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# Cymbals of renewal



Cantonese opera veteran Yuen Siu-fai plays the emperor (front centre) on stage at Ko Shan Theatre. Yuen is also researching the history of the art form in an effort to make it more relevant to modern audiences. Photo: K.Y. Leung

The traditions of Cantonese opera should be protected, but the art form must be made appeal to a modern audience, writes Janice Leung

Cantonese opera – and its conservation in this city – has come a long way since veteran Yuen Siu-fai and like-minded fellow artists set up an independent troupe in 1970 to ensure its survival and stop the traditional performance art becoming overly commercialised.

The Group of Hong Kong Experimental Cantonese Opera was the first of its kind to receive financial support from the then colonial administration.

Today, the art form is getting the attention it deserves. As Hong Kong's item on Unesco's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, Cantonese opera receives support through an advisory committee and a development fund set up by the Home Affairs Bureau in 2006.

There is a permanent exhibition on Cantonese opera

at the Heritage Museum in Sha Tin, and two public performance venues at Yau Ma Tei Theatre and Ko Shan Theatre, which opened a new wing in October.

Cantonese opera was incorporated into the music curriculum of primary and secondary education in 2003.

Yuen continues to be an advocate for the preservation of Cantonese opera, a highly stylised dramatic format that has been popular in southern China since the 13th century.

The 69-year-old performer believes Hong Kong has an important role in safeguarding Cantonese opera, pointing out that it came under threat on the mainland during the Cultural Revolution.

From 1966-76 it was banned on the mainland; only eight "model operas" based on the style of Peking opera were allowed. The ban was lifted after the end of the Cultural Revolution, but by then, as Yuen explains, practitioners had either fled to other countries or simply quit their profession. Institutes had to hire opera teachers from Beijing, "as if their young actors were performing Peking opera".

Along with giving more than 100 shows annually, Yuen devotes himself to the inheritance of Cantonese opera. He has published research on the origins of the erhuang singing style and introduced its stagecraft overseas at this year's Edinburgh Fringe Festival. His new work, *A Heroic Woman of the Ming Dynasty*, was staged recently at Ko Shan Theatre.

Since 2012, he has been guiding emerging talent to perform at Yau Ma Tei Theatre for its venue partnership scheme with the Chinese Artists Association of Hong Kong.

Hong Kong has other players who are keeping Cantonese opera alive. Theatre director Fredric Mao Chun-fai is now the chair of the School of Chinese Opera at the Academy for Performing Arts.

Formed last year, the school has launched Hong Kong's – and possibly the world's – first bachelor degree in Chinese opera. It also awards the diploma and advanced diploma in Cantonese opera, offered since 1999 and 2001 respectively.

While the practical perspective remains, Mao says the focus of the programmes has shifted. "It's not just about how to perform. It's important that students learn about the art of Chinese opera, its history, aesthetics and culture, so that they keep pursuing it."

After decades of acting, directing and teaching in the US and Hong Kong, Mao has come to recognise how his knowledge of modern theatre, acquired during his postgraduate years at the University of Iowa, had prepared him for a fulfilling career. "If you want to create something new, you've got to learn from the past," he says.

Still, for Mao, formerly head of acting at the Academy for Performing Arts School of Drama, and the artistic director at Hong Kong Repertory Theatre, Cantonese opera has to find new avenues to appeal to a changing audience.

The hybrid quality of Hong Kong's way of life has long enabled Cantonese opera to assimilate foreign elements without forsaking its essence, he says. Film adaptations of Cantonese opera, for example, were innovative syntheses of Chinese and Western culture.

"So I think we could explore and modernise Chinese opera in a more profound way, backed by research," he says.

## If Chinese opera has a robust development, other forms of art will benefit

LOUIS YU, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF PERFORMING ARTS, WEST KOWLOON CULTURAL DISTRICT AUTHORITY

Mao says it's becoming common for mainland opera companies to stage East-meets-West-style "spectacles" rather than truly develop the art form.

Teresa Lee Ming-chun, senior manager (theatre and Chinese opera) at the Leisure and Cultural Services Department, agrees that mainland troupes tend to opt for new productions rather than historical classics.

"It takes us a long time to bargain with them sometimes, as we're keen to see old favourites that have not been staged for a long time," she says.

During more than 20 years

of organising Chinese opera programmes for the government's cultural sectors, Lee has been introduced a wide range of regional operas from across China to Hong Kong. She started the Chinese Opera Festival, which has been held every summer since 2010.

"The festival sets out to make our city a window on traditional Chinese opera culture," she says, adding that there are few other opportunities to watch Chinese operatic genres, some of which are from remote regions and "endangered".

With bilingual surtitles, the festival has been attracting audience members from Shenzhen, Guangzhou, Taiwan and Singapore.

Visiting troupes are often particularly grateful for the festival, says Lee, as they rarely get the chance to stage classic repertoires in their cities, or to travel between provinces to watch other artists perform.

Hong Kong's role as a cultural entrepôt for Chinese opera will grow through the much anticipated Xiqu Centre, scheduled to open in 2017 as the first venue of the West Kowloon Cultural District.

It has long been argued that the term "xiqu" is preferred to "Chinese opera", as the unique art form has a different lineage from "opera" in the West, which conjures up images of Mozart, Wagner and Verdi.

Xiqu is also much older than opera. It has been practised for a thousand years, reaching maturity during dynastic China.

Louis Yu Kwok-lit, executive director of performing arts at the

West Kowloon Cultural District Authority, says it's important to ensure this theatrical art resonates with modern audiences. It should not be treated as a museum piece. "If there's one thing that government support cannot achieve in the short term it's audience development," Yu says.

Pre-opening programmes such as the West Kowloon Bamboo Theatre might have attracted more than 100,000 visitors during the 2013 Lunar New Year – "Many young people were there to get the atmosphere of a bamboo theatre", says Yu – but "they might not have appreciated the performance format put on stage."

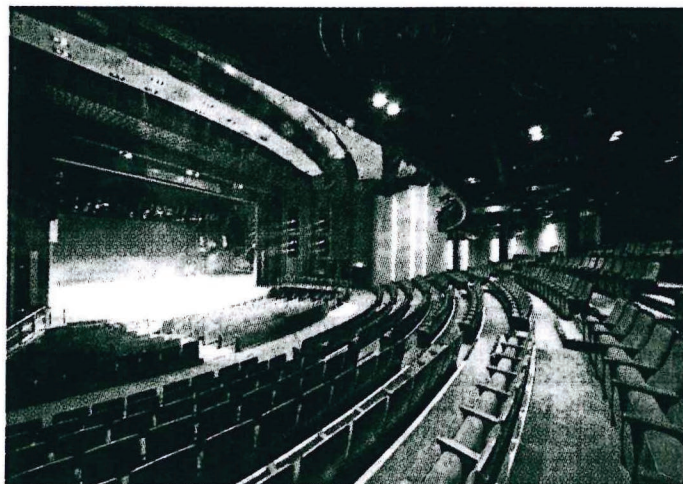
To cultivate new enthusiasts for the art, the West Kowloon Cultural District is exploring a contemporary presentation of Chinese culture for the future Xiqu Centre.

Instead of clanging gongs and thundering drums, the artistic finesse of Cantonese opera and Chinese music will be highlighted in a repackaged, modern teahouse set-up.

A new landscape of Chinese opera – and the arts – awaits.

"I don't see the Xiqu Centre as an individual centre," Yu says, adding that this "inexhaustible treasure" from the past encompasses the rich heritage of Chinese arts, and can be a source of inspiration to nourish music, theatre, dance and literature.

"If Chinese opera has a robust development, other forms of art will benefit." life@scmp.com



The auditorium in the new wing of the Ko Shan Theatre.