By Ken Smith

HKUST Music Alive! - The Dream of the Red Chamber Symposium@HKUST

Dreamweavers

An all-star creative team transports an epic Chinese novel to the operatic stage

It's not the first time that San Francisco Opera has looked toward China. There was the 2008 premiere of Stewart Wallace's The Bonesetter's Daughter *with a libretto by Bay Area native Amy Tan. And of course, there's John Adams'* Nixon in China. *Neither of those, though, could properly be called a Chinese classic.*

By contrast, Dream of the Red Chamber, *which has its world premiere on September 10, is not just a classic. To millions of Chinese readers, it's* the *classic. Cao Xueqin's epic novel of ill-fated love amidst a prominent family's spiraling decline has inspired numerous films and spoken dramas, two television series, and far too many Chinese operas to count. But never before has the story made it—in English, no less—to the international operatic stage.*

The creators of Red Chamber*—the* "Dream *team," if you will—are notable not just for their personal accomplishments but also the breadth of their background. The range of perspectives from MacArthur-winning Shanghai-born composer Bright Sheng, Tony-winning American-born playwright David Henry Hwang, American-born Taiwanese director Stan Lai, and Oscar-winning Hong Kong-born designer Tim Yip are perfectly pitched to haul San Francisco audiences*

(Opposite page, from left to right) The "Dream team" of composer and co-librettist Bright Sheng, director Stan Lai, co-librettist David Henry Hwang, and (right) production designer Tim Yip.

into another culture and era. In this interview with Hong Kong-based Financial Times *critic Ken Smith, the composer, librettist, and director discussed the daunting task of tackling one of China's most beloved novels as a 21st-century musical drama.*

***Dream of the Red Chamber* is almost universally known in the Chinese world but barely registers at all with readers in the West. What was your personal relationship with the story before this project began?**

BRIGHT SHENG: I first started reading *Dream of the Red Chamber* when I was 12 or 13, about the same age as Bao Yu in the novel. This was during the Cultural Revolution, and I wished that I too could be surrounded by beautiful women and have his extravagant lifestyle. Later on, in my late teens, I read the book again and began to appreciate the literary content. I still didn't pay much attention to the scholarly details until later. I've reread the book every ten years or so, and since I got the commission to write the opera, I read it through twice more. So now I'm a dilettante Redologist, which is what they call academics who devote themselves to studying the novel. At least I could have a meaningful conversation with a *real* Redologist.

DAVID HENRY HWANG: I had no real relationship with the material. I mean, I knew it was one of the four great Chinese novels, along with *The Three Kingdoms*, *The Water Margin*, and *Journey to the West*. But my Chinese is horrible, so I couldn't actually read it in the original language. And even now my knowledge of the book is still pretty superficial. But I have the benefit of collaborating with Bright, who has a long history with the novel, and Stan, who's digested *Dream of the Red Chamber* throughout most of his professional life.

STAN LAI: *Dream of the Red Chamber* has resonated with me ever since I first read it as a freshman in college. Some of the story's structural sensibility has made its way into my own work, particularly the idea that something so simple and normal-looking on the surface can underneath be very profound. Much of the profundity in *Red Chamber* comes from the way the author opens with the stone and the flower, which becomes a metaphor encapsulating elements of Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism—the three incredibly vast philosophical systems that work together in making up the Chinese mind.

How did each of you get involved in the project?

SHENG: Pearl Bergad at the Chinese Heritage Foundation in Minnesota had this crazy idea to do an opera of *Red Chamber* in English. The foundation first approached Kevin Smith, then President and CEO of the Minnesota Opera, who arranged a meeting with David Gockley, then still General Manager of San Francisco Opera, who approached me. And then I approached David Hwang, whom I'd worked with on other projects. He didn't want to do it at first, but I persuaded him.

HWANG: I said absolutely no, I'm not going to adapt this story into an opera, because it just seemed impossible. The book is twice as long as *War and Peace*, with more than 400 characters. How can you shape that into a two-and-a-half-hour show that has any relationship to the source material or respects it in any measurable way? But Bright grew up in China during the Cultural Revolution and I grew up in Los Angeles, so consequently his will is much stronger than mine. First, he said, "At some point in your life, you have to read this book, so here's your chance." But more importantly, Bright had a vision of how to tell the story. So I agreed, provided we share the credit, since half the work of a librettist is determining the structure.

"There's a constant tension just below the surface, which later became a metaphor for the decline of imperial China—sort of like Downton Abbey *of the Qing Dynasty." —Dream of the Red Chamber* co-librettist David Henry Hwang

SHENG: I did a synopsis that David was very happy with, and after that we worked very closely. I had a general vision, but he wrote every word. He was able to sketch rich domestic scenes and bring out the different personalities of each character in only a few lines. That was masterful.

LAI: I came into the project after the first draft of the libretto was finished and immediately embraced the major choices that David and Bright had made. It was, I should add, a gross simplification of the novel. The process is by definition rough to the author, even if you're being loyal to the story. So while there's a big discount in terms of detail, we've tried not to discount the novel's profundity.

"I do not use detailed designs on the fabric itself, as in real silk brocade," says Dream of the Red Chamber *production designer Tim Yip. "Instead, my costume designs are more abstract, allowing you to sense the body within—or perhaps the aura of character's spirit." Characters are distinguished by different colors. For Dai Yu, green reflects her living quarters in the garden, surrounded by bamboo. The embossed gold patterns on Bao Chai's robe remind you that she comes from a rich family. "Bao Chai's costumes signify a woman who's rational, orderly, and pure," says Yip.*

We've established that *Red Chamber* is a teeming epic, even by operatic standards. What did it take to restructure 2,500 pages into a manageable two-act opera?

SHENG: We all had long conversations about just what this novel is about, which is something not even Redologists can agree on. In opera, you have to boil down the material to one major element. The problem with *War and Peace* as an opera—and Prokofiev was an experienced composer—is that he wasn't daring enough in his cuts. In the novel, the love story was just a sideline. In an opera, of course, you want to beef up the love story. You can't disregard the politics, since that's what the novel was all about. So, in the end, the opera tried to do both equally and lost focus. For us, *Red Chamber* is a love story. The main point isn't the political intrigue, though we've kept that as the historical backdrop.

HWANG: It's easier to talk about what we kept than what we jettisoned. The love triangle, I think, is pretty universal. People can relate to that, and it's essential and true to the novel. But we also have the Jia family, incredibly wealthy but now in decline. There's a constant tension just below the surface, which later became a metaphor for the decline of Imperial China—sort of like *Downton Abbey* of the Qing Dynasty. And so elements that have to do with the political machinations and how the Emperor manipulates this corruption to bring down the family is a crucial sociopolitical aspect. And also, it's just good plot material, in a sort of *House of Cards* fashion.

LAI: We've entered this opera with the best intentions, which does give us some poetic license. For me, it was a process of discovering how to take something that might take up a whole chapter in the novel and translate it into a single image on stage.

Audiences in San Francisco will surely be calling this a "Chinese" opera, but it resembles nothing that you'd see on stage in China. Do you think audiences there would find it "Chinese" enough? Was your goal to emphasize international storytelling with a Chinese story, or to bring a Chinese story to the international stage?

HWANG: As the most "American" of the group, my role has been to bring an outsider's perspective. One distinction I've noticed between contemporary Western and traditional Chinese storytelling styles is that the latter tends towards episodic narrative. In other words, traditional Chinese epics are a bit like pre-cable television: chapters can often be viewed by themselves or out of order without too much impact on the larger story. Translating *Red Chamber* into a Western dramatic mode involved steering the action towards a climactic event.

"You'll find that quite a few of the robes are expansive, almost like mounted kites ready to fly off with the wind," says Yip. "You'll also see that I chose a lot of sheer materials, so that light can pass through, again creating a layering effect. Besides adding depth, back lighting can also change the hues depending on how the light is cast." Again, color is key. The brown of Granny Jia, for instance, represents stability and unquestioned authority. "Granny Jia provides the structure on which the family is built," says Yip.

SHENG: Any great opera has a great story. *Tosca* and *La Traviata* have come to China, where people have a totally different culture, and audiences were still touched by the music and the drama. We were making *Dream of the Red Chamber* for an international audience. Whether the audience is Chinese or Western, a touching story about ill-fated love should appeal to everyone.

LAI: I don't see it in terms of China and the West. My job is to tell the story in whatever way resonates most deeply with the audience. The story already encapsulates the whole Chinese mind and experience. Even if you bring a whole avant-garde European flavor to it—which I'm definitely not, by the way—the story will still come out Chinese. If we were doing it for a Chinese audience, there's only one big change I would suggest, which is to perform it in Chinese. As far as staging is concerned, I think there's sufficient visual language in common for what we do to resonate in Beijing as well.

Which was harder, translating this work on a linguistic-cultural level or instilling an ancient story with contemporary relevance?
LAI: I think both are equally challenging. For example, the opera has a wedding scene. In Chinese tradition, wedding ceremonies are very different: the couple gives their offerings to the heavens and the parents, and then they're married. But how do we make this clear to an audience in San Francisco today?

SHENG: David Hwang and I have worked well in this type of adaptation right from our first collaboration, *The Silver River*. Because I spent the first half of my life in China, I completely understand the way Chinese culture sees the story. David comes from an almost purely Western point of view. So we both have to be happy with what we come up with before we move forward. And with Stan, whose background is mainly in modern drama, we work through yet another perspective.

HWANG: The love triangle is highly relatable to a contemporary audience, but it's different from Western romantic conventions because of the novel's spiritual framework: the *uber*-story about the stone and the flower. On some otherworldly plane, the stone has continually watered the flower with morning dew for thousands of years. The flower wants to express her gratitude, so they ask a priest if she and the stone can be incarnated as humans and express earthly love. The priest warns against it, but they do it anyway. And this metaphysical element sets up an interesting thematic question: to what extent can true love exist in a corrupt, material


Granny Jia


Princess Jia


Dancer

"Two things strike me about novelist Cao Xueqin's Dream of the Red Chamber *and have influenced my visual designs," says production designer Tim Yip. "If we trace the actual history of the Cao family, which also experienced its own heyday and demise, the family trade was in silk brocade. Clearly, looms are very important to these people, and you'll notice that my set design has strings suspending different panels that rise and fall during the opera. These strings are like threads that interweave, adding texture and depth. When back lighting is added, they create the idea of weaving 'dreams' and 'illusions.'"*

world? And that, too, is a very contemporary, universal concern.

SHENG: One of the things that our version makes plain—and this point has been almost entirely neglected by Redologists—is that Bao Yu and Dai Yu are the only two characters whose lives were pre-ordained. They don't realize it right away. They don't even live in the same house until Dai Yu's mother passes away. But still they were destined to find each other as soulmates.

The novel is known for being a one-stop guide to Chinese traditions, with highly detailed descriptions of daily life in the Qing dynasty. What were the most challenging details to put on stage today?

HWANG: Fortunately, most of the physical details fall into Stan's and Tim's departments. What's challenging from a libretto standpoint is that everything is stated in such an indirect fashion. For example, no one just comes out and says they love someone. Conveying this refinement of speech, while also making the story clear to a contemporary American audience, took some work. Bright would often give me notes that a passage I'd written was too baldly stated!

SHENG: There's a moment in the last scene in Act I where the princess, now the Emperor's favorite concubine, comes home with gifts from the Emperor. She has fans for both Bao Yu and Bao Chai, and they're obviously a pair. It's a clear message. Marriage back then was not decided by love but by social status, and now even the Emperor supports this union. It's a bombshell for Dai Yu, and the cliffhanger for the audience at the end of Act I. I didn't just want to illustrate it in the score with a gong or something, because that wouldn't be elegant. But I did add a stage direction: "Dai Yu collapses to her knees." The rest is Stan's job.

LAI: This is the kind of thing that any Chinese person would understand immediately, but we had to make sure Western audiences realized that the Emperor himself is playing matchmaker. Another example is in Act II, when Dai Yu burns her poetry while Bao Yu is lamenting that they won't be able to marry. Tim Yip and I had set that scene somewhere in the garden, but we weren't specific. So I decided to move Bao Yu to the same point where he'd spied on Dai Yu earlier as she was catching blossoms and burying them. Now we have Bao Yu recalling this scene in his aria at the same time Dai Yu is burning her poetry. This is one of the most famous scenes in the whole novel and an image that resonates very deeply in Chinese culture.

Ken Smith divides his time between New York and Hong Kong, where he is the Asian performing arts critic of the Financial Times. *A winner of the ASCAP/Deems Taylor Award for distinguished music writing, he is also the author of* Fate, Luck, Chance...The Making of *The Bonesetter's Daughter* Opera.