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A CHENGDU FIELD RESEARCH REPORT [1]

The Lively 'Torch Troupes' of Sichuan Opera

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Sichuan opera, although relatively 'young', is widely viewed as one of China's most prominent theatre traditions. A lively genre with a lot of on-stage improvisation, it employs a small chorus, and an impressive battery of percussion instruments. The author repeatedly visited Chengdu (the capital of Sichuan Province) in 2001 and 2002, and was struck by the contrast between the existing official opera troupes, who were little active at the time, and a number of independently operating, far more succesful companies, who called themselves 'torch troupes' **(huoba jujuan).** ***The name designates underground troupes of that name which secretly performed traditional plays during the Cultural Revolution. The present report describes one of the torch troupes visited in 2001-2002, the Wangjiang troupe, in some detail. This study was carried out more than a decade ago, but it provides telling snapshots of Sichuan opera in recent history.***

After I had completed my PHD on Chinese Rock Music[2], I was looking for a new area of study. Since I wanted this new domain still to be related to music, my interest turned very naturally toward the study of Chinese popular theatre or opera[3]. More specifically, by focusing on the 'popular space' *minjian* in the field of theatre, I hoped to broaden my understanding of ordinary Chinese people, and to get deeper insights into their cultural traditions. I did not know much about this new field, so I decided first to make a tour of China to learn where the theatrical tradition was still most vibrant. That is how, in

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1 This paper was presented at the 9th international CHIME meeting, held in Paris in July 2004.

2 Published in French: *Rites et Rock à Pékin – Tradition et Modernité de la musique rock dans la société chinoise* (2001).

3 The Chinese words *xiju* and *xiqu* are usually translated either by 'theatre' or by 'opera'. However, neither of these words in our occidental languages adequately describe the particular features of this Chinese art. As most analysts like to say, it is a 'synthetical art' which includes music, singing, dancing, acting, martial arts, mime, speech, literature and poetry, etc. As it is very different from what we call 'opera' in the West, I prefer to use the more general term 'theatre', with the understanding that it is a form of theatre which is sung, not spoken. Traditionally, occidental authors have widely used the word 'opera' to designate the various Chinese theatre genres, as for instance 'Peking opera' or 'Sichuan opera', so I will keep using the word 'opera' when talking about these specific genres, but will use the word 'theatre' when speaking more generally.

2001, I arrived in Chengdu for Chinese New Year, with a few addresses which my French teacher had given me of actors and musicians who worked in official troupes. However, when I contacted these people, they told me that the Chengdu world of theatre was totally paralysed at that time. No new performances were being put on, and they didn't see any point in receiving me for discussions. So, I decided to see if I could trace, on my own account, other theatrical activities in Chengdu. Soon, with the help of Chinese friends, I came across the city's rich, lively, and independently operating 'torch troupes'. I spent a month with the Wangjiang torch troupe, arriving every morning to screen their activities, and staying all day. I also contacted some other torch troupes, and had extensive talks with actors and musicians of other institutions. In the summer of 2002, I returned to Chengdu once more; I came armed with new questions and stayed for a few weeks. This article is based principally on the field research which I made at that time[4]. Unfortunately, I have not had the chance to return to Chengdu since then.

The local theatre genre most commonly played in Chengdu is called *chuanju* 'Sichuan opera'. One actor described it it as one of the five most important opera genres in China. He did not name the other four, but Sichuan opera is indeed quite well-known and hardly a minor or very local genre: it is performed throughout Sichuan (one of China's largest and most populated provinces) as well as in neighbouring Yunnan and Guizhou. Sichuan opera took shape as a combination of five different regional operatic styles, each with their own distinctive musical rhyme patterns: *gaoqiang* (from Jiangxi *geyangxi* opera), *kunqiang* (from Jiangsu), *huqinqiang* (from the *hui* (Anhui) and *han* (Hubei) modes), *tanqiang* (originating from the northern style called *bangzi*) and *dengqiang* (the only one of these five styles which actually originates from Sichuan). Consequently, Sichuan opera has a unique flavour among Chinese opera genres, because it is *yifangduomin*, i.e. a genre of 'one place (but including) many different people'[5], combining both northern and southern musical elements. This is due to its specific history and especially to the arrival in Sichuan, at the beginning of the Qing dynasty, of many refugees and merchants grouped in guilds. They came from other parts of China and brought their local music with them. By the end of the nineteenth century and at the beginning of the twentieth, these several styles were brought together to form *chuanju*, which acquired its official name at that time.

Sichuan opera is a very lively genre, and it offers room for a lot of on-stage improvization by the actors. The *gaoqiang* sections of the music co-feature a chorus of a handful of singers seated inside the orchestra (rather than on the stage). This chorus expresses certain feelings of the actor on stage which he or she should not convey directly, and it can also give the public the point of view of a third person of the action on the stage. The orchestra is composed of the percussion ensemble made up of three or four different percussion instruments of which the *sigu* drum player is the director of the spectacle during the show, and of a melodic ensemble composed mostly of violins and oboes (*suona*).
Surprisingly, Sichuan opera seems not to have been the subject of a lot of research by anthropologists or ethnomusicologists. I will list here below the most interesting references which I came across.

4 A full account of my research in Chengdu is included in chapter 3 of my book *Le theatre dans l'espace du peuple – une enquête de terrain en Chine* (2012).
5 Cui Longpeng (2007).

In his article 'Theatre in China's Sichuan Province' published in 1987, Colin Mackerras presented the poor situation of Sichuan opera in the middle of the eighties: even though Sichuan opera remained the most popular form of theatre then, its audiences were often 'embarrassingly small' in urban centres (1987: 192).

Elsa Lee wrote an unpublished Ph.D thesis on *The Changing Role and Status of the Drummer in Chuanju (Sichuan opera)* at the University of Adelaide in 1993. Luckily, she did publish a paper titled 'An Introduction to the 'Gushi' Drummer of the 'Chuanju' Percussion Ensemble' in 1997, which gives a remarkable insight into the fundamental role of the drummer in Sichuan opera from an anthropological point of view.

In 1999 the Chinese researcher Hu Tiancheng wrote an extensive 1434-page study called (in its English title) *Folk Sacrifice and Ceremony Drama*, dedicated to the ritual theatre in the Sichuanese region of Chongqing city. He shows how all kinds of ritual theatres and Sichuan opera are deeply related, ritual being an important ingredient in all of them, but that, nevertheless, these theatre genres are viewed by many as mere entertainment.

In *The Sounds of Nature - Chengdu Taoist Music* (2009, English title), Liu Hong also mentions the close links existing between Sichuan opera and Daoist music, and notably the fact that Daoists priests used to play in *chuanju* troupes[6].

Sichuan opera has always been very close to ritual forms of theatre, be it Daoist, Buddhist, or other popular forms. This situation totally changed due to the communist revolution: all ritual activities by Sichuan opera troupes were prohibited, and henceforth these troupes, as theatre groups elsewhere in the country, were made to perform plays in support of the revolution. Sichuan opera troupes were reorganized as official artistic units, with the status of either state-run or collectively owned troupes, and their actors and musicians became state officials or employees. During the Cultural Revolution, most of these troupes were expected to perform the eight so-called 'model operas' (*yangbanxi*), under the guidance of Qiang Qing, Mao's wife. All traditional pieces were forbidden. It was not until the end of the 1970's that such plays were permitted again, in the period (after 1978) when Deng Xiaoping introduced his substantial social and political reforms. At the beginning of the eighties, this led to a quick revival of tradition in theatres all around the country, especially in Sichuan, where the public was now allowed to watch the traditional *chuanju* plays again. But state interference with cultural activities soon became strongly reduced, and all theatre troupes in Sichuan were no longer supported by the government. Colin Mackerras (1987) reports a number of 130 *chuanju* troupes in 1983 in the entire province. My informants told me there were as many as 180 *chuanju* troupes during the 1980s, but that only about thirty of them still remained by the end of the 1990s. By 2002, the last five official *chuanju* troupes of Chengdu were reportedly going to be amalgamated into just one. Middle-aged actors were forced to retire; younger ones were put on the unemployment roll. These unemployed actors and musicians then started to reorganize themselves independently of state or collectively owned units, and they created what they decided to call 'torch troupes'.

6 '(Many of the Taoists priests) during the busy agricultural period worked at home as peasants, and during slow agricultural periods, worked in Sichuan opera troupes during the first, second and third months of the lunar year; then on the eight, ninth, tenth and last months of the lunar year, they resumed Taoist activities on the Taoists scenes (2009: 384)'.

This article presents these newly shaped torch troupes, first and foremost by focusing on their internal organization through a case study of the Wangjiang troupe. I will then analyze the question of the flexible structure of their performances and the importance of improvisation in their shows. In my conclusion, I will compare the torch groups with the remaining official troupes.

1. The organization of torch troupes and the Wangjiang troupe

Actors of the Wangjiang troupe explained the name 'torch troupe' *huoba jujuan* to me with reference to the Cultural Revolution. During that time, when the performance of traditional pieces was forbidden, some actors decided to organize themselves independently into autonomous troupes, which would perform traditional plays secretly, meaning that they would play only at night, and mostly in the more remote places of the countryside. They would light the stage with torches, and this was how the term 'torch troupes' came into use. As one actor told me: 'Because the State unlit the culture, the people lit torches', and 'torches stood up and shone'. These underground troupes were obviously not under any political surveillance, and operated independently. Just how many of them existed is hard to know, but the fact that, in recent decades, people began to remember them again and revived their name attests to the special importance, in quality if not quantity, of these troupes during the darkest period of the Cultural Revolution.

Today's torch troupes differ from the ones in the past in the sense that they do no longer operate as dissident troupes and are no longer the sole promoters of traditional repertoire. The State has relaxed its grip on cultural activities to that extent that all theatre troupes, including official reforms opera companies, can now play traditional pieces if they wish, and are expected to govern their own finance and run their own business. The new torch troupes' 'independence' is not so much political as economical and administrative: as long as they get a license from the cultural bureau, these groups are free to perform, and are expected to to vie for themselves. If they are itinerant, as many are, they do not even need the government license. They receive no financial support from the state and must take care of their own affairs, it is up to them to earn profits or cover deficits. In 2001 and 2002, about ten torch troupes were active in the wider Chengdu region. The city alone had four torch troupes, each based in its own theatre, but these troupes would not merely cater to city dwellers: they would often tour the countryside near Chengdu as well, especially during summer. Perhaps the total number of torch troupes is not impressive, certainly not compared to the much bigger quantity of opera troupes active in Sichuan in the past. But it is still significantly larger than the number of official troupes active in Sichuan today, and it shows the continued relevance and persistence of this genre for ordinary people in this province.

All torch troupes share a similar organization: they offer shows every afternoon, from two to five, with no day off. The price of the tickets is three *yuan*, a price which also includes a cup of tea and a free fill-up of hot water. A big torch troupe may include some twenty actors and ten musicians, whereas smaller troupes have seven or eight actors and three or four musicians. Every troupe is directed by a 'boss' *laoban*, a word that designates the person in charge of financial matters.

The Wangjiang troupe (*wang* means 'to look at' and *jiang* is 'river') gets its name from the quarter of Chengdu where it is located (near the town's east gate) and from the Wangjiang theatre where it is based. When I was there last in 2002, I was told that the theatre was soon going to be destroyed. (Below I continue to write in the present tense, although my research is now some years old.)

The Wangjiang theatre.

The Wangjiang theatre is on a small street, inside a compound, hidden behind another building. The theatre has about 350 seats, separated in two rows in the stalls and a few rows on the balcony. The stage is about five metres deep and a dozen metres wide. A light blue curtain hangs at the back of the stage. For New Year 2001, a huge red and white drawing of a head of a character with a painted face was hung in the middle of the background curtain. The orchestra sits on the right side of the stage, in full view. On stage, left, is an altar for the theatre god: it is a small rectangular table beneath an inscription in Chinese characters that reads 'peach garden grand-father ancestor-master' *liyuan zushiye*. An incense burner has been placed on the table, together with two candleholders, a pot of wilted flowers, and a plate of apples. Built around the time of Liberation (1949), this theatre was one of the five districts' theatres of Chengdu. It is old, dirty, and run down. One feels it has never been properly maintained, and never restored. Even though the floor is swept every day, it is black with dirt. Several seats are broken. There is no heating and in winter it is very cold. The place looks miserable. However, the actors, musicians and public seem to be quite at ease and accustomed to these hard conditions.

The public inside the Wangjiang theatre.

The Wangjiang troupe is composed of sixteen actors and six musicians (plus one singer who, together with the drummer, makes up the chorus). One person is in charge of costumes, and there is a female cook and a girl in charge of tea for the public. The actors, most of them from distant places, live in rooms situated behind the stage, at the rear of the theatre. Those who live in Chengdu only appear for the afternoon show, and sometimes they come in the morning for short rehearsals. The actors and musicians living in the theatre spend most of their time together, not only as colleagues but also as neighbours and friends. In the morning, they are continuously visiting each other, watching TV, talking or playing cards or mah-jong. They also eat lunches and dinners together.

At noon, the first members of the public start to arrive; they may eat some hot *doufu* jelly or bowls of noodles sold by the cook. Some will sit in the theatre, with some mah-jong players sitting in groups of four around mah-jong tables in the front of the theatre. Everybody will have a cup of tea. At two o'clock, the drum and gongs will clang loudly, announcing the actors. The afternoon's show is usually composed of three or four short pieces. Unoccupied actors will stay backstage, talking quietly together. The public is composed mostly of old people, both men and women. They do not pay very much attention to the show. They will come and go, sometimes leave the hall to eat some noodles, and will talk together, eat watermelons seeds. Some of the women knit. The tea girl passes down the rows filling the cups of tea with hot water. The characteristic sound of mah-jong dominos being shuffled will sometimes drown a part of the music performed on stage.

Nevertheless, at times the public may get genuinely and visibly moved by the show. Sometimes, usually in the middle of the afternoon, people can show strong emotion in response to an actor's well-made movement or a particularly beautiful song. Then they

may shout 'good!' *hao*, fairly loudly, and may applaud. At the end of scenes which meet with a lot of approval, members of the public, and especially the mah-jong players, may buy bunches of paper flowers from the tea girl and offer them to their favorite actors. A bunch of flowers costs five *yuan*, and the customary habit is that one always offers at least two bunches at a time. Actors are honoured by the number of flowers they receive: it also earns them substantial amounts of extra money, for after the performance they will exchange their bunches of flowers for cash with the tea girl.

An actress receiving flowers.

The audience will start to leave before the end of the show. At the end, there is never any applause, nor any further flower giving. The last actors on the stage have barely made their exit, when the public will already get up and quickly leave as well. Actors will obviously go backstage first to take off their costumes and make-up. Those living in Chengdu will leave, those who stay at the theatre might still get together for a quick rehearsal for the following day's performance: the director will distribute the roles and explain the scenario. Then, at six, the actors will eat dinner together. The evening is spent by learning the next day's part, playing mah-jong or watching TV. The atmosphere is usually very convivial, I have heard a lot of laughter on many occasions.

'Teacher' *laoshi* Wan, called so respectfully to acknowledge his theatrical skills by people exterior to the troupe, but called 'boss *laoban* Wan' by the actors, was directing the Wangjiang troupe in 2001, but he had passed on the job to someone else by the time I returned in 2002. Some of the actors had joined the troupe before he did, and stayed on after he had left. Other actors joined the group for shorter periods and then left again. There was clearly a certain mobility among the actors and musicians of torch troupes.

Teacher Wan was originally an actor of an official state troupe which was dismantled in 1986; he had been sent into early retirement. He was a good actor, specialized in martial arts, but when he was in his thirties a nose cancer had made it impossible for him to continue singing on stage. After his retirement he wanted to promote Sichuan opera in a different manner, and began to organize torch troupes. His primary motive in doing so was not financial, since the revenues from performances were quite low, as they had been for several decades already. He was motivated, first and foremost, by love for his art.

From 2002 onwards, Teacher Wan was only taking care of the troupe's finance and business matters, leaving artistic affairs to the troupe's new director. It was the new director's task to plan the scenarios, assign actors to characters and direct the short rehearsals. However, once a performance was on its way, it would be the drummer's task

Teacher Wan selling tickets.

to leads the show. These three men – the financial manager, the director and the drummer – essentially share the responsibilities of the troupe's leadership, dividing tasks. Under their joint guidance, the musicians and actors play and act quite freely, according to the tunes and lyrics as they have learned to perform them during their training.

A theatre 'director' is normally referred to in Mandarin as *daoyan*, but is called *zhangjiaoshi* in Sichuan dialect, 'the master who controls the teaching (education/morale)'. The director told me he had been taught this role as part of a family tradition: it was his father who educated him to be a *zhangjiaoshi*, after having learnt it in turn from *his* father. Traditionally it was the only way for a person to aspire to this job: the function was hereditary, as it is also the case for Daoist civil priests. The title of *zhangjiaoshi* actually closely resembles that of *zhangtanshi*, the formal name for leaders of exorcist *nuo* theatre *tiyangxi* troupes in northern Sichuan, as reported by Riley et al (1991). *Zhangtanshi* means 'the master who controls the altar'. The word 'altar' was apparently used in the past to designate a group of shamans, before it began to be used in connection with *nuo* theatre troupes. The *nuo* troupes were invited to help a family or a community which faced difficulties, for example natural calamities, illness or sterility. *Nuo* theatre, led by the *zhangtanshi*, was meant to appease or drive away any evil forces, and to help solve such problems. The function of the *zhangtanshi* was transmitted down the (male) family line, and the *zhangtangshi* was habitually the keeper of the genealogy of ancestors initiated in this 'kind of religion', *tiyangjiao* (Riley 1991: 8).

The similarity of the terms *zhangjiaoshi* and *zhangtanshi* is remarkable. The word *tan* 'altar' is more directly related to ritual than the word *jiao*, which the director of the

Wang jiang troupe translated to me as 'education *jiaoyu* and morale *daode*'. The hereditary leadership function in Sichuan torch troupes and its resemblance to a similar function in ritual *nuo* theatre hint at a close and continuing relationship between ritual and theatre in the case of local Sichuan opera troupes. And the Wangjiang troupe clearly emphasises ritual activities. Its director regularly leads a ceremonial cult for the god of theatre; furthermore he took the step to organize the ritual play *Wang Lingguan pacifies the scene* on the first day of the new lunar year of 2001[7]. I think that the director's authority is defined by the ritual obligations which he has to carry out, and by his deep knowledge of written books and scripts. He is also the only member of the troupe who never seems to stop working the whole day long, always thinking of the plays to be performed, of the actors to be designated, of the links between the different plays, etc. He told me that he is often nervous, since the troupe does not really have enough actors to make all the performances run smoothly, and because the solving of nearly all organizational matters comes down on his shoulders.

2. The flexible and adaptable structure of the shows

In many genres of Chinese opera, a pupil, in the course of long and arduous years of training, will learn from his master to play many roles in different plays (cf. Danny Yung, 2006)[8]. I was aware of this fact, but still I found it difficult to understand how actors actually managed to appear in new and different plays every day, and to know all their parts by heart, and perform them on the spot without any need for rehearsal. When I asked them how they did this, they explained that they grew up 'naturally' *ziran* with theatre: 'We know everything by heart because we've heard it so many times'. So it is not as if they would really stage new plays every day. Most of the time, they would already have had opportunities to perform them before, or they might have heard them previously played by others. Clearly, Sichuan opera actors have a deep familiarity with the traditional plays that feature actively in their repertoire. They know all the different stories and are familiar with the characters. They usually also know the songs of the plays, either from their own practical experience or from having heard them many times in the past. Precisely because of this familiarity they are capable of adjusting to new roles every day.

The practice of changing plays on a daily basis may echo an old practice of Sichuan opera, as reported by the famous actor of female roles Yang Youhe in his memoirs (1993:7): in the past, before the revolution, members of the public could 'choose' a play of their own liking – the process was called *dianxi* – and the actors then had to perform that play. Regardless of whether they knew the play well or not, they had to stage it right away, with

7 For a detailed description of this event, see my book *Le theatre dans l'espace du people – une equête de terrain en Chine* (2012).

8 Danny Yung (2006: 35) says: 'The traditional Chinese musical theatre does not know the stage director. A master transmits the art of performance orally, and the apprentice is initiated by his master in the interpretation of each piece. Finally, after decades of experience on stage the actor will have memorized dozens of pieces, so that he can show them on stage anytime without the need for rehearsal – an achievement which seems almost impossible to an outsider. An actor is more or less his or her own stage director, and has enough experience for the stage's layout and the timing. The fact that the actor is capable of showing his art anytime and everywhere, quasi ad hoc, is due to their rigorous training during apprenticeship and the accumulation of experience of performing.'

very little time to prepare. The practice was a source of anxiety for many actors, especially good ones who had reputations to keep up. Acting in plays one did not know well was a risky enterprise, but Yang Youhe said he always managed to bring it off (1993:7).

It shows how flexible Sichuan opera actors were expected to be. Another fact that underpins this flexibility is the absence in Sichuan opera of written texts, be it scripts or musical scores. At least this was the normal situation before the revolution. Elsa Lee (1997:1) states that 'Chuanju drumming was traditionally an oral tradition, therefore there is a distinct absence of teaching aids or any lengthy written documents on Chuanju drumming, percussion and performance practices.' Yang Youhe (1993), in the detailed account of his traditional training in Sichuan opera, never makes reference to the reading of any written text. Instead, he overwhelmingly emphasizes the master's practical teaching and the student's practical exercizing. Once, when asked to play a part he did not know at all, he states that it was with the sole aid of his teacher that he managed to learn the play in just one night.

In 2001, the Wangjiang troupe possessed only a few copies of libretti, which were owned by the director. Most of them were handwritten; there were a few published copies but they were in a very bad shape, basically illegible, and books were an even rarer commodity in the Wangjiang troupe. However, one actor offered me his copy of the *Dictionary of Sichuan opera* (1987). To my surprise, I discovered that most young actors in torch troupes could only write and read with difficulty, and some could hardly read at all. These were young people who came from peasant families. They had left school at 15 or 16, or even earlier, and were then accepted by the opera troupes, where they began to practice performing skills on the spot. In the troupes, they were trained by elderly actors, who would teach them orally. Only once did I see an actress copy her part for her next day's role. Sichuan opera is sung in Sichuan dialect, which might explain why written texts are dispensable. I never saw the Chinese characters of a play being projected on the side of the stage, as it is now often done in (for example) urban professional Beijing opera. The scarcity of scripts seems to have been a common situation for local theatre groups, not just in Sichuan. During fieldwork in Hebei province, Chinese shadow theatre players told me that in the past they were compared to Buddhists priests because of their ability to read their songbooks, which were actually called 'sutras', like Buddhist texts. It gave them a higher social status than other local theatre actors, who were not required to be able to read.

I once saw the play *Bajiuzhai* (the name of a place) played by a famous actor, Mr. Xiao, who worked in the Sichuan opera Experimental Troupe. On this occasion he came especially to act with the Wangjiang troupe. He told me that the play *Bajiuzhai* had no written script at all, and that he had learned it from his teacher. But he did not transmit it to anyone, so he feared that it would die out, or survive only in recorded form. I saw Mr. Xiao ten minutes before the performance began, explaining the scenario to the Wangjiang actors who were to act with him immediately afterwards. The story was about a conflict between two master crooks whose sons had had a fight. One of them had died. The two families got entangled in a vendetta. The two main bandits got together to try to persuade the others to stop the violence and, in doing this, used the very specific and humoristic jargon of bandits. An agreement was finally reached, and the dispute was resolved without the help of a judge.

The public generally loved to hear this piece and they would always laugh a lot. Under the pretext of speaking of a distant past, the play would target the corruption of contemporary society - be it the society of pre-Liberation days, or of China under communism.

The absence of a written script does not imply that the words in Sichuan opera plays are totally free. They are subject to precise structural rules; actors operate within a fairly fixed structural framework, which retains room for flexibility. As one actress told me, if she forgot some words on stage, it wouldn't really matter so long as she stuck to the general framework. Lapses and mistakes seem to occur quite frequently, as is corroborated by Elsa Lee (1993 14/15). Lee explains that the drummer has a role of 'prompter' and that he has to 'rescue stage or scene' if an actor happens to make a mistake: the drummer will then play music employed exclusively to cover mistakes. There is no fixed method for doing this, every drummer will perform it according to his own experience and skill. In turn, this music might trigger an actor to draw out his solo into a long concluding melismatic passage (1993:15). I watched the drummer of the Wangjiang's troupe closely: his eyes were always fixed on the stage, and he would keep following the singer, or precede him, always keeping the beat.

Are the actors allowed to 'improvise'? As the show goes on, actors and musicians are constantly adapting to each other. Actors say that they usually follow tradition and that they act and sing in the way they were taught by their teachers. If they forget a word in a song, they replace it by another one and try to come back to the original text as soon as they can. However, they admit that they sometimes 'expand' or 'express' *fa*, which may be understood in this context to mean 'improvising'. For instance, an actor once inserted a totally improvised speech in a play, complaining that he did not have a *dageda* 'mobile phone' because it was too expensive, and he was too poor to purchase one… The mobile phone was of course unknown in traditional plays, but the idea to make reference to it suddenly crossed the actor's mind. As a result, the public laughed and responded very positively, maybe also because the joke hinted, in a direct and humorous way, to actual poverty and people's daily struggles to survive.

Even though the texts and music of plays are largely fixed, actors are allowed considerable freedom in modifying and manipulating different elements in a play. This freedom, as demonstrated by the Wangjiang troupe, allows the actors in Sichuan opera plays to avoid too much routine, to renew and surpass themselves in performance, and to bring out their emotions on stage in the best and most effective ways. An actor can cover a mistake by adding some words of his own invention, or by embarking on a full and deliberate improvisation; he may also lengthen his solos, creatively adding parts of his own. As Yang Youhe explains, in the past it always used to be an actor's unique capacities to innovate which triggered the public's enthusiasm and would make the actor famous: 'After I added several martial elements to the play *Jinshansi* (The Temple of the Gold Mountain), I got a lot of approval from the public (1993:7)'. The same still applies to acting in today's Wangjiang troupe: whenever an actor or actress surpasses all expectations, creating something out of the ordinary, the public will notice it right away, and will acknowledge his or her achievement by shouting loudly, applauding and offering flowers.

When actors improvise on stage, the emotions which they express will often concern today's social problems like corruption and poverty. Such shows of emotion remain embedded within the overall framework of the performance; they are mere fleeting moments within the totality of a play, embedded in, and surrounded by, the traditional story and music. The shows will never present a political challenge to the authorities, because actors refrain from direct and strong criticism of contemporary public affairs and social conflicts.

The aspect of improvisation and the overall flexibility in Chinese theatrical music-making and play-acting has already attracted the attention of several western analysts. For instance, Georges Soulié de Morant (1926:108) said about Peking opera in the old days: 'At (Chinese) theatre shows, everybody plays by heart. Every interpreter, according to his mood, improvises with more or less success on different themes.'

More recently, Elizabeth Wichmann (1991:175) reported the following in her study of Beijing opera: 'The flexibility of melodic passage composition permits carefully composed melodic passages to be adapted to performance conditions, allowing the performer to make the best possible display of his or her songs skills under less than ideal circumstances'. In his extensive study about improvisation in Cantonese opera, Sau Y. Chan (1991) mentions that troupes very seldom have rehearsals because it is usually not necessary. Very likely, Chinese plays have always included some kind of theatrical fluidity, be it in the music, the songs or the the spoken parts. However, the degree of improvisation as it survives today seems to stay within narrow limits determined by modern Chinese society; it may be far less explicit than what Occidental people might generally have in mind when thinking of the word 'improvisation'. As Sau Y. Chan (1991:90) puts it: 'The concept of originality certainly exists… but it has not been emphasized…'

The actors of the Wangjiang troupe primarily try to follow the lines which were taught to them, and only occasionally 'express' or 'expand' *fa* on purpose. The word does not so much imply that they improvise in bold innovative ways, adding new personal creative elements. What they do, essentially, is deepen or extend the sentiments conveyed by a song within the play's framework. It may be difficult to draw hard lines between individual creative innovation and mere enhancement of emotion, but I had a clear impression that the actors of the Wangjiang troupe did not attempt to exceed any conventional limits in this respect, not in their actual performances, and not in rehearsals either. In fact, I noted that, apart from the afternoon shows, they were not much engaged in work at all: most of the time they would watch TV or play mah-jong, and I very seldom caught them rehearse their theatrical skills. They seemed very relaxed, never under any pressure, often laughing together; their mutual relationships seemed to matter more to them than any training or developing of acting skills.

A major reason for this may be their poor salaries, a mere few hundred *yuan* a month, depending on each actor's visibility within the troupe. Such fees will not encourage them to invest more energy in their performances than is strictly necessary to keep the theatre going. As one actor told me: 'with theatre, we can always eat, but we can never become rich'. Admittedly the audience's practice of donating flowers would generate some extra income. A few actors of the troupe regularly managed to earn substantial amounts in this way, a few tens of *yuan*, or even one hundred *yuan* per succesful show. But this only happened at

certain times, and it was the privilege of a small number of actors. So the flower money, no matter how welcome, would hardly affect the troupe's essential motivation. Ultimately, in terms of its earnings, the Wangjiang troupe ranks at a rather low level, it is a 'popular' group with a low status, which distinguishes it from any official troupes of Sichuan opera. To conclude this report, I will briefly address the differences between these two types of theatre groups.

Conclusion: comparison with official troupes

I did not succeed in making a thorough investigation of official troupes, but I still gained some insights, via the frequent comparisons which Wangjiang actors made between their torch troupe and the official troupes. The first aspect which they stressed, as I already mentioned in my introduction, was their independence: they were running their own business, organising their own affairs, in relative freedom. It is probably what helped to sustain the liveliness and flexibility of the torch troupe shows: keeping matters in their own hands enables these groups to steer and consolidate their success, to make sure that the public keeps coming. Indeed, in the case of the Wangjiang troupe, some diehard fans come back every afternoon. It clearly distinguishes this torch troupe from any of the official troupes, which are currently totally paralyzed.

Their independence must also be understood in financial terms. In explaining the difficulties of the official troupes to me, actors would always refer to money: because of modern China's economic development, the costs of organizing shows had risen so high for the official troupes that, as one informant told me: 'big concerts represent big losses, small shows represent small losses, so it is better not to play at all.'

Admittedly all troupes, official or torch, face the same economic conditions, but torch troupes seem better equipped to cope with the new, much more competitive market conditions. Their organizational flexibility and their modest economic standards (limited expenses, low salaries, small revenues) help them to adapt and to keep afloat. But this very aspect is also what limits the torch troupes: for instance, Teacher Wan told me that he could absolutely not raise the low ticket price of three *yuan*, not even by a few cents, for then many people in the public would no longer be able to attend several shows in a row. At least this indicates that the organization of the torch troupes is really tailor-made for the economic and social environment in which they operate.

A final point worth discussing is the question of the torch troupes' quality. Many professional people from the official troupes tend to mock or despise the quality of torch troupes, comparing them to 'low level troupes', similar to rural peasant troupes. Actors in torch troupes are well aware of this, and they frequently stress the fact. But the situation is not entirely black-and-white. On two occasions I met very good actors from official Chengdu troupes (such as Mr. Xiao, mentioned above) who were by no means averse to coming to the Wangjiang theatre and sharing the stage with Wangjiang actors: they obviously did not have such poor opinions of the Wangjiang troupe. I asked one of them what he thought about the question. He answered that, from his point of view, some of the Wangjiang actors were 'good' but that none of them were 'extremely good'. Some were quite capable singers, but their martial skills generally could not match those of official

actors who had received formal training in opera schools. Clearly, there are different sets of criteria for judging the quality of theatre troupes and of their actors.

The contrasting fate of torch troupes and official troupes in Chengdu echoes a somewhat similar situation in Cantonese opera of the 1980s and '90s as observed by Daniel Ferguson (2005): theatre groups in the city of Guangzhou and in smaller cities were then facing a major crisis; at the same time, many rural troupes of Cantonese opera were riding the waves, traveling extensively from village to village, and performing plays everywhere. Something similar happened in Chengdu in the early 2000's, when the official troupes were paralyzed, whereas the torch troupes remained active, and were actually the only ones to succeed in bringing a taste of 'rural liveliness' to the city. Torch troupes also share with Cantonese rural troupes a strong interest in ritual: both of them maintain many ritual activities, either by observing the regular cult of the god of theatre, or by carrying out exceptional ritual sequences on specific occasions.

Nevertheless, it remains to be seen if torch troupes can maintain their liveliness, and succeed in surviving. What will happen once the elderly people who make up most of their audience are gone? Will there be a new audience for torch troupes in the future? To answer such questions, I would first need to travel to Chengdu once again, to see what is going on right now, some ten years after my first study.

An actress holding flowers; in the rear, the big make-up face for New Year.

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Glossary of Chinese terms

bajiuzhai	巴九寨	Bajiuzhai
chuanju	川剧	Sichuan opera
daode	道德	morale
daoyan	导演	director
dengqiang	灯腔	name of regional opera style
dianxi	点戏	ask an actor to play a role
fa	发	express, expand
gaoqiang	高腔	name of regional opera style
hao	好	good
huobajutuan	火把剧团	torch troupe
huqinqiang	胡琴腔	name of regional opera style
jiang	江	river
jiaoyu	教育	education
kunqiang	昆腔	name of regional opera style
laoban	老板	boss
laoshi	老师	teacher
liyuan zushiye	梨园祖师爷	peach garden grand-father ancestor-master
minjian	民间	popular
nuo	傩	nuo theatre
suona	唢呐	oboe
tanqiang	弹腔	name of regional opera style
wang	望	to look at
wangjiang	望江	Wangjiang (troop, theatre)
yifangduomin	一方多民	one place, many people
zhangjiaoshi	掌教师	the master who controls education and morale
zhangtanshi	掌坛师	the master who controls the altar
ziran	自然	natural