

Cantonese Opera in Canada – Outsider Perspective
Newspaper Article (Excerpt from the *Globe and Mail*, 8 July 1922, p. 15, 17)

This is a selection from a newspaper article. The author is a white Canadian journalist for *The Globe and Mail* who attended a 1922 Cantonese opera performance in Toronto's Chinatown.

Read the passage, and fill in definitions for the vocabulary words where indicated. Refer to the footnotes for further explanation where available.

Note that some of the terms he uses to refer to Chinese Canadians (i.e., "Orientals" and "Chinamen") were acceptable in 1922, but have since fallen out of use and are now considered by many to be offensive.

Somewhat Like Exotic Dream is Chinese Drama as Played by Orientals on Bare Stage

With all the hunger of their souls for far-off flowery China, hundreds are reviving memories of their homeland at the National Theatre. Every night the theatre is crowded with eager Chinamen and their families, and not a few Anglo-Saxons may be seen who are finding in the doll-like actresses with their high-pitched, bird-like voices, the quaint native music in a plaintive minor key, and the refreshing delicacy of plot, an intriguing contrast to the eternal sameness of modern musical comedy, **perennial vaudeville humor [1]**, and cinema novelties.

Vocabulary: "Anglo-Saxons" _____

Fragile and dainty as the exquisite hand-embroidered silk garments, passing the powers of masculine description, which screen from sight all but their piquant faces, are the actresses who portray two Chinese girls of noble birth. Despite the "**lily feet,**" **[2]** they move about with a charming grace. A Chinese student at the University of Toronto, who explained the progress of the play to *The Globe*, said that the feet of the actresses were not really bound, but for the purpose of realism they had these, as it were, false feet attached to their shoes – and the long robes furthered the deception.

No curtain drops during the entire four hours of the play, and in the amount that is left to the imagination of the audience the Chinese theatre resembles a great deal the **early Elizabethan stage [3]**.

Another aspect which would probably strike the Western eye is the unabashed presence upon the stage throughout of the scene-shifter, who hovers constantly in the background, now dropping a cushion when one of the actresses is about to kneel, now setting out a tea service, or putting up what is to represent a room, and so on. All the time while on the stage he is a bored, coatless figure with belted trousers and bow tie. But to tell the truth, when one has entered into the spirit of the thing, these trivial issues are lost sight of completely.

The laughter of the Chinese was not boisterous, but a beatific smile was on all visages as they sat dreaming, possibly of distant scenes. At one point in the play, a bouquet of roses was handed up to one of the actresses from an English woman in a box.

Vocabulary: "beatific" _____

The glamorous costumes and the absence of all horse-play or vulgarity are features of these Chinese theatricals which American productions might emulate with advantage.

Vocabulary: "vulgarity" _____

Vocabulary: "emulate" _____

Notes:

[1] perennial vaudeville humor: Vaudeville is a theatrical genre of variety entertainment, popular in Canada and the United States from the 1880s-1930s. Vaudeville humour is typically satirical, and could be mean-spirited. The author is critical of this style of humour.

[2] "lily feet": bound feet. From the 10th century to the 20th century, many women in China, particularly upper-class women, had their feet bound during childhood to look like lotus flowers or lilies. This process permanently damaged their feet. It was outlawed in the 20th century.

[3] early Elizabethan stage: Refers to the minimal scenery or set dressing used during theatre performances in England during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I (1558-1603).