

Hanju Opera: A Brilliant Pearl Lost in the Sea

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Which is Better, Hanju (a welding saw) or Gangju (a hacksaw)? (The irony in the question lies in that, “Hanju” [汉剧] or Hanju opera in the Chinese language, sounds the same as “hanju” [焊剧], “a welding saw”, which is a non-existent object, whereas “Gangju” [钢锯] means “a hacksaw” rather than any opera or drama in Chinese. Translator’s note)

The above question is supposedly raised by the new girl-friend of a Hanju opera artist when he is telling her about what his job is like.

The question, full of comic colors, happens to have appropriately depicted the current situation of the Hanju opera, which is intermingled with hopes and worries.

There are varied accounts of the origin of the Hanju opera, one of the oldest and most influential operatic forms among the Chinese operas. One of them is closely related to the war, iron and blood. Tradition has it that after Li Zicheng (1606-1645) started his uprising against the Ming Court, he stationed his troops in the area between what is today’s Xiangyang in Hubei province and Dengzhou in Henan province for as long as a decade. During that period, the *bangzi* melody, a local opera performed to the accompaniment of *bangzi*, or wooden clappers, popular in the Gansu and Shaanxi region, found its way to Xiangyang, and gradually evolved into the *xipi* melody (the inside string of the Chinese two-stringed fiddle is tuned to “la” and the outside string to “me”) typical of the Hanju opera. After Zhang Xianzhong (1606-1648) launched the genocide against the people in Sichuan, only ten percent of the local population survived. As a result, people in Hubei, Hunan, Guangdong and other provinces were ordered by the Court to emigrate to Sichuan to replenish the population there. After numerous people had left their homeland in Hubei to settle down in Sichuan, however, some of the people in the neighboring Jiangxi and Anhui provinces, fleeing the extreme miseries caused by the consecutive years of war and famine, entered Hubei. These refugees brought with them the Yiyang melody, which was transformed into the *erhuang* melody (the inside string of the Chinese two-stringed fiddle is tuned to “sew” and the outside string to “ray”. See Yang Duo: *The History of the Hanju Opera*) In this way, “*xipi*” and “*erhuang*”, the two major characteristic melodies of the Hanju opera, having gone through numerous hardships, and musical, historical and social selections, came to meet in Xiangyang. On the basis of these two melodies, subsequent generations of artists incorporated, in their practice, such new elements as the *geqiang* melodies, Kunqu opera melodies, *zaqiang* (variety tunes) and folk tunes into the Hanju opera, which took its initial shape during the Kangxi and Qianlong period (ca. 1661-ca. 1795) in the Qing Dynasty. Since the origin of the Hanju opera is rooted in Hubei, it is first called the Chu melody (Hubei is historically known as the State of Chu) or the Han melody (after Hankou, a city in Hubei). The Hanju opera reached its peak during the Jiaqing and Daoguang period (ca. 1796-ca. 1850) in the Qing Dynasty due to the socio-economic prosperities then. At that time, guild halls, stages and opera houses mushroomed in Hubei to serve the traders and merchants who had flocked there. Since the mandarins and wealthy merchants enjoyed watching the opera, a variety of the Hanju opera troupes, with graceful, elegant and talented artists, performed to cater to their needs. Gradually, four *luzi* (in the Hubei dialect, *luzi* means schools, or ways) of the Hanju opera, one along the

Xiang River valley, another along the Fu River valley, a third along the Jing River valley and the last along the Han River valley, came into being. However, with the changes of dynasties, the fate of the Hanju opera also reached its peak at some time or fell to its bottom at other time. During an evolution of more than three hundred years, the early Chu melody or Han melody was renamed the Hanju opera at the end of the Qing and early Republic era, and the practice of training performers by the troupe owners themselves in the early period was replaced by training in regular vocational schools in the Jiaqing and Daoguang period in the Qing Dynasty. In the early stage of its development, there were only male Hanju opera singers, in the 1920's, however, Xinhua school started to train young girls into future performers. The influence of the Hanju opera began to spread to parts of Henan, Hunan, Sichuan, Shaanxi, Jiangxi, Anhui, Guangdong, Shanxi and Guizhou provinces. There appeared a plethora of famous Hanju opera stars such as Mi Yingxian, Yu Sansheng, Yu Hongyuan, Lai Xuan, Dong Yaojie, Li Caiyun, Li Chunsen, Wu Tianbao, Huang Linchuan, Chen Bohua, and Huang Guizhu. Traditional and newly created repertoires include nearly one thousand items. As many as 10 thousand practitioners were involved in various regular and mobile troupes. At the peak of its splendor, the Hanju opera could well compete with the Beijing opera and Kunqu opera. Since both Dong Yaojie (1894-1952), the most famous Hanju artist, and Mei Lanfang (1894-1961), the most distinguished Beijing opera artist, had their own fans, the audience was sometimes at a loss as to whose performance they should watch. That was the period when the Hanju opera flourished.

There were several dozens of the Hanju opera troupes of various sizes in different parts of China up till the 1960's. At present, however, few of them remain. The majority of the citizens have long forgotten what the Hanju opera is.

My first encounter with the “fascinating verses” in Jiaying Prefecture

At the beginning of this year, a conference was held in Meizhou City (known as Chiaying or Jiaying Prefecture in the Qing Dynasty), Guangdong Province. One of the conference attendants is a classmate of Li Jia, Mayor of Meizhou City. Thanks to this friend, Mayor Li Jia, representing the host city, arranged a Hanju opera performance for the conference participants. Although people of my generation, who are brought up in the age of globalization and modernization, are familiar with the prevalent popular culture, we know little about our traditional culture, as we do not care enough for it. I had never heard about the Hanju opera before that event. At about seven o'clock in the evening, after dinner and a shower, I walked leisurely to the opera house. The performance had already started. I was instantly struck by a high-pitched penetrating female aria coming from the other end of the hallway. The singing sounded sometimes sorrowful, sometimes romantic, sometimes lingering, sometimes sonorous, sometimes emotional, hitting my heart directly. After I got into the hall, I waited till the singing was over before I asked the singer what she had been singing. She replied that it was a selected aria known as “Recalling the Past” from the Hanju opera *Qin Xianglian*. In this way, I came to know Zuo Xueqin, a straightforward artist who plays the role of “*qing yi*”, or a modest and virtuous married woman at the Guangdong Hanju Troupe, and her colleagues Zhang Guangwu, who plays the role of “*lao sheng*”, or a dignified old official or scholar with a beard, and Ji Bing, who plays the role of “*hua dan*”, or a flirtatious or playful girl, and the real Hanju opera into the bargain. I also got to see the fading, yet still enchanting brilliance of

the Hanju opera that had sparkled for well over three hundred years through their live performances of the selected arias from the traditional operatic items such as *Parting at Congtai*, *The Reunion of Baili Xi with His Missing Wife*, and *Baimen Liu*.

From *The Development History of the Hanju Opera in Guangdong* presented to me later as a gift by the Chinese Department, Jiaying University, I further learned the evolution of the Hanju opera in Guangdong. Known originally as “wai jiang xi” (opera or drama imported from places outside Guangdong), the Hanju opera was brought into the Eastern Guangdong during the Qianlong period (ca. 1736-ca.1795) in the Qing Dynasty by the mandarins whose hometowns were not in Guangdong. As the local officials, gentry, merchants and traders regarded the Hanju opera as the “orthodox form of elegant music”, it gradually took its root in the Lingnan area. Historically, numerous Han people in the Yellow River valley were forced to flee the incessant wars at the end of the Western Jin Dynasty in central China, making the Lingnan area in the south their final home. Such migrations lasted on and off for more than one thousand years. The Han Chinese migrants from the central plains tried to blend their culture with that of the local Gu Yues while retaining their own cultural independence. These cultural fusions and adaptations resulted in a rich variety of Lingnan and Hakka cultures with their own unique features. And the Hanju opera added some momentum to this cultural development. The several hundreds of years that followed witnessed the training of the Hanju actors in regular vocational schools and rise of new stars. The Hanju opera not only flourished in cities and temples, but also in out-of-the-way rural areas. Their performances in Singapore, Malaysia, Hong Kong and Taiwan helped to spread the influence of the opera to the entire South-east Asia. Since its establishment in 1956, the Guangdong Hanju Troupe has toured Beijing five times for performance, where the Hanju opera was lauded as a “Peony from the South”. At a time when the status of the Hanju opera is precarious and the future of it uncertain today, Meizhou, a city that cherishes its traditional culture, in an attempt to save this dying operatic form, has not only appropriated fund and acquisitioned land to build and update the Hanju opera houses, but also provided favorable policies to encourage the Hanju opera to apply to the United Nations for the status of intangible cultural heritages.

Now I see the true intention of Li Jia, a capable and discreet mayor, who was actually promoting the Meizhou culture and Hanju opera in the name of entertaining his old classmates. But his trick worked, at least he has captured one more person who has been tainted all over with modern and popular elements, and found one more person who cares for and listens to the Hanju opera in this new age.

Hanju's deep love and woes

It was in the depth of winter in Guangzhou when I saw the three topnotch Hanju opera artists again. They brought to me a newly written Hanju play entitled *Huang Tsun-hsien* or *Huang Zunxian* (1848-1905). As a famous historical and cultural figure from Meizhou, known in Japan as the “most graceful and cultivated diplomat of the new generation”, Huang is a well-known poet, statesman, diplomat and educator in the late Qing Dynasty. In his long diplomatic career, he served successively in Japan and the United States, and traveled to over a dozen countries and regions such as the United Kingdom, France, Italy, Belgium, Singapore and Hong Kong, where he witnessed the scientific and institutional

advantages in Europe and America. A man with great patriotic enthusiasm, Huang Zunxian resorted to writing in an attempt to find a cure for the ills of a weak motherland. He became a reform pioneer, taking active part in the 1898 Reform and doing his best to push it. The reform efforts, however, failed due to a plethora of reasons. To express his concerns and indignation, he wrote a poem which includes these lines, “The cuckoo sheds its sad tears once more to entreat the sovereign to care for his subjects, and Jingwei (a legendary bird) will never take a rest before she fills up the East China Sea with the small pieces of stone she drops into it everyday.” It is the most important mission and function of the Hanju opera, as a traditional operatic form, to portray such a serious theme. The majority of the more than one thousand items in the traditional repertoire of the Hanju opera, like those in the Kunqu opera and Beijing opera, are concerned with the fate of the Chinese nation, in addition to the basic criteria of human and social ethics such as the conflicts between loyalty and treachery, ugliness and beauty, faithfulness and betrayal, honesty and deception. And it is the consistent stand of traditional operas to uphold truth, goodness, and beauty, while castigating falseness, evil and ugliness. In the past hundreds of years, the most popular and the most influential Hanju opera items, such as *The Story of A Sword Named Yuzhou Feng* (Space Blade), *Wen Zhong, the Grand Mentor for the Crown Prince*, *Assassinating the King of Qi*, *The King of Qi Seeking a General*, and *The Reunion of Baili Xi with His Missing Wife*, have instilled the notions of virtue, good conscience, falseness, ugliness, goodness, and evil into the mind of everyone in the cities, townships and rural areas. Hand in hand with the poetry reading, calligraphy writing and cultivation of good manners incorporated in the traditional culture, the Hanju opera has helped in the formation of the national characters and moral values of the Chinese nation.

Until the 1980’s, the traditional operas had been the main type of spiritual life for the people in the vast rural country in China. At weddings, funerals, or slack farming seasons, it has been a traditional custom of several hundred years for people to invite the troupes to give live performances in their homes and villages. It is the cultural function of traditional operas, including that of the Hanju opera, of course, that has bogged itself down in the current difficult situation under the backdrop of modernization and globalization in China. With the changes of political and economic situations, with the emergence of new ethic values, and with the gradual collapse of traditional moralities, the old forms of entertainment have been gradually replaced by the new ones. What we see and hear today are more likely the individualized expressions of insignificant sentiments. What we care today are no longer the survival of our country as a nation, but the “smell of the socks” or the “flavor of the cigarette” of someone we care and love.

Not an ending

Of course, the loss of soil for the traditional ethics is just one of the reasons for the Hanju opera to go downhill in this new age. It is not easy to generalize what the other reasons are in a just few words. However, how to make an old form of art to re-germinate and bloom is an important problem confronted by the Hanju opera today. Faced with anachronism and lack of understanding on the part of the audience, Gustav Mahler (1860-1911) said confidently, “My time will surely come”. What the Hanju opera faces, however, is a bygone era, or a past glory. Faced with this situation, experts from various fields have offered different solutions, or have made different efforts and explorations. Some have

written new plays to portray the contemporary life, with the hope to striking a sympathetic chord of the time; some have tried to re-package the traditional operatic items in modern stage decorations and acoustic effects, with the aim of shortening the distance with the audience through those touches of modernity; others, in an attempt to seek alternative possibilities through the combination of the Chinese and Western elements, have tried to stage Shakespeare's plays in the form of the Hanju opera. There are still others who have been trying to train new Hanju opera talents, set up the Hanju opera museum, or stage the opera in the rural areas or factories. All these efforts are worthwhile, but the final result is not what we can predict, because every person, every nation, has his/her own fate. In my opinion, an operatic form has its own fate too. What we can say now is that we have been trying to reverse its fate, and we will continue to do so in the years to come.

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Translated from the Chinese original by Guo Yidun

汉剧-----沧海遗珠的光芒

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汉剧（焊锯）好， 还是钢锯好？

据说这是一位汉剧演员在向刚认识的女友介绍自己工作的时候， 女友向他提出的问题。

这样一句不可谓充满喜剧色彩的问话， 恰巧十分贴切地表明了汉剧悲喜交加的当下处境。

作为中国戏曲最古老、影响最大的剧种之一，汉剧起源说法有多种。不过其中的一个说法，却与战争和铁血有着密不可分的关系。相传李自成起义时，曾屯驻襄邓之间（即今湖北襄阳和河南邓州）达十年之久，而将流传于甘陕地区的梆子腔传入襄阳，经改造而成汉剧的“西皮”。而张献忠对四川大开杀戒，生民十不遗一，于是“湖广填四川”之后，大量湖北人离开故土，相邻的江西安徽因连年战祸和饥荒，人民生活水深火热，逃难的人一部分进入湖北，将弋腔带进了湖北，经改造而成了“二黄”（参扬铎《汉剧史考》）。汉剧的两大主要声腔“西皮”“二黄”就这样经过音乐的、历史的、社会的炼沙淘金和披荆斩棘之后，在襄阳相遇了。之后又经过数辈艺人的悉心实践，融会贯通，将歌腔、昆曲、杂腔、小调兼收并蓄，在清康熙时代而初具规模。因汉剧产生在湖北，是以初称楚调、汉调。到了嘉庆道光年间，随着社会经济的繁荣，湖北商贾云集，会馆林立，舞榭歌台遍布，达官贵人歌舞升平，戏班艺人烟视媚行于其间，风姿绰约，风华绝代，汉剧由此开始兴盛，以其流传于襄河、府河、荆河、汉河四流域而称四路子（路子，湖北方言，流派之意）。朝代更迭，风流云散，汉剧的命运也随之或矗高山，或陷深谷，历经 300 多年的流变，汉剧也从早年的楚调汉调，到清末民初更名汉剧，从开初的民间艺人草台自创，到嘉庆道光

年间的科班授徒，从只有男艺人一统天下，到举办新化女科班培训女学员，汉剧的影响，逐渐漫散，远及豫、湘、川、陕、赣、皖、粤、晋、黔等省的部分地区，先后涌现了著名的汉剧艺人米应先、余三胜、余洪元、赖宣、董瑶阶、李彩云、李春森、吴天宝、黄彝传、陈伯华、黄桂珠等，整理出传统剧目及和创写剧目近千个，各种正规班社及流动班社的从业者达万人。在汉剧的鼎盛时期，大有与京剧和昆曲分庭抗礼之势，当年名重一时的董瑶阶，与名满天下的梅兰芳各有拥趸，观众常为到底看哪个而犹豫不决，汉剧可谓一时风光无限。

直到 20 世纪 60 年代，全国各地尚有各种形式的汉剧团体几十个。而到今天，只剩下寥寥数个，大多数人，则早已不知汉剧为何物了。

嘉应州初遇“销魂绝妙词”

今年初，一班人到广东梅州（清时称嘉应州）开会，其中一位朋友的大学同窗好友李嘉，时在梅州任市长。托这位友人的福，李嘉市长安排了一场汉剧表演，以尽地主之宜。似我这等在全球化现代化背景中成长的一辈人，对通俗文化流行文化耳熟能详，对祖国的传统文化却漫不经心孤陋寡闻，此前竟从未听闻汉剧之名。是夜七时许，吃完饭待我洗漱完毕，磨磨蹭蹭来到演出地点，节目早已开始。一声穿云裂帛的青衣唱腔从走廊传来，悲怆又缠绵，千回而百转，高亢而深厚，声情并茂，直抵心灵的演唱，霎时将我震住。进得门来，待她唱罢，我就询问她唱的什么，她说是汉剧《秦香莲》中的《想当初》一折。就这样我认识了广东汉剧院的青衣演员、个性爽直的左雪琴，以及她的同事，老生演员张广武，花旦嵇兵，也因此认识了活生生的汉剧。在他们现场演出的《丛台别》、《百里奚认妻》、《白门柳》等传统曲目的片段中，我进一步切身体会到汉剧闪耀了 300 多年，如今虽已衰微，却依旧坚韧的让人迷醉的光芒。

后来获得嘉应学院中文系送我一本《广东汉剧发展史》，才知道汉剧在广东的流变发展情况。以“外江戏”为名的汉剧从清乾隆年间由外省籍官员带入粤东，因官绅商贾崇尚汉剧而成为“正声雅乐”，而在岭南地区慢慢扎下了根。由于从西晋末年因战乱而开始的大量黄河流域的汉民南迁，断断续续延续了 1000 多年，岭南地区成为了这些汉民的最终归属地，他们与当地土著古越人的文化即（既）融汇又独立，形成丰富独特的岭南文化、客家文化，汉剧更为这一文化的发展增添了新的源头活水。此后几百年间，科班迭起，名角辈出，既兴盛于城郭庙堂，又活跃于乡村僻野，并曾远赴新加坡、马来西亚、香港、台湾等地，将汉剧的影响，扩展到整个的东南亚。自 1956 年成立广东汉剧团之后，曾 5 次晋京演出，有“南国牡丹”之称。现今，当此汉剧风雨飘摇、前途未卜之时，热爱传统文化的梅州，开始拨款拨地，出政策、申请非物质文化遗产，修剧院，努力地想挽救这个步履蹒跚的剧种。

现在我终于明白，原来干练谨严的李嘉市长是醉翁之意不在酒，借招待老同学之名，却行的是宣扬梅州文化以及汉剧之实。不过这招挺管用，至少他因此又俘获了一个浑身沾满现代和流行因素的人，为汉剧多找到一个新时代的关注者和倾听者。

汉剧的深情与深愁

再次与这三位优秀的汉剧演员相遇，是隆冬时节的广州，他们带来了新编的汉剧《黄遵宪》。作为梅州的历史文化名人，被日本友人称为“新一代最有风度，最有教养之外交家”的黄遵宪，是晚清著名诗人、政治家、外交家、教育家。他在长期的外交生涯中，出使日美，游历英、法、意、比、新加坡、香港等十几个国家和地区，看到了欧美国家科技和制度的优势，满怀爱国热情的黄遵宪，想为积弱的祖国找到治病的良方，为此著书立说，苦思对策，成为了改良的先行者，是戊戌变法的积极推动者和参与者。变法因各种原因而失败，他写下“杜鹃再拜忧天泪，精卫无穷填海心”的诗句，表达满腔忧愤。作为传统的戏剧形式，表达这样严肃的主题，正是汉剧最重要的使命和功能。纵观现存的近千出汉剧剧目，和昆曲、京剧以及众多地方戏曲一样，绝大部分都涉及国家民族命运、忠奸丑恶对抗、坚贞诚实与欺骗背叛等等人类及社会的基本道德标准，而坚持真善美、反抗假丑恶，是传统戏剧一贯的立场。汉剧中那些流传最广、影响最大的曲目，如《宇宙锋》、《闻太师》、《弑齐君》、《齐王求将》、《百里奚认妻》等等，都是在唱念做打寓教于乐的过程中，几百年来润物无声地把美德良知假丑善恶地(的)观念浇灌在城镇乡野每个人心中，从而与传统文化中诗书礼等一起，共同塑造了中华民族民族性格和道德观念。

直到上个世纪 80 年代，传统的戏剧形式还是中国广大乡村主要的精神生活之一，婚丧嫁娶或农闲时候，请戏班子唱戏，延续的还是几百年的老习惯。而正是传统戏剧，当然也包括汉剧的这种教化功能，在中国的现代化进程和全球化背景下，成了自己陷入目前困境的重要原因之一。随着政治经济的变迁，新的道德伦理产生，传统的道德伦理逐渐瓦解，新的娱乐形式逐渐取代了旧的娱乐形式，充斥耳边眼前的，更多的是小情小绪的个人表达，人们关心的，不再是国家民族的生存，而是某个心爱之人“袜子的味道”，“手中香烟的味道”。

并非结束

当然，传统伦理在新的时代失去了土壤，这只是汉剧衰微的其中一个原因，林林总总的其他原因，不是三两句话可以说得清楚。而一种旧的艺术形式，如何在新的时代重新发芽开花，则是汉剧要面对的又一个重要问题。面对时代的错位和观众的不理解，马勒曾自信地说：“我的时代必将来临。”而今汉剧面对的，却是一个逝去的年代，曾经有过的辉煌。面对这样的处境，各方有识之士都提出了不同的解决之道，也做出了不同的努力和探索。有人新编了表现当代生活的新剧，以求获得这个时代的共鸣，有人以新的舞台形式和音响效果重新包装传统剧目，想以其现代感来拉近与观众的距离，有人以汉剧形式演出莎士比亚的戏剧，想在中西合璧中找到另外的可能性。当然，还有人培养汉剧新人，修建汉剧博物馆，送戏下乡到工厂，各种形式的努力，都值得嘉许，而最终的结果，已非我们能料想。因为，一个人，一个国家，都有自己的命运，我想，一个戏剧形式，也会有它自己的命运，而我们能说的只是，我们正在为此努力，而且，还将继续努力。

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