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## **Staging of the Opera “Dream of the Red Chamber” at the San Francisco Opera – A Breakthrough Event in the Context of the Global Reception of Chinese Culture**

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### **Abstract**

*Dream of the Red Chamber* (红楼梦, Hónglóu Mèng), an 18th-century novel by Cao Xueqi, is one of the four great classic novels of Chinese literature and holds a special place in the canon of Chinese cultural heritage. Its significance is reflected in the English-language opera *Dream of the*

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*Red Chamber* by Bright Sheng, which premiered on September 10, 2016, in San Francisco, in collaboration with the San Francisco Opera, the Chuanlong Foundation, and the Chinese Heritage Foundation Friends of Minnesota. The success of this project marked a significant milestone in the global dissemination of Chinese classical literature and music, demonstrating an original synthesis of Chinese musical traditions with Western compositional language. The use of English and the international team of producers emphasised the universal dimension of the project and its importance for intercultural dialogue. This article attempts to provide a concise overview of Cao Xueqin's novel and Bright Sheng's opera, focusing on their cultural significance, artistic merits, and international critical reception. The focus of this discussion is the opera's staging and its resonance in the United States and China, rather than a detailed analysis of the musical work.

**Keywords:** opera, Chinese folk music, Chinese classical novels, the global context of the reception of Chinese culture.

## Introduction

The exploration of Chinese culture has become a global phenomenon in recent years. A growing audience is showing interest in traditional Chinese culture, considered one of the most representative forms of Asian cultural heritage. Whether the subject of reflection is architecture, visual arts, film, or manifestations of popular culture such as fashion, audiences from European and American cultures recognise the distinctive Chinese elements in these areas. This growing interest in Chinese culture also extends to opera music. Contemporary Chinese opera is a distinct phenomenon from the so-called Peking opera, which is an original performance composed of diverse elements, such as traditional singing accompanied by traditional instruments, dialogue, acrobatics, dance, and rich, symbolic scenography. The music of contemporary operas in China is based on the foundations of Western music, while retaining its distinctive characteristics, conditioned by centuries-old tradition and the country's ethnic diversity.

Contact with theatrical and musical culture of the United States, particularly the Philadelphia Symphony Orchestra's tour of China in 1973, became an impetus for an intensified interest in European-American music. Chinese composers quickly began to adopt the principles of this music, often facilitated by trips to the United States and Europe to study music. One of the first operas representing this new trend was *The Savage Land* (原野, Yuányě), based on the drama by Cao Yu (曹禺, CáoYù), with music by Jin Xiang (金湘, JīnXiāng), which premiered in Beijing in 1987.

This work is characterised by a balanced relationship between music and dramatic action, which brings it closer to the Western model of opera, while simultaneously retaining distinct elements of Chinese tradition. In the 1980s, the process of cultural exchange between Chinese and Western opera music began, and *The Savage Land* gained recognition and appreciation, especially after its performance at the Washington Opera in the 1991/1992 season. The New

York Times published a review titled "Opera; From China, Echoes of Puccini," which praised the artistic quality of *The Savage Land*. The reviewer describes Jin Xiang's opera as:

a highly individual creation that – though it nearly matches Puccini on his own terms, with slightly updated orchestral effects and far more convincing Orientalisms — is invested with great conviction by a composer for whom turn-of-the-century European styles remain fresh and vital.<sup>1</sup>

In the process of eliminating subsequent cultural barriers, groundbreaking phenomena are emerging, including the world premiere of Bright Sheng's new opera, *Dream of the Red Chamber*. The opera's libretto, written by David Henry Hwang and composer Bright Sheng himself, is based on a classical Chinese epic, described in the PWN Encyclopedia as "the sum of ancient Chinese culture."<sup>2</sup> The world premiere of the work, preceded by nearly five years of preparation, took place on September 10, 2016, at the San Francisco Opera (War Memorial Opera House). The opera was produced by outstanding artists with both American and Chinese roots, which contributed to its spectacular success.

This article addresses four fundamental issues related to an event of significant importance for global culture: firstly, *Dream of the Red Chamber* as a masterpiece of Chinese literature and culture; secondly, the production team and cast of the opera *Dream of the Red Chamber* at the San Francisco Opera; thirdly, the adaptation of Cao Xueqin's novel in Bright Sheng's opera, considered in the context of the libretto and selected elements of musical style, without a detailed analysis of the stylistic features of the compositional language;<sup>3</sup> fourthly, the reception of the opera in the United States and China in the light of music critics' reviews.

## 1. The epic *Dream of the Red Chamber* (original title: Hónglóu mèng) as a masterpiece of Chinese literature

The novel *Dream of the Red Chamber* (红楼梦, Hónglóu mèng)<sup>4</sup> is considered a classic of Chinese literature and one of the four epochal works of litera-

<sup>1</sup> J.R. Oestreich, *Review. Opera From China, Echoes of Puccini*, The New York Times, 20.01.1992; source: <https://www.nytimes.com/1992/01/20/arts/review-opera-from-china-echoes-of-puccini.html> [access 7.09.2024].

<sup>2</sup> Entry: *Cao Xueqin, Cao Sūe-cin*, [in:] *Encyklopedia PWN*, source: <https://encyklopedia.pwn.pl/haslo/Cao-Xueqin;3883087.html> [access 5.08.2024].

<sup>3</sup> Xirui Huang deals with this issue in detail in his doctoral dissertation; See, X. Huang, *The Musical Style and the Cultural Connotation of Bright Sheng's Opera "Dream of the Red Chamber,"* doctoral dissertation, University of Nevada w Las Vegas, 2020, nr 3904, DOI: 10.34917/19412091, p. 105.

<sup>4</sup> Other translation of the epic's title: *Dream of the Red Pavilion*

ture in Chinese history. The novel was written by Cao Xueqin (1715–1763?), who lived during the Qing Dynasty.<sup>5</sup> The Encyclopaedia Britannica also gives the author's actual family name as Cao Zhan.<sup>6</sup> Little is known about Cao Xueqin's life, although his novel is largely autobiographical. According to his friend Zhang Yiquan,<sup>7</sup> Xueqin was one of his many pen names. He also used the surnames Qinxi and Qinpu, and the honorific pseudonym Mengruan.

Cao Xueqin was born into a powerful family. His great-grandmother, Lady Sun, was the Emperor Kangxi's<sup>8</sup> wet nurse, and his grandfather, CaoYin, known to the emperor since childhood, became the imperial commissioner of silk in Jiangning and Suzhou. CaoYin was a distinguished scholar and book collector. During his reign, Emperor Kangxi stayed at the CaoYin household four times, indicating the high level of trust he placed in the Cao family. Thanks to his prestigious family background, Cao Xueqin experienced a luxurious and prosperous childhood in the flourishing Jiangnan region. However, the family's fortunes turned due to intrigue and political conflict, ultimately leading to its downfall. Having experienced both luxury and humiliation, Cao Xueqin undoubtedly found much inspiration for his work in his own life experiences.

Cao Xueqin's novel reflects the lives of the prominent Jia family and other aristocratic families, including the imperial family of the time. Creating a broad family saga, Cao Xueqin provides the reader with a detailed insight into all aspects of life in feudal China in the 18th century. Topics covered include social hierarchy and its consequences, artistic creation, especially literary work, and elements of everyday life such as tailoring, colloquial language, music, customs, and norms of behaviour. References to traditional Chinese religions such as Taoism and Buddhism also appear. A key theme is the tragic love story of Jia Baoyu and Lin Daiyu. The novel's author introduced 30 main characters and approximately 400 supporting characters. To avoid political repercussions, the writer often chose to conceal real names and certain events, effectively creating a fictionalised family history. Encyclopaedia Britannica describes Cao Xueqin's writing style as a blend of realistic, romantic, and psychological prose, combining descriptions of everyday life with supernatural elements.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Entry: *dynastia Qing*, [w:] Encyklopedia PWN, Source: <https://encyklopedia.pwn.pl/szukaj/dynastia%20Qing.html> [access 7.08.2024].

<sup>6</sup> Entry: *Cao Zhan*, [w:] Encyclopaedia Britannica, source: <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Cao-Zhan> [access 8.02.2025].

<sup>7</sup> See, source: <https://blog.wenxuecity.com/myblog/2802/201103/16741.html> [access 7.08.2024].

<sup>8</sup> The Kangxi Emperor (1654–1722) was the third emperor of the Qing Dynasty and the second emperor of that dynasty which ruled over all of China. He was the longest-reigning emperor in Chinese history and one of the longest-reigning emperors in the world history (reigned for 61 years).

<sup>9</sup> See entry: *Dream of the Red Chamber*, [in:] Encyclopaedia Britannica, source: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Dream-of-the-Red-Chamber> [access 26.10.2024].

Due to the high scholarly value of the novel *Dream of the Red Chamber*, studies examining the work's content and meaning emerged almost from the beginning of its circulation. This intense scholarly interest resulted in the emergence of a new field of study called *redology*, a history of which is described in Chen Weizhao's book.<sup>10</sup>

Cao Xueqin was a man of great talent, writing epics and poetry, as well as painting. Unfortunately, most of his works have not survived, leaving future generations unable to discover and appreciate them. His literary talents can only be discerned in the poetry and prose attributed to the characters in *Dream of the Red Chamber*. Known for his outgoing nature, Cao Xueqin had many friends, and the manuscript of *Dream of the Red Chamber* was widely admired, frequently borrowed, and copied. Unfortunately, this led to the loss of a significant portion of the work, a regrettable cultural loss. Only the first 80 chapters of Cao Xueqin's original work have survived to this day.

The author's manuscript bore the title *The Story of the Stone* (石头记, Shítóuji). Only after the author's death, in a printed edition of the novel from 1791, did the title *Dream of the Red Chamber* (红楼梦, Hónglóumèng) appear.<sup>11</sup> The authors of the new edition of the work were: Cheng Weiyuan (程伟元, Chéng Wěiyuán) and Gao E (高鹗, Gāo È). They published a "complete" version of the work, comprising 120 chapters, supposedly reconstructed from Cao Xueqin's notes. This edition became the basis for subsequent editions, although the authorship of the last forty chapters remains a matter of scholarly debate.

In the early 19th century, the following sentence became popular in China: "Without mentioning *Dream of the Red Chamber*, reading all other books is futile." This attests to the work's unique position in the Chinese public consciousness and its universal significance, transcending the confines of literature. The loss of a significant portion of Cao Xueqin's manuscript was repeatedly lamented, leading to a widespread literary lament. Numerous attempts at similar works appeared during the mid-to-late Qing dynasty, but only Gao E's version gained lasting recognition alongside Cao Xueqin's original work.

The characters and events described in the novel largely reflect the writer's biography. The first commentator on the work, who lived during Cao Xueqin's times and used the pseudonym Zhiyan Zhai, notes that the characters Jia Baoyu<sup>12</sup> and Zhen Baoyu<sup>13</sup> can be considered the writer's *alter ego* in two incarnations. The surnames Zhen and Jia can be translated as "true" and "false," respectively. By focusing on the "false Baoyu" and using the "real Baoyu" as his

<sup>10</sup> W. Chen, *Hongxue tongshi* (红学通史; *A History of Redology*), Shanghai People's Publishing Press, Shanghai 2005.

<sup>11</sup> In translations from Chinese into English we can find the title : *Dream of the Red Pavilion*

<sup>12</sup> Jia Baoyu – the main character of the novel and opera, a spoiled and effeminate young man, living in ignorance of the realities of everyday life.

<sup>13</sup> Zhen Baoyu appears in the novel as a supporting character belonging to the Zhen clan.

reverse, reflection (or other side of his personality), Cao Xueqin subtly conveyed real emotions through fictional narratives. One could say that Zhen Baoyu mirrors Jia Baoyu, just as the fate of the fictional Jia clan reflects that of the Zhen clan (the "true" family). Cao Xueqin's original intention while working on *Dream of the Red Chamber* was primarily to reminisce about his family's past glory and the wealthy life he once led. His portrayal of the protagonist Jia Baoyu as "distracted, unable to engage in worldly affairs, and reluctant to read"<sup>14</sup> was a rather self-deprecating remark, typical of a young master from a declining aristocratic family, which later generations interpreted as a rebellion against feudal ethics. With the fall of the Qing dynasty (1911), and thus of feudalism, in the so-called Early Republican period, new social ideas emerged, which are reflected in literature.

The New Culture Movement<sup>15</sup> was born. Further interpretations of the work emerged, reflecting the spirit of the new era. The disappointment, passivity, and ultimate resignation of the novel's protagonist, Jia Baoyu, are interpreted as his failure after unsuccessful attempts to break free from the old world and create a new one. The vibrant and spiritually rich female characters in the novel are seen as embodiments of progressive ideas about gender equality. As time passed and China's political and social situation changed, the novel's universal appeal continued, and subsequent generations found themes of interest within it. As Lu Xun,<sup>16</sup> a Chinese writer working in the first half of the 20th century, one of the designers and leaders of the New Culture Movement, aptly noted:

The same *Dream of the Red Chamber* is perceived differently by each reader: Confucianists sees the I Ching, Neo-Confucianism sees prostitution, the talented man sees the lingering, the Revolutionary sees the anti-Manchu struggle, and those who like gossip will learn the secrets of the royal palace.<sup>17</sup>

## 2. The Opera *Dream of the Red Chamber* on the stages of the opera houses in San Francisco and China – creators and performers

On September 10, 2016, a joint effort between the San Francisco Opera and the Chuanlong Foundation – a Minnesota-based Chinese organisation dedicated

<sup>14</sup> C. Xueqin, G.E, *Dream of the Red Mansions* (*Honglou meng* 红楼梦), Foreign Languages Press, Beijing 1978, s. 45; Authors' own translation.

<sup>15</sup> The New Culture Movement in China – a mass movement following the overthrow of the Qing dynasty and the proclamation of the republic; young intellectuals demanded the modernisation of China according to Western models, the dissemination of colloquial language in literature, and the overthrow of the remnants of feudalism.

<sup>16</sup> Lu Xun (1881–1936) – considered the father of modern Chinese literature, a proponent of colloquial language in fiction.

<sup>17</sup> Lu X., *Lu Xun Miscellaneous Essay Classics* (*Lu Xun zawén jingdian quanji* 鲁迅杂文经典全集), Taihai Publishing House, Beijing 2022, p. 396.

to promoting Chinese culture worldwide – held the world premiere of Bright Sheng's English-language opera *Dream of the Red Chamber*. This unique artistic event marked a milestone in the global dissemination of classical Chinese literature and music, as Bright Sheng's musical style represents a unique blend of Chinese musical traditions and Western musical language. Furthermore, the use of English to create and perform an opera based on an emblematic masterpiece of Chinese culture, and the international composition of the production team, represent a breakthrough in integrating diverse traditions on a global scale.

## 2.1. Producers and performers of the opera *Dream of the Red Chamber* on the stage of the San Francisco Opera

The opera *Dream of the Red Chamber* was commissioned by the San Francisco Opera and co-produced with the Hong Kong Arts Festival. Following its premiere in the United States, the performance was presented during an artistic trip to China. The production team faced the challenge of reaching audiences with diverse cultural backgrounds: on the one hand, Western audiences unfamiliar with ancient Chinese culture, and on the other hand, domestic and international fans of the novel.

Production team:

- Composer: Bright Sheng,
- Libretto: David Henry Hwang, Bright Sheng,
- Conductor: George Manahan,
- Director: Stan Lai,
- Set Design: Tim Yip.<sup>18</sup>

**Bright Sheng** was born on December 6, 1955, in Shanghai. His Chinese name is Sheng Zongliang. He was exposed to folk music from an early age thanks to his mother, who performed at the Peking Opera and also played the folk instrument *jinghu*. The composer learned to play a variety of traditional instruments at a very young age, which later played a significant role in his work. In 1978, he was accepted into the Composition Department of the Shanghai Conservatory of Music. During his studies, he realised that studying traditional Chinese music exclusively placed significant limitations on his creative development. Two years before graduation, Sheng's parents emigrated to the United States and settled in New York City. In 1982, Bright Sheng was accepted to Queens College in New York, where he studied with renowned composition theorist George Perle and renowned composer Hugo Weisgall. In 1993, he continued his studies at Colum-

<sup>18</sup> Source: <https://theatrestorm.com/2016/09/27/review-dream-of-the-red-chamber-at-sf-opera/> [access 8.08.2024].

bia University, where he received a Doctor of Musical Arts degree. He studied with Chou Wen-chung, Jack Beeson, and Mario Davidovsky. Studying under masters at Columbia University, Sheng realised that while he could freely imitate the style of many 20th-century composers, he couldn't freely express his own musical ideas. Deep down, he had always longed to combine Eastern and Western music, but there were no models for such creativity, and he struggled to define his own style. In 1985, Bright Sheng met his most important mentor, teacher, and friend – Leonard Bernstein. Bernstein encouraged Sheng to create his own unique style, trusting his intuition.

From 1994 to 1995, Bright Sheng worked at the University of Washington. In 1995, he joined the faculty of the University of Michigan's Department of Music, where he quickly rose to full professor based on his outstanding teaching and compositional achievements. As a composer, he has collaborated with the Lyric Opera of Chicago, the Seattle Symphony Orchestra, the New York City Ballet, and many other renowned orchestras. He is the recipient of numerous music awards in the United States, including the MacArthur Fellowship Award (2001) and the National Association of Composers, Authors, and Publishers Award (2002). To date, Schirmer, Sheng's publisher, has published 43 of his compositions.

Although Sheng studied in the United States for much longer than in China, he has always been committed to presenting Eastern works in a mature Western compositional language. In his symphonic piece *Scars*, composed in the 1980s, the composer employed the serial technique as a principle of organisation and shaping thematic and harmonic structures.<sup>19</sup> At the same time, he introduced the characteristic rhythms and timbres of Chinese percussion, constituting the first clear manifestation of his individual musical language. *Scars* is considered a breakthrough in Bright Sheng's oeuvre, defining the direction of his further artistic explorations.

In the 1990s, the composer's style continued to evolve: in works from this period, he developed the synthesis initiated in *Scars*, combining classical vocal technique of the European tradition with the singing of Peking opera, introducing traditional instruments such as the *pipa*<sup>20</sup> into the orchestra, and juxtaposing the cello with a folk ensemble. He also attempted to combine the piano with folk percussion instruments, the flute with the *pipa*, and even creatively incorporated the idiomatic playing characteristics of the *erhu* into the cello part. Most of Bright Sheng's compositions exhibit distinct cross-cultural characteristics,

<sup>19</sup> Bright Sheng based it on the tetrachord 0,1,6,7; for more on serialism see: R. Reti, *Tonality in Modern Music*, W. W. Norton & Company, New York 1962, p. 164; source: [https://archive.org/details/tonalityinmodern00reti\\_0](https://archive.org/details/tonalityinmodern00reti_0) [access 15.09.2025].

<sup>20</sup> Pipa – a traditional Chinese plucked string instrument, called the Chinese lute; known for over two thousand years.

achieving a high degree of sophistication. Even without a clear stylistic label, the language of his works remains easily recognisable.

**David Henry Hwang** was born in Los Angeles in 1957. His Chinese name is Huang Zhelun. After graduating with a degree in English from Stanford University, he studied theater at Yale University. During this time, he created his first three plays centred around Chinese immigrants. In 1980, he received the prestigious Obie Award, one of the highest honours in American theatre. By the age of 27, he had already written four acclaimed stage works.

Hwang's most famous work is the play *M. Butterfly* (1988), for which he became the first Asian American to receive a Tony Award, the highest honour for theatre artists in the United States. He was approached by composer Bright Sheng, with whom Hwang had previously collaborated on the chamber opera *The Silver River* (1997), to collaborate on the libretto for the opera *Dream of the Red Chamber*.

Hwang initially declined the invitation, arguing that the complex plot of a work as monumental as *Dream of the Red Chamber* couldn't be clearly conveyed within the roughly two-and-a-half-hour operatic performance. He pointed out that a multitude of complex threads could weaken the dramatic conflicts and disrupt the coherence of the theatrical concept. Ultimately, he and Bright Sheng decided to focus on the novel's central love story, treating the political intrigue as a backdrop. This allowed the core plot to remain largely intact, while maintaining the narrative framework as complete as possible.

Both artists were fully aware of the cultural differences between China and the United States and their potential impact on the creative process. To strengthen the production team with similar cultural sensibilities, they invited Stan Lai to collaborate as director.

**Stan Lai** was born on October 25, 1954, in Washington, D.C. His Chinese name is Lai Sheng-chuan (賴聲). He began his directing career in Taiwan and currently works in both China and the West. He graduated from the Department of Dramatic Arts at the University of California, Berkeley, where he subsequently served as a lecturer. He also spent many years at the National Taipei University of Arts, serving as dean of the School of Theatre Arts, and teaching at Stanford University. Lai has directed numerous productions of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's operas, including *Don Giovanni*, *Così fan tutte*, and *The Marriage of Figaro*. He is considered one of the most important figures in contemporary Chinese-language theatre. The BBC has called him "the world's best Chinese-language playwright and director." His play, *Secret Love in the Land of the Blossoms*, was named the most popular contemporary Chinese play by The New York Times. The work has been performed eighty times in English by American actors, becoming the first Chinese-language work to enter mainstream American theatre.

Stan Lai's directing skills played a key role in the production of the opera *Dream of the Red Chamber*. His ability to creatively and consciously utilise stage techniques achieved an exceptionally high artistic level in this project.

**Tim Yip** was born in Hong Kong in 1967. His Chinese name is Yip Kam-tim (葉錦添). He is a director and set designer who has won numerous awards (Oscar, Bafta, and others). Tim Yip created the concept of "new Orientalism" in art, which has made him one of the most interesting artists of our time. Tim Yip served as artistic director for Dream of the Red Chamber, responsible for the set and costumes. Thanks to his unique artistic vision, Bright Sheng's opera achieved a balance between Eastern aesthetics and Western styling. This synthesis allowed for the interpenetration of both artistic orders, combining Chinese emotionality with Western aesthetic sensibilities, resulting in a work with the distinct emotional depth and rich colour of the original novel.

**George Manahan** is an American conductor, born in Atlanta in 1952. He is a graduate and currently a professor at the Manhattan School of Music in New York City. He has conducted numerous distinguished opera companies in Santa Fe, Minnesota, Portland, Seattle, and the New York City Opera. He is renowned for conducting many premiere performances and recordings of operas by contemporary composers, particularly American ones.

Main cast in the opera *Dream of the Red Chamber* in the premiere performance (2016)<sup>21</sup> and in the revival (2022)<sup>22</sup> at the San Francisco Opera:

- **Stone/JiaBaoyu:**
  - Yijie Shi, Chinese tenor (2016),
  - Konu Kim, Korean tenor (2022);
- **Flower/Lin Daiyu:**
  - Pureum Jo, Korean soprano (2016),
  - Meihui Zhang, Chinese soprano (2022);
- **XueBaochai:**
  - Irene Roberts, American mezzo-soprano (2016),
  - Hongni Wu, Chinese mezzo-soprano (2022).
- Other roles in the premiere performance (2016):
- **Monk (speaking role):** Randall Nakano,
- **Lady Wang:** Hyona Kim,
- **GrannyJia:** Qiulin Zhang,
- **Aunt Xue:** Yanyu Guo.
- **Conductors:**
  - George Manahan (2016),
  - Darrell Ang (2022).

<sup>21</sup> Source: <https://theatrestorm.com/2016/09/27/review-dream-of-the-red-chamber-at-sf-opera/> [access 2.09.2024].

<sup>22</sup> Source: <https://operawire.com/san-francisco-opera-to-present-dream-of-the-red-chamber/> [access 6.09.2024].

## 2.2. The opera *Dream of the Red Chamber* in China

The resounding success of the world premiere of Bright Sheng's opera in San Francisco and the enormous contribution of the entire production team were recognised by critics, opera connoisseurs, and fans alike. The next step in building a "cultural bridge" between East and West was to present the San Francisco Opera production to Chinese audiences. A tour with the San Francisco Opera and the Chorus of the Dnipro Opera and Ballet Theatre (Ukraine) took place in 2017 and included six performances in the following Chinese cultural centres: the Hong Kong Cultural Centre, the Beijing National Centre for the Performing Arts, and the Wuhan Qintai Grand Theatre.

The cast for the performances in China was essentially the same as the premiere production. It is worth noting, however, that the young Chinese soprano He Wu performed one of the main roles of Lin Daiyu during the China tour, while Lin Shi performed the role of Xue Baochai. The performances in China were conducted by the composer himself, Bright Sheng. Regarding the planned China tour, the San Francisco Opera General Director Matthew Shilvock commented as follows:

*Dream of the Red Chamber* has had a profound impact on connecting the San Francisco Opera to the broader Bay Area community. It's exciting that this influence will continue as *Dream of the Red Chamber* travels to China on one of the most exciting US-China cultural bridges to emerge in recent years. I couldn't be more proud that the San Francisco Opera was the birthplace of a work that speaks so powerfully to such a wide audience.<sup>23</sup>

## 3. Opera *Dream of the Red Chamber* by Bright Sheng as an attempt to synthesise the culture of the East and the West

In operas based on Chinese tales, elements of traditional Chinese culture are often deeply embedded in the narrative. To some extent, a comparable Western narrative for Sheng's opera might be Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, whose action, set against a similar backdrop of familial and social constraints, also depicts young lovers' quest for love and freedom. This analogy helps Western audiences, who may be unfamiliar with Chinese literature, more easily grasp the essence of the action. However, there is no doubt that the incredibly complex narrative of *Dream of the Red Chamber* presented the composer, co-author of the adaptation, and librettist with a significant challenge: how to faithfully adapt the novel's intricate plot to the operatic stage.

<sup>23</sup> Source: <https://www.mundoclasico.com/articulo/29919/Dream-of-the-Red-Chamber-tour-performances> [access 8.08.2024].

### 3.1. Cao Xueqin's Novel as the source text for Bright Sheng's opera libretto

Cao Xueqin's original work contains two main plots: the love triangle between Jia Baoyu, Lin Daiyu and Xue Baochai, and a study of the political struggle for power. The opera version significantly condenses and reconfigures the story, transforming the novel's sweeping narrative into a two-act opera with eleven scenes, each named after the location where the events take place. The opera focuses on the tragic love story of Jia Baoyu and Lin Daiyu, emphasising the conflict between Jia Baoyu's longing for romantic freedom and the unconditional laws of familial duty.

Supporting characters and subplots have been simplified, retaining only the basic narrative elements. The opera centres around characters, among whom, besides the protagonist Jia Baoyu, a predominance of women: his cousin and true love Lin Daiyu, his wife Xue Baochai, his mother Lady Wang, his grandmother Jia, and his aunt Xue. The Monk (a speaking role) is also significant, serving as a unifying character. In the final scene, a political thread is revealed as the root cause of this tragic love story. We learn that Jia Baoyu's marriage to Xue Baochai and the Jia family's downfall are part of the emperor's plan to seize the Xue family's wealth.

On the subject of adapting the plot of the novel *Dream of the Red Chamber* for the needs of an opera libretto, music critic Ken Smith, in the magazine Classical Voice North America (Journal of the Music Critics Association of North America), says the following:

But what does *Red Chamber* offer opera? That is a different proposition entirely. Given the generally high emotional tone, multiple deaths, and the financial ruin of a prominent family, one would be hard-pressed to find a more suitably operatic story in world literature. Even more crucially, the key characters conveniently fall into internationally standard dramatic and vocal types. Of the story's treasured love triangle, the teenage Bao Yu is a tenor much like the impulsive Calaf, the gifted and sickly Dai Yu a consumptive soprano heroine in the tradition of Mimi and Violetta, and the pragmatic and reliable Bao Chai — is anyone surprised here? — a mezzo-soprano. Structurally, once all the narrative digressions are removed (and the remaining details rearranged and compressed) the story smoothly fits a familiar emotional arc. China has many stories to give the world, but few tick all the opera boxes so neatly. This adaptation demonstrates the complex process of transforming a novel into a libretto, into an opera, retaining its emotional depth and narrative thread while retaining the structural conventions of the operatic genre.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>24</sup> K. Smith, *Dream of Red Chamber: An Epic Chinese Novel Is Classic Stuff of Opera*, source: <https://classicalvoiceamerica.org/2022/06/29/dream-of-red-chamber-an-epic-chinese-novel-is-classic-stuff-of-opera/> [access 8.08.2024].

### 3.2. Adaptation within the structural and stylistic features of Bright Sheng's opera

Traditional Chinese cultural elements are clearly visible in the opera *Dream of the Red Chamber*. Although the opera is stylistically based on a Western model and uses English as its language, composer Bright Sheng imbued the music with numerous Chinese elements. This is expressed in various ways. To explore this topic, it is necessary to limit ourselves to analysing selected issues. These include: the composers' approach to linguistic issues, the concept of the narrator in the opera's action, the use of traditional Chinese instruments, and motifs and allusions to Chinese music.

#### 3.2.1. SPECIFICS OF ADAPTING THE NOVEL'S LANGUAGE TO THE ENGLISH VERSION

A thorough analysis of the libretto of the English version of the opera *Dream of the Red Chamber* reveals its distinctive linguistic features. The text is meticulously crafted specifically for the opera stage and differs significantly from traditional English translations of the novel and other adaptations of this work. Cao Xueqin's novel partially uses Classical Chinese, which is not the colloquial language used in contemporary society.<sup>25</sup> However, this work also earned a place in literary history as one of the first novels written largely in the vernacular *baihua*. The use of *baihua* was not possible in sophisticated written Chinese literature before *Dream of the Red Chamber*, nor indeed throughout the 19th century. It was not until the early 20th century that a breakthrough occurred, and the vernacular *baihua* became the generally used language of novels, as well as newspapers and other written works.<sup>25</sup>

In the context of the linguistic and stylistic peculiarities of Cao Xueqin's novel, it is important to note that creating the dialogue for the libretto required not only adapting to the characters' personalities but also selecting precise and appropriate English vocabulary. Overall, the opera's text does not rely on ornate language or archaic English, but utilises more contemporary, accessible vocabulary and grammatical structures. This approach ensures accurate information delivery and facilitates a better understanding of the action for Western audiences. However, for audiences well-versed in the original text and its Chinese context, this tendency may be perceived as a noticeable departure from the poetic and classical charm of Cao Xueqin's original prose. This is particularly risky in lyrical passages, such as the poem "Flower Funeral,"<sup>26</sup> which belongs to Lin Daiyu in the opera. It can be argued that the librettists, aware of the preferences of contemporary English-speaking audiences, sought to preserve the essence of

<sup>25</sup> Source: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/baihua>, [access 16.02.2024].

<sup>26</sup> C. Xueqin G.E, *Dream of the Red Mansions*, Foreign Languages Press, Beijing 1978, p. 399–400.

the original work, using simple language to facilitate perception and ensure coherence and narrative appeal. However, this does not mean that the adopted concept has met with complete acceptance among Chinese audiences. Xirui Huang, author of a doctoral dissertation at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, states that:

However, some reviews commented that the “everyday English texts” that were being sung in the opera were inopportune; on the contrary, the texts should be modified in the style that close to Shakespeare’s plays.<sup>27</sup>

### 3.2.2. Unique narrative device: the Monk

Opera, as an art form combining music and drama, shapes characters and develops plot, relying heavily on musical expression. However, the novel *Dream of the Red Chamber* abounds with complex themes that cannot be fully conveyed within a two-and-a-half-hour operatic performance. To address this problem, the authors of the operatic adaptation of *Dream of the Red Chamber* introduced the character of the Monk – a narrator absent from the original novel. This is a speaking role. In Buddhist tradition, the monk is a revered religious figure, often associated with spiritual wisdom and detachment from worldly matters. The novel *Dream of the Red Chamber* is deeply imbued with Taoist and Buddhist philosophy, as reflected in its alternate titles: *The Story of the Stone*, *The Record of the Conscious Monk*, *The Mirror of Romance*, and *The Twelve Beauties of Jinling*. These titles offer the reader diverse interpretive perspectives. In Sheng's opera, philosophical references are consciously woven into the narrative. The story is told from beginning to end by the Monk, and only at the opera's conclusion does the audience realise that the Monk is actually an older version of the protagonist, Baoyu, and the narrative is based on a flashback. The entire story presented in the opera takes place in the dream of the Monk, who is both a participant and commentator on the action. At the beginning of the first act, the Old Monk appears on the right side of the stage, addressing the audience with the words: "Welcome to my dream."<sup>28</sup>

### 3.2.3. The role of traditional Chinese instruments in the opera score

In the concept of combining the aesthetics of the East and the West in Bright Sheng's opera, a significant role is played by the use of many traditional Chinese instruments in the score, such as: Peking opera gongs, Peking opera cymbals, wind gong, *qin*, drums.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>27</sup> X. Huang, op. cit., p. 105.

<sup>28</sup> Source: <https://open.lib.umn.edu/redchamber/chapter/the-monk/> [access 7.09.2024].

<sup>29</sup> X. Huang, op. cit., p. 105.

In original Chinese music, each of these instruments carries specific symbolism. For example, in traditional Chinese theatre and Peking opera, instruments like the gong and cymbals often accompany intense, dramatic conflicts or significant events. This is similar in *Dream of the Red Chamber*. In the first act, when the emperor's envoy arrives at the Jia residence to announce the imperial decree, the envoy's entrance is accentuated by Chinese percussion. Just a few simple strokes of the gong evoke absolute silence, signifying the gravity of imperial power and transporting the audience back to the rigid and corrupt feudal era of centuries past.



Example 1. *The Dream of the Red Chamber*, act 2, scene 5, orchestral introduction, bars 8–14<sup>30</sup>

In Act 2, Scene 5 (note example 1), the composer employs a dense pattern of eighth and sixteenth notes. The use of a percussion instrument suggests that beneath the surface of the dignified celebration there is disturbing tension. Throughout the musical progression, the composer effectively highlights the narrative's climactic moments using traditional Chinese percussion. In addition, the opera also features the *guqin*, an instrument characteristic of traditional music, played by Lin Daiyu. The *guqin*, originally known simply as the *qin*, but also known as the *yaoqin*, *yuqin*, *wuxianqin*, or *qixianqin*, is a plucked string instrument with a history spanning over three thousand years. It is classified in the silk (丝) section of the Eight-Tone classification system.<sup>31</sup> The *guqin* holds the highest cultural status among ancient Chinese musical instruments, as reflected in sayings such as "a scholar is never without his *qin* and books" and "*qin* on the left, books on the right."

In ancient China, where the ideal of femininity was expressed through the belief that "a woman's virtue lies in her lack of talent," women were discouraged from learning to read and write, limiting their role to household management. However, women from noble families were expected to acquire other skills, such as embroidery, playing musical instruments, and playing chess. The ability to play the *guqin* was a symbol of a refined upbringing and belonging to an aristocratic family. Daiyu's proficiency with the *guqin* highlights her noble origins and excellent education.

<sup>30</sup> Source: [https://issuu.com/scoresondemand/docs/dream\\_of\\_the\\_red\\_chamber\\_acti\\_54476](https://issuu.com/scoresondemand/docs/dream_of_the_red_chamber_acti_54476) [access 7.09.2024].

<sup>31</sup> The Eight-Tone System is the oldest method of classifying musical instruments in China, classifying instruments according to the materials used in their construction. The Eight-Tone System includes the following categories: gold, stone, silk, bamboo, fruit, leather, clay and wood.

The sound of *guqin* is melancholic and sad, reflecting Daiyu's personality. When she first plays the instrument, it immediately captures Baoyu's heart. However, in the opera's tragic ending, Daiyu plays the *guqin* alone on a deserted lakeshore, singing the ancient Chinese song *Feng Qiu Huang* symbolising the pursuit of free and true love. While playing, Daiyu wonders why Baoyu abandoned her to marry Baochai. When the music ends, Daiyu no longer feels attached to the world and enters the lake without looking back, completely resigned to her fate. This scene evokes profound emotions and is a prime interpretation of the subtle and understated nature of Chinese artwork, which often uses symbols to suggest so-called "hidden meanings."



Example 2. *Dream of the Red Chamber*, act 2, scene 6, solo *guqin*<sup>32</sup>

In Bright Sheng's music, elements of Peking opera percussion, the sound of the *guqin*, folk melodies, and other Chinese musical elements seamlessly integrate with contemporary Western opera music. It should also be noted that the composer also references Chinese music through quotations – musical symbols, a phenomenon that has appeared before in Western opera. For example, the "inner journey" of Turandot, the heroine of Puccini's opera, is accompanied by a symbolic motif: the Chinese folk song "Jasmine Flower," which reflects the world of her inner experiences. The production of opera by Sheng at the San Francisco Opera also stands out for its use of body language derived from Chinese tradition, seamlessly integrated with the English dialogue. This not only heightens the dramatic tension on stage but also intensifies the underlying conflict of the action. The opera concludes with a powerful emotional climax, further accentuated by the distinctive Chinese percussion accompaniment.

#### 4. Reception of the opera *Dream of the Red Chamber* in the USA and China

The San Francisco production of the opera *Dream of the Red Chamber* was undoubtedly a great success for composer Bright Sheng. This is evidenced by the

<sup>32</sup> Source: [https://issuu.com/scoresondemand/docs/dream\\_of\\_the\\_red\\_chamber\\_actii\\_5447](https://issuu.com/scoresondemand/docs/dream_of_the_red_chamber_actii_5447) [access 7.09.2024].

revival of the same production in 2022. In her article "Dream of the Red Chamber Earns a Place in the Opera Canon – at SF Opera, published in the San Francisco magazine „Theatrius", Jennifer Ann Charron states:

Bright Sheng – a brilliant and innovative composer of our time. June 16, 2022

Bright Sheng's score of *Dream of the Red Chamber* is one of the most dynamic, yet sumptuous pieces of music I have heard. He blends western and eastern musical traditions and sounds in innovative ways. Chinese folk tunes morph into lush, multi-dimensional overtures, both expressive and unique. Hwang and Sheng's libretto of *Red Chamber* is a distinct masterpiece. They unify their intricate, yet superb libretto with an exquisite score, making *Red Chamber* an operatic success. [...] *Dream of the Red Chamber* is not your grandmother's opera. While bold and beautiful in the traditional Western operatic form, *Dream of the Red Chamber* has delicate yet rich Eastern nuances that give this opera its luxurious sound. A unique and sumptuous evening for opera and non-opera lovers alike.<sup>33</sup>

In turn, Lois Silverstein in her review from June 24, 2022 draws attention to the metaphysical depth of meanings in the opera's music and the omnipresent symbolism:

The use of repetition of key lines such as "We live and die without knowing why" and "who cares for fallen petals" enlarged the thematic meaning, and further heightened the kind of simplicity and sincerity that pervades the whole performance of the opera. Against the elaborate sets and costumes, here we have a human drama that we know all too well. To give ourselves that perspective is to give us a chance to awaken to the gap between the two and question its meaning. [...] here we have contemporary music that provides a feast of more than what we see and hear and feel.<sup>34</sup>

The deep symbolism permeating the opera is also emphasised by Byron Au Yong in his article: Three Entry Points to Appreciate the Opera "Dream of the Red Chamber". He considers the statement by director Stan Lai himself, published in The New York Times (September 9, 2016), to be crucial for the correct interpretation of the work's message:

Impermanence and the fleeting quality of life – these are things that are very Buddhist and quintessentially Chinese. The "fleeting quality of life" abounds in this opera from the opening line, "welcome to my dream."<sup>35</sup>

<sup>33</sup> J. Charron, "Dream of the Red Chamber" Wins a Place in Operatic Canon – at SF Opera, „Theatrius", source: <https://archive.theatrius.com/2022/06/16/dream-of-the-red-chamber-wins-a-place-in-operatic-canonical-sf-opera/> [access 7.09.2024].

<sup>34</sup> L. Silverstein, San Francisco Opera 2021–22 Review: "Dream of the Red Chamber", source: <https://operawire.com/san-francisco-opera-2021-22-review-dream-of-the-red-chamber/> [access 7.09.2024].

<sup>35</sup> B. Au Yong, Three Entry Points to Appreciate the Opera Dream of the Red Chamber, source: <https://hearbyron.medium.com/three-entry-points-to-appreciate-the-opera-dream-of-the-red-chamber-efdc7146740e> [access 17.11.2024].

Despite the opera's overwhelmingly positive reception in the United States, critical voices have also emerged, reflecting doubts about the work's very concept as a synthesis of diverse cultural traditions. In a review published in the online magazine "Theatrestorm" (September 27, 2016), Charles Kruger points out features that may hinder the opera's reception by audiences outside of Chinese culture:

The rich orchestration is not matched by a similar richness in the vocal score. The austere singing pretty much pares away what opera audiences are likely to seek as they try to find an emotional handle to connect to the music. Rhythms are plodding, tempi slow, melodies minimalistic, notes sustained (beautifully, it must be said) beyond the point of expectation. This is a very demanding score for the audience. The challenges are not made less daunting by Wang's libretto, which is often difficult to understand, and choppy—typical problems with English language opera.<sup>36</sup>

In turn, press reports from the Chinese tour expressed reservations about the simplification of the plot and the omission of numerous subplots from the novel, which in the original bring significant cultural colour and meet the established expectations of Chinese audiences. The use of an English libretto, as well as the reduction of commonly known narrative motifs, to some extent deepened the Chinese audience's sense of distance from the operatic approach to the work. In Xirui Huang's previously cited doctoral dissertation, we read:

The most denunciation aspect of the opera for Chinese audiences is the rearrangement of the novel. Most of the Chinese audiences knew the story too well, and they found it extremely hard to accept Sheng and Hwang's drastic reduction of some of their favorite secondary characters.<sup>37</sup>

It's undoubtedly true, however, that the San Francisco performance of Bright Sheng's new opera, generated enormous interest in China. Han Xianyang, a correspondent for the *Guangming Daily*, reported on it a few days after the premiere, on September 19, 2016:

歌剧《红楼梦》轰动旧金山

能够容纳3146人的歌剧院座无虚席，甚至后排站席还有数十人。谢幕时，掌声和喝彩声此起彼伏。首演结束后，观众久久不愿离场

美国观众激动地说，故事堪比《罗密欧与朱丽叶》，透过《红楼梦》更多地了解了中国文化。<sup>38</sup>

<sup>36</sup> C. Kruger, *Review: "Dream of the Red Chamber" at SF Opera*: source: <https://theatrestorm.com/2016/09/27/review-dream-of-the-red-chamber-at-sf-opera> [access 07.09.2024].

<sup>37</sup> X. Huang, op. cit., p. 101.

<sup>38</sup> H. Xianyang, *Yingwen geju „Honglou meng“ ba Zhongguo guanzhong kan ku le. Yong shijie yuyan yanyi Zhongguo gushi* (英文歌剧《红楼梦》把中国观众看哭了——用世界语言演绎中国故事), „Guangming Ribao“ 《光明日报》, 19.09.2016/ 12; source: [https://epaper.gmw.cn/gmrb/html/2016-09/19/nw.D110000gmrb\\_20160919\\_1-12.htm](https://epaper.gmw.cn/gmrb/html/2016-09/19/nw.D110000gmrb_20160919_1-12.htm) [access 15.09.2025]; pinyin transliteration: Gējù «Hónglóu mèng» hōngdòng Jiùjīnshān. Nénggòu róngnà 3146 rén de gējūyuàn zuòwú xūxí, shènzhì hòupái zhànxí hái yǒu shùshí rén. Xièmù shí, zhǎngshēng hé

[The opera "The Dream of Red Chamber" has caused a sensation in San Francisco.

The opera house, with a capacity of 3,146 seats, was filled to the brim, with dozens standing in the back rows. At curtain call, waves of applause and cheers filled the hall, and audiences lingered unwilling to leave. Excited American audiences compared the story to Romeo and Juliet and expressed that the opera helped them better understand Chinese culture].<sup>39</sup>

Some reviews compare the 2016 staging with the 2022 revival of the same version. Ken Smith, in a lengthy review of the opera, says:

Having now been in the audience for opening night of the revival, I see how small but judicious cuts have heightened the opera's momentum. A new conductor and mostly new cast — many making their San Francisco Opera debuts — frequently bring fresh insights to their characters and the musical score. Much as *Red Chamber* devotees return frequently to Cao's novel — some readers claim to reread it every year — audiences in San Francisco are again reminded that knowing the story beforehand need not spoil the experience but can actually deepen an appreciation of a work's artistry'.<sup>40</sup>

The previously mentioned Lois Silverstein also confirms that the version presented in San Francisco in 2022 differs slightly from the premiere version. According to the reviewer:

[...] under the baton of Singaporean maestro Darrell Ang in his debut with the San Francisco Opera Orchestra, the opera, which was presented here in a new version that differs from the 2016 score that San Francisco Opera previously performed, began. Dynamic, colorfully textured, the music coupling with the text to transmit the multiple dimensions of the theme and the overall accessible music.<sup>41</sup>

This account suggests that Sheng likely made changes to the score to make it easier for American audiences to assimilate the overly exotic-sounding music and to intensify the dramatic action. Critics have also noted certain differences in the opera's reception by American and Chinese audiences. Ken Smith writes on June 29, 2022:

Critics at both the premiere and the 2022 revival have found much to admire, along with numerous frustrations. Reviews have noted a structural imbalance between the background-heavy first act and the comparably seamless flow of the second. The reaction in China, however, was a world apart. Much like the novel, the opera was less an authoritative statement than the start of a conversation. Gaps and compressions from the original story presented few problems — similar narrative slashings have been done in traditional Chinese opera [...] Instead, the challenges came in following a familiar story

hēcāishēng cǐqǐ bífú. Shòuyǎn jiéshù hòu, guānzhòng jiǔjǐù bù yuàn lí chǎng. Měiguó guānzhòng jǐdòng de shuō, gǔshì kān bǐ «Luómí'ōu yǔ Zhūlìyè», tòuguò «Hónglóu mèng» gèng duō de liǎojiě le Zhōngguó wénhuà.

<sup>39</sup> Authors' own translation.

<sup>40</sup> K. Smith, op. cit., source: <https://classicalvoiceamerica.org/2022/06/29/dream-of-red-chamber-an-epic-chinese-novel-is-classic-stuff-of-opera/> [access 7.09.2024].

<sup>41</sup> L. Silverstein, op. cit., source: <https://operawire.com/san-francisco-opera-2021-22-review-dream-of-the-red-chamber/> [access 7.09.2024].

through an unfamiliar medium; many were seeing a western opera for the first time. Critical evaluations were mostly favorable. Li Cheng, a music critic for the Beijing Morning Post and editor of China's Music Weekly, was particularly adulatory in describing Sheng's handling of the ensemble writing. Even on social media, both supporters and detractors engaged with each other.<sup>42</sup>

Among the Chinese reviews, Wang Run's extensive report from the September 9, 2017 performance, published in the Beijing Evening News under the title "English-language opera 'Dream of the Red Chamber' brings Chinese audiences to tears," deserves special mention. The author describes, among other things, the reaction of one audience member, quoting his brief statement:

一位看演出时情不自禁泪流满面的观众表示：“原本听说用英文歌剧形式演绎《红楼梦》，我是持观望态度的，觉得可能只是个给老外看的东西，中国人很难认可和接受。但没想到，竟然让我非常感动，并且对这部早已非常熟悉的名著有了新的视角和感受。尤其下半场，宝玉面对无法和黛玉成婚的现实，做出出家的决定，那份伤痛和决绝，触动人内心特别柔软之处，我忍不住落泪了。编剧导演作曲的功底和演员的唱功，真是太令人佩服了！”

也有观众认为，虽然听演员用英文演唱中国故事有点“怪怪的”，但演出整体制作精良，给人以美的享受和新颖的感觉。<sup>43</sup>

[When I first heard Dream of the Red Chamber would be staged as an English opera, I was skeptical. I thought it was just something made for foreigners, unlikely to be recognised or accepted by Chinese people. But I was deeply touched. This gave me a fresh perspective on a work I thought I knew so well. In the second half, when Baoyu faced the reality that he could not marry Daiyu and chose instead to become a monk, the sorrow and decisiveness struck the softest part of my heart. I couldn't hold back my tears. The librettists, the director, the composer, and the singers – all are truly admirable! Other audience members admitted that hearing Chinese stories sung in English felt “a bit strange,” but praised the production for its overall refinement, beauty, and freshness].<sup>44</sup>

Elsewhere in this report we read:

<sup>42</sup> Source: <https://classicalvoiceamerica.org/2022/06/29/dream-of-red-chamber-an-epic-chinese-novel-is-classic-stuff-of> [access 7.09.2024].

<sup>43</sup> W. Run, Yingwen geju „Honglou meng“ ba Zhongguo guanzhong kan ku le. Yong shijie yuyan yanyi Zhongguo gushi (英文歌剧《红楼梦》把中国观众看哭了——用世界语言演绎中国故事), „Beijing Wanbao“ 《北京晚报》, 9.09.2017; Source: [https://www.toutiao.com/article/6463629758558110221/?upstream\\_biz=doubao&source=m\\_redirect&wid=1765821622685](https://www.toutiao.com/article/6463629758558110221/?upstream_biz=doubao&source=m_redirect&wid=1765821622685) [access 15.09.2025]; pinyin transliteration: Yí wèi kàn yānchū shí qíng bù zìjīn lèi liú mǎnmiàn de guānzhòng biāoshi: “Yuánběn tīngshuō yòng Yīngwén gējù xíngshì yānyì «Hónglóu mèng», wǒ shì chí guānwàng tài dù de, juéde kěnóng zhǐshì gè gěi lǎowài kàn de dōngxi, Zhōngguó rén hěn nán rěnkě hé jiēshòu. Dàn méi xiāngdào, jìngrán ràng wǒ fēicháng gǎndòng, bìngqìe dù zhè bù zǎoyě fēicháng shúxī de míngzhù yǒu le xīn de shíjiǎo hé gǎnshòu. Yóuqí xià bàncǎng, Bǎoyù miànduì wúfǎ hé Dàiyù chénghūn de xiànshí, zuòchū chūjīā de juédìng, nà fèn shāngtòng hé juéjué, chǔdòng rén nèixīn tèbié róuruǎn zhī chù, wǒ rěn bù zhù luò lèi le. Biānjù, dǎoyǎn, zuòqù de gōngdǐ hé yǎnyuán de chànggōng, zhēn shì tài lìng rén pèifú le!” Yě yǒu guānzhòng rènwéi, suīrán tīng yǎnyuán yòng Yīngwén yǎnchàng Zhōngguó gǔshì yǒudiǎn “guài guài de”, dàn yānchū zhěngtǐ zhìzuo jīngliáng, gěi rén yǐ měi de xiāngshòu hé xīnyǐng de gǎnjué.

<sup>44</sup> Authors' own translation.

此次歌剧《红楼梦》中国巡演的曲谱，正是今年3月香港艺术节演出之后的改进版。有些写得较长的乐句改掉了，现在比之前的版本更精炼一些。”

除此之外，盛宗亮还新增了几处，“宝玉和黛玉相爱的地方，在最后唱高音之前增加了一段轻柔的旋律，会让人有一下子特别温暖，像是找到自己心爱人的感觉。<sup>45</sup>

[The score used in the China tour is an improved version, further refined after the Hong Kong production. Sheng shortened some long musical phrases and added new touches. For instance, in the scenes of Baoyu and Daiyu's love, he introduced a gentle melody just before the high notes, creating a sudden warmth, as if the characters had found their true beloved].<sup>46</sup>

The author of the report is particularly impressed by the magnificent set design and costumes – masterpieces of their kind – by Tim Yip. He also explains the original use of colour symbolism, a blend of Western and Oriental symbolism. He discusses, among other things, the significance of colour symbolism in the costume design of a specific character in the drama – the ethereal Daiyu.

最终，整部歌剧全部手工制作了超过150套服装，有些服装具有建筑的廓形，像是展翅欲飞的风筝；有的则用轻薄的布料织就而成，当光线透过这些布料，会形成鲜明的层次……这些华美服饰不仅帮助演员塑造角色，同时也展现了人物内部的“精神光环”。

剧中，叶锦添不仅使用最柔软的面料制作黛玉的长袍，而且大胆采用绿色与红色来诠释黛玉的艺术形象。柔软的多层绿袍、影影绰绰的绿影，展现了黛玉的清雅，并且也象征着她原为绛珠仙草的身份和意义；而红色的兜帽则有双重含意：红色在中国象征着喜悦与幸福，这预示着黛玉将迎来一场婚礼；然而在西方，红色代表着危险，则暗示了黛玉的死亡与不幸。<sup>47</sup>

[More than 150 hand-crafted costumes were created, some with architectural silhouettes like kites poised to fly, others woven from translucent fabrics that glowed under stage lighting. These garments not only shaped the characters but also projected their “spiritual aura.”

<sup>45</sup> W. Run, op. cit., pinyin transliteration: Cǐcì gējù «Hónglóu mèng» Zhōngguó xúnyǎn de qǔpǔ, zhèng shì jīnnián sān yuè Xiānggǎng Yishù Jié yǎnchū zhīhòu de gǎijīnbǎn. Yǒu xiē xiě de jiào cháng de yuèjù gǎidiào le, xiànzài bǐ zhīqíán de bǎnběn gèng jīngliàn yīxiē.” “Chúcǐ zhīwài, Shèng Zōngliàng hái xīnzēng le jǐ chù, ‘Bǎoyù hé Dàiyù xiāng’ài de dìfāng, zài zuihòu chàng gāoyīn zhīqíán zēngjiā le yī duàn qīngróu de xuánlù, huì ràng rén yǒu yīxiàzi tèbié wēnnuǎn, xiàng shì zhǎodào zìjǐ xīn’ài rén de gǎnjué”.

<sup>46</sup> Authors' own translation.

<sup>47</sup> W. Run, op. cit., pinyin transliteration: Zuìzhōng, zhěng bù gējù quánbù shǒugōng zhìzuò le chāoguò 150 tào fúzhuāng, yǒu xiē fúzhuāng jùyǒu jiànzhù de kuòxíng, xiàng shì zhǎnchì yù fēi de fēngzhēng; yǒu de zé yòng qīngbáo de bùliào zhī jiù ér chéng, dāng guāngxiàn tòuguò zhèxiē bùliào, huì xíngchéng xiānmíng de céngcì..... zhèxiē huáměi fúshì bùjìn bāngzhù yǎnyuán sùzào jiāosè, tóngshí yě zhǎnxiān le rénwù nèibù de “jīngshén guānghuán”. Jùzhōng, Yè Jǐntiān bùjìn shǐyòng zuì róuruǎn de miànliào zhīzuò Dàiyù de zhǎngpáo, érqiè dàdǎn cǎiyòng lùsè yú hóngsè lái quánshì Dàiyù de yǐshù xíngxiàng. Róuruǎn de duōcéng lùpáo, yǐngyǐng chuòchuò de lùyǐng, zhǎnxiān le Dàiyù de qīngyǎ, bìngqìe yě xiàngzhēng zhe tā yuán wèi Jiàngzhū Xiāncǎo de shēnfèn hé yìyì; ér hóngsè de dōumào zé yǒu shuāngchóng hánýi: hóngsè zài Zhōngguó xiàngzhēng zhe xǐyuè yú xìngfú, zhè yùshì zhe Dàiyù jiāng yínglái yī chǎng hūnlǐ; rán’ér zài Xīfāng, hóngsè dàibiǎo zhe wéixiǎn, zé ànshì le Dàiyù de sīwáng yǔ bùxìng.

For Daiyu, Yip used the softest fabrics and boldly combined green and red. Her layered green robes reflected her elegance and symbolised her origin as the Crimson Pearl Flower. Her red hood bore double meaning: in China, red signifies joy and marriage; in the West, it suggests danger, foreshadowing her tragic fate].<sup>48</sup>

In the extensive report quoted here, we also find short statements by the main singers, including the soprano He Wu, who was making her debut in her role:

大家心目中的黛玉比较娇弱敏感、多愁善感。但盛老师理解的黛玉比较丰满有层次感。他在黛玉的唱段中，注入了黛玉对自己命运的悲愤：‘为什么我的命运是这样？为什么我出生是这样？’她有一种问天问地的悲愤感。<sup>49</sup>

[Most people see Daiyu as fragile, sentimental, and melancholy. But Maestro Sheng sees her as fuller, with more depth. In her arias, he infused a sense of protest against fate: ‘Why is my destiny like this? Why was I born this way?’ This gives her a defiance and dissatisfaction with life].<sup>50</sup>

The author of the review also adds his commentary to the artist's statement:

很多观众在看演出前，很难想象柔软的林黛玉如何唱美声。在剧中扮演林黛玉的女高音歌唱家武赫，在塑造角色上融合了87版《红楼梦》林黛玉的风格，加上作曲盛宗亮对曲目整体性的描述，又融入了她自己的理解，塑造了一个“情理之中、意料之外”的林妹妹。<sup>51</sup>

[Many doubted whether the frail Lin Daiyu could be convincingly sung in bel canto. But soprano He Wu, in her portrayal, combined the style of the 1987 television adaptation with Bright Sheng's vision of a more layered and complex Daiyu. She added her own interpretation, creating a Daiyu that was both expected and surprising].<sup>52</sup>

Thanks to this review, we also learn that the originality of Bright Sheng's opera lies not only in the sphere of musical language or libretto text, but also in the penetration of modernised and universal elements into traditional interpretations of the novel's characters.

## Conclusion

The adaptation of a novel of extraordinary and universal significance for Chinese culture represents a bold attempt at cross-cultural theatrical and musical

<sup>48</sup> Authors' own translation.

<sup>49</sup> Ibidem; pinyin transliteration: Dàijiā xīnmù zhōng de Dàiyù bìjiào jiāoruò mǐngǎn, duōchóu shàngǎn. Dàn Shèng lǎoshī lǐjiě de Dàiyù bìjiào fēngmǎn, yǒu céngcì gǎn. Tā zài Dàiyù de chàng-duàn zhōng, zhùrù le Dàiyù dùi zìjǐ mìngyùn de bēifèn: ‘Wèishénme wǒ de mìngyùn shì zhèyàng? Wèishénme wǒ chūshèng shì zhèyàng?’ Tā yǒu yī zhǒng wèn tiān wèn dì de bēifèn gǎn.

<sup>50</sup> Authors' own translation.

<sup>51</sup> W. Run, op. cit pinyin transliteration: Hěn duō guānzhòng zài kàn yānchū qián, hěn nán xiǎngxiāng róuruǎn de Lín Dàiyù rúhé chàng měishēng. Zài jùzhōng bànyǎn Lín Dàiyù de nǚ gāoyīn gēchàngjiā Wǔ Hè, zài sùzào juésè shàng rónghé le 87 bǎn «Hónglóu mèng» Lín Dàiyù de fēnggé, jiāshàng zuòqù Shèng Zōngliàng duì qùmù zhěngtǐxing de miáoshù, yòu róngrù le tā zìjǐ de lǐjiě, sùzào le yí gè ‘qínglǐ zhī zhōng, yìliào zhī wài’ de Lín Mèimei.

<sup>52</sup> Authors' own translation.

exchange and is a successful example of internationalisation of a classic literary work. Despite the complexity of *Dream of the Red Chamber* (originally titled: *The Story of the Stone*), this literary epic, often compared to European works such as Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace* or Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*, has been recognised as the essence of feudal Chinese culture. However, it is not a work that has become a museum piece. It remains alive and constantly inspires new interpretations in our contemporary times. In China, a significant number of artistic works inspired by it continue to be created, and it is also a constant subject of scholarly research. The opera's creators, and the producers of the American premiere of *Dream of the Red Chamber*, represent Chinese roots, but have also become part of global culture, living and working in the United States. They are therefore ideal representatives of artists from the edges of cultures, and even creators of works of a multicultural nature. Bright Sheng's opera undoubtedly belongs to this category.

The success of the English version of *Dream of the Red Chamber* is due to the composer's profound mastery of Western operatic language, as well as his creative incorporation of elements of Chinese national music. By employing a series of groundbreaking, innovative, and creative adaptation strategies, a work was presented to a global audience that retains its traditional flavour while simultaneously infusing it with modernity. These strategies encompass the conceptual, linguistic, and musical dimensions. In the conceptual dimension, the libretto insightfully evokes the philosophical depth of the original *Dream of the Red Chamber* epos. To achieve a coherent adaptation, a narrator, the Monk, was introduced, symbolising the universal dimension of the human condition and the mystery of the human psyche. Within the framework of Chinese literary aesthetics, confronted with Western dramatic logic, the English language was also employed in an innovative manner. One of the key adaptations in the musical and symbolic spheres was the introduction of traditional Chinese instruments in non-standard combinations of sound and colour, a hallmark of Bright Sheng's original creative style.

The final issue addressed by the authors of this article was the reception of the opera *Dream of the Red Chamber* in the United States and China. An analysis of reviews on the two American performances and the San Francisco Opera's Chinese tour suggests that both the opera itself and its stage production were met with acclaim in both cultural contexts. Despite the work's artistic merits and originality, distinct differences in reception emerged, stemming from differing cultural habits. In the United States, the shaping of the leading vocal parts, which deviated from the canons of Western opera, was surprising. Jennifer Ann Char-ron wrote in the *Theatrius* magazine:

Unlike traditional Western opera, the singing does not follow the music. The voices are layered over the orchestration and create a dissonance that some may find jolting; but I find the separation enhances the libretto and gives weight to the story. I could see how

this may work against the musicians, but master conductor Darrel Ang retains perfect control.<sup>53</sup>

The opera's dramatic narrative is characterised by a slowed, contemplative tempo, analogous to the musical progression. It was likely this aspect that prompted the composer to introduce a number of modifications to the score, noted by critics during the performance's 2022 revival. Meanwhile, in China, where traditional forms of music and theatre are strongly maintained, many audiences perceived *Dream of the Red Chamber* as an entirely new, previously unknown form of musical theatre. Xirui Huang, quoted earlier, provides a concise synthesis of the diverse opinions and voices of Chinese critics:

To look from the music aspect, most of the Chinese reviewers held the same opinions with the western media. Sheng's technique of blending Western and Chinese elements was on the peak of the high professional proficiency. Although some of them find the advanced style of writing makes the opera less accessible and hard to propagate. They enjoyed hearing Chinese percussions and Guqin over the western orchestra, and also many audiences sensed the pentatonic system and folk elements throughout the opera. Obviously, the harmonic languages and orchestral layers were much darker and thicker than traditional Chinese folk tune, but Chinese audiences were pleased to recognize and find peace with them'.<sup>54</sup>

The review reports cited in this article in no way undermine the fact that the stage production of Bright Sheng's opera *Dream of the Red Chamber* represents not only a pioneering stage in the history of Sino-Euro-American theatrical exchange, but also a bold attempt to broaden the international horizons of Chinese theatre. It can also be assumed that this work points to new paths and directions for the development of contemporary opera in European and American culture, as Steven Winn suggests in his review of September 12, 2016:

*Dream of the Red Chamber* is a cultural event that in some way transcends its own intrinsic strengths and limitations. Seeing and hearing this company of international singers, in a story with deep resonance in China and beyond, widens the lens of what opera can and should do to thrive in an increasingly global age.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> J. Charron, op. cit., source: <https://theatrius.com/2022/06/16/dream-of-the-red-chamber-wins-a-place-in-operatic-canonical-sf-opera/> [access 7.09.2024].

<sup>54</sup> X. Huang, op. cit., p. 105.

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## Inscenizacja opery *Dream of the Red Chamber* w Operze San Francisco – przełomowe wydarzenie w kontekście globalnej recepcji kultury chińskiej

### Streszczenie

*Sen czerwonej komnaty* (红楼梦, *Hónglóu Mèng*), XVIII-wieczna powieść Cao Xueqina, należy do czterech wielkich klasycznych powieści literatury chińskiej i zajmuje szczególne miejsce w kanonie chińskiego dziedzictwa kulturowego. Jej znaczenie znalazło współczesne odzwierciedlenie w anglojęzycznej operze *Dream of the Red Chamber* Brighta Shenga, której premiera odbyła się 10 września 2016 roku w San Francisco, we współpracy z Operą w San Francisco, Fundacją Chuan-long oraz Chinese Heritage Foundation Friends of Minnesota. Sukces tego przedsięwzięcia stanowił istotny etap w globalnym upowszechnianiu chińskiej literatury klasycznej i muzyki, ukazując oryginalną syntezę tradycji muzyki chińskiej z zachodnim językiem kompozytorskim. Wykorzystanie języka angielskiego oraz międzynarodowy zespół realizatorów podkreśliły uniwersalny wymiar projektu i jego znaczenie dla dialogu międzykulturowego. Artykuł podejmuje próbę syntetycznego omówienia powieści Cao Xueqina oraz opery Brighta Shenga, koncentrując się na ich znaczeniu kulturowym, walorach artystycznych oraz międzynarodowej recepcji krytycznej. W centrum rozważań znajduje się sama inscenizacja opery i jej rezonans w Stanach Zjednoczonych i w Chinach, a nie szczegółowa analiza dzieła muzycznego.

**Słowa kluczowe:** opera, chińska muzyka ludowa, chińskie powieści klasyczne, globalny kontekst recepcji kultury chińskiej.