

Book Review

Chinatown Opera Theater in North America

by Nancy Yunhwa Rao. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2017, xiv + 440 pp.

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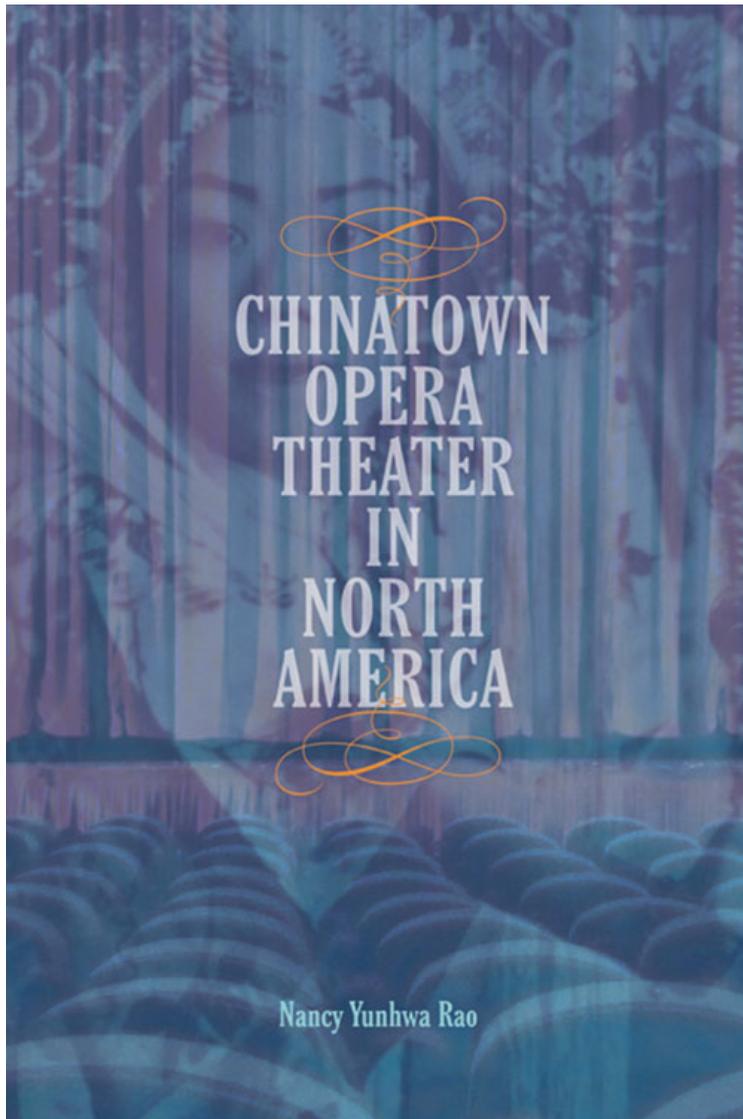
This book is an intriguing historical account of the Cantonese Opera in the Chinatowns of North America in the 1920s. Known as the golden period for Chinese theatre, this decade saw the Chinese opera flourish in the Chinatowns with the establishment of theatre companies by the Chinese elites, daily performances promoted through the print media such as playbills, newspapers and lyrics in Chinese, and the influx of well-known performers from China and Hong Kong. Gramophone recordings of famous songs by eminent opera actors and actresses helped to popularise the form. Although there was no support from the mainstream American society, the Chinese opera garnered the backing of the various classes of the Chinese community.

As Rao points out, despite its rich past, Chinese theatre has been "invisible" in the history of American music or theatre. Instead, American travelogues and journals describe the theatre as "old, unchanging, quirky, opaque, and devoid of imagination" (p. 11). Using untapped and novel sources such as playbills, pamphlets, theatre programmes, poems, photographs, portraits, and immigration papers kept in the private museums, archives and libraries, Rao has been able to challenge the stereotypical descriptions of Chinese theatre found in American mainstream writing at that time. Rather, the book chapters show that the Chinese opera was in fact "dynamic". The transformations in the theatrical form were moulded by the histories of the trading and family networks in China and North America, the immigration status of the performers, audience preferences and the agency of the individual performers who created innovative performing styles.

This manuscript begins and ends with fascinating anecdotes from letters, old song texts and oral interviews; they show that the Chinese opera was not only theatre for entertainment but was part of the daily lives and collective identity of the Chinese living in the Chinatowns of North America. The correspondences allowed the Chinatown residents to express their views about how the music, movements, stories and lyrics inspired the younger generation to learn the Chinese language, folklore and history in a foreign land. The immigration papers provided information about how the Chinese opera troupes, which had already entertained the early migrants in the various Chinatowns during the gold-rush in the mid-19th century, declined following the anti-Chinese movement and the exclusion laws of 1882. These laws were intended to restrict the entry of Chinese labourers but was often extended to include opera performers.

In the first part of the book, Rao illustrates that Chinese theatre was able to flourish in the 1920s as it was developed as a business by the privileged and wealthy merchants of the community. Moreover, due to the popular demand of Chinese actors in American vaudeville shows in the 1920s, Chinese performers including Cantonese opera artistes were given short-term entry permits, this contributed to the revival of the Cantonese opera in the Chinatowns. Just as Chinese labour followed the transnational trade routes and family networks, so too did the Cantonese opera in the 1920s. In fact, the circulation of opera performance products and performers overlapped with the import of Chinese goods such as herbal medicine by Chinese multinational companies that were active in both Hong Kong and North America.

Simultaneously, the introduction of railway and steamships in the 1920s facilitated the transportation of performers from China to North America and the dissemination of playbills and advertisements of shows in North America. Ships carrying goods and performers from Hong Kong would stop by Honolulu, the gateway to North America in the trans-pacific crossing. From Honolulu, the performers travelled to the major cities in the west coast of America: Victoria, Vancouver, Seattle, Portland, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Mexicali and Mexico City. Performers also travelled to the east coast performing in towns such as Toronto, Montreal, Chicago, Boston and New York City. From there, they travelled by steamship to Havana.



The second part of the book focuses on the performance practices, performing stars, successes and challenges of the Chinese opera troupes in the transnational network particularly at cities such as San Francisco, New York City, Honolulu, Vancouver and Havana. The active trans-Pacific trade routes that enabled the circulation of Cantonese opera performers and materials from China to North America made sure that the opera culture was "dynamic". It is no wonder that Chinatowns in San Francisco, New York, Vancouver, Mexicali and Havana shared repertoire, performers, record labels and catalogues.

The author highlights two theatre companies in San Francisco that were crucial for the development of Chinese theatre in North America in the 1920s. The first company was The Great China Theatre (1926–1928) that was set up as The Lun On Company by the Canadian merchant Chen Yee You in year 1922. After successful runs in San Francisco, the Canadian troupe was bought over by merchants from San Francisco and renamed Ying Mee Lun Hop. The latter became the resident theatre in San Francisco, which also performed in cities with Cantonese populations such as Seattle, Portland, Honolulu, Los Angeles, New York and Mexicali. Famous performers such as Bai Jurong from China created new stories that attracted new Chinese audiences. In 1926, it was renamed the Great China Theatre. This theatre was known for its innovations in stage design, spectacular performances and the promotion of new and young actresses that attracted the Chinese audiences. In collaboration with businessmen from San Francisco and Hong Kong, the Great Chinese Theatre started its own record label known as the Oriental Record Company. This company was publicised as the first Chinese-owned phonograph record company in the United States and Hong Kong to produce records that featured opera singers in both places.

The second Chinese theatre that rivaled the Great Chinese Theatre in San Francisco was The Mandarin Theatre (1924–1928). The business magnate Chin Lain whose kinship and trade networks in Hong Kong and North America facilitated the circulation of performers from Hong Kong to North America led it. Performing at its own theatre space in San Francisco, this troupe was famous for its cast of actresses who were brought in to cater to the theatre community's fascination for women actresses who specialised in male roles and cross dressed. Several superstar actresses included Li Xuefang and Guan Yinglian who became key players in the performing network in North America and made a name for the Mandarin Theatre.

Rao's indepth study of the historical development, performing styles and performers of the Cantonese opera based on the correspondences and immigration papers of audiences and patrons, and other printed materials in Chinese, has carved a place for Chinese theatre in American cultural history. Equally important, this seminal work has contributed to the transnational approach in the recent studies of diasporic communities, illustrating that there were multiple sites to Chinese cultural production and that cultural borders were porous in the early 20th century. In contrast to state-centred studies, this approach explicates that the development of the Chinese theatre in North America was shaped by the circular flows of transnational actors and capital as well as trade and family connections between the Chinese in North America and China.