



The Moon Opera

Bi Feiyu

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In a fit of jealousy, Xiao Yanqiu, star of The Moon Opera, disfigures her understudy with boiling water. Spurned by the troupe, she turns to teaching.

Twenty years later The Moon Opera is restaged, under the patronage of a rich local factory boss who insists that Xiao Yanqiu return to the role of Chang'e. So she does, this time believing she is the immortal moon goddess.

Set against the dramatic backdrop of the Peking Opera, this devastating portrait shows the extent to which a desperate woman will embrace an exalted image of herself in an effort to flee earthly concerns.

The Moon Opera is translated by **Howard Goldblatt**.

Bi Feiyu is one of the most respected authors and screenwriters in China today. He was born in 1964 in Xinghua, in the province of Jiangsu, China.

He is the recipient of several literary awards, including the Xu Lun Prize, and the Man Asian Literary Prize 2010. He co-wrote the film *Shanghai Triad*, which was directed by acclaimed Chinese director Zhang Yimou.

The Moon Opera Details

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Author : Bi Feiyu

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From Reader Review The Moon Opera for online ebook

Michael says

Attracted to the novella by its subject: Peking opera. Began it five years ago when living in Beijing for a few months. Towards the end of my stay I went to see traditional theatre almost every weekend. Reading the last few chapters now brought back memories of plays I saw and read. Well translated but narrative itself a bit disappointing.

Amy Beck says

I am an avid reader of Asian fiction. Although nowhere near as profound in storytelling or characterization as *Memoirs of a Geisha*, it wasn't until I finished the book that I realized the writer, like Arthur Golden, was a man who is very sensitive to the emotions and actions of the female gender. While reading, I felt transported back in time which I was thoroughly enjoying until contemporary curse words slipped in and shook me back to the present. It felt jarring to me, and I wanted to resist feeling like I was tossed by a time-jump.

There were aspects of this novella that I didn't understand. For example, why our heroine suddenly had sex with another man, without even being seduced, wooed, or even desired, baffled me followed with why did she later assume her resulting pregnancy was her husband's child and not this man's?

This story has a haunting vibe that has me wrapped up in it even after I closed the covers.

Anita says

My expectation about this book (actually, novelette) prejudices me against its length. It is actually a narrow window perspective into the life and experience of one Chinese opera singer, told in a compressed time frame (as in "present" and then "20 years later"). The opera in question tells of the legend of Chang'e (the moon goddess in Chinese mythology).

I would have liked that the legend was at least mentioned in gist, but the story presupposes that the reader already knows about it (or would at least look it up independently of this book). I do know about the legend, and I accept that some Chinese authors -- this is a translated work-- write for an audience that is already familiar with the Chinese classics / fables. Nonetheless, I grouse...

I did, however, enjoy learning about the different aspects of Chinese / Peking opera: styles, voices, etc. As a child, I have watched the stage performances, enchanted by the elaborate costumes and the accentuated makeup of the performers, the gestures and mannerisms. I always knew that there was more to the storytelling, because the background props don't change, but I never understood the subtleties -- especially since I don't understand much of the language, and what little was made more difficult to comprehend when executed in a high-pitched singsong voice. After reading this, I know a little bit more about these nuances now.

This is my personal observation (from the cultural practices in my own country), that outside of China, I don't think that Chinese opera is much practiced now. It is a 'trade' that is not passed down to the younger generation, and the old-hands are retiring. Reading this brought back some fond childhood memories; I can still hear the whine of the stringed instruments and the clash of the gongs.

Stephen Durrant says

Perhaps deserves 2.5 stars. "The Moon Opera" is a thin, fairly quick read about a Beijing opera singer who specializes in playing the role of Chang'e, the mythological woman who stole an elixir of immortality and fled to the moon where she lives forever in isolated beauty. The author is obviously an aficionado of Beijing opera, and the reader comes away from the novel with a greater appreciation of the subtleties of this art form. The larger topic, however, is what I would call "pedagogical genealogy"--the passing of knowledge or skill from one generation to another and the love-hate relationship it so often fosters between the teacher and the student as the former comes to realize he (or in this case "she") is training his replacement. One of my more generous teachers once said: "If you students don't stand on my shoulders I have failed." A noble sentiment. But those who stand on your shoulders do weigh you down, as this novel demonstrates.

Fiona says

This genre is not one that I usually read. In fact, this is a first for me. I haven't read any Chinese literature before and definitely nothing about Chinese opera. I chose this book because it looked like a cute little story.

Xiao Yanqui is the opera star (diva). In the ill-fated run of the Moon Opera, she stars as Chang'e early in her life. Backstage, she throws scalding hot water onto the face of her understudy and disfigures her. The only thing left for Yanqui is teaching.

Twenty years later, she is requested to bring back to life Chang'e in the Moon Opera at the request of a fan & opera patron. Her understudy is now one of her students. Does she have the voice to sing the arias? Does she have the stamina for the performance? Because of her diva reputation, will the troupe ever trust her?

This story is her struggle to relive as Chang'e. To Yanqui, this is not just a role, but her life.

In typical Chinese fashion, the author writes this story lyrically with many allegories. It was a delight to read.

Katrina Tan says

Very different in style from Three Sisters.

I prefer this very much more, and was glad I read Three Sisters before this. I might not have made it through. A novella, really, it is the story of a vain, tempestuous and wholly insecure woman.

Told so intimately, you might think the author a woman, what with the womanly tantrums, machinations and insecurities.

A joy to read, you want to savour the short work, but some of his philosophical musings do not flow with the narration. However, it is a wholly enjoyable read, which would work for anyone, even those who read on the

run.

Hazy says

Chinese novella about a Peking Opera singer's slow descent into madness and irrelevance. A good companion book would be Lilian Lee's 'Farewell, My Concubine', which got made into a pretty decent movie.

As a character study, it's alright, although, because of its short length, it probably should've been published in a short-story collection, much like Su Tong's 'Raise the Red Lantern' or Tanizaki's 'Seven Japanese Tales'.

A bit too short and abrupt an ending. Not a bad read, really, but since it's Chinese, you're probably going to have a sour mood afterwards. Read with caution.

Netanella says

I decided to read this to "expand my horizons," as an old family acquaintance Bill Avlonitis used to say. Plus, it reminded me of younger days when I was a young college student and I had an addiction to foreign films and Publix lemon pepper chicken.

Written by a famous modern Chinese author, the story revolves around a vain and jealous Peking Opera singer with the unpronounceable name of Xiao Yanqui. The setting is also contemporary, a modern, post Cultural Revolution China that harkens back to an early time, when classical opera was in vogue.

Twenty years earlier, Xiao Yanqiu had viciously burned a beautiful young rival with scalding hot water in a fit of jealousy. Unable to show remorse for her actions and despite her talent for opera, Yanqiu is demoted to a teacher in the opera troupe, and as a result the opera company falls upon hard times.

Fast forward to the present. An aging boss wants to relive his youth by having his old opera heroine reprise her famous role in The Moon Opera. Overweight and out of shape, Yanqiu pushes herself to prepare for this role. She diets, she cheats on her husband by sleeping with the boss, she prepares her understudy, a gorgeous and raw young talent, to inherit the mantle.

But, things go south, as they almost always do. By the end of the book, I was left with a bitter taste in my mouth. Yanqui is self-involved, mean spirited, and just plain ugly on the inside. I enjoyed the glimpse that this book showed me, a part of Chinese culture I was not aware of. But Yanqiu is a difficult character to read.

Emmy says

The writing was slow and methodical, and after 40 or so pages, I realized that not much had happened. Then, I glanced over at the stack of books waiting for me to read them and realized that even at 120 pages, this was

just going to be too long of a book for how little I was enjoying it.

Beverly says

This was a 3.5 read for me.

When *The Moon Opera* by Bi Feiyu opens Xiao Yanqiu, elegant star of the troupe, disfigures her understudy by throwing a cup of boiling water into her face. This action shuts down the production of the opera and for a second time *The Moon Opera* is stopped from being performed. Xiao Yanqiu is disgraced and retires to teaching and marriage to an average working man. Twenty years later, a tobacco factory manager wants to sponsor a production of *The Moon Opera* and insists that he wants his idol, Xiao Yanqiu, to play the lead role of Chang'e, the moon goddess, or he will withdraw his financial support for the production. Will the third attempt actually result in getting this opera in front of an audience? Will Xiao at forty, and being away from the stage for twenty years, be able to perform the intricate songs and most importantly, how will Xiao react to her understudy?

While the reader is engaged in following Xiao as she becomes the immortal moon goddess, both on and off the stage, this novel takes you behind the scenes into the world of the Peking opera and the interconnection of art and commerce in the Chinese culture. The glossary at the back of the book helps the reader understand the terms and roles of a Chinese opera troupe.

This is an engaging story that can easily be enjoyed in one reading. The language while spare is descriptive. As I read this book it was like watching a Chinese movie unfold, and my emotions ranged from being curious to sympathetic to pity for Xiao. I recommend this book to anyone who is interested in learning more about Chinese opera or any reader that would like to escape into a world that is not well known.

Reviewed by Beverly

APOOO BookClub

March 2, 2009

Nae says

This was interesting primarily for opera details for make up, costume, etc. Maybe it is just me but I found the primary character simply unlikable.

MK says

Though a short novel, Bi Feiyu's *The Moon Opera* is laden with passion. Though the passion of this novel is not of a woman to man, but a woman to her own expectations of her life. Xiao Yanqiu, is a woman I know and understand more than I care to admit. Yanqiu is a rising star in the Peking Opera and in a divaesque moment disfigures her understudy. This one moment leads her from the realm where her dreams can be accomplished to that of ordinary status. Twenty years later she is given a second chance to live out her dreams only to have the stinch of her common life keep it buried forever. Xiao Yanqiu is a woman whose

heart longs for what she ought to have been and not what she sees when she looks in the mirror.

A beautifully executed story that caused me to look at my reflection closer and try to appreciate what it has become and not what I expect it should have been.

Marie-aimée says

C'est l'histoire de Xiao Yanqiu qui incarne la célèbre Chang'E, de l'opéra L'Envol vers la lune. Star déchue qui revient sur le devant de la scène lorsque la troupe organise de nouveau un spectacle sur cet opéra.

L'auteur nous plonge dans les états d'âme de cette femme qui s'incarne littéralement dans son personnage.

Une belle réflexion sur l'acteur et le rapport au corps.

Larry says

Bi Feiyu is a successful screenwriter, and it kind of shows in his beautifully-conceived, carefully choreographed, and disappointingly written novel. The premise is excellent: a behind-the-scenes drama of ambition, jealousy and decline in the cloistered world of Chinese opera. The main character, Xiao Yanqiu, is famous for her portrayal of the lead role of Moon Goddess in a fictional opera called “The Moon Opera”.

When an understudy seduces the director into allowing her to do one public performance, Xiao throws boiling water in her face, disfiguring the understudy and destroying both their careers. Twenty years later, Xiao is making a comeback in a revival of “The Moon Opera”, and must confront her deteriorated looks and voice, in contrast to her new talented young understudy. There is plenty of room for high melodrama in this story, and Bi packs much of that into the sparse 118 pages of his book.

Screenwriters by and large write the minimum words necessary to convey a complete story. They leave it up to the director and actors to interpret their words and provide the nuance and depth. I get the impression that Bi is doing the same with his novel, expecting the reader to fill in the emotional blanks. Surprisingly for a screenwriter, he uses very little dialogue and a bit too much exposition.

Bi sets up scenes that are visually appealing, just as one would see in a stage opera. Mid-way through the story, in the rehearsal studio, everyone goes home except for Xiao and her young understudy. One can visualize the other actors leaving the stage and the lights dimming except for a spotlight. Later, there is an emotional encounter in which Xiao realizes she must pass the torch to her student and they end in an uncomfortable embrace. Unfortunately, all of the emotion and drama is explained rather than performed. For example:

As she looked at her student, jealousy was unavoidable. It was the first time she'd experienced the lethal power of that emotion and it was as if she was seeing blood flow.

Perhaps some of the issue is with the translation, so it's difficult to be sure of how such passages come across in Chinese.

Xiao's character development is big, bold and larger than life, and the transition points in her personal struggle are presented in striking imagery: in a dim hallway leaning against an unsavory chain-smoking business magnate, or performing a solo dance with flowing handkerchiefs under a streetlamp in the snow.

But images aside, the reader is mainly kept arm's length from Xiao.

I enjoyed the insider's view of Chinese opera, which flows quite smoothly into the narrative. Some of the descriptions are poetically lovely, and the flow of events is presented almost as if staged as distinct acts and scenes within an opera. Unfortunately, this novel mostly reads as a well-written synopsis of a truly colorful and heartbreaking drama.

Jacqueline says

Very well written. Short but dramatic. Deep emotions about the Peking Opera and their actors.
