

“The Song of Selling Olives”: Acoustic Experience and Cantonese Identity in Canton, Hong Kong, and Macau across the Great Divide of 1949*

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ABSTRACT: This essay looks into the cultural identity and acoustic experience shared among Canton, Hong Kong, and Macau through “The Song of Selling Olives,” a piece from *Siu Yuet Pak* – a 1950 Cantonese opera adaptation of *Flame of Lust*, a 1948 story broadcasted in Canton (as Guangzhou was known in the Republican era) that soon become a household name across the region. By means of archival research and close-reading, I will explicate ways in which the song appropriates the cultural icon of Siu Yuet-pak and re-invents the tradition of “selling olives,” projecting the boundary-crossing experience among the three Cantonese-speaking areas in a time of frequent exchanges, occasional competition, and potential disconnection from the late 1940s to the early 1950s.

KEYWORDS: Stories on air, radio, Cantoneseness, Cantonese song, popular music, selling olives.

Introduction

On Youtube, one can find several videos about “aeroplane olives” – in which a seller throws packs of olives to customers standing on verandas or balconies.¹ As a by-gone tradition, “aeroplane olives” often appeared in Hong Kong nostalgia films representing the sense of community long lost among flyovers, chain stores, and skyscrapers.² Yet it was more than a spectacular sight involving the action of throwing a pack of snacks precisely onto the hands of customers several floors up – it was also an acoustic experience in itself: hawkers often sang while walking along the streets in order to draw attention.³

The vernacular songs associated with selling “aeroplane olives” – or “white olives” as they were also known – could have been produced rather spontaneously; these songs could have vanished without a trace alongside the waning trade.⁴ Yet the song discussed in this article, called “The Song of Selling Olives” (*mai lan ge* 賣覽歌), is an exception. Surviving on several records, it was originally sung by the famous diva Yum Kim Fai 任劍輝 (1913–1989) for the Cantonese opera *Siu Yuet Pak* (*Xiao Yuebai* 蕭月白), which was based on the famous radio programme known as *Flame of Lust* (*Yu yan* 慾燄). The song is more than a simple ethnographic record of a by-gone street-life custom. It arguably embodies the intra-regional and media-crossing interaction between reproducibility and authenticity of acoustic experience, telling a riveting story of cultural consumption and identities among Canton

(as Guangzhou was known in the Republican era), Macau, and Hong Kong in a time of frequent exchanges, occasional competition, and potential disconnection – that is, from the late 1940s to the early 1950s. In retrospect, the year 1949 not only marks the birth of New China, but also opens a new page for Hong Kong society as well as, to some extent, for the city’s popular music industry. Indeed, the city broke further away from Communist China as stricter border controls and censorship were imposed. This was accompanied by an influx of immigrants, including Shanghai capitalists and talent, which had a huge influence over the film industry and caused Mandopop to set root in the Cantonese-speaking city, becoming a model for the still-emerging Cantopop (Wong 2003: 12–4). While such an account

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1. For instance, see this Youtube video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jpzY6lZikr0> (accessed on 22 August 2019).

2. These examples include, among others, *He Ain’t Heavy, He’s My Brother* (*Xin nan xiong nan di* 新難兄難弟) (Chan 1994).

3. It seems that hawkers selling olives did not merely sing about olives, but sang various other songs as well. One is known as “發瘋仔自嘆” (*Fa feng zai zitan*, A self-pity song from an insane man). The famous singer Little Star (*Xiao Ming Xing* 小明星) learned it when she was young. See Mo (1988: 12).

4. The trade had become less and less popular by the 1980s, if not earlier. And Mr. Kwok, possibly the last hawker of the trade, passed away in 2013. For an account on Mr. Kwok’s legend, see Poon (2009).

of events is commonplace and generally accurate, it has unfortunately bypassed the Cantonese tides in popular culture and specifically in popular music. Such tides in the city and amongst its nearby regions continued to linger regardless of the divide between Communist China and the free world, and contributed to the formation of a Cantonese identity amidst the interfusion between the North – for Hongkongers that would be the Shanghaiese newcomers – and the South. My discussion of “The Song of Selling Olives” and its implications hopes to bring a “regional perspective” alternative to the national discourse and inter-states narratives offered by studies on Modern China or Cold War studies. It may also contribute to a fuller and historically contextualised understanding of what might be called a “Cantonese” identity amidst recent calls for, and resentment of, further integration between Hong Kong and nearby Guangdong and Macau in the blueprint of the PRC’s “Greater Bay Area,”⁵ as well as providing a glimpse into the cultural roots of a continuous regional sentiment that is often expressed through a defence of the Cantonese language⁶ – again highlighting the acoustic aspect of Cantonese identification.

The following discussion comes in three parts. The first part positions the song and productions in the framework of “Cantonese song.” “Cantonese song” is the English translation of the Chinese term “*yue qu*” (粵曲), to distinguish it from Cantopop, which is rendered differently in Chinese. Although there is no conflict, and some might even believe that there is indeed “linkage” between “Cantonese song” and “Cantopop” (Liu 2013: 6), it would be helpful to set the discussion of earlier “Cantonese song” from the relatively greater explored studies of Cantopop, which focus more on the 1970s and after.

It argues that songs such as “The Song of Selling Olives” on the one hand are representative of Cantonese popular music of the 1950s in terms of popularity, formal characters, and mode of production. On the other hand, such popular music tests the general conception of “popular music” in its lack of the “danceable” rhythm and formal repetition that often characterise popular music such as Mandopop and Cantopop. Yet, with high degree of commercialisation and reproducibility, Cantonese song also arguably distinguishes itself from folk music. Nor should it be simply seen as part of or an extended commodity of Cantonese opera, given its media-crossing character. Here the author proposes to study Cantonese song in relation to its “vernacular” aspect, given the dominance of lyrics, as will be elaborated further. Such “vernacularity” is best denoted by the language used (i.e. spoken Cantonese) and the ways in which the narrative is constructed (that is, ways in which stories are “told”). Thus, the second section traces such vernacularity to the cultural practice of story-telling, particularly in its technologised form: broadcasting. Originating in Canton in the late 1940s, story-telling on radio, later crowned “stories on air” (*tiankong xiaoshuo* 天空小說), became phenomenally popular in Hong Kong, Macau, and nearby regions. Such “stories on air” recaptured the folk-based and location-specific institution of the “story-telling house” (*jiang gu liao* 講古寮) in Canton, transforming it into a border-crossing cultural experience shared among Cantonese in Hong Kong as well as Macau. This border-crossing experience is interactive and interdependent, projecting a complex identity of Cantonese that was formed in the particular historical context of the late 1940s and made possible only through the technologised soundscape, as this essay tries to explicate through archival research in periodicals of the three cities. Among these popular “stories on air,” *Flame of Lust* is of particular interest, as it is the original story upon which “The Song of Selling Olives” is based. Part Three therefore carries out a close reading of “The Song of Selling Olives” in comparison with the original story, *Flame of Lust*,

and against the historical context in which this operatic adaptation took place in Hong Kong in 1950, that is, right after the great divide. It highlights ways in which the song on the one hand localises the story after a greater division between Hong Kong and its nearby regions had been imposed, while on the other hand it reinvents the Cantonese tradition of selling olives. The essay concludes with a rethinking of the relationship between acoustic experience and Cantonese-ness – while the acoustic experience being circulated among the three Cantonese cities is yet another example of how soundscape deviates from national boundaries to define social communities. This Cantonese-ness should not be regarded as an umbrella term to make a case for an uncritical celebration of Cantonese identity, but rather as a point of departure to confront the complex ways in which popular culture was consumed and identities negotiated among Hong Kong, Macau, and Canton.

Cantonese song and vernacularity

Two main scholarly directions are prominent so far in studies of “Cantonese popular music.” The first orientation of research has focused on Cantopop. Cantopop has been regarded since the 1970s as Hong Kong-produced popular songs that have gained prominence, overcoming the dominance of Mandopop as well as English pop songs (Wong 2003; Chu 2017). Academic debate on Cantopop thus becomes inseparable from an emerging local identity. While some discern a deep linkage to Shanghai modernity (Wong 2003), others see its cross-regional success in the 1980s and 1990s as a palpable embodiment of the diversity of cultural production and consumption (Chu 2017). In short, Cantopop studies focus more on the second half of the twentieth century, and are geographically Hong Kong-oriented. Theoretically speaking, the “pop” in Cantopop means “popular” in the sense of being opposed to an elite musical world – either in form (i.e., classical music), in language (i.e., Mandarin), or in spatial hierarchy (i.e., national). It is such positioning that gives Cantopop a critical dimension. The second main orientation of studies approaches “popular” more in a folkway sense. This includes research on Cantonese opera and its associated forms, such as Cantonese ballads, “Southern tone” (*nanyin* 南音), and the performance of sing-song girls (*nü ling* 女伶) at teahouses (Yung 2006; Lai 2010; Yu 2014; Cheng 2018). Since the activities of talents and opera troupes have spread over Hong Kong, Macau, Canton, and other Cantonese-speaking areas in the first half of the twentieth century, what has been attended to is a broader geographical soundscape, where records of creative works or the heritage of or reform of various performance practices have become a primary focus of interest (Yung 2006; Yu 2014; Chen 2015). Performances of Cantonese operas, “Southern tone,” and various ballads continue today. Rather than being a vital part of popular culture, however, they are more often seen as part of cultural heritage. Some also consider them to be “marginalised,” as mere entertainment for “old people” (Yu 2014: 21–2; Cheng 2018: 214), and they are consequently not received as “popular music” as they should have been (Yu 2014: 22). Siu-wah Yu further argues that the misconception of Cantonese operas, narrative songs, and ballads as “traditional” and hence “unpopular” was a result of the neglect of indigenous

5. See The Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, “粵港澳大灣區發展規劃綱要” (Yue Gang Ao da wanqu fazhan guihua gangyao, Outline Development Plan for the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area), 2019, https://www.bayarea.gov.hk/filemanager/tc/share/pdf/Outline_Development_Plan.pdf (accessed on 22 August 2019).

6. An example of this defence can be found in activism in Guangzhou supported by people in Macau and Hong Kong. See Tan (2014: 199).

musical forms in favour of “Western” forms among the general public as well as the scholarly world, and as a whole such neglect represents an uninformed grasp of history that might be best explained by Abbas’s notion of “mis-recognition” (*ibid.*).

The common practice of making a new Cantonese song during the 1950s and earlier was to have lyrics written before being put into songs, usually with ready-made tunes. (Wong 2014). Some suggest, however, that the song-making process was more organic: the writer (*zhuanquren* 撰曲人) of the song wrote lyrics and arranged the songs with ready-made tunes, including “melodic models” (*qapai* 曲牌), many of which were derived from Cantonese opera and “eight grand tunes” (*ba da yin* 八大音) (Liu 2014: 6-7). In any case, the common division of labour between lyric-writers and composers is inapplicable to these Cantonese songs. Take “The Song of Selling Olives,” for instance. It was written by the “king of song” (*quwang* 曲王), Ng Yat-siu 吳一嘯. By “written” it means that the lyrics, rather than “the melodic models,” were composed by him. Indeed, there is only a small part in which melodies might have been original: it is a four-beat melody called “The Song of Selling Olives” at the very beginning. But there is little mention of the “composer” in publicity for the song. Then, typical of Cantonese songs at the time, the song was interrupted by speech (*bai* 白), followed by small tunes (*xiaoqu* 小曲) such as “Selling Fried Breadsticks” (*Mai youtiao* 賣油條) and “Heaven and Earth” (*Tianshang renjian* 天上人間). At some point the song even merges into part of a Mandopop song known as “The Remembrance of Autumn” (*Qiu de huainian* 秋的懷念), sung by Yao Lee 姚莉 (1922-2019).

This musical form differs greatly from what is understood as popular music; it is undanceable, and even lacks the repetition that popular music is often “accused” of. In fact, it has prioritised the lyrics and marginalised the composition in such a manner that understanding the meaning-making of the piece seems to be more crucially linked to the “lyrics” rather than any formal repetition. Meanwhile, the very mixed nature of this kind of “Cantonese song” – it has melodies from small tunes of Cantonese origin, but may also have those of Mandopop – has also problematised any presumption of “Cantonese-ness” in the musical form. In fact, even in “An Ode to the General” (*Jiangjun Ling* 將軍令), a well-known piece whose modern Cantonese rendition might be regarded, in McGuire’s words, as an unofficial Cantonese anthem, there is little, if any, “Cantonese-ness” in the music (Yu 2013; McGuire 2018). The music has a Manchurian origin, modernised by musicians in Shanghai before being “Cantonised” when it was adapted into various film versions portraying the well-known Cantonese kung-fu master Wong Fei Hung (Yu 2013: 151-3; McGuire 2018).

Hence, what seems more fruitful here, instead of searching for an essentially Cantonese element in the musical form of “The Song of Selling Olives,” or adapting any pre-existing framework of “popular music” to access the meaning of its “popularity,” is to concentrate on the distinctive character of “Cantonese song” – that is, the Cantonese lyrics. More precisely, it is its vernacularity. The prevalence of lyrics, as explained earlier, is essential to these Cantonese songs, and “Cantonese” here should not simply be understood as a specific “dialect” or language used in singing. It is the soul of the song – “melodic models” or any ready-made tune used or posteriorly arranged according to it. Tradition-wise, Cantonese ballads and “Southern tunes” have a narrative-oriented convention. “Southern tunes,” specifically, are usually sorrowful stories told from the third-person and occasionally from the first and second-person perspective (Yu 2014: 33). The strong inclination to “tell” a story, or adapting a term from the studies of Chinese literature, the association with “oral literature”

(*shuochang wenxue* 說唱文學), is evident and characteristic of many “Cantonese songs.”⁷ They generally tend towards the narrative rather than the “lyrical” side, compared to modern Cantopop. Also added to this consideration of vernacularity is that “Cantonese songs” emerged from a historical background wherein the campaign for Chinese national language and modernisation of Chinese language (in written form, that is, to depose Classical Chinese in favour of the vernacular, the latter of which is heavily based on Spoken Mandarin) were underway. Cantonese song, in this sense, highlights not only “regional” colour and sentiment, but also tensions with the “national line” of the musical world as well as of the socio-cultural scene in its vernacularity.

To proceed further on such vernacularity, and discuss the lyrics of “The Song of Selling Olives,” it is necessary to examine the historical context of story-telling from which the song and *Flame of Lust*, the original story, derived.

Fiction on air: Common acoustic experience in the Pearl River Delta

Story-telling became one of the most common forms of entertainment for ordinary Cantonese from the Late Ming onward. Specifically, a venue known as “story-telling house” was established in Republican Canton for that purpose: a simply-built establishment attracting up to hundreds of people who were willing to pay the story-teller, in Cantonese a “story-telling fellow” (*jiang gu lao* 講古佬), for a good story. Stories being told were not only limited to heroic deeds and romantic encounters from well-known classics, but also included contemporary “urban legends.” Story-telling houses, as one might sensibly assume, become meeting points for their communities and were often surrounded by crowds and hawkers (Liang 2015: 88-90).

Such location-bound entertainment nonetheless took a new turn as story-telling became much-loved radio programming in Canton and extended its influence over Hong Kong and Macau, as will be elaborated later. One of the major story-tellers here is Lee Ngo 李我 (1922-). The story was that Francis Herrys, the CEO of Rediffusion (founded in 1949 as the first commercial radio station in Hong Kong), observed a remarkable phenomenon on the streets of Canton as he paid a visit there: many activities suspended just for Lee Ngo’s story-telling.⁸ Lee’s voice was allegedly the only voice being heard in Canton at noontime. Lee’s programme ran from 12:15 to 13:45 on Popular Radio (*Fengxing diantai* 風行電台),⁹ a time when Hong Kong’s official RTHK radio station was playing Hokchiu ballads, Peking opera songs, and Cantonese ballads among others. It was obvious that the Hong Kong broadcasting industry was lagging behind the diversified programmes offered by many radio stations in Canton,¹⁰ the frequencies and programmes of which were printed in Hong Kong newspapers (see Figure 1). Particularly, *Red-Green Evening Post*

7. The Cantonese practice of oral literature, often carried through singing, can be traced back to the Qing dynasty. See Borotova (2006: 49-50).

8. After this visit, Rediffusion decided to recruit Lee with a very attractive remuneration package. See Lee (2004: 94).

9. See schedules of Lee’s programme published in Canton’s *Guo Hua Bao* 國華報 and in Hong Kong’s *Wah Kiu Yat Po* in late 1948 to early 1949.

10. Based on the observation of Hong Kong newspapers, the Hong Kong audience could listen to the programmes of at least six radio stations based in Canton: Time Radio (*Shidai diantai* 時代電台), China Electricity Radio (*Huadian diantai* 華電電台), Popular Radio (*Fengxing diantai* 風行電台), Reform Radio (*Gexin diantai* 革新電台), Guangdong Radio (*Guangdong diantai* 廣東電台), and New Life Radio (*Xinsheng diantai* 新生電台).

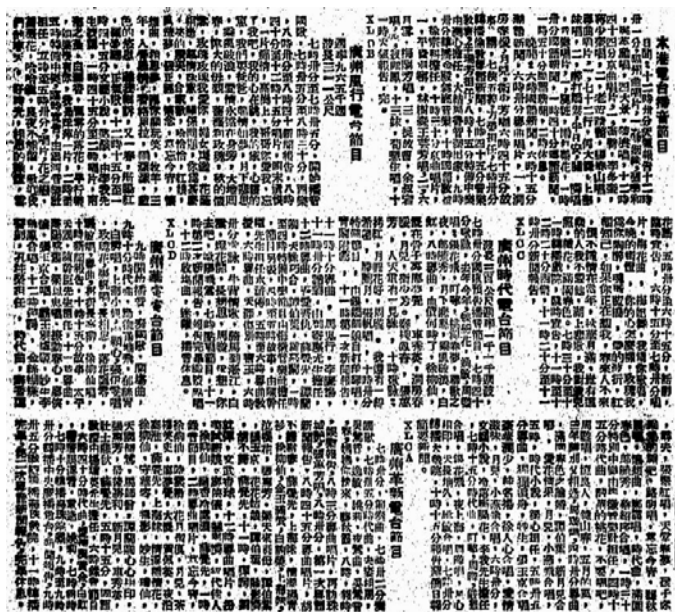


Figure 1. Schedules of radio programmes from RTHK and radio stations in Canton printed in a Hong Kong newspaper. *Wah Kiu Yat Po*, 22 December 1948.

(*Hongliu wanbao* 紅綠晚報), a Hong Kong four-page tabloid edited by the cultural entrepreneur Yum Wu-fa 任護花, who also directed *Crime Doesn't Pay* (1949), the film adaptation of *Flame of Lust*, hosted a column called "Broadcasting from Canton-HK" (*Shenggang boyin* 省港播音). The column devoted as much as two pages of coverage to the radio programmes of the two cities. The radio craze was obvious, and the flourishing broadcasting industry in Canton attracted the Hong Kong audience to keep up with the radio culture there – but not the other way around. Newspapers in Canton made no mention of radio programmes from Hong Kong. This demonstrates not only how the soundscape of the cities were joined together with the aid of broadcasting, and particularly through a modernised folk practice of story-telling, but also how the cultural flow between Canton and Hong Kong was interdependent, rather than one-sided, as was assumed when the "more-developed" Hong Kong seeming to dominate the cultural flow in retrospect.

Macau played another crucial, yet often overlooked, role in this cultural flow among the Cantonese-speaking areas. Since the middle of the nineteenth century, the close connection among Canton, Hong Kong, and Macau has always been recognised by the term "Sheng-gang-ao" (*Sheng Gang Ao* 省港澳) – a term combining Canton, Hong Kong, and Macau with a Chinese character representing each city. This term also seems to indicate the hierarchy among the three cities: Canton was regarded as the most prominent, Hong Kong as the second, and Macau as the last (Ching 2007). The marginality of Macau changed in the 1940s. Benefiting from the neutrality of Portugal during World War II, Macau, then a Portuguese colony, became a refuge for men and women living in nearby Canton and Hong Kong, bringing a significant increase in population (Gunn 2016: 74). Among these refugees were not only spies and entrepreneurs, but also entertainers. Many opera stars, ballad singers, and opera troupes moved to Macau from Hong Kong and Canton, helping to create an unusually flourishing entertainment industry (Lai 2010: 362). This sudden boom died off after the war ended. Contrary to the decline in population, as a contemporary writer observed, was a growth in the transportation industry (Yu 1947: 23). Ferries to many ports in Guangdong region operated regularly on a daily basis. Indeed, even at the close of the Civil War, new flight routes, telephone lines,

and shipping routes were being established with a view to further connecting the city with the rest of the Guangdong region. Here, movements among the Cantonese-speaking areas did not halt after the war when people returned to their points of origin; rather, it continued, and Macau was particularly keen on building on that. Sporting events competing for the Delta Cup (*Sanjiao bu ji* 三角埠際) were extensively reported in local tabloids,¹¹ and restaurants opening branches in Macau advertised themselves as being able to offer a taste similar to branches in Hong Kong and Canton (see Figure 2). When it comes to Cantonese films, which were often shown in movie theatres in the three cities at around the same time, publicity in Macau highlighted proudly, whenever possible, and with an underlying sense of competition, that their screening was a premiere, as in the case of the film adaption of *Flame of Lust*, *Crime Doesn't Pay* (see Figure 3). All in all, there was a close cultural proximity among the three cities, and such proximity was further enhanced by broadcasting. Lee Ngo was recruited by Rediffusion in Hong Kong in late 1949, and following a disagreement with Rediffusion, he moved to Vila Verde Radio (*Lücin diantai* 綠村電台) in Macau, where he had a major influence on the once very small-scale broadcasting industry.¹² Lee's voice therefore represents a "common acoustic experience" of the delta region across the great divide of 1949.



Figure 2. The Luk Yu Tea House once had branches in Canton, Hong Kong, and Macau. This is an article about the opening of the Macau Branch. Sit Kok-sin, the Cantonese opera star, was said to be satisfied with his visit there. *Jornal do Cidadão*, 28 March 1949.

So, what does this "common acoustic experience" signify? First of all, it registers the unique sense of community made possible through "stories on air." Lee's performances were more than just story-telling. He is best remembered for his exceptional skill in portraying different characters with his single voice, imitating the tones of young and old, male and female (Ng 1993: 46-51). In other words, his story-telling was heavily "dialogue" based. It was a casserole of voices if not heteroglossia. Of course, Bakhtin's notion of heteroglossia intends to theorise the deep tensions (or what

11. For instance, see the nearly full-page coverage of the Delta Cup in *華僑報* (*Huaqiao bao*, *Jornal Va Kio*) on 31 July 1949.

12. For an account of the disagreement, see Lee (2004: 120-4). As for the broadcasting industry in Macau, it was small even in 1949, when Macau Radio Club (*Aomen guangbo diantai* 澳門廣播電台) only operated in the evening from five to eight, playing basically records. See "Tonight's programme from Macau Radio Club" (*Aomen guangbo diantai jinwan boyin jiemu* 澳門廣播電台今晚播音節目), *Jornal Va Kio*, 2 April 1949.



Figure 3. *Crime Doesn't Pay* launched its “World Premiere” at Teatro Apollo in Macau, *Jornal Va Kio*, 14 July 1949.

he called “double-voiceness”) among the many “languages” existing in society and hence in a genuine work of fiction, and these many languages stem from different social-linguistic backgrounds that embody different views of the world, rather than appearing superficially as a literary trope representing various “points of view” of different characters. Yet the notion that a given, unified language (which inevitably embeds a world view) is nothing but a pretence, and that heteroglossia seems more possible in “low” genres, inspires us to rethink the story-telling carried out in vernacular Cantonese as a deviation from the “unifying” voice that has dominated modern Chinese culture in either the elitist or national discourse.¹³ Content-wise, Lee did not adapt his stories from folktales or legends of olden times; rather, he created them based on hearsay or observations of contemporary society. He wrote no script. He “made up” his stories on the spot. The spontaneous nature of his story-telling occasionally had its defects: once he presented a long speech by a protagonist whom he had described as mute in earlier episodes. Realising his mistake, he concluded the whole speech as part of the dream sequence of another protagonist (Lee 2004: 20–2). Certainly, Lee intended to highlight his wit when recalling this incident, yet it also showcases the resemblance of his performance with that of “the story-telling fellow” of olden times – except that Lee spoke into a microphone rather than in front of the audience, while the audience was scattered among numerous households and public spaces listening to the radio rather than under the roof of the same “story-telling house.” All the same, the acoustic experience was always new and irreproducible. If soundscape is a major element of “structur[ing] space” and “character[ising] place” (Smith 1994), “stories on air” are examples of how sound contributed to building an “imagined community” that would otherwise have been separated by geographical distance and political reality – the audience listened to a single voice “here and now” regardless of physical boundaries among them. In some cases, where people gathered at various herbal tea shops just to listen to the broadcast,¹⁴ this soundscape actually redefined the cityscapes.

Secondly, this common acoustic experience further reveals the uniqueness of Cantonese vernacular. These “stories on air,” intriguingly, were rendered in modern vernacular Chinese (that is, as previously mentioned, modelled largely upon spoken Mandarin) when published in newspapers or as serialised fiction.¹⁵ The Cantonese-ness, in other words, can only be experienced acoustically and reproduced in media that can be faithful to the verbal-ness and vernacularity of that experience – apart from broadcasting, that would be film (Cantonese films) and Cantonese songs. The latter, as will be elaborated below, should therefore be seen not merely as a re-consumption of a popular cultural icon, but as a further consolidation of that vernacularity and consequently Cantonese-ness.

“The Song of Selling Olives”: Cantonese experience re-visited

It was around April 1950, when stricter control over the border was implemented in Hong Kong, that the once Macau-based New Sound Opera Troupe (*Xinsheng jutuan* 新聲劇團) released *Siu Yuet Pak*, an opera adaption based on the household story of *Flame of Lust*.¹⁶ By then, the common acoustic experience once shared across the region seemed to have halted, as Hong Kong newspapers ceased to list radio programmes from Canton. Lee Ngo, like many of those living in Canton and nearby regions, had moved to Hong Kong. Lee was telling the story of *Black Heaven* (*Hei tiantang* 黑天堂) on Rediffusion. “Heaven” here refers to Hong Kong, which seemed to be the only safe haven for the time being; and “black” meant to expose the dark side of the city. The notion of Hong Kong being a “shelter” against increasingly difficult border crossings reminds us of the historical backdrop of this particular operatic adaption.

To begin with, the transgression of boundaries is a notion already central to *Flame of Lust*. Set in a war-ridden time, the protagonist Siu Yuet-pak was robbed of his family fortune by his brother and sister-in-law. Leaving his hometown with a strong sense of injustice, he plots revenges, commits many sinful deeds, and becomes immensely rich until recovering his conscience and seeking redemption. Locations mentioned – e.g., the North-and-South Lane (*Nan bei hang* 南北行) – in the original story suggest that it was Hong Kong that Siu went to. As for his hometown, a contemporary critic criticizes the 1949 film adaption for not making a “clear depiction” of Canton (Ling 1949: 11–5). Writing for a “progressive” agenda, this critic demands a clear depiction of Canton probably for an idealistic “realism” that he finds lacking in the film as well as the original story. Nonetheless, it is precisely the usage of “a certain town” instead of Canton that renders the motif of transgression with a vague image of home, symbolising the distance from which the audience might have been dislocated. In this sense such vagueness would

13. See Bakhtin (1981: 324–5). The notion of heteroglossia has been used as a theoretical framework for the non-national, and the vernacular, in literary studies. See for instance, Keating-Miller (2009: 105–6).
14. For those who could not afford a radio in their home, herbal teahouses, which were often equipped with a radio, became places where the audience went to follow their favourite radio programmes. See Ng (1993: 46–51).
15. Before *Flame of Lust* was published in book form, it was serialised in *Guo Hua Bao* (國華報) simultaneously with the broadcast. The published form was in modern vernacular Chinese. It is unclear whether this arrangement was intentional or circumstantial. Unlike entertainment and literary articles published in Hong Kong, which were often written in a mixture of Classical Chinese, Cantonese, and modern vernacular Chinese, those published on newspapers in Canton, in the late 1940s at least, were nearly all in modern vernacular Chinese.
16. Border control used to be relatively loose until April 1950, when a new quota system was introduced to tackle the surging number of immigrants coming to Hong Kong from “liberated” China. See Madokoro (2016: 38).



Figure 4. One of the highlights of the show was giving out olives to the audience. *Wah Kiu Yat Po*, 4 April 1950.

have a wider appeal across the Cantonese-speaking regions, as resonance would not necessarily be affixed to a particular place, but would be associated with the notion of movement, which varied among members of the audience. This notion of movement was not entirely geographical, but also class-bound. The story is indeed about how Siu managed to fight downward social mobility, a common experience during wartime. Character-wise, the notion of movement is associated with the way one adjusts amidst change. Siu's decadence and redemption are basically a mental journey of self-discovery. Movement and change, therefore, are present at all levels in this phenomenally popular story. The fact that Lee Ngo told it through numerous personas enhanced the effectiveness of this notion of changeability.

This notion of movement and change, before being adapted to opera, was already translated or visualised into an "icon" when the film *Crime Doesn't Pay* came out. The male protagonist Siu Yuet-pak was played by Cheung Wood-Yu 張活游 (1910-1985), an established film star of Cantonese cinema famous for his portrayal of the scholarly, gentle, and sometimes undecided type. If Cheung's star image manages to soften the repulsiveness of Siu Yuet-pak,¹⁷ then the opera adaptation, in which Yum Kim Fai, the diva famous for "cultural-and-martial roles" (*wen wu sheng* 文武生), even succeeds in turning the male protagonist into a positive role, as will be demonstrated soon. In many cases, by 1950, the story was known by the name of the male protagonist Siu Yuet-pak, rather than by its original title *Flame of Lust*. "Siu Yuet-pak" was more than a character; he became a type representing the sentiments and experiences of the epoch.

In the opera, "The Song of Selling Olives" was a duet sung by Siu Yuet-pak and his companion Yu Lifan 于立凡 (played by Au Yeung Yim 歐陽儉). In this scene, after Siu is forced out of his wealthy family and denied by his presumptive father-in-law, he becomes a hawker selling white olives on the street. As he is selling these olives in the street, he bumps into his old flame in the City of Scent (*Fang cheng* 芳城) – a common idiom for Hong Kong in the popular culture of those days. The song, like the other ten songs in the opera, are new additions that didn't exist in the original broadcast. Not only is the song new, but it has a comical note foreign to the original story. This comical note was accompanied by a "panto" arrangement in which olives were given out to the audience at Hong Kong's Ko Shing Theatre (*Gaosheng xiyuan* 高陞戲院) (see Figure 4), probably as the song was sung by the two protagonists who were trying to sell olives – immediately positioning the theatre audience as onlookers in the diegesis:

(Siu Yuet-pak): 賣欖! Olives for sale!

(Yu Lifan): 賣欖! Olives for sale!

(Siu): 淮鹽大白欖! Salted big white olives!

(Yu): 真係盞! Splendid!

(Siu): 丁香肉桂欖! Clove-and-cinnamon olive!

(Yu): 的確係盞! Fantastic!

(Siu): 仲有夫妻和順欖! Also loving-couple olives!

(In spoken words 插白): 買啦先生 幫襯下啦 大姑娘! Gentleman!

Ladies! Please have a go!

(Yu): 呢總之係好欖 拎出嚟唔使揀 我哋有飛機送貨 唔再兩頭行!

Good stuff indeed! We deliver by jet! Save your steps!

As the song proceeds, lines such as the following continue to address the audience directly from time to time:

嘩嘩想買就企定嚟 我飛來你咪眨眼!

Ok! You want one? Stand still and I will fly it to you in a blink!

The whole notion of giving out olives and addressing the audience as "you" created an immediacy that those who had listen to the radio broadcast, watched the film, or read the novels would never have experienced. Such immediacy stands well with the nature of theatrical performance, for it involves an irreproducible spectatorial experience. On the other hand, this immediacy is built on the everyday experience of buying olives or seeing them being sold. For the audience, seeing this performance is like coming to the theatre for the retelling of a well-known story; it is all about sitting together to revisit a familiar experience. In this case the familiar experience includes "the" story about Siu Yuet-pak and the practice of selling-olives.

Selling olives on the street was a common sight in Hong Kong in the 1950s. There was even a 1959 film called *Loving-couple Olives* (*Fuqi heshun lan* 夫妻和順欖) in which the opera singer Sun Ma Sze Tsang 新馬師曾 (1916-1997) sang several songs about selling olives while playing the role of a hawker. The film even features a "mechanical device" through which the protagonist could deliver olives as high as the ninth floor of a residential building, which began to become more and more common in the city. By the 1950s, "selling olives" had already been carried out with the practice of "flying olives" far and high, and was consequently commonly used in popular culture as an icon of grassroots adaptability and diligence – I will come back to this idea later. This shows a shift from what was depicted in songs about selling olives found, for instance, in *New Cantonese Ballads* (*Xin yue ou jiexin* 新粵謳解心), a collection compiled in 1924 by Liu Yan-tou 廖恩燾 (1863-1954) with numerous ballads depicting customs, brothel stories, and several street professions in Canton. In this collection, a ballad called "Selling White Olives" (*Mai bai lan* 賣白欖) records the selling of olives but makes no mention of any "flying" or throwing notion – which probably did not exist then. What characterises this song, as with later versions of songs about "selling olives" in Hong Kong, is the first-person perspective. The song is sung from the perspective of the olive-selling hawker. Second, it features an array of different types of olives and their health benefits. For instance:

17. There were reports of Cheung Wood-Yu being welcomed and referred to by his fans as "Siu Yuet-pak." See "蕭月白拍攝花絮" (Xiao Yuebai paishhe huaxu, Behind the Scene of Siu Yuet-pak), *市民日報* (*Shimin ribao, Jornal do Cidadão*), 18 July 1949.

佢都消得毒瘴 – 使乜良醫國手! 正話退得災殃! 解悶除煩 全靠甘草四兩!

It treats illness and miasma – so forget about famous doctors! Their claims of defeating diseases! It even cures boredom and nausea, for the little herbs have done the trick!

不若我白欖呢船 清得五臟!

Unlike my white olives here, which can detoxify your body!¹⁸

Regardless of how exaggerate they may seem from today's perspective, these lyrics at least indicate the way in which “olives” were once sold as a “healthy snack,” and this folkway tradition continued into the 1950s. However, while the 1920s version is written in a more detached style, in which the olive hawker appears more as “a hawker” – a type, whose face is vague, whose emotion we know little of – “The Song of Selling Olives” of 1950 depicts a particular hawker who is set in a diegesis. The latter version thus drifts away from a “semi-anthropological” context as a “custom” being recorded and has become associated with a household story against the background of movement, or unsettlement. “The Song of Selling Olives” in this sense is not simply a song about selling white olives. It is also a song about the exiled and the downtrodden.

Yet, like many songs about lower-class professions in the 1950s – e.g., “Song of the Carpenters” (*Mujiang zhi ge* 木匠之歌), also sung by Sun Ma Sze Tsang – “Selling White Olives” does not indulge in self-pity. The misfortune or hardship depicted in the song is rather used as the background against which one's bright spirit is highlighted. Thus, one can see a very different Siu Yuet-pak, one who seems to have a happy-go-lucky attitude towards life – an attitude that would have been unimaginable in the original story. For instance, this is how Siu-the-hawker mentions his own downward mobility in the song:

喂喂有好多入, 佢話我大隻雷雷 點解淪落街頭, 嚟賣白欖 總之係唔使計? 做一日和尚敲一日鐘

Well... Many might wonder why a well-built lad like me has lowered himself to selling olives on the street? I care not; I get along.

(...)

好仔唔論爺田地; 好女唔論嫁裝衣. 祇要辛勤努力 在人間.

A good son cares not how much his forefathers left him; and a good girl mentions not her dowry. I just work hard in this world.

The notion of “working hard” and the grassroots wisdom of biting the bullet are perhaps more closely related to the convention of popular Cantonese songs about lower-class professions than to the original story. It is also perhaps a modification made to portray Siu Yuet-pak more positively in order to match the “cultural-and-martial role” status of Yum Kim Fai, and to bring her closer to the Hong Kong context. On the stage, Yum Kim Fai played the role of Siu Yuet-pak, who left his hometown to make a living in the City of Scent; offstage, Yum, who was originally from a “all-female-opera troupe” in Canton, had attempted to resettle herself and her once Macau-based troupe in Hong Kong since 1947.¹⁹ A song giving out the message of working hard to resettle certainly might strike a chord with a large audience, but it might also be a self-reference well suited to the diva's relocation. In the song, Siu-the-hawker and his companion also sing about many places (e.g., Diamond Hill, Central, Wan Chai, the Peak, etc.) as if they have walked through all parts of Hong Kong to sell olives. These locations, which are entirely new additions to both the original story and to the older version of “Selling White Olives,” serve as indicators for the audience to revisit the familiar practice of selling olives, and of the familiar icon of Siu Yuet-pak in a localised setting.

While the opera was running, it was also broadcasted live on RTHK and Rediffusion. Originally a story from radio, *Siu Yuet Pak* travelled in a circle to return to the air with music and songs added to it. More than simply enriching the acoustic experience, the existence of songs and music prolonged the consumption of *Siu Yuet Pak*: the songs were later produced by Lucky Records, and “The Song of Selling Olives” was broadcasted repeatedly as a single on the radio.²⁰

Conclusion: Tradition and invented tradition

Last but not least, the opera adaptation was a “costume version” (*guzhuang* 古裝) of *Flame of Lust*. Protagonists were dressed in costumes, suggesting that the adaptation sets a war-time story between Canton and Hong Kong in the “distant past.” While temporal schizophrenia is nothing new in Cantonese opera – a more radical example is *Gandhi Meeting Beauty Xishi* (*Gandi hui Xishi* 甘地會西施), in which a beauty of the pre-Qin era meets Mahatma Gandhi²¹ – the consequence of performing “flying olives” and singing out Hong Kong place names in a setting of the remote past must be an intriguing sight, for “flying olives” had probably not yet come into existence then, and the Hong Kong place names would have been unknown, or different. It is almost a perfect example of an “invented tradition” (Hobsbawm 1983). The illusion of “flying olives” being an old practice passed down to the present might have created a stronger sense of togetherness among the audience, or even a false sense of common origin.

As to how acoustic experience and Cantonese-ness was circulated in areas other than these three cities – such as Shanghai, where broadcasting in Cantonese was evident – is perhaps a different story that deserves attention in further research. Based on the study presented above, this essay concludes that Canton, Hong Kong, and Macau had a stronger connection in this regard given that broadcasting made a common acoustic experience technologically possible. The paradox, however, is that now that the olden-days connections among these places are recalled as early examples of the close relationship in the delta area under the call for greater integration in the name of “sharing the same cultural roots” (*wenhua tongyuan* 文化同源),²² little has been mentioned of how the aforementioned cultural proximity was maintained contrary to the will of the “state.” People sharing common cultural icons such as Siu Yuet-pak or “selling olives” were subjects of the Portuguese, British, and Chinese nationalist/communist governments, and the most essential aspect of their proximity was heavily dependent on a Cantonese-ness that is downplayed, if not eradicated, in today's nationalist discourse.

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18. 懺綺龕主人 Chanqikan zhuren, “賣白欖” (Mai bai lan, Selling White Olives), 新粵謳解心 (Xin yue ou jixin, New Cantonese Ballads), 1924. The lyrics here are based on a 1977 photocopy of the original publication.

19. “新聲演至十號暫告灣水” (Xin shengyan zhi shihao zangao wanshui, New Sound Temporarily Cease Performing in Macau after the 10th), 市民日報 (*Shimin ribao*, *Jornal do Cidadão*), 4 July 1949.

20. The lyrics of the song were printed in a big album collecting popular songs of radio in the fifties, which suggests that the song had been broadcasted on its own. See Anonymous (1955: 224–5).

21. For more information about this play, see Cheng (2018: 213–62, 239–40).

22. *Ibid.*, 3.

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