



New Dream: adapting *The Handan Dream*, by Tang Xianzu, for music-theatre performance in the contemporary UK context.

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Project summary

As an imaginative writer and scholar, consulting *kunqu* scholars and artists at Shanghai Theatre Academy and attending *kunqu* performances in Shanghai, Suzhou and Hangzhou over a three month period, allowed me to develop a full length music-theatre adaptation of the 17th century play, *The Handan Dream* or '*Handan ji*', by Tang Xianzu, suitable for performance in the UK. I also began work on a reflective paper on the process of adapting this theatre text for performance in English. I investigated how the experience of *kunqu* (music, dance, poetry and recitative) could be translated into a music-theatre piece that retained the integrated art forms and the literary refinement of the poetic libretto, especially in relation to the adaptation of stage time, since an original performance could have lasted over 20 hours. The play has never been translated or adapted by a native English speaker. Indeed, there is only one full length book in English published about *kunqu*, and that is mostly photographs even though it is designated as a UNESCO National Treasure. Despite the importance of *kunqu* in the history and current practice of Chinese theatre, it is almost unknown in the west and there are only a couple of USA adaptations of Tang's most famous play, *The Peony Pavilion*.

During earlier adaptation work in 2016 on *Dreaming under the Southern Bough* (Tang's *Nanke-ji*) for the stage@leeds company, collaborating with Steve Ansell, comparisons had been made by scholars and commentators between Tang and Shakespeare. I found this unhelpful after finding more about *kunqu* and experiencing a series of performances, since the work is so different. While we can examine Shakespeare's texts on the page and interpret them, and adapt them in any way we choose since they spring from no particular performance tradition, Tang's texts need to be considered with some knowledge of *kun* music and dance, which are inseparable from the words. The performance script is a score of notes, words and choreography, and the orchestra is called 'ch'ang mien', literally 'the face of the drama'. Here is the first reason for my decision to adapt *kunqu* as contemporary opera or music-theatre, bringing the rigour of operatic rehearsal process to the project, where the singers expect to learn words, music and movement. Actors, musicians and scholars in China asked me if my adaptation would be 'pure' and my reply is that it will be most 'impure' because there is no other option if it is to live.

What I tried to do, by watching a variety of *kunqu* performances both live and on film, and by talking to performers, writers and musicians, was to 'get a feel' of what aspects of the aesthetics and practice might cross-over to a Western context and, like I have with Japanese traditional theatre for many years, to develop a deep understanding of the practice and aesthetics of the form.

An image I use to explain something about this investigation is a circular window or portal, found in Chinese architecture, often looking through to water or a garden. This shape is also found in the design of the *kunju* museum in Suzhou:



The circular arch, familiar from Chinese garden design, is used consciously as a design feature at the *kunqu* museum, to suggest a portal to the dream world or different 'sacred' dimension that the audience enters during the performance. We pass through to another state of consciousness. When we pass through, both actors and audience enter a transformative story of instruction; *kunqu* is a pedagogical form as well as beauty, beauty, beauty – it asks us to live a better life, a life of fuller understanding.

So what have I done with the story? The beginning of my adaptation, which in the original is an inn, where famously the whole dream takes place in the time it takes to cook a pan of millet, is set in the beer garden of a pub close to the

sea on the Tamar estuary at the edge of Cornwall. The 'hero', Lou, has arrived after leaving his barren farm in the far West of the county for good, a frustrated lonely, self-taught scholar who has always been bypassed and has not been able to afford the fees for the exams he needs to take to get on in life (From the Ming Dynasty to now, such a hugely important thing in China). It's just after closing time when he turns up in a broken down old VW Beetle (in the original it's a donkey) and he's crestfallen when he finds the pub has stopped serving food but the landlady takes pity on him and offers to cook some rice to go with some curry that's left over. I begin very much in the real world, just like the original. He gets involved in talking to a stranger, Dong (the Immortal Lü Dongbin in the original, a kind of itinerant monk), who questions him about his life and his ambitions. He falls asleep and Dong guides him into the timeless dream world, where he lives his life from the age of 31 until he dies in his mid-80s, and where the imaginative landscapes reference both China and England. The actor playing Dong plays all the characters in the story except for the wife Lou meets, Miss Cui or C in my version. I have a cast of 3 actor-singer-dancer-puppeteers and an orchestra of 5 to 8, much smaller forces than a traditional *kunqu* performance but if I am ever to get it performed, I have to deal with the economic reality of the UK, where my work is not seen as a UNESCO National Treasure! My adaptation, once music is composed for it, will last around two and half hours.

The next steps

Back in Leeds, it has been difficult to find time to take the project forward but the plan is for a summer school/two week intensive exploration in the UK that will involve a small group of contemporary European and Chinese performers, musicians and designers working with the text and visual ideas I have prepared. We would then hope to take it forward as a fully composed production, a collaboration between institutions in Leeds and China (possibly the new theatre in Hangzhou since this city is twinned with Leeds and has a strong *kunqu* tradition) and to publish it in a volume including my other writings that have sprung from the research. The spirit of *kunqu* is elusive and difficult to capture in English prose so I wrote a poem to try and get closer to it, suffused with the imagery of nature that somehow defines the form:

All that matters

Kunqu

She springs up like a bee orchid on a verge,
flower-flesh wet with dew, a brief beauty
whose velvet lips coolly kiss the morning.

She steps like the drift of a punt under willows,
a lingering pole-push that turns the corner of the river
unnoticed, except by the mute swan.

She sings like warblers in a blackthorn hedge,
a high rubato of twitters and weeps, wild sounds
that fill the landscape with human longing.

She dances like the dash of a limestone beck
that shushes, shushes through a zigzag of rocks
as it catches the last sun of a long, sultry day.

She is the dreamy student in the dorm
somewhere at the other side of the world,
who brushes her hair with a peach wood comb
and thinks only of love love love