

## Book Reviews

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*Chinese Theatre Troupes in Southeast Asia: Touring Diaspora, 1900s–1970s* (Routledge Studies in the Modern History of Asia, vol. 8). By Beiyu Zhang. London: Routledge, 2021. ix+190 pp.

With an introduction, conclusion and seven substantive chapters, this exciting new book by Beiyu Zhang offers a vivid and deeply historicized account of Chinese performing arts in Southeast Asia. The story centres networks established through the circulation of Chaozhou theatre (*Chaoju*, a.k.a. Teochew opera) that moved between the Chinese mainland (primarily Shantou, Shanghai and Guangzhou) and various locations in Thailand, Hong Kong, Singapore and Malaysia during the first eight decades of the twentieth century. Part I begins with a materially rich account of the sites of Chinese theatrical performance in Southeast Asia focussing on temple-theatres, commercial playhouses and transnational amusement parks. It then follows with case studies of three distinct examples of diasporic Chinese performance in the pre-1949 period: Chaozhou opera troupe tours orchestrated by Teochew Chinese in Bangkok; the 1928 Nanyang tour of the China Song and Dance Troupe (Zhonghua Gewutuan, a.k.a. Bright Moon Opera Company) led by Li Jinhui; and salvation theatre troupes in British Malaya during the Second Sino-Japanese War. Part II shifts chronologically to the post-1949 era, looking first at Chaozhou theatre reform in the 1950s People’s Republic of China (PRC) and the 1960 tour of the Guangzhou Provincial Chaozhou Theatre Troupe in Hong Kong. This is followed by two case studies: Chaozhou opera films in 1960s Hong Kong and Southeast Asia, and performance tours by left-affiliated Hong Kong film stars in Singapore and Malaysia in 1959, 1963, 1966 and 1971.

One particularly compelling aspect of this book is Zhang’s firm grounding of performance history within political and economic

contexts. In each case study, Zhang asks what concrete factors made the presence and circulation of these groups in Southeast Asia possible, looking at material factors such as transshipping routes and rail lines, diasporic networks and key individuals, as well as troupe organization, performance contracts and repertoires. Colonial history plays an important role in Zhang's analysis throughout. She offers sober accounts of how British colonial laws about theatre construction and public assembly affected performance spaces. She also shines a light on how British and United States anti-communism during the Cold War restricted flows of performance groups and films, as well as the role of local governments and political parties in suppressing or encouraging various forms of Chinese linguistic and cultural expression in different periods. Finally, she looks at how local political negotiations or strategies in relation to local Chinese communities often drove invitations and performance tours. In the case of Cold War Hong Kong, for example, Zhang investigates the tactics used by both left-wing and right-wing film companies and theatre troupes to navigate anti-communist censorship. Likewise, in her analysis of postcolonial Singapore and Malaysia, she shows how efforts by the People's Action Party and the Malaysian Chinese Association strategically used performance tours to "win the hearts and minds of leftwing Chinese" (p. 166) who were otherwise being marginalized in the Cold War climate of anti-communist, anti-Chinese legislation, racial riots and cultural suppression.

Another important strength of the book is its rethinking of diaspora-homeland relations, both in terms of reorienting directions of cultural flow and rethinking definitions of diaspora and homeland themselves. Throughout each case study, Zhang emphasizes the two-way interactions between diaspora and homeland, showing how diverse members of the Chinese diaspora in Southeast Asia played agential roles in initiating performance activities, shaping performance repertoires and making tours possible. In this way, Zhang explicitly

challenges the conventional notion of a one-way cultural flow from the homeland to the diaspora. Secondly, through her detailed examination of specific performance tours, ensembles and repertoires, Zhang also argues that “the wrestling of the two pulling centres—homeland and diaspora—are not fixed and pre-determined and need to be examined in disparate spatial-temporal configurations” (p. 7). Instead, she advocates temporally and spatially specific understandings of the “performativity of Chineseness” (p. 180).

This is an outstanding study that is well informed by the secondary scholarship in both English and Chinese and is strongly grounded in original research using historical newspapers, periodicals and unpublished documentary sources. In some cases, important secondary scholarship on the history of theatre and drama in China was regrettably left out of the discussion—notably, Siyuan Liu’s work on *wenmingxi* (civilized drama)—which would have enhanced the analysis of hybrid theatrical practices in Part I. Additionally, the absence of any discussion of an important Southeast Asia tour by the China Music, Dance and Drama Society (a.k.a. ‘Zhong Yi’) in 1946–49 and PRC performance delegations to Indonesia and Burma in 1955 seems like an oversight in an otherwise comprehensive account. Better copyediting by the publisher would have greatly enhanced the professionalism of the book’s presentation, which in its current form, unfortunately, detracts from the sophistication of the scholarship.

Taken as a whole, Beiyu Zhang’s book makes an enormous and very welcome contribution to the field of Chinese and Sinophone performance studies. It is a must-read for all those interested in the Chinese diaspora in Southeast Asia.

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