

**Opening Remarks -
Transcending Cultural Boundaries through Chinese Opera in Canada**

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I am pleased to have the opportunity to provide some context of Chinese opera in Canada before we appreciate the performances. Chinese opera, particularly Cantonese opera for the earlier Chinese settlers, has been a popular cultural entertainment in Chinese Canadian communities. It is a hometown entertainment for most Chinese in Canada who came from southern part of China. Familiar themes and atmosphere in Chinese opera bring forth both individual and collective memory of Chinese Canadians, reminding them of not only where they came from but also who they were prior to their arrival in Canada.

The first wave of Chinese immigrants came to Canada when the Fraser River Gold Rush began in 1858. The gold miners, later on railroad workers and other labourers coming to Canada in those decades were mostly single young men. They spoke little English and did not understand western culture, they led their own lives and customs in parallel with those of westerners.

As the population of Chinese labourers continued to increase in the late 19th century and the early 20th century, a small merchant class among the Chinese in Canada emerged, providing network and business support for visiting troupe to perform Chinese opera. Chinese opera activities appeared in Canada as early as the 19th century. Evidence of earliest Chinese opera activities in Canada shows that by 1885, five theatres were constructed in Victoria’s Chinatown.

The cultural meanings and conventions encoded in Chinese opera reinforced the early Chinese settlers' cultural heritage, which was passed down to later generations of Chinese Canadians. The impact of cultural imagination, identity, and social memory transmitted by Chinese opera is most vividly illustrated in the works of two Chinese Canadian writers, Wayson Choy and Denise Chong, who remade and reinterpreted the stories and cultural space of Chinese opera in their Chinatown stories and memoirs.

After the Second World War and Chinese exclusion act, Chinese opera flourished and spread to Montreal, Toronto and other major cities in Canada with the influx of Chinese immigrants from Guangdong and Hong Kong that creates the market and talented performers. In addition to the participation of local Chinese Canadians in the performances, Chinese opera was transformed & adapted in the Canadian context in many ways. For example, female and male performers were mixed as early as 1915 in Canada while that happened much later, 1930s, in China (Chen 1995, p. 12), advancing gender equity in this traditionally male-dominated performance. When the audience consists of non-Chinese, the repertoires have been more movement based with a more dramatic plot so that non-Chinese speaking audiences could follow the play more easily. Make-up demonstrations prior to the show and post-performance discussions with audiences were included to develop a more informed audience.

Chinese opera helps the younger generation of Chinese Canadians understand and carry on their cultural heritage and identity. Starlight Chinese Opera is an excellent example of community efforts in transcending cultural boundaries.

Starlight Chinese Opera Performing Arts Centre.

<http://www.starlightopera.com/index.html>

Starlight Cantonese Opera (SCO), was established in the year 2000 and renamed Starlight Chinese Opera in 2009 to include Beijing Opera. Their objective is to preserve, maintain and introduce this cultural art to the general public and other ethnic communities in Canada. They aim to introduce this art to the younger generation in Canada so that young Chinese Canadians can experience and recognize their own culture. We are so delighted that they will perform for us today.