



中国戏曲海外传播工程丛书

Honorable Official
Yu Chenglong
— A Beijing Opera

Translation,
Introduction and Annotations
by Shi Yili (石逸莉)

京剧 — 廉吏于成龙



The Project for Disseminating Chinese Operatic Dramas Overseas
Sponsored by
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Preface to the Project

There are two Chinese terms that describe the dramatic performance on the stage in China: *xiju* and *xiqu*. The former is equivalent to the dramas in the West while the latter, frequently referred to as the Chinese national operas or Chinese local operas, is a native Chinese invention. *Xiju*, an imported art form from the Western literature, was introduced into China during the second half of the 19th century. *Xiqu*, on the other hand, has a much longer history.

As one of the three ancient dramatic forms in the world, Chinese national operas, together with ancient Greek tragedy and ancient Indian drama, have a long history of over two thousand years. It can be traced back to three types of primitive entertainment in China: exorcising dance, storytelling and ballad singing and comic dialogues. As early as the Qin Dynasty (221-206 BCE), an art form began to emerge with all the three types of entertainment combined to give public shows, sometimes in the royal palaces and sometimes in Buddhist temples. It was recorded during the reign of Emperor Yang Guang (604-618) of the Sui Dynasty (581-618) that performers all over China were summoned by the emperor to provide entertainment from January 1st to 15th annually according to the Chinese lunar calendar. To prepare for the performance, stages were erected and lined up, stretching sometimes as long as four kilometers outside the imperial palace, a scene with a scale and grandeur that can hardly be imagined even in the 21st century. Gradually, other elements were added to the art form, encompassing acrobatics, martial arts, dancing, puppet shows and leather-silhouette shows. It was not until the 13th century that the prototype of Chinese national operas finally began to take shape. Right now, there are as many as three hundred different types of Chinese national operas active on the Chinese stage, attracting

millions of theater-goers, both men and women, old and young. *Xiqu* is definitely one of the crown jewels in Chinese culture.

The idea of introducing Chinese *xiqu* to the audience outside China has been brewing in my mind for quite some time, commencing in the mid-1980s when I was working on my Ph.D. dissertation in the United States. Since my dissertation, with the title of *Shakespeare Through Chinese Eyes*, is a comparative study of Shakespeare scholarship in China with that in the West, I reviewed more than three hundred introductory and critical essays of Shakespeare written by the Chinese scholars in the course of eighty years. While browsing these scholarly works, I suddenly felt an irresistible urge to introduce Chinese theatrical dramas to the audience of the West by translating and publishing a collection of *xiqu* in the United States. However, my first attempt was not successful since my proposal was declined by some American publishers on the ground that such a book would be too scholarly to attract local readers. I only managed to have a part of my first chapter published in *Shakespeare Quarterly* as the leading essay in the Summer issue of the journal in 1986 with a note from the editor. But my initial idea has never wavered as I firmly believe that there is definitely an interest in the West in this area and I will wait for the “right time” to offer the “right” contents in a “right” way for the “right” audience.

Now, the moment I have been waiting for has finally come. After two years of preparation, “The Project for Disseminating Chinese Operatic Dramas Overseas” was eventually launched in October 2008 at Renmin University of China. The Project, which I am in charge of, is joined by a dozen of scholars who are proficient in both Chinese and English languages to work under my direct supervision. With the secured funding, the participation of the well-established scholars and the guaranteed publisher, I am enabled to expand my initial plan of simply

translating a score of Chinese dramas into a more ambitious project with the following characteristics.

First, each drama is introduced as a book-length work. Instead of a simple translation project, the rendition of the opera script only takes up a small fraction, one third or one fourth, of the book. The focus of the book is on the cultural elements embodied in this particular form of the opera, which include but are not limited to narrative and dramatic sources of the opera, the authorship of the literary work, the dissemination of the literary work, the theatrical performance, the historical evolution of the opera and its various characteristics, stage practice and cultural interpretation of the story or the legend. In other words, the translated drama serves as a springboard of introducing Chinese culture. To achieve this goal, efforts have been made by a team of researchers to prepare sufficient raw materials for each perspective writer/translator before he or she embarks on a book.

Second, I make sure that each play script chosen for the book is of the authoritative version. The authorship of a Chinese operatic drama is quite different from that of a Western opera. In the West, the authorship has been a non-issue. The fact that *La Traviata* was composed by Verdi or *La Bohème* by Puccini has never been put to question. In China, however, it is often the case that both the libretto and the music of an opera were composed by an anonymous author, and subsequent performers are free to adapt the original version into a new one. For most of the theatergoers in China, they come to the theater not to watch the gradual unfolding of the plot or the theatrical conflict of the drama; rather they are only interested in the performance of the leading actor or actress. A particular drama becomes famous due, in most part, to the particular performing style of a leading opera singer. As a result, one opera may end up, in the course of its evolution, with various versions with different

librettos, different performing styles and different musical tunes. To present the most authoritative version of an opera, we have selected the script written by the well-known literati and the drama performed by the most prestigious actors and actresses. The selection is made by the distinguished scholars and specialists in the field of Chinese national operas.

Finally, we have designed the Project for what both Samuel Johnson and Virginia Woolf called “the common reader.” Our targeted audience is the general public outside China, people who have a genuine interest in the Chinese culture. It is a prerequisite for all the authors to increase their “audience awareness,” a catch phrase in the US college writing class, which emphasizes the analysis of audience in terms of how much information is necessary to get one’s message across. Specially, authors are required to select the materials that appeal to the targeted audience and present them in a way that can be easily understood by the people who have no prior knowledge of Chinese national operas and culture. As a result, instead of a simple translation of the opera script, each work of the Project is a creative writing loaded with background information and explanation to help “the common reader” to better understand and appreciate the opera introduced in the book.

It is our intention that our readers will find the works intelligible, interesting and entertaining. I also hope that the Project offers a clearer sense of the cultural elements embodied in the selected Chinese national operas and stimulates the readers’ greater interest in Chinese national operas and Chinese culture.

He Qixin

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Chapter I

Origins and Contexts

Chapter I provides background information of the drama, including the origin of the drama, an outline of the story, the main characters and their legendary stories in history, and a detailed

introduction of the renowned Beijing opera performing artists Shang Changrong and Guan Dongtian who play Yu Chenglong and Prince Kang in the opera, respectively.

1. Origin of the drama

The famous Beijing opera *Honorable Official Yu Chenglong* (《廉吏于成龙》), produced by Shanghai Jingju Company, originates from a novel *Yu Chenglong, Man of Justice* (《清官于成龙》), by Wang Yongtai. The drama tells the story of Yu Chenglong, who was praised by Emperor Kangxi (reigning 1661-1722) of the Qing Dynasty (1616-1911) for being “The Country’s Most Honorable Official.” The story goes like this: after assuming office as Chief of Judiciary of Fujian Province, Yu Chenglong discovered that his predecessor, an irresponsible and corrupt official, had conducted a case that wrongly accused thousands of people of having connections with enemy forces across the sea. Leaving his personal risks behind, he found a way to report the case to Prince Kang, who was sent by the emperor from the royal court to be in charge of the military and administrative work of Fujian in the southeast of China. Conquering many difficulties, Yu successfully saved the lives of thousands of people.

The story presents Yu Chenglong as an honest, incorruptible, upright public legal official who loved people and protected them from injustice, thus portraying a vivid historical figure and representing him as a true, credible official that we would see in everyday life.

According to Zhou Yude (1-2), a well-known researcher in Chinese performing arts, *Honorable Official Yu Chenglong* is a successful historical drama since it maintains a good balance between the historical elements and the theatrical performance. The opera is, therefore, based on a true story about Yu Chenglong during the Qing Dynasty, who was known as a worthy and honorable official.

Yu Chenglong (1617-1684) was from Yongning, Shanxi Province. During his more than twenty years of political career, he served many important leadership positions in counties, cities, provinces, and at the national level. Three times he had been given the title of “Outstanding Performance.” People respected him for his extraordinary achievements and simple, honest life style, and he has been remembered as such a respectable official ever since.

Yu Chenglong’s story not only appears in historical documents, but also in ordinary folks’ legendary narratives. Yu Chenglong himself published several documents that have passed from generation to generation and that have provided rich materials for the making of the opera. There are many stories about Yu Chenglong. Different from the TV series or the novel, the opera only centers on one episode of his twenty years of public service, that is, the time when he served as Chief of Judiciary of Fujian. This part of the historical documents can be seen in the *Documents of the Qing History* (《清史稿》) as follows:

Upon finishing his duty in Huangzhou, Hubei Province, he got a new assignment as the chief official in charge of the provincial judiciary, a third-rank high government official sent by the emperor. At that time,

Fujian was in chaos with Zheng Chenggong^① from Taiwan leading the army to attack Zhangzhou and Quanzhou. In order to manage to resist Zheng Chenggong's anti-Qing forces from Taiwan, the Qing government issued an order to prevent fishermen from going to the sea. However, the fishermen had to go to the sea to make a living and support their family. Thus, they became the victims of the law case. The royal general accused them of having connections with the enemy forces and put them into jail. When Yu assumed office and investigated the case, he discovered that nearly one hundred people were put on death penalty, including some women, and thousands of people were arrested because they were family members and relatives of the "convicted" or they were in some way associated with the "convicted." Yu Chenglong, thus, insisted that the case be reinvestigated although this might offend his superior. In the end, Yu was able to reopen the case and set free thousands of people who had been sentenced to death or serve jail time. In addition, he paid the army money to set free children who served as slaves in the Qing army.

This part of the historical documents about Yu Chenglong has been applied in the opera to create the character. The four playwrights use the historical facts to depict objectively the historical background where the story took place, thus establishing a framework for the opera. However, if the opera strictly followed the historical line, it would not be a drama. For example, according to the *Documents of the Qing History*, Yu reported the case to Prince Kang, who listened to Yu carefully and granted his requests immediately. Whenever there was a difficult case, Prince Kang would ask Yu for advice. If we added these lines to the drama, then it would be

① Zheng Chenggong (or Koxinga) was a prominent leader of the Ming loyalist movement opposing the Qing Dynasty. After many unsuccessful campaigns against the Qing, he turned his attention to Taiwan as a possible military base.

lacking essential dramatic conflicts. Thus the writers use imagination to create several conflicts between Yu Chenglong and Prince Kang in solving the problem and to add details of Yu's way of doing things. For instance, first the writers create an episode of Yu Chenglong visiting the prison complex. It all starts when Yu meets a group of soldiers who brutally treat two women, mother and daughter, puppeteers performing on the street and threaten to arrest them because they are suspected to have connections with enemy forces across the sea. Yu witnesses this incident and thinks it unbelievable. This strange feeling of his is reinforced when Le Chun, another high government official, praises the previous Chief of Judiciary for handling the case successfully and because of this he has been promoted to a higher leadership position. He feels strange and thus he starts the examination of all case documents. Later he personally tours the jail complex, where he hears people's complaints of being wrongly accused. To his surprise, in prison there are nine hundred and ninety suspects, one thousand eight hundred family members, two thousand six hundred people who are somewhat associated with the main criminals, and three thousand prisoners sentenced to be executed. The way the case was conducted was historically rare, Yu thinks to himself. He can't believe there could be so many ordinary people who have committed crimes. As this involves people's lives, he has to reinvestigate the case.

However, the "sea" case has been personally conducted by the previous chief in charge and approved by the Department of Judiciary. More importantly, Prince Kang has to approve of the decision to reopen the case, but he is difficult to deal with, for he is Emperor's brother and is in charge of the army and the administrative governing of the southeast China. He is arrogant and changes his moods from being happy to mad instantly. Furthermore, if the case should be reinvestigated, that would mean Prince Kang has made a huge mistake.

Before Yu Chenglong starts to reexamine the case, there came another hurdle. He received an order from his superior that he must collect enough food supplies for a hundred thousand officers and soldiers in the battlefield within three days. There is only one way to get the supplies, that is, to force every household to donate food. Yu would not want to do that, so he would desperately want to see Prince Kang.

These two incidents immediately form a dramatic conflict between Yu Chenglong and Prince Kang. The drama then presents how they handle the conflict and solve the problem. We have an episode of Yu and Prince Kang competing in wine consuming, during which Yu uses wisdom and courage to persuade Prince Kang to do the right thing. The playwrights describe Prince Kang as a reasonable man: sent by the emperor, Prince Kang stations in the southeast China near the coast to protect the country and to lead the army in destroying enemy forces. He has power, ambition, and responsibility. He would like to accomplish the mission so as to live up to the emperor's expectations, but he has a lot of worries, because he feels people there are not listening to him and government officials are ignorant and inefficient. He is expecting the royal family to send him a capable official to help him run the province, but is dismayed to know that they sent him an old country man who does not even know how to behave in an official circle, or at least that is what he has heard. Prince Kang's personality and background has made it possible for Yu to influence him and make him work for himself, but Yu has to use courage, wisdom, and humor to compete with his superior.

Prince Kang knows that Yu has a good reputation, and he needs his support for running the province, but he is not sure about his capability of handling political affairs, so he has to test him. To let Yu know that he is his superior and Highness Prince Kang, he decides to let Yu stand outside the camp waiting forever, while he and his subordinate are drinking wine

and enjoying music and dance inside. However, Yu, a very smart man, is taking proactive steps to pressure Kang into meeting with him. First, he tells the guard loudly that if Prince Kang is too busy to see him for the urgent matter, he would send his man to Beijing with his letter and deliver it to the emperor. Overhearing this, Prince Kang quickly appears in front of him. Yu Chenglong then sarcastically explains that he did not want to disturb Prince Kang at work. Inside Kang's camp Yu Chenglong makes a speech about how to tell a good person from a bad one, influencing Prince Kang to understand the saying "the sky, the ground, and a good conscience." Thus, Prince Kang has not only received and accepted Yu's "criticism" of him being arrogant and rude, but also offered Yu three rounds of beautiful wine.

With the typical Manchu (Man) people's hospitality and confidence in his capacity of consuming wine, Prince Kang declares that they will drink wine while talking business and insists that "no drinking, no business." Underestimating Yu Chenglong, Prince Kang thinks he could make Yu a drunken man with a couple of drinks. This is exactly what Yu would like to do knowing his ability to handle alcohol, so he quickly agrees, ready to persuade Prince Kang to see the bad effects of forcing the poor to donate money and food supplies to the army, and to beg him to remove such an order. They finish one cup of wine and Prince Kang admits that Yu's request is very reasonable. Yu Chenglong's first mission is accomplished. Prince Kang offers him a second cup of wine. Yu proposes that Prince Kang borrow the grain stored in the city granary for the royal family and send that to the army to meet the urgent demand. Of course, Prince Kang does not like the idea. However, Yu makes the prince realize that first, it would benefit the army, second, it would be beneficial to the local poor people, third, it would help the royal family to rule the country, and last but most importantly, it would help him to gain a good

reputation and popularity. Prince Kang then realizes that it is a very wise decision. He admires Yu Chenglong for his wisdom and courage, so he offers him a third cup of wine. Yu claims that he is a little drunk and asks Prince Kang to forgive him if he were to behave inappropriately. With wine to back him up, Yu delivers a report to Prince Kang requesting reinvestigation of the “sea” case. While reading the report, the prince is shocked, but he does not want to have anything to do with it. Yu says that he had released all the innocent prisoners and he will be responsible for that. However, there are three thousand people in prison who have received death penalty and would be executed soon. Yu requests that the case be reinvestigated. Prince Kang has been touched by Yu’s sincerity, sense of justice and responsibility, and he wants to help him, but he is afraid it would affect not only his reputation and prior accomplishment, but also that of many government officials who conducted the case. While he is in perplexity, Yu challenges him to grant his request. Kang then comes up with an idea: they would continuously drink until one of them falls to the ground. If he loses, he would grant Yu’s all three requests. In other words, he would let wine speak for him as he is quite confident that Yu is not his equal. Compete they start to and lose Kang did. As he has promised, he grants Yu’s three requests; that is, he will not hold Yu responsible for releasing innocent prisoners; he will postpone the execution of the prisoners who received death penalty; and he will ask his man to go to Beijing on horseback and deliver his message to the emperor. Yu Chenglong has accomplished his mission and saved many innocent people’s lives.

This plot is probable and can be traced back in history. When Yu Chenglong assumed office in Fujian in the seventh year of Kangxi (1679) of the Qing Dynasty, Emperor Kangxi (1654-1722) was twenty-five years old and his cousin Prince Kang was about thirty-four years old. Yu was