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China's Mandarin Mamma Mia!

By Patti Waldmeir

Can a Mandarin version of 'Mamma Mia!' spark a homegrown musical theatre industry in China?



The finale of the Chinese production of 'Mamma Mia!' at the Shanghai Grand Theatre in Shanghai, China

If there is such a thing as global culture, *Mamma Mia!* must be it. The songs are classics of the lingua franca of pop, familiar from Bujumbura to Beijing, and proof that even those who do not speak English can still spell Abba.

Now *Mamma Mia!* has arrived in China – the first time that a Broadway-quality western musical has been performed in the language of the world's most populous nation. Classics such as "Money, Money, Money" are sung entirely in Chinese (apart from the word "money", which apparently needs no translation). A Chinese cast sings songs in Chinese in a show staged by a Chinese production company that is the commercial arm of the Ministry of Culture. It is a peculiar – and in some ways uncomfortable – fusion of east and west, but one that has been greeted rapturously by audiences in Beijing and Shanghai. Next month the production moves to Guangzhou, before returning to Shanghai on Christmas Eve.

Beijing hopes that the show – which is being staged under licence from original producers Littlestar, and is under their artistic control – will spark the creation of an indigenous musical theatre industry in China. Chinese producers United Asia Live Entertainment Co

(UALE) say that box-office revenues so far stand at RMB26m (£2.58m, \$4.06m), while it cost RMB70m to produce.

But the show has a bigger purpose than profit: it is part of a much larger drive towards a new Chinese creativity. Beijing wants China to move from faking things to making them – from counterfeiting CDs to creating homegrown stage shows. The eventual goal is to produce Chinese musicals based on Chinese stories to export around the world – and help China replace widgets in the trade balance.



The audience at the Shanghai Grand Theatre prepares to watch the show

Of course it is likely to be a long time before the west is humming tunes from *Raise the Red Lantern: The Musical*. Western musical theatre is an alien art form in China. Probably the closest thing is Beijing opera – but it is hard to see much similarity between the stylised, quintessentially Asian musicality of traditional Chinese opera and the rambunctious melodiousness of the average western musical. Translating *Mamma Mia!* into Mandarin is meant to start the long process of bridging that gap.

This production takes just a baby step across the divide. Apart from the words, everything about it is western: the costumes, the body language, the gestures. The show's three middle-aged divas – Donna, Tanya and Rosie – wear neon Lycra and bellbottoms; the younger Chinese cast members bump bottoms in greeting (in a way that would never pass muster offstage). Plug your ears and this could be Broadway.

The story, too, could hardly be more western. The heroine, Donna (played by Meryl Streep in the movie), has had sex with three men and does not know which one fathered her daughter. When her daughter gets married and invites all three potential fathers to the wedding the result is a classically western comedy of errors. The backdrop of the story is the sexual revolution of the 1960s, in which Donna enthusiastically participated. Her Chinese contemporaries were going through a spot of upheaval then too – but it did not involve quite as much free love, and certainly a lot less laughter.

It may seem odd to choose such a foreign story to promote the localisation of stage musicals in China, but Tian Yuan, president of UALE, thinks it is an obvious choice: “In a relatively short period, *Mamma Mia!* has become the world's number one hit musical with the largest audiences and the most language versions around the globe,” she says. In that respect, it is like a Fendi handbag: a famous name, in the land where brand is king.

David Lightbody, British executive producer of the Mandarin version for Littlestar, says the brand needs to be translated into the vernacular to have maximum impact – and crucially, to generate the commercial success on which a sustainable musical theatre industry in China must be based. “It's a commercial decision to use the local language,” he

says.

English productions of *Cats*, *Les Misérables* and other global hit musicals have done short mainland tours in recent years. But to succeed in China, musicals must make money – and to make money, they must run for years, says Lightbody. “How do you get a show to run for years in the local market?” he asks. “You do it in the local language.”



Shanghai theatregoers familiar with Abba classics can now hear them in their own language

That may sound obvious, but many Shanghai theatregoers do not agree. On a sultry evening in August, Zhang Yuwei, who works in sales in Shanghai, donned a chiffon shirt and hotpants to attend one of the first performances of the show in Mandarin. But she wishes it had been in English. “Even though Chinese is my mother tongue, I would rather see it in English,” she commented during the interval. “I know it’s been performed all over the world and it is sort of ‘globalised’, but there is still a cultural gap,” she said, adding, “I have the

sense that there is something missing.”

Zhang speaks for many Chinese when she questions the logic of performing it in the vernacular. Mandarin is a tonal language, where changes in pitch can deliver radically different meanings: “English can be sung fast and understood, but Chinese cannot,” says Zhang.

Many Shanghainese prefer foreign things on principle – whether handbags or stage shows. Shanghai is the most western of China’s cities, and has a long history of familiarity with – not to mention occupation by – westerners. And throughout the mainland, middle-class consumers often want nothing to do with Brand China. Many assume the Chinese version of everything will be the cheap one. In fact, domestic brands have often found it hard to compete with the conventional wisdom that, in the words of a Chinese proverb, “foreign monks give better sermons”. Overseas goods are always assumed to have the edge on quality.

Surprisingly, even those whose English is poor seem to agree. The English language newspaper China Daily recently posed the question, “What’s the point of translating Broadway hits into Chinese?” It asked a dozen young Shanghainese women which version they would prefer to see and they all chose the English one. What if they could not speak English? “Still English,” they said.

This is not the first time a vernacular translation of *Mamma Mia!* has been criticised locally, says Judy Craymer, global producer of the show. “When we first went to Germany ... the reaction from the press was, ‘Why isn’t it in English, English is our second language?’” she recalls. “But then they began really to enjoy it and ‘get it’ in their own language, and it ran for many years there,” she says, predicting the same will happen in

China.

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After one recent performance, Shen Xiaocen, who rose to fame as a pop singer under communism and now plays Tanya in the show, says the musical is perfect for igniting the Chinese appetite for western musicals: “the Abba music is so famous, [Chinese] people know the music very well,” she says, speaking in the British-accented English she acquired living in London for the past decade.



Left to right, the show's stars Shen Xiaocen, Shadow and Yang Zhuqing, who perform in Mandarin

Shen points out that it is not only Mandarin she speaks in the show, but also local dialect (Shanghainese in Shanghai, Cantonese in Guangzhou). “People love it when I speak Shanghainese,” she says.

Chinese actress Shadow, who plays Donna, has appeared in both English and Chinese productions of the show, and thinks the Chinese version is a sign of things to come. Speaking with the midwestern twang she picked up studying drama at the Chicago

College of Performing Arts, she says she thinks there will eventually be only two language markets for the performing arts worldwide: English and Chinese. “I performed in Chicago and on Broadway,” she says. “The [audience] reaction in the mother tongue is truly different.”

So is the show a historic step towards a new Chinese creativity – or just another case of China faking a famous western brand (even if the imitation is fully authorised this time, with the Chinese producers paying full licence fees for it)?

Lei Ting, producer of the indigenous musical *Wanderings of Sanmao* (which recently played in Shanghai), says it is impossible to popularise musicals in China merely by imitating western models. “One woman and three men – that could never happen in China,” she insists. “If you want to bring a musical to China you have to localise it, but the *Mamma Mia!* story is not Chinese so people will think: “This is not our story,” she says. “It’s important to find a way to fit in with Chinese habits of listening to music,” she says, noting that most Chinese expect their songs to sound like poems. Abba songs are too prosaic.

But this kind of imitation is a necessary stage on the road to true creation, believes Niu Xinci, founder of the musical drama department of the Central Academy of Drama, China’s top drama college. China is still a long way from creating its own indigenous musicals, but imitating western ones is not a worthless pursuit in the meantime, she says, pointing out that she cried twice when watching the Mandarin version of *Mamma Mia!*, and not at all when she saw the show in English.

Indeed, some Chinese businessmen and even government officials believe that faking things can be creative in its own right – provided the imitation adds value. In Mandarin, it is known as “shanzhai”, and encompasses things such as HiPhone, a knockoff iPhone that can accommodate two sim cards, a feature popular with globetrotting Chinese travellers – and not available from the real thing. One of the most famous examples of shanzhai culture is the Chinese search engine Baidu, which many consider a knockoff Google – but with better music search functions. And recently, a shanzhai amusement park opened near Shanghai, based on the online game *World of Warcraft*. Who but a Chinese counterfeiter would think to turn a virtual game into a real-world amusement park?

A senior Chinese government official recently defended the role of shanzhai in China's budding culture of innovation. Liu Binjie, head of the China National Copyright Administration, said shanzhai “is a sign of the cultural creativity of the common people”, which “fits a market need” in China.

Littlestar's Lightbody sees this as stage two of a 20-year transition to the day when China can export musicals instead of widgets: first English musicals are brought to China; next comes translation; and eventually indigenous creations will emerge. “[This production] is about building the skills and resources to deliver, ultimately, the third stage” – the development of indigenous musical theatre where Chinese stories are told by Chinese people in Chinese, and exported, he says. Even finding a cast that could sing, dance and act – and were old enough to play middle-aged characters – was a challenge this time, says Craymer. Chinese drama schools only recently began teaching the skills needed for western-style musical theatre.

China is nothing if not humble about how much further it has to go to build a musical theatre industry. After the last curtain call of the recent Shanghai performance of *Sanmao*, the composer came on stage to plead for more support for the industry. “Compared with the western musical that is more than 100 years old, we are really babies,” he told the audience of mostly families with small children. When they are grown, maybe China will be exporting musicals to Broadway – but do not bet on it.

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