

ethics, to promote sensual pleasure and romantic love, and to address the radical cultural and political transformations in the age of Westernization/modernization. If the ‘fragrant and bedazzling’ images were still encoded with deeper political meanings, they were no longer the conventional metaphors for the minister–ruler relationship or its extension, loyalism or patriotism. . . . China’s lyrical tradition is sexier and more ‘modern’ – and that sensual lyricism is more political – than existing histories have led us to believe (p. 10).

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FAN PAN LI CHEN (ed. and trans.):

Marionette Plays from Northern China.

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This is an important book of translations of interesting and unique, as well as some quite funny, string theatre puppet texts from a genre in northern China that is in decline. It opens a window for the Western reader on the lively local Chinese performing arts tradition and the diversity of topics presented in the puppet theatre.

Translations of Chinese puppet theatre plays have been rather limited, which is unfortunate as the puppet theatre not only has a much longer tradition than the actors’ theatre (opera), but it also has a unique repertoire that deserves greater scholarly attention. Earlier publications by the author (*Chinese Shadow Theatre: History, Popular Religion and Women Warriors*, Montreal, 2007 and *Visions for the Masses: Shadow Plays from Shaanxi and Shanxi*, Ithaca, 2010) contain complete translations into English of unique Chinese shadow plays. Fan Pan Li Chen’s new book continues her puppet theatre research and translation work and starts with a useful and concise introduction to the history of puppet theatre in China. This is followed by an introduction to the Heyang marionette/string puppet theatre from the region north of the city of Xi’an. The puppeteers mention that the genre dates back to the Tang dynasty, which is indeed possible, as marionette theatre is already mentioned in a poem by Tang emperor Xuanzong (685–762), whose court was in the Tang imperial capital of Chang’an, present day Xi’an.

The genre did not escape the socio-political experiments of the People’s Republic of China. After 1949, the more than 30 remaining companies were forcefully disbanded, and only a state company continued to perform, albeit with apparent success. The author observes a definite decline after economic reforms that started in the 1980s. Only three companies currently perform, and they lead a marginal existence, performing for local sponsors and tourists. As the entertainment function of the theatre dwindles everywhere in modern China, the repertoire of the companies in Heyang is likewise reduced to a mere shadow of its former glory. The claim by the Heyang people that almost the whole repertoire of the Heyang marionette theatre was written (and sometimes performed) by scholars, and would-be scholars, is impossible to prove, yet it does give the genre a certain prestige and identification with the former (imperial) elite.

The texts translated in this collection are all from government publications and these were quite difficult to obtain, as many printed texts disappeared or were difficult to locate. It is a pity that it is not clear if the Heyang marionette theatre ever had a scripted tradition, as no manuscripts are mentioned. The plays that have survived give evidence of a unique and interesting repertoire.

The translations are divided into three sections, the Post-Midnight Skits (with three translated skits), which is followed by the section on Historical Fiction (with three translated full plays) and the section Romance (with two translated plays).

The translations thus start with the late night playlets full of fun and action in the Post-Midnight Skits section. *Baldy's Wedding Night* is a hilarious story of a bald character who finds out on his wedding night that his wife is bald too. The Baldy character is fascinating for another reason: he seems to be a direct descendant of the Baldy character of the puppet theatre mentioned in the earliest sixth-century sources on Chinese puppet theatre, and connections with the bald Turkish Karagöz character come to mind. The martial romance *Short Version of River Yang* from the Historical Fiction section is especially interesting due to the significance of this piece for the local population, as the main character is Lord Guan, one of the most important local deities. The puppet has an almost god-like status, and the puppet of Lord Guan is invited through a ritual before the performance very much like a deity. In the section Romance, the play *Pavilion of the Immortals in Exile* deserves special attention. This is a delightful play with unique content, as the main protagonists, two immortal young ladies, get to select their male partners. This is indeed an extremely rare subject in Chinese theatre and literature, where young women may support poor struggling students, but never have the chance to have young men vie for their attention as in this play. The play is also full of action and humour and could very well be the script for a Western opera. Which brings me to mention the only part I find lacking from the book: there could be some attention given to the use of music, instruments, and singing in the different plays.

As I have not read the original Chinese scripts, I cannot comment on the quality of the translations, but they are extremely lively and well written. Indeed, they are very useful for theatre classes. The book opens a fascinating window on a theatrical tradition faced with slow extinction, and is a delight to read. The many colour photographs give a good impression of the puppets, props, performers and performing practice.

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MARK BENDER, AKU WUWU (translators) and JIVOT ZOPQU (transcriber):

The Nuosu Book of Origins. A Creation Epic from Southwest China.

(Studies on Ethnic Groups in China.) xviii, 173 pp. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2019. £19.50. ISBN 978 0 295 74569 5.

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The Nuosu Book of Origins is a complete translation into English from the language of the Nuosu people dwelling in Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture in Sichuan, China. The translation is thoroughly annotated, which helps us to comprehend the text more profoundly. It also contains an encyclopaedic introduction to the Nuosu people, their life and culture. This part is concise but surprisingly detailed so it is