

Traditional theater in the modern world: Cantonese opera in South China and the Diaspora, 1860-1945; South China: Themes in local and transnational History

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This application seeks a Fulbright award (Program #2096) to undertake research and teaching in Hong Kong during 2012-2013. The two parts of this proposal draw on my current research on the social history of Cantonese opera, and my expertise as a historian of modern China specializing on issues of cultural institutions, identity formation, and overseas migration. Given the emphasis of the program on collaborative research as required by the host, the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK), about 80% of the grant will be dedicated to research and 20% to teaching.

### Research – Traditional Theater in the Modern World

Scholars studying traditional Chinese theaters have long identified their favorite subjects: the classical drama of *chuanqi* and *Kunqu* under the patronage of the literati, and the revered Peking opera much celebrated in the last century as the country's "national" art (e.g. Birch 1995, Lu, 2001, Swatek 2002; Arlington 1930, MacKerras 1972, Yeh 2004, Guy 2005, Shen 2005, Goldstein, 2007). More recent theatrical formations like Cantonese opera and other regional genres have received serious attention only in the last thirty years. The modest literature on Cantonese opera consists of, first of all, the study of ethnomusicologists, notably Bell Yung (1989) and his student Sau Yan Chan (1991, 1999). These studies offer an in-depth understanding of the performance contexts, the music, and the improvisation techniques of this form of cultural production. Although confined to contemporary Hong Kong, anthropological field studies, pioneered by Barbara Ward (1979, 1981) and continued in the hands of Gregory Guldin (1992) and Kevin Latham (1996, 2000), are full of insights that illuminate the ritual practices and cultural symbolisms on and off stage. Only in the 1990s has painstaking historical research – including the collection of documents, artifacts, and personal interviews – begun in earnest by local scholars in the Guangzhou and Hong Kong area (e.g. Lai 1993, Liu and Sinn 1995, Lai 2001, Luo 2007). In recent years, foreign-trained scholars, many based outside of China, have joined the effort to reconstruct the history of Cantonese opera by focusing on its local development in South China as well as its extensive travels overseas (Rao 2000, 2002 and 2011, Ho 2005, Yung 2006, Ng 2005-6 and 2009, and Lei 2006 and 2011). In October 2009, UNESCO inscribed Cantonese opera as an "intangible cultural heritage" on its prestigious world list, and the reception of international recognition at once generated much excitement and critical awareness. As a result, across the Pearl River Delta region, especially in Hong Kong, Guangzhou, and Macao, interest in historical preservation, public education, and academic research on Cantonese opera has reached a new height. This proposal will make a timely contribution to this collective effort.

As a keen observer and participant in some of these recent developments, I propose two components on my research agenda to advance historical scholarship on Cantonese opera. The first part is a collaborative project on the Taiping Theater Collection housed at the Hong Kong Heritage Museum in Shatin. The Taiping Theater was in operation from 1904 to 1981, and was a major venue for Cantonese opera performances in Hong Kong before the Pacific War. The

granddaughter of the original founder donated the collection to the Heritage Museum in 2006. I was one of a handful of scholars who were given immediate access to review the collection. Its content is exceedingly rich, including over 300 copies of play scripts used by the resident opera troupe in the 1930s, historical photos of the owners, the business partners, and the principal actors, and a small number of opera costumes and stage paraphernalia. The largest and most notable portion of the collection consists of commercial documents, ranging from traditional apprenticeship agreements, employment contracts, and loan receipts signed by actors, to business correspondences between the management of the theater on the one hand, and related business entities and government departments on the other. There are also bulletins, playbills, and other publicity materials, as well as ledgers, receipts, and account journals, detailing the operation of the theater. Yet another fascinating aspect of the collection is the valuable information it yields regarding this Hong Kong theater house's dealings with Guangzhou, Macao, and places in Southeast Asia, especially Malaya and Singapore, indicative of the trans-regional and transnational circulation of Cantonese opera in this period. Compared to other major collections in museums and research libraries – such as the Guangdong Cantonese Opera Museum in Foshan (a neighboring municipality of Guangzhou), the Anthropology Museum at the University of British Columbia, and the Ethnic Studies Library at the University of California Berkeley – the Taiping Theater Collection offers us a much fuller picture with valuable documentations and new insights on the formative period of Cantonese opera as this originally rural based traditional genre developed into a highly commercialized popular entertainment in the urban theater.

Recognizing the importance of this collection, a number of researchers – including Yung Sai Shing (Chinese Studies, National University of Singapore), Li Siu Leung (Cultural Studies, Lingnan University, Hong Kong), Yu Siu Wah (Music, Chinese University of Hong Kong), and myself (History, UT San Antonio) – have mapped out a collaborative effort to utilize and publicize it. Yung Sai Shing has taken the lead in contacting a team of about 7-8 scholars who have worked on the collections from a variety of disciplinary perspectives (including architecture and museum studies, in addition to those represented by the core group above). We plan to have a preliminary workshop in Hong Kong in the winter of 2011-12. A successful Fulbright application will allow me to assume the responsibility in organizing a conference in early 2013, and to finalize the collection of papers into a single volume publication. This collection of essays will seek to examine not only the significant role of the Taiping Theater in the cultural history of Hong Kong but also to capture the underlying features of Cantonese opera as a commercialized entertainment in an urban context. The Heritage Museum is considering issuing a companion catalogue of the Taiping Theater Collection with write-ups on select items based on input from our team of scholars (See Yau 1992 for an earlier catalogue published by the predecessor of the Heritage Museum).

The second component on the research agenda pertains to the final revision of a historical monograph on Cantonese opera from the mid-nineteenth century to the Pacific War. Adopting a social history approach, this study tries to unveil the dynamics of Cantonese opera as a cultural institution in constant interaction with the historical environment (Cox and Kasten 1997). The book is organized into three parts. Part I charts the rise of this traditional Southern Chinese theatrical genre, which began in its home region as a lowly peripatetic occupation with troupes performing on makeshift stages in temple courtyards and rural market fairs. Focusing on the operation of theater companies, the study delineates Cantonese opera's expansion into a

commercialized entertainment in the theater houses of Guangzhou and Hong Kong after 1900. This process of urbanization shows how a traditional art form negotiated its entry into the orbits of popular entertainment – and the accompanying modern media such as radio, gramophone, and movies – and demonstrated remarkable resilience (Gerhard 1998, Stock 2003, Yung 2008). Part II examines the opera theater in the city as a contentious public space where the local authorities routinely asserted control in the interest of social order, and where the emergent nationalist ideologies in China repeatedly questioned the legitimacy and viability of regional culture. The efforts mounted by Cantonese opera to withstand these challenges in the home region are underscored. Part III places Cantonese opera on a broad global canvas by tracing the itineraries of opera companies and actors to Chinese immigrant communities in Southeast Asia and North America. Hitherto much overlooked and unmapped, the transnational circuits added vitality as well as new dimensions to this evolving theatrical genre even as the performance refashioned the identities and enriched the lives of many in the diaspora.

The research for this monograph has been conducted at archives and libraries around the Pacific for over a decade. It has received funding and support from a variety of sources, including my home institution, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation for International Scholarly Exchange, and the Centre for Asian Studies at Hong Kong University. I have presented findings from this project in fifteen conference papers, mostly delivered at national and international venues, in the United States, Canada, Hong Kong and Singapore. At the time of this application, I have drafted five of the eight chapters and I plan to finish the remaining three chapters by the spring of 2012. I propose to use about a quarter of the research time (i.e. 20% of the total Fulbright award) to revise the manuscript before submitting it to the publisher. This monograph will appear as the first book-length study of the history of Cantonese opera in English language.

The Chinese University of Hong Kong will be an ideal host for my proposed research because of its longstanding commitment and leadership in promoting academic research and teaching of Chinese music and traditional theater. Since the late 1980s, the Music Department at CUHK has emphasized Cantonese opera as a focus of research activities. I am familiar with its research programs, having served as an external reviewer in programmatic assessment, contributed to its publications (Ng and Chan 2007, Ng 2008), and participated in its conferences (I keynoted at its international conference in 2007). The Music Department hosts regular workshops for the public and its conferences are noted for the success in bridging the divide between the academic and the performance communities. At a time when local history and culture have aroused growing public awareness and interest, other tertiary institutions in Hong Kong have also developed programs to sponsor academic research and public education of Cantonese opera, especially the Department of Cultural Studies at Lingnan University, and the Faculty of Education at the University of Hong Kong. Moreover, the opportunity to network with fellow scholars will not be limited to Hong Kong as its convenient location will facilitate collaboration with Chinese scholars in Guangzhou, such as Ching May Bo and Kang Bocheng at Zhongshan University. Last but not least, as a current museum expert advisor (2010-2012) appointed by the Department of Leisure and Cultural Services, Hong Kong Government, I am confident that I will continue to receive full support from the Heritage Museum and its peer institutions in my work.

## Teaching – South China: Themes in Local and Transnational History

My expertise on the history of Cantonese opera and Chinese migration history informs the teaching portion of this proposal. The appended course outline on Cantonese opera is developed specifically for the Fulbright application. The course seeks to offer a historical overview of Cantonese opera from its inception as a performance genre in Guangdong, and examine its evolution within the context of local culture and society. A look at the course catalog of the Music Department at CUHK suggests that this course will be a welcome addition to the course offering at the upper-division level. By modifying the reading list and placing more emphasis on underlying concepts and questions of historiography, the course can also be adapted into a reading/research seminar for the postgraduate programs. I am keenly aware of the opportunity for students to attend live performances on field trips, to interview contemporary practitioners, and to conduct research on material artifacts and documents in the Music Department's own collections and at various local museums. These hands-on learning activities will complement lectures and classroom discussion.

The second course I propose to teach is one on "The Global Chinese," an examination of the migration history of the Chinese over the last 500 hundred years. The course is part of a regular rotation at my university; it is scheduled for the spring semester of 2012. Given the interdisciplinary nature of the topic and my eclectic approach, the course can be offered through the Department of History or the Department of Anthropology at CUHK. Both departments feature scholars with expertise on the topic of the Chinese Diaspora such as Leung Yuen Sang, Choi Chi Cheung, and Tan Chee Beng. The proposed syllabus (appended) can be modified to give it a sharper disciplinary focus, or to concentrate on a particular period, in order to fulfill specific programmatic needs.

Both courses are eminently related to the history and society of Hong Kong: Cantonese opera being an indelible part of Hong Kong culture and local identity, and Hong Kong being a historical gateway for Chinese migration activities ever since the mid-nineteenth century. Both subjects are of obvious importance to the people and society of Hong Kong. As a former Hong Kong resident and an American scholar, it will be a privilege and an honor to make a contribution to my native place in the arena of higher education. My fluency in Cantonese will allow me to develop rapport with students and colleagues. I will be a highly effective cultural ambassador of my country in Hong Kong.

In closing, a Fulbright award will be a significant milestone in any educator's professional career. Given my personal background, academic credentials, and research interests, this award will be the opportunity of a life time for me. Not only will I finish a major piece of scholarship in my field, I will be in a position to facilitate a collaborative research project and forge strong relationships with colleagues in the Asia Pacific region. The experience will also be highly valuable for my home institution in terms of cultivating international links and strengthening its profile to garner recognition for Tier I research intensive status. On a personal level, I will be eager to act as an educational ambassador to promote the United States in general and UTSA in particular as a desirable destination for study abroad, graduate school, and other professional experience.