CANTONESE OPERA

Chan Sau-yan

Introduction

Cantonese opera is a regional genre within the Chinese opera genus that comprises 348 regional styles. Before 1949, the year the People’s Republic of China was established, it was the most popular form of performing entertainment among the pan-Cantonese population spreading over the areas encompassing the Pearl River Delta, Guangzhou (formerly Canton), Macau (the Portuguese colony until 1999), Hong Kong, and part of Guangxi Province. Since then, Cantonese opera in Guangzhou has been tied to the political ebbs and flows of the Mainland, and its counterpart in Macau has declined despite it having had a short-lived boom during WWII. In Hong Kong, the Crown Colony until July 1997, the genre has been flourishing since the five years or so preceding the handover of its sovereignty to China. All in all, though ploughing through different paths in the three cities, the overall development of Cantonese opera has been shaped by cultural and political forces.

The evolution of Cantonese opera in the changing identity of Hong Kong

With a current population of about 7.5 million and an ever-growing economy, Hong Kong, among other things, is well-known for its rich variety of performing arts. Professional art bodies like the Hong Kong Philharmonic Orchestra, Hong Kong Sinfonietta, Hong Kong Ballet, Hong Kong Repertory Theatre, Hong Kong Chinese Orchestra, Hong Kong Dance Company, Zuni Icosahedron, and suchlike, all subsidized by the government and together with visiting groups from overseas, jointly present hundreds of productions yearly. Despite that there has never been any government-supported company of Cantonese opera, according to the present writer’s estimation, in the 2010s perhaps up to 2,000 Cantonese opera and operatic singing shows are being staged every year, which probably outnumber the total deliverables of all eleven government-subsidized groups. In this fashion, Cantonese opera, though receiving grants from a few government bodies, manages to prosper while, up to a certain extent, maintaining its unique identity as a “genre of the people” and proudly surviving on its own feet.

In a nutshell, having forged its modern form and enjoyed its first heydays during the 1920s and 1930s, Cantonese opera suffered a setback due to the Japanese occupation from 1942 to 1945, renewed its vitality in the 1950s, and endured a decline from 1960s to 1980s, but has been flourishing since the mid-1990s. When dealing with the development of Cantonese opera, the present chapter takes into consideration all forms of its dissemination, including commercial and ritualistic performance, research and education, film production, and sound recording.
A number of factors account for the persistent vitality of Cantonese opera. By using Cantonese, the everyday dialect spoken by over ninety percent of the locals, the genre is intelligible to most people and thus touches the core of their cultural identity. Through maintaining its essential role in traditional religious and ritualistic activities, it continues to serve as a functional form of performing arts. By constantly adapting itself to the ever-changing cultural environment, it keeps its tabs on the pulse of its audiences. Above all, when Hong Kong is guided by the central government to evolve into a Chinese city, Hong Kongers uphold their identity by fostering Cantonese opera, a genre unique to Hong Kong. And Cantonese opera together with operatic song are practised and enjoyed by the diaspora of Cantonese-speaking Hong Kong people who now live in many major cities around the world.

1. Brief history and musical evolution

Little is known regarding the early history of Cantonese opera. According to Mak Siu-haa⁶ (1904–1941), the esteemed film director, renowned opera playwright and first historian of the genre, in the greater Guangzhou area during the 1850s a certain imported regional style of Chinese opera, probably the predecessor of Cantonese opera, was going native while absorbing influences from regional operas of Hubei and Anhui provinces.⁷

According to the Cantonese opera historian Cheng May-bo, Cantonese opera might have taken its early shape in the 1850s, which saw the emergence of a number of elements that contributed to the identity of Cantonese opera. They included the appearance of native Cantonese artists and local troupes, the use of the Cantonese dialect, the performance tours in the San Francisco area, the incorporation of Western musical instruments, and the use of a singing known as “Canton style”.⁸

Having suffered from suppression during and after the Taiping Rebellion of 1851 to 1865, it was not until 1871 that the Manchu government lifted its official ban against the genre, which by then, was known to be sung in a stage dialect close to Mandarin by male and female roles who had nurtured their individual vocal styles.⁹

Like Beijing opera but in a simplified manner, two sub-genres of contrasting dramatic styles, Bong-zi and Ji-wong, each having its repertoire independent of the other, were performed by the same actors in the same troupe. Whereas Bong-zi operas specialized in portraying comical, hilarious, and agitated moods, Ji-wong operas inclined towards melancholy and lamenting sentiments. Nowadays, Bong-zi is essentially a pentatonic scale while Ji-wong is heptatonic; their tonal centres are respectively saang and ho.¹⁰

Taking advantage of the tonal inflections of Cantonese words that formed the lyrics, the vocal forms of Bong-zi and Ji-wong derived their melodies, hong in Cantonese, from the inflections, and regulated them by modal constraints. Other structural constraints managed to create further unity from regulating the number of syllables in each vocal phrase and line. Apart from a few non-metrical forms that were sung almost in tempo rubato, a variety of “pulse patterns” rendering permutations of strong and weak pulses known respectively as baan and ding, served as the metrical regulator. As a result, all these vocal forms featured the functional and structural elements of “pulse patterns” and “melodies as per inflections” and were collectively known as baan-hong (highlighting the roles of baan and hong) or bong-wong (an abbreviation of Bong-zi and Ji-wong).

Since the two strings of the leading fiddle used in the accompanying ensemble were respectively tuned to “si” and “gung” in Bong-zi passages, Bong-zi and Si-gung were used interchangeably. Similarly, Ji-wong was also known as “ho-ce”, referring to the tuning.

By the turn of the century, as the growing genre called for new operas that in turn called for new music, the two sub-genres started to merge, probably in two stages. The first saw a new Bong-zi opera written with insertions of Ji-wong acts among the Bong-zi ones, depending on the dramatic situation. The second saw Ji-wong passages inserted into all the Bong-zi acts. In both cases, while the mode of Bong-zi formed the “default” base of the entire opera, vocal forms using the Ji-wong mode must be
specified. For example, with the lyrical form maan-baan (“slow strokes on the baan”) that featuring ten-syllable lines with one-baan-three-ding cycles, the cue “maan-baan” as appeared in a libretto denoted “Bong-zi maan-baan”, but the passage to be sung in maan-baan with the Ji-wong mode must be specified as “Ji-wong maan-baan”.

A new mode, faan-sin (“reversed tuning”), came into use when Ji-wong maan-baan was transposed to a register approximately a perfect fourth lower than usual. This new form, entitled faan-sin ji-wong maan-baan, also featured highly melismatic setting and extra phrases added to the originally ten-syllable lines that respectively had 3, 3, 2, and 2 syllables in each of the phrases. Subsequently, faan-sin mode was also applied to a number of baan-hong forms other than maan-baan, and to the singing of Tune passages.11

With the Bong-wong or Baan-hong Family well established, two more vocal families were added to Cantonese opera at the same time. The Tune Family, composed of tunes from folksong, instrumental pieces and other regional operatic genres, all requisitioned to become vocal passages via the setting of Cantonese operatic lyrics to them, is marked by the unlimited number of syllables in each phrase and line, and by using a variety of modes other than Bong-zi and Ji-wong. The Storytelling Family, comprising a number of traditional Cantonese vocal forms of narrative then borrowed for operatic portrayals, has structural constraints close to that of Baan-hong. With such storytelling forms, the mode of ji-faan,12 which is also known as fu-hou, “sorrowful voice”, was introduced to Cantonese opera.

2. The 230-year tradition of ritual performance

Nowadays, full-scale and professional performances of Cantonese opera are enjoyed in more than fourteen government halls, a commercial theatre, the Grand Theatre and Teahouse Theatre located in the Xiqu Centre of the West Kowloon Cultural District, and in the temporary theatres built for the ritual series. Ritualistic operas, known as san gung hei (“dramas as sacred merits”), are traditionally held in bamboo and tin-sheet structures comprising a stage (and backstage), an auditorium and sometimes a “sacred shed” for housing the statues of the deities concerned. The exceptions are found in the few communities that either hold their ritual series within their local town halls or build marquees with steel beams and fibre canopy for such occasions.

Rarely would a community celebrate its temple festival by staging a single opera; ritual performances invariably come in series, known as toi (“stage”) lasting from two to six days, featuring one or two operas in each day. Typically, when a fishing community hires a troupe to perform for the celebration of the birthday of their patron deity, the Queen of Heaven, the series start two days before the main day on the twenty-third day of the Third Moon of the lunar calendar, and last for another two afterwards. While the opening day only accommodates an evening show, the following four days respectively feature an afternoon and an evening opera, enabling the series to abide by the tradition of “5-day-9-opera”, which only counts the main operatic items but excludes the ritualistic playlets and the overnight shows.

According to Tanaka Issei, the first series of ritual opera in Hong Kong were staged in 1786,13 probably in front of the Queen of Heaven Temple at Under the Big Tree Village in the Yuen Long area. The troupe hired by the community was most likely not a local one, and the genre it performed was certainly not yet called “Cantonese opera”. The main items it staged probably included a number of “abstract opera”, which did not have librettos, but were improvised by the actors who referred to an “abstract” that outlined only a story framework. During the performance, they were required to apply singing, acting (including stage movement), reciting and fencing (including martial arts), and had to compose the lyrics extemporaneously. Other than the main items, the troupe had probably staged a number of ritualistic playlets. Required by the locals as essential routines that carry specialized ritualistic functions, nowadays they include Sacrificial Offering to White Tiger, The Prime Minister of Six Kingdoms, Birthday Greetings from Eight Immortals, Dance of Promotion, The Heavenly Maiden Delivers a Son, and Sealing the Stage.
White Tiger is a solemn ritual reserved for initiating a piece of land that has never been used for building an opera stage;\textsuperscript{14} Prime Minister is intended for showing off the cast and costume of the troupe and for creating a festive bustle;\textsuperscript{15} Birthday Greetings pays respect to the deities on behalf of the locals; Promotion and Heavenly Maiden both pray for prosperity and productivity; and Sealing closes the operatic series by thanking the deities and spirits.

In 2017, some 230 years later, seventeen communities around Hong Kong staged operatic series for celebrating the Queen of Heaven’s birthday, each lasting from two to six days, totalling eighty-one “days” of performance and 144 main operas. Elsewhere, another eight patron deities whose birthdays were celebrated similarly included Hung Sing (God of Sea and River), Tou Dei (Village God), Bak Dai (Lord of the North), Hau Wong (God Marquis), Saam Saan Gwok Wong (Kings of Three Mountains), Gwaan Dai (God of War), Gwun Jam (Goddess of Mercy) and Taam Gung (Lord Taam). Within this year, a total of thirty-four series were staged for celebrating the birthdays of all these deities, totalling 154 days and 270 operas.\textsuperscript{16}

In 2017, the birthday of a deity was only one of the four ritual occasions where operas were staged. In Hong Kong, about thirty communities hold elaborate series of Taoist rituals as thanksgiving to the deities and ancestors, and as purification for the neighbourhood, and together with operas as entertainment for the gods, spirits, and fellow folks. Such series, known as Purification Rituals for Peace, are held yearly or once every two, three, five, seven, eight, nine, ten, or sixty years, depending on the local tradition.\textsuperscript{17} In 2017, five communities held such ritual and opera series, totalling twenty-three days and forty-one operas.

The other two ritualistic occasions included Purification Rituals for the Ghosts held during the Ghost Festival (one series of 2-day-2-opera) and Thanksgiving to the Queen of Heaven held once a decade (one series of 5-day-9-opera). In short, in 2017, a total of forty-one series, totalling 184 days and 322 operas, were staged by sixteen troupes within the san gung hei context.\textsuperscript{18}

The regular actors of a ritual troupe are divided into three tiers according to the parts they play. Take a 4-day-7-opera series as an example, the main cast, comprising the six major actors collectively known as Six Pillars, only perform five operas including all the evenings’ main items and the matinee of the main day, and two ritualistic playlets including Prime Minister and Heavenly Maiden. The second cast, comprising another six actors, would support the Six Pillars’ performance but take the main roles in the other two afternoon main shows when the Pillars are resting. The “base”, comprising usually four female and eight male mute roles, play minor characters like maids, soldiers, and suchlike in all the main and ritualistic items whenever they are needed. An extra tier, the martial artists, only perform in Prime Minister; only troupes of a grand scale would require them to stay to take part in the main items that feature martial scenes.

Another important troupe component is the accompanying ensemble. Depending on the scale of the company, the melodic musicians range from four to six with the main cast but only two to three with the second cast. Another three to four percussionists are involved in all main items.

Compared with the seventy-four series with 304 days and about 534 operas staged in 1990,\textsuperscript{19} one notices a forty percent drop of san gung hei in contemporary Hong Kong within less than three decades. One might attribute this diminution to factors such as the migration and emigration of the local population, the weakening of local traditions, and the increasing costs of hiring operatic troupes and of building the temporary theatres. In some ways, as shows of Cantonese opera and operatic song singing are booming in government halls and the commercial theatres within the urban areas, troupe impresarios often find difficulties in recruiting actors and musicians for ritual productions. Often being held in the countryside or outlying islands and requiring the artists to travel and even overnight at the site, older artists would find such performances tiresome. Yet, some actors and musicians of the younger generations are enthusiastic since ritual series offer them more exposure. For decades, only one single actor from the “base” was assigned to perform in the overnight shows when they were needed. Nowadays, young actors often volunteer themselves for such occasions.
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Other than some thirty or so stars who can afford to make a good living without taking up other jobs, the rest of the actors often need other part-time employments, like driving a taxi, giving opera tuitions, offering clerical services, and suchlike for enhancing their income. Comparatively, the average musician often earns more than the average actor as he or she is more sought-after due to limited supply. In 2018, a superstar actor (or actress) makes up to HK$20,000 (about US$2,500) for a day’s performance and might be hired for up to more than 100 days. The average star makes about half of that but with up to 200 days; an actor in the second cast makes about HK$800 to $1,000; and a mute actor makes from $400 to $500. As of the musicians’ wages, with every four-hour session, a head melodic or percussion instrumentalist makes from $2,000 to $5,000, while the average player is paid from $600 to $800.

3. The 150-year heritage of theatre performance and internationalization

A. Early commercial theatres

About a decade into the British colonization of Hong Kong, and almost seventy years after the first ritual series were staged, the urbanization of Cantonese opera saw the emergence of the first batch of commercial theatres located up the hills from, and in the urban area west of, Victoria, now known as Central District. Daai Loi, Sing Ping, Tung Hing, and Gou Sing theatres inaugurated their business from 1852 to 1870, followed by Pou Hing, Taai Ping, Gau Jyu Fong, and Wo Ping from 1902 to 1919. But it was not until the 1920s that several substantial theatres entered the scene. The Hong Kong Grand Stage (1924), Lee Garden (1924) and Lee Theatre (1925), together with the newly refurbished Gou Sing (“Rising High”; 1928) joined Taai Ping (“Peace”) to become the key commercial venues where Cantonese opera would entrench itself from the 1920s to 1950s.20

With the infrastructure now ready, and ideologically spurred by the New Culture Movement sparked by the May Fourth Incident of 1919, Cantonese opera, following the footsteps of Beijing opera, would undergo a revolution, partly for winning over the urban, Westernized, and educated audiences, and mainly for proving that the genre is a worthwhile contribution to the new republic. The fledgling Republic of China was then in a life and death struggle against encroaching foreign powers.

To a great extent, what master Mei Lan-fang (1894–1961) had introduced to Beijing opera for improving its scriptwriting, make-up, costume, stage setting, subject matter and patriotism would be copied by the new generation of Cantonese opera stars. Among them, Sit Gok-sin (1904–1956) was the key figure in forging the modern style of Cantonese opera. Even up to the present day, the popular saying “Sit of the south, Mei of the north” highlights the two masters’ lasting legacy and contribution to Chinese opera.

B. Sit Gok-sin: founder of modern Cantonese opera

Born and educated in Hong Kong, Sit, unlike Mei, specialized in the young male role. And unlike most opera employees of his generation who entered the profession as pre-teens, he joined his first troupe at the age of sixteen or seventeen. Driven by the imminent dissection of his motherland by the world powers, he was determined to invigorate Cantonese opera as a powerful political tool of disseminating to his compatriots patriotism, anti-British colonialism, anti-economic manipulation by foreign trade consortiums, and anti-Japanese aggression.21

To begin with, in order to reach the general public, Sit, by refining the experiments of masters Baak Keoi-wing (1892–1974) and Zyu Ci-baak (1892–1922), fostered a new style of male role singing which featured the Cantonese dialect replacing the traditional Mandarin, and the natural voice replacing the falsetto, with less melismatic text-setting, and in a lower pitch level. In collaboration with his wife, Tong Syut-hing (1908–1955), Sit founded their own company in 1929, and performed operas and made films to promulgate their political causes until the Japanese invasion in late 1941.
C. New role types

Although Cantonese opera was then growing rapidly, the stiff competition among operatic companies had probably resulted in the elimination of quite a number of them. In order to cut the cost of production to stay in business, and for renovating the traditional role types, stars and impresarios joined hands to found the Six-pillar Convention to supersede the traditional Ten-role System, within which old male, painted-face, young male, young female, comic, supporting old male, supporting young male, maid, old female, and the general mute roles would no longer be specialized by any single individual or groups of actor. Partly inspired by Hollywood filmmaking that featured the omnipotent male lead, the foremost Pillar was named Civil-military Male or Principal Male, followed by five more pillars respectively known as Principal Female, Supporting Female, Supporting Male, Comic, and Old Male. As the traditional Chinese operatic system of role types had facilitated past scriptwriters, writers of new operas would now unfold their plots based on these six pillars, who would be supported by the minor roles. However, to live up to their titles, actors of the first four pillars would take up personages who would be young or ageing, serious or comic, civil or military, and heroic or wicked, depending on the dramatic context. Similarly, actors of the comic role would play comical personages who would be young or ageing, civil or military, heroic or wicked, and male or female, and the old male role would play a variety of ageing characters and would even impersonate a female one. The year 1933 saw another major change in troupe organization. Following the Hong Kong government’s formal approval, actors of both sexes were allowed to perform together in the same troupe. As a result, the tradition of male actors impersonating female roles began to decline.

D. Script-based operas

As late as in the 1920s, many troupes still lived on a repertoire of “abstract operas”. The urbanization and modernization of Cantonese opera would not have been possible without a revolution in scriptwriting. While itinerant troupes, specializing in ritual series held in the countryside, could survive with a small number of script-based operas and a large number of “abstract operas”, both enriched by dexterous improvisatory elaborations, the urban audiences frequenting the same theatres increasingly desired new and more sophisticated works. Educated and resourceful playwrights thus came into demand when improvisatory shows were giving place to script-based performance.

The 1930s saw Hong Kong people starting to embrace their unique identity. As Hong Kong Chinese under British colonial rule, they enjoyed territorial security, social stability, and economic prosperity as much as they endured political, social, and racial inequalities, which above all were ubiquitous in the Mainland. As Chinese, they were free to express their patriotism as long as they stifled their anti-British and anti-Japanese sentiments. Culturally, Hong Kong as a melting pot of East and West had become their ideal niche for gleaning and cultivating their values and ways of living. In Cantonese opera, artists had easy access to Western cultural elements that would inspire their revitalization of their art.

According to Mak, the special features of those newly created operas of the 1920s to 1930s included the portrayal of Chinese historical uprisings, as in operas about the Taiping Rebellion and Xinhai Revolution of 1911; adaptations from international masterpieces, like A Rosy Smile (1938) from Romeo and Juliet and The Three Earls (1922) from Le Comte de Monte Cristo; adaptations from classical plays of foreign countries, like Richard the Lionheart; adaptations from famous films, like Romance at the Splendid Palace (1930) from The Love Parade (1929); operas in Western costume, like Platinum Dragon (1929) adapted from The Grand Duchess and the Waiter (1926); and operas in contemporary costume, like Poisonous Rose (1935).

E. Combined innovations

The productions of new operas of new subject matters would go hand in hand with musical innovations. Sit, together with Maa Si-zang (1900–1964) and a number of other stars, succeeded in introducing several
Western folk, orchestral, and jazz instruments to the Cantonese opera ensemble; they included violin, saxophone, both the slide and acoustic guitar, trumpet, banjo, piano, and trap set, to be used side by side with traditional Cantonese instruments like ji-wu (two-string fiddle) and dek-zi (bamboo flute), and with percussions borrowed from Beijing opera. Hence, to this day, a Cantonese opera ensemble is composed of two sections, respectively known as “Western music” and “Chinese music”. Moreover, Western tunes were assimilated, new tunes composed and new forms of Baan-hong created. Further enriched by three-dimensional stage setting, electric lighting, the improved face-paintings and costume designs, and martial art and dance movements adopted from Beijing opera and Western drama, Cantonese opera in Hong Kong had reinvented itself. The budding industries of phonograph and filmmaking managed to tap into this rich and popular source of materials, hence hundreds of Cantonese operatic records and movies were made. Cantonese opera of the 1930s had won tremendous support and had reached its unprecedented culmination until the advent of WWII.

**F. Tong Dik-sang’s legendary success**

Once the cousin, brother-in-law, and student of Sit Gok-sin and the script-copyist and disciple of Mak Siu-haa, Tong Dik-sang (1917–1959) emerged in the 1950s to become the hottest playwright, at the time when a number of leading scriptwriters like Fung Zi-fan (c.1907–1961), also one of the mentors of Tong, had resettled in Guangzhou to contribute themselves to the newly founded People’s Republic of China. Notwithstanding he only had a two-decade creative career due to an abruptly shortened life, Tong had created over 440 operas with around 100 of them surviving up to the present day. His later works, about twenty of them, having become the core of the contemporary repertoire, have been repeatedly staged. More than eighty films adapted from his operas are re-screened from time to time. Recordings of his pieces sell unnoticeably well, and his masterpieces, *The Floral Princess* and *Purple Hairpin*, both of 1957, are synonymous with Cantonese opera. His representative works, being adaptations from classical Chinese operas, are marked by literary refinement in the lyrics, the intricate but convincing plots, the impressive personages, and the musically enriched vocal passages. Undisputedly, the performance of Tong’s works is regarded nowadays as the Rite of Passage for serious artists.

The elevation of Cantonese opera from a mass entertainment to an art form was a mission initiated by Sit, Mak and their contemporaries. Having been interrupted by the Japanese invasion and occupation from late 1941 to August 1945, it was drastically pushed forward by Tong, whose unexpected early demise in 1959 again interrupted the process.

Tong’s prolific career would not have been possible without his adoption of an eclectic creative endeavour. In brief, his sources of subject matter included films of both Hollywood and Chinese productions, like *Mount Fuji Romance* (1953) from *Madonna of the Seven Moons* (1945); novels by both Chinese and foreign writers, like *Dreams of the Red Chamber* (1956) from the classical Chinese novel of the same title; dramas East and West, like *Heart Broken When Cherries Are Ripe* (1954) inspired by George Bernard Shaw’s *Pygmalion* (1913, adapted into its first film in 1938); other Chinese operatic genres, like *Sylph from the Ninth Heaven* (1958) from a Min opera of Fujian Province; traditional and pre-existing repertoire of Cantonese opera; Chinese storytelling genres; his own earlier works; folktales; and classical works of the Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties, which account for about ten of his best-known works including *The Floral Princess* and *Purple Hairpin*.26

**G. From Jam-Bak to Co Fung Ming**

Notwithstanding that all star actors of the 1950s had benefitted from Tong’s works that they commissioned, his operas tailor-made for Sin Fung Ming (Voice of the Celestial Phoenix) Company led by Baak Syut-sin (born 1928) and Jam Gim-fai (1913–1989) are more sophisticated and thus have become more popular.
Baak, daughter of the renowned master Baak Keoi-wing and once the disciple of Sit Gok-sin and Tong Syut-hing, was one of the key figures in the 1950s in uplifting Cantonese opera to becoming a refined artistic genre. Not only is she credited for her persistent demands for quality scripting and painstaking revamps from Tong Dik-sang, but her ingenious premieres of Tong's works, her impressive roles in Tong's films, her exquisite recordings of Tong's masterpieces, and her unflinching efforts in passing on Tong's legacy to her disciples have all brought her unprecedented respect from Cantonese opera fans of Hong Kong and around the world.

Fong Jim-fan (born 1926), another superstar prima donna of the 1950s, had also premiered a substantial number of Tong Dik-sang's works. The Fong Style of singing she founded has become the paragon of female singing among both professional and amateur singers and actors of Cantonese opera in Hong Kong.

Not long after Tong's demise in 1959, Jam and Baak and Fong respectively announced their early retirement. As a result, Cantonese opera suffered its darkest days in the 1960s, which were aggravated by the riots of 1967. In 1965, a band of Jam and Baak's disciples formed Co Fung Ming (Voice of the Fledgling Phoenixes) Company for carrying out their masters' unfinished mission. From 1973 to 1992, led by Lung Gim-sang (year of birth unknown) and Mui Syut-si (year unknown), Co Fung enjoyed sensational success in Hong Kong, Southeast Asia and some American cities. It was the leading troupe in preserving and developing the legacy of Tong and of Sin Fung Ming and was the major force in keeping Cantonese opera alive during its difficult era. At Lee Theatre where they were then based, it was not uncommon to see queues overnighting and bivouacking outside the box office. Though now performing separately, both Lung and Mui are still being embraced as icons and idols.

H. Grand Dragon, New Sound and Cantonese opera in English

Two other glittering stars of the 1960s were Mak Bing-wing (1915–1984) and Fung-wong Neoi (Phoenix Donna; 1925–1992) whose vernacular and comical style had cheered up countless hearts of the grass roots. With their Grand Dragon and Phoenix Company, and later Grand Courting Phoenixes Company, they premiered a series of popular operas such as Love, Hatred and Endless Love at the Phoenix Chamber (1962) and Glamorously Returning to Court the Phoenix (1965), both deploying amnesia and double identities to unfold the drama, and were adorned by plenty comical improvisations.

Lam Gaa-sing's (1933–2015) Singing the New Sound Company was another leading troupe from the 1960s to 1980s. Featuring abundant martial-art episodes and tuneful vocal passages, his masterworks included Battling Amidst Thundering Drumming and Airs of Barbaric Pipe (1962) and Merciless Swords Under the Merciful Heaven (1963), among many others. Lei Bou-jing (year of birth unknown), a former partner of Lam and a follower of the Fong Style, is highly respected for her singing that features a refined voice and clear elocution.

In 1947, led by Father Terence Sheridan (1908–1970), staff members and alumni of the renowned Wah Yan College inaugurated their productions of English Cantonese Opera (sic), which features the fitting of English speech and lyrics into the traditional idioms of Cantonese operatic plots, singing, acting, reciting, fencing, and both melodic and percussive accompaniment. Subsequently, with Mr. Wong Chin-wah (1919–2019) serving as its artistic director, it has become an iconic genre for charitable fundraising, invariably starring amateur actors who are but socialites, tycoons and government grandees. Strictly speaking, while unique to Hong Kong, it should better be recognized as a genre of English opera bearing strong Cantonese operatic flavours.

I. Global dissemination of Cantonese opera

The signing of the Sino-British Joint Declaration on 19th December 1984 revealed to the people of Hong Kong that their home city would become part of China from 1st July 1997. During the subsequent years,
while many were looking forward to greeting this date, many others chose to resettle in Western cities such as Vancouver, Toronto, Sydney, Perth, London, San Francisco, New York, and in Asian cities like Singapore and Kuala Lumpur. Later, the student upheavals in June 1989 in Beijing also kicked off wave after wave of emigration.28

As the Hong Kong general public were facing an identity crisis, the 1980s also saw Cantonese opera employees struggling for survival. With an average of about 420 “days” of annual performance within which about sixty to eighty percent were ritualistic shows,29 the profession experienced a scarcity of new members and young talents, and many artists had to seek additional jobs or to leave the circle for better income.

As of those who had left Hong Kong for a new world, many of them brought along with them records of Cantonese opera pieces, often those by Tong Dik-sang, as if through them they would cling to their Hong Kong identity. They also organized singing clubs in their new home cities. As a result, the diaspora, continuing up to the present,30 has enabled the dissemination of Cantonese opera to a number of cities around the globe. For examples, there are about twenty clubs in New York City accommodating about 200 singers of Cantonese operatic song; in Vancouver, around 150 singers are active in fifteen clubs.31 Though Cantonese opera remains a sub-culture exclusively enjoyed by the Hong Kong community within these cities, it has nonetheless entered the international arena.

J. 1990s to 2010s

As soon as the discourses on the future of their home city had sunk in, especially for those commoners who could not afford a new political identity, Hong Kong people turned their attention to their cultural identity, as if the fostering of Cantonese opera, Cantopop,32 Cantonese films, and television soap operas would compensate what they would lose after the handover.

A number of government bodies also felt the urge to promote Cantonese opera for meeting the growing demand. Set up in 1995, the Arts Development Council (ADC) is now supporting 10 art forms including Cantonese opera. Under the Home Affairs Bureau, the Cantonese Opera Advisory Committee was established in 2004 to coordinate the efforts of all government and NGO bodies that are involved in the development of Cantonese opera. Founded in 2005, the Cantonese Opera Development Fund has joined ADC to give out one-off project grants to finance the performance, scriptwriting, research, publication, and preservation of Cantonese opera and the training of Cantonese opera artists.

Since 2009, Cantonese opera has been recognized by United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) as an Intangible Cultural Heritage. The recognition has spurred the Hong Kong government to step up the promotion of Cantonese opera. Also administered by the Home Affairs Bureau, the Lord Wilson Heritage Trust also funds public projects that study and preserve Cantonese opera.

Established in 2000, the Leisure and Cultural Services Department (LCSD) has been the major operational arm of the Home Affairs Bureau in producing Cantonese opera performances and providing rehearsal and performance venues for both professional and amateur bodies. Other than its flagship theatres in Hong Kong City Hall and Hong Kong Cultural Centre which only host Cantonese opera occasionally, another dozen of LCSD’s venues regularly present Cantonese opera and operatic song singing. The major ones include Ko Shan Theatre and its New Wing Auditorium where nowadays most of the professional companies hold their shows; and Yau Ma Tei Theatre where since 2012 a training-via-performance programme for nurturing young talents is being run in collaboration with the Bar Wo association. As the work union of Cantonese opera employees in Hong Kong and officially known as The Chinese Artists Association of Hong Kong, Bar Wo, literally “eight harmonies” referring to its original eight member-guilds, was founded in 188933 and formally established in Hong Kong in 1953. Currently it also runs a four-year training programme at its Cantonese Opera Academy of Hong Kong.

The theatre at Shatin Town Hall and Kwai Tsing Theatre respectively located in the southern and western New Territories are another two popular venues of Cantonese opera administered by LCSD.
Productions of a grand scale featuring the brightest stars such as Lung and Mui are usually held at the Grand Theatre of Hong Kong Cultural Centre and at the Lyric Theatre of Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts. The Grand Theatre and Teahouse Theatre in the Xiqu Centre of the West Kowloon Cultural District, both specially designed for Chinese opera performances, are now in use since December 2018. In the future, the Xiqu (literally Chinese opera) Centre will systematically carry out its long-planned programmes of promoting Cantonese opera via productions, training of young performers, preservation of operatic scripts and public education. As of the preservation of Cantonese opera materials, the Chinese Opera Information Centre and University Library of the Chinese University of Hong Kong, together with LCSD's Hong Kong Museum of History, Hong Kong Heritage Museum and Central Library, and the Cantonese Opera Script Archive of Xiqu Centre are housing valuable collections of librettos, costumes, and related historical archives and artefacts. Regularly screening Cantonese operatic films and holding related exhibitions, the Hong Kong Film Archive under LCSD also houses a large collection of Cantonese opera films and documentary files of such movies.

The Sunbeam theatres, opened in 1972 and now comprising a grand and a smaller auditorium, are the only remaining commercial venues devoting themselves to the “revitalization of Cantonese opera”, in the words of Li Kui-ming, the famous playwright of thirty-four operas and their entrepreneur since 2012. Other than featuring performances of his own works, Li also hosts Cantonese opera artists from mainland China and rents out his venues to local opera and drama groups and to Cantopop stars.

Throughout the past few decades, the constantly booming property market has torn down the commercial theatres one after one, with the last premium venue, Lee Theatre, being closed in August 1991 and redeveloped into an impeccable mall in 1995. The remaining two, Yau Ma Tei and Sunbeam, have respectively become a government venue and a venture struggling for survival. Should Sunbeam’s entrepreneur fail to pay the monthly rent of about HK$1 Million, the theatre complex would probably be turned into a shopping mall or a residential building. In short, the rise of government venues and the decline of commercial theatres, as witnessed, has succeeded in delimiting Cantonese opera and reducing it to a government-dominated mass medium, which will gradually undermine Cantonese opera’s traditional identity of being a people’s genre.

K. Contemporary training and education

Ever since the British colonization of Hong Kong, its people’s identity has become a complicated issue. To the people whom the Manchus handed over to the British, they, as Han Chinese, had become British subjects. On the one hand, while many of them resented the British for having stolen their land, some were pleased that the annexation had spared them from the corrupt Manchu rule. On the other hand, no matter how much they hated or liked the British, few locals would give up their Chinese identity though their China was then ruled by an impotent foreign power. In short, the double identity of Chinese-British was equally liked and hated. It was during the 1930s that a uniquely Hong Kong culture and a unique Hong Kong identity emerged in tandem. Relishing the protection under the British wing, they were spared from the rows between the Communists and Nationalists, and from the Japanese aggression.

During the 1950s, the land reform taking place in China, which led to mass appropriation of private land, properties, and assets, aroused much fear in Hong Kong. Similarly, the Opera Reform that banned the portrayal of emperors, kings, generals, ministers, scholars, and belles from Cantonese opera in Guangzhou scared Hong Kong opera practitioners and fans. In fact, without the freedom of expression as then allowed in Hong Kong, Tong Dik-sang could not have brought Cantonese opera to its second culmination.

During the 1960s, that endless series of devastating political campaign, famine and exodus across the borders of Hong Kong restored complacency among Hong Kong people. In the wake of the Great Riots of 1967, the Education Department discouraged the teaching of Chinese music in schools to avoid it being manipulated as political propaganda. This prejudice was only revoked in the early 1990s when the
The Sino-British Joint Declaration had sunk in. As Hong Kong was going to become part of China, and to align with the public’s growing interests in Cantonese opera, a revolution in the school curriculum was about to take place.

The first CD-ROM of Cantonese opera, *Cantonese Opera Windows*, was jointly produced in 1997 by Radio 5 of Radio Television Hong Kong and the Music Section of the Advisory Inspectorate under the Education Department. Covering the general history and artistic characteristics of the genre, it was designed for primary and secondary school teachers who would teach Cantonese operatic music in the music lessons. Two years later, with support from the music inspectorate, the Hong Kong Schools Music and Speech Association launched its first Cantonese operatic singing contests in its 51st Music Festival, which attracted hundreds of entries. Since then, this annual event has stayed popular and become the hotbed of cultivating budding talents in Cantonese opera.

As the result of eight years’ preparation, the Arts Education Section of the Education Bureau in 2004 published the first Cantonese operatic music teaching kit for primary and secondary school teachers and students. It covers the rudiments of the traditional *gung-ce* notation, the major forms of speech, some well-received tunes taken from the existing repertoire, a number of commonly used stage movement and percussion patterns, and an introduction to the musical instruments, and is supplemented by transcriptions of the selected pieces in both *gung-ce* and staff notations, suggested curriculum designs and classroom work sheets, a glossary of technical terms and a CD-ROM. A second volume, published in 2017, contains eleven short pieces of Cantonese operatic song specially commissioned for the teaching of four commonly used forms of Baan-hong.

The Music Department of the Chinese University of Hong Kong was the first tertiary institution that offered courses on Cantonese operatic music. From 1976 to 2007, its curriculum covered operatic song singing, and the history and theory of Cantonese opera. From 1990 to 2007, the Cantonese Opera Research Programme in the department conducted several research projects and published a series of monographs on a variety of Cantonese opera subjects. Founded in 2000, the Chinese Opera Information Centre in the same department houses a large collection of research materials. Elsewhere, a team of research staff at Lingnan University have been working on a series of substantial projects including the forthcoming publication of *Annals of Chinese Opera (Hong Kong Volume)*, the translation of librettos and a compilation of Cantonese operatic music. In May 2018, the Education University of Hong Kong established Research Centre for Transmission of Cantonese Opera. Currently, the Division of Humanities of the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology is offering the course Cantonese Opera in Hong Kong Culture. In the Chinese University of Hong Kong, the Music Department is offering The Appreciation of Chinese Opera, and the Cultural Management Programme is teaching Cantonese Opera as a special topic.

From 1996 to 1998, the Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts had offered part-time courses for the training of Cantonese opera actors, before it founded its full-time programmes in 1999. Since then, the part-time and full-time courses ran in parallel until the former’s phase-out in 2015. In addition to the pre-existing full-time certificate, diploma and advance diploma programmes for actors and musicians at the Academy, its School of Chinese Opera in 2013 launched the first degree programme with specializations in performance or music accompaniment.

### The ups and downs of Cantonese opera in Guangzhou

#### 1. One opera, two styles

As mentioned previously, the 1920s and 1930s were the heydays of Cantonese opera in Hong Kong, Macau and Guangzhou. In 1925, over forty grand troupes were based in Guangzhou, each having over 150 members. The popular ones, known as Canton–Hong Kong Grand Companies, would tour around the theatres in the three cities, while the rest would travel to smaller towns and villages by means of Red Boats.
The 1930s also saw cinemas rising to draw audiences away from the opera auditoriums. In Guangzhou in 1933, twenty cinemas were in operation while only around five opera theatres were actively in business.\footnote{37}

Having enjoyed its first heyday during the 1930s when Cantonese opera was like a pair of twin brothers entwining into a single body and were embraced by the pan-Cantonese population of the Pearl River Delta area, the twin brothers in the post-1949 era bid farewell to each other to settle respectively in Guangzhou and Hong Kong to live their individual new lives and to raise their children and grandchildren. In reality, a significant number of Hong Kong practitioners, who aligned themselves with the new China, resettled in Guangzhou. They included a number of leading playwrights like Fung Zi-fan and several prominent star actors and musicians. Especially in the wake of the outbreak of the Korean War (1950–1953) that put China and Britain in antagonism, the embargo against China and closure of the borders between Hong Kong and the Mainland had cut off the exchange between Cantonese opera practitioners of the two places. And for similar but different reasons, another batch of influential figures like Sit Gok-sin, Tong Syut-hing, Maa Si-zang, Hung-sin Neoi (1925–2013), and Gwai Ming-joeng (1909–1958) also left Hong Kong for Guangzhou from 1954 to 1957.

2. Leaving the market for government subsidy

From 1949 to 1950, in Guangzhou and among the Cantonese-speaking towns and villages in the provinces of Guangdong and Guangxi, Cantonese opera was staged by a large number of troupes active in ritual series and by a small number of commercial troupes in the city area. The famous ones were Sing Sau Nin (Year of Longevity), Sing Lei (Victory) and Wing Gwong Ming (Everlasting Brightness). By late 1952, at least twelve self-financed troupes were still actively performing in Guangzhou. The larger ones were Wing Gwong Ming, Sun Sai Gaai (New World), Zyu Gong (Pearl River) and Taai Joeng Sing (Rising Sun), respectively hiring 149, 144, 137, and 117 practitioners.\footnote{38}

Following the establishment of the Guangdong Provincial Cultural Bureau in early 1953, two government-supported bodies were founded: Guangdong Provincial Company of Cantonese Opera and Guangzhou Working Troupe of Cantonese Opera. Having requisitioned some of the best artists from the market-based troupes, they staged works in accordance with government guidelines but were independent of the audiences’ demand. They were then known as the “elite”, “professional” and “national troupes”.

3. The opera reform and Anti-Rightist Campaign

Before the 1980s, the Communist Party of China always valued Chinese opera as a powerful tool of disseminating propaganda. The Opera Reform campaign kicked off in 1950 in Beijing soon led to nationwide reforms in the personnel, repertoire and institutional practice among all operatic bodies of all regional genres. In Guangzhou, compulsory reforms had not taken place until 1953. As traditional works highlighting emperors, kings, generals, ministers, scholars, and belles were branded “feudalistic scum” and “poisonous weeds”, playwrights were encouraged to create new works for glorifying the new republic, its leaders and workers, soldiers and farmers. This resulted in a whole series of operas that portrayed successful harvests in farming communes, heroic deeds of historical revolutionaries, the defeats of the Nationalists, valiant exploits performed by members of the People’s Liberation Army, and suchlike. However, at the time when no draconian measures were enforced by the reform, it was still the traditional plays that drove most of the scriptwriters and drew the majority of the audiences. Yet those audacious playwrights who had defied the reform guidelines were to pay their dues during the Anti-Rightist Campaign in 1957. Among them was Fung Zi-fan. Convicted as an Ultra-Rightist, he was sentenced to labour in a quarry and died there in late 1960 or early 1961.\footnote{39}

From 1957 to 1958, as a result of the combined policies derived from Opera Reform, Anti-Rightist Campaign and Great Leap Forward Movement, the various government-supported Cantonese opera
troupes in Guangzhou underwent merges and re-structuring. The reshuffle culminated in the establishment of Guangdong Institute of Cantonese Opera in November 1958, which merged all such troupes into four grand companies and an experimental group, and into another five self-financed companies independent of the Institute.40

4. The cultural revolution

The early 1960s also saw a nationwide ban of “ghost operas” and an enforced prohibition of traditional plays. When the film Untold Story from the Manchu Palace (released in 1948 in Hong Kong, in 1950 in Beijing), and the Beijing opera Hai Rui Dismissed (early 1961), among other operas, were ruled by Green River (Jiang Qing 1914–1991) to be satires against some top leaders of the central government, the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution erupted for removing those deemed recalcitrant.41

In order to push ahead her agenda of implementing Modern Revolutionary Beijing Opera to supersede all regional styles, Green River recruited her pawns nationwide. In Guangzhou, at the outset of the revolution, the Red Guards and Rebels raided Guangdong Institute of Cantonese Opera, assaulted the artists and incinerated a majority if not the entirety of the files, librettos, musical instruments, costume and stage sets and props, and the veteran star Hung-sin Neoi was abused severely before being sent to labour in a farm. But she was pardoned and “liberated” by Green River in 1969 to become her agent in overseeing the opera scenario in Guangzhou.42 Under Hung from 1971 to 1976, many defiant Cantonese opera artists were let go, persecuted or sent to correctional labour in farms and quarries. Since the traditional role types, personages, formulaic stage movement sequences, subject matters, instrumentation, singing, acting, reciting, and fencing were forbidden in the revolutionary operas she promoted on behalf of Green River, what left in the reformed music drama was only the Cantonese dialect. Cantonese opera had literally ceased to exist.43

In late 1970s, in the wake of the arrest of the Gang of Four who included Green River, Hung was dismissed, as hundreds of practitioners who had suffered from Anti-Rightist Campaign and Cultural Revolution were reinstated. The open policies fostered by the new leaders at once urged back the traditional plays in Cantonese opera. The genre enjoyed a rebound; citizens of Guangzhou once again packed the auditoriums of the theatres from 1977 to 1980.

5. The post-revolution era

But the rebound was short-lived. From the 1980s, the post-revolution open policies also ushered in China a wide spectrum of imported popular culture. Films, popular song recordings and live shows, karaoke singing, disco dancing, television shows, electronic games, and radio broadcasting were fanatically pursued by the public as the fashionable and “hi-tech” media. At the same time, as the market economy was picking up its momentum, opera companies that used to rely on government subsidies were encouraged to remodel themselves. Now with dwindling financial support, such companies found their survival within a competitive market an onerous task. And as the older generations of audiences had passed away, the auditoriums failed to find their successors. Cantonese opera practitioners faced a painful dilemma: while experimental plays alienated the older ones, traditional plays scared away the youngsters. This resulted in the departure of many veteran artists, some seeking other jobs, some going into a variety of businesses, and some emigrating to Hong Kong and overseas countries. Once again, not only Cantonese opera, but all Chinese operatic genres faced a crisis.

6. The new millennium

From 2000 onwards, inasmuch as the ritualistic opera troupes, about 100 of them,44 have still been prospering in the countryside around Guangdong, all Cantonese opera shows within the urban areas suffer a
deficit. Though the Guangdong Institute of Cantonese Opera still retains a couple of “national” companies, they are encouraged to compete in the market. The Guangzhou Institute of Cantonese Opera and its opera company, used to receiving subsidies from the municipal government, have become a commercial enterprise since 2009. Among the half dozen privately owned companies now active in the Guangzhou area are Workers’ Cantonese Opera Company and Cantonese Opera Company of Young Artists, respectively having forty-five and fifty-seven troupers. Through a downsizing of their personnel, quality assurance of their shows, and above all their proactive marketing strategies, they manage to maintain an edge over their competitors.

As the young consumers of cultural products are attracted to the fashionable, international and “hi-tech” forms of popular culture like film, television, pop song and social media, games and other facilities found in the internet, young performing-art talents regard traditional opera as their last priority. Veteran opera artists who passed away and retired have not been succeeded by qualified neophytes, who found the art too demanding and their future career too uncertain. The two government-funded schools of Cantonese opera, Guangdong Vocational Institute of Dance and Drama in Guangzhou and Zhanjiang Institute of the Arts located in the south-western end of the province, both suffer suboptimal admissions.

Since 2009, UNESCO’s recognition of Cantonese opera as a form of Intangible Cultural Heritage has urged the provincial and municipal governments to enforce measures to stabilize, preserve, and develop Cantonese opera. As a result, the Chinese Web of Cantonese Opera was inaugurated in 2010, the Museum of Cantonese Operatic Art opened in 2012, the Hatching of New Drama Scheme launched in 2012, and the municipal government kicked off its Cantonese opera revitalisation campaign in 2014. Among all the government and NGO bodies that devote themselves to the promotion of Cantonese opera, the Guangzhou Research Institute of Literature, Art and Creative Works is currently taking a leading role through running the Chinese Web of Cantonese Opera and publishing the bi-monthly Nan-guo Hong-dou (Red Beans of the South, the genre’s epithet awarded by Premier Zhou En-lai in 1956). Yet, to say the least, it seems such bodies are at a loss in finding effective means to carry out their mission. Many attribute the predicament to the fact that ever since Cantonese opera has been requisitioned by the government to become a channel of propaganda, it has lost its survival skills.

To add one more hurdle to the battle for the preservation and development of Cantonese opera, as a result of the migration of Cantonese-speaking people from Guangzhou to other parts of China, and of the influx of Mandarin-speaking immigrants to Guangzhou from all parts of China, the roots of the genre – its audiences – are being undermined.

If the success of Cantonese opera in Hong Kong could offer any hints, the key to victory in Guangdong perhaps lies in identity. If Cantonese opera could play a sustaining role in the cultural identity of the people of Guangzhou, it would maintain its functional status and would thus be embraced by its people. In order to achieve so, it must be transformed into a refined art form, and its practitioners must be educated and trained to become artists.

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Notes

1 “Findings of the National Survey of Chinese Regional Operatic Genres”, uploaded on 26th December 2017, see http://caifang.china.com.cn/2017-12/26/content_40120293.htm?f=pad&a=true.
2 Via Leisure and Cultural Services Department under the Home Affairs Bureau, the Hong Kong government currently subsidizes and provides long-term administrative, rehearsal, and performance venues for three orchestras, three dance companies, three theatre companies, a multi-media and cross-genre group, and a company of Western opera. Totaling eleven, these bodies are commonly known as the “professional art groups”.

3 Take 2014 as an example, the present writer, based on data recorded in *Hong Kong Xiqu Yearbook 2014* and provided by the Hong Kong Hikers’ website that lists schedules of ritual performance, counted a total of 1,256 Cantonese opera shows, excluding operatic song concerts, fully or partly staged by professional artists.

4 Only non-profit-making Cantonese opera companies are entitled to such subsidies. Hence most commercial troupes refrain from the application for such grants.

5 The historian Ng Wing-chung points out that the decline in Cantonese opera performance, due to over-expansion of some of the grand troupes, started as early as from 1928 to 1932; Chan Fei-nong suggests 1938 was the onset of the downturn. Taking into consideration that the setback in theatrical performance was compensated by the boom in Cantonese opera phonograph recordings and films, the present writer maintains that the 1930s were still the heydays of Cantonese opera. See Ng 2015: 62–71; Ng and Chan 2007: 176–81.

6 The Romanization of most of the Cantonese names in this chapter is based on the system designed by Linguistic Society of Hong Kong.

7 See Mak 1940: 10.


9 See Mak 1940: 10.

10 The scale of Bong-zi mode is “saang, ce, gung, ho, si, saang” while that of Ji-wong is “ho, si, ji, saang, ce, gung, faan, liu”, where “ji” can be slightly lower than “ti” and “faan” slightly higher than the “fa” of the Western major diatonic scale. In both modes, saang is tuned as C. Generally speaking, while most vocal forms in both modes are pentatonic, kwun-faa (“rolling flower”) in Ji-wong stands out to be heptatonic.

11 Nowadays the scale of faan-sin mode is “ho, si, ji, saang, ce, gung, faan, liu”, where “ji” can be slightly lower than “ti”, “faan” slightly higher than the “fa” of the Western major diatonic scale, and saang is tuned as G.

12 Nowadays the scale of ji-faan mode is “ho, ji, saang, ce, faan, liu”, where “ji” can be slightly lower than “ti”, “faan” slightly higher than the “fa” of the Western major diatonic scale, and saang is tuned as C.


14 *White Tiger* is also required for the initiation of any new theatre; see Chan et al. 2008: 55–73.

15 Unlike the rest, Prime Minister had once been as elaborate as a full-scale “main operatic item”. Nowadays only shortened versions are performed in ritualistic series.


17 Other than these thirty communities, it is estimated that around another ten that hold Purification Rituals do not at the same time offer opera.


19 See Chan and Cham 2018:10.

20 See Cheng 2013: 1–31; Judith Ng 2015: 98–117. While both authors note that the first theatre came into business in 1865, Ng points out there was probably another one built in as early as 1852.


22 See Ng Wing-chung 2015: 73–77.

23 The titles of the first three pillars were then new inventions. Though using titles borrowed from traditional role types, the supporting male, comic, and old male also take up additional artistic duties. For example, known as siu-sang (young male) in Cantonese, Supporting Male was a de facto “deputy principal male”.

24 Throughout the 1930s and up to the British surrender in late 1941, many locals assumed the Crown Colony was impregnable.


27 The disciples of Tong Syut-hing all bore the syllable “Syut” (“snow”) in their stage-names, and so do the disciples of Baak Syut-sin.

28 It is estimated that around 800,000 had left Hong Kong during the period from 1984 to July 1997. See “Emigration Generation: Will Hong Kong Experience Another Brain Drain?” posted in the internet on 8th November 2016. The figure accounted for over ten percent of the total population of about six million by then.


30 According to the Security Bureau, around 6,500 people left Hong Kong in 2017. According to a survey conducted by the Chinese University of Hong Kong, in 2011, over sixty-five percent of the Hong Kong permanent residents desired to migrate to other countries. See Wikipedia.
31 The present writer wants to thank Mr Preston Lai and Ms Suk Lee, respectively noteworthy singers of Vancouver and New York City, for their preliminary surveys and estimations.
32 In fact, the first generations of Cantopop were excerpts from Cantonese opera of the 1950s.
34 As told by Dr Cham Lai Suk-ching, formerly Principal Inspector of Education Department, which has been renamed as Education Bureau.
35 The resignation of Prof. Chan Sau-yan in January 2008 prompted a short suspension of the courses and research on Cantonese opera.
36 See Ng and Chan 2007: 157.
37 See Ng 2015: 66.
38 See Leung 2006: 40–44.
39 See Ho 1993: 245.
44 As no conclusive data is yet available, this was told by Wen Ru-qing, a leading young actor of the Second Company of Guangdong Institute of Cantonese opera in an interview on 23rd June 2019.
45 See Luo 2016: 100.
47 As told by Wen Ru-qing; see note 44.
48 See Luo 2016: 98, 103. This also suggests that Cantonese opera artists of Hong Kong should not over rely on government subsidies.

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**II. In English**
