

**Canadian
Performance
Documents
and Debates**

A Sourcebook

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11 : Cantonese Theatre in Vancouver (1916–1936)

Glimpses into the World of Chinatown Theatre

WING CHUNG NG

1. For a brief biographical sketch of Yip Sang, see Stanley 2005. Nancy Rao notes the building of the venue in the Shanghai Alley (2017, 136). See also the recollection of J.S. Matthews (1947) on his visit to the theatre in the winter of 1898: the writing was prompted by the theatre's destruction in a fire the preceding week.

FROM THE 1920S TO THE LATE 1930S, Vancouver was a major hub of Chinese theatrical activities in the western hemisphere. Commonly referred to as the “Saltwater City” throughout the Chinese diaspora, Vancouver was a principal gateway for incoming and departing opera performers and musicians who crossed the Pacific. In conjunction with San Francisco and New York City, Vancouver was one of the three major hubs that anchored a transnational circuit for the dissemination of opera theatre across Canada and the United States, with offshoots reaching some neighbouring countries in Latin America and the Caribbean (Ng 2015, 161–64).

After Chinese migrants had settled in Victoria in the latter part of the nineteenth century, Chinese opera troupes based in California (first appearing in San Francisco as early as 1852) soon made their way up the Pacific Northwest and performed for their countrymen in this city, the site of the earliest Canadian Chinatown (Sebryk 1995). By the turn of the twentieth century, Vancouver had also joined this regional circuit with its first known Chinese theatre built by the prominent merchant Yip Sang in 1898. The venue was located in the Shanghai Alley and remained in use for theatrical entertainment over extended periods of time until it burned down in 1947.¹ In the 1910s, after Vancouver's Chinese settlement had grown into the largest in Canada, its theatrical scene developed into a vibrant component of the community. Two additional theatres were built in close proximity within the ethnic neighbourhood in 1913–14.

Since Chinese migrants in North America were overwhelmingly Cantonese natives hailing from the Pearl River Delta of Guangdong in South China, the theatrical fares they enjoyed belonged to the genre known as Cantonese opera. In its original habitat, this native theatre catered initially to the village communities across the Pearl River estuary and was performed by itinerant companies as part of communal celebration of local deities and seasonal festivals. By the late nineteenth century, Cantonese opera had entered the regional metropolises of Guangzhou (the provincial capital of Guangdong) and Hong Kong (the nearby British Crown Colony), and thrived as commercial entertainment in the twin cities' playhouses as well (Ng 2015, see especially Part I). No wonder Cantonese opera was immensely popular among Chinese migrants in North America. Indeed, the sojourn overseas only deepened a desire for

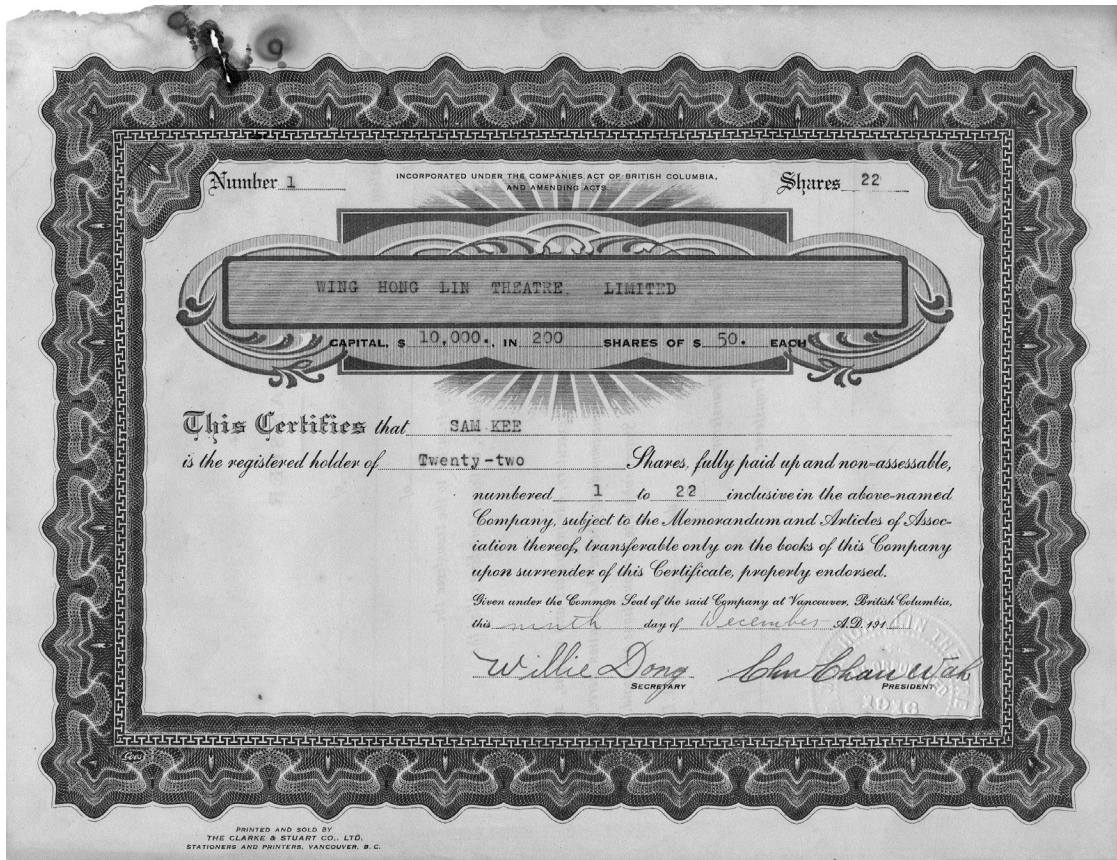


FIGURE 11.1: Wing Hong Lin Theatre Limited, Certificate of shares owned by Sam Kee, December 1916. MSS 571, 566-G-4, file 2, Sam Kee Papers, City of Vancouver Archives.

heartwarming entertainment from home. As we shall see in this chapter, the theatre was deeply woven into the social and cultural fabrics of Chinatown life, even as the theatrical entertainment was facilitated by, if not dependent on, the migrant community's long-distance contacts and ocean-spanning activities. The following discussion seeks to unveil the local as well as transnational dynamics of the theatre world by drawing on some untapped sources: archives left by Chinatown businesses involved in the promotion of the theatre and available in the City of Vancouver Archives and the Special Collections at the University of British Columbia Library; theatre advertisements and various reports in the Chinatown daily newspaper the *Chinese Times* (*Dahan Gongbao*); and finally, a small number of photographs taken in the late 1930s deposited in the photographic collection of the Vancouver Public Library.

Though theatre entrepreneurs seldom physically ascended the stage, they played a pivotal role in the theatre world. In Vancouver, one of the earliest instigators was the Wing Hong Lin Theatre Company, which was established by a group of Chinese merchants in December 1916 to engage troupes directly

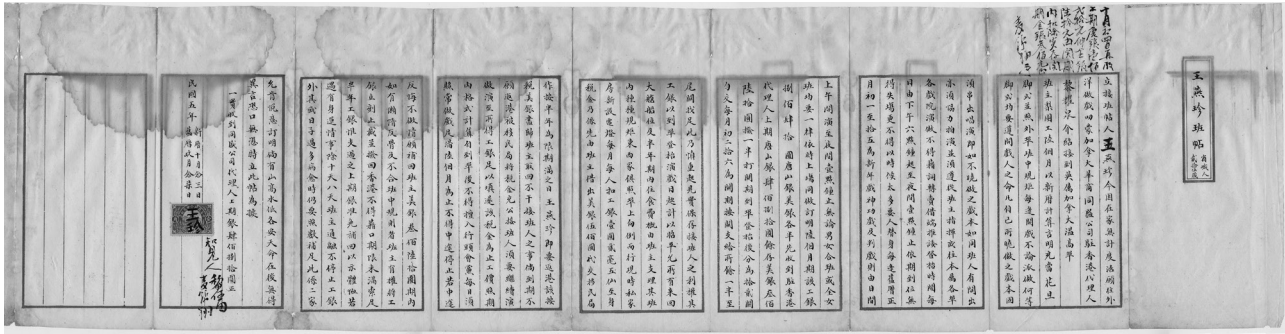


FIGURE 11.2: An actress's contract, October 1916. Add.

MSS 571, 566-G-4, file 12, Sam Kee Papers, City of Vancouver Archives.

2. The principal female role type. Back in China, since actresses were banned from the stage, the role was assumed by a female impersonator. Only in the early twentieth century did actresses regain their legitimacy and rise quickly in popularity.

from China for performance abroad. The principal partner was Chang Toy, better known to his business associates and non-Chinese counterparts by the name of his firm, Sam Kee. As Paul Yee (1986) points out, Sam Kee was no small shopkeeper, but an influential figure with wide-ranging business interests inside and outside of Chinatown. Figure 11.1 shows the very first copy of Wing Hong Lin's share certificate issued to none other than Sam Kee. Of the initial capital of \$10,000, Sam Kee invested \$1,100, making him the largest shareholder. Other items in Wing Hong Lin's extant business archives further confirm Sam Kee's prominent role. According to company minutes, board meetings were held at his business premises on 111 East Pender Street, and he was the landlord of the Sing Ping Theatre on Columbia Street, where the company's troupes performed for two seasons of about six to seven months each between December 1916 and May 1918 ("Wing Hong Lin").

The several notarized performance contracts in the Wing Hong Lin collection are among the earliest extant copies of such documents signed by Cantonese opera actors for overseas engagement in the early twentieth century. Figure 11.2 shows a contract for an actress Wang Yanzhen, aged twenty-five and a native of Guangzhou, signed in Hong Kong in October 1916. Wang Yanzhen was engaged to play the female lead role of *huadan*,² with the understanding that she might be assigned other role types because overseas troupes were typically much smaller than those in South China, and itinerant performers had to be versatile and flexible. A local agent in Hong Kong signed the contract on behalf of the Wing Hong Lin Company. Apparently, North American-based theatre entrepreneurs relied on their distant business associates in Hong Kong (and also Guangzhou) for recruitment of actors as well as for shipment of performance paraphernalia and other stage supplies. The contract also details compensation, travel arrangements, and other terms of employment. One particular item pertains to the payment of the \$500 bond required by the Canadian immigration authorities for actors seeking entrance into the country. Since actors were not deemed labourers and therefore not liable to the payment of the infamous head tax, they were subject to

民國八年		舊曆正月拾一日		雲高華優界會館啓	
▲庶務員	▲陳庭元	▲李達超	▲李華	▲劉子倫	▲李強
▲胡英	▲龍祥	▲謝龍	▲何榮	▲張滿	▲黎保
▲李英	▲馬進	▲張連	▲趙鵬	▲黃光	▲黃德
▲李英	▲鄭秋	▲徐德	▲許盈	▲梁柱	▲黃華
▲黃煖	▲黃明	▲梁庭	▲李全	▲曾建	▲黃華
▲廖彬	▲陳松	▲呂成	▲黎振	▲方富	▲陳保
▲陳盛	▲雷基	▲梁成	▲李富	▲黃欽	▲李光
▲太子祥	▲陳月	▲馬蹄	▲邱雪	▲劉虹	▲周瑜
▲陳扎勝	▲李秋	▲陳月	▲金絲	▲梁寶	▲馮玉
▲評議員	▲外江	▲陳月	▲金絲	▲梁寶	▲馮玉
▲審計員	▲關奇	▲關錫	▲伍玲	▲李恩	▲麥兆佳
▲議員	▲余元	▲歐陽枝	▲吳光	▲伍玲	▲李恩
▲正副議長	▲吳月	▲梅黃	▲小鳳	▲伍玲	▲李恩
▲西文書記	▲西人	▲李倫	▲林健	▲生	▲正副議長
▲正副協理	▲鄭海	▲張淑	▲勤	▲正副財政	▲李槐
▲正副監督	▲程林	▲劉芬	▲正副財政	▲李槐	▲朱廷
▲正副主席	▲勞文山	▲陳元亨	▲正副議長	▲卓登	▲黃俊
▲正副會長	▲莫懼之	▲陳耀臣	▲正副議長	▲鄭合	▲奮黃雨庵

FIGURE 11.3: List of officers and members of the Actor's Guild, 1919. First published on February 13, 1919 in the Chinese Times (Vancouver). UBC Asian Library.

CLASS OF SERVICE	SYMBOL
Telegram	
Day Letter	Blue
Night Message	Nite
Night Letter	NL

If none of these three symbols appears after the check (number of words) this is a telegram. Otherwise its character is indicated by the symbol appearing after the check.

GREAT NORTH WESTERN TELEGRAM

RECEIVED AT 516 HASTINGS STREET WEST, VANCOUVER, B. C. Telephone, Seymour 6880. 1923 JUL 12 PM 12 46

PRB248 7 COLLECT

SEATTLE WASH 12 1229P

KUE HING GOLD 083/35

107 PENDER ST EAST VANCOUVER BC

TROUBLE JUST OVER WHOLE TROUPE LANDED

LIM BANG.

FIGURE 11.4: Telegram from Lim Bang to Kue Hing Company, July 12, 1923. Add.

MSS 1108, 612-F-7, file 1, Yip Family and Yip Sang Ltd. fonds, City of Vancouver Archives

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