Trading Fame for Freedom;

Chinese Opera Stars Find Haven, and Hardship, in U.S.

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Body

Down a cascade of steel steps in the half-basement ***Chinese*** video store in Elmhurst, Queens, Shi Jiehua methodically glued labels onto black plastic cases one recent afternoon as a ***Chinese*** soap ***opera*** murmured on a small television.

Suddenly, her husband, Cai Qingling, burst through the door, joking, chatting, then pausing a moment before breaking into song -- a short, shivery aria from the 16th-century ***opera*** "The Peony Pavilion."

This shoe box of a store has become a gathering place for some of the greatest ***Chinese opera stars*** -- part of a growing diaspora of ***opera*** performers who have come to the ***United States*** from China, often initially to perform, but then to stay.

They come seeking ***freedom*** for themselves and opportunity for their children. But unlike many artists from Western countries whose celebrity follows them here, the performers from China ***find*** themselves plunged into the austere world of new ***Chinese*** immigrants, a world of menial jobs, Spartan housing and little contact beyond the immigrant community.

For many ***Chinese***, the sight of Shi Jiehua shelving videotapes or Cai Qingling delivering takeout food is akin to the notion of Luciano Pavarotti scrubbing pots at a pasta joint in Little Italy. But virtually no ***Chinese opera star*** in this country can survive on performing and teaching alone.

Still, in the last 10 years, a network of ***opera*** societies, workshops and private patrons has evolved in cities across the ***United States***, especially in New York. Amateur ***opera*** buffs can study with master teachers. Legendary singers from Shanghai, here at the invitation of local ***Chinese*** arts centers, spend afternoons mingling with ***opera*** greats who have immigrated. One group scours China for talented performers, trying to lure them to live in the ***United States***.

Some wealthy ***Chinese*** here, evoking the practice in the late Ming Dynasty of having individual ***opera*** troupes attached to great households, even sponsor ***stars*** from China to come and sing for them and their friends in intimate gatherings.

On Friday night, Anna Yip, a native of Hong Kong who has been in the ***United States*** for decades, hired Alice Tully Hall at Lincoln Center to stage three scenes from Beijing ***operas***, performed by ***opera stars*** living here and one flown in from Beijing -- as well as by Mrs. Yip herself. "I'm an ***opera*** nut," she said, adding, "You come to America and you start to get homesick."

When ***opera*** resumed in Shanghai in the late 1970'***s***, after the decadelong devastation of the Cultural Revolution, Mr. Cai and Ms. Shi returned to the stage as two of the "10 pillars" of the city'***s*** celebrated Kunqu Theater Troupe. But in 1988, while on a tour of this country, they decided not to return to China.

A colleague, Chen Zhiping, who has most recently worked in a ***Chinese***-owned garment factory and who also passes time at the Elmhurst video store, followed a year later. "People have a lot of individual reasons for coming," explained Mr. Chen, who spent three and a half years in prison during the political terror of the Cultural Revolution. "Children, marriage, political reasons. Today, if I say I want a day off because I'm tired, I take a day off. On the mainland, you can't do that.

"But the basic reason," he added, "is we don't want our children to be raised in that repressive atmosphere."

Year after year, ***opera stars*** from Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou and dozens of other cities across China filter into the ***United States***, some through performing-artist visas, others through defecting from visiting ***opera*** companies. So great is the influx of talent that, unlike anywhere in China, New York regularly has performances of China'***s*** four major ***opera*** traditions by ***stars*** of the first magnitude.

"We have 21 professional resident artists," said Anna Chen Wu, the president of the Kunqu Society. "But none of them are full-time. Some don't even speak any English. Many of them work in garment factories, restaurants, small jobs like that. But they are some of the best ***opera*** musicians and singers in the world."

For Ms. Shi, 51, whose name was known in every Shanghai household during the peak of her career, leaving China meant forsaking ***fame*** and entering an unknown world. "What did we know about the ***U.S.***?" she said. "When we came, there was almost no one here. But we had to do this for our son. So what if we are not famous here?"

In Flushing, Queens, Agnes Ho and her husband, Steve, have turned their red-brick house into a nerve center of ***Chinese opera***. A dining table is heaped with immigration documents for ***opera*** singers, grant applications to Federal and state arts agencies, invitations to ***opera*** troupes in China. A basement walled in mirrors serves as a practice room.

From here, Mrs. Ho, 61, runs the Tung Ching ***Chinese*** Center for the Arts, a nonprofit group that has sponsored more than 50 ***opera stars*** to come to live in the ***United States***.

"All these ***opera stars*** stay here because in China they neglect culture," she said. "We're trying to keep this alive. We devote all our time to this."

Mrs. Ho, who emigrated from Hong Kong in 1968, said the effort began almost by chance in 1984, when she and her husband met a ***Chinese*** musician who had played the erhu -- a long-necked, two-string instrument with a slightly nasal tone -- in ***opera*** orchestras in China. "He said he wanted to stay here," Mrs. Ho said, "so we helped him."

Behind the brick house, Mrs. Ho and one of her boarders, a newly arrived ***opera*** performer named Xie Dong, opened a shed filled with costumes and props. Silk and satin robes, densely layered with gold and silver embroidery, sat on shelves carefully labeled with the names of individual ***operas***. A steamer trunk overflowed with swords in elaborate scabbards. Mrs. Ho bought the collection, which she thinks may be the largest of its kind, with money she earned here as an insurance agent.

Last year, a 40-member ***opera*** troupe from the northern ***Chinese*** city of Shenyang went to Berkeley, Calif., to perform. Three of the leading performers, all award winners in China, fled the troupe and sought help from Mrs. Ho. All three now live in Queens, around the corner from the Hos' house.

Not far away, on two Saturdays each month, the annex of St. George's Episcopal church in Flushing echoes with the wail of the kundi, the bamboo flute that is at the center of kunqu (pronounced KUN-CHEW) ***opera***. Slumped in a leather armchair one recent Saturday, Mr. Chen waited for his students at the Kunqu Society workshop.

"I came to the ***United States*** in 1989, just when Tiananmen took place," he explained, referring to the ***Chinese*** Army's killing of pro-democracy protesters around Beijing's Tiananmen Square on June 3 and 4, 1989. "I love ***freedom***. That is why I am here."

On that day, 20 members of Shanghai's most prominent ***opera*** troupe were in Los Angeles to perform; as pictures of the massacre filled television screens at the troupe's hotel, eight of them sought asylum. Nearly all of them are now in New York.

The workshop in Flushing offerssix hours of courses embracing the elements of kunqu ***opera*** -- first flute, then singing, followed by movement and acting and concluding with percussion -- and all classes are led by kunqu masters who learned their art in China.

"This is a way to meet with other ***Chinese*** and to do something cultural," said Shen Kuo-chen, a Taiwanese immigrant who is working on a master's degree in ***Chinese*** art history. "For me, it is a way to learn it. I couldn't afford it in Taiwan, but I can here."

All four principal genres of ***Chinese opera*** can be seen in New York: Cantonese yue, popular in Hong Kong and Guangdong province; Beijing, now known as the national ***opera*** form; Shanghai yue, heard predominantly in central China, and kunqu, the most prized among many cognoscenti.

"It's a much more refined tradition," Isabelle Duchesne, a French scholar of ***Chinese opera*** who works in New York, said of kunqu. "It has much stricter rules on rhyming and pronunciation."

Kunqu, like the other genres, is a musical drama, but it is also a stage performance that combines ballet, poetry recital, ***opera*** and music; classical poetry and literature, sung and recited, form the basis of the drama itself. The performers dance and act in highly stylized manners, each gesture carrying a precise meaning understood by knowledgeable audiences. Elaborate and complex costumes, many with long "water sleeves" that are repeatedly folded and released in gentle movements, accord not with a historical period but with roles played by a character in the ***opera***.

At the end of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th century, kunqu was gradually displaced by the less sophisticated Beijing ***opera***, which embraced showy acrobatic and martial scenes that proved more popular to less literate audiences. Today, Beijing ***opera*** receives the most Government support in China.

Mr. Cai and Ms. Shi were among the ***stars*** of Shanghai's kunqu ***opera*** troupe, with Mr. Cai playing the physically arduous role of the "chou," or clown, in each ***opera***.

"When I was in primary school," he recalled, "some people from the Shanghai Theater School came to the school asking for applicants. I wasn't chosen, but I snuck in anyway. As it turned out, I was the only one who made it. We were really poor, and the school took care of all our expenses.

"When I was that little, I didn't look too good," Mr. Cai said, laughing. "I was ugly. I was small. I behaved terribly. So the professor said, 'You be a chou.'

"It's much easier to produce a lot of Ph.D.'s than one artist," Mr. Cai insisted, slapping the glass counter with his palm at the Elmhurst video store. "We have a saying: '10 years of training and three seconds on stage.' Our whole lives are ***opera***."

When he is not helping his wife at the video shop, Mr. Cai pilots a small van around Queens, delivering ***Chinese*** food. "Yes, it is very difficult here," he said. "In China, we didn't have to do anything except put on makeup and perform. There were even people to put on our hats. The Communist Party called us 'engineers of the human soul.' But still, we had to come here to be free, to raise our son here."

Earlier this month, Ms. Shi returned from an ***opera*** tour in Austria. While she was gone, Mr. Cai and Mr. Chen performed at a gala ***opera*** with two visiting ***stars*** from Shanghai before several hundred kunqu aficionados at the Taipei Theater, on the Avenue of the Americas at 49th Street in Manhattan.

"As artists," Mr. Chen said, "we would like to improve our artistry. But we all have to work in the daytime, so we don't have lots of chances to see each other'**s** art. We don't have a lot of opportunity to practice."

Strains of an operatic aria drifted from the television. "But you know," Ms. Shi said, "our son does not like kunqu. He'**s** 15. He listens to Janet Jackson."

Graphic

Photos: Lu Weizhi practicing a movement taught by Shi Jiehua, a former Shanghai ***opera star*** who works in a Queens video store. (Chang W. Lee/The New York Times); Ms. Shi, center, and her husband, Cai Qingling, left, with a colleague, Chen Zhiping. Mr. Chen, who has worked in a garment factory, moved to the ***United States*** in 1989. In the photograph at far left, Mr. Cai, right, performs with Lu Weizhi. (Chang W. Lee/The New York Times)(pg. 25); Zhao Chunqi, left, leading a percussion workshop. Students included Shen Kuo-chen, center, a Taiwanese immigrant, and Anna Chen Wu, the president of the Kunqu Society, which meets in Flushing, Queens.(Chang W. Lee/The New York Times)(pg. 28)

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