

# *A Dream in Fantasia* — A Cantonese Opera

## Based on *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

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### Abstract

This review discusses an appropriation of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* by the Hong Kong Young Talent Cantonese Opera Troupe. While retaining most of Shakespeare's characters and his basic plot structure, the new opera, *A Dream in Fantasia*, aimed to expand the audience for Cantonese opera. At the same time it proved to be transparently entertaining to its Cantonese audience.

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*A Dream in Fantasia* (adapted from William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*), with a new script by Keith Lai. Hong Kong Young Talent Cantonese Opera Troupe. Director, Lee Lung.

Cast: Lam Tin-Yao as Linghu Feng (Demetrius); Doris Kwan as Xiahou Jun (Lysander); Lam Tsz-Ching as Yuwen Piaopiao (Hermia); Cheng Nga-Kei as Murong Xiangxiang (Helena); guest artist Kwok Kai-Fai as Crown Prince Gongyang (Oberon); guest artist Leung Wai-Hong as the Crown Princess (Titania); Hong Wah as the Forest Fairy (Puck); Wong Kit-Ching as Shangguan Chan (Peter Quince); Yuen Seen-Ting as Zhuge Zi (Bottom); Keith Lai as Chanyu Xiong

(Egeus); and Wong Po-Hyun as Queen Xuanyuan (Hippolyta).

Tsuen Wan City Hall Auditorium, Hong Kong, 14 December 2013.

As I enter the theater at the City Hall of Tsuen Wan, a suburb of Hong Kong, the audience — predominantly elderly people and women — is eagerly waiting to watch *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in a Cantonese version, entitled *A Dream in Fantasia* (figure 1).<sup>1</sup> At stage right, a small Chinese orchestra is about take us to Fairyland, where four confused young lovers will try to find true love, while a group of villagers prepare a show for the Queen's birthday. In this *Dream*, most of Shakespeare's characters are represented by their Cantonese counterparts; Hermia, for example, becomes Yuwen Piaopiao; Lysander, Xiahou Jun; Helena, Murong Xiangxiang; and Demetrius, Linghu Feng.<sup>2</sup> Crown Prince Gongyang is the Oberon character, and his Princess Consort is Titania. The mechanicals are reduced in number from six to four. Their leader, Peter Quince, is Shanguan Chan, a female role in this version, and Bottom becomes Zhuge Zi, the one who is fitted with an ass's head, and who so enchants Princess Gongyang. Puck is present too, of course, as the "Forest Fairy." Finally, Queen Xuanyuan is loosely modeled on Hippolyta, but there is no Theseus. The mechanicals prepare their play for the Queen's birthday, rather than her nuptials.

The performance I attended on 14 December 2013 was the second run of a revised version, which had been premiered a year prior to this date, by the Hong Kong Young Talent Cantonese Opera Troupe Company. The show was supported financially by the Leisure and Cultural Services Department of the Hong Kong Government.

### History and Demography

After one-and-a-half centuries of British rule, Hong Kong has become a meeting place of European and Asian cultures. Among the major five opera genres in China, Cantonese opera is one of the most versatile. Cantonese is a language spoken in the capital city of Guangzhou, formerly called Canton, in the province of Guangdong. The versatility of Cantonese opera is probably due to Cantonese seaport culture: Hong Kong, Macau, and Guangzhou were some of the earliest seaports in China to open for foreign trade. Another factor adding to the adaptability of Cantonese opera is the emigration of Cantonese people overseas. Cantonese opera performance actually started more than a century ago in San Francisco and other cities in the world where Cantonese labor, restaurants, laundry shops, and grocery stores were found. Other big cities such as New York, Vancouver,

and London, and nearby countries such as Vietnam, Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand have all become diasporas of Cantonese culture, as well as sites of Cantonese opera performance.

The classical Chinese opera of the early modern period, which influenced both Beijing opera and Cantonese opera, has stayed very faithful to traditional practices. In this style, known as Kwan Kek in its Cantonese pronunciation, and as Kunju (or Kwanju) in Putonghua (Mandarin), movements in successive performances of a character are expected to stay as close as possible to the original. In contrast, Cantonese opera has more liberty for modification after each performance. Unlike many operas of China, Hong Kong Cantonese opera is constantly evolving; western instruments in the orchestra, modern stage techniques, foreign plots, and even the use of foreign words by jester characters have been introduced. (Usually, the jester is the only character with the liberty to introduce deliberate anachronisms for comic effect.) A further distinction exists between contemporary performances of Cantonese opera in Hong Kong, as compared with those in the Guangdong region of China. On the mainland, opera performance was subject to the vicissitudes of government cultural policy. In Hong Kong, Cantonese opera has retained more traditional performance practices, even as it remains open to new plots and dialogue.<sup>3</sup>

The years that followed World War II were a time of political instability in China. This led to opera workers and performers moving to Hong Kong in vast numbers. In such a time of turmoil, the quality of performance would have to wait for new immigrants in the industry to stabilize their own lives. With the rise and popularity of the movie industry in the 1950s, some performers subsequently became movie actors and actresses. A lack of support from the Hong Kong British government and global cultural trends towards westernization made performance of Cantonese opera difficult in Hong Kong. Without government help, Cantonese troupes struggled for survival for many decades. A lack of performance venues and expensive venue rental rates remain constant issues in metropolitan Hong Kong.

Like Western opera, almost all opera in China is losing audiences, especially young audiences. Westernization, the movie industry, television, computers, smart phones, and other technological advancements are all factors that contribute to the decline of opera. For the Cantonese opera of Hong Kong, one other important factor is the attitude and respect of the general public towards the opera. In the decades following World War II, opera audiences in the Westernized colony were generally regarded as old-fashioned, working or lower in social class, and as having received a relatively low level of education. In all of these respects, the audience for Cantonese opera seems quite the opposite of Western opera audiences.

Ultimately, the survival of any performing art depends on the performers, but not many young people aspire to careers in an uncertain performing-arts industry with low respect from the public. Only with an increased awareness from the general public following the transfer of sovereignty from the United Kingdom to China, reinforced by a few performers and scholars pointing out the importance of saving this valuable art form, has the new government of Hong Kong begun to face the problem. Appropriately enough (and just in the nick of time), financial help from the government started to focus on training performers of the younger generation.

After Cantonese opera was recognized by UNESCO in 2009 as a non-tangible cultural heritage, a more reasonable level of financial support began to assist the dying opera industry. Starting around 2012, after rounds of petitions by the performers and audiences, direct financial assistance from the Hong Kong Government became available. Perhaps for the first time since the Golden Age of Cantonese opera in the 1920s and 1930s, the prospects for Cantonese opera seem encouraging.

### Performance Conventions

Is Cantonese opera "opera"? Hong Kong people tend to call the opera *Yuet kek*, or *Da hay*. Both of these generic terms have a connotation of drama, even with orchestral music and singing all through the performance. *Yuet* is an abbreviation for the Province of Guangdong, and *kek* is Cantonese for "drama." The term *Yuet ju* is also used; in Chinese, it has the same written form and meaning as *Yuet kek*. While *kek* is a Cantonese word, *ju* is the Putonghua (Mandarin) transcription for drama. There have been debates among scholars and performers about whether Cantonese opera should be considered a true operatic genre like its Western counterpart, or as another genre of musical theater.

As Bell Yung explains in his influential study of Cantonese opera, the terms employed to denote *Yuet kek* in English language studies typically reflect the scholarly orientation of the author: "The musicologist prefers 'opera,' the literary scholar prefers 'drama,' and the student of theater arts prefers 'theater'" (Yung 1989, xii). Thus, my training as an ethnomusicologist inclines me to see and hear this theatrical art as opera. Most obviously, Cantonese opera combines aria and recitative throughout the performance, as does Western opera.<sup>4</sup> Too, as I will further explain below, my own formal training as a classical singer in the (western) *bel canto* tradition has sensitized me to the different, but equally specialized techniques of vocal production employed in Cantonese opera.

Most Cantonese opera plots are based on traditional folk stories that carry an instructive moral. The performers dress in elaborate traditional costumes. The performances include stylized kung fu fight scenes and traditional choreographed gestures. Even though its plot is borrowed from

a Shakespearean drama, script writer Keith Lai's *A Dream in Fantasia* includes all these traditional elements. With its setting translated to a Chinese forest, and with its music based on Cantonese scales and tune-types, it adheres to the performance conventions of Cantonese opera.

### Seeing and Hearing a Cantonese *Dream*

Returning now to City Hall Theater in Tsuen Wan, let us briefly consider the role of the orchestra seated at stage right. The Cantonese opera orchestra accompanies the singing in heterophonic texture. The musician who plays the principal melodic instrument closely follows the vocal melody, playing in unison with the singing voice but sometimes embellishing the melody. Often the instrumentalist seems to lag slightly in tempo behind the singing voice, creating the impression that he is following the singer's lead. The lead instrumentalist is known as the *tau gaa*, and his position is an important one. Bell Yung writes, "His relationship to the principal singer is extremely close and, as a result, is critical to the success of a performance" (Yung 1989, 28).

Cross-gendered and cross-costumed performances are common in Cantonese opera, as they are in Shakespeare. The two most common voice types of Cantonese opera singing are the *zi hau* and the *ping hau*. Leading female roles sing *zi hau* (soprano), regardless of the gender of the singer. Leading male roles sing *ping hau* at a lower register, also regardless of the gender of the performer. In *A Dream in Fantasia*, cross-gendered performances of the "Peter Quince," "Bottom," and "Titania" roles are foregrounded. The Peter Quince character, Shangguan Chan, is a middle-aged country woman. This role was sung by a young female singer, Ms. Wong Kit Ching (figure 2). Ms. Wong delivered her recitative at a very high pitch, and she sang so sharply and clearly that everyone in the hall could understand the story without reading the program.<sup>5</sup> (*A film clip is available in the HTML version of this document.*)

When the villagers meet to rehearse their play, there is extensive banter about cross-gendered performance. Instead of the "Most Lamentable Comedy of Pyramus and Thisbe," they plan to perform as the Eight Immortals of Taoist legend. Shangguan Chan naturally expects to play "Immortal Woman He," the only female deity among the Eight.<sup>6</sup> However, her fellow cast-members also want her to play Lu Dongbin, the leader of the Immortals. She responds, "No way, I am a feminine lead; why would I go cross-gender?" but she ends up accepting the part and eventually another male role, as well. Another of the Eight Immortals, Lan Caihe, is reputed to be of ambiguous gender, and this role is willingly accepted by Zhuge Zi: "That's right, ambiguous sex; that's me." Appropriately enough, the male role of Zhuge Zi was sung and acted by a female singer, Ms. Yuen Seen Ting (figure 3).

In the performance I saw, the role of Princess Consort Gongyang was sung by guest artist Mr. Leung Wai Hong, a powerful male singer who can also sing *zi hau* at the proper soprano register (figure 4). Titania's helpless attraction to Bottom thus becomes a scene in which a large man, cross-dressed as a woman, falls madly in love with a petite woman wearing a donkey head and cross-dressed as a man. The aria sung by the Princess is a popular tune-type, "Temple Bells." This famous aria (widely available in multiple Youtube performances) generally evokes feelings of nostalgia and unrequited love, but here it is used to comic effect.<sup>7</sup> When Mr. Leung delivered the aria, the audience clapped along with the beat, and excitement reached a climax as the tempo accelerated. Finally, the Princess Consort embraced her donkey-love, and they mimed a passionate kiss. (*A film clip is available in the HTML version of this document.*)

Mr. Leung's virtuoso performance was pivotal because his character also plays the jester role in the opera. Though technically a "princess" in the Cantonese version, his character is really a "jester-queen" type. His "queenliness" can be seen in the publicity still below, where he towers over the much smaller Zhuge Zi (figure 5). As the jester, Mr. Leung got to throw in several anachronistic, comic asides. His contemporary references, to events such as "planting grass and flowers for environmental protection" or needing an oxygen tank to catch his breath, drew laughs from the audience. He even referred directly to the expense of renting the hall and the likelihood of a financial penalty being charged, due the show's long running time: "The opera is running late; it's fortunate that the Leisure and Cultural Services Department is sponsoring this performance." Except for his very last aria, Mr. Leung sang *ping-hau* with a male voice; however, in his final aria, he turned to falsetto to sing *zi-hau* in a female voice. As far as audience reaction was concerned, Mr. Leung's performance of *zi-hau* was the climax of the opera.

Keith Lai, a graduate of the Hong Kong City University's Chinese Literature Department, is the librettist/composer of *A Dream in Fantasia*. As librettist/composer of a Cantonese opera, he was responsible for devising (or in this case adapting) the plot, writing the libretto, and selecting which pre-existing recitatives and tune types would be used. (Typically, the composer does not have to compose new music.)<sup>8</sup> With training in the English language as well as Chinese literature, Mr. Lai is one of a very small number of librettist/composers and performers to have received tertiary education in both languages.

## Reflections

Fairy tales and comic operas account for only a small proportion of the Cantonese operas. Among the 120 Cantonese opera synopses I have edited for the Opera Information Center at the Chinese University of Hong Kong (selected from the most performed titles of the past

thirty years in Hong Kong), most were serious love stories, very often involving class struggles. Love stories often circle around handsome scholars and pretty women who are in different social classes and who find their social situation drastically changed, often based on the outcome of a state civil service examination. Happy endings are the rule, but even so the traditional plots are more romantic than they are comedic. Heroic stories of male and sometimes female heroes that incorporate choreographed fight scenes account for another substantial group of plots.

As a comedy with a fairy-tale setting, *A Dream in Fantasia* is therefore atypical, and its use of a borrowed plot from western literature makes it quite unconventional. Nevertheless, for the silver-haired community of Hong Kong, who still make up the greater part of the audience for Cantonese opera, this comic story was transparently entertaining. In fact, although England ruled Hong Kong for 150 years, some of the elderly audience members, especially those not accustomed to reading the program, may not have realized that the plot was Shakespearean. Certainly, the Cantonese villagers' play, *Baat sin hor sau* (A Birthday Greeting from the Eight Immortals) is much more familiar as cultural referent in Cantonese culture than the tale of "Pyramus and Thisbe" is in Western culture.<sup>9</sup>

In *A Dream in Fantasia*, Mr. Keith Lai has succeeded in appropriating Shakespeare in a way that will be of considerable interest to students and fans of Shakespeare's theater, and certainly to scholars of Shakespearean appropriation. Yet this accomplishment would be meaningless if Mr. Lai had not also been successful in creating a Cantonese opera that fits easily within the horizon of expectations of its traditional audience. Both English theater and Cantonese opera have rich repertoires; hopefully, such blended stories and melodies of East and West will continue to enrich (and complicate) world culture in the years ahead.

### Notes

1. The English title is a bit misleading, as the work has no connection to the famous Disney film of 1940. The Chinese title translates literally as "A Dream of NanKe." It alludes to a well-known ninth-century Chinese tale in which an official falls asleep and dreams of an alternate reality.
2. Unfortunately, it has not been possible to use a single system of Romanization consistently throughout this review. Instead, the following general principles were applied. 1) Titles of works, names of characters, and names of performing artists that have appeared previously in the company's press releases or in the Anglophone press of Hong Kong are usually given as they appeared there. 2) Technical terms relating to Cantonese opera are usually given according to the Standard Cantonese Pinyin system developed by Yu Bingzhao in 1971. However, some terms that may be familiar from general studies of Chinese music in English are romanized

according to the Hanyu Pinyin system using Putonghua (the official national language of China) pronunciation.

3. Plays without music and singing arrangements did not appear on Cantonese stages until the New Culture Movement, which triggered a massive demonstration on 4 May 1919. Scholars and students advocated drastic changes in culture and values in order to resurrect a very weak China. Despite being victorious in World War I, China was required to hand over Shandong Province (which had been occupied by Germany) to Japan. The *Baak Wair Mun* Movement (*baak*, meaning simplification; *wair*, meaning language; and *mun*, meaning literature) was a movement that became part of the May Fourth Movement. *Baak Wair Mun* advocated that the Chinese language should be written in a manner closer to its spoken form so that it could be easily understood by less educated people. Quickly, modern theaters began sprouting up. These plays, with performers wearing contemporary costumes, using simplified *Baak Wair* in the dialogue, and with men and women acting as ordinary people, were designed to promote a new culture that would hopefully help to revitalize a weak country. Going to makeshift bamboo theater halls to enjoy performances (a privilege restricted to men in most parts of the country) became a newfound pleasure for girls and women.
4. It should be added that Cantonese arias and recitatives draw on a traditional repertoire of tune-types, although there are rare situations in which new arias are composed for a particular opera.
5. This is both a performance convention and a result of specialized vocal training. Cantonese opera singers keep both the hard and soft palettes lower than Western *bel canto* singers. The jaw and tongue are tight, so that all the words delivered are crystal clear. Aesthetically, the mouth of the singer opens horizontally, so that the teeth show as little as possible. Opening the mouth too wide, as in *bel canto* singing, would be considered aesthetically non-appealing. As a *bel canto*-trained singer myself, the first comment I received from my Cantonese opera teacher was that the tone I was producing was not sharp enough.
6. Inside the "play within the play," it is not possible to correlate Cantonese and Shakespearean characters. "Immortal Woman He" is one of the Taoist Eight Immortals; she has no counterpart in Shakespearean drama.
7. Also known as "The Sound of Bells from the Monastery," it was composed between 1939 and 1940. The original lyrics are about a literati who returns to his hometown only to find that his lover has been married. In despair, he becomes a monk and pours out his disappointment.
8. The process of combining a borrowed tune with newly written libretto is called *siu kok* (*siu*, meaning small; *kok*, meaning tune). *Siu-kok* is a relatively modern compositional approach. In contrast, the more traditional *baun-huang* approach utilizes the tonal characteristics of the



Cantonese language to create tunes consistent with the speech tones of the libretto. In Cantonese opera, "composing" means something close to its etymological meaning of "putting-together."

9. The Eight Immortals have even gained a popular-culture following in the West. They are featured in the classic Jackie Chan martial arts movie *Drunken Master* (1978), and in the controversial PlayStation video game *Fear Effect 2* (2001).

### Permissions

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