New York author/director Ping Chong is absorbed with histories and ethnographies of a different kind. *Cathay: Three Tales of China*, which opened last week at the New Victory Theater on 42nd Street and continues through November 13, links ancient China with the Japanese occupation in World War II and globalized China today. Chong worked with the Shaanxi Folk Art Theater of northwest China to develop his concept; it was augmented by the Carter Family Puppet Theater from Seattle, where the piece was premiered. But *Cathay* is more than a puppet show.

The three stories are told with rod and shadow puppets in scenes that materialize in a proscenium-high wall divided into 25 panels. Instead of taking up the whole space, the individual scenes shift in location and scale, as if this were a movie, from miniature villas and caravans to close-up dialogues between characters. A tiny rod puppet does a scarf dance. There’s a frightening simulated cock fight. Fat disembodied heads gossip and scheme.

The first story takes place in the T’ang dynasty. The relatives of the emperor’s favorite wife intrigue within the palace, and when the country is attacked, the army threatens a revolt unless the corrupt regime ends. Lady Yang hangs herself to save the country. The puppets and the beautiful decors are done in traditional style, with painted and projected backgrounds.

The second play has realistic shadow puppets and looks like a 1940s comic strip. A peasant family gets separated during an air raid. The young boy, the only survivor, wanders the countryside. On the verge of starvation, he steals food from the occupying soldiers. He’s caught and apparently shot, but we discover later that his assigned executioner has spared him.

They meet again in a later life, as do the other characters from both tales, as travelers and businessmen in a modern commercial hotel. Chong’s ingenious device for holding it all together is that we’re looking at the site of the T’ang emperor’s tomb. Two immense guardian-beast puppets are stationed at the entrance to the tomb, and they provide comic relief around the three stories. They’re bored with their job and with each other after a thousand years of watchfulness, but they’re philosophical about it.

Before the last play, we hear voices and the sound of anthropologists digging into the tomb. Next thing you know, the place has turned into a theme hotel, with each of its 11 floors named for a different Chinese ruling family. Reincarnated as a desk clerk, Lady Yang finds her love again in the elevator, and the grown-up peasant boy takes his merciful adversary to dinner.

Now the entrance to the tomb is a hotel lobby, and one of the guardians mulls over the changing scene: “By the time we pay off our karmic debt, who knows what China will look like?” The whole backdrop fills with films of urban streets, crowds, and traffic, environmentally ominous but full of life.

The 90-minute show seemed a bit halting, and this may have been due to the fact that the script was pre-recorded by American voices. The additional layer of Chinese/American fusion wasn’t the problem; the action was so skillful and swift, it outraced the words at times. But the show was impeccably done in its visuals, with all the elements flawlessly engineered together.

By the end of it, Ping Chong has told more than an entertaining tale. He’s commented on the way cultures clash and overrun one another and somehow turn into a new thing. And he shows how events half-forgotten can live on as myth.