

New Company. I would assume that this was another manufacturer of costumes, except for the fact that, on one costume, it occurs along with the stamp of Gam Leuhn Cheung, leaving its identity uncertain until further research can be undertaken.

In addition to the costumes there are several other kinds of materials in the collection. Most important among them, from the point of view of contemporary Cantonese opera practitioners, are four large, heavy, stoutly built red trunks of a type not used after 1960.³² All bear the name of the company that manufactured them, written in English, which suggests that they were intended to be sent overseas. They are made of wood with rawhide stretched over their lids, which are held together with hand-forged iron nails. The fittings that allowed them to be carried on poles are also made of hand-forged iron. According to Wong Toa, four men were required to carry one trunk. With boards on top, they sometimes served as beds for male actors.³³ Jin Wah Sing still has some red trunks, which remain useful for storing costumes and other materials. In the past, the size and status of a troupe was judged by the number of costume trunks that accompanied them.³⁴ Their continuing importance today was demonstrated when the collection was exhibited and opera practitioners who visited it chose to have their photographs taken next to the trunk that was on display rather than with the costumes and other materials.³⁵

The English word “props” does not quite encompass another category of materials. Some – such as weapons, horse whips, gilded papier mache wine cups, handcuffs, and two decapitated heads (one male and one female, also made of papier mache) – were used as props. Others, however, served to identify particular characters. These include a papier mache pagoda carried by Li Jing, the Celestial King Who Holds the Pagoda,³⁶ and wings of the same material worn by the God of Thunder. These were recognized by Wong Toa and so may be of a type used during his long theatre career, which began in the 1930s; however, they are now antiquated.

³² Wong Toa, personal communication.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Huang Jinpei, personal communication.

³⁵ Their importance may derive not only from the fact that their numbers represent the status and wealth of a troupe but also from the fact that at least one would have been used to hold the image of the patron god and his shrine. In the temporary bamboo theatres built in Hong Kong and south China for festival performances honouring local deities, the costume trunks are placed in a long row immediately behind the stage backdrop (Ward 1979, 28).

³⁶ Mary Tuen Wai Yeung and Master Wong Toa, personal communication.

Among the musical instruments are percussion instruments of types very different from those used today, although we do not have information on when they went out of use. Contemporary Cantonese opera musicians have said that they are very difficult to play. They are all in good condition, which suggests that they have not received heavy use. Jin Wah Sing also transferred wind instruments and string instruments, all distinctively Chinese, but none of the Western instruments (such as saxophones, violins, and cellos) that were adopted by Cantonese opera in its twentieth-century quest for innovation.

Photo 18: Wings worn to identify the God of Thunder, Leuih Gung Edziz624.



Photos 19, 20: Two drums of a style no longer used, a "barrel drum" Edziz662 and a "water chestnut drum" Ni.828.

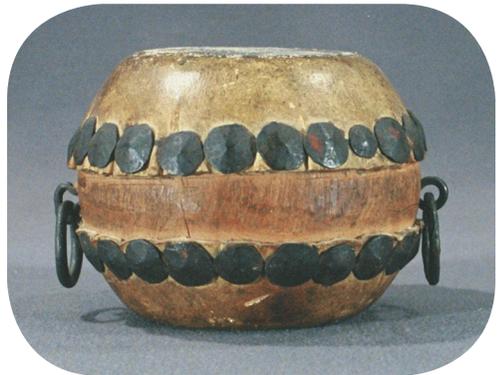




Photo 21



Photo 22



Photos 21, 22, 23: Costumes and accessories, musical instruments, props, and materials for the stage as shown at the Museum of Anthropology and six other venues in the 1993 exhibition entitled “A Rare Flower: A Century of Cantonese Opera in Canada.” The banners and fans are almost certainly those in the 1936 Golden Jubilee parade photograph, and the suit of armour at the left of the group of costumes appears to be the same as that worn by one of the actors on horseback.

Particularly significant among the materials are those used to create the early twentieth-century Cantonese opera stage. At that time the stage was virtually bare, and it was the actors’ skilled mime that created the physical features of the setting in the viewers’ imaginations. These conventions may, in part, have reflected the exigencies of the troupes’ itinerant life, for scenery would have been very hard to carry. Settings could be indicated by small plaques hung on the stage, of which there are two in the collection. Actors entered at stage right and exited at stage left through openings hung with door panels called *fu doub muhn*.³⁷ In the collection there is a pair made of a valuable and durable kind of fine hemp.³⁸ Written across the top of this pair is the auspicious saying, “good fortune in all you desire.”³⁹ The fact that these panels are decorated with silver-coloured brass discs dates them at no later than the early 1920s,

³⁷ Wong Toa, personal communication.

³⁸ Wong Hok-sing, personal communication.

³⁹ The use of such panels is clearly shown in an illustration of a San Francisco Chinese theatre in 1979, from *The Pacific Tourist*, edited by F.F. Shearer (Rodecape 1944, 96). Hsu (1985, 28-9) also describes these stage entrance and exit positions and panels.

but they show little wear, which suggests that Jin Wah Sing used them sparingly, if at all, and stored them carefully. According to an actor's account, all-female troupes first began to use cloth backdrops painted with scenes during the period between 1910 and 1920, while other troupes began to use them during the 1920s and 1930s.⁴⁰ These could be rolled up to be transported to performance venues.

A later piece is a proscenium curtain with an advertisement for a medicine company in Guangzhou emblazoned on it with the gelatin sequins that were coming into use in the early 1930s. Other objects created special effects on the stage: these consisted of early electrical devices that, having been packed with gunpowder, produced smoke when they were plugged in.⁴¹

HOW TO INTERPRET THIS EVIDENCE?

Identifying more than 500 antique objects from the highly complex and specialized art form of Cantonese opera has proven to be an extremely challenging but rewarding process. Through this process diverse materials have taken on histories, relationships, and significance. Apparently the first acquisition was identified for museum staff by Master Wong Toa and Chuck Chang, the head of Jin Wah Sing, with translations provided by a Chinese student. When the remaining materials were donated in 1991, as the exhibition was being planned, good identifications were imperative, and the two curators responsible for the content of the exhibit, Rosa Ho and myself, faced a challenging problem, especially as very little has been written in English on Cantonese opera costumes and other materials.⁴²

We were very fortunate, however. Because Vancouver continues to be a lively centre for the performance of Cantonese opera, senior specialists were available and were able to help with the identification of the materials. They were extremely generous in sharing both their time and the knowledge they had gained through their long experience with Cantonese opera.⁴³ Two of these people are now in their nineties: Master Wong Toa and Professor Huang Jinpei. Master Wong Toa is a

⁴⁰ Personal communication, Mary Tuen Wai Yeung, citing Chen Feinong, a famous actor of female roles (Chen 1983, 159-60).

⁴¹ Wong Toa, personal communication.

⁴² Examples are the works by Duchesne and Hsu.

⁴³ It is tempting, here, to borrow Clifford's (1997, 188-95, 201-4) concept of the "contact zone" to describe the meetings between those who represented the culture of Cantonese opera and those who represented the culture of Western museums. Museums were unfamiliar territory to the opera specialists, and we were grateful for their willingness to enter the strange world



Photo 24: This sign, only thirty centimetres wide, was hung on the stage to indicate the location of the scene, which, in this case, was the Great King Temple. Edz1659.

Photo 25: Pair of door panels, deep pink with green borders and decorated with metal discs, used by actors to enter and leave the stage in the time before scenery was used. N1.861a-b.



Cantonese opera musician who first trained as an actor under the old apprenticeship system and who began his career on the Red Boats that carried opera troupes around the Canton Delta.⁴⁴ He continues to share his knowledge with the Museum of Anthropology as questions arise, and he has published extensively in Chinese. Professor Huang Jinpei, retired from the Xinghai Conservatory in Guangzhou, is an ethnomusicologist who has broad knowledge of Cantonese opera both from his professional

of the museum storeroom, to encounter the unfamiliar value that we placed on old and rare Cantonese opera materials, and to share their knowledge so that objects salvaged from the history of their art could be properly identified.

⁴⁴ For a valuable study of the Red Boats, see Ward (1981).

work and from his childhood experiences in Singapore, where he also learned English.⁴⁵ He worked as a valued member of the Museum of Anthropology's exhibition team for several years. Another most helpful person, somewhat younger than the preceding two but with extensive historical knowledge, is Master Chan Kwok-yuen, Hong Kong's foremost designer of Cantonese opera costumes. During one of his visits to Vancouver, he examined many of the materials, as did the renowned actor and director of Cantonese opera films Wong Hok-sing, who began his career in the late 1920s. Hung Ka-fung, president of Jin Wah Sing in the early 1990s, also shared his knowledge. Both Hung Ka-fung and Wong Hok-sing have since died.⁴⁶



Photo 26: Wong Hok-sing and Huang Jinpei identifying costumes, with Chan Kwok-yuen working with Rosa Ho in the background.

⁴⁵ I am indebted to Dr. Alan Thrasher for introducing me to Professor Huang. They have collaborated extensively on the study of Cantonese music.

⁴⁶ The research method used by my late colleague Rosa Ho and myself involved bringing the materials out one by one and then recording how the specialists identified them. Professor Huang Jinpei looked at the entire collection, while the other specialists examined portions of it. The transcripts of their comments were placed in binders along with photographs and the existing catalogue records for the objects. I am currently working to prepare this information for entry into the museum's collections database, which will become publicly accessible in the future, together with images of the materials.



Photo 27: Chan Kwok-yuen working with two of the many racks of costumes.

The specialists were able to identify the musical instruments, props, and materials for the stage, and to attribute the costumes to their role type and character type. They also gave us the clues needed to assign the costumes to chronological periods in the history of Cantonese opera. The heaviest costumes, densely decorated with gold and silver threads and applied ornaments, are the earliest, dating from the 1910s to the 1920s.⁴⁷ Of these, the ones made to glitter with silver coloured brass discs are said to be the earliest, while those decorated with small glass mirrors are somewhat later. Both would have been impressive on stages that may not yet have had electric lighting. The costumes have the sheen of silk and, indeed, were made of silk woven with cotton to give them the strength needed to hold the discs and mirrors.⁴⁸ Many costumes have both kinds of ornamentation, and they are often trimmed with white rabbit fur, making them look very luxurious indeed, especially when these decorations are combined with the application of heavy gold and silver thread. Most of the work on these older costumes was done by hand,⁴⁹ including the weaving of their heavy hemp linings and the stitching of their seams. Those that predate the 1930s do not have the long silk “water sleeves” that add expressiveness to Beijing

⁴⁷ The dating of the early costumes was repeatedly reinforced by Wong Hok-sing on the basis of his personal experience as a very young actor.

⁴⁸ Wong Hok-sing, personal communication.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* Careful examination of the costumes also reveals that they were made by hand.

opera costumes, although short-sleeve extensions of nylon fabric that would decorously cover the actors' hands were apparently added to the oldest costumes at a later date, probably by Jin Wah Sing.⁵⁰ Costumes ornamented with designs outlined in sequins made of gelatin became popular in the 1930s, and a few are represented in the collection. Those that are machine-sewn, possibly made of rayon rather than silk, lined with cotton fabric, and decorated with relatively coarse embroidery of twisted silk thread rather than silk floss probably date from the 1930s to the early 1940s. Their embroidered motifs are often in art deco style.

Most of the heavily ornamented costumes are in the style of Ming Dynasty robes (1368-1644), voluminous and with wide sleeves. A few are very unusual in that they are in Qing Dynasty style (1644-1912),⁵¹ having tight sleeves with horse-hoof-shaped cuffs and Manchu-style closings. According to Master Wong Toa, the latter were used for operas set in that dynasty. There are also female shoes with Manchu-style elevated soles that look like elegant heels placed under the arch of the foot. Two of the costumes for female roles have short sleeves – otherwise unheard-of, even today – and were made in the style of clothing of their time (early 1920s). According to Huang Jinpei, these represent a failed experiment typical of Cantonese opera's quest for novelty. According to Wong Toa, four sequined dresses with short sleeves and of a much later style were made to be used in one particular opera.

As the specialists interpreted the costumes for us, we learned to look for many clues that would indicate the role type and character type each was intended to represent. In contrast to Western theatre costumes, few Cantonese opera costumes are specific to individual characters, and those that are relate to supernatural beings. Wide sleeves indicate civil roles, while narrower ones indicate that the role type and character are military. Extensive ornamentation indicates high social status, and simple, dark-coloured costumes indicate poverty. Particular details distinguish eunuchs from officials, and servants from those they serve. Ribbons indicate gentility. We carefully recorded the specialists' interpretation of each piece and benefited from their vast experience. Although the older robes are heavily decorated with symbols from the

⁵⁰ According to Master Wong Toa, water sleeves were first used in Cantonese opera in the 1930s.

⁵¹ Cantonese opera actors had a complex and sometimes antagonistic relationship with the Qing Dynasty, thus making the existence of opera costumes in Qing style an interesting paradox that bears further investigation (Ward 1981, 250, 252). Huang Jinpei reported that, until about 1920, notices in the *Chinese Times* referred to Beijing opera. Cantonese actors had to perform under this guise because, after 1854, their opera was temporarily banned due to their support of the Taiping Rebellion (Huang Jinpei, personal communication). Authorities give various dates for the lifting of this ban (one example may be found in Ferguson [1988, 58]).

Chinese repertoire – coins, bats, butterflies, auspicious Chinese characters – we learned that, in Cantonese opera, their meanings were not necessarily consistent and that they were not necessarily relevant to the role type or character being portrayed.⁵² Why would eunuchs' robes be decorated with the characters meaning “double happiness,” normally prominent at weddings?

Photo 28: Detail of a robe from the 1920s. This close-up shows the heavy gold and silver thread work, the dragon's glass eyes, and the applied mirrors and metal discs that made the robe sparkle. N1.616.



Photo 29: Transforming robe, c. 1920. The front panels are double, and the outer ones could be unfastened and flipped over on the stage, revealing the undersides and transforming the robe into one with different colours and motifs, thus indicating the supernatural nature of the being represented. N1.716.

⁵² Wong Toa, personal communication.



Photo 30: Military robe in Qing Dynasty style, c. 1920. This costume is one of the few in the collection in this style. It is unfinished and shows no signs of use. Edz1821.



Photo 31: Robe representing a eunuch c. 1920, one of four identical robes in the collection, all the same colour and all well worn. The hip panel and overall configuration indicate that it was used to represent a eunuch. Edz1769.

Photo 32: Costume in the style of contemporary women's clothing, c. 1920. Costumes of this type were used only in Cantonese opera and only in the 1920s. According to Huang Jinpei, the *Chinese Times* advertised productions featuring them as "contemporary dress opera." N1.695a-b.



Photo 33: Shoes representing bound feet, 1930s.⁵³ Cantonese opera actors did not have bound feet but could undergo arduous training in order to learn to balance for long periods on shoes like these, which have wooden foot supports inside.⁵⁴ N1.766a-b.



Photo 34: Robe representing a young scholar. The slanted neck and straight shape are typical. c. 1940 N1.655.



⁵³ The *Chinese Times* has a notice of a June 1935 performance that featured such shoes.

⁵⁴ In a 1995 interview with Mary Yeung and myself, Chen Shaozhen, a senior Cantonese opera researcher and teacher from Guangzhou, described in painful detail her childhood training in the use of these shoes (Chen Shaozhen, personal communication).



Photo 35: Vest worn to represent a Daoist priest, c. 1920. A vest for a woman would be less elaborate, according to Chan Kwok-yuen, who also said that Cantonese people could call such a vest a “100 families garment” because it could represent pieces of cloth contributed by many families. N1.639.



Photo 36: Headdress for a high official, c. 1920. The brilliant blue areas are made of real kingfisher feathers. On a later headdress the feathers were no longer used, having been replaced with blue paper. Edzi664a-c.

Almost all the costumes have linings that look new and clean, even when their exterior surfaces are badly worn. Master Wong Toa explained that costumes were valuable and needed to be protected from the actors' perspiration, especially when the troupes were performing in the heat of south China. He said that the actors wore inner shirts made of a net of fine bamboo tubes that held the costumes away from their bodies, as well as layers of cotton cloth to absorb perspiration, thus adding weight and bulk to the already heavy costumes. He emphasized the fact that bearing the weight of the costumes (as well as some of the specialized accessories) required stamina and skill on the part of the actors and that the heaviness of the costumes sometimes caused actors to faint on stage. The outer, decorated sides of some costumes have deteriorated, providing clear evidence of how they were used (especially where they display loose embroidery threads, bent ornaments, and soiling). Others look completely new, despite their age. This suggests that some costumes were more useful than others, although it is hard to see a pattern here. Some costume parts that one would expect to have been heavily used, such as guards' vests, are in pristine condition, despite the fact that guards and retainers always accompany emperors and generals. Perhaps more were available than were needed; there is now no way to know. The seven suits of armour suffered serious wear, and the transforming robes are somewhat worn. The latter were worn in a splendid short play called *Six Kingdoms Present a Chancellor*,⁵⁵ which was designed to show off the special skills of a troupe and the luxury of its costumes, and also in the popular short play⁵⁶ entitled *The Celestial Maiden Presents a Son*. Transforming robes also appear in other museum collections and, according to Chan Kwok-yuen, were produced in such abundance that they could be bought virtually "off the rack." Their popularity came from the fact that they enabled actors to amaze audiences by appearing as the Celestial Maiden and supernatural "sisters" come to earth and then, by flipping back the front panels of their costumes, to transform themselves into something entirely different but equally spectacular.

Now we can only imagine the feelings experienced by Chinese audiences in early twentieth-century Vancouver as they were spellbound by the magic of the Cantonese opera performances they witnessed.⁵⁷ Operas were filled with colour, glitter, brilliance, and the ability to

⁵⁵ Wong Hok-sing, personal communication.

⁵⁶ Wong Toa and Wong Hok-sing, personal communication.

⁵⁷ The *Chinese Times* sometimes reports general audience responses, both positive and negative.

transport the audience to a world of emperors, immortals, and beautiful, elegant women in a country where so few Chinese women were then present. Through their stage techniques the actors had the ability to break this spell⁵⁸ and to communicate directly with the audience, thus making them feel a part of the performance. Victoria Yip shared with us her first-hand experience as an “opera lover.” It is important that we continue to learn from those senior specialists who have first-hand knowledge of Cantonese opera, as well as from the surviving written records, so that we can gain a better understanding of the actors who came here at that time, the dramas they performed, the materials they used, and the itinerant lifestyle they led.

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Dr. Edgar Wickberg gave me valuable, penetrating comments on a draft of this article, based on his many years of research on Chinese Canadian history. Dr. Graham Johnson also gave me important comments and provided translations of the written Chinese. Mary Tuen Wai Yeung provided valuable assistance by asking complex

⁵⁸ See Brecht (1964).

questions of Master Wong Toa on my behalf as well as by generously responding to my request for comments on this article. Her comments reflect her deep knowledge of Cantonese opera, gained through years of careful research. I am grateful for their help and guidance. Leah Pageot provided technical support with regard to the production of images.

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