

Regional Literature and the Transmission of Culture: Chinese Drum Ballads, 1800–1937. By Margaret B. Wan. Harvard East Asian Monographs 426. Cambridge, MA and London, England: Harvard University Asia Center, 2020. Pp. xxii + 434. \$75.00/£60.95.

This brilliant book is about a form of storytelling called “drum ballads” (*guci* 鼓詞), which exists in northern China as oral performance and written text. The author weaves together several major themes relevant to the drum ballads, especially those about the court-case stories of two famous judges. She does so against the backdrop of Chinese history from the beginning of the nineteenth century down to 1937, the year the full-scale Japanese invasion of China began.

These themes are: (i) The idea of popular literature, appreciated not by the elite but by ordinary people; (ii) the idea of regional culture, varying from place to place; (iii) the interaction of storytelling forms and equivalents in drama and other genres; (iv) the Chinese culture special to the north, as opposed to the much more often studied southern culture; (v) the way justice operated in China at the time, with popular views compared and contrasted with actual practice; (vi) the impact of the technologies of printing on culture, especially the drum ballads; and (vii) the ways popular culture interacted with political, social, and economic life.

All these themes may be very specialized, and it is a specialist book. However, we can see that they are, in fact, somewhat more wide-ranging and hence historically more important than they seem. Moreover, they are more interconnected with each other than they appear at first sight.

This review hopes to explore some of these themes in more detail, though for space reasons it will not cover all. The overall purpose is to demonstrate the complexities both of Chinese literary history and of the way these topics are handled in this book. To my mind, it is a masterly piece of scholarship, which is a major contribution to research in its fields.

Margaret B. Wan is Associate Professor in the Department of World Languages and Cultures at the University of Utah. She is very well known in the field of Chinese performing arts. She has contributed enormously not only to the literature in the field, but also to professional engagement, taking a leading role in relevant professional associations.

Although this is a highly scholarly book, it is also replete with stories appealing to ordinary people and conveyed in a very accessible language. For example, the book opens with a “rare account of reading drum ballads” (p. 1) from the eighteenth century. It is about a very poor soldier who is treated very kindly by a slightly better off colleague. It turns out that this soldier “may not have food,

warm clothes, or firewood, but he has a drum ballad” (p. 2). This raises interesting questions about the publication of drum ballad books, and about literacy among the very poor. It looks as if they were written in a very simple language with recurring characters appropriate to popular literature. But the fact is these very poor people could read a few characters and well enough to enjoy written stories. They were an art in which reading was very important.

The point comes up repeatedly. For instance, in discussion of the drum ballads as regional literature, Wan comments that “Transmission could be primarily oral, entirely textual, or a middle ground involving both” (p. 32). There are two points of considerable relevance here.

One is that these drum ballads are regional. Wan finds various and even changing characteristics in the texts examined in different places, even some with loyalties to particular localities. The drum ballads are a good example of local culture.

The second point is that we can associate these drum ballads with the regional theatre that has been so important in China over many centuries. Just as storytelling and balladry are regional, so is drama. Drum ballads are not necessarily sung; they may be spoken without music, in a mixture of poetry and prose. But the same people will very frequently also perform these in song, in a form known as *dagu* 大鼓, or “big drum.” This is a clearly musical performance form, which can be given by just one or two singers.

It becomes even more striking when we learn that this form was introduced into the imperial palaces. From the time of the Kangxi Emperor (r. 1661–1722), drama was performed there by eunuchs belonging to an official body called the Shengpingshu 昇平署 (Bureau of Rising Peace). Wan finds evidence that “those performing drum songs or drum ballads (*guci*) in the palace were usually eunuchs of the Shengpingshu” (p. 73). The Shengpingshu’s eunuchs had initially performed mainly the elite drama, *Kunqu* 崑曲, for members of the court. But the Empress Dowager was very keen on Peking Opera (*Jingju* 京劇) and, in the nineteenth century, invited actors from the City of Beijing to come to the palace to perform. The fact that a member of the court should issue such an invitation raised the status of drama, which some regarded as very lowly. But for them to perform the even more lowly drum songs and drum ballads is very interesting indeed. Once again, this shows how the topic of drum ballads intersects society, history, literature, and performance.

Concerning the issue of justice, Wan writes:

Ballads on court-case stories are one of the main subcategories of drum ballads, and for several of the court-case stories, the drum ballad form was

a major incubator for their development. Such drum ballad texts recount stories of incorruptible judges who help the powerless gain justice. These court-case stories are little studied, but were hugely popular in their day. (pp. 12–13)

This raises the interesting and important interconnection between fiction and history. Let us begin by noting that both the most important “incorruptible judges” who feature in the drum ballads were real people. The earlier was Shi Shilun 施世綸 (d. 1722), the later Liu Yong 劉墉 (1719–1805).

According to Arthur Hummel’s classic *Eminent Chinese of the Ch’ing Period*, which is still an excellent reference work all these years later, the Kangxi Emperor opposed the appointment of Shi to a senior judicial post on the grounds that he was “always on the side of the poor and depressed classes” and “might be unjust in trials involving other ranks of society.”¹ This may tell us something about why he was loved enough among ordinary people to warrant being the hero of a popular novel. This was *Shigong an* 施公案 (Court cases of Judge Shi), which first appeared in 1838.

The other wise judge, Liu Yong, was famous for many cases, especially one in 1782, when he established an incontestable case of corruption against the Governor of Shandong, Guotai 國泰, who wanted independence for his province and was a henchman of the notoriously corrupt Heshen 和珅 (1750–1799). This man is famous and important in Chinese history for his immense power and wealth, which he gained through controlling the ageing Qianlong Emperor (r. 1735–1796), and for contributing greatly to the early stages of decline of the Qing Empire. Hummel confirms that Liu Yong was indeed noted for his incorruptibility, political abilities, and sense of justice.²

The reason for dwelling on these men is because of the emphasis Wan lays on the drum ballads about their court cases as a means of broadcasting the law and creating an image of a popular figure. The fact is that life was very hard for most people, especially those at the bottom of the heap. However, ordinary people could get some sense of social justice from the drum ballads and other performance and written forms.

The great drama historian Wang Guowei 王國維 (1877–1927) claimed that the spirit of the Chinese people was “worldly and optimistic,” which was why the

¹ Arthur W. Hummel, ed., *Eminent Chinese of the Ch’ing Period (1644–1912)* (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1943–1944), Vol. 2, p. 654.

² *Ibid.*, Vol. 1, pp. 536–37.

plays and novels of old times “begin sadly but end happily.”³ In accordance with this spirit, people could listen to a drum ballad about how Judge Liu overcame corruption and showed how ordinary people might get fairness from the law. He “punished corrupt officials and people who broke the law” (治賊官犯法民) but was himself “utterly selfless” (p. 156; 無私). The ordinary person’s dream of social justice might have usually been illusory but was not an impossibility.

Following numerous and captivating quotations from the drum ballads on Judge Liu, Wan concludes with the observation that they “present one way to explore popular understandings of legal culture within North China.” She continues: “They give a multi-faceted picture of how ideas might be transmitted and interpreted across social and education groups within the region” (p. 198). In other words, their value is not only literary but also historical and social. Wan draws out these complexities in a highly skilled and fascinating way that relies on her deep research and insights into China’s performing arts, and the drum ballads in particular.

The range of literary and performing arts forms that encapsulate the stories about Judges Shi and Liu, and hence those of the drum ballads, is really quite enormous. Wan calls these genres “oral, written and visual” and lists them as “literati jottings, histories and gazetteers, vignettes, novels, drama, casual and professional storytelling, and popular prints” (p. 199).

She claims that Judge Shi stories were popular in various forms in Beijing by the Daoguang era (1821–1850). They included Peking Opera which, by that time, was rising rapidly in the hands of outstanding actors, mainly the mature male roles (*laosheng* 老生). On the other hand, she says that Judge Liu stories were not particularly popular in the capital.

In analysing the reasons for this difference in popularity, Wan appeals to interventions and influence by the court and the authorities. Judge Shi items may have sided with the poor and weak against the rich and powerful but made no attempt to challenge Manchu rule or the imperial government. On the other hand, “the Judge Liu legend emphasized his daring in challenging corruption in the central government and taking down Guotai,” and that raised sensitivities about combatting wrongdoing by senior officials. There was another reason. The Judge Liu legend was associated with a story about the conflict between the Manchus and the Han Chinese, “which draws the clash along ethnic lines” (p. 229).

³ Faye Chunfang Fei, ed. and trans., *Chinese Theories of Theater and Performance from Confucius to the Present* (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 1999), p. 105.

This political sensitivity, Wan argues, is the major difference accounting for the difference in popularity between the stories of these two judges.

My own research into Peking Opera, especially in the nineteenth century and in Beijing, suggests that censorship was quite tight. Moreover, at private parties by officials, courtiers, and wealthy men, no actors would be willing, even if they were able, to perform items they thought could be offensive or even unwelcome to their patrons. So I think she is right to see political differences, even important ones, between stories of judges, even if they appear at first glance to be similar in nature.

Drum ballads were mainly focused on northern China. But in the Republican period, especially in the wake of the New Culture Movement, beginning in 1915, and the related May Fourth Movement of 1919, Shanghai tended to become a more important publishing centre. The main reason was that it veered towards becoming a kind of national city for the production of material printed through the modern lithograph process, as opposed to the traditional woodblock. This produced a bad effect on the printing of drum ballads. By the 1920s, many traditional (woodblock) drum ballad producers had been driven out of business, and by 1937 nearly 90 per cent of modern Chinese book and journal publishing was in Shanghai. “When the discourses surrounding culture changed, drum ballads were largely relegated to niche markets including children’s literature and literature for rural residents” (p. 278).

What this shows about the regional nature of drum ballads (and many other cultural forms) is the shift from Beijing and north to Shanghai as the main cultural centre. We can see here the relationship between drum ballads and the political and economic life in the early stages of modernization in China. Wan even raises big-picture questions, such as what the history of the drum ballads over the period between 1800 and 1937 tells us about how layers of identity relating to “region” and “nation” developed. She writes:

Clearly in the nineteenth century one of these layers was a “national” “Chinese” identity conveyed through widely shared stories like historical romances, exemplars from textbooks, law, ritual practices, and Confucian terminology. Many of these broader cultural expressions were also inflected by regional or local practices. “Regional” identity was influenced by large dialect areas and performance traditions, including stories specific to drum ballads. Under this layer would come ever smaller “local” identities. (p. 286)

To draw big questions about Chinese history from a regional performance or literary form such as drum ballads strikes me as both daring and innovative. Actually, she shrinks from answering “how generalizable” her findings on the drum ballads and regional culture may be (p. 287). But for me the interconnection of

such small cultural matters with the big issues of politics and identity is how we can begin to develop major theories of the inner workings of Chinese history. That is why I found this book truly impressive.

Wan is everywhere careful about terminology and very familiar with the way fellow scholars have handled it. One point I note with interest is that she everywhere uses the term “Peking opera” or “Peking Opera,” rather than leaving the term untranslated (*Jingju* or *Jingxi* 京戲), or adopting the translation Beijing Opera. There is actually quite a controversy over this question among specialists of this form of musical theatre. One stream of thought would support the approach adopted by Wan in this book. Another argues that the term Peking Opera is a Western imposition and that it is better not to translate it. For instance, one never translates the terms *kabuki* from Japanese or *gamelan* from Indonesian, but leaves them in the original.

My own leaning is nowadays towards the second approach. However, I concede that Wan’s is perfectly rational and I followed it myself in early writings. Most Anglophone people will not know what you mean if you refer to *Jingju*, but may know Peking Opera, and, after all, translation aims to make meaning from terms in unfamiliar languages. My main point is that, in this book, Wan has dealt with myriad technical terms relating to various forms of literature and performing arts. I think, on the whole, she has managed the question of translation extremely well.

The scholarly appurtenances in this book are superb. These include annotation, bibliography, and four detailed appendices. The index is masterly, with numerous subheadings that make it easy to find one’s way around the book. There are also numerous figures, tables, and maps. These always add to the interest of a scholarly account, as well as making it easier to follow.

This field has not attracted much scholarship up to now. There is a substantial literature on topics allied to the drum ballads, such as popular literature, storytelling, and drama. However, there is not much on the drum ballads themselves, apart from Li Xuemei 李雪梅 et al., *Zhongguo guci wenxue fazhanshi* 中國鼓詞文學發展史, published in Shanghai in 2012.⁴ Margaret Wan’s is the first work in a Western language that is dedicated to the drum ballads. For that she deserves enormous credit.

It is obvious from the above that this topic, though it seems very narrow and specialized, is in fact quite broad-ranging. There are numerous implications

⁴ Li Xuemei et al., *Zhongguo guci wenxue fazhanshi* (The history of the development of Chinese drum ballad literature) (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 2012).

following from this genre and they involve literature, performing arts, society, and the politics and history of the period. Wan has uncovered and analysed these implications with remarkable skill, sensitivity, and attention to detail.

So I regard this book as a truly a monumental piece of scholarship and a major contribution to the literature in its field. I recommend it strongly to specialized readers. Ordinary readers will also find much of interest here.

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The Last Embassy: The Dutch Mission of 1795 and the Forgotten History of Western Encounters with China. By Tonio Andrade. Princeton, NJ and Oxford, England: Princeton University Press, 2021. Pp. xi + 408. \$35.00/£28.00.

In 1795, The Dutch East India Company (VOC) sent Isaac Titsingh (1745–1812), a high-ranking official in its company in Batavia, to Guangzhou, where he would organize an embassy to travel to Beijing to congratulate the Qianlong Emperor (r. 1735–1796) on the sixtieth year of his reign. This “ceremonial diplomacy” was a success, judging from the benevolent response from the emperor and his high officials, and stood in sharp contrast with the failure of the British mission led by George Macartney (1737–1806), undertaken just two years previously. The difference between the two European missions lay not only in the refusal of Macartney to conform to Chinese ceremony—to kowtow to the emperor—but also in the Qing perception of British assertiveness and aggression. Hurriedly dismissed from the capital, without having the opportunity to discuss opening trading ports and permanent diplomatic representation, the Macartney mission turned British opinion sharply against Qing China and represented for many the prelude to Anglo-Chinese armed conflict in the First Opium War. The Dutch embassy, despite not being commissioned by the King in The Hague, and with gifts much less impressive than the British, received a warm welcome. Titsingh and Jacob Andries van Braam (1771–1820), the VOC Factor in Guangzhou, who acted as the deputy ambassador, were shown extraordinary favours by the old emperor. Bearing the Macartney mission in mind, Titsingh and van Braam judged their own diplomacy a success, as did their superiors at the VOC. Yet the disastrous British mission would have a long-standing impact on Sino-Western relations, while the