

Cheng Yanqiu¹: His Hobbies, His Farming Life in the 1940s and the Artistic Achievements of *The Lucky Purse*²

ZHANG Yi-he³

Institute of Traditional Chinese Drama, Chinese National Academy of Arts, Beijing, China

LIU Yue⁴ (Translator and Editor)

Beijing Language and Culture University, Beijing, China

In this paper Cheng Yanqiu's personality, manliness and his hobbies are discussed. From the narration of his farming life in the 1940s and his founding of schools his view on life is to be seen. In the latter part of the paper the artistic achievements of his masterpiece "The Lucky Purse" are explored.

Keywords: manliness, hobbies, farming life, *The Lucky Purse*

As one of the most famous artists and a great master of Beijing Opera Dan actors, Cheng Yanqiu has nothing of the features of a Dan actor in life. On the contrary his manliness is very obvious. It can be told from his hobbies and his fighting with the Japanese. His integrity and his nobleness also can be seen from the history of his founding of an art school and the founding masterpiece "The Lucky Purse" is much worth doing research on.

Cheng Yanqiu's Manliness

Cheng Yanqiu had several hobbies. He loved alcohol and smoking. As mentioned before, he could sing better when taking alcohol so he often took some alcohol even by himself. In 1926 he went on a performance tour to Hong Kong and his singing appealed to thousands of people. The then English governor gave him two bottles of 120-year-old Brandy.

Speaking of alcohol reminds me of the stories Wu Zuguang⁵ told. In the 1950s, the Ministry of Culture made a decision that Cheng's play "Tears of the Deserted Mountain" should be turned into a film directed by Wu Zuguang. Wu wrote an article to memorize the shooting of the film as follows, "We often took a bus and

¹ Cheng Yanqiu: 程砚秋 (1904-1958) famous Beijing Opera artist. His style of performance won such acclaim over the years that it came to be known as the "Cheng Yanqiu school."

² *The Lucky Purse*: It here refers to Suo Lin Nang 锁麟囊, a play written by Weng Ouhong 翁偶虹 (1908-1994) in 1937 for Cheng Yanqiu. It tells the story of a rich young woman (Xue Xiangling 薛湘灵) who gave a jewel purse on her wedding day to a poor bride and later she was returned with good reward for her good virtue. It is the most famous play that Cheng Yanqiu performed in his life and also was his favorite play. The play had its debut in Shanghai at Crystal Palace (Huang Jin Da Xin Yuan 黄金大戏院) in May 1940 and was presented in Peking in 1941.

³ Zhang Yi-he (1942-) Researcher, Institute of Traditional Chinese Drama, Chinese National Academy of Arts.

⁴ Liu Yue: (1968-) English teacher, Beijing Language and Culture University.

⁵ Wu Zuguang: 吴祖光 (1917-2003) film director, dramatist and writer. He was the director for Cheng Yanqiu's only film "Tears of the Deserted Mountain" *Huang Shan Lei* 荒山泪.

had dinners together. Cheng Yanqiu, despite being a Dan role performer, has typical masculinity. This was featured in his daily life and in his hobbies. For example, he smoked very big and strong cigars. Once I gave it a try. I was choked so badly that I could not even talk! As for alcohol, he took very strong ones. I advised him not to smoke such strong cigars nor take alcohol for the sake of his voice. Smiling slightly, he said, ‘A poor voice is not to be turned into a good one even if you don’t smoke or take alcohol. On the contrary, a good voice would not be harmed by taking any of those things.’”

Cheng enjoyed seeing movies. Once there were good movies on he went to the cinema. At Zhen Guang Cinema⁶ or Ping’an Cinema⁷ he would often be seen. He liked to be dressed in a long Chinese robe. This was very different from Mei Lanfang who often was neatly dressed in a suit. He was often seen sitting in the back of a cinema in a long robe with a suitcase. Someone wondered if he was far-sighted while others presumed that he was afraid of being recognized.

His Hobbies

Another hobby of Cheng’s was playing Tai Ji Quan⁸. He played Tai Chi every morning in his court. He not only played it very well but also had his study on it. The audience having seen his performance in the play of “The Dream of Boudoir”⁹ could have observed his mastery of Tai Chi from his performances in the dreamy situation. The brilliance of his performances is of no difference than slow motions shot in a movie. In addition, he had to do the singing and dancing at the same time. But when he finished singing “Nan Bang Zi”¹⁰ he looked just as usual instead of being out of breath or sweating. How could he do that? It’s all due to the endeavors he made in singing, acting and practicing Tai Chi.

A Fight at Qianmen Station

As for his manliness, a story about his fight with the Japanese must be told. There were no ways to give performances at the time. When learning that the Peking-Wuhan railway was cut off, Cheng Yanqiu tried to return to his residence at Shi Jin Garden at Dong Cheng District in Peiping¹¹. On the 20th Japanese attacked

⁶ Zhen Guang Cinema: It refers to 真光电影院. Today it is China Children’s Art Theater (中国儿童剧场), located at No.64 Dong An Men Avenue 东安门大街, Dong Cheng District 东城区, Beijing.

⁷ Ping’an Cinema: It here refers to 平安电影院 Ping An Dian Ying Yuan. Today it is named as Beijing Children’s Cinema 北京儿童电影院. It was founded by foreigners in 1907, located at East Chang’an Street 东长安街, Beijing.

⁸ Tai Ji Quan: It is an ancient form of self-defense, also named as Tai Chi 太极 or Tai Chi Chuan 太极拳. Tai Ji can be translated into the “Supreme Ultimate Force”. The notion can be associated with the Chinese concept of Yin- yang 阴阳, the notion that one can see a dynamic duality in all things.

⁹ Dream of Boudoir: It here refers to a play named as Chun Gui Meng 春闺梦. It is a play co-authored by Cheng Yanqiu and Jin Zhongsun 金仲荪 in 1931 when they saw Chinese people suffer badly from wars. It mainly tells a young woman Zhang Shi (张氏 ancient women were named by their or their husbands’ surnames) who missed much her newly-wed husband Wang Hui 王恢. Wang had been taken away into the army and was shot to death by an arrow in the battle. The play expressed people’s wishes for peace.

Jin Zhongsun 金仲荪 (1879-1945) also named as Jin Zhaoyan 金兆棧. He was a poet, educator and Beijing Opera playwright. He had written and edited several plays for Cheng Yanqiu. The most famous ones are *Wen Ji Gui Han* 文姬归汉 *Wen Ji’s Captivity and Return*, *Huang Shan Lei* 荒山泪 *Tears of Deserted Mountain*, *Chun Gui Meng* 春闺梦 *Dream of the Boudoir*, *Mei Fei* 梅妃 *Imperial Concubine Mei*, and *Bi Yu Zan* 碧玉簪 *Jade Hairpin* etc.

¹⁰ Nan Bang Zi 南梆子: It is a fixed singing pattern for Beijing Opera, only used for roles of Dan 旦 and Xiao Sheng 小生 in the past to express very subtle and fine emotions of the character.

¹¹ Peiping: 北平 Bei Ping. Here it refers to the old name of Beijing. In 1949 it was changed into the name of Beijing 北京.

Wanping city¹² and ChangXinDian¹³. On the 29th Japanese army entered Peiping and Peiping fell. The whole city was empty and the people stayed home. They could only hear the orderly boots of Japanese soldiers and the clatter of horses' hooves. Cheng and his wife both became silent. Just three months ago with Shang Xiaoyun¹⁴ he performed "Gong Yan Yuan"¹⁵ and "Nineteen Heros of the Green Mountain"¹⁶ for General Song Zheyuan¹⁷, No. 29 Army commander. The audience included Deputy Commander Tong Linge¹⁸ and Division Commander Zhao Dengyu¹⁹. But in just three months the two generals lay dead on the battlefields. The Japanese sought for Beijing Opera Workers Union of PeiPing and ordered the Union to organize free shows to donate planes to Japanese army. Cheng said, "I cannot give free shows for the Japs as they would buy planes to bomb Chinese. If I don't perform do I deserve death? Whoever likes to perform it's his business. But I will not." In the following year (1938), Mei Lanfang went to Hong Kong to live in hermitage while Yu Shuyan²⁰ fell very ill and Yang Xiaolou²¹ died of illness.

Cheng kept on giving shows on stage until the year of 1942. During that time he refused to co-operate with the puppet government. Neither would he perform free or go to Manchuria, the Japanese puppet regime, nor would he reserve any seats for the government officials, thus came up the persecution.

In the early September of 1942, Cheng returned to Beijing from Shanghai. He was interrogated and searched by the police of the puppet government railway company. He could not help reprimanding, "What do you want? A gentleman can be killed but not to be abused!"

¹² Marco Polo bridge Incident: On July 7th, 1937 Japanese troops shot at Chinese troops and bombed Wanping 宛平 city after they were refused to search the city in an excuse of a missing soldier. After the incident near the Marco Polo bridge (Lu Gou Qiao 卢沟桥) Japan launched a full-scale invasion of China. It is generally regarded as the official start of China's anti-Japanese war.

¹³ Chang Xin Dian 长辛店: It is an ancient town located in the district of Feng Tai 丰台 District, Beijing with a distance of 19 kilometers from Tiananmen 天安门.

¹⁴ Shang Xiaoyun: Here it refers to 尚小云 (1900-1976), famous Beijing Opera artist, Dan performer. In 1927, Mei Lanfang 梅兰芳, Cheng Yanqiu 程砚秋, Shang Xiaoyun 尚小云, and Xun Huisheng 荀慧生 were elected as the "Si Da Ming Dan" 四大名旦 (Four Greatest Masters of Dan Role performers of Beijing Opera) by *Shun Tian Shi Bao* 顺天时报, *Shuntian Times*, a newspaper in Peking city.

¹⁵ Gong Yan Yuan: It here refers to Gong Yan Yuan 《弓砚缘》, a play telling the story of Shi San Mei 十三妹, a heroine who wanted to revenge for her father. It is a play adapted from a novel named as ERNVYINGXIONGZHUAN, 《儿女英雄传》 The Biography of the Heroic Youth, written by Wen Kang 文康 (1820?-1871?), a novelist living in the late Qing dynasty, is a mid-19th century vernacular novel, giving us a rough profile of Beijing dialect and is of great value in doing research of modern Chinese language.

¹⁶ Qing Cheng Shi Jiu Xia: Here it refers to 《青城十九侠》 (Nineteen Heros of the Green Mountain). It is a novel written by Li Shan Ji 李善基 (1902-1961) in his pen name Huan Zhu Lou Zhu 还珠楼主 and firstly published in 1935. It tells the complicated stories of 19 swordsmen.

¹⁷ Song Zheyuan: Here it refers to 宋哲元 (1885-1940), a senior Nationalist Army officer. He ordered to fight against the Japanese at Xi Feng Kou (喜峰口) and the Sabre Team Da Dao Dui (大刀队) in his army inspired Chinese people in fighting against the Japanese invasion of China.

¹⁸ Tong Linge: Here it refers to 佟麟阁 (1892-1937), deputy army commander of No. 29 Army of the Nationalist forces. He died in a battle fighting against the Japanese army in 1937 near Beijing.

¹⁹ Zhao Dengyu: Here it refers to 赵登禹 (1898-1937), Vice Division Commander of Nationalist forces. He died in a battle in fighting against the Japanese near Beijing.

²⁰ Yu Shuyan: Here refers to 余叔岩 (1890-1943), a famous Beijing Opera artist playing Lao Sheng 老生 (old male) role. His style of performance is known as the "Yu Shuyan school."

²¹ Yang Xiaolou: Here it refers to 杨小楼 (1878-1938), a famous Beijing Opera artist playing Wu Sheng 武生 (martial art) role. He is regarded as a generation master for Wu Sheng art. His style of performance is known as the "Yang Xiaolou school."

When he was talking he walked in front of a pillar in case of the rear attack, then came up a man but to meet his fists. The other thugs besieged him. Cheng punched them one by one to the ground, throwing them into embarrassment. Then he stopped fighting and picked up his hat.

Those thugs threatened him, “Wait till next time.”

“Yeah, see you later!” After saying that, he tidied up his clothes and left the station.

On arriving at home he found his golden watch gone and one ear injured. The whole episode seemed like a heroic movie as vivid as a Cheng’s Tai Chi show. Since then it was spread in the whole Peking city that Cheng’s Kung Fu was amazing.

Mei Lanfang had the national integrity as he grew a beard to show his determination in order not to cooperate with the Japs. In fact Cheng Yanqiu also had his national integrity.

His Farming Life in the 1940s

Cheng Yanqiu was smart and determined. Since he encountered the puppet government police at Qian Men railway station, he decided to stop giving shows in order to farm. In the march of the following year (1943), he was seeking for a farming house near Qing Long Qiao in Haidian²² and bought 60 mu²³ of farming lands in the area of Hong Shan Kou and Hei Shan Hu²⁴. He would more cherish living in harmony with the nature. He wrote in his diary as follows. “I would have thought of buying a house in Haidian to be a farmer. I wonder if I can do that. I wonder if my big brother, other brothers and their wives would like to settle here. My ideal life is to enjoy farming and planting life but I wonder if others would make the same choice. If they did, we could save our expenditures. As my theatrical life has paused we must do something else to make a living. In my opinion an official’s job is very boring. I hope my children can do farming but I’m afraid that they think differently.”

At the views of a stream, some white clouds, moonlight over the willow top or some remaining snow on the salb bridge, Cheng Yanqiu would meditate a lot. He was busy with cooking himself from morning till night. When receiving a visitor, he cooked himself and treated the visitor with his corn cakes. When his wife came to see him and helped to wash clothes, Cheng gave her the corn cake he had just learnt to make and kept on asking: “Is it delicious?” He was learning to plow. With one mu ploughed, a piece of the ploughshare broke. With another Mu ploughed, another piece of the ploughshare broke. But he was feeling good. He was said to have the presence of Feng Yuxiang’s²⁵. But he said, “How does Feng Yuxiang have my presence!” Farming needed water so he asked workers to install a pulley. Cheng cheerfully watered his land while singing. He was also taking alcohol and eating meat with the installation workers. His country life was not without its troubles. In 1944, he wanted to “expand reproduction” so he bought land, donkeys, fodders, fertilizer and large wooden windows, iron nails, and slate for the construction of a new residence. In order to plant more lands, Cheng

²² Qing Long Qiao: Here it refers to 青龙桥 which is located in the area of the Fragrance Hill 香山, Haidian 海淀 District of Beijing.

²³ Mu 亩: It is a unit of land measurement in China. One Mu equals about 666.67 square meters. One acre is about 15 Mu.

²⁴ Hong Shan Kou and Hei Shan Hu: Here it refers to 红山口 and 黑山扈 located in Hai Dian District.

²⁵ Feng Yuxiang: Here it refers to 冯玉祥 (1882-1948), Wade-Giles romanization Feng Y ü-hsiang, original name Feng Jishan 冯基善, courtesy name (zi 字) Huanzhang 焕章, (born Nov. 6, 1882, Xingjizhen 兴济镇, Zhili 直隶 [now in Hebei 河北 province], China—died Sept. 1, 1948, at sea), Chinese warlord, known as the Christian General, who dominated parts of North China from 1918 to 1930. Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia. “Feng Yuxiang”. (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2 Nov. 2022, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Feng-Yuxiang>. Accessed 3 November 2022, Chinese notes added by the translator)

Yanqiu had to entertain the related people. Consuming two tables of simple dishes and alcohol cost 600 yuan (old money then) and this made his wife very unhappy. He was not very happy about her coming then. His diary was written as follows. “My wife has come for six days and eaten all of the best things I ate for every day: all the cakes made of flour, buckwheat, bean flour and fried rice cakes. She’s gone back to the city. If she stays there is nothing to eat.” Madam Cheng complained that her husband had spent too much money on farming so she did not allow the old housekeeper to take anything out of the city residence to the countryside.

Cheng Yanqiu was also feeling angry and sad with this so he wrote in the diary as follows, “How funny! She must think that I throw money down into the drain here at Qinglong Bridge. I also think that I am stupid! I don’t enjoy leisure but building houses on acres of land. Life fades like smoke. Why do I suffer myself? I wonder who will benefit from all these in the future. I have earned everything. Isn’t it unfair that I should be treated like this? I really feel unjust. Life will just end up in 20 years. Why do I suffer like this? But if I leave the money to unfilial children will it be justified?”

Intense farming, reading historical books and practicing calligraphy made up for his daily routine in this farming period. But “life is suffering and everything is like a dream”. Such words were his repeated chants in his diary. It should be said that living in hermitage was a long-cherished dream for Cheng. When he was performing in Shanghai in the early years he asked an old painter named as Tang Dingzhi²⁶ to paint for him “A Painting of Yu Shuang Study²⁷,” demonstrating the meaning of hermitage into the mountains.

In his mind, retiring from stage and settling down on a farm is a good lodge for his life. His own words are to be quoted here as follows: “A flower looks nice in half bloom but looks less good being out of bloom.” However, human beings are complicated. He did not forget the stage when taking farming as his career. When Cheng Yanqiu heard comments like “What a pity you don’t perform!” he was feeling gratified and his years of hard practice worthy. He often invited his friends from the Pear Garden²⁸ who would cheerfully talk about art when taking glutinous rice noodles, pickled radish strips and millet porridges. Weng Ouhong²⁹, the playwright, was a frequent visitor to his rural home. In the face of simple food, living on a bed of rope in a mud hut, Cheng Yanqiu more than once reminded Weng of bearing in his mind of writing a play for him once finding a good story. To this he gave an explanation, “Off stage I should still keep the logistics material repertory of the artistic accumulation. Once the winds of war disappear, I will go back to Beijing Opera.”

He returned to the Hill of West and gave away all the pigeons to friends. One year later, a pigeon suddenly flew back home. With this Cheng Yanqiu was greatly surprised. A friend remarked that the return of the

²⁶ Tang Dingzhi: Here it refers to 汤定之 (1878-1948), a Chinese painter. He was regarded as an important painter in Beijing in his middle age.

²⁷ A Painting of Yu Shuang Study: It here refers to 御霜簪图 Yu Shuang Yi Tu. Yushuang means lotus. This courtesy name of Cheng Yanqiu’s has the meaning of being noble and unsullied.

²⁸ Pear Garden: 梨园 (界) Li Yuan Jie refers to the Traditional Theater Art industry. The literal meaning of the Pear Garden comes from Tang Xuan Zong 唐玄宗, Emperor Xuan of Tang Dynasty (685-762) whose real name was Li Longji 李隆基. Tang Xuan Zong 唐玄宗 had a passion for art so he supported a band in his garden of pears in the capital of Chang An 长安 (Xi’an 西安 for today).

²⁹ Weng Ouhong: It refers to 翁偶虹 (1908-1994), brilliant playwright, theorist and educator of traditional Chinese theater art. He was a prolific playwright, having written dozens of Beijing Opera plays and produced many in his teamwork when working for the National Beijing Opera Company 中国京剧院 (founded in 1955). The most famous plays he wrote are *Suo Lin Nang* 锁麟囊 *The Lucky Purse*, *Da Nao Tian Gong* 大闹天宫 *The Monkey King* and *Hong Deng Ji* 红灯记 *The Red Lantern* (one of the Eight Sample Plays, Yang Ban Xi 样板戏) etc. He was also a great researcher of Beijing Opera painted faces (Lian Pu 脸谱).

pigeons marked the end of his declining stage. Sure enough, after the Japanese surrendered, he moved back to the city and immediately set about restaging.”

Setting up Schools

From 1930 to the end of 1940 he founded College of Traditional Chinese Theater Art³⁰, hiring Jiao Juyin³¹, a graduate of Peking University as the school headmaster. When Jiao went to study in France the headmaster's position was taken over by Jin Zhongsun. Cheng was the president. During his ten years' running, five classes of students graduated from the school. Cheng eliminated the old principles of Kowtowing to the masters and physical punishments etc.

The codes were self-esteem for being a performer. He often told the students, “You should have self-esteem instead of just entertaining the rich for their pleasures. You are newly-fashioned artists.” He also told the girl-students: “You are not going to become some rich men's concubines in the future.”

But eventually the school had to be dismissed. Even in March 1943 Cheng was still dealing with the school affairs. He had to return the debts amounting to 16,000 yuan (old money³²) so he sold the bus, the show cases, furniture and the school property at Nancuimingzhuang at Dong Huamen Avenue.³³ In several years he had sold numerous staff and was feeling frustrated, thinking of himself as “a Manchu master³⁴ who lost all the family properties.”

In 1944 during his farming period, he founded Gonde³⁵ Middle-school for the farming children in the Qing Long Bridge area right in the ruined Temple of Gonde. He spent his own money in repairing the campus facilities, tailoring, making desks and chairs and also sent his own steward to act as the door keeper and cook.

Right after that he bought the 10 mu Jin Family Garden as student dormitory. According to his rules all the farming children go to the school free. Later a group of rascals came to fight and bully the girls which frightened the local children to appear. As the deflation went worse and the staff kept on asking for salary raise, this philanthropic act went into an unfilled hole.

Cheng Yanqiu, the former performer now president suffered badly from being always asked for money but nothing beneficial for village education was seen to be done. He could not run the school any more. One day he went to Tianjin and saw Zhang Boling³⁶, president of Nankai University. He told Zhang the troubles about his charity. The latter was not at all surprised to hear it and persuaded him into giving it up. Zhang claimed, “You

³⁰ College of Traditional Chinese Theater Art: Here it refers to Zhong Hua Xi Qu Zhuan Ke Xue Xiao 中华戏曲专科学校. Founded by Cheng Yanqiu in 1930 and dismissed in 1941, it was a school of educating Beijing Opera actors. It recruited 200 students including boys and girls in five years.

³¹ Jiao Juyin 焦菊隐 (1905-1975) dramatist and translator, founder of Beijing People's Art Theater 北京人民艺术剧院 Bei Jing Ren Min Yi Shu Ju Yuan.

³² It refers to the money used in the period of Republic of China (1912-1949).

³³ Dong Huamen Avenue: Here it refers to 东华门大街 Dong Hua Men Da Jie. It is an avenue east-westward, with its western end as Dong Huamen of the Forbidden City.

³⁴ Manchu master: Here it refers to 八旗子弟 Ba Qi Zi Di. Literally it refers to the descendants of the Qing 清 (1636-1912) aristocrats who were Manchu 满族 living in degeneration counting on their ancestors' credits. Later it referred to those young people who idled away the time and spent all the family property by doing nothing and degenerating.

³⁵ Gonde 功德: It means grace and kindness. The phrase comes from the phrase Gunla in Buddhism.

³⁶ Zhang Boling: Here it refers to 张伯苓 (1876-1951) who was an educator and one of the founders of Nan Kai University 南开大学.

are not a professional educator. And you don't know there are people who just would take advantage of education. After quitting performances, you now live on the savings and spend money without income. How can you support such a group of people? In the long term you will be run out. You'd better close the school as soon as possible".

He closed the school and the government took it over. The school changed its name into Yihe³⁷ Middle School. He changed Jin's Garden into Cheng's Garden and occasionally went to stay there for days. He was not happy for long when seeing the government corruption after the Anti-Japanese War was over. Becoming very frustrated and downcast he lived as a half-recluse. It is said that Yihe Middle-school still exists today. Do the students know the founder ChengYanqiu?

"The Lucky Purse": A Long Story to Tell

"The Lucky Purse" is a play generalizing Cheng's artistic achievements. It tells the vicissitudes in the life of a woman named as Xue Xiangling³⁸ to portray the unexpectedness of human nature and complicatedness of human feelings. The play was prepared for a long time. Since 1937, Cheng and Weng Ouhong began to exchange their views on how to write the script. They also had tried a lot of techniques to write the script in order to achieve the best stage effect. While writing the script they were composing the fixed singing patterns. They knew the appeal of the traditional Chinese art and culture underlying deeply in the singing and acting, which can only be perceived by human feelings. Many singings and details should be extracted with poetic existence. Actually the traditional Chinese culture from Tang Poetry and Song Ci³⁹, YuanQu⁴⁰, Ming and Qing

³⁷ Yi He Middle School: Here it refers to Yi He Zhong Xue 颐和中学.

³⁸ Xue Xiangling: Here it refers to 薛湘灵, the heroine in the play of *The Lucky Purse* 锁麟囊 Suo Lin Nang.

³⁹ Tang Poetry: *Tang poetry* (táng shī 唐诗) refers to poetry written during China's *Tang Dynasty* (táng cháo 唐朝), often considered as the Golden Age of Chinese poetry. According to a compilation created under the *Kangxi* (kāng xī 康熙) emperor of the *Qing Dynasty* (qīng cháo 清朝), there were almost 50,000 Tang poems written by over 2,200 authors. During the Tang Dynasty, poetry became an important part of social life at all levels of society. Scholars were required to master poetry for the civil service examinations, but the art was available to everyone. This led to a large record of poetry and poets, a partial record of which survives today. Two of the most famous poets of the period were *Du Fu* (dù fǔ 杜甫) and *Li Bai* (lǐ bái 李白). The *Three Hundred Tang Poems* (Táng shī sān bǎi shǒu 唐诗三百首) were compiled by the Qing scholar *Sun Zhu* (sūn zhū 孙洙), also called "*Retired Master of Hengtang*" (héng táng tuì shì 衡塘退士), and published in 1764. **Five-character-regular-verse** (wǔ yán lǜ shī 五言律诗), **Five-character-quatrain** (wǔ yán jué jù 五言绝句), **Seven-character-quatrain** (qī yán jué jù 七言绝句) are most popular verses.

Ci: Here it refers to 词. Wade-Giles romanization **tz'u**, in Chinese poetry, song form characterized by lines of unequal length with prescribed rhyme schemes and tonal patterns, each bearing the name of a musical air. The varying line lengths are comparable to the natural rhythm of speech and therefore are easily understood when sung. First sung by ordinary people, they were popularized by professional women singers and attracted the attention of poets during the Tang dynasty (618-907). It was not, however, until the transitional period of the Five Dynasties (907-960), a time of division and strife, that *ci* became a major vehicle for lyrical expression. Of *ci* poets in this period, the greatest was *Li Yu* 李煜, last monarch of the Nan Tang 南唐 (Southern Tang) dynasty. The *ci* served as the predominant form for verse of the Song dynasty (960-1279). (Britannica, The Information Architects of Encyclopaedia. "ci". Encyclopedia Britannica, 26 Oct. 2022, Retrieved from <https://www.britannica.com/facts/ci>. Accessed 26 October 2022.)

⁴⁰ YuanQu: It refers to 元曲 here. It is a kind of verse art popular in Yuan dynasty 元朝, including Zaju 杂剧 and Sanqu 散曲. Zaju, originated in Song dynasty 宋朝, which focused on comical and funny amusement and became a kind of drama set to music in Yuan dynasty (1271-1368). Sanqu is a type of verse popular in the Yuan, Ming and Qing dynasties, with tonal patterns modelled on tunes drawn from folk music. (Britannica, The Information Architects of Encyclopaedia. "zaju". Encyclopedia Britannica, 26 Oct. 2022, <https://www.britannica.com/facts/zaju>. Accessed 26 October 2022.)

legends⁴¹ to the art of Mei Lanfang, Ma Lianliang⁴² and Cheng Yanqiu, has guarded the poetic existence, making the art perceptible and sensible with a historical and cultural tone. It took Cheng a whole year to design the fixed singing patterns. Every time he composed a piece he would sing for Weng Ouhong and consulted Wang Yaoqing⁴³. He had racked his brains. Generally speaking the lyrics of Beijing Opera are made up of regular seven character or ten character lines. But Cheng asked his playwright to write irregular lines of different number of characters. He said, "Please think more and write more irregular lines so that I can design the singing patterns accordingly." So did Weng Ouhong. For example, when Xue Xiangling was singing as follows, "Zai Jiaozhong zhi jue de tian hun di an, er bian xiang, feng sheng duan, yu sheng xuan, lei sheng luan, yue sheng lan shan, ren sheng na xian, dou dao shi da yu qing tian".⁴⁴ "Jiao zhong ren, bi ding you yi qiang ai yuan, ta lei zi tan, sheng xu duan, si du juan, ti bie yuan, ba xia ai yuan, dong ren xin xuan, hao bu can ran".⁴⁵ Such patterns of lines never existed in traditional Beijing Opera before. Out of the need for literary description and creation of characters Cheng created a kind of new singing pattern to the dramatic cadence of music, the rising and falling rhythm and high and low as in musical notes. When he was singing and acting at the same time onto the stage he filled the stylized performance⁴⁶ with strong human sentiments and amazing beauty.

In April 1940 *The Lucky Purse* had its debut at Crystal Palace of Shanghai⁴⁷. The audience was grasped immediately by the graceful and unique singing art as well as the unexpectedness of life and the humane warmth. The famous clown actor Liu Binkun⁴⁸ would almost forget his own lines onstage. The theater was filled for ten

⁴¹ Legends of Ming and Qing Dynasties: Here it refers to 明清传奇 Ming Qing Chuan Qi. **Chuanqi**, Wade-Giles romanization **ch'uan-ch'i**, a form of traditional Chinese operatic drama that developed from the *nanxi* 南戏 in the late 14th century. *Chuanqi* alternated with the *zaju* as the major form of Chinese drama until the 16th century, when *kunqu* 昆曲, a particular style of *chuanqi*, began to dominate serious Chinese drama. Highly subject to regional variations in language and music, *chuanqi* became popular throughout southern China. The average *chuanqi* was characterized by 30 to 50 changes of scene, the frequent and free change of end rhymes in arias, singing parts that were probably more languorous than those of the *zaju* and were distributed among many actors (not just the hero and heroine), and plots often taken from popular accounts of historical figures or from contemporary life. (This article was most recently revised and updated by Amy Tikkanen.) (<https://www.britannica.com/art/chuanqi-Chinese-drama>, Accessed 28 August 2023)

⁴² Ma Lianliang: Here it refers to 马连良 (1901-1966) famous Beijing Opera Sheng actor. He was twice voted to be the Four Great Masters of Xu Sheng, 须生 Xu Sheng, also named as Lao Sheng 老生, is a role for old male characters in Beijing Opera. Xu means beard as most Xu Sheng roles wear beards onstage.

⁴³ Wang Yaoqing: 王瑶卿 (1881-1954) Beijing Opera artist and educator. He had a reputation of Tong Tian Jiao Zhu 通天教主, which means he was a great authority of Beijing Opera and almost all of the famous Dan artists studied from him. Tong Tian Jiao Zhu is a character from the legendary novel of "Creation of the Gods," 封神演义, Feng Shen Yan Yi, written by Xu Zhonglin 许仲林 (1567-1620), translated by Gu Zhizhong 顾执中 (1898-1995). Tong Tian Jiao Zhu was very highly skilled in martial arts and would not die after going through many hardships.

⁴⁴ "Zai Jiaozhong zhi jue de tian hun di an, er bian xiang, feng sheng duan, yu sheng xuan, lei sheng luan, yue sheng lan shan, ren sheng na xian, dou dao shi da yu qing tian. Here they refer to the following Chinese lines: 在轿中只觉得天昏地暗，耳边厢，风声断，雨声喧，雷声乱，乐声阑珊，人声呐喊，都道是大雨倾天。

⁴⁵ Jiao zhong ren, bi ding you yi qiang ai yuan, ta lei zi tan, sheng xu duan, si du juan, ti bie yuan, ba xia ai yuan, dong ren xin xuan, hao bu can ran: Here they refer to the following Chinese lines: 轿中人，必定有一腔幽怨，她泪自弹，声续断，似杜鹃，啼别院，巴峡哀猿，动人心弦，好不惨然。

⁴⁶ The stylized performance: It refers to the stylized performance 程式化表演 in Beijing Opera. The performances are standardized including the singings, the recitations, the gestures and the dances etc.

⁴⁷ Crystal Palace: Here it refers to Huang Jin Da Xi Yuan 黄金大戏院, which is located at No. 1 Jin Ling Zhong Lu 金陵中路, Shanghai. It was founded by Huang Jinrong 黄金荣 (1868-1953) who was the only Chinese inspector general at Shanghai French Concession from 1898 to 1927 and who became head of Qing Bang 青帮, a secret society in Shanghai. The theater was opened in 1930 and in the initial stage films were put on there instead of Beijing Opera plays.

⁴⁸ Liu Binkun: Here it refers to 刘斌昆 (1902-1990), a famous Beijing Opera clown actor.

shows. When the 11th day came the play bill was changed to Yu Tang Chun⁴⁹ but to meet the audience' dissatisfaction. Then he put on *The Lucky Purse* again. This time when he began to sing the audience was singing with him. How touching the scene was! After 1949 the play was not passed by the censorship. In 1955 after the shooting of the film "Mei Lanfang's Stage Art," Zhou Enlai⁵⁰ suggested to make one film for Cheng Yanqiu. He required that one play should be selected to generalize Cheng's varied artistic achievements. Cheng Yanqiu first proposed "The Lucky Purse", his ideal and favorite play. But the upper side did not agree. Cheng had to give in and chose the play "The Deserted Mountain" which had the theme of calling for peace against war.

The Last Rose of Summer

For a period of time Cheng Yanqiu did not have many shows to give so he frequented Wu Zuguang at his residence Qi Feng Lou. Every time he got there he went upstairs to ask for Sheng Jialun,⁵¹ the musician's help. Later Sheng told Wu, "Cheng Yanqiu is great! He is very knowledgeable in music. He knows everything and he can absorb it."

Once Sheng asked him, "Can you combine western music into your fixed pattern of singing?"

Cheng replied, "I'll give it a try".

Sheng Jialun whistled an English folk song "The Last Rose of Summer". Cheng Yanqiu meditated for a while before he was singing. He was still singing Beijing Opera but with the English folk song into the melody. Cheng was so greatly talented that Sheng Jialun extremely admired him.

When he was making the film "The Deserted Mountain" Wu Zuguang and Cheng had a very nice co-operation. Cheng Yanqiu sent a correspondent for two of them. Usually Wu wrote a piece of play and sent it to Cheng right away. On the next day Cheng had composed the fixed pattern of singing. On the third day he choreographed the figure dance⁵². Unexpectedly one year later Wu Zuguang became a rightest in the drama circle. At the criticism session of the drama circle, Cheng Yanqiu was sitting onto the chairmen's platform. When the time came up for criticizing Wu, the atmosphere was at its climax. Wu Zuguang had stood for a long while and occasionally he raised his head, finding the seat of Chang Yanqiu's empty.

⁴⁹ Yu tang Chun: Here it refers to 玉堂春. The play was an adaptation of "The Miserable Yu Tang Chun Meets Her Husband" 玉堂春落难逢夫 Yu Tang Chun Luo Nan Feng Fu from the book *Jing Shi Tong Yan* (警世通言 *jǐng shì tōng yán*) by Feng Menglong (冯梦龙 Fēng Mènglóng) (1574-1646 AD). Su San 苏三, a prostitute also known as Yu Tang Chun (玉堂春 yù táng chūn), fell in love with Wang Jinlong (王金龙 Wáng Jīnlóng), the son of a retired minister. When Wang's money was drained he was forced to live in a deserted temple. Su gave him some money and urged him to return home and study hard. The owner of the brothel then sold her to Shen Yanlin 沈燕林, a rich merchant from Shanxi (山西 shānxī) province as a concubine. Worrying that Su would tell her husband the affair with a young man, Shen's wife tried to kill Su by putting poison in her noodles. But Shen ate the noodles and died. His wife then bribed the magistrate to sentence Su to death. Su was escorted to Taiyuan 太原, the provincial capital of Shanxi, to have her sentence endorsed. Three senior officials, including an imperial ambassador, who was Wang Jinlong himself, sat at the court to review the case. He pledged to save his lover's life and tried hard to dig out new evidence to overthrow the verdict. Su was acquitted after the maid's confession. She then lived happily with Wang ever after. (<https://www.hjenglish.com/new/p584252/> accessed on 17 August 2023)

⁵⁰ Zhou Enlai: Here it refers to 周恩来 Zhou Enlai, Wade-Giles romanization Chou En-lai, (born March 5, 1898, Huai'an 淮安, Jiangsu 江苏 province, China—died Jan. 8, 1976, Beijing), leading figure in the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and premier (1949-76) and foreign minister (1949-58) of the People's Republic of China, who played a major role in the Chinese Revolution and later in the conduct of China's foreign relations. (<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Zhou-Enlai/> Accessed on 28 August 2023)

⁵¹ Sheng Jialun: Here it refers to 盛家伦 (1911-1957), Chinese musician.

⁵² Figure dance: Here it refers to shen duan (身段). Figure Dance is a way of stylized performance in Beijing Opera.

How Did Cheng Yanqiu View Life?

An interpretation is as follows: In an autumn evening of 1941, he was walking along Shi Chahai⁵³ with his student Liu Yingqiu.⁵⁴ Gazing at the dark crimson of the sunset, Cheng Yanqiu said sentimentally, “Life is like a show. The society is a stage and everyone is an actor”. Then he pointed at the surrounding views and said, “Look! This is such a beautiful setting of nature! We give shows but act in the play again!” Are human beings audience or characters? Are human beings acting or is it the play acting as human beings? It’s not easy to say. Deeply immersed in the art of Beijing Opera and in the bottom of his heart, he was longing to be a hermit, detached from the world. This can be verified by the laughs he had when watering the farmlands and forcing apart the corn cobs with his hands and also by the words written in his diary (August 2, 1944) such as “I feel life is a suffering. Everything is like a dream. In the future I will just close my eyes.”

Mei Lanfang, Cheng Yanqiu and Ma Lianliang are still our topics for today. Only they deserve the name of great masters. One of my colleagues once said that the emerging of a master goes with the surroundings and the opportunities. Firstly he is greatly gifted and very hard-working. Secondly he has the help of masters and friends and he himself is tolerant. Thirdly he must be in a certain social environment in which he is nurtured by the passing on of the traditional art and he is also good at following the new fashion. He must be nurtured by both the old and the new trends as well as the oriental and the western art in order to enrich his own art. I believe that is why Mei and Cheng excel their peers and even their predecessors.

Cheng Yanqiu and his art have deserved similarly good comments both officially and from the audience. On the stage he had a good mastery of Beijing Opera art. He passed away at the age of 54 years old. The colleagues all claimed that he and Mei Lanfang had passed away at a good time. The drizzling and the meadows were all taken away by him⁵⁵. Today where can we find the fervent atmosphere in the theater along with the crazy obsession of the fans? Today’s traditional Chinese theater art is but a window to peep the traditional views. Mei Lanfang and Cheng Yanqiu are becoming a cultural symbol and are being written into history, gradually retreating from the world.

References

- Zhang, Y. H. 章诒和. (2007). *Ling Ren Wang Shi 伶人往事* [A Memoir of Beijing Opera Performers] (4th ed) (pp. 340-379). Hong Kong: Ming Pao Publications Ltd..

⁵³ Shi Cha Hai: Here it refers to Shi Cha Hai 什刹海. It is a historical and cultural reserved area lying in Xicheng 西城 District of Beijing covering 336000 square meters of water.

⁵⁴ Liu Yingqiu: Here it refers to 刘迎秋 1919-1998), a disciple of Cheng Yanqiu’s.

⁵⁵ The drizzling and the meadows were all taken away by him: The original version in Chinese are as: Xi Yu Lian Fang Cao Dou Bei Ta Dai Jiang Qu Liao 细雨连芳草，都被他带将春去了。This was the subheading of Zhang Yihe’s article on Cheng Yanqiu’s life in the book “A memoir of Beijing Opera Performers” (Ling Ren Wang Shi 伶人往事).