

# EVIDENCE OF AN EPHEMERAL ART:

## *Cantonese Opera in Vancouver's Chinatown*

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ELIZABETH LOMINSKA JOHNSON

### CANTONESE OPERA: A DISTINCTIVE ART FORM

**A**NYONE WHO SEES a Cantonese opera performance cannot fail to be overwhelmed by this experience of “total theatre” (Ward 1979, 20-1; Ward 1985, 184-6), which demands seemingly super-human skills from its performers. The Western concept of “opera” does not do justice to performances that are more choreographed than scripted.<sup>1</sup> Actors continually control every muscle and facial expression, “keeping the whole body alive even in the stillest moments of the action,”<sup>2</sup> as they express fundamental themes and emotions readily understood by experienced audience members. Settings and actions are created through mime on a stage that even now has no more than a backdrop and a few furnishings, and in the past was virtually bare. Stepping over an invisible sill indicates the presence of a house, while moving quickly around the stage snapping a whip shows that the character is on horseback. When an actor<sup>3</sup> carries a lantern, the audience knows that night has fallen (Ward 1979, 21). Furthermore, an actor’s every movement is punctuated by percussion and the other leading instruments, which are played by musicians who watch the actors so that they can audibly express their movements and emotions with absolute precision. The instrumental music emphasizes and embellishes the actors’ singing. As Ward (1979, 21) points out: “All these splendid sounds are much more than mere

<sup>1</sup> According to Nancy Yunhwa Rao (2000, 136), “Chinese opera as a whole ... builds extensively on the long established practice of visual and musical acting and dancing, as well as oratory and acrobatic conventions. It is also a theatre of symbolism where pantomime, limited stage props, backdrops, and the encoded music express the dramatic scenes and emotional state of the characters.”

<sup>2</sup> Rao quoting Stark Young (2000, 142).

<sup>3</sup> In this article the term “actor” is used to represent both male and female performers.

accompaniments; they carry in themselves their own symbolic meaning and so make their own contribution to the whole performance. *The performance is the thing* – in its complete totality ... the steady unfolding of a procession of simultaneous sounds, actions, words, colours, things.” To create this integrated performance, the musicians have traditionally been seated at one side of the stage, in full view of the audience, and facing the drama as it unfolds. As with their gestures, the actors’ singing and speaking are characteristic of opera: both are highly stylized and are often delivered with particular rhythmic patterns. Female roles are sung in a distinctive, ornamented falsetto that remains elegant even as it retains the penetrating qualities that were needed in the time before microphones.

The world portrayed in Cantonese opera is not that of everyday life. The settings normally are imperial, and the stories are often drawn from legends and popular histories (Ward 1979, 22). The characters include emperors and empresses, generals, and scholars aspiring for imperial posts (and their struggling and supportive [or scheming] wives). Immortals also appear, as deities and powerful beings, as do ghosts and other spirits. The stories they enact represent the fundamental values of Chinese society; these are played out through complex dramas that almost always come to a happy resolution that functions to reaffirm them.<sup>4</sup>

This world is created by costumes and accessories that are designed to create awe and excitement in the audience through their glittering splendour, their novelty, and their complexity. Continually managing them requires great skill and stamina on the part of the actors. Those in civil roles must constantly manipulate long “water sleeves” (filmy white sleeve extensions used for dramatic emphasis), while those in military roles must manage weapons, various accoutrements, and complex costumes while carrying out acrobatic combat. Actors communicate femininity through the delicate management of hairpieces, glittering hair ornaments, and elaborate headdresses, while moving with tiny steps in tasseled shoes that should barely show beneath their skirts. Actors performing the roles of high-ranking men must move about the stage in boots with very thick, rigid soles, whose purpose is to give them an imposing presence. Furthermore, all costumes, accessories, and props are manipulated in ways specific to the role type being played, whether

<sup>4</sup> Opera performances, by representing positive cultural values, may actually bring good fortune, which is reinforced by the fact that their sound, light, and colour are exorcistic, as are the large, bustling crowds of people that they attract (Ward 1979, 29).

it be civil or military, male or female, old or young, clown or scholar, high-ranking or low.

The profound differences between the world of opera and the often harsh realities of everyday life must have been especially apparent to Chinese audiences in Canada in the early decades of the twentieth century. These audiences were composed primarily of men, reflecting the impact of the head tax and then the exclusionary Chinese Immigration Act that made immigration to Canada first extremely costly and later impossible. For the most part their lives were confined to Chinatown, and those who were able to enjoy a good standard of living were the exception. They were the merchants who, among other activities, invested in the creation and travel of itinerant opera troupes.<sup>5</sup> For people of all social classes, Chinatown offered much that was culturally familiar, and Cantonese opera offered not only a familiar regional form of entertainment but also diversion and a distinctive kind of beauty.



Photo 1: Ruth Orr Huber (left) and Winnie Poon playing the roles of a young scholar and a beautiful woman. Jin Wah Sing Musical Association, Vancouver, 1991. Cantonese opera continues to be popular in Vancouver, stimulated by recent immigration from Hong Kong and Guangdong province. There are approximately twenty-five sets of performances – amateur, professional, and mixed – in any one year.

<sup>5</sup> Wing Chung Ng, “Chinatown Theatre as Transnational Business: New Evidence from Vancouver during the Exclusion Era,” this issue.

EVIDENCE OF PERFORMANCES  
IN BRITISH COLUMBIA, 1880-1950

As Wing Chung Ng's article in this issue indicates, Cantonese opera was an important cultural activity in early twentieth-century Vancouver's Chinatown. What was the nature of the performances that were so popular among overseas Chinese audiences, and how were they organized and managed? Ng's article analyzes the economic and social system that recruited troupes and organized their itineraries in the first half of the twentieth century, and it examines the varying frequency and popularity of their performances. His work is based on surviving documents that are now held in archival collections as well as on advertisements and articles from the *Chinese Times*, a Chinese language newspaper first published in Vancouver in 1908.<sup>6</sup> However, these materials, unlike those documents recovered from a Cantonese opera association in New York (Duchesne 2000), do not give us detailed information about the nature of the performances held here, and there is almost no one left who remembers this period.

Cantonese opera is an ephemeral art form, even more so than are many other theatrical performances. European plays and operas are based on written scripts or librettos, but in the early years of the twentieth century, Cantonese opera was largely improvisational, especially when performed in China within the temple festival context (Chan 1991; Yung 1989, 42). Until urban theatres became well established in Hong Kong and China, and certain actors and actresses gained fame and the status of stars, actors were of low social standing and were often illiterate. They were frequently recruited from poor families and, through long and harsh apprenticeships, were trained in the many skills that successful actors were expected to have.<sup>7</sup> In a society in which literacy was highly valued, illiterate people were stigmatized, especially if they made their living as actors. As itinerants in a society that gave status and legitimacy to people attached to the land, actors were suspect. Furthermore, their

<sup>6</sup> The Asian Library at the University of British Columbia has the complete run of this newspaper, from the time it was acquired by the Chinese Freemasons in 1915 until it ceased publication in 1991. It was an extremely important Chinese language newspaper and was distributed throughout North America and into the Caribbean. The Asian Library has made this valuable newspaper available on microfilm.

<sup>7</sup> During the time we worked together (from the planning of the Museum of Anthropology exhibition "A Rare Flower: A Century of Cantonese Opera in Canada" to the present), Master Wong Toa, a Vancouver Cantonese opera teacher with a great knowledge of history, described his apprenticeship in graphic detail. The Chinese film *Farewell My Concubine* depicts the conditions of apprenticeship as well as the highly refined performance skills ultimately attained by a successful actor – a male performer of female roles.

identity, already uncertain because of their apparent lack of affiliation with a native place, was made more ambiguous by the fact that they had the skill to change it when on stage.<sup>8</sup> Given the highly stylized nature of Cantonese opera, its system of standardized role types, and the fact that its music is based in commonly known tune types (Yung 1989, 67–81), actors could learn how to put together a four- to five-hour performance upon reading or (more likely) hearing a brief outline (Ward 1979, 37; Rao 2002, 407).<sup>9</sup> The status of actors was changing during the early twentieth century, however, and many newspaper notices describe the attributes of visiting performers who had attained the status of stars. Despite the publicity these performers received in the Chinese newspapers, there is no evidence of the presence in Vancouver of any stars whose eminence was such that they made a powerful impression on the broader, non-Chinese society, as did Mei Lan Feng in New York in 1930 (Rao 2000).

In Vancouver and Victoria, both of which had large Chinese populations to whom opera was important, non-Chinese observers only occasionally reported on the presence of Cantonese opera. An 1882 article in the *British Colonist*, a Victoria newspaper, describes the arrival from San Francisco of eighteen trunks of costumes for the city's new theatre, suggesting that a large number of lavish costumes were to be used. The same newspaper described the building of three theatres for Cantonese opera in the 1880s, one of which had a seating capacity of 800.<sup>10</sup> J.S. Matthews wrote a report describing his 1898 visit to a theatre in Vancouver's Chinatown.<sup>11</sup> To non-Chinese people, Cantonese opera remained a virtually invisible part of the cultural life of Vancouver and Victoria, despite its splendour, the extraordinary skill demanded of its actors, and clear evidence of its importance to overseas Chinese.<sup>12</sup>

As far as we have been able to determine, there is little photographic evidence of early Cantonese opera in British Columbia, although there

<sup>8</sup> According to Barbara Ward (1979, 33), traditional actors could be considered to be outside the social system because, through their roles in short plays, they were capable of performing exorcistic functions with ritual efficacy: "In some strangely uncanny way they appeared to incarnate or act as mediums for spirits, whether of gods, mythical beings, or heroes, or – at the very least – men and women other than themselves" (Ward 1979, 33).

<sup>9</sup> Although individual songs may be practised repeatedly until the singers know them well, even the amateur opera societies put on performances after no more than a few full rehearsals (Wong Hok-sing and Hung Ka-fung, personal communication).

<sup>10</sup> *Daily British Colonist*, 23 July 1885.

<sup>11</sup> Matthews, City of Vancouver Archives, 1947.

<sup>12</sup> This problem continues today, not because of racism or exclusion but, rather, because of the language barrier. Performances are normally advertised only in Chinese, and attempts to perform them in English are rarely successful. This is not due to a lack of interest in reaching out to a wider audience but, rather, to a lack of resources.

are a few significant exceptions.<sup>13</sup> The Chung Collection at UBC includes an important photograph – a formal portrait of the Kwok Fung Lin Troupe taken in Vancouver in 1923.<sup>14</sup> The photograph shows that the troupe included both men and women, a practice not yet permitted in China. They are wearing the heavily ornamented costumes that were in use at that time. Of particular interest for my topic are two photographs, now in the City of Vancouver Archives, that show a parade held in Chinatown on the occasion of Vancouver's Golden Jubilee in 1936.<sup>15</sup> As we shall see, the old style heavily decorated Cantonese opera costumes,



Photo 2: Victoria Yip, offering warm hospitality in her home while sharing her memories of opera with Professor Huang Jinpei<sup>16</sup> (and Elizabeth Johnson). Victoria Yip, who is now in her nineties, has been unfailingly generous in sharing her knowledge of local history with many researchers. She has always loved Cantonese opera. As a girl growing up in Victoria, she attended performances and was greatly disturbed by what she saw of the poor living conditions of the itinerant actors. She also loved listening to records of Cantonese opera, which she purchased in Vancouver. After she married into the large Yip family as the sixteenth daughter-in-law of the merchant Yip Sang, she continued to enjoy performances in the Vancouver theatres.

<sup>13</sup> Articles in the *Chinese Times* occasionally include illustrations (Eleanor Yuen, personal communication).

<sup>14</sup> Photograph by Cecil B. Wand, Rare Books and Special Collections, University of British Columbia Library, #5850. The tumultuous history of this troupe is analyzed by Wing Chung Ng, this issue.

<sup>15</sup> Photographs by James Crookall, City of Vancouver Archives, cva 260-487 and cva 260-488.

<sup>16</sup> In this article Chinese personal names are given with the surname first, as is customary. An exception is Wing Chung Ng. Cantonese terms that are not names of people or organizations, and names that do not have conventional renderings, are written using the Yale system of romanization.



Photo 3: Kwok Fung Lin Troupe wearing costumes similar to those in the Museum of Anthropology collection, photographed in Vancouver in 1923. Rare Books and Special Collections, University of British Columbia Library. Photograph by Cecil B. Wand, Chung Collection, #5850.

the guards' vests, and the banners and standing fans that decorate the float were to appear again at a later date.

These lead us to materials that can give us some insight into the nature of early twentieth-century Cantonese opera in Vancouver. Although we lack detailed written documents on the contents of the dramas that were so important to local Chinese audiences, we can learn about other aspects of this cultural form, which was so popular among Chinese people in Vancouver, by examining other kinds of evidence. We can begin to recreate its sounds, colour, imagery, and overall visual impact and dramatic qualities through examining an abundance of actual costumes and other materials from that era that remain in Vancouver.

#### EVIDENCE: OBJECTS LEFT BEHIND

For reasons that may never be fully understood, some of the troupes that toured North America in the early decades of the twentieth century, or their individual members, left costumes and other performance materials behind rather than taking them back to China.<sup>17</sup> They were then held by

<sup>17</sup> In addition to the materials held by the UBC Museum of Anthropology, other historic Cantonese opera materials are held by the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, the Vancouver Museum, the Canadian Museum of Civilization, and the Museum of Chinese in the Americas in New York. Doubtless there are also holdings in other museums. The Ching Won Musical Society in Vancouver also owns old Cantonese opera costumes. Records in a collections



Photos 4 and 5: Parade celebrating Vancouver's Golden Jubilee, 1936. Most of the costumes, as well as the banners and standing fans, are identical to those transferred to the Museum of Anthropology by the Jin Wah Sing Musical Association in 1971 and 1993. In fact, they are almost certainly the same ones. City of Vancouver Archives, cVA 260-487 and cVA 260-488. Photographs by James Crookall.





the Jin Wah Sing Musical Association in Chinatown, which eventually transferred many of them to the UBC Museum of Anthropology. The largest collection of Cantonese opera materials from the first half of the twentieth century appears to be located in Vancouver.<sup>18</sup> Why they were left in Vancouver is unclear, given that existing evidence suggests that apparently this city was often the point of disembarkation for troupes undertaking North American tours rather than their last performance venue before returning to China (Ng, this issue). Perhaps they did leave from Vancouver, given the frequency of sailings from this port. If troupes or individual actors were returning to China from Vancouver, there are various reasons why they might have left materials here, especially if they were under financial duress.<sup>19</sup>

Possible explanations for the fact that so many materials were left and preserved here may lie in the history of the Jin Wah Sing Musical Association; perhaps actors realized that it would be a good home for their material. Jin Wah Sing is one of two Vancouver Cantonese opera associations that have a continuous history from the 1930s.<sup>20</sup> It was founded in 1934 by members of the Chinese Freemasons Association. It was well connected, as it was and is the only Vancouver opera association acknowledged as a local affiliate of the Chinese Artists' Association of Hong Kong. The other surviving Vancouver association from that period, the Ching Won Musical Society, was founded in 1935.<sup>21</sup> Others did not survive. The next society to be established and that

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documentation file (no. 1091) at the Museum of Anthropology report conversations with two non-Chinese women who said that they had bought Cantonese opera materials in Chinatown in the 1920s.

<sup>18</sup> There are various reasons why such materials may not have survived in Hong Kong and south China. The climate of the region is hot and wet, which is inimical to textile materials and supports destructive insects and rodents. Storage space is in short supply, at least in comparison with North America. The Second World War, the Chinese Revolution, and the Cultural Revolution all resulted in the destruction of cultural materials. Furthermore, there may have been no desire to keep old materials. Fashion and novelty are preeminent forces in the world of Cantonese opera, and even Master Wong Toa said of the materials now in the Museum of Anthropology collection: "We considered them to be garbage!"

<sup>19</sup> Information on the movements of troupes and individual actors is the focus of the article by Ng, this issue.

<sup>20</sup> The oldest existing Cantonese opera society in Canada, as of the early 1990s, is the Manitoba Chinese Dramatic Society, which was founded in Winnipeg in 1921. In that same year Dr. Sun Yat-sen awarded it a certificate of merit for its fundraising activities in support of the Chinese Revolution.

<sup>21</sup> Voluntary associations of many kinds have long been important features of overseas Chinese communities as well as urban communities in China. In situations in which people were separated from their communities of origin, and often from their families, associations brought them together into organizations based on common place of origin, surname, occupation, or interest (which included cultural activities such as opera). The book *From China to Canada* (Wickberg 1982) includes detailed information on Chinese associations in Canada.



Photo 6: Portrait of actors, musicians, and society officers at the successful conclusion of the performance celebrating the fifty-eighth anniversary of the Jin Wah Sing Musical Association, Vancouver Chinese Cultural Centre, 1992.



Photo 7: Headquarters of the Jin Wah Sing Musical Association on Pender Street, Vancouver, c. 1993.

still continues is the Ngai Lum Musical Society, which was founded in 1965. Each of these societies differs from the others in its membership and affiliations, but all have the mandate to teach, perform, promote, and preserve Cantonese opera. Each has its own headquarters, with musical instruments and all the necessary equipment for its members' practice sessions. Visitors walking on Chinatown streets may be startled to hear live music – the distinctive sounds of Cantonese opera percussion and singing – when these sessions are taking place. These sounds have been heard in Vancouver's Chinatown for at least a century.

The Jin Wah Sing Musical Association was very active in promoting and producing Cantonese opera during the years immediately following its founding and, together with another society, Sing Kiu, was responsible for maintaining a lively Cantonese opera presence in Vancouver.<sup>22</sup> The *Chinese Times* from the years 1935 to 1944 contains many



Photo 8. Master Wong Toa, right, and Hung Ka-fung, elected head of Jin Wah Sing in the early 1990s, in front of the plaque that acknowledges the association's affiliation with the Chinese Artists' Association of Hong Kong. Jin Wah Sing invited Master Wong Toa from Hong Kong in 1961 to teach Cantonese opera to its members. He remained in that position until his retirement. The Ngai Lum Musical Society also has a resident teacher, in addition to a society head.

<sup>22</sup> See Ng, this issue.



Photo 9. A member of Jin Wah Sing making offerings at the society's shrine to the patron god of Cantonese opera performers, Master Wah Gwong, and also to minor gods responsible for teaching actors gestures and martial skills. Members also make offerings to the souls of former society members, now deceased. Opera troupes and societies place a small shrine dedicated to Master Wah Gwong backstage so that the actors can pay their respects to him before beginning their performances (Ward 1979, 28). The inscriptions on this shrine acknowledge the moral purpose of opera, which is to inculcate Chinese values: "As you put on powder and paint, remember that you must go out to teach the people."



Photo 10. Entrance to the former headquarters of the Ching Won Musical Society on Pender Street in Chinatown. They have now moved to a new location. Like most Chinatown associations, Ching Won was located on the second floor, the ground floors normally being devoted to commercial enterprises.<sup>23</sup> Photograph by Ben Johnson.



Photo 11. Members of the Ching Won Musical Society in their headquarters, 2005. They are proud of their banners, which acknowledge their role in putting on benefit performances to raise funds to defend China during the Second World War. In 2005 one of their benefit performances raised nearly \$20,000 for tsunami relief in Southeast Asia.<sup>23</sup> Photograph by Ben Johnson.

notices of operas put on under the auspices of Jin Wah Sing. Some were produced by Jin Wah Sing members, while others included professional actors or complete troupes brought from Hong Kong or China. In 1939 through to the spring of 1940, a troupe named the Jin Wah Sing Opera Troupe performed regularly. According to a history provided by the Jin Wah Sing Musical Association, these performances raised funds for the Chinese and Canadian war efforts. After this period of flourishing activity, Jin Wah Sing returned to its status as a local amateur opera society. In the postwar years it occasionally sponsored tours by opera troupes<sup>24</sup> – supported by a member shareholding system<sup>25</sup> – as well regular performances featuring society members.

It was in 1973 that the curator of the Museum of Anthropology at UBC learned that Jin Wah Sing held a large number of very old costumes

<sup>23</sup> Pearl Lam, personal communication.

<sup>24</sup> Information in the *Chinese Times* in 1971, for example, reports that a troupe invited by Jin Wah Sing from Hong Kong also included actors invited from San Francisco, suggesting that the association was creating troupes. They gave a series of performances in the spring of that year.

<sup>25</sup> Wong Toa, personal communication. It is not clear whether or not the Jin Wah Sing troupes of the 1930s and 1940s toured as the *Chinese Times* notices concern only their Vancouver performances.

that its members were no longer using.<sup>26</sup> These were heavy and had been made in outdated styles. Cantonese opera is distinguished by its emphasis on innovation and changing fashion, and costumes from much earlier decades may not have been appreciated by local audiences, even though the overseas Chinese were said to be more conservative in their tastes than were the homeland Chinese. As Jin Wah Sing was no longer using these costumes, it was willing to sell them to the Museum of Anthropology. In 1991, when the museum was planning an exhibition on Cantonese opera in Canada, Jin Wah Sing donated more than 200 additional costumes, musical instruments, props, and materials that had been used to create settings and adorn the stage.

No one interviewed during our exhibition research had conclusive information on why the materials had been left with Jin Wah Sing or on their previous owners. Master Wong Toa said that materials may have been left here because troupes had financial problems, because members may have changed their occupations and remained here [illegally], or because female members may have married and remained in Canada. Opportunities for marriage must have presented themselves, given the shortage of Chinese women in Canada at that time. According to the economic histories studied by Ng, it seems likely that troupes may indeed have experienced economic failures that resulted in having to leave their materials behind. They may have been left with Jin Wah Sing for safekeeping or been given or sold to the association for its own use.

Do the inventory marks that are on the costumes shed any light on their early ownership?<sup>27</sup> None of the costumes examined to date has the inventory marks of any troupe predating the late 1930s. The great majority of the inventory marks on the costumes indicate ownership by the Jin Wah Sing Musical Association either in the form of a hand-written mark: "Jin Wah Sing Opera Society" or as a stamped mark: "Vancouver, Jin Wah Sing Society." Some have the hand-written name of the troupe: "Jin Wah Sing Opera Company." None has the names of other troupes, and only one has a mark from another location. This is a woman's costume with an inventory stamp in Chinese and English,

<sup>26</sup> Audrey Hawthorn, curator of the Museum of Anthropology, learned of the existence of the costumes through Graham Johnson, who was interviewing heads of Chinatown societies as part of his research for the book *From China to Canada* (see Hawthorn 1993). The Museum of Anthropology documentation file for the acquisition contains letters from Chuck Chang, the head of Jin Wah Sing at that time.

<sup>27</sup> We recorded many of the inventory marks when specialists were identifying the materials for the Museum of Anthropology exhibition, and I am now in the process of checking each piece to record the information in the museum's database. I have not yet completed this work, however.



Photos 12, 13: Master Wong Toa in the basement storage of the Chinese Freemasons' building, where the opera materials were kept. He is guiding museum staff members Rosa Ho and Elizabeth Johnson in the selection of Cantonese opera materials to be donated by Jin Wah Sing to the Museum of Anthropology. Jin Wah Sing to the Museum of Anthropology, 1991. Photographs by Jan Vuori.



the latter reading “Jin Wah Sing, 116 Third Ave., Calgary, Alta.” This stands in contrast to a group of costumes that had belonged to the Chinese Musical Theatrical Association in New York and is now held in that city by the Museum of Chinese in the Americas. Among the costumes in the collection of that museum is a group stamped: “Vancouver Chinatown / Wo Lee See Co. / Lock Man Ning Theatrical Company,” which suggests that they had been used in Vancouver before being taken to New York (Duchesne 2000, 58-9). The marks, or lack thereof, on the Jin Wah Sing costumes leave us with a mystery. Based on stylistic analysis, according to the specialists who examined them a large portion of the materials predates the 1930s. We know from the Golden Jubilee parade photographs that at least some of the materials were here and in use by 1936. Before Jin Wah Sing acquired them, were the costumes owned by troupes or actors who had used no inventory marks? Or were old-style costumes with no previous owners brought to Canada for performances in the 1930s?

There is also the question of whether the materials would have been useful to Jin Wah Sing or the visiting troupes of the late 1930s. We do not know the extent to which costumes of earlier dates would have been acceptable at that time, although, going by recent analogy, some may have been. In their recent performances some Jin Wah Sing members have worn costumes that date from the 1950s, as is indicated by their style and the fact that they are heavily sequined (a characteristic of that time). Furthermore, a photograph from the early 1960s owned by Master Wong Toa shows association members wearing much older costumes for the performance of a traditional short ritual play.<sup>28</sup> In another such performance in New York in 1949, the actors used transforming robes from the 1920s (Duchesne 2000, 59).

To complicate matters further, many of the costumes acquired from Jin Wah Sing appear to be incomplete. There are a number of complete sets, and other costumes that may not have required specific elements to complete them, but the collection includes relatively few headdresses, belts, and footwear for male roles. Does this mean that many of the costumes could not be used because they were incomplete, or simply that the complete costumes were not transferred to the museum? Master Wong Toa stated that the costumes may not have been systematically organized before transfer, which would have required that Jin Wah Sing officers commit a lot of time to sorting unfamiliar materials. He also

<sup>28</sup> For information on these important short acts and their ritual functions, see Ward (1979) and Ward (1985, 167-8).





Photo 14: Jin Wah Sing production of *The Eight Fairies Offer Birthday Congratulations*, 1962. The association members are wearing costumes in the style of the 1920s. Photograph courtesy of Master Wong Toa.

Photo 15: Trunk for storing and transporting opera materials, with inscriptions in Chinese and English, the latter stating: "MADE IN KUM LON CHANG CO. CHONG YUEN FONG STREET, CANTON." This is the same company whose manufacturer's stamp is on most of the costumes, and whose name I have rendered as Gam Leuhn Cheung. On the trunk is a costume representing a general's suit of armour from the 1920s, boots for a wealthy young man of high status, Manchu-style shoes for an actor representing a woman (their sequins suggesting that they date from the 1950s), and a more recent headdress.



stated that, while footwear did not have to match the costume, the robe and headdress had to match.<sup>29</sup> Another question raised by the collection concerns why the majority of costumes are for male roles. It is quite certain that, in the 1930s, many actors and most if not all association members would have been men, but it was usual in Chinese opera at that time for men with the appropriate body type, voice, and training to play female roles. Women were also very active in professional Cantonese opera by that time and, as it happens, were a major attraction. The fact that only a minority of the Jin Wah Sing costumes could have been used to represent women raises the question of whether the costumes could have been useful to the association as well as the question of why more women's costumes were not included. Could it have been the case that, in the mixed troupes that played in North America – a decade before they were accepted in China – women were more likely to own their own costumes? Given certain Chinese beliefs about the polluting power of women, it may have been the case that women's costumes were not shared. Of all the costumes, only one – an incomplete woman's costume in 1930s style – has an owner's name written on it.

This mark raises again the question of previous ownership and whether the costumes and other materials were left by individual actors or by troupes. My research notes reveal that the opinions of specialists differ regarding this question. According to Professor Huang Jinpei, general types of costumes such as these were of lesser value than were those that were more likely to be owned privately; hence the former might not be kept after they had been used a few times.

The inventory marks make it clear that Jin Wah Sing valued these costumes. They assert the association's ownership, often followed by a classification code and number, and a brief identification of the costume type.<sup>30</sup> They make it clear that the association's officers cared for the costumes and considered them to be their collective property, for which they were responsible. The costumes bear other evidence in addition to the inventory marks. The origin of the costumes, the beginning of their journey to North America, is indicated by the fact that almost all of the older ones bear the stamp of the company that made them. In most cases this was the Gam Leuhn Cheung Company in Guangzhou.<sup>31</sup> Some costumes have another stamp, the Gam San Gung Si, or Glorious

<sup>29</sup> Wong Toa, personal communication.

<sup>30</sup> The later costumes, dating from the 1930s to the 1940s, are made of lightweight materials upon which an inventory mark written in ink would be both visible and damaging.

<sup>31</sup> The same mark appears in many of the costumes now held by the Museum of Chinese in the Americas (Duchesne 2000, 57).

Photo 16: An example of a Jin Wah Sing inventory mark on hip panels, constituting part of a costume for a guard.



Photo 17: The stamp of the Gam Leuhn Cheung Company, Guangzhou, on the hemp lining of one of the older costumes.