

## Chinese Culture in Western Shadow

Margaret Chan

China is rising and the US is faltering, but that's as far as economics go. On the cultural front, the West, largely represented by American pop and rock power, has staged a highly successful invasion of the East. This was apparent to me over the last Christmas holidays which I spent in Chengdu in the Sichuan province of China.

The streets were filled with pretty girls with mascaraed lashes, rouged cheeks and lipsticked lips. They were walking about on stiletto heels, which while less crippling than bound feet, was a new and imported way of constraining women. The dandies had their hair spiked with gel and wore scarves artfully arranged about their necks in a way that suggested that the accessory had been carelessly thrown on.

But it was not the pretty girls or the guys who caught my eye. Neither was it the Santas at the shopping malls, or that fellow in the reindeer suit. It was the *piying* shadow puppet theatre which I saw being performed at a stall in Jinli.



Jinli is one of the oldest streets in Chengdu, dating to the Three Kingdoms era around 200BC. It's been turned into a marketplace of shop-lined alleys built in the style of the Qing era of the 19<sup>th</sup> century; a sort of Disneyland, without the rides, much quieter and therefore rather more charming.

Forty-five-year-old Zhou Wei has been selling Chinese leather puppets at Jinli for the past five years. Every night, he switches on the fluorescent light tube behind the white cloth screen that fronts his stall. He then throws another switch, and rock music blasts out from speakers. Mr Zhou then takes up a puppet made of oxen skin. It's been dried and stretched to transparent thinness, and cut and painted into characters, many drawn from Chinese mythology such as the Monkey King from *Journey to the West*.

But it's not Monkey, or Pigsy that attracts the crowds. They push eagerly forward when they see an Abraham Lincoln-type puppet appear. Mr Zhou presses the puppet against the screen with a bamboo rod, and moves its arms with two other rods. The puppet feet are set upon a wooden strip and can be made to "walk," and dance, which is what Abraham Lincoln did, to Michael Jackson's *Beat It*. The puppet moon walks, kicks up its feet and, of course, grabs its crotch – a move that draws appreciative laughter from the audience. Then a tall, sinuous girl puppet comes on. Her red hair announces her as Caucasian. Mr Zhou has this puppet thrusting her hips provocatively to the latest K-Pop number, *I Want Nobody but You*, by the *Wonder Girls*, a Korean girl group performing in 1960s American doo-wop style.





I asked Mr Zhou, and then later another puppeteer, forty-two-year-old Lei Keqiang, if I could catch traditional shadow puppet theatre in Chengdu. Both said I could not, outside of specially-staged cultural events. No one wants to perform the old way, they explained, because it's such a bother, they said. Besides the puppeteer, you need three musicians and a singer who can narrate using as many voices as there are characters in the story.

Now with the CD-player, a single puppeteer can delight the crowds, they said. This fact was made quite clear by the warm reception accorded to Mr Zhou's puppet show by the largely Chinese audience.

At its largest, I about 20 people around the screen, and they were all laughing and moving to the music. Western-style pop and rock is irresistible, so that even the woman selling candied fruit in the opposite stall, who must have seen the same show over and over again, could not help but bob to the beat.

Was this pop shadow puppet theatre a Jinli phenomenon? The place is about commercial as it can get. From the times of the Song Dynasty, it was the enterprising storytellers and puppeteers who had shaped Chinese folk theatre. Mr Zhou and his street stall follow in this tradition.

Conquest is often thought of in terms of war, but a quieter and more effective invasion can take place without your ever knowing that it happened. This is when a borrowed tradition gets repeated so often it unconsciously insinuates into the Everyday, the realm of ordinary daily life.

In his 1984 book, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, French scholar Michel de Certeau argues how seemingly mundane social activities such as walking in the city form “ways of operating” that combine to compose a culture. It is in the Everyday that a hegemonic force can creep in to assert subtle but profound influences upon the socio-cultural makeup of a country and a people.

And so we now have the likes of the *Twelve Girls Band*, an ensemble that plays Western classical pop on traditional Chinese instruments. The band is billed as comprising members trained at music conservatories who perform on instruments with histories that go back 1500 years. The women have also been portrayed as exotic rock chicks. The two descriptions are said in the same breath.

At the *Jinjiang* theatre on Huaxing Zheng street, Chengdu, where I had gone to watch Sichuan opera, I was presented instead with a variety show where an *erhu* player performed with virtuosic verve but whose musicianship was drowned out by the loud and funky backbeat of a recorded accompaniment.

That evening in Chengdu, I watched people watch shadow puppetry. Up in front were two children of perhaps three years of age. One, a girl wearing a pink pull-down cap was dancing energetically. The other, a boy, was partnered by his indulgent grandfather who twisted and turned with the little boy.

In Chengdu at least, traditional *piying* [shadow puppet theatre] has been commodified as cultural artifact to be self-consciously staged at art events, while street puppetry draws audiences with catchy rock and pop presentations.

These two children and many others might grow up knowing Sichuan shadow puppet only this way.

*This article first appeared in the Sunday Times, Singapore 31 Jan 2010, Think Section, p. 34. The writer is Practice Asst Professor of Theatre and Performance Studies, School of Social Sciences, Singapore Management University.*