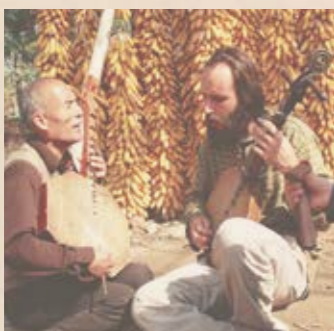


## On the Art of Shaanxi

# SHADOW PLAY

TED BURGER

In a quiet hilltop hamlet called Lu Yuan lives a group of humble farmers. These are not just any farmers. By day they tend and harvest the land, but by night they are artists whose skilled hands and practiced voices bring to life the folklore, history, myth and legend of a vast and ancient China.



Shadow play is a farmer's art. By day, the puppet-master, storyteller and their troupe work their family land like any other peasants in Shaanxi Province. But as the sun begins its slow descent towards night, something special happens. These farmers wash the earth from their hands and pick up their lutes as virtuosos in one of China's most delicate and intricate performance arts. The quiet village night becomes a living theater of love-struck maidens, fearless warriors and righteous kings. And the shadows come out to play.

Shadow puppet theater is an integral part of traditional Shaanxi culture, with about 2,000 years of history.<sup>1</sup> Lu Yuan village, home to several of Shaanxi's finest shadow play artists, is located just north

of Xi'an, Shaanxi's provincial capital. Xi'an was formerly the Imperial capital of the T'ang Dynasty, China's philosophic and artistic Renaissance from 618 to 907 AD. The T'ang culture of Xi'an is the source of what is now broadly considered "classical Chinese culture," and it also influenced much of the traditional cultural heritage of Japan and Korea. Both Nara and Heian-period Kyoto were modeled on Xi'an.

Xi'an was also the starting-point — or end-point — of the Silk Road, the ancient trade route that stretched through Asia and the Middle East, as far as the Mediterranean. The city was a melting-pot, populated by thousands of foreigners from Central, South and East Asia, and

was at that time one of the most civilized cities in the world. For a period spanning over 1,100 years, it served as the capital city to 12 dynasties — from the Zhou to the T'ang. Now Shaanxi Province is best known for its Qin Dynasty "Terracotta Army," and the 65-meter Big Goose Pagoda, built for the monk Xuan Zang, who was immortalized in the Buddhist epic "*Monkey*" or "*Journey to the West*."

The culture and high arts of the imperial court spread beyond the walls of Xi'an to become part of everyday culture in the surrounding Shaanxi countryside. It is within these rural areas where we can still find the surviving remnants of China's most unique and influential folk arts, including shadow puppetry.



Courtesy of the Yang Fei collection

In traditional Shaanxi society, shadow puppet theater is an integral part of the celebrations marking all of life's most important events such as birth, marriage, and death. Friends and neighbors come together to honor such occasions and to watch the myths and legends they never tire of — stories recounting everything from heated battles with mythological creatures to wooing lovers' agonizing separation. The popular saying goes, "three meters of cloth covers all things under heaven." Most performances last around eight hours, although the old artists remember a time when the show would go on until sunrise. While people come and go throughout the performance, everyone is sure to be there when it matters most —

to catch their favorite lines, the best fight, the clincher, the punch line. They cheer and call out. Tears are sometimes shed.

Not long ago shadow play did more than merely entertain peasants. It was within the characters and stories of shadow theater where people gained insight into life's mysteries. These stories brought history, literature and ancient wisdom to a rural Shaanxi where formal media and educational institutions did not exist for common citizens. In this way, shadow plays were the radio shows and movies of old China, filled with the morals and ways of thinking traditional peoples glean from history, myth and a good old-fashioned story.

As darkness falls over the quiet country-



side, men, women and children of all ages gather, sitting on short wooden stools they have carried from their homes nearby. The orchestra begins, and the sound of lutes and gongs fill the still and quiet night. The eager faces of the onlooking crowd are gently lit by the warm glow of the white cloth screen. Delicate images of color and shadow appear, characters and creatures born from ancient legends, moving gracefully across the stage. A story told of a familiar past.

Children and curious onlookers move in close to the wooden stage to peek behind the three-meter-wide screen for a behind-the-scenes view of the magic. In designs as delicate as fine lace, these paper-thin translucent leather puppets are held up to the screen, backlit by a strong, bright lamp. The puppeteer, a master of hundreds of traditional expressive gestures, rocks and twists thin bamboo rods between his fingers to manipulate the depth and angles of the shadows. Within a beam of light he dances and poses his puppets, breathing life into complex gestures and movements that pulse with the emotion of the characters.

Music is central to shadow theater and the audience relates to this form of light opera almost as much as they do the characters and actions themselves. The storyteller, with a voice that is limber and versatile, sings the voices of both male and female characters. In *Wanan Qiang* shadow theater, he is also the lead of the four-member orchestra and plays the Moon Lute (*yue qin*), a two-stringed wooden instrument, plucked with a long bamboo plectrum and a metal slide on the first finger of the fretting hand. He also plays two drums and a small gong for emphasizing rhythm in the story and cueing the

puppeteer's actions. The first string plays a bowed instrument called the *erhu*, a simple two-stringed violin with a snakeskin resonator which is held vertically on one knee. He is also responsible for playing a trumpet-like instrument needed occasionally for high-energy battle scenes or the pomp and circumstance of the royal court. The second string, a master of the *erxuan* or *banhu*, instruments similar in structure to the *erhu*, maintains the melody continuously throughout each play. The percussionist plays a number of gongs, drums and cymbals. Most important though are his wood clappers and *wan-wan*, a small brass bowl for which this style of shadow theater is named. These create the syncopated rhythms which are the backbone of every tune.

To understand the origins of this uncommon art form, we must look to the distant past, to the story of an emperor and his concubine; here expanded into a narrative for my documentary film, *A Life in Shadows*:

*Two thousand years ago Emperor Wudi ruled*

*over a vast and powerful empire. In his palace lived thousands of beautiful concubines. But only one could truly capture his heart. She wrote poems that made even this great ruler of the Middle Kingdom weep, and it is said, she could sing and dance like plum blossoms turning gently in the winter breeze. Her lips were as sweet as persimmons, her hair flowed like the water of a placid summer stream. Her name was Lady Li and it was the Emperor's love for her that led to China's Shadow Theater.*

*Emperor Wudi ruled over his people with benevolence and righteousness. All was well and bountiful across the land. Rains came and the crops grew stronger with each passing day. At harvest time the Emperor was overjoyed by the great bounty. Lady Li wrote songs and poems and danced for the Emperor and she sang for him in celebration of his great fortune.*

*The Emperor and Lady Li lived together in happiness. As a long winter laid its icy fingers over the land, the warmth of their love filled every chamber of the Emperor's palace. But not even love can cheat calamity. The winter was long and fierce, and Lady Li fell terribly ill.*

*The Emperor visited Lady Li every day, wishing to see once more the fair beauty of his love. But each visit was in vain, for Lady Li insisted he not see her in such a state. "Your Majesty," she entreated, "forgive me, but I dare not show my face. Ill as I am, my visage is unfit to behold."*

*Time passed, and the emperor grew weary. A yearning burned in his heart, for he so wished to see his Lady Li, and worried desperately about her condition. Winter though would have its way. One cold and dreary day, Lady Li succumbed to the harsh winds of winter, and a dark shadow fell over the empire.*

*Emperor Wudi was overcome with a sadness and longing he could not bear. One of his men called upon an eminent shaman to heal the emperor's dolorous heart. The mysterious priest cut out a silhouette of the emperor's dear departed love and stood it in his chamber with a lamp, burning through the night, which cast her shadow upon a*



Photographs by Zhang Tao

curtain for the Emperor to view. Seeing her image he was so overjoyed he called out to her, and begged her to dance for him just once more. Court musicians were called and the sounds of their lutes brought happiness and beauty to the still and dark night. Thus the Emperor bade his last farewell, and this is how Chinese Shadow Theater came to be.



Two thousand years later, shadow play lives on. Just as Emperor Wudi loved his concubine and could not let her go, so do the people of China love their past. Emperor Wudi created a shadow image of his beloved lost love. China created shadow theater to recreate their beloved history.

These shadows of history have passed through the many twists and turns of China's classical and modern times. Most recently, the Cultural Revolution nearly obliterated this art as traditional puppets, some hundreds of years old, were systematically de-stroyed, seen as symbols of China's feudal past. Some shadow play artists and enthusiasts managed to hide a few old puppets and scripts, finding ways to deceive the Red Guards who came to raid their homes. And so, shadow theater survived the Communist Revolution.

But now shadow play faces yet another threat — the “Modern Revolution.” Although this revolution is portrayed as benevolent, welcome and popular, many Chinese folk arts are now in the situation of so many other traditional arts in the industrialized world. Old artists are dying, audiences are dwindling and the village performance tradition is nearly obsolete.

The provincial government has established a troupe of shadow puppeteers, made up of trained artists from Xi'an City. In 2005 they performed at the China Festival at the Kennedy Center in Washington D.C.<sup>2</sup> Although the artists are highly skilled, the stories they perform lack the historical and traditional themes of village shadow play. They perform plays with simpler plots and complicated puppeteering, which appeals to a younger, more modern crowd. What they do is very impressive, but it does little to preserve the folk performance tradition itself, which centers around stories and characters pregnant with history and knowledge which have for centuries made shadow play such an influential folk art tradition.

The West has also taken some interest

in shadow theater. The Lu Yuan shadow players have performed in Japan, France and Germany and have even collaborated with a French puppeteer, Jean Luc Pen-so. A few years ago he recorded the troupe performing the music to several traditional shadow plays. Jean Luc uses these recordings in shadow plays at his theater in Paris, Theater du Petit Miroir, singing translations of the scripts in French. Mr. Wei has also designed and created new puppets for Jean Luc to use in shadow puppet adaptations of French stories. When visiting the Lu Yuan shadow artists, Jean Luc sits in with the troupe to sing a few verses in French for the mesmerized audience of Shaanxi villagers. It is a seamless and unique melding of cultures.

Although it is very satisfying and thrilling for these farmer artists to partake in these collaborations and perform in the streets and theaters of Europe, this overseas attention thus far has not resolved issues surrounding their situation at home.

For the last few years I have been returning to Lu Yuan Village to visit with Mr. Lu and Mr. Wei and the other shadow artists. My first few visits were spent sitting in the sunny courtyard at Mr. Lu's, picking some new licks on a moon lute, listening to stories about the “old days.” That is the Lu Yuan of my documentary, the Lu Yuan I love to visit, which the old artists say has been this way for over a hundred years. But lately I return to find the simplicity of the village artists' life shaken up by a new kind of complexity brought about by economic, social and cultural changes.

Local artists explain that though shadow play once appealed to rural Shaanxi people as a window into a past they identified with, nowadays many of this area's youth are searching for their identity elsewhere. The old generation managed to hold on to traditions like shadow play, as they toiled through the radical ideological shifts of the '60s, because this rejection of China's history threatened to tear them from a past that many of them held dear. China's current, lightning-fast modernization threatens to do the same. The difference is that young people today grow up in a system that encourages them to look to the future, not toward the past, for their sense of identity. Though young people find traditional arts like shadow play interesting and recognize it as culturally “theirs,” they do not identify with this heritage in the same way their parents and



grandparents do.

The artists are faced with daunting challenges regarding shadow theater's survival in a new China. Although places like Lu Yuan are benefiting locally from the development happening in nearby urban areas, with improvements such as paved roads and electric pumps for the village well, progress is slow and the magnetic pull toward urban centers with new education, higher pay and heightened living standards is too much to ignore. Because of this there are few young people in the villages to learn the old ways. And those that do remain aren't interested because the diminishing audience for shadow puppet theater in these rural areas shows them there is no hope of making a living as a shadow player in the future.

Entrepreneurs in nearby cities have made some early efforts to remedy this situation. Some have opened schools or performance venues in cities and tourist areas hoping to revive interest in the art. But thus far these efforts have done little more than pay artists a salary to live away from their homes, putting them out of touch and unable to perform their traditional role in village society. These organizations hiring the artists to perform 30-minute plays for groups of tourists raise the troupe's performance fees to meet the demands of their budget and an

urban economy. Because of this villagers can no longer afford to hire the troupes to return for local funerals and celebrations. Isolating the artists outside of their native environment like this is a shortcut to the hermitically sealed museum case.

Mr. Wang, one of the old shadow players in my documentary, and at the time one of a mere handful of storytellers remaining in the Lu Yuan area, died while we were editing the film. Unfortunately, he had no students to inherit his knowledge and skills and his lute hangs on the wall of a small museum in a nearby city. Mr. Wang's story is not unusual. It is the norm. And artists who are still able to perform are now selling their instruments and puppets to pay for expenses such as the education of their children and grandchildren. Even China's greatest folk artists see the material value of their tools as greater than the artistic value of their knowledge and performances.

If I want to visit Mr. Lu the storyteller, I don't go to Lu Yuan anymore. He has left his village and gone to work for his family's future. He and his friends all agree they'd return home for half what they are earning now, but no one is offering a better option.

It is the living performance of traditional plays known only by rural farmer-artists such as those living in Lu Yuan that keep the shadows of China's past alive. The future of this art in the countryside where it was born and nourished for so many centuries is uncertain at best. Is China going to wake up in twenty years to find merely dusty scripts, lifeless puppets and rusty lute strings? What kind of a present can we hope for without firm roots uniting us with the past? Shadow play is the inexhaustible storehouse of the story, history and myth upon which these people have for centuries built their identity and their way of life. Emperor Wudi's long-



ing may have been his own, but that for which he yearned is something shared by all of humanity. Can we turn our backs on the Lady Li's of our history and head out, alone, into the future?



1 Among historical references to Chinese shadow puppetry, the Persian historian Rashidid mentions it being played in Persia by Genghis Khan's troops. A French missionary who returned from China in 1767 introduced Chinese shadow theater to France, and it soon spread to England. In 1774, the poet Goethe introduced it at an exhibition in Germany, later organizing a special presentation to entertain the German imperial court.  
<http://library.thinkquest.org/05aug/01780/performing-arts/shadow-theater/index.htm>

2 See Flash presentation: <http://artsedge.kennedy-center.org/shadowpuppets/>

COURTESY OF THE YANG FEI COLLECTION



TED BURGER has been living in the People's Republic of China for over seven years, working as a translator, filmmaker, cultural-exchange project coordinator and musician. Originally drawn to China as a student of Buddhism, he found his teacher, Master Guangkuan, in the Zhongnan Mountains in the winter of 1999. He completed his first documentary, *Amongst White Clouds*, about Zhongnan Mountain hermits in 2005 (see featured interview on KJ website; movie available on DVD through COSMOS Pictures). The Shaanxi Shadow Theater tradition was the subject of his second film, *A Life in Shadows*. See [www.commonfolkchina.com](http://www.commonfolkchina.com) for full bio, more photos, links to his film websites and more.