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.

---

Timely videos on U.S.-Japanese trade and economic issues in the news are available to High School teachers for classroom use at no charge. Reported from Tokyo by correspondent Lucy Craft, these stories are presented exactly as they aired on public television’s Nightly Business Report a few weeks earlier.

And to help you find a way to work these reports into your curriculum, supporting lesson plans will be available on Nightly Business Report’s website.

For more information on the series of four videos for this school year (to be delivered in October, December, February and April), go to www.nbr.com/nbrjapan. While you’re there, you can sign up online for this free service. (Don’t delay...tape supply is limited).

Why is Japan important to your students?

☐ 1. Because it is the second-largest trading partner of the U.S.
☐ 2. Because it is the largest economic force in Asia.
☐ 3. Because in a global economy, it is important to be aware of the people and cultures of other countries.
☐ 4. All of the above.