

# THE ARTISTIC PHILOSOPHY OF CHINESE TRADITIONAL DRAMA

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The term Chinese Opera has passed into common usage in both hemispheres as a description which is synonymous for Chinese traditional drama. It is an imprecise definition and as a generalization leaves much to be desired. Comparison can be a useful aid to understanding another culture, it can also be misleading. Even the word culture itself has ambiguous implications. Culture is not simply the preoccupation of intellectuals but rather the environment in which we each exist and through which our everyday living is controlled in many unsuspected directions; culture, therefore, is not one thing but many and conceals far more than it reveals, most noticeably from those involved. One of the significant things about studying another country's culture is the increased perception it induces towards one's own. The study of another culture, however, often stops short at formal linguistic training and historical facts while ignoring the most important factor of all, a receptivity to the complex texture of behaviour which defines a people, their attitudes towards work, or play, or sex, their feelings for time and spatial relationships, their philosophy of living, in fact the many abstract qualities which create the weft and woof of a national sensitivity. They find expression through the arts among other things and not least the theatre.

It is because the problems in inter-cultural communication are often imperfectly assessed that we tend to seek convenient comparisons designed to contain our unfamiliarity at familiar levels or what we assume are familiar levels. The use of the term opera to describe Chinese drama is an example of this. Because the terms opera and drama in this instance have become interchangeable, although they have quite different impli-

cations as a Western concept, a closer consideration of Chinese dramatic method may help to clarify semantic ambivalence.

In the first place it is well to be sure of what is intended by the definitions drama and opera, not in terms of Aristotle's and Wagner's theories so much as on basic philosophical grounds. Drama is a created phenomenon on the stage, it is dynamic, the actor's performance being within a continuous flow of movement whose true shape and rhythm provides a penetration into an inner world. A drama as it is unfolded by the actors has a coherence that cannot be defined in moments, it has been acted, it is being acted, it is about to be acted. Yet there is no external linking of these factors, drama is and yet it is not, at any stipulated point. To consummate its creation the actor in the final phase is completely immersed within the dynamics of the whole and the experience which he undergoes is that active force which constitutes the drama. The drama is alive precisely as the actor is aware of the form that moves through him. It is a united form but as a structure does not exist objectively in space either for the actors or the audience. Instead time and space are created through the moving entity of the drama as it evolves upon the stage. It is the immediate experience of this event called drama which though in motion remains an entity that provides revelation to the audience. In this revelation lies the poetry of drama and its sudden impact is not explicitly through the words of a text but becomes implicit on the Chinese stage, for example, in the twist of a sleeve, the gesture of a hand, the turn of a head or the movement of an eye, the pause in the notes of a flute or between violent motion and sudden immobility. The Chinese drama does not proceed from the right distinction that words are language and that gesture is motion but evolves on stage with the sure knowledge that words are equally motion and that gesture is language, the interior reflection of an inner imagery.

The same totality cannot be observed in the case of Western opera which achieves true artistic expression primarily through music. The conventions of stage representation are accessory to this and indeed can even be detractive. Certainly the architectonic qualities of operatic stage technique are in no way comparable to those of the music as they are in Chinese drama. Wagner's contention that drama rather than music was the end and not the means of opera was most sharply rebutted by the 19th century Prague critic, Eduard Hanslick<sup>1</sup> when he wrote . . . "opera in which music is really and truly employed solely as a medium for dramatic

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1. *The Beautiful in Music*, By Eduard Hanslick, Library of Liberal Arts, New York

expression is a musical monstrosity." It was Hanslick too who provided an effective definition when he compared opera to constitutional government whose very existence depended upon an incessant struggle between two parties, the principles of dramatic nicety and musical beauty in this instance, entailing never-ending concessions on both sides. From this conflict Hanslick considered all the imperfections of opera arose.

Music is created through sound which is the vehicle of transmission to the audience's mind. It has no descriptive power in a purely objective sense, it cannot express feelings; its special quality lies in its communication through architectonic levels constructed from pulse, meter, rhythm, accent, stress, in other words all the elements of musical composition which are the real providers of creative force within the hearer's mind. It is in this aspect that any dramatic function in opera can be sought.

Although these qualities of sound and motion which provide the essence of musical expression are no less significant in Chinese drama than they are in Western opera, they are also allied with movement in both a psychical and visual capacity, in a way which is outside the capabilities of operatic conventions or their purpose, and to an extent which makes mere surface comparisons on the basis of sung forms rather irrelevant. Having carried matters to this point it is as well to consider in more detail the special nature of Chinese drama, and by this is inferred Chinese drama as a purely artistic form and not as a means for social education or political propaganda.

Chinese stage art imposes a strict demand on the actor's physical powers, making his body a tool of remarkable precision controlled by the mind. Take, for example, the entry of a player in a leading male role, he comes on with rigidly controlled pace, his steps alternating to right and left, his feet lifted to show the soles of his boots. The various costume accessories or ornaments on his head-dress flicker and tremble in unison with the rhythmic sound patterns of voice and music, causing visual punctuation as it were, arabesques of movement alternate with sharply defined pauses during which the actor manipulates his flowing sleeves delineating a subtle effect of line reinforced by adjusting his head-dress, his beard or his girdle, with formal precision that reinforces the whole patterned structure. From the pauses which appear to contain action within inaction, as it were, the actor moves on to utilize the plastic potentiality of the stage area in its entirety with a series of poses and posturings of sculptural quality that point a climax of rhythm which again merges into the ongoing flow. Every single advancement of a gesture through its sequences is supported by a rhythm of line even when

it is not musically stressed. The head and eyes are no less active in this rhythmic pattern than the rest of the body. Everything is faultlessly controlled and impersonal but there is an absolute in the pattern of gesture and mime which, though it appeals intuitively, by its force transcends the logical and discursive as communication. And there is no transition from gesture to sound only complete interpenetration on a sensory level. The mathematically precise vocabulary of gesture and mime is completely co-ordinated within the vocal-musical structure. It is this conscious interweaving of sound and movement involving the actor and his audience in a rhythmic flow arising from the fusion of the physical movement of the body, melodic movement within the vocal-music pattern and the psychological movement of the theme, that is so characteristic of Chinese drama and constitutes the bare bones of dramatic structure.

Because of the monosyllabic nature of the Chinese language, melodic movement has always been a dominating element of Chinese music. The term melodic is used here to mean a succession of musical tones producing a horizontal line pattern of expression as opposed to the simultaneous creation of tones which forms the basis of Western harmony. The physical nature of the Chinese language, whose paucity of sounds required the use of rising, falling and level tones to distinguish different meanings for an identical sound, created a special musical relationship. Because each Chinese word consciously utilised the basic elements of melodic movement an idea expressed through language and one expressed in music acquired a close affinity that became fully exploited in musical composition. In Western languages vocal movement devolves far more upon the emotional content of verse or prose than on melodic movement within the language itself. But in the case of Chinese the emotional basis was relegated, the arrangement of the elements of movement overriding all other consideration.

In Chinese musical composition each element was closely inter-related not only in regard to time and movement but in the perfect relationship of tone pattern. In this the manipulation of a positive and negative basis of movement, centered in the rising, falling and level elements, was developed to create balance in musical phraseology with the interplay of elements so devised, to produce contrasting effects of tension, relaxation, progression, retreat and so on.

Because of the close relationship between thought in language and in music, Chinese poetry was written according to precisely formulated rules which first required a melodic-rhythmic compositional structure on which the words were then imposed, that is to say, poetic composition

used words as units of time and movement instead of first considering their literary emotional significance.

Stipulated tonal sequences and rhyme patterns were the materials of the poet and dramatist, rhyme in Chinese requiring words not only to be of the same sound but of the same tone. As balance, order and arrangement of tonal and rhyming patterns were the necessary ingredients for musical-poetic-dramatic composition, aids were devised in the shape of rhyming tables which classified words having the same tonal relationship and these were indispensable to the poets and playwrights. The fact that composers established their patterns of rhythm on the basis of tonal relationships, that is to say, on abstract patterns of sound movement, indicates why in China, music, poetry and the dance were in fact contributory factors to a common process and why, for example, a poem was danced as well as recited. From what has been touched upon here concerning the immediate relationship of language and music with tonal movement and its precedence over the emotional content of song and poetry it is possible to realise how profoundly stage technique was affected by these factors and how the fusion of sound pattern with mime and gesture became a vital accessory to dramatic expression.

Most Westerners when speaking of Chinese drama today think of the Peking style theatre which has provided the most common experience for a majority of non-Chinese people during the last fifty years. The Peking style theatre, nevertheless, was a 19th century development and by Chinese artistic standards a purely popular form which superseded the *k'un-ch'ü* a more classical style which embodied the spirit of a great cultural past.

The *k'un-ch'ü* whose increasingly refined nature led to its decline was heir to a dramatic tradition developed during the Yuan dynasty (1280-1367 A.D.). During this period the rhythmic elements of song, speech and stage movement were organised within new patterns of theatre usage and a four act structure was devised which became a prototype for stage techniques in succeeding centuries. Both the Peking theatre and the *k'un-ch'ü* style trace their origins back to these developments.

The *k'un-ch'ü* and the Peking styles though having a certain family relationship are different in artistic aim. Where the Peking theatre uses stringed instruments and percussion as the principal means of musical accompaniment, the *k'un-ch'ü* has the seven-holed bamboo flute which defines the scales that in turn define the tonalities for mood, movement and emphasis and provide countless arrangements. Where the Peking theatre has a limited number of musical modes, the *k'un-ch'ü* has a great variety

which vie with each other in finesse and abstract beauty. Song, in the sense that it has been discussed previously, is important within the *k'un-ch'ü* and, while there are no words in Chinese theatre terminology to distinguish musical genre, what may be called monody is very typical of the *k'un-ch'ü*. Frequently an entire act is performed in monody.

Articulation in singing depends on the disembodiment of each word into three sounds, the "head", the "belly" and the "tail", the initial letter of the "head" being short while the "belly" is drawn out from its preceding sound without change of intensity according to the measure, and the "tail" is the final leading the head and belly into the whole pronunciation. The way of separating a word from the one that immediately follows, so that the quality of succeeding "head" is not destroyed, constitutes one of the finer points of sound pattern technique. In order to achieve perfect expression a scrupulous regard for this pattern is essential in order to penetrate the musical character of the stage roles. Declamation takes a lesser place in the *k'un-ch'ü*, monologue is characteristic and a poetic passage usually precedes a monologue generally situated after a sung prologue, while an act is often concluded with a verse passage. Principles of contrast and differentiation underly the fusion of verse and prose and the playwright is free to utilize the full resources of poetic device and imagery to achieve his effects in harmonious combination with melodic movement, the physical movement of the actor and the psychological movement within the theme. The *k'un-ch'ü* attains a high pitch of concise artistry and depth of symbol through its technique, elements of which have been outlined here. It is essentially an intimate theatre in which convention and not illusion is the deciding dramatic principle that underline its form, a synthesis of completely co-ordinated stage movement and sound pattern. The rules of gesture and posture are no less precisely defined than the rules of musical composition. Where verse enables the playwright to use his resources without concern for the facts of reality and his imagery creates response within the consciousness, movement and gesture imposes upon the mind the sense of a new physical language. The actor uses his voice and body as an instrument in the same way that the Chinese painter uses his brush, with a superb control of resources and austere economy of effect. The analogy with painting is in fact a very pertinent one. In painting the relationship between calligraphy and the brush stroke is fundamental. The Chinese painter must first be an accomplished calligrapher and his ability to write characters is the first step in his art. Each character must embody all the principles of unity, form, balance and design extended on a larger scale in the complete painting. The right movements have to be made in the right order with an

unfailing eye for the relationship of a single movement with the greater whole. The same principles exactly apply in the actor's art. The counterpart in music is the tonal basis of individual words and the movement basis of the composition. In music, painting and acting the line movement is obvious to literal impact.

The Peking style actor is concerned with a more popular approach than his *k'un-ch'ü* counterpart although in the past the best Peking actors had their grounding in *k'un-ch'ü* methods. The plays of the Peking theatre are largely drawn from historical novels and popular romances whose characters were immediately identified by the man in the street. Dialogue and musical forms were composed for a more general kind of public than the intellectual audiences of the *k'un-ch'ü*. Modes and melodies are strictly limited, two-four or four-four timing predominates. In devising his play the dramatist used a fixed and often repetitive musical basis. Song is used to express emotional states, to evoke memories and so on, it is here that the principal reason for Chinese theatre being classed as opera may be sought. On the Peking stage a special rhyme system containing thirty key endings is used. If for example the rhyme of a first paragraph comes within a specific rhyme group, then the rest of the paragraph must follow suit. Verses of the two principal musical modes in use are usually composed of ten words which the actor breaks down into two series of three plus a group of four or alternatively a group of four and two series of three. This stereotyped usage results in a special accentuation of rhyme cadence and smooth versification which creates a characteristic vocal-movement. Peking stage language is compounded from the dialects of Peking, Hopel, Anhui and Szechuan and this fusion of dialectical emphasis and pitch patterns has created a special sonority and dramatic intensity capable of great psychological impact. Monologue or dialogue on the Peking stage usually takes the form of lines grouped to form a repetitive pattern, a stanza in Western concepts. The first two lines are usually in monotone, the end of the third line rises to be slowly prolonged while the fourth line is enunciated with deliberation or else vigorously rendered as a prelude to music or dance movement.

Although the Peking style theatre is such a popular form it has more than a superficial affinity with the old classical tradition and in its development of the vocabulary of movement and gesture it has made a significant contribution to stage art.

In the technical perfection of the Chinese stage and the aesthetic principles invoked it is possible to sense a relationship with a deeper Asian philosophy; an artistic attempt to take the mind beyond relativity. The

rhythmic flow induced within the evanescent processes of stage art can be seen as an extension of those principles which in Buddhism define "the mind of no mind," which is interpreted as the original mind, unconscious of itself, always flowing, never ceasing or assuming concrete form, it is like a running stream. In Western rational thinking this sounds like a paradox for how can thought process be in a state of non-thinking? But in a final analysis all art springs from the physical and metaphysical rhythm which alone explains the patterns, forms and melodies through which the mind derives profound satisfaction without demanding why. And just as the total rhythm of a work of art is the result of the fusion of lesser rhythms which define its form and content so it induces in human consciousness a sense of absorption within the basic rhythms which underlie the cosmic scheme and therefore ultimate reality. Poetry, music and the dance are arts of time and their measures are not dimensional, rather they embrace our sense of inner time, a state in which past, present and future are assimilated, and in which memory of a past note or gesture or the anticipation of sounds and movements to come are without significance in themselves. Asian artistic philosophy has always been supported by the fundamental metaphysical idea that the entire universe is suffused with an eternal flowing stream of consciousness of which different forms and appearances are wave patterns so to speak which rhythmically appear and disappear. Art is the revelation of these rhythmic manifestations of the inherent metaphysical reality in natural forms. A dominating principle, therefore, has been not the imitation of nature but the expression of the rhythms embodying this reality through sensory contrast and differentiation lying within different forms of artistic expression. In the body of rhythm, which is line, it is not the visible appearance of things which is revealed but their inner structure and essence.

Applying these principles to stage art we find that Chinese drama is concerned with internalization and non-action. By action, is meant a succession of situations linked to each other by a moment to moment tension and progressing in a linear fashion towards a climax in time or space—in other words, the action of Aristotle with its clearly defined beginning, middle and end. Where in Western drama activity is externalized, in Chinese drama the action is internal, within the mind of the spectator. There is none of the point to point progression of Western drama, where in the latter there is plot and linear advance, here there is a lack of action and a circular or elliptical form; where the West provides plausibility of action here there is no realistic logic in action and no emphasis of the unities. Again where in Western drama there are human beings faithful to life and psychological delineation here there is imagination and fanciful portrayal; instead of form residing in the use of verbal language, song,



dance and music are equally important parts of the dramatic vocabulary while formalized acting and symbol replace Western psychological identification and naturalism. And in expressing an idea there must be no breadth of interval, only a moment of instantaneousness.

The training methods used in Asian performing arts are basically technical methods for developing and perfecting intuition to the keenest point. Learning and intuition are co-partners but here intuition must not be confused with the conventional Western implication of the term; intuition here means the highest point of human perception and inner revelation. Intuition without learning degenerates into mechanical manipulation just as theoretic knowledge is useless by itself. At its worst we see the former frequently displayed in second-rate Chinese drama but the great stage artistes attain that balance between the two which provides the deeper motive. Then the impulse behind controlled movement and vocal pattern attains something more than mere narration or even symbolic representation. The performer is *en rapport* with a creative intensity within, generating a dynamism that places both himself and his audience beyond the bounds of the everyday. Within the performance of a single Chinese actor a totality of communication is reached and the realm of inner experience explored.

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