

## Lingnan Literati and Cantonese Love Songs

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### I. Introduction

Hu Shi 胡適 (1891–1962) is probably best known for the leading role he played in China's Vernacular Literature Movement (*Baihua yundong* 白話運動) in the early 1900s; the publication of his "Tentative Proposals for the Improvement of Literature" (*Wenxue gailiang chuyi* 文學改良芻議) in 1917 is often viewed as the opening salvo that launched the movement.<sup>1</sup> What is less well known is that he was also interested in the use of regional Chinese vernaculars in literature. In a 1925 preface for the collection *Songs of Wu (I)* (*Wuge jiaji* 吳歌甲集), Hu explicitly argues that promotion of written vernaculars in China should include vernaculars other than Mandarin, and makes particular mention of Wu (Suzhounese) and Cantonese. Of these two, Hu feels Suzhounese has the most potential as a literary language, and he offers several reasons: China's Wu-speaking region is large; use of Suzhounese in writing has a 300-year tradition; all over China people who learn to sing Kun opera have training in Suzhounese; Wu-speaking Shanghai has risen to be China's commercial centre; and the beautiful girls of the Jiangnan region have won the hearts of China's youth. In the following year, in the preface to a new edition of the novel, *Flowers of Shanghai* (*Haishanghua liezhuan* 海上花列傳),

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<sup>1</sup> Jerome Grieder, *Hu Shih and the Chinese Renaissance: Liberalism in the Chinese Revolution, 1917–1937* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970), p. 76.

he argues that the appearance of this novel is another reason to believe Suzhounese has a bright future as a literary language.<sup>2</sup>

In contrast, Hu views Cantonese as having somewhat dimmer prospects as a written language, largely because Cantonese is too distant from other varieties of Chinese. However, he acknowledges that Cantonese already has a significant written tradition, and makes special mention of a collection called *Cantonese Love Songs* (*Jyut Au* 粵謳)<sup>3</sup> by Zhao Ziyong 招子庸 (1793–1847). Hu feels these songs have considerable literary merit, and that they should be viewed as the “centre” of the written Cantonese tradition.

Over the subsequent century, as we now know, Cantonese actually developed more as a written and even literary language than Wu did, but we should not be too critical of Hu’s assessment of the situation in the 1920s—most of his reasons for predicting the brighter future for written Wu were by and large quite reasonable, at least at the time when he was writing. Having said that, I think that it is fair to point out that Hu missed one attribute of the written Cantonese tradition, one that suggests that, even by the 1920s, it had already developed further as a written language than Suzhounese had: the number of socially prominent individuals associated with the written Cantonese tradition and, more specifically, with the Cantonese love song genre. In essence, my argument will be that the number of prominent and influential individuals associated in one way or another with the Cantonese love song genre is an important indicator that—with the exception of Mandarin—it had developed further as a written language than other Chinese vernaculars.

I certainly do not intend to suggest that the Cantonese love song genre was the only written Cantonese genre associated with socially prominent people. For example, in the early 1800s, He Huiqun 何惠群 (n.d.), an imperial

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<sup>2</sup> Hu Shi 胡適, “Wuge jiaji xu” 吳歌甲集序 [Preface to *Songs of Wu (I)*], in *Hu Shi wenji* 胡適文集 [Hu Shi’s collected works], vol. 4, edited by Ouyang Zhesheng 歐陽哲生 (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 1998 [1925]), p. 576; Hu Shi, “Haishanghua liezhuan xu” 海上花列傳序 [Preface to *Shanghai Flowers*], in *Hu Shi wenji*, vol. 4 (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 1998 [1926]), p. 406.

<sup>3</sup> Romanization for texts written in Cantonese follows the Jyut Ping system, as found in Robert Bauer, *ABC Cantonese-English Comprehensive Dictionary* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2021).

examination degree-holder (*jinsbi* 進士) and official, compiled a collection of texts in Cantonese called *Jottings of Lingnan* (*Lingnaam ziksi* 嶺南即事) and wrote the famous Cantonese southern song (*naam jam* 南音), “Sighs of the Fifth Watch” (*Tann Ng Gaang* 嘆五更).<sup>4</sup> Later in the 1800s, He Danru 何淡如 (n.d.), a holder of the provincial examination (*juren* 舉人) degree, became the first person to write classical-style poems using Cantonese.<sup>5</sup> In the late 1800s, degree holder and prominent educator Chen Ronggun 陳蓉滾 (1862–1922) wrote literacy primers and textbooks partly in Cantonese,<sup>6</sup> and reform leader Kang Youwei 康有為 (1858–1927) designed educational materials for children that included Cantonese southern songs.<sup>7</sup>

However, I very much agree with Hu Shi’s view of the importance of the Cantonese love song genre and will argue that for a number of reasons the genre is especially important in the history of Cantonese’s development as a written language. Here we should note that the growth of written Cantonese—and written vernaculars in general—often does not take the form of a smooth gradual increase. Instead, its growth tends to occur more in spurts, as new genres appear and push the written vernacular into new territories. There are a number of ways in which the Cantonese love song genre made special contributions to advancing the role of written Cantonese. For its time, the genre was unusual for its extensive and obligatory usage of a regional language.

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<sup>4</sup> Liang Peichi 梁培熾, *Nanyin yu Yueou zhi yanjiu* 南音與粵謳之研究 [A study of Nanyin and Yueou] (Guangzhou: Guangdong renmin chubanshe, 2012), p. 83; Tan Zhengbi 譚正璧 and Tan Xun 譚尋, *Muyuge ji Chaozhouge xulu* 木魚歌及潮州歌叙錄 [An annotated bibliography of wooden fish songs and Chaozhou songs] (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2012), p. 45.

<sup>5</sup> Li Wanwei 李婉薇, *Qingmo Minchu de Yueyu shuxie* 清末民初的粵語書寫 [Late Qing and early Republican Cantonese writings], revised edition (Hong Kong: Sanlian shudian, 2017), p. 147.

<sup>6</sup> Bernard Luk, “Lu Tzu-Chun and Ch’en Jung-Kun: Two Exemplary Figures in the *Ssu-shu* Education of Pre-war Urban Hong Kong,” in David Faure, James Hays, and Alan Birch, eds., *From Village to City: Studies in the Traditional Roots of Hong Kong Society* (Hong Kong: Centre of Asian Studies, University of Hong Kong, 1984), p. 127; Li, *Qingmo Minchu de Yueyu shuxie*, p. 282.

<sup>7</sup> Li, *Qingmo Minchu de Yueyu shuxie*, p. 272.