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COMMENT ON  
“A STUDY ON THE ANCIENT THEATER OF THE OFFICIAL  
HOUSE IN THE TAIHANG MOUNTAIN AREA OF NORTH HENAN  
PROVINCE IN CHINA”

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Commented Article: PENG Hengli; LI, Hanwen. A study on the ancient theater of official house in the Taihang mountain area of North Henan province in China. **Trans/Form/Ação**: Unesp journal of philosophy, v. 46, Special Issue, p. 153- 178, 2023.

Peng and Li (2023) explore these ancient theatres of official houses to prove the richness of the architectural types of ancient Chinese opera and the significant value of historical material and cultural relics. The first-hand data obtained in the investigation will also provide the latest research materials on ancient Chinese opera and theatre architecture. The traditional theatre is the carrier of Chinese performance culture, and its lively atmosphere is a unique part of Chinese performance culture. Through field investigation, the article found eight existing theatres in the Taihang Mountain area of northern Henan, including three newly discovered and unrecorded theatres, as well as several opera inscriptions and murals. It is not only of great significance to improve the knowledge system of traditional Chinese theatres, but also provides material evidence for the study of rural opera performances in the Taihang Mountains in the Qing Dynasty. It also has a

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practical significance to guide and improve the design of modern theaters. In particular, the inscriptions on the stone tablets and the stage walls can reflect some characteristics of local opera performances since the Qing Dynasty, such as type, time, troupes, etc. To a certain extent, it proves the richness of ancient Chinese opera architecture types, which has important historical and cultural value.

Opera cultural relics are the material carriers closely related to opera cultural activities. The textual research and analysis would not only help to understand the historical features of the origin, formation, development, prosperity and decline of drama but also help to summarize its universal laws, greatly broadening the vision of drama research. As one of the important types of opera cultural relics, the theater has had an indissoluble bond with opera since its birth. Its changes in shape and layout are closely related to opera performance (BAO, 1991. p. 3). From the standpoint of the quantity, form and integrity of the bequest of the era of theatre ruins, it is unquestionably the ideal beginning place for comprehending the grand performances of ancient Chinese urban and rural temples. There has always been a clear distinction between the styles of Chinese and Western performance architecture. Behind this distinction, there are two distinct performance models. In western modern theatre architecture, the audience held their breath and paid close attention, becoming nearly one with the performers. In front of the traditional Chinese stage, the audience was conversing and applauded, and the atmosphere is quite calm and casual.

The article summarized the characteristics of the ancient theater of the official house in different times and the relationship between inheritance and evolution in different times. On this basis, this paper probed into the pluralism and universality of the belief of the folk gods in the north of Henan, as well as the penetration and popularization of the thought of rites and music.

From the perspective of the structure of the article, it adopted the structure of total division and total. First, it introduced the origin of the ancient theater of the government. In ancient books, “official houses” refer to the houses owned by the government, while the villagers refer to the public houses collectively owned by the village (CHE, 2011, p. 4). The villagers call the village public housing “official housing” because they have similar connotations - non-private property. After that, this paper introduced the ancient theater of the official house in northern Henan and listed its construction schedule. It can be seen that the ancient theater of the official

house mainly appeared in the late Qianlong period of the Qing Dynasty. Finally, it introduces Anyang in detail. Anyang is a place with many ancient theaters of official houses. Although Huixian County is under the jurisdiction of Xinxiang County, it is geographically closer to Shanxi Province and belongs to the Taihang Mountains area, with less distribution within the territory. From the architectural form perspective, the width of the official surface is 8-10m, the depth is 5-7m and the height is 5m. The theater is 6-7m wide, 1.4m high, 2.5-2.9m high at the entrance, 3.5-4m deep at the front and 1.7-3m deep at the back (TUO, 1985, p. 13103).

The government theater has several characteristics. First, the type of opera the government theatre performs is Dapingdiao. The large flat carving was formed in the middle and late Qing Dynasty. It was mainly popular in northern Henan and southern Hebei. Secondly, local troupes are performing groups. Third, the opera performances of the government theater are concentrated primarily in the spring and autumn. Fourth, the main plays are historical, reunion and comic. Historical operas account for the vast majority of local opera performances. The academic research on the ancient theater of the official house is relatively weak, and there are not comprehensive investigation and research on this special type of theater. It is worth noting that these theaters have not received due attention and proper protection. Some were appropriated for other purposes, and some were eroded by wind and rain (YANG, 1992. p. 233). If not repaired and protected in time, these precious cultural relics would disappear into the depths of history.

The performance of government theaters can be effectively guaranteed in terms of time and material, which is also an important reason why many government theaters can be preserved, and their performances can continue to this day. Up to now, most folk independent theaters are dilapidated or no longer exist due to a lack of repair and protection. Due to its special reasons, the ancient theater of the official house has been well preserved and has become the most important and important part of the traditional performance architecture that has been preserved so far.

The ancient theatre of the official mansion is characterized culturally by its typical performing atmosphere. The ancient theatre of the government residence should not only be safeguarded for its tangible value but also for its cultural features. The research on the relationship between the atmosphere of watching performances and the ancient theatre of the official house is

not only of great importance to the protection of the “cultural relics” of the ancient theatre, but it also provides theoretical support for how to better restore the cultural characteristics of the ancient theatre in contemporary preservation practice.

The ancient theater of the official house is an important part of traditional Chinese theater. The modern theater of China almost directly continues the western theater model. As a kind of “cultural relic” almost forgotten by the times, the traditional Chinese theater is gradually disappearing. The traditional theater is an important carrier of Chinese traditional culture. Along with the “disappearance of traditional theater”, the Chinese traditional performance culture is also gradually disappearing. In modern theater, which generally follows western theater, the Chinese traditional performance culture is difficult to continue because it cannot display its characteristics. In the modern cities of China, it is hard to see the traditional phenomenon of “[...] the actors on the stage sing and dance beautifully, and the cheers under the stage overwhelm the public.” (YANG, 1992. p. 145). Today, this endangered culture can only be seen in small and backward rural theaters. With the rapid development and expansion of the city, when the remote villages are also swept by the wave of urbanization, how this traditional performance culture would continue would be a serious problem. Chinese traditional performance culture is an important part of the intangible culture of China. Under today’s extensive appeal for the protection of immaterial culture, the inheritance and protection of traditional performance culture are imminent. As an important part of the traditional official performance, the discovery of the article provides help for the protection of traditional drama.

People from all walks of life are paying greater attention to the safeguarding of intangible culture as a result of increased urbanization and the integration of global culture. In contrast to the western theatre, Chinese government theatre is a significant and distinctive performance tradition that has not received attention from all segments of society. This distinctive performing culture arises due to the influence of conventional theatres. It can still be observed in some rural traditional communities with somewhat underdeveloped economies. This unique performance culture is in jeopardy of extinction due to the rapid loss of traditional communities by contemporary metropolis.

This paper discussed the role of theater in creating the atmosphere of watching the performance from three aspects: location, shape and decoration,

along the way from macro to micro. This paper attempted to stand in the perspective of architecture, combined with the relevant knowledge of other disciplines to study and explain this unique phenomenon of performance culture. The article comprehensively recorded and verified the data information of these theaters, which would not only provide new research materials for the research of Chinese opera and ancient theater buildings and contribute to the rescue and protection of this historic architectural heritage.

As far as the traditional theater in China is concerned, the ancient theater of the official house is only a small part of it, which has certain limitations in the scope of research. Secondly, the viewing space is only a part of the “environmental” factors that affect the viewing atmosphere. The broad sense environment includes physical, regional and cultural environments. The ancient theater of the official house is by no means produced under the independent influence of the viewing space. The article also needs to combine anthropology, history, sociology, philosophy, psychology and other multi-disciplinary research methods to more comprehensively explain the development of the ancient theater of the official house and constantly improve the knowledge system about the traditional viewing culture.

Although we cannot experience the original taste of the ancient theater of the official house as the ancients did, and although the original magnificent theater has disappeared, what we need to do is to make these excellent traditional cultures disappear slowly.

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