

VILLAGE OPERA

Lu Hsun

Table of Contents

<u>VILLAGE OPERA</u>	1
<u>Lu Hsun</u>	2

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During the past twenty years I have been to the Chinese opera only twice. During the first ten years I never went, having neither the desire nor the Opportunity. The two occasions on which I went were in the past ten years, but each time I left without seeing anything in it.

The first time was in 1912 when I was new to Peking. A friend told me Peking had the best opera and that seeing it was an experience I shouldn't miss. I thought it might be interesting to see an opera, especially in Peking, and hurried in high spirits to some theatre, the name of which I have forgotten. The performance had already started. Even outside I could hear the beat of the drums. As we squeezed in, bright colours flashed in view, and I saw many heads in the auditorium; as I scanned the theatre I saw a few seats in the middle still empty. But when I squeezed in to sit down, someone spoke up. There was such a throbbing in my ears I had to listen attentively to catch what he was saying—"Sorry, these seats are taken!"

We went to the back, but then a man with a glossy queue led us to a side aisle, and indicated an unoccupied place. This was a bench only three-quarters the width of my thighs, but with legs nearly twice as long as mine. To begin with I hadn't the courage to get up there, and then it reminded me of some instrument of torture, and with an involuntary shudder I fled.

I had gone some distance, when I heard my friend's voice, asking: "Well, what's the matter?" Looking over my shoulder I saw he had followed me out. He seemed very surprised. "Why do you march along without a word?" he demanded.

"I'm sorry," I told him. "There's such a pounding in my ears, I couldn't hear you."

Whenever I thought back on the incident, it struck me as very strange, and I supposed that the opera had been a very poor one—or else a theatre was no place for me.

I forget in what year I made the second venture, but funds were being raised for flood victims in Hupeh, and Tan Hsin-peï was still alive. By paying two dollars for a ticket, you contributed money and could go to the Number One Theatre to see an opera with a cast made up for the most part of famous actors, one being Tan Hsin-peï himself. I bought a ticket primarily to satisfy the collector, but then some busy-body seized the opportunity to tell me why Tan Hsin-peï simply had to be seen. At that, I forgot the disastrous din and crash of a few years before, and went to the theatre—probably half because I had paid so much for that precious ticket that I wouldn't feel comfortable if I didn't use it. I learned that Tan Hsin-peï made his appearance late in the evening, and Number One Theatre was a modern one where you didn't have to fight for your seat. That reassured me, and I waited till nine o'clock before setting out. To my surprise, just as before, it was full. There was hardly any standing room and I had to squeeze into the crowd at the rear to watch an actor singing an old woman's part. He had a paper spill burning at each corner of his mouth and there was a devil-soldier beside him. I racked my brains and guessed that this might be Maudgalyayana's mother, because the next to come on was a monk. Not recognizing the actor, I asked a fat gentleman who was squeezed in on my left. "Kung Yun-fu!" he said, throwing me a withering look from the corner of his eye. My face burned with shame for my ignorant blunder, and I mentally resolved that at all costs I would ask no more questions. Then I watched a heroine and her maid sing, next an old man and some other characters I couldn't identify. After that, I watched a whole group fight a free-for-all, and after that, two or three people fighting together—from after nine till ten, from ten till eleven, from eleven till eleven thirty, from eleven thirty till twelve: but there was no sign of Tan Hsin-peï.

Never in my life have I waited for anything so patiently. But the wheezes of the fat gentleman next to me, the clanging, tinkling, drumming and gonging on the stage, the whirl of bright colours and the lateness of the hour

VILLAGE OPERA

suddenly made me realize that this was no place for me. Mechanically I turned round, and tried with might and main to shove my way out. I felt the place behind me fill up at once—no doubt the elastic fat gentleman had expanded his right side into my empty place. With my retreat cut off, naturally there was nothing to do but push and push till at last I was out of the door. Apart from the rickshaws waiting for the playgoers, there was practically no one walking outside, but there were still a dozen people by the gate looking up at the programme, and another group not looking at anything, who must, I thought, be waiting to watch the women come out after the show was over. There was no sign of Tan Hsin-pei. . . .

But the night air was so brisk, it went right through me. This seemed to be the first time I had known such good air in Peking.

I said goodbye to Chinese opera that night. I never thought about it again, and, if by any chance I passed a theatre, it meant nothing to me for in spirit we were poles apart.

A few days ago, however, I happened to read a Japanese book—unfortunately I have forgotten the title and author, but it was about the Chinese opera. One chapter made the point that Chinese opera is so full of gongs and cymbals, shouting and jumping, that it makes the onlookers' heads swim. It is quite unsuited for presentation in a theatre but, if performed in the open air and watched from a distance, it has its charm. I felt this put into words what had remained unformulated in my mind, because as a matter of fact I clearly remembered seeing a really good opera in the country, and it was under its influence, perhaps, that after coming to Peking, I went twice to the theatre. It's a pity that, somehow or other, I've forgotten the name of that book.

As to when I saw that good opera, it was really "long, long ago," and I could not have been much more than eleven or twelve. It was the custom in Luchen where we lived for married women who were not yet in charge of the household to go back to their parents' home for the summer. Although my father's mother was then still quite strong, my mother had quite a few household duties. She could not spend many days at her own home during the summer. She could take a few days only after visiting the ancestral graves. At such times I always went with her to stay in her parents' house. It was in a place called Pingchao Village, not far from the sea, a very out-of-the-way little village on a river, with less than thirty households, peasants and fishermen, and just one tiny grocery. In my eyes, however, it was heaven, for not only was I treated as a guest of honour, but I could skip reading the *Book of Songs*.

There were many children for me to play with. For with the arrival of a visitor from such a distance they got permission from their parents to do less work in order to play with me. In a small village the guest of one family is virtually the guest of the whole community. We were all about the same age, but when it came to determining seniority, many were at least my uncles or grand-uncles, since everybody in the village had the same family name and belonged to one clan. But we were all good friends, and if by some chance we fell out and I hit one of my grand-uncles, it never occurred to any child or grown-up in the village to call it "disrespect to elders." Ninety-nine out of a hundred of them could neither read nor write.

We spent most of our days digging up worms, putting them on little hooks made of copper wire, and lying on the river bank to catch shrimps. Shrimps are the silliest water creatures: they willingly use their own pincers to push the point of the hook into their mouths; so in a few hours we could catch a big bowlful. It became the custom to give these shrimps to me. Another thing we did was to take the buffaloes out together, but, maybe because they are animals of a higher species, oxen and buffaloes are hostile to strangers, and they treated me with contempt so that I never dared get too close to them. I could only follow at a distance and stand there. At such times my small friends were no longer impressed by the fact that I could recite classical poetry, but would hoot with laughter.

What I looked forward to most was going to Chaochuang to see the opera. Chaochuang was a slightly larger village about two miles away. Since Pingchiao was too small to afford to put on operas, every year it contributed some money for a performance at Chaochuang. At the time, I wasn't curious why they should have operas every year. Thinking about it now, I dare say it may have been for the late spring festival or for the village sacrifice.

That year when I was eleven or twelve, the long-awaited day arrived. But as ill luck would have it, there was no boat for hire that morning. Pingchiao Village had only one sailing boat, which left in the morning and came back in the evening. This was a large boat which it was out of the question to hire; and all the other boats were unsuitable because they were too small. Someone was sent round to the neighbouring villages to ask if they had boats, but no—they had all been hired already. My grandmother was very upset, blamed my cousins for not hiring one earlier, and began to complain. Mother tried to comfort her by saying the operas at Luchen were much better

VILLAGE OPERA

than in these little villages, and there were several every year, so there was no need to go today. But I was nearly in tears from disappointment, and mother did her best to impress on me that no matter what, I must not make a scene, because it would upset my grandmother; and I mustn't go with other people either, for then grandmother would be worried.

In a word, it had fallen through. After lunch, when all my friends had left and the opera had started, I imagined I could hear the sound of gongs and drums, and saw them, with my mind's eye, in front of the stage buying soya-bean milk.

I didn't catch shrimps that day, and didn't eat much either. Mother was very upset, but there was nothing she could do. By supper time grandmother realized how I felt, and said I was quite right to be angry, they had been too negligent, and never before had guests been treated so badly. After the meal, youngsters who had come back from the opera gathered round and gaily described it all for us. I was the only one silent; they all sighed and said how sorry they were for me. Suddenly one of the brightest, called Shuang-hsi, had an inspiration, and said: "A big boat—hasn't Eighth Grand-uncle's boat come back?" A dozen other boys picked up the idea in a flash, and at once started agitating to take the boat and go with me. I cheered up. But grandmother was nervous, thinking we were all children and undependable. And mother said that since the grown-ups all had to work the next day, it wouldn't be fair to ask them to go with us and stay up all night. While our fate hung in the balance, Shuang-hsi went to the root of the question and declared loudly: "I give my word it'll be all right! It's a big boat, Brother Hsun never jumps around, and we can all swim!"

It was true. There wasn't one boy in the dozen who wasn't a fish in water, and two or three of them were first-rate swimmers.

Grandmother and mother were convinced and did not raise any more objections. They both smiled, and we immediately rushed out.

My heavy heart suddenly became light, and I felt as though I were floating on air. When we got outside, I saw in the moonlight a boat with a white awning moored at the bridge. We jumped aboard, Shuang-hsi seized the front pole and Ah-fa the back one; the younger boys sat down with me in the middle of the boat, while the older ones went to the stern. By the time mother followed us out to say "Be careful!" we had already cast off. We pushed off from the bridge, floated back a few feet, then moved forward under the bridge. Two oars were set up, each manned by two boys who changed shifts every third of a mile. Chatter, laughter and shouts mingled with the lapping of the water against the bow of our boat; to our right and left, as we flew forward towards Chaochuang, were emerald green fields of beans and wheat.

The mist hung over the water, the scent of beans, wheat and river weeds wafted towards us, and the moonlight shone faintly through the mist. In the distance, grey hills, undulating like the backs of some leaping iron beasts, seemed to be racing past the stern of our boat; but still I felt our progress was slow. When the oarsmen had changed shifts four times, it was just possible to see the faint outline of Chauchuang, and catch the sound of singing. There were several lights too, which we guessed must be on the stage, unless they were fishermen's lights.

The music we heard was probably flutes. Eddying round and round and up and down, it soothed me and set me dreaming at the same time, till I felt as though I were about to drift far away with it through the night air heavy with the scent of beans and wheat and river weeds.

As we approached the lights, we found they were fishermen's lights after all, and I realized I hadn't been looking at Chaochuang at all. Directly ahead of us was a pine wood where I had played the year before, and seen the broken stone horse that had fallen on its side, and a stone sheep couched in the grass. When we passed the wood, the boat rounded a bend into a cove, and Chaochuang was really before us.

Our eyes were drawn to the stage standing in a plot of empty ground by the river outside the village, hazy in the distant moonlight, barely distinguishable from its surroundings. It seemed that the fairyland I had seen in pictures had come alive here. The boat was moving faster now, and presently we could make out figures on the stage and a blaze of bright colours, and the river close to the stage was black with the boat awnings of people who had come to watch the play.

"There's no room near the stage, let's watch from a distance," suggested Ah-fa,

The boat had slowed down now, and soon we arrived. True enough, it was impossible to get close to the stage. We had to make our boat fast even further from the stage than the shrine opposite it. We did not regret it, though,

VILLAGE OPERA

for we did not want our boat with its white awning to mix with those common black boats; and there was no room for us anyway. . . .

While we hastily moored, there appeared on the stage a man with a long black beard who had four pennons fixed to his back. With a spear he fought a whole group of bare-armed men. Shuang-hsi told us this was a famous acrobat who could turn eighty-four somersaults, one after the other. He had counted for himself earlier in the day.

We all crowded to the bow to watch the fighting, but the acrobat didn't turn any somersaults. Some of the bare-armed men turned head over heels a few times, then trooped off. Then a girl came out, and sang in a long drawn-out voice. "There aren't many people in the evening," said Shuang-hsi, "and the acrobat's taking it easy. Nobody wants to show his skill without an audience." That was common sense, because by then there really weren't many people left to watch. The country folk had work the next day, and couldn't stay up all night, so they had all gone to bed. Just a score or so of idlers from Chaochuang and the villages around remained sprinkled about. The families of the local rich were still there in the boats with black awnings, but they weren't really interested in the opera. Most of them had gone to the foot of the stage to eat cakes, fruit or melon seeds. So it didn't really amount to an audience.

As a matter of fact, I wasn't keen on the somersaults. What I wanted to see most was a snake spirit swathed in white, its two hands clasping on its head a wand-like snake's head. My second choice was a leaping tiger dressed in yellow. But though I waited a long time, they didn't appear. The girl was followed at once by a very old man acting the part of a young man. I was rather tired and asked Kuei-sheng to buy me some soya-bean milk. He came back in a little while to say: "There isn't any. The deaf man who sells it has gone. There was some in the daytime, I drank two bowls then. I'll get you a dipperful of water to drink."

I didn't drink the water, but stuck it out as best I could. I can't say what I saw, but it seemed that the faces of the players gradually became very strange, the features blurred as though they had melted into one flat surface. Most of the younger boys yawned, while the older ones chatted among themselves. It was only when a clown in a red shirt was fastened to a pillar on the stage, and a greybeard started horsewhipping him that we all roused ourselves to watch again and laughed. I really think that was the best scene of the evening.

But then the old woman came out. This was the character I most dreaded, especially when she sat down to sing. Now I saw by everybody's disappointment that they felt as I did. In the beginning, the old woman just walked to and fro singing, then she sat on a chair in the middle of the stage. I was really distressed, and Shuang-hsi and the others started swearing. I waited patiently until, after a long time, the old woman raised her hand, and I thought she was going to stand up. But despite my hopes she lowered her hand slowly to its original position, and went on singing just as before. Some of the boys in the boat couldn't help groaning, and the rest began to yawn again. Finally Shuang-hsi couldn't stand it any longer. He said he was afraid the old woman would go on singing till dawn, and we had better leave. We all promptly agreed, and became as eager as when we had set out. Three or four boys ran to the stern, seized the poles to punt back several yards, and headed the boat around. Cursing the old singer, they set up the oars, and started back for the pine wood.

Judging from the position of the moon, we had not been watching very long, and once we left Chaochuang the moonlight seemed unusually bright. When we turned back to see the lantern-lit stage, it looked just as it had when we came, hazy as a fairy pavilion, covered in a rosy mist. Once again the flutes piped melodiously in our ears. I thought the old woman must have finished, but couldn't very well suggest going back again to see.

Soon the pine wood was behind us. Our boat was moving rather fast, but there was such thick darkness all around you could tell it was very late. As they discussed the players, laughing and swearing, the towers pulled faster on the oars. Now the splash of water against our bow was even more distinct. The boat seemed like a great white fish carrying a freight of children on its back through the foam. Some old fishermen who fished all night stopped their punts to cheer at the sight.

We were still about a third of a mile from Pingchiao when our boat slowed down, and the oarsmen said they were tired after rowing so hard. We'd had nothing to eat for hours. It was Kuei-sheng who had a brilliant idea this time. He said the *lohan* beans were ripe, and we had fuel on the boat—we could use a little to cook the beans. Everybody agreed, and we immediately headed towards the bank. The pitch-black fields were filled with succulent beans.

"Hey! Ah-fa! It's your family's over here, and Old Liu Yi's over there. Which shall we take?" Shuang-hsi had

VILLAGE OPERA

been the first to leap ashore, and was calling from the bank.

As we all jumped ashore too, Ah-fa said: "Wait a minute and I'll take a look." He walked up and down feeling the beans, then straightened up to say: "Take ours, they're much bigger." With a shout we scattered through the bean field of Ah-fa's family, each picking a big handful of beans and throwing them into the boat. Shuang-hsi thought that if we took any more and Ah-fa's mother found out, there would be trouble, so we all went to Old Liu Yi's field to pick another handful each.

Then a few of the older boys started rowing slowly again, while others lit a fire in the stern, and the younger boys and I shelled the beans. Soon they were cooked, and we let the boat drift while we gathered round and ate them with our fingers. When we had finished eating we went on again, washing the pot and throwing the pods into the river, to destroy all traces. Shuang-hsi was uneasy because we had used the salt and firewood on Eighth Grand-uncle's boat, and the old man was so sharp he would be sure to find out and scold us. But after some discussion we decided there was nothing to fear. If he did scold us we would ask him to return the pine branch he had taken the previous year from the river bank, and call him "Old Scabby" to his face.

"We're all back! How could anything have happened? Didn't I guarantee it would be all right!" Shuang-hsi's voice suddenly rang out from the bow.

Looking past him, I saw we were already at Pingchiao, and someone was standing at the foot of the bridge—it was mother. It was to her that Shuang-hsi had called. As I walked up to the bow the boat passed under the bridge, then stopped, and we all went ashore. Mother was rather annoyed, and asked why we had come back so late—it was after midnight. But she was soon in a good humour again, and smiled as she invited everybody to come back and have some puffed rice.

They told her we had all eaten something, and were sleepy, so they had better get to bed at once, and off we all went to our own homes.

I didn't get up till noon the next day, and there was no word of any trouble with Eighth Grand-uncle over the salt or firewood. In the afternoon we went to catch shrimps as usual.

"Shuang-hsi, you young rascals stole my beans yesterday! And you didn't pick them properly, you trampled down quite a few." I looked up and saw Old Liu Yi on a punt, coming back from selling beans. There was still a heap of left-over beans at the bottom of the punt.

"Yes. We were treating a visitor. We didn't mean to take yours to begin with," said Shuang-hsi. "Look! You've frightened away my shrimp!"

When the old man saw me, he stopped punting, and chuckled. "Treating a visitor? So you should." Then he asked me: "Was yesterday's opera good?"

"Yes." I nodded.

"Did you enjoy the beans?"

"Very much." I nodded again.

To my surprise, the old man was greatly pleased. He stuck up a thumb, and declared with satisfaction: "People from big towns who have studied really know what's good. I select my bean seeds one by one. Country folk can't tell good from bad, and say my beans aren't as good as other people's. I'll give some to your mother today for her to try." Then he punted off.

When mother called me home for supper, there was a large bowl of boiled beans on the table, which Old Liu Yi had brought for her and me to eat. I heard he had praised me highly to mother, saying, "He's so young, yet he knows what's what. He's sure to pass all the official examinations in future. Your fortune's as good as made." But when I ate the beans, they didn't taste as good as the ones we'd eaten the night before.

It's a fact, right up till now, I've really never eaten such good beans, or seen such a good opera, as I did that night.

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