

Cantonese Opera and the Growth and Spread of Vernacular Written Cantonese in the Twentieth Century¹

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This paper outlines some of the contributions of Cantonese opera to the growth in the use of written Cantonese in the twentieth century, and aims to demonstrate the vital role Cantonese opera played in spreading vernacular written Cantonese, in tracing the development from the heydays of Cantonese opera performances during the 1920s and 1930s, through post-World War II, and into the present. The paper studies the link between Cantonese opera and print culture on the one hand (opera scripts for mass readership, songbooks, printed lyrics and dialogues accompanying audiorecordings, etc.), and multimedia materials on the other hand (that is, multimedia productions where written Cantonese can be viewed and read (lyrics (and dialogues at times as well) are printed onscreen in opera films, video-recordings of stage productions, karaoke, etc.). Also addressed are some literacy issues.

0. Introduction

During the past two to three decades, vernacular written Cantonese (or simply ‘written Cantonese’ for short)—that is, the written form of Cantonese that reflects the vernacular language used in the informal register—has become very widespread in usage in popular print media in Hong Kong and in overseas Cantonese-speaking communities. Written Cantonese, with respect to vernacular Cantonese characters and Cantonese lexicon and syntax, is often found in such genres as advertisements, comic strips, newspaper headlines and columns, magazine articles, personal correspondence, as well as written transcripts of spoken discourse.

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Since Bauer's (1988) pioneering study on written Cantonese, a fair amount has been published on such issues as code-mixing and dialect literature.² An important starting point is the definition 'written Cantonese.' For heuristic purposes, this paper follows Bauer (1988) in defining it as "any text which contains at least one Cantonese lexical item and is intended by its writer to be read by a Cantonese-speaking reader" (emphasis mine—mc). What is truly vernacular written Cantonese text should, however, contain a larger inventory, or a larger proportion, of written Cantonese than a single token of what is clearly identifiable as Cantonese that is not part of standard written Chinese taught in school. To be debated then is what proportion would be deemed sufficient, and how large a corpus of text would be needed.



Figure 1.

An illustration of text with written Cantonese is displayed in Figure 1, a page from 9 October 2005 issue of a weekly magazine with an article on Andy Lau (劉德華), a well-known Hong Kong Canto-pop singer and movie star. The weekly is *Star Magazine* (星周刊), the Vancouver (Canada) edition of the *Sing Tao Daily* (星島) for local Cantonese readers, many of whom had emigrated from Hong Kong. In Figure 1, the text of the main article is printed in traditional format with vertical columns going from right to left, and written in simple language that requires only limited education and literacy level, and it is in standard Chinese. The caption under the inserted photos differs both in layout—horizontal text from left to right—and in dialect; it is written intended to be read aloud in Cantonese and as direct speech, to capture the full flavor of the singer's own words. He recounts an incident in his China trip: “呢朝八點幾,去機場途中見到隻蟹,我即刻叫司機駛入去!嘩!一世人都未曾見過咁大隻蟹呀!真係令我好激動!於是我哋架車直衝草原,我立刻落車衝埋去,唔使九秒九就爬咗上去!”³ Such written text—containing marked Cantonese mixed with standard written Chinese (and potentially more literary language)—abounds in Hong Kong, where the population is mainly Cantonese

² Examples of recent linguistic literature concerning written Cantonese include Bauer (1984), Li (1998, 2000), Lo and Wong (1990), Lock (2003), Snow (1993a, 1993b, 2004), Wu (2003), Yan (this volume), and sources cited therein.

³ The following is a rough translation of the narrative: “That morning at a bit after eight, enroute to the airport, (I) encountered a crab. I immediately called the chauffeur to drive in! Wow! In my entire life I’ve never seen such a huge crab! It got me really excited! As a result, our car mowed straight through, I dashed out of the car and rushed over, and in less than 9.9 seconds I had already climbed on!”

speakers.⁴ Extensive use of written Cantonese is similarly evident in Chinese communities with a large population of former Hong Kong residents. This phenomenon is observed less in cities in Guangdong Province in China, as a result of tighter government controls on dialect use.⁵ The growth and development of written Cantonese forms a vital part of the dialect history of Cantonese.

This paper takes a somewhat different focus from other linguistic studies of written Cantonese in that it analyzes written Cantonese found in Cantonese operas during its peak of popularity in the early decades of the twentieth century through the post-World War II decades with references to the present. The paper aims to show that Cantonese opera played a vital role in the spread of vernacular written Cantonese, particularly earlier in the century. In other words, the use of written Cantonese in popular Hong Kong culture today—from the lyrics of Canto-pop in the 1970s to advertisements and printed media—did not develop in a vacuum, but is part of a long and rich legacy of rendering the vernacular language of a region into a written medium for a reading public with varying degrees of literacy and education.

The remainder of this paper is organized into three broad historical periods concerning the contribution of Cantonese operas to the growth in use of written Cantonese in recent years. Section 1 discusses briefly some historical background on written Cantonese prior to the twentieth century. Section 2 presents the period of relative peace between 1920 and 1937, a period that can be called the “golden age” of Cantonese opera. This very creative and very productive period was cut short with the outbreak of the war of resistance against the Japanese (抗日戰爭, 1937-1945), the end of which also marked the end of World War II. Section 3 discusses the post-WWII decades with respect to the impact of the different political systems in Hong Kong and China on Cantonese opera and on the fate of written Cantonese during that period, leading up to the present. Section 4 presents some concluding remarks.

⁴ Some recent census and language survey data for Hong Kong are available. For example, the results of a 1993 survey in Hong Kong (Bacon-Shone and Bolton 1998) show that 81.6% of the Hong Kong residents speak Cantonese as their ‘mother tongue.’ Some Hong Kong residents learn Cantonese after starting school. Thus, the total figure for Hong Kong residents who can speak Cantonese is higher still, namely, 91.9%. The clear dominance of this spoken language in daily life is then observable in the kinds of oral and written discourse found in Hong Kong society.

⁵ See, for example, China’s Language Law of 2001 (中华人民共和国国家通用语言文字法) and recent efforts by the State Administration of Radio Film and Television (国家广播电影电视总局) to suppress the use of local, non-standard speech on television. (Exempt for cultural reasons are regional dramas, such as local operas that are performed using regional dialects.) URL: <www.sarft.gov.cn/manage/publishfile/35/3329.html>.

1. Written Cantonese Prior to the Twentieth Century

The origins of written Cantonese will probably never be known, although speculations link its development to the influence of Buddhism (Snow 2004, based on Mair's 1994 study). While written Cantonese texts probably date back to at least late Ming dynasty (1368-1644), extant texts containing written Cantonese only date back to early Qing dynasty (1644-1911). The earliest extant text containing written Cantonese is the long (book-length), literary narrative verse song, *Hua Jian Ji* (花箋記).⁶ While the earliest extant copy of this work dates back to a 1714-prefaced edition, this work is generally accepted as having been written in the Ming dynasty. *Hua Jian Ji* and such works belong to the genre of *muyuge* 木魚歌 'wooden-fish songs' and may vary both in length and in degree of literary refinement (from very colloquial to highly classical), these songs are sung in Cantonese without musical accompaniment,⁷ and are published in 'wooden-fish books' (*muyushu* 木魚書).⁸

By the early twentieth century, *muyu* song style had made its way into Cantonese opera as an aria type, where they are sung without any instrumental accompaniment and where the lyrics tend in general to be quite literary in flavor. Nevertheless, as noted above, wooden-fish songs per se may also reflect a more informal style of spoken Cantonese. In *Hua Jian Ji*, for example, although written in a fairly literary style, one can still find, scattered throughout this work, vernacular Cantonese occurring both in descriptive narrations and in discourse contexts. In fact, in his English translation of this narrative song, Thoms (1824:v) describes it as having been written "in a colloquial style, peculiar to the province of Kwang-tung, and is much read by persons of both sex."⁹

⁶ For a discussion in English of this narrative song, see Leung (1999). For a detailed, line-by-line annotation and critical analysis of *Hua Jian Ji*, including consulting multiple editions, see Liang (1998).

⁷ *Muyu* performances may be sung without any instrumental accompaniment or with some simple percussion instrument, such as a pair of bamboo strips, musical clappers, or a *muyu* (木魚), 'wooden fish.' *Muyu* is a percussion instrument consisting of a hollow wooden block shaped like a skull that was originally used by Buddhist priests to beat rhythm when chanting scriptures.

⁸ Liang (1978:xiii) introduces *muyuge* 木魚歌 as follows. It is "a variety of popular 'ballad', a product of Kwangtung, especially of the areas adjacent to the Pearl 珠江 and Hsi-chiang 西江 rivers, and of Nan-lu 南路. They were usually chanted in Kwangtung dialects. The texts or *mu-yü-shu*, wooden-fish-books, are, of course, the consequence of the songs; but, on the other hand, the existence of the books furthered their influence among the people. *Mu-yü-shu* had once a great influence on persons of limited education, especially on women, who were able to derive much pleasure from them even without being literate." As an example, see Yue-Hashimoto's (2005) field-recording a narrative in the Dancun (Taishan) dialect of Cantonese entitled 'Learning *Muyu* Songs' 學木魚歌.

⁹ Stating that this narrative song made its appearance during the Ming dynasty, Thom (1824:v) notes that its authorship is still unknown, but that it is "supposed to be the production of two

Another early genre relevant to written Cantonese in Cantonese opera is that of *nanyin* (南音) ‘southern songs,’ which are sung in Cantonese to the accompaniment of string instruments. As with the *muyu* song genre, *nanyin* is also incorporated as an aria type into Cantonese opera during the early part of the twentieth century. Both genres have remained an integral part of the repertoire of tunes in Cantonese opera, as manifested in stage performances as well as in published opera scripts.¹⁴

It should be noted that these and other ballads that were chanted or sung in the Cantonese dialect appeal especially to women, and for some who are semi-literate, the songbooks containing these ballads may very well be their initial, or even main, source of reading materials. A description of life in Phenix Village in Northeastern Guangdong Province in Kulp (1925, cited in Hayes 1985) is instructive: “the women like to gather in a reading circle and listen to one of their number ‘sing’ ballads. These ballads are in simple and rhythmic popular language, especially designed for women to read or sing.”

In a similar vein concerning the eighteenth and nineteenth century Cantonese ballads in the Munich State Library Collection, Eberhard (1972:2) notes that these ballads “are written *by* simple writers, not by scholars, and *for* simple folk to be read by them or to be listened to.” In fact, songbooks can conceivably serve as textbooks or primers for teaching literacy to women. An example to illustrate is a touching story recounted by a ninety-five year old Dongguan man to a news reporter in 2004.¹⁵ In telling the reporter about the popularity of *muyu* songs among the populace in his early youth in Dongguan

¹² Liang (1998) gives 呢 from another edition. The selection of a lateral initial consonant in graph for the demonstrative in the edition that Thoms used is interesting, suggesting that the mixing of l/n in (some varieties of) Cantonese may be a fairly early phenomenon.

¹³ Liang (1998) gives 被 from another edition.

¹⁴ Short, sample video clips from two karaoke-versions of scenes from the Cantonese opera, *Liu Yi Chuan Shu* 柳毅傳書 (Liu Yi delivers a letter) were shown during the oral presentation at the NACCL-17 conference to illustrate *muyu* and *nanyin*. They were chosen because they allowed the audience to hear how *muyu* and *nanyin* were sung in Cantonese opera. Furthermore, being karaoke, with highlighting of each Chinese character (syllable) as the line of lyrics was being sung, the audience was also able to follow the script. However, both video clips contain rather literary and poetic language, without marked Cantonese vocabulary or syntax. Nonetheless, this is not universally the case, as colloquial Cantonese words do appear in some lyrics sung in *muyu* and *nanyin* in Cantonese opera. One example is a very short excerpt, *Jingdiande Shendiao Daxia* 经典的神雕大侠 (The classic condor hero), online at <<http://blog.bcchinese.net/ducdumaine/archive/2005/07/23/29676.aspx>>. There, *nanyin* aria type is sandwiched between spoken lines of dialogues, and all three occurrences in the excerpt contain vernacular Cantonese characters in the script, as can be seen in the presence of 冇 ‘not have’ and 佢 ‘s/he’ from the first piece sung in *nanyin*: (南音) 神雕大侠, 到处有欢叫声, 婴儿听到亦睡得安宁, 只因大侠降临, 妖精亦会有命啊, 佢将邪魔慑服, 风暴化作天青, 佢更仗义挺身, 为民请命, 挽救无辜免受酷刑.

¹⁵ URL: <<http://www.nanfangdaily.com.cn/southnews/tszk/nfdsb/dgzz/200408170606.asp>>.

(a district in the Pearl River Delta region of Guangdong Province), he also recalled how he had used these ballads to teach his wife how to read. He first transcribed the lyrics of his wife's songs, and then used that very songbook that he compiled to teach her, patiently, character by character, the written text of her beloved songs that she sang and knew by heart. In a year, he explained, she had learned several thousands of Chinese characters and eventually from there learned to read the newspaper and even Liang Yusheng's (梁羽生) *wuxia* novels!

There is an extensive collection of ballads published in printing centers in China, including Cantonese ballads published in the Pearl River Delta region (Magang, Foshan, Guangzhou) during the Ming and Qing dynasties, late Qing in particular (Rawski 1970). The Cantonese ballads are printed in quantity on low-quality paper for local consumption, to be sold quickly and cheaply. The fact that there is a market for these publications, ranging from two or three pages to booklets in multi-volume sets, bespeak the extent of literacy, or semi-literacy, among the populace, and among the male population in particular. As Snow (2004:79) notes, more than fifty publishers have produced the *muyu* books, hundreds of which are still extant today. Of particular significance to note here is that the same mass printing of *muyu* books and booklets is later also used for printing opera scripts—or libretti (劇本)—in the early twentieth century.

On issues of reading knowledge, Rawski's (1979, 1985) research findings on popular literacy suggest that during the Ming and Qing dynasties, the sector of the Chinese population who is literate—in being able to read at least popular literature—is larger than scholars have previously supposed. It should be emphasized that literacy *per se* should not be measured against a level of mastery attained by the scholar-gentry class through classical education. This is a point well noted by Twitchett (1962):

We often make the mistake of accepting at its face value the Chinese literati's view that literacy is to be equated with a thorough grounding in Confucian learning. By this standard, the literate class was very small indeed. But undoubtedly there was always a very large number of persons who, although uneducated by the yardstick of classical scholarship, were nevertheless literate. The evidence for this, from Tun-huang MSS, from early popular literature and even more from the vast quantities of practical handbooks designed for popular use ... speak eloquently of a mass readership, and their authors constantly stress that they are designed for the members of all four classes. (p. 188)

With regard to female literacy, Rawski (1972:6) notes that formal education was neither approved nor systematically provided to women prior to the twentieth century. She further cites early nineteenth century estimates of only 1-10 percent for female literacy, albeit probably great regional variance. Against that backdrop, it is significant that Rawski identifies Guangdong Province as seemingly having high levels of female literacy; for example, she provides statistics from the 1896 census statistics for Hawaii

that record 25 percent literacy rate for Chinese female immigrants.¹⁶ In imperial China, household educational level may also factor into this, with female literacy likely to be more common in literati homes, as literacy aids in attending to duties in the household and to the early education of the children.

In fact, as part of more recent scholarship on women in Chinese history, Mann (1997) notes that the education of daughters appears to have become increasingly important in the High Qing period (c. 1683-1839): “In the marriage market, erudition marked a woman as a highly desirable marriage partner, one who could provide not only sons but also the very best in early childhood education for them. Moreover, she was seen by her kinfolk and by society at large as the heir to her family’s tradition of ‘house learning’ or ‘family learning’ (*jia xue*).” Historical records (Mann 1997) also indicate that literacy education for girls began with family members, and those gifted and lacking male siblings may, in fact, be doted upon by fathers who recognize and appreciate their talents. The low estimates on female literacy cited in Rawski (1972) should probably be revised, taking into consideration the need to review what constitutes literacy, and the need to re-evaluate female literacy in light of more recent scholarship on the education of females in Chinese history. The high statistics (25 percent) on Chinese female immigrants’ literacy in 1896 Hawaii may perhaps be a reflection of a higher overall literacy attainment by females in the Guangdong region and a broader, more universal, understanding of literacy that is not narrowly confined to a literacy level that is attainable only through an elite education aimed at successfully passing the different levels of the civil service examination system. The issue of literacy has direct bearing on the ability to read written Cantonese, be it ballads or opera scripts with arias and dialogues in spoken Cantonese. The above then sets the stage for the next major phase, when Cantonese opera scripts, containing both verse and spoken colloquial dialogue, become widely read.

2. Cantonese Opera and Written Cantonese in the Early Twentieth Century

Much has been published on Cantonese opera, its history, artists, plots, and so forth.¹⁷ What is known today as Cantonese opera (*yueju* 粵劇)—or *daxi* (大戲), in street parlance—is conventionally traced back to an actor, Zhang Wu (張五) who was performing in the capital during Yongzheng’s reign (1723-1736) in the Qing dynasty (1644-1911). As the Manchu government considered his acting subversive, he was exiled from the capital. He travelled south and eventually settled in the bustling commercial city of Foshan, a short distance from yet another major commercial city, Guangzhou (Canton City). Zhang Wu established an opera company in Foshan, accepted pupils, and established

¹⁶ In addition to 48 Hawaii-born Chinese women living in Hawaii in 1896, the 1896 census statistics for Hawaii also give a total of 1,419 foreign-born Chinese women living there that year (Glick 1980:119).

¹⁷ See, for example, Guo (1988), Lai (2001), Li (1993), Liu and Xian (1995), Mackerras (1975), Xianggang Shizhengju (2003), Zhongguo Xiqu Zhi (1993), *inter alia*.

a guild-hall for actors that became extremely influential. Moreover, the region around the two cities of Foshan and Guangzhou became the major center of Cantonese opera in the following centuries. Development of Cantonese opera was temporarily interrupted by the banning of Cantonese operas as a result of the performers' participation in the Taiping rebellion in the 1850s led by Li Wenmao (李文茂, ? - 1858).¹⁸

Over time, Cantonese operatic tradition evolved and absorbed local characteristics, including the use of the vernacular spoken language. We do not appear to have historical records documenting the use of Cantonese dialect in the opera performances of the 18th and early 19th centuries, but it is likely that Cantonese dialect was used prior to the outright banning of Cantonese opera performances in the aftermath of local performers' anti-Manchu activities (Luo 1993). With the government authorities' prohibition of Cantonese opera performances and permitting only performances of *kunqu* (昆曲) and Peking opera (京劇), the Cantonese performers renounced—or at least outwardly renounced—their local operatic tradition and either outwardly adopted the northern-style operas or joined the 'non-local' theatrical companies that were not similarly condemned and proscribed by the Qing government (Su 2003, Mackerras 1975). Eventually, the ban against the local Cantonese operas was relaxed, and by late Qing and the early years of Republican era in the twentieth century, Cantonese dialect replaced the use of Mandarin (官話) for the performance of Cantonese opera.

An important change during this time was the development of opera scripts, or libretti (劇本). In late Qing dynasty, opera troupes did not use scripts; instead, they relied on brief outlines of stories from a small stock of 17th century and later play scripts, as well as on notes that matched performer with role (rank of character). As Su (2003) notes, "Major dramatic highlights would have their lyrics and music written down, but the remainder would be improvised by the actors, who were allowed to sing away as long as they continued to make sense." The need to entertain the audience with new story lines led to the expansion of the repertoire of stories in the preparation of original scripts. And by the 1920s, fully-written scripts for spoken and sung lines began to be produced (Liang 1995).

The switch from Mandarin to Cantonese dialect had additional consequences, one of which was the ultimate replacement of the male falsetto voice with natural voice (*ping-hou* 平喉) for the young male role. Lai (2001) attributes the change as due to differences in the two phonological systems (number of lexical tones in Cantonese, preponderance of Pingsheng (平聲) syllables, heavier use of nasal sounds, etc.); that is, there is a mismatch between singing in high-pitched falsetto using the sound system of Cantonese, with its overall lower pitch sounds. The warm reception of the audience to the experimental use of natural voice by Zhu Cibo (朱次伯, ?-1922) and Jin Shanbing (金山炳, n.d.) led to its

¹⁸ While *Zhongguo Xiqu Zhi* (1993:598) gives his year of death as 1858, Mackerras (1975:148) gives 1861.

adoption by other performers and the gradual switch to natural voice (Zhongguo Xiqu Zhi 1993).

The replacement of Mandarin with Cantonese in the performance of Cantonese precipitated other changes as well, such as the incorporation of colloquial vocabulary and expressions, which can be seen in the scripts from as early as the 1920s and 1930s. The frequent use of vernacular written Cantonese characters is amply demonstrated in Huang (1995).¹⁹ These include 佢 's/he,' 啱 'correct,' 冇 'not have,' 咪 'don't,' 嬲 'be mad at,' 氹 'puddle,' 啲 'more, -er, some, a few' (e.g., 快啲 'faster')²⁰, 唔 'not' (e.g., 唔好 'not good,' 唔夠 'not enough,' 唔會 'will not,' 唔係 'not be,' and even in the opera title, as in 《唔嫁》 'won't get married'), and so forth, including a host of Cantonese sentence-final particles that are still used in Cantonese today. Some of these particles appear in the utterances in (2) from these scripts. (SP = sentence-final particle, ASP= aspect marker, CL=classifier)

- | | |
|---|--|
| (2) a. 搵 到 嘞 噃
<i>find-arrive SP SP</i> | 'Found it.' |
| b. 你 番(返) 咗 嚟 哩 咩
<i>you return ASP come SP SP</i> | '(So) you're back?'
(咗: perfective aspect marker) |
| | |
| (3) a. 將 你 來 蝦
<i>JIANG you come bully</i> | 'pick on you' |
| b. 我係一個初歸新婦(讀“抱”音)
<i>I be one CL first return new married.woman</i> | 'I am a first-time returning (home) daughter-in-law.' |
| c. 呢個係我新抱 嚟 㗎
<i>this CL be my new married.woman ASP SP</i> | 'This is my new daughter-in-law.'
(嚟: similar to Mandarin 來著) |

Other colloquial and slangy expressions from Huang (1995) include 冚崩冷 'all,' 真論盡 'so clumsy,' 大泡和 'dummy,' and even curse words, such as 冚家劇 (annihilation of the entire family). Chinese characters may also be used strictly for their phonetic value; that is, used as phonetic loans (*jieyong* 借用), harking back to an earlier “read as” (*duruo* 讀若) tradition in Chinese that preceded the use of *fanqie* (反切) spelling. The reading based on phonetic loan may not be explicitly noted in the script, as in the case of (3a), where the character for the noun ‘shrimp’ (蝦) is used simply for its sound value to spell out a homophonous word in Cantonese meaning ‘to pick on, to bully.’ Phonetic

¹⁹ English glosses and translations to Chinese examples from Huang (1995) are provided here for readers' benefit and not in the original article.

²⁰ In Hong Kong today, 啲 is sometimes simply written using a graphic variant, namely, the upper-case Roman letter, D, whose pronunciation in English is homophonous with Cantonese 啲.

loans or changes in pronunciation may be indicated, as in the case of (3b). In the case of 新婦 ‘bride, daughter-in-law,’ a word in standard Chinese, 婦 [fu²⁴] is pronounced with a labiodental fricative onset in that syllable in Cantonese, as in Mandarin *fu* in *xinfu*; in the spoken language in Cantonese, however, the second syllable of the word is actually pronounced with a bilabial stop: 抱 [phou²⁴]; for that reason, a note of instruction was inserted in the script on pronouncing the character 婦 as one would the character 抱.²¹ In (3c), the colloquial pronunciation is not similarly flagged; the phonetic-loan character 抱 is used in lieu of 婦.

The vernacular language is not limited to spoken dialogues. It even penetrates the sung lyrics, as exemplified in (4a) from Huang (1995), where the line is sung in the aria type known as 滾花 (Mandarin *gunhua*), which is the most frequently-used aria type in Cantonese opera today (Bell 198). In (4), evoking the devil (鬼) is very much part of Cantonese vulgar (unrefined) language, and the derogatory expression, 躑死咕路, corresponds very closely to Mandarin *gundan* (滾蛋) ‘beat it, scram.’

- (4) [滾花] 快啲 躑死咕路, 鬼 嫁 你 個 大泡和
quick-ly beat-it/scram devil marry you CL dummy
 ‘Beat it! Scram! Who wants to marry (you), you big dummy!’

Equally amazingly, there are even English loanwords in these scripts from the 1920s and 1930s. Some examples are 括擺 ‘good-bye,’ 柯禮 ‘alright’ and 尾厘 ‘minute.’²² As further illustration of the extent to which colloquial Cantonese shows up in these early scripts of the 1920s and 1930s, Huang (1995) provides two pages from one such opera, *Mai Hua De Mei* (賣花得美). Only four lines from page 12 are given here in Figure 2. Undated, the opera title that Huang gives in his caption includes the name of the performer, Shezai Li 蛇仔利 (? – 1962). He also provides the following title for the opera: 蛇仔利賣花 得美.²³ Shezai Li, well-known for playing the clown role, was at his height of fame in the 1920s and 1930s. This opera is one of his earlier operas (Zhongguo Xiqu Zhi



Figure 2.

²¹ The colloquial pronunciation of 婦 with a bilabial stop is actually a preservation of an earlier bilabial onset for the word in the Chinese language.

²² Some examples in Lin (2003) that are not mentioned in Huang (1995) include 丫路 or 蝦勞 ‘hello,’ 爺是 ‘yes,’ 士的 ‘stick,’ 仙士 ‘cents,’ and 燕梳 ‘insurance.’

²³ Apparently, the audience enjoyed adding the phrase, 蛇仔利 (Little Snake Li, his stage name) in front of the name of his operas; as a result, audience and performer clown with each in the process (Zhongguo Xiqu Zhi 1993:517).

1993). The 1920s also happens to be the peak period of the opera troupe that produced the script, the Zhu Hua Nian Opera Troupe (祝華年劇團). It is, thus, quite likely that this script was published some time during the 1920s. There is an astonishing amount of very colloquial, vernacular written Cantonese on those two pages, both for the arias and for spoken lines. The fact that this is a comedy undoubtedly contributes to the high degree of colloquialism in the script. Such colloquialisms so early in Cantonese operas would not be obvious without a perusal of these early scripts.²⁴ What is significant is that such colloquial language continued in the scripts in China until the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, and that such vernacular language continued unimpeded in Hong Kong, spreading into opera films and other genres.

Starting with the 1920s, there was tremendous demand from the audience and readers for Cantonese opera scripts, which were printed locally and in large volumes. They were a commodity that sold well, with beloved scripts reprinted multiple times. As illustration, Huang (1995) mentions a script connected with a well-known performer that underwent its fifth reprinting by 1 March 1927. There was an avid readership, the result of which written Cantonese was regularly encountered through these opera scripts as one important source of inexpensive, popular reading materials for the general readers in Cantonese society. With the huge demand (of published scripts and live performances of these operas), besides modifying old scripts, new scripts were written making use of traditional plots from classical novels as well as adapting plots from Beijing opera and other regional Chinese operas and making use of Chinese folk tales and local stories. Casting the net more widely, plots from foreign literature and foreign films were also adapted for Cantonese operas, such as Shakespeare's *Taming of the Shrew* rewritten as *Diaoman Gongzhu Gang Fuma* 《刁蠻公主戇駙馬》, and so forth (Liang 1995). The use of written Cantonese to capture the flavor and authenticity of the local dialect came to a halt after 1949 with the emphasis on standardization and the promotion of Putonghua.²⁵

The above focuses on developments that pertain to linguistic and orthographic issues. There were other developments in the area of division into scenes, new props and costume design, scenery, tunes, instruments, and so forth that were also taking place in the world of Cantonese opera at this time. The 1920s and the pre-war years in the 1930s

²⁴ Snow (2004:229) states that his opera example, with 7% marked Cantonese characters, is “a fairly typical example of Cantonese opera.” It is not necessarily so, since there is an overall elevated register used, despite colloquialisms in the spoken dialogue of even the emperor.

²⁵ As illustration at the NACCL-17 conference presentation, a quick comparison of the circa-1950 publication of *Liu Yi Chuan Shu* (柳毅傳書), written by Tan Qingshuang (譚青霜, 1928-1993), that was published as a 33-page, handwritten booklet—reminiscent of the inexpensively-produced scripts of the 1920s and 1930s and containing the rich flavor of the Cantonese vernacular—and a much modified version in a collected volume (Guangzhou Zhenxing Yueju Jijinhui 1993), with the colloquial language virtually expunged from the dialogues and lyrics. (See Chan (2005) for more on this opera; a corresponding manuscript is work-in-progress.)

was a period of relative peace and stability that was conducive to much experimentation and innovations. Changes that took place during that period became established, forming an integral part of what we understand to be Cantonese opera today. Given the vitality, creativity, and productiveness of that period, it is apt that the 1920s and 1930s be dubbed the “golden age” of Cantonese opera. The tremendous innovations that took place during that period would not be repeated in the decades after the end of World War II.

3. Written Cantonese and the Legacy of Cantonese Operas in Post-World War II

The establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949 brought a different political system to China, one that embraced strong ideologies concerning language standardization, both spoken and written. With the political changes, the colloquially-written Cantonese scripts ceased production and earlier scripts were revised to serve the new regime. While spoken lines retain the language of the local dialect, the cruder, livelier and more colorful vocabulary and expressions, which were frowned upon by the new government, yielded to speech that reflected a blander, more neutral and standardized Chinese, with more ‘respectable’ vocabulary and expressions, as revealed in video-recordings of live, post-Cultural Revolution performances that are commercially available on VCDs and DVDs. In post-1949 China, the more folksy humor and the coarser, more vulgar language that was found in Cantonese operas of the 1920s and 1930s have all been expunged;²⁶ at the same time, the lyrics in the arias have also been placed on an elevated plane, such that there is practically no Cantonese colloquialisms in those arias—only literary language that one cannot very easily identify as markedly Cantonese. Based on viewing of video-recorded stage performances of Cantonese operas from China, there is only the occasional intrusion of vernacular Cantonese in the arias; and perhaps these were due to ad-libbing by the performers. For example, the standard Chinese third-person plural pronoun, 我們 ‘we’, that is given in the subtitles in a VCD or DVD, may in fact be sung based on the corresponding colloquial Cantonese counterpart, 我哋, where the plural suffix is 哋 and not 們.

The suppression of non-standard Chinese writing after 1949 can also be seen in the broader societal context. For example, in charting the use of written Cantonese in newspapers in Guangzhou (Canton City) in the two years after Communists gained control of the city in 1949, Snow (2004:121) notes that by August 1951, “there is very little evidence of Cantonese in Guangzhou newspapers after that time.” Clearly, written Cantonese in opera scripts and in local Cantonese newspapers shared the same fate.

Post-World War II finds a very different situation in the British colony of Hong Kong, where the colonial government took a *laissez-faire* attitude toward its Chinese citizens’ language use. Written Cantonese was left to follow its own course in Hong Kong, without suppression or standardization, including no imposition of standardization

²⁶ Moser’s (2004) online article suggests some parallels in the fate of bawdier humor in comic dialogues (*xiangsheng* 相声 ‘crosstalk’) in post-1949 China.

on graphic variants that exist alongside phonetic loans, resulting in texts that look superficially like standard Chinese but are incomprehensible to readers without some knowledge of spoken Cantonese.²⁷

Cantonese opera played a vital role in the spread of vernacular written Cantonese in the twentieth century initially in print media with the publication of opera scripts. The booming film industry in post-World War II Hong Kong added a new dimension. It brought Cantonese operas to the silver screen. With a new form of entertainment and far lower prices for movie theater tickets than live opera performance, many Cantonese opera fans with low or average income were able to see far more Cantonese operas than they ever would have had they been limited to attending opera performances in opera theaters. In fact, Cantonese opera films eventually supplanted the opera theater. Production output was phenomenal: Cantonese operas accounted for one-third of the over 500 opera films that were produced in Hong Kong during its peak in the 1950s.

In these opera films, written Cantonese is customarily included onscreen for the lyrics when arias are sung. These onscreen lyrics provide visual reinforcement of Cantonese vocabulary and syntax, as well as vernacular Cantonese characters. In some films, even spoken lines are accompanied by written Cantonese text. In this way, Cantonese opera film-goers encounter written Cantonese in regular dosages at the cinema.

As indicated earlier, Cantonese operas of the 1920s and 1930s were influenced by the West (e.g., adaptation of scripts, English loanwords, etc.). Such influences also extended to Cantonese opera films in Hong Kong. Such ideas as theme songs, for example, penetrated into Cantonese operas and films. For example, *Fengge En-chou Weiliao Qing* (鳳閣恩仇未了情, Romance of the Phoenix Chamber), a 1962 opera film directed by Huang Hesheng (黃鶴聲) based on a stage version, was exceptional in having its theme song at the beginning rather than at the end of the opera. These theme songs and other Cantonese operatic songs (*Yuequ* 粵曲), as well as excerpts from Cantonese operas that would include spoken dialogues, are collected into anthologies that are read and sung by the populace. One such (undated) volume is a voluminous, 494-page collection entitled *Jinpai Yuequ Huang* (金牌粵曲皇), the cover of which includes such self-promotions as ‘Every song is popular’ (支支流行, where the classifier for ‘song’ is *zhi* 支) and ‘Mostly well-known songs’ (名曲最多). In other words, these Cantonese operatic songs and excerpts from Cantonese operas—and even full-length operas—were

²⁷ Bauer (1984) and Bauer (1988) provide excellent background on the Hong Kong Cantonese speech community as well as on the development of written Cantonese in the British colony. More recent studies include Wu (2003) and Snow (2004). Overseas Chinese communities in the United States Canada and elsewhere enjoyed similar unfettered freedom in usage of written Cantonese in newspapers. In Vancouver Chinatown today, for example, besides posters and ads that may contain written Cantonese, store signs may also contain written Cantonese, such as the loanword, 燕梳 for ‘insu(rance),’ the phrase, 睇靚相 ‘see pretty photos’ (prominently displayed in an old neon sign of a photo-finishing shop), and so forth.

the “Canto-pop” of the pre-Canto-pop song era in 1950s and 1960s Hong Kong. And, in terms of presence of written Cantonese, there is probably more written Cantonese in Cantonese operas, even in the arias, than in Canto-pop songs.

The difference between Cantonese operatic tunes and Canto-pop music in twentieth-century Hong Kong is rather fuzzy. What one finds is, in fact, a continuum rather than a categorical shift between two genres. At one end are the very traditional Cantonese opera arias and at the other end are the heavy-beat rap songs of more recent years. The major reason that there is not a sharp break is that, in addition to traditional opera tunes, early Cantonese operas absorbed local folk melodies into the operas. Later extensions incorporated other popular tunes, even popular or well-known Western tunes. At the same time, the 1950s and 1960s Hong Kong cinema also produced Cantonese operas with western garb and modern themes. An example is the 1957 film, *Xuangong Yan Shi* (璇宮艷史, My Kingdom for a Husband), directed by Zuo Ji (左几). Billed as a romantic musical comedy, it is based on an earlier Cantonese opera that is an adaptation of a 1929 Paramount musical directed by Ernst Lubitsch, namely, *The Love Parade* (1929). While the Cantonese film opens with modern westernized songs, the film is essentially a Cantonese opera using modern dress and modern themes, and includes both romance and comedy. Predictably, given this combination, there was much room for the vernacular language, slang expressions, English loanwords, and so forth, to be incorporated into the arias and for these lyrics to be displayed onscreen. The creativity and experimentation in the 1950s Hong Kong Cantonese opera films, in many ways, also harkens back to creative and innovative changes that took place in Cantonese opera during the 1920s and 1930s, but in cinematic mode this time.

With respect to written Cantonese, lyrics to Cantonese opera songs (and opera excerpts and full-length operas with dialogues abound in written Cantonese) are not only available onscreen in films—both in the theaters and later in the homes as well through television—and in song books, but they are also printed on backs of albums of phonograph records or printed separately and slipped into record albums, and later into audio-cassette tape cases and CD jewel cases.

While Cantonese opera films began to decline in popularity by the mid-sixties ((Xianggang Shizhengju 2003), there remained strong sentiments towards Cantonese opera songs. As a result, traditional Cantonese opera songs are able to find a place amidst modern Canto-pop songs sung to karaoke. The proliferation of Cantonese opera songs and excerpts available in VCD and DVD formats today attest to their staying power.

4. Concluding Remarks

Cantonese operas served an important role in popular Cantonese culture throughout the twentieth century. Written Cantonese has been an integral part of this popular culture, whether in print media (opera scripts, song books, printed lyrics accompanying audio-recordings) or in multimedia formats in the form of commercial films in theaters, film and video-recorded performances in analog and digital formats for home-viewing, or

karaoke songs on laser discs, VCD, or DVDs. The ubiquitous presence of written Cantonese in Hong Kong culture today is, thus, partly due to the important role that Cantonese opera played throughout the twentieth century in providing the populace with access to written Cantonese.

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