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

Joshua, Chan; Joshua Chan

Citation

Joshua, C. (2017, September 12). *Periphery matters : a cultural biography of Peking Opera in Hong Kong*. Retrieved from https://hdl.handle.net/1887/54688

Version:	Not Applicable (or Unknown)
License:	Licence agreement concerning inclusion of doctoral thesis in the Institutional Repository of the University of Leiden
Downloaded from:	https://hdl.handle.net/1887/54688

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Cover Page

Universiteit Leiden

The handle http://hdl.handle.net/1887/54688 holds various files of this Leiden University dissertation

Author: Chan Pui Lun
Title: Periphery matters : a cultural biography of Peking Opera in Hong Kong
Date: 2017-09-12

Chapter Eight / Conclusion

When he first proposed the idea of Cultural Biography in his 1986 article, Kopytoff gave a house-related example from one of his focus groups, the Suku of Zaire. He observed that there is a typical biography of a Suku hut that shows its expected functional changes in its "life expectancy".[379] Throughout previous chapters I have shown that the biography of Peking Opera in Hong Kong is characterized by the reacquisitions of cultural, social and political meanings across time, especially when it moved along various cultural forms. In Kopytoffian terms, Peking Opera repeatedly experienced recommoditization – and hence functional changes – when it travelled along different "spheres of exchange" during its life. What, then, does this biography tell us about Peking Opera itself, and its relation to various social agents in Hong Kong? Moreover, what message does this biography convey when we compare it with its "expected" biography on the Chinese mainland?

8.1 A house of curiosities

Everything started with the nationalization of Peking Opera, as used in reference to the process that transferred Peking Opera's status from that of a regional theatrical genre to that of a representative icon of the modern nation of China, which happened on the Chinese mainland in the first few decades of the twentieth century. The combined effort of Qi Rushan and Mei Lanfang among others to select Peking Opera from hundreds of traditional Chinese theatrical genres, and to lift it up to a national level comparable to that of Western theatre, as the Chinese "national drama", fundamentally changed the fate of the genre. At this level, it was not mere entertainment anymore, but a refined high art that with a sense of entitlement to worldwide recognition. This moment also set the core background for many of my discussions in this project, especially with respect to identity and politics. This nationalization process is so significant that it has created a contextual framework: scholars have no way to neglect the impact made by the genre's national status when they discuss Peking Opera in modern times.

As for my study, one early and major impact made by the nationalization of Peking Opera is that it brought the genre to Hong Kong, first through Mei Lanfang's tour in 1922. This moment marks the beginning of my cultural biography of Peking Opera in Hong Kong. This was not just another ordinary tour by a star performer, but rather a stop on a grand diplomatic tour of the reformed Peking Opera throughout the world, through Mei's presentation. This can be seen from the choice of repertoire to the strategy of publicity; from Mei's feminine impersonation on stage to his diplomatic interactions with the British colonial officials off stage. In the meantime, the success of this tour was facilitated by the simultaneous dual sense of "familiar yet exotic" that was shared among local spectators. On the one hand, Peking Opera's artistic similarities with the local genre of Cantonese Opera

[379] Kopytoff 1986: 67.

motivated local spectators to go for something that was (more or less) comprehensible. On the other hand, the northern origin of Peking Opera intrigued them to reach for something new. The sense of "familiar yet exotic" was at work in the creation of a unique spectacle of the incoming genre for the local community.

Meanwhile, it also set the stage for the inter-genre interaction between Cantonese Opera and Peking Opera in the first few decades of the twentieth century. The urbanization of Cantonese Opera had created a consumer-centred market of the genre. In no time, practitioners were thrust into the arena of market competition. In order to survive, they continuously needed something new to dazzle spectators but, at the same time, whatever they did needed to be incorporated into the genre organically without fundamentally distorting its form – after all, people were paying to see a Cantonese Opera performance and not something else. This was where the "familiar yet exotic" effect of Peking Opera came in and why Cantonese Opera performers were inspired to draw on it. Several articulations of the artistic adoption were observed: some were "copy and paste" types of borrowing that offered spectators one-off amusement, such as particular martial arts moves, and the scenes from which they originated. Some were adapted into Cantonese Opera and became a stylistic option of the genre, such as the *beipai* martial arts style and the percussion-set of *jingluogu*. As noted, these examples even replaced the traditional options in Cantonese Opera and became the conventional choice of practitioners. There were also a few adoptions drawn from Peking Opera that had become organically integrated into Cantonese Opera. Such adoptions were so seamless that their northern origins have been largely forgotten. The singing mode of *liantan* is a good example of this kind of incorporation.

8.2 A refugee shelter

The life of Peking Opera in Hong Kong became challenging soon after its triumphant start. The "exotic" power of Peking Opera faded across time, as the local community gradually got used to the genre due to substantial visits by mainland performers and its appropriated representation in Cantonese Opera. After all, that it was not performed in Cantonese was a huge disadvantage in its attempt to win favour from an audience in the local entertainment market. The "hero to zero" story of Ma Lianliang's stay in Hong Kong in the late 1940s illustrates convincingly the cold reception given to Peking Opera by local society.

However, despite the lack of attention from locals, Peking Opera managed to stay in the local cultural scene, supported by the growth of a community of mainland immigrants. This community provided both supply and demand, which formed something of a stable habitat for the genre. The formation of this community took place from the 1930s to the 1950s with a large-scale emigration from the war-torn Chinese mainland. Given the cultural background of the majority of these immigrants, for whom Peking Opera was part of their life, the community itself created a sizeable audience base for the genre. Although their cultural background might undermine the exotic power of Peking Opera, at the same time the genre served them well as a site of nostalgia. Attending Peking Opera performances gave them an opportunity to satisfy their longing for the familiar – the entertainment they grew up with, as well as the accompaniment of fellow clansmen.

In addition to an audience base, within this community of mainland immigrants there were also practitioners of Peking Opera, who had to earn their living by continuing their profession in their new home. Their pragmatic career decisions led to the establishment of four local Peking Opera training schools in the mid-twentieth century. This marked the period between the late 1950s and the early 1970s as the heyday of Peking Opera in Hong Kong. Offering free boarding and career training, these schools successfully recruited young talents from local families. These training schools were also able to sustain themselves by capturing substantial opportunities for conventional performances and, in the case of the China Drama Academy, the chance to spin off acrobatic shows. Moreover, these schools had a social impact. Their operational basis offered local families a way to survive in the challenging economy of mid-twentieth century Hong Kong. It was only in the late 1960s that Peking Opera began to lose its battle for popularity against other modern entertainment forms such as public television broadcast and movies. Also, improved living standards gradually downplayed the attractiveness of the financial and career incentives created by these schools. These pressures forced Peking Opera deep into the background of the local cultural scene.

Nevertheless, the dwindling of Peking Opera opened up another avenue for graduates from these local training schools, when they made an unexpected and substantial impact on the industry of local martial arts movies. Working as stuntmen, martial arts choreographers, actors and directors, they brought extremely competitive acrobatic skills to their new field, even though they had originally been equipped with these skills for an entirely different profession. More significantly, after the death of Bruce Lee, they filled a void in the industry with new aesthetic energy. As such, their choreographed actions, distinctive sense of rhythm, harmonious unison of action and comedy, and appealing filming technique of stunt sequences had a major impact on the industry.

Meanwhile, one could also find aesthetic engagement between Peking Opera and martial arts movies exemplified in the *wuxia* movie productions by King Hu and Zhang Che in the 1960s. Especially in the case of Hu, the insight here is that the engagement was not a mere borrowing from one art form to another. Instead, Hu's vision was far more radical: he wanted to test the limits of Peking Opera, regarding its presentational capacity, by reproducing it in cinematic settings and with cinematic language.

At this point I want to stress a main argument of my project, which concerns the nature of Peking Opera in Hong Kong. Its existence has not always and invariably been understood as a stand-alone art form; rather, it has been intertwined with other performing arts. As shown in my summary above, Peking Opera has had an appreciable influence on Cantonese Opera and local martial art movies. Many, however, would have initially overlooked this. Jackie Chan's success as a movie actor, for instance, has overshadowed his previous Peking Opera background, which in fact clearly was a major contribution to his later fame in the movie industry. The same is true for King Hu, as his radical idea on Peking Opera has been obstructed from view by his general success as a *wuxia* movie director.

8.3 A laboratory of performing arts

While the first half of my biography of Peking Opera in Hong Kong was centred on the duad of "familiar and exotic," its development in post-1997 Hong Kong was charged with that of "national and local." I develop this argument from an emerging discourse on how Chinese-speaking communities in different social settings have sought, interpreted or invented Chinese-ness through their practice of traditional Chinese theatre. Examples include Nancy Guy's study of the fate of Peking Opera on Taiwan (2005) and Lee Tong Soon's article on Cantonese Opera in Liverpool, U.K. (2009). In my study, both the local authorities and Peking Opera performers have their own visions of Chinese-ness, and their own ways of identity-building, which affect their stance toward, and their practice of, Peking Opera in Hong Kong.

The British Colonial government, for example, had an obvious identity as a colonizer. The change of governing philosophy by the British imperial regime at the turn of the twentieth century, which was to facilitate collaborative governance with the colonized population, led to the local government's adoption of a more tolerant attitude toward the Chinese community in Hong Kong. Practically, the government maintained a minimal interference policy toward traditional Chinese culture. This stance passively provided a space for Peking Opera to survive. The urge for more means of public access to cultural activities in the 1960s, and then the preparation of sovereignty handover since the mid-1980s, led to more input from financial and infrastructural resources. Again, traditional Chinese theatre benefitted from these, and a revival of Peking Opera in Hong Kong occurred through the establishments of several troupes.

The HKSAR government after 1997 would have led one to expect to have a clear identity as part of the Chinese national sphere. Interestingly, in practice, the government has tried to consider both sides of the duad, and has created a "national yet local" identity for itself. On the one hand, it subscribes to the national discourse on Peking Opera that was developed on the Chinese mainland in the first decades of the twentieth century, and perceives the genre as the "national drama," a cultural symbol of a reemerging, tradition-based Chinese nation. This political stance directly informs its booming financial and institutional support for Peking Opera. On the other hand, it attempts to claim localness by differentiating Hong Kong from the Chinese mainland and, hence, carefully positioning the city in the pan-China atlas of traditional Chinese theatre.

As for the three representative Peking Opera performers in contemporary Hong Kong, while they all share the same nationalist vision of the genre (with "nationalist" used in the sense developed for this study), they have diversified interpretations of their own identities, which in turn have led them to undertake different artistic endeavours. Liang Hanyong may be viewed as a pure national player. He takes the nationalist vision fully and in its purest form – something is worth doing because it represents the nation. This motivates him to utilize the increasing official resources, which are distributed by various cultural administrative institutions through direct funding and audience-building programmes, to cultivate the small Peking Opera habitat in Hong Kong. He manages to survive by utilizing various cost-reducing measures such as the one-man troupe setting, as well as his focus of small scale,

straightforward community performances.

Sharing a nationalist vision of Peking Opera, and benefitting from official support in a similar way to Liang, Tang Yuen-ha has taken another path by expressing a strong local identity. Her artistic taste, which was largely nourished by her cosmopolitan background, leads her to deviate from the mainland presentational trend of Peking Opera. With a vision to represent the genre in a form that best suits locals' taste and knowledge, she has developed the practice of "guided demonstration". In other words, she creates something that is produced both *by* the locals and *for* the locals. This innovation not only contributes to establishing Tang's status as the leading figure of Peking Opera in Hong Kong, but also makes a reverse impact on the "home" of the genre, causing her mainland counterparts to rethink how Peking Opera should be carried on and popularized in the twenty-first century.

Meanwhile, Yeung Ming articulates yet another interpretation of a "national yet local" identity. Among the three contemporary performers I have studied, he shows the most vigorous national sentiment regarding the genre – indeed he admitted to a certain amount of disparagement toward other regional genres of traditional Chinese theatre. Despite this, he chose to represent the "national drama" through the local genre of Cantonese Opera. He "repackages" Cantonese Opera plays with references to Peking Opera, and draws on artistic devices from the latter extensively. On the one hand, such repackaged plays serve as a good example to prove that interaction between these two genres is still strong in present-day Hong Kong. On the other hand, these repackaged plays also raise interesting questions. How should we identify them? Are they Cantonese Opera plays in a strong Peking Opera style, or Peking Opera plays that are performed in Cantonese and by Cantonese Opera performers? If we also consider the "national-ness" and "localness" that these two genres represented, this question of identification also leads to a fascinating question on Yeung's role in this saga. Does he nationalize a local genre, or localize a national genre? I would suggest, at this point, that what he does has created a double image, an ambiguity.

In addition to Yeung Ming, the School of Chinese Opera at HKAPA also carries the inter-genre interaction forward in present-day Hong Kong. The addition of Peking Opera performers into the School's faculty and their involvement in teaching and directing ensure that Peking Opera has a voice in the institutionalized training of Cantonese Opera performers. I further suggest that the "Peking Opera effect" is further legitimized and canonized because of the School's leading status in Cantonese Opera training in recent decades. Here the cases of Yeung and the School form a contrast regarding the effect of their engagements in this inter-genre interaction. While Yeung has created a fascinating ambiguity, the School has given a clear signal regarding its standpoint: the future of Cantonese Opera should lie in a more vigorous interaction with other traditional Chinese theatrical genres, and possibly other theatrical and performing art forms.

8.4 Peking Opera in Taiwan and Singapore: a comparison

Zooming out from Hong Kong, transmissions of Peking Opera from the Chinese mainland to other areas in Asia also entail noteworthy stories. Here, drawing on previous research by others, I will briefly consider the cases of Taiwan and in Singapore. The respective

similarities that they share with Hong Kong – an already mature local theatrical tradition in Taiwan (*gezaixi* 歌仔戲), and a British colonial background in Singapore – offer good starting points for comparison. In this light, a discussion of the developments of Peking Opera in these two places will enrich our understanding of how the genre situates itself in different social, cultural and political settings, and at the same time provide comparative insight into any unique features of the case of Hong Kong.

8.4.1 Peking Opera in Taiwan

After the first verifiable Peking Opera performance on the island in 1891, which was performed by a troupe from Shanghai in a private event, the genre gained popularity during the Japanese colonization period between 1895 and 1945.[380] According to Wang Anqi, this vibrant Peking Opera environment was mainly facilitated by frequent visits of troupes from Shanghai and other coastal cities in the southeast of the mainland.[381] Meanwhile, a sizable audience base of the genre that could sustain such an environment was maintained by the desire of the colonized to tie in with Chinese culture. As Nancy Guy writes: "In the face of foreign domination, the Taiwanese, particularly the literati, sought to strengthen cultural ties with China, which in turn affirmed their identity as Chinese."[382] This coheres with a similar desire to connect to the Chinese mainland identity found among mainland immigrants in mid-twentieth century Hong Kong, when they turned to Peking Opera as a site of nostalgia. Also similar was the minimal control over local cultural practices by the colonizers. For the first four decades of the Japanese colonial period, little governmental intervention in the arena of traditional theatres was found.[383] According to Zeng Yongyi, the Japanese government was more interested in studying these practices so as to better understand their colonized subjects.[384] Thus, both Peking Opera and indigenous Taiwanese theatrical genres were given space to develop on the island. It was only after the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War in 1937 that everything associated with China, including traditional theatre, was restricted until the end of colonization in 1945.

Another similarity between Peking Opera in Hong Kong and Taiwan was the struggle for survival in the private sector during the 1940s and 1950s. While the situation in Hong Kong was demonstrated by Ma Lianliang's, Zhang Junqiu's and Yu Zhenfei's failure to sustain their enterprise, it was illustrated on Taiwan by Gu Zhengqiu 顧正秋, a renowned female role performer who was trained in Shanghai and was a private student of Mei Lanfang. She and her troupe were invited to Taiwan by the Eternal Happiness Theatre (*Yongle Xiyuan* 永樂戲院) for an engagement of a month at the end of 1948, and she extended her stay after an initial success. However, this extension also made the tour conclude at the peak of political unrest on the mainland, which in turn prevented the whole troupe from traveling back. So they decided to stay and continue their regular commercial performances at the Eternal Happiness

---

[380] Guy 2005: 15; Wang 2002: 25.
[381] Wang 2002: 26.
[382] Guy 2005: 15.
[383] ibid. 21.
[384] Zeng 1988: 63.

Theatre. More fortunate than Ma's ill-fated career in Hong Kong, Gu enjoyed five years of successful business in Taiwan before financial problems led to the disbandment of the troupe in 1953.[385] Nevertheless, no other Peking Opera troupe at the time shared Gu's success, and none – even those with strong casts of performers – survived for more than a few months.[386] The reasons for the unreceptive environment toward Peking Opera were once again familiar: a struggling post-war economy, the emergence of other, modern forms of entertainment, and the locals' active alienation from mainland-imported culture. Particularly in Taiwan, the alienation was greatly attributed to tension and, later on, violent conflicts between "in-province" (*bensheng* 本省) Taiwanese and mainland Chinese immigrants or "out-provincers" (*waishengren* 外省人) during that period. In this sense, Peking Opera as a mainland import was inevitably associated with the mainlanders, and became the subject of indigenous alienation.[387]

In spite of the similarly struggling private market of both places in the mid-twentieth century, Peking Opera was actually experienced a rise in Taiwan in the 1950s and reached its peak in the 1960s and 1970s, while its activity was still limited in Hong Kong at the time. This can be attributed to support by the Nationalist government soon after they moved their base from the Chinese mainland to Taiwan in 1949. From the early 1950s, troupes of various scales were established under the administration of the Ministry of Defense.[388] Later on in the 1960s, the Ministry also set up training schools affiliated with these troupes. This state support through military-owned troupes and training schools also makes the history of Peking Opera in Taiwan very distinctive in studies of the genre at large.

According to Wang Anqi, there was a practical reason for the Nationalist armed forces in Taiwan to set up and support their own troupes. As Peking Opera remained a major public entertainment on the mainland in the first half of the twentieth century, there already existed a practice in the Nationalist regime to arrange Peking Opera performances for the armed forces as entertainment before their 1949 relocation to Taiwan. Understandably this practice continued after the relocation, and oral records of performers testify to the vibrant scene of such performances at the time. For example, Zhou Zhengrong 周正榮 recalled that he had participated in 339 performances in 1951; Li Huanchun 李環春 also recalled an experience of giving three performances at three military zones on the island in a single day.[389] Given the dwindling private market, it was logical for the Nationalist government to maintain the "supply" with its own resources.

---

[385] Wang 2002: 32-33.

[386] ibid. 43-44.

[387] Guy 2005.

[388] There were as many as twenty troupes existing at some point of that period. Numerous reorganizations took place, and the final one in 1969 consolidated the four major state-owned troupes: The Great Condor Troupe (*Dapeng Jutuan* 大鵬劇團) of the air forces, the Light of the Land Troupe (*Luguang Jutuan* 陸光劇團) of the army, the Light of the Sea Troupe (*Haiguang Jutuan* 海光劇團) of the navy, and the Light of Camel Troupe (*Mingtuo Jutuan* 明駝劇團) of the Combined Service Forces.

[389] Wang 2002: 45-46.

As a matter of fact, the operations of these state-owned troupes did not go well during the first few years, mainly due to the government's poor post-war financial situation. They gradually improved with the recovery of the state's economy and the gradual perfection of the organization of the troupes. Moreover, the difficult early years also compelled these troupes to engage in commercial performances from 1954 onward, with officials for entertainment affairs in the armed forces responsible for arranging such events. In 1965, the Ministry of Defense monopolized the organization of commercial performances of all military-owned troupes, staging them at the China Armed Forces Literature and Art Activities Center (*Guojun Wenyi Zhongxin* 國軍文藝中心), formerly the Kuo-kuang Movie Theatre (*Guoguang Xiyuan* 國光戲院).[390]

In addition to the practical needs, there were also political factors that contributed to the government support of Peking Opera on Taiwan, in which the genre "was put to work in support of hegemony," in Guy's words.[391] As noted in chapter four, a competition for legitimacy was underway between the PRC government on the mainland and the Nationalists on Taiwan. As a strategy the Nationalists spread an ideology that valued traditional Chinese culture over local Taiwanese culture. Hence the "Chinese-ness" Peking Opera symbolized was to them a powerful tool to achieve their political goal. On top of that, Peking Opera was intentionally kept in its traditional form, so as to counterbalance the mainland-Chinese reforms of the genre. As such, the Nationalists were able to imagine and present themselves as safeguarding traditional Chinese culture. This traditionalist cultural strategy was particularly effective when traditional plays were denounced and banned on the mainland during the Cultural Revolution, from the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s. Consequently, Peking Opera's tradition was kept alive in both Taiwan and Hong Kong, while it was almost wiped out on the mainland during a decade of denunciation and forced silence. Government support of Peking Opera in Taiwan was further increased in 1968, when the Ministry of Education took over the Fu-hsing Drama School (*Fuxing Xixiao* 復興戲校) and became the second major supporter of the genre besides the Ministry of Defense.[392]

The state's regulation of repertoire was another political impact on Peking Opera in Taiwan. It is embodied, since its first implementation in 1947, primarily in a list of permitted and banned plays. The list underwent several major revisions throughout the following decades, mainly in response to the changing political environment across the Taiwan Straits. For example, the list was thoroughly revised in 1966, in an attempt to prevent all new plays that flourished during the PRC's drama reform movement in the 1950s from being staged in Taiwan. The ban of post-1949 mainland plays was formally lifted by the Ministry of Education in 1988, after the lifting of martial rule in 1987.

The 1970s was a decade of challenges for Peking Opera both in Taiwan and in Hong Kong. Both places faced the aging of the first generation of immigrants from the Chinese mainland, who formed the core audience base of the genre. Coupled with the failure to

[390] ibid. 53.
[391] Guy 2005: 4.
[392] ibid. 69.

nurture a new generation of spectators, who grew up in a completely different setting of popular culture, rapid shrinking of the audience base was inevitable – and devastating.[393] On Taiwan, scholars ascribe the problem to the government's traditionalist strategy on Peking Opera, with the government's preference for traditional plays, strict censorship of content, and ban of interaction between Taiwan and the mainland resulting in a lack of artistic creativity in the field. As Guy puts it, "artistically speaking, Taiwan's Peking Opera tradition essentially remained frozen in a pre-1949 state" in that period.[394]

The generational shift within the political leadership on the island also gave rise to indigenous ideology and posted a political challenge to Peking Opera. Voices that urged the government to redirect its focus from the recovery of the Chinese mainland to a focus on Taiwan itself and its own people had been growing louder ever since the 1970s. The rise of opposition political parties, such as the Democratic Progressive Party (established in 1986), further catalyzed this trend. Moreover, the empowerment of new-generation Nationalists in the government also shook the dominant Chinese national ideology from within.[395] Eventually a significant shift of cultural policy was made during the first term of Lee Teng-hui's 李登輝 presidency between 1988 and 1990, formally recognizing indigenous discourse.[396] Under the new policy, the local genre of *gezaixi* received stronger state support, while Peking Opera no longer held high priority.[397] The re-legalization of travel across the Taiwan Strait in 1987 and the lifting of the ban on mainland plays in 1988 also contributed to the downsizing of state support for Peking Opera. As mainland troupes were free to perform in Taiwan, their innovation in repertoire and artistic superiority quickly came to dominate the Peking Opera market over local practitioners. This in turn caused doubts, among the public and within the government, on the rationale behind continuous state support for local troupes, as the shrinking market could easily be accommodated by regular visits by mainland troupes. It was in this context that the three military-owned troupes were dissolved and merged into one, the Guo Guang Opera Company 國光劇團, in 1995. Its shift of administration from the Ministry of Defense to the Ministry of Education also marked the end of the distinctive history of Peking Opera in Taiwan as tied to the military. In all, the downsizing of state support for Peking Opera toward the end of the twentieth century presents a sharp contrast with the case of Hong Kong, which was experiencing an increase of official recognition and sponsorship at the time.

Practitioners in Taiwan responded to these two challenges accordingly. In terms of audience building, they turned to a modernization of Peking Opera in order to accommodate the changing tastes and cultural consumption habits of new generations of Taiwanese. Guo Xiaozhuang's Small Ensemble of Elegant Voices (see chapter five) is a case in point. It drew

---

[393] Wang 2002: 88-89; Su 2002: 99.

[394] Guy 2005: 132.

[395] Su 2002: 93; Guy 2005: 151-152.

[396] Lee was the first local Taiwanese to become the ROC president. He was hand-picked by Chiang Ching-kuo 蔣經國, his predecessor who first brought up the agenda of democratization and indigenization of the government. (Guy 2005: 152)

[397] Su 2002: 133, 139.

on western contemporary theatre extensively. For example, Guo introduced the idea of a director and became the first in Taiwan to appoint a director for a Peking Opera production. It also employed modern stage techniques, and collaborated frequently with practitioners in, for instance, western theatres and Chinese orchestras. Moreover, the troupe adopted modern marketing measures, such as staging its performances in modern theatres, distribution of illustrated programs, and selling of complementary merchandise: T-shirts, mugs, stationery, etc. In Wang Anqi's words, what Guo did was an attempt to transform the image of Peking Opera in Taiwan from a "cultural remnant of the past generation" to a "contemporary, hip, yet refined art" for the younger generation, especially intellectuals.[398]

Indeed, one may associate Guo's vision of Peking Opera in Taiwan with that on the post-Cultural-Revolution Chinese mainland, which resulted in a gradual domination of reformist, contemporary approaches to the genre; and Taiwan saw some even more radical developments in this respect. Wu Hsing-kuo (see 6.2.2), a martial male role performer who graduated from the Fu-hsing Drama School, formed the Contemporary Legend Theatre in 1986. Most of the troupe's productions were adaptations from Shakespearean plays and Greek tragedies. It also drew substantively on modern art forms, such as contemporary dance, movies and Environmental Theatre, and showed a tendency to retain only thin traces of Peking Opera in its productions. In other words, Wu had created an experimental style of Peking Opera – or nearly turned it into a new theatrical genre, as Wang puts it.[399]

Meanwhile, a localization of Peking Opera was observed in response to the rise of indigenous discourse. This process was embodied in three facets. Firstly, new plays that were based on Taiwanese stories emerged. One example is the *Taiwan Trilogy* (*Taiwai Sanbuqu* 台灣三部曲), where all three plays within the series – *Mazu* 媽祖 (1998), *Zheng Chenggong and Taiwan* (*Zheng Chenggong Yu Taiwan* 鄭成功與台灣, 1999) and *Liao Tianding* 廖添丁 (1999) – were based on local religion and familiar figures in the history of Taiwan. Secondly, local art forms were drawn on. For example, local tunes were used in the *Taiwan Trilogy*.[400] Also, when the Peking Opera Troupe of the National Taiwan College of Performing Arts produced a theatrical adaptation of Lu Xun's 魯迅 famous story *The True Story of Ah Q* in 1996, the production team adopted *duma diao* 都馬調, a major singing mode in *gezaixi*, and based a singing passage on the familiar Taiwanese folksong *Grasshopper Teasing a Rooster* (*Caomeng Nong Jigong* 草蜢弄雞公).[401] Thirdly, plays were produced from the Taiwanese perspective, meaning that they reflected a "Taiwanese way" of thinking. To Wang, this is the ultimate embodiment of Peking Opera's localization on the island. This has not been fully achieved yet in Wang's eyes, but some preliminary results on this front were in evidence. For example, the representation of Taiwanese perspectives on the intercultural conflict between

398 Wang 2002: 108-109.
399 ibid. 110.
400 Lei 2011: 38.
401 Wang 2002: 134.

the Taiwanese and the Dutch and Japanese in respective colonial periods was found in the latter two of the *Taiwan Trilogy*.[402]

In the twenty-first century Peking Opera in Taiwan continued its path of thematic innovation, but at the same time demonstrated a process of de-politicization. One example is the redirection of the Guo Guang Opera Company from producing localized plays to focusing on the feminization of plays. The focus was shifted from telling Taiwan's story to, in Daphne Lei's words, "telling women's stories from women's points of view."[403] In the meantime, the Small Ensemble of Elegant Voices and the Contemporary Legend Theatre are still enjoying some success, in terms of popularity, with their experimental productions; while the Taipei Li-yuan Peking Opera Theatre (*Taibei Xinjutuan* 台北新劇團), a private professional troupe established in 1992, represents the traditionalist in terms of performing practices and repertoire.

In short, Peking Opera in Taiwan and Hong Kong travelled frequently opposing trajectories, especially from the 1950s onward. Both being impacted by political interventions, Peking Opera in Taiwan experienced a downfall, from being the beneficiary of full-fledged government support to a genre severely affected by indigenous discourse. In the meantime, Peking Opera in Hong Kong rose from being a weak contender in the public entertainment market to the status of "national drama" under the discourse of "cultural return".

8.4.2 Peking Opera in Singapore

The history of Peking Opera in Singapore began around the same time as in Taiwan, with the first verifiable performance in 1893, performed by a visiting troupe from Fuzhou, in Fujian province.[404] The large proportion of ethnic Chinese in Singapore, which comprised around three quarters of the total population at the time, ensured relatively high visibility for traditional Chinese theatre. Nevertheless, a similar demography of Chinese communities to that in Hong Kong, including Cantonese people and people from Fujian and Chaozhou, meant that Peking Opera was less prominent also in Singapore than the three culturally and linguistically bounded regional genres of Cantonese Opera, Hoklo Drama and Teochew Opera.

In the first four decades of the twentieth century, Peking Opera was staged mainly indoor in theatres, where theatre owners frequently organized temporary troupes by hiring mainland performers, mostly from Fujian and Shanghai.[405] This presented a contrast with those more prominent genres that were often performed outside on the street or on temporary stages outside temples. Also, performances of Peking Opera usually served as pure entertainment, while those of the more prominenent genres were usually linked to traditional Chinese religious activities.[406] In Singapore, distinct from other cases I have discussed where audience bases were formed mainly by the so-called northern Chinese community, the Fujian

---

[402] Lei 2011: 38.
[403] ibid. 41. Lei also argues that Peking Opera itself was also effeminized with these innovative, feminine plays.
[404] Wang 2004: 29.
[405] ibid. 36.
[406] Lee 2009: 5.

community formed the core audience of Peking Opera. According to Wang Fang, this may be attributed to the geographical proximity of Fujian and Anhui and, thus, the familiarity and comprehensibility to the Fujianese of Anhui Opera, a predecessor of Peking Opera. Practically, this community, which included many bankers and businessmen, was wealthier and could afford the expensive tickets. To them, it was a site for the accumulation of cultural capital – they went to Peking Opera performances to show off their wealth and taste in traditional Chinese culture.[407]

Singapore being – like Hong Kong – a British colony in Asia, traditional Chinese theatre was also given sufficient space to survive by the colonial government, although such freedom was also very much the result of initial efforts on the part of the Chinese community. According to Gretchen Li, Angelina Phillips and Pitt Kuan-wah, performances of traditional Chinese theatre were somewhat restricted by the government before 1850, probably in order to restrict public assemblies of the Chinese community. It was after a petition submitted by a group of Chinese community leaders in February 1850, a protest by Chinese shopkeepers in January 1857 and a riot in Penang two months later that the government made a decision to loosen its control over traditional Chinese theatre.[408] Even so, occasional legal interventions in the name of public order occurred, similar to the case of Hong Kong. For example, in 1895 the colonial government passed the Theatre Ordinance, forcing theatres to rearrange their seat layout from teahouse style to modern theatre style, for the sake of public safety and hygiene.[409] Later in the 1950s, the use of child performers was also banned by the government, which passed a law to prevent those under seventeen years old from being employed as performers unless it was permitted by the labor department.[410]

One common theme that is shared among all the locations I have discussed – except the Chinese mainland, because of the PRC government's constant political interference and the massive, nationwide popularity of the genre – is the decline of the genre in the mid-twentieth century. Again, the situation in Singapore may be attributed to similar reasons: a struggling post-World-War-Two economy, the influx of modern entertainment, the aging of the core audience, and lack of interest in traditional Chinese theatre among the younger generations.[411] The migrations of performers back to the mainland after the establishment of the PRC in 1949, based on an optimistic vision of the new regime and a wish to contribute to nation-building, further worsened the situation in Singapore.[412]

However, the period from the 1960s to the 1980s marked a revival of traditional Chinese theatre in Singapore. After it declared independence in 1965, the city-state was in search of a national identity, and multiculturalism had become one important notion in this quest, because of Singapore's multiethnic demography. Chinese culture inevitably became a pillar of the multicultural discourse, and traditional Chinese theatre was elevated as a cultural symbol.

[407] Wang 2004: 66-72.
[408] Liu & Phillips 1988: 23
[409] ibid. 27-29.
[410] Pitt 1988: 68.
[411] Lee 2009: 138.
[412] Wang 2004: 86.

This strategy to uphold traditional Chinese theatre as a means to strengthen the state's Chinese identity was similar to the situation in post-1997 Hong Kong, although the latter was more like a passive political obligation of a "cultural return" to China. Also, the Chinese identity that the Singaporean government tried to build was more heterogeneous. In other words, instead of a single, national Chinese identity that was mainland-based, the Singaporean government was looking for a "multi-Chinese" identity, where it pragmatically echoed the variety of its Chinese communities. In terms of traditional theatre, this meant that Peking Opera was never the jewel in the crown, but had to share the state's re-recognition with other prominent genres, such as Cantonese Opera.

Also noteworthy was that under the epithet of "culture", traditional Chinese theatre in Singapore was "sanitized" of its long-standing commercial and religious functions. Amateur groups replaced professional troupes to be the bearer of the art form. Customary and religious performances, which were traditionally performed by professional troupes, were deemed artistically inferior by the authorities.[413] On the other hand, the organization of amateur groups fit well into the government's vision of a national culture of Singapore and were privileged. As Lee Tong-soon puts it,

> "In this framework, the structure, history, ideology, and performance practices of amateur opera troupes serve as an appropriate model of culture that the state wants Singaporeans to aspire toward: their members are educated, have stable occupations, are versed in a traditional art form and yet innovative, employ creative technologies in their performances, are known locally and abroad, and engage in artistic knowledge and practice as a leisurely and altruistic pursuit."[414]

After the 1980s, traditional Chinese theatre continued to be supported in Singapore. Amateur groups were still privileged, now for their outdoor performances as cultural heritage and their indoor performances as a manifestation of a refined art form. Official funding institutions, such as the Chinese Opera Institute (1995), were established, and troupes of various genres enjoyed increasing financial support.[415]

To summarize, a distinctive feature of Peking Opera in Singapore was the take-over of the role to preserve the genre by amateur groups in the second half of the twentieth century, while professional troupes were marginalized. The demography of Chinese communities in Singapore also led to the problem of the language barrier, just like in the case of Hong Kong and Taiwan, which restricted Peking Opera's development in Singapore as an entertainment. In this sense, Peking Opera in Singapore was somewhat marginalized by other, more popular genres, and was very much part of a broader, general trajectory of rise and fall of traditional Chinese theatre in the city-state at large.

[413] Lee 2009: 142.
[414] ibid. 12.
[415] Wang 2004: 130-131.

8.4.3 So what is special about Hong Kong?

The above comparison indeed demonstrates some common phenomena between Peking Opera in Hong Kong, Taiwan and Singapore. Firstly, together with other local art forms, in all three places Peking Opera was given space to survive and develop by the colonizers. Secondly, these stories are evidence of a decline of Peking Opera in East and Southeast Asia in the mid-twentieth century. At the same time, some distinct features about Peking Opera in Hong Kong emerge as well. First of all, there is the claim of local identity, by Hong Kong practitioners, as part of their practice of this "national" drama form. On the one hand, both Taiwanese and Hong Kong practitioners made this claim by distinguishing themselves from the mainland. On the other hand, the situations in Taiwan and Hong Kong show different perspectives. While the Taiwanese emphasized cultural roots by putting forth local-themed stories and local perspectives on playwriting, their Hong Kong counterparts looked into the issue from a perspective of the "preservation / modernization" dichotomy, and sided against the contemporary, reformist approaches to Peking Opera on the mainland.

Secondly, there is the issue of audience-building, with practitioners in various places bringing diverging interpretations of being "innovative" to the table. To practitioners on the Chinese mainland and in Taiwan, innovations are mostly technical and outward-looking – by which I mean Peking Opera's interactions with theatrical forms of other cultures – so that Peking Opera would be enabled to accommodate new generations. In the meantime, instead of re-molding the genre for the audience, practitioners in Hong Kong did things the other way around. With their representational innovation of, for instance, guided demonstration, they attempted to re-educate the audience in order to accommodate traditional Peking Opera, from the belief that this tradition bears some artistic values that are attractive regardless of generational differences. To a certain extent, this resembles Qi Rushan's vision, almost a century ago, to achieve Chinese modernity through the affirmation and theorization of traditions.

Thirdly, this comparison shows how Peking Opera was appropriated in different social and political settings in Asia. For example, the pragmatic notion of a multi-Chinese identity in Singapore means that instead of being given an outstanding status of Chinese symbolization, Peking Opera was only part of the cultural heritage of traditional Chinese theatre, which had to be shared with other genres. And this cultural heritage was in turn only part of the whole, multi-cultural, national identity of Singapore. In Taiwan, the indigenous discourse even directly suppressed Peking Opera's development on the island. Meanwhile, Peking Opera in Hong Kong has been experiencing a noticeable rise from the turn of the twenty-first century, as the genre was appropriated as a tool by the government to serve its cultural nationalism agenda after the sovereignty handover in 1997.

8.5 What next?

As Michael Billig says:

> In many academic books, the conclusion provides the place for authors to be optimistic. After chapters of hard travelling, buffeted between theory and doubt, an author can now settle back and tell readers why the journey has been so worthwhile.[416]

So far, this has been indeed a fascinating journey – not only for a traditional Chinese theatrical genre that has borne the "national" name since the early twentieth century, but also for me as the storyteller. This journey has provoked many intellectual exercises and has cultivated my fondness for this beautiful art form. I have enjoyed every moment I have had to talk with performers, to learn in classes, to perform – even just as a sidekick soldier standing still – and to witness all the physical and artistic spectacles of the performances.

Moreover, my fondness for Peking Opera has stimulated my thinking about its future in Hong Kong. Fortunately, there are optimistic signs. The Hong Kong government is still supporting the genre strategically, and the two active troupes are still benefitting from various sources of funding and performing platforms. Thanks to these, Peking Opera is indeed more in the foreground of the local cultural scene than it has been for some time.

There is also an appreciable increase of locals' enthusiasm for learning Peking Opera. For example, the years Tang Yuen-ha and Geng Tianyuan have invested in training local performers have paid off. In 2015, they staged a performance with the entire line-up made up of their students. In fact, Tang has hinted in various pieces of publicity that she intends to produce more productions featuring local talents. Moreover, some of Tang and Geng's students have shown professional dedication. For example, there are two female apprentices who have been trained intensively for several years under Tang and Geng, and they are seriously looking for careers in Peking Opera. In addition to these two, a young male apprentice also appears constantly in the YCOC's productions. Rather than receiving training from Liang Hanyong at the troupe, he has been attending a training school in Beijing, where he receives more systematic and vigorous training. Either way, these young talents all show great potential. Through my conversations with Tang, Geng and Liang, I have a strong sense that they indeed regard these talents as their successors, who may help to write the next chapter of the life of Peking Opera in Hong Kong.

[416] Billig 2013: 206.