

Hong Kong Xiqu Overview



2021 – 2022

香港戲曲概述 2021-2022

Hong Kong Xiqu Overview 2021-2022

主編、行政統籌
蔡啟光

Editor and Administration Coordinator
Choi Kai-kwong

原文審訂
羅麗

Original Text Reviewer
Luo Li Lawly

英文翻譯
蔡啟光

English Translator
Choi Kai-kwong

英譯審訂
汪卿孫

Translation Reviewer
Teresa Wang

版面設計及排版
沛誠公司

Layout Design and Typeset
Amazing Source Company

網站
hkxiqu.hk

Website
hkxiqu.hk

國際標準書號
978-988-74613-8-8

ISBN
978-988-74613-8-8

版次 2025 年 7 月初版

First published in July 2025

本刊物內所有圖文資料，版權均屬本計劃及個別圖文提供者所有。大量轉引、複製、或將其用於商業用途，均可構成侵權行為，本計劃負責人保留追究權利。

All rights reserved. Large-scale quotation, copying and reproduction for commercial purpose is considered infringement of copyright. When such situation arises, the Project-in-charge reserves the right to take legal action against involved individuals and/or organisations.

Supported by



香港藝術發展局支持藝術表達自由，本計劃內容並不反映本局意見。

The Hong Kong Arts Development Council supports freedom of artistic expression. The views and opinions expressed in this project do not represent the stand of the Council.

Adapting Cantonese Opera Ritual Performances for Appeasing Gods During the Pandemic

Written by: Choi Kai-kwong (Researcher of bamboo theatre culture)

During the height of the pandemic, government anti-epidemic policies prohibited public gatherings, which led to the rejection of applications to build bamboo theatres for staging ritual Cantonese opera performances. As a result, performances could only take place on a smaller scale inside temples, in front of altars, or even be entirely cancelled. When the pandemic slightly improved, bamboo theatres were allowed to be erected in some locations, but with unprecedented anti-epidemic measures adopted. This article examines how bamboo theatre performances had to adapt during the pandemic and explores the preservation of ritual Cantonese opera and bamboo theatre culture.

Sharp Decline in Ritual Cantonese Opera Performances

Before the pandemic, there were on average more than 30 bamboo theatre performances of ritual Cantonese opera each year during festivals. During the pandemic, the number dropped sharply to only two performances in 2021 and three in 2022.

Performances in 2021 include the Cheung Chau Da Chiu Festival from May 16 to 19 (the 5th to 8th day of the fourth month of the lunar calendar) by Ko Shing Cantonese Opera Troupe; Tai O Hau Wong Festival from July 13 to 18 (4th to 9th of the sixth lunar month) by Lucky Cantonese Opera Troupe.

Performances in 2022 include Tai O Hau Wong Festival again, this year from July 2 to 7 by Lucky Cantonese Opera Troupe; Tung Chung Hau Wong Festival from September 11 to 15 (16th to 20th of the eighth lunar month) by Lucky Cantonese Opera Troupe; and Remembrance of Ancestors during Ghost Festival organised by Tung Wah Group of Hospitals on August 15 and 17, by Tsui Yuet Cantonese Opera Troupe.

2021 Cheung Chau Da Chiu Festival

The Organizing Committee adopted an open-air bamboo theatre, leaving the audience area uncovered to improve ventilation and reduce the risk of virus transmission. There was only one entrance and exit point to strictly control crowd flow.

The audience was required to have their temperature taken, and anyone with symptoms such as fever was denied entry. Before entering, audience had to sanitize their hands with disinfectant. Masks were mandatory and eating and drinking were strictly prohibited inside the theatre.

The audience seating area was divided into grids to reduce crowding. In each grid, a maximum of four people was allowed, with the total audience limit set at 96. Some stood to watch from outside the barrier.



Open-air bamboo theatre



The audience was required to have their temperature taken and scan the LeaveHomeSafe app QR code.



Musicians were moved from the side of the stage to the area in front of the stage.



Audience seating area was divided into grids to reduce crowding.

This case demonstrated the flexibility of bamboo theatre construction, which can be adapted to different circumstances. Theatres can be built large or small, elevated or less elevated; the perimeter of the audience seating area can be enclosed with zinc sheets or left completely open. The number of chairs can be increased or reduced at any time. The grid system used effectively helped to achieve social distancing and epidemic prevention.

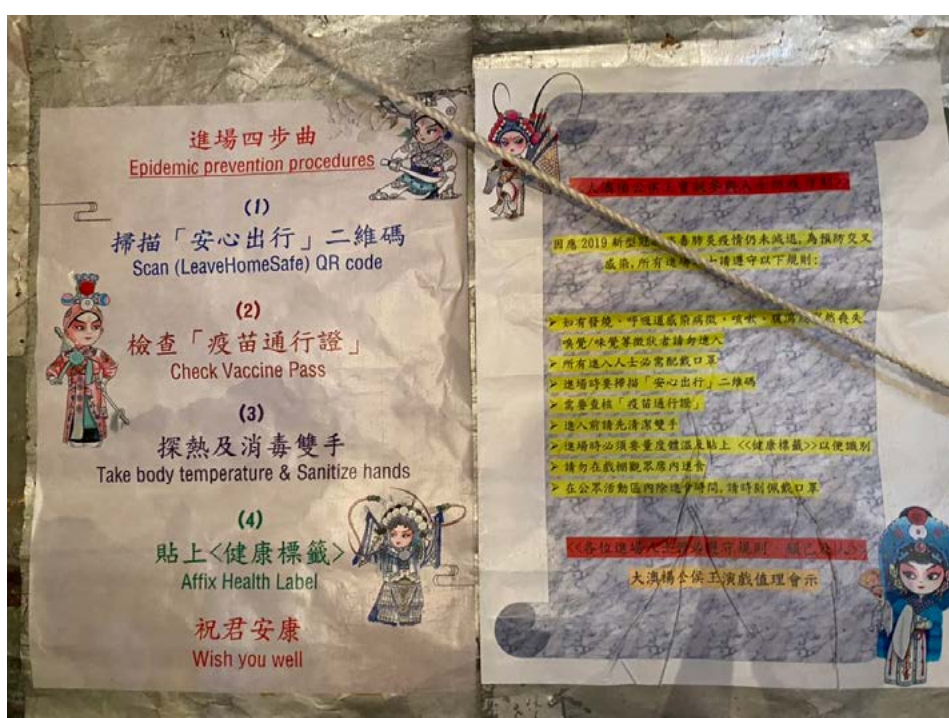
2022 Tai O Hau Wong Festival

During this festival, a bamboo theatre was erected despite the pandemic. It was made possible not only because the venue was not a Leisure and Cultural Services Department sports ground and required only approval from the Lands Department, but also of the determination of the Organizing Committee and the opera troupe.

It was the first bamboo theatre performance after the government implemented the Vaccine Pass.



The Organizing Committee distributed gift packs that included masks.



Notices on epidemic prevention were posted.

Before taking their seats, the audience had to scan the venue QR code using the LeaveHomeSafe app, then present their Vaccine Pass for verification, followed by a temperature check. If the temperature was normal, the person gets a “healthy sticker”. The sticker was a creative initiative by the organizers, featuring different lead actors. A different design was used for each performance and it was useful for identification.



Checking the Vaccine Pass



Staff taking the temperature of the audience



Audience receiving the “healthy sticker” after inspection



Full set of the “healthy stickers”

The bamboo theatre followed the epidemic prevention rules implemented by the government by opening only 85% of the seats. Certain seats were cordoned off with tape to maintain social distancing. After each performance, staff disinfected all seats with spraying devices.



Seats blocked off by tape



Staff disinfecting seats

As for the opera troupe crew, they were required to present a negative PCR test result taken within 48 hours and take a rapid test every day before entering the venue. They had to report their negative results to the troupe manager. Everyone except performers and wind instrument musicians had to wear masks. Fans were strictly prohibited from visiting backstage to protect the crew from outside infection.



Onstage performance of the routine opera *Eight Immortals Bestowing Longevity*, with wind instrument musicians playing at the side of the stage.



Notice posted by the troupe: Backstage visits strictly prohibited

During the pandemic, organizing committees had to spend additional manpower and resources to implement anti-epidemic measures in compliance with government regulations when holding folk events, including ritual opera performances. They could be fined for anything not done properly. Such events were made possible only with the determination and support of everyone involved.

Temple Performances in Front of Altars

In the event the organizing committee cancelled the construction of bamboo theatres, smaller-scale routine performances were staged in front of temple altars to serve as ritual operas.

For example, at the Tai Wong Yeh (Great Lord) Festival in Yuen Chau Tsai, Tai Po on June 17, 2021 (8th day of the fifth lunar month), performances of *Eight Immortals Bestowing Longevity*, *Promoting to High Officialdom*, and *A Fairy Returns Her Son to the Mortal Father* (short version) were held that afternoon, in front of the temple altar to express gratitude and seek blessings.



Performing the routine repertoire *Eight Immortals Celebrate Longevity* in front of the altar inside the temple.
(Photo provided by Lucky Cantonese Opera Troupe)



Performing the routine repertoire *Blessing by the God of Fortune* in front of the altar inside the temple.
(Photo provided by Lucky Cantonese Opera Troupe)

Replacing Live Opera with Puppet Theatre

In 2021, the Wang Chau Da Chiu Festival held once every eight years cancelled the bamboo theatre performances. Instead, Cantonese opera puppetry was staged to reduce crowd gatherings.

In 2022, the Lin Fa Tei Da Chiu Festival held once every five years cancelled the ritual opera performance entirely.

致：各位村民

橫洲太平清醮各項活動時間表（庚子年）

修訂

1. 啟壇吉日： 上三表	二零二一年一月廿五日【農曆十二月十三日（星期一）】 上午七時三十分開始：取水、揭幡、迎神登壇、上三表 上午十時三十分前村民擺放祭品奉神 下午四時：啟壇典禮	（木偶劇） 日場：下午 一時三十分 夜場：晚上 七時三十分
2. 行鄉拜訪 友村 啟人緣榜：	二零二一年一月廿六日【農曆十二月十四日（星期二）】 上午八時由醮棚出發（改為乘車到各村） 約下午十二時三十分上黃榜 下午四時	（木偶劇） 同上
3. 賀醮吉日：	二零二一年一月廿七日【農曆十二月十五日（星期三）】 上午八時三十分開始（嘉賓、出嫁女來賀醮）	（木偶劇） 同上
4. 超幽散醮： 備註	二零二一年一月廿八日【農曆十二月十六日（星期四）】 下午二時：村民攜「引福歸堂」到醮棚領符 晚上十一時：化大士	（木偶劇） 同上
5. 送神回位：	二零二一年一月廿九日 由上午九時	

備註：是屆太平清醮取消粵劇公演，敬請見諒！

酬謝神恩 合境平安

風調雨順

橫洲建醮委員會

Notice announcing the cancellation of live opera performance, which was replaced by puppetry.



Stage of the Cantonese opera puppet performance

Conclusion: The Pandemic Reveals the Nature of Cantonese Opera Ritual Performances for Appeasing Gods

During the pandemic, even though many organizing committees decided to cancel the bamboo theatre performances, they were still able to celebrate the deities' birthdays and the Da Chiu festivals.

This raises several questions:

Is building a bamboo theatre and staging ritual Cantonese opera essential for the celebration?

Since building a bamboo theatre and hiring an opera troupe is very costly, will committees resume such performances after the pandemic to lower the expenses?

Will they replace large-scale bamboo theatre performances with small-scale routine performances in front of temple altars?

Or will they simply stop staging ritual operas altogether and use other rituals to celebrate the deities' birthdays and the Da Chiu festivals?