

Hong Kong Xiqu Overview 2020



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Supported by the Hong Kong Arts Development Council

Editors Siu Leung LI Siu Wah YU

Assistant Editor (Music) Chi Chun CHAN

Assistant Editor (Research) Arthur S. Y. Pang

Graphic Design Timmy Wai

Illustration Edith Tsang

Publisher Centre for Cultural Research and
Development, Lingnan University

First published June 2022 v1.0.0

ISBN 978-988-76025-5-2

Supported by



香港藝術發展局
Hong Kong Arts Development Council

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Centre for Cultural Research and Development,
Lingnan University

嶺南大學文化研究及發展中心



Lingnan 嶺南大學
University 香港 Hong Kong



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Hong Kong Chinese Opera in the Time of COVID-19: Major Events 2020

Siu Leung LI



2020, Hong Kong Chinese opera's year of mischance (for that matter, same to all performing arts and other arts fields). Since early 2020, COVID-19 quickly turned a global pandemic causing lockdowns of almost everything. A year back, 2019, Hong Kong Chinese opera enjoyed a blossoming year beginning with the January grand opening of the magnificent West Kowloon Cultural District Xiqu Centre. Stepping into January 2020, the industry was like being thrown into an apocalyptic dystopia of contagion. New productions, large scale shows, ritual drama performances, overseas and non-local troupes' visits, educational and promotional activities were all drastically shrunk, rescheduled, relocated to virtual space, or simply cancelled. COVID-19 cancelled culture, in a sense, amongst other things in everyday life. The Chinese opera practitioners in Hong Kong have

been syncretic, flexible, and enduring in face of the devastating pandemic. Some turned more to social media platforms, some grabbed any chance of face-to-face meeting live audiences whenever circumstances allowed, and some strived for raising fund to help sustain the industry that was virtually thrown into ice age. A mainstream cultural tradition in Chinese opera for 800 years (counting from the maturation of traditional Chinese theatre in the Mongolian dynasty from the 13th century) is that, unlike European drama that has privileged tragedy since the ancient Greeks, there is necessarily, almost always a happy ending. Even when occasionally there emerged a play with a sad ending in which good people suffered and got unjustly killed in tragic sublime, the dejected ending will be altered and replaced by a comic resolution in later adaptations with a full happy reunion. Thus lived Hong Kong Chinese opera.

Chinese Opera in the Time of COVID-19

Coronaviruses (CoV) re-entered the human front stage in 2020 taking the form of a novel coronavirus (nCoV) that the World Health Organization officially named COVID-19 in 11 February 2020. It has been walking the earth, at the time of writing, for two years and without signs of retreating, regardless of all the precautions humans have been taking and with the help of modern medical science. In the domains of arts and culture, the performing arts that presume and found on the form of face-to-face live performance as the fundamental mode of presentation, have been suffering horrendously, for the sad fact that very often in 2020 and after, performing venues would be closed at any

moment by the authority, abruptly, because of successive waves of the pandemic onslaught. In January 2020, the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government announced for the first time the closing of all performance venues. It was not until 19 June that venues were given the green light to reopen to stage shows and receive audiences but with some stringent restrictions, the significant one being only 50% of a venue's audience capacity was allowed.

Hong Kong's performing arts venues big and small are almost all owned and run by the government. Many other cultural facilities are also under the jurisdiction of the government. The social and historical factors leading to this condition is not the concern here. Suffice to say that the almost half year shut down of its venues and facilities in 2020 rendered the various performing arts industries virtually frozen. The cold did bother them, anyway. As the Cantonese folk saying goes, "Hands stop, mouths stop."¹ The Chinese opera practitioners in town kept uttering these four words as they were taking the COVID hit. It also drew once again to our attention that in the operations of the local Chinese opera industry, the part-time mode has long been the "normal." The "new normal" brought about by COVID-19 in 2020 pushed the majority of the Chinese opera workers who were already originally part-timers² to the edge of their survival. They voiced out and took all available means to sustain their livelihood. The Chinese Artists Association of Hong Kong, commonly known as Barwo in Cantonese, the only union of the Cantonese opera industry in the city, pressed hard the HKSAR Government for relief subsidies. *Wen Wei Po* journalist Li Siying reported on 5 February, "Wuhan new coronavirus infected pneumonia epidemic continues. To follow the requirements of the state's epidemic control

measures, including the reduction of crowding to reduce the chances of transmission. Many entertainment events and performances have been cancelled or delayed. [...] The Hong Kong Cantonese opera industry has also been negatively affected. All ritual drama shows have been called off. Barwo's members see the miserable condition of hands stop, mouths stop. They asked to meet with the legislative councilor Ma Fung-kwok for help and to discuss countermeasures.”³

Government venues and facilities were again closed from July to September, and again from early December onward. The on-and-off closing of venues amounted to a total of almost 10 months in 2020, resulting in various big shows being called off or postponed. Compared with the chain of celebratory and grand events in 2019—from the launching of the majestic Xiqu Centre in the first month to the visits of various renowned Chinese opera troupes of different regional operas from mainland China and Taiwan, the 2020 year of COVID-19 downturn was a stark-naked contrast. The Chinese Opera Festival, the Leisure and Cultural Services Department's (LCSD) flagship annual event since 2010 that took place every summer was suspended in 2020 for the first time, although all the performance programs and related events such as talks and meet-the-artists had already been scheduled months before. The turnout of non-local Chinese opera troupes was zero in 2020.

As for local Chinese opera shows, relatively large productions were reduced to only three in the whole year. The most notable was the joint effort between the LCSD and Barwo in October, “Traditional Set Pieces and Excerpts from Formulaic Plays in Cantonese Opera,” staged at the Tuen Mun Town Hall and the

Hong Kong Cultural Centre respectively, from 8-9 and 16-19 October. Four traditional set pieces, namely *The Imperial Emperor of Heaven Holding Court*, *Eight Immortals Bestowing Longevity*, *Blessing by the God of Fortune*, *A Fairy Returns Her Son to the Mortal Father* were put on stage like a prelude before the performance of the select-scene excerpts. A total of more than 60 actors participated in this event that showcased preserved traditional aspects of Cantonese opera in Hong Kong.

The Hong Kong Arts Festival since 1973 had routinely been held in spring, around February and March. The regular practice of the 48th Hong Kong Arts Festival in 2020 was disrupted. Nevertheless, the Festival was able to stage later in the year its Cantonese opera shows *A Thorn Hairpin* at the Xiqu Centre, starring the veteran actors Law Kar-ying and Liza Wang; and *Praying to the Moon* at the Ko Shan Theatre, starring young performers Ruan Dewen, Ling Yan, Man Wah, Man Lai-ha, Ryder Chan, Chan Yuk-hing. The two productions were part of the original festival program package of “The Four Southern Opera Classics.” Both were originally scheduled in March, but was postponed to November, due to the COVID-19 pandemic. At the same time, the Xiqu Centre was also able to partially realize its “Experimental Chinese Opera Festival 2020” from mid-October to mid-November, presenting the Centre’s own production of the two experimental “little theatre” Cantonese operas *Farewell My Concubine* (New Adaptation) and *Wenguang Explores the Valley*, with a series of online seminars with troupes from mainland and Taiwan participating virtually. Altogether more than 10 shows of the two award-winning “little theatre” Cantonese operas were staged in such a time of the COVID contagion.⁴

Different Chinese opera troupes, organizations, and individual artists began to try out various means to counter attack this seemingly never-ending pandemic kill. The immediate alternative to theatre live performance was the cyberspace. Internet live streaming was first attempted by Kim Lun in June. His company's presentations of *The Chinese Ghostbuster* and *Farewell My Concubine* were streamed online, with Kim Lun as the producer and lead actor, also starring Yue Ling-lung, Zhan Haofeng, Kwong Tsz-wong, and Ng Lap-hei. The Kim Lun Cantonese Opera Troupe set the record for Hong Kong Cantonese opera in the time of COVID-19 to do an Internet broadcast of a closed-door live performance without audience. Prior to Kim Lun's online streaming of a live performance, fung shui master cum scriptwriter Edward Li Kui Ming streamed 12 of his Cantonese opera plays for free on his own website, aiming at providing entertainment to senior citizens who would be mostly staying at home at the time of the pandemic.⁵

Lee Ship (Man Wah) and her Sensational Sprouts Cantonese Opera Association (Tin Ma) responded to the COVID-19 crisis in manner that added a social dimension to her actions. In April 2020, Lee produced a music video in the style of Cantonese operatic singing entitled "Thanking the Nurses" as an appreciation of the contributions of the medical professionals. Written by Lee Ship, music arranged by Li Shek-um, performed by Lee Ship, Wilbert Lee, Yue Ling-lung, Ng Ka-yee, the music video was uploaded to YouTube for free viewing. A couple of months later, Lee's new Cantonese opera *Zhang Ji the Doctor-Sage* was first scheduled to debut at the Ko Shan Theatre but had to be changed to online streaming. This Cantonese opera, written by Lee and with herself in the title role, was intended to "commend

the medical practitioners' professionalism and spirit of serving the people," and that Lee's creative impulse was inspired by "the medical professionals' devotion to serve from the beginning of the pandemic at a time when everybody was panic and that there was a slump in all business."⁶ Written by Lee Ship, starring Lee Ship, Yue Ling-lung, Fong Hiu-hong, Premium Jiny So, Wan Yok Yu, Kim Lun, *Zhang Ji the Doctor-Sage* was a project funded by the Hong Kong Arts Development Council. The funding organization and the troupe both showed flexibility in taking alternative platforms to realize new creative Cantonese opera works in response to the COVID-19 hit on the performing arts.⁷

The Hong Kong Cantonese opera industry in tackling the 2020 COVID pandemic had put financial aid a priority. The HKSAR Government's first round of \$30 billion Anti-epidemic Fund (AEF) allocated \$150 million to the Arts and Culture Sector Subsidy Scheme. The Cantonese opera sector was given an amount of \$15 million aid. The Home Affairs Bureau (HAB) laid out in rich details its aid to the Cantonese opera workers in its 30 April 2020 press release update "Latest implementation progress of Arts and Culture Sector Subsidy Scheme under Anti-epidemic Fund":

The HAB has engaged the Chinese Artists Association of Hong Kong (Barwo) to collect details of the affected professional Cantonese opera performances in the period from January 29 to April 30, and disburse the subsidies to the practitioners of various categories involved in the performances. These practitioners include actors/actresses, martial artists and musicians as well as staff responsible for the sets, costumes, transportation and administration,

etc. While most of them are freelancers, both members and non-members of Barwo are included. The principle of subsidisation under the scheme is to help mainly the frontline and low-income practitioners, under which frontline staff enjoys a higher percentage of the subsidy. From January 29 to April 30, around 200 professional Cantonese opera performances have been cancelled, affecting around 700 practitioners. The total amount of subsidies is \$8.3 million. Since April 23, Barwo has started to disburse the subsidies to the Cantonese opera practitioners. The HAB is in discussion with Barwo about covering the performances scheduled for May and June in the scheme as well.⁸

The Cantonese opera industry had been given good attention by the HKSAR Government in anti-COVID subsidy and Barwo had served as a pivotal point in the implementation of the related measures. The government's official figures published at a Legislative Council meeting in late 2020 indicated that 786 Cantonese opera workers were subsidized.⁹

Furthermore, senior members in the Cantonese opera industry also made use of online live streaming and a “brotherhood” concept and practice to provide additional assistance to their fellow workers. For instance, Lau Wai-ming held a fundraising function “Anti-epidemic Together, Enjoy Cantonese Operatic Singing at Home” via Internet streaming in July. In the same month, Law Kar-ying and Lung Koon-tin led a performance “An All Together Troupe of Brothers” that was supported by the Sun Beam Theatre in the form of providing its

rent-free venue, with the box office income first paid out to the supporting performers, costume attendants, and backstage crew members, the remains would then be allotted to the lead actors. In late 2020, the One Table Two Chairs Charitable Foundation organized an online fundraising event, a Cantonese operatic singing concert with 33 actors took part in the making of the video recording for the streaming. Led and coordinated by Yuen Siu-fai, the show raised a total sum of \$3,340,000.

From the closing down of performance venues and cultural facilities, cancellation of shows, blows to the livelihoods of practitioners, the Cantonese opera industry managed to rethink, respond, and react to the COVID-19 hard punches, in time. Leading members of the Cantonese opera community would shift their mode of performance from live theatre to virtual streaming live or pre-recorded online sharing. In addition to pressing hard for government aids, the Cantonese opera practitioners themselves did not forget or fail to raise funds on their own to get through the pandemic. In rounding up the COVID-19 year for Cantonese opera in this city, a performing arts critic raised a question, “At the end of the day, what is still there left for Cantonese opera?”¹⁰ Regardless of whoever drama reviewers spoke whatever reflections theatre critics made, the first principle, spirit, and subsequent actions taken as displayed by the Cantonese opera industry might perhaps be best illustrated by Zhang Yimou’s *To Live* as a metaphor.



Notes

- 1 “Les Misérables Cantonese Opera Industry Hands Stop Mouths Stop; Barwo Asking for Help,” *Wen Wei Po*, 5 February 2020, accessed 21 January 2022. [read more>>](#) “Hong Kong Cantonese Opera’s Transmission and Change of Fortune Under the Pandemic: The Internet Might Be the New Break Point,” CHINANEWS.COM, 19 April 2020, accessed 21 January 2022. [read more>>](#)
- 2 “Closing Venues, Suspending Shows, Suspending Schools: The Literature and Arts Fields Receive \$150 Million Aid, Who’s Being Helped?” *Ming Pao OL*, 13 March 2020, accessed 21 January 2022. [read more>>](#)
- 3 “Les Misérables Cantonese Opera Industry Hands Stop Mouths Stop; Barwo Asking for Help,” *Wen Wei Po*, 5 February 2020, accessed 21 January 2022. [read more>>](#)
- 4 For more details about Chinese opera performances and events, as well as the government shutdown of venues and facilities throughout 2020, see the next chapter in this volume “Selected Events, Hong Kong Chinese Opera 2020.”
- 5 “Edward Li Kui Ming’s 12 Plays Free Online Broadcast,” *Wen Wei Po*, 12 April 2020, accessed 2 February 2022. [read more>>](#)

- 6 “Man Wah [Lee Ship] Video Records Theatre Show Streaming Online for Free Sharing,” *Wen Wei Po*, 13 December 2020, accessed 21 January 2020. [read more>>](#)
- 7 For more details on Internet Hong Kong Chinese opera streaming in 2020, see the next chapter in this volume “Selected Events, Hong Kong Chinese Opera,” section 2 “New Productions,” section 3 “Online Media Productions.” [read more>>](#)
- 8 HKSAR Government press release “Latest implementation progress of Arts and Culture Sector Subsidy Scheme under Anti-epidemic Fund”, accessed 5 February 2022. [read more>>](#)
- 9 HKSAR Government press release “LCQ12: Assistance for sectors of sports, performing arts, culture and publication,” 16 December 2020, accessed 21 January 2.
- 10 The International Association of Theatre Critics (IATC) in December 2020 published its “ARTiSM” special issue “May Not Willing to Recall but Can’t Forget: 2020 Hong Kong Performing Arts Retrospective” in which a long article “Hong Kong Cantonese Opera: Countermeasures to the Pandemic” authored by Ho Wai Chun ends with a section under the subheading ‘At the end of the day, what is still there left for Cantonese opera?’ accessed 28 February 2022. [read more>>](#)

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