Flying Dragons, Flowing Streams

Music in the Life of San Francisco's Chinese

RONALD RIDDLE

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FOREWORD BY
H. M. LAI

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Foreword

When Chinese pioneers first left their native Pearl River delta region to establish a Chinese American community in California during the mid-nineteenth century, they also brought along a number of elements of Chinese culture. One of these, the music theater, was soon established in the New World, sped somewhat by events in their native Guangdong where, concurrently with the Taiping Rebellion, Cantonese opera actor Li Wenmao had led an armed uprising against the Chinese imperial government in 1854. Because of this involvement, the authorities banned performances of the opera, and it had to lead an underground existence until 1868 when the ban was lifted. Thus, for more than a decade, the repertoire could only be staged publicly abroad where operatic troupes did not have to fear official retribution. The west coast of North America, with a large concentration of Cantonese, was one of these refuges. Here the opera became established and played a prominent role in the Gold Mountain (the Chinese term for California) musical scene.

After the first introduction of the Chinese opera to America, society in China experienced great changes. This was also reflected in its music. For example, during the first part of the twentieth century, a form of chamber music, now known as Guangdong music, developed from the music used to accompany Cantonese opera performances. Western instruments such as the violin and saxophone were introduced into Cantonese musical ensembles. Chinese musi-

cal compositions began to adopt some Western techniques. Arrangements of classical and folk instrumental orchestral compositions, as well as popular songs and music, also became popular. In parallel to these developments, the Cantonese opera, which during the nineteenth century was very similar to the Peking opera in style, evolved into one which has strong regional characteristics and uses vernacular Cantonese. All these changes in the mother country were reflected in the music and music theater activities among the Chinese of America, although changes in the New World usually lagged behind the mother country by a few years, and when introduced, were selectively accepted and adapted to local conditions.

Being a small ethnic minority in Western society, Chinese Americans were also greatly influenced by the Western musical tradition. During the nineteenth century, the chief instigators of these changes were the Protestant missionaries with their church hymnals. With increasing Americanization during the first part of the twentieth century, many, especially the younger generation, forsook the music traditions of their immigrant forebears for the popular and symphonic music, brass bands, and dance orchestras of the West.

Thus both the Chinese and Western traditions played significant roles in shaping the course of development of Chinese American musical life. For the most part, these two musical cultures coexisted side by side in the Chinese American community.

In the past, there has been little or no scholarly study of this interesting sector of Chinese American culture. Hence Dr. Riddle's research is a pioneer effort. His work presents insights which have been gained through personal experiences and observations, and provides rare opportunities for the reader to glimpse the Chinese American musical world. It is also a timely study, since Chinese American society is now undergoing rapid changes and cultural institutions existing today may disappear or may exist in the future only in greatly modified forms. For these reasons, Dr. Riddle's study is a meaningful analysis of the historical development and current status of Chinese American musical life which should be of interest to musicologists, to students of Chinese American history and society, and to general readers interested in the development of a fascinating facet of one of the components making up the mosaic of America's multi-ethnic, pluralistic society.

H.M. Lai

Preface

What follows is a social history. It offers a beginning toward understanding the musical culture of America's Chinese, through an examination of the musical life of their oldest and largest community. It is only in recent years that the musics of American urban minority groups have engaged the research attention of ethnomusicologists. Investigation in this area has been antedated by a half century of research on the music and musicians of one specific urban musical culture, that of black Americans, particularly as regards jazz. But other minority groups in cities have had to wait until the 1960s, for the most part, for scholarly attention to their music and its role. Even today the material that has seen print consists of only a handful of articles, plus several song collections, mainly of European folk musics in American cities.[1]

There is no question as to the usefulness of such literature, scant as it is, in the understanding of American music as a whole; but it provides little in the way of a precedent or model for the investigation of the musical culture of America's urban Chinese. These quiet dwellers in cities-within-cities, virtually walled off from the rest of American society in past decades, have inhabited this soil in sizable numbers since the 1850s—thus long predating the large-scale immigration of other minority groups whose musical retentions and syncretisms have been more extensively studied.

Despite their long history on these shores, the Chinese are only recent arrivals with respect to the perceivable effect that American urban life has had on their musical culture. The apparent paradox of long-time settlement and short-time musical change among the Chinese is explained in part by the profound differences between Western and Far Eastern conceptions of music and the barriers to stylistic interpenetration that result from highly disparate notions of melody, texture, rhythm, and tone color. But this is only part of the story, and perhaps a smaller part. What has made America's Chinese unique among all immigrant groups of large population has been this group's tendency, until recent years, to regard its American experience as temporary—as a sojourn rather than a settlement. Thus few cultural developments have taken place other than those that have been carried over from the homeland. In an all-male society of laboring sojourners, there is no passing of culture traits from generation to generation on American soil, simply because there *is* no "generation to generation," only arrivals and departures. Exceptions exist to this disjunctive pattern—and certainly it does not hold true in the present day—but generational discontinuity has kept America's Chinese music in a corner by itself throughout most of its history. I have accordingly emphasized this feature of Chinatown's music in my introductory and concluding chapters, and it is naturally intrinsic elsewhere in the study as well.

I should like to express my gratitude to a number of people who have given me inspiration and help in the preparation of this study.

The encouragement and useful suggestions of Bruno Nettl have been invaluable every step of the way. Two other University of Illinois faculty members have offered helpful insights to me: musicologist Alexander L. Ringer and anthropologist Lawrence W. Crissmann. Charles Hamm of Dartmouth College was the first to whom I mentioned the idea of this project, and I have enjoyed his support and sympathy from the beginning.

Much of the historical research in this study was carried out in the libraries of the University of California, Berkeley. I am particularly grateful for help from the staffs of the Bancroft Library and the university's Newspaper Library. Other assistance was genially given at the California State Library in Sacramento. At the San Francisco Public Library I have benefited from the kind and expert

suggestions of Gladys Hansen, Special Collections Librarian. I also wish to acknowledge the assistance of Patricia Bryant, reference librarian of my own institution, New College of the University of South Florida. Maria Russin Ivancin, my research assistant at New College, gave invaluable help as the manuscript neared completion.

Much of the information in this study comes from field work in San Francisco's present-day Chinese community. Literally hundreds of individuals have aided me in this search. My largest debt and warmest thanks are to Mabel L. Quon, of the Nam Chung Musical Society, who, over many years, has provided valuable information and has helped open many doors to me for further field research. It is to her that this book is dedicated. She has also read portions of this study and given numerous useful suggestions. Others who have read and generously offered comments on parts of the manuscript have been Him Mark Lai, Lim Lai, and James P. Wong.

Among the informants who have graciously responded to my questions have been: William Au, Bruce Bartholomew, Therese Bartholomew, Mary Chan, Joyce Cheng, Larry Cheung, Sherlyn Chew, Thomas Chinn, Lambert Choy, Anthony Dong, Chung Fong, Herbert Fong, Harry Ho, David Huang, Kenneth Joe, Munwu Chau King, S. T. Kwan, Marks Lamm, Benjamin Lau, C. C. Lee, Ning Lee, Ting Lee, David Ming-yueh Liang, Lawrence P. L. Liu, Reno Liu (Gil Yiu-nui), Wilma Pang, C. Y. Peng, Yim T. Quan, Thomas Tong, Betty Wong, Ernest Wong, Shirley Wong, Sidney Wong, Victor Wong, William D. Y. Wu, Winston Wu, Mina E. Yee, Richard Yee, and Samuel Yuen. I am deeply grateful for the kindness of these and the many others not listed. Whatever merits lie in this study's coverage of recent history are largely the result of their help. For deficiencies and misinterpretations, however, I claim full responsibility.

Special thanks are due my editor, Ann Pescatello, who has helpfully stimulated both my thinking and my pace of activity as the study grew into book form.

Lastly, my deep appreciation goes to Anna and Maynard Briggs, my parents, who have been unfailingly helpful and encouraging throughout this project.

A note on romanization: Transliterations into English will be found in several varieties. For Cantonese proper names, I have sim-

ply used the existing spellings which have found currency among Chinese in the United States. I have used the Wade-Giles romanization for words in the Northern (Mandarin) dialect. Though the Wade-Giles system is rapidly being superseded by the pīnyīn system of transliteration, I have retained the former system both because of its continuing wide acceptance and because it appears with some frequency in the quoted sources in historical parts of the book, and I should like to maintain a fairly consistent romanization of at least Mandarin—though no entirely consistent method of romanizing Cantonese has ever been successfully adopted.

NOTE

1. Samuel G. Armistead and Joseph H. Silverman, "Hispanic Balladry among the Sephardic Jews of the West Coast," *Western Folklore* 19 (1960), pp. 229-44; Stephen Erdely, "Folksinging of the American Hungarians in Cleveland," *Ethnomusicology* 8 (1964), pp. 14-27; Jacob A. Evanson, "Folk Songs of an Industrial City" [dealing with the music of Slovaks in Pittsburgh], in George Korson, ed., *Pennsylvania Songs and Legends* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1949); Bruno Nettl, "Preliminary Remarks on Urban Folk Music in Detroit," *Western Folklore* 16 (1957), pp. 37-42; Harriet Pawlowska, *Merrily We Sing, 105 Polish Folk Songs* (Detroit, Wayne State University Press, 1961); Shulamith Rybak, "Puerto Rican Children's Songs in New York," *Midwest Folklore* 8 (1958), pp. 5-20. The progress of urban ethnomusicology in general can be seen in the contributions to the recent volume, *Eight Urban Musical Cultures*, ed. Bruno Nettl (Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 1978).

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Flying Dragons, Flowing Streams

Introduction

THE SETTING

Virtually since its founding, San Francisco has contained a large and significant community of Chinese. Today's Chinatown—whose core comprises about fifteen square blocks in the heart of the city—is a unique ethnic enclave among cities of the Western world. It is the largest concentrated settlement of Chinese outside of Asia, and it has occupied the same geographical location since the first Chinese sojourners were attracted by the discovery of gold in California in 1848.

Once described by Kipling as "a corner of Canton," San Francisco's Chinatown, like most communities of overseas Chinese, is populated almost entirely by immigrants from the southern province of Kwangtung or their descendants; and their dialects and life-patterns reflect strongly those of the province's hundreds of villages or of the capital—Canton—itself. The circumstance for the original surge of Chinese immigration in the 1840s and 1850s was a fortuitous combination of disaster and revolution at home combined with the spectacular attraction of riches to be mined in the golden hills beyond the sea.

Southern China was ripe for diaspora. The urge to emigrate was motivated in large part by social tumult and economic uncertainties

in the homeland. The ruling Manchu dynasty had decayed and declined, and by the middle of the nineteenth century had become notably corrupt and unjust in its administration. The popular unrest that resulted from misgovernment was exacerbated by an ever-diminishing availability of land, owing to population increases, and a devastating cycle of flood, famine, and drought. The economy was racked by inflation, stemming from the Opium War; and native handicraft industries suffered severely from the growing importation of Western goods. The T'ai-ping Rebellion of 1851–1864 brought havoc to all China; and Kwangtung endured a decade of related uprisings in the Pearl River Delta region instigated by the Triad Societies and a dozen years of warfare between Cantonese and Hakka elements, starting in 1856.[1] For thousands of men in the area of the Pearl River Delta, economic dislocations and distress left little choice but to seek work outside of China and to support their families from abroad for extended periods. Many took passage to Southeast Asia, Australia, South America, and the West Indies.

When news of California's gold discovery reached Canton in 1848, America became a prime destination. From the ports of Canton, Hong Kong, and Macao, an ever-increasing stream of job seekers from the small farms and villages of Kwangtung boarded ships for San Francisco. Over 500 men left Hong Kong on forty-four vessels in 1850. By the end of the following year it was estimated that there were twenty-five thousand Chinese in California engaged in mining or manual labor.[2] Their numbers would continue to increase throughout the nineteenth century, to a peak in 1890 of some 107,488 Chinese officially accounted for in America, most of them on the West Coast, after which a forty-year decline would result from U.S. legislation excluding Chinese immigration. From 1882, when the First Exclusion Law was passed, until Exclusion Repeal in 1943, immigration from China was negligible. But from the 1940s to the present day, new waves of immigration have re-infused American Chinese communities with first-generation Chinese.[3]

Chinese immigration in the nineteenth century was of a special character. The new population was almost totally male, and its individuals had no intention of settling permanently outside of China.

> Of the Chinese who came to California at least one-half were married and expected not merely to make their personal fortune but to support a family at home. . . . At this period there was so strong a sentiment in China against any respectable woman leaving home even with her husband that very few went to America. . . . The few who went to California were for the most part . . . women of the working class or women of disreputable character.[4]

Initially, a lack of women was by no means limited to the Chinese community, as the general population of San Francisco and the Gold Rush country was preponderantly male in the 1840s and 1850s, when the sojourning mentality was the rule rather than the exception. However, while San Francisco's sex ratio gradually became normalized among the white community, Chinatown continued throughout the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth to exist as a man's society, its sparse female population generally consisting of either the wives of affluent merchants or young women imported for prostitution and entertainment.

By 1890 there were nearly twenty-seven Chinese men for every Chinese woman in the United States. In the twentieth century this disparity declined only slowly, largely through the birth of Chinese females in this country, as immigration of women was exceedingly rare (almost nonexistent between 1924 and 1943, when even Chinese wives of American citizens were excluded from entry).[5] As late as 1930 the male majority was nearly four to one. Only with the admission of women through the War Brides Act of 1945 and subsequent legislation to liberalize immigration has Chinese society moved toward sexual parity, though men still significantly outnumber women,[6] and a large "bachelor society" continues to exist today among elderly men in Chinatown who never married or were unable to return to families and children in China.[7]

The lack of Chinese women and the immigrants' penchant for return to their homeland has made for a distinctive generational discontinuity in Chinatown. Prior to recent decades, the bulk of the Chinese population considered California as only a temporary home. Even those who stayed for long periods or for life often continued to maintain their families in China, returning to them only for brief visits. Gradually, many Chinese did choose to settle here permanently with families, and very few of today's American Chi-

nese envision a retirement to the homeland. Yet it took eighty years for a significant second generation to emerge in Chinatown; and even today, one finds that most San Francisco Chinese are first or second generation, despite the existence of a Chinese community here for over a century and a quarter.

The first Chinese in California are said to have landed in San Francisco on 2 February 1848—two men and a woman brought by the merchant Charles V. Gillespie. While this date, cited by H. H. Bancroft,[8] lacks convincing documentation, one may note an editorial in the San Francisco *Star* several months later which mentions the presence of "two or three 'celestials' in San Francisco who found ready employment."[9] Soon thereafter, immigration began on a mass scale. In the decade of 1849–1859 an average of 7,100 Chinese disembarked each year and an average of 2,660 returned to China,[10] making for a substantial turnover but a burgeoning growth nonetheless, with the Chinese population in California reaching the number of 22,385—or 19 percent of the state's total population—in 1860.[11]

The attitude of other Californians toward the Chinese in the 1850s was essentially favorable:

> In the first few years the Chinaman was welcomed, praised, and considered almost indispensable; for in those days race antipathy was subordinated to industrial necessity, and in a heterogeneous community where every Caucasian expected to be a miner or a speculator, the reticent, industrious, adaptable Chinese could find room and something more than toleration.[12]

The generally friendly attitude toward the new arrivals can be noted in an announcement in the daily *Alta California* of 12 May 1852 that

> Quite a large number of the Celestials have arrived among us of late, enticed thither by the golden romance that has filled the world. Scarcely a ship arrives that does not bring an increase to this worthy integer of our population. The China boys will yet vote at the same polls, study at the same schools and bow at the same altar as our own countrymen.

As general laborers, carpenters, and cooks, the Chinese were highly valued. Their willingness to do domestic chores and other

jobs scorned by the white man curried much favor in a society lacking women and an established laboring class. As miners they were unaggressive and noncompetitive with the whites, often devoting their energies to claims already abandoned and achieving modest successes by dint of patience and long hard work. Further, they were respected for their quiet dignity and general tendency to mind their own business and stay out of trouble. "In light of the fifty years of intolerance that followed," comments Mary Coolidge,

> the cordiality with which the Chinese were welcomed by the first pioneers is almost incredible. It finds explanation in the necessities and contradictions of the time. In San Francisco the services of the Chinese were indispensable to decent living, and there were few other immigrants who would condescend to menial services or even to manual labor. The city itself had not yet become the prey of politicians and of so-called labor parties; and . . . the predatory hoodlum had not yet been evolved.[13]

Even in this "honeymoon" period of the 1850s, however, early winds of race antipathy and political Know-Nothingism were felt by the Chinese, and discriminatory taxes and regulations were leveled against them.[14] In the 1860s, anti-Chinese feelings increased among many elements of society—particularly among miners and kindred laborers who saw the Chinese as an economic threat—as did the flow of bills restricting and taxing Chinese. Yet the full force of anti-Chinese sentiment was not to be felt until the 1870s. The end of the preceding decade saw the completion of the transcontinental railroad—thus throwing many thousands of Chinese laborers out of work—and the petering out of mining resources. Unemployment mounted among Californians, and the economic slump was aggravated by a flow of new settlers from America's Eastern Seaboard, seeking to escape the economic depression on that coast. Chinese became increasingly subject to verbal and physical abuse on the streets and in the countryside, as white miners, laborers, and farmers alike rallied to the political cry "The Chinese Must Go!" Now vilified for his alien demeanor and dress, his "paganism," and a variety of fantasized immoral, unsanitary, and treacherous ways, the hard-working Chinese became essentially a victim of his virtues. The very attributes of industriousness, frugality, and self restraint that had been admired by the welcomers of