time. (Mengxiang)

Based on this comment, Lloyd Webber’s works are accessible to Chinese audiences, as the reviewer reflects on the experience of performing Lloyd Webber’s musical theatre in college, saying Webber’s musicals “are very suitable for beginners”, which reveals an important reason that Lloyd Webber has made his musical theatre productions close to popular taste and the idea of entertainment from an audience’s perspective. Gordon and Jubin (2016) comment that “There are no other composers like Lloyd Webber’s artistic

talent”. Lloyd Webber’s musical productions appear to combine a hybrid style, as his musicals have a classical style with a distinctive British sensibility and also incorporate European classic and operatic styles into the popular genre.

Audience reviews also express Sarah Brightman’s romantic relationship with Lloyd Webber. Since 2008, Sarah Brightman’s fame has increased markedly among Chinese audiences when she co-performed the theme song *You and Me* with the singer Liu Huan at the Beijing Olympics Opening Ceremony. One reviewer writes: “Sarah Brightman was such a beautiful woman when she was young. I couldn’t recognise her face when I was watching the Beijing Olympics Opening Ceremony. Sarah was one of the singers whose voice was precise and impressive”. Before her live performance debut in the 2008 Beijing Olympics, Sarah Brightman had been known by her song *Time to say goodbye*. More recently, she has been associated with her characters in the musical theatre shows. Another reviewer says: “In fact, Sarah’s appearance is not particularly stunning in the field of musical theatre. When she was on the stage, she looked even a little bit slim in my first impression. As the story went deeper, I started to think that her eyes were so clean and attractive”. Based on these comments, it can be seen that a globalised communication environment supports possibilities for Chinese audiences to get in touch with western stars. Chinese audiences have been gradually familiarised with musical theatre stars from other countries, those with recognisable faces and global visibilities via the media and digital platforms. Most importantly, musical theatre stars’ private lives have become a big part of entertaining audiences who share and co-create the stars’ affairs on social networking websites. Co-creating the narrative of musical theatre stars is seen as an active interaction between the audience and the performance.

*The Phantom of the Opera* reflects musical theatre stars' personal stories that draw the audiences to participate in creating content for musical theatre celebrities in a Chinese-speaking online community. As one reviewer writes: "In order to package his fiancée Sarah Brightman, Andrew Lloyd Webber created Christine for her. It showed Lloyd Webber gave his love for Sarah Brightman. He made tremendous efforts to make this musical and he was even willing to use lots of his previous popular songs and music in this work. He carefully selected music, lyrics, performances, stage arrangements, costumes, props, creative teams, and premiere actors for this production. The couple was separated then and their love story made *the Phantom of the Opera*". Sarah Brightman's romantic relationship with Andrew Lloyd Webber has become a "hot topic" discussed by Chinese media and audiences. Similarly, another review remarks that "The couple is artistically talented in musical theatre, as Lloyd Webber has tailor-made *the Phantom of the Opera* for Sarah Brightman who played Christine in the play." The review shows the audiences believes Lloyd Webber made Sarah Brightman into a musical theatre star. These personal stories become increasingly popular as Chinese audiences co-create new content with professional media writers on the online platforms. Audience reviews demonstrate the tendency that the characters and the plot merge with musical theatre stars' personal lives.

Based on audience comments, online reviews offer a rather discursive account of consuming and producing musical theatre stars. Chinese audiences show more interest in reading and talking about musical theatre performers' personal life stories and love affairs. In this way Lloyd Webber becomes a familiar figure to Chinese audiences and their attention has been attracted to his personal life story. *The Phantom of the Opera* demonstrates the effects of co-creating musical theatre stars in the Chinese context. The

audiences have extended the romantic sentiment of *the Phantom of the Opera* to the real life by discussing the romantic relationship of Sarah Brightman and Lloyd Webber. Therefore, the commercial value of musical theatre idols or celebrities spotlights the meaning of co-creation with the audiences, which transforms an audience's role from attending musical theatre performances to co-creating content on social media platforms. The romantic plot is linked to musical theatre stars' personal lives after the performance – in turn this creates conversations about the play, and the stars who have drawn transnational audiences.

The audience-actor interactions make *the Phantom of the Opera*'s Chinese journey that has been advanced by engagement through a Chinese TV programme “Phantom China Project” scheduled in 2020. The project is co-produced by Shanghai SMG Performing Arts Group Live and the Really Useful Group. “Phantom China Project” aims to create Chinese musical theatre stars for the stage production. The star-making TV programme employs participant competition and invites global musical theatre stars such as Sarah Brightman to be judges. Focused on audience participation, the TV programme asks the audience to participate in the process of selecting performers along with the judges. In so doing, it gives the audience a central role in selecting their preferred actors and actresses for the Chinese version. “Phantom China Project” has foreseen the value of star-focused systems delivered by stars and audience voting. Compared with other Chinese productions, such as *Cats* and *Mamma Mia!*, “Phantom China Project” has an ambition that reinforces “direct participation” for Chinese audiences to co-create local musical theatre stars. Meanwhile, it tends to develop a cult among fans of the TV programmes so that the audience is more participatory when watching the performances and will therefore support their favourite musical theatre performers. The idea of the Project



applies television as a mass media platform to reach broader Chinese audiences who may know less about musical theatre. Television undertakes the role of widening the influence of musical theatre in a way which is close to a Chinese audience's common entertainment activities. The incorporation with mass entertainment genres, such as reality TV programmes and star-chasing activities, could draw a wider audience to prosume the stars' anecdotes, careers and personal lives for a long-term interaction.

### **7.2.3 Story as a means of facilitating audience experience**

Story plays an important part in facilitating an audience's cultural experiences allowing them to seek intellectual or entertainment experiences. In the consumer society, the production of stories is strongly related to how stories are consumed by audiences, and especially the advancement of social media offering all formats of stories. The case of *the Phantom of the Opera* enables audiences to engage with the stories and participate in making the interpretive meaning of the show. *The Phantom of the Opera* adopts the romantic and suspenseful content that has mass appeal. It develops the enduring appeal of romantic and suspenseful elements as a storytelling strategy to tap into audiences' emotional and psychological expectations.

The story of *the Phantom of the Opera* is set in the Paris Opera House which it is full of historical and mysterious atmosphere. The interplay of romance and suspense in the theatre reveals the complexity of human nature and strongly enhances the dramatic effects and emotional communications. Many stories seem popular, interwoven with romance and suspenseful plot in musical theatre productions, but also including elements of surreal abilities or peculiar behaviour. The musical *Wicked* is a magic story depicting a green-skinned girl and how she strives to live her life with a peculiar look. *Young*

*Frankenstein* tells of a mad scientist who creates a new creature with a monster-like appearance. *Ghost* engages love and ghostly matters to enact lives, death, love and revenge across both the mortal world and the ghost world. The story portrays a murdered man who became a ghost with a live spirit, who seeks to protect his impending lover. These specific feelings create audiences' psychological and emotional reactions in order to strengthen the theatrical experience and appeal to the audience's entertainment need.

In *the Phantom of the Opera*, the romantic element propels the character and the story to deliver emotional experiences to audiences. The idea of romantic love engages with the broader theme as a way of making the story performable. As a reviewer has said, "The phantom is invisible, ugly and emotional, while Christine represents beauty and innocence. The phantom loves Christine but Christine loves Raoul". This comment views the romantic relationship within a problematic, tough and complex situation as a realistic representation of the dramatic conflict taking place onstage. The phantom and his love for Christine shows conflicts and this struggle evokes an emotional resonance for the audience throughout the story. Another reviewer points out that Christine's and the Phantom's characters are totally opposite and in contrast. The strong sense of the Phantom's mystery, self-contradiction and conflicts empower the effect of emotional and psychological expressions. One audience online review comments:

There are always subtle details that show the phantom's uncertainty and fear to get on with his beloved girl Christine. His conflict appears to enhance the development of the plot. On one hand, his revenge and cruelty were growing; on the other hand, his ugliness and weakness were revealed and strengthened by the development of the story. I believe that for Christine, this is the process in which her Angel of Music took off the mysterious veil of the phantom. (Wuxia)

Online reviews illustrate how this way of storytelling facilitates an emotional exchange with a Chinese audience and draws them to automatically participate in reflecting and

discussing the story. The phantom's ugly face under the semi-veiled mask is in contrast to his ugliness and mysterious behaviour, the vulnerability and misery are related to the phantom's character that lead to an extreme and peculiar person. This theatrical expression touches on people's hidden interiority on thoughts and feelings and audiences feel open to express their empathy with the performance. The reviews reflect the phantom's flaws and weaknesses, and how his love, struggle and conflict evokes Chinese audiences' empathy. The story demonstrates that the phantom's contradictory personality and self-identity bring the audiences to an emotional journey.

Romantic love is an ever-increasing social phenomenon and a contemporary theatrical preference. *The Phantom of the Opera* sets a grim love story built by the characters' emotional complexity. The story comprises the main characters' subtle emotional and psychological activities through musical and theatrical expressions. In the words of one audience's review:

This small detail of Christine's performance was the first time that made me grab my heart. She appropriately expressed her happiness of being an innocent girl who was in love and opened her heart with shyness and excitement. (Tianya)

This audience review uses words including "grabbing my heart", "happiness", "love", "shyness" and "excitement" to describe a sensory and emotional experience. The audience's feelings are associated with the characters embedded in the story and ensure emotional interactions and personal pleasure during the live-performance experience. The review also shows that the audience noticed the details of the romantic plot and reflected on the moment of emotional interaction with the actress's performance onstage. It has demonstrated that the audience's feelings interact with the character's (Christine) during the performance, evoking the audience members' emotional desire to resonate with the character. Moreover, one audience member suggests that:

For Christine, the phantom was her teacher who was respectable. He was her big strength in her life. The relationship between Christine and the Phantom was complex. Christine was still young and she might not realise that she relied on the Phantom emotionally but the emotion was not meant as love. The last kiss let us know that Christine was always grateful and respectful towards the Phantom. (Huahua)

This comment indicates that the love story brings the audiences to an emotional journey that focuses on the romantic plot, which demonstrates that Chinese audiences have paid more attention to the characters in relation to the romantic and emotional element of the story.

#### **7.2.4 Concluding remarks on *The Phantom of the Opera***

This case study has indicated the role of transnational stories that supports ways of facilitating audiences' emotional and psychological experiences in a live theatre context. Audience online reviews show their interest in story experiences that are communicated by the show as well as by the personal life of musical theatre stars. A story comprising romantic and thriller elements draws audiences to interact emotionally with the story and enhances the quality of their live experiences, and thus a story is able to facilitate deeper emotional interactions with the audiences in a live theatre setting. Overall, a successful production of musical theatre represents cultural and commercial value that delivers quality theatre experiences and post-performance interactions.

An effective transnational story promotes connections between the performance and the audience. The case of *the Phantom of the Opera* clearly indicates the overriding importance of storytelling enabled by online review platforms. The romantic elements have artistic attractiveness and a capacity for entertainment that evoke Chinese audiences' curiosity and enthusiasm about paying attention to *the Phantom of the Opera*. A finding

suggests that Chinese audiences learn to react with the romantic element of the play, and the use of romantic and thriller elements is applicable to tell stories catering for transcultural audiences.

### **7.3 *Wicked* (2017)**

In 2017, the Beijing run *Wicked* was being staged at Tianqiao Performing Arts Centre, a brand new venue. A number of famous musical theatre performers including Jacqueline Hughes, Carly Anderson and Bradley Jaden played the show for the Chinese production. Anglophone musical productions have appealed to Chinese audiences more than ever before, as one online review mentions the exuberant music of the theme song *Defying Gravity* - the reviewer could recite the lyrics and sing the song. As one of the slogans on the poster says, *Wicked* is “the best-seller Broadway production” and “the award-winning Broadway & West End musical”, which clearly indicates that Chinese audiences are attracted to the show by knowing the origin of the production. In terms of the poster design, the green background makes it stand out and, the green-skinned witch’s witty smile invites you to explore what will happen in the show.

Media reports that the musical *Wicked* is one of the most successful Broadway productions ever. Not only does *Wicked* receive industry awards but it makes substantial box office revenue. The show has been touring internationally for decades across Europe, South America, the Pacific and Asia. The distribution of American musical theatre productions occurs in many instances of related cultural brands, such as Disney, Hollywood and Broadway. The transnational circulation has given *Wicked* an international reputation since its transfer to London’s West End in 2006. Compared with

*Cats* (1981) and *The Phantom of the Opera* (1986), *Wicked* which premiered in 2003 is a young production but it was born at a time when musical theatre is more popular around the world than ever before. The industrialisation of global musical theatre represents a world in which musical theatre makers are professionally trained and the creative teams are artistically efficient. However, *Wicked* faces strong competitors when entering the Chinese market: *Chicago* received better audience reviews than previous shows in 2018 and 2019. *The Producers* (2017) was the first to present a New York sense of humour across cultures. Disney Entertainment's *The Lion King* (2015) got unusually wide coverage in the Shanghai press. As is known, many productions face the challenge of adapting to local audience needs, which means they do well in English-speaking venues in New York or London but might not do so well in other cities or countries.

### **7.3.1 Broad appeal and potential audience**

Reviews are easily read by audiences via digital platforms, which maintain its influence in terms of audiences' purchase decision-making. *Time Out London* describes *Wicked* as a production that "will entrance every generation in wonder, wit and suspense". This quote, more or less, is designed to attract a wider audience to come to the show as "every generation" is a sign of broadening the audience. But it seems to the audience that this quote creates a universal appeal because of its sense of appeal to all age groups. The target of all generation may lead to a gap between different audiences' real experiences and their expectations, and thus the media publicity may result in a higher risk of credibility-loss in the marketplace. Another magazine review, from *The New York Times*, offers a different perspective to comment the production. *The New York Times'* review describes *Wicked* as "perfectly pitched to teenagers" and sees it as a "teenager drama". This review suggests that teenagers are a specific audience group, but ignores the fact

that teenagers may not be able to afford to see the show, as the tickets are priced higher than other entertainment forms such as cinema.

This case study aims to examine how the themes of *Wicked* appeal to a broad Chinese audience and how their responses reflect on social values and the serious contemporary issues that the themes raise. The Chinese production of *Wicked* makes a solid effort to reach a mass audience and compete with other global productions in order to succeed. *Wicked* is associated with the origin of a classic American Children's book *The Wizard of Oz*. The themes have multiple layers delivering simple yet deep philosophy. The themes of the show are wide-ranging, integrating ideas of friendship, romance, female empowerment, fairy tale, "good and evil" in human nature, social equality and racial issues; of which some themes have been explored by the audiences themselves. The universality of the themes enables the show to pitch its market position, and also to maximise its potential audience.

Previous studies of the musical *Wicked* have come from theatre and performance studies and gender studies. Research stresses that the female double lead roles and the role of the girl have distinctive features of female leadership and self-actualisation (Kruse and Prettyman, 2008; Wolf, 2008). The female and gender topics appear to attract Chinese female audiences who are economically and socially empowered in contemporary society. The report from *AliResearch*, an *Alibaba*-based research institution, shows that the average Chinese woman spends over 4% money more than men on online shopping and also demonstrates that females represent a rising spending power in China. Entering to the female economy, it is undoubtedly important to target Chinese women who make about 80% of the purchasing decisions in a household (AliResearch, 2013). The data

evidences that the Chinese female is becoming a dominant group in the expression of willingness to spend money in everyday life, and their economic power can also extend to the theatre consumption.

The Chinese production attempts to target families. Besides children, adults are also seen as an important potential audience. The successful transfer of the production to China is, in part, because it fills the genre gap in plays for children and teenagers. Children's theatre is a major sub-genre in Britain and America. Famous productions for children include *Matilda*, *Billy Elliot* and Disney cartoon productions, but China has never had specific plays for children. According to the statistics, China has 370 million population under the age of 18, and by 2019 at least 600 active publishers in the children's book industry (Tan, 2019). Moreover, Chinese parents have a higher willingness now to spend money on their children's education and long-term personal development (*Sina Education*, 2017). Therefore, there is a demand for children's plays and especially for the imports of western productions.

Knapp et al. (2011) summarise the characteristics of children's plays as including "fantasy within reality", "myths and legends", "toys and inanimate objects" and "fairy tales". *Wicked* is suited for cross-cultural transfer because it features magic and fairy tales, which is a distinct feature of children's plays. In *Wicked*, the magic part is presented via stunning visual designs, including exotic and colourful scenery and flying monkeys, which involves the audience in the show. This magic presentation has been achieved by the technology used to create the sets and by close-to-character costumes. The technological side of *Wicked* is now stored in London, in the Victoria & Albert Museum's collection of Theatre and Performance, where, the model of Elphaba wears her



characteristic neon-green make-up, pointy black hat and boots. In addition to child and teenage audiences, drawing parents into the audience is an important means of widening musical theatre attendance. What might attract adults to see *Wicked* could be their seeking of memorable and thought-provoking experiences. *Wicked* is a timely work that makes adults recall childhood memories of reading the book and watching the movie of *the Wizard of Oz*. The style of performance is magical, witty, and understandable for children but the themes involve serious contemporary issues, which suggests *Wicked* is a performable show for various age groups.

### **7.3.2 Local audience reactions to universal themes**

The risk of transfer, however, is that between different cultural values in America and China. The themes of musical theatre shows strongly determine whether or not musical theatre productions are marketable to the overseas market, especially in non-English-speaking regions. For instance, musicals such as *Hamilton* and *The Book of Mormon* are labelled by their American history and culture. *Hamilton* reveals the origins of US nationhood and the construction of the national identity. *The Book of Mormon* is comic musical theatre in which it involves religious elements and American humour, so there are fewer possibilities of running international tours appealing to cross-cultural audiences. *Wicked*, however, originates from prominent, globally known literature, so it has achieved the transformation from literature to stage.

*Wicked* is an accessible and critical show for examining contemporary social problems and issues across cultures. The online reviews also reflect a sharp focus on the themes that are related to female empowerment, friendship and romantic relationship. These themes appear to be discussed by online reviews, and the female theatre-goers also seem

to have a passion for being seen as part of a loyal audience of the show. *Wicked* undoubtedly brings a modern female image to Chinese audiences. The show to some extent expresses the thoughts of building female power and leadership. It arrives in China at a time when Chinese young women are keen to obtain a modern female identity, to make differences in social advancement, as a review has illustrated:

I saw an elder lady next to me who held several tickets for the same show but for different performances. I was surprised. She told me she felt full of energy and power when watching *Wicked*. She was lucky having had tickets for watching the same show more than one time. (Feiniaoxiyu)

*Wicked* is a production that raises the awareness of contemporary female power for Chinese women, in the form of the two leading roles Elphaba (Jacqueline Hughes) and Glinda (Carly Anderson). The female figures are the representation of modern women against the traditional Chinese female role, constructing a modern feminine image featuring independent, confident and strong personalities. It is no doubt that *Wicked* presents a feminine topic suited to the trending issue of constructing contemporary female empowerment. Within China's modern transition, the traditional Chinese female position still remains, but the women empowered by modern thoughts seek to find a new gender identity in marriage, family and the workplace. The feminist theme of *Wicked* becomes for female theatre-goers to build up strength and power to relocate their gender position in modern society, and becomes a "life guidance" for women.

Alongside the modern female theme, the themes of addressing friendship and romantic relationships also meet Chinese audiences' expectations, especially for female audiences. The song *For Good* is themed about friendship, woman's self-improvement and self-reflection. As Glinda sings: "I've heard it said, that people come into our lives for a reason. Bringing something we must learn. And we are led to those who help us most to grow if

we let them. And we help them in return”. The lyrics transmit strength and energy from the show to the audiences, and allow the audience to seek a “guidance” or “reassurance” for their everyday lives when facing uncertainties and challenges. The online reviews comment on friendship and romantic relationship:

There are too many choices performed in the story to reflect our real life. The show tells the truth, so it is the way to keep an open mind for your life. Glinda and Elphaba’s friendship told me that the real change starts by changing yourself (Xiaodu).

Romantic relationship is a kind of emotional mystery that is a process of giving and loving. Elphaba uses her supernatural ability to experience the world. She and Fiyero broke the obstacles between them altogether. They are very serious and make efforts to be with each other. Life is to spend on facing difficulties and challenges, but you should believe that there is a person in this world who deserves to pursue and to be with. This is love - you may give up anything for love. (Yan)

The wicked witch is not bad. Her wickedness is the result of her good intentions that are manipulated by bad persons. The good witch does not mean she is a perfect person. But many people unlike Fiyero will fall in love with a person by physical beauty over inner beauty. (Wendy)

Based on audience reviews, this musical educates the audience not to judge people and things from their physical appearance. The male character Fiyero falls in love with the green-skinned girl who might not be thought of as an ideal beauty. The role of Elphaba subverts people’s established perceptions of “beauty” and “love”. The lyrics depict Elphaba’s contradictory psychological activities about the dilemma of being good: “I don’t even know what I’m reading! I don’t even know which trick I ought to try”. The lyrics continue: “One more disaster I can add to my generous supply”. The audience is able to see that the character Elphaba has compassion for the injustice of the Land of Oz, by showing her inner emotion with uncertainty and self-conflict, and can imagine that her situation that may take place in the daily life.

Along with the love and romantic themes, this play also deals with topical issues engaged by the subplots regarding social equality. *Wicked* is similar to other American musical theatres in its focus on American society, immigration, race and social equality, and national identity. Musicals which convey the so-called American Dream have enhanced the desirability of pursuing American values and lifestyles for global audiences (Crothers, 2010). *Wicked* is one of the shows conveys modern American values that help it attain commercial success as well as increasing the influence of American popular culture on Chinese audiences. The show *Wicked* is associated with the wealth gap, the power of hope, and social difference in contemporary China led by social transformation, such as the economic reform and the privatisation of individual wealth since the 1980s. People's thoughts and values are influenced by China's social and economic shift.

Through online reviews, the commentaries are a reflection of how the audiences link the thematic content to social affairs, and take the new values back to their own reality. *Wicked* hits upon different themes that obsess adult audiences. The themes of the story introduce a series of contentious social dilemmas in social equality, justice and human nature. The magic content is about an outsider, a green-skinned girl who overcomes a variety of difficulties to become a "good" witch. The story is led by the characters, known as "Wicked Witch of the West" and "Good Witch of the South", the theme of which evokes the nature of human goodness and wickedness for Chinese audiences. This theme fits into profound Chinese thoughts on the dichotomy of good or bad human nature. The existence of goodness or evilness in human nature is a traditional Chinese philosophical debate that influences the construction of Chinese traditional values. It is a significant criterion that has guided people's behaviour for centuries in China's moral society. This

has become linked to a consciousness of modern moral crisis, as the lyrics of the song singing “no good deed” describe. This is shown in a selection of audience reviews:

What is interesting is that this play does not define ‘good’ and ‘evil’ in such a simple way, but it blurs the boundaries between ‘good’ and ‘evil’. There is no absolute good person and the so-called ‘bad person’ is not so evil. It depends on our perception in different time and situation. (AsuraHu)

Even though it is difficult to divide the boundary between ‘good’ and ‘evil’, *Wicked* has a distinct position that seeks to find a balance between power and freedom. (Lachesis)

Online reviews show that the Chinese audience has a great interest in discussing the controversial debates on good or bad human nature. Their opinions mirror the influence of Chinese traditional values on the audience’s understanding of the themes. It seems like this show creates a “connection” or “relevance” that fits into the Chinese audience’s mindset. Some audience reviews express a concern of being good because of the insecurity caused by the social distrust. *Wicked* uses magic and animals to satirise society. It is a model of social reality in which personal trust and Chinese modern morality are required to combine. Audience commentary has linked characters’ experience and situation as a way of discussing the status quo of Chinese society in a more realistic environment. It has also extended the topic to discover other contradictory situations, such as inner versus outer beauty, power versus freedom and love versus hatred. What makes audiences interested is that the show leaves spaces for them to think about the meanings of good and bad in real life instead of characters that come from a labelled image. Audience reviews express the dilemma of human nature in terms of whether we are being good and helpful, or not, to invoke people’s awareness and the attitudes towards hope and diversity.

Another theme focus based on the online reviews reflects on social (in)equality. Online reviews have paid attention to social inequality and the unjust treatment of animal characters that have been extended to a debate related to the wealth gaps, in which rich people take advantage of their economic power (for instance, the phenomenon of the rich second generation in China). This theme invokes the audience's spirit to criticise so-called rich people who are believed to have bad behaviour and a lack of self-discipline. The gap in economic status in modern China deepens social inequality and generates prejudice towards wealthy people and more attention is now paid to monitoring their behaviour.

Let us come to the social reality. Do you know there is a minority of people who are the rich second generation? They drive sports cars and they have affairs with stars and celebrities. Their family's wealth has offered them too much priority in the society. Their wealthy parents paid lots of money for the best school they enrolled. They are lucky but snobby. Look at ourselves. We are the ordinary mass. This is not fair as they have many advantages but might not be as talented as ordinary people. (An Jing)

*Wicked* should have been a fairy tale. It should have had a good ending. You saw that after a whole story, the world is still so stupid, the hatred between the species is getting worse, and the 'animals' were treated unequally and did not get liberal treatment. (Wudianrenkoumoluo)

There are some reasons why I like Elphaba. There are many people who have dreams, few people who are persistent to pursue their dreams. There are many people who give in to the reality, and there are few people who can fight against the reality. Look at the reality that the people from the Land of Oz were fooled by wizards and the governor. At the beginning of the show, Elphaba can be real to persuade Glinda to find a different way when facing difficulties. (Xuanxin)

From the audience reviews, it seems that *Wicked* stimulates the generation of ideas, beliefs and life meanings as well as being a theatrical experience. The reviews reflect an unrestricted self-expression and a deep communication through discussing the themes conveyed by the show. The reviews demonstrate the ability of the show to connect a western fairy-tale story with "universal" values suited to Chinese audiences. The

audiences are seeking energy and encouragement to face the challenges in their lives, to achieve their life goals and *Wicked* may offer a way to envision this.

### **7.3.3 Concluding remarks on *Wicked***

The broad appeal of *Wicked*'s themes is used for targeting audiences in different age groups. However, the show has also needed to emphasise its broad themes to attract family audiences. *Wicked* involves a wide range of themes that explore the role of modern women, friendships, romance, human nature and social justice. The case of *Wicked* suggests musical theatre should possess both thought-provoking value and entertainment capacity for Chinese audiences. For adult audiences, it needs the show to communicate common emotions, to provoke deep thoughts and to reflect on personal lives and life realities. The case of *Wicked* has addressed how local audiences discuss its main themes by tapping into Chinese existing values and serious contemporary issues. Chinese audiences participate in communicating feelings, experiences and strong opinions in online spaces and their expression co-creates understanding of the themes. Existing Chinese values shape ways of interpreting the themes of *Wicked* and allows audiences to absorb modern values and merge these with Chinese traditional values such as Confucian ethics.

## **7.4 Conclusion**

In this chapter the three case studies have shown that the use of Chinese actors, customs, languages or dialects in the Chinese production of *Cats* (2012) is an attempt to appeal to local audiences, via an assemblage of original and local cultural elements; *The Phantom of the Opera* (2015) shows that Chinese audiences' interest comes from both story

experience of the play and from stars' offstage stories. *Wicked* (2017) attracts broad audiences from various age groups, but in particular the fairy tale and feminist themes could appeal to family audiences including children and parents. The delivery of universal themes is received by Chinese audiences and their reactions to serious contemporary issues reflected on local existing values. The three case studies aim to make the point that the features of Chinese productions and the understanding of Chinese audiences' response decides the marketability of live musical theatre productions across cultures. It suggests a deeper understanding of Chinese audience responses to the plays and the further development of musical theatre productions in China. The live experiences of watching musical theatre performances varies individually, and the audiences' attitudes and behaviours are influenced by personal and environmental factors.

Along with the artistic representation of the art form, musical theatre productions are crucial to deliver new aesthetic judgements, modern values and urban lifestyles, through different layers of thematic, aesthetic, and technological representations to Chinese audiences. There is an upcoming challenge for international theatre practitioners to know how to maintain the appropriation of musical theatre in a cross-cultural context and to connect local culture, language and theatre attendance tradition relevant to the audience's accepted expectations. Recent national tours in China carry the reputation and the brand impact of the original plays to achieve the purpose of profit-making and ensure win-win results for both Chinese and overseas theatre business bodies. The studied productions transferred to China for several times and have demonstrated a worldwide reputation. However, the Chinese market might have less opportunities for the entry of new musical theatre productions with less global recognition and reputation. The strategy of developing audiences through marketing campaigns and celebrity endorsement might



distract Chinese audiences from rationally understanding the deeper layers of musical theatre. Consequently an over-reliance on this strategy for both Chinese and overseas theatre practitioners would mean they are unable to maintain and develop audiences in a sustainable, long-term way in the Chinese market.

The findings discussed in the three cases highlight audience reactions to each musical theatre production. The analysis and discussion of the three productions, and positive or negative comments and responses from the audiences are not meant to deny any experiments of making and transferring musical theatre and the deployment of marketing campaigns. However, understanding Chinese audiences' real-life cultural experiences is important to be able to increase the likelihood of developing long-term relationship between the audience and the productions in the cross-cultural practices of musical theatre transfer. Understanding Chinese audiences' preferences should be prioritised to develop Chinese audiences and then productions can provide relevant information and knowledge through media exposure and arts education. Together with the main findings from Chapter 6 and Chapter 7, the next chapter outlines audience post-performance responses to three musical theatre productions. These have been critically analysed to present audience experience and response to the cross-cultural transfer of mega-musicals in the Chinese market.

## **Chapter 8 Post-performance experience of musical theatre – the Chinese audience**

Society of London Theatre has released data: a total of 18,708 performances are available to audiences over the course of 2018 in London's West End theatres (UK Theatre, 2019). The variety of theatrical productions on the market increasingly offer high quality cultural experiences, but it seems people are more difficult to make a wise decision on theatre attendance. On this occasion, potential audiences require a balanced, informed and insightful voice to help them make choices. Theatre critic reviews are a longstanding tradition representing powerful voices to influence theatre attendances in North American and British societies. Theatre reviews give a sense of the play for potential audience members by providing intelligent comments that form mass taste and guide audiences' purchase choice. Compared to the West's theatre review tradition, the Chinese censorship culture tends to use the political means to control the voice of writers and critics. Many Chinese intellectuals were suffering from high political pressure and they had limited space for free expression (Jiang, 2007). Theatre critics in China have a minimum impact on audiences, and thus theatre reviews have been paid less attention to by Chinese audiences in the contemporary society.

Theatre critics who have usually had a strong background in theatre appear to ignore the possibility of a range of audience responses, and become not able to represent a diversity of audience experience (Freshwater, 2009). With the increase of international theatre tours and the advancement of digital technologies, traditional theatre reviews in newsprint have become difficult to reach wider audiences. Also, considering a weakened role of Chinese critics, the internet has become an alternative channel for audiences to search theatre-going information, and the online space wherein the audiences can post comments, photos, and videos from their daily lives. Compared to traditional theatre

reviews, review websites and online audience reviews have a greater influence on audience opinions and attendance choices in current societies. Review websites flourish when digital platforms enable mass audiences to produce theatre reviews. Audience members are active and participatory to introduce personal experiences in a more authentic and reliable way. Local theatre markets have generated a growing number of audience review websites that analyse and judge global productions in a native language. Review websites thus enable international touring companies to effectively employ local native speakers who know well about local audience tastes and potential choices.

This chapter provides insights into Chinese audiences' post-performance experiences regarding three musical theatre performances staged in Beijing and focuses on discussing the role of social networking websites including review content in liberating audiences' expression of their post-performance experiences, the ways in which Chinese audiences build a relationship with particular musical theatre productions, and the ways in which Chinese audiences respond to the features and elements of musical theatre. The analysis is derived from a "thick description" (Geertz, 1973) of commentary reviews posted by online users on *Douban*, known as a Chinese social networking website.

### **8.1 Audience engagement of online communities**

The emergence of online communities breaks down traditional Chinese relational society building upon familiar people and relatives (Fei et al., 1992). These online communities represent a construction of a new social network order via digital technologies in which people could meet and communicate with online encounters. According to the statistics of McKinsey & Company, China has 500 million social network users who have accessed

information via online platforms (Chiu et al., 2012). The digital platforms enable entertainment-seekers to find user-friendly information and connect with online communities. However, Chinese online environment has a strict internet censorship for preventing Chinese residents from accessing foreign websites, such as Google, Facebook and Twitter (Bamman et al., 2012), but local social media platforms have risen to create a wide array of online social spaces. Chinese home-grown online platforms become an unobtrusive way for people to participate in a range of autonomous expressions and interactions, and especially lead to the popularity of user review websites (Herold and Marolt, 2011). Compared to traditional media channels, Chinese cyberspace has a relatively unlimited freedom for online users to search information and practise individual expression.

Based on the researcher's observations of user-generated content on *Douban*, there are major reasons driving Chinese audiences to engage with online communities. First of all, the convenience of online platforms stimulates the access to user-generated reviews for finding authentic opinions and expressions. Review websites provide a great deal of positive and negative comments (which are usually related to higher and lower ratings), showing critical information that allows other people to avoid potentially frustrating choices. Secondly, audience-generated online content appears to be an authentic reflection as these kind of reviews represent a voice offered on behalf of mass audiences. One reviewer uses the words "cheated, disappointed and angry towards the theatre company's misleading information" to express an unexpected and unsatisfactory post-performance feeling. The information from companies' promotional campaigns emphasises only on the positive aspects of a product, but audiences may still feel negatively about the product. This may cause audience concern about the quality of the theatre

experience: As one theatre-goer says, “I suspected that the popularity of *Cats* came from the exaggerated publicity produced by the local media. The theatre company is only profit-seeking”. Audiences become averse to the advertised information that overstates the products or services, and thus distorts their perceived authenticity. Audiences may have been tempted by advertised information that was blurred or overstated and thus they bounce into seeking alternative channels where they may access authentic information to know other people’s experiences.

In particular, unlike other products, theatrical productions cannot demonstrate their quality until curtain-up. Alexander et al. (2018) believe that review websites help to avoid uncertainty when potentially choosing a new cultural experience. Online audience reviews act as electronic word-of-mouth, including critical and audience-facing suggestions, which enable audiences to evaluate the value and quality of live musical theatre performances. Therefore, online reviews play a pivotal role in exchanging and providing relatively authentic and trustworthy information because audiences directly participate in the production and consumption of online reviews.

Maffesoli (1996) argues that the mass is tribalised with the emergence of a variety of small groups distinguished by their members’ shared lifestyles and tastes. In light of review website users’ different interests, lifestyles and hobbies, online communities have been generated to discover and exchange dynamic opinions and experiences. The emergence of online communities demonstrates the needs of Chinese theatre-goers seeking to further their personal interests, hobbies and communicative expectations through online platforms. The online review becomes a vital way to liberate audience expression, including accounts of enjoyable and also disappointing experiences from a

live theatrical performance. The expressive freedom of online communities attracts Chinese audiences to create content, to exchange ideas and to achieve mutual communication. The most common texts and images in audience reviews are related to how they interact with the performance, the venue, performers and other audience members. *Douban's* musical theatre communities tend to present audience discussions regarding past experience, their entertainment lives, and their personal emotions. Reviewers can be anonymous or creating a username to writing, posting and re-posting comments about a particular musical theatre production. As Edmund Burke Feldman says, audiences have “a desire to share what they have found” (Reason, 2010b, p. 15). The creation of online musical theatre communities enables existing audiences to share social and artistic experiences. Audiences gathering through online communities enable the researcher to delve into their personal experience of musical theatre. As the review illustrates:

I am still very excited, very happy, but the only pity is, I have no one to share this feeling with. But it doesn't matter. I can find my way to share ideas that might be noticed by like-minded persons. (*Wicked*, Xi Xia)

Online review communities build a strong tie between audiences and musical theatre performances. With the widening use of social media, *Douban's* communities become popular platforms for online interactions among existing musical theatre audience members and fans in China. It offers a function for rating and reviewing entertainment and cultural activities and for shaping people's tastes and choices in theatre attendance. Audience online reviews are based on people's emotional, intellectual and social expectations and echo their hands-on experiences of attending musical theatre performances. The posts are not only included texts but personal photographs. The use of images shows an enthusiasm to visualise the contours of musical theatre experiences.

For these online reviewers, sharing is a key motive for curating and exchanging social experience and entertainment lifestyle choices with broader audiences.

The *Douban* platform has collected hundreds of audiences' reviews for each musical theatre production, and audience reviews include: who, where, when and how they engaged with musical theatre performances. Although the number of *Douban* review is small, it provides a detailed narrative and image sharing compared to other review websites (e.g. *TripAdvisor*) with thousands of comments. The vast number of reviews and comments demonstrate the popularity of online review websites that has a growing influence on audiences' choices and decision-making. By analysing the content of online reviewers' posts, the characteristics of Chinese musical theatre audiences are key actors in creating meanings for musical theatre in a local context. Review themes are articulated by analysing collected data, and four significant themes are highlighted during this phase of analysis.

<b>Table 6 Themes of audience online reviews</b>
• Memories of a particular musical theatre performance
• Descriptions of theatrical features and live experience
• Celebrities' and stars' personal lives
• Life lessons from the stories

## **8.2 The emergence of transnational Chinese fans**

The homogeneity of a popular culture that has reached global audiences via advanced media technologies has resulted in the formation of transcultural fandom in musical

theatre. Due to the empowerment of far-reaching technologies and international media platforms, globe-trotting British and American musical theatre productions have been welcomed in China. In the age of Web 2.0, Chinese audiences have started to follow musical theatre performers' accounts on social media such as *WeChat* and *Weibo*. Subsequently, online fandom culture has been thrived in China and incorporates local media and fan-star relationships in order to reach a broader base of fan communities.

The fandom-stardom phenomenon in the Chinese context dates back to the popularity of Peking Opera in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Chinese theatre fans are broadly referred to as devotees of Chinese operas, whereas the stars are invested with more meaning, with regards to the mastery of their performing art; they are treated like masters, teachers or leaders with a higher social status and cultural influence (Jiang, 1994). Chinese theatre stars are typically referred to the performing artists with higher artistic excellence which attracted audiences. The performing artists were treated as stars (known as *jue-er* in Chinese). They also act as the heads of the performing troupes and thus are called "bosses" who decide the survival of the troupes.

Particular Chinese theatre stars enjoy a loyal following over many years. In other words, casting is important for achieving a higher rate of theatre attendance and becomes a guarantee of box office. The traditional star system is a successful practice in terms of profit-making in the commercial theatre context where fame is a promise of quality and profit-making. The traditional fandom has fostered a Chinese fan culture that shapes the Chinese star-fan relationship in the modern society. Therefore, the historical construction of Chinese fan culture more or less maintains its influence on the star-fan engagement in other theatre forms. The star system elucidates what are musical theatre's fandom and



stardom meant in the Chinese context, and explores how musical theatre experience is incorporated into the Chinese context, merging with Chinese fan culture.

In the context of musical theatre, the audience is enthusiastic attenders whose experience has built on “exchanging emotional, psychological and social benefits with a production” (Duchesne, 2010, p. 21). These audiences can be seen as fans who regularly attend shows or who have attached to a specific performer, and their behaviour is aligned with “loyal audiences”, “influencers” and “followers” (Linden and Linden, 2017). As Matt Hills claims, the status of a fan may obtain certain types of knowledge and attachment within a specific cultural form (Knapp et al., 2011). As one online audience description illustrated below, it features the existing Chinese musical theatre audiences who attend a specific show several times, and become recognised as part of a local audience who attempts to renew his/her cultural experiences or memories over and over through the same show.

The first round of *Cats* ended last night. Many *Cats* fans have watched five or six times, or even more than ten times for the same show. These loyal fans undoubtedly proved why *Cats* is so popular. The musical made the world beautiful. (*Cats*, Paradox)

Chinese theatre-goers who want to attend a new live cultural experience become a growing number of transcultural fans in musical theatre consumption. Active Chinese audiences show their fan behaviour by posting experience-related pictures which show the “exciting moment” they participated in through online community interactions. Some reviews describe an audience-performer interaction, for instance, with fans asking to have photos taken with the leading performers or buying programmes autographed by the stars. Post-performance events, such as cast-audience meetings, which aim to entertain audiences and maintain a long-term spectatorship with local audiences. These interactive

activities are designed to culminate in fan engagement for musical theatre and to sustain audience loyalty for future theatre attendance. One online review notes as below:

Most of the audiences knew that this was the end of the performance, and they were applauding at the moment when the curtain opened. But the most exciting moment was when Savannah and Emma played separately. When Savannah was on the scene, I was so excited and I cried. After Emma ran out, it was obvious that she was holding back her tears. (*Wicked*, Wudianrenkoumoluo)

The counterpart of fans is musical theatre stars whose visibility is built upon the exposure of mass media, zooming in on high-profile performers and public personalities from a variety of media platforms. Compared with film, music or social media stars, musical theatre stars have had a relatively low media exposure. The term “star” is used here to refer to actors and performers who are active on the musical theatre stage and can be recognised and appreciated by theatre-goers and beyond. The category of musical theatre stars has been extended to broader specialists such as composers, playwrights, directors and producers, which together construct the identity of musical theatre and generate the desire for fan-like engagement of online communities. Musical theatre stars have gained public attention by delivering and offering high-quality performances, delivering brand effects, and featuring in media headlines.

With an ongoing taste in western popular culture, Chinese audiences seek to obtain an emotional exchange from a musical theatre production and are keen to hear about star gossips and love affairs from the internet. Stars are important to symbolise a certain type of entertainment, and are aligned with the quality of audience experience. Attractive musical theatre performers have been acknowledged as stars with artistic and commercial value to increase attendance rates. The effect of these performers on the industry has allowed Chinese audiences to remember and recognise star names in a cross-cultural context. The names of global musical theatre stars feature in online discussion by Chinese

audiences, names including Sarah Brightman, Sierra Boggess, Michael Crawford, Ramin Karimloo, John Owen-Jones, Bradley Jaden, Savannah Stevenson, and Jacqueline Hughes – with reviewers expressing their fulsome admiration. These stars have become known to Chinese audiences and their personal attractiveness creates a unique chance for audiences to feel and experience a live theatre setting. The influence of musical theatre stars on Chinese audiences is primarily derived from their stage attractiveness and their professional skills. As online reviews reflect as below:

Sierra can't be more beautiful. She laughed and was simply like the best little angel, and her character was very frantic, giving a very energetic and sunny feeling. (*The Phantom of the Opera*, Yucca)

Sierra Boggess was young, beautiful, sweet and professional. She looked like less than 30 years old, but she can perform the leading role so perfectly and amazingly. She was a musical genius. What impressed me most was her appearance. She was very attractive. (*The Phantom of the Opera*, Xiaozhong)

The reviews show that Chinese audiences tend to focus their attention on leading performers recognised as musical theatre stars. The performers' physical attractiveness and theatrical expertise are recognised as key factors to impress audiences in China. The audiences' fan behaviour is emotionally driven and linked to their fondness, enthusiasm and affection of a musical theatre performer. This behaviour is also reflected in curiosity about new faces and an appreciation of an excellent performance in relation to their character. These reviews also illustrate that Chinese audiences tend to be enthusiastic and regular theatre-goers who are emotionally influenced by the performance. Their behaviour identifies them as musical theatre fans - as one of the reviewer said "I was so excited and I cried". Musical theatre performers have the ability to influencing audience emotions, and they are recognised as key to enhancing audiences' participatory experiences. The fan behaviour of Chinese audiences is based on a fondness for stars' physical attractiveness and artistic expertise.

Moreover, Internet-mediated platforms provide a new mode of fan engagement with musical theatre stars. The formation of Chinese fans is a transnational group united by enthusiasm for musical theatre. Online Chinese fan behaviour represents an expanding audience group which is influential in theatre attendance's choice-making. Online communities become an accessible platform that enables Chinese audiences to take part in fan activities, such as star-chasing or experience-sharing. In so doing, the fan behaviour of Chinese audiences has become a benchmark that effectively entwines consumption, entertainment and participation. The global circulation of musical theatre shapes the formation of transcultural fan communities, and this is the same as putting the U.S. stars on the West End stage.

Caldwell and Nicholson (2014) argue that commercial value is attached to entertainment that is able to transform artists into stars or celebrities. The phenomenon of fandom and stardom is a result of industrialisation and commercialisation of musical theatre productions across nations. Chinese fandom practice involves generating topic-related discussions, posting comments, stories and images about famous or leading performers, embedded in a Chinese popular culture environment. The live performance of musical theatre is a face-to-face interactive format that produces stronger emotional bonds between audiences and musical theatre performers. Online fan communities become a conceptual space that stimulates a long-term musical theatre consumption and enhances continued engagement with musical theatre performances and celebrities. Fandom has identified the artistic and commercial value of musical theatre performers. The commercial success of musical theatre is also attributed to the internal system inside the industry, which creates stars and package actors. The mode of Chinese audience

interaction with musical theatre stars is based on the use of online communities to build star-fan relationships. This provides opportunities for international musical theatre practitioners to understand the fan behaviour of Chinese audiences through online communities.

The local market needs the global musical theatre industry that builds upon the output of online fan communities in the process of distribution and consumption. Chinese fan culture still requires musical theatre marketing teams to adapt to the local media environment and to gain an awareness of local media for improving stars' public presence. The exposure of musical theatre stars' profile will stimulate growth in the consumption of musical theatre, but it is a risky way to draw audience attention to celebrities rather than focus on theatrical quality. In other words, the commercial power of fandom is more about building a star-fan relationship rather than an individual's stardom. Online communities discuss artistic excellence of performance and, in a way, decide what is regarded as excellent. But this does not really represent each audience member's perception of excellence through a ranking and a review. Maybe this nuance is missing. The audience sits in an interesting place: well-informed viewers whose opinion can make or break a show.

### **8.3 Audience reminiscences: connecting with memories**

I watched *Cats* from my music class ten years ago. I watched the live version tonight, which was also very memorable. It was a really wonderful show. (*Cats*, Jayne)

Audience reviewers discuss how Chinese audiences stick to memories of musical theatre that is “a physical, psychological and cultural sensibility” (Higson, 2014, p. 121).

Audiences use words to express their emotions about the shows, such as “memories”, “unforgettable moment” and “a sense of recollection” frequently appeared in online audience reviews, which represent audience reminiscences about musical theatre. Even though musical theatre clearly stands for a popular western art form, audience reminiscences here refer to their wistful longing for the live experience or the re-creation of a moment of musical theatre. Thus, this section aims to analyse the reasons that lead to Chinese audiences’ memories in relation to musical theatre, and explore how this experience boosts the consumption of musical theatre embedded in Chinese social and cultural circumstances. Musical theatre specifically taps into the lifestyles and aspirations of a young Chinese generation who grew up during the period of the 1980s and the 1990s. Chinese audience reviews communicate an unforgettable experience of musical theatre, including how they make sense of live musical theatre performances, and how much the effects of audience memories are aimed at – and essential to – Chinese cultural consumption.

Musical Theatre for Chinese audiences is associated with their childhood and teenage memories. Acting as diary-like narratives, Chinese online reviews express when and how theatre-goers engage with musical theatre by tracking individual musical theatre experiences and linking time, place, memory and personal lives. As demonstrated in Chapter 1, musical theatre entertainment initially arrived in mainland China during the late 1990s when there was relatively limited access to the art form and its original productions and people began to attend the live performance in the 2000s. According to online reviews, audiences have known musical theatre through a variety of media, from DVDs, original soundtrack recordings, TV programmes, and also through school education. These different modes of introducing musical theatre have enabled Chinese

audiences to link this popular entertainment to their past experience. Audience reminiscences, media outputs and modern education combine to promote the performances of musical theatre to the Chinese market.

For many, school education is a key source of experiencing musical theatre because it plays a fundamental part in nurturing young people's interests, tastes, and choice of musical theatre. As Bourdieu (1993)'s theory demonstrates, education is an important channel through which to foster cultural competency in a specific art form. Along with school education, media technologies are functionally designed to educate and broaden audiences for musical theatre. Recorded versions of musical theatre productions give Chinese audiences an enticing glimpse of the outside art form. During the 1990s, media technologies became part of a day-to-day communicative tool for a younger Chinese generation. Musical theatre productions were filmed and released on DVDs, allowing them to reach previously distant audiences. These products have allowed Chinese audiences to develop longstanding memories and emotional ties with musical theatre, keeping alive wistful longings for the performances. As one online reviewer states:

I knew this play from *Crazy English*, a sound magazine. It played *the Music of the Night* from *the Phantom of the Opera*, and then I bought a DVD record from a local store. The DVD accompanied me during the most stressful period of time before the exams. I listened to the music before every bedtime. The songs drilled into my mind, singing 'Let the soul soar and forget everything in the world'. (*The Phantom of the Opera*, Dongjing)

This result may be explained by the fact that the Chinese younger generation grew up at a time when western popular culture started to influence mainland China. Musical theatre consumption is a mirror reflecting how western popular entertainment influences Chinese people's contemporary cultural activities in their everyday lives. Before the 2000s, musical theatre live performances could not be staged in China due to cultural issues and

technological and venue limitations. Recorded versions made it possible to create Chinese audiences' expectations of new entertainment experiences, especially those from the West. Recorded pop music and DVDs refreshed the lives of Chinese school boys and girls who born after the 1980s no longer suffered from material shortage and hardship. Instead, they faced a competitive educational system and higher family expectations for achieving a better higher education degree and a decent career. In addition to the pressure from an exam-oriented education system, Chinese families expect their children to succeed in their future careers. As the American Law Professor Amy Chua in her book *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* (2011) maintains, a traditional, strict "Chinese" upbringing and parents' expectations create an ideal outlook for their children as "the best" possible students. The previous audience review truthfully illustrates the need for Chinese youth, faced with academic pressures, to find a way to relax. Musical theatre records become one of the major entertainment forms, helping young Chinese to pursue a sense of emotional freedom and pleasure. "Hope", "mental treatment" and "bittersweet memories" are words used by the reviewers who describe what musical theatre meant to them during their school life.

During the 1990s a generation of Chinese young people faced either the absence of new entertainment forms or the monotony of existing ones, with little choice in cultural and entertainment products. Entertainment activities were urgently needed by Chinese students seeking relaxation and an escape from the pressures of study and work. Western cultural products filled a gap in the Chinese cultural market and western exports of entertainment quickly became adopted widely among Chinese younger people. In this way, the younger generation has developed interests or hobbies in one or two western forms of entertainment linked to their childhood or teenage lives – these entertainment



activities were related to a memory of happiness, enjoyment or fun from the past time. With the expansion of Chinese consumerism, the younger generation gradually invested their money and time in western cultural products, showing a strong motivation towards hedonistic and new experience. Chinese audiences/consumers were becoming more willing to spend money on developing their personal interests and hobbies. As one online reviewer says:

I am passionate about musicals because it is part of beautiful memories in my life. I remembered I tried to watch as many musicals as possible, watching the same show in different performances in my high school. I introduced *The Phantom of the Opera* to my friends. I listened to the music in the dorm every night, and sometimes I sang, which may have bothered my roommates. Every time on hearing the music from *The Phantom of the Opera*, it reminded me of times in my high school life.  
(*The Phantom of the Opera*, Daimianjudexiong)

Another possible explanation for the prevalence of seeking memorable experiences among Chinese audiences is their association with previous cultural experiences of musical theatre. Past experiences tend to recall a specific memory, to evoke the desire of renewing the experiences and help to encode a new experience (Erll and Nünning, 2008). The memories of previous musical theatre experience are emotionally bonded in social, mental and psychological activities, which are always valued by Chinese audiences. Memory is a key that invokes a past experience of musical theatre for Chinese audiences and motivates renewing a cultural experience (Bal et al., 1999). The processes of individual memory have created culturally-embedded attitudes that explain a motivation to see live musical theatre performance. One example of the Chinese production *Cats* in 2018 launched a “nostalgic” marketing strategy by using the slogan “Let the memory live again” and “Let’s make memories” for provoking memories. This slogan is a direct link to the theme song *Memory* and it has become a decade-defining memory for Chinese audiences. Memory becomes a marketing strategy that uses the past to reshape the present.

Chinese audience comments are perhaps best defined as emotional expressions regarding previous theatrical experiences. As audience online reviews state:

When I was young, I loved the story of *The Wizard of Oz*. I expected a good life filled with passion and energy. I always felt that it was the most unforgettable experience that was related to my childhood memories. (*Wicked*, Xiaofugaote)

The Chinese-speaking *Memory* was pretty different from the original one. In the first scene, they were half-way through the song before I remembered it was the theme song. In the end, I felt the song didn't fulfil my expectation as it didn't resonate with me too much. When *Memory* was not *Memory*, how can cats be the cats in my mind? (*Cats*, Alili)

These views surface mainly in relation to the memorability of audiences' previous experience. The influence of audience reminiscences brings a question: Can the past experience be recovered or replicated through a live performance? Previous experience is built on selective memory and sets out to revive the past in response to present knowledge and needs. The experiential offering of musical theatre is shifting from recorded versions to the live or stage versions as the experience forms a major part of the show's construction, from practical necessities such as casting, venues, and audience accommodation and companionability. Past experience is unduplicatable and is constructed by a certain people in a certain time, place and mood. Once one of these elements has changed, it is hard to bring audiences to a previous experience that they remember, and the experience may fail to help them recover their longed-for memories. Chinese audiences attempt to compare their current experience to their past experience. Once there is a perceived difference, the negative side of the audience psychology will occur and a theatrical work will fail to renew audiences' memories or live up to expectations.

Above all, Chinese audiences' memories can be linked to their past experience relevant to musical theatre. Past experiences have stored in their memories to create emotional

connections between Chinese audiences and musical theatre. The memories of Chinese audiences suggest that the original version of a production must be highlighted to the consistent quality; otherwise, the production will fail to recall Chinese audiences' memories in a positive way. Chinese audiences' memories are linked to music, story, or other artistic elements that shape an overall image of musical theatre. In addition to this memorable element characterising Chinese audiences, the next section will examine how Chinese audiences respond to the artistic elements of musical theatre.

#### **8.4 Responses to musical theatre experience**

The style of musical theatre comprises a range of artistic elements including music, dance, storytelling, design, acting and audio-visual technology. The collaboration of artistic elements produces the holistic experience of musical theatre. Along with an enjoyment and appreciation of the artistic elements, musical theatre attendance offers a sociable experience for an audience; involving communication, intellectual expectations and live interactions with theatre venues, facilities and other attendees. As one reviewer says, "artistic experience is personalised depending on an individual's knowledge of the art form and other external factors, including physical spaces, time and companions". Both positive and negative experiences rely on whether one's expectations have been met and whether one is willing to renew their experiences through re-attendance. Analysis of online reviews suggests that artistic elements such as music, songs, stories, characters, and scenic design are highly rated topics among Chinese audiences. Perhaps surprisingly, the artistic and aesthetic elements of the art form are no longer the only focus of the audience experience, but also audio-visual effects, stage technologies, and the theatre etiquette of live interactions are emerging features in Chinese online reviews. The

examination of audiences' theatrical experiences aims to reflect how Chinese audience members make sense of the art form and how they interpret the artistic arrangement of musical theatre in the local context.

### **Music and songs**

One interesting finding is that music and songs are given more attention by Chinese audiences, as they believe vocal performances are vital for determining the quality of a specific musical theatre performance. The quality of vocal performances defines how well the themes and emotions can be perceived by Chinese audiences. Music is a big part of musical theatre and offers a crucial means of catharsis for enhancing the audience experience (Taylor, 2012). It connects with the pace of storytelling and points of emotion are further developed by lyrics and vocal performances. Along with classical music, musical theatre has adopted a great deal from operatic, ethnic and pop musical genres that have made songs more memorable. Andrew Lloyd Webber's music composition appears to display the adoptions of different types of music. In his musical works, Lloyd Webber has used classical as well as popular approaches to making musical songs and considers both the appeal of a classical and a popular aesthetic. This synthesised aesthetic requires musical theatre performers to demonstrate high singing skills (Caldwell and Nicholson, 2014). One reviewer highlights a vocal performer's name in relation to her/his emotional experience of music and songs. Experiences evoked by music and songs are illustrated by the following comments that have been translated into English:

The vocals of Michael Crawford appeared to be relaxing, so rich on the air with the hidden, subtle symbols. His vocal performances were so elegant, and the emotional expression was so direct that he seemed to be the one who I fell in love with. The raw music angels and devils can make me feel come to heaven and fall to hell. You knew his danger but his voice drew you to be close with him. (*The Phantom of the Opera*, Xiaochouyu)

I admired her voice - thick but not heavy, and when singing along with Glinda

*Defying Gravity*, the two sound lines set each other off clearly and complemented with each other! With the lead performer singing *As long as you're mine* I can actually feel the delicate tenderness of her charm through the voices. (*Wicked*, Xuanxin)

The lyrics were so good, the love in the story was burning. (*The Phantom of the Opera*, Yeyazi)

The quality of vocal performances is a decisive element to connect a positive experience with musical theatre performance. The audience reviews vividly describe the simultaneous feelings that are evoked by the vocal performances, as evidenced by the expressions: “relaxing”, “elegant”, and “thick but not heavy”. The descriptions reflect a strong emotion gained from the vocal performances by Chinese audiences, and indicate some of Chinese audiences are able to fully appreciate musical theatre. There are also critical comments that have expressed the sense that sometimes performances do not meet audience expectations.

*Memory* naturally brought a lot of expectations for the audience. Although the actor's performance won a lot of applause. Personally speaking, I was very disappointed with this actor. The actor tried very hard to sing the song but she did not put her feelings into the song. (*Cats*, Fangkai)

The audience review above sets out from a different perspective. Vocal performances may fail to meet the artistic standard increasingly demanded by Chinese audiences. This review shows that the audience felt “disappointed” by the show, because the performers lacked emotion in playing the role. There is a potential for the audience to be disappointed as the song *Memory* from the musical *Cats* has been popular for decades among Chinese audiences. The familiarity of the song drew loyal audiences and repeat attendance, but reputation may lead to higher expectations, such that every performance must be able to reach or maintain the highest quality to fulfil audiences. As Alexander (2003) suggests that the understanding of a specific performance is in relation to audiences' general impressions and “horizons of expectations”. In musical theatre, vocal performances along

with lyrics are the key tools in shaping and enhancing emotional experience. Music and songs create dramatic and artistic effects to portray characters, to tell the stories and to enhance emotion and then draw audiences in to a designed scenario.

## **Stories**

Story is about an organisation of people and events told for entertainment activities. Good stories can effectively draw audiences to the performance and create an engaging experience. The Greek philosopher Plato once emphasised the importance of good storytelling, arguing that “Our first business is to supervise the production of stories, and chose only those we think suitable, and reject the rest” (cited by Mazzucato, 2019, p. 53). According to Plato, musical theatre should select good stories that are of interest to the audiences. An effective story in theatrical performances should be communicative and understandable to the audience. It enhances the emotional and psychological experiences and enables an organic combination of theme, character and plot.

Audience reviews also show that Chinese audiences care about the origin of the stories told and the organisation of storylines and characters in musical theatre productions. Storytelling has always had a close relationship with novels, classic literature and fairy tales. It is an entertainment form in the literature category and has maintained its influential position in a live performance context. The literary element accounts for a big part of the appreciation of theatrical performance for Chinese audiences, which could relate to a traditional Chinese emphasis on playwrights rather than composers in the process of theatre-making. Chinese theatre audiences are more interested in how a

musical theatre performance tells stories. Stories decide the experience of Chinese audiences and the ways of value judgement.

Broadway and London's West End have known that audiences are responsive to good stories, especially when marketing musical theatre, which sets the highest tone for prestigious authors or book awards. The adaptation of stories from a world-renowned literature or authors minimises risk for international tours. The reputation of the original stories decides the value of current performances - and how much audiences are willing to attend. One reviewer writes: "You should read *The Wizard of Oz* before watching *Wicked*. The story of *The Wizard of Oz* is interesting, so I was keen to watch the musical production". A well-known story is more advantageous for bringing audiences to the theatre. Another example is the story of *Cats* based on a piece of classic English literature. As one reviewer comments, "The story of *Cats* came from T.S. Eliot's 1939 collection of poems, *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats*. This collection of poetry has confirmed the status of T.S. Eliot, known as a pioneering poet of English literature, and a winner of a Nobel Prize in 1948. Most of the lyrics in *Cats* were taken from this collection of poems". Prize-winning authors or books are a guarantee of storytelling quality - and the popularity of these stories may allow transcultural audiences to be more confident of understanding the performance. Yet for some reviewers there is a sense of frustration with the story of *Cats*:

In general, *Cats* still seemed to be a show for children. It made me somewhat disappointed compared with its international reputation. The weakness of the plot challenged the performers from China. In other words, the performers did not make sense of the roles at the beginning of the story, so that it did not draw my attention to the show. I personally preferred a clearer plot. (*Cats*, Iarain)

Emma Brockes (2016)'s writing for *The Guardian* admits that "There was, as ever, no plot, no subtext, no apparent point to *Cats*". The theatrical presentation of *Cats* may

disappoint audiences who seek story experiences from the theatre. The non-traditional plot cannot always be apprehended by Chinese audiences and this causes disquiet. Conversely, a simpler storyline may make it hard for serious-minded adult audiences to engage as they tend to connect stories to their daily existence. Stories of musical theatre act as an artistic element, which can inspire the audiences to think about their own life realities and resonate emotionally. Some audiences are immersed in stories which link their real life reflected through personal emotions. As one reviewer illustrates below:

Over the past 11 years, more and more people have known *The Phantom of the Opera*. When I was a teenager I always dreamed that I would have a lover who could sing songs from the musical to me. Many years later I heard the song *All I ask of you*, I wondered maybe there is no such love in real life. It seemed it would be difficult for dream this to come true in my daily life. (*The Phantom of the Opera*, Dongjing)

## **Characters**

Along with stories, characters are the subject of developing plots and themes with emotionally-charged dialogue. Characters allow audiences to recall a specific production or a story, and generate audiences' post-performance discussions and reflections. There are audiences' reviews which discuss the characters of *The Phantom of the Opera* and *Wicked*, as illustrated below:

It could not simply say Phantom was a good or bad man. He had an evil side but he was pure and loyal in the face of love. His soul was pure so that he was a contradictory character filled with the hatred and esteem. His pain and struggle made his talent stunning. Just like the music, it represented his soul, as one netizen said: "There was always a place in this world where there were violence and peace". Phantom was an amazing character because his crazy love, panic and loneliness that led to his extraordinary artistic talent. (*The Phantom of the Opera*, Chouxiaoyu)

The most memorable and love-hate characters should be Glinda and Elphaba. Unlike the ultimate evil, their confusion was the confusion of morality. Glinda was eager to have friendship and vanity. On one hand, she helped Elphaba to escape from a dangerous moment. On the other hand, Glinda lost her friendship with Elphaba. (*Wicked*, Feinia)



From the above narratives, a series of stage characters have impressed Chinese audiences who are able to remember and resonate with the stories and themes. The realistic expressions of musical theatre produce stronger connections with audience emotions and thoughts, which in turn stimulates audiences to think about the performances deeply and closely. Popular characters share a capacity to expressing human nature related to their setting within the musical theatre performance. However, the way characters are developed in musical theatre is different from the creation of theatrical roles in traditional Chinese theatre. Jiang (1994) suggests that for a long time China has lacked the creation of theatrical characters who perform the complexity of human nature. The role of traditional Chinese theatre is augmented by masks, costumes and make-up to give symbolic meanings for characters. The characters of traditional Chinese theatre tell audiences more about their roles in terms of their social position, personality and judgement in a stereotypical way. Traditional Chinese theatre uses painted facial masks: a red-painted face represents a loyal and brave character while a white-painted face represents an evil and hypocritical character (Xu, 2012). This influence tends to guide a Chinese audience's understanding of how to judge characters in theatre contexts.

### **Scenic design**

Technological advancement has made musical theatre commercially successful. Sontag (1966, p. 27) argues that, the theatrical stage represents “the spatial relation of the beholder to the spectacle”. The space of the stage is like a showcase comprising a variety of artistic design including lighting, props, costumes, setting and audiovisual technologies. Scenic design is one of the most memory-worthy aspects of the experience and builds a close relationship between the stage and the audience. Dating back to the 1930s, American scenic artist Jean Rosenthal claims that “a production arises out of a

visual response to the dramatist's words and/or the composer's music" (Reid, 2013, p. 2). Rosenthal's idea indicates that scenic design captures audiences' visual experiences, and supplements story and musical experience for theatre spectators. This enlarges actors' stage performance and interplays with dialogue and music for enhancing a live experience.

Adopting advanced technology, scenic design creates high-value theatrical experiences, which is also recognised in the form of mega-musical productions (Gordon and Jubin, 2016). Scenic design is a powerful way to realise an audience's imagination from a single story to the physical stage. One reviewer writes: "the scenic design of *The Phantom of the Opera* has matched all my imagination of romance". Even though artificial reality enhances audiences' theatrical expectations, technological application risks the authenticity of theatrical art as audiences seem to be averse to the over-use of technological devices in musical theatre performances. As one review writes:

The Chinese version of *Cats* has largely expanded the visual experiences in advancing the scenic design of the Chinese production. The stage was beautiful. The 3D effects created an immersive experience, and various props were well-utilised in the performance. Actors' costumes were good but some of them were made for "special effects". They were very fancy but too superficial. (*Cats*, Langweixian)

### **Theatre manners**

Another interesting finding is that theatre experience is reinforced by audience behaviour during the live performance. As in the above review, one audience member writes about how other audiences engage with musical theatre and how they behave during show time. Appropriate manner in theatre is an issue that has always been ignored in theatre audience studies. Theatre audiences are mass gatherings for watching a performance at a specific time. Connections always exist among audience members and their behaviour and responses spread collectively (Freshwater, 2009). Audiences care about their relationship

to the performance and to other theatre-goers, and thus it is crucial to understand whether audiences have enjoyed a musical theatre performance at a particular venue and time. The behaviour expected of audiences decides individual experience as well as the reactions of other around them.

Differences in perceptions of theatre manners reflect the way in which audiences react to a live performance. Traditional Chinese theatre performances have fewer stage interactions with audiences, whereas musical theatre performers provide interactive opportunities for audiences to enjoy high-level contact with the performance. As one review says, “*Cats* was a musically interactive show. The cat performers rushed down the stage to the audience to perform close-up performances during the show. Audiences who were not familiar with this form of performance were scared”. Chinese audiences are culturally less comfortable with a live audience-performer interaction. There is a tension in Chinese spectator culture about how to build an appropriate live interaction between audiences and performances in the contemporary theatrical context.

Another example of the differences between audience reaction in traditional Chinese theatre and western musical theatre is that it is accepted in the former for the audience to express their approval immediately, such as shouting “bravo!” and applauding in the Chinese tradition; whereas in the western theatrical tradition, audiences commonly wait until the end of performance to applaud at length. Also, the numbers of curtain calls in musical theatre is an indication of the level of audience approval. However, Chinese audiences are quite mixed in their knowledge of western theatrical customs and the appropriate way to enjoy a performance, a fact reflected in review postings and commentaries. Some theatre-goers do not appear to care for appropriate responses in

terms of approval during the performance and this may impact on the pleasure of the experiences when watching musical theatre. Moreover, one audience member's negative experience may affect a neighbour's capacity to have a positive experience. Considering the diversity of musical theatre audiences, inappropriate theatre behaviour may influence the general impression of the art form for new audiences. A reviewer writes:

*Cats* is the first musical I have seen. It could say I am a new audience to musical theatre. The show was stunning though I knew less about it. I think it should be a successful show. During watching the performance, I saw that many audiences were playing with their phones. It seemed the performance could not draw the audience's attention. Some audiences shouted 'bravo' showing their appreciation of the show. I felt the show was really good and we could applaud for our approval. Overall, I was a bit of pissed off by the other audience members. I would not plan to watch a musical in the future. I guess I haven't known how to appreciate musical theatre. (Cats, Xiaoming)

## 8.5 Conclusion

This Chapter has considered audience experience as a central element in understanding how Chinese audiences make sense of and respond to their musical theatre experiences. Social networking websites (e.g. *Douban*) have emerged which allow virtual interactions among the socially distanced users. The online space of social networking websites provides a large degree of freedom for the users who are musical theatre enthusiasts to connect and to realise an authentic expression of their theatre-going experiences. The practice of online interactions aims to achieve self-expression and to find like-minded people through posting reviews for mutual communication. For Chinese musical theatre audiences, online communities offer anonymous spaces that liberate the users' expression and help them relate authentic emotion, as well as create opportunities to critique artistic performances and daily existence.

The continuing engagement of Chinese audiences with online review communities appears to show a fan's behaviour – where they express admiration and fondness for the leading performers of musical theatre. Online communities allow Chinese audiences to co-create the meaning of a production and act as reproductive labour for the content of musical theatre performances. In terms of musical theatre, Chinese audiences tend towards reminiscences of the shows, linking shows and characters to their own memories of childhood or teenage life. Chinese engagement in musical theatre is embedded in online communities, where the reviews reflect the desire for a memorability of past and recent experience, which maintains audience interest and stimulates live theatre re-attendance.

Online reviews from Chinese audiences show a culturally-oriented holistic view of the elements that form musical theatre. Alongside, an understanding of audiences' interpretive ways is used to make sense of the art form in a cross-cultural context. A review of audience online posts reveals the ways in which Chinese audiences respond to the aesthetic, entertainment, and social representations of musical theatre. Its artistic elements have been underlined specifically by Chinese audiences as building a holistic experience of musical theatre performances. The integrated features of musical theatre give the genre a strong capacity for enhancing audiences' experiences in a cross-cultural circumstance: music and vocal performance, stories, characters and scenic design are artistic elements in relation to live musical theatre experiences and directly influence how Chinese audiences perceive the art form. Chinese audiences tend to prefer the performances that have both classical and popular musical styles and a good story adaptation from classic literature or award-winning authors. Characters in musical theatre are attractive to Chinese audiences as they contrast with the characters portrayed by

traditional Chinese theatre. In addition, scenic design should make appropriate use of technology and avoid overusing it through audio-visual effects and superficial spectacle.

In terms of how to appreciate and behave in a musical theatre setting, and how to obtain an enjoyable experience from a live performance, musical theatre might be alien to Chinese audiences who are not experienced in watching this theatrical genre before its arrival in Chinese theatres. Appropriate appreciation needs time and efforts for audiences to cultivate theatre manners through theatre attendance, arts education and media publicity. Regarding audience responses to musical theatre experiences, the online reviews analysed involve artistic, historical and behavioural dimensions which reveal the ways in which Chinese audiences experience musical theatre. Holistic musical theatre experiences are based on the engagement between audience and performance, artistic features, and also audience behaviour shapes the response of the theatre-goers to live musical theatre performances. Narratives of post-performance experience prove that the cross-cultural practice of musical theatre is certainly a meaningful way to build online and offline interactions and high-quality entertainment experiences for Chinese audiences.

## Chapter 9 Conclusion

The previous chapter analysed audiences' post-performance experiences, investigating how Chinese audiences react to musical theatre productions transferred from the United Kingdom or the United States. In response to the growing phenomenon of musical theatre in China, this thesis has paid a close attention to the cross-cultural practice of musical theatre to explore the richness of audience experiences and consumption trends in the context of Chinese market. Based on a thorough investigation, the current status of global musical theatre productions requires a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of local audiences; in particular, how audiences' choice-making is shaped by cultural frames of theatre tradition, education, media and marketing to guide potential musical theatre consumption. With regard to the sense of "Chinese audiences" focused on within this thesis, the term implies continuing cross-cultural practices of musical theatre for widening audiences on a global scale, and offers a cultural dimension of theatre participation to explore how likely Chinese audiences are to engage with an overseas art form and performance.

As the conclusion of the thesis, this chapter briefly reviews the findings from the fieldwork and the existing literature in order to address the initial research questions. For instance: How does musical theatre travel to China and engage with local audiences' entertainment lives? How do Chinese audiences respond to the live experience of musical theatre? In line with audience responses and expectations, how do global productions address local audiences' cultural and entertainment preferences to achieve market success? Based on the findings, in terms of deepening the understanding of Chinese audiences, this chapter begins with a self-reflection on the methodology. The second section of this chapter summarises the findings that contribute significantly to the field of theatre

audience research. It then moves on to the third section to present original contributions and recommendations for cultural policy-makers, arts marketing professionals and theatre producers. Finally, the limitations and further research opportunities are discussed. In particular, this chapter it provides a more comprehensive and critical framework for furthering knowledge about audience needs in response to a western theatrical form, within the context of the Chinese entertainment and cultural market.

### **9.1 Reflections on the methodology**

Reflecting on the methodology of this thesis allows the researcher to guide future fieldwork and data collection. Generally speaking, the application of multiple methods enabled this study to enrich the understanding of the diverse and complex nature of musical theatre audiences in the Chinese market, and the researcher's attempt was to establish the validity and reliability of the data (Moran-Ellis et al., 2006). The methodology provided a rich, multi-layer and relational understanding of Chinese audiences in musical theatre. Although the use of multiple methods meant that the researcher was able to obtain more information and achieve the fruitful combination of the data, the methodology posed a potential challenge of sorting, ordering and categorising the multiple-sourced data collected from different methods. They were pragmatically-focused but with hindsight and more time the data could be refined and more systematically triangulated. Multiple methods were engaged with an ethnographic overview that showcased the cultural setting of the research participants who shared demographic characteristics, for example, in terms of ethnicity, socioeconomic status and age range. In so doing, ethnographic data was produced based on what the researcher heard and what the researcher saw (Forsey, 2010). However, the multiple-methods



research design raised the concern of methodological triangulation, which represented the validation of convergence and reliability of data integration in this study. The methodological challenge of this research was that it took more time and energy to manage each method that can simply be transcended by integrating, comparing and interrogating the data from different perspectives.

The deployment of multiple methods limited the sample size for each method, which reduced the power of generalising audiences' attitudes, trending choices and preferences. This research design was only used for targeting respondents with experience of watching musical theatre. Focus group discussions produced three transcripts, and online questionnaires only received 173 replies, due to the time and financial restrictions. The resulting sample size was very minimal for representing a large population of Chinese audiences. In particular, the online questionnaire was scheduled at the final stage of data collection and this led to there being insufficient time to receive more responses. There were a total of 66 audience online reviews for three musical theatre productions, which was restricted by the number of participants in the online community. Despite using multiple cases, these case studies offered an insight to evaluating particular musical productions, but the findings were inadequate for generalising more cases; this could lead to a limited application of the research findings to generic, real environment practices.

The methodology was adapted to internet and online platforms for data collection throughout this research. The limitations of using internet-mediated devices stemmed from the rapidly-changing virtual environment for fieldwork and data collection. Internet platforms were efficient and an accessible way for this research to connect with the target respondents and communities to conduct online sourcing and observations, such as

audience online reviews. However, the application of data extracted from online equipment undoubtedly had pitfalls. The structure and formation of the internet is complex, fluid and fragmented (Caliandro, 2017). Even though online content provided a large dataset, the rapid change in this content resulted in a need to maintain and store the original data – data that could be deleted and modified at any time. For example, the *Cats*' online community has since greatly expanded and now offers more comments and reviews, due to the musical's 2018 China tour; this represents a significant change of scale in community output in comparison with when I was collecting data. This factor indicates that theatre companies take online review communities seriously to boost public image and reputation in the Chinese market. The use of data from online devices made it hard to identify the demographic information of the research respondents. It was extremely tricky to verify the respondent's identity and therefore to confirm the authenticity and trustworthiness of online content. Due to commercial drive, some online commentaries were produced by marketing professionals on behalf of theatre companies. There was a potential risk that data captured from online communities could include fake, commercially-driven or politically-driven content.

## **9.2 Summary of findings**

The thesis examines the art forms to explain the tradition of theatre engagement for Chinese audiences. From a historical perspective, theatre attendance has for a long time been a big part of Chinese people's cultural and entertainment lives. Traditional Chinese theatre embraces a mixed art form of content and styles over the past hundred years. With China's social and ideological changes, on one hand, the power of central authority still lies in state-funded arts and cultural organisations which decide the selection of overseas

performances and the upgrading of cultural infrastructural facilities to receive the transfer of western musicals. On the other, the social and cultural transformation provides the freedom for Chinese audiences to appreciate western cultural imports, which propels the expansion of consuming overseas theatrical performances. Meanwhile, it creates commercial and creative opportunities for western musical theatre that is made to fulfil Chinese audiences' growing cultural and experiential needs.

The discussion in Chapter 1 illustrates that musical theatre is a collaborative genre with a strong influence from European theatrical forms, and it has gradually evolved to be a commercial theatre reinforced by the rise of consumerism and hedonism. In terms of the art form, musical theatre is an interdisciplinary artistic form that resembles traditional Chinese theatre in terms of its integrated artistic expression. During the 1950s -1960s, musical theatre arrived in Hong Kong leading to the initial transformation of the art form that then started to engage with the local audience. Hong Kong's musical films have created a broader meaning that defines musical theatre including a variety of traditional Chinese theatrical genres. Even so, Hong Kong's musical films offer a wide range of innovative opportunities that enable the producers to explore very diverse storylines and settings from western and Chinese traditions. An investigation of Chinese audiences' response to, and engagement with musical theatre, suggests that the cross-cultural popularity of musical theatre is perhaps unsurprising, given the longstanding popularity of traditional Chinese theatre.

In considering consumer culture theory, Chapter 2 focuses on Chinese patterns of cultural consumption for identifying the profiles of potential audiences for musical theatre. The literature review examines Bourdieu's theories on social distinction which lays a

foundation for examining the role of China's emerging middle-class consumers in relation to the contemporary consumption of musical theatre. From this perspective, cultural capital is a vital factor in the creation of an audience for musical theatre composed of people who are culturally open-minded to participate in and consume a western art form. With Chinese political policy emphasising the importance of cultural consumption, Chapter 2 articulates the characteristics of the Chinese emerging middle classes and the way in which China's modernisation and economic reform catalyse its growing interest and enthusiasm for consuming the imports of western artistic products. The profile of the Chinese middle classes highlights a better-educated, urban-concentrated and younger cohort whose consumption patterns are reflected in Peterson's omnivore theory, which indicates a hybrid taste to an internationalised mix of theatrical products, and represent their desire to enjoy a modern theatrical experience. The rise of cultural consumption in China facilitates the emergence of arts marketing towards an audience-focused approach, which reflects the conceptual adaptation of arts marketing merges with the Chinese context. The literature reviewed in Chapter 3 has identified a focus on the audience experience in arts marketing and audience development, and has suggested a new role of audiences in the digital age.

The investigation of how Chinese audiences make sense of musical theatre - and the style in which musical theatre is consumed - suggests that Chinese audiences have a gestalt way of evaluating dramatic elements, in which they recognise that a sum is greater than its parts, and this lies at the heart of audience understanding of quality and artistic value. The findings have been presented in Chapter 6, 7 and 8. The transcultural journey of musical theatre negotiates meaning with local audiences, which offers active routes for Chinese audiences to engage with musical theatre performances. Access to a variety of

media channels enables musical theatre to reach Chinese audiences and vice versa. Both international and local entertainment companies have applied musical theatre to achieve commercial success, an approach demonstrated by the Walt Disney Company and Bollywood. Combining familiar elements is key to invite local audiences to deepen their emotional exchange and long-term engagement. These commercial entities are vital vehicles for the transmission of musical theatre to a Chinese audience, but also carry a potential risk that through them Chinese audiences would receive a vague understanding of musical theatre. Despite of an understanding gap, musical theatre finds a natural home in China, where musical theatre is a cultural import from an entirely different cultural system. It chimes more closely with what the Chinese are already familiar with, namely the wide variety of home-grown entertainment forms which can be categorised under the gloss “musical theatre”.

Chapter 7 analyses three cases of mega-musicals that integrate the transcultural practice of interacting with local cultural references. The involvement of Chinese elements is controversial among Chinese audiences, whose interpretations always reflect on relating to local cultural values. The evaluation of three musical theatre productions finds that these productions share a sense of global reputation, built on international marketing and celebrity casting. These productions commonly apply large scale marketing campaigns to deliver and position the productions for the Chinese market. This study finds that an upcoming challenge for transcultural practices – and international tour transfers – is to find a way to strike a balance between producers’ artistic ambitions and local audiences’ cultural preferences and expectations.

The popularity of recommendation and review websites demonstrates that promotional materials sometimes provide misleading or distorted information, and that therefore Chinese audiences urgently need to acquire authentic, trusted information through alternative channels. Reflections of the themes discussed on *Douban* show that digital platforms have been welcomed by Chinese audiences who want to enjoy critical information and free expression as well as archive the experience. Chapter 8 presents positive and negative feedback on live musical theatre experiences through online communities. Audiences' online engagement focuses on topics including, reminiscences of musical theatre, stars and celebrity stories, appreciation of artistic expression, and life lessons and inspirations. The discussions reveal that Chinese audiences actively participate in the exchange of their experiences of musical theatre. Most of Chinese reviews feature the names of musical theatre celebrities and share their star-chasing experiences, which can be seen as the behaviour of transnational fans. Chinese audiences tend to recall their past experiences of watching musical theatre, which are likely to drive them to attend live performances.

### **9.3 Original contributions**

This study reaffirms the importance of audience research in musical theatre from a cross-cultural perspective. New forms of global communications provide opportunities for consumers who are demanding overseas theatrical entertainment and suggest a focus on subsequent online and offline interactions. By investigating more deeply the nature of consumption patterns and the theatrical experiences of Chinese audiences, it provides additional insights into the world of theatre attendance in China, thereby making a contribution to cultural consumption, arts marketing, audience research, and cross-

cultural theatre practices. With the spread of consumerism, the essential principles of consumer culture theory now define many of the practices adopted by researchers across continents. It is of great importance to facilitate the cross-cultural transfer of musical theatre aiming to diversify the entertainment consumption choice in the context of China. First of all, this thesis has achieved the main purpose that is to extend theoretical strategies which could be applied to professional practice. The thesis is based on Peterson (1983, 1996)'s idea of omnivorous cultural consumption which declassifies the hierarchy of cultural forms, which shapes the profiling of Chinese potential musical theatre consumers in this research. In light of Bourdieu (1984, 1993)'s theories, the economic growth enables the expansion of Chinese middle-class consumers and this social group is likely to become potential audiences of western musical theatre productions. Chinese middle-class consumers, having mostly received higher education especially with the experience of studying overseas, have obtained transcultural capital to maintain their interests and tastes into live theatrical experiences. The middle class has been recognised as a major group of Chinese cultural consumers who have been nurtured an omnivorous taste towards overseas and multi-discipline theatrical performances. A more experiential and hedonistic model of consumption could be more appropriate when considering Chinese patterns of musical theatre attendance.

Drawing on Reason and Lindelof (2016)'s and Walmsley (2019a)'s opinions, audience behaviour and expectations are changing more quickly than ever, especially in a commercial theatre setting. Based on Ritzer and Jurgenson (2010)'s discussion of "prosumer", this thesis suggests that the role of audiences is transformed from passive consumers to empowered, engaging and intellectual consumers in the digital age. Chinese audiences are keen to know more about the performances and artists who feature in a

specific musical theatre production. Digital platforms and technological advancement provide far-reaching opportunities for Chinese audiences to build contacts with musical theatre artists and productions through virtual communities and online interactions. Contemporary Chinese audiences care about their artistic expectations, post-performance experiences and freedom for individualistic expressions. The audience responses tend to show their “multiple identities” as online platforms blur the boundaries of the user’s role between audience member, online reviewer, fan and consumer. The role of audiences in the digital age is key to make sense of their diverse experiences and changing behaviour in terms of musical theatre attendance. In other words, Chinese audience behaviour tends to show their interests and desire to engage with western musicals and its related popular culture via the internet and digital platforms.

Second, the findings of this study fill a significant gap in knowledge and data regarding the cross-cultural engagement of Chinese audiences with musical theatre. The data and findings yield a rich and multi-layered understanding of Chinese audiences’ views and experiences about the art form and musical theatre performances through their cross-cultural spectatorship. This study confirms the importance of art forms in Chinese consumption practices and the viability of cross-cultural transfer. By tradition, there is not a choice of going to art galleries and concerts as a form of social interactions or entertainment among Chinese residents. But theatre attendance has been a longstanding form of entertainment throughout Chinese history and maintains its status of being a popular social and cultural activity for Chinese people. Theatre attendance is thus a social and entertainment experience among certain members of all social classes in China. With the ongoing cultural interactions between China and the West, the cross-cultural transfer of theatrical performances has been observed for many years but not much attention has



been paid to musical theatre. The examination of art forms demonstrates that musical theatre delivers a modern aesthetic and a sense of a metropolitan entertainment life to potential Chinese audiences. Previous analyses have shown that one major characteristic of musical theatre is the high degree of cross-art disciplines. Musical theatre can apply authentic as well as hybrid content that is seen as accessible references to the audience and is able to reconcile the tension between local preferences and global presentations. In this sense, various musical cultures and theatrical performances contribute to the consequent emergence of its hybrid styles. The employment of hybrid styles addresses the musical genre to prolong its international performability and marketability in a contemporary theatre setting.

However, hybridising local elements remains a contentious issue depending on how musical theatre producers practise hybridity in cross-cultural transfers. The findings suggest that Chinese audiences prefer to appreciate a western musical theatre with familiar cultural references that can easily relate to their emotional and cultural existence. The original language can be better linked to the real story setting and characters which build a sense of authenticity differing from the local theatrical forms. As Wai Chung Ho (2003) suggests, globalisation is a process of local hybridisation that determines how local audiences perceive and appreciate a new, unfamiliar and authentic art form. The global-local interaction of musical theatre involves a process of negotiated cultural identities, as expressed in the use of the English language, Chinese dialects and other representational means in both Anglophone and Chinese cultures. More specifically, translation brings the musical theatre product to the wider overseas market, which is a commercial and cultural achievement, but it somehow dilutes the authenticity of musical theatre performances. The impact of hybridity undoubtedly promotes the popularity of

western musical theatre productions on a local scale and accelerates its distribution, consumption and reception in the Chinese market. Global musical theatre productions allow local audiences to reinvent the interpretations of the performance, which fits into Chinese audiences' feeling structure and entertainment preferences according to local values and tastes. In this way, the global musical theatre product has large spaces to hybrid multiple meanings for Chinese audiences and beyond.

Finally, there has been a growing number of musical theatre imports in the Chinese market over the last two decades. In this more globalised world, rapid flows of media content, international theatrical collaborations and viral communication increase a deeper need to understanding potential audience experiences and responses. The commercial and aesthetic dimensions of marketing activities such as posters stimulate audiences' desire and pre-performance interactions with branded productions. Social media highlight the extension of Chinese audiences' social and entertainment experiences outside the theatre venue. It becomes a vital platform that can be used for audiences to archive, exchange and enlarge their musical theatre experiences. With China's social and cultural transformation, the majority of contemporary Chinese cultural consumers have grown up in a context of rapid modernity and globalisation, which predisposes them to appreciate and consume mix-style theatrical performances. The taste of Chinese audiences is becoming more mixed, shaped by both western and native influences – which is also reflected in Chinese audience behaviour and consumption patterns. Therefore, social media marketing is encouraged to enhance western musical theatre productions to merge into China's internet culture and online fandom practices.

#### **9.4 Implications for policy**

Hermann-Pillath (2017) has claimed “Chinese economic style” as a state-market hybrid model that has formed a type of Chinese free-market economy through central, provincial and local governmental supervisions. Chinese central government plays a key role in facilitating the transfer of public and private capital into the development of national, regional and local creative and cultural industries which have been seen as a new engine of domestic economic growth (Keane and Chen, 2019). This policy-led cultural development incorporates in a market-driven model, which emphasises on the nation’s consumption upgrade towards services, tourism, entertainment and technological goods. The aspiration of consumption upgrade has, in particular, paid a great deal of attention to the culture, arts and entertainment sector for boosting domestic consumption and creating new employment opportunities. In China’s context, Chinese taste and preferences are influenced by the government policy which plays a leading role in guiding consumption choices and public tastes.

At present, China’s central government and Beijing municipal government have committed to a policy emphasis on the social effects of widening citizen’s performing arts participation for well-being and social harmony. The municipal government sets out to upgrade the city’s arts and cultural facilities in order to improve the experience of people’s cultural participation. Key audience development policies have acknowledged the government’s role in supporting audience development, such as constructing theatrical infrastructure, mobilising creative human resources, subsidising excellent theatrical productions and encouraging online and offline audience participation. China’s policy-led audience development aims to facilitate people’s intellectual, emotional, and social needs through theatre attendance, to stimulate theatre consumption and to satisfy

people's diverse social and entertainment needs. The goal of policy-led audience development gives consumption in a central place in guiding an integration of cultural tourism, theatre attendance, by-products and the consumption of other services.

At a city level, the policy on audience participation in the performing arts sector adopts financial tools such as tickets subsidies and urban development strategies including theatre clustering and agglomeration of creative and cultural spaces. These policy-led strategies attempt to remove the financial and geographical barriers to theatre-going and, furthermore, provide accessible and memorable live experiences for theatre audiences. The policy-led administration is effective to foster the performing arts market and increase the rate of theatre attendance. These measures psychologically create a norm that potentially increases the opportunity of theatre attendance and fosters the Chinese market of musical theatre. However, there is a need for the policy strategy to deepen Chinese audiences' knowledge of new art forms, which could further offer lower price tickets and arts learning activities for wider participation. For the central government, audience research and development should play a key role in deepening audience understanding of new art forms via the mechanism of arts education prior to marketing a particular musical theatre productions. Arts organisations could provide media platforms for promoting appropriate knowledge of western theatre etiquette and how to enjoy a musical theatre performance.

At an arts organisation level, state-funded arts and cultural organisations, such as China Arts & Entertainment Group and Shanghai Media Group, still play a gatekeeper role in deciding and selecting musical theatre plays and thus they have direct influence on audience taste and an individual's decision to access art forms and specific plays. Arts

and cultural organisations need to open the selection process of different types of musical theatre productions to the public. It suggests the central government could give more autonomy to state-funded as well as private arts and cultural organisations to introduce a wide range of musical theatre performances in order to know the real taste of the audience. Arts and cultural organisations could fabricate a platform system to develop a deep and rigorous audience research mapping out audience tastes and preferences in terms of western musical theatre performances, which aims to produce long-term evaluations of engagement, impact and financial investment for arts organisations.

With a growing number of musical theatre imports in the Chinese market, organisations and institutions from the two countries involved need to strengthen collaborations in understanding the audience. For the central government it needs to reflect on the efforts so far of policy-making in facilitating transnational collaborations of staging imported musical theatre performances and audience development. Efficient transnational collaborations will help build a long-term partnership with international organisations to match productions to consumer need, and apply a western-style management system to Chinese theatres for operating musical theatre production, distribution and promotion. More specifically, the researcher suggests transnational collaborations could set a shared objective around how we can take Chinese audiences into the future through workshops and consortium in close liaison with production companies, theatres, potential investment partners, and market research institutions.

### **9.5 Implications for practice**

Not only has the art form of musical theatre itself but also its commodification, transformed the Chinese market. The operation of commercial theatre such as musical

theatre makes a continuing contribution to the UK economy, a fact which allows the Chinese government to show a willingness to adopt a commercially-driven theatrical form to boost domestic cultural consumption and theatre attendance rate. Besides Chinese central government, non-state owned businesses have become a rising commercial force investing a large amount of commercial capital over the last two decades in the theatre market. Chinese private enterprises such as ACOMusical (also known as Jucheng in Chinese) have become a new power involved in the musical theatre sector for promoting and selling western productions to Chinese audiences.

The findings of this study have a number of important implications for theatre producers and arts marketing professionals. For theatre producers, the opening-up of economic policy and ongoing marketisation in the arts and cultural sector mean that China is becoming a more competitive market for overseas musical theatre productions. The rise of Chinese pop music enhances the emergence of Chinese home-grown musicals, and the recent introduction of French and German musicals widens competition in the Chinese market. Facing a competitive market, theatre producers are required to capture audiences' experiences, preferences and expectations in a deeper and richer way to introduce market-driven productions. Local recognition is decisive for strengthening the performable and marketable advantages in the Chinese market, especially for those musical theatre productions that have not yet been introduced to China. It is a fact that opportunities may be restricted to the productions with a weak connection to Chinese cultural organisations and media companies, or which are less known among Chinese audiences. International theatre festivals could be a platform that showcases musical theatre productions to draw attention to audiences and potential local partners interested in being part of a cross-cultural transfer.

The characteristics of musical theatre demonstrate that the art form boasts popular aesthetics and provides entertaining and engaging experience for audiences, and thus the art form is culturally adaptive to fit in with Chinese omnivorous taste. The multiple artistic elements of musical theatre can cater for Chinese audiences' theatrical preference by offering sensory live experiences, and thus the art form is likely to incorporate interactive technologies and multimedia to deliver a new audience experience. This trend in musical theatre could combine immersive art and interactive digital technologies to effectively reform a traditional audience-stage relationship. This possible innovation also indicates technologies which upgrade theatrical productions can offer a new and up-to-date experience for audiences. There will be ongoing possibilities in musical theatre to apply technologies for innovating the art form and this will enable producers to become more confident and ambitious in targeting wider audiences, which means a production could invite as many types of audiences as possible (e.g. *Wicked*). Targeting wider audiences is also strategic in marketing campaigns, because it removes a psychological barrier of attending new theatrical experiences and emphasises a common desire for experiential entertainment.

For arts marketing professionals, traditional marketing campaigns successfully have reached transnational audiences, promotional materials are an effective means for raising people's awareness of knowing an unfamiliar art form. However, audiences have started to become discerning and more alert to these promotional information, and they have to move on to search information via user-generated online reviews. Social media platforms can be used for combining traditional media platforms to nurture audience interests in a new art form. For example, TV shows and theatre festivals could provide eye-opening

opportunities for potential audiences to taste new arts experiences, whereas social media can encourage audience engagement with the performance from offline to online. In so doing, this could inform a larger audience and gradually influence potential audiences' attitudes to attend live musical theatre performances. The findings suggest that a profile of existing audiences is well-educated with gradually developing tastes and understanding of musical theatre. They have a strong motivation to discover new theatrical experiences. These audiences could become vocal leaders - rather than followers - who are likely to recommend and share their experiences with other people, whereas potential new audiences tend to be open-minded and willing to try new experiences. They can easily accept peer recommendations to help them make their own discoveries. Audience-focused arts marketing aims at understanding more about audience needs and creating productions which answers the mix of audience needs.

Digital platforms have inevitably become a major source of engaging with a musical theatre audience. Chinese audiences are willing to express personal emotions, experiences and opinions via online communities. The emergence of online communities tends to liberate audience expressions, renew an experience with like-minded people and forms individualistic taste, which are major motivations for Chinese audiences using online communities. The virtual space also encourages free expression for new audiences and less confident audiences who can easily contribute to discussions of musical theatre. Arts marketing professionals should consider using online forums and communities to capture the way of Chinese audiences to express, share and co-create the post-performance experience, in order to profile their responses and experiences.



Marketing strategies could utilise the views of Chinese key opinion leaders, such as scholars, or famous artists to indicate the value of a particular musical theatre production. The reputation of musical theatre productions originating in the United Kingdom and the United States is positive among Chinese audiences, and especially those associated with London's West End and New York's Broadway – this creates huge possibilities for the theatre companies from the United Kingdom and the United States to succeed in the Chinese market. Classic, globally-recognised productions, such as those derived from classics of literature, are the most popular content among Chinese audiences. Promotional materials, digital marketing and advertising have become compelling vehicles that strongly drive Chinese audience choices in theatre attendance, which leads to Chinese audiences rely on brands or reputations to decide the value of musical theatre productions, and it sometimes seems to be the singular criterion for judging the value of musical theatre performances. If a production has a solid reputation - award winners, theatrical or literacy classics, shows featuring local stars – this is a major factor for predicting audience attendance rates. Global musical theatre productions are needed to maintain their international reputations and improve visibilities to attract a Chinese audience, and especially an introduction of musical theatre's artistic characteristic from local key opinion leaders can influence audience understanding of musical theatre. Marketing musical theatre requires arts organisations and marketing professionals to work together to help audiences build a detailed, rich and authentic understanding of the dynamics of musical theatre via media platforms.

## **9.6 Limitations and future research**

Throughout studying Chinese musical theatre audiences, this research is under several constraints. Given the time and word limit, the researcher only focused on the experience

of audiences in Beijing but the implications lie in a cross-cultural context which are not limited to guide the musical theatre industry in other Chinese cities and regions. Since 2010, global musical theatre productions have tended to launch tours to large and middle-sized Chinese cities in which audience knowledge of the art form and post-performance experiences might slightly differ from audiences in Beijing. For instance, the specificity of cities or locations may influence audience experience of musical theatre performances and attitudes to theatre consumption. As far as the researcher is concerned, the market and industry structure are fast-changing and remain uncertainties. Further research on Chinese audiences would show more data in the Chinese market for expanding the scale and potential audiences in other cities. Further work could also be carried out to analyse the variance in audiences' responses and consumption trends across Chinese cities.

Another limitation is that this research only targeted on musical theatre attendees, i.e., existing audiences, but future research could investigate non-attenders to reveal potential barriers of musical theatre attendance. This could be conducted through focus groups with non-attenders and could shed light on why these groups refuse to attend a musical theatre performance. Meanwhile, other actors in the ecosystem of the musical theatre industry also play key roles in creating audiences' collaborative and collective experiences in the theatre context, such as theatre venues, arts organisations and media platforms. As the researcher has pointed out, future research could, therefore, add to the debate by in-depth interviews with media and arts organisations' senior managers on creating different formats of musical theatre experience from an organisational perspective, which could provide a new angle of audience engagement from the inside of arts and cultural organisations.

With the continuing technological innovation, this study suggests the necessity to acknowledge the interdisciplinary standpoint of understanding audiences from the perspective of the digital empowerment of contemporary audiences in the consumption of musical theatre. Digital technologies are commonly used for searching for relevant information, buying tickets and making post-performance reviews. Online interactions have become a major way of deepening audience engagement with an overseas theatrical production. Digital involvement is a future trend in audience research, as digital technologies continue to play an influential role in changing audience consumption and purchase patterns. This study does not include a focused discussion on technological innovation and digital engagement, but it allows the prospect for future research to pay attention to the growing influence of digital technologies for arts marketing and audience engagement. Future research could look into audiences' online consumption and digital engagement in a way that anticipates and shapes audiences' theatre experience and choice-making patterns in the Chinese market. This is especially relevant for the "digital generation" who relies heavily on the online consumption of arts and culture via apps and websites.

The findings of this research primarily focus on Chinese audiences' reactions to the musical theatre genre, but there is no restriction to suggesting theories and implications in a wider performing arts context. Further research is needed to provide more evidence that audience data could be applied to other forms of theatrical events in the Chinese market. The data on Chinese audiences in this thesis could be widely tested through qualitative and quantitative studies, which build knowledge and practice across countries and art form disciplines to test the applicability of the findings in comparative studies. This research could also be useful for extending the exploration of Chinese audiences'

attitudes, experiences, preferences and expectations to imports of other overseas cultural and entertainment productions more generally.

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### Appendix 1: The list of Chinese terms mentioned in this thesis

<i>All Red River</i>	《满江红》
Cultural System Reform	文化体制改革
<i>Douban</i>	豆瓣
<i>Geju meiying</i>	《歌剧魅影》
Guo Cui	国粹
Iron rice bowl	铁饭碗
<i>Juyuan meiying</i>	《剧院魅影》
Jue-er	角儿
Lu Xun	鲁迅
Peking Opera	京剧
<i>She Xi</i>	《社戏》
The Examination	科举考试
<i>Wenjuanxing</i>	问卷星
Xiqu	戏曲

## **Appendix 2: Focus group guide**

**Topic: How do British and American musical theatre productions enter the Chinese market and engage with local audiences?**

### **Part 1 How do participants shape the meaning of art forms?**

1. Tell me about what do you think about musical theatre.
  - a. How do you know musical theatre?
  - b. How does musical theatre appeal to you?
2. Tell me about your understanding of traditional Chinese theatre.

### **Part 2 How do participants perceive British and American musical theatre productions?**

3. What productions do you know?
4. What factors affect your feelings and experience of a musical theatre performance?
5. Show 20 musical theatre posters. Which one impressed you?

### **Part 3 What other social activities do you engage with when seeing a musical theatre performance?**

6. Who do you go with for musical theatre performances?
7. What do you do with your friends or companions before enjoying a musical theatre performance?
8. After the show, what are you going to do?
9. Do you ever get together with your companions to recall your musical theatre experiences? And if you do, how do you share it? How do people share memory?
10. Do you buy products that are associated with a musical theatre performance?



### Appendix 3: Sample of the online questionnaire

#### Part I Audience trending choices

1. Have you ever been to a performance?
  - Yes
  - No
2. What kinds of theatre performances did you attend on your last visit to the theatre?
  - Spoken drama
  - Dance (Ballet, Contemporary dance etc.)
  - Musical theatre
  - Concert
  - Opera
  - Traditional Chinese theatre ('jing ju', 'kun qu' etc.)
  - Crosstalk show
  - Acrobatics
  - Circus
  - Other, please specify:
3. How regular do you visit a theatre? / How often do you go to the theatre?
  - Every week
  - Every two weeks
  - Once a month
  - Once in three months
  - Once in half a year
  - Once per year
  - Less than once a year
4. Have you ever experienced watching a live musical show?
  - Yes
  - No
5. How do you find information about musical theatre productions? Please select all applicable.
  - Newspapers
  - Magazines
  - Word of mouth
  - Social media

- Googling
- 3<sup>rd</sup> Party Sites (e.g. Damai Website)
- Other, please specify:

6. What factors attract you to a particular musical theatre production? Please select all applicable.

- More visibility (e.g. advertising)
- Cheaper ticket prices
- Better live experience
- International fame
- Better customer services
- More accessible location

7. What is your reason for seeing a live musical theatre performance?

- To relax
- To gain cultural and artistic knowledge
- To spend time with family and friends
- To enjoy new experiences
- To renew previous experiences
- Other, please specify:

8. How do you book your tickets? Choose your most common methods.

- Tickets agent
- Phoning directly to box office
- Official website
- Ticket booth
- 3<sup>rd</sup> Party Sites (e.g. Damai Website)

9. How much would you be willing to pay for a musical ticket? (Unit: RMB)

- 100 or less
- 280-480
- 481-680
- 681-880
- 881-1080
- 1081 or more

10. What factors contribute to your choice of musical theatre shows?

- Storylines

- Themes
- Music
- Lyrics and literature
- Character-set
- Stage design/ scenography
- The use of high-tech
- Reputation
- Stars and celebrity
- Online reviews
- Other, please specify:

11. Preferred genre types for a musical theatre show. Select all applicable.

- Comedy
- Historical drama
- Tragedy
- Horror
- Romance
- Fairy tale
- Fantasy
- Science fiction
- Other, please specify:

12. Have you ever seen a musical show more than once?

- Yes, I have.
- No, I haven't.
- No, but I would like to.

## **Part II Audience attitudes towards musical theatre genre**

13. Western musical theatre has features that remind me of traditional Beijing opera.

Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Strongly agree

14. Western musicals like Beijing Opera are collaborative art forms.

Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Strongly agree

15. Western musicals are more accessible to me than Beijing Opera.

Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Strongly agree

16. Western musicals can offer more engaging experience to me than Beijing opera.

Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Strongly agree

17. Western musicals offer good value experiences in terms of the style of performance.

Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Strongly agree

18. I cannot easily understand the beauty and style of Western musicals' performances.

Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Strongly agree

19. Western musicals will eventually replace the Beijing opera in terms of popularity.

Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Strongly agree

### **Part III Audience attitudes towards musical theatre productions**

20. I prefer musical theatre productions using English language.

Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Strongly agree

21. Hybridising Chinese cultural elements creates a sense of intimacy to me.

Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Strongly agree

22. I am willing to pay more money for a star-casting show.

Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Strongly agree

23. I am interested in buying products that are associated with a musical theatre (e.g. T-shirt, Programmes).

Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Strongly agree

24. I post pictures about the experience of watching musical theatre shows on social media.

Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Strongly agree

25. I would like to take part in the online fans community of musical theatre.

Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Strongly agree

## Appendix 4: Consent Form

### CONSENT FORM FOR PARTICIPANTS

**[Title of Study:** Production branding of musical theatre in urban China: A consumer-based approach]

The Institute for Creative and Cultural Entrepreneurship, Goldsmiths College, University of London attach high priority to the ethical conduct of research. **Alongside this form, you should read the Information Sheet and/or listen to the explanation about the research provided by the person organising the research.** If you have any questions regarding the research or use of the data collected through the study, please do not hesitate to ask the researcher. We therefore ask you to consider the following points before agreeing to take part in this research:

- This research is being undertaken for the purposes of a PhD dissertation
- The research will be conducted by Xiao Lu
- The interview will be recorded.
- All data will be treated as personal under the 1998 Data Protection Act, and will be stored securely.
- Copies of transcripts and other data collected through the research will be provided to you, free of charge, upon request. [include this if you think that you can reasonably commit to this]
- Anonymity will be maintained and it will not be possible to identify you from the resulting dissertation
- If you decide at any time during the research that you no longer wish to participate in this project, you can withdraw immediately without giving any reason.
- You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep and refer to at any time.
- By signing this form you assign copyright of your contribution to the researcher. This excludes visual data supplied by you.
- Feedback will be provided to all participants at by the end of the project.

If you have any concerns about the conduct of the research, please contact the department's ethics officer Dr Nicola Searle.

I confirm that I have freely agreed to participate in the research project: Production branding of musical theatre in urban China: A consumer-based approach. I have been briefed on what this involves and I agree to the use of the findings as described above. I understand that the material is protected by a code of professional ethics.

*Participant Signature:*

Name:

Date:

I confirm, for the project team, that we agree to keep the undertakings in this contract.

*Researcher Signature: Xiao Lu*

Name: Xiao Lu

Date: 9<sup>th</sup> February 2018