Wing Chung Ng


*The Rise of Cantonese Opera* as a title effectively conveys the major idea of the book. More than illustrating the emergence of Cantonese Opera as a distinctive genre among many other Chinese operas, the book demonstrates how this genre arose as a brand of popular culture as well as a profit-making business in the first half of the twentieth century. It is with this premise that the discussion of Part I is set against an urban scenario threading together a number of themes relating to modernity — to name but a few, human mobility, markets and consumptions, capitalization and commercial strategies, state-building and nationalism. Here, the urban setting refers to the “twin cities” of Guangzhou and colonial Hong Kong. Having shared a common urban Cantonese accent and a recurrent interflow of people, the vigor of the two cities joined together and supported from the 1900s through the late 1920s the survival of “Sheng-Gang troupes” — the more stationary urban companies which traveled between and performed in city theaters in Guangzhou and Hong Kong. The rise of “Sheng-Gang troupes” together with the boom of city theater houses triggered many changes in the performance and operating dynamic of Cantonese opera.

In conjunction with an analysis of commercial strategies against an urban setting is a discussion of the intersection of culture and politics. In Part II, Ng elaborates on the expansion of the state authority in cities by considering the opera theater as a public arena. Like many of its counterparts, Cantonese opera was considered by the national and local authorities as a tool for promoting social reform. Because of its commercialized and popular character, Cantonese opera had always been criticized for its “vulgarity” and “low tastes”. With its regional character and dialect-based nature, Cantonese opera was also subject to the challenge of Peking opera which was ascending as the country’s “national theater” in the twentieth century. Ng shows how Cantonese
star actors responded to such challenges by replicating the Shanghai model of celebrity-making. Around the same time women also won a gender war on and off the stage. With the increase in the number of all-female troupes and the entrance of women in the theaters, romance and love tragedies became fashionable themes of opera plots. Yet for years the guild Bahe Huiguan rejected the application of the actresses for full membership. Institutional changes finally came when the ban against mixed companies was lifted in Hong Kong and Guangzhou in 1933 and 1936. Audiences’ fondness for nü huadan (women playing female roles) declared the ultimate extinction of the time-honored nan huadan (men playing female roles).

Notwithstanding the similarities and connectedness between Guangzhou and Hong Kong, the author makes an effort to compare the political circumstance and its impact on theaters in the two places. While ordinances relating to theaters in Hong Kong were mostly about safety and public order, in Guangzhou, they also dealt with public morality, hygienic modernity, and thus censorship. British-ruled Hong Kong clearly benefited from a more stable social and political order than Republican Guangzhou. Simultaneously, unionism was more intensely felt in Guangzhou than in Hong Kong.

Part III echoes the studies of Cantonese diaspora by crossing the Pacific to examine theater activities in the North America. Making use of a considerable amount of primary source materials collected from the San Francisco and Vancouver Chinatowns, this part brings to light the largely understudied networks of Cantonese opera overseas from the 1850s till the early 1930s. As noted by the author, the Chinatown theater boom of the 1870s and 1880s in San Francisco was in a sense ironic in light of the anti-Chinese movements that had emerged in America. The exclusion policy in the American West nonetheless became a push factor and drove the Chinese population and their theater away from California to Portland, Boston, Chicago, New York City, Havana in Cuba, and Vancouver in Canada between the late 1870s and 1890s. Ng further argues that Cantonese theater was the most transnational of all China’s regional performance genres, as well as an important site for the negotiation and inscription of power relations and community politics in Chinatown. The existence of the Trans-Pacific, Southeast Asia, and occasionally Shanghai theaters meant a widening of space for investors and laborers to maneuver.

Of the different sections, Part III is most relevant to overseas-Chinese studies. It reminds researchers that research on Cantonese theater is not a mere “supplement” to overseas Chinese studies. Furthermore, the outstanding strength of the book is its use of a large amount of newly available materials, notably the recently surfaced Taiping Theater Collection in Hong Kong and the business documents collected in Vancouver and San Francisco. These source