



Beijing Opera between East and West in Modern Times

Alexander C. Y. Huang

The modernisation of Beijing opera, also known as *jingju*, began in the early twentieth century when much of China was undergoing radical political and cultural changes. Among the genres of Chinese opera (*xiqu*), Beijing opera is young compared to *kunqu* (Kun opera) (see Wernsdörfer in this volume). However, over the years, Beijing opera has become the quintessential representation of all things Chinese, including stereotypical constructions of Chineseness such as striking painted facial patterns, percussions, acrobatics, and plays emphasising the concept of filial piety. Traditional Beijing opera repertoire is a conglomerate of a vast variety of plots with roots in various literary, historical, and legendary sources. The twentieth and twenty-first centuries have witnessed a dramatic expansion of its repertoire to include motifs and plots of Anglo-European literatures and dramas – Greek tragedies, Goethe's *Faust*, Homer's *Odyssey*, and Shakespeare's *Hamlet* among them. For over a century, great Beijing opera actors, playwrights, and directors have been at the forefront of cultural exchange to bring the ancient art form to the crossroads of cultures. In the following, I shall show how Beijing opera is transformed and renewed both in content, as exemplified by Beijing opera adaptations of Shakespeare, and style, as evidenced by the appropriation and incorporation of Beijing opera into intercultural productions. Before we delve into these two fascinating discourses between Beijing opera and Western dramatic tradition, it is useful to consider the vicissitudes of Beijing opera as a national and cultural icon, and the Chinese and Western perception of it.

Fig. 46: Lin Hsiu-wei as the dancer in the Contemporary Legend Theatre's *jingju* adaption of Macbeth entitled *The Kingdom of Desire*.

The Rise of a National Theatre

Despite its intercultural roots and modernisation over the years, Beijing opera, rather than the modern spoken drama (*huaaju*) theatre, is still regarded by both its practitioners and their Anglo-European audiences as the ultimate, quintessential representation of Chinese identity, thanks partly to the invention of Beijing opera as national opera (*guoju*) in the early twentieth century. Leading actors and critics Qi Rushan (1875–1961), Mei Lanfang (1894–1961), and their followers constructed the tradition of national opera as the mirror image of Western illusionist, realist theatre. Since Western theatre was perceived to be imitating life, Beijing opera was posited as stylised – an abstract art form (see Riley in this volume). Mei Lanfang, who exerted a visible influence on Bertolt Brecht's theory of *Verfremdungseffekt* (alienation effect), played a leading role in elevating Beijing opera to the status of China's national opera, or *guoju*. Both Chinese and Western artists now deploy Chinese opera as a means to create and meet the demands on the cultural market for traditional China – a commodity with exotic and nostalgic value (Qi 1998: 126–185; Goldstein 2007: 131–171, 264–289). It is little surprise that Shakespeare's comedies and tragedies have occupied a dominant place in the expanded Beijing opera repertoire ever since Beijing opera encountered Shakespeare for the first time in 1914 when Ya'an Chuanju (Sichuan Opera) Theatre adapted *Hamlet*.

The powerful dichotomy between the traditional non-West, represented by Beijing opera, and the global West, represented by Shakespeare, has allowed this oppositions to play out in the externalising, defamiliarising, and coded movements of Beijing opera.¹ Just as stylised Chinese-swordplay period films (Lo 2005: 180), Beijing opera also relies on cultural difference – especially for the Chinese who are not connoisseurs – as a marketable feature that turns it into a commodified spectacle, which is why Beijing opera productions have garnered more invitations to international festivals than spoken drama theatre. It seems to cross national boundaries in the global marketplace with ever greater facility. David Henry Hwang's *M. Butterfly* is probably the best-known instance of the iconification of Chinese opera (see Riemenschnitter in this volume). As both a theatre genre and a cultural symbol, Beijing opera brought Giacomo Puccini's opera, René Gallimard, and Song Liling into a gripping narrative about the promise and peril of visual pleasures. Beijing opera's colourful facial pat-

terns (see Wegner in this volume) for individual role types, musical aspect, and codified gestures and movements have contributed to the perception that the art form provides a visual language that can more easily be "translated" across linguistic boundaries when compared to spoken drama that relies more on verbal cues. That is not to say that Beijing opera does not rely equally heavily on arias, lyrics, and verbal expressions.

Why is Beijing opera's visual language receiving more attention? One quick answer is the global mass culture's penchant for images capable of crossing linguistic borders. By the late twentieth century, Beijing opera performance idioms have enriched the possibilities to play Shakespeare in Chinese, and, in turn, Shakespearean characterisation has also expanded Beijing opera practices and created bridges for bona-fide Beijing opera fans to appreciate Shakespeare and for Western audiences to get more out of Beijing opera performances (see Wu in this volume).

Shakespeare in Beijing Opera

Shakespeare in Beijing opera as a new form of fusion theatre has attracted both local audiences and global spectators. Due to the extremely varied constituencies of this new audience, the reception of every performance is shaped by a wide spectrum of opinions. It is not unusual for Beijing opera aficionados to criticise the unconventional approaches of these adaptations of Shakespeare, claiming that they damage an ancient form of art and succumbed to the market law at the expense of Chinese traditions. Praises of Beijing opera innovative Shakespeare interpretations often come from audiences who are more adventurous in taste and not fully entrenched in the ideology of traditional repertoire and style of Beijing opera.

The perceived affinity between Chinese opera and Shakespearean performative aesthetics (both rely on audiences to fill in the visual details via verbal cues and in their minds) has reoriented performers and audiences to focus on visuality and allegorical readings of the representations of China and Shakespeare.

What is unique about Beijing opera? Stylised movements, make-up, and musical elements (arias, bursts of percussion, chorus) are some of the characteristics that distinguish it from other forms of theatre, although as noted previously, these elements have occasionally been appropriated and deployed in spoken

drama productions and films as well. Shanghai Kunju Opera's adaptation of *Macbeth* entitled *Story of Bloody Hands* (1986), for instance, uses masks to highlight the three weird sisters' ambiguous nature and double-talk. Three androgynous "mountain spirits" dance on stage with grotesque masks on the back of their heads. As they swirl and turn, their faces and the grotesque masks are shown alternately. Stylised movements and masks have also been appropriated in *huaju* productions. Lü Po Shen's *Macbeth Unplugged* (2007), a Taiwanese-language *huaju* adaptation, features three actresses with grotesque masks on the back of their heads, wearing identical trench coats and holding black umbrellas. Likewise, Wu Hsing-kuo's *Kingdom of Desire* uses masks inspired from Japanese *No* theatre to highlight the tensions between visual and verbal expositions of truth.

One of the most striking scenes in the *Kingdom* is the famous dance (as found in Akira Kurosawa's film version, *Throne of Blood*) during General Ao's (Macbeth) banquet. In a costume and style imbued with Japanese elements, Lin Hsiu-wei, a renowned female dancer, offers to entertain the newly anointed ruler and the lords of the court (fig. 46). She holds two masks in her hands and alternately covers her face with them as she swirls, bends, and crosses the stage. When the dance is over, she reveals a third mask on her face, hitherto concealed by the others. With the Duncan figure murdered and the usurper's ambition revealed, this dance interlude becomes an appropriate footnote to Duncan's remark about treachery: "There's no art / To find the mind's construction in the face" (1.4.10–11). The dance itself is also a stylistic intervention, since it represents a pronounced departure from the Beijing opera style that dominates the rest of the production. Lin's dance combines ballet steps and *No*-inspired masks. Likewise, in *The Story of Bloody Hands*, important transformations of the characters are sometimes expressed physically. As the three witch figures dance, they dominate the stage. In the scene where Ma Pei, the Macbeth figure, seeks advice from the spirits, he dances with them as prophecies are delivered. His dance gradually synchronises with that of the spirits, which implies that his thoughts are being contaminated and controlled by them.

Shakespeare's metaphors and plot lines are given local contexts and restaged with little concern for word-for-word accuracy or precise transformations of Shakespearean metaphor. Colour symbolism acquires local flavours so that in turning "multitudinous seas incarnadine" (2.2.60–2), invoking the glow of an imagined

dagger at night, the subdued light of dawn, or the unnatural pitch of black night, Shakespeare highlights the metaphorical meaning of colour in the course of the play. In Chinese opera performances, colours of the stage and costumes call attention to themselves in similar ways, albeit with culturally mixed symbolism: red, the colour that dominates the costume, lighting, and stage design in *The Story of Bloody Hands*, signals both life-giving joy and the fear of a blood bath.

Another example of how Beijing opera conventions are combined with Shakespearean narratives is Ma Yong'an's *Aosailuo (Othello)*, which premiered in Beijing in 1983 (fig. 47). Ma exploited the colour symbolism of white and black, the pure and the tainted. The backdrop was lit with blue light. The light and the wave patterns on the costumes conveyed a sense of the setting: Venice and Cyprus, two islands surrounded by the sea. However, in act six, the backdrop turned red when Othello decided to kill Desdemona. Othello then compared the colour of the sunset to the blood of Desdemona:

Othello: Iago, look, what is that?

Iago: The sunset.

Othello: No, it is not the sunset. It is blood, blood! It is Desdemona's blood, Cassio's blood, and my enemies' blood! If you deceive me, it will be your blood, too ... By Heaven in great reverence, I swear, if I cannot revenge such great humiliation, I will no longer go on living in this world.

This scene corresponds to act three, scene three of *Othello*, where Othello reveals his "bloody thoughts" (3.3.457) to Iago. Othello appeals to "black vengeance". He shouts frantically: "O blood, blood, blood!" (3.3.451). Ma's performance highlighted the physical dimension of colour symbolism and metaphors.

In addition to symbolism, Beijing opera techniques were brought in to carry strong emotions. A case in point is the scene in which Othello sees and reacts to the "ocular proof" Iago arranges for him. Being led on by Iago, Othello is

prompted into believing that Desdemona is having an affair with his subordinate, Cassio. Performing on an empty stage, Ma used a swaying dance in which he "saw" illusions from all directions in order to project his jealousy and anger in the scene. The mantle in this scene took on great effect, as did small movements and gestures which signified hesitation and uneasiness. Othello saw Cassio giving the handkerchief to a prostitute, a scene arranged by Iago to persuade the already confounded Othello that Desdemona had been unfaithful. Appalled by the sight, Ma's Othello did not express his extreme anger in grand movements, but rather froze on stage and used silence and the absence of action to deliver the shock, which he took as "most difficult *onstage*, since *actors* have been trained to act".² Non-movement and the absence of lines effectively dominated the stage. Othello then asked for poison but was discouraged by Iago, who encouraged him instead to smother Desdemona in bed. At this suggestion, Othello opened his eyes widely, staring into the void as if his mind itself had been poisoned and possessed by Iago. Ma Yong'an used *jingju* conventions to represent a character and dramatic situation unknown to the genre. This in turn engendered new *jingju* performing idioms, especially non-movement, which Ma admitted was a very difficult choice. His training and the conventions of *jingju* required him to sing and, most importantly, to act according to specific sets of steps and gestures for specific *jingju* characters. The tensions in Othello's mind and between Othello and other characters became pretexts for innovations in an art form that traditionally demands less rigorous representation of the psyche of the characters.

Beijing Opera in Intercultural Theatre

Adaptations of Shakespeare are not the only area of innovation in Beijing opera today. Chinese-French Nobel laureate Gao Xingjian used Beijing opera extensively in a recent production to realise his ideal of "total theatre". *Snow in August* (published in 1997 and premiered in Taipei in 2002) chronicles the life of Huineng (633–713), the illiterate Sixth Patriarch of Chinese Zen Buddhism. In both hagiographical and literary accounts, Huineng's life story revolves around his self-exile from the establishment. Fleeing is also a prominent theme in Gao's creative writing since he emigrated from China to France in 1987. Being an outsider to the established order, Huineng lived in exile and became known for his anti-establishment stance. Defending the value of marginality, Huineng is uncom-

Fig. 47: Ma Yong'an as Othello in his *jingju* adaptation of Othello entitled Aosailuo.



promising in his refusal to serve politics – both within and beyond his religion. In the Taipei production Wu Hsing-kuo wore high-soled *jingju* shoes to play Huineng. The play was accompanied by a large symphony orchestra. The *jingju* performers' movements were intentionally distilled from *jingju*. During the rehearsal and during interviews with the media after the premiere, Gao emphasised the hybrid nature of the production, indicating that achieving "four unlikes" (*si bu xiang*) is his primary goal: unlike European opera (despite the presence of a ninety-musician symphony orchestra), unlike *jingju* (despite a cast made up of mainly *jingju* performers), unlike dance (despite its many dance pieces choreographed by Lin Hsiu-wei), and unlike Chinese spoken-drama, *huaju* (despite the play's reliance on verbal language). Contributing to the striking presentation is Gao's decision to use *jingju* music and movements as the site of his experiment. Gao tests his theory of *quanneng de xiju*, variously translated as omnipotent theatre (Fong 2003) or total theatre (Quah 2004), a modern theatre of music, dialogue, and movements that combine performing idioms from past and present and from different cultures. Commenting on his decision to commission the Chinese-French composer Xu Shuya (b. 1961) to compose music for *Snow in August*,³ Gao points out that both he and Xu resist the "pastiche strategy" employed by many Chinese composers that senselessly combines *jingju* stylised music with Western music. Gao commends Xu's effort to "transcend the East-West divide", to "dissolve East and West", and to compose a piece that belongs to Xu alone. Gao spoke of the production's use of Beijing opera: "The story of Huineng is of epic proportions, on a par with any drama from the pen of Shakespeare. In fact, *Snow in August* melds Eastern and Western cultures. The form is like that of Shakespearian or Greek tragedy, but the spirit can only have come from the wisdom of the East" (Chang 2002: 13; Fong 2003: xiii).

Like traditional Beijing opera productions, *Snow in August* employs a minimalist stage set, with enlarged images of Gao's own ink paintings featured as the backdrop in some scenes, including the scenes in which Huineng flees for his life after becoming the Sixth Patriarch. The *jingju* performers, trained by Gao to "undo" their *jingju* background, abandoned the stylised *jingju* vocal expression and spoke in the vernacular, a mode commonly employed by *huaju* actors. They also sang to Xu's atonal music played by the ninety-musician symphony orchestra. Their presence was complemented by modern dance movements of

acrobatics and the ensemble performers in the last scene. This arrangement seems to have achieved what Gao aims at in his "total theatre", the ultimate form of freedom, not restricted by spatial or temporal limitations. Gao calls it "multi-level visual imagery" (Gao 1988: 137; Fong 2003: xvi). He also uses the term "polyglossia" to refer to this desirable level of multiplicity (Gao 1988: 137; Fong 2003: xvii). The most successful part of the production is perhaps its polyglossic and multi-vocal dimension. For example, Huineng, played by the seasoned experimental *jingju* actor Wu Hsing-kuo, was joined by tenor Fang Weichen and baritone Gao Xinja who are Huineng's invisible selves present only vocally. The three different voices (Wu, Fang, and Gao) singing with techniques from different traditions converge to convey Huineng's thoughts. Other characters including Boundless Treasure and Singsong Girl, all performed by *jingju* performers, were joined by their respective European operatic counterparts, coloratura soprano and mezzo soprano. The fifty-singer chorus that resembles a chorus in Greek tragedy further diversifies the vocal scene in the performance and provides contrast to the fragmented *jingju*-based singing by the main performers. The challenge is for the Beijing opera performers – now uprooted from the arts they trained in – to find a voice of their own in this polyglossic theatre.

Coda

Beijing opera has undergone a sea change and has now clearly found its modern voice. Over the course of a century, Beijing opera has borne the weight of intercultural bridges. Both its content and style have been renewed and transformed. Shakespearean characterisation and soliloquies have expanded dramaturgical possibilities for actors such as Wu Hsing-kuo, Ma Yong'an, and countless others. For playwrights and directors interested in creating a new form of theatre such as Gao Xingjian, Beijing opera has also provided flexible artistic ingredients for incorporation into a performance style that sustains music, stylisation, and multiple sources of cultural origins. Beijing opera is at home in the world, and it is not difficult to see why.

- 1) I wish to thank Columbia University Press for the permission to use material from my book, *Chinese Shakespeares: Two Centuries of Cultural Exchange*, in some sections of this essay.
- 2) Alexander C. Y. Huang, interview with Ma Yong'an in Beijing, 4 September 2002.
- 3) Chinese diasporic composer based in France. Xu was born in Changchun and studied composition with Zhu Jian'er and Ding Shande at the Shanghai Conservatory of Music before leaving China to pursue a career in France.



Pointing with Rage



Expression of Praise

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ON STAGE

THE ART OF BEIJING OPERA



On Stage

The Art of Beijing Opera

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