

The Translation and Dissemination of the Orphan of Zhao in France

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Abstract: This paper focuses on the translation and dissemination of the Chinese Yuan Dynasty play “The Orphan of Zhao” in France. It first introduces the creation background and cultural connotations of the play, and then combs through its translation process in France. It goes on to analyze the adaptation and dissemination of the play in France, pointing out that the localization adaptation in the 18th century and the multi-media dissemination in contemporary times have expanded its influence. The paper also elaborates on the positive significance of its dissemination for the development of French drama, the study of Chinese popular literature, and the promotion of Sino-French cultural exchanges. Finally, it summarizes and emphasizes the role of the play as a link in Sino-French cultural exchanges and its far - reaching significance.

1. Introduction

As a classic of Chinese classical drama, The Orphan of Zhao embodies rich Chinese cultural connotations and profound humanistic spirit^[1]. With its unique artistic charm and ideological depth, the play vividly portrays the ethical morals, family concepts, and the brilliance and complexity of human nature in ancient Chinese society. In the realm of international dissemination, Voltaire’s translation and introduction of L’Orphelin de la Chine made this story well-known in the Western world for centuries, becoming an important medium for the West to understand the spirit of Chinese culture. Voltaire’s translation not only attracted widespread attention in France but also sparked a strong interest in Chinese culture in other European countries, building a bridge for Sino - Western cultural exchanges.

Since its introduction to France in the 18th century, this classic work has undergone a unique process of translation and dissemination in France, becoming a shining pearl in the history of Sino - French cultural exchanges. From the initial translation and introduction to subsequent localization adaptations and diversified dissemination, the play’s spread in France has exhibited a rich diversity of characteristics^[2]. This process has not only allowed audiences and scholars in France and Europe to appreciate the charm of traditional Chinese drama but also influenced the development of French culture and the progress of Sinological studies to a certain extent.

By studying the dissemination of The Orphan of Zhao in France, we can gain a deep understanding of Sino - French cultural exchanges and explore the mechanisms of cultural adaptation and integration

in cross-cultural communication, providing valuable insights for cultural exchanges and mutual learning in today's globalized context. Therefore, conducting an in-depth study of the translation and dissemination of *The Orphan of Zhao* in France holds significant academic and practical value.

2. The Translation and Introduction of *The Orphan of Zhao* in France

2.1. The Translation and Introduction by Joseph de Prémare

In the 18th century, the French missionaries who came to the east devoted themselves to the study of the Confucian classics, and their understanding of China based on an in-depth reading of Chinese historical documents provided a great deal of information for the scholars of the Enlightenment, while at the same time, the Enlightenment scholars' view of China was also more or less branded with the missionaries' imprint. In addition to the missionary task, the missionaries at that time also had the mission of understanding Chinese culture. They hoped to study Chinese culture to find out where Christianity's teachings fit in with Chinese culture, so as to better spread Christianity in China^[3]. Against this backdrop, Joseph de Prémare began to study Chinese literature in depth and translated *The Orphan of Zhao* into French for the first time, which triggered the "China Fever" in Europe.

Having lived in China for many years, Joseph de Prémare has a deep understanding of Chinese culture. His translation, titled *The Chinese Tragedy of The Orphan of Zhao* was completed in 1731, in which anyone who reads it will see lofty feelings and a noble spirit of self-sacrifice. And in translating the play, Joseph de Prémare was always meticulous and serious. His translation retained the basic plot framework of the original play, but adjusted some details to suit the reading habits of French readers^[4]. For some elements that are characteristic of Chinese culture, such as the names of ancient officials and ritual customs, he introduces the French readers to the cultural connotations behind these elements by means of annotations and so on, so that the readers can better understand the plot.

His translation of *The Orphan of Zhao* is an important achievement in the development of French Sinology and is regarded as an important sample for understanding Chinese culture. It provided an important textual basis for later sinologists to study Chinese drama and literature. His translation methods and research results influenced the attitudes and research methods of subsequent French sinologists towards Chinese literary works, and promoted the in-depth development of French sinology in the field of literary studies.

2.2. Dissemination by Du Halde

Joseph de Prémare's translation, when completed, was included in Du Halde's edited edition of *Description géographique, historique, chronologique, politique, et physique de l'empire de la Chine et de la Tartarie chinoise*. Although he had never set foot in China in his life, Du Halde, a full-time editor, while systematically reviewing his correspondence with the Joseph de Prémare, he conceived the idea of creating a work that would systematically organize and compile the writings and correspondence of the Jesuits who had entered China over the past hundred years, and finally completed this important work. *Description géographique, historique, chronologique, politique, et physique de l'empire de la Chine et de la Tartarie chinoise*, a comprehensive encyclopedic work introducing China, was published in Paris in 1735. *The Orphan of Zhao* was included in it, allowing it to be disseminated to a wider French readership. The book focuses on an in-depth analysis of the academic achievements of 20 missionaries and a detailed examination of their biographies. Although the work was a bit weak at the level of theoretical construction, it had a profound impact on the European cultural world at that time, and became a core document for Enlightenment thinkers such as Voltaire and Montesquieu to understand China^[5].

2.3. Translation by Jurien

In 1814, a chair of “Chinese, Tatar and Manchu Language and Literature” was established at Le Collège de France, marking the entry of Sinology into the higher academic system and its becoming an independent discipline^[6]. Between 1801 and 1842, when French sinologists were unable to go to China for direct investigation, they devoted more energy to the Chinese literature brought back by missionaries in the previous century, and tirelessly engaged in translation and research.

Jurien, the student of the first Chair of Chinese Language, Prof. Jean Pierre Abel Rénusat, has been trained in many aspects of language and culture since his childhood, and has a strong curiosity and keen interest in Chinese culture. Classical Chinese drama, as an important part of Chinese culture, is rich in philosophical ideas, moral concepts and artistic values^[7]. Among them, *The Orphan of Zhao* as a classic of Chinese Yuan miscellaneous dramas, has a great attraction to Jurien for its wonderful story, distinctive characters, and traditional values such as loyalty and righteousness embodied behind it, and he hopes to expand the field of Sinological studies by translating *The Orphan of Zhao*.

In nineteenth-century French Sinology, the study of Chinese literature was still in a developing stage. Such a representative dramatic work as *The Orphan of Zhao* provided Jurien with an opportunity to study Chinese literature, dramatic art and traditional Chinese culture in depth. Through translation, Chinese drama, a unique form of literature, is introduced to French and even European academics, enriching the content of Sinological studies and providing French writers and playwrights with new creative inspirations and reference objects. For example, the characteristics of Chinese drama that focus on moral education and allegorical expression inspire French writers to pay more attention to the ideological connotation of their works in their creation.

Jurien’s translation of *The Orphan of Zhao* is more faithful, and he adopted a word-by-word translation that preserves as much as possible the story framework, character relationships, and plot development of the original play^[3]. For example, the complex character relationships and the entanglements between characters in the original play are presented more accurately in his translation. At the same time, Jurien annotated some Chinese cultural elements in the play, the ancient Chinese concepts of family, morality and ethics, etc., and through his annotations, French readers were able to better understand the cultural connotations behind the plot^[8]. Jurien’s translation provides an important textual source for French Sinology research, and is an important reference for French scholars studying Chinese theater, literature, and culture. Sinologists can gain a deeper understanding of the literary features, cultural connotations, and social background of Chinese drama at that time through the study of this translation. At the same time, Jurien’s translation promoted Sino-French cultural exchanges, enabling the French to recognize the uniqueness and richness of Chinese culture, and to appreciate the charm of ancient Chinese drama, including its unique narrative style, characterization, and moral concepts. In addition, in the context of cultural exchanges at that time, Jurien’s translations helped to bridge the cultural gap, and through *The Orphan of Zhao*, people learned about the values of the ancient Chinese society, such as loyalty and justice, which helped to promote mutual understanding between the people of China and France at the cultural level.

3. Adaptation of *The Orphan of Zhao* in France

In the 18th century, there was a “China Fever” in Europe, and Chinese culture received a lot of attention in Europe. Voltaire, a famous French philosopher, came across the translation of *The Orphan of Zhao* and was attracted by the story, hoping to use it to introduce Chinese culture to Europe and to convey his own Enlightenment ideas. Voltaire was an important representative of the Enlightenment, advocating ideas such as rationality, freedom, equality and tolerance, and attempted to incorporate these Enlightenment ideas into France by adapting *The Orphan of Zhao* in order to criticize the feudal despotism and religious ignorance in Europe at the time, hence Voltaire’s creation

of *L'Orphelin de la Chine*. Voltaire's adaptation was performed in Paris in 1755 and caused a huge sensation. In his adaptation, Voltaire incorporated his own thoughts on Enlightenment ideas. He transplanted the setting of the original play from the Spring and Autumn and Warring States Periods to the Yuan Dynasty, and drastically altered the characterization and plot. This change was made to better integrate with the historical and cultural background of Europe at that time and to make it easier for European readers to understand. In addition, Voltaire drastically adjusted the plot of the original play. While the original play takes revenge as the main plot thread, Voltaire's *The Chinese Orphan* weakens the revenge plot and puts more emphasis on morality, rationality and the glory of humanity. He conveyed his Enlightenment ideas by adding some new episodes, such as long dialogues between the characters on moral and political issues.

4. The significance of the dissemination of *The Orphan of Zhao* in France

4.1. The impetus for the development of French drama

The *Orphan of Zhao* provided a new source of material and inspiration for French literature. Its storyline has ups and downs, and its characters are vivid and full of drama and tension. French writers can draw inspiration from it, and learn from its experience in narrative structure, characterization and theme expression. For example, when French writers create historical novels and dramas, the description of family revenge and moral choice in *Orphan of Zhao* can provide reference for them. At the same time, the Chinese narrative techniques in *The Orphan of Zhao*, such as flashbacks and interludes, also provide reference for the narrative innovation of French literature.

4.2. Promotion of the study of Chinese popular literature in France

In the early stage of the European Jesuits' entry into the field of Chinese antiquities research, their research vision had already touched on Chinese literature, and classic literary works such as the *Poetry Classic* and pre-Qin prose had been included in their research vision. However, before the French Jesuits arrived in China, they regrettably neglected the "pure literature" of China. This situation, which had changed by the time of the French missionaries. This shows that Western missionaries have realized from their own practice that, in order to understand the essence of Chinese culture, it is not enough to probe from the *Four Books* and the *Five Classics* alone, but it is also necessary to look for materials from Chinese "pure literature" works. In the 18th century, through the efforts of French missionaries, the *Orphan of Zhao*, a type of opera known as "popular literature", was emphasized. This shows that the missionaries tried to use these literary works as a "window" to Chinese civilization.

4.3. Promotion of cultural exchanges between China and France

The translation and dissemination of *The Orphan of Zhao* in France is an important manifestation of Sino-French cultural exchange. It has enabled French audiences and readers to understand the charm of ancient Chinese drama and feel the profound heritage of Chinese traditional culture. At the same time, the French adaptation and research results of *The Orphan of Zhao* have also been fed back to China, promoting China's reexamination and innovation of its own traditional culture. This two-way cultural exchange has enriched the cultural connotation of China and France, and enhanced the mutual understanding and friendship between the two peoples.

When France was in a period of intellectual agitation of the Enlightenment, the exploration of Eastern civilization by the Parisian intelligentsia was gradually systematized. This classical tragedy entered the French cultural field through the Jesuit translation, and not only became a hot topic of

discussion between Louis XV and the Parisian salons, but also enabled the aesthetics of Chinese drama to penetrate into the European civil society for the first time in the form of a text on a large scale, which is a milestone in the history of Sino-Western cultural exchanges between China and the West in the 17th and 18th centuries. At the same time, the cross-cultural dissemination of this work triggered a paradigm shift in French society's perception of Chinese culture. French sinologists began to analyze the idea of "righteousness and profit" in *The Orphan of Zhao* from the perspective of tragic aesthetics, and compared it with the theme of fate in Racine's tragedy. This deepening of cognition directly contributed to the formation of "Chinese drama fever" in the 18th century French publishing world.

5. Conclusion

The translation and dissemination of *L'Orphelin de la Chine* in France has spanned centuries. From the abridged translation by Joseph de Prénare in 1731, which initiated the dissemination of the text, to Voltaire's adaptation of *L'Orphelin de la Chine* in 1755, which triggered the Enlightenment, to the full translation by Jurien in the 20th century, which promoted scholarly research, and to the digitized stage practice in the 21st century, it has formed a complete chain of dissemination, from the introduction of the text to the innovation of the stage. This process not only highlights the artistic vitality of classical Chinese drama across cultural barriers, but also becomes a historical testimony of the dialogue between Chinese and French civilizations. Voltaire grafted Confucian ethics with Enlightenment ideas through his adaptations, while the contemporary Avignon Theatre Festival reconstructs traditional narratives through immersive performances. The communication practices of different eras have always been closely related to the cultural needs of both countries. In the context of globalization, its practical significance has become more and more prominent. As a classic sample of sinology research, it has continuously promoted the French academic community to analyze the Chinese ethical system in depth; as an innovative resource for stage art, it has provided a practical model for the integration of Chinese and French theatrical aesthetics. This kind of communication, with both historical depth and contemporary innovation, is continuing the new chapter of mutual understanding between Eastern and Western cultures in a new form. Through in-depth study of this process, I can better understand the law of cross-cultural communication, and provide useful reference and inspiration for the promotion of Sino-French cultural exchanges as well as global cultural mutual understanding.

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