

# Foreword

ANTHONY ALAN SHELTON

DIRECTOR, MUSEUM OF ANTHROPOLOGY AT UBC

---

**DIVINE THREADS:** *The Visual and Material Culture of Cantonese Opera* is a dazzling work in its originality and erudite interpretation and in its beautifully evocative writing style. April Liu tells stories that dance off the pages and appeal to the artifices of our memories and imaginations to conjure images, sounds, and smells—from the stylized pronouncements and gestures of the performers and the excitement of crowds at the arrivals of opera troupes across southern China and North America to the festive background of red lanterns, with the accompanying noise and smell of fireworks and burning gunpowder. This is a lively and accessible, but deeply scholarly book that tells a global story, first of the relentless tours undertaken by the red boats up and down the Pearl River Delta in the nineteenth century, and then, at the beginning of the early twentieth century, of the much longer journeys that troupes endured, sometimes lasting for up to two years, to perform in the Chinatowns that had emerged in cities across North America. The book never takes refuge in detailed formal iconographic analysis or focuses only on the opera performances themselves. Liu paints a vivid picture of Cantonese opera as a culture in constant movement; of troupes emerging, disappearing, restlessly innovating their dress, music, scenography, and choreography, borrowing from Hollywood, Western fashion trends, North American street styles, and jazz clubs to constantly accentuate and create ever

more brilliant and spectacular performances, while remaining faithful to traditional spiritual practices and prescribed rituals of which opera is part. It is fascinating to read how, throughout these great changes and advances, the hierarchical classification of materials, colours, and embroidered designs, applied to both divine and social rank, persisted also in opera costumes and performances. Moreover, the performances themselves never lost their ritual meaning and continued to exert magical efficacy for the benefit of whole communities.

Liu not only focuses on the stage, but also describes the role of opera in funeral processions, exorcism and cleansing rites, celebrations, political marches, and even uprisings, emphasizing its assertion of Han traditions and values in the fight for political emancipation at home and suffrage and inclusiveness abroad. The influence of Cantonese opera pervaded popular culture, including the costumes found on woodcut prints, and, it might be added more recently, interactive digital media and films. By rejecting abhorrent Manchu-style costumes and etiquette, opera helped keep Han culture alive during a period of foreign rule. Liu's epilogue, like all good expository accounts, discusses the implications of operatic history for the present, describing how Cantonese opera remains a site of contestation between Chinese nationalist cultural agencies, entrusted with protecting its integrity as a UNESCO-designated intangible expression of world

◀ Cantonese opera  
peacock cape, 1910  
Silk, dye, metallic threads,  
brass, glass  
78 × 122 cm  
MOA Collection, N1.627

heritage, and the communities of performers who have always ensured its creativity and vitality.

The Cantonese opera collection at MOA is one of the museum's unsung treasures, which in Liu has found a brilliant and fitting expositor, whose research and interpretation will make these works better known to Chinese communities, research students, and the public. The collection, mainly dated to the early years of the opera troupes' tours to North America, is one of the largest pre-World War II collections in existence. Liu interviewed operatic society members, musicians, curators, historians, and archivists in Guangzhou, Hong Kong, San Francisco, Montreal, and Vancouver and, like her predecessors, Audrey Hawthorn and Elizabeth Lominska Johnson, worked especially closely with the Jin Wah Sing Musical Association and the late Master Wong Toa, the association's much-respected and deeply missed musician and teacher. The close bonds Liu shared with communities, augmented by multi-sited fieldwork and archival and library-based research, have achieved spectacular results. Her work exemplifies the very best of museum-based scholarship, which by "writing from sight" follows the diverse intersubjective and artifact-based agentic networks that objects open across time, space, and disciplinary barriers.

The Cantonese opera collection, numbering about eight hundred pieces, is part of the approximately twenty thousand works from Asia held by MOA, and the first part of the collection to have a

substantial publication dedicated to it. Our continuous and active scholarly and curatorial engagement with the continent dates back to our foundation in 1947, when the first director and curator, Harry and Audrey Hawthorn, actively sought out Asian collections in London and Europe and established a close relationship with the University of British Columbia's Department of Asian Studies, which continues through to the present. Since its beginning, the museum and the department cooperated in building collections and curating exhibitions, including three Japanese and Chinese exhibitions in the early 1950s. Today, Asian Studies and its associated library and archival collections at UBC have grown to become one of the leading centres in North America. Working together, we have been able to obtain collections such as those assembled by R.P. Dore, Wayne Suttles, Ping-ti Ho, and Shuichi Kato from China and Japan. These were added to by other notable collections formerly put together by Edith and Bernulf Clegg, Ray Dunlop, Leslie G. Kilborn, and the Fyfe Smiths, and acquisitions made in London from 1959 to 1960 by the Hawthorns. By the 1970s, the collections were sufficiently large to warrant a curator of their own. Dr. Elizabeth Lominska Johnson, an anthropologist specializing in China, was appointed in 1978 and complemented the expertise of the then director Michael M. Ames, who specialized in India and Sri Lanka. After her retirement in 2006, Dr. Johnson was replaced by Dr. Fuyubi Nakamura, who in 2015 and 2016 was joined by Dr. April Liu,

the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Postdoctoral Curatorial Fellow. Over the past thirty years, the collections have continued to increase rapidly, both through fieldwork—such as Stephen Inglis’s work in India and Dr. Johnson’s collection of domestic materials, clothing, and agricultural implements from southern China; by the donation of important collections such as those of Victor Shaw, Hugh Campbell-Brown, and Miguel and Julia Tecson; and by major gifts from the Korean, Taiwanese, and Japanese governments. Unlike most museums, MOA’s collection is rich not in archaeological ceramics, statuary, or court art, but in aspects of popular culture, especially textiles, prints, puppets, masks, and everyday domestic items. Like the opera pieces described here, many of the things collected were examples of cultures in movement and transit. Taken together, they show that Asia was long part of a globalized society that predates the expansion of European trade in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. We have continued to focus on aspects of Asian globalization through our recent exhibitions of contemporary artists—“(In)visible: The Spiritual World of Taiwan Through Contemporary Art” (2015–2016) and “Traces of Words: Art and Calligraphy from Asia” (2017)—giving voice to the continent’s cultural and social uniqueness, which endlessly reiterates that modernization is far from synonymous with Westernization.