

Research Article

The uniqueness of Cantonese opera in Hong Kong: contributions and influence by Tong Tik-sang

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Abstract

Cantonese opera is one of the four Chinese-language operas recognized by UNESCO. It is an important art form, and its popularity reaches not only canton-speaking regions but audiences around the globe as well. This paper will begin with Cantonese opera's history and its establishment in Hong Kong. Through studying the contributions of Tong Tik-sang and his collaborators, this paper aims to address the uniqueness of the style of Cantonese opera in Hong Kong. The historical research method is a type of qualitative research in which the historical and cultural context from the late 1800s to the early 2000s are examined. Fushan, a city in the Central Guangdong province, was home to many Cantonese Opera troupes. However, due to political reasons, many Cantonese opera troupes relocated to Hong Kong, settling there in the early 1900s. This relocation led to innovations and developments that are still seen today. Playwright Tong Tik-sang played a very influential role in advancing and popularizing Cantonese operas. This article traces the origin of Cantonese opera, gives an overview of its characteristics, and discusses Tong's contributions and legacy to the future of Cantonese opera.

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Introduction

Cantonese opera, known as Yueju, is one of the three hundred and fifty regional operas in China. Throughout history, Cantonese opera has been developed through ongoing innovations and adaptations, and in the twentieth century, Hong Kong, as a place with multicultural diversity, has been significant to such development. Born and raised in Hong Kong, I have often watched and listened to Cantonese operas. According to my family history, one of my great uncles was a librettist of Cantonese opera. I wanted to discover his works during my initial research for this paper. However, I later decided to focus on the playwright Tong Tik-sang, an influential figure in Cantonese opera today.



Picture 1. The picture was taken during a performance of Cantonese opera. (Web 1)

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Background of Cantonese Opera

Cantonese opera, one of the traditional Chinese operas, represents parts of the performing art and cultures of Canton-speaking regions, including Hong Kong, Macao, the western half of Guangdong province, and the southern half of Guangxi province.² While the history of Chinese opera began as early as the eighth century under the reign of Emperor Ming Huang (712-755) in the Tang Dynasty, the origin of Cantonese opera did not begin until the sixteenth century in the Ming Dynasty.³ Foshan, a city located in the central Guangdong Province, is considered to be the “home” of Cantonese opera, where “Qionghua Guild,” one of the earliest associations of Cantonese opera, was established. Qionghua Guild hall became the meeting place for Cantonese opera actors and troupes. However, during the Taiping Rebellion (1850-1864), Qionghua Guild hall was burnt down in 1855, and Cantonese opera was banned for ten years. By the time the ban was lifted, many opera troupes moved from Foshan to Guangzhou, where the new Qionghua Guild hall was built.⁴



Figure 1. A Map of the current Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area (Web 2)

Cantonese opera troupes used to live in “red boats” and traveled with the boat to perform around the delta region of Pearl River. There were as many as thirty-six active touring troupes, and each troupe had around one hundred and fifty workers, including sixty staged performers. The troupes also traveled down to Hong Kong and gave performances there. However, during the early 1900s, the “deteriorating social conditions and alarming lawlessness in the surrounding counties and countryside” made travel to Hong Kong and Guangzhou difficult.⁵ As a result, a particular kind of Cantonese opera troupe, *Sheng Gang Ban*, was established and their performances were limited to these two locations. The Sheng Gang companies were essential to the development of Cantonese opera. Their performances were also relocated from temples and outdoor theaters to purposely built indoor theaters.

Aim and Problem of Study

This paper will begin with Cantonese opera’s history and its establishment in Hong Kong. Through studying the contributions of Tong Tik-sang and his collaborators, this paper aims to address the uniqueness of the style of Cantonese opera in Hong Kong.

Method

This historical research examines both the primary and secondary sources of the Chinese and Cantonese operas. The primary source includes pictures, newspaper excerpts, and posters of the operas. Secondary sources include scholarly written documents about Chinese operas and opera troupes, as well as biographical information about Tong Tik-sang. All the sources claim the difference and uniqueness of Hong Kong Cantonese opera as a style and proven the significant contributions of Tong Tik-sang to Cantonese opera.

² Bell Yung, “Creative Process in Cantonese Opera I: The Role of Linguistic Tones,” *Ethnomusicology* 27, no. 1 (1983): 29.

³ Marcelo Duhalde, Yan Jing Tian, and Dennis Wong, “Cantonese Performing Art,” *South China Morning Post*, November 8, 2019, <https://multimedia.scmp.com/infographics/culture/article/3036661/cantonese-opera/index.html>.

⁴ Benjamin N. Judkins, Jon Nielson, *The Creation of Wing Chun: A Social History of the Southern Chinese Martial Arts* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press), 66.

⁵ Wing Chung Ng, *The Rise of Cantonese Opera* (Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2015): 31.

Findings

This paper is divided into three major sections. The first section gives a brief introduction of the origin of Cantonese opera and the relocation of troupes. The second section focuses on the development of Cantonese operas in Hong Kong, includes the changes in performing venues and the music elements and styles, as well as the new system for the characters in the opera. The last section presents the importance of the Tong Tik-sang and his influence and contribution to the development of Cantonese opera.



Picture 2. A portrait of Tang Tik-sang (Web 2)

Cantonese Opera in Hong Kong

By the end of the nineteenth century, Cantonese theaters began to replace temporary stages. Numbers of theaters in Guangzhou and Hong Kong were built. Under less restrictive controls by the colonial government, Hong Kong “had an earlier start in Chinese public theaters.”⁶ The earliest purpose-built theater in Hong Kong is the Tung Hing theater, built in 1867. Subsequent theaters include the famous Ko Shing theater, Tai Ping theater, and Kau Yue Fong theater were opened one after another in the late nineteen and early twentieth centuries. These theaters not only provided opera performances to the locals but also introduced this influential Chinese art to the visiting foreign dignitaries such as the Duke and Duchess of Connaught, Sir Andrew Caldecott, and Princess Margaret.⁷

Due to the unstable political situation in the mainland China during the Second World War, many Cantonese opera performers moved to Hong Kong. This established Hong Kong as the center of Cantonese opera. In order to attract a larger audience, Cantonese opera underwent revolutionary changes. Many of these changes initiated in Hong Kong.⁸

Characteristics of Cantonese Opera

Not all the changes in Cantonese opera were permanent. Some changes were only temporarily; adjusting to the changing tastes of the audience. However, some changes from this time are still being practiced to the present day.

Roles

One of the earliest changes of Cantonese opera is to allow male and female actors to perform together. In 1933, the Hong Kong governor agreed to this change, and the Guangzhou government soon followed the new trend. Since then, male and female performers have been able to perform together, which encouraged more innovative developments in Cantonese opera. The second revolutionary change regarding to the role system is the introduction of the “six-pillar system.” Similar to other Chinese operas, Cantonese opera employs different roles according to gender, social status, and personality. Prior to the 1950s, a Cantonese opera could have as many as ten major roles. In order to reduce the cost of production, the six-pillar system was introduced, and only six major characters are featured.

The major male roles are called wenwusheng, xiaosheng, zhengyin chousheng, and zhengyin wusheng. Wenwusheng “portrays a clean-shaven scholar-warrior” and xiaosheng is a character of a young man.⁹ Zhengyin

⁶ Ibid., 33.

⁷ “The Majestic Stage: The Story of Cantonese Opera Theatres,” Hong Kong Heritage Museum, accessed June 15, 2020, https://hk.heritage.museum/documents/2199315/2199693/The_Majestic_Stage-E.pdf.

⁸ Liu, Jingzhi 劉靖之. *Hong Kong Music History: Cantonese Popular Code, Serious Music, Cantonese Opera* 香港音樂史論: 粵語流行曲, 嚴肅音樂, 粵劇. Hong Kong: The Commercial Press, 305.

⁹ Marcelo Duhalde, Jing Tian Yan, and Dennis Wong, “Cantonese Performing Art,” *South China Morning Post*, accessed by June 16, 2020, <https://multimedia.scmp.com/infographics/culture/article/3036661/cantonese-opera/index.html>.

chousheng represents a funny character and zhengyin wusheng is a military character which requires high level of martial arts skill. There are only two female roles under the six-pillar system, and they are known as zhengyin huadan and erbang huadan. Zhengyin huadan is a lead role that features a beautiful young woman and erbang huadan, a supporting role, normally older and unmarried, or a mother. Similar to Peking opera, all the characters are identifiable visually through their make-up and costumes. Additionally, through the “four skills” and “five methods” in Cantonese opera, each role has a unique singing style and acting technique which helps the audience identify their role immediately.



Picture 3. A picture of Wenwusheng (Web. 4)

Since fewer performers were able to perform on stage, the six-pillar system is highly competitive. Along with the severe competitions among Cantonese opera theaters, “elite companies and the star performers on the urban stage had become the center of cultural production, the arbiters of taste, and the deciders of the latest trends.”¹⁰

Music Elements and Styles

Because Cantonese opera was traditionally performed outdoors, singers used a high, falsetto to be heard by the audience. In the early 1900s, as more and more performances moved indoor, the use of the *pinghou* (the natural voice) came into practice.

While traditional Cantonese opera consisted of only Chinese instruments, the Western influence on Hong Kong and Guangzhou during 1910s introduced western instruments to Cantonese opera. The modern Cantonese opera orchestra is divided into melodic and percussion sections. The melodic section includes Western instruments like saxophones, violin, and cellos collaborating with gaohu, erhu, zither, and some other chordophone Chinese instruments.¹¹ In the percussion sections, various cymbals and drums are used to provide rhythmic intensity to the music.

In Cantonese opera, almost all tunes in Cantonese operas are pre-existing materials. These materials are categorized according to their source and musical structure and bong wong is one of the major categories. Bong wong, or aria type, has two short melodic phrases which are related to a certain dramatic situation. It can reappear exactly the same during the associated opera scene, or it repeats in different texts. Although several bong wong tunes are recycled and reused in different operas, the combinations of different melodic phrases can still keep the individual opera unique. In the early 1900s, with the shift from using performing in mandarin to Cantonese, these arias shifted to more creative combinations to facilitate the sound of Cantonese.

Scriptwriters made substantial contributions to the changes in the early twentieth century. They are as crucial as composers in Western opera, and they are responsible for constructing the whole work. Tong Tik-sang (1917-1959)

¹⁰ Wing Chung Ng, *The Rise of Cantonese Opera* (Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2015): 55.

¹¹ Note that gaohu and erhu both belong to huqin family. Other members like zhonghu, yehu are also used in the Cantonese but not Jinghu.

was perhaps the most significant playwright of Cantonese opera. He was very influential in the development and unique characters of Cantonese opera in Hong Kong.

Tong Tik-sang, His Influence, and Contributions to Cantonese Opera

Tong was born in Zhongshan, a city in Guangdong Province. He studied at the Shanghai Fine Arts School before he moved to Hong Kong in 1937. He worked for his cousin, Kok Sin Sit, who was a famous Cantonese opera actor of the time and also the leader of Gok Sin Sing Troupe 覺先聲劇團. He joined Sing's troupe, working as a copyist and an assistant for Fung Chi-fun and Kong Yu-Kau, both famous playwrights for Sing's troupe of the time.¹² Tong's first opera, *The Consoling Lotus of Jiangcheng* 江城解語花, was written in the same year.

In 1942, he married his second wife, Cheng Man-ha (1912-2000), a Peking opera actress and later a Cantonese opera actress.¹³ Tong's use of elements from Peking opera was likely a direct result of his wife's experience with Peking opera.

Tong was very productive, and the last few years before his death was the prime of his playwrighting career. He passed away at forty-two from a stroke shortly after attending the premiere of his last opera, *The Regeneration in the Red-Plum Chamber* 再世紅梅記.



Picture 4. A poster of *The Regeneration in the Red-Plum Chamber* in 2014 (Web 5)

During his twenty-two-year career, Tong produced more than four hundred opera works. His works not only adapted existing works of Chinese and Western literature and music but also tailormade the scripts for individual artists. Numbers of famous Cantonese opera performers, such as Chan Kam-tong 陳錦棠, Fong Yim-fun 芳艷芬, and Pak Suet-sin 白雪仙 collaborated with Tong during their performing careers.

Tailored-made Script for Individual Artists

Among the famous performers who collaborated with Tong, Fong Yim-fun appeared the most in his operas. Fong was one of the most renowned actresses of the time. Known as the “Queen of Diva,” she was known for her “beautiful singing and distinctive artistic image.”¹⁴ She founded Sun Yim Yeung Troupe and the Chik Lei film Company. They started working together in 1954, and before Fong's retirement in 1958, Tong wrote sixteen plays for her and her troupe. While the majority of these plays are Fong's representative repertoires, *Liuyuexue* 六月雪, adapted from Tong's *Jinsuoji* 金鎖記, perhaps was one of the most memorable operas of Fong's. In fact, *Jinsuoji* was initially adapted from a Chinese classical play, and in *Liuyuexue*, Tong focused on displaying Fong's talent by highlighting her singing and

¹² Kong Yu-Kau, nicknamed Nam Hoi Sup-sam Long (南海十三郎), whose extraordinary life was filmed as *Mad Phoenix* in 1997.

¹³ Tong's first wife was his cousin Sit Gok Ching, who was a sister of Sit Gok Sin.

¹⁴ Sze Sum Chow, “Tradition and innovation: adaptation in Cantonese opera” (PhD diss., University of Hong Kong Baptist University, Hong Kong, 2016), 142, https://repository.hkbu.edu.hk/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1288&context=etd_oa.

acting styles. He also portrayed her as an “ideal Chinese woman” of the time and twisted the original story to avoid death and the ghost’s return of her character.¹⁵

Adaptation of Existing Literature and Operatic Elements

Like *Liuyuxue*, a number of famous works by Tong were adapted from films, historical events, and famous literature from both East and West. *Lest We Forget Cheung Yuk Kiu* 萬世流芳張玉喬 was the first work that Tong wrote for Fong. The original story was written by Jian Youwen, a professor at the University of Hong Kong at the time. In the opera, Tong kept the style of the work while adjusting the script to fit into the libretto of Cantonese opera.

Another example of Tong’s influence on Cantonese opera is his integration of the characteristics and stylistic elements from Peking and Kun operas. He mastered these elements with the guidance of disciples of well-known Peking opera singer Mei Lanfang, such as Hu Ying and Zhang Shuxian. His last work, *The Regeneration in the Red-Plum Chamber*, was an adaptation from a work written in the Ming Dynasty. Tong was inspired by Mei Lanfang’s performance technique and incorporated it into this work. For example, he borrowed Mei Lanfang’s mad scene in *Yuzhoufeng* 宇宙鋒 and incorporated it into *The Regeneration in the Red-Plum Chamber*. In *Mudantang* 牡丹亭, Tong borrowed the “Youyuan” scene between Mei Lanfang and Yu Zhenfai. He even specified in the script to emphasize that the performance of the two roles should match Mei’s and Yu’s performance.¹⁶

He borrowed scenes with the “most critical and dramatic elements” from Peking opera and added an extra plot to create more drama to the storyline.¹⁷

Adaptation from Chinese Folk Music

His adaptation was not only limited to literature but also traditional Chinese music. One famous example is *Zhuangtai Qiusi* 妝台秋思 in which Tong incorporated *Dinubua* 帝女花, a pipa solo from the classical pipa repertoires. The music was inspired by a story from Western Han Dynasty, *Zhaojun Departs the Frontier* 昭君出塞, which expressed Zhaojun’s sadness of leaving her homeland.¹⁸ Another famous example is *Chunjiang Hauyueye* 春江花月夜, which was adapted from a poem in the Tang Dynasty. The poem describes the beautiful moonlight shining on the lake and leads to philosophical thoughts about life and dreams. Tong adapted this piece in *Zichaiji* 紫釵記 with the story adapted from Tang Xianzu’s work in the Ming Dynasty. Tong applied this music to set up the mood of the scene and the application of long tunes in his operas is one of the unique features of his works.¹⁹ He worked closely with musicians and carefully arranged the music to his scripts. As such, the “elegant melodies and eloquent language in his plays can stir many emotions and memories in the general public.”²⁰

Tong’s Legacy and Conclusion

Tong Tik-sang and his Cantonese operas are influential even today. His successors continue to adopt Peking and Kun operas, existing literature, and music. They “imitated the script structure and style” of Tongs and his colleagues.²¹ They also adapted and modified Tong’s works to meet the change of audience’s taste and continue Tong’s legacy.

Tong’s influence not only introduced existing classical works to the audience but also “established an elegant, classical Hong Kong Cantonese opera performance style.”²² After Tong’s death, his legacy continues to shape and highlight the beauty of Cantonese opera. In 2009, Cantonese opera was designated as an Intangible Cultural Heritage

¹⁵ According to Chow Sze Sum, Fong’s touching performance in *Liuyuxue* was “successful actualized the moral value of a traditional Chinese woman.” See Sze Sum Chow, “Tradition and innovation: adaptation in Cantonese opera” (PhD diss., University of Hong Kong Baptist University, Hong Kong, 2016), 144, https://repository.hkbu.edu.hk/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1288&context=etd_oa.

¹⁶ Sze Sum Chow, “Tradition and innovation: adaptation in Cantonese opera” (PhD diss., University of Hong Kong Baptist University, Hong Kong, 2016), 148, https://repository.hkbu.edu.hk/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1288&context=etd_oa.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 149.

¹⁸ “中國古典樂曲欣賞—妝台秋思,” *The Epoch Times*, November 4, 2010, <https://www.epochtimes.com/b5/10/11/4/n3074822.htm>

¹⁹ Sze Sum Chow, “Tradition and innovation: adaptation in Cantonese opera” (PhD diss., University of Hong Kong Baptist University, Hong Kong, 2016), 164, https://repository.hkbu.edu.hk/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1288&context=etd_oa.

²⁰ “Splendour of Cantonese Opera: Masters Tong Tik Sang and Yam Kim Fai,” Hong Kong Heritage Museum, accessed June 15, 2020, https://www.heritagemuseum.gov.hk/documents/2199315/2199693/Splendour_of_Cantonese_Opera-E.pdf.

²¹ Sze Sum Chow, “Tradition and innovation: adaptation in Cantonese opera” (PhD diss., University of Hong Kong Baptist University, Hong Kong, 2016), 165, https://repository.hkbu.edu.hk/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1288&context=etd_oa.

²² *Ibid.*, 171.

of Humanity by UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization). As one of the four Chinese operas recognized by UNESCO, the popularity of Cantonese opera has grown not locally but internationally.²³

Biodata of Author



Po Sim Head (D.M.A., NCTM) is a musicologist-pianist and a passionate piano teacher. As an active performer, presenter, and writer, she is interested in discovering lesser-known musicians and promoting their works. She is a regular presenter at national and local conferences such as Music Teachers National Association, Kansas Music Teacher Association, and College Music Society. She also writes for the online magazine *Interlude.hk*. Po Sim has a thriving studio whose students are active participants to recitals and local music events. She also serves as an adjunct instructor at Metropolitan Community College- Kansas City. Research interests are piano performance and pedagogy, world music, musicology. Personal web site: www.kcguitarpiano.com Academic Social Media Links: <https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Po-Sim-Head>

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²³ The three other Chinese operas are Kun Qu, Peking opera, and Tibetan opera.

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