

## BOOK REVIEWS

***Opera and the City: The Politics of Culture in Beijing, 1770–1900.*** By Andrea S. Goldman. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012. Pp. xv + 365. \$55.00.

*Opera and the City* is an extremely well-researched and well-argued monograph on the development of commercial theatre in Beijing from the heyday of the Manchu Qing dynasty in the middle of the eighteenth century to the eve of the dynasty's collapse in 1911. As the most conspicuous "public space" in the capital city, the commercial theatre operated under the watchful eye of a suspicious government that imposed strict limitations on the physical location of playhouses and also tried to interfere in matters of audience composition and repertoire. During the reign of the theatre-loving Qianlong 乾隆 emperor (r. 1736–1795) the court itself was a major sponsor of large and small dramatic activities (including extravagant pageants on three-tiered stages), but as the emperors started to economize in the early nineteenth century, the commercial theatre became increasingly trend-setting. And while in the first half of the nineteenth century the Kunju 崑劇 style of performance remained important, by the second half of the nineteenth century both at court and in the city Pihuang 皮簧 drama (Peking opera) became fashionable and dominant. At the same time the court started to have a much more direct impact on the repertoire and the career of leading actors outside the palace as it started to invite the star performers of the commercial playhouses to perform at court. As Kunju gave way to Pihuang, the contents and performance style of plays changed too, as feminine sentimentality was replaced on stage by male bravado.

Professor Goldman's monograph consists of three parts. Part 1, "Audiences and Actors," consists of only one chapter, entitled "Opera Aficionados and Guides to Boy Actresses," which deals with a specific genre of writing on theatre which flourished from the late eighteenth to the late nineteenth century, called *huapu* 花譜 or "flower-catalogue."<sup>1</sup> These *huapu* were made up of "a tangle of biographical sketches, homoerotic poetry, and theater gossip" (p. 10). The heyday of the genre was the first half of the nineteenth century, when Kunju was still dominant. In these "flower catalogues" their authors catalogued and evaluated the popular boy-actresses

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<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this chapter was published as Andrea S. Goldman, "Actors and Aficionados in Qing Dynasty Texts of Theatrical Connoisseurship," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 68, no. 1 (June 2008), pp. 1–56.

(that is, the young boys who were trained to perform female roles) of the day, and rated them for skill, beauty, and charisma. The *huapu* may be mined for a variety of purposes. Some earlier scholars have used these materials to glorify the open practice of homosexuality<sup>2</sup> in traditional China, whereas our French colleague Roger Darrobers in his *Opéra de Pékin*<sup>3</sup> has mined these sources exhaustively to reconstruct the lives of the boy-actresses in considerable detail. Professor Goldman is especially interested in the psychology of the authors. These, she writes, tend to portray themselves as underappreciated intellectuals (that is, unsuccessful would-be officials) who because of their own position are perfectly placed to appreciate the hidden charms of their preferred performers, and who stress the gulf between their purely aesthetic appreciations of the actors and the gross and sensual attitude of the rich patrons who can afford to buy the sexual favours of these boys.<sup>4</sup> Professor Goldman's approach is novel in its emphasis on the authors of these texts. But precisely because the authors of *huapu* distinguish themselves so strongly from author patrons and theatre goers, their appreciations are also very one-sided and the picture they present of the commercial playhouses and their offerings must be very incomplete.

Part 2 of Professor Goldman's monograph, "Venues and Genres," deals with the various forms of theatre performance and the various musical styles involved. In chapter 2, "Metropolitan Opera, Border Crossings, and the State," the commercial playhouses are studied in contrast to temple fairs and salon performances. The commercial theatre with its many playhouses putting on daily shows will have been the most visible performance venue in the capital, and it is the commercial playhouses that were the object of constant government concern. Temple festivals, like everywhere else in traditional China, usually will have included theatrical performances of some kind, and with the number of temples in Peking, such public performances must have been an almost daily occurrence. The large mixed crowds these performances attracted also were a source of constant anxiety for the Qing government. The ten pages Professor Goldman devotes to a description of these temple fair performances (and the scandals they generated) are very welcome indeed

<sup>2</sup> In view of the age of the boys more accurately characterized as paedophilia.

<sup>3</sup> Roger Darrobers, *Opéra de Pékin: Théâtre et société à la fin de l'empire sino-mandchou* (Paris: Bleu de Chine, 1998).

<sup>4</sup> In this respect these *huapu* are very similar to the novel *Pinhua baojian* 品花寶鑑 (The Precious Mirror of Ranked Flowers) by Chen Sen 陳森 of 1849. This novel provides a panoramic overview of the world of boy-actresses and their patron in the first half of the nineteenth century, and enjoyed an immense popularity throughout the remaining decades of the Qing. While Professor Goldman occasionally discusses this novel (actually more often than her index suggests) she makes less use of it than she conceivably might have done in view of the rich detail the novel provides.

as they are, to the best of my knowledge, the first detailed English-language discussion of this aspect of the Beijing theatre culture of the late Qing. Whereas temple performances were open to the public and probably the only way for the large majority of the city population to watch drama, salon performances were private affairs. Any person or group might invite a theatre company to their home or hostel to enliven a festive event by their performance (the Beijing Opera Museum is housed in one of the best preserved *huiguan* 會館). Professor Goldman also discusses the court performances under this latter category of “salon” performances. But her own well-informed discussion of the wide variety of court performances also makes clear that this classification applies poorly to those lavish court pageants that were performed by hundreds of palace actors, and to which high officials and foreign ambassadors were invited in order to impress them with the power of the dynasty. Chapter 3, “Musical Genre, Opera Hierarchy, and Court Patronage,” deals with the changing fashions in musical style over the course of the nineteenth century. Up to the middle of the nineteenth century Kunju continued to be respected as the most sophisticated style of drama music, even though many other genres of regional music became popular—occasionally so popular they were proscribed by the court. The demise of Kunju as the leading style is usually, also by Professor Goldman, linked to the devastations wrought by the Taiping Rebellion in the Jiangnan area in the 1850s and 1860s as it ruined the homes of southerners who in Peking favoured Kunju and also disrupted the supply of new boy-actresses from Suzhou. One wonders, however, to what extent the economizing measures of the court in the first part of the nineteenth century may have contributed to an “artificial” extension of the popularity of Kunju by repeatedly releasing court actors. From the middle of the nineteenth century the court itself became a major patron of Peking opera. Especially during the reign of empress-dowager Cixi 慈禧 the court had a major impact on the fortune of the major Peking opera actors and their repertoire by imperial summons to perform at court.

By far the most original section of Professor Goldman’s monograph is her third section “Plays and Performances.” In this section Professor Goldman traces the impact of the changes described in the earlier chapters on the actual repertoire as performed in the commercial theatres. This means that she has hunted down as far as possible the manuscripts that can be related to actual performance. She also takes into account the implications of performing only selected acts from plays, rather than the complete plays as such. This is because “the selection of scenes staged significantly altered the meanings that might be derived from the performances” (p. 147). Chapter 4, “Social Melodrama and the Sexing of Political Complaint,” follows the fate of *Feicui yuan* 翡翠園 (The Garden of Turquoise and Jade), one of the popular items in the repertoire of Kunju opera, as it travelled from mid-seventeenth Suzhou to early nineteenth-century Peking. This play in 26 scenes attributed to Zhu Suchen 朱素臣 (c. 1620–1701), features a poor but righteous scholar, a clever and attractive seamstress, and a

good-hearted government runner in conflict with corrupt authorities—when the law fails them, they take justice into their own hands. Whether the play was performed in its entirety or only in excerpts in Beijing, the key attraction for the audiences was the female lead’s “sentimentality and sensuality (leavened with plenty of humor)” (p. 161). A descriptive catalogue of the scripts of *Feicui yuan* that have been consulted by the author is provided in Appendix 2. Chapter 5, “Sex versus Violence in ‘I, Sister-in-Law’ Operas,” discusses a group of plays that all feature a “hero” who ends up killing the adulterous wife of an (elder or sworn) brother. Most of the plays were based on episodes in the sixteenth-century novel *Water Margin* (*Shuihu zhuan* 水滸傳). While for a long time the commercial theatre had preferred to perform the scenes of seduction from these plays, in the second half of the nineteenth century the Pihuang plays performed at court and in the commercial theatres once again glorified the machismo of the avenging hero. Appendix 3 provides a survey of “Mostly Rare, Hand-Copied Scripts of *Saozi Wo* 嫂子我 Plays.”<sup>5</sup>

The three parts that make up the main body of this monograph are preceded by an Overture and followed by a Coda. In the Overture the author introduces her monograph as a study that will illuminate “relationships between culture and power in the Qing dynasty” (p. 3) and a few pages later she writes, “Thus, opera performance—who performed it, what was performed, who watched it, and who policed it—came to be a hotly contested site of state-society friction in Qing Beijing” (p. 5). And in her coda she writes, “This narrative has presented opera in the capital as a site of resistance—some imagined, some real—to normative ideologies and practices of gender order, class hierarchy, and state authority” (p. 237). But for all the (mostly unenforced) government decrees and regulations, this is too simplistic. Neither the state nor the theatre was a monolithic entity, and the same men who made up the bureaucracy also were among the most fervent theatre fans. Moreover, traditional Chinese society allowed for a much larger variety in the expression of shared values that is often taken for granted—not every divergence from elite normative discourse was intended or perceived as oppositional. Like much of Hollywood, the traditional commercial theatre thrived on sex and violence. And while the performances took place during the day, the playhouses also doubled as night clubs in their social function. Of course the local and national authorities were concerned about maintaining law and order, and in this respect the Beijing was not that different from contemporary Edo, London, Paris, or Vienna. Personally I would have liked to see a comparative discussion of pre-modern theatre censorship and control that would place the activities of the Qing authorities in perspective. But even

<sup>5</sup> In its emphasis on performance manuscripts, the volume under review is similar to Catherine C. Swatek, *Peony Pavilion Onstage: Four Centuries in the Career of a Chinese Drama* (Ann Arbor, MI: Center for Chinese Studies, University of Michigan, 2002).

if they kept a close eye on all aspects of the theatre and occasionally interfered, that doesn't mean that they necessarily perceived the playhouse as an oppositional force. Actually the opposite happened when the court by the second half of the nineteenth century embraced Peking opera. In the words of our author, "Threatened by reason of its ethnic difference, the Manchu court closed ranks politically with the Han elite but culturally with Han commoners; in so doing, it helped construct a new cultural identity for both the state and society" (p. 244).

In terms of subject and period covered, Professor Goldman's monograph invites comparison with Colin P. Mackerras, *The Rise of Peking Opera 1770–1870*,<sup>6</sup> but if I mention that book, it is primarily to stress the huge advance in scholarship of the last forty years that is represented by Professor Goldman's monograph. Mackerras's monograph is based on published materials, and about one third of his work is devoted to a historical survey of drama outside Peking up to the last quarter of the eighteenth century. It still provides us with a very useful survey of the development of Peking opera, but in terms of sources and analysis it is far cry from the rich creativity of the detailed studies of Professor Goldman's book. I already mentioned the work of Roger Darrobers, which like the work of Mackerras, is primarily based on printed materials; this work is extremely detailed in its description of the life of actors and their customs, and so is quite different in its emphasis from Professor Goldman's study. In terms of ambition and originality the work on Peking opera that is highly comparable to Professor Goldman's work is Joshua Goldstein, *Drama Kings: Players and Publics in the Re-creation of Peking Opera 1870–1937*.<sup>7</sup> The two books overlap for their treatment of the last quarter of the nineteenth century, which for Professor Goldstein represents the traditional Peking opera, but for Professor Goldman is very much a period of change. As the Peking opera of Shanghai in the first decade of the twentieth century tried to become an oppositional or at least reformist genre, I would have loved to read Professor Goldman's comment on that aspect of the development of Peking opera, but that would of course have taken her away from Beijing. Professor Goldstein, dealing with the twentieth century, could of course make use of a much wider array of sources about drama and drama reform, but he never engages in the meticulous analysis of individual plays and their transformations on stage we find in the work of Professor Goldman.

In her Overture, Professor Goldman claims that "opera historians in China have tended to gloss over the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries" (p. 6). That

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<sup>6</sup> Colin P. Mackerras, *The Rise of the Peking Opera, 1770–1870: Social Aspects of the Theatre in Manchu China* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972).

<sup>7</sup> Joshua Goldstein, *Drama Kings: Players and Publics in the Re-creation of Peking Opera, 1870–1937* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2007).

may have applied up to the end of the last century, but the last two decades have witnessed a remarkable upsurge in interest in the theatre of the latter half of the Qing dynasty. While the majority of these studies do not focus on the topics Professor Goldman has selected, the unsuspecting reader should be aware of this rapidly growing body of Chinese scholarship. As many of the relevant titles are listed in the Bibliography, one would have expected our author to alert her readers to this growing body of new scholarship more often and discuss in somewhat greater detail the differences between her approach and that of her colleagues from China and Taiwan. Together with this rapidly growing body of Chinese scholarship, Professor Goldman's monograph makes clear that the relative neglect of the history of Chinese drama during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries has come to an end. This development is long overdue as the long-neglected sources for this period turn out to be very rich. Professor Goldman's monograph demonstrates not only how these sources allow for a detailed understanding of developments on stage, but also how they can speak to a great number of issues in Chinese cultural history.

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*Anyuan: Mining China's Revolutionary Tradition.* By Elizabeth J. Perry. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2012. Pp. xv + 392. \$75.00 cloth, \$34.95 paper.

Elizabeth Perry's latest book is centrally an examination of the role of culture in the Chinese revolution both before and after 1949. To address this issue, she focuses on the history of the labour movement in the Anyuan coal mines 安源煤礦 in Jiangxi in the 1920s and the ways in which that history has been used and conceptualized in the decades since then.

The first half of the book presents a narrative and analysis of the history of the Anyuan workers' movement in the 1920s. Four chapters cover the rebellious history of the area, the workers' education movement and the 1922 strike, the period in the mid-1920s when Anyuan was known as "Little Moscow," and the white terror following the suppression of the workers movement.

The key concept developed in this first half of the book is that of "cultural positioning"—"the strategic deployment of a range of symbolic resources (religion, ritual, rhetoric, dress, drama, art, and so on) for purposes of political persuasion" (p. 4). The author argues that this cultural positioning was far more important in the