



So Far from Heaven: the KT Wong Foundation and Zhang Huan Reimagine ‘Semele’

Lyle Rexer, 2009

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It is a story of the ultimate tragic presumption: a human being who would become a goddess. And yet when the curtain rises, the audience confronts neither a palace nor a heavenly realm but an empty ruin, a place of fallen humanity and thwarted ambition. We are far from heaven but close to our world, and that is precisely where the artist who designed this experience and the patron who conceived it, want us to be.

For a foundation devoted to creative collaborations between China and the West, the idea of staging of a new production of George Freidrich Handel’s opera ‘Semele’ could not have been more audacious – or more unlikely. China’s foremost visual artist, Zhang Huan, would direct the full stage production of this little-known baroque opera at one of Europe’s most distinguished opera venues, the Theatre de la Monnaie in Brussels. Knowing nothing of baroque music, he would collaborate with one of the leading baroque ensembles in the world, Les Talens Lyriques, conducted by Christophe Rousset. And yet there are compelling reasons why this artist and this opera are ideally suited for a historic encounter. That encounter underscores the determination of the KT Wong Foundation and its founder, Linda Wong Davies, to make a lasting and significant impact on global culture.

Chartered in 2008 by Lady Davies, and named in honor of her father KT Wong, the foundation has organised a series of large-scale projects featuring important Chinese artists in Western or international contexts. It did not being modestly. At the same time that it commissioned the Chinese composer Chen Yi to write a piece for the BBC Proms celebrating the Beijing Olympics, it sponsored a remarkable installation by Shao Fan for London’s Royal Horticultural Society during the annual Chelsea Flower Show. Shao Fan is best known for his conceptual manipulations of traditional Chinese furniture designs, but this project took everyone by surprise. ‘I dream, I seek my garden’ simulated an archaeological excavation in which visitors could

see the structures of a classical Chinese scholar’s garden. Lady Davies’ interest in gardens and their restoration was only one of her motivations. Gardens are central to the cultural life of both China and England and this theme offered a bridge between worlds. ‘My original intention in launching the project and the foundation was to bring to the West the most vivid and artistically outstanding representations of Chinese culture,’ she remarks, ‘so that people might understand and appreciate it. Shao Fan’s art reaches back to the traditions of the Sung period and forward to our time.’

This installation contains, in essence, all the elements of the KT Wong Foundation’s distinctive approach to cultural exchange. In the wake of China’s increasing openness to the West, many organisations have formed to promote such exchanges, but none is more directly engaged in the creation of new works – or as ambitious. Indeed, ambition is the most striking thing about its projects. For both Chelsea and Brussels, Lady Davies selected one of the leading artists on the Chinese scene, someone of international stature but whose work was not well known in the West. By spurring the creation of new work in venues where it might not be expected, the foundation would ‘get people to pay attention’, as she puts it. Moreover, Shao Fan had never attempted a work of installation art, and the Chelsea Flower Show had never before accepted such a project. Likewise Zhang Huan had never experienced baroque opera before working on ‘Semele’. In both cases, Lady Davies’ intention was to push everyone out of their comfort zone in order to elicit the most daring work.

Second, the projects are driven by an artist’s vision. When Lady Davies, who was raised in Malaysia, visited Shanghai nearly four years ago, she was overwhelmed by the pace of social and economic change and the explosion of creativity in all the arts, especially the visual and performing arts. China was gearing up for its first great moment on the global stage, the Beijing Olympics, and she felt that the point of her work must be to help people understand and appreciate the China taking shape. The arts offered a powerful vehicle. ‘There is increasing exposure to China everywhere but still a dearth of knowledge about what China is, even within China itself,’ she says.



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Finally, both the Shao Fan installation and the 'Semele' project unite ancient tradition and contemporary sensibility. Both of these projects involve bold attempts to recover and reexamine an artistic and cultural inheritance. The artists themselves are well known for their engagements with the past. Zhang Huan, especially, has become increasingly preoccupied with the persistence and fragility of the past. His recent 'ash' paintings, for example, appear at first glance to engage more recent history, based as they are on photographs from the communist period of his childhood. But the ash used as the medium for the ghostly black and grey paintings is collected from burnt incense in Buddhist temples. The gesture grounds the 'historical' events of the imagery in a far broader cultural, not to say spiritual, context.

The significance of Zhang Huan's gesture reaches beyond personal expressiveness. In contemporary Chinese art – that is, art produced since the death of Mao Zedong – there have been two key phases. The first involved seizing the moment of liberalisation to assert the freedom of artists to express unorthodox opinions and adopt new models. The second phase is more widespread and complex and is still ongoing. It represents nothing less than a nation's attempt to heal a rupture.

The rupture was the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s. Until that point the traditional arts, from opera to painting, had been adapted by the state for its political purposes. The revolution ended that fragile rapprochement. Instead it sought to expunge nearly all traditional practices and imagery, not to mention teaching and scholarship, as well as any residual Western influences. For artists of Zhang Huan's generation, the closed book of the past was just being reopened when they came of age, as was a dialogue with Western art. Zhang Huan was able to study traditional painting at university and live in the United States. He was a central figure in the embrace of Western trends through his involvement as a performance artist with Beijing's so-called East Village, a group of avant-garde artists who lived and worked on the outskirts of the city in the early 1990s. More recently he has been a central figure in the engagement with tradition. The two go hand in hand. Western culture has its own ruptures that make this production of 'Semele' especially

resonant. The period of Zhang Huan's artistic growth and maturity corresponds almost exactly to the recovery of an ignored, even ridiculed, European tradition: that of baroque opera. The early-music and authentic-performance movements that began in the 1970s carried masterworks by Rameau, Handel and even earlier operas by Monteverdi back into the repertoire of major companies, and now it is standard to see at least one baroque production in most schedules. 'Semele' itself, conceived as an opera but presented as an oratorio in its original incarnation, received a spectacular musical coming-out party at New York's Metropolitan Opera in 1985. But for audiences conditioned by 19th-century Italian opera, it remains an acquired taste.

This production, imagined through Chinese eyes and ears, may change that. Lady Davies had that intuition when she heard Handel's 'Messiah' performed in Shanghai. She was raised on Western classical music; the Chinese audience she watched it with was not, yet their emotional reaction to the power of the music was stunning. Her goal in staging a production of 'Semele' was not only to bring a new interpretation to the music, but to bring the music to a new generation of Chinese audiences and singers. That is the reason for the presence of Ying Huang singing Semele and the production's presentation in Beijing and Shanghai in 2010. True cultural exchange is a two-way street. There are a host of reasons to think that the two worlds may be ready for the meeting, and even Zhang Huan's idea of interpolating passages of Chinese music may not be so far-fetched after all. His staging has created the common ground. On this starkly simple set, nothing more than the frame of a ruined house, the tragic triangle of Semele, Jupiter and Juno unfolds with a distinctly unromantic rawness. That rawness betrays Zhang Huan's roots as a self-punishing and brilliantly theatrical performance artist. Although classical Chinese music is based on percussive rhythms and baroque music on regular repetitive rhythm, both are highly stylised and formally rigorous. Neither is naturalistic and neither places a romantic emphasis on the interior identity of the characters. Concepts of fate and social position are more important than individualised desire. Passion is an almost impersonal force that disrupts the lives it touches.



In the current production, the constant reminder of these themes is the house itself. The actual physical structure, built during the Ming dynasty, had once been a temple. Later it was converted to a house. Zhang Huan discovered it was for sale and bought it, and during his exploration of the house discovered the journal of a previous owner. In it he read of the jealousy that led the man to murder one of his wife's lovers, a crime that led to his execution. The artist transported the building to his studio and made it the centerpiece of an unsettling video project, '100 Sages in a Bamboo Forest', depicting the often violent behavior of a troop of monkeys caged within its structure. One can only conclude that, for Zhang Huan, the behavior of the gods and the behavior of the animals is not so very different in its violence, and human beings are not very far from either. 'The opera is a cautionary tale of ambition, lust, greed and redemption,' adds Lady Davies. 'It is a tale that has resonance for both cultures. It is not difficult to imagine it as a Cantonese soap opera.'

At least since 1917, when Picasso designed the costumes for the ballet *Parade*, visual artists have made forays into stage performance and opera with varying degrees of success. Marc Chagall, Fernand Léger, David Hockney, Olafur Eliasson and Anish Kapoor, to name just a few, have all given images to the performing arts. The latter two worked with the *Theatre de la Monnaie*. Almost inevitably it is the music that trumps everything, reducing the visual elements to the role of window dressing. The KT Wong Foundation's belief in creative encounters that challenge all the parties involved guarantees a different outcome, a genuinely new work of art with each of its projects. And regardless of critics' judgments, the artistic relation between East and West will be irrevocably altered when the curtain falls on this 'Semele'.

- Lyle Rexer