



PROJECT MUSE®

*Opera, Society, and Politics in Modern China* by Hsiaot'i Li  
(review)

Yizhou Huang

*Asian Theatre Journal*, Volume 37, Number 1, Spring 2020, pp. 277-280  
(Review)

Published by University of Hawai'i Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/atj.2020.0011>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/757863>

tripartition of the empire, the so-called the era of the three kingdoms, started.

Together, however, the two books provide a proficient educational package, and the editors and translators have added to our resources for introducing the early traditional Chinese classical plays to the world that trans-crosses time and localities.

IRIS H. TUAN

*National Chiao Tung University*

**OPERA, SOCIETY, AND POLITICS IN MODERN CHINA.** By Hsiao-t'i Li. Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2019. 376 pp. Cloth, \$49.95.

Although the model operas produced during China's Cultural Revolution stand out in theatre history for their ability to seamlessly blend traditional forms with contemporary concerns, a number of scholars writing in English have shed light on experiments that preceded these performances. Colin Mackerras, for instance, has pointed out that popular opera played a part in the collapse of the Qing Dynasty (*Chinese Theatre: From Its Origins to the Present Day*). Later, researchers have discussed politicized performances in the context of subsequent historical moments and specific geographical locations, including the Sino-Japanese War (Chang-tai Hung, *War and Popular Culture: Resistance in Modern China, 1937–1945*), the Yan'an years of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) (David Holm, *Art and Ideology in Revolutionary China*), and the CCP's rural revolution (Brian James DeMare, *Mao's Cultural Army: Drama Troupes in China's Rural Revolution*). Citing Chinese, English, and Japanese sources, Hsiao-t'i Li joins these scholars to think about reformed opera in *Opera, Society, and Politics in Modern China*, but his project is more ambitious in scope. With an emphasis on intellectual discourses, Li delineates and contextualizes the repurposing of popular opera to serve sociopolitical agendas from the 1900s to the 1940s. He argues that this continuous use of reformed opera for social criticism, enlightenment, and revolutionary propaganda was propelled by the time-honored tradition of *jiaohua* (moral transformation) in imperial China and its radicalized variations in the twentieth century (p. 1). In a way, this book is a continuation of Li's earlier project, *Qingmo de xiaceng shehui qimeng yundong, 1901–1911*

(The Late Qing Popular Enlightenment Movement, 1901–1911) in which he examines the roles of popular forms, including vernacular Chinese newspaper, public speech, and opera, in educating the masses.

Lying at the heart of Li's discussion are two in-depth case studies: the Xin Wutai (New Stage) of Shanghai and the Yisushe (the Shaanxi Society to Transform Customs) of Xi'an, Shaanxi Province. Founded, among others, by actors Xia Yueshan, Xia Yuerun, Pan Yueqiao, and merchants Li Pingshu and Shen Manyu, the New Stage (1908–1927) spearheaded experiments that came to be known as *haipai jingju* (Shanghai-style Beijing Opera). The Yisushe, by contrast, produced reformed *qinqiang* (the Qin tune opera), the regional form of Shaanxi Province in northwestern China. Established by gentry-literati Li Tongxuan, Sun Renyu, et al. in 1912, this theatre group is still in business today. The helmsmen of both the New Stage and the Yisushe had connections with Sun Yat-sen's Tongmenghui (the Revolutionary Alliance) and the Xinhai Revolution, which partly explained their shared interest in reformed opera. The critical juxtaposition of the two case studies leads to fruitful comparisons: a national opera versus a regional style, a semi-colonial treaty port versus an inland garrison city, and a market-driven company targeted at urban audiences versus a theatrical society with strong rural connections. Such comparisons highlight the importance of local contexts as well as the various factors at play between opera and society. This comparative framework also distinguishes Li's project from existing scholarship on China's theatre reform.

The book consists of an overture, six chapters, and a finale. After laying out the structure, key concepts, and major themes in the overture, Li provides some background information on opera in late imperial China in chapter 1. He documents the rise of *jingju* over *kunqu* and *huabu* (flowery tunes) over *yabu* (elegant tunes) in the Qing Dynasty. Accounting for a wide array of audience groups of popular opera, including members of the court, the gentry-literati, merchants, and the masses (p. 19), Li specifies the circumstances under which different groups attended opera and the venues they frequented. Here, Li pays special attention to the urban and rural differences that existed in opera performances. Towards the end of the chapter, Li argues that historically religion and theatre were intertwined: not only did rituals and performances take place in proximity with one another geographically (for instance, at temple fairs), but also staging opera was a way to pay tribute to the gods (pp. 44–45). As the court and scholars increasingly promoted “[the introduction of] religious factors into a secular based morality” (p. 46) in late imperial China, opera became a channel for *jiaohua*.

Chapter 2 investigates the intellectual discourses behind the reformed opera. The chapter starts with a close reading of Chen Duxiu's "Lun Xiqu" (On Opera, 1904), detailing Chen's proposals to reform opera. In the 1910s and 1920s, May Fourth intellectuals' (specifically Hu Shi and Fu Sinian) attack on traditional theatre sharply contrasted with a nuanced approach to reform Chinese theatre put forward by theatre practitioners trained in the United States (Yu Shangyuan, Zhao Taimou, and Xiong Foxi). The chapter closes with the leftist discussion of art for the masses in the 1930s (Qu Qiubai and Feng Xuefeng) and theatre's place in it. A survey of these changing perspectives shows the Chinese intellectual's sustained engagement with the reform of opera in the early twentieth century and the politicization of this discourse in the 1930s (p. 78).

The next two chapters are devoted to *haipai jingju* and the New Stage. Chapter 3 sets the scene with an overview of the dissemination of *jingju* and the booming teahouse theatres in Shanghai. Li discusses the New Stage, its founders, the commercial districts in which the company operated (it relocated a few times), its audience makeup, and the measures that the New Stage took to modernize design, stagecraft, and seating. These innovations marked the New Stage's venue as the first modern Chinese theatre in Shanghai and a countrywide trendsetter. Drawing extensively from primary sources such as *Shen Bao*, the most influential Chinese newspaper in Shanghai at the time, chapter 4 analyzes the New Stage's repertoire in detail. Li carefully categorizes and analyzes corresponding performances. Based on subject matters, he divides the New Stage's productions into "plays about social reform, political plays, historical plays, and plays about deities (*shenguai ju*)" (p. 127).

While much scholarship has been produced, both in Chinese and in English, about theatre reform in Shanghai in the late-Qing and Republican years (see, for instance, Siyuan Liu's *Performing Hybridity in Colonial-Modern China*), chapter 5 appears to be the first time that Xi'an's Yisushe is foregrounded in English scholarship. Mirroring the previous case study, Li introduces Xi'an and *qinqiang* before moving on to the theatrical society that built the first modern theatre in the area (p. 182). A closer look at the Yisushe's founders and its repertoire reveals that, unlike the highly commercialized New Stage, the running of the Yisushe relied more on its ties with local authorities from its inception to the 1930s. Not only did the society enjoy patronage from Guomindang military and political leaders in the Shaanxi Province, but also the Yisushe artists traveled outside of Xi'an to perform for

Guomindang troops (pp. 194, 202–203). Unlike its highly commercialized counterpart in Shanghai, the Yisushe was geared towards public service and social education, and therefore did not value stage spectacles as much (pp. 204–206). Although the Yisushe also incorporated contemporary materials into its reformed *qinqiang* repertoire, the content of many plays was traditional compared to the New Stage (pp. 212–215). Li uses the last few pages of the chapter to discuss the post-1949 *qinqiang* portrayed in Jia Pingwa's novel *Qin Qiang* (2005). While Jia's award-winning novel is a significant achievement in Chinese literature, this section seems slightly out of tune with the entire project because of the chronological and methodological shifts.

After establishing that the commonality between the New Stage and the Yisushe was to take reformed opera as a vehicle for social change, Li goes on, in the sixth chapter, to give an overview of similar experiments in other parts of China, especially those influenced by the New Stage. Here he pays equal attention to *daxi* (literally “big opera,” or major regional styles) as well as *xiaoxi* (literally “little opera,” or operas with only two to three role types, developed from popular ballads and dances and reflecting the daily lives of local people). Without simplifying these geographically diverse experiments into a single coherent social movement, Li argues that the reformed opera was politicized and radicalized during times of war. Eventually, the CCP and the Red Army used them for propaganda and “cultural mobilization” (p. 239); Li concludes this narrative with a brief analysis of model opera and the Cultural Revolution. In the concluding chapter he also notes how the interplay of opera, politics, and society in the twentieth century bridged the gaps between elites and masses, traditions and innovations, high culture and popular entertainment. Well researched and clearly written, this monograph will prove useful to students and scholars of Chinese theatre, modern Chinese history and culture, and comparative political theatre.

YIZHOU HUANG  
*Tufts University*