Caroline Chia, *Hokkien Theatre Across the Seas: A Social-Cultural Study*. Singapore: Springer, 2019, vi + 145 pp. ISBN: 9789811318337, price: EUR 77.99 (hardcover); 9789811318344, EUR 64.19 (ebook).

Caroline Chia's book carefully and meticulously examines the development of Hokkien theater, including Liyuan opera, Gaojia opera, Gezai opera, string puppet theater and glove puppet theater, in three regions of *Nanyang* (South-east Asia). She argues that, in contrast to the homogeneity of 'continental culture', the region's 'archipelagic culture' features fluidity and openness. Based on the openness of this 'sea' or 'maritime' culture, she examines the localization of Hokkien theater in *Nanyang* after it was absorbed from southern Fujian, demonstrating how different social, cultural, and political contexts have influenced theatrical practices, primarily in the three major sites of Taiwan, Kinmen, and Singapore.

Chia's narrative is basically chronological, covering a *longue durée* history from the ninth century through to contemporary times. On the basis of a brief introduction to the features of Hokkien culture in Chapter 1, Chapter 2 starts from major genres in Hokkien theater, clarifying their rise and fall in the Medieval Ages. Historically, due to Quanzhou's prominent position as China's maritime nexus for international commerce after the first millennium, the relative openness to outside influence formed a diversified theatrical tradition. While *nanxi* and the local song form of *Nanguan* (or *Nanyin*) 'played a formative role in the development of Hokkien theatre' (p. 15), Hokkien theater is more a form of 'lower culture' *per se*, favored by the greater masses rather than the elite class. As a result, Gaojia opera was soon able to take the place of the more refined Liyuan opera by virtue of martial performances. It later turned from fixed-repertoire to ad libitum performances of *canovaccio*, due to the audience's demand for a varied repertoire.

Chapters 3 and 4 delineates the historical development of Hokkien theater in the scenes of colonization and nationalization, initiated by the end of the Second World War. Chia divides the case of Taiwan into three phases—Koxinga's (Zheng Chenggong) rule, Manchu control, and Japanese colonization. Central to her narrative is the third phase, when an intermixed Taiwanese culture was formed out of Hokkien culture and Japanese influence, a process that eventually led to Nipponization after Taiwan was ceded to Japan by the terms of the Treaty of Shimonoseki. As a result, a made-in-Taiwan theatrical form—Gezai opera—soon overshadowed the traditional forms of Liyuan opera and Gaojia opera. After the war, the Nationalists (*Kuomintang*/*Guomindang*) retreated to Taiwan and used theater as a vehicle to 'Rebel [against] the Communist and resist the Soviets'. Their prohibition of Gezai opera and

promotion of Peking/Beijing opera (*jingju*) as the ‘national opera’ showed a tension between the mainland Chineseness that Nationalists tried to maintain and the Taiwanese identity constructed during colonization.

In the case of Singapore, Chia uses urbanization and secularization as prisms to describe the major trends of Hokkien theater. The massive waves of Chinese migration after the first Opium War (1839–1842) introduced traditional Hokkien theater to British-colonized Singapore due to the colonizers’ *laissez-faire* policy on theatrical activities. As part of the process of ‘modernization’, in the 1930s the easier-to-understand colloquial language led to the rise of the folksier Gezai opera, which fundamentally overshadowed Gaojia opera by the 1950s. With Chinese migrants’ trajectories from sojourners to residents after the war, Hokkien theater also departed from its traditionally liturgical function and entered the realm of secular entertainment. Puppeteers incorporated elements of Gezai opera into the vocal performance of puppet theater, and the liturgical elements faded due to their lack of proper training in ritual practices.

Chapters 3 and 4 also show the different fate of Kinmen due to geopolitics. In contrast to Taiwan, Kinmen was not directly colonized by Japan in the late Qing due to its geographical position near Fujian, and this proximity to Fujian allowed Kinmen to retain more characteristics of a Hokkien society. After the Second World War, Kinmen was highly militarized and was cut off from contact with the outside world until the 1992 Consensus was reached. Over three decades of seclusion meant that Kinmen retained Hokkien characteristics, in contrast to Taiwan, where a Japanese legacy persisted even after its departure in 1949. In this sense, while in Taiwan Gezai opera and glove puppet theater were primarily welcomed and performed for entertainment purposes, string puppet theater became the foremost theatrical form in Kinmen and was frequently seen on various occasions, including traditional ritual practices.

Chapters 5 and 6 contain two meticulous case studies based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Taiwan, Kinmen, and Singapore, in order to show the diversity of Hokkien theater arising from varying social, cultural, and political contexts in contemporary times. Chapter 5 is based on Chia’s observations on performances of string puppet theater in Taiwan, Kinmen, and Singapore. While the Taiwan and Kinmen performances in October 2016 and December 2017 showed that the traditional liturgical function was still closely adhered to, these elements have mostly disappeared from the ‘secularized’ performance in Singapore in April 2013. Chapter 6 presents three fieldwork reports on *Maudgalyāyana* (Mulian) theater—one in Taiwan and two in Singapore. While the one in Taiwan in November 2013 was performed at a *Shijiao* (Śākyamuni Buddhism, a mixed belief of Buddhism and Daoism) funeral ritual, the two cases in Singapore in February 2013 and December 2016 were very much

theatrical performances with few liturgical functions. Believing that Mulian is considered an emblem of filial piety, the author argues that the aim of Mulian theater in varying scenes is to educate its audience.

Overall, Chia's book deliberately and successfully contours the historical trajectory of Hokkien theater and its dissemination in Taiwan, Kinmen, and Singapore from the ninth century onwards, and examines how different social, cultural, and political contexts serve to influence the localization of a theatrical form. The book benefits from rich local knowledge. Chia insightfully problematizes the frequently-used term 'diaspora' in current scholarship on overseas Chinese through discussions that exemplify the complexity of Taiwan, Kinmen, and Singapore. In view of their shared Hokkien origins, different perceptions of identity, arising out of varying local knowledge, have led to a different *status quo* of Hokkien theater in these sites. The author's fieldwork reports in Chapters 5 and 6 also afford valuable ethnographic observations in the three societies, providing us an opportunity to have a glimpse of what she refers to as 'declining customs'.

Noticeably, however, this elaborated book would have benefited from proper editorial support. Besides frequent repetitions, the alternative name of Mulian is initially written as Luo Bo, but sometimes as Luobo (p. 132). The founding of the ROC is of course not in Taiwan in 1949 (p. 138), but in Nanjing after the 1911 Revolution. Except for these minor errors, Caroline Chia's book affords an entrance into the localization of Hokkien theater in Taiwan, Kinmen, and Singapore, and sheds light on some dimensions in Southeast Asian theater that have lacked scholarly attention. This makes it a useful reference for scholars on Asian theater and culture.

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