

Ascendant Peace in the Four Seas: Drama and the Qing Imperial Court. By Ye Xiaoqing. Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2012. Pp. xv + 330. \$55.00.

The late Ye Xiaoqing's *Ascendant Peace in the Four Seas: Drama and the Qing Imperial Court*, a book much awaited among specialists in Qing drama, brings her many years of research in the archives of the Neiwufu 內務府 (Imperial Household Department) into the English-language scholarship on Qing-court theatre. The single greatest contribution of this erudite study may well be its effort to bridge the Chinese-language scholarship on Qing opera with English-language studies on Qing political history.

Ascendant Peace in the Four Seas is an accomplished study in the *kaoju* 考據 (evidential research) tradition. In five chapters, the monograph addresses the evolution of Qing imperial institutions for performance; the diplomatic, ritual, and private uses of court entertainment; a history of court actors; the cultural and political control of opera under the Qing; and the impact of the court on the development of Peking opera. Embedded within the rich detail is a critique of past scholarship that has overemphasized the court as an institution at the expense of the individual personalities of regents. Ye calls for, in essence, a return to a reign-centred approach to Qing history, in which the private predilections of emperors is factored into court policies and institutions. A second theme threaded throughout the work focuses on the interaction between court and popular performance over time, with attention, too, to how that reflected changing Manchu notions of identity.

In Chapter One, "Imperial Institutions for Ceremonial and Private Performances," Ye makes use of new archival research to tease out the intricacies of the various court agencies responsible for performance, both ritual and entertainment. We learn that the Kangxi reign (1661–1722) was critical to the establishment of a new palace institution for performance, the Nanfu 南府, under the supervision of the Neiwufu, which became responsible for attending to the personal entertainment needs of the imperial household. Although ostensibly this structural innovation separated performance for pleasure from ceremonial music, Ye also shows that throughout the next two reigns, in spite of many later attempts to restructure court agencies for ceremonial occasions, the Nanfu came to manage performances both for state rituals and for the personal enjoyment of the imperial family. Downsizing and change to this originally informal institution came in 1827 under the Daoguang emperor (r. 1820–1850), at which time the Nanfu was renamed the Shengpingshu 昇平署 (Bureau of Ascendant Peace). During the last sixty years of Qing rule, the Shengpingshu became ever more important not only in providing entertainment within the palaces but also in monitoring opera within the city of Beijing at large.

Throughout the chapter Ye is mostly in conversation with the Chinese-language scholarship on Qing court drama. She effectively mobilizes her discoveries in the

archives to correct histories of court theatrical institutions by an earlier generation of scholars, especially the work of Zhou Mingtai 周明泰 and Wang Zhizhang 王芷章.¹ Neither Zhou nor Wang, writing in the 1930s, had access to complete palace records, but their accounts of Qing court performance, and especially the institution of the Shengpingshu, have become the standard narrative in Chinese-language scholarship, invoked in countless later studies on Qing court drama. Ye corrects dating errors in this earlier scholarship, pushing back in time establishment of the Nanfu from the Qianlong (1735–1796) to the Kangxi reign. She further shows that multiple court agencies for ceremonial music remained on the books, even as in daily practice the Nanfu came to be responsible for both ritual and entertainment performance until 1827.

Ye's work on Qing court drama also engages with a second debate in the Chinese-language scholarship: in the decades from 1950 to 1980, the ideological need to justify Peking opera as a "people's art" resulted in scholarship from the mainland downplaying the role of the court in its development. More recent Chinese-language scholarship now acknowledges the court as an important player in the growing popularity of Peking opera in the second half of the nineteenth century. *Ascendant Peace in the Four Seas* fully embraces this newer interpretation. Ye's greatest contribution in this chapter is her discussion of the expanded role of the Shengpingshu in the last half-century of Qing rule. Here, as well as in sections of Chapters Three and Five, she carefully charts the processes by which the Shengpingshu, via oversight of the local actors' guild, came to monitor not only palace performance but also opera in commercial theatres. As a result, the palace now had the potential to censor the contents of performance in the city of Beijing in a way never previously possible.

Chapter Two, "Drama, Occasion, and Audience," takes up the various uses of opera at the court. After enumerating the occasions for performance at court—from state ritual and tribute mission spectacle to seasonal celebrations and royal birthdays—the heart of the chapter turns to an analysis of a drama commissioned for the visit of Lord George Macartney to Beijing in 1793. Through a close reading of a palace repository script, *Sihai shengping* 四海昇平 (*Ascendant Peace in the Four Seas*), complete with annotations by the vermilion brush of the Qianlong emperor, Ye makes a strong case for the centrality of court performance to diplomacy. Had the British participants of the Macartney Mission been able to understand the drama, rather than just marvel at the spectacle, she claims, they might have known that

¹ See Zhou Mingtai, *Qing Shengpingshu cundang shili manchao* 清昇平署存檔事例漫抄 (Beiping, 1933; reprinted in *Jindai Zhongguo shiliao congkan* 近代中國史料叢刊, vol. 700; Taipei: Wenhai chubanshe, 1971); Wang Zhizhang, *Qing Shengpingshu zhilue* 清昇平署志略 (Beiping: Guoli Beiping yanjiuyuan Shixue yanjiuhui, 1937; Shanghai: Shanghai shudian, 1991).

the Qianlong emperor was unwilling to grant their requests for extended stay in the capital and European-style diplomatic recognition.² Here Ye makes an overture to the scholarship of James Hevia on Qing guest ritual, although it is not entirely clear how Ye's focus on opera moves that discussion forward. She ends the section on the Macartney audience with the observation that "Qianlong still remains 'most elusive' and 'an enigma'" (p. 96). It is thus not fully evident how the focus on the personalities of emperors helps us arrive at a deeper understanding of historical events. Indeed, while her opera scholarship is full of new information drawn from archival research, when she engages political history her reign-centred approach tends to reinforce older interpretations, in which, for instance, Qing emperors come across as arbitrary and inscrutable.

"Performers in the Palace," the third chapter, presents a detailed narrative of both eunuch and non-eunuch actors at the court over the full span of the dynasty. Ye's descriptive account of the history of performers in the Nanfu and Shengping-shu essentially accords with that of the best specialists on Qing court drama in the mainland, such as Ding Ruqin 丁汝芹. Ye uses the occasion, too, to engage the scholarship on the *yuehu* 樂戶, or music households, a hereditary category of entertainers who were considered of the mean classes. Into the early Qing, *yuehu* still performed in the palace, a holdover from Ming practice. Although the mixed-sex *yuehu* in the palace were slowly replaced by eunuch actors, the status of *yuehu*—and by extension all actors—remained degraded. Ye takes issue with scholars who make too much of the Yongzheng emperor's (r. 1722–1735) 1723 edict eliminating the category of *yuehu*.³ This ruling, although ostensibly rehabilitating these and other actors to commoner status, in fact did little to eradicate the bias toward performers, whether in legal terms or customary practice. Her case studies of actors caught up in legal suits in late nineteenth-century Shanghai show that the social status of actors, even favourites of Dowager Empress Cixi, remained compromised until the Republican era.

Ascendant Peace in the Four Seas next turns to Qing control of opera both within and beyond the court. Chapter Four begins with a short exposition of a "secret" empire-wide crackdown on seditious and immoral drama scripts begun in 1780 at the urging of the Qianlong emperor. The censorship campaign was abandoned within

² A recent dissertation questions whether *Sihai shengping* was actually performed during the Macartney visit; see Liana Chen, "Ritual into Play: The Aesthetic Transformations of Qing Court Theatre" (Ph.D. diss., Stanford University, 2009), pp. 96–100.

³ Ye, in particular, engages the argument about the impact of the 1723 edict advanced in Matthew H. Sommer, *Sex, Law, and Society in Late Imperial China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000).

a few years, presumably without much effect, its main repercussion having been to send a large quantity of scripts into the palace, where they ended up being preserved, and possibly even viewed by later emperors less troubled by their contents. Ye then takes the reader through the concerns and interests of subsequent emperors: Jiaqing (r. 1796–1820), spooked by rebellion, prohibited plays based on the *Shuihu* 水滸 (Water Margin) bravos from being performed in the palace; Daoguang (r. 1820–1850), the stern economizer, privately preferred lowbrow comic skits; Xianfeng (r. 1850–1861), an opera enthusiast, no longer seemed threatened by plots centring on the historical conflict between the Song and Jin and even embraced the use of current Manchu dress worn as costume by the non-Han characters in such plays. Here, Ye's reign-centred approach to history works best, although how much imperial taste was shaped by personal preference and how much by external social and political pressures is not fully pursued.

The final chapter, "Peking Opera and the Court," returns to a description of the Shengpingshu oversight of commercial performance and its impact on the development of Peking opera. Along the way, readers are treated to anecdotes about the origins of the term *piaoyou* 票友 (amateur performers, lit., ticket-friends) and its association with a genre of Banner-identified narrative-song performance known as *zidishu* 子弟書; the reintroduction of outside actors into the court in the 1850s; and court regulations and the development over time of commercial theatres in Beijing and Shanghai. The chapter concludes with some observations about bannermen transformation from amateur to professional Peking opera artists in the early twentieth century, suggesting—consistent with other scholarly literature on Qing drama—the extent to which live drama, and especially Peking opera, had come to be identified with Manchu culture by the end of the dynasty.

Without a doubt, as the great variety of topics related to court drama broached in *Ascendant Peace* show, the author is a master of empirical research. If the larger import of the study sometimes gets lost in the details, her choice of title hints at what she may have intended this all to add up to. Since she adopted the name of the play commissioned for the Macartney Mission as the title for the entire book, at heart her overriding concern would seem to be the relation of court drama to Qing politics. From tributary drama to her concluding comments about the later politicization of Peking opera, she is making a case for the centrality of opera to the workings of state and society in the Qing. Perhaps from this perspective, too, we can understand her effort to put into dialogue the Chinese-language scholarship on Qing drama with English-language studies about Qing politics (which have heretofore ignored opera). Ye has made a case for court drama being relevant to other discussions in Qing history.

And yet, perhaps because it attempts to be so comprehensive, *Ascendant Peace in the Four Seas* shares some of the drawbacks of the evidential research mode of

analysis. The study prizes the carefully documented anecdote, but it is sometimes hard to see how each gem of scholarship adds up to a larger interpretation. Evidential research historically has tended to value textual sources above all other records. One wonders whether some of Ye's arguments about the centrality of drama to Qing court life and politics might have been sharpened by attention to visual and architectural sources at the palace: the great quantity of court painting albums of opera characters, for instance; or the many stages—some intimate, some multi-storeyed—scattered throughout the imperial residences. The point here is not that she should have tried to cover even more in this study, but rather that by embracing a fuller imagining of the archive she might have relinquished some topical breadth for greater analytical focus. Perhaps her work on court opera would have moved in this direction had she been given a longer lease on life.

In sum, *Ascendant Peace in the Four Seas* has done a great service by updating and synthesizing the vast Chinese-language literature on Qing court drama and bringing it into the English-language scholarly conversation. It will be up to the rest of us in the field to build upon the solid foundation that Ye Xiaoqing has bequeathed to us.

ANDREA S. GOLDMAN

University of California, Los Angeles

Home and the World: Editing the “Glorious Ming” in Woodblock-Printed Books of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries. By Yuming He. Harvard-Yenching Institute Monograph Series 82. Cambridge, MA and London, England: Harvard University Asia Center, 2013. Pp. xiv + 343. \$39.95/£29.95.

The great increase in late-Ming publishing may enchant the ever-widening circle of historians of Chinese publishing, but the Qing compilers of the various *Siku quanshu* 四庫全書 (Complete library of the four treasures) catalogues were not very well disposed towards books published during the Ming period. They criticized these worthless books as *baifan* 稗販 (“hucksterish”), and deplored them for their sloppy editing and failure to properly cite resources, their “practice to plunder and steal, to delete and exaggerate at whim” (p. 2). To our benefit, Yuming He¹ in this insightful

¹ In this review I will often use Yuming He's full name, to avoid any misconstruction of her name as the pronoun “he.”