

KENNESAW STATE UNIVERSITY ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW WITH MING CHEN

CONDUCTED, EDITED, AND INDEXED BY THOMAS A. SCOTT

for the

KSU ORAL HISTORY SERIES, NO. 129

MONDAY, 5 OCTOBER 2015

Kennesaw State University holds legal title and all literary property rights, including copyright, to this oral history. It is not to be reproduced without permission from the director of the Kennesaw State University Oral History Project.

Kennesaw State University Oral History Project  
KSU Oral History Series, No. 129  
Interview with Ming Chen  
Conducted, edited, and indexed by Thomas A. Scott  
Monday, 5 October 2015  
Location: Social Sciences Building, Kennesaw State University

TS: Professor Chen won the 2015 KSU Foundation Distinguished Research Award in Artistic and Creative Activities. Ming, why don't we begin by you talking about your background, where you grew up and where you went to school? I know you received two of your degrees in Shanghai before you came to the United States.

MC: I was born and grew up in Shanghai, China. Before I got my B.F.A. and M.F.A. degrees from Shanghai Theatre Academy, I studied three years in drawing, painting and needlepoint tapestry design at Shanghai School of Fine and Applied Arts. I love art, but it's interesting that I went to that school not because of my love for art but because I was denied access to other places such as Shanghai University of Foreign Language and Shanghai publishing houses. We didn't have national standard exams for placement after our graduation from high school back then. My teacher liked me enough to recommend me to these places, but I was repeatedly turned down. During the Cultural Revolution, those places were closed off to people like myself, who were born to a descendent of a landlord and who had an uncle living in the United States.

TS: Your father was . . . ?

MC: An engineer, the son of a landlord. During the Cultural Revolution, you know, there were so-called Black Families and Red Families, and my family was considered to be Black.

TS: Because you're capitalists?

MC: Because my father was born into a landlord's family, and also because my father's brother was in the United States at the time.

TS: So you're five or six or seven when the Cultural Revolution gets underway?

MC: I was 11 when the Cultural Revolution started in 1966. It lasted for 10 years. During that time, you know, publishing houses and foreign language schools were reserved for the people who were born in the Red Families, so that the sons and daughters of Red Families could eventually become diplomats, or someone in charge of propaganda media. . .

TS: A "Red Family" means totally supportive of the Communist revolution?

MC: No, Red Family meant a family of farmers and factory workers. My father supported the revolution at the time. No one would dare to say that they wouldn't support the Cultural Revolution. Besides, they didn't understand what the Cultural Revolution actually was at that time. My teacher was wondering why I couldn't be accepted to the places she recommended me to, and asked me if I had a family history that tied it to this. I didn't

know that could be a reason until then. I said, “Oh, yes!” You know, I was discriminated against.

TS: But you didn’t know?

MC: I didn’t know until my teacher asked me, “I sent you to these places; why did they reject you?” So I told my teacher about my family, and my teacher understood and then sent me to an art school. That’s how I started art because art school didn’t have restrictions on those from questionable families. I had always liked art when I was young. I liked singing, dancing, and drawing. So I was happy at that time, and I studied three years of art in that school. After graduation, I was invited to remain in the school teaching. I felt that I wasn’t ready to teach. So I was sent to a factory that produces needlepoint tapestry. Yes, I was trained as a designer as well as a craftsman. So I designed and made needlepoint tapestries for two years. When the Cultural Revolution was over, we were allowed to apply to universities. This was the first year after the Cultural Revolution. Shanghai Theatre Academy started to accept people, regardless of their family history, who passed national standard exams and scored well in the specialty exams. So this was the opening of the door for people like myself.

TS: What’s the history of Shanghai Theatre Academy?

MC: It was established in the 1950s and was one of the two top training programs in higher education for theatre professionals in China. I didn’t intend to learn theatre. I intended to study drawing and painting. I loved drawing and painting and design. This was one of a few schools in Shanghai that was offering drawing and painting classes at that time. We didn’t have fine art schools on the college level in Shanghai back then.

TS: Oh, so it had to be applied to the theatre or something like that?

MC: Yes, so I went to the school and got sucked into theatre. I remember I took an entrance exam, which consisted of national standard exams as well as the specialty tests, like subject tests, in drawing and painting. There were like eight hundred people who applied that year. The Academy only accepted thirty.

TS: Eight hundred and they only took thirty?

MC: Yes. There were not many universities in China. Usually the Academy only took fifteen each year, but that was the first year after the Cultural Revolution that the Academy had opened to the public to accept people from all kinds of backgrounds.

TS: All over the country?

MC: Yes, all over the country. I was lucky to get in. In an interview before acceptance, they asked me if I really wanted to be a stage designer—because the job was tough for women. It’s challenging not only physically but also psychologically, for the stage design profession in China was primarily a MAN’s world. But I said, “Yes, I like the challenge because I love art.” They eventually accepted two girls into the program, and I was one of them.

- TS: What would the physically challenging part be? You have to put things up as well design them?
- MC: Yes, painting and designing and getting involved. You know how much energy it takes to put a show together. It's not all that you do; other people work with you as a team. But you are the leader of the team to make it happen. So it was physically challenging, and most of the time after a show I would be sick—not during the show because you are so involved and could not afford to be sick.
- TS: But you collapsed afterwards.
- MC: Yes, after that I always collapsed. But I got used to it. That's the nature of theatre. You concentrate on things while putting the show together, but after the opening everybody collapses like that.
- TS: I understand. I used to do that at the end of every quarter when we were still on the quarter system. I'd be fine until it ended, and then I'd collapse for a week.
- MC: Yes, so I studied in the Academy for four years.
- TS: So another four years to get a bachelor's degree.
- MC: Bachelor's degree. At that time China didn't have a system of job application like the one in here. They just send you to a place to work. Your job was secured because it was so selective to get into the Academy. Every company wanted you after you graduated. I was sent to a theatre company to do the designs, and I was there for a couple of years. Then I applied for graduate school at the Academy. It's interesting that several people took the exams again, but I was the only one accepted into the Stage Design program that year—not because I was better than everybody else, but because I was the only one amongst the applicants who passed the national exam in English.
- TS: How did you learn English if they wouldn't let you take English earlier on?
- MC: I just learned. I mean, during the undergraduate program, they taught English. You know, after the Cultural Revolution, the nation opened its door to the world.
- TS: Well, I think of Shanghai as being the connection to the world and all the world coming through there.
- MC: Yes, it's a port city.
- TS: It's long been a prosperous city, hasn't it?
- MC: Certainly among Chinese cities. It's the cultural center and commercial center of China. Beijing is the political center, so it's different, but Shanghai is always welcoming.
- TS: What happened to the grandfather that was the landlord when the revolution took place?
- MC: Oh, he died a long time ago, when my father was three. It was a long time ago, but our family had a horrible experience during the Cultural Revolution because of him. They didn't look at what you do that much. They looked instead at your family history to

decide what your future was going to be. That was my background. Then I took the exams to go to the graduate school; it was a two-and-a-half year program. I graduated from there, and I was the first one in Chinese history to get that degree.

TS: First woman?

MC: Not the first woman, first one.

TS: First one, ever?

MC: Yes, to get that particular degree, stage design and theory. I felt that I was blessed all the time. I graduated and . . .

TS: So that brings us up to 1985 then when you get your degree.

MC: Yes. I remained in school teaching, but at that time, because I studied Western theatre, I was thinking maybe I should go to the West to see and experience what the real Western theater is—because the Shanghai Theatre Academy was the training program that focused on Western theater style—what they call spoken drama. In China we have Chinese opera of different kinds, and then we have Western spoken drama. It seems that it's all spoken, but China . . .

TS: Does it make a difference in theatre design? Are there different types of designs?

MC: Yes, completely different—the traditional designs. But we later tried to explore different ways to come together these two kinds of traditions, the East and the West. At that time it was as if Eastern theatre designs were very simplistic—Chinese traditional theatres focused on actors art, but not on stage design. Stage designs were usually minimal, symbolic, and versatile on Chinese traditional stages. The Western theatre was most represented by realism to us, but we also started to see some abstract designs in the books. When I came over, I saw a lot of different Western theatre styles. I mean, Westerners was trying to mingle the East and the West and to produce new kinds of theatre.

TS: Okay, 1985 you got your MFA in stage design and theory, and then you started thinking about coming to the West.

MC: I applied for PhD program at the University of Pittsburgh and I was accepted.

TS: Did you have any trouble, after the government had spent so much money on your education, with the authorities wanting to keep you in China?

MC: Yes, they did. My husband was invited to give a solo exhibition in one of the galleries in New York. He left for the U.S. before I left. He was teaching in China at the Academy as well before he left. So the school official said to me, “Why don't you wait until your husband comes back, and then we will let you go?”

TS: In other words they're saying, “We want to make sure you come back.”

MC: Yes, that's true. I didn't spend a penny on my education in China, so that's what made me feel later that I needed to give back to China in one way or another. Sometimes I

would buy books to bring back to the Academy or go back to lecture in China. Sometime, I would host artists and visiting scholars from China for professional and academic purposes. Now I'm a columnist for "Arts Trends USA," a fixed column in *EPerformance*, which is a refereed journal in China. It publishes six issues each year in both online and print forms. So necessarily I write, but I also encourage others in the United States to contribute to the column. So you see, I am trying to give back somehow to help to build the new China. Coming back to my story, I went to Beijing to the Ministry of Culture and said, "You have a policy allowing us to go abroad. Why don't you let me go?" They admitted that this was the policy. So, the school officials finally allowed me to come to the United States to study.

TS: Why the University of Pittsburgh?

MC: I didn't know of many universities. My sister was applying to the University of Pittsburgh to study over there. I looked at the catalog, and thought, "Oh, there's a theatre program there. So I applied and was accepted. I told the professor "I don't have American dollars to pay the application fee." They waived my application fee. I thought, "Well, they liked me and treated me well." So I just went there. I studied under a professor who brought me to the U.S. I was accepted into the PhD program before I arrived in the U.S., however, the University of Pittsburgh did not accept all of the credits I received in China. So, I had to take a bunch of classes in theory and criticism in order to start my PhD program. After about two years, I received a letter from the Academy asking me to make a choice either to go back to China right away or to give away my teaching position in the Academy. I thought it was a reasonable request from the Academy, knowing that many people were waiting in line to get this position. However, it would take me at least two more years to get my PhD degree, but if I didn't get a PhD degree, it would be embarrassing for me to go back to China. So, I decided to stay in the U.S. This was my conscious choice, but under such a circumstance. Then, I had to rethink what I wanted to do in the U.S.

I thought. "Maybe if I stay in the United States, I don't need a PhD degree. If I do pursue a PhD, I may not be able to get a job, and then I couldn't go back, and I couldn't stay." That was how I gave up on the PhD. Besides, I liked design, and the PhD, I found out, was not in theatrical design, but was in theatre history and criticism. There are only two schools that offer a PhD in theatrical design in the U.S. One is Stanford, and the other is Harvard. I didn't even think to apply to those places, so I just gave up. I thought, "Maybe I can find a job after I graduate from the University of Pittsburgh."

TS: So if you had been in a PhD program at Pittsburgh it wouldn't have been theatre design, right?

MC: No, it would be in theatre history and criticism.

TS: Right. And you didn't want that much history.

MC: I like history but I'm more of a creative person, I like writing but not as much as designing.

TS: But the MFA is really regarded as the terminal degree if you're going to do . . .

MC: Design. Yes, I got a terminal degree. I don't need a PhD degree if I stay here. I don't need another degree, but I got another master's from the University of Pittsburgh.

TS: Any mentors along the way that you want to talk about that helped you?

MC: Yes, there were a lot of mentors, of course, that helped me along the way. There were official mentors. My graduate advisor in China was a very distinguished professional in our field. He was a theorist/practitioner of stage design. He was named one of a dozen national distinguished scholars. After I came to the United States, he came over. I asked him to lecture at the University of Pittsburgh and translated for him. Then when he went back, he became the president of Shanghai Theatre Academy.

TS: Is that right?

MC: Yes. So he was very distinguished and very well known.

TS: What's his name?

MC: Hu Miao Sheng. He taught me about stage design and how to rationalize the design practice into theory. He was a good teacher and my mentor and graduate advisor. Another mentor of mine was in Pittsburgh was my graduate advisor at UP. She is a well-known figure also. She wrote a book titled *Rhythm in Drama* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 1980). She gave it to me, and I still have it. But she also wrote dozens of published novels, and they are popular novels. She is most known for a series of detective novels.

TS: Detective novels?

MC: Oh, crime novels set in Pittsburgh. Yes, she brought me into the U.S., and I look up to her as a mentor. She's a strong woman and very successful not only in theatre, but also in other areas such as writing.

TS: What's her name?

MC: Dr. Kathleen [E.] George.

TS: I'll have to look up her crime novels.

MC: Yes. And then there are a lot of unofficial mentors. My husband was sort of a mentor for me. He is five years older than me, and we met in Shanghai Worker's Palace. At that time I was working in the factory. I went to Worker's Palace to continue to study art, and he was the teacher over there. So we met, and we talked a lot about designing and painting, color theory, and even philosophy. Yes, he influenced me quite a bit at that time. Then we got married.

TS: What's his name?

MC: His name is Zhen-Huan Lu. He's a skilled painter, and he was later teaching at the Shanghai Theatre Academy as well. After he moved to the United States, he became a

freelance artist. He was represented by a gallery in New York, and later was invited by First Lady Laura Bush to paint for the official White House Christmas...

TS: Christmas card?

MC: Christmas card. So we went to the White House to meet the president, and we had pictures with the President and First Lady.

TS: What year was that?

MC: In 2002.

TS: Okay, pretty soon after Bush became president then. About the second year I guess.

MC: Yes. I also had a mentor at Pittsburgh who was a designer. His name was Henry Heymann. I learned a lot about design and scene painting from him. .

TS: How did he influence you?

MC: Actually, I was the assistant to him for a lot of shows. I painted for those shows, and he taught me how to paint, and I learned about design by watching him designing. He sometimes told me why he made those choices, and I learned a lot by hands-on working with him. Also, he was a pretty good practitioner. He worked a lot, non-stop—a workaholic. So he influenced me that way as well.

TS: So you're a workaholic?

MC: Yes, I was; and I am still is. He actually has a theatre at the University of Pittsburgh named after him.

TS: Oh, the Henry Heymann Theatre.

MC: Yes. He was there for forty years in the University of Pittsburgh doing designs. Then, when I designed for the Alliance Theatre in Atlanta, I had another mentor, Marjorie Bradley Kellogg (1922 - 2005), who was assigned by Kenny Leon to me.

TS: What was the theatre?

MC: The Alliance Theatre in Atlanta. It's the best theatre in the region. The Artistic Director of Cornell University liked my design and recommended me to Kenny Leon, the Artistic Director for the Alliance Theatre then [1988 - 2000], to design for the Alliance. So I designed for them. But I was still young, so Kenny Leon assigned a mentor to me, and that was Marjorie Kellogg. She was very well-known—dozens of Broadway design credits. She designed a lot of shows for the Alliance Theatre [between 1992 and 2001]. She was my mentor for that production, and I learned a lot from her advice and comments, and I was really appreciative of that. Beyond being a designer, she was also a screenwriter. She ended up being better known as a screenwriter than as a designer. Just think how talented this lady was.

TS: I guess so.



MC: She's a woman, and Broadway designs alone make her so well-known and distinctive, but she later on kept writing novels and writing screen plays and non-stop. It's an inspiration to me. These are the mentors that helped me along the way and inspired me in different ways.

TS: Okay. They gave you an MA degree at Pittsburgh in theatrical production and then you started looking for a job, I guess, in '89?

MC: Yes, I looked around, and there was a job in the Shakespeare Theatre at Folger in Washington, D.C. posted in the Chronicle of Higher Education. With the recommendation from Dr. Buck Favorini of the University of Pittsburgh, I applied. They offered me the position of their first ever resident scenic artist.

TS: So you're painting scenery at the Folger Theatre?

MC: I was a charge painter, painting sceneries at the Folger Theatre for a year. The second year I felt that I missed the academic environment as I had been there for most of my life. I thought I liked the environment and doing research and being creative but also writing and teaching. So I applied and got into the State University of New York at Buffalo. I taught over there.

TS: Right. So the 1990-91 school year you were at State University of New York at Buffalo.

MC: Yes, but it wasn't a tenure-track position. SUNY at Buffalo offered me another contract the next year, but I decided I would apply at KSU.

TS: Right. But you wanted a tenure-track job.

MC: Exactly, because by that time, I had a daughter and was looking for stability in my life.

TS: And you probably froze that one year in Buffalo.

MC: Exactly. There are several reasons I came to KSU; that was one of the reasons. My daughter was sick a lot with four months of snow in Buffalo that year. I thought maybe I needed to move to a warmer place. She got asthma and was coughing a lot. Plus Kennesaw was growing.

TS: Right, we were about 10,000 students at that time.

MC: That's right—but new buildings everywhere. I saw the potential for growth, and I saw the possibility of shaping my own environment because I was the second KSU hiree in theatre. You may know Kurt [Curtis D.] Daw—Kurt was the first one hired in theatre, and I was the second one. So whatever we did would shape the department. We didn't even have a department at the time. We were under the umbrella of Music and Performing Arts.

TS: Right. Was Joe [Joseph D.] Meeks the department chair?

MC: No, no. Wayne . . .

TS: Oh, [R.] Wayne Gibson?

- MC: Yes, Wayne Gibson, that's right. So I saw the possibility of shaping the environment instead of going to a more established environment where everything was set and you just followed the rules. Those sorts of thing excited me—the possibility of growing and shaping the environment.
- TS: Right. I don't know whether it's true anymore, but for years and years that was the main draw of Kennesaw for a lot of people, to do things from the beginning.
- MC: Yes, everything was possible. If you thought of something, you asked for it, you tried hard, and you might get it. So that was it, and the weather, of course, and the place is so close to metro Atlanta; so, the possibility of designing over there, and also the budget. I think Dr. [Betty L.] Siegel was very supportive of art. She used to be in a theatre club while she was studying in the university, and she liked theatre and put money into the KSU theatre program to make it grow. That was very good because then your work was supported. The budget for the shows at that time in Buffalo was very low. There was a financial crisis that year. They originally called it state-supported, then state-assisted, and then it became all yours.
- TS: From state-supported to state-assisted?
- MC: Yes, we only had \$800 for a show in the stage design area. The budget here was at least \$2,000 at that time and \$3,000 later. I remember I designed the first production in Stillwell Theatre.
- TS: Oh, the first one ever?
- MC: The first one ever in the Stillwell Theatre.
- TS: Was that 1993 or about then?
- MC: Yes, it was 1992 for Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. I had a very innovative design. Kurt liked it. The budget was not quite enough. He asked for more, so we got more budget. That was exciting! Those sorts of things that happened at KSU could not possibly happen in Buffalo.
- TS: So if you're putting on something like *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and you've got a \$2,000 or \$3,000 budget, what is the money going for?
- MC: I designed a magical forest, an enchanted forest, by using acrylic pipes, hundreds of them, flying in at different moments and in different places. At the beginning it was a chandelier. When it was all lit up the shape looked like a chandelier in the court scene. And then in the woods some parts came down. The money we got covers the material cost of the design. I designed the costumes for that show as well because I was the only designer back then. It was a full time job.
- TS: But you didn't have to pay for the costumes out of that budget did you?
- MC: No, it was for the set.
- TS: Okay, because I was thinking that would really start adding up.

- MC: Yes. Props, but not costumes, sometimes belong to scenic budget. If you have a separate prop budget that would be great. We now have a separate budget for lighting, for props, and for costumes.
- TS: So you applied in '91. Were you applying other places too?
- MC: There weren't many openings. I got the contract from the University of Buffalo. Then I thought of moving. I applied probably at another place; I don't remember what it was. I didn't get it, but Kurt offered me a contract, and so I decided to come over here.
- TS: So you had a choice between staying up in Buffalo and freezing with no money and no tenure or coming down here and being in the tenure-track job?
- MC: Yes, he told me they would offer me the highest salary at assistant professor rank that year. That was very nice—not just that the money was good, but it looked like they liked me.
- TS: Right. So you came down here, and hopefully your daughter's asthma got better.
- MC: My daughter's asthma was cured later, after she went to Walker School in Marietta. Yes, the teacher asked her to practice a lot, running, you know. That actually helped a lot. Then it didn't come back.
- TS: Good. So you moved here in '91. At that time you were part of the music department with Wayne Gibson as the Chair, and I guess Wayne didn't stay as department chair too much longer after that did he?
- MC: Quite a while.
- TS: Did he?
- MC: Yes, and then it was Joe.
- TS: Joe Meeks. So small department, and you got to do things your way and helped to build the program. Why don't you talk about Kennesaw and the opportunity for creative activities and scholarship? You wrote a book along the way fairly recently entitled *Visual Literacy for Theatre* (2011). Talk a little about how Kennesaw has grown and the culture has changed and maybe opportunities for more scholarship have grown as time has gone on.
- MC: Yes. Kennesaw is a really good place to stay. I didn't plan to stay as long. I thought I would move after my daughter grew up a little. At that time I was thinking that, but the more I stayed the more I liked it because Kennesaw helped nurture and support the creativity and the research. That has been the environment. Always I was supported along the way—although it could have been more because teaching is always the central mission of Kennesaw State University. The workload for the faculty member is that you have to always teach many classes. The time that's left is limited, but I always tried to find a way to get grants or time release to do something.
- TS: Some grants?

MC: Yes.

TS: They gave you released time?

MC: Yes, we always got releases for our creative productions in theatre.

TS: Oh, okay.

MC: Yes, it was supported that way, although it could be more as we move towards being a research university. I think the workload of the teachers should be released more, so that we have more time to do research and creative activities. One is workload and the other is funding. Most of the funds go into scholarship of teaching. I see a lot of support from CETL that has those grants, but I wish we could have more for pure research or creative activity of faculty. I know we are always supported along the way. If we were not supported, I would not be here. I feel, yes, the intellectual climate of the university is vibrant. We have a lot of things happening on campus all the time—you know, paper presentations, book clubs, theatre performances, the art exhibitions, music performances... all the time. If you want to be really involved, you could be very busy all the time. So the climate is good, and it's moving towards more of a research institution.

TS: So in terms of intellectual climate you saw a vibrant climate when you first arrived in '91? Or was this something that evolved?

MC: In the first few year at KSU, I was so absorbed into production and teaching, I didn't pay much attention to what was happening in the rest of the world—because we had only two people, and we produced three plays each year.

TS: Well, we were still on the quarter system when you arrived.

MC: Yes, I think so. I didn't have a chance to pay attention to what was going on around me. I think also one of the distinctive features of our university was the international, global education. I was on the study abroad council. I brought students to places in China as well as in the UK.

TS: Our involvement in study abroad was just getting started when you arrived here, wasn't it?

MC: Yes. Actually, I was the first one at KSU who brought a group of students to perform overseas.

TS: That you took overseas?

MC: Yes, I took a group of students and faculty members to participate in the Shanghai Theatre International Festival.

TS: So this would be back right shortly after you got here?

MC: No, in 2005. That was the Year of China at KSU, and I proposed it and wrote the grant proposal. We got a gift from Coca-Cola Foundation, and we also get some funds from Shanghai Theatre Academy to support our travel and performance there. Thousands of

people in China saw our performing a play [*Monkey King*] that was adapted from a famous Chinese novel [*Journey to the West* by Wu Cheng'en]. We do it with our American spin, so it was interesting. We were well received over there, and we got a lot of visibility through newspaper reports and reviews both in China and in the United States.

TS: I did an interview last year with Margaret Baldwin.

MC: Yes, Baldwin was the writer.

TS: That's the one you're talking about?

MC: The adaptation, yes. Karen Robinson was the director of that. But I was the project director. I applied for funding and brought them over there.

TS: Oh, so that's how it happened?

MC: And I designed costumes and the set for that show as well. That was one of the projects that got grants.

TS: I've done an interview with Karen Robinson as well.

MC: I noticed it in the e-mail you sent me. Another project we did for the Year of China was on the works of a former classmate of mine who died in 2000. Both of us studied at Shanghai Fine and Applied Arts as well as Shanghai Theatre Academy. He later went to France and then became a contemporary visual artist, exhibiting his works in museums throughout the world. He would do installations that fused Eastern and Western sensibilities. Upon his premature death in 2000, his widow asked me to translate his last writings, so I got his material. He produced dozens of books and catalogs during his lifetime, and sometimes he would send them to me. I felt that I was familiar with his works and loved them. So when Roberta and Suzanne approached me for the planning of The Year of China, I said to them, "We can bring Chen Zhen's work to represent Chinese artists in diasporas." Do you know Roberta?

TS: Roberta Griffin?

MC: Yes, Griffin, the director of KSU art galleries, and Suzanne Talbott, who was the curator of the galleries back then.

TS: What's the artist's name?

MC: His name is Chen Zhen. So they reviewed his books and catalogues and Googled his works and said, "Yes, let's do that, and let's apply for funding." They asked me if I would like to be the project director. I agreed. So we applied to the National Endowment for the Arts, and this was the first national endowment that we received since the inception of the College of the Arts. It was also the first national endowment the Department of Visual Arts ever received.

TS: The first?

MC: Yes, the first. The College of the Arts was established in 2005 from the School of the Arts that had been created in 1998. After the project was completed, I wrote a nine-page summary report, and the department of Visual Arts got a call from NEA, asking “Can you apply again?” So, the Visual Arts Department applied and got the second one.

TS: How about that?

MC: Yes. They probably were impressed with what we did for that exhibition. Chen Zhen’s exhibition attracted about 3,000 people. We had lectures and gallery talks built around it. I knew Chen Zhen's wife and through her we contacted scholars of Chen's art, including gallery and museum directors from Paris, New York, and San Gimignano [Italy]. Chen Zhen’s assistant later on became P.S.1’s director for exhibitions, and we invited him from New York. The one from Paris was a scholar of Chen's work, a curator for many international art events including the Venice Biennale. He was working with Chen Zhen all the time. We also invited the director of Galleria Continua, a prominent contemporary art gallery that represents Chen Zhen's work, and a Chinese scholar working at Leeds University in the United Kingdom for the Year of China.

TS: So this became part of the “Year of China”?

MC: Yes. The following year was the “Year of France”; Chen Zhen was living and working in Paris before he died. So it was all connected. We had a series of lectures and gallery talks, and we had the exhibition of Chen Zhen's installation, that went in conjunction with each other. The project was very successful. In 2006, seven hundred people attended the lectures and gallery talks.

TS: Where did you hold the lectures?

MC: We had them in the Stillwell Theatre, in the University Rooms and in the art galleries.

TS: Oh, in the Carmichael Student Center.

MC: Yes. So it was in connection with the “Year of” cultural studies.

TS: And this was before we had the Bailey Performance Center, right?

MC: Yes, before that. We got an NEA grant, and we also got a grant from Georgia Humanities Council.

TS: I was going to ask about that.

MC: Yes. And we also got funds from the French Consulate in Atlanta, the Cultural Services of the French Embassy.

TS: The French Embassy?

MC: Yes.

TS: Right. I noticed that you’ve done some things with the Confucius Institute on campus here too. What have you done with them?

MC: Yes. When I do something related to Chinese culture and arts, they always support me. One of the things that we did, which is almost published, is a sixty-seven minutes digital film. We've got the contract signed by the president of TMW Media Group, Inc., but we haven't signed it yet. We need to do the final editing. I worked with hundreds of people in China and the United States to produce this educational program. This film was shot in China. I had colleagues who worked with me. I had interns from other universities. We went to China to stay for ten days. We worked with the people from China Central Television. We got private funds, a grant from KSU [Division of] Global Initiatives and a grant from the Confucius Institute. It was about \$60,000 total. That was not a big budget for a film project, but still big for us and we will be completing the project within the budget. We went to different places in China, including Kunming, Xishuangbanna, Xianggelila, Mongolia, Beijing, and I ended finishing up the shooting in Shanghai. The team took ten days to shoot the footage, and then we came back to KSU to edit. That was done in 2012. This educational program was used in various classes at KSU since then. Because we intended to publish the program, but we could not shoot all the dance performances we included in the programs during our ten-day stay in China, we had to resolve the copyright issues for archival footage and music we used in the program.

TS: Copyrights?

MC: Yes, copyrights which stopped us to publish the program for years. But now the issues are resolved and the program will be ready for publication in about two weeks.

TS: What's the title going to be?

MC: It's titled *The Heritage of Chinese Culture and Dance*. It is a sixty-seven-minute program that focused on Chinese culture and dance. Probably after publication we will seek the possibility of airing it on TV programs. It was a good practice for me to familiarize myself with motion pictures, because when I wrote *Visual Literacy for Theatre* that was only for still images. I wanted to expand the topic to include motion pictures.

TS: That's the textbook?

MC: That's a textbook published in 2011, which we have been using in our design classes, but my projects have always related to research and writing. After this film project, it will be something that is added to that textbook, a section on motion picture. I was intending to use this project as a ground for experimentation, so that I can understand motion picture a bit deeper, and I learned quite a bit from our cinematographer, who works in CCTV.

TS: I know that you've had your works displayed all over the world.

MC: Yes, my designs.

TS: Could you talk about that?

MC: Yes, my table works, including co-designs, were seen in Prague Quadrennial, the most prestigious theatrical design exhibitions in the world, and in Los Angeles, Beijing,

Shanghai and Tokyo. For exhibition in Prague, my colleagues and I received an honorary award from PQ.

TS: What is table work?

MC: Table works are drawings, renderings, drafting and models a designer does to prepare for the performances. Some of them are realized in actual performances, others may not. Aside from the exhibitions of my table works, there are performances that my designs are part of. I have designed for performances shown in metro Atlanta theatres such as The Alliance Theatre, Atlanta Ballet, Horizon Theatre, 7 Stages, and Theatre in the Square. I designed for performances shown in Pittsburgh, PA, Deer Field, MA, and, the Kennedy Center American College Dance Festival gala performances in New York City and Washington D.C. I have also designed for performances that went overseas, such as the Edinburgh Festival Fringe in Scotland, U.K., which is the largest theatre festival in the world, Shanghai International Arts Festival in Shanghai, China, which is the largest arts festival in Asia, Shanghai Theatre festival and many cities in India and in China National Theatre.

TS: Oh, so they're not looking just at your design, but it's part of a performance?

MC: Oh, yes, indeed.

TS: This may be a naïve question, but you think a painter paints something that will last forever. But in theatre I imagine a lot of what you do is taken down once the play is over, and nobody ever looks at it again.

CM; This is a quite insightful question in my view, because you hit on the ephemeral aspect of what live theatre is about. Yes, it's sad.

TS: I was going to ask about that. I guess the table works maybe are something you can display that lasts longer, but that has to be hard to think that your designs are temporary.

MC: Exactly. We work so hard, and all of these productions only lasts a few days or a few weeks. And theatre only exists when they present in front of an audience. Table works are designer's works, but they are not theatre. The theatre experience can only exist at the moment.

TS: I guess to some people scenery is the background, and they're not paying attention to all the effort that you put into it.

MC: Correct. People don't even notice all that we do. Sometimes I sit there in the theatre, looking at a part of the scenery and saying to myself, "Oh, I didn't make that right. If I had more time, I could have corrected that" ... Like someone is going to notice that...only me, right?

TS: I guess my naïve question is, do you save these stage designs after a play is over or do you take them down and throw them away?

MC: You mean the actual scenery? Yes, after it is built and performed, sometimes if some parts are worth keeping, we keep them in the shop. But the storage room is so limited,



and scenery occupies the space. So we can't really afford to save a lot of these things. It's very sad.

TS: I guess you at least photograph them before you take them down?

MC: Yes, I do take photographs. Over the years I have thousands of pictures. These remind me of the shows I've done.

TS: Right. What did you do for Theatre in the Square?

MC: I designed three of their productions. I even got an award for the best set design of the year in Theatre in the Square. It was for *The Night of the Iguana*. I also did designs for *Uncle Vanya* and *The Far East*, which is set in Japan.

TS: You were talking about released time being important for more scholarship. How has that evolved as the years have gone by at Kennesaw? I guess you were teaching a full load when you started. In the quarter system that would probably be about fifteen hours a quarter, and then with the semester system twelve hours maybe when we started, which would be like four classes.

CM: Yes, it was hard.

TS: What is your teaching load now?

CM: I teach basically two classes and do one or two designs for a course release. That's the standard for a semester. If one main stage design is fully produced, it's a complete release. For two or three designs, that would be for small theatre productions. This workload is standard in our department now. It's much better. As time went on and I had more experience in teaching, I didn't have to spend a lot of time just preparing for classes. You know, our knowledge base became bigger, and preparation time became shorter. Also I got a semester release from CETL for the publication of my book. They gave me a sabbatical leave, but you have to wait for seven years before applying for another one. I wish there could be more of these kinds of release, but then that means that we need more employees to take on the classes. I don't know if it will happen soon, but I wish it could happen soon.

TS: What are the main classes that you teach?

CM: I always teach a course called Visual Imagination. For that course I wrote *Visual Literacy for Theatre*. I think students, after they read it, are clearer about what I want them to know. It has a lot of good examples of designs that they can see. I think in order for students to advance their visual literacy, they need to see a lot of good designs. I spent a lot of time, acquiring copyright for the photos of designer' works that I included in this book. For instance, Julie Taymor, the director of *The Lion King*, and George Tsybin are two of the top designers in our nation. I asked them for the copyright of their work so that I could use them as design examples in my book. I believe students will gradually develop a sense of beauty by just seeing these works, so I have a lot of pictures along with my text in the book. *Visual Literacy for Theatre* serves as a textbook for Visual Imagination. I teach this class every semester. I'm still teaching it. The other

class I teach often is Design Skills. I cover drafting in that course. Then I teach Scene Design, Drawing, and Scene Painting. Those are the courses I have been teaching, but not as often. I used to teach Theatre 1107, but not anymore.

TS: How big is the program now? How many students are theatre majors?

CM: We currently have 184 majors.

TS: How many do you typically get in a class such as set design?

CM: Our class is smaller in that we coach individual students. Our classroom is set in that it only allows twelve students maximum. For design classes we need big tables in the classrooms because students need to build models, doing drafting, and we give them a lot of detailed feedback. It used to be like five students in the Scene Design classes. Nowadays we've got more—like ten to twelve students—in those classes. So it's growing.

TS: Are the students actually making things that we use in productions?

CM: Students built sceneries and costumes for our productions. As for the designs, it all depends. Occasionally, when I ask students in my class to do a design for a play, the director likes one of the designs and says, "That's great; can I use it for my show?" But most of the time, student designers will get assignments for the designs, starting from smaller shows to main stage productions. Students get to design main stage shows before they graduate if they tell us earlier what their concentration is. If they begin later, they probably won't have time, because it takes time to build their skills in order to do a main stage production. But always when students do a main stage production, we coach them all the way through.

TS: Right, that's a lot of work doing that. So, do the students have trouble finding jobs when they got through your program?

CM: Some student found jobs in teaching theatre in high schools. Others found jobs in building sceneries and costumes for theatre productions. Usually if they want to design for professional theatres, they are looking for graduate degrees. But for the smaller theatres, if you are experienced in designing, people might hire you on a show-to-show basis. Occasionally, we have graduates working for professional theatres after they graduated from KSU: Eric Teague, a winner of the first place for costume design at American College Theatre Festival (twice); James Maloof, a winner of second place for scenic design at American College Theatre Festival; Lauren Roundone and Ben Rawson are such examples. Dorisz Tatár and Katie Marks are working for Disney now, but Dorisz went on to Cal. Arts for graduate study before being hired by the Disney. Aside from getting to a graduate school, there are other ways of doing designs for theatre productions. That is being an apprentice to a well-known designer and working in his/her studio. I have been trying to make connections for our students to be assistants to those top designers. After working for these designers, they can start to design on their own. But those are rare cases because formal training is important in our profession. We don't offer graduate courses or graduate degrees here in our department.

- TS: Right. Do you think it is coming?
- CM: I hope. I hope that will happen all the time, but we just don't have enough teachers to take on any more degree programs beyond what we have been doing.
- TS: I think that's the next stage at Kennesaw to build the graduate programs that correspond to the bachelor's programs that we have now. There are a lot of areas that we still have to fill in. We don't have a history master's degree, for instance. How often are you involved with study abroad these days? How often do you take a group abroad?
- CM: I used to be on KSU Study Abroad Advisory Council and review all the programs. I saw hundreds of programs proposed, and we tried to fund them. Those programs take time to prepare. To supervise study abroad, you have to connect with the other party in a foreign country. The timing is important for our theatre study abroad programs. When they have a festival or event in which we can perform, we may be busy with our own theatre season here at KSU. It's hard to put a program together. Last time I went to Edinburgh with our students, it was in the summer, and so students could go. The Shanghai [trip] was in October, and the department was just committed to do that. Last year I was with the European Council Study Abroad Program, and I taught in Paris for five weeks. I also taught in China for five weeks for another KSU study abroad program last summer.
- TS: That's pretty much your whole summer.
- CM: No kidding. It's hard to do these programs during the semester. You teach other courses, and students take other courses. You cannot just take the students in your own class to go abroad. So that's difficult.
- TS: What percentage of your time goes into teaching, what percentage goes into service, and what percentage goes into creative activity?
- CM: I see a gradual reduction in actual preparation for teaching and more time spent on intercultural projects. The nature of my work varies vastly from one year to another. It is hard to put them in percentage.
- TS: Would you say you spend more time on projects than teaching?
- CM: Not necessarily than teaching— for instance, when I wrote the textbook, it was for teaching. I spent a lot of time on it. Now I spend less time preparing for the Visual Imagination class because students can read, right? But I still spend quite a bit of my time giving detailed written feedback for each of their projects. When I first came here, I think I spent a lot of time teaching courses because I needed to gather and organize the material. My English was not as good at the time, so I spent so much time preparing for the classes and almost nothing else except for my designs for theatre productions. But now I see a shift of emphasis in my course preparation. It is hard to count percentage, because it depends on the projects. Sometimes I spend a lot of time on those projects. Those projects are not just the research and creative activities that I do, but also the service I do, and the purpose of the project is to develop teaching material. Take our digital film production as an example, I co-wrote the grant proposals, hosted fund-raising events, did research on various Chinese dances, and led the translation and adaptation of

the script. I went to China as location scout and picked the shooting locations. I organized a group of people to go to China for film production, dealing with the logistics of the trip, including hotel reservations in various locations, visa applications, booking of plane tickets. After coming back from China, I supervised the editing of the film and resolved all the copyright issues for the publication of this program. I edited ten trailers and designed ten box covers and ten disc labels for the promotion of the various episodes and combinations of the program. So you see, the project is not just something on the creative and research side, but also on the service side. And furthermore, it is for the development of a teaching material that the professors in the English-speaking world can use in their classroom teaching. Can you see how difficult that is to count the percentage for each area? It would be a total mess.

TS: So it's hard to separate teaching, scholarship, and service?

CM: Well, it's hard to say how much percentage for each.

TS: Well because it's really all integrated together?

CM: Yes, very well said. This project is a part of teaching, because the digital film we produce is an educational program. After it is published, we save a lot of professor's class preparation time, and we contribute to the intellectual community by offering a program that is not readily available in the Western world. Even before it is published, the professors in KSU dance classes, general education classes, classes in Asian Studies and Chinese Language, even study abroad classes, are using the material.

TS: It's obvious that you stay busy.

CM: As busy as I can.

TS: You may have answered this already because you've already talked about the intellectual climate on campus, but what has kept you at Kennesaw for twenty-four years?

CM: Originally I didn't plan to stay that long, but I stayed. One thing is that I find it so rewarding because I like teaching. I like to spend time with students. Sometimes, I just don't have as much time as I wish to spend with them. But I still like students. I think they are to be shaped, and I'm proud to be a part of shaping America's future. I see a professor's job as the engineering of the students' mind. As a professor, you're not only being a role model for the students, but also producing works for them. For instance, I interviewed Julie Taymor, the director and the costume and mask designer for *Lion King*. She did a lot of other very innovative designs. I interviewed her, and it's published. I put the interview online to share with my students.

TS: That's great.

CM: Yes. I also interviewed George Tsypin, who is the designer of a lot of Broadway shows as well as the writer, co-artistic director and production designer for the opening ceremony of the Olympic Games in Sochi in 2014. I also interviewed Han Lixun, who is the chief designer for the 2008 Beijing Olympics, a schoolmate of mine. We published

that interview in *TD&T*, which is the top theatre design and technology journal in the U.S. and Canada. It will be beneficial for our design students to read it as well.

TS: What's the name of it?

CM: *TD&T* (Theatre Design & Technology). It's the leading refereed journal in our profession. So I let my students know what I'm doing and how busy I am. I think we should influence our students and to be role models for them in all aspects.

TS: Sure. Well, I'm about out of questions. Is there anything that we should have talked about in this interview that I haven't asked you?

CM: No, I think we've talked enough. I'm sorry for being a non-stop talker.

TS: That's a good thing. Thank you for the interview.

CM: I hope it helps. Thank you.

## INDEX

Alliance Theatre, Atlanta, Georgia, 7, 15

Baldwin, Margaret P., 12

Chen, Ming

- Growing up during the Cultural Revolution, 1-2
- Study at Shanghai School of Fine and Applied Arts, 1-2
- Father, 1
- Work in a factory producing needlepoint tapestry, 2
- Education as stage designer at Shanghai Theatre Academy, 2-3
- Work as designer for a theatre company, 3
- Acceptance to graduate school at Shanghai Theatre Academy, 3-4
- First to receive M.F.A. in stage design and theory, 4
- Acceptance into PhD program at University of Pittsburgh, 4
- Husband, 4, 6-7
- Giving back to China in gratitude for free education, 4-5
- Columnist for *EPerformance*, 5
- Sister, 5
- Reasons for not continuing PhD program, 5-6
- Masters degree in theatrical production, 5, 8
- Mentors, 6-7
- Resident scenic artist at the Folger Theatre, 8
- Faculty member at State University of New York at Buffalo, 8-10
- Reasons for coming to Kennesaw State, 8-10
- Daughter, 8, 10
- Designer of first production in Stillwell Theatre, 9-10
- Author of *Visual Literacy for Theatre*, 10, 14, 16, 18
- Reasons for staying at KSU, 10-11, 19
- Member of Study Abroad Advisory Council, 11, 18
- Project director for student trip to Shanghai Theatre International Festival, 11-12
- Project director for Chen Zhen exhibit, 12-13
- Work with Confucius Institute, 13-14
- Production of film, *The Heritage of Chinese Culture and Dance*, 14, 19
- International exhibitions of table works, 14-15
- Designer for performances at Theatre in the Square, 15-16
- Teaching load and classes taught, 16-18
- Member of European Council Study Abroad Program, 18
- Teaching abroad, 18
- Integration of teaching, service, and creative activity, 18-19
- Interviews conducted with directors and designers, 19-20

Chen, Zhen, 12-13

China Central Television, 14

Chinese Cultural Revolution, 1-4

Coca-Cola Foundation, 11

Daw, Kurt (Curtis D.), 8-10

Favorini, Buck, 8

George, Kathleen E., 6  
Georgia Humanities Council, 13  
Gibson, R. Wayne, 8-10  
Griffin, Roberta T., 12

Han, Lixun, 19  
Heymann, Henry, (Henry Heymann Theatre), 7  
Hu, Miao Sheng, 6

Kellogg, Marjorie Bradley, 7-8  
Kennesaw State University  
    Department of Theatre and Performance Studies, 8, 11, 17  
    Stillwell Theatre, 9, 13  
    Teaching loads, 10-11, 16  
    Research and creative activity, 9-11  
    Center for Excellence in Teaching & Learning (CETL), 11, 16  
    Study abroad program, 11, 18  
    Year of China, 11-13  
    Department of Visual Arts, 12  
    College of the Arts, 12-13  
    Year of France, 13  
    Confucius Institute, 13-14  
    Division of Global Initiatives, 14

Leon, Kenny, 7  
Lu, Zhen-Huan, 4, 6-7

Maloof, James, 17  
Marks, Katie, 17  
Meeks, Joseph D., 8, 10

National Endowment for the Arts, 12-13

Rawson, Ben, 17  
Robinson, Karen, 12  
Roundone, Lauren, 17

Shanghai, China, 1-3, 12, 15, 18  
Shanghai International Arts Festival, 11, 15  
Shanghai School of Fine and Applied Arts, 1-2, 12  
Shanghai Theatre Academy, 1-6, 11-12

Shanghai Worker's Palace, 6  
Siegel, Betty L., 9  
State University of New York at Buffalo, 8-10

Talbott, Suzanne, 12  
Tatar, Dorisz, 17  
Taymor, Julie, 16, 19  
*TD & T*, 19-20  
Teague, Eric, 17  
Theatre in the Square, Marietta, Georgia, 15-16  
TMW Media Group, Inc., 14  
Tsypin, George, 16, 19

University of Pittsburgh, 4-8

Venice Biennale, 13

Walker School, Marietta, Georgia, 10