

# A Typical Example of the Survival Pathway of Sichuan Opera

Based on the Field Investigation of Chengdu Yuelai Tea Garden\*

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**Abstract**—The history of Chengdu Yuelai Tea Garden can be dated back to the Laolang Temple during the Qianlong period of Qing Dynasty. Because of the adherence to the Sichuan Opera performance for a long time, it is regarded as a holy land by the theatre fans. At present, Yuelai Tea Garden still regularly performs opera highlights of Sichuan Opera every weekend, which attracts many Sichuan Opera theatre fans, thus continuing to keep the status of "theatre nest". In this practice, Yuelai Tea Garden is taken as the investigation site. Based on the sociological research method, the analysis is given through the survey of performance current situation of Yuelai Tea Garden and the interview of audience and actors of Yuelai Tea Garden to explore the crisis contained in Yuelai Tea Garden's Sichuan Opera and the enlightenment of Yuelai Tea Garden as a public art space for the development pathway of Sichuan Opera in the context of modern urbanization.

**Keywords**—Yuelai Tea Garden; current situation of Sichuan Opera; field investigation; enlightenment on the inheritance of Sichuan Opera

## I. INTRODUCTION

Sichuan Opera, as the largest drama genre in southwest China, is also an important artistic and cultural symbol of Sichuan at the same time, whose unique gong and drum instrumental music, touching vocal accompaniment, and rich local linguistic characteristics have been loved by people for thousands of years. The development of Sichuan Opera's performance site has mainly gone through four stages: Miaotai (Wanniantai), guild hall, tea garden and theatre.<sup>1</sup> Among them, the tea garden is something that goes a long way towards Sichuan Opera. According to the Overview of Chengdu, "there was no theatre before. In the thirty-two years of Guangxu of Qing Dynasty, theatre was founded by Wu Bicheng in Zhikeyuan of Huifu North Street. Because people in Chengdu are interested in watching operas, there are a lot of lookers to theatre after the

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<sup>1</sup> Written by Du Jianhua and Wang Dingou. Sichuan Opera. Zhejiang People's Publishing House. First Edition in September 2008, P. 44.

admission by the government.<sup>2</sup>" Thereafter, Yuelai Tea Garden and Jinjiang Tea Garden etc. began to flourish and became an important site to perform Sichuan Opera, so the development of Sichuan Opera will be accompanied by tea gardens. However, in recent years, there are few tea gardens performing Sichuan Opera, which makes Sichuan Opera lack the stage for survival and performance, thus presenting a trend of gradual decline and disappearance in public life.

Fortunately, Yuelai Tea Garden, an old theatre nest located in Main Huaxing Zheng Street, Jinjiang District, Chengdu City, is still regular to perform traditional opera highlights on Saturdays and Sundays, which provides Sichuan opera artists with a chance to show their skills, supports the artistic blue sky in the hearts of the large number of theatre fans, and brings a glimmer of new vitality and hope to the declining Sichuan Opera. So what is the performance status of Sichuan Opera in Yuelai Tea Garden? What's the current situation of audiences and actors? What is the crisis in Yuelai Tea Garden? What is the value and enlightenment for the inheritance and development of Sichuan Opera? In terms of these problems, the author conducts a special field investigation on Yuelai Tea Garden from the perspective of sociology, and at the same time hopes that Yuelai Tea Garden can be used to provide a glimpse of the current situation of Sichuan Opera in Chengdu.

## II. BRIEF INTRODUCTION OF YUELA TEA GARDEN HISTORY

The history of Yuelai Tea Garden can be dated back to the Laolang Temple during the Qianlong period of Qing Dynasty. In 1908, Zhou Shanpei, the police general officer, carried out the New Deal of "prostitution, plant, singing and site" in which the implementation of "singing" was to transform the Laolang Temple into a "Yuelai Tea Garden" and use it as a model of excellent theatre and new theatre of the performance reform. Among them, the Sanqinghui, which has long been rooted in Yuelai Tea Garden for performance, has inextinguishable contributions to the reform of traditional opera. The Sanqinghui not only

<sup>2</sup> Edited by Fu Chongju. Overview of Chengdu. Chengdu Times Publishing House. First Edition in January 2006, P. 132.

devotes all its efforts to the performance of Sichuan Opera, but also makes every efforts to the theoretical research of Sichuan Opera, which make the art of Sichuan Opera develop rapidly, thus Yuelai Tea Garden is also known as the "theatre nest" of Sichuan. As in the Anecdotes of Bashu Opera Troupe, the Yuelai Tea Garden at that time had the following scenes: "In the tea garden, there is a humming noise and steaming environment, and all like a time of temple fair."<sup>3</sup>

In 1954, Yuelai Tea Garden was completely demolished, Jinjiang Theatre was built here and a new Yuelai Tea House was rebuilt on the side. The new Yuelai Tea House only sells tea and does not perform and all the performances are performed in Jinjiang Theater. The high-pitched gongs and drums of Jinjiang Theater were interrupted for 10 years during the Cultural Revolution. Until 1984, Jinjiang Theater has resumed its previous graceful charm.

And by 1997, the Jinjiang Theater has been demolished due to its increasingly antiquated facilities, and a "Sichuan Opera Art Center" that consists of Jinjiang Theater, Yuelai Tea Garden and a Sichuan Opera Art Museum has been built on its original site, which has been completed at the end of 2001. The newly built Yuelai Tea Garden has retained its original appearance to the greatest extent, and the performance has been restored to this day. The long-lost sound of gongs and drums and the old taste of teahouse have made the old theatre fans more excited.

### III. CURRENT SITUATION OF YUELAI TEA GARDEN PERFORMANCE

#### A. *Insideoverview of the Yuelai Tea Garden*

After entering Yuelai Tea Garden, there is a display board on the left for the repertory, and a plaque of the "old site of Sanqinghui" is standing at the main entrance. The drama stage is still a "Wanniantai" in the style of the ancients with simple stage installation and only one table and two chairs. There are front pool, left pool and right pool under the stage, with the fare being 50 yuan, 40 yuan and 30 yuan respectively. After buying the tickets, the "Gaiwaner" tea set can be got with the ticket. Find a good seat and lift the lid off the teapot, there instantly will be a tea mixer to mix tea. Although the current tea mixers have not the superb tea-making skills of "accurately shooting tea in the tea bowl a meter away with a long mouth copper teapot"<sup>4</sup>, they still are skilled in mixing water to the right place. By leaning on the bamboo chair, you can wait for the beginning of the performance pleasantly and contently.

#### B. *Composition of Performing Troupes*

At present, Chengdu Sichuan Opera Troupe and Minzhong Sichuan Opera troupe are fixed in Yuelai Tea Garden to perform Sichuan Opera. According to the Eighth

<sup>3</sup> Written by Jiang Weiming, TangJianqing. *The Anecdotes of Bashu Opera Troupe* [M]. Chengdu: Chengdu Times Publishing House. First Edition in December 2012, P. 257.

<sup>4</sup> Editor-in-Chief of Xu Chuanhong. *Chinese Tea House* [M]. Beijing: Chemical Industry Press. First Edition in July 2010, P. 168.

Album of Jinjiang Cultural and Historical Documents, Jinjiang Theatre was affiliated to Chengdu Sichuan Opera Theatre in 1959, and Chengdu Sichuan Opera Troupe began to perform in Jinjiang Theatre. By 2002, Chengdu Sichuan Opera Troupe regularly performed traditional opera highlights in Yuelai Tea Garden on Saturdays every week, while high-quality repertory with high performance requirements was performed in the nearby Jinjiang Theatre. By 2014, the Minzhong Sichuan Opera Troupe began to perform Sichuan Opera in Yuelai Tea Garden on Sundays every week, which added to the jollification of this "theatre nest".

Sichuan Opera Troupes of Chengdu are one of the most famous artistic troupes in China with a history of more than 300 years, which not only trains a large number of Sichuan opera performing artist such as Xiao Ting, Liu Yun, and Chen Qiaoru and so on, but also performs a large number of extremely influential Sichuan opera works. In recent years, the teaching mode of "using troupes lead classes" has been opened, that is, senior Sichuan Opera cast members are selected to teach for students of College of Culture and Art of Chengdu, and then students who make a good enough score can be selected after graduation. Chengdu Sichuan Opera Troupe will continue to contribute all its advantages and strengths in the long march of the inheritance of Sichuan Opera that needs more work to do.

Minzhong Sichuan Opera Troupe belongs to private Sichuan Opera Troupe. Pang Minzhong, the owner of the troupe, is a veteran who loves Sichuan Opera very much. In order to salvage Sichuan Opera, he employed in 2012 Peng Xiaolong, Cheng Zuntang, Dan Zhisheng and other state-level actors to set up Minzhong Sichuan Opera Troupe in Xichong. Later, because it was difficult to maintain in Xichong, it turned to Luodai, Longquan and Chengdu. However, its survival in Luodai was also under a difficult circumstance. In 2014, it was fixed in Yuelai Tea Garden to start a new performing life through the coordination of Chengdu cultural department. Today, the performance quality of the Minzhong Sichuan Opera Troupe is comparable to that of the state-owned Sichuan Opera Troupe.

#### C. *Attendance Rate of Performance*

Yuelai Tea Garden consists of a total audience of more than 300 people, and the attendance rate of the two troupes has reached about 85% or more. Because of the different performance time of the two troupes, this also started the performance "competition" between the two troupes, showing the broad and endless vitality of Sichuan opera art in the "competition".

### IV. BASED ON THE AUDIENCE'S INVESTIGATION, STATISTICS AND ANALYSIS

As for the investigation of the audience in Yuelai Tea Garden, the author mainly selects and uses the method of combining interview with questionnaire to survey 52 audiences by random sampling, and a total of 48 valid questionnaires have been sorted out. The contents of the

questionnaire are mainly divided into four aspects: the basic situation of the audiences, the reasons for choosing to come to Yuelai Tea Garden to watch the theatre, the preferences for the types of repertory, and the comparison of the popularity degree of the two troupes. Hereinafter, the questionnaire will be summarized from these four aspects.

TABLE I. FREQUENCY, GENDER AND AGE OF THOSE WHO COME TO YUELA TEA GARDEN

"The Frequency for Coming to the Tea Garden"						
	Under 18 years old		19-59 years old		Above 60 years old	
	Male	female	Male	female	Male	female
First time to come	4%	4%	2%	4%		
Occasionally come			2%		11%	4%
Come often			4%		10%	6%
Come every time			3%		28%	18%

From the statistical results (see "Table I"), we can firstly know that the elderly audience is still the main group to watch Sichuan Opera at the age distribution level, which has a direct or indirect relation with a large number of social factors such as the influx of foreign music that is very attractive to young people after the reform and opening up, and the overall aging trend in China. Secondly, male audiences are more than female audiences on the gender distribution level. Such trend has some correlation to the idea that "until the New Deal of the Late Qing Dynasty and the emergence of the police in 1902 in Chengdu, social customs still restrict women access to teahouses, which or regarded as a behavior of 'bad women' " for a long time. In addition, most of the audiences interviewed are local people in Chengdu, Sichuan province, which shows that the mobility of the audiences is not high.

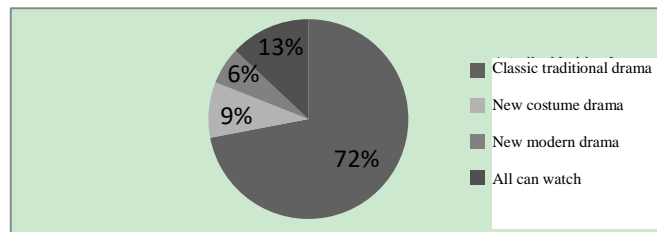
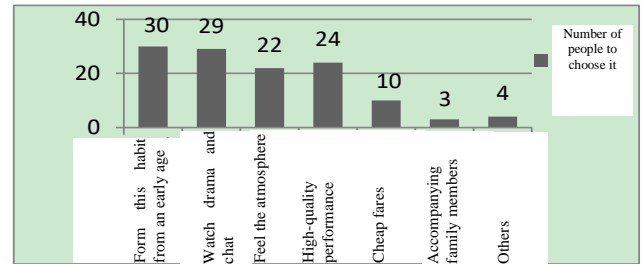


Fig. 1. The types of Sichuan opera repertory you like to watch.

It can be seen that the most popular is still traditional opera: such results are related to the audience who are mostly the elderly (see "Fig. 1"). Through interviews, it is found that the main reasons why the elderly audiences prefer traditional operas but reject modern ones are: a large number of modern operas are mainly made to cater to young audiences and deviate from the living context of ordinary senior citizen on the one hand; most of the elderly audiences

TABLE II. THE MAIN REASONS WHY AUDIENCES CHOOSE TO COME TO YUELA TEA GARDEN FOR WATCHING THE DRAMA



Statistical results show that the number of people who choose to "form this habit from an early age" and "go to the theatre, chat and drink tea" is at best (see "Table II"). Firstly, audiences who choose to form this habit from an early age are theatre fans with great enthusiasm for Sichuan Opera. Secondly, audiences who choose to "go to the theatre, chat and drink tea" express that Yuelai Tea Garden provides them with an excellent place to watch Sichuan Opera and chat with their theatre friends. Of course, a large number of audiences think that the high-quality performance of Yuelai Tea Garden is also a factor that cannot be ignored. In addition, some of the audiences who choose to "feel the atmosphere" express their more appreciation for the "old tea shop" lively atmosphere created by Yuelai Tea Garden. The audiences who choose to "accompany their family members" are mainly young people. It should be mentioned that there are some children because they accompany their family members to go to the theatre, who the author has not investigated. Yuelai Tea Garden has no restraint and restriction on children's relevant behavior in theatre, which provides more possibilities for audience to take children to accept the artistic influence of Sichuan Opera from an early age.

have developed a mentality of watching "familiar operas", which embraces nostalgia and fear of not understanding new operas on the other hand. In addition, there are a few audiences who prefer to see the new costume drama, or hope to make some innovations on the basis of the traditional drama. The audiences who choose new modern drama repertory are mainly young people and tourists.

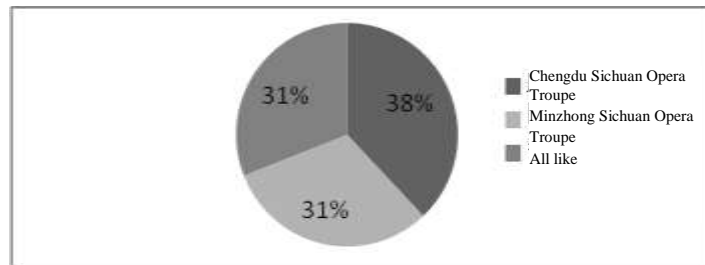


Fig. 2. Types of Sichuan opera troupe's performances the audience prefer.

The findings show that the popularity degree of the two troupes tends to hold the line, and this trend has some correlation with the incentive of benign competition mechanism between their counterparts (see "Fig. 2"). According to interviews, the audiences like the Chengdu Sichuan Opera Troupe for the following reasons: firstly, they have been watching the performance of Chengdu Sichuan Opera Troupe from childhood, and think that the costumes and performances of the state-owned troupe are more formal; secondly, there are many actors, especially more young actors in Chengdu Sichuan Opera Troupe with much more complete characters and trades. The reasons for liking the Minzhong Sichuan Opera Troupe are as follows: firstly, the members are mostly old actors, and the performance skills, especially the singing skills, are more mature than the young actors; secondly, the owners and actors of the Minzhong Sichuan Opera Troupe are more close to the people. It can be seen that both troupes have their own advantages.

To sum up, the author has a certain understanding of the overall situation of Yuelai Tea Garden audiences: firstly, the elderly audiences account for a considerable proportion and the flow of audience is not large; secondly, the audiences are mostly senior theatre fans, which has become one of the external reasons for the improvement of the performance quality of actors; thirdly, the particularity of Yuelai Tea Garden site has the advantages of audience can not only watch the drama, but also can chat, which is an important reason for the audience to Yuelai Tea Garden for drama; fourthly, traditional repertory are still the most popular among the elderly audience, but there are also some expectations of audience that traditional repertory can make some innovation; fifthly, at present, the popularity degree of the two troupes tends to hold the line, which is just about because of the benign competition between the counterparts.

## V. ANALYSIS OF INTERVIEWED RESULT OF ACTORS

Firstly, the available information are as follows after the interviews with Deng Fangyuan, an outstanding actor of the young man's role of Chengdu Sichuan Opera Troupe: the age range of actors who often perform on the stage in the troupe is mainly between 20 and 40 years old, the proportion of young actors is large, and most of them come from Culture and Art School of Chengdu, which is also the result of "using troupes lead the teams" model implemented by Chengdu Sichuan Opera Troupe; secondly, actors are more satisfied about the income aspect, and the income of actors with better performing skills is more considerable,

which not only is benefited from the support of the government, but also from Yuelai Tea Garden that provides the soil and space for Sichuan Opera actors to survive and polish their skills. Actors say that it is more convenient in Yuelai Tea Garden to interact and communicate with the audience at close range than in theatre and the immediate feedback from the audiences provides more practical basis for their performance quality improvement. After interviewing the actors of Chengdu Sichuan Opera Troupe and watching their performances, the author believes that, with the continuous succession of these excellent young actors, it will not be empty talk to attract more young people to the theatre, and the future of Sichuan Opera will be full of vitality and hopes (as shown in "Fig. 3" and "Fig. 4").



Fig. 3. Sichuan Opera Mao Yanshou Benfan (High tune system).<sup>5</sup>



Fig. 4. Sichuan Opera Caisang Fenggong (Peking opera).<sup>6</sup>

Then, as for the investigation of Minzhong Sichuan Opera Troupe, the author is honored to have a conversation with Cheng Zuntang teacher, and the information we can learn is as follows: on the one hand, it is about the advantages of Minzhong Sichuan Opera Troupe. Firstly,

<sup>5</sup> Performer: Harlequin Wang Haoran of Chengdu City Sichuan Opera Theater.

<sup>6</sup> The left 1 is the teacher of Cheng Zuntang from Minzhong Sichuan opera troupe who is a national first-class actor. In 1992, he awarded the cultural performance award, the highest government award in Chinese drama.

Minzhong often looks out for opportunities to perform outside. Secondly, Minzhong attaches great importance to the selection of repertory, which mainly considers the attractiveness of the plot to the audience, and occasionally performs self-compiled repertory. Thirdly, there is a much closer relationship between the Minzhong and the audience. It is not uncommon for actors to interact with audiences on stage or sit down with audiences under the stage, and even audiences to take the initiative to praise or make suggestions for actors' performances in the dressing room. It can be seen that long-term frequent performances, concentrated attention in the selection and arrangement of repertory and frequent communication and exchanges with the audiences are important factors that contribute to the growing performance quality of the Minzhong Sichuan Opera Troupe, so that now it has the ability to share on a fifty-fifty basis with the national-level Troupe. On the other hand, the problems contained in Minzhong Sichuan Opera Troupe are gradually emerging. Firstly, the boss is responsible for his own profits and losses without the financial support of the government; secondly, the actors are aging seriously, and the youngest actors are 40 years old, resulting in young actors are urgently needed to join.

If we say that by the interview with the actors of Chengdu Sichuan Opera Troupe, we can see the vigorous vitality of young actors brings new hope to the development of Sichuan Opera, and then in the interview with Cheng teacher of Minzhong Sichuan Opera Troupe, we can see a group of old actors' faithful adherence to Sichuan Opera.

#### VI. CRISIS CONTAINED IN YUELAI TEA GARDEN AND RELEVANT SUGGESTIONS

From the perspective of the results of the audience investigation: the audience is aging seriously and the audience flow is not large. It can be seen that Yuelai Tea Garden's Sichuan Opera can only be appreciated by a specific range of groups, so expanding the channels to cultivate new audiences should be paid attention to. Firstly, from the investigation, it is found that the audience's love for Sichuan Opera has a great relationship with whether they have come into contact with Sichuan Opera in childhood. Therefore, it is the first step to cultivate children's understanding of Sichuan Opera with being influenced by what one constantly sees and hears from childhood. And then, although the action of "Sichuan Opera into Primary and Secondary Schools" is in the ascendant and has achieved considerable results, far water is difficult to save near fire because college students are the most active groups in today's society. Therefore, it is necessary to encourage more universities to offer optional courses of Sichuan Opera with relevant policies. Finally, the expensive ticket price of Sichuan Opera is also an important factor hindering young people from watching Sichuan Opera, so more people need to know that Yuelai Tea Garden has such a popular-based ticket price and "a gong and drum full of the garden in spring".

From the perspective of the interview and analysis of the actors: the Minzhong Sichuan Opera Troupe is not only facing the problem of the aging of the actors, but also facing

the problem of the troupe cannot make ends meet, so the solution of these two problems is the key to the sustainability of the troupe. Any arts only enhance its vitality in competition: therefore, it is urgent for the government to strengthen the policy and financial support for the Minzhong Sichuan Opera Troupe.

From the perspective of the performance of Sichuan Opera: on the one hand, there is a short of the performance of special effects of Sichuan Opera. The advantages of young actors in Chengdu Sichuan Opera Troupe can be used to train potential actors and cultivate famous Sichuan Opera famous actors. On the other hand, traditional opera highlights are repeatedly performed that are not only easy to cause aesthetic fatigue, but also not conducive to attracting new audiences. Therefore, it is necessary to create new dramas that are suitable for both groups and times to maintain and attract audiences. That is, to create repertory that are much closer to the modern life context of all ages in the context of identifying the types of repertory that people of all ages enjoy and their appreciation interest.

#### VII. ENLIGHTENMENT OF YUELAI TEA GARDEN ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF SICHUAN OPERA

While seeing the crisis emerging in Yuelai Tea Garden, the author cannot help thinking and summarizing, what enlightenment does Yuelai Tea Garden bring to the development of Sichuan Opera?

##### A. *The Superiority of One's Own Site Is the Basic Condition*

There are ample opportunities for communication between actors and audiences. Compared with those sites such as theatre, tea houses provide more possibilities for communication between actors and audiences, which not only strengthens the emotional connection between actors and audiences, but also enables actors to understand the feedback and aesthetic situation of audiences in a timely manner, "so that music production enters into a benign orbit because of the audiences' mental sets as the motive force."<sup>7</sup>

The audiences of Sichuan Opera form a closely connected interesting group<sup>8</sup>. In such a relaxed environment as Yuelai Tea Garden, theatre friends often sit together to discuss Sichuan Opera and share interesting episodes of life, so as to establish a profound friendship. If each audience is taken as a point, one after another will be interwoven into a mutually connected network, and audience size will be strengthened and continuously extended in such a relatively stable relationship.

Provide possible conditions for training young audiences. As mentioned above, compared with the big theatre, watching performances in Yuelai Tea Garden does not restrict children's silence and free movement, which also provides the audience with the possibility of taking children

<sup>7</sup> Written by Zeng Suijin. Music Society-Research on the operation of Music Production System in Contemporary Society. Culture and Art Publishing House [M]. First Edition in March 1997, P. 140.

<sup>8</sup> Interesting groups refer to social groups with the same interests and hobbies and mutual understanding and continuous interaction.

to the theatre. As children are influenced by what he constantly sees and hears, their interests in Sichuan Opera will gradually grow, and the succession of young audiences of Sichuan Opera is around the corner.

#### *B. Benign Competition among Peers Is the Promotion Mechanism*

The state-run and private theatre troupes in the Yuelai Tea Garden perform on Saturdays and Sundays respectively, which inevitably makes the two troupes to form a competition relationship with each other for contesting their respective audience numbers. In such competition, the actors will constantly improve the performance quality of Sichuan Opera. The benign competition between the two troupes will certainly inject vitality and energy into the development of Sichuan Opera.

#### *C. Effective Implementation of Relevant Government Policies Is an Important Guarantee*

In 2011, the Propaganda Department of the Chengdu Municipal Party Committee, the Chengdu Cultural Bureau and the Chengdu Cultural and Art Circle jointly printed and issued the Opinions on Promoting the Development of Sichuan Opera in Chengdu, which formulates policies from eight aspects. Among them, the proposed new highlights and core are to train excellent reserve talents of Sichuan Opera and bring Sichuan Opera into life. The mode of "using troupes lead classes" of Chengdu Sichuan Opera Troupe and School of Culture and Art of Chengdu have emerged as the times require. Yuelai Tea Garden, "a theatre house favored by theatre fans", has also become an important bridge for the communication between Sichuan Opera and theatre fans. Through the field investigation of Yuelai Tea Garden, it can be seen that the effective implementation of the "using troupes lead classes" mode of Chengdu Sichuan Opera Troupe has accumulated sufficient and excellent reserve force of actors for Sichuan Opera.

Yuelai Tea Garden, as a public art space, plays a decisive role in the survival and development of Sichuan Opera. "There are many reasons for the depression of Sichuan Opera, but one of the essential reasons has not been mentioned. That is, Sichuan Opera should not be 'moved out' of the teahouse, which likes a fish leaving the water and a melon leaving the seedling. Sichuan Opera leaves the teahouse that is equal to leave mass base."<sup>9</sup> The existence of Yuelai Tea Garden shows that the fate between Sichuan Opera and Tea Garden is not at the end, and the prosperity and development of Sichuan Opera is enjoying a brighter future.

### VIII. CONCLUSION

To sum up, Sichuan Opera in Yuelai Tea Garden is inevitably faced with the problem of how to survive and develop in the context of modern urbanization through the

field investigation of Yuelai Tea Garden. The key to the inheritance and development of local culture lies in the people living in this land. Therefore, the protection, inheritance and development of Sichuan Opera need not only the attention and emphasis of the government, but also the responsibility of every people of Sichuan. In addition, what cannot be neglected is that Yuelai Tea Garden has also given us an important inspiration to inherit and develop Sichuan Opera. Whether Yuelai Tea Garden actors or audiences who let us see that they are and continue to pursue the light that Sichuan Opera can survive, thus leading to the correct direction of development of Sichuan Opera. The sound of heated gongs and drums, touching vocal accompaniment and warm applause linger in the corner of east city in Chengdu for a long time, which proudly shows people the artistic charm of Sichuan Opera, presents the unique cultural deposits of the city, and demonstrates the indomitable vitality of local culture!

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<sup>9</sup> Written by He Xiaozhu. Chengdu Tea House: A Half-Tea Guest of One City Resident [M]. Chengdu Times Publishing House, First Edition in October 2015, P. 101.