

Juan Pablo Gil-Osle and Frederick A.
de Armas, editors.
*Faraway Settings: Spanish and Chinese
Theaters of the 16th and 17th Centuries.*

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THE FARAWAY SETTINGS explored in this collection of essays encompass the Habsburg empire and the Ming dynasty and their theatrical traditions: the Spanish *comedia* and the Chinese *chuanqi*. Not only culturally and geographically distant from each other in their own time period, these two traditions rarely converge in theater studies today. This book makes a commendable effort in drafting the first blueprint to bridge that distance from a variety of scholarly approaches, including attention to staging and performance of classical Spanish and Chinese works in different cultural settings in the twenty-first century. In the editors' own words, the book aims to show that the two theaters "complement one another" and that they "are not a far-off place," from one another or from us today (12).

In their preface, Gil-Osle and de Armas note that the book "focuses on two theaters that were not apparently in dialogue with each other" (11). While missionaries to the Far East brought back accounts of Ming theatrical works produced in printed books as well as live performances, there is no evidence of any actual exchange or transmission of works across the two theatrical cultures, nor does one culture make reference to the other. The book is thus essentially an exploration of imagined intertextualities and commonalities based on the premise of shared humanity and the coincidence of circumstance. Seeking shared features of the theaters of Habsburg Spain and Ming China is certainly promising, though it has the potential to gloss over the historical and cultural particularities of each. The editors seem to be mindful of this danger: while asserting that the two theaters "show surprisingly similar ways of thinking," they also acknowledge that "at times certain commonalities are in reality spaces fraught with misunderstanding" (12). In fact, the essays in the collection make some hits and misses, and several terms, codes, and conventions seem to have gotten lost in translation from Chinese.

The collection is divided into four sections. Section 1, "Theatrical Origins," confronts Orientalist tendencies in Western approaches to Chinese theater. In the first essay, Bruce R. Burningham proposes that the "jongleuresque"

foundations of the Spanish comedia he has identified in his earlier work are also at the basis of Ming theater. However, the two theatrical traditions soon diverged: according to Burningham, post-Ming theater continued highly stylized jongleuresque practices such as singing and dancing while Western European theater went through waves of neoclassicism, romanticism, realism, and naturalism that eliminated or marginalized almost all jongleuresque elements. However, Burningham's theory of divergence overlooks such theatrical genres as the *sainete*, *tonadilla*, and *zarzuela* that developed in post-Habsburg Spain as well as European musical theater in general, which began to take independent shape after the seventeenth century. All those theatrical forms include elements found in the Chinese theater: music as their most notable feature, a high degree of lyricism, archetypical characters, and costumbrista scenes. Was the post-seventeenth-century divergence between the two jongleuresque traditions indeed as wide as Burningham suggests?

Jorge Abril Sánchez examines the first Spanish account of Chinese theater by a soldier named Miguel de Luarca, who, as a member of Spain's diplomatic embassy from the Philippines to China in 1575, witnessed and recorded two theatrical performances in Fujian province. Sánchez argues that Luarca's account reveals the growing frustration of the colonizer in the struggle to control an alien object that constantly resists being objectified. Sánchez speculates that Luarca intentionally omitted details from the plot of one particular drama in order to "devalue China's democratic system to elect the ruler based on the individual merit, in contrast to the European imposition of a ruler allegedly selected by the divine and inherited through hereditary lines" (55). But on close scrutiny of the passage in question, Luarca's succinct plot summary is actually close to the legend of three brothers by oath (instead of blood), a key plotline drawn from a corpus of literary texts and folk tales that record the Han dynasty's collapse and fracture into the Three Kingdoms (190–280 CE). At the core of the Three Kingdoms saga is the idea of the hereditary right to power, embodied in the eldest of the three brothers who legitimized his decades-long military and political campaign by claiming royal lineage and being true heir to the Han throne. The question is: Did Luarca really misread the play or is it Sánchez who misreads Luarca's account by inserting modern political ideas that were neither familiar to the colonial soldier nor embedded in the Chinese legend?

In section 2, "Oneiric Excesses and Theatricality," essays by de Armas and Carmella V. Mattza Su compare emotions, dreams, gardens, and other motifs in Ming playwright Tang Xianzu's most celebrated work, *Peony Pavilion* (1598), and dramas by Lope de Vega and Pedro Calderón de la Barca. Both contributions mention major philosophical currents and concepts that are crucial to interpreting *Peony Pavilion*, particularly Tang's philosophy of *qing*; the term is translated as emotions in this collection, but in fact it is a metaphysical concept of Daoist and Buddhist roots at the core of Tang's theory of theater. Without fully engaging with the idea of *qing*, both authors overlook basic aspects of the original Chinese text and its cultural and historical context. De Armas, for example, argues that the use of certain numbers in describing the heroine Du Liniang's dream of intercourse with her lover Liu Mengmei in Tang's play constituted a wordplay alluding to the great

distance between her innocence and the sexual experience, thus marking her transgression into the socially forbidden space. However, this association is a stretch, since the combination of those numbers is a stock rhetorical structure of classical Chinese literature that can refer to verbal expression, bodily gesture, physical and mental labor, objects, time, and other phenomena. Likewise, de Armas's perception of a clash between the forbidden garden and the place of the gods is based on an exaggeration of certain details: contrary to what he assumes, the heroine was neither prohibited from entering the real garden nor afraid to tell her elders that she intended to visit and in fact did visit it. The symbolism of the garden in Tang's play cannot be confined to a dichotomous framework of passions and senses versus social duty and order that de Armas seems to take for granted.

The garden in *Peony Pavilion* is very much associated with *qing*, as Mattza Su recognizes to some extent in her essay. Her interpretation of the pavilion or garden as "an emotional space" (117) comes from a more attentive reading of Tang's original text and reckons with contrasting perceptions of the garden by the heroine's mother and the heroine herself, in reality and in her erotic dream. However, as the essay veers away from Tang's core philosophy and forces Western equivalents onto Chinese cultural symbols, the richness and coherence of the play's symbolism gets lost. As the symbolic landscape of the cosmic force known as *qing*, Tang's garden constantly changes: from the garden of wanting and longing the heroine visited in reality to the garden of fulfillment and elation she dreamed about, and from the corner of solitude, neglect, and decay her middle-aged mother was wary of and the heroine also deplored after the dream to the vacuum of abstinence and apathy her old tutor dismissed.

Considering the symbolic meaning of the flowers in Du Liniang's garden, Mattza Su notes that only azaleas and a rose arbor are in bloom, which she interprets as signifying the pain of love, comparable to the melancholy in Calderón's *El príncipe constante*, and that in contrast, the garden in the heroine's dream is full of peony blossoms symbolizing the bliss of love. What should be considered here is a longstanding convention of Chinese classical poetry: the metaphorical use of azaleas and rose arbors as metonyms for spring's nascent phase, and of peony, which blooms later into the season, as its glorious prime, from which point spring will fade away and cede to summer. What the heroine suffers in the real garden is a longing for spring's prime and a lament for its inevitable passing. In other words, she experiences an emotional state known as *chungshang*, or "spring sorrow," a common trope in classical Chinese poetry explicitly named by characters in the play's ninth scene.

Chungshang may thus be comparable to the melancholy in *El príncipe constante*, as an existential anxiety over the passing of time. However, the linear concept of time in the Judeo-Christian tradition reinforces the inescapability of mortality and turns it into a confirmation of Christian faith as the only way to transcend human frailty in face of time, while the circular and cyclical concept of time in Buddhist and Daoist thinking renders such anxiety a natural state in the transition to the next phase within indefinite repeats of the existential cycle. Mattza Su's comparison of the oneiric

phenomena in *Peony Pavilion* and *La vida es sueño* is likewise framed in such early modern European theories as occultism and mysticism. Yet Tang Xianzu's well-known inclination towards Daoism would invite a Chinese reader to interpret the oneiric phenomena in terms of Daoist relativity, which breaks down the dichotomy of reality versus dream, the physical versus the metaphysical, just as it blurs the division between beginning and end, past and future. In short, Tang Xianzu's contemporaries would have seen the garden as a symbolic landscape of *qing* in constant fluctuation instead of as a space of confrontation between binary opposites like bliss and pain, dream and reality, or life and death.

The Daoist notion of nonduality does get some attention in section 3, "Global Stagings," with Matthew Ancell's essay commenting on a 2015 amateur production that combined the act 2 of *La vida es sueño* with a short act 1 and act 3 written by Chen Kaixian, an emeritus professor of Spanish at the University of Nanjing, China. Chen's added acts turn Don Quijote and Sancho Panza into characters of his metatheater who travel to China to watch Chen's production of Calderon's play, and then meet Zhuang Zhou (fourth century BCE), the Daoist sage, who shares his famous dream of being a butterfly with the two visitors. Chen's mishmash of dream and reality, fiction and history, theater and novel, past and present, creates a labyrinth of literary and philosophical codes and conventions from two cultures. It is with good reason that Ancell describes this adaption as "palimpsestic" and "grotesque" (190), but then he also sees "productive resonances" between the aesthetics of the Spanish baroque and the Daoist notion of nonduality (201). Despite repeated errors in spelling the Daoist sage's name and the title of the books attributed to him, Ancell's essay provides the only sustained explanation of basic Daoist ideas in this book, but falls short of clarifying how such philosophies are threaded into the thematic and aesthetic fabric of mid-Ming literature, including Tang Xianzu's plays.

The remaining essays in section 3 shift the focus from texts to staging and audience reception. Alejandro González Puche reflects back on the production of Cervantes's *Pedro de Urdemalas* that he codirected with Ma Zhenghong in Beijing in 2008. In turn, Ma Zhenghong writes about the directorial collaborators' staging of Calderón's *El astrólogo fingido* in Cali, Colombia, in 2001. On both occasions, the directors confronted the challenges of cultural distances they had to bridge through experimental innovation. In their respective essays, each of the two collaborators highlights the rationale and effects of adaptation, negotiation, and immersion in the creative process within a cross-cultural setting, from script and direction, to performance and production. Reflecting on the staging of *Pedro de Urdemalas* in Beijing on the eve of China's first time as host country of the Olympics in 2008, González Puche goes as far as to say that dealing with Chinese actors' struggles to comprehend literary tropes and theatrical motifs of the Spanish baroque and with the directors' own deep doubts and increasing sense of crisis made the whole experience worthy of a play about staging a play production. With the backdrop of Beijing's fervently anticipated rise-and-shine on the world stage, mounting *Pedro de Urdemalas*—an old, obscure foreign play when viewed from a twenty-first century Chinese perspective—in a small alley theater of

the capital city was a highly significant gesture. Whether knowingly or not, the Cervantes production played a part in the grand spectacle of China's ambitious political campaign undertaken on a global stage.

Just over a half decade earlier, the duo's Cali production of *El astrólogo fingido* faced different but no lesser challenges. Ma Zhenghong's essay notes that during the preproduction it became clear that Calderón's intricate poetry would have sounded artificial and ridiculous to both actors and spectators accustomed to the psychological realism of modern theater. So instead of bringing Calderón over hundreds of years and across the Atlantic, the directors took the alternative route: displacing their audience from naturalistic theater of today to a faraway place in time and space. To do so, they borrowed generously from the ultra-stylized and symbolic performance of the traditional Chinese opera, from recitation method and musical accompaniment to makeup, costume, body movement, and props.

Another essay from the cluster of section 3 focused on staging and reception is María José Domínguez's discussion of the production of Puche and Ma's *El astrólogo fingido* in El Paso, Texas, in 2006. She notes that the play's reception among the Spanish-speaking audience fit patterns that Edward Said so famously classified as *Orientalism*. Domínguez observes that the audiences were notably mute and irresponsive to the opening of the performance, as elements of Chinese opera were first introduced. Those elements ranged from acrobatics, pantomimes, and percussion sounds to the appearance, movement, and recitation of the actors constantly accompanied by musical chords. As if shocked by what was unconventional to them, Domínguez continues, the audience only began to react to the performance when they came to realize that all that strangeness was meant to produce entertainment and comical effects, as any comedia performance is expected to do, although in different ways. This process, in Domínguez's opinion, can be explained in terms of Said's idea of a defensive response to the exotic or the other: one seeks what is familiar in the perceived foreignness. Applying Domínguez's same insights to the directors' 2008 production of *Pedro Urdemalas* in Beijing, one might also notice parallels in how the Chinese actors attempted to assimilate the Cervantine characters they were to play by finding equivalents in their own life and culture.

Section 4, "Sinosphere," includes an essay by Javier Rubiera on Jesuits' accommodation of elements of Noh theater in staging religious instruction for Japanese converts in the sixteenth century. Citing the incorporation of indigenous performance and religious practices in missionary theater of the colonial Americas, he poses an abiding question for scholars of Spanish American theater: were such staging practices strategies of colonization or effects of intercultural syncretism in an authentically egalitarian sense? To conclude this review, one might raise a similar question regarding our own comparative scholarly approaches: When attempting to overcome distance between cultures, is there a risk of committing self-imposition and overpowering the Other, or simply put, of turning bridge building into assimilation? As a first collection of essays attempting a comparative study of the early modern Spanish and Chinese theaters, *Faraway Settings* invites more rigorous and in-depth investigation as well as more expansive multidisciplinary, multilingual, and cross-cultural exchange and collaboration.