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Xiqu in the Philippines: From Church Suppression to MegaMall Shows

菲律宾的戏曲：从天主教的压制到 MegaMall 购物中心的表演

Josh Stenberg (石峻山)

The University of Sydney

josh.stenberg@sydney.edu.au

Abstract

Evidence of *xiqu* (“Chinese opera”) in the Philippines begins in the early 16th century, when the Catholic church sought to suppress it. Despite its longevity, Philippine *xiqu* has not featured much in the multidisciplinary study of ethnic Chinese in the Philippines, nor as part of the global turn in *xiqu* research. This article, attending to the history and contemporary practice of *xiqu*, situates the Philippines and especially Manila firmly in the Hokkien network of Chinese theatre, especially in the period between the late nineteenth century and World War II. The Philippines were, and remain today, an important node in *xiqu* dissemination, transfer, and transnational evolution, as well as an integral part of the culture of the Chinese in the Philippines. The Philippine case helps break down fundamental linguistic, ethnic, and religious equations surrounding *xiqu*, given the genre’s syncretism, ethnic ambiguity, and non-Chinese language environment.

Keywords

Xiqu (Chinese opera) – Chinese Filipino – Hokkien theatre – Manila theatre – Philippine Chinese – budaixi (potehi)

摘要

摘要: 有据可考的菲律宾的戏曲始于16世纪初, 当时的天主教会试图压制戏曲。尽管戏曲在菲律宾具有悠久的历史, 但无论在有关菲律宾华人的跨学科研究中, 还是在戏曲研究的全球化转向中, 菲律宾戏曲都未受到太多关注。本文考察戏曲的历史和当代表演实践, 认为菲律宾(以马尼拉为主)在闽南戏剧中起着纽带作用, 尤其是从19世纪末至第二次世界大战期间。菲律宾无论在历史上还是今天都是戏曲传播, 转移和跨国演进的重要节点, 而且戏曲也是菲律宾华人文化不可分割的组成部分。鉴于菲律宾戏曲的宗教综合性、种族含混性和非中文环境, 这一案例有助于打破有关戏曲的基本语言、种族和宗教范式。

关键词

戏曲 – 华裔菲律宾人 – 闽南语戏剧 – 马尼拉戏剧 – 菲律宾华人 – 布袋戏

1 Philippine Chinese Theatre in a Global System

As with most Southeast Asian Chinese communities, public and academic discourse surrounding the Chinese in the Philippines has focused largely on the group's political and socioeconomic features. In regional context, the Philippine case may represent a relatively (recently) harmonious site for Southeast Asian coexistence, particularly in contrast to the Sinophobic violence of twentieth-century Indonesia or Vietnam. Local organizations have understandably but perhaps not very critically sought to represent the Chinese presence in the Philippines as a benign contribution to local culture and society. Scholars have shown the historical "liminal virtuosity" (Wilson 2004) of ethnic Chinese in the Philippines who were and are "constantly changing and manipulating their identities over time" (Chu 2010: 409), an argument that could well be extended to other Sino-Southeast Asian communities in various periods.

Thus, the ways of being in or of the Philippines as ethnic Chinese are and have been complex, and despite many more positive narratives the suspicion does regularly resurface in the Philippines that the community is "loyal only to their economic interests and to China" (Chu 2010: 3–4). As elsewhere in Southeast Asia, this makes the community's cultural history, with its nuance and demonstrable rootedness in local society and culture, an imperative concern. Chinese contributions to the Filipino performing arts, however, have largely been left out of the picture, usually featuring only when adjacent

projects of a sociological or ethnographic character incidentally touch on performance practices. Some of this is no doubt due to the usual documentary paucity surrounding vernacular and minority performing arts.

Although methodological, institutional, and financial biases limit many research projects to national silos, *xiqu* (“Chinese opera”)¹ studies increasingly reflect the global reach of its history and contemporary practice.² Scholars such as Wing Chung Ng (2015) and Nancy Yunhwa Rao (2017) have provided a clearer view of the history and significance of Chinese theatre history in North America, while recent work in Latin America and Russia has helped to incorporate late nineteenth and early twentieth-century *xiqu* into global networks (Stenberg 2018; Berezkin 2016). Southeast Asian *xiqu* has been an older and more consistent part of Chinese theatre studies than in the Americas, but the focus within Southeast Asia has largely been (as so often) on Singapore and Malaysia, where high levels of Chinese-English bilingualism produce much scholarship in both languages and where the large proportion of ethnic Chinese makes the communities integral to any realistic national account of culture. It is, however, becoming increasingly clear that every Southeast Asian culture had and often retains a substantial presence of, and engagement with, Chinese theatre. It is to be hoped that the threads of evidence available in Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam will stimulate further research.

This paper’s principal contribution is, as far as sources allow, to chart a through-line from the earliest records of theatre to the present practices. *Xiqu* in the Philippines has largely consisted of related Hokkien actor forms (*gaojiayi/kaoka*, *gezaixi*, *nanguanxi*) and a glove puppet form (*budaixi/potehi*), with the more occasional presence of Putian, Fuzhou and Cantonese forms as well as *jingju* (Peking opera). Considering *xiqu* in the Philippines from the colonial period to the present day, this article asks how theatre has evolved as a form of ethnic expression for the community, and where the Philippines is situated in a global *xiqu* geography. Faced with a wide historical range but limited sources, this article begins with a historical sketch of the community before presenting a chronological account of Chinese theatre by period: early colonial, late colonial, post-colonial, and contemporary. This history is then

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- 1 In recent years, ‘*xiqu*’ has gained ground on ‘Chinese opera’ for use in the academic sphere, since for many academics ‘opera’ would seem to suggest a misleading equivalence between European and Chinese stage arts.
 - 2 It seems to me that much of theatre studies is susceptible to the “methodological nationalism” diagnosed by Wimmer and Schiller (2002) in the social sciences. Recent work (Zhang 2017; Chia 2019) promises to open more transnational perspectives surrounding Chinese theatre in Southeast Asia.

mustered to suggest that this case intervenes in major ways in contemporary academic debates surrounding *xiqu*. Specifically, the article's exposition of the Philippine case helps break down fundamental linguistic, ethnic, and religious equations surrounding *xiqu*, given the genre's syncretism, ethnic ambiguity, and non-Chinese language environment in the Philippines.

2 Historical Sketch

China's proximity to the Philippines means that contacts with it were early and intense, especially from the late Tang or early Song Dynasty onwards (Beyer 1948; Quiason 1966; Ng 2016; Fox 2015). As elsewhere in Southeast Asia, the Chinese in the Philippine archipelago began as a trading population whose commercial networks preceded European colonialism. Spanish dominion over the Philippines, beginning in the 1560s, produced a succession of expulsions and massacres of Chinese, even as trade greatly expanded (Guerrero 1966; Santamaria 1966). The most important of these occurred after the brief British occupation of Manila (1762–64) during the Seven Years War (Escoto 1999). Even after the most egregious violence had subsided, Spanish colonial administrators only “tolerate[d] the Chinese in an atmosphere of mutual fear and suspicion” (Guerrero 1966: 39). Chinese migration all but ground to a halt, and a class of mixed, acculturated mestizos became a fundamental feature of Philippine society, especially in the cities (Wickberg 1965; Tan 2006).

Large-scale migration resumed in the 1850s, with Chinese thriving in retail and mestizos shifting to landholding. The same dramatic rise in immigration from southern China that produced large new, predominantly Hokkien, communities in Java, Sumatra, and Malaya, also occurred in the Philippines from the mid-nineteenth century until World War II. Much less acculturated, and consisting of women as well as men, it is largely the descendants of this long wave of immigration that have retained a degree of Chinese identity, and principally their Hokkien-origin genres that can be traced directly to performance today. Furthermore, Chinese communities have been concentrated in Manila, and it is there that Chinese identity has been most consistently transmitted and that theatre has consistently been recorded.³

Emergent Philippine nationalism was often (though not always) hostile to the Chinese, who—as in the Dutch East Indies—had been deliberately

3 Nevertheless, Percy Ng lists a wide variety of *kaoka* locales, most of them on Luzon, but including major centers in the Visayas and Mindanao as well (2016, 161).

constituted by the European colonial power as exploiter aliens (Wickberg 1965). After the 1898 Spanish-American war, the racist attitudes of the American colonial regime on the Philippines in the early twentieth century further contributed to ethnic discord while also encouraging Chinese capitalism and hardening distinctions between “Chinese” and “Filipinos” (which now included many mixed Chinese-Filipino mestizos). The period saw the establishment of “dichotomous and oppositional political as well as cultural ‘Chinese’ and ‘Filipino’ identities that we see in Philippine society today” (Chu 2010: 14).

Since full Philippine independence in 1946, the position of Chinese in the Philippines has been largely stable, with integration into Filipino society relatively successful and contributions to Filipino life acknowledged in press and academe. The cultural achievements of Chinese Filipinos have been noted across the fine and the applied arts (Alip 1959), and studies have also been conducted of the community’s literature, whether in Chinese, English or various Filipino languages.⁴ In the postwar period, the Chinese community was largely beholden to the Chinese Nationalist government in Taipei (Kung 2018). Between 1972 and 1986, the Chinese arts were policed and to a large degree silenced during the period of martial law.

However, the virulent twentieth-century anti-Sinitic eruptions, like those in Indonesia or Vietnam, have been mercifully absent. The recent and significant disputes surrounding the maritime boundary with China, though, have again raised concerns about Sinophobia, as has widespread antipathy to new arrivals from the PRC, who are popularly associated with the gambling industry. Evidently the Philippines’ “Chinese question” has not entirely receded, and recent Mainland Chinese economic involvement has stirred some controversy, as it has elsewhere in the region (Hau 2014; 2017).

4 Rizal may himself be the most important Philippine writer of Chinese descent, though there is little to be gained by applying this category to him. It is however interesting to note that he devoted a few pages of his diary to Chinese theatre, which he watched (a companion translating) on his visit to Hong Kong around Chinese New Year in 1888. Most of his comments are devoted to the plot, but he appends a final paragraph regarding the stage conventions: “When [a Chinese actor] goes on horseback, he carries only a whip and this means that he is going horseback,” etc. Although his observations are not dissimilar from those of other strangers encountering *xiqu* for the first time, it does allow us to surmise that Rizal was not familiar with Chinese theatre in the Philippines. Although this period was, as we shall see, a high tide for Chinese theatre in Manila, the *ilustrado* Filipinos do not seem to have been at all aware of it (Rizal 1961a: 206; translation 1961b: 142). There is a discrepancy in the dates: the Spanish *Diarias y memorias* dates the performance to February 13, while the English translation gives February 12.

3 Early History of the Chinese Stage

The presence of Chinese theatre in the Philippines has been an organic part of the historic exchange between regions. Spanish records of Chinese theatre in the Philippines are among the earliest known accounts of *xiqu* in European languages,⁵ and formal Chinese theatrical performance seems to have antedated Tagalog theatre in the Philippines.⁶ As so often with European colonialism, valuable information about local cultures can be garnered through the very attempts to prohibit them: the earliest known records of *xiqu* in the Philippines largely concern the moves of Spanish religious authorities to curtail or ban Chinese performance. No doubt this was in some part because conversion to Catholicism was a political as well as a missionary endeavor: Catholic Chinese would be or at least appeared to be less threatening to Spanish rule (Wickberg 1997: 156–158).

For instance, at the Chinese New Year of 1592, Manila Dominicans attempted, on the grounds of superstition and idolatry, to excommunicate those (Chinese and Spanish) who attended Chinese theatrical performances; as usual in such cases, the success of their efforts of preventing attendance may

5 We also have the Philippines to thank, indirectly, for another of the earliest Western accounts of Chinese theatre, that of the Jesuit Alonso Sánchez (1547–93) who arrived in the Philippines in 1581 and made two trips to China from there. His account, reproduced in a publication of Jesuit materials on the evangelization of the Philippines in 1900, mentions comedies in China that are “great performances with stages, costumes, bells and drums, choirs and voices in time [*“bozes a sus tiempos”*] and I have seen comedy of ten or twelve days and nights, without any lack of people either on the stage nor watching it; different characters and scenes are brought forth and while some perform, others sleep or eat [;] they treat of moral matters or of good examples but are wrapped in others not so [, and they also treat of] gentility” (Colin 1900–1903, I: 533). It may be worth drawing attention in passing also to another contemporaneous Spanish account bearing on *xiqu*, which does not yet seem to have attracted the attention of Chinese theatre studies: Juan González de Mendoza’s 1586 *Historia de las cosas más notables, ritos y costumbres del gran reyno de la China* (History of the Most Notable Things, Rites and Customs of the Great Kingdom of China).

6 This might mean that the earliest formal theatre in the Philippines was *xiqu*. Despite the apparent commonness of Chinese theatre in the Philippines, and the suggestions of some early scholars notwithstanding (see, for instance, Fernández López, 1894: 51), there seems little reason to believe that Chinese theatre generated a substantial impetus to the development of Tagalog theatre. Indeed, the idea that there was a Chinese influence on the development of Filipino theatre was dismissed as “absurd” by Retana, who reasons that “when the Chinese colony grew to a considerable size in the Philippines, it was indeed the case that there was *Chinese theatre* in the Islands, but so different from Tagalog theatre, that this fact itself serves as one more argument against the influence of one on the other” (Retana 1909: 15; see also 42). A later writer concurred, writing that the “Chinese theatre has no appreciable influence on the Pilipino theatre” (Bañas y Castillo 1969: 183).

be doubted (Chia 2011: 269).⁷ It seems the performances had been tolerated until the interference of Father Juan Cobo (Cobo 1966: 138–139; van der Loon 1992: 25).⁸ Cobo proposed that the shows were objectionable due to “idolatry and superstition,” eventually convincing Cristóbal de Salvatierra, the local episcopal official (“*Provisor*”), to intervene to stop “the comedies the Chinese perform, which are mixed with superstitions and idolatries, principally those they perform to celebrate their annual festivals such as in these days” (Aduarte 1962: 306; Irving 2010: 199).⁹

This ban, reportedly,

was much regretted among the Chinese and the Spanish; the latter because, without understanding, they enjoyed watching the actions and performances that the Chinese made in very lively fashion; and the Chinese because they are great aficionados of this entertainment; and all opposed the *Provisor* [Salvatierra], in which they were assisted by the Governor, who, not knowing the harm that was in them, was among those who took the Chinese side.

ADUARTE 1962: 306

Salvatierra, for his part, is recorded as being “certain that these comedies were an offense against the Lord” not least because “they were performed at night and ... were watched at that hour by Spanish men and women, and their

7 Li Li’s otherwise excellent Chinese-language summary of Chinese theatre in the Philippines dates the beginning of *xiqu* from the beginning of the twentieth century, likely because she is not consulting Spanish colonial sources (2007: 802).

8 Curiously, Cobo’s own account of Chinese theatre (Cobo 1966 [1589]: 138–139), three years earlier, in 1589, is not especially negative:

“The Chinese also have comedies against arrogance, showing bandits who quarrel and finally kill one another. In such manner they have all sorts of comedies against all the vices with an abundance of costumes, spending much on the presentation of each comedy. They act in loud voices, making gestures, and they sing a great part of what we would recite.”

Another letter from Cobo similarly describes the tales as “stories of war, learning, seeking fame and the activities of judges and governors. Of love stories they have many; and they have many plays about morals” (quoted in van der Loon [1992: 25]). It must be noted that Cobo was also drawing his knowledge of China from books imported from China, but the history of his intervention and the observations regarding gestures and recitation, as well as some preceding descriptions of musical instruments, suggest that Cobo was describing, at least in part, Manila *xiqu*.

9 According to the principal chronicler, that which Salvatierra most paid attention to, and in which he found the most difficulty, was in prohibiting the infidel Chinese from performing comedies, and prohibiting Spanish men and women from going out to see how they were conducted, which was full of superstitions and idolatries (Aduarte 1962: 306).

servants and other Indian women, who, covered in the dark cape of the night, did things very unworthy to be done in Christian lands" (306). The ritual aspect of theatre was also noted with opprobrium (Retana 1895: 153). The penalty for going to see Chinese shows became excommunication (Aduarte 1962: 306).

But the victory caused other difficulties. The attempt to mandate corporal penalties on Chinese who "performed or caused to have performed any comedy in any of these islands or towns" (Retana 1895: 153) drew the ire of Governor Gomez Dasmariñas, who had permitted Chinese performances and complained to the King that Salvatierra was meddling in "the performances of the Chinese and other things that are not under his jurisdiction" (152–53), part of a larger conflict between church and colonial state in the Philippines. The Jesuit chronicler Aduarte goes on to claim that by his time in the Philippines the 1630s, and due to Salvatierra's early efforts, Spanish men "let alone Spanish women" (1962: 306) no longer went to these shows; and that the shows no longer received licenses unless they were vetted. This gives the distinct impression that in the mid-seventeenth century, despite prohibitions, there must still have been rather a lot of unlicensed Chinese theatre for Spanish colonials to be prevented from attending.¹⁰

The passage of over a century seems to have produced no friendlier attitude from the church: at the beginning of the eighteenth century, Bishop Camacho y Ávila banned Chinese music as part of an expansion of existing restrictions on performances (Irving 2010: 210).¹¹ Other restrictions targeted syncretic practices, ritual performance, and conspicuous celebrations of Chinese holidays (Irving 2010: 199). Nevertheless, performance seems to have gone on, judging by an exhortation of the Archbishop of Manila from 1741 that complains that *los sangleyes* (a Spanish colonial term for Chinese) are performing "their

10 The Spaniards of this period might have had political as well as moral reasons to be unfriendly to the "Chinese comedies," or one might be forgiven for thinking so upon consulting this passage on the 1639–40 Chinese insurrection, which began at Christmas 1639. The Chinese of Manila allegedly

"were to carry gifts of fowls on that day, as was their custom, to the Spaniards of their acquaintance; and were to perform a comedy near one of the gates, to divert the attention of the citizens from any suspicion of their designs. Then at an appointed hour they were to kill all the Spaniards, and take possession of the city (Blair and Robertson 1903–1909, v. 29: 254n81)."

It seems likely, however, that this story was part of a Spanish *ex post facto* justification of the massacre, especially since violence had begun well before Christmas (McCarthy 1970).

11 In principle, Chinese theatre had had since the beginning of the seventeenth century to be "approved by Spanish religious officials versed in the Chinese language, before they could receive a license for performance" (Irving 2010: 210).

comedies and performances” without licenses in “estates, lands and orchards,” which suggests that the theatre was at this time performed in the countryside as well as in the city (Retana 1909: 42).¹² Another mid-eighteenth century Jesuit source, Pedro Murillo Velarde’s *Geographia historica* notes, with the same kind of attitude that one finds from colonial authorities throughout Southeast Asia, that Chinese instruments “are used more for unpleasant noise than for harmonious music. They perform the most inexpressive theatrical pieces, which can last an afternoon, or a day, or a week” (Irving 2010: 38).

Given the animosity that previously characterized official attitudes up to that point, it is therefore somewhat surprising to find that Chinese theatre was included in the 1791 festivities to celebrate the accession of Carlos IV. The show began “at three in the afternoon, lasted until four the next morning; and even then they say that it was a short one compared with what they were accustomed” (Blair and Robertson 1903–1909, v.50: 67), although the lion and dragon dances seem to have made more of an impression on the Spanish chronicler.

It seems on the whole best to model the earlier colonial attitude to Chinese theatre as one of repression and disdain, but apparently without conclusive result. By the late eighteenth century, as Spanish attitudes towards the Chinese softened, the theatre too likely became a less frequent target for repression.

4 Late-Colonial Chinese Theatre

The last major hostilities carried out by the Spanish colonial power against the local Chinese date from the mid-eighteenth century. The nineteenth century produced a relatively stable social existence for the local Chinese communities, and the largest wave of migration was happening by the middle of that century. In the realm of theatre as elsewhere, regulation took the place of direct repression of the Chinese community.

Reports throughout the nineteenth century suggest that *comedias chini-cas*, as Chinese theatre performances were becoming known in Spanish, or *sarsuwelang intsik* in Tagalog (literally ‘Chinese zarzuelas’), were extremely popular in the Chinese areas of Tondo and Binondo (Zaragoza 1990: 49). Much as in other relatively early histories of *xiqu* in colonial and/or immigrant locales, officials noted complaints that “the Chinese neglectfully improvised their noisy theaters, which, with their even noisier music, haunt the neighborhoods in which they establish themselves.” The practice was deemed inimical

¹² For the contentious derivations of *sangle*, see Hau 2014: 8–10.

to the colony, leading eventually to regulation by the municipal government (Barrantes 1889: 40).

In 1865, the Spanish governor general Juan de Lara refers to “daily public Chinese theatrical functions, even in private homes” (Archivo Histórico Nacional de España: “Arbitrios,” Doc 1).¹³ The local Chinese, he went on to say, “in any place, in the open air or under roofing, may quickly set up some boards and perform a show, to which hundreds of individuals are attracted by the sounds of gongs and cries, abandoning their work” (Doc 1).¹⁴ He would repeat his claims and go further a few months later, claiming that the shows spawned “gambling, opium, and all kinds of disorders” and that the content of the plays was “immoral and even grossly obscene.” It was just the thing to “attract the humblest of that sensual and degraded race” (Doc 8). This concern for “public morality” would consistently underlie much of the governmental discourse surrounding the theatre, much as it did in Batavia or Singapore.

The solution, according to the colonial government, was to institute a 5 escudo tax on each performance, the same fee as was charged to Tagalog theatre; de Lara, for one, continued to argue for higher taxes on the basis of public disturbance (Doc 8). A punitive fine for non-compliance was also stipulated (450 pesos). Fragmentary municipal records recording these taxes suggest performances must have been very common in Manila—446 licenses being granted in June 1865 alone, and never fewer than 200 performances for any month between April and August of that year (Doc 6; Doc 7; Doc 8; Doc 10). A planning document based on the first month estimated 13,750 pesos a year, amounting to 2,750 licenses yearly, an average of 7.5 performances a day (Doc 6). In April 1866, De Lara—displeased by “scandals” and “abuse” of the regulating system as well as the fact that licenses had not decreased the frequency of performances—limited to four the venues where Chinese theatre could be performed, presumably to eliminate street plays (Barrantes 1889: 43; Galang 2019: 207). A few documents from the remainder of the Spanish periods show petitions for performances and fees being paid to authorities by local Chinese from the 1860s through the 1890s (*Teatros*: Reel 306; Reel 307).

At the end of the century, *xiqu* was clearly part of the ordinary leisure-time activity for Manila Chinese, rich and poor—and no doubt non-Chinese also attended, as they did in San Francisco, Lima, Vancouver, and Havana. By the 1890s, a permanent Chinese theatre had been built in Manila’s Chinatown, Binondo, called Teatro Quiñol Chino or simply Teatro Quiñol (Zaragoza 1990: 49); this

13 The author would like to thank Jely Galang for generously sharing transcriptions of this file with me.

14 De Lara would write a third time in 1866 urging greater regulation. See Retana 1909: 83.

would seem to be the same as Teatro Guiñol, which was run by “Don Ignacio Billar, an inspector in the office of *Policia Secretas*.” The theatre (its name presumably referencing Grand-Guignol which was at that time enjoying its heyday in Paris) hosted nightly shows for a “fee of ten to twenty centavos per head,” apparently among the cheapest shows in town (Lacónico-Buenaventura 2010: 25; 194–195).

The advent of US rule, after the defeat of Spain and the nascent Philippine Republic, must have posed a serious challenge to the Chinese cultural sphere in the archipelago, including *xiqu*. As the US consolidated its rule in the early years of the century, the colonial custom authority determined in 1902 that actors did not fall under the “exempt classes” of Chinese (essentially laborers) who would be permitted entry (Congressional Information Service 1991: Circular 32),¹⁵ a decision then reversed by the Secretary of War in 1905 on the basis of an Oregon ruling that actors were admissible to the Mainland (Congressional Information Service 1991: Circular 181; Fritz 1991: 230; Moon 2012).¹⁶ The Secretary was William Howard Taft, later to be President, and who as first US civilian governor of the Philippines (1901–03) had already lobbied, unsuccessfully, for a less restrictive Chinese immigration policy there (Burns 2011). Taft, however, ultimately overruled himself (after a conversation with President Roosevelt), in 1907, again on the basis that the Philippines policy must not be different from that of Mainland US (Congressional Information Service 1991: Circular 185).¹⁷ The Philippine census of 1903 records no Chinese actors and only one Chinese music teacher (Ang See 2005: 12–25).

The prohibition must either not have been very effective or not have lasted very long, since Fujian and less often Guangdong troupes had Luzon on their itinerary often enough in the 1920s and 1930s. Chinese theater was a maritime commodity in Southeast Asia during this period, with Chinese sources showing a substantial flow of itinerant theatre troupes lasting from the early twentieth century until the Second World War, matching the great period of

15 Many thanks to Richard T. Chu for sharing these materials with me. The circular is signed by W. Morgan Shuster, the Collector of Customs for the Philippine Islands, later to become treasurer-general of Persia and to write critically about Russian and Persian power games there in *The Strangling of Persia* (1912).

16 In this, they were following the decision of a judge in Oregon in the case of an actor named Ho King. The judge, Matthew P. Deady, ruled that actors were not “laborers” for the purposes of the treaty with China.

17 It isn’t clear on what basis this decision was made, or in what sense it represented US policy in the Mainland, since the Ho King decision had not been overturned. We learn only that the “Secretary of War, after full conference with the President and the Secretary of State, has become convinced there must be uniformity” between the Philippines and the US.

migration. Records of tours thus suggest that the switch from Spanish to US colonial rule did not cause permanent disruption, despite racist US exclusion laws. Like migrants new and old, itinerant troupes were mostly Hokkien, dominated in that period by the earthy, sometimes buffoonish, often melodramatic, *gaojiaxi*. The fact that some of the most famous *gaojiaxi* performers, including “number one clown” Ke Xianxi 柯贤溪 and the best-known mid-century actor of the scholar roles, Dong Yifang 董义芳, developed their careers through Manila sojourns also speaks to the lively networks of theatrical migration and travel (Zhuang 2006: 237–240).¹⁸ The Philippines were part of the itinerary of numerous *gaojiaxi* troupes, first as part of a larger Southeast Asian loop (1909–14) and then for numerous groups constituted through visits to China to recruit actors particularly for performance in Manila, from about 1919 until the outbreak of hostilities in 1937.

Moreover, performance travel was not restricted to *gaojiaxi*. As early as 1917, the Teochew-language *chaoju* troupes, popular across Southeast Asia, were also making the trip. In the 1920s, the older Hokkien *liyuan* genre and the western Fujian *Hanju* troupes also visited. As Hokkien theatre pivoted to the more colloquial, folksy *gezaixi* troupes emerged and supplanted *gaojiaxi*, and we find troupes visiting from both Fujian and Taiwan, with one Fujian troupe spending six months in Manila in 1930. The central Fujian *puxianxi* genre sent a 40-member troupe between 1924–25, reportedly performing 351 different plays. Although the Manila Cantonese community was small, the great Cantonese opera clown Ma Si-tsang 马师曾, for instance, is known to have toured Manila in 1941, while several other stars passed through Manila in the same year on the way back to China from Vancouver (Zhongguo xiqu zhi bianji weiyuan hui 1993: 26–33; Wang 2017; Bai 2011; Mackerras 1975: 152; Lai 1993: 192; Li 2007a: 809–811).¹⁹ Judging by its taste for performances in a

18 Dong stayed in Manila for more than a year in 1922–23, and seems to have been a well-known figure among Manila Chinese.

19 In Charlson Ong’s novel *Banyaga: A Song of War*, *kaoka* troupes perform during the occupation, where “youngsters collected money for the guerrillas clandestinely among the audience” (2006, 112), and where a man rushes the stage with the Nationalist flag. Ong would again use *kaoka* as a theme surrounding Chineseness in his scripts for *Manu Po 8* and *Ghost Bride*. Both films used actors from the Chinese Hockian Opera Group. In several of the works where he mentions *kaoka* (which he usually calls Fujian Opera), he mentions their contemporary decline. In *Banyaga*, one character remarks: “Later when there were hardly any audiences left the troupe would be invited to play in temple grounds—for the deities, invisible audiences. By then most of the players were local youngsters who could hardly memorize the lines in Hokkien or Mandarin, they would write down the words on their palms the way they sounded in English and Tagalog, using Latin alphabet” (2006, 353).

variety of languages and styles, Manila had developed into an important station on a transnational, transdialectal *xiqu* market, though Hokkien genres never lost their predominance.

5 Local Chinese Theatre in Independent Philippines

After 1949, the Philippines and Mainland China were politically estranged from one another, and the flow of troupes from Fujian ceased. The founding of local *gaojiaxi* troupes in the 1950s and 1960s was likely a response to these conditions (Li 2007b; Roces 1964: 51).²⁰ Meanwhile, the Republic of China (ROC, on Taiwan), which regarded *Jingju* (Peking opera) as the national opera, sent a number of troupes to visit the Philippines (alongside South Vietnam and Thailand, other key anti-Communist allies), beginning in 1956 (Guy 2005: 55; 194110; Zhang 2000). Partly inspired by ROC efforts, for whose governing party *Jingju* was a legitimating talisman, a number of amateur organizations around *Jingju* also appeared in Manila. *Xiqu* was incorporated into student anti-Communist shows by Manila Chinese and toured the provinces (Kung 2018: 198).²¹

Gezaixi troupes from Taiwan began to renew visits at least from 1957, at which time Manila, it seems, could support visits from two overlapping troupes, with a third one arriving by the end of the year (Wang 2017: 92). At least six more *gezaixi* or mixed *gezaixi/gaojiaxi* troupes visited by 1965 (Wang 2017: 93). In 1963, the market was so strong in Manila that the Saijinbao 赛金宝 troupe was engaged for six months there, launching the career of teenager Yang Li-hua 杨丽花, to become one of the genre's leading stars (Taiwan Review 1983). There was a sufficient attachment to *xiqu* among Manila Chinese to furnish a market that could also attract *xiqu* troupes in various genres from Malaya and Hong Kong. Manila Chinese also financed at least one musical Hokkien film by pro-KMT studios in Hong Kong, *Lijing yuan* 荔镜缘, a version of the core Hokkien

20 Nevertheless, comments of the Secretary of Education in 1962, Alejandro R. Roces, speaking to the Chiang Kai-shek High School (in Manila, now Chiang Kai Shek College) on the topic of "For Closer Chinese-Filipino Cultural Relation," suggest that local *xiqu* practice was at that time not well-known, just as it seems to have been unknown to Rizal. Roces, who had been taken to see *Jingju* during a visit to Taipei, identified the theatre practice as "one of numerous aspects of Chinese culture that should be brought to the Filipinos" and "an art form that had defied the inroads of western influence through the centuries" (Roces 1964: 51).

21 The *xiqu* may not have always been overtly deployed to political effect. The play Kung mentions as being performed, *Great Repair of the Vat* 大补缸, is a comical scene known across numerous genres and popular in the PRC as well.

and Teochew star-crossed lovers story, Chen San and Wuniang 陈三五娘 (Li 2007b: 825–857; Taylor 2018).²²

Since at least the postwar period, local *kaoka* orchestra performers have been partly drawn from *nanguan* groups. *Nanguan* (known in the PRC as *nanyin*) is a Hokkien orchestral (and often vocal) genre; it can make a considerable claim to be the classical Hokkien art song and theatre form. According to one source, the foundation of a *nanguan* troupe in Manila in 1820 marks the oldest such endeavor among overseas Chinese (Li 2007a: 806). Before and after the Pacific War, leading *nanguan* performers and teachers from Fujian were living and teaching in Manila and Cebu. These groups achieved considerable renown in the Hokkien diaspora and replaced inaccessible Fujian as the principal node of exchange for Taiwanese *nanguan* performers. The ROC sponsored tours by Philippine groups, which were warmly received (Wang 2013; 2016). Since the reestablishment of relations with the PRC, Philippine troupes have maintained contacts with groups in Fujian and Taiwan, and are (or have until recently been) part of Chinese social life in smaller cities like Iloilo (Li 2007b; Nicolas 2009, 2016; Omohundro 1981: 104).

Philippine *nanguan* performers played a crucial role in the preservation of its theatrical manifestation, *nanguan xi*, in Taiwan.²³ By the 1960s this theatre was moribund on Taiwan, where Hokkien genres were officially discouraged, and which (perhaps due to a higher-brow standing) did not have a comparable market. Quanzhou performer Li Xiangshi 李祥石—intending to perform there for three months—had been trapped in Manila in 1939 by the outbreak of war, remaining there for decades and ultimately playing a key role in its Taiwanese revival. A member of the Silian Musical Studio 四联乐府 in Manila, he visited Taiwan looking to recruit students for *xiao liyuan* (the child-actor theatre based on the same musical system) performance in 1963. Among the students who signed on was Wu Suxia 吴素霞, then 15 years old. Over the objections of her family, Li trained her in *nanguan*, and

22 Taylor points out that this can be seen as part of a larger KMT-CCP battle for dialect film audiences in Southeast Asia and links the 1957 arrival of Taiwan *gezaixi* troupes in Manila performing *Chen San Wuniang* to the Mainland *liyuanxi* film of the same year.

23 *Nanguan xi* is one case where political regimes in Taiwan and in Mainland China have resulted in very different outcomes. Before 1949, various theatre troupes performed in Taiwan and Mainland China, all basically using the same musical system as the *nanguan* orchestra-and-voice ensemble. They were known by various names, and performed different styles of repertoire. One of these, *xiao liyuan*, was only performed by children. The result was that in Mainland China these traditions had coalesced by the late 1950s into a genre known as *liyuanxi*, represented by a single troupe in Quanzhou, the Fujian Province Liyuan Experimental Theatre, which was nationally successful in the 1950s and has been again since the late 1980s.

along with the other students they performed in Manila in 1965. Since 1967, Wu has been teaching in Taiwan, where she is considered “the only native *nanguan* opera teacher” (Wang 2013: 132n51). Li continued to make frequent trips between Taiwan and the Philippines, winning several awards from the ROC government for his *xiqu* work in the 1980s, before moving to Keelung permanently. Taiwan *nanguanxi* visits to the Philippines also occurred in 1977 (for five months) and 1985 (The Online Database of Taiwanese Musicians 2019). Without this 1960s Philippines-based initiative, *nanguanxi* would likely already have vanished from Taiwan (Ministry of Culture).

Locally, *kaoka* (the established name of *gaojiayi* in the Philippines) has long been the dominant, and for many recent decades perhaps the only, performance genre with local-based troupes. Martial law (1972–81) in the Marcos era represented a threat to the genre’s vitality, because the curfew (at least in theory) precluded the usual late-evening theatre. In practice, it was unevenly applied, and in certain areas it seems to have been mostly ignored. Caroline Hau (2020) recalls of her childhood in this period:

In San Nicolas district, where I grew up, I remember watching *kaoka* performances as a young child (around five or six years old). They were well-attended, usually lasting until around midnight. One time my uncle brought me backstage and I got to watch the troupe members put on their makeup. These *kaokas* were put up on makeshift stages at the intersection of Lavezares and Elcano Streets, and they were pretty lively affairs, attracting at least a hundred people. Despite the increasing number of TV ownership, they nonetheless offered public venues for socializing, and like the Filipino *moro-moro* and *zarzuelas* of yore, relied on people from different generations coming and going and paying intermittent attention, rather than sitting with sustained attention throughout the entire performances (though the older generation which understood the *kaoka* better did do so).

Permits could be difficult to acquire, and it often became impractical to set up temporary stages outside temples. On one occasion, troupe members (having secured a permit for only one person rather than for the whole troupe), were arrested and detained overnight. During this period, a number of performers also left for Taiwan or Hong Kong; troupes that visited from Taiwan found that their market had declined and the voyage had become less worthwhile. By 1977, the venues offered them for *gezaixi* had devolved from “opulent indoor stages to desolate outdoor spaces” (Wang 2017: 92–93) and the age of long, large-scale

visits from Taiwan came to an end (Qiu 2019; Wu 2000: 50–53; Wu 2009: 152; Ng 2016: 36–37; 156).²⁴

The overall effect seems to have been a decline in troupe visits, performances from local troupes, and the pushing of the form indoors and a greater restriction to community celebrations and religious performance (Li 2007c; Ng 2016: 56–59). To some degree, this decline reflects broader trends across the region, including the struggle *gezaixi* encountered trying to remain viable in the face of television in Taiwan, Singapore, and Malaysia. One veteran performer reports a gradual decline in interest in *kaoka*, due to the then-new availability of *xiqu* videos from Taiwan (principally *gezaixi*), a spate of kidnap-for-ransom cases targeting Manila Chinese, and the restrictions of martial law (ABS-CBN News 2017).²⁵ Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the familiarity of the narratives and the ability to speak Hokkien waned. The period also coincides with the rise of new media such as television and waning interest in traditional media among younger community members.

Marilies von Brevern's 1988 book "*Once a Chinese, Always a Chinese?: The Chinese of Manila: Tradition and Change*" includes an anonymized first-person account of a *gaojiayi* troupe director, a text that provides the most complete written account of the theatre from that period (49–53). The troupe in that account had been founded in the 1960s; according to this text, it was one of three in Manila. The director's parents had both been Fujian-born actors, and her father had performed as a youth in pre-war Vietnam and Singapore, before both had been stranded by the war in Manila. There they remained, teaching their son the opera from a young age. In the 1980s, they used both locally made and imported costumes, and at that time Filipinos without Chinese descent were already being employed as actors (51). The high level of technical accomplishment, with flying actors and horror-show special effects, corroborate oral-history accounts that suggest that the late 1980s, after the end of Martial

24 The iconic performer Liao Chiung-chih 廖琼枝 visited mid-career, in 1977, performing for six months as part of a ten-person company. Her decision to interrupt her career upon returning to Taiwan suggests that the market for *gezaixi* in neither place was particularly encouraging. The principal Taiwanese *gezaixi* company, Ming Hwa Yuan, visited in 1993. However, such visits are less and likely to be generated by market forces, and instead consist of ROC outreach to the community. Percy Ng's report that the Singaporean *chaoju* company, Sin Yong Hua Heng 新荣和兴, visited in 1998 is based on a *Manila Standard* article. Having spoken to the journalist who authored that piece, I believe that the article refers to performances in Singapore, not the Philippines; the *Standard* picked up the story from Associated Press.

25 This is one of most active performers of *kaoka* today, Teresita Carmona Lim, who also goes by Chan Bee (or Bi) Hua 曾美华, 66, in 2018. She is Chinese on her father's side.

Law, saw some degree of revival for *kaoka* (52). Even then, however, it does not seem to have provided a sufficient living for many of his practitioners (51). The account also broadly suggests that performances in the 1980s were still closely linked to the ritual calendar, both observing and enacting ritual, much as Chinese theatre has been in Indonesia or Malaysia. Van Brevens's interviewee makes no mention of performances in commercial spaces; it would seem likely that mall-based performance is an evolution of the last three decades.

6 Contemporary *kaoka*

The history of *xiqu* in the Philippines spans a considerable period, but its documentary record is, at least at present, regrettably patchy. Since ongoing contemporary practices, too, have yielded only a limited amount of academic material or primary sources, it is sensible to supplement this account of *xiqu* history with some brief observations from a 2018 fieldwork trip. Four performances are briefly sketched below to give a reader some sense of how *kaoka* works today, before concluding by noting some features that help us define the place of the Philippines in a global *xiqu* network.

6.1 Performance 1

The foyer of the SM MegaMall in Manila's Ortigas Business district, 5 PM on Sunday, February 11, just before the 2018 Chinese New Year. The speakers play instrumental string-and-keyboard arrangements of semi-recent pop hits such as "Happy" and "Somebody I Used to Know." A portly, gilded canine—2018 will be Year of the Dog—presides in mandarin dress over a series of red columns that demarcate the stage, *pinyin* good wishes "Xin Nian Kuai Le" soaring above him.

Meanwhile, members of the Philippines' most active *xiqu* troupe, the "Chinese Hockian Opera Group" 福建戏剧社, crowd into a nearby green room, applying their makeup and fitting their head-dresses. Musicians are tuning their instruments (one of them sketches out, briefly, the Teresa Teng evergreen "The Moon Represents My Heart"): an eight-person orchestra will accompany this performance, one of them on an electric guitar (Ng 2016: 88–90).²⁶

Malls have in recent years increasingly favored Chinese New Year events, especially since 2015, when President Aquino (himself, through his mother

26 Ng's generous assistance during my 2018 Manila sojourn was invaluable, and I thank her for her introductions, guiding, accompaniment, explanation, and sharing her thesis with me for research purposes.

President Corazon Aquino, partially of Hokkien descent) officially declared the holiday “one of the most revered and festive events celebrated not only in China but also in the Philippines by both Chinese-Filipinos and ordinary Filipinos as well; and the joint celebration is a manifestation of our solidarity with our Chinese-Filipino brethren who have been part of our lives in many respects as a country and as a people” (Philippines Malacañang Palace 2014: Proclamation No. 831). The special focus that SM MegaMall puts on the Chinese holiday may also be connected to the fact that the corporation is an undertaking of the Filipino-Chinese²⁷ Sy 施 family, a wealthy and prominent Manila name.

The MegaMall performance has not been specially advertised, so the audience comprises a shifting cluster of casual shoppers, standing in groups or seating themselves in the rows of temporary chairs. Now, in American English, a mall announcer welcomes shoppers to come watch “ancient traditional Hokkien-style Chinese opera, presented by SM MegaMall.” The band strikes up.

Orchestral pieces precede fan and lantern dances by two dozen young women in *xiqu* attire and makeup, none of them (as I am later told) of Chinese descent. Then, for the last twenty minutes of the hour-long show: theatre. A martial scene is presented, ultimately revealing itself to be *Xiangjiang hui* 湘江会 (Meeting at Xiang River). The clash between a male and a female warrior defines the scene, with minimal dialogue and singing. This is the genre known locally as *kaoka*, deriving from the *gaojiayi* practices of southern Fujian.²⁸

For the mall’s shoppers, the spectacle of costuming and choreography is evidently the principal attraction: the story, revolving around a warrior maiden of the Warring States Period, is neither familiar nor interpreted to the audience. The leading man and woman confront one another with weapons, each backed up by troupes of their own sex. Henry Tan, a performer of mixed descent, speaks Hokkien, otherwise the performers have no knowledge of

27 Another term for this community is “Tsinoy,” coined in 1992, a portmanteau of “Tsinong Pinoy” (Chinese Filipino). The term, however, is disputed among those whom it is intended to describe, and I have therefore not adopted it here.

28 Like a number of important theatrical and musical practices, *gaojiayi* is associated with the Xiamen-Quanzhou area of southern Fujian, in which region both state-sponsored and private troupes continue to perform regularly. In Taiwan, Southeast Asia, and to some extent in Fujian itself, *gaojiayi* lost its preeminence among Hokkien forms to *gezaixi* in the mid-twentieth century. The fact that the Philippine Hokkien genre is coded as *kaoka* suggests that pre-war transmission determined genre terminology. See Zhuang 2006 and Chia 2019.

Chinese languages (Ng 2016: 113).²⁹ The female warrior role is taken by Jhennifer Mosqueso Kabigting, a non-Chinese woman resident in Caloocan, in the north of Metro Manila. Kabigting, who otherwise makes her living at a burger stand, has been performing in this genre for more than ten years (113). Like several other performers, she speaks no Chinese whatsoever and has learnt the few necessary lines of Hokkien by rote. For every *kaoka* performance, she must make a commute of several hours across Manila's legendary traffic, first to pick up troupe performance materials from storage, before going on to the performance venue.

Bows and applause. The audience, which fluctuates but reaches its highest point at something like two hundred people, snaps pictures of the performance and is invited by an announcement at the end to pose with the performers afterwards. Thus began the Chinese Hockian Opera Group's 2018 Chinese New Year season.

6.2 *Performance 2*

A little over a week later, February 19. A temple in a sprawling residential area, deep in one of Manila's northern suburbs, Valenzuela. Travel there by Uber takes three hours, punctuated by dozens of phone calls to the troupe at the temple, a minor vehicular collision, meanderings through three or four unrelated suburbs with temples of somewhat similar names or on roads with the same name. Long-time local *kaoka* researcher Percy Ng and I arrive in time for the 5 PM show. There is no audience but the temple patron, another researcher in Manila for a conference, and the troupe leader, Baby, who welcomes us.

Baby launches into a variety of explanations surrounding the costumes, which are fifty years old and came from China (Ng 2016: 68–76).³⁰ The scene being performed, to the accompaniment of a traditional four-piece orchestra, is not something I can immediately identify. When I ask, Baby approaches stage and redirects the question to performer, Zinaida Lim. Lim interjects

29 In the Philippines, the term *mestizo* was used in a way similar to Latin America, to indicate that someone has mixed indigenous and foreign background. In the Filipino case, this results in "Chinese mestizo," while *mestizo* without further specification could also imply Spanish blood. It seems to be used primarily historically—for the mestizos who were absorbed into the category of "Filipino," while other descriptions (e.g. "mixed descent") are used for such backgrounds today.

30 Ng (2016) has shown that as the *kaoka* market has declined, troupes have become less and less able to import costumes from China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. Instead, less elaborate solutions are devised locally, including both repairs and new items.

between the lines she is singing that she is performing Zhao Kuangyin in the story *Escorting Jingniang a Thousand Miles* 千里送京娘. As often, it is tempting to map the thousand miles of the journey onto the distance the opera genre itself has travelled.

This is one of several dozen performances a year by another troupe, the Siu Lian Heng 秀联兴 troupe (Pan 2013: 222), established in 1962. Composed largely of Hokkien speakers with mixed origins, Siu Lian Heng is invited to perform on ritual or anniversary occasions, at temples or sometimes at restaurants. Most of the actors were trained by Baby's late father-in-law, and are now themselves in later middle age. Of the troupes performing in the Manila region, this group is most readily identifiable as *xiqu* and indeed much like the *gaojiayi* one might see at a temple festival in the Quanzhou/Jinjiang region; on the other hand, its future seems far from assured, given that there are few engaged youngsters.

6.3 Performances 3 and 4

I am invited to see Siu Lian Heng again, the following week. Morning of the 25th of February. This time we are indoors, in a small, second-floor temple in Tondo, Manila's most densely populated district. Baby hurries about, sometimes with grandson on hip, managing the performance logistics while also, remotely and simultaneously, taking care of other performers, busy a few hours away in the province of Angeles, by telephone. Today is the birthday of the Jade Emperor, and temple members are filing in and through the narrow passages, partaking of some noodles, lighting incense, folding sacrificial money. The theatre today is more overtly ritual in character, and there is no separate stage area. To the accompaniment of the four-member orchestra, eight performers—in the aisle, three meters by one meter, between the food sideboard and a work table where food is placed and spirit money folded—go through an Eight Immortals sequence. A *tiao jiaguan* ("Promotion of the Official") ritual mime follows, before the performance of a scene depicting the presenting of birthday wishes to the Jade Emperor (see Dean 1995: 222n12).

Having extricated ourselves through polite farewells, we rush onto Manila's packed trains to see the Hockian troupe performing a few stops away, in the historic Chinatown of Binondo. *Tiao jiaguan* performance, here, too, takes place upstairs in the opulent halls of a Chinese temple, while the remaining members of the troupe have started performing in a makeshift low-ceiling carpark. There they will complete two two-hour shows, attended by a few children on bicycles who pass into the parking lot from the street, and who come and go.

7 Renewed Contact with Mainland China

While it appears that *kaoka* is the only “local” form of Chinese theatre extant in the Philippines, Manila audiences may be exposed to other varieties through transnational tours. After the recognition of the PRC by the Philippines in 1975, official or officially-sanctioned cultural exchanges began slowly to appear. This was again particularly the case with the Hokkien genres (most Chinese Filipinos trace their origins to Fujian) and formed a part of a revived cultural exchange with communities in southern Fujian.

One such visit was a 25-member delegation of the Quanzhou glove puppet troupe, (Quanzhou Mu’ou jutuan), more colloquially familiar as *budaixi* or *potehi*, which in 1983 conducted 73 shows in 55 days, and (according to reports of the day) attracting 80,000 spectators in that time (Zhu 1986a). These performances were primarily in “the Chinese quarter” (235), by which PRC accounts presumably meant Binondo. In one article, Zhu Zhanhua 朱展华, a cadre accompanying the visit, describes overflowing theatres and Manila Chinese moved by this encounter. In another article he describes a workshop in which the puppeteers shared their art with Filipino artists after a welcome from “the old friend of the Chinese people” and then-head of the Cultural Center of the Philippines, composer Lucrecia Kasilag (Zhu 1986b: 243).³¹

31 In fact, *potehi* had a considerable history in Manila, as it does throughout Hokkien communities of Southeast Asia (Fushiki & Ruizendaal 2016). It has undergone very different evolutions in its various environments: the ancestral region of southern Fujian, Penang, Singapore, East and Central Java, and Taiwan, as well as apparently extinct versions in Sumatra, Borneo, and Myanmar. In the late nineteenth century, it was known in Manila (due to Spanish orthography) as *puteje*. As one Filipino theatre scholar noted,

“The *puteje* was a dramatic presentation common among the Chinese laborers in the Philippines during Spanish times and the early American years. It was performed in vacant lots at night by characters represented by doll-like figures. The motion of the figures was controlled by performers who, as in the *carillo* [a cardboard shadow puppet theatre of the same period], also did the speaking for the characters. The small stage was lighted but the audience sat in the dark ... The characters in the *puteje* were doll-like figures (Bañas y Castillo 1969, 182–3).”

There can be no doubt, then, that *puteje* is the Spanish rendering of *potehi*. Most likely an 1896 petition to the Manila municipal government, from a Binondo resident by the name of Uy Chinban, asking for permission for daily performances of a “little Chinese *guignol* theatre” (“teatrito giñol chinico”) for daily evening performances (7–10 PM) with afternoon shows on holidays, also refers to *potehi* (*Teatros*: Reel 307). There is evidence for an extended history of travelling troupes after records of Manila-based ones disappear: in 1908 and 1914 the Quanzhou marionettist Cai Qingyuan performed there, spending four months in the Philippines (Li 2007a: 809). The famed puppeteer Li Rongzong 李荣宗 toured Manila in 1947, and his son Li Tianbao 李天宝 performing there for extended periods in the early 1950s (Lin 1989).

An even more prominent performance series was the 1986 visit of the Fujian Province Liyuan Experimental Theatre, the key PRC troupe for classical Hokkien theatre. That visit, perhaps encouraged by the success of the related Hokkien puppets as well as the more liberal environment in the wake of the Philippines' People Power Revolution, occurred at the invitation of the "Palace Opera and Film Center" 皇都影剧院, with the coordination of the Philippine Cultural Center. The principal agent behind this invitation was the prominent Manila cultural figure and magnate Zhuang Dingshui 庄鼎水, who acted as the chair of the hosting committee, and wrote in the program (held in the troupe's archives) that he hoped the theatre could prove itself "a cultural 'angel'" for improving relations between the two countries.

The troupe largely offered abridged versions of their traditional *liyuan* troupe fare such as *Chen San Wuniang* and *Li Yaxian*, although there was notably (since it is not a usual play for the genre) also an adaptation of the *kunqu* play (and enduring PRC anti-corruption favorite) *Shiwu guan* (Fifteen Strings of Cash). The prominent use of written Chinese in the program suggests that the expected audience was predominantly Manila Chinese, though the performances also attracted a highest level of official interest. The ads in the back, too, are largely Chinese-English bilingual, preceded by paid-for congratulatory messages from various community organizations. The program makes clear also that the event engaged much of the organized Manila Chinese community: Thirty-one organizations are thanked in Chinese on the inside cover of the program, the majority of them local Chinese, including place-name associations, Hongmen (Masons), business groups, and friendship associations. The hosting committee lists more than 100 names.

The program shows that the performance series was noted and supported at the highest levels, including messages from the then President Corazon Aquino, with the usual hopes for "greater cooperative efforts by our two peoples" (Bilingual Theatre Program 1986:1) and one from Vice-President Salvador H. Laurel, speaking a little more ominously about the need for cultural exchanges in the Cold War, an "age when so much conflict is spawned" (Bilingual Theatre Program 1986: 2). Messages follow from the PRC ambassador Chen Songlu 陈嵩禄, associate Supreme Court justice Pedro L. Yap (whose attendance newspapers especially noted, and whom troupe members visited in person) (FPLET Archives 1986b). The head of the Cultural Center, Maria Teresa Escoda Roxas, showed (not quite accurate) knowledge of Manila Chinese theatre when she remarked in her message that "the Lijuan [*sic*] Opera Troupe is an exponent of Gaojia Opera, a major theatrical form in Fujian Province ... [as well as] the Philippines where the Chinese occasionally present operas or excerpts of operas in Binondo. Unfortunately, very few of us are aware of this" (2).

After the premiere at the Cultural Center, the Philippines' premier performance venue, the remaining shows were held at the Asia Theatre 亚洲戏院. Performing more than a dozen productions for 31 performances in twenty-eight days in October and November, the troupe's visit (55 people, including 31 performers and 11 musicians) elicited dozens of enthusiastic articles in the Manila Chinese-language press (FPLET Archives 1986b: A2-004-161-6-39; A2-004-161-2-30), including both reports of shows and other activities as well as some explanatory pieces authored by troupe members, such as Wu Jieqiu 吴捷秋—the principal chronicler of the troupe. Troupe leader Xu Zaiquan 许在全 contributed a poem inspired by the reception of local alumni associations and reprinted in several other outlet. Another poem by local author Huang Chun'an 黄春安, on being moved by the performances, was also printed. The troupe's newspaper clipping archives show numerous welcome events, often with photographs, arranged by community organizations. The troupe in its entirety—more than 50 people—stayed at Zhuang's three-story home on Ong Pin Street. The Fujian newspapers also made a brief note of the trip, as did the *People's Daily Overseas Edition* (FPLET Archives 1986a).

A Xiamen *gaojiayi* troupe had made a visit on a similar scale (30 performances) earlier in the same year, but 1986 seems to have been the high-water mark for these commercially-supported, officially-recognized tours: no subsequent tour from any genre has been of similar importance. Instead, theatre exchange with China has increasingly taken place on a wholly official level, consisting of one-off performances, exchanges, or collaborations.

One such development has been the *xiqu* education of a Filipina, now a prominent arts administrator in Manila: Annie Luis. The recipient of an award from the China Scholarship Council, she became, in 2008, the first Filipino graduate of the *jingju* program at the National Academy of Chinese Theatre Arts 中国戏曲学院 (16th Congress of the Philippines 2014: No. 452), an achievement for which she won a commendation from the Senate. Presently the head of the National Commission for Culture and the Arts International Affairs Office, she was in 2016 instrumental in arranging the visit—with the support of the Chinese embassy—of the National Ballet of China (which performed *Raise the Red Lantern* in a free performance). Herself a performer with Bayanihan, the national folk dance company, she hopes in future both to teach *jingju* in Manila and combine the Filipino genre of *sarswela* with *jingju* (Ang See 2014; Custodio 2016). There have also been recent visits from the Qingdao Peking Opera troupe, and it seems there is a project afoot to initiate a theatrical collaboration to highlight historic Sino-Filipino ties (Lion's Den 2018).

8 Conclusions

Colonial reception of *xiqu* was colored by the great power of Catholic orders and their distaste for all non-Catholic culture, before slowly becoming a thriving but little-remembered element of late colonial theatre. Although intimately connected to transnational Hokkien networks before World War II, after the war local *kaoka* companies filled the gap as contacts with the PRC dried up. Martial law and new technologies put a damper on local Chinese performance, but renewed contacts with the PRC brought Mainland *xiqu* back to the Philippines in the 1980s. Today, *kaoka* performances are given—largely by mixed or non-Chinese performers—as part of a religious obligation or in commercial spaces as part of cultural festivals, especially at Chinese New Year. Official willingness to use culture to improve PRC-Philippines ties will likely continue to bring *xiqu* to Manila audiences. There seems little doubt that there will continue to be an evolving practice of *xiqu* performed by Filipinos as well as a new chapter of visits and collaborations from China. Whether that reinforces or replaces the connections of the Hokkien diaspora remains to be seen.

Examining the Philippine history and ethnic practice of *xiqu* puts pressure on a number of assumptions. Today, ethnic constructions of Chinese in Southeast Asia (and perhaps minority groups everywhere) are “constantly being transgressed and broken down by people to create new meanings” (Chu 2010: 412) and certain salient features of how *kaoka* is performed furnish excellent examples. For instance, many contemporary performers are mixed or non-Chinese, and speak no Hokkien—the genre’s “Chineseness” can therefore not be feasibly categorized as ethnic or linguistic. Performers learn their lines by rote; audiences, too, are mixed and largely speak little or no Hokkien. *Kaoka* now operates across a variety of venues, maintaining a historic ritual function while also appearing in commercial venues such as shopping malls. The audience in the latter case has expanded, with viewership representing a variety of Manila shoppers and mall staff, many or most of them (like the performers) not ethnic Chinese. The mall itself, as a Chinese-owned business, carries an ethnic signification that undergirds the logic of the modern commercialization of holiday, ritual, and performance practices for the consumer. For younger Chinese Filipinos, the show may also function as an exotic experience, since *kaoka* has largely disappeared from the Manila streetscape; for older people, it may have a nostalgic function. In this, one notes a certain similarity with other Sino-Southeast Asian genres, such as the Hokkien-derived glove puppetry *wayang potehi*, where puppeteers are largely no longer ethnically Chinese,

where Hokkien has been replaced by Indonesian, and where mall performance has become common.

Another area in which the Philippines case causes us to reconsider received knowledge on Chinese opera is religion. For the colonial authorities, *xiqu* meant “superstitious comedies in honor of false gods ... part of the idolatry which was prohibited” for the Philippines Chinese (Aduarte 1962: 306).³² This looks a great deal like early records elsewhere, and confirms the ritual function of theatre. Today, however, many *kaoka* performers are devout Catholics (Ng 2015: 128; 134), although they will perform ritual theatre at Chinese temples. Outside Manila, post-war temple performances are recorded among Chinese coastal communities of Batangas, with a certain amount of syncretism with Catholicism, including performances at temple festivals that combine or conflate veneration of Our Lady of Caysasay with Mazu (Ang See 1997: 63; Lee 2013: 74; Pan 2013: 222). Such tendencies, too, offer a direct analogy with *wayang potehi* in Indonesia, where many of the puppeteers and musicians involved in performances are Javanese Muslims, and where performance can have both ecumenical and syncretic features.

Despite its near-invisibility in accounts of transnational Chinese theatre or Philippine Chinese community, *xiqu* has been an enduring feature of Philippine, and especially Manila, life. The case of *xiqu* in the Philippines shows us that Chinese transnational culture is not a new phenomenon, and that Chinese theatre has been a vehicle and expression for it since at least the sixteenth century. The recent noteworthy participation of non-Chinese people allows us to further decouple the idea of ethnicity and of performance. The syncretic background of performance, too, complicates views of Chinese theatre as essentially or primarily ritual.

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32 The Chinese Rites controversy occupied Roman Catholicism from the second half of the seventeenth century, with Pope Clement XI ultimately condemning Chinese rites in 1704. The Jesuits would be in this controversy the party that most strongly advocated accommodation of Chinese ritual, but evidently this was not Cobo and Salvatierra's position vis-à-vis theatre.

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