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Performance, Adaptation, Identity: Cantonese Opera Costumes in Vancouver, Canada

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Photographs of the 1936 Vancouver Jubilee Parade show Chinese men and women wearing Cantonese opera costumes that appear to be similar, if not identical, to ones in the collection of the Museum of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia. In this highly public forum, they portray the role of “Chineseness” for the non-Chinese audience, reference the power of temple festival dramas, and assert their presence and aspiration to be accepted by mainstream society. By reconfiguring costumes for public display, Chinese immigrants employed material culture in a strategy of performance, adaptation, and identity. This connects to matters still pertinent today: how a living tradition adapts and cultural identity is sustained in a new environment.

Beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, Chinese men from the Guangdong region of China traveled to British Columbia, Canada to work as labourers in the gold fields, the railroad, and on steamships. Others established businesses including cafes, laundries, tailor shops, and grocery stores. Cultural and political factors in China and Canada meant that wives and children were generally left behind. As the Chinese population increased, the 1885 Head Tax made it increasingly expensive and difficult to bring families from China, rising to $500 per person by 1903. The Head Tax was repealed in 1923 but was immediately replaced by an even more oppressive Immigration Act that effectively prevented further Chinese people from entering Canada until 1947. The Chinese community was largely self-contained, with limited contact with the dominant Anglo-European populace due to racial, social, and economic separation and prejudices. Employment opportunities were severely restricted; there were barriers to mobility, and few cultural activities.

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries performers of what is now commonly termed Cantonese opera (yueju 粵劇) – dramas that integrated acting, singing, music, and martial arts – traveled to temple festivals throughout Guangdong’s Pearl River delta. Such performances honoured local deities and generated awe and excitement through “glittering splendor,” novelty, and complexity. Plots, nearly always taken from legends, popular history, or classic novels, typically express fundamental Confucian values. As part of a vigorous trans-Pacific network that linked Hong Kong, Sydney, Honolulu, Victoria, Vancouver and San Francisco, Cantonese opera troupes performed in Vancouver before 1898, and by the 1920s regularly toured Chinese communities in North America. Theatre provided immigrants with much needed Chinese language entertainment, familiar music and stories, fantasy, beauty, and a connection to popular religion and spirituality. The imperial settings, dazzling costumes, and happy outcomes strongly

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contrasted with the harsh reality of everyday life, including the obstacles to bringing families to Canada, homesickness, and a low standard of living.\(^4\) Performances offered opportunities for public gatherings and addressed other cultural and welfare needs within a hostile political environment.\(^5\) For reasons not completely understood, early twentieth-century itinerant troupes left costumes in Vancouver rather than return them to China. Troupes may have been under financial duress, or costumes were outdated and no longer valued. In any case, the Jin Wah Sing Musical Association ended up with a large number of costumes, which were acquired by the Museum of Anthropology in 1971 and 1991.\(^6\) Today, the Museum holds one of the oldest and best-preserved collections of Cantonese opera artifacts in the world.\(^7\)

The city of Vancouver marked its fiftieth birthday in 1936 with a Golden Jubilee Celebration dedicated to the city’s youth, who would “carry the torch of progress into the future.” Nearly all the city’s civic and business sectors were involved,\(^8\) and events included daily pageants, sports competitions, concerts, art displays, and official functions. The Chinese community was among the many cultural groups who participated in the various parades and performances that commemorated the anniversary. The year 1936 marked a turning point in the status of Chinese-Canadians, who were particularly marginalized and routinely faced relentless discrimination; even those born in Canada were prohibited from voting. The federal House of Commons debated Asian-Canadian enfranchisement in 1934, and it became a national campaign issue in 1935. In early 1936 a motion to secure voting rights was defeated, however, a House committee was formed to examine the question.\(^9\) The matter was undoubtedly on the minds of Chinese residents, demonstrated by its mention in several issues of the Chinese News Weekly.\(^10\) The Jubilee offered a timely opportunity to petition for respect and civil rights, which may have been an important impetus for participating in the celebration. As a cultural attraction, the community constructed a “Chinese Carnival Village” that included an immense bamboo gate and a pagoda. With its exhibits, acrobatic performances, and food and souvenir stalls, the Carnival Village was enormously popular and heavily attended. In commenting on its success, the Chinese News Weekly pointedly stated: “the Chinise [sic] carnival, an important part of Vancouver’s Golden Jubilee celebration, has fixed attention on the part that can be played in public life by the Canadian citizen who has no franchise.”\(^11\)

\(^5\) Cheung, Painted Faces, n.p.
\(^6\) The Museum of Anthropology bought more than two hundred costume components and stage accessories from Jin Wah Sing in the early 1970s; Jin Wah Sing donated an equally large number in 1991.
\(^7\) Johnson, “Ephemeral Art,” 63. Not many old Cantonese costumes survive in China, due in part to the emphasis on innovation as well as the difficulties of preservation in the hot and humid environment of the southern region of Guangdong. Collections of opera costumes in Canadian institutions include the MOA, Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, Museum of Vancouver, Canadian Museum of Civilization, and private organizations including the Jin Wah Sing Musical Association and the Ching Won Musical Society (Vancouver).
\(^10\) Chinese News Weekly, Aug. 6 and 24, 1936. This English language paper was “created to interpret to Canadians the deeds, aims, and aspirations of their Chinese fellow citizens.”
\(^11\) Chinese News Weekly, Aug. 6, 1936; emphasis added. The Chinese News Weekly was hardly a neutral observer.
Several Chinese parades are listed in the official Jubilee program of events. Archival photographs document participants including acrobats, the “Chinese Queen and her Court,” and individuals dressed in opera costumes. Performing identity through Cantonese opera is not unique or limited to Vancouver, as in the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries Chinese residents in San Francisco, New York, Edmonton and Calgary also participated in parades and showed a “Chinese face” by wearing clothing and headgear that embodied cultural identity. Even though such civic parades may not have been directly connected to theatre performances, such activity can nonetheless be considered “paratheatrical,” defined by Daphne P. Lei as “performative events happening around, along, and parallel to the stage proper…but nevertheless viewed as performance.” The Jubilee parade and Carnival Village echoed the “massive processions and temporary markets” that were standard for opera troupes visiting Pearl River villages. As important aspects of ritual theatre and temple festivals, processions and bustling, noisy crowds were effective in spreading good fortune and prosperity throughout the community, paralleled by the Jubilee Parade and its throngs of spectators. Traditional opera processions were offerings to those “from whom favors have been received or are hoped for” in this adaptation, mainstream society and the politicians who controlled the rights of Chinese-Canadians.

Parade photographs show two men on horseback and nine women seated on a float (figs. 1 and 2). Traditional temple festival processions typically featured “platforms carried on men’s shoulders, on which villagers [dressed in elaborate costumes] were posed in scenes from operas.” Likewise, these parade participants wear opera costumes, including the two Caucasian men leading the horses. One rider wears the dakao 大靠 armour of a high military general while the other is dressed as a young hero figure. The two men on foot both wear vests of common soldiers. The float on which the women travel is festooned with banners similar to those that identify kingdoms of the Warring States period (475-221 BCE). The general’s armour and the banners were specifically used in the ritual playlet Six Kingdoms Invest a Chancellor (Liu guo da feng xiang 六國大封相). The robes that seven of the young women wear cannot be seen clearly enough to make a firm identification, but based on the details that can be discerned, the presence of the banners, and the general’s costume, they are likely dressed in a set of “transformation robes” that were used not only in the Six Kingdoms drama but also another important ritual playlet, Celestial Fairies Deliver a Son (Tian ji songzi 天極送子). These two playlets were always performed for the ceremonial openings of festival performance runs and have themes of

12 No specific dates are recorded with the photographs beyond noting the 1936 Golden Jubilee.
19 While only three banners are visible in the photograph, we can assume that three more decorate the opposite side of the float.
unity against a common enemy (*Six Kingdoms*), successful outcomes, and the birth of a son (*Celestial Fairies*).

**Figure 1.** Individuals wearing Cantonese opera costumes in the Vancouver Golden Jubilee Parade of 1936 dressed as a young hero, a military general and common footsoldiers. The armour and headdress and the vests appear to be identical to those in the MOA collection. City of Vancouver Archives CVA 260-488. Photograph by James Crookall.

**Figure 2.** Chinese Benevolent Association Float, Vancouver Golden Jubilee Parade of 1936. Seven of the women wear "transformation robes" in the aspect of celestial maidens. The robes, banners, fans, and umbrella appear to be similar or identical to ones in the MOA collection. City of Vancouver Archives CVA 260-487. Photograph by James Crookall.

In their traditional context, *Celestial Fairies* and *Six Kingdoms* showed off a troupe’s most impressive and costly costumes, which thrilled the audience with sparkle and colour and promoted a celebratory mood. *Six Kingdoms Invest a Chancellor* is the story of six warring states that unite against a common enemy by choosing one man to act as prime minister and following
his strategy.\textsuperscript{20} The high point of \textit{Six Kingdoms} is the spectacular entrance of the imposing generals in full regalia, each heralded by the banner that identifies his kingdom. \textit{Celestial Fairies Deliver a Son} recounts the love match between an immortal maiden and a mortal man. They endure trials and separation but all is favorably resolved in the end with an auspicious marriage, rise in rank (with attendant success and wealth), and the birth of a son. As ritual offerings, these operas ensured “bliss-bestowing” and brought prosperity to the community. Music theorist Nancy Yunhwa Rao points out that \textit{Six Kingdoms} in particular acted as a “courtesy greeting to the public and the spirits” and implored supernatural beings not to disturb the proceedings.\textsuperscript{21}

The chief point of reference in traditional Chinese garments is not so much the form of the body but the surface of the fabric, where the wearer’s status and ambitions are represented through decoration and pattern.\textsuperscript{22} The armour of the generals and the robes of the celestial maidens are particularly extravagant and eye-catching: made of silk, hand sewn, and densely embroidered in satin stitch silk floss and couched threads wrapped with gold-coloured metal (figs. 3 and 4). The armour is heavily ornamented with silvered brass disks and hexagonal mirrors held by fitted metal frames, while the women’s robes are adorned with framed round mirrors.\textsuperscript{23} These particular costumes are among the oldest in Museum’s collection, dating from around 1920. Made in Guangzhou,\textsuperscript{24} an embroidery centre, the diversity, liveliness of motifs, and lavish decoration reinforced a “specific vernacular culture with a craving for spectacular visual effects, relatively carefree creativity and receptivity to new ideas.” Costume makers displayed innovation in their free use of symbols, choice of materials, profusion of techniques, and the use of light reflection, which lent “a distinctly Cantonese ‘local flavor’ to the costumes.”\textsuperscript{25}

\textsuperscript{20} Canadian Museum of History, “Power and Elegance: The Collection of Cantonese Opera Records at the Canadian Museum of Civilization,” “A Prime Minister Who Carries Seals of Six Hostile Kingdoms,” http://www.historymuseum.ca/operacantonais/opera33-e.shtml (accessed Aug. 24, 2016). In the drama, Su Qin becomes the prime minister of six relatively weak states that unite and use his strategy to fight the State of Qin, the most powerful kingdom of the period.
\textsuperscript{21} Rao, “Transnationalism,” 113.
\textsuperscript{22} Verity Wilson, \textit{Chinese Dress} (London: Victoria and Albert Museum, 1986), 9. Dense layering of rebus images is a common convention in Cantonese opera costumes, pointing to the ritual agency of these objects to activate auspicious and moral speech, amongst both the performers and the audience.
\textsuperscript{23} Unlike ordinary garments that would typically be lined with silk, costumes are lined in hemp or cotton fabric for durability and to reduce damage from performers’ perspiration.
\textsuperscript{24} Guangzhou was formerly known in English as Canton. Many of the costumes bear stamps identifying the Gam Leuhn Cheung 绣纶唱 costume shop as the maker.
\textsuperscript{25} Duchesne, \textit{Red Boat}, 56-57.
The armour is distinguished by a tiger head placed on the wearer’s abdomen to protect the dantian 丹田, where one’s qi 氣, or vital energy, resides in the body.\textsuperscript{26} As the strongest icon for warding off and exorcising evil, tiger power was especially important when fighting a mighty enemy, as in \textit{Six Kingdoms}. The tiger’s heavily padded nose may contain a charm, relating to its protective and ritual role.\textsuperscript{27} “Transformation” robes have an alternate face that is revealed when the front panels are unfastened and flipped to the back. The aspect of the celestial maiden descended to earth is a loose-fitting long robe (seen in the parade photograph), which conceals her heavenly nature as an immortal being. This second side features a large design of a bat and coins extending across the chest and sleeves and a double-layered skirt of feather-shaped embroidered panels. The combination of motifs on the bodice, “blessings before your eyes” \textit{fu zai yan qian} 福在眼前, is a message that underlines the outcome of \textit{Celestial Fairies}, while the

\textsuperscript{26} The tiger, identified by \textit{wang} 王 (king) written on his forehead, is heavily used as a protective motif, especially on children’s clothing, and in Cantonese opera performs a significant and powerful role in the ritual preparation of a new theatre stage.

\textsuperscript{27} Comment by Master Wong Toa in conversation with Dr. Elizabeth Johnson, c. 1972.
bat’s outstretched wings and the feather skirt suggests the immortals’ flight. Such robes were very popular with audiences, as actors were able to transform themselves into entirely different and even more spectacular personages while onstage.29

*Ling* 靈, often translated as “efficacy,” is a distinct quality attributed to Cantonese opera materials and performances. Carrying connotations of the powerful, numinous, and otherworldly, *ling* is attributed to persons, objects, sites, performances, or combinations of these. As such, it resonates with Bruno Latour’s definition of the “actant,” an agentic force that may be human, nonhuman, or both.30 Chinese theatre costumes are actants that narrate role type, social category and personality traits and perform alongside the actor to heighten the effect of movement and gesture,31 “imbuing the body of the performer…with meanings, history, and remembrance.”32 Whether in the context of a theatre performance or parade, the display of opera costumes is part of the symbolic capital of a troupe or community. Costumes and other textiles represent the greatest capital investment of an opera company,33 thus their presentation is highly effective for increasing success and status in the longer term. Parading in costumes strengthens *ling* by demonstrating pride and prominence to a community as well as the wider society, while its spectacle activates crowds and further increases symbolic capital and harmony.34 The materials used are also performative – silk was intimately associated with China from as early as 3000 BCE, functioning as cultural, social, economic, and political capital both inside and outside the country. Generously cut garments presented wealth through the copious use of silk and embroidery that required the skilled labour of many people to produce. Silk and silk embroidery enact “Chinese” in a way that no other textiles can, and these, along with gold thread, denoted the highest strata of society. The addition of silvered brass disks and mirrors on the costumes resonates with *fengshui* practices to deflect demons and malevolent spirits.35

On viewing these photographs, a present-day Cantonese opera teacher offered the opinion that the parade costumes seemed “thrown together” as the matching headdresses and appropriate make-up are missing, and no professional performer would appear in such a manner.36 There were fewer visits by traveling troupes through the 1930s due to the political situations both in China and Canada – including the Sino-Japanese war and immigration restrictions – which prompted local groups to try to fill the gap.37 The parade participants were most likely amateur

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28 Bats are a homophone for happiness/blessings, as the two words share the same pronunciation (*fú*).
30 Thanks to Dr. April Liu for these remarks. This paper is part of a larger project with Dr. Liu that focuses on the efficacious qualities of Cantonese opera material culture.
36 Master Hoi Seng Leong in conversation with Dr. April Liu, 2016. Given that the costumes were at least ten to fifteen years old and in the possession of the Jin Wah Sing Musical Society by the time of the parade, proper headdresses may have already gone missing.
37 Johnson, “Ephemeral Art,” 59. The amateur Jin Wah Sing Opera Troupe (founded in 1934) performed regularly in 1939-40 (Johnson, *Ephemeral Art*, 65); however Cantonese opera was largely invisible to non-Chinese Vancouverites due to language barriers.
opera performers or simply members of the community; the women may have been the wives or daughters of men in the Benevolent Association, the sponsor of the float. There is a quality of “playing dress up” in the women’s attitudes in particular. Notably, while the man dressed as a general has a painted face, none of the women are wearing stage make-up or has her hair properly styled. The float becomes a “liminal space” between performance and mundane life, where Chinese women are modern yet at the same time proclaim their ethnic heritage. Although these young people were probably not professional actors, given the importance of Cantonese opera in the community, they likely had attended performances from childhood and were familiar with the repertoire. Oft-repeated operas were not simply entertainment but taught history, mythology, and Confucian moral standards. Further, by following lyrics printed in playbills children learned to read Chinese characters. Thus, as a living art form, Cantonese opera had a significant impact on collective memory, the acculturation of children, and formation and expression of Chinese identity, in addition to pervading aesthetic and public realms in both China and Canada.

In China, Cantonese opera performers were of the lowest status, yet they performed the roles of emperors, immortal beings, and legendary heroes. Their training gave them an extensive knowledge of classical literature, and performances educated the often-illiterate audience. The Jubilee parade participants likewise held relatively low status in Canadian society and yet represented themselves as lofty individuals in an effort to educate – and impress – the spectators. In a further ironic role reversal, the white men leading the horses impersonate low ranking “foreign barbarian” grooms for the elevated Chinese warrior-heroes. Cross-dressing offers insight into the power relationships between expressing identity in performance and in society “off-stage,” as “cross-dressed actors often stand in for the fantasies, desires and anxieties of their social moment.” Chinese girls aspired to be like the clever and courageous heroines who won honour and the men they loved, while boys emulated mighty warriors and their astonishing acrobatics on the battlefield. Plots of Cantonese opera traditionally show self-sacrificing, loyal characters contending against the selfish and greedy; the good may struggle (and sometimes die) but values of duty and nobility always triumph in the final positive resolution. For individual audience members, happy endings such as that in Celestial Fairies offered hope to immigrant bachelors that against all odds they might eventually have wives and families and their quality of life would improve. For the community at large, Six Kingdoms celebrated the power of unity and a spirit of collaboration against violence and tyranny. Filled with glitter, colour, and brilliance,
children and adults alike could temporarily escape from the reality of racial inequality in their daily lives in Canada through Cantonese opera.48

Known for its innovative and improvisational nature, Cantonese opera adapted to local circumstances. It fortified local allegiance to the homeland within an unfriendly, even hostile, Canadian social-political environment, and provided Chinese immigrants with ways to cope with loneliness and meet their social and cultural needs.49 The power of its costumes as essential material culture was employed to portray Chinese people not as low status, migrant labourers but as formidable warriors and heavenly maidens, and to perform Chinese culture at its most impressive. Groups often identify with real or fictional “larger-than-life” representatives who have the “power-to-protect.”50 What better agents than legendary generals and celestial immortals to both embody and defend Chinese residents? Given the meanings of the particular plays discussed here, quite possibly a conscious choice was made to employ these specific costumes in the parade, beyond their fabulous appearance.

Cultural performance is designed to be viewed by not only the actor him or herself but also onlookers, and to be evaluated against other performances in the contact zone. The Golden Jubilee Parade of 1936 was perhaps the first time Vancouver’s mainstream population encountered Chinese culture. In this public arena, Chinese-Canadians actively engaged in self-representation and the Cantonese opera costumes they wore captivated new audiences as visual signifiers of Chinese identity. Early newspaper reports in English typically described such costumes as magnificent, gorgeous, splendid and costly. Although no longer worn, these costumes still interact with viewers in the Museum, while contemporary versions perform on stage and in lunar New Year festivals: enlivening conversations, inciting curiosity, and engendering wonder and delight.51 As theatre scholar Aoife Monks says, costumes continue “to resonate after the performance has ended: their presence is not mute, but rather replete with meanings and memories.”52 Journeying from southern China to the streets of Vancouver, linking performers and spectators, Cantonese opera was adapted as a strategy to question, challenge, and affirm what it meant to be Chinese in Canada in 1936.

51 During a viewing with theatre students at the MOA, when a drawer was pulled open to reveal an official’s costume with a deer motif heavily decorated with metal disks, the viewers spontaneously responded with a gasp of pleasure and surprise.
52 Monks, Actor in Costume, 139.
Bibliography


