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Cantonese Opera Troupes in Southeast Asia

Political Mobilizations, Diaspora Networks, and Operatic Circulation, 1850s–1930s

This article examines the transnational activities of the Cantonese operas that traveled constantly from native hometowns in Guangzhou and Hong Kong to ports and cities of Southeast Asia by using diasporic linkages and networks. By consulting Chinese local newspapers, oral histories, and biographies, I argue for an emic view that foregrounds diasporic mobility and diversity in the production of political awareness and operatic knowledge. The article negates the earlier colonial ethnographic gaze that constantly rendered Chinese immigrants and their operas as exotic, uncivilized, and primitive. Furthermore, the unique traveling experiences in Southeast Asia nurtured important Cantonese opera performers, whose "Nanyang fame" circulated back to the motherland and was greatly celebrated by domestic audiences. The article re-evaluates the operation of transnational networks formed and developed through opera troupes' political mobilizations, commercial tours, and the circulation of operatic aesthetics. By emphasizing a circular and transnational angle, this article gives agency to the performers and troupes that helped Cantonese operas to transform and take root in heterogeneous diasporic contexts.

Keywords: Cantonese opera troupes—1911 Revolution—opera tours—Nanyang fame

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Instigated by European colonialism and global imperialism, the latter half of the nineteenth century witnessed unprecedented volumes of Chinese overseas migration, which shaped the outlooks of the Chinese diasporas in Southeast Asia. The need for cheap labor increased exponentially following the expansion of European colonies in Southeast Asia. In these alien colonies, Chinese immigrants were able to structure and mobilize themselves around different communal organizations channeled through native-place ties, lineages, and dialects (Li 1995; Kuhn 2008; Yen 2008). Accompanying the immigrants from southern China, opera troupes traveled overseas to perform for their fellow townsmen, who formed various settlements in Southeast Asia. They brought along with them various *fangyan xi / difang xi* (dialect or regional opera) performances, which constituted an important part of their identity, heritage, and social memory as rooted in a romanticized ancestral land.

Dialect operas belonged to the Chinese *xiqu* (classic operas) that evolved from ancient China and formed their own regional aesthetic styles distinguished by plays, choreography, and languages for singing and dialogue. Each speech or linguistic group brought its own dialect operas from its native place to Southeast Asian diasporas, with *Yueju* (Cantonese operas), *Chaoju* (Chaozhou operas), *Minnanxi* (Hokkien operas), *Hainan xi* (Hainanese operas), and *Hanju* (Hakka operas) forming significant parts of the diasporic Chinese everyday popular entertainment.[1] It has been widely held that Chinese dialect operas left impressive traces in Chinese temples, as they formed an essential part of the Chinese ritual ceremonies conducted for sacred occasions, such as deities' birthdays (Perris 1978; Tan 1980; Ward 1979; Sutton 1990). In Singapore, these ritual operas mostly took place in the vacant spaces either in front of Chinese temples or along the streets, therefore they are also referred to as "street operas" or are sometimes rendered with the local Malay term *wayang*s (Lee 2009).

In understanding the natal connection that sustained Chinese diasporic cultural practices, such as dialect opera performances, it is necessary to invoke Philip A. Kuhn's famous conceptualization of "corridor." By corridor Kuhn refers to a channel of connections that keep the migrant in a meaningful relationship with the old country, or old village, lineage, and province (Kuhn 2008, 49). It is the corridor that linked the diasporas and the places of origin in order to maintain one's Chineseness. Alternatively, Adam McKeown (1999) calls for a paradigmatic shift to address the fluidity and diversity of the Chinese diasporas by attending to issues of links, flows, and networks.

Scholars also employ the term "circulation" to argue for mutually constitutive multidirectional interactions among diverse diasporas. Such a focus has reshaped the understanding of diaspora networks in significant ways (Tagliacozzo and Chang 2011). Plenty of works have proven how multidirectional networks built and developed by Chinese merchants, clans, speech-group associations, and lineages facilitated the flows of capital and the expansion of Chinese business across different territories (Nonini and Ong 1997, 3–36).[2]

More recently, there have been efforts to understand Chinese theater and performances through the lens of transnational cultural networks. In studying the Hokkien operas, both Caroline Chia (2019) and Josh Stenberg (2019) trace the operatic influences from multiple sites of cultural production that incorporate the Chinese native-place roots (southern Fujian), local diasporic practice (Indonesia, Singapore, and Taiwan), and regional circulation in Southeast Asia. Different from the migration routes of the Hokkiens, the demographics of the Cantonese immigrants would depict a contrastingly different pattern of cultural interactions along the migrant corridor of Guangzhou and Hong Kong, Southeast Asia, and the Pacific Rim. Wing Chung Ng's work traces the transnational circulation of Cantonese theater troupes that traveled from Guangzhou and Hong Kong via Southeast Asia and finally to the Pacific Rim (Ng 2015). Due to the pre-eminence of Cantonese migrants in North America, Cantonese operas are also studied as important cultural heritage of Chinese Americans and key sites to examine their ethnic identity (Lei 2006; Rao 2017).

This article engages with such recent scholarship in transnational history and the cultural transformation in the Chinese diasporas through a historical study of Cantonese opera troupes in Southeast Asia from the 1850s to the 1930s. It starts with an analysis of early ethnographic descriptions about the sociocultural life of the Chinese immigrants in Southeast Asia. I unpack the discursive constructs in early ethnographies that adopted enlightenment theory to cast Chinese opera performances as a primitive tradition: the Chinese community was pervaded by vices, which hence justified the need for colonial interference. Nonetheless, these accounts did give a glimpse of the everyday cultural practices of the Chinese immigrants and testify to the prevalence of Cantonese opera performances in Chinese diasporas.

Extant studies on Cantonese operas have argued for a global and migratory turn, whereby the operatic knowledge was transmitted through a transpacific network, encompassing San Francisco, Vancouver, New York, Honolulu, and Havana (Liao 2019, 280). Going beyond earlier scholarship, this article postulates that by conducting transnational opera tours from Guangzhou and Hong Kong to towns and ports of Southeast Asia, Cantonese opera troupes also generated operatic aesthetic innovations that in turn circulated back to the motherland. The circular angle defies the Sino-centric point of view that regards Chinese diasporas as passive recipients of the cultural influences from the center. It gives agency to mobile opera practitioners and revolutionaries, who helped Chinese performing art to thrive at the margins of the mother country. The one-way hierarchical cultural diffusion or dominance was henceforth replaced by a cross-cultural interaction (Manning 1996, 771–82).

Early ethnographic gazes

Since the latter half of the nineteenth century, traveling officials, diplomats, and merchants sent by European companies, courts, and Chinese governments had shown a growing interest in writing about their encounters with Southeast Asia. These ethnographic writings, although implicated with Orientalist constructs, offered invaluable sources to recover the everyday life and cultural practices of the local Chinese immigrants. Importantly, these writings were preoccupied with the eminence of Chinese opera performances that were held frequently at Chinese communal occasions, such as festivals and ritual celebrations.

Europeans were particularly amazed by the dazzling opera performances. However, they could hardly make distinctions about the diverse regional genres as patronized by different speech groups. Charles Wilkes, Commander of the United States Exploring Expedition to Singapore in 1842, noticed that Chinese theatrical exhibitions were happening simultaneously in many places in erected open sheds. "The dialogue was in a kind of recitative with an accompaniment performed by beating with two small sticks on the bottom of a copper kettle of the shape of a coffee-pot. . . . The dresses of the actors were very rich, and the females were represented by males or boys." The combat scenes appeared to be most attractive, as Wilkes found them hard to be surpassed, either in muscular action or agility (Wilkes 1984, 15–16).

J. D. Vaughan (1825–1891), a colonial official who spent most of his life in the Straits Settlements (Singapore, Penang, and Malacca), had a more profound understanding of the Chinese community and their associated sociocultural life. He made several important observations specifically regarding Chinese theatrical performances in the colony. First and foremost, Vaughan made clear distinctions between opera performances staged for ritual purposes and secular entertainment. He called the latter ones "domestic plays" that were more intelligible and replete with fun. They were so splendid that not only Chinese liked to watch, but also sometimes Europeans would make up parties to visit the theater. Second, he made important comments about the traveling Chinese opera troupes, as he observed that "besides these fixed companies there are itinerant companies who perform on hastily erected stages before audiences who stand in the open air unsheltered from wind and rain" (Vaughan 1971, 86). Third, the religious function of Chinese opera performances seemed to be most straightforward to Europeans. As Vaughan pointed out, Chinese theatricals were always related to their rituals and religious functions. As he observed, in front of every Chinese temple there was a large flagged square surrounded by a high wall, in which temporary stages were erected for theatrical performances; Chinese gods were particularly fond of drama. The prominent Chinese merchant Zhang Fanglin (Cheang Hong Lim) had built a theater and presented it to the trustees of the Tian Fu Gong (Thian Hock Keng) temple for the performance of plays during festivals. The plays were enjoyed by Mazu (sea goddess) and her attendant deities through the gateway (Vaughan 1971, 58).

Early colonial ethnographic accounts were often permeated with Oriental constructs, and even worse, racial stereotypes that legitimized colonial administration to manage the immigrant populations. For instance, Chinese opera performances were always associated with an unruly and irrational space, where the Chinese audiences smoked, laughed, and chatted loudly. Like Vaughan highlights in his notes, “To a European, one or two visits to the theater suffice for a lifetime. The din, smoke, and foul air within are somewhat too much for his sensibilities” (Vaughan 1971, 86). These ethnographic constructs were to be understood as part and parcel of the enlightenment discourse that promoted rationality and modernity as represented by Western civilizations. In another account made by James Low, he interpreted Chinese ritual opera performances in light of the primitive tradition pertaining to many ancient Western nations (Low 1972, 300). Casting the Chinese operas in an ancient past as being the antithesis to modernity and progress, European travelers’ accounts reinforced the colonial representation in which the Chinese theatricals, just like the Chinese immigrants themselves, were cast as uncivilized, irrational, and therefore inferior to European culture.

In 1887, the prominent Qing official Li Zhongjue visited Singapore for two months and wrote a detailed account about the place and its peoples, known as *Xinjiapo fengtu ji* (A description of Singapore in 1887). By then, it was clear that Singapore had a dominant proportion of Chinese immigrants, totaling 86,066. Among them, the Cantonese diaspora ranked the third largest with a population of 14,853, whereas the Hokkiens were the most numerous group (24,981), followed by 22,644 Teochews (Li 1947, 4). Li made special mention about the lively opera performances that were staged in the Chinese section of the colony. “There were both male and all-female troupes performing in Chinese playhouses. Four playhouses were located at *da po* [big town], whereas there were one or two in *xiao po* [small town]. Most of the performances were Cantonese operas, with occasional shows of Hokkien operas and Teochew operas.” Adjunct to Chinese playhouses were prostitutes, gambling houses, restaurants, and inns that together catered to the daily needs of Chinese immigrants (Li 1947, 12–13). In contrast, in describing the colonial presence in Singapore, Li Zhongjue was very affirmative toward the British infrastructure such as roads, bridges, schools, and museums (ibid., 14). Around the 1930s, the Chinese merchant and intellectual Song Yunpu made a similar comment based on his close encounter with the Chinese community in the British Straits Settlements. According to Song, Chinese opera performances all converged in the area densely populated by the Chinese immigrants and their brothels and gambling houses. Apart from being greatly favored by many diasporic Chinese, these places were seen as unruly, dirty, and full of danger (Song 1930, 60).

The nineteenth-century violent clashes with European imperial powers forced the late Qing government to look up to the West as a model for self-awakening. Enlightened intellectuals in China ardently subscribed to Western ideas of rationality, progress, and science as a recipe for China’s modernization. As scholar Yuen-sang Philip Leung comments, the ethnographic accounts by Chinese intellectuals were more of a “gaze,” constantly othering local Chinese diasporas so as to initiate self-reflection and self-evaluation about domestic struggles in China (2001, 431). For both European and Chinese travelers, Chinese operas were imbued with in-group fighting by secret societies, gambling, prostitution, and opium smoking. They were portrayed as incompatible with Western rationality and therefore justified the need for colonial administration. To make Chinese operas compatible with the colonial framework, laws were applied to change the structure of Chinese playhouses, which by the early twentieth century had made them resemble European architecture (Liu and Phillips 1988, 27). One such example was Li Chun Yuan (Lai Chun Yuen), located at the center of Chinatown in Singapore. In 1897, the owner of Li Chun Yuan invited the European architect Regent Alfred Bidwell—who also contributed to the building of the Raffles Hotel and Victorian Theatre—to turn the three-story Li Chun Yuan playhouse into Palladian style, resembling architecture in the London metropolis (Zhang 2021a, 29).

Performing revolutions and nationalism

Early colonial ethnographies reinforced the impression that Chinese dialect operas were part of primitive rituals with little real-life significance. Such a rhetoric substantiated social Darwinist thought, which represented the race and culture of the native peoples as backward and uncivilized. However, utilizing local Chinese newspapers dated in the early 1900s and oral histories made by traveling opera performers, I propose an emic point of view to understand the untapped significance of Cantonese operas for China's struggle for modernity and national awakening. The operas were, first and foremost, harbingers of political movements from the homeland to the diasporas. Because of their popularity among illiterate migrant populations, Chinese nationalists used dialect operas to propagate nascent political awareness and modern Chinese nationhood to the overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia. Specifically, it was the Cantonese opera troupes that acted as the messenger of Chinese revolutions and nationalism at the turn of the twentieth century. Their being able to tour the revolutionary theatricals from Guangzhou and Hong Kong across the South China Seas to towns and cities in Southeast Asia not only attested to the historical entanglement of China and Southeast Asia but also revealed the transnational dimension of the presumed ethno-linguistically bounded notion of Chinese nationalism.

The alliance that brought nationalistic politics, Chinese diasporas, and opera performances together could be traced to China's Taiping Rebellion of the 1850s. The overt participation of Cantonese opera performers in the movement drew an unprecedented suppression of the Cantonese opera performances by the Qing government. As a result, many opera practitioners fled to Southeast Asia by venturing beyond the vast South China Sea. Later on, when Sun Yat-sen launched a menacing wave of anti-Manchu revolutions in Guangzhou at the turn of the twentieth century, many Cantonese opera practitioners again supported the revolutions by forming a new kind of organization called *zhishiban* (patriot troupe). One of the most well-known *zhishiban* that traveled to Southeast Asia was the Zhen Tian Sheng troupe (Strike the Heavenly Voice). In 1908, the death of Emperor Guangxu and the subsequent nationwide funeral required all entertainment, especially operas, to be halted. Therefore, Zhen Tian Sheng set out on an opera tour in British Malaya in the name of raising funds for the flood relief in South China (Chen 1983, 295). Ostensibly the Southeast Asian tour was for charity purposes, yet underneath it was to propagate revolutionary ideas and conduct political mobilization among the Chinese diasporas.

Such a deliberate cover-up was necessary to circumvent colonial censorship and also to ward off the harassment of reformist groups led by Kang Youwei (Yen 1971, 58–59).

Zhen Tian Sheng's opera tour was definitely political. Its political tone was made evident by the fact that a dominant proportion of its performers were revolutionaries who ardently supported Sun Yat-sen's party Tongmenghui (United Revolutionary League) (Feng 2009, 339). Furthermore, the troupe was closely associated with Sun Yat-sen's overseas mobilization for the 1911 Revolution. Sun himself had greeted the troupe members when the troupe was performing and propagating revolutionary dramas in Singapore. During the important meet-up with Sun at Singapore's Wan Qing Yuan (Sun Yat-sen Nanyang Memorial Hall),[3] many performers readily participated in the oath-swearing ceremony to join Tongmenghui in Singapore (Xie 1983, 244; Feng 2009, 339). Additionally, Cantonese opera performers participated in the frontline of the revolutionary struggles in various ways. Some troupes used their diasporic mobility to transport armaments for the revolutionaries; for example, their opera box was used to store weapons and could be carried around under the nose of British colonial surveillance (Xie 1983, 245).

Sun Yat-sen himself attributed special importance to the role of diasporic Cantonese opera troupes in circulating revolutionary ideas and promoting nationalistic sentiment. Zhenxiang Jushe (Truth Drama Society) formed in Penang had long been supporting Sun's revolutionary activities in British Malaya. In 1922 Sun had a private talk with the members of the troupe, instructing diasporic Cantonese opera performers to continue promoting ideas of the "three principles of the people" among the diasporic Chinese.[4] Sun told performers that *youling* (opera actors) should not be seen as ignorant commoners coming from low social stratas, as they had been in the past. Now they were enlightened fighters just like those revolutionaries and indispensable parts of the success of the revolutions (Xie 1983, 244). Sun's statement clearly illustrated the marriage of Cantonese operas and Chinese national revolutions in the diasporas, blurring the boundary between opera performances and political mobilizations. Suffice it here to conclude that Cantonese operas and troupes in Southeast Asia were very much politicized, being used as a tool to mobilize political resources across the geographical boundaries for China's revolutions.

In terms of the performances, the defining feature of the plays was their strong nationalistic and revolutionary spirit. Plays such as *Jingke* (*Assassin*) were staged by Zhen Tian Sheng in 1908 in Singapore's Li Chun Yuan. *Xu Xilin Qiangshang Enmin* (*Xu Xilin Shot Governor Enmin*) was performed by a number of different *zhishiban* in Singapore, Penang, and Pontianak in Dutch Borneo between 1905 and 1910 (Yen 1971, 59). Plays as such were well known for scenes of violent assassination of Qing officials and emperors. They aimed to provoke radical feelings toward the ruling Qing government, further calling for armed action to overthrow the feudalistic Qing Empire.

More importantly, the routes and itinerary of Zhen Tian Sheng in Southeast Asia well illustrated how the Chinese national consciousness was actually propagated by a group of transnational performer-cum-revolutionaries. In a letter that Sun Yat-sen wrote to Zhuang Yin'an, the president of Tongmenghui in Rangoon (Burma), Sun made special mention of Zhen Tian Sheng and the relevance of its tours to propagate revolutions to the Chinese in Rangoon. The more interesting detail lay in how Sun recounted the itineraries of Zhen Tian Sheng's performing tours:

> Zhen Tian Sheng first arrived at Kuala Lumpur, then it headed to Seremban, from which it made such a reputation that other neighboring states all tried to get in contact with the troupe leaders to have it perform in their theaters. It continued to travel to perform in Taiping, Perak, and finally Penang, completing its tours in British Malaya. After it finished its performances in Penang, the troupe would head to Saigon, after which it returned to Singapore. (Xie 1983, 302)

Sun told Zhuang that he had seen the Zhen Tian Sheng performance in Singapore and was very impressed. He hoped Zhen Tian Sheng would finally make it to Rangoon to spread the revolutionary messages to the Chinese in Burma. Another local news outlet revealed additional details about the performing routes of Zheng Tian Sheng. On March 31, 1909, just when Zheng Tian Sheng was about to complete its tours in Southeast Asia—with a final performance in Singapore's Tong Le Yuan—it received an invitation from Bangkok, asking the troupe to continue its journey to Siam (*Le Bao* 1909). It shows that Zheng Tian Sheng's reputed fame in propagating revolutionary dramas had spread to the Bangkok Chinese community and was very likely to be well received by the revolutionary factions in the Bangkok side. By the time of its Southeast Asian tours, the overall revolutionary influences were surging in the Thai Chinese community. Between 1903 and 1908, Sun Yat-sen had visited Siam four times to mobilize overseas Chinese in Thailand to contribute to the domestic revolutions (Wongsurawat 2019, 21). Throughout these visits, Sun was able to garner support from local Thai Chinese businessmen and leaders. For instance, the respected Thai Chinese community leader and powerful magnate Zheng Zhiyong (Tae Ti Wong) had joined Tongmenghui during Sun's first visit to Bangkok (Murashima 2013, 154). Another influential figure in the local Thai Chinese community was Xiao Focheng (Seow Hoot Seng), a Malaya-born, British-registered Straits Chinese who moved to Siam in childhood with the support of his elite family (Wongsurawat 2019, 55). He became the head of the Siamese branch of Tongmenghui in 1908. After this, the revolutionary consciousness in Siam rose prominently (Murashima 2013, 154). It can be inferred that when Zheng Tian Sheng toured Malaya in 1909, the Siamese revolutionaries were eager to see Bangkok be part of its itinerary. It can likewise be inferred that the fame of Zhen Tian Sheng's tours in British Malaya had spread to Siam, fostering solidarity between revolutionaries in these two places. This was revealing about the existence and operation of the political network, which was reified in Zhen Tian Sheng's tours in Southeast Asia.

A close examination of the history of Zheng Tian Sheng in Southeast Asia unveiled a connected diasporic network that incorporated key nodal points, such as Bangkok in Siam, Saigon in French Indochina, and Rangoon in Burma. What can be inferred from these crisscrossed travel routes was that Zhen Tian Sheng benefited a great deal from the transnational networks cultivated by political mobilizations that connected distinct diasporic societies into meaningful relationships. The connections were not merely two-way—linking China and the Chinese diasporas—but weaved various Chinese diasporas in Southeast Asia into a multidirectional pattern. Therefore, Cantonese opera troupes were both the constituent and the fruit of the transnational networks of Chinese nationalism. As Prasenjit Duara elaborates, “the modern nation-state seeks to deploy the frequently older, extraterritorial narratives of racial and cultural community to serve its own needs” (1997, 39). They were themselves “nationalists among transnationals.”

In each locality, performance-related affairs including accommodation, tickets, and venues would all be settled by local contacts. These go-betweens usually came from local Chinese business elites, who had the personal connections and power to negotiate with the colonial government. Their status allowed them to mobilize local resources freely. Above all, these people supported Sun Yat-sen’s revolutionary cause and its associated opera performances. For example, the debut of Zhen Tian Sheng took place on March 16, 1909 in Singapore. The performance venue was Li Chun Yuan, one of the most well-known Chinese theaters in Singapore. It staged the modern play *Meng Hou Zhong* (*Alarm Bell to Wake Up from Dreams*) to launch criticism about the vices (opium-smoking and superstition) prevalent among the Chinese diasporas (Huang 2019, 184). Significantly, the performance was mediated through the important local contact Lin Yishun (Lim Nee Soon). Lim was a prominent Straits Chinese merchant who had multiple investments in rubber, banking, and plantations. Moreover, he was an esteemed community leader who was particularly dedicated to Sun Yat-sen’s revolutionary cause. When Sun established the Singapore branch of Tongmenghui, Lim was in charge of the local social affairs (Song 1923, 516). Therefore, when Zhen Tian Sheng planned a performing tour in Singapore, resourceful local mediators such as Lim would readily help to arrange miscellaneous affairs. Similarly, Zhen Tian Sheng’s performing tour to Bangkok was also arranged by prominent Siamese Chinese businessmen (*Le Bao* 1909). According to a local news outlet, immediately after the performances in Singapore, Bangkok Chinese merchants had inquired about its itinerary details, including the name of the steamship to Bangkok, so as to welcome the troupe and arrange for its accommodations in local society (*Le Bao* 1909). Although the identity of this local contact is unknown, it is plausible to suggest that in disparate diaspora contact zones, Cantonese opera troupes’ overseas tours were mediated through important local contacts.

Zhen Tian Sheng and many other *zhishiban* indeed played a significant role in awakening early modern Chinese nationhood among Chinese diasporas. Furthermore, what they generated was not merely enthusiasm and passion but also concrete funds and monetary donations, which were circulated back to the motherland to support the revolutionary causes. It is hard to calculate how much capital exactly these opera troupes collected from the audiences; nonetheless, local newspaper reports are helpful to make general suppositions. On March 17, 1909, after Zhen Tian Sheng completed its night show, it was reported that it collected more than $1,500 Straits dollars from the oversea Chinese (*Zhongxing Ribao* 1909). Reporters applauded the mass appeal of the performance by giving special attention to commoners’ contributions. For instance, they noted that many vendors had made a great fortune from the night show by simply selling drinks to the audience. Nevertheless, they also contributed their income from the night to the revolutions. Such occasions were numerous, and together they formed a significant part of the revolutions in the motherland that should not be underestimated.

This also confirms the fact that Cantonese opera and opera troupes were deeply grounded in grassroots and working-class Chinese immigrants. Yen Ching-hwang argues, "for the member[s] of [the] upper class . . . because of their wealth and vested interests in maintaining the status quo, they were reluctant to antagonize the Manchu government, let alone to the support the movement in overthrowing it" (Yen 2008, 348). As Rebecca Karl puts it, "by virtue of its very form and history in China, opera could and did reach deeply into the largely illiterate masses" (Karl 2002, 45). Therefore, it would be plausible to infer that the majority of the audiences who fervently supported the revolutions came from the lower and middle strata of the Chinese diasporas in Southeast Asia.

Performers, agents, and diaspora networks

Approaching the 1930s, Cantonese opera troupes and performers began to conduct more frequent opera tours in towns and cities across Southeast Asia. Different from their predecessors in the early 1900s, these opera troupes were part and parcel of the commercialization of Chinese theaters in Guangzhou and Hong Kong. They conducted performing tours in Southeast Asia, not through political networks but through the emerging transnational entertainment industry. In conceptualizing cultural mobility, Stephen Greenblatt (2010) advocates studying various "contact zones" where cultural goods are exchanged. In the contact zones, "a specialized group of mobilisers—agents, go-betweens, translators, or intermediaries—often emerges to facilitate contact" (251). I concur with Greenblatt by laying out key intermediaries that helped the troupe to negotiate with diasporic variables. Specifically speaking, mobile mediating agents (individuals and business enterprises) played a key role in forming a meaningful collaborative relationship with itinerant troupes (Zhang 2021b, 193).

The itinerant opera tours in the diasporas were so prevalent that special terms for Cantonese opera performers appeared in Southeast Asia. Veteran male performers who enjoyed stellar popularity were called *laoguan* (senior male performers), and their mobile opera tours were known as *youbu/zoubu* (itinerant tours) (Liu 1965, 172–79). Notably, Cantonese opera performers from Guangzhou and Hong Kong developed a distinguishable practice, namely to form a temporary cooperation with diasporic theaters and troupes. One prerequisite for such a practice was that these *laoguan* had already established a good reputation in the highly commercialized city centers of Guangzhou and Hong Kong (Liang 1982, 285; Lai and Huang 1988, 354–55; Huang 2012, 344–45). Diasporic theater owners and merchants usually devoured their fame and the high-caliber performances in order to attract more diasporic audiences into their theaters. It was this stellar fame that made their diasporic tours desirable. Additionally, local and diasporic troupes emerged that were able to garner resources, including second-tier and third-tier actors, musicians, and other relevant operatic personnel to form a stable operatic structure. In Singapore, for instance, there were two renowned Cantonese opera troupes, Pu Chang Chun and Yong Shou Nian (Liang

1982, 285; Lai 2001, 298). Their opera performances were mostly centered in the theaters of Chinatown neighborhood, including the very prominent ones, Li Chun Yuan, Qing Wei Xin, Qing Sheng Ping, and Tian Yan Stage. The opera performances were so popular and prevailing that local residents began to use *wayang*—a Malay term for street opera—to identify the surrounding streets as "Wayang street" (Liu and Philips 1988, 29).

Additionally, such diasporic mobility was very much dependent on the thriving trading agents who actively mobilized performers to the diasporic theaters. Mobile mediating agents played a very active role in connecting actors in native hometowns to diasporic troupes and theaters. There were numerous small-scale Cantonese opera troupes based in Guangzhou. During the busy season, opera performers would be convened to form a troupe to conduct performances. The rest of the time opera performers were mobilized to other adjunct places wherever there were good performing opportunities (Liu 1965, 172–73). The lack of bonded relationships made these small-scale opera troupe owners remain versatile and flexible in their operatic practice. They were always alerted to potential business opportunities in Southeast Asia; for example, they traded Cantonese opera performers from Guangzhou to diasporic troupes and theaters in French Indochina (ibid., 172–73).

For the theaters in Saigon-Cholon in the southern part of Indochina, diasporic theaters were connected to opera performers through one resourceful agent in Guangzhou: a man named Ma Jingtang. Ma's dominance in the trade of Cantonese opera actors from Guangzhou to the Indo-Chinese diaspora could not be separated from his transnational relationship built with his corresponding partner in Saigon-Cholon, namely his older brother Ma Daxiong. This older brother Ma was said to have run business in Cholon for a long time and was well connected with local secret societies. He often acted as the guarantor of opera performers to negotiate with local colonial authorities in Saigon (Liu 1965, 172–73). It was through his wide social connections that Cantonese opera performers were to find protection in Saigon. Therefore, it is plausible for us to argue that the trust that Cantonese opera actors had given to the big brother Ma must have also been extended to his corresponding younger brother Ma Jingtang on the Guangzhou side.

As the operatic connections between Guangzhou and Cholon were basically monopolized by Ma Jingtang and his brother, other diasporic theaters had to seek alternative connections in order to obtain fresh sources of opera performers. New ways of mobilizing performers had developed, not just along the corridor between native hometowns and diasporas (e.g., between Guangzhou and Cholon) but also among distinct yet connected diasporic societies (e.g., between Singapore and Cholon). Two Cholon theaters—the Tong Qing Theatre and the Da Tong Theatre—had successfully built important linkages with another key nodal point: Singapore. It is especially worth noting that the owner of Tong Qing Theatre in Cholon was a man named Lao Meijing, who was exactly the same person that used to run the Pu Chang Chun troupe in Singapore. While in Singapore, the Pu Chang Chun troupe was bought by the Singapore tycoon Yu Dongxuan (Eu Tong Sen) and was integrated into Yu's theater enterprise Qing Wei Xin. Being squeezed out of the Pu Chang Chun troupe, Lao Meijing found it difficult to establish a foothold in Singapore and decided to seek other opportunities elsewhere. Thereafter, Lao began to run troupes in Kuala Lumpur and finally the Tong Qing Theatre in Saigon-Cholon (Liu 1965, 172–73). More interestingly, the owner of Da Tong Theatre in Saigon-Cholon was a man named Cha Tairong, who turned out to be Lao Meijing's close partner in Singapore. Resembling the experience of Lao Meijing, Cha also had been running theater businesses in many other diasporic places such as Malacca. The success of the Tong Qing Theatre and the Da Tong Theatre in Cholon would not be possible without the connections that these two men had built in Singapore. This might well explain why the two theaters owned by Lao Meijing and Cha Tairong in French Indochina constantly mobilized Cantonese opera actors from the theaters in Singapore, instead of Guangzhou.

Furthermore, the identical experiences of these two men were revealing. Their careers spanned different localities including Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, and Malacca and in the end converged in Cholon. For Lao Meijing and Cha Tairong, failing to do business in one place forced them to seek alternative connections with other diasporas, and this process enabled them to accumulate and diversify their operatic resources. It illustrates the kind of diasporic mobility that was embodied and practiced by opera performers, who saw movement in the region as the basis that sustained their livelihoods.

If these were important individuals who helped to mobilize actors and troupes at a transnational level, there were also endeavors made by more significant transnational enterprises that facilitated the diasporic circulation of actors and opera troupes at a much grander scale. When opera troupes were incorporated into their transnational business empires, the circulation of people, materials, and information became more outstanding. In particular, Yu Dongxuan's engagement in the transnational circulation of Cantonese operas was remarkable. As noted earlier, Yu had bought the Pu Chang Chun troupe and made it part of his theater business in the Singapore Qing Wei Xin theater. However, as a transnational tycoon, Yu's investment was far more than that. Like any rags-to-riches legend about successful diaspora merchants, Yu's father started his small herbal business in a mining town in Perak in 1879. Yu Dongxuan inherited his father's business and successfully made it into a well-known brand, Yu Rensheng (Eu Yan Sang), by launching branches across Malaya, Singapore, Hong Kong, and South China. Having accumulated great wealth, Yu later further diversified his venture in tin mining, rubber plantations, banking, remittances, as well as theaters. In his recent study of the rise of Cantonese opera, Wing Chung Ng has made a significant discovery of how this transnational operation of Cantonese opera theaters was incorporated into Yu Dongxuan's transnational business network in Singapore and Hong Kong:

> In December 1917, Qing Wei Xin [Heng Wai Sun] first appeared in the business account books of Eu Yan Sang in Hong Kong. An unidentified agent from the Singapore theater first drew $500 in local currency for an unspecified reason and then another $200 for lodging and ship fares. The following year, another agent, named Cai Ying, appeared, and he remained active as a local operative for Qing Wei Xin in Hong Kong through at least 1923. Based on the account entries, Cai's principal task was to take care of the logistics for new recruits under contract and to ensure their smooth departure. Actors coming through Hong Kong under his

> watch included Jinzhong Ming, Xiaosheng Quan. . . . As far as Cai's assignments are concerned, his responsibilities fell under three different areas. First, he arranged the itinerary of a recruit in transit through Hong Kong, including lodging, shipping tickets to Singapore, and safe passage of the actor's wardrobe and personal effects. He also prepared the required documentation for travel, such as visa papers, medical examination reports, any notarized legal document, and proofs of payment of customs. Finally, he was in charge of the disbursement of salaries. (Ng 2015, 143)

Yu's example allows us to catch a glimpse of the operation of transnational ventures and mobile agents that were essential in assuring a safe and smooth journey for Cantonese opera troupes to conduct overseas tours in Southeast Asia (Ng 2011, 445–60).

In spite of the Singapore-based tycoon Yu Dongxuan, the Shaw Brothers had led diasporic Chinese theaters to a golden era. Notably, the Shaw Brothers were crowned as the "kings of entertainment." From the 1930s, the Shaw Brothers began to acquire amusement parks in Singapore and later on expanded the network of amusement parks to the rest of British Malaya. Yet the investment in amusement parks was only one small part of their bigger canvas. According to an advertisement that appeared in the *Nanyang Yearbook* in 1939, the Shaws' business expansion in Southeast Asia included "developing movie markets in Southeast Asia, setting up film studios to produce Chinese sound movies, managing more than sixty theaters in different locations (in Malaya), operating amusement parks, selling equipment and accessories to sound movies and purchasing and distributing Western and Indian cinema" (Yung 2008, 137). It meant the Shaw Brothers were able to control the entertainment market by getting hold of multiple entertainment resources. Moreover, the resources generated from cinemas, theaters, and amusement parks were often interrelated. Business in cinemas and theaters overlapped each other and could be used in innovative ways to maximize profits. For example, the first Cantonese opera movie *Bai Jin Long* (*White Golden Dragon*) that was made and distributed by the Shaw Brothers in Southeast Asian cinemas was so successful that the main Cantonese opera actor Xue Juexian (Sit Kok Sin) was elevated to the number one stellar performer in the Cantonese opera circle. The Shaw Brothers quickly spotted Xue's potential and recruited him into their transnational entertainment empire. For example, Xue was exclusively sponsored by the Shaw Brothers to conduct diasporic opera tours, performing in their theaters and amusement parks across Malaya. The case illustrated here clearly exemplifies the cross-influence and the mutually reinforcing effects of movies and theaters under the Shaws' entertainment empire. It signaled another phase of development, contrasting with their predecessor Yu Dongxuan (Zhang 2021a, 39).

Incorporating opera performers and troupes into the transnational empire was not a new strategy; however, what distinguished the Shaw Brothers' transnational operation from their predecessors was the extensive network of amusement parks and theaters that acted as the key nodes of connection to circulate actors and troupes regionally and transnationally (Zhang 2121a: 39). Once a performer became part of their entertainment empire, he would be mobilized to any of the Shaws' theaters and amusement parks, for example from the Great World in Singapore to the Bukit

Bingtang Park in Kuala Lumpur, or to the Jubilee Park in Ipoh (Cheong 1996, 12). As Yung has summarized, "in order to provide a constant supply of new faces and fresh entertainment to the chain of amusement parks, local artists and troupes were absorbed into the company. They were either acquired or subsidized by Shaw Brothers to tour in the big cities on the Malay Peninsula, moving from stage to stage along the company's circuit of amusement parks and theaters" (Yung 2008, 143).

Returning with "Nanyang fame"

For earlier migrant generations, *Xia Nanyang* ("sail downward to the South Seas") was often described as a popular option that afforded great fortune and opportunity. In the eyes of domestic opera critics, Nanyang or Southeast Asia[5] was a propitious land yet artistically inferior and culturally ignorant compared to the modernizing mother country. Opera troupes from China set the high-quality benchmark that diasporic performers and troupes eagerly followed and adopted. In the 1930s Nanyang was increasingly portrayed as a place of openness and diversity, a land that could nurture many innovative opera practices. Specifically, Cantonese opera performers had long ago found the overseas diasporas much freer and a more accommodating place for innovation. So, instead of portraying the opera tours as a one-way dissemination, I argue for a circular process, which allows one to see new opera practices that not only thrived in the diasporas but also traveled back to the native place and stirred up great excitement. The life trajectory of the renowned Cantonese stellar performer Ma Shizeng (Ma Sze-Tsang) was illustrative to see how the Nanyang experiences shaped his performing epistemology and underlay the way he achieved his status.

In addition to the aforementioned *laoguan*, a new title emerged to refer to the opera performers who were trained in the diasporas and gained a reputation in Nanyang, rather than native hometowns. They were called *zhoufu laoguan* (senior male performer in Malaya), referring to those male performers whose activities were mostly concentrated on touring different parts of British Malaya. Ma Shizeng, one of the *zhoufu laoguan*, was a household name; he was a dedicated reformer, a talented opera performer, and, most importantly, a key innovator of Cantonese operas. Whereas many are familiar with Ma's artistic accomplishments, little was known about his experience in Nanyang before he became a household name. Examining his personal biography, this section reveals that his sojourn experience in Malaya and Singapore from 1918 to 1923 was a milestone in his operatic training and practice.

Unlike many great *laoguan* from Guangzhou and Hong Kong who received first-class treatment, Ma's first encounter with Singapore was not a fancy story. In 1918 the Qing Wei Xin theater in Singapore came to Guangzhou to recruit new faces. Together with ten other young apprentices, Ma was sold to the theater for only 30 Straits dollars; henceforth began his diasporic life and career (Ma 2016, 14–16). While working in Qing Wei Xin, Ma met the great master Xiaosheng Quan, who taught him a number of classic Cantonese opera plays. With the help of Xiaosheng Quan, Ma was then introduced to the Yao Tian Cai troupe to join a month-long tour in Genting in the western part of Malaya. After the tour, another troupe agent from Kampar in the Perak state of Malaya spotted Ma's talent and recruited him to tour

Kampar for another month. However, after the contract, Ma suddenly became jobless and tried to make a living by working as a street hawker and plantation miner. Such a difficult struggle was a common episode in the life history of many diasporic performers, who often found themselves both obsessed with diasporic mobility and troubled by the uncertainties and risks it brought along (Ma 2016, 14–16). Clutching at straws, Ma saw an opportunity when the Ping Tian Cai troupe from Penang happened to be performing in Perak. During his time in Ping Tian Cai, the great *laoguan* Liang Yuanheng was conducting his tour in Penang and joined the troupe for a co-performance. This great master Liang saw Ma's potential and soon took him back to Singapore as his apprentice; so began the turning point in Ma Shizeng's performing career (Ma 2016, 18–19). In 1923 Cantonese operas achieved full-fledged commercialization in Guangzhou and Hong Kong, whereby the opera circle was dominated by three rival troupes (each with their own stellar performers): Li Yuan Le, Ren Shou Nian, and Xin Zhong Hua. Ma was recruited into one of them, Ren Shou Nian, as a first-tier actor whose "Nanyang fame" was greatly admired and celebrated by the theaters in Guangzhou and Hong Kong.

Notably, Ma's Nanyang fame was deeply entrenched in his virtuosity in multiple roles and his ability to eclectically fuse and integrate operatic stunts from other genres. This operatic epistemology was shaped by a unique system of training that could only be found in Nanyang, and from the practice of *youbu/zoubu* (itinerant tours). As has been articulated earlier, traveling opera performers from Guangzhou usually formed a temporary cooperation with diasporic troupes. While in Singapore and Malaya, Ma had plenty of opportunities to perform with the famous traveling *laoguan.* For example, he learnt to sing *luantan* (operatic tunes in Peking opera) from the famous *laoguan* Kuang Xinhua, who joined the Yao Tian Cai troupe in Genting (Ma 2016, 15). While in the Ping Tian Cai troupe, Ma got the chance to co-perform the famous civil play *Dian, Chao, Fei, Han* (Crazy, Mockery, Decadence, Stupidity) with the first-tier actor Liang Shaofeng (who was also the playwright of the drama). Ma was also asked to perform multiple roles in the Ping Tian Cai troupe, becoming a versatile actor in both the female warrior, young scholar, and comedy roles (Ma 2016, 18–19). From the great master Liang Yuanheng in Singapore's Pu Chang Chun troupe, Ma learned the four bases in Chinese opera conventions, namely the *shou* (hand), *yan* (eye), *shen* (body), and *bu* (step) (Zhongguo xiquzhi 1993, 525). This cooperation system fostered the transference of operatic knowledge, expertise, and skills from different masters to the diasporic performers. It was challenging in a sense that one had to be familiar with new scripts, get to know about the acting style of the partner, and at the same time grasp every opportunity to learn artistic skills from them. When Ma finally was able to do all these stunts, the *laoguan* left for his next port of tour. Ma would be prepared to work with another traveling *laoguan*, who had new practices that Ma would have to learn to integrate into his own performing system.

However, when Ma returned to Guangzhou and first greeted the picky domestic audiences, it was an unhappy experience. Guangzhou audiences found Ma's self-invented singing style *Qi'er hou* extremely awkward and weird. It was a new and rare singing style that used a coarse and loud voice to imitate the wretched comedy roles, such as vagrants and beggars (Zhongguo xiquzhi 1993, 525). Whereas Nanyang

Chinese welcomed it for its hilarious effects, domestic audiences found it rough and did not suit their aesthetic habits (Chen 2007, 4). To attract the domestic audiences to come to his performances, Ma thought about performing original humor plays that he had created for the Nanyang audiences, such as *Guguai gongpo*, also known as *Jiayou rongbing* (*Weird Old Couple*). This was a play that exemplified the convergence of innovations drawing upon a wide range of opera influences during Ma's sojourn in Nanyang. In this play, Ma first utilized combat conventions from *jingju* (Peking opera), which was known by its northern-style martial arts. During his time in Singapore, Ma often encountered traveling *jingju* troupes from Shanghai, and he grasped every opportunity to learn *jingju* stunts from experienced performers (Chen 2007, 5; Ma 2016, 23). As it turned out, the traditional Cantonese audiences in Guangzhou were amazed by the fusion of northern-style martial arts that used spades and spears to fight and dance.

Cantonese operas had a definite categorization of role types, which were traditionally separated into *wenweusheng* (young civil-martial male), *xiaosheng* (young scholar), *wusheng* (bearded warrior), *zhenyin huadan* (young belle), *erbang huadan* (secondary young belle), and *chousheng* (comedian) (Rao 2017, 87). However, in this play, Ma broke down the rigid categories by allocating the comedy stunts to several other role types that included bearded warrior and young scholar. In such a way, the art of comedy roles was greatly enriched and diversified (Ma 2016, 24). As it turned out, the play *Weird Old Couple* offered Guangzhou audiences intense fighting scenes plus amusing comic stunts, helping Ma Shizeng to gain recognition from the domestic opera circle. His *Qi'er hou* was also accepted and became the signature of his opera art. Ma stood out and rose to prominence not only because he had acquired high caliber performing skills, but also because he embodied the kind of innovative spirit that was crucial to reform and refine the art of Cantonese operas.

From the 1930s, Nanyang, especially Singapore where Ma Shizeng was trained, began to present itself to the traveling subjects as a place of mobility, openness, and diversity. This unique Nanyang ecology nurtured many talented opera performers. Ma's rising career was a perfect illustration of how the mobility of the diasporic opera provided a different system of training and practice. In this system, performers were often exposed to a great variety of operatic skills and performing styles, which through a proper innovative cross-fertilization would become a signature art of diasporic performers. Versatile performing skills became the core of the Nanyang fame that the domestic opera circle began to crave.

Another important practice that stirred no small controversy in the opera circle in China was the *nannü tongtai* (co-ed performance). It was controversial, because the idea of separation of the sexes was not only deeply rooted in people's moral conception but also entangled with power and politics. Men and women were referred to as "binary categories of persons with complementary but separate roles to play in the household and in society at large. The 'inner' sphere confining women to the household, out of sight, was seen as a necessary counterpart to the 'outer' sphere where men moved about freely" (Mann 2011, 47). Females were not supposed to go to theaters, not to mention perform on the public stage. When actresses did appear on the stages in the early republican era, they were either thought of as inferior by artistic standards or unchaste representations of modern womanhood. Throughout the first two decades of the 1900s, laws were issued in Beijing, Shanghai, Tianjing, Guangzhou, and Hong Kong to suppress the all-female troupes and male-female co-ed performances (Luo 2005; Qiao 2010).

However, on the overseas stages in Nanyang, it was totally a different scene. Opera actresses found Nanyang a much freer and more accommodating place for them. For example, *laoguan* Chen Feinong recollected that during his sojourn in Singapore, he learnt the skills of *tiannü sanhua* ("maiden in heaven showering flowers") from a *jingju* actress Shisan Dan. This performance was later popularized by Mei Lanfang on the international stage (Chen 1983, 6–7). Several actresses who later shined in the theaters of Guangzhou and Hong Kong all emerged on the stages of the Chinese diasporas, either in Nanyang or in American Chinese theaters. For example, Li Xuefang from the all-female troupe Qun Fang Yan Ying once toured with Ma Shizeng in America and was especially well received among overseas Chinese Americans (Zhongguo xiquzhi 1993, 520).

In 1936, the major entertainment magazine in South China *Youyou* drew domestic audiences' attention to the popularity of the co-ed performances among diasporic Chinese. It reported that huge profits were generated from the tickets sold every night by co-ed performances in Nanyang (Liyuan 1936). When diasporic troupes set out for their return journey to Guangzhou, news about their co-ed performances began to spread (*Youyou* 1936a). Their success was used by the Guangzhou opera circle to petition for the further lifting of the ban, helping the opera circle to break away from the traditional confinement imposed on the bodies of male and female performers (*Youyou* 1936b). To recapitulate, underneath the Nanyang fame was the notion of mobility and diversity that traveling performers had been practicing. Opera performers traveled frequently, met with different famous stellar performers, co-performed on different stages across Southeast Asia, and cross-fertilized them into the Nanyang version of the Cantonese opera art.

Conclusion

This article locates the transnational history of Cantonese operas in three prominent aspects, namely, political mobilizations around the 1900s, commercial opera agents and networks, and aesthetic innovation and circulation that culminated in the 1930s. Throughout the processes, multidirectional networks and linkages functioned dynamically to facilitate the transformation of Cantonese operas in both diasporas and the homeland. Much has been written about how social and political movements in China influenced Chinese diasporas through print capitalism that disseminated discourses of revolutions and nationalism. However, opera performances as an important means of cultural production that enjoyed wider appeal than newspapers, especially among illiterate immigrant communities, received less attention (Zhang 2021a, 177). The marriage between Cantonese opera troupes and Chinese revolutions further illustrates how ideas of nationalism relied on its antithesis in the transnationalism that popularized the ideas of modern Chinese nationhood. Moreover, Cantonese opera troupes' involvment in the political mobilizations for

China's national awakening also negated the early colonial ethnographic gaze that cast Chinese operas as purely irrational and primitive.

When it comes to the commercial opera tours in the 1930s, the diasporic networks functioned more effectively as opera troupes, and performers organized themselves in order to gather information, look for business opportunities, and negotiate with diasporic variables. Following these individual mediating efforts, there further emerged the earliest batch of transnational tycoons, including the Singapore-based Cantonese merchant Yu Dongxuan and the Shaw Brothers. Coming from different backgrounds, they each gave shape to distinct transnational operations, which helped to institutionalize the practices of transnational operatic tours by incorporating every procedure into their business empires, from recruiting actors, to providing direct transportation, to the offering of a ready Nanyang market. Such fresh operations illustrated the kind of multidirectional diasporic networks that were embodied and practiced by individual agents, tycoons, and transnational entrepreneurs, who all came to regard diasporic mobility as an essential way of life in this part of the world.

Additionally, thanks to the thriving commercial networks and the expanding entertainment market in the colony, there emerged a subtle but evident shift in mentality about the people conducting diasporic opera tours. Specifically, the unique diasporic ecology modified operatic practices in a way that they could speak back to the presumed "cultural center" of the homeland. For example, traveling Cantonese opera actor Ma Shizeng was known to return to homeland Guangzhou with a unique Nanyang fame after sojourning and performing in Southeast Asia for several years. The diasporic mobility allowed him to travel to different localities, accumulate diverse operatic resources, and integrate such diversity into his own performing system. It was such transnational experiences that made him the pioneer and innovator of Cantonese operas in China. By and large, zooming into the routes, itineraries, and networks developed by traveling Cantonese operas troupes and performers, this article reveals a circular and interactional process that bore witness to a crucial artistic transformation in the Sinitic heritage from the turn of the twentieth century to its golden era in the 1930s. Above all, the cultural and historical analysis that I have woven rightfully provides an alternative insider's view as opposed to the Orientalist constructs about Chinese operas made by European travelers and diplomats.

NOTES

1. Chinese operas in Southeast Asia were divided into several regional genres distinguished by different southern dialects as spoken by each linguistic or speech group. These included the Cantonese originating from the Pearl River Delta in southern parts of China; Hokkiens from southern Fujian province along the southeast coast of China; Teochews from the eastern part of Guangdong province; Hakkas, who resided in many different parts of Guangdong and Fujian; and Hainanese from Hainan province.

2. There is a growing literature in the cultural area that addresses multidirectional networks (Frost 2005; Dean and Zheng 2010; Chia 2020).

3. "Zhang Yongfu (Teo Eng Hock), a Straits-born Teochew merchant, bought the Villa in 1905 for his aged mother to spend her sunset years there, and accordingly renamed it 'Serene Sunset

Villa/Garden' (Wan Qing Yuan). When Teo later became entangled with China's republican revolutionary movement, he offered the Villa as a base from which to plan the overthrow of the Qing dynasty and the establishment of a modern republic" (Huang and Hong 2004, 66).

4. This is a political philosophy developed by Sun Yat-sen and was used as a governing principle of the Republic of China. The three principles are summarized as nationalism, democracy, and social welfare.

5. Nanyang literally means the South Seas, referring to the current-day geographical region of Southeast Asia. This term is often used by the Chinese immigrants to refer to their diasporic travels in places like British Malaya, the Dutch Indies, the Philippines, French Indochina, and Thailand. Here "*Xia Nanyang*" was the phrase often used by itinerant opera performers to refer to their overseas performing tours.

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