

THE CHINESE UNIVERSITY OF HONG KONG

THIRTY-SIXTH CONGREGATION

Conferment of the Degree of Doctor of Literature, *honoris causa*

A Citation

Mr. Yu Zhen Fei

In the year 1790 when Mozart's *Così fan Tutte* had its premiere in Vienna, half a world away four of the best Qing opera troupes converged on the capital city of China and started the process of synthesis which resulted in the birth of Peking Opera as we know it in our time. At the head of the four troupes was a man called Cheng Chang Geng 程長庚 whose art was passed on through the family to his grandson Cheng Ji Xian 程繼先 who became, at the turn of the century, the most celebrated *xiao sheng* 小生, the equivalent in Peking Opera of a leading man. His star pupil is Mr. Yu Zhen Fei 俞振飛, the man this University is honouring today.

Yu Zhen Fei was born in China towards the end of the Qing dynasty, in 1902. He first learned the art of Kun singing (崑曲) from his father, the renowned Yu Su Lu 俞粟廬. Having mastered the singing of Kun Opera, he apprenticed himself to the great Cheng Ji Xian and learned all the *xiao sheng* roles for which his master was justly famous. His apprenticeship completed, Mr. Yu began to make a name for himself in the 1930's during which period he sang and played *xiao sheng*, along side the four most famous *dan jiao* 旦角 or leading ladies, of his generation, including the legendary Mei Lan Fang 梅蘭芳 whose female impersonation is unequalled to this day. In contrast to European Opera in which some male parts, such as Mozart's Cherubino and Richard Strauss's Rosenkavalier, are entrusted to the fair sex, the female parts in Peking Opera can be performed by very good-looking men. In the 1930's there were *dan jiao* aplenty, but there were not nearly so many leading men; and so Yu Zhen Fei was paired with one "female" lead after another.

However, Yu's great reputation was firmly established early in life not because leading men were scarce but because Yu's style was innovative and unique. In the words of Zhang Li Hui 章力揮 who wrote the epilogue of *The Art of Yu Zhen Fei* (俞振飛藝術講集),

"Mr. Yu had fused Peking Opera and Kun Opera by bringing to Peking Opera the perfect coordination of singing and dancing which is characteristic of Kun Opera, and by introducing into Kun Opera the pace, contrast and audience appeal of Peking Opera, and in so doing had brought about the cross fertilization and elevation of both these two opera styles".

Yu's most famous role was as the talented and flamboyant poet Li Po in the opera *Li Po's Drunken Mischief* (太白醉寫). The role requires a leading man who is as dashing and cavalier as Lord Byron and who is able to drink, compose and do calligraphy all at the same time. Mr. Yu was perfect for the part. Unlike previous *xiao sheng* who merely acted at being poets without knowing many words and without being able to write a good hand, Mr. Yu is himself a scholar and calligrapher. And he is credited with bringing to this role that extra dimension of credibility which had hitherto been lacking when less accomplished actors played China's greatest poet. When Yu Zhen Fei played Li Po, there need be no suspension of disbelief.

Mr. Chancellor, as a performing art, Peking Opera is extremely difficult to do well. Unlike European Opera which is primarily a medium for great singers in full voice, Peking Opera requires its artists to combine the talents of singer, dancer, actor and acrobat in a single person. I am absolutely sure that, if Italian Opera had demanded dancing and acrobatic skills of its singers, the imposing Luciano Pavarotti and Joan Sutherland would not have made it to the stage. Indeed, I am reliably informed by an authoritative Hong Kong music critic that until the seductive Grace Bumbry appeared in the part of *Salome* at Covent Garden, the dance of the seven veils had always been a great embarrassment, to the audience as much as to the soprano or mezzo-soprano, and some had indeed made a mess of it.

But, Mr. Chancellor, when Mr. Yu was performing on the stage, and he had done that for sixty years of his life, he had all the well-honed skills of singer, dancer, actor and acrobat at his beck and call. For two generations, he entertained, thrilled and mesmerized his fans in many parts of China. Sadly, there is today very few record of those commanding performances when Mr. Yu and Mei Lan Fang and his other "female" leads romped and ruled the stage. This is because in China performances were rarely recorded, unlike in the West where great singers like Caruso and Melba had made recordings of their art on the gramophone as early as the turn of the century and these have been carefully preserved and can still be enjoyed today. Traditional Chinese operatic singers were artists who somehow made light of their art; some of them did not know how to read and write, and many were content to perform and take applause as their reward. It never occurred to them to preserve their art for posterity.

Not so Mr. Yu Zhen Fei. He is probably one of the few who saw a need to collect, record and pass on. But his entire collection of Kun Opera scores, his academic treatises on the subject of Kun singing, his press cuttings as well as photographs of himself and other famous artists, and, most important of all, the stills and recordings of their actual performances - all of that and more were taken away from him during the Cultural Revolution when his house was ransacked by the Red Guards. This priceless collection representing half a life's work was then left unattended in the Shanghai Traditional Opera School and later destroyed in a fire.

After the excesses of the Cultural Revolution had subsided, Mr. Yu wanted to re-trace and re-create those famous roles for posterity, but found that advancing age had impaired his memory, his voice and his legs. What has been lost is no longer redeemable.

He did, however, try to record his every experience in an oral autobiography. This is the book *The Art of Yu Zhen Fei* which is a standard reference work for students and connoisseurs of Kun and Peking Opera.

Mr. Chancellor, for his immense and unique contribution in synthesizing the most appealing elements of Kun and Peking Opera, for the millions he had entertained, for the thousands he had taught at Jinan University and as Director of the Shanghai Traditional Opera School and Shanghai Beijing Opera Theatrical Company, for the great service he has rendered his country as a member of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference and as Vice-Chairman of the China Federation of Literature and Art Circles, I have the honour to present Mr. Yu Zhen Fei, artist, educationist, calligrapher, literati, aesthete, author, scholar, and founder of a school of operatic art known as the Yu School, for the award of the degree of Doctor of Literature, *honoris causa*.

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