IFA CHINA PROJECT WORKSHOP
Performing Images: Opera in Chinese Visual Culture

With Judith Zeitlin (University of Chicago) and Yuhang Li (Grinnell College)

ABSTRACT
Performing Images: Opera in Chinese Visual Culture
An exhibition to be held at the Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago, February-June 2014
curated by Judith Zeitlin and Yuhang Li
with a contemporary experimental art section curated by Wu Hung

I. Exhibition Proposal

Writing in the early nineteenth century, the French traveler and cleric Abbé Huc exclaimed: “There is, perhaps, not a people in the world who carry so far their taste and passion for the theatrical entertainments as the Chinese.”¹ This taste and passion for the theater was not restricted to the stage, but permeated the visual and material world of everyday life. The visual spectacle of this theater is well-known, displayed primarily through colorful costumes, props, and face painting. What is less known is the extent to which operatic characters and stories were favored as pictorial and decorative motifs across the full spectrum of visual mediums from scroll paintings to popular prints, illustrated books, and painted fans, to carved utensils, ceramics, textiles, dioramas, and snuff bottles. What links or distinguishes these different treatments in design, function, or viewer response? How are the visual, literary, and performing traditions intertwined aesthetically, ritually, and commercially? What kinds of connections, if any, can be drawn between this visual heritage and the striking use of Chinese opera elements in contemporary Chinese experimental art? This exhibition attempts to respond to these questions through concrete images and objects.

This exhibition departs from previous exhibitions about Chinese opera in its thematic focus and visual imagery. On the whole, exhibitions about Chinese opera in the West have been the province of ethnographic museums, which have mainly displayed real artifacts used in the theater to demonstrate how opera is performed and to showcase its connections to Chinese festivals and folkways. The idea behind the show we are proposing, however, is to show how opera was represented in a variety of visual and material forms. An example will clarify this difference in approach: rather than simply exhibiting opera costumes (the most

common opera-related object in American museums and relatively familiar to the western audience), we will show several amazing robes embroidered with narrative scenes from opera.

In this way, our exhibition will go beyond the mere display of operatic artifacts to give viewers an insight into the role that operatic imagery played in various facets of life across class and region. Our larger aim is to explore the interpenetration and influence of operatic images and ideas on Chinese art and culture (and vice versa). To do so, the visual quality and aesthetic interest of the objects in the exhibition needs to be high and is among the important criteria for selection. This commitment to the artistic quality of the objects shown is also in keeping with the mission of a university art museum like the Smart.

Our emphasis will be on Qing dynasty materials (1644-1911), in part to reflect the incredible vibrancy of Chinese opera in this period and in part because the majority of works representing opera in US collections date from this period. Nineteenth- and early twentieth-century American collectors were enamored of objects related to Chinese opera and left a treasure trove of materials that are mainly languishing in museum storerooms across the country. Our preliminary research identified rich findings in the Field Museum and The American Museum of Natural History. The Chinese ethnographic collections of these two institutions are particularly well-suited for our purposes because of the efforts of Berthold Laufer (1874-1934), the brilliant sinologist and anthropologist, who began at AMNH, but spent the bulk of his career at the Field. Laufer loved theater and paid particular attention to acquiring opera related artifacts on his four ethnographic collecting missions to China.

In addition to these two collections, we have discovered important works in many other American institutions with sizable Chinese collections: the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco, the Honolulu Academy of Arts, the Brooklyn Museum, Berkeley’s East Asian Library, and the Art Institute of Chicago. In addition, the Museum für Ostasiatische Kunst (Museum of East Asian Art) in Cologne, Germany, has agreed to lend us some of their extraordinary late Ming color woodblock prints of Romance of the Western Chamber (see below). The only other collection outside North America we will secure loans from is the Butler private collection of Chinese ceramics in England.

We will organize the exhibition in three sections: (1) a general section showcasing the multiplicity of forms and mediums in the visual representation of opera, primarily during the Qing dynasty (to provide a sense of breadth); 2) a thematic section focusing on the single most famous Chinese play of all times—The Romance of the Western Chamber (Xixiang ji), which was also particularly popular in the visual realm (to provide a sense of depth); (3) and a contemporary section which will explore how concepts of theatricality and the operatic are deployed in the context of Chinese experimental art. This section will feature
pieces by a single artist and be co-curated by Wu Hung. It is planned to use two sites, one at the Smart Museum, and one at the art gallery at the new Logan Center for the Arts, to facilitate crossover and communication between these two art centers on the University of Chicago campus.

To our knowledge, there has never been an art exhibition of this sort mounted in the United States, so it should have a considerable impact on the understanding of traditional Chinese culture, visual arts, and theater from a new angle. It should also attract different kinds of audiences, from drama specialists and art historians to students and faculty and the general public. The exhibition, as we conceive it, is also ideally poised to bring together the usually separate spheres of theatrical performance and the visual arts into a new set of interdisciplinary conversations and events about China, past and present.