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Cantonese opera is not as well known in the English-speaking world as its sister genres, Peking opera and Kun opera. Peking opera was officially designated as the national opera of China as early as almost a century ago and has generated many publications and performances in the West. Kun opera, having been acknowledged by UNESCO in 2001 as a “Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity,” has attracted intense interest from the theater world, resulting in high-profile performances and several major studies in English. In setting out to inform the world about another major Chinese theatrical genre, this book therefore addresses a long-standing need in a timely fashion.

Possibly inspired by Colin Mackerras’s now classic study, *The Rise of the Peking Opera, 1779–1870: Social Aspects of the Theatre in Manchu China* (1972), and certainly matching its predecessor in scope, approach, and scholarly rigor, this book, as the title indicates, treats the early history of Cantonese opera and delves deeply into its social and political issues.

Ng’s work is remarkable on several levels. First, he has dug up an extraordinary quantity of obscure primary source material such as playbills, posters, performers’ contracts, financial accounts of troupes, and popular magazine and newspaper articles, most of them from a century ago or even older. He has also been exhaustively comprehensive in compiling secondary sources, often annotating them with critical comments. Future students and scholars will find his bibliography a useful reference list.

Second, Ng has interpreted and organized this incredibly diverse and enormously copious material to produce coherent but interrelated narratives. In the first part of the book (chapters 1 to 3), he presents the early history of Cantonese opera in southern China from its earliest days up to the Pacific War. Beginning with the first wave of visiting troupes from northern provinces from as early as the Ming dynasty, wave after wave of northern troupes came to southern China to cater to northerners who migrated to the south. By the late eighteenth century there developed a distinction between “local” troupes (*bendiban*), who came earlier and gradually adopted local Cantonese languages and musical tastes and made use of local Cantonese performers, and “beyond the river” troupes (*waijiangban*), who arrived from the north at a later point. Ng describes how itinerant performers of “local” troupes, housed in so-called red boats that ploughed the waters of the Pearl River and its tributaries, would perform in villages and market towns in the rural areas, eventually moving and settling into commercial
theaters in the urban centers of Guangzhou and Hong Kong. In the second part (chapters 4 and 5), Ng addresses the social, political, and economic challenges that confronted these troupes during the first three decades of the twentieth century and the solutions they found. Finally, in chapters 6, 7, and 8, Ng discusses the spread of Cantonese opera in Southeast Asia and North America, beginning in the middle of the nineteenth century and culminating in a peak of popularity among the immigrant population in the 1920s and 30s.

Third, what makes Ng's writing particularly outstanding is his attention to detail. He discusses many social and political topics related to the rise of Cantonese opera in the early twentieth century, some of which were touched on in earlier publications but remained largely undefined. Ng's thick description and microscopic examination bring these topics into sharp relief, with concrete information on names, places, and dates, making the stories jump off the page vividly and effectively. Among these topics are such institutions as the Jiqing Gonsuo, Bahe Huiguan, and Xiban Gonsi, all of which functioned in various capacities to regulate operatic activities and oversee the welfare of performers. He also highlights individuals who played a prominent role in promoting the development of the genre, including theater owners like Yuan Xingqiao in Hong Kong and business tycoons who invested in operas such as Eu Tong Sen in Singapore.

Fourth, Ng is an extraordinarily gifted writer in his shaping of sentences and spot-on choice of vocabulary. The fact that English is not his mother tongue makes this an even more remarkable achievement.

The history of Cantonese opera cannot be separated from the stories of individual opera performers, and the book gives sketches of some of the most famous protagonists of the early twentieth century such as Chen Feinong, Xue Juexian, Ma Sizheng, and Gui Mingyang. Skipping detailed analysis of their artistry, these brief but vivid accounts of their struggles, triumphs, and failures amid social, political, and financial challenges bring the performers to life on the page. The early decades of the twentieth century were a particularly turbulent time for China, given the revolution, the Japanese invasion, infighting between political factions, strikes, currency turmoil, and other crises. The glory days of success and fame enjoyed by a Cantonese opera troupe rarely lasted longer than a few years and were invariably followed by years of decline due to external factors. In front of the stage enthusiastic applause was heard, yet constant fear of social unrest hid behind it. One cannot help but be impressed by the resilience and optimism displayed by the opera community.

Chaos at home was one factor that drove many performers overseas to America. Some of this book's most vivid accounts focus on the hardship and resilience endured by second- and third-tier actors as they made the long voyage across the Pacific in dismal accommodations, then adhered to contracts requiring them to work eight hours a day for months on end with practically no days off, all the while being willing and able to fill more than one role type as circumstances required. One cannot but be impressed by such heartbreaking determination and artistic flexibility.

Ng's discussion of activities in North America, which relies on his earlier research on Chinese immigrants in Vancouver and on the pre-publication manuscript of Nancy Rao's *Chinatown Opera Theater in North America* (2016), is particularly rich and poignant. At its zenith, beginning in the 1920s and lasting little more than a decade, the opera theater in America was “an institution deeply embedded in the organizational activities and public life of Chinatown ... it delivered a hometown entertainment to assuage the homesickness and lift the spirits of a sojourning population. The theater's active involvement in the af-
fairs of Chinatown organizations led to the stage being cherished as culturally relevant and as an accessible public arena where charities were performed, community spirit celebrated, and leadership affirmed" (p. 188). Ng interprets the theater, among its other functions, as a public space, in which immigrants indulge “in nostalgia and fantasy [that] offered unspeakable pleasure, and so did the opportunity for socializing among peers” (p. 173). “It was the pleasure of amnesia,” he writes, “to forget the distance from home and entailed separation and loss, and to forget the immediate drudgery, alienation, and loneliness in a land of ghosts.... A theater was eagerly sought as a refuge and a home, even for just a moment, in the life of a sojourner” (p. 173). This explains how an immigrant community of limited size in 1920s Vancouver could sustain daily opera performances by two or three troupes over a period of several months, an unthinkable occurrence today.

The early history of Cantonese opera also sheds light on the current situation in Hong Kong, a metropolis with some seven million residents and home, on Forbes’s account, to the second-largest number of billionaires after New York City. This populous and wealthy city cannot sustain even one single Cantonese opera troupe capable of offering daily performances for any extended period of time. Where are the Yuan Xingqiaos and Eu Tong Sens of today? Why is the Bahe Huiguan so ineffectual in comparison with the same institution a century ago?

That Ng’s book was published by the University of Illinois Press deserves particular commendation. Although three of the eight chapters discuss North America and for that reason may be of direct interest to a North American audience, the text will not always make easy reading for English readers not already familiar with Chinese opera. Yet the press clearly recognized the book’s scholarly and historical value, and I applaud its vision, boldness, and admirable commitment in publishing this book.