

**Karlsson, Kim, Anna Schmid, and Martina Wernsdörfer** (eds.): *On Stage. The Art of Beijing Opera*. Basel: Museum der Kulturen, 2011. 281 pp., photos. ISBN 978-3-033-03081-7. Price: CHF 52.00

This beautifully presented volume offers a collection of essays on the centuries-old tradition of Beijing/Peking opera (*jingju*) in an edgy, contemporary graphic package. The hip cover photograph shows amateur *jingju* performer Jialong Shen in full costume and make-up posed in front of an urban construction barrier emblazoned with an enormous graffiti-art image of an earphoned tagger shouldering an explosive quiver of spray cans and paint rollers. Towering behind the barrier is a row of highrise apartment blocks. The photograph bends around the spine of the book and morphs imperceptibly into its own mirror image on the back cover. The image stages the question around which the collection of essays within the covers revolve: what is the place of a traditional, conventionalised performance form in contemporary society? Its wrap-around layout echoes the volume's apparent attempt to straddle boundaries of scholarly criticism and Museum exhibition souvenir – the impulse behind the book being a *jingju* exhibit at the Museum der Kulturen Basel, which published the volume. The collection of essays offers a sampler of approaches from magazine photo-essay to dense academic argument, and a range of entries falling somewhere in between.

The introduction by the museum's director, Anna Schmid, offers a brief overview of *jingju*'s defining aesthetics: a synthesis of “visual, oral, and musical elements” into a “highly stylised and codified” performance language requiring mastery by performers, as well as audiences who must be able to decode “the highly symbolic features of the performance” in order to “follow the story” (8f.). After skimming superficially over 20th-century developments, particularly the Cultural Revolution period, Schmid outlines current performance conditions (a *jingju* troupe in every province and most major cities, regular broadcast of performances on state television, and frequent international touring) refuting predictions of its demise. She then gives an insightful précis of each of the entries. Each of the essays contains sufficient background to stand alone without the introduction. No chronological or other structuring principle for the ordering of the essays is apparent. Essay topics move from historical and intra-cultural issues through 20th-century innovation, followed by two essays analysing traditional conventions relating to the visual aspects of make-up and costume design, the next several articles address international intercultural experimentations, and the collection ends with an essay on puppets suggesting them as shamanic precursors to *xiqu* (a generic term for the over 300 forms of indigenous Chinese music drama, of which *jingju* is one).

The entries are mostly quite short and offer some version of the narrative of *jingju* in the post-Mao era as threatened by declining audiences and struggling to maintain cultural relevance. Taken together, there are occasional contradictions and little editorial assistance for those coming to the volume without a firm grasp of contemporary Chinese history and political pressures across the Tai-

wan straits. Surprisingly, despite several authors' use as an entry point to their discussions Brecht's 1935 encounter with Mei Lanfang (Riley, Kaulbach, Riemenschneider, Huang), no reference is made to Min Tian's extensive and meticulous scholarship re-examining the intercultural flows of artistic inspiration between Chinese opera and European theatre artists, particularly Brecht (e.g., “The Poetics of Difference and Displacement. Twentieth Century Chinese-Western Intercultural Theatre. Hong Kong 2008). Tian argues persuasively that, much of what Brecht says about *jingju*'s aesthetic processes in his famous article “On Alienation in Chinese Acting” is inaccurate and that rather than sparking new ideas, Mei's performance provided Brecht with the opportunity to confirm ideas already well under development (39–60).

The collection is bookended by photo essays, both with text by Hsin-Mei Chuang, photographs by Matthias Messmer. The first photo essay offers glimpses of the daily life of Jialong Shen, from the cover image. The text interweaves biographical information about Shen, including his family's ambivalence about his interest in the traditional form and especially his choice to study female roles, with the plot of his favourite role, “White Snake” – a snake spirit who takes human form and falls in love with a mortal young man. One particularly striking image of Shen in full costume amidst a block rubble from demolished old-style housing suggesting Shen as a parallel spirit out of his element.

Martina Wernsdörfer chronicles the “birth” of *jingju* at the end of the 18th century through cross-pollination of regional *xiqu* artists called to Beijing for Imperial birthday celebrations. She offers a readable, broad-brush history that addresses the shift of performance emphasis from male (*sheng*) to female (*dan*) roles (and the rise of male performers of female roles, or male *dan*) as *jingju* developed. She touches also on the shift from three-sided stages that promoted audience interaction with the performance to European end-stage style theatres prompting more passive audience behaviour and changes in troupe make-up from collaborative groups to star-based structures. This historical discussion is followed by Susanne Knödel's detailed analysis of two carved wooden lintels, dated 1897, depicting theatre scenes which she argues show the spread of influences from the northern capital of Beijing south to Canton (Guangzhou) as skilled carvers, like skilled performers, travelled to Beijing in response to Imperial demand.

Susanne Weigelin-Schwiedrzik, Professor of Chinese Studies at the University of Vienna, covers complex territory of 20th-century attempts to adapt *jingju* for modern audiences in an accessible way but resorts to some overly simplistic binaries: absolutist traditionalist Chinese who see any incursion of “realistic” modes of staging as destroying the essence of Beijing opera are posed in opposition to “modernisers” who see integration of modern and/or Western elements as one more ingredient in the already eclectic mix that is Beijing opera. When portrayed in such extreme terms, the factions both warrant the scepticism the author levels against them. She frames the Cultural Revolution period as an extreme break in transmission of

tradition, with attempts at compromise and balance primarily an impulse of the post-Mao era.

Barbara Mittler, Director of the Institute of Sinology at Heidelberg University offers a more complex, yet highly readable consideration of *jingju* in Maoist and post-Mao eras. Where Weigelin-Schwiedrzik emphasises the disjuncture between traditional performance modes and the modes adopted in the model plays of the Cultural Revolution, Mittler emphasises the continuity of the process of synthesising elite and popular impulses that gave birth to Beijing opera and other regional *xiqu* forms. She usefully links the strident political messages of the Cultural Revolution plays, which were conveyed through depicting real life on a stylised, exemplary manner and “offering the audience a role model and guidance for action,” to emphasis in traditional plays on exemplary, often Confucian, behaviour (80–85).

After offering an engaging introduction to the complex conventional structure of role type divisions, University of Hawai'i Professor Elizabeth Wichmann-Walczak undertakes a rigorous comparison of the role of Yang Yuhuan in the famous play “Gui Fei Zui Jiu” (The Favourite Concubine Becomes Intoxicated) as performed by male *dan* (female role type) Mei Lanfang with that of female *dan* Li Yuru. The article traces fascinating political and social pressures around cross-gender performance and offers an important insight into the contributions of individual artistic innovation within this conventionalised performance structure. Wichmann-Walczak concluding that Li Yuru's performance evidences both that she was trained to perform the role by Mei Lanfang and that she successfully reinterpreted the role, infusing it with her own deep training across several role types and performance styles.

Jo Riley also addresses the issue of individual creative expression within *jingju*'s conventionalised structures. She analyses the performance style of Cheng Yanqiu, another of the “four great *dan*” with Mei Lanfang. Riley analyses a “video accompaniment” by one of Cheng's disciples. To raise skill levels among young *jingju* performers and give *jingju* fans visual access to great performances of past generations, an extensive series of these “video accompaniments” were produced in which rising *jingju* performers synchronise movement and facial expression to audio recordings of past masters. Riley perhaps does not give full consideration to the complexities and inaccuracies such a project inevitably entails, discussing disciple Li Shiji's movements as unproblematically representative of Cheng's. After a concise and readable overview of key aesthetic goals, for example, to “write the meaning” of a thing rather than the thing itself (*xieyi* rather than *xieshi*) Riley identifies unique characteristics of Cheng's performance style. She concludes that the development of such a distinctive style would not be possible today because audiences, rather than judging subtle variations in conventionalized performances, watch new plays with unfamiliar plots wanting to learn what will happen next or to be awed by spectacular scenery and acrobatic feats.

Irene Wegner and Alexandra Bonds offer engaging discussions of principles behind the conventions of design elements of make-up and costume respectively. Stronger

editorial input could have helped resolve several apparent contradictions between the two articles by advising that different schemes of colour signification apply to make-up than to costume.

Barbara Kaulbach, head of the Goethe-Institute Glasgow, offers an overview of corporeal emphasis in traditional training methods before briefly introducing three Westerners who have studied *jingju*: performer of martial male roles, Ghaffar Pourazar, scholar/director/translator Elizabeth Wichmann-Walczak, who studied *dan* roles with Mei Lanfang's disciple, Madam Shen Xiaomei, and composer/librettist, Karsten Gundermann. The discussion uncritically suggests that interest by non-Chinese will provoke Chinese themselves to “reconsider the very special and wonderful art form of the Beijing opera” (178). Addressing intercultural influences from a different angle, Alexander C. Y. Huang reviews *jingju* as a national and cultural icon, then examines how it is “transformed and renewed” in a two-way cultural flow: *jingju* adaptations of Shakespeare and incorporations of elements inspired by *jingju* into intercultural productions. Between these two essays, Andrea Riemenschnitter gives a theory-dense review of *jingju*'s shifting position as ethnic and national marker as “the traffic within and across thoroughly intertwined cultural realism has rendered aesthetic representations hybrid to the point that the borderlessness of cultural production has become a critical trajectory by itself” (186). Hers is the strongest critical offering of the collection, following the trope of the unhappy *jingju* male performer of female roles as emblematic of the political and cultural framings that construct China as feminized, victimized “other.” Rounding off the series of entries addressing intercultural flows is a fascinating insider discussion from famed *jingju* actor and innovator Wu Hsing-kuo about his internationally acclaimed adaptations of Western plays.

A glossary of Chinese terms and plays in *pinyin* Romanization and simplified Chinese characters supplements the volume. No indexing is provided. On the whole, the entries are challenging but concise and accessible to a nonspecialist reader. The extensive inclusion of large, full-colour illustrations provides engaging visual supplementation to the text. The minimal referencing and critical framing evident in many of the essays, however, make the volume more suitable as an entry point than a destination for readers with a scholarly agenda.

Megan Evans

**Körling, Gabriella:** In Search of the State. An Ethnography of Public Service Provision in Urban Niger. Uppsala: Uppsala University, 2011. 299 pp. ISBN 978-91-554-8127-8. (Uppsala Studies in Cultural Anthropology, 51) Price: € 15.63

In dieser aus ihrer Dissertation hervorgegangenen Monografie untersucht Gabriella Körling den Staat in drei am Rande der nigerischen Hauptstadt Niamey gelegenen Stadtteilen (Saga, Pays Bas, Tondigamay), genauer in der dortigen Bereitstellung der öffentlichen Dienstleistung Gesundheit und Bildung. Basierend auf der Nachzeichnung historischer Entwicklungen und feinen ethnografi-