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“Calming my heartbeat to enjoy the show”

The social-indexical meanings of in-yer-face theater recontextualized China

Abstract: This article investigates the *performability* of in-yer-face theater when *recontextualized* from the British to the Chinese context, proposing an interdisciplinary approach that uses sociolinguistic tools to empirically examine relevant issues for theater translation studies. By analyzing audience reactions from both online and offline platforms, we found that different audiences in China link this form of theater to context-specific *indexical meanings*. Our study reveals that Chinese audiences associate in-yer-face theater with the social persona of the *wenyi qingnian*—a stereotype of a pretentious youth with niche interests in the arts—and with socially transgressive ‘tastes’ referred to as *zhong kouwei* “heavy taste” and *da chidu* “overboard”. Because of the mixed attitudes among various stakeholders, it underscores the controversial nature of in-yer-face theater in China, as it is neither fully accepted nor fully rejected. By focusing on audience perception and interpretation, our study enriches the broader understanding of theater translation. We emphasize the pivotal role of different audiences in recontextualizing in-yer-face theater by examining the social-indexical meanings they attribute to it in the Chinese context. We hope this study could provide a foundation for navigating the complex field of indexicality and performability for in-yer-face theater in China.

Keywords: figure of personhood; indexical meaning; in-yer-face theater; performability; recontextualization

1. Introduction

Originating in the Great Britain in the 1990s, in-yer-face theater is characterized by its use of direct, raw, and explicit language to portray themes such as rape, homosexuality, war, cannibalism, and humiliation. This novel and thought-provoking theater matter is intended to shock its audience, and this shock factor has been the subject of both criticism and appreciation in its source context and is well documented in scholarship on contemporary British theater (Aragay et al. 2007; Boles 2020; Sierz 2000). In this article, we focus on reactions to in-yer-face theater, but in the context of its translation to Chinese and its performance in China. In-yer-face theater was introduced to China in the early 21st century, and due to its radical plots and deviation from China's conservative ideology, it faced official censorship and even prohibition, and also shocked many theatergoers (China Youth Daily 2016). Nonetheless, it has also attracted the attention of some Chinese theater practitioners, scholars and certain audiences (Wang 2002; Zhang 2008b). Thus, the introduction of in-yer-face theater from the Britain to China is a complex process. In this paper, we aim to shed light on this process through careful attention to the specific social-indexical meanings that in-yer-face theater acquires when it moves to this new context.

In order to do this, we propose an interdisciplinary approach that uses sociolinguistic tools to empirically examine issues relevant for theater translation studies. More specifically, we evaluate whether in-yer-face theater is *performable* when it is *recontextualized* in the Chinese context based on how different audiences in China link

this form of theater to context-specific *indexical* meanings. Through an analysis of audience reactions collected from online and offline contexts, we show that Chinese audiences link in-yer-face theater to the social persona of the *wenyi qingnian* – a stereotype of a pretentious youth with niche interests in the arts; and to socially transgressive ‘tastes’ referred to as *zhong kouwei* ‘heavy taste’ and *da chidu* ‘overboard’. These social meanings of in-yer-face theater in China share much in common with the social meanings of this form of theater in Great Britain: i.e. youthfulness and social transgression are consistently associated with this form of theater. However, we also show that there are more subtle ways in which these social meanings differ due to recontextualization in the Chinese context. For example, the *wenyi qingnian*’s love of in-yer-face theater is connected to Chinese perspectives on “foreign arts” and individualism. Additionally, the transformative potential of in-yer-face theater in China is celebrated in part because of its ability to (momentarily) avoid censorship. At the same time, the recontextualization of in-yer-face theater in the Chinese context requires a consideration of the consequential impacts of audience perception of social transgression, particularly when some of these audience members are themselves censors. By examining the indexical meanings of in-yer-face theater in this way, a complex and nuanced picture of Chinese perceptions of in-yer-face theater can be achieved. This nuanced picture highlights the multiplicity of audiences in China, and the particular “flavor” of youthfulness and social transgression that is derived from engagement with in-yer-face theater in this context. All of this contributes to the ways in which this type of theater is both performable and unperformable in China.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 Beyond translation: taking drama to a new context

In theater translation studies, the “performability” of a play (Bassnett 1991; Espasa 2000; Glynn 2020 and 2022) is arguably the most crucial issue in considering whether or not the play is a success (Aaltonen 2010). Performability is generally understood as whether a play can be performed on stage or not. This seemingly simple idea however, has been shown to be rather complex. For instance, Glynn and Hadley (2021) argue that performability is most useful when it is thought of – not as a binary outcome – but as a way of drawing attention to the various obstacles encountered in the process of trying to achieve it. To achieve performability one needs to effectively transfer the intended message of a text from one language to another, *and* transfer the written text into a format suitable for stage performance (Brodie 2019; Lass 2023). As Espasa (2000) points out, however, performability is not only based on “textual and theatrical factors”, but perhaps more importantly on the negotiation of “ideology and power” (p. 58). In this sense, performability is an issue of intercultural communication as it is related to how one navigates the “style, conventions, and ideology of the target cultural environment” (Bigliuzzi et al. 2013). Beyond cultural and ideological issues, technical and practical concerns may also influence a play’s performability (Glynn and Hadley 2021). In this way, the notion of performability covers a wide range of issues that are relevant to both theater scholars and practitioners effectively bridging “the apparent gulf between theater practice and translation theory” (Hale and Upton 2000: 12).

However, the analysis of performability cannot be ended at this point. Theatrical performance requires “at least one spectator ...to constitute a performance” (Grotowski 2002: 32). Peter Brook’s statement that “a man walks across this empty space whilst someone else is watching him, and this is all that is needed for an act of theater to be engaged” (1968: 9) also emphasizes this point. The audience serves as the final stage

of the theatrical experience, acting as the recipients whose opinions and preferences have a substantial influence on the critical and commercial success of a show, determining whether the show can continue to be performed. In the case of unperformed plays, readers' reactions to these texts can also determine whether the play is performed or not. Therefore, the audiences' understanding, and reception of the theatrical work fall within the scope of performability. However, in scholarship on performability little attention has been paid to audience reactions. Some scholars have used the notion of *symbolic capital* (Bourdieu 1984: 291) to explore how a play's positive reputation and an image of respectability and honorability can lead it to be brought into a new target context (Glynn and Hadley 2021: 24; Sapiro 2015). But, more detailed analysis of audience reactions and interpretations have yet to be examined. What we aim to explore in this paper is the complexity of audience reactions to translated dramas, and the various social meanings they assign to these dramas that may include, but also go beyond *symbolic capital*. In order to dive more deeply into the details of audience reactions, and to link these reactions to the broader ideological and cultural context, we draw on sociolinguistic approaches to social meaning, which we outline below.

2.2 Sociolinguistic approaches to social meaning

Sociolinguistic approaches to meaning rely strongly on the notion of *indexicality*, which is meaning that is closely tied to context (Bucholtz and Hall 2005; Johnstone 2010). an indexical approach shifts the focus from referential meanings to a richer understanding of how language "points at" various other non-referential, social meanings (Silverstein 2003). To use Silverstein's example, if someone describes a wine as having "medium dryness and body" this is not only a reference to the quality of the wine, but also a way for the speaker to *index* themselves as a "well-bred" and "interesting" person. Eckert (2008) expands on the idea that certain ways of speaking can point to multiple layers of social meaning. She uses the example of fully pronounced '-ing' in gerunds like 'running' in American English, showing that this pronunciation indexes a constellation of potential social meanings including: "education", "intelligence", "formality" and "articulateness". She describes these interrelated social meanings as the "indexical field" of the phonological variable '-ing'. Zhang's (2008a, b) study of er-hua (i.e. rhotacization) in Beijing demonstrates that linguistic variables can also point to socially recognized *personas* (see Agha 2007). In the case of Zhang's data, rhotacization is linked to an image of an urban man in Beijing who can smoothly navigate social situations through his use of street smarts, i.e. the "Beijing Smooth Operator". Such personas take on moral associations (Blommaert 2018; Perez-Milans 2023), further adding to the "indexical field" of potential social meanings that may be associated with them. Note that these social meanings have no intrinsic relationship with the linguistic forms themselves, but instead emerge from particular contexts. That is, through the use of these forms, in particular contexts, by particular people, they come to acquire associations, which then solidify into socially recognized meanings and personas (Eckert 2008; Silverstein 2003). Another important point is that while sociolinguists often apply indexicality to linguistic features, it is a broader semiotic process, and all forms of semiosis can index social meaning. Thus, certain types of pants can index independence and autonomy (Eckert 2008) and water bottle design can index natural sources (Manning 2012). As we discuss in this paper, certain types of theater can also acquire specific indexical meanings, and when these forms of theater are introduced to new contexts, these social meanings can also be transformed.

To theorize this transformation, we find the notion of (re)contextualization useful.

Contextualization refers to the idea that texts are always bound to particular contexts and that significant changes occur when they are removed from their contexts, i.e. decontextualized, and recast within new contexts, i.e. recontextualized (Bauman and Briggs 1990; Linell 1998; Fairclough 2003). In fact, scholars have already recognized the utility of the notion of recontextualization for translation studies. Particularly relevant to our case at hand, Greenall and Løfaldli (2019) examine a book that was translated from Norwegian to English, and also adapted for screen. They draw attention to changes that were made in order to situate the story within its new contexts, including alterations to character names, adjustments to the plot, and the use of accents familiar to the target audience. Following Greenall and Løfaldli's (2019) claim that recontextualization encompasses both 'adaptation' and 'translation' (2019: 240), we propose to see the process of theater translation as a whole in terms of recontextualization. This means that the attempts to achieve performability through changes to scripts and performance are processes of recontextualization. But it also means that changes to *indexical meanings* – regardless of the extent to which the play itself has been changed – are also involved in theater recontextualization. As an example of the indexical aspects of recontextualization, consider Birnie-Smith and Robertson's (2021) study of Taiwanese and Japanese metal music. They argue that when local semiotic forms get recontextualized into Taiwanese and Japanese metal music, they can be transformed into indexes of a translocal metal culture. Or consider Dong and Blommaert's (2009) example of a Chinese student whose accent is associated with an in-group identity in her hometown, but becomes marked as “rural” and “peripheral” when she migrates to Zhejiang. As House (2006: 356) notes, recontextualization involves "taking a text out of its original frame and context and placing it within a new set of relationships and culturally conditioned expectations". These new expectations can transform meaning, even when the semiotic forms are not changed. Varis and Blommaert (2014: 36) emphasize this point, noting that even if a “reshared post” on Facebook appears to be a repetition, recontextualization means that “every ‘repetition’ of a sign involves an entirely new set of contextualization conditions” and can lead to “very different meaning outcomes”. Such recontextualized social meanings are the focus of this study.

3. In-yer-face theater's journey to China

To observe the nuanced differences between the Chinese and British indexical meanings of in-yer-face theater, it is essential to first understand the sociohistorical background in which this form of theater emerged in Great Britain and how it later entered the Chinese cultural landscape. The term "in-yer-face theater" describes the avant-garde new writing movement that emerged in Great Britain throughout the 1990s. Sierz describes this form of theater in the following way: “In the nineties, a host of plays by young writers used explicit and directly confrontational material to explore the way we live and feel. Never before has so many plays been so blatant, aggressive or emotionally dark.” (Sierz 2000: 30). In-yer-face theater is always controversial and aggressive, and it presents unpleasant, embarrassing, and extreme plots. Playwrights depict graphic and provocative scenarios in their works, exploring themes such as rape, fellatio, anal intercourse, nudity, cannibalism, drug abuse, and torture. In Sierz's words, “The language was gross, the jokes sick, the images indelible” (2000: 30). Politically speaking, in-yer-face theater can be regarded as “a direct response from Thatcher's children [those born in the late 1960s and 1970s] to their own sociopolitical and sociocultural context” (REBGuest 2014). This context included the 1970s economic crises, growing inequalities in Great Britain, the AIDS epidemic, the fall of the Berlin

wall, the civil war in the Balkans, and high-profile cases of violent murders of British children and youth (Kritzer 2008; Sierz 2003). Kritzer (2008) notes that these playwrights wanted to contrast the concerns of their generation with those of their parents' generation, and to engage in societal critique and self-critique through open expressions of anger without reservation (see also Sierz 2000). However, she also notes that this anger was highly individualistic, and that the playwrights of in-*yer-face* theater had no common political cause, and offered no solutions to the sociopolitical issues they raised.

Further, despite its countercultural nature, in-*yer-face* theater was also a central, influential, and widely recognized form of theater within the British scene. The movement was not a sudden cultural phenomenon but rather part of a broader cultural renaissance known as "Cool Britannia", during which British culture experienced a revival in the midst of crisis and challenge. According to Sierz (2000: xii), it was the in-*yer-face* playwrights that played a pivotal role in revitalizing the struggling British theater during the 1990s. In-*yer-face* theater reached a peak of prominence in British theater, taking center stage during the 1990s when it captured widespread attention with its bold and often violent themes (Urban 2004). This period witnessed a doubling of output, with new in-*yer-face* plays exhibiting the ability to surpass the popularity and success of classical plays (Sierz 2011: 21). These plays were staged in well-known new writing theaters in London, but also in Edinburgh, Manchester, Birmingham, Bolton, and West Yorkshire (Sierz n.d). In short, in-*yer-face* theater was highly performable in the British context, and continues to exist as a part of the collective and historical memory of practitioners of theater in Great Britain (Sierz 2003, as cited in REBGuest 2014).

In-*yer-face* theater's introduction to China, on the other hand, was facilitated by economic restructuring in the late 1990s, and the corresponding rise in consumerism, which led to the introduction of more foreign art. In the early 1990s per capita urban spending in China rose 51 % and people had more free time, resulting in new consumer habits such as going out to "watch entertainment" or "have a quick snack of Kentucky Fried Chicken" (Chao and Myers 1998: 353–364). Growing consumerism into the early 2000s – when in-*yer-face* theater was brought to China – came hand in hand with more permissive cultural policies that allowed for the introduction of a wider range of Western products, brands, and art. Furthermore, Guan (2006) argues that consumerism from the 1990s onward led to a decline in the influence of traditional moral values and conservative aesthetics, which allowed for a growing prevalence of literary works in Chinese literature that addressed themes of sexuality and violence. Note also, that the introduction of in-*yer-face* theater into China followed two decades of *Chinese avant-garde* movements. These share in common with in-*yer-face* theater a concern with youth, differences between generations, sociohistorical trauma (though this trauma was about China's economic transformation), a rebellious character, and a search for something artistically "new" (Gao 2006; Lin 2009). At the same time, there were significant differences between Chinese and Western avant-garde movements. For instance, while Western avant-garde art was more concerned with railing against "middle-class commercial society and its kitsch tastes", Chinese avant-garde was more focused on the relationship between "localization and globalization, ideology and materialism" (Gao 2006: 68). Furthermore, while in-*yer-face* theater was strongly individualistic and professed no solutions to social problems in the European context, Chinese avant-garde was generally collectivist and attempted to pose solutions through experimentation (Gao 2009: 138). Thus, while in-*yer-face* theater's introduction to

China came on the heels of Chinese avant-garde productions, it was still a distinct and foreign form of art.

Another difference between the two contexts relates to the scope of dissemination of in-yer-face theater in China vs. Great Britain. That is, while in-yer-face theater became a prominent cultural trend in the Britain, in China it has garnered attention from only a small audience. This is influenced by three factors: a relatively smaller level of interest from Chinese audiences, the performance of in-yer-face theater in small theaters, and censorship. The provocative nature of in-yer-face theater, with its explicit depictions of violence, sexual references, strong language, and nudity, has generated interest – particularly among Chinese scholars and practitioners in the field of theater. Chinese dramatists have consistently made efforts to adapt to contemporary circumstances in theater, resulting in their fascination with renowned and award-winning in-yer-face productions that effectively showcase their symbolic capital at global level. Certain Chinese audiences have also found resonances with the social, emotional, and financial concerns depicted in in-yer-face drama. Nonetheless, most Chinese audiences are not interested in such niche forms of Western art. When they are performed, in-yer-face plays are put on in “small theaters”, such as Drum Tower West Theater (DTWT) in Beijing. These theaters are located only in large cities and are small in terms of their physical size and seating capacity, usually accommodating less than 200 audience members. Further, they generally rely on private funding unlike large-scale theaters in China which receive government funding (Li 2016). The final issue restricting the scope of in-yer-face theater is censorship. This censorship has resulted in in-yer-face performances being shut down after very short runs. Thus, despite an increased culture of consumerism and opening up to Western art forms in China, censorship places limits around the performability of in-yer-face theater in China and is a very relevant part of the context that constructs social meaning for these plays in the Chinese context.

4. Data and Method

In the analysis below, we focus on audience reactions to a translated book of plays written by Sarah Kane, and the performance of a play by Antony Nielson. In his seminal work, *In-yer-face Theater: British Drama Today* (2000), Sierz predominantly focuses on the contributions of Sarah Kane, Antony Neilson, and Mark Ravenhill. Kane and Neilson, in particular, have garnered significant recognition within the Chinese in-yer-face theater community, and as a result, reactions to their works will be the primary objects of this study. The theatrical productions of Sarah Kane are universally acknowledged as having significant relevance within the 'in-yer-face' theater movement, not only in China, but also globally. Each of her five works has been translated and published into Chinese in a relatively faithful way, and these translations have stimulated continuous discourse across various digital and traditional platforms. Antony Neilson became controversial in China when his play, *The Censor* was staged at DTWT in Beijing. The plot revolves around a male pornographic film censor and a female adult film director. The former believes that the films of the latter should not be released, while the adult film director believes that the movies should be released and that they will influence the whole world. The performance of this play was not as bold and explicit as in the original context. For instance, according to online comments, a montage was used on the Chinese stage to depict the intercourse between the censor and Miss Fontaine. Nonetheless, the play was still subjected to censorship because of its sensitive themes and sexual content. *The Censor* was eventually prohibited to be

staged, which generated some controversy.

In order to analyze audience reactions to in-er-face theater in China, we made use of Chinese social media, news reports, and ethnographic observations. The emergence of Web 2.0 has facilitated a medium through which ordinary people can express their viewpoints, effectively challenging the dominance of critics and professional scholars in the domain of theatrical evaluation (Murugesan 2007). In China, social media platforms such as WeChat, Weibo, and Douban have progressively emerged as prominent channels for the dissemination of theater commentaries (Zhou et al. 2021). These social media platforms facilitate the amplification of previously marginalized and disregarded comments. By virtue of online anonymity, netizens are able to freely articulate their perspectives and opinions. This study primarily focuses on the analysis of comments sourced from Douban, supplemented by additional sources including Weibo and news reports from various social media platforms. Douban is a prominent Chinese social media platform that facilitates the exchange of reviews and recommendations pertaining to movies, books, theater, and music (Zhao et al. 2011). The widespread usage of Douban enables the general public to engage in the evaluation of theatrical productions through the act of assigning ratings and sharing concise or extensive critiques. The utilization of Douban.com as an online community platform facilitated online ethnographic research, also known as netnography. Netnography is a specialized variant of ethnography that has been adapted to accommodate to the distinctive characteristics of computer-mediated social environments in contemporary society (Kozinets 2010: 1).

This study involved the collection of a total of 401 brief comments from the online platform Douban.com in the summer of 2023. Of these, 320 comments relate specifically to the Chinese translations of *Sarah Kane's Completed Plays*, encompassing the period from its publication in China on December 18, 2006 to April 23, 2023. Additionally, a total of 81 comments pertain to performances of *The Censor*, encompassing the timeframe spanning from its premiere on April 22, 2016, to last Douban available feedback on November 30, 2021. The relatively small number of comments over the span of many years also points to the relatively niche status of in-er-face theater within China.

All of the data was examined after which, a decision was made to focus the analysis on those comments which included information about the audience's response and viewing experience. This meant excluding comments that solely provided a plot summary. Among those comments examined, attention was given to looking for *socially recognized personas* that were linked to in-er-face theater. This is in parallel to Zhang's (2008a) attempt to find a persona (i.e. "Beijing Smooth Operator") that was linked to rhotacization in Beijing. This approach is useful because such personas are great sources of information about local indexical meanings, and the moral evaluations and identities that are implicated in these meanings. Across the data set, the *wenyi qingnian* was the only such persona that appeared in connection with in-er-face theater. Thus, although mentions of the *wenyi qingnian* did not appear very frequently beyond the data presented in this paper, we feel that the comments that do invoke this persona are still very relevant for understanding the social meanings of in-er-face theater in China. In addition, the data was also examined for any recurring themes that linked in-er-face theater with the Chinese cultural context through the use of culture specific terms. The two that emerged were *zhong kouwei* and *da chidu*. These terms are culturally specific and provide insight into the reception of in-er-face theater in China.

Both appeared more frequently in comments related to performances of *The Censor* on Douban.

5. Analysis: The indexical associations of in-yer-face theater in Mainland China

5.1 The *wenyi qingnian* persona

As noted above, the socially recognized persona that emerged in the comments on Douban was the *wenyi qingnian*. Before delving into these comments in detail, we start our analysis by giving a more situated and ethnographic understanding of this locally recognizable persona. On October 12, 2023, the first author, her father and husband had the opportunity to attend a performance of *The Pillowman*, a highly renowned in-yer-face theater production in China, which has gained significant popularity and has been staged annually at the DTWT in Beijing. This black comedy is set in a totalitarian state and centers on a writer who is interrogated due to a spate of murders that resemble his short stories. As the audience awaited ticket verification outside the venue, her father, a fifty-three-year-old man, suddenly said,

大家都是文艺青年，就我一个文艺老炮儿。

(They are all **wenyi qingnian**, only me a **wenyi laopaoer**.)

The first author was taken aback by her father's remark and inquired as to the rationale behind his statement. He responded that there were no other individuals of comparable age who had joined in this theatrical performance, and thus he perceived himself as being out of place both in watching the show and in relation to the audience. The distinction between 文艺青年 *wenyi qingnian*—literally, 'artistic youth'—and 文艺老炮儿 *wenyi laopaoer*—"artistic old gangster" is most obviously about age, and this is the level at which he felt himself to be very different from the others. If being at an in-yer-face theater performance made the first author's father "feel old", then we could take this as evidence that the indexical linkages between in-yer-face theater and "youth" are consistent across the British and Chinese contexts. However, rather than the "aggressively emotional youth" associated with 1990s Great Britain, in his comments it is more likely the "idle youth" associated with middle class consumerism in urban China that emerges. This is because idleness is what the *wenyi laopaoer* and *wenyi qingnian* share in common. *Wenyi laopaoer* is derived from the Beijing slang *laopaoer*, which refers to a middle-aged Beijing resident who spends their days relaxing and strolling with a caged bird companion. This persona embodies a lifestyle of nonchalance, characterized by pastimes that prioritize personal enjoyment. In calling himself a *wenyi laopaoer*, the first author's father was taking a somewhat critical view towards himself as someone who did not have more important things to do and was therefore watching this play for his own pleasure. Similarly, his use of *wenyi qingnian* can be seen as an indictment of the young people who have free time to be able to engage in the show. Idleness, youth, leisure time, and enthusiastic consumption of art for personal enjoyment are some of the characteristics of the *wenyi qingnian* persona.

Additional important characteristics of the *wenyi qingnian* are their love of niche - and specifically foreign or Western - art, as well as their attempts to differentiate themselves from others as superior individuals through their artistic tastes. In the 1980s in China, the term denoted young individuals who exhibited fervor for literature and art, and it possessed a neutral connotation. During that period, China experienced a transition from the Cultural Revolution, and subsequently witnessed the introduction of Western products into mainland China as part of the reform and opening-up movement.

Wenyi qingnian was a designation for those who showed a keen interest in imported literature and other art forms. Many *wenyi qingnian* participated in China's great upsurge of aesthetics and literature craze and held the belief that art and literature served as potent symbols of liberation and intellectual emancipation. In a reality show on Youku (2016), the celebrity Ma, who was a youth during this time, recalled that during the 1980s, individuals would endure prolonged exposure to frigid winds in order to acquire a single copy of a newly published book. At that time, the *wenyi qingnian* persona was imagined like this: as someone who was eager to consume as much art – and especially foreign art – as possible.

In the contemporary era, the connotation of the term *wenyi qingnian* has undergone a transformation. It now denotes not only a desire to consume art, but specifically to consume niche art as a means of distinguishing oneself from others. Evidence of this view of the *wenyi qingnian* can be seen in recent media representations of the persona. For instance, in a Youtube video (Neng Liang Media Official Channel 2019), the speaker Shao says that *wenyi qingnian* are characterized by three negative attributes: pretentiousness and fragility, a tendency to lecture others, and a reluctance to settle for mediocrity despite financial constraints. They often exhibit a high degree of individualism, disdain associating with others, and are quite arrogant. Similarly, the uploader Yi (2020) in a video on Bilibili.com introduced an extreme example of *wenyi qingnian* which is a person who only appreciates the highest echelon of culture. Notably all of the “highest echelons of culture” that Yi associates with the *wenyi qingnian* are Western: i.e. enjoying literary works such as *Limonov* by Emmanuel Carrere, attending operatic performances, and appreciating the classical compositions of Johann Sebastian Bach. This example illustrates how the *wenyi qingnian's* assertion of uniqueness and superiority is closely tied to their consumption of foreign or Western art (see also: Guo 2017).

We now move to show how the *wenyi qingnian* persona comes to be linked with the consumption of in-yer-face theater in comments on Douban. In the below, we examine comments that explicitly refer to *wenyi qingnian* or *wenqing* (an abbreviated form of *wenyi qingnian*), and also those that invoke this figure of personhood – even without explicit use of these words. The first six examples are the Douban comments reacting to the text of *Sarah Kane's Completed Plays*.

- (1) 文艺青年装逼神器。

(*Wenyi qingnian's* artifact **posey**.)

- (2) 不太懂作者想要表达什么。问了周围的朋友也没人听说过这个剧作家。就.....很小众。可能标榜独特的文青们会喜欢吧。

(**Didn't quite understand** what the author was trying to express. Asked friends around and no one had heard of the playwright. Just **very niche**. Maybe the *wenqing*, who **advertise uniqueness** will like it.)

These two commenters take a negative evaluative view towards the *wenyi qingnian* persona and their assumed love of in-yer-face theater. In (1) The term 装逼 *zhuangbi* (*posey*) is a derogatory expression that refers to an individual who engages in ostentatious behavior or pretense with the intention of impressing others by presenting qualities or possessions that they do not actually have. This behavior is driven by a desire for self-gratification and the pursuit of vanity. By combining the term *posey* with *wenyi qingnian*, the commenter further emphasizes the superior attitude of the *wenyi*

qingnian and frames their behavior as hypocritical or superficial. The ‘artifact’ (*shenqi* 神器) here is in-yer-face theater, so it appears the commenter is arguing that in-yer-face theater has played a role in enabling and supporting their disingenuous facade. The commenter in (2) reflects on the fact that in-yer-face theater is hard for them to understand given that it is such a niche type of theater. This commenter claims that this type of theater only has special meaning for *wenqing*. The term 标榜 *biaobang* (advertise uniqueness) in Chinese has the meaning of boosting and praising excessively, and the commenter may use this term to reflect that the *wenqing* is too supportive of in-yer-face theater in order to highlight their own uniqueness.

Although *wenyi qingnian* is not mentioned directly in comment (3), it does allude to a collective of young individuals with a shared interest in niche art.

(3) 真是年轻气盛的写法，也是年轻气盛会喜欢的作品。

(It is really written in a **young and aggressive** way, and it is also a work that **young and aggressive** people will like.)

The commenter also takes a negative view towards these youth and in-yer-face theater, which can be seen in the use of the term 年轻气盛 *nianqing qicheng*. This term could be translated as young and aggressive, meaning that one is too young to know how to deal with people and is very competitive. Older people often use this term when expressing negative opinions about the younger generation. This comment also suggests that the preferences of young people are different from those of the general population.

These three comments above highlight negative stances taken towards the persona of the *wenyi qiniang*. While negative views about youth with a propensity for in-yer-face theater may not be unique to the Chinese context, the concern here seems to be about these youths’ obsession with individuality and inability to cooperate well with others. While in-yer-face theater is also associated with individualism in the British context, in that context individualism was consistent with dominant cultural ideologies under Thatcher (Kritzer 2008). In the Chinese context, however, when in-yer-face theater is associated with excessive individualism, its critics are operating within a different moral vision of the world where one should be a part of a collective group and not be overly proud about one’s differences – even when joining countercultural movements (Pei 2010; Gao 2009). Thus, we argue that when it is recontextualized in China, in-yer-face theater takes on additional negative social meanings of excessive individualism.

In contrast to the viewpoints expressed previously, the following commenters take up a positive view towards *wenyi qingnian* and in-yer-face theater.

(4) 很适合文青的作品，独树一帜，但是翻译烂死了。

(Very suitable for *wenyi qingnian*, **uniqueness**, but the translation is so terrible.)

(5) 是文青们喜欢的东西，够劲爆够激进，我也是文艺青年了。

(It's the kind of thing that *wenqing* like. It is so **awesome** and so **radical**. I am such an artistic youth.)

The literal meaning of 独树一帜 *dushu yizhi* (uniqueness) is "to set up a separate flag", which can be interpreted as representing distinctiveness, uniqueness, and specialness. It signifies the aspirations of *wenyi qingnian* as well as the unique characteristics of in-

yer-face theater. Besides, it is in-yer-face theater's 劲爆 *jinbao* (awesome) and 激进 *jijin* (radical) nature that also attracts *wenyi qingnian*. *Jinbao* was initially used to describe the popular snack offered by KFC, namely its "popcorn chicken". Over time, the connotation of this term has broadened to encompass the qualities of being trendy, fashionable, and cutting-edge. *Jijin*, translated as radical, embodies the concept of deviating from established norms, thereby encompassing the audacity to effect transformative change. The tone displayed by commenter (5) reflects their enthusiasm and satisfaction in being associated with the term *wenyi qingnian*. Within this context, *wenyi qingnian* maintains its association with niche art, but this association is recast in a positive light and associated with the potential to bring about societal change.

In (7) we see an additional comment that provides a favorable view towards in-yer-face theater and links it to notions of social transformation.

(7) 有种文艺片的感觉，晦涩难懂却振聋发聩，很喜欢。

(It has the feel of an art film, obscure but **has an enlightening effect**. Love it so much.)

This comment establishes a correlation between art cinema and in-yer-face theater. Art cinema refers to a serious and non-commercial type of filmmaking that prioritizes artistic expression over catering to a wide audience, making it particularly favored by *wenyi qingnian*. The associated work, though challenging to comprehend, is metaphorically described by commenter (7) as 振聋发聩 *zhenlong fakui*, signifying a situation where the sound is so loud that it can be heard by a deaf person. This emphasizes in-yer-face theater's ability to stir individuals from a state of apathy or indifference through the power of language and words. In-yer-face theater, as a genre of serious theater, aims to thoroughly explore and critically assess societal circumstances through highly intense and provocative stage productions, and the commenter interprets this novel form of theater as a transformative process.

In the British context, in-yer-face theater is often seen as a critique of societal conditions. On Chinese stages, however, this transformative impact appears more surface-level, perhaps offering audiences a novel cultural experience rather than deeper societal critique. The importance of Western culture here can be implied in part from the use of the word *jinbao* and its association with the Western brand, KFC. It can also be implied from the invocation of *wenqing* and their strong indexical connection with the consumption of foreign art. Note that while there are a wide range of meanings associated with Western brands and objects, scholars have documented how some Chinese consumers see Western objects as bringing about positive social transformation, simply by being consumed in China (Dong and Tian 2009).

The preceding analysis suggests that *wenyi qingnian* is a figure of personhood that is closely connected to the indexical meanings of in-yer-face theater. However, the view toward *wenyi qingnian* is a multifaceted issue owing to the diverse perspectives held by different individuals. Certain individuals derive satisfaction from being categorized as *wenyi qingnian*, as it connotes a youthful cohort with a penchant for art, while also embodying qualities of trendiness, distinctiveness, erudition and some type of global social consciousness. In contrast, some individuals reject the label of *wenyi qingnian* due to perceiving it as derogatory, and associating it with pretentiousness and sentimentality that they find bothersome. The *wenyi qingnian* highlights the surface level similarities between the social meanings of in-yer-face theater in its target and

source context: the association with youthfulness, the confrontational nature of its presentation of social issues, as well as its new and subversive nature. At the same time, our analysis of this particular persona and its evaluation in the Chinese context allows us to observe additional layers of social meaning: the indexical association between in-yer-face theater and Westernness (which could be both positively and negatively evaluated), and the negative evaluations of the excessive individuality that is linked to this form of theater.

5.2 The Controversial Content of *Zhong Kouwei* and *Da Chidu*

In addition to the indexical associations of in-yer-face theater discussed above, this particular genre of theater also possesses indexical connotations of *zhong kouwei* and *da chidu*. The term 重口味 *zhong kouwei*, which literally translates to heavy taste, originally referred to an individual's preference for consuming food items characterized by rich flavors and pronounced spiciness. Over time, the usage of the term has expanded to encompass cultural tastes more broadly and has become associated with a subculture among the younger generation (New Weekly 2011). Individuals who identify with the concept of *zhong kouwei* often exhibit an interest in topics or subjects that deviate from dominant societal norms and are considered inappropriate or unacceptable by traditional perspectives in Chinese society (Wen 2013: 28). For example, they may engage with art that explores themes of homosexuality, sadomasochism, and perversion, as well as literature containing depictions of violence, graphic imagery, deviant behavior, and obscenity.

The term 尺度 *chidu* can be translated as scale or dimension and originally referred to a fixed standard used for measuring length. However, its current interpretation has expanded to include the norms or standards established by law and societal customs. In everyday life, *chidu* is utilized to regulate behavior and ensure adherence to societal expectations. Similarly, in the realm of literature, there exist specific criteria that serve as the *chidu* for evaluating content. When an artistic work surpasses these established standards or boundaries, it is referred to as 大尺度 *da chidu*, which literally translates to “large scale” and can be understood as going overboard. Works classified as *da chidu* often become the subject of controversy, censorship, and even prohibition. Visual literary works, in particular, appear to be more susceptible to controversies surrounding the concept of *chidu*.

Both *da chidu* and *zhong kouwei* can be linked to the universal view of in-yer-face theater as being shocking and going against conventional norms. Nevertheless, within the distinctive socio-political and cultural framework of China, the two phrases acquire supplementary connotations due to censorship and societal expectations. In China, the *Regulation on the Administration of Commercial Performances* (2020 Revision) stipulates the censorship criteria. It draws attention to the need to prohibit performances that endanger the unity, sovereignty, territorial integrity, and security of the state, that harm social morality, or advocate pornography, cults, superstition, or violence. However, in actual censorship practice, there exists considerable flexibility and discretion. More specifically, censorship is often outsourced to local elites whose subjective interpretations of works of art in relation to various social meanings have a huge impact on whether or not these works are censored (Ruan 2023). In this context, the audience's reactions and broader societal responses play a crucial role, as these can draw the attention of censors and potentially result in a play being banned. Indeed, the perception of whether a play is considered in need of censorship depends not only on

legal frameworks but also on how the cultural and moral significance of a play is interpreted by others. As such, whether a play is permissible or violates the law often hinges on subjective judgments made by dramatists, audiences, and censors, which are informed by how these stakeholders interpret the work. Interpretation of the work also relies on social norms for public art to reflect “positive energy” and moral instruction, which aligns with mainstream values and aims to reinforce social harmony (Zou 2019).

Given limited exposure to *zhong kouwei* or *da chidu* content for most Chinese audiences, the sensory experience may take them aback. As we see in the next series of comments, their focus is drawn to forbidden subjects like sex or violence instead of the overall social criticisms and analogies these plays may aim to convey. As a result, the initial shock or curiosity that is elicited by such content leads to a psychological response that is anchored in a fascination with the forbidden. In this context, we show how *zhong kouwei* and *da chidu* are associated with subversion in an interplay of state-imposed limitations, societal conventions, and personal interest. While censorship has a long history in China, spanning over two thousand years, as noted by Tan (2014: 314) and has been well documented by scholars, we add to this scholarship by incorporating the notion of indexical meaning, and censors’ uptake of these indexical meanings in their decision-making processes.

5.2.1 From the general audience perspective

The data collected from Douban.com for this study, which mentioned *zhong kouwei* and *da chidu*, predominantly involve an analysis of the violent, bloody, sexual, deviant, and perverse elements within in-yer-face theater. In the below, we examine individuals' remarks regarding the reading scripts of Sarah Kane's plays and a live performance of *The Censor*.

(8) 我天呢我真的很喜欢，一口气读完了，原来我是一个深柜重口味.....

(Oh my God, I really like it. I read it in one sitting, turns out I am a closeted with *zhong kouwei*.....)

(9) 第一次看这么重口味的戏剧，大为震撼且特别喜欢。

(It is the first time to see such a *zhong kouwei* drama, greatly shocked and particularly like.)

(10) 第一次看尺度如此之大的话剧，从瞠目结舌到平复心跳来看话剧本身都花了一段时间，演员非常优秀，很值得一看。

(It was my first time seeing such a *da chidu* drama, and it took a while to transition from jaw-dropping to calming my heartbeat to enjoy the show. The cast is excellent, and the show is well worth seeing.)

In (8), the commenter expresses a strong appreciation for Kane's plays. However, they unexpectedly realize a personal interest in the portrayal of homosexuality in the play, and expresses this through the use of the term “深柜”(closeted). In this context, the term "closet" is associated with being secretly gay, indicating that there were discussions of homosexuality in the plays and suggesting the commenter’s view on the social unacceptability of the subject matter. As Shaw and Zhang (2017) note, while homosexuality is not illegal in China, the 2010 Censorship guidelines for Radio, Film

and Television in China put restrictions on portrayals of homosexuality. Thus, when the commenter in (8) found this content interesting and attractive, and was shocked by their own personal liking for it, this is at some level in dialogue with both social norms and censorship regulations. The commenter frames the *zhong kouwei* nature of the play as deviant, but desirable. As for the commenter in (9), it sounds like the person was pleasantly surprised by the plot and expressions in the *zhong kouwei* plays by Sarah Kane. Although the commenter did not specify which specific plot or expression shocked them, the individual mentioned that it was the first time reading a *zhong kouwei* work and it was a novel experience. The person discovered that they could tolerate and even enjoy the author's writing style, particularly the so-called *zhong kouwei* descriptions. Similarly, it seems that both commenters (8) and (9) appreciate the unique and unconventional elements in *zhong kouwei* plays, finding them attractive and engaging.

Commenter (10) was also astonished by the in-yer-face theater, but different from the former two, the individual commented on a performance of *The Censor*, rather than on their experience of reading a play. Commenter (10) exhibited a state of astonishment towards the performance, necessitating them to take a period of time to regain composure ("it took a while to transition from jaw-dropping to calming my heartbeat"). The individual encountered a distinctive experience wherein they were exposed to explicit discussions and depictions of sexuality on stage, but they still thought it was a commendable experience. Although the individual labeled the show *da chidu*, they expressed their recommendation to view the performance.

There is an intriguing phenomenon observed in the repeated contrast among all three commenters, as they all underwent a transition from shock to appreciation. Except for comment (9), all other comments do not directly convey shock. The commenter (8) expresses shock and surprise through the exclamation "Oh my god". Commenter (10) uses the terms "jaw-dropping" and "heartbeat" to emphasize feelings of astonishment and shock. All three commenters shared a unanimous positive view towards the explicit and bold nature of the described in-yer-face theater, showcasing their appreciation for the daring and boundary-pushing elements presented on stage. Their collective response highlights the intriguing allure and fascination that the explicit and unconventional aspects of the plays held for them, emphasizing their willingness to embrace and recommend such thought-provoking types of plays. Further, while clearly not the only issue at stake, their appreciation is also in dialogue with the fact that the boundary-pushing elements subvert not only cultural norms, but also potential censorship. This becomes more clear in the examples below.

5.2.2 From the governmental perspective

Ke Zhou, the director of *The Censor*'s performance in China, expressed her satisfaction with the display of diverse values and open-mindedness among the younger generation. She claimed that the production of *The Censor* can be seen as a symbolic representation of the changing perspectives in traditional Chinese society. Throughout history, discussions about sex in China have been stigmatized, resulting in a general hesitancy to openly address the topic. However, some Chinese playwrights have courageously taken on the task of exploring themes of sexuality and incorporating explicit sexual content into their works, signifying a notable advancement in this realm. Nevertheless, such bold portrayal of explicit content faced significant challenges in gaining acceptance from the general public in China, due in large part to censorship. This can be seen in the case of the performance of *The Censor* in 2016.

(11) 很有幸能看到这么优秀的作品，看后没几天就被封了，这么大尺度的作品还是需要时间被中国接受。

(I was lucky to see such an excellent work, it was blocked within a few days after watching it, it still takes time for such a *da chidu* work to be accepted in China.)

(12) 谈论本剧不能不说到尺度，尤其是在中国。其实在我个人看来，合理地公开谈论性并没有冒犯什么，尺度本身无甚可说。但现实中的审查者们显然并不这么认为。

(It is impossible to discuss this play without mentioning its *chidu*, particularly in China. From my perspective, discussing sex openly and reasonably is not offensive, and there is nothing inherently offensive to say about *chidu*. The reality, however, is that the censors themselves clearly do not see it that way.)

Both comments are from Douban made by ordinary audience members after their attendance of the performance of *The Censor*, but both of the reviews assess the reception of this drama from two distinct levels. Firstly, from the perspective of each individual commenter *The Censor* is highly regarded. The commenter in 11 regards it as "an excellent work", while the commenter in (12) notes that "From my perspective, discussing sex openly and reasonably is not offensive". As ordinary viewers, they personally found the performance's style and *chidu* to be acceptable, without encountering any barriers to their acceptance. However, both commenters also address the broader context of "China". Commenter (11) claims that the Chinese environment is not conducive to accepting excessively bold and *da chidu* theatrical works. Additionally, commenter (12) emphasizes that the topic of going *da chidu* is a sensitive issue within the nation. While the *da chidu* nature of a production might not discourage someone from attending a play and could even serve as an attraction, this is not the case for the censoring authorities. While both comments made reference to China, they convey distinct meanings. In the context of (11), "China" encompasses a broad range of perspectives, which could include those of ordinary citizens, authoritative censors, or the overall social atmosphere. On the other hand, the commenter in (12) explicitly identifies China as the entity responsible for censorship. The censors, as representatives of the Chinese government's ideology, hold significant power and influence as an audience. They possess the authority to determine whether a play will be permitted or prohibited from being performed. As a result, productions like *The Censor* have been deemed unperformable and face bans from staging due to their perceived excessive and *da chidu* nature.

The original schedule for the performance of *The Censor* by DTWT was set from April 22nd to May 15th, 2016. However, on May 8th, before the end of the run, the show was unexpectedly called off. Although the official reason provided by the company was equipment failure, there was widespread speculation that the actual cause was the play's perceived non-compliance with censorship regulations. This speculation arose from the inclusion of explicit sexual content in the original script, such as scenes featuring male actors simulating masturbation, along with plot elements that openly depicted sexual organs and acts of intercourse, as well as the controversy the performance generated among the public both online and offline. The content of the *da chidu* show garnered the notice of the censors, who promptly halted its staging following their viewing.

The perception of the authorities and local censors plays a crucial role in shaping the evaluation of specific theatrical productions by mainstream societal platforms, such as the media. Moreover, this perception also exerts an influence on the overall development of this genre of theater within the Chinese context. Here is a critique from China Youth Daily, a government-owned Chinese news agency, which was released after the closure of *The Censor* on May 8th.

(13) 任何艺术展现的形式都有边界，话剧虽小众但也不能没尺度。好的作品、伟大的思想，并不是依靠触碰底线来成就，这其实是创作者内在功力不够，心虚的体现。

(Any form of artistic display has boundaries, and although the drama is niche, it cannot be without *chidu*. Good works and great ideas do not rely on touching the bottom line to achieve, which actually shows the creator's ability is not enough and with less confidence.)

This review issued by the official media presents a critical evaluation of *The Censor*, emphasizing its lack of *chidu* as the primary reason for its ban, rather than any specific appeal to the censorship guidelines. Interestingly, the official media aligns with the earlier comments we examined in that it sees in-*yer-face* theater as indexical of *da chidu*, and “niceness”, however, their ultimate assessment of this *da chidu* play is negative. While they can make allowances for niche art, they note that even this type of art “cannot be without *chidu*”. In contrast to the *wenyi qingnian* who seek to assert their uniqueness through the consumption of “great art” that is niche and *da chidu*, the censors argue that this is in fact bad art, with the creators having insufficient ability to produce meaningful art.

Overall, the controversial nature of in-*yer-face* theater sparks ongoing discussions surrounding its *zhong kouwei* and *da chidu* nature. Both in written form and on stage, this genre manages to attract a specific group of viewers who appreciate its bold and provocative nature and its ability to pass or subvert censorship – albeit sometimes only momentarily. However, the Chinese authorities and local censors view in-*yer-face* theater as a dangerous and detrimental form of art that demands serious attention. When these plays are adapted for stage performances and presented to the public, they become even more sensitive issues that require careful consideration. This highlights the complex and multifaceted nature of the indexicality of in-*yer-face* theater, which can vary depending on the audience. While the general public perceives it positively due to its audacity and innovation, officials express concerns about its frequent association with negative assessments, suggesting potential risks for performing in-*yer-face* theater in the Chinese context.

6. Discussion and conclusion

This article has offered an exploration of the indexical meanings linked to in-*yer-face* theater within the Chinese sociocultural landscape through critical analysis of social media discourses and other media and ethnographic observations. The findings show that this theatrical art form has become indexical of the *wenyi qingnian* persona as well as particular tastes and norm-crossing represented by the terms *zhong kouwei* and *da chidu*. Furthermore, both the negative and positive attitudes of various stakeholders highlight that this form of theater is still controversial and is neither fully rejected nor fully accepted in the Chinese context. We have discussed the ways in which these indexical meanings share similarities with the meanings of in-*yer-face* theater in the

British context: i.e. this form of theater is considered youthful, new and transgressive. But we have also shown the nuances of how these indexical meanings shift slightly when this form of theater is recontextualized in China. Here the youthfulness is perceived as an idle, consumerist youthfulness that is negatively evaluated on the basis of its overemphasized individuality. The newness of in-*yer*-face theater in this context is at least partially attributed to its Westernness. And finally, it is transgressive, not primarily because it assails middle-class sensibilities, but because it walks a fine line between being performable and being censored. In these ways, we have come to a more detailed and nuanced understanding of how diverse Chinese audiences perceive recontextualized in-*yer*-face theater.

To frame this in terms of performability, in-*yer*-face theater may initially be deemed unperformable due to censorship restrictions. However, literary enthusiasts and audiences with a predilection for *zhong kouwei* represent a formidable demographic for in-*yer*-face theater, advocating its adaptation and performance. This demonstrates the dynamic nature of the indexical meaning of in-*yer*-face theater, as it varies according to audience perspectives and these various indexical meanings are in dialogue with one another. All in all, the data suggests that the interpretation of in-*yer*-face theater in China is multifaceted and complex. Therefore, oversimplifying its acceptance or rejection fails to grasp the intricate dynamics at play. Further, while in-*yer*-face theater is obviously more performable in Great Britain than in China due to British collective memory of this period of theater, in China this form of theater gains new indexical meanings which may make it performable and relevant for theater-goers in unexpected ways.

Theoretically, our focus on audience perception and interpretation enriches understandings of theater translation more broadly. Notably, the purpose of our article has *not* been to explore the semiotic changes made to the translation or stage performances of recontextualized in-*yer*-face theater – though this is another interesting issue. Instead, we have emphasized the role that different audiences play in recontextualizing in-*yer*-face theater by examining the social-indexical meanings that they apply to it in this new context. We have applied sociolinguistic theories of indexical meanings to the issue of performability, in an attempt to explore the potential synergy between sociolinguistics and translation studies in the study of drama theater translation (see also Nida 1994). Empirically, we have been able to document an under-researched form of theater translation, since little has been written about in-*yer*-face theater in China. Finally, while further research is necessary to translate our findings into a practical guide, we hope our analysis of recontextualized social meanings provides a starting point for navigating the complex field of indexicality and performability for in-*yer*-face theater in China.

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