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BOOK REVIEW BY WEI LIU

David Johnson's *The Stage in the Temple* centers around Southwestern Shanxi village opera, commonly referred to as *Za* Operas (*zaju* 雜劇) by local people and known as Gong and Drum *Za* Operas (*luogu zaxi* 鑼鼓雜戲) or Cymbal (*nao* 鐃) and Drum *Za* Operas by specialists. These theatrical performances are deeply entrenched in the region's history, serving as integral components of village rituals aimed at invoking blessings and safeguarding against various threats such as inclement weather, diseases, and banditry. The current scholarship on Shanxi opera largely focuses on its popularity in the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1911) dynasties, and when discussing village ritual/opera in premodern China in general, the research on the politics of ritual/opera emphasizes its civilizing mission of rectifying customs and inculcating orthodox values among commoners (*jiaohua* 教化).[1] Johnson's work, however, aims to counteract elite bias by tracing the almost invisible operatic tradition to the Song dynasty (960–1279) and unveiling the lived reality of villagers in premodern China's rural world (mainly from the Song dynasty to the near present). It underscores the importance of acknowledging and preserving the voices of ordinary villagers, a perspective often overshadowed by the written records of the classically educated and legally privileged elite. Divided into three parts, the book features Johnson's analysis of Shanxi village opera scripts, summarizing their plots, discussing main themes, and investigating their sources. Additionally, it delves into the little-known history of southwestern Shanxi village opera and scrutinizes correlated village opera performances and their settings. Johnson's book provides invaluable insight into the cultural transmission of the scripted performance tradition in premodern rural China.

In the first part of the book, Johnson analyzes five scripts from Southwestern Shanxi villages—namely, "Presenting Incense," "The Banquet at Hongmen," "The White Ape Leads the Way," "Changban Slope," and "The Fire Assault Stratagem." He discovers that most *Za* Opera scripts share similar historical-military themes and belong to "an archaic, ritualized tradition that was quite separate from the main line of development of opera in north China" (p. 33). Further, he examines three scripts from Xinzhuang Village—"Thrice Inviting Zhuge Liang," "Attacking Yanzhou," and "Xue Gang Assaults the Court." He observes that, except for "Thrice Inviting," whose values are faultlessly orthodox, the other scripts convey ambiguous, amoral, and sometimes cynical or subversive messages. After analyzing

1 Li, *Opera, Society, and Politics in Modern China*, pp. 34-47; Liu, *Confucian Rituals and Chinese Villagers*.

eight scripts in Part One (five from Southwestern Shanxi villages and three from Xinzhuang Village), Johnson argues that the eight scripts do not clearly reflect the conceptual world of their audiences and they do not resonate with the realities of the lives led by their village audiences because of the ambivalent message they often convey. For instance, while some scripts convey a sense of antiauthoritarian sentiment, they do not portray the action in villages with the explicit intention of critiquing the sociopolitical status quo.

In the second part, Johnson posits that *Zaju* opera can be traced back to the Song dynasty. He cites stone inscriptions and tomb findings to attest to the opera's popularity in the countryside during Song and early Jin times (1115–1234). He also references local actors and theater scholars who acknowledge that *Zaju* may belong to a very old, village-based tradition of ritual opera, often overlooked in the sources and outside the mainstream of Chinese opera. Additionally, he points to a *Nuo* 儺戲 Opera (a masked religious performance of exorcism) script that is virtually identical to the first half of a fifteenth-century chantefable, demonstrating that an Anhui village ritual opera script remained substantially unchanged for five centuries. This evidence supports the notion that Shanxi village *Zaju* scripts dating from the eighteenth century could have originated in the thirteenth century or even earlier.

In the third part, Johnson admits that modern scholarly reports on rural ritual opera performances are likely composite narratives based on incomplete information about a tradition in terminal decline. However, he maintains his belief that further research will reveal a consistent structure of village opera across North China. After scrutinizing eyewitness accounts of *Za* Opera, *yuanben* 院本, *Dui* 隊戲 Opera, *Sai* 賽 Opera, and *Tiao* 跳戲 Opera, he cautiously generalizes that these various forms of ritual opera were integral to village ceremonial life, highly valued by the villagers, and shared a significant number of elements. The right to perform in an opera was hereditary, with the responsibility for a particular role becoming a traditional privilege of a specific family.

In the conclusion, Johnson revisits intriguing questions, such as why village opera consistently explores military-historical stories. He explains that, on one hand, these narratives serve as thrilling spectacles depicting life struggles and reflecting peasant wisdom. On the other hand, they function as proper offerings to the gods, with villagers not being the intended audience. Consequently, they provide limited insights into villagers' conscious attitudes and values. Johnson ultimately concludes that the local opera genres examined in this book exhibit striking similarities across different locations, including characters identified by name rather than role-type, unconventional makeup compared to mainstream patterns, villagers serving as performers, exclusive use of percussion as musical accompaniment, and rudimentary vocal techniques. These characteristics are indicative of drama at a very early stage of development emerging from storytelling, suggesting that village opera genres in North China share a common early origin, spread widely, and underwent minimal changes over the centuries. The popularity of ritual operas in the religious life of the villagers underscores people's desire to express gratitude to higher powers and seek blessings and protection through the offering of operas.

Johnson's book constitutes a significant contribution to illuminating the often-ignored history of village opera and the rural milieu in premodern China, as well as villagers' values and beliefs communicated in ritual operas, or in his own words, "vernacular ideology."[2] His revelation of local opera genres persisting over centuries with minimal change serves as a compelling case study in the transmission of scripted performance tradition and the folk beliefs embedded in it. Johnson's analysis of opera scripts, colophons, and eyewitness accounts of performances unveils a dynamic interplay between cultural mnemotechnics: ritual repetition and textual interpretation, to borrow Jan Assmann's terminology.[3] Ritual, characterized by repetitive forms, aims to preserve essential meaning and bring individuals in alignment with the eternally divine cosmic life. Conversely, in the age of writing, texts necessitate interpreters to rejuvenate their meanings through the art of hermeneutics. While ritual underscores repetition, texts foster variation and innovation. Interestingly, through ritual repetition and textual interpretation, ritual operas produce a repertoire of orientations that can shape participants' responses to everyday events[4] and tableaux that form a cultural vocabulary used by people in all walks of life (p. 58), demonstrating the interpenetration between scripted performances and

2 Johnson, "Popular Values and Beliefs," p. 73.
3 Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization*, pp. 79–86.
4 Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth*, p. 169.

people's everyday communication both verbally and bodily.

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