

Translation as growth: Xiangsheng's growing trajectory in China and abroad

Ye Tian*, Durham University

Guanpeng Wang**, Cape Breton University

ABSTRACT

To survive in different environments, performances adapt and grow to the measure of the different conditions of reception offered by these contexts. This article reviews the development in China and abroad of *xiangsheng*, or 'crosstalk', a Chinese comic double-act that relies on quickfire exchanges and narrative skills on stage. It brings together a blend of scripted material and improvisation whose address to the audience is immediate. Through the ecological metaphors of growth and using the lens of semiotic translation, we characterise translation as growth and explore the complexities in *xiangsheng*'s developing trajectories over time. We review *xiangsheng*'s development in China by examining current archives and research and examine its growth in diasporic performers by combining interviews with semiotic and textual analysis. Our exploration reveals that translation enables the intermingling of political tension, performers' self-awareness, audiences' social and cultural background, and the broader historical background of the form itself as it grows and evolves in different times and locations.

KEYWORDS

Diaspora, growth, translation, trajectory, *xiangsheng*.

1. Introduction

The aim of this article is to explore how semiotic translation facilitates the growth of diasporic 相声 (*xiangsheng*), 'Chinese crosstalk', by focusing on North American diasporic performers. As suggested by its English translation, *xiangsheng* usually features as a grassroots performance with two actors entertaining the audience with a comic sketch by directly 'talking' to the audience from the stage, a rupturing of the so-called 'fourth wall' that is a characteristic across many different popular performance cultures, for example, a key marker of the ways in which classical Chinese opera so vividly engages its audiences.

The grassroots origin of *xiangsheng* is still evident in its place within popular culture in China today, so that it is acclaimed as the style of stage performance "most deeply soaked in the daily life of ordinary people" (Link, 2016, p. 218). Such a close link with everyday life makes it a target of manipulation for political purposes — so that it falls victim to the insidious creep of 'political correctness' in the broad sense of professed adherence to the social and cultural status quo. As a grassroots form, *xiangsheng* reflects how the top-down political environment of China influences people's lives, but it also shows how people resist ideological control. Either constrained by top-down regulations or inspired by bottom-up resistance, an analysis of *xiangsheng* offers an opportunity to observe and critically reflect on how performances are translated in different environments shaped by various forces that coalesce under the umbrella term of political correctness that can be broadly defined as being seen to do what is commonly accepted as the right thing.

The comic nature of *xiangsheng* makes it sensitive to the changes in political-cultural

* ORCID 0000-0002-4591-272X, e-mail: y.tian@translation.ac.nz

** ORCID 0009-0001-2623-8549, e-mail: CBU22BQBD@cbu.ca



landscapes; the relationship between laughter and dissidence is deeply felt in China, where it is seen as key tool either reinforcing or challenging the rigid contours of social order. Ping Zhu (2019, p. 4) argues, for example, that Chinese theatre in Mao Zedong's era, "laughter was [...] predominantly, in Mao Zedong's famous words, a weapon to 'unite and educate people, attack and annihilate enemies.'" The political significance attributed to laughter and the suspicion arising from the sense that laughter, with its roots in the absurd, may well be a powerful tool of deconstruction, have survived after Mao's era. In the main, *xiangsheng* relies on the potentially powerful weapons of ridicule and sarcasm, both of which reverberate loudly within the tightly controlled performance spaces of contemporary China. Ridicule, at times, is problematic because many *xiangsheng* pieces make the audience laugh through punching down at the vulnerable or the displaced, reinforcing in this way a consolidated sense of belonging, officially sanctioned Chinese identity. Sarcasm is more interesting in *xiangsheng* performance because, especially after the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) by the Communist Party of China (CPC) in 1949, it often treads a fine line between pandering to the politically correct (Cai & Dunn, 2020, p. 19) and exploring the farther extremes of sarcasm as contempt. In broad terms, the perception of laughter as embodying and stimulating a political response means that our analysis of translating humour necessarily goes beyond the textual analysis translation studies typically focus on; as an example, Marinetti's (2005) analysis of translating humoristic language draws attention to textual operations but fails to see humour and laughter themselves as a result of semiotic translation.

In other words, *xiangsheng* and the laughter it incites are vulnerable to social and political manipulation. To develop within modern China, *xiangsheng* has necessarily had to grow *into* and *with* the changing landscapes of political power, and the new variants of the form outside China have responded to the new opportunities for audience engagement offered by an environment in which the politically correct is controlled and sanctioned in radically different ways. It is in this double sense that we propose to highlight the role of translation in analysing how *xiangsheng* grows both within China and in the United States, so that 'translation' used in this article refers to a process of semiosis where meaning emerges (see Marais, 2018), where the practitioners' semiotic reading of the context of performance impacts not only on the tone of the scripted elements, but also on the space for improvisation offered by the form. Every stage performance translates into a variant performance text, in the sense that Rozik (1993, pp. 117–118) defines this as a "definite set of organised signs, verbal or otherwise, that the reader/spectator is confronted with and expected to decode"; and every text is a translation in the sense that Paz (cited in Bassnett-McGuire, 1980, p. 38) argues: "Every text is unique and, at the same time, it is the translation of another text". In other words, every effort to generate a new text relies on a translational re-reading of signs. Within this article, the reader will find a variety of signs that are discussed under different temporal, spatial, and political environments.

Conventionally, Translation Studies works on performance translation focus on how translators translate towards a particular cultural context. Instead, we see the translations of *xiangsheng* as continuous growing trajectories — albeit non-linear ones. Such trajectories, as framed by Marais (2024, pp. 7–8), are "tendencies of thermodynamic systems to emerge over time, with particular tendencies rather than others." This is important because such systems point to the rule of the so-called 'arrow of time', (Marais, 2024, p. 153) which resonates within our analysis in its

reminder, that growth is a continuous trajectory, that cultural forms are cumulative. Marais's development of translation trajectories pivots around his emphasis on biosemiotics. Following his focus on biology but taking a step back, we purposely use 'growth' as an ecological metaphor, where the development of this stage artform is situated in the changing social-political structure. Johnston and Xu (2021), for example, compare the common features of performances as their DNA and apply the term 'affordance', originally an evolutionary biological concept, whose verb, 'to afford', "refers to the effects of the features through which a given environment sustains — or renders extinct — a particular life form" (Johnston and Xu, 2021, p. 199). To survive, an organism necessarily needs to grow. Therefore, our approach focuses on the growing tendency of organisms, that is, the growth of the text of the performance. Kuberski's (1992, p. 2) argument that "the organism is an evolutionary outgrowth of the past" echoes what Frow (1990) calls the historical structure of the text, which defines text to be "only ever available to knowledge within and by means of a system of representations, it has the form not of a final referent but of a link in an endless chain of semiosis" (Frow, 1990, p. 47). In a broader sense, this metaphor of growth refers not only to an increase in quantity but also quality, addressing how *xiangsheng* translates itself to survive and evolve in such difficult cultural and political sensitivities. In short, the metaphor of growth illustrates how *xiangsheng* text, akin to a living organism within an ecosystem, adapts and evolves in response to the environment and, by doing so, keeps itself alive and leaves a growing trajectory — the "t-effect" of translation that "extend it, enrich it, enlarge upon it" (Johnston 2012, p. 51). Our discussion of growth, in this regard, extending Johnston's focus on the materialities of time and space, moves on to examine how the trajectories of the text inevitably shape the shape of the performance in which it is encased. Discussion of the case of how it grows outside China and the specific difficulties *xiangsheng* is encountering as it survives in foreign soil, such as North America, with its stark contrast in terms of affordances, culturally and politically, to its native environment, helps us to understand the contribution of theatre translation to the growth of an art form beyond the constraints of political correctness.

2. The ecology of *Xiangsheng's* growth in China

In other words, *xiangsheng* is translated to evolving cultural-political landscapes. While there are already works reviewing *xiangsheng's* history in English (Cai & Dunn, 2020), our focus here is to highlight the key developments that showcase *xiangsheng's* evolution.

In its early days, *xiangsheng* performers tended to play solely for laughs, as they "had to compete for audiences alongside a ragtag group of acrobats, magicians, and storytellers who performed in Beijing's Tianqiao District, and these lowly beginnings as a form of street performance, as well as the challenge of attracting the attention of distracted pedestrians, would later have an indelible effect on the form and content of the art" (Moser, 2018, p. 78). The performing environment at that time was a competitive one: The stages in Tianqiao District were not solely assigned to *xiangsheng* but a range of competing performances. To earn a living, *xiangsheng* performers had to attract audiences, the majority of whom were ordinary people, of limited education. To attract such audiences, many of the *xiangsheng* performances focused solely on ridiculing easy targets and the peddling of a ribald form sexual humour, known as 臭活 (*chou* ['stink'] *huo* ['performing skills']), in many ways

reminiscent of the set pieces of Aristophanes and Plautus. This necessarily brief account of the origins of the form not only demonstrate that, from early on, *xiangsheng* was flexible enough to adapt to its performing environment, but it also confirms the initiation of a trajectory that was to influence the shape and style of later *xiangsheng* performances.

Xiangsheng performance today still centres round a tension between 高雅 [‘elegance’], as a key principle of Chinese aesthetics, and 低俗 [‘crowd-pleasing vulgarity’]. For example, Cai and Dunn (2020) discuss how Guo Degang, a “grassroots culture hero” (p. 109) of *xiangsheng*, using the vulgar nature of *xiangsheng* as a means to resist a growing mainstream call for *xiangsheng* to offer educational benefits (p. 63), doing so by turning laughter from vulgar jokes into a form of resistance against worthy mainstream political opinion. This is laughter as the puncturing of good intentions, the unleashing of a Rabelaisian energy against deadpan worthiness. But, as we will see later, when these sexual jokes are translated to the North American context, they are challenged by the political correctness of vulnerable communities — so the performers found most of these sexual jokes insulting to women so that they self-censored them so as not to offend the radically different sensitivities of North America. In China, however, as *xiangsheng* started to gain a certain volume of audience, it gradually expanded its commitment to laughter as a corrective tool, as a sharply invective reflection on wider social issues. This tendency sees *xiangsheng* performers mainly using sarcasm as their weapon to, on the one hand, provoke laughter, and on the other, to address critical issues in a way that punctures top-down enforced regulations. One of the earliest sketches involving sarcasm was featured in 八大改行 [‘The eight career-changes’] created in the late Qing period (see Xue et al., 2012, p. 148). It tells a story set during the hundred-day mourning for the death of Emperor Xianfeng in 1861, when the performance of *quyi* [‘oral performing arts’] was forbidden, along with other rules like no red to be worn on the streets. To make a living, performers were forced to run other small businesses, and the sketch provokes laughter by pushing social and political restrictions into the realm of the absurd, serving as a subtle form of resistance to the perceived pomposity of the ceremonial mourning. This example of transgressive mirroring demonstrates how *xiangsheng* has historically employed humour to comment on and critique the socio-political realities of its moment, so that Chinese theorists like Ni (2013, p. 6) argue that *xiangsheng*’s most far-reaching performance tradition is to be found in 战斗性 [‘combativeness’] and political sarcasm. *Xiqu* theorist Zhaonian Zhu (1998), accordingly, argues that *xiangsheng* is the natural inheritor of “the combative tradition of sarcasm art”. However, when the government began to regulate performance generally, *xiangsheng*’s functionality became more politically oriented. Accordingly, we will focus mainly on some of the significant changes that came about after 1949, with the establishment of the PRC.

Immediately after the establishment of the PRC in October 1949, on 19 January 1950 the *Xiangsheng* Improvement Group [相声改进小组] was created to foster *xiangsheng* performance, to professionalise it in every sense. From March 1950 onwards, members studied every morning for one hour, including politics, literacy, terminology, current affairs, and *xiangsheng* history and revision of old pieces to establish contemporary standards of performance, aiming to serve the people [服务人民] better through art. This approach marked the era when *xiangsheng* started to be managed in a top-down approach, becoming effectively a political propaganda tool. Against such

a backdrop, since the early 1950s, *xiangsheng*'s growth became almost entirely a government-determined issue (see Anonymous, 2021). Within this political manipulation, *xiangsheng*'s satirical function became an ideological battleground as the State moved to commodify the form and remove the sting from its sketches. The satirical impulse of *xiangsheng* was crushed when a piece 买猴儿 ['Buying monkeys'], written by He Chi, drew huge official criticism. At that point, 'Buying Monkeys' was broadcasted on television and even performed to CPC leaders, but the performance, depicting wealthy political cadres running amok in a department store, was quickly seen as a denunciation of insouciant political elites. The laughter of the ordinary people in the audience aroused suspicion amongst the viewing elites, and the play was immediately criticised for its lack of positive characters and forces, its portrayal of internal issues as enemies, and its exaggeration as derogatory to the image of socialist seriousness (Tian, 2020). Even though the writer of the play, He Chi, was not formally pardoned until 1978, the satirical function of *xiangsheng* remained tarnished in the eyes of officialdom. Yang Zhou (1958, p. 8), then Deputy Minister of the Propaganda Department of the Central Committee and the Deputy Minister of the Ministry of Culture, pointed out at the National *Quyí* Work Conference that *xiangsheng* should play its role in satire, but that this satirical function should only point to "individualism, the remnants of private ownership, and the wrong attitude towards labour". Under this guidance, propagandist *xiangsheng* satire pieces were created. For example, 还乡记 ['Going back home'] by Chang Baoting calls people who do not want to leave the cities as "having problems with [their] thinking [思想有问题]". At the time, the Chinese government were encouraging urban intellectuals and youths to move to rural areas. Chang's *xiangsheng* targets those reluctant to embrace this movement, framing their hesitation as a moral failing.

Sarcasm gives way to praise, so that whatever bite is left in the form is directed at those who choose to stand outside or against the official version of things. One of the most representative of its laudatory pieces is 社会主义好 ['Socialism is good'], the title itself revealing its propagandist function. It is certainly worth noting here that in spite of government pressure for the form to shore up the culture of officialdom, the satirical edge of *xiangsheng* continued to produce biting satirical sketches. Be that as it may, what matters at this point of our discussion is to highlight *xiangsheng* as a terrain where radically different concepts of artistic purpose compete. Either sarcasm or praise, it is obvious how the translation of *xiangsheng* is subject to the manipulation of political correctness as perceived by the government — in this case, the *Xiangsheng* Improvement Group. The social-political environment is indeed suffocating — in terms of affordance, it threatens to "render extinct" (Johnston and Xu, 2021, p. 199) the grassroots art of *xiangsheng* — not only because of governmental control but also because of how such control is volatile, as in the case of 'Buying monkeys'.

However, *xiangsheng* survives. Under top-down pressure, performers translate *xiangsheng* from one semiotic construct to another, fostering the performance's spurts of growth, all of which leave their trajectories in today's performance styles. After the reform and opening-up of China, *xiangsheng* experienced more freedom with less surveillant pressure from the government. In 1980, Dun Tao pointed out that *xiangsheng* performers "should pick up our pens and speak out freely" (Tao, 1985, pp. 150–151). However, the call for freedom has still been restricted by governmental policy. More than 40 years have passed since Tao's call for the freedom to be sarcastic, yet the close censorship of *xiangsheng* still plays a significant role in shaping the

performance. Very recently, the Ministry of Culture and Tourism (2019) issued a “Notice on Further Strengthening the Management of the Performance Market”, specifying the need to “focus on strengthening the content review and on-site supervision of language-based programs such as [...] *xiangsheng*”. *Xiangsheng* performers, therefore, continuously translate their performance into and through the limited freedom they have to tell stories of ordinary people while carefully picking their way out through governmental review and supervision.

To review what we see in the development of *xiangsheng* in China, we can easily see how it has experienced a growth trajectory from grassroots performance to coping within the strictures of top-down regulation. At different political moments, *xiangsheng* has grown from vulgar jokes to satirising the government and then to becoming one of the political propaganda tools subject to constant regulation from the government. If the early growth of *xiangsheng* shows how the performance is translated to cultural content, the later involvement of political engagement, including censorship and propaganda, demonstrates how a performance grows within certain political constraints. What becomes clear, however, is that no matter how various socio-political realities articulate themselves, *xiangsheng* adapts and grows — it constantly translates itself in and through the contexts in which it has found itself.

3. Diasporic *xiangsheng*

From the material conditions of time to those of place, we now turn our focus to the growth of *xiangsheng* outside China, where it develops in line with the history of migration and the migrancy policies of destination countries. For example, Ni (2013) dedicates over twenty pages to recording diasporic *xiangsheng* development in Southeast Asia, because in “many countries in Southeast Asia are the family of Chinese migrants” (Ni, 2013, p. 500). North America, of course, has long been an attractive destination for Chinese diaspora, and it is to there we will turn our focus.

Aside from Ni’s work, diasporic *xiangsheng* performances and performers is a topic largely ignored by scholarship. In countries like Canada and the US, even less has been recorded about *xiangsheng* performances and performers. Before our analysis, there is a distinction that we want to highlight regarding the difference between the diasporic translation of *Xiangsheng* and other theatre translations. Most theatre translation is mostly a cooperative process. A successful translation that ensures performance needs not only textual rendition but also collaboration between translators, performers, directors, etc. In Johnston’s (2004, p. 27) words, the theatre translator is “an interface between source text and the collaborative team”. The translation of *xiangsheng* by diasporic performers, however, presents a very different reality. As the discussion will show, diasporic *xiangsheng* groups are small in scale. Performers are usually simultaneously the creators. As such, when they translate the performance from a Chinese political environment to a North American one, they are, at the same time, a translator, a creator, and a performer — a performer-translator. The collaborative effort, in this regard, becomes largely a self-translation process. In that regard, the complexity shifts, however, rather than being eliminated. As there is no teamwork, there is less gatekeeping before the translation meets the audience, and the ideological influence from the performer-translator, albeit greatly influenced by new conceptions of political correctness, often becomes the deciding factor for the final performance. By interviewing such performer-translators, we will look more closely at

how the political environment influences these diasporic performers' decision-making. That said, to understand the growth of diasporic *xiangsheng* and its status in its new environment, we contacted some of the performers to firstly invite them for an interview and secondly to ask for some first-hand materials to analyse. Interview is the main method we use in understanding diasporic *xiangsheng* performances and performers. Three performers eventually accepted our interview invitation, nicknamed Alex, Ben, and Chris, respectively in later analysis. In addition to interviews, we obtained video recordings and photographs of the *xiangsheng* sketches performed by diasporic performers on various occasions, allowing us to understand how place is addressed and translated by the conditions of reception operative in the theatrical space itself. The semiotics of the stage reveal the growing trajectory of performance text in the theatre on a performance-to-performance basis. By comparing the semiotic resources diasporic *xiangsheng* performance employs and those used by domestic *xiangsheng* performers, we wish to highlight how diasporic *xiangsheng* is growing at a different pace and in a different style to the Chinese original. Finally, we analyse a number of key texts that are performed. These texts leave traces for us to track the process of translation in their growth, especially when some of the traditional scripts are re-created and adapted for the new time and space. In the following section, we will see how *xiangsheng* traditions, the venues, the audience, and the performers' personal values lead to unique diasporic *xiangsheng* translation trajectories.

3. 1 Tradition as source text

Xiangsheng performers, both in China and abroad, respect the tradition. For performers, the traditions of *xiangsheng* still nourish its development. The trope of nutrition here bears a double meaning: first, it sets rules that best help *xiangsheng* to flourish, even in a foreign land, and second, it serves as a source of inspiration. Admittedly, most, if not all, of the theatre performances rely on developing their own traditions. De Toro (1995, p. 54) calls such traditions “theatre conventions”, which interact with the metaphorical space accorded to performance by society, and performance codes that eventually influence performance text (de Toro, 1995, p. 57). However, in addition to de Toro's statement of interrelatedness between performance system and performance style, or codes, in Chinese theatre, traditions are not only a semiotic tool that constructs the performance text but also serve as a key value judgment. Put simply, it is because tradition is identified as heritage, passed on from revered older generations. Heritage, or more precisely ‘heritaging’ as an act, entails an imaginary connection with certain good qualities in time, space, and among people — in short, a translational act (Tian and Bhatt, forthcoming). Tradition, therefore, can be conceptualised as the source text; it not only forges how people understand *xiangsheng* but, more importantly, it allows performers to create and exploit connections with an imaginary origin. This value-bearing role of tradition is explicit in how performers perceive and use it to embody and extend their current role.

For some performers, tradition is precisely the reason that *xiangsheng* survives. Alex (personal communication, 13 December 2023) also chose to use an ecological metaphor to compare *xiangsheng* with Talk Show, another language-reliant form of performance, “Talk Show is growing wildly. For example, a Talk Show performer may have multiple shows per day. This is unimaginable for *xiangsheng* performers” (Alex, personal communication, 13 December 2023). In other words, the rule-observant function of the *xiangsheng* tradition is essential in maintaining and protecting the

professionalism of *xiangsheng*. This seems to suggest that tradition works as a protectionist mechanism, especially when *xiangsheng* is challenged by other forms of performance. Indeed, it is still often observed that professional bodies “tend to self-organisation”, that is, “stand together for the assertion of the rights or the protection of interests and principles” (Flexner, 1915/2001, p. 156). It is not our wish to discuss whether *xiangsheng* is a professional form or not, but the ‘rules’ set up by the tradition, as alluded to by Alex, indeed allow *xiangsheng* to stand out among other performances. Confidently, Alex believes that, because of the tradition, “performances relying on language alone, at least Chinese language, are all less successful than *xiangsheng*” (Alex, personal communication, 13 December 2023).

Such confidence arises not only from the sense of protectionism that tradition brings to bear. Another, arguably more important function of tradition is that *xiangsheng* tradition “includes *all* the skills that Chinese can make people laugh” (Ben, personal communication, 15 December 2023). If what Ben says is true, we can see the *xiangsheng* tradition as the source text is eventually completed by its various translations before, as with all translations, being subject to newer acts of completion. But before it is completed, as a source text, the tradition has things to offer to the translator-performers. As Alex puts it, “Contemporary *xiangsheng* is sucking the blood out of the tradition” (Alex, personal communication, 13 December 2023). This belief in the generative capacity of *xiangsheng* tradition creates what Barthes (1977, p. 148) referred to as the “Author-God” conception of tradition as source text. Indeed, this concept of tradition lies at the core of many theatre analyses, so that for example Ketterer (2010, p. 86), reviewing four different studies on European opera, concludes that “[t]he final product need not look much like its Greek original, but that does not necessarily invalidate the effort or betray its original spirit”. The fear of betraying the original, much like the answers of our interviewees, re-imagines the Greek original as the Author-God, whose ‘DNA’ serves as an everlasting heritage from which European operas draw their inspirations.

However, this reverence for tradition, as exemplified by Alex’s and Ben’s perspectives, invites a critical examination of how it functions within the evolving landscape of diasporic *xiangsheng*. While tradition establishes and protects the art form in a rich historical context, providing a sense of authenticity and a reservoir of skills, it also raises questions about how and to what extent diasporic performers can mediate the tradition and the environment. This suggests a re-evaluation of tradition’s role, in the sense that tradition is ever moving; accordingly, performers are beginning to reinterpret the tradition to suit its new environment of performance, and through it to facilitate its growth.

3.2 Translating the stage

On a micro-level, the material conditions of the stage cast the most direct influence on any performance. Diasporic *xiangsheng* performers find themselves situated in a different theatrical environment compared with their peers in China. The different stages require performers to rethink their relationship with their source text — the *xiangsheng* tradition, in the same way as biological conditions condition the chances of survival of a newly arrived organism. Firstly, finding a venue to perform in already poses challenges to diasporic performers; this becomes the most basic impetus to adapt. As recalled by Alex, the very first obstacle they found in shaping their

performance was to find a theatre:

We could not afford the rent (of a venue that hosts a 50-ish audience) [...] One of our friends found us one. We really appreciated the effort, but, to be fair, it is still not ideal. So, for the venue of diasporic *xiangsheng* performances, performers do not have their own choices (Alex, personal communication, 13 December 2023).

Other *xiangsheng* performers are lucky enough to be able to make use of the local university campus. Chris, a member of a university-based *xiangsheng* performance organisation, has less difficulty in finding a venue, compared with Alex: “[The university I graduated from is] friendly to student-led activities. We can borrow classrooms for rehearsal and their theatre on campus for our shows for free” (Chris, personal communication, 19 December 2023).

Diasporic *xiangsheng* is decisively influenced by such material constraints. Whereas traditional *xiangsheng* groups in China enjoy long-term rentals, where they can dress the theatre to align with their conception of best performance, diasporic performers tell us that the difficulty of renting venues can be mitigated by *xiangsheng*’s minimal requirements for stage settings. Ben (personal communication, 15 December 2023) believes that “[a]mong all the *quyi*, *xiangsheng* has minimum requirements in terms of the venue. As long as the audience can see and hear us, we can perform”. As a result, many diasporic *xiangsheng* performers see Chinese restaurants as viable venues, especially during traditional celebrations, such as the Spring Festival. In other words, the very flexibility of *xiangsheng* becomes one of the basic conditions that allows *xiangsheng* to thrive in the new environment.

To grow in a new environment means to adapt. As the performers translate their performances to changing venues, *xiangsheng* adapts its growth to the new material environment. Some of our interviewees reflect on how the environment regulates — and arguably develops — their performance: performing in a Chinese restaurant poses difficulties to *xiangsheng* as performers need to talk to and interact with the audience, but in Chinese restaurants, many spectators sit with their backs to the stage. Moreover, “audiences are busy eating and drinking”, as Ben laments (Ben, personal communication, 15 December 2023). By contrast, in China, a classic setting of a traditional *xiangsheng* venue (Moser, 2018, p. 80) is where audiences sit on three sides of a square wooden table, facing the stage when they usually have some snacks and pots of tea to enjoy. Such a stark contrast reveals the new conditions to which *xiangsheng* has to adapt: Ben believes that, performing in this situation, “the amusement that relies on logic won’t work” (Ben, personal communication, 15 December 2023). As a solution, performers need to tell more fragmented stories with punchlines much denser than performing in China.

These difficulties in locating venues also influence the way diasporic *xiangsheng* performers set the stage. While they only have minimalist requirements for performance, the need to connect their performance to *xiangsheng* tradition is still observable. In this section, we compare the semiotics of the stage set-up of *xiangsheng* theatre in China and abroad. This allows us to see how *xiangsheng* emerges from a process of material translation, and how the tradition constantly emerges from semiotic growth.



Figure 1: *Xiangsheng* stage in Tianjin, China. Photo by Guanpeng Wang.



Figure 2: *Xiangsheng* stage in Boston, U.S. Photo by Guanpeng Wang.

These two photos contrast the stage settings of a *xiangsheng* teahouse in Tianjin China, and a *xiangsheng* performance organisation in Boston, USA. The former deploys a large hall in one of the malls in Tianjin, rented under a long-term contract and, therefore, a more stable ‘home’. Such a long-term, stable way of managing the performing venue is frequent in China, both enabling easy footfall and getting the chance to ensure the venue aligns with performance style. In Figure 1, we see the stage richly decorated with a plaque engraved with the name of the teahouse, while a permanent wooden set is used. By comparison, the Boston *xiangsheng* group makes use of a theatre at a university as a temporary venue. Since the theatre is only rented for one performance, it is impossible to decorate it like the teahouses in China. Diasporic performers, however, have minimum requirements: “The stage needs nothing” (Chris, personal communication, 19 December 2023). Yet, as simple as the background is, performers still value certain traditions and hail them as rituals. There are certain objects the performers have to use in their performances: 大褂 [‘a robe’], a table with cloth, a folding fan, a handkerchief, 醒木 [‘an attention-catching block’], bamboo clappers, and, for Alex, a standing mic. Alex recalls that “in our first ever performance, there were no audio devices. So, we didn’t link our mic with anything, but allowed it to stand there nevertheless, as part of our ritualistic stage settings” (Chris, personal communication, 19 December 2023). This ritualistic set on the *xiangsheng* stage is shown in a close-up photo in Figure 3.



Figure 3: Typical diasporic *xiangsheng* stage setting. Photo by Guanpeng Wang.

The ritualistic setting has a clear semiotic importance both for performance and its link with tradition as the source text. On the one hand, the settings play different metaphorical roles that correspond to specific performances. The folding fan, for instance, can be used as a weapon, a brush, a piece of paper, etc., for different performing purposes. That is, it is an icon that works to “represent or to materialise referents onstage” (de Toro, 1995, p. 77). On the other hand, and maybe more importantly for diasporic performers, these items have symbolic functions that allow both the performers and the audience to link what happens in North America with the performances’ origin in China. While, as shown in the previous section, performers will be satisfied as long as the audience can see and hear them, they still find it necessary to bring along these ritualistic items “because this is learnt from our masters,” Alex explains (Alex, personal communication, 13 December 2023). Far away from their masters, diasporic performers still respect the connection with the tradition by using these symbolic items. In translational terms, these items reflect a kind of loyalty to the source text. In other words, even though the North American environment limits performers’ ability to bring out the entire stage setting that is typical for *xiangsheng* performance in China, they still use items to translate their relationship with *xiangsheng* in China and across history to signal respect for the tradition.

3.3 Translating into a North American environment

The previous section describes a micro-environment where diasporic *xiangsheng* grows, namely, the stage and venue where it is performed. Beyond that, there is a larger social-political context in which both the audience and performers are situated. This macro-environment involves demographic characteristics as well as different conceptions of political red lines. It is self-evident that theatrical performances are oriented towards the audience, with the result that the demographic characteristics of the audience largely shape the environment where its *xiangsheng* performance grows. In our interview, two topics emerge regarding how the sociocultural profile of the audience and performers construct the growing environment for local *xiangsheng* performance, namely language proficiency and cultural awareness, and the quality of performer persona.

In China, *xiangsheng* is appreciated by people from various educational backgrounds. However, in North America, *xiangsheng* is most popular on university campuses, with limited audience resources. Chinese migrants only accounted for around 5% of the total US population in 2021 (Rosenbloom & Betalova 2023) and *xiangsheng*, as a performance that relies heavily on Northern Chinese cultural consensus, does not even speak to this whole population. Chris has been trying to reach a broader audience through a university-based *xiangsheng* organisation; however, after more

than ten years' effort, they realised that such a cultural organisation does not work. Chris believes this is due to the high cultural barrier of *xiangsheng* "because it is an art of [northern] Chinese *language*" (Chris, personal communication, 19 December 2023). According to Alex, older generations of migrants, who are usually less well-educated, "are from Fujian or Guangzhou [southern China], so they are not our target audience" and cannot contribute to expanding *xiangsheng* to the larger community (Chris, personal communication, 19 December 2023).

However, as growth is not dependent on volume or frequency of performance, such university-based performances allow *xiangsheng* to grow in quality, as the educational levels for both diasporic audiences and performers are higher than those in China. Such a gap is perceived by diasporic performers as a difference in 'quality of persona', or 素质 ['*suzhi*'], meaning by the stage presence of the actor. Our interviewees are generally proud of such differences. Chris says that "our audience is different from those in China, so we naturally perform more eloquently [...] the eloquent taste is shared among us and our audience" (Chris, personal communication, 19 December 2023). This statement highlights a self-awareness among performers about the qualitative growth in *xiangsheng*'s presentation and reception in its new cultural settings. The shared taste and the difference in *suzhi* are seen as crucial for the growth of *xiangsheng*, especially from a "vulgar entertainment" to a "refined art form", as Chris believes, because "art needs artists and artists are, without a doubt, those who have very good personality or quality of persona" (Chris, personal communication, 19 December 2023). While Chris acknowledges that his remarks are somewhat "elitist", there is a strong belief that better education creates better art. This view is echoed in Alex's interview, where he criticised some performers in China, who "only perform sexual jokes"—the *chouhuo* discussed earlier—because this is "what the market wants" (Chris, personal communication, 19 December 2023). It is clear that the educational level, resulting in higher *suzhi*, of the North American audience and performers directs the orientation of *xiangsheng*'s growth.

Local political values also play a significant role in fostering a specific growing trajectory of *xiangsheng*. Compared with performers in China who face censorship, performers in North America are much freer. Diasporic performers see the freedom of creating as an advantage — sometimes *the* advantage — as they can "do things from our heart" (Chris, personal communication, 19 December 2023). By contrast, even the best *xiangsheng* performers in China "have their political identity [...] constraining them because of their huge social influence" (Chris, personal communication, 19 December 2023). Within this environment, many *xiangsheng* scripts are created with the aim of political sarcasm. In recent years, there have been performances criticising Chinese politicians and satirising issues in Hong Kong. One such performance is a translation of the traditional *xiangsheng* 八大吉祥 ['Eight auspicious symbols'], in which the performers project each of eight Chinese characters into three different characters and use them to form questions and answers about historical or literary figures (Ma & Wang, 1993). Performed in North America, the questions and answers were inflected towards one of the most controversial issues of contemporary Chinese politics. One of these figures was the Hong Kong lyricist Albert Leung, who supported the Hong Kong protests and was consequently censored in Mainland China. His lyrics are now shown as written by 'Anonymous' in Mainland China (see Xie & Liu, 2020). In 'Eight auspicious symbols' performed in North America, the question and answer are 'Where is Albert Leung?' 'There is no such a man' —bluntly satirising the Chinese

authorities' censorship. However, it should be noted that such freedom is still only relative. Most, if not all, of the performers are first-generation migrants with families in China and, for professional performers, masters there too. Many student-performers may also need to go back eventually. Ben, a performer who went back to China after staying abroad for a while, claims that performers like himself "will not be reckless" (Ben, personal communication, 15 December 2023). Ben's favourite performance is 祖国颂 ['Praising my homeland'], which includes a 贯口 ['*guankou*'], rapid-fire monologue, of famous natural and cultural sceneries in China. There is either a sense of self-protection or patriotism — or both — that makes Ben more willing to perform praising *xiangsheng* rather than critical ones.

Beyond the fact that performers have roots in China, shared political values or identitarian politics of North American society also provide restraints. "[Y]ou cannot ridicule minority groups you are not part of", said Chris in his interview. For example, in China, *xiangsheng* performers take advantage of nationalist anti-Japan/Korea sentiment. One of the performances offers a phonetic pun between the Korean surname 'Park' and the Chinese word 嫖 [*piao*], 'seek prostitute'. This was one of the most popular scripts in China, especially during the tension when South Korea allowed America to deploy the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system in its territory, which was believed to threaten China's national interest (see Meick & Salidjanova, 2017). However, it faced an immediate backlash when performed in North America due to its perceived insensitivity towards Korean migrants. But notwithstanding false steps such as these, diasporic performers are generally aware of social values and the balance between a good performance and respecting minority groups through self-censoring. In our interview, Alex denied that this was self-censorship as such and related his choices to his own beliefs: "The show can be very good. If I were to perform it, it would be one of the most popular. But I believe it's problematic, and I can do nothing to change it, then I would rather not perform it" (Alex, personal communication, 13 December 2023). Regarding one performance, Alex recalled himself finding a traditional script full of the male gaze: a well-educated girl fell in love with a poor scholar simply because "you taught me a lot" (Chen, 1980, p. 208). "How absurd," Alex comments, "a well-educated girl loves someone simply because he knows about things she already knew?" (Alex, personal communication, 13 December 2023). He eventually changes the narrative in his performance to find an alternative reason for this romance — the scholar is humble, and it makes him cute. "It's still a masculine-oriented story, but I hope my version can, at least, make my female audience feel a little better" (Alex, personal communication, 13 December 2023).

In that way, the experience of diasporic *xiangsheng* performers in North America highlights a complex interplay between artistic freedom and the new constraints imposed by cultural and political correctness. North American diasporic performers translate their performance into their living environment, in the same way as do Chinese performers. This awareness marks out a growing trajectory of *xiangsheng* itself: it extends its flexibility to the stage while developing its content within the political correctness that is imposed either by political redlines or by the self-consciousness of translator-performers themselves. The artistic responses in North America and China bear fascinating parallels, even if state apparatus and audience response are radically different.

4. Conclusions

This article has shown that *xiangsheng* performance, as a text, constantly undergoes translation in direct relation to the changing conditions of time, space, and political contexts. As it does so, the sources of humour may vary, but there is a deep sense that all laughter is anarchic, liberating, and deconstructive. Translation, in that way, builds upon its own particular brand of temporary completion: “The textuality that flows into any given act of translation may include the whole range of other kinds of re-creation” (Reynolds, 2023, p. 28). This interplay is seen in *xiangsheng*’s growth both in China and abroad. With tradition as its source text, *xiangsheng*’s growth cannot be reduced to any single reason, but rather translation allows the intermingling of a range of factors that have led to *xiangsheng* being the phenomenon that it is today, rooted in political tension, in performers’ self-awareness and consciousness of the constraints under which they must present their performance, but above all in its commitment to visceral laughter. Theatre performances themselves are dynamic and productive of change, of pushing forward the form, bringing it to grow from what it was without ever abandoning those roots.

Acknowledgements/Funding

This research is approved and funded by St. Francis Xavier University, Canada. We extend our sincerest gratitude to Professor David Johnston and Dr Lisha Xu for their insightful comments and their efforts in publishing this article. We also want to take this opportunity to pay tribute to the late *xiangsheng* artist, Mr Yang Baozhang, the grandmaster of Guanpeng Wang. Mr Yang was a humble and knowledgeable elder who loved *xiangsheng* with sincerity and kindness. His legacy will continue to grow through future generations.

References

- Anonymous. (2021). *The history of Xiangsheng’s functionalities of satire and praise*. <https://zhuanlan.zhihu.com/p/24370247>.
- Barthes, R. (1977). *Image, music, text*, Stephen Heath (trans.). Fontana.
- Bassnett-McGuire, S. (1980). *Translation Studies*. Methuen and Co.
- Cai, S., and Dunn, E. (2020). *Xiangsheng and the emergence of Guo Degang in contemporary China*. Springer Nature.
- Chen, S. (1980). *Storytelling of strange stories from a Chinese studio* [评书聊斋志异]. Baihua Literature and Art Publishing House.
- de Toro, F. (1995). *Theatre semiotics: Text and staging in modern theatre*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Flexner, A. (1915/2001). Is social work a profession? *Research on Social Work Practice* 11(2), 152–165.
- Frow, J. (1990). Intertextuality and ontology. In M. Worton and J. Still (Eds.), *Intertextuality: Theories and practices* (pp. 45–55). Manchester University Press.
- Johnston, D., & Xu, L. (2021). Ecologies of translation: Chinese classical opera and Spanish Golden Age Theatre. *Boletín de La Biblioteca de Menéndez Pelayo*, 97(1), 197–224.



- Johnston, D. (2004). Securing the performability of the play in translation. In S. Coelsch-Foisner & H. Klein (Eds.), *Drama translation and theatre practice* (pp. 25–38). Peter Lang.
- Johnston, D. (2012). Created telation: The translated play in performance. *Quaderns. Revista de Traducció*, 19, 43–52.
- Ketterer, R. (2010). Opera and the uses of the classical tradition: Four studies. *International Journal of the Classical Tradition*, 17(1), 60–86.
- Kuberski, P. (1992). *The persistence of memory: Organism, myth, text*. University of California Press.
- Link, P. (2016). *Xiangsheng*: Chinese comic dialogues. In J. A. Murray and K. M. Nadeau (Eds.), *Pop culture in Asia and Oceania: Entertainment and society around the world* (pp. 217–219). ABCCLIO.
- Ma, J. & Wang, B. (1993). 'Ba Da Jixiang' [八大吉祥]. In B. Feng and Y. Liu (Eds.), *Collection of Chinese Xiangsheng [中国相声大全]* (3rd Volume) (pp. 555–561). Culture and Art Publishing House.
- Marais, K. (2018). *A (bio)semiotic theory of translation: The emergence of social-cultural reality*. Routledge.
- Marais, K. (2024). *Trajectories of translation: The thermodynamics of semiosis*. Routledge.
- Marinetti, C. (2005). The limits of the play text: Translating comedy. *New Voices in Translation Studies*, 1(1), 31–42.
- Meick, E., & Salidjanova, N. (2017, July). *China's response to U.S.-South Korean missile defense system deployment and its implications*. U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission. https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/Research/Report_China%27s%20Response%20to%20THAAD%20Deployment%20and%20its%20Implications.pdf
- Ministry of Culture and Tourism. (2019, December). *Ministry of Culture and Tourism announcement on publicly soliciting opinions for the "Notice on further strengthening the management of the performance market (draft for comment)"*. The State Council of the People's Republic of China. https://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2019-12/07/content_5459222.htm
- Moser, David. (2018). Keeping the *Ci* in *Fengci*: A brief history of the Chinese verbal art of *Xiangsheng*. In K. Tam & S. R. Wesoky (Eds.), *Not just a laughing matter: Interdisciplinary approaches to political humor in China* (pp. 77–96). Springer.
- Ni, Z. (2015). *A history of Chinese Xiangsheng [中国相声史]*. Wuhan University Press.
- Reynolds, M. (2023). Prismatic translation and *Jane Eyre* as a world work. In M. Reynolds. et al. (Eds.), *Prismatic Jane Eyre: Close-reading a world novel across languages* (pp. 21–62). Open Book Publishers.
- Rosenbloom, R. & Betalova, J. (2023). *Chinese Immigrants in the United States*. Migration Policy Institute. <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/chinese-immigrants-united-states-202>
- Rozik, E. (1993). Categorisation of speech acts in play and performance analysis. *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism*, 117–132.
- Tao, D. (1985). *The selection of Tao Dun's essays on Quyi [陶钝曲艺文选]*. Zhongguo Quyi Publishing House.
- Tian, L. (2020, January 1). *He Chi and Buying Monkeys [河池与《买猴儿》]*. Xiting Xiangsheng [细听相声]. https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/NV_wBCh1M6MOha4xI6kB7w



Tian, Y. & Bhatt, I. (forthcoming) Translating heritage in Sino-Muslim China: Vernacularisation and connexity. *Target*.

Xie, W. & Liu, X. (2020). Popular HK lyricist's image tarnished for being 'traitor' to Woo Secessionist. *Global Times*. <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202008/1197779.shtml>

Xue, B., Gao, Y. & Wei, Z. (Eds.). (2012). '*The great dictionary of Xiangsheng*' [相声大词典]. Baihua Literature and Art Publishing House.

Zhou, Y. (1958). 'Develop new *Quyí*, serve socialism [发展新曲艺，为社会主义服务]', *Quyí*, 9(8).

Zhu, P. (2019). Introduction: The study of laughter in the Mao era. In P. Zhu, Z. Wang, and J. McGrath (Eds.), *Maoist Laughter* (pp. 1–18). Hong Kong University Press.

Zhu, Z. (1998). 'Inherit the combative tradition of sarcasm art' [继承讽刺艺术的战斗传统]. In G. Ma and H. Zhu (Eds.). *Selection of Zhu Zhaonian's Essays on Xiqu* [祝肇年戏曲论文选] (pp. 5–15). Art and Culture Publishing House.

Data availability statement

The data supporting this research are not publicly available. However, interview transcripts are available from Ye Tian upon reasonable request.

Disclaimer

The authors are responsible for obtaining permission to use any copyrighted material contained in their article and/or verify whether they may claim fair use.