

Gender Progressivism in Chinese Musical Theatre: A Comparative Case Study of *Rent*

Introduction

Musical theatre is an art form that not only reflects core social values but also is shaped by contemporary social ideologies. American Broadway theatre particularly meets this criteria, and it is easier to find progressive gender ideas on Broadway stage than on the big screen (Wolf, “A Feminist History” 50). Tracing Broadway history, one can find that patterns of feminism, gender role changes, and support of minority groups emerged as early as in the 1970s, long before such patterns emerged in the more mainstream visual arts.

When a society is not open to discussing issues of gender roles, theatrical arts might reflect this trend, and China is such an example. Despite China’s long history of cultural conservatism and government censorship regarding progressive presentations about gender, the trend started to change in China’s musical theatre. Emerging as a brand new market in China, which started its first musical adaptation adaptation *MamaMia!* in 2011 (MacDonald 29), Chinese musical theatre received less political attention. From adaptations of *Spring Awakening*, a Broadway musical about teenage sexuality, to *Avenue Q*, a Broadway musical about racism, homosexuality, and Internet pornography, it seems that China is beginning to embrace gender progressiveness in its theatrical field.

Nonetheless, no researcher has studied in depth the extent to which specific Chinese musical adaptations deliver progressive Western messages about gender and sexuality in the recent decade. Therefore, a comparison focusing on gender progressive elements between a Chinese adaptation of a musical and its Broadway original is needed. The 1996 Broadway musical *Rent* proved to be the most optimal case because *Rent* is the most recent and popular

Chinese musical adaptation, which was on tour from November 2019 to January 2020. More importantly, this rock musical was one of the first Broadway musicals that brought lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender elements to the stage (Sullivan 3).

This leads to the question: to what degree are progressive elements regarding gender and sexuality presented in a 2019 Chinese musical adaptation of the Broadway musical *Rent*? The findings on the differences and similarities between the Broadway original *Rent* and its 2019-2020 Chinese adaptation version might hint an opening of cultural acceptance of gender progressivism in China.

Literature Review

Gender progressiveness in Broadway Theatre Over Time

The perceptions of gender roles and sexuality have been changing over time. Every culture has its own trajectory of these changing perceptions, and a culture's art and literature can serve as a medium to reflect its core and distinct cultural values. This is particularly true of theater. For example, after comparing language use in the musical adaptations of the same Shakespeare work, *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and *Romeo and Juliet*, in Italian, German and English, Alina Bottez revealed that rereading and rewriting Shakespeare's works in different social contexts enriches and recontextualizes the values of his work. She also found out these values about genders and relationships are more culturally specific to the audience in each language context (Bottez 1, 3-5). Moreover, Princeton University Professor of Theater, Stacy Wolf, concluded after a detailed examination of popular Broadway shows that Broadway reflects the progressive change of feminist ideologies since the 1940s, the time females dominated on and off the stage, (Wolf, "A Feminist History of the Broadway" 327-328). As Bottez's and

Wolf's studies suggest, theatre can be a reflection of changing perceptions of gender roles and sexuality both across cultures and over time.

Adding on to her own findings about a general progressive trend in Broadway theatre, Wolf traced and compared the development of Hollywood films and Broadway theatre. She found Broadway was always ahead of Hollywood in presenting innovative and progressive elements, especially about genders roles, sexuality and minority groups (Wolf, "A Feminist History" 50). For example, the 1947 musical *Finian's Rainbow* depicted a socialist neighborhood that promoted racial and sexual equality by bringing actors of different colors onto the stage, and opened the window for progressivism in Broadway theatre.

Researchers admit that although Broadway audiences are self-selective and are always more educated and open to new ideas, the change of representations of sex and genders in Broadway theatre over the past decades is a vivid reflection of progressing American culture ("American Participation in Theater"; Savran 547). In support of this idea, Wolf argues that Broadway demonstrated the desires of American society over time, especially in its racially and sexually equal productions (Wolf, "Something Better than This" 48).

Therefore, Broadway theatre is now a place where diversity in productions enjoy free exhibitions; it is also an important window to observe how evolving social patterns are projected within musicals. Through analyzing specific role shapings, plots and major themes, male and female relationships, the delineation of LGBTQ communities, researchers have been able to further trace the explicit and implicit changes in American gender and sexual perceptions over time.

In the original 1943 Broadway show *Oklahoma!*, gender stereotypes against women were a serious issue. Masculinity and femininity still remained unbalanced in that show. Female

characters including the protagonist Laurey Williams and her female friends and relatives were always regarded as inferior in this production, merely serving the function of marrying men and rearing their children. Moreover, in the original production, the distinctions between ‘good’ girls and ‘bad’ ones were attributed to the virgin/whore dichotomy (Cook 36). Cook, after conducting a gender analysis of the 1943 *Oklahoma!*, concluded that its “outmoded displays of femininity provides a white[self-reliant, masculine] middle-class man’s world” and “removed female characters from things public or political, demonstrat[ing] how to be domestic heterosexual beings”(Cook 36, 46). In addition, Wolf uses another musical, *The Sound of Music*, which was produced in the 1940-50s period to support Cook’s argument. Wolf observes that female protagonist Maria was also depicted as a submissive one, which was “narrow, negative and stereotypical” (Wolf, “A Problem like Maria,” 237). Combining plot analysis and experts’ comments, it is not hard to find that Broadway was still stuck in unbalanced representation of gender roles in the 1940s and 1950s.

However, since the 1960s, attitudes toward femininity in Broadway theatre began to shift while feminine empowerment and independence emerged on the stage boldly. For example, in a 1966 Broadway musical *Sweet Charity*, the female protagonist decided to reveal her true identity, a taxi dancer, to her boyfriend and strived to fight her own path independently in the end with hope. Therefore, Stacy Wolf, after conducting a detailed analysis of the plots, lyrics, characters and choreography of this production, appreciated that it formulated its “own feminist utopia on and off the stage” and was a milestone which showed Broadway’s emerging participation in a larger cultural conversation about gender and sexuality (Wolf, “Something Better than This” 330). Although Graber, after thoroughly comparing contemporary scholastic queer studies and Wolf’s commentaries, criticized Wolf that she overly relied on her own

interpretations of homosexuality representations in Broadway musicals, such as *Rent* and *Sweet Charity*, Graber admitted that it was a fact that Broadway, since the 1960s, has been shifting to a progressive gender discourse in general, as shown not only by *Sweet Charity*, but also by *Chicago* and other productions (Graber 368). Looking back to the 1960 and 1970s, according to Pew Research Center, the labor force participation rate has risen for women and fallen for men since the late 1950s, suggesting a shift in gender roles in American society and that women no longer remain as domestic figures (Horowitz). In addition, as Valerie Lynn Schrader points out that Broadway has been a major workspace for females and gay communities; it is more prone to be an outlet for innovation, progressiveness and expressions (Schrader 3). For example, the musical *Rent* in 1996 glorified sexual diversities and supported HIV communities when the public were panicking about HIV as a life-threatening epidemic (Schrader 6). In this case, Broadway was even more progressive than mainstream social values.

In summary, the demographics of Broadway's audiences, who are more likely to be upper-middle class and more well-educated, thus more open to innovative ideas; large part of the staff working on and off Broadway stages, who themselves were gender minorities; and a growing awareness of gender progressivism and diversity in American society, contributed to the openness and progressivism of the Broadway theatre.

Gender and Sexuality Perceptions in China

China has been conservative regarding gender roles. In its Confucian ideology, only heterosexual marriage is allowed and the belief is that women should stay at home (Mengzi). Contemporary observation reaffirms this idea, as Chen claims that traditional sexual culture in China has been regarded as "repressive and reserved" (Chen 971). Moreover, there have been

unbalanced expectations toward male and female roles. Males are expected to pass on the generation and legacy while females are expected to work behind the scenes (Zhang 206). In a culture that has long centered around male dominance and heritage, tolerance and opening of gender progressivism seemed difficult. Although attitudes toward women have improved significantly, according to Huiping Zhang's study on Chinese wives relative income and their marital quality, China did not remove homosexuality and bisexuality from the list of mental disorders in "Chinese classification and diagnosis criteria for mental disorders (third edition)" until 2001.

However, it still takes time for the Chinese government to open up to free gender discourse. According to People's Republic of China's Bureau of Culture website, it is still illegal for any Chinese digital media to explicitly depict or support the homosexual/LGBTQ community. Even though arts and literature regarding homosexuality indeed exist in China, they are rather products of subculture or the "grey area", according to Jin Cao's study on gay movements in mainland China (Cao 844). Zhou's study of Chinese theatre market, though it viewed government's and society's attitudes toward homosexuality from a theatrical angle and only contributed a small piece of discussion on this topic, was in support of the "grey area" idea. Interestingly, Zhou described Chinese experimental theatre, which has a very small market share, as the "grey area" in China's performing art field, which has more, yet still limited, latitude to exhibit LGBTQ+ and sensitive political elements (Zhou 25).

On the other side, with the development of social media and the new generation, perceptions of homosexuality and gender roles are evolving in China, especially among the younger generation and those who have a higher level of education (Chen 960). In Chen's study, a majority of her randomly selected interviewees who were at their twenties and thirties were in

support of homosexuality in China and appealed for legalization of gay marriage in China. Examining the landscape of sexuality in China in 2017, Chen found out that younger generations and the middle class showed “more tolerance toward sexual practices outside of the dominant frame”, indicating age and class are important determinants in Chinese sexual culture (Chen 972). Besides age and class, education level is also shown to have a positive correlation with egalitarian gender attitudes in China (Shu 311). Since the early 2000s, Chinese middle class has experienced the fastest growth in the world, from 29 million in 1999 to 531 million in 2013 (“How Well-off Is China's Middle Class?”). Moreover, the number of students receiving graduate level education increased from 1,000,000 in 1978 to 13,000,000 in 2004 and more than 60% of high school graduates in China now attend a university, up from 20% in the 1980s (Fengliang 689). Combined with insights from Chinese gender researchers, these trends suggest that China’s gender and sexuality perceptions are shifting toward egalitarianism and progressiveness.

Chinese Musical Theatre

As a newly emerged performance art in China, musical theatre did not fully embrace the commercial market until its adaptation of *Mamma!* in 2011. Since musical theatre is a new Western performing art, its audiences in China are more self-selective than on Broadway, and they are usually members of a well-educated, middle class (Kim 6). Therefore, emerging middle class and demographics of Chinese musical theatre audience indicate that Chinese musical theatre can be a platform of bold expressions and sexual progressiveness, just like Broadway (“American Participation in Theater”). Productions and adaptations carried out by Chinese commercial musical companies seemed to confirm this trend. Although homosexual elements are

still illegal to show in digital media, Chinese adaptations of *Avenue Q* (2014), *Spring Awakening* (2020) and *Trill Me* (2013), all were Broadway and off-Broadway shows containing progressive gender ideas and gay cultures; these productions prevailed in the Chinese musical market.

Overall, the choices of musical adaptations and changing demographics in China reflect a developing movement in empowering diverse gender roles and sexual minorities, mirroring the trend in American Broadway theatre as described by Wolf.

The Gap

The literature review shows that experts in the theatrical field have studied gender and sexuality progressiveness in western musicals in depth, along with gender ideologies in the western society. Experts in the Chinese theatrical field, on the other hand, have developed series of research to study societal representations and ideologies in independent plays, and Chinese sociology experts have studied gender and homosexuality ideologies in the Chinese society respectively. However, none has studied the gender elements, especially progressive representation of sexuality, in Chinese musicals. To study the extent to which specific Chinese musical adaptations deliver progressive Western messages about gender and sexuality in the recent decade, one needs to select a representative musical that has progressive gender elements, and has been produced by both Broadway and Chinese musical companies. Therefore, the 1996 Broadway musical *Rent* proved to be the most optimal case.

Introduction of Musical *Rent*: Plot Synopsis, Legacies and Reviews

An effective example of Broadway's early opening and China's emerging opening to gender progressivism in musical theatre is the rock musical *Rent*. *Rent* records the lives of a group of young New Yorkers throughout the year as they grapple with relationships, loss, meaning, shelter, and AIDS. Characters include Roger, a musician suffering from AIDS and recovering from a heroin addiction; Mark, a struggling producer, Maureen, a bisexual performance artist, and Mark's ex-girlfriend; Tom Collins, homosexual, a fellow AIDS teacher at New York university, is a friend and former roommate of Roger and Mark; Angel, Collins's lover, is a drag queen, a street musician, who also has AIDS. *Rent* begins on Christmas Eve in Mark Cohen and Roger Davis's loft apartment in the Lower East Side of New York City, and they have no money to pay for their rent. Throughout the musical, this group of friends has experienced a freezing Christmas without electricity and heat, unexpected encountering with lovers and reunion with the AIDS support group, rebuilding relationships, death of Angel, suffering from poverty and discrimination, yet they manage to reconcile and celebrate the Bohemian spirit in the end, and sing "No Day But Today" out loud together (Sullivan; Titrington).

Rent is the first rock musical to bring elements about LGBTQ, AIDS, race and poverty together and deliver hope to the minorities in every aspect. In 1996, *Rent* won four Tony awards, including the best musical award, and the Pulitzer Prize for Drama. Ben Brantley, a theater critic for the New York Times, called *Rent* "an uplifting, landmark rock musical" (Brantley). Moreover, Steele notes the significance of *Rent*'s positive and progressive depiction on homosexuality, and argues that *Rent* "helped a whole new generation of young queers to come out" (Schrader 25).

Though popular, literature on analyzing *Rent* from serious theoretical perspectives is extremely lacking. Judith Sebesta's theatrical analysis paper provides a relatively thorough and scholarly examination of the show. It rejects criticisms that "Larson failed to accurately represent AIDS, homosexuality, and counterculture" (Titrington; Sebesta). Sebesta presents *Rent* as an example of carnival, as described by Mikhail Bakhtin, and argues that *Rent* "deserves considerably more credit as a transgressive piece of musical theatre than it has been given." Additionally, by exploring how life perspectives of HIV-infected individuals are portrayed in *Rent* with a rhetorical analysis of *Rent's* script and lyrics, Schrader applies her observations and analysis from *Rent* to a broader HIV population in the society (Schrader 33). Her attempt again confirms Wolf's argument that musical theatre can be a window to observe and interpret society as a whole (Wolf, "Something Better than This" 50).

Method

A comparative content analysis of the 2008 Broadway *Rent* recording version and 2019 Chinese adaptation *Rent* live version followed a mixed-method design, in which both quantitative and qualitative data were collected and analyzed. Permissions from the production company, ACO Musical, were requested and received by the researcher. The 2019 Chinese adaptation *Rent* was recorded in audio and was transcribed into Chinese scripts. It was recorded on January 10th, 2020, during the *Rent* Chinese Version Beijing Tour. Photos of stage performances were derived from the production company's official website and were given permission to include in this paper. Communications with the translators, producers and directors show that no major adjustments on scripts, lyrics, stage design and dance movements were made during the two-month long *Rent* China tour from November 2019 to January 2020. Therefore, an

analysis of the January 10th *Rent* recording as a case study can be safely generalized to *Rent* Chinese version as a whole.

Quantitative data included the number of times that “gay” and other gender-related terms were mentioned in the plots and lyrics of both productions. This method was developed from the methods of Stella Sorby’s comparative analysis on translating Western Musicals into Chinese with her focus on cultural adaptations (Sorby 165). Although she didn’t use inferential data in her study, she grouped her analysis by Chinese script, English original script and English back-transliteration, and counted all Chinese explicit expressions of the phrase “love(爱)”, including all terms with the word “爱”, such as “爱抚(caress)” and “爱护(cherish)”. Therefore, in this case study of *Rent*, “gay and other gender-related terms” were specifically referred as:

“gay/homosexual/gayman(同性恋/基佬)”, “lesbian(女同性恋/蕾丝边)”, “transgender/drag queen(变性/变装皇后)”, “coming out(出柜)”. These terms are the most well-known and frequently used terms in Chinese cultures, both mainstream and sub-cultures, in describing non-mainstream gender roles (ie.LGBTQ+), according to Fang Chen’s research on contemporary sexualities in China (Chen 970; Ding and Shen 100).

The quantitative data (ie. gender related terms) was analyzed as the percentage of the total word count of the musical. The percentage of gender and gay-related terms in the Chinese adaptation and its Broadway original version will be compared to distinguish how two productions deliver progressive gender ideas. Inferential statistics such as two-sample t-tests and chi-square tests for independence were not used because the samples were not independent nor were they different categorical variables.

However, gender related terms deliver progressive connotations only when one interprets them in their context. Therefore, a qualitative content analysis was necessary to interpret

underlying meanings of plots and lyrics, to conclude how these terms contribute to the development of gender minority characters in the production, and to ultimately determine whether the characters and the 2019 Chinese production of *Rent* as a whole adequately delivered gender progressive messages from the 2008 Broadway original *Rent*.

The qualitative analysis was developed from the theatrical analysis framework used in Valerie Schrader's "*No Day But Today: Life Perspectives of HIV-Positive Individuals in the Musical Rent*." Schrader picked "HIV" support group gathering scenes as the focus of her content analysis and rhetorically examined scripts and lyrics of the musical *Rent* along with detailed character analysis of individuals diagnosed with HIV in the musical (Schrader 23). Her framework focuses on one major scene as a unit, such as the "HIV support group scene", and then begins with depiction and analysis of each individual character appearing in the scene. The data obtained from this comparative analysis involved a focus on major characters' narratives on the embodiment of gender and sexuality ideologies in both productions (ie. how gay/lesbian relationships are presented through major characters' dialogues and interactions).

Then, a detailed character analysis of major gay/lesbian characters in two productions was drawn according to their lines and lyrics; the interpretations of specific connotations of LGBTQ and gender related phrases were also made to describe how these phrases contribute to the main characters developments. Other notable instances of representations of LGBTQ relationships and progressive gender roles that were not inside actors' lines or lyrics, such as body interactions, choreography and costume designs, were noted and described; an explanation of their importance in two productions was provided.

In order to determine the degree to which the progressive elements regarding gender and sexuality maintained in the Chinese musical adaptation of *Rent* in 2019, special attention was

given to how LGBTQ relationships were directly preserved or deviated from the original version. Moreover, character interactions and their lyrics are specifically and separately analyzed in the song “La Vie Boheme” and “I will Cover You”, which are performed during the most important scenes in *Rent* that most explicitly show LGBTQ relationships and promote positive attitudes toward gender progressivism (Schrader 39).

Results and Discussions

Quantitative Analysis Results

In the original Broadway version of *Rent*, there were 51 instances of terms related to homosexuality and gender progressiveness, which accounted for 0.27% of the total word count. These terms were counted according to Fang Chen’s categorizations of progressive gender-related terms in mainstream and sub cultures in China, as indicated in the method section. In the Chinese adaptation version of *Rent*, there were 2 instances of such terms, which accounted for 0.017% of the total word count.

Compared to the percentage of appearances of progressive gender-related terms in the original Broadway version, 0.017 percent in the Chinese version shows a lack of representation of homosexuality and gender progressivism. However, viewed holistically, 0.27 percent in the Broadway *Rent* is not a significant indication of gender progressivism in the show. While the original Broadway version was long regarded as a milestone of gender progressivism in musical theatre, its relatively low percentage of terms related to gender progressivism might be explained with a closer examination of the whole context including character relationships, costumes, stage design, and choreographies, which may apply to the Chinese version as well.

Qualitative Analysis Results

Character relationship analysis and comparison:

In the original Broadway *Rent*, there are two explicit queer relationships including a gay couple: college lecturer Collins and drag queen Angel, and a lesbian couple: street performer Maureen (also ex-girlfriend of the narrator and protagonist, Mark), and lawyer Joanne. In the Broadway version, the relationship between Joanne and Maureen is first revealed in the first song *Rent* in the first act, when Joanne is calling Maureen on the phone:

JOANNE. Don't screen, Maureen, It's me -- Joanne, your substitute production manager. Hey hey hey! (Did you eat?) Don't change the subject Maureen. But darling -- you haven't eaten all day You won't throw up. You won't throw up. The digital delay ---Didn't blow up (exactly) There may have been one teeny tiny spark... You're not calling Mark.

Later, when this lesbian couple ran into a big fight and threaten to break up in Act 2, Maureen sings to Joanne,

MAUREEN. Just like my ex-girlfriend (on cellular phone) Honey...? I know you're there. Please pick up the phone. Are you okay? It's not funny; It's not fair. How can I atone? Are you okay? I lose control. But I can learn to behave. Give me one more chance. Let me be your slave. I'll kiss your Doc Martens. Let me kiss your Doc Martens. Your every wish I will obey.

Both scenes portray the romantic and complex love between Joanne and Maureen, explicitly and objectively showing a homosexual relationship to the audience (see fig. 1 and fig. 2). The lyrics made it seem that it was natural to exhibit any kind of love in *Rent* and that every couple has special stories to tell. In the Chinese adaptation version, the same sections along with other details revealing this lesbian relationship were transcribed as the following:

“别想了，Maureen, 是我Joanne, 你的代班制作人，亲爱的请别转移话题，你一天也没吃东西，也不会吐的，你可别打电话给Mark (English-back Transliteration: Don't screen Maureen, it's me, Joanne, your sub production manager... Don't change the subject, darling, you are not throwing up even though you didn't eat anything. You are not calling Mark)”

The second scene was transcribed as the following:

“就像我的前女友(通过手机)亲爱的.....? 我知道你在那请接电话你没事吧? 这不是有趣的, 这是不公平的, 我怎样才能赎罪呢? 你还好吗? 我失去控制了亲爱的, 但我可以学着守规矩再给我一次机会! 让我成为你的奴隶, 我会吻你的。你的每一个愿望我都会遵从 (English-back Transliteration: Just like my ex-girlfriend... Honey? Please pick up the phone! Are you alright? It's not funny or fair. I completely lost my control honey but I can learn to follow the rules. Please give me one more chance! Let me be your slave, and I will kiss you. I'll follow obey every wish of yours)”

The first transcription is Joanne's phone call with Maureen in the first song *Rent* in the first act, and the Chinese lyrics means exactly the same as its English counterparts when using English back-transliteration. The second transcription corresponds to Maureen's phone call to Joanne, and the only difference is that the original lyric “*I'll kiss your Doc Martens*” was

changed into “I’ll kiss you” in Chinese. Therefore, Chinese *Rent* also made this lesbian relationship obvious to the audience while rationalizing gender progressivism on stage.

Similar representation of gay relationships is also delivered in the Chinese *Rent*. For example, Angel and Collins called each other, “(亲爱的/爱人)love/my lover” and “甜心 (honey/sweetheart)”, which completely aligned with the original Broadway version. More importantly, the storyline of Angel and Collins, was well delivered and was kept unchanged from the original version. Therefore, it is safe to conclude that there is no major difference in homosexual character relationships between the Broadway and the Chinese version. The translator and producer of the Chinese *Rent* did not change the setting, slang or anecdotes to fit into the mainstream Chinese culture.

Analysis of major scene: “La vie Boheme”:

According to theatrical studies researcher Titrington, “*La vie Boheme*” and “*I will Cover You*” are two most important scenes to study gender progressivism in *Rent*. In “*La Vie Boheme*” everyone in *Rent* sings:

ALL. Bisexuals, trisexuals, homo sapiens, Carcinogens, hallucinogens, men, Pee Wee,
Herman German wine, turpentine, Gertrude Stein Antonioni, Bertolucci,
Kurosawa, Carmina Burana To apathy, to entropy, to empathy, ecstasy Vaclav
Havel - The Sex Pistols, 8BC, To no shame -never playing the Fame Game.

This line of lyric is important and significant in understanding the progressive message that *Rent* delivered because it admits and endorses the existence of homosexuality and other possibilities. Nowhere else in the musical does it stated these gender related terms explicitly and boldly. However, the narratives of the Chinese *Rent* were more implicit and gave more

connotations in the lyrics rather than direct expressions. For example, the Chinese *Rent* replaced “Bisexuals” and “homosapiens” with “百合 (literal translation is “Lily”, meaning lesbian in Chinese slang)” and “断背山 (Brokeback Mountain, a film about gay relations, long used as gay connotations in China)”. It is also worth noticing that queer costumes were remained in “*La vie Boheme*” of the Chinese *Rent*, especially Angel’s drag queen dress, highlighting their celebration of queer culture and gender progressivism (see figure 3).

Viewing from quantitative perspective, Broadway *Rent* stated gender progressivism more directly as it has more instances of mentioning the coded gender-related terms. However, the percentage in both the Chinese and Broadway *Rent* is not relatively high. This is because the quantitative analysis and the categorization of the phrases were not put into context. For example, in “*La Vie Boheme*” of the Chinese *Rent*, no instances of mentions were counted yet the connotations of the words delivered similar meanings of other identified gender-related phrases; in “*I’ll Cover You*” of both Chinese and Broadway version, only “爱love” and “让我保护你let me cover you” were explicitly mentioned to reveal the gay relationship, yet the design of the dance and the kiss in the end both help convey messages of new gender roles. This also explains why the percentage of instances of identified gender-related phrases in Broadway *Rent* almost doubled that of the Chinese *Rent* although the queer characters and their relationships remained completely the same. Lyrics of Chinese *Rent* tends to hint a relationship or gender progressivism which are already made explicit to the audience through contexts, costumes and choreographies, such as the use of 百合 (literal translation is “Lily”, meaning lesbian in Chinese slang)” and “断背山 (Brokeback Mountain, a film about gay relations, long used as gay connotations in China)” in “*La Vie Boheme*”. This trend was previously noted by a Chinese theatrical studies professor, Shin Dong Kim, who stated Chinese musical producers’ attempts to

keep the storyline but make minor and intricate adjustments of the wording a “struggle to fit in and balance mainstream aesthetics, government critics and their own artistic pursuits” (Kim 38). Critics of the 2019-2020 *Rent* claimed that it was satisfying and surprising enough to see a queer musical maximumly delivered the celebration of queer spirits and gender progressivism from the original one now in China, and that this attempt “indeed sacrificed some original expressions for the sake of the permission to deliver other queer expressions at all” (Liu 57). Therefore, the gap between the Chinese *Rent* and Broadway *Rent* was only adjustments of the wordings in order to make the lyrics more implicit and safe to the audience; it was also obvious that the Chinese production team tried to fill this gap and complete the original storyline through adding more implicit hints in lyrics while maintained body interactions and dance movements of the characters unchanged from the original version.

Analysis of trends of Broadway musicals have emphasized the significance of musical theatre as the “Utopia of carrying new norms, especially those about genders onto the stage” (Wolf, “Something Better than This” 320). Results of the qualitative analysis of the Chinese *Rent* showed a beginning of attempts made by Chinese production teams to carry new gender roles to the stage, thus hints at an opening of Chinese musical market to new gender roles as well as gender progressivism. Though it was clear that the productions have to make compromise with the government censorship by hiding certain phrases, both the characterizations and designs and translation of the plots and lyrics are indicating a progressive move of the Chinese musical industry. This trend in the musical market perfectly corresponds to Cao’s conclusion about a progressive trend happening in China regarding gender ideologies and following movements to support LGBTQ groups among new generations in China, according to professor Cao, who has studied gender attitudes in China for a decade (Cao 841).

Therefore, following this research, one can safely conclude that Chinese musical theatre is beginning to defy mainstream norms of gender role depictions in mainstream Chinese digital media, and try to deliver diverse representations of gender progressivism through preservations of the original plots from Broadway. When homosexual relationships are hidden or deleted in Chinese films and TV shows, *Rent* as a representation of a series of adapted Broadway musicals portray homosexuality explicit to the audience, and delivering the relationships objectively, without trying to rationalize or conform to the mainstream gender culture. Until 2020, China has not developed a thorough system and standard to regulate theatrical contents. Therefore, it all depends on the production team to play with the intricate balance between delivering *Rent's* original artistic values and avoiding possible governmental censorship, as Cao vividly described this process as “dancing with shackles”. A cause of the bold and progressive moves in the recent Chinese musical market could be the demographic of the audience and the production team. While musical theatre, as proved by Wolf, has been a safe haven for minority groups such as women and homosexuals in history, it provided the base for the Chinese production team to be bold and creative about progressive message delivery. On the other hand, the average price of a musical ticket in China is around 40 USD to 200 USD while the average monthly income of Chinese people in 2018 was 200 to 350 USD according to the Chinese Statistics Bureau. This means that the audience of musicals in China can afford at least a standard of middle class living. In addition, like those of Broadway theatre, audience of Chinese musical theatre generally received higher education; therefore, it's easier for them to accept new gender norms established by the plots and stage.

Limitation

This research has been limited to one case study on *Rent* only, disregarding other musical productions and adaptations in China around the same time. Therefore, the conclusion drawn from this case comparison study may not be able to be applied to the 2019-2020 Chinese musical market as a whole, although the results indicate a possible opening to gender progressivism. Moreover, the English-transliterations of the Chinese plot and lyrics were conducted by the researcher alone, and no other third-party aids were used. Therefore, the literal-approach English-back transliterations were based solely on the understanding and translation skills of the researcher, which may cause some degrees of bias and misinterpretation. However, since most of the plots and lyrics have their literal-meaning counterparts in the original Broadway script after the English-back transliteration, bias and misinterpretations during the transliteration process might not be able to heavily skew the result of the qualitative analysis.

Implications

Considering the fact that the study was only based on one comparative case study, it is dangerous to make assumptions about other musicals in China from the same period. Moreover, since *Rent* is an adapted musical, the result of this study can not be used to interpret original Chinese musicals either. However, based on the result of the study, it is safe and logical to suggest that Chinese musical market has shown some signs of opening to gender progressivism and other new gender norms yet there are still steps to be taken in addressing minor differences in wordings surrounding explicit expressions about sexuality and genders. The root of this difference is not because of limited artistic and production abilities of the Chinese production

team, but rather their concerns on government regulations and censorship policies. As musical theatre can vividly reflect developments of people's perceptions regarding social norms, this study suggests that the government regulations can be loosen up to allow both the production teams and the audience to fulfill their needs. More importantly, Chinese musical theatre, along with other performance types, will never be truly embracing gender progressivism and keeping up with innovative artistic expressions around the world until the government provides a platform for free expression and exchange of ideas.

Further Research

This research could be taken further by discovering how other musical adaptations in China delivered gender progressivism messages when compared with their Broadway original counterparts. In this way, the trend of opening to new gender norms in the Chinese musical market can be generalized. Although this study is limited to Broadway adaptations, more research could also be conducted on the subject of Chinese original musical productions to trace how local production teams are taking this initiative to open up the stage for new norms and ideas about diverse gender roles.



Fig 1. Joanne and Maureen from Chinese *Rent* stage photo. ACO Musical, 2019,
<http://www.aco-musical.com/Home/News/newsDetail?id=26893>



Fig 2. Joanne and Maureen from Chinese *Rent* stage photo. ACO Musical, 2019,
<http://www.aco-musical.com/Home/News/newsDetail?id=26893>



Fig 3. “La Vie Boheme” from Chinese *Rent* stage photo. ACO Musical, 2019, <http://www.aco-musical.com/Home/News/newsDetail?id=26893>

Works Cited

- BOTTEZ, ALINA. "Shakespeare Re-Read, Re-Written, Re-Contextualised Or... Re-Placed in Opera and Musical." *Linguaculture*, vol. 2017, no. 2, Dec. 2017, pp. 145–157. *EBSCOhost*, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=128266253&site=ehost-live.
- Brantley, Ben, et al. "Theater Reviews: The Seven-Year Odyssey That Led to 'Rent.'" *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 21 Mar. 2019, www.nytimes.com/reviews/theater.
- Cao, Jin, and Xinlei Lu. "A Preliminary Exploration of the Gay Movement in Mainland China: Legacy, Transition, Opportunity, and the New Media." *Signs*, vol. 39, no. 4, 2014, pp. 840–848. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/675538.
- Cook, Susan. (2009). Pretty like the Girl: Gender, Race and Oklahoma!. *Contemporary Theatre Review*. 19. 35-47. 10.1080/10486800802547260.
- Chen, Fang. "Gender, Sexuality, and Social Change in Contemporary China." *Sexuality & Culture*, vol. 21, no. 4, Dec. 2017, pp. 953–975. *EBSCOhost*, doi:10.1007/s12119-017-9435-
- Deaux, Kay and Laurie L. Lewis. "Structure of Gender Stereotypes: Interrelationships Among Components and Gender Label." (1984).
- Ding, Jianxin, and Shen Wenjing. *边缘话语分析 (Marginal Discourse Analysis)*. Beijing Book Co. Inc, 2013.

- Fengliang, Li & Morgan, W. & Ding, Xiaohao. (2008). The expansion of higher education, employment and over-education in China. *International Journal of Educational Development*. 28. 687-697. 10.1016/j.ijedudev.2007.10.002.
- Graber, Naomi. “*Changed for Good: A Feminist History of the Broadway Musical*. By Stacy Wolf.”, *Music and Letters*, Volume 94, Issue 2, May 2013, Pages 367–370, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ml/gct059>
- Horowitz, Juliana Menasce, et al. “Views Of Gender In The U.S.” *Pew Research Center's Social & Demographic Trends Project*, 22 Jan. 2019, <https://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2017/10/18/wide-partisan-gaps-in-u-s-over-how-far-the-country-has-come-on-gender-equality/>.
- “How Well-off Is China's Middle Class?” *ChinaPower Project*, 29 May 2019, <https://chinapower.csis.org/china-middle-class/>.
- Judith Sebesta (2006) Of fire, death, and desire: Transgression and carnival in Jonathan Larson's *rent*, *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 16:4, 419-438, DOI: 10.1080/10486800600923960
- Kim, Shin Dong. “The Industrialization and Globalization of China’s Musical Theater.” *Media Industries Journal*, vol. 1, no. 3, Jan. 2015, doi:10.3998/mij.15031809.0001.303.
- Kirle, Bruce. (2000). Something for the Boys: Musical Theater and Gay Culture (review). *Theatre Journal*. 52. 594-595. 10.1353/tj.2000.0112.
- Larson, Jonathan. *Rent*. www.thealmightyguru.com/Reviews/Rent/Rent-Script.html.
- Larson, Jonathan. “Rent: Filmed Live on Broadway.” *IMDb*, IMDb.com, 24 Sept. 2008, www.imdb.com/title/tt1273675/.

- MACDONALD, LAURA. "The Sound of Musicals: JAPAN AND KOREA HAVE EMBRACED AND NURTURED WESTERN-STYLE MUSICALS. CAN CHINA BE FAR BEHIND?" *American Theatre*, vol. 34, no. 5, May 2017, pp. 28–58. *EBSCOhost*, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=123641739&site=ehost-live.
- Miller, Scott. "Inside Rent--Background and Analysis." *Newlinetheatre.com*, www.newlinetheatre.com/rentchapter.html.
- Rent* (Chinese Version). By Jonathan Larson, directed by Trey Ellett and Lu Shi, 10 Jan. 2020, Ru Lun Theatre, Renmin University of China, Beijing. Performance.
- "《RENT》中文版打造全新氛围式舞台，用梦&爱点燃自由狂欢！（New Creation of Chinese RENT）." *ACO Musical, Creating Your Best Memories*, ACO Musical, 11 Dec. 2019, www.aco-musical.com/Home/News/newsDetail?id=26893.
- Shiao-ling Yu. "Politics and Theatre in the PRC: Fifty Years of Teahouse on the Chinese Stage." *Asian Theatre Journal*, vol. 30, no. 1, Spring 2013, pp. 90–121. *EBSCOhost*, doi:10.1353/atj.2013.0017.
- Shu, Xiaoling. "Education and Gender Egalitarianism: The Case of China." *Sociology of Education*, vol. 77, no. 4, 2004, pp. 311–336. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/3649392.
- Sorby, Stella. "Translating Western Musicals into Chinese: Language and Cultural Adaptations." *Translating Musical Libretto: A Dynamic Collaboration*, vol. 60, no. 2, 3 Sept. 2015, pp. 162–173., <http://www2.port.ac.uk/media/contacts-and-departments/slas/events/tr08-sorby.pdf>.
- Schrader, Valerie Lynn. "'No Day But Today:' Life Perspectives of HIV-Positive Individuals in the Musical Rent." (2009).

- Sullivan, John. "Bohemians of the moment." *American Theatre*, July-Aug. 1996, p. 3. *Gale OneFile: Fine Arts*,
https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A18571307/PPFA?u=vol_s22s&sid=PPFA&xid=3fc6f677
 . Accessed 21 Dec. 2019.
- Titlington, Elizabeth. "'OVER THE MOON': THE CREATION AND DEVELOPMENT OF
 RENT BY JONATHAN LARSON." 3 May 2007, pp. 1–73.,
<http://hdl.handle.net/1903/6943>.
- Wolf, Stacy. (2004). "Something Better than This: Sweet Charity and the Feminist Utopia of
 Broadway Musicals. *Modern Drama*." 47. 309-332. 10.1353/mdr.2004.0040.
- Wolf, Stacy Ellen. *A Problem like Maria: Gender and Sexuality in the American Musical*. Univ.
 of Michigan Press, 2007.
- Wolf, Stacy Ellen. *Changed for Good: A Feminist History of the Broadway Musical*. Oxford
 University Press, 2010.
- Zhang, Huiping. "Wives' Relative Income and Marital Quality in Urban China: Gender Role
 Attitudes as a Moderator." *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*, vol. 46, no. 2, 2015,
 pp. 203–220. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/43613112.
- ZHOU, RAYMOND. "China's Theatre Bubble: Most Stage Works Don't Attract Mass
 Audiences or Enjoy Long Runs--But There Can Be Strength in the Shadows." *American
 Theatre*, vol. 34, no. 5, May 2017, pp. 22–27. *EBSCOhost*,
search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=asn&AN=123641738&site=ehost-live.