

Cantonese Opera in Canada – Insider Perspective
Memoir (Excerpt from *Paper Shadows* by Wayson Choy, 1999)

The author is a Chinese Canadian man who grew up in Vancouver’s Chinatown. In this excerpt from his memoir, he remembers attending a Cantonese opera performance as a child in the early 1940s.
Read the passage and fill in definitions for the vocabulary words where indicated.

Guarded by two loyal servants, the Gentlewoman, played by Mah Dang Soh, stood ready to sing a challenging aria.

The star tilted her proud, confident head to one side. The audience stirred. I was mesmerized by the lengths of pure white silk cascading from the embroidered sleeves of her emerald-green dress. Her elegant hands rose like the wings of a swan, and the silk “water sleeves” swept backwards. She seemed to be brushing tears from her eyes. Mother told me the lady lived in exile, and was aching to see again her long-lost family, just like all of Chinatown was longing for their own families in faraway China.

“She’s going to sing of her village,” Chulip Sim told me in a more formal Chinese dialect. “*Hm’mo cho-lah. You be quiet now.*”

Vocabulary: “dialect” _____

“*Kay-dee. Stand up,*” Mother said. “You be her guard.”

I stood up, ramrod-stiff like a soldier, at attention.

With long fingers now resting against her cheek, the actress began to pierce the air with her falsetto voice, and the audience – suddenly – responded with silence. We children knew we were not to run about, but to tiptoe, and not to utter even a whisper.

Vocabulary: “falsetto” _____

Listening to the sing-song evocation of Old China, the lyrics conjuring up images of a genteel country life and lost family, of the Gentlewoman’s dream to be in her village home again, our elders and our parents sat transfixed; then, after a defiant vibrating note, which escaped wildly from her throat, and after a final sweep of her water sleeves, the words she sang turned into a call to arms – *Oh no, never give up hope!* – and the actress stood frozen in a heroic pose. Brushing aside their own tears, the audience gave her a thunderous ovation.

Vocabulary: “evocation” _____

Vocabulary: “genteel” _____

Vocabulary: “transfixed” _____

Vocabulary: “defiant” _____

Vocabulary: “ovation” _____

“It’s so Chinese to long for home,” the elders said to each other. Others said, “Oh, for the children to be still Chinese and go back to China!”

Her headdress shimmering with gemstones and pearls, the star bowed to the shouting audience. I bowed back.