


A STUDY ON THE ANCIENT THEATER OF OFFICIAL HOUSE IN THE TAIHANG MOUNTAIN AREA OF NORTH HENAN PROVINCE IN CHINA¹


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Abstract: As a particular type of ancient Chinese theater, talented theater of official house was mainly found in the Taihang Mountain area, in North Henan Province, which was formed in the middle of the Qing Dynasty. The appearance of it is related to the local natural environment, folk culture and agricultural productivity. Through field investigation, it is found that there are eight existing theaters in the Taihang Mountain area of North Henan Province; among which three ones are newly discovered that have not been documented by the academic circle before, as well as several traditional Chinese opera steles and wall inscriptions. This is the first time the academic circle discloses relevant data and information. These provide physical evidence the performance of the village opera in the Taihang Mountain area of the Qing Dynasty, in China. Especially the inscriptions on the steles and the stage wall can reflect some features of the local opera performance since the Qing Dynasty, such as the type,

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time, troupe, and so on. To some extent, the richness of these ancient theaters of official house, with the architectural styles of ancient Chinese opera, has a significant value related to 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 theater architecture.

Keywords: Official house. Ancient theater. Ancient opera. Folk belief.

INTRODUCTION

An ancient theater of official house is a place for folk opera performances in the Taihang Mountain area. It is mainly distributed in the Taihang Mountain area of the Zhanghe River Basin, in North Henan Province, and the junction of Henan, Hebei and Shanxi provinces. The official theater, named after the “official house,” consists of the official house, the stage and the auditorium (formerly known as the “pool”). The local people build the official house to invite gods to “sit down” to see the opera performance. It is usually empty.

Typically, brick-wood or brick-stone houses make up the official residence. They are constructed on stone foundations, which range in height from 0.1 to 0.8 metres. The house often uses a three - or five - couplet gallery and veranda structure. There are passageways set into the front eaves, and the depth is roughly 1 metre. The main door is in the middle, and there are symmetrical windows on either side. Plaques and couplets are absent. The area is rectangular and has three open-concept rooms on the surface. The front of the platform serves as the site of worship, with a shrine built up against the gable to house statues. The theater building in the front of the official house is generally of brick and wood structure, hard-gable-type, or hanging-gable-type building. The foundation of the platform is at the same level as the office building from 10 to 30 meters of the area for ordinary audiences to watch the opera between the theater and the official house. Because of the low-lying terrain between the officials and the theater building, it was called a “pool” in the Qing Dynasty. In the collection of Xiaojuyou Pavilion, written by Bao Shichen (1991, p. 3) of the Qing Dynasty, the performing theater in the Qing Dynasty is recorded as “[...] the place is built in the middle of the stage, the flat ground in front of the platform is famous for the pool, and the opposite platform is the hall [...]”. It is an architectural pattern. The scientific name of the official house opposite the theater should be the hall, a common folk name.

Since the ancient theater of official house is a place to worship gods and perform operas, the academic circle has always regarded it as a temple theater

in the past, without a special in-depth investigation and study. Although in the 1980s and 1990s, Henan made a concerted effort to investigate and publish *Records of Chinese Opera* and *Records of Anyang Opera*, they did not mention the particular type of temple theater (YANG, 1992, p. 151). Che Wenming (2013, p. 4), a famous expert on theater research in China, also ignores the important type of “ancient theater of official house” when discussing the types of ancient Chinese theater. Yang Jianmin (1992, p. 145-160) made a preliminary record of the ancient theater of official house in Anyang County. However, there is no comprehensive investigations and in-depth study on this type of theater, not to mention its position and value in the history of ancient Chinese theater. Even some of the theaters recorded by him are no longer in existence.

Firstly, the difference between the official house theater and the temple theater is that an official house is a temporary place of sacrifice. They are used for opera performance to worship the gods in only a few days and are empty or for sundries at other times. Therefore, they are called “Empty God Hall”: houses without the gods. Secondly, the official house is a space shared by the gods, not belonging to a particular God. The immortals have their temples and are invited to this place only during the drama performance. Thirdly, the official house is a public asset of the village, that is jointly owned and administered by the town. Since the official house theater is a specific kind of ancient theater, which one is unique in the Taihang Mountain region of North Henan Province, it differs from the temple in this way.

Based on the above understanding, from July to August 2019, the research groups “Investigation and Research of Ancient Theater in Central Plains” and “Chinese Opera in the Context of Temple Culture in Central Plains” made a comprehensive investigation and study of the ancient theater of official house in the Taihang Mountain area of North Henan Province. This is the first thorough investigation and research on the ancient theater of official house by Chinese academic circles. It has found the distribution law of three previous unrecorded theaters, several opera steles and wall inscriptions. All the data and information were measured and verified by the authors and members of the research groups. Based on the first-hand information obtained from the investigation and the previous research, this article discusses the ancient theater of official house, as well as its performance detail, and devoted to provide the latest data information for research in this field.

1 NAME OF OFFICIAL HOUSE AND ITS ORIGIN

To study the ancient theater of official house, we first clarify the origin of its name. The word “Guanfang (官房, Official House)” was first found in the Northern Song Dynasty. He Zhu (2008, p. 548), a famous poet in the Northern Song Dynasty, once wrote: “I used to live in an official house. I always admire Zhong Mu. There is no place for horses in the mountains, but there are cattle fields in the mountains”.

He Zhu was born in an official house. He Zhu's Biography in the History of the Song Dynasty records that “He Zhu is a native of Weizhou and the grandson of empress Xiaoh.” (TUO, 1985, p. 13103). It can be seen that He Zhu was a royal relative. He lived in the house provided by the government since he was a child, calling himself the “official house”. It is worth noting that Weizhou (now Xinxiang, Hebi, Henan Province) refers to the South Taihang area where official houses are ubiquitous. It shows that the name “Guanfang (Official House)” has existed since the Northern Song Dynasty. In the “Records of Si Ming” in the Song Dynasty, it is written “distribute Haozhai official houses before the barrack”:

East Corridor: three official houses, one Xuan house, one official cabin, one department room, one teaching room, one teaching headroom, one golden drum teaching room, and one miscellaneous office room were allocated. (WU; MEI, 1990, p. 5998).

The “barrack” refers to the army. In the Song Dynasty, the government provided the military, and the government built and appropriated the officer's housing. The “official house” here has two meanings: one refers to the officer's house; the other refers to the house is officially owned. After the Song Dynasty, the term “official house” was used by later generations. According to the fourth volume of “Tongzhi Tiaoge” in the Yuan Dynasty:

In October of the 19th year of the Zhiyuan's reign (1282 A.D.), there was a clause in the imperial edict saying: according to the imperial decree issued in the 1st year of the Zhongtong's reign (1260 A.D.), those who were widow, lonely, old, weak, disabled, and unable to survive by themselves, should be supported by the government. It still ordered each place to set up a nursing house. If there were official houses, they would be used to build the nursing house. If there was no official house, the nursing house should be made by the government and adopted exclusively. (BAI, 1986, p. 56).

The “official house” here refers to the house invested in and owned by the government. The meaning is the same as that of the Song Dynasty. According to the “Records of Zhaozhou County” in the Ming Dynasty:

GuanZhai, a of sections, Likou was in 50 Li of the County West, led to the county boundary of Leping, Shanxi province. Baichengkou was 50 Li northwest of the county, with Yuanshi County in the East, Pingding City in the west, and Jingxingkou in the north. The critical point was to build three stone cities and one official house. (CAI, 1962, p. 118).

The second volume of the “Rules and Regulations of Punishment Continued by the Imperial Military Department” in the Qing Dynasty states that:

The bodyguards of the Qianqing gate in front of the imperial palace were awarded 30 rooms in Chen’s residence. The minister in charge of the imperial guards planned to send two members to serve as the guards’ battalion commander. No idle people were allowed to live. They would be punished if they did not live as requested by the official house. (B.O., 1893, p. 7).

The above are the records of official houses in the Ming and Qing Dynasties. The meaning of “official house” has always been evident in ancient times since referring to the house owned by the government, as opposed to a private house. The “official house” mentioned in the “Records of Zhaozhou County” deserves attention. Since Zhaozhou County was located in the Taihang Mountainous area, passes were set up at the “key places” of Taihang Mountain in the Ming dynasty. Official houses were built for soldiers guarding such passes. All ordinary people in the Taihang Mountain area needed to pass through the official house, so they were familiar with it. It is the reason why the term “official house” is popular in the Taihang Mountain area.

It should be noted that the “official house” stated in historical texts refers to the residence held by the government. In contrast, the residence referenced by villagers is the public house that the village collectively owns. Due to their identical meanings as non-private real estate, the people refer to the village public housing as “official house.” The main house in the village was referred to as the official house by the residents, who appropriated this title. In the Taihang Mountain area, building official houses to sacrifice the gods and perform operas is unnecessary. There is a simpler and easier way to build

a “viewing shed”: made of bamboo, wood, and fabric, commonly known as “Shenpen.”. During the play, people bring the statue tablet to the shed and remove it afterward. The advantages of the canopy are low-cost, simple and easy to operate, and the disadvantage is that it is not resistant to wind and rain. If it is windy and rainy, it will affect the ceremony. In the 13th year of the Yongzheng’s reign of the Qing Dynasty (1735 A.D.), the “Reconstruction of the Theater” in Jitan Town, Deng County, Nanyang City, said:

The palace was built in the year of Emperor Yongzheng and completed in August. Each value of playing truss wood for the platform, there was no shelter in windy and rainy weather. Although the music and dance performance were still going on, the clothes, costumes and movements of the opera performance were disrupted. It seemed blasphemous to the gods. (CULTURE BUREAU OF DENG COUNTY, 1987, p. 396).

In the 28th year of the Qianlong’s reign of the Qing Dynasty (1763 A.D.), the “Inscription on the Renovation of the Theater” in Xujia Village, Xin’an County, Luoyang City, said:

In Xin’an County, there is Xujia village at 30 kilometers to the north, a kiln temple in the west, and three theater buildings in front of the temple. On the day of prayer, the stage of the theater was blocked by wind and rain. It was a pity for the village that there was no way to please the gods or follow people’s wishes. (CULTURE BUREAU OF XIN’AN COUNTY, 1987, p. 93).

There is no favorable weather in Shenxi (divine opera performance for gods), which is a severe event in the eyes of the ancients and should be taken seriously. It may be the reason that the villagers in the Taihang Mountain area, built the ancient theater of official house to use. With so many temples around the village, why do people not build a temple theater there? It is because of the local physical and geographical conditions and economic conditions. Most of the temples in the Taihang Mountain area are located in the mountains around the villages. The mountains are high, the forest is dense and the transportation is inconvenient. The cost of building the temple theater is very high, and the problems of artists’ food, housing and transportation are not easy to solve. The villages in the Taihang Mountain area are small in scale and population, and poor in economic conditions, so they cannot build theaters for all the temples. In the long-term practice, the local tradition of performing opera in the official house gradually came into being.

The official house theater of the village was constructed, and its purpose changed from “[...] sending the opera for gods up the mountain” to “[...] inviting the gods to go down the mountain.” The gods were invited to attend an opera being performed in the village, which helped them to overcome the difficulty of human climbing and preserve human, material and financial resources. Judging from the extant inscriptions of operas, the ancient theater of official house has been famous since the Qianlong period of the Qing Dynasty. The following is a statistical table of the construction time of official houses and theaters in the existing local inscriptions.

Table 1 - Statistics of construction time of the ancient theater of official house in North Henan

Theater location	Inscription name	Creation and repair time	Origin of the inscription	Remarks
Dongshui Village, Duli Town, Anyang County	The stele inscription of the renovation of official house	The 42 nd year of the Qianlong's reign (1777 A.D.)	Yang Anmin. Records of Opera in Anyang City. Zhengzhou: Zhongzhou Ancient Books Publishing House, 1992, p. 233.	The stele of rebuilding the official house dates to the 11 th year of Daoguang. There is a record in the inscription that „the official house was repaired in the 42 nd year of Qianlong's reign, and it is not far from this year.”
East Ma'an village, Heshun Town, Linzhou City	The stele inscription of the renovation of official house	The 49 th year of the Qianlong's reign (1784 A.D.)	The stele is now embedded in the west wall of the courtyard of the East Ma'an Village Committee.	The stele of rebuilding the official house was inscribed in 1796 in the first year of Jiaqing of the Qing Dynasty. The inscription says that „in the 49 th year of Qianlong's reign, Li Fude, a good man of the village, and all villagers worked together to build a new official house.”
Jiaoling Village, Tongye Town, Anyang County	The stele of the renovation of official house	June 15, the 9 th year of the Yongzheng's reign (1731 A.D.)	The stele is now in Jiaoling Village	The original stele has no title; the inscription is the list of donors who rebuilt the official house in the 9 th year of Yongzheng's reign.

<p>East Lingxi Village, Duli Town, Anyang County</p>	<p>The stele inscription of the renovation of official house and the construction of theater</p>	<p>May 26, the 14th year of the Guangxu's reign (1888 A.D.)</p>	<p>The stele is now embedded in the gable on the north side of the theater in East Lingxi Village</p>	<p>The inscriptions are embedded in the wall, and some of the inscriptions are covered, but the information of time is clearly marked.</p>
<p>Lingxi Village, Shayao Town, Huixian County</p>	<p>The stele inscription of the construction of temple and theater</p>	<p>4th year of the Republic of China (1915 A.D.)</p>	<p>The stele is now standing under the gallery of Lingxi Village</p>	<p>The original stele has no title, and the contents are the process of building official houses and theaters and the list of donors</p>

Data source: The table is made by the authors based on the information obtained from the field investigation and the research results of Yang Anmin (1992, p. 233).

The table shows that the ancient theater of official house mainly appeared in the late Qianlong period of the Qing Dynasty. In the year of 1790, to celebrate Qianlong Emperor's birthday, the rulers of the Qing Dynasty changed the situation of suppressing folk opera and called Hui troupes to Beijing. This event marked the rise of local opera in the Qing Dynasty. Still, it also shows that the folk opera in the Qing Dynasty had been prosperous in the late Qianlong period, with the strength of confrontation with "Yabu" Kung Opera. The theater of official house began to appear in the Taihang Mountain area at this time, which shows that local folk drama activities were pretty active. Many opera performances put higher requirements for performance places, prompting people to donate money to build more solid performing places to improve performance conditions.

2 EXISTING ANCIENT THEATER OF OFFICIAL HOUSE IN NORTH HENAN

Up to now (2019 A.D.), there have been eight ancient theaters of official house in North Henan. Among them, three are well preserved; three are remaining theaters, but the official houses have been destroyed; two are remaining official houses, but the theaters has been destroyed. The following is a brief introduction to the eight theaters.

Table 2 - Statistics of the existing ancient theater
of official house in North Henan

Theater location	Age of Construction	Preservation status	Official house data	Theater data
East Lingxi Village, Duli Town, Anyang County	The 14 th year of the Tongzhi's reign (1871 A.D.)	Well preserved	The surface width is 9.10m. The depth is 5.08m. The height is 5.41m.	The surface width is 6.73m. The height of the platform mouth is 2.94m. The height of the platform base is 1.44m, and the depth of the front stage is 3.85m. The depth backstage is 2.81m.
Nanyangcheng Village, Duli Town, Anyang County	Unknown	The theater has been destroyed, and the official house is in excellent condition.	The surface width is 8.46m. The depth is 7.40m. The height is 5.86m.	
Dongshui Village, Duli Town, Anyang County	The 11 th year of the Daoguang's reign (1831 A.D.)	The theater has been destroyed, and the official house is in excellent condition.	The surface width is 10.60m. The depth is 5.92m. The height is 5.50m.	
Jiaoling Village, Tongye Town, Anyang County	The 9 th year of the Yongzheng's reign (1731 A.D.)	The official house has been destroyed, and the theater is in excellent condition.		The surface width is 7.07m. The height of the platform mouth is 2.88m, the size of the platform base is 0.99m, and the depth of the front stages is 3.93m. The depth backstage is 3.11m.

Yanghe Village, Wulong Town, Linzhou City	Unknown	Well preserved	The surface width is 8.20m. The depth is 5.20m. The height is 5.20m.	The surface width is 7.29m. The height of the platform mouth is 2.96m, the size of the platform base is 1.56m, and the depth of the stage is 7.13m.
Dongma'an Village, Heshun Town, Linzhou City	The 1 st year of the Jiaqing's reign (1796 A.D.)	The official house has been destroyed, and the theater is in excellent condition.		The surface width is 6.69m. The height of the platform mouth is 2.89m. The height of the platform base is 1.43m, and the depth of the front stage is 3.91m. The depth backstage is 2.80m.
Lingxi Village, Shayao Town, Huixian County	The 4 th year of the Republic of China (1915 A.D.)	Well preserved	The surface width is 8.74 m. The depth is 5.50m. The height is 5.430m.	The surface width is 6.74m. The height of the platform base is 1.49m, and the size of the platform mouth is 2.66m. The depth of the front stage is 4.66m. Backstage depth: 2.20m.
North Dongpo Village, Nancun Town, Huixian County	Unknown	The official house has been destroyed, and the theater is in excellent condition.		The surface width is 7.383m. The height of the platform base is 1.495m. The entrance height is 2.540m, and the depth of the front stage is 3.551m. The depth backstage is 1.751m.

Data source: The authors make the table based on the information obtained from the field investigation. And all data were personally measured and verified by the authors.

Among the eight theaters mentioned above, six are in Anyang. Anyang is a place with many ancient theaters of official houses. Although Huixian County is under the jurisdiction of Xinxiang City, Henan Province, it is geographically closer to Shanxi Province and belongs to the Taihang Mountains area, so there is a small distribution in the territory. From the architectural form, the surface width of the official house is between 8-10m, with a depth of 5-7m and a height of 5m; the surface width of the theater is about 6-7m, with the size of the platform base of 1.4m, the size the entrance of 2.5-2.9m, the depth of the front-stage of 3.5-4m, and the depth of the backstage of 1.7-3m. This article is to introduce the well preserved theaters and their great academic value as follows.

2.1 OFFICIAL HOUSE THEATER OF EAST LINGXI VILLAGE, DULI TOWN

The northernmost point of Henan Province is East Lingxi Village, which is situated on the south bank of the Zhanghe River. Tianjiazui Village in Shexian County, Hebei Province, is located across the river, and the ancient theater of official house is located at the entrance of the village. The official house is constructed on a 0.4-meter-high stone platform with a hard top made of brick and wood, facing west. Under the front eaves, two wooden eaves columns support the architrave. The corridor under the eaves is 1 meter deep, and the indoor area is 36 square meters. The altar is the same wide as the room, with a depth of 1 m, a height of 1.5 m, and a statue on top. In front of the platform is the worship area, covering an area of 27 square meters. The theater building is directly opposite the official house, about 10 meters away from it, facing east from the west, and backed by the Zhanghe River. It is a brick wood structure with a gable in front and a hard gable behind it. The roof is covered with grey tiles, and there are no ornaments like the tail and ridge beast on the ridge. The platform foundation is made of Qingtiao stone in the Taihang Mountain area. It is 1.44 meters high and firm. The beam frame structure consists of five beams, and the front stage is supported by four wooden eaves pillars and a drum-shaped mirror foundation.

On the north wall of the theater is a “Stele Inscription of the Construction of the Theater in East Lingxi Village, Anyang County”, in the 10th year of Tongzhi’s reign. It records the process of building an ancient theater of official houses in the Qing Dynasty, which is precious. It is at this moment collated and transcribed as follows:

Today, the foundation of the theater building in East Lingxi Village has been built for years. It has not been made into a stone wall but a towering building. When people pray for the autumn harvest in spring, or there are strong wind and rain, the divine opera cannot be performed, and people's reverence is depressed. In the village, Han Yongqi and Wang Yi were filled with emotion. They were kind-hearted and prepared to invite the public to discuss. They donated money according to the acre of land and paid wages by the door. If there was divine help, Jue Gong would succeed quickly. On the day of the completion of construction, the villagers asked me to engrave stones on its composition. The poem said: "the building is as high as an eagle flies and as colorful as sunshine, to pray for favorable weather and village protection" Han Yongqi and Wang Yi, the leaders of the community (The following are donations from the stewards and from She County, Cizhou County and Lin County, and the names of craftsmen were omitted).

March 20, Xinwei, 10th year of Tongzhi's Reign in the Qing Dynasty

With a total of 220, 200 Wen spent.

All village public opinion: Official land should not be used to sell rice and gamble. If anyone refuses to accept, he will be sent to the government for investigation and punishment. (YANG, 1992, p. 151).

According to the inscription, this ancient theater of official house, in East Lingxi Village, was built in the Tongzhi period of the Qing Dynasty. There once was a theater in the local area, but it collapsed only because of age and was rebuilt on the original site in the 10th year of Tongzhi's reign. The purpose of building the theater is evident in the inscriptions. Local people were worried that the gods would be offended if the divine drama could not be performed regularly because of strong wind and rain, so they spared no effort to rebuild the theater. The completion of the theater has reduced the villagers' anxiety of belief and enhanced the public's confidence. Local people believe that this will not only bring happiness to the gods but also will bring harvest and good luck to the community.

According to the inscription, the local societies played a decisive role in the construction of the theater. Han Yongqi and Wang Yi, who initiated this move, were the "leaders" of the community. Only by using the power of faith can the villagers' organizations be mobilized to complete this large project. The inscription records that the cost of building the theater is apportioned according to the acre of land per household. In addition to apportioning money and food, they have to provide volunteer work. As the villagers built

the ancient theater, the property and use rights belonged to the collective of the village. The village rules, at the end of the inscription, are shown as “All village public opinion: Official land should not be used to sell rice and gamble. If anyone refuses to accept, he will be sent to the government for investigation and punishment.” (YANG, 1992, p.151).

This area is referred to as “official land” because it is not privately held. The phrase “Official land should not be used for the sale of rice and gambling” does not preclude villagers’ businesses from conducting catering and gaming. It stresses that working in such sectors is prohibited in the ancient theater of official house. The internal reasoning is that since the theater is owned by the collective, nobody should exploit it for their own benefit.

2.2 OFFICIAL HOUSE THEATER OF JIAOLING VILLAGE, TONGYE TOWN

The official house in Jiaoling Village of Tongye Town was demolished in 2010, and now only the official house and theater remain. The theater is facing north and 15 degrees east. It is a brick and wood building with a front rolling shed and hard rear gable.

The platform foundation is made of Qingtiao stone in the Taihang Mountain area, with a height of 0.99m. The bearing structure of the theater is five beams. The front stage has four square stone columns as eaves pillars, and the lower end is connected with the drum-shaped mirror foundation. The platform is 7.07 meters wide; the entrance is 2.88 meters high; the front stage is 3.93 meters deep; the backstage is 3.11 meters deep. Wooden partition fans separate the front and back platforms. Above the wooden lattice fans, there are four words, “Ge Wu Lou Tai (Singing and Dancing Terrace),” among which the word “Ge (Singing)” has disappeared. The door is 0.74 meters wide and 2.03 meters high. The “Stele Inscription of the Construction of the Theater” is inlaid on the gable of the east side of the theater. The date of the inscription is “[...] the 5th day of July in the 5th year of the Republic of China (1916 A.D.)”, which indicates that the theater was rebuilt in the early Republic of China. The inscription says: “[...] there was an old singing and dancing building in the street of Jiaoling Village, Anyang County, Zhangde City (Now Anyang City), Henan Province.”⁴ Therefore, this theater existed in the Qing Dynasty.

⁴ The stele was discovered by the authors during the investigation in August 2019, and the quoted content is extracted directly from the stele inscription.

There are opera sculptures under the front of the theater, the contents of which are opera characters, and the repertoire remains to be examined.

Figure 1 - Ancient Theater of Official House
in Jiaoling Village, Tongye Town



Photographed by the author Hengli Peng, on August 15, 2019.

2.3 OFFICIAL HOUSE THEATER OF YANGHE VILLAGE, WULONG TOWN, LINZHOU CITY

It is located on Yanghe Village Street, Wulong Town. The official house is on the north side of the road, facing the south and the theater. The distance from the official house to the theater is 10 meters. It is a hard-gable building with a civil structure, 8.20m long from east to west, and 5.20m wide from south to north, with the eaves of 2.20m high.

The theater is of brick and wood structure, and the front eaves are paved with brackets under the forehead. The surface width is 7.29m, the height of the platform mouth is 2.96m, the size of the platform base is 1.56m, and the depth of the stage is 7.13m. The bottom of the platform is paved with bluestone, and the gable is covered with green bricks and filled with the embryo. There are four square eaves pillars at the entrance. A couplet is carved on the two stone pillars in the middle: “[...] according to the law and Lv’s point, the ancient and modern human feelings are expressed through

their clothes.”⁵ From the architectural style and structure, it should be Qing-dynasty architecture.

Figure 2 - Ancient Theater of Official House
in Yanghe Village, Wulong Town



Photographed by the author Hengli Peng, on July 22, 2019

2.4 OFFICIAL HOUSE THEATER OF EAST MA'AN VILLAGE, HESHUN TOWN, LINZHOU CITY

The theater is located in the courtyard of the village committee of East Ma'an Village, Heshun Town. Compared with the office building of the village committee, the location of the office building is the base of the official house.

The theater has a rolling shed in front and a hard gable behind. The width is 6.69m, with a height of 2.89m and 1.43m. The wooden lattice fans and the upper and lower doors are well preserved. The depth of the front stage is 3.91 meters, and that of the backstage is 2.80 meters. The entrance is 0.91 meters wide and 2.43 meters high, and the stage faces north and south to the official house. Besides, the load-bearing structure consists of five beams and four square stone columns at the front stage, supporting the main beam. A drum-shaped mirror foundation is at the end of the column, which is about 0.40 meters high. There are long strips of pressed stone along with the platform, masonry gables and blue bricks on the forum. Four eaves pillars are engraved with couplets, and the side couplets read: "The place is not big;

⁵ The couplet was discovered by the authors during the investigation in July 2019, and the quoted content is extracted directly from this couplet.

it can serve the public for private and public purpose; the number of people is not large, but it can be proficient in everything”; the middle couplets say: “The silk and bamboo orchestral strings break through the hot and cool state of the world, pretend to play the ugly man, and describe both ancient and modern human feelings.”⁶ It emphasizes the educational function of opera performance.

Figure 3 -Ancient theater of official house in East Ma'an Village, Heshun Town



Photographed by the author Hengli Peng, on July 22, 2019)

According to the “Stele Inscription of the Renovation of Official House”, the official house in East Ma’an Village was built in the 49th year of the Qianlong’s reign (1784 A.D.) by the villagers, Li Youwen and Li Jiade. On the gable, there is also a “Stele Inscription of the Renovation of Theater”, which is inscribed as “August in the 10th year of Guangxu’s reign (1884 A.D.) of the Qing Dynasty”, indicating that the theater was renovated in Guangxu period.⁷ According to the inscription in front of the theater in 2009, the villagers held a sacrificial performance here on February 9, 2009 (the Lantern Festival), “[...] the festival lasted for several days, with gongs and drums

⁶ The couplets were discovered by the authors during the investigation in July 2019, and the quoted content is extracted directly from these couplets.

⁷ The two steles were discovered by the authors during the investigation in July 2019, and the quoted content is extracted directly from the stele inscriptions.

blaring, firecrackers blaring, singing and dancing, and more than ten plays”.⁸ It indicates that the theater is still in use.

2.5 OFFICIAL HOUSE THEATER OF LINGXI VILLAGE, SHAYAO TOWN, HUIXIAN COUNTY

The official house is located in the west and faces east. It is a hard-gable building with a masonry structure. It is built on the stone foundation, which is 8.78 meters long, 5.54 meters wide and 0.42 meters high. The gable is also made of stone. Under the front eaves, there is a gallery under the forehead, supported by two square stone columns, and covered with a bucket-shaped stone foundation. The height from the platform base to Fang is 2.76 meters, and the depth of the corridor is 1.20 meters. The room is 8.74 meters long, 5.50 meters wide and 5.43 meters high. Under the southern gable, there is a stele erected in the year of 1915. The inscription contain the following records: “[...] the money for building an empty temple is 236,000 wen” and “the money for building and repairing a theater is 321,890 wen”,⁹ which is the cost of building the official house and the theater in the early years of the Republic of China.

The theater building faces east and west, opposite the official house, was built in November of the 6th year of Xuanton’s reign of the Qing Dynasty (1914 A.D.). It is a hard-gable building with a brick wood structure. The outside of the platform foundation and gable is stone masonry, and the inside is filled with green bricks. The width of the platform entrance is 6.74m; the height of the platform base is 1.49m; the height of platform mouth is 2.66m; the height from the platform base to the main ridge is 5.74m. The bearing structure of the theater has four rafters with four columns in front and back. The front eaves columns are two square stone columns, and the column foundation is four-corner square. There are two circular columns in the background, which support the beam together with the eave columns. The front and rear wooden partition fans are no longer preserved. From the trace, the front-stage is 4.66 meters deep, and the backstage is 2.20 meters deep. On the west side of the gable, a certificate shaped door is opened, which is 1.78 meters wide and 1.77 meters high.

⁸ This stele was newly built in 2009 and is now standing in front of the theater, and the quoted content is extracted directly from the stele inscription.

⁹ The stele was discovered by the authors during the investigation in August 2019, and the quoted content is extracted directly from the stele inscription.

Figure 4 -Ancient theater of official house in Lingxi Village, Shayao Town



Photographed by the author Hengli Peng on August 12, 2019

3 CHARACTERISTICS OF OPERA PERFORMANCES IN THE THEATER OF OFFICIAL HOUSE

The situation of the opera performances in the official house theater has disappeared; however, according to the inscriptions on the stage left by the troupes in the past, the situation of performing in official house theater can be partially restored. At present, there are mainly three types of wall inscriptions found on the stage.

3.1 INSCRIPTION ON THE WALL OF OFFICIAL HOUSE THEATER IN TIANJIAZUI VILLAGE (WEST LINGXI VILLAGE), SHEXIAN COUNTY, HEBEI PROVINCE

The first thing to point out is that although Tianjiazui Village is in Hebei Province, it is located at the junction of Hebei and Henan Province, facing East Lingxi Village in Anyang County across the Zhang River (So Tianjiazui Village is also known as “West Lingxi Village”). In addition, the theater in Tianjiazui Village is the type of official house theater as well. Thus, the inscription on the wall of the theater in Tianjiazui Village is of great reference value to study the opera performances of the official house theater in North Henan Province. On its left side of the gable are the following ink book titles:

From September 21, the 3rd year of the Xuantong's reign (1911 A.D.), Hualin Opera Class sang: The first script is going downhill, the second one is Eryongcheng, the third one is Pennsylvania, the four coal mountains, the five anti-flood tunnels, six books are Dong Jialin, seven books are Jiaohai, eight books are looking for water, nine books are borrowing ice, ten books are headquartered, and eleven books are Luozhou. (YANG, 1992, p. 152).

On the right gable, there is doggerel: "In the 6th years of the Republic of China (1917 A.D.), there was a first-class pedestrian opera. On February 27, they went on stage to sing for four days (YANG, 1992, p. 152)."

3.2 INSCRIPTION ON THE WALL OF OFFICIAL HOUSE THEATER IN MUMING VILLAGE, LEIKOU TOWN, ANYANG COUNTY:

A. (FROM RIGHT TO LEFT)

From September 24th to 17th in 1917 A.D.

(Top of the repertoire from left to right)

Jiangyi Wei House

(Right of the repertoire)

Styne Zhang Linyun, director of Yixing Opera Team in Zhang Daping Tune

(Left of the repertoire)

Accountant (Shuiye Town) Zhang Ting

(The repertoire list goes from right to left, the order is one up and one down)

Longfengpei, Ji Dongfeng, Yanmenguan, Mie Xiguo, Miao, Beiqiu Shan, Daming Tu, Huoniu Zhen, Jiutou, Yinyang, Jinbo, Fu (Foshou) Ju, Caobao Lijiancheng, Dahonglian Yu Hanjin, Wang Binyong, Zhengdan Hanqi, Xiaosheng Wang Chunhua, Laodan Zhang Donglin

(Right below the list on one table)

Santang Huishen, Shenci, Wu, Fan Deng, Zou, Pan, Er Jingong, Hong Damiao, Ji Deng, Ma, Daluo, Gua Yin. (YANG, 1992, p. 159-160).

B. (OPERA LIST OF SEPTEMBER 18 IN 1924)

*Yongzhou, Touben,
Gui Hanqiao, Erben Zha Zhaowang, Heisheng Gaibao
Shiqian Daomu, Sanben Guogong Tu, Erben Liba
Hongtang, Siben Jieyi He, Er Shengxiao zhu
Chanyu, Wuben Zuochengqiao, Da Mei
Maiyou Lang, Liuiben Wuhan, Xiao Huanxin
Zou Yunnan, Qiben Fan Xitang, San
Er Yunnan, Baben Wufeng Ling, Lao Chen
Shiben Fan Tongguan
Heishui Guo, Shiyiben Fan Chang' an
(A doggerel)
There was a king of Tang Ming on the West day.
Heaven led him to heaven
Wen Wu of Hui Dynasty Performs
Wei Zhengcheng took the lead.
Left-word person Liu (YANG, 1992, p. 160).*

C. (INSCRIPTIONS IN 1925)

The 11-day deadline begins before noon on August 20, 14, of the Republic of China

Kuai Song Ji is in the city of Linyi, and Wang Fengtai, who is in charge of the theater, is performing here. (YANG, 1992, p. 160).

3.3 INSCRIPTION ON THE WALL OF OFFICIAL HOUSE THEATER IN NORTH DONGPO VILLAGE, NANCUN TOWN, HUIXIAN COUNTY

In the investigation, the authors found an inscription on the wall for the first time, which had not been recorded by the academic circle before. The specific content is as follows:

(From right to left)

Liangjia Village, Huyi, Shanxi Province

(Above the repertoire)

Liangjia Village

(From right to left, up and down in the repertoire)

1936 A.D.

Shuangfeng Du, Da Baxian, Wujue Zhen, Da Jinzhi

Zhongchen Tu, Liu Pei, Tianmen Zhen, Wufeng Lou, Hongshiguan

Bai Guan, Huan, Da Chuan, Gong, Song, Sha Gou

Dong, Guang Bei, Sha Simen, Leyi Hui, Bu Dong

(Outside the repertoire, from top to bottom)

*Leyi Hui*¹⁰

Figure 5 - Wall inscription on the stage in the official building of North Dongpo Village, Nancun Town, Huixian County



Photographed by the author Hengli Peng on August 12, 2019.

Overall, the above inscription cover a period from the year of 1910 to 1936, which can reflect the situation of local opera performance from the late Qing Dynasty to the period of Republic of China. It can be summarized as follows:

¹⁰ The inscription was found on the east wall of the official house theater in North Dongpo Village. And this is first discovered by the authors in the investigation, which has not been recorded by the academic circle before.

Firstly, local operas were mainly performed at that time. According to the inscription, the type of the opera performed in the official house theater was Dapingdiao. It was formed in the middle and late Qing Dynasty and was mainly popular in North Henan and South Hebei. The operas performed in the ancient theater of official house were mainly local ones. The name of the troupe was Yixing troupe, and the head of the it was Zhang Linyun.

Secondly, local troupes were the performing groups. Zhang Ting, Shuiye town, mentioned in the inscription on the wall, was a township of Anyang County, adjacent to Leikou, Tongye, and Duli Towns. Yixing troupe is a local opera troupe in Anyang County. Besides, Kuai Song Ji which is mentioned in the inscription on the wall, actually refers to the opera troupe from the city of Linzhou, and the leader of the troupe was named Wang Fengtai. Huyi, Shanxi Province, mentioned in the inscription on the wall, actually refers to Huguan County in Changzhi City, Shanxi Province, showing that there were both local and provincial troupes performing here at that time. Of course, considering that Huguan County is adjacent to Huixian County, the troupe from Huyi is local in the Taihang Mountain area.

With the help of wall inscription on the stage, some artists' names and roles, who performed in the ancient theater of official house, were also preserved, such as "Yu Hanjin, Wang Bingyong, Hanqi, Wang Chunhua, and Zhang Donglin (YANG, 1992, p. 160)". They all belong to the grand Dapingdiao artists of Yixing troupe from Anyang.

Thirdly, the official house theater had its opera performances mostly in the spring and autumn. Autumn was the peak season for the opera performances of Muming Village, in Leikou Town (August 20, September 18th and September 24th of the lunar calendar). The Tianjiazui Village official house, in Shexian County, was in session from February 27 to February 30 of the lunar calendar. The "Stele Inscription of the Renovation of Official House and the Construction of Theater" of this village says:

There are always spring and autumn reports in this village. An old official house has been destroyed for a long time. Now Wang Huaiyi has made a feast to invite people to renovate it. The official house becomes radiant and new, and there is no punishment sent by God. (YANG, 1992, p. 152).

It shows that the time for opera performance is in spring and autumn. The "Stele Inscription of the Renovation of Official House" in Dongshui

Village, Anyang County, says: “From now on, in the spring and autumn period, performing the opera before gods, fellow villagers burn incense and enjoys the place”. (YANG, 1992, p. 233).

The opera performance in Dongshui Village was also played in spring and autumn. Chunqi Qiubao is the essential node of local opera performance because the Taihang Mountain area belongs to the temperate continental climate. The spring is dry and less rainy, and the farmers pray for rain. According to Wu Yinmei, a villager in Nanyang Village, Duli Town, in the past, the village held opera performances in the theater of official house on April 4, and twelve Dragon Kings were invited to watch the performance for three to five days.¹¹ Yang Shulin, a villager of Dongshui village, recalled that in the past, the village paid gods an opera performance in the theater of official house on February 15 of the lunar calendar, and invited twenty-four Dragon Kings to the show for three to five days.¹² The gods invited by the opera performance are consistent, mainly the rain god, to pray for rain. The opera performed in autumn is the reward to the gods after the agricultural harvest, that is, making a wish in spring, and the autumn reward, thus is also related to the agricultural production cycle in the Taihang Mountain area.

Fourthly, the main repertoires were historical opera, reunion opera and farce opera. Historical opera occupied the vast majority of the local opera performance, such as *Huoniú Zhen*, *Ji Dongfeng*, *Yanmenguan*, *Mie Xiguo*, *Daming Yu*, *Gua Yin*, *Guogong Tu*, *Fan Xitang*, *Fan Chang'an*, *Zhongchen Tu*, *Sha Ximen*, *Tianmen Zhen*, *Wufeng Lou*, and *Hongshiguan*. The main historical opera was related to the long duration of opera performance in official house theater. The shortest time for the opera performance was three days. Some play four to five days, three times a day, with about ten to fifteen plays. The advantage of the historical opera lied in the fact that they had enough story length, such as *Fan Chang'an* having 11 scripts, *Fan Tongguan* had 10 scripts, *Wufeng Ling* has 8 scripts, and *Fan Xitang* has 7 scripts. For the troupe, the advantage of historical opera was that the costumes, props, costumes, music and voice of each book were the same, and the actors' roles and professions

¹¹ Interviewee: Wu Yinmei, female, born in 1938, from Nanyangcheng Village, Duli Town; Interviewer: Hengli Peng; Interview time: August 15, 2019; Interview place: in front of the committee office of Nanyangcheng Village.

¹² Interviewee: Yang Shulin, male, born in 1949, from Dongshui Village, Duli Town; Interviewer: Hanwen Li; Interview time: August 15, 2019; Interview place: Next to the official house of Dongshui Village.

were the same, too. During the performance, the actors only needed to change character name and place name, which saved the artists trouble.

There were also some auspicious reunion operas, such as *Longfengpei*, *Maiyoulang*, *Guihanqiao*, *Jieyi He*, *Zha Zhaowang*, *Shiqian Daomu*, *Da Baxian Sha Gou* and *Da Jinzhi*. The plots of these plays were vivid and interesting, and ordinary people liked to hear and see them. Moreover, the contents of these plays were auspicious. Because of this, these operas were the best of local troupes, and they were well performed and loved by the people. For example, the opera of *Zha Zhaowang* was a prevalent play in the Taihang Mountain area in the Qing Dynasty. In the Taihang Mountain of Qi County, we found the opera murals of the Qing Dynasty, including the opera of *Zha Zhaowang* and *Zha Meian*, indicating that these plays in the Qing Dynasty were top-rated in the Taihang Mountain area.

CONCLUSIONS

In general, the academic research on the ancient theater of official house is relatively weak, and there is no comprehensive investigation and research on this special theater type. It is worth noting that these theaters have not received due attention and proper protection. Some of them have been used for other purposes, while others have been eroded by wind and rain. If they are not repaired and protected in time, these precious cultural relics will disappear in the depth of History. Therefore, through field investigation, the authors and team members have comprehensively recorded and verified the data and information of these theaters, which will not only provide new research materials for the study of Chinese opera and ancient theater architecture, but also contribute to the rescue protection of this historical architectural heritage. Besides, the following conclusions can be drawn after the research:

First, the “official house” is derived from the ancient official language, which refers to the house both built and owned by the government. The folk borrowed this term to refer to the houses built in the village and owned collectively by the village. In the Taihang Mountain area, it refers to the public house where the gods are entertained with opera performance.

Second, even though the official house and the temple perform essentially the same tasks, there are some key distinctions between the two. A temple is a location where people go to worship the gods, and religious