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# WASHINGTON CHU SHAN CHINESE OPERA INSTITUTE

The Washington Chu Shan Chinese Opera Institute is a special treasure of the state of Maryland and the capital region. As the Washington Post wrote in a review of the company's 2002 staging of "The Monkey King" at the Clarice Smith Center for the Performing Arts, "it is remarkable that a company specializing in such an exotic art form at such a high level of achievement exists in the Washington area." Indeed it is remarkable, and it is testimony primarily to the artistry and dedication of two individuals.

The Washington Chu Shan Chinese Opera Institute was founded in 1991 by Chu Shan Zhu and his wife Judy Huang. The couple are richly steeped in the traditions of Chinese Opera. Both come from multiple generation families of performers. Chinese Opera forms are intensely demanding artistic genres requiring years of training before even basic parts can be accomplished correctly. To reach high levels in these arts, performers start at a very young age. Both Mr. Zhu and Ms. Huang began serious training at the age of 5. They first appeared on stage at the age of twelve, and both were trained further at the Shanghai Traditional Opera College. Both rose to positions of prominence in the Chinese Opera world, Mr. Zhu as Director of the Experimental Chinese Opera Troupe at his alma mater; and Ms. Huang as a lead actress at the Beijing Opera House of Shanghai.

They arrived in the United States in 1987 and settled in Maryland. In 1991, they founded the Washington Chu Shan Chinese Opera Institute and since then, they have made an enormous contribution here, exposing tens of thousands of children to the excitement and beauty of Chinese Opera, and training an enthusiastic cultural community of Chinese Opera lovers at a high level. Their performances are legendary, and showcase internationally recognized visiting performers from Taiwan, China, and New York. Mr. Zhu is sought after around the world for his talents as a Director, and has brought a new level of sophistication in the use of costume and staging to this tradition as it continues to evolve.

"Chinese Opera" is a term that refers to a range of expressive traditions that have varied historically and regionally. Today the most popular and well-known style is Beijing Opera. This style emerged beginning in 1790, when troupes from Anhui province performed for the Qing Emperor Qianlong's birthday. Their vigorous performances appealed to audiences tired of the more subtle literary qualities of Kunqu Opera which had up until then been in favor. After this signal occasion, different styles continued to mix and add to each other; forming the pihuang drama style, the backbone of Beijing Opera music and song. Pihuang is a compound derived from *xipi* and *erhuang*. *Xipi*, a form of clapper opera, spread to Northern Hubei from Shaanxi Province in North-Central China. *Erhuang*, from Hubei and Anhui, originated in Jiangxi Province.

The Washington Chu Shan Chinese Opera Institute emphasize both excellence in the Beijing style as well as the historical and geographical diversity of Chinese opera and the Chinese performing arts, by presenting works of various genres from North and South Mainland China as well as Taiwan.

Today, as in the past, a student of Chinese opera must master a wide range of performance skills, broken down into the four categories: *chang* (singing); *zuo* (performing); *nian* (speaking); *da*

(martial arts). What makes up a Chinese opera role—whether that of the *dan* (young woman), *xiaosheng* (young man), *laosheng* (old man), or *chou* (clown)—is defined by the set of performance skills to be mastered by the performer of that role. The Washington Chu Shan Chinese Opera Institute starts with children of 5 and up, and introduces them to these challenging skills. According to Mr. Zhu, after seven years of training they acquit themselves well in productions that feature some of the tradition's finest performers.

It is through cultivating a community of supporters, rigorously training new performers, and engaging the finest talent for performances with cutting-edge production values that the Washington Chu Shan Chinese Opera Institute does so much with so little for so many. The Washington Chu Shan Chinese Opera Institute is a particularly outstanding exemplar of the diverse expressive traditions that bless Maryland's metropolitan regions. As an area of great commercial and governmental activity and opportunity an array of new immigrant communities have settled here, seeking the American dream. They have brought not only their skills and hard work, but their traditions and culture with them. Not content to see the traditions that shaped and supported their growth as individuals fade, communities throughout the region are supporting their best artists to share their knowledge and skills, and provide rich experiences both for their own communities and for the public at large. We are fortunate indeed that Mr. Zhu and Ms. Huang have made Maryland their home, and look forward to continuing to partner with them as they develop their artistry and pass down their knowledge to future generations.

Rory Turner  
Program Director: Folk and Traditional Arts  
Maryland Traditions Program  
Program Initiative Specialist  
Maryland State Arts Council (MSAC)

Rory Turner co-directs Maryland Traditions, a statewide folklife folk arts infrastructure initiative, and currently serves as President of the Middle Atlantic Folklife Association. He is a co-founder and past

President of the Baltimore International Rhythm and Drumming Society. His doctorate is from the Folklore Institute at Indiana University and he has published articles, photographs, poetry and reviews on topics including Nigerian traditional culture, art and ecology, civil war reenactments, and performance theory in journals such as *The Drama Review*, *African Arts*, *Anthropology and Humanism Quarterly*, and *Folklore Forum*.

The American Folklife Center was created by Congress in 1976 and placed at the Library of Congress to "preserve and present American Folklife" through programs of research, documentation, archival presentation, reference service, live performance, exhibition, public programs, and training. The Folklife Center includes the Archive of Folk Culture, which was established in 1928 and is now one of the largest collections of ethnographic material from the United States and around the world. Check out our web site [www.loc.gov/folklife](http://www.loc.gov/folklife)

