

**David George Johnson**

***The Stage in the Temple: Ritual Opera in Village Shanxi***

Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, 2022. 190 pages.

Paperback, \$25.00; paperback + ebook, \$37.50; ebook, \$24.95. ISBN: 9781557292018 (paperback), 9781557292025 (ebook).

The next time you walk into a temple complex in China, turn around and look to your left and right. There, you will often see an empty stage that faces the main hall housing the temple's deity or deities. During temple festivals, operas are performed on these stages for the entertainment of those deities and the festival attendees who stand and sit on stools set up in front of the stage. *The Stage in the Temple: Ritual Opera in Village Shanxi* is about some of the local operas that have been performed on temple stages in southwest Shanxi Province in northern China over many centuries.

The book's author, David Johnson, begins the introduction with an impassioned and elegant tribute to the importance of studying village life in China, in which the operas

performed at temple festivals discussed in this book play a central role. Throughout the book, one is struck by the importance of ritual operas in local society and the staying power of particular local genres over centuries. The evidence of this can be seen in the number of stages. Johnson notes that before the Cultural Revolution, there were almost ten thousand stages in Shanxi, most in temple compounds, and “in the high Qing, the numbers must have been considerably greater” (5). As “an integral part of the rituals honoring gods’ birthdays” (*ibid.*), these operas “were old, deeply rooted in their villages, and essential to the rituals that brought blessings to the village and protection from bad weather, disease, bandits, and the like” (11). While performance traditions tend to navigate a vital line between continuity and change (cf. Toelken 1996), Johnson notes that the ritual operas he writes about “were intensely conservative because they were offerings to the gods; some villagers believed that changing the scripts would displease them” (3). According to Johnson, this conservatism essentially shielded the genre from the influence of other genres, with the local ritual opera scripts focused “almost entirely about events in Chinese history” (*ibid.*).

Johnson notes that much of the research for this book was originally done for his book *Spectacle and Sacrifice: The Ritual Foundations of Village Life in North China* (2009), but he found that his in-depth discussion of ritual opera and the larger questions he raises about content and function ultimately required an entirely new book, thus giving rise to *The Stage in the Temple*. This new book fills in several lacunae, both geographically and textually. Johnson notes that while *Spectacle and Sacrifice* focused on village festivals in southeastern Shanxi Province, the ritual opera scripts of that region have been lost. In contrast, *The Stage in the Temple* focuses on a number of handwritten scripts from southwestern Shanxi of a local ritual opera genre known as Za Opera (*zaju*) (a different genre from the more famous Yuan dynasty *zaju*, which the author refers to as “Yuan Drama”). Following the introduction, the book is divided into four sections, which look at scripts of Za Opera, the history of the genre, how village opera was performed, and various questions raised, together with the author’s conclusion. There are also three appendices that provide a list of temple stages in Shanxi Province, several of which are still extant, a discussion of the provenance of the scripts, and a list of scripts donated by the author to the C. V. Starr East Asian Library at the University of California, Berkeley. The latter will serve as an important resource for scholars who want to do further research on these operas in the future.

The first section of the book, “Scripts of Za Opera,” looks at opera scripts “collected by government teams in southwestern Shanxi villages between the 1950s and 1980s” (11). Many of the operas are of the military-historical variety, “focus[ing] on military action involving well-known historical figures” (66). Their protagonists are not plucked from village life but are instead “kings and generals,” and the operas “are set not in villages but in the palaces and battlefields of great dynasties of the past” (152). Some of the operas are moral and didactic, while others are amoral and heterodox. Johnson focuses on eight scripts out of dozens available, analyzing their plots and themes, and conducting a bit of textual sleuthing as to possible influences and sources. In some cases, he points to particular operas’ connections to novels and other literary works; Johnson looks at similarities and differences between the versions, noting a conflict in one opera “is presented in harsher terms in the village opera” than the novel (16), and how, in another opera, *The Banquet at Hongmen* (*Hongmen hui*), “the high drama of *Records of the Historian and Romance of Western Han* has been turned into innocuous entertainment” (20).

For the latter opera, Johnson discusses different registers of speech in the opera that suggest a combination of sources, including the novel, storytelling traditions, and so on. While Johnson writes, “that these elements survived the transfer from storytelling to stage suggests that the playwright had an extremely crude conception of opera,” he adds, “this is solid evidence that *The Banquet at Hongmen* was little influenced by mainstream drama and may well have been in part very old” (21). Johnson does a good job of including the reader in his process of textual research. For example, later he writes about the opera *Changban Slope* (*Changban po*), “The substantial amount of verse in the script suggests that a ballad or *chantefable* may possibly have been a source, so I looked at two candidates—a sixty-six-page *shipaishu* version and a twenty-two-page ‘Big Drumsong’ (*dagushu*) version—but neither bore any resemblance whatsoever to the opera” (29–30). For another opera, *The Fire Assault Stratagem* (*Huogong ji*), which draws on the novel *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, Johnson writes, “Although the action of the opera closely follows the novel, sometimes using the novel’s exact phrasing, the opera also drops many incidents and adds new ones” (31).

Several of the scripts examined “show a connection, never close, with Ming novels” (32), and the Za Operas are diverse enough that Johnson suggests that “there is no Za Opera genre in the narrow formal sense” (33). The operas range in length, content (humorous versus serious), and political or religious morals. In looking for what ties them together, Johnson writes, “What they have in common is neither literary form (though most verses are written in seven-character lines) nor content (though historical subjects are heavily favored) but their mode of performance: the roles were played by villagers, the music and stagecraft were unsophisticated and probably very old, and they were performed on temple stages” (33–34). Noting the combination of unique local variations and the way the operas were carefully conserved over time, he extends his idea from *Spectacle and Sacrifice* of the “ritual autarky” of northern Chinese villages to what he calls “operatic autarky”—fiercely held local traditions of opera scripts and performance (34).

There is clearly an intentionality and a selectivity involved in the composition of these scripts. In *Thrice Inviting Zhuge Liang* (*San qing*), an opera from Xinzhuang village in southwestern Shanxi about the ruler Liu Bei’s repeated attempts to acquire the brilliant Zhuge Liang as his military strategist, Johnson shows how the opera rewords language from the novel *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* for expressive purposes and dramatic effect: “Here the author takes a passage from the novel, changes a few words, and radically changes its meaning. He is turning the language of the novel to his own purposes” (39). Although the opera scripts could be edited and restored by local educated elite, the villagers saw each opera as “part of their patrimony as a village, and the writer felt an obligation to hand it on to future generations in the best possible condition” (44, italics in original). Johnson concludes, “Clearly there was what we would call a Xinzhuang Village identity, and this opera was part of it” (*ibid.*). Part of the building blocks of that identity were what Johnson calls the operas’ “tableaux,” referring to “moments of high drama in popular operas that formed a cultural vocabulary for people in all walks of life” (58). He notes that the playwright’s confidence that “his village audience would understand the allusion [to those moments of high drama] shows just how present opera was in the minds of ordinary people” (*ibid.*).

The second section discusses the origins and early development of the genre; its early stages; local funding, which shows the early popularity of ritual theater in various localities; and the presence of ritual opera-related objects in tombs. Johnson notes that

across classes “opera was intimately connected with ritual life” and “it appears that by the twelfth century opera had taken hold all across the society of rural southern Shanxi and northern Henan and no doubt elsewhere in north China” (87). He goes on to discuss the effects of various historical migrations on the spread of the genre and notes the continuity of elements within the genre from the Song dynasty to the early twentieth century. As further support for the idea that such elements could persist over centuries, he looks at village opera material from Anhui Province as a “parallel tradition,” suggesting that “the Anhui material provides us with irrefutable evidence that village ritual opera could last virtually unchanged for many centuries” (99).

The third section, “Village Opera in Performance,” looks at Za Operas and other genres performed in villages, noting how “remarkable similarities in stagecraft” suggest that many “village opera genres in north China . . . had a common ancestor” (111). One “archaic element” (157) common to several of these genres is the role of the Director, a sort of master of ceremonies who leads community prayers for the village, summarizes the plot of each opera for the audience, invites the actors to the stage, and acts in minor accompanying roles (118). Johnson notes several ritual opera genres in other localities with similar roles, variously referred to as the Bamboo Staff-Holder, the Master, the Announcer, and the Leader (157). Other genres addressed in this section include *yuanben*, which was part of festivals but not ritual programs, consisting of “off-color farces that were performed at night behind the locked gates of the temple compound” (126); *Tiaoxi*, a genre from across the Yellow River in Shaanxi Province; and others.

The fourth and final section, “Questions and Conclusion,” addresses the probable functions and rationale for these ritual operas. Johnson begins by comparing Za Operas to other types of popular village plays, such as those translated in Sidney Gamble’s well-known collection (Gamble 1970) and the abundance of shadow puppet plays (*piyingxi*) in the region. Johnson notes that many of these popular plays speak to themes of contemporary importance to the lives of their local audiences and suggests that such plays can provide “a window into the feelings of ordinary people” (150). As an example, when an oppressed female character fights back against those who bully her, members of the audience may experience a vicarious enjoyment of speaking back to those in power. However, the Za Operas seem to be focused almost exclusively on historical and military dramas involving superhuman characters. Johnson asks if the Za Operas might be “intended to teach orthodox morality” but decides against this idea, given the way the ritual operas “portray violent conflict, ranging from assassination to rebellion to grand battles” (154). A key difference between the Za Operas and other popular village plays is that the former’s key function was “as offerings to the gods,” while the latter were intended “as entertainment” (152).

Regarding the historical and military subject material, Johnson suggests that there was a standard understanding, going back to the Song dynasty, that historical operas were “what the gods preferred” (156). As to why deities preferred this type of opera as ritual offerings, Johnson writes that “men in the great dynasties of the past—kings, noblemen, and generals, men who shaped history—were the most powerful of terrestrial beings” and “only their stories were appropriate offerings to the divine Powers” (*ibid.*). He also notes connection between rituals and opera in terms of their performativity—both belonged to “a single system of scripted performances; they were *alike*” (*ibid.*, italics in original).

While the principal purpose of the Za Operas was as ritual offerings for the gods, Johnson points to several elements of the operas that would have appealed to their human audiences. Besides offering “exciting spectacles,” the operas “showed that even at the highest levels, life was struggle—war, in fact” (155). They also taught that cleverness and cunning outweigh virtuous behavior, a point that Johnson describes as “peasant wisdom writ large” (ibid.). At the same time, the operas “provided an elementary sense of the functioning of the Chinese state in those lofty realms that farmers would never experience personally,” giving them “a rudimentary conceptual vocabulary for national politics” (ibid.). Given the way that villagers themselves were involved in the editing, performance, and percussive accompaniment of these ritual operas, Johnson concludes that the Za Operas “helped the villagers make Chinese history their own history” and “in a sense taught them what China was” (ibid.).

This book, together with Johnson’s previous work, represents a groundbreaking contribution to our understanding of ritual performance in China. *The Stage in the Temple* would make an excellent addition to undergraduate courses on Chinese and East Asian popular religion, performance, and popular culture.

---

REFERENCES

- Gamble, Sidney D. 1970. *Chinese Village Plays from the Ting Hsien Region (Yang Ke Hsüan)*. Amsterdam: Philo Press.
- Johnson, David G. 2009. *Spectacle and Sacrifice: The Ritual Foundations of Village Life in North China*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center.
- Toelken, Barre. 1996. *The Dynamics of Folklore*. Logan: Utah State University Press.

Levi S. Gibbs  
Dartmouth College