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Cheng Yu Tung East Asian Library Access Grant Report

Over the month of March 2021, the Cheng Yu Tung East Asian Library granted me access to their databases for research on Chinese opera. Initially I wanted to study what has been written on Chinese opera within the diaspora communities in Canada and the United States, but there was a limited number of resources on the diaspora Chinese opera that I broadened the scope to examine research on Chinese opera more generally both in China and the West. As an undergraduate student at McGill in anthropology, I was inspired by my Chinese ethnography through film class and the East Asian courses I was taking to bring these interests together through a research project on performance and soundscapes in the diaspora. I have a strong personal connection and history with the subject as well, since my grandfather immigrated from Hong Kong to teach Cantonese opera in Vancouver. So Chinese opera has informed many of my relationships to the Chinese communities in both Vancouver and Montreal.

As I began researching the subject through the Cheng Yu Tung library, I found an abundance of resources, unfortunately not all of them were accessible through online databases. Hana Kim, the coordinator for the grant, facilitated the online access with UofT to log into the platform and was available to answer any questions I had. I focused on recent publications related to keywords like "Cantonese opera; Peking opera; Chinese opera; diaspora; performance; and aging." I found articles from various disciplines that perfectly embodied elements I was researching, from psychology, ethnomusicology to queer studies. They engage with aging Asian communities and the benefits of performing Chinese opera. Namely, David Wai-Kwong Man, Frank Ho-Yin Lai, Edwin Chi-Sing and Grace Yuet-Lee's article on the "Effects of traditional Cantonese opera songs on Cantonese-speaking, community dwelling older adults' cognitive and psychological function, well-being, and health" in the Journal of Aging & Mental Health 2021 issue. This project emerged out of a partnership with the Department of Rehabilitation Sciences at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University; the department of psychiatry, Kwai Chung Hospital and the CHG Health Service Limited Hong Kong. They discovered that the symptoms of aging diminished and increased the well-being of Chinese seniors who actively participated in Cantonese opera. They noticed differences on the effects of aging between the participants who passively listened to Cantonese opera and those who actively sang and performed. Based on this research, I think it would be important to examine the aging experience of diaspora Chinese seniors and how certain cultural activities like Chinese opera might improve their life course. I think diaspora

Chinese communities would greatly benefit from Chinese cultural programs and services geared to support diaspora seniors.

Nancy Yunhwa Rao's article discusses the transnational dimension of Sino-soundscapes in America during the 1920s from a musicology tradition. This article mapped the cultural migration of Chinese opera and its significance in Chinese diaspora communities. They argue that Chinese opera was a cultural space, which constituted the Chinese American collective memory. This demonstrates the cultural vibrancy of Cantonese opera within the diaspora and its transnational interaction with China, challenging ideas within Western thought. Priscilla Pui-Sze Tse's article adds another nuance to the discussion on Cantonese opera in relation to gender and what she calls the queering of bodies through cross-dressing performances. They argue that identity politics is performed on and off the stage of Chinese opera as male actors perform and train as female characters. Identity is a concept many actors use to articulate their passion and interest in Chinese opera like in the documentary *My Way* (2012) on male Dan characters and in the CBC interview with William Lau.

Apart from online articles, I also viewed most of the documentaries, videos and audio on Chinese opera on the library database. Most of the mixed media were available online through various sites. Several of the documentaries produced by Chinese institutions and a few features on Chinese opera in the diaspora. Christine Choy's "The Monkey King Goes West" (1992) plays on the traditional Chinese opera *Journey to the West*. This documentary focuses on the experiences of Chinese opera actors as they migrate from China and Taiwan to America. What is of particular interest to me is how these performers articulate the specific social-cultural forces at play within these soundscapes. The documentary represents the beauty of Chinese opera as well as the hardships of immigrant life in America. The documentary reflects on how Chinese opera has changed and evolved because of the actors' migrations; and the reception of these performances by Westerners and diaspora Chinese communities. I wonder whether there is a particular emphasis on traditional operas as a form of nostalgia and recollection of a far-away home?

There is a stark difference between the documentaries made by Chinese directors and producers versus Western interviews produced by and for Western audiences. An interview by Elliot Norton from the Boston Music Society with Zhao Yianxia, a performer from the Gerald Wen troop and the theatre company producer Sheldon Gold (1980). The interview made it seem like it was the first time Americans were experiencing Peking Opera, and while perhaps for many

American audience members it was but by the 1980s Chinese opera already had a particular presence in diaspora Chinese communities. A translator for Ms. Zhao Yianxia was provided but most of the conversation was done in English between Elliot Norton and the American producer Sheldon Gold. Few questions were posed to Ms. Zhao Yianxia, in fact, one can visibly see the disappointment in her face by the questions especially when Norton inappropriately pushes her to comment on the political climate in China. There is a clear difference in nuance and depth between American produced documentaries on Peking Opera and Chinese American ones. Zhao Yianxia's interview and *The Peking Opera* documentary do not have to completely be done away with. They do hold value as reminders to scholars and journalists on the importance in creating meaningful engagements with Chinese communities instead of assuming preconceived ideas of Chinese culture are true. Where there is a lack of sensitivity and complexity to the stories told about Chinese Americans, there are communities that suffer the burden of these consequences and the labour of educating the American public.

The Cheng Yu Tung Access Grant program was an exciting opportunity for me as I pursue various research interests related to Chinese opera by examining the online archives and databases at the University of Toronto. As an undergraduate in the midst of exploring graduate studies, the program was the perfect way for me to get a sense of what independent research might look like during a pandemic. Remote learning has required students and professionals to adapt quickly to the online world. Unfortunately, online research and thesis-project development are trickier to navigate but there is certainly no shortage of resources available through online libraries and partnerships between institutions and their databases. The Cheng Yu Tung Access Grant has made me more aware of the abundance of research documents and media, while simultaneously signalling a need to update the archives and breathe new life into the scholarship written about Chinese opera.

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