Periphery matters : a cultural biography of Peking Opera in Hong Kong

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A Cultural Biography of Peking Opera in Hong Kong

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Cover designed by Lydia Lam
Image: Tang Yuen-ha performing in the 2015 Chinese Opera Festival in Hong Kong.
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Em. Prof. dr. Wilt Idema (Harvard University and Leiden University)

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Author's Note

The misleading Peking "Opera"

Peking Opera and all genres of traditional Chinese theatre (*xiqu* 戲曲) at large, which is often referred to as "Chinese Opera", are in many ways different from the Western genre of opera. Firstly, the musical features of the two art forms are different. While western opera uses composed music, traditional Chinese theatre bases its music on fixed tunes and the tone-matrix system. Fixed tunes (*qupai* 曲牌) are pre-existing tunes that are preserved and orally transmitted, and are known to people by their titles. To be used in a play, tunes are put together, like a "medley" in the western sense, to form a larger unit of musical entity. This way to organize music is called *lianzhui* 聯綴, or the "medley" form.[1] The tone-matrix (*banqiang* 板腔) system, on the other hand, operates in a play by tempo-variations of singing mode(s). A singing mode (*shengqiang* 聲腔) can be understood as a specific set of structural rules that govern the melodic formation of musical lines. These rules of melodic contour are highly dependent on linguistic features of the performing language (dialect) and, thus, singing modes are highly region-specific. According to Bell Yung and Chan Sau-yan, there are five factors to determine a singing mode: "the text's verse structure, the metrical pattern and syllable placement, the line-ending notes, the mode and the instrumental accompaniment."[2] While many genres organize their music with a mix of these two forms, they are not invariably balanced. For example, Kunqu Opera operates mostly in the "medley" form of fixed tunes, while Peking Opera basically sticks to the tone-matrix system.[3]

Secondly, while western opera performers are categorized according to their vocal range, categorization of performers in traditional Chinese theatre operates in a role type (*hangdang* 行當) system. Formed together with the emergence of *zaju* 雜劇 in the Song dynasty (960-1279), the system contained five role types, namely *moni* 末泥, *yinxi* 引戲, *fujing* 副淨, *fumo* 副末 and *zhuanghu* 裝狐, which indicate performers' tasks in a play. For example, *moni* was the leading male; *yinxi* was responsible for starting the play with songs and dances; and *fumo* was to make jokes during the play.[4] After centuries during which roles were added and removed, the role type system adopted by the majority of traditional Chinese theatrical genres in the present contains four main role types. They include male role (*sheng* 生), female role (*dan* 旦), painted face role (*jing* 淨)[5] and clown role (*chou* 丑), categorizing performers according to the gender and the attributes of the characters of their specialization. Within these four main role types, there are sub-types to further categorize performers according to the age-range of the characters and technical requirements for the performers.

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[1] Yung 1989: 7.

[2] Yung 1989: 69-71; Chan 1991: 11.

[3] Yung 1989: 7.

[4] Liao 2014: 32, 62.

[5] Performers in the painted face role specialize in portraying characters with distinctive moral qualities, be they good or bad, as well as characters with a mythical nature or immortality. The role type is named after the conventional practice of elaborate face painting among performers of this type.

For example, under the male role there are junior male role (*xiaosheng* 小生), senior male role (*laosheng* 老生) and martial male role (*wusheng* 武生). Names and numbers of sub-roles under the four main role types may be different across genres due to their diversified paths of development.

Thirdly, traditional Chinese theatre is highly stylized, and this is reflected in its stage setting and performance. In terms of stage setting, the use of backdrops and props is minimized. On the traditional stage one would only find a modestly decorated backdrop of a piece of cloth, a plain-coloured rug, as well as a wooden table and two wooden chairs set in the middle. Such setting is called "one table, two chairs" (*yizhuo liangyi* 一桌兩椅). Small variations to the traditional setting would be made according to the story contexts. For example, if it is to depict a scene in the royal palace or a wedding chamber, respective kinds of decorated silk cloths would be used to cover the table and chairs. In turn, the indicative function of location and context of a scene is taken up by the performers through their verbal deliveries and formulaic actions. For example, performers present a horse ride by a loop run around the stage with a decorated horsewhip in their hand;[6] or performers would have a specific set of actions – for example, they mimic door opening and threshold crossing to indicate that they are entering or exiting a room.

In addition to the aforesaid artistic differences between traditional Chinese theatre and western opera, another reason for my hesitation toward the use of "opera" is that the term "Chinese Opera" can also mean something else altogether. Due to cultural globalization, a development of western opera in China in recent decades is observed. Be the productions produced *in* China, *by* Chinese composers, or *with* culturally Chinese elements, I believe that "Chinese Opera" is the best, if not the only, term for describing these practices of western opera in China.

Indeed a debate has existed for long on a suitable English term for *xiqu*, which covers a wide range of traditional Chinese art forms. I have encountered terms like "Chinese Opera", "Chinese Theatre Arts", "Chinese (Musical) Drama", or its Romanization from the Hanyu Pinyin system, *xiqu*, in scholarship by others. I prefer to use "traditional Chinese theatre" in this research project, for the above-mentioned reasons. As for my seemingly contradicting choices of terms such as "Peking Opera", "Cantonese Opera" and "Kunqu Opera", I use them because they are the most established terms for the respective genres in English-language scholarship. Also, precise but wordy alternatives such as "traditional Chinese theatre in Peking (Beijing) style" would hamper readability, especially in view of their numerous appearances in the dissertation.

On Romanization and conventions

In general, I transliterate Chinese names and terms following the official Hanyu Pinyin system of the People's Republic of China, as it is the dominant Romanization system used in Chinese studies. For names of individuals and places, unless I am aware of an established

[6] Up to the sixteenth century, bamboo horses were used on stage.

name in other Romanization systems – for example, the Cantonese Romanization system used by the Hong Kong government – I spell them in Hanyu Pinyin. Names of individuals are in Chinese order (surname, given name), unless an English language publication uses a specific spelling (e.g. King Hu) or if a name is a mix of English and Chinese (e.g. Jackie Chan). A name will be followed by corresponding Chinese characters at its first appearance.

For the sake of readability, a different convention goes with other names and play titles. A name at its first appearance will be in English first, whether it is the official name, a received translation or my own translation. If the appearance of the name is not for reference purpose, it will be followed by Chinese characters. Any subsequent references are in English only. A similar convention goes with play titles, which will be in the order of English, transliteration in Hanyu Pinyin and Chinse characters. Titles of complete plays and scenes that are conventionally performed as independent plays are in italics, while titles of scenes or excerpts from complete plays are put between quotation marks. As for other phrases and terms in Chinese, unless otherwise stated, I will first give an English translation, followed by the Chinese Romanization and Chinese characters.

One exception of such convention is for titles of Chinese-language publications. I will first give the Chinese Romanization and Chinese characters, followed by an English translation, so as to identify its source language. All translations of Chinese texts are mine unless otherwise stated.

Life years of significant individuals in my narrative will be cited, but in those cases where individuals have objected to their life years being cited, I have respected their preferences.

List of Tables and Figures