

Interview

Dream Improvisation: An Interview with Coco Zhao

Christopher Lee, University of British Columbia

As one of the relatively few Chinese singers on the international jazz circuit, Coco Zhao (Zhao Ke) has garnered much attention and acclaim in the last few years. Zhao's parents were Chinese opera singers, and he was trained in classical music from an early age. In the mid-nineties, he moved to Shanghai and quickly gained a following in part of an emerging jazz scene. His performances have been acclaimed for their blending of Eastern and Western musical styles. Zhao has performed with jazz legends such as Betty Carter and has toured the West extensively, with performances at places such as the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, D.C. and the Montreal International Jazz Festival. On his debut album, *Dream Situation* (Effendi, 2006), Zhao collaborated with violinist Peng Fei and others on a set of original interpretations of popular Chinese songs from the 1930s and 1940s.

In 2002, filmmaker Michelle Chen produced a documentary film about his life and music entitled *The Snake Boy*. The film was not distributed widely in China due to its frank treatment of Zhao's homosexuality, but it has contributed to Zhao's growing following in the West. *The Snake Boy* was screened as part of the symposium "Comin' Out Swingin': Sexualities in Improvisation" held at the University of British Columbia in November 2007.

This interview was conducted in Vancouver on July 1, 2008, several days after Zhao performed as part of the 2008 TD Canada Trust Vancouver International Jazz Festival. Zhao performed a selection of new arrangements of pieces from *Dream Situation* accompanied by the Montreal-based band Jazzlab.

Chris Lee: I've been doing some reading about your career and I noticed that, when you're performing in the West, people fixate specifically on your foreignness. But in your album *Dream Situation*, your repertoire is mostly from 1920s and 1930s Shanghai, music that's so interesting because it's a mixture of Chinese, western jazz, and movie music. That music reflects another time when, like now, China and Shanghai in particular, were international places where cultures frequently crossed. So to me, it's odd when people talk about you as just a Chinese jazz singer, because you're singing music that is already so international. I want to get your thoughts about this repertoire and why you gravitate to it.

Coco Zhao: I like those songs. Because I always got this kind of old Shanghai complex because it was just so *jizui jingmei*, you know? Just so glamorous and just very controversial, and I think it's kind of similar to Shanghai now as well. Of course it's a different era, different time, but somehow the same stories are happening as in those songs, but they happen in different forms, in different ways; so that makes me feel related to those songs, and also artistically, I think. Of course it's fun to do originals, but sometimes to rearrange songs which already exist into different forms is really fun as well. It's really a lot of challenge, because you're like . . . a surgeon. You have to do some surgery on this person to make this person look different, but [it's] still the same person. I think it's a lot of a fun and a lot of space where you can create and you can use your imagination to reinterpret the story with [your] own language. So, I think that's quite fun.

CL: Can we talk about the attraction of the old Shanghai for people now? It's not just in music, but also in film, in fashion, in the whole way the city's been rebuilt; there is a sense of nostalgia and connection. Do you feel that nostalgia?

CZ: Every human being likes things like that. They like to relate to something from the past, because it's not there anymore. It's just like a fetish, I think, for people who want to find out more about the past especially if the past is somehow related to nowadays. So how do you call the word: astrology?

CL: Oh, nostalgia, *huajiu*.

CZ: Nostalgia. I think it's just, for me, I think it's just a fetish . . .

CL: Tell me what you mean by that.

CZ: I just think that no matter in Shanghai or in the West, everybody likes to find out more about the past. It's not there anymore, but it has happened and might have happened beautifully or glamorously and can touch your mood or emotions nowadays. The more you feel related to it, the more you want to discover it. And the more you discover, the deeper you fall into it. For me, artistically, I think this is only a period of time that I am going through. Like a phase I am going through. I am pretty glad that I've found this subject.

CL: How did you come across this music?

CZ: I had this idea about a revue of Shanghai songs in 2002 or, no, 2003. I got this idea of working with three or four different bands. We rearranged classic jazz into experimental electronic music. In the end, I found Peng Fei, a great violin player, and we settled down for the final decision. But it's taken quite a while, actually, for the whole process.

CL: At your performance a few nights ago, I was struck by your singing of "*Woyao nideai*" ["I Want Your Love"]. I really liked how, when you were singing each syllable of "*Wo-yao-ni-de-ai*," you were using different vocal effects. You introduced this song as a blues tune, and you were bringing vocal techniques that are clearly not from China into a popular Chinese song. Is this how you perform "plastic surgery" on your music? How do you come up with your arrangements?

CZ: I sit down with Peng Fei and we talk. [At] that stage, you hear colours through music and you have so many more ideas. So, spontaneously, we found a way for each song. But of course, it's not just a one-day [thing]. We spent probably about two weeks trying to find out how to rearrange those songs, in what feel, in what style, with what specific ways to do it: the bass line, the beat, how the song goes, how the colour changes . . .

CL: Do you spend a lot of time listening to the original recording?

CZ: Not really, actually. Well, we know these songs by heart. We've heard them so many, so many times. So, we don't want to hear it anymore. We asked our bass player and drummer because they are Americans and they have no idea about these songs. We let them listen to the songs and said, "tell us, what you think, what would you like to change?" They don't have to understand Chinese; they understand music. And that's the good part. For us, we listened to them so many times, we have this frame around them. But for our bass player and drummer, they don't know these songs, so they can actually jump out from the square and be more creative when they have ideas. So that's how we got everything together. So, I would say that this is not only my work. It's a pity this time the band is not here because this is something we've created together.

CL: Has there been anything in the process of remaking these songs that surprised you?

CZ: Yeah. Many times. For example, in the beginning we were really stressed out about "I Have a Tale," because we couldn't find a good way to redo this song. I remember I was in Peng Fei's home playing on a keyboard and I found this riff and then Peng Fei added harmonies to it. And then I'm like, "cool, I can sing on it!" And then we found that if we keep the A part in this colour and then we transfer to another key during the bridge, it keeps moving, changing colours intensely. Of course, we didn't get to that point right away, but we were just trying to see how we can make this song develop into a different thing. So that's an example. Also, in "Unavailable Love," the bass player plays a very Afro-Cuban sound, nothing like Chinese [rhythm], but it fits the song really well.

CL: It's nothing like the original!

CZ: Actually, I can tell you a funny thing. I was once performing this song in China. God, it was so embarrassing. There was a woman, she was ever so drunk, and she stood there and shouted, "What the fuck you're singing? You're singing this song completely different! You're not a good singer!" I was shocked! I was like, "Oh no, this was so embarrassing!" But you know, I can understand, because for her, it wasn't exactly how it [should sound]. [laughs]

CL: We're doing this interview for a special issue of *Critical Studies in Improvisation* on sexuality and improvisation.

CZ: This is a very interesting subject!

CL: And a very wide subject—there are many ways we can look at it. When I listened to *Dream Situation*, I noticed that you are singing the songs of famous female singers that were the sex symbols—

CZ: I am a sex symbol too! I am kidding. I am not.

CL: When someone who knows this music listens to the first song on your album, Zhou Xuan comes to mind, and you think about this image of . . .

CZ: Chinese divas!

CL: Yes! We hear a lot how Billie Holiday has influenced you, but what about singers like Zhou Xuan, Bai Guang, and people like that.¹ Can you talk about your take on this female tradition?

CZ: Actually, I did not initially choose these songs because the singers were divas. I chose the songs because, first, I liked them. Second, I've got a high voice and I like female singers . . . I don't know why [laughs]. And for that I just chose those songs. But I think that probably you're right, those songs come from sex symbols and divas from the past.

CL: The lyrics are incredibly suggestive.

CZ: Back then all these songs had lyrics like that. You know, it's all about love, and "don't leave me," "you make me cry," "you make me heart break," and "I don't have food, but I have love." It's not cliché. It's just what it was back then.

CL: Many of the songs are so tragic.

CZ: Yeah! They are.

CL: And so I was thinking about the song "I'm Waiting for You," where the singer is singing, again and again, "I am waiting for you to come back, waiting for you to come back." And of course . . .

CZ: Never comes back! Same in "Unavailable Love": love I can't get but I still look hard for it. Three years and I am waiting for you. In "I Have a Tale," I have a heart broken story and who I can tell it to? Where is my lover? It's all about that. I think that's why people like Shakespeare—because everybody loves tragedy. I think tragedy makes people feel more beautiful.

CL: Hmm, can you talk about that?

CZ: Ah, no you got me! I don't know, I just think . . . For example, when someone gets sad, they don't actually try to get out of it right away. They actually enjoy reminiscing about themselves to feel this heart broken feeling, this candle is going off feeling, the what is going on feeling, and the tears are dropping down feeling. I think it makes people feel more alive. Of course you can't stay there forever. And once you've had enough enjoyment of the sadness then you know how to move on. I think without sadness you can't fully realize happiness.

CL: Earlier, we spoke about nostalgia for Shanghai now, and it seems to me that it has very much to do with the sexuality of Shanghai as a place.

CZ: Okay, I know what you mean. I think Shanghai is a very feminine city. And I think that's why these songs were so well received a long time ago, and these songs are well received nowadays. These songs represent the sexuality of Shanghai, which is feminine. Shanghai, for me, is a spoiled girl. She will turn her face any second. It's a bitch but I love it! It's funny, actually, because these songs are all tragic songs but the real Shanghai nowadays is not tragic at all. She is a really powerful bitch. Anytime it can shock you and make you drop your drawers. But I think deep inside maybe Shanghai still has this little woman complex in it. Like Shanghai is a *xiao nuren*. She's a very sensitive, very emotional. I try not to be like that, actually. [laughs] So, why I am telling you this?

CL: Well, in any city there's the chaos of daily living but also a certain vulnerability because you're exposed in certain ways. This may sound like an odd question, but do you feel exposed when you're singing on stage?

CZ: I used to. Not anymore.

CL: Is it a matter of experience?

CZ: Well, it's part of my life. If I choose this, then I've got to be able to take whatever comes along with it. Nothing is perfect and you just have to take whatever's there.

CL: We've been thinking about improvisation as a technique and as a practice, and how improvisation is always about taking things apart and putting them back together in new ways.

CZ: Not only in music, but also in our real life, daily life. In every moment, you have to improvise. For example, we're improvising talking. We don't have a script. We actually talk to each other spontaneously and respond to each other's sentences. And that's improvisation. And I think everything is improvisation. Of course with music you need certain skill, certain technique, a rich new vocabulary, musically . . . I think it's all the same.

CL: This might be a way to come back to the question of sexuality. Because sexuality in practice is much more improvisatory.

CZ: Definitely. And I think everyone should be more improv . . . improvisative? How do you say the word? I've said something like that in my performances. For example we say that music, playing music, is like making love. It's the same thing.

CL: Can you talk more about that? Are you talking about the bodily experience of making sound?

CZ: You know, I think there are three kinds of people who play music. One, I've heard of musicians who play only by head, and they are just so perfect you can't find any mistakes, you can't find any wrong parts. Another kind plays by heart. Sometimes you go "Oh my God, that's horrible," and sometimes you go, "Wow, how did you do that?" And there is another kind of people . . . There are two explanations: this last style can be played by both heart and brain or can be just played by the sexual . . . genital? Genital, yeah. [laughs] You're like, "What the fuck are you talking about!"

CL: [laughs]

CZ: For example, there is a friend of mine. Her name is Sugar Mama. She's in Shanghai. I love to listen to her sing. She's a blues queen. She's beautiful. She's real, she's powerful. She smokes a lot of cigarettes and she's got a deep voice like this: [mimics] She's like, "Mama's doing you, you loves to sing." No, I am not kidding, really, really beautiful, and powerful. And I think she's one of the last in this style. She uses heart and brain at the same time, and that's why I also think if you play with different people you can feel this. If you use your heart to feel, then it's really like making love. You just find different keys to press and different effects come out.

CL: You received a very specific kind of musical training. Did you feel a desire for freedom during this training?

CZ: At least I felt it. I loved classical music but there were so much limitations in it. You know, you got to be careful with this, be careful with that, or you can't do this you can't do that. Oh, there's another interesting theory I am gonna tell you! When I was studying, my teacher told me that any learning process has three steps. The first one, well, if you are looking at a Chinese ink painting, you don't know where the mountain is, where the water is. You know, it's like wow –I don't have no idea! Then in the second step, you study it and then you realize "Holy shit, the mountain is so high, the water is so deep, the sky is so blue, the birds are so free, the flowers are so red, the grass is so green." And it has so many details you have to pay attention to. And you think, how I am gonna understand all these little details, all these great techniques. And for the third step, we have to go back to the first a step, in which you see . . .

CL: The confusion?

CZ: Exactly. In the last step you will say, "I don't know where the mountain is, and where the water is," but that's based on what you already know. [You know] exactly where they are so you can actually blend them together again. It's the same as when you practice a sword: at the beginning, you practice with it and at the end maybe you don't even have a sword in your hand, but you have a sword in your heart. So you know what exactly [it is] you're doing. But same thing: you've got to know all the limitations. You've got to know where exactly everything [is] before you can break it.

CL: So how do you know when you're singing with your heart?

CZ: I can't say where exactly my heart is but I am trying to keep my heart in a, how do you say that, awareness? For example, if I sing, I always try to focus with my brain on how everything is, where the form is, so I don't get too lost. But at the same time, I am trying to let myself be, let my heart be delightful, so I can fly with my heart and follow what my brain sees. Do I make any sense?

CL: Yeah.

CZ: 'Cause I don't even myself know if I make any sense! [laughs]

CL: You gave an interview in Chinese where you said one thing you're working on is how to lead an ensemble. How do you do that when you're headlining the show?

CZ: I have to say that everybody is part of making the show go. Of course, being a vocalist has advantages because, after all, the vocalist is the front person, so you get more space and more chances to lead the band. But every member of the band is very important, because after all, it's like making love. If I keep pressing your buttons, and you're lying there like [snoring noise], you know, it's no fun. You need to have all the musicians on the same level in order to have mutual understanding about what the music is. That's why, you know, people choose people to play music with, because if you see music totally different from me, we will be having a horrible time! [laughs] You know what I mean? Like I love certain people in Shanghai. They are great and I love to hang out with them, but I'll never play music with them.

CL: Are they musicians?

CZ: They *are* musicians. But they just see music totally different from the way as I see. Of course, people have different requirements. Like, for me, I am an easy-going musician. I can play with any musician, and I don't [accuse] musicians like, "Oh, you're not good" or whatever. But I still have to say that sometimes you need to have mutual understanding music-wise and human-wise. Because then you can actually share your visions, share you imagination and creativities.

CL: Someone once asked Tan Dun, "do you play music or does the music play you?," and I want to ask you the same question.

CZ: Music plays me. Definitely. Music plays me. I think I am just the instrument. You know, some nights, some days, I try so hard, and it comes out shit. You know, and some nights I don't even try. I just open my mouth and just all the gold silver jade comes out from my mouth, naturally, beautifully. I am like "Ah, fuck, I am not me anymore" [laughs]. I don't know who I am, but I am so happy. [laughs]

CL: That's a dream, right?

CZ: Exactly. I think there's no way you can explain why. I mean as a musician you know that too, right. You don't know why, but some nights are like magic. You stand there, you feel your feet are down, like really grabbing the earth, like really tight. I mean you don't even know but it just comes out beautifully and you're like "Wow, it's so beautiful." Sometimes you just go like, "I wanna smash the microphone on the floor or my own head."

CL: Last year we had a conference at UBC where we showed the documentary "Snake Boy." In the film, you were quite open and frank about your own sexuality and your relationships. I don't want to go over the whole film, but watching it now, do you feel different from the person on screen?

CZ: Oh yeah! I hate watching it!

CL: Are there moments when you don't identify with that story?

CZ: Yeah, there are moments. The whole movie, I think, is how *they* see me. It is not really what I am. I mean it's hard to explain *what* is different, how it is different, because, you know, humans are very complex things. You can't just explain them in one or the two words. But I just know that when I watch the movie, I know that it is very far from

what I am. It has pieces of me; I am not denying it's me. It was me. But that was not all of me, and it is not enough of what I was back then.

CL: What do you think is missing?

CZ: I think it's missing some sincerity. I think they really wanted me to be this person who is unique and doing a lot of things which are impossible in China. For example, singing jazz, being gay, being extravagant, and things like that. And, they don't see I can be very shy, I can be very sensitive. I can be helpless, for example. I can be gray. I can be so many other colours, but they didn't see it. They only see me in a pink colour. For me, the movie was a bit of a show-off, a little bit of sourness, and a little bit uncertain. Of course, I have those elements in my life; I am not denying it. We all do. But that's not what I only have. And at the end, I had a bit of a fight with the directors because they were saying, "Oh, we want to shoot you doing this in front of the mirror. Do this to your eyebrows and put some lip balm on your lips in front of the mirror." I was like, "This is not music video clip. This is not any commercial. I don't do whatever you tell me to do. If this is a documentary, go find the moments you can find. Don't ask me to act moments that you want me to be. It's not fair." So I had a big fight. And they were like, "But in the movies you sometimes have to create art." I said, "Well, this is not an art work; this is about my life. So you can't ask me to act my life out of your fucking artwork. It's not fun."

CL: Was this your experience throughout the whole filming of the documentary?

CZ: It got more and more intense at the end. They followed me for a year. At the beginning I thought it was cool. At the end I hated it. I wanted to punch them all the time. But, you know, I don't really hate them now. I hated them back then, but now I don't blame them. I just think it was stupid to let myself get into a vulnerable situation where I wasn't thinking clearly enough for myself. I think if I was more mature, if I was more thoughtful, I could [have] known that these people, the directors, don't have ability to capture the shining parts of me or let's say more angles of me. It's not about [what] they didn't want to. They don't have ability. So I think, I mean, they can only do what they can do.

CL: When we watched the film here, the audience definitely noticed the explicit sexuality. What is interesting of course is that whenever you put any form of sexuality together with China in the West . . .

CZ: It's like "Aaaah!"

CL: And of course it's true for femininity and for queer cultures as well.

CZ: I think the directors are *lieqi xinli*, curiosity mongers. They don't really understand what's going on underneath. They just wanted to show the surface, which might shock people, which might catch people's attention. But I think that's called being opportunist. You know, like there are so many things in so many different layers, and so many different truths under the surface, and if you don't go dig into it, I don't think you will get any further or deeper.

Of course, everybody wants to see a movie that they can understand or label so they can easily categorize or recognize what it's about. But I still have to say that no one is going to understand or know the real thing [behind the movie].

CL: But has this film helped you build an audience in the West?

CZ: Actually, in this case, I have to say thanks to the two directors of the movie as well as what has happened in my past, because they have given me a chance to perform in the West. People have actually treated me really well. I mean, I don't know how they really think, but from what I see, they've really liked me. [Now] they really respect me and like my work as well, and they have given me great support. And I think that some of that comes from watching the movie, so in this case, the movie has brought me great advantages.

CL: I was very struck by a statement that came up several times in the film: "He's not a man, he's not a woman, he's a dream." Of course there's a gender subtext there, but I am also interested in how the idea of dreams comes up in your work.

CZ: Yeah, that's crazy, ah?

CL: Well, as you said in your performance, we all have dreams, we all have visions and aspirations for our lives.

CZ: Why is mine continuously non-stop? I don't know. I think I am a Pisces. That's one explanation! [laughs] Which I cannot explain. So I leave to nature and leave it to the god who can decide for me. I just love dreams. Actually, this was not from me, but from a really old French woman. She said that I am not a man, I am not a woman, I am a dream.

CL: How did you feel when you heard that?

CZ: I was really happy. I was like "Wow, beautiful." [laughs] I was really glad to hear that.

CL: Can you talk about what you mean by dream?

CZ: Yeah, I don't know, I just have this special thing for dreams. For example, I always get touched by *Zhuang-zi mengdie* and his story.² Sometimes I really don't know: am I a human being dreaming he's in another world, or am I, was, some another creature dreaming I am a human being talk to you right now. Maybe *this* is a dream. You never know what is reality, what is a dream. And there are so many movies and art works trying to define this subject. Actually, I can remember most of my dreams vividly. I remember every one of them in my head. I tell people my dreams and they are like, "That's fucked up. Oh my god! That is crazy."

CL: There's a line in Zhuang-zi's story where he's incredibly happy with his dream. He's ecstatic, but exactly at the moment he wakes up. So it's such an interesting story, because there's this sadness at the end, this confusion about not [being] able to stay in a dream.

CZ: That's it. You know, that word explains everything: confusion. I am totally into confusion. I always think that there's something I can question, and I always think there are many, many answers. I think that explains why I like dreams. I just think that there are many things in our lives we can question and we can be answering in different forms, in different ways. And, I think, that's why I like dreams. 'Cause these are things we actually cannot explain. And that's why I love it. A lot of people don't like things without explanation, but I love things without explanation. Actually, I think that the most *real* things have no explanation. When I talk to you about my life, I see different things in my life. You know, I always think that a lot of times, you don't see yourself clearly until you actually talk to someone. Like a mirror, you can say, "Oh, there are certain things that I haven't seen about myself yet." Like, I realize now, I am a big confusion [laughs]. Which I love!

Special thanks to Kristin Fung and the Coastal Jazz and Blues Society for making this interview possible, and to Tomasz Michalak for the transcription.

Notes

¹ Zhou Xuan and Bai Guang were two of the most popular singers from Shanghai before the Communist revolution in 1949. Although their music was banned for a long time after 1949, they retained their popularity among Chinese outside the Mainland. After China embarked on reforms after the death of Mao Zedong, they regained their popularity. For a discussion of the popular music of early twentieth century Shanghai, see Andrew Jones (*Yellow Music: Media Culture and Colonial Modernity in the Chinese Jazz Age*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2001).

² *Zhuang-zi mengdie* (Zhuang-zi Dreams He is Butterfly) is one of the most famous stories attributed to the ancient sage Zhuang-zi, whose writings form an important part of the Taoist tradition. Translated by Burton Watson, the story is as follows: "Once [Zhuang-zi] dreamt he was a butterfly, a butterfly flitting and fluttering around, happy with himself and doing as he pleased. He didn't know he was [Zhuang-zi]. Suddenly, he woke up and there he was, solid and unmistakable [Zhuang-zi]. But he didn't know if he was [Zhuang-zi] who had dreamt he was a butterfly, or a butterfly dreaming he was [Zhuang-zi]. Between [Zhuang-zi] and a butterfly there must be *some* distinction! This is called the Transformation of Things" (Watson, Burton. *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu* [Zhuang-zi]. New York: Columbia UP, 1968. 49).