

# THE *Peony Pavilion*

*Mudan ting, Second Edition*



舞步千態似流神一應看來  
一面真雨後可憐傾國色風前  
照眼賞音人香攜滿袖初留影  
品入瑤臺不聚塵寄語東君  
分次第莫教蜂蝶亂爭春



Tang Xianzu

TRANSLATED WITH A NEW PREFACE BY

*Cyril Birch*

INTRODUCTION TO THE SECOND EDITION BY

*Catherine Swatek*

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THE  
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## Preface to the Second Edition

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Has the world ever seen a woman's love to rival that of Bridal Du?

Dreaming of a lover she fell sick; once sick she became ever worse; and finally, after painting her own portrait as a legacy to the world, she died. Dead for three years, still she was able to live again when in the dark underworld her quest for the object of her dream was fulfilled. To be as Bridal Du is truly to have known love.

Love is of source unknown, yet it grows ever deeper. The living may die of it, by its power the dead live again. Love is not love at its fullest if one who lives is unwilling to die for it, or if it cannot restore to life one who has so died. And must the love that comes in dream necessarily be unreal? For there is no lack of dream lovers in this world. Only for those whose love must be fulfilled on the pillow and for whom affection deepens only after retirement from office, is it entirely a corporeal matter....

Tang Xianzu wrote these words in 1598, in his own preface to his new play. He was forty-eight years old, scion of a gentry family of Linchuan in Jiangxi. In his twenties he had made a name for himself as scholar and poet, and at thirty-three he passed the Advanced Scholar (*jinshi*) examination, the gateway to the highest levels of the imperial bureaucracy. His reward was appointment in the prestigious Ministry of Rites in the "southern capital," Nanjing. Before long, however, he conceived his duty as a loyal subject to protest against attempts by the Grand Secretary of the day to block the "path of speech," the means by which honest advisers might gain the ear of the emperor. His majesty viewed Tang's memorial as a reflection on his own judgment, and responded not by action against the Grand Secretary but by reducing the memorialist to service as a jail warden in a remote corner of Guangdong.

The bureaucracy's loss was literature's gain. Tang never again reached higher rank than district magistrate, and in 1597 he retired to his family home to devote himself to his writing. *The Peony Pavilion* was his third play and his masterpiece. It rapidly won wide popularity, and Tang personally instructed actors in its performance. Before his death in 1616 he completed two more major "dream plays, *The Handan Tale* (*Handanji*) and *Tale of the Southern Bough* (*Nankeji*), both based on old Daoist parables, both plays continuing Tang's search to reconcile, in the realm of human feeling, the claims of Confucian ideals with the transcendental values of Daoism and Buddhism which the playwright had imbibed from family members, notably his grandmother, and from friends among learned monks and recluses.

*Peony Pavilion* is Tang's longest play, his most protracted and profound meditation on the nature of love. One of the preoccupations of late-Ming thinkers was the place of what they called *qing* in the scheme of values. *Qing* is the word I translate as "love" in the above quotation from Tang's preface. A more extended equivalent would be "feeling": joy and sorrow, fear and anger, desire and hate are all part of the feeling side of the dichotomy *qing* versus *li*, *qing* standing for the spontaneous affects of the heart and *li* for the powers of reason and the conventions of the coldly rational. For Tang Xianzu *qing* in its highest development, as true love between man and woman, embraces sexual attraction, physical passion, but also sentiment, empathy, devotion—the virtues of that broader love that exists also outside the sexual relationship.

Tang found the vehicle he needed in an old tale, a run-of-the-mill story of the so-called "promptbook" genre. "Bridal Du Longing for Love Returns in Spirit Form" (*Du Liniang mu se hu*

*hun*) baldly tells of a girl who dreams of a lover, pines for him and dies, but is permitted to return from the shades to the world of light. By the power of his poetic genius Tang Xianzu creates from this crude tale a model of the ultimate mystery of Woman. Bridal Du is unforgettable as a young girl in the early scenes, cloistered and shy, yearning for love yet hiding her feelings even from the pert maidservant, Spring Fragrance, her confidante. She flowers through love's experience, first in dream only, then as a shade in the nether realm; more and more openly sensuous, gaining in courage and self-possession, she emerges full-fledged at last as wife and helpmeet. Bridal's archetypal quality is strengthened by many allusions to earlier heroines: to ladies in portraits who came to life and stepped forward from the painted silk, and to Qiannü, in the poignant fourteenth-century play, who lay comatose in her chamber while her disembodied spirit valiantly pursued her lover to the capital.

Bridal's dream lover, the young scholar Liu Mengmei, undergoes stern tests to prove himself a man of true feeling. He has more to conquer than Bridal's heart and maidenhood. He must overcome his fear when he discovers his beloved is a ghost. Then, further even than this, he must banish a revulsion over the disinterment of her corpse, and hold to his faith in the power of his love to resurrect her incorrupt physical body—just as Bridal, in her turn, must hold fast to her love for him in the chamber of the grave and through the shadows of her spectral wanderings.

The realms of dreams and ghosts and demons provide avenues to psychological truth and philosophical depth in *Peony Pavilion*, but we can rest assured that they held a solid reality for Tang Xianzu and the audience of his day. And indeed of a later time: We have a real-life account of a parallel situation to Liu Mengmei's in a moving passage from the eighteenth-century memoirs of Shen Fu, *Six Chapters from a Floating Life*. After the death of his beloved wife Yuen, Shen Fu keeps a lone vigil in her chamber in the fearful hope of a visit from her spirit:

Opening my eyes, I looked into all four corners of my room. I saw the two candles burning brightly on the table, but even as I looked at them, their flames began shrinking slowly until they were no larger than beans.

I was horror-struck. My hair stood on end and my whole body was seized with an icy shiver. To stop my trembling, I rubbed my hands together and wiped my forehead, staring steadily at the candles all the time. Suddenly, both candle flames commenced to rise until they were more than a foot high and in danger of setting fire to the paper ceiling, and the light had become so bright that the whole room was lit up. Then, just as suddenly, the flames began shrinking and growing dimmer, until they were just as tiny as before.

By this time my heart was pounding and my legs were trembling. I wanted to call Chang to come in and look, but remembering Yuen's gentle spirit and retiring nature, I changed my mind, afraid that the presence in the room of a living stranger might distress her. Instead, I began calling her name and implored her to appear to me. But nothing happened. I remained alone in the silence and dimness. Finally the candle flames became bright again, but did not rise high as before. Then I went out and told Chang what I had seen. He thought me very strong and fearless, not knowing that mine was only the strength and bravery of love.

(Translation by Shirley M. Black)

Where Liu Mengmei is the very incarnation of masculine *qing*, Bridal's father Du Bao represents the opposite term of the dichotomy, Confucian rationality or *li*. Liu Mengmei never flinches when asked to disinter Bridal's body; Du Bao in contrast refuses until the last possible moment to acknowledge her living reality. Du Bao is a Chinese father, and thus even in a stage comedy (more precisely a tragicomedy), he commands respect. Substitute for him the sort of gullible old pantaloon



who would be the girl's father in Roman comedy or in the plays of Molière, and we would lose the whole point of the play. Du Bao is a decent man, fondly appreciative of his young daughter and filled with tender sorrow by the (falsely reported) death of his wife. The set piece of scene 8 shows his paternal concern for the rustic populace in his charge as Prefect. He is admirable, later, in his determination to defend besieged Huaian, though held down to less than heroic proportions by the rather cheap trick he employs against the rebel Li Quan and his dame. Above all, Du Bao is the blinkered Confucian rationalist. His daughter, too young in his eyes to be prey to the unwelcome emotion of passion, died three years ago and was buried, and there's an end on't. Her resurrected self can only be some malevolent harpy; Liu Mengmei can be nothing more than an impostor and a grave robber; nothing will induce this father to acknowledge them—until, in the great climactic moment of the final scene, Bridal swoons away and Du Bao, overcome at last by spontaneous affection—by *qing*—exclaims, “My daughter!”

This story of Bridal Du, crudely fantastic in the original tale, grows glamorous under Tang Xianzu's lyrical brush. But both fantasy and glamour are undercut by a rich, earthy comedy that establishes the play on a satisfyingly sturdy foundation. With a character such as Scabby Turtle present at Bridal's exhumation, we have no choice but to suspend our disbelief. The mysteries of love can never close when they are constantly being shot through, by the cheeky flower-lad who propositions Spring Fragrance in scene 9, by Sister Stone's bawdy autobiography in scene 17, or by the extraordinary amatory history narrated by the infernal Judge in scene 23 through the medium of puns on the names of thirty-eight different flowers.

The scope of *Peony Pavilion* is vast. Not surprisingly, the large cast included several staple figures of Ming comedy, but often these are clothed with rich invention. Tutor Chen is a bumbling old pedagogue picking his teeth through the spring afternoon that sets Bridal's heart aflame, but he develops in the most interesting way to stand as her eventual champion against her stiff-necked father. Spring Fragrance is the pert abigail in the tradition of Hongniang of the *Story of the Western Wing*; it is a pity her role diminishes after the vibrancy of her early scenes. Comic relief in the later part of the play revolves around the henpecked traitor Li Quan and his lusty dame, and the uproarious scene 4 introduces another stock figure in the person of the ridiculous barbarian.

At a more sophisticated comic level, several of the older males in the play are instruments of topical satire. Not long before Tang Xianzu was writing, peace agreements between the Ming empire and raiding Mongols under their leader Altan Khan had included the offer of a fief of land to one of Altan's wives. This kind of truckling to the border tribes, which was crippling the late-Ming courts, is directly satirized in Du Bao's bribery of Dame Li. In like manner, the Judge's songs of scene 2 pillory official venery, and Miao Shunbin, in scene 41, epitomizes the incompetence of chieftain examiners (not that the candidates themselves are spared; their essays on the burning topic of national defense contain nothing but sexual innuendo).

Like his three other major plays, Tang Xianzu's *Peony Pavilion* is a dramatic romance or *chuanqi*, a long lyrical work with a cavalcade of scenes. Such plays, or rather operas, were intended for performance before an elite audience, usually in a private household, often through the leisurely days of a festival. Families of ample means might boast their own private troupe of actors, or at least have been training some of their own household servants from childhood in the demanding techniques of drama in which there is “no word but is sung, no movement but is danced,” in the time-honored phrase of the schools. The actor playing the role of Bridal might be male or female, but consummate skill would be expected in the singing of the arias to the accompaniment of languorous flute or livelier pipa (lute), and in the miming of the poetic images with balletic grace in every movement and gesture.

As is true of the most refined schools of classical Chinese opera to the present day, the tradition of *chuanqi* performances dispensed with anything in the way of a set beyond perhaps a table and a couple

of chairs. The total number of scenes could be very large (*Peony Pavilion* with fifty-five does not hold the record for length), and the variety of individual scenes ranged from short transitional with one or two characters, through comic or martial or major dramatic episodes, all the way to grand scenes with many participants such as that of final reunion in *Peony Pavilion* scene 55. Successive settings for the action might therefore shift from boudoir or study to roadside inn or prison cell, city wall, mountain top or sea bottom, imperial court or courtroom in hell. Dialogue and arias will make it quite clear where the action is taking place, and descriptions of background, landscape, and atmosphere will often be lushly poetic. It is not very usual for the venue to change within a single scene but if it does the characters will indicate this by taking a few steps, perhaps circling the stage, and then announcing their arrival at the new location.

Tang Xianzu furnished his original text with quite explicit stage directions, to which I have added very little beyond an occasional reminder that, for example, the “boat” in scene 36 is an imaginary one, indicated by the boatman’s pole or oar and by elaborate miming as the actors “board” and are “rowed away.” Two characters may be understood to be invisible to each other, even though both are in full view of the audience, until an imaginary door is opened and passed through. Bridal, already on stage, “emerges” from Liu’s study to greet him in scene 32, and in scene 50 Liu is on stage across from Du Bao for some time without ever being “admitted” to see him.

Other conventions to which the reader will quickly grow accustomed include self-introductions and the sometimes irritating recapitulations of plot. Tang Xianzu is no very serious offender, though, in this latter regard, especially if we bear in mind the drifting in and out, over two or three days, of the original audiences for whom he wrote. Bridal sometimes seems to be given a surfeit of opportunities to reminisce about her years in the shades—to Liu, to Sister Stone, to her mother, to Spring Fragrance—but each time brings a new aria, a new set of images, a further deepening of the tints of the marvellous portrayal.

My first encounter with *Peony Pavilion* was as reading material on a long flight with my family to Japan. By the time we landed in Tokyo I realized I would have to do a complete translation, and the sabbatical studies I had planned would simply have to wait. When my translation was first published in 1980, I concluded my introduction by sadly dismissing any hope of ever attending a complete performance of *Peony Pavilion* on the modern stage: Over a span of years I had witnessed a number of Kunqu performances of “The Interrupted Dream” and a handful of other scenes, but aside from that Tang Xianzu’s great work had remained for me no more than a literary masterpiece. I sense a huge debt now to the dedication of Madame Hua Wenyi and other actors, and to the vision and enthusiasm of Peter Sellars and Tan Dun, Chen Shi-Zheng, and all who have worked to bring Tang’s text back to life in the theater. It has been an unforgettable thrill to be treated to their artistry and with their help to discover new depths of meaning in a work I have loved for so long and thought to have understood.

I owe a particular debt to Catherine Swatek. She has made a special study of the performance history of the play over the centuries, and has traveled across three continents in close observation of its modern resuscitation. It is a pleasure and a privilege to introduce here her lively report on recent productions of the play (and on the controversies surrounding them), and she has also generously provided a guide to the valuable new scholarship that continues to enrich our understanding of *Peony Pavilion*’s depth and beauty.

Cyril Birch  
Berkeley  
July 2001

# Introduction: *Peony Pavilion* on Stage and in the Study

## CATHERINE SWATEK

Nineteen ninety-nine marked 400 years since *Peony Pavilion* was first performed in the home of its author, and in that year three new productions of it reached audiences inside and outside of China. In March, an avant-garde interpretation by the American director Peter Sellars completed its international tour with two evening performances and a matinee in Berkeley, California. At 3½ hours this was the shortest of the new productions, concluding with the resurrection of Bridal Du, enacted using a water-filled perspex tomb that had doubled as her bed in earlier scenes of lovemaking. In July Chen Shi-Zheng's interpretation of the complete play—killed by cultural authorities in Shanghai the year before but revived by Lincoln Center and a French co-sponsor—finally had its world premiere in New York, as part of Lincoln Center's "Festival 99." At 18 hours, this "Ming Ring" in six segments included every scene and aria, perhaps for the first time ever.<sup>1</sup> Finally, in October, a "classic version" (*jingdianban*) of the "complete" play had its first public performance in Beijing, as part of the festivities marking the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China. For three evenings in succession, three pairs of actors took the lead parts, and in a pointed departure from Chen Shi-Zheng's concept, director Guo Xiaonan and his collaborators cut arias and scenes if they felt they prolonged the performance unnecessarily or detracted from its beauty.

Despite decades of benign neglect in China, it is no coincidence that *Peony Pavilion* attracted so much attention in one year. Guo Xiaonan's production, lavishly funded by the Beijing government, was clearly a response to Chen Shi-Zheng's, even though no mention was made of him in the Chinese media. The silence was deafening, given that many contributors on this occasion had also written about Chen's production the year before, and given that the Shanghai Kun Opera Troupe was involved in both productions. For those in the know, there were coded references to the Lincoln Center production in the coverage of the Beijing event. Virtually all of the critiques emphasized that Guo's was a "classic" version of *Peony Pavilion* that preserved the beauty of Tang Xianzu's original work while staging it in a contemporary style. While rehearsing his production in Shanghai the previous year, Chen Shi-Zheng had raised hackles when he announced that he was restoring many of the "dregs" (*zaopo*) that are regularly cut from performances of the play in China, because these dregs are the most intelligent parts of it and because "traditional drama goes too much after beauty and casts aside many things that are essential to life." Given this manifesto, insistent references to the beauty of Guo Xiaonan's production in Chinese coverage of it were clearly pointed in Chen's direction.

Chen's production was a critical response to Kun opera and its aesthetic. Sellars's was too, and not simply with its high-tech stage design, contemporary costumes, and Western-style makeup. Sellars feels that opera the world over is losing its relevance and its audience, and he made plain his disenchantment with the current state of Kun opera when he decided to work exclusively with actors based outside of China and collaborate with Chinese artists who now make their homes in North America. Hua Wenyi, former director of the Shanghai Kun Opera Troupe, defected to the United States in 1989, and Tan Dun, a composer trained in China, now makes his home in New York. Hua told Sellars in 1992 that she could not reinvigorate her art in China, and after visiting several troupes there in 1997 he agreed that Kun opera was moribund. He rehearsed his production in New York, with funds raised from European and American backers, but held out hope that the show might eventually be performed in China and perhaps reawaken interest there in Kun opera.

That hope now seems utopian, given the controversies that erupted as *Peony Pavilion* became

entangled in cultural politics at the highest levels. At the premiere of Sellars's show in Vienna, in March of 1998, the Chinese ambassador in attendance told him that his staging of the play was too sexual and explicit ever to be performed in China, and this view was underscored by Liao Ben, Deputy Secretary General of the Chinese Dramatists Association, at a symposium in Berkeley the following year. In the meantime, after two dress rehearsals in June of 1998, Chen Shi-Zheng's production was condemned as "feudal, pornographic and superstitious" and unfit for foreign audiences by authorities at the Bureau of Culture in Shanghai. Beginning in April, there had been murmurs of disenchantment in the local media coverage, with some reporters who had attended the open rehearsals dismissing Chen's staging as a "hodgepodge" (*zahui*) that combined Kun opera with stilt-walking and puppetry, disco and break dancing (an exaggerated picture, as it happens). Chen's was an "export model" (*waixiangxing*) of Kun opera that in no way fairly represented Chinese classical opera. Despite these complaints, no one was prepared for the Bureau's refusal to issue visas to the actors just weeks before the world premiere in New York. Guo Xiaonan's production, rehearsed in secrecy and previewed by invitation only, was fulsomely praised in the Chinese media but little covered outside of China. Its run was the shortest, concluding after performances in Beijing, Shanghai, and Hong Kong. As of 2001, only Chen Shi-Zheng's resurrected production is still touring.

The attention given the international productions has demonstrated *Peony Pavilion's* appeal to audiences on three continents, but the often heated criticism of them has also revealed how firmly Kun opera is wedded to its traditions. As one who is familiar with canonical interpretations of Tang's play, I have welcomed Sellars's and Chen's iconoclastic approaches to the task of staging it. Both directors have taken a fresh look at Tang Xianzu's original text and treated received interpretations of the play with skepticism. I have not been surprised that their interpretations met with stiff resistance, both from Kun opera aficionados and from cultural authorities who oversee artistic production in China, and will venture explanations of why this was almost inevitable. Some background about how *Peony Pavilion* has been performed during the past four centuries will be helpful.

## The Tradition of Performing *Peony Pavilion*

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Since the early 1600s, *Peony Pavilion* has been performed in a musical style known as *kunqu* (Kun opera, so named for its place of origin, the town of Kunshan near modern Suzhou). It is now believed that Tang Xianzu, who was a native of Linchuan, an out-of-the-way county seat in Jiangxi Province, did not write the text of *Peony Pavilion* for performance in the Kunshan style, but, as the popularity of the play rapidly spread, adaptations of it were made for that style. By the second decade of the seventeenth century, excerpts from the play were included in anthologies that catered to lovers of Kun opera, and thenceforth the play remained preeminent in the Kun opera repertoire, its unbroken tradition of performances well documented. This tradition faltered as Beijing opera supplanted Kun opera in the nineteenth century, but Kun opera's prestige as the oldest classical style of opera still performed has been jealously guarded.

Kun opera is elite opera, favored by scholar-officials and wealthy merchants who enjoy performances of it in their homes and gardens. Its music is soft and melodious, anchored by the horizontal bamboo flute rather than the two-stringed fiddle featured in Beijing opera. Lyrics to the syncopated tempos of its arias are sung using melisma, a technique whereby single syllables are prolonged over several bars of music. This renders the words largely incomprehensible (unless one already knows them), but *kunqu's* slow tempos facilitate the use of mime and dance accompaniment, expressing the meaning of the lyrics in other ways. Kun opera combines song, dance, dialogue, and, to a lesser degree, acrobatics, and for most of its history the first two elements were most prized, because of the precision and beauty of their synchronization.

When word reached Shanghai of Lincoln Center's plan to stage all fifty-five scenes of the play, skepticism about the project was widespread. Senior actors in the Shanghai Troupe doubted that one actor could master the role of Bridal Du and have the stamina to perform it, especially when they learned that Qian Yi, the troupe's new young star, had been chosen for the part. After all, since the mid-eighteenth century no more than a dozen scenes from the play have remained in the repertoire of Kun opera, and these have been vehicles for actors specializing in a variety of roles. Moreover, only a half dozen of these scenes have featured the "boudoir *dan*" actor assigned the part of Bridal Du: both dream scenes ("The Interrupted Dream" and "Pursuing the Dream"), Bridal's death scene ("Keening"), her encounter with the underworld judge ("Infernal Judgment"), one scene of ghost wooing of Liu Mengmei ("Union in the Shades"), and the grand finale ("Reunion at Court"). Even the most loyal fans of Kun opera wondered whether foreign audiences would sit through all fifty-five scenes.

Complete performances of *Peony Pavilion* have been so rare that Chen Shi-Zheng's claim to be the first ever to direct one was not easy to refute. A scholar from Fudan University, Jiang Jurong, set himself that task, and the results of his research were published in the June 1998 issue of *Shanghai Drama*. Jiang found scattered references, mostly in poems, to performances that followed Tang Xianzu's original text, and surmised that these were likely complete ones because of the amount of time involved (in one case, two days and two nights). Such references persist through the Kangxi era (1662-1722), tapering off after 1694. But Jiang's findings are based on inference, and the occasional mention of a "complete" performance very likely refers to one for which an abridged script was used, as indeed has been the case for Guo's "complete" version performed in Beijing.

For most of its stage career, *Peony Pavilion* has been performed in the manner described by Professor Birch in his book on theater in the Ming dynasty—as highlights (*zhezixi*, "broken-off plays") performed either separately or in a sequence of three or four linked scenes (in the modern era, enough to make up an evening's entertainment).<sup>2</sup> Most *zhezixi* feature beautiful arias, witty dialogues

and lively (*re'nao*) action. In the late Ming and early Qing periods, people were familiar with the complete *chuanqi* plays from which *zhezixi* were taken, but with time the link between extract and *chuanqi* attenuated.<sup>3</sup> By the second golden age of Chinese opera during the reign of the Qianlong emperor (1736—95), few who enjoyed performances of *zhezixi* had read the complete mother play and almost none of the actors who performed them were literate. Interpretations of the scenes onstage, though highly embellished, had less and less to do with the original playwright's design, and more and more to do with the intentions of the artists and the requirements of the occasion at which *zhezixi* were performed.

Examples of the “actors’ takeover” of creative control abound in the case of *zhezixi* from *Peony Pavilion*. As Tang Xianzu conceived it, “The Schoolroom” (scene 7) marks a pivotal moment in Bridal’s evolution from cloistered daughter to sexually awakened young woman, and the scene is carefully apportioned among three characters: Bridal, her maid Spring Fragrance, and the tutor Chen Zuiliang. The comic mischief of Spring Fragrance is counterpoint to Bridal’s demurely respectful treatment of the tutor. All three characters sing, and the alternating exchanges between the two young women and the comically pedantic tutor work together to reveal Bridal’s growing curiosity about the world beyond the schoolroom. In the complete play, “The Schoolroom” anticipates “The Interrupted Dream” (scene 10), in which Bridal encounters her lover for the first time in the family garden. But since the eighteenth century at least, as a *zhezixi* it has been a vehicle for the comedic talents of the “flower *dan*” actress who plays the maid and the *laosheng* actor who plays the tutor; Bridal is little more than a “living prop” (*huo daoju*). “Speed the Plough” (scene 8) features Bridal’s father Du Ba and depicts him on a visit to a village in his district where he presides over spring planting rituals. This scene is very *re'nao*, and as written comes close to burlesquing rituals that Tang Xianzu himself would have performed as a magistrate. It exemplifies his talent for divesting rituals of a good deal of their solemnity, but humor most certainly was not a part of performances at the Manchu court, where “Speed the Plough” was often performed for observances of the Qingming festival in the third lunar month. This scene was also very popular in the area around Kunshan; handwritten copies of it often crop up in script collections kept by actors who performed at weddings and village celebrations. Similarly deflating uses of humor disappear from mid-Qing *zhezixi* for Bridal’s death scene (scene 20). One preserved in a miscellany published in the 1830s interpolates both dialogue assigned to Bridal and to her mother, Madam Du, and elaborate stage instructions indicating that Bridal rises from her deathbed to perform numerous kowtows over her mother’s anguished protests.

Historians of Kun opera have coined the term *erdu chuangzao* (“second-stage creation”) to acknowledge actors’ embellishments of *chuanqi*. Most are undismayed by the modifications introduced in *zhezixi*, and defend them as a necessary accommodation to the changing tastes of Qing dynasty audiences. The dominance of the actor has persisted in the modern period even with the advent of academically trained playwrights and directors, with whom they now collaborate. Descriptions of the 1999 Beijing production praised the second-stage creativity of Guo Xiaona, the playwright Wang Renjie, and senior members of the Shanghai Troupe.<sup>4</sup>

## The “Festival 99” Version, Directed by Chen Shi-Zheng

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John Rockwell, whose idea it was to perform *Peony Pavilion* in a days-long format, originally thought of staging it in a manner that “possibly harkened back to Tang’s time.” To him this meant faith in textual completeness and in what can be revealed through “a creative reinterpretation of the past.” Both ideas are unheard of in China, where respect for tradition is more important than returning spirit to an authentic (but lost) past. Once hired to direct, Chen Shi-Zheng ran with Rockwell’s concept, in a direction that put him on a collision course with Kun opera. In Shanghai, he pointed out in interviews that *Peony Pavilion* was not written for performance as a Kun opera but as a *chuanqi* opera, which is not at all the same thing. Kun opera is a particular *style* of *chuanqi*—the most elegant and formalized style in Tang’s day—and Chen had in mind a more expansive recreation of Ming theater, which would capture both the liveliness of early *chuanqi* and the social and cultural atmosphere of the time when it first became popular.

Chen’s point, historically accurate, gave him more scope in realizing Rockwell’s mandate. What resulted was a production that showcased the earthy humor of Tang’s text and curtailed the stylized elegance favored in performances of Kun opera. In was a long and very bawdy scene sung by the sexually deformed Sister Stone (“Sorceress of the Dao”); out were many elaborately choreographed movements in “The Interrupted Dream,” long familiar to Kun opera’s fans. Qian Yi performed her famous solo aria (“Shanpoyang”) while seated, instead of maneuvering her body around a table using prescribed movements designed to suggest—*delicately*—the anguish of frustrated desire. For a ghostly tryst with her lover in “Disrupted Joy,” she was seated on the lap of Wen Yuhang (as Liu Mengmei), a posture inconceivable in a traditional staging of the scene.

Chen’s decision to use other kinds of performances in his production lent variety to the staging (part of his project to recreate Ming theatrical experiences for contemporary audiences), but elicited the “hodgepodge” label from his detractors, who were indignant at the claim (subsequently revoked) that his was an “authentic” version of *Peony Pavilion*. Stilt-walking, skip-rope, and other children’s games contributed to the *re’nao* atmosphere in scene 8, and two pivotal scenes that feature Liu Mengmei with Bridal’s portrait (24 and 26) were staged as *pingtan* (storytelling in Wu dialect with musical accompaniment). Puppeteers performed in some of the military scenes, and an elaborate funeral ceremony concluded the second segment. Realistic props and techniques were used, to the dismay of Kun opera purists. Prostitutes dumped real water from real wooden chamber pots into a pond that fronted the stage, and funeral mourners wore hemp robes and burned paper objects and braziers, including a troupe of opera actors fashioned of paper. These touches went over well in New York but not in Shanghai, where critics complained that Chen had undertaken a “confused artist’s project.”

With hindsight, it is easy to see why the combined visions of John Rockwell and Chen Shi-Zheng met with growing resistance in Shanghai. What proved decisive was the overwhelmingly negative response to the “dregs” that Chen resurrected from Tang’s text. Himself trained in *huaguxi*, a form of Hunanese opera, Chen had taken on Kun opera’s aesthetic dogma, which countenances common (silly) touches only if they are performed elegantly and looks askance at theater that is improvisational and unscripted. With the authorities in Shanghai, it cut no ice that most of Chen’s “dregs” (Sister Stone, the prostitutes, villagers at their games and much more) originated with Tang Xianzu; but a review in New York’s Chinese-language press, written after the show had had its successful run there in 1999, had this to say about their efforts to censor them:

The artistic achievement of the complete *Peony Pavilion* ... has become caught up in



nationalistic feelings of contemporary Chinese who are both extremely proud and lacking in self-confidence; this naturally has made an even-handed critique of the play more difficult. Opinion that criticizes portions of *Peony Pavilion* as vulgar, superstitious and feudal runs up against a serious contradiction. On the one hand it elevates Tang Xianzu's genius as high as the sky and frets that an insufficiently cultivated director and uncomprehending foreigners will misunderstand his labor of the heart, but these very critics are willing temporarily to forget that the person who wrote these lewd words was Tang Xianzu himself. Since everyone can agree about the artistic level of *Peony Pavilion*, and also agrees that a complete performance of it is a happy event, then no one has the right to decide for Tang Xianzu which parts of the stage language can be put before foreign audiences.<sup>5</sup>



The *Peony Pavilion* that Peter Sellars brought before foreign audiences had a contemporary look, but its underlying aesthetic had more in common with that of Kun opera than did Chen Shi-Zheng's. A set consisting of translucent panels, mounted on wheels and inset with television monitors, adhered conceptually to a minimalist expressionism reminiscent of traditional Chinese staging techniques. There were few props (Chen used more than a thousand); Sellars relied instead on colors (displayed on the television monitors and projected onto a backdrop), images (also projected on the television monitors), and choreographed movement to convey the layers of meaning in Tang's text. Known for the detailed attention he gives to the texts of operas he stages, Sellars's multilayered approach to Tang's text also had more in common with Kun operatic staging techniques than did Chen's. In interviews he spoke of his collaboration with Hua Wenyi and Tan Dun as motivated by a utopian vision of ideal love and impassioned youth. In this respect too his determination to elicit performances free of anything crass had more to do with the lyricism of Kun opera than Chen Shi-Zheng's folksy naturalism did.

That said, other aspects of Sellars's direction were intended to deliver a shock and did, because they departed radically from classical Chinese opera's staging conventions. The first shock was delivered in Part One, when Hua Wenyi appeared onstage to perform the traditional Kun opera movements dressed in a yellow silk pantsuit and wearing Western-style make-up, lightly applied. An even greater shock was delivered at the beginning of Part Two by Tan Dun's music, which was composed along principles similar to those for Kun opera (linear melodies, melismatic singing, repetition of musical motifs), but performed by a band that was anchored by rock drums, Midi horns, and pipa rather than the traditional clapper and flute.

Sellars's Bridal Du was Everywoman, not just the passionate but demure seventeenth-century Chinese young woman, but also a diva-like seductress in her ghostly incarnation (as performed by the soprano Ying Huang) and rebellious teenager (as portrayed in English by the Asian-American actress Lauren Tom). Sellars is fond of using contemporary elements in his productions of classic operas, which can be jarring to sensibilities but are put there to "test the present against the past" and capture important dimensions of the work that are apt to be missed in conventional productions.<sup>7</sup> It was fun to watch these touches appear and disappear during rehearsals and over the course of the show's tour. One that did not make it out of rehearsal was to have Lauren Tom aim an invisible machine gun in the direction of Madam Du as she tells Liu Mengmei that "I owe you a debt greater than to my own father and mother" (a vestige of Sellars's interest in how Tang portrays family relationships in the play). Another that did make it into performances was to have Joel de la Fuente as Liu Mengmei wear a bandanna and carry a knapsack, modern substitutes for the traditional umbrella sported by *sheng* actors on their travels.

A more penetrating example of this fondness for arresting juxtapositions was Sellars's decision to cast English-speaking Asian-Americans in the lead roles (one of three leading pairs). This was dictated by a plan, subsequently abandoned, to perform the play on two evenings and include more material from the final third of Tang's text (scenes 36—55). In these late scenes Liu Mengmei's character comes to the fore; devoting an evening to them would rescue his character from the emasculating portrayal (as Sellars sees it) of highborn young males by the "fan-carrying" *sheng* actors of Kun opera. Sellars was determined to give Liu Mengmei back his voice as frustrated student and free him to speak for disenfranchised youth, especially the Chinese youth who were brutally silenced in Tian'anmen Square.

Sellars hoped that Liu Mengmei's voice would be heard by audiences in China, but for audiences in Europe and North America he broke with his usual practice of staging operas in their original language. In Part One, Lauren Tom's spoken English helped to bridge the language gap, as did Yin Huang and Lin Qiang's performance of Tan's music in Part Two, which was composed to accompany Birch's translation. After Vienna, surtitles were also used, selectively, for some of the most difficult arias. This manner of putting the Chinese text and English translation in dialogue with each other differed from Chen Shi-Zheng's approach, which was to rely exclusively on surtitles. Chen and his collaborators created a new translation, which drew on Birch's at times but more often departed from it. One goal, clearly, was to make the text more accessible, but this was achieved with a good deal of mangling of Tang's beautiful but obscure language.

One example from scene 10 must suffice to make my point. Professor Birch has written elsewhere of an aria from that scene, which is sung by the Flower Spirit as he witnesses the lovemaking that is taking place offstage.<sup>8</sup> This aria exemplifies the difficulty of Tang's language, which Professor Birch's translation (p. 49) captures well. Compare the English translation used by Chen, part of which I managed to scribble in my notes in New York:

Yin and Yang are so involved  
See them writhe and squirm like worms.  
But this meeting is a mirage  
It is in their minds.  
Their lust has stained my flower bed.  
Rain petals down,  
Or else she will never want to wake up from her dream.

Sellars believes that the opera house is "a good place to hold civic discussions about large-scale issues," and is committed to a politically engaged theater that asks its audience to notice the present rather than escape from it.<sup>9</sup> His direction of Mozart operas and Bach cantatas discovers political dimensions that have escaped the notice of other directors, and his reading of Professor Birch's translation of *The Peony Pavilion* similarly has recovered political messages that have gone unnoticed in China. Tang Xianzu's portrayal of Liu Mengmei is complicated enough to accommodate—barely—Sellars's interpretation of the character, but I regretted a missed opportunity, seized upon by Chen Shi-Zheng, to bring out the humor that Tang Xianzu directs at the impoverished but brash student.

In the end, overt political messages fell victim to the collaborative nature of Sellars's project. Hua Wenyi was uncomfortable from the outset with this part of Sellars's plan, in part because she hoped that the work would be performed in China and knew that thinly disguised references to the events of 1989 would doom those chances. Tan Dun was more interested in the Daoist and Buddhist dimensions of Tang's play, and it was these elements of Tan's score that Sellars responded to in his direction of Part Two, "Three Nights of Making Love to a Ghost."

The *Peony Pavilion* that had its world premiere in Vienna incorporated fragments from scenes performed only rarely or never as *zhezixi*, especially in Part Two, which was built around a core sequence consisting of scenes 27, 28, 30, and 32. Even so, as noted above, Sellars's "luscious, beautiful, romantic evening" was more akin to Kun opera than the Chen Shi-Zheng marathon, which resurrected satire suppressed in the tradition of performing *zhezixi*.<sup>10</sup> Sellars did depart from the oft-cited saccharine depictions of lovemaking favored on the cleaned-up post-Liberation stage in China. Known for his dark depiction of sexuality in productions of Mozart operas, his depictions of lovemaking, especially in Part Two, were not always pretty. Hua Wenyi, partnered by a modern dancer (Michael Schumacher), was exempted from portraying Bridal's sexuality in an overtly physical way out of

deference to the decorum of Kun opera, but for the other two pairs of actors the lovemaking was physically energetic, erotically explicit, and at times wildly unrestrained.

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## Cultural Politics and Audience Reception

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The politics that swirled around Chen Shi-Zheng's *Peony* probably had less to do with his reading of Tang's play than with the awkward position in which he found himself as an expatriate Chinese directing China's premier Kun opera troupe. Backed by powerful interests in Europe and North America but himself positioned as a folk artist in China's cultural field, Chen pitted himself against the cultural establishment in Shanghai. As a Hunanese with an American passport, he was doubly the outsider there, and brought with him a director-centered style acquired during his years of graduate study at New York University. *The Peony Pavilion* was enthusiastically received by audiences who attended two full dress rehearsals in Shanghai; displeasure with it was concentrated in government bureaus and in well connected circles of Kun opera experts in Shanghai and overseas. Both constituencies rightly saw Chen's methods and aims as an assault on how cultural work is carried out in China, at least where Kun opera is concerned. Sellars, Hua, and Tan avoided their wrath by working only with artists based in North America.

What Sellars risked in his staging of the work—a risk he always takes—was incomprehension of his unique stage language, which makes demands of the audience by defamiliarizing theatrical conventions. Sellars draws the viewer into the beauty of the illusion he and his actors create, and simultaneously distances him or her from it by exposing the technical apparatus of the theater and setting up dualities that compel intellectual engagement with what is happening onstage (and a lot of other things happening). A Sellars opera is always, at one level, about opera, and appeals to people who enjoy theater at the cutting edge. It is not surprising that Chen's marathon version is the one that is still on tour; it is much more accessible than Sellars's intense and packed evening.<sup>11</sup>

Where do these international productions fit in the long history of Kun opera, in which *Peony Pavilion* has had such a prominent place? Are they likely to have the stimulating effects on Chinese opera that their creators envisioned? In the short run, the collaboration with Lincoln Center and other international backers of Chen Shi-Zheng's production has been disastrous for the Shanghai Kun Opera Troupe. It lost two of its most talented young performers, the *dan* actress Qian Yi and flautist Zhou Ming, who resigned from the troupe so that they could go abroad and form the nucleus of Chen Shi-Zheng's resurrected production. Despite a substantial infusion of money by the Chinese government to mount the 7-hour 1999 production (reportedly 3 million RMB), morale at the troupe, especially among the younger performers, is low. When I went to Shanghai in the spring of 1999, rehearsals of the 7-hour version were off limits, the doors of the troupe's theater were closed, and actors I had gotten to know on previous trips were inaccessible. What little I heard about the rehearsals was disheartening, and what I have read about the performances in Beijing suggests that the show was a flop.

There were, however, some fine performances in the Beijing production and some interesting ideas. This production also used three pairs of actors to play the lead roles, combining the talents of two generations of performers at the troupe and recruiting a Beijing opera actress to portray Bridal as a ghost. But the staging, which according to one account seemed inspired by karaoke and television variety shows, sounded tacky, especially by comparison with the elegant set of Sellars's production. Neon peonies figured prominently (Sellars—more appropriately, in my view—made the plum the predominant floral image); there was a catwalk perhaps inspired by kabuki; fog machines; and multicolored lighting that pulsed at climactic moments such as the lovemaking duet in scene 10. The brigade of flower maidens—a traditional actor-inspired embellishment of scene 10 that has no presence in Tang's text—was also deployed for scenes 23 and 24, to give testimony to the underworld judge and present Liu Mengmei with Bridal's portrait. One way that this production clearly responded

to Chen Shi-Zheng's was the inclusion of scenes from the final third of the play in Part Three, but Liu Bao was the focal figure, not Liu Mengmei. One critic, no doubt inadvertently, echoed Chen Shi-Zheng when he admired how the Shanghai team had "extrapolated a swath of China's social history in their staging, and "restored the richness from every level of society contained in Tang Xianzu's great work."<sup>12</sup>

David Rolston, in a critique of the Lincoln Center marathon for *Asian Theatre Journal*, did not find Chen's staging particularly innovative, but acknowledged that the audience response was "overwhelmingly positive" and hoped that the expense of such complete stagings of *chuanqi* would not rule them out in the future. If and when it makes its way to Beijing (a possibility according to John Rockwell), Chen's production will likely get a warmer reception at the end of its world tour than it did at the beginning.

It will take time to gauge the impact of these non-traditional stagings of Kun opera, but long before they were undertaken, study of *Peony Pavilion* in English was well underway. In China, enjoyment of Tang's playtext as armchair drama has always been limited to the small number of readers capable of understanding its difficult language; most who knew and loved the play did so from seeing it on the stage. Outside of China, however, *Peony Pavilion* has been enjoyed almost exclusively as literature, and the following brief survey of critical literature about it will attest.

C. T. Hsia's pioneering essay "Time and the Human Condition in the Plays of T'ang Hsien-tsu" remains a valuable introduction to Tang's dramatic oeuvre.<sup>13</sup> Hsia was the first modern critic in an English language to argue for philosophic consistency in Tang's plays, since in each of them he examined human feelings (*qing*) under the "tyranny of time." Hsia was responding to Chinese critics who found a disappointing break between Tang's affirmative depiction of love in his first three plays and his pessimistic treatment of it in the last two. In a chapter entitled "The Late Ming Moment," Wai-ye Li has also given a penetrating analysis of Tang's depiction of *qing* in his plays, in the context of the late Ming literati's fascination with dreams and the theater.<sup>14</sup> Like Hsia, she finds consistency in Tang's plays, even though the mood moves from comic reconciliation of passion and dispassion in *Peony Pavilion* to greater detachment in *Nankeji* and *Handanji*, where human attachments are concerned.

Professor Birch is the other scholar who has introduced Tang's plays to the English-speaking world in a series of articles, his translation of the complete play, and in a chapter devoted to Tang in his aforementioned book on late Ming theater.<sup>15</sup> Subsequent to this first wave of work, several dissertations on Tang Xianzu were written, notably Cheng Pei-kai's study of the playwright's life, thought, and dramatic oeuvre, Wei Hua's study that contextualizes Tang's playwriting techniques with respect to Chinese ideas of harmony (*he*), and a dissertation by Chen Jingmei that looks at female readers of *Peony Pavilion*.<sup>16</sup>

Dorothy Ko also devotes a chapter to female readers of *Peony Pavilion* in her influential study of seventeenth-century women's lives and culture (a book that Sellars specifically mentioned to me for its impact on his thinking about the play).<sup>17</sup> Judith Zeitlin has contributed an article about a particular coterie of female readers married to the same man, who published their commentaries on the play in an edition of *Peony Pavilion* commonly referred to as the "Three Wives" edition. Zeitlin has also examined Tang's depiction of Du Liang as ghost in several articles, which combine the perspectives of literary critic, art historian, and scholar of Chinese medicine.<sup>18</sup>

Two other studies foreground Tang Xianzu's interest in illusion and representation, a subject first taken up by Wai-ye Li. Anne Burkus-Chasson examines the treatment of Bridal Du's self-portrait in "Disquieting Doubles: The Body in the Portrait and the Illusory Shape of the Self in *The Peony Pavilion*,"<sup>19</sup> and finds that the representation of the self in Bridal's portrait suggests the self's transience. Tina Lu grapples with similar questions regarding the stability of personal identity in her profoundly illuminating book *Persons, Roles, and Minds: Identity in Peony Pavilion and Peach Blossom Fan*.<sup>20</sup>

Mine is the only study in English thus far that examines how *Peony Pavilion* has been performed. It is centrally concerned with the tradition of staging it as a Kun opera, but two chapters are devoted to the international productions discussed in this essay. Articles on these productions by Judith Zeitlin, David Rolston, and myself have also appeared in the issue of *Asian Theatre Journal* cited in note 1. Without a doubt, there is more to come.

## Postscript

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While revising this introduction for publication, I have learned, via John Rockwell, of a decision by cultural authorities in China to draw up a ten-year plan to save Kunqu, the “mother of traditional Chinese traditional opera,” whose artists have dwindled in number to only 800 because of poor pay, declining audience support, and defections to other forms of opera and popular music. An article in Hong Kong’s *South China Morning Post*, which appeared on September 10, 2001, reported that the plan came at the initiative of UNESCO, which in May of that year added Kun opera to its list of masterpieces of oral and intangible human heritage. The article mentions Cai Zhengren, head of the Shanghai Kun Opera Troupe, who acknowledged that international recognition helped highlight concerns for Kunqu’s plight.

It is too early to say how successful these rescue efforts will be, but without a doubt the international productions of *Peony Pavilion* discussed here have been instrumental in bringing the concerns about.



## Notes

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[1](#) Some arias, however, were abridged. This production originally had four co-sponsors (The Lincoln Center Festival, Festival d'Automne à Paris, The Sydney Festival, and The Hong Kong Arts Festival) once resurrected, its co-sponsors were Lincoln Center (with substantial help from Bloomberg News) and Festival d'Automne à Paris.

[2](#) See both his Introduction and his chapter on Tang in *Scenes for Mandarins: The Elite Theater of the Ming* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995).

[3](#) *Chuanqi* (“southern drama”) refers to a form of drama that originated in the south of China before the Yuan dynasty (1260—1368) and came to be referred to by that name c. 1400. By 1550 Kun opera was becoming the dominant musical style of *chuanqi*, and it would remain so until the emergence of Beijing opera in the eighteenth century. Unlike *zaju* (“northern drama”), which it supplanted, *chuanqi* are very long, and *Peony Pavilion*'s fifty-five scenes make it among the longest.

[4](#) The above account draws from two chapters in my book, *Peony Pavilion Onstage: Four Centuries in the Career of a Chinese Drama* (Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies, The University of Michigan, 2001). Jiang Jurong's concise performance history of the play, “*Mudan ting yanchu xiaoshi*” (A short performance history of *Peony Pavilion*), was published as a fifteen-page insert in *Shanghai xiju*, no. 6 (June 1998).

[5](#) John Rockwell lays out the history of the Lincoln Center production in “Love, Death and Resurrection, in and of *The Peony Pavilion*,” *Kaikodo Journal* 15 (spring 2000): 10—24. I have written an account of Chen's production, based largely on coverage of it in the Shanghai press, in chapter 7 of my book. The reporter quoted is Lin Qianxiu, “*Mudan ting luomu shengzhong zhengyi wei pingxi*” (Midst Applause as the Curtain Falls on *The Peony Pavilion*, Controversy Has Not Yet Quieted Down), *Shijie ribao*, 12 July 1999.

[6](#) This account is based on chapter 6 of my book. Quotations from other items are cited below.

[7](#) See David Littlejohn, “What Peter Sellars Did to Mozart,” in *The Ultimate Art: Essays Around and About Opera* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 142.

[8](#) Birch's discussion of the Flower Spirit's aria comes at the beginning of his chapter devoted to *The Peony Pavilion in Scenes for Mandarins*.

[9](#) See Mark Pappenheim, “Shock Tactics,” *BBC Music Magazine*, March 2001, 42, and Littlejohn, “What Peter Sellars Did to Mozart,” 142.



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