

Studies in Musical Theatre  
Volume 14 Number 2

© 2020 Intellect Ltd Article. English language. [https://doi.org/10.1386/smt\\_00031\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1386/smt_00031_1)

Received 25 November 2019; Accepted 12 May 2020

---

**JOSH STENBERG**

The University of Sydney

# How far does the sound of a *Pipa* carry? Broadway adaptation of a Chinese classical drama

## ABSTRACT

*The 1946 Broadway premiere of Lute Song represents a milestone in reception of the Chinese dramatic tradition in the United States. Despite its yellowface and 'Oriental pageantry', it must be situated at the beginnings of a more respectful relationship to China and Chinese people, as the American stage began to move beyond treatments of China dominated by racist vaudeville or fantastical fairy tales. Instead, Lute Song emerged from a classic text, the long drama Pipa ji – even as its own casting and staging inherited some of the same problematic habits of representing Asia. Lute Song, one of several indirect adaptations of Chinese dramas in the American mid-century, represents a milestone as the first Broadway show inspired by American immigrant Chinatown theatre and the first Broadway musical to be based on Chinese classical drama, mediated through European Sinology.*

## KEYWORDS

*Lute Song*  
Chinese drama  
Broadway  
*Pipa ji*  
Will Irwin  
Cantonese opera

Chinese musical theatre has flourished in the United States since the 1850s (Lei 2006; Ng 2015; Rao 2017). Until very recently, its principal expression was

1. *Pipa ji* was one of the few specific pieces of early Cantonese opera repertoire mentioned in the period's Anglophone American media: for instance, an 1898 account in *The Strand* told its readers that a 'masterpiece of Chinese dramatic literature is a domestic drama entitled "The Story of the Lute"' (Inkersley 1898).
2. Much of this loss, however, seems to have been recouped on tour (Anon. 1947).

Cantonese opera, then and now 'the most transnational of all China's regional performance genres' (Ng 2015: 7). In the early twentieth century, San Francisco was one of the genre's principal hubs for 'regional circuits for the distribution and circulation of itinerant actors and entire opera troupes across a wider area' (Ng 2015: 132), while New York, Vancouver, Toronto, Havana and Lima were all important stops on a broad circuit in the Americas in the latter half of the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries that is only now beginning to come fully into focus.

The 1930 tour of Mei Lanfang to the United States is rightly credited with introducing American theatre elites to 'Chinese opera' (Cosdon 1995), but it is also clear that the Cantonese opera troupes performing in numerous Chinatowns had over previous decades already reached a much larger and more diverse group of Americans. By the early twentieth century, Cantonese opera was already attracting a certain non-Chinese audience in California, as indeed it did everywhere from Rangoon to Camagüey. In San Francisco, non-Chinese audience interest was strong enough that there were special shows for such 'tourists' (Irwin 1921: 42). Cantonese performers and backers 'were well aware of this fascination, the consumption of the imagined, exotic Chinese as entertainment', and early performances were advertised with 'bilingual play-bills for mixed audiences [and] mobilized English-language news media to bring attention to the star actresses' (Rao 2017: 28).

Among the white Americans that were captivated by this theatre was a 'cub reporter' called Will Irwin, who worked in San Francisco during the early years of the twentieth century. Forty years later, he would recollect fondly in the *New York Times*:

I fell in love with the Jackson Street Chinese Theatre, then one of the best in the world, and did much of my loafing there. I don't speak Chinese; but Chinese houseboys, whom I picked up at the entrance, would for the price of admission sit beside me and whisper a translation of the action. In such circumstances I heard 'Pi-Pa-Ki' and recognized it as a drama with pity, irony, humor – everything that means universal appeal. And I formed a dim resolution, which at first was only a hope, that I would some day adapt it for the American Stage.

(Irwin 1946: X1)<sup>1</sup>

Irwin's hope ultimately became *Lute Song*, which in 1946 was finally premiered on Broadway in a musical theatre version starring Yul Brynner, at the outset of his career, and Mary Martin, then a rising star. Though at best a *succès d'estime* critically and a failure commercially on Broadway – *Billboard* estimated that the producer lost about \$100,000 on the show before it left New York (Anon. 1946a: 46),<sup>2</sup> – *Lute Song* deserves pride of place in the history of US reception of Chinese drama, constituting one of the most serious and respectful early efforts to bring a Chinese classic to the most prominent of American stages. It was the first Anglophone show created in the United States to emerge, however delayed and however indirectly, from the presence of *xiqu* ('Chinese opera') troupes (in this case, Cantonese opera) in the country. Furthermore, it is likely the first Broadway musical to derive from Sinology (although productions without songs had preceded it) – the academic treatment and translation of Chinese classical texts in European languages. At the mid-century mark, *Lute Song* showed that the American stage could prove amenable to adaptations from the texts and practices of the Chinese dramatic inheritance, though

in adapting it to the casting practices and audience expectations of the era, it inevitably adopted yellowface and an aesthetic that might be characterized as stereotypical 'Oriental pageantry' (Orodenker 1945: 41). Nevertheless, it constitutes a substantial milestone in American musical theatre and in the reception and adaptation of Chinese theatre abroad and in intercultural terms.

### FROM PIPA JI TO LUTE SONG

The book for *Lute Song* is an indirect adaptation of *Pipa ji* (*Tale of the Pipa*), the *pipa* being a four-stringed instrument in the lute family. *Pipa ji* is now usually classified as a fourteenth-century southern drama (*nanxi*), and some scholars consider it to be the earliest mature expression of Chinese dramatic literature (all of which contained sung portions until western contact in the early twentieth century introduced spoken theatre) as well as the 'great progenitor' of the southern *chuanqi* ('legend plays') that followed (Birch 1995: 16; Sun 1996). As such, it has long been part of the central canon of Chinese drama studies. The script, based on an earlier folk tale, is attributed to the Yuan dynasty author Gao Ming (also known as Gao Zecheng, c.1305–70), of whom few details are known, and the study of the early texts of *Pipa ji* constitutes a substantial subfield of Chinese drama studies, not least because as with the majority of early Chinese drama texts, there is no single 'original' source. In the words of one researcher, scholars labour to 'recover an approximation to the original Yuan text from later Ming and Qing editions, but all remaining versions are datable only to after the Jiaqing reign 1522–6' (Llamas 2007: 80).

*Pipa ji* has continued to be as well-known on stage as in script form, including in genres that became popular in diaspora. Chinese students in Boston selected it for translation and performance in 1925, one of the first attempts to bring Chinese drama into English for the edification of Americans.<sup>3</sup> In 1959, under the title *How Madame Zhao Went Far and Wide in Search of her Husband* (*Zhao Wuniang qianli xunfu*), it was made into a successful Cantonese opera movie in Hong Kong. Today, excerpts performed in the prestige genre of *kunqu* as well as numerous other theatre adaptations remain in regular repertory. Although there is substantial variation in length, episodes and characterization, the plot is quite consistent.

It is concerned principally with Zhao Wuniang (who became Tchaou-Ou-Niang in the French-influenced approximation used in *Lute Song*), her husband Cai Yong (Tsai-Yong) and his parents. Following the conventional narrative arc of traditional Chinese drama, the young scholar Cai sets off for the capital at his father's insistence, to sit imperial exams that will grant him access to status and wealth in the national administration. He leaves his parents in the care of his wife, who discharges her family responsibilities with great assiduity and tenderness. Cai garners the highest honours in the examination, but the powerful Prime Minister compels Cai to marry his daughter. Word of this does not reach Cai's wife and parents.

Famine hits the country hard. Zhao, feeding herself only on the husks of the rice, nobly saves the grains for Cai's parents. But she cannot keep starvation at bay, and when they die, Zhao tries to sell her hair to cover the burial costs but cannot find a buyer. Having built a grave with her own hands, she sets out with a lute to the capital to find her husband and to establish why there has been no news from him during the famine years. Arriving in the capital in tatters, she is warmly received by Cai's new wife, the Prime

3. Irwin, however, was not aware of this performance, and the translation is probably lost. The script for *Lute Song* would seem to be the earliest extant printed English-language adaptation of *Pipa ji*.

Minister's daughter, and is hailed by all for her steadfast virtue. Cai bemoans his own neglect. All three travel to Cai's home village to pay their respects at his parents' grave.

Research on the textual history of the narrative indicates that the story, while once focused on an 'ungrateful scholar' who abandons his wife and forgets his parents, was rewritten by later scholars seeking to redeem Cai and defuse a story that might seem to impugn the dignity and virtue of the scholar class (Yan 1994; Llamas 2007). This and the related matter of the tension between political loyalty and family obligation in *Pipa ji* are the object of fruitful research in Chinese literary studies, but neither need detain us here because all the sources accessible to the creators of *Lute Song* – the Cantonese opera Irwin watched and the French translation he would eventually read – feature the reformed version in which Cai is largely (and for most contemporary readers, problematically) absolved from the suffering his neglect caused to Zhao and her parents-in-law. If the alterations surrounding Cai's character are increasingly uncomfortable for audiences today, Zhao's representation has changed little: she is and remains the 'ultimate example of a Chinese *xian* [virtuous] wife' (Lei 2016: 288, n 93), uncomplaining and self-sacrificing.

As a major classical text, *Pipa ji* achieved an important place in nineteenth-century European Sinology, which had a propensity for drama translation, probably because its source texts were relatively easy to interpret (Idema 1996). The 1841 French translation of *Pipa ji* by A. P. L. Bazin, although preceded by numerous French translations of the shorter *zaju* (including one that was to inspire Voltaire's *L'Orphelin de Chine*), was the first rendering of a long-form Chinese theatre script into any European language. There would be no full English translation until 1980, though anonymous and somewhat faulty verse translations of a page-long extract (1840), as well as a few pages of dialogue and verse (1898), have recently been rediscovered (Zhang 2019). Nevertheless, some Anglophone scholars incorporated the play into their discussions of world theatre, having read the play in the French translation (Posnett 1901), and the Italian Jesuit Angelo Zottoli even translated portions of it into Latin in his Chinese primer *Cursus litterae sinicae neo-missionariis accommodates* (1879–92).

### **LUTE SONG AND LADY PRECIOUS STREAM**

*Lute Song* belongs to a family of projects that one might call 'Traditional Chinese Theatre on Broadway' that reached the American Anglophone stage via European adaptations of Chinese dramatic texts and/or journalistic accounts of the Chinese theatre (Du 1995; Chang 2015). In contrast to much of that family, however, *Lute Song* constitutes a considerable engagement with Chinatown-based Cantonese opera as well as with a classical text. In the latter respect, perhaps *Lute Song's* closest relative is a play called *Lady Precious Stream*, based on the well-known folk narrative about Wang Baochuan, a girl from a lofty house who selects a humble suitor. Almost exactly a decade before *Lute Song*, that show had transferred from London's West End to Broadway. As with *Lady Precious Stream*, profound changes and abridgments were made to *Lute Song's* plot in order to institute the monogamous ethic presumed to be necessary for Anglo-American audiences. In *Lute Song's* case, this meant the replacement of the (for Chinese classical drama, unremarkable) polygamous ending of *Pipa ji* with one in which the 'new' wife graciously relinquishes her claim, a change apparently brought about by the insistence of the leading lady, Mary Martin (Du 1995: 200–05; Zhang 2016; Gao 2019).

But while *Lute Song* was inspired by Cantonese opera, its adaptation and writing probably had no direct involvement from anyone of Chinese ethnicity. *Lady Precious Stream*, on the other hand, was initiated by London-based Chinese bilingual intellectuals, who positioned themselves as intimately familiar explicators of China for an Anglo-American public. The adaptor and director was Hsiung Shih-I, who had a self-conscious and systematic project of speaking for and valorizing Chinese classical drama for Anglophone audiences. As his recent biographer noted, Hsiung gave *Lady Precious Stream* a 'structure that, complete with Western-style stage instructions', made the story 'intelligible to the British theatre world' (Yeh 2014: 38). As such, his project bore similarities to Mei Lanfang's 1930 American tour – offering a Chinese pedagogy of the traditional stage for interested foreigners – and indeed Mei (though not present in New York) designed the costumes for the Broadway production of *Lady Precious Stream* (Zheng 2015: 88). Furthermore, the Chinese embassy was involved with the project, and a major role was taken by the daughter of the ambassador. Also, although *Lady Precious Stream* drew on a Chinese story, it was not adapted from any specific work, the relevant narrative, *Wang Baochuan*, having no expression as an early or canonical drama script. One might as reasonably consider it an adaptation from a folk tale as from a drama.

However, if *Lady Precious Stream* can be understood as a 'transposition' (Zheng 2015) in which the process is a 'mutually negotiated transaction' (Hecht 2011: 12), or perhaps even as an officially sanctioned project verging on cultural diplomacy, *Lute Song* was considerably less 'mutual', being the product of the admiration of Americans for a foreign work that was only partially accessible to them. Rather, its achievement in interculturalism derives from the unique genesis of the play.

## TRANSLATION, ADAPTATION AND REALIZATION OF *LUTE SONG*

In the years after his experience of watching *Pipa ji*, Irwin became a well-known journalist, hailed especially for his coverage of the 1906 San Francisco Earthquake and the First World War. He had not forgotten his ambition to stage a play based on *Pipa ji*, but he faced a fundamental obstacle: the absence of an English script. He came a step closer when in 1924 he was informed by a 'Chinese scholar' (of whom nothing more, unfortunately, is recorded) that the German Sinologist A. E. Zucker of the University of Maryland had a copy of Bazin's *Pi-pa-ki*. Zucker duly lent this text to Irwin, who had a copy made (Hudson 1982: 138–39).

With his copy of the typescript of the Bazin French translation in hand, Irwin could initiate the difficult process of adaptation. For this, he enlisted the help of Sidney Howard, later to win fame as the screenwriter for *Gone with the Wind* (1939). Howard agreed to collaborate on the script, being himself a Californian who was also fond of Chinese theatre (Irwin 1946: X1). However, it proved difficult to find funding for an enterprise that fell so far outside the usual purview of Broadway, and the authors found the process of abridgment and adjustment for Broadway tastes no small endeavour. As Irwin wrote, 'no one who has not tried to render Oriental symbolism in Occidental action, while keeping the flavor of the original, can appreciate the difficulty of the task' (Irwin 1946: X1). The script for *Lute Song* was drafted in the late 1920s and premiered as a play without music at the Berkshire Theatre Festival in western Massachusetts in September 1930, already a quarter century after Irwin first conceived of the project. Howard,

who had been pushing for a Broadway production, died in a freak accident in 1939, and Irwin continued looking for funding on his own. It would be another fifteen years after the Berkshire premiere before Broadway financing was secured and then only after 'dozens of prospective Broadway producers had read and rejected the play' (Hudson 1982: 173).

In the intervening years, it is likely that broader geopolitics worked in favour of the production of a script that, like *Lute Song*, was sympathetic to Chinese people. During the Second World War, the American view of China had undergone substantial change. Chiang Kai-shek's China was an American ally, and Americans were encouraged to feel solidary with Chinese people suffering the horrors of Japanese invasion and occupation. Coverage of the fall of Hong Kong and of Singapore represented the ethnic Chinese in these British colonies also as loyal allies in the Pacific War. Chinese Americans rallied around the flag and served under it, mostly in non-segregated units. Moreover, for two decades, the writings of authors such as Lao She, Lin Yutang and Chiang Yee (Jiang Yi), and especially the China-born 1938 Nobel Laureate Pearl S. Buck, served to create empathy and interest towards the Chinese people. Buck's novels *The Good Earth* and *Dragon Seed* received Hollywood productions in 1937 and in 1944; the latter explicitly thematized Chinese suffering at the hands of the Japanese. Publisher Henry Luce, born to missionaries in China like Buck, joined her in campaigning successfully for the 1943 Magnuson Act, by which the Chinese Exclusion Act was repealed and substantia; Chinese migration was allowed for the first time in 60 years (Hong 2013). Furthermore, by 1946, when *Lute Song* premiered on Broadway, Chiang's Nationalist government was already locked in a bloody Civil War with Mao Zedong's communists and thus was becoming a key anti-communist ally in the emerging Cold War. American theatregoers were primed to see a play about the virtues and suffering of the Chinese people.

Ultimately, the project was picked up by Michael Myerberg, a producer described as 'a patron of esoteric masterpieces' (Santo Pietro and Hartke 2002: 138–39) and 'The Great Chance-Taker' (Mantle 1946: 346; Garland 1946: 460). Myerberg decided that the piece could not be presented with the unremitting gravity of its original script. To break up the solemnity, he commissioned 'pleasant, jingly' (Gibbs 1946: 48) songs. These songs, by Bernard Hanighen (lyrics) and Raymond Scott (music), can still be heard on recordings and range from the inane 'See the Monkey' to the self-consciously oriental if sympathetic 'Mountain High, Valley Low'. A boisterous 'Imperial March' furnished the occasions for much of the capering and finery that reviewers often singled out for praise and that gave set and costume designer Robert Edmond Jones the scope for his designs (Figure 1).

Indeed, it was production design that received the readiest praise when the show premiered, with *Time* calling Jones 'the real hero'. The *New York Times* described his stage design as 'an ever-changing pageant' (Nichols 1946: 47), and *LIFE* devoted its coverage of the show primarily to reproductions of set design. The *Washington Post* lauded the 'rare and colourful beauty' of a stage design, 'drenched in reds and golds' (Coe 1947: 13). The enthusiasm of many reviews for the decoration reflected an uncertainty about the merits of the performance itself. As *Billboard* noted, '[w]hen an audience leaves a play discussing the costumes and the scenery, you have a situation that spells doom for the production' (Orodenker 1945: 41). Meanwhile, *The New York Journal-American* considered that "'Lute Song" is \$185,000 worth of scenery,



Figure 1: Costume sketch by Robert Edmond Jones. Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond. John Koenig Theatre Fund Photo: Troy Wilkinson © Virginia Museum of Fine Arts.

lights and costumes. They're wonderful! But there is a little play that insists upon intruding' (Garland 1946: 460).

To his credit, Jones had made at least some effort to consult Chinese theatre, judging from available drawings, pictures and reports: among them the *shuixiu* (water sleeves) of most *xiqu* genres. According to *LIFE*, Jones 'found inspiration in museums and print collections and aimed to create a paraphrase of the Giotto-like splendor of ancient China' (Anon. 1946b: 54). However,

4. Several companies sell images of designs, actors in costume and caricatures, especially Getty Images, The Illustrated Gallery and Period Paper. Since these images are still copyright-protected, it is only possible to reproduce those ones kindly provided by the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts and Dr David S. Shields, Broadway Photographs, to whom I extend my many thanks.

other elements, such as nonsense Chinese ideographs visible in some of Jones' sketches, or the willy-nilly introduction of Buddhist iconography, make the scenic design seem today more like a hodgepodge of orientalist fantasies.<sup>4</sup> As Brooks Atkinson, the *New York Times* reviewer, wrote of the 1959 revival (which used the same sets), 'Oriental settings invariably awaken a hidden longing for splendor in any designer' (Atkinson 1959: 24).

*Lute Song's* casting ultimately inscribed itself in the lineage of one of the most controversial depictions of Asia and Asian people in American popular culture. Yul Brynner, on the recommendation of his *Lute Song* co-star Mary Martin, later landed the leading male role in *The King and I*, leading one critic to remark that 'Mr. Brynner's King of Siam is a direct descendant of his role in *Lute Song*' (Cassidy 1952). Brynner, who was of Swiss, Russian and Buryat descent, was at pains, not for the last time, to claim an Asian legitimacy. While his claim in the *Lute Song* programme biography that he was 'partly Mongolian' might be true enough, his claim that he 'first saw "Pi-Pa-Ki" in Peking with Mei Lanfang' (Anon. 1946c: 26) seems more likely to be part of his tireless myth-making. Martin, for her part, drew scepticism in her role for being 'obviously of America rather than China' (Nichols 1946: 461). Her costumes also elicited sarcasm, with one critic remarking that 'Miss Martin was reduced to beggary in a gorgeous white gown designed by [elite fashion designer] Valentina' (Rascoe 1946: 462) (Figure 2).

There were no Asian-Americans on stage, but the period's conflation for all things 'Oriental' resulted in the engagement of Japanese-American dancer Yeichi Nimura (1897–1979) to provide the choreography. According to Martin, it was based on 'long, liquid movements suited to the Oriental robes [...] Nimura taught me how to hold my hands and arms, how to make the graceful hand movements' (Martin 1977: 119). From the only audio-visual material apparently available, a five-minute clip of Mary Martin singing 'Mountain High, Valley Low' and performing various prostrations, it would seem that (like a few years later in *The King and I*) the American-Oriental style of that period could most readily be distinguished by 'hand-flutterings [...] [and] the molasses pace of formal movements' (Cooke 1946: 8), gestures of humility and vague mysticism.

By and large, the critical reception of *Lute Song* was marked by ambivalence, with journalists acknowledging the project as difficult and noble but adjudging it more worthy than entertaining. The general tone concurred with the *New York Times's* characterization of the play as showing a 'high and sincere aim' (Nichols 1946: 47) and *LIFE* magazine's depiction of it as 'a fascinating theatrical experiment' (Anon. 1946b: 53). One critic remarked that 'there is a limited appeal to the drama students and to those steeped in Chinese history and culture, but there the appeal ends' (Rice 1946: 462). Yet another wrote that, 'my mind wouldn't slow down to an Oriental pace and it would not, therefore, remain absorbed' (Chapman 1946: 461).

Still, the influential Burns Mantle selected it as one of the ten best plays of the year, and the *Chicago Tribune* reviewer Claudia Cassidy, despite her reputation for causticity, called the show 'superior theater' full of 'sumptuous yet reticent beauty' (Cassidy 1946: 23). George Jean Nathan, the theatre critic for *American Mercury*, provided the most insightful commentary on the piece, perhaps because he seems to have been the only American critic with any knowledge of the original story. On balance, he regarded the switch of the American adaptation from emphasis on filial piety to an emphasis on 'marital fidelity' as 'an improvement, at least in the case of the Western stage' (Nathan





Figure 2: *Mary Martin as Tchao-ou-Niang and cast. Photograph by George Karger. Courtesy of Dr David S. Shields, Broadway Photographs.*

1946: 306). Its mediocre success at the box office was attributable to the fact that 'plays of delicate charm are distasteful to local criticism', since, he claimed, American audiences:

crave speed and action above all else and, since the Chinese drama is lacking in such attributes, it fails to gratify them. They further are not to be won by the sentiment in Chinese drama; it is much too delicate for their taste.

(Nathan 1946: 305)

His criticism is thus something in the character of a lament for a 'lute' among the brash 'trombones' (Nathan 1946: 306) of the usual American theatre fare, an expression of regret that Americans were the poorer for their 'dramatic delicacyphobia' (Nathan 1946: 308).

Although the critical response was ambivalent, the Broadway run of 142 performances was respectable. It seems likely that Irwin and Howard's adaptation, solemn and stately like the original, did not mix well with the largely upbeat songs and opulent scenery and that Mary Martin was not ultimately well-suited to depicting the travails of a destitute Chinese woman. As a consequence, reviewers tended to acknowledge the daring and worthiness of attempting to introduce a foreign tradition to the American stage, even if only a few adherents mustered enthusiasm.

### POST-BROADWAY AND LEGACY

After its Broadway production, *Lute Song* went on to tour Chicago (where it received the best reviews), Indianapolis, Milwaukee, Denver, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Detroit and Washington, substituting Mary Martin with Dolly Haas, whose performance was well received. In London, it received a chilly welcome, but a Swedish translation performed in Gothenburg garnered better reviews. Reception of a 1958 Virginia Museum of Fine Arts production (Figure 3) once again highlighted the 'dazzling pageantry of Old China'



Figure 3: Publicity photograph for Virginia Museum of Theatre production of *Lute Song*: Adaire H. Williams (Princess Nieou-Chi) posing with headdress and fan. VMFA Photo Archives © Virginia Museum of Fine Arts.

but also featured complaints that 'the stylized movements often become stilted', perhaps because actors could not 'suggest completely the ancient oriental mood and manner' (Williams 1958).<sup>5</sup> In Hawaii, where it had apparently been performed even before the Broadway premiere, it continued to be programmed (Foster 1952: 374; Coe 1966: D9), most likely because it provided some rare Asian lead characters in an American musical script. A final 1989 revival at Berkshire Theatre Festival (where the first production had been mounted in 1930) featuring New York-based Asian-American actors was similarly motivated.

On the scant available evidence, it seems that theatre groups and audiences gradually began to find the piece dusty. A review of a 1959 New York City Center revival with the original set and costumes opined that 'any modern production' might be 'too gentle and leisurely for popular success on Broadway' (Morrison 1959: 90). The depiction of Asian characters must also have seemed less and less adequate. Of a 1966 Catholic University student production, a local critic – who had hailed it in a 1946 review of the post-Broadway tour – took it for granted that the show was now 'exhume[d]', noting 'nostalgia is not a good enough reason to revive a play' (the University had first performed it in 1944). Also, yellowface performance conventions had become an issue:

In the casting of Caucasian players as Orientals, the students are behind the ball. In some cases, the make-up strives for Oriental faces, in others there is no attempt whatever. While there may be rudiments of a Chinese style, they are no more impressively conveyed than one would expect from any group of young people within a few rehearsal weeks.

(Coe 1966: D9)

By this time, emerging American-ethnic identity politics were making the inadequacies of yellowface performance increasingly obvious and embarrassing. And the political context had changed: as the same reviewer notes, 'watching *Lute Song* is like sitting in Taiwan longing for the Good Old Days' (Coe 1966: D9). But Chiang's Nationalists were now reactionaries in the eyes of many in the American artistic establishment and among students, many of them no doubt sceptical of American military engagement in Asia, as the Vietnam War escalated.

Depictions of Asians and of Asian-Americans, even when intended to be positive, had been stereotypical and exotic on the American stage until the 1960s (Moy 1990: 48). Although *Lute Song* was inevitably marked by the 'Broadway tendency to present traditional Chinese themes in a fantasized or romanticized way' (Du 1995: 268),<sup>6</sup> its (stylized and yellowface) characters were essentially treated sympathetically and, in the case of the principal character, even as heroic depictions of Chinese characters. With the beginnings of a sensitivity surrounding the casting of Asian characters and the presence of Chinese politics in the American public arena, the space for works deemed to represent fantasy-China was reduced.

In this way, over time, respect for an ambitious project has worn off. In reference works, *Lute Song* tends to be recalled as a 'curiosity' with 'trivia value' (Scher and Coen 1996: 58). What is left is bemusement that the performance came to pass at all, mixed with ridicule of the casting and design. Take, for instance, this 1999 summary from acerbic Broadway specialist Ethan Mordden: 'This is a musical? Who on Broadway would play these roles...? [...] [O]f course the wife is a natural for [...] Mary Martin? Wearing her Valentina

5. I am grateful to the VMFA and especially Howell Perkins for this and related news clippings, as well as access to various photographs of the production.
6. This tendency much predated Broadway and is traceable in Anglophone theatre at least as far back as the sixteenth century.

gowns even during the famine?’ (Mordden 1999: 242). *Lute Song* has now fallen almost entirely into disrepute, except, interestingly, among scholars in China.

### **LUTE SONG AS SEEN FROM CHINA**

At the time of its initial production, although it did not benefit from any official or local community support, the production was taken by Chinese intellectuals and diplomatic representatives in New York as a pleasing sign of respect and interest from the American cultural establishment. The ambassador of the Republic of China, Wei Tao-ming, on a visit to New York, invited three major figures of Chinese letters to see the show on Broadway: Cao Yu (the most enduring writer of modern Chinese spoken theatre), Lao She (author of enduringly popular novels and plays including *Rickshaw Boy* and *Teahouse*) and Chiang Yee (one of the major cultural ambassadors of Chinese culture to the Anglophone world in the mid-twentieth century and author of the *Silent Traveller* series). Chiang Yee regarded the American adaptation as ‘an agreeable version’ and that,

[a]ll who took part acted very well, except that the heroine’s manner might have been a little less stiff and both her facial expression and that of the hero might have been livelier. No doubt they were trying to be Chinese!

(Chiang 1950: 185)

Chiang further relates a brief conversation with an ‘elderly lady in a white fur coat’ at the theatre, who disapproved of the show and suggested that he was too young to know what Chinese theatre ought to be like. For Chiang, such objections were comically beside the point: ‘*Lute Song* is not a Chinese play. It is an American play on a Chinese theme, just as Fitzgerald’s *Rubaiyat* is an English poem on a Persian theme’ (Chiang 1950: 186). Chiang regarded this attempt to adapt a Chinese narrative as unable to convey Chinese manners, but as a pleasant and unobjectionable adaptation of a narrative he would have known well.

Contemporary Chinese scholarship has been similarly understanding and even enthusiastic. One scholar, Zhang Qiulin, is based in the central Chinese city of Wenzhou, where ‘southern drama’ such as *Pipa ji* is perhaps the city’s greatest claim to China’s classical heritage. Zhang has incorporated *Lute Song* into several research works on the influence and transmission of *nanxi* narratives abroad, proposing that *Lute Song* may legitimately be considered as an example of intercultural theatre and arguing that this play is an indigenized example of the Chinese original, respecting ‘the Western theatrical tradition of “self”, while employing the “other” to improve on the Western realistic stage’ (Zhang 2017: 77).

While American reception tends to be concerned with the politics of representation, Chinese accounts instead regard adaptation of Chinese texts as marks of esteem and as a triumph of transnationalism. As Zhang notes, PRC researchers of Chinese transnationalism consider that,

it is not our job to criticize or censure such rewritings, but rather to actively explore how to build bridges for the effective communication of Chinese and Western theatre, so that Chinese *xiqu* culture can ‘go abroad’, and moreover go steadily and reach far.

(Zhang 2016: 258)

Today, where cultural influence is understood by Chinese officialdom as a major goal of the 'Belt and Road Initiative', adaptations of Chinese texts, both historical and contemporary, are more often hailed and praised than criticized.

## CONCLUSION

An adaptation can be defined as 'an acknowledged transposition of a recognizable other work or works', 'a creative and an interpretive act of appropriation/salvaging' and 'an extended intertextual engagement with the adapted work' (Hutcheon 2013: 8). It necessarily entails change to suit contemporary circumstances, and 'proximity or fidelity to the adapted text' need not be 'the criterion of judgment or the focus of analysis' (Hutcheon 2013: 6). Min Tian's work on intercultural theatre between China and the West has argued that 'it is the differences in cultural, social, ideological, political, economical, and ethnic dimensions that serve as a common denominator determining the mechanism of intercultural exchange' and reasons that, 'so long as such differences exist, we cannot avoid the Other being perceived differently' (Tian 2008: 5).

While numerous scholars have rightly pointed out the importance of adaptation of western texts on Chinese stages (Tian 2008; Huang 2009; He 2011), we would do well to emphasize, with examples such as *Lute Song*, that this history is actually part of a multilateral exchange, and Chinese texts have a considerable history on western stages (as well as on Southeast Asian, Japanese, Russian and Korean stages), including those of Broadway. Moreover, *Lute Song* accomplished two major milestones: it was the first Broadway show inspired by American immigrant Chinatown theatre and the first Broadway musical to be based on Chinese classical drama, mediated through European Sinology.

Not least due to the absence of direct input from Chinese people, the Broadway iteration of this narrative was, from our present vantage point, far from ideal, in part because it inscribes itself into the inglorious history of yellowface performance. As one scholar notes, at the time when Irwin and Howard were writing *Lute Song*, staged versions of China in the Anglophone American theatre 'drew on unpleasant stereotypes, and the racist epithets found in many of them were never amusing' and many were worse than that (Saffle 2017: 88; see also Moon 2005). China in *Lute Song*, despite a surface of lavish spectacle and the interpolated songs that mixed oddly with the serious purport of the story, appears as a source of classical drama and a site of sympathetic interest. It is worth insisting on a sharp contrast between this kind of project, which was aspirationally intercultural if limited and monoethnic in its execution on Broadway, with the essentially external, fantastical and ultimately racist ways that Asia usually appeared on the American stages of the era. Ultimately, it may be that *Lute Song's* most notable achievement was to deal with the Chinese text as Broadway had so often dealt with European ones: that is to say, as the product of a major literary culture, turned to Broadway devices, instead of as 'primitive and childlike' or as a source of 'perverse, inhuman villains' (Chang 2015: 141), both of which were common pre-war China tropes.

It then stood on its own for decades. One scholar noted in 1993 that 'the last well-publicized commercial staging of an adaptation of an actual Chinese drama text performed by western actors was *Lute Song* in 1946', likely because 'traditional texts are so dependent on actors trained in a difficult style' and consequently 'offer little incentive for adaptation by themselves' (Diamond

1993: 261, n 43). From our historical vantage point, it is reasonable to be critical of *Lute Song* as intercultural theatre without an interlocutor, as interculturality as acquisition – but, in retrospect, *Lute Song* also shows that the door to Broadway was open to adapting the heritage of classical Chinese drama in 1946. With this, Broadway continued a radical break from the negative and comical tropes of a fantastical China and began to turn its attention to the narrative worlds of Chinese theatre that had been showing in American Chinatowns for a hundred years.

## REFERENCES

- Anon. (1946a), 'Mama closing in as *Lute Song* builds in Chi', *Billboard*, 12 October, p. 46.
- (1946b), '*Lute Song*', *LIFE*, 4 March, pp. 53–56.
- (1946c), '*Lute Song*', *The Plymouth Theatre*, programme, 29 April.
- (1947), '*Lute* hits 50G net in 10 week Chi run; Ace Flack job cited', *Billboard*, 12 April, p. 45.
- Atkinson, B. (1959), 'Theatre: *Lute Song* at City Center', *New York Times*, 13 March, p. 24.
- Birch, C. (1995), *Scenes for Mandarins: The Elite Theatre of the Ming*, New York: Columbia University Press.
- Cassidy, C. (1946), '*Lute Song* wields its spell despite late start and some lopsided staging', *Chicago Tribune*, 17 September, p. 23.
- (1952), 'Nov. 1 closing date set for *I Am a Camera*', *Chicago Tribune*, 5 October, p. F4.
- Chang, D. (2015), *Representing China on the Historical London Stage: From Orientalism to Intercultural Performance*, New York: Routledge.
- Chapman, J. (1946), '*Lute Song* visually magnificent but self conscious as to drama', *New York Theatre Critics' Reviews*, New York: Critics' Theatre Reviews, 7, p. 461.
- Chiang, Y. (1950), *The Silent Traveller in New York*, London: Methuen & Co.
- Coe, R. L. (1947), '*Song* drenches national stage in rare and colorful beauty', *The Washington Post*, 28 May, p. 13.
- (1966), 'CU exhumes *Lute Song*', *The Washington Post*, 6 December, p. D9.
- Cooke, R. P. (1946), 'The theatre: Brocade parade', *The Wall Street Journal*, 8 February, p. 8.
- Cosdon, M. (1995), '"Introducing occidentals to an exotic art": Mei Lanfang in New York', *Asian Theatre Journal*, 12:1, pp. 175–89.
- Diamond, C. T. C. (1993), 'The role of cross-cultural adaptation in the "Little Theatre" movement in Taiwan', Ph.D. thesis, Seattle: University of Washington.
- Du, W. (1995), 'Traditional Chinese theatre on Broadway', in S. Clausen, R. Stars and A. Wedell-Wedellsborg (eds), *Cultural Encounters: China, Japan, and the West*, Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, pp. 192–214.
- Fleming, V. (1939), *Gone with the Wind*, Hollywood: Selznick International Pictures.
- Foster, J. B. (1952), 'China and the Chinese in American literature, 1850–1950', Ph.D. thesis, Urbana: University of Illinois.
- Gao, Z. (2019), 'Wenti de zhihuan: Bailaohui juchang dui Pipa ji de jieshou' ('Genre replacement: Broadway's reception of *Pipa ji*'), *Xiqu yishu*, 40:2, pp. 40–46.

- Garland, R. (1946), '“Lute Song” opens at the Plymouth', *New York Theatre Critics' Reviews*, New York: Critics' Theatre Reviews, 7, p. 460.
- Gibbs, W. (1946), 'The theatre', *The New Yorker*, 16 February, pp. 46–48.
- He, C. (2011), 'World drama and intercultural performance: Western plays on the contemporary Chinese stage', *Neohelicon*, 38:2, pp. 397–409.
- Hecht, S. J. (2011), *Transposing Broadway: Jews, Assimilation, and the American Musical*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Hong, J. H. (2013), 'Reorienting America: Race, geopolitics, and the repeal of Asian exclusion, 1940–1952', Ph.D. thesis, Cambridge: Harvard University.
- Huang, A. (2009), *Chinese Shakespeares: Two Centuries of Cultural Exchange*, New York: Columbia University Press.
- Hudson, R. V. (1982), *The Writing Game: A Biography of Will Irwin*, Ames: Iowa State University Press.
- Hutcheon, L. (2013), *A Theory of Adaptation*, 2nd ed., Abingdon: Routledge.
- Idema, W. (1996), 'Why you never have read a Yuan drama: The transformation of Zaju at the Ming Court', in S. M. Carletti, M. Sacchetti and P. Santangelo (eds), *Studi in onore di Lanciello Lanciotti*, Napoli: Istituto Universitario Orientale, Dipartimento di Studi Asiatici, pp. 765–91.
- Inkersley, A. (1898), 'The Chinese drama in California', *Strand Magazine*, 15:87, pp. 402–09.
- Irwin, W. (1921), 'The drama that was in Chinatown', *New York Times*, 10 April, p. 42.
- (1946), 'On the trail of a Chinese script', *New York Times*, 3 February, p. X1.
- Lei, D. (2016), *Operatic China: Staging Chinese Identity across the Pacific*, Berlin: Springer.
- Llamas, R. (2007), 'Retribution, revenge, and the ungrateful scholar in early Chinese southern drama', *Asia Major*, 20:2, pp. 75–101.
- Mantle, B. (ed.) (1946), *The Best Plays of 1945–1946*, New York: Dodd, Mead and Co.
- Martin, M. (1977), *My Heart Belongs*, London: W. H. Allen.
- McKinley Theater Group (n.d.), website, <http://jim-nakamoto.com/tribute/mckinley-theater-group/>. Accessed 10 April 2020.
- Moon, K. R. (2005), *Yellowface: Creating the Chinese in American Popular Music and Performance, 1850s–1920s*, New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.
- Mordden, E. (1999), *Beautiful Mornin': The Broadway Musical in the 1940s*, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Morrison, H. (1959), 'Review of *Lute Song*', *Variety*, 18 March, p. 90.
- Moy, J. S. (1990), 'David Henry Hwang's "M. Butterfly" and Philip Kan Gotanda's "Yankee Dawg You Die": Repositioning Chinese American marginality on the American stage', *Theatre Journal*, 42:1, pp. 48–56.
- Nathan, G. J. (1946), *The Theatre Book of the Year 1945–1946: A Record and an Interpretation*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Ng, W. C. (2015), *The Rise of Cantonese Opera*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Nichols, L. (1946), 'Lute Song: The new play taken from the Chinese has a high and sincere aim', *New York Times*, 17 February, p. 47.
- Orodenker, M. (1945), 'Lute Song', *Billboard*, 29 December, p. 41.
- Posnett, H. M. (1901), 'Pi-Pa-Ki, or, San-Pou-Tsong', *The Nineteenth Century*, 49:288, pp. 307–20.
- Quick, D. (1946), 'What's new in New York', *The East Hampton Star*, 25 April, p. 2.

- Rao, N.Y. (2017), *Chinatown Opera Theater in North America*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Rascoe, B. (1946), 'Lute Song is authentic, no doubt, and a bore', *New York World-Telegram*, 7 February, in Anon. (1946), *New York Theatre Critics' Reviews*, New York: Critics' Theatre Reviews, 7, p. 462.
- Rice, V. (1946), 'Lute Song, a Chinese play', in Anon. (1946), *New York Theatre Critics' Reviews*, New York: Critics' Theatre Reviews, 7, p. 462.
- Saffle, M. (2017), 'Eastern fantasies on western stages: Chinese-themed operettas and musical comedies in turn-of-the-last-century London and New York', in H.-L. Yang and M. Saffle (eds), *China and the West: Music, Representation, and Reception*, Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, pp. 87–118.
- Santo Pietro, M. J. and Hartke, G. V. (2002), *Father Hartke: His Life and Legacy to the American Theater*, Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press.
- Scher, H. and Coen, S. (1996), 'CDs in brief: Broadway music', *American Theatre*, 13:5, p. 58.
- Sun, M. (1996), 'Performances of Nanxi', *Asian Theatre Journal*, 13:2, pp. 141–66.
- Tian, M. (2008), *The Poetics of Difference and Displacement: Twentieth-Century Chinese-Western Intercultural Theatre*, Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.
- Williams, A. (1958), 'Stage: By Alton Williams', *The Richmond News Leader*, 4 December.
- Yan, H. (1994), 'Ideology and critique: Images of women in two traditional Chinese dramas', *Ming Studies*, 1, pp. 20–27.
- Yeh, D. (2014), *The Happy Hsiungs: Performing China and the Struggle for Modernity*, Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.
- Zhang, Q. (2016), 'Pipa ji yu yingyu Pipa ge zhuti sixiang de duizhaoxing jiedu' ('Contrasting readings of the ideological thrust of *Pipa ji* and the English-language *Lute Song*'), *Yishu baijia*, 3, pp. 77–84.
- (2017), '"Tazhe" zhi jingxiang: Lun nanxi Pipa ji de kuawenhua xiju gaibian' ('The mirror of the "other": On the intercultural adaptation of the nanxi play *Pipa ji*'), *Shanghai xiju xueyuan xuebao*, 3, pp. 77–84.
- (2019), 'Wan Qing shiqi nanxi Pipa ji duo xingtai Xi xhuan yu yijie yanjiu' ('Research on late Qing era southern drama *Pipa ji*'s multi-genre transmissions, translations and introductions to the West'), *Wenzhou daxue xuebao (shehui kexue ban)*, 32:1, pp. 35–42.
- Zheng, D. (2015), 'Performing transposition: *Lady Precious Stream* on Broadway', *New England Theatre Journal*, 26, pp. 83–102.

## SUGGESTED CITATION

Stenberg, Josh (2020), 'How far does the sound of a *Pipa* carry? Broadway adaptation of a Chinese classical drama', *Studies in Musical Theatre*, 14:2, pp. 175–191, doi: [https://doi.org/10.1386/smt\\_00031\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1386/smt_00031_1)



## CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Josh Stenberg is a senior lecturer in the Chinese Studies Department at the University of Sydney's School of Languages and Cultures. His research interests include transnational Chinese-language literature and theatre as well as Southeast Asian Chinese communities.

Contact: School of Language and Cultures, The University of Sydney, Brennan MacCallum A18, NSW 2006, Australia.

E-mail: [josh.stenberg@sydney.edu.au](mailto:josh.stenberg@sydney.edu.au)

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6832-2909>

Josh Stenberg has asserted their right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988, to be identified as the author of this work in the format that was submitted to Intellect Ltd.

---

Copyright of Studies in Musical Theatre is the property of Intellect Ltd. and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.