

***Liu Yi Chuan Shu* (柳毅傳書):  
A Cantonese Opera, Its Language, Script Versions, and Stage Performances**

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The story of Liu Yi (柳毅) and the Dragon Princess (龍女) of Dongting Lake (洞庭湖), has been loved and read by the Chinese since it was handed down as a *chuanqi* (傳奇 'marvel tale') by Tang dynasty (618-907) writer, Li Chaowei (李朝威, n.d.), entitled *Liu Yi Zhuan* (柳毅傳 'The Story of Liu Yi'). Adapted subsequently by Yuan dramatist, Shang Zhongxian (尚仲賢, 13<sup>th</sup> century), as a *zaju* (雜劇) entitled, *Dongting Hu Liu Yi Chuan Shu* (洞庭湖柳毅傳書 'At Dongting Lake Liu Yi Delivers a Letter'), the story underwent numerous adaptations in drama and the performing arts over the centuries. It is the source for the Cantonese opera, *Liu Yi Chuan Shu* (柳毅傳書 'Liu Yi Delivers a Letter'), written by Tan Qingshuang (譚青霜, 1928-1993) in the early 1950's. It made its debut in 1954, performed by the Guangzhou Taiyangsheng Cantonese Opera Troupe (廣州太陽升粵劇團), with Luo Jiabao (羅家寶, b. 1930) in the lead role of Liu Yi and Lin Xiaoqun (林小群, b. 1932) that of the Dragon Princess. Luo Jiabao's arias in that opera became instant hits among the populace and were sung with gusto, from main streets to alley-ways (Zhongguo Xiqu Zhi Bianji Weiyuanhui 1993:139). The opera became Luo's signature opera and, except for the Cultural Revolution decade, he continued to deliver master performances of that opera in the decades that followed.

This paper is a preliminary study into the history behind this Cantonese opera, and highlights some of the colloquial language that is used in it. In addition, a comparison is made among three published versions, supplemented by a printed script accompanying a commercial audio-recording of the opera and stage performances of the opera. The earliest published version of the opera (circa 1950) is handwritten and contains seven acts. Two later versions of the script (both published in 1993) contain only six acts, as is also the case for commercially-available video-recorded stage performances of the opera.

The third version of the script was based on modifications by Cantonese composer and librettist, Chen Guanqing (陳冠卿, 1920-2003). While Tan's handwritten version has ample vernacular Cantonese characters that capture the flavor of the spoken language and appears to target local consumers, the 1993 printed versions had undergone significant changes to the language, changes that would make the script accessible to a (geographically) broader readership. At the same time, there were also changes in the dialogues, lyrics, and so forth, not only across the scripts, but also across performances. Some highlights of these differences will be addressed.

Today, although Cantonese opera is still performed in southern China and in overseas communities with a substantial Cantonese-speaking population, it struggles to survive, unable to compete with film, television, and newer forms of entertainment. Nonetheless, for linguists, just as early missionary publications on Chinese dialects have proven invaluable for historical dialect research, Chinese regional operas offer a wealth of information on a dialect's linguistic past.