RED BOAT TROUPES AND CANTONESE OPERA

by

LORETTA SIULING YEUNG

(Under the Direction of Jean N. Kidula)

ABSTRACT:

The Cantonese opera, one of China's major operas, was inscribed as a valuable world heritage to be preserved by the United Nations in 2009. Because Cantonese people have migrated to many continents, performances, practitioners, and audiences, listeners have expanded to beyond Guangzhou in China, and Hong Kong to diasporas. The Red Boat Troupes were influential in shaping contemporary Cantonese opera. They were performing troupes that used boats for transportation between towns and villages in the Pearl River Estuary from the late Qing dynasty until 1938. These boats were specially designed for opera troupes. The boats also served as sleeping quarters for performers, musicians, apprentices, stagehands, and sailors. Many Red Boats were destroyed during the Japanese invasion of China in 1938. Unfortunately, in just 70 years, no more Red boats seem to exist.

This study situates the historical background of Cantonese Opera and Red Boat Troupes. Culture, function, life style, the art, performance practice, aesthetics, and music of Cantonese opera in the Red Boat society are examined. The thesis also looks into the social and economic understandings that brought about the demand for the Red Boat Troupe industry. Changes due to modernity, industrialization, metropolitan living, trade, colonialism, Westernization, and

improved transportation affected the development of Cantonese opera. Feminist movement, cross-gender performance, economics, and class issues historically associated with the opera are examined and compared to recent activities in Hong Kong, and in one Cantonese diaspora, Vancouver of Canada. The findings from the research shed light on the genre with a hope of preserving the heritage and increasing the practice and consumption of Cantonese opera.

KEYWORDS: Cantonese Opera, Red boat Troupes, Hong Kong Opera,

RED BOAT TROUPES and CANTONESE OPERA

by

LORETTA SIULING YEUNG

B.S., University of Alberta, 1974

B.A., Augusta State University, 2004

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of The University of Georgia in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

ATHENS, GEORGIA

2010

RED BOAT TROUPES AND CANTONESE OPERA

by

LORETTA SIULING YEUNG

Major Professor: Jean Kidula

Committee: Adrian Childs

David Schiller

Electronic Version Approved:

Maureen Grasso

Dean of the Graduate School

The University of Georgia

May 2010

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my parents, Mr. Ling Hon Wai, and Mrs. Ling Lee Oi Ling. This thesis is also dedicated to my late grandmother Mrs. Ling Fung Suet Ching. For everyone in my family, I love you.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful to Dr. Jean N. Kidula, my thesis advisor, whose help in the discipline of ethnomusicology has been insightful, knowledgeable, and encouraging. The time and effort that she has spent with my work have been insurmountable. I am also indebted to Dr. David Schiller and Dr. Adrian Childs, who took time to be on my thesis committee. Dr. Schiller has given me tremendous curriculum advice for the past years and Dr. Childs has provided me with theoretical knowledge in an exceptional organized fashion. The University of Georgia music department has provided a desirable environment for my study and the music department's graduate officer Ms. Susan LeCroy has been very helpful to me for information, especially when I was abroad.

I am grateful to Dr. Sau Y. Chan who taught me the music knowledge in Cantonese opera, introduced me to performances and publications for reference while I was in Hong Kong. His dedication to show knowledge of Cantonese opera is exemplary. I would also like to thank Ms. Manshan Cheung of the Chinese Opera Information Center at the Chinese University of Hong Kong for her tireless effort locating books and knowledge at my frequent requests.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

Preface

This study was approved by the Subjects Office of the Institutional Review Board on 2008-01-30. Project number: 2008-10398-0

Romanization and Transliteration

In order to maintain consistency for scholars and musicologists of the English world, some terms in this thesis adopt the Hanyu Pinyin system with official Putonghua (the national language in China) pronunciations, which is used in other music literature studies in English. However, for the convenience of more direct tonal transcription, many names of performers, characters, play titles, places, terms in the Cantonese opera trades, and lyrics are romanized according to the Standard Cantonese Pinyin system developed by Yu Bingzhao in 1971. The IPA system of Wong Sek Ling is used as a guide in the Cantonese pronunciation system.[1] The system of Jyutping, a romanization system for Standard Cantonese developed by the Linguistic Society in 1993 of Hong Kong (LSHK), is used for most transcriptions. The "j" used by this system is the "j" used by IPA, which is equivalent to the "y" used by English speakers.

Most information obtained in this study is from the three large cities at the three points of the Pearl River Delta: Hong Kong, Guangzhou, and Macau. Hong Kong was a British Colony from 1842 to 1997; Guangzhou was the earliest port opened for international trade in China; and Macau was a Portuguese colony from the 16th century to 1999. An older system for transcription, the Yale system, had been used in the area for quite some time. Some

[1] Sek Ling Wong, Yuet yum wan leoi [*An Anthology of Phonics in Yuet Yum*] (Hong Kong: Zhong Wha Book Store, 2007).

transcriptions retain the old Yale system because performers and places had already established their English names spelled in this manner.

People's name in Chinese is in the order of surname followed by the first name. In this thesis, American convention is used. In the footnotes, first names are followed by the surnames. And in the bibliography, surnames are followed by a comma, and then by the first names of the authors. In the interviews, the Chinese name of the author, Ling, is used.

Chapter One
Introduction

I was awakened early by the motor boats along the Pearl River just beneath the balcony of my hotel room. It was a pleasant early summer day in 2003 at Saa Min, an esplanade surrounded by the waters of the Pearl. Across the river was a busy area of Guangzhou, where the Thirteen Company used to stand. This was a city where my parents had studied, worked and spent their youth. I left the hotel and took a morning walk on the wide street where the central portion, all along the road, was planted with trees, bushes and flowers. All the buildings were in the grand European style; it was where embassies of all representing nations stood, before 1949.

Some music from a cassette player attracted my attention— it was Cantonese opera singing and reminded me of my childhood in Hong Kong. The cassette belonged to a middle-aged woman exercising in front of a building. The walk along a clean, quiet street surrounded by historic buildings, accompanied by the pleasant fragrance of flowers, was certainly wonderful. But most wonderful was the lingering music that I had not heard for many years. My stay in China was just for a few days. I went on to Hong Kong where I searched for books on Chinese and Cantonese music and opera. The most comprehensive one was written in simplified Chinese, the form that is commonly used in China today. I struggled to read the book with the help of a Simple-to-Traditional character conversion dictionary.

On the way back to the United States, I stopped in Hawaii. This was my first time in the state, but my desire for touring beaches and sight-seeing diminished with the anxiety of reading the five books. The books were interesting, informative, loaded with history and people, and resonated greatly with Western music and Western opera. But this knowledge had been ignored

by me, by people from the estuary, by the Chinese, and by the world. From then on, I compared my projects on Western music history with developments in Chinese music. They included small projects such as "What was Happening in Chinese Music during the Western Medieval Period," and "The Development of Chinese Music During the Western Renaissance, Baroque and Classical Period." Eventually I chose to explore Cantonese opera for my undergraduate senior project.

I began listening to Cantonese opera, called older people to ask what they knew about it, and tried to recall what my grandmother had spoken about the genre. Perhaps it was a nostalgic reaction for people like me, who had been away from their native culture for a long time. The more I got involved with the research, the more I decried the little documentation and few resources available, and the more I understood my roots. In the process, I asked friends in the very small Cantonese community in Augusta, GA, what they knew about Cantonese opera. We started to discuss Cantonese opera at social gatherings. The response led to many audio and video recordings being sent to me. I did not expect that these "Westernized" friends, with college educations and residence in America for more than 30 years knew much about the opera. Most had kept listening to and watching Cantonese opera private. People in the past, especially during my friends' teenage years, considered Cantonese opera a low-class entertainment in Hong Kong. The more I researched the opera, the more I found my cultural roots. Both my grandmas (one grew up in the Pearl River Estuary, the other lived in Vancouver, Canada, since the age of nine) were fans of the opera. I also grew up watching Cantonese movies whose stars were Cantonese opera performers. After graduation in 2004, I visited the Opera Information Center at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. As I frequented the center, I gained access to books,

CDs, and news. In subsequent years, I became attached to Cantonese opera and the performance.

Yuet Kek,[1] Yuet ju, Yuet Kelk, or Yuetju is a Chinese opera genre of the Guangdong Province commonly known as Cantonese Opera, or Cantonese Grand Opera. It is one of the opera genres, Chinese or Western, that is performed often in many parts of the world. Cantonese is a spoken dialect of the capital city Guangzhou of the province Guangdong in China, and in Hong Kong and Macau.[2] Many dialects in the region surrounding Guangzhou are closely related to Cantonese. Cantonese is also spoken in Guangxi, the province west of Guangdong.[3] The audience of Cantonese opera is mostly concentrated in the Pearl River Estuary, where the river flows into the Pacific Ocean. Major cities in the Estuary include Hong Kong, Macau, Guangzhou, and Foshan, a city that is believed to be where Cantonese opera originated.[4] Because of the immigration culture among many Cantonese, Malaysia, Vietnam, Singapore, Thailand, Indonesia, Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Canada, Australia, are also diasporas of Cantonese opera.[5]

Despite its popularity and long history, hardly anyone living in the estuary nowadays knows that the term "Cantonese Opera" was only coined in 1925. Prior to this period, traveling troupes performing Cantonese opera in the Pearl River Estuary were called Red Boat Troupes—named after the carrier these troupes used for traveling.[6] The Red Boat Troupes were Cantonese opera performing troupes that used boats as carriers for performers, managers, musicians, and

[1] *Yuet* is an abbreviation for the Province of Guangdong; both *Kek* and *ju* mean opera. Kek is the Cantonese transcription while *ju* is the Putonghua transcription.
[2] Guangzhou is the earliest port in China that stayed open to international trade. It used to be called "Canton" in English.
[3] Cantonese is also spoken in the eastern part of Guangxi, but the dialect is referred to as "baak waa."
[4] Foshan is a city about 15 kilometer away from Guangzhou.
[5] In 1999, just the metropolitan area of Vancouver had 33 amateur Cantonese Opera associations (Wong 1999b). In Melbourne, Australia, one third of its residents speak Chinese at home; and Cantonese opera is the most represented of all Chinese operas in the Metropolitan of Melbourne (Wong, C.T., 2007).
[6] 2008 telephone Interview with Mr Lee Yau Wor (b. 1924 in China) who lives in Calgary, Alberta, Canada.

properties from town to town in the Pearl River Estuary. The boats were also sleeping quarters for troupe members during the performing season. The practice began flourishing in the 1910s. More than 30 Red Boat Troupes coexisted. Each troupe used two to three boats that toured the waterway of the Pearl River. The practice ended in 1938 when Guangzhou, the capital city of Guangdong, was seized by the Japanese.[7]

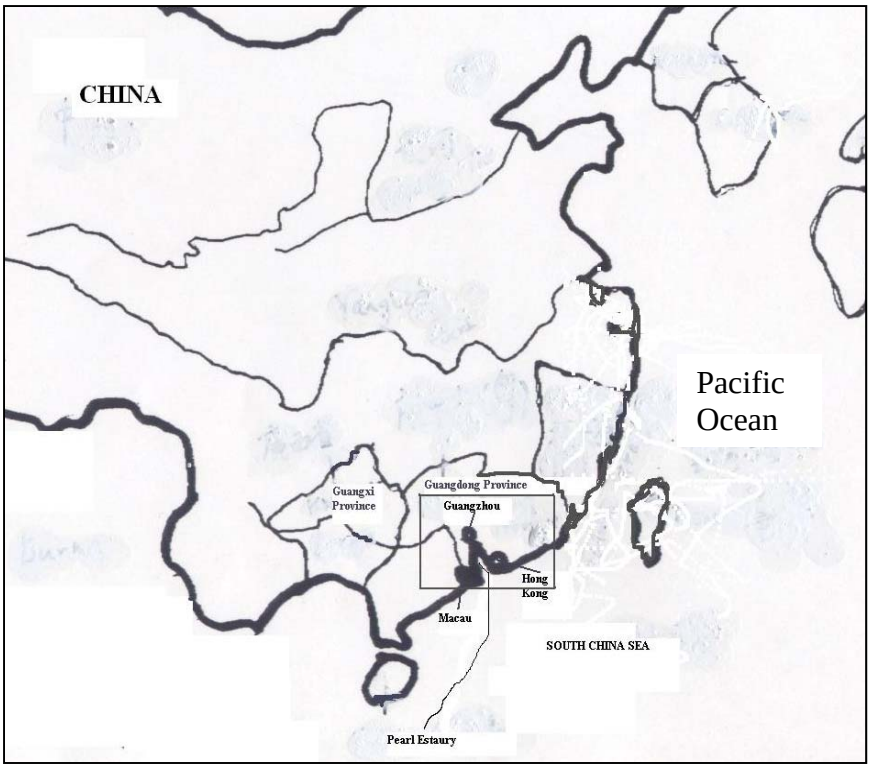

Figure 1. Map of China. Guangdong Province, Hong Kong and Macau are located at the south eastern part of China.[8]

Like operas in other parts of China, Cantonese opera flourished with the establishment of the Republic in 1911. Led by Dr. Sun Yat Sen, the rebellion against the minority rule Qing ended thousands of years of control by imperialists and kingdoms. The emergence of a new society allowed freedom that had never been given to individuals, particularly women. Introduced by

[7] Toa Wong, *Hung shun time bai* [In Searching the Mystery of Red Boats] (Vancouver: Wong Toa Publishing, 1999a), 3.
[8] Map drawn by the author.

returned scholars from Europe and Japan, Western modernism triggered the May Fourth Culture Movement in 1919, which further crystallized new liberty for people in literature, arts, opera, and the liberation of women. Women began to have more freedom to go to public places and have careers. The demand for opera performances increased as female audiences increased. All-women troupes began to appear. Some women became important figures in the opera industry. Due to relative political stability, warm weather, and coastal trade in Guangdong, Hong Kong, and Macau, Cantonese opera performance became a large industry before WWII.

The flat bottom Red Boats were the most suitable for bringing performers, musicians, props, and scenery to various parts of the Estuary in the warm, calm river. As more convenient transportation became available and Red Boat performance gained enough capital to become enterprises, permanent theaters were built. The 1920s and 1930s were prosperous for the industry. After the legalization of mixed gender groups, music and contemporary stories of the period were incorporated into the ever-changing genre. Modernism, Westernization, colonialism, economic freedom, and social freedom all led to changes. Moreover, the unique characteristics of Cantonese people may have been the most important factor for changes.

Due to overseas trade, the Pearl Estuary was economically prosperous in the first half of the 20th century. Since the 1920s, broadcasting and private ownership of phonograph records helped make Cantonese opera listening and singing a popular entertainment in the Pearl River Delta and abroad. The large number and widespread emigration of Cantonese to different parts of the world and nostalgia in the diasporas also made Cantonese Opera an important entertainment for the new immigrants. Singers and troupes of Cantonese opera from the Pearl River Estuary area frequently toured large cities in North America. Today, opera singers

perform at venues such as Caesar's Palace in Las Vegas, and at performing halls in Atlantic City, during the lunar New Year.

Art cultivation is highly influenced by local culture, language, and environment. Cantonese opera is certainly seasoned with unique characteristics, much influenced by the open, contingent nature of its coastal people. Yet, it retains some conservatism and traditionalism. Following is what Bell Yung wrote about Cantonese opera in Hong Kong:

> Some performance practices in Cantonese Opera reflect what other regional operas have long lost; yet it is in many ways the most progressive of all Chinese operas in view of its development over the last eighty years. It is also 'living' because of its intimate relationship with the lives of the Cantonese people; its role as ritual as well as entertainment is still very much evident in the cosmopolitan city of Hong Kong today…It is "living" in its performance practice: a performance on stage can be considered a continual "creative process" rather than a static "display."[9]

The citizens of Guangdong are relatively open-minded because of their access to information and culture from foreign countries: "Just like Cantonese dishes, Cantonese opera is unique, special and attractive. It has the basic potential of preservation and development."[10] Perhaps the opera itself is like the culture of these coastal people who bravely withstand big waves and crossing the ocean in spite of adversity, always looking forward for change, and yet retaining some conservatism in their nostalgia. The large number and widespread emigration of Cantonese to different parts of the world makes Cantonese opera the most performed opera genre in the diasporas. Cantonese Opera is probably one of the easiest to study by Western trained musicians because of the similarity of the scale system. Many Western elements have been incorporated into the music since the 1920s.

---

[9] Bell Yung, *Cantonese Opera: Performance as Creative Process* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), ix.

[10] Leung P. G. "Koi Lun Yuet Kek [Discourse on Cantonese Opera] (paper presented at the International Seminar on Cantonese Opera, Hong Kong, November 18-20, 1992).

Need for Study

In 2009, the United Nations declared Cantonese opera an important and intangible cultural heritage for preservation. Since WWII this culture had not been well-preserved due to wars and political instability in the Guangdong province of in China and in Hong Kong, the two main areas where the opera originated. In the 1960s and 1970s, Cantonese opera relied on the small colony of Hong Kong for continuation. Colonial education, Westernization, and lack of identity by the youth rendered the opera to be entertainment mainly for old people. In addition, vernacular opera performances in this part of the world have not been as highly respected as Western opera by their audience.

Preservation and development of the opera are tremendous efforts that require the cooperation of musicians, ethnomusicologists, performers, educators and societies. Unless the opera culture receives respect, the recognized heritage by the United Nations will be meaningless. A hundred years of vibrant Red Boat troupe performance are almost forgotten in little over seventy years.[11] Before facts disappear, I will attempt to preserve a record of some of the history of Cantonese Opera and Red Boat Troupes. Along with these facts, findings in the social and gender issues may help shed some light on why there is a decrease in audiences, especially among young people. Ways to attract young audiences and to elevate the social status of this genre, will eventually arouse interest, which will lead to conservation and development.

Unlike Western opera and Western classical music, academic documents on operas in Chinese are rare, and information on Cantonese music written in English is indeed scarce. The intangible heritage of Cantonese opera, and many other vernacular operas of the world, needs to be made known to the English-speaking world, and to the world in general.

[11] During my stay in Hong Kong between 2007 and 2009, most people whom I talked to hardly know what *hung sun*, red boats are.

After reading Lai Kin's proceedings from seminars he organized in 1980s to preserve Cantonese Opera,[12] I was amazed at the large scope of the Red Boat society, and I was also worried about the demise of the culture. In the seminar series, elderly performers and workers recounted details of the past— especially in the period 1911 to 1926 when Red Boats were the main transportation for opera troupes. The tightly structured Red Boat society is what shaped Cantonese opera. Almost all the people invited for the talks had been Red Boat performers and they had vivid descriptions of life on the red boats. For a hundred years, Red Boat Troupes provided entertainment for the estuary. They provided happiness, enjoyment and now I realized moral education. Cantonese opera and opera singing have also been home to the nostalgia of Cantonese immigrants in foreign lands for the last one hundred and fifty years. Most performers, managers and musicians of Red Boats, have become history now. Being brought up in the Cantonese culture, I feel obligated to help preserve this part of the history.

Objective of the Study

Objectives of this study include situating the historical background of Cantonese Opera and Red Boat Troupes. I describe the culture, function, life, business, structure, performance practice, aesthetics, and music of the Red Boat Troupes. I also look into the social and economic understandings that brought about the demand for the Red Boat industry. I investigate changes in performance programs, venues, mixed troupe performances, music, aesthetics, taste, and demand that were brought about by modernity, industrialization, metropolitan living, trade, colonialism, Westernization, and improved transportation. Other objectives include discussing performances of the past and comparing them to present opera activities in Hong Kong, and in

[12] Kin Lai. *Hong Kong Yuet Kek hou shek si* [The History of Yuet Kek in Hong Kong](Hong Kong: Joint Publishing Co. Ltd., 1995).

one diaspora, Vancouver of Canada. I examine some class and gender issues that may have hindered the development of the genre. From the data and interviews, I seek to explore why Cantonese Opera has not been drawing young audiences. By addressing these problems, I hope to find ways and means to improve the general reception and respect for the opera.

Assumptions

More than 36 Red Boat troupes co-existed during the flourishing years in the 1920s and 1930s, which meant that about 100 Red Boats toured the Estuary and thousands of employees and performers were hired in the business. We can assume Red Boat performance were a big and prosperous business at one time. Besides the Estuary, Cantonese opera is heard in almost every continent. It may also be one of the operas with the widest audience dissemination in the world.

Methodology and Methods

My study included several trips beginning in 2003 to Hong Kong, Foshan, Guangzhou, Macau, and Vancouver. In the process, I attended lectures and seminars at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, went to Cantonese opera singing classes, studied the music, participated in translation and proof-reading of Cantonese opera synopses, visited museums, back-stages, and libraries in Hong Kong and Vancouver, and communicated constantly with the Opera Information Center at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. I also attended theater performances (professional, amateur, student training), ritual performances, and interviewed in person and by telephone, musicians and opera performers, as well as students of performers who had resided on Red Boats.

This report includes voices from various performers of Cantonese Opera. Mr, Wong Toa represents performers of the Red Boat Era; Mr. Yuen Siu Fai, a lead-role professional performer, leader of the Eight Harmony Guild of the Performers, is an activist in the development of Cantonese opera; Ms. Tse Suet Sum, a lead-role performer, plays both women and men, and is a television star; Mr. Liu Hon Wo is an amateur opera organizer, an instrumentalist, and an opera teacher and on board of opera education in Hong Kong; Ms. Chan Sau Hing is an amateur lead-singer and teacher; Mr. Paris Wong, a young man who plays female roles, is an activist in organizing opera activities, and a teacher who trains young performers. The interviewees also include family members, friends, even elderly women who sat on planes next to me. I also interviewed elderly men and women who had attended Red Boat Troupe performance before WWII. From their sincere discussions with me, and my observations in Hong Kong and Vancouver, I examine the reasons for the decline of audience, and hope to find ways to help preserve, document, and develop the precious cultural heritage of Cantonese Opera.

Literature Review:

Literature that has been written in the English language is rare, partly because singing and oral delivery are in Cantonese, and partly because the art has not received respect and attention. Only a few articles and books were written on the music of Chinese opera prior to Prof. Rulan Pian's analysis of Peking Opera at Harvard in the 1960s.[13] Cantonese opera studies have benefitted from Pian's student Dr. Bell Yung, and Yung's student Dr. Sau Y. Chan.[14] Chan and his students published other books in Chinese on Cantonese opera at the Chinese University

[13] Rulan Chao Pian's article "Aria Structure Patterns in the Peking Opera" is one of the earliest articles in English on analyzing Chinese opera. "Aria Structure Patterns in the Peking Opera," in *Chinese and Japanese Music-Dramas, e*d. J.I. Crump and William P. Malm (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan. 1976), 65-89.
[14] Bell Yung, *Cantonese Opera: Performance as Creative Process* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989. Chan, Sau Y. *Improvisation in a Ritual Context*. Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 1991.

in Hong Kong. Other books, articles, and theses on Chinese operas that were under the supervision of Yung have recently started to appear. I will limit my review on the background and history that led to the prosperous era of Red Boat Troupe, life in the Red Boat society, and on class, gender, aesthetics, and social issues that relate to opera in the past. Because very little literature is available in the English, I will at times translate meanings of certain basic terms.

A. Cantonese Opera

References in English includes Bell Yung's book (1989) that is a comprehensive study and report on Cantonese opera. It details aria types, linguistic tones, musical instruments and the creative process. This is the first book on Cantonese opera ever written in English. He has also published other works on Cantonese opera.[15] Sau Y. Chan's book based on extensive fieldwork in Hong Kong, discusses cues that have been established in the trade over the years.[16] These cues are used in improvised performances of Cantonese Opera. Daniel L. Ferguson's article in the *Garland Encyclopedia of World Music* is a comprehensive introduction to Cantonese opera.[17]

Chinese references include the *Proceedings on the Symposium 200 Year: Footprint of Yuet Ju* edited by Si Sum Chow and Yan Cheng Ling, which provides current and important information on history, aesthetic, and theory of Cantonese opera.[18] Various articles in the *Papers and Proceedings of the International Seminar on Cantonese Opera* edited by Lau and Sin provide statistical, historical, and structural information on the genre.[19] Sau Y. Chan's book in

[15] Bell Yung, "Creative Process in Cantonese Opera: The role of Linguistic Tones," *Ethnomusicology* 27, no. 1 (1983): 29-47.
Bell Yung, "Narrative Song: Southern Traditions: Cantonese Narrative Song" " in *the Garland Encyclopedia of World Music* 7, ed. Robert C. Provine et al. (New York and London: Routledge, 2002) 267-74.
[16] Sau Y. Chan, *Improvisation in a Ritual Context* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 1991).
[17] Daniel L. Ferguson, "Cantonese Opera" in *the Garland Encyclopedia of World Music* 7, ed. Robert C. Provine et al. (New York and London: Routledge, 2002) 303-10.
[18] Chow, Si Sum and Cheng, Ling Yan, *Yuet Kek kwok zai yin to wui lun man tep* [Thesis on International Yuet Kek Symposium] (Hong Kong: Opera Information Center of the Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2007 (1) (2)).
[19] T. Lau and Y. Y. Sin, *Papers and Proceedings of the International Seminar on Cantonese Opera*. (Hong Kong: Center of Asian Studies, 1995).

Chinese is a comprehensive reference on the music of Cantonese opera.[20] His other book on theory and discussion cover many facets of performance including recitative, music, movement, and communication.[21]

B: Red Boat Troupes

No extensive research on the topic has been found in the English language. Many facts on Red Boat Troupe are contained in the series of seminars arranged by Lai Kin in the 1980s.[22] Pamphlets written by Wong Toa,[23] as well as scattered articles in newspapers, magazines, books, and television interviews were the basis for further research. Talks by researchers and performers at a symposium sponsored by the Center of Asian Studies at the University of Hong Kong in the 1980s were also helpful. The 2007 Global Symposium on Cantonese Opera arranged by the Opera Information Center, which I had attended, elucidated facts and provided current information. The amount of literary work on Chinese operas is very scarce compared to the extensive history, literature, and the performing practice of the genre. In view of the impending loss of the historical information of Cantonese opera due to wars, political instability, and lack of academic interest for the genre, in the 1980s, Lai Kin invited aging performers and managers to account for life in the troupes during the 1920s, 30s, and 40s. Most of the guests were old enough to have lived on the red boats. They recounted the life, society, and performance of the Red Boat Troupe. Lai also gathered information from other people, including responses from questionnaires he had designed. Some of the talks were included in a proceedings volume.[24] I was delighted to be introduced to Mr. Lai's niece at the seminar given

[20]Sau Y Chan, *Yuet kek yum gnok di tam to* [Investigation into the Music of Cantonese Opera] (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Music Department Research Program, 2001).
[21] Sau Y Chan, *Hong Kong yuet kek do lun* [Theory and discussion on Hong Kong Yuet Kek] (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Music Department Research Program, 1999).
[22] Lai, *Hong Kong Yuet Kek hou shek si*.
[23] Toa Wong, *Hung sun time bai*.
[24] Lai, *Hong Kong Yuet Kek hou shek si*.

by Red Thread Lady from Guangzhou in 2009, but I was also sad to learn about Mr. Lai's passing. Lai's effort to collect data for future generations was a noteworthy and respectable gesture.

I obtained primary sources of information on life in a Red Boat from Wong Toa. He is one of the very few survivors who had lived on a Red Boat. My first contact with this musician was in Vancouver in 2007. He had self published a few pamphlets. Of the pamphlets, *In Searching the Mysteries* of *Red Boats,* was the most helpful. During the Global Symposium in Hong Kong in 2007, I had asked a group of senior researchers from Canton for contacts on the topic of the Red Boat. They all pointed me to Mr. Wong Toa in Vancouver. Likewise at the Qing Wan Music Association in Vancouver, several members told me to see Mr. Wong. I met him the very next day. The interview was conducted at his apartment. At this writing, he told me on the phone that he was still teaching, and he was 97 years old. Prior to seeing Mr. Wong, I had visited the Vancouver Chinese library where I collected related articles, including those he had written for the *Singtoa Daily*, where he had previously been a columnist. He had been a musician at Ma Sze Tsang's Tai Ping Kek Tuen in the 1930s.

Organization of the Document

Chapter two introduces the history of Cantonese opera and Red Boat Troupes. Chapter three looks into the very structuralized Red Boat society. Chapter four discusses the kinds of plays, the *zong jyun culture* as a means of elevating social class in civil examination, and Confucianism that is ingrained in the operas.[25] Chapter five outlines the music, the performance practices, the tune types, the arias, and the recitatives. Chapter six examines practices, make-up, and costumes from the Red Boat period that were adopted in Hong Kong theaters. Chapter

[25] A *zong jyun* is the valedictorian at a civil examination

seven looks into issues of class and gender associated with Cantonese Opera development in Hong Kong. Chapter eight traces the development of Cantonese opera in China and Vancouver. Chapter nine discusses ways to respect, preserve, and develop the Cantonese Opera culture.

Chapter Two
The Rise of Red Boat Troupes and Cantonese Opera

Cantonese opera is one of the 256 recognized Chinese singing style and opera genres.[26] Others include Peking opera, Kunju, and Shanghai Yueju. In the vast area of China, genres influence each other. The long history of opera in China can be traced back to ritual performance dating to 800 B.C. Evidence of dance ritual for chasing away spirits that caused diseases was located in unearthed bronze masks that resemble animal faces.[27] Other origins important to the development of all music in China include the establishment of Liyuen (pear garden) during the realm of emperor Yin Cheung (A.D. 712-755) of the Tang dynasty. The emperor was a connoisseur in dance, music, performance, and a lover of *faat kuk* (an ensemble court music for singing and dancing that was accompanied by instruments like the *pipa*, chime bells, chime stones and flutes). Unlike the *dai kuk*, (dance music that was driven by the rhythm of drums), *faat kuk* was elegant. The emperor himself was a composer. And he was teacher of several thousand "Disciples of the Pear Garden." "Pear Garden" was named after the garden of pear trees inside the palace. It is believed that the music and dance of the Pear Garden helped to shape operas in China. Vernacular operas continued to develop in different regions since then.

There were three locations of Pear Garden for training when Yin Cheung was Emperor. The main one, inside the palace, hosted three hundred male performers and several hundred female performers. Male performers were selected from other music training camps, and female

[26] A study based on singing styles and operas genres in the early years of the Qing dynasty (1644-1911). Won Dat Jin, *Jong kwok yin yur si* [A history of Chinese Music]. Beijing: People's Music Publication, 1994, 541.
[27] The unearth of masks made in green copper with fierce face of animal for dance in the purposes of chasing spirits away indicated that 2800 years ago, performing ritual existed. Chow, W. B. *Chung kwok hei keik si lun how* [A Study of Chinese Opera]. Peking: Broadcasting Institute of Beijing, 2003.

performers were selected from ladies-in-waiting in the palace. The two other locations were in the capitol Cheung An, then a prosperous international trade center. They hosted 1000 and 1500 trainees. Today, performers of opera in China are referred to as "Disciples of the Pear Garden."[28]

Opera became a very popular type of entertainment during the minority Mongol-governed Yuen dynasty (A.D. 1127-1279).[29] Opera performers, usually from very poor families, stood at the bottom of the social ladder. They were trained as apprentices at a young age and received very little other education. Historically, government officers, in high- level social hierarchy, hardly mixed with performers. However, during the Yuen dynasty, many members of the Han majority lost their jobs or resigned, due to pressure in the new regime. Mingling with musicians and performers, some of these unemployed ex-officers started writing librettos to pre-existing tune types. Combining music and beautiful verses and literature, a very important genre of art, the *Yuen Jap Kelk* (Variety Opera of the Yuen dynasty) came into being. The *Yuen Jap Kelk* included shows other than opera. The Yuen opera reflected life's reality, more so than operas of the previous generations. Characters in the operas depicted people from all walks of life.[30] The *Yuen Jap Kelk* included recitatives and singing. Each opera had many characters, but there was only one lead singer. Others were mute or only sung a few lines. The structure of *Yuen Jap Kelk* is organized in "books." Each book contains four acts, and each book is a coherent story. Some long operas use two or three books, which are performed in a continuous fashion. Each act of the play is restricted to only one kind of mode. The ending of each book is

[28] Won Dat Jin, *Jong kwok yin yur si* [A history of Chinese Music] (Beijing: People's Music Publication, 1994), 206, 216.
[29] Ji Nan Sun and G. C. Chow, *A Concise Course of General Music History of China* (Shangtong: Shangtong Education Publication, 1999), 135.
[30] Jin, Won Dat, 378.

usually followed by a recitation of 2, 4, or 8 lines of a poem that recapitulates the whole plot. The last sentence is usually the title of the play.

Two well- known librettists (among the 120 known today) were Kwan Hon Hing and Ma Chi Yuen. Ma's opera "Autumn in the Han Palace" is one of the most valuable for revealing the art of thought. In the opera, the Han Emperor speaks what had not been permitted in the oppressive regime.[31] By composing, ex-officer Ma, who had lived in a time of conflict, expressed his dissatisfaction with the Mongolian's upper class and the social structure at the time. Ma's libretto was graceful and pretty, his language grand. The operas of these two masters are still performed today.

Performance was popular entertainment even before the flourishing of *Yuen Jap Kelk*. The sites of performances were called *au lan* (*au* means to frame, and *lan* means fences). At the capitol of North Sung(A.D. 960-1127), in the few market places, there were 50 *au lan*. And at the capitol of South Sung (A.D.1127-1279), there were 23.[32] The largest *au lans* could accommodate several thousand people. Towards the end of the Yuen Dynasty (A.D. 1269-1368), *Jap Kelk* gave way to an emerging genre, *Nanxi* (Southern opera).[33] Influenced by music and tones in language of different locations, the southern story telling opera *Nanxi* evolved into different kind of *sing horn* (singing style) at various locations. Among them, *hoi yim*, *yu yiiu*, *gwor yern*, and *Qwan Shan* were the main styles. Cantonese opera was heavily influenced by the *Kwan Shan* and *gwor yern horn*, but the high register singing g*wor Yern horn* became more popular. [34] Different genres of opera subsequently developed in many parts of the country. When Emperor Cinlung celebrated his 80th birthday in 1815, many opera troupes from various

[31] Ibid., 404.
[32] Ibid., 266.
[33] Won Dat Jin, *Jong kwok yin yur si*, 540.
[34] "*Horn*" means singing style in here.

places gathered in Peking to perform. The monumental gathering became a fruitful exchange for opera types such as the Hanju, Faiju, and Kwanju. Kwanju, the oldest, was called the "ancestor of all operas." The opera originated in Suzhou, Jiangsu Province in the Eastern part of China. Kwanju was a predecessor of the Peking Opera, (opera of the capitol). It is also influential in forming Cantonese Opera. The introduction of percussion instruments, such as the Chinese clapper and drums of this vernacular genre added more flavor to its Cantonese counterpart.

Cantonese opera was originally sung in Goon Waih (*goon* means mandarin, and *waih* means dialect.) It may have been a language spoken as far back as the Tang Dynasty (A.D. 618-907) in court and among Mandarins. The dialect in the Middle Region has since gone through many changes because of the invasion of two dynasties of foreign rule, the Mongols and the Manchurian. But the old dialect, to some extent, was retained in performance in the Guangdong province and later became Cantonese opera. Until the beginning of the twentieth century, *mo toi goon waih*, (stage mandarin dialect) was the language used in Cantonese opera.

Through the speech of a character, performers had the chance to address their disappointment and the social injustice of the regime. Performers and troupes members very often became targets of persecution from the regime. In the last two centuries, performers were important in leading insurgencies and campaigns. Performer Lee Man Mau led troupes fight against Qing soldiers in answering the calls from the Tai Ping Kingdom of Heavenly Peace, a civilian organized rebel group against the Qing Imperial regime.[35] Wearing opera costumes, the participants used *kung fu* and acrobatic skills that they had learned from performance in combat. Lee and many of his followers were captured and imprisoned in the 1854 coup. The same year, King Fa Wui Goon, the building that hosted the guild in the city of Foshan, was also burned

[35] Toa Wong, *Hung sun time bai*, 3.

down by the Qing Royal family. [36] Cantonese opera was then banned from 1855 until 1865.[37] In 1871, the ban was lifted. By the year 1880, many Red Boats could be sighted in Wong Saa.[38] Goon Waih continued to be the language used. During these years, some Cantonese performers fled to northern provinces, some hid and performed in *oi gong ban* (non-Pearl River troupes), and some were reduced to performing in the streets.

In the late Qing period, the weak regime faced invasion by foreign countries. Opera had been used as a tool to arouse people in political movements. One of the literati who tried to stabilize the imperial system by modernizing China was Leung Kai Chiu. He proposed using more Cantonese in opera in order to stir people's cooperation and express their yearning for a modernization. The *Goon Waih* in opera was not vernacular, and people had a difficult time understanding it. Nationalist script-writers composed plays that passed the message on working together to conquer the empire. Performers also used Cantonese in opera to work against the Qing dynasty, and helped to end it finally. The Republic was established in 1911, ending the minority rule, as well as several thousand years of kingdoms and empires. More Cantonese were incorporated in opera. Both *Goon Waih*, and Cantonese dialects were used in performance. Due to its high pitch, *Goon Waih* was used particularly for authoritative speech. Gradually, more Cantonese was added into performance. Today, the performance of Cantonese opera is strictly in the Cantonese dialect.

The establishment of the new republic from 1911 saw drastic changes in social life. Going to theatres was once entertainment for men. Women, who had their feet bound, stayed

---

[36] B. C. Tse, "goo gum Yuet Kek si how yuet duk." (Paper presented at the International Seminar on Cantonese Opera, Hong Kong, November 18-20, 1992), 44.
[37] Ibid., 3. During this time, a cross-dress male performer with the stage name *au bei* Zeung (hooked nose Zeung) performed at the house of the governor. Zeung resembles the dead daughter of the governor's mother. Zeung asks the mother to help persuade the governor to lift the ban on Cantonese opera performance. In the process, the ban was relaxed pending resolution.
[38] Wong Toa, *Hung sun time bai*, 3.

home. But Dr. Sun Yat Sen, a leader of the uprising, proposed ending the inhuman practice. Women, with the new freedom of going to public places, found the theatre fulfilling. They had more spare time and were curious about going to the center of action. More than one hundred years ago, the performance venue *hei pang* (*hei* means opera, and *pang* means scaffold), hosted men to the left and women to the right of the hall.[39] With the increase in demand, Cantonese opera started to flourish. The 1919 May 4th literature movement further crystallized the social status of women. More opera troupes were formed and the flat bottom boats that were most suitable for travelling in some of the narrow and shallow parts of Pearl River became the means of transportation and residence for the troupes.[40] Soon it became known that there were 36 troupes coexisting and performing in the estuary.[41]

It is not certain when *boon day ban* (local troupes) started to perform in Foshan and Guangzhou, but Zhang Wu's teaching in the area was influential. To escape political persecution, the anti-Manchu actor Zhang Wu (Cheung Ngh in Cantonese) and his brother came to Foshan in Guangdong from Beijing around the year 1723.[42] Zhang's nickname was *tan sau Ngh* (handicapped hand Ngh).[43] During his escape to the south, Zhang encountered robbers who seriously hurt his arm, rendering him unable to perform on stage. Teaching at the nearby King Fa Goon (Agate Flower Club), he passed his knowledge of the "Eighteen Standard Plays" (the 18 standard operas) of Peking Opera to Cantonese performers. *Boon day ban* (local troupe) started

[39] A picture taken around 1890 in an open-air theatre in Hong Kong showed only men as audiences. John Warner, *Fragrant Harbour: Early Photographs of Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: John Warner Publications, 1976), 144.
[40] Wong, Toa, *Hung sun time bai*, 3.
[41] Hon Wai Ling, (b. 1919), my father, recounted what he saw and heard from hawkers selling opera performance publications on the streets in his hometown in the estuary during his childhood: Chung Lan! Chung Lan (name of an advertisement publication for opera performance)! Newly formed ensemble; altogether 36 troupes…." The slogan is confirmed in: Chun Wu. *Gundong hei kek si* [Opera History of Guandong] 6, (Hong Kong: La yuen she bo sai yau han go si, 2003), 231.
[42] Lee, Moon. "Yuet Kek mim mim guoon" [The Many Facets of Cantonese Opera] (paper presented at the International Seminar on Cantonese Opera, Hong Kong, November 18-20, 1992), 3.
[43] The written word *tan* may be pronounced in two different tones, and hence different meaning. I asked Mr Yuen Siu Fai for verification. He told me that it meant handicap.

public performances after local disciples studied under Zhang. Zhang made great contributions to the establishment of Cantonese Opera. Today, he is highly regarded in the circle of the "Disciples of the Pear Garden." Foshan, where Zhang taught, is now home to the Yuet Kek Opera Museum. The new museum hosts a model of the Red Boat— the boats that disappeared after the 1938 bombing at the nearby dock Wong Saa. The re-construction of the model was an effort that relied on the memory of old performers.

The term Cantonese Opera was established in 1925.[44] Prior to the coining of the term by the troupe led by Sit Kok Seen who performed at Go Sing Theatre in Hong Kong for several years in the 1930s, Cantonese Opera was referred to as "Red Boat Troupes." And "people who worked for the troupes were called workers of *hung sun*, red boat."[45] Before the construction of permanent theatres Po Hing, Tai Ping, and Tung Lok in Hong Kong and elsewhere, troupes performed on makeshift stages made of bamboo, canvas and fabric that were completed in only a few days by skillful builders. The boats toured towns and villages along the Pearl River.

Boats carrying performing troupes might have been initiated as early as 1730, the 19th year of the reign of Cinlung Emperor (A.D. 1711-1799) as described in a poem.[46] Around 1871-1874, after the ban on Cantonese opera was relaxed, a group of performers led by Kong Sun Wah suggested calling the boats "Red Boats" to celebrate the allowance of Cantonese opera to perform again. In Chinese culture, red is a color for celebration.[47] In 1875, Lau Wah Dong re-designed the red boats.

> More than a hundred years ago when the transportation system was underdeveloped, opera troupes relied on red boats for performance in the Pearl Estuary. Moreover, since

[44] Leung, "Ci sik yuetju keik bun yu coeng ci [Simple Analysis to the Plays and Librettos]" (paper presented at the International Seminar on Cantonese Opera, Hong Kong, November, 18-20, 1992), 140.
[45] Telephone conversations with my uncle, Wallace Lee of Calgary, Canada, born 1924 in China.
[46] C. P. Chan, "Yuet ju si shan di yuet sai shui yue how ching di mun tai [Some Questions that Need to be Verified in the History of Yuet Kek]" paper presented at the *Yuet Kek quat cia yin to woo* [International Forum of Yuet Kek], Hong Kong, September 5-9, 2007), 58.
[47] Ibid., 57.

> the river is shallow, these flat bottom boats were appropriate. With props, scenery, boxes, people in the opera troupes, these boats were most suitable for travelling.[48]

The above-mentioned origin for the name *hung sun,*[49] (red boat) may not be for celebration. Wong Toa[50] suggested five other possible explanations, listed as follows:

> a) During the Qing Dynasty, Chinese naval boats used for regulating marine traffic and customs inspection were called *hung sun.*
>
> b) Some scholars believe that the boat used by the naval admiral was called *hung sun*.
>
> c) The opera boats were painted red to attract attention.
>
> d) The Chinese government stipulated that boats or ships from different provinces should be distinguished by their unique colors. Red was the designated color for the province of Guangdong.
>
> e) In a failed attempt to overthrow the Qing Dynasty, members of the opera troupes joined the uprising of the Tai Ping Kingdom of Heavenly Peace. During their clash with the government, troupe members wore their opera costumes. Rebels not from the troupes simply put on a red headband for identification. The reason for choosing red was because red (*hung*) sounds identical to the last name of the leader of the rebellion, Hung Sau Tsuen.

Any from the five reasons, or a combination of a few of them, might be how the name emerged.

People who were born after WWII seldom hear the term "red boat." And yet, it is not too long ago that Red Boats Troupes traveled the estuary and provided entertainment for thousands. During the flourishing years, a renowned troupe could be solidly booked for eight or nine years.

[48] Wong, Toa, *Hung sun time bai*, 3.
[49] *Hung* means red and *sun* means boat
[50] Wong, Toa, *Hung sun time bai*, 4-5.

It was common to be booked for two years.[51] The salary on the boats tended to be higher than wages elsewhere. The unwritten legend, the undocumented scripts, and the improvised culture are sinking into obscurity. Life on the boats has become mysterious to many.

[51] Sun Gum San Zing, "Hung sun kwai tzai kup ke gum gei [Regulations and prohibitions in hung sun]" in *Hong Kong Yuet Kek hou shek si* [The History of Yuet Kek in Hong Kong], ed. by Lai Kin (Hong Kong: Joint Publishing Co. Ltd., 1995), 18.

Chapter Three
The Red Boat Society

The Red Boat Troupe was a highly organized society. Each full troupe had a staff of one hundred forty to one hundred and sixty people.[52] Two red boats usually carried the entire troupe and the crew members. A troupe that required only one red boat was called a half troupe. The two red boats were separately called *tin teng*, sky boat, and *dei tan*, earth boat. For some larger troupes, a third boat— the *waa teng*, picture boat— accommodated the large stock of properties, costumes, and the scenery. Lau Wah Tong, a *goe jan* (a title for passing imperial examination on the provincial level) and script- writer, was well known for his creative and careful designing of red boats during the Qing dynasty.[53] He standardized and limited the number of *ji ceong* (boxes for property and costumes storage) to sixteen.[54] Most red boats were leased. It is estimated that the cost of leasing a pair of boats went from $400 late in the Qing dynasty to about $700 annually in the early years of the Republic.[55]

Red boats were typically painted in red and white. A plaque was hung on the boat with the name of troupe written in Chinese calligraphy. On each side of the boat, a piece of wood was installed to stabilize the ropes for anchor. It was believed that these two pieces of wood resembled the teeth of a dragon. Also, the stern of the boat was tilted slightly up, resembling the tail of a phoenix. Hence, the term "dragon head phoenix tail" was used to refer to its beauty.

[52] Wong, Toa. *Hung sun time bai*, 5.
[53] Interview with Mr Yuen Siu Fai on Mar 3, 2008.
[54] Hei sun dik yuen yung [The Use of Opera Boats] Wah Que Daily, April 21 1989, Hong Kong edition.
[55] Wong, Toa, *Hung sun time bai*, 6.

The length of a boat was about seventy-six *ceks* (about 82.8 feet), the width about 10 *ceks* (10.9 feet), and the height in the cabin was nine *ceks* (9.81 feet).[56]

Figure 2. Picture of a Red Boat model taken at the Yuet Kek Museum in Foshan, Guangdong.[57]

During the opera-performing season, all troupe members lived on the boats. The *tin teng* (sky boat) accommodated the managers, the *dans* (female role), the *shengs* (lead male characters), the *chous* (the clowns), the instrumentalists and some other members of the staff. The *dei teng* (earth boat) accommodated the *wu shengs* (*kungfu* and acrobatic characters associated with *wu* plays) and other members. This arrangement grouped people of different characters together. The Red Boat model that I saw at the Guangdong Yuet Kek Museum in

[56] A Chinese foot is equivalent to 1.09 English feet; a Chinese yard equals 10 Chinese feet.
[57] All pictures in this thesis are provided by the author.

Foshan was an Earth Boat, which has a wooden dummy at the bow for *kungfu* practice.[58] Since the boats had limited space, all troupe members needed to observe certain protocols in order to make the operation run smoothly. In general, these included participation in various rituals, worship of deities, and observation of specific etiquettes. Naturally, all these were common practices of the trade during that time in China.[59]

Figure 3. The Bow of is an Earth Boat. Wooden dummy for action performers exercising appears on the right (Picture taken at the Guangdong Yuet Kek Museum in Foshan)

The cabin of a boat was divided by a corridor called *saa gaai* (sand street) with bunk beds on both sides. Obviously, some parts of the sleeping quarters—those farthest away from the toilet, high traffic, and kitchen areas— were more desirable. Certain bunk locations even had names such as *Prince, Green Dragon, White Tiger, Cross Road*. Allocation of the bunks was

[58] Miss Ho, my host and on staff at the Guangdong Yuet Kek Museum in Foshan, informed me that the Earth Boat model was built according to the memory of performers and staff who had worked on the Red Boat, such as the well- known performer Lo Ban Ciu.
[59] Sun Gum San Zing, "Hung sun kwai tzai kup ke gum gei," 19.

assigned by drawing early in the performance season. Performers who made more money could afford to pay others in exchange for more comfortable bunk positions in the boat. The sum could be as high as a year's salary for a young apprentice. After being assigned sleeping quarters, a principal performer could immediately hire carpenters to make partitions, hang electric fans, and install lighting for his quarter.[60] The battery operated light and fans provided some "luxury" in the crowded ward.

Figure 4. Inside of the cabin, the saa gaai (sand street), with bunk beds on both sides. (Picture taken at the Guangdong Yuet Kek Museum in Foshan.)[61]

The model boat in the Foshan Museum shows lightings and bunk beds installed inside the cabin.[62] Almost all troupes were all- male. *The sei dai neoi ban* [The Four Main Woman

[60] I was concerned about the availability of electricity on the boat at the time; from my interview with Mr. Wong Toa, he mentioned that those appliances were run by batteries.
[61] A camera was inserted into the dark inside of the model. It was a surprise to see the detail in the cabin of the boat.
[62] The city Foshan is several centuries old. It is a city famous for porcelain making.

Troupes] were all-female troupes that rode the Red Boats and appeared in glamour.[63] Some troupe members did cross gender performances.

Figure 5. The rear part of the boat. Cooking was done at the stern. (Picture taken at the Guangdong Yuet Kek Museum in Foshan).

Division of labor was rather standardized among troupe members. Other than the performers, staff members included a manager and an assistant manager who took care of all the administrative work. Other employees consisted of two accountants (one took care of money transaction for day shows and the other for evening shows); eleven musicians; nine wardrobe keepers; an apprentice who took care of sixteen costume boxes; and ten maintenance technicians for miscellaneous property and equipments. Other workers include a job position called "local ghost," whose job was to remind actors to go on stage, two laundry workers for cleaning

[63] C.P. Wan, "Yuet Kek nu ban ci chor tam [Preliminary Investigation into all Women Troupes of Yuet Kek] (paper presented at the International Seminar on Cantonese Opera, Hong Kong, November, 18-20, 1992), 371, 374.

costumes, performing apprentices, and twenty-eight sailors.[64] Between two and four o'clock every day, two barbers offered hair cutting and shaving services. In addition, thirteen to fourteen people were responsible for changing scenes and lighting. The department that took care of scenes is called *ce waa* (scene pulling). The stage was enclosed by three large pieces of fabric; one at the back and two on the sides.[65] Eleven people worked on scenery.[66] For lighting, kerosene lamps were used. They were hung from the top of the stage with fuel added at intermission.[67] Two workers were in charge of three to four lights, and some stagehands were responsible for machine operation as needed, as well as microphones, if required.[68]

All food was evenly distributed among staff regardless of position. According to Yuen Siu Fai when he was a young trainee in the 1960s, a meal was served on a round wooden tray, about two feet in diameter, with a hole in the middle.[69] This kind of tray was actually traced to the Red Boat food serving culture. When the trays were not in use, they were stacked together by having the hole in the middle of the tray pass through a shaft to keep it neat and secure on the boat. The tray carried different dishes with bowls of rice that served about six people. Those lead role performers who could afford extra food paid for the ingredients and had the cook fix extra dishes.[70] The cooking area was located at the stern of each boat; the sky boat had the facility for cooking rice and a stove for stir fried dishes. The earth boat supplied hot water.

People in the Red Boat circle used the term "slept" on Red Boat, meaning to have worked and lived in the Red Boat Troupes. The apprentices usually practiced singing or *kungfu* on land,

---

[64] Wong, Toa, *Hung sun time bai*, 11, 13.
[65] This is according to my father Ling Hon Wai who was raised in an island Coeng Zau, close to the historical coastal custom the final stop of " Silk Road of the Sea."
[66] Wong, Toa, *Hung sun time bai*, 36.
[67] Ibid.
[68] Sun Gum San Zing, "Hung sun kwai tzai kup ke gum gei," 23.
[69] Interview with Mr. Yuen Siu Fai at the Eight Harmony Guild of Performers on Nathan Road in Hong Kong, March 3rd, 2008.
[70] Interview with Mr. Yuen Siu Fai. Mr. Yuen was born in 1953; he studied with performers who had "slept" on Read Boat, including Wong Tao.

on a hill, or at the river-bank early in the morning. Depending on personal features, talent, and the ability of the apprentice, s/he was assigned one, two or sometimes three role types. A more senior performer of similar role type served as a *si fu* (teacher). The *si fu*, either a *sheng*, a *dan*, a *chou*, or a *jing* passed his own singing, recitative, movement, acrobatic or *kungfu* techniques to the younger performers. In return, the apprentice helped take care of his *si fu*'s errands such as costumes, props, serving tea and sometimes buying special food and cooking for the teacher.

For the red boat troupes, the official starting date of the performing year was customarily the 18th day of the sixth month on the lunar calendar (usually around July in Western calendar)—this is one day before the birthday of Gun Yum, a deity.[71] The season lasted until the first day of the sixth month of the following year. On the opening day of the season, performers of all the troupes, led by the managers, gathered at the *baat wok wui gun* (Eight Harmony Guild for the Performers) at Wong Saa for a ceremonial ritual. The *wu sheng* (lead-male *kungfu* character of the troupe) held the name plaque of the troupe (called "water plate")[72] and paid tribute to the deity W*aa Gwong*, while loud instruments and fireworks escorted everyone back to the boats and the plague was hung. Naturally, no ceremony was complete without the generous burning of incense to the deities. It was believed that deity worship was absolutely essential for blessing all activities in a performing season such as travel safety, cooperative weather conditions, smooth human relations, and good health of the troupe members. Some taboos associated with the ceremony, such as women walking on the ship-board, were strictly prohibited. Also, appearance of a carp onboard was considered a bad omen for the upcoming opera season. Since the carp was believed to be the reincarnation of the dragon without the bones, eating carps was prohibited

[71] Wong, Toa. *Hung sun tam bai*, 17.
[72] The name of the troupe was written in gold color with black in the background

on the "dragon head phoenix tail" red boats. Other rituals were performed to counteract undesirable mishaps.

At each venue, the opera troupe performed either seven (four days and three nights) or nine shows (four days and five nights).[73] Usually, the main shows started about ten-o'clock in the evening, and very often, lasted until two o'clock a.m. the next day. After the main show, the apprentices performed *tin kwong hei* (dawn show), usually *wu* plays with *kungfu* actions that are accompanied by heavy percussion. As the name indicates, the dawn show lasted until daybreak. A troupe usually stayed in a town for a few days, and different repertoire was performed each day. Living accommodations were arranged for the performers if the venue for performance was more than eight *li* (Chinese mile) from the shore (one mile is equivalent to 2.794 *li*).

An opera year consisted of two vacation periods: ten-day period before Chinese New Year called the "short vacation," and the 18 days before the birthday of Gun Yum called the "long vacation." The short vacation allowed performers, instrumentalists and all troupe members to visit their families and rest before the hectic performance schedule starting on the New Year's Day (this usually falls in February of the Western Calendar). The long vacation between two opera seasons was used for boat painting and maintenance.

Guangzhou was the city where most troupes had their headquarters. Each company owned a few troupes. When the troupes were in high demand, some companies become enterprises. Very often, popular troupes were solidly booked for a few years. The organization Gaat Hing Gung Soeng, situated in Wong Saa, was a public legal office for the *maai hei*, "selling of opera." Managers of troupes and private parties from towns requiring performances met at Gaat Hing Gung Soeng to transact. Each troupe had two marketing personnel, the "*hung gong*" (*hung* means walking, *gong* means river). One was stationed at Guangzhou and Gaat Hing Gung

[73] Toa Wong, *Hung sun time bai*, 1.

Soeng. Another brought lists of play titles, with the cast of lead performers for the forthcoming years, to towns and villages for marketing and scheduling performances.

The manager of a troupe was an experienced administrator. He was responsible for the cast and the profitability of the troupe. The owner relied heavily on the manager for business and was usually little involved with decisions. The aim of the business was not to have any idle days. The contract between an opera troupe and the local sponsoring party included the supply of rice, cooking oil, vegetables, meat, kerosene for lighting, and wood for cooking.[74] According to Wong, upon arrival at a performing venue, the day show ended with the full stage show of the playlet *Inaugaration of a Six Alliance Kingdoms Appointed Chancellor*. All performers gathered for dinner after the afternoon playlets, either ashore or on the boat. This was also the time the director /scriptwriter talked to the performers about details of the evening shows.[75]

Only one statue was placed on a boat; that was the Tin Hau, Goddess of the Sky.[76] The statue of Tin Hau was located at the stern of the sky boat close to the kitchen. Tin Hau blessed peaceful travelling and boat living. Disciples paid tribute to five deities. Only Zhang Ngh was a human.[77] Another deity was Wah Kwong, God of fire, who did not burn the stage but could have done so. In the Qing dynasty, a troupe performed the opera Yok Wong Dung Gei (*Inauguration of Yok Wong*, king of the Other World). According to legend, Yok Wong was upset, and sent the God of Fire to Earth for investigation. The God of Fire found that the purpose of the play was to deliver the word "Ming," meaning back to Ming dynasty from the Qing (people were yearning not to be governed by the Manchu any more). Wah Kwong realized the truth and saved the performers by not burning the stage.

[74] Toa Wong, *Hung sun time bai*,
[75] Conversation with Wong Toa, 2007.
[76] Telephone interview with Wong, March 2010.
[77] Interview with Yuen.

Another two gods were teachers of dance. They were children dancers, *Tin Dao Yi Si*, the two Tin Dao Teachers. According to legend, passing by a field, a person saw two children dancing skillfully, elegantly, and happily. The passerby soon found the dancers had disappeared. Disciples of Pear Garden also pay tribute to these dancing-teacher deities. The last deity was Tam Gong Je. He was a teacher of music. Teachers of dance, music, theater, and the God of fire were all respected in the industry. During festivities, these were the deities to which tribute was paid. Besides Tin Hau, no statues were placed in the boat, only a plate representing the deities hung around where the manager worked.[78] But statues do appear at the guild venues.

The onset of the 20th century ushered in the revolution against the Manchu dynasty. Led by Dr. Sun Yet Sen in the early 1900's, the campaigns encouraged opera performance to use vernacular languages in China so that operas could send revolutionary messages more directly. The last emperor of China was finally removed in the 10th revolutionary up-rising in 1911, which was preceded by nine unsuccessful trials. From then Cantonese opera entered a golden age that lasted for the next several decades. Red boat business reached its most prosperous years between 1919 and 1923.[79] Merely the county of Shuntak alone had as many as one hundred opera pang (hall made by bamboo).[80] On performance days, gambling activities sponsored by local business usually took place in the early part of the evening, and the main show, the evening show, started around ten-o'clock. Some gambling took place on boats parked close to the Red Boats.[81] As many as eleven programs could be performed each evening in late Qing dynasty and early Republic, and some programs were short.[82] The main show usually lasted until two-

[78] Telephone interview with Wong Toa, March 2010.
[79] Sun Gum San Zing, "Hung sun kwai tzai kup ke gum," 18.
[80] Ibid.
[81] Conversation with Wong Toa
[82] Yung So, "*Yuet Kek pin kek gnai suik lau bean* [The Changes in Cantonese opera Libretto/Composition]" in *Hong Kong Yuet Kek hou shek si* [The History of Yuet Kek in Hong Kong] ed. Lai Kin (Hong Kong: Joint Publishing Co. Ltd., 1995), 80-82.

o'clock a.m. After the main feature, the *tin kwong hei* (dawn play) was staged. It was an acrobatic *wu* play (*kungfu* performance mainly by apprentices) that lasted until daybreak.

A hundred years ago when transportation and infrastructure on land was limited, performing troupes in the estuary relied heavily on flat bottom boats for traveling on the shallow and narrow river. According to Wong Toa, depending on how fast a troupe needed to be at a performing site, most times the boats use rows for traveling in the inner river. At times when the wind blew in the right direction, canvas was used, and if the troupe needed to rush to another location, a motorboat was hired to tug the two red boats.[83] Where the river was narrow, in addition to rowing, men on the shore tugged the boats. Two sailors guarded the travel day and night.[84] These guards were also assigned interesting jobs—notifying instrumentalist to play birthday music, paying toll, and burning worshiping paper as the boats approached temples of the Goddess of the Sea. Punctuality for the subsequent performances was the guards' responsibility.

The high demand of opera performance at a time of relative political stability in the 1920s and 1930s turned the simple Red Boat operation into enterprises. Enterprises built permanent theaters in the cities of Guangzhou and Hong Kong. Troupes frequently travelled between cities. Since Red Boat Troupe became *saan gong daai baan* (large troupes plays in Quangzhou and Hong Kong), and with steamers available for travelling between Guangzhou and Hong Kong, more performers took the passenger ferry in the morning to Hong Kong from Guangzhou and were able to perform in the evening show. The second and third floor of most theatres in Hong Kong had beds to accommodate travelling performers.[85] Po Hing and Gou Sing line was run by the Sit Gok Sin group, while the Tai Ping and Dong Lok line was run by the Ma Si Tsung group. The two rival groups performed continuously for almost ten years, before the

[83] Interview with Wong Toa
[84] The model at the Foshan Museum has a canon at the bow to protect the troupes from pirates
[85] Interview with Wong Toa in Vancouver, Canada.

Japanese occupation of Hong Kong. The movement of modernism and Marxist theory on economics moved the very local opera genre to the prosperous and industrialized theaters in cities of southern China, Hong Kong and Macau from the 1910s to WWII. Au Yeung Yu Ching, a performer and play critic once said:

> Since the Birth of the Republic, the fate of Cantonese Opera had been in the hands of commercial theatres, which set standard by the Hong Kong audience—the Guangdong economic system was highly controlled by the *taipan* in Hong Kong…Hong Kong was the important market of Cantonese opera.[86]

Japanese troops destroyed most Red Boats parked at Fong Tuen near Foshan by air bomb. Those remaining were used for other purposes. In 1951, there was sighting of a pair of red boats parked at the shores of Macau.[87] No more red boats were seen after that. After searching for a few years, I finally found one; the model at the Guangdong Yuet Kek Museum at Foshan.

[86] W. Leung, "Ci sik yuetju keik bun yu coeng ci [Simple Analysis to the Plays and Librettos]" (paper presented at the International Seminar on Cantonese Opera, Hong Kong, November, 18-20, 1992), 145.
[87] Toa Wong, *hung sun time bai*, 4.

Chapter Four
The Plays

According to statistics, there are 11360 recorded titles in the history of Cantonese Opera.[88] Even though certain tunes are repeatedly used in other operas, the figure is still astonishing. Over the years, many performances have been staged. The two main categories of traditional Cantonese operas are *wan* and *wu* plays. *Wu* plays are usually stories that involve generals and warriors with weapons and choreographed fighting. *Wan* plays are civil operas of romantic stories and the paternal-filial bond; instead of swords, long water sleeves[89] are used often to enhance expression. *Wu* acts, fighting scenes, may be in some parts of a *wan* play. Fewer *wu* plays have been performed in the last few decades.

During the Red Boat era, a troupe was stationed at a performing venue in a town for a few days. The program for each day was different so that the audience could watch a different line up on another day. The program included the Eighteen Standard Operas, playlets, and main feature plays. The Eighteen Standard Operas were a pool of play titles that were performed during daytime shows in the 1930s.[90] Many Chinese opera genres also have their own eighteen standard plays. Each play is numbered from one to eighteen, and the number is the incipit of the poetic play title, e.g. *Luk Jyut Syut* (Snowing in the sixth month); *luk* is the transcription for six,

[88] P. G. Leung. "Koi Lun Yuet Kek [Discourse on Cantonese Opera] (paper presented at the International Seminar on Cantonese Opera, Hong Kong, November 18-20, 1992).
[89] Sleeves of a costume that are extended beyond the length of the hands.
[90] Interview with Wong Toa.

the sixth month of the year.[91] Numbers one to ten were performed often in the Red Boat era, while number eleven to eighteen were seldom performed.[92]

A pool of *lai hei* (common practice playlets), some lasting fewer than five minutes, would be performed before and after the regular long plays. These were ritual plays composed of stylistic movements and gestures with or without singing. Playlets were for troupes to display the cast and costumes to attract the audience, and to create a welcoming atmosphere. The following are the names of some playlets that are still performed at ritual shows:

1. *Zae bak fu* (Paying Tribute to the White Tiger)
2. *Luk gwok daai fung seong* (The Grand Six Countries Invest a Chancellor)
3. *Baat sin hor sau* (A Birthday Greeting from the Eight Immortals)
4. *Tin Gei sung zi* (The Heavenly Maiden Offers her Son)
5. *Fung Toi* (Sealing the Stage)

Depending on the occasions, consecutive mini shows created a bond between performers and audience. If a troupe started to perform at a *pang* (makeshift performing hall), or a theatre that had never hosted an opera production, the first show performed on stage was "Paying Tribute to White Tiger."[93] Two *kungfu* players, one supposed to be a tiger, and the other a hero fighting the tiger, fought until the tiger lost the battle and left the stage (in Cantonese opera, losers do not drop dead on stage—they leave it). "Paying Tribute to White Tiger" was not a show for human audiences, but a tribute to a white tiger, who could bless the performance of a new stage to be safe and smooth for the entire time the troupe was in town. Depending on the size of the troupe, some playlets in Red Boat era required 65 to 70 people on stage.

---

[91] An abnormal weather in the northern hemisphere; something ominous was happening in the warm sixth month of the lunar calendar, around July in the Western calendar.
[92] Interview with Wong Toa.
[93] Sau Y Chan. *Improvisation in a Ritual Context.* Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 1991.

The performance practice of ritual playlets is a long-standing tradition. Its performance is also a ritual. In his book *Improvisation in a Ritual Context,* Sau Chan wrote,

> When I visited the backstage about two hours before the opening evening's performance, the workers and actors whom I knew well maintained silence and avoided talking to me…the performance hall was a "new" one (which actually means that it was built on a piece of land which had not been initiated for this purpose), and nobody should speak before the White Tiger ritual. …most of the other actors hid themselves in their dressing compartments, which were closed with curtains…According to an experienced accompanying musician Wong Jyt-seng, before the execution of the *zae bak fu* ritual, troupe members in the "new performance hall could easily be hurt by the White Tiger." The White Tiger was capable of making use of a member's mouth to hurt another member, in that the words uttered by one member could become a curse and anybody who answered such an utterance might meet with bad fortune. According to Wong, accidents had taken place in the past which were believed to have been caused by the White Tiger, including fire backstage and the collapse of the performance hall.[94]

Prior to the main feature, the first ritual play is *Birthday Greeting from the Eight Immortals*, followed by *The Grand Six Countries Invest a Chancellor*.[95] The story of *The Grand Six Countries Invest a Chancellor* is about a talented young scholar who is supported by all six nations to fight against the fearful Chin Nation during Warrior Period. This is a short play requiring all performers, principal and all other cast members, to be on stage for a short moment of big gathering in colorful costumes.[96] *A Birthday Greeting from the Eight Immortals* (*Baat sin hor sau*) and *The Heavenly Maiden Offers her Son* (*Tin Gei sung zi*) are appropriate playlets for celebrating New Year and the birthday of a deity.

Librettist/composer So Yung made the following remarks regarding the sequence of a day's program in the Qing Dynasty and early part of the Republic:

> Because of the previous uprising against the Qing and edicts of not allowing Cantonese opera performance, Cantonese opera performances are usually registered as "Peking opera" on contract, and the situation lasted until early part of the Republic. At this period, each evening performs 11 shows. After *White Tiger, Birthday Greeting from the*

[94] Ibid., 55.
[95] So, Yung, "The Changes in Cantonese opera Libretto/Composition" in *Hong Kong Yuet Kek hou shek si* [The History of Yuet Kek in Hong Kong], ed. Lai Kin (Hong Kong: Joint Publishing Co. Ltd., 1995), 81.
[96] Ibid.

> *Eight Immortals*, and *The Grand Six Countries Invest a Chancellor*, three Kunqu sung in dialect. Follows by that are three Cantonese operas in "Goon Waih," which is the prime performance of the evening. Wu play, *kungfu* play, with *wu* performers fight on stage follows. After this tenth performance, it is almost day-break and many audiences start leaving. And for those not willing to leave, they can enjoy the last episode staged by two performers who sings and converses in funny exchange, and this part is called farewell to the guests show *(shunn hark hei*).[97]

The dawn show is what So referred to as the show following the prime performance of the evening. The following is what Chan wrote about the dawn show:

> Besides the main operatic items and ritualistic playlets, sometimes the *zy wui* requires a troupe to perform *Tin gwong hei* (dawn show, meaning all-night performance) after a certain evening's or after each of the evening performances. An all-night show often starts within one hour after the evening's main operatic item and lasts for about four hours. According to some actors, it is often staged roughly and improvisatorily, not based on a script, but on an outline prepared by the play reminder, in a style somewhat close to the improvisatory plays of the pre-930 period… At the present time [this book was published in 1991], an all-night performance is rarely staged, except occasionally in the Purification for Peace series. [98]

The playlet *Fung Toi* (*Sealing the Stage)* is the last show that follows the last regular play. "The playlet is usually performed shortly after the end of the last main operatic item of the series, and involves only one actor who wears a white mask and goes through a short sequence of stylistic movements, which lasts for about ten seconds."[99] *Fung Toi* is supposed to be the last show after the *Tin gwong hei* (dawn show, meaning all-night performance). At the time of the Red Boat Troupes, *tin gwong hei* were *wu* plays performed by apprentices. Asked if scenes, or excerpts of different plays were performed during the Red Boat Era, Mr. Wong Toa said that during his time on the Red Boat (around 1926-1931), only a "complete play" was performed.[100]

---

[97]Yung So, "*Yuet Kek pin kek gnai suik lau bean* [The Changes in Cantonese opera Libretto/Composition]" in *Hong Kong Yuet Kek hou shek si* [The History of Yuet Kek in Hong Kong], ed. by Lai Kin (Hong Kong: Joint Publishing Co. Ltd., 1995), 81.
[98]Sau Y Chan. *Improvisation in a Ritual Context*, 57.
[99] Ibid.
[100] Interview with Mr. Wong Toa

I have not seen ritual playlets performed at permanent theatres in Hong Kong in the 2000s, but I have seen them staged at makeshift halls before main features at local festivities. Some playlets were performed consecutively. Seeing different shows with many performers wearing colorful bright costumes on stage in a matter of several minutes at the Shek O community festival in Hong Kong Island, and at the Feast of the Ghost at Kowloon City in Hong Kong, was certainly enjoyable for me. I seemed to go back in time and watch what my grandmother saw 90 years earlier in the village Sum Zeng (Deep Well), on the island of Coeng Zau (Long Island), in the estuary.

Unlike opera seria in the West, Cantonese operas usually have happy endings. Even with the tragic nature of *The Butterfly Lovers*, both lovers who die at the end and were unable to get married live happily ever after as butterflies that dance in the beautiful woods. And in the well-known Tong Dik Sung tragedy *Princess Coeng Ping*, the princess and her husband-to-be, both committed suicide, and both later reunited happily with the princess's deceased mother in heaven. In many Cantonese operas, the characters are everyday people –"Verismo" is found in the plots often. And, of course, the moral teaching of each play praises good people and punishes bad ones.

Before the establishment of the Republic during Qing dynasty, simple scripts were used for operas of the Eighteen Standard Plays. As opera reached its golden age between 1911 and 1923, with frequent performances and with some large-scale troupes of a hundred fifty people, copies of scripts could not be distributed to all the staff. Out-line plays (*tai kong hei*) with simple plots and entrance points for characters were posted on a large board backstage with characters only understood by people of the trade. The performer used his or her improvisational skills to speak the dialogue and sing the aria. This was a time when the details of conversations

were not written. The practice ceased in China in the last few decades. However, operas with only rough sketches written out were still performed in Southeast Asia in the 1970's according to Mr. Law Ka Ying in his television interview.[101] When permanent theaters were built, and when sound movies were introduced from the West, new productions were needed often in the cities. *Hoi sun hei*, new production, began to replace a generation of *tai kong hei*. A generation of energetic librettists/composers was in high demand for the urban theaters.

The stories of Cantonese operas were usually legends, folklore, heroic epics, romantic stories, and relations in a family, such as the struggle to keep a good wife in *Wu But Gwai*. Each story has a moral message. The moral guidelines in many operas have been valuable to society. Occasionally there are plots with unhealthy or twisted messages; these operas usually do not last long. In the days when education level was low, especially in the rural areas, opera stories served the important purpose to spread *go toi gaau fa* (teaching morality from the high stage). Opera also passed on social and historical knowledge. In an interview, singer Fong Yim Fun said, "traditional opera in China has provided Confucian moral standards and education in lieu of religious beliefs."[102] In addition, the famous performer and owner of a troupe that was continuously stationed at two theaters for more than ten years in Hong Kong, Sit Kok Seen said, "Dramas could change culture, which is a tool for social education." [103]

According to 120 Cantonese opera synopsis project that I was involved with at the Chinese University of Hong Kong's Opera Information Center, most operas follow the moral code of praising good people and punishing the bad ones. *Zong jyun* culture, that praises the valedictorian of the national civil examination, is in many of the scripts. After a young man had

[101] A renowned performer of Cantonese Opera in Hong Kong. He is from a family of performers.
[102] Fong had donated the venue as an office for Eight Harmony Guild for the Performers.
[103] B. G. Lai, *Sit ma zung hong yu gna shuirt dik dan sung* [Competition between Sit and Ma and innovations of Yuet opera] (paper presented at the International Seminar on Cantonese Opera, Hong Kong, November, 18-20, 1992), 539.

become a *zong jyun*, *bon aan*, or *tam fa*,[104] in passing the civil examination, he was praised by the family, the village, and the county. High official jobs followed, which would eventually lead to wealth and fame. Many scripts were based on a poor scholar who studied hard in order to pass the civil examination so that he could marry the girl he wanted. This would have been impossible because of his low social status. The plays also reflected the ancient Chinese value of education, even though civil examination were not offered every year, and only one person among hundreds of thousands could actually become a *zong jyun* in one examination.

Librettist/composer Tong Dik Sung is an important figure in the history of Cantonese opera. His works are still being performed fifty years after his death. His poems were beautiful, and used elegant language. He elevated Cantonese opera to a higher literary status. *Ci Tsai Gay* (The Purple Hairpin) and *Dai Nu Fa* (Princess Coeung Ping) are some of his most memorable operas. One of the small tunes in Princess Coeung Ping is known to most Cantonese, even non-opera goers. Coi Sai Hung Mui Gai (*The Reincarnation of the Red Plume*) was Tong's last opera. It is often performed and shared among other genres. It appears in other titles such as *The Red Plum, Legend of Red Plum, Li Hui-liang, Hung Mei-ge,* and *The Red Plum Chamber*. Dr. Chan S. Yan's synopsis of this opera[105] has been translated to English (see appendix I).

Competition with movies, Western or Chinese, changed opera plays from basic *gong wu sup baat boon* (Eighteen Standard Plays) and *tai kong hei* (out-line plays) to *hei yuen hei* (theater plays). Hong Kong has been a commercial center for the last century in Southeast Asia. The region looks up to Hong Kong for trends and fashion. Cantonese opera in Hong Kong has also been in leading position since the 1930s. Today, the main performance venue, the Sunbeam

[104] Accomplished rank titles in civil examination
[105] Sau Y. Chan, *Hong KongYyuet Kek kek mok cok tam*: Yum Baak Gyun [Investigation into Hong Kong Yuet Kek Titles: Yum Pak Series] (Hong Kong: The Chinese University of Hong Kong Yuet Kek Research Plan, 2005), 129-133.

Theatre in the North Point central region of Hong Kong performs mainly civil “theatre plays.” However, in local historic communities, in addition to “theater plays,” the traditional ritual playlets are performed at events such as the Festival for the Ghost, Purification for Peace, and the birthdays of deities.

Chapter Five
The Music

Cantonese opera includes singing, acting, recitation, and *kungfu* (*coeng zou lim da*). Most arias, recitatives, and oral utterances are delivered as solos and duets. Only on rare occasions do more than two characters sing or deliver a speech in one scene. The librettist of an opera receives the most credit for the texts. A successful librettist is careful to choose suitable words to fit the plot and tone of the music. He sets the text into pre-existing tune types or requests a musician to set his poem into an aria. Since sung music in Cantonese opera consists of arias and recitatives, sometimes two tune types are separated by a recitative. A librettist also writes recitatives and heightened speech. S/he knows how to modulate a passage from one tune type to another, or set a recitative that is suitable for the play.

The Arias and Recitatives

Arias are performed solo or as duets. The arias are arranged from a large pool of pre-existing tunes and new compositions. These tune types are in three main categories: *boun huang, siu kok,* and narrative songs. *Boun huang* is short form for *boun tze* and *er huang*, the main sung music used before *siu kuk* and local folk songs were introduced. *Boun tze* and *er huang* originated from other operas north of the Guangdong province. *Boun huang is* characterized by rhythm and tones determined by the natural pitch of the words. Since there are nine tones in the six-pitch Cantonese language, words delivered determine the contour of the melody. In singing *boun huang*, "Asking word for tone" (*maan zi hung horn*) is very special in the nine-tone Cantonese language.

In the composition /libretto creation process, choosing the right word for a matching tone is important. The word needs to have a natural tone that is close to the pitch in the music. Otherwise the word "sky"<*tin*^{1}> (1st tone) would sound like " field" <*tin*^{4}> in the 4th tone, if sung an octave lower. The following incident may demonstrate how tones are derived. During a visit to the Qing Wan Cantonese Opera Association of Vancouver in 2003, I heard a gentleman who is from the Four Yups[106] sing a *boun huang* in Cantonese. On the last word of the stanza, he delivered the tone one octave lower that I expected it to be. He sang the word in his native dialect. Many words in the Four Yups are lower in tone than what is spoken at the city of Guangzhou. His Cantonese diction was perfect, except for that very last word. For people who grew up in Guangzhou or Hong Kong, his one octave lower intonation provided a different meaning to the word.

Local narrative folk songs are usually formulated with certain melodic contours. They include *nam yum* (southern tune, which used to be sung by blind singers who tell stories), *mok yu,*[107] *lung zhou,*[108] and others. S*iu kuk* are made up of known melodies. *Siu kuk* includes songs set to Cantonese instrumental music, folk songs of China, Western tunes, movie theme songs, and arias specially composed for new operas. Some *siu kuk* have nametags that can be referenced. Mr. Wong Toa said that *siu kuk* started to be added to repertoire after the 1930s.[109] It was interesting for me to hear a short passage of *London Bridge is Falling Down* from a 1950 script.

---

[106] Four counties, Toi San, Hoi Ping, Yan Ping and Sun Wui, are close to each other in the Province of Guangdong and have different, but closely related Cantonese dialects.

[107] This is a popular sing-recite genre popular at the turn of the 20th century. They were available in small booklets after printing allowed mass production. Women enjoyed reading these booklets because the poems told expressed their feelings.

[108] The melody is similar in contour to *mok yu*, except they are sung around dragon boat festival time by people who beg for money. The singers carry small percussion instruments and add a few strokes after phrases end. Wong Toa gave me a demonstration by reading a *mok yu su* (*mok yu* book) in 2007.

[109] Conversation with Wong Toa

Recitatives in a Cantonese opera include speech in metrical rhythms, recitation of poems, heightened speech, and speech with a formula, which is usually recited quickly with percussion accompaniment**.** The orchestra gives cues to singer in approaching certain oral delivery. The *kwun fa* (rolling flower) style recitative is announced by the orchestra in either one of two types of short motifs. Other recitatives include *so pak lam* (counting white olives) in narrating a story, *hau goo* (*hau*-mouth, *goo*-story) and *si pak* (*si*-poem, pak-recite). Sometimes two different tune types are sung consecutively with little break, the rhythm changes suddenly, and the melody changes. This stimulates the audiences' attention.

Three beats in one measure occasionally appears in the music, but the following meters are most common in Cantonese Opera:

1. The slow rhythm (*maan ban*) – similar to the 4/4 in the western system
2. The moderate rhythm (*zong ban*)– similar to the 2/4 in the western system
3. The water rhythm (*lau seung ban*)– one beat in a measure
4. The freedom rhythm (*san ban*) – the performer has liberty to sing according to his/her wish.

Cantonese singers alternate between palms facing upward and facing downward in counting beats while practicing a song. While doing this, touching the thumb to the second finger, index finger or ring finger also expresses the number of beats in a measure.

Most songs are sung in a key with the tonic some microtones higher than concert pitch C, which is called *zing sin*,[110] and its relative dominant as tonic, the *fan sin*.[111] B-flat and F are sometimes used as tonics. Mr. Wong Toa said that professionals used to sing with C# as tonic, but lately they lowered it to C. He lamented that professionals today do not practice as much as

[110] Meaning on the line.
[111] Meaning opposite line.

those in former days. He said that most people today, especially amateurs, cannot reach ranges as high as professionals who used to reach. Modulation is sometimes employed, and it is usually a perfect fifth or perfect fourth away.

The scale in Cantonese opera is close to the Western major scale except the 4th degree is slightly higher (somewhere between F and F-sharp in C major), and the 7th degree is slightly lower (somewhere between B and B-flat). The degree of microtone deviation on the 4th and 7th is dependent upon the preference of the player and singer.[112] Because just one person plays the melody, there is no problem regarding uniformity of tone. Many *siu kuk* are actually in a Western major scale. These are the predecessors of popular Canto pop today—songs that are loved by Cantonese, Chinese, and second generation Chinese in the diasporas.

Performance Practice

Most Western voice teachers encourage students to loosen the jaws and drop the chin while singing. Hence the mouth is open horizontally, or in a "north- south" position. Cantonese opera teachers tell students to sing with good poise. They are not supposed to show the teeth. The students end up opening the mouth in an "east-west" horizontal position. The words need to be enunciated as clearly as possible. Therefore, the jaws cannot be as loose as in Western aria singing. Cantonese opera singer Yuen Siu Fai told me that the breathing method is similar to western singing. The muscle in the lower abdomen is tightened as air is expelled, but in Cantonese opera singing the rib-cage is not expanded while inhaling.[113] The process is a shallow breathing that creates a very bright sound, especially when the mouth is opened horizontally.

[112] Only one instrumentalist plays the *tau gaa* in the orchestra, and seldom do many people sing a line together simultaneously.
[113] Interview with Yuen Siu Fai in March 3rd, 2008.

The bright sound was desirable especially when microphones were not available. Just by listening to the aria, the audience knew what was said.

Unlike Italian, the Cantonese language has diphthongs. These diphthongs are nasal. Cantonese opera singers pay special attention to the diphthongs, especially the last syllable of each phrase, without which, it would have an undesirable effect. Singing Cantonese opera therefore employs a nasal resonance. To some Western opera audiences, Cantonese Opera singing may be too nasal and perhaps too "closed." After getting used to the nasal tonality, Cantonese songs and operas are a joy to listen to. Cantonese words are syllabic. Choosing a vowel that follows the word in a melisma is up to the performer. "Ah" and "ee" are commonly used. "ee" is used more often by polite woman, because "ah" sounds a bite rude in the Cantonese language.[114]

Voice types

The two most common voice types of Cantonese opera singing are the *zi hau* and the *ping hau*. Lead female role sings *zi hau* (soprano), regardless of the gender of the singer. Lead young male role sings *ping hau*, also regardless of the gender of the performer, at a lower register. *Ping hau* was introduced after microphones were used. Before the common use of microphones, male roles were sung an octave higher. By transposing the male vocals an octave lower, *ping hau*, a "young man" voice type, became closer to natural Cantonese.

Most natural tones in Cantonese are lower than those of the dialects used in predecessor operas of Cantonese opera. Women singing *ping hau* is still a common practice in theater and in singing stages. A female singer may possess more than one voice type singing ability. Sometimes, after singing a passage as a young lady with a soprano *zi hau*, the same performer

[114] Interview with Ms Chan Sau Hing who does lead female roles

can immediately switch to sing a response passage of a young man in more masculine *ping hau*. The performer is usually a female singer who can also sing in the low register. There are different schools of singing styles. A well- known performer may have impersonators who try to imitate his/her singing style and timbre. Very often the younger, or less well-known performer may establish the stage-name by adding *sun,* (meaning new), or *siu,* (meaning small) to the name of a famous performer s/he imitates. For instance, Sun Ma Tsia (New Little Ma) was stage name of an impersonator who sang in the style of the famous opera singer Ma Sze Tsang of the 1920s and 1930s. "New Little Ma" became famous and just as successful as Ma Sze Tsang.

The Orchestra

The Cantonese opera orchestra accompanies the singing in heterophony. The accompanying melody played by the orchestra is similar to the voice part, often lagging slightly behind the singing voice. Sometimes, *gaa fa* (adding flowers) ornamentation is employed. Only one person in the orchestra plays the main melodic instrument. The position of the instrumentalist is known as *tau gaa*. The *tau gaa* is either a violinist or a *goh hu* player. Very often, the person can play both instruments.

The orchestra is usually quite small. Very often, fewer than 10 people are in the ensemble, but larger ensembles do exist. The pre-Westernized instruments in an opera performance included *er hu* (a 2- stringed bowed instrument), *yanqin* (a hammered dulcimer), *pipa* (a pear shaped plucking instrument), *dizi* (flutes) in different ranges, *sor lap* (a double reed instrument with an origin in the Middle East), wood blocks, cymbals, gongs, clappers, bells, and drums. Liu Man Xing (1898-1981) used a metal string to replace a silk string in *er hu* (*er* means

two).[115] The new instrument, called the *goh hu* (*goh* means high), has a louder sound than the conventional silk string *er hu*. Pitches are extended an octave higher. The *goh hu* plays the melodic line.[116] Liu also used metal strings for the y*angqin* to give this instrument a larger volume.

During the 1930s, Western instruments such as the violin, saxophone, cello, banjo, and jazz drums were introduced to support the orchestra. Traditional orchestras lack instruments in the low register for support. The cello serves the purpose. Some traditional instruments such as the *yanqin* and the *pip*a have found their way back to the performance stages since the 1960s. Following the adoption of Western instruments of this period, equal temperament was achieved in Cantonese opera music.

Cantonese instrumental music became entertainment in Guangdong and Shanghai starting in the 1920s. The Cantonese were active in the department store business during the two decades of booming trade in Shanghai. During the 1920s and 1930s, the roof gardens of Four Large Companies [sei daai gung si] near Nanking Road in Shanghai were venues where Cantonese workers played Cantonese music. Most these stores were run by returned Cantonese emigrants from Australia and North America. Cantonese musician Liu Man Xing, who lived in Shanghai, led orchestras that played on the rooftops of department stores. He arranged old Cantonese and Chinese tunes that became Guangdong yum ngok (Cantonese instrumental music), a light instrumental music genre now played in some Chinese restaurants in North America. Melodies of this genre entered Cantonese opera in the form of *siu kuk*. Liu received a warm welcome in his native Guangdong Province. He later came to Hong Kong and helped with Cantonese Opera troupes during the Sit-Ma Competition era in the 1920s and 1930s. He was the

[115] Yum gnok guai suk[music studio] "Patzak enjoying music with you," Oi gnok yan gia sai fong [music lover going to places], http://www.bh2000.net/special/patzak/detail.php?id=2579 (access April 9, 2010)
[116] Usually the *tau gaa* plays this instrument.

most important figure in introducing Western music and Western instruments to Cantonese Opera.

Goe Tan

I cannot discuss Cantonese opera without mentioning *goe tan* (singing stage). Goe tan was the performance of opera arias, narrative songs, *siu kuk*, and popular Cantonese songs in teahouses, entertainment parks, and roof top gardens in Guangzhou. Each song or program could last as long as an hour. Singers of *goe tan* usually performed without much gesture or elaborate costumes. In the 1930s, well-known singers performed in a few different venues each evening and were booked for long periods of time. Very often, their singing techniques were better than those of opera performers because they sang a lot and did not worry about acting. They are called the *coeng gaa ban* (singing specialist). Woman singer Tsu Lau Seen had an attractive low voice (*zi hau*). One of her famous narrative song was *zoi zit coeng ting lau* (Breaking the Willow Branches Once More). It was a heart-felt tune. Cantonese radio listeners in Shanghai loved the song. One day, a DJ found the phonograph record punched through by the stylus. He had to rush out to buy a new one to continue the program. In the 1930s, Tsu and other three singers were named the *se dai ping hau* (Four Queens of *ping hau*). Her low voice is exceptionally thick and her high voice was forceful. Her singing was compared to Chinese scenic mountain and water pictures.[117]

The culture of *goe tan* has been adopted in Hong Kong. There are still *coeng gaa ban* who give concerts. In 2009, I attended the farewell concert of Zoeng Yim Hung, who had a career of singing professionally and teaching students for 50 years. Zoeng could sing both *zi hau* and *ping hau* very well, her technique is superb. Compared to theater opera performance, these

[117] Djmusicarea, "Tsu Lau Sin," by Ikl, http://www.djmusicarea.com./viewthread.php?action=printable&tid=3843 (accessed April 11, 2010).

goe tan are actually more attractive and practical to amateur singers. At their leisure, non-professional singers go to commercial singing clubs to sing for fun at a fee. Most of these people are middle-aged woman who can afford it. The singers select whatever song they would like to sing. The clubs supply the orchestra and tea. The fee charge is according to the length of the song. Women flock to clubs across the border to Shenzhen in China from Hong Kong on weekends or after work, because it is much cheaper in China. Those who can afford to sing a few arias in concerts at government or private concert halls sponsored by certain institutions or clubs, hire a profession with whom to sing duets. The woman or man who performs pays a portion of the rental fee, pays the teacher for lessons, and pays the instrumentalist for the service. These women dress in contemporary colorful, mostly western, long formal gown at the events. Some talented ones may eventually become opera singers, but most of them are amateurs. They sing opera arias and Cantonese tunes.

The *goe tan* club business is prosperous but at the same time, the continual aging of the Cantonese opera audience in Hong Kong puzzles scholars and concerned artists. One explanation is that middle-aged people are only interested in their own performance. They are satisfied with the glamour of singing on stage, wearing pretty gowns, and showing off their talent. These aficionados of the aria may not be interested in watching a three-hour opera. Indeed, with expensive housing in the high-pressure society of Hong Kong, working people seldom have the luxury to spend three hours on the opera at all.

Chapter Six
Costume, Venues, and Remnants of Red Boat Culture

As the demand for Cantonese opera reached its peak in the 1920s and 1930s, some Red Boat troupes that had worked in the estuary turned to performing at newly built modern theaters in the two large cities of Hong Kong and Guangzhou. These troupes were called the *saan kong baan*.[118] They performed and travelled between Hong Kong and Guangzhou. Because more transportation was available in the 1930s, railroad and steamboats helped to move performers between the two cities. Troupes were able to take the early morning steamboat to Hong Kong from Guangzhou and perform in the evening show. The second and third floor of some of these theaters had beds that accommodated the performers.[119] These theaters were run by enterprises that speculated on the demand of entertainment.

Cantonese opera today is elaborate in scene and costume. Enhanced with technology, most shows today are an enjoyable evening experience. In Hong Kong, there is only one commercial theater, the Sunbeam, which constantly performs (mostly Cantonese) opera. The theatre stands on a valuable piece of land in a central location. For several years the owner of the theater had tried to re-develop the site. If Hong Kong lost such a theater, there would be few stages for performing opera. Concerned citizens and performers have fought to retain the theatre.

[118] *Saan* means capital (Guangzhou was the capital of the Guangdong Province); Kong referred to Hong Kong; *ban* means troupe
[119] Interview with Wong Toa

Many *ji ceong*[120] lie in the backstage and backyard of the Sunbeam Theatre. The Red Boats were carefully designed by scholar Lau Wah Tung during the Qing dynasty. Due to inadequate room in the boat, efficient use was made of the space. Lau limited the numbers of *ji ceong* to sixteen. These rectangular boxes for costumes and props were used as beds by some staff when the boat was in motion. Even seventy years since the disappearance of Red Boats, these traditionally designed *ji ceong* are still used in the trade. *Ji ceong* are made of durable wood. The ones I saw at the theater and at Tai O ritual plays came in a few different sizes. Some look old, but still function for performers. Many are painted red, just as Wong Tao described in his book.[121] Because of crowded living conditions in Hong Kong, most performers store *ji ceong* in warehouses.[122] Before a performance, the organizer sends trucks to pick up the *ji ceong* that belong to cast members. The performer requests for his/her *ji ceong* from the warehouse by its number. A person hired to help with dressing, take care of a performer by bringing water, and iron costumes is also called a *ji ceong.*[123] Previously it was mandated that these people had to obey the designated performer they cared for.[124] It was also a rule in the trade that the person who performed the female lead role was not allowed to sit on *ji ceongs*. Today, the practice is still being followed in the trade.

Compared to other genres in China, Cantonese opera is elaborate in its costumes. Before 1920s, costumes were supplied by owner of the troupe. Some of them were old and unattractive. Since female troupe performers So Chow Miu and Lee Suet Fong began using colorful embroidered costumes, lead singers began owning private costumes to help with ticket sales and hence elevate their fame. Just the two vessels, the *sky boat* and *earth boat*, could no longer

[120] Costume boxes, *ji* means clothing *ceong* means boxes.
[121] Wong, Toa, *Hung sun time bai*, 8.
[122] The name of the performer and the box number is written on each box
[123] Today, these people are freelance.
[124] Toa Wong, *Hung sun time bai*, 21.

accommodate the many extra boxes of costumes. Therefore a *picture boat* was added to a large troupe to carry the costumes. These costumes were, and still are, very ornate, and are made of silk and satin. They are further embellished with embroidery and cloth trims, with a darker matching shade than the material to enhance the color of the costume. Recent years have seen lighter material with beautiful matching color shades such as the *sheng* and *dan* in different but matching shades of purple.

Women wear a small hair-piece that is used as bangs. The hair is adorned with shiny jewelry, flowers, and other hairpieces. A *do ma dan* (a female who does action plays) wears a few long pieces of peacock feathers; a maid, or a young girl has her hair tied in bun; and a mature woman usually has the hair covered or tied up and the hair is adorned by jewelry. A black strip of fabric as sideburn is glued to each side of a woman's face. By placing it just right, this strip helps to make the face of the performer look narrower than it is, and can be adjusted to make the face look pretty. When plastic shiny beads were imported in the past, these materials were sewn onto the costumes. A male scholar or a government official usually wears a hat with two flaps on the sides, a general wears a helmet with pheasant feathers. A warrior who has lost a battle would also have lost his helmet—so he has only his braid. When frustrated, the warrior swings his braid in circular movements. Beards of men may be in different colors and shapes depending on the role.

The make-up process of an opera character is rather complicated. White color foundation is applied first, then red rouge in different shades is applied over the white foundation to the cheeks and eyelids. To make a performer's eyes look more engaged, the eyebrows are drawn at an upward angle from the nose. Eye-liner is also used to give the eyes an upward slant. After the make-up is done, an actor or actress uses a long black piece of fabric to pull the outer corner

of the eyes upward and ties it tightly on the head to make the eyes and eyebrows look even more slanted. I shadowed actor Hung Hoi when he painted his face for a short opera excerpt in a movie (summer, 2008). He spent more than an hour just painting his face by using a Peking opera face mask in a picture as model (the character was from *Ba wong bi gei* –Farewell my Concubine). To remove the make-up, he used baby oil.

Figure 6. Mr. Hung Hoi starts painting.[125]

Figure 7. Painting of his face is complete. Beard is to be worn on his chin.[126]

Dancing seldom appears in Cantonese opera, but movement is carefully choreographed. In a *wu* plays, the *kungfu* and fighting movements are organized precisely and meticulously. In a *wan* play, the movements, especially of a *fa dan*, should be as elegant as possible. For instance, the walking pace should be light, the moving of hands should allow for some fingers to bend, and all movements should be slow. The *sheng* usually wears high white platform boots.

Traditional arranged scenes (*pai cheung*) are the precious legacy of previous generations. *Pai cheung* is a scene, an excerpt of a play. Each *pai cheung* has standardized percussion, tune

[125] Picture taken by the writer.
[126] Ibid.

type, and *kuk pei,*[127] acrobatic performance, characters, psychological profile, and unfolding of events. These are modules for forming an opera. Using these basic modules, performers can easily assemble *tai gon hei*, out-line plays.[128] *Pai cheung* may be performed as a scene of a play, or used as a fundamental play module for directors, performers, and script writers. Some old performers remember as many as 300 *pai cheung*. The Cantonese traditional art survey in 1961 documented 142 *pai cheung*. Among them 54 were *wan pai cheung*, 81 were *wu pai cheng*, and 7 *chow* (funny play) *pai cheung.*[129] Examples of *wu pai cheung* included "Fighting the Tiger" and "Fighting in the dark," while *wan pai cheung* included "Teaching Son," "Reading Letter from Home," and "First Night after Wedding."

Influenced by the northern performer Zhang Wu, early Cantonese opera have role types similar to Han and other opera genres that divide the types into ten categories.[130] In the 1930s, the roles were narrowed to six. Today, there are four main types: the *dan*, the *sheng*, the *chou* and the *jing*. A *dan* is a woman's role. A beautiful main character is called a *fa dan*, meaning flower *dan*. An old woman is called a *lao dan*, meaning old woman. A heroine who can master martial arts is called a *do ma dan*, ("do" means knife and "ma" means horse). A *sheng* is a male role. A young scholar or young man is a *sheng*. An old man is a *lao sheng*. A scholar or young man who can also master martial arts is a *wan wu sheng.* A *chou* is a clown who usually has a white mark on around his nose. He is a humorous character. A *jing* is a painted face. The color and style of painting indicates his character. Usually, a performer specializes in one or two of these stock roles. Kunju and Peking Opera are predecessors of Cantonese Opera. With the rapid economic growth in the Pearl River Triangle, Cantonese Opera expended, especially between

[127] Name tag of a tune type
[128] Wong, Toa, *Yuet kek* [Yuetju] (Vancouver: Wong Toa Publishing. 2002), 22-29.
[129] Ibid.
[130] Wong, Toa, 15.

1911 and 1949. Audiences are no longer content with florid singing; they also want to watch pretty faces, elaborately decorated stages, and pretty costumes.

Interview with Mr. Yuen Siu Fai

Mr. Yuen Siu Fai is a renowned performer of Cantonese opera in Hong Kong. A disciple of Red Boat performers, and a disciple of Pear Garden, he is well known for his dedication to preserving the opera. Mr. Yuen was one of the few people in Hong Kong who could shed light on Red Boat Troupes because he had been a disciple of a few performers who had "slept in *hung sun*." He is a "*hung fu zi,*"[131] that is, he has been trained in the opera from a young age. He is an exceptional performer who does not mind doing different roles, which include a *sheng*, a *lao dan* or a *chou.* I have watched Mr. Yuen in many Cantonese Operas. His acting skill as a handsome scholar is superb, yet his roles as clowns (*chou*) in both *Yin guai yan mei guai* (*Swallow has Returned, where my Love*) and *Fung gok yan sau mei liu cing* (The *Phoenix Pavilion*), were highlights of each play. In Cantonese opera, only clowns, among other stock roles, can add short impromptu speech in conversations. Mr. Yuen's skilful way of adding current news and slang made people laugh to tears for the next few days.

I called the staff at the Eight Harmony Guild for the Performers for help to arrange an interview with Mr. Yuen. I was very grateful for Mr. Yuen's prompt reply and acceptance of the interview in just a few days. It was an honour to talk with him. The interview was held in the office of Eight Harmony Guild for the Performers on March 3, 2008. I had watched "Phoenix Pavilion" several times, before the show that was arranged by a Cantonese opera class at the beginning. Midway through the show, I was astonished to read from the synopsis that Mr. Yuen had the role of the old lady, Lady Ha. The movement, the voice, the singing, and the recitative,

[131] Red trousers; an apprentice wears a pair of red trousers.

all were indicative of an old lady. I mentioned to Mr. Yuen how surprised I was that he took the old lady stock role. Mr. Yuen's answer was simple: In order to put the show on stage, somebody needed to do roles when no other performer was available. I applaud a performer who did not mind how he looked, and whose goal was to make the performance possible and preserve history. At the time of the interview Mr. Yuen was scheduled to perform a new production about the librettist Kwan Hon Hing of *Yuen Jept Kek*. Based on a Kwunju, the script was organized by Mr. Yuen. The opera was to premier in the next few days.

Figure 8. Mr. Yuen Siu Fai and the author. Picture taken at the Eight Harmony Guild for the Performers in Hong Kong at the interview in 2008.

Following is the interview I conducted with Mr. Yuen in Hong Kong in 2008

Ling: Mr Yuen, please let me know what you have learned about Red Boat Troupes from your *si fu* (teachers) or anyone from the performance industry.

Yuen: The Northern performer Zhang Ngh who came to Da Gai May of Foshan is the only human that is venerated by the performance industry. Other figures are god of plays, god of fire etc. Zhang Ngh trained many Cantonese performers, he became blind at old age. In memory of his hard work for the industry, no one on the Red Boats poured water on the deck [so that a blind person would not slip]. Much of the culture of the Red Boat troupe was carried to the opera

performing industry when I was young. I remember round wooden trays about 2 feet in diameter with two long pieces of wood to station and align wood pieces together. Each tray had a hole in the middle for stacking the trays together in the crowded boat when they are not in use. The tray was used to carry dishes and bowls of rice. Usually one tray with two dishes was served to a party of six apprentices, musicians or performers. The trays were placed on the floor instead of on the *ji coeng* (boxes for costumes) so that the food did not make the costumes dirty. People eat while squatting on the ground; it is not elegant for other people to see, but the practice lasted until the 1960s.
The food was usually not much to distribute among 6 people. Besides the good quality rice, usually two dishes and one salty dish were served. The salty dish enhances the flavour of rice so that the young and active performers could stay full if food were not enough for these people. Rice was ample, and is usually in good quality because those lead performers who could afford to pay the cooks to make extra food usually wanted good rice for the meal.

Ling: I heard from Mr. Wong Toa that singers in the earlier days sang at higher register.

Yuen: After moving to indoor performance, performing at higher pitches to be heard better was no longer necessary. Singers are singing 2 to 3 semi-tones lower. With the availability of microphones, performers now sing with the assistance of the device. Performers no longer need to strive to practice volume as it used to be.

Ling: Do you know when *harm seu gor*[132] songs become popular?

Yuen: Probably after the Republic of China was established [1911]. Before that time, opera performances were *oi gong ban* [Non-Pearl Troupes].

Ling: What were some common traditional plays you learned as an apprentice?

Yuen: Plays like *San Tung Huang Ma* and *Ping Gua Bi Yiu*. At the time of being an apprentice, I hardly think other than what *si fu* taught—just learned whatever was trained.

Ling: I admire your effort in arranging teaching material and preservation of the art, and I knew that you and Dr. Sau Y. Chan had spent tremendous time to design teaching material for Hong Kong schools.

Yuen: I had discussed with Dr. Chan that performance and research should come hand in hand.

Ling: Do you think that there were both female and male performers on Red Boats?

Yuen: I think there were just male performers, we will have to verify that.[133] Male performers did the *dan* (female role).

[132] Narrative songs of the fisherman, the *Dan Gaa.* The boats were their permanent homes.
[133] I called Mr. Wong Toa after the interview, he confirmed Mr.Yuen's statement that there were just men on the all-male troupes.

Ling: I read that the duties of members of the staff in a Red Boat were well defined. What have you heard about?

Yuen: A *hungn gong* (*hung*- walking, *gong*-river) is a sailor, whose duty is to watch for water current and weather.

Ling: How did you get to become a performer?

Yuen: I came from a family of many children. The family economic situation was going down. My mother enrolled me in a competition, and I successfully got in a movie company at recruitment.

Ling: I went to see the star performance of Guangzhou performers in 2004 and found that they sing differently from the Hong Kong performers. Their singing was closer to the western *bel canto* singing style, more so for the singing of men.

Yuen: The Hong Kong singing style has retained the original breathing and delivering technique. Most performers from Guangzhou were trained at government training schools where they believed Western breathing technique with rib cage expansion is best. Traditional Cantonese opera singing does not expend the rib cage. The training in China has made Cantonese opera singing lose the tradition.

Ling: Cantonese opera is considered the most representative art of Hong Kong. There has been issue of preserving the Sunbeam Theatre in Hong Kong, the only performing hall that is dedicated to the performance.

Yuen: Preserving the theatre arouses the public's awareness on the respect of Cantonese opera. The allocation of revenue by the government of Hong Kong in the new West Kowloon large project had shown uneven distribution. The government belittled the development of Cantonese opera by putting much less money into its development than into Western arts.

Ling: What is most important for raising the standard of Cantonese opera?

Yuen: The respect of the art and the understanding of the art.

Ling: Thank you very much. Your help has been very important for the history of the opera.

Chapter Seven
Hong Kong— Social Issues that Influence Cantonese Opera

I will attempt to examine some social issues, particularly those regarding gender and class associated with Cantonese opera in Hong Kong. Just like Hong Kong set fashion trends for Guangdong, Hong Kong Cantonese opera set the standard for Guangdong, South East Asia, and other parts of the world. Hopefully some findings of this study in Hong Kong will shed light on problems that have hindered the progress of this sophisticated art.

In the last one hundred years, Chinese have gradually attained equal treatment in Hong Kong. Private clubs used to discourage the Chinese from joining by requiring new recruits to be sponsored by a few existing members. Ethnic Chinese were prohibited from living above the mid-level on the mountainous Hong Kong Island before the intervention of Sir Ho Tung (1862-1956). Ho, of mixed Chinese and Dutch heritage began his work for the British company, Jardine Matheson, as a translator. He soon became a high level Chinese manager in the company. In 1906, Ho was successfully granted permission to live in the Mid-level on the Hong Kong Island by the Executive Council and governor of Hong Kong.[134] He soon quit the job at Jardine Matheson, started his own business, and became the richest Chinese in Hong Kong. The Ho Tung Garden where his estate is situated hosted Irish writer George Bernard Shaw. The cool and spectacular view that faces the South China Sea and Victoria Harbor used to house only the British and non-Chinese. The coastal area facing the Victoria Harbor and below the Mid-level were crowded streets and living quarters for ethnic Chinese. Some theaters were built on the slopes below the mid-level in the first few decades of the 20th century.

[134] http://baidu.com/view/88146.htm, accessed Mar. 6, 2010.

Following Ho's success, a class of *go dun wa jan* (high class Chinese) soon appeared. They included salesmen for the British firms, professional lawyers, physicians, and businessmen. They attended horse races, became horse owners at the Jockey Club, attended Western concerts, frequented receptions in high class hotels, and ate Western and Cantonese dishes in expensive restaurants, just like the British citizens living in Hong Kong. These families were highly influenced by the British culture. Some sent their children to study in England. When these children returned, they became lawyers and doctors. Listening to Western opera and orchestral music on phonograph records were home entertainment for some of these "high class Chinese." They purchased homes at the Mid-level on Robinson Road, Bonham Road, and Caine Road along the coastal line. Below Caine Road, lay two "modern theatres:" the Tai Ping and the Go Sing Theaters built between 1921 and 1924.[135]

Before 1933, mixed gender performances were prohibited. Lawyer Lo Man Gum petitioned with success in lifting the prohibition. His reasoned that since men and women could watch opera at the same time, although on separate sides of the theater, why not act on the same stage?[136] Subsequently, the Tai Ping and Go Sing Theaters became venues for two rival troupes: the Tai Ping Kek Tyun (a mixed gender troupe), ran by Ma Si Tsang, stationed at the Tai Ping Theatre, and Got Seen Sing Men and Women Troupe, ran by Sit Got Seen, stationed at the Go Sing Theater. For the next nine years, Sit and Ma competed for ticket bookings in Hong Kong and at their sister theaters in Kowloon (Tai Ping with Tung Lok and Go Sing with Po Hing). A new production would be staged on the Tai Ping for two weeks and then move to the sister theater for the next two weeks then return for a performance in the Hong Kong theater.

---

[135] Sau Y. Chan, *Hong Kong Yuet Kek Koi Syut*: 1900-2002 [Synopses of Hong Kong Cantonese Opera: 1900-2002] (Hong Kong: The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2007), iii.

[136] Zi Pang,Wan, "Yuet kek nu ban zi zor tam" [A preliminary investigation to the women troupe of Yuet Kek] (paper presented at the International Seminar on Cantonese Opera, Hong Kong, November 18-20, 1992), 379.

To attract spectators, Sit and Ma hired script-writers to continuously produce new materials. Western instruments such as the saxophone, violin, cello, jazz drum, and guitar were also introduced into the orchestra. Wong Toa, who had been an apprentice in the Red Boat, was hired as a musician playing *je wu* (a string instrument) in the Ma's Tai Ping Troupe. He recalled *fa dan* Tam Lan Hing (1908-1981) was called *siu kuk wong* (queen of *siu kuk*). [137] Many new songs were composed for Tam to sing in the new productions. Wong also remembered the night audience loudly demanded its money back for tickets paid when jazz drums replaced the Chinese drums, and when other Western instruments were used in the opera.[138] The Japanese occupation in 1941 did not stop staging these operas. In fact, the Japanese encouraged entertainment in order to promote a peaceful atmosphere. Because of fear of being used as tools for propaganda of the Japanese, both Sit and Ma fled to China from Hong Kong.

All-female troupes in Cantonese opera started in the first decade of 1910s after the Republic was born. The 1920s and 30s were flourishing years for these all-female troupes. As audiences accepted these troupes, many women became famous. The Four Main Female Troupes were among the many female troupes. Department store roof gardens, such as the Dai Sun Department Store in Guangzhou, were venues for performances; some could accommodate over a thousand people.[139] Yum Gim Fai and Tam Lan Hing performed on these roof gardens. One reason for the flourishing of female troupes was their novelty. People had been watching male performers before female troupes started. Females were better at expressing feelings and their fresh and pretty looks were accepted by people, especially male audiences. The Tai Ping

[137] Tam was a comedian in many movies the 1950s
[138] Telephone interview March 2, 2010.
[139] Wan, 376.

Theater manager said that four male troupes were not as good as one female troupe [from a business point of view].[140]

My grandmother was a good source of information regarding social issues. Like many other people who left China, my grandmother came to Hong Kong to attend a wedding in 1949 and did not return until after President Nixon went to China in 1972.[141] Grandma loved to tell stories when I was in bed. The stories, as I later found out, were all from opera; she loves opera. She said that her family would buy a *zong* (bed), meaning packaged tickets for a few people to sit on. I later found out that it is a *gua fei zong* (concubine bed) that can accommodate about four to five people. It is a bench like a Western day-bed, which has only one longer side open without a frame. Well-to-do foot-bound ladies were carried on backs of servants to the performance halls (poor women did not have their feet bound). Relatives, serfs, and servants sat on the "bed" to watch opera performance when Troupes came to the otherwise quiet town. My father saw the Red Boats when he was a child. He still called the red boats that park at the docks *dai hung sun* (big red boats). Father said that a make-shift big hall in his village was built on the part of the beach normally used for drying fish and laying out fishing nets. I could imagine

[140] Ibid., 372.

[141] My paternal grandmother was born in the estuary in 1892 during the Qing Dynasty. She received three months of formal education, but she was able to read newspaper and letters sent to her by relatives. In those days, there was a saying, "women without talent are good women." A good wife should not receive much education. My grandmother learned to read through *mok yu shu* (wooden fish books), a popular narrative song genre in her days. Volumes of printed poems may be read and recite softly in certain melodic and rhythmic contour. When she was a teenager, she was once travelled with girl friends and girl cousins by foot. They went into a tea house for dim sum when they got tired, only to be seen by an older male cousin. The girls were admonished by the family when they returned home. Girls in the Qing Dynasty were not supposed to go to public places.
She was married to my grandfather at the age of nineteen in the year the Chinese Republic was established. Grandfather had his braid cut. Grandma had ceased the foot-bounding turmoil long before that, about the age of seven. She told me that it was Dr Sun Yat Sen who advocated stopping the inhumane practice and 'released' her feet; otherwise the front part of her feet would be bent. Unlike the older ladies who had "successfully" gone through the entire foot bounding process, her feet look normal, except for the size. They grew to the size of an eight-year-old. With a tradition to wear a new pair of shoes on New Year day to "step on the bad people," I remember accompanying her into numerous shoe-stores on Nathan Road before New Year in Hong Kong looking for adult style that fitted her, a non-Mary-Jane type that did not look like a pair of child shoes. It was challenging.

women looking forward to troupes coming to town, and the excitement of children seeing "big red boats" and buying colorful ice from hawkers. The docks suddenly became busy with two to three big red boats, service boats, small sampans carrying audiences from other towns and villages, the gongs, the drums, the orchestra, the opera singing, the colorful costumes, and the acrobatic *kungfu* shows that lasted until dawn. Women went to watch other plays during the three to five performing days. How those foot-bound ladies looked forward to Red Boat Troupes in town!

Hong Kong was flooded with people fleeing China in the 1950s and 1960s. Most people lived in a crowded environment. Life was not easy for most new immigrants. Opera performers from Guangdong came to Hong Kong too. Besides the stage, these actors found a new venue to perform and make a living—they became movie stars. Demand for staging opera was cut by the three year and eight month Japanese occupation of Hong Kong in December 1941. After WWII, movies became a great pastime for most people, and the mass-produced Cantonese films in Hong Kong served the purpose. The ticket price in Hong Kong had been very stable until the late 1960s. For the price of a bottle of Coca-Cola, a person could buy a ticket to enjoy movies for one and a half hours in an air-conditioned theatre. Not all shows were cheap, only the noon shows and the after-work shows, but they were still affordable.

Grandma loved those opera movies. My siblings and I stopped following her to watch Cantonese opera movies in the cinema when we were in grade school. We thought that those opera movies were backward and not "cool"; they belonged to grandmas, old ladies, and old men. Elvis, Rolling Stones, and Beatles were the idols in the colony during the 1960s. Young people, especially those who went to "English schools" disassociated themselves from the "low class" and "backward" Cantonese opera. Playing guitar was considered "cool;" singing in the

school choir, playing in the brass band, or string orchestra were acceptable activities in the eyes of students. Many "English schools" were Catholic schools run by priests and nuns from Western countries, or those who had been trained in foreign countries. "Chinese schools" leaned on Confucianism and on the Chinese moral and education system. Since Hong Kong has become a British colony in 1842, a person's social status, and hence, wealth, seemed directly related to his/her English speaking and reading ability. Although "Chinese school" students were considered of inferior social class in the eyes of their "English school" counterparts, listening to Western pop music was still the trend for these students.

Most teenagers would not admit that they like Cantonese opera, even if they did, because parents or grandparents listened to the phonograph records. They refrained from telling their friends; otherwise they would be teased. If they wanted to sing an aria, they only did it in the shower, or at home. In my high school years, when friends called, grandma would tell them on the phone that I had gone to *coeng je* (singing stuff) when I was at the high school choir rehearsal. My friends later told me how they laughed after hanging up the phone. In her days living in the estuary, grandma had heard blind women and men singing on the street, low class music for donations to buy food. She also heard opera in the performance halls, but no Western choir singing. There was just no vocabulary with which she could describe choir practice except for what had commonly been used in her village that referred to low class musical performance, *coeng je*. My singing activity is still called *coeng je* by family members for fun.

Many performers continued to sing opera as well as take part in the movie industry after WWII in Hong Kong. One of the most successful *fa dan* was Fong Yim Fun in the early 1950s. Under her leadership, many new operas were premiered between 1954 and 1956.[142] Tong Dik Sung (1917-1959) wrote librettos for her productions before Fong left the stage to get married.

[142] Sau Y. Chan, *Hong Kong Yuet Kek koi syut: 1900-2002*, v.

After his teacher 13th Son of Nam Hoi, Tong Dik Sung became the most talented librettist/script writer of the 1950s, as well as in the history of Cantonese opera. Both 13th Son of Nam Hoi and Tong were highly educated. Tong's plays were elegant and contained many unforgettable *siu kuk* that are the most selected plays among other scripts. Despite his short career, his contribution to Cantonese opera is unmatched.

Following in the footsteps of his teacher the 13th Son of Nan Hoi, Tong used elegant language and got rid of vulgar elements. Both teacher and student realized that the audience's average level of education had advanced. Tong also gave young lead-female and lead supporting female roles more chances to perform and display their capabilities. He wrote scripts for *Seen Fung Ming Kek Tung*,[143] whose lead- roles were performed by Yum Kim Fai (1913-1989) and Baak Shuet Seen (b. 1928), both female performers. Yum always took the lead- male role. With the cooperation of other well-known performers, Seen Fung Ming was very successful. Nine premieres[144] were made including Tong's last one, the *The Re-incarnation of the Red Plum*[145] (see appendix I for synopsis). Baak and Yum continued to train students, many of whom became successful performers. Baak and Yum were respected because of their perseverance, persistence, and hard work. Female performers were important in helping the Cantonese opera industry survive in the absence of government support. Baak and Yum used their money to stage shows of uncertain return and dedicated themselves to train students, setting up a new troupe for their students. Together with Fong Yim Fan, who donated a flat for the Eight Harmony Guild for performers in central Kowloon as a permanent home for the performers, they were important in the continuation of Cantonese opera when Guangzhou was under the Cultural Revolution.

[143] Seen Fung Ming Kek Tung is a performance troupe.
[144] Sau Y. Chan, *Hong Kong Yuet Kek koi syut: 1900-2002,* vi.
[145] The story is also named *Legend of Red Plum*, *Li Hui-liang*, *Hung Mei-ge,* or *Cabinet of Red Plum* in other opera genres.

These women were important figures in helping Cantonese opera and performers through difficult times to maintain production and assist the survival of performers.

A decrease in young clientele, competition with Hollywood and British movies, Kwok Yu movies (Mandarin, or Putonghua movies), Westernization, lack of support from government, and general lack of respect, were some reasons for the decline in Cantonese opera audience. Survival in the commercial and industrialized metropolis was difficult. Most men had little time for opera. Scripts turned to more civil plays than had been the case in the previous years.[146] Opera patrons since the 1950s have been mostly elderly men and women, housewives, female servants, and children who followed adults to the shows. Most people who went to operas did not know much Putonghua (mandarin) or English, and were traditional Chinese. It was amazing that in those years, people who knew Putonghua and English had little desire for the opera.

Female servants made up a certain percentage of the audience, through either going to shows with their employers or taking advantage of free rituals in the communities. Many of these servants called *gu por*, were women who had chosen not to get married after becoming mature. They were probably the most independent group of women. After a ritual of tying up her hair as a witness to her new roommates, the woman started living with her "sisters." The sisters took care of each other until the end of their lives. These women found work raising silkworms, and doing embroidery in the three counties— Nam Hoi, Pun Yu, and Shun Tak— close to Guangzhou. These counties were prosperous before WWII, so finding work and making a living was not difficult. In the early 1950s, many *gu por* went to Hong Kong and served as domestic servants. They wore white traditional tops, black trousers, and braids that hang to the waist. Modernism did not seem to change much of their life style. Some factory women workers were aficionados of opera too. Plastic, toy, and wig factories were the first factories that

[146] Action plays were enjoyed by men and civil plays by women.

made up new industries in the 1960s, followed by the garment industry in the 1970s. Some employees were middle aged women, and others were young women whose education was interrupted by poverty. These women were consumers of opera and opera films, especially films with the factory as a backdrop. Chan Po Chu, the young movie star who was in may factory background movies in the 1960s, was their idol.

Many movies were made in the 1950s and 1960s. Yum Gim Fai, the female who played male- roles was in several hundred movies. Audience loved her posing as a young scholar. Because of her singing technique, she was an imaginary male sweetheart for many women who worked as domestic servants. Ms. Tse Suet Sum (b. 1953), who was Yum and Baak Shuet Seen's "in-house disciple,"[147] recalled going to their living quarter after school each day for training from she was about 11. Each day's practice would last until dark. Tse became a prominent *fa dan* but when Baak and Yum did not want her to get married, her studies from the two masters stopped. Tse performed again after her daughter was a few years old as a *fa dan* by singing *zi hou*. After Yum died in 1989, Tse switched to take the male-role by singing *ping hao*. To Tse, the change was economically unwise because she had to learn the moves and singing in addition to buying different kinds of shoes and costume herself.[148] She did not speak about her motivation in the past, but after more than a decade she broke her silence by saying that it was because of her teacher Yum. Tse wished to pay her *si fu* (teacher) respect and perform what Yum had done. I asked what she had in mind every time she was about to play the male-role. She said, "Once the procedure of *laak je*[149] is done, my mood is ready for the sex change, and I

[147] An 'in house disciple' is a student who is recognized by the teacher as having potential to become a performer. These students are trained seriously for a long period of time. Usually a ritual initiates the close rapport relationship. These students are different from those who pay the teacher for hourly instructions.
[148] Since some Red Boat performers start owning their costume to elevate their status, it has become a practice in Cantonese opera performance.
[149] Using a long piece of long cloth to tie the skin of forehead in order to make the eyes looks bigger and more engaged.

would think about my teacher Yum." I asked her to explain the major differences between playing man and woman. She said that the make-up process and the costume were very different. Having a padded shoulder made her feel more like a handsome literate scholar. She continued, "Voice, look, and art technique" (*sing sik ngai*) are what determine the quality of performance; hard work is the most important."[150] Tse is a famous television star of TVB. She appeared in sequels and has had frequent lead-roles in Cantonese opera.

Figure 9. Ms Tse Suet Sum at the concert "Opera of Two Worlds."

Prior to the establishment of the Republic in 1911, most opera performance troupes were all-male troupes. In these performances, almost all female roles were played by men. Except for a few all-female troupes whose *ban zyu* (owner) was female, performers on the red boats were all male. Learning women's gait in movement, singing, and putting on make-up and dressing were the main concerns of these cross-gender apprentices. Mr. Mei Lan Fan, a well-known female role player who performed in New York, Chicago, and San Francisco in prewar time, was a

[150] Telephone interview March 4, 2010.

Peking opera *fa dan* (leading female role). Perhaps it is the aesthetic and training that made Mei and others women.

Male singers who play leading woman roles are increasingly rare in Chinese Opera today.[151] Women opera singers cross-dressing as male-leads are widely accepted, with female stars such as Yam Kim Fai. But men playing women seems difficult to accept. Paris Wong (b. 1981) is a man who performs as a woman. Wong's desire to enroll as a student singing z*i hau* in an art school as a cross-gender actor/singer was denied. His mother was embarrassed by his performance as a woman. But Wong was undaunted and continued to perform and teach students. He said that he had to "follow his heart to excel in art."[152] Wong describes Chinese opera as a formulaic art. Each character, either a *dan* or *sheng*, has to follow set patterns. A performer's gender is less important than her mastery of theatrical gestures, recitative, and singing skill, "Even if you are a woman, it doesn't mean you can play a female part on stage. I hope one day audiences can understand more about *namdan*[153] through my performances."
I asked Wong the question as I had asked Ms. Tse Suet Sum, who played male roles: what did he have in mind when he was about to play the female role? "I have more feeling of 'acting' than when I play a male-role. As a *namdan*, I am more concerned with aesthetics of my singing. I have to renew the recognition of myself as a female." I asked Wong why women playing men was so acceptable in Cantonese opera today while there was ambiguity with women playing men in Purcell and Mozart's operas. He said,

> Unlike Western culture, in Chinese women's mind, a desirable man needs to be one who understands woman, a character that is not as macho as in the Western woman's mind. A scholar who is gentle and calm is the ideal man in Chinese female audience. The character of Fai Yu, the male court student is gentle and often being lead to places by Li Wai Leung, a woman strong in mind and weak in appearance in the *Reincarnation of the*

[151] Males still play old lady-roles in recent productions, not many women want to play the old lady roles.
[152] Kit Wai Lau, "Return to Gender," *South China Morning Post*, June 2, 2009, Life section, Hong Kong edition. .
[153] N*amdan* is a man who plays young female roles.

Red Plum (see appendix I). A soft appearance and strong interior is regarded as most desirable in a traditional Chinese woman. Having women playing men is quite suitable in Chinese love stories… I have always loved women literature. Lee Ching Giu and Lau Wing's poems that deal with *fung fa suet yuet* [wind, flower, snow and moon], have always been my preference in literature.[154]

Figure 10. Mr. Paris Wong (center) with his voice students on both sides.

Figure 11. Left to right: the author, Ms. Cheung Manshan (Executive manager of the Opera Information Center at the Chinese University of Hong Kong), and Mr. Paris Wong at the Kunju and Cantonese Opera Cultural Exchange Dinner organized by Mr. Wong and his opera group.

[154] Telephone interview March 4, 2010.

Selecting virtues of a few male friends from the perspective of a female performer, and combining them to create the character she performs may be one privilege of a female who plays men. Male performers might not be as observant as women in playing same sex roles.

I was surprised to find many of the 120 Cantonese synopses I participated in translating and editing in corporation with the Opera Information Center at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, used *zong jyu*n culture as a theme.[155] An ideal man, in the heart of many Chinese women, is a gentle, understanding, and not so macho scholar. Wearing a long gown with padded shoulders, hats and platform shoes, a handsome young man appears in the body of a woman. Women playing man is ideal in singing duet with a *fa dan.* It is not only acceptable; it is a trend. In non-professional singing clubs, two women can have fun singing in an afternoon or after work. When there were no microphones, Chinese opera singers used high pitch to make the voice audible. Today, most performers use microphones. When the range becomes uncomfortable, a performer can raise a passage an octave higher (or lower) to a comfortable tessitura, at her discretion.

With more movie production after WWII in Hong Kong, Taiwan, China, the United Kingdom, and the United States, Cantonese opera was at its low time in the 1950s and 60s. After the 1970s, there seemed to be a re-birth of Cantonese opera in Hong Kong. Since then opera in Hong Kong has been developing steadily. The relaxation of travelling policy in China in the 1980s facilitated more cultural exchanges between artists in Hong Kong and China. A typical Cantonese opera today has little *kungfu*. More emphasis is on singing. *Wan* plays dominate the stage. The orchestral sound is more balanced than before so as to accommodate the performance venues;

[155] http://corp.mus.cuhk.edu.hk/corp/trans/content.html

costumes are beautifully matched in color, and sceneries are beautifully and elegantly decorated. Many clubs have been established for amateurs to practice the art form.

Chapter Eight
China and Vancouver

Many opera performers went to Hong Kong and became citizens after 1949. Others stayed in China. The development of Cantonese opera in Hong Kong and China went in different directions. After the 1960s, many citizens of Hong Kong migrated to different parts of the world. Attracted by the nice weather, scenic view of the Rockies and the Pacific Ocean and an established Chinatown, some left Hong Kong for Vancouver, Canada.

China

The development of Cantonese opera in China after 1949 was relatively conservative in comparison to its progress in Hong Kong. The opera was supported by the Chinese government at the beginning. But in communist China, production and training was directed by the ideology of the country. The development of the opera in Guangzhou went through rigid control, especially during the Cultural Revolution. Mao's wife Gong Qing pointed out that the tenets of Cantonese Opera were not suitable for the Revolution. Since the 1980s, with the relaxation of the ban and the death of Mao, more exchange has allowed performers from Mainland China to absorb new technologies from Hong Kong. Performances in China caught up very quickly. Guangzhou has had government run training institutions since the 1950s, which allowed better technical training for students. They had an advantage, in this respect, over their counterparts in Hong Kong. In contrast, Hong Kong benefitted from new staging technologies from the West, and wealth in Hong Kong allowed the development of more audience friendly and glamorous

stages. The exchange, after a separation of more than three decade, was a happy reunion. The marriage was a friendly overture for other future economic and business cooperation.

Red Thread Lady (Hung Sin Neoi, b. 1927) was one of the best-known female singers in the 1940s and 1950s. She left Hong Kong in 1955 for China. She had lead-roles in 70 movies and 200 opera plays.[156] Now in her 80s, she is still very active in teaching students. Her dedication to art is highly praised in China and overseas. Her 2009 tour to Hong Kong promoted a Cantonese opera Cartoon, *Sassy Princess and Her Husband*. In her seminar, she said that she would not do anything that is not related to improving her singing skills. She never stopped learning. Besides learning singing from Peking opera performer Mui Lang Fong, she studied body movement and water sleeve from Yu Chung Fai, and Western Opera from Chow Siu Yin. Because of her influence, Cantonese opera singers from China has a higher placement for resonance, which leans more to the Western *bel canto* singing style than their Hong Kong counterparts.

Vancouver

My trip to Vancouver in the summer of 2003 included visits to a few Cantonese opera singing activities in the city. Vancouver is a city populated with Cantonese people. It has a long history with Cantonese immigrants dating from the 1800s. The return of Hong Kong to China in 1997 prompted people to immigrate to Canada. For many of them, Vancouver was the first port of entry. Many stayed there because of the mild weather and beautiful scenery.

I visited an opera institution in Richmond, a suburb in the Greater Vancouver Area. It was set up by a professional instrumentalist who had been trained in Guangzhou. He plays the

[156] Hifitrack.com. "Hung Sin Neoi," Music Powerhouse Company. http://www.hifitrack.com/zh-hant/node/2561 (accessed April 11, 2010).

violin, the *koh hu*, and he also trains singers. The institution was on the second floor of a small shopping center. The two rooms in the institution included a reception area with many chairs for people to wait and watch the singing activities inside the performance room with an elevated stage. A glass door and glass wall separated the two rooms. One blind musician played *dizi*s of different ranges, and another professional musician played the *yangqin.* The owner of the institution played the violin on the day I visited. A percussionist played in a semi-separate area.

Cantonese opera songs were passions for Cantonese people, especially those new immigrants who were adjusting to life in a foreign country. On a regular afternoon, people wishing to sing signed up and waited in the reception room. Depending on whether a person wanted instruction or not, the institute charged singers different rates. The rates were also based on the length of the song in minutes. I attended a performance by students of this institution a few evenings later. They performed arias from different operas. I was told that a non-professional (usually a lady) spent a lot of money in order to perform. She had to pay a portion of the rental expense of the performance hall, pay for her costume, and sometimes she had to pay for a professional to accompany her in singing a duet. The performance style of the singers perhaps could be considered a modern practice of Cantonese opera.

On a Sunday afternoon I also visited a club established by people of a common last name –Chan. The Chan Club was a non-profit institution established in the 1930s. It was situated on a second floor on the busy Pander Street of Chinatown. Most musicians who attended were non-professionals and majority of them were over 55 years old. Those who wished to sing signed up when they arrived. The activities ended at 5:00 p.m. sharp, and those who were not able to sing were disappointed. Each singer paid five Canadian dollars to sing (singers prefer longer songs). The money was used for snacks. These people were mostly working class and many of them had

been in Canada for several decades. Their repertoire was in the vein of 1950s China and was traditional compared to the professional from Guangzhou in the aforementioned Richmond club. I also visited a retired couple who had converted their basement into a studio to teach Cantonese Opera to students for free. Mr. Chan played the *yanqin* and Mrs. Chan played all the percussion instruments. What a fun way for them to enjoy their golden years! Mr. Chan is also a librettist/composer who has sent several compositions to me over the last few years. Both Mr. and Mrs. Chan are members of the Qing Wan Music Association, which was established prior to WWII.

Figure 12. Amateur singers at the Qing Wan Music Association in Vancouver.

Figure 13. Mr. C. Chan at the Qing Wan Music Association in Vancouver.

There seemed to be two groups of amateur singers in Vancouver: those who went to Vancouver before the 1980s were working class immigrants who sung old repertoire and *boun huang* and those who came after the 1980s were upper middle class and left Hong Kong because of the 1997's political uncertainties. Many husbands of the newer immigrant families returned to Hong Kong to work, leaving their wives and children in Vancouver. Women of this class enjoyed singing from the newer repertoire, such as *siu kuk* from Tong Dik Sung's operas.

An Interview with Mr Wong Toa

In the summer of 2007, various members from Qing Wan Cantonese Opera Association of Vancouver directed me to Mr Wong Toa. He was a retired professional instrumentalist, a prolific writer who had published articles on Chinese opera for the *Singtao* Newspaper for several years, and a teacher of opera singing for seventy years. Many professional singers (including Bruce Lee) were his students. In 1961, Mr Wong became the first Cantonese Opera musician to receive permission to immigrate to Canada on the basis of his trade.[157] Having glanced through the publications he donated to the Chinese Library in Vancouver, I was excited

[157] Conversation with Wong Toa

to find a person who had "slept" on Red Boats and was still alive. From the Association's members and from Mr. Wong's writing which I had read in the library, I knew he was interested in spreading the legacy of Cantonese opera. My desire to interview him was so intense that I was chauffeured to the Chinese herbal store on the busy Pander Street of Vancouver Chinatown which I had been told was a contact place for him.

The store was crowded with customers. One of the storekeepers told me that Mr. Wong was having *dim sum* at a nearby restaurant. I took little time to look for him at the restaurant— I asked a headwaiter where the gentleman was, and was pointed to the two tables next to the windows where Mr. Wong was having lunch with his students. When I was about 30 feet away from those two tables, one elderly gentleman noticed my presence and stood up. He was the only person to notice my approach. The scene was a little shocking, for I had neither given him any information on my visit, nor had he ever seen me before. I introduced myself and asked if I could interview him. He was delighted and told me to wait for him at the herbal store that afternoon and he would take me to his apartment.

Figure 14. Mr. Wong Toa at his residence in Vancouver at the interview in 2007.

The 94-year-old gentleman walked adroitly with a cane up a slope, I followed him to the bus stop. As we sat on the bus, he told me that he was one of the many children of a widow. He attended a traditional *si sok* (a private teaching arrangement; a teacher is hired to teach reading, writing, literature to a small group of students) as a *pui dok* (an accompanying student) to his cousin. At the age of fourteen, his mother melted a *tel* of gold to pay for his *si fu* (teacher) who worked as a performer of Red Boat, and he became an apprentice of *kungfu* in *wu* play. For his mother, the aim was to get him into a trade and reduce the expense of eating at home. In his youth, Mr. Wong found *kungfu* playing was too physical for him, and he turned to playing instruments.

The following conversation took place at his neat apartment:

Ling: Cantonese opera did not use all Cantonese to begin with; how did Cantonese became the sole language of the opera?

Wong: In the old days, officers from the north took a few performers to the south for entertaining the family. The language was brought through Kwai Lin, a city in the Guangxi Province, west of Guangdong. The language is called *Kwai Lin kwong song*, which is equivalent to Goon Waih.

Ling: When did Cantonese opera start using all Cantonese in performance?

Wong: 1940s and 1950s.
Western instruments were commonly added for accompaniment between 1950s and 1970s. Starting in the 1980s, the trend reversed to using more traditional instruments. During the occupation by the Japanese, Western instruments were commonly used. At Chan Fei Lung's time, violin, banjo and guitar was named *sam gin toa*, the three pieces. Ma Sze Tsang used mostly western instruments. Once audiences were unhappy about not hearing the traditional gongs and Chinese drums, they demanded reimbursement of the money paid for the tickets. The audience's were expecting to hear the traditional drums and gongs— instead, Ma provided the audience with jazz drums.

Ling: Zhang Ngh, the northern performer who came to Foshan, taught opera and made Foshan a center for Cantonese opera; how important is Foshan in the development of Cantonese Opera.

Wong: Zhang Ngh escaped to Foshan from being captured by the Qing government. Almost all well-known performers originated from Foshan. [Mr Wong lived in Foshan when he was young. His mother was from the area.]

Ling: Are the beds in Red Boats in two level bunk beds?

Wong: They are usually in upper and lower bunks. People are assigned to bunks by drawing.

Ling: Where is the best location in a Red Boat?

Wong: S*up gee twung* (cross road). Principal performers who exchanged for better locations had the luxury to board up the area by carpenters, which can be done quickly, and battery operated fans and lights adds to the "luxury."

Ling: When is *White Tiger* performed?

Wong: At a venue where no opera had been performed. *Qing yun* (principal characters), *da lo goon* (important performers) and all the cast got to perform on short opera after *White Tig*er, on the first afternoon at a new location. After that, the characters met with *hoi hei si yeh* (director) during dinner to discuss the detail of the up-coming performance in the evening.

Ling: What kind of food did hawkers sell at the venue?

Wong: It depended on the location. Different foods are sold at different towns. Tea is sold in bowls. Local gambling organizations entertained audiences by providing gambling stalls. A gambling boat is parked next to the Red Boats to entertain performers.

Ling: I can see that you are keeping many books on Cantonese opera in your library.

Wong: I have all the books published on Cantonese opera; for those I could not get, I would borrow it, put the pages apart and copy the pages; some by hand. [He showed me a book]. This one I copied from my cousin. The once governor of Hong Kong Clementi translated some of Zhao's salt-water songs as *Yuet Au*. These two books are in Cantonese slang, the University of British Colombia and New York University had taken material from here for study. Many of the books I possessed are no longer published.

Ling: Among all students of yours, who is the most accomplished?

Wong: I can't say whom.

Ling: What did you teach mainly?

Wong: I taught mainly singing. I also wrote libretto. *Twenty four Filial Love* was written by me. Mr. Ho [a philanthropist of Hong Kong] paid for it and the famous performer Man Cin Sui sang the song.

Ling: What is in your mind when you write libretto?

Wong: It is all improvised.

Ling: What is the difference in music between Cantonese opera of the 1930s and the new modern style?

Wong: In the 1930s, it was all *boun huang*; there were no *siu kuk*. Gradually, more *siu kuk, yuet au,* and southern tunes were added. The famous Southern tune singer and performer Yuen Siu Fai had been my students; he is one of the best Southern tune singers of today. [*Southern tunes* were sung by blind performers in the past; singing of southern tunes today is not limited to blind singers].

Ling: Who is considered the best Southern tune singer?

Wong: Blind Duk [Toa Wun].

Wong: Cantonese singing is unique, it doesn't have scores. Other genres have scores. Cantonese singing is *hok hou hok sit* (emulate sound, emulate tongue). [What he meant is the pitch in singing changes according to the pitch of the speaking tone.]

Ling: Does Cantonese Opera use different key as tonic according to the range of individual performers?

Wong: Never. In Ma Sze Tsang's time, people sang up to A (Western music pitch); nowadays, people do not practice as much as then. Performers used to sing with C# as tonic; nowadays they lower to C as tonic. During the time of Yum Kim Fai, performances use C#; starting in the 1980s, C is used.

Ling: Have you ever seen the famous *Nam Hoi Sup Sam Long* (Thirteenth Son of Nam Hoi, a famous librettist of Cantonese opera).

Wong: Of course; he is from a family of literati.

Wong: Red Boat Troupe flourishes between 1920 and 1940. After most Red Boats were destroyed by the Japanese invasion, “Black Boats” were used as carrier for troupes to the ocean, particularly to Hong Kong. Bunk-beds were used in these non-flat base boats. We student instrumentalists slept close to the boat rowing area. Some people slept on the *ji coeng* (wooden boxes for costumes). When permanent theatres such as Po Hing, Tung Lok and Go Sing were built, we performers would sleep on the second and third floor of the theatres. Go Sing Theatre was the earliest performance venue in Hong Kong. Po Hing was another theatre that teamed up with Po Hing (called Go-Po line) that performed the same plays.

Wong: In the 1920s, five pieces of harmonic instruments called *ngh ga tau* (five main instruments) were commonly used. They were the *yuet qin*, the *qing hu*, the *hau goon*, the *three string* and the *er hu*. When permanent theaters were established and Cantonese opera flourished,

especially in the 1930s and 1940s, before the mass invasion of the Japanese to the area, many Western instruments were added into the orchestra. These instruments include the violin, the cello, the jazz drum, and the saxophone.

Ling: The cello was invaluable in light of the lacking bass support of the traditional instruments, and equal temperament was introduced in this period with western instrument players added into the orchestras.

Wong: Ma Sze Tsang and Sit Kok Seen, two performers with each having his troupe performing daily on stages of the two Hong Kong theatres, were responsible for bringing in the Western instruments. Eventually, the orchestra of Ma's troupe used all Western instruments, which also included the flute and the electric guitar.

Ling: Did Red Boat Troupe performed *tsi zi hei* (scenes of plays)?

Wong: No, they perform complete plays only.

Ling: What were the most performed?

Wong: The Eighteen Standard Plays during daytime performance. Evening plays may be from new scripts. Only the first ten plays were performed often in The Eighteen Standard Plays; plays numbered eleven to eighteen were seldom performed. After the 1940s, a few other Eighteen Standard Play versions appeared. Yuen Siu Fai, my previous student, occasionally produces new scripts on the Eighteen Standard Plays.

Ling: I heard of *tai gong hei* (out-line plays).

Wong: *Tai gong hei* ended around 1940s. They were based on the Eighteen Standard Play. During the 1930's, not many new scripts were written with the heavy performing demand; *tai gong hei*, out-lined play was common.

Ling: Where was the most active area of these troupes at the peak time of red boat troupes?

Wong: The Wong Saa area was the center of activity; 36 troupes were active during the 1930s. Many top performers bought homes in the area.

Ling: Thank you very much for your time. It is an honor to be a guest at your home and been given information that no other people could provide.

Wong: It is fortune that brought the two of us together.

During the interview, Mr. Wong offered me several publications and showed me pictures he had taken with well-known performers including the renowned Red Thread Lady who

legendarily departed from Hong Kong to communist China. A picture of Mr. Wong and Red Thread Lady was taken at the Indian Club in Hong Kong, shortly before her departure to China. One of the most prolific script writers in Hong Kong, Yip Suit Duk had also been a student of Mr Wong.

Mr. Wong had been a *tau gaa;* he plays the violin, *er hu*, *goh hu* and other instruments. He was also an instructor of Cantonese opera singing for decades. With an extremely good memory and writing skill, Mr. Wong is a walking dictionary of Cantonese opera, and perhaps the only living survivor with an accurate memory of the Red Boat Troupes. He told me that at a meeting with younger performers and opera friends several years back in Guangzhou, people were surprised see that he was still alive and active. Mr. Wong was actively teaching students in Vancouver at the time of my interview. He often referred to his famous students in the industry. I could see the pride he takes in his success as a teacher. There is something I have experienced in the last few years while researching Cantonese opera. In the Cantonese opera society, people are always very helpful when I need information. Perhaps what Mr. Wong told me was ingrained in the training: "Learn morality before learning the art." Most traditional performers may not have much formal education, but through script reading, physical training, and living in the opera society, they are my *si fu* in many ways.

Chapter Nine
Future of Cantonese Opera

Hong Kong was faced with political problems during the last few years of the 1960s. In order to calm young people in the crowded city, the government allocated money for art activities. Some performers and amateur used the funding to promote Cantonese opera. In the New Territories, a group of school principals and Cantonese Opera lovers began to sing, perform, and organize amateur Cantonese opera. These school principals, who were leaders at work and in the society, helped to raise respect for the genre, as well as the identity of Hong Kong citizenship. In subsequent years, university professors, performers, and amateurs joined the education department to design Cantonese education programs in elementary and high schools. At first, it was difficult for some schools to accept Chinese opera in Western music classes, which had been the tradition in the colony for many decades. Mr. Liu was one of the people who started an amateur group in the 1970s. He, among others, made a tremendous effort to preserve the dying art. Some basic knowledge of Cantonese opera has now been implemented in the school music curriculum. More people are aware of Cantonese opera, but a lot needs to be done.

Meeting with Mr. Liu Hon Wo and Ms. Chan Sau Hing

In January 2008, I organized a cultural exchange concert in Hong Kong with musicians from the United States in Hong Kong. The title of the concert was "Operas of Two Worlds." I sought to bring together Western singers from the United States and Cantonese Opera singers.

A Chinese instrumental orchestra, stationed in the New Territories, was to perform, and the conductor helped me to contact Mr. Liu and Ms. Chan's Cantonese Opera group. At the concert, I recognized Mr. Liu, who had given a talk at the Symposium "200 years Footprints of Cantonese Opera" organized by the Opera Information Center at the Chinese University of Hong Kong in 2007. He had recounted how he concealed his Chinese musical instrument in a bag as he travelled to rehearsals in his youth in the 1960s. He was afraid passers-by or friends would consider him a low brow musician who played at the low class entertainment venues (*daai daat dei*), or Temple Street (I can infer that young people of those days did not need to hide a Western guitar in a bag).

Mr Liu is the organizer of *Siu Nga Ork Hin*, an amateur Cantonese opera performing group in Hong Kong. He was born in the New Territories. The New Territory is on the outskirts of the city. It is not as densely populated as in the city center. People who live there tend to be more conservative than those who live on Hong Kong Island and in Kowloon. Mr Liu is a "real" native of Hong Kong. All his extended family lives nearby. Many performers, especially from the New Territories have studied with Mr Liu. Mr Liu plays many instruments; he was the violinist in the ensemble when I attended the group's performance earlier. He plays, among others, the *goh hu*, the *je hu*, the *yang kum*, the gongs, the drums, and the cello. He is a composer, an instrumentalist, a librettist, a coordinator, an education, a painter, a calligrapher, and a preserver of opera scripts as well as recordings. Upon being informed that a building with many opera manuscript was about to be demolished, he and his group scrambled to take the scripts home in a heavy rain. When I last called him, he said that he had saved old phonograph records in a building that were about to be taken down. He intended to donate the discs to a University.

Mr Liu is talented in many arts. I have read articles by him with detailed statistics of his research on the development of Cantonese opera in the last few decades, especially the period he had participated in the New Territories. He has composed and notated over 500 songs. Mr Liu is innovative in combining traditional opera style with Western harmony. His group has been very active in staging performances.

Figure 15. Mr. Liu Hon Wo at the Xylophone; he is joined by the Sun Sing Chinese Orchestra and Siu Nga Ork Hin at the cultural exchange concert "Operas of Two Worlds" in Happy Valley, Hong Kong.

Figure 16. Ms. Chan Sau Hing on the left sang the *dan* role; Ms. Mak Kit Chun on the right sang the *sheng* role in *Princess Ceoung Ping* at "Operas of Two Worlds."

Ms. Chan was the lead singer in the Siu Nga Ork Hin, the performance group. We spoke on the phone and arranged for an afternoon tea in the New Territories. As a teenager, Ms. Chan worked part-time to pay tuition to study opera. She decided not to sing as a professional because she is not used to the hierarchical system in the profession. She preferred staying as an amateur. She is a teacher of Cantonese opera singing. Both Mr Liu and Ms Chan are *si fu* (teachers) of the amateur group in the New Territories, and very strict on ethics and cooperation between members. Both are very concerned about preserving the opera's heritage. We discussed the future of Cantonese opera in Hong Kong and how the genre may be conserved. What she and Mr. Liu have done in the past for the opera is respectful. It was an enlightening afternoon and an enjoyable cultural exchange.

Cantonese opera may be considered the most representative art of Hong Kong. The tourist association in Hong Kong often uses Cantonese Opera characters in films and posters to promote the city. These characters look grand and entertaining. With very little government sponsorship, survival of Cantonese opera performance has been difficult in Hong Kong. The government of Hong Kong should help to set up permanent venues for performance, as well as special art school for training young people. Singing, acting, reciting, and action all require learning from an early age, as happened in the apprentice system. There should be no delay in beginning these programs. Currently, formal studies of Cantonese Opera are at college level. The result is very different from that of artists who learn at an early age. The moral teaching of Confucius ideology, and the cultural identity ingrained in the opera, should be promoted, as it was for the amateur Chinese opera groups after independence in Singapore.[158] To help elevate respect towards Cantonese Opera, Western-trained, ethnic Cantonese musicians could be very

[158] Tong Soon Lee, *Chinese Street Opera in Singapore* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 94.

effective in promoting the art. Cantonese opera cannot become extinct, like the music that once appeared in the verses of Sung dynasty (A.D. 960-1279).

Fig. 17. Western and Cantonese opera singers singing together at the conclusion of the concert "Opera of Two Worlds." in Hong Kong, 2008. From left to right: the author, Dr. Linda Banista, and Ms. Chan Sau Hing.

Traditional operas are too long for working people. Short scripts—about the length of a movie— would draw in young people who are used to a faster life-style. A "young version" featuring new technology, scenery, lighting, color, costumes, and new thinking but with the important elements of traditional elements, would also attract more young people. The liberation of women drew more females to opera; industrialization drew fewer men to theater. I am hopeful that in the future, Cantonese opera can re-incorporate a few more *wu* plays, and more action plays to attract young men returning to the theatre. Young people are needed to preserve traditional operas; this applies to Cantonese opera as well as Chinese opera, Western opera, and traditional operas all over the world.

Cantonese opera is not static; it is rather dynamic. I recently heard from Mr Liu about a Cantonese Opera script accompanied by an orchestra and voice with harmony—Symphonic Cantonese Opera—and an aria called "The Aftermath of Lehman Brother Mini Bond." Another playlet that I would like to watch is "Symphonic Goon Waih."[159] Cantonese and Cantonese opera are certainly dynamic. In my last phone call to Mr. Liu, I asked what he would like to see in the future development of Cantonese opera. His answer was the same as what Mr. Yuen Siu Fai said—the respect and understanding of the art. His statement applies to all vernacular opera genres all over the world.

One day, I would like to stay in the same hotel in Saa Min. When I look down from the balcony, I will see three smart looking "dragon head phoenix tail" Red Boats moving along the Pearl River. Actors practice their moves, cooks busily prepare a meal, many props, costumes, and red *ji coengs* are visible, performers practice singing with the accompaniment of the orchestra, and the sound of *goh wu*, *gongs*, drums, and clappers—fill the air. It is a re-enactment in the Red Boat Troupe Museum!

[159] Conversation with Liu Hon Wo.

Bibliography

Agawu, Kofi. "The Challenge of Semiotics" in *Rethinking Music*. Edited by Nicholas Cook, and Mark Everist, 138-161. London: Oxford University Press, 1999.

Blacking, John. *How Musical is Man*? Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1973.

Chan, Chiu Ping. "Yuet ju si shan di yuet sai shui yue how ching di mun tai [Some Questions that Needs to be Verified in the History of Yuet Kek]." Paper presented at the *Yuet Kek quat cia yin to woo* [International Forum of Yuet Kek], Hong Kong, September 5-9, 2007.

Chan, Sau Y. *Improvisation in a Ritual Context*. Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 1991.

___. *Hong Kong Yuet Kek do lun* [Theory and discussion on Hong Kong Yuet Kek], Hong Kong: The Chinese University Music Department Research Program, 1999.

___. *Yuet Kek yum gnok di tam to* [Investigation into the Music of Cantonese Opera], Hong Kong: The Chinese University Music Department Research Program, 2001.

___. Hong Kong Yuet Kek koi syut: 1900-2002 [Synopses of Hong Kong Cantonese Opera: 1900-2002], Hong Kong: The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2007.

Chow, Si Sum and Cheng, Ling Yan. *Yuet Kek kwok zai yin to wui lun man tep.* [Thesis on International Yuet Kek Symposium] Volume 1 and 2. Hong Kong: Opera Information Center of the Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2007.

Ferguson, L. Daniel. "Cantonese Opera." In *The Garland Encyclopedia of World Music* 7, edited by Robert C. Provine et al, 303-310. New York and London: Routledge, 2002.

Jiang, Jin. *Women Playing Men*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2009.

Jin, Won Dat. *Jong kwok yin yur si* [A history of Chinese Music]. Beijing: People's Music Publication, 1994.

Lai, Kin. *Hong Kong Yuet Kek hou shek si* [The History of Yuet Kek in Hong Kong]. Hong Kong: Joint Publishing Co. Ltd., 1995.

Lau T. T. and Sin Y. Y. *Papers and Proceedings of the International Seminar on Cantonese Opera*. Hong Kong: Center of Asian Studies, 1995.

Lee, Tong Soon. "Professional Chinese Opera Troupes and Street Opera Performance in Singapore." *Asian Music* 131(2000): 35-70

___. “Chinese Street Opera Performance and the Shaping of Cultural Aesthetics in contemporary Singapore.” Singapore: *Yearbook for Traditional Music* 34 (2002): 139-161.

___. *Chinese Street Opera in Singapore*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009.

Leung, P. G. “Koi Lun Yuet Kek [Discourse on Cantonese Opera]. Paper presented at the International Seminar on Cantonese Opera, Hong Kong, November 18-20, 1992.

Leung, W. “Ci sik yuetju keik bun yu coeng ci [Simple Analysis to the Plays and Librettos].” Paper presented at the International Seminar on Cantonese Opera, Hong Kong, November, 18-20, 1992.

Liu Hon Wo. Interviewed with the author, June 14, 2009.

___. Telephone interviews with the author March 4, March 19, 2010.

Makerras, Colin, *Peking Opera*, Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1995.

Pian, Rulan Chao. “Aria Structure Patterns in the Peking Opera” in *Chinese and Japanese Music-Dramas, e*dited by J.I. Crump and William P. Malm, 65-89. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan. 1976.

Roa, Nancy Yunhwa, “Songs of the Exclusion Era**:** New York Chinatown’s Opera Theaters in the 1920s” *American Music*, 20 no 4, (2002): 399-444.

Reyes, Adelaida, “From Urban Area to Refugee Camp: How One Thing Leads to Another”, *Ethnomusicology*, 43 (1999): 201-220.

So, Yung. “*Yuet Kek pin kek gnai suik lau bean* [The Changes in Cantonese opera Libretto/Composition].” in *Hong Kong Yuet Kek hou shek si* [The History of Yuet Kek in Hong Kong], edited by Lai Kin, 80-87. Hong Kong: Joint Publishing Co. Ltd., 1995.

Sun Gum San Zing, “Hung sun kwai tzai kup ke gum gei [Regulations and prohibitions in hung sun]” in *Hong Kong Yuet Kek hou shek si* [The History of Yuet Kek in Hong Kong], edited by Lai Kin , 12-20. Hong Kong: Joint Publishing Co. Ltd., 1995.

Sun, Ji Nan and Chow, G. C. *Jung kwok yin yuk tong sig an pin* [A simplified history of Chinese Music]. Shangtong: Shangtong Education Publication, 1999.

Tse, B. C. “goo gum Yuet Kek si how yuet duk.”. Paper presented at the International Seminar on Cantonese Opera, Hong Kong, November 18-20, 1992.

Tse, Suet Sum. Meeting with the author in Hong Kong 2007 to 2009.

___. Telephone interview with the author March 4, 2010.

Wan, Zi Pang, “Yuet kek nu ban zi zor tam [A preliminary investigation to the women troupe of Yuet Kek].” Paper presented at the International Seminar on Cantonese Opera, Hong Kong, November, 18-20, 1992.

Wong, C. T. “ Oh dalaiar Melbourne kong chew yuet ju kok ngai shai: 1961-2001[The Kong Chew Yuet Ju Song Association of Melbourne, Australia: 1961-2001].” Paper presented at the *Yuet Kek quat cia yin to woo* [International Forum of Yuet Kek], Hong Kong, September 5-9, 2007.

Wong, Isabel. “ The Music of China” in *Excursions in World Music*, 3rd ed, edited by Bruno Nettl, Charles Capwell, Isabel Wong, and Thomas Turino, 74-111. New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2001.

Wong, S.H. Basic Knowledge of Yuet Kok (Cantonese songs). Hong Kong: China Book Store Co. Ltd., 2001.

Wong, Paris. Telephone interview with the author March 4, 2010.

___. Various meetings with the author in Hong Kong, 2007-2009.

Wong, Toa. *Hung sun time bai* [In Searching the Mystery of Red Boats]. Vancouver: Wong Toa Publishing, 1999a.

___. Wui goo *Vancouver ngai tang se sup nin* [Looking Back Forty Years of Art Stage of Vancouver]. Vancouver: Wong Toa Publishing, 1999b.

___. *Yuet Kek* [Yuetju]. Vancouver: Wong Toa Publishing, 2002.

___. Interview with the author June 5, 2007.

___. Telephone interview with the author. April 1, 2008 and March 2, 2010.

___. Letter to the author. July 14, 2007; Mar, 20, 2008.

Wu, Chun. *Gundong hei kelk si* [Opera History of Guandong] vol. 6. Hong Kong: La yuen she bo sai yau han go si, 2003.

Yuen, Siu Fai. Interviewed with the author in Hong Kong, Mar 3, 2008.

Yung, Bell. “Creative Process in Cantonese Opera I: The role of Linguistic tones.” *Ethnomusicology* 27 (1, 1983): 29-47.

___. *Cantonese Opera: Performance as Creative Process*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989.

___. "Narrative Song: Southern Traditions: Cantonese Narrative Song." In *The Garland Encyclopedia of World Music* 7, edited by Robert C. Provine et al, 267-274. New York and London: Routledge, 2002.

Yung, Sao-Shing, "Gian yup sing si: ng kwong sup sik: 1920's Yuet Kek time sik [Entering the cities: An analysis of the Colorful 1920's]." Paper presented at the *Yuet Kek quat cia yin to woo* [International Forum of Yuet Kek], Hong Kong, September 5-9, 2007.

Appendix A: Synopsis

The Re-incarnation of the Red Plum

The translation is based on Dr. Chan S. Yan's synopsis on the opera.[160] Based on the play *The Red Plum* of Ming Dynasty, *The Reincarnation of the Red Plum* is the last play by the renowned script-writer Tong Dik Sung. At the first night of the play's premier in 1959, the librettist was taken from the audience seat to the hospital with a stroke. The talented script writer died the next day at the age of 43. The cast at the premier included Yum Kim Fai, Baak Suet Sin, Lang Chi Pak Leung Sing Bor and Lum Ga Sing from the Sin Fung Ming Opera Troupe; it was the eighth production of the troupe. Directed by Wong Hok Sing, the play was made into a film in 1968 with Chan Po Chu, Nam Hong and Leung Sing Bor in the cast.

Cast

Lead-male role	Fai Yu, Court Institute student
Lead-female role	(at first) Li Wai Leung, Ga Zi Do's concubine (later) Lo Ci Yung, Lo Tong's only child who resembles Li Wai Leung
second male role	Nephew of Ga Ying Zung, head of the court education institute
second female role	Ng Gong Sin, a concubine of Ga Zi Do
jester	Ga Zi Do, Left Chief Minister of the State
old man role	Lo Tong, a retired troop commander

[160] Sau Yan, Chan, Hong Kong Yuet Kek kek mok cok tam: Yum Baak Gyun [An Investigation into Hong Kong Yuet Kek Titles: Yum Pak Series] (Hong Kong: The Chinese University of Hong Kong Yuet Kek Research Plan, 2005), 129-133.

second jester	Ga Lueng Yee, a servant of Ga Zi Do
action male role	Kong Man Nae, a 90 year old Right Minister of the State

Background

Lee Wai Leung was sold to Ga Zi Do as Ga's concubine. One day, as Wai Leung accompanies Ga to Westlake, she encounters a court institute student Fai Yu. Although Wai Leung keeps a distance from Fai Yu, she cannot forget the handsome and passionate face. The encounter eventually leads to the death of the concubine. With more intriguing incidents, the story advances to bring the dead soul of Wai Leung from the Underworld to the living world again by borrowing the dead body of another woman who bear similar features to Wai Leung.

Synopsis

Act I. Admiring the Willow and Refusing the *Qin*

1. Along with 36 wives and concubines, the grand preceptor Fai Yu tours the scenic Westlake. The Court Institute student Fai Yu is amazed by the beauty of Wai Leung. Rowing a small boat, Fai Yu follows Wai Leung for the next few days.

2. One day, as Ga is hunting ashore, Wai Leung is asked to arrange wine serving at the front of the boat. Wai Leung sees Fai Yu holding a musical instrument, the *qin*, while looking at the beautiful scenery. Fai Yu cannot resist asking Wai Leung to meet him ashore. Wai Leung meets Fai Yu later and Fai Yu presents Wai Leung with a *qin*[161] to show his adoration, but Wai Leung refused to accept the instrument. Wai Leung's refusal to accept the gift of love and her telling Fai Yu about her concubine status makes Fai Yu break the *qin* and leave.

[161] A string instrument.

3. Seeing Fai Yu's back shadow, Wai Leung utters "handsome young man." As Ga Ci Do returns from his hunting trip, he over-heard what Wai Leung had said; he is mad and scorns Wai Leung. Refusing to acquiesce, Wai Leung confronts Ga a few times, which leads to her being hit hard and killed by Ga. Ga orders followers to cut Wai Leung's head and put it into a silk lined box. The act is to warn others concubines for what punishment may happen.

4. Ga regrets what had happened. In seeing that the numbers of wives and concubines missing one to become three dozen, nephew Ha Ying Zhong suggests his uncle to make the beautiful maiden of Silk Valley Lo Ci Yung become Ga's new concubine. Having heard that, Ga orders his nephew to bring jewelry to Silk Valley.

Act II. The Encounter—Breaking a Plum Branch

1. Due to the power of Ga Zi Do, the dedicated 30-year troop commander veteran Lo Tong retires early to the Silk Valley. With his daughter Lo Ci Yung, they sell wine to earn a living.

2. Walking into Silk Valley, Fai Yu sees full blooming red plum branches. Since leaving West Lake, Fai Yu has been thinking about Wai Leung. The blooming flower reminds him of Wai Leung. His desire to break a branch to take to his room lands him on the ground of the Lo's home, and it is too late to hide from Lo Ci Yung.

3. Fai Yu is delighted to see Ci Yung, for he had mistaken Ci Yung as Wai Leung. The two ladies resemble each other in feature. Seeing the invasion of a stranger, Ci Yung is about to call her father and have the invader brought to justice. But after observing the handsome young man, Ci Yung is a little impressed. To ease Ci Yung and answer her inquiry, Fai Yu recounts the encounter with his fair maiden, Wai Leung. Hearing the story, Ci Yung allows Fai Yu to break a plum branch.

4. As the two young people are having amorous conversation, Ci Yung's father appears and he is happy to see a handsome and talented scholar. He soon allows the two to get married.

5. In the busy process of preparing for the wedding, Ga Ying Zhong, the nephew of Ga Zi Do comes to the Lo family with jewelry for proposing to Ci Yung as concubine of Ga Zi Do. Lo Tong tells the high official's nephew that his daughter is to accompany him until life ends. His daughter has no desire to get married. Ci Yung asserts that she is in bad health and is lucky to be alive; nevertheless, she is not a person to bring good fortune to a family. Ga Ying Zhong ignores their plea. He leaves the jewelry and departs. As Ga Ying Zhong is leaving, he encounters Fai Yu and had a glimpse of Fai Yu.

Act III. A Pretencious Mad Scene

1. Returning to the home of the high officer, servant Ga Leung Yee reports to Ga Zi Do that Lo Ci Yung had behaved like a mad person. The servant therefore fails to bring Ci Yung back on a sedan. Ga Zi Do is disappointed to hear the message. Ying Zhong, however, thinks that Ci Yung's behavior is feigned. Ying Zhong orders the servant to go back to Silk Valley and bring back in Ci Yung so that Ci Yung's mental problem can be observed for possible feigning.

2. Fai Yu arrived at Ga's mansion expressing his reason for not visiting earlier—that his elder brother had failed the court exam and committed suicide; therefore, Fai Yu had to wait until the mourning period of three months expired. Fai Yu also tells Ga that his brother was disappointed drank a lot, and in Cheung An, his brother met a mad girl who had been sick and she transmitted the disease to the brother. Soon after returning home, the brother became mad and plunged to his death from a cliff. Knowing that Fai Yu is a talented scholar, Zi Do invites Fai Yu to stay at his residence for a few days.

3. During their conversation, the sedan returns with Ci Yung pretending to be mad; with his father, Ci Yung plays a mad scene at the residence. In her speech, Ci Yung scorns Zi Do as a person with no integrity in an indirect way by referring another person. The high officer is mad, but he is suspicious of the genuineness of her sickness; hence, he tests her various times. Ci Yung is smart enough not to be tricked. The high officer is about to let Ci Yung leave by asking Fai Yu to bring her to the door. Before leaving, Ci Yung cannot resist speaking softly to Fai Yu. Lo Tong brings his daughter away from the Ga residence. Afraid to be recognized as pretending mad, Ci Yung's father takes Ci Yung to a distant city, Yangzhou, directly.

4. In appreciating Fai Yu's informing him of what disaster a mad woman can bring into a family, Zi Do asked Fai Yu to stay in the study so that the scholar can be recommended to the court.

5. Ying Zhong has been observing the whole incident. He also seems to remember Fai Yu at Silk Valley. Ying Zhong becomes suspicious and suggests killing Fai Yu and then capturing Ci Yung.

Act IV. The Escape

1. In the Ga residence, Ng Gong Seen, a concubine of Ga Zi Do, who is in a red dress, brings paper money and luxury for burning to the dead to the Red Plum Mezzanine for ritual memory of Wai Leung. Having heard of a coffin in the Red Plum Mezzanine, Fai Yu wants to learn more about what had happened from Gong Seen. To avoid being seen by others talking to a man, Gong Seen leaves in a hurry. Fai Yu is puzzled. He soon leaves for the study room and falls asleep.

2. A sudden breeze brings the ghost of Wai Leung who wants to meet Fai Yu. Fai Yu recognizes Wai Leung. He shows Wai Leung his yearning of her. And because of the resemblance in

features, he turns to Ci Yung. Wai Leung is delighted to know that Fai Yu is an admirer. She warns about Ga Zi Do's plot to send assassin to kill Fai Yu before mid-night. Wai Leung is willing to help Fai Yu to escape.

3. At three garn (eleven o'clock), Ying Zung comes to the study with a sword to kill Fai Yu, but his act is stopped by the ghost of Wail Leung. Wai Leung is about to lead Fai Yu to leave.

4. Ga Zi Do comes and ask why Ying Zung had not killed Fai Yu. Ying Zung tells about a lady in red dress had come to help Fai Yu to escape. Leun Yee comes to report seeing Gong Seen chatting with Fai Yu. Ga is furious; he orders his followers to bring Gong Seen to the Room of Half Leisure to be interrogated.

Act V. Dialogue on the Ghost Podium

1. While Ga Zi Do is about to interrogate Goon Seen for secretly letting Fai Yu to escape at the room of Half Leisure, Wai Leung's ghost appears and prevents further interrogation. Wai Leung says that she is the one who let Fai Yu leave. Ga is horrified at seeing Wai Leung's ghost. Ga wants to offer a 49-day ritual. Wai Leung does not accept and forces Zi Do into the Room of Half Leisure to face the wall with his head bowed down to repent. At this time Wai Leung brings Fai Yu away.

2. Leun Yee reports that after bringing Gong Seen back to her room, he went to buy medication to calm himself down after the shock of seeing a ghost. On the way, he heard that the Lo Tung and her daughter had fled to Yangzhou, and that the mad scene was a feigned one. After the horrified incidence of seeing the ghost, it takes little time for the womanizer Ga to decide on going to Yangzhou to find Ci Yung.

Act VI. Reincarnation—Re-matching of the Body and Spirit under the Banana Tree outside the Window

1. From the Right Secretary of State Kong Man Nee's house where Lo and his daughter are guests, Ci Yung and his father learn that a new emperor is about to reign, and that he has already ordered the capture of Ga Zi Do. Kong and Lo Tong discuss a plan to capture Ga.

2. In the Kong residence at Yangzhou, Lo Tong worries about the illness of his daughter, and he also worries that if the daughter dies, she will not be able to help capture Ga.

3. During his escape, Wai Leung asks Fai Yu to bring her soul to Yangzhou to Lo Tong and his daughter. If her soul is brought there, there will be a chance of continuing the relationship between Fai Yu and Wai Leung. Fai Yu and Wai Leung agrees on 'smile three time, cry three times" as mutual signal for returning to the living World. When Fai Yu arrives at the Kong residence in Yangzhou, Ci Yung dies at about the same time. By borrowing the dead body of Ci Yung, Wai Leung is able to live again. Despite his daughter's leaving him, Lo Tong is pleased to have Wai Leung as his god-daughter; she promises to take care of him to the end.

4. Ga Zi Do and followers are trapped by the plan. The Right Secretary of State reads the new emperor's order, which condemns Ga Zi Do, who, as Left Secretary of State ignored state rules, did not rescue the city of Shanyang, fostered too many concubines, and allied with other country to instigate restless in the country. Ga is to be stripped of the Left Secretary of State position to become a commoner, and together with his gang, Ga is to be handled by the justice department and sent to a distant Gor County. Ga and members of his faction are to be punished under the law. Only Gong Seen is saved because of Wai Leung's pleads for her innocence. Finally, Fai Yu and Wai Leung become husband and wife.

End.

Appendix B: A list of interviewees

Interviewee	Date	Profession	Place	Form
Chan Sau Hing	14-Jun-09	Amateur Cantonese Opera Performer	Hong Kong	Face to Face
		Teacher of Cantonese Opera		
Liu Hon Wo	14-Jun-09	Instrumentalist, Teacher of Cantonese Opera	Hong Kong	Face to Face
	4-Mar-10	Private assistant to a Hong Kong Councilman		Telephone
Paris Wong	2007-2010	Cantonese Opera Performer	Hong Kong	Face to Face
	4-Mar-10	Teacher of Cantonese Opera		Telephone
Tse Suet Sum	2007-2009	Cantonese Opera Performer	Hong Kong	Face to Face
	4-Mar-10	Hong Kong Television (TVB) actress		Telephone
Wong Toa	5-Jun-07	Instrumentalist, Teacher of Cantonese Opera	Vancouver,	Face to Face
	1-Apr-08	A Red Boat Troupe Performer	Canada	Telephone
	2-Mar-10	Newspaper Columnist on Cantonese Opera		Telephone
Yuen Siu Fai	3-Mar-08	Cantonese Opera Performer	Hong Kong	Face to Face
		Student of Red Boat Troup Performers		
		Composer, librettist, script writter		