

AI Empowerment and Paradigm Reconstruction: Development Dilemmas and Innovation Paths of Chinese Musical Theatre in the AIGC Era

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Abstract—Against the backdrop of digitalization and intelligentization, China's musical theatre industry has shown a trend of market expansion and a flourishing fan economy, yet it still confronts structural dilemmas such as weak original creation capacity, insufficient industry chain coordination, and shortages of talent and facilities. Taking China's musical theatre industry in 2025 as the research baseline, this paper combines ticketing platform data from the China Association of Performing Arts with performance data of 29,143 shows from 2023 to 2025 collected by this study, and analyzes the current situation and problems in three dimensions: creation, operation, and community. The study points out that the core tension of the industry lies in the deep insufficiency of “cultural translation” beneath the superficial coexistence of “importation” and “original creation”—the localized aesthetic language and industrial logic have not yet been systematically constructed. Emerging technologies represented by generative artificial intelligence provide possible paths to break through these bottlenecks by assisting content creation, promoting data-intelligent operation, and reconstructing community connections. This paper further explores the innovation paths and potential risks of AIGC empowering the musical theatre industry, with a view to providing forward-looking reflections for the sustainable development of the industry.

Keywords— AIGC; musical theatre; fan communities; digitalization; cultural industry.

I. INTRODUCTION

Musical theatre is a form of drama originating in the West, based on music and expressed through song and dance.^[1] Since its introduction into China in the early 1980s, through several generations of outstanding music creators' exploration, innovation, and breakthroughs, it has been widely developed and well extended.^[2] At present, China's musical theatre market is entering a critical transition period. On the one hand, box office revenue and audience numbers continue to grow. The 2025 Annual Report on China's Musical Theatre Market shows that in 2025, national musical theatre box office revenue reached RMB 1.807 billion, and audience attendance was 8.1859 million. Fan communities centered on young consumer groups have demonstrated astonishing consumption power and cultural creativity, promoting the rise of new consumption phenomena such as “cast-card collecting attendance” and “merchandise socializing”^[3]. On the other hand, deep-rooted contradictions in the industry have become

increasingly prominent, such as weak original creation capacity, insufficient professional talent and venues, and low industry chain integration^[4], constraining its progress toward a high-quality and sustainable stage.

At the same time, emerging technologies represented by generative artificial intelligence (AIGC) are intervening in content creation and cultural production with unprecedented depth and breadth. AIGC can not only generate text, images, music, and video, but also shows great potential in creative stimulation, structural optimization, and user experience reshaping. This provides technological affordances for China's musical theatre industry, which is undergoing transformation, to resolve development dilemmas and explore innovation paths. Meanwhile, technological empowerment also entails risks. The impact of AIGC on the subjectivity of artistic creation, the balance of the industry ecosystem, and cultural values also needs to be examined and evaluated. This paper aims to explore the possibilities of AIGC technology participating in and empowering musical theatre creation, operation, and community management, and to analyze its innovation paths and potential risks, so as to provide theoretical reference and practical guidance for industrial development.

II. “COEXISTENCE AND CULTURAL TRANSLATION”: THE CURRENT DEVELOPMENT OF CHINESE MUSICAL THEATRE

Musical theatre is a modern comprehensive stage art that takes drama as its core, music as its soul, dance as an important means of expression^[2], and integrates elements such as stage design. It originated in light opera and vaudeville in the 19th century and reached its zenith on Broadway in the United States and in London's West End in the 20th century, forming a mature industrialized production and business model^[5]. Its core charm lies in creating strong emotional resonance and immersive experience through highly integrated audiovisual narrative.

According to the 2025 Annual Report on China's Musical Theatre Market and the performance data collected by this study, China's musical theatre market presents the following characteristics:

First, the scale of the musical theatre market is growing steadily. According to ticketing platform data from the China

Association of Performing Arts, in 2025 national musical theatre performances reached 19,700 sessions, with box office revenue of RMB 1.807 billion and audience attendance of 8.1859 million, all showing significant year-on-year growth. The performance data for 2023–2025 manually collected by this study from public information of theatres, ticketing platforms, and social media (mainly covering Chinese-language musicals and resident small theatre productions, excluding some original imported productions) also show that a total of 29,143 performances were staged over the three years, averaging about 9,714 performances per year^[6]. Although the two types of data differ in total volume due to different statistical calibers, they are consistent in growth trends and seasonal distribution (peaks in August and October, trough in February). Monthly box office data show that the May Day holiday, National Day holiday, and summer vacation contributed 15.40% of annual box office revenue, an increase over the previous year; the share of weekend box office rose from 46.6% in 2024 to 50.6% in 2025, indicating that holidays and weekends have become core periods for musical theatre consumption. This growth is not accidental; it marks that musical theatre is gradually shifting from an “imported” or “niche” form of entertainment and becoming embedded in the consumption landscape of domestic cultural entertainment, truly becoming a mass cultural phenomenon. In 2018, Hunan Television's vocal variety show *Super-Vocal* was launched and “created” a group of musical theatre “popular idols” such as Ayanga and Zheng Yunlong^[7]. Since then, the scale of China's musical theatre market has begun to grow exponentially^[8]. After years of market cultivation, Beijing and Shanghai have basically formed a complete ecological chain of musical theatre “from incubation to consumption”, and attendance consumption has become a stable cultural consumption option for specific groups, consolidating the industry's basic foundation.

Second, musical theatre consumption behavior shows a characteristic of “community-based” patterns, and attendance behavior is gradually evolving into a youth cultural practice and identity construction. Statistical information shows that actors such as Shi Bowei (615 performances) and Gu Yi (607 performances) staged astonishing numbers of performances within three years. High-frequency cast rotation provides objective conditions for “cast-card collecting” consumption. In addition, weekend performances (15,684 sessions) are markedly more numerous than weekday performances (13,459 sessions), and evening performances (20,152 sessions) far exceed matinee performances (8,991 sessions), reflecting the characteristic that office workers and student groups concentrate their consumption during leisure periods. Social media platforms and offline interactions such as Stage Door have become important channels for musical theatre to reach young audiences. This trend not only promotes the diversification of musical theatre market content but also spawns a large number of peripheral products and a fan economy. The current musical theatre market presents notable “she-economy” characteristics, with a highly youthful audience structure. “Cast-card collecting” consumption and repeated viewing behavior have become strong drivers of

market growth. As a cultural consumption practice, watching musical theatre is not only entertainment consumption but also an important way for youth groups to construct subcultural identity and achieve stress regulation. The study finds that through ticket purchasing, ticket grabbing, offline gathering, merchandise exchange, and online sharing, young audiences construct a complete set of digital interaction rituals. In this process, young people can temporarily detach from their real social roles and, through emotional catharsis and symbolic interaction within the community (such as supporting specific actors and collecting peripherals), gain emotional compensation, value identification, and social connection, thereby alleviating the pervasive anxiety of modern life^[9]. Therefore, “cast-card collecting” is not merely a consumption behavior of following different actors; it is a key practice through which fans express themselves, accumulate subcultural capital, and establish status within the community. Offline “merchandise exchange” and online peripheral trading networks further materialize such community relationships, forming a stratified order based on shared interests and characterized by both emotional support and commodity circulation^{[10],[11]}.

Third, in terms of the sources of musical theatre productions, “importation” and “original creation” coexist. “Importation” refers to the introduction of international classic productions and their localized adaptation; “original creation” refers to the creation of original productions based on local cultural contexts. Although the number of productions and performances of original imported shows is far lower than that of the Chinese-language musical theatre market, their box office revenue accounts for 51.4% of the total market, demonstrating strong market appeal. Headline classics such as the original English productions *The Phantom of the Opera* and *Les Misérables*, and the French *Le Rouge et le Noir - L'Opéra Rock* have attracted much attention. On the other hand, original Chinese-language musicals have shown vigorous creative energy, with new works emerging continuously, including *Looking for Li Ergou*, *This Life Must Drive*, *She Is Fed Up*, and *Baoyu*, reflecting contemporary characteristics and regional features. “Nationalized style” is not only an artistic exploration path of localization practice but also a representative symbolic marker of national cultural confidence and distinction from the “other” art form^[12]. This is both an active attempt at cultural translation of this foreign form and an organic exploration of establishing a unique aesthetic language and cultural identity for Chinese musical theatre, so as to address the long-standing sense of highbrow aloofness^[13].

While China's musical theatre industry is expanding in scale and thriving in the market, it also faces a deep dilemma of “cultural translation” beneath the surface of “coexistence”. The so-called “coexistence” is reflected not only in the parallel existence of imported and original productions in market share but also in the symbiosis of large theatre resident performances and small theatre environmental productions in form. However, this coexistence currently remains mostly at the level of quantitative and typological superposition, and has not yet achieved organic integration in cultural logic and

aesthetic systems. Although imported productions contribute more than half of box office revenue, their influence mainly relies on the existing halo of classic IPs and mature overseas production systems, with limited feedback to local creative capacity. Although original Chinese-language productions are considerable in number and diverse in subject matter, a considerable portion of works are still in the stage of imitating Broadway or Korean musical theatre models^[14], lacking conscious localized cultural translation in narrative structure, musical language, and stage aesthetics. The tension between this “formal coexistence” and “substantive insufficiency of cultural translation” constitutes the structural contradiction of China's musical theatre industry at present.

The difficulty of “cultural translation” stems from the fact that, as a foreign art form, musical theatre's cultural background and linguistic signs^[15], as well as its industrialized creation processes, entertainment-oriented value logic, and business model highly dependent on long-term resident performances and segmented markets, are systematically incompatible with China's local theatrical traditions, aesthetic habits, and cultural policy environment. Specifically, this is manifested at three levels: at the creation end, dependence on imitation of foreign works leads to weak original creation capacity and a lack of local aesthetics; at the production and operation end, insufficient professional system support results in a loose industry chain, high costs, and extensive operation^[4]; at the audience level, the downstream audience's receptive capacity does not match creative capacity^[16], and cognitive barriers caused by artistic labeling confine the market to fan circles for a long time, making it difficult to effectively break the circle and achieve popular dissemination^[8].

Although the industry has entered a critical stage of transformation from “traffic-driven” to “quality-driven” development, if “cultural translation” remains only at localized adaptation at the production level without completing deeper transformation at the levels of creative concepts, industrial logic, and cultural value, then “coexistence” will hardly move from short-term market prosperity to long-term ecological health. The core proposition for the future development of Chinese musical theatre lies in how to move from “cultural importation” to “cultural translation”—that is, on the premise of respecting the basic laws of musical theatre as an international art form, finding points of convergence with local cultural experience and social emotional structures, so that the imported form can carry the local soul and truly grow a musical theatre language and narrative mode belonging to China.

III. THE EMPOWERMENT AND RESHAPING OF THE ENTIRE MUSICAL THEATRE INDUSTRY CHAIN BY AIGC TECHNOLOGY

AIGC refers to artificial intelligence technologies that can automatically generate multimodal content such as text, images, audio, video, and code based on instructions. Technologies represented by large-scale language models and multimodal models (such as ChatGPT, Sora, and Suno) are developing vigorously. They have not only significantly improved the quality and efficiency of content generation but

also achieved important breakthroughs in logical reasoning, semantic understanding, and complex task planning. The continuous acceleration of technological iteration marks the initial emergence of an “intelligent society”, and this technological wave is reshaping the content industry with unprecedented depth and breadth. Under the sweep of this technology, China's musical theatre industry, which is in a critical transformation period, can also rely on this technology system to achieve ecological innovation from the bottom layer of creation to the top layer of experience.

The entire production process of musical theatre can be systematically divided into three core ecological links: creation ecology, operation ecology, and community ecology.

In creation ecology, AIGC facilitates human-machine collaboration and the intelligent reconstruction of the creation process. In the scriptwriting stage, based on semantic understanding and natural language processing technologies, AI can generate diversified story outlines, scene drafts, and dialogue options according to set themes, characters, and plots, thereby accelerating musical theatre creation. At the music creation level, AI can learn the combination rules of melody, harmony, and orchestration from various music databases, thereby generating music that conforms to specific dramatic situations and character emotions. In dance and stage visual design, combined with motion capture and computer graphics, AI can generate choreography suggestions that match musical rhythm and narrative emotion^[17], and use intelligent lighting technology in coordination with multimedia scenes to create a more immersive stage experience.

In the operation ecology dimension, the application of AIGC and related technologies is promoting the transformation of musical theatre operation from experience-dependent to data-intelligence-driven. Dynamic pricing models based on machine learning algorithms and large language models can integrate historical data, real-time demand, user profiling, and other multidimensional information to dynamically adjust prices with the goal of optimizing box office revenue. AIGC can also be used to generate personalized promotional materials in batches, improving the viewing experience of musical theatre fans.

In community ecology maintenance, AIGC technology injects new momentum into the operation and evolution of musical theatre fan communities, promoting their transformation from one-way information reception and emotional consumption to a two-way value co-creation ecology. Original musical theatre should not be a one-off cultural consumer product; its vitality needs to match the dramatic core of the work itself, and it should gradually settle, polish, and accumulate reputation through resident performances, tours, and multiple revivals, so as to form lasting expectations and resonance in the hearts of audiences^[18]. At the interaction level, based on user data analysis, AI can generate personalized digital content (such as customized souvenirs) and realize sustainable simulated interaction through actors' “digital avatars”, thereby extending and deepening emotional connections. In community management, AI can conduct real-time sentiment analysis and

topic mining on social media and community discussions, accurately identify public opinion trends and core user needs, and assist operators in effective intervention. In addition, AIGC greatly lowers the difficulty of using creation tools, thereby greatly stimulating fans' enthusiasm for secondary creation, and further constructs a virtuous cycle of "creation—sharing—feedback—re-creation", enhancing fans' sense of participation, belonging, and community stickiness.

IV. INNOVATION PATHS FOR MUSICAL THEATRE COMMUNICATION AND INDUSTRY DRIVEN BY AIGC

The deep empowerment of musical theatre creation, operation, and community ecology by AIGC technology marks that China's musical theatre industry is undergoing a systematic transformation from production-oriented to consumption-oriented. This transformation not only provides technological solutions to structural problems such as weak original creation capacity, extensive operation, and limited communication, but also fundamentally expands the possible boundaries of musical theatre as a comprehensive art form, opening innovation paths for building a vibrant local musical theatre ecology. It should be noted that technology can only assist artistic creation, but cannot replace it. The premise of technology empowering artistic creation is to adhere to the quality and humanistic core of artistic creation itself. On this basis, the innovation paths of musical theatre communication and industry driven by AIGC can be discussed.

First, deepen the application of new media technologies and reconstruct the content production and communication logic of musical theatre. The integration of AIGC and traditional new media technologies provides new infrastructure for the content creation and communication of musical theatre. At the creation end, natural language processing and generative models can be used for rapid prototype development and multi-version comparison of scripts, shortening the creation cycle. At the communication end, AI-driven data analysis can accurately identify content preferences of users on different platforms and guide differentiated customization and precise distribution of promotional materials. At the same time, AIGC reduces the production costs of derivative content such as short videos, audio, and graphic texts, enabling musical theatre IPs to penetrate social media, video platforms, and audio platforms in richer forms, thereby realizing a communication pattern of "one-time creation, diversified expression, and full-domain reach". On this basis, a data closed loop of "creation—communication—feedback—optimization" can be explored, incorporating audience feedback data (such as social media discussion heat, sentiment tendencies of comments, and video completion rates) into subsequent creation and operation decisions, so that musical theatre production and communication truly form an organic whole linked by data.

Second, promote the "xiqu translation" of local musical theatre creation and construct a unique auditory and cultural identity for Chinese musical theatre. Chinese musical theatre has long wavered between Broadway-style grand orchestration and pop-rock paradigms, and has failed to construct a unique auditory identity from China's rich musical traditions,

resulting in a lack of cultural recognizability in the musical language of many original works^[19]. AIGC technology provides a bridge for this translation: through deep learning of a large amount of audio data from traditional xiqu, folk songs, and quyi, a localized digital aesthetic system can be constructed, and multimodal training datasets covering xiqu conventions and ethnic instrumental music can be established^[20], assisting creators in organically integrating these traditional musical elements into the scoring system of musical theatre. Specifically, based on the analysis of characteristics such as pitch contours, ornamentation, and metrical structures of representative xiqu genres including Peking opera, Kunqu opera, and Yue opera, AIGC can generate musical motifs and orchestration schemes that possess both traditional charm and modern listening habits, enabling the musical language of musical theatre to preserve the vocal aesthetic of xiqu while conforming to the aesthetic expectations of contemporary audiences. Meanwhile, AIGC can also assist in the fusion and transformation of classical Chinese and modern Chinese in lyric writing, enhancing literary quality and singability. In addition, cross-disciplinary participation of xiqu performance talent should be actively introduced, and the stylized body movements, vocal techniques, and stage scheduling experience of xiqu should undergo modernized cultural translation through "human-machine collaboration", so that Chinese musical theatre can establish a unique aesthetic system at the level of performance vocabulary distinct from Western musical theatre—moving from "formal resemblance" to "spiritual resemblance", and from "imitation" to "creation", gradually establishing the cultural subjectivity of Chinese musical theatre.

Third, expand new performance spaces and strengthen the cultural identity construction of musical theatre with urban culture as the underlying foundation. Musical theatre programs are by no means limited to exposure; their deeper value lies in the transformation from "traffic" to "retention", and industrial linkage will more closely connect variety shows, theatres, and cities^[21]. The efficient multimodal generation capability of AIGC enables it to serve as a core engine driving the derivative development of IPs into diverse forms such as immersive performances, themed experiential exhibitions, and virtual performances. This also provides an opportunity for the integration of musical theatre and the cultural tourism industry. Relying on their dramatic scenes and emotional connections, musical theatre IPs can be combined with specific historical and cultural districts, tourist attractions, or urban public spaces to develop immersive cultural tourism performances, environmental resident performance projects, or themed interactive experiences. For example, historical-themed musical theatre can be deeply linked with related heritage scenic areas, and Chinese-style musical theatre can be situated in traditional cultural districts, endowing musical theatre productions with localized cultural identity based on urban culture. Through "using diverse urban spaces for performance activities^[22]", not only can the spatial limitations of traditional theatres be broken, but the urban cultural fabric can also serve as a stage, enabling the narrative of musical theatre to resonate with regional historical memory

and collective emotion, thereby realizing mutual empowerment of the production and the city brand. In this process, AIGC can assist in immersive soundscape design, interactive plot generation, and multisensory content creation, greatly reducing the content production cost and iteration cycle of spatial performance, and enabling the “small circle” of musical theatre to broaden into a wider “big world” through the integration of digital media and urban space^[23].

Fourth, establish a fan co-creation and circle-breaking mechanism, and drive content iteration with community creation feedback. Real-time monitoring and capture of social media comments and film review website feedback should be conducted to analyze audience evaluations of musical theatre plots, songs, and other aspects. Based on the feedback information, scripts, lines, or track sequences can be adjusted, and content can even be finely tuned in response to cultural preferences in different regions^[24].

V. CONCLUSION

This paper originates from an examination of the current situation of China's musical theatre industry. On the one hand, the market shows a growth trend in box office and community activity, forming a unique fan culture and consumption rituals, and the basic foundation of the industry has been consolidated. On the other hand, structural dilemmas such as weak original creation capacity, low industry chain coordination efficiency, and rigid communication models constrain the industry's leap to a high-quality stage. This contradiction of “coexistence and cultural translation”—the parallel existence of importation and original creation, and the coexistence of prosperity and weakness—constitutes the core tension in the current development of Chinese musical theatre. The rapid development of generative artificial intelligence technology provides new technological paths for breaking through the above dilemmas. Through human-machine collaboration, AIGC can systematically empower the three core ecologies of the musical theatre industry: in creation ecology, it enhances the efficiency of creative incubation and cross-modal visualization; in operation ecology, it promotes data-intelligence-driven dynamic pricing, precision marketing, and personalized services; in community ecology, it promotes the transformation from one-way consumption to two-way value co-creation. At the level of innovation paths, AIGC can help construct four major practical directions: integrating new media technologies to reconstruct content production and communication logic and establish a data closed loop; promoting “xiqu translation” by using AI's deep learning of traditional music and performance conventions to construct a unique auditory and cultural identity for Chinese musical theatre and break away from path dependence on the Broadway paradigm; expanding new performance spaces and strengthening the cultural identity construction of musical theatre with urban culture as the underlying foundation to realize mutual empowerment of productions and local culture; and establishing a fan co-creation and circle-breaking mechanism to drive content iteration with community creation feedback, transforming fans from consumers into co-builders of the content ecology. However, the process of AIGC

technology empowering musical theatre artistic creation is also accompanied by multiple risks that require careful attention: at the level of artistic creation, it is necessary to guard against the excessive reliance on data and algorithms that may lead to creative homogenization and the dissolution of artistic emotional depth; at the level of industrial development, technological thresholds may exacerbate unequal resource distribution, impact traditional employment structures, and give rise to new governance issues such as copyright attribution, data ethics, and algorithmic transparency; at the level of cultural value, there is a risk that local aesthetic characteristics may be weakened in global models and that artistic value may be reduced to quantitative indicators.

Therefore, the future of Chinese musical theatre should rely on artificial intelligence and other technologies to deeply explore content, and explore a balanced development path of “technological empowerment, humanistic guidance, and industrial synergy.” The industry needs to establish reasonable boundaries for human-machine collaboration in practice, let technology serve artistic expression and humanistic care, and actively construct relevant ethical norms and talent training systems. While actively embracing change, it should adhere to the artistic essence and cultural roots, and construct a creation ecology with artistic height, industrial efficiency, and cultural depth, so that Chinese musical theatre can truly radiate unique vitality in the intelligent era.

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