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– Jennifer Scappettone

Ghost Village: An Opera in Three Acts
 Libretto: Judith T. Zeitlin
 Composer: Yao Chen
 Story adapted from "Gong-sun Jiu-niang,"
 a tale from Liaozhai's *Records of the Strange* by Pu Songling (1640-1715)

DRAFT 1
Act One, Scene 1, Opening Chorus

GHOSTS:

Like bats we surface at twilight
 Glimmering like glowworms
 In the hour when you can't tell dog from wolf

Five long years since the Yu Qi rebellion was quelled,
 Five long years since they rounded us up
 Young and old, rich and poor alike.
 Five long years since we were sentenced to death,
 On the military parade grounds here in Ji-nan,
 Far from our homes in the eastern counties
 of Qi-xia and Lai-yang.

On a single day, hundreds of us were slaughtered,
 And the earth ran with our emerald blood,
 The emerald blood of the martyred,
 Grass-green beneath the earth.
 So many of us, the stacks of bones stretched to the sky
 So many of us, the coffin makers ran out of wood
 and they laid us poor souls in unmarked graves
 on the far outskirts of town
 beyond the city wall.
 Only five years,
 But who remembers us now?

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Pennies from Nellor: A Chorus

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DRAFT 10

Act One, Scene 1, Opening Chorus

GHOSTS: (*whispering*)

We died unjustly! We died unjustly!
(*singing*)

Green hills glower
and blacken.

Blasts of bitter wind.
We come out at twilight.

On a single day, we died en masse.
Qing axes struck us down.

How dearly we paid for Yu's Revolt!
The ground ran with our blood,
emerald blood of the innocent,
grass-green beneath the earth.

Only five years ago.
Who remembers us now?

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DRAFT 11

Act One, Scene 1, Opening Chorus

GHOSTS (*whispering*):

Unjustly! Unjustly!
(*singing*)

Green hills glower
and blacken.

Blasts of bitter wind.

Death! Death!
The earth ran dark
With emerald blood
Innocent blood
Grass-green beneath the earth.

A single day, a single day.
We died.
Unjustly.

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DRAFT 15

Act One, Scene 1, Opening Chorus

GHOSTS (*whispering*)

Unjustly! Unjustly!

(*singing*)

Green hills glower.

Bitter winds blow.

Qing axes mowed us down.

We paid dear for Yu's Revolt!

Blood, innocent blood, emerald blood

Soaked the earth,

Blazed grass-green beneath the earth.

We died, unjustly.

Who remembers us?

In 2016, literary historian
composer Yao Chen began
in the European tradition
ghost story. As is customary
began working on the libretto,
adapted by Zeitlin from her
before Yao Chen began composing
of their collaborative work together
as demontage of the piece as a
of the libretto and the music. The
conversation-to-stages, where the
working process and the challenges
genres, and words, particularly those

**REFLECTIONS ON
GHOST VILLAGE**

a conversation

with **Judith Zeitlin**
Majel Connerly
and **Yao Chen**

Judith Zeitlin and
working to create an opera
based on a Classical Chinese
with my opera, the pair first
which was to be written and
English translation of the story
the score. During the process
they enlisted Majel Connerly
kind of bridge between the work
following is a cross-continental
three collaborators talk about their
of translating between traditions,
of the living and the dead.

¹² From the beginning one of the key struggles for you, Judith, in writing the libretto was the ethical imperative to ground the opera historically. Could you talk a little about this issue as it relates to *Ghost Village*?

¹³ There was a moment that was very important to me in working with Yao Chen on this opera. The story the libretto is based on is a story by a very famous Chinese writer named Pu Songling and at one point, Yao Chen said to me: "You have to understand, you are not writing an opera by Pu Songling. You are writing an opera by Judith Zeitlin."

And that was really important because I had to set aside a lot of the original story, even elements I had published in my book *The Phantom Heroine*, where I talked extensively about the historical record that led to Pu Songling's story. I even had to put aside some parts of my interpretation that I liked best—certain very concrete historical details that just had no place in the opera, that were too complicated or just didn't add enough to make it worthwhile.

So in the end I kept just the general contours of the historical event. It's about a government crackdown on a rebellion in which all these innocent victims get caught up in the dragnet and executed, or arrested, or commit suicide, and many more lives are destroyed. That general situation—innocent people being destroyed by historical events they have no control over—is unfortunately still very much with us. So when you mention an ethical imperative, yes, I do feel that ultimately the ghost story is a way for

survivors somehow to commemorate these victims while at the same time recognizing that despite their best efforts, those survivors can't provide the relief or amelioration to the ghosts, to the dead, that they want to give.

¹⁴ That general situation is really at the core of the opera. It has to be there and it has to be rooted in history for it to have real power. I don't know if that makes sense.

¹⁵ Yes, of course, and this brings up another issue related to genre that I remember being a point of some confusion that had to be gradually worked out. In the early drafts, the libretto veered into territory I would have called very *opera buffa*, and which really gave me pause.

I think for you and Yao Chen, given your much richer sense of what's possible in the context of a Chinese ghost story, there was a feeling that, look, this is a much more flexible genre that can easily and naturally go in a funny direction. But at the same time, because the opera was destined for a primarily Western audience, at least at this stage, you wanted to take my generic Western reactions into account. How did you resolve this balancing act?

¹⁶ Firstly, Yao Chen always felt that it was very important to have you on board, partly as a kind of barometer for our audience. And it was always fascinating to see your confusion at various points. Yao Chen and I really went back and forth about pushing things in a more comedic or grotesque direction. I wanted to, and he didn't. And the story pushes in both directions: there is some banter and some

real humor in it, but it's also one of the sadder stories in the collection. It carried the risk of being a really unremitting opera, just doom and gloom the whole way through. There'd be no way to build it if it's always so subdued.

That's why I also wanted some spectacle, even though we have a very small cast. In Act Two, there's a marriage between two ghosts in the underworld—the living male protagonist is invited to attend the wedding and that's where he meets the ghost woman he falls in love with. This underworld is simply pictured as a village, hence the opera's title. But from the very beginning, I was very wedded (no pun intended) to showing this scene. Yao Chen and I really worked on finding the right tone for that ghost wedding. I'm pretty happy with how it has come out—sort of beautiful and eerie and festive, not like a horror movie, nothing too Halloween-y or too comic.

MC This is an interesting scene, because the issue of historical record we started out talking about begins to blur here into a parallel story of bilingual accommodation. On top of figuring out how to transmit crucial historical information to a Western audience, you also faced the very difficult problem of helping a Western audience simply to understand what was even being represented. I'm sure you remember, for instance, that moment when you completed an initial draft of what you imagined to be the wedding ceremony—two dead characters getting married. I just assumed you were drawing on some actual wedding ceremony from Chinese history. But your response was basically, "Oh, I just made that up!"

42 Yes, I decided, okay, the opera is set during the Qing Dynasty, during the 17th century, so I'll go look at normative Chinese marriage ritual from the 17th century and see what I find. It turns out that the wedding ceremony itself was not elaborate, and there are earlier steps to the ritual, like betrothal, that we certainly couldn't show. And I realized, well, maybe historical scholarship about weddings isn't a very good source. So in the current version, I pulled out a couple lines from an actual betrothal ceremony in a famous late 16th-century play, *The Peony Pavilion*.

Then I looked into the idea of an actual ghost wedding. Posthumous marriage, or afterlife marriage, is a topic I've worked on elsewhere in my research on Chinese literature. There's this practice of families trying to marry a son or daughter who died young to a spouse in the afterlife. There are different reasons for it, but some of those marriages were just intended to alleviate the loneliness of the dead.

We have a lot of interesting evidence from dynastic histories and excavated texts. Can you believe that in a hidden library from the 8th or 9th century, we found model letters for parents to send to their children in the afterlife announcing the betrothal? Most of this is pretty esoteric, but it was clearly an influence on ghost stories and Vice-versa. So I looked into one particular secret ritual handbook from the 12th to 14th century that includes a section on spirit marriage to see if that would give me some inspiration for the ghost wedding scene—which it did.

MC This reminds me of how, in some of our conversations, you've had to push against my own allergy to formal conventions in opera. My scholarship on opera revolves largely around operas that break rules. So part of our process was you hearing my resistance, my feeling that you needed to do something exceptional, outlandish, weird and unconventional, but still saying "I want spectacle here, because that seems quintessentially operatic. And shouldn't there be a big crowd scene?" Or, "I want a drinking song here which is quintessentially operatic, but I embrace that."

42 I thought you might raise this. I have a somewhat different view of your role. *Thought* you would be like you just described, but actually, you also pushed really hard on the story and on logic in the story. I had cut out the drinking song and you said, "Well, don't you want to put the drinking song back? Or don't you need a wedding ceremony here?" When I look over your comments on my drafts, you're always saying "This isn't really very plausible." You're often even giving me a kind of naturalistic reaction. "He's met his dead friend for the first time—how could he immediately accept this? He can't just say hello and go on with it; he has to like register some sort of shock."

Yao Chen himself is very unconventional. He's lyrical, he's not going to sly away from melody or direct emotion, but he also wants some really interesting stuff to work with. So I think your multiple impulses as a dramaturge have been really useful in this regard.

MC This is actually a really interesting topic. I know one of the things that you've had to tackle, and that you perhaps hadn't quite anticipated, is how much of a dramatist a librettist really is—you're not just supplying words, you're supplying the kernel of the opera as a drama, as an enactment of compelling human interaction. And that drama has to do all the things a good story does: establish a pace that's not too fast or too slow, and give just enough information at all times so that the audience can follow what's going on. How would you describe your process of learning how to dramatize?

42 I think you're right. Originally, I thought writing a libretto meant going to write a poem or something that it would be basically just like writing lyrics. That's why it was so important to write the synopsis first. I didn't expect to spend months working on the synopsis. But it was so crucial because we needed the story.

The thing I found really hard and that I am still struggling with is the issue of character, which is so crucial to drama. Of course, the music and all kinds of other elements can flesh out the character. But in the original story material that I'm working with, the characters are closer to Chinese dramatic types rather than full-fledged characters. In the original Pu Songling story, the central character, the protagonist, doesn't even have a name. We basically know nothing about him; he's simply an agent, a witness, a catalyst for making things happen. He gets sucked into things, he's really very passive. In making him one of three principal characters in an opera, I actually had to figure out who he was. That was intensely challenging, and I'm still working on it.

MC It's also difficult to make the straight man complicated, which is the challenge of writing your central character. You had to complicate him in some ways, in order to allow him to rise to the level of conflict and sophistication of the other characters to make him worthy of playing on the same field as them.

Actually, Judith, I want to ask you about the final scene in the opera, because to me, your original concept for the final scene was the whole selling point. Like, if we had been pitching this in a film context, that scene would have been the closer. Primarily, I liked it because it seems to upset our expectation of how an opera of this kind ought to end—in other words, tragically, as it does in the Ophelias myth. There Eurycleia is quiet, in fact, we hear nothing from her at all, she just disappears, goes back to what she was doing before, and is never again given a voice. But what if Eurycleia actually did come back, what if she returned and basically said to Ophelias, "You asshole. How could you have fucked this up so badly?"

You provide the Eurycleia in your story with a loud and angry voice, that's the certain closer. And I found her return, her expression of anger and upset and betrayal to be just an amazing and inspired way of ending the opera. I don't recognize this move generically, and that's what feels cool about it.

But then there was the whole problem of "How do we actually put that on stage?" I actually don't know how you and Yao Chen decided to end the opera. Where did the

inspiration for the ending come from, and how might it eventually get translated into stagecraft?

42 This really is what makes the original story so compelling. The collection that Pu Songling wrote contains something like 500 stories, but this one completely stands out because of that ending. Most of his stories, believe it or not, even his ghost stories, have happy endings. But this one ends in such a jagged way. It's why I chose it. I was always so happy that you loved this ending, because the abruptness of the ending is what makes the whole story.

We're still working on this ending. In the original story, the living protagonist and his ghost lover—the Eurycleia-like character—meet again, this time in the graveyard as opposed to the ghost world, and she refuses to recognize him. She simply gives him a look of total hatred. She says no actual words. That's the most hurtful part of it.

What then happens is there's a complete breakdown of communication between man and ghost; one of the most interesting features of Chinese ghost stories is how permeable the membrane between this world and the other world is, and how open they remain to communication. I remember you were quite startled by this when I first described the story to you.

That communication needs to be there in the story's first part to prepare for the breakdown of the communication at the end. But then how do you show that breakdown? It's an opera, of course, so the ghost has to make sounds. But what kind of sounds? This is the one place Yao Chen is thinking we'll bring in the craft of Chinese *Kuan* opera singing, as a way of registering a shift from intelligible language to unintelligible language. But probably even there, the *Kuan* opera singer wouldn't sing in Chinese, but in meaningless syllables.

MC I think it's such an inspired idea. And on a higher level, I also like how you bring a conceptual question—the question of translation, and the inevitability of mistranslation—to the fore here. It's a theme that haunts the entire opera. But at the end, you literalize mistranslation, not just in the encounter of the two protagonists—your hero, Dan, can no longer understand his bride Ling—but also in the encounter between Dan and the audience. So even as the thematic kernel of communication-breakdown is realized between the two characters inside the opera, another kind of connection is fostered between the world of the opera and the world outside it. We and Dan are both left in the same position: outside the ghost world.

This avoids what I think would be the expected ending: a "conventional" tragic outcome where, say, the couple are still united

in spirit but not in body. Instead there is a total breakdown of communication. But this split between the couple then allows us to unite with Dan—a final act of passion with him. It's very beautiful and elegant.

42 You are really summarizing these points so wonderfully. Thank you, Majel. Yao Chen, I want to bring you into the conversation here. I know you haven't actually started writing any of the music for *Ghost Village* yet, but of course you've been thinking intently about it for a long time. How has your thinking of the music, your image of it, changed over the course of our collaboration, from the very beginnings when we first came up with the project to where you are now, soon to start actually composing? Can you tell us about some specific milestones or inspirations, or dead ends, along the way?

YC In general, I don't really know how the music for an opera will unfold until I know more about the story and see more lines of the libretto. Opera music writing is very story-based. At the very beginning of the project, after we chose the story of *Ghost Village* (*Gongsun Jiantang*), I of course had some ideas about the basic soundscape—how I could portray the atmosphere here and there, how I could expand the soundscape from one point to another. But these ideas stay very uncommunicative, submissive, static, not really going anywhere. They just brood in my blood.

This is the fundamental layer of the musical composition. Over the course of constructing the synopsis, getting in touch with some of the storylines, my musical imagination gradually became more directional, demanding more communication between the music and the plot. For example, I would start to think how I can characterize different musical ideas in different soundscapes, and how I can make the music in accord with or in contrast to the dramatic moments. Conversely, I would also ask you to create more or less dramatic moments in the plot to invite a more enriched and nuanced musical potential. With all of these elements ready, I am now about to set some of the ready-to-go texts to music. So the music starts to grow in my mind. Since the libretto is mostly done, I'm about to select some representative numbers to work on.

42 Among the questions I've been thinking about on and off over the years in my scholarly work on *qu* (Chinese drama and song) is a very basic one: "Why do songs have words?" I'm interested in hearing your perspective as a composer about what difference it makes to

you. You told me early in our collaboration that the words I wrote needed to inspire you (those words including not just the lyrics but the dramatic situation, the description of the *mise-en-scène*, etc.)—but I wonder if you could say something about the nature of what that inspiration needs to be, and how the process actually works for you.

On a more fundamental level, what are the attractions—and difficulties—for you of writing for the voice as opposed to instruments? I know you're very sensitive to nuances of sound and meaning of words, and to the English language. I have to say I've been surprised throughout our collaboration at the many wonderful and insightful changes and suggestions you've made to my libretto—at your poetic, and not just musical, sensibility. I don't know if you'd feel differently setting Chinese words to music, as you did with your *Pipa Plays Opera*, where you wrote a *Kuan* opera aria based on the original lyrics from *Romance of the Western Chamber* (*Xixiang ji*), a 13th-century Chinese play.

YC I have written songs in Chinese as well as in English in the past. When I say I need the words to inspire me, I mean I enjoy pondering the meanings of the words and the texts. They somehow open a poetic space or introduce some mysterious atmosphere for me to feel connected to and to obtain a kind of freedom that endows me with creative power. Under this condition, there's no difference for me doing vocal music or instrumental music. Very often, the titles of my compositions are the sources of my inspiration. However, when dealing with lyrics, I have to say I really hope to feel the underlying emotions of the texts, and the breaths of the phrases. Generally, I am not interested in plain or colloquial texts. I find it hard to set them, but if I must, I let them roll quickly by doing some compositional tricks and providing cool musical settings. But when texts are important, situated in important moments, I like them poetic, sophisticated, philosophical. These three adjectives always trigger me.

To compare vocal writing and instrumental writing, I think they are the same and you just have to apply your imagination bravely to what you know about voices and instruments. Conveying the meaning of words is important, but the instrumental capacity and dramatic quality of voices is even more important. That is why we have to choose certain words that can help the voice shine and resonate, no matter if it is English, Chinese, or nonsense syllables.

42 Majel and I discussed earlier what are for me as a scholar and librettist the most important components of *Ghost Village*—the permeable membrane between ghost world and living world, and engaging the Chinese tradition

of the romance between mortal man and female ghost as a way of coming to terms with historical trauma. But then I have been working on ghosts in Chinese literature, art, and film for years. I would be really interested in hearing what you think about ghosts now in the context of this project. Is the need to somehow express the difference between the two worlds shaping your vision of the music you might compose?

This question makes me think of one of the libretti we co-launched in our Gray Center seminar in the spring of 2018 ("Literature of the Fantastic and Operatic Adaptation"), which was actually called *Between Two Worlds*. Charles Kondek wrote it for the composer Shulamit Ran, your former teacher, who led a wonderful session of our seminar that week. I really admire the libretto, which is based on S. Ansky's early 20th-century Yiddish play *The Dybbuk* about a bride who is possessed by the ghost, the dybbuk, of her dead fiancé. I really wish I could hear Shulamit's music for her opera, but because there is no recording I've had simply to imagine it. Do you have a concrete musical vision of ghosts in our opera, and if so, has it evolved?

YC I love Kondek's psycho-thrilling libretto! I too wish I had been able to hear the opera. In terms of musical visions of ghosts, I might first say that, of course, there are so many stereotypical visions about the ghost world in general that are ugly and gruesome. But in our own opera, we have agreed that we would like to create a kind of inversion—to portray the living world in a ghostly way and the ghost world in a beautiful and harmonious way. The people in this living world suffer and are fate-driven, having little control over their humble lives. The ghost world is, however, the ideal place where poor dead people can enjoy things that they are not able to enjoy in the living world. In this kind of ghost world, the dead even have the mysterious power to bring living people down to help them correct their mistakes and rectify their moral sense. Those are the things I want to reflect in my music.

The music for Acts I and III, which take place in the living world, will mostly be grotesque, angular, haunting, devastating even; the music for Act II, which takes place in the ghost world, will be transparent, crystal, lyrical, and romantic. This is the basic musical division I will make. But of course, there are also blurred areas where I will play with mixtures and transitions. For the ending of the opera, and as you and Majel discussed earlier, I intend to include a Chinese *Kuan* opera soprano who will vocalize some unique, heightened, gliding *Sprechstimme* ["speech-song"] so as to confront standard Western

opera singing. I hope these confrontational vocal styles can symbolize the synchronicity of the two worlds, the two souls and two identities of the female protagonist. There will be more great musical ideas coming along when I am writing. So I cannot reveal too much here.

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