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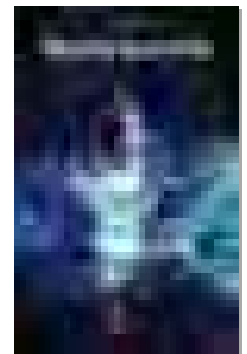
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Other Explorations: Ming Wong's *Wayang* *Spaceship*

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BY

JEANNINE TANG

Ming Wong's *Wayang Spaceship* is a cinema for the moving image built from the scaffolding of Cantonese opera stages.¹ This structure with two lives is dormant in the day and enlivened at dusk. During the day, its mirrored surfaces reflect the setting around it, its structure available for exploration; visitors may climb its stairs and walk among its reflective mirrored planes, which reflect viewers and their environment. At sunset, the *Spaceship* comes alive, with audiences that are sometimes co-present (or at least, not those human ones—after all, Cantonese *wayang* opera in Singapore is as much for the ghosts as it is for the living, particularly during the Seventh Month when, according to Chinese belief, the deceased are said to walk the Earth). The animation of *Wayang Spaceship* is directed at both a speculative, spiritual realm and a mortally human world. Its clock emulates the nighttime shows of *wayang* opera, while its architectural armature is derived from *wayang* as a temporary, outdoor theatre, with traditional techniques and materials that are retrofitted here for an expanded cinema.

Upon awakening, an array of magnetic fluorescent lights flickers on. These are positioned in relation to one-way mirrors that flank the installation's stage left and right, upstage and downstage. The mirrored surfaces of the stage background part—these are doors that open to reveal a projection screen that plays *Wayang Spaceship*, a single-channel video sharing the installation's name. The parting doors echo the parting of theatrical drapes, cinema curtains and the opening of space shuttle doors—dissolving theatrical fourth walls and proscenium divisions between spectator and cinema, as well as viewer and action. By lifting the veil between audience and action and crossing thresholds of corporeal and virtual space, *Wayang Spaceship*'s awakening creates a portal between one plane of reality and another.

Unlike the dark environments of cinematic auditoriums and outdoor night screenings—where spectators are absorbed in immersive experiences of a conjured reality—*Wayang Spaceship*'s lights stay on as the video plays, calling attention to the moving image as something that is continually framed. In the work's choreography of light, stage and video devised by Wong with the support of lighting and camera artist Liam Morgan, dichroic films are activated once fluorescent lights come on, upon which light passes through the films' different colour tints. The colour palette is based on the visual spectrum and results in a pastel array of hues—salmon pinks, baby blues and minty greens reminiscent of Cantonese opera costuming. The stage perimeter flickers intermittently, as imperfections in the one-way mirrors refract light with an unpredictable rhythm, evoking the uncertainty of a spaceship potentially arriving, opening or even taking off, a vehicle in perpetual motion.

Such interactions of fluorescent light, mirrored surface and the moving image call to mind a number of references: Dan Flavin's fluorescent tubes, passed through the mirrored *mise-en-abyme* of Yayoi Kusama's *Infinity Mirror Room* and the functionality of Joan Jonas's *My New Theatre* cinematic structure. In ways akin to these predecessors of the 1960s and 1990s—in which sculpture and cinema operated in an expanded field of cinema where the apparatus of screening, projection, lighting and the image all form crucial aspects of a work—Wong's *Wayang Spaceship* is simultaneously both a structure and its environment, a film and its cinema. Unlike these predecessors, the animation of *Wayang Spaceship* incorporates theatrical traditions, as a work of the cinematic, visual and performing arts. Lit as though it were a character on a film set, while simultaneously serving as a cinematic environment, *Wayang Spaceship* becomes a portal into film history. Structured like an essay film, the video montage features a wide range of clips, including Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), Soviet science-fiction films, as well as Cantonese opera film clips featuring Yam Kim-fai's renowned cross-dressing performances. Yam's wide-ranging body of work is sampled in clips that range across her performances of mythical and modern characters—a hero rowing a boat through rushes and peering through trees, a dapper lover in modern suiting, gazing into a mirror with a smile, adjusting their tie, the performer's masculine visages fading into the coy gaze of an opera heroine.

In *Wayang Spaceship*, the use of dissolves, fades and other special effects troubles the binaries of dimorphic gender, while melding together the worlds of Cantonese opera and science-fiction films, cinematic genres that are so often held apart. Superimposition is used extensively, bringing together intergalactic space and Chinese pavilions, misty mountain ranges becoming both foreground and background to spacecraft cabins. Astronauts travel through landscaped botany and the galactic skies, while lovers from opera tales meander and commune beneath both gazebos and spacecraft control rooms, gazing out towards picturesque garden views and the skies of outer space. Edenic lands occupied by deities and fairies give way to the rocky terrain of planets, astronauts landing and coasting spacecraft. Not only do opera heroes and space voyagers share a landscape: they are one another's audiences and fellow travellers across all these different genres.

Wayang Spaceship features excerpts of these Cantonese opera films (that is to say, films shot, produced and adapted from the stage), including key scenes from the genre's heyday between the 1940s to the 1960s. These include *New Love Story of Leung Shan-pak and Chuk Ying-toi* (新梁山伯祝英台) (1951); *Lovesick*

(為情顛倒) (1952) and *The Tragic Story of Leung Shan-pak and Chuk Ying-toi* (梁祝恨史) (1958). Cantonese opera has long been celebrated throughout the 20th century for the gender transitivity of cross-gender casting and cross-dressing performance (with male actors and female actor troupes gaining popularity at different times), along with its implications of homosocial relations and queering of audience fandoms and identifications in the work of particular actors such as Yam Kim-fai and Pak Suet-sin.²

Previously, in the single-channel video installation *Windows On the World Part 1* (2014), Wong played the role of a space traveller—clad in a silver astronaut suit with orange piping and a spherical silver helmet, this traveller strides silently in slow motion through a tubular passageway of silver fabric.³ The traveller turns, arms outstretched to explore the walls or peer through a window. Their expression fluctuates: sometimes meditative and pensive, other times curious, exploring their surroundings. At other times, their gaze is bold, eyes firmly set on a distant horizon. With a face made up with drawn eyebrows and red lipstick, long hair coiled in a thick bun and short bangs across their brow, this character's physique and gestures amalgamate feminine and masculine styling, evoking Cantonese opera's many-gendered roles. The camera—initially offering fixed frontal and side views—then rotates in a circular path, evoking an anti-gravitational experience of space. A visitor to the gallery encounters this video after ambling through a tunnel installation of wood and silvery, reflective fabric, its round portholes echoed in the screen and video's round aperture. The character is backlit in white, then red and magenta light, tinting the walls surrounding the viewer, extending the tunnel of the video into physical space, the space explorer's passageway into ours.⁴ The astronaut moves silently, while the Cantonese opera aria "Princess Zhao Jun Crosses the Border" plays in the background, evoking the story of Wang Zhao Jun's journey to the northern frontier to wed Chanyu Huhanye in an act of diplomacy between the Han dynasty and Xiongnu empire—a simultaneously sorrowful and agential act. Yet Wong's video includes no further language or scenes: as a work without narrative detail, one senses the feeling and affect of narrative abstracted from the specific details of plot. Set within a physical gallery, their exploration repeats endlessly in a loop—the process of exploration (rather than its results) is the point.

THEIR TRANSITIVITY

The space explorer of *Windows On the World Part 1* (2014) is gender-ambiguous: their dramatic brows, white foundation and pink, contoured cheeks are immediately reminiscent of makeup for both male and female roles in Cantonese opera, as well as

the mutability of gender roles and cross-dressing on stage. At the same time, devoid of the genteel robes of the scholar, the evanescent dress of fairies, or the bulkier costuming of warrior roles—dressed instead in a puffy gender-neutral astronaut suit—the physical appearance of Wong's explorer flickers between masculine and feminine traits while never securing a definitive position. Crafted as a nonbinary character, the space explorer offers an alternative to (and implicit critique of) Western archetypes of Asian female space explorers—those disposable unknowns killed off in a film's first quarter, or when more fully rendered, appearing as an Orientalist alien threat or sexualised exotica. In contrast, Wong's space explorer is never subject to the rapid rise-fall of narrative action, nor are they consigned to the film's background or oblivion. Rather, their focus is on meditative, contemplative exploration suggestive of an interiority held in reserve, their gestures signalling and scrambling heterosexist codes of male or female gender.

By evoking characters without fulfilling their prototypical functions, Wong's astronaut cites gender without re-enacting it. If mutability was an aspect of plot in earlier narratives of Cantonese opera films, here it is emphasised. Historically, Cantonese opera troupes at their inception were all-male, necessitating the performance of female characters by men. In the 19th century, all-female troupes emerged, albeit sidelined in comparison to the mainstream popularity of all-male troupes. Wong's sampling of clips cites the modernity of Cantonese opera in the 20th century, within which gender transitivity found an eager audience. Wong's selection notably features excerpts from the oeuvre of Yam Kim-Fai, who was renowned for her performances as male leads in all-female opera troupes between the 1920s and 1970s in Macau, Hong Kong and the United States. Working both on stage and in film, Yam was a notable *wenwusheng* actor who specialised in the primary heterosexist masculine character types of Cantonese opera—learned, military and scholar-warrior roles—a “specialist gender bender” of the genre.⁵ Artists such as Ellen Pau have invoked Cantonese opera history in avant-garde video productions, for instance, Pau's single-channel video *Song of the Goddess* (1992)—which also appropriated footage from Yam Kim-Fai's opera film performances—drawing upon the homoerotic dynamics between Yam Kim-Fai and Pak Suet-Sin, who played romantic partners on screen and on stage and co-founded the Sin Fung Ming Opera Troupe. In contrast, even as Wong samples from Yam's oeuvre of characters, these performances rarely appear in relation to other actors but are positioned in relation to science-fiction films and special effects, rendering these performances allegorical rather than interpersonal.⁶

That said, I do want to stress that Yam's gender-bending performances—on their own, in their historical context—should not be interpreted as equivalent to or as representations of transgender identity. See-Kam Tam has noted how “cross-gender performances are by no means unique to Cantonese opera films, or opera from which such films derived their conventions.”⁷ Additionally, for Priscilla Tse, cross-dressing performance in Cantonese opera “is a traditional practice [...] with minimal implications of social deviance and political agenda,” in the sense of its lack of equivalence to the Western politics of drag performance or transgender identity.⁸ Wong's use of Yam's characters in *Wayang Spaceship* is not a straightforward recovery of earlier trans identities. Rather, the footage devises a *new* type of character aimed at a speculative future, constructed from a broader repository of tropes, echoes and references already circulating in popular culture.

As Wong puts it in a previous description of *Wayang Spaceship*:

In the land of Before, I set about structuring a storyline, a narrative shaped by a world that no longer exists, for a speculative fictional Cantonese opera cinema performance for the 21st century. My spiritual guide through this space-time-gender-travelogue—my Orlando of the East—takes the form of a gender-bending star of the Cantonese opera stage (an icon of the 20th century) reimagined as a transgender scholar-warrior of heaven and earth.⁹

Through the amalgamations of earlier gender-bending Cantonese opera performances, the space traveller of *Wayang Spaceship* was conceived as a gender-fluid and potentially nonbinary figure: using they/them pronouns, wielding a repertoire of varying masculine and feminine performances of gestures and affects. I am reminded of how Marquis Bey recently wrote that “trans is not merely, or even primarily, about having a certain bodily expression or sexed history. Rather, trans marks the ways that one transes gender,” describing how “trans” practices may give shelter to “bodily effects, psychical identifications, gendered subject positions, and performances of gendered “social, sexual, or kinship functions.”¹⁰ That is not to valorise trans- as an abstract or universal cipher of mutability and changeability, nor to romanticise the state of transgender rights in Hong Kong and Southern China (indeed, struggles over oppression and rights persisted at the time and during the year of *Wayang Spaceship*'s installation).¹¹

Rather, it bears mentioning that Yam's performances excerpted in *Wayang Spaceship* range from the masculinities of

mythic heroes to 20th-century suitors clad in corporate armour: working deals in shirtsleeves, making deals on the telephone, getting married in the Western drag of a bridegroom's suit. If Wong's Orlando-esque space traveller is a guide, then by casting this Orlando through the visage of Yam—a multi-continental celluloid star—we are equally reminded that this androgynous, gender-crossing oeuvre of characters was fundamental to Cantonese opera's diasporic migrations across Guangzhou, Macau, Hong Kong, Singapore and the United States, and allegories of modern Chinese society as it crossed thresholds of democratic invention across the world. If Wong's astronaut offers a trans relationship to gender, this forms part of a queer relationship to Cantonese futurity. At stake, then, is the cultural preservation, transformation and transmission of critical Cantonese cultures in the 21st century.

OTHER CANTONESE FUTURES

The intervening years between this spaceship's arrival and Wong's earlier works *Windows on to the World Part 1* and *2* (2014) included Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement of 2019, in which Cantonese diasporas and the world witnessed Hong Kong pro-democratic struggles for political rights to election and trials, and a broader shoring up of concern regarding suppressions of Cantonese expression across political speech, the Cantonese dialect and critical popular cultures. In this regard, *Wayang Spaceship* “seize[s] hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger” as though it were Walter Benjamin's angel of history.¹² Wong's research for the project *Wayang Spaceship* included Cantonese opera's diasporic migrations and political history: the ways in which Cantonese opera films summon the genres, languages and cultures of Southern Chinese culture and their resistance to governmental control and the dominance of more dominant Sino cultures of the North.

The history of Cantonese opera notably included bans against it, against which troupes rebelled and resisted, fighting for the survival of their craft, language, tradition and forms. Although captivated by its colourful spectacle, Western ethnographers also associated Cantonese opera with incivility, unruliness and irrationality, in need of European civilising missions.¹³ During the 19th century, the late Qing government turned to Western ideals of “rationality, progress and science” for China's modernisation, and Chinese opera was seen as “incompatible with Western rationality”—leading to the building of playhouses that would resemble European architecture by the early 20th century.¹⁴ As Wing Chung Ng has pointed out, the “rise of Cantonese opera unfolded in the context of political and

cultural upheavals in China ushered in by the demise of the Qing monarchy and the frustrated transition into republicanism.”¹⁵ Cantonese opera was also embroiled in radical nationalist politics of early 20th century Guangzhou, when “in an age of state-building when different government authorities—including the British in colonial Hong Kong, the successive warlord regimes in control of South China and the Chinese Nationalist government after 1927—all, to various degrees, sought to police the theatre and assert control in the interest of mobilisation, discipline, and order.”¹⁶ Beiyu Zhang has argued that Cantonese opera was crucial in “China’s struggle for modernity and national awakening,” as a harbinger, collectivity and vehicle for revolutionary political movements across the diasporas, including the Taiping Rebellion and Sun Yat-sen’s anti-Manchu revolutions in Guangzhou.¹⁷

Consequently, the storied life of Cantonese opera is a tale of Chinese modernity, nationalist and democratic political struggles. Its conversion from opera to films emerged with the advent of the cinematic experience in Hong Kong and China, joining sibling technologies of the gramophone and mass media that would expand the democratic relationship between the people and traditional cultural forms.¹⁸ The emergence of Cantonese opera films relied on a range of cinematic architectures, including those cinema-theatres built in the 20th century, as part of histories of transpacific exchange in which Hong Kong and Macau were urbanised through British colonial modernity, giving rise to theatrical venues that became cinematic ones. The shift from theatrical performances into a cinematic, ticketed experience also produced a departure from its festival and ritualistic performance contexts. If Cantonese opera presentations were previously fundraisers for temples, activities for clan associations or performances for spirits during religious or spiritual festivals, the effect of its modernity and incorporation into capitalist experience economies saw its transformation into a commodified form.

However, in refracting Cantonese opera films, *Wayang Spaceship* does not so much represent Cantonese opera as continues its transportation and its reinvention—as cinema, stage and spacecraft. The valences of *Wayang Spaceship*’s futurity are, however, distinct from mass-cultural science fictions of the recent past: Dawn Chan has pointed out how Asian-inflected futures populate mass culture and contemporary art (whether through cyberpunk films, or the robots and cyborg figurations of Nam June Paik, Lee Bul, Lu Yang and others), not to mention the numerous techno-Orientalist figurations of East Asian cities and denizens, symptomatic of Western anxieties towards the economic rise of Asian countries—such science

fictions are sites of projection, cultural misunderstanding and psychic misrecognition.¹⁹ That said, Xin Wang has argued that there is “danger in accepting the implication that otherness necessarily operates from a place of deficiency, which threatens to essentialise what is in fact radically heterogeneous.”²⁰ Wong’s study of science fiction for *Wayang Spaceship* notably drew upon Sino-cultural texts and literary studies, including the work of scholars of Chinese science fiction such as Wu Yan, whom Wong met during the research for this project. Wu has notably observed the tensions between Chinese science fiction’s proximity to imaginative desire, on the one hand, and the genre’s relationship to scientific realism across the 19th and 20th century.²¹

The realism of *Wayang Spaceship*’s technological form surfaces in the materialism of its construction. The spaceship’s armature is that of a *wayang* opera stage built by Mr. Lee Beng Seng, whose craft derives from a family tradition of *wayang* stage building, which Lee learnt from his father. *Wayang* stages are often covered with makeshift canvas fabric roofs to contain the stage and protect it from the elements. For *Wayang Spaceship*, Wong sourced reflective insulating materials more typically used in agriculture and space technologies, salvaged from a stage builder who could no longer afford to store them (in this regard, *Wayang Spaceship*’s material life is a practice of regional conservation, of materials, skill and craft). And so, the work’s stagecraft manifests those imagistic and architectural technologies that historically propelled Cantonese opera from Southern coastal communities into international diasporas. The temporary theatre is a site of “cross-cultural interaction,” honouring the theatrical traditions of opera films and how the arrival of Cantonese opera and opera films in Singaporean cinema history involved actors, dancers and musicians from the Malay stage.²²

It is a particularly poignant aspect of *Wayang Spaceship*’s circulation that its material architecture is reconstituted and assembled in each site of its installation, falling asleep and glowing with awakening. By way of *Wayang Spaceship*, spectators witness how cultural preservation, social resistance and even a trans relationship to gender and history have been fundamental to Asia’s modernities. This witnessing takes place, at the moment of threat—as critical Cantonese expressive cultures face suppression and its corollaries of resistance and renewal—we might be reminded that cultures exist through their promiscuous circulation and their material enactments. Indeed, the temporality of *Wayang Spaceship* is riven with repetition: the work’s nightly activations are at once an evening show and a loop in space.²³ *Wayang Spaceship*’s outdoor temporary stage and living cinema is a vehicle of traditions available to passing audiences (and I mean “vehicle” in both the semiotic and transportation senses

of the word—the work is a carrier of meaning and a means of transport).

Each time it is installed and stirs awake at night, the spaceship summons yet again new exploratory counterpublics. The space explorer that we perceive is also not a singular figure. When *Wayang Spaceship* is activated, its combination of mirrored surfaces and the angling of light upon dichroic film reflects the fluorescent lights to infinity, bending light patterns left and right. The programming of lights forms part of the film's editing, flickering with and against the video image, such that the projected image lands upon two layers of dichroic film rather than a flat white screen. As a result, the black-and-white projected images are divided into five or six layers of colour—as though it were a hologram. Consequently, instead of one astronaut in space or performer in an environment, a viewer perceives up to six of the same figure, choreographed differently by chromaticity and luminescence. That is not to say that this is a work of perspectival illusion: rather than a window view of the world or a world picture, *Wayang Spaceship* operates as though an open portal of multiple co-occurring realities, refracting an explorer—and exploration—in its multiplicity. Like all speculative projects, *Wayang Spaceship* is a bid for futurity and a reminder from history that dormancy in culture is never truly extinction. Exploration, and its kaleidoscope of personifications, remains at hand.

- 1 My thanks to the artist Ming Wong for the extended conversation that provided insight, detail and context, and Syaheedah Iskandar for the meaningful resources and interlocution that made writing this text possible.
- 2 See Kar Yue Chan, "Cross-Dressing and Gendered Voice Representation in Cantonese Opera," in *Comparative Literature: East & West*, 3:1 (2019): 1–14.
- 3 The work was produced in collaboration with Thomas Tsang / DeHow Projects and commissioned by ParaSite Art Space / Spring Workshop for the group exhibition *Islands Off the Shores of Asia* in 2014.
- 4 This cycle of works represents a shift of sorts, from earlier works—in which historian Joan Kee had argued, "Wong gravitates toward particularly climactic, emotionally charged scenes, whose affective content is channeled into heightening the unreleased tensions inherent in such appropriation. Indeed, much of the impact of Wong's work stems from the subtle ways in which he emphasizes the boundary separating the viewer from the on-screen world and its reenacted emotions without needing to break the proverbial fourth wall altogether." See Joan Kee, "False Front: The Art of Ming Wong," *Artforum*, May 2012.
- 5 See Shi-Yan Cao, *Queer Representations in Chinese-language Film and the Cultural Landscape* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2020) and See-Kam Tan, "The Cross-Gender Performances of Yam Kim-Fei, or the Queer Factor in Postwar Hong Kong Cantonese Opera/Opera Films," *Journal of Homosexuality*, 39:3–4 (2000): 206.
- 6 Here, I use "androgynous" in the sense of Priscilla Tse's descriptions of androgyny in Cantonese opera—"performance is an emerging space that accommodates the possibility of intertwining the fantasy world onstage and homoerotic emotional intimacy together with fluidities of gendered identities and sexualities that are experienced by both actresses and audiences." See Priscilla Tse, "Performing androgyny: cross-dressing actresses, fandom, and queer sensibility in Hong Kong Cantonese opera," *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, 22:2 (2021): 140.
- 7 See-Kam Tan, "The Cross-Gender Performances of Yam Kim-Fei, or the Queer Factor in Postwar Hong Kong Cantonese Opera/Opera Films," *Journal of Homosexuality*, 39:3–4 (2000): 202–203.
- 8 Tse, 142. "Moreover, it is also important to point out the inaccurate use of the Chinese term 'fanchuan.' In today's Hong Kong, *fanchuan* is widely used by practitioners, scholars and laypersons to refer to cross-gender performance. They tend to make a simple equivalence between the English word 'cross-dressing' and the Chinese term *fanchuan* when referring to performances in Cantonese opera. However, the original meaning of *fanchuan* (*fan*, literally 'reverse' or 'opposite'; *chuan*, literally 'occasional acting') in the Chinese opera context refers to crossing role-type performances instead of crossing gender." (Cheung 2014, 140–145; Chou 2004, 243).
- 9 Ming Wong, "Tales from Wayang Spaceship" *Wayang Spaceship* (Singapore: Singapore Art Museum, 2023), exhibition poster for outdoor public installation, January 7–March 4, 2023.
- 10 Marquis Bey, "Notes on (Trans)Gender," in *Cistern Failure: Essays on Blackness and Cisgender* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2022): 65. For Bey, "trans" has importantly sheltered "a wide variety of bodily effects that disrupt or denaturalise heteronormatively constructed linkages between an individual's anatomy at birth, a nonconsensually as-signed gender category, psychical identifications with sexed body images and/or gendered subject positions, and the performance of specifically gendered social, sexual, or kinship functions."
- 11 See Jessie Pang, "Hong Kong transgender protesters say government is not abiding by landmark ruling," *Reuters*, March 31, 2023, URL: <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/hong-kong-transgender-protesters-say-government-is-not-abiding-by-landmark-2023-03-31/>.
- 12 "To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it 'the way it really was' (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger." Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History (Thesis IX)," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books), 258.
- 13 Beiyu Zhang, "Cantonese Opera Troupes in Southeast Asia: Political Mobilizations, Diaspora Networks, and Operatic Circulation, 1850s–1930s," *Asian Ethnology*, 81:1/2 (2022): 86–87.
- 14 Zhang, 86–88. See also Gretchen Liu and Angelina Phillips eds., *Wayang: A History of Chinese Opera in Singapore* (Singapore: National Archives, 1988).
- 15 Wing Chung Ng, *The Rise of Cantonese Opera* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2015): 6.
- 16 Ng, *The Rise of Cantonese Opera*, 6, 107–131.
- 17 Zhang notes how dialect operas such as *wayang* would stage assassinations of Qing officials and emperors, openly clamoring for the overthrow of feudal Empire, mobilising illiterate and working class migrant populations towards revolutionary ideas, forming temporary autonomous zones and critical counterpublics around modern concepts of nationhood, while troupes themselves were sometimes active participants in revolutionary struggle, transporting arms and storing armaments, using stage boxes to evade surveillance. From Zhang, "Cantonese Opera Troupes in Southeast Asia Political Mobilizations, Diaspora Networks, and Operatic Circulation, 1850s–1930s," 88–90. See also Bingchou Xie, "*Zhongguo xiandai xiqu de mingzhugeming secail he yueju de gailiang yundong*" [The revolutionary and democratic opera reform of modern China], in *Yueju yanjiu ziliao xuan* [Sources for research on Cantonese opera], ed. Guangdongsheng Xiju Yanjiu Shi, (Guangzhou: Guangdongsheng Xiju Yanjiu Shi, 1983): 226–288.
- 18 *Wayang Spaceship* pays homage to long relationships between film and theatre in Hong Kong culture—Cantonese opera actors and directors were among the genres' principal filmmakers, and part of the pivotal translation of opera from theatre to screen. The life of Cantonese opera films was not only restricted to Southern Chinese diasporas—it drifted north too, as Cantonese opera crucially entertained immigrants on the West Coast of North America, as male audiences were those recruited to work railroads, and opera troupes performed for them, bringing back their own encounters with Hollywood cinema to China and Hong Kong.

- 19 Dawn Chan, "Asia-Futurism," *Artforum*, Summer 2016, <https://www.artforum.com/columns/asia-futurism-229189/>.
- 20 Xin Wang, "Asian Futurism and the Non-Other," *e-flux journal*, No. 81 (April 2017), <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/81/126662/asian-futurism-and-the-non-other/>.
- 21 Wu has observed that after the formation of the People's Republic of China, science fiction turned away from unrealistic forms of speculation towards adopting basic scientific ideas and sociological ideas from Marxism—"The so-called 'possibility' imagination mode involves envisaging ways in which people's desire for social development and a better life may become a reality in the near future [...] Not only did science fiction adopt "miracles of technological progress, but also sociological or political theory which could explain the development path to a future world. This was not only expressed in literary science fiction's landscapes and technologies, but in characters' relationship to society." See Wu Yan, "Imagination in Chinese Science Fiction," *Frontier Literary Studies* 14:2 (2020): 161–180, <https://doi.org/10.3868/s010-009-020-0008-2>.
- 22 Zhang, 85.
- 23 The soundtrack of *Wayang Spaceship*'s video bleeds across different sources of footage, and is itself composite: mechanical sounds evoking spacecraft engineering and galactic flight commingle with the soaring vocals of opera songs. These overlays are associative and allusive. Eschewing the linear progression of plot, *Wayang Spaceship*'s essayistic structure is marked by a looping temporality. Footage of astronaut and spaceship explorations rewinds and accelerates, recurrences of visual movement that have an audio analogue as repetitions of song, sound and phrasing occur throughout, as though an uncanny echo pulsing through the piece.



Installation views, *Wayang Spaceship* at Empress Lawn as part of Light to Night Singapore 2024, 19 January—10 March 2024.



Installation views, *Wayang Spaceship* at Empress Lawn as part of Light to Night Singapore 2024, 19 January—10 March 2024.