

Examining the decline of Chinese shadow puppetry in national identity perspective

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Abstract: Shaanxi shadow puppet theatre as well as many other traditional cultural elements has been declining since the downfall of the imperial China. This is rather a complicated cultural phenomenon caused by multiple factors. But most of these factors are related to China's pursuit for national identity. In this paper, the author explores the issue of China's national identity and its relationship with traditional cultural elements (Shaanxi shadow puppet theatre is one representative case among many others). Then on the basis of field and textual research, the decline of Shaanxi shadow puppet theatre and the inner relationship between this decline and the formation of China's national identity are analyzed and discussed. The author argues that, despite the fact that Shaanxi shadow puppet theatre is an important component of China's traditional cultural identity, the decline of this traditional art as well as the decline of other traditional cultural elements is an inevitable cultural expense in the context of establishing China's new national identity.

Keywords: China, Shaanxi, shadow puppetry, national identity.

Exame do declínio do teatro chinês de sombras com bonecos, sob a perspectiva da identidade nacional

Resumo: O teatro de sombras com bonecos Shaanxi esteve em declínio desde a queda da China imperial, assim como muitos outros elementos culturais chineses tradicionais. Esse é um fenômeno cultural bastante complicado, causado por múltiplos fatores. Porém, a maioria desses fatores está relacionada à busca por uma identidade nacional para a China. Neste artigo, a autora explora a questão da identidade nacional chinesa e sua relação com elementos culturais tradicionais, sendo o teatro de sombras com bonecos Shaanxi um caso representativo, entre muitos outros. Ele analisa e discute a relação interna entre a formação da identidade nacional da China e a decadência do teatro de sombras com bonecos Shaanxi, com base em pesquisa de campo e textual. A autora argumenta que, apesar do fato de que o teatro de sombras Shaanxi ser um componente importante da identidade cultural tradicional da China, o declínio dessa arte tradicional, assim como o de outros elementos culturais tradicionais, é um preço cultural inevitável no contexto do estabelecimento da nova identidade nacional chinesa.

Palavras-chave: China, Shaanxi, teatro de sombras com bonecos, identidade nacional.

Introduction

The continuously booming economy is neither a panacea for all China's social problems nor a vaccine for possible national crises. To maintain a stable domestic political and social environment and to keep up with the international situation, China is eager to establish its new national identity. The nationwide promotion of Mandarin, the government and people's attitudes and reactions to territorial issues and the idea of "harmonious society" all carry weight in establishing China's new national identity. The decline of traditional culture elements is also related to China's search of a new national identity, as traditional culture is part of cultural identity and cultural identity is one key component of national identity. In this paper, the author chooses a

specific genre of Chinese shadow puppet theatre,¹ namely Shaanxi shadow puppet theatre, as the object of study. By looking into China's new national identity issue and studying the relationship between the decline of this traditional cultural element and the formation of China's new national identity, the author argues that the decline of Shaanxi shadow puppet theatre is an inevitable cultural expense in China's search for a new national identity, and believes that it is quite reasonable to draw inferences about other cases from this instance.

The time-honored Chinese shadow puppet theatre, which is on the verge of existing only in museum collections, is a typical case of declining traditional cultural elements amongst many others. It seems, however, that most people who take an interest in this issue, from amateurs of the grass roots to scholars of the academia, would rather concern themselves with the question of how to preserve this performing art in China's rapid modernization than engage in a causal analysis to examine the fading of traditional cultural characteristics from a national identity perspective. In consideration of its representative features, the decline of Shaanxi shadow puppet theatre is chosen as the object of study in this paper. In order to examine this theatre's decline from a broader perspective, this paper is focused on the following aspects:

- 1 China's national identity and its relationship with the decline of Shaanxi shadow puppet theatre,
- 2 Identifying the major declining periods of Shaanxi shadow puppet theatre from the late Qing dynasty to the Reform and Opening-up period, and concluding the main reasons that caused the decline,
- 3 Analyzing the inner relationship between the decline and China's search for a new national identity.

This paper consists of four sections. Section 1 is on the issue of China's national identity and its relationship with the decline of Shaanxi shadow puppet theatre; section 2 is on the background of Shaanxi shadow puppet theatre; section 3 is on the periods, reasons and analysis of the decline of Shaanxi shadow puppet theatre; and section 4 is the concluding part.

1 China's national identity and its relation with the decline of Shaanxi shadow puppet theatre

1.1 National identity and China's national identity

The purpose of this paper is to bring this concept and related theories in to examine the wane of Shaanxi shadow puppet theatre, or taking one step further, to examine the decline of Chinese traditional cultural elements as a phenomenon of cultural identity reintegration from a macro-perspective. But first of all, there are two questions that need to be briefly dealt with:

What is the definition of national identity?

What is the situation of China's national identity?

Then on the basis of the clarification of these two questions, the discussion about the relationship between China's pursuit for national identity and the decline of the Shaanxi shadow puppet theatre will be carried out.

1.1.1 The definition of national identity

Generally speaking, the concept of national identity refers both to the identity-founding elements of a nation, and to the individual's sense of belonging to it.

¹ Chinese shadow puppet theatre, also known as "shadow play" or "light and shadow play", is an ancient ballad and storytelling theatre which uses flat articulated figures (shadow puppets) to create the impression of moving humans and other three-dimensional objects. Shadow puppets are cut-out figures made of paper or animal skins. When performing, the puppets are held between a source of light and a translucent screen. Performers stand behind the screen and manipulate the puppets. During the performance, they also sing a ballad in a local tune to tell the story to the accompaniment of some folk music instruments. This folk art form is very popular in the vast rural area of China and can be found in most provinces, such as Shandong, Beijing, Sichuan, Hunan, Gansu, Ningxia, Heilongjiang, Liaoning, Zhejiang and Hubei. In China, the best-known genres of shadow puppet theatre are in Shaanxi, Hebei and Guangdong.

According to Lowell Dittmer and Samuel Kim's comprehensive discussion in their "In search of a theory of national identity", the definition of identity varies considerably across disciplines (sociology, psychology, politics, anthropology, etc.), and the definition of national identity places emphasis on different aspects when it is defined in different approaches (analytic approach and synthetic approach). An analytic definition of national identity often captures one or several dimensions of a wide range of criteria, including such essential elements as territory, ancestry, language, nationality, culture, history and religious belief. Comparatively, a synthetic approach requires more "substantive content", for instance, "why people identify with their country and their government and exactly what it is with which they identify".² The simplest and broadest definition of national identity is offered by Barrington Moore Jr. as "membership in a group that can save an individual from the anxieties of carving out his own meaningful place in the world especially when the realistic chances of doing so are tiny" (Moore, 1978, p. 488). A further study is carried out by Anthony D. Smith. He indicates that "National identity and the nation are complex constructs composed of a number of interrelated components—ethnic, cultural, territorial, economic and legal political. They signify bonds of solidarity among members of communities united by shared memories, myths and traditions that may or may not find expression in states of their own but are entirely different from the purely legal and bureaucratic ties of the state" (Smith, 1991, pp. 15-17).

The above statements made by different scholars on national identity pave the way for the author to set off his discussions in the following section. As is mentioned in the definition of national identity above, culture is an indispensable component of national identity. Then, what is the situation of China's national identity?

1.1.2 The issue of China's national identity

Werner Meissner gives a clear and concise summary in his discourse on national identity: "Individual and national identities are not static, but are changing continuously. Each individual, group and nation always tries to redefine his/her/its identity when it is changed, endangered or broken" (Meissner, 2006). This statement provides a general explanation of China's pursuit for a new national identity. But there are still several questions that need to be explained in detail, such as: did China have a national identity in its pre-modern history, when did China become aware of the Western concept of national identity and why does China need to establish a new national identity?

A common mistake made by some people is that there has existed national identity in China since ancient times. It is true that China has a long history, but the ancient China was never fit for the Western concept of a nation. Qin is the first monarchy regime set up in 221 BC. And from the Qin dynasty till the Qing dynasty, China's monarchy system lasted for more than 2000 years. So some people hold that China's national identity goes back to the Qin dynasty. This idea is argued by some scholars like Joseph R. Levenson and Liang Qichao. They claim that there was no sense of national identity in ancient China, as the term nation is a Western concept and it is different from the ancient Chinese idea of *guo*, which is actually a dynastic monarchy (Levenson, 1953). During this long historical period of more than 2000 years, the Chinese people had no idea about nation or state. All they had in mind was the imperial identity. This identity does not involve the concept of nation or individual's sense of belonging. The core of this imperial identity was simply "to serve the Monarch with loyalty"³, which prevailed for long in Chinese history.

It was not until the late Qing dynasty after the Opium War in 1840 did China begin to realize that it could not meet the challenges from the West without reform and had to learn from the West. Some radical intellectuals and social reformists advocated saving the nation with Western thought and technology. The Reform Movement in 1898 led by Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao

² See Dittmer & Kim (1993). This paragraph is a summary of Lowell Dittmer and Samuel Kim's discussion.

³ This idea, "To serve the Monarch with loyalty", is an important idea in Confucianism and well served ancient China's Monarchy system.

and Westernization Movement led by Li Hongzhang from 1860 were attempts conducted by these people. It was during this time that China accepted the Western concepts of nation and state. With the contribution of these people and the wide spread of the Western concepts of nation and state, Sun Yat-sen, a revolutionary pioneer who was later honored by the Chinese people as “Father of the Nation”, finally overthrew the Qing government and founded the Republic of China (ROC) in 1912. The establishment of the ROC marked China’s transition from a dynastic monarchy into a modern country which coincided with the Western concept of a nation. From the above, it is reasonable to say that it was in the late Qing and the early ROC period that China became aware of and accepted the Western concept of nation. And along with the establishment of ROC, China officially took its first step in constructing its national identity. This period featured the foundation of the political identity as a nation.

The period from 1912 to 1949 witnessed a rapid development of China’s national identity. The invasion of Japan in 1937 stirred up the patriotic passion of the Chinese people and facilitated the cooperation between the Kuomintang and the Communist Party (1936-1946). During the eight years’ War of Resistance (1937-1945), 21 million Chinese army men and ordinary people were killed and most part of the territory were occupied by Japanese. The whole China was fully aware that “the Chinese nation is facing the gravest danger of all time” and they should “use our flesh and blood to build our new Great Wall”.⁴ These two lines from National Anthem of China can be seen as a sign that the national identity was further developed in the period of the War of Resistance against Japan. To sum up the above discussion, the author holds that the second period of establishing China’s national identity started from 1912 and ended in 1949 when Kuomintang left mainland for Taiwan and the Communist Party seized the power. By winning the War against Japan, this development period featured the stabilization of its ethnic identity and territorial identity.

The third period for national identity covers 29 years from 1949 to 1978. The Communist Party reinforced its domination since the establishment of the PRC in 1949. So this period is deemed by the author to be a reinforcement period. The social system of centralism existed in China for almost 2000 year from the Qin dynasty to the Qing dynasty. This system is inherited and innovated by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). On analyzing China’s centralism, Mary C. Wright says: “There was no trend toward the establishment of civil liberties, and there was no trend toward government by majority decision” (Wright, 1959, pp. 2-8). From this point of view, China’s centralism is completely different to the liberal and democratic system of the West. Under such system, the central government holds the reins of power politically, economically, militarily and culturally. To consolidate its regime, the CCP launched a series of political and social movements as well as military action from 1949 to 1978. The prominent ones include the War to Resist US and Aid North Korea (1950-1953), the Movement of Anti-Rightists in 1957, the Great Leap Forward in 1958, the Movement of Anti-Right-Deviations in 1959 and the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). By making use of continuous movements, the CCP achieved its attempt to reinforce China’s political identity both domestically and internationally. So, in this period, the development of China’s national-identity-formation is characterized by a forced political identity.

China has entered a new historical period since 1978 when the policy of “Reform and Opening-up to the Outside World” was carried out. This policy has brought fundamental changes to this closed nation. These changes have benefited the whole nation in many aspects, especially in China’s economy. However, with the development of economy in the past 30 years, more and more social problems have emerged from the big changes as well. Since 1978, the increasingly bilateral flow of the personnel between China and the Western countries through tourism, study abroad, immigration and multinational corporations has blurred the state boundaries and diluted the people’s sense of ethnical identity. The surge of Western modern culture represented by Valentine’s Day, KFC and Macdonald’s, Hollywood movies, pop music, the

⁴ Quoted from *March of the Volunteers*, the National Anthem of the PRC. The lyrics are composed by Tian Han and music by Nie Er. This song was produced in 1935.

Internet, etc. has occupied the Chinese market and weakened the position of traditional Chinese culture and the people's sense of cultural identity. Moreover, the Western ideology of democracy and liberalism, appreciated and accepted by radical intellectuals and young generations, has shaken China's political identity which is mainly based on centralism. From a national identity perspective, these changes have undermined China's indigenous ethnical, cultural and political identities. And these identities, according to the previous introduction of national identity's definition, are the crucial components of national identity. Some of these changes have already caused or stimulated serious problems that could absolutely escalate into national crises, such as the Tiananmen Square protests in June 1989 and the conflict in Tibet in March 2008. These problems have made it more pressing that China needs to establish a new solid national identity to cope with all these political, social and cultural changes.

As stated above, now that the political, social and cultural identities set up from late Qing to 1978 can no longer provide a constantly stable political and social environment, it is imperative for China to improve these identities in order to integrate them into its new national identity. And based on the changes mentioned above, the author believes that this new national identity should at least possess the following two features: modernistic and multicultural. In this sense, the alteration in China's cultural identity is bound to happen, and the traditional culture is sure to decline. With globalization as background, it is a hard job for China to make a choice between traditional culture and Western modern culture. It is more difficult for China to take a selection between centralism and liberalism. However, westernization is a general trend in the whole world. A better and very practical solution is to mix the two together. The author believes that it is suitable to define this period as a transition period, a period for China to reconstruct its cultural identity (and political identity if possible) so as to establish a new national identity.

1.2 The relationship between national identity and the decline of Shaanxi shadow puppet theatre

The relation of culture with national identity can be easily found in the definitions of national identity presented in the previous discussion. For example, Smith concludes that national identity consists of a number of interrelated components, and these components are respectively labeled with "ethnic," "cultural," "economical" and "legal political". In other words, national identity is built up on the basis of ethnical identity, cultural identity and political identity, etc. Moreover, we can also refer to the definition of culture to look into the relationship between national identity and culture from another perspective.

Generally, culture is defined as the shared patterns of behaviors and interactions, cognitive constructs, and affective understanding that are learned through a process of socialization. These shared patterns identify the members of a culture group while also distinguishing those of another group. An explicit definition made by Geert Hofstede is that "Culture is the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one category of people from another" (Hofstede, 1984, p. 51). While James Banks and Cherry McGee Banks provide a rather elaborate discourse on culture: "Most social scientists today view culture as consisting primarily of the symbolic, ideational, and intangible aspects of human societies. The essence of a culture is not its artifacts, tools, or other tangible cultural elements but how the members of the group interpret, use, and perceive them. It is the values, symbols, interpretations, and perspectives that distinguish one people from another in modernized societies; it is not material objects and other tangible aspects of human societies. People within a culture usually interpret the meaning of symbols, artifacts, and behaviors in the same or in similar ways" (Banks & Banks, 1989, p. 8).

From the above definitions, it is clear that culture can "identify the members of a culture group while also distinguishing those of another group," "distinguish the members of one category of people from another," or "distinguish one people from another in modernized societies". In a word, culture is a distinguishing identity of a group. A nation is also a group, and, according to the definition of national identity, culture certainly belongs to the identity-founding elements. So, based on the definition of both sides, national identity and culture are clearly closely interrelated.

Shaanxi shadow puppet theatre is an inalienable component of traditional Chinese theatre. And traditional theatre is likewise an inseparable component of Chinese traditional culture. So, Shaanxi shadow puppet theatre as a representative genre of Chinese shadow puppet theatre belongs to the substructure of China's traditional culture, which is part of China's cultural identity. And culture identity, by the definition of national identity, belongs to the substructure of national identity. Thus, it is understandable to compare national identity and its substructures to a pyramid model: national identity is the apex; cultural identity and other constitutional identities are in the upper level and their substructures like theatre are in the lower level; such fundamental elements as Shaanxi puppet theatre and other theatre genres compose the bottom level. Theoretically, any change in the substructure of this model could result in the shake of the apex, and vice versa. Therefore, in the case of China, to establish a new national identity would certainly bring about the change in its substructures. Practically, a further observation made by the author in the third section has discovered that national identity and this traditional art do interact on each other. The boom in Shaanxi shadow puppet theatre is beneficial to the stability and promotion of cultural and political identities. And in turn, the crisis of cultural and political identities is harmful to this traditional art. The prosperity of this art in late Qing period and its collapse in Cultural Revolution period serves as solid evidences.

Based on the above analysis, the author will examine how national identity is related to the decline of Shaanxi shadow puppet theatre in each historical period from late Qing till the present.

2 The background of Shaanxi shadow puppet theatre

As an ancient ballad and performing art, shadow puppet theatre enjoyed broad popularity in imperial China. For centuries, the shadow puppet theatre played an irreplaceable role in many important occasions, from religious rituals and festival entertainment, to births, weddings and funeral ceremonies.

There exist various schools and styles of shadow puppet theatre in China. All the schools and styles took the shape in the course of its dissemination. Of all the schools, Hua county (Shaanxi province), Tangshan (Hebei province) and Lufeng (Guangdong province) are the most famous ones, constituting three leading schools in China (Yang, 2013, pp. 20-27).

Although archaeological evidence is scarce in supporting the argument that the Chinese shadow puppet theatre can be traced back to the Han dynasty,⁵ textual research done by scholars shows that this performing art has over a thousand years of history, dating at least from the Song dynasty.⁶ Shaanxi province, where 13 dynasties including the Han and the Tang founded their capitals intermittently (in or close to today's Xi'an city), is believed to be the birthplace of Chinese shadow puppet theatre. This makes Shaanxi shadow puppet theatre one of the most important genres of its kind. Apart from its origin role, Shaanxi shadow puppet theatre is particularly chosen as the object of study of this paper also because it has several representative features as compared with the other schools: it witnessed years of warfare, survived several severe famines and the Culture Revolution, and then was gradually marginalized by the prevalence of modern mass media as China's economic system reform developed. Most shadow puppetry schools share similar features, such as Tangshan shadow puppet theatre and Lufeng puppet theatre—even other theatre forms like Beijing opera also share similar features. Thus, theoretically, the research approach of this paper is also applicable in studying another similar case of Chinese traditional theatre, and the conclusion would most likely be the same. Affected by Shaanxi's geographical location (inland of northwestern China) and China's unbalanced policy on devel-

⁵ "Shaoweng, a man from Qi, paid his respects to his Majesty with mystic techniques. His Majesty favored a concubine Madam Wang, and Madam Wang died. Shaoweng used his mystic techniques, and brought back two figures looked like Madam Wang and the god of kitchen. His Majesty saw this through his bed curtain" (Sima, 2005, p. 322). The scholars, who believe the Chinese shadow puppet theatre can be traced back to the Han dynasty, often refer to this literature.

⁶ See Gao (1999, p. 256): "It is said for generations that the origin of shadow theatre can be traced back to the death of Emperor Wu's concubine Madam Li in Han dynasty".

opment, the pace of modernization in this province is slower than that of southeastern provinces, which additionally makes the study of Shaanxi puppet theatre more fruitful (the traditional cultural elements are often better preserved in a less modernized area).

3 The decline of Shaanxi shadow puppet theatre: periods, reasons and analysis

Inasmuch as this paper places emphasis on the national identity perspective, it is necessary to first point out that, in the modern history of China, a series of national crises, arising both from foreign challenges and domestic turmoil (for instance, the Opium War in 1840, Western expansionist countries' colonization, the Japanese invasion and the Chinese Civil War), were the most pressing matters for the nation. These crises played a pivotal role in shaping China's national identity since the downfall of imperial China. This analysis is made by many Chinese and Western scholars including Werner Meissner. He says: "China's defeat in the Opium War in 1840 was the beginning of a perennial identity crisis caused by the West" (Meissner, 2006).

In Jiang Yuxiang's *Chinese Shadow Puppet Theatre*, the development of shadow puppet theatre in Qing dynasty is divided into three periods, namely the dissemination period, the maturing period and the thriving period (Jiang, 1992, p. 70). According to his text research and field research, Jiang states that the dissemination period is symbolized by the fact that the shadow puppet theatre was spread to many more cities and provinces covering Beijing, Gansu, Qinghai and Sichuan; as for the maturing period, a prominent feature is that more and more script writers emerged in this time – Li Fanguai, Zhang Yuanzhong, Guo Ankang and others; in the thriving period, more than 40 troupes sprung up in Tangshan and each troupe employed and trained apprentices for the future enlargement. Jiang separates the ROC period from the former periods and makes his discussion in another chapter. Li Yuezhong adds one declining period (early 1930's-1949) to these development phases, considering Qing dynasty and the ROC as a whole (Li, 2008, p. 21). In the following discussion, the author will adopt Li's argument in order to examine the decline of Shaanxi shadow puppet theatre in a more integrated manner.

After the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, shadow puppet theatre was "critically inherited" together with other traditional performing arts and gained vigorous support from the government of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). According to incomplete statistics compiled by the Ministry of Culture, in 1955, there were more than 900 troupes and over 5,300 performing artists in various regions. However, this booming situation is more of a policy-driven phenomenon rather than the art's self-driven result. The reasons are as follows. First, the original ritual function, which was also the major function of shadow puppet theatre, was considered as a remnant of feudalistic superstition and completely excluded from the performance, replaced by its new propaganda function formed during the war of resistance against Japanese aggression period. Second, the government set up state-owned troupes, most members of which were amateurs, to replace the private ones with professional performers. This change to some extent separated this art from its folk roots. This institutionalization of traditional theatre has been proven to be not really constructive, and even harmful to the art itself. A lot of ritual-related performances of traditional theatre were labeled as "superstitious" and prohibited by the administrators of these institutionalized troupes. Lots of shadow puppets became publicly-owned property during the institutionalization, and were lost or destroyed later in the Cultural Revolution. In addition, government's undertaking the whole business bred the inertia of those troupe members, since they did not have to face any competition. In this sense, this temporary boom can be considered as an artificial revival of this genre. A detailed discussion about these reasons can be found in Li's work (Li, 2008, pp. 30-31).

Since shadow puppet theatre on the whole was neither declining nor enjoying a real revival from the PRC's establishment to the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, it can be said that the major periods of decline include both the late Qing dynasty and the ROC Period, the Cultural Revolution Period and the Reform and Opening-up Period after the reform and opening policy was implemented. These three declining periods and the corresponding reasons for the decline will be discussed in the following paragraphs.

3.1 *The late Qing Dynasty and the Republic of China period*

Almost all the traditional performing arts suffered from natural disasters and years of warfare in the late Qing dynasty and the succeeding Republic of China. Shaanxi shadow puppet theatre was not an exception, and was additionally suppressed by the Qing government.

Chinese rulers in both the Ming dynasty and the Qing dynasty took into account the importance of theatre as it could serve as a tool for political and ideological indoctrination. For example, the Confucianism embodied in Chinese traditional theatre is significant, which well served the rule of the imperial government. Under such social and political environment, the Qing dynasty witnessed the thriving of traditional Chinese theatre, from script composition to theatrical performance. Some Chinese literati, especially those who failed to achieve great success in the imperial examination and were not able to realize their political ambitions, would usually divert their attention to other activities such as calligraphy, painting, literature and theatre. In the field of theatre, this tradition can be traced back to Guan Hanqing (often acclaimed to be the first dramatist in Chinese history) in Yuan dynasty. These literati had significant influence upon local theatre. Were it not for their contribution, some local theatre would hardly become influential in China's traditional culture, let alone affect China's national identity. In this respect, without the literati class, it would be also impossible for Shaanxi shadow puppet theatre to become one of the most influential genre of its kind.

As an opera form, the development of Shaanxi shadow puppet theatre had always been in accordance with the development of traditional Chinese theatre. Li Fanggui (1748-1810), the most important and probably the earliest Shaanxi shadow puppet theatre dramatist recorded in text, was an active advocate of this art and composed a number of scripts for Shaanxi shadow puppet theatre in the Qing dynasty. In the period of Emperor Qianlong, Li failed the imperial assembly examination held triennially in the capital. Having witnessed enough warfare, refugees, the uprising of the White Lotus Sect and the Qing government's suppression, he then started to compose scripts for shadow puppet theatre in order to cultivate people from the stage. Owing to Li's contribution, Shaanxi shadow puppet theatre developed into its thriving period shortly after his death. According to Shaanxi volume of the Records of Chinese Drama, there were dozens of troupes performing with different singing styles in a few Shaanxi counties in the late Qing period. For example, there were 20 to 30 "bowl tune" troupes with more than 100 artists in Hua county, and more than 60 "chord and plate tune" troupes in Liquan, Xingping and Xianyang regions with more than 100 famous performers (The Editing Committee of Records of Chinese Drama, 1995, p. 111). This data clearly shows that in the late Qing dynasty, Shaanxi shadow puppet theatre achieved considerable popularity among the local audience. The record of Shaanxi shadow puppet theatre in the Ming dynasty is scarce. Due to the lack of evidence, till now there are only some inferences made by Chinese scholars, saying that shadow puppet theatre was not as flourishing as it had been in the Ming dynasty because of the Ming government's strict culture policy. It seems logical to say that, compared with the Ming dynasty, Shaanxi shadow puppet theatre gained greater development in the Qing dynasty.

But that does not mean that the Qing government fully supported this collective activity. For public security concerns, local prohibitions against shadow puppet theatre were issued occasionally in Shaanxi as well as in other provinces. An announcement carried out by Chen Hongmou, the provincial governor of Shaanxi, proclaimed two bans on theatre in the fourteenth year of Qianlong (1749). One of them was "forbidding night shows", stating: "There has always been the wicked night show custom in Shaanxi...The shadow puppet theatre, certainly put on at night, also assembles many people. Both of them could cause trouble, and should be efficiently prohibited" (The Editing Committee of Records of Chinese Drama, 1995, p. 814). Similar kinds of announcements can be found in other provinces where shadow puppet theatre enjoyed vast popularity at that time. But it seems that, as Jiang points out in his book, these bans were not enforced very well. This was because some high-ranking officials and princes and dukes themselves were quite fond of this theatre and owned private troupes. And shadow puppet theatre's ritual function as well as its entertaining function was indispensable to the audience (Jiang, 1992, pp. 95-99). However, Jiang may have underestimated the Qing government's suppression,

at least in the case of Shaanxi shadow puppet theatre. On 6 August 2010, the author had an interview with Wang Tianwen, Chairman of Shaanxi Puppet Theatre Academy and a national level shadow puppet engraving master. According to Wang's statement, there were more than 60 troupes in Hua county at its most prosperous time in Qing dynasty. Implicated in the uprising of the White Lotus Sect in the Jiaqing period, shadow puppet theatre troupes greatly diminished nationwide. The famous playwright Li Fanggui died in this period. By the end of Qing dynasty, there were barely more than 20 troupes (in Hua county). In this sense, the late Qing government created a notionally restrained environment for shadow puppet theatre in this period.

It was not until the ROC period that this genre met a second striking decline. The data collected in Jiang's Chinese Shadow Puppet Theatre and Shaanxi volume of the Records of Chinese Drama show that as a result of constant warfare and economic depression, the number of "bowl tune" troupes dropped to 24 from 48 by the end of Republic of China in the 1930's (Jiang, 1992, p. 119), and only 3 "chord and plate tune" troupes survived the ROC period (The Editing Committee of Records of Chinese Drama, 1995, p. 111). Not much literature about Shaanxi shadow puppet theatre is available in this period. Yet through analyzing the political, social and economic environment of Shaanxi province at that time, some inferences can still be drawn out from the existing literature about this genre in general. The complicated situation of China in this period brought about different circumstances in different regions. Shaanxi, the base area of revolution for the CCP, had never been occupied by the Japanese army as the three provinces in northeast China had been, or colonized by Westerners as Shanghai had been. Thus the decline of Shaanxi shadow puppet theatre in this period can hardly be imputed to the "Japanese army's prohibition and destruction" as Wei Liqun stated (Wei, 2007, p. 395), or what Li Tuochen called "the bad Western customs," which "were introduced to China and spoiled China's native arts" (Jiang, 1992, p. 26). Tong Jingxin's observation provides another perspective on this decline: "Now only a group of stubborn and conservative people, (like) rural women and mineworkers, still favor this old Chinese shadow puppet theatre. As for (people from) today's intellectual class, (they) have already lost interest in it" (Tong, 1934, p. 17). Market and ideology have always played an important role in the development or decline of this genre. After the New Culture Movement and the May 4th Movement, great changes took place both in the market and the social ideology in China. From Tong's observation, it is evident that at least the intellectual class at that time paid little attention to shadow puppet theatre. On the other hand, lower classes like rural people and workers were still fond of this folk art. This well explains why at that time there were only two professional troupes which could barely enough make a living in Xi'an (Chen, 1932), capital of Shaanxi, while there were still dozens of "bowl tune" troupes in Hua county. The negative attitude of the intellectual class towards traditional folk arts reveals that change in social ideology may cause change in people's interest and eventually trigger change in market. The topic that how market and ideology affected this genre will be further discussed later.

In addition to warfare and economic depression, natural disaster is another influential reason that caused certain loss to Shaanxi Shadow puppet theatre. Some artists died from starvation or illness in the famine of 1900 in the late Qing and disastrous droughts in 1929 in the ROC, including several famous performers, following which their troupes consequently disbanded (The Editing Committee of Records of Chinese Drama, 1995, p. 113).

In summation, the major factors that caused Shaanxi shadow puppet theatre's decline in this period were: the Qing government's suppression, warfare and economic depression in the ROC, natural disasters and changes in people's ideology. Factors other than ideology are all extrinsic factors which could only temporarily obstruct the progress of an art's development, provided there are enough consumers making continuous demand in the market. But ideology is intrinsic and could alter the fate of an art as it involves change in people's interest and attitude.

The Qing government's suppression, warfare and economic depression in the ROC, natural disasters and changes in people's ideology were the factors that caused the decline in this period. From the above analysis and conclusion, the Qing government's suppression was mainly directed against the White Lotus Sect's rebellious activities and other cases jeopardizing local

public security. And Shaanxi shadow puppet theatre was involved in the incident. Therefore, the corresponding decline of Shaanxi shadow puppet theatre was merely a temporary trauma, as the art itself was not at all a threat to but an important element of China's imperial identity. While during the warfare and economic depression in the ROC, China faced constant national crises, from territorial crisis to cultural crisis. The sense and the demand of establishing a modern nation-state became stronger and stronger. The political leaders as well as the patriotic populace were craving and struggling for an independent powerful nation, and the Western science and democracy or Marxism and socialism were believed to be the effective "ideological weapons" at that time. Under such circumstances, Shaanxi shadow puppet theatre seemed to be unserviceable and negligible as a remaining element of the disintegrated imperial identity. Undoubtedly, the warfare and economic depression were two considerable objective factors. But from the national identity perspective discussed in Section 1, since the imperial identity collapsed, China had to face the situation of trying to redefine its identity (Meissner, 2006). The identity-redefining process involved the redefinition of all aspects of China's identity—legal and political identity, cultural identity, territorial identity, etc. As an element of the traditional cultural identity which had mainly served the imperial China, Shaanxi shadow puppet theatre lost its former position when China started redefining its culture identity.

3.2 *The Cultural Revolution period*

As previously mentioned, Shaanxi shadow puppet theatre, together with other traditional performing arts, enjoyed a policy-driven revival after the establishment of the PRC. But this short revival of traditional theatre soon withered as the Cultural Revolution started in 1966. This nationwide social-political movement was a 10-year catastrophe for the whole nation. During this period, not only did the economic activity grind to a halt, but countless ancient buildings, antiques, books, and paintings were also destroyed by Red Guards, as they were deemed to be remains of the Four Olds (old thoughts, old culture, old customs and old habits) which had to be rooted out from the new socialist China. As a traditional art form, especially one that had been closely related to religious ritual, Shaanxi shadow puppet theatre became a typical specimen of the Four Olds. It suffered great losses not long after the "break the Four Olds" movement spread in Shaanxi province. A great number of stage properties were destroyed, and numerous shadow puppets and shadow theatre scripts were burnt to ashes. Most professional and amateur troupes were forced to dismiss. Famous shadow theatre artists were labeled as the "bull devils and serpent demons" and were criticized and tortured, while people who had been working in those troupes were compelled to seek other occupations. Only one or two troupes survived by transforming into "work team of literature and art" or "propaganda team of Mao Zedong Thought", composing and performing "revolutionary model theatre" for the Great Cultural Revolution. Due to the chaotic environment at that time, it is not easy to find any textual or video evidence of the destruction that Shaanxi shadow puppet theatre underwent, nor is it possible to assess the exact losses. The damage to traditional theatre caused by the Cultural Revolution in Shaanxi is briefly mentioned in Shaanxi volume of the Records of Chinese Drama (The Editing Committee of Records of Chinese Drama, 1995, pp. 31-32, 68). Scholars like Wei Liqun and Jiang Yuxiang have also mentioned the severe damage and listed some specific losses that shadow puppet theatre suffered in the Cultural Revolution period in their books (Wei, 2007, pp. 493-494; Jiang, 1992, p. 70). According to Wei, Chinese shadow puppet theatre was almost suffering a drowning calamity during that time. During the author's interview with Mr. Wang Tianwen on 6 August 2010, he confirmed that the situation of Shaanxi shadow puppet theatre was essentially the same. The Cultural Revolution did not come to an end until the death of Mao in 1976. After 1978, some surviving shadow puppet theatre artists and performers resumed their old profession, and the restoration of Shaanxi shadow puppet theatre began.

The damage to the traditional culture committed by Cultural Revolution should never be underestimated. The physical damage dealt to Shaanxi shadow puppet theatre was tremendous, but it was basically limited within that period. While its influence on people's ideology went far beyond that period. After decades of aggressive propaganda and destructive actions against the

Four Olds, the traditional culture was tremendously devaluated in the whole society. During the Cultural Revolution, classes were suspended in schools and universities; pupils and students were encouraged to abandon pursuits of knowledge and culture. They were incited to join the Red Guards to devote themselves into the “great revolution”. It is worth noting that the trend of “value science and belittle humanities” in education started in this very period by following Mao’s instruction.⁷ This trend also had a considerable impact on the younger generations’ ideology and worsened the prospects of traditional culture. In fact, although the physical destruction caused the direct decline of Shaanxi shadow puppet theatre in this period, the ideological change was a more fatal factor to this traditional folk art and still has an impact on it today.

In short, in the Cultural Revolution period, the main reasons that caused the decline of Shaanxi shadow puppet theatre were the “break the Four Olds” movement and its manipulation of people’s ideology.

From the national identity perspective, this period was not long after the PRC’s foundation, and CCP’s sovereignty over the nation was not stable yet. That is why the CCP launched a series of political and social movements as is previously mentioned in Section 1. After the rupture with the former Soviet Union in 1962, China stopped the copying of political modes from its “big brother” and needed to set up its own characteristics. For Mao, there was hardly any tool at hand rather than a political movement that could both consolidate his position and enhance CCP’s sovereignty at that time. And a total destruction of the old cultural identity was seemingly a necessary means to establish a new cultural identity for the new China. In this sense, the Cultural Revolution was an impulsive social-political movement aiming at consolidating the communist political identity and a corresponding cultural identity. The decline of Shaanxi shadow puppet theatre in this period was but an “expected” cultural expense.

3.3 *The Reform and Opening-up Period*

The Reform and Opening-up policy was officially confirmed as the basic state policy in December 1978 in the Third Plenary Session of the 11th Central Committee of the CCP. It comprised of two elements: “internal reform” and “opening to the outside world”. The main aim of this policy was to reconstruct China’s economy and develop China into a modern socialist power. The program of economic reforms was led by Deng Xiaoping and some other reformists of CCP. In 1982, Deng further proposed that China should “go its own way, and develop socialism with Chinese characteristics”.⁸ Economic construction has been the central task for China from then on. In the following thirty years, the economic reform achieved great successes. Economists estimated China’s GDP growth from 1978 to 2005 at 9.5% per annum. This figure was confirmed on People’s Daily Online: “It is learned that from 1978 to 2004, China’s GDP rose from some 150 billion USD to more than 1.6 trillion USD, with an annual increase of 9.4 percent”.⁹ Since the beginning of Deng Xiaoping’s reforms, China’s GDP had risen tenfold by the year 2005.

However, the successes in China’s economic development did not see a revival of the traditional culture, and even indirectly aggravated the decline of Shaanxi shadow puppet theatre. This phenomenon can be explained from the two aspects of the Reform and Opening-up policy. On the one hand, even though the Cultural Revolution was over and the social environment allowed this folk performing art to resurrect after 1978, neither the governments at all levels in Shaanxi province nor the related professionals managed to formulate a plan or carry out any organized restoration work. From the governments’ side, economic reconstruction was a matter

⁷ See the newspaper *People’s Daily*, July 22th, 1968. On July 21th, Mao Zedong made comments on an investigation report entitled “To observe the way of training engineers and technicians by Shanghai machine tool plant”. He says that “We should still run colleges and universities. Here I am mainly speaking of science and engineering colleges and universities, but the length of schooling should be reduced, and the education system should be reformed...?”

⁸ This is from Deng Xiaoping’s “Opening Speech at The Twelfth National Congress of the Communist Party of China” on September 1st, 1982.

⁹ “China has socialist market economy in place”. *People’s Daily Online*, 2005. Available at: http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/200507/13/eng20050713_195876.html

of prime importance, leaving no excess funding or personnel for restoring local theatres. From the professionals' side, the material losses caused by the Cultural Revolution were too huge to be recovered any time soon, and the negative impact on people's ideology still remained, especially in urban areas. This situation can be attributed to the fact that the urban residents had been more often exposed to and more severely affected by the breaking-the-Four-Olds propaganda, and had an increasing identification with the modern urban life style as the economic reforms proceeded. Traditional arts related to religious or ritual activities like shadow puppet theatre were considered to be part of the old life, drawing less and less attention among citizens. Thus the restoration mainly made its limited progress in rural areas with a fairly slow pace. In fact, the neglectful and opposing attitude towards traditional culture had been growing among citizens since the New Culture Movement and the May 4th Movement. After the May 4th Movement, scientific education gradually replaced traditional education in urban areas, and the intellectuals and politicians kept pressing the ideology that "only science and democracy can save China" or "Marxism and socialism can save China" (Chen, 1984, p. 318).¹⁰ Traditional ideas and culture were consequently undermined in those periods when the whole nation faced serious national crises. On the other hand, opening to the outside world policy did not just introduce foreign capital, technology and equipment into China's market, but also brought in foreign culture and ideology. The impact on people's minds, especially urban people's minds, was significant, for extensive changes took place from people's habits and customs in their everyday life to their identification with the political system. For instance, fast food, jeans, Western festivals became popular throughout the country rapidly. The culmination of these factors was the development of China's modern mass media which decisively widened the gap between Shaanxi shadow puppet theatre and the local people's modern life. Thoroughly criticized and wiped out during the Cultural Revolution, Shaanxi shadow puppet theatre was only performed as a festival entertainment in the Reform and Opening-up period. Along with the spreading of movies, television and the internet from the urban areas to rural areas, Shaanxi shadow puppet theatre was gradually replaced by these forms of modern visual mass media. As a result, the place for Shaanxi shadow puppet theatre and some other traditional performing arts in people's lives diminished to a critical point. It was not until the government began to pay attention to intangible cultural heritage after 2006 did the situation see an upturn.¹¹

As discussed above, the reasons that directly and indirectly caused Shaanxi shadow puppet theatre's decline in the Reform and Opening-up period were: the economic-reconstruction-centered policy which belittled cultural reconstruction, the sustained effect of former ideological impacts which continued to weaken people's identification with traditional culture, and modern visual mass media which rendered Chinese traditional theatre obsolete in modern society.

During the Cultural Revolution, China's economy was pushed to the brink of collapse. This situation would certainly weaken the social stability and the government's sovereignty, which would, from the national identity perspective, hinder the integration of China's new national identity. So in the Reform and Opening-up period, the whole nation began to reconstruct the economy intensively. In other words, the construction of economic identity was put in the first place. As the economic reconstruction proceeded, modernization, or a certain degree of westernization became the priority which would strengthen the power of China and people's identification with the state. As Friedman states in his book, "the new international economy based on technologies that can instantaneously penetrate borders welcomes an international culture that subverts Confucianism-Leninism throughout China" (Friedman, 1995, p. 34). Having lost its position in reconstructed cultural identity and limited by its traditional performing way, Shaanxi

¹⁰ The early enlightened Chinese ideologists advocated for western democracy and science since the New Culture Movement. Chen Duxiu believed that "only these two gentlemen (democracy and science) can save China from all the political, moral, academic and ideological darkness". While after the May 4th Movement, with the spreading of Marxism and socialism in China, some Marxists put forward that Marxism and socialism can save China.

¹¹ On May 20th, 2006, the State Council of China issued "The first batch of national intangible cultural heritage list". Four kinds of Shaanxi shadow puppet theatre were included in the list, together with other 9 kinds of shadow puppet theatre from other provinces.

shadow puppet theatre has no chance in competing with modern international cultural elements—all of its functions are either invalid or replaced by modern cultural elements. So it has little value in establishing China's new national identity, which should include a modernistic and multicultural cultural identity.

4 Conclusion

From the late Qing dynasty to the present, China has been establishing its national identity by constructing and reconstructing its political, ethnical, territorial, economic and cultural identities in order to handle all sorts of modern national crisis. Along with the rapid modernization, China is becoming more and more commercialized and globalised both economically and culturally on a daily basis. Simultaneously, the conflict between autocracy and democracy is becoming more evident in China. Some scholars even point out that northern China and southern China seem like two different countries—the north is autocratic; the south is more democratic and progressive (Friedman, 1995, pp. 77-86). Without an open, new national identity, it is more and more difficult for China to deal with a national crisis like this north-south gap.

The decline of the traditional theatre is now an accepted fact to China. The author also has at hand some statistical figures about Peking opera. In Shanghai, the biggest city of China, the number of audiences watching Peking opera dropped from 3,72 million to 0.36 million within 30 years (1953-1983) (Xu & Lu, 1990, pp. 213-214). Apart from theatre, many other traditional elements like traditional “rural festivities” and temple fairs share a similar fate. Shaanxi shadow puppet theatre is but an example of the declining traditional opera forms and a specific case of the declining traditional culture elements. In this respect, the decline of Shaanxi shadow puppet theatre is a miniature of the withering Chinese traditional culture. From the perspective of national identity, the factors caused this decline cover politics, economy, culture and changes in people's ideology. Now that the whole traditional culture already lost its importance in establishing China's new culture identity, the decline of Shaanxi shadow puppet theatre as well as the decline of other similar traditional culture elements is an inevitable cultural expense.

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