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By Shanghaiist and The Guardian

Perhaps a bit of fancy footwork and a catchy show tune is the key to introducing a new generation to Karl Marx's *Das Kapital*. At least that's what He Nian, director of the upcoming musical, is anticipating for the Shanghai theatregoers. The play which is on schedule to open next year, is meant to serve as a kind of "edutainment" providing the audience with amusement but also an intellectually sound interpretation of Marx's work. Shanghaiist and The Guardian report more extensively:

http://shanghaiist.com/2009/03/17/can_marxist_masterpiece_hit_the_chi.php

Screw Shakespeare and forget that Chinese opera business - right now, preparations are underway to bring a sing-song version of Karl Marx's *Das Kapital* to the Shanghai theater.

This particular rendition of Marx's treatise against capitalism is borrowed from "a best-selling Japanese manga adaptation". We're not sure if anime and Marxism go hand-in-hand, but He Nian, *Das Kapital*'s director has ambitious hopes for the play, according to Danwei:

He Nian says he will combine elements from animation, Broadway musicals, and Las Vegas stage shows to bring Marx's economic theories to life as a trendy, interesting, and educational play...

To director He Nian, *Das Kapital* and the theory of surplus value are serious issues, yet he wants to make them fun to watch. He will set the play in a business. In the first half of the story, the employees discover that their boss is exploiting them and learn of the "surplus theory of value." However, they react differently to the knowledge of their exploitation: some are willing to be exploited by the company, and the tighter they are squeezed, the more they feel they are worth. Others rise in mutiny, but this ruins the company and leaves them out of work. Still others band together and use their collective wisdom to deal with the boss...

He Nian said that due to the different points of view held by the boss and the workers, he would borrow the structure of *Rashomon* to show things repeatedly from different viewpoints.

Oh, *Rashomon*! So that's where some of the Japanese influences come into play. Oh wait, didn't they say manga earlier? As if the whole Marxist theory "edutainment" wasn't confusing enough...

Apparently though, there have been earlier theatrical adaptations of the Marx classic: a Japanese "writer, translator, and civil servant" adapted the book in 1931, which was subsequently translated into Chinese and published as *A Dramatic Capital* in 1949.

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/mar/17/china-das-kapital-marx-stage>

You've read the book, attended the seminars and pondered the accumulation of surplus value - now see the musical.

Chinese producers are attempting to transform *Das Kapital* from a hefty treatise on political economy into a popular stage show, complete with catchy tunes and nifty footwork.

Whether Karl Marx would approve of his masterwork being served up as entertainment for China's new bourgeoisie is a matter of speculation. But the director He Nian - best known for his stage adaptation of a martial-arts spoof - has promised to unite elements from Broadway musicals and Las Vegas shows in a hip, interesting and educational play featuring a live band, singing and dancing.

"The particular performance style we choose is not important, but Marx's theories cannot be distorted," he said sternly, in an interview with the Wen Hui Bao newspaper.

Zhang Jun, an economics professor at Shanghai's prestigious Fudan University, is being drafted in to ensure the production is intellectually rigorous.

The director said the play, which is to open next year, will be set in a company and will document the progress of its workers. In the first half they realise their boss is exploiting them and begin to understand the theory of surplus value. But far from uniting, as Marx enjoined them in the Communist Manifesto, some continue to work as before, some mutiny and others employ collective bargaining.

Yang Shaolin, the general manager of the Shanghai Dramatic Arts Centre, said that in the past it would have been difficult to imagine *Das Kapital* adapted into a play with "main characters, major dramatic elements, and profound educational meaning", but that it was now possible thanks to the flourishing of different styles in Chinese theatre.

Even so, the producers face a tough challenge. True, the social criticism of Marx's 19th century contemporaries Charles Dickens and Victor Hugo has been transmuted into two hugely successful all-singing, all-dancing musicals — *Oliver!* and *Les Miserables*. But unlike the novels on which those were based, *Das Kapital* has never been noted for its vivid characterisation or gripping plot.

There is some precedent for the new production. A Japanese writer and translator is said to have adapted *Das Kapital* for the stage in the 1930s, and the result was subsequently translated into Chinese.

Three years ago a German theatre group had another bash. But despite an added inducement to attend — a copy of Volume 23 of the *Collected Works of Marx and Engels* for each theatre-goer — the *Suddeutsche Zeitung* described it as mostly "something of a lecture" — at times dry and boring".