

## Social Functions of LEPING Ancient Opera Stage

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**Abstract.** Ancient village stage in Leping County is an extinguished architecture type with special art characteristics and functions. Village stage is early built in ancestral hall for worship ancestors by making opera. It has entertainment function for villagers to hold a festival and release themselves. Stage is a place for education and culture inheritance as there are many typical opera scenes which are performed to show moral and values. Social communications between different villages and clans are occurred when making opera long-scenes on the stage. Stage area is also a center for all villagers to acquire information in daily lives. Above all, ancient village stage is the spiritual palace and culture space with regional rural characteristics for villagers.

### 1. Introduction

China Leping County has a reputation of “Home of China Ancient Stage”<sup>[1]</sup>. Leping County has a long history of immigration which traces Tang Dynasty (A.D. 618) when northern people immigrated to the South. Immigration culture makes local people have strong lineages and clans beliefs. Until Ming Dynasty (A.D. 1368), ancestral hall were allowed to be built for the whole family clan. Every village began to build more opera stages with their own special features to worship ancestors. From then on, village stages start a construction history with four more hundreds years. Village stages in Leping County play an important role in culture inheritance and social communication in China rural society.

### 2. Culture Entertainment Function

Ancestral hall stage is the earliest type of stage architecture in Leping County. People built opera stages in ancestral halls, which is aimed at worshiping ancestors by the function of culture entertainment from opera. In the villagers’ opinion, opera can bring enjoyment to themselves and share with ancestors. They expected well-beings brought to their descendants from ancestors.

**2.1 Opera Recreation.** In ancient China, Opera is the main entertainment way for Chinese to release themselves. People all enjoy themselves from emperor to general villagers when watching opera. Even some emperor and nobilities made themselves up and went on the stage to feel, which reflects opera cultural entertainment function directly. Nowadays, though people’s lives change a lot, opera and its spirit still nurtures villagers. They always hum tunes of opera when walking along lane outside, sewing dresses, farming on the land, washing clothes in the river and fertilizing the farm land. When it comes to opera performance, all villagers rush to the stage for watching opera. (Fig. 1 and Fig. 2)



**Fig.1.** Opera performance on ancient village stage.



**Fig.2.** All villagers rushing for attending opera.

Ancient stage has limited space for opera performance. Gan opera often performs full-length scenes, complicated plots and rich characterization. Moreover, opera props are placed as partitions for opera accompaniment people. The performance space on the stage is not spacious enough for actors' action. Therefore, Gan opera has some special performance features. <sup>[2]</sup>

**2.2 Extension Space: Offstage Area is Also Used As Stage for Performance.** During full-length scenes of opera, lots of plots need extension space such as offstage area. Sometimes actors suddenly step on the stage from offstage. Also, take the scenery called "*Stopping Officials for Complain*" as an example, it is usually performed offstage for reaching the sense of presence and impressive. Some other acrobatic stunts are finished offstage, such as a performance named Dabu, actors build two ten more meters long logs in the courtyard offstage not far from stage. It is three to four meters distance between the two logs, and another one log is laid on the top of the two big logs. Two pieces of seven or eight meters long white cloth are just down the ground from top. Actors climb up cloth with their hands and feet, and then they perform some difficult actions after their arriving the top. Even they directly head down and swing with their feet. At last, they release the two piece of cloth and slide down at a high speed. The whole procedure of performance is full of waves of cheers and applauses.

**2.3 Festivals Recreation.** Stage performances are usually accompanied with festivals and stage around is the most popular area. More villagers engage in celebrating festivals and local folk custom activities together with opera performance. People walk in the street for seeking excited and releasing themselves just like Carnival. There are lots of commodity transactions nearby. Villagers bring their hand made and fantastic products for sale. Merchants also join the trades, which is helpful for inconvenient villagers to buy seeds, farm machines and daily necessities. Kinds of folk specialty snacks and toys are sold for children.



**Fig. 4 & Fig. 5** Villagers attending Carnival festival and releasing themselves

All these scenes happen around ancient opera. Opera stage performance and festival activities are mutual influence as an integral prosperity. Stage opera performances attract more villagers around. Carnival festival makes villagers attend activities to release themselves for pursuing happiness. (Fig. 4 & Fig. 5)

### 3 Culture Inheritance Function

**3.1 Moral and Value Education.** Opera is different from poem, literature and other artistic styles. Opera has deep influences and wide spread during various sections of society because it is commonly understood and easily remembered. Every opera story has close relationship with people's own lives. Affections are resonated between actors and audiences when comic and tragic, success and fail, kind and evil experiences are performed. Moral and values are all expressed by opera performance and deeply into human mind. Sometimes they are criteria of judging right and false and standards of behavior which can persuade themselves and others. <sup>[3]</sup>

Opera performance is the main culture recreation activities and important spiritual lives for farmers in rural society. Every village stage is just like a classroom for moral and value education. Series of opera stories are performed including values characters of loyalty-piety-chastity-righteousness and propriety-integrity-honesty-honor for education during China villagers from generation to generation as basic moral behavior norms.

**3.2 Knowledge Spread.** In China traditional society, people seldom had opportunities to receive normal school education. They usually had family education which is different from schooling. Therefore, it is really difficult to cultivate culture knowledge. But at that time, many opera stages were built. People had more chances to attend opera performance which is an efficient way to spread knowledge. Opera stage is a type of architecture integrated with social culture. On the one hand, opera is a popular and folk artistic performance type and it is easily accepted by villagers. Opera stories performed by actors all potentially shows great effects on general education. On the other hand, opera carvings are fully decorated on the stage which shows opera stories. They are all containing abundant information and details about history and culture. Therefore, Opera stage has an obvious function of knowledge and culture spreading.

### 4 Social Communication Function

Opera stage is not only a space for performance but also a communication center for all villagers. Some opera stage has special relations with ancestral hall for worship and village history, which makes stage high reputation as spirit symbol in people's mind. Opera stage is usually built in a spacious center of the village which is convenient for villagers to gather and spend leisure time to communicate each other. <sup>[4]</sup> Usually, it is a playground nearby for children to play on. It is a symbol of the village and some important celebrations of festival are held in stage area. Communications centered opera stage occasionally happen between native villagers and villagers in their

neighborhood when opera is performed on the stage. Villagers expand their relations and communication to other villagers as opera performing. They make extension social communication in the period of opera performance, which makes senses below:

**4.1 Acquiring Information.** Villagers live calmly simple lives as traditional ways. It is difficult to acquire information because of remote location and complicated transportation. When opera performance happens on village stage, people come from different villages nearby all rush for watching opera. And at the same time, many anecdotes, interesting news and policies are brought by villagers to spread from mouth to mouth. The one who knows information a lot is the central figure and has voice privilege. Therefore, villagers are readily to go to stage area to acquire kinds of news. Rural social communication needs information spreading. The one who knows more will have strong adaptive capacities and play a leading position in communication. It is a typical predominate social life centered with opera stage which leads a social function of information acquiring.

**4.2 Transferring Emotions.** Whenever opera is performed, native villagers will invite their relatives in different villages far away to come, attend and celebrate festivals. Some elders married will be picked up back by a special cart. During opera days, villagers are all busy with making delicious food for guests. They entertain less seen relatives with wine and best food, sit together to reminisce together at the feast. Watching opera is rare spiritual enjoyment experiences for villagers and they'd like to take this opportunity to visit relatives and elders. All attribute to stage culture which is centered for people to communicate with others when opera is performed. <sup>[5]</sup>

**4.3 Improving Social Communication Between Different Villages.** One village usually has the same family name in Leping County. They have the same ancestors and ancestral hall. Once some village makes opera, it is proud thing for the whole villagers. It means their families are prosperous and blooming. They always hold solemn ritual of ancestor worship. Also the ancestral tablets are placed out of hall when opera is performed. Other neighborhood village representatives come for congratulations with gifts. <sup>[6]</sup>

## 5 Summary

Village is the unit of China rural society. Different villages all have their own opera stages with clan features as entertainment facilities. All activities are close connections with ancient opera stage, such as periodic season opera performance and folk activities.

Ancient opera stage has the functions of culture entertainment and culture, but also plays an important role in clan communication and information exchange. Ancient opera stage is spiritual palace for villagers, which is always full of native culture and local history. It is another kind of rural public culture space in China today. <sup>[7]</sup>

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