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Attractive Features and Potential Value of the Chinese Traditional Theater School as a Tourist Spot: A Case Study of the Shaanxi Opera in Xi'an City

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1. Introduction

The People's Republic of China, with one of the fastest growing economies in the world, has a thriving tourist market. Chinese tourism has developed rapidly over the past few decades due to two main reasons. First, the living standard has improved significantly, giving people the time and money to enjoy tourism. Second, policies promoting tourism have been enacted since the beginning of the Open Door Policy in 1978 that have supported the government and/or local people in constructing tourist attractions and related infrastructure nationwide (Muramatsu and Tsujimoto 1999: 17-21). Under such circumstances, both international tourism (foreigners traveling to China) and domestic tourism (Chinese traveling within China) have flourished considerably in recent decades. For example, while the total number of domestic travelers increased from about 300 million in 1991 to about 870 million in 2002, the total number of international visitors (including people from Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan) nearly tripled from about 33 million in 1991 to about 97 million in 2002 (Kunimatsu and Suzuki 2006: 5). These figures alone are enough to suggest why some people now call China "the superpower of tourism" (Kunimatsu and Suzuki 2006; Suzuki 2008).¹⁾

Meanwhile, as a result of the nationwide development of tourism in China, various tourist cultural activities have been generated by the government and/or local people, often based on the reinvention of traditional cultures and/or the invention of new "traditions" such as ones based on traditional folk cultures, ethnic cultures, revolutionary traditions, or customs related to ancestor worship (Han 1996, 2007; Kaneshige 2008; Zeng 1998, 2001). Of course, the purpose of generating such cultural tours varies depending upon the region. Goals include the revitalization of the local economy, the reinforcement and reconstruction of ethnic identity, and the expansion of international trade networks. The economic effect that such cultural tourism could create is also fairly varied. However, many such cultural activities are generated by the local government and/or local people to revitalize the depressed local economy and to revive declining traditional cultures because they regard tourism, when successfully organized and made to produce a certain amount of economic profit, as an important means to survive in the new era of market-economy competition.

In this study, taking into account the factors mentioned above, I will discuss a Chinese regional theater called the Shaanxi Opera to show how local people reconstruct or try to reconstruct some aspects of the Opera in their struggle to survive in the new environment of fierce free competition.²⁾ Focusing specifically on a Chinese traditional theater school (where actors/actresses of the Shaanxi Opera are trained), I will analyze how the leaders of the Shaanxi Opera utilize some of the characteristic features of the school for the purpose of tourism to help revitalize the Opera.³⁾ As I will mention in the second section, the Shaanxi Opera has not completely recovered from the damages caused by the Cultural Revolution. Worse, it is also suffering from serious economic difficulties now because it is losing the battle against competing entertainment industries such as movies, animated cartoons, and television. So, the leaders of the Shaanxi Opera, particularly officials of the local agency for cultural affairs, have turned to tourism, hoping that it might help revitalize the Opera. In this study, I will analyze the “open house” project, which shows the educational process of actors/actresses to tourists and was initiated by the leaders in the social and economic context described above. Although it may seem like an ordinary project without any surprising contents, many leaders of the Shaanxi Opera see it as having great potential for enhancing tourists’ understanding and appreciation of the Opera. By using a specific example of one traditional theater school in Xi’an city, which has been especially committed to the project, I will describe the current state of the project and forecast its future prospects.

2. About Shaanxi Opera

The Shaanxi Opera is a traditional type of theater not widely known except to devoted fans or researchers specializing in Chinese traditional theater.⁴⁾ But the Shaanxi Opera (*qinqiang*) is a very popular regional theater in the northwestern part of China and it is especially influential in Shaanxi and Gansu provinces.⁵⁾ In Shaanxi province (see Map 1), the Shaanxi Opera is one of the ten popular legends of the region (*shidaguai*) especially because its “painted face” role category called *hualian* is known to sing with a roaring voice that is said to be audible for miles around (Zhang *et al.* 2000: 5).⁶⁾ The Shaanxi Opera has a long history and it is said to have existed from at least the middle of the Ming Dynasty (or the end of the sixteenth century). Although the exact origin of the Shaanxi Opera is still wrapped in mystery, some researchers suggest that the Shaanxi Opera is much older than the famous Beijing Opera, which came into being only at the end of the eighteenth century during the reign of Emperor Qian Long of the Qing Dynasty. Moreover, there is some evidence to suggest that the Shaanxi Opera influenced the formation of the Beijing Opera (Jiao and Yan 2005: 140). Thus, the Shaanxi Opera is a regional theater that has been influential enough to leave illustrious marks on the history of Chinese traditional theater as a whole.

Because the Shaanxi Opera is a very complicated theater, it is not possible to sum up its basic characteristics in a few words. However, it certainly has some unique characteristics that differentiate it from the Beijing Opera. For example, actors/actresses of the Shaanxi Opera use the Shaanxi dialect (especially the dialect of the Guanzhong region in Shaanxi) in their songs and speeches. In addition, the Shaanxi Opera’s sometimes passionate and vigorous music is also quite different from the Beijing Opera’s more elegant and milder



Map 1 Location of Shaanxi Province in China (Created by the author).

music. Interestingly, some fans of the Shaanxi Opera claim that its music reflects “the vigorous and audacious nature of the Shaanxi people” because it is the music created by the people who have witnessed so many dynastic changes and therefore played an active part in the history of ancient China as the citizens of the old capital city Chang’an (present-day Xi’an).⁷⁾ Meanwhile, the singing voice of *hualian* (the painted-face role category) is also something that may reflect the so-called “vigorous and audacious nature of the Shaanxi people”. As I mentioned earlier, the *hualian* singing voice is fairly energetic and quite unlike its counterpart in the Beijing Opera, which is much more elegant.

Thus, the Shaanxi Opera has many unique characteristics of its own that reflect the culture of the Shaanxi region. But it also has some of the basic characteristics of the Chinese traditional theater, such as the traditional patterns of acting called *sigongwufa* and the traditional role categories for an actor/actress called *hangdang*.⁸⁾ *Sigongwufa* is based on the four skills of *chang* (singing), *nian* (recitation), *zuo* (acting), and *da* (martial skills) and the five categories of techniques, which are *shou* (hand movement), *yan* (eye movement), *shen* (body movement), *fa* (coordination of hand, eye, body, and foot movement), and *bu* (ways of walking).⁹⁾ *Hangdang* is comprised of four main role categories, *sheng* (male), *dan* (female), *jing* (painted face), and *chou* (comic), and their various subcategories.¹⁰⁾ Just as in any other Chinese traditional theater (including the famous Beijing Opera), the performance of actors/actresses of the Shaanxi Opera is structured by the *sigongwufa* and the *hangdang*.

What is particularly attractive about the Shaanxi Opera? Some people might find the Shaanxi Opera’s long and mysterious history quite intriguing. Others might respond to the

Opera's unique music which has a rough liveliness. But what most people find appealing is the performance of the actors/actresses because of its impressive creativity. The Shaanxi Opera is often called "the performing art of actors/actresses" due to the central and creative role played by the actors/actresses. They must convey different times and places and create various figures (whether historical or literary) relying almost solely on their own bodies, using the *sigongwufa* and the *hangdang*, since there are very few props (usually just a table and a few chairs) used in many of the traditional programs.¹¹⁾ In other words, the performers cannot count on the stage set to help them express the characters, the historical setting or a specific place. The skill and creativity required is something that, once appreciated, most people find attractive.

3. Present Condition of the Shaanxi Opera

It is imperative to know the present condition of the Opera in order to better understand the implications of the open house project instituted at the school. Here I describe the situation of the Opera in Xi'an, which is my main fieldwork site.

As mentioned above, the Shaanxi Opera is a regional theater that is quite popular in the northwestern provinces of Shaanxi and Gansu. In Shaanxi province (including the capital city of Xi'an), there are still many zealous fans of the Opera. In fact, some of them love the Opera so much that they call themselves "super fans of the Opera" (*chaoji ximi*), and they claim that enjoying the Opera is more important than having three meals a day. That's why these super fans often form recreational groups called *zileban* and play instruments or sing some famous *changduan* (parts of songs) of the Opera (see Picture 1 for a *zileban* performance). Perhaps it is possible to say that the close link between the Shaanxi Opera and the Shaanxi people is the fruit of their self-entertaining activities at the grass-roots level.

However, the Shaanxi Opera as a whole has been facing serious economic difficulty recently, and it is far from prosperous in urban areas like Xi'an. The super fans usually are old people living in farming communities on the outskirts of cities, while young or middle-aged city dwellers rarely appreciate the Opera anymore. There are at least two factors, political and economic, involved in this situation. The political factor has a lot to do with the damages caused by the Cultural Revolution. During the ten years of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), many eminent performers and directors of the Shaanxi Opera were persecuted and driven from their jobs. Moreover, it was prohibited to perform programs other than designated revolutionary programs (*yangbanxi*), and therefore the young people of the time (today's middle-aged people) grew up without knowing much about the traditional Shaanxi Opera (cf. Chen 2003: 281-282).¹²⁾

The economic factor involved in the declining fortunes of the Opera has something to do with the spread of TV and the diversification of people's tastes in entertainment that gradually occurred in the era of the Open Door Policy after the Cultural Revolution. In addition, more and more people regard the Opera as old-fashioned, and they just do not care enough to go to theaters to learn to appreciate it. This is especially true for young people, who are usually much more interested in popular music from Taiwan or Hong Kong

(cf. Kato 2002: 304-305). People often complain that the stories go too slowly in the Shaanxi Opera and the themes do not match modern life. They thus regard the Opera as outdated in the age of modern technology and global media.

How is this situation affecting the Shaanxi Opera in Xi'an and how are the leaders of the Opera (particularly officials of the local agency for cultural affairs) responding to the situation? To put it simply, the number of opera performances in the city has decreased noticeably since the late 1980s because of the difficulty in getting younger people to attend. Accordingly, many theatrical companies came to make less money from their performances in the city, and their financial conditions have worsened. For example, even a very prestigious company called Xi'an Yisushe became obliged to perform in farming communities, where there are still a certain number of Opera fans, in order to survive financially.

In response to the financial difficulties, the leaders of the Opera have recently initiated two types of reforms: restructuring of the theatrical companies and fuller participation of the Opera in the tourist market.¹³⁾ In 2005, four opera companies merged into two troupes. Members of those theatrical companies who had reached a certain age (40 for both men and women) were made to retire early in order to lighten the economic burden on the theatrical companies. Meanwhile, with the two newly consolidated theatrical companies (Sanyishe and Yisushe) under the managerial control of a corporation called Qujian Guanweihui, the Opera is now preparing to enter the tourist market. So it is within this context that the importance of the open house project in the Chinese traditional theater school, the main focus of this study, has come to be recognized by the leaders of the Opera.



Picture 1 Fans of the Shaanxi Opera playing instruments, Xi'an, March 2006.
(Photo by the author)

4. Basic Characteristics of the Chinese Traditional Theater School: A Case Study of the Provincial Art School in Xi'an

Here I present a brief look at the history of traditional theater schools in general with a particular focus on the school in Xi'an where I conducted fieldwork. In the theatrical world of the Shaanxi Opera, the training of actors/actresses used to be conducted through apprenticeship, and the early examples of schools appeared in the late 1940's (at the end of the Republic of China period).¹⁴⁾ Then, in the 1950's (right after the foundation of the People's Republic of China), more modern forms of traditional theater schools were established nationwide by the government to ensure the systematic training of actors/actresses and musicians to help propagate the principles of the proletarian revolution (Beijingshi Yishu Yanjiusuo/Shanghaishi Yishu Yanjiusuo ed. 1999: 1791-1802). At that time, many traditional theater schools were also established in Shaanxi province, such as the Northwestern Institute of Traditional Theater and the Shaanxi Provincial Traditional Theater School in Xi'an city (Zhongguo Xiquzhi Biansuan Weiyuanhui/Zhongguo Xiquzhi Shaanxisheng Biansuan Weiyuanhui 1995: 495). Although most of these schools were closed during the Cultural Revolution, some of them reopened after the Revolution, and new schools have been established in the last three decades as well. Today, traditional theater schools have become a key educational institution for the training of actors/actresses of the Shaanxi Opera.

I now turn to my case-study school. The school that I will introduce here is called the Provincial Art School, which has been quite eager to use tourism as a way to help revitalize the Shaanxi Opera.¹⁵⁾ This is a provincially founded secondary vocational school (*zhongzhuan*) that evolved from the Shaanxi Provincial Traditional Theater School mentioned above.¹⁶⁾ It was called by that very name until the mid-1980's when it specialized only in the Shaanxi Opera. However, the school established new courses, such as folk dance, vocal music, and fine arts, when the Opera went into a slump and the number of students decreased conspicuously. Today, it is managed as a general art school with many different subjects. Here, I will outline the five-year training course for actors/actresses of the Shaanxi Opera. Upon completion of the course, most graduates find jobs in the opera companies of Shaanxi and Gansu provinces. At the time of my fieldwork, conducted intermittently from March 2006 to September 2007, there were three different classes in the course, each of which had about 30 students (15 boys and 15 girls). All the students lived in school dormitories.

The major goal of the Shaanxi Opera course, in a nutshell, is the training of actors/actresses, so there are many specialized subjects related to performance. For example, there are *changnian* classes for singing and recitation skills, *shenduan* classes for acting skills, *tanzigong* classes for martial skills, and *bazigong* classes to learn the techniques of using wooden swords and spears in performance. These subjects constitute elementary skills associated with *sigongwufa* mentioned in the first section. Moreover, there is a more advanced subject called *jumu* (or *paixi*) in which particular plays of the Shaanxi Opera are rehearsed. This class is based on the fundamental skills learned in the other specialized subjects, and it is regarded as the most important subject of all. Meanwhile, the students also study Chinese, math, and history in courses like those found in ordinary secondary schools. These

subjects expand the students' general knowledge and are considered to be as important as the specialized performance courses.¹⁷⁾

5. Three Attractive Features of the Shaanxi Opera Training

Many leaders of the Shaanxi Opera (including the leaders of the traditional theater school) claim that there are at least three attractive features in the education of actors/actresses that can be utilized for the purpose of tourism. The open house project that I will describe below is mainly based on these three features of the school.

5.1 Long and Difficult Training

Many leaders of the Shaanxi Opera regard the long and difficult training of actors/actresses as one of the most attractive features of the school, since they think that people would learn a lot about the Opera by observing the process of training. Below I describe what that training process is like.

As mentioned above, there are many subjects, including both elementary and advanced ones, in the Shaanxi Opera course. One thing that makes learning the Opera very difficult for students is the complexity of the skills involved. Recently, several books that systematically analyze and describe the performance skills required in the Chinese traditional theater have been published (Guan *et al.* 2002; Zhao *et al.* 2004).¹⁸⁾ The publication of such books then suggests that the skills comprising the performance of the traditional theater are simply so many and so complicated that it takes several voluminous books to introduce and analyze them all. As a matter of fact, students in the Shaanxi Opera course of the Provincial Art School were frequently overwhelmed by the number of subjects they had to learn, and many of them lagged behind in their studies. Many of them had a hard time mastering the complicated skills of the Opera and they were often made to practice extra hours after school (see Picture 2). There were even some students whose bodies so ached with weariness from so much practice that they had trouble sleeping at night.

In addition to the hardships involved in the training process, the period of time spent in training is also unusually long. As mentioned above, the Shaanxi Opera course is a five-year program with a boarding system. That means that students do not go home after school and they stay at school to practice day and night for five years (except for summer vacations and spring breaks when they can go home). However, they learn only the basic opera techniques for the first two years. They do not rehearse particular plays until around the third year. Even then, they are allowed to practice only simple pieces called *pianduan* (portions of plays) at first and they do not get to rehearse a complete play until the fourth year. They do not perform on stage in front of theater audiences until the fifth year, right before their graduation. Of course, they do not become a full-fledged actor/actress right after graduation or upon entering a theatrical company. Although each theatrical company has a slightly different system, many of them require new members (especially recent graduates) to undergo a training period, which may last a few years, to learn the artistic style of a particular theatrical company. For example, one company that I visited in Lanzhou, Gansu province, had a three-year training period to reeducate young graduates. As this



Picture 2 Students tutored by a demanding teacher after school, Xi'an, September 2005.
(Photo by the author)

example indicates, the period of time spent in training for the Shaanxi Opera is fairly long, and sometimes tedious, and is likely to extend well beyond graduation (cf. Rimer 1998; Salz 1998).

Why do the leaders of the Shaanxi Opera think that the arduous training will be attractive to tourists? To put it plainly, many of them hope that tourists will become more sophisticated audiences if they understand the Opera training. That is, many leaders think that tourists will be more respectful and appreciative of the Shaanxi Opera once they know how long and hard the training process really is. There is a proverb in the Shaanxi Opera world that says, “A one-second performance on stage is based on ten years of training backstage” (Zhongguo Xiquzhi Biansuan Weiyuanhui/Zhongguo Xiquzhi Shaanxisheng Biansuan Weiyuanhui 1995: 683). Although this is just an expression, it accurately captures the reality of the training process. Many leaders quote this proverb to point to the fact that it takes many years of hard training for an actor/actress to perform well on stage even for a second. They also emphasize that a traditional theater school is one of the few places to gain genuine understanding of the reality of the training process.

5.2 The Rehearsal Process

Many leaders of the Shaanxi Opera regard the process of rehearsing for plays as another attractive feature of the school because they believe that people will learn a lot about acting by observing the process.

Students do not start rehearsing plays in *jumu* class until the third year, once they have sufficient mastery of the elementary skills. The rehearsal process is not that simple because

there are both external stages (according to the academic grades) of learning and internal steps of learning in the process. The former are characterized by different levels of plays based on the school curriculum. In the Provincial Art School, there are (1) introductory plays (*qimengxi*) for the third-year students, (2) middle-level plays (*zhongnianji*) for the fourth-year students, and (3) advanced-level plays (*gaonianji*) for the fifth-year students. The introductory level, for example, includes relatively simple one-act plays called *zhezixi*, while the advanced level contains more complicated plays (including some modern works) requiring a high command of martial skills and a wide range of acting ability.

Meanwhile, the internal steps of learning are another aspect in the rehearsal process of a play. In the Provincial Art School, there are three conspicuous steps with different goals: (1) *chupai* (learning and memorizing the basic body movements, songs, and speeches of a play), (2) *daiyue* (adjusting the tempo of the performance to match the music of the band), (3) *caipai* (rehearsing a play with costumes and make-up).¹⁹⁾ Students thus learn to perform a play step by step by following this sequence, and it takes much more than one day and night to do so. It is no wonder that some teachers of the Provincial Art School compare the rehearsal process to that of building a house, saying that it is important to lay a firm foundation (acquire the basic skills) first and then build on it step by step (polish the acquired skills) (Shimizu 2006: 115).²⁰⁾

Why do the leaders of the Shaanxi Opera think that the rehearsal process will be attractive to visitors? To put it simply, they think that the ability of people who do not regularly attend the Opera to appreciate performances would improve through close observation of the creative process of rehearsal. That is because tourists would come to understand the details of acting by following the rehearsal process carefully and that would in turn enable them to feel the depth of the Opera. To make their point, the leaders of the Opera often give an example of a play called *zhangbanpo*, which is a traditional program from the famous “Tales of the Three Kingdoms” story. They say that if tourists keenly observe the rehearsal process of the play, they will comprehend the following two aspects of the play. First, they will surely know the plot, which is about a hero called Zhaozilong rescuing and protecting his master Liubei’s baby from an old enemy Caocao. But, more importantly, they will also appreciate how the highlight of the play, a famous battle scene between Zhaozilong and Caocao’s generals, depends upon subtleties in performance such as the ambivalent way Zhaozilong holds his spear, reflecting both aggression toward the enemy and care for the baby.

5.3 *Suzhi* Education

Many leaders of the Shaanxi Opera regard aspects of *suzhi* (“quality”) education manifest in the school attractive as well because they believe that people enhance their understanding of an actor/actress by knowing something about this aspect of education. *Suzhi* education (*suzhi jiaoyu*) is an educational principle that aims to achieve well-rounded development, both psychological and physical, of students in order to improve the quality of education as a whole (Zhu *et al.* 2007). The principle has been adopted in schools across China in recent years and it has also influenced the educational practice of the traditional theater schools (Shimizu 2007).

To put it succinctly, *suzhi* education in the Provincial Art School aims to expand the general knowledge of students at the same time that they acquire specialized performance skills. For example, subjects such as Chinese, math, and history are intended to expand the general knowledge of students. The Provincial Art School is a secondary vocational school, so these are secondary-level classes. However, they are all regarded as crucial elements of the curriculum because many teachers believe that without learning them an actor/actress cannot acquire a certain level of intelligence (or *wuxing* in Chinese) necessary for analyzing scripts and performing different characters. Accordingly, there are also such subjects as politics, music theory, and history of the Chinese traditional theater that are designed to expand and enrich students' general knowledge.

Meanwhile, the influence of *suzhi* education is manifest in the well-planned teaching methods for specialized performance subjects as well. In a specialized subject like *changnian* (singing and recitation skills), for example, a highly sophisticated method of teaching and applying theories of vocal music is used to practice vocalization and ways of breathing. In addition, ways to keep a good singing voice (usually instructions on nutrition, eating habits, and disease prevention) are taught, based on the same theories, since so many students experience a period of voice change while in school. It is needless to say that the purpose of such a well-planned teaching method is to help students acquire a correct form of singing (based on the accurate pronunciation of words) and acquaint them with scientific ways to prevent them from harming their voice.

Why do the leaders of the Shaanxi Opera think that aspects of *suzhi* education will be of interest to tourists? The answer has a lot to do with the ways *suzhi* education has affected changes in the educational practice of traditional theater schools in the world of the Shaanxi Opera. Many schools, including the Provincial Art School, used to have extremely specialized curriculums, mostly taught with unscientific methods of instruction. However, *suzhi* education has helped to enrich the general education subjects and refined the teaching methods for specialized subjects. In other words, it has contributed to the adoption and reinforcement of modern school-like characteristics into these educational institutions that once ran more on an apprenticeship model (Shimizu 2007). Consequently, the leaders of the Opera are quite proud of such modern aspects of traditional theater schools, saying that the schools are more balanced in terms of curriculum than before. Moreover, they believe that tourists (and most theater audiences) can better understand actors/actresses (especially how they acquire the intelligence required of an actor/actress) by knowing what kind of curriculum they have gone through. The leaders of the Opera hope that such knowledge will in turn refresh the images of an actor/actress and deepen people's understanding of the performance.

6. About the Open House Project in the Traditional Theater School

In the previous section, I briefly described the Provincial Art School and its three features that many leaders of the Shaanxi Opera want to display to visitors. As mentioned earlier, these features are integrated into a project called "open house" that reveals the educational process of actors/actresses to tourists. Below, I describe the open house project in some detail.

In the Provincial Art School, the leaders of the Opera (including the leaders of the school) have been accepting some tourists to show how actors/actresses are trained since the late 1980's (1988 to be exact) when the Opera went into a slump. At first, these tourists were mainly art school leaders, corporate leaders, or local political leaders from other parts of China or foreign countries interested in the Opera who were brought in by the leaders of the Opera on an irregular basis through their social networks. They usually came in a small group of around 5 to 10 people at a time when the school was not in recess (during the summer vacation and spring break) or busy with exams (during the each semester's mid-term and final exam weeks). According to a school leader, there were approximately 50 to 60 tourists (about half of them foreigners) per year for the first few years of the open house project. The number of tourists has been increasing slowly but steadily since then, though with some fluctuations, reaching about 100 tourists per year by the year 2006.²¹⁾

What is the purpose of this project? The leaders of the Opera maintain three main purposes for the open house project. (1) First, they hope to stimulate students to train harder by inviting some important guests who often give words of encouragement to the students. (2) Second, they aim to help tourists achieve a more thorough understanding of the Opera. (3) Finally, they hope that the visitors' reports to others on what they saw will make the Shaanxi Opera more appealing to people at home and abroad. Of course, the open house project produces a certain amount of profit, since each tourist is charged 50 RMB for the tour of the school. The leaders of the school also make some profits by selling souvenirs like DVDs, cassette tapes, and postcards of the famous Opera actors/actresses to tourists. Nevertheless, the open house project as a whole has been placing special emphasis on promoting the Shaanxi Opera and not simply on making money. That is why the leaders of the Opera maintain those three purposes for the project.

What are the main contents of this project? In sum, the leaders of the Opera show things like the everyday training process of actors/actresses, the rehearsal process for plays, and aspects of *suzhi* education (the three features described in the previous section) as the main contents of the project to achieve the above three ends. In addition, they sometimes show a performance by the students at the end of the tour to provide an even more satisfying and meaningful experience for the tourists. Certainly, there are some tour guides (usually some teachers of the school) to show the tourists around the school and introduce the basic characteristics of the Opera to them. By the way, it is important to note here that these contents of the project are specially arranged for the tourists. For example, when they show the rehearsal process for plays, they make sure that tourists can see the rehearsals of relatively well-known plays such as the "Tales of the Three Kingdoms" story or the "Outlaws of the Marsh" story because these plays are familiar to many tourists. Likewise, they choose carefully the contents of a performance by the students shown at the end of the tour. What is more, English translations are provided for foreign tourists who don't speak Chinese by tour guides (usually some teachers of the school who speak English) throughout the tour.

What are the effects of this open house project? It seems that the first purpose of the project, to stimulate students to train harder, has been well-achieved because many students indeed enjoy meeting visitors who often praise their efforts in training and performance. More importantly, it seems that the second purpose of the project, to help tourists become

better acquainted with the Opera, has likewise been well attained, since many tourists clearly enjoy the tour of the school. Some tourists, for example, are so curious about what they see during the tour that they ask many questions about the training process to the teachers and students. Others take notes on what they have seen and heard during the tour and snap numerous photos of the training process. Still others go even further and try on the Opera costumes or try using the wooden swords and spears. In any case, most of them write the following sort of comment after the tour. “I never would have thought that becoming an actor/actress of the Shaanxi Opera is so hard!”, or “I was quite amazed to find that performance of the Shaanxi Opera is based on so many complicated skills!”, or “I was simply overwhelmed by the depth of the Shaanxi Opera which is made up of so many different elements!”, or “Actors/Actresses are more educated than I thought!”

Meanwhile, it seems that the third purpose of the project, to make the Opera better known and more attractive to people at home and abroad, has also been realized to some extent because students of the Shaanxi Opera course (especially those senior year students who can already perform) have been invited to perform in art schools in Hong Kong, Korea, and the United States over the past few years. Although the Provincial Art School has not been able to make any money from these overseas performances, which were mainly for cultural exchange, the school has at least been successful in leaving some impressions among those theater audiences abroad since it still maintains relatively strong ties with those foreign art schools.

Since 2005, the scope of the open house project has been somewhat expanded after the theatrical companies were merged and the Shaanxi Opera began to participate more actively in the tourist market. That is, the leaders of the Opera, especially the leaders of the school, have become more eager to cultivate the tourist market since then, so they now accept some foreign exchange students studying at the universities in Xi'an and other neighboring cities as tourists in the hope of better acquainting them with the Opera (see Picture 3).²²⁾ These foreign exchange students are brought in by the leaders of the Opera on an irregular basis (when the school is not in recess or busy with exams) through their contact with the foreign affairs office of the universities. At the moment (as of September 2007), the project seems to be going well since many foreign students, who previously knew nothing about the Shaanxi Opera, have come to understand some basic differences between the Beijing Opera and the Shaanxi Opera.²³⁾ The project has also been successful in attracting a total of 80 foreign students to the school for the past few years since 2005.

In addition to bringing in foreign exchange students, the leaders of the Opera are seeking ways to attract travelers to Xi'an (especially foreign travelers) to visit the school by collaborating with some local travel agencies. Although they are still working on this new idea, they are hoping to make the project one of the popular optional tours in Xi'an jointly organized by the school and local travel agencies. So, in order to make the tour of the school more appealing, they have developed an idea to combine the existing open house project with a performance by a local theatrical company. This is another way that might expand the scope of the project. Most importantly, whether by accepting foreign exchange students or attempting to attract travelers, the leaders of the Opera are trying to appeal to broader groups of people who are not usually inclined to attend the Opera.



Picture 3 Foreign tourists visiting the Provincial Art School, September 2007.
(Photo by the author)

7. Open House Project: Implications and Prospects

So far, I have mostly concentrated on describing the basic situation of the open house project in the Provincial Art School. What are the implications and prospects of this project? I would like to examine these points next.

7.1 Implications

Let us first turn to the implications of the project. One of the important effects of the open house project has a lot to do with the ways it has been introducing the Shaanxi Opera, and to whom. That is, the project has been introducing the Opera to people (especially to tourists interested in the traditional culture of Xi'an) far beyond the narrow circles of the elderly "super fans of the Opera". More importantly, it has been promoting the Opera broadly to people of all ages by revealing the internal structures of the Opera to help them gain understanding of the Opera. Such introductions, which might be compared to showing visitors the process of making a film, are quite effective since the Shaanxi Opera is a complicated traditional theater and difficult for most people to understand.²⁴⁾ Perhaps this project is comparable, in terms of providing general introductions, to the way the Beijing Opera has promoted itself by performing well-explicated, translated, and/or simplified programs for tourists.²⁵⁾

The project's three key features described above seem to have succeeded in making people more appreciative of and knowledgeable about the Opera. As many leaders of the Opera expected, tourists are quite likely to become more interested in the Opera if they gain deeper knowledge about the actors/actresses from the three features of the project. Actually, the comments left by the tourists, some of which I cited in the previous section, clearly suggest this possibility since most comments describe certain refreshed images (usually positive ones) they came to have toward the Opera after the tour. So, the effect of the open house project is not limited to helping tourists gain a general understanding of the

Opera, but it helps them to achieve some insights into the subtleties of the Opera as well.

Meanwhile, it is also interesting to consider how the project has transformed the school itself (especially the Shaanxi Opera course). As mentioned in the fourth section, the Provincial Art School is one of those traditional theater schools which used to serve as a training center for systematically educating actors/actresses and musicians to help propagate the principles of the proletarian revolution in the 1950's and 1960's. But now, with the open house project in progress, the school (especially its Shaanxi Opera course) has become a tourist site for promoting and disseminating the artistic value of the Opera to people at home and abroad. This functional change of the school from the revolutionary period to the contemporary period is so dramatic and quite interesting to note. It seems to epitomize one aspect of the social change (from the era of proletarian revolution to the era of market-economy and commercialism) that China has undergone for the past six decades.

7.2 Prospects

Next, I consider the future development of the open house project. To put it simply, the open house project in the Provincial Art School is quite likely to join hands with local theatrical companies of the Shaanxi Opera, since its ultimate aim is to promote the Opera itself, not simply to enhance people's understanding of the educational process of training actors/actresses. So, the project may develop into a new type of theater appreciation tour with visitors attending performances by local theatrical companies after the tour of the school. Another possibility is that students might demonstrate some basic body movements at the theaters right before performance.²⁶⁾ Some theatrical companies of the Shaanxi Opera in Xi'an have tried that kind of tour before with moderate success (Xi'anshi Wenhua ju 2006: 7-8). However, whatever forms it may take, it seems almost inevitable that the open house project will strengthen ties with local theatrical companies, which have the ability to perform at any time, in order to more broadly and effectively promote the Opera.²⁷⁾

8. Future of the Open House Project in Xi'an Tourism

In this final section, I would like to forecast the prospects of the open house project in the context of Xi'an tourism.

Objectively speaking, it seems that the open house project, as one of the important means to promote the Shaanxi Opera, has bright prospects in the context of Xi'an tourism. This is because tourism in Shaanxi province, the cradle of the Shaanxi Opera, has been thriving as Chinese tourism in general has been flourishing. According to recent statistics, for example, about 1.6 million international travelers (including people from Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan) and about 69.5 million domestic travelers (Chinese travelers) visited Shaanxi province, including the city of Xi'an, in the year 2006 alone (Zhongguo Guojia Luyouju Bianjibu 2007: 334). Surely, in the future many more tourists will visit a famous tourist city like Xi'an, with attractive destinations such as the Terracotta Soldiers of the Emperor Qin Shihuang, Huaqing Chi (the Huaqing Pool), and Dayan Ta (The Great Wild Goose Pagoda). Consequently, the open house project stands a good chance of getting more public attention and attracting a larger number of tourists. The project is all the more likely

to be successful because competing performing arts are relatively underdeveloped for tourism in Xi'an, where tombs and temples are the most popular tourist spots.

Of course, there are some issues that remain to be dealt with if the project is to continue thriving and become more effective. Specifically, there are at least two problems: one of education and one of tourism. First, there is the delicate problem of maintaining an optimal balance between education and tourism in a school like the Provincial Art School so as to avoid disrupting the educational process. This is the main reason why tourists are not brought in when the school is busy with exams (see the sixth section for this point). Accordingly, the scope and scale of the project must be carefully designed so that the school is not distracted from its primary mission of education. Second, there is the important issue of how to combine efforts with local theatrical companies to make the project more effective. One realistic way to combine efforts would be for theatrical companies to translate and/or simplify certain programs for tourists, just as the Beijing Opera has done, so that performance of those programs can complement the project.²⁸⁾

So, as is obvious from the presence of these issues, the open house project is not flawless at the moment. There are still some issues that must be dealt with. However, as mentioned above, since Xi'an is a famous tourist city that attracts many tourists every year, the project is likely to develop further as long as it is thoughtfully devised and sincerely supported.

Notes

- 1) Of course, apart from these statistics, there is other evidence that Chinese tourism has been flourishing lately. For example, the chairman of the China National Tourism Administration, Shao Qiwei, has recently emphasized the importance of appropriate utilization of ethnic cultural resources for the sustainable development of Chinese tourism (Shao 2006). The chairman's speech reflects the fact that China has recently been quite active in protecting and developing ethnic cultural resources for the purpose of tourism (cf. Zeng 1998; 2001).
- 2) This study is based on the data that I gathered during my fieldwork conducted intermittently from March 2006 to September 2007 in Xi'an, China.
- 3) In the anthropology of tourism, many researchers emphasize the importance of analyzing local hosts' involvement in tourism (e.g., Kawamori 2006; Ota 1993; Stronza 2001). For example, reviewing the anthropological literature on tourism extensively, Stronza finds the relative lack of analysis in the studies about the "origins of tourism" (ones that focus on understanding the origins of tourism) on how and why people in host destinations become involved in tourism. Thus, she suggests that we devote more attention to a question like "what are some of the factors that can explain particular kinds of local involvement in tourism?" (Stronza 2001: 263). I would like to stress here that this study is inspired by such a question and endeavors to illuminate the nature of hosts' involvement in tourism.
- 4) Since very few people know about the Shaanxi Opera in Japan (my home country), I created a Japanese website (http://www.geocities.jp/qinqiang_com/) about the Opera in 2003. This site was created with the aid of the Shaanxi Provincial Agency for Cultural Affairs, especially the administrative office within that agency called *zhenxingban*, which is in charge of promoting the

- Opera. The process of creating the website is described in a periodical published by the Xi'an Agency for Cultural Affairs (Xi'an Shi Wenhua Ju 2006).
- 5) The influence of the Shaanxi Opera can also be seen in areas such as the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region, Qinghai, Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region, Tibet, Shanxi, Henan, and Taiwan. For example, Yang and Zhu (1984) introduce the history of the Shaanxi Opera in Tibet. Zhang (1994: 4-6) writes of the situation of the Opera in Taiwan. I have had some contact with the theatrical companies of the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region and the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region during my long-term fieldwork (September 2000 to September 2002) in Xi'an.
 - 6) The Shaanxi people have made a legend about this voice, saying that *hualian* has a thunderous singing voice (or *changxi houqilai* in Chinese), which is included as one of the ten popular legends mentioned here.
 - 7) The expression "the vigorous and audacious nature of the Shaanxi people" was repeatedly used by some of the informants (fans of the Opera) throughout my fieldwork in Xi'an (cf. Wang 2003: 1).
 - 8) See Mackerras (1983) and Riley (1997) for general introductions to the Chinese traditional theater in English.
 - 9) Actually, there is some disagreement about the exact meaning of *fa*. Some people, for example, interpret *fa* as equal in meaning to a homonym *fa* ("hair"), claiming that it implies ways of moving hair. However, in this study I will stick to the most widely accepted interpretation of the term, i.e., *fa* as the coordination of hand, eye, body, and foot movement (cf. Sheng *et al.* 2002: 42).
 - 10) As for the subcategories, there are, for example, subcategories of *sheng* (male) such as *xusheng* (middle-aged male), *xiaosheng* (handsome young male), and *wusheng* (a male role that mainly uses martial skills). Surely there are subcategories of *dan* (female) as well. Every actor/actress must choose one of these subcategories, based on his/her physical appearance and abilities, and train to perform that subcategory exclusively. In other words, actors/actresses are not free to perform any role they want in the Shaanxi Opera because their choices are determined by such physical factors. Of course, there are some actors/actresses who are capable enough to perform more than one subcategory.
 - 11) When newly edited historical programs (*xinbian lishixi*) or modern programs (*xiandaixi*) are performed, however, gorgeous props are often used in the Shaanxi Opera.
 - 12) Some people refer to this period, during which only revolutionary programs were allowed, as *shinian erxi* to express their hunger for other programs, especially traditional ones, over the ten years.
 - 13) Of course, the Shaanxi Opera is not the only performing art to use tourism as a means of revitalization. Japanese folk performing arts, for example, also take this approach (Hashimoto 1996).
 - 14) However, there is one exceptional school affiliated with a famous theatrical company called the Shaanxi Yisulingxueshe (present-day Yisushe) that was founded in 1912 (in the first year of the Republic of China period). This school was a very progressive traditional theater school that contrasted sharply with the other apprenticeship-like educational institutions of the time. See Shimizu (2004) for more details on this school.
 - 15) Although there are other traditional theater schools in Xi'an, none of them has been as eager to have anything to do with tourism as this school, due to their limited resources in terms of numbers

of students, classrooms, and so on.

- 16) See Shimizu (2005; 2006) for more details on this particular school.
- 17) These basic characteristics of the Provincial Art School are found in most traditional theater schools.
- 18) Although these books are mostly about the Chinese traditional theater in general with a special emphasis on the Beijing Opera, they are often used by teachers of the Shaanxi Opera as textbooks.
- 19) Other traditional theater schools also have these three basic steps. However, some people have different names for these steps. For example, some people use the term *xiangpai* instead of *daiyue*. In addition, some people divide the three steps into more steps, saying that, for example, *chupai* is made up of *cupai* (the step for learning the basic body movements, songs, and speeches of a play) and *xipai* (the step for rehearsing particular scenes of a play more thoroughly).
- 20) In more anthropological terms, the rehearsal process can be understood as the process of acquiring artistic “body techniques” (Fukushima *et al.* 1995). I have analyzed the educational process of the Shaanxi Opera from this viewpoint in other articles (Shimizu 2005; 2006).
- 21) The number of tourists decreased significantly in 2003 due to SARS.
- 22) At the moment (as of September 2007), these foreign exchange students mostly come as invited guests at no charge because the leaders of the Shaanxi Opera are still experimenting to see whether or not the open house project can attract these people. Once the leaders ascertain that the project is attractive enough, they are likely to charge a fee (probably 50 RMB per person just like other tourists to the school) in order to make a decent profit. By the way, there are occasionally some foreign exchange students who express an interest in learning the Opera. However, most of them give up on the idea because of the difficulty involved in learning the Shaanxi dialect that is used in the songs and speeches of the Opera.
- 23) Increasingly, the presence of these foreign tourists in the Provincial Art School is attracting the media’s attention. For example, reporters of local newspapers often visit the school to take pictures of foreign tourists watching training and performance. They are quite curious about how these foreigners perceive the Shaanxi Opera. The leaders of the Opera (especially the leaders of the school) also actively invite reporters to the school in order to advertise the open house project.
- 24) Such introductions may also be compared to showing visitors the exhibitions in a museum. In the context of tourism, a museum is often strategically utilized by local hosts to manipulate tourist images of host communities (e.g., Ota 1993: 392-396). Similarly, the open house project also manipulates or try to manipulate tourist images in order to refresh the images of the Shaanxi Opera as a whole.
- 25) In the Beijing Opera, the contents of famous programs are well explicated in foreign books on the Beijing Opera (e.g., Lu 2002). What is more, some songs have English subtitles during performance. There are also some theaters in Beijing which mainly present simplified programs with a lot of acrobatics, such as “Journey to the West”, to foreign tourists. Unfortunately, the leaders of the Shaanxi Opera have been too busy dealing with the problem of the basic survival of the Opera to consider these practices.
- 26) These new types of theater appreciation tour may open possibilities for the transformation and/or re-creation of aspects of the Shaanxi Opera performance since the ways the Opera will be shown to tourists (especially foreign tourists who usually know very little about the Opera) are a lot different from the ways it has been shown to domestic “super fans of the Opera” who have

- sufficient knowledge of the Opera (cf. Yamashita 1992: 15-21).
- 27) Here I have exclusively focused on the Provincial Art School since it has especially been earnest in carrying out the open house project. However, other traditional theater schools in Xi'an, which do not have any similar projects at the moment, might consider instituting them if the open house project in the Provincial Art School is successful in promoting the Shaanxi Opera by closely cooperating with local theatrical companies.
- 28) By the way, finding ways to connect with popular images of Tang dynasty culture may also make promotion of the Shaanxi Opera in Xi'an effective. There are certain reasons for this. First of all, Xi'an, the former capital of the Tang dynasty, attracts many tourists interested in images of Tang dynasty culture. Moreover, Xi'an tourism has developed by taking such interests of tourists into account, as can be seen from recent developments of Dayan Ta (Great Wild Goose Pagoda) Square and Tang Paradise.

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