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## **The Traditional Opera (Xiqu) of China’s Shanxi and Shaanxi Provinces in the Context of Popular Religion: Considerations Based on Field Observations**

*Abstract.* This paper covers a broad array of issues related to the performance of traditional opera (xiqu) in rural areas of Shanxi and Shaanxi Provinces in the People’s Republic of China such as temple restoration, a revival of religious activity, the role of opera in systems of rituals and worship, and the functioning of state-run and private opera troupes. Of particular importance is the fact that this paper is based on conclusions derived from first-hand field observations made by the author in China in the period 2007–2009. This fieldwork included visiting numerous rural temple festivals and interviewing many of those involved in temple management and the organization of opera performances. The central argument of this study is that given the close historical connection between these opera performances and the worship of deities from the popular Daoist pantheon (e.g. the Dragon King, the Emperor Zhenwu, city gods, and the bodhisattva Guanyin), rural Chinese opera can be seen as a religious offering to these deities. The wealth and influence of temples is a key determinant of their ability to attract higher-quality, state-run opera troupes to perform at festivals. The Shaanbei area in particular boasts a larger number of such wealthy temples compared to the villages of western Shanxi. In addition to operas performed for gods, various other types of traditional performance such as yangge and erren tai are very popular among rural audiences. Due to the limited amount of state support, local troupes performing in so-called ‘big genres’ (such as jinju, puju, and qinqiang) rely on temple festivals for their main source of income, while ‘small genres’ that are not considered suitable to be performed for deities are less likely to survive.

*Keywords:* contemporary Shanxi and Shaanxi, opera xiqu, popular religion, offering, state-run and private troupes, fieldwork, interview

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### **Традиционная драма (сицзюй) провинций Шаньси и Шэньси в контексте народной религии: заключения на основе полевых наблюдений**

*Аннотация.* Статья затрагивает широкий круг вопросов, связанных с исполнением традиционной драмы (сицзюй) в сельских районах современных провинций Шаньси и Шэньси, а именно: восстановление разрушенных храмов и возрождение религиозных мероприятий, роль драмы в системе ритуальной практики народной религии, система функционирования государственных и частных теат-

ральных трупп. Ценность исследования заключается, в частности, в том, что данные и выводы были получены автором в результате полевых наблюдений в КНР в 2007—2009 гг., которые включали наблюдение ряда храмовых праздников, интервью с людьми, участвующими в управлении храмами и организации оперных представлений. В статье дан анализ тесных исторических связей между исполнением традиционной драмы и правилами поклонения божествам из народного даосского пантеона (Царю Дракону, Владыке Чжэнью, бодхисатве Гуаньинь, Богу города и проч.), где драма играла роль самого главного подношения от верующих. Финансовые возможности и влияние храма стали факторами, определяющими возможности того или иного храма по найму более профессиональной государственной труппы для исполнения драмы во время храмовых праздников. На севере Шэньси таких влиятельных гораздо храмов в сравнении со сравнительно бедными областями западной Шаньси. Помимо музыкальной драмы, исполняемой для божеств, существует немало традиционных танцевально-песенных жанров (янгэ, эржэнь тай), которые очень популярны среди сельской публики и тоже являются частью храмовых праздников. В условиях ограниченной государственной поддержки храмовые мероприятия становятся важным источником дохода для трупп, исполняющих драмы в «больших жанрах» (цзиньцзюй, пиньцзюй, циньцян и проч.), при этом труппы, исполняющие в «малых жанрах», недопустимых для поднесения божествам, сталкиваются с угрозой закрытия, а малые жанры — под угрозой исчезновения.

*Ключевые слова:* современные Шаньси и Шэньси, драма сицзюй, народная религия, подношение, государственные и частные труппы, полевая работа, интервью.

## Introduction

In August 2006 I attended a conference devoted to the rural Chinese festival known as the God-Welcoming Community Competition (yingshen saishe, 迎神賽社) in a southeastern area of Shanxi Province called Shangdang 上黨. Formerly widespread in many parts of the People's Republic of China, this large-scale collective celebration on the occasion of the Lunar New Year (frequently also the local deity's birthday) is known as shehuo 社火 or saishe 賽社. A core part of the celebration includes opera sketches of an archaic genre called 'opera in a line' (duixi 隊戲), preceded by a scene in which the 'road-opening' spirit Fangxiang 方相 fights with the Five Demons. Another excerpt, taken from the Romance of the Three Kingdoms epic, depicts Guan Yu 關羽 slaying six generals and passing through five gates, while another piece from the same epic featuring Guan Yu fighting the black-faced general Hua Xiong 華雄 was performed in front of the main altar of the Bixia Yuanjun 碧霞元君 Temple, the main venue for deity worship in the area. These short plays were performed the purpose of driving away evil spirits and purifying the sacred area. The music was performed by hereditary professional musicians known as 'music households' yuehu 樂戶 in front of the temporary altar. The ceremony had last been performed as part of local ritual practices in 1937 and had not been resumed since the Cultural Revolution until 2006, when it was performed specifically for the attending researchers.

In September 2008 I attended a similar event in Shouyang 壽陽 County in central Shanxi. The event—part of a conference organized by the Opera Research Institute of

Shanxi Normal University in the city of Linfen 臨汾 — was a ritual dance that used to be performed by local villagers on the occasion of the Yellow Emperor Huangdi's birthday. Both the group of performers and the ritual were called *aishe* 愛社, while the dance bore the name *Huangdi Fights Chiyou* (Huangdi zhan Chiyou 黃帝戰蚩尤). The 24 soldiers fighting for Huangdi wore masks and attire reminiscent of Chiyou's demons and succeeded in seizing the fort through a strategic feint. This ritual dance used to be performed by men from four neighbouring villages at the Xuanyuan Temple (軒轅 is another name for Huangdi) on the thirteenth day of the seventh lunar month—a period when ghosts are believed to walk in the world of humans, so have to be appeased and fed. The *aishe* dance ended with Huangdi's disguised soldiers snatching food offerings from the table, which could be interpreted as a way to feed the roaming ghosts. We were shown a group of villagers that was much larger than in the past, now including females, who were traditionally not allowed to participate. The performers were recruited and trained for this performance by a village elder who used to participate in this ritual dance. The practice came to a halt in the 1950s but had not been revived since, and the performance we saw had been prepared specifically for this conference.

Local traditions in China are increasingly considered to hold promise as a way of promoting such areas at the local, state, and even international level under the slogan 'Going towards the world' (*zou xiang shijie* 走向世界). The two above cases demonstrate that a large industry of cultural festivals (*wenhua jie* 文化節)<sup>1</sup> and accompanying academic conferences has been arising in Chinese localities with rich ritual or operatic traditions. These activities have in many instances resulted in the beautification and, sometimes, the serious distortion of the original nature of the events. The emergence of staged versions of these performances may be qualified as a new representation of traditional culture (in this case, local rituals and operas) in the age of digital media and the Internet, institutionalized cultural networks, and an acute need for new tourist resources such as museums and culturally themed parks in underserved areas. If they are promoted and safeguarded by local state bodies, rituals risk losing their links with their origin, space, and contexts, but no matter how far they diverge from the original practice, these reconstructions may be the only chance for some to revive or be performed at all. It might be appropriate to speak about officially organized activities as a realm different to the more widely spread practices that do not normally come into contact with levels of officialdom higher than that of the 'township' (*xiangzhen* 鄉鎮) administration. I propose that the co-existence of both of these realms be acknowledged as a fact of the cultural terrain of contemporary China.

Nevertheless, it is important to look for fieldwork sites that are at least somewhat 'uncontaminated' by the recent boom in the protection of the 'intangible heritage' (*feiwuzhi wenhua yichan* 非物質文化遺產) of China. Temple communities known as either *she* 社 or *hui* 會 occupied most of my attention in the course of my fieldwork in western Shanxi and northern Shaanxi (Shaanbei 陝北)<sup>2</sup> in 2007–2009, where I made field observations on this area's geographical environment and the specifics and organizational side of opera performance. This paper addresses the nature of connections between opera and ritual in these regions, as well as the mechanisms that sustain opera performance in contemporary China.

### 1.1. Operas at temple festivals in connection with ritual practices

In this study, the performance of traditional Chinese rural opera (xiqu 戲曲) is seen as an inclusive part of a larger system of deity worship. Temple reconstruction has been a much-discussed subject in the recent literature on the revitalization of Chinese religions. It is typically thought of as a recreation of traditional organizations [Chau, 2005; Eng, Lin, 2002], regional or translocal networks [Dean, 1993; Fisher, 2008], or as a contest between various new agents and associations [Ashiwa, Wank, 2006]. Another approach sees temple reconstruction as representing the resurgence of community, local pride, and self-identity [Feuchtwang, 2000; Flower, 2004; Jing, 1996]. Construction and other temple activities are regarded as ways for local people to negotiate with the state or globalization [Yang, 2000, 2004]. In the area of interest of this study—Shanxi and Shaanxi Provinces—opera performance is an essential part of temple festivals or miaohui 廟會, which are an important way of demonstrating collective and individual respect and reverence to communal gods on important dates, mainly their birthdays (shengdan 聖誕). Another important occasion for performing opera is the Lunar New Year period. Temple festivals are a complex of religious activities organized and conducted by members of a community—usually a number of villages clustered around a temple—and are occasions during which villagers gather together to pay tribute and express gratitude to the local god (choushen 酬神). A festival includes elements of secular culture but also serves as a venue for trade and entertainment. In recent years temple festivals have remained one of the few channels of entertainment available to people in rural areas. Traditionally, temple fairs have offered a chance for poor people living in far-flung places to meet, communicate, and do trade. Temple festivals were also one of the few places where males and females could mingle with each other. In the contemporary world of electronic media, it would be plausible to suppose that new forms of entertainment might have distracted people from participation in traditional events such as temple fairs, but the range of activities I witnessed in Shanxi and Shaanxi suggest that temple festivals are far from declining in popularity. This suggests that locals do not only seek entertainment at festivals but rather regard them as the best time of the year to worship because the deity is most likely to lend an ear to their appeals.

The ‘singing opera’ (changxi 唱戲) performed during temple festivals and Lunar New Year celebrations is another important event organized by a temple committee, including representatives of all the villages that participate in worship at a particular temple. In the perception of the local people I have interviewed, an opera performance is similar to the act of worship as a whole. When locals say that an opera is to be ‘sung’ on certain dates, they tend to be referring to temple festivals in general. This supports the assertion that opera performances play a central role in offerings to deities.

I heard actors and people connected to performing troupes in both Beijing and my fieldwork sites say that fewer and fewer people from villages go to see opera performances. One reason for this I heard proposed is a supposed deterioration in the quality of performances. The audiences who appreciate the art of traditional drama are mostly made up of elderly people over the age of 60. In the village of Lijiazhuang 李家莊 in Linxian 臨縣 County, Shanxi Province, I heard that those younger in age (aged 40–50, for example) claim that they do not watch, do not like, and do not understand opera.



**Photo 1.** A private troupe performing at a temple festival in Fangshan County, Shanxi Province

A difference can be observed between the western part of Shanxi, which is poorer in terms of ‘cultural accumulation’<sup>3</sup>, and northern Shaanxi (Shaanbei 陕北) to the west across the Huanghe River, where a considerable number of people vigorously partake in temple revivals. In the latter region, males and females of all age groups seem to be much more interested in watching opera than elsewhere<sup>4</sup>.

The contemporary situation can be characterized by a proliferation of both venues and occasions for opera performance, but paradoxically, also by a deterioration in the quality of performances. The decrease in audience attendance does not call into question the necessity of opera performance. In Linxian 臨縣 County I was told that in the old days, performances were held even in the absence of any audience at all, and were never cancelled just because no one came to see them. According to my informants in Lijiazhuang, misfortunes such as an unexpected death would be thought to afflict their village if an opera were not duly performed. Actors from private bands touring the

country would tell of cases when an actor could not come to the stage and perform; this would be taken as an ominous sign by villagers, and might even lead to a fight with the opera troupe or a demand for compensation. It seems clear that traditional opera survives in these villages to this day thanks to its purpose as ritual offering. Opera fills its niche in the ritual sequence and has, in most cases, become a symbolic act, with the quality of its performance far from guaranteed. This is not because deities do not expect as high-quality a performance as humans but because many temple communities in Shanxi simply cannot afford to hire better troupes.



**Photo 2.** An opera performance by a prefecture-level Shanxi Province troupe at Baiyun Shan Temple festival, Shaanxi

The main factor determining the cost of an opera performance is the status of the troupe. State-run troupes grant a higher quality of performance, while private ones are usually worse due to the lack of regulations concerning their actors and performers. The cost of hiring a top-ranking province-level opera troupe amounts to 150–160,000 RMB, which only the wealthiest temples can afford (e.g. White Cloud Mountain Baiyunshan 白雲山 and Black Dragon Pond Heilong tan 黑龍潭 in Shaanbei). If a troupe has actors who have won a national competition such as the Meihua Prize 梅花獎 or they have been granted any of the three professional grades awarded by the state committee, then the status of the troupe will rise considerably. The more famous actors that are present in the troupe, the higher the performance fee it can command. For instance, the wealthy Baiyunshan Temple once hired the experimental jingju 京劇 opera troupe from the city of Taiyuan (the capital of Shanxi Province) for a period of three days at a cost of tens of thousands of RMB for a single performance with the participation of well-known actors. A cheaper, local private opera troupe of Shaanxi's qinqiang 秦腔 genre was then hired to perform for the other three days of the festival. Communal temples in Linxian County in western Shanxi can usually only afford cheap private troupes consisting of

actors recruited from among peasants for three to four days at a cost of 7–10,000 RMB.<sup>5</sup> The average cost of a middle-rate private troupe (taikou 台口) in 2007 was 20,000 RMB for several days. The rank and cost of the opera troupe hired by a temple are important indicators of its wealth and influence, as well as the level of importance of the religious activity being held.

Mu-lien opera (Mulian xi 目連戲) might be seen as a typical representation of the elements of ritual that can be found in modern-day opera performance in southeastern China. According to David Johnson, segments 'or a version of the entire opera were (and still are) presented as an integral element of funeral rituals, with mourners, funeral professionals' [1989, p. 3] in Hunan, Fujian, and Taiwan, generating a blend of performance and ritual. Ritual and exorcism plays are said to be still performed in northwestern parts of Shanxi (particularly in Shuozhou 朔州 Prefecture) and Shaanbei, but I did not get a chance to find out more about it. In the 1950s and 1960s, villages in Linxian County used to hold an annual ritual of 'leaping spirits' (tiaoshen 跳神) to expel evil ghosts [Holm, 2003]. Two or three male shamans (duangong 端公) and female shamans (shenpo 神婆) acted as mediums possessed by spirits to perform a ritual dance accompanied by a drum. The inhabitants of the village were free to join in. When I asked locals from Congluoyu township 叢羅峪 in Linxian County whether they still had shamans and ritual dances, they laughed and compared them to a circus—the practice had been forbidden by the authorities in their village. In the past, shamans and mediums were in demand because rural people had no access to medical help, and shamans were instead summoned to heal and cure. Ritual and exorcism dances should, however, be differentiated from ritual drama, which is a more complex performance with a plot, protagonists, and music. On many occasions, very short sketches were performed with clearly identified characters with mere traces of a plot, but without dialogues and singing. These can be considered 'plays' (xi 戲) but not 'dances' (wu 舞), as in the case of plays performed on the street.

In the village of Weicun in Linfen 臨汾 Prefecture, actors were obliged to participate in the ritual of welcoming and seeing off a deity, thus confirming the position of the actor as a mediator or medium between gods and humans. Actors could be punished if they arrived late for the ritual because doing so was considered disrespectful to the deity [Yan, 2002, pp. 33–34]. The ritual of purifying a newly built stage (da tai 打台) was apparently still performed in the region in the 1980s and 1990s. On such occasions, three roosters would be taken onto the stage and beheaded, their blood spilled around the stage to expel the Five Demons (sha wugui 殺五鬼), also known as the Demons of the Five Directions (wufang gui 五方鬼), who may be connected to the malicious demons or wuchang 五猖 in southern Chinese ritual practices.<sup>6</sup> It is said that actors did not dare to step onto the stage and proceed with an opera performance if such a purifying ritual had not been completed. There was also a belief that the stage and the space in front of it should not be swept because doing so could sweep away luck. Since the late 1980s up to the early 1990s, a period during which a large number of temples were rebuilt, it was common to invite two or more troupes to add size and splendour to the consecration ceremony of a temple (kaiguang 開光).

One important occasion that merits an opera performance is the fulfilment of a vow or a thanksgiving called the 'vow returning opera' (huanyuan xi 還願戲). This custom

used to be popular all over China. On such an occasion, an opera troupe would be hired by an individual or a family group. A payment would be made to the actors as mediating agents, and they would express gratitude to the deity. When talking to informants, I learned that it is becoming rarer to hold a thanksgiving opera, although the tradition has not completely died out. One of the reasons for its decline may be that although individuals might be capable of making a monetary donation to thank a deity, he or she could hardly afford to hire an entire opera troupe. Low-cost vow-fulfilling plays consisting of one or several short scenes (zhezi 折子) performed by cheap, private troupes are also appropriate for such an occasion. This kind of performance normally costs only several hundred or perhaps a thousand RMB, and cigarettes and liquor are often also presented to the actors.<sup>7</sup> Zhezi used to be considered a separate type of play. On the occasion of a temple festival, it was customary to perform a number of short zhezi but not a 'big play' (da xi 大戲) consisting of several acts, which may be considered a product of the drama reforms of the 1950s. One of my informants, Gao Hongping (高宏平, aged 33) from the Congluoyu township in Linxian County, recalled a rare case several years ago of a man from his village ordering a vow-fulfilling opera performance that lasted three evenings.<sup>8</sup> My informant himself ordered a huanyuan xi twice: The first time after he had paid back all his debts, and the second after the birth of his child. I saw a number of advertisements for vow-fulfilling operas when visiting temples. In Congluoyu, these can be booked via the temple committee. In the Baiyunshan Temple, arrangements for these services lie in the hands of individual entrepreneurs.

## 1.2. Operas as prayers for rain and collective well-being

Shanxi and Shaanbei Provinces are often afflicted by drought, and as a result 'operas to pray for rain' (yuxi 雨戲, or qiuyu xi 求雨戲) are frequently performed throughout rural areas. In imperial China, in a case of severe and continuous drought, local officials from the county seat would be summoned to conduct prayers for rain. Upon making enquiries in the villages of Linxian County I learned that 'rain operas' have not been performed there for a decade or more. Locals told me that they now have pump stations sending water to the fields, so their reliance on the will of heaven has weakened. Nevertheless, there is still a saying in the area that people rely on heaven to get their food (kaotian chifan 靠天吃飯), implying that locals are not yet completely liberated from their dependence on rain. Not long ago, a number of villages would form temporary alliances in order to perform a rain opera. The impulse for cooperation within certain villages was a lack of rain and their willingness to put together limited finances to hire a good opera troupe, since it was not affordable for a single village to do so. According to the recollections of my informants, a procession of several hundred men with arms and shoulders exposed to the sun, heads covered with hats made of leaves from trees, barefoot, and wearing only underpants would march towards the mountain carrying a tablet of a deity, accompanied by a folk band. They would look for a cool cavity between rocks (perhaps one with a spring) and pray for rain there. A rain opera would not be performed in a fixed venue, but might be held in a different village each year. The tablets of the Dragon King (Long Wang 龍王) would be relocated from the temple to the



performing village. Opera for the Dragon King used to be performed regularly on the occasion of his birthday in the temple where the deity is housed during the fourth and seventh lunar months.

An annual performance of the 'population well-being opera' (renkou xi 人口戲) is also a central part of the worship of inter-village deities during the New Year period. In most instances it is offered to the bodhisattva Guanyin 觀音 (a goddess who gives children), whose temple can be found in every village. Deities from the community temple (run by a number of villages) are not invited to watch this opera since the status of these deities is higher than that of their village-level counterparts, and according to informants from the village of Shibaitou 石白頭 in Linxian County, an invitation could offend them. In a poor county such as Linxian, about 5—10 RMB is collected from each household for an opera performance. All households strive to secure the protection of the gods and willingly contribute to the fee. People may give more than the minimum if they wish. In contrast, most of the Shaanbei temples, which are relatively better off, no longer resort to fee collection to cover opera performance costs since they have sufficient temple funds. In the vicinity of the village of Shibaitou, I have heard 'community opera' (shexi 社戲) being mentioned in connection with the worship of the Dragon King. Temples devoted to the Dragon King normally have statues of subsidiary deities inside such as the God of Plague (Wenshen 瘟神) and the God of Locusts (Zihuang 子蝗). A community opera for these two gods used to be performed in spring and summer, but I did not come across recent performances specifically devoted to these two deities. One reason for this might be because the widespread availability of pesticides and improvements in medical care mean fewer occurrences of crop failures and medical ailments and as a result, the worship of these deities has gradually declined.

Traditionally, the plot of an opera was connected to the occasion, the season, and the biography of the deity for whom it was performed. There were a great number of plots for specific occasions, but present-day opera performances have lost most of their immediate connection with the biography of the deity. In the course of the opera reforms that began in the early 1950s, traditional Chinese opera has been institutionalized and turned into an artistic medium organized according to a Western standard of theatre, stripped off its ritual meaning and purpose. Contemporary professional troupes offer a limited repertoire from among traditional plots, which tend to have become 'new productions of historical plays' (xinbian lishi ju 新編歷史劇) that have undergone considerable changes both in terms of content and stage direction.

When worshipping deities like Guandi or the Daoist immortal Lü Dongbin 呂洞賓, who are both native Shanxi deities, wealthy temples from Shaanbei typically invite two troupes for the same festival: One that performs a local opera genre from Shaanxi, and another that performs an equivalent genre from Shanxi. The choice of which play to perform for the festival was said to be made by the deity and conveyed to humans through stick divination (chouqian 抽籤). Today, however, members of the temple committees make their selection by vote. In Shaanbei, the heads of temples (huizhang 會長) still select a play with the help of a special construction called a 'divine tower' (shenlou 神樓), which rotates and points at one of several pieces of paper. It is also used for divination and consulting deities on other occasions, and can be said to form part of the local tradition of spiritism. I once saw a shenlou being placed inside a temporary

altar together with the statues of a deity during the Lantern Festival as an attribute of the deity's power.

In my opinion, the ritual meaning of rural Chinese opera is still implied in the way it continues to be regarded as an offering for the entertainment of deities. However, it has been deprived of its former direct connotation with the ritual of exorcism of the souls of the dead passing on to another realm (chaodu wanghun 超度亡魂). In the area where I conducted fieldwork, rural people do not understand opera performance in this sense. The state has been making efforts to detach opera from its religious contexts, but it is apparent that opera's connection with worship has still not been erased from the memory of rural practitioners. Once rural temples began to engage in traditional acts of worship again beginning in the early 1980s, opera quickly resumed its position as an offering to deities.

In northern China, the main market secular of professional troupes is temple festivals. In the following section I will give a brief account of the historical changes that have led to the contemporary situation of the market for operas in these areas.

### 1.3. State-run troupes and rural opera performances in recent decades

I started my fieldwork by interviewing the heads of local troupes in Pingshun 平順 County in southeastern Shanxi, who perform the genre of opera known as Shangdang laozi 上黨落子<sup>9</sup>, and troupes in Linxian County in northwestern Shanxi, who perform the genre known as Linxian daoqing 臨縣道情.<sup>10</sup> They told me about their troupes' transformation into state-run units in the early 1950s; drama reforms, the Cultural Revolution, and the subsequent revival of temple festivals were said to be turning points in the nation's history. During the Cultural Revolution, performances of traditional opera plots were prohibited and troupes instead began to perform 'model plays' (yangban xi 樣板戲). According to my informant from the Lin County troupe, opera troupes flourished in the period of the Cultural Revolution:

The 1970s was the heyday of opera. At that time, the central government and Jiang Qing<sup>11</sup> were interested in opera, and Jiang Qing personally supervised the editing of the eight 'model plays'. The results were very high quality. All troupes were state-run back then, and all their expenses were borne by the state. Troupes worked intensely and painstakingly. Actors were highly respected members of society; everybody, even the sons of officials, dreamed of joining an opera troupe. Farmers knew that actors earned more money, and were better fed and clothed.<sup>12</sup>

The director of Linxian County opera troupe, Zhang Ruifeng 張瑞鋒, attributed the flourishing of opera during the 1970s to generous state funding and the important role opera played as propaganda. Despite the fact that it had been detached from worship, which might have plausibly reduced interest among the general populace, rural opera nevertheless enjoyed wide popularity as a form of entertainment in the absence of alternative pastimes. 'At the start of the 1980s', Zhang said, 'the reform policy was taking off. State subsidies for county opera troupes fell and as a result, by the late 1980s over 90 per cent of county-level troupes had been deprived of whatever support the state

could give us. Many troupes were disbanded and people in the counties could no longer watch opera'.<sup>13</sup>

Zhang is inclined to criticize this state policy, which was characterized by the elimination of government subsidies. The overall result of the policy was a decline in the number of performances, which quickly led to a deterioration in performance quality. Subsidies were cut for county-level troupes, but prefecture-level (shiji 市級) varieties were still granted over 60 per cent of subsidies from the city budget and thus were much better off, so their artistic level was accordingly better maintained. Actors from county troupes often dreamed of moving to city-level troupes. Given the better performance quality of the prefecture-level and provincial troupes, the cost of hiring them is therefore considerably higher and affordable only to the rich temples. According to Zhang, 'Eighty per cent of performances by the better troupes take place at temple festivals. Temples are their main venue, but these earnings make up a small part of their budget; they are only capable of sustaining their artistic level because of state subsidies.'<sup>14</sup>

'Plays in traditional costumes' (guzhuang xi 古裝戲) returned to the stage once popular religion was revived in the early 1980s. A crucial point here is that only guzhuang xi are allowed to be performed for deities, which explains why the so-called 'modern plays' (xiandai xi 現代戲) favoured by the government have failed to find their way to rural audiences. The requirements of opera performances as ritual offerings determine the choice of operas made by temples. So-called 'small genres' (xiao juzhong 小劇種) with plots centred around the trivial affairs of local people such as matchmaking, marriages, and family relations have gradually ceased to be performed inside temples; in some cases they were prevented from being performed at all. This and a number of other reasons thus led to the decline and eventual extinction of many local 'small genres'. In the case of Linxian daoqing, the context in which it used to flourish has undergone dramatic changes, so it is very rarely performed by either amateur or professional actors, and has no market<sup>15</sup>; it has been pushed to the brink of extinction, despite its repertoire's direct connection to Taoist legends and canon. Currently, the Zhang Ruifeng troupe does not perform daoqing plays at all, and its actors have been dispersed among the private troupes that perform the jinju 晉劇 genre in Shanxi. The market in this area is governed by the so-called 'big genres' (da juzhong 大劇種) such as jinju in central and southern Shanxi, puju 蒲劇 in southern Shanxi and central Shaanxi, yuju 豫劇 in southern Shanxi and Henan, and qinqiang 秦腔 in northern Shaanxi. Temples often commission multi-act plays (daxi 大戲) with traditional plots, but troupes specializing in the small genres unfortunately have very few occasions on which to perform them.

Many state-run troupes fell by the wayside in the 1990s. The rural market for opera performance continued to grow, however, and new private-run troupes emerged to fill the gap. These troupes, which catered to the demand created by temple festivals, operate on a basis similar to that of state-run troupes. They perform the same plays as do state troupes, but have fewer opportunities to enhance their repertoire with new plays because doing so would require considerable investment in terms of time and money. A common opinion is that the artistic level of private troupes is lower than that of state-run troupes because the actors belonging to the latter tend to have received solid training in formal opera institutions, whereas the actors of private troupes are mostly recruited from among the rural population. It is also believed that only the poorest rural families send

their children to learn and perform opera professionally. Survival pressures have caused a general decline in the quality of performances by state-run troupes during the last ten to fifteen years, resulting in smaller audiences. I mentioned before that the standard of a hired troupe is an important indicator of the status and wealth of a temple, and a high-quality performance is still capable of attracting a large audience, as in the case of the opera performances commissioned by the Baiyunshan Temple. This implies that rural populations are still fond of opera, but rarely have an opportunity to enjoy it at a good artistic level. In traditional rural Chinese areas, hiring a troupe of a poor standard was considered disrespectful to the temple deity.

#### 1.4. Other entertainment for deities and humans

I said earlier that despite dwindling audiences, opera performances continue; they have not been cancelled or replaced by other genres. Opera's ritual purpose has become more explicit in recent decades; it must be performed, regardless of the size of the audience actually present. On occasions when fewer people linger in front of the stage, artists from other genres are summoned to liven up the atmosphere. Traditionally, the temple festival was a venue for all sorts of forms of entertainment and amusement organized and performed by groups of village amateurs and professionals including circus acts, gymnastics, yangge 秧歌, stilt-walking, and short sketches.

When attending a temple festival devoted to the deity Zhenwu dadi (真武大帝, or Xuantian dadi 玄天大帝, also known in the area as Zushi 祖師) in the Congluoyu township in Linxian County on the occasion of his birthday, I noticed that the operas that were being performed twice per day by a private troupe attracted a small audience. The performances took place on a newly built stage in the village. A temporary tent had been installed in front of the stage with a miniature statue of Zhenwu placed inside. The number of people attending each performance varied from a few dozen to about 100, while the festival as a whole attracted tens of thousands of visitors. Not surprisingly, people were particularly scarce on the day it rained. Some ceremonies and celebrations were moved to the following day, during which the weather fortunately turned out for the better. Around noon, a crowd of villagers climbed to the top of the mountain where the temple was located. The spectators had gathered to see a performance of sketch plays in the popular genre *erren tai* 二人台 by professional actors who had been hired by the temple committee.<sup>16</sup> The performance, which took place on a shabby earthen stage in front of the hall at the back of the temple, lasted for more than two hours and drew an audience larger than that of regular *xiqu* opera. It was preceded by a colourful and boisterous performance of yangge dancing by local middle school pupils, other young people, and middle-aged women from the hosting and neighbouring villages.

Later in the evening a huge audience of several thousand people gathered around the stage down in the village to see a concert of the best yangge couplets by performers from the area. The genre 'yangge with a leading umbrella' (*santou yangge* 傘頭秧歌) is very popular in western Shanxi and Linxian County in particular, the local version being called *Linxian yangge* 臨縣秧歌. The lead performer, holding an umbrella, is expected to compose and sing a witty and original versed couplet on the spot in response to the one

composed by the previous performer. Yangge performers are invited to perform at temple festivals, weddings, and business inauguration ceremonies. The concert in the Congluoyu township also drew a huge audience and ended long after midnight. The popularity of the yangge and erren tai performances among the rural audiences suggests that they perceive them to be addressed to a human audience—unlike opera, which is relatively more difficult to understand and is intended for the gods.

Erren tai actors perform traditional couplets in dialogue but not modern pop songs, even though the musical arrangement and the use of electronic instruments makes it sound like pop music. In contrast, in the village of Qiaoyan, where the Bull King Bodhisattva was worshipped during a temple festival in his honour, two bands with traditional set of instruments were hired to play music and sing inside the yard at the temporary altar called fotang 佛堂. They performed in between ceremonial yangge dances. Erren tai and music bands obviously play a role in creating a noisy and cheerful atmosphere and contribute to the goal of entertaining the human audience.

Modern forms of entertainment like pop concerts, female dance groups, and disco music have recently entered the temple festival repertoire. This probably happened later in northern China than in the more developed southern regions. These new forms of 'song and dance' (gewu 歌舞) entertainment are staged along with opera at wealthier temples in Shaanbei for the purpose of attracting young people. The cost of such shows is higher than those of opera. Many state-run and private troupes responded immediately to this new demand in the market by hiring and retaining groups of young male and female dancers. The Linxian County daoqing troupe has even gone so far as to transform itself into a gewu band, a fact



**Photo 3.** *Erren tai* by professional actors in the Congluoyu township, Lin County, Shanxi Province.



**Photo 4.** Sketches performed by professional *erren tai* actors near a temporary altar in the temple festival dedicated to the Bull King Bodhisattva, Hengshan County, Shaanxi Province.

that that worried my informant, Zhang Ruifeng. According to Zhang, gewu troupes are in demand for the corporate parties thrown by local authorities and coal mine bosses (the main business elite in the area).<sup>17</sup> The growing presence of ‘song and dance’ performances at temple festivals suggests that temple authorities are increasingly influenced by the tastes and preferences of local business and political cadres, many of whom take an active role in the restoration of temples and the sponsorship of temple festivals.

## Conclusion

A striking aspect of this discussion is the re-emergence of intense religious and ritual practices, which have contributed to the revival of traditional art forms such as Chinese opera, in association with ritual performances. The situation is very different in Taiwan, where religious practices have not been hindered by state policies and continue to thrive, but the opera has lost a large proportion of its human audience. It is now frequently staged mainly as an expression of thanksgiving and addressed solely to deities, with very few people in the audience. The cost of a puppet zhangzhong xi 掌中戲 performance is rather low (approx. 8,000–10,000 NT\$) and easily affordable by a single individual. The tendency recently in Taiwan has been for individuals to donate money to a temple instead of hiring opera troupes so their donations can be used for charitable purposes, thereby leading to a diminishing role for ritual performance as a mediator between the donor and deities. Compared to Taiwan, opera attendance by rural audiences in northern China appears to still be rather impressive, while opera performances are also more artistically refined and demand more skill from the actor. They are accompanied by live music ensembles, include more singing and acrobatics, and are consequently more costly.

The revival of temples and worship has fostered a restoration of traditional ties between ritual and opera performance. Shanxi Province is believed to be a crucible of traditional Chinese opera; numerous stages dating back to the Song and Yuan dynasties have been attached to temples to perform the Yuan-period northern genre zaju 雜劇. During the reign of the Qianlong Emperor (1735–1796), popular local genres of bangzi 梆子 opera started to be performed as an offering to deities. Cult worship and temple festivals in this area have preserved strong links with opera performance, which is seen as a crucial and inseparable part of the worship of deities.

The frequency with which an opera is performed by a temple depends on the latter’s financial status, which is determined by the prosperity of the adjacent area that identifies itself with the temple and donates money to it. For instance, the well-to-do city god temple Cheng-huang 城隍 in the Yuhe 鱼河镇 township in Hengshan County 横山 in Shaanbei puts on two opera performances per year. During the Lantern Festival, a yangge procession takes place along the streets and tribute is paid at the temple. Participants are invited from neighbouring villages that have tight bonds with Yuhe. In the case of temples that are not prosperous (like many in Linxian County), their committees nevertheless find ways to arrange a performance or, at the very least, invite a folk band to give thanks to and provide entertainment for the temple deities.

In the contemporary era of highly developed transportation networks, distances are shrinking and people living in villages are able to visit not just the closest communal temple but also famous and prosperous temples located quite some distance away. Many go to large and old temples since they are regarded as more 'efficacious' (ling 靈) at hearing prayers and petitions, and temples compete with one another to attract visitors. The quality of a temple's management plays a crucial role in its ability to attract a sizeable audience. Better-managed temples attract more people, some of whom may be wealthy businessmen and donors. If they have constant access to such funding they can afford both good-quality opera troupes and costly song and dance performances that appeal to younger audience. The opera market appears to be well stratified and to meet the various demands of those who visit rural and county temples. The growing number of middle- and low-rate private opera troupes signifies that popular religion in rural areas is on the rise, but time and accumulation of capital are necessary if a bigger proportion of temples are to be able to afford good-quality performances.

Looking back at the twists and turns that have taken place in the recent history of local opera genres in China, one finds that they have been significantly influenced by the standards of Peking Opera (jingju 京劇) and the 'model plays' of the Cultural Revolution. Even though the 'model plays' resulted in uniformity and the erosion of certain specific characteristics of local genres, the period of the Cultural Revolution is nonetheless recalled as a favourable time for county-level troupes, who enjoyed generous state support and the respect of villagers. When the influence of politics on opera subsided, it was market pressure that challenged the artistic quality of performances. Few county-level troupes successfully survived this challenge and adjusted to the difficult conditions of the open marketplace. The standards for evaluating the ability and quality of opera troupes that were established by the state (e.g. grades for actors, prizes, and competitions) remain the authoritative standard by which troupes are measured. Although good actors prefer to work for prefecture- and provincial-level state-run troupes, newly emerging, high-quality, and privately-sponsored troupes<sup>18</sup> provide better salaries and may eventually change the disposition of the opera market.

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## Примечания

<sup>1</sup> Stephen Jones calls them 'staged versions of ritual' [Jones, 2007, p. 4].

<sup>2</sup> By 'temple communities' I mean associations of up to several dozen villages organized by villagers in order to conduct worship in a communal or shared temple. A temple is normally located outside of the borders of any member village and managed by a temple committee consisting of member-village representatives.

<sup>3</sup> 'Cultural accumulation' can be understood as the cumulative process in which innovations are gradually added to existing cultural traits across many generations [Boyd, 2016].

<sup>4</sup> I draw this conclusion having visited temple festivals at the big Daoist temple Baiyunshan 白雲山 in Jiaxian 佳縣 County and the Bull King Bodhisattva festival (*Niuwang pusa* 牛王菩薩) in Qianyan 喬壩 village, Dangcha-zhen 黨岔鎮 township, Hengshan 橫山 County on the occasion of the Lantern festival (*yuanxiao jie* 元宵節) in February 2009.

<sup>5</sup> My informants jokingly said that these troupes are so poor in quality that the actors even walk onto the stage wearing regular shoes and trousers.

<sup>6</sup> In western Shanxi, a special 'stage-clearing opera' (*datai xi* 打台戲) was often performed on newly built stages. One actor would play a 'Wang celestial official' (Wang *lingguan* 王靈官) who has three eyes and a mouth tied by a cloth, and holds a magic mirror to drive away evil spirits (*zhao yao jing* 照妖鏡). Another actor would play a 'golden lad' (*jintong* 金童) who sprinkled the blood of a rooster over the stage.



<sup>7</sup> In most cases, *yangge* (秧歌) troupes are hired for this occasion. In the Shangdang area in southeastern Shanxi, professional *yangge* troupes make a living by performing at family gatherings like weddings or by performing vow-fulfilling operas. Different types of *yangge* derive their name from their area of origin, e.g. Wuxiang *yangge* 武鄉秧歌, Xiangyuan *yangge* 襄垣秧歌, and Qinyuan *yangge* 沁源秧歌.

<sup>8</sup> Personal communication with Gao, April 8–10, 2008.

<sup>9</sup> Troupe: Pingshun County *laozi* opera troupe 平順縣落子劇團, Changzhi city 長治市, troupe director: Yuan Jiwei (原紀衛, 1963). They perform the *laozi* 落子, *bangzi* 梆子, and *yuju* 豫劇 genres.

<sup>10</sup> Troupe: Linxian County *daoqing* opera troupe 臨縣道情劇團, Linxian town, troupe party secretary and deputy director: Zhang Ruifeng 張瑞鋒.

<sup>11</sup> Jiang Qing (江青 1914–1991), actress and major political figure of the Cultural Revolution, was Mao Zedong's fourth wife.

<sup>12</sup> Personal communication with a troupe leader, February 2008.

<sup>13</sup> Interview with Zhang Ruifeng, February 2008.

<sup>14</sup> Interview with Zhang Ruifeng, February 2008.

<sup>15</sup> The 'Collected Reports of the All-state Survey of the Current Situation concerning Opera Genres and Troupes' offer alarming accounts of the state of Shanxi opera genres. Of the 49 genres registered in 1983, only 28 survived the following 20 years [Liu, 2005, p.6]. In my estimation, even these figures are too optimistic.

<sup>16</sup> *Erren tai* sketch-plays are performed by two actors, normally a male and a female, and feature singing, elements of dance, gymnastics, and juggling with a fan. Humorous sketches are done in the local dialect and involve story-telling about relations between couples. They appeal to the public with coarse humor and obscene (*hun* 渾) jokes.

<sup>17</sup> Interview with Zhang Ruifeng, February 2008.

<sup>18</sup> In Shanxi, they are owned by wealthy coal mine bosses.