

Fieldwork Methods: Performing Arts

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Fieldwork Methods: Performing Arts

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1. Introduction

My field of specialization is classical Chinese literature, and I did considerable research on *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, a novel written in the Ming Dynasty, and its various editions. Then, in order to discover more about how *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* was created and how it was enjoyed in China, I became interested in plays and dramatic performances based on stories relating to the Three Kingdoms period of history which feature in the novel. While living and studying in China, I ended up conducting research all over the country.

When I was a student, my supervisor was Issei Tanaka, the first Japanese scholar of Chinese theatre to produce significant research findings from introducing full-scale fieldwork into his work; he travelled to Hong Kong any number of times to better understand the origins of Chinese theatre and the processes of its development. My work does not compare to his, in terms of its precision and its scale, but nevertheless I would like to introduce my experiences in conducting research on China's performing arts.



Photo 1

Guan Suo Play on the theme of Guan Suo, a lesser known hero of the Three Kingdoms. (Xiaotun Village, Chengjiang County, Yunnan province)

2. About Chinese performing arts

“Traditional performing arts” is a familiar term in Japan, but the Chinese do not have a similarly all-encompassing term; instead of “arts” (*geinō*), which includes theatre, music and dance, and theatrical performances, the Chinese terms refer to the performing arts by genre: *qūyì* (theatrical performance), *xijù* (theatre), and so on.

The Chinese performing arts environment also differs considerably between urban and rural areas.

Theatres and performing arts centers were built in urban areas to provide entertainment to citizens starting from around the Song Dynasty (960-1279). Today, still, city-level urban areas will have large theatres. Unfortunately, however, many theatres have been converted into cinemas, but some will still occasionally host plays and theatrical performances.

Theatre in Chinese rural areas, however, is said by some to have developed from ritual ceremonies¹, which is why much of the theatre and theatrical performance that remains today in the market towns known as *xiāngzhèn qǐyè* (township and village enterprises) and in villages are linked to shamanistic rituals. This theatre is performed on stages (known as *xítái*) set up within temples, on tempo-



Photo 2

Yueju opera from Zhejiang province, performed on a stage in the middle of a temple for Chinese New Year (Jiangmao temple, Dancheng town, Xiangshan county, Zhejiang province)

rary stages, in town squares, community centers and even in people's homes. The subject of my research is the theatre and theatrical performance of agricultural villages.

It is not the case that the same play or theatrical performance is performed at the same place every day. Grand productions are only performed at temple festivals and seasonal festivals such as Chinese New Year. In such instances, local society leaders will found a performance group. Professional theatre troupes, such as the *yuèjù* opera troupe of Zhejiang province, have around 40 members including musicians and demand payment of the equivalent of 100,000 Japanese yen for each day of performance; this is too great a burden for any individual.

Performances sometimes accompany personal events, such as funerals, weddings and family birthdays. Wealthy families may invite a theatre troupe to perform in their village to celebrate, for example, the longevity of their parents. Normally, however, when performances are arranged for private events, the organizer will invite a small theatrical troupe to undertake theatrical performance. In addition to theatrical performance to entertain the ancestral spirits, the performers may also conduct some ritual ceremonies.

3. What is being performed, where and when: the role of preliminary research

The biggest problem in fieldwork is determining when to go where, in order to see what.

For those regions for which ethnological surveys have already been conducted, the reports of those surveys may be used as a reference, making preliminary research somewhat easier. Where such reports are not available, however, it is first necessary to refer to local papers and newspapers in order to determine what folk culture exists in which region and what festivals are performed when, and to establish what types of theatrical performance are performed by which troupes, and the names of any performers.

It is extremely hard for outsiders, in particular for non-Chinese outsiders, to have any awareness of those smaller plays and theatrical performances that are conducted in private residences. It is advisable, therefore, to establish a friendly relationship with a local researcher, who will be able to inform you of such performances in advance.

The most reliable approach is to make direct contact with troupe directors and performers, and have them inform you of their work schedule. For example, in the past I have stayed at the home of a performer whom I had come to know well, while accompanying him to the theatrical performances conducted at funerals, memorial services, significant birthdays, and other occasions in order to study those performances. The idea of theatrical performances at funerals and memorial services may seem strange, but in China they are performed in order to comfort the departed souls of the ancestors.

4. So, to China

Once the region for fieldwork has been identified, the next step is working out how to get there. A number of different approaches can be seen.

In my case, I followed the example set by my teacher, Dr. Tanaka, and tend to go alone, using local public transport such as buses as much as possible to reach the destination. Taxis can be ridden for a very reasonable fare in China, and it is appropriate to count them as a means of public transport; I sometimes use them when the distance to be travelled is not too far. Conversations with the driver about his home village can lead to the acquisition of unexpected information, and they will sometimes even offer to help at the fieldwork location.

Once you reach your location, you must then find the place where the performance will be held. When the infor-



Photo 3

Chaozhou-ju opera, regional theatre from Guangdong province, characterized by intense action (Chai Tin Tai Shing temple, Sau Mau Ping, Hong Kong)

mation obtained in advance is unreliable, it is not unheard of to reach the location only to be told that the performers have left the village for another job and will not be back for some time. To prevent this being a waste of time, you need to switch mindsets, and instead use the time to research the village temple or *xítái*.

In those lucky cases where plays or theatrical performances are indeed due to be performed, the first step for any researcher who has travelled alone to the location without any prior connection to the area or troupe is to introduce yourself to the (person who seems most likely to be the) organizer, explain the purpose of your trip, and ask for permission to study the performance. Previously, there were multiple areas in China that were closed to foreigners, making it difficult to obtain permission to conduct research. In the past ten years, however, I have thankfully never once been denied permission. In addition to speaking with the organizer to obtain crucial information about the purpose of the performance, it is also advisable to conduct interviews with members of the troupe and performers, and to make as many audio and visual recordings as possible.

5. What to do at the destination, which parts of the performance to pay attention to

Once the performance has started, as the researcher you will find yourself very busy if you are working alone: filming the performance, taking photographs of significant moments in the performance, taking notes, and so on.

Recording the performance on video is crucial for research. It allows you to watch the performance again should you, for example, get confused about the running order. It also allows you to go over any terms you were not able to understand with a native speaker.

The performance environment is often closely linked to the content of the performance. Where the performance is accompanied by rituals, you must take detailed notes of the procedures of each ritual and take photographs where possible of any inscriptions in the temple or edicts used in the ceremonial rituals. It is also important to make a note of the layout of the location of the performance and to identify the location using GPS.

I have found, however, the most important resource

to be written versions—scripts—of the theatrical performance.

Live performances contain a very large amount of information in many forms. One theory holds that the amount of information per second of video footage is up to 50,000 times that of written material²; it is basically impossible to properly process all of the visual and audio information contained in video footage. Note should be made of many factors: the music, the gestures, the dance, the rituals, the costumes, the makeup. However, as a foreign researcher who is not a native speaker of Chinese, I feel that approaching the performance from the written script, where I can gain some understanding if I spend enough time, is the most fitting method for me.

In some cases, performers will memorize scripts completely and do not own written versions. In many genres of Chinese theater, however, performers tend to own scripts. Some religious performances, known as *xuānjuàn*, even involve performers reciting from scrolls in front of the audience. Some troupes will use equipment to project subtitles during performances, meaning they have digital versions of scripts.

Of course, for some performers these scripts are secret texts, so it is important to explain the reasons for wishing to acquire copies and to be persistent. I will never forget how overcome with emotion I was when they finally agreed to show me these texts.



Photo 4
Shaoxing xuanjuan at a memorial service held 35 days after death (Xiayu village, Fuquan town, Shaoxing county, Zhejiang province)

6. And finally: what can be learned from fieldwork and from the performing arts

What I am about to say may sound like a contradiction to my earlier statement that the researcher should seek out written materials such as scripts at the fieldwork destination, but one of the highlights of fieldwork is when something that you had not been quite able to picture by reading texts alone suddenly becomes clear, as if having a revelation (although that may be just an illusion).

At the same time, there are those things that can be missed when watching a performance, or were not understood at the time; having access to written materials upon return from fieldwork means that these problems can be resolved. Ultimately, literature review and fieldwork together are inseparable and vital approaches in the study of Chinese literature, and relying upon one more than the other will mean you are unlikely to reach your goal.

Looked at historically, it is clear that the performing arts have influenced the traditional poetry and novels that occupy the highest rung of China's cultural order. Despite this, aside from a select few, they have been considered as low culture and as such not appropriate targets for research. For now, careful and deliberate case study-based research is required in order to separate out China's performing arts into micro-categories; this will allow us to build up a picture of performing arts in their entirety. This will allow, in due course, studies on the performing arts to revitalize research in Chinese literature. I think that this is the real purpose of fieldwork.

Notes

- 1 Tanaka, Issei. Research on Chinese Ritual Drama (*Chugoku saishi engeki kenkyū*). University of Tokyo Press, August 1981.
- 2 Fukushima, Satoshi. The Food of Life: The World as Opened by Braille (*Kotoba wa inochi no kate: yubitenji ga hiraku sekai*). (Special Edition: Barrier Free Language—Towards the Resolution of the Information Divide (*Tokushū kotoba no baria furī jōhō debaido no kaishō wo mezashite*)). *Language*, Vol. 35, No. 7, Taishūkan Publishing, July 2006. pp.20-25.