

BORIS RIFTIN AND CHINESE POPULAR
WOODBLOCK PRINTS AS
SOURCES ON TRADITIONAL CHINESE THEATER

ELLEN JOHNSTON LAING¹
University of Michigan

Boris Riftin (a.k.a., Li Fuqing 李福清), Professor at the Institute of World Literature, Russian Academy of Science, was born in Leningrad in 1932 (fig. 1). He is recognized for his extensive publications on Chinese popular literature. Two aspects of his career are less well known. First, that he often used Chinese popular woodblock prints in his research on Chinese oral performing literature. Second, that he made Chinese popular prints held in Russian collections available to a broader audience for investigation. The purpose of this essay is threefold: to introduce Riftin's work with Chinese opera prints, his efforts to publicize Chinese prints in Russian collections, and how depictions of traditional Chinese theater (referred to as opera below) in the prints might be of value in understanding aspects of the history of the genre.

Chinese popular prints are inexpensive, mostly colored woodblock prints destined for the mass market. They often are termed "new year prints" (*nianhua* 年畫). This term is misleading because only some, but not all, of these prints were printed to replace earlier versions of themselves during the New Year season. Pairs of door guard prints pasted on exterior doors, exposed to wind and rain, easily became tattered and so needed to be replaced annually. Images of the Stove God placed in the kitchen, ritually burned in New Year ceremonies, would be replaced each year with a new one. Prints in demand at other times of the year include images of protective deities, sometimes used in rituals observing their birthday. Some prints containing auspicious motifs were considered

¹ I wish to acknowledge the meticulous editing of David Rolston as well as his substantial contributions to the content of this essay.

appropriate for weddings; a large number of prints portrayed deities whose help was sought to insure safe pregnancies and delivery of children. Other subjects that did not require annual replacement at the beginning of the new year include scenes of everyday life in China as well as illustrations to novels, legends, and stories. Chinese opera scenes, printed in the hundreds, belong to this category. And finally, woodblock prints were also produced for use as lantern panels, kites, fans and in peepshows (see Laing forthcoming).

This essay is in three parts. To appreciate Riftin and his work it is helpful to know what his predecessors achieved and his relationship to their work. Part One provides background for Riftin's work with popular prints by surveying the gathering of Chinese popular prints in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by European, Russian, and American sinologists and travelers. Riftin's participation in published studies on Chinese popular prints now in Russian collections is noted and his reputation as a scholar of Chinese popular culture is confirmed. Part Two highlights Riftin's use of Chinese popular prints in his explorations of Chinese oral performing literature through a few selected examples of how he deals with print imagery. Where appropriate, comments on his findings and interpretations are added. Part Three turns away from Riftin's own research to focus on his commitment to making the Russian print collections more generally available through two recent publications. The many theater prints reproduced in these volumes are valuable resources for investigating aspects of Qing dynasty (1644–1911) stage performances and their consumption. To demonstrate this, Part Three concludes with a brief discussion of woodblock prints of stages, actors, and opera performances and what they might reveal about the history of Chinese opera.

Part One: Boris Riftin and his Predecessors

Riftin studied with the eminent Russian ethnographer and sinologist V. M. Alexeev (a.k.a., Basil M. Alexéiev, 1880–1951), who in turn was a student of the French sinologist, Edouard Chavannes (1865–1918). In 1907, Chavannes and Alexeev traveled together in China where both acquired large collections of popular prints. Alexeev was in China again in 1909. Other important Russians traveled to China in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century for a variety of purposes. These sojourners include Dmitry A. Rovinsky (1824–1895), a pioneer in the study of Russian folk prints who collected Chinese prints in 1895; V. L. Komarov (1869–1945), a botanist who traveled in Manchuria and whose prints were

assembled in 1896–1897; and Vasily F. Novitsky (1869–1929), a captain in the Russian army who was in Manchuria and Siberia, his Chinese prints were acquired in 1907. The archaeologist P. K. Kozlov (1863–1935), who discovered the lost city of Khara-khoto, gathered Chinese prints in 1909, and N. D. Vinogradov collected Chinese prints in 1912. The Chinese popular prints they acquired are now housed in Russian museums and educational institutions (Li Fuqing 2009b; 2009c).

In the United States, the sinologist and ethnographer Berthold Laufer (1874–1934) led several expeditions to China at the same time and he also amassed a significant collection of popular prints, many of which are theater prints. One expedition led by Laufer when he was associated with the American Museum of Natural History in New York City occurred in 1901–1904. A second expedition to China was in 1908–1910, when Laufer was a curator at the Field Museum in Chicago.

In the first half of the twentieth century Alexeev, Chavannes, and Laufer received extensive appreciations of their contributions to the exploration and understanding of Chinese literature and culture (Anonymous 1918; Anonymous 1934; Eidlin 1947; Walravens 1974). As Alexeev's student, Boris Riftin loyally recorded Alexeev's scholarly interests (Li Fuqing 2001; 2009b, 450–460).

Alexeev compiled extensive records on subjects rendered in the popular prints. The thoroughness of his approach is attested in a lecture on Chinese gods of wealth presented in London in 1926 that was converted into a highly informative and well-illustrated book (Alexéiev 1928). Alexeev's notes were incorporated into his posthumous book on Chinese popular prints (Alexeev 1966). For this illustrated volume, Riftin (along with Maria L. Rudova) prepared the foreword; Riftin was responsible for the commentary and the bibliography (Bodde and Bodde 1968: 339). Later, an English language volume by Rudova (1988) presented an overview of Alexeev's popular woodblock print collection that serves as an introduction to the range of subjects in the popular print lexicon. More than thirty years after the appearance of Alexeev's 1966 book, Riftin published an essay on Alexeev's collection of popular prints and Alexeev's research on these (Li Fuqing 1999a). In 1987, Riftin himself began collecting old prints and now owns some 100 of them.²

Riftin first went to China in 1959 and repeatedly returned thereafter. He continued many of the research topics pursued by his mentor, in particular Chinese popular literature and Chinese popular prints. The scope of

² E-mail communication from Riftin to author, 12 February 2010.

Riftin's scholarly interests is evident in a lengthy essay where he details the frustrations and triumphs of his constant search for new research materials in China (Li Fuqing 2007). In the essay he lists four long-term projects for which he was then seeking research materials, both written and pictorial: 1) a book on classical novels and *nianhua*, 2) a book to be published in Beijing on Chinese minorities mythology studies and foreign literature on the subject, 3) a bibliography of foreign collections of Chinese novels and plays, and 4) the translation of a book of essays by Russian sinologists.

Riftin was acknowledged in the west for his scholarly contributions to Chinese popular culture when an anthology devoted to Chinese oral literature edited by Vibeke Børdahl was dedicated to him and the eminent Chinese scholar, Chen Wulou 陳午樓 (d. 1998). In the dedication statement, Børdahl praised Riftin as “among the most prolific and innovative scholars in the field of Chinese oral and oral-derived literature” (Børdahl 1999, xiv). Riftin contributed an essay on the *Three Kingdoms* in Chinese storytelling to this volume (Riftin 1999) and it also contains a selected bibliography of Riftin's publications in Chinese, English and German (Børdhal 1999: 340–43).

Part Two: Chinese Woodblock Prints and Riftin's Research

Riftin often uses Chinese woodblock prints in his studies exploring the relationship between text and image. In a very direct manner, he analyses the images in popular prints depicting episodes from novels, comparing the pictorial image with its textual counterpart as a means of understanding the complex, fluid relationship between popular literature, oral performance, and visual images. When he detects a discrepancy between pictorial image and written text, he endeavors to trace the origin of the anomaly to an alternative source, such as storytelling, and failing that, assumes that print artisans relied on well-known folklore.

The extent of Riftin's research is so broad and his publications so numerous that in this brief article, a few samples of his work must suffice to indicate how he has used Chinese popular prints.

Riftin and woodblock prints depicting episodes in novels

In traditional China, fiction and theater had an intimate and complicated relationship, with material from one genre constantly being adapted for the other. In individual cases it can be a very difficult business to try and prove which version came first, although there has been a persistent tendency to assume the priority of fictional versions. The

illustrations that accompanied elite editions of classical drama (*zaju* 雜劇 and *chuanqi* 傳奇) in the Ming and Qing dynasties typically depicted the characters and scenes of the plays as they might appear in real life and not as they would appear on the stage, so that there was not that much difference between illustrations for drama and fiction. With rise of popular prints of dramatic and fictional material in the Qing dynasty, we see increasing influence of stage practice on the representational repertoire of both. These are the kinds of problems Riftin has to face when trying to sort out the sources of elements in popular prints and to use such evidence to argue about the development and dissemination of stories connected to the classical novels and storytelling traditions he is primarily interested in.

When scenes from plays are depicted in a woodblock print, two basic approaches are used in popular prints. Riftin identified these two approaches as being *xiju nianhua* 戲劇年畫 “theater prints” and *gushi nianhua* 故事年畫 “story prints” (Li Fuqing 1997: 133). He briefly stated the differences, saying the theater prints represented the story as seen on stage and the story prints had landscape settings. More extended commentary is useful for understanding the differences. Using the first approach, the story is represented as it would be on stage, that is, with no scenery, only a few relatively stationary props such as the ubiquitous table and two chairs for interior scenes, a rather restricted number of more movable props often held in the hand and often used symbolically (for example, a horsewhip can be used to represent a horse), elaborate costumes with unrealistic extensions such as “water sleeves” and banners strapped to the back signifying the troops under one’s control, and often non-realistic makeup that includes painting the face in a variety of colors not found in real life (figs. 2 and 3 are of this type). Prints using the second approach, however, take the same opera characters, complete with their stage makeup and magnificent stage costumes, and plunk them down in landscape or architectural settings consistent with representations of the real world but not of the traditional stage. These characters often strike the same kind of poses they would on stage, but instead of holding a horsewhip to show that they are on horseback, they now have a horse between their legs (fig. 4 is of this type). Of these two basic types of representation of opera scenes, the first is most directly valuable for suggesting actual stage presentation. Both are valuable evidence for the dissemination of particular plays and aspects of the dramatic presentation of characters.

Riftin’s primary focus has been on the development of traditional narrative fiction (written and oral) and not on drama, but this has not kept

him from paying full attention to visual representations of dramatic versions of material in the novels that he is interested in. For decades he has been working on the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (*Sanguo zhi yanyi* 三國志演義; hereafter *Three Kingdoms*) and, more recently, on the Wu Song 武松 episodes from *The Water Margin* (*Shuihu zhuan* 水滸傳). Although both novels were influenced in their formative period by pre-existing dramatic renditions of related material, the forms of theater depicted most often in popular prints developed long after these two novels were already in wide circulation and there is generally little doubt about which influenced which. But this is not to say that there are not often interesting disparities between theater prints and the novels. This has been one focus in Riftin's work and we will now look at some examples.

The Romance of the Three Kingdoms

In one essay on visual and textual versions of *Three Kingdoms* material, Riftin carefully analyzed popular prints produced in Yangliuqing 楊柳青 (near Tianjin) and elsewhere depicting the sequence of events commonly referred to as "Changban Slope" (*Changban po* 長阪坡) after dramatic versions of it. In this sequence Zhao Yun 趙雲 saves Liu Bei's 劉備 infant son, Adou 阿斗, from enemy forces led by Cao Cao 曹操 and Zhang Fei 張飛 prevents Cao Cao's army from crossing a bridge just with his presence and the power of his yell. Many of the prints place the protagonists in landscape settings, but theatrical elements, such as Zhang Fei's distinctive black and white face pattern, still appear in the renditions. Riftin published and discussed a rare print, which he dates to 1820,³ in which 12 characters with their names inscribed next to them appear (Li Fuqing 1998: 19). With regard to why the print features so many figures when Zhao Yun is the central character, he postulates that because ordinary people do not like blank spaces in pictures, the artisan filled out the scene with them.⁴ Although it is indeed possible that this was the artisan's motivation, the logic is not as strong as it might be. There are innumerable popular prints (and paintings) of one or more figures against a blank background, including one "Changban Slope" print that Riftin discusses in this very article (Li Fuqing 1998: fig. 7). In another example

³ The text at the top of the print has a note with a cyclical date that could be identified as 1820, or 1880.

⁴ In a footnote (p. 26, note 3), Riftin distinguishes popular prints from those produced by Ming print carvers, pointing out the latter's fondness for leaving blank space in their prints.

of a Changban Slope print, this one from Suzhou, besides ordinary troops, a group of women and children and unarmed men help fill the scene (fig. 4). They appear in the upper left of the print and seem primarily designed to balance Cao Cao, his retinue, and a cluster of three mounted warriors of his camp on the upper right. Here and elsewhere, Riftin stresses that print designers were free to add pictorial elements not based on dramatic or fictional sources in order to increase sales by making a print more visually appealing.

A special feature of most print renditions of Changban Slope is a vapor containing an image of a dragon rising from the diminutive infant Adou, whom Zhao Yun has tucked into his armor to protect him and to leave his own hands free to fight with. This magical mist with its dragon, a sign that the child will become the ruler of the kingdom of Shu, is not mentioned in the *Three Kingdoms* texts. Riftin notes that in Peking opera versions of the story, a dragon appears when Zhao Yun and Adou face death after Zhao falls into a pit that was especially dug to trap him.⁵ Riftin also recounts a popular tale about Liu Bei, Zhang Fei, and Guan Yu 關羽. According to that story, after the three men swore their covenant in the Peach Garden, they often feasted together. The food was always paid for by Zhang Fei or Guan Yu, while Liu Bei always dined for free. Angered, Zhang and Guan plotted against Liu. They arranged to have a meal near an abandoned well into which they planned to shove Liu, but when they tried to put the plan into effect, they found that they were unable to budge Liu. Then a dragon appeared out of the well and clasped the legs of Liu Bei's stool. Zhang and Guan recognized that this was a prediction that Liu Bei would occupy the "dragon throne" (Li Fuqing 1998: 19). There are, of course, numerous stories of extraordinary vapors and/or snakes or dragons indicating the eventual rise to imperial eminence of males who otherwise seem to have little to recommend them, and the designer of the print need not have been thinking about the story about Liu Bei that Riftin mentions (Liu Bei's future eminence is shown in the novel by entirely different means) or any story related to Liu Bei as opposed to other future emperors. There is also the possibility that the real motivation for adding the vapor and the dragon is to help the viewer see the diminutive Adou, who is almost completely hidden in Zhao Yun's armor. On the traditional Chinese stage, the most

⁵ Post 1949 versions of the play cut this detail out as superstitious. For instance, the website xikao.com has three versions of the play, all named *Changban po*. The only one of the three in which the dragon appears is the one that was published in *Xikao* 戲考 (Play Resource), published in 40 installments from 1912–1925 (the installment containing *Changban po* was first published in 1914).

comparable stage effect to the vapor shown emanating from Adou would be the sudden flash produced by the burning of phosphorescent powder (*huocai* 火彩) that was used to signify divinity, among other things.⁶

In this same study, in a section on depictions of the opera presentations of Changban Slope, Riftin notes that often the weapons used by one character differ from print to print, as can the face pattern for a character. These inconsistencies can occur in prints from the same geographical area and suggest that stage presentations were not yet standardized.

In his 1997 monumental study of Guan Gong 關公 (Lord Guan, title of respect for Guan Yu), Riftin devoted one section to popular prints of Guan Gong as a revered deity as well as how he is portrayed in prints depicting the operatic staging of episodes involving this hero of the *Three Kingdoms*. Riftin reveals that, contrary to his importance as one of the three sworn brothers and one of the major characters of the novel, Guan Gong appears in opera prints less frequently than one would expect and suggests that this is because Guan, at the time when the majority of surviving prints were made (late nineteenth-early twentieth century) was considered a god whose image had to be handled with respect. The representation of Guan Gong on stage and as a deity mutually influenced each other, with actors who specialized in playing him on stage studying statues of him in his temples (for example, see Ma Shaobo et al. 1990–2000: III, 1361), some of his devotees visualizing him sporting the banners that he wore on his back on stage (Lu Xun 1981: III, 334), and lots of images of Guan Gong stroking his beard (in Peking opera, Guan Gong is the proud possessor of the longest and fullest beard of any character).

In explaining why Guan Gong is often portrayed wearing a green robe, Riftin notes that there is a reference to Guan Gong wearing a “green brocade battle dress” in chapter 25 of the *Three Kingdoms* (Li Fuqing 1997:137). Riftin quotes one of Alexeev’s comments on Guan Gong. According to Alexeev (1966: 133) Guan Gong was dressed in green the night before his death. Alexeev gives no source for this assertion and Riftin notes that no such reference exists in *Three Kingdoms* text (Li Fuqing 1997: 167). Riftin believes Alexeev depended upon information gathered from interviews with print artisans (Li Fuqing 1997: 137). By

⁶ According to the stage directions in the *Xikao* playscript mentioned above, this kind of fireworks is used three times in the play, 1) when Zhao Yun kills Xiahou En, 2) when Zhao Yun first tries out the special sword that he got from the latter, and 3) when the dragon appears. Fireworks of this kind are not called for in the two post-1949 play scripts for the play on xikao.com.

extension, this would indicate that the print artisans sometimes relied on popular lore for their knowledge of the *Three Kingdoms* heroes.

Riftin's 1999 illustrated worldwide inventory of depictions of the *Three Kingdoms* in Chinese popular prints encompasses 468 prints and includes many heretofore unnoticed examples, especially renditions of opera productions of certain episodes (Li Fuqing 1999b). He divided his findings into five types: 1) prints that depict identifiable scenes from the novel, listed chapter by chapter; 2) illustrations to stories of *Three Kingdoms* characters not found in the novel; 3) individual portraits of *Three Kingdoms* personalities, including those in Japanese *ukiyo-e* prints; 4) multiple scenes from the novel on a single print; and 5) uses of prints of *Three Kingdoms* as a game or amusement. On the basis of his inventory, Riftin discovered that the single most popular subject for opera prints of *Three Kingdoms* stories was "Returning to Jingzhou" (*Hui Jingzhou* 回荊州). In that play, Liu Bei and his new wife, the sister of his rival, Sun Quan 孫權, foil a plot to make him a hostage dreamed up by Sun Quan's supreme naval commander, Zhou Yu 周瑜, by successfully escaping their virtual imprisonment in her brother's palace to return safely to Liu Bei's home base in Jingzhou. The reason for this print's popularity, Riftin speculates, is the Chinese insistence that newlyweds live in the husband's household and not the wife's (Li Fuqing 1999b: 32). There is the possibility that the play's use as the last item in a play-cycle known by the very auspicious name of *Longfeng chengxiang* 龍鳳呈祥 (Dragon and Phoenix Present Auspicious Signs) also has to do with its popularity, or that the play's simple poetic justice (Sun Quan tried to harm Liu Bei but ends up losing both his sister and troops that he sends to capture her and Liu Bei, a result encapsulated in a famous one line saying, *pei le furen you zhe bing* 陪了夫人又折兵 [not only lost his sister but also lost his troops]). Riftin points out that another popular subject for opera prints is the "Ruse of the Empty City" (*Kongcheng ji* 空城計). In that play Zhuge Liang 諸葛亮 successfully persuades the enemy commander, Sima Yi 司馬懿, that his empty city, manned only by a small number of old and infirm soldiers, conceals a (nonexistent) ambush. He does this by leaving the gates to the city wide open and calmly sitting in the watch tower playing his *qin*-zither. Sima Yi, detecting no nervousness in Zhuge's playing, is convinced that the latter is trying to lure him and his troops into an ambush, and calls off his army. Riftin believes the popularity of this subject is simply because the story was so widely known, coupled with the fact that the print artisans (as befits a commercial business) wanted to please their customers (Li

Fuqing 1999b: 32–33). It can also be argued that the scene was so popular because its elements are very simple but instantly recognizable and easily portrayable. In his endless quest for popular prints, Riftin has since located more *Three Kingdoms* prints in European collections (Li Fuqing 2007: 171), but even so, for those studying the iconography of the *Three Kingdoms*, his 1999 publication remains a valuable resource.

The Water Margin

Recently, Riftin has turned his attention to the *Water Margin*. His 2007 article in this journal exhaustively analyzed images in two sets of popular prints from the southern city of Suzhou, each portraying scenes from the ten chapters detailing the story of Wu Song. One set is from the Laufer collection now in the American Museum of Natural History in New York City; the other belongs to Riftin himself. Through a meticulous comparison of the print images with the received text Riftin separates the illustrations founded on specific chapters in the novel from those based on other sources. He had recourse to the records of modern performances of the Wu Song story by storytellers from nearby Yangzhou, but also believes that some elements in the pictures must be attributed to the influence of Suzhou storytellers. A major weakness, as he notes, is that no records of Suzhou storytelling texts survive.

In one instance, Riftin shows that one scene is based on a particular chapter in the novel, but the title of the scene inscribed on the print differs with regard to one of the three characters from the novel, and it further contains details not to be found in the latter. Riftin's hypothesis is that the illustration is based on oral sources (Riftin 2007: 118). On the other hand, might not the discrepancy of one character in the title be the result of the artisan's semi-literacy or carelessness? Incorrect or substituted characters are not rare in the written text on Chinese popular prints. As for the added details, might not these have been added for compositional reasons, or the need to make the scene visually more varied and interesting?

An interesting discovery of Riftin's is that one of the scenes of heroes from the *Water Margin* is not of an episode from the novel, but in a scene for a play, *Cai Family Village* (*Cai jia zhuang* 蔡家莊) that covers material not to be found in the novel. Riftin also points out that one character in the scene, Shi Xiu 石秀, does not appear in extant versions of the play. Riftin believes that the print artisan relied on his own version of the scene or perhaps was influenced by Suzhou story telling (Riftin 2007: 122–23).

The scenes discussed by Riftin in his Wu Song study are arranged as a series of twelve small scenes in the first set and twenty in the second one, a format quite different from the large, single picture format characteristic of many other prints. Riftin points out that the two sets of prints do not always present their scenes in an order that is consistent with the appearance of the material in the novel or even with logic. Riftin cautions that while storytellers follow the chronological order of events in a story so as not to confuse their listeners and for dramatic effect provide details about appearance, actions, and setting, the goal of the print designers is more to “aid the viewers in recollecting (giving an original graphic hint) the events already known to them” (Riftin 2007: 134). He expands on this idea saying that “the artist must select one moment from the whole chain of events comprising one episode and must render a scene so that the observer can see the whole picture of the event” (Riftin 2007: 135). In other words, the print designer of these multi-scene prints provides a single distillation of each episode, and is less interested in narrative details than the novelist or storyteller.

Lacking enough evidence to do otherwise, Riftin was often forced to speculate on the reasons for the anomalies he found in popular prints. But it should be kept in mind that without his work the anomalies themselves would not have been made apparent. He can also be credited for doing a lot of ground work that can become the basis for new conclusions as new materials and new approaches become available.

Part Three: Prints in Russian Collections

We now switch from Riftin’s own research to his commitment to making Russian print collections more generally available. Riftin has been instrumental in the publication of two important volumes, one in collaboration with Wang Shucun, and another in a series edited by Feng Jicai. They both are filled with beautiful color reproductions of popular prints, not restricted to opera scenes but covering a wide range of subjects. The book produced by Riftin and Wang Shucun, was published in both Russian and Chinese editions (for the latter, see Li Fuqing and Wang Shucun 1989). The second volume is part of a lavishly-produced series reproducing Chinese popular prints (Li Fuqing 2009a). These two titles contain theater prints from holdings in collections in St Petersburg, Moscow, and elsewhere in Russia, including prints acquired by Rovinsky (1895), Komarov (1896–1897), Alexeev (1909–1912), and Vinogradov (1912). For the majority of the prints, their provenance and date of collection are indicated.

Because so few Chinese popular prints are dated, those collected by the Russians between 1895 and 1912 are an invaluable reservoir of pictures for which the collection dates provide *termini ante quem*. For students of the history of Chinese opera, they are significant resources for understanding elements of the visual representation of Chinese opera in the late Qing. These prints possibly preserve the appearance of opera performances before photography became widespread. While the black and white photographs that began to proliferate about this time largely convey actors in formal poses in a photographer's studio, the prints sometimes, as will be seen below, are able to suggest actual stage action and had the added advantage of being in color.

Before turning to a discussion of opera prints in the two volumes Riffin helped produce, it is useful to first review some of the research previously done on such prints. Although the doyen of popular prints, Wang Shucun 王樹村 (1923–2009), compiled several books on opera prints, his examples are rarely specifically dated, but are only vaguely labeled as “Qing” or “late Qing” or “Republican era” (Wang 1990; 2006). Wang names the opera depicted, indicates alternate titles and identifies the characters depicted, but says little about actual performance, costuming, or makeup.

The opera prints obtained by the early Russian collectors, Chavannes, and Laufer have received limited attention. Danielle Éliasberg (1978) published many of the theater prints retrieved by Chavannes in 1907. She recognized the importance of these early theater prints and established a foundation for our understanding of them by including a short note at the end of each entry about the costumes depicted and the *mise en scène*, indicating briefly whether the imagery was true to stage productions, or was only partly accurate, or was totally without connection to the stage. Some of the Alexeev opera prints were included in Rudova's book (1988). Rudova was primarily concerned with identifying the opera stories depicted, not in explaining the staging of the story as portrayed in the print. Unfortunately, Laufer's collections in the American Museum of Natural History in New York City and the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago have never been systematically studied or published, although the American Museum of Natural History collection is available online.⁷

⁷ Online access is complicated. To get to where you input search parameters, you can either input anthro.amnh.org and from the options that come up select the home page for the Division of Anthropology,” then select “explore collection databases,” scroll down to “Asia” and select “Laufer China expedition” or google and click on the site that comes up. Once you have gotten to the interface asking for search parameters, insert “print.”

Ideally, the discussion of any opera print should be informed by as much detail as possible about such factors as who produced the image, how the image was produced, what market it was produced for, and how it was actually consumed. Unfortunately, we often know far less about these factors than we would like.

What is the relationship of the prints to actual performance? Wang Shucun has argued that at least in the case of the print shop of Dai Lianzeng 戴廉增, some of them were drawn from live performances. Dai's shop was located in Yangliuqing near Tianjin. It prospered and opened a branch in Beijing. Wang claims that the shop invited artisans from the Yangliuqing headquarters to visit Beijing to see Beijing opera performances in the local theaters and the print artisans sketched scenes that they used to make the final drafts (Wang 2006: 8). Wang's assertion might be based on several extant theater prints that have an attached sheet of paper with hand-written notes for each of the depicted characters about the colors of the items of their clothing and such things as what kind of person they are and their relationship to the other characters and the action depicted in the scene (fig. 2, after Li Fuqing 2009a: 189; for other examples see Li Fuqing 2009a: 39, 79, 88–89 and Rudova 1988: 131, 132). One is tempted to think that one of the purposes of the notes was to make sure that they were hand-colored properly and consistently, and while the colors indicated in the notes in fig. 2 match those in the print (with the exception that the color of the robe of the middle figure is not given in the notes), that is not always the case in the other examples. Although by the late Qing paintings and dough figures of famous actors were in circulation that had been done in such a way that the likeness between the image and model was clear and the identity of the actors knowable (for descriptions and publication information for examples of each see Che Wenming 2001: 285 [item H 102], 219 [item D 132]). At least to those versed in such things, the figures of the actors in the typical theater print are presented more generically and only very rarely are either the actors or the theater identified on the prints themselves, which contrasts with the care generally given to identifying the characters.

The woodblock prints that Riftin has made more widely available through the publication of Chinese prints in Russian collections can be categorized into five types according to how the stage action is portrayed. In the first category, the depictions include an opera stage on which the troupe is shown in action, and these appear to preserve the circumstances of a particular performance, the stage and its setting, and even, sometimes, some of the audience. A second kind shows a staged tableau of actors,

often four or more, posed as if they were waiting for the audience to yell “bravo” (*hao 好*), Peking opera performance at the time was punctuated by such tableaux, referred to by the special term, *liangxiang* 亮相. No part of the stage is shown, if we discount the occasional appearance in them of large moveable props such as tables and chairs. Contrasting with the static quality of the images of the second category is a third one that tries to convey an impression of the actors’ movements. A fourth class depicts characters with theatrical costume and face makeup in natural settings instead of on the stage. A fifth group consists of prints depicting toddlers performing one specific named play.

The Russian held prints published by Riftin include depictions of stages patronized by Beijing and Shanghai residents. One marvelous Yangliuqing print (Fig. 5), acquired by Alexeev in 1907–1909, purports to depict the emperor Kangxi’s (1662–1722) visit to an early Qing restaurant in Beijing named Yueming lou 月明樓 (Yueming Theater Restaurant) where guests had the option of requesting (and paying) for the performance of plays or watching plays requested by other guests. In this famous story the emperor Kangxi sneaks out of the palace to enjoy himself but doesn’t have enough money to pay his bill. The layout of the print follows the basic design of a painting of the same subject thought to fairly faithfully reflect how theater was performed in restaurants in Beijing in the early Qing (on this painting and the story see Liao Ben 1996; for publication information for the painting see Che Wenming 2001, 278 [item H 50]). The Alexeev print, however, includes elements found in public theaters of the last decades of the Qing empire in Beijing. Thus we see both the small stage on the second floor proper to theater restaurants (where theater was not the main business) together with the long tables and benches placed perpendicular to the stage typical of the public theaters. For the nighttime performance depicted in the print, the whole theater is lighted with both traditional Chinese and modern Western lanterns. A print of the same era (collected in 1907 or 1909) from Shanghai, also collected by Alexeev, depicts a horizontal bar suspended from the ceiling that lies outside the picture frame. Martial characters are shown performing acrobatic stunts on it (Li Fuqing 2009a: 400–401).

The most detailed and meticulous of the tableau prints come from Yangliuqing. They typically depict four or five actors facing forward toward the audience (or viewer of the print) with the conventional stage table and two chairs behind them. They can be frozen in lateral lunges or other dramatic poses; their eyes clearly look at each other, or are crossed in dramatic tension. Pictorial and stage convention coincide in the

placement of the most important figure of the particular episode in the center of the composition, with actors in secondary roles at either side. These are much like today's movie stills. Many of these are in the two publications reproducing prints in Russian collections (see, for example, fig. 6 and Li Fuqing 2009a: 27, 139, 141, 169).

In some of these prints, details of costume and make up are meticulously rendered (see, for example, Li Fuqing 2009a: 31, 34–35, 122, 139, 141, 162, 163). These details can be compared to paintings of scenes and individual characters produced for the court (see Che Wenming 2001: 285–86 [items H 103–107] for description and publication information) and actual costumes formerly in the Qing Imperial Palace (see Anonymous 1933–1934; Gugong bowuyuan 1983: 104–106; Che Wenming 2001: 311 [item Q 25]).

In contrast to the statically posed actors of the last category are unusual prints designed to give an impression of actors' movements, through such devices as swinging fringes of battle costumes, swirling ribbons or tassels, and the looping of long pheasant feathers. Primary examples are depictions of four combatants in two prints in Russian collections (fig. 3, after Li Fuqing and Wang Shucun 1989: 67). Notice the depiction of the pheasant feathers of the figure on the right and the tassels attached to the flags on the backs of all four figures.

The fourth category consists of theatrical figures in natural settings. This pictorial approach was discussed in the introduction to the section titled *Riftin and woodblock prints depicting episodes in novels*. The prints in this category locate the actors wearing theatrical make-up and elaborate stage costumes in realistic landscape or architectural settings unrelated to the theater stage (for examples, Li Fuqing 2009a: 46–47, 64, 74–75, 267).

Riftin, to the best of my knowledge, can be credited for publishing for the first time examples of the final category, prints showing toddlers performing specific plays with no setting whatsoever. Four examples, all from the Dai Lianzeng shop, are given (Li Fuqing 2009a: 213–15).⁸ These novelty prints cannot, of course, be taken as evidence that infants this young ever actually performed these plays, the make-up and costume of the young actors are generally in conformance with that expected of real actors of the time, with the exception that characters' who should have

⁸ Riftin had earlier reproduced one of the four in black and white and mentioned what he considered a related print (Li Fuqing 1999a: 24). That fifth print (reproduced in Alexeev 1966: 106), which is by a different workshop, does not appear related to the four Dai Lianzeng prints. It shows two toddlers looking at the bared breasts of a woman (their mother?), and does not reproduce a scene from the play that Riftin identifies it with.

face patterns painted on their faces lack them, and some of their costumes have been modified to show that the actors are indeed meant to be infants. For example, two of them are shown wearing little more than stomachers (*weidu* 圍肚) on their upper bodies and many of them are shown revealing far more “leg” than would ever be the case with older actors (see fig. 7 for an example). These prints are distinct from the more widely disseminated prints of young students causing a ruckus and playing games in the schoolroom when the teacher is absent or sleeping, some of which will include infants in theatrical garb but where either no real attempt is made to make clear what theatrical characters they are impersonating (see Wang Shucun 1986: 152–53, pls. 130–31), or, in a rare example collected by Alexeev (in 1907–1909) and also apparently published for the first time by Riftin, where sixteen children are shown performing scenes from eight different plays and the names of the plays are all indicated (Li Fuqing 1999a: 24; 2009a: 218–19).⁹

Conclusion

Scholars researching the nuances of Chinese oral literature and performance arts are beholden to Boris Riftin not only for his careful studies of the oral traditions but also for providing such rich visual treasures as the theater prints contained in the two volumes of prints in Russian collections. It is hoped that this introduction to his work and these prints will lead to their being more widely known and more fully utilized than they have been.

⁹ The Alexeev print and the Wang Shucun print are clearly related to each other.

REFERENCES:

- Alexéiev, Basil M. 1928
The Chinese Gods of Wealth. Reprint: Graham Brash, Singapore, 1989.
- Alexeev, V. M. 1966
Kitayskaya narodnaya kartina: Dukhovnaya zhizn starogo Kitaya v narodnykh izobrazheniyakh (The Chinese Folk Picture: The Spiritual Life of Old China in Folk Graphic Art). Moscow: Izdatelstvo Nauka.
- Anonymous 1918
Edouard Chavannes obituary, *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 38, pp. 202–205.
- Anonymous 1933–1934
“Xian chenlie yu Changyin ge” 現陳列於暢音閣 ([Opera costumes] Now Displayed in the Changyin Pavilion). *Gugong zhoukan* 故宮周刊 (Palace Museum Weekly), nos. 383, p. 4; 385, p. 4; 388, p. 4, 389, p. 4; 390, p. 4; 395, p. 4; 396, p. 4; 397, p. 4; 398, p. 4; 399, p. 4; 400, p. 4; 401, p. 4; 402, p. 4; 403, p. 4.
- Anonymous 1934
Berthold Laufer obituary, *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 55.4, pp. 349–62.
- Bodde, Derk, and Galia S. Bodde 1968
“Chinese Folk Art and the Russian Sinologist V. M. Alexeev,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 27.2 (February), pp. 339–47.
- Børdahl, Vibeke, ed. 1999
The Eternal Storyteller: Oral Literature in Modern China. Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press.
- Che Wenming 車文明 2001
Ershi shiji xiqu wenwu de faxian yu quxue yanjiu 二十世紀戲曲文物的發現與曲學研究 (The Discovery of Theatrical Artifacts and the Study of Traditional Chinese Theater in the Twentieth Century). Beijing Wenhua yishu.

Eidlin, L. Z. 1947

“The Academician V. M. Alexeev as a Historian of Chinese Literature.” *Harvard Journal of Asian Studies* 10.1 (June), pp. 48–59 (tr. Frances Cleaves).

Éliasberg, Danielle 1978

“Imagerie populaire chinoise du Nouvel an.” *Arts Asiatiques* 35.

Gugong bowuyuan (Palace Museum) 故宮博物院 1983

Zijincheng dihou shenghuo 1644–1911 紫禁城帝后生活, 1644–1911 (Life of the Emperors and Empresses in the Forbidden City, 1644–1911). Beijing: Zhongguo lüyou chubanshe.

Kita Yūji 喜多祐士 1992

Shoshū hanga: Chūgoku nenga no genryū 蘇州版画: 中國年画の源流. Tokyo: Shinshindō.

Laing, Ellen Johnston, forthcoming

Göttliches Walten und irdisches Glück: Volkstümliche chinesische Drucke: Die Sammlung Gerd und Lotti Wallenstein—Divine Rule and Earthly Bliss: The Collection of Gerd and Lotti Wallenstein. Nicolai Verlag, Berlin.

Li Fuqing 李福清 (a.k.a., Boris Riftin) 1997

Guan Gong chuanshuo yu Sanguo yanyi 關公傳説與三國演義 (Guan Gong and the Romance of the Three Kingdoms). Taipei: Hanchung shuju, [Reprint: Taipei: Yunlong chubanshe, 1999].

_____ 1998

“‘Sanguo yanyi’ nianhua yu Guan Yu banhua” “三國演義年”畫與關羽版畫 (Three Kingdoms Romance New Year Pictures and Prints of Guan Yu). *Chūgoku minkan hanga kokusai shinpojiumu ronbunshū* 中國民間版画國際シンポジウム論文集/ *Symposium on Chinese Popular Prints 2* (Special title: *Sekai kara mita Chūgoku minkan hanga* 世界から見た中国民間版画 [Chinese Popular Prints as Seen from Around the World]). Tokyo: Japan Folk Crafts Museum, pp. 17–26.

1999a

“Zaoqide Zhongguo nianhua shoucang ji nianhua jieshi: V. M. Alexeev nianhua shoucang jiqi yanjiu” 早期的中國年畫收藏及年畫解釋: V. M. Alexeev 年畫收藏及其研究. (Early Chinese New Year Print Collections and New Year Print Explanations: V. M. Alexeev’s New Year Print Collection and Research)” *Chūgoku minkan hanga kokusai shinpojiumu ronbunshū* 中國民間版画國際シンポジウム論文集/*Symposium on Chinese Popular Prints 3* (Special title: *Sekai kara mita Chūgoku minkan hanga* 世界から見た中國民間版画 II [Chinese Popular Prints as Seen from Around the World II]). Tokyo: The Japan Folk Crafts Museum, pp. 17–26.

1999b

“Sanguo gushi nianhua tulu” 三國故事年畫圖錄 (Illustrated Catalogue of New Year Prints Depicting Stories from the Three Kingdoms), *Lishi wenwu* 歷史文物 (Historical Relics) 11, pp. 30–50; 12, pp. 3–22.

2001

“Jinian Eluosi Hanxuejia Aliekexieyefu dansheng yibai ershi zhounian 紀年俄羅斯漢學家阿列克謝耶夫誕生一百二十周年 (Commemorating the 120th Anniversary of the Birth of the Russian Sinologist Vasili Alexeev),” *Hanxue yanjiu tongxun* 漢學研究通訊 (Newsletter for Research in Chinese Studies) 20.3 (79), pp. 63–69.

2007

“2004 nian xueshu fangwen jianbao ji fuji” 2004 年學術訪問簡報及附記 [Brief Report on Scholarly Field Trip Activities in the Year 2004 plus an Appendix]. *Chūgoku hanga kenkyū* 中國版画研究 (Research on Chinese Woodblock Prints), 5.2, pp. 163–72.

2009a

Zhongguo muban nianhua jicheng: Eluosi cangpin juan 中國木板年畫集成: 俄羅斯藏品卷 (Grand Collection of Chinese Woodblock New Year Prints: Volume on Items in Russian Collections). Beijing: Zhonghua shuju.

2009b

“Zhongguo muban nianhua zai Eluosi” 中國木板年畫在俄羅

斯. [Chinese Woodblock New Year Prints in Russia]. In Li Fuqing: 2009a, pp. 444–51.

_____ 2009c

“Shoucang Zhongguo nianhua de Eluosi bowuguan he tushuguan” 收藏中國年畫的俄羅斯博物館和圖書館 [Collections of Chinese New Year Prints in Russian Museums and Libraries. In Li Fuqing: 2009a, pp. 512–537.

_____, and Wang Shucun 王樹村 1989

Sulian cang Zhongguo minjian nianhua zhenpin ji 蘇聯 藏中國民間年畫珍品集 [Collected Treasures from Chinese Popular New Year Prints Collected in the Soviet Union]. Beijing: Zhongguo renmin meishu chubanshe.

Liao Ben 廖奔 1996

“Qing qianqi jiuguan yanxi tu ‘Yueming lou’ ‘Qingchun lou’ kao” 清前期酒館演戲圖月明樓慶春樓考 [An Investigation of the Paintings of Early Qing Theater Restaurants “Yueming Theater Restaurant” and “Qingchun Theater Restaurant”]. *Zhonghua xiqu* 中華戲曲 [Chinese Theater] 19: 1–12.

Lu Xun 魯迅 1981

“Mashang zhi riji” 馬上支日記 [Supplement to Diary on Horseback]. *Lu Xun quanji* 魯迅全集 [Complete Works of Lu Xun]. 16 vols. Beijing: Renmin wenzue, III, 334.

Ma Shaobo 馬少波 et al. 1990–2000

Zhongguo Jingju shi 中國京劇史 [The History of Peking Opera in China]. 3 vols. Beijing: Zhongguo xiju.

Riftin, Boris 1999

“‘Three Kingdoms’ in Chinese Storytelling: A Comparative Study.” In Vibeke Børndal, ed. *The Eternal Storyteller: Oral Literature in Modern China*. Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, pp. 137–60.

_____ 2007

“The ‘Tale of Wu Song’ in Chinese Popular Prints.” *CHINOPERL Papers* 27, pp. 107–39.

_____ 2010

“Chinese Performing Arts and Popular Prints.” In Vibeke Børdhal and Margaret Wan, eds. *The Interplay of the Oral and the Written in Chinese Popular Literature*. Copenhagen: NIAS Press, pp. 187–221.

Rudova, Maria 1988

Chinese Popular Prints. Leningrad: Aurora Art Publishers.

Walravens, Hartmut 1974

“V. M. Alekseev—Leben und Werk: Eine Bibliographie.” *Oriens Extremus* 21, pp. 67–95.

Wang Shucun 1986

Ancient Chinese Woodblock New Year Prints. Beijing: Foreign Languages Press.

Wang Shucun 王樹村 1990

Xichu nianhua 戲齣年畫 [New Year Prints of Opera]. 2 vols. Taipei: Hansheng zazhi she.

_____ 2006

Zhongguo xichu nianhua 中國戲出年畫 (Chinese Opera New Year Prints). Beijing: Beijing gongyi meishu chubanshe.

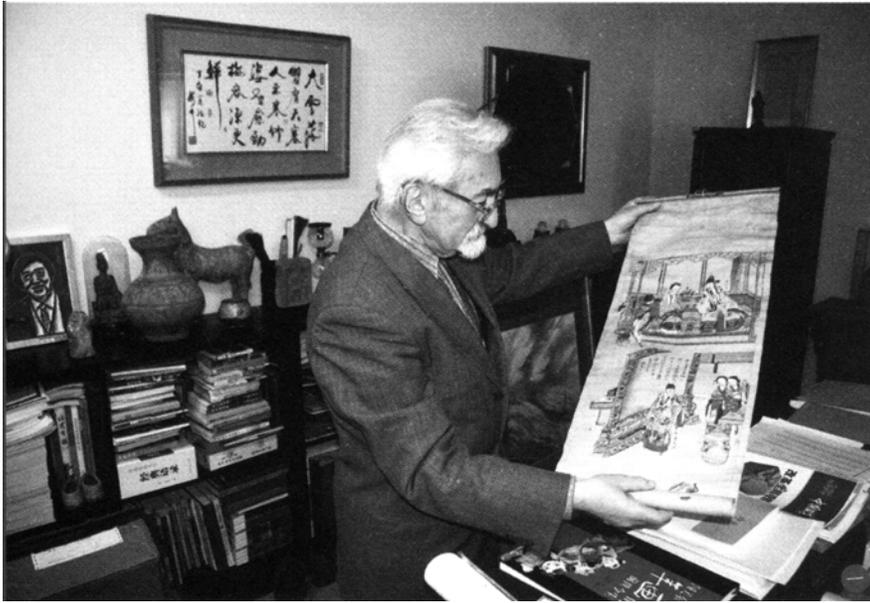


Fig. 1. Boris Riftin Examining a Chinese Woodblock Print. Photograph. Date unknown. After Li Fuqing 2009b, p. 504.



Fig. 2. *Da zaowang* 打灶王 (Hitting the Kitchen God). Woodblock opera print with designer's notes, from the Dai Lianzeng 戴廉增 print shop, Yangliuqing, collected in 1907 by Alexeev. After Li Fuqing 2009a, p. 189.



67

Fig. 3. *Zijin guan* 紫金關 (Purple Gold Pass). Undated woodblock opera print from the Qi Jianlong 齊建隆 print shop, Yangliuqing. After Li Fuqing and Wang Shucun 1989, pl. 67.



Fig. 4. *Changban po* 長坂坡 (Changban Slope). Nineteenth-century woodblock print from Suzhou. After Kita 1992, pl. 84.



Fig. 5. *Yueming lou* 月明樓 (The Yueming Theater Restaurant). Woodblock print collected by Alexeev in 1907–1909. After Li Fuqing and Wang Shucun 1989, pl. 132.



Fig. 6. *Lianhua hu* 蓮花湖 (Lotus Flower Lake). Undated woodblock opera print from the Wan Taichang 萬泰長 print shop, Yangliuqing. After Li Fuqing 2009a, p. 166.

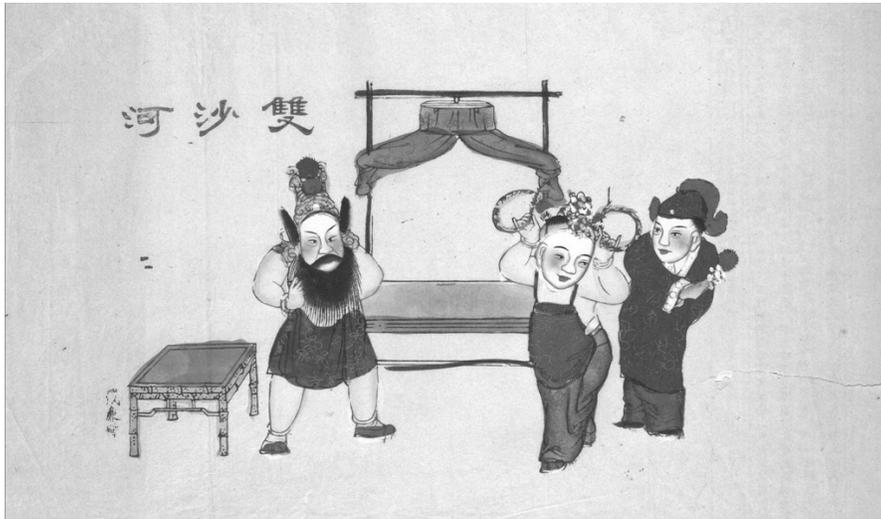


Fig. 7. *Shuangsha he* 雙沙河 (Double Sand River). Woodblock print from the Dai Lianzeng 戴廉增 print shop, collected by Alexeev in 1907. After Li Fuqing 2009a, p. 215.

