

THE ESSENTIAL LI YU RESURRECTED:
A PERFORMANCE REVIEW OF THE 2010 BEIJING
PRODUCTION OF *LIAN XIANG BAN* (WOMEN IN LOVE)

XU PENG
University of Chicago

In recent decades, one after another, masterpieces of the southern Chinese theatrical genre *chuanqi* 傳奇 have been staged in productions that are more ambitious than stringing together the separate scenes that have been preserved in the *Kunqu* 崑曲 performance repertoire. These include Tang Xianzu's 湯顯祖 (1550–1616) *Peony Pavilion* (*Mudan ting* 牡丹亭), Kong Shangren's 孔尚任 (1648–1718) *Peach Blossom Fan* (*Taohua shan* 桃花扇), and Hong Sheng's 洪昇 (1645–1704) *Palace of Lasting Life* (*Changsheng dian* 長生殿). Their more productive colleague, Li Yu 李漁 (1611–1680), however, had to wait until last year for one of his plays to receive such attention. The production under review, adapted from Li Yu's comedy, *Lian xiang ban* 憐香伴 (Women in Love),¹ was produced by the Beijing Polo Arts Entertainment Company and premiered May 11–14, 2010, at the Poly Theater in Beijing.

Despite his importance in the development of Chinese theatre, both in terms of his plays and his writings on the theatre, it is understandable that it has taken a while for one of Li Yu's plays to enjoy a production of this sort. His plays in general lack gravity or sublimity, but are instead playful and entertaining, chronicling as they do individual pursuits of happiness in the face of cultural orthodoxies. If *Peony Pavilion* in many respects is

¹ “Women in Love” is the way Patrick Hanan translated the title. The production itself used the English translation of “Two Belles in Love.” Other translations of the title in English language scholarship include “The Fragrance-Adoring Companion” and “The Fragrant Companion.”

thought to embody the late Ming (1550–1644) fascination with love (*qing* 情), *Peach Blossom Fan* turns its back on that fascination in the wake of the collapse of the Ming. *Lian xiang ban* written just a few years after the dynastic transition, shows no traces of that national trauma. It might be said to have little more historical significance than its place at the head of the ten comedies that Li Yu wrote, all of which feature witty women.

But the delay in the appearance of an adaptation of this particular play of Li Yu's, however, has been generally attributed to its sensitive subject matter. Unlike the typical scholar-beauty romance, *Lian xiang ban* tells an unconventional story of two women falling into love with each other on their first encounter and the daring scheme they carry out to be married to the same scholar, in order to live together as lovers. According to Yang Fengyi 楊鳳一, the head of the Beifang Kunqu juyuan 北方崑曲劇院 (Northern Kunqu Opera Theater) from which all the performers in the production come, the project was initially to be financed with government funds but that proved unworkable, considering the sensitive nature of the subject material (personal interview, July 2010). When Polo Arts took over the production, they explored precisely the commercial potential of that aspect of the play. For instance, they stirred up media attention by bringing on board the well-known openly gay film director Stanley Kwan (Guan Jinpeng 關錦鵬) and the renowned sexologist Li Yinhe 李銀河. However, while the role of homosexuality in the play was used as a selling point on the market, the actual production shows no interest in raising social questions about either same-sex or heterosexual love. Instead, the female protagonists stay essentially as they are in Li Yu's original conception: they are not worried about patriarchal hierarchy, but instead are good at mischievously using their wit and courage to deal with the obstacles the patriarchy presents them with. As they smile triumphantly at their imperially approved wedding, we smile along with them at how they have hoodwinked authority. In this sense, the production's self-promotion strategy of presenting the female leads as controversially lesbian in an unaccepting society does not accord with how they appear in the actual production. Ironically, the more the production attempted to "resurrect" the comic side of Li Yu, the more the audience focused on the plot and the performances of the actors and ignored the messages that the production claimed it was conveying. The social questions that the production was supposed to raise got lost in the merriment.

In reality, what the production offers is but a one-night, lively, lighthearted, hilarious entertainment, destitute of modern social concerns but full of the charms so characteristic of Li Yu's work. However, this

feature of the production seems to have been largely ignored by critics biased towards intellectual and cultural content. To fully appreciate the production's unique contributions to theater history, one needs nonetheless to view it against the backdrop of the growing production and consumption of modern-day large-scale and well-funded *Kunqu* productions as the embodiment of the best of the elite artistic tradition of China. Earlier productions, especially the landmark “Young Lovers’ Version” (*qingchun ban* 青春版) of *Peony Pavilion* (premiere Taipei 2004), have been successful in establishing a critical preference for an elegant, poised, and cultivated style. This style has been so widely accepted that the opening footage of a recent video made for the Ministry of Culture of the People’s Republic of China as a diplomatic gift to introduce the art form of *Kunqu* to foreigners goes so far as to have a voiceover accompanying the image of a young actress playing the heroine of *Peony Pavilion* say: “This beauty is *Kunqu*.”² It is not any other role-type or character but precisely Du Liniang 杜麗娘, a daughter of an elite official family with refined literary cultivation, that has come to represent *Kunqu*. This choice goes hand in hand with the particular market orientation of these productions: educated urbanites who agree with the categorization of *Kunqu* as a highbrow theatrical form fully worthy of their modern-day appreciation. This being the case, all aesthetic decisions concerning these productions must match their audiences’ mental image of a high-minded elite theater: the productions must be grand in structure (productions presented in three parts over three nights are becoming the standard), elevated in theme, elegant in tone, subtle rather than garish in color scheme, etc. But unrelieved elegance can become boring. The refusal of this production to bend Li Yu to meet contemporary audiences’ expectations comes therefore as a welcome relief.

According to Wang Shiyu 汪世瑜, the artistic director of the production, the main reason the production was able to achieve a coherent lightness was the way it was put together. Wang was also a member of the production team for the “Young Lovers’ Version” of *Peony Pavilion*. For

² “China’s Traditional Kunqu Opera” (*Zhongguo Kunqu* 中國昆曲), part of the “Meeting a Cultural China” Series produced by CAV Television Production Co., Ltd. for the Ministry of Culture of the People’s Republic of China. The same series includes titles such as “Chinese Musical Instruments” (*Zhongguo qiyue* 中國器樂) and “Traditional Chinese Medicine in Chinese Culture” (*Zhongyi wenhua* 中醫文化). Each exquisite box contains a booklet, a CD ROM and a VCD. Although the date of the production is not given, the booklet contains stage stills taken after 2006.

that production, he recalled, issues related to the final aesthetic effect were debated among the team of artists until there was unanimous agreement among all the parties, even if it took almost till morning. In contrast, artists of the production team for *Lian xiang ban* worked separately along their own familiar trajectories without struggling for a unified style. Not until the final rehearsal did he finally have a better understanding of the total theatrical effect of the production, but everything seemed to work together and add to the whole.³ What Wang felt to be so miraculous about the production was perhaps a mysterious rightness in the creative approach: a certain orderly form was created from a seemingly chaotic process, which indeed sounds quite miraculous. Perhaps easier to understand is the fact that this way of working seems to have given the individual members of the creative team more room to develop their creativity. In my opinion, the unconventional combination in the members of the production team of elements of traditional Chinese opera mentality with cutting-edge avant-gardism produced an interesting and effective aesthetic. In what follows, I shall comment on five aspects I believe to be crucial to that result.

First, because practically nothing has come down to us concerning how the play was actually staged, the stage movements and music had to be worked up from scratch. Theoretically, there was the distinct possibility of a lack of harmony between the two. Instead, a wonderful balance was created by Wang Shiyu and Qian Hongming 錢洪明, who composed the music. Both men are emeritus members of famous *Kunqu* troupes and had recently collaborated on the Imperial Granary production of *Peony Pavilion*.⁴ Both were able to exploit to the full traditional elements from the existing repertoire of *Kunqu*. Perhaps because they drew upon the same pool of resources, the resonances between the two artists are clear and powerful. The restraints and limitations they cautiously applied to their creation ensured that the production would remain quintessentially *Kunqu* despite the non-traditional stagecraft elements to be discussed below. It is also true that occasionally their quotation of traditional

³ Personal interview on July 22, 2010, in Hangzhou. Mr. Wang was overseeing the rehearsals of a new stage production under his directorship of a *Yueju* 越劇 (Shaoxing opera) adaptation of *Shihou ji* 獅吼記 (The Roar of the Lion) based on three extracted scenes (*zhezhi xi* 折子戲) from the *Kunqu* repertoire. I was lucky enough to be able to witness his working process for a few days and to converse with him about *Lian xiang ban*.

⁴ See the review of this production by Colin Mackerras in *CHINOPERL Papers* 29 (2010): 209–16.

elements could look too familiar to those knowledgeable of the tradition. For instance, in Scene V, “Subdued Woes”⁵ (“Jian chou” 緘愁), when one of the female leads expresses her longing in an aria to the tune of “Miandaxu” 綿搭絮, the aria sounds too similar to the one to that tune in scene 10 of *Peony Pavilion*, and the copying of movements expressive of a woman’s heterosexual desire (clinging to a chair and moving up and down against it) from earlier in the same scene of *Peony Pavilion* seems a bit odd in the context of same-sex love.

Second, Hong Kong-based film director Stanley Kwan participated in the final month’s production meetings and contributed a cinema-trained eye to the rehearsals. The protagonist at the center of almost all the newspaper interviews, he offers so far the most accessible and informative readings of the staging. It is illuminating to hear his analysis of his own formal inventions. For example, because only the center of the stage is lit while the surrounding areas are in relatively dark shadow, Kwan was able to design winding routes and let the actors walk speedily between shadowy and lit areas on the stage, creating sequences that he has described as “moving cinematic framing-shots” (*liudong de dianying goutu* 流動的電影構圖). He has also said, “Of course, I naturally brought my sense of filmmaking into it [the stage production]” 當然, 我也是很自然而然地就把拍電影的感覺帶入其中.⁶ He explains his symbolic use of lighting and stage design as designed to comment on contemporary gay culture. For instance, he says that although the two female protagonists are allowed their intimate moments, they

are practically always within the metal frames, and we can use the lighting to emphasize the fact that there is no relief from these frames. If the audience is able to understand that, then they will be clear: in fact these two persons are operating within constraints.

基本上都是在鐵框架裏面,我們可以用光影強調框架的無處不在。觀眾要是看得懂的話,他們就明白:其實兩個人還是受到束縛的。

⁵ The translation of the scene title comes from the substantial program for the performance, which includes not only the Chinese texts for the prologue, ten scenes, and epilogue of the play, but also complete English translations of them.

⁶ Yang Tingting 楊婷婷, “Guan Jinpeng, Kunqu xuetou” 關錦鵬, 崑曲噱頭 (Stanley Kwan and *Kunqu Sales Tricks*), posted May 14, 2010 at <http://www.eeo.com.cn/2010/0514/170153.shtml> (accessed October 13, 2011).

Likewise, he says that the removal of the frames in the final scene is to allow the protagonists an instant of a more open (*kailang* 開朗) expression of emotion between them.⁷ As mentioned above, however, this portion of Kwan's message—the agony imposed by and the struggle against an oppressive society—conflicts with and therefore is veiled by Li Yu's merry ironies, and the audience would only be confused if both get through at the same time.

Another input of Kwan's, it is said, is his emphasis on psychological realism in acting. For the young actors, almost all in their twenties, Wang Shiyu demonstrated the details of acting technique, while Kwan added psychological depth to the roles. Yang Fengyi spoke very strongly in favor of Kwan's contribution in this regard. In her opinion, what Kwan brought into the production is profound insights and powerful interpretations, especially psychological profundity (personal interview, July 2010). Kwan himself spoke of his job as bringing the actors' emotions into play.⁸

Third, the most impressive visual components of the production were the stage and costume design. The stage design stands in marked contrast to famous models such as Chen Shi-Zheng's 陳士爭 1999 lavish, "naturalistic" and spectacular production of *Peony Pavilion*, with its live ducks swimming in a real pond; Tian Qinxin's 田沁鑫 segmented stage decorated with *chinoiserie* elements in her 2006 production of *Taohua shan (1699: Taohua shan)*; and the restrained symbolic stage found in the "Young Lovers' Version" of *Peony Pavilion* with its use of abstract-looking large-scale Chinese calligraphy and projections that look like fragments of traditional Chinese paintings. In this production of *Lian xiang ban* the stage is white, contemporary in feel, and decorated with gauze curtains. The best use of these gauze curtains, I felt, was the creation through them of the illusion of a reclusive bedchamber deep in the women's inner quarters. They added class to the naturalistic caresses

⁷ Shi Yan 石岩, "Guan Jinpeng fengyue tan" 關錦鵬風月談 (Stanley Kwan Talks about Romance), *Nanfang zhoumo* 南方周末 (Southern Weekly), May 12, 2010, available at <http://www.infzm.com/content/44866> (accessed October 13, 2011).

⁸ "Guan Jinpeng: *Lian xiang ban* zhong wo fuze tiaodong yanyuan qingxu" 關錦鵬: 憐香伴中我負責調動演員情緒 (Stanley Kwan: In *Lian xiang ban* I Was Responsible for Waking up the Actors' Emotions), transcript of a video interview of Kwan by moderator Wang Dong 王東, posted on June 15, 2010 at <http://big5.ifeng.com/gate/big5/i.ifeng.com/ent/idolnews/bagangtai/news?aid=4374519&mid=4YekTM&vt=2>. For the video interview itself, see <http://v.ifeng.com/e/201006/dde36904-b0f0-47f7-ae20-55a987d5c237.shtml> (accessed October 13, 2011).

performed by the actors and interestingly constructed the audience as voyeurs. The illusion of closed-up space was also produced by the projection onto a scrim at the back of the stage of negative images, sometimes lines of text, sometimes parts of an illustration, from traditional woodblock printed pages. Upstage center were three moveable metal frames arranged in layers, painted white, rectangular in shape, and contemporary in style. Superimposed upon one another, they both gave a sense of “depth,” a principle element of western perspective, and a focal point for the audience’s attention. White table and chairs in simple design took the place of the typical tables and chairs with embroidered covers of the traditional Chinese stage.

Fourth, the largely black-and-white scenic conception, accidentally or not, served to amplify the colorful costumes designed by couturier Guo Pei 郭培. These striking costumes were clearly an important part of the marketing strategy for the production: a fashion show featuring them took place in the same theater before the premiere. Unexpectedly, they met with disfavor and were said to be flamboyant, tasteless, and vulgar. What made Guo’s designs controversial was first and foremost her decision to abandon completely the color aesthetics promoted by many previous large-scale *Kunqu* productions—a palette of light, calm, and moderate colors present throughout the costume and stage designs that was meant to symbolize a refined, elite taste. Guo Pei used instead flamboyant colors on exotic textures (the fabrics themselves tended to be Japanese or Italian). This strategy ended up freeing her, as well as the uninitiated among the audience, from a pre-existing system of messages encoded in the color and pattern symbolism of traditional Chinese theater, which the designers of the “Youth Lovers’ Version” of *Peony Pavilion* chose to elaborate. In fact, Guo’s logic is much easier to understand: the initial and last scenes use bright colors—orange and scarlet gauzes decorated with mica flakes that glitter—as a means to set a merry tone for the whole play; the color scheme used in the middle scenes changes to light grey and violet to indicate deep but manageable gloominess. In short, vibrant color sustained the dominant mood of the play and heightened its patterns of emotional development. Costume design, therefore, marked the production as different from the aesthetic tradition that predominates among contemporary *Kunqu* productions. Interestingly enough, striking colors and scintillating costumes, which drew negative criticism in the case of Guo’s design, are considered by theater anthropologists to be an important

tool in the transformation of the “Oriental” actor (a traditional Peking Opera actor for instance) into a ‘miniature set.’⁹

Last, but certainly not least in terms of significance, on the production team, is Wang Xiang 王翔, who was responsible for bringing together all the artists and for the finalization of the script. Producer also of the “Banquet Hall Version” (*tingtang ban* 廳堂版) of *Peony Pavilion* that has been in continuous performance for several years at the Imperial Granary in Beijing, this businessman has exerted considerable effort to make *Kunqu* into a modern theatrical fare, aspiring to persuade theatergoers to try consuming his products. His adaptation of *Lian xiang ban* succeeds in getting across effectively the essential plotting and meaning of the original play in a largely intact linear structure. As is common with adaptations of long works that shrink the work down to a length that modern audiences will tolerate, there are losses in terms of depth of characterization and detail. Wang’s bold editing, which includes creating new arias by combining lines from different scenes and even different aria patterns, was not always done carefully enough. This causes some damage to the continuity and comprehensibility of the production.

As *Kunqu* tries to adjust itself to a modern world very different from the one that created it, it makes sense to experiment with moving away from increasingly stiff aesthetic ideals, such as the idea that *Kunqu* is a beautiful refined lady restrained by a strict dress code and reserved manner. This production of *Lian xiang ban* appears as a healthy variation, if not a correction, at an appropriate moment of time in contemporary Chinese theater history. It reminds us that stage productions, even of *Kunqu*, can be aesthetically controversial and “imperfect,” rather than unanimously docile to what is expected of an art form that is now taken as the symbol of the cream of the nation’s cultural past. If one of the main venues in America would open its doors to this brave, modest production, American audiences would be given a chance to experience not only the essential Li Yu that shines through in it, but also an alternative Chinese theater aesthetic in danger of being forgotten in contemporary *Kunqu*: the “vulgar” and “hilarious.”

⁹ See Eugenio Barba and Nicola Savarese, eds., *A Dictionary of Theatre Anthropology: The Secret Art of the Performer*, Richard Fowler, tr. (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), pp. 218–19.



Fig. 1. Still captured from a DVD with clips from the production distributed for publicity purposes. This and the following figure are from Scene V.



Fig. 2. Still captured from a DVD with clips from the production distributed for publicity purposes.



Fig. 3. Publicity image widely available on the internet for the version of the production featuring the male performers of female roles Dong Fei 董飛 and Liu Xinran 劉欣然.



Fig. 4. Publicity image widely available on the internet for the version of the production featuring actresses Hu Zhexing 胡哲行 and Wang Li'ai 王麗嫻.