

# CHINATOWN THEATRE AS TRANSNATIONAL BUSINESS:

*New Evidence from Vancouver  
during the Exclusion Era\**

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## INTRODUCTION: HISTORICAL INVISIBILITY AND TRANSNATIONAL MOBILITY

**A**S A TODDLER, award-winning novelist Wayson Choy vaguely remembers spending many evenings with his mother and her friends at the Sing Kew Theatre in old Shanghai Alley in Vancouver's Chinatown. To build on his fading memories and to capture the context of the late 1930s and early 1940s for his childhood memoir, Choy spent three summers in local archives and museums researching the activities of Cantonese opera troupes. His chapter on what transpired inside Chinatown theatre – the mesmerizing performance on stage and the conviviality among the theatregoers – furnishes by far the most vivid and engrossing account of Chinese immigrant theatre of that era. However, neither the author's literary licence nor his historical imagination has prepared him (and his readers) for the unfolding drama. As Choy approached the end of his memoir, he learned that he had been adopted by his working-class immigrant parents and that his "real" father was an unknown member of a visiting Cantonese opera troupe. Ironically, Choy's

\* This article is drawn from a larger project on the social history of the Cantonese opera in South China and among the Chinese in diaspora in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation for International Scholarly Exchange, the US National Endowment for the Humanities, and the University of Texas at San Antonio have offered this project generous financial support. Different portions and versions of this article have been presented at the annual meetings of the Association for Asian Studies (2003) and the Southwestern Conference on Asian Studies (2004) as well as at a symposium on Chinese theatre performance hosted by the Chinese University of Hong Kong (2004). I thank the participants for their helpful suggestions. In particular, I appreciate the sound advice and encouragement of Edgar Wickberg, Nancy Rao, Yung Sai Shing, Elizabeth Sinn, Elizabeth Johnson, Sau Yan Chan, and Roger Daniels. Among librarians and archivists, Chak Yung, George Brandak, and Wei Chi Poon have rendered assistance that has been indispensable to my work. Any remaining errors and shortcomings in this article are mine. As a general rule, names of actors, opera troupes, and other Chinatown entities are rendered in local forms.

absorbing narrative and masterly embellishment of Chinatown theatre became the backdrop to a piece of deeply unsettling personal history.<sup>1</sup>

Not to belittle Choy's personal anguish at his shocking discovery, the mystery behind his biological parents reminds us of the large void in our understanding of Chinatown theatre in North America during the exclusion era. Despite the Cantonese opera's once commanding popularity as a favourite entertainment for Chinatown residents, the subject continues to elude in-depth historical analysis. The only partial exception is Ronald Riddle's pioneering and sympathetic study of musical life among the Chinese in San Francisco, which contains valuable information on opera theatres, gleaned from tourist writings and news reports; however, his reliance on English-language sources has limited his perspective to that of an outside gaze.<sup>2</sup> The gap in serious scholarship is glaring in light of the attention concerned scholars have given to Chinese migrant communities' myriad ethnic institutions – such as newspapers, language schools, and the ever-evolving world of voluntary organizations – all of which are being scrutinized in order to delineate the process of immigrant adaptation, community formation, and the texture of social life. As far as Chinatown theatre is concerned, whereas novelists seem to be able to evoke its meanings and significance with regard to the early immigrant experience, historians seem to have little to offer beyond a general outline.<sup>3</sup>

An encouraging recent development involves new research materials and their gradual incorporation into historical work. Yong Chen's study of Chinese San Francisco, in which he argues for the importance of

<sup>1</sup> Wayson Choy, *Paper Shadows: A Memoir of a Past Lost and Found* (New York: Penguin Group, 1999), 41–56, 281.

<sup>2</sup> Ronald Riddle, *Flying Dragons, Flowing Streams: Music in the Life of San Francisco's Chinese* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, 1983). One source of particular importance to Riddle is a 380-page typescript report by Peter Chu, Lois M. Foster, Nadia Lavrova, and Steven C. Moy entitled "Chinese Theatres in America," which was commissioned as part of the federal theatre project and was finished in 1936. The bulk of this document pertains to San Francisco. Given the dearth of Chinese sources, the report derives its historical information largely from Western reportage, of which it says: "Most of our records of Chinese theatres in this city are grotesque colorations of fleeting visits by amused sight-seers, or occasional newspaper items forced into print by reason of indisputably news-valuable occurrences or a temporary paucity of subjects for reporting" (17–8). The document contains useful fieldwork observations regarding the theatre houses and stage practices of the mid-1930s.

<sup>3</sup> See the following two standard references on Chinese American and Chinese Canadian history: Him Mark Lai, *Cong huaqiao dao huaren: ershi shiji Meiguo huaren shehui fazhanshi* [From Overseas Chinese to Ethnic Chinese: A History of Chinese American Society in the Twentieth Century] (Hong Kong: Joint Publishing, 1992); and Edgar Wickberg, ed., *From China to Canada: A History of the Chinese Communities in Canada* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1982). Apart from Choy, other writers, such as Jade Snow Wong, Denise Chong, and Paul Yee, have also written about Chinatown theatre.

native language materials and draws on a collection of opera playbills from the 1920s in order to provide a brief analysis of the social and cultural functions of the theatre, is a case in point.<sup>4</sup> The contributions of musicologist Nancy Rao represent even bolder steps, both empirically and conceptually. Through a careful reading of theatre advertisements in New York's Chinatown newspaper the *Chinese Nationalist Daily*, Rao offers a succinct account of the lively Cantonese stage in this important east coast Chinese community from the early 1920s to about 1930. She observes that, for too long, the lens of racial prejudice and the exclusionist impulse of the host society had rendered Chinatown theatre not just historically invisible but also inadmissible to mainstream American musical discourse. An especially intriguing moment – one that illustrates the cultural dynamics behind such invisibility – is the visit of the Peking opera superstar Mei Lanfang to the United States in early 1930. As Rao poignantly argues, New York highbrow society's fascination with Mei as a representative of the beauty and cultural essence of China's historical civilization only underscores its persistent disregard and dismissal of Chinatown's own musical tradition.<sup>5</sup> In my view, what makes the juxtaposition doubly interesting is the self-centring posture of Mei, who attempted to appropriate Chineseness for his art at the expense of other regional theatres. Hence, in the diaspora, the Cantonese opera much enjoyed by southern Chinese immigrants was relegated to the margins not once but twice.<sup>6</sup>

Deep-seated cultural prejudice on both sides of the Pacific has contributed to the neglect of Cantonese opera; however, to take another hint from the disappearance of Wayson Choy's father, an underlying difficulty in writing the history of the Cantonese opera overseas has to

<sup>4</sup> Yong Chen, *Chinese San Francisco, 1850-1943: A Trans-Pacific Community* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 90-5, 225-8. The collection of playbills was first gathered by Him Mark Lai and is now available at the Ethnic Studies Library at the University of California, Berkeley. Chen's use of the collection appears to be cursory, as indicated by his preliminary remarks. Wei Chi Poon, head librarian, has kindly given me access to the collection during three short research trips, all over holiday breaks, and permission to arrange the materials in some order.

<sup>5</sup> Nancy Yunhwa Rao, "Racial Essences and Historical Invisibility: Chinese Opera in New York, 1930," *Cambridge Opera Journal* 12, 2 (2000): 135-62; and "Songs of the Exclusion Era: New York Chinatown's Opera Theaters in the 1920s," *American Music* 20, 4 (2002): 399-444.

<sup>6</sup> On Mei Lanfang's US tour and his collaboration with scholar-dramatist Qi Rushan to articulate a larger cultural claim, see Joshua Goldstein, "Mei Lanfang and the Nationalization of Peking Opera, 1912-1930," *Positions* 7, 2 (1999): 377-420. Such cultural hierarchy remains evident in Chinese scholarship, as is indicated in the following recent work by Xu Yaxiang, "Jindai Zhongguo xiban zai guowai de chuanbo" [The Activities of Chinese Opera Troupes Overseas in Modern Times] in 2002 *liangan xiqu dazhan xueshu yantaohui lunwenji* [Proceedings of the 2002 Cross-Straits Symposium on Chinese theatre] (Taiwan: Center of Traditional Art, 2003), 151-86.

do with its transnational mobility. Individual actors and entire opera troupes came and left; as travelling entertainers performing among immigrants, they were transients among transients. Tracking their itineraries demands a multi-sited research effort to collect and collate the existing evidence. Katherine Preston recalls encountering the same problem in her research on European travelling troupes operating in the ante-bellum United States: “Names pop up in secondary sources – for example in studies of the history of music or the theater in specific American cities, and in such primary sources as playbills or music and theater periodicals. Only by accumulating such isolated bits of information – and by fleshing out the resulting itinerary with additional data – can we begin to understand just how active these singers were, how their careers constantly converged and diverged, how frequently they performed, how widely they traveled, and how important their activities were in American life.”<sup>7</sup> With regard to studying Chinatown theatre, the task is rendered all the more difficult because of the relative paucity of both primary and secondary sources. Connecting the dots in order to map out the performing circuits is easier said than done.<sup>8</sup>

By delving into sources in Vancouver, British Columbia – sources that have only recently become available – this article seeks to tackle questions concerning the Cantonese opera’s transnational mobility. Among these sources is an extensive run of theatre advertisements and related news items that appeared in the Chinatown newspaper the *Chinese Times*.<sup>9</sup> The information contains the most complete record available of the

<sup>7</sup> Katherine Preston, *Opera on the Road: Traveling Opera Troupes in the United States, 1825–60* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 42.

<sup>8</sup> In preparing for an exhibition of Cantonese opera costumes and theatrical paraphernalia owned by a musical society in New York’s Chinatown, Isabelle Duchesne has come across evidence of “costume migration.” Some of the items acquired by the society before the Pacific War bear the stamps of their original makers in Guangzhou. Intriguingly, seven elaborate costumes in this collection are also stamped with the name of an opera troupe that once performed in Vancouver in 1921–22. It is quite possible that this troupe initially imported these costumes into Canada as Duchesne suggests. However, without any additional documentation, the routes and means by which these items journeyed east remain a matter of speculation. See Isabelle Duchesne, “A Collection’s Riches: Into the Fabric of a Community,” in *Red Boat on the Canal: Cantonese Opera in New York Chinatown*, ed. I. Duchesne (New York: Museum of Chinese in the Americas, 2000), 51, 57–60.

<sup>9</sup> Theatre advertisements and relevant news items in the *Chinese Times* have been extracted and copied from microfilms by Professor Huang Jinpei as part of a research effort to support a major exhibit entitled “A Rare Flower: A Century of Cantonese Opera in Canada.” Organized by the Museum of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia, the exhibit (1993–96) features the largest collection of Cantonese opera costumes in North America. Elizabeth Johnson kindly allowed me to duplicate a set of the *Chinese Times* materials during a research trip in 2000. For highlights of the exhibit, see Elizabeth Johnson, “Cantonese Opera in its Canadian Context: The Contemporary Vitality of an Old Tradition,” *Theatre Research in Canada* 17, 1 (1996): 24–45; and “Opera Costumes in Canada,” *Arts of Asia* 27 (1997): 112–25.

activities of Cantonese opera troupes in Vancouver during the first half of the twentieth century. The data further allow us to document the circuits of touring actors and troupes by comparing notes with material that surfaced earlier (albeit in much lesser amounts) in the two major Chinese settlements in San Francisco and New York. Even more valuable are the business records, which offer an understanding of the internal workings of such transnational operations. These records pertain to two theatre companies established by Chinatown merchants in Vancouver in 1916-18 and 1923-24, respectively, for the purpose of bringing in opera troupes from South China. The first set contains details of incorporation, minutes of board meetings, information on ticket sales and payrolls, several actor's contracts, and miscellaneous items such as receipts.<sup>10</sup> The second consists almost entirely of internal correspondence that shows the logistical, financial, and legal difficulties of running a theatre business and how the company sought to address them.<sup>11</sup> Similar archival materials regarding the history of Cantonese opera have thus far not been found on either side of the Pacific.

The above sources predispose me to analyze Chinatown theatre as a business organization. Admittedly, it is hard not to insert a comment or two on the theatre as a cultural institution, but I will wait for another occasion to delineate its integration into the socio-political life of Chinatown – a subject that deserves full treatment on its own.<sup>12</sup> The primary purpose of this article is to discern the transnational nature of Chinatown theatre by focusing on various facets of its operation. The findings concerning the performing itineraries of Cantonese opera, and the underlying business and social networks that supported such

<sup>10</sup> "Wing Hong Lin Theatre Records," Sam Kee Papers, Add MSS 571, 566-G-4, City of Vancouver Archives (hereafter cited as WHLTR).

<sup>11</sup> The records are deposited in two separate collections: "Kue Hing Company File regarding a Chinese Acting Troupe," in Yip Sang Family Series, fol. 0018, file 3, Chung Collection, Rare Books and Special Collections, University of British Columbia Library (hereafter cited as KHUBC); and "Theatre Management – Kue Hing Co. Ltd.," in Yip Family and Yip Sang Ltd. fonds, Add MSS 1108, 612-F-7, City of Vancouver Archives (hereafter cited as KHCVL).

<sup>12</sup> The following studies of European operas from a business history perspective are inspiring models: Lorenzo Bianconi and Giorgio Pestelli, eds., *Opera Production and Its Resources* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998); John Rosselli, *The Opera Industry in Italy from Cimarosa to Verdi: The Role of the Impresario* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984); Anselm Gerhard, *The Urbanization of Opera: Music Theater in Paris in the 19th Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); and F.W.J. Hemmings, *The Theater Industry in Nineteenth-Century France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993). The collection of essays in John Cox and David Scott Kastan, eds., *A New History of Early English Drama* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), is a fine example of the social history approach. A recent attempt to apply the latter perspective to the China field is Joshua Goldstein's "From Teahouse to Playhouse: Theaters as Social Texts in Early-Twentieth-Century China," *Journal of Asian Studies* 62, 3 (2003): 753-79.

mobility, serve as a testimony to the historical agency of the migrant Chinese. Elusive as it may seem, Chinatown theatre was indeed a most demonstrably transnational undertaking in the diaspora experience of these migrants.

THEATRE HOUSE, IMPORTED ACTORS, AND THE  
WING HONG LIN THEATRE COMPANY  
IN EARLY CHINATOWN, 1898-1919

The first written account of Chinese theatre in Vancouver is similar to many of those furnished by Western tourists and reporters who had visited Chinese opera houses in San Francisco since the first performing troupe arrived from South China in 1852. Local historian J.S. Matthews remembered following a Chinese guide to an old Chinatown theatre house in Shanghai Alley on a dark and rainy evening in the winter of 1898. According to a short reminiscence written almost half a century later, Matthews did not understand the music or the play but was intrigued by the off-stage spectacle of “drably dressed Chinamen ... loosely grouped, [sitting] on every bench ... There were no ushers; the audience merely stayed and departed at their own will.” Aside from the apparent casualness of the audience, Matthews was struck by the physical conditions of the facility: “one might compare it with going with a lantern to the woodshed or the barn ... Inside we climbed an equally ill-lighted stairway of wood, carpetless [sic], unpainted, and in the gloom, seemingly begrimed with tobacco smoke. We found ourselves in a balcony overlooking the ‘pit’ below, and the stage beyond ... it was about as gloomy, ill-lighted, and dreary a den as could be imagined.”<sup>13</sup>

Unimpressive as it might be, the venue described by Matthews was probably the first theatre house established by the immigrant Chinese in what they called the “Saltwater City.” Vancouver was incorporated only in 1886, and the Chinese population at the turn of the century was about two thousand, barely enough to keep this theatre house in intermittent operation.<sup>14</sup> The visiting opera troupes could have started

<sup>13</sup> J.S. Matthews, “Chinese Theatre,” 4 December 1947, City of Vancouver Archives, AM 54, vol. 13, 506-c-5, file 6. Matthews did not mention the name and the exact location of the theatre in the piece, but he did say that the facility had been burned down the previous week, which was what prompted him to jot down his memory. According to news clippings located in the City of Vancouver Archives, m13610, this was the old Sing Kew Theatre in Shanghai Alley.

<sup>14</sup> The only other piece of information on this theatre house may be seen in a picture of Shanghai Alley taken after the riot of 1907. It shows a sign, in Chinese, pointing to the “Theatre Upstairs.” In Paul Yee, *Saltwater City: An Illustrated History of the Chinese in Vancouver* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1988), 31.

their tours from San Francisco or from nearby Victoria, the provincial capital, where there had been a Chinese settlement since 1858. Indeed, a recent study by Karrie Sebryk has identified five Chinese theatre houses in and around Victoria's Chinatown at various times between the 1860s and about 1885. However, after the turn of the century, these activities were gradually to shift to Vancouver, which overtook the provincial capital as the host of the largest Chinatown in Canada.<sup>15</sup> As a result of continuous immigration, the Chinese population in the Saltwater City grew to about 3,500 in 1911 and then to 6,500 ten years later. The prospects for the theatre business improved accordingly. By 1915 there were reportedly two theatre houses operating in Vancouver's Chinatown; namely, Ko Sing on East Pender Street and Sing Ping around the corner on Columbia Street. These theatres were catering to an expanding audience.<sup>16</sup>

The early promoters of Cantonese opera in Vancouver were Chinatown merchants of considerable repute and wealth. Loo Gee Wing, for instance, had theatre houses in Vancouver and Victoria under his management, including the above-mentioned Ko Sing, which he owned. Two extant actor's contracts, dated December 1914, identify him as an impresario who had an agent in Hong Kong who recruited players on his behalf.<sup>17</sup> Another notable backer was also among the wealthiest Chinese merchants in western Canada – Chang Toy, better known to his Chinese and non-Chinese business associates by the name of his firm, Sam Kee. In late 1916 Chang Toy and twenty other shareholders set up the Wing Hong Lin Theatre Company. With an initial investment of \$5,000, they assembled a troupe of twenty-nine members to perform at the Sing Ping Theatre, which belonged to Chang Toy. This first group, which included a few fresh recruits from South China, finished its season in May 1917. After a summer lull, Wing Hong Lin brought in a different troupe, which performed from October 1917 to May 1918.<sup>18</sup>

There are traces of a few other Cantonese opera troupes in town at various times between 1914 and 1918. In the summer of 1915, members from two unnamed troupes joined forces for a performance whose

<sup>15</sup> Karrie M. Sebryk, "A History of Chinese Theatre in Victoria" (MA thesis, University of Victoria, 1995), 111-40.

<sup>16</sup> *Chinese Times*, 20 January and 16 February 1915. According to other sources, Ko Sing was located at 124 East Pender Street, and Sing Ping was located at 536 Columbia Avenue (also identified as "at rear of 106-114 East Pender Street," perhaps because of its corner location). See the following paragraph.

<sup>17</sup> WHLTR, files 10-11. For a short report on Loo in the Western press, see Yee, *Saltwater City*, 33-4. Thanks to Edgar Wickberg for the reference.

<sup>18</sup> WHLTR. Specific references are provided below.

purpose was to benefit the victims of flooding in Guangdong. The local Chinese Benevolent Association sponsored the event, and these kinds of fundraisers, which were put on by opera troupes to support local charities or provide China-bound relief, were to become familiar Chinatown spectacles, especially in the 1930s.<sup>19</sup> Chinatown theatregoers may not have been as discriminatory as the more sophisticated audiences back in Hong Kong and Guangzhou; however, in early 1916 separate disturbances broke out in Ko Sing and Sing Ping after viewers expressed their disapproval by hurling insults and hard objects at the actors. Later that summer a Chinatown newspaper reported a more notorious incident, which involved a comic actor's being seriously wounded in his dormitory due to his assailant's "sexual jealousy."<sup>20</sup> Snapshots like these are indicative of how Cantonese opera – both its production and its consumption – slowly wove its way into the social life of an immigrant population that consisted predominantly of adult males. The theatre furnished a place for public socializing, for having a good time and escaping the drudgery of migrant life. Equally revealing are the audience's emotional reactions to the plays, whether these were light-hearted comedies or serious moral pieces drawn from historical legends and popular tales (usually focusing on sacrifice, dedication, and loyalty). However, far more informative are the business records of the Wing Hong Lin Theatre Company, which provide rare glimpses into the world of Chinatown theatre during the initial phase of its expansion. They present, to my knowledge, the earliest documentation on the organization of the theatre business, the role of merchant capital, the background and sojourning experience of the actors, and the conditions under which these travelling entertainers negotiated their entry into Canada.

First of all, the involvement of Chinatown merchant capital is noteworthy, particularly the participation of someone of the stature of Chang Toy. As mentioned, Chang Toy was no common storekeeper. Paul Yee has documented his extensive activities in "imports and exports, retail sales, charcoal and fuel sales, labour contracting in the timber, fishing, and sugar industries, steamship ticket sales and real estate development," which rendered him the *crème de la crème* among

<sup>19</sup> *Chinese Times*, 24 July 1915.

<sup>20</sup> *Chinese Times*, 23 February, 16 April, and 14-15 June 1916. The troupes involved were Kuo Tai Ping, Hing Fung Lin, and Po Yu Yee. Precisely what caused the uproar and reaction cannot be ascertained from the reports, but nowhere did the situation in Vancouver match the violence in San Francisco and New York, where the powerful tong organizations occasionally gunned down opponents in theatre houses.



the Chinese merchant elite.<sup>21</sup> As far as Wing Hong Lin is concerned, Chang Toy's role was pivotal. As the largest shareholder, he hosted the monthly board meetings at his business premises 111 East Pender Street. Reflecting the weight of his opinions, the official minutes note his views and endorsement of major decisions, including the retention of individual actors and the call to raise another \$5,000 for a second season. The same document further indicates that Wing Hong Lin paid him \$200 for the monthly rental of Sing Ping (his theatre house).<sup>22</sup> Last but not least, undertaking the important task of recruiting actors from South China was Chang Toy's chief business associate in Hong Kong, the Sun Tong Chong Company. Sun Tong Chong belonged to the group of "Gold Mountain Firms," which specialized in imports and exports to Chinatowns across North America; these firms also tapped the multilateral business connections to furnish a host of migration-related services, such as the handling of travel documents, passenger shipping, remittances, and the like. With instructions in hand, local agents started scouting for actors with the desirable skills and credentials in the Hong Kong-Guangzhou area. Once the home company approved the selection, the agents then proceeded to negotiate the contract, issue an advance, apply for travel documents, and arrange transportation for the departing actor. While locally organized, Chinatown theatre was a trans-Pacific operation that hinged on and strengthened the transnational networks of the migrant Chinese.<sup>23</sup>

Before the booked actors were to land, Wing Hong Lin and other Chinese theatre companies faced an additional hurdle. Apparently, the Canadian immigration authorities followed the example of the US authorities in refusing to consider "actors and theatrical performers" labourers – the initial target of exclusion.<sup>24</sup> Under Canada's anti-Chinese

<sup>21</sup> Paul Yee, "Sam Kee: A Chinese Business in Early Vancouver," *BC Studies* 69-70 (1986): 70-96, esp. 73. Yee has examined only the pre-1916 activities of the Sam Kee Company (though Chang Toy died in 1920) and, thus, has omitted entirely Sam Kee's involvement in Wing Hong Lin.

<sup>22</sup> WHLTR, "Corporation record," file 1, especially minutes from the inaugural meeting (undated) as well as two other meetings on 9 December 1916 and 17 May 1917, respectively. See also "Stock certificates," file 2.

<sup>23</sup> The appointment of Sun Tong Chong as recruitment agent was officially approved at the first board meeting. See WHLTR, "Corporation record," file 1. Also, "Leases, indentures, and correspondence," file 3, holds a receipt for a cheque in the amount of HK\$1,120, payable to Sun Tong Chong as commission, dated 18 January 1917. For a discussion of the "Gold Mountain Firms," see Madeline Y. Hsu, *Dreaming of Gold, Dreaming of Home: Transnationalism and Migration between the United States and South China, 1882-1943* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 34-40.

<sup>24</sup> The ruling was rendered by the US immigration authorities in the 1890s as part of the effort to make a finer distinction between Chinese labourers, the primary target of exclusion, and

immigration policy, actors were therefore exempt from the \$500 head tax; instead, both countries required a local bona fide business entity to place a \$500 bond on each actor seeking entry. These permits were valid for six months and could be extended for up to three years. Admittedly a favoured way of doing things as the money was refundable, the bond requirement was no small expense for anyone who sponsored a troupe of over twenty members. In the case of Wing Hong Lin Theatre Company, it fell to a local surety company to provide the required bond fund. Chang Toy and another major partner then signed off as guarantors in order to indemnify the surety company against any loss in the event that an actor should fail to leave the country upon the expiration of his or her permit.<sup>25</sup>

One can appreciate why management was so adamant about having control over actors as soon as they arrived, and the available evidence of contracts should put to rest any illusion that these itinerant performers were free agents. Wong Yin Tseng and three fellow players, age twenty-five to thirty-five and natives of Guangzhou and its vicinity, signed their contracts with Wing Hong Lin's agent in Hong Kong on 23 October 1916. These were standard printed documents that left blank spaces for individual information such as personal names and the amount of compensation. The fact that handwritten contracts had been drawn up two years earlier (with Loo Gee Wing), with almost the exact stipulations, suggests that, by this time, overseas engagement was becoming both common and standardized.<sup>26</sup>

The contract can be divided into three parts, beginning with the terms of employment. The player was hired to perform one or two principal role types, but the "conventions" observed by travelling troupes required her/him to be "amenable to any assignment," including role types in which he or she was not trained. The impresario had the right to shuffle the player to different locations around the country. Working hours were from 6:00 PM to 1:00 AM daily, except over Chinese New Year, when an early session commenced around noon. Finally, the composition of the troupe, "whether it be a mixed or all-female company," was no cause for objection on the part of the actor.<sup>27</sup> These stipulations show evidence of

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other categories of Chinese travellers. See Marie Rose Wong, *Sweet Cakes, Long Journey: The Chinatowns of Portland, Oregon* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2004), 68 and 83.

<sup>25</sup> Guarantor letter from Choe Duck to the Canadian Surety Company, 8 November 1916, in WHLTR, "Correspondence," file 13. The sponsoring company had the option to advance the bond fund itself. On occasion the required bond amount was as high as a thousand dollar per person. See undated (1923?) correspondence sent to the Canadian immigration authorities, obtained by Sebyrk from the City of Victoria Archives and appended in her "History of Chinese Theatre in Victoria," 169-70.

<sup>26</sup> WHLTR, "Actor's contracts," files 10-11.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

adaptation as the Cantonese opera journeyed abroad. The requirement for individual actors to play multiple role types was a function of reduced troupe size. In South China a full Cantonese opera company had some seventy or more players; overseas, the logistics of long-distance travel and financial constraints resulted in a much smaller troupe.<sup>28</sup> Another example of local variance pertains to the warm reception for mixed and all-female companies among Chinese immigrant communities. Since mixed troupes remained banned by the authorities in Guangzhou and Hong Kong until the 1930s, some performers may have found the practice of sharing the stage with members of the opposite sex objectionable. My research has uncovered no such dispute, but it is difficult to tell whether the reason for this might be a pre-emptive clause in the contract, the versatility and adaptability of the acting profession, or both.

Compensation, of course, varied among actors, and it ranged from us\$780 to us\$960 in the case of Wong Yin Tseng and her three fellow travellers. The package included round-trip third-class ship fare, plus room and board for the duration of the contract. The us\$500 bond money is noted in the contract as “an advance” made by the impresario to the immigration authorities. Should the action of the player cause the forfeiture of the bond fund, she would be fully liable for reimbursing the owner. The contract also details the payment schedule. Traditionally, actors in South China received one-third of the value of the contract at the beginning of the annual performing season in early summer and another one-third before Chinese New Year. The rest was broken down into equal installments disbursed twice a month. The overseas contract stipulates some interesting modifications in that half of the entire amount was to be issued to the player before departure but in Chinese currency, with the remainder to be paid in US dollars on a bimonthly basis. Since Chinese dollars were worth far less than US dollars (the exchange rate noted on the contract put the Chinese dollar at half that of the US dollar), shrewd Chinatown businesspeople, who were adept at working transnational operations, continued to find ways to work the system.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Lai Bojiang and Huang Jianming, *Yueju shi* [History of Cantonese Opera] (Beijing: Chinese Theatre Press, 1988), 281–301. The authors also note that, back in South China, troupes working on outlying rural circuits away from the Pearl River Delta core were smaller in size, and their members were adept at playing multiple role types. Moreover, certain stage practices in this genre – such as the deployment of standard arias and highly conventional scenarios, not to mention the reliance on improvisation – have considerably enhanced its ability to adjust to different performance contexts, audience expectations, and changing personnel. See Rao’s “Songs of the Exclusion Era,” 407, for a succinct discussion of these artistic elements and how they may account for Cantonese opera’s ability to adapt overseas.

<sup>29</sup> In other words, for a contract carrying a face value of us\$780, the actor would first receive \$390 in Chinese cash and only the remaining \$390 in US currency. On the contract and

The last part of the contract spells out further restrictions. Actors were not allowed to enter a guild, join a brotherhood, or form any fraternal organization. Sick leave was paid up to ten days, after which time actors had to make up for missed performances. A voiding clause vested the impresario with the authority to suspend the actor and to return him or her to Hong Kong if s/he proved to be “indolent, insubordinate, or otherwise defiant of the conventions observed by the troupe.”<sup>30</sup> This was not an empty threat. During the Wing Hong Lin Theatre Company’s second season, one actor, who was caught stealing from his peer, was turned over to the local police and then deported after serving jail time. Another was thought to be making unwanted sexual advances towards a popular actress. Rumours soon spread about this “womanizer,” and, during a performance, he was ridiculed by some members of the audience. This resulted in a physical altercation, which the management cited as sufficient cause for abrogating his contract.<sup>31</sup>

One may surmise that actors did not enjoy high regard and that, in part, this reflects the contempt in which they were held by traditional Chinese society. The standard contracts used by the Wing Hong Lin Theatre Company begin with a highly demeaning statement, which describes the signatory as “being destitute at home and therefore willing to perform opera aboard.”<sup>32</sup> Whether or not one takes this projection of poverty and powerlessness literally, the large majority of actors who travelled abroad during this early period generally belonged to the second tier, having lesser fame and coarser skills than those who belonged to the first tier. Again, the larger transnational context offers clues as to why this would be the case. In the late nineteenth century, back in South China, the Cantonese opera had flourished as an itinerant theatrical entertainment catering to villages and market towns across the Pearl River Delta; however, after the turn of the century,

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remuneration system in South China, and the different practice for overseas engagement, note the reminiscences by several actors: Liu Guoxing, “Yueju banzhu dui yiren de baoxiao” [The Exploitation of Cantonese Opera Actors by the Impresarios], *Guangzhou wenshi ziliao* [Literary and Historical Sources on Guangzhou] 3 (1961): 126-7; Xinzhu, Pang Shun Yao, Ye Furuo, and Xin Xuemei, “Yueju yiren zai Nanyang ji Meizhou de qingkuang” [The Situation of Cantonese Opera Actors in Southeast Asia and the Americas], *Guangdong wenshi ziliao* [Literary and Historical Sources on Guangdong] 21 (1965): 158-9; Liu Guoxing, “Yueju yiren zai haiwai de shenghuo ji huodong” [The Lives and Activities of Cantonese Opera Actors Overseas], *Guangdong wenshi ziliao* 21 (1965): 182.

<sup>30</sup> WHLTR, “Actor’s Contracts,” files 10-II.

<sup>31</sup> Minutes of meetings, 9 March 1918 and 3 April 1918, WHLTR, “Corporation Record,” file 1. For a report on the incident in the theatre house, see *Chinese Times*, 9 March 1918.

<sup>32</sup> WHLTR, “Actor’s Contracts,” files 10-II. See Liu Guoxing’s comment on the lowly origins of the opera actors who travelled to North America during this early period in “Yueju yiren zai haiwai de shenghuo ji huodong,” 181-2.

it underwent a decisive urban shift, capturing the larger audiences in Hong Kong and Guangzhou. The urbanization and commercialization of Cantonese opera turned the twin cities into a huge market – a market that offered abundant performance opportunities and that functioned as a magnet to emerging star performers who enjoyed high incomes and close to celebrity status.<sup>33</sup> Subsequently, throughout the late nineteenth century and the first two decades of the twentieth century, it was mostly second-rate players (and maybe the more adventurous types) who accepted the hardship of performing in foreign lands. Moreover, if overseas engagement was an option, then nearby Southeast Asia held greater appeal than did North America. Geographical proximity aside, the presence of sizable Cantonese communities among the Chinese immigrant populations in Singapore, the Malay Peninsula, and Vietnam rendered these places relatively more attractive destinations than were Vancouver or San Francisco.

The Wing Hong Lin Theatre Company's records provide some idea of the degree of audience interest. Over the course of two seasons, from the end of 1916 to May 1918, the company regularly ordered 700 to 1,200 copies of playbills to be distributed to patrons attending the shows.<sup>34</sup> Admissions stayed within the affordable range of ten to fifty cents. Both seasons went through an almost identical cycle regarding ticket sales and incomes (see Table 1). A strong first month was followed by a temporary dip and then two to three months of relatively healthy attendance. Perhaps because the cast remained stationary, audience enthusiasm inevitably waned and income declined in the remaining months. No final balance sheet can be generated from the data, though the board claimed minor losses at the end of both seasons. In late 1918 the books were closed and the Wing Hong Lin Theatre Company disappeared from the scene.<sup>35</sup>

If the backers of the Wing Hong Lin Theatre Company found the theatre business to be challenging and decided to fold, others were ready to step in. Immediately, another visiting troupe took over the Sing Ping Theatre and stayed there for seven months. Named Chuk Sing Ping, this company marked the first time a daily advertisement appeared in the *Chinese Times*, enunciating the presence of the Cantonese opera in

<sup>33</sup> See Liu Guoxing, "Xiban he xiyuan" [Opera Troupes and Theatre Houses], in Guangdong Theatre Research Office, ed., *Yueju yanjiu ziliao xuan* [Select Research Materials on Cantonese Opera] (Guangzhou: Guangdong Theatre Research Office, 1983), 328–65.

<sup>34</sup> See receipts from two local printers, in WHLTR, "Receipts," files 14–17.

<sup>35</sup> Minutes of meetings, 17 May 1917 and 4 May 1918, WHLTR, "Corporation record," file 1. According to payrolls, actor turnover during both seasons appears to have been minimal. See "Receipts signed by actors and staff," file 8, WHLTR.

TABLE 1:

*Wing Hong Lin's income from ticket sales over two seasons, 1916-18*

BIWEEKLY RECEIPTS DATE REPORTED	PROCEEDS FROM TICKET SALES *	NOTES	
First Season			
12.2.1916	\$2,106.65	10 days	
12.16.1916	\$1,080.05		
12.30.1916	\$656.50	Chinese New Year	
1.13.1917	\$1,007.30		
1.27.1917	\$1,622.40		
2.10.1917	\$1,503.62		
2.24.1917	\$1,398.73		
3.10.1917	\$1,051.45		
3.24.1917	\$753.82		
4.7.1917	\$860.77		
4.21.1917	\$647.42		
5.5.1917	\$468.57		
5.16.1917	\$296.50		9 days
Second Season			
10.13.1917	\$2,175.70	9 days	
10.27.1917	\$1,319.65		
11.10.1917	\$989.30	Chinese New Year	
11.24.1917	\$1,054.30		
12.8.1917	\$1,103.18		
12.22.1917	\$2,532.58		
1.5.1918	\$2,212.20		
1.19.1918	\$1,230.85		
2.2.1918	\$1,291.85		
2.16.1918	\$677.35		
3.2.1918	\$725.20		
3.16.1918	\$681.50		
3.30.1918	\$556.15		
4.13.1918	\$376.95		
4.27.1918	\$277.15		
5.2.1918	\$58.25		4 days

Source: Wing Hong Lin Theatre Records, "Daily income and expenses," City of Vancouver Archives, Add. MSS 571, Sam Kee Papers, 566-G-4, files 5-7.

\* These figures are based on daily intakes minus miscellaneous expenses, such as occasional tips for the staff of the theatre house, heating utility charges during the winter months, midnight snacks for actors after performances, minor repairs and supplies, and so on.

the public arena.<sup>36</sup> Another intriguing incident was the public formation of an actor's guild in early 1919. The announcement took the form of a list of ninety-three individuals who occupied various positions as officers – enough to fill the rosters of three opera troupes. While the names of many actual actors (and musicians) were on the list, the president of the organization was identified as “Mok Kue Chee,” meaning, literally, “don't be scared!”<sup>37</sup> As we have no more information about this group, it is hard to tell whether Mok Kue Chee was fictive or whether the guild was making a defiant gesture against the heavy-handed policies of the management. At any rate, the fact that actors were essentially a population of transients hindered any sustained organizational effort. Their travelling practice was to become more pronounced in the following years as Chinatown theatre entered an exciting phase of growth.

#### ENTERING THE GOLDEN AGE OF CHINATOWN THEATRE: THE 1920S

In an era during which the majority society continued to shun Chinatown for its perceived alienness and presumed decadence, Vancouver's Chinese residents had more opportunity than ever to enjoy their favourite entertainment. During the first half of the 1920s, five Cantonese opera troupes landed in Vancouver, two of which stayed in town for over a year. There were periods when their seasons overlapped, resulting in long stretches of uninterrupted nightly performances, probably for the first time in this particular Chinatown's history (see Table 2). The Sing Ping Theatre continued to be the primary venue, but two other facilities joined in, at least for a short while: the Imperial Theatre on Main Street, which was renovated in the fall of 1921, and the old theatre in Shanghai Alley, which reopened during 1923-24. Sponsoring the visiting troupes were companies just like Wing Hong Lin. Theatre advertisements identify their ticket agents in the neighbourhood, and these included several import-and-export general stores, one pharmacy and herbal dispensary, and a jeweller, all of whom were located on Pender Street.

Driving such business interest was, first of all, an expanding clientele. The local Chinese population reached 13,000 by 1930. Although the Chinese Immigration Act, 1923, all but shut the door on new arrivals and eventually caused some Chinese to leave, initially, due to the relocation of immigrants from smaller settlements, Vancouver's Chinatown

<sup>36</sup> *Chinese Times*, 5 September 1918 to 12 April 1919.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 11 January 1919.

TABLE 2:

*Cantonese opera troupes that performed in Vancouver's Chinatown, 1920-33*

NAMES OF TROUPES	PERIOD OF PERFORMANCES	TICKET AGENTS
Sing Ping	Dec. 1920 – Jan. 1922	On Hing Lun
Lok Man Lin	Sept. 1921 – Feb. 1922	Ken Fung Co.
Kwok Fung Lin	April – June 1923	Foo Hung Co.
Chuk Man On	March 1923 – May 1924	Man Sing Lun
Kwok Chung Hing	Nov. 1924 – May 1925	Luen Sing Jeweller
Tai Mo Toi	April 1927 – April 1928	Gim Lee Yuan
Wan Kau Lok	Sept. – Dec. 1930	Watsang Drug Store
Tai Law Tin	Nov. – Dec. 1931; Feb. – May; July – Sept. 1932; Dec. 1932 – Jan. 1933	Watsang Drug Store

Source: *Chinese Times*, 1920-33.

experienced a boom.<sup>38</sup> Canada's largest Chinatown afforded the Chinese a degree of mutual protection from a hostile society as well as the enjoyment of ethnic facilities and resources, such as the increasing number of native place and clan organizations; supplies of food items and goods from the home country; and, of course, the opportunity to frequent a theatre house. At the same time, the brewing ethnic sentiments in a ghetto-like environment, as well as a discernible tide of nationalist feelings related to events in China in the 1920s, helped to heighten a desire to consume traditional theatre among nostalgic, if not downright homesick, people.<sup>39</sup>

Nevertheless, more than audience interest and business opportunity are required to explain why Chinatown theatre in Vancouver reached a new height in the early 1920s. For reasons that were broadly similar to those mentioned above, the theatre markets grew simultaneously in Chinese communities across North America, beginning with such key locations as San Francisco and New York as well as Vancouver. Together, these three nodal points anchored an expanding transnational circuit of Cantonese opera. Not only did these communities host entire troupes and rotate individual actors through their stages but they also fed these

<sup>38</sup> For trends in Chinese immigration and domestic movements, see David Chuenyan Lai, *Chinatown: Towns within Cities in Canada* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1988), 56-67.

<sup>39</sup> See Wickberg, *From China to Canada*, various chapters in Part 2 and Part 3 that deal with the years right before and after the legislation of the Chinese Immigration Act of 1923. Yee offers a focused discussion on Vancouver during this period in *Saltwater City*, 49-73.



travelling performers into secondary locations and transit points like Seattle, Portland, Los Angeles, Honolulu, Chicago, Boston, and even Chinatowns in Latin American countries such as Mexico, Cuba, and Peru. The following two examples of 1920s Cantonese opera troupes demonstrate the interconnectedness of various locations on a large canvas.

On 5 September 1921 an opera company called Lok Man Lin landed in Vancouver and immediately started performing in the recently renovated theatre on Main Street. It was the second troupe in town, and it consisted of ten male and six female actors who were trumpeted as hailing from “Tang Shan” (i.e., China), where the leading members had performed with well-known opera troupes. In particular, the prima donna was said to have enjoyed a successful stint in Vietnam’s Chinese enclave in Saigon-Cholon, charming the audience with her exquisite beauty and elegance. Subsequently, five more actors joined Lok Man Lin and took turns playing the principal role until the season ended on 6 February 1922.<sup>40</sup> After this time the whereabouts of Lok Man Lin would have remained a mystery if not for the information unearthed in San Francisco. Apparently, after Vancouver, while a few members struck out on their own, the majority of the troupe made their way to San Francisco and joined forces with another visiting group called Yan Sau Lin. Under the sponsorship of the Ying Mei Leun Hop Company in San Francisco, this move ushered in a new phase in the development of the local Cantonese stage.<sup>41</sup>

Cantonese opera was of course no novelty to the Chinese immigrant community in the Bay Area. Riddle’s chronicle has traced the appearance of Chinese theatre to the very beginning of significant Chinese immigration into the western United States in the mid-nineteenth century. The Chinese community in San Francisco boasted its first permanent theatre built for the enjoyment of its countrypeople as early as 1867. With the Chinese population soon climbing to 30,000, the community hosted one or more opera troupes on a regular basis. Only in the last decade of the century, under the shadow of anti-Chinese exclusion, did support for Chinatown theatre ebb. And then came the devastating earthquake of 1906. As the survivors rebuilt their community, theatre houses were not high on the agenda, and there

<sup>40</sup> *Chinese Times*, 1 September 1921 – 6 February 1922. The theatre was located at 720 Main Street, according to the news clip “Remember Our Chinese Opera?” 25 March 1966, City of Vancouver Archives, M15, 610.

<sup>41</sup> Cantonese opera playbills, 9 July – 23 October 1923, box F, Ethnic Studies Library, University of California, Berkeley. One actor, Shea Chai Kit, went to Havana and later joined his comrades briefly in October 1923, when he stopped over at San Francisco on his way back to China.

were only occasional reports of opera performances in various theatres around Chinatown until 1923. However, with the Chinese population rebounding from about 8,000 in 1913 to 10,000 in 1920, it was only a matter of time before Chinatown theatre regained its vitality.<sup>42</sup>

The circumstances surrounding the arrival of the Lok Man Lin Troupe in San Francisco and its collaboration with Yan Sau Lin are not clear, but the performances evidently struck a chord.<sup>43</sup> In fact, the reception was so enthusiastic that two brand new theatre houses were built in the following two years. In June 1924 the Mandarin Theatre opened on Grant Avenue, followed a year later by the Great China Theatre on Jackson Street, the latter being underwritten by Lok Man Lin's sponsor Ying Mei Leun Hop. Enjoying substantial support from different factions in Chinatown, the two theatres became rivals, and their competition has since been part of San Francisco's Chinatown lore of the pre-Pacific War era.<sup>44</sup>

On the east coast yet another opera troupe that had used Vancouver as a point of entry triggered a similar renaissance. Chuk Man On had begun the season at the old theatre in Shanghai Alley in March 1923 and had stayed through May 1924.<sup>45</sup> This company of thirty-two then travelled to New York City, marking a revival of its Chinatown stage after a lull of fifteen years. Notwithstanding the periodic shuffle of players, the troupe, bearing the same name, performed in New York until March 1927, when it merged with another troupe to become Wing Ngai Sheung. The merger was reportedly financed by the Hop Hing Company, which was founded by local Chinatown merchants with capital raised in various Chinese communities in the United States, Canada, and Cuba. After the home theatre burned down in June 1929, a new location was found immediately and the troupe performed until 1930, using the name Sun Sai Gai.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>42</sup> Riddle, *Flying Dragons, Flowing Streams*, 17-103, 135-43; and Chen, *Chinese San Francisco*, 90-4.

<sup>43</sup> A local contact told the federal theatre project research team that the troupe had come to San Francisco after rather "indifferent results" in Vancouver. Business intelligence on box office results, actors' compensations, and the like is not the most reliable as the rumours could be part of a publicity effort or perhaps, in this case, serve to undercut the bargaining position of the other party. See Chu, "Chinese Theatres in America," 76.

<sup>44</sup> The rivalry is mentioned in many different places, including Chu, "Chinese Theatres in America," 77; Riddle, *Flying Dragons, Flowing Streams*, 144-5; Liu Guoxing, "Yueju yiren zai haiwai de shenghuo ji huodong," 183; Suzhou Nu, "Yueju zai Meiguo wangshi shiling" [Sketchy Memories of Cantonese Opera in the US], *Xiju yishu ziliao* [Sources in Theatre Art] 11 (1986): 259; and Lai and Huang, *Yueju shi*, 369-70.

<sup>45</sup> *Chinese Times*, 20 March 1923 - 16 May 1924.

<sup>46</sup> See Rao's discussion in "Songs of the Exclusion Era," 404-5, 413; and Arthur Bonner, *ALAS! What Brought Thee Hither? The Chinese in New York 1800-1950* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1997), 93.

The routes of troupe migration are traced not to suggest the primacy of Vancouver among the three principal locations but, rather, to note that the Canadian city was a convenient point of disembarkation for North America-bound Cantonese opera troupes. If anything, the size of the Chinese population in San Francisco and that city's dominant position as the hub of ethnic Chinese commercial capital, business intelligence, and networks gave its theatre market the edge. As the 1920s wore on, San Francisco's Chinatown clearly possessed the largest share of theatre business, was home to the most opera professionals, had the stronger bargaining position with regard to signing the actors and troupes of its choice, and had the most extensive business networks through which to funnel players into secondary venues and more distant markets.

Finally, the Chinatown theatre boom in the 1920s reflected conditions across the Pacific in South China. The urbanization of Cantonese opera in the preceding decades entailed cut-throat competition in Guangzhou and Hong Kong. From around 1918-19, large-scale city-based and city-bound companies were formed, with heavy capital investment and resident superstars. These urban troupes entertained an audience that had a seemingly insatiable appetite for the latest dramatization of historical plays, adaptations from Western novels and current events, improved costuming and stage properties, the use of new musical instruments, and the development of new arias.<sup>47</sup> Compounding the problems of rising production costs and intense competition was the occasional political crisis and social disturbance, such as the 1924 Merchant Corps incident in Guangzhou (a clash between a faction of local merchants and the emergent military power of Chiang Kai-shek) and the 1925-26 general strike that paralyzed the British colony of Hong Kong for sixteen months. Hence, even before the first sign of a major meltdown of the theatre market in South China at the end of the decade, a growing number of actors were warm to the idea of engagement abroad.<sup>48</sup>

It was not a coincidence then that the early 1920s marked the arrival of a growing contingent of actors from South China. Evidence further

<sup>47</sup> Lai and Huang, *Yueju shi*, 32-41.

<sup>48</sup> Michael Ts'in, *Nation, Governance, and Modernity in China: Canton, 1900-1927* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 103-10; and an excerpt from Deng Zhongxia's classic published in 1930, *Zhongguo zhibigong yundong shi, 1919-1926* [A History of Chinese Trade Unionism], in David Faure, *Society: A Documentary History of Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1997), 166-74. The famous actor Pak Keuk Wing mentioned the strike of 1925-26 as his reason for going abroad. See Lee Men, ed., *Yueju yishu dashi Bai Jurong* [Bai Jurong Master Artist of Cantonese Opera] (Guangzhou: China Dramatist Association, Guangdong Branch, 1990), 35.

indicates the increased circulation of these actors through different overseas locales. Instead of maintaining a stable cast, as opera companies did in the preceding period, the troupes of the 1920s adopted a different *modus operandi* in that they rotated their key players regularly through the theatre networks in order to keep their casts fresh and attractive in the eyes of their patrons. For instance, during Chuk Min On's season in Vancouver in 1923-24, more than a dozen players trickled in one or two at a time, while others departed.<sup>49</sup> Another example from Vancouver is Da Mo Toi: during its year-long season in 1927-28, as many as twenty new actors arrived and played leading roles at different times. Among them were Kim Shan Bing and Sun Gui Fei (note the reference to "Kim Shan" [lit. the "Gold Mountain"; that is, the United States and Canada] as part of the first actor's pseudonym. This was a naming practice that performers [especially male performers] often adopted and that functioned as a badge of experience and honour). This couple had performed in the Mandarin Theatre in San Francisco in 1924-26, and, after a five-month stint in Vancouver, they left for New York, where they spent over a year with Wing Ngai Sheung and its successor.<sup>50</sup> The expansion of the theatre market in these three Chinese communities in the early 1920s thus resulted in heightened mobility among individual actors.

The golden age of Chinatown theatre meant lucrative contracts, particularly for top-notch actors who, in the past, had been recruited only with great difficulty. Increasingly, the 1920s saw well established actors parading across North American stages, and, unsurprisingly, the two theatres in San Francisco claimed the lion's share. An excellent example from this period is Pak Kuek Wing. Widely acclaimed as the leading performer of the role of "civil male," Pak was based at the Great China from November 1925 to March 1927. Another outstanding actor was the flamboyant Ma See Tseng, who, at a young age, had launched his career in British Malaya and had electrified theatregoers upon his return to Hong Kong and Guangzhou in 1924. The North American host for his tour from 1931 to 1933 was the Mandarin.<sup>51</sup> Drawing no

<sup>49</sup> *Chinese Times*, 20 March 1923 – 16 May 1924.

<sup>50</sup> Cantonese opera playbills, 2 December 1924 – 19 January 1926, box A, Ethnic Studies Library, University of California, Berkeley. See also *Chinese Times*, 12 September 1927 – 13 February 1928; Rao, "Songs of the Exclusion Era," 419. A Hong Kong scholar, Leung Pui Kam, has identified thirty-two players (only two of whom are females) bearing the title of "Kim Shan" as part of their pseudonyms. See Leung, "Yueju yanjiu" [A Study of Cantonese Opera] (PhD diss., University of Hong Kong, 1980), 703.

<sup>51</sup> Cantonese opera playbills, boxes D, E, and G, Ethnic Studies Library, University of California, Berkeley. See also Pak's biography by Lee, *Yueju yishu dashi Bai Jurong*, 35-8, based on oral history. On Ma See Tseng, see Shen Ji, *Ma Shizeng de yishu shengya* [The Artistic Career of Ma Shizeng] (Guangzhou: Guangdong People's Press, 1957), 91-9. Prior to his trip

less attention, and perhaps travelling even more widely due to popular demand, were a number of distinguished female actors. Cheung Suk Kun, for instance, was hired by Po Yu Yee in Vancouver in 1918-19; the *Chinese Times* put her twelve-month contract at \$6,000. This amount was dwarfed by the offer she received from the Mandarin six years later, allegedly an annual salary of \$17,000. Dubbed by a local magazine the “Mary Pickford of southern China,” Cheung spent the bulk of her sojourn in San Francisco, taking occasional road trips to Los Angeles and making a brief visit to New York City.<sup>52</sup>

#### KUE HING COMPANY AND THE CHALLENGE OF MANAGING TRANSNATIONAL CHINATOWN THEATRE

Lest we assume that the transnational Chinatown theatre simply thrived on its own, the short history of the Kue Hing Company brings to light the challenges of managing a business that hinged on long-distance mobility and communication. Kue Hing was set up in January 1923 by a group of Chinatown merchants in British Columbia. Forty-five shareholders, twenty-two of whom had each contributed \$250 or more, sat on the board of directors. The majority of the investors were from Vancouver, including the elderly Yip Sang, who was every bit as successful and wealthy as was Chang Toy, and two of his sons, Yip Kew Mow and Yip Kew Him. Also involved were some up-and-coming Chinatown merchants of the Yip brothers’ generation, like Lee Bick, whose Foo Hung Company at 107 East Pender Street is identified in various documents as the headquarters of Kue Hing, and Wong Yee Chun (alias Wong Ow), a Chinese agent at the Royal Bank. Representing Victoria’s Chinatown was a small contingent, including Lim Bang (of the Gim Fook Yuen Rice Mills) and Chan Horne. Both these men were major shareholders and were actively involved in the affairs of the theatre company.<sup>53</sup>

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to the United States, Ma had put together a small pamphlet entitled *Qianli zhuangyou ji* [A Collection of Essays Published on the Occasion of This Thousand-Mile Journey] (Hong Kong: Dong Ya, n.d.).

<sup>52</sup> *Chinese Times*, 21 January 1918; Franklin Clark, “‘Seat Down Front!’ Since Women Have Appeared on the Chinese Stage, Chinatown’s Theaters are Booming,” *Sunset Magazine*, April 1925, 33, 54. These monetary figures offered to the media by interested parties should be viewed with caution. Cantonese opera playbills, 2 December 1924 – 9 May 1926, box A, Ethnic Studies Library, University of California, Berkeley.

<sup>53</sup> “Kue Hing Company’s Share Certificates,” in KHCVA, file 2.

Kue Hing's articles of association, first filed with the BC Registrar of Joint Stock Companies in January 1923 and then revised in May, give us an idea of how this business was conceived.<sup>54</sup> The company appeared to be based on a close-knit group, or at least it was intended to be. Kue Hing was a private company that had \$20,000 worth of capital, which was divided into four hundred shares. Shareholding was limited to, at most, fifty people. If a member wanted to transfer his share(s), or liquidate his investment, then he had first to offer it to the current shareholders. In any event, the board of directors had the final authority to approve the sale. In the same spirit, additional funding or bond money was to be raised internally before anyone could resort to a bank or any other outside source. Though the details are unavailable, these stipulations probably sprang from the sharply drawn, kinship-based, parochial divisions and factional politics of Chinatown.<sup>55</sup>

The Kue Hing Company was formed for the purpose of engaging Cantonese opera troupes from "Tang Shan" to perform in Vancouver and Victoria, and possibly elsewhere, subject to the approval of the directors. The revisions adopted in May contain an interesting section concerning the management of a Honolulu offshoot. Presumably, the company had developed good contacts in Honolulu, which led it to decide not only to send a troupe there but also to run and staff a theatre house. According to the revised articles, a management team of three from the home office was to oversee the extension of the company in Hawaii. As a guarantee, each expatriate was required to own \$5,000 worth of real estate, and their one-year appointment was renewable at the discretion of the board. The staff was further instructed to file daily business reports with Vancouver by regular mail and to keep, at most, \$2,000 on hand, the rest to be remitted to the home office.<sup>56</sup> As we shall see, this long-distance cross-border project would occupy all the attention of the Kue Hing Company and, the above precautionary measures notwithstanding, problems repeatedly threatened to derail the project.

Before we unveil this particular saga, it is fair to say that the Kue Hing Company looked poised to take advantage of the business opportunity presented by transnational Chinatown theatre. Research findings

<sup>54</sup> Both documents are available in KHUBC.

<sup>55</sup> The individuals involved in Kue Hing were generally aligned with the Guomintang faction within Chinatown. For the rivalry between the Chinese Freemasons and the Guomintang within the context of Chinese organizational activities, see Wickberg, *From China to Canada*, 101-14, 157-68.

<sup>56</sup> "Kue Hing Company, Articles of Association, May 1923," in KHUBC.

comparable to Paul Yee's on the Sam Kee Company are unavailable for any of the major business partners of the Kue Hing Company. However, some of the activities undertaken by the company leave no doubt that it was comprised of a resourceful and capable group of Chinatown merchants with extensive connections. For instance, like the Wing Hong Lin Theatre Company, the Kue Hing Company had its own agents in Hong Kong whose task was to sign up actors. Its correspondence contains business intelligence sent from Seattle; San Francisco; Washington, DC; and, of course, Honolulu. Seattle, as a major point of arrival and departure for travelling actors, served Kue Hing particularly well with regard to gathering information on troupe activities and movements. The company retained the service of a Chinese agent in Seattle, whose responsibilities included arranging local performances for the troupe in-transit, working with immigration attorneys to resolve legal glitches, and contacting departing actors to see whether they were interested in a short-term engagement with Kue Hing.<sup>57</sup> The ethnic networks deployed were very broad, as was illustrated on one occasion when a Chinese cook working on a coastal liner running between Vancouver and Seattle was asked to courier company documents.<sup>58</sup> The Kue Hing Company was also in contact with its counterparts in the United States, a relationship that, although marked by some collaboration, was mainly competitive. In the spring of 1924, the Kue Hing Company negotiated with the Ying Mei Luen Hop Company in San Francisco about furthering their cooperation, including swapping actors, while simultaneously preparing for a continental tour by its Honolulu-based crews. Needless to say, the arrangement, along with the planned itinerary, was kept from Ying Mei Leun Hop and other local competitors.<sup>59</sup> Later in the summer Kue Hing clandestinely approached an actress under contract with Ying Mei Leun Hop. When the San Francisco company found out about this, its managing director sent a strongly worded letter to the Kue Hing Company, stating that it should have first requested the right to contact the player as its overture now afforded her leverage to bargain for a bigger contract.<sup>60</sup>

<sup>57</sup> See "Kue Hing Company, Correspondences," in KHCVA, file 1, covering mainly the period June-August 1923. Another set of letters and telegrams from August 1923 to July of 1924 are available in KHUBC.

<sup>58</sup> Lim Bang to Kue Hing Co., telegram, 28 June 1923, in KHCVA, file 1.

<sup>59</sup> Correspondences on this business move between 26 January and 27 February 1924, in KHUBC.

<sup>60</sup> Ying Mei Luen Hop Co. to Kue Hing Co., letter, 31 May 1924, in KHUBC.

In its early days the Kue Hing Company seemed to run smoothly. Within three months after incorporation, the Kwok Fung Lin Troupe arrived in Vancouver from South China on schedule and debuted at the Sing Ping Theatre. In the meantime, the other troupe in town, Chuk Man On, stayed at the older facility in Shanghai Alley.<sup>61</sup> One can imagine the smile on the face of the local shareholders as they flashed their season's passes and took their seats nightly at the shows. Little would they have expected the troubles awaiting them after the troupe finished its last performance and packed its trunks for Honolulu. The following day, Saturday, 23 June 1923, when the group of twenty-three actors sought entry into the United States in Seattle, the local immigration officials rejected their credentials and detained them for further investigation.

Fearing huge financial loss, the Kue Hing Company at once dispatched the bilingual Lim Bang and two other directors to Seattle. An initial appeal was quickly dismissed by federal immigration officials, allegedly on the grounds that there were already three other Chinese opera troupes in the country (San Francisco, Los Angeles, and Boston) and two similar applications that had been filed from San Francisco had been denied.<sup>62</sup> Lim and his colleagues, however, were undeterred, and their rescue efforts in the following days were two-pronged. First, they contacted the Chinese Legation in Washington under Dr. Alfred Sze and asked him to intervene. Lim also insisted that the home office petition the Chinese diplomats in Canada for support. Second, they hired Seattle immigration attorney Paul Houser and his Washington, DC, associate Roger O'Donnell to represent the Kue Hing Company. For two weeks telegrams went back and forth between Seattle and Vancouver – at times more than once a day – addressing legal strategies, discussing the latest development, and inquiring about copies of company documents to substantiate financial sponsorship and the group members' status as bona fide opera performers. Eventually, the case was decided in favour of the Kue Hing Company at a federal review board hearing. On 12 July Lim Bang wired a six-word message to Vancouver: "Trouble just over whole troupe landed."<sup>63</sup>

This twenty-day ordeal is a reminder that Chinatown theatre, like the rest of the immigrant community, was subject to the suspicious impulse and vigilant scrutiny of exclusion-era immigration authorities.

<sup>61</sup> *Chinese Times*, 7 April – 22 June 1923.

<sup>62</sup> Lim Bang to Kue Hing Co., telegram, 27 June 1923, in KHCVA, file 1.

<sup>63</sup> See correspondences from June 27 to July 12, 1923, in KHCVA, file 1.



Many field-level immigration inspectors and examiners were armed with ethnocentric assumptions about race, gender, and citizenship; they shared a widespread belief that the Chinese made liberal use of fake documents and falsified identities; and they could wreak havoc to the theatre business at the point of first encounter. The successful rescue of the Kue Hing Company lends support to recent scholarship, which emphasizes the agency and resourcefulness of the Chinese migrants in fighting injustice and bettering their conditions under exclusion.<sup>64</sup> Nevertheless, one cannot overlook what this cost the Chinese community in both financial and human terms. The incident revealed and exacerbated tensions within the company. No sooner had Lim Bang and his two associates arrived in Seattle than, in separate communications back to Vancouver, they began to trade accusations of incompetence.<sup>65</sup> Not to be forgotten is the frightful experience of the detainees. As far as I know, the actors involved have not left any record of what happened. Others who, in oral histories or memoirs, have reminisced about their dealings with immigration typically recall their ill treatment and their indignation towards the authorities.<sup>66</sup>

So, after much delay, the Kwok Fung Lin Troupe finally arrived in Hawaii and began its season on 2 August 1923. For some reason, this venture continued to be a disappointment riddled with human drama. In less than three weeks, attendance dropped precipitously and ticket sales became erratic, despite the arrival of additional players to boost the cast. The home office soon turned on the local management. In a string of letters to the board, the once triumphant Lim Bang expressed his concerns over the decline in income and questioned the plan to send over more actors. He was particularly upset with the apparent lack of communication from the local staff and their withholding of the surplus fund.<sup>67</sup> Bearing the brunt of Lim's accusations were Low Chung and Y.C. Leong, two Vancouver-based directors who had been appointed to escort the troupe and to oversee the business in Hawaii. In response, the latter blamed several actors for being uncooperative and troublesome. More specifically, they pointed out that the theatre house was located in a very poor part of town and that local scoundrels had several times interrupted performances, thus creating bad publicity. However, they

<sup>64</sup> See a most recent example in Erika Lee, *At America's Gates: Chinese Immigration During the Exclusion Era, 1882-1943* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003).

<sup>65</sup> In a letter to Kue Hing's agent in Seattle, Houser charged Kue Hing \$410 for his handling of the case. Paul Houser to Wong On, 17 September 1923, in KHUBC. On the brewing internal conflict, see Y.C. Leong and Leong Kai Tip to Kue Hing Co., letter, 1 July 1923, in KHCVa, file 1.

<sup>66</sup> For instance, Suzhou Nu, "Yueju zai Meiguo wangshi shiling," 260.

<sup>67</sup> Lim Bang to Kue Hing Co., letters, 21, 27 August and 2 September 1923, in KHUBC.

did say that arrangements were under way to move to a more desirable venue.<sup>68</sup> Nonetheless, dissatisfaction with the duo escalated so rapidly that the board granted Lim Bang's request for power of attorney so that he could undertake an investigation in Hawaii. No clear picture emerges. Leong was said to have arbitrarily lowered admission after 9:00 PM, which was actually a common practice among Chinatown theatres, its purpose being to draw a larger audience; however, Leong apparently had done this without the board's consent. For Low's part, he admitted to having spent much of his time starting a restaurant business, and this rendered him liable to the charge of negligence (which he denied), but no evidence surfaced to support the more serious allegation of embezzlement. In the end, both men were released and new directors arrived to take over the management.<sup>69</sup>

It was in the aftermath of such upheaval that the Kue Hing Company attempted to send the Kwok Fung Lin Troupe on a tour of major Chinatowns on the mainland. The itinerary was to include Seattle, Portland, Los Angeles, Chicago, and New York, and it was to ostentatiously exclude San Francisco. The company's attorney had obtained permission from immigration authorities and the management was in the process of negotiating with local theatre houses when the plan fell through due to financial problems.<sup>70</sup> The repeated setbacks must have taken a toll on the morale of the troupe as, in the spring of 1924, groups of actors decided to opt out of their contracts with the Kue Hing Company. Adding insult to injury, all thirteen actors involved joined a rival theatre in Honolulu. The defection had serious financial and long-term business consequences. Should these actors refuse to leave the country at the expiration of their permits, the Kue Hing Company, as the original guarantor, could be forced to relinquish its bond money. Moreover, such an occurrence could have so badly damaged the credibility of the company with the American and Canadian governments that any future business plan would have been put in jeopardy. The Kue Hing Company was fighting for its survival when it instructed Attorney Paul Houser to begin legal proceedings to have the aforementioned actors deported.<sup>71</sup>

<sup>68</sup> Low Chung and Y.C. Leong to Kue Hing Co., letter, 16 October 1923, in KHUBC.

<sup>69</sup> The authorization to conduct the investigation was given in Kue Hing Co. to Lim Bang, letters, 15 and 16 October 1923, in KHUBC. See also the affidavit signed by the directors on 27 October 1923. No formal indictment or report can be found in the existing records, and my findings are based on various correspondence, all from the same file. The new management consisted of David Lee, Wong Ow, and Chan Horne.

<sup>70</sup> See relevant correspondences, 26 January through 27 February 1924, in KHUBC.

<sup>71</sup> The first sign of trouble appeared as early as late December. Kue Hing tried to have an actor by the name of Fai Hong Quon deported. While the case was pending, a dozen other actors

It is no coincidence that the records end soon thereafter, leaving us no further trace of the company.

#### CHINATOWN THEATRE TO THE EVE OF THE PACIFIC WAR

While the Kue Hing Company may have been bankrupted by its Hawaiian venture, the Cantonese stage in Vancouver featured at least four more troupes until the early 1930s. However, the deleterious effects of the Chinese Immigration Act, 1923, and the onset of the Great Depression finally took a toll on the theatre scene. After the last troupe left in January 1933, the only remaining theatre house in Chinatown – Sing Ping – closed its doors. Two years passed before it was remodelled and renamed “the Orient,” its only purpose being to show movies.<sup>72</sup> Indeed, as Yung Sai Shing argues, after the turn of the century the advent of the gramophone, radio, and sound movies ushered in a new dimension of aural and visual entertainment in urban China. These modern media helped popularize Cantonese opera, but they also undercut the appeal of the stage as its primary venue.<sup>73</sup>

More important, the downturn of the 1930s enveloped other Chinese communities. The Cantonese opera theatre seems to have disappeared from New York City after 1931. In San Francisco, the two powerhouses of the 1920s – Great China and the Mandarin – struggled to stay afloat. The former shut down in the mid-1930s and the latter scraped by with occasional opera performances, which it alternated with movies and variety shows. The contraction of the transnational theatre market reversed the trends of the 1920s; reports on opera performances were sporadic, and the number of actors on the road dwindled. For a period of time the more visible signs – or, rather, audible sounds – of Cantonese opera in the three main North American Chinese communities came not from the stage but from the halls of musical societies set up by local

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decided to join the defection. See relevant correspondences in KHUCB, especially Kue Hing Co. to Paul Houser, letter, 15 April 1924.

<sup>72</sup> *Chinese Times*, 13 January 1933 and 2 March 1935. The architectural drawing prepared for the alteration is available in the City of Vancouver Archives, job no. 563, 1934, in Townley, Matheson and Partners fonds, Add. Mss 1399, 917-F.

<sup>73</sup> Yung Sai Shing, “Qingmo minchu de yueyue changpanye yu Guangdong quyì (1903-1913)” [The Gramophone Record Industry at the Turn of the Century and Cantonese Musical Art], *Zhongguo wenhua yanjiuzuo xuebao* [Journal of the Chinese Cultural Research Institute] 41 (2001): 511-38; and “Keji yu ganguan: ‘sheng guang hua dian’ dui jindai Zhongguo xiqu de yinxiang” [Technology and Sensation: “Sound, Light, Chemistry, Electricity” and Their Impact on Chinese Theatre], paper presented at the Symposium on Chinese Theatre Performance: Past, Present and Future, Chinese University of Hong Kong, 30 April – 2 May 2004.

fans and amateur musicians. The most notable among these include Jin Wah Sing and Sing Kew in Vancouver, Nam Chung in San Francisco, and the Chinese Musical and Theatrical Association in New York.<sup>74</sup>

The case of Jin Wah Sing is noteworthy in that, in the late 1930s, it brought forth a revival of Chinese theatre in Vancouver. The group started in 1934 as a gathering of amateurs who were also members of the Chinese Freemasons. Sensing the void left behind by the professional troupes, Jin Wah Sing began to present occasional public performances in April 1935, but not as commercial theatre; rather, its plays were staged as part of such community events as anniversary celebrations put on by traditional organizations and fundraisers for charities and Chinese language schools. Encouraged by its warm reception, Jin Wah Sing gradually shifted gear, invited professional actors from South China, and had its own members play along as a supporting cast. By 1938, Jin Wah Sing had become a de facto theatre business firm. Under its sponsorship, five opera troupes came to Vancouver before the outbreak of the Pacific War. The days of full-time nightly performance of Cantonese opera had returned to Vancouver's Chinatown for one last time. Joining this effort was the Sing Kew Dramatic Society, which was based in the renovated theatre house in Shanghai Alley.<sup>75</sup>

The resumption of the regular, professional performance of Cantonese opera shows that the underlying interest in theatre in Vancouver's Chinatown was most resilient. In particular, critical support for the theatre came from Chinatown organizations. During the initial, amateur phase of Jin Wah Sing, the Chinese Freemasons and its affiliates offered financial and moral support, publicity in its mouthpiece the *Chinese Times*, and opportunities for performances. This alignment with the partisan politics and power structure of Chinatown remained steadfast in the ensuing years and enabled the Cantonese stage to become a vehicle of popular mobilization and community activism after the Japanese aggression escalated into a full-scale war in China in the summer of 1937. One is tempted to argue that at no other time had the theatre been so deeply enmeshed in the fabric of Chinatown politics and public life.<sup>76</sup>

<sup>74</sup> On New York, see Bonner, *ALAS! What Brought Thee Hither?* 95; and Duchesne, "A Collection's Riches." For San Francisco, refer to Riddle, *Flying Dragons, Flowing Streams*, 149-58. Another musical society in Vancouver was Ching Won, which was founded in 1935; however, information on its activities is minimal. E-mail correspondence from Elizabeth Johnson, 21 April 2005.

<sup>75</sup> *Chinese Times*, various issues from April of 1935 to the end of 1941.

<sup>76</sup> The vibrancy of Chinatown theatre in the late 1930s and during the war may have another interesting dimension: the increasing presence of women and children among the audience. Wayson Choy and authors such as Jade Snow Wong and Denise Chong have all given such impression in their writings. Whether the theatre indeed provided an avenue by which

From the limited extant accounts, the Cantonese stage in San Francisco and New York City both witnessed a renewal of sorts at the end of the 1930s. It is likely that the political instability in China continued to spur actors to go overseas both before and after the outbreak of the anti-Japanese war, and later, after Pearl Harbor and the fall of Hong Kong in December 1941, some actors were reportedly stranded in the United States and Canada.<sup>77</sup> However, the troupes no longer came and left as they had during the preceding period. Nor did the actors travel as much, circulating through the stages of different Chinatowns. The troupes that performed in Vancouver all featured a stable cast, and the actors no longer rotated from one locale to another. The golden age of transnational Chinatown theatre had passed.

In conclusion, Chinatown theatre of the exclusion era was not a marginal institution, despite its long neglect by scholars. New evidence from Vancouver's Chinatown demonstrates that highly successful and wealthy merchants were involved in the business of providing affordable entertainment to their own people. As is shown in the case of Wing Hong Lin and Kue Hing, Chinatown merchants furnished the capital, the managerial experiences, and the business networks that allowed these companies to bring in opera troupes from South China. Different aspects of this business operation offer a compelling illustration of Chinese transnationalism, from the recruitment of the actors from Hong Kong and the details of their compensation to their negotiated entry into Canada and the United States and their subsequent itinerary, which touched the principal hubs and key settlements of the immigrant Chinese. Based on newly uncovered business records, as well as sources such as theatre advertisements and playbills, I argue that the transnational theatre of Chinatown reached its high tide during the 1920s, when opera troupes and individual actors circulated widely and routinely to perform for their countrypeople in various locales. The historical invisibility of overseas Cantonese opera has to do, in part, with just such mobility, and taking account of this mobility, as I have attempted to do in this article, is essential to any effort to understand the history of Chinatown theatre.

The transnational mobility of Cantonese opera was a vital component of immigrant agency among the Chinese. I have offered examples of the ups and downs of Chinatown theatre, the hurdles posed by the

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immigrant women could enter Chinatown's public space, and what roles the stage played in community building and mobilization, will be among the issues explored in my coming work on the theatre and cultural politics of Chinatown.

<sup>77</sup> See Note 74.

exclusionary practices of state authorities, the hazards of cross-border cooperation and long-distance management, and the efforts of Chinese merchants to overcome these barriers. Not to be forgotten are the personal experiences of the touring actors, even though their published reminiscences are few and the opportunity to interview them has passed.

Finally, in making the case for Chinatown theatre as a quintessential transnational operation, I offer findings that help to place the transnational practices of immigrant Chinese in historical perspective. This preliminary mapping of a mobile theatre suggests that those who write about this transnational history should change their emphasis. The earlier generation of historical scholarly writing on the Chinese in North America (and elsewhere in the diaspora) manifests an insular quality in that it focuses on single migrant settlements or communities. The rise of interest in transnationalism has shifted this paradigm, enabling us to take into account the ongoing multi-stranded relationships between the migrants and their native homes. Evidently, the connections forged by the Chinese in the course of their dispersal enabled them to engage in multilateral networking and trans-border activities. The history of the diaspora involves not simply the resilient ties between migrant outposts and native home but also the myriad connections between those outposts.