

**Transcultural Identity:
Cantonese Opera in Chinese American Literature**

Jack Hang-tat Leong

York University

Presented at the International Comparative Literature Association Conference

30 July 2025, Seoul, South Korea

Introduction

In this presentation, I explore how Chinese heritage is represented, preserved, and transformed through Cantonese opera—particularly in a global and diasporic context. I focus on North America, where Cantonese opera occupies a somewhat marginal or “off-kilter” position, yet remains culturally significant.

I argue that these opera performances and related cultural practices, as depicted in literary works, serve not only as a means of cultural preservation but also as a powerful expression of transcultural identity and acculturation. They reflect how Chinese Americans and Canadians engage with inherited traditions while adapting to new environments.

Literary representation of Cantonese Opera in North American Literature

Cantonese opera played a crucial role in preserving and transmitting the cultural heritage of early Chinese settlers in North America. Its rich symbolism, storytelling, and performance traditions helped reinforce a shared cultural identity—one that was passed down to later generations of Chinese Americans and Canadians.

This imaginative and symbolic world of opera—rooted in memory, myth, and moral lessons—continues to resonate through the writings of authors like Maxine Hong Kingston (*The Woman Warrior*), Wayson Choy (*The Jade Peony*), and Paul Yee (*Jade in the Coal*). Each of them draws on Cantonese opera to reimagine cultural space, retell traditional stories, and explore identity within North American Chinatowns. Through their work, we see how opera becomes not just performance, but a living archive of diasporic memory and creativity.

Maxine Hong Kingston (1940–) illustrates the deep influence of Cantonese opera as a medium for passing down and reimagining Chinese legends, myths, and characters. This influence is especially evident in her major works: *The Woman Warrior* (1976), *China Men* (1980), and *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book* (1989).

Kingston was born and raised in a Cantonese-speaking family in California. These stories were part of her everyday life. Her father was a teacher, and her mother—an avid opera fan—was trained as a midwife in Canton before immigrating to the United States.

Kingston's writing transforms these inherited narratives into literary forms that express the complexity of Chinese American identity, blending memory, imagination, and tradition through the lens of Cantonese opera.

Kingston's memoir *The Woman Warrior* was widely recognized as one of the most important Asian American writings globally for providing voices and empowering Asian Americans, especially Asian American women. In this work, Kingston employs the imagery of Chinese

opera to depict elegantly the dichotomies of opaque blackness and colorful fantasy, oppression and freedom, and silence and sound. The subtitles of her memoirs, such as “White Tigers,” “At the Western Palace,” and “A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe,” resemble opera motifs and images, connecting the author’s cultural identity and social memory to the stories transmitted through Cantonese opera.

Kingston further expresses this connection to Cantonese opera in *China Men*. In recounting her grandfather Ah Goong’s theater-going experience, she highlights the powerful moment when he sees the character Guan Goong on stage:

“The main actor’s face was painted red with thick black eyebrows and long black beard, and when he strode onto the stage, Ah Goong recognized the hero, Guan Goong; his puppet horse had red nostrils and rolling eyes. Ah Goong’s heart leapt to recognize hero and horse in the wilds of America” (149).

The story of Guan Goong, featured in *The Oath in the Peach Orchard*, reappears in *Tripmaster Monkey*. This time, Kingston emphasizes the ritual of sworn brotherhood among Guan Goong, Liu Pei, and Chang Fei—depicting how this story, along with its values of loyalty and friendship, was carried to Gold Rush-era America by a traveling opera troupe (141).

The novel’s title pays tribute to the Monkey King from *Journey to the West*, a legendary figure central to many Cantonese opera repertoires. The protagonist, Wittman Ah Sing, embarks on a journey to find identity and self-expression through Chinese theater.

For Kingston, Cantonese opera becomes a creative wellspring—a source of inspiration, memory, and artistic exploration.

In 1995, Chinese Canadian writer **Wayson Choy** published his award-winning novel *The Jade Peony*. Raised in Vancouver's Chinatown during the 1940s, Choy later discovered—only in 1995—that he was adopted, and that his biological father had been a member of a Cantonese opera company, one of the actors (Choy, *Paper Shadows* 281). Even before this revelation, Choy's childhood experiences with Cantonese opera deeply inspired one of the main characters in *The Jade Peony*.

Jook Liang, the narrator of the first story in *The Jade Peony* trilogy, transcends her everyday reality by imagining herself through the cultural figures of Cantonese opera. For Jook Liang, these playful acts create a space where she truly belongs — a world where she is “dressed perfectly, behaved beyond reproach, and was loved, always loved, and was not ... mo yung [useless]” (40).

In *Paper Shadows: A Memoir of a Past Lost and Found* (1999), Wayson Choy dedicates an entire chapter titled “At the Opera” to recount his experiences attending Cantonese opera as a child in Vancouver's Chinatown. His adoptive mother often took him to the Sing Kew Theatre, where she “whispered to [him the Cantonese opera stories] over and over again” (117).

For Choy, the theatre was more than a stage—it was like a bustling village square. The Chinese community found a sense of belonging there. He describes the Sing Kew as a place to “be home,” just like back in Old China—a place to pass the time, meet friends, gossip, and, of course, to focus on the performances on stage (50).

Cantonese opera has been a significant source of inspiration for **Paul Yee**, an award-winning Chinese Canadian writer. Yee grew up in Strathcona, a Vancouver neighborhood right next to historic Chinatown, during the 1960s (Lee & Yee 44). He attended Chinese school every day and learned about Chinese culture and language, in part, by watching black-and-white Hong Kong movies that featured Cantonese opera.

Cantonese opera in *Jade in the Coal* is not just an inspiration; it is presented as a “performance within a performance,” showcasing the virtuosity of this art form. The play dramatizes the dangerous working conditions and daily struggles of the early Chinese coal miner community in Cumberland, BC. It features live Cantonese opera performances by the Guangdong Cantonese Opera Academy and Singaporean performers.

The story begins with a tragic coal mine accident that kills dozens of miners, including the father of the protagonist, Sally. A year later, Sally’s husband, a business owner, brings in a Cantonese opera troupe to open a new 400-seat opera house.

The Cantonese opera performed within the play parallels Sally's love story and family drama. When the lead opera actor becomes possessed by Sally's deceased father, and they sing together, Sally finds reconciliation—with her father, her lover, and her community.

Conclusion

The representation of Cantonese opera in North American literature plays a vital role in reinterpreting and reinforcing transcultural identity among Chinese Americans and Canadians.

By surveying the narratives of Cantonese opera across works by Maxine Hong Kingston, Wayson Choy, and Paul Yee, we see how this tradition helps preserve and transmit Chinese heritage across generations. More importantly, it enables locally born Chinese Americans and Canadians to recognize, negotiate, and reconcile a cultural identity that often feels “other” to their American or Canadian upbringing.

References

- Choy, Wayson. *Not Yet*. Doubleday Canada, 2009.
- . *Paper Shadows: A Memoir of a Past Lost and Found*. New York: Viking Press, 1999.
- . *The Jade Peony*. Toronto: Douglas & McIntyre, 1995.
- Kingston, Maxine Hong. *China Men*. New York: Vintage Books, 1989.
- . *The Women Warrior*. New York: Vintage Books, 1989.
- . *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book*. New York: Vintage Books, 1990.
- Lee, C. and P. Yee. “From the Past, for the Future: An Interview with Paul Yee.” *Canadian Literature*. 2024 (257): 44-68.
- Yee, Paul. *A Song for Ba*. Toronto : Groundwood Books, 2004.
- . *Email to the author*. 7 Feb. 2025.