

# CHINESE & JAPANESE STUDIES NEWSLETTER

## Valparaiso University

CHINESE & JAPANESE STUDIES PROGRAM  
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### *The Peony Pavilion* by Prof. John Steven Paul

I recently returned from Berkeley where I was extremely fortunate in seeing a production of *The Peony Pavilion* staged by the avant-garde director Peter Sellars at a very large theatre on the campus of the University of California. *The Peony Pavilion* is one of the plays we studied last fall, you'll remember, but I didn't find the Mackerras history text very helpful in providing images to work with. This production has helped me a great deal in this regard and I wanted to report to you about it.

This is not so much an essay (I haven't edited it very thoroughly) as it is a kind of addendum to last semester's course. Just in case I don't make it clear, this was a truly wonderful production, though not very traditional. In fact, in conjunction with the day-and-a-half of seminars that I attended, Peter Sellars' work has helped me to understand the Chinese, or at least the *kunqu* aesthetic and *kunqu* music much better. Anyway, here is my report. I begin with a review of the play itself:

On Friday, March 5, 1999, I attended a production of the Chinese *kunqu* opera *The Peony Pavilion* (Mudan Ting, 1598) by Tang Xianzu, at Zellerbach Hall on the campus of the University of California at Berkeley. It is important to know that when Peter Sellars directs he uses the text as point of departure for his own new work. His is controversial work, but it is always illuminating and usually very entertaining.

Tang Xianzu (1550-1617, a contemporary of William Shakespeare 1564-1616) lived during the Ming Dynasty and left behind him five plays of the *chuanqi*, or romance, type. (Mackerras 73) Since *chuanqi* generally used the national musical form of *kunqu* for accompaniment, *chuanqi* plays are often referred to as *kunqu* opera and some of the

performers in *The Peony Pavilion* identify themselves as *kunqu* artists.

### *The Peony Pavilion*

Tang's play has fifty-five acts and would last a score of hours were it to be produced in its entirety. Only a few of the scenes still remain in the performing repertory. Prof. John Y. H. Hu of Taiwan University summarizes the plot in this way:

The heroine of the play is Du Liniang (Bridal Du as Cyril Birch translates it), the beautiful daughter of a high-ranking official. After having had a love affair with a handsome young scholar in her dream, she pines away and draws a self-portrait before her death. Compassionate and sympathetic, Judge Hu of the underworld frees her soul and has her body preserved. She soon begins to have nocturnal trysts with Liu Mengmei, a young scholar, who has discovered and admired her self-portrait. Then, at her ardent pleas, he exhumes her body and brings her back to real life. They marry and travel to the capital, where he takes the civil service examinations. Due to the Tatar invasion, the disclosure of [the examination] result is postponed indefinitely. In sheer poverty, Mengmei visits his father-in-law seeking help, merely to be thrashed as a fraud. He is rescued in the nick of time because the invaders are defeated and he is selected as the top graduate. Du, however, can neither believe in the resurrection of his daughter nor forgive her for the self-contracted marriage. Only imperial intervention makes reconciliation and family reunion possible. (Mackerras 73-74)

Sellars begins his version of the play, using Cyril Birch's English translation (I.U. Press, the one which we used in class), at the beginning of the story and concludes with the departure of the newly married couple for the capital. (The performance lasts about three and one-half hours.) He has cut a number of Tang's characters including Liniang's father Old Du. Also gone is nearly all the comedy

of the play, a significant loss. What remains of Tang's play is a streamlined story of a passionate love between two young people that survives all obstacles including death and the grave. There is a strong resemblance to another play composed in the mid-1590's, *Romeo and Juliet*. Sellars acknowledges and emphasizes this similarity.

#### PETER SELLARS' PRODUCTION

Sellars has divided *The Peony Pavilion* into two parts which are fundamentally dissimilar. In Part I, there are two simultaneous presentations of the story up to Liniang's death. In the refined and formal classical style and the Chinese language the *kunqu* artists Hua Wenyi as Liniang and Shi Jiehua as her maid Spring Fragrance sing and dance the scenes of sixteen-year-old Liniang's first excursion into her garden at spring to the accompaniment of the traditional *kunqu* instruments: lute (PIPA), bamboo flute (DIZI), two stringed violin (ERHU), and percussion. As she falls asleep, Mengmei appears in the form of dancer Michael Schumacher and together they dance the dream of love which is interrupted short of consummation.

Weaving in and around, over and under the *kunqu* performers are American actors Lauren Tom and Joel de la Fuente who, as Liniang and Mengmei, are performing the same scenes but speaking in English and moving in a hyper-naturalistic style characteristic of an R-rated film. For the un- or semi-tutored American audience member, Sellars' stereo staging works like a good interlinear translation of the sixteenth-century text. And, he has foregrounded the eroticism of Tang's story by turning the hot-blooded Tom and Fuente loose on one another. There is a stunning section in which the young Americans pause in their writhing and the singing and accompaniment stop as Hua Wenyi and Schumacher dance a passionate *pas de deux* in complete silence.

Sellars and his designer George Tsybin have transformed the vast Zellerbach stage into a garden of earthy and technological delights. The principal scenic elements are several glass screens about 10

feet tall by five feet wide. These units are actually two pieces of glass between which are pressed shards and bubbles of color, suggesting tree peonies. The screens are lit by fluorescent tubes from the bottom. The stems of the peonies do not bloom with flowers but with video screens; each screen unit has three video screens ranging in size from 19 inches to 7 inches (my estimate). The screen units are set on casters so that actors and stage assistants can reshape them into the configurations required by the action. Other stacks of video screens frame the stage and are placed within the auditorium. The other major scenic unit is the large bed on which Du Liniang dreams of her scholar, a box (8 feet x 5 feet x 24 inches) made completely of glass or Plexiglas. The bed is also lit from the inside with fluorescent tubes. Its surface is actually a series of lids that can be opened for access to its interior filled with water. Its great weight requires 4 stage assistants to move. The peonies are reminiscent of delicate pressed flower table decorations. They are elegant and beautiful. Trailing from them, however, are long, thick cables, one for each video screen. Thus this lovely grouping of glass screens is juxtaposed to a floor littered with cabling and a vista pocked with video monitors. At left are the musicians, in full view, and at right, on a simple table, is a huge glass bowl of water, brightly lit, with a video camera suspended above it. Throughout the performance, a head-phoned technician drops flower petals of various kinds into the bowl and ripples and stirs the water creating a kind of visual underscoring on the video monitors. Down stage of this water bowl is the production stage manager who also remains in full view throughout the performance. She and her colleagues, dressed completely in black, correspond in some ways to the convention of the on stage assistants in the Asian theatre. All are completely wired for instant communication and they give the stage the feel of a sound stage or a TV studio.

The screen, whether the glass containing the peonies or the video screen, is an appropriate image for Tang Xiansu's play. For Tang there are various screens which stand between, or mediate, the world of the perceiver and the world of the real. One of

these screens is death, separating Mengmei from his ghostly lover Liniang. Another is the girl's self-portrait. In Sellars' production, while the *kunqu* paints, the contemporary Liniang repeatedly reproduces herself -- live, in real time -- on twenty-two video screens by holding a miniature TV camera to her face.

In Part II, Sellars lays a third layer of action over the *kunqu* and his own naturalistic version. Working with the contemporary Chinese composer Tan Dun, Sellars introduces a third Liniang-Mengmei pair, in this case a soprano and a tenor, to sing Tan Dun's operatic treatment of the story. Tan's music incorporates the Kunqu singing style into what he calls a new musical language for which he draws on "Monteverdi, early Medieval music and Chinese Sung Dynasty music, paintings, languages, western opera and Chinese opera and today's young people's music like pop, rap, rock, jazz, and art music." We later learn that the forty-one-year-old Tan Dun was greatly influenced by the music of John Cage, Harry Partch, and George Crum, in addition to Monteverdi.

It is in this second part that *The Peony Pavilion* becomes, in Peter Sellars' own words, "much too much." (If you want much too little, he says, go home and watch TV.) We are now looking at three simultaneous enactments of the story: one in words, one in song, and one in dance. All accompanied by a six-piece orchestra of modern and ancient instruments and a rock-'n'-roll drummer. It is impossible to take in everything that is going on. In the midst the orchestrated chaos, there are supremely effective moments, the appearance of Liniang's ghost and the exhumation of Liniang from her watery grave-- the Plexiglas bed had opened to be her burial vault -- among them. When the three Liniang's finally come together for the last line of the production, ONLY THE HAPPY BRIDE KNOWS ALL THERE IS TO KNOW, the audience flops back in its seats more with a sense of relief than catharsis.

This newsletter, produced by the Chinese & Japanese Studies Program at Valparaiso University (formerly called the East Asian Studies Program), aims to enhance communication among those who are interested in Chinese and Japanese Studies. If you wish to submit an item to the newsletter, please contact Professor Zhimin Lin at 5749 or email him (Zhimin.Lin@valpo.edu).

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