

Hong Kong Xiqu Overview



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The Impact and Revelations of the Pandemic on Cantonese Opera Industry

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Translated by: Lois Ng and Catalina Yang

Hong Kong's Cantonese opera industry has experienced unprecedented difficulties since 2019. Amid the global pandemic, theatres were forced to close, all performances were cancelled, the livelihoods of industry workers were gravely affected, and the industry's future was unclear. This situation hindered the development of Cantonese opera, even threatening the inheritance and transmission of this traditional art form. In fact, the transmission of Cantonese opera in Hong Kong has faced multiple challenges in recent years. These include low attendance rates, an ageing target audience, and the declining need for Cantonese operas to appease gods. The pandemic worsened the already severe situation for the Cantonese opera industry.

Given the challenges brought by COVID-19 to Hong Kong's Cantonese opera industry, funding from the Lord Wilson Heritage Trust was applied for this study. Thanks to the trust's support, research finally began for the project¹ "The Impact of COVID-19 on Cantonese Opera in Hong Kong²", which took nearly three years to complete.

An Unprecedented Impact and Shock

In this battle against the pandemic, industry workers were the first to be impacted. Cancelled performances, sudden loss of income, and interruptions to classes all contributed to immense pressure financially and mentally.

First of all, Cantonese opera industry workers are usually paid daily. They get paid if they are hired for performances, but there is no guaranteed income if they do not perform. The sudden drop in income, or worse, no income, significantly affected young second and third-tier actors and other support staff with limited savings. Industry workers who also took jobs related to Cantonese opera education and promotion were further affected because courses were cancelled or postponed indefinitely due to the pandemic and school closures. Even industry seniors faced great crises. They may need to pay for fees such as warehouse storage and office rent, so their expenses are often higher than those of young actors. Some people even had to switch careers during the pandemic for their livelihood.

In addition, people needed time to adapt to the implementation of the refund

process and pandemic prevention measures. Countless performances were cancelled

due to the waves of the pandemic, and this led to complicated administration and procedures when arranging ticket refunds. On the other hand, industry workers also had to cooperate with the government's pandemic prevention measures. For example, the enforcement of COVID-19 testing also contributed to the stress and challenges to the operation of theatre troupes.

Performance venues were also closed for an extended periods during the pandemic. As the government tightened anti-pandemic measures, it was challenging to set a rehearsal schedule for when venue closure could be announced at any time to respond to the changing situation of the pandemic. Troupes were sometimes forced to shelve performance plans due to the financial deficit when the allowed audience capacity lowered. The uncertainty of performance dates, losses caused by capacity restrictions, and difficulties in applying for venues tested the industry's agility.

Finally, in addition to Cantonese opera performances, the teaching work that many Cantonese opera workers take part in, including Cantonese opera and singing classes in primary and secondary schools and public classes, was also significantly reduced. Even when schools resumed, Cantonese opera teaching was still regulated by various pandemic prevention measures, such as half-day classes. Although the government allowed public Cantonese opera classes to resume operation, parents were still concerned about the possibility of contracting the illness. They were not confident enough to send their children out to take Cantonese opera classes.

In Crises Come Chances

On the other hand, some people who taught adult Cantonese opera classes pointed out that the number of students did not decrease, and they earned more from teaching during the pandemic. The main reason was that adult students had more free time to take Cantonese opera or singing classes during the pandemic. Some students also stayed and took classes in Hong Kong as they could not cross the border to visit the singing studios in Shenzhen.

In addition, many industry workers did not stop even when faced with cancelled performances and venue closures during the pandemic. They continued working hard to prepare actively for work after the pandemic. Some say that artists get inspired when facing adversities. This pandemic proves them correct. A portion of Cantonese opera actors who participated in this study made full use of their spare time during venue closure to write new scripts and music scores, to the point where their output increased significantly. Moreover, the pandemic has inspired some industry workers to try new career directions and make professional breakthroughs. Some actively explored using various internet and art technology tools. They conducted online Cantonese opera performances and produced online video content related to Cantonese opera in the hope of maintaining interaction and connection with their audience to avoid losing audiences. At the same time, some industry workers transformed their roles from just acting to also teaching, hoping to educate more people about Cantonese opera culture. In fact, UNESCO has repeatedly emphasised that education and professional training play an

indispensable and pivotal role in cultural inheritance and transmission³.

In conclusion, if the industry workers can maintain the positivity and agility developed during the pandemic and take up new chances that arose from the pandemic, their efforts will positively impact the sustainability of the Cantonese opera industry.

Support from the Government and Industry

During the pandemic, the HKSAR Government lent a hand and provided monetary support to the Cantonese opera industry. Unions and organisations reacted swiftly and responded with various actions, showcasing the spirit of mutual support in the industry.

The Chinese Artists Association of Hong Kong (Barwo)⁴ performed an important role as a union during the pandemic. Firstly, Barwo supported the HKSAR government in actively distributing funding assistance to relieve the industry workers' financial stress. In early 2020, the HKSAR Government allocated 150 million dollars from the Anti-epidemic Fund to the Arts and Culture Sector Subsidy Scheme. Among which, 15 million dollars were allocated to the Cantonese opera industry in Hong Kong. Barwo was tasked to distribute the funding.⁵ From the start of the pandemic to the time of writing, Barwo has completed six rounds of funding disbursement. In addition, the Government's Home Affairs Bureau also entrusted Barwo to disburse two additional rounds of one-off subsidies. Members of the Cantonese opera industry received a 5,000 and 7,500 dollars subsidy in November 2020 and February 2021, respectively.⁶

More importantly, Barwo presented the industry's challenges to the government and actively sought support for the industry, hoping to support industry workers in all aspects. Other than coordinating and disbursing the government funding, they also took up another important supporting role. Their work included distributing supplies to workers and coordinating with the government for venue arrangements. Barwo also applied for funding from the government to create videos to contribute to Barwo Channel: Cantonese Online Classes, a YouTube channel providing ingenious learning and research materials about Cantonese opera.

Moreover, Barwo called for the government's support to safeguard the precious traditions of performing Cantonese operas to appease gods. Dr Liza Wang, chairman of Barwo at the time, wrote an open letter intended for the HKSAR Government in March 2021, titled "Rescue World-Class Intangible Cultural Heritage - Save Traditional Cantonese Opera (San Gung Hei) from the Crisis of Interruption", requesting the government to allow these traditional performances to resume. She stated in the letter that the tradition of performing Cantonese operas to appease gods might cease to exist if these traditional performances are postponed or cancelled entirely in various districts and villages. This consequence will also impact whether Cantonese opera can remain on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity established by UNESCO. Barwo's request helped push the resumption of performing Cantonese operas to appease gods, bringing hope to the industry in a desperate situation.



Barwo performed an important role as a union during the pandemic.
(Photo courtesy of The Chinese Artists Association of Hong Kong)

Besides Barwo, the One Table Two Chairs Charitable Foundation⁷ also actively supported the industry in overcoming hurdles during the pandemic. Seeing how vulnerable the Cantonese opera industry was to the situation, the One Table and Two Chairs Charitable Foundation launched the "Together as One, Fight the Pandemic (仝人同心，抗疫重生)" online fundraising Cantonese opera concert. All funds raised were used to support Hong Kong Cantonese opera industry workers and to rebuild the ecological system of Cantonese opera in Hong Kong, which was affected by the pandemic. This large-scale fundraising event brought together 33 veteran performers of the Cantonese opera industry, a professional team of musicians and backstage staff. The concert recording was filmed in two days at the Tea House Theatre of the Xiqu Center in the West Kowloon Cultural District, and 18 Cantonese opera pieces were performed. The event was well received by the industry and the public, with more than one million views online. A total of 3.34 million dollars was raised, and the foundation distributed all funds to 403 beneficiaries (all Cantonese opera industry workers affected by the pandemic). Each beneficiary received 8,302 dollars.

Other organisations also held various online fundraising performances during the pandemic. These included other larger-scaled online fundraising programmes, such as the global anti-epidemic Cantonese opera fundraising concert "Multi-Voices One Heart".

Revelations and Opportunities Brought About by the Pandemic

Though the almost three-year-long pandemic impacted the Cantonese opera industry severely, it has also uncovered revelations or even new opportunities for its future development.



The One Table and Two Chairs Charitable Foundation launched the "Together as One, Fight the Pandemic" online fundraising Cantonese opera concert. All funds raised were used to support Hong Kong Cantonese opera industry workers and to rebuild the ecological system of Cantonese opera in Hong Kong. (Photo courtesy of The One Table and Two Chairs Charitable Foundation)

Industry workers are key to Cantonese opera's future development and transmission of cultural heritage. The pandemic was the chance for them to re-evaluate their career prospect. During the rough waves of the pandemic, many actors worried about their future, just like their other colleagues in the industry. Some even considered switching career paths. Among them, most were young actors or new joiners. They are usually well-educated and have more choices for work, so they would consider leaving the industry to pursue other careers or continue on as a hobby instead of a full-time job. If these people had left the industry, there would have been a shortage of junior roles. Luckily, the situation was not as dire. Most workers still see Cantonese opera as their lifelong career and are determined to continue until they are old. The pandemic was just a challenge to get through. Some actors now plan to branch out and take on education and art administration roles for financial security and sustainability. Learning Cantonese opera has actually become more common in Hong Kong. Be it classes in primary and secondary schools (as part of the curriculum or extracurricular activities) or professional training (such as courses taught by Barwo or the Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts), Cantonese opera is being taught more in-depth.

Other than career prospects, the traditional method of business is changing. For example, traditional operas performed to appease gods, often staged in and for villages, have such strong cultural, religious and historical significance that villagers believe there would be serious consequences if they do not continue the tradition. When faced with the pandemic and consequent social distancing measures, most traditional operas for the gods were cancelled in 2020. The large-spread cancellations were the industry's biggest challenge since the establishment of Hong Kong. Interim changes were made to these traditional operas swiftly to protect this important heritage that has gone on for over 230 years. For example, stages were redesigned, adopting an open plan to allow better airflow and to increase the distance between seats. In terms of the performances, some cancelled live performances on stage. Instead, they switched to video recordings, performed

the traditional operas to the statues inside the temples, or using the Guangdong Hand Puppet Cantonese Opera instead. Though all stakeholders tried their best to keep the traditional operas going during the pandemic, the prolonged suspension of performances has undoubtedly affected many people's determination to defend the tradition. In addition, this cultural heritage was already facing problems such as rising costs and a large number of villagers emigrating overseas. The ecological environment for the survival of traditional operas to appease gods is worrisome.

The long-term development trend for Cantonese opera will be exploring digital transformation. Art tech has been one of the key focuses of the Hong Kong government in recent years. During the pandemic, online tools were widely used for performances and communication to fill the gap when venues were closed due to the anti-epidemic measures. Now that we are in the post-pandemic era, the industry has continued the discussion about using digital technology to promote the sustainable development of Cantonese opera. Admittedly, this method may help present the art form by showcasing details such as the actors' eyes and



The last performance at Cheung Chau's Pak Tai Festival with no audience. (Photo courtesy of Mr Choi Kai Kwong)

gestures. It would also benefit audience development by implementing technology to introduce this unfamiliar art form to young audiences. However, art tech requires a certain amount of cost and support, and it will also give stress to actors who are not used to facing the camera. Considering the downsides, the industry is still positive and open towards adopting art technology. They proposed limited-time broadcasts and uploading only excerpts of performances to the internet. The most important part is to control the use of technology and balance art tech and the tradition of Cantonese opera so we can retain the essence of the art form and not be overwhelmed by technology.

Based on the above considerations, the following three directions can be considered for the long-term development of Cantonese opera. Firstly, Hong Kong must cooperate more with the Greater Bay Area, which is the key to the future development of Cantonese opera. Hong Kong needs to work with and communicate more with the Mainland, learn from their Cantonese opera industry, such as their use of technology and the internet, and integrate these with our advantages. Only then can Cantonese opera industries in Hong Kong and the Greater Bay Area be benefitted.

Secondly, we must develop a young generation of Cantonese opera audiences. Attracting young audiences is the key to the sustainable development of Cantonese opera. While we continue preserving the essence of the traditional art form, we

can bring in new elements and keep up with the times under the supervision of seasoned Cantonese opera workers. We can apply modern technology to Cantonese opera and rethink how to present a performance that is in line with the habits of contemporary society. For instance, we can reconsider the performance length, content, stage design, and so forth to attract more young audiences and ultimately increase the growth rate of the audience.

Thirdly, the government must listen to feedback from the Cantonese opera industry to understand the needs of the industry. Only then can the government allocate adequate resources to support the development of the industry. The current system of subsidy application should be reviewed regularly to fit in the rapidly developing society. While funding support is crucial, grants must be strictly monitored to ensure the overall quality of Cantonese opera performing groups and workers.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic is undoubtedly the most severe challenge posed to the Cantonese opera industry since the establishment of Hong Kong, but it has also brought new opportunities. The challenges experienced by the industry workers provided us with points of revelation and reference. As long as the industry continues to strive for self-improvement and keep on evolving with the times, with the unrelenting efforts of the Cantonese opera industry and their persistence in preserving traditional culture, they will be able to weather through the storm and rebuild their glory to become the pride of Hong Kong and the world.



The author was invited by the Hong Kong Public Libraries and The Lord Wilson Heritage Trust to host an interview with Cantonese Opera maestro Prof. Yuen Siu-fai and young actor Mr Tam Wing-lun, discussing how the pandemic has impacted Cantonese Opera.

1. The project (HAB/C 27/9/167)'s co-investigators are Prof. Sau-yan Chan and Prof. Sidney Chin-hung Cheung.
2. This article is based on the following publication: Chung M. Y. (2023). "Protecting the Transmission of Cantonese Opera under the Pandemic" [〈守護疫情下的粵劇傳承：香港八和會館〉]. *Beyond Seventy: 70th Anniversary of the CAAHK*. Hong Kong: The Chinese Artists Association of Hong Kong.
3. UNESCO. (2009). Decision of the Intergovernmental Committee: 4.COM 13.27. <https://ich.unesco.org/en/decisions/4.COM/13.27>.
4. The Chinese Artists Association of Hong Kong was established in 1953, and registered as a charitable organisation in 2009. They are committed to establishing and protecting the survival mechanism of Cantonese Opera in Hong Kong, and to strengthen the inheritance system and enhance the communication with various stakeholders in the society, thereby passing down the tradition of Cantonese Opera in a dynamic fashion.
5. "Hong Kong Intangible Cultural Heritage Item." Hkichdb.gov.hk, 2025, www.hkichdb.gov.hk/en/item.html?bf20c45b-b843-4dd8-861f-17f95e5dc799.
6. Chinese Artists Association of Hong Kong. (2022). *Barwo Newsletter*. Issue 112, January to April, 2022. Hong Kong.
7. One Table Two Chairs Charitable Foundation was established in 2018, and is a non-profit charitable organisation devoted to the preservation, promotion, and development of Cantonese opera and its related folk arts.

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