



Francesca R. Sborgi Lawson, *The Narrative Arts of Tianjin: Between Music and Language*

Abingdon, Oxon, UK: Ashgate, 2010. 212 pages. Hardback, £55.00. Includes 14 b&w illustrations and 25 music examples. ISBN: 978-1-4094-0588-7.

THE NARRATIVE ARTS OF TIANJIN provides a slice-of-time look at the narrative arts tradition in Tianjin, China, called *shuochang*. The period of study, the mid-to-late 1980s, was a time of change for the narrative arts in Tianjin, particularly as regards the system of patronage and pedagogy. Part I of the book provides background on the history of the narrative arts, social relationships, and language-music relationships in China leading up to and following the 1949 establishment of the People's Republic of China. The author's main focus, laid out in the six chapters of Part I, is on the structural relationship between speaking (the *shuo* of *shuochang*) and singing (*chang*) in the different genres of this tradition and how that relationship shapes what can be communicated in performance. This communication hinges upon the balance between semantic intelligibility and aesthetic elements of performance such as musicality, timbre, rhythm, the demands of a tonal language, and so on. Her second focus is on what she calls the "hidden discourses" in performances, or those things that cannot be expressed openly for fear of reprisal, and which are structurally and semantically obscured through the interplay of language and music. Part II of the book focuses on four genres in the *shuochang* tradition: Tianjin Popular Tunes (*Tianjin shidiao*), Beijing Drumsong (*Jingyun dagu*), Fast Clappertales (*kuaibarshu*), and Comic Routines (*xiangsheng*). Each genre is presented in a separate chapter as an "act" that begins with a description of a specific performance by a well-known professional performer, followed by the author's analysis of the textual and musical structure of the piece, and finally a short section about the "hidden discourses" in the performance.

The main strength of the book is its musicological descriptions of the four genres included in Part II. In her discussion of each genre, the author's focus remains on the balance and interconnection between speaking and singing, or the textual and musical elements of each genre. In particular, explanations of the genre-specific techniques for putting text to music or visa versa result in a good understanding of the structure of each genre and how it compares to the others. The author demonstrates well how analyzing only the musical elements or only the text of a piece would lead to an incomplete or even misleading understanding of the performance. These chapters all include instructive photographs and transcriptions to aid understanding, even for those not well versed in ethnomusicology, as well as a CD with examples of the first three genres discussed.

The pedagogical background on the singers provided in the chapters of Part II, while minimal, is helpful in historicizing the *shuochang* tradition. It becomes clear

that although this is a living tradition dependent upon oral transmission, it has also relied upon particular named individuals to develop new styles over the years. However, these individual changes are not linked consistently to the historical background briefly raised in Part I of the book. While any reader with some knowledge of recent Chinese history can imagine why the mid-to-late 1980s, a mere ten years after the Cultural Revolution, is an essential period of change for the musical arts, and culture more generally, the direct impact of these changes on *shuochang* could be explained in more detail. For example, discussions of the hidden messages in performance, in which sensitive cultural information must be veiled to protect performers from reprisal, are unconvincing without the details of how such danger unfolds in reality and how such danger would change over time as the cultural and political situation changes.

Structurally, putting the “background” at the beginning of the book and the detailed musicological discussions later, in Part II, creates the sense of a split between past and present and serves to sever the depth of the musical analysis from the complex sociopolitical context in which it surely unfolds. The use of the ethnographic present throughout the book is somewhat confusing and contributes to a sense of timelessness that belies the author’s claims of change. For instance, the name for the tradition used throughout the book, *shuochang*, was changed to *quyi* (“vocal arts”) in 1953 in order to “impose a sense of pan-Chinese unity” on the vocal arts (23). Despite the book’s focus on performances in the 1980s, she uses the earlier name, implying that she identifies current practice with the earlier form. While this may be the case, as many of these performers were trained in the earlier tradition, this usage seems to gloss over the politics that brought about the change and which must inform the practice of even those trained pre-1949. One wonders which name her performers use? This would be important ethnographic information about performer identity, which the author argues is primarily a local Tianjin identity. Identity politics is important to the book’s argument about hidden messages, and a number of examples of how local identity is encoded in the structure of the music are given. In the earlier background chapters, it is clear that performers have strong opinions on these matters, but their voices are frustratingly absent in the latter part of the book focusing on actual performances. Instead, the author often relies on textual analysis to speak for them. While it is clear that the author conducted numerous interviews and observations of these performers, the strongest perspective is her own.

More ethnographic engagement with the sociopolitical context is needed to give the reader a true sense of the significance and lived reality of the changes to traditional performance arts in China in the period of study and beyond. Without this depth, the analysis seems to be more an interpretation of the meaning of individual texts and performances than discourse analysis. Consequently, the analysis of “hidden discourses” at the end of each chapter in Part II contributes to the distancing of research subjects from their representation in the book such that at times they can even seem alienated from their own culture. This is particularly so in discussions of the messages that are “deeply embedded” in musical structure. The author explains that these messages require a connoisseur’s dedication to decipher them,

yet they often seem to be expressions of shared cultural values that all Tianjin people would implicitly understand. More ethnographic evidence of how the performers and audiences themselves interpret the meaning of these performances would lessen this effect and enrich the study.

On a technical note, the book would benefit from a more rigorous copyedit. Overall, the book provides a strong outline of the structure of four *shuochang* genres as they were performed in the mid-to-late 1980s and demonstrates how the musical and textual elements are integral, as a unit, to the messages communicated in performance. This part of the book will be of good use to those interested in narrative arts in general and Chinese narrative arts in a transitional period in particular. The work of contextualizing this tradition more rigorously in the evolving cultural politics of Chinese society, however, remains to be done.

Lauren Meeker
SUNY New Paltz