

BOOK REVIEWS

***The Life and Career
of Hung Ch'eng-
ch'ou (1593-1665):
Public Service in a
Time of Dynastic
Change***

by
Chen-main Wang

AVAILABLE SOON!

This book focuses upon the controversial character and activities of Hung Ch'eng-ch'ou, who first won distinction for his role in suppressing indigenous peasant armies in northwestern China. After being given command of the vital northeastern frontier military district, Hung was captured by the Manchu—and eventually joined his captors to assist them in conquering China and establishing the new Ch'ing dynasty. Although Hung has traditionally symbolized treachery and disloyalty, this book adopts a quite different focus. It brings mid-seventeenth century China to life in new ways, deepening our sense of the historical complexity of the era.

"Without sentimentalizing Hung Ch'eng-ch'ou, [the author] nonetheless forces us to see him as a quite understandable figure, one whose choice to serve the conqueror . . . was not without its principled underpinnings, and whose service was of decisive impact on the success of the Manchu conquest. In short, Hung can no longer be seen as a cardboard figure symbolizing political treachery, but must be recognized as a complex human of great capacities, striving and brilliantly succeeding in doing a job that he felt must be done."

Frederick W. Moore, Professor Emeritus,
Princeton University

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Theater & Society

An Anthology of Contemporary Chinese Drama

Haiping Yan, editor

ARMONK, NEW YORK: M. E. SHARPE, 1998
XLVI + 328 PAGES

Translations of Chinese drama are not readily available (especially in reasonably priced editions), so Haiping Yan has performed a great service by providing the English-speaking world with translations of four plays and a film script. In addition, her introductory essay puts the plays in their theatrical context and serves as a scholarly entry into the plays. The book would be useful to teachers of contemporary Chinese history and politics as well as theater historians, since the plays depict current issues and living conditions in both urban and rural China.

The introduction, entitled "Theater and Society: An Introduction to Contemporary Chinese Drama," explains that much of the theater since 1976 has been a response to the Cultural Revolution. Yan describes the first wave of new plays as expressing nostalgia for life before the Gang of Four and the horrors of the Cultural Revolution. The second wave, starting in 1979, produced several different forms of theater: "critical realism," which focused on social inequality in such plays as *If I Were Real* by Sha Yexin (which unfortunately is not included in this anthology); historical drama, which uses events from China's vast history and legends to comment on modern life; and "Western-style modernism," which utilizes techniques from Absurdism and other nonrealistic forms of Western theater. At the end of the introduction, Yan notes that recent cutbacks in government subsidies have hurt many theater companies in China, while the "Hongkongization" and "Taiwanization" of Chinese television and films have stolen audiences away from live theater. This pessimistic note sounds like Western theater historians in the 1960s who feared that television would kill live theater.

The first play in the anthology, *Bus Stop* by Gao Xingjian, shows a group of people waiting for a bus that never comes. As the characters wait several years pass, and they age before our eyes. Finally a couple of the characters decide they must take matters into their own hands and find their own way into the city. Unlike Absurdist theater in the West which is usually pessimistic, many Chinese "modernist" plays end on a more hopeful note, as this play does.

The next play, *WM* by Wang Peigong and Wang Gui, follows seven characters that were "re-educated" together on a farm during the Cultural Revolution. The play begins with the

characters during the Cultural Revolution and follows their lives afterwards until 1984. The authors detail the changes in Chinese society during this period, and the excellent footnotes explain cultural and political references in the play, making this a useful teaching tool for a class in contemporary Chinese politics, economics, or culture.

Pan Jinlian: the History of a Fallen Woman by Wei Minglun is the most theatrically interesting play in the anthology. The character of Pan Jinlian, who first appeared in the classic Chinese novel *Outlaws of the Marsh*, is known in China as a lascivious and evil woman. Wei Minglun re-tells her story sympathetically with commentary by other literary characters such as Jia Baoyu from *The Dream of the Red Chamber* and Anna Karenina from Leo Tolstoy's novel. Historical personages and modern women also appear in the play to further comment on the traditional status and limitations on Chinese women. The play is a *chuanju*-style opera with songs that comment on the action, sometimes in a Brechtian manner. *Pan Jinlian* would be an excellent way to stimulate class discussion about the changing roles for women in China, as well as a fascinating example of postmodern theater.

Sangshuping Chronicles by Chen Zidu, Yang Jian, and Zhu Xiaoping depicts life in a rural village in Northern China. Because the play is based on a series of short stories by Zhu Xiaoping, the plot is episodic with many unrelated subplots. Although presenting a comprehensive view of rural China, this script contains several scenes about rural politics that are difficult to understand. More extensive footnotes to explain party organization and government regulations would help.

The last translated text in the anthology is not a play, but a film script. The story tells of the search for water in the dry mountainous regions of western China. Students would probably prefer to see the movie version of *Old Well* than read the script.

All of the translations are readable and interesting. My only criticism is the inclusion of a film script and the exclusion of *If I Were Real* (although it is available in another anthology, along with *Pan Jinlian* and *Bus Stop*). Still, this anthology provides English-speaking readers with some excellent translations in an affordable paperback edition suitable for classroom use. (*Chinese Drama after the Cultural Revolution, 1979–1989*, edited by Yu Shiao-ling, contains the three plays mentioned above and many others in an expensive hard cover edition.) This anthology and its insightful introduction would obviously be valuable for a course in Chinese theater and drama, but it would also be useful for any course about modern China. The plays reveal the important issues facing contemporary Chinese in human terms that bring emotion and dramatic power to the recent news from China. ■

DAVID PASTO is an Associate Professor of Theater at Oklahoma City University and has recently returned from a three-week seminar in China sponsored by AsiaNetwork.

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