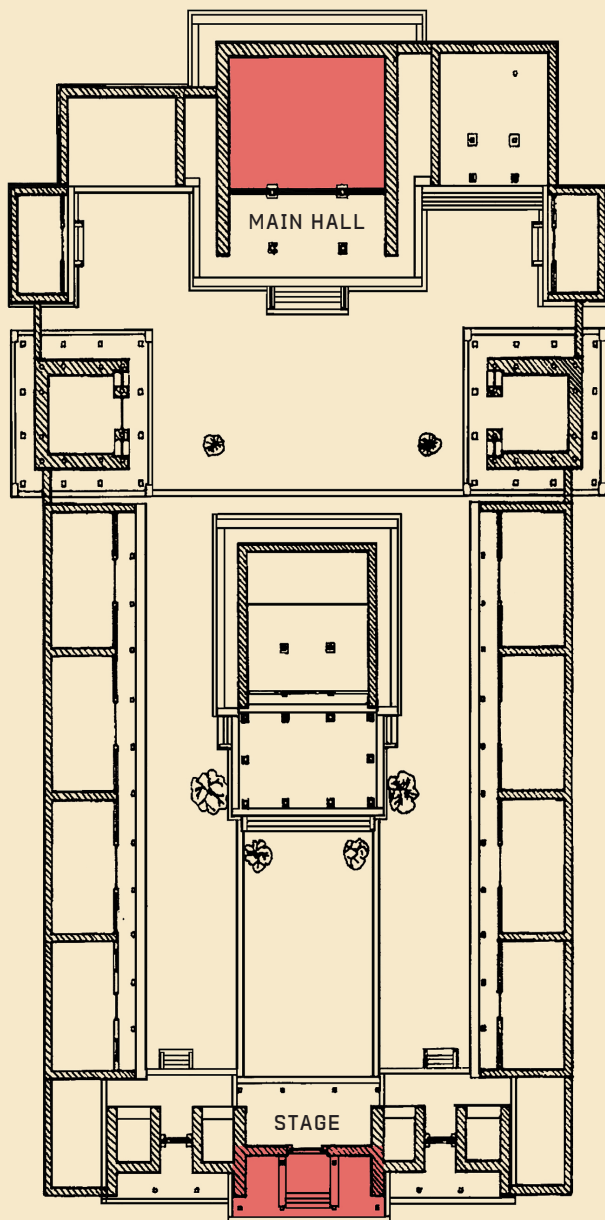


# THE STAGE IN THE TEMPLE

## RITUAL OPERA IN VILLAGE SHANXI



DAVID JOHNSON

## Notes to this edition

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# The Stage in the Temple

*Ritual Opera in Village Shanxi*

David Johnson



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East Asian Studies  
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# Contents

INTRODUCTION	I
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## I. SCRIPTS OF ZA OPERA

Five Scripts from Southwestern Shanxi	II
<i>Presenting Incense</i>	13
<i>The Banquet at Hongmen</i>	18
<i>The White Ape Leads the Way</i>	22
<i>Changban Slope</i>	27
<i>The Fire Assault Stratagem</i>	30
Three Scripts from Xinzhuang Village	35
<i>Thrice Inviting Zhuge Liang</i>	35
<i>Attacking Yanzhou</i>	43
<i>Xue Gang Assaults the Court</i>	55

## 2. HISTORY OF ZA OPERA

Origins and Early Development of <i>Za</i> Opera	71
Early Stages in Shanxi	78
The Invisible History of <i>Za</i> Opera	88
<i>Nuo</i> Opera in Anhui: A Parallel Tradition	99

### 3. VILLAGE OPERA IN PERFORMANCE

<i>Za</i> Opera	111
<i>Yuanben</i>	126
<i>Dui</i> Opera	128
<i>Sai</i> Opera	131
<i>Tiao</i> Opera	137

### 4. QUESTIONS AND CONCLUSION

147

APPENDIX 1	List of Early Stages in Shanxi	159
APPENDIX 2	Note on the Authenticity of Our Scripts	163
APPENDIX 3	List of <i>Za</i> Opera Manuscripts	167
	Bibliography	175
	Glossary-Index	183

## INTRODUCTION

Our ideas about traditional Chinese village life have been heavily influenced by old black-and-white photographs that show ragged peasants, tumbledown mud-brick houses, primitive farming equipment, and temple roofs covered with weeds. But the early period of photography in China was an age of disasters, and those images are of a society in collapse.<sup>1</sup> My main aim in this book and its predecessor, *Spectacle and Sacrifice: The Ritual Foundations of Village Life in North China*, is to replace those stereotypes with detailed descriptions of premodern China's rural world that are closer to lived reality. Chinese villages and villagers have usually been treated as a vague backdrop to economic development or political upheavals, but they are worth close study and analysis for their own sake. Farmers to a large extent ruled themselves, adjudicating disputes, allocating irrigation

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When, some years ago, I did research on village ritual and drama in Shanxi I was helped by many local scholars and specialists. I thanked them for their generous assistance in the acknowledgements to *Spectacle and Sacrifice*. There are several whom I wish to thank again here: Yang Mengheng, who provided access to the scripts that are central to this book; Li Tiansheng, who transcribed my interviews; and Liao Ben, who accompanied me on an initial expedition to southern Shanxi and whose knowledge of local opera history is unmatched. My thanks also to Wang Ch'iu-kuei, who first pointed me toward the study of Shanxi ritual theater, whose conferences in China did much to shape my thinking, and who has helped me in many other ways.

Closer to home I thank David Rolston, Wilt Idema, and Beth Berry for their insightful suggestions and corrections. Thanks also to Jianye He, the ever-helpful Librarian for Chinese Collections at Berkeley's East Asian Library. Finally, my thanks to Berkeley's Institute for East Asian Studies for sponsoring the publication of this book and providing indispensable support in its production.

<sup>1</sup> There were major famines in north China in 1876–1879, 1899–1901, 1920–1921, and 1928–1931, and there was the catastrophe of the Taiping Rebellion (1850–1864), not to mention many lesser upheavals.

water, and building and repairing temples to the gods they believed worthy of offerings. They had wide latitude in creating their own rituals and raised the money to pay for them. They designed elaborate objects to be used in the celebration of gods' birthdays, such as the lavishly decorated thirty-foot tower carried by dozens of men at the festival of the Divine Mother in western Pingshun County.<sup>2</sup> They drew up contracts, surveyed landholdings, and kept genealogies. There is plentiful evidence for these things in north China, but I expect villages in all regions of China had their own versions of most of them. In ordinary times a Chinese village of medium size was a world in a small place.<sup>3</sup>

Some of the residents in such a village would have had more property, others less, but all were aware of the tax-collecting power of the representative of the state residing in the county seat. Some would have had one or another kind of basic literacy, and a few would have had enough classical-style education to have competed for *shengyuan* (*xiucai*) status. The villagers would have regularly visited various market towns, depending on their resources and needs. All the residents, literate and illiterate alike, could attend opera performances and listen to the spiels of storytellers. Some of those with limited education would have been able to read simple rhymed chapbooks called *baojuan* that were brought to the village by itinerant peddlers, while the classically educated few could read official documents, essays and poems by revered masters, and more sophisticated fiction. Moreover there were local specialists, such as ritual masters (*zhuli*, *lisheng*), whose practices were ultimately derived from classical texts and scriptures, *yinyang* masters (*yinyang xiansheng*), geomancers (*kanyu jia*), and even chefs who all had their own handbooks. Thus villagers were part of the greater Chinese world and connected to it in a variety of ways. And yet they almost certainly thought of themselves first of all as members of a family and next as residents of their village. We shall see later how strongly they identified with their villages.

In general, historians of China have tended to ignore the hundreds of thousands of villages that until the mid-twentieth century held probably 90 percent of the population. Lack of documentation is one reason, but

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<sup>2</sup> See David Johnson, *Spectacle and Sacrifice: The Ritual Foundations of Village Life in North China*, pp. 202–203, for background and a photo.

<sup>3</sup> The phrase is Robert Brentano's.



## Five Scripts from Southwestern Shanxi

Scripts of *Za* Operas collected by government teams in southwestern Shanxi villages between the 1950s and 1980s form the most important corpus of Shanxi village opera scripts. Specialists refer to these as Gong and Drum *Za* Operas (*luogu zaxi*) or Cymbal (*nao*) and Drum *Za* Operas, but local people generally called them just *Za* Operas.<sup>11</sup> *Za* Operas were old, deeply rooted in their villages, and essential to the rituals that brought blessings to the village and protection from bad weather, disease, bandits, and the like. They were part of an anonymous village opera tradition not to be confused with the familiar “regional opera” (*difangxi*) genres, which developed much later, in more sophisticated settings.<sup>12</sup> Operas were the dominant form of entertainment in Chinese villages. But they were not just entertainment. They were always performed in association with communal rituals, never as separate events. (Shadow opera [*piyingxi*] and marionette opera [*kuileixi*] were sometimes brought into village ritual programs, but they also had their own powerful magico-religious potencies and could be performed on other occasions.) Temple rituals were part of festivals that celebrated the birthday of a god, and were taken very seriously indeed by villagers. The largest of those festivals were sponsored by village alliances and included spectacular processions, lavish food offerings,

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<sup>11</sup> The term *zaju* (or its equivalent, *zaxi*) is vague: “miscellaneous opera(s)” is one translation, quite inadequate, which is why I leave it untranslated. This book deals with three different but related operatic genres, and I will refer to them as follows: for Song through Qing times, *zaju*, and for the texts from southwestern Shanxi, *Za* Opera or occasionally Gong and Drum *Za* Opera. The famous *zaju* of the Yuan dynasty I always refer to as Yuan Drama.

<sup>12</sup> *Difangxi* is usually translated “local opera,” but it is more accurate to render it “regional opera.”

# Origins and Early Development of *Za* Opera

In our study of eight Shanxi village opera scripts we found that they were always at least partly independent of other sources and in two cases were probably original village creations. We also found that they presented rather different views of the world, that even educated men were willing to recopy or revise old scripts, and that village audiences were very familiar with the larger operatic repertoire. But to fully understand their significance we need context, and that begins with the history of the *zaju* genre. The study of early Chinese opera is beset with problems, the foremost of which are the nearly complete absence of textual evidence and the lack of fixed definitions for the names of theatrical genres. But we need to look closely at origins and early development if we are to make sense out of what came later.

*Zaju* emerges from the shadows into the half-light of history in the late tenth century. Hu Ji writes that in Song times “anything that had a dramatic character and was performed by people [as opposed to puppets] could be called *zaju*.”<sup>137</sup> The third Song emperor, Zhenzong, wrote scripts of something called *zaju* for performance in the palace, and both he and his predecessor, Taizong, were buried with the figurines (one hopes) of troupes of musicians and/or actors.<sup>138</sup> Around 985 the palace had twenty-four *zaju*

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<sup>137</sup> Hu Ji, *Song jin zaju kao*, p. 4. Liao Ben offers a slight modification, saying that there was only one *zaju*, and the other uses of the term to which Hu Ji refers, such as puppet *zaju*, are subcategories of it. See his *Zhongguo xiqu fazhan shi*, vol. 1, pp. 195–196. Zhou Yibai appears not to accept the multiple *zaju* position either. See his *Zhongguo xiqu fazhanshi gangyao*, pp. 91–92.

<sup>138</sup> Liao Ben, *Zhongguo xiqu fazhan shi*, vol. 1, p. 203, quoting *Song huiyao jigao* 宋會要輯稿, “Ritual,” chap. 29.

## Za Opera

Shanxi *Za* Opera and Anhui *Nuo* Opera scripts descended through many centuries with little change. Remarkable similarities in stagecraft suggest further that they, and many other village opera genres in north China, had a common ancestor. However, when the first modern scholarly reports were written, in the counties where *Za* Opera and analogous forms survived, ritual opera was on its last legs, and the details of performance we have are mostly based on the recollections of older villagers.<sup>274</sup> Moreover each village had its own versions of the operas as well as the rituals they accompanied. So any description of rural ritual opera performance must of necessity be a composite based on incomplete information about a tradition in terminal decline. But I believe further research will show that village opera had a similar structure all across north China.

The colophon of one of the scripts from Xinzhuang Village (*Thrice Inviting Zhuge Liang*) says, as we have seen, “Our village has what are called *Za* Operas.”<sup>275</sup> Xinzhuang and two other villages sponsored *Za* Opera performances at the nearby Longyan Monastery. In an important early article Du Lifang wrote that in former times on the day of performance the village actors would get into costume at home. When they heard the summons of the Gong and Drum troupe they picked up their props and paraded through the streets and lanes to the temple where the operas would be staged. “This was called ‘*Za* Operas Go to the Temple.”<sup>276</sup> He

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<sup>274</sup> Wang Xiaju, “Jianjie Jinnan de ‘Luogu zaxi’”; Du Lifang, “Lun Longyan zaxi.”

<sup>275</sup> Yang Mengheng, “Luogu zaxi kaolue,” part 1, p. 19.

<sup>276</sup> Du, “Lun Longyan zaxi,” p. 343.

## 4. QUESTIONS AND CONCLUSION

Some years ago I learned of a book called *Chinese Village Plays*, by Sidney Gamble.<sup>441</sup> Play scripts from villages are rare and I bought the book immediately. (What I refer to as “scripts” in the following are in fact transcriptions of the performances by old actors who had been persuaded to re-enact what they remembered of their repertoire in the genre known as *yangge*, or rice-planting songs.)<sup>442</sup> The content of some of the scripts was stunning: brutally realistic descriptions of the sufferings of destitute villagers, and their anger. One in particular stood out. It was called “Guo Ju Buries His Son.” Many readers will recognize this as the title of one of the twenty-four stories of exemplary filial piety (*Ershisi xiao*), possibly the most famous Chinese didactic tract. The original story in the “Twenty-four Exemplars” tells of a family living in the most extreme poverty, on the edge of starvation: a young man, his wife, their infant son, and his widowed mother. They cannot all survive; one must be sacrificed. Is it to be the bedridden mother, or the baby? Filial piety dictates that they must sacrifice the child to save the life of his grandmother. But as Guo Ju is digging the grave—O wonderful, his virtue is rewarded! He uncovers a cache of silver ingots with this message: “Heaven’s gift to the filial son Guo Ju.

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<sup>441</sup> Amsterdam: Philo Press, 1970.

<sup>442</sup> Gamble’s “village plays” are much shorter and less complex than *Za Operas*, more like skits than full-fledged drama. The Chinese texts cited in *Chinese Village Plays* can be found in *Ding xian yangge xuan*. The scripts were taken down from dictation by village performers in Ding County, Hebei, in 1929 (p. xxvii). Gamble suggests that they had never before been written down (p. xix). Gamble and his associates worked for years in Ding County with James Yen’s Mass Education Project. I have corrected some but probably not all errors in the original translations. There is an important early report by Chao Wei-pang: “Yang-ko: The Rural Theatre in Ting-Hsien, Hopei.”

## APPENDIX 1

# List of Early Stages in Shanxi

The following is based primarily on Liao Ben, *Zhongguo gudai juchang shi* (Zhengzhou: Zhongzhou guji chubanshe, 1997), pp. 17–20 (together with the very similar list in Liao Ben, *Song Yuan xiqu wenwu yu minsu* [Beijing: Wenwu yishu chubanshe, 1989], pp. 130–134), supplemented by the list in *Zhongguo xiquzhi: Shanxi juan*, Zhongguo xiquzhi bianjibu, ed. (Beijing: Wenhua yishu chubanshe, 1990), pp. 562–564. Note: With one exception I have used only entries in these lists that are based on epigraphic evidence. The exception is the mural in the Water God Temple, about 14 km east of Hongtong, which commemorates an opera performance there in 1324. (See Anning Wang, *The Water God's Temple of the Guangsheng Monastery* [Leiden: Brill, 2002], and the extensive literature cited there.) No entries based solely on local monographs or other literary evidence were used. This undoubtedly eliminated a number of stages that were genuinely old. Some of the steles included in the list are no longer extant. Since some inscriptions commemorate the repair or reconstruction of a temple or stage, a number of stages are older than the date assigned to them. I have excluded from the list an extant stage said to be of Yuan dynasty provenance: Sanguan Temple, Sanluli Village, Yuncheng Municipality (運城市三路里村三官廟). For additional information on early stages in Shanxi, see Huang Zhusan, “Cong Bei Song wulou de chuxian kan Zhongguo xiqu de fazhan,” *Minsu quyī* 35 (1985): 32, 34; Mo Yiping, *Puju shi hun* (n.p., Shanxi sheng wenhuaju xiju gongzuo yanjiushi, 1981), p. 16; *Zhongguo xiquzhi: Shanxi juan*, p. 9.

## APPENDIX 2

# Note on the Authenticity of Our Scripts

Are the scripts labelled “Gong and Drum *Za* Opera” by various collection teams and the archivists of the Shanxi Provincial Drama Research Office in Taiyuan actually the *Za* Operas we analyzed in the first half of this book? Given the habitual lack of precision with which Chinese local opera specialists use generic labels, which reflects the unsystematic way in which villagers named their operas, this is not an idle question. A total of sixty-five scripts identified as “Gong and Drum *Za* Opera” by the Drama Research Office or the men who collected them are available to me. Fifty-three are xerox copies of village manuscripts from the archives of the Shanxi Drama Research Office, now in the East Asian Library of the University of California, Berkeley.<sup>458</sup> Twelve were published in 1981 in the first volume of the *Anthology of Shanxi Local Opera*,<sup>459</sup> five of which duplicate manuscript scripts, leaving a total of sixty unique scripts. One authority estimates that the total number of surviving *Za* Opera manuscripts at “over one hundred,”<sup>460</sup> but this may be too low. There still is a saying in Yuncheng County in southwestern Shanxi regarding the scripts of *Za*

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<sup>458</sup> The fifty-three scripts are in forty-three manuscripts. This is not the total holdings of *Za* Opera in that archive. In addition, collections of *Za* Opera manuscripts are held by the Pu Opera Institute (蒲劇院) in Linfen and the Opera Materials Research Institute (戲曲文物研究所) of Shanxi Normal University, also in Linfen. The Yuncheng Cultural Affairs Bureau may also have a collection. Lists of titles can be found in *Shanxi sheng ge juzhong jumu diaocha*, p. 86; Wang Xiaju, “Jianjie Jinnan de ‘Luogu zaxi,’” pp. 119B–120A; Du Lifang, “Lun Longyan zaxi 論龍岩雜戲,” p. 350; “Shanxi xiancun difang xiqu mulu 山西現存地方戲曲目錄” (mimeo, n.p., 1980, in the author’s collection), pp. 20, 42, 47; Dou Kai and Yuan Hongxuan, “Shilun Shanxi luogu zaxi,” pp. 75–76.

<sup>459</sup> *Shanxi difang xiqu huibian*.

<sup>460</sup> Yang Mengheng, “Luogu zaxi kaolue,” part 1, p. 21B.

## APPENDIX 3

# List of *Za* Opera Manuscripts

Scripts of Gong and Drum Operas (鑼鼓雜戲) from southwestern Shanxi donated to Starr East Asian Library by David Johnson, February, 2015. The descriptions are based on examination of the original manuscripts housed in the archive of the Shanxi Provincial Opera Research Academy (山西省戲劇研究院) in Taiyuan. Manuscripts that appear to have been copied at around the same time, or that have the same provenance, are grouped together. Most are handwritten copies made after 1950 by government workers, but there are also some older manuscripts—these are listed first.

1. 火攻計 [南巷].

39 pages, large format. Old manuscript, repaired in 1934. On cover: “南巷”; “民國二十三年二月二日修”; “火攻計□本” [this resembles the title of no. 2]. This ms. is probably from 寺北曲村 (see no. 2), and the 南巷 on the cover refers to a neighborhood or quarter of that village.

2. 大鬧天宮 [寺北曲村].

61 pages. Old manuscript. On cover: “寺北曲村南社雜戲本”; “民國廿三年三月廿三日修”; “大鬧天宮□本.” Old ms. repaired in 1934, as was no. 1. “南社” probably refers to the same quarter of the village as the “南巷” of no. 1.

3. 火攻計 [寺北曲村].

70 pages. Old manuscript. On cover (in addition to the title): “寺北曲村南社雜劇” and “光緒三十二年 [1906] 丙申月.”

4. 大鬧天宮.

48 pages. Old manuscript. Paper weight and color, binding, ink, handwriting, and format very similar to no. 3, hence this ms. probably is

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# Glossary-Index

- “All Keys and Modes” (*zhugongdiao* 諸宮調) genre, 75, 75n152, 76–77, 95–96  
allusions, 36n69, 39–40, 42–43, 58, 60, 60n130, 61, 64–66  
*Anhui Guichi nuoxi juben xuan*, 102  
Anhui Province, 99  
Announcer (*da bao de* 打報的, *da bao zhe* 打報者), 103, 105, 118, 121–22, 121n326, 122–23, 133–34, 138–39, 143, 157. *See also* performances  
*Anthology of Shanxi Local Opera*, 13  
Aoshi 澳石, 96–97, 122, 131–36  
*Art of War* (Sunzi), 64  
*Attacking Yanzhou* (*Xia Yanzhou* 下兗州), 43–55, 65–66, 152, 165  
audiences: comprehension by, 12, 21;  
familiarity with story, 14–15, 22, 24n48, 28, 58, 60–61, 66, 122n330;  
and gender, 111–12, 152; growth of, 72–73; and historical allusion, 39–40;  
mentality of, 24n47; and moral sense, 18; space for, 7, 12  
authorship, 14–15, 42–43, 56, 66. *See also* scripts  
  
*bai chang* 擺場, 141  
*bai zhen* 擺陣, 141  
*Ballad of the Hidden Dragon*, 76. *See also* Liu Zhiyuan *zhugongdiao*  
bandits, 57n123  
*bangzi* 梆子, 21n38, 114n239  
*Banquet at Hongmen, The* (*Hongmen hui* 鴻門會), 13, 18–22, 26–27, 51, 119, 129n366, 134. *See also* *Romance of Western Han* (*Xi Han yanyi* 西漢演義)  
*baojuan* 寶卷, 2, 12, 22–23, 130  
“Bao Longtu and Selling Rice at Chenzhou” (“Bao Longtu Chenzhou tiao mi ji 包龍圖陳州糶米記”), 104  
*baozi* 報子. *See* Announcer  
Battle of Red Cliff, 30  
*Beating the Stove God* (*Da zaowang* 打灶王), 150–52, 154  
*bianwen* 變文, 34n63, 57n124, 130  
Big Drumsong, 29–30  
*Biji manzhi* 碧鷄漫志, 77  
Black Dragon, 26  
blackmail, 47–48  
Buddhism, 22–27, 75–76, 117–18, 118n305  
Bunyan, John, 12  
  
Cao Cao 曹操, 28–32, 38–39, 41  
Cao Jie, 53–54  
Cao Ren, 48, 50–52, 54  
Chang, H. C., 153  
*Changban Slope* (*Changban po* 長坂坡), 13, 27–31, 51  
*chantefable*, 27, 29, 32–33, 104–7  
*Chinese Literature: Popular Fiction and Drama*, 153  
*Chinese Popular Culture and Ming Chantefables* (McLaren), 104  
*Chinese Vernacular Story, The*, 153



**FRONT COVER:** Temple of the Immortal Sisters, 二仙廟, in Lingchuan County, Shanxi. It was massively rebuilt on the site of an older temple in A.D. 1142. Many new buildings, including a stage, were constructed at that time.

**BACK COVER:** The temple's stage, viewed from the Offering Hall in 1993.

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