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Cantonese Opera Clubs as *Pake* Culture in Honolulu

This paper examines the complex relationships between music, locality, and identity. Located on the edge of the US geopolitical margins, Hawai‘i—known in Chinese as the sandalwood mountain—attracted a sizable group of Chinese migrant workers to its plantations in the 19th century. Early arrivals, Cantonese from the Taishan and Zhong Shan areas, were skilled in refining sugar from sugar cane. Unlike their compatriots who immigrated to the continental US and endured overt discrimination, Chinese immigrants were eventually able to thrive in culturally and ethnically diverse Hawai‘i by acquiring land and establishing their own businesses. Over time, they became a visible and influential ethnic group in the local community. Regional associations, clan associations, professional guilds, and cultural clubs were formed, allowing Cantonese Chinese to establish bases for their ethnic moorings. Among these cultural organizations were amateur Cantonese opera clubs, which were run by amateur Cantonese music enthusiasts and some professional musicians. This paper focuses on the development of Cantonese opera clubs in Honolulu over a span of more than a century. Despite its regional identity, Cantonese opera assumed an important role in articulating a Chinese identity on the islands. The earliest club was established in the early 1900s and a few of them continue to be active today. New clubs such as the Hua Xia and Zi Jin have been recently established and cater to recent immigrants. This paper, a historical and ethnographic study of Cantonese opera clubs in Honolulu, explores how the unique socio-political environment of Hawai‘i has affected the practice and symbolism of Cantonese opera in Hawai‘i.