

Introduction: The links and locations of Asian American theatre

Linking is particularly important in cultural history, because culture is a web of many strands; none is spun by itself, nor is any cut off at a fixed date like wars and regimes.

Jacques Barzun¹

THE SINGLE EVENT THAT PUT ASIAN AMERICAN THEATRE ON the national and international cultural map was the Broadway production of David Henry Hwang's *M. Butterfly*, which won the Tony Award for best play in 1988. Hwang was widely publicized as the first Asian American playwright to be produced on Broadway, but very few knew the history that brought Hwang to the Great White Way. Most did not know that Asian American theatre debuted in New York City for the first time in 1972 with works by Frank Chin and Ping Chong, or that Hwang interned at the East West Players in Los Angeles during his college years. *M. Butterfly* quickly became canonized in drama anthologies, but Asian American theatre history, in its richness and complexity, rarely found its audience. Indeed, Asian Americans were “strangers from a different shore,” as the historian Ronald Takaki famously put it, not only in immigration history but also in American theatre history.² This book places these strangers center stage and offers their history from 1965 to the early years of the twenty-first century. The year 1965 appropriately marks the beginning of “Asian American theatre,” as stipulated in this book, because the first Asian American theatre company, the East West Players, was founded that year

¹ Jacques Barzun, *From Dawn to Decadence: 500 Years of Western Cultural Life* (New York: Harper Collins Publisher, 2000), ix.

² Ronald Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans*, rev. edn. (Boston: Back Bay Books, 1998).

and the concept of “Asian America” emerged in the consciousness of artists, activists, intellectuals, and community leaders around the country in the second half of the 1960s. And the new millennium, as I will show, marks the start of a new era for Asian American theatre.

After Hwang’s success on Broadway, a number of anthologies of Asian American plays began to appear, and editors such as Misha Berson, Roberta Uno, Velina Hasu Houston, and Brian Nelson, provided invaluable examinations of Asian American theatre in their introductions and editorial notes.³ Of course, plays by individual authors such as Frank Chin had been published in the 1980s, and *Kumu Kahua Plays*, a collection of plays produced by Kumu Kahua (the first Asian American theatre company in Hawaii), had been in print since 1983.⁴ But it was in the 1990s that a noticeable number of Asian American plays received publication and mainstream reception. Also in the 1990s, scholarly works by Josephine Lee, James Moy, Dorinne Kondo, and others provided historical, theoretical, and literary studies of Asian American theatre. Their scholarship explored various issues, themes, and developments while rooting their research in both Asian American Studies and Theatre Studies. More recently, Alvin Eng’s anthology of New York City Asian American performances, Yuko Kurahashi’s study of the East West Players, and Karen Shimakawa’s theoretical examination of abjection and embodiment have added to this growing field.

As indispensable as their scholarships have been, however, many questions have remained unanswered and many historical details unmentioned. As a scholar trained in theatre history and historiography, I wanted to know about the most basic facts of Asian American theatre; about causes and effects, the progress, and stasis, of its history; and about how the history should be researched and told. Accordingly, this project began with a simple query about who participated in Asian American theatre, what they did together, what happened, and in what chronology. Such a survey of Asian American theatre seemed long overdue.

At the beginning of this project, I vastly underestimated the scope of the topic and overestimated my ability to document it. I naïvely planned

³ Misha Berson, *Between Worlds* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1990); Roberta Uno, *Unbroken Thread* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993); Velina Hasu Houston, *Politics of Life* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993) and *But Still, Like Air, I’ll Rise* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997); and Brian Nelson, *Asian American Drama* (New York: Applause, 1997).

⁴ Dennis Carroll, *Kumu Kahua Plays* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1983).

on talking to a dozen Asian American theatre artists and reading all available scripts – and actually worried about not having enough material for a book-length project. Moreover, without any background in ethnography or journalism, I decided to use interviews as the primary mode of research. I was driven by my ambition for research and knowledge, but I did not know where to start or who to contact for interviews. But fortune was on my side: in the spring of 1999, I heard about the first conference on Asian American theatre in Seattle at the Northwest Asian American Theater Company where major Asian American theater artists and producers were to gather to discuss the state of their profession. Without any hesitation, I jumped on the plane and registered for the conference. At first, I did not know anyone at the conference, but by the end of it, I had a handful of interview audiotapes and dozens of contacts for future interviews.

As I gained more access to my research subjects (i.e. Asian American theatre artists who graciously agreed to talk to me), I realized that the Asian American theatre community is a huge web of links that are profoundly personal, professional, chronological, geographical, spatial, racial, ethnic, gendered, generational, and multicultural. Because of theatre's inherently collaborative nature, each artist's career was linked to numerous others. It was imperative that the most "truthful" survey of Asian American theatre include and represent all of those links in the fairest way. Thus, my worries of not having enough material were soon replaced with the bigger concern of how I could best document the constantly growing community without excluding any important strands. Moreover, every interviewee had a different perspective of the past and often contradicted what others said, making a "truthful" history challenging. Everyone's memory was both unreliable and trustworthy. The result is a *Rashomon*-like history, in which everyone tells a different version of an event.⁵ It is fitting, then, that *Rashomon* was the first production presented

⁵ The stage version of *Rashomon* adapted by Fay and Michael Kanin is based on a film by Japanese director Akira Kurosawa. The story is about a court trial of a double-crime of rape and murder. In ancient Japan, a bandit sees a woman who is passing through the woods with her husband. The bandit becomes sexually infatuated with the woman and decides to rape her. He takes the husband to the bush, ties him up, and rapes the woman. Later, the husband is found dead with a stab wound to the chest. A woodcutter witnesses this and is later called to testify during the trial, along with the wife, the bandit, and a medium who speaks for the dead husband. The story is told by the woodcutter who, after the trial, stops at the Rashomon gate to avoid rain. The woodcutter tells his listeners about how each witness told the judge his or her own distinct version of the story. The versions contradicted one another although each witness sincerely believed in his or her testimony.

by the East West Players in 1965. *Rashomon* serves as a metaphor for Asian American theatre history, and the different versions bring about a rich history full of contradictions and short-circuited links.

Charlotte Canning expresses similar concerns and observation in her study of feminist theatre that was also based on interviews. According to Canning, many of the interviewees, like mine, told her, “You’ll have to get other parts of the story from other people.”⁶ But she also notes that in the process of research, the interviewer inevitably becomes “part of the story”: “Concomitant with the narrative created by the interviewee, the interviewer’s own interpretation plays a vital role in the construction of the oral history.”⁷ In other words, I’m like the woodcutter in *Rashomon* who ultimately narrates his version of the story to whoever is willing to listen to him, and variant versions of Asian American theatre history are interpreted by my assumptions and expectations.

Moreover, archival materials (such as original program notes, meeting minutes, newspaper clippings, photographs, letters, manifestos, and objects) are as, if not more, prone to interpretation. As Thomas Postlewait describes, “a gap thus exists between the event and our knowledge of it,” and archival materials are “traces, footprints in the sand.”⁸ Indeed, theatre history is an attempt to reconstruct an aspect of our cultural past with the “traces” and “footprints” of what is already ephemeral to begin with: rehearsals, performances, audience responses, meetings, protests, documentations, and many other elements that, together, form the “event” of theatre.

Because there is no explicit consensus on what Asian American theatre history is or should be, I find it necessary to stipulate what I mean by Asian American theatre. I have tried my best to be as inclusive as possible and believe that the history should be about anyone who has worked in Asian American theatre. This question, however, begs further questions of who are Asian Americans and how we define theatre. For instance, is a Peking opera performer from China who immigrates to the United States an “Asian American theatre artist” from the day he sets foot in the country? And does he have to give up Peking opera and perform in naturalistic American dramas? Such questions of labels and boundaries

⁶ Charlotte Canning, *Feminist Theaters in the U.S.A.: Staging Women’s Experience* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 20.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁸ Thomas Postlewait, “Historiography and the Theatrical Event: A Primer with Twelve Cruxes,” *Theatre Journal* 43 (1991), 160.

are endless, and the struggles to define Asian American theatre are part of the history. In this book, I have focused on the locations of production (both artistic and cultural) as the primary stipulation of Asian American theatre. In other words, I have looked to, and always come back to, Asian American theatre companies, rehearsal and performance spaces, meeting and protest locations, and geographical areas. Whoever is associated with such spaces (artists, producers, audiences, or critics) is part of Asian American theatre history. For instance, I consider the actor John Lone – a trained Peking opera performer who immigrated to the United States – part of Asian American theatre history, not because he is an Asian performer in America but because he was once a major member of the East West Players, an Asian American theatre company. Such locations are linked to each other and collectively create a national space from which Asian American theatre has emerged.

In terms of national geography, the term “Asian America” applies to all fifty states in the United States, and this book certainly attempts to capture the regional diversities. However, Hawaii presents a unique challenge for the discourse of Asian American theatre. For example, plays written by students of the University of Hawaii in the first half of the twentieth century are considered by some, as Roberta Uno has suggested, the first Asian American plays written for the stage.⁹ And throughout the second half of the twentieth century, Asian Americans from Hawaii, such as the actor Randall Duk Kim, have made an indisputable contribution to Asian American theatre. I discuss some of these artists in the following chapters, but I have not included Hawaii as a geographical space in my study. My primary reason stems from a debate within Asian American Studies: some in Asian American Studies argue that Pacific Island Studies should be included and that the term “Asian America” should be replaced with “Asian Pacific America.” Others (including scholars of Pacific Island Studies) argue against the inclusion for a number of reasons. The debate continues, and thus I have chosen to focus on Asian American theatre on the mainland. In my view, the inclusion of Hawaii would necessitate a shift in the paradigm of Asian American theatre history, and the nature of this shift would hinge on whether Asian American theatre is considered as part of the larger Asian diaspora theatre.

Indeed, as Josephine Lee points out, the inclusion of Hawaii in Asian American theatre history would “illuminate the fault lines” in how we, as

⁹ See Roberta Uno’s introduction to *Unbroken Thread*.

theatre historians, have imagined Asian American culture.¹⁰ For this book, however, I've been more interested in how Asian American theatre artists I have interviewed have imagined their theatre. I have observed that in their minds the inclusion of Hawaii was not as important as their desire for acceptance in American theatre. In other words, they emphasized "American" in Asian American theatre and wanted to write and perform like other American theatre artists. That is why they founded theatre companies modeled after American regional theatres and presented their shows using American naturalistic sets. Future studies of Asian American theatre should include Hawaii and even Asian diaspora theatre, but the purpose of this book is to provide an introduction to the who, what, where, how, and why of Asian American theatre as told by the artists and as interpreted by me.

Accordingly, I have focused on four major cities – Los Angeles, San Francisco, New York City, and Seattle – as the key locations of Asian American theatre. The research is based on over seventy interviews and archival findings in and around those cities.¹¹ There are, however, scores of artists I did not get to interview, and the oral histories documented in the interviews I have conducted are so vast that only a fraction is incorporated in this study. Telling all of the stories and histories would require a multi-volume book with details that can only be captured with an encyclopedic approach. Thus, this book is by no means a comprehensive history of Asian American theatre. Rather, it is intended to be an introduction and an invitation to the scholarship of Asian American theatre history. What I provide is a sketch that reveals the essential links and locations of the history. I have broadly and perhaps swiftly suggested the major trajectories of Asian American theatre while slowing down at certain points in order to provide specific examples and case studies. I have no doubt that a fuller picture of Asian American theatre will soon emerge with the growing participation of scholars in the field. As I envision this optimistic future, I also anticipate more Asian Americans appearing on stages, not as strangers but as indisputable citizens and artists of America.

¹⁰ Josephine Lee, "Asian Americans in Progress: College Plays 1937–1955," in Josephine Lee, Imogene L. Lim and Yuko Matsukawa, (eds.), *Re/Collecting Early Asian America: Essays in Cultural History* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press), 308.

¹¹ As I discuss in chapter 8, a growing number of Asian American theatre companies emerged in the 1990s in other cities, including San Diego, Boston, Washington, DC, and Minneapolis, and most of these newer companies were modeled after the earlier companies in the four major cities.

I

Asian American theatre before 1965

THE TERM “ASIAN AMERICAN” DID NOT EXIST BEFORE 1965, AND neither did “Asian American theatre.” But theatrical activities by Asian immigrants and their descendents have been around as long as they have lived in the United States, and Asians and Asianness have appeared on mainstream American stages at least since the eighteenth century. Historian Yuji Ichioka coined the term “Asian American” in the second half of the 1960s as he and others of the Asian American Movement rejected “oriental” as racist and imperialistic.¹ The classification of the “oriental” and the pseudo-scientific “Mongolian” race had made no distinction between those living in the United States and those abroad. The conflation had been used by the US government to justify systematic and consistent denial of Asians’ basic rights as immigrants and citizens. It did not matter that Asians had lived in the Americas long before the thirteen colonies declared their independence from Britain.² What did matter was that “orientals” and “Mongolians” were among other “inferior races” such as “Negroes,” “Indians,” and “Mexicans” that were disenfranchised and excluded from the national imagination of the ideal new country.

¹ See Yuji Ichioka, Yasuo Sakata, Nobuya Tsuchida, and Eri Yasuhara, *A Buried Past: An Annotated Bibliography of the Japanese American Research Project* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974). For studies on the Asian American Movement, see William Wei, *The Asian American Movement* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993) and Steven G. Louie and Glenn K. Omatsu, eds., *Asian Americans: The Movement and the Moment* (Los Angeles: University of California, Los Angeles, Asian American Studies, 2002).

² In the sixteenth century, many Filipino sailors who worked on Spanish ships during the Spanish galleon trade between Manila and Mexico jumped ship and sought freedom on the coast of Louisiana. And Mexico City had a thriving Chinatown as early as the seventeenth century. See Helen Zia, *Asian American Dreams: The Emergence of an American People* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001), 23–25.

From the beginning of American history, the imagined Asianness that appeared on theatre stages often had little to do with the realities of Asia or Asian immigrant communities in the United States. As Erika Fischer-Lichte articulates, theatre is a “communal institution, representing and establishing relationships which fulfill social functions.”³ The first relationship American theatre established with Asia and Asianness was founded on exoticism and voyeurism. James S. Moy points out that the first appearance of Chineseness (and by extension Asianness) in American theatre occurred in the production of Voltaire’s *Orphan of China* (1755), which was adapted into English by Arthur Murphy and appeared at Philadelphia’s Southwark Theater on January 16, 1767.⁴ According to Moy, the production was “vaguely ‘oriental’” and far from authentic. All Chinese characters were played by white actors in yellowface makeup and wore Middle Eastern looking costumes. As Moy notes: “Indeed, the notion of Chineseness under the sign of the exotic became familiar to the American spectator long before sightings of the actual Chinese.”⁵ The European American impression of Asia was similar to that of Europeans, who viewed the civilizations of China, India, and the Arab world as wealthy, culturally sophisticated, and exotic, yet past its glory and in decline. Americans, especially those who emulated the European aristocratic class, were fascinated with the products from the East, such as porcelain, spices, tea, and art. But as John Kuo Wei Tchen remarks, “ardent nationalists proclaimed Europeanized America the next great occidental civilization.”⁶

As Americans increasingly sought their new national identity in the context of older world civilizations, their curiosity for the “oriental” exotic grew. Museums and circus performances featured the “oriental” as well as other racialized groups for both anthropological education and freakish entertainment. In 1834, for instance, a “Chinese Lady” named Afong Moy

³ Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The Show and the Gaze of Theatre: A European Perspective* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1997), 26.

⁴ James Moy, *Marginal Sights: Staging Chinese in America* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1993), 9.

⁵ According to John Kuo Wei Tchen *The Orphan of China* was produced in New York City before, during, and after the Revolution, and the productions signified the “cultural values” of the period. It “simultaneously allowed for a critique of the British monarchy, gaining the legitimacy of Chinese civilizational precedent for American values, while also reconnecting U. S. cultural perspectives to an Anglo-Saxon cultural tradition.” See John Kuo Wei Tchen, *New York Before Chinatown: Orientalism and the Shaping of American Culture: 1776–1882* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 19–22.

⁶ *Ibid.*, xvi.

was put on display for public viewing at the American Museum in New York City. This actual person “performed” her Chineseness along with magicians, glassblowers, “Canadian dwarfs,” and other spectacles for the next three years at several locations. As James Moy notes, her “simple foreignness” was “deemed sufficient novelty to warrant her display.”⁷ Other exotic displays and “performances” from Asia followed throughout the nineteenth century, including the most famous, the “Siamese twins” Chang and Eng.

The audiences of such entertainment were mostly on the East Coast in the first half of the nineteenth century, but on October 18, 1852, the first real Chinese theatrical performance was presented on stage at the American Theater on Sansome Street in San Francisco by the Tong Hook Tong Dramatic Company, a forty-two member Cantonese opera troupe from Guangdong Province. When gold was discovered at Sutter’s Mill in 1848, the Chinese population in California did not exceed one hundred, but by 1850 about 25,000 were residing in the state. Just as Chinese miners were lured to leave their homeland by the promises of gold and quick fortune, Chinese opera performers expected to make their fortunes entertaining their compatriots.⁸ As the performers had hoped, the performances were successful in San Francisco, where thousands of Chinese men paid up to \$6 per seat to see entertainment from their homeland. Wherever there were sizable populations of Chinese immigrants, permanent theatre buildings and companies emerged. For instance, the first Chinese theatre opened in San Francisco on December 23, 1852, with a seating capacity of 1,400, and in Portland, Oregon, three Chinese theatre companies were operating by the 1890s.⁹

Encouraged by the success in San Francisco, the acting manager of the Tong Hook Tong Dramatic Company signed a lucrative contract with a promoter from New York City. Chinese themes had always been popular with the European American audience in New York City, as they had been in Europe since the eighteenth century. For instance, popular plays such

⁷ James Moy, *Marginal Sights*, 12.

⁸ John Kuo Wei Tchen, *New York Before Chinatown*, 86.

⁹ See Thomas Postlewait, “The Hieroglyphic Stage: American Theatre and Society, Post-Civil War to 1945,” in *The Cambridge History of American Theatre, Volume Two: 1870–1945*, edited by Don B. Wilmet and Christopher Bigsby, 3 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 139. Also see “Pear Garden in the West – America’s Chinese Theater, 1853–1983” by The New York Chinatown History Project in Patricia Haseltine, *East and Southeast Asian Material Culture in North America: Collections, Historical Sites, and Festivals* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1989), 48.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-85051-3 - A History of Asian American Theatre

Esther Kim Lee

Excerpt

[More information](#)

as *The Yankees in China* (1839), *Irishman in China* (1842), *The Cockney in China* (1848), and *China, or Tricks Upon Travelers* (1841) had entertained New Yorkers with comedic images of Chinese characters (although they were played by white actors in yellowface). So, when the acting manager was presented with a contract that promised large sums of money and support from powerful investors such as P. T. Barnum, the future seemed too good to be true for the Tong Hook Tong Dramatic Company.

When the company arrived in New York, they realized that the contract was, indeed, too good to be true. All promises were broken, and Barnum denied any involvement. To salvage what they could, the company performed on May 20 at the Niblo's Garden, but the performances were vastly misunderstood by the New York critics and audiences, who did not know what to make of the real Chinese theatre. They had only seen Western versions of Chinese performance with Western staging techniques and white actors in yellowface, so even the most basic elements of the Cantonese opera performance confused them. Subsequent performances utterly failed, and the company made no profit while expenses grew.

In assessing the failure of the Tong Hook Tong Dramatic Company, John Kuo Wei Tchen concludes that "faux Chinese" representations had several advantages over the real thing: "As exemplified by the failure of the Tong Hook Tong opera troupe, authentic Chinese culture was too strange for New Yorkers' tastes. The sensibility of the Chinese opera was quite different from European American traditions."¹⁰ The bottom line was that "faux Chinese" or "simulated Chinese" were more profitable for theatre producers and investors in New York City. Unfortunately, this tradition would continue throughout the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries in American theatre. Caricatures of Asians continued to appear on stages, and white actors in yellowface were seen as more "real" than real Asians. "Oriental" exoticism always had more box-office appeal than the actual Asians and Asian immigrants in the United States.

The fate of the Tong Hook Tong performers in the 1850s foreshadowed what would happen to Chinese laborers in the second half of the nineteenth century. Between 1850 and the 1930s, almost one million Asians from China, Japan, Korea, the Philippines, and India came to the United States, while approximately thirty-five million came from Europe and Russia during the same period.¹¹ At first, America welcomed Asian

¹⁰ John Kuo Wei Tchen, *New York Before Chinatown*, 123.

¹¹ Most Asian immigrants were young men who came to work on the sugarcane plantations in Hawaii and in the goldmines in California. Many Chinese men from Canton in South China