

Yuè Lìng Jié (Moon Spirit Feasting)

The opera draws upon the Chinese myth of the moon goddess, Chang-O. There are many, often conflicting versions of her story but its basic outline is as follows:

Legend has it that the Archer Hou Yi was given the Herb of Immortality for shooting down nine renegade suns. These fell to earth as three-legged ravens. His beautiful wife Chang-O stole the Herb of Immortality for herself. Pursued by Hou Yi she floated to the moon where, in fright, she coughed up the herb-casing. This transformed into a rabbit, her only companion in the Palace of Far-Reaching Cold. The Queen Mother of the West, a demon-goddess, later turned Chang-O into a toad. The toad and rabbit are symbols of female fertility. In an ancient version of the myth Chang-O gives birth to twelve moons. In Chinese culture she symbolises coldness, loneliness and beauty.

Our opera conjures up the figure of Chang-O to re-tell her story from a number of angles: Chang-O as a woman who is transformed into a goddess; as a figure of psychic nightmare; as a wish-granting heavenly creature (associated with fertility). The stories can be understood as projections of aspects of a society's anima and in terms of symbolic interactions between cosmic forces.

The structure of the work draws upon the sequence of rituals which take place during the Chinese Hungry Ghosts Festival. This is an annual month-long festival during which the Gates of Hell are opened and ghosts, spirits and demons roam freely upon the earth. They have to be invoked, propitiated with food and other offerings, entertained with performances of opera, movies, puppet shows etc. and then cathartically released back into the spirit world.¹ Hungry Ghosts are abandoned spirits, with no descendants to look after or feed them; they are the outcasts and beggars of the spirit world, whose hunger can be assuaged but never satisfied.

The ritual nature of the seven parts of the opera acts as a series of 'tools' or 'instruments' used to access different levels of story: mythic, symbolic, comic and contemporary. The 'shimmer effect' of layering different versions and interpretations of the Chang-O myth one upon another, firstly, acknowledges 'cracks' in storytelling, masked spaces in which 'shadow stories' proliferate. Secondly, it explores the idea that there is a kind of permeable meniscus between the spirit and earthly worlds, and seeks to mirror possible 'cross over' spaces through which ritual journeys into unknown and dangerous realms can be made.

Since (Chinese) ghosts are said to move only in straight lines, the opera's non-linear, non-conclusive structure of changed directions, blocks and missing bridges also acts as a kind of metaphorical safety device: a controlled space in which to explore the uncontrolled.

The opera's structure is also informed by the poetic and architectural perspectives of the Chinese ideograms of the opening Li Shang-yin poem. Each of these Chinese characters can be read as a constellation of images and concepts which together create the meaning of the word. By analysing these components, we gained a three-dimensional view of the poem as a complex structure of receding poetic spaces. Each character in itself is a kind of 'Chinese box' containing several possibilities for transformation both within itself and in relation to the other characters. The ambiguous, fluid and mysterious qualities of the form of the written language is attested to by the impossibility of arriving at an adequate translation of this poem.

The libretto is in English (in parts colloquial Malaysian-English), Mandarin and Cantonese.

月靈節

Yuè Lǐng Jié (Moon Spirit Feasting)

Ritual Street opera in 7 parts for 3 singers & 9 instrumentalists

text: Beth Yahp

music: Liza Lim

prologue

Hou Yi
+
Perc 2
(Chinese
gong)

"Chinese opera street-crier" (baritone)

The first two lines are declaimed as the baritone moves from the "shrine" to the main performance area. He is freely accompanied by the percussionist beating a Chinese gong.

Yún mù píng fēng zhǔ yǐng shēn
Chéng hé jiàn luò xiǎo xīng chén

I INVOCATION

Hou Yi, the Archer King summons up the spirit of Chang-O

$\text{♩} = 66$

Singer plays high wood-block or other sharply percussive instrument.

8 "Beijing opera" style inflected speech.

Hou Yi 2
(Baritone)
+
woodblk.
on stage

Chéng é yīng huǐ tōu líng yāo³ Bì hǎi qīng tiān yè yè xīn

Perc 1
(high & low maracas)

$\text{♩} = 56$, hallucinatory

Hou Yi

2
4

4
4

thai gongs

high & low maracas [one hand]

mf *f* *mf* *f* *mp* *f*

yu u n n

intense, nasal

Hou Yi

7

ord

mf *f*

mu

mu

ping ing feng

nasal

water-gong

kwengkwan

Chinese gongs

thai gong

mf *f* *mf* *mp* *f*

A

Hsu-Yi 10

(nasal) → ord

feng

Perc 1

Water-gong

f mf

3 3

Chang-O's first appearance
(Spirit "bridal music")

(♩ = 56) unearthly, extreme

large drum* (dampened)

Perc 2

f

*this drum to be situated where Chang-O makes her entrance

picc.

sfz

f mf f mf

clarinet

sfz

f mf f mf

3 3

koto

sfz

f

10 9 5 11

1 5 6 10 11

12 11 11

3 3 3

(7)

erhu

sfz

f

3 3

mf

cello

sfz

f

3 3

ff

mf

koto tuning

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13

13

Hou Yi

Perc 1 (gongs)

Perc 2 (drum)

picc.

16

Hou Yi

(Perc 1) Chinese gong

pair of bongos
tam-tam
↓
timp II

19 ♩ = 72

Hon Yi

mf zhu — f ying — mp ing — 3 — 7:4 — 3 — shen — she — n

(like Chinese gong)

(Perc 1)
Chinese gong

bongos
tom-tom
↓
timp II

mp mf mp p (play) pp mp 3 mf

6/4 4/4

21 ♩ = 72

Hon Yi

4/4

(Perc 1)
tom-tom
↓
timp I

bongos
tom-tom
↓
timp II

mf Pedal. (luxuriantly)

mp (Ped.) pp mp pp 3