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The story so far

*– a representation of China's heritage
in music drama*

Ho Wai-On

Dr Ho Wai-On (surname Ho), aka Ann-Kay Lin, British Chinese.
ARU: PhD in Music & Performing Art; Cardiff: MA in Contemporary Music & Electronic/Computer Music; Royal Academy of Music: performer and graduate courses (ARAM LRAM ARCM GRSM); Stanford University: CCRMA Computer Music Workshop; Chinese University HK: Chinese & English language & literature.

Best known as a composer, and creator/director of cross-cultural combined arts projects. Works have been performed in the UK, HK, US and Europe. She has been using the Internet as a venue for her creative work. For more info see her website.

The story so far

Duration: 40 minutes

Music, costumes and direction: Ho Wai-On

Words: Stephen Webber and Ho Wai-On,
based on an idea by Ho Wai-On

First performance: October 24th 1991
Purcell Room, London
performed by Inter-Artes

(S. = Soprano, B. = Baritone, I. = Instrumentalists, C. = Conductor)

Spring and Autumn Period (722 – 403 B.C.)

- S. (*narrator*): Let us recall the time known as Spring and Autumn, about two thousand five hundred years ago, before the kingdoms of China were united:
- B. (*narrator*): Confucius was walking one day upon Mount Tai, when he found a woman weeping bitterly by a graveside.
- S. (*the woman, kneels down, and mimes weeping*): Naah, aaah ...
- B. (*Confucius, to the woman, with concern*): Thou hast suffered sorrow too hard to bear?
- S. (*woman*): Aye. My father-in-law was killed by a tiger,
- I. (*Confucius' disciples*): Aah-eye-cc!
- S. (*woman*): then my husband was taken by another,
- I. (*disciples*): Aah-eye-cc!
- S. (*woman*): and now my son also, has been eaten by one.
- B. (*Confucius, moved by her grief*): Why then, dost thou not leave this land?
- I. (*disciples*): Why? Why-cc?
- S. (*woman*): Despite my grief, despite that I now belong to none, despite that I now am none, in this land I am free from tyranny, I am free despite my tears.
- I. (*disciples*): Aye-cc.
- B. (*Confucius, philosophically*): 'Tis true!
- I. (*disciples*): Aye-cc.
- B. (*Confucius*): Tigers are less terrible than tyrannies.
- I. (*disciples*): Aye-cc, I am free, to hear, to think, to act, to be.

The Chin dynasty (221 – 297 B.C.)

- S. (*narrator*): After many years of warring between the many kingdoms,
- B. (*narrator*): about two thousand two hundred years ago, China is united under the kingdom of Chin:
- I. (*people*): Behold, the first emperor of China!
- S. (*commentator*): Heed the commands of the first emperor and wonder at his works.
- B. (*the first emperor*): One system of measurement to unite us!
- I. (*people*): Aye, aye.
- B. (*emperor*): On system of writing Chinese characters to unite us!
- I. (*people*): Aye, aye.
- B. (*emperor*): All weapons are forbidden! Civilians cannot revolt!
- S. (*commentator*): See the twelve colossi in the capital, cast from our swords.
- B. (*emperor*): Build roads for me to inspect my vast empire!
- S. (*commentator*): But count not the pain entailed.
- B. (*emperor*): Build me fabulous palaces imprisoning thousands of women I never summon.

- S. (*commentator*): But count not the pain entailed.
- B. (*emperor*): Build the Great Wall to protect and unite us.
- S. (*commentator*): But count not the pain entailed.
- B. (*emperor*): These books shall be consumed by flames.
- S. (*commentator*): No longer may we think for ourselves.
- B. (*emperor*): Bury these scholars alive! Those who disobey must die!
- S. (*commentator*): They were buried alive, together with our minds.
- B. (*emperor*): My dream — long live mighty Chin!
- S. (*commentator*): The first emperor's dream, which lasted a bare decade and a half, crumbles the moment he dies.

The Han dynasty (202 B.C. – 220 A.D.)

- S. (*story teller*): The mighty Chin, lost in a massive upsurge of rebellion, is overthrown,
- B. (*story teller*): and a commoner becomes the emperor of the following Han dynasty.

–music–

- S. (*story teller*): About two thousand years ago,
- B. (*Confucius' spirit, mournfully*): Confucius' words, to help kings as well as common man, were falsely used to help sustain the dynasty of Han.
- S. (*story teller*): About one thousand eight hundred years ago:
- B. (*gossiper*): Bao Xuan, the scholar, is arrested on a trumped-up charge for opposing the abuse of official power.
- S. (*gossiper*): A student named Wang Xian raises a banner outside the imperial academy.
- B. (*Wang Xian*): Those who wish to save Bao Xuan, rally here!
- I. (*students*): Rally here! Rally here!
- S. (*gossiper*): A thousand fellows surge to his support.
- B. (*gossiper*): The emperor commutes Bao Xuan's death sentence to exile.
- S. and B. (*commentators*): Ancient China sometimes listens to her people.

The Tang dynasty (618 – 907 A.D.)

- B. (*story teller*): And in the following Tang dynasty, about one thousand three hundred years ago, the listening does not stop, and sometimes ancient China even listens to her women:
- S. (*chinese woman, full of life*): My dress cut low, my charms displayed. I take pride in my healthy body and am unafraid.
- B. (*chinese man, with astonishment*): A woman scholar attends the court and is allowed to be the judge of men's ability!

- S. (*the woman scholar, confidently*): No matter how my form is decked, my mind commands mankind's respect.
- B. (*chinese man, disgusted*): China has her one and only female emperor.
- S. (*Emperor Wu*): To rule, one must be strong and able, to survive, be strong.
 I proclaim the dynasty of Chow, and myself, Emperor. I, a woman, openly sit on the throne as China's absolute ruler.
 No matter that I, Emperor Wu, am an able ruler, less lustful and less unnecessarily cruel than most of China's male emperors, I am forever called murderess and whore.
- B. (*chinese man*): Some brothers do admire her abilities and renown. Those who do not, cannot strike our female monarch down.
- S. (*Emperor Wu*): Yet with my death comes the revival of Tang, and a retrograde step for a woman's role.

The Sung dynasty (960 – 1279 A.D.)

- S. (*chinese woman*): And with the following Sung dynasty, about one thousand years ago, a woman is no longer heard:
- B. (*chinese man*): I am bound by the four corners of the Earth.
- S. (*chinese woman*): I am bound by four walls.
- B. (*chinese man*): I take which woman I please, and my stock is enhanced.
- S. (*chinese woman*): I give my life to but one man, or my virtue is lost.
- B. (*chinese man*): I am learned and consort with whom I choose.
- S. (*chinese woman*): I am illiterate and confined with women and children, as are my sisters of the Spring and Autumn period; I am once more not supposed to have talents. I am subservient to my father, to my husband, and to my son.
- B. (*chinese man*): You, who are fair, be fair! To your beauty, I grant all due. In privacy I kneel to you.
- S. (*chinese woman*): I get what I want from you if I care to practise feminine wiles.
- B. (*chinese man*): It's all right as long as you control me from a position of weakness.

The dynasties of Yuan, Ming and Ching (1279 – 1911 A.D.)

- B. (*story teller*): Then followed Yuan, Ming and Ching,
- S. (*story teller*): That is from about seven hundred years to eighty years ago. Yuan, Ming and Ching!
- B. (*playfully*): And force begat fear begat fear begat force!

—music—

- B., S., I. and C. (*chorus*): Yuan!
- B. (*chief character*): Break!
- S. (*chief character*): Take!

B.: Flay!
S.: Obey!
B.: My will!
S.: I will!
B.: Rule here!
S.: You fear!
B.: Son rules!
S.: All fools!
B., S., I. and C. (*chorus*): Each day, all pay!

-music-

B., S., I. and C. (*chorus*): Ming!
B. (*chief character*): Break!
S. (*chief character*): Take!
B.: Flay!
S.: Obey!
B.: My will!
S.: I kill!
B.: Rule here!
S.: You fear!
B.: Son rules!
S.: All fools!
B., S., I. and C. (*chorus*): Each day, all pay!

-music-

B., S., I. and C. (*chorus*): Ching!
B. (*chief character*): Break!
S. (*chief character*): Take!
B.: Flay!
S.: Obey!
B.: My will!
S.: I kill!
B.: Rule here!
S.: You fear!
B.: Son rules!
S.: All fools!
B., S., I. and C. (*chorus*): Each day, all pay!

The game we play

- S. (*playfully*): From dynasty, to dynasty, to dynasty.
- B., S., I. and C. (*chorus*): Each day, all play!
- B.: You scratch
- S.: my back,
- B.: I scratch
- S.: yours!
- B., S., I. and C. (*chorus*): Each day, All play!
- B.: Never break unwritten laws
- S.: never break those written, too —
- B.: unless it will do good for you.
- S. I. and C.: Each day, all play!
- S.: A gentleman adapts himself to circumstances – please accept this little present (hmm
ch, bribe),
- S., B., I. and C.: Each day, all play!
- B.: Sail with the wind – why should living not be pleasant?
- I. and C.: Each day, all play!
- S.: Pay the piper, call the tune, silver surpresses idle talk,
- B.: silver buys a man the moon.
- I. and C.: Each day, all play!

Lets hear the words of Bao Jingyan

- S.: The words, from about seventeen hundred years ago, of Bao Jingyan:
- B. (*Bao Jingyan*): Where one must rule another must obey, and evil increases day by day.
- S. (*echo*): Each day, all play! Each day, all pay!
- B. (*Bao Jingyan*): The ruler's hall imprisons him in fear, and apprehension increases year
by year.
- S. (*echo*): Each day, all play! Each day, all pay!
- B. (*Bao Jingyan*): To surpress by means of moral code, shackled limb and blood – as with
one's palm to dam the people's flood ...

Let's hear the cage birds' song

Baritone (to the audience): That was THEN! Do you know, even Confucius' words are seldom heard after the Ching dynasty? But NOW, let's hear the Cage Birds' songs.

*-Alto flute and alto saxophone leave their seats and move on stage
freely as if playing in a pop concert-*

S. (*cabaret entertainer*): Ladies and gentlemen, the *crude song*:

B. (*cage bird*): Democracy,

S. (*cage bird*): freedom and democracy.

B.: I want to escape to the land of democracy.

S.: There, I shall have plenty

B.: There, I shall have plenty of money.

S.: Democracy!

B.: Freedom and democracy!

S.: There, I shall have idleness,

B.: There, I shall have idleness and a taste of promiscuity.

B. (*cabaret entertainer*): Ladies and gentlemen, the *Popular song*:

B. and S. (*cage birds*): Silver buys a man the moon!

B.: Give me the moonlight.

S.: Give me the fun.

B.: Give loads of money to numero one.

S.: Give me the singin'.

B.: Give me the wine. Give me the wimmen so life'll be fine.

S.: Give me the pleasure, give me the vote.

B.: Give me the chance to just jump on the boat.

S.: Give me the leisure, give me the best.

B. and S.: Give me the credit, for I'm goin' West.

-pause-

S. (*an individual*): And what about the pure and sincere?

B. (*cabaret entertainer, looks around as if alarmed*): Hush! Hush!

I. and C. (*the discontented, look at S. and B.*): Come out and look! It is a jungle anyway!

-Flute and saxophone return to their seats-

The Curious robe

-Baritone puts on a tattered robe of splendid material-

- S. (*an individual*): What is that you are wearing?
- B. (*China personified, proudly*): I am wearing the robe of past splendours.
- S.: How can you wear it with pride?
- B.: I rejoice in my people and their past. In their achievement.
- S.: In their pain?
- B.: In their culture.
- S.: In their vanity?
- B.: In their conquest.
- S.: In their cruelty?
- B.: I rejoice – and wear my robe with pride.
- S.: But how can I ignore the ugliness that clings to your past? Your robe is in tatters. It pains me so because of its magnificence.
- B.: I rejoice in my people and their present. In their power.
- S.: In their oppression?
- B.: In their determination,
- S.: In their corruption?
- B.: In their future splendours,
- S.: In their greed?
- B. (*pigheadedly*): I rejoice – and wear my robe ...
- general pause-*
- S.: Will the future mend the splendours of your robe?
- B. (*pause, as if questioning, then*): I AM! I GROW! This way I may go – or that: How may I know?
- S., I., and C. (*look at B., then look at audience, then speak to each other, not simultaneously*): How may we know?
- All (*stand up, look at the audience, then speak together*): The story so far.

-Bow to the audience together-