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Theatrical Commodity Chains and Colonial Competition

Abstract

This essay examines forms of theatrical performance that animated California port cities like San Francisco in the 1840s to ask two sets of interrelated questions: what is the relationship between the trade routes of traditional physical commodities and cultural ones like theater, and how do multiple national projects affect the forms of locality that emerge in contested colonial sites? By looking at a single site within the colonizing world of the nineteenth century, we can more clearly see the ways theater operates as an artifact of multiple national influences, and also in its relationship to multiple physical commodities.

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In the wake of recent discussions of theatrical commodity chains, there are several tenets we might consider foundational to our analysis of modernity's theatrical trade routes. What follows is a series of recognitions that might complicate and enrich our understanding of the cultural (and intercultural) dynamics of theatrical commodity chains in the colonised world. In particular, I am interested in complicating the picture of colonisation as a single-nation process (for example that of Britain, that of France), and in trying to think about the effects of competing colonial interests or multiple national layers of colonisation within a single site on cultural commodity chains. The theatrical trade routes of modernity were both the residue and the enabling cultural material of a set of intertwined phenomena: competing colonialisms, commodity chains, and the movement of peoples across the diasporic networks put into motion by them.

Most of the essays of this volume will trace the movement of a single performer or theatrical group across an imperial network, or will look at a single nation's theatrical exports to another national site. In what follows, I offer a different structure: rather than trace the circulation of a single nation's theatrical exports, I examine single sites within what Max Weber called the colonial periphery in order to consider the impact of different national projects that operated in that space within a certain time period on the

formation of local identity and culture. Such an analysis could allow us to understand the interaction between global and local cultures in ways scholars continue to demand, but seemingly have a hard time framing, and in particular would allow us to focus on how the local is in fact an artefact of a network of multiple national influences, rather than seeing it through the lenses of nationally specific pieces that obscure, nearly literally, the forest for the trees.

Such a method offers a bit of a daunting task, as it requires us to form multiple-national competencies that are difficult to work up. For the most part, humanities scholars are trained in 'nation-period' combinations (nineteenth-century British drama, eighteenth-century German poetry, twentieth-century US racial history, and so forth) that make cross-national research very difficult to accomplish. Indeed, to undertake the method I advocate here successfully would require a basic familiarity with the cultural and political histories not only of the chosen site, but of those of all its various streams of influence. If we are to understand 'the local' in all its complexity, such an approach is surely warranted.

Some of what follows concerns methodological questions, and some takes up concerns of conceptual framework and analysis. Many of the examples here are drawn from the performance forms of California in the period prior to the US takeover in 1850, but I have included others as necessary to illustrate certain phenomena or dynamics. I am primarily interested in the role performance took in the process through which Californians in the decade prior to the US take-over of the region (in the 1840s) articulated their local identities at a time when these were especially fluid. In this period, California constituted nearly a nationless space, and as such, figures as a fascinating stage for the transnational dynamics of early modernity. In a decade that witnessed significant immigration from China (caused by the massive population displacements of the Opium Wars in Guangdong province), increasing alienation of Mexican citizens from their own national government, the first sizable wave of US settlers, and substantial imperialist pressures from Russia and Britain, California's racial and national identity was almost radically open and undetermined. In this, California of the 1840s echoed other colonial sites of the nineteenth century in which fierce international competition within a single space was the order of the day, creating an open, polyglot, cosmopolitan space. Like Malacca in Malaysia, Shanghai, Havana, and parts of Indonesia, California's port cities like San Francisco were animated by the interactions of these multiple national influences. How did regional residents of this period — who might have identified themselves through a variety of national and racial markers — use public performance forms such as popular theatre, marketplace comedy routines, and music to try to define what it meant to be Californian? How might the multinational character of the nineteenth-century port city affect the way we think about theatrical commodity chains? And how might we go about detangling the multiple threads of this complicated knot?

We might try first to understand the particular qualities of the theatrical commodity. Its primary value seems to lie in its labour, in other words its status as a service. But that service turns on the pleasures it affords its audiences, through novelty or innovation, through aesthetic values (spectacle, music, physical virtuosity of the performers), through its affective momentum (its ability to move an audience to tears, laughter, anger, or other sentiment), and through its often-cited ability to create an imagined community.

These elements are the markers of a given theatrical work's trade value. This should be obvious, but to the extent that a potential patron is willing to part with her hard-earned money, she is willing to do so (and part with more of it) to the extent that she anticipates the work will meet her expectations in this area.

A key element of theatre's commodity structure lies in its differences from traditional physical commodities, particularly a lack of centrality in the way theatre works are created, influenced by other works, and consumed by audiences. To what extent does theatre's commodity structure mirror that of other traditional commodities such as textiles (cotton, flax), comestibles (sugar, tea, coffee), industrial raw materials (metals, petroleum), luxuries (gold, tobacco) and so forth? During modernity, the commodity chains of these varied items were comprised of removal from their origins in the colonial periphery to be processed and consumed within the industrial core. By contrast, the commodity chains of theatre (as well as of other cultural products) seem to lack an extraction origin. Rather than being structured through the extraction-processing-consumption process of traditional commodities that seem primarily unidirectional, theatrical commodities seem to emanate from multiple locations and then recombine in different regions in ways similar to those Appadurai lays out in his *Modernity at Large* (1996).

We might denote these distinctions by acknowledging the differences between physical commodities and cultural ones – differences that mirror those between a commodity chain as it is generally construed and Appadurai's notion of cultural 'flow'. For Appadurai, cultural flows are the foundation for cultural practice within a given location, and are comprised by the residue of competing and often inchoate streams of finance, ideology, ethnically-distinct peoples, technology and media. These streams not only compete with one another, but often derive from multiple national origins simultaneously. These various streams, which Appadurai names 'scapes', are 'deeply perspectival constructs, inflected by the historical, linguistic, and political situatedness of different sorts of actors' (Appadurai, 1996, pp. 31-33). These 'scapes' combine to create combinative, syncretic qualities that abound within a variety of cultural practices, including the movement of theatrical performance across various national locations.

To understand theatre's multiply national flows, I'd like to explore briefly the movement of a somewhat different commodity: that of a common comestible. The British tradition of drinking tea with milk – one of its iconic cultural practices – is a tradition of India, and not of China, from which the majority of Britain's tea was imported. In other words, not only did 'Britishness' come to be habituated through a consumption practice imported from its colonies, but through one imported from a colony that was not even the actual source of the commodity consumed. The combinative qualities of British tea consumption would at first glance seem to exemplify a distinction between the physical commodity (the tea itself) and the cultural one (the rituals and qualities associated with the act of consumption). However, the triangulated relationship between Britain, China and India with respect to the tea trade reveals how much more intertwined the physical and cultural commodity were in actuality.

British tea consumption drove the transnational routing of another physical commodity – opium – with disastrous consequences for both China and India. In

China's attempt to shore up its sovereignty in the face of increasingly aggressive European trade strategies, China began to accept only silver in exchange for goods, a practice they maintained well into the nineteenth century. The desire for tea, of which the British were the largest per capita consumers in the world by the eighteenth century (a distinction they still hold), threatened to bankrupt the British East India Company, which was dependent on trading with other nations for its silver holdings. In order to offset these losses, the East India Company began in the eighteenth century to import opium from India to China, and the instant addiction of thousands of Chinese nationals created a mass market that reversed the silver loss. The Qing government, alarmed by its economic losses and the looming spectre of a growing population of opium addicts, banned the importation and use of opium in the early eighteenth century, but Britain's use of Chinese smugglers meant that by the time a diplomatic and trade crisis erupted over the opium trade in the 1830s over 1400 tons of opium were sold in China annually despite the ban. The resulting war was devastating for China; over a half-million people were displaced by the war in Guangdong Province (the province surrounding Guangzhou, or Canton, the location for most of the military action) and when China eventually conceded defeat in 1842, she was forced to open her trade more generally, to pay indemnities to the crown, and to give Hong Kong to the British.

Given this backstory, one might note the ways cultural commodity of British tea-drinking, an iconographic practice that signalled civility, refinement and a kind of globalised sophistication linked to The Empire, was in fact founded on a history of coercive trade and military tactics that began what came to be known in China as its 'century of humiliation' (Scott, 2008). The cultural associations with tea drinking in Britain masked the violence and humiliation of the opium trade, which was intentionally and cunningly created in order to offset the potential losses induced by tea-drinking in the first place, but it also camouflaged the triangulated nature of cultural influence between Britain, China and India. The practice of drinking tea with milk was dependent on the hidden consumption of another Indian commodity, albeit a consumption whose effects and consequences for China, the country from which its tea was extracted, were largely hidden from those at the site of consumption.

The practice of tea drinking demonstrates the complicated systems of cross-cultural and economic influence at work within what seems like the simple consumption of a physical commodity – the intersection of the trade route of tea with what Appadurai might call competing ideoscapes and financescapes. The convoluted, tortuous systems of interaction and influence located in the practice of tea drinking should be familiar to theatre scholars from the ever-widening body of research on theatrical modernism's reliance on non-western forms for much of the innovation of the twentieth century. For a signal example of how theatre's commodity chain looks very much like that of British tea drinking in its multiply-directional quality of cultural influence and consumption, we could look to that chestnut of Asian American Studies, Giacomo Puccini's *Madama Butterfly* (1904). Puccini was partly inspired for the score of his opera, in particular for some of its most famous arias, by a performance of modified, western-friendly Kabuki by the actress Sada Yacco at La Scala in 1900. After seeing the Japanese actress perform, Puccini had wax discs of her singing recorded, which he then used to alter sections of his score (Havnes, 1998). Sada and her husband, actor-manager Kawakami Otojirô, had developed the performance Puccini witnessed at La Scala based on their US tour of 1899,

where they learned that the single most important element of her performance was the spectacle of Sada performing *seppuku*, the ritual Japanese suicide that provides the climax of Puccini's opera. By the time Puccini saw Sada perform at La Scala, she was killing herself four or five times onstage, as the same character within the same narrative arc.¹ Ironically, Sada and Otojirô had gone on tour to the US and Europe in order to raise money to perform *non*-Japanese performance forms at home. As early forerunners of the *shingeki* theatrical movement, the pair were interested in trying to bring the tenets of western realism to Japanese theatre, and to dispense with traditional Japanese forms such as Kabuki. In this, their work was part and parcel of larger Japanese modernisation projects of the Meiji Era (1868-1912), during which time Japanese nationals sought to create a national culture that could rival that of the major Imperial powers. Japanese audiences were slow to warm to Sada's and Otojirô's innovations, however, and so the pair travelled abroad, performing the very Japanese form from which they attempted to escape in order to raise money to perform western-style theatre at home (Berg, 1993 and 1995). Within this anecdote (which is now a familiar story within the annals of theatrical modernism), we have an iconic western theatrical piece (the most frequently performed opera within the US today) partly based on the work of Japanese actress, who performed a Japanese theatrical form modified to suit western tastes in order to raise money to perform European theatrical forms back in Japan. In other words, we have a commodity chain for which it is nearly impossible to pinpoint a cultural origin, a definitive direction of influence, or a final point of consumption. And yet the trade value of Puccini's and Sada Yacco's work undoubtedly rested on its perceived Japaneseness, on its access to the exotic, and the novelty it offered audiences. Homi Bhabha (1994, pp. 212-235) captured this quality beautifully when he noted that the circulation of cultural influence that we find in stories such as Yacco and Puccini's embodied the process through which 'newness entered the world'.

But not all newness entered the modern world via performance troupes that circulated from the colonised world into the industrialised one. With that in mind, we need to better understand the relationship between colonialism and mass migration, and the impact of this relationship on theatrical trade routes. As soon as Chinese migration began to the western US and Australia as a result of the Opium Wars, Chinese Opera troupes began to tour those regions, and their performances and theatres became a significant feature of the local theatrical landscapes (Lei, 2006; Moon, 2004). Without this migration diaspora, no Chinese theatre would have been performed in these regions. However, the Chinese diaspora was not caused directly by the colonial enterprises local to those destinations (that is those of the US or Australia), but by the British colonial practices within China itself. The initial waves of the Chinese immigration were created by the mass displacement of people in Guangdong province during the Opium Wars, in other words by political events that had nothing to do with California or Australia. The Chinese chose to migrate to those regions (to the extent that one can understand refugee status as a choice), however, because the local colonial projects of those spaces created large labour shortfalls, which the displaced Chinese stepped in to fill.

Our example of tea drinking also reveals the relationship between seemingly unconnected commodity routes. To return to the example of California, the theatrical trade routes of Chinese Opera that were set up to help Chinese migrants survive culturally and socially were built on the interaction between three commodities: tea,

opium and gold. The Chinese came to California as a direct result of the interactions between the tea and opium chains of production and trade, but were able to survive financially because of the commodity chain surrounding gold extraction and its various support industries (the same is true of Australia). The ties between the gold commodity chain and the theatrical commodity chain were so close within Chinese Opera that actors wishing to augment their status at home would advertise themselves as 'Gold Mountain' actor in reference to their time on the boards within California. As this example illustrates, important theatrical trade routes exist in the intersection between otherwise unconnected commodity chains. We should try to understand in more detail the crossover between cultural commodity networks (such as those for theatre) and commodity networks that are more commonly the object of economic scrutiny (in other words, for objects that were extracted, traded, processed and sold). In other words, how might it affect our understanding of global theatrical dynamics were we to map them with respect to global commodity chains of sugar, opium and tea, or gold? And can we understand these fully in tracing a single commodity chain at a time, or do we need to consider the interaction between multiple commodity chains?

In addition to considering the multiple national streams of influence over a given site at a given time, we might also consider how the performance sites of theatrical trade routes are in some cases ones previously colonised by countries other than that of the dominant nation during the period under scrutiny. As such, intercultural dynamics are not necessarily ones between the current coloniser and an original indigenous culture. We should remember that the 'local' culture of a particular colonial space might not be its 'indigenous' culture. By the mid-nineteenth century, much of the colonised world had already experienced multiple waves of colonisation, producing a kind of intercultural contact between indigenous groups and prior colonial powers. For example, in Alta California of the 1840s, the local culture was no longer predominantly that of local Native American groups; rather, what existed might be charitably termed a syncretic blend of indigenous Californian, Spanish and Mexican cultures. Large portions of the Native American population of the region, which had been one of the largest, most diverse, and culturally rich of North America, had already been killed off in the Spanish mission project (which stretched roughly from the 1770s to the 1820s, and was itself prompted by competition with Russia, which had just begun its own colonising activities along the Pacific Coast of North America) (Rawls, 1984; Lind and Møller, 2002; Gibson, 1988). Those not destroyed by the introduction of European diseases (which conservatively are thought to have killed at least one-third of the regional population) were killed for refusing to convert to Christianity, or by the near slave-labour conditions the Spanish missions imposed on converts as part of their forced transition from hunter-gatherer economies to those of conventionalised agriculture. What emerged from the end of the mission period (which ended largely as a result of the Mexican war of independence from Spain) was a cultural structure unique to Alta California, characterised by a syncretic combination of the practices of the remaining indigenous peoples (most of whom no longer practiced their original cultures) and those of wealthy Mexican entrepreneurs who operated massive land ranches in the wake of the missions' collapse. By the time US or Chinese migrants began to come to California in large numbers in the 1840s, the local cultural structures were vastly different from what Spanish Missionaries had

encountered in their initial exploration of the region in the 1770s and 1780s (Paddison, 1999; McKanna, 2002).

We might note, however, that the intercultural contact that displaced indigenous tradition was not always between European colonisers and the original population; in other words, not all cross-cultural contact was determined by European colonisation. In large segments of Indonesia, for example, Dutch colonisers encountered a population that had already been affected by the spread of Islam from the Middle East through to South East Asia. While the specific forms of Islam in Indonesia were distinctive from those in other regions (particularly from those of the origin region of the Arabian Peninsula), they were in no way indigenous to Indonesia (Winet, 2010, pp. 174-195).

Perhaps most notably of all, theatrical trade routes enabled counter-nationalist formation, as well as fostered nationalist sentiment. Following Simon Potter's analysis of how communications networks helped create a sense British identity among the scattered peoples of its global holdings, we might ask whether the rituals of national formation (such as opening the daily newspaper, or attending the theatre) solidified identities for different national groupings evenly or in the same way (Potter, 2006). In 1840s California, seeing Chinese Opera performed if you were a Chinese migrant most likely animated the kind of pleasurable processes Benedict Anderson identified in his *Imagined Communities*: nostalgia for a departed homeland, connection to a network of others like you spread across the globe, and pleasurable immersion in a familiar language and familiar stories (Anderson, 1991). For Mexicans of the same period, many of whom felt a growing dissatisfaction with and alienation from their national government in Mexico City, attending a theatrical performance or catching a marketplace comic turn might have evinced the increasingly *disarticulated* nature of relations between the primary national culture and its regional outliers. Given the issues of political rivalry that roiled Alta California in the 1840s (there was active talk of seceding from Mexico within the region), what was the content of the performances on California's Mexican stages. What kinds of stories were being told? Patriotic epics? If so, how were these received? Satires of the Mexico City government? If so, how did performers — who were largely itinerant figures travelling throughout the various regions of Mexico — alter their routines for the political tastes of different audiences? In effect, this population was itself a colonialist settler group, even if the land they occupied was contiguous with the home nation. While it might be tempting to chalk such differences up to the sentiments of a migration diaspora (in which the Chinese of San Francisco and Sydney may well have been akin in affective structure to the British subjects of Calcutta and Christchurch, though they had a totally different legal, racial, and cultural status within those varied spaces) as opposed to those of regional division within a nationally contiguous space, it is worth remembering the extent to which the Mexican *ranchero* inhabitants of California had only settled in the region within a generation prior to this unrest. In this sense, they resemble the Chinese migration diaspora more closely than first glance suggests. How might we understand these differences in national, communal sentiment, both on their own, and in combination with one another?

In many ways, it has been assumed that within a colonial theatrical trade route the ability to engender an imagined community was one of a theatrical commodity's most important attributes. The primary attraction of the theatrical work within a colonial

setting, in this vein of thinking, is usually assumed (tacitly or explicitly) to be its ability to remind local labour or managerial communities of their homeland. But it seems important to ask whether or to what extent this is actually true. We need to take into account research that suggests – contrary to Anderson and Potter – that diaspora were fundamentally uneven in their dynamics, sentiments, and processes of identification. Brent Hayes Edwards (2003, p. 13) has argued that the discourses of diaspora articulate ‘cultural and political linkage *only* through and across difference in full view of the risks of that endeavour...Such an unevenness or differentiation marks a constant *décalage* in the very weave of the culture, one that cannot be either dismissed or pulled out.’ (ibid). This *décalage*, which Edwards defines as the constitutive gap or discrepancy fundamental to all diasporic projects, could be a feature of theatrical attendance in a number of ways: through tensions between the repertoires of theatrical troupes and the tastes of their audiences, through class pressures within the make-up of the audiences themselves, or the intrusion of regional or sectarian divisions within performance locations. For an example of these dynamics, we might look to the increasing disarticulation between national culture in China and that of its various diasporic spaces. During the Republican Era (starting in 1912), national culture in China increasingly became defined by the official Mandarin-speaking political elites of the North (particularly those of Beijing), functionally suppressing regional cultures such as that of Guangdong Province, from which the majority of Chinese diasporic inhabitants originally hailed. As cultural traditions of these regional forms were excluded from the formation of national culture over the early twentieth century – as occurred notably within Chinese Opera itself, which became increasingly codified through its Beijing variant – Guangdong audiences within the diasporic network were increasingly querulous with opera performers who stuck to repertoires they perceived as exclusionary.

It might be useful to distinguish between the various ways the term diaspora is used by ethnic studies scholars of differing racial backgrounds. Within African American Studies, the term is generally used to denote African peoples scattered by the transatlantic slave trade, who moved largely coercively. Generally speaking, these peoples often have a primary sense of affiliation with their nation of residence (the United States, Jamaica, Haiti, and so forth), even when that nation also functionally or explicitly excluded them from political and economic enfranchisement. Their sense of a felt affiliation with Africa may be highly imaginary due to the ways slave practices destroyed generational transfers of cultural knowledge and practice – because slave families were often separated during early childhood, many African Americans, for example, do not know their ancestral country of origin, let alone their tribal affiliation or the cultural practices that distinguished them. The Asian diaspora encompasses quite different characteristics, however. Due to family recording (if only orally disseminated), Asian diasporic figures generally know not only their country of origin, but usually their region of origin, even the village or city of origin within that nation. So not only are they aware of national cultural practices that are passed down generationally, they are also often aware of (and may be even contribute to) tensions between different regions of their nation of origin, class differentiations, and cultural distinctions between their co-ethnics. As a result, they have a much more precise sense of bi-national or transnational affiliation, with a very specific sense of how they relate to both their nation of origin and their nation of residence. Evelyn Hu-DeHart (1999, p. 4) describes this phenomenon somewhat

differently, calling it a ‘deterritorialized’ social identity: ‘they identify first with their co-ethnics wherever they are rather than submit to the hegemonizing claim of exclusive citizenship demanded by a single country or nation-state.’ This distinction might help us map more accurately the potential tensions within a diasporic group’s theatrical practices. Knowing that the Chinese diaspora is only *sometimes* animated by a sense of national identity, and that the sense of national identity is often complicated by regional identities from within China helps to explain why, for example, Chinese American spectators of Chinese Opera (who were largely southern and Cantonese speakers) were increasingly frustrated with a Mandarin-based repertoire they understood to be dominated by Beijing. Similarly, Alta Californian Mexicans may well have embraced *carpa* performers whose repertoire mocked the political class of Mexico City.

Lastly, we might note that not everyone within a local space may identify themselves as members of that community. For example, in the early decades of Chinese migration to California, most migrants thought of themselves as temporary sojourners there simply to make enough money to send home to their families in China and fully intended to return to their nation of origin. It is not at all clear at what point Chinese migrants and their descendants thought of themselves as permanent residents, let alone ‘Californians’ or American. Their affiliation with China was reinforced once the US takeover of California occurred, at which point federal laws such as the Page Act of 1875 prohibited the immigration of women from China altogether. Legislation such as the Page Act prevented Chinese migrants from establishing families in California and other diasporic communities, and helped ensure that Chinese migrants thought of themselves as temporary residents, whether or not that turned out to be the case.² The potential identity shift from Chinese to Chinese American was unquestionably linked to generational dynamics — as early waves of migrants had families in their diasporic locations, subsequent generations came to identify with their new national home. Simultaneously however, new waves of migrants entered those diasporic spaces, people for whom ‘home’ was most definitely back in China. The heterogeneous nature of felt national affiliation among Chinese in California makes it nearly impossible to generalise a sense of imagined community — to do so would require us to focus on micro- or sub-groupings within a given national or ethnic or migrant population.

Endnotes

¹ Although we should note that Puccini was also influenced by David Belasco’s *Madame Butterfly*, which opened in 1900, and also featured Cio-Cio San’s suicide at its climax.

² The conditions of migration were frequently as indentured servitude, from which it was very difficult to free oneself, especially when whatever excess wages one accumulated were sent back to one’s family rather than put towards purchasing one’s freedom. As a result, many migrants who came to California fully intending to return to China were never able to do so, and became permanent residents of the region by economic default.

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