

# Vincenz Hundhausen and the Spread of Chinese Opera in the German-Speaking World in the 1920s and 1930s

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**Abstract.** In the 1920s and 1930s, German sinologist Vincenz Hundhausen devoted himself to translating and staging Chinese operas. The poetic translation method makes the translation more understandable to audiences in the German-speaking world, and the performance form that is gradually closer to the opera itself has made Chinese opera successfully appear on the stage in the German-speaking world and received a good response. This paper draws on cross-cultural communication theory and from a historical perspective, conducts an in-depth study of the background, situation and impact of the spread of Chinese opera in the German-speaking world in the 1920s and 1930s. It demonstrates the important role of Vincenz Hundhausen's translation and performance in promoting the progress of Chinese and Western dramatic art and cultural exchanges, and expanding the international influence of Chinese culture. It also provides certain reference and inspiration for the current overseas dissemination of Chinese opera and its own development.

**Keywords:** Vincenz Hundhausen, Chinese opera, Chinese Studies, German-speaking world.

## 1. Introduction

The spread and development of Chinese opera in the German-speaking world can be traced back to the 1920s and 1930s. The German-speaking world mentioned in this paper includes Germany, Austria, and Switzerland, which are closely linked in terms of language, culture and history, and are the leading countries in the German-speaking world. At that time, the famous German sinologist Vincenz Hundhausen was committed to translating and staging Chinese operas. He translated *The Romance of the West Bower*, *The Lute*, *The Peony Pavilion*, etc. into German. Then he established a German theater troupe, which successfully brought Chinese classical opera to the German-speaking world stage. After a certain degree of German adaptation of the opera translation and performance form, the local audience can better accept it. This has made a great contribution to the spread of Chinese opera in the German-speaking world.

At present, domestic academic research mainly focuses on literature, art and cross-cultural communication. Wu Xiaoqiao principally studies Vincenz Hundhausen's German version and staging of Chinese classical operas from the perspective of Chinese intellectuals in the 1920s and 1930s, thus filling the gap in Chinese information on Vincenz Hundhausen [1]. Li Lin mainly focused on the changes in the performance form of Chinese opera in German, that is, from drama to the art form of Kun Opera itself, thereby providing reference for the overseas dissemination of Chinese opera [2, 3]. Other scholars have also analyzed Vincenz Hundhausen's opera translations from the perspective of the literati's drama concepts they reflect, or have specifically studied Vincenz Hundhausen's opera translations from the perspectives of literature and translation studies [4-6].

Drawing upon the theory of cross-cultural communication, this paper conducts a 'historical perspective' study on this topic from three aspects: background, method, and impact. The study will not only deepen our knowledge and understanding of the overseas spread of Chinese opera in the 1920s and 1930s, but also have rich enlightening significance for the current development of Chinese opera.

## 2. The Background of the Spread of Chinese Opera in the German-Speaking World

The spread of Chinese opera in the German-speaking world in the 1920s and 1930s was inseparable from Vincenz Hundhausen's participation and contribution. Vincenz Hundhausen's personal love for Chinese opera greatly promoted its German version and performance in the German-speaking world. In addition, the political and economic systems and social and cultural atmosphere of China and the countries in German-speaking world have also laid a certain foundation for the spread of Chinese opera in the local areas.

On September 15, 1919, China issued an order lifting the ban on the confiscation of German assets in China as an enemy country [7]. On May 20, 1921, the government of the Republic of China and the government of Weimar Republic signed the Agreement Regarding the Restoration of the State of Peace between Germany and China (1921), the first equality agreement since the Opium War in 1840, officially ending the hostilities between the two sides since the First World War. It consists of seven sections, and is also accompanied by a statement from the German representative, a reply to the German statement by the Chinese Foreign Minister, an official letter from the German representative, and a reply from the Chinese Foreign Minister.

This agreement stipulated that the two sides restored peace, and its main content included "Germany declaring to renounce all rights, industrial rights, and privileges obtained by entering into the Lease Agreement between China and the German Empire (March 6, 1898) and other documents concerning Shandong Province, and canceling the tariff rights agreed in China, consular jurisdiction and the privileges enjoyed by the embassy in Beijing [8]." It also stipulated that "the people of the two countries have the right to travel, live and operate industry and commerce in each other's country. Their lives and property are under the jurisdiction of the local courts and must abide by the laws of the locality. The taxes they should pay shall not exceed the amount paid by the people of the country where it is located [8]." This agreement regained for the government of the Republic of China all the privileges of Shandong Province that had been seized by Germany in the Lease Agreement between China and the German Empire and promoted cooperation between the two parties in many fields. This is an epoch-making event in the history of Sino-German cultural exchanges.

In 1930, China was Germany's largest trading partner in the Far East. In that year, the trade volume between Germany and China was 347.5 million Reichsmarks, while the trade volume with Japan was 234 million Reichsmarks. German oil industry relies almost entirely on soybean exports from the Northeast for its raw materials. German industry also has a large demand for tungsten sand, antimony, manganese, tin, bristle and tung oil produced in China [9]. China and Germany gradually established a friendly and equal relationship. These political motivations and economic transaction activities provided potential ways and conditions for the realization of cultural communication.

After the outbreak of World War I, the German people fell into hesitation and confusion in the face of the bleak social conditions. They urgently needed to find a spiritual prescription to cure the illnesses deeply rooted in Western society. This spiritual crisis triggered Germans' attention to Eastern wisdom and Chinese classics. Thus, there was an upsurge in studying China in Germany. During this period, "a large number of ancient Chinese classics were imported, and a large number of literary works were translated and introduced. As a rising star, German Sinology made the fastest progress among European countries [9]."

Moreover, the social and cultural atmosphere in Germany at that time was gradually becoming more inclusive. People valued peace and stability, were able to accept different civilizations, and were aware of the importance of international cooperation and cultural exchanges. These enabled German Sinology to achieve great development in the 1920s and 1930s: four major Sinology centers were formed, universities established full professor positions of Sinology, and a large number of outstanding Sinology research and translation works came into being. The social and cultural atmosphere promoted the spread of Chinese opera in the German-speaking world.

In addition to political and economic factors and social and cultural atmosphere, individuals played a vital role in the spread of Chinese opera in the German-speaking world. Vincenz Hundhausen was

born in Grevenbroich, North Rhine-Palatinate on December 15, 1878. He died in his hometown on May 18, 1955 [1]. He was a famous German sinologist in the first half of the twentieth century. He came to China in 1923 because he needed to handle cases as a lawyer. He was obsessed with Chinese culture, so he stayed there for a long time and lived in China for 30 years. From 1924 to 1937, he taught in the German Department of Peking University and joined the Sino-German Cultural Association [10].

He was particularly fascinated by Chinese classical opera and was attracted by its unique art form and rich cultural connotation. He believed that opera was one of the important ways to understand Chinese culture. Thus, he devoted himself to German version of Chinese opera scripts and brought them to the German-speaking world stage. During his tenure at Peking University, he successfully completed the German version of a large number of Chinese classical opera with the help of young scholars who were proficient in Chinese and German. Later, a German theater troupe was organized to try many times to perform German version of Chinese operas. These individuals, through their deep understanding of the culture and their enthusiasm for spreading it, have built a bridge for the German-speaking world to understand and appreciate Chinese opera.

The political friendship brought about by the Agreement Regarding the Restoration of the State of Peace between Germany and China signed in 1921 and the establishment of Sino-German trade partnership opened a window for the spread of Chinese opera in the German-speaking world. Not only that, the craze for studying China and the highly tolerant cultural atmosphere that emerged after World War I also made the audience more receptive to local Chinese operas. Moreover, the translation and performance by German sinologist Vincenz Hundhausen directly brought Chinese opera to the public's horizons in the countries of German-speaking world.

### **3. The Specific Situation of the Spread of Chinese Opera in the German-Speaking World**

Vincenz Hundhausen loved Chinese opera culture. While teaching at Peking University, he translated many classic Chinese opera works into German and performed them in China by German theater troupes. Vincenz Hundhausen made some modifications in content and form for the performance effect, and then put them on the stage in the German-speaking world. Local newspapers published relevant performance information, which played a certain publicity role.

The major opera works translated by Vincenz Hundhausen include *The Romance of the West Bower*, *The Lute*, *The Peony Pavilion*, etc. In 1926, he completed the German version of *The Romance of the West Bower*, in 1930 he completed the German version of *The Lute*, and the three-volume German version of *The Peony Pavilion* was published in 1937. In fact, although Vincenz Hundhausen was a well-known sinologist at the time, he himself was not very proficient in Chinese. Therefore, his German versions of Chinese operas were helped by his colleagues and students at Peking University. Vincenz Hundhausen once mentioned that among these scholars who were proficient in Chinese and German, Feng Zhi was particularly helpful to him [11]. For this reason, he specially expressed his gratitude to Feng Zhi on the title page of the German version of *The Lute* in 1930.

Although his Chinese proficiency is limited, Vincenz Hundhausen is quite knowledgeable about poetry. His father's friend Ernst Moritz Arndt (1769-1860) was an outstanding patriotic poet during the German Anti-Napoleonic War of Liberation. The romanticism originated from his mother's generation made Vincenz Hundhausen associated with history and literature [6]. It can be said that Hundhausen was a poet translator. He cleverly used poetic language expressions to translate classical Chinese lyrics. Hundhausen free-translated the original lyrics of Chinese opera and then transformed them into German poetry that fit the rhymes. Although it received mixed reviews from domestic intellectuals at the time, it still conveyed the soul of Chinese opera art. Hundhausen opened Yangshu Printing Bureau in Tiananmen Square to publish Chinese-German works that he and his friends and students translated.

Except translation, Vincenz Hundhausen was also committed to the performance of the Chinese operas in German version. In the 1930s, Vincenz Hundhausen founded the Peiping Opera Troupe, and his translations of *The Lute* and *The Peony Pavilion* were put on the stages in Peiping and Tianjin, causing a great sensation. At that time, *Ta Kung Pao* and *Peking Morning Post* published relevant news reports [12]. In the theater troupe founded by Vincenz Hundhausen, the actors were almost German native speakers. Although its performance continued the stage model of "creating scenes based on the heart" of Chinese opera and the actors also wore costumes and tried their best to imitate the figures of Chinese opera actors, but perhaps due to its translation, the singing and rhyme of the original Kun Opera repertoire could not be maintained. So much so that it looked more like a Western drama or opera.

However, singing is the most essential content in opera. The most unique charm of Kun Opera lies in its lingering, gentle and long-lasting singing voice. Only by skillfully combining singing and body movements can the delicate and rich lyricism of Kun Opera be maximized. Thus, Vincenz Hundhausen made adjustments. During the performance of *The Lute* in Shanghai, a short performance was performed with German lyrics and Kun Opera music [2]. Before these operas were performed in the German-speaking world, Vincenz Hundhausen made certain modifications based on the domestic performance conditions.

In 1936, Vincenz Hundhausen invited German fancier Rosa Jung to perform, and also invited Chinese traditional music performers Wang Shaoxian and Lou Shuhua to provide musical accompaniment. A total of twelve people went to Europe and successfully brought *The Lute* and *The Peony Pavilion* to Austria, Switzerland and Germany. Although Vincenz Hundhausen summarized the plot of the story, adapted the performance form into German, and the lyrics were all German poems, Vincenz Hundhausen retained the stage settings, costumes and props of Chinese opera to the greatest extent. The most important thing is that the performance in Vienna was no longer just a short section of German lyrics accompanied by Kun Opera music, but the entire performance was accompanied by Kun Opera music and used traditional Chinese instruments for accompaniment. In this way, Western drama gradually moved closer to the original form of Chinese Kun Opera, which not only made it easier for Western audiences who were accustomed to appreciating dramas and operas to understand, but also retained the charm of Chinese opera to a certain extent.

The Chinese newspaper *Shenpao* reported on the staging of Vincenz Hundhausen's translation. Besides, the print media in the countries of German-speaking world also previewed and promoted its local performances. The performance poster posted at the Concert Hall of the Hofburg Palace in Vienna introduced specific information such as the performance time of *The Lute* and *The Peony Pavilion*, the author and translator of the opera, the main actors and the accompanists with traditional Chinese instruments. What is more, the local newspapers *Neue Freie Presse* and *Gerechtigkeit* also published relevant performance advertisements. *Neues Wiener Journal* previewed this performance and expressed expectations for Chinese opera performances in the German-speaking world. *Das Ieressante Blatt* described and commented on it, saying that it was "the most interesting kind of strange stage play". The *Salzburger Volksblatt* and *Salzburger Chronik* reported on the great success of the performance in the local area [3].

#### **4. The Influence of Chinese Opera in the German-Speaking World**

Vincenz Hundhausen translated Chinese operas into German and brought them to the German-speaking world for performances, which received a good response. This not only helps to increase the popularity and further development of Chinese opera, but also provides new paradigms and ideas for Western dramatic art. It also makes important contributions to cultural exchanges between China and the West and the improvement of the international influence of Chinese culture.

In 1936, Vincenz Hundhausen's German version of *The Peony Pavilion* was performed in Europe. This was the earliest record of the large-scale dissemination of Chinese Kun Opera on the European stage. It showed the Western world at that time Chinese opera art and the significant cultural

information behind it. At that time, people in the German-speaking world gained a deeper understanding of the Chinese aesthetics contained in singing, acting, recitation and acrobatics by watching the performance of Vincenz Hundhausen's translation. They can experience the unique musical style of Chinese opera singing style and traditional Chinese instruments. What is more, they can profoundly experience the subtle and touching emotions from the narration and stories.

Moreover, the successful performance of Chinese operas in the German-speaking world also corrected to a certain extent the bias in domestic criticism of old operas at that time. Since the New Culture Movement, some Chinese people had been opposed to whether traditional Chinese culture should be passed on. They believed that only Westernization could make China at that time better integrate into the world's trends.

However, Vincenz Hundhausen's translation and staging of Chinese operas have been welcomed by the local people in the German-speaking world and have achieved good results. This will naturally make the Chinese people regain their confidence in traditional Chinese arts. As a result, our country's scholars and artists can further promote the inheritance of opera more firmly. Therefore, the spread of Chinese opera in the German-speaking world in the 1920s and 1930s greatly promoted its own inheritance and development, and provided meaningful reference for the development of opera art in later generations.

Western art established the tradition of realism since ancient Greece. However, with the advent and development of the industrial age, people are gradually eager to find pure beauty. No longer focusing on objective realism, they hope to heal the depression and alienation caused by industrialization through some simple, simple and abstract art forms [13]. Therefore, Western drama, which originally advocated realism, entered the stage of the "anti-realism movement" in the early 20th century.

Chinese opera happens to be a freehand art, emphasizing the creation of artistic conception, musical rhythm and facial makeup symbolism. Thousands of troops going into battle to kill the enemy, in fact, may only require two people to fight and the music of gongs and drums to complete it. The scenes on the Chinese opera stage are not the scenes people experience in their daily lives. Instead, relatively single props are used to represent different scenes. For example, if an Emperor sits behind the square table that is commonly seen on the opera stage, it is an imperial case. But if an official sits behind it, it is a public case. This is the so-called "creating the environment due to the heart". The freehand expression method of Chinese opera provided a new paradigm and idea for the development of Western drama at that time.

The internationally renowned cross-cultural psychologist John W. Berry once proposed the theory of cultural adaptation, pointing out that cultural adaptation has two basic dimensions, namely the tendency to maintain one's own traditional culture and identity, and the tendency to communicate with other cultural groups [14]. He believed that the process of acculturation actually had an impact on the two different cultures that came into contact with each other. Cross-cultural adaptation is a continuous process of interaction between two cultural systems; it refers to a harmonious state of balance and symbiosis formed by the two opposite ends through verbal and non-verbal communication [15].

In the process of introducing Chinese opera to the German-speaking world, the disseminated Chinese operas inevitably incorporate German elements through adaptation, making the local audience more accepting and willing to take the initiative to understand Chinese culture. This has enhanced the understanding and friendship between people in China and the German-speaking world, and closer the cultural exchanges between China and the West.

Through the spread of Chinese opera in the German-speaking world, audiences in more places could be exposed to Chinese culture. In the process of appreciating Chinese opera, they may discover the universal elements of human nature, emotion, and social issues contained in it, thereby developing a sense of cross-cultural identity with China. This sense of identity enhanced the interest and favorability of Chinese culture among audiences in the German-speaking world. It further expanded the influence of Chinese culture in the German-speaking world, Europe, and even the world.

## 5. Conclusion

In general, the spread of Chinese opera in the German-speaking world in the 1920s and 1930s was closely related to Vincenz Hundhausen. It was his passion for Chinese classical opera that prompted him to devote himself to translating Chinese opera and bringing them to the stage of the German-speaking world in a form more acceptable to local audiences. As a vital part of traditional Chinese culture, Chinese opera has unique artistic charm and cultural connotation. Through its spread in the German-speaking world, Chinese opera provided audiences in the German-speaking world with a new and expressive way of displaying Chinese culture. This approach not only helped audiences in the German-speaking world understand the diversity of Chinese culture, but also promoted cultural exchanges between China and the West, and further enhanced the international influence of Chinese culture.

Then again, the local audience's relatively enthusiastic responses to the performance of Chinese operas enabled Chinese people to affirm the unique charm and significant value of their own culture, thus enhancing their confidence in their own culture. Last but not least, it also brought far-reaching references and inspirations to the current distribution, inheritance, and development of Chinese opera.

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