

Kramer vs. Kramer in China

-- The Innovation and Deficiency of Local Adaptation of Western Classic Plays

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Abstract: Local adaptations of Western countries' plays are common in China; different theaters have various ways of making Western plays locally adapted to Chinese society. The explicit ways and disadvantages are what people are curious about; these may inspire future directors to direct productions. This research identifies how the Guangzhou Dramatic Art Center made the Western classic play *Kramer vs. Kramer* locally adapted in Guangzhou and analyzes the innovation and deficiencies of the local adaptation based on an interview with an anonymous repertoire coordinator in the Guangzhou Dramatic Art Center. The result is that the disadvantages led to criticisms related to how this local adaptation did not show feminism, but the overall changes achieved the goal of local adaptation. The audience developed empathy for the characters and plots, and they understood the overall play with reflections and special opinions. The result is due to the changes of the setting, texts in the script, and the names, elements, and belief of characters.

Keywords: Local adaptation, *Kramer vs. Kramer*, interview, the Guangzhou Dramatic Art Center

1. Introduction

Western countries produced many famous plays, such as *King Lear* by Shakespeare and *A Doll's House* by Henrik Ibsen. While China has its own plays like *The Orphan of Zhao* by Ji Junxiang, it still tries to bring Western plays to its citizens. To help the citizens understand the contents and the central ideas of Western plays better, some theaters choose to change the original plays' characters, settings, plots, and other characteristics by using local adaptation. Adding the unique cultures of where the plays will be performed to the original scripts and designs, the theaters try to make the local audiences resonate with the plays. The Guangzhou Dramatic Art Center made the Western classic play *Kramer vs. Kramer* locally adapted in Guangzhou by changing the settings, texts of the script, and characters of the play. The Guangzhou Dramatic Art Center performed this play in 2022 and received praises and criticisms as the first stage play of *Kramer vs. Kramer* since it was originally a film [1]. This research will analyze how exactly the Guangzhou Dramatic Art Center made the original play *Kramer vs. Kramer* locally adapted in Guangzhou and the adaptation's disadvantage. The analysis is conducted based on an interview with a repertoire coordinator in The Guangzhou

Dramatic Art Center and the commentaries toward this production that the center received. The analysis of the local adaptation of *Kramer vs. Kramer* in the Guangzhou Dramatic Art Center can help Chinese theaters reflect on the method of local adaptation of Western classic plays.

2. *Kramer vs. Kramer*

Kramer vs. Kramer was originally a novel written by Avery Corman. Afterward, Robert Benton wrote a script based on this book and directed a movie, which won five Oscars in 1980. The movie talks about the conflicts that a man experiences in his family and jobs. In 1970 in New York, the protagonist Ted Kramer was working to gain income for his family while his wife, Joanna Kramer, was the one who looked after the young son Billy in the family and relied on Ted. Joanna did not work for years, and she felt depressed and perplexed about her role as a full-time housewife. As a result, she decided to leave her husband and Billy behind to chase her dream and find herself. Ted Kramer was sad and anxious at the beginning since he needed to take care of both his job and Billy at the same time, but he soon became familiar with two roles with the help of Margaret, a single parent. Ted also experienced heavy blows when he lost his job and when Billy almost lost an eye, but he soon pulled himself together and acquired a new job successfully. However, Joanna came back after she got a stable job because she wanted her son Billy back, so she sued Ted and obtained custody of Billy. After thinking deliberately, she decided to give up the custody, so Ted could live with Billy with love and happiness.

Kramer vs. Kramer has many deeper messages that the audience may explore. This play reflects individualism by depicting how Joanna tried to achieve spiritual independence and economic independence [2]. The play shows the condition of American families from 1960 to 1970, how women were encouraged to work as full-time housewives since men were afraid that women would take many opportunities of jobs away [3]. This play also explores feminism. After leaving her husband, Joanna inside *Kramer vs. Kramer* was not restricted by her economic status because she got a job that had an income of thirty-one thousand dollars. Her income is even more than her husband's yearly income [4]. Joanna is a typical example that shows the power of women, feminism, in 1970 when women were still not in a high status.

3. Guangzhou Dramatic Art Center

As a drama cultural enterprise, the Guangzhou Dramatic Art Center incorporates drama creation and production, agency performances, drama training, stage art production, film and video production, and other initiatives. The Guangzhou Dramatic Art Center's artistic pursuit is to attract more audiences who are interested in drama through the use of creative stage style of drama, the aesthetic power of drama to interpret life, and the development of expert teams with outstanding drama production.

The Guangzhou Dramatic Art Center has presented a number of popular plays, including Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* and *Macbeth*, Bai Xianrong's *A Vivid Dream in a Garden*, *King of Nanyue*, and many other plays. In total, it performed more than 80 plays. In the Guangzhou Dramatic Art Center, there is a variety of talented, energetic, and young actors and old, experienced actors who have won accolades like the Splendor Award, Plum Performance Award, Magnolia Award, and numerous additional prizes.

4. The Guangzhou Dramatic Art Center's Local adaptation of *Kramer vs. Kramer*

As a small theater located in Guangzhou, the Guangzhou Dramatic Art Center wanted to perform plays that related to different relationships and emotions in Guangzhou society because COVID-19 had affected people's emotions. Watching the shows may help people get rid of any confusion toward

emotions and the negative impacts of Covid [1]. This was why the Guangzhou Drama Art Center chose *Kramer vs. Kramer*, a play related to emotions between a couple, to perform. According to the interview, the Guangzhou Dramatic Center not only did hard work to change the movie *Kramer vs. Kramer* into a stage play but also made *Kramer vs. Kramer* locally adapt to Guangzhou. These changes can be separate.

4.1. Setting--Moving the Whole Play to an Ordinary Street of Guangzhou

The whole play of *Kramer vs. Kramer* originally takes place in Manhattan, New York. The time of this play also took place from 1960 to 1970, when the anti-Vietnam War movement, feminism movement, and African American Civil Rights Movement took place [5]. Technology like cell phones were not invented yet, so people used the telephone to communicate. This is also why the audience always saw the actors use telephones to communicate in the original movie. To help the audience in Guangzhou become familiar with the play, the director made some changes regarding the setting of the play.

The director gave a Chinese name to the original play's title *Kramer vs. Kramer* as *A Married Couple in The Kelan Street* because he wanted the setting to be an ordinary street in Guangzhou. In Guangzhou, some names of streets have structures like: "Proper name + modifier + general name, Agroforestry + straight + street" [6]. Since the pronunciation of the word 'Kramer' is similar to the Chinese word 'Kelan', the director included the phrase "The Kelan Street" inside the play's Chinese name to connect the original film to the current stage play. He also achieved his goal of moving the setting to Guangzhou by using this phrase. As he states in the other interview conducted by the Guangzhou Dramatic Center, the new Chinese name would help the audience in Guangzhou imagine an ordinary married couple who lives on a common street. As a result, the audience will be pulled closer by this name to the characters and the play itself.

The director also changed the time period to modern time in Guangzhou during the COVID period. The use of props inside the stage play of *Kramer vs. Kramer* can reflect this change of time setting. Inside the stage play, the characters used cell phones instead of telephones, which were what Ted Kramer and Joanna used in the original film.

The stage settings and background music also reflect the change of setting as well. In the stage play *Kramer vs. Kramer*, the backgrounds of the stage were pictures of old buildings and tall skyscrapers that were located in Guangzhou. In one of the transitions, the stage designer put a video of people crossing a crossroad in Guangzhou, which is very familiar to citizens who live in Guangzhou. Additionally, during one of the transitions, the background of the stage played a short video clip that contained advertisements of Guangzhou traditional food, such as Squab, chicken pot bellies, and roasted chicken. This transition shows the culture of Guangzhou and helps the audience feel the connections between the play and themselves. Finally, in the stage play before the protagonist's mother-in-law appears, the audience can hear forty seconds of Suzhou opera. This transition is inferring that the protagonist character's mother-in-law is from China, Suzhou. The integration of this piece of music also helped to shift the setting from New York to China.

4.2. Texts--the Additions of Specific Words and Phrases

The director added specific words and phrases inside the script, which was also one strategy that helped the local adaptation process. When the protagonist mentioned possible business tactics, he referred to his selling method as the "bucket meal service" (Quan Jia Tong), a type of service that Kentucky Fried Chicken restaurants in China provide. He believed this method would help him to sell his talent and designs in advertisements, winning more customers for the company he was working for. This phrase is not strange for most of the audience, Guangzhou citizens, since there were

8675 Kentucky Fried Chicken restaurants in China, which indicates that people are very familiar with the Kentucky Fried Chicken restaurants and their menus [7]. This addition of phrase is not only a tactic inside local adaptations but also a phrase that adds a sense of humor to the play.

Furthermore, when the kid of the Kramer family, Billy, mentioned the cartoon that he liked to watch with his father, he mentioned the animation *Boonie Bears*. *Bonnie Bears* is a very popular animation in China for little kids, and it is many Chinese people's childhood memories. It is a comedy that talks about how the two bears protect the environment. *Bonnie Bears'* s series such as *Forest Frenzy of Boonie Bear* have a TV average viewing rate of 72% percent [8]. By including this popular animation's name in the kid of the Kramer family, the audience can feel the innocence of Billy and the sense of familiarity.

In the stage play after Ted lost his job and explained his situation to Billy, Billy asked him if he was fired by the boss. Explicitly, Billy used the phrase "fried squids" (Chao You Yu) in Chinese to refer to his father's situation. It has the same meaning as "getting fired". This phrase is connected to the employment system in China in the past; at that period, laborers did not have the right to conserve their jobs, so they had to leave immediately when their boss fired them. Since at that time, the boss did not provide beds, workers needed to roll up their own blankets when they got fired. Because the shape of the blankets that they rolled up had the same shapes as the curling shapes of the squids when chefs fried them, Chinese people use "fried squids" to imply that someone or themselves are fired from work [9]. The addition of this phrase was a strategy of local adaptation that assists the audience in understanding the characters' difficulties.

4.3. Characters--Changes of Names, Elements, and Beliefs

For the characters' aspect, the director changed some characteristics including the names, elements, and beliefs.

The director changed the name of Ted Kramer to Taisheng Lin, which is a Chinese name while the first name sounds similar to the original first name "Ted". Joanna Ted's name was changed to An Qiao; Billy's name was changed to XiaoXiao. The nice single parent Margaret's name was changed to Miss. Hua. These names helped the Guangzhou audience to associate these characters with people that they meet in daily life.

The characters' characteristics also changed due to the local adaptation. For instance, Miss. Hua, who was originally the kind single parent Margaret, became a middle-aged woman who exercised and did square dancing every day. Compared to the original Margaret in New York, Miss. Hua is more energetic. Her hobby of doing square dance is different from the original Margaret. Nowadays, square dance contains all kinds of Folk dance, aerobics, popular dance, and other elements [10]. Different sporting activities have thrived in China after the reformation and opening up in China. Square dancing also evolved into a well-liked national sport. After the Olympic Games in Beijing in 2008, square dancing rose to prominence as a distinct and popular sport in China [11]. The addition of this characteristic for Miss. Hua, Joanna, makes this character amiable for the audience.

The director changed some beliefs of the characters too. For example, He added certain beliefs and lines for Taisheng Lin, Ted Kramer, to demonstrate the Chinese traditional view on marriage and how it forced An Qiao, Joanna, to leave her family. Chinese traditional marriage believes that procreation is very important, and wives should always listen to their husbands [12]. Patriarchy is what the women faced. In the stage play, Taisheng Lin, Ted Kramer, kept asking An Qiao, Joanna, to have more children with him while An Qiao just wanted to come out and work in society instead of giving birth to more children and staying at home. Taisheng Lin could not understand her. He explicitly criticized her with sarcasm by saying that her salary would be lower than a babysitter's salary because as a woman, she would only get an average job. After An Qiao rejected him and left, Taisheng Lin called his parents and An Qiao's parents. The conversations that he had with both parents in the stage play

reflected the director's addition of beliefs into the characters. Taisheng Lin's parents became mad when they heard how An Qiao left their grandson alone. They used extremely offensive words and phrases to describe her as an irresponsible mother. An Qiao's parents also reacted with fear and anger when they heard that their daughter left Xiao Xiao, their grandson behind. They could not believe that their daughter was so cruel and selfish. Both parents' reactions reflected the Chinese traditional view on marriage. In the Chinese traditional belief, a wife should never abandon her husband and son when she feels unhappy about the marriage. Individualism should not be what a wife considers about [13]. Adding this unique traditional view to the characters, the director indirectly reflected the repressive environment that An Qiao lived in. The Guangzhou audience could develop empathy for An Qiao better in this scenario since as Chinese, they understand An Qiao's helplessness.

5. Disadvantages

According to the interviewee, the audience had various comments and different opinions toward the stage play. While some audiences believed the local adaptation did help the audience resonate with the play and let them see the shadow of themselves in the stage play, some audiences criticized the play harshly due to its vivid portraits of male protagonists. The stage plays *A Married Couple in The Kelan Street* mainly focused on the perspective of Taisheng Lin, Ted Kramer, to deliver a story of how he overcame the challenge of raising a kid and finding a job. The stage play did not spend time narrating how An Qiao, Joanna, found a job after she left the family. For certain audiences, it is unreasonable that when Taisheng Lin was fighting with An Qiao in court, both lawyers did not mention how An Qiao had cultivated her child for more than five years with hard work and sorrow. Some audiences believed that the stage play would be interesting and different if the playwright would stand in An Qiao's point of view to deliver the story.

However, the original movie *Kramer vs. Kramer* was also delivering the story and idea standing in Ted Kramer's point of view. To be aligned with the original film, *A Married Couple in The Kelan Street* chose to show the story from Taisheng Lin's perspective. There was a time limitation for a stage play, so the Guangzhou Dramatic Art Center chose to stand in the male protagonist's point of view in telling the story. This is why the audience can only watch the play from Taisheng Lin's perspective.

Another part of the stage plays also led to its criticisms. At the end of the stage play, An Qiao came back and reflected that she should take care of her son, but the male character Taisheng Lin still did not fully reflect on how he repressed his wife in the past. This is different compared to the original play. In the original film, Ted Kramer explained to Billy that Mommy probably left because she did not want to become the perfect housewife, whom Ted wanted her to be. He thought that if he was happy, Joanna would also feel happy. In the court when Ted and Joanna were fighting for custody, Ted also reacted to Joanna and apologized that if everything started over, he would change his attitude toward her [13]. Taisheng Lin in the Guangzhou Dramatic Art Center's version did not entirely reflect his actions and attitudes toward An Qiao. He did not understand his wife's condition. He emphasized how hard he worked as a single parent for one year while An Qiao worked as a full-time housewife for six years without freedom.

Some Guangzhou audiences hated Taisheng Lin, but this proves that the director created a vivid portrait of this male character for the audience in Guangzhou. This character, being changed for the local adaptation, became a typical Chinese man who still has the traditional beliefs that Guangzhou citizens may encounter in daily life. Judging from a social perspective, the audience felt that this local adaptation made this play too patriarchal and one-sided. However, viewing from an artistic and theatric perspective, this play helps the audience develop empathy and understanding.

6. Conclusion

There are both disadvantages and innovations in the local adaptation of *Kramer vs. Kramer*. Even though the disadvantages led to some criticisms of the Guangzhou Dramatic Art Center's stage play, the local adaptation still helped the audiences resonate with the play. The changes in the setting, texts, and characters help the audience understand the contents and central idea of the play. The stage plays also guided the audience to reflect on Guangzhou society and the relationship between wives and husbands in Chinese families. If the director of the play deleted some scenes and transitions and transformed them into a short scene where An Qiao is finding her job, the stage play could show more parts of how a woman rises. This can fulfill certain audience's dreams by showing the contemporary feminists' ability and power. Changing small parts of the central ideas of the play to adapt better to the current society can be a brave decision that many theaters can make in the future. By analyzing the local adaptation's methods and their flaws, future Chinese theaters may use and improve the techniques that are mentioned in the research in changing the Western classic plays to achieve local adaptation. This research only analyzes based on one example of local adaptation, so the result may not be suitable for every other play that is locally adapted in China. In the future, the research can be conducted based on various plays. In this case, the research can compare and contrast different plays' local adaptation methods and their impact to come up with a universal adaptation method that can be adopted in every play.

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