

BR, "Poetics of Displacement", March 2009

Min Tian, *The Poetics of Difference and Displacement: Twentieth Century Chinese-Western Intercultural Theatre*. Hong Kong University Press, Hong Kong, 2008. Hardback, 282 pp.

Professor Min Tian is an expert on Chinese theatre (xiqu, kunqu, jingqu, bangzi); intercultural theatre, including a millennium of Chinese-Western inter-influences; the staging of Greek and Shakespearian tragedy in traditional Chinese formats; female impersonation as a Chinese art form; the person and life of Mei Lanfang, (book forthcoming), greatest early modern exponent of the latter; and more. His works, (Mandarin and English), emanate mostly from the Universities of Illinois and Iowa, with roots at the Beijing Central Academy of Drama. Married, living in the USA,

his deep scholarly grasp embraces Western avant-garde and postmodernism.

The book, not easily read, must enrich any erudite library whose owner claims a broad cultural love of world twentieth century stage drama. No exceptions. One hopes that the dominance of the linear, black--white print medium of polite academia will soon allow a book/DVD set, despite copyright pains. Why? Traditional Hebei Province theatre music ("Hebei bangzi", see Chapter 10), with its 'resounding power and tragic evocation and...high-pitched, vigorous singing' (p. 195), would likely resemble, to untrained ears, the catastrophic drum-banging of ethnic funerals. Like eating sea-urchin, these are acquired tastes, not paper-based. If you believe theatre, or its music, are universal, try offering Lucia di Lammermoor's *bel canto* to the unfamiliar. Awful? 'Universality' is too often one-sided, (Chapter 1), requiring the mediation of true intercultural knowledge. Enter Min Tian: now there's no defence for 'chinoiserie'.

Yet one feels throughout that the 'true and the beautiful', or let's say, 'historical forms' and pure art, are about to disappear (again?) in a consuming surge of eclecticism, in which the Empire will finally lose all chance to 'write back'. Thence arise fears that neo-colonialism, that hardy beast, will yet plagiarize and disrupt any still-extant versions of authentic mainland China voices or texts. The corrupted product is then set free, by brand-new imperialists of culture, as 'real'. (Introduction, pp 2-6. For other Chinese views of 'pure theatre', see p 142 ff.)

An intense exchange among Russian, West European, USA and traditional Chinese theatre is revealed from 1900 to 1935. This included the intellectuals' NTM (Guoju Yundong, or National Theatre Movement), led by pioneers such as Yu Shangyuan, who studied abroad. Film is untouched, though Eisenstein is multi-referenced. Meyerholdt's biomechanics receive attention. The early 'greats', Stanislavsky, Brecht, Artaud, Gordon Craig appear within the relevant Chinese milieu, with so many more, even back to Voltaire, en passant par Isadora Duncan. Thus, this book is essential for any sincere devotee of the fusion of twentieth century 'meanings' via drama.

Debates abounded in that seminal period: thorny ('Elizabethan!') issues of men playing women; naturalism and realism vs. stylization; and more. A danger soon arose (p 149) of Chinese theatre withering to a decadent Western-ness. Meanwhile, the writer clearly shows that Mei Lanfang, who toured the USA in 1930, and was greatly admired by Soviets and others, was deliberately ignored, post-1935, by Craig, who also downplayed traditional Indian theatre (pp 95-96). Min Tian is so polite that he declines to grandstand on Craig's gross ethno-centrism, gently concluding that richness of exchange, severely limited by Western ignorance of China's theatrical essences, is based frequently on incomprehension. He styles this panorama, the good, the bad and the ugly, very generously as 'poetics'.

The 1940's and 50's seem somewhat skimmed, but this is not a chronology. Chapter 8 addresses 1950's theatre, including Li Zigui, renowned Chinese xiqu actor-director. Page 126 touches revival of kunqu in that period. There is no homage to popular Western entertainment, so Moulin Rouge, Broadway, Les Girls et al, are out. I feel some sensitive subtitles, (not 'user-friendly', facile subheadings), to highlight themes inside chapters, would add to ease of use.

Driven perhaps by necessity, the writer moves, via Ibsen, to Eugenio Barba's 'Eurasian theatre' and his Theatre Anthropology (Chapter 5), then to Peter Sellars (not Sellers, the British comedian), whose postmodern opera, 'Nixon in China', c. 1988, was a response to the Red Ballet extravaganza offered in 1972 by Mao to the Americans. (Chapter 6.) The libretto has verses wildly removed from lines in Nixon's diary. Min Tian writes more strongly on Sellars' 1998 appropriation of 'Mudan ting', ('The Peony Pavilion'), an undisputed 1598 Chinese classic, heavily adapted, street-sexed and plexiglassed for global markets. One critic called it 'multimedia mayhem'. (See p 136.)

There are rare photos, too few, painstakingly gathered. Page 202 pictures a traditionally staged, contemporary 'Medea' from Hebei, with the author's moving commentary on Chinese characterizations of infanticide and grief. The 'Works Cited' and footnotes are goldmines. A Glossary gives names and terms in Mandarin characters, but omits entries like Foucault, Macbeth, Grotowsky, perhaps needed by non-scholars and students. The Index is thorough.

A ground-breaking book, not for the faint-hearted. What are the risks? More frivolous gambles with Chinese ingredients—kungfu violence, facepainted heroes, red lantern erotica? The possible switch of Mei Lanfang to a mere gay poster; the morphing of displacement and intertextuality into intellectual theft or frank untruth? Oliver Goldsmith wrote in 1759, in a witty Drury Lane review, "...the refined European has...had recourse even to China...to diversify the amusement of the day." (Cited pp 24-25.)

"The more it changes, the more it is the same." Let us hope that the poetics of real dramatic intercultural exchange will take us far beyond that.

Zophia Newborne, BA (University of New South Walse), Dip. RSA, TESOL (UK), has taught English language on four continents since the early 1980's. Her original interests were poetry, the French and Spanish languages and the history of ideas. Living since 2002 in Shanghai, she is a native of Perth, Australia and a great lover of Macau's rich cultural heritage. She has established a small press (2009) and is preparing a collection of environmental and religious poems, spanning 1973-2008.