

FINANCIAL TIMES

That big journey to the west

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Financial Times

December 29 2005

Lu Gang shot six people and then himself on an Iowa campus in 1991. Two years later, on New Zealand's Waiheke Island, Gu Cheng murdered his wife with an axe then hanged himself. The first young man was a brilliant physics student, the second a talented poet. "It's a Greek tragedy," reflects Chen Shi-Zheng, glancing around the breakfast room at Paris's Hotel du Louvre. "I look at these characters and think 'It could have been me'.

"My early days in New York were not easy. For any Chinese person to move out of China is a major trauma. It's unbearable to think that you left a country because you couldn't stand living there, to go to a new country only to find that you can't stand that either. Where are you going to go? You feel the world has no place for you."

Instead of ending his life in a blood-bath, Chen turned to stage direction. And where his tormented compatriots failed, he succeeded. This year alone, Chen directs a new opera by Cong Su in Berlin, Monteverdi's *Orfeo* at the English National Opera, and his first film, starring Meryl Streep, Val Kilmer and Ye Liu. The film, *Dark Matter*, tells Lu Gang's story; the opera, *The World in Quicksilver Light*, is about Gu Cheng and poetry. Next year, Chen will devise a new piece of musical theatre based a Chinese literary classic together with hip-hop group Gorillaz and a Chinese circus troupe.

The scope of his activities is only surprising to those who have not followed his career for the past five years. Chen's spectacular international debut, an 18-hour performance of 15th-century Kunju opera *The Peony Pavilion*, toured the world and altered western preconceptions of Chinese music theatre. He has gone on to work in spoken theatre, traditional Chinese and western opera, musical theatre, and staged sacred music. No two projects are ever alike, although violent themes remain something of a constant.

That, admits Chen, is no coincidence. He is a child of the Cultural Revolution. His mother was shot in front of him when he was four, his father sent to the countryside for re-education. A picture begins to emerge as we discuss *Journey to the West*, the 16th-century novel that he is adapting for the stage with Gorillaz. Although the book was banned, Chen says he loved it as a child.

"My father had a friend whose wife was a librarian. She kept a lacquered jewellery box hidden beneath the floorboards under her bed. And in it were four or five classic Chinese novels.

"Because there was a kind of civil war situation, there was a lot of shooting. We would hide with my father's friends, under the bed. That was how I found the books. And I spent quite a lot of time reading, while the killing was going on."

The story is told ingenuously, as if everyone grew up reading their way through civil wars. But Chen has seen enough of life not to take his psychological stability for granted.

"I live out my craziness on stage. But I'm fascinated by the sadness of the human heart. For most people, the reality is far from what you envisage. It's difficult to be a failed dreamer. I think everyone has to deal with that - what you achieve in life, and what you leave."

Taken in by a group of Hunan funeral singers as a child, Chen was raised in an environment where performance and trauma went hand in hand. In his teens, he was performing opera in crowded stadiums. The audience, he recalls, watched abstractedly, cracking water-melon seeds with their teeth.

"There would be a pile of seed husks three feet high, and we'd have a bonfire afterwards. I like that sense of open theatre as a social occasion. Greek tragedy was like that. In an amphitheatre. It was an event, like football. That's one of the reasons why I'm attracted to film as a media. There's no pretence. People tend to think more before they spend \$100 on an opera ticket."

Still, Chen was not satisfied with his performing experiences in China.

"In China, when you study with a master, they say you should sound like the master, look like the master, capture the essence of the master. And then after a while you realise that this can't work, because you are not him. I just didn't feel that there was any room for me to interpret, to be myself. I want to live outside the box. That's why I'm here."

In Chen's early years as a student in New York he needed every ounce of that certainty. After he had spent eight painstaking months rehearsing *The Peony Pavilion* with the Shanghai Kunju Opera, Chinese cultural officials condemned his production for "feudal superstition, stupidity and pornography", blocked the export of sets and costumes and refused passports to the performers. Instead of giving up, Chen started rehearsals again in Paris, with a new cast. The result was a triumph.

"My aim has always been a western audience. I'm trying to create a bridge, to transpose this world of my experience into the world of the west. At the same time, I want to take all my work to China. I travel to China several times a year but I'm very cautious. I think the problem has been the personal nature of my vision. Personal style is not encouraged in China. You don't hear people talking about individual artists."

Chen sees his own life story as a play on the title of *Journey to the West*, although the title of Wu Cheng's novel actually refers to the journey of a Buddhist monk and a monkey from China to India in search of enlightenment. Western audiences are more likely to know it from the Japanese television series *Monkey*.

"It's the most liberating thing for me, after working with so much bloody murder and assassination, to stage something that's just fun. Not only does it have a lot of modern relevance, since it's all about not wanting to die and the search for immortality, but it also has an incredibly rebellious, funny social commentary, using *Monkey* to teach Buddhism.

"I want to work with Chinese circus actors. They start training when they are five-years-old, they reach their prime when they are 18, and they retire at 20. In our technological world, where people hardly use

their bodies any more, this is something almost magical, a superhuman power to transform."

Chen took Gorillaz to a remote area of rural China to study village life and primitive Chinese folk music as inspiration for their score.

Journey to the West will open at the Manchester International Festival in 2007 and go on to Paris and Berlin. For now, though, he is working in *The World in Quick-silver Light* in Berlin. The production goes on to Glasgow and Brisbane. Two hours of conversation with Chen Shi-Zheng feels like a frenetic tour of the globe. Urban rock musicians meet leaf-playing Chinese healers, murderous scientists and anguished poets leave a trail of blood across several continents, Monteverdi's Orfeo learns that artistic arrogance cannot rescue love or raise the dead, Meryl Streep discovers new worlds, Euripides meets Tibetan burial rituals. In a world of displacement, he explains, the way to survive is to find a way to create a place where you belong.

"I've found a place for myself in the world, in hotel rooms and on the stage. In theatres, I have found an incredible sense of home. And my job there is to create images that capture the human interior."