

A Memoir of Beijing Opera Performers: Cheng Yanqiu's Early Life and His Art*

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As one of the greatest masters of Dan¹ role performers in Beijing Opera history, Cheng Yanqiu had a very hard time in his childhood in learning the art. In this article, the author has reviewed his early life and probed into the help of Luo Yinggong who supported for his great success. The author has also explored the art of Cheng's singing, his study from Wang Yaoqing and explored how he created the melodies as well as trying to solve his making-up mystery.

Keywords: Beijing Opera performer, Dan role, Cheng's school art

ChengYanqiu's Life

Cheng Yanqiu, (1904-1958) was a famous Beijing Opera artist, a great master known as one of the four greatest masters for playing Dan, founder of Cheng school art. He was born in Beijing to be named as Chenglin, Manchu. Later he changed to a Han name as Cheng, first named as Junong and later changed into Yanqiu(艳秋), another name as Yushuang. In 1932 he changed his name into Yanqiu (砚秋).

He was born in 1904. His family declined in his childhood. At the age of six, he became a student of Rong Diexian²'s. And he learned martial art. As he looked very pretty after making up, he changed to learn Dan role. At the age of 11, he began to perform on stage.

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¹ Dan: 旦, it refers to the female roles in traditional Chinese Theater Art including Beijing Opera. In Qing (1636-1912) dynasty it was not allowed for girls to perform or to enter the theater. So it was all male performers on Beijing Opera stage.

² Rong Die Xian 荣蝶仙 (1893- ?) He was a Dan performer in his early period and later collected Cheng Yanqiu as his disciple. He left home in 1930 and he was missing then. It was Cheng Yanqiu who provided for his whole family.

His Childhood

Due to the family poverty, the six-year-old Cheng Yanqiu began to study from Rong Diexian (a male performer who played as Dan). As a disciple he had to sign a 8-year-contract with his master. For these 8 years, the Rong family provided accommodation and food but also collected all his income for his performances. For another two more years after the 8-year-contract, he should again work for Rong which means that his income should all be collected by his master.

His mother signed the contract and advised him that he should be prudent in talking and never took advantage of others especially in the respect of money. Cheng later said "I remembered these words all my life."

Cheng had a very hard time in learning. He was learning while being beaten. He did all the daily chores for Rong family, no different than a servant. Rong was very bad-tempered and let out his anger easily and beat him with a whip with no reason. Cheng cut the woods and made a fire, cooking and washing clothes, having very little time in learning art and sometimes learned nothing for the whole day.

At that time, Rong was wearing cotton socks. In the morning Cheng should give Rong's socks to him. As his hands were stained with dust or coal and in the winter sore with frosted cracks, he dared not directly give the socks to his master. So he put a piece of white cloth onto his hands and there put the socks before giving them to his master. Even so the beatings were still inevitable.

Eventually, his legs were injured with some big blood bumps by his master before the 8-year-contract was over. During his visit to Europe after he became famous, he had a surgery on his leg by a German doctor. In his own words, "The eight years of studying were the most miserable time in my childhood." So he promised at a very young age that he would never permit his future children to study Beijing Opera art.

For his miserable family background and for his gloomy personality, Cheng was very unhappy, with his eyes often looking downwards and frowning a lot. When he was growing, probably due to his malnutrition, he was always moody. So his master thought he was not fit for learning Huadan (Huadan is a role for playing young girls who are lively and cheerful and they move in an agile and quick way. Their performances focus on acting and recitation.) So the master sent him to study Qingyi. (Qingyi, also named as ZhengDan, a main role for Dan, for playing graceful and decent women, many times a virtuous wife and a mother, women of integrity and chastity. The performances of this role focus on singing and sedate movements.) Rong also found that the boy had an exceptionally good voice and after his making-up his appearance was very calm and clean, like a shining pearl contained in a jewel box.

Acquired the Recognition of Luo Yinggong³

Soon after Cheng began his debut on stage, he became famous and recognized by the famous celebrity Luo Yinggong. Luo wrote six poems after watching his performances. One of which was written as follows: "No

³ Luo Yinggong: 罗癭公 (1872-1924), a disciple of Kang Youwei (康有为)'s, modern poet and Beijing Opera playwright. Kang Youwei 康有为 (1858-1927), Chinese scholar, a leader of the Reform Movement of 1898 and a key figure in the intellectual development of modern China. During the last years of Qing Dynasty (1636-1912) and the early years of the Republic (1912-1949) he sought to promote Confucianism as an antidote against "moral degeneration" and indiscriminate Westernization.

Talent like him apart from Mei⁴, Cars and wagons from the Eastern City, Laughing myself what I was busy for the whole day, Just watching the art of Qiu and Mei.”

In 1917 Cheng was invited to perform in Shanghai with a monthly salary of 600 taels of silver. Rong Diexian certainly wanted him to go there. But it was strongly opposed by Luo Yinggong and Wang Yaoqing⁵. They held that Cheng had his voice lost for singing and had his voice “dao cang”, a Beijing Opera term meaning that his voice was lost earlier than it should be. They insisted that he should take a good rest now.

Luo wanted to pay Rong to stop Cheng's contract. But Rong was no fool. He believed that this disciple had a bright future and could bring him much more. So he refused Luo's suggestion. Luo, who really appreciated Cheng's talents, made a quick decision. He negotiated with Zhang Jiaao, vice president of Bank of China and borrowed 600 taels of silver from him to make up for the loss of 700 taels of silver of Rong Diexian's.

Rong Diexian, under this condition, had to annul the contract. So Cheng finished his studies with his master before the 8-year- contract was expired. On the way to pick him up Luo Yingguo composed verses such as: “Catkins rolled in the brilliant spring, Sending the handsome young man home” as the first two lines.

Cheng was born into a poor family, residing on Qiong Han Shi⁶ close to Tianqiao⁷. During his apprenticeship, his mother was looking forward to the end of his studies. Everyday she would either buy coal balls with a willow basket or burn joss sticks to prey in Guan Di Temple⁸ near Qianmen. No wonder as soon as he left Rong's home, Cheng sent a boy named as Xu to send a message to his mother. Xu said, “Mr. Luo has helped your son to finish his studies. From now on you will have a nicer life!” From then on his mother ended the days of preying to Buddha and stopped burning the joss sticks and seeing the hope. Then Luo Yinggong helped Cheng's family move away from DaShiwanchi Alley near Tianqiao and settle in a nicer home in No. 9 Bei Lucaoyuan. After gaining freedom, the ambitious young man followed Luo to study how to read and write and begin to do research on rhymes and music. So later Cheng not only mastered classics of literature and history but also became a good calligrapher. He was especially good at using the melodies of Beijing Opera. All these talents were nurtured by a literary figure and they are rarely seen among Beijing Opera performers.

Although with support of literary people, Cheng was not a success with his career while Mei Lanfang already was a great success at the time. In 1919, he followed Luo's advice and became a disciple of Mei's. For the night shows, Mei's performances were always put to the last piece. In this way Cheng had got the opportunities of performing beforehand or having a minor role as a fiery in Mei's shows. In the whole year after becoming

⁴ Mei: Here it refers to Mei Lanfang 梅兰芳 (1894-1961), famous Beijing Opera artist. His style of performance won such acclaim over the years that it came to be known as the “Mei Lanfang school.” He toured Japan, the United States, and former Soviet Union before 1949. He is one of the greatest artists in Chinese history. Qiu: Here it refers to Cheng Yanqiu.

⁵ Wang Yaoqing: 王瑶卿 (1881-1954) Beijing Opera Artist and educator. He had a reputation of Tong Tian Jiao Zhu 通天教主, which means he is a great authority of Beijing Opera and almost all of the famous Dan artists studied from him. Tong Tian Jiao Zhu 通天教主, a character from the legendary novel of “Creation of the Gods,” Feng Shen Yanyi, 《封神演义》, written by Xu Zhong Lin 许仲林 (1567-1620), translated into English by Gu Zhizhong 顾执中 (1898-1995). Tong Tian Jiao Zhu was very highly skilled in martial arts and would not die after going through many hardships.

⁶ Qiong Han Shi: 穷汉市, literally meaning Poor Man Market.

⁷ Tian Qiao: 天桥 It refers to the business zone in the southern part of old Peking city, where performers and entertainers gathered.

⁸ Guan Di Temple: 关帝庙 It refers to a temple in which people enshrine and worship Guan Yu 关羽, a famous general and hero in the period of Three Kingdoms. Guan Yu is the symbol of loyalty and filial piety in Chinese culture.

Mei's disciple, he had played in the pieces such as *Madam Shangyuan*⁹, *Tianhe Match*¹⁰, *Beating princess Jinzhi*¹¹ etc. Playing the minor roles means having the chance of observing and viewing, which very much enlightened him. He much envied the ancient costumes that Mei had created. In this year, Luo Yingong visited Nanjing and Shanghai in south China but he never forgot about Cheng's performances. He replied to Cheng as soon as possible and corrected his misspellings. He even sent him better writing papers when he replied.

Luo Yingong invited Xu Beihong¹², a young painter to paint for Cheng and he funded for him. With this money Luo bought the head decorates and costumes as well as rewriting a lot of new pieces of opera. In 1921 he also introduced him a teacher to teach him martial art. Luo Yingong thought that the essential steps and gestures onstage were closely connected with Chinese martial art. Learning martial art should benefit Cheng on his art. The later experiences of Cheng's life proved that martial art would not be confined to his stage art.

The Spring Festival of 1922 had a very special meaning for the 18-year-old young man Cheng Yanqiu. With Luo's elaborate arrangements, he became the leading actor of a company and his starring "*The Marriage With Princess Dragon*¹³", a newly-adapted piece of Beijing Opera made a hit in Beijing. His company was named as "*He Sheng She*¹⁴", entrusting his master Rong Diexian as the manager. The contented Rong, instead of being arrogant as his master, actively helped Luo to work well. The co-operation between the master and the disciple showed the broad-mindedness of Cheng Yanqiu. In the past the act of beating disciples was not only a habit in the industry of traditional Chinese theater art but also in the other industries. Cheng Yanqiu now would take it for granted. Someone made such comment on the great masters of Beijing Opera Dan roles: "Mei Lanfang was as pretty as a woman and Shang Xiaoyun¹⁵ was unconstrained like a young master from a rich family while Cheng Yanqiu was as modest as a scholar." Such descriptions showed that Cheng Yanqiu was nurtured by a famous master (referring to Luo Yingong) and his disposition became internalized.

From such descriptions, the young readers may conclude that Luo Yingong was a super fan for Cheng. But this term is not good enough to describe the two people's relationship. Luo was actually his strict teacher, adviser, path-finder, planner, play-wright and actual supporter. A great celebrity recognized a performer's potentials and helped him to grow into a real talent. We can see the dependable, touching and graceful relationship between a literary figure and a performer which portrayed more of an emotional attitude of traditional Chinese culture.

⁹ *Madam Shangyuan*: Shang Yuan Fu Ren 上元夫人. It is a Beijing Opera play telling a legendary story about a fiery, the little daughter of the Queen Mother of the Western Heavens, a figure in the myth.

¹⁰ *Tianhe Match*: Tian He Pei 天河配. It is a Beijing Opera play telling the legendary love story of Niu Lang 牛郎, the Herd boy and Zhi Nv 织女, the Weaving girl who can only meet once a year across the milky way on July 7th according to the lunar calendar. It is said on that day magpies will build up a bridge for them to meet.

¹¹ *Beating Princess Jinzhi*: Da Jinzhi 打金枝. It is a traditional theater art play telling the story of a princess named as Jin Zhi in Tang dynasty who refused to go to celebrate the birthday of her father-in-law's. Her husband beated her and she would ask for her father, the emperor's punishment for her husband. But her father-in-law, Guo Zi yi 郭子仪 (697-781) was a marshal having made great contributions to the state, so the emperor asked the queen, the mother of the princess to educate her.

¹² Xu Beihong: 徐悲鸿 (1895-1953) Modern Chinese painter and art educator.

¹³ *The Marriage With the King of the Sea*: Long Ma Yin Yuan 龙马姻缘. It is a Beijing Opera play, revised by Luo Yingong. It is a legendary story telling a man named as Ma Jun 马骏 who navigated to an island and married the daughter of the king of the Sea.

¹⁴ *He Sheng She* 和声社, means a company of harmonious voices. Fouded in 1922 and later was reformed into "Ming He She".

¹⁵ Shang Xiaoyun: 尚小云 (1900-1976) famous Beijing Opera artist, Dan performer. In 1927, Mei Lanfang, Cheng Yanqiu, Shang Xiaoyun and Xun Huisheng were elected as the "Si Da Ming Dan" 四大名旦 (meaning four greatest Masters of Dan Role performers of Beijing Opera) by Shun Tian Shi Bao 顺天时报, Shuntian Times, a newspaper in Peking city.

Cheng Yanqiu was a filially pious son to his mother. When he became a popular Juer¹⁶ visiting Shanghai and Wuhan, his income was above 10,000 yuan. He gave it all to his mother. Once his mother said, "Your third brother (Cheng Liqui¹⁷, performer of Beijing Opera) has not acted for a long time and he is living in difficulties now. Please give this money to him." With this Cheng Yanqiu had no complaints.

Another teacher of his was Wang Yaoqing, Tong Tian Jiao Zhu of Beijing Opera, to whom Cheng was also introduced by Luo Yinggong. It is said that Wang Yaoqing initially did not really think highly of Cheng Yanqiu but was later moved by his hard-working spirit. When Cheng stepped into GuMaoXuan, the residence of Wang Yaoqing's, Wang found that his voice was pretty in the early morning but after 8 p.m. he could not sing loudly. His voice was usually dry and narrow but after taking alcohol his voice became broad and bright. For such a differently gifted young man, Wang Yaoqing would not teach him in a normal way. So he made a special arrangement and requirement for Cheng including that he was permitted to practice only vocalizing in the morning and singing to the orchestra only after 10 p.m. Wang put it like, "Juer appeared on the scene after 9 p.m. If you cannot sing loudly then, how can you become Juer? You can only go on the stage in the kaichangxi¹⁸. So you must practice singing in the late night." After six months' practicing, Cheng had a voice loud enough to sing in the night.

As a tall man and being nervous Cheng shrank his upper body. As a new actor he had his left shoulder higher than his right one, looking really bad. Wang Yaoqing had pointed this out to him many times but he could not make a change. Once before he went on stage, Master Wang hid a ruler in his sleeve. At the moment Cheng was to go on the stage he took out the ruler and knocked hard onto Cheng's right shoulder. Cheng was astonished and ached. But this worked well. Since then he would never appear onstage with one shoulder higher than the other. Wang also created a kind of new singing, following an irregular way and forming a unique style. With a special voice and a special way of singing, suddenly Cheng was very different from others: His voice and his tunes were very special, illusory, high and low-pitched and unpredictable.

When he did research on melodies, Cheng would go to Wang Yaoqing's residence to pay a visit. He should go there in the mid-night as it was the best time for Mr. Wang to give lectures after taking opium and became high-spirited.

At that time Cheng was living in BeiLuCaoYuan. Ba Da Hutong¹⁹ (where gathered brothels) were right there located on the way to Wang's residence. Luo Yinggong told him to evade the area, "You should make a detour and go to the east end of Damashen Temple from Meishi Jie." He followed the advice and every day he would walk for half a kilo more. Wang Yaoqing sighed, "Among Dan performers, few are like him who abides all the codes." Cheng was becoming more and more popular.

¹⁶ Juer: 角兒, a respectful term in Beijing Opera referring to megastars in Beijing Opera.

¹⁷ Cheng Liqui: 程丽秋 (1902-1944) Beijing Opera performer. Cheng Yanqiu's elder brother.

¹⁸ Kaichangxi 开场戏 Beginning plays: The appearance of the performers is routinized for the routinized art of Beijing Opera. In the beginning plays for the night, usually it was the minor roles to appear. Important artists such as Juer appeared in the last two pieces of plays. The time for the appearance of the Juer can be very late.

¹⁹ Ba Da Hu Tong: 八大胡同, Eight Big Alleys. Here it refers to Da Shilan, Qianmen area where the brothels gathered before 1949.

His Marriage

In 1921 Mei Lanfang's first wife introduced to Cheng Yanqiu the first daughter of Guo Xianglin's,²⁰ to get engaged. At that time Cheng was only sixteen so he thought himself too young to get married. Then the engagement was postponed. The Guo family was not very satisfied either. As Cheng had several brothers, the Guo family assumed that he should move out before getting married. In February 1921 with the match-making of Luo Yinggong and the Mei family again, a marriage was finally made. As young people were not permitted to meet beforehand Luo Yinggong proposed that Cheng go to a studio where Guo's family picture was put on display. Cheng was satisfied with what he saw. But he married the second daughter instead of the first one. Why? In his own words, "the first daughter is less pretty than the second one". On March 27, 1921 they got engaged and on April 26, 1923 they held the wedding reception. Over 400 guests attended the ceremony. All Dan performers in Beijing except Shang Xiaoyun who went to Shanghai for his visiting tour of shows were present. The wedding reception was hosted by Mei Lanfang. It was reported by newspapers that the wedding reception was the most grandiose one since the performers began to hold their weddings. The congratulatory paintings amounted to 100 rolls. After marriage Luo Yinggong changed Guo Xiuying's name into Guo Suying.

Cheng Yanqiu had very light skin as most Dan performers and his teeth were glittering, fine and better than those of a woman's. He was often dressed in a gray suit, behaving gently like a scholar. Though not talking much, he was generous and never behaved womanish as some Dan performers. His wife was slender and simply dressed. The couple looked to be well-matched and had no look of working in the entertainment circle of Beijing Opera.

The Great Charms of Cheng's School

Mr. Qi Song²¹, a researcher of traditional Chinese Theater Art in Taiwan, claimed, "If you compare the loving of Mei Lanfang's art to taking opium, then you can compare the loving of Cheng Yanqiu's art to taking morphine. It is possible to kick the habit of taking opium but it is too hard to get rid of morphine. Eventually you can only sacrifice your life to it." This claim is like a joke but undeniably true. If you listen to Cheng's singing, you will get addicted to it. Then you listen to the others, you'll find it boring. That is why he had gained more and more audiences. Before he became famous he once had Mei Lanfang as his master, he was taken care of and got help from Mei. So in the field of Beijing Opera, there is such a saying: the nature of Cheng's melody actually is Mei's melody. Without tasting their arts it is not easy to perceive it. That's because it is not easy to make out Mei's melodies when Cheng was singing with his own voice and in his own way and thoroughly remoulding his own style.

Cheng's voice sounds soft and restraining, and his unique singing sounds very beautiful and marvelous. His acting in "Yu Tangchun"²² is very impressive. While his eyebrows looked as pretty as willows his phoenix-like

²⁰ Guo Xianglin 果湘林 (1881-1965): He was a Dan performer in his early years. When his second daughter Guo Suying 果素瑛 (1904-1986) married Cheng Yanqiu, he worked as the manager of Cheng's company for a short period.

²¹ Qi Song 齐崧 (1906-1986): He graduated from Peking University and University of Michigan. He is a theorist of Beijing Opera.

²² Yu Tangchun 玉堂春. It is a famous play of Beijing Opera. It tells an unjust case of a prostitute named as Yu Tangchun 玉堂春 or Su San 苏三 who was wronged by the wife of the man who bought her as his concubine.

eyes²³ had expressive glimpses. With a very fine voice, his singing was sometimes quick and sometimes slow. The high-pitched part was like floating cloud while the low-pitched part sounded like a flowing creek but both sounded amazing. His making up was also very special. When he was wearing a criminal's red dress onstage, with dark blue eye-shadows his face looked exceptionally pretty. He wanted to show the grievances in the unjust case instead of portraying it as a romance. In this way he portrayed Yu Tangchun in a more elegant way. At the first sight of his very tall stature, the audience was surprised to see such a big Dan. But they soon became attracted by his performances and forgot about his big size in stature. Instead, in their eyes he turned into a beautiful woman. Simple, free and elegant as his art was, Cheng was such a charming man.

As for his making up, it is still a mystery for today because he hated to be seen doing it except for his best friends. Only the make-up artist and his wife could enter his dressing-room freely. The audiences could tell that the most attractive part onto the stage was his eyes. Many people wondered how he painted his eyes. Someone would say that he used a brush with crushed carbon-crystal to paint his eyes and put on rouge later. His glimpses were as pure as lake water, all coming from the amazing drawing in black and red.

Conclusion

Mr. Cheng Yanqiu is one of the four greatest masters of Dan role performers in Beijing Opera. In this article the author had recalled his miserable childhood, portraying a vivid picture of how Beijing Opera artists were learning the art in the early 1910s and the 1920s. The author has also explored how Luo Yinggong had given his full support to Cheng Yanqiu in different aspects of art, thus contributing to Cheng's later great success. The author has also written about Cheng's wedding reception, showing the customs of late Qing and early Republic of China period. The latter part of the article probes into Cheng's singing and tries to solve his making-up mystery which are also of great importance to his charms as a great artist.

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²³ Phoenix-like eyes: It refers to the long pretty eyes with eye corners slightly slanting upwards. Such eyes can be either single-eyelids or double-eyelids but not small.