

# **Staging the Worlds: Representations of Otherness on the Late Imperial Chinese Stage**

Liana Chen

## **Abstract**

Representation of the unfamiliar and presentation of the exotic are core to the rise of the pre-modern Chinese theatre. A great number of court plays (*gongting ju*) and literati plays (*wenren xi*) could be grouped to form a sub-genre that might be called “border-crossing” drama (featuring worlds outside/beyond China) and “border-fusing” drama (featuring a world that is both Chinese and foreign). These plays stage China, its cultural others, and the world at large. They stage multiple worlds, both exotic and familiar. *Adventures on the Western Ocean*, for example, features a carousal display of real and imagined foreign countries and their kings who are brought to China to pay tribute, led by Zheng He's technologically and culturally superior fleet. *The World of Ultimate Bliss*, on the other hand, transforms the demonic Rakshas Kingdom into a Utopia within the Confucian framework, where the frustrated Chinese scholar-merchant realizes all his dreams that are not otherwise attainable in China proper.

The purpose of my dissertation is to reconstruct the historical development of the discourse of otherness on the Ming and Qing stages (1368-1911). It focuses on the issues of imperialism, uses of history, and the dynamic relationship between pageantry and the theatricality of power. Specifically, it looks at theatrical representations of Han people's perception of the “oceanic” others at a specific historic moment. Since Zheng He's westward voyages (1405-1433), China has witnessed increasingly frequent contacts with foreign cultures through maritime routes. In fact, since the Han dynasty, there has been a profusion of Chinese materials dealing with cultural others, ranging from official histories, ethnographic accounts and travelogues to short stories, novels and dramas. This study focuses on dramatic works for two reasons. Drama dealing with cultural others has traditionally received less attention than novel and poetry. Further, physicalization and visualization add a performative dimension to the ethnocentric imaginaries of the foreign.

Through different historical periods, strategies to construct and stage cultural others change with the taste of the targeted audience. A comparative analysis of these strategies sheds new light on the dynamics of the culture of performance. Further, as a new and hitherto unknown history of Chinese exoticism and pre-modern intercultural drama, this dissertation fills in a gap in the study of Chinese literature and theatre. It systematically examines the vicissitudes of cultural constructions of things alien that fascinate, challenge, and inspire.

My project takes its cue from the following research questions: What is the *modus operandi* behind the making of such “border-crossing” and “border-fusing” plays? How do these plays differ in style and ideology from those dealing with “barbarians” along the northern frontier? Further, since many different forces contribute to the emergence of Chinese Occidentalism discourses, how do the purported Sinocentrism intertwine with wish-fulfillment schemes and Utopianism in these plays? My research has shown that the idea of “China” has always been an integral part of the complex matrix of imagined and contested borders. Dramatizing cultural differences is an act of consolidating and policing the borders. It is crucial to the engendering of Chinese cultural identities. While resembling each other thematically and formalistically, cross-cultural encounters on the overland and oceanic routes do manifest disparate concerns. Contrary to “northern-border” plays, the “oceanic” plays do not relocate Han ethnic group’s anxiety about being invaded by northern “barbarians.” Eastern and Western oceans surrounding the Chinese mainland are simultaneously a line of natural protection and an outlet of defeated national pride. An unchanging, unflinching world order is at the core of these plays, with the sovereignty intimately connected to the heavenly mandate.