

ABSTRACT

Title of thesis: THE PROPERTY MAN – AN EXPLORATION
OF REPRESENTATION OF AND WITHIN
TRADITIONAL CHINESE OPERA

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Performance Studies

The lack of scholarship and recognition has rendered the Property Man of Chinese theatre and the vital work that he does largely invisible to western theatre historians. The English language written theatrical archive provides us with various narratives as to the Property Man's purpose and existence. His tasks help us know the narrative behind a play like *The Yellow Jacket*, and at the most basic level they address the question whether the Western representation that is the character of the Property Man coincided with the actual historical Property Man in Chinese theatre. This thesis explores the visibility and invisibility of the Property Man in Western drama by his presence in five theatre history texts and three plays scripts and by considering how these portrayals created the Property Man as a caricature and therefore stereotype. The relationship between the East and West creates an overall foundation for this exploration as well. Western narratives of Eastern practices create and problematize the understandings of the roles, responsibilities, and representations of, in this case, the Property Man both on and off the stage. The final section of the thesis provides a comparison of Eastern and Western staging and production support practices, and how the practices of a Western stage manager align with the Property Man. The idea of invisibility is carried forward here as both stage

manager and Property Man uphold the concept of invisible labor both onstage and backstage. Though this exploration proves that his purpose is worth knowing and that his role, however enigmatic, was critical to Chinese theatre. The labor the Property Man provided alongside actors on the Chinese stage revealed within the historical archive proves the necessity of his being. Ultimately this inquiry adds to the archive a narrative that allows others to engage with and understand who he was and what he did.

THE PROPERTY MAN –
AN EXPLORATION OF REPRESENTATION OF AND WITHIN
TRADITIONAL CHINESE OPERA

by

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The curtain parted at the Fulton Theatre in New York City. The year was 1912 and an excited audience gathered to catch their first glimpse of a unique and exotic form of theatre inspired by the Chinese. On to the stage stepped an actor by the name of Arthur Shaw. He was dressed in a black tunic with black pants and a black cap on his head. Down his back hung a long braid and his face was tinted yellow by pancake makeup. He carried a gong which he struck three times with a mallet and then departed the same way he entered. Immediately another man entered the stage. This was Signor Pergini, and he was dressed as a Chinese scholar in yellow robes and black velvet hat decorated with jade and coral. Pergini was the Chorus,¹ and he stepped center stage to address the audience. He told those gathered about the play they were to see and about the “Brothers of the Pear Tree”² which was the troupe of players assembled to enact the performance. During this, Shaw entered again with the gong which he struck numerous times while the Chorus continued to talk. Though clearly annoyed by the repeated gong strikes, Pergini continued his speech asking the audience for their patience and informing them that what they were about to see was strange. As he turned to exit, he saw Shaw who again struck the gong three times. Pergini then turned to the audience and said: “ere I depart my footsteps hence, let me impress upon you that my property man is to your eyes intensely invisible.”³ Thus began the Broadway premier of J. Harry Benrimo and George C. Hazleton’s play, *The Yellow Jacket*.

¹ There is not now and never has been a chorus in Chinese opera. That was a fabrication made by the playwrights of *The Yellow Jacket*.

² Chinese performers were trained from a young age and the Pear Garden was one such training school. Reference to “Pear Tree” could be an error in translation.

³ George C. Hazleton and Benrimo. *The Yellow Jacket* (acting edition), (New York: Samuel French, Inc., 1912 & 1913), 19.

Throughout the performance, Shaw as the Property Man, along with his four assistants, set and struck furniture for each scene, cleaned, and handed off various hand props such as swords, flags, cushions, and teacups, and held scenery in place while scenes were enacted in front. As the performance came to a close Signor Pergini, as the Chorus yet again, took to the stage to call forth each character to take a final bow. In his final line he called forth Arthur Shaw informing the audience “now quite visible to your eyes, our Property Man.”⁴ At this Shaw crossed to Pergini, shook his hand, and bowed to the audience. (Figure 1)



Figure 1 - A photograph of the curtain call of The Yellow Jacket at the Duke of York's Theatre, London 1923. ((c) Illustrated London New Ltd/Mary Evans).

⁴ *The Yellow Jacket*, Samuel French acting edition, 96.

Shaw reprised the role of the Property Man four years later at the Court Theatre, also in New York City. The printed program provided to the audience lists him first on the cast list (in order of appearance). In the pages that follow his role as Property Man is given context within the purported framework of Chinese Theatre conventions:

‘The Yellow Jacket’ presents in English the conventions of the Chinese Theatre...while the story is original to the authors, it brings together and presents with all possible authenticity, the conventions, customs, action and music...with them everything seems to be inverted. They do one thing and we do quite the opposite...we paint a snow-capped mountain and build a scaffolding invisible, upon which the player mounts the ragged cliff. The propertyman [sic] of Chinese Theatre with two chairs and a table gives us a more imposing mountain, and we believe it too, for he leads us into the fair realm...Their art of suggestion is richer than ours, if we will let our imaginations drift with them, in the fancy-play which they devise for our enchantment. They lend themselves so completely to the picture that they regard the property-man [sic] and his assistants who produce snow-storms, mountain peaks, heaven, with a Juliette balcony, as quite invisible...This property-man does not belong to our conventions and, therefore, at times he is far too visible. Let him not delude you, however, but smile inwardly, and find his simple devices real, for to him they are real.⁵

Consider closely the idea of “presents with all possible authenticity” that the above text suggests. The re-creation of an authentic performance leads one to believe that all attempts were made to mimic original Chinese theatre. However, J. Harry Benrimo (co-author of *The Yellow Jacket*) admits that the creation of the play was not authentic in this 1928 newspaper article written in anticipation of the revival:

All the mechanical arrangements of the play... were our own conception, our stage management. We did borrow bodily from the Chinese theater our property man. When you go to the Chinese theatre you see the property man at the side of the stage, disgusted, bored, superior. He is a laborer, not an actor, and therefore socially superior to the actor.⁶

⁵ *The Yellow Jacket* playbill, Cort Theatre, 1916.

⁶ Benrimo, “LEGEND AND TRUTH: The Facts About ‘The Yellow Jacket,’ Again in Revival Here” (*New York Times*, November 4, 1928).

The *Yellow Jacket* is fiction. It is based on concepts of the Chinese Theatre and perhaps meant to pay some amount of homage to the theatrical form, but despite claims in the original program to the contrary, it is not authentic. Though the concept of the Property Man was borrowed from the Chinese Theatre and therefore has some legitimacy, attempts to make him authentic to Western audiences created an inaccurate and caricaturized portrayal.

It is not a coincidence that this representation made an appearance on the Broadway stage in the early 20th century. Although audiences may have believed that *The Yellow Jacket* introduced Chinese style, there were other plays in the decades that followed that drew upon Chinese Theatre or presented a Property Man. *Lady Precious Stream* (1934) and *Lute Song* (1946) were unlike *The Yellow Jacket* in that they were adaptations from actual Chinese plays, but they did include a named Property Man. Together all three of these plays contributed to a Western inaccurate, unauthentic representation of the Property Man.

In many respects that unauthentic representation was overshadowed by other performances like those provided by the famous Chinese performer Mei Lanfang who visited North America (and other countries) in 1930 and who exposed the West to a more authentic Chinese theatre, or at least a version of Chinese theatre and performance that was not the hyper-theatricalized accounts provided in these three plays. Lanfang is understood to be one of the most gifted and pervasive performers in Chinese Opera. His acting career spanned over 30 years before he shifted to directing.⁷ But while Lanfang's

⁷ Mei Lanfang is the most written about and documented Chinese Opera performer. His performance career spanned 33 years and he was best known for his portrayal of female characters before women were allowed to perform. He was the first to perform Chinese opera in other countries including a 1930 trip to North America.

impressive career is relatively well known, the significant history of the Property Man is largely unfamiliar to western audiences, and plays like *The Yellow Jacket*, *Lady Precious Stream* and *Lute Song* actually did little to cultivate any real or accurate familiarity with the Property Man, whose origins are to be found in the traditions of Chinese opera.

My personal interest in this topic began seven years ago when a co-production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was embarked upon between the School of Theatre, Dance, and Performance Studies at the University of Maryland and the National Academy of Chinese Theatre Arts in Beijing. As the production manager for the University of Maryland at the time I insisted that we must have a stage manager for the co-production for the first leg of the journey which took place at the University of Maryland. The stage manager is a vital and standard part of any theatrical production in the United States, and much to my surprise the faculty from the National Academy of Chinese Theatre Arts denied the need for a stage manager from the beginning. None of their productions utilized this position, and they saw no need for it as the director was sufficient for providing the logistical and organizational support. We agreed that the student stage manager would serve her purpose in America and travel to China with the production but that most likely she would not continue her duties there. Upon arrival at the National Academy of Chinese Theatre Arts the stage manager and I, as her mentor, were under constant scrutiny and observation. Everyone wanted to know what we were doing and how and why. I fielded questions from multiple faculty members, mostly directors, daily. It quickly became clear that for my Chinese counterparts, the consolidation of logistical and organizational support in the job of American-styled stage manager was something unique, and they loved it.

Connections to the National Academy of Chinese Theatre Arts have continued since the production of *Midsummer*. For several years students or faculty from the National Academy of Chinese Theatre Arts have come to the University of Maryland to study and I have often gone there to teach workshops on stage management. On one trip I visited the Beijing People's Art Theatre where a former National Academy of Chinese Theatre Arts student now works. She pointed out the "stage manager's desk" standing off stage right. I was confused and perplexed. Clearly, in its long history, Chinese theatre has managed its logistical and organizational support quite well. But the genuine interest that my counterparts in Beijing showed in the work of an American stage manager suggested a fascinating and yet largely unrecognized point of difference in the practice of theatre on two different continents in two different cultures. It is with this difference in staging theatre in China with and without a stage manager that my research journey began and eventually led me to the discovery of the Property Man.

The terms opera, theatre, and drama are used interchangeably with regards to performances on the Chinese stage. This thesis focuses primarily on what is known as Chinese Opera, of which there are historically over 300 forms throughout the various provinces of China, Peking Opera being one such form local to Beijing. The term "opera" is used as much of the performance is sung. However, the three plays referenced in this project, which had productions outside of China, were staged as plays, not operas, with spoken dialogue. The plots and storylines for *Lute Song* and *Lady Precious Stream* were taken directly from Chinese opera versions of these plays. *The Yellow Jacket* was an original story utilizing the form and structure of Chinese opera performances.

The English language written theatrical archive provides us with various narratives as to the Property Man's purpose and existence. His tasks help us know the narrative behind a play like *The Yellow Jacket*, and at the most basic level they address the question whether the Western representation that is the character of the Property Man coincided with the actual historical Property Man in Chinese theatre. This is the central question guiding this thesis and its explorations. The exploration of this question is informed by the work of Saidiya Hartman and in particular by her concept of Critical Fabulation. Hartman's work is particularly helpful in addressing the fact that the Property Man is truly an enigma as his story has never been told in an accurate way – at least in the West. Through this investigation, his history will be presented, as “an unrecoverable past; it is a narrative of what might have been or could have been; it is a history written with and against the archive.”⁸ Although truth might not be fully achievable, context, influence and intersections will help to contemplate the following questions: What is the Property Man's narrative? What is his history? What was his function? Why was his story unrecorded? The hopeful result is to make the invisible visible and add his very important story to the written archive of theatrical history.

This inquiry will explore the notion of the Property Man from the framework of visibility and invisibility. What do historical and dramatic representations reveal about the Property Man? What are the cultural politics underlying these representations, and what are the misconceptions about the Property Man that support those representations? These questions are complicated by the recognition that the Property Man has been an invisible laborer who works literally behind the scenes of the Chinese Theatre as well

⁸ Saidiya Hartman, “A Venus in Two Acts,” *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism* 26, no. 3 (June 2008): 12.

behind the scenes of the existing Western historical narratives. It's important to note the limitations of this study which falls squarely into the theatre archive written in English. In fact, the topic of the Property Man is bigger than this project, but it is my hope that this small effort provides the Western theatre community with a deeper understanding of the importance of the Property Man and his work.

This thesis will explore the visibility and invisibility of the Property Man in Western drama, by exploring his presence in three plays with subsequent Broadway and/or West End productions and by considering how these portrayals created the Property Man as a caricature and therefore stereotype. A sense of that caricature emerges when one contrasts the representation in the plays with the accounts of the Property Man in five English language histories of Chinese theatre, and while this thesis will argue that those histories are often inaccurate, they do suggest that the plays highlight the Property Man's visibility and invisibility in fulfilling his purpose and function.

Implicitly at least, these early 20th century representations of the Property Man have something akin to a Western stage manager in mind, and so in the final section of the thesis I will provide a comparison of Eastern and Western staging and production support practices, and how the practices of a Western stage manager align with the Property Man. The idea of invisibility will be carried forward here as both stage manager and Property Man uphold the concept of invisible labor both onstage and backstage in support of the work of the actors and the storytelling. To do so, this thesis will also interrogate here the concept of labor both from Eastern and Western perspectives and within the framework of live theatre.

In addition to the concept of visibility versus invisibility, the relationship between the East and West creates an overall foundation for this exploration. It is necessary to interpret how Western narratives of Eastern practices create and problematize the understandings of the roles, responsibilities, and representations of, in this case, the Property Man both on and off the stage. His person, his work, and the representations, reproductions, caricatures, and stereotypes historical present throughout the archive show how easily narratives can be complicated and troubled, resulting in inaccurate understandings and erasures.

Audiences of Chinese Opera grow up going to the theatre. Weekly or even nightly attendance at the theatre is very common. Chinese theatre is a very popular form of entertainment and individuals will often attend the same venue again and again to watch different actors portray the same role or to watch their favorite actor play different roles. Today it is common for a theatre to have a wide repertory of plays which rotate nightly so you can attend multiple evenings in a row and not see the same production twice. Repeated experiences within the ritual of Chinese theatre trains audiences to know what to notice and what to ignore. As it is such, Chinese audiences do not have the same theatre expectations as Western audiences often do. Patrons of Chinese opera will often get up from their seats during the performance to visit the restroom or get a refill on their tea. They will also talk freely during the show either to their neighbor or back to the characters onstage. To an American audience it would feel more like a sporting event than what we expect from the theatre. All of the above is based on my research of Chinese theatre but also my firsthand accounts of being in Beijing and attending

numerous Peking Opera performances over the span of seven years. I will continue to pull on both research and personal experience throughout this thesis.

HISTORICAL ACCOUNTS

Although seldom mentioned, the Property Man sometimes appears in the larger overviews of English language historical accounts of Chinese opera. However, as we will also see in the Western adaptations of Chinese theatre, Western historical accounts of the Property Man vary and are often factually problematic. With such problems in mind, this section will thus explore five Chinese theatre history texts written in English, paying particular attention to how the Property Man is represented in the Western historical narratives. Each account provides information on the representation of the Property Man – who he was and what he did – and sometimes becomes entangled in the dichotomy of his visibility and invisibility. These accounts do not follow chronological order, but rather a progression of the Property Man’s visibility within the texts from least visible to most visible in their descriptions and representations.

Secrets of the Chinese Drama: A Complete Explanatory Guide to Action and Symbols as Seen in the Performance of Chinese Theatre by Cecilia S. L Zung –

The first description of the Property Man in a western historical text occurs in relation to the stage properties for which he was responsible. In her 1936 book, *Secrets of the Chinese Drama: A Complete Explanatory Guide to Action and Symbols as Seen in the Performance of Chinese Theatre*, Cecilia S. L Zung referred to the Property Man in a chapter entitled “The Costumes and Stage Properties.” There she provides a description

of one type of prop known as “the Shou-chi or decapitated head,” describing it as follows: “A bundle about the size of a head wrapped in red cloth (sometimes with beard if an old man) indicates a decapitated head. Any character decapitated runs quickly off stage and the property-man produces the head if called for.”⁹ This is the single reference to the Property Man made in this text, and it is clear from the context of the reference that the props were the subject rather than the bearer. The minor mention of the Property Man in this passing exemplifies his invisibility to the historian Zung, as he is to Chinese audiences during a performance. Invisibility in a performance is an aesthetic convention whereas invisibility in an historical account incline toward oversight and neglect and toward a lack of acknowledgement of the labor that the Property Man provides.

This lack of acknowledgement is puzzling given that Zung’s book focuses on all aspects of Chinese traditional opera including acting techniques, production elements and synopses of the plays. Zung was a Chinese born scholar who wrote in English, and as noted in the preface to the book, began attending Chinese opera as a child. It was her love of the art form that inspired her career as a historian:

With such fondness for the theatre I would have written earlier on Chinese drama had I not been overcome by the great difficulty of putting into a foreign language the complicated technique of acting on the Chinese stage and the feeling of my lack of literary style. To the best of my knowledge no one else has attempted to interpret in English the Chinese stage technique.¹⁰

It’s clear that showcasing Chinese theatre to a Western audience was paramount to Zung, but to her the Property Man was less essential for storytelling, than the items in his care. It is telling that Zung majorly omits the Property Man from her history. Although

⁹ Cecilia S. L. Zung, *Secrets of the Chinese Drama: A Complete Explanatory Guide to Action and Symbols as Seen in the Performance of Chinese Theatre* (New York: Benjamin Blom, Inc., 1936), 27.

¹⁰ Zung, Foreword.

necessary and visible in a Chinese theatre performance, the Property Man is invisible to Chinese audiences and perhaps to Chinese historians. This invisibility is repeated throughout many Chinese theatre history texts.

Chinese Opera: Images and Stories by Siu Wang-NGai with Peter Lovrick –

Siu Wang-NGai and Peter Lovrick's 1997 book entitled *Chinese Opera: Images and Stories* is framed around photographs and descriptions that provide historical details about the conventions of Chinese Opera and synopses of commonly produced operas. Peter Lovrick is a Canadian born theatre scholar and performer who has engaged in amateur Chinese opera productions in Canada. His goal was to create an annotated album for the amazing photographs Siu Wang-NGai took of over fifteen years of Chinese opera performances.

Lovrick never refers to the Property Man by name, however references to the “stagehands” clearly point to what other scholars call the Property Man. The book provides important information about the Property Man's actions within a traditional Chinese performance and gives us some sense of how the Property Man was dressed. We learn about the Property Man's actions in Chapter 3 entitled “Conventions” under the heading “Props”:

Props like cups and chairs are brought onstage and removed by plainly dressed stagehands during the course of the production, in front of the audience. The stagehands also rearrange the furniture for different scenes. The customary arrangement of a sitting room is a narrow table with a chair on each side...Stagehands simply add additional chairs to make the scene the imperial court.”¹¹

¹¹ Siu Wang-NGui and Peter Lovrick, *Chinese Opera: Stories and Images* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997), 28.

Lovrick does not name the Property Man in this book, which leads one to believe that his role was considered unimportant or invisible in this narrative. Shakespeare reminds us that the name is not always important, the rose still smells sweet regardless of what it is called. However, to be given a name creates identity, and identity creates visibility.

In a book of nearly one hundred images of Chinese Opera, there is no pictorial representation of the Property Man. Though he was an essential part of the Chinese theatre, the Property Man either remained outside of the frame of Siu Wang-NGai's camera lens, or Lovrick chose not to include photographs of him. The Property Man remained an invisible member of the production and the troupe and therefore not important to showcase by this photographer. He is yet again invisible, this time literally invisible since he does not show up once in the many photographs. He is important enough to be mentioned in relation to the onstage conventions of the drama, but not important enough to be visible in the archive.

An Introduction to Chinese Theatre by A.C. Scott –

An Introduction to Chinese Theatre was published by A.C. Scott in 1962. Much as Zung does in her historical account, Scott wanted the general reader to understand the importance of the Chinese Opera. In the introduction of the book Scott admits that he has written this account for a general reader which is a useful frame with which to understand his accounts of the Chinese Theatre:

Chinese romanization systems provide difficulty for the average Western reader, who is quickly dismayed if he wishes to study a specialized subject like the theatre...Chinese names are confusing in profusion and general descriptions for personalities have been used whenever possible...the Chinese names for the actor's role divisions are for more compact and embracing than the rather labored descriptions the engender in English, but their use would have meant constant

repetition throughout the text and so again the novice was considered first. It is primarily for him that this book has been written.¹²

Scott was a photographer for the British army and was sent to China during World War II where he was first introduced to Chinese drama. Upon leaving the military he returned to China to begin his study of the artform. He is also known for his work archiving Japanese drama:

As a pioneering scholar, translator, and teacher, Scott's contributions to the study of Chinese and Japanese theatre have lasting impact on generations of scholars and students who entered the field after him... Thanks to A. C. Scott and his generation of trail-blazing scholars of Asian theatre studies, the torch he passed on to others has burned significantly brighter in recent decades.¹³

He published numerous works about the Chinese theatre during his career and his positionality as one of the first Western scholars focusing on Eastern theatre history increases the significance of his account.

Scott reiterates the role of the Property Man in relation to the props in his care, as Zung did, but also reveals that there was more to his duties. In the chapter titled "The Background," Scott, while describing the set-up of the stage and how it is utilized by actors, tells us that "suddenly a stage assistant holds aside a curtain and a resplendent figure struts upon the stage."¹⁴ In the Chapter 2 "The Technique" we learn that "a stage hand remains permanently in sight, to move the tables and chairs, hand out other properties such as flags and swords and assist the actors generally, as well as give them tea to drink from the spout of a small pot after a particular arduous piece of song or recitative."¹⁵ Scott makes the Property Man visible in two ways. He reinforces what we

¹² A. C. Scott, *An Introduction to the Chinese Theatre* (Yokohama, Japan: General Printing Co. Ltd. 1958), preface.

¹³ Siyuan Liu, "Colin MacKerras," *Asian Theatre Journal* 28, no.2 (Fall 2011), 424-5.

¹⁴ Scott, 1-2.

¹⁵ Scott, 16.

have come to know about the delivery and resetting of the properties necessary for the storytelling. He also shares a key detail about the support provided by the Property Man to the actors by supplying them with tea to drink between scenes. In Scott's text he verifies the existence, importance, and visibility of the Property Man.

Scott then relates that in the "more contemporary stage discipline...the property man is no longer visible, at any rate to the audience, nor does the actor drink his tea in public view."¹⁶ It should be noted that Chinese drama went through an extensive reform in 1949 during the Communist Revolution. This is often attributed to China wanting to align conventions more with Western theatre. It would make sense that the Property Man would move off stage and into the wings, as that is location of the modern-day Western stage manager who I believe the Property Man closely aligns. In essence, Scott reveals that the Property Man moved from onstage visibility-invisibility to offstage invisible-invisibility, similar to modern Western stage managers and stagehands. Scott has chosen to tell us why we no longer see him sitting onstage, acknowledging his importance, and explaining that the move to invisibility is not an erasure of the person, but rather a change to the conventions in modern times.

Peking Opera by Colin Mackerras –

Colin Mackerras' book *Peking Opera*, published in 1997, reveals not only the role of the Property Man, but also suggests his physical location within the theatrical stage set up. Mackerras, an Australian scholar, is considered a foremost scholar of Chinese performance and is said to have picked up where A.C Scott left off after his death. Siyuan

¹⁶ Scott, 17.

Liu argues that “his writings stand out both for their substantial historical research and as contemporary reports through field investigation, interviews, and insightful examination of Chinese sources.”¹⁷ Research and reporting methods had changed by end of the 20th century and Mackerras’ approach to the material showcases an in-depth interest and desire to bring the work of the Chinese theatre to an international audience. At the writing of this paper, Mackerras has published over 20 works focusing on the history of China and Chinese Theatre practices and continues his work as a Chinese culture and drama expert as Emeritus Professor at Griffith University in Australia.

In the third chapter of this book, he provides this account: “In old-style performances, a special actor with no character role opens the curtain at the back of the stage for the actors to enter, generally from left seen from the point of view of the audience and moves the stage properties as necessary.”¹⁸ Note that as in Lovrick’s book, the Property Man is not given a name here, only a description. The fact that he is referred to as a “special actor” creates an interesting gaze of visibility to his role and function unlike Lovrick’s “stagehand” description. If he is an actor then he is meant to be seen, unlike a stagehand who would be invisible. As a Westerner it’s possible that Mackerras fell victim to Western staging understandings, assuming that is someone was onstage, and if they were meant to be visible to the audience, then they must be called “an actor.”

Within the central color plates of Mackerras’s book there is a photograph of the stage along with someone pulling open a side curtain for a performer to enter, as he describes in chapter three (Figure 2). Mackerras also included a full stage photograph of a tea house from 1930 where Chinese opera was traditionally performed. Stage left we

¹⁷ Siyuan Liu. “Colin MacKerras.” *Asian Theatre Journal* 28, no.2 (Fall 2011), 429.

¹⁸ Colin Mackerras, *Peking Opera* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1997), 39.

see two figures in grey, one seated and one standing. There is a strong possibility that these are the Property Men in their offstage position (Figure 3). It is my belief, however, that their presence in this photo is a coincidence. This image was meant to showcase the theatrical venue and just happened to catch the Property Men in their off-stage position. And yet this moment of visibility in the archive, however coincidental, is of great importance as it is one of the only images that shows us the Property Man's physical attributes, location, and demeanor.



Figure 2 - Property Man holding back a curtain for an actor's entrance. ((c) Colin Mackerras' Peking Opera 1997).



Figure 3 - 1930's Chinese Tea House Theatre, Property Men located far right. ((c) Colin Mackerras' Peking Opera 1997).

The images from this book are not the only ones showing the Property Man in the archive. Harold Acton lived and worked in China from 1932-1937 during which time he frequented the Chinese theatres and took an extensive number of photographs including two which, like Mackerras' images, show the Property Man in his offstage position (Figures 4 - 5). These photographs and many more by Acton were donated to the New York Library and made into a special collection after his death in 1994. It was not until the 1990's that a pictorial representation of the Property Man emerged in the archive and provided clues on his person, location and physicality. Mackerras' and Acton's images were invisible to a larger audience for over 50 years. The dichotomy of visibility in a handful of photos within a vast archive of Chinese Theatre images clearly shows how invisible the Property Man's person has been throughout history.



Figure 4 - Chinese Tea House Theatre with Property Men seated left and right. ((c) Harold Acton).



Figure 5 - Chinese Tea House Theatre with Property Men seated left and right. ((c) Harold Acton).

The Chinese Theatre by Jack Chen –

The final historical account we will explore helps to understand how the Property Man approached his job. In his 1948 book *The Chinese Theatre*, Jack Chen recounts a personal experience attending a performance in a tea house. Chen was primarily an illustrator and cartoonist who traveled throughout China and accompanied Chinese theatre troupes on international tours as well including Mei Lanfang's legendary trip to Russia in 1935. His account is useful as it is written as a narrative of his experience attending and watching a Chinese opera performance from the moment he arrives through the curtain call. The amount of detail he provides is more than is found in any of the other texts we explore in this paper.

As an artist and not a historian, Chen's understanding and reflections on his experience are unique. Unlike Zung and Lovrick, he recognizes the person who is the Property Man and how the man completes his tasks. In his description of the performance, he gives us this account: "Several attendants stand unobtrusively on the side of the stage in their workaday clothes. It is a warm day and in keeping with the air of general unconcerned lack of ceremony, one wears no vest or shirt under his cotton jacket which is left comfortably unbuttoned."¹⁹ The vivid description of the Property Man's demeanor and physicality support the notion of him as a laborer, present onstage to do a job, to carry out a necessary function.

Chen continues to explain the pivotal function of the Property Man in the storytelling of the play:

¹⁹ Jack Chen, *The Chinese Theatre* (New York, NY: Roy Publishers, 1948), 11-12.

General Chu enters and in full view of the audience, takes his seat on a chair atop a table which had just been placed there by a stage attendant. In front of him two other attendants hold up a bamboo frame which supports a screen painted with a city gate in brick wall about five feet high. When the scene ends the attendants remove the 'wall', roll it up and take it away.²⁰

By holding scenic items aloft during the action of the play the Property Men create location. Here is another example:

Banners decorated with a 'waves and fishes' design are brought on the stage by attendants to indicate water, the sea or a great river. A character committing suicide by drowning jumps towards them. The attendants fold the flag around him and all exit together as a swift pace.²¹

The labor of the Property Men provides essential elements necessary for storytelling, without which there is no setting, no water, and no drowning. Shortly after we are told that "if an attendant approaches the actors and throws white bits of paper over them like confetti at a wedding you will know it is snowing hard."²² The Property Man locates the action of the play within a snowy outdoor scene. And then we learn "whenever the devil manifested his power, an attendant standing on the side of the stage would let off fire-crackers. When the devil cast flames on another character, the attendant walked up to him with a nonchalance of some invisible man and, striking a match, set fire to spirit soaked bunch of tissue paper and whisked this around him."²³ The Property Man is more than just a person who carries props, he is a visible laborer going about the duties of his job supporting the actions of the play and the actors. Thanks to Chen we have this firsthand account of the Property Man's actions and importance. He and his work are made hyper-visible in this book.

²⁰ Chen, 27.

²¹ Chen, 28.

²² Chen, 28.

²³ Chen, 29.

The various historical documents allow us to better appreciate the Property Man's practical work within the three play texts previously explored. This compilation of data allows us to see his critical role onstage supporting the performers, the narrative of the play and the overall success of the production. Through these five historical textual accounts of Chinese Theatre, the Property Man's purpose through various frameworks is clearly visible. The first is his role in relation to the properties in his care, which were vital for storytelling. The second is how he performed his role and perhaps how he identified as a laborer doing his job. Also, these texts suggest how he was dressed (or perhaps costumed), which either added to or subtracted from his visibility, depending on one's frame of reference. Finally, his relationship to the performers, not only by delivering the items they needed for their work but caring for their physical wellbeing. These labors exceed that of a fellow actor or crew member, and they position him in the role of caretaker.

Do Western representations of the character of the Property Man coincide with the actual historical role in Chinese theatre? As will be revealed in the exploration of the plays in the next section, Western representations were unable to achieve accuracy in performance for the Property Man due to differences in Eastern and Western cultural gazes, which affect if not determine, what is visible and what is invisible. For Chinese theatre the labors of the Property Man were essential for a more representational form of storytelling, which allowed epic stories to be told with symbolic staging practices. These symbolic stage practices relied on audiences accepting the stage convention of invisibility for the Property Man. The first attempts to present these stage conventions for Western audiences could not achieve the same invisibility because Western eyes, attracted by the

new and exotic, could only view the Property Man as visible. But this heightened visibility was its own kind of invisibility because it was unfortunately based upon stereotyped and parodied yellowface performances. Historians such as Zung and Lovrick, accustomed to the Property Man as invisible, neglect to mention him as an essential staging element within their histories. Within the histories above, only the artist Chen clearly characterizes and reveals the Property Man. Visible, yet invisible, the Property Man is essential for early Chinese Theatre, yet invisible to audiences - visible for Western audiences, yet invisible to historians. This dichotomy can also be found also in American theatre.

THE PROPERTY MAN AS A CHARACTER

This section will explore three plays written in English and performed in both England and American between 1912 and 1946 where a physical embodiment of the Property Man appears onstage. Examining the work that the Property Man engages onstage and how he completes this work, we will explore the fine line he walks between visibility and invisibility for Western audiences. Though the Property Man appears onstage for all three plays, they each show a progression of visibility from hyper visible as is the case in *The Yellow Jacket* (1912), to moderately visible in *Lady Precious Stream* (1934), to barely visible at all in *Lute Song* (1946). The purpose of exploring these three plays is to also to show how the Property Man's various representations provide a lens for understanding how Western portrayals of Eastern theatrical ideas can provide an intended or unintended erasure of the original personage.

The Yellow Jacket by J. Harry Benrimo & George C. Hazleton –

In 1912, two American playwrights attempted to recreate what they considered to be an authentic Chinese performance. With performances in London's West End and on Broadway in America, *The Yellow Jacket* is the earliest known Western representation of the Property Man not only as a presence onstage, but also as a ubiquitous character. In the Foreword of the printed script, Benrimo and Hazleton describe their theatrical attempt as follows:

The purpose of the creators of this play is to string on a thread of universal philosophy, love and laughter the jade beads of Chinese theatrical convention. Their effort has been to reflect the spirit rather than the substance. To do this, the property man has to be overwrought; the Chorus has to be introduced. Signs usually indicate the scenes on the Oriental stage; the Chorus voiced them for us. While the story of *The Yellow Jacket* is not taken from any direct source, it is hoped that it may convey an imaginative suggestion of all sources and reflect the childhood of drama.²⁴

Benrimo and Hazleton wished to emulate an accurate Chinese Opera performance, and in doing so, they included the Property Man as a vital element.

The Property Man's work and the performance of his work was necessary for recreating Chinese theatre for a Western audience. The problem was that Western audiences were not socialized in ways that guided their understanding of this unique figure on the stage. Chinese audiences, by contrast, learned to ignore the parts of the production not immediately relevant to the story. This was certainly the case with the Property Man and his work. However, in *The Yellow Jacket*, this socialization is not only lost. It is overturned. In "The Quaintness-and Usefulness of the Old Chinese Traditions:

²⁴ George C. Hazleton and Benrimo, *The Yellow Jacket* (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company Publishers, 1913), Foreword.

The Yellow Jacket and Lady Precious Stream” James Harbeck helps us further understand the approach of the authors:

During the first run of *The Yellow Jacket*, Hazelton and Benrimo gave an interview explaining why and how they had written the play: ‘To us the property man in the real Chinese playhouse was very funny. We said to ourselves that if American actors could be persuaded to go through the scenes with that same seriousness, there was no reason why an occidental audience could not have as much fun as we were having then.’ To that extent, they ‘started a search for every available bit of information about the Chinese theater.’²⁵

Clearly Benrimo and Hazleton could not ignore the Property Man as Chinese audiences were able to do. He was quite visible to them, and they wanted him to be visible to the Western audiences as they believed his position was vital to the style of the performance. But at some level, moving the Property Man from invisibility to visibility ironically erased the Property Man who actually served the Chinese theatre.

The basic Chinese Opera set consists of one table and two chairs which are arranged in various ways by the Property Man to represent different locations. As mentioned previously, a chair placed behind the table represents a throne. A chair on top of the table could mean a mountain. A chair laid on its side is no longer a chair, but another item to sit upon such as a tree stump or mound of dirt. Additional chairs can be brought on from offstage as well to add to the scene. Hand props are also minimal and meant to showcase a location or action. A paddle for example can represent that the characters are on a boat, or a whip can designate that they are riding a horse. Miming props is not uncommon either. The backdrop of the stage was adorned in a vibrant ornate

²⁵ James Harbeck, “The Quaintness-and Usefulness of the Old Chinese Traditions: The Yellow Jacket and Lady Precious Stream” *Asian Theatre Journal* 13, No. 2 (Autumn, 1996): 240.

embroidered tapestry with two doorways covered in fabric – one left and one right where the performers would enter and exit.²⁶

The stage directions in the published script of *The Yellow Jacket* support the idea that the properties and furniture are under the Property Man's control. It also gives us the best understanding of the Property Man as a character and the actor's portrayal and approach. On the first page he is introduced to us as follows - "The property man enters indifferently from the opening at center of curtain strikes thrice on the gong and exits."²⁷ What follows throughout the script are numerous descriptions such as "The property man assists [Wu Sin Yin] to arrange his costume, then smokes complacently."²⁸ Another stage directions inform us that he "holds flowers for [Wu Fah Din] to smell again...Property man draws them away from him and put them in the box left. Property man then sits and reads Chinese paper."²⁹ We learn that the Property Man has assistants who help him during the production from stage directions such as this:

Property man's assistants push four stools together, then bring four chairs and place them back of stools, touching them. An assistant exits right but returns immediately with two bamboo poles to be used as oars. Hands one to another assistant and they stand a little above and to the right of the chairs. Property man gets drapery and places it over back of chairs. Then he places two cushions on the stool which he gets from the left near property box.³⁰

These descriptions of the Property Man's work are in alignment with those mentioned in Chinese theatre historical texts, which we will explore later in this paper.

²⁶ The details in this paragraph are all pulled from the historical Chinese theatre texts referenced in this paper.

²⁷ George C. Hazleton and Benrimo, *The Yellow Jacket* (Brooklyn, NY: Braunworth & Co., 1913), 1.

²⁸ *The Yellow Jacket*, Braunworth & Co. edition, 5.

²⁹ *The Yellow Jacket*, Braunworth & Co. edition, 62-63.

³⁰ *The Yellow Jacket*, Braunworth & Co. edition, 81.

It is important to note that there are differences between the original printed script and acting edition published by Samuel French. Each give us different accounts of the blocking and acting of the Property Man. For example, at the end of the Chorus' opening monologue where he announces that the Property Man is invisible the original script includes this stage direction – "Property man now comes before curtain again. Strikes gong and exits."³¹ Whereas the acting version states "Property Man beats gong once. Chorus is visibly disturbed. Smiles slightly."³² Then slightly later the acting edition included this stage direction, not present in any form in the original script – "Property Man goes about his work in a bored manner. Neither he nor his Four Assistants take any notice whatever of the audience – they show no regard for the conventions of the stage. Property Man always gives a signal for Chorus to speak, after he has arranged the stage."³³ Even later in the play we find another moment where nothing exists in the original script but in the acting edition it explains that the "Property Man interrupts by pounding teacups. Wu Sin Yin turns and looks at the tray with tea, etc. Property Man points to tray with a look of disgust on his face, then turns and assumes his previous attitude."³⁴ The acting edition of any script is often comprised of stage directions based on the blocking and acting notation from the original production. It is most probable that this is so for *The Yellow Jacket*'s acting edition, and that the stage directions noted above as well as many more were in fact based on the performance of Arthur Shaw in the original Broadway production, not written by the authors.

³¹ *The Yellow Jacket*, Bobbs-Merrill Company edition, 4.

³² *The Yellow Jacket*, Samuel French acting edition, 19.

³³ *The Yellow Jacket*, Samuel French acting edition, 20.

³⁴ *The Yellow Jacket*, Samuel French acting edition, 38.

The Property Man sets important rules at the beginning of the play which allow the audience to understand what they are about to see and how to interpret what transpires. The conventions of Chinese drama or its “frame” are at the core of Erika Fischer-Lichte’s chapter on *The Yellow Jacket* in her book *The Show and the Gaze of Theatre*. “This frame of reference,” she argues, “sets the conditions which, in the course of events, will determine the process of meaning-generating. All that is to be perceived and interpreted has to be related to this frame.”³⁵ For Western audiences who have little familiarity or understanding of Chinese Theatre conventions, the Property Man assumes a very different function than in Chinese theatre. He guides the gaze: he indicates where to look, where not to look, and how to follow the story. He also transforms the properties under his care from everyday items to symbols and things of meaning with his gestures. By taking a small red sack from his offstage property box and throwing it onto the stage at the moment a character swipes with a sword at the head of another, for example, the Property Man transforms the red bag into a severed head and gives it life and meaning³⁶ – all of which is achieved through the Property Man’s implied invisibility. At the end of *The Yellow Jacket* when the Chorus allows the audience to see the Property Man again for his curtain call, the rules are broken, we are back in a theatre with the actors and laborers. The illusion is gone. In Western Theatre, one speaks often of the “willing suspension of disbelief” which is necessary for an audience to appreciate the reality of the play and disregard the artifice of the theatre space in *The Yellow Jacket*, the suspension of

³⁵ Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The Show and The Gaze of Theatre: A European Perspective*, (Iowa City: The University of Iowa Press, 1997), 79.

³⁶ *The Yellow Jacket*, Bobbs-Merrell Company edition, 36.

visibility for the Property Man is invoked at the beginning of the play and dispelled at the end.

Benrimo and Hazelton created a character from the Property Man. They took a historical laborer vital to the onstage action and made him a visible part of the play. Dongshin Chang, in a commentary of the London production of *The Yellow Jacket*, includes a reference to the Chinese name of the Property Man - “Last but not least, they adopted the Chinese method of employing the property man (Jianchang, 檢場) to move props without disguising his presence in the midst of dramatic action. Their adaptation, however, exploited his presence for laughs.”³⁷ Chang adds that “it is noticeable that the Property Man is present for and central to the construction and depiction of the dramatic actions: he supplies the posey for Wu Fah Din, holds the chair for Wu Hoo Git, and provides the paper threads for the Spider. He smokes a cigarette and exhibits an aloof, even contemptuous attitude toward the stage actions, demonstrating Hazelton and Benrimo’s creative adaptation of this stagehand from Chinese theatre as a character in his own right.”³⁸

The Yellow Jacket reimagined a position that was invisible to the gaze of a Chinese audience and made him hyper-visible to the Western audience. *The Yellow Jacket*’s description of the Property Man’s invisibility at the top and allowing him the final curtain call gives him a strong identity within the play. He is also given top billing in the list of characters in the printed script and, we must therefore believe, he was also top billed in the playbill given to audiences. This may have been because he is the first

³⁷ Dongshin Chang, *Representing China on the Historical London Stage: From Orientalism to Intercultural*, (New York: Taylor & Francis Group, 2015), 154.

³⁸ Chang, 155.

character we see, or perhaps because he is a principal character in the play. Regardless, his inclusion in the cast list reveals that he is an important member of the story. The Property Man in Chinese opera was never listed on any cast list or playbill; he was a laborer, and not part of the play. The portrayal of the Property Man within *The Yellow Jacket* forms many contradictions. It gives him a leading role, complete with top billing, while also erasing the original intent of the Property Man as he existed on the Chinese stage.

The portrayal of the Property Man in *The Yellow Jacket* is one of parody. He is meant to be a comedic character, perhaps to provide a cultural commentary allowing and encouraging the audience to laugh at the alien ways of the Chinese and their stage conventions. “Comedy was a common element of chinoiserie plays – Hazelton and Benrimo, the authors of *The Yellow Jacket* had played the property men for comic effect, since they found them, ‘very funny’.”³⁹ Chinese audiences did not see the historical Property Man this way, even if he did perform his tasks in the ways described here - “The property man assists [Wu Sin Yin] to arrange his costume, then smokes complacently.”⁴⁰ Many printed reviews and accounts credit him as being the most enjoyable part of *The Yellow Jacket* production. Benrimo himself took over the role of the Property Man during the London production⁴¹ which can only lead us to believe how important he found the role to be and how critical this caricaturistic portrayal meant to the overall production.

³⁹ Diana Yeh, “Staging China, Excising the Chinese: Lady Precious Stream and the Darker Side of Chinoiserie,” In *British Modernism and Chinoiserie*, ed. A. Witchard, (Edinburgh University Press, 2015), 18.

⁴⁰ *The Yellow Jacket*, Bobbs-Merrell Company edition, 5.

⁴¹ Ashley Thorpe, *Performing China on the London Stage: Chinese Opera and Global Power, 1759-2008*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 73.

Benrimo and Hazleton, in trying to recreate an authentic Chinese performance, in fact created a mockery of what they presented as “authentic.” In the article “Trying on the Yellow Jacket: Performing Chinese Exclusion and Assimilation” Ju Yon Kim shares this insight:

Whereas a similar property man in a Chinatown theatre would have a purely practical role managing the stage and would therefore not be considered part of the performance itself, Benrimo and Hazelton scripted in detail the behavior and mannerisms of their Property Man. Their stage directions, explicitly call for the Property Man not only to arrange the set, but also to smoke, read a newspaper, hurt himself, eat a bowl of rice, and make mistakes. They even specify his attitude: mainly ‘indifferent’ or ‘complacent.’ The play therefore does not simply use Chinese stage conventions; instead, it mimics the application of these conventions to create a specific staging of ‘Chinese drama’, which is then reproduced every time *The Yellow Jacket* is performed.⁴²

Kim then expands her views into a book entitled *The Racial Mundane* which gives a great deal of focus to the Property Man. “I would also propose that insofar as the Property Man joins two definitions of performance – ‘doing’ and ‘representing’ – his onstage activities obstinately resist dissipation as mere flavor or inflection of Chinese theatrical practices.”⁴³ Kim’s references to mimicry and representation are the key points here. Benrimo and Hazleton’s attempts at authenticity in fact creates a mimicry of the Property Man not only for the Western audiences but for the historical archive. These Western playwrights, in what we can only assume was an attempt at honoring and showcasing the work of Eastern theatre, erased the original Property Man’s invisibility and replaced him with a visible and false representation.

⁴² Ju Yon Kim, “Trying on The Yellow Jacket: Performing Chinese Exclusion and Assimilation,” *Theatre Journal* 62, no. 1 (March 2010): 89.

⁴³ Ju Yon Kim, *The Racial Mundane: Asian American Performance and the Embodied Everyday* (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 58.

Arthur Shaw's portrayal of the Property Man reinforces the idea of parody and caricature. He went on in this role to rave reviews for many years, in New York City and beyond. But, as Michelle Su-mei Liu notes, this portrayal was very much out of sync with the actual Property Men who populated the Chinese stage. In her dissertation "Acting Out: Asian Images and the Performance of American Identities, 1898-1945" Liu states, for example:

In charge of all the props and special effects was the Property Man. According to Chinese stage conventions, the Property Man was always present on stage but "invisible," vital for the smooth running of the drama. The playwrights exaggerated the role of the Property Man to make him the comedic focus. American audiences over the years were continually delighted by the result. As first played by Arthur Shaw, the Property Man is utterly bored by a drama that he has purportedly seen hundreds of times. He stares off into space and reads the Chinese newspaper, annoyed by the bother of having to hand the actors props or a cup a tea. A cigarette always hanging off his lip, nothing shakes his world-weary attitude.⁴⁴

Liu's observations notwithstanding, Arthur Shaw's portrayal of the Property Man in the Broadway production garnered positive reviews by multiple critics, all of which at varying degrees celebrated an embodiment of parody and humor under the guise of "authenticity" that ultimately came at the expense of actual Chinese conventions. In the *New York Tribune*, for example, Shaw's Property Man was "comical in his imperturbability and officiousness."⁴⁵ A review in the *Christian Science Monitor* describes him as "delightfully funny."⁴⁶ And the *St. Louis Dispatch* said that Shaw's performance was "masterfully drawn in mute comedy."⁴⁷ Clearly Shaw's performance

⁴⁴ Michelle Su-Mei Liu, "Acting Out: Images of Asians and the Performance of American Identities, 1898-1945" (PhD diss., Yale University, 2003), 109.

⁴⁵ "'The Yellow Jacket:' A Play Presented in Chinese Fashion at Fulton Theatre," *New-York Tribune*, November 5, 1912.

⁴⁶ "Chinese Drama is Novelty of Season in New York City," *Christian Science Monitor*, November 30, 1912.

⁴⁷ Ripley D. Saunders, "Relish Dramatic Dish: Play has a Tang for the Jaded Taste," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, November 5, 1912.

was one of comedy, meant to pull the audience's focus from the other characters onstage and be highly visible; the exact opposite of how a Property Man in Chinese Theatre would have assumed the role.

This Property Man's comedy-infused visibility reached even higher into the echelons of celebrity culture. Harpo Marx' portrayal of the Property Man in a 1941 production of *The Yellow Jacket* at the North Shore Playhouse in Massachusetts only deepened the argument that this role was primarily for comic relief. Marx, a legendary comedian, and part of the Marx Brother's trio, saw the original Broadway production with drama critic and friend Alexander Wolcott. They both agreed that if Marx' career ever went solo this was a role he was meant to play. Fifteen years later after the last Marx Brother's movie premiered Wolcott and Marx got their wish.⁴⁸ Wolcott went on to play the Chorus in the same production. Marx went on to reprise the role in 1952 at the Pasadena Playhouse in California. Printed reviews support Marx' portrayal of the Property Man as parody and comedy – "Here, indeed, is a part destined for that famous mime, Harpo Marx. With an air of proper boredom, and with characteristic mannerisms, he flicks his duster, reads his paper, smokes, eats rice, and even dozes-all this to, without his famous red wig."⁴⁹ A *Los Angeles Times* review of the Pasadena Playhouse production claimed that Marx played himself, which seemed apt for the role.⁵⁰ But with the portrayal, the normally invisible Property Man was culturally erased. All of this is to say that by making the Property Man a character and hence fundamentally visible, *The Yellow Jacket* ultimately gives us a false representation of him.

⁴⁸ "Summer Theatre," *Life Magazine*, September 1, 1941.

⁴⁹ "North Shore Players 'The Yellow Jacket,'" *Daily Boston Globe*, August 12, 1941.

⁵⁰ Katherine Von Blon, "Chinese Play Pleases; Silent Harpo Scores," *Los Angeles Times*, November 20, 1952.

Harpo Marx and Arthur Shaw are not only portraying a new character, they are also trafficking the stage in Yellowface and leaning into the stereotypes that come along with this parody. Yellowface refers to the portrayal of an Asian character by a white performer using make-up, costumes, and mannerisms indicative of the original representation of the character or in this case the person. Krystyn R. Moon has written at length about this. In her book *Yellowface: Creating the Chinese in American Popular Music and Performance, 1850s-1920s*, Moon writes that,

Throughout this period, white performers in yellowface dominated the stage and primarily controlled what it meant to be Chinese in the performing arts...furthermore these actors expanded on the Chinese immigrant stereotype...and began to reemphasize the exoticism and even allure of Chinese life through costuming and sets.⁵¹

Reminiscent of Blackface portrayals from minstrel shows in early 19th century America, Yellowface not only created a false representation of Asians, but also fetishized them.

Images of Arthur Shaw and Harpo Marx as the Property Man can help us see how they were made to appear Asian (Figures 6 – 7). The printed script of *The Yellow Jacket* also specifically calls out the need for them to be costumed in a specific way as to emulate (or satirize) the original Property Man and his distinctive look. The various reviews of Marx's and Shaw's performances praised them for how they continued a narrative that relied on parody and stereotype. Stereotyped and parodied performances make highly visible inaccurate characters, rendering accurate depictions invisible.

⁵¹Krystyn R. Moon. *Yellowface: Creating the Chinese in American Popular Music and Performance, 1850s-1920s*. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 118.



Figure 6 - Arthur Shaw as the Property Man. ((c) Arnold Genthe, 1913).



Figure 7 - Harpo Marx as The Property Man. ((c) Getty Images/Ralph Morse, 1938).

Although *The Yellow Jacket* ultimately uses a flawed and caricatured version of the Property Man, it has value for being the first Western representation, its confirmation of the existence of the role, and its partial truths of the role. Benrimo and Hazleton found the function and inclusion of the Property Man essential for depicting a Chinese styled theatre. His labor was critical to the story and to the re-telling of the Eastern narrative. Unfortunately, the historical Western gaze of Eastern labor morphs the

representation into something inaccurate and ultimately harmful to the archive and the Western audience's understanding.

Lady Precious Stream by Shih-I (S. I.) Hsiung –

If the portrayal of the Property Man in *The Yellow Jacket* was problematic, then the attempts in this next work were equally so despite the author's desire to more accurately represent the Chinese stage to a Western audience. S. I. Hsiung (1902-1991), author of *Lady Precious Stream*, was fluent in both Chinese and English and translated dramatic literature including Shakespeare and George Bernard Shaw. His teaching career began in China, but then he worked in London and then to Hong Kong. Hsiung, Benrimo, and Hazleton shared a common desire to introduce Western audiences to Chinese theatre which included highlighting the Property Man. However, as Yupei Zhou notes, Hsiung was attempting to right the wrongs that plays like *The Yellow Jacket* created in their inaccurate representations:

His most important motive for writing plays in English was to introduce classical Chinese drama and authentic Chinese ways of life to the West...Hsiung's plays were intended to correct these stereotyping and often falsifying representations of the Chinese theater and of Chinese culture through staging in typical Chinese dramatic manner.⁵²

Lady Precious Stream was based on the Chinese play *Wang Baochuan*. Hsiung wrote it from memory, and therefore it can be considered an original work based on a folk tale rather than a translation of a Chinese script. Hsiung was said to have crafted the text himself to ensure "sensitive, intelligent English, without the excessive quaintness that

⁵² Yupei Zhou. "Shih-I Hsiung." *Asian American Playwrights*. Ed. Liu Miles-Xian. (Westport, Connecticut: ABC-CLO, 2002), 122.

mars *The Yellow Jacket* and parts of the popular *Lute Song*.”⁵³ Of the three plays explored here, this is the only one written by a person of Chinese descent who had lived and worked in China. “Hsiung’s adaptation largely kept to Chinese stage traditions, maintaining elements of Chinese convention – the use of property men and symbolic scenery, costumes and make-up, but omitting the orchestra and the singing parts.”⁵⁴ He did not want to recreate the false representations of Chinese theatre that had been seen onstage in the West previously, but rather he tried to honor the original work by showcasing an accurate depiction to the Western audiences.

As is the case with *The Yellow Jacket*, the actions of the Property Men in *Lady Precious Stream* are noted in the stage directions as well as in the opening monologue of the play. Since the script notes no other authors or adaptors, it is reasonable to assume that Hsiung himself wrote the stage directions and therefore crafted how the Property Men would behave in this production. Leonard Pronko agrees, stating that “Hsiung appends rather copious stage directions, so that anyone producing the play will not lose all touch with the correct production techniques.”⁵⁵ As Hsiung was also the director, it follows that his vision realized their portrayal. Hsiung appears to have placed high importance on precise representations of each role and character, particularly the Property Man. *Lady Precious Stream* attempts to accomplish what *Yellow Jacket* did not - an accurate portrayal of the Property Man without the “quaintness” and stereotyping we saw from the portrayals of Marx and Shaw.

⁵³ Leonard Pronko, *Theatre East and West: Perspectives Toward a Total Theater*, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1967), 52.

⁵⁴ Yeh, 4.

⁵⁵ Pronko, 52.

In *Lady Precious Stream* the Property Men are not intended for comic affect as they were in *The Yellow Jacket*. Instead they are represented in a true form based on their role in Chinese Theatre. In the opening monologue performed by the “Reader” we learn that:

The property men are supposed to be unseen by the audience are taking an active part in the performance. The success or failure of a production is sometimes in their hands. They provide chairs for the actors to sit on and the cushions to kneel upon; and the case when the hero is to die a heroic death he can fall down majestically and without any hesitation, the never-failing hands of the property men are always on the watch and will promptly catch him before any disaster can take place. Nevertheless, they sometimes, in an excess of zeal, overdo their duty by even looking after the worldly comforts of the players. When the actors have just finished some long lines, they would present him a cup of tea to ease the throat. These actions would certainly be condemned by a western audience, but we accept or rather pretend not to see them. There is, at least, one advantage; if some accident happens to the actor or property, they can come forward and pit it right before the audience can decide whether it is part of the play or not.⁵⁶

Hsiung attempts an accurate portrayal of the Property Men by clearly depicting the actions they would carry out on stage and the support they give to the overall production. This also provides an important historical account of the work of the Property Man and the importance of his role and functions. He was trying to visualize the work of the Property Man onstage not only to create an authentic production, but also to inform and educate the Western audiences about the conventions necessary to understanding Eastern theatre.

A review of a production of *Lady Precious Stream* noted the Property Man and the appreciation of his actions:

It is all a delightful make-believe. A prompter tells you what the scene is - and you believe him. The attendants open doors that are not there. The actors run up and down invisible steps. You can no more see Hsieh Ping-kuei's gallant war horse than you can see the Emperor's clothes in Hans Anderson's immortal

⁵⁶ S. I. Hsiung, *Lady Precious Stream*, (New York: Samuel French, Inc., 1937), 9-10.

Chinese fairy tale.... Best of all, so some of us think, are the "property men." While other things that are invisible are supposed to be there, these property men are "there" all the time, but are supposed to be invisible. When the Princess knocks at an unseen door, they supply the taps by hammering on their bench. They shake a tambourine to supply the jingle of the horses' bridles. Better still, when the Princess or Prince has to kneel - and this being a Chinese play etiquette compels them to kneel very often - the "unseen" attendants kindly come forward and put a red cushion on the ground. Even when the Prime Minister kicks the fraudulent suitor, the attendants kindly interpose that same cushion between the Prime Minister's and the suitor's body.⁵⁷

Note the concept of visibility and invisibility mentioned here. Many items are mimed or represented, and the audience expected to understand what they are, and yet the Property Man is omnipresent and invisible at the same time. This reviewer understood the necessity of the Property Man to be invisible to the audience and yet appreciated all of his actions. Not only did the Property Man deliver props but also provided sound effects. This is an important piece of knowledge that we have not learned elsewhere. Even in a written review, the Property Man becomes more visible.

Lady Precious Stream (and the subsequent attempt of an accurate portrayal of the Property Man) appeared at the People's National Theatre in the West End performance district of London in 1934 and ran for three years. The Chinese Embassy in England was involved in the production because accuracy mattered greatly to Hsiung. It opened on Broadway at the Booth Theatre in 1936 and had a subsequent 1937 run in Los Angeles as well. Hsiung co-directed both productions, one can assume yet again to ensure accuracy. The play has since been performed over 800 times in seven countries and four languages. The show was tremendously successful and loved by audiences. Diana Yeh in her article "Staging China, Excising the Chinese: *Lady Precious Stream* and The Darker Side of

⁵⁷ "Lady Precious Stream," *Brighton Herald*, December 21, 1934.

Chinoiserie” reveals this appreciation as she notes that *The Daily Telegraph* in 1934 printed that the Property Men “were treated as a matter of course...the property men were used not to create laughter but to help illusion.”⁵⁸ The *Brighton Gazette* in 1936 commented that “the use of property men and symbolic scenery in *Lady Precious Stream* placed: ‘the Chinese Theatre ahead of the most advanced producers in the West’.”⁵⁹ Hsiung’s play and his use of the Property Men supported the original intent of the Chinese theatre staging by accurately presenting their role and intention to a Western audience.

Ironically, the issue with *Lady Precious Stream*’s use of the Property Man was not so much the representation of him in the play (even though he was a character) but rather how audiences received that representation. Even though the Property Men were not created by Hsiung as comic characters, audiences found them comical nonetheless because they performed the tasks in the ways of the original Chinese Property Men. D. Zheng, in an article published in the *New England Theatre Journal*, points out that Norman Stuart and Jesse Wynne who played the Property Men in the Broadway production both played their parts in such a way to cultivate the comic element:

They waited at either end of the stage, ready to dart forth to move chairs or tables, provide swords or whips to the actors, or throw cushions to the actors for them to kneel upon. Sometimes they pretended to appear bored, smoking a cigarette or reading a paper. They were comic figures and became a source of amusement to the audience. Even though the audience had been previously instructed to ‘use their imagination to obliterate’ the property men from their sight, they did exactly what they had been asked not to do as they followed the movement of these supposedly invisible figures with great interest, even chuckling now and then. This hybrid element of a traditional convention and clownish entertainment

⁵⁸ Yeh, 19.

⁵⁹ Yeh, 21.

offered ‘a pleasing quaintness’ to the audience and added to ‘the appeal’ of the play.⁶⁰

Given a western audience’s expectations and the fact that Stuart and Wynne played to that expectation perhaps unwittingly, the attempt to achieve invisibility as in the Chinese Theatre conventional sense was impossible. Despite Hsiung’s attempt to avoid the “quaintness” that *The Yellow Jacket* was accused of, the Property Men, by performing realism as it exists in Chinese Theatre, were seen as comical to Western audiences. Western audiences’ fundamental differences from Eastern audiences denies the invisibility of the Property Man. Eastern audiences ignore a Property Man smoking on the side of the stage, while Western audiences believe that there is a character’s purpose for the Property Man to remain on stage – perhaps for amusement.

The Property Man in *Lady Precious Stream* was always played by a Western performer in Yellowface. This was true even when the show had a production in Shanghai after its successful runs on the West End and on Broadway.⁶¹ As previously mentioned, yellowface perpetuates stereotype and parody. Not only did *The Yellow Jacket* engage this device, *Lady Precious Stream* did as well, though for different reasons. As Shuang Shen notes: “A foreign [Western] actor was always asked to play the role of the property man so as to make this play seem different and exotic from most other Peking Opera or spoken drama performances in this Chinese city.”⁶² Shen was not the only critic to note the irony that a character used initially to help Western audiences understand the unique conventions and frames of Chinese Theatre was subsequently used

⁶⁰ Da Zheng, “Performing Transposition: Lady Precious Stream on Broadway,” *New England Theatre Journal* 22 (2015): 93.

⁶¹ Thorpe, 105.

⁶² Shuang Shen, “S.I. Hsiung’s Lady Precious Stream and the Global Circulation of Peking Opera as a Modernist Form,” *Genre* 39, no. 4 (2006): 93.

to alienate when *Lady Precious Stream* played on Chinese soil. In his book *Performing China on the London Stage*, Ashley Thorpe also showcases the portrayal of the Property Man by British actor Holman Clark as an act of cultural ethnography and performative Yellowface:

The Property Man straddled a number of theatrical frames: A British actor, a Chinese actor, a part of the play, but not a part of the narrative. His role is crucial not only because he, to paraphrase Fischer-Lichte, reveals the rules of the game, but also because he is the rule of the game: a full theatrical expression of the duality of ethnography and fantasy that yellowface supplied.⁶³

As Yellowface was used by Western performances to stereotype and parody, yellowface is used here for Chinese audiences to indicate the alien representation of the actor, playing an alien representation of the Property Man.

Hsiung, like Benrimo and Hazleton, needed the Property Man to uphold the conventions of the Chinese drama he was showcasing. He attempted to create an accurate Chinese Theatre experience, and without trying, fell into the same stereotype realized in the problematic representation in *The Yellow Jacket*. And this, of course, begs the question of whether a Property Man can exist on the Western stage without being seen as an act of Yellowface? We have one more play to explore and this one may hold the answer. This third attempt to create the reality of the Chinese stage to a Western audience bares similarities and distinct differences to the two previous plays, specifically with the role and portrayal of the Property Men.

Lute Song adapted by Will Irwin and Sidney Howard –

⁶³ Thorpe, 78-9.

Lute Song, written and first performed in the 1940's, is based on the play "Pip Pa Ki" (or "Story of the Lute") and written by Kao Tong Kia or Gao Ming⁶⁴ (1305-1370). In China this play was an incredibly popular during the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), and it was said to have been the favorite of the Emperor Zhu Yuanzhang. Colin Makerras states Gao-Ming was the "greatest writer of southern plays" and that "Many Ming critics ranked the *Lute Song* among the highest dramatic works ever written."⁶⁵ The published script notes that "'Pi-Pa-Ki' ('Lute Song') is a classic on the Chinese stage, exactly as 'Hamlet' is a classic on our stage. It is known that it was written by Kao-Tong-Kia in ancient China and that an adaptation of it was made by Mao-Taou for presentation at the Imperial Court on Peking in the year 1404. Since that date, it has enjoyed a continued stage life for more than five hundred years."⁶⁶ Of all the plays discussed so far, *Lute Song* has the closest identifiable ties to Chinese theatre, but in fact, it has a circuitous route from its Eastern to Western texts.

Will Irwin (1873-1948), adapter of *Lute Song*, was more of a novelist and a journalist than a playwright, who fell in love with the Chinese Theatre attending performances in San Francisco's Chinatown at the Jackson Street Chinese Theatre:

'I don't speak Chinese,' he wrote in 1946, 'but Chinese houseboys, whom I picked up at the entrance, would for the price of admission sit beside me and whisper a translation of the action. In such circumstances I heard 'Pi-Pa-Ki' and recognized it as a drama with pity, irony, humor – everything that means universal appeal. And I formed a dim resolution, which at first was only a hope, that I would someday adapt it for the American Stage.'⁶⁷

⁶⁴ It should be noted that there are differing historical accounts on the actual name of the playwright.

⁶⁵ Colin Mackerras, *Chinese Theatre: From its Origins to the Present Day*, (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1983), 64-5.

⁶⁶ Kao Tong Kia, *Lute Song*, Adapted by Will Irwin and Sidney Howard. (New York: Dramatist Publishing Company, 1945), 6-7.

⁶⁷ "Mama closing in as *Lute Song* builds in Chi", *Billboard*, 1946.

Removed from the mainland and encountered through the rough paraphrases of simultaneous translation, what Irwin created was in fact far removed from the classic of the Chinese stage. All of this was further complicated not only because he did not read Chinese but because he ultimately had to use a translation from Chinese to French done by A.P.L. Bazin in 1841 in order to construct the English language version of *Lute Song*. The result was not a direct or accurate translation. It was a paraphrase of the Chinese classic.

That Sidney Howard (1891–1939) was asked to assist in that paraphrasing is perhaps not so difficult to understand. He was a playwright and screenwriter. He had received the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 1925 for *They Knew What They Wanted* which later became the musical *The Most Happy Fella*. He also won an Academy Award in 1940 for the screenplay for *Gone with the Wind*, a work that with the advantage of hindsight now looks extremely problematic in its idyllic portrayal and reinforcement of white normative cultural and political values. He was brought on by Irwin to help with the project but passed away before he could see the production mounted.

Lute Song was produced on Broadway in 1946 at the Plymouth Theatre starring Mary Martin and Yul Brynner (before they starred together in *The King and I* in 1951) and was directed by John Houseman. It was considered a musical and had eight songs, all performed by Mary Martin (Tchao-Ou-Niang) and Yul Brynner (Tsai-Yong). It should be noted that the original Chinese version of this play was likely all sung and thus referred to as an opera. The production ran 142 performances from February 6 – June 8, 1946 and did not garner rave reviews. One such review in *Time Magazine* stated that:

There should have been either less spectacle or less story. As it is, the old tale is retold at considerable length, but loses much of its flow and human feeling

through gorgeous interruptions and sumptuous distractions. What's more, neither the writing nor the acting has quite the stylized quality it reaches after.⁶⁸

Whether such criticism was aimed at the original play or its adaptation by Irving and Howard is hard to say, but it is worth mentioning that in this sweeping critique the Property Man seems to have remained invisible. This was not entirely in line with Irving and Howard's intentions.

Those intentions were clear to any theatre reading the script and contemplating a production. The preface specifically states that:

Although the presumably 'invisible' Property Men make changes of hangings in full view of the audience it is not desirable that the production emphasize the quaintness of the Oriental stage technique as contrasted with the sophistication of our own. Producers are asked to consider the play on its merits for the homely wisdom of the dialogue, the poetic simplicity of the story and for its fidelity in the portrayal of Chinese character and civilization.⁶⁹

The contrasting notions of western "sophistication" and Chinese "quaintness" indicate that those intentions were far from culturally neutral, and here the Property Man is positioned as an embodiment of that. With respect to the "quaintness" and the "poetic simplicity" mentioned in the preface, it is clear that the Property Men were doing double labor - the physical labor traditionally assigned to Property Men and also the cultural labor of reinforcing Western assumptions about Chinese theatre being less than and/or less sophisticated than Western theatre.

The physical portrayal of the Property Man onstage of *Lute Song* is distinctly different from both other plays we have explored. Each act of *Lute Song* is set behind a curtain and then revealed. First and Second Property Men then bring on and take off furniture, props and costumes as needed internally within each scene. According to the

⁶⁸ "The Theatre: Old Play in Manhattan." *Time Magazine*, November 18, 1946.

⁶⁹ Kao Tong Kia, *Lute Song*, 6.

stage directions they do not remain on stage throughout but rather enter when needed to perform their tasks and then immediately exit. This is a point of great significance as it creates two major arguments in relation to the portrayal of the Property Man. First, by allowing him to enter and exit, this play removes a critical truth as he was always in view of the audience and never stepped backstage. This change erases a vital part of his role inside the Chinese theatre. Second, by taking him out of view when he was not actively manipulating the props and scenery, the playwrights focus the eye of the audience on the actors and not on him holding space on the side of the stage portraying acts of boredom as we know the Property Men in *The Yellow Jacket* and *Lady Precious Stream* did. *Lute Song* both diminished the role of the Property Man and simultaneously eliminated the ability of the audiences to view him as comic relief.

The acting edition of the play by Dramatist Publishing Company was arranged by Ruth Sergel (a dramatist who wrote and adapted many scripts for the Dramatic Publishing Company). It is quite possible she provided the stage directions in the printed acting version from the staging of the original Broadway production, which is where we learn about the movements and actions of the Property Men as they are not mentioned in any dialogue, unlike in *The Yellow Jacket*. It is a common practice that the stage directions are not written by the author but rather taken from the originating Stage manager's blocking script.⁷⁰ It's also worth noting that the Property Men are not listed in the Playbill, but we might assume fell into the category of "Travelers on the North Road, Beggars, Guards, Attendants and others."⁷¹ This is a significant difference from both *The*

⁷⁰ George Ledo, "The script, the set, and stage directions," last modified January 31, 2017, accessed November 7, 2021, <https://setdesignandtech.wordpress.com/2015/10/23/the-script-the-set-and-stage-directions/>.

⁷¹ *Lute Song* Playbill, February 6 – June 8, 1946, 4.

Yellow Jacket and *Lady Precious Stream* where they were listed as characters in the play and the actors who portrayed them specifically noted as well. This is more in line with traditional Chinese Theatre where the Property Man would not have been given recognition alongside the cast. The portrayal of the Property Men in *Lute Song* is difficult to discern as no reviews of the show can be found that mention them. Perhaps this is because they achieved invisibility for the audience, as they are meant to do. This suggests that, even for a Western audience, it is possible to utilize the conceit of the Property Man while not satirizing the role or the work.

Thus far this thesis has explored the role of the Property Man by better understanding the concept of invisibility in Chinese theatre conventions and how this concept translates to an Eastern audience. It has also contemplated the creation or modification of the Property Man into a character and viewing the representation of the Property Man in western drama as caricature which harms the actual historical narrative of the Property Man by making him truly invisible through the process of erasure. By attempting to recreate accurate Chinese productions, all three of these plays utilized an onstage Property Man (or Men), however these portrayals lacked historical accuracy. In all instances, he carried out the practical roles of the historical Property Man by moving scenery, placing props, and creating sound effects. By doing so he enabled these productions to look and feel authentic. However, in the case of *The Yellow Jacket* and *Lady Precious Stream*, he was performed in a way that suggested parody and stereotype. These portrayals reimagined a laborer whose actions are intended to be invisible, as a highly visible character within the play.

At this point it is important to acknowledge the problematic title of the Property Man with its specific regards to gender. All historical references found to date indicate that the position of Property Man was always occupied by a man, hence the gendered title. Men worked exclusively onstage in Chinese theatre until 1912 when the ban on female performers was lifted. China remains a male dominated society with women often working in subservient roles to their male counterparts in the workplace.⁷²

Acknowledging the historic “maleness” of the Property Man may inform comparisons between the Property Man and a Western stage manager. At the time this paper was written, Western stage management is a female dominated profession. This was not always the case as men previously occupied most stage management positions. Stage management professor and researcher David McGraw surveys professional stage managers working throughout the United States every two years and publishes the results. His survey in 2017 showed the following regarding stage management and gender:

Since its creation, the Stage manager Survey has tracked the shift in stage management from a male-dominated to a female-dominated profession. In the 2006 survey, 66% of participants were female. Female representation rose to 68% in 2009, rose to 70% in 2011, fell to 69% in 2013, and rose to 73% in 2015. In the original 2006 survey, men made up 48% of all participants over age 40; in the 2017 survey, men comprised 41% of participants over age 40. This change suggests an overall shift in the stage management population rather than a steady gender division occurring at later ages.⁷³

In his 2019 study he noted:

In the original 2006 survey, men made up 48% of all participants over age 40; in the 2019 survey, men comprised 36% of participants over age 40. This shift indicates a change to the stage manager population as a whole rather than support

⁷² This assumption is based on my own travels to China and the experiences noted while there, especially in the theatre and academia.

⁷³ David McGraw, “Stage Management Survey 2017,” accessed December 8, 2019. <http://www.smsurvey.info/>

the argument that older stage managers will skew towards male identity representation.⁷⁴

This disparity in gender roles for Property Men and stage managers will inform future comparisons within this thesis.

INVISIBILITY – WORKING BEHIND THE SCENES

Chinese theatre audiences are more accepting of stage conventions that fully realize location with simple staging and props:

That an onstage property man is possible at all arises from the fact that Oriental forms of theatre are invariably theatrical and there is hence no attempt at creating an illusion of real life. The spectator is capable of focusing his attention on that part of the performance which is intended for him.⁷⁵

The Property Man had multiple vital roles to support the actors and theatrical storytelling onstage. However, the Chinese audiences make no note of him. He is invisible. This larger concept of invisibility is critical to understanding the Property Man in relation to the Chinese opera audiences. Chinese staging conventions teach the Chinese theatre goer to only see what is important to see for the sake of the story.⁷⁶ The staging is limited, the furniture sparse and yet the stories told are vast. Audiences perceive location based on the configurations of a table and chairs and ignore the rest, just as they ignore the person moving the furniture. We are told by *The Yellow Jacket* chorus that the audience is not supposed to see the Property Man doing his work, which helps the audience understand this stage convention. “Ere departing my footsteps hence, let me impress upon you that my property man is to your eyes intensely invisible.”⁷⁷ He remains invisible until the end

⁷⁴ David McGraw, “Stage Management Survey 2019,” accessed May 22, 2021. <http://www.smsurvey.info/>

⁷⁵ Pronko, 54.

⁷⁶ Pronko, 53-4.

⁷⁷ *The Yellow Jacket*, Bobbs-Merrell Company edition, 4.

of the play when the chorus makes him visible again so he may take a bow. “And now quite visible to your eyes, our property man.”⁷⁸ It’s doubtful the Property Man in Chinese Theatre ever had the chance to bow and certainly no one ever spoke of his existence to the audience. The Chinese opera audiences understood this stage convention without having to be told.

To be invisible is to not be seen and yet still be present. In their article entitled “On the Invisibility of the Visual,” Gordon Fyfe and John Law articulate “that what can be seen is in part a question of what visual languages allow us to see.”⁷⁹ To understand what is to be seen or not seen in onstage, we must understand the language of the production, or the conventions and conceits created for the audience. The audience must be taught the language. In the case of Chinese Theatre, we know that audiences are taught at a young age the conventions or languages of the stage. They understand that an actor crouched behind a chair looking through the slats is in jail, just as they understand that the Property Man who moves about the stage setting and striking props and furniture is invisible:

To the Chinese theatergoer, [the property man] is invisible; any Westerner who has attended a play in which the property man has a function will remember how quickly this factotum disappeared from his field of perception...[The property man] is an indispensable adjunct to many forms of Oriental drama, but he has often become, in the hands of an unwitting Westerner, the focal point of the performance. His role is to help the performance in a self-effacing way...to the Chinese theatergoer, he is invisible; any Westerner who has attended a play in which the property man has a function will remember how quickly this factotum disappeared from his field of perception...That an onstage property man is possible at all arises from the fact that Oriental forms of theatre are invariable theatrical and there is hence no attempt at creating an illusion of real life. The spectator is capable

⁷⁸ *The Yellow Jacket*, Bobbs-Merrell Company edition, 190.

⁷⁹ Gordon Fyfe and John Law, "Introduction: On the invisibility of the visual." In *Picturing Power: Visual Depictions and Social Relations*. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1988), 2.

of focusing his attention on that part of the performance which is intended for him.”⁸⁰

The invisible labor of the Property Man serves the same function as the invisibility of a Western stage manager. The stage manager is a vital and yet often overlooked and invisible position in the American and British professional theatre. It is nearly impossible to mount a production without a stage manager, and if you have an exceptional one, the production process will run smoother. The average theatregoer knows very little about this person and the important role they play. Yet ask anyone in the business of creating theatre if the Stage manager is important and you will get a resounding “Yes!”

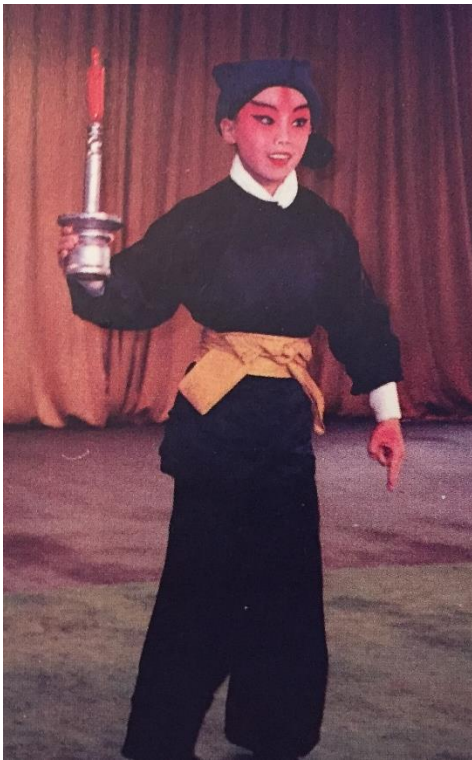


Figure 2 - Young male actor from Peking Opera. ((c) Colin Mackerras' Peking Opera, 1997).

⁸⁰ Pronko, 53-4.

From the images we have of the Property Man we know that he had a uniform, or perhaps it can be considered a costume. The elements of this costume are in line with other articles of clothing worn by the performers onstage. By looking at Figure 8 one can see how similar the Property Man's attire is to that of a young male character. They are both wearing black tunics, pants, and hats. The differences lie in the lack of belt and makeup on the Property Man. This leads one to believe that he is part of the world of the play. Whoever chose his attire, whether it was him or a designer, the costume positions him as part of the company of actors onstage. He always appears in dark grey or black, which is still the universal color worn by stage managers and stagehands today.

Whenever stage managers or crew are utilized for onstage scene changes in a Western theatrical production, they are dressed in all black clothing. Black is worn to blend into the backstage so that these people cannot easily be seen in the shadows. If not in traditional black attire, stage managers and stagehands might be costumed to match the world of the play, which also renders them invisible. Their actions are, like the Property Man, meant to be invisible to the audience. The audience sees them, but the convention created allows them to disappear into the background. This Western conceit of invisibility for stage managers and stagehands is exactly what the Chinese audience realizes for the Property Man.

The costume of black is still worn today by the Chinese theatre technicians who take on the role of Property Man moving furniture and handing off props, still invisible in their simple mundane tasks and their quotidian dress. The mundane are "everyday enactments...[which] underscore a fusion of the corporeal and the quotidian."⁸¹ The

⁸¹Ju Yon Kim, *The Racial Mundane: Asian American Performance and the Embodied Everyday*, (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 3.

everyday is unremarkable. The ubiquitous becomes invisible, even in front of our eyes. But as is obvious from this exploration – the mundane and quotidian can in fact be very meaningful.

The Property Man not only hands out props and moves furniture, but he has another important purpose as well. We learn from A.C. Scott that the Property Man would “give them tea to drink from the spout of a small pot after a particular arduous piece of song or recitative.”⁸² Stage managers are responsible for the company of artists as much as they are responsible for the technical aspects of a productions. Many modern stage managers self-identify as a parent or caretaker of the people they work with. It is not uncommon to prepare tea and other healing drinks to have ready for actors after they exit the stage, or to retrieve cold packs or other first aid supplies if needed during a performance. The actor’s voice and body are important tools and need care to insure the best performances. The stage manager cares for and supports all members of the production. In many ways, stage managers take on a parental role to make sure the cast, crew, and creative team are taking care of themselves physically, mentally, and emotionally, so that they may do their best work. How this occurs will differ based on the stage manager and the person to which they are caring and supporting. It can manifest as physical care of the actor’s person such as providing hydration stations backstage. It can also be emotional safety in the form of creating a supportive and encouraging rehearsal environment in which the actor can explore their character’s emotions and touch a place of vulnerability in the workplace. This is an additional invisible labor of both property men and Stage managers.

⁸² Scott, 16.

Actor Arthur Shaw, who portrayed the Property Man during *The Yellow Jacket's* 1912 Broadway run, was the focus of a New York Times article "Acting, Acting All the Time, But Not a Word to Speak: Yet Arthur Shaw, as the Chinese Property Man in *The Yellow Jacket* Responds to Several Hundred Cues." We learn from his own words how he views his identity and purpose in the play:

But in reality I am working all the time. Why? Because it's my job to respond to 480 cues-to anticipate everything about a minute before it happens, to hear everything without seeming to, to smoke a million cigarettes a night and act as though I liked them-in fact, to be a nonentity on a stage populated by living, talking, scheming, loving, fighting human beings. It's not the easiest job I ever had, even though I haven't a word to say.⁸³

He was the manager of the stage if you consider modern day descriptions of how a Stage manager works. They "respond" to the needs of the show, the personnel, as well as the physical attributes. They are trained to "anticipate" the needs of the creative team and the cues of the play. They "hear" everything by utilizing active listening skills, sometimes being able to listen to multiple conversations at the same time, while not missing details from the rehearsal room.

The stage manager is the silent and unseen conductor of the oversized orchestra of players and contributors. This idea exemplifies the ability of the stage manager to orchestrate the collaboration for the production process as well as the performances. "[The Stage manager] both listens intently and uses their experience and intuition to feel the moment when the show will benefit the greatest by calling the next cue. It's a subtle art and not simply a mechanical process of saying the word "go" when the actor utters a

⁸³ "Acting, Acting All the Time, But Not a Word to Speak: Yet Arthur Shaw, as the Chinese Property Man in *The Yellow Jacket* Responds to Several Hundred Cues" *New York Times*, December 1. 1912.

specific word.”⁸⁴ The difference between an orchestra conductor and a stage manager is that the former is clearly visible by the audience. The stage manager is not, they are invisible. However, their unseen ability to conduct the performance, by calling the cues for lights, sound, scenery, actor entrances, etc., is essential.

One important dichotomy explored herein is whether the Property Man was an actor or a member of the crew supporting the onstage performances. Does he identify as part of the production or separate from it? One of the best complements I was ever given as a professional stage manager was from an actor after a performance who recounted that it felt as if we were onstage together as the light and sound cues were in sync with every action and motion of the actors. The stage manager must experience the play with actors to call the best production. To this end one would argue that the stage manager is part of the company of actors, whether they physically appear on the stage or not.

The archive provides us with various narratives as to the Property Man’s purpose and existence. His tasks help us know the narrative of the play. But what is his narrative? Did he like his occupation? Did he care about the work? Or was it just a job? If we subscribe to the idea that he is an actor, we could make various assumptions. The first is that he cares about the work, the story, and the other actors on the stage because he is one of them. The other possibility is that he is bitter and upset that he is not able to perform the roles himself. It is also possible that he is a mere laborer, indifferent to the work. “When the devil cast flames on another character, the attendant walked up to him with a nonchalance of some invisible man and, striking a match, set fire to spirit soaked

⁸⁴ Al Franken wrote a response to a local debate regarding the role of stage manager as part of the creative team of a production. Now entitled “In Defense of Stage managers,” it is a widely used description of not only the role and duties of the stage manager but the importance of the position in American theatre. I, among many other stage management teachers, use it as a teaching tool.

bunch of tissue paper and whisked this around him.”⁸⁵ However, this nonchalance could be an act of invisibility, intentionally performed. It is also possible that he merely does the work because it pays a salary, not because of a devotion to the final product.

In China, laborers abound. In a country of over a billion people the vast majority fall into the category of laborers, completing manual tasks in the fields, in factories and as we can see here, onstage. In the appendix of the 1912 Samuel French acting edition of *The Yellow Jacket* under the “Acting” section it explains that “the actor in the Chinese Theatre was formerly low caste. Therefore, the Property Man looked upon him with contempt.”⁸⁶ Even the actors were seen as mere laborers, not given the prestige or audience devotion as they do now.

The work of the Property Man and other theatrical laborers in China and beyond is invisible. The average consumer (or audience member) does not see and cannot know the effort, time and energy put into the work. This is true for theatre as the amount of labor it takes to mount a production goes unseen and therefore can go unappreciated by the average audience member. Carpenters, painters, stitchers, electricians, sound technicians, and many others work for weeks and months to create the show, with their work only shared to audiences as names in a playbill. Christin Essin notes their willingness towards anonymity in her article “An Aesthetic of Backstage Labor” where through photographs she took the invisible labor of her students and placed it on display. “By pulling the working technician out of the shadows, rendering them not just visible but visually appealing, they demonstrate the extensive scale of theatrical production and multiple proficiencies of technicians to administrators and funders, whose decisions

⁸⁵ Chen, 29.

⁸⁶ *The Yellow Jacket*, Samuel French acting edition, 97.

impact future possibilities.”⁸⁷ The labor of the Property Man was never to be considered by the audiences or was likely unconsidered by those working alongside him. The work he did was a job, a means to an end.

In Chinese theatre, the Property Man was responsible for the theatrical space in two major ways. The physical stage was his to set up and manage. These responsibilities mirror responsibilities of a stage manager. But he also had the ability to communicate setting to the audience based on his actions, and in this respect, he literally occupied a different physical space than the Stage Manager, and so understanding the Property Man’s complex visibility and invisibility necessitates consideration of the space he took up both physically on the stage and psychically in the minds of the audience, especially as it relates to his work supporting the performance and the artists.

One way to pursue such considerations is through the concept of “space as practiced place”⁸⁸ that Michel de Certeau posits in his text *The Practice of Everyday Life*. This book explores the concept of city by how people engage with it. Pedestrians, for example, create meaning based on the locations they visit and how often then travel there. “Thus the street geometrically defined by the urban planning is transformed into a space by walkers.”⁸⁹ He also suggests that any space can be described or considered by how people operate inside of it. Anyone has the power to transform a place into a space and therefore give it meaning and importance, either to themselves or others. A space cannot exist without a personal interaction with it. People “perform” in these spaces, by simply carrying out basic or mundane everyday acts. de Certeau’s notion of the mundane can be

⁸⁷ Christin Essin, “An Aesthetic of Backstage Labor,” *Theatre Topics* 21, no 1 (March 2011): 35.

⁸⁸ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Randall (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988), 117.

⁸⁹ de Certeau, 117.

seen as a descriptor for the hidden and invisible labor of theatre. The Chinese make the mundane visible through the existence of the Property Man, despite his invisibility to the Chinese audience. However, Western theatre seems only able to thematize the mundane by making the Property Man an onstage character while simultaneously leaving the stage manager invisible in the wings.

Traditional Peking Opera performances utilize minimal scenery and properties. The most common furniture found on stage in Peking Opera is a table and two chairs, both painted red. Every movement of those furniture pieces and hand props within the duration of a given Peking Opera performance was under the Property Man's control. When it was time to transition to a scripted location, the Property Man and his assistants moved these items of furniture from the previous positions to the new ones thus changing the setting of the scene. When an actor needed a hand prop, the Property Man was there to hand it off when the action of the play required its use or received it when the actors were finished with the item.

The caricaturized but representative script of *The Yellow Jacket* leads us to believe that the actors were also under his control. The stage directions often reference that he nodded or gestured to the actors to let them know it was time to begin the next scene. In the top of Act 2 "Property man discovered seated on stool in center of stage. When music stops, property man arises, indicated to Chorus that scene is set and crosses left."⁹⁰ Shortly after this stage direction is noted – "Property man's assistants place four stools in a row across stage with spaces between them. Take two stools from left and place them right of stool which is center; take one stool from wall left and place it left of

⁹⁰ *The Yellow Jacket*, Bobbs-Merrell Company edition, 54.

stool center. Property man then makes gesture to Chorus and crosses left.”⁹¹ We also know that the Property Man would cue performers by opening the curtains on either side of the stage, allowing for them to enter unbothered with the fabric.

Modern day stage managers conduct performances much the same way. Props and furniture are preset by the stage manager often before the show begins, though sometimes as part of the action of the show and in some cases in view of the audience. It all depends upon the needs of that specific show and the stage conventions that the creative team has chosen to employ. When the scene is ready to begin the actors are cued, either by a cue light operated by the stage manager at their calling station or by a gesture from an assistant stage manager in the backstage wings.

These simple property moves and hand offs are the mundane acts of a laborer, such as the Property Man. He acts as such, dresses as such, and behaves as such, but his labor is just as necessary as the performers who inhabit the stage with him. De Certeau argues that any mundane act transforms a place into a meaningful space, and this is true of the space in the theatre. The very act of a prop hand off gives this theatrical space meaning, and it is the Property Man AND the actor who jointly fulfill this operation. Modern day stage managers work similarly for each performance, sometimes for weeks, months or years in the case of a long running show. Together the actors and the stage manager create the space and fill it with meaning night after night. To the performers, the stage manager and Property Man are very much visible, and their labor necessary to the success of the performance.

⁹¹ *The Yellow Jacket*, Bobbs-Merrell Company edition, 61.

Now consider how the Property Man created the space or location of a story in performance. We learn from Jack Chen's book and from *The Yellow Jacket* that the Property Man would make it "snow" by dropping small pieces of cut up paper over the heads of the actors to locate characters in an outdoor space in the wintertime. Stage techniques have progressed beyond this basic idea, but when it is time to make the snow fall in a modern-day production (perhaps with the use of a snow machine above the stage), it is the stage manager who cues that operation to begin. De Certeau explains that stories have great meaning and "carry out a labor that constantly transforms places into spaces and spaces into places. They also organize the play of changing relationships between places and spaces."⁹² The story of a play cannot be known and fully realized without the labor of the Property Man or the stage manager. They transform the empty stage into the space of spectacle, illusion, and imagination. And whether these quotidian acts are done in front of the audience or behind the scenes and invisible, the labor is no less important.

All early accounts of the Property Man make it clear that he worked in real time with the actors to make the performance occur as conceived and directed. He stands by their side to execute the storytelling moments. Chinese opera uses various staging conventions all of which are presentational to locate the actors within space and time. "Regional opera forms differ chiefly in dialect and music, but traditional stage conventions of Chinese opera are consistent. They offer a stage language that represents rather than recreates stories. Gestures, costume and props as used as symbols, not elements of literal portrayal."⁹³ The audience knows they are watching a play. The ever-

⁹² de Certeau, 118.

⁹³ Wang-NGai, 27.

present Property Man can be seen as a time piece that reminds the audience that they are watching a story in real time, even if time is in fact passing quickly as part of the narrative that is unfolding.

For many years, during a performance the Property Man's was located on the stage, off to the side of the action, but in full view of the audience. An image from Colin Mackerras' book shows us the full stage with two individuals stage left, one sitting on a stool (Figure 3). We also have two images from Harold Acton (Figures 4 and 5) which show a similar stage set up with individuals sitting off stage left and right. These appear to be Property Men in their default positions. Live musicians were also on the stage and in view of the audience - shown in the same image stage right behind a screen. They still sit onstage in modern Chinese, but they are more removed into the wings and not fully visible (Figure 9). In addition to the Property Man being onstage, so were his props, often kept in a box by his station and retrieved by him when needed. When he was not actively engaging with the props or actors he would stand or sit in his onstage spot, where the audience could see him, if they wished.



Figure 3 - Modern Day Peking Opera performance with musicians seated onstage far right. ((c) Cary Gillett, 2017).

A modern-day stage manager has a similar location offstage left and right, though out of the view of the audience. The stage manager often uses this position to “call” the show when they command the operation of the technical elements (Figure 10). This calling position can also be in a booth located behind the audience. Stage managers choose which position they would like for calling the show. Even if the stage manager chooses to call from a booth instead of from an offstage position, a member of the stage management team, such as the assistant stage manager, would be backstage ready to assist with scene changes, hand off props, cue an actor, or assist in an emergency, just like the Property Man.

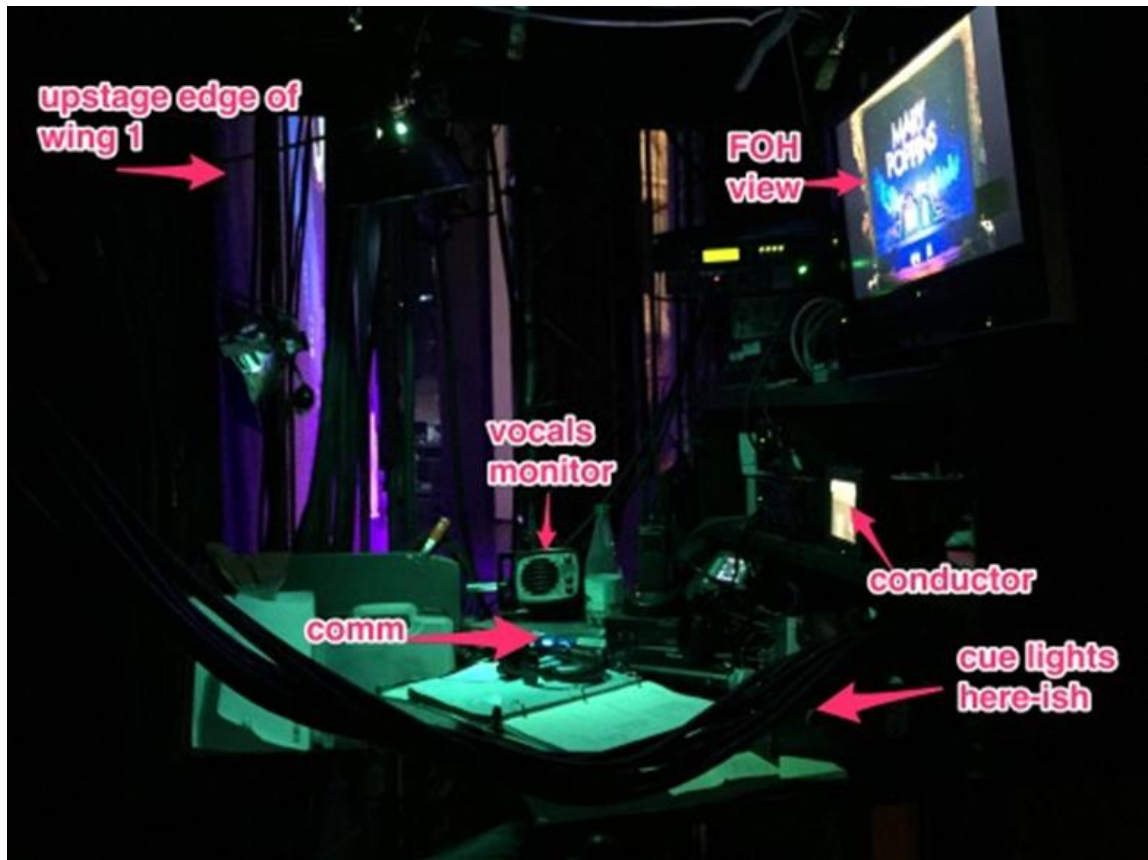


Figure 4 - Backstage stage manager calling desk. ((c) "Headset Chatter" blog post).

We learned from A.C. Scott that the Property Man began onstage but that in the shift to modern day drama he moved into the wings and out of view of the audience. During the Broadway run of *Lady Precious Stream* the onstage presence of the Property Man was called out as anachronistic since “back in China Peking Opera stars such as Mei Lanfang were already beginning to abandon such traditional practices as using a prop man onstage.”⁹⁴ Mei Lanfang was known for leading the Chinese dramatic reform in 1949 where significant changes were made to how Chinese theatre productions were mounted and presented. These reforms, some would argue, were to make Chinese theatre

⁹⁴ Shen, 91-2.

more Western and accessible. In fact, Qi Rushan, Mei Lanfang's manager was said to have pushed the old Chinese conventions away, such as keeping the Property Man onstage between his actions and allowing actors to drink water on the sides of the stage in view of the audience:

“Qi [Rushan] (artistic advisor to Mei Lanfang) also decided that some old habits in conventional Peking Opera performances were not aesthetically pleasing and should be abandoned in Mei's performances in America. He wrote in his memoir, ‘The actors were not allowed to drink water in the middle of the performance, and cushions were not used when curtseying. Property men could come on stage but had to leave right after his work was done.... We followed conventional practices most of the times even though some of these conventions were no longer traditional, and our purpose was to present the true face and spirit of the Chinese theatre’ (2:1078)”⁹⁵

Therefore, in modern Chinese theatre the Property Man is no longer seated on the side of the stage, he is instead backstage and out of the view of the audience entirely. As Chinese Theatre and specifically Peking Opera shifted towards Western presentational practices, if the Property Man was already invisible, he is even more so when operating from the wings.

⁹⁵ Shen, 98.



Figure 5 - Image of a modern-day Chinese Theatre backstage with tables laid out for properties. ((c) Siu Wang-Ngai.

Wang-Nai's book of Chinese opera photographs provides an image of the backstage with what looks like a table holding the properties when not in use (Figure 11). This photo confirms Scott's account of the Property Man removal to a backstage position. A photo taken of a Chinese opera production in 2017 also clearly does not have any Property Man in view (Figure 9). Why the move? Are modern sensibilities unable to ignore the "invisible" Property Man as audiences had done for so many years? This does not appear to be true as modern performances still utilize stage managers and stagehands to manipulate physical aspects of the production, often in view of the audience. It is the fact that he no longer sits on the side of the stage that is notable. De Certeau suggest that "the map, or totalizing stage, on which elements of diverse origin brought together to from a tableau a "state" of geographical knowledge, pushes away into its prehistory or into is posterity, as if in the wings, the operations of which it is the result of the necessary

condition. It remains alone on the stage”⁹⁶ Though perhaps the Property Man is gone from view and now totally invisible, the labor he undertook still happens. But his absence on the stage prompts the question: Has his value diminished? Has he been “pushed [offstage] into posterity”⁹⁷ as de Certeau suggests considering the changing map of the stage? Has his person and his labor become truly invisible?

CONCLUSION

This inquiry explored the notion of the Property Man by exploring the archive including three plays and five historical Chinese theatre texts. The Chinese theatre conventions held both useful and complicated frames for how history has viewed the Property Man and his work. His presence as such in the archive is in fact an erasure of the actual historical figure of the Property Man. By using the framework of visibility and invisibility, connections between East and West become clearer and simultaneously more tenuous. The fact that these were all Western adaptations in which the Property Man becomes a character or caricature cannot be ignored. The cultural politics underlying these representations (or misrepresentations), and therefore the misconceptions about the Property Man call into question ideas of appropriation, stereotyping, parody, and performativity.

Relating the Property Man to a modern-day Western Stage manager, also working behind the scenes, allows for the archive to be troubled in such a way to critically fabulate who he could have been and what role or importance his work serves. His labor was a necessary part of the success of the performances he supported, as is true for

⁹⁶ de Certeau, 121.

⁹⁷ de Certeau, 121.

modern stage managers. What is clear is that his purpose and his labors are very similar to modern stage management, suggesting an evolutionary causality – one could very easily have led to the other. One can believe that as he was removed from the stage, his role evolved towards a stage manager.

Though this exploration cannot truly unearth who the Property Man was, hopefully it has proved that his purpose is worth knowing and that his role, however enigmatic, was critical to Chinese theatre. From this exploration, the connection is evident, but regardless of connection, the labor the Property Man provided alongside actors on the Chinese stage revealed within the historical archive proves the necessity of his being. Perhaps this inquiry adds to the archive a narrative that allows others to engage with and understand who he was and what he did.

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