

## FEATURE

# How I Enjoyed The Peony Pavilion!

By Chia-Hui Shih

I enjoyed the performance of *The Peony Pavilion* so much that I wrote of my experiences with the show in two parts: first my overall impression as a layman and then my appreciation of the performance on each of the three days that the show lasted.

### Part I: A Layman's Experience

On September 22 to 24, I watched *The Peony Pavilion* at the Barclay Theater in Irvine, Calif. It was presented by a Chinese Kunqu opera company from Suzhou, Jiangsu Province. Tang Xian Zu (the Ming Dynasty, 1550- 1616) wrote the libretti, originally consisting of 55 acts.

I have never seen a Kunqu production, nor even heard any recital of Kunqu. My closer encounter with the play came some twenty years ago when I read a play written by Bai Xian Yong (the producer of *The Peony Pavilion*) named "Visiting a Garden, Startled in a Dream". It was based on one episode of *The Peony Pavilion*.



The melodies (if they could be called melodies, more like tones) in Kunqu are quite different from those in the popular Jingju (Peking Opera), are more monotonous—at least to the untrained ears of mine. On the other hand, the non-singing parts, such as the movement of eyes, hands, and arms; walking styles of men and women; and the dialogue were quite similar to those in Jingju. Actually I had expected that the spoken lines would be the dialect of Suzhou, but it turned out to be a mixture of Mandarin and some Jiangsu dialects, including that of Suzhou.

Just like in Jingju, the stage design was minimal and abstract; place and scenery were suggested by a few pieces of desk and chairs and through the acting of the actors. However, unlike

Jingju in the past, the background screen was projected with various abstract designs of broad brushworks to imply the locales as well as to enhance the aura of the events taking place. Facilitated with modern lightening and mechanical gadgetry, the stage was much more elaborate than a truly traditional Chinese opera stage. The raised ramp along the background screen from where many actors entered and left had a flowing and aerodynamic line. Obviously it has a modern touch.



The first day's play ended as a tragedy with the death of Du Liniang, the heroine; the second day, a high drama of life, death, mystery, suspense, resurrection, and the uniting of the lovers; and the third day concluded with lots of humor, actions (acrobats), and a happy ending. If I have time only to attend one day's performance, I might have chosen the second day. On the other hand, the first day contains the most famous story line that makes *The Peony Pavilion* a widely known drama. Concerning the third day, there are at least two favorable factors: 1. Unlike the Greeks, Chinese like to see a happy ending? the so-called, Grand Reunion (*Da Tuan Yuan*). 2. The show time happened to be a Sunday matinee, convenient for many out-of-towners. No doubt, in order to enjoy a complete treat, it is best to see all three days.

The cast was excellent. All the actors are of first rate. The protagonists, the heroine Du Liniang and the hero Liu Mengmei, are played by two elegant performers who are radiant with youth and energy, making it very believable that this is a love story between a young couple. Even with the heavy traditional theatric makeup, one

can still discern the natural Chinese beauty of Du Liniang. She was like a beauty walking out of a Chinese scroll of "Beautiful Woman," a particular genre in Chinese paintings. Her singing voice was crisp and pure, though on the second day, sometimes a little throaty and dark, but still pleasing. Occasionally I was not so comfortable when she (or any other singer) sang high notes, as the sound was piercing and too metallic to my ears. I guess the microphone had exaggerated the effect. The theater is small and has nice acoustics.

In a Chinese love story, the hero is always a fair looking scholar (a white-faced litterateur.) He is usually feminine looking with a gentle demureness, even sissy. His singing is in the range of soprano, using falsetto. The young man who played Liu was strikingly handsome, tall and slender, quintessential young man of the class of literati. Once in a while he sang with a low and darker natural voice of good quality.

All the dancing routines were very well executed. The dancers, men or women, were of uniform built and height. One could still see some movements not perfectly aligned, but after all, they were not robots. The acrobatics were, as expected in any professional Chinese opera, excellent but not overly showy. Battle scenes were concise and precise. All costumes were so elaborate and superbly designed that they must have cost a fortune.

The English subtitles were obviously done by professionals. The Chinese Qu (a style of Chinese poetic singing, developed in the Yuan Dynasty) was not always easy to understand. I

had to read the English subtitles right below the Chinese ones from time to time. This made Kunqu watching a very busy task: paying attention to the stage, listening to the singing and the orchestra, and reading the Chinese and the English subtitles. Qu, being used for theatric plays, in my humble opinions, is not as elegant and as well formed as Shi and Ci. Qu could be at times colloquial and even a little vulgar.

The English translation was helpful; in general, it is smooth, flowing, and often poetic. But I must say that sometimes I was not completely satisfied. For example, translating “Shu Sheng” as “student” may not sound right; perhaps *Élittérateur*; is more appropriate. I found it interesting that a refined young woman such as Liniang referred herself as “An”. I thought that only the uneducated man-laborers in northern China call themselves that. In Peking Opera, a refined woman would refer herself as “Qie or Nu-Jia” , a very humble self-reference.

I like the orchestra a lot. Western musical instruments, such as cello, violin and perhaps others were used. The West and East seemed to have mingled well.

The whole production was executed in such a refined and deliberate manner; every step and positioning seemed to be choreographed. I



compare it with Suzhou silk embroidery, beautiful, smooth, exquisite, and harmonious. A friend asked me, “Based on what you said—You are more used to Western music, Kun qu sounds monotonous, and the stage is very austere—why weren’t you bored when watching the show all three days? Well, here is my answer: The Peony Pavilion was exotic and educational; the cast was superb; the movements were lyrical and poetic; it had a mesmerizing aura; the story had a modern theme yet surrealistic, thus interesting; and it was a visual treat. Besides, I appreciated the monumental effort that all these people—musicians, artists, scholars, and technical staff—have made to give us a chance to experience this extravaganza. I felt lucky and privileged to have seen it in its entirety, mostly likely, a once-in-a-lifetime experience.

## Part II

### Performance of Three Days

#### Day One - Garden, Dream, Lovesick, and Death

Synopsis — Du Liniang, a beautiful sixteen years old maiden, was brought up by her Confucianist father according to the strict Confucian norms. Her father hired an old fashioned private tutor to teacher her, along with her maid companion Chun Xiang, poetry and literature. One day Chun Xiang found Liniang roaming in the garden behind the study, mesmerized by the charming spring scene. Soon falling asleep, Liniang dreamed in a Peony Pavilion beside a plum tree. She saw a young man with a willow branch (a hint on his name Liu) approach her. They fell in love at first sight. The young man asked her to write a poem. Later they



made love under the plum tree. But the fallen petals of the plum blossom awakened her.

From that day on, Liniang fell seriously ill, yearning for her dreamed lover. In spite of all the medical care provided her, she withered away day by day. On her last day, she painted a self-portrait, composed the poem requested by her lover, and wrote it on a scroll. Since she did not know his name, she wrote her poem by reference to the plum or the willow. She confided in Chun Xiang about her lover and asked her to hide the portrait under a rock by the pond in the garden. She asked her mother to bury her under the plum tree. Then she died.

This whole episode is like a poem, filled with passion, yearning, fantasy, and beautiful visual presentation. The overall aura of was dreamy, romantic, erotic, and surrealistic. There were a few light-hearted moments, provided by Chun Xiang who was delightful and mischievous and down to earth, in contrast to her proper-mannered mistress. The two maidens practically performed the entire show.

I noticed that Chun Xiang was smaller in size compared to her mistress. It reminded me that in paintings of traditional China, medieval Europe, India, or Persia, the less important persons were deliberately drawn smaller than the more important ones. I wonder if this was the very consideration when the cast was chosen. The attires they wore indicated, naturally, their social status. Chun Xiang always wore a pair of trousers under her gown because she needed to move swiftly from one spot to another. She could run and jump; but her mistress could not and, of course, would not.

Liniang's mother looked matronly but young. Since her daughter was only sixteen, she might be in her middle thirties. But her dress revealed that she was a mature and married woman of status. She also had a good clear voice; unlike the dark soprano voice of elder woman in Jingju, her voice was natural.

The garden scene in springtime was very enchanting. It was effectively depicted by projecting the background screen with splashes of colors of warm tones. What was painted on the screen looked very beautiful and modern, obviously an innovation.

It took everyone's breath away when the flower goddesses filed in. Of similar height and size, they wore capes embroidered with different flowers. They moved with tiny and rapid steps, hidden under their gowns, as if they were sliding or, as someone said, floating. Their shoulders stayed at the same level without wavering, thus giving the illusion of a continuous flow. Their dance was also well choreographed.

Lovemaking in Chinese opera can be normally shown through highly abstract movements. The lovers never kiss or embrace, not even touching hands. Yet their dancing movements, accentuated by their long sleeves in parallel motion, and their eye contact produced a highly romantic and passionate atmosphere. No work in Jingju dares to include such a scene. As far as I know, the lovemaking scene in Liniang's dream is unique in Kunqu. Their long sleeves wrapped around or laid on top of one another; mingling, dismantling, gathering, separating, up and down, in and out, almost like having a life of their own. Their bodies whirled around, getting closer, touching slightly, then away; facing one another, then fading away. The gentle and subtle choreography suggested, in an abstract and poetic way, their physical intimacy.

Liniang performed very well for her passion toward Liu Mengmei and her feeling toward her mother and Chun Xiang, each with a different relationship. In her death scene, Liniang, Chun Xiang, and her mother acted out enormous emotion through the libretto, singing tone, and movements. The act of Liniang approaching her mother on her knees to say goodbye was extremely touching. I saw a big Caucasian man wipe his eyes again and again. My eyes were wet too.

When Liu appeared in Liniang's dream, he was the first actor who impressed me as a quintessential handsome *littérateur*. He and Liniang made a believable couple in love. His calling her "Jie Jie"(elder sister) was so charming in tone that it caused a string of giggles. Actually Liniang was younger than Liu who was in his early twenties. I do not understand why the playwright used "Jie Jie" instead of "Mei Mei"(younger sister), which was more intimate. Perhaps it was a local custom.

I was very charmed by the Suzhou dialect spoken by the Daoist priestess, the Venerable Stone. With the help of the subtitles, I could understand what she was saying. It really added colors to the show. Her recitation of her life story was honest and unabashed.

A weakness, if I may say so, was the loose structure of the play sometimes. One single story splitting into three days might have caused the problem. For example, the bandit, his wife, and their entourage who appeared in day 1 had no connection to the story being developed at a later time.

The first day's play ended with a dramatic stage design. The visual impact was magnificent when the flower goddesses escorted Liniang to the underworld. Instead of wearing a traditional white robe associated with death according to Chinese tradition, Liniang wore a bright red cape and walked (or rather floated) to the upstage as the long train of her cape slowly untangled and spread out into a huge red pond below a red waterfall. At the top of the platform, she turned and faced the audience, regal and serene. I was very impressed by the stage design and the choreography.

I read in the synopsis that the reason for Liniang to wear red instead of white after her death was to hint that her death was not her ultimate fate, and that she would be resurrected in the future. I think it was an unwise extrapolation. A successful drama contains twisting of events, local climaxes, and suspense. The intention is to grasp the audience's interest so that they would

want to find out the rest of the story. Whether it is happiness turning into tragedy or vice versa, the author would want the audience to feel appropriate moods at different stages as the story developed. Since the first day's drama was supposed to be a tragedy, then it should end as a tragedy. Using red color to imply future happy ending defied the proper effect of the first day's drama.

There was also one minor mishap. The opening scene was in the study of Liniang's father. Four huge scrolls, each with a line of a poem, were hanging on the background wall. The scrolls were hung in such a way that poem must be read from left to right instead of the traditional Chinese way, from right to left. I do not know whether this was deliberate or an oversight.

## Day 2 - Underworld, Garden, Nunnery, Affair, Resurrection

Synopsis - Du Liniang was led to the underworld's judge to be determined which purgatory she was to be sent to. The judge found out that she was destined to marry Liu Mengmei, who would be the next literary laureate. The judge ordered the garden deity and the flower goddesses to preserve her body. The ghost of Liniang would be resurrected, however, only when the proper time arrived. Three years later, Liu was on his way to the capital to participate in the National Civil Service Examination. He fell sick in a place near Liniang's home. Liniang's ex-tutor came to his assistance and let him recuperate in a nunnery headed by the Venerable Stone that was next to the garden of Liniang's home.

As Liu recovered on a spring day, he wandered into the garden. He accidentally discovered Liniang's portrait on a scroll with a poem on it under a rock by the pond. He realized the woman on the painting to be the beauty he came to meet in a dream he had. He was very much intrigued by the poem, for it contained his name Liu (willow) and Mei (plum). In ecstasy, he took the scroll back to his room. Every day he looked at it, adored it, talked to it, and called out Jie Jie.





Liniang's ghost came to him, and they became lovers. The Venerable Stone discovered their affair and was willing to help them out. She helped Liu to dig out Liniang's body from under the plum tree, and Liniang returned back to life. But Liniang's ex-tutor discovered that the grave was dug and notified the authority. The lovers and Stone were forced to escape on a river boat. Stone married them on route so that they would not be living in immorality.

The second day's story was most dramatic and complex. Liniang was particularly beautiful when she appeared as a ghost. Wearing a pure white gown, she looked stunningly like a ghost, especially so in her dreamy movements. It was one of the most charming and haunting scenes I have seen.

In this episode, Liu's acting was most intensive, taking twenty minutes to cover the scenes of discovery, astonishment, and exhilaration. I saw through my binoculars his perspiration dripping down his eyebrows. I was worried if he could sustain to the end.

Liniang certainly was a pioneer for the Women's Lib. She was not shy from pursuing her sexual pleasure. Yet she was far from being an unabashed liberated woman. When Stone was going to marry the two lovers, Liniang told Liu that she was still a virgin. Only her spirit had a love affair with him.

### Day 3 - Path to the Grand Reunion

Synopsis—Liu finished his examination at the capital and, without waiting for the results, went his way to look for Liniang's parents so as to tell them of Liniang's resurrection and of their marriage. At that time, Liniang's father of was an officer in charge of defense of a strategic city

against the invading forces of the Jin, a tribal people from the northeast. Liniang's mother and Chun Xiang had to leave that city for safety reason but lost their way. They accidentally ran into Liniang. Mother and Chun Xiang were shocked in disbelief that Liniang came back to life; the three women were then happily reunited.

Liniang's father in the meantime successfully defended the city, and Liu presented himself to the father. Upon hearing Liu's story of Liniang's resurrection and their marriage, the father could not believe him and imprisoned him for fabricating the story. Meanwhile, the result of the Civil Service examination was announced, and Liu won the top honor. The couriers of the good news found Liu imprisoned. Finally, the case was brought up to the emperor, who made a judgment in favor of Liu. A grand reunion of Liniang and her family as well as a reconciliation of Liniang's father with Liu ended the show.



The third day was filled with actions and comic skits. The whole show was entertaining, with less singing or delicate acting than in the two previous days. The acts of invasion and defense were sidestepped by threats, negotiations, espionage, scheming, and bribing. Some of these

were comical, totally out-of-line with the serious atmosphere of the other episodes in the previous days. The Jin general was shown as a clown; his makeup hinted that he was a barbarian, almost not quite human; moreover, he talked with jabberwocky, quite insulting to those ethnic people.

Two minor points: One is that the mother walked with a cane on the third day performance. Since she was still in her thirties, surely it was a big exaggeration. The other is that the resurrected Liniang should not have remembered anything of her underworld experience. But in one aria she sang of the imperial guards as being more fearsome than the demons in the underworld.

Although I am picking bones out of an egg, I am very happy that I did not forfeit a single day of the three-day extravaganza.

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