Periphery matters : a cultural biography of Peking Opera in Hong Kong

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Chapter Three /
The First Wave of Peking-Cantonese Opera Interaction
Chen Feinong

In the previous chapter we have seen how Peking Opera was introduced to Hong Kong spectators through Mei Lanfang's historical visit in 1922. The campaign of selling "national drama" had proven to be a success, as Qi Rushan's reformulation of aestheticism, visualized in prolonged dance sequences and choreographed martial art moves, had fascinated local theatre-goers. Moreover, it was also a salient moment in the history of Cantonese Opera in Hong Kong, as the local cultural space Cantonese Opera had dominated for centuries was for the first time shared with the "national" genre. As a result, in the following decade, interaction between the two genres emerged, in which producers of Cantonese Opera – including performers, scriptwriters and troupe owners – started drawing on artistic devices from Peking Opera. This is an interesting period from the perspective of this study, as the existence of Peking Opera in Hong Kong was maintained not only by travelling performers from the mainland, but also by another traditional Chinese theatrical genre, albeit in a fragmented manner. In this chapter, I will outline this process, identify Peking Opera devices that made their way into Cantonese Opera, and discuss the meaning of this interaction from various perspectives.[93] I submit that the market forces created by audience preference for Peking Opera were among the main reasons for Cantonese Opera performers to draw on Peking Opera. On the other hand, we should not overlook the artistic agency of the producers of Cantonese Opera, for they had their own evaluations of both genres, and made their own artistic choices.

In regard to Cantonese Opera producers' evaluations of Peking Opera, I refer again to the idea that I suggested at the end of chapter two, of a dynamic of exoticism and familiarity that was created among local spectators. This dynamic not only shaped spectators' taste at that time, but also made Cantonese Opera drawing on Peking Opera feasible and practical. In this regard, it is clear that a detailed explanation is needed of what in Peking Opera was different from, and similar to, Cantonese Opera. Having discussed "newness" and innovation in Peking Opera – i.e., Qi's aestheticism – in chapter two, I will start the present chapter with a discussion of similarities shared between the two genres by reviewing the early history of Cantonese Opera. This will show that they had the same theatrical roots, but developed along different paths. Such dynamics of similarity and difference, in terms of singing and performing styles, paved the way for Cantonese Opera drawing on selected devices of Peking Opera in the 1920s and 1930s.

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[93] Here I am aware of the question in regard to the existence of an impact in another way, in which Peking Opera drew on anything from Cantonese Opera. To an extent, this is one of my major arguments in this project to question the unidirectional influence of Peking Opera on its periphery. However, as there is no evidence supporting the existence of this reverse impact so far, I have decided not to pursue this issue any further..

Nevertheless, I do not intend to suggest that this process can be reduced to a simple, unidirectional influence of the "national drama" on a regional genre. The matter is far more complicated, and involves considerations of agency and to what extent the elements in question would become an organic part of Cantonese Opera after they had been adopted. Therefore, I suggest viewing the process as a spectrum accommodating three scenarios: borrowing, adaptation and integration.

The discussion will be presented through the life story of Chen Feinong 陳非儂 (1899-1984), who was a renowned Cantonese Opera performer and a pioneer in this wave of inter-genre interaction. Through his story we will see how he and some of his colleagues got acquainted with Peking Opera, how they were inspired by it, and how they drew on devices from the "national drama" in their own work. Then I will reflect on this meaning of the process, first from my own point of view as a theatre researcher, then in an attempt to empathize with Cantonese Opera performers – or in other words, to gauge and understand their motivation to borrow from Peking Opera. In addition to Chen's story, I will also look at the issue from several other perspectives, so that a more holistic view of the picture is provided.

3.1 A brief history of Cantonese Opera

As Cantonese Opera scholar Li Jian suggests, "The formation of traditional Chinese theatre took place mainly from folk song and folk dance."[94] Long being an important trading hub in China, the Guangdong area was also the center of cultural exchange at that time. Song and dance activities from different regions across the country were found in the area as early as in the Tang dynasty (618-907).[95] These song and dance activities then gradually developed into various traditional Chinese theatrical genres that were performed in the area, including Cantonese Opera.

There are several narratives about the origins of Cantonese Opera. The commonly agreed one traces its origin back to the time of emperor Yongzheng 雍正 (reigned 1722-1735) of the Qing dynasty. At the time a performer of northern drama from Hubei named Zhang Wu 張五 fled from Beijing to Foshan, in Guangdong. He stayed in this then very prosperous city, introduced the *yiyang* 弋陽 singing mode that had originated from Jiangxi province in the fourteenth century and became a popular mode for performers in northern China in the Ming dynasty (1368-1644), and helped establish drama troupes.[96] Apart from this narrative, there are others, including one that dates the origins of Cantonese Opera to around 1820, which is almost a century later than the common narrative.[97]

Cantonese Opera is not the only genre developed and performed in the Guangdong area. Leung Pui-kam in his *Yueju Yanjiu Tonglun* 粵劇研究通論 (An Introduction to Cantonese Opera Studies, 1982) suggests that there were fourteen theatrical genres in the area that can be

[94] Li 2010: 2.
[95] Zhongguo Xiqu Zhi 1993: 4.
[96] Ruan 2008: 7; Li 2010: 24.
[97] Chan 1999: 16.

regarded as local and still survive, while *Zhongguo Xiqu Zhi: Guangdong Juan* 中國戲曲志：廣東卷 (Anthology of Chinese Opera: Guangdong, 1993) claims that there are seventeen local theatrical genres (interestingly, including Peking Opera). On the one hand, many of the surviving genres are similar in that they experienced external influences by singing modes or genres from outside Guangdong. For example, the introduction of the *yiyang* mode influenced not only Cantonese Opera, but also quite a number of other genres in the area.[98] On the other hand, there are two distinctive differences between Cantonese Opera and the other genres in Guangdong nowadays. Firstly, Cantonese Opera is the only genre that uses Cantonese as its performing language. Secondly, it employs *pihuang* 皮黃 as the major singing mode. I will elaborate on both points in the following sections.

3.1.1 The same roots: *pihuang* singing mode as foundation

Pihuang is a hybrid singing mode, merging *bangzi* 梆子[99] and *erhuang* 二黃. According to *Zhongguo Jingju Shi* 中國京劇史 (A History of Peking Opera in China, 1990), both *bangzi* and *erhuang* were introduced and became popular in Beijing at the end of the eighteenth century. While the *qinqiang* 秦腔 performer Wei Changsheng 魏長生 facilitated the popularity of *bangzi*, *erhuang* was introduced by Anhui Opera (*huiju* 徽劇) troupes when they visited Beijing for the first time.[100] Later, around 1828-1832, several Han Drama (*hanxi* 漢戲) troupes, whose major singing mode was the hybrid *pihuang*, also made their first visits to Beijing. Those Anhui troupes that stayed in the city integrated the visiting genre into their performances, and the mixed product gradually developed into what we call Peking Opera today. Along the same lines, *pihuang* also became the foundation of the singing system in Peking Opera

Interestingly, similar traces of *bangzi*, *erhuang* and *pihuang* are also found in the history of Cantonese Opera. Firstly, *erhuang* was also introduced to the Guangdong area by Anhui Opera troupes. The exact date is unknown, but from the considerable number of Anhui Opera troupe names carved on the two steles, "Waijiang Liyuan Huiguan Beiji" 外江梨園會館碑記 (Memorial of the Outer-river Troupes Guild, erected in 1780) and "Liyuan Huiguan Shanghui Beiji" 梨園會館上會碑記 (Members of the Outer-river Troupes Guild, erected in 1791), it appears that Anhui Opera troupes, and *erhuang*, were already part of the theatrical scene in the region in the late eighteenth century.[101] In 1821, *bangzi* was also introduced to Guangdong, and it gradually became the major singing mode of local Cantonese Opera troupes. A quote from the poet Yang Moujian 楊懋建 best summarizes the co-existence of *erhuang* and *bangzi* in Guangdong at the time:

> The theatrical scene in Guangzhou [a city in Guangdong province] is divided into two: outer-river troupes and local troupes … probably outer-river troupes are more similar to the Anhui Opera

[98] Zhongguo Xiqu Zhi 1993: 6-7.

[99] The same singing mode is termed *xipi* 西皮 in Peking Opera.

[100] Art Research Institutes of Beijing and Shanghai 1990: 39-44.

[101] Ouyang 1990: 61-62.

troupes, and local troupes are more similar to the *Xiqin* 西秦 [a.k.a. *bangzi*] troupes."[102]

Secondly, similar to the northward movement of Han Drama to Beijing, the hybrid mode of *pihuang* also went south to Guangdong through regional genres in the Han Drama family, probably around 1851. Before that, although both *erhuang* and *bangzi* existed in the same area, local troupes never mixed them in performances. Either they sang in *bangzi* for the whole repertoire, or they sometimes adopted repertoires from Anhui Opera troupes and sang the entire repertoire in *erhuang*. But when Xiang Drama (*xiangxi* 湘戲) from Hunan province – a member of the Han Drama family, hence also in *pihuang* – came south to Guangdong in around 1851, local troupes began to abandon *bangzi* and to sing in *pihuang* (a.k.a. *banghuang* 梆黃 in Cantonese Opera). Since then, *pihuang* has become the major singing mode of Cantonese Opera. Despite the changes in singing mode, however, the performing language of the mid-land dialect remained unchanged at this point.[103]

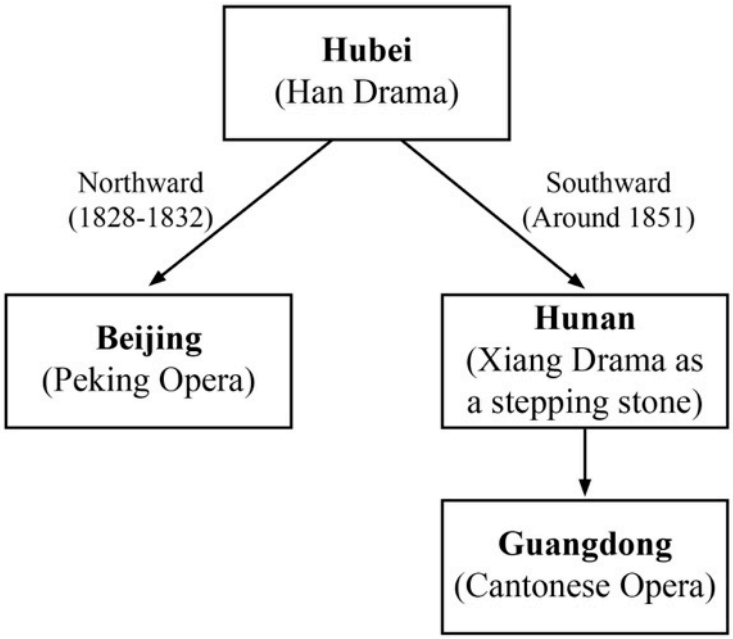

Figure 3.1. The transmission paths of Han Drama (i.e. *pihuang*) to north and south of China.

3.1.2 Different paths: the localization of Cantonese Opera

As noted, Cantonese Opera at the time was in many ways similar to Han and Xiang Drama – for example in the *pihuang* singing mode and the performing language of the mid-land dialect. In addition, the major repertoire in Cantonese Opera was also similar to those of the latter two genres. Mai Xiaoxia in his *Guangong Xiju Shilüe* 廣東戲劇史略 (History of Cantonese Dramas, 1958) lists the eighteen most common plays performed at the time, collectively known as the Eighteen Grand Plays (*Dapaichang Shiba Ben* 大排場十八本). Li Jian argues

[102] Yang 1886: 3.
[103] Ouyang 1990: 60.

that many of these plays are based on their original Han Drama version.[104] This is confirmed by Ouyang Yuqian, who also suggests that "early plays and scripts (of Cantonese Opera) were the same as, or at least very similar to, that of Han Drama, Xiang Drama and Peking Opera."[105]

It is not uncommon for traditional Chinese theatrical genres to interacte with others – in fact this is what I am focusing on in the present chapter. And in the case of Cantonese Opera-Xiang Drama interaction, there were social reasons for Cantonese Opera performers to keep performing like this. In 1854, a local performer Li Wenmao 李文茂, taking his cue from the Taiping Rebellion (1850-1864), started a revolt in Foshan. In response to the uprising, the Qing authority banned all Cantonese Opera performances. The ban was loosened after the failure of the Taiping Rebellion, but was only fully lifted in 1875. In this regard, the "disguised" Cantonese Opera, in the form of Xiang Drama in terms of performing language and style, can be understood as a safety measure of local troupes – a way for them to survive under the eyes of local officials – during that period. However, this also means that local troupes were losing support from local audiences, who identified with Cantonese language and culture.

In order to reverse this disadvantage, Cantonese Opera started to localize soon after the ban was lifted. The most direct way of localization was to use Cantonese as the major performing language. According to Ouyang, Cantonese was first used around the 1870s in some spoken passages of plays. The scale of linguistic localization gradually expanded, to the point where Cantonese was replacing mid-land dialect even in sung passages. Later, in the first decade of the twentieth century, the drama reform movement, and hence the spoken-drama-like Civilized Plays, spread through all of China. In the north, the movement and the new form of Chinese theatre inspired Peking Opera performers like Mei Lanfang. In the south, the Civilized Plays also made an impact on Cantonese Opera from their first introduction in 1908 – mainly in terms of the use of the Cantonese vernacular. However, unlike its counterpart in the north that survived for a while, in the Guangdong area the Civilized Plays were soon incorporated by Cantonese Opera. For example, some troupes that were originally dedicated to Civilized Plays soon started singing *pihuang* in their productions and gradually turned their focus to Cantonese Opera.[106]

As discussed in the author's note at the beginning of this study, the melodic contours in the tone-matrix singing system are highly dependent on the tones of the performing language. In this sense, the localization of music in Cantonese Opera seems to be a logical next step, as the *pihuang* mode was no longer fully compatible due to linguistic change from the mid-land dialect to Cantonese. Therefore, local vocal music genres were employed, such as the narrative singing genres of "southern sound" (*nanyin* 南音) and "dragon boat" (*longzhou* 龍舟), as well as folksongs.[107] Meanwhile the *pihuang* mode itself was also adapted in order to fit into singing in Cantonese. Firstly, in order to cater to the frequent use of particles in

[104] Li 2010: 111.
[105] Ouyang 1990: 68.
[106] ibid. 72-73.
[107] Yu 1999: 264-265.

spoken and sung Cantonese, the "slow-tempo passages" (*manban* 慢板) in *pihuang* were made to be much slower than in other genres using the same singing mode (for example, Peking Opera), allowing performers to add extra text in between full words when singing. Secondly, as the pronunciation of Cantonese tends to be lower in pitch than the mid-land dialect, a vocalization named "flat throat" (*pinghou* 平喉) was created by down-tuning the original tonal key of *pihuang*.[108]

In addition to performing language and music, the role type system of Cantonese Opera was also localized. The original "ten role types system" (*shida hangdang* 十大行當), which was adopted from Han Drama, was abandoned and replaced by the invention of the "six pillars system" (*liuzhu zhi* 六柱制). This change was a response to the changing performing context in the early twentieth century. From rural stages to modern theatres, from being mostly a rural ritual to mostly urban entertainment, the nation-wide social process of urbanization resulted in commercialization and celebritization of traditional Chinese theatre, and Cantonese Opera was no exception. Under this social trend, troupe managers focused on maximizing profit. To achieve this they had to cut the number of members in the troupe, and to maximize the celebrity effect to spectators. In this sense the old "ten role types system" presented a barrier for two reasons. Firstly, this system emphasized the specialization of the ten role types. In other words, there were rigid boundaries between role types, and cross-role performing was discouraged. This means that for any troupe that wanted to fully develop its performing variety, the number of members would have to be considerable in order to fill all role types. Secondly, the system also emphasized the equal importance of each role type or, to some extent, each performer in the troupe. For example, performance would have to be more or less equally distributed among leading performers – in this case ten, and sometimes even more. These two characteristics of the "ten role types system" were certainly unfavorable to the urbanized performing context at the time. The "six pillars system" reduced the necessary role types in a troupe to six, and allowed cross-role performing. This allowed troupes to lower the number of key members, and favored performers who could show off their all-round skill across different role types to the audience.

3.2 Chen Feinong and his early career

Indeed, the localization of Cantonese Opera contributed greatly in shaping the genre we know nowadays. In addition, Cantonese Opera performers had never isolated themselves from other traditional Chinese theatrical genres and Western cultural imports. The development of Cantonese Opera did not end in the early twentieth century. Instead, it went on to draw on Western music, for example the uses of violin and saxophone, and on Peking Opera. In the following section, I will look at the multi-aspect impact of Peking Opera on Cantonese Opera, through the life story of Chen Feinong, a renowned Cantonese Opera performer from the first half of the twentieth century. Transcribed by Yu Muyun and Shen Jicheng, Chen's own account of his life was first published in sections in the local *Dacheng Zazhi* 大成雜誌 (The

[108] Ouyang 1990: 83-84.

Great Achievement Magazine) from 1979 to 1981. It was then re-edited as a book by Ng Wing-chung and Chan Chak-lui in 2007.[109] This is a valuable source not only to reconstruct the history of Cantonese Opera, but also to examine the early encounter between Cantonese Opera and Peking Opera.

3.2.1 Early years (1899-1920/21)

Born in 1899, Chen received his primary and secondary education in Guangzhou, where he started performing spoken drama at school and in an amateur drama society named the Civil Music Society (*Minyue She* 民樂社). This was a period when new ideas and art forms were flushing in, manifesting itself in the multi-faceted localization of Cantonese Opera, as well as the rise of the Civilized Plays, and their quick incorporation by Cantonese Opera. As a theatre lover, Chen was exposed to all of these, and was particularly influenced by the Sky Shadow Troupe (*Youtianying* 優天影). At that time, the troupe performed both in Guangzhou and Hong Kong, and was known as the most famous troupe to perform Civilized Plays.[110]

Graduating from secondary school in 1915, Chen came to Hong Kong working in a company owned by his uncle, while he continued his amateur drama performing in local drama societies. The first troupe he joined was the Arrayed Fantasia (*Linlang Huanjing* 琳瑯幻境), which was also famous for performing Civilized Plays. Later he joined the re-established Sky Shadow Troupe. Upon its re-establishment in 1912, the troupe did not totally abandon the repertoire and performing style of the Civilized Plays. Also, though many plays were adapted to a Cantonese operatic style, they were presented in a modified form, as only the dialogues and arias were develivered and no acting took place. In other words, those were not literally "plays", as they were performed without acting components. A comparable in Western theatre may be public readings of play scripts, though no singing is involved in this case. This indeed gave Chen an advantage to hide his weakness, as he was then an experienced performer of spoken drama with some experience in Cantonese operatic singing in a female role, but had never received formal training in Cantonese Opera acting. He gradually gained a reputation, in the circles of spoken drama and those of Cantonese Opera, by performing this kind of hybrid "readings". Finally in 1920-1921, he was invited by Li Yanqiu 李雁秋 (a.k.a. Jing Yuanheng 靚元亨), a Singapore-based Cantonese Opera performer who owned the Eternal Life Troupe (*Yongshounian* 永壽年), to join his troupe. He accepted the invitation and began his professional career in Cantonese Opera.

3.2.2 In Singapore (1920/21-23)

As noted, Chen had no Cantonese Opera background apart from some singing in the Sky Shadow Troupe. This made his first few months in the Eternal Life Troupe a tough time. He

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[109] When using this data, I am fully aware of the reliability issue. Indeed, it is a common question with the use of one's oral history. In this case, as Chen's own account about his life is mostly in coherence with that from other sources (with only one to two exceptions, in which I will discuss in the following paragraphs), I submit that it is reliable for an academic discussion.

[110] The Sky Shadow Troupe was banned from performing in 1908 by the Qing authorities.

was quickly stripped of his main role after a cold response by the audience to his first performance of *Li Shishi* 李師師. He was told to start learning from the basics, and was assigned to perform only in some minor shows. His chance came after a while, when he was assigned to perform the role of Xue Rengui's wife in *Xue Rengui Returning to the Kiln* (*Rengui Huiyao* 仁貴回窯) in a daytime show.[111] He performed well, regaining his reputation and earning a three-year discipleship with Li Yanqiu. He began an intensive training on the genre, including singing, acting, and martial arts. He also started adapting plays that he had performed in the *Youtianying* troupe to Cantonese Opera. After a year or so of training and performing, he became the leading female role of the Eternal Life Troupe. In 1923, the Happiness of the Pear Garden Troupe (*Liyuanle* 梨園樂) from Hong Kong offered Chen the position of leading female role. At that moment the performing season of the Eternal Life Troupe also came to an end, and Li Yanqiu decided not to continue and disbanded the troupe.[112] Therefore, Chen accepted the offer and continued his career in Hong Kong.

3.2.3 Correcting dates in Chen's life history in the early 1920s

In the previous sections I have suggested that Chen went to Singapore in 1920-1921, and then returned to Hong Kong in 1923. This is a new narrative about this particular part of Chen's life story, which is different from Ng Wing-chung's version in his edition of Chen's oral history. Ng suggests that Chen left for Singapore in 1920 and returned in 1924. I believe this contradicts Chen's own words:

> After the formation of the Republic of China, Huang Luyi 黃魯逸 re-established the Sky Shadow Troupe. Because it happened in the year of *jiazi* 甲子, the troupe was renamed Sky Shadow of *Jiazi* (*Jiazi Youtianying* 甲子優天影). I also joined the troupe.[113]

Jiazi is part of a designation used to number years in the Chinese calendar. There are altogether sixty designations in the system, so each designation will repeat after sixty years. So if we convert *jiazi* to the Western calendar and compare the possibilities with the fact that the re-establishment happened in the early twentieth century, it can be determined that the year Chen was talking about is 1924. This then generates a contradiction with Ng's version, in which it is impossible for Chen to join the re-established Sky Shadow Troupe (as this should have happened before he left Hong Kong) and return to Hong Kong after his experiences in Singapore in the same year.

To make a more convincing alternative proposal to this part of history, I have checked it against the situations of other Cantonese Opera performers who were also involved in those events. For example, I have examined materials about Huang Luyi and the history of the Sky

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111 Cantonese Opera troupes at the time performed several shows per day, including a matinee, an evening show, and sometimes a midnight show.

112 As was customary at the time, Cantonese Opera performers were bonded to the troupe by contracts, which were usually signed at the beginning of each performing season. When a season ended and the troupe owner decided not to continue, the troupe would disband and the whole crew became free agents.

113 Chen 2007: 16-17.

Shadow Troupe; I have also looked into the life histories of two other Cantonese Opera performers, namely Ma Shiceng 馬師曾 (1900-1964) and Xue Juexian 薛覺先 (1904-1956), who worked with Chen in the Eternal Life and the Happiness of Pear Garden respectively. Several clues are also found in the literature review. Firstly, according to the *Zhongguo Xiqu Zhi: Guangdong Juan*, the Sky Shadow Troupe was re-established twice, first in 1912 – which is consistent with the previous quote from Chen, as the Republic was formed at the beginning of this year – and again in 1924.[114] Secondly, Ma Shiceng went back to Hong Kong in 1923, and Chen mentioned that he went back to Hong Kong at the same time with Ma.[115] Thirdly, several sources discussing Xue's career suggest that he joined the Happiness of Pear Garden in the end of 1923.[116] Based on this evidence, I submit that Chen actually left Hong Kong in 1920-1921, and returned probably at the end of 1923. As for the contradiction, I suggest that it is a mistake by Chen recalling the name of troupe he joined. He would have joined the Sky Shadow Troupe during its first re-establishment – in fact this is also consistent with the previous citation, stating that he joined the troupe after the founding of the Republic.

3.3 Inter-genre interaction in the 1920s and 1930s

3.3.1 Defining and framing the interaction

In regard to the phenomenon of Cantonese Opera's adoption of certain elements from Peking Opera that is examined in this chapter, Chen Feinong's return to Hong Kong in 1923 was significant, as he engaged heavily with Peking Opera from that date, and began to use some artistic devices from Peking Opera for his own Cantonese Opera productions. However, we must first be aware that the issue of adoption is much more complicated than a simple process in which Cantonese Opera drew on Peking Opera bit by bit. In fact, interactions between cultural forms are hardly ever "pure," and the boundaries are blurred and permeable. For example in this case, it involves the consideration of agency and questions of how and to what extent the artistic devices in question were adopted. Therefore, to avoid oversimplification, I suggest viewing the adoption in the form of a spectrum. The spectrum visualizes the degree to which the artistic devices in question became organic parts of Cantonese Opera. Three central terms are set up, indicating three reference points along the spectrum, in order to give the readers a clearer idea of how those devices were adopted. On one end of the spectrum we have *borrowing*, in which the devices were kept in their original, unchanged form, and were still regarded as foreign devices (i.e. really belonging to the "foreign" form of Peking Opera) after being put into Cantonese Opera. Along the spectrum we also find various degrees of *adaptation*, in which the devices were modified for the use of Cantonese Opera. And on the other end lies *integration*, in which the devices were contained, through a period of time, as parts of Cantonese Opera at large. To a certain extent, those devices became indistinguishable from their "new host." Needless to say, the said three notions constitute a sliding scale, and

[114] Editorial Board of *ZXZGJ*: 395, 502.
[115] ibid. 525.
[116] ibid. 530.

are not separated by absolute boundaries and cut-off points.

My use of these central terms all denotes external influence. This is especially significant in the historical context in which the two genres share the same theatrical root and are in many senses similar in the early stages, so one may ask: if they share common practices in the early periods, is it really the case that the artistic devices in question were "adopted" by Cantonese Opera in the early twentieth century – in this case, from Peking Opera – and were they not in fact an artistic development of Cantonese Opera itself?

I will approach the question from a conceptual perspective, arguing that what Chen and other Cantonese Opera performers claimed to have taken from Peking Opera are actually the re-formulated devices set out by Qi Rushan in the early Repubican period described in chapter two. In other words, the artistic devices in question were traditional, and while they may have been similar to those in the early form of Cantonese Opera technically, conceptually they are completely new. Also, let's not forget that Cantonese Opera in Chen's time was already highly localized, and had steered away from its previous form that was more like its northern counterparts. This further justifies my treatment of the adoption of elements from Peking Opera to Cantonese Opera as an external influence of one on the other.

3.3.2 A pioneer

Meanwhile, I would say that for his re-employment in 1923 in Hong Kong to work in the Happiness of Pear Garden Troupe, Chen's stay in Singapore was vital to his career. Not only did he grow into a promising performer there, he also started engaging with Peking Opera. The experiences of exploration soon made him one of the pioneers who facilitated the first wave of artistic adoption from the 1920s. For example, as Chen recalled in his autobiography, in Singapore he once watched a Peking Opera performance of *The Heavenly Fairy Scattering Petals* – one of the Ancient Costume plays created by Mei Lanfang and Qi Rushan – by Nü Shisan Dan 女十三旦. He was fascinated by the silk-sleeves dance sequence, and asked her if she could teach him. Nü Shisan Dan accepted his request and, more than the dance sequence, taught him also the moves-set of the two-headed spears fighting in the play *The Pass of Nihong* (*Nihong Guan* 霓虹關). This experience encouraged Chen to continue learning from Peking Opera. After returning to Hong Kong, he wrote a new play, *The Fate of Revenge* (*Chouyuan* 仇緣), which borrowed the original silk-sleeves dance sequence from *The Heavenly Fairy Scattering Petals*. Moreover he spent years integrating the dance sequence into his own arsenal of performing skills, and eventually made it one of his signature routines.[117]

The spears fighting moves also greatly inspired Chen to explore the more stylized and choreographed martial arts moves in Peking Opera. In the field of Cantonese Opera, this martial arts style is called *beipai wuda* 北派武打 (hereafter *beipai*), literally "martial arts fighting of the northern style".[118] His first attempt to put *beipai* in his performance was when

[117] Chen 2007: 6, 23.

[118] It is named so as to differentiate from the conventional martial arts style in Cantonese Opera, which is called the "southern style" (*nanpai* 南派).

he worked together with Ma Shiceng in Singapore. Chen taught Ma the spears fighting moves that he had learnt from Nü Shisan Dan, and they borrowed the full moves-set in the play *A Strange Couple* (*Guguai Gongpo* 古怪公婆). Then during a short stay in Guangzhou before his return to Hong Kong, Chen hired Yan Lanqiu 閻嵐秋, a Peking Opera performer of the martial female role from Beijing, to teach him *beipai*. Subsequently, Chen actively borrowed *beipai* moves for his productions of both re-arrangements of existing repertoire and new plays. Ma Shiceng, Chen's "fight partner," also utilized the moves and indeed the full Peking Opera scene from which the moves originated. When Ma worked in the Fortune Life Troupe (*Renshounian* 人壽年) in 1923, he borrowed the spear-fight scene from *The Pass of Nihong* and put it into his old production of *A Strange Couple*, resulting in a re-arrangement called *The Perfect Martial Match* (*Bingou Jiarong* 兵偶佳戎). The latter later became one of the most famous plays produced by Ma.[119]

3.3.3 Interaction as a chain reaction

A vision of Chen Feinong as facilitating the phenomenon of adoption certainly deserves a spot in the history of Cantonese Opera in Hong Kong. Moreover, the act of direct borrowing of Peking Opera scenes into existing Cantonese Opera repertoire, like Ma's re-arrangement of *The Perfect Martial Match*, also shows a glimpse of how adoption operated as a chain reaction. The first three decades of the twentieth century are seen as the golden age of Cantonese Opera. Before that time, troupes used to perform in teahouses, and at ritual celebrations in rural areas in the Guangdong area and Hong Kong. During the 1920s and 1930s, however, troupes started to move their performing bases to permanent, commercial theatres in urban areas. Chan Sau-yan calls this new performing context of Cantonese Opera "theatre performances" (*xiyuan xi* 戲院戲). According to Chan, insiders from the Cantonese Opera community clearly distinguish between theatre performances and ritual performances. As he and other Cantonese Opera scholars point out, one characteristic of theatre performances is the dramatic increase of speed at which scriptwriters and performers produced new plays and re-arrangements, in order to cater to the fast-changing taste of local spectators.[120] Under such circumstances, what is easier for a performer than to present to spectators the *beipai* moves or dance sequence he/she had learnt by directly borrowing the original Peking Opera scene for an existing Cantonese Opera play? Certainly the two genres may not be completely compatible with each other. However, given the similarity between them it was still not impossible to mix the two in the same play. Besides, the language problem here can be avoided as those martial arts or dance scenes are non-verbal.

This kind of chain reaction, in which the adoption of one device would facilitate that of another since the latter is an essential accompaniment of the former, became a regular phenomenon among Cantonese Opera performers. Xue Juexian, for example, was yet another activist in the adoption wave. He first became acquainted with *beipai* when he worked together with Chen Feinong in the Happiness of Pear Garden, when Chen taught him the

[119] Chen 2007:5.
[120] Chan 1991: 3; Yung 2007.

spear-fight moves. Xue quickly borrowed the moves for his new play *A Hero's Tragic Tale* (*Yingxiong Leishi* 英雄淚史). Later, when he worked in his own Voice of Xue Juexian Troupe (*Juexiansheng* 覺先聲) in 1937, he hired Yuan Xiaotian 袁小田, a Peking Opera performer of the martial male role, and three other performers from Shanghai. They were given two main tasks. Firstly, they taught Xue and his troupe members *beipai* moves. Secondly, they performed the borrowed moves and scenes in Xue's productions.[121]

Apart from borrowing particular moves or scenes, some Cantonese Opera performers would adapt the entire play into Cantonese Opera, mainly in the way of changing the performance language from mid-land dialect to Cantonese. Zhu Zhiping 朱植平, for example, studied with the Peking Opera performer Wang Hongshou 黃鴻壽 (a.k.a. Sanma Zi 三麻子) in Beijing. When Zhu returned to Hong Kong he started adapting the series of plays he had learnt from Wang, all of which feature the character Guan Yu, to his own Cantonese Opera productions.[122] Other documented adaptations include *The Sky-booming Thunder* (*Hongtian Lei* 轟天雷), *Women Generals of the Yang Family* (*Yangmen Nüjiang* 楊門女將), *Blocking the Horse* (*Dang Ma* 擋馬) and *Chang E Flees to the Moon*.[123]

The next link in this chain reaction is music. It particularly concerns the percussion section of the ensemble, and concerns the adoption of both instruments and rhythmic patterns from Peking Opera. The rationale here is to be found in the close connection between martial art scenes and percussion music in traditional Chinese theatre, where percussion is the main and sometimes the sole musical accompaniment for those scenes. In other words, it makes perfect sense to also take the percussion music for use in Cantonese Opera if one wants to produce an effective adoption or adaptation of the martial art scenes. In this regard, I would like to refer again to Xue Juexian, who was also the first Cantonese Opera performer to adopt percussion music from Peking Opera in *A Hero's Tragic Tale* as we learn from Chen Feinong:

> The percussion music of Peking Opera was first introduced to Cantonese Opera from Shanghai by Xue Juexian. The music first appeared in martial plays [*wuxi* 武戲], and the very first play that the music was used was *A Heros's Tragic Tale*. The play had a scene featuring the spears fight moves. This was well appreciated by the spectators. Later it was also used in civil plays [*wenxi* 文戲].[124]

Moreover, the integration of the acting style by Cantonese Opera performers should also be considered another link in this chain reaction. It is because Peking Opera is a highly formulaic genre, in which all actions (steps, body movements, hand gestures, etc.) in every play are highly standardized and specified. Some moves are also unique to Peking Opera. Therefore any Cantonese Opera performer who wanted to perform the adapted plays was also

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121 Chen 2007: 79, 168.
122 Mai 1958: 39.
123 Chen 2007: 31, 161.
124 ibid. 81.

required to learn and integrate those actions into their own tool box of performing skills. The dance sequence and spear-fight moves that Chen Feinong learned from Nü Shisan Dan provide a clear example. Later, Zhu Zhiping also received high acclaim for his portrayal of the character Guan Yu in his adaptations, once he had integrated what he learned from Wang Hongshou into Cantonese Opera.

3.3.4 Canonizing adoption

As noted, some artistic devices became organic parts of Cantonese Opera, like the actions integrated into a performer's own performing "tool box". Moreover, this process of integration also went to a higher level, in which the devices became part of the artistic canon in Cantonese Opera. One good example, again from Xue Juexian, concerns his measures to standardize the stage practices and costumes of Cantonese Opera.

Similar to Peking Opera, stage practices of Cantonese Opera were very flexible in the first few decades of twentieth century. Stage assistants were allowed to enter the front stage while performers were performing, and even personal servants of performers were allowed to do so to serve their masters, who were in the middle of their performance, during the show. Rules on costumes were also loose, so that in many cases performers wore costumes that were inappropriate to their performance – for example, wearing high-heeled shoes in a play telling an ancient story – just to compete with other performers in terms of looks.[125] Such "flexibility" later attracted criticism from their counterparts in Peking Opera, whose stage had also undergone "purification" in the 1910s.[126] One criticism came from national icon Mei Lanfang, who was also active in purifying Peking Opera's stage. In 1928, after seeing a Cantonese Opera performance in Guangzhou, he said, "the female role performers of your province [Guangdong] cannot even dress appropriately. Let's not talk about their performing skills."[127] Being one of the Cantonese Opera representatives who were present on that occasion, Xue Juexian responded to the criticism constructively. He tried to copy the success of Peking Opera in "stage purification," for instance forbidding any non-performing personnel from entering the front stage during performance, and standardizing performers' costumes and make-up in the style of Peking Opera.[128] All these measures eventually were widely accepted, and became common practices of the reformed Cantonese Opera.

This kind of canonization also occurred in respect to singing modes. When talking about the singing modes of Cantonese Opera, Chen Feinong tells a story about Kuang Xinhua 鄺新華, a Cantonese Opera performer who traveled frequently to Beijing. During one of his trips to Beijing, Kuang learned the tune *In Love With An Attractive Man* (*liantanlang* 戀檀郎). He

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[125] Ouyang 1990: 81.

[126] At the time of Qu Rushan's reformulation of Peking Opera, he also reflected on some traditional stage practices of the art form, and came to a conclusion that some practices were harmful to the "nationalization" of Peking Opera. In response to the issue, he together with Mei Lanfang started a movement to "purify the stage" (*jinghua wutai* 淨化舞台).

[127] Cui & Guo 2009: 21.

[128] Lai 1993: 43.

then borrowed the tune into the play *Su Wu Herding Goats* (*Su Wu Muyang* 蘇武牧羊).[129] Later on, the way in which Kuang sang the tune in *Su Wu Herding Goats* was singled out, integrated, and developed as one of the common singing modes in Cantonese Opera, called the *liantan* mode.[130]

3.3.5 Impact on Cantonese Opera

The process of adoption from Peking Opera to Cantonese Opera in the 1920s and 1930s was massive, and I argue that it brought along various kinds of impact on the development of Cantonese Opera in Hong Kong. First of all, the introduction of *beipai* restored the balance of repertoire between martial plays and civil plays. Contrasting with *beipai*, the *nanpai* (see footnote 118) martial plays in Cantonese Opera feature real, more physical martial arts skills. From an insider's perspective, constant engagement with *nanpai* plays would cause serious damage to performers' bodies and voices. Therefore performers at that time mostly focused on civil plays and ignored martial plays, resulting in an imbalanced repertoire.[131] In this sense, the arrival of the more choreographed *beipai* provided a solution to Cantonese Opera performers, allowing for a balance not only between their voices and action skills, but also between spectators' tastes for both kinds of plays. This injected innovation into the local genre, which helped to maintain its attractiveness as an urban entertainment. Indeed, this proved a great success as *beipai* was widely welcomed by spectators, and gradually replaced *nanpai* as the common performing style in martial plays. I will come back to this in chapter seven.

My analysis of how the adoption impacted Cantonese Opera at that time has so far focused on technical aspects. Taking this as our point of departure, we will see how Cantonese Opera performers brought the discussion to both a social and an artistic level. For the social side, I will return to Chen Feinong. He calls the decade from 1926-1936 a "period of change" for Cantonese Opera. As discussed, the genre was experiencing changes in various aspects; in doing so, it was responding to two emerging challenges. First was the external challenge from the rising movie industry. This novel, modern form of entertainment was a new attraction to local society, and quickly took the position of Cantonese Opera as the dominant form of entertainment. Having found themselves losing the battle, Cantonese Opera performers had to inject innovation into the genre in order to win back public's attention.

Secondly, this innovation-oriented strategy generated an internal competition among troupes and performers. One early example was the competition between all-men and all-women troupes from 1919. In this year, the first all-women troupe in Hong Kong was established, and the trend of setting up all-women troupes developed rapidly in the local society.[132] These troupes had to face the same challenge from the movie industry as the all-men troupes did. And in this fight of innovation, they turned to modern drama forms. They

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[129] Chen did not point out clearly whether Kuang adopted the tune without any changes. Though it is found that the play was sung completely in mid-land dialect, I submit that it was a direct borrowing.

[130] Chen 2007: 116.

[131] ibid. 79.

[132] Before that, all women-troupes were popular only in Guangdong.

borrowed various stage techniques, including mercury lighting, illustrated backdrops, and the front stage curtain. They also began to use modern technology, for example in decorating their backdrops and props with electric light bulbs. To some extent, this threatened the long-standing domination of the market by all-male troupes. Facing these challenges from both outside and inside, I argue that the adoption, which was facilitated by merely male performers, advanced the male performers' victory in this war of innovation. Chen also makes a similar point when naming, in his autobiography, a few adaptations of plays, including the series of "Guan Yu plays" and *Chang E Flees to the Moon*, as an immediate response to the challenge of all-women troupes.[133]

The adoption process was also motivated by artistic motives, as some Cantonese Opera performers believed that artistic devices of Peking Opera would be a great enrichment for the development of the local genre. Xue Juexian, for example, had been an advocate of this idea since his first encounter with Peking Opera. In a short article written before a tour to Singapore in 1936, entitled *Nanyou Zhiqu* 南遊旨趣 (My View [on Cantonese Opera] Before Travelling South), he explicitly related his participation in this process as a "revolution" of Cantonese Opera. Even his Peking Opera teacher in the late 1940s, Yu Zhenfei 俞振飛, was convinced that Xue's passion to learn from Peking Opera was motivated by his determination to "enrich Cantonese Opera and, hence, raise its artistic status in society."[134]

One may ask, taking a step back, why Cantonese Opera needed to be improved or enriched in the first place. Apart from the self-reflection of Cantonese Opera's shortcomings by its practitioners, I submit that southbound Chinese nationalism also had a role to play in regard to this perceived inferiority of the genre. The term "southbound Chinese nationalism" refers to the ideology of Chinese cultural nationalism that was brought along with immigrating mainland intellectuals during the migration wave at the end of the 1930s. These southbound intellectuals, mostly influenced by May Fourth ideologies, soon dominated Hong Kong's cultural scene, especially in the field of literature. And they were rather negative toward the local cultural environment. As Law Wing-sang puts it:

> In the eyes of the southbound intellectuals, the existence of an anachronistic traditional Chinese culture under the protection of the British authority, together with a local popular culture peripheral to the forward-marching Chinese nationalist culture, made Hong Kong a culturally backward and abhorrent place.[135]

To these intellectuals, the only criterion to determine cultural excellence was the degree to which it presented severance from the past, and Hong Kong was disqualified by them as conservative when compared to the nationalist culture on the mainland. The city was a "cultural desert" in their eyes.[136]

Such criticism of local culture by southbound intellectuals was also seen in the field of

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[133] ibid. 158.
[134] Yu 1985: 242-243.
[135] Law 2009: 113.
[136] ibid. 113-115.

traditional theatre. In 1927, Ouyang Yuqian 歐陽予倩 was assigned to lead the Drama Reform Movement in Guangdong. Once he made himself familiar with the current state of the field of Cantonese Opera, he commented:

> Not only the singing modes in Cantonese Opera has been changed, but also the practices. The rules of traditional plays are decimated. Actions became more realistic, while being extremely clumsy and chaotic. Choices of costumes are completely up to the performer, who wears what he can grab besides him, which is confusing. The old has been destroyed, but the new has not been built yet. Practitioners are hesitating, and the genre is on the wrong path.[137]

As one may already expect how the story goes, he offered Peking Opera as a means to "rescue the lost." He employed several measures to impose Peking Opera's influence on Cantonese Opera. For example, during his leadership in the affiliated training school of the Guangdong Research Institute of Drama between September 1929 and November 1931, he introduced the learning of Peking Opera[138] to the curriculum, in addition to Cantonese Opera and modern spoken drama.[139] He also praised those who attempted to draw on Peking Opera:

> Wanhua 畹華 [courtesy name of Mei Lanfang] indeed made an impact [on local society] with this tour to Guangdong. Soon enough some already wanted to borrow his plays, such as *The Heavenly Fairy Scattering Flowers* and *Chang E Escapes to the Moon*, and made them the yardstick to improve Cantonese Opera. They even thought about sending Cantonese performers to training schools in Beijing. This great idea can only be come up with by those who are from the birthplace of revolution.[140] Now I know that what the people of revolution want is the very art that is supported by the court![141]

3.4 Conclusion

Without the close artistic connection between the two genres, the artistic adoption from Peking Opera to Cantonese Opera in the early twentieth century might not have happened. Along different developmental paths, they ended up in two different communities, in the north and the south, respectively. However, the localization of Cantonese Opera and the wider circulation of a Peking Opera that aspired to the status of "national drama" outside China – in Hong Kong among other places – in the 1920s provided the soil for their encounter in that city.

> Over a long period of time, the traditions of Cantonese Opera and Cantonese operatic singing

[137] Ouyang 1990: 284.

[138] The author uses the term *pihuang*, which is also a major singing mode in Cantonese Opera, in the source material. However, since the author lists it in line with Cantonese Opera and Kunqu Opera, I believe that she/he uses it as an interchangeable of Peking Opera, which is not an unusual practice among insiders especially from northern China.

[139] Anonymous 1990: 423.

[140] At that time Guangdong province was seen by mainland Chinese as the birthplace of a series of revolutions that eventually overthrow the Qing court.

[141] Ouyang 1990a: 283.

> formed a set of styles, concepts, performing practices and behaviors. The aim was to respond to issues encountered across performing venues and environments.[142]

This statement by Chan Sau-yan, which underlays the close relationship between the urbanization of traditional Chinese theatre and the changing social context of a place, not only summarizes the purpose of localization in Cantonese Opera in Hong Kong, but also holds true for the artistic adoption at large. When the performing context of Cantonese Opera shifted from ritual celebrations to commercial shows in the 1920s and 1930s, the identity of spectators also changed. Before that they were only part of the ritual, but then they became customers who paid and expected to be well entertained. Such demands by the spectators also created pressures on the troupes, which needed to constantly produce new and special things in order to keep spectators around and to survive in the entertainment market. Then the next question: "where can we look?" To many prominent figures – like Chen Feinong, Ma Shiceng and Xue Juexian – Peking Opera was a perfect source. The artistic devices that they borrowed, adapted, integrated, and indeed canonized, including *beipai* moves, repertoire, music and costumes, are good examples of their responses to the challenge of Cantonese Opera's survival in the local society in the first few decades of the twentieth century. At the same time, the adoption was also a response to the constructed inferiority of the local genre, which was a combined effort by Cantonese Opera performers themselves and southbound intellectuals. Especially to the latter, the reformulated Peking Opera was indeed a panacea to the – in their eyes – "backward", "filthy tasting" Cantonese Opera.

3.5 Chen Feinong in later years

Despite his contribution to the inter-genre interaction in the 1920s, Chen Feinong has never been the most discussed Cantonese Opera figure, neither in academic nor in popular writings, especially when compared to Xue Juexian and Ma Siceng. One reason may be Chen's absence from the Cantonese Opera scene in Hong Kong during the 1930s, when the genre enjoyed its greatest glory in the city.

As noted above, Chen returned from Singapore to Hong Kong in 1923, and joined the Happiness of Pear Garden Troupe. In the next few years, he worked for two other troupes, The Great Canopy Heaven (*Daluotian* 大羅天) and Happiness in Balanced Heaven (*Juntianle* 鈞天樂).[143] He stayed in Hong Kong until 1932, when he started performing in Southeast Asia again. He spent the 1930s in Vietnam, Thailand, Singapore, Malaysia and Burma. He returned to Hong Kong but left again soon because of the Japanese occupation. He traveled around Guangdong province and performed occasionally for a living. His wandering life in the province ended in the mid 1940s, when he decided to retire from the stage and lived in the countryside somewhere in Guangdong. Years after, however, warfare forced him to move again – this time the civil war between the Nationalists and the Communists. He went

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[142] Chan 1999: 63.

[143] The Happiness in the Balanced Heaven Troupe was renamed New Spring and Autumn (*Xinchunqiu* 新春秋) in the second year of the troupe's establishment.

back to Hong Kong around the first half of 1949, took up his profession again, and established a Cantonese Opera training school. He lived in Hong Kong until his death in 1984.

Warfare on the Chinese mainland and Hong Kong in the first half of the twentieth century (the two Chinese civil wars from 1927 to 1936 and from 1946 to 1949 respectively, and in between the Second Sino-Japanese war, as part of the Second World War) had an enormous impact on demography. People left warzones along with their skills and cultures and moved to new places. While they might adapt themselves to new local cultures, at the same time, they might insist to retain part of their own culture. In the case of Peking Opera in Hong Kong, this was the scenario during the mid twentieth century, in which many mainland Chinese – including Peking Opera performers and spectators – fled to Hong Kong due to warfare. They tried to continue in the city what they did in the past: to perform and to watch Peking Opera. This resulted, for the first time, in Peking Opera truly taking root in Hong Kong's cultural spectrum. In the next chapter, we shall see how this was facilitated and how it impacted the local society.