Introduction: Performing Zero

Zero, an ancient discovery, is enjoying an early twenty-first-century vogue. Printed in white geometric type against the mysterious blur of a dark background below the classic red cursive “Coca Cola” logo, “zero” grabs the attention of the young generation, suggesting an emo cool, an explosive sensation, and a youthful masculinity. On the other hand, the Chinese notion of “going down to zero” (in Chinese, guiling, “homing to zero”) implies the opposite: it is a pseudo-zen practice intended to empty the mind and bring one to serenity. In the context of diet drinks, zero sugar and zero calories suggest abundant caffeine stimulation, surplus energy, and unlimited possibilities, for example, sexual possibilities. In the context of new age self-help practice, zero connotes relaxation, breathing, meditation, and the recharging of one’s body and mind. The new millennium zero introduces positive energy and potentiality. Zero is not an end; zero is the new beginning. The emptiness of zero brings out unlimited potential.

The focus of this study is Chinese opera and its particular ways of performing zero, a performance that involves a monstrous combination of fashionable cool and stale archaism. Globalization in the new millennium manifests itself in the rapid growth of virtual realities and the even more rapid disappearance of real-world regional languages and traditional cultures. As aging Chinese opera artists and audiences cling to their art, younger, wired generations are increasingly immersing themselves in the virtual world for their entertainment. Desperate cries for help from traditional art are not heard because no one is listening. The stakes are high, the moment is urgent, and the rift between the two groups has to be mended now. The new millennium brings the last chance to revive Chinese opera with alternative energy and with a view...
to a future. The UNESCO preservation effort (more on which below) is the tolling of a warning bell.

This project examines alternative Chinese opera in the “Chinese peripheries,” a genre that by definition includes traditional Chinese theatres adjusted and modified for both local and international audiences. My focus is Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the major Chinese American ethnopoles in California – all the “non-China” Chinese-speaking nations on the Pacific Rim. The intense trafficking and collaboration of ideas, capitals, and manpower among these regions imagines a peripheral alliance surrounding the center. To battle identity confusion and anxiety, Chinese opera, an “intangible” cultural heritage which is supposed to transcend any material index such as GDP, has become an intrigue medium of Chinese identity performances in the age of globalization. In the peripheries, various forms of Chinese opera carve out a comfort zone to ease political conflict, nostalgia, cultural ambivalence, and identity anxiety in the transnational Chinese world. Because of its ambiguity and antiquity (who would suspect that a dated art could have any political function?), the complex and encompassing art form is also used in efforts to comply with, resist, criticize, or promote local governments while avoiding direct confrontation. A seemingly apolitical art can sometime make for the most effective political statements. Alternative Chinese opera negotiates a space between personal identity and national ideology, between traditional Chinese values and postmodern cultural nonchalance. As an innovation in, or updating of, traditional forms, alternative Chinese opera helps Chinese opera resist the “natural selection” of time and progress that all traditional arts face today. A discursive space becomes a bulwark against the tides of time.

**Chinese nations**

While the English term “Chinese” seems comfortably to encompass both ethnic Chinese in general and political Chinese in particular, it is a trickier business to name a Chinese person in the Chinese language. Terms like Han and Tang, traditionally used to denote “China” and “Chinese,” generally referred only to members of the Han ethnicity, the ethnic majority.\(^1\) The term Zhongguo (literally, “central state or states,” a term used for “China” since antiquity), also implies a Han-ethnocentric view and paints surrounding ethnic groups as barbarians.\(^2\) Since the Yellow River region played an important role in early Chinese civilization, one can also say that this ethnocentric view derived from a northern perspective.\(^3\) Sun Yat-sen’s 1912 revolution ended the Qing