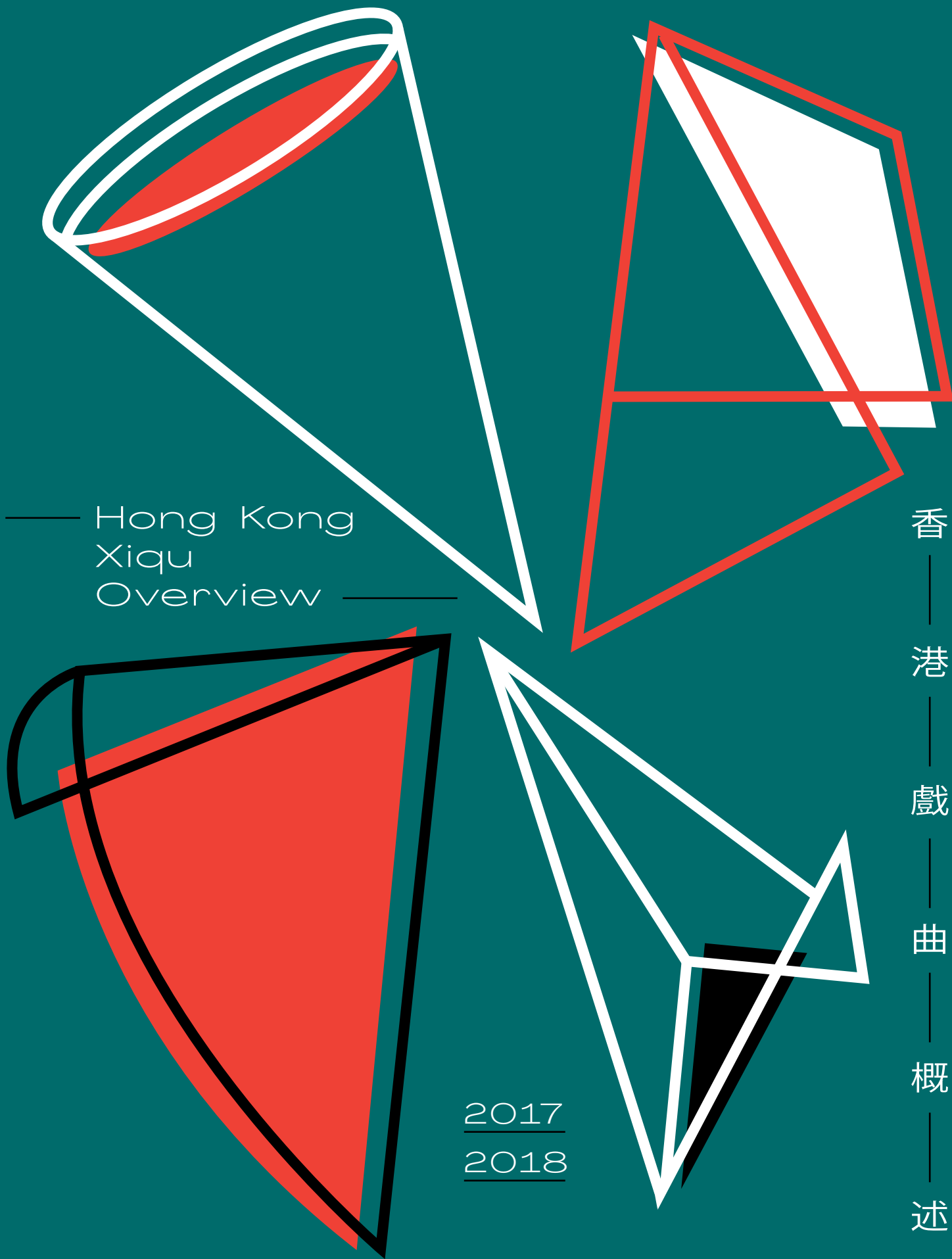
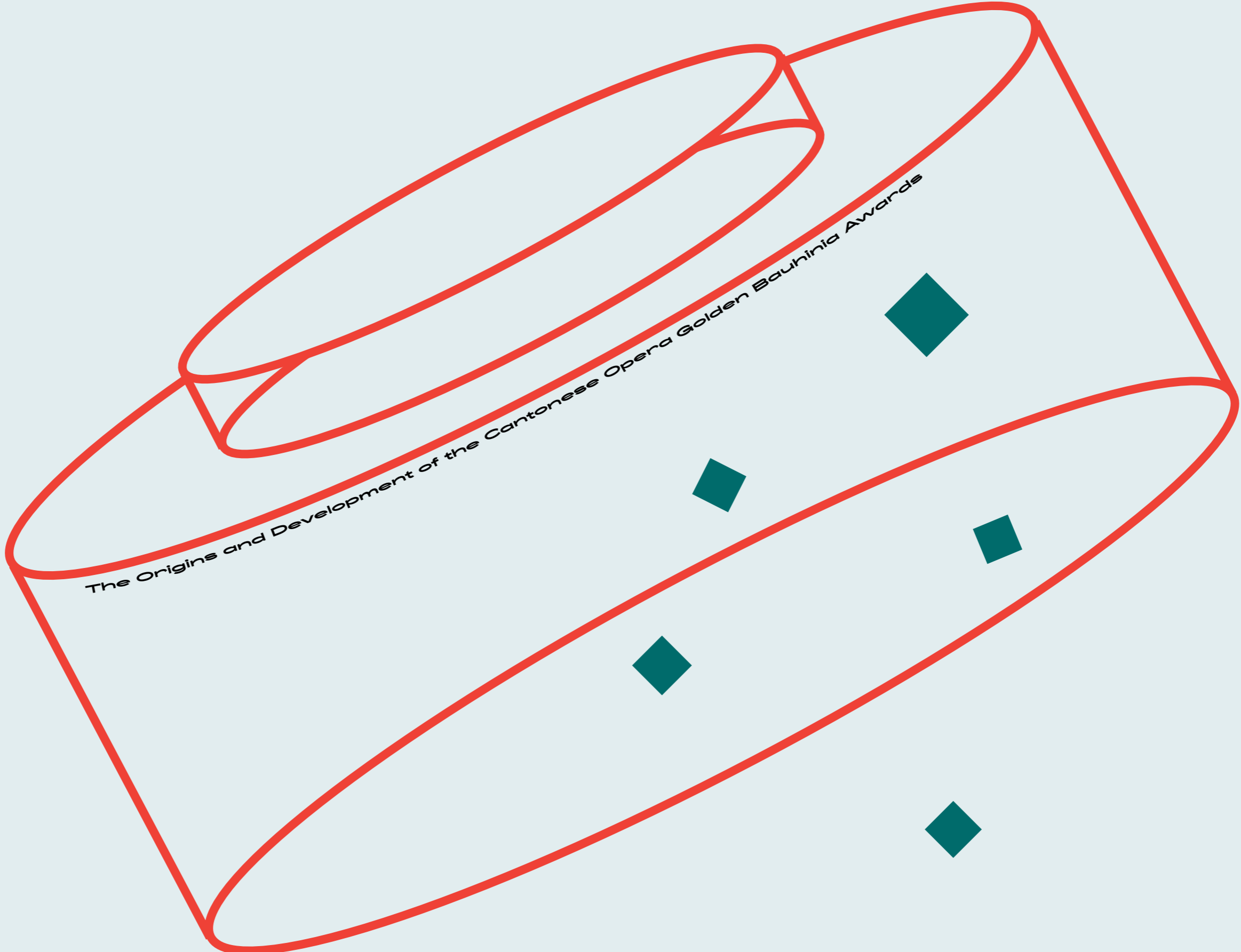


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The Origins and Development of the Cantonese Opera Golden Bauhinia Awards



The Origins and Development of the Cantonese Opera Golden Bauhinia Awards

Interviewer
Bernice Chan

Text
Yuen Hok-wai

Presented by the Life Encouraging Cantonese Opera Association (LECOA) under the Life Encouraging Fund, the inaugural Cantonese Opera Golden Bauhinia Awards presentation ceremony was held at the Hong Kong Cultural Centre Grand Theatre on 25 November 2019. Preparations for the ceremony began in 2018 as part of efforts to mark the tenth anniversary of Cantonese opera's inscription on the UNESCO's Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage. Just as the Hong Kong Film Awards carry the same weight as the Oscars for Hong Kong cinema, the Golden Bauhinia aspires to be its equivalent for Cantonese opera.

For decades, the Hong Kong Film Awards and the RTHK Top 10 Gold Songs Awards have been major events for the film and music industries respectively. Marilyn To Wai Sau-ming, committee member of the LECOA, asserted that there should also be an award for what is Hong Kong's premier intangible cultural heritage—Cantonese opera. This led to the founding of the Golden Bauhinia, which aims to honour actors who work tirelessly for Cantonese opera and to expand the reach of the art form. Kwok Ming-cheung, founder and chairperson of the Life Encouraging Fund, also seeks to promote Chinese culture through the Golden Bauhinia. Putting Cantonese opera and life education side by side, the award aims to encourage the younger generations to pass down our cultural legacy and cultivate positive life values.

Naming the awards the Golden Bauhinia was a result of much contemplation. As To remarks, the bauhinia is the floral emblem of Hong Kong. As such, this biennial award clearly applies to Cantonese opera in this city, which is different from its counterpart in mainland China, and the name also serves as a window for people to learn about this regional art form and its practitioners. On the judging panel are industry veterans such as Cantonese opera maestros Yuen Siu-fai, Sun Kim-long and Wong Chiu-kwan, head musician Lau Kin-wing, and celebrated theatre director Clifton Ko. In an attempt to draw the attention of other branches of the performing arts, the panellists, To adds, are not confined to Cantonese opera but include notables from other disciplines.

In what has provided a boost to the development of the Chinese opera sector at large, prizes and accolades for industry professionals and performance troupes have been given out in many places. For instance, the biennial Plum Blossom Award in mainland China is the highest commendation in the world of Chinese opera, and it mainly spotlights middle-aged and younger performers. In Hong Kong, prior to the Golden Bauhinia, there were awards in the Cantonese opera circle that are still running today. These include the RTHK Radio 5 Best of Chinese Opera, an acknowledgement of merit for distinguished artists and a means to promote Cantonese opera and local culture, as well as the Young Artist (Xiqu) and Artist of the Year (Xiqu) awarded by the Hong Kong Arts Development Council. In To's view, the former focuses on top stories of the industry and their news value, and the latter are sometimes not presented and usually awarded to actors, the principal male and female in particular, paying insufficient attention to the other role types.

Taking all this into account, the inaugural Golden Bauhinia sets itself apart in terms of the wide range of role types covered by its Outstanding Young Performers Award. Among the six recipients, namely Kwok Kai-fai, Yuen Tak-cheong, Lam Tsz-ching, Lai Yiu-wai, Wong Kit-ching and Ruan Dewen, were a *chou* (clown) and a *laosheng* (old male), as well as two male and two female leads, fully mirroring the "Six Pillars" tradition of Hong Kong's Cantonese opera. Furthermore, with the recent rise of social media as a major content distribution channel, arts and cultural enterprises have joined the fray trying to extend their reach on the internet. The Golden Bauhinia also launched a bespoke webpage and the Most Popular Performer Online Award, the winner to be decided by a two-week voting campaign by netizens. Audience response was ardent, and the *wenwusheng* (principal male) actor Leung Siu-ming emerged as the winner of the inaugural award. Official sources indicate that all Cantonese opera performers aged between 18 and 45 are eligible for nomination. As a token of encouragement, winners of the two aforementioned accolades are each given a trophy and a cash award of HK\$8,000. Alongside recognition for young talent, there is also the Golden Bauhinia Artistic Achievement Award for seasoned artists with outstanding contributions to the profession. The inaugural award was given to Yuen Siu-fai, who has worked tirelessly in furthering the legacies of Cantonese opera and nurturing younger generations. In his award acceptance speech, Yuen remarked that he owes everything he has learnt to his predecessors, and that he is obligated to pass knowledge on to his successors for the benefit of the art form.

No less important than support for the performers on the stage, is support for talent behind the scenes. Another special feature of the Golden Bauhinia is its New Play Staging Award for new Cantonese opera playwrights. As To remarks, the boom in new works in recent years has provided

more room for unconventional writing techniques, while novel stage effects are also a draw for new audiences. At the inaugural Golden Bauhinia, three out of the ten nominees for the New Play Staging Award were recognised, including *The Gentle Breeze Pavilion*, *Battle of the Throne*, and *Lu Buwei - A Kingly Potential Asset*. Two of the winning playwrights are relatively young, and To believes that their fresh insights are worth encouraging.

Additionally, the new plays are not assessed solely as written works. The panellists refer to the recorded stage performances and evaluate their overall presentation. Cash awards for the winners are granted as direct subsidies for reruns, so that the new works can be polished further. Planning for reruns is underway, but To notes that only one of the winning entries has been scheduled so far, whereas the other two have yet to be worked out.

As one of its objectives, the LECOA strives to scout and groom scriptwriting talent for Cantonese opera. Before the launch of the Golden Bauhinia, the association established the New Cantonese Opera Scriptwriting Competition, delivering four merit prizes of HK\$30,000 each for the open category, another one of \$5,000 for the student category, and cash awards of \$1,000 each for a number of shortlistees. This biennial competition is to be held alternately with the Golden Bauhinia every other year.



Renowned Cantonese opera artist Yuen Siu-fai is presented with the Golden Bauhinia Artistic Achievement Award. (From the left: Kwok Ming-cheung, Chairperson of the LECOA, Marilyn To Wai Sau-ming, committee member of the LECOA, Cantonese opera maestro Yuen Siu-fai, BBS, BH, and prize presenter Peng Jie, Director-General of the Department of Publicity, Culture and Sports Affairs of the Liaison Office of the Central People's Government). Photo courtesy: The LECOA

The value of an award becomes evident only when its effects are allowed to develop over a longer period of time. The same goes for performers and playwrights who need to accumulate experience and go through trials in order to grow. Looking back, all four winning titles at the inaugural New Cantonese Opera Scriptwriting Competition have been staged at Ko Shan Theatre. That says something about the quality of these new creations, which won the approval of the industry and were subsequently brought to life for audiences. Additionally, all participating works and playwrights have the chance to compete for the Golden Bauhinia New Play Staging Award. The winning entries will be subsidised for rerun, thus earning for their creators the opportunity to perfect their plays by absorbing feedback from professionals and audiences. This is how a new play could possibly become a classic.

Chinese opera is by nature a performing art that revolves around the actor. Historically, much emphasis has been placed on the training and development of the performer. However, since the 1980s and 1990s, Chinese opera productions in both mainland China and Taiwan have come to be helmed by the director and the playwright. This period also saw a surge in new works, often spanning multiple disciplines, with Chinese opera at the core, while incorporating methodologies and techniques of Western theatre. Therefore, training and support for talent behind the scenes, from directors and playwrights to musicians and technical personnel, is direly needed. The Golden Melody Awards for Traditional Arts and Music, an annual mega-event for the Chinese opera community presented by the Ministry of Culture, Taiwan, is an exemplary award that covers a broad spectrum. Among the prizes for the Chinese opera category—along with those based on onstage performance such as the Best Group Performance, Best New Artist and Best Performer—there are also Best Theatre Script and Best Musical Design awards, to pay tribute to playwrights and music makers in the profession.

The Golden Melody Awards also encourage creative endeavours on both sides of the curtain. For instance, its 31st edition, with the theme “Wild and Boundless”, asserts that “this era has granted new momentum to the development of the traditional arts. Using their creative themes in traditional frameworks, experienced and up-and-coming artists unite to create more diverse and experimental interdisciplinary performances, creating a future where imagination is no longer bound by limitations, but rather embodies our thoughts and hopes for a new frontier”.¹ From

¹ The Golden Melody Awards for Traditional Arts and Music official website: <https://gmafta.ncfta.gov.tw/home/zh-tw/origin>

this, it is fair to say that the Cantonese Opera Golden Bauhinia Awards, by giving attention and recognition to not only actors but new plays and playwrights as well, have taken a major step in fostering the development of Cantonese opera in Hong Kong.

(Translated by Elbe Lau)



The awards ceremony of the inaugural Cantonese Opera Golden Bauhinia Awards (From the left: Anthony Wong, committee member of the LECO, Lam Tsz-ching, one of the winners of the Outstanding Young Performers Award, Marilyn To Wai Sau-ming, committee member of the LECO, Kwok Ming-cheung and Mrs Kwok, Chairperson of the LECO, Wong Yee-man, committee member of the LECO, Choi Kai-kwong, committee member of the LECO, and Cantonese opera actor Janet Wong) — Photo courtesy: The LECO

Yuen Hok-wai

is a Chinese opera performer who specialises in the *dan* (female) role, and who graduated from the Cantonese Opera Academy of Hong Kong and the Chinese University of Hong Kong. Since 2013, she has performed in the Cantonese Opera Young Talent Showcase by the Chinese Artists Association of Hong Kong. She founded The Little Box Theatre in 2017. The troupe's inaugural performance, *Princess Changping*, was presented in celebration of the 100th birthday of playwright Tong Tik-sang. A learner of Kunqu, she has studied with Kong Aiping and Shen Fengying. In recent years, she has taken part in performances of the new Kunqu production, *The Peony Pavilion* (Students' Edition), produced by Pai Hsien-yung, in Hong Kong and Taiwan. She is currently pursuing her master's degree at the Department of Drama and Theatre of the National Taiwan University.

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