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Household Drama

During recent travels through several different provinces, it struck me that, despite modernisation, there is much which is still traditional in modern China. Seeing people going about their daily lives, particularly in rural areas, made me wonder to what extent the social order may still resemble that depicted in dramas such as *The Peony Pavilion*. For the Chinese, the word 'household' carries immense historical and cultural significance. In Chinese, 'Jia' means family and 'Ren' is person. The two combined, 'Jia Ren', means 'household'. In ancient China filial piety towards one's parents was considered the root of all morality and household management. Confucius said that government of a state depends on the regulation of the family, and so it follows that the dramas played out within different households were important to the social order.

I mention in another essay Mr Wang Xici's restaurant (in Fuzhou City) and the ways it which it may be seen as a stage for drama. It seemed to me that Mr Wang's commitment to 'family' extended beyond his immediate home to include his local county community. Likewise, in a temple, the 'family' may extend to the wider spiritual or religious community. Even in a theatre, the concept of 'family' could extend to the actors and the lives of the characters being portrayed.

On this trip (October 2019), I was privileged to see a lot of drama in Fuzhou City. I had previously seen traditional Chinese drama, but this time the Cambridge Shakespeare Festival group would be performing, and had arrived in Shanghai shortly after my own arrival. This group is recognised as one of the UK's best loved open-air troupes and has been performing in college gardens for twenty years, attracting upwards of 25 000 visitors annually for summer productions, and acquiring an international reputation. The al fresco nature of their dramas seems to have given them a spontaneous openness to people and situations. They were a distinctive 'family' of twenty-five actors led by director David Crilly.

After refreshments at the Artour Hotel near Pudong Airport, we were all taken by bus to the Boss-Horse Coffee Restaurant to meet our host for that night. Mr Xu greeted artist David Paskett and myself like old friends. We had met several times previously in Fuzhou, Shanghai and Cambridge. Helping ourselves at a cold-lunch bar (for we had a train to catch), we sat at small tables in readiness for a presentation. Everyone crowded round as a virtuoso artist painted the yin-yang panda in calligraphy style, in ten minutes. This was Mr Li Pingan, a retired teacher and graduate of East China Normal University. Mr Xu presented us all with a white shirt bearing a lovely design of a traditional mountain scene with the added humorous touch of a tiny panda. The painting design was by a young architectural designer, Yan Wenlei, who had changed her profession to become a cake designer! David Crilly and several actors gave us a sample of their professional singing voices. As we left the restaurant, we were given two large rectangonal boxes as gifts. I assumed they contained tea until word went round that they were China Opera Dolls.

The China Doll, also known as Tangwawa, is an art form derived from the traditional Beijing Silk Figurine. The dolls are made of iron wires and tiny beads, twisted and weaved together, and the faces are colour-painted by hand. The whole process is done manually, including the hand-sewn silk garments and tassels. Antique dolls can fetch high prices. In traditional style, these dolls tell famous and colourful Chinese stories to the rest of the world. I was delighted to discover that my dolls represented the two young lovers in *The Peony Pavilion*, Tang Xianzu's masterpiece. Now displayed in my home, the (doll) heroine, Du

Liniang, flaunts a floral pink dress and a blue butterfly head-dress, while her young scholar-lover, Liu Mengmei, is dressed in a green floral gown and black headwear. In his right hand he holds a mock peony branch. Both gowns are made of silk.

In her celebrated biographies, the nineteenth-century British explorer and photographer Isabella Bird (1831-1904) mentions silk several times while describing her perilous travels through Sichuan. In Chengdu she wrote: 'the handsome shops make far more display than is usual in China, the jewellers' shops specially, with their filigree silver, and even rich silk brocades are seen gleaming in the shadow in the handsome silk shops.' From time immemorial the leaves of the mulberry tree have been picked to feed the voracious appetite of silkworms. Pictograms on bone and bronze, that for a long time were believed to depict (women's) hands picking, are now thought to represent the leaves themselves.

Isabella Bird was fascinated by the popularity of theatre, which at that time still retained its original strolling character and, speaking of the two dramas she attended, said: 'It is on the stage alone that the gorgeous costumes of brocaded and embroided silk of former dynasties are to be seen.' She noted that women, usually carrying babies, attended in large numbers, except for women of the upper classes, whose public presence wouldn't have conformed to the etiquette of the period. Instead they were invited to theatrical performances held in rich men's houses. She related with mischievous irony the fact that boys always performed the female roles, 'with grotesque success, tranforming their feet into excellent representations of "golden lilies", and hobbling and tottering to perfection.' Happily this custom no longer exists today.

On this occasion we would be treated to works by both Tang Xianzu and Shakespeare. The first was a two-hour performance of *Hamlet* at the imposing Tang Xianzu Grand Theatre in Fuzhou. The Cambridge Shakespeare Festival group spent a morning supervising the installation of stage equipment, followed by an afternoon of rehearsals. One initial difficulty they faced, due to the stage accousics, was the need to wear microphones during the performance. As outdoor players, they were not accustomed to microphones and needed extra rehearsal-time to adapt their physical movements to accommodate them in their clothing. If a microphone shifted position, dialogue could suddenly be inaudible. The contrast between the delicate handmade silk gowns of Beijing or Kun Opera and the Shakespearean costumes couldn't have been greater. David Crilly explained: 'The costumes come from various sources over the last thirty years. Many of them are old stock from the Royal Shakespeare Company.' It's testimony to their skill that the microphones didn't lose audio range amongst those fine voluminous garments.

The auditorium was packed with people of all ages, who switched their attention between the action on the stage and the small screens on either side of the stage where they could follow the dialogue in Chinese. This wasn't enough to capture the attention of one little boy who ran noiselessly in and out until he was finally riveted to his seat by the sword fight between Hamlet and Laertes in Scene V. It was a virtuoso performance, with something of a martial arts - acrobatics charisma and appeal. The audience's tension was palpable through to the end, when Gertrude unwittingly drinks from the poisoned chalice, King Claudius is stabbed by Hamlet and is also forced to drink, and the play draws to a close as he lies prostrate, repeating the words 'I am dying. I die.'

In April 2018, I had been captivated by a Kun Opera performance of *The Peony Pavilion* in this same magnificent theatre. Knowing very little about the genre, I was mesmerised by the mime-like movements of the young male and female actors, by the beauty of their made-up faces and by their flowing pure-silk costumes. I had read Cyril Birch's first-rate translation, which includes copious notes, and was enchanted by the love story, and the language and poetry. Set within the herione's household and garden, *The Peony Pavilion* had for me strong resonances with *Romeo and Juliet.*

This year, we were to see excerpts from both *Hamlet* and *Romeo and Juliet* performed on an ancient stage, called Yulong Longevity Palace, in the Wenchangli Historical and Cultural Block. I asked Fan Lianglian (known to us as Tom) about the history of the palace. It was first built some 620 years ago during the Hongwu Period of the Ming Dynasty and was rebuilt in 1882 (the eighth year of the Guangxu Period of the Qing dynasty). Originally, it was the venue for Fuzhou businessmen to do trade and discuss day-to-day issues, and later evolved into an important forum for local political, economic and cultural activities. Nowadays there are regular performances every week, beloved by the local people. The performances include Peking Opera, Fuzhou tea-picking opera, Yihuang opera, and Nuo dancers. As we walked towards it under a street canopy of Beijing Opera Masks, I thought of the Kun Opera performers and my Beijing Opera Dolls. The symbolism of the facial make-up and paint is influenced by the colours and patterning on ancient dance-masks, and as such is often considered to be 'painting of heart and soul', since it reveals the inner nature as well as the outer personality.

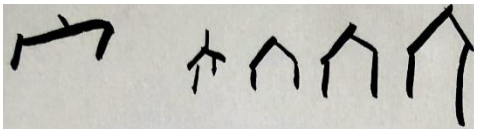
Once again, in the theatre, technology permitted the audience to follow the drama in Chinese and English, which they did avidly, watching scenes from *Hamlet*. I wondered what the Chinese thought about the English Renaissance songs, and asked David Crilly about his choice of composer: 'The opening song was an arrangement of John Dowland's "Come Again",' he said, 'which I did to accommodate the voices available'. It was relaxing to sit at tables drinking sweet coffee, nibbling nuts and dried fruits brought to us on trays by young men and women wearing simple colourful gowns. During the excerpts from *Romeo and Juliet*, we were treated to a delightful arrangement of 'Come Away Sweet Love' by Thomas Greaves. I remembered the high-pitched stylised singing of Kun Opera in *The Peony Pavilion* and decided that David's choice of Renaissance songs sounded equally fitting on this ancient stage.

Sitting inside the Yulong Longevity Palace was rather like being in an open pavilion with the sky visible and birds flying in and out. The atmosphere reminded me of a lunch which I enjoyed in 2018 with a Fuzhou village secretary and his wife in their own house. I'd been charmed by its open structure which invited swallows to build their own little mud houses in the eaves above our heads.

The Palace stage is raised on pillars above the ground; the ground floor leads to wide doors opening out onto the street, willow trees and the sky beyond; and the overall roof is also supported by pillars. We sat in the auditorium at long tables immediately opposite the stage, while the actors performed, framed on each side by strings of large red lanterns.

Looking more closely at the Palace architecture, I thought about the shapes and designs that informed the earliest language found on bone and bronze. Many pictograms have adhered in more or less their original form up to the present day: for example, 'roof', 'roof tile', and 'home and family'. Image and language may be seen as synonymous.

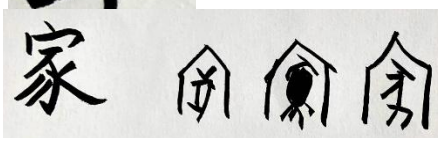
Finally, I present some of the pictograms, ideographs and symbols that have informed my essays and inspired my poems. I would like to thank Sophie Song of Cam Rivers Publishing for drawing these.



All of the pictograms shown here relate to 'roof'. The modern pictogram for the word 'roof' is shown on the far left. It preserves the chimney and two wooden supporting pillars, as also depicted in the earlest oracle bones.

The modern character for roof-tile shown here is believed to stem from the curving shape that interlocking clay-tiles acquired through the centuries. A new gable could to be added

onto the existing house when a son married, which increased the accommodation for the new family. It is this type of tile that gives the ancient buildings I saw their distinction and beauty.



Each of the images shown here depicts a pig under a roof, symbolising and attesting to its importance within a household. The pig is prized for its suculent meat and life-giving manure and, as recently as the 20th century, pigs shared house-space with poorer rural families. The modern character for *house/family* is shown on the left. In order to fit larger animals onto a narrow bone, artists had to engrave them sideways on. If we turn the characters onto their sides, all may be revealed.

This is the ideograph from the *I Ching*, representing 'Household'. The upper image of roof, chimney and pig, symoblises *jia*, family. The lower image of *ren*, person, depicts a figure bending down. The ancient sages always related the principle of managing a household to the management of a country. In their view, a country was simply a big household, which brings us back to Confucius:

> *From the loving example of one household,*
> *A whole state becomes loving.*
> *From the courteous manner of one household,*
> *A whole state becomes courteous.* The Analects

In conclusion, whatever may be said today about the relationship between household management and national government, there's no doubt that the Chinese continue to show great reverence for their past.

Scenes at Yulong Longevity Palace

It started with running| running the way long grasses
ran before a breeze| the way the people's limbs

moved swiftly| constructing pillars & rafters for roofs
& houses| pictures in carvings on bone & bronze

graced with a curve| echoing the upward curl of tiles
prefiguring elegant characters| Liniang paints her self-

portrait for her lover Mengmei to find after she dies
Juliet calls from the balcony torn from Romeo

by their fathers' feuding households| Swallows flit
amongst the beams and through the open doors

& latticed windows braids of willow sway| A cloud
curls like a roof| stirring Mengmei's dream to bring

a bride to the father's gabled house| Dramas live
in pictograms of man & house & pig| this little black

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nimble beast rooting for grain & fruit| Its juicy meat
Mao's *whole little manure factory* holding up the household

Note: Books I have drawn upon for this and other essays include the following:

Bird, Isabella Lucy, *The Yangtze Valley and Beyond; An Account of Journeys in China*, (Hardpress Publishing, Miami, FL)
Bird, Isabella Lucy, *A Photographic Journal of Travels through China 1894-1896* (Ammonite Press, 2015)
Huang, Alfred, *The Complete I Ching*, (Inner Traditions, Vermont, 1998, 2010)
Lindqvist, Celilia, *China Empire of Living Symbols,* trans. Joan Tate, (Lifelong Books • Da Capo Press, 1989, trans. 1991)
Yee, Chiang, *Chinese Calligraphy*, (Harvard University Press, 1973)

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