

Joanna Wong: An Indomitable Life, An Operatic Legacy

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The Chinese opera canon contains stories that spans over various time periods and realms as well as extol virtues that we should possess. While these stories having delighted audiences for centuries, the stories behind the face that dons the mask are sometimes more intriguing. *Joanna Wong: An Indomitable Life, An Operatic Legacy* is one such tome that attempts to tell such stories. Six decades worth of them.

This bilingual biography relates the life of Joanna Wong, a Cantonese opera doyenne, and her attempts at training herself to be a competent artiste, promoting the art form and simply pursuing a passion that she had since childhood. In the course of doing so, hardships were overcome, a life-long romance blossomed and hundreds of eyes all over the world were opened to the beauty and intricacy of Cantonese opera. With the editorial intention to reach out to a wide audience with the text in English and Mandarin, the writing in itself fulfils the intention as well. Any trepidations of not being able to appreciate due to the lack of knowledge about the art form should be dispelled as the simple writing with succinctly adequate explanations would aid the reader. The abundance of pictures, which were carefully selected and well placed, brings to life the various milestones in Joanna's career which enhances the overall reading experience. Unfortunately, one's enjoyment might be marred by the over-segmentation of the writing and the lack of Joanna's voice in the biography – it is odd that the interview with Joanna that is in the appendix of the Mandarin section is not translated and placed in the English section as well.

What makes this biography interesting is that it attempts to do more. One can see it as a tri-narrative that unfolds; Joanna's personal and artistic life, a brief history of Cantonese opera with a special focus of its development in Singapore and a slice of Singapore history. The first narrative shows a woman of conviction, who was largely self-taught, pursuing her passion relentlessly at a time in which it is difficult to do so. Joanna also possessed foresight in insisting that one must prize raising the profile of Cantonese opera by reaching to as many people as possible regardless of venue or cultural context while maintaining a firm reverence for the art form; a difficult balance to maintain. As for the other two narratives, this book provides an interesting angle as well as a launching pad for further research into Cantonese opera in Singapore, the activities of Chinese clans and even the development of tertiary education in Singapore as Joanna was an administrator at NUS.

Perhaps, one of the most encouraging and inspiring thing to know is that this book is in no way a cue for Joanna's curtain call. Currently in her 70s, she is still actively promoting Cantonese opera through the Chinese Theatre Circle as well as external workshops and even training students as young as 12 in the art form. Her life story of many ups and

downs is in itself a beautiful opera. *Joanna Wong: An Indomitable Life, An Operatic Legacy* is certainly a valuable book to have on your bookshelf if you are interested in Cantonese opera.

Joanna Wong: An Indomitable Life, An Operatic Legacy is retailed at \$40 and can be purchased from the Chinese Theatre Circle by calling them at 6323 4862.

Stay tuned for the second part in this series in which I will document my experiences of a Cantonese opera recital at the Chinese Theatre Circle tea house!

