



中国戏曲海外传播工程丛书

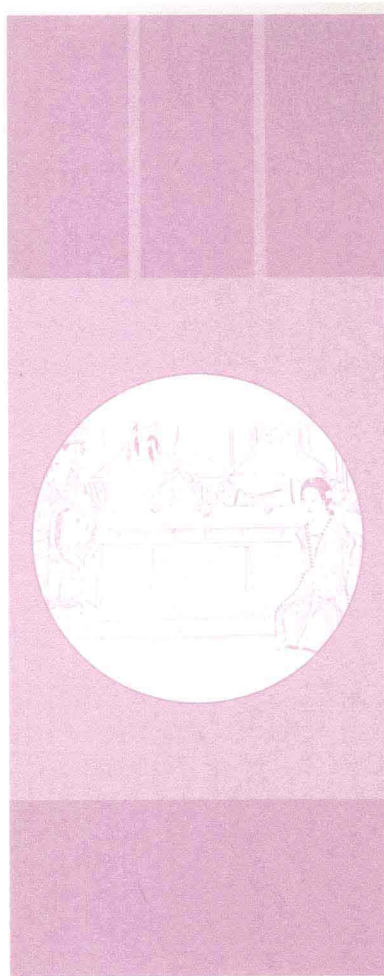
# Qin Xianglian

- A Beijing Opera

Translation,  
Introduction and Annotations  
by Chen Rong (陈融)



京剧  
——  
秦香莲



The Project for Disseminating Chinese Operatic Dramas Overseas  
Sponsored by  
the "985 Project" of Renmin University of China

中国戏曲海外传播工程丛书

■ 京剧 — 秦香莲 ■

# Qin Xianglian

— A Beijing Opera



Translation, Introduction and Annotations

by Chen Rong (陈融)

外语教学与研究出版社  
FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING AND RESEARCH PRESS

北京 BEIJING



## 图书在版编目(CIP)数据

秦香莲 = Qin Xianglian : A Beijing Opera : 英文 / 陈融编译. — 北京 : 外语教学与研究出版社, 2013. 9

(中国戏曲海外传播工程丛书. 京剧)

ISBN 978-7-5135-3636-3

I. ① 秦... II. ① 陈... III. ① 京剧—介绍—英文 IV. ① J821

中国版本图书馆CIP数据核字(2013)第233850号

---

出 版 人: 蔡剑峰	丛书策划: 吴 浩	开 本: 650×980 1/16
责任编辑: 段会香	装帧设计: 覃一彪	印 张: 14.5
出版发行: 外语教学与研究出版社		版 次: 2013年10月第1版
社 址: 北京市西三环北路19号(100089)		2013年10月第1次印刷
网 址: <a href="http://www.fltrp.com">http://www.fltrp.com</a>		书 号: ISBN 978-7-5135-3636-3
印 刷: 中国农业出版社印刷厂		定 价: 39.00元

---

购书咨询: ( 010 ) 88819929 电子邮箱: club@fltrp.com 物料号: 236360001

如有印刷、装订质量问题, 请与出版社联系

联系电话: ( 010 ) 61207896 电子邮箱: zhijian@fltrp.com

制售盗版必究 举报查实奖励 版权保护举报电话: ( 010 ) 88817519

## Preface to the Project

There are two Chinese terms that describe the dramatic performance on the stage in China: *xiju* and *xiqu*. The former is equivalent to the dramas in the West while the latter, frequently referred to as the Chinese national operas or Chinese local operas, is a native Chinese invention. *Xiju*, an imported art form from the Western literature, was introduced into China during the second half of the 19th century. *Xiqu*, on the other hand, has a much longer history.

As one of the three ancient dramatic forms in the world, Chinese national operas, together with ancient Greek tragedy and ancient Indian drama, have a long history of over two thousand years. It can be traced back to three types of primitive entertainment in China: exorcising dance, storytelling and ballad singing and comic dialogues. As early as the Qin Dynasty (221-206 BC), an art form began to emerge with all the three types of entertainment combined to give public shows, sometimes in the royal palaces and sometimes in Buddhist temples. It was recorded during the reign of Emperor Yang Guang (604-618 AD) of the Sui Dynasty (581-618 AD) that performers all over China were summoned by the emperor to provide entertainment from January 1st to 15th annually according to the Chinese lunar calendar. To prepare for the performance, stages were erected and lined up, stretching sometimes as long as four kilometers outside the imperial palace, a scene with a scale and grandeur that can hardly be imagined even in the 21st century. Gradually, other elements were added to the art form, encompassing acrobats, martial arts, dancing, puppet shows and leather-silhouette shows. It was not until the 13th century that the prototype of Chinese national operas finally began to take shape. Right now, there are as many as three hundred different types of Chinese national operas active on the Chinese stage, attracting millions

of theater-goers, both men and women, old and young. *Xiqu* is definitely one of the crown jewels in Chinese culture.

The idea of introducing Chinese *xiqu* to the audience outside China has been brewing in my mind for quite some time, commencing in the mid-1980s when I was working on my Ph.D. dissertation in the United States. Since my dissertation, with the title of *Shakespeare Through Chinese Eyes*, is a comparative study of Shakespeare scholarship in China with that in the West, I reviewed more than three hundred introductory and critical essays of Shakespeare written by the Chinese scholars in the course of eighty years. While browsing these scholarly works, I suddenly felt an irresistible urge to introduce Chinese theatrical dramas to the audience of the West by translating and publishing a collection of *xiqu* in the United States. However, my first attempt was not successful since my proposal was declined by some American publishers on the ground that such a book would be too scholarly to attract local readers. I only managed to have a part of my first chapter published in *Shakespeare Quarterly* as the leading essay in the Summer issue of the journal in 1986 with a note from the editor. But my initial idea has never wavered as I firmly believe that there is definitely an interest in the West in this area and I will wait for the “right time” to offer the “right” contents in a “right” way for the “right” audience.

Now, the moment I have been waiting for has finally come. After two years of preparation, “The Project for Disseminating Chinese Operatic Dramas Overseas” was eventually launched in October 2008 at Renmin University of China. The Project, which I am in charge of, is joined by a dozen of scholars who are proficient in both Chinese and English languages to work under my direct supervision. With the secured funding, the participation of the well-established scholars and the guaranteed publisher, I am enabled to expand my initial plan of simply

translating a score of Chinese dramas into a more ambitious project with the following characteristics.

First, each drama is introduced as a book-length work. Instead of a simple translation project, the rendition of the opera script only takes up a small fraction, one third or one fourth, of the book. The focus of the book is on the cultural elements embodied in this particular form of the opera, which include but are not limited to narrative and dramatic sources of the opera, the authorship of the literary work, the dissemination of the literary work, the theatrical performance, the historical evolution of the opera and its various characteristics, stage practice and cultural interpretation of the story or the legend. In other words, the translated drama serves as a springboard of introducing Chinese culture. To achieve this goal, efforts have been made by a team of researchers to prepare sufficient raw materials for each perspective writer/translator before he or she embarks on a book.

Second, I make sure that each play script chosen for the book is of the authoritative version. The authorship of a Chinese operatic drama is quite different from that of a Western opera. In the West, the authorship has been a non-issue. The fact that *La Traviata* was composed by Verdi or *La Boheme* by Puccini has never been put to question. In China, however, it is often the case that both the libretto and the music of an opera were composed by an anonymous author, and subsequent performers are free to adapt the original version into a new one. For most of the theatergoers in China, they come to the theater not to watch the gradual unfolding of the plot or the theatrical conflict of the drama; rather they are only interested in the performance of the leading actor or actress. A particular drama becomes famous due, in most part, to the particular performing style of a leading opera singer. As a result, one opera may end up, in the course of its evolution, with various versions with different

librettos, different performing styles and different musical tunes. To present the most authoritative version of an opera, we have selected the script written by the well known literati and the drama performed by the most prestigious actors and actresses. The selection is made by the distinguished scholars and specialists in the field of Chinese national operas.

Finally, we have designed the project for what both Samuel Johnson and Virginia Woolf called “the common reader.” Our targeted audience is the general public outside China, people who have a genuine interest in the Chinese culture. It is a prerequisite for all the authors to increase their “audience awareness,” a catch phrase in the US college writing class, which emphasizes the analysis of audience in terms of how much information is necessary to get one’s message across. Specially, authors are required to select the materials that appeal to the targeted audience and present them in a way that can be easily understood by the people who have no prior knowledge of Chinese national operas and culture. As a result, instead of a simple translation of the opera script, each work of the project is a creative writing loaded with background information and explanation to help “the common reader” to better understand and appreciate the opera introduced in the book.

It is our intention that our readers will find the works intelligible, interesting and entertaining. I also hope that the project offers a clearer sense of the cultural elements embodied in the selected Chinese national operas and stimulates the readers’ greater interest in Chinese national operas and Chinese culture.

He Qixin

## Preface

In its nearly two hundred years' history, the Beijing opera has put on stage three to four thousand operas. *Qin Xianglian* is among the most popular and influential. A search of 秦香莲 (the Chinese characters for "Qin Xianglian") on the very popular Internet search engine, [www.baidu.com](http://www.baidu.com), for instance, turned out 2,050,000 hits on March 29, 2011, at the time of writing this monograph. Moreover, its characters—Chen Shimei, Qin Xianglian, and Bao Zheng in particular—have become cultural icons, each representing a particular set of values and conjuring up a particular image in the Chinese mind.

The plot of *Qin Xianglian* is relatively simple. Chen Shimei, a married man with children, wins the first place in the highest imperial examination and is hence married to the princess, the emperor's sister. When his wife Qin Xianglian finds him, he refuses to recognize her and their children. He even sends an assassin to kill them but the assassin kills himself instead, due to an awakening of conscience. Qin Xianglian sues him for betrayal and attempted murder and wins the case on the verdict of Bao Zheng, an official famous for uprightness and integrity. The drama ends with the execution of Chen Shimei.

This monograph is hence devoted to *Qin Xianglian*, a success story in the Beijing opera that has stood the test of time. It aims at helping the readers gain some understanding of both *Qin Xianglian* as a Beijing opera and the Beijing opera as a form of art. It is also hoped that the reader will have a glimpse of the Chinese society—its history, philosophy, art, and social values—through the play hereby presented.

The monograph is divided into three chapters. Chapter I presents information about the plotline of the play, its major characters, and the history of its performance. In Chapter II, Interpretation and Appreciation,



commentary is offered on what *Qin Xianglian*, as a piece of literature and art, informs its audience about the society in which it is deeply rooted. It also provides basic information about the Beijing opera as a form of art to get the reader prepared for the reading of the translated play script to come in Chapter III.

The play script of *Qin Xianglian* presented in Chapter III is a translated version of the play script from Fang Rongxiang's collection. Care has been taken to strike the balance between maintaining the original flavor of the play and presenting it in ways that are in conformation to the conventions of the English language. The Appendix, The Beijing Opera ABC, is adopted from X. Yang and is attached at the end of the monograph.

Chen Rong

# *Table of* CONTENTS

## **Chapter I**

### ***Qin Xianglian* as a Beijing Opera \_ 1**

1. The origin of the story \_ 1
2. Synopsis of the plotline \_ 5
3. Main characters \_ 7
4. Performance and influence \_ 54
5. Summary of Chapter I \_ 60

---

## **Chapter II**

### **Interpretation and Appreciation \_ 62**

1. Interpretation \_ 62
2. Appreciation \_ 94

### **Chapter III**

#### ***Qin Xianglian* \_ 103**

Dramatis Personae \_ 103

Scene 1: Departure \_ 104

Scene 2: Marriage \_ 106

Scene 3: At the Inn \_ 108

Scene 4: In Chen's Palace \_ 114

Scene 5: Meeting Wang Yanling \_ 123

Scene 6: Birthday Party \_ 125

Scene 7: Temple Killing \_ 145

Scene 8: Execution \_ 148

---

#### **Bibliography \_ 166**

#### **Appendix: The Beijing Opera ABC \_ 173**

#### **Works Consulted and Cited \_ 224**



---

## Chapter I

---

### *Qin Xianglian* as a Beijing Opera

---

This chapter is entitled “*Qin Xianglian* as a Beijing opera” because *Qin Xianglian* is not only a Beijing opera. As will be discussed immediately below, the story of *Qin Xianglian*<sup>①</sup> had been in other forms of literature

and art for hundreds of years before it was adapted into the Beijing opera. As such, *Qin Xianglian* represents a cultural phenomenon. It was created in response to a need to condemn betrayal and to promote justice. It has since in turn been exerting a long-lasting influence on society, keeping alive the cultural values it promotes in a modern China where cultural norms and values are believed to be fast transforming.

This chapter serves as an introduction to *Qin Xianglian*, discussing the development of the plotline, the socio-cultural background for the creating of the characters, and—lastly—the history of its performance as well as other forms of art that share the same plot with *Qin Xianglian*.

#### 1. The origin of the story

*Qin Xianglian*, also known as *Zha Mei An* (铡美案 “The Case of Chen Shimei”), is believed to have directly evolved from the *bangzi*

---

① In this monograph, names are presented according to the Chinese convention: the family name comes before the given name. Hence the family name of *Qin Xianglian* is *Qin* and her given name is *Xianglian*. Similarly, in the name *Zhou Xinfang*—a Beijing opera performer—*Zhou* is the family name and *Xinfang* is the given name.

opera (梆子)<sup>①</sup> *Ming Gong Duan* (明公断, “The Just Verdict”). In 1953, the Chinese Institute for Opera Research rewrote the story of *Ming Gong Duan* into the Beijing opera based on various versions of the same story seen in a number of local operas: the Han opera (汉剧) (Hubei area), the Hui opera (徽剧) (Anhui area), the Chu opera (楚剧) (Wuhan area), the Dian opera (滇剧) (Yunnan area), the Yu opera (河南 area), the Ping opera (评剧) (Hebei area), the Tongzhou *bangzi* (同州梆子) (Tongzhou area), the Qin opera (秦腔) (Shaanxi area), the Hebei *bangzi* (河北梆子) (Hebei area), the Huai opera (淮剧) (areas in Jiangsu, Anhui, and Shanghai), and the Xiang opera (湘剧) (Hunan area).

However, the storyline of *Qin Xianglian* has had a much longer history. According to L. Zhang’s “About the revision of *Qin Xianglian*—A case study of opera revision in the 1950s and 1960s,” the earliest version of the story was seen in *guci* (鼓词 “Drum Verse”), verses sung by the blind in the Song Dynasty (960-1279) in the 13th century. The next reincarnation is *Zhao Zhennü and Cai Erlang* (赵贞女蔡二郎) in *nanxi* (南戏 “the South opera”), a story about Cai Erlang allowing his horse to trample on his wife Zhao Zhennü, after he has risen to a prominent position in the government. The play was very popular but was banned by the government, possibly because of the very negative image it creates of the ruling class. But the spread of the story survived the ban (L. Zhang 91). In the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), Gao Zecheng rewrote the play and named it *Pipa Ji* (琵琶记 “The Story of the *Pipa*”). However, the new version of the story takes a drastic turn in characterization. Cai Erlang, the despicable character who violates the principles of loyalty

---

① One of the oldest Chinese operas originated in Shaanxi. *Bangzi* refers in Chinese to a bamboo percussion instrument. The use of the instrument is the most pronounced feature of the opera, hence the name. It is commonly thought that the *bangzi* opera gave rise to *qinqiang*, the Shaanxi or Qin opera, which was one of the dramatic forms that led to the birth of the Beijing opera.

and filial piety in the former becomes Cai Bojie, a loyal official and a filial son in the latter. His betrayal of his wife is seen not as a result of his moral degradation but as a consequence of external, uncontrollable circumstances. The new version of the play, then, is no longer a condemnation of those who are corrupted by power but a demonstration of how one's personality and conscience are twisted by the political system. Fortunately, the image of Zhao Wuniang, the heroine of the play, remains: She is still that hard-working, devoted, and principled admirable woman, to be seen in all later reincarnations of the play, albeit renamed Qin Xianglian.

In the Qing Dynasty (1616-1911), there appeared a local opera called *Sai Pipa* (赛琵琶), whose storyline is close to the story of Chen Shimei and Qin Xianglian. By now, the storyline of *Pipa Ji* had been established in the oral literature as well as on the theatrical stage for some 400 years, so that Cai Bojie's image as a good man had been entrenched in the minds of the masses. Therefore, *Sai Pipa* changed Cai Bojie into Chen Shimei and altered the plot in the second half of the story drastically. Qin Xianglian goes to the capital to find her husband, who had left home to take the national imperial examination.<sup>①</sup> But her husband, Chen Shimei, has come out first in the examination—becoming the *zhuangyuan* (状

---

① The most important—and, in many cases the only—system to select government officials. It started in the Sui Dynasty (605 AD) and lasted till 1905. Although the system went through numerous modifications in the 1300 years of its history, its function and structure largely remained. Under this system, particularly since the Song Dynasty, there were three levels of examinations: the county level, the provincial level, and the national level. Those who passed the county level are called *xiucai* 秀才, who would have the right to enter government-run schools to prepare for the next level of examination. Those who pass the provincial level are called *juren* 举人. They become eligible to take the national examination but may also be assigned local government posts should there be any available. Those who passed the national level of examination are called *jinshi* 进士, who would be assigned to government posts at all levels. The content of the examinations varied more than the structure, but disciplines in the humanities—poetry, prose, classics, philosophy, history—were the most important.

元)<sup>①</sup>—and has been consequentially married to the emperor's sister, gaining the title of *fuma* (驸马)<sup>②</sup>. He therefore refuses to recognize her as his wife. He also sends an assassin to kill Qin and their children. Qin Xianglian attempts suicide but is saved by a god, who teaches her military strategies. She leads her army in a victorious war and is rewarded a high post in the government. Chen Shimei, on the other hand, has been sued for deceiving the emperor and is sent to Qin Xianglian's court to be judged and sentenced. Qin Xianglian reprimands him to her heart's content. But she pardons him at the end anyway, resuming their spousal relationship. Years later, the Qin opera writers in Shaanxi rewrote *Sai Pipa* into *Zha Mei An*, changing the ending of the story into Chen Shimei being executed by the judge Bao Zheng for his betrayal of his wife and his attempt to have her and their children killed (L. Zhang 91). This change won the hearts of the audience, creating a fever for the play far and wide in the country.

This is the libretto for the later play *Qin Xianglian*, about which this monograph is compiled. Compared to its earlier version *Sai Pipa*, *Qin Xianglian* has three major changes. The first change is the addition of the scene *Sha Miao* ("Temple Killing"), which highlights the assassin Han Qi, who sacrifices his own life to let Qin Xianglian and the children go free. The second change is also an addition, this time of Bao Zheng, as a character who upholds justice. Thirdly, the "live happily ever after" ending is eliminated, which helps demonstrate the strong will of Qin Xianglian: the will to see justice done on her husband.

---

① The special title exclusively for the one who won the first place in the national examination. The second place winner is called *bangyan* 榜眼 and the third place winner is called *tanhua* 探花. In the rest of the monograph, the term *zhuangyuan* will be used where necessary.

② A military position in charge of guards for the emperor's procession when he went out of the palace. Because the title was typically—and later exclusively—granted to the husband of the princess, the term *fuma* has become a proper noun.

The story of *Qin Xianglian* has been on stage for hundreds of years, for a good reason. Qin Xianglian is the representative of the fairer sex: seemingly weak but in essence unyieldingly strong. She is loving, devoted, carrying heavy burdens imposed by the society but does not complain about it. Chen Shimei, on the other hand, has become synonymous with betrayal, selfishness, corruption, and the unconscionable (G. Zhang 136). This centuries-long popularity of the play among the masses speaks of the cultural values the play promotes. Even in the modern society in which it is not uncommon to see people discard the “old” for the excitement of the new, no one has attempted to vindicate Chen Shimei—strong proof for how despicable Chen Shimei and his likes are viewed by the common folk.

## 2. Synopsis of the plotline

Chen Shimei, a scholar from Junzhou, travels to the capital for the imperial examination, leaving his aged parents and two young children—a boy and a girl—home in the care of his wife, Qin Xianglian. In the next three years, Qin Xianglian supports the large family alone, working in the field as well as at home, taking care of both the old and the young, while at the same time hearing no word from her husband. A severe drought causes a famine in Junzhou and Chen Shimei’s parents die of starvation. Qin Xianglian buries her parents-in-law and goes to the capital, with her two young children, to find her husband.

The mother and the children travel for days without sufficient supplies of food and water. When they arrive in the capital, they stop at an inn, whereby they learn, from the innkeeper, that Chen Shimei has won the first place in the highest imperial examination. He has hence gained the favor of the empress dowager and is now married to the princess, the



beloved sister of the emperor and the treasured daughter of the empress dowager.

Completely taken aback by these unexpected events, Qin Xianglian manages to get into Chen Shimei's palace to confront him. Not wanting to lose his position, power, and wealth, Chen Shimei refuses to recognize his wife and children and has them driven out. On her way out into the busy street, Qin Xianglian sees the sedan chair of the Prime Minister Wang Yanling and stops it. Kneeling down in tears, she begs Wang's help to bring justice to Chen Shimei. Realizing the magnitude of the case—a case that involves the royal family, even the emperor himself—Wang Yanling decides that the best way to resolve the issue is to settle it without a court trial. So he tells Qin Xianglian to disguise herself as a singer to sing at Chen's birthday party the next day.

On that day, Wang Yanling arrives with Qin Xianglian as a street singer. At the birthday party, Qin Xianglian sings about her sufferings in tears but Chen Shimei refuses to show any signs of remorse. He becomes furious, believing that Qin had been brought to his residence to humiliate him. He tries several times to expel Qin Xianglian and, along the way, says things that offend Wang Yanling, the Prime Minister. An equally infuriated Wang hands Qin Xianglian his own fan upon departure, telling her to use it to gain entrance into Judge Bao Zheng's court, where she can bring a suit against Chen Shimei.

Realizing that the turn of the event may not be to his advantage, Chen Shimei had Qin Xianglian and the two children driven out of the capital. He also sends Han Qi, his bodyguard, to kill the mother and the children. In a deserted temple, Han Qi meets Qin Xianglian and learns that the people he has been ordered to kill are not Chen's "enemies"—as he has been told—but his own wife and children. His sense of fairness and principle wins the battle of morality inside him: He lets Qin Xianglian