

## CHINA

JOHNSON, DAVID, editor. *Ritual Opera, Operatic Ritual. "Mu-lien Rescues His Mother" in Chinese Popular Culture*. Papers from the International Workshop on the Mu-lien Operas with an additional contribution on the Woman Huang legend by Beata Grant. Publications of the Chinese Popular Culture Project, 1. Berkeley: University of California, Chinese Popular Culture Project, 1989. xiii+325 pages. Paper US\$12.00; ISBN 0-9624327-0-9. (Distributed by IEAS Publications, University of California, 2223 Fulton Street, Sixth Floor, Berkeley, CA 94720, USA. Prepaid)

Chinese local operas and religious plays have rarely been the subject of specialized study in Western languages. The present volume—the first publication of the Chinese Popular Culture Project in Berkeley—offers new and rare insights into this still largely unknown area of Chinese regional culture. Six of the papers in the book were originally prepared for the International Workshop on Mulien Operas in Berkeley, 9-13 August 1987. An additional contribution by Beata Grant deals with the numerous versions of the Woman Huang legend in various genres of performance literature. The book concludes with a selective bibliography on the Mulien Operas by Dajun Yao.

Stagings of the well-known story of the monk Mulien 目蓮, who descended into the netherworld to rescue his sinful mother from the torments of hell, were not restricted to the great, multi-day operas performed on various dates of the year for the entire community. Certain scenes of the Mulien story cycle have been and still are acted out by Buddhist and Taoist priests during funerary rites. This explains why the majority of the essays focuses on these dramatic intermezzi in Buddhist and Taoist liturgies, whereas only one article (by David Johnson) is concerned with the Mulien Operas proper. With this emphasis, the question of the relationship between opera and ritual naturally became the main theme of the whole book.

Stephen F. Teiser recapitulates the origin of the Mulien myth from the fifth-century Buddhist *Yulanpen sūtra* 盂蘭盆經 and shows that this myth was central to the annual Yulanpen festival on the 15th day of the 7th month. On that day people made offerings to their ancestors and, above all, to the myriads of lost souls and hungry ghosts who constituted a constant threat to the living and, therefore, had to be appeased. Teiser presents a synopsis of the various "Ghost Festival" celebrations, including their Buddhist, Taoist, and Confucian aspects, from the sixth century up to the Ming and Qing dynasties. What he might have stated more explicitly is that most of these festivities were popular rites rather than part of the Buddhist and Taoist liturgies. This is important, since the embellishments of the Mulien story and the variety plays (*za-ju* 雜劇) first mentioned in the mid-twelfth century evolved precisely from the popular sphere, and not from the liturgical traditions of Buddhism and Taoism.

That the Mulien Operas were not enacted to instruct or educate the people from above, but belonged to the people themselves, is emphasized by David Johnson, who gives a vivid tableau of varying Mulien performances in different parts of China. We cannot fail to notice that Johnson's descriptions largely substantiate Piet VAN DER LOON's (1977) arguments in his path-breaking study, "Les origines rituelles du theatre chinois." Van der Loon's exciting thesis of the fundamentally ritual function of the Mulien Operas is amply verified by a multitude of Johnson's observations: the purification rites executed by the actors themselves at the beginning of the plays, the central

importance of ghosts and their expulsion in certain key segments of the operas, the emotional seriousness with which the spectators reacted to these scenes, the high degree of identification of the actors with their roles, the blurring of the distinction between stage rituals and genuine rituals, and between opera and reality in general. All this points to the fact that the main effect of these plays was exorcistic rather than merely entertaining. The basic similarities between opera and ritual noted by Johnson may, therefore, not only be due to the fact that both "were parts of a single performance system" (2). It seems indeed that opera *itself* represents a form of ritual that grew out of the largely unorganized religion of the people. Van der Loon has also hinted at the close relationship between actors and mediums. In his view, an actor playing the part of a god or a ghost was, just like a medium, actually possessed by these spirits. Thus, their performances were authentic exorcisms, rather than mere imitations of the rites of religious specialists. This point is also corroborated by Johnson, who reports that spirit-medium troupes in northwestern Hunan "first performed the rituals that were needed by the community, then changed into opera costume and went on stage to perform Mu-lien" (30).

The integration of Mulien sequences into Buddhist and Taoist funeral services is the subject of the contributions by Kenneth Dean, Ch'iu K'un-liang, Kristofer Schipper, and Gary Seaman, all of them presenting valuable source materials gathered during their fieldwork. In this context, the interpenetration of opera and ritual is viewed from a different angle.

Dean explains the theatrical parts as sophisticated commentaries to rituals that had become redundant and increasingly incomprehensible. For example, in his interpretation, the introduction of the comical figure of Lei Yousheng 雷有聲 into funerary services in Quanzhou (and southern Taiwan) parodies and contrasts the inferior practices of spirit mediumism against the more refined and powerful methods of Taoist priests represented in the self-controlled figure of Mulien. In a similar way, Schipper understands the insertion of Mulien-related playlets into the classical Lingbao mortuary rituals of southern Taiwan as "apological actualizations, of Indian Buddhist origin, of the Chinese shaman's trip to the Underworld" (141). Here again, and certainly not by accident, we come across the complex of shamanistic religion and its still largely unexplored role in the development of Buddhist and Taoist liturgies, as well as ritual opera.

The comical element, for example, the obscene jokes reported by Dean, Ch'iu, and Schipper, also deserve further attention. Rather than merely heightening entertainment, these burlesque features may also reveal a deeper ritual significance.

Gary Seaman's exegeses of funeral rites in Puli (Taiwan) emphasize the relationship between the various dramatic sequences, the different family groups, and the identity of the deceased. His complex symbolic explanations offer a fascinating and homogeneous view of the dramatic segments in mortuary ritual. However, we have to bear in mind the numerous regional variations of these rites that make any uniform interpretation rather problematic.

Today we know that in nearly every culture the roots of theater have to be sought in ritual. Even during their more and more independent evolution, theater and ritual often retained certain relationships. The ways in which this general insight holds true for China become apparent in this book. Many of van der Loon's ideas are here fleshed out by textual evidence and firsthand ethnographic data. Of course, numerous questions still remain open. However, the reader is led to perceive the manifold links between the vast substratum of Chinese ecstatic cults, festivals, and religious plays, on the one hand, and the higher liturgical traditions on the other. The essays of this

volume are a precious source of inspiration for anyone interested in these areas of Chinese popular culture.

REFERENCE CITED:

VAN DER LOON, Piet

1977 Les origines rituelles du théâtre chinois [The ritual origins of Chinese theater]. *Journal Asiatique* CCLXV, 144-68.

Ursula-Angelika CEDZICH  
Center for Chinese Studies  
Berkeley, California

KNAPP, RONALD C. *China's Vernacular Architecture: House Form and Culture*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1989. xiv+195 pages. Illustrations, map, glossary of Chinese terms, bibliography, index. Cloth US\$38.00; ISBN 0-8248-1204-2.

In his previous book, Knapp discussed vernacular architecture throughout rural China. In the course of his fieldwork in cultural geography, his research drew him for various reasons (stated in the introductory chapter of the present volume) to Zhejiang province in eastern China. The present book is the result of his field surveys in that province. While his previous book can be considered a general introduction to the study of vernacular architecture in China, the book under review is the first step toward intensive treatment of the same subject on a regional basis.

As elsewhere in the world, despite the obvious distinctions between rural and urban architecture, the majority of elements are shared. This includes the basic forms of the dwelling, the building materials and elementary spatial concepts, as well as underlying non-material aspects such as the world view and various religious and quasi-religious notions. For this reason, this book does not equate the terms "vernacular architecture" and "rural architecture," but rather identifies vernacular architecture as the spontaneous and generally traditional domestic architecture that stems from various cultural sources and that is adapted to the climatic and environmental factors. Structures influenced by the "great tradition," such as temples and palaces, are not defined in terms of vernacular architecture in the strict sense of the word and are thus excluded from the present volume, although the author acknowledges that there is often a thin line distinguishing simple rural dwellings from the lavish urban houses of wealthy Chinese.

Utilizing the cultural-geographic approach to the study of vernacular architecture pioneered by A. Rapoport, which is multidisciplinary in its essence as it draws data from cultural anthropology, architecture, physical geography, art history, and folklore, the present work attaches equal importance to material and non-material aspects of the dwelling. This allows the reader to appreciate the web of relationships that bind the two aspects into an integral whole, in which the various features of the dwelling make sense only when seen within the framework of this bilateral relationship. This two-sided approach guides the discussion in each of the major chapters of the book.

The first chapter, "Settlement," deals with the geographical background of Zhejiang province and the types of settlements within it, as well as with the general features of *fengshui* 風水, the Chinese system of geomancy (termed "mystical ecology" or "esoteric cosmology" by the author) that is of great importance in site selection and