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# OPERATIC CHINA

Staging Chinese Identity across the Pacific

DAPHNE P. LEI



Operatic China

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# Operatic China

Staging Chinese Identity Across  
the Pacific

*Daphne Pi-Wei Lei*

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OPERATIC CHINA

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*For My Trans-Pacific Family*



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## Introduction: Lotus and Mud

**I**n spring, 1996, as a graduate student in theatre, I had a rare opportunity to win a ticket to go to Paris. The only catch was that, for an hour, I had to pretend to be Parisian, drinking coffee at a bistro in an imaginary Quartier Latin set up in an airport concourse. The occasion was the inaugural ceremony for a new Boston-Paris route, and local theatre students had been summoned to play French people. Naturally, I had my doubts: could I play French? My Chineseness often made my performance as an American risky, despite my longtime acculturation in this country. My love for Godard and Camus probably would not legitimize my French performance. I was worried.

When I arrived, a wonderful Parisian scene was already set up, with chocolate, strawberries, cheese, coffee, and cheerful chansons. I was given a black beret, a black-and-white striped shirt, and a scarf. Et voila! My classmates and I were instantly transformed into French people! No one doubted my authenticity; what mattered more was the identifiable cultural symbols I was wearing. My performance paid off: I won the ticket and went to Paris. Of course my experience was very different from the one created by the American corporate imagination; of course no one was wearing berets or striped shirts; of course there were plenty of Asians in Paris; of course all cultures are much more complicated than their most identifiable tokens. But we do start a cultural performance with a token, a beret, wooden shoes, a kimono, or, in Chinese opera, a painted face. Cultures change, but tokens seemingly don't; tokens offer an imaginary eternity for the culture, which is essential for identity performance. It is the slightest glimpse of hopeful stability that makes "identity" possible.

Chinese opera, in this study, is a token that offers hope of imagining a Chinese identity. The questioning, defining, and imagining of

Chinese identity were enduring concerns throughout Chinese history, especially during times of national crisis and political instability. In recent years, numerous scholars, Chinese and non-Chinese, have written on issues related to Chinese identity. These works range across a wide variety of academic disciplines and contexts.<sup>1</sup> Tu Wei-ming's famous essay on cultural Chinese—with its view that even non-Chinese who are interested in Chinese affairs might be considered part of cultural China—probably offers the broadest definition of Chinese identity.<sup>2</sup> Like identity, Chinese opera has also commanded more than its usual share of attention in the Western hemisphere since the late twentieth century. The focus has usually been either on the history and practice of the art, on literary aspects of the text, or on the dramatic characters.<sup>3</sup> My intention is to combine these two major areas of investigation and to address the uniqueness of Chinese opera and its relation to identity performances by Chinese, for Chinese, and against Chinese, on and off stage.

Unlike a national flag, images of Chinese opera are rare in Chinese daily life, but in other contexts these images seem to possess a magical power that can conjure up the most essential and rarefied Chineseness for both Chinese and non-Chinese, whether in China or abroad, in the past and in the present. They also legitimize identity performances for the imagined national, diasporic, and transnational Chinese communities. What is this special charm that is efficacious and spectacular across space, time, and cultural boundaries? What is the specific Chineseness represented by Chinese opera? How is Chinese opera used and abused, referenced and criticized, loved and hated by all these identity performers? This study is an attempt to explore, from various perspectives and points of entry, all these aspects of Chinese opera and to address the dilemma of operatic identity performance.

## STAGING AN IDENTITY IN THE CONTACT ZONE

All identities—be they cultural, ethnic or national—owe a great deal to performance. Such staged identity is essential in any “contact zone” of international negotiation or multicultural collision. By contact zone I mean a geographical, social, political, and ideological site

brought into being in the clash of at least two cultures or two ideologies; it is the typical gray and muddy “intercultural” area, which is nurtured by negotiation, assimilation, and conflict. In postcolonial studies, the contact zone is where colonization takes place, where hybridity or *mestizaje* happens. In this work, I use the term contact zone to indicate where two or more cultures encounter each other in a rather intense (but not necessarily colonial) way: San Francisco’s Chinatowns (both that of the Gold Rush era and the contemporary one); late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Japan, where Chinese students learned about Westernization in a mediated way; Chinese coastal cities during the late Qing, where Western impact could be felt most directly; and certain imagined spaces created by different cultural discourses, ideologies, and practices, such as the discursive space created by late Qing political reforms, the theatrical space created by late Qing rebellions, and the cyberspace created by today’s globalized media.

Hybridity, resulting either from colonial policy or simple cultural interaction, seems inevitable in the contact zone. Robert Young points out the racist connotation of the original concept of “hybridity,” a botanical term for interspecies grafting or interbreeding. The racial hierarchy provided for in the “Great Chain of Being” placed certain races at the bottom of the human family, implying that mixing resulted in impurity.<sup>4</sup> Paradoxically, hybridized products of various sorts were also often seen as improvements over pure originals. In postcolonial discourse, hybridity is used as a self-consciously anticolonial strategy by many activists. In the context of performance, hybridity implies “fusion” instead of “intercultural” performance, as when, in the intercultural paradigm proposed by Richard Schechner, “two or more cultures mix to such a degree that a new society, language or genre of art emerges.”<sup>5</sup> Despite the fruitfulness and potential of hybridized performances, my focus here is on the antihybrid nature of Chinese opera in the various contact zones I address in this study. One familiar image appears: the lotus flower, rooted in deep mud but holding its bloom aloft in fresh clean mid-air. “Unmarred by putrid mud” (*chu wuni er buran*) is a favorite image of Chinese literati to describe the concept of integrity.<sup>6</sup> I seize on the lotus image both for its familiar symbolism and for the irony it embodies. The

filth, the repulsiveness, and the stench of the mud are exactly what give the lotus strength and vitality. The pollution is the source of its purity. The contradictory nature of the lotus flower image is important in this study. In various contact zones, Chinese opera is often figured as a lotus flower resisting hybridity and assimilation and used to represent a unique, intrinsic, pure, and stable Chinese identity. Yet without the threat of contamination such purity could not be envisioned or celebrated. The chaos of the muddy contact zone puts Chinese identity at stake, but it also provides the necessary medium for the elevation of Chinese opera. Through Chinese opera, a staged Chineseness appears pure, authentic, unpolluted, and eternal against the background of its sullied but organic contact zones.

A performative identity should be seen as comparative and relative, contingent upon the particulars of counterperformance in the contact zone. Searching for a national and cultural identity is not a uniquely Chinese endeavor; the problem of defining and articulating identity is a universal anxiety. Therefore, for instance, the issue of Chinese identity in the New World was not just the typical struggle of an ethnic minority, but it took place in the context of the search for a collective American identity, whether multicultural or racist-supremacist. Shared Americanness was constantly in flux because of the rather unstable demographic makeup of the immigrant country and the search for a stable Chinese, Asian American, or American identity as a whole was and is essentially a desperate task. The only temporary escape from identity crisis comes in performance, especially in something like Chinese opera, which offers an illusion of cultural stability and permanence. Similarly, in late Qing China, the tension between Han Chinese and Manchu-ruling elite was complicated by the presence of the new barbarians, the Western imperialists. The identity performance for Han Chinese depended upon the definition and performance of barbarians.

Writing about religious ceremonies, Clifford Geertz defines the “cultural performance” as one that members of a group reserve specially to “exhibit to visitors and to themselves.”<sup>7</sup> It is important to keep this notion in mind and to consider the Chinese identity performances discussed here as designed to be viewed by oneself and by others and to be evaluated and negotiated against other performances in the contact



zone. The multiple Chinese performances by Chinese and non-Chinese are united around a notion of Chinese opera as uniquely capable of stabilizing identity in various contact zones. Chinese opera is a textbook, a history, a proof, a truth, and an ideal for Chinese theatrical and paratheatrical performers. Chinese opera on the one hand is the most malleable and adaptable weapon in any conflict; on the other hand, it is stable, solid, pure, beautiful, and eternal. It is what Chinese *should be*. It is the most exemplified Chineseness. Theatre and life imitate each other to create the eternal truth of Chinese identity. Such model Chineseness, when taken out of its theatrical context and embodied by amateur performers, has real-life effects in times of turmoil. Theatrical Chineseness authenticates and legitimizes rebels and revolutionaries in their ethnic nationalist uprisings for themselves (performers) and the believers (spectators), because it plays against the background of identity loss. Centuries-old opera performance is recuperated as a rehearsal for such real-life events.

On the other hand, as the distilled, most concentrated, and most ethnic experience of all Chineseness, Chinese opera becomes a double for Chinese culture and the Chinese people. As a tokenized object, Chinese opera is easily recognized, enjoyed (or satirized), and consumed. Discourse on Chinese theatre inevitably becomes discourse on Chinese culture and people; as demonstrated in the nineteenth-century Sino-American encounter in California, comments on opera encompass art and ethnography, theatricality and life, artificiality and truth. Geertz terms ethnographers' "inscription" on social discourse: writing turns a passing event into permanent inscription that can be reconsulted.<sup>8</sup> Here the discourse on Chinese opera functions as a double inscription: an inscription not only on Chinese art and culture but also on American art and culture and non-American art and culture. However, in the latter example, the base for such double inscription—the original inscription, American theatre and culture as a norm—is essentially a performance itself. To perform American is to perform Chinese negatively. The double marginalization of Chinese opera—both under racial discrimination and under the antitheatrical prejudices of non-Chinese people—promotes xenophobia on the one hand, but on the other hand it reflects the critics' own insecurities and anxieties in identity performance.

Moreover, the practice of female impersonation adds gender ambiguity to racial complexity for the Chinese stage. Chinese opera thus invents a fantasyland where gendered cultural and ethnic voyeurism is satisfied. Despite all sorts of oppression and marginalization, Chinese theatre manages to negotiate a space to represent eternal Chineseness in the face of gendered ethnic voyeurism and cultural tourism in the United States, in the face of Western colonialism in a weakened Chinese empire, and in today's globalized media. The lotus bloom emits its fragrance in spite of and thanks to the mud.

### CHINA, CHINESE, CHINESENESS

*Zhongguo*, the most common name for China among Chinese, means “central states” or, in later usage, “the central state.” The term appears in ancient texts such as *The Book of Documents (Shangshu)* and *The Zuo Tradition (Zuozhuan)*,<sup>9</sup> both composed more than two millennia ago. Its long history epitomizes an official, imperial way of viewing Chinese geography and demographics from the “center,” the Yellow River region. In today's geography, this “central” view is actually a “northern” perspective. Although “central” Chinese culture certainly spread southward under the successive dynasties of the empire, with Nanjing and other cities in the Yangtze valley serving as the nation's capital from time to time, the notion of an inferior south lingers in the popular imaginaire. No matter how the worldview changes otherwise, this central positioning is an image that Chinese hold dear. Yet throughout history, Chinese rarely referred themselves as the Central State(s) (*Zhongguo*), instead adopting dynastic names like Tang, Song, and Qing to represent themselves in international settings. In other words, centrality was an ideology, a cultural belief, but it was not part of the official name for the country. Only in 1912, when Sun Yet-sen's revolution successfully overthrew the Qing government, did “Central State” become the official name for the country. *Zhongguo* (China/Central State) is short for *Zhonghua minguo* (Chinese Republic), the Republic of China.

Historically, the Chinese people have defined themselves from a central position as well. As a state comprising a Han ethnic majority and multiple minorities, China identified Han groups with the

political and cultural center and regarded ethnic minorities as marginal, uncivilized, non-Chinese *barbarians*. In the nineteenth century, for instance, when Western colonialism and imperialism first challenged the geographical concept of centrality, many Chinese official policies for dealing with the new “barbarians” were indeed conceived within traditional notion of central positioning. By situating the self in the center and representing ethnic others as uncivilized and barbaric, Chinese have formulated something that Edward Said might call a Chinese version of *Orientalism*, or “internal Orientalism”—Orientalism in the Orient.<sup>10</sup> This quasi-Orientalist discourse is seen in both official policies and in popular imagination, as in local drama. Throughout this book (especially in chapter 2), I use the word “barbarian” to reflect this Sino-centric and Han-chauvinistic mentality, not to diminish any minority or foreign race and culture in the intrinsic sense. In the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911), when the Manchus, an ethnic group from northeastern Asia, took over China for more than two centuries, both the central positionality and definition of Chinese faced severe threats. In the late Qing, when Western imperial powers aggravated the calamity, the Chinese confronted a double barbarism. Determining who was more barbaric and who more Chinese became a major task for literati, reformists, revolutionaries, dramatists, and actors. In the contact zone, where other cultures might exercise cultural and ethnic superiority, this endangered centrality opened the way for the performance of Chinese identity through opera.

In the twentieth century, Chinese centrality was further complicated not by barbarians but by the Chinese themselves. After the split of the People’s Republic of China and the Taiwan-based Republic of China in 1949 and after the rise of economic powers in Taiwan and Hong Kong, both Chinese identity and Chineseness came to be negotiated and performed in ways unprecedented in the nineteenth century. Especially at the turn of the new millennium, a globally sanctioned Chineseness is at work to represent all Chinese on the world stage, even as an image of local and national Chineseness has been instituted to respond to local and national politics and cultures. In order not to confuse the various kinds of Chineseness, in the final two chapters of this study I use the terms mainland China or

Mainland (for PRC), Taiwan (for ROC), and Hong Kong (for this special territory of PRC) to refer to differences in regional and cultural positionality. This is intentionally to go beyond the current political and ideological debate over China's unity and to bring my analysis to a global level.

### CHINESE OPERA, CHINESE THEATRE

Loud drums and gongs, high-pitched falsetto, colorful painted faces and embroidered costume, ferocious fighting and delicate dancing—Chinese opera provides a set of vivid visual and aural images of China. “That the Chinese are extravagantly fond of theatrical representations, is well known to all who live in China,” claims Arthur Smith, an American missionary who spent more than two decades in China at the end of the nineteenth century. Smith places Chinese theatre, people, and lives under the comparative lens of his particular microscope.<sup>11</sup> Setting aside Smith's somewhat supercilious attitude toward his subject, we might attempt to evaluate his judgment anew. Are theatrical representations especially characteristic of the Chinese? Are the Chinese especially fond of their opera? Perhaps this is the question we should ask: why are Chinese people always perceived through their theatre?

The naming of *Chinese opera* itself is problematic, as it is a comparative term reflecting Western cultural hegemony. Euro-American theatre, especially since the rise of realism, has drawn a clear distinction between drama, dance, musicals, and opera. Traditional Chinese theatre (Cantonese opera, for instance) indeed confuses the categories of Western performance, and the best way for some interpreters to understand it was to mark it as a “translation,” a Chinese version of Western opera. Naming Chinese theatre according to its Western counterpart is to negate its unique nature as a performance genre. What English term is most appropriate for traditional Chinese theatre? Opera? Musical? Melodrama? Dance? Mime? Acrobatics? Or just drama? Even if the name can be translated into English, it is still difficult to acknowledge the new concept of Chinese theatre at moments of East-West encounter, as in nineteenth-century California.<sup>12</sup>

The term “Chinese opera,” itself evoking a sense of antiquity, is a result of both Chinese and American theatrical modernity in the early twentieth century. “Opera,” with its elite European pedigree, was part of the international scene in San Francisco when Cantonese opera was first performed. However, as far as I know, “Chinese opera,” was a term rarely used for Cantonese opera in early writings; instead, the latter was usually called “Chinese theatre,” “Oriental performance,” or “Celestial drama.” “Chinese opera,” on the other hand, sometimes meant Western opera on Chinese themes, such as *L’Oracolo* (1915) by Franco Leoni, an Italian opera set in the Chinese quarter in San Francisco.<sup>13</sup> The 1920s saw the first obvious increase in the usage of “Chinese opera” to refer to traditional Chinese theatre in newspapers. The timing coincided with both the establishment of Chinese modern drama and the rise of the modern American musicals.<sup>14</sup> Andrea Most points out that “musical theatre” encompasses a wide variety of forms, including opera.<sup>15</sup> So why doesn’t one call an American musical “American opera” or Chinese opera “Chinese musical”? Regardless of all the technical differences among forms, I believe the real difference between American-style musicals and European-style operas lies in the popular perception of the forms. Musical is for popular audiences, and operas are for the elite; while musicals are a modern American taste, operas are quaint, archaic, and European. Perhaps it was after a distinction was drawn between American drama and American musicals that it became necessary to regard Chinese theatre as Chinese opera. The term “musical,” implying as it does American modernity, was not suitable for Chinese theatre, which was figured as antique and foreign. Opera might be a better term for this alien art.

Moreover, Chinese students’ experimentations in Japan in 1907 (see chapter 2) brought new meanings to Chinese theatre. “Spoken drama” gradually replaced traditional theatre as the mainstream theatre for modern Chinese. The May Fourth Movement in 1919, with its promotion of vernacular literature made traditional theatre even more “archaic.” Although the English term “Chinese opera” is a Western invention, not a translation from Chinese, Chinese modernity has acquiesced in adapting this new concept for traditional Chinese theatre.

What Chinese consider their traditional form of theatre (and what Westerners consider “Chinese opera”) is a dramatic form mixing both songs and spoken lines. Usually arias are rhymed verse and dialogs prose. Music is not optional but essential, as it provides the melody for arias, punctuates movements, and distinguishes theatrical subgenres from one another. Playwrights need to have good knowledge of music; training in singing is the most important aspect of actors’ preparation; and theatre going is referred to as “listening to theatre.”<sup>16</sup> (This emphasis on music helps explain how modern-day Cantonese opera can survive in karaoke parties, a topic that is discussed in chapter 4.) The orchestra—either at the back of or at the side of the stage, but always highly visible—occupies a liminal space but is nevertheless an essential part of the performance. Besides its strong musical component, Chinese theatre’s presentational acting style, symbolic and stylistic movements, simple set and props, and rather elaborate costuming also distinguish it from its Western counterpart. In general, Chinese theatre conventions prescribe very different means for the representation of the “real.” Such differences have often irritated non-Chinese critics and prompted them to make negative comments. Strangely, the focus of such comments is not exactly on the artistic or cultural differences but on a *lack*; the focus of attention has been not the special features that Chinese theatre has but the expected Euro-American theatre features that Chinese theatre does not have. As explained earlier, artistic critique shades into cultural critique and gendered performance critique inspired gendered ethnocentrism. Such double inscription not only suggests the backwardness and primitivism of Chinese but also extends the notion of a Lacanian lack from Chinese theatre to Chinese people. The “lack” renders Chinese theatre effeminate, and Chinese people cannot escape the fate of emasculation. This gendering of ethnic stereotypes was an enormous obstacle for Chinese pioneers in California and for Asian American playwrights, but it has also been utilized deftly as a means to increase the visibility of Chinese on the global level.

Besides music, physical activities underlie another general classification of Chinese theatre. The “civil drama” (*wenxi*) emphasizes singing and speaking, with light dancing and miming, and usually

involves domestic affairs, whereas the “martial drama” (*wuxi*) includes lively acrobatic movements, such as fighting with or without weapons, and usually revolves around military issues. The two kinds of drama overlap to a certain degree, but one can sense a general difference, just as one can distinguish an “action movie” from a romantic comedy with some fighting scenes. There are of course magic shows, dance pieces, and skits that involve purely physical activities without much narrative. Compared with Western drama, both Chinese civil and martial plays appear much more physical.<sup>17</sup> In general, both music and action are important, so much so that critical reception of Chinese opera has sometimes erred in seeing it as little more than acrobatic skits with gorgeous costumes.

Having challenged the definitions of “China,” of “Chinese,” and of “Chinese opera,” how am I to proceed? Fully aware of the term’s shortcomings, I continue to use “Chinese opera” throughout this work. By doing so, I emphasize the performative aspect of the operatic discourse; I also stress the insatiable desire to produce a fixed definition for China and Chinese in Chinese opera. Chinese opera is encompassing, including all kinds of qualities imputed to the genre, even as the genre is imagined as something pure and unchangeable, as a national treasure or museum piece. Like the lotus metaphor I adopted earlier, Chinese opera represents a fixedness and eternity about China and Chinese that can survive the impurities of the contact zones.

### LOCAL, NATIONAL, TRANSNATIONAL

On the basis of musical conventions, length, and other criteria, Chinese opera has traditionally been divided into *zaju* (variety plays, from the northern music tradition) and *chuanqi* or *nanxi* (marvel plays or southern drama, from the southern music tradition). In the mid-Qing period (roughly the eighteenth century), one begins to see the rise of multiple regional operas<sup>18</sup> and the decline of the southern genre *kunqu* (kun opera), which had been the leading operatic form during the Ming (1368–1644).<sup>19</sup> Beijing opera and Cantonese opera, both subjects of this book, originated as regional forms. In contrast to elite *kunqu*, composed by famous literati, regional operas

were often composed and written by anonymous writers or opera practitioners; they were also full of local color and contemporary references, and devoid of difficult literary allusions. While it is almost impossible to preserve voices from the populace in this time, local theatre offers a rare opportunity to view contemporary images of history.

What American audiences saw as the first Chinese theatre was a dramatic genre called Cantonese opera (*yueju*), one of the most popular regional forms from the Guangdong and Guangxi regions.<sup>20</sup> Historically, these regions are typically associated with “southern barbarians” (*nanman*), and Cantonese opera has never won national approval, despite its popularity in southern China and in the Chinese diaspora. Beijing (Peking) opera, a local form originally from Anhui province, had a chance to develop in the capital Beijing, there gradually shedding its local, provincial associations and acquiring the name of “capital opera” (*jingju*); later it would achieve the status of “national opera” (*guoju*).<sup>21</sup> On the world stage nowadays, it tends to be regarded as *the* Chinese opera, replacing its nineteenth-century pioneer forebear Cantonese opera. Besides the appeal of the style itself, the importance of the city of Beijing as a cultural and political center and the Chinese government’s policy of adopting the capital’s Mandarin dialect as the national language also supported Beijing opera’s status as a national form. Mei Lanfang’s 1930 tour of the United States, advertised as Chinese national opera, perhaps also confirmed the American conception of Beijing opera as the orthodox Chinese opera.<sup>22</sup> However, in the nineteenth century, it was Cantonese opera, a local “lowly” form, transcending its national reputation, forging ahead of “national” Beijing opera, and waging a guerrilla war for the right to represent Chinese on the international frontier. This is what the New World knew as *the* Chinese opera, as *the* Oriental theatre in the nineteenth century. By approaching the world’s newest metropolis, San Francisco, Cantonese opera advanced to modernity before any other Chinese operas. California’s local response to the art created a transnational contact zone, whose implications would be felt in generations to come, particularly in the works of contemporary Asian American playwrights. This phenomenon has to be balanced with the national status of Beijing opera,



another form of Chinese opera, to represent China on the world stage today, as the popularity of Cantonese opera seems to reside in its localness, both at home and in diaspora.

In late Qing Chinese coastal cities—another multicultural, multi-ethnic contact zone—Chinese opera played a different role. While Chinese laborers and Cantonese opera performance were engaged in an intercultural struggle in the New World, Western imperialists also embarked on a colonial endeavor in China, creating another East-West contact zone. Generally following historical or legendary stories, local drama during this time reinforced the popularized version of history, while at the same time, with inserted comments on current affairs, it also became a record of contemporary local history and social criticism. Juxtaposed with official policies or elite discourse about contemporary affairs, local theatre preserved voices from the populace and provided a rare glimpse at local history.

The transnational contact zone, whether one finds it in nineteenth-century California or in Chinese coastal cities, demands that temporal distance be balanced by spatial distance in the construction of a historical narrative. This demand informs any effort to reconstruct identity performances in contact zones. The ephemeral nature of theatre makes any writing of performance a reconstruction, an invention, or false memory. Yet the insertion of transnational distance and the engagement of the defamiliarization process can provide a better chance for understanding a local history, as the writing of an “alien” subject in the course of transnational alienation tends to preserve more information as viewed from a historical point of view. Purely local material, though certainly valuable, does not age well in the locality itself. Nineteenth-century Chinese theatre in California, for instance, won a better historical representation because of its international audience. “International” writing is very often more detailed, descriptive, and in some cases, even more objective, because of the observers’ own alienation from the art; on the other hand, such perspective might be lost in local (Chinatown) writings because of the writers’ familiarity with the subject. In order to get a closer look at Chinese theatre in nineteenth-century San Francisco, one indeed needs to go further, to leave Chinatown, and to acquire a transnational and transcultural perspective. As Brecht’s

actor observes himself on stage in order to create the alienation effect, the writer of a local subject has to become his own observer from a transnational perspective. Throughout this work, the *transnational alienation* process provides a historical view of localness.

### THE INCOMPLETE RACIAL SPLIT

Identity performance cannot function without an incomplete split. Brecht's actor experiences a split within himself: he is the observer and observed, the narrator and the narrated. Lacan's subject also experiences a split within himself when he recognizes his own image in front of the mirror. The moment of identification is also the moment of fragmentation and negation. The "I" recognized can never be the "I" who identifies himself as the mirrored image. For Kristeva, the split is the separation between the body and the corpse (nauseating waste), but what is jettisoned is in fact part of the body. Fanon's body has a split between the black skin and white mask: he learns to despise his black skin with the white gaze, but he cannot escape his own blackness. He is both the perpetrator and the victim of racism. In "cultural performance," states Geertz, the performer is also the viewer, and the performance is for self as well as for others. The split is obvious in theatre: spectacle, according to Guy Debord, has the separation effect, as one is "held up as a self-representation to the world, and is superior to the world." Spectacle bridges these divisions but unites them in separateness.<sup>23</sup> The unique presentational style of Chinese acting inevitably inserts a split between the actor and the role, as the former always introduces the latter on stage. Whatever its theoretical context, the split functions as a constant in the sense that it both separates and connects; the jettisoned is also part of the self, the inferior part of the superior, and the viewer is the viewed. In other words, the split is never complete. The incomplete split is essentially what makes performance and identity possible; it nurtures ambiguity, and it is exactly the gray area where identity performance flourishes. In performances of Chinese identity there exists a similar kind of ambiguous split, a "racial split" that separates *this kind* of Chinese and *that kind* of Chinese. I term it "racial" because it is concerned with a national/racial identity, though in

truth the real “racial” difference occurs only in performance. The racial split also becomes the divide between actors and spectators, so *this kind* of Chinese is performing for *that kind* of Chinese, and the self is performing for the other (the jettisoned self). The self and the other are essentially one—Chinese. The racial split is both temporary and incomplete.

Performers need audiences and vice versa. This aspect is the most essential part of Chinese identity performance. Theatre as a whole is a tool that both bridges/separates and unifies/alienates actors and spectators. Zhou Ning explains that in premodern China, while government power hardly reached remote areas except during wartime, theatre provided a rare “public life” for the otherwise family-centered populace in countryside.<sup>24</sup> Theatre conjures up in public space history and familiar stories and reconfirms moral values that people might have learned at home. Like religion, theatre can strengthen a communal belief system and offers hope for the future by citing examples from the past. In this study, I focus on the double function of the split in Chinese theatre: it both connects and separates. Chinese theatre reconfirms the notion of ethnic, cultural, and nationalist identity; it is what China and Chinese should be. Audiences on the one hand admire the “larger-than-life” dramatic characters while on the other hand they try to see themselves in the dramatic representation. They are part of the drama but also lower than the drama. It is the incomplete racial split that makes theatre pleasurable and efficacious.

For actors—mainly amateur actors in this study—the split is deliberately instituted. Traditional Chinese theatre requires long and intensive training. It is a highly demanding art characterized by a professionalism that cannot be faked. However, despite its popularity and the high level of its achievement, Chinese theatre and its performers, like actors in other cultures, have not escaped antitheatrical prejudice. Theatre has always been subject to government control: curfew and censorship were common, but the most effective way to exercise control over theatre was probably through controlling the social status of actors. Throughout history, actors occupied the bottom stratum of society; moreover, they were not allowed to take the Imperial Examinations, the best way to move up the social ladder. Theatre might

possess insurmountable subversive power, but as long as actors are continuously marginalized, the subversivity is nothing but “play.”

In the tradition of Chinese theatre, a kind of amateur practice—*wanpiao*, or *piaoxi* (performance by amateurs)—was common among wealthy elites. This type of amateurism was considered loftier because these “actors” were in it for love of the art rather than for money. Since these amateurs were not in it for financial gain, they were free from the stigma associated with professional actors, and their social status was not affected by antitheatricalism. Many famous literati were engaged in playwriting or even performing, but such practice was usually considered an artful pastime, not a serious profession. The real recognition of professionalism for the elite lay in civil positions. Tang Xianzu (1550–1616), the author of *The Peony Pavilion*, for instance, could fully devote himself to theatre only after he announced his early retirement. To further distance themselves from the profession, the *wanpiao* people were very often major patrons of theatre. *Wanpiao* became a special category in Chinese performance art, implying a practice that was not necessarily (but probably was) inferior to professional art but compensated by a higher social and economic status.

In my study of Chinese identity performance in various contact zones, I find that the notion of amateur performance is often used in this way. For instance, in late Qing revolution-theatre, theatrical conventions (spectacle, costume) authenticated the revolution and transformed these amateur players (revolutionaries) into kings and heroes. Though kings and heroes, they could easily see their own faces in the crowd because of their own origin. It is the understanding of the populace and of the power of the theatrical play that makes the racial split work—now the national heroes are saving the populace, building a new China for the Chinese commons. Spectators, on the other hand, see both the self-representation in the spectacle (the Han Chinese, the real) and the separation (national heroes, the theatrical). With borrowed theatricality and theatrical conventions, these amateurs reinforce certain beliefs that are known to the populace. Their “theatre” unites the populace but at the same time inserts the division that is hierarchy. It links real and theatrical in their separateness. It is exactly the ambiguous and incomplete racial split that makes this kind of revolution-theatre work.

Professional theatre needs an audience; amateurs need an audience as well. Without the virtuosity of professional actors, how does amateur theatre attract its audience? Does the watered-down spectacle and theatricality still work? Paratheatrical performances (the performance around, before and after the show) often come to the rescue and institute a split between the amateur performers and audience. In the case of early twentieth-century Japan, the amateur actors (Chinese students) performed their new drama as a fundraising event for Chinese flood victims, using the occasion as an opportunity to promote modernization, Westernization, nationalist ideologies, and a new theatre (spoken drama). Their alien art form was not subject to theatre or social criticism because of their elite and philanthropist position. A similar situation is seen in today's Cantonese opera in San Francisco. A racial split separates *this* kind of Chinese (affluent suburban Chinese) from *that* kind of Chinese (poor Chinatown residents). The amateurs are performers, theatre patrons, and also philanthropists. The act of charity creates a virtual Chinatown—an imaginary race that is poor, fresh of the boat (FOB) like, and ready to accept charity. The charity recipients (brought in by bus to see a free show) also fill the theatre as the most faithful audience. With a gesture of charity, the amateurs' contribution is not only to art but also to mankind. The *wanpiao* notion of theatre gives them both freedom and power to perform their amateur art. To further the spirit of *wanpiao*, the paratheatrical performance becomes an essential part of the theatre, because it is in the paratheatrical realm where they can perform their roles as charitable people, theatre patrons, cultural ambassadors or preservationists. Promoting new Chinese nationalism and identity becomes the main performance for these amateurs. Their "abuse" of theatre might be the most powerful way to use theatre.

On the Asian American stage, the split is extremely complicated. Asian and American are often seen as occupying two sides of the "hyphen" or two ends of the spectrum of "Asian-American identity." As in Fanon's black skin/white mask complex, Asian Americans' yellowness is pit against Orientalism, but on the other hand, since Orientalism is state-sanctioned, taught by the education apparatus, and filtered through popular media, Asian Americans naturally

acquire such an “Orientalist” gaze toward themselves.<sup>25</sup> Such an ambivalent gaze toward self and other, met by Asian and white American gazes toward them, situates Asian American theatre in the limbo of a binary system. The racial split, though it varies, is essential in Asian American theatre performance. Asian American actors might feel the racial split between the self (Americanized body) and the yellowness of their characters; the non-Asian audience might feel a similar split between the self and Asian actors, not knowing that the Asian actors might also feel an alienation with regard to their own yellowness. To further complicate such racial ambiguity, on today’s global stage we see alliances between Asian yellowness and Asian American yellowness, both responding to an Orientalized yellowness. Every alliance creates a new split, a new ambiguity, a new fertile ground for identity performance.

#### TOKENIZED CHINA IN ITS GLOBAL ASPECT

At the turn of the twentieth century, California Governor John Hay wisely predicted, “The Mediterranean is the ocean of the past, the Atlantic the ocean of the present, and the Pacific is the ocean of the future.” Half a century later, Ernest S. Dodge saw the increasing possibility of embracing the Pacific: he saw the Pacific as “a highway and not a barrier,” perhaps easier to cross than the mountains. Moreover, he considered it a “region which will become ever more important to the world we live in.”<sup>26</sup> As we can see clearly, the “future” is definitely here, now. As I write, APEC (Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation) has just finished its summit at Busan, Korea. China holds the keys to the world’s economy: it provides raw material, labor force, and a large consumer market; therefore, it is hardly a surprise that after visiting the summit meeting, President Bush spent time in China trying to establish better Sino-American economic ties. The awarding of the 2008 Olympic Games to Beijing has boosted Chinese nationalist pride, and China has been feverishly cleaning up the old and unrepresentable while constructing a new Chinese image for the world. The Olympics, a grand theatre with international performers and spectators, will make China an even more “present” nation. The splendid “celestial drama” will regain its glory. Also at this point,