

*The Soul of Beijing Opera: Theatrical Creativity and Continuity in the Changing World.* By Li Ruru, with a foreword by Eugenio Barba. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010, xvi + 335 pp. 22 illus. Paper \$25.00; Cloth \$50.00.

Among the huge advances made in studies of Chinese theatre in European languages over recent decades, those on the genre now normally called *jingju* 京劇 in Chinese and referred to in English as Peking opera or Beijing opera occupy a significant place. Theatre is by its nature multidisciplinary in the sense that it covers history, politics, performance, literature, society and other fields. Among other book-length studies published in the last few years, this art has yielded those with a historical perspective such as Joshua Goldstein's *Drama Kings: Players and Publics in the Re-creation of Peking Opera, 1870–1937* (University of California Press, 2007) and those focusing more on stage aesthetics such as Alexandra B. Bonds' *Beijing Opera Costumes: The Visual Communication of Character and Culture* (University of Hawai'i Press, 2008). Li Ruru's new study stands out for the breadth of its scope and the vastness of experience and learning of its author.

Li Ruru has already written widely about the Chinese theatre, and *jingju* in particular. She comes from a family deeply versed in theatre. Her mother Li Yuru 李玉茹 (1923–2008) was well known and distinguished as a performer of *jingju* while her stepfather Cao Yu 曹禺 (1910–1996) can rightly be regarded as China's premier exponent of *huaju* 話劇 (spoken drama). The author is definitely *neihang* 內行 when it comes to Chinese theatre. But there are other ways in which her experience and learning are difficult to surpass. She has studied *jingju* as a performer and a scholar, the second for much longer than the former, and lived a long time both in China and England, with a notable academic career at the University of Leeds.

This is an extraordinary book, which takes a novel approach to the study of *jingju*. Through an examination of the acting of six major controversial performers it looks at the “soul” of *jingju*. The term “soul of *jingju*” (*jingju hun* 京劇魂) comes from an interview with Li Yuru. It is explained in a crucial sentence by Li Ruru: “Performers and their endeavours in their new work re-form but also continue the tradition, and the dynamic between the creativity and continuity form the ‘soul of

*jingju*,’ which has made the theatre relevant to audiences since its inception about two hundred years ago” (p. 10). The interplay between creativity and continuity amid change is of critical importance to this book, and appropriately emphasized through inclusion in its subtitle.

Although the author does not explain her methodology in great detail, it clearly has three parts. One is analysis of printed material, and her bibliography shows an enormous command of both the Chinese- and English-language literature on the subject. The second one is personal experience and I doubt there is anybody who can claim greater richness and variety in this field than she. And thirdly she has undertaken large numbers of interviews with a whole range of people involved with the theatre; among them actors loom largest, emphasizing the way the book “focuses on the function of the performer, the ultimate creator of *jingju*” (p. 10). I actually found much of what she heard in these interviews extremely moving for the closeness of the interviewees to their subject and the passion with which they talk about their experiences.

Each chapter begins with a summary of the time period it covers, plus a brief explanation of the main issues involved. This is an excellent way to go. It makes the various chapters easy to follow, by clarifying the main points of the content. I find the structure of the chapters enlightening and greatly admire how Li Ruru is able to bring out interesting and important issues through the careers of distinguished performers. It makes for fascinating reading and, apart from what it tells us about the soul of Beijing Opera, explicates the theme of reform and shows how *jingju* relates to the society where it exists.

The first two chapters explain the aims and background of the book, and summarize the origins and early history, as well as the performance techniques. Then follow six chapters, all of them focusing on one particular actor, each well chosen for the issues that their careers raise. Chapter 3 is about the great male *dan* 旦 (female role) actor Cheng Yanqiu 程砚秋 (1904–1958), Chapter 4 the female *dan* actress Li Yuru (1923–2008), Chapter 5 the *jing* 淨 (painted face) actor Ma Yongan 馬永安 (1942–2007), Chapter 6 the *chou* 丑 (comic role) actor Yan Qinggu 嚴慶谷 (1970–), Chapter 7 the Taiwan *dan* actress Kuo Hsiang-chuang 郭小莊 (1951–) and finally Chapter 8 focuses on the Taiwan *sheng* 生 (male role) actor Wu Hsing-kuo 吳興國 (1953–).

These six can be categorized in several different, and significant, ways. Firstly, their careers belong to different periods, enabling the reader to gain a clear idea of how *jingju* and its reform evolved over the twentieth

century and is continuing to do so in the twenty-first. Secondly, the six belong to different role types or *hangdang* 行當. Thirdly, the first four of the six are from the Chinese mainland, two from Beijing, one from Shanghai, and one from Suzhou, and two from Taiwan. Fourthly, and just as significant, the performers exemplify various aspects of the political background and ideologies that were so important for the history of theatre and its reform in the period covered.

I elaborate slightly on three of the six, those discussed in Chapters 3, 4 and 5. For Cheng Yanqiu the period is from the 1910s to the 1940s, the location Beijing and the main issues those involved in a man's impersonating a woman. The chapter about the author's mother, Li Yuru, takes a different slant. Although Li was also a *dan*, she was among the early group of females who acted people of her own sex. In Li Yuru's case the focus is on how she became a "people's artist" and was able to negotiate "between a strong theatrical tradition and a formidable ideology" (p. 121). Ma Yongan was a painted face actor who enthusiastically took up a role in one of the later revolutionary model dramas that flourished under Jiang Qing in which traditional *jing* face patterns were not used. Though there is no focus on the fact here, since it is covered elsewhere in her works,<sup>7</sup> Ma later played the role of Othello in a *jingju* adaptation of Shakespeare's tragedy.

There are so many interesting and relevant issues raised by the question of reform in the *jingju* that it is impossible to cover them all. I just raise a few that I find especially interesting and relevant. My evaluation of Li Ruru's treatment in all cases is very high indeed. I actually found myself on exactly or nearly the same side over just about all the issues where I feel able to make a judgement.

The first is the practice of male *dan*, and its association with male prostitution. After looking at the evidence over whether the boy actors bought from south China to Beijing and put on the stage as male *dan* were actually sexual partners as well as performers, she concludes that they "might perform both functions—that of male prostitute or companion—depending on the owners' scrupulousness" (p. 89). It is a touchy topic, and a translator of one of my own works omitted discussion of it for fear of offending descendants still alive today. But in my opinion Li Ruru's is a judicious conclusion.

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<sup>7</sup> Li Ruru has written widely on Shakespeare in China; see especially her *Shashibiya: Staging Shakespeare in China* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2003).

I also find interesting the issue of the survivability of the male *dan* practice in China today. The author points out, correctly, that the form of male prostitution associated most strongly with male *dan* actors (the *xianggong* 相公 system) was banned in 1912, and that the Communists have generally taken a very negative attitude towards the training of new male *dan* even in the reform period. But in October 2008 I attended a performance at the Grand Mei Lanfang Theatre (*Mei Lanfang da juyuan* 梅蘭芳大劇院) in Beijing featuring an excellent young male *dan* Liu Zheng 劉錚 in the role of Wang Baochuan 王寶釧. Liu is the best of a class of those newly trained in this old art, which seems to be making a mild comeback.

A second issue crucial to this book is the effects of the Chinese Communist Party's reforms from 1949 down to 1976, especially those during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). As Li Ruru makes very clear, these were very extensive and became more so after the Cultural Revolution began. Through the careers of Li Yuru and Ma Yongan, she shows how the plots, costuming, gestures, and music changed, becoming progressively more class-based and unlike traditional *jingju*. Li Yuru and other interviewees could affirm that it was "not only through circulating its ideology and punishing dissidents" that the state accomplished its surveillance, "but also by means of conciliatory gestures and rewards" (p. 133). That was an impression I gained about the society in general from living in China from 1964 to 1966. However, to conform to the rigid requirements of the authorities became increasingly difficult for most actors, including Li Yuru, and many suffered criticism during the Cultural Revolution.

A question I find very interesting and relevant to the issue of "the soul of Beijing Opera" is whether the revolutionary models still retained enough of the essence of *jingju* to be categorized under that genre-title. We know that there were some people who found the reforms so radical that the resulting performances could no longer be called *jingju*. The role-types were more or less gone, the make-up was changed almost beyond recognition, the costumes and plots were transformed, even the music saw the addition of Western musical instruments and vital changes in style. Was it still *jingju*? Of course, Jiang Qing and her followers said it most certainly was. Li Ruru's conclusion is that even the most radical reforms did not destroy the essence or "soul" of *jingju*. Here is part of her summation on this issue (p. 140). I agree with it, but also consider it so thoughtful, well-informed, and apt as to be worth quoting at some length.

The strength of the *jingju* tradition comes not only from its own relatively short history, but also from the maturity of the pre-existent theatrical and cultural components on which *jingju* is based. Moreover, its power exists in the way the tradition has been carried forward. Take the acting conventions, one component of the tradition, as an example. Through the vigorous training, the pre-set stage vocabulary has become part of the actor's body and consciousness. Thus, to *jingju* performers, the tradition of their genre is not abstract or ideological but concrete and practical. They were trained and educated by this tradition, but also work with it and live in it. In addition, even today, many performers are still in one way or another linked together through blood, marital and master/disciple relationships. Defeating such a tradition has proved an unaccomplished mission .... It is also important to remember that, despite the Theatre Reform discarding much of *jingju*'s traditional repertoire, thereby losing those plays' specific acting conventions, the stylized theatre maintained its basic principles and some of the tradition therefore survives.

The final issue I'd like to take up is the survivability of *jingju*. One of the things I like about this book is that it treats *jingju* as a living art. In discussing contemporary Chinese culture at the end of the twentieth century, Claire Huot described the theatre scene in China as "rather desolate" and *jingju* as "definitively dead."<sup>8</sup> Li Ruru's picture is much more nuanced and though admitting declining audiences, does allow the possibility of an acceptable future. She quotes an interview she held with *jingju* actor Wang Jinlu 王金璐 (1919- ): "Why are audiences declining if it is such a wonderful theatre? People nowadays enjoy many more entertainments than ever before. So *jingju* now has difficulties.' Sighing deeply, he continued, 'I am convinced it won't die...although I don't know how its shape may change'" (p. 2). In the last chapter of the book, Li Ruru puts forward her own view of the future, which is similar to Wang's: "*jingju* evolves and develops constantly, though nobody can foresee its future shape" (p. 282).

My own experience and research bring me to a conclusion very similar both to Wang Jinlu's and Li Ruru's. I am impressed with two main contradictory points. One is that on the whole young people do not seem

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<sup>8</sup> Claire Huot, *China's New Cultural Scene, A Handbook of Changes* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2000), p. 76.

## BOOK REVIEWS

very interested in *jingju*. Among quite a few students I have taught in China, not many show an interest either in it or other forms of Chinese traditional theatre. A performance a colleague took me to in mid-2010 in the large Chang'an Theatre in Beijing had hardly any spectators. On the other hand, the Grand Mei Lanfang Theatre and the National Centre for Performing Arts in Beijing, both fairly new, regularly have good *jingju* performances of high standards, with respectable audiences. And the tourist trade has taken up classical performing arts of all kinds and given them very good commercial reasons for survival. Of course, where these differ is mainly in being directed more at the external than the local market. But surely tourists also have a right to enjoy a great form of art. What this amounts to is that what both Wang and Li call the "shape" is undergoing change, maybe great change. But the art-form still survives.

In addition to other merits, the appurtenances of this book are excellent. There are some beautiful plates, which add to the interest and scholarly value of the book. There are also two extremely useful appendices. The first is a chronology covering the period 1790 to 2008 linking political events and those in *jingju*, and, for the period since 1949, distinguishing Taiwan and the mainland. The second shows the main features of *jingju* role types. The glossary, bibliography and index are all detailed and excellent, the first two appropriately including Chinese characters.

I strongly recommend this book for all kinds of readers. Of course, it will be especially valuable for readers of this journal, because it is about a major branch of the Chinese performing arts. But the richness of what it has to say about performance, gender, history, politics, and society also makes it a real contribution to the literature not only on Beijing Opera but also on China, theatre, and performance in general. It is a truly splendid book!

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