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The Heritage of Wang Piying Troupe: Shadow Puppetry in North Sichuan

Tang Rui

Wang Piying (Wang Shadow Puppet Troupe) has a long history. It manifests both the essence of Shaanxi shadow play and traditional old style North Sichuan shadow puppetry which uses chuanju (Sichuan opera) character types, staging, and music. The troupe maintains this Chinese intangible cultural heritage genre with exquisite puppets and rich narratives. Through the efforts of several generations of artists, this family company has achieved a balance between art and commerce, becoming known domestically and internationally.

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Introduction

Chinese shadow play (*piyingxi*)¹ is an important genre, rooted in the cultural needs and spiritual beliefs of the people and it has been documented for two thousand years. It is found in most regions of China. Professor Jiang Yuxiang notes: “In modern China the shadow play is divided into two styles, northern and southern. The shadow play of Luanzhou [north China] is representative of northern style and Sichuan [southwest China] can be seen as the leader in southern style” (Jiang 1992: 267). Sichuan province itself has two major styles:

Chuanbei (North Sichuan) *piyingxi* and Chengdu (capital of Sichuan) *piyingxi*. Wang is the surname of an important troupe of puppeteers in Chuanbei, called Wang's Shadow Puppet Troupe (Wang Piyong).

This article will discuss Chuanbei shadow puppetry: a genre that shares features with *chuanju* (Sichuan opera). I will discuss the figures with vivid costume patterns, the manipulation technique, the repertoire, and functions of the form, detailing the history of the important Wang Piyong Troupe, with focus on the fifth-generation master Wang Wenkun (1923–1999) and his seventh-generation successor Wang Biao (b. 1964). From the Republic of China Period (1912–1949) to the twenty-first century, Wang Piyong Troupe has now survived over a century of ups and downs, including the impact of modern entertainment media. This troupe's experience can represent in microcosm Chinese shadow puppetry's development in Sichuan and beyond. The survival of a family troupe depends on both the given artists' virtuosity and the national political and economic environment. Current Chinese government protection of and economic support for this folk art has allowed for development of this folk troupe.

North Sichuan *Piyingxi*: Figures, Manipulation, Repertoire, and Function

North Sichuan includes cities such as Guangyuan, Bazhong, and Nanchong. Shadow play of North Sichuan is also known as *chuanbei shan dengying* (North Sichuan Shaanxi lamp shadows) or *chuanbei Weinan yingxi* (North Sichuan's Weinan-style shadow play). Weinan is city in Shaanxi province from whence the genre was introduced to Sichuan in the Qianlong reign (1735–1796) during the Qing Dynasty. Shadow plays with exquisite figures and unique features developed in rural areas as artists from other regions came or influenced locals. For the purposes of this paper, I identify three styles: *tu piying* (original local style with rough carving and few props), *Weinan piying* (Shaanxi style), and finally Wang *piying* (Wang Shadow Puppet Troupe style).

The rich repertoire was mostly comprised of traditional stories: *Investiture of the Gods* (*Fengshen Yanyi*), *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio* (*Liaozhai Zhiyi*), *Journey to the West* (*Xiyou Ji*), *Record of Three Kingdoms* (*Sanguo Zhi*), and *Outlaws of the Marsh* (*Shuihu Zhuan*). Many stories as well as musical tunes were and are shared with *chuanju*, the local opera, but some troupes and tunes are also borrowed from Taoist-, Buddhist-, and folk music repertoires. Performances are accompanied by drums, gongs, cymbals, *erhu* (two-stringed bowed instrument), and *suona* (reed woodwind).

Puppeteers in North Sichuan are usually called *lanmenjiang* (manipulator) and, like the *dalang* of Indonesia, performers can

control one or more figures at the same time as they sing or speak. The figure is danced via its three control rods and sometimes strings are connected to joints for further movement. Figures can shake their heads, pull or drag something, sit, walk, and kick. Slight movements—the soft touch of a beard or hat—can bring a character vividly to life. Puppeteers use elaborate scenery pieces, such as a palace, temple, or fairy kingdom. Puppets figures also execute *chuanju*'s distinctive *tuhuo* (spitting fire from the mouth) and *bianlian* (face-changing technique, where a mask is stripped off to reveal another mask/face below).

Chinese celebrations—weddings, passing exams, births, birthdays, and solicitations for rain—traditionally required festivities. Shadow puppetry helped mark these events for common people. Before modern entertainments, shadow puppetry regularly enriched leisure time. At the same time, performances had a ritual function, connecting people with deities: plays could thank the gods, fulfill a vow, or ward off personal or community disaster. Additionally, plays had a strong role in educating and communicating traditional morals. Most troupes were hired by a local landlord and performed plays appropriate to the occasion.

However, puppeteers and actors had very low status. Many puppeteers were farmers, who only performed in their leisure time. Chinese Confucian thought valued high education. Puppeteers, who entertained the commoners and created 'fun', were from an elite perspective, engaged in an ignoble occupation, and represented the dregs of society. Puppetry families were generally banned from participating in the imperial examination and, therefore, could never become officials to wield political power. Puppeteers were not permitted to create family graves or to engage in elite ancestral rites.

For these commoner performers, religious practice was ecumenical and pragmatic. Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism were each regarded as important, and people could take what they needed from each. Shadow plays might, therefore draw on these religious sources, but the puppetry itself was staged more for entertainment than for spiritual reasons: this, of course, contrasts with genres like Java's *wayang kulit* (shadow puppetry) where plays like the *ruwatan* ("making safe") may exorcize, or forms like India's *tolpava kutthu* (shadow play) of Kerala which were presented at temples for the Goddess.

By the 1980s, most remaining shadows figures in Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan, were already stored away in museum collections. However, in North Sichuan a few farmer troupes with talented performers were still active. Wang Wenkun of Langzhong City, who will be discussed further, led the Wang Piyong Troupe and He Zhengtong of

Nanbu County spearheaded He Piyong Troupe.² According to 1951 statistics of the North Sichuan Shadow Play, Puppetry, and Zoetrope Workers Conference, thirty-six counties of North Sichuan included 145 shadow troupes, but by 1987 only sixty-nine troupes had survived the destruction of the Cultural Revolution ([Sichuansheng Nanchong Diqu 1989](#): 7). By 2017 only two groups were active: one led by Wang Biao (grandson of Wang Wenkun) and the other by He Huaping (son of He Zhengtong). The state professional theatre does some traditional pieces, but operates quite differently.³

Shadow Play in the early PRC (1950–1966), Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), and Post Cultural Revolution (1976–1990)

Shadow play flourished, especially during the Song (960–1279) and Qing Dynasty (1636–1912), but declined during the Republic of China Period (1912–1949) when economic depression, the Japanese invasion, and civil war created harsh conditions. Few puppeteers could live from their art, and puppetry became confined to the remote countryside. After the establishment of People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, the government showed concern for the folk arts. In 1951, many professional or semi-professional puppet troupes were set up throughout the country. The state-owned shadow theatres were quickly established and hired professional actors with the local government financing the groups—for example, the Shadow Play Troupe of Hunan Province (1949), Tangshan Shadow Troupe of Hebei Province (1952), and Shaanxi Province Puppetry Troupe (1960). In the same period, family troupes such as Lu Troupe of Beijing and Wang Troupe of North Sichuan also revived. In April 1955 the Culture Ministry reported 900 professional or semi-professional troupes with 5,300 artists ([Liu 1955](#)). Many farmers additionally did shadow performances as a hobby. For example, Tengchong County of Yunnan Province had seventy-three amateur shadow troupes in the early 1960s.

The local culture offices arranged training in shadow theatre, helped artists modify their as needed to fit government guidelines, and helped artists innovate. In the 1950s, the government banned traditional repertoire with “feudal” or “superstitious” plots such as *Mulian Saves his Mother*, a story associated with the Buddhist belief of releasing souls of the dead from hell or “erotic” stories of scholar-beauty love affairs. Old works were reinterpreted through contemporary Marxist ideology. For example Tangshan Shadow Troupe adapted twenty-seven stories including *White Snake*, *Chang'e Escapes to the Moon*, *Flaming Mountain*, and *Nezha Conquers the Dragon King*. In *White Snake*, for example, self-choice in marriage partner and empowering women were

emphasized, while the Buddhist monk, who thwarts White Snake's quest to retrieve her husband from the monastery, was denigrated as the antagonist. By 1955, new shadow shows were popular. For example, *White-Haired Girl* (based on the 1945 *xiqu* with music by Yan Jinxuan and libretto by He Jingzhi and Ding Yi) was a tale of a peasant girl brutalized by landlords and saved by the Red Army; *Marriage of Xiao Erhei*, based on Zhao Shuli's novel, presented the eponymous peasant who overcomes resistance from his beloved's family to marry her; and *Hongxing Agricultural Production Cooperative* promoted the farm collective movement. Such pieces were played all over the country. These stories were intended to educate and inspire the masses and encourage them to work harder.

The Culture Ministry held the First Puppetry and Shadow Play Observation Festival from 1–22 April 1955 in Beijing. Twelve provinces were represented by fifty-five shows (including eighteen shadow plays) presented by 230 performers from thirty-one troupes (Zhu 1955: 6). An exhibition included puppets old and new with exquisite carving. Literary and art workers, as well as general audiences, flocked to the performances, which contributed to the further development of shadow play and puppetry. A second festival was held from 22–29 January 1960 in Beijing with ten provinces, fifty shows, twelve professional troupes, and three hundred performers were included. Thus, shadow puppetry in the early PRC was meant to create a new image of and for the masses, to promote modern thinking, and to disseminate national policy.

But, during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) shadow puppetry suffered. The repertoire (which still often featured emperors and generals, scholars and beauties, immortals and fairies) was banned. Traditional puppets and scripts were destroyed. Many groups disbanded as artists were sent down to the country to do agricultural labor (Wei 2007: 493). Tangshan City Shadow Troupe managed to remain active, but performed only *yangbanxi* (eight model revolutionary operas, works such as *Red Lantern* and *White-Haired Girl*).

When the Cultural Revolution ended in October 1976, shadow play and puppetry troupes revived; especially after The Third Plenary Session of the Eleventh Central Committee was held by the Communist Party of China (CCP) (December 1978). By 1980, fifteen professional troupes and a large number of amateur troupes existed, with one hundred thousand active shadow-, glove-, or rod-puppeteers. The China Puppetry and Shadow Arts Association was established in Beijing (29 December 1980), and the Culture Ministry held art forums, competitions, exhibitions, Children's Theatre Week events, and supported overseas exchanges of puppet performance.

Establishment of Wang Shadow Troupe (Wang Wenkun Period, 1930s–1999)

As noted previously, Wang Piyong or Wang Dengying is a noted family troupe in Baotai Country of Langzhong. The group dates from 1666 during Kangxi period (1661–1722) of the Qing Dynasty and founded by Wang Jialu. Puppeteer Wang Wenkun (1923–1999) was the fifth-generation in this family performing North Sichuan shadows using folk sources and *chuanju* style singing and percussion. He manipulated figures with quick-paced movement and cultivated distinct Sichuan regional characteristics. This made his performance much loved by the local audiences.

His figures referenced costume designs of *chuanju*, displaying the same complicated patterns and gorgeous colors. His beautifully-carved figures were elegant in appearance, vivid in color, yet flexible. This gave the puppets a three-dimensionality when they moved. Characters' heads were oval and fine beards and mustaches graced the males. A head and cap might be either carved as one piece or two so the hat could be attached. The bodies of literati and warriors exhibited clear lines and yet complicated patterns (Fig. 1). Head, body, and legs were rather proportional to the human body and therefore more graceful than Shaanxi style puppets, which, with their foreshortening—long body and short legs—move more jerkily than these Sichuan figures.

Figures have eleven joints and are manipulated by three bamboo sticks. Characters are about twenty inches tall, bigger than other puppets in North Sichuan; but, due to the separate joints at wrists and arms, movement is fluid: characters even pick up objects with ease. The main stick for a warrior is on the back of his neck, while a scholar's main rod attaches a little below the buttons on the chest. Similarly to Weinan-style puppetry, Wang's was a solo show: one puppeteer manipulated all the figures and did all the singing, in contrast to forms where one to three puppeteers manipulated figures while still other artists sing. Those multi-person versions were and are, of course, more expensive.

Wang Wenkun began studying woodcarving and shadow puppetry with his grandfather Wang Renhe in 1930 when Wenkun was seven (Wei 2007: 469). Next, he studied singing, percussion, and manipulating with his father Wang Yuanshun. Wenkun proved clever, even if he sometimes broke the rules and practiced his carving late at night. His cutting technique was influenced by Shaanxi and Luanzhou styles, but was further developed. Figures became exquisite as he hollowed out the patterns with his high-level skill. In 1942, Wang Wenkun established his own troupe, touring rural North Sichuan. The

FIGURE 1. The design of Wang Piyong figures was distinctive. General Guan Yu usually had a red face and rode a red horse. (Photo: Tang Rui)

audience noted the difference from the smaller Chengdu and Weinan figures, which looked comparatively slight on the screen. Although Wenkun had begun from older and Shaanxi style figures, he made his characters twice as large. His unique figures created a sensation in the surrounding area. He joined the Opera Artists Association of Nanchong City in 1951 and the Public Cultural Art Center of Sichuan Province in 1958. But with the Cultural Revolution, he returned to farming.

Wang Wenkun was not only a master of shadow play but also skilled in making paper cuts. In 1933, Wenkun's father, stopped shadow puppetry for three years: due to the disruption caused by Chinese civil war fighting between the CCP and Kuomintang, no one was hiring performances. So Wenkun in this period developed his skill in paper cutting under his father's guidance. Thus Wenkun became noted for this art as well: his paper cuts were displayed at the Sichuan Folk Art Museum in 1958 and at the Sichuan Art Museum in 1959.

Once the Cultural Revolution ended, the early 1980s were a boom time for shadow theatre. Electricity was rare in rural areas, so a

shadow show at night was a great draw. Wang Wenkun made significant innovations integrating both *chuanju* and folk song music in his show. He manipulated figures at the same time that he sang the lyrics, accompanied by gongs, *erhu*, and *suona*. His superior skills in manipulation and music were apparent, and his humor with great use of dialect made audiences laugh. His paper cutting was likewise praised. In 1980, his cuttings were included in the National Art Exhibition and collected by the Chinese Folk Art Gallery. During the 1990 Beijing Asian Games, China Central Television screened *Shadow Art Master Wang Wenkun* during prime time.

As the PRC created cultural relations with Europe, Wang's work became known there. In 1986, Gerd Kaminski, vice chairman of Austrian and China Friendship Association collected a Sun Wukong (Monkey King) figure that Wengkun carved (now in the collection of a Vienna museum). Next Kaminski arranged for a week of performances by four members of the Wang Piyong Troupe in Vienna (June 1988), presenting *Yin-yang Fan* (*Yinyang Shan*), *Shining Mirror* (*Suoluo Jing*), *Saving Mother at Peach Mountain* (*Po Taoshan*), and *Surrendering Golden Dragon* (*Shou Jinlong*) (*Sichuansheng Nanchong Diqu* 1989: 14). But despite this international success, when Wang Wenkun died on 6 November 1999, he had not fully shared his shadow skills with a designated successor.

Revival of Wang Piyong (Wang Biao Period, 2002–)

Wang Wenkun's grandson Wang Biao (b. 1964) started to learn manipulation when he was eleven and often performed with his grandfather when he was still a child. Wenkun hired a *chuanju* master to teach Biao music and singing. But as TV and films became available performances grew infrequent. Wang Biao moved to Guangdong province and beyond to work, and his participation in shadow theatre lapsed.

In 2002, shadow collector Zhao Shutong (Professor of Chinese Academy of Fine Arts and Vice President of the Chinese Shadow Museum) arranged support for Wang Biao and his younger brother Fang to leave other employment and organize a troupe that performs regularly for tourists in Shunxin, an old Chengdu Teahouse. Wang Biao has different plays to suit different customers. He does traditional shows for foreign tourists, modern shows for young people, and specially designed children's shows for young audiences. Wang Piyong Troupe revived slowly after the hiatus of some years. The troupe also began to do short performance tours to Beijing, Hangzhou, and other places.

Wang Biao registered Sichuan Wang Piyong Troupe in his hometown Langzhong for commercial performances in 2004. The

city—due to its old buildings, and historical importance—draws a significant number of tourists. Biao rented a space in the center of the old town, performing shadow play in both classical and modern styles and carved figures in his spare time. Biao added modern music to performances and new fashion elements to his designs, which proved popular with younger audiences. His contemporary shows *Fire Drill* and *Disco* have inaugurated a new era for the group. In early 2007, Wang Piyong became a member of the Union Internationale de la Marionnette (International Puppetry Association, UNIMA). In January 2009, Wang Fang presented *Disco* in Los Angeles and San Francisco for a Chinese Cultural event and Spring Festival Carnival. For the twenty-first International Puppets and Shadow Play Festival held in Chengdu on 27 May 2012, he made twelve-foot figures of the *Three Kingdom* heroes—Liu Bei, Guan Yu, and Zhang Fei. For this performance the figures and manipulators used no screen, but appeared together on the stage in *Oath of the Peach Garden* (*Taoyuan Jieyi*), a play where these three iconic Chinese heroes swear brotherhood.

In 2010, Wang Piyong participated in Shanghai World Expo for forty-five days presenting *Yang Jian Saves his Mother* (*Yan Jian jiumu*), *Journey to the West* (*Xiyouji*), and *Luo Cheng's Marriage* (*Luo Cheng zhaoqing*) for domestic and foreign audiences. General Director of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Irina Bokova viewed the shows and stated Wang Piyong Troupe represented *piyingxi* admirably. Soon thereafter *piyingxi* was officially inscribed as a UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage genre in 2011.

Inheritance of Wang Piyong

In 2008, Wang Piyong was chosen to become one of the second batch of national intangible cultural heritage projects. Wang Biao and Wang Fang were identified as seventh-generations successors of their family's troupe. As part of this project Wang Biao recruited twenty-two students and, breaking with tradition, taught the skills to outsiders, even females. At this time, having no government grant, he used his own money, paying everyone one hundred dollars every month and providing room and board. Students studied with high interest at first, but then left, one by one, perhaps finding it too difficult. Wang Biao, when I interviewed him in 2017, said he cried for a half hour hidden behind the shadow screen when the last student left. To whom would he be able to bequeath the shadow play? But Wang Biao persisted despite having wasted \$16,100 and suffered a blow to self-esteem.

A second training class of Wang Piyong began in November 2011 with six college students (three male and three female). Biao recruited

only students who he sensed deeply loved shadow play. He cultivated the group's interests in the early part of the training, then slowly guided them. This time he paid no one, but just signed a contract with each student, guaranteeing a job in the troupe if the student persisted in the study. Several young female apprentices also trained part-time in musical accompaniment, rather than just performing as manipulators. This contract-training pattern brought success. Wang Piyong Troupe as of 2017 has more than twenty members performing several hundred shows a year. Wang Biao has combined traditional shadow puppetry and Langzhong's tourism power. He has registered his own travel service trademark, set up a performing team, a product design and development team, a shadow puppet carving team, and a specialized marketing team—all of which operate within the troupe. He works assiduously to promote Wang Piyong to the world.

Wang Xiaobin (b. 1986), the son of Wang Biao, was one among Biao's many apprentices. He seemed to grasp his father's teaching more quickly than others, perhaps due to having grown up around the performance. Xiaobin has now been performing shadow puppetry for nearly ten years, understands all aspects of performance, and takes a strong leadership role, especially as the drummer, a central role in directing the show. In 2010, Wang Xiaobin with his father and his uncle organized Wang Wenkun Troupe of North Sichuan Shadow Play, and won the Golden Lion Cup Award at Changsha—the highest award in Chinese puppetry—as well as the Inheritance and Development Award and Outstanding Performance Award, given jointly by Chinese Puppetry and Shadow Play Art Association and International Puppetry Federation Chinese branch. In 2012, Xiaobin with his father performed in Europe for the first time and Xiaobin was impressed that foreign audiences responded shadow play, giving him additional incentive to continue. Wang Xiaobin's own son is now often found backstage, watching both his father and grandfather perform.

In 2012, while Wang Piyong was on tour in Europe, Wang Biao met the French playwright-director of L'Equipee Drama Troupe Gibel Cai and they decided to co-create a play *The Disappearing Shadows*, to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of diplomatic relations between the PRC and France in 2014.⁴ *The Disappearing Shadows* tells of a Chinese shadow puppeteer family of six generations in Langzhong that encounters difficulties in passing on the art. A prerecorded shadow show was projected onto the screen, sound and lights change as live performance and video alternate on the stage. The large-scale projections meant the shadow play, which in the past was suitable for just twenty or thirty people to watch, could be performed for thousands in a large theatre. Strong visual impact of modern media

combined with ancient shadow play. Wang Biao cooperated with this French director and actors for the sake of international exchange, in hopes that Wang Piyong can become more widely known. The group's first show was in Langzhong (4 June 2014), then toured to Kunming in Yunnan Province, followed by twenty-five shows in twenty Chinese cities, and a ten-month tour of 200 shows in Holland, Luxemburg, Italy, the Vatican, and other European sites. The tour garnered \$160,000: the economic clout and international travel have attracted many young people in the Wang family to study the art, including those who had no interest previously.

An Interview with Wang Biao

I and my husband, Sun Bao, met Wang Biao in his restaurant at the center of Langzhong old town of Sichuan Province on 1 January 2017. Because normal performance income is insufficient for expenses of the troupe, Wang Biao runs a restaurant. His performing studio is next to the restaurant, so guests can watch a show for free if they pay for a meal. The stable revenue from the restaurant supports the troupe.

TANG RUI: How is the present situation of Wang Piyong Troupe? Is there fixed invitation for [national or international] performance every year?

FIGURE 2. The author interviewed Wang Biao (left) and Wang Fang (right). (Photo: Sun Bao)

WANG BIAO: Our present situation is much better than in previous years. The troupe has enrolled four batches students, more than twenty students now perform regularly, including my son, grandson, and my younger brother Wang Fang's children. The authorities pay more attention to shadow heritage, and send us abroad to perform four times every year—this expanding international opportunity is organized by the Publicity Department of the Communist Party of China. The local government has also actively cooperated with our construction of Wang Piyong Folk Culture Courtyard of North Sichuan in the old town. Our culture courtyard will include shadow plays, puppetry, embroidery, paper cutting, woodcarving and other intangible cultural heritage arts. Two antique courtyards are being developed to become Wang Piyong's home for production, exhibition, training, and performing, and it will also be the location of Wang Piyong Folk Culture Dissemination Limited Company. The construction formally began in May 2014 and will be completed in September 2017. Our folk courtyard received grants from the Macao Foundation. It covers 2600 square meters, and we have invested more than \$60,000 dollars. The site will become a shadow play training base of China International Wang Piyong Center of UNIMA. While focusing on the preparation of the new stage here, we have no time to do long [international] touring as commercial performances.

TANG RUI: Are there any folk rituals or taboos relevant to Wang Piyong Troupe?

WANG BIAO: [Traditionally] We would put all the figures and props into shadow box the evening of last day of the year, sacrifice a rooster, and seal the shadow box with its blood, to show gratitude to the gods and ancestors for blessings of safety and surety through the whole year. We wouldn't go out to look for performance opportunities at the beginning of New Year, but had to wait at home for an invitation. For example, if we were invited to perform on first day of first lunar month, we would steamed the rooster we sacrificed at noon to get off the hair and guts, but not yet break open abdomen, keeping its integrity. After steaming, we took out rooster's mandible and divined our wealth prospects for next year: there is a bone spur at the end of mandible that can turn towards the inside or outside. The direction of bone spur towards east or west was lucky, others directions

were unlucky positions, and one would not perform there [in those directions] even if invited.

In addition, we could not drop the figures on the floor when performing outside. Women could not sit above or step over the shadow box, because people believed in the past female bodies were polluting due to their menstrual cycle. If we broke these taboos, it would bring us bad luck, and we had to do another sacrifice at shadow box again. But now, with the development of science and society, these previous female taboos have been broken. Women can now manipulate figures, even during their period. However, in those [old] sacrifice days, they could not sit on or cross over the shadow box.

TANG RUI: Do you have any opinion on the development and future of Wang Piyong Troupe heritage?

WANG BIAO: Now I am fifty-two years old and it has been forty-one years since I started at age eleven learning shadow play from my grandfather. As a farm kid I didn't have a record of formal schooling or deep knowledge. I sum up in one phrase my ideas from many years of performing experience: inherited from ancestors, protecting our history, developing our obligation, and [maintaining] our own right to innovation. This is my aspiration for these many years: to carry forward traditional culture and protect the heritage of Chinese shadow puppetry. As the seventh-generation successor of Wang Piyong, I am committed to passing on Chinese traditional culture. I frequently go to the elementary school (Langzhong National Elementary School), secondary schools, universities (China Academy of Art, Southwest University for Nationalities, and Sichuan University) to teach lessons and perform for the students. Despite the government's current attention, support, and greater social concern, Wang Piyong Troupe is a private company and always needs to be self-sufficient. Hopefully, all levels of government and private art lovers will continue to intensify communication about the various aspects, attracting more people to pay attention to shadow play.

After speaking, Wang Biao led my husband and myself into the shadow show studio. Half of the studio is screen-and-backstage area; the second part accommodates about thirty-five viewers in three rows in front of screen and then four or five round tables for diners watching the show. Wang Biao pulled out figures and props from storage

FIGURE 3. A scene of *Guan Yu Decapitates Cai Yang*. (Photo: Tang Rui)

compartments built into the operating platform behind the screen. In the past a shadow troupe was always on the move between countryside and town, and the portable shadow box, full of puppets, was regarded as the wealth of the puppeteers. Only when Wang Wenkun (Biao's grandfather) could afford a full set of shadow box, was he able to set up his own shadow troupe. Now Wang Biao has turned this fixed performing structure/space into his shadow box.

Wang Biao performed for us fragments of the classical play *Guan Yu Decapitates Cai Yang* (*Guan Yu Zhan Cai Yang*) (Fig. 3) and his new creation *Disco*. I savored the charms of the traditional play and the fashionable elements of the new show. The Guan Yu episode is a famous episode in the novel *Three Kingdoms* and has many fight scenes. Wang Biao separated Cai Yang's head and body very quickly. The vivid interpretation of this scene showed us Wang Biao's special manipulation skills. Because only we with Wang Biao's grandchildren were watching, the two plays lasted for about twenty minutes. Wang Biao did not sing but put on a CD recording. He usually performs for more than six audience members, charging ten dollars per person. If someone makes a block booking, they must pay him \$120 to play thirty or forty minutes. After the performance, Wang Biao routinely sets aside ten minutes for interactive sessions: he invited me come backstage to try out my skills of shadow play in person. Obviously Wang Biao realized that audiences' satisfaction is the most important way to survive. He has broken the traditional taboos that women are not allowed into the back or to touch figures. He no longer clings conservatively to the old system, but adapts to the social development of the present, allowing positive changes for bequeathing Chinese shadow play to the next generation.

Conclusion

Shadow puppetry has had several rises and difficult falls in the last century, but Wang Piyong, a family troupe, has survived through the efforts of its different generations. This has not been easy in the turbulent social changes of the twentieth century PRC. Today, emerging media has overshadowed shadow play: TV, movies, and the Internet. Problems—market reduction, aging puppeteers, lack of innovation, funding—arise. In this difficult situation, Wang Piyong has modified its art from earlier styles especially since the 1980s. For example, Wang Wenkun doubled the figure size and Wang Biao has relied on government support, tourism resources, and international touring to good effect.

Shadow play of north Sichuan has been actively adapting to the market, carrying on reform, innovation, modernization, and internationalization to achieve sustainable development. Wang Piyong has laid a solid foundation for the modern revival of the intangible cultural heritage of *piyingxi*.

NOTES

1. *Pi* means “hide”, *ying*, “shadow”, *xi*, “play/performance” and the form can also be called *dengyingxi* (*deng*, “lamp”). In different regions the form may have different names: Beijing, for example, calls it *lúpiying* (donkey hide shadow play) or *putuan ying* (“cushion” shadow play, since the puppeteer sits on a pillow to perform).

2. He Piyong Troupe (also be called Mawang Piyong) originated in the Yongzheng period (1723–1735) of Qing Dynasty in Mawang Township, Nanbu County, Sichuan. He Yinggui, a Guanyinshan village farmer, founded Xinglong Piyongshe (Booming Shadow Troupe) using rough figures, usually two puppeteers, four musicians, one drummer, and singers. From 1961, He Nansheng, a fifth generation puppeteer in this family, taught his son, He Zhengtong (1946–2008), but usually did realistic stories before and after the traditional costume drama until the Cultural Revolution when the troupe disintegrated. In 1981, He Zhengtong revived the group and, over time, taught his son He Huaping, his daughter-in-law, and nephew. As Sichuan *piyingxi* was inscribed on the national intangible cultural heritage (2008) list, both Wang Piyong and Mawang Piyong were recognized.

3. Among the post 1980 fifteen major national theatres is Chengdu Puppetry and Shadow Art Theatre which derives from Chengdu folk arts and acrobatics improvement association (founded in 1951) and which morphed into the Chengdu Puppetry Troupe in 1957, then merged with other groups in 1959. In 1966, the traditional repertoire was banned and figures burned. After the Cultural Revolution, the troupe was re-established as the Chengdu

Puppetry Troupe (May 1978). Madame Tang Dayu (Vice Chairman of China Center of UNIMA and Vice President of China Puppetry and Shadow Arts Association) was appointed head. She initiated a project to rescue, inherit, and develop Chengdu shadow play. She asked master puppeteer Chen Jiyu (1911–1994) of Chunletu (a famous Chengdu troupe) to teach. In September 1989, Chengdu Puppetry and Shadow Art Theatre was formally approved by Chengdu Municipal People's Government. In 2017 the theatre had seventy artists for hand/rod puppetry and shadow play and was considered the top professional shadow theatre in China, with three hundred performances a year for 300,000 viewers. It does modern shows—like *Flying Apsaras* and *Turtle and Crane*—and children's shows—like *Cat and Mouse*.

4. Gibel Cai is a French-Chinese playwright-director and head of L'Equipee Drama Troupe with much of her work related to Chinese themes. In October 2013, she came to Langzhong. She interviewed people for two weeks, collecting Langzhong legends, and Wang family history. Her script for *The Disappearing Shadows* grew from that research.

GLOSSARY

<i>bianlian</i>	变脸
<i>chengdu piyingxi</i>	成都皮影戏
<i>chuanju</i>	川剧
<i>chuanbei piyingxi</i>	川北皮影戏
<i>chuanbei shan dengying</i>	川北陕灯影
Chunletu	春乐图
He Yinggui	何应贵
Langzhong	阆中
<i>lanmenjiang</i>	拦门将
Luanzhou	滦州
Mawang Piyong	马王皮影
<i>tu piying</i>	土皮影
Wang Biao	王彪
Wang Piyong	王皮影
Wang Wenkun	王文坤
Wang Xiaobin	王晓彬
<i>weinan piying</i>	渭南皮影
Xinglong Piyongshe	兴隆皮影社

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