

China Images

by Nancy Pine

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Opera and The Soul of China

I am not an opera fan. Yet I have come to appreciate the worth of the impossibly dissonant sounds of Chinese opera.

My first evening in a Chinese village, I listened to the high-pitched sounds of the two-stringed *erhu*. They accompanied the tight strains of rural opera sung by local residents to welcome three foreign visitors. Although I was one of the honored guests, I struggled to comprehend what I was hearing and to understand why it was so appealing to many Chinese.

Almost a decade has passed since then, and my recent return to the same village has strengthened my recognition of where opera stands within Chinese life.

I grew up detesting the Wagnerian opera my father listened to. Not a culture buff and of humble background he loved that kind of opera, while my sisters and I made fun of it. Though years later my husband and I enjoyed the pure melodic tones of Italian opera during leisurely Sunday breakfasts, that soon faded when young children were added to the mix. Relaxed mornings no longer existed and, for me, opera became a nerve-jangling overlay. Chinese opera was even less attractive. Over the years, I'd heard bits of it, probably the popular Beijing style. To my American ears it sounded screechy and discordant as it wove among the notes of the five-tone pentatonic scale accompanied by unfamiliar

string instruments, cymbals and gongs. Exotic, yes, but definitely not enjoyable.

Then in 1989 I began traveling to China. I heard fragments of traditional music, including opera, in the parks. Although the instruments and voices were still strange to my western ears, the tones seemed more at home in a Chinese context.

On one walk through a city park I came across a lone *erhu* player. He leaned against the stonewall of a pavilion seated on a tiny stool. The tall, thin *erhu* rested on his thigh, and he seemed lost in the sounds that his horse-hair bow drew from its two strings. In the midst of thousands of urban dwellers, his melody suggested an aloneness, a way to imagine a walk in mountain forests or a rest along an isolated river. Another time, walking atop the Xi'an city wall, a friend stopped to listen to singing from a park below us. We peered down through the crenellations of the ancient wall at amateur performers who had set up chairs so onlookers could pause and listen. They were performing songs from the local Qin opera which, Ping'an pointed out, is quite different from Peking opera. We stayed there for some time, Ping'an drumming his index finger to the rising and falling sounds.

During my second trip to China, a year later, a friend treated me to dinner in his favorite Nanjing restaurant in the old market area of Fuzi Miao. Traditional dishes were accompanied by an orchestra of ancient

instruments. He chose a table close to the music. It jarred my senses. I tried to focus on the food and the conversation rather than the screeching tones, yet I knew he was showing me something he loved. The next day he arrived in my dorm room carrying a gift of two CDs of similar music softened by sounds of running water and bird calls. In the following months as I crisscrossed Los Angeles freeways for my job, I listened to those CDs and began to realize the privileged experience he had provided me. He had helped me draw closer to the pulse of China.

A few years later, my husband and I visited Banpo, an excavated Neolithic village in Central China. As we ambled along the walkways imagining people inhabiting the home sites, flute-like music wafted along the low ceilings of the iron excavation cover—haunting and compelling. In the souvenir shop replicas of the ancient clay instrument, the *xun*, beckoned from a shelf. The clerk motioned for me to try it. Nestling its egg-shaped smoothness in my palm, I tightened my lips and blew. The mellow tone rolled out of that piece of clay. I blew again, the chills moving along my spine as I realized the same sounds had floated across these lands 5000 years ago.

After several decades traveling to urban China, I joined a Global Volunteers project to teach spoken English for several weeks in a village on the edge of the great Loess Plateau. My first evening there we volunteers and our students (several high school teachers from surrounding areas) were treated to a welcoming celebration in a family courtyard.

Darkness was settling as my hesitant steps led me through the open door leading into the yard. Villagers were already seated on wooden benches facing a performance area set up with a portable audio system. Mr. Feng, a village leader, shook my hand and

motioned toward the front bench reserved for us, the honored guests. More villagers crowded in behind us.

Several musicians tuned their instruments, and after children scurried back and forth adjusting costumes and props, the local elementary school classes performed well-rehearsed songs and dances. We all clapped and swayed to their efforts. A student keyboard solo followed, and then Mr. Feng, his long, good-natured face crinkled by his smile, asked others to perform. He motioned to us. Forewarned, we volunteers sang a simple song with hand motions that probably no one understood and sank gratefully back onto our bench.

The local talent took over. First Mr. Feng sang. Then his wife was pulled forward. Reticence flickered across her high cheekbones. The villagers packed around us murmured in expectation, and her strong voice penetrated the courtyard. I leaned over to our project leader to ask if it was opera.

"Yes," he said quietly. "And it may be hard to listen to." He was right. The tones stretched across the Chinese pentatonic scale, built on five notes to an octave instead of the more familiar seven notes of the west. While my musical enjoyment vanished, I was drawn to the enthusiasm around me. Six or so musicians, arranged along the brick wall, slid into the rhythm of her song. A shiver ran through me as I watched her serene assurance. I tried to settle into the strange sounds and let their force encompass me.

Gazing up at the stars, I felt frozen in time in this make-shift performance hall. Two days earlier I had been on a 747 flying toward the middle of China. Now I sat surrounded by traditions that date back thousands of years. Squash vines dangled from the second story of the homestead, and as my eyes grew accustomed to the dim light, I began to notice the gourds hanging among the leaves.

The villagers urged another singer toward the microphone. I began watching the audience. Everyone packed into the courtyard seemed to know the music. As one woman's voice rose to a high tremor, a two-year old with dark sparkling eyes tapped her fingers and moved her body to the rhythm. Young children squatting on the floor nearby kept time with their feet and hands. The melodies and harmony, so strange to me, were as much a part of their lives as the breezes that lifted the leaves on the squash vines.

One after the other, villagers and then visiting teachers sang, each more passionate than the one before. "We've heard An Shang village opera. Now I'll sing my county's opera," said one young English teacher, her black hair and red patterned jacket framed by the darkness behind her. Next a local villager sang a piece from Shaanxi opera.

I looked at the musicians more carefully. Dressed in assorted dark blue jackets and neat shirts they sat upright on wooden stools. Their instruments were traditional two-stringed *erhus*, a bamboo flute, wood blocks, rhythm sticks, and a small skin drum. As each singer began, the *erhus* picked up the melodic line, found the right pitch, and joined in scratchy unison while the other instruments began to shape the tempo. As another performer took the floor the musicians switched instruments, now this one taking an *erhu* and that one the rhythm sticks. An Ke Jiang, our host, was among them, eyes closed, foot tapping.

A middle-aged farmer wearing a tan wool sweater gripped the hand-held mic. His face tensed as he poured every fiber of his body into the dissonant tones of the opera. Piercing, his voice rose to pitches I had never before heard. I sank into my exhaustion as I listened to this foreign music, exhilaration creeping through me as I glimpsed the soul of China.

I knew nothing about formal Chinese opera, but here, sitting in Feng's courtyard surrounded by farmers and their families, I imagined the voices spanning millennia. For the singers and listeners, the songs appeared a cathartic release, telling the history of passions and of the brutal labor exacted by the land. For me, it was as though the songs were rent from deep within the singers, from the days, not so far off, when farmers bent to the dried up soil and it yielded little food. I could not think of more appropriate words than those of Orpingalik, an Inuit shaman and poet, who said, "Songs are thoughts, sung out with breath when people are moved by great forces and ordinary speech no longer suffices."

We volunteers needed to prepare to teach the next day and so we followed the school children out early. The villagers and visiting teachers remained. As we walked along the dark road toward our new home, the moon and a few stars resting above us in the clear October night, strains of local opera followed us partway, then slowly drifted into the night, replaced by the dense stillness of the fields.

Loud-speakers blare the latest pop songs into the sidewalk hype and glitz of modern China--rap, Chinese rock and roll, experiments with synthesizers. Young urbanites pick through the latest CD releases from Taiwan and Hong Kong. In spite of this modern overlay and urban clatter, age-old sounds remain. In the parks where young and old meander, musicians of traditional music and opera are frequent—singers and *erhu* players remain the most common, performing for their own enjoyment in small pavilions or near lily-filled ponds, an integral part of Chinese life.

One recent sunny weekend I strolled through expansive Beihai Park behind the Forbidden City in Beijing. Unique music

drifted across the central lake. I hastened my pace and found a large group of musicians playing an assortment of ancient instruments that often accompany opera. Stationed in a grand pavilion the men, all in dark jackets or sweaters, were engrossed in what seemed to be a jam session. I leaned against a railing to watch and listen, mesmerized. Each man in turn took over the line of music and amplified the themes, embroidering them with calm assertion. A flute first, then the energetic twang of one bowed erhu after another, next the French-horn like tones of a multi-piped *sheng*, one of the oldest instruments in China. I have no idea how long I lingered with Behai Lake behind me, as I soaked up the strains of ancient melodies given exuberant life in the 21st century.

Nevertheless many modern Chinese I know express ambivalence or downright distaste for such music. A young Chinese visitor to my college in Los Angeles, looking for presents for her parents, wrinkled her nose in distaste when she said they only listen to Chinese opera. In a Shanghai hotel recently, I asked two concierge attendants if they could get me tickets for the Beijing opera theatre. "No, madam," one of the young men said, a slight smile playing across his face. "We young people don't know anything about that. We like the modern music. But you can walk down to the theatre and buy a ticket easily." That seems to be the trend these days.

Newspaper stories appear regularly about the fading Beijing opera. During the first half of the 20th century it was part of everyday life; now most urban young people prefer something more modern and older people just don't want to spend their time watching a full opera. Government subsidized performances, free to the audiences, have sparse attendance, while young performers are hard to find. Even those with generations of family tradition in

opera frequently prefer other professions and musical rhythms.

Yet it's not quite that simple, not quite that black and white. Undergraduates at a translators' college, saturated with the youth culture of pop singers, say they can't stand opera, that it sounds like screaming full of anger and that only their grandparents like it. In spite of this, they have great admiration for one of their classmates who is an accomplished Peking opera singer and has studied the art since kindergarten. They make sure he performs at all of their celebrations.

My first rural opera experience in An Shang village dramatically shifted my understanding of its role in Chinese life. As I read Chinese memoirs, I began to notice the central role opera had played in people's lives, especially in the countryside.

As one expert put it, in the early 1900s opera was "in the air people breathed"—in both urban and rural China, only with an important difference. Urban opera, one of several entertainment forms, was more attuned to the literati and to the ruling families. In the countryside illiterate performers passed down their craft orally from one generation to the next. Performed in the local dialect, opera was the most popular form of rural entertainment. It enlivened village fairs and festivals. Audiences jammed onto benches, the bright colors flashing as actors played out familiar tales. The clanging and drumming of instruments could be heard a kilometer away, and for weeks afterward, children imitated the stylized gestures of the actors—a finger placed just so or an arm or foot raised to hint an emotion or action.

Almost all villages had a stage of some sort. An Wei, who grew up in An Shang village, said, "We kids loved the characters and their colorful costumes." He spent hours during his elementary and middle school

years in the 1950s drawing and painting the characters. "They told wonderful stories and histories," he said. They also taught lessons about admirable behavior and supported communal values with an emotional power that he and the other villagers loved.

I have returned to An Shang twice since that first visit and each time I listen and wonder about the opera. I recently walked along a path leading to the fields, as opera played over the village loudspeaker. Women's voices moved energetically up and down the scale, then melded into slower phrases. Woven together with the whine of stringed instruments and the occasional clash of gongs, it seemed normal to me. It added a dimension to the fields of loess, dust-blown particles laid down over thousands of years, and to the ripening winter wheat that spread out around me. A 20th century writer, Lu Xun, wrote that opera belonged in the open

air of the countryside, not in Beijing theatres. I had to agree.

What the future holds for Chinese opera is hard to say. Television and electronic media have replaced the need to pass on stories orally from generation to generation. Nevertheless, as in all cultures, traditions become the foundation for new forms.

In the United States, folk music moved from Woodie Guthrie through Bob Dylan to influence the mainstream; the Blues, at home in the isolated Black communities for generations, flowed into the mainstream to make Rock and Roll and jazz what they are today. As I ponder these trends and the power of opera that grips the hearts and drumming fingers of An Shang villagers, I have come to believe that opera is still alive. I am sure it will change forms and incorporate new material, but for now it continues to thrive in one form or another in the countryside and the parks of China.

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