

# CURTAIN CALL

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ROBIN HALLER  
ENGLISH AUDIENCE MEMBER



PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

The first staging of Kunqu Opera at the Shaw Theater of London leaves British audiences singing the genre's praises. **Mu Qian** reports.

China's Kunqu Opera was recently performed for the first time at the Shaw Theater of London — and to great acclaim.

The theater, named after Irish playwright George Bernard Shaw, hosted two performances of the genre as part of the Beijing Culture Week in London. The Northern Kunqu Opera Theater staged *A Dream of Red Mansions* on July 24 and *The New Legend of Pipa* on July 25.

These works aren't the genre's best known, but the troupe's vice-president Cao Ying believes they represent important aspects of Kunqu Opera.

*A Dream of Red Mansions*, which is based on the namesake classical novel, is an original work that made its debut last year. *The New Legend of Pipa* is a recently revived work that hadn't been performed for 300 years. Its playwright, Cao Yin (1658-1712), was the grandfather of *A Dream of Red Mansions'* author, Cao Xueqin (1724-1763).

"Kunqu is regarded as the 'origin of a hundred operas' in China," Cao Ying says.

"It has a history of 600 years and has influenced not only many styles of Chinese opera but also Chinese literature, music and art."

In the novel *A Dream of Red Mansions* — one of China's "Four Great Classical Novels" — there are 26 depictions of Kunqu, the best-known one of which is when heroine Lin Daiyu is enchanted by 12 girls singing Kunqu in the 23rd chapter.

However, there was never a Kunqu adaptation of *A Dream of Red Mansions*, except for some excerpts,

until the Northern Kunqu Opera Theater premiered their version last year.

Written in the middle of the 18th century, *A Dream of Red Mansions* tells about the rise and decay of a noble family and, by extension, of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911). The best-known plotline of the work is the tragic love story between hero Jia Baoyu and heroine Lin Daiyu, who are forced apart by Jia's family, Romeo and Juliet-style.

"*A Dream of Red Mansions* is a great work that covers various dimensions of feudal China, including the political, social and cultural — and even medicine and food. It's a great challenge for us to put it onstage," the work's general director Cao Qijing says.

Traditionally, there was no director in Kunqu Opera, and the leading actors and actresses decided the form of presentation. But today's directors are getting more involved in traditional Chinese operas.

"I think this is something natural as arts become more multidimensional, although I have a principle of not changing the original aesthetics of the ancient art of Kunqu Opera," Cao Qijing says.

"My approach is 'limited innovation.'"

One thing Cao Qijing does innovate upon is the inclusion of such Western instruments as the violin, viola, cello and harp to the accompanying Chinese orchestra.

"I feel these instruments will add to the expressiveness of the original Chinese instruments, and can help convey the rich emotions of the work more vividly," she says.

The new orchestration went over well with some English audience members. Robin Haller, a 33-year-old Londoner, believes the music was the most successful part of *A Dream of Red Mansions*.

"In a way, it was the music that reached out to a Western listener, and it made a better bridge between the traditional Chinese music and what we, as European audiences, expected to hear in an opera," Haller says.

"In a way, the composer has done the most ... in reaching out to the Western audience."

Haller was also impressed by the English subtitles that ran during the performances.

"The translator did a good job. I could more or less follow what was going on onstage, although I have never read the original novel," he says.

"As long as there is good translation, there are not really cultural barriers that prevent one from appreciating Kunqu Opera."

The cast of *A Dream of Red Mansions* comprises not only award-winning actors and actresses from the Northern Kunqu Opera Theater but also performers, who auditioned, from Kunqu companies in Shanghai and Jiangsu province.

When adapted to other forms of Chinese operas, some paralleled plots from the novel were given lineal narration. But the Kunqu version has some plots run simultaneously onstage — for example, that of Lin burning her scripts and Jia's wedding.

*The New Legend of Pipa*, which the Northern Kunqu Opera Theater recently revived after a script

was found in the National Library of China, is closer to Kunqu Opera's traditional form.

The work tells about Cai Wenji, a Han Dynasty (206 BC-AD 220) woman poet and composer, who was taken prisoner by the Xiongnu nomads and became a chieftain's wife but eventually returned home.

Wei Chunrong, who played Wang Xifeng in *A Dream of Red Mansions* and Cai Wenji in *The New Legend of Pipa*, says it's a great honor for her to perform in London just before the 2012 Olympic Games.

"Kunqu Opera is an ancient art of China that reflects the lives of Chinese people in the past, but it's understandable to today's audiences from all over the world because people's sensitivity to art and emotions are similar," she says.

Kunqu Opera dominated Chinese theater from the 16th to the 18th centuries and has influenced many other Chinese theater forms, including Peking Opera. In 2001, UNESCO listed Kunqu Opera among the Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity.

Wei says she belongs to a generation of Kunqu Opera singers who are responsible for both inheriting the tradition and developing the old art.

"I hope I will have an opportunity to exchange and collaborate with UK theater workers next time," she says.

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## A long tricycle ride to pick up garbage

By CECILY LIU

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Chen Guanming, 57, is celebrating the Olympics in London's iconic Chinatown on a tricycle — the very same one he traveled on continuously for almost two years from Shanghai to London.

"I want to support the Olympics, so I came here," he said.

Wearing a T-shirt on which his name and the Olympic rings are printed, the white-haired farmer from Jiangsu province looks fit and energetic.

On his tricycle are a Chinese flag, an English flag and a curtain displaying photos of his expedition across 16 countries.

A keen environmental advocate, Chen said he will stay outside the Olympic Stadium to pick up trash for the duration of the Games, just like he did in Beijing four years ago. "I want to contribute to the Olympics in my own small way," he said.

Sharing Chen's excitement for the Olympics on the day of the opening ceremony were around 600,000 Chinese people in the UK.

Inside Chinatown, scores of Chinese and British flags hanging high in the air across the narrow

streets create a festive atmosphere. Large banners of the Olympic logo, and slogans like "celebrating the Games" and "inspire a generation" also hung on lampposts.

Ma Feng, 21, a digital music student at Queen Mary, University of London, said he is looking forward to watching the opening ceremony after he finishes his part-time work in a Chinatown restaurant during the day.

"For me, British music is amazing, and I look forward to hearing British music at various Olympic venues," he said, adding that he particularly looks forward to hearing classic tracks from David Bowie, the Arctic Monkeys and the Sex Pistols.

The Olympics will be a chance for Britain to showcase its best music, which includes five songs written especially for the event by rock trio Muse, Elton John vs Pnau, Delphi, the Chemical Brothers and London rapper Dizzee Rascal. A music library of 2,012 songs built around five themes — energy, primetime, extreme, heritage and world stage — will be used as background music during the Games.

Many Chinese will be able to watch the Games inside dedicated Olympics venues, including the newly built Olympic Stadium, the Aquatics Centre and the Velodrome.

One of them is Wang Lei, 34, a teacher in London. She will be watching basketball and archery with a group of friends, many of whom are from China.

"I'm normally not a fan of sports, but I see this opportunity as a fun day out with friends," she said. She said that the Chinese flags that her friends brought with them remind her of the last Olympics in Beijing.

"The Chinese people in London are so excited, because we still remember when the world came to see Beijing four years ago," she said.

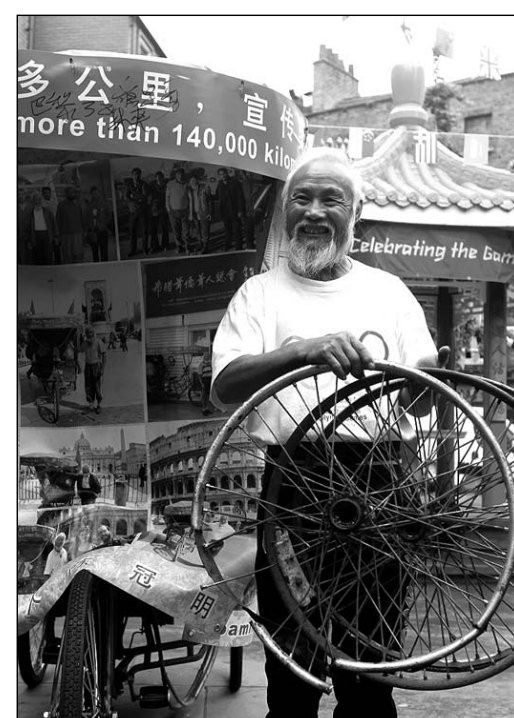
Poh-San Wan, 23, a second-generation Chinese immigrant, is also looking forward to watching the Olympics live for the first time in her life.

She entered Britain's ticket-bidding process for tennis, swimming and women's soccer, and won two tickets for women's soccer, which she will be watching with her older brother.

"My brother has always wanted to see Wembley Stadium, where basketball takes place, so I'm very happy to get the tickets," she said.

Earlier this March, Wan and her brother also won tickets to see the track and field trials at the Olympics Stadium, which she loved.

"The atmosphere was great, and the stadium looked so big. We sat on the very last row, so we got a full view of it," she said.



CECILY LIU / CHINA DAILY

Chinese Olympics enthusiast Chen Guanming shows off his used tricycle tires in London after he trekked across 16 countries to celebrate the Games. As he did in Beijing in 2008, Chen will pick up trash outside the Olympic Stadium.