

## Inside Chinese Theatre: Cantonese Opera in Canada

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Volume 38, numéro 1-2, 2018

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1071675ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1071675ar>

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### Éditeur(s)

Canadian University Music Society / Société de musique des universités canadiennes

### ISSN

1911-0146 (imprimé)

1918-512X (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

### Citer cet article

Rao, N. Y. (2018). Inside Chinese Theatre: Cantonese Opera in Canada. *Intersections*, 38(1-2), 81–104. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1071675ar>

### Résumé de l'article

L'opéra constitue une part importante de l'histoire culturelle sino-canadienne. Dès leur apparition à Victoria dans les années 1860, les théâtres chinois faisaient organiquement partie de la vie quotidienne de la communauté, pour laquelle ils programmaient des opéras cantonnais, genre régional et familier pour les immigrants chinois de la région du Delta de la Rivière des Perles dans le sud de la Chine. Un survol des cartes historiques de villes de la fin du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle et du début du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle illustre leur rôle central dans la communauté sino-canadienne du Nord-Ouest Pacifique. La découverte récente des comptes journaliers d'une compagnie théâtrale chinoise nous donne un accès inédit à la culture de performance et aux opérations quotidiennes d'un théâtre chinois de Vancouver entre 1916 et 1918. La période florissante des années 1910 a préparé le déploiement complet de l'activité théâtrale des décennies suivantes, qui ont contribué à l'avènement d'une nouvelle ère pour la performance de l'opéra chinois au Canada.

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# INSIDE CHINESE THEATRE: CANTONESE OPERA IN CANADA

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Nancy Yunhwa Rao

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“The youngest leading lady Toronto has seen for some time is Soo Lum Mark.” So began a news article in the *Toronto Daily Star* in July 1922, a feature story on an eighteen-year-old Chinese opera singer with a Cantonese opera troupe performing at the National Theatre on Agnes and Teraulay Streets (now Bay and Dundas). The article, accompanied by the actress’s full-length photograph, depicted an independent-minded daughter of a high government official in Guangdong who left her respectable home to join a Cantonese opera troupe, following the call of the footlights. Her success was such that within a year she received a contract to come to Canada. In addition to praising her

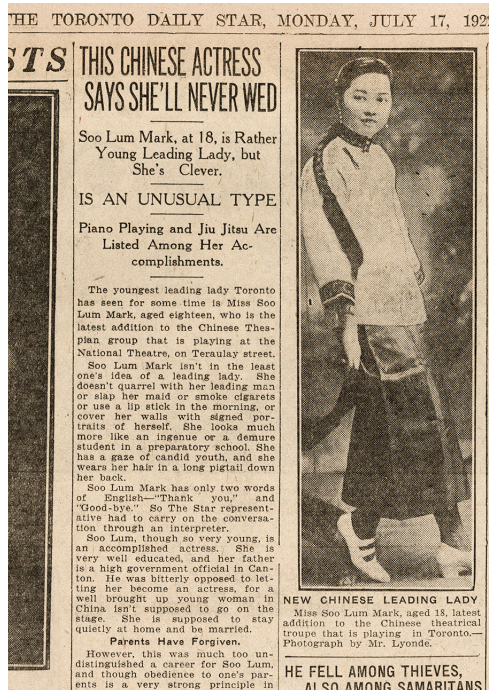


Figure 1. Soo Lum Mark, *Toronto Daily Star*, 17 July 1922

accomplishment as an actress of classical Chinese opera, the article also noted her capability in piano playing and jiu-jitsu. The actress appears in a stylish contemporary Chinese dress, wearing high heels. Soo Lum Mark looked into the camera demurely, confident and smiling. It was a seamless mixture of modern and conventional grace, typical of modern Chinese women of the time.

Soo Lum Mark and her troupe were part of the nascent network of Cantonese opera performance that was beginning a renaissance in North America, eventually encompassing Canada, the United States, and Cuba. She would continue on, performing in Boston and New York City, later San Francisco, becoming one of the many adored actresses who contributed to the vibrant scene of Cantonese opera in North America of the 1920s (Rao 2017).<sup>1</sup>

The troupe's performance in Toronto also was a part of the long-held tradition in Chinese Canadian communities. Chinese theatres, following in the footsteps of Chinese immigrants, first appeared in Victoria in the 1860s, assuming an integral role in community life of early settlers in British Columbia, attracting Chinese and non-Chinese settlers alike.<sup>2</sup> (The theatres performed Cantonese opera, the genre popular in the Pearl River Delta region, where most Chinese immigrants came from.) The demand for it was such that in 1885 a fifth Chinese theatre opened in Victoria. The opening of this new brick three-story Chinese theatre—when timber-frame construction was still commonplace—was widely reported in the English media and, following the opening, the theatre's advertisement appeared continually in the *Victoria Colonist Daily* for several weeks (Rao 2014).

The success of Chinese theatres in Victoria from the nineteenth century to the 1910s, coupled with the establishment of multiple Chinese theatres in Vancouver in the 1910s and the periodic presence of theatres in towns such as Barkerville, Edmonton, Calgary, Nanaimo, Cumberland, Winnipeg, Toronto, and Montreal over the years, pointed to the unique significance of theatrical and operatic culture in the life of Chinese Canadians all over the region. Take for example, at its peak Cumberland's Chinatown had two 400-seat Chinese theatres, in addition to no fewer than eighty other businesses such as twenty-four grocery stores, five drugstores, a temple, etc. (Lei 1998, 73).<sup>3</sup>

A 1907 report of a theatre's season opening from the *Victoria Colonist Daily* on 3 October provided a snapshot of the busy movements of Cantonese opera singers performing in cities along the Pacific Northwest corridor:

**Chinese Theatre Opening** The Chinese theatre in the valley off Cormorant Street will open for the season on Saturday evening, after a lengthy interval of darkness. A company of Victoria and Vancouver players headed by Chung Sing Wung, who conducted the Chinese theatre in

<sup>1</sup> See in particular chapters 4 and 11. Soo Lum Mark is the romanization of the Cantonese translation of the actress's name. In Rao's book, she is identified by the pinyin romanization Mai Sulan.

<sup>2</sup> Several books have addressed Chinese theatres and Cantonese opera performance in Canada. See also Ng (2015), Sebyrk (1999); Johnson (1996, 2005–06).

<sup>3</sup> This detailed study of Chinatowns in Canada includes many references to Chinese theatres or opera troupes.

Vancouver, will be followed at a later date by Seattle players. There are twenty people in the company which will open up on Saturday evening. The theatre closed down last May and since then has been renovated and generally overhauled. The entertainment generally begins about 7 o'clock in the evening and lasts till 12 o'clock. A Chinese drama is weird and, to the Occidental, an unintelligible thing, but the Chinese population seem to have great pleasure in it for they flock to the theatre night after night and the players seldom have to perform without a full house.

Since the second half of the nineteenth century the Pacific Northwest Corridor has been known for the circulation of commerce, goods, and labour force. Cultural production was also constant. The mobility of opera performers reflected the commercial success of the corridor on one hand, and the Chinese community's persistent demand for opera performances in British Columbia on the other. Theatres fulfilled many functions within the community, from entertainment and leisure activities, to religious rituals. Opera performers also did not simply move through these cities; many formed significant local ties. Despite stringent rules on Chinese immigrants entering Canada—in 1885 the government implemented a Chinese head tax that steadily increased to as high as \$500 by 1904—many opera performers became Canadian domiciled (the status of being a lawful permanent resident) after three years' residence. Their connection with the local legal brokering system was so tight that they returned to Canada regularly to maintain their domiciled status.<sup>4</sup> Cantonese opera performers were themselves Chinese Canadian in every way. Whether or not opera troupes intended to stay only temporarily, they participated in local activities, in many cases mobilizing the community and drumming up support for them, and the performers shared predicaments and faced challenges like all members of the Chinese Canadian community. The theatrical productions necessarily relied on community infrastructure, and the performers formed social connections, and even started families. The most famous such family connection was that of the Canadian writer Wayson Choy, whose biological father, as he found out as an adult, was a member of a Cantonese opera troupe (Choy 2001).<sup>5</sup>

At Chinese theatres, audiences of hundreds flocked to performances of Cantonese opera, making them the most popular entertainment. The theatres, stars, and opera were a part of the community's history and collective memory: the theatre spaces, a physical focal point for the community; the opera, the familiar musical utterance; the exquisite costumes, an elegant and glorious form of self-image; and the stories and legend long cherished and retold in many forms. They constituted the community's sense of cultural self. As Paul Gilroy noted, "Music and its rituals can be used to create a model whereby

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4 For Chinese actors' regular return to Canada to maintain domiciled status, see Rao (2017, chapter 2). The importance of Chinese legal brokers in Canadian immigration control before the Second World War is the subject of a fascinating study; see Mar (2010).

5 Choy's memoir is filled with accounts of Chinese opera and theatre experiences in Vancouver. Only at the age of fifty-six, long after his parents were dead, did Choy learn that he was adopted and his birth father was an opera singer.

identity can be understood neither as a fixed essence nor as a vague and utterly contingent construction to be reinvented by the will and whim of aesthetes, symbolists, and language gamers” (Gillroy 1993, 102).<sup>6</sup> Gilroy’s notion aptly describes the rich complexity of the relationship between the opera theatres and Chinese community’s identity and self-image.

Inside the theatre, familiar stories and legends were actualized by real characters, and formed the basis for classics of Cantonese operas. The opera plots were imbued with a traditional hierarchy of moral order and social values. Not surprisingly, then, opera performances were regular features in community gatherings, both for the enchanting music and virtuoso performances, and for their important function of reinforcing shared values in the communities. The arias or songs were coupled with verses and lyrics that were close to the heart and were musical utterances for many, whether labourers, middle-class shop owners, wealthy merchants, or young adults and family workers. Few other music genres had the power of Cantonese opera to transform, amaze, and serve as the perfect conduit of feeling and emotion for early Chinese Canadians.

### NEW IMAGE OF CHINESE THEATRE AND ACTRESS IN THE 1920S

Despite the important role of Cantonese opera, the portrayal of Soo Lum Mark in this 1922 *Toronto Daily Star* article was still remarkable, especially as it came from a prominent English media outlet. In the report, her presence in Toronto was not only viewed in a positive light but a contemporary sensibility was also attributed to her. The reporter portrayed Soo Lum Mark as inoculated with Western ideas of independence, and thus—by being trained on a Western instrument—in line with the Western notion of musical talents. The photography by Mr. Lyonde, from a downtown Toronto studio, was also on a par with his other portraits of glitterati in *Toronto Daily Star*. Furthermore, the report emphasized the appeal of Cantonese opera, representing it as classical drama requiring sophisticated skills and competency in both stock materials and improvisation. Soo Lum Mark was featured in the “Woman’s Daily Interest” section, together with a golfer, visual artist, businesswoman, and others. She was made, if still unequivocally foreign, remarkably relatable and even trendy. Presented as well-versed in musical culture of both worlds, she appeared to be even more cosmopolitan than other women featured on the same page. From this portrait, the readers could expect the enjoyable performance of a Chinese opera actress with modern flair, rather than one of incomprehensibility.

Two weeks earlier, the *Christian Science Monitor* published a similarly favourable article, accompanied by a detailed Chinese theatre playbill from 23 June, noting, in particular, the juxtaposition of Chinese opera on a former Yiddish theatre stage in downtown Toronto. Its thoughtful consideration of the musical characteristics was impressive for its time: “The ordinary assumption with regard to Chinese theatrical music is that it is all meaningless noise, but

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<sup>6</sup> In particular, Gilroy’s argument that no matter how traumatic the transatlantic passage had been, the way in which it became an active agent in the production of their counterculture is very relevant and instructive to the current study.

careful attention soon dispels this rash conclusion. Noisy it is for the most part, but to the attentive ear is revealed very subtle gradation of tones and curiously suggestive inner rhythms .... One soon discovers that the actors though stately, move, speak and gesticulate to the minute rhythms of the music. Thus there is a real unity of ensemble .... It seems a very far-drawn simile, but somehow this Chinese opera in its orchestral illusion of phrase and action made one think of Debussy's 'Pelléas et Mélisande.'<sup>7</sup> Certainly the attentive ear implicated here was an enlightened one, likely that of the writer's interlocutor at the theatre or opera troupe. The appreciation transcended the usual cultural barriers. Particularly impressive was the connection to Debussy's opera of symbolism that premiered in the United States only in 1908 (Hamberlin 2011, 128). Debussy's allegiance to the tenets of symbolism in his opera was well known, and so by referencing it the writer underscored the aesthetic of Chinese opera—the genre known as theatre of symbolism.

This reception of a Chinese opera actress and music in the mainstream English newspapers was an important, if quiet, victory for the Chinese community in Canada. Here Chinese theatre was neither seen automatically through the usual racial stereotypes, nor regarded as the quintessential marking of racial differences that populated English media of the nineteenth century. The examples of those earlier denigrating reports were so abundant that they had long been ingrained in the popular imagination. English-language newspapers' depiction of Chinese theatres and performance was usually disparaging, reinforcing the notion of Chinese immigrants as immoral and inferior. Viewed as abhorrent to the norm of European opera and musical entertainment, Chinese theatres were regularly depicted as incomprehensible and queer. Its music in particular was regularly ridiculed and dismissed as noise, reinforcing the notion that Chinese Canadians posed a threat to society. In 1903 Reverend and sociologist Elliott S. Rowe told the *Toronto Star*, "The Chinese are breeders of social and moral impurities, and the fact that no Chinese women are permitted into Canada without an extraordinarily high fee being paid tends to encourage dissolute white women to cater to the vices of the Chinamen."<sup>8</sup> A writer for the *Victoria Daily Colonist* opened a feature article on Chinese theatre in 24 January 1904 dismissively: "There is an awful crash of cymbal on cymbal and the uncanny wail of siren strings. Ah Mee, tragedian, groans and sputters with torn and connecting emotions. The audience, five hundred queue-wearing Asiatics, sit with strained muscles and eyes wide a-slant and staring." The reporter's incomprehension was a common tactic to denote racial inferiority and to underscore the alien nature, a notion frequently associated with Chinese theatre. As such, Chinese theatres as of low morals and unsuitable for normal cultural function fit very well within the narrative of Western imperialism. Such preconceptions came to frame the reception of these earlier Chinese theatres.

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<sup>7</sup> This report included an image of a full playbill, as well as a comprehensive report. For an image of this playbill, see Rao (2017, 276).

<sup>8</sup> Elliott S. Rowe was quoted in a report about Chinese theatres in Victoria, *Toronto Star*, 10 March 1903.

The 1922 image of Chinese opera and actress was a departure from earlier preconceptions, and signalled a different era. The new image benefited from the growing success of Chinese settlement in Canada, which by 1921 reached a population of 39,587 (Henry 1976, 118). After a quarter century as settlers in Vancouver, the Chinese community had secured its place in the city with financial strength, as well as family formation. According to the 1921 census, of its 6,384 Chinese residents, 600 were women, and 500 Chinese children were attending local public schools. And a 1923 missionary report noted that there were 210 Chinese families in the city and 7 per cent of the Chinese population were Canadian born (Ng 2000, 14).<sup>9</sup> Although in 1923 Canada passed the Chinese Exclusion Act, which severely restricted their immigration, the years of growth of Chinese community had already been accompanied by the creation of infrastructure and cultural institutions, as well as increasing connections to mainstream institutions. Leaders of Chinese communities also embraced cultural traditions such as opera as their public face, and deployed it to navigate a period of growing anti-Chinese sentiment at all levels of society. With the intervention of the Chinese Canadian community, Chinese cultural and musical expressions could no longer be easily dismissed as incomprehensible and queer.

Furthermore, the path to the positive perception of Soo Lum Mark and her troupe of 1922 was paved in the previous decade by immense growth of theatres, as well as community infrastructure supporting them, and stellar performers recruited from China. During the 1910s, Chinese theatres in British Columbia had expanded, even with laws limiting the growth of the Chinatown, ie. policies that prevented the Chinese from buying properties outside the Chinatown area. Theatres started producing regular print materials to reach a wider audience, to increase the circulation of theatre news and advertisements, and to enhance their prominence in the community. Theatrical companies established themselves as fully incorporated contemporary businesses. Furthermore, the stages of Chinese theatres in Vancouver saw female opera singers and programming similar to city theatres in Guangzhou and Hong Kong. Cantonese opera also began to enter everyday life through recordings, anthologies, reports, and reviews in Chinese-language newspapers. In short, in the 1910s the modern apparatus of Cantonese opera performance began to be established in Canada, which led to full-fledged theatre operation toward the end of the decade.

This article will consider this period through the study of a Chinese theatrical company active between 1916 and 1918 in Vancouver. Using evidence from the company's daily business receipts, this study provides a window into the performance culture and daily operations during this era. It also contributes to the understanding of Chinese Canadian society in the 1910s, centring upon theatre. The article will close by considering how the 1920s brought together the theatrical success of the 1910s with a new approach to Chinese theatres,

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<sup>9</sup> These figures can be supported by a large number of images in the Chung Collection at the University of British Columbia.

which led to the moment when a Chinese actress's confident appearance in the *Toronto Daily Star* was a matter of course. First, however, we will review the early years of Chinese theatres in the context of cities in which they resided.

## EARLY YEARS OF CHINESE THEATRES IN VICTORIA AND VANCOUVER

Cantonese opera theatres opened almost immediately with the arrival of Chinese immigrants to British Columbia and became a part of the frontier's entertainment life. As historian Haiming Liu noted, pioneer Chinese migrants were men of wealth and ambition. Their arrival in North America signalled the "transnational flow of people, commodities and cultural traditions. Following their footsteps, there would be steady and continuous waves of Chinese immigrants from all social classes" (2015, 9). In Victoria, though the city had been incorporated only in 1862, between 1860 and 1885 five theatres were built within Chinatown's four blocks, tucked into the central part of the community.<sup>10</sup> For example as shown on a 1885 fire map, two were located in Blocks 30 and 29, between Cormorant and Fisgard Streets, recessed from the street, and there was a third, older theatre in Block 24 on Store Street (see figure 2). These theatres typically were of two stories and seated 700, providing much-needed entertainment for the settlement. They were not merely transient or quick-cash businesses. Such a large number of theatres required a reliable supply of theatre professionals, cash flow, and capable actors to attract audiences. They constituted serious investments that met the demand of a fast-growing Chinese community. In 1884, as anti-Chinese sentiment started to grow in Victoria, merchants founded the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association (CCBA) as a means of protection. The Chinese population of the city was 1,767 in 1881 and grew to 3,589 in 1891.<sup>11</sup>

Entertainment was not the only reason for establishing theatres and fostering performance culture in Chinese communities. Notably, a 1903 map shows a joss house across from the theatre, reinforcing the notion that Cantonese opera performance also fulfilled a religious and ritual social function: worship of deities<sup>12</sup> (see figure 3). It was common in southern China for itinerant opera troupes to set up temporary stages in front of the temples, as they were typically hired to perform for the deities. At the same time, the theatre's physical space could perform several functions. Reverend Alexander Brown Winchester of the Chinese Presbyterian Church rented a Chinese theatre to hold Sunday services from December 1893 to February 1894, though the situation was less than ideal, because the service was frequently interrupted by actors preparing for New Year's celebrations (Lee 1998).<sup>13</sup> Paradoxically, then, a

<sup>10</sup> For a detailed study of these theatres see Sebyrk (1999).

<sup>11</sup> These figures were revealed in the Royal Commission Report on Chinese Immigration. See Lei (1998, 198–9).

<sup>12</sup> "Fire Insurance Maps: 1903," Victoria's Chinatown, [http://chinatown.library.uvic.ca/index.html%3Fq=fire\\_insurance\\_maps\\_1903.html](http://chinatown.library.uvic.ca/index.html%3Fq=fire_insurance_maps_1903.html).

<sup>13</sup> Lei's account was in the larger context of missionary work in Chinatown, and no detail was given about the theatre or actors.





Figure 2. Three Chinese theatres, fire insurance map, Victoria, 1885

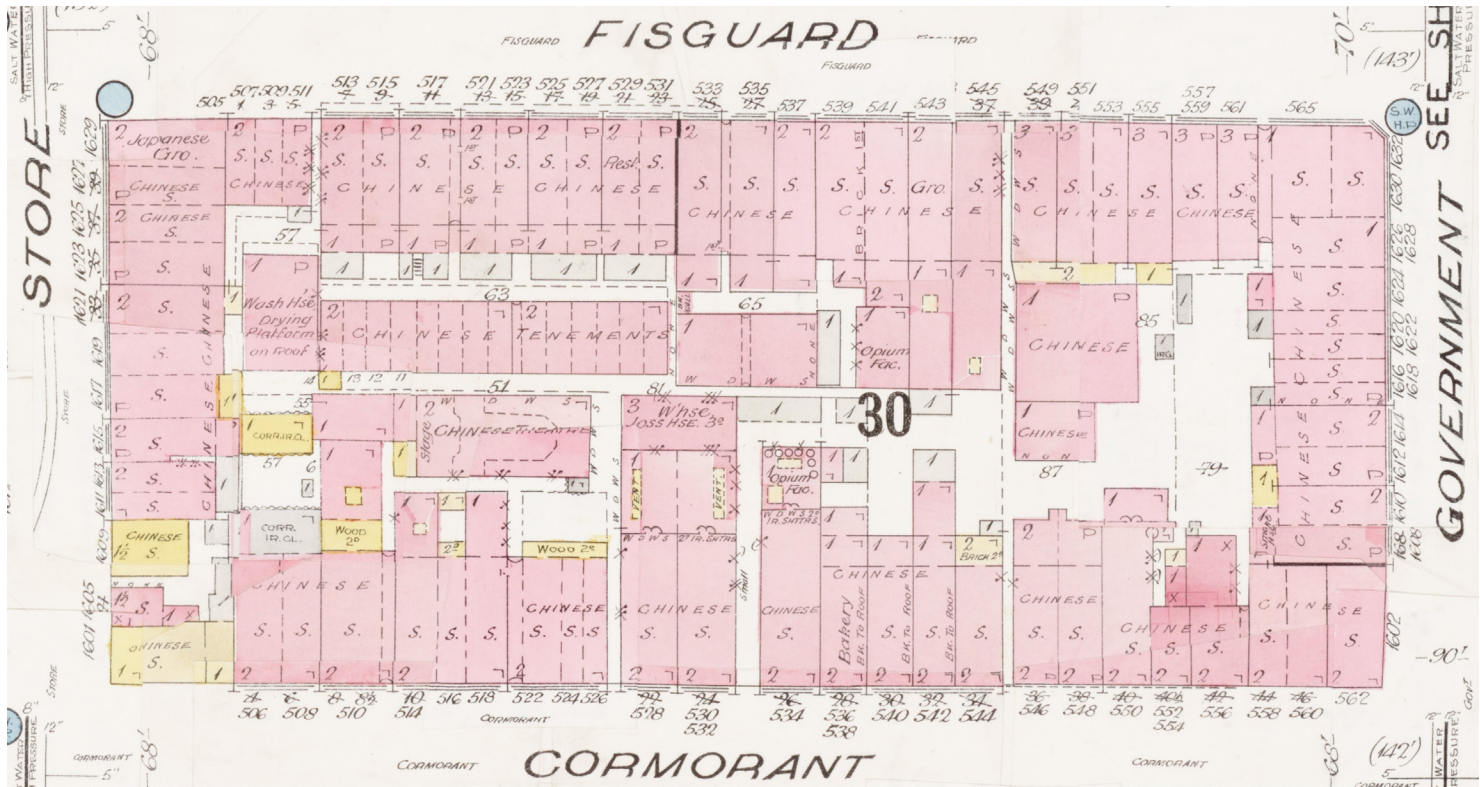


Figure 3. Joss house across from Chinese theatre. Fire insurance map Victoria, 1903

Chinese theatre could play a role in the service of both traditional deities and Christianity.

Today, the names of these theatres in Victoria have been lost, and little is known about their repertoire, performers, etc., except for the buildings and their locations.<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, occasional news reports provided glimpses of their popularity and the prominence of the theatre's space in the community. On the first day of the Chinese New Year, 12 February 1888, for example, the *Victoria Colonist Daily* reported that "two Chinese theatres were crowded to capacity."

At the start of the twentieth century Cantonese opera activities in Victoria were extended to Vancouver as the latter grew to become the largest city in British Columbia. With the advantage of its harbour and location as the terminal station of the newly built Canadian Pacific Railway, Vancouver's Chinese population soon outnumbered that of Victoria and became the primary port on the West Coast of Canada. The first Chinese theatre in this city was built by Yip Sang, a contractor for the CPR and a business titan in Vancouver. He built a 500-seat theatre close to his family building, on Shanghai Alley, as early as 1898, around which time other institutions such as a Chinese hospital and Chinese Methodist Church were also established. (The theatre appears in the Goad's Vancouver map from 1913, showing its central location—see figure 4.) Though the city of Vancouver constrained the ways that the Chinese community could expand north, it grew westwards and by the end of 1900s covered about four city blocks. By the mid-1910s, three Chinese theatres were in operation concurrently within these four blocks. In addition to Yip Sang, two other Chinese Canadian business titans, to borrow historian Lisa Rose Mar's term, erected their theatres as well (Mar 2010, 22). Chang Toy, owner of the Sam Kee Company, built a second theatre in 1913, designed by architect W. H. Chow. It became Sheng Ping Theatre on 536 Columbia Street. A third theatre was built in 1914 by Loo Gee Wing, who already owned a theatre in Victoria. It became Gao Sheng Theatre on 124 East Pender Street. All were within three blocks of one another. Indeed, as historian David Lei noted, most of the buildings standing today in Vancouver's Chinatown were built between the 1910s and the 1920s. (On a later map the theatre is identified at 122–6 East Pender, 580 Shanghai Valley. However 536 Columbia is difficult to locate, as the street number might have changed.)<sup>15</sup>

Despite the continuing rise of anti-Chinese initiatives since the 1880s, such as requiring Chinese to pay an annual head tax and banning Chinese from owning lands, and an anti-Oriental riot of 1907 that assaulted Chinatown in Vancouver, the First World War resulted in labour shortages and demand for Chinese immigrants rose again, especially toward the end of the war. In 1917, employers in BC, Alberta, and Saskatchewan proposed increasing Chinese

<sup>14</sup> Elsewhere I have provided a longer discussion of Chinese theatres during the early period based on newspaper reports and advertisements (Rao 2014).

<sup>15</sup> It is possible to create a map showing these theaters from a map tool Vanmap developed by Vancouver City Archive, using 1913 Goad's Fire Insurance Map (City of Vancouver 2020). However reproduction is not clear enough to demonstrate the spatial relation.

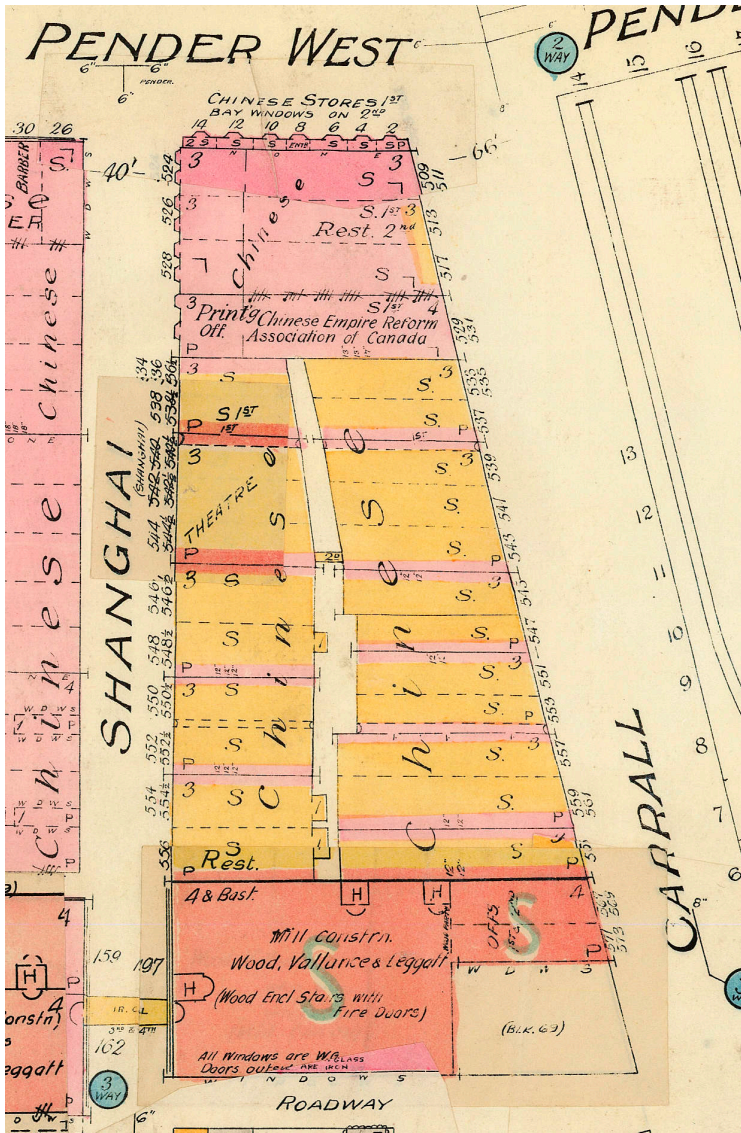


Figure 4. Shanghai Alley Theatre, Vancouver, 1913. Goad's Fire Insurance map

immigration to relieve the labour shortage, and the Chinese population grew. In 1911 the Chinese population in Vancouver was 3,458 and grew to 6,484 in 1921 (Lei 1998, 84).

According to reports in Vancouver's leading Chinese newspaper, *Chinese Times*, in about 1915 the Sheng Ping Theatre hosted the Guo Taiping troupe, while the Qing Fengnian troupe was performing at the Gao Sheng Theatre. On special occasions, performers from different theatres also came together to give gala performances to benefit social causes or organizations. Invariably such joint endeavours conjured up community spirit and were lauded by

reports in the *Chinese Times*. In mid-1916 the paper also noted an endeavour in Vancouver to form a performing troupe Guoming Zhong (Citizen Bell) that pleaded to enlighten and supply the best opera for Chinese immigrants in Canada. It sought to expand the reach of Cantonese opera by taking an eastward tour to Winnipeg, Edmonton, Toronto, and arriving at Montreal by the end of that year. Months after arriving at Montreal, the *Chinese Times* reported (24 April 1916, 25 January 1917), the troupe reaped a large profit from its showing to enthusiastic audiences.

From Victoria to Vancouver, Chinese theatres were deeply integrated to the daily life of Chinese communities. They were a major player in the entertainment of the community. As a part of its cultural institutions, they were also woven into the web of business, leisure, politics, bachelorhood and families in these thriving urban spaces.

### WING HONG LIN THEATRICAL COMPANY AND THE SUCCESS OF THE 1910S

In the fall of 1916 the Wing Hong Lin (aka Yongkang Nian, according to the Mandarin Chinese pronunciation, WHL hereafter) troupe came to perform at Chan Toy's Sheng Ping Theatre and had two seasons of residency (21 November 1916 to 16 May 1917; 5 October 1917 to 2 May 1918) ("Wing Hong Lin Theatre Records," hereafter WHLTR).<sup>16</sup> After an initial success, it folded with a decline in business. The theatrical company left the most complete business records of Chinese theatre in Canada, housed at the Vancouver City Archive and the Special Collection at University of British Columbia. The records include the incorporation of the company, bylaws, minutes of board meetings, daily business receipts of ticket sales, actors' contracts, and miscellaneous receipts (WHLTR). Working from these documents, historian Wing Chung Ng unveiled tension within management of the theatre company, the company's strict policy and practice regarding performers' obligations and payment, and the dramatic fluctuation in theatre income.

The WHL Collection also contains a significant set of documents that could shed new light on the era: 326 daily business receipts. The current study shows that they reveal a great deal about the audiences, community, and performing activities of the troupe that point to the establishment of a significant Cantonese opera scene during the decade of 1910.

By the time WHL arrived in 1916, Vancouver had enjoyed the comings and goings of many Cantonese opera troupes with its three theatres. Nonetheless, WHL was the first known incorporated Chinese theatrical company in Canada. At Sheng Ping Theatre, the WHL troupe performed daily with different programs, except for Sundays, when the Sabbath law was observed and no performance was allowed. On special holidays matinées were also offered. The opera repertoire was drawn from the corpus that had long been established as the classics. With the advancement of printing technology, professional

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<sup>16</sup> Wing Hong Lin Theatre Records, Sam Kee Papers, Add Mss 57r, 566-G-4, City of Vancouver Archives.

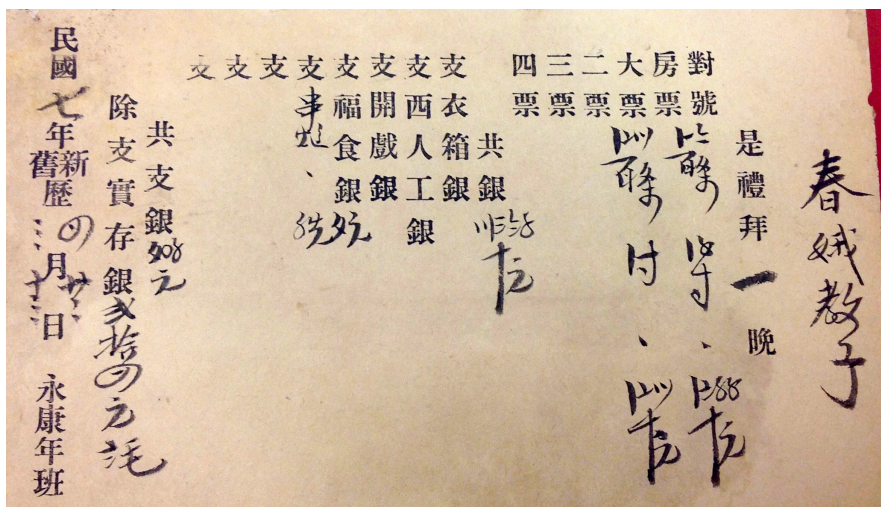


Figure 5. WHL business receipt of 22 April 1918, *Chun'Er Teaching Her Son* (aka *Sanniang Teaching Her Son*)

Chinese printing facilities—equipped with full sets of Chinese lead type—were readily available. The theatre announced its programs through playbills printed daily, with a usual print run of 1,000 copies, which were disseminated to the community at large (WHLTR).<sup>17</sup> The theatre's printing needs were first provided by the *Chinese Times*, then by a print shop Ho Sun Hing founded in 1908.<sup>18</sup> Though few playbills survive, ample business receipts from the print shop confirm the regularity of playbills.

The theatre also printed standard blank sheets for its daily business record; each sheet was filled in ink with a brush pen by bookkeeping staff. These small sheets of newsprint paper, filled with characters and Suzhou numerals, provide the best material existence of the theatre's daily operation. The proceeds and expenses of each performance were recorded, including dates, opera title, ticket prices, and number of tickets sold in different classes. Also recorded were expenses for miscellaneous items ranging from candles, oil, and food, to instrument strings. Figure 5 reproduces the business receipt for 22 April 1918, featuring the classic opera of a family moral drama, *Chun'Er Teaching Her Son*. It shows the total sale of tickets of the evening was \$33.85 (117 tickets at 15¢ and 163 tickets at 10¢) and detailed two expenses totalling \$9.05 (auspicious food \$9 and fire crackers 5¢). With 280 tickets sold, this was a slow evening.

### WHAT DO TICKET SALES REVEAL?

Performing at one of the two larger Chinese theatres in Vancouver, the WHL troupe attracted sizable audiences. Society gathered nightly in the public space

<sup>17</sup> According to the receipts, the print run ranged from 800 to 1,200. But they were mostly for 1,000.

<sup>18</sup> The print shop was closed in 2014 (Mackie 2014).

for operas. Of the receipts surveyed, only 28 per cent recorded sales fewer than 300 tickets, the remaining being generally much larger. In good times, the theatre sold over a thousand seats for one performance, with an average of 470 seats sold daily. These ticket sales reveal the theatre's significance to the urban Chinese community at large. Theatre audiences came from the full spectrum of social classes.

The growing number of Chinese immigrants in Vancouver meant there was increasing support for such an endeavour. Whereas elite merchants were the official sponsors of the theatre, it was the general public that could sway the size of the profit for the theatre. During the first season, the theatre had three classes of tickets, the top two of which cost the same price. Second-class tickets were for the fifty-six box seats, which were frequently sold out, showing regular attendance of the wealthier part of the community and stable support of the theatre. Sale of first-class tickets generally fluctuated with total ticket sales. Yet the sale of the third-class tickets oscillated dramatically, ranging from small numbers, similar to first-class tickets, up to nearly three times that number. Table 1 shows the sales record of a very successful evening in 1916, shortly after the troupe's debut at Sheng Ping Theatre. The price for first- and second-class tickets was 40 cents, with all fifty-six box seats of the second-class tickets sold. But the number of the third-class tickets sold was 2.6 times of that of the first class. It was a good evening.

Table 1. Sales receipts for 25 November 1916

Date		Ticket type	Price (¢)	# tickets	Subtotal (\$)	Total sales (\$)	Total # tickets
25 Nov., Mon.	<i>Diaochan Story</i> (王允獻貂蟬)	1st class	40	271	108.40	305.80	1027
		2nd class	40	56	22.40		
		3rd class	25	700	175.00		

What enticed such a large audience? Though we do not have information on why this evening drew a full house, perhaps the repertoire played a role in enticing the audience. The opera performed on this successful evening was a good example of the historical genre, full of intricate plot twists, a classic story based on Diaochan, a heroine immortalized in classic Chinese literature. After the Han Dynasty ended in 189 A.D., three warlords emerged and introduced the stalemate known as the Three Kingdoms. The tyrannical Dong Zhuo, with the help of his godson Lü Bu, a young warrior, was prevailing. Diaochan was a talented courtesan who assisted the court official Wang Yun in a plot to persuade Lü Bu to kill his godfather. Wang Yun presented Diaochan to Dong Zhuo as a concubine, but at the same time secretly betrothed her to Lü Bu. Diaochan then turned Dong Zhuo and Lü Bu against each other by inciting jealousy between them. The opera included many famous scenes popular among fans, such as the flirtatious scene of Diaochan and Lü Bu's first meeting at a banquet, the melancholy scene of Diaochan's lament to Lü Bu about her destiny of becoming Dong Zhuo's concubine, the famous Fengyi Pavilion scene where as the two professed love for each other, Dong Zhuo appeared. In addition,

there was also Diaochan's dance and song to allure Dong Zhuo, and Wang Yun's song praising women as saviours of the country. Roles of the young belle, young warrior, and middle-aged, bearded warriors have especially prominent parts in this opera. It was a staple repertoire in Cantonese opera that could display the talents of performers new to the community. It was also the kind of tale and folklore passed on in Chinese communities for generations, and the opera's musical and theatrical presentation melded shared cultural memories.

In response to social conditions, rivalries, and competition, or to entice audiences, theatres adjusted ticket prices frequently, ranging from as high as 50/35¢ for the more expensive shows to as low as 15/10¢ for the bargain ones. Table 2 shows the proceeds of a less successful evening from a period of low prices in January 1917. Lower prices, however, did not boost sales of the third-class tickets (276), which was similar to total sales of the higher-priced tickets (204 and 56). The WHL troupe's performance of comic opera this evening probably did not have the same draw as its other performances. Theatre business was volatile, nevertheless. Three days later, a new actor arrived. Ticket prices rose promptly and kept pushing upward until they reached \$592 for 961 tickets on 22 January, the Chinese New Year's Eve.

Table 2. Sales receipts for 12 January 1917

Date	Ticket type	Price (¢)	# tickets	Subtotal (\$)	Total sales (\$)	Total # tickets	
12 Jan., Fri.	Sale of Horseshoe (賣馬蹄)	1st class	15	204	30.60	66.60	536
		2nd class	15	56	8.40		
		3rd class	10	276	27.60		

The number of tickets sold and ticket prices could change the profit in unpredictable ways. Table 3 compares receipts of 15 and 17 December 1917, when the ticket prices were lowered from 45/35¢ to 35/25¢. Proceeds for both days were similar. Total revenue was deceiving, however, since 17 December was near full capacity, about 180 more viewers in attendance than 15 December. Judging from proceeds alone, one could not tell if the civil opera from the classic *Story of the Red Chamber* was more popular—with 963 tickets sold—than the martial opera *Swords of Three Knights*—with 685 tickets sold. Could the actresses be more stellar than actors in their warrior roles? Or were there other factors?

Table 3. Sales receipts for 15 and 17 December 1917

Date	Ticket type	Price (¢)	# tickets	Subtotal (\$)	Total sales (\$)	Total # tickets	
15 Dec., Sat.	<i>Swords of Three Knights</i> (三俠劍)	1st class	45	324	145.8	272.15	685
		2nd class	35	361	126.35		
17 Dec., Mon.	<i>Story of the Red Chamber</i> (晴雯補裘)	1st class	35	325	113.75	273.25	963
		2nd class	25	638	159.5		



On 15 December, at the rival Shanghai Alley Theatre, the Puruyi troupe held an important event. It was a successful matinee benefit performance commemorating the inauguration of a new organization, Pei Ying Yue Shubao She (Peiying Literature Review Guild), with proceeds of \$210.45, to be donated to the organization (*Chinese Times*, 18, 19 December 1917). The cast included not only thirty members of the Puruyi troupe, but also twenty or more martial arts experts. Festivities went into the evening with a banquet for hundreds, celebrating the founding of this literary branch under the auspices of a leading community organization, Chinese Freemasons. On that day, the Puruyi troupe's benefit performance and the significance of the inauguration ceremony dominated the community's attention, probably affecting negatively the ticket sales of the WHL troupe.

Competing attractions reflected the vibrancy of the theatrical entertainment in the community, as well as the volatility of the theatre business. In general, however, ticket proceeds could bloom dramatically upon the arrival of famous performers. While daily sales receipts included no information on actors, one occasion was an exception: the arrival of Xiaosheng Hui, who played the young scholar/warrior role type on 30 December 1916. During the ten days following his debut, ticket sales were extraordinary: 1,000 and more for four evenings, and 800–900 for another four evenings. The community poured out and kept returning to his performances! Xiaosheng Hui performed young scholar roles and young warrior types, playing the legendary figure of General Xue Pinggui who bid farewell to his wife, the young charismatic Emperor Tang Ming flirting with courtesans, etc. His success also represents the practice of having the WHL troupe form the staple cast of the theatre and integrating famous performers whenever possible to increase its appeal and enhance its reputation.

## POPULAR REPERTOIRE AND RITUAL

The success of WHL might have been due, in no small part, to two recent changes in the Cantonese opera tradition in early twentieth century it adopted: the rise of performance practices associated with city theatre and the appearance of actresses on stage. The practice of programming a different opera each evening became common only for city theatres of Cantonese opera in southern China. Since opera employed plot outlines that used conventional formulaic scenarios, performers and musicians did not need laborious rehearsals to produce an opera. This approach was particularly suitable for Chinese theatres in Vancouver. Furthermore, the practice afforded the theatre the flexibility to control the focus of the storyline on the basis of the strength and size of its cast. With theatres showcasing their talents, the same opera could render very different performances or carry varied titles. Scenes were often said to be strung together to form the plot, using dozens or more scenes. Performers extemporized, to inject their unique humour and pathos into their roles, and to respond to the audience's reaction. When performers added dialogue or improvisation, they used hand gestures to communicate the extemporization with fellow performers and accompanying musicians. Needless to say, this inspired, unexpected

spontaneity in performance of a familiar repertoire was an important part of the excitement in going to theatres.

Some opera titles that were local favourites or were performed brilliantly returned to the stage frequently. Fourteen operas were most popular during the troupe's residency, each of which was given four or more performances. Among them were the young belle's *Shilin Paying Respect at a Pagoda* (from the legend of Madame White Snake); the bearded warrior's *Pinggui Bidding Farewell and Returning Home* (about the historical figure of General Xue Pinggui); romance drama, *Pan Jinlian Trifling with Her Brother-in-Law* (from the novel *Outlaws of the Marsh*); the sentimental *Golden Leaf Chrysanthemum* (from a vernacular ballad songbook *muyu*); and the young belle's *Drunken Empress* (the story of Empress Yang Guifei from the Tang Dynasty).

Some of these operas, as well as others on the program, featured prominent female roles with demanding singing techniques, acting skills, and glamorous stage presence. In southern China actresses were banned on the stage until female troupes began to perform in the early 1910s. They were also seen regularly on the Vancouver stages after the early 1910s, and the new troupe brought stellar actresses as well. Surviving playbills of the WHL troupe show actresses such as Baoyu Quong and Huang Xiaofeng in the cast (WHLTR). The latter followed an itinerary that extended to Havana, and then to San Francisco's Great China Theater in 1925–7. All through the 1910s, the *Chinese Times* published abundant laudatory poems about actresses, confirming their popularity in the community.

Ritual performance was conventional and customary, advertised on playbills for special occasions. A playbill for the Chinese New Year of 1917 showed that actress Baoyu Quong was the lead. The evening began with traditional auspicious ritual playlets: *The Heavenly Maiden Offers a Son* and *The Birthday Greeting from the Eight Immortals*. The *Heavenly Maiden* playlet entailed actresses switching into glamorous costumes in mid-play accompanied by percussion, producing a heightened festive mood. Auspicious playlets such as these were customarily performed during festive and seasonal celebrations to enhance the celebratory atmosphere. They symbolized the prosperity of the community and set the festive mood, before the performance continued with the feature opera of the show.

## COMMUNITY RESPONSE AND CONSTRAINTS

Occupying a large building in the heart of Chinatown, the Sheng Ping Theatre was a public space filled with action, movement, drama, expressive emotion, and laughter every evening. Theatres during this era were involved in many types of activities: recruiting performers, casting roles, selecting opera programs, creating productions, as well as promoting theatre, keeping supplies, managing facilities, and answering to a wide range of community needs, including performing for banquets or participating in political events. Both the visual spectacle and the enchanting music were crucial to the production. As noted on the daily business receipts examined, the theatre regularly

replenished strings for musical instruments or colourful face powder for performers, purchasing stage props such as cloth snakes and oranges, even borrowing costumes and accessories, etc. Performing troupes in Vancouver also relied on local merchants to import and furnish supplies for their theatrical operation. Chinese theatres were a transnational business.

During the 326 performances examined, as reflected by the surviving business receipts, the WHL troupe entertained an immense number of audiences: about 154,000 tickets were sold altogether and around 220 different opera titles were performed. Cantonese opera performance was a regular part of social life, as the Chinese community secured its future in the nascent city of Vancouver with its own schools, hospital, family associations, and even marching band and tennis team. Chinese community leaders and merchants sought to affix the quintessential symbol of Chinese identity—the opera theatre troupe—onto the community infrastructure, much like the rise of social clubs or associations for classical Chinese poetry writing and publication of daily newspapers in Chinese, or the celebration of associations such as the Peiyong Literature Review Guild, founded to offer Chinese books and newspapers to the community. More than any other form of cultural activities, however, opera performance was also a popular addition to formal social gatherings such as memorial events, festive banquets, etc. As a public forum, the theatre took on the most prominent responsibility and primary role in shaping the society. One writer expressed high hopes and his evaluation of Chinese theatres in a series of twelve articles published in the *Chinese Times* in 1917. The writer lamented the lack of public discourse surrounding Chinese theatre opera performance. Pointing to the popular tradition of newspaper columns that reviewed theatrical performances in Peking, Shanghai and other cities, the writer continued,

However, in Victoria and Vancouver, even though there are two Chinese newspapers (*The Chinese Times* and *The New Republic*), four theatres (Shanghai Theatre, Gao Sheng Theatre, Sheng Ping Theatre and Victoria Theatre) and despite the vibrant scene of hundred or more performers present, the capable sponsorship of theatre troupes by affluent owners funding either solely or jointly, the stellar actresses with annual salaries in the thousands (monthly pay for Jin Hao at \$270; Shewang Su at \$380, Suzhou Mei at \$430), the newspapermen would not pen even a word of praise or criticism. What could be the reason? What a pity it is! ... We all should know, it is the theatre's responsibility to encourage what is prudent and moral, and condemn what is evil and malevolent, whereas it is the newspaper's obligation to award the honourable and virtuous, and criticize the ill and corrupt. (*Chinese Times*, 14 March 1917)

In the remaining articles in the series, the author considered the strength and weakness of seven noted actresses, some of whom began performing in Vancouver as early as 1914. The content of these articles was a mixture of praise for the strengths of these actresses—virile martial movement, witty dialogue, tender romantic scenes, expressive voice, etc.—and critiques of their weakness and shortfalls. They were filled with descriptions and remembrances of the author's favourite moments in different operas or prominent actresses' signature

operas, and reminiscences of different troupes that had performed in Vancouver. The series—entitled “Lament of Pear Garden” and sequel—was a rare account of Cantonese opera performance in Vancouver from the audiences’ perspective. The writer demonstrated such dedication to Cantonese opera, attentive to details of performance and nuances of arias, that it was itself an expression of aspiration for the ideal performance or interpretation of the operas. Chinese opera of the early twentieth century was particularly notable for this blurred boundary between amateur, critic, and professional. The series of articles is indicative of the lively performance scene, audience deeply invested in the art form, and notable connoisseurship.

When the sales had dwindled in 1918 the WHL troupe company folded. Daily receipts show that the number of ticket sales had dropped significantly to between 200 and 300, and ticket price fell to the bottom, 15/10¢.<sup>19</sup> The patronage of the Vancouver community sustained the troupe company’s operation for two seasons, after which, unfortunately, the general audience’s enthusiasm for the troupe dissipated. Indeed, as a theatre of the 1910s, the WHL company ran into two significant challenges: recruitment and border-crossing mobility. According to the minutes of the company’s board meeting of 11 November 1917, the theatre suffered from a shortage of actresses. Upon the report that the actress it had hoped to hire, Zhang Shuqin, was snatched up by another theatre—in fact, the Puruyi troupe—the board all agreed to telegram Hong Kong to request an urgent recruitment effort. The larger and more difficult obstacle for its healthy operation was border-crossing. The minutes of 3 April 1918 noted that performers refused to tour the United States, and as such, unless they could find other performing opportunities, which they were free to do, they should be returned to Hong Kong. Even though the United States was an obvious market for expansion, it passed the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882 that severely limited the entry of Chinese. Thus crossing US border became a true hardship for opera performers. Without a vibrant and robust established network of circulation in the Pacific Northwest, rotating the performers and troupes was difficult and the troupe company had little choice but to remain regional and risk losing hold of audiences’ interest over time.

### **ADAPTING TO NEW CHALLENGES—TRANSNATIONAL AND LOCAL**

Discovery of daily business receipts of the 1916–18 troupe sheds light on the everyday existence of Chinese theatres in Vancouver’s fast-growing Chinese community. During the decade prior to 1920, the size of audiences fluctuated greatly, though they remained large. As the public face and primary entertainment in Chinatown, Chinese theatre served the community at large with its offerings. Its stakeholders included its local patrons as well as the larger Pacific Coast transnational theatre community. The success of a theatrical enterprise required complicated manoeuvres with immigration and was necessarily part of a transnational business operation, shaped by its political, economic,

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<sup>19</sup> This was before the influenza pandemic hit Canada in November.

and social forces. At the same time, it was the community, including children, family, and workers, that was key to the theatre's success, as they filled the seats.

The close of the WHL troupe company in early 1918 did not signal the decline of Vancouver's interest in Cantonese opera. Rather, its demise could have been caused by stiff local competition; the newly arrived troupe, Puruyi, was performing at the theatre on Shanghai Alley, featuring actress Zhang Shuqin, whose central role in the benefit performance during the previous December was prominently noted in the newspaper. After all, the closure of one theatre meant new opportunity for another. The urban community was ready for fresh talent. The Puruyi troupe was managed by the Lian An Company (aka Lun On in Cantonese pronunciation), which would soon play a key role in reopening the market of Cantonese opera performance in United States. It became the leading force of the 1920s renaissance—the first Cantonese opera troupe to enter the United States in the twentieth century and re-establish Chinese theatre in San Francisco in 1922. (The U.S. Immigration Bureau was newly agreeable to admitting Chinese actors with heavy bonds and limited stay.) Notably, Lun On Company's entry began a successful decade of Cantonese opera performances in North America, and the company was the precursor of the Great China Theatre of San Francisco founded in 1925.<sup>20</sup>

In Vancouver, after WHL left, Sheng Ping Theatre did not dim its lights for long. It continued to host waves of opera performers arriving from China, or from elsewhere in North America. Cantonese opera performers continued to move between Victoria and Vancouver, as well as cities of proximity. A new theatre would also open outside of Chinatown, Le Wannian at the Empire Theatre on Main Street. Chinese theatres would promote their shows regularly with daily advertisements in the *Chinese Times*, and the sale of Cantonese opera records would increase quickly. The performers also continued to apply their skills and talents, participating in community functions, serving as spokespersons for social causes, and leading fundraising events. With the advent of the large performing network of Cantonese opera in the 1920s, Vancouver became a nodal point, hosting some of the most famous performers en route to leading U.S. theatres.

The early 1920s success was helped by the rise of a new self-image of Chinese cultural brokers. Several historians have observed that the 1920s saw a new type of “brokering” and leaders in North American Chinese communities, with more active self-representation.<sup>21</sup> As Chinese merchants of the early twentieth century expanded their business to cater to a clientele outside Chinatown, they also pulled together collective resources and hired lawyers to challenge racial discrimination in the courts and protect their rights. The well-established theatrical practice supported by community infrastructure in the previous decade was given additional energy with new cultural brokering.

<sup>20</sup> For the history of Lun On and Great China Theatre, see Rao (2017, chapters 6 and 7).

<sup>21</sup> See Lei (1998), Mar (2010, 72). Although Mar's study focuses on the interpreters, she paints a general picture of the third generation of Chinese brokers and cultural leaders as charismatic rather than traditional.

Meanwhile, anti-Chinese sentiment continued to grow: 1922 was in the midst of heightened anti-Chinese sentiment in Canada. A version of Chinese exclusion legislation was on its way to being passed in the following year, effectively banning most forms of Chinese immigration. The 1923 Chinese Immigrant Act was a severe blow to the Chinese Canadian community; in the subsequent three decades the Chinese population would gradually decrease in Canada. Paradoxically though, the increased exclusionist sentiment and government-sanctioned racial discrimination intensified, rather than diminished the importance of cultural institutions such as Chinese theatres. Cultural means could well be the most effective ways for the community to regain its integrity and respectability in the face of racial discrimination. One strategy for the newer generation of cultural brokers was to connect to and communicate with the mainstream community in meaningful ways: as cultural interlocutor. At the theatre, the strategy included ensuring that English media were fully informed of these theatrical endeavours. To that aim, it could print bilingual playbills, as another Vancouver troupe did when it went to perform in Seattle's Orpheum Theater in 1923 (Rao 2017, chapter 7). The *Toronto Star* article accompanying Soo Lum Mark's photo was a successful publicity piece. As a member of the Le Qianqiu Troupe that was heading eastward—readying itself for entry to Boston—Soo Lum Mark was given the platform of a cultural interlocutor. Her image fitted well with that of a celebrity in English media, the text and image aimed to create a buzz about her.

Generally, the Chinese Exclusion Act in Canada did not seem to directly hinder the mobility of the performers, who were still given resident domicile status, and many arrived from China and moved on to the United States. The new border-crossing capability created in the early 1920s also gave Cantonese opera troupes a better chance to thrive in North America for a longer period of time. Actresses such as Soo Lum Mark thus had the opportunity to become not only cosmopolitan and trans-Pacific, but also mobile and transnational, crossing borders in North America to pursue performing possibilities.<sup>22</sup> Her name would continue to appear on the playbills of New York and San Francisco.<sup>23</sup> She, together with many other successful Cantonese opera performers, made an indelible impression on Chinese Canadian communities. Furthermore, a second generation of Chinese Canadians continued to be born, and cultural institutions such as Chinese theatres were kept alive.

Social changes were often reflected inside the Chinese theatres as well. As museum curator April Li notes in her book on the treasure trove of Cantonese opera costumes at the Museum of Anthropology in Vancouver, "The operas reflected the evolving social trends [such that] female characters began appearing in tight sequined dresses and male characters in three-piece suits,

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<sup>22</sup> Many Cantonese opera actresses enjoyed transnational mobility as trans-Pacific cosmopolitan performers during this time, among them Zhang Shuqin, Li Xuefang, Mudan Su, and Guan Yinglian, all of whom performed in Canada as well as United States. Their gender roles both on and off stage contributed to the mobility and influence on North American communities (Rao 2011).

<sup>23</sup> A picture of Soo Lum Mark can be seen on the playbill of 3 October 1926, Mandarin Theater, San Francisco. The playbill is reproduced in Rao (2017, 105).

and the musicians picked up Western instruments such as the violin and saxophone. Stage designers painted realistic city scenes, airplanes, and Neoclassical mansions. As a flourishing global phenomenon, Cantonese opera was at the forefront of visualizing the new identities and migrant subjectivities that emerged during this formative era” (Liu 2019, 3).

At the Vancouver City Archive, among the business records of the WHL was another significant item of Chinese theatre: a blueprint for the alteration of Sheng Ping Theatre dated 30 November 1934, by Townley and Matheson Architects (WHLTR). By this time live performance of Cantonese opera was no longer the single major public entertainment in the Chinese community, though it still drew great interest, both in viewership and amateurism. More significantly, however, it was the era of nascent sound film. The first Chinese talkies in Cantonese were produced and released in 1933 by companies of Hong Kong and China and by the Grandview Film Company in the United States, mainly featuring Cantonese opera stars and stories. The blueprints showed theatre alterations to accommodate the new fluidity between the opera stage and silver screen. The plans preserved two stage doors at the back of the stage—following Cantonese opera tradition, the “hudu men” designed for the entry and exit of performers—but added a full silver screen to the stage. They also removed seats at the rear of the balcony to construct a projector room. A newly designed box office and facade of the theatre were also included in the drawing. The blueprints of Sheng Ping’s renovation indicates the transition of Chinese theatre into the new era. Cantonese opera theatres, as physical space, would house more Chinese families, second-generation Chinese Canadians, such as Wayson Choy, and opera lovers.<sup>24</sup> Cantonese opera would be continued through amateur groups, who sponsored visiting troupes of professional performers from China, and produced their own performances. Inside the theatres, however, the community members were mesmerized afresh by their favourite singers—on the silver screen.

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<sup>24</sup> An analysis of the influence of Chinese theatre on Wayson Choy can be found in Rao (2017, 4–7). The influence of Chinese theatre on second-generation immigrants in North America is indelible and often complicated (Rao 2016).

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## ABSTRACT

Opera theatre forms an important part of Chinese Canadian cultural history. Since first appearing in Victoria in the 1860s, Chinese theatres were woven into the community’s everyday life, performing Cantonese opera, the regional genre known to the majority of Chinese immigrants who came from the Pearl River Delta of southern China. A brief survey of historical city maps from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century shows their central role in Chinese Canadian community of the Pacific Northwest. Recent discovery of a Chinese theatrical company’s daily business receipts provides a window into the performance culture and daily operations of a Chinese theatre between 1916 and 1918 in Vancouver. This vibrant period of the 1910s paved the way for full-fledged theatre operation in the following decade that brought about a new era of Chinese opera performance in Canada.

## RÉSUMÉ

L’opéra constitue une part importante de l’histoire culturelle sino-canadienne. Dès leur apparition à Victoria dans les années 1860, les théâtres chinois faisaient organiquement partie de la vie quotidienne de la communauté, pour laquelle ils programmaient des opéras cantonnais, genre régional et familier pour les immigrants chinois de la région du Delta de la Rivière des Perles dans le sud de la Chine. Un survol des cartes historiques de villes de la fin du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle et du début du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle illustre leur rôle central dans la communauté sino-canadienne du Nord-Ouest Pacifique. La découverte récente des comptes journaliers d’une compagnie théâtrale chinoise nous donne un accès inédit à la culture de performance et aux opérations quotidiennes d’un théâtre chinois de Vancouver entre 1916 et 1918. La période florissante des années 1910 a préparé le déploiement complet de l’activité théâtrale des décennies suivantes, qui ont contribué à l’avènement d’une nouvelle ère pour la performance de l’opéra chinois au Canada.

## BIOGRAPHY

Nancy Yunhwa Rao is professor of music at Rutgers University. Her work bridges musicology, music theory, Chinese opera and Sinophone studies. She has published on the use of musical gestures, singing, and percussion patterns of Beijing opera in contemporary music by composers of Chinese origin. Her essay “Ruth Crawford’s Imprint on Contemporary Composition” won the best article award in American music from the Society for American Music in 2009. Rao’s recent book, *Chinatown Opera Theater in North America*, has received three book awards, from the American Musicological Society, the Society for American Music, and the Association for Asian American Studies, and a Certificate of Merit from the Association for Recorded Sound Collection.