

GOLDMAN, Andrea S. — *Opera and the City: The Politics of Culture in Beijing, 1770-1900*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012. Pp. 365.

From 1770 to 1900, Beijing was the center of a vibrant opera culture in multi-ethnic Qing China, where the Manchu minority ruled over the Han Chinese majority. Tightly anchored on historical and literary sources, and informed by gender and cultural studies, Goldman's erudite social history of opera takes us on an exciting walk in the capital city, from the height of the empire to the foreign occupation in 1900 that disrupted the state, the society, and the practice of opera. Augmented by fascinating illustrations, the text unravels the evolving opera culture as it tracks turning points where politics, society, and war shaped the urbanite community of a million people.

In the first chapter Goldman constructs the contemporary discourse of opera through sixteen guidebooks, or "flower registers," a genre that she compares to ethnographies. These were nostalgic biographies of "boy actresses" (boys playing young lady roles and eroticized as female beauties and flower metaphors), homoerotic poetry, patronage, and theater gossip. The authors, themselves opera fans and aficionados, were male and southerners sojourning in Beijing, all immersed in classical literature and feeling unappreciated by the social and political echelons of power. Like the biographers of courtesans, they intended to address the gap in the historical records on the opera actors, their skills, beauty, and sensibilities. The flower registers equated the gender ambiguity of a boy-actress acting feminine to that of a courtesan possessing the male scholar's literary skills; such "gender performing" and "gender-bending" conduct was acceptable social practice for entertainers and did not transgress social norms. This discourse of opera circulated in public space, guided opera connoisseurship, and educated the audience.

The next two chapters focus on state interventions in performance venue and opera genre. The commercial playhouses and temple fairs served as public venues while private venues were located in salons and Qing palaces. Opera was considered a Han cultural practice that the Manchu emperors and banner aristocracy enjoyed. To preserve the distinction between Manchus and Han Chinese, the state allowed playhouses to be located only in the Outer City, where 90% of the population was Han Chinese. High-ranking officials and the bannermen were forbidden to go to the playhouses and mix with the Chinese population. Nor were women allowed, on stage or in the audience. To better regulate public morality and maintain social control, the state imposed curfews and forced performances to begin at noon and to wrap up by 5-7 pm. But enforcement became relaxed, as wealthy women attended and Manchu patrons mixed with the Han Chinese. Goldman contends that cross-dressing on stage did not transgress social norms of gender, especially when such acts were accompanied by parody and humor. The temple fairs were open to women and the poor; they had fewer restrictions but the state still scrutinized the performances. In the private venues, scheduling was more flexible and invited guests included women, who sat in segregated space.

The Qing state achieved greater success at mandating the musical style, taste or the performance genre, but the genre that it eventually patronized was the product of extensive blending of regional styles. Earlier the state preferred the elitist, highbrow, *kun* opera, so it ordered the popular *qinqiang* performers to switch to *kun* and *yi* styles. To meet with the legislation, *qinqiang* actors changed names and adjusted melodies; at the same time *kun* troupes also borrowed from *qinqiang* style. In the 1770s, Anhui troupes arrived in Beijing and incorporated *xipi* and *erhuang* melodies to produce the hybridized *pihuang* opera, now known as Beijing opera. Designated as lowbrow entertainment, *pihuang* opera became popular among lower classes. When the Taiping Rebellion dismantled *kun* troupes in the

1850s, the Qing court in Beijing forged a new identity with commoners and treated the outlawry found in *pihuang* opera as patriotism. The Qing patronage of *pihuang* opera gave it new respect and elevated it to middlebrow and high culture.

In the last two chapters Goldman analyzes the scripts of *Garden of Turquoise and Jade* and the *I, Sister-in-law* operas to gauge audience reception. *Garden* uses some Suzhou dialect in a plot in which a clever seamstress and a clown stop a powerful and corrupt official from appropriating a poor scholar's plot of land. When the seamstress marries the scholar's son and the clown gets a job, the theater-goers identified with the downtrodden and rejoiced at the triumph of social justice against corruption, and some among them relished the erotic allure of the actors and cross-dressing youths on stage.

In the *I, Sister-in-Law* scripts, women characters from the novel, *Water Margin*, are killed as punishment for plotting their husbands' deaths and for seducing their husbands' biological or sworn brothers. Goldman states that the *kun* scripts maintained a balance between "titillation and decorum" and accorded primary attention to these women, whose plight garnered sympathy from the audience. The *pihuang* operas were entirely performed in Beijing dialect; they were misogynous and put primary focus on the wronged husband and brother, who violently executed the unfaithful women before joining the outlaws to bring down the government. While the *I Sister-in-law kun* scripts are female-centered, the *pihuang* scripts are male-centered and heap praise on male martial valor and outlawry. The clever seamstress and sexually charged *I Sister-in-law* scripts air private desires in public space and as such could be observed as violating the social norms of class and gender hierarchies. Indeed, Goldman's overall thesis argues that opera served as "a site of resistance" in Beijing when the characters, actors, and the audience blurred the boundaries of gender, class, ethnicity and morality. She correctly concludes that it was the intersection of opera culture with commercial interests and state intrusion that prevented the playhouses, actors, and audiences from turning this site into a public sphere where oppositional politics could challenge state authority.

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HUMPHRIES, Mark Osborne — *The Last Plague: Spanish Influenza and the Politics of Public Health in Canada*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013. Pp. 323.

If, like me, you tried to write an undergraduate essay in the early 2000s on "Spanish Flu" in Canada, you probably found few sources, wrote your 10 or 20 pages, and moved on with your life thinking you knew what there was to be known. Mark Osborne Humphries' *The Last Plague: Spanish Influenza and the Politics of Public Health in Canada* now joins Esvyllt Jones's *Influenza 1918: Disease, Death, and Struggle in Winnipeg* (UTP 2007) in showing us how little we actually understood. Humphries' important and insightful book significantly alters the place of Spanish Flu in the landscape of Canadian social and medical history. Some 50,000 Canadians died in this epidemic, and in *The Last Plague* Humphries demonstrates that their deaths ultimately brought Canada into a new, modern era of public health work and knowledge.

Even if they have never spared a thought for cholera, smallpox, or any other historical epidemic, most students and scholars of modern history are at least familiar with the existence of the global 1918-19 influenza pandemic, hot on the heels of the First World War.