

First Impression by Chung Ying Theatre: A bold attempt to redefine *Pride and Prejudice* in Hong Kong texture with enduring Cantonese humour and unique cultural setting

Pride and Prejudice, Jane Austen's most beloved tale of love, marriage and society, remains an all-time classic and still delights modern literary lovers with its characters and comedy. Acclaimed translator and playwright, Rupert Chan's adapted play reimagined the original work with 1950s Hong Kong context and maintained an excellent balance of drama and humour. The merge of Western and Chinese elements brings the English classic close to the local theatre audience in a fresh approach.

The story follows headstrong, quick-witted Ka-wai (Belinda Chan) from the middle-class Pak family as her mother seeks to ensure Ka-wai and her other three charming daughters marry rich to secure their future. At a grand party, Ka-wai meets Tat-chi (Ronald Wang), heir to the prominent Kong family; however, his arrogant pride of social status and her deep prejudice about personality masked the affinity. As they learn to put aside the misconceit, the feuding lovers make the perfect match; both marry for love.

Tongue-in-cheek humour and dry wit have always been the main attractions of Austen's work. Rupert Chan reshaped Austen's blisteringly articulate dialogue into vivid conversations with extensive use of Cantonese slang and idioms. These punchlines, frequently used back in the 1950s, stand the test of the time and still entertain the younger audience. Chan exploited the unique feature of Cantonese language with a subtle blend of English and Chinese. For example, when Charlene explains Dowager Yue's high expectations of Tat-chi's future bride, she refers 'sophisticated woman' as 'cooked girl (熟女)' and 'get married' as 'draw the skylight shut (拉埋天窗)'; the play on words cause a roar of laughter in the audience. There are also other Cantonese elements involved such as Ka-wai's cousin, David speaking in Bailan – a Cantonese patter speech in rhymes. The wicked wit of Chan breaks the boundary of generations old and new as the audience of all ages finds humour in his delightful language.

Chan's skill and artistry shine in not only domesticating translation of the Regency romance, but also in exploration for the bewildering collision of social class in the period. Set in class-conscious colonial Hong Kong, the play decodes the huge gap between the upper class and the middle class. Ka-wai might ridicule the senseless social mores, but Chan understood the importance to tell the universal truth: a wealthy marriage secures the future for most young women, as claimed by Mrs Pak. Yet, the upper class often looks down on people beneath them. The experienced socialite of high society, Dowager Yue, sums this up in her advice to her nephew Tat-chi, "You may well have middle class friends, but when it comes to marriage, your bride mustn't be of other class." Apart from class division, first impression at its heart explored the dependence of women on marriage and the social constraints on women back then. Unlike her peers, Ka-wai chooses a different path. As an intelligent, independent individual with pragmatic personalities and rich inner lives, she expresses her conviction about women's capacity to earn their own living, and their destiny doesn't hinge on marriage. She chooses to stay true to herself in refusal to be judged solely on etiquette, artistic accomplishments or family connections, as stated in her impressive monologue after being humiliated by Dowager Yue. In the end, it is the heroine's decision to marry Tat-chi, not subject to family or social pressures.

The changing social dimensions in Hong Kong in the period offer close parallels to Austen's world and provides insights into the cultural difference. In Chan's version, the juxtaposition of Chinese and Western culture enhances the tension between the central characters. Chan envisaged Ka-wai, born and raised in Hong Kong, a great fan of Cantonese opera, in contrast to the obsession of Tat-chi with Western opera and disregard of Chinese culture. The difference in musical taste alongside their mistaken first impressions hints their mismatch as a couple at first, but as the story evolves, Tat-chi takes the initiative to explore the world of Cantonese opera; Ka-wai starts to change her mind on him. Their progression of romance here corresponds with the cultural fusion process happened in Hong Kong, demonstrating it as a place where east meets west in the 1950s.

Although the play is not a musical, there are a few times when the actors grace the audience with their voice in Cantonese opera. Ka-wai and her younger sister Ka-yi take turns to sing excerpts from famous Cantonese opera, such as *The Peony Pavilion*, accompanied by not Chinese instruments but the piano. Previous Canto-pop hits like 'I Love Cha-cha' and 'Manbo Girl' are featured as party music. These musical scenes do more than bringing back the 50s vibe; they connect story threads and propel the plot forward. Act II begins with Ka-wai and Tat-chi on their way to watch *The Flower Princess* (帝女花), and their date to the theatre serves as the turning point, where the central roles set aside the bias and find the same passion for arts, especially operas.

Set designer, Douglas Ho also contributed significantly to set a nostalgic tone. The production team makes excellent use of the stage wagon which revolves, dividing it into three sections so that the characters can seamlessly transfer from the living room of the Pak's family house to the house-warming party in Sunny's mansion. The typical and stylish interior designs and distinctive street views from the 50s well match the scope in which the tale is being told and magically create the feeling of going back in time. And they deliberately didn't fully fill the stage, leaving a black frame around the set. This gives the audience the déjà vu of watching the play through the old-time television screen using 4:3 aspect ratio, visually enhancing the true aesthetic of the period.

This exquisitely executed adapted play that captures the essence of the original work with the unique eastern and western background of Hong Kong is perhaps the best gift deceased Chan had left for all local theatregoers.

(Reference list removed, text shared with the writer's consent)