

Hong Kong Xiqu Overview



2021 – 2022

香港戲曲概述 2021-2022

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Turning Crisis into Opportunity

Hong Kong's First Online Cantonese Opera Course

Barwo Channel and E-book for Children

Written by: Dr. Chan Hiu-ting Winnie (Research Assistant Professor, Ip Ying To Lee Yu Yee School of Humanities and Languages, Saint Francis University)

The HKSAR Government has been supportive of Cantonese opera since the art form has made UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2019. However, in the three years affected by the Covid-19 outbreak, the government's strict anti-epidemic measures, including closures of performance venues, caused unprecedented disruptions to the Cantonese opera industry. In 2021, the Leisure and Cultural Services Department's (LCSD) performance venues were closed from January 1st to February 17th. This period included the Lunar New Year holiday, a festivity that major opera troupes commonly presented celebratory performances. Many troupes had to cancel or reschedule their shows, and the livelihood of industry workers were gravely affected, especially those who are paid per diem.

As the leading union of Cantonese opera performers and backstage crew, the Chinese Artists Association of Hong Kong, also known as "Barwo", negotiated with the government proactively during the pandemic, hoping to provide the industry with timely and effective support. In order to continue offering job opportunities, Dr Liza Wang Ming-chun, then president of Barwo (Terms: 1992-1997, 2007-2023), dedicated her efforts into launching two online Cantonese opera promotion programmes targeting adults and children respectively - Barwo Channel: Cantonese Opera Classes and the e-book *Cantonese Opera for Kids*. Under her guidance, both projects successfully completed between 2020 to 2021.

The power of coming together: Achieve the impossible

Alisa Shum, Ex-Chief Executive of Barwo reminisced about the reason behind Barwo Channel in her book, *Rebranding the Chinese Artists Association of Hong Kong*. Liza Wang looked for many ways to support the industry during the pandemic. She reached out to the government in multiple attempts, and the government finally responded to her persistent effort. They wanted Barwo to

create Chinese opera education programmes for the public to watch online for free. Barwo’s Board of Directors agreed that the project could address at least three things: provide jobs for Cantonese opera practitioners, boost morale, and promote Cantonese opera. However, in reality, it was not an easy task. Alisa Shum thinks that Barwo faced these difficulties: “Firstly, who gets to decide on the programme content? Secondly, with all the fully scheduled Cantonese performances, it’s impossible to call on this many workers to participate in multiple days of filming. Lastly, the production cost for filming is high. This is not a sum Barwo can easily provide.”¹ This seemingly impossible project only succeeded because of the pandemic. With the funding support of the Home Affairs Bureau of the Hong Kong SAR Government, (now Culture, Sports and Tourism Bureau), Barwo successfully mobilised over 350 people in the Cantonese opera industry and collectively made 47 episodes of educational materials on the art of Cantonese opera. The materials officially launched on 1 March 2021, following a launching ceremony.

The government was willing to support the production costs, but in order for the project to go through the official funding vetting procedures, they requested Barwo to provide a comprehensive proposal in a very short period of time. That meant Barwo needed to act swiftly in the limited time given. According to the publication *Reaching Seventy: 70th Anniversary of the CAAHK*², Liza Wang became Barwo Channel’s producer. The production team included seven famous performers. They are Law Ka-ying, Loong Koon-tin, Sun Kim-long, Wong Chiu-kwan, Chan Hong-chun, Wan Yuk-yu and Lai Yiu-wai. They oversaw planning the actual content of the programmes. In addition, each artistic director took on the task of deciding the subject, cast scouting and content demonstration for the different episodes.³ The administrators in the office also had to draft the proposal and budget expeditiously, and communicate with government officials on the specific application details. In the end, with the collective effort of Barwo staff and members, the team was able to complete the proposal and the preparation work for the production in just two weeks.

Taking lead with no fear of hardship; Good deeds bear sweet fruit

Liza Wang shared in the book, *Rebranding of the Chinese Artists Association of Hong Kong*, about the difficulties of producing Barwo Channel. As the producer, she did not have to stand in front of the camera, but she had to show up and lead the filming at the theatre every day throughout the 17-day production period. To create high-quality videos, she had to “take charge throughout the whole process, which was even more tiring than going to work. I paid special attention to fairness as the producer, to avoid anyone fishing in troubled waters. The production involved many people, and the funding came from taxpayers. If we didn’t safeguard every step properly, we would fail our members, and the trust of the government and the public.” They were faced with adverse difficulty. Even looking for a venue for filming during the pandemic proved to be difficult.

While preparation for filming was going on in full-speed, Barwo was unable to rent any government performance venues, which were closed due to the continued severity of the pandemic. Sunbeam Theatre, a venue long associated with Cantonese opera would have been the perfect venue for filming, but their rental cost was out of Barwo’s budget. After several rounds of searching, Hong

Kong Polytechnic University supported Barwo’s cause and rented the Jockey Club Auditorium to them with a discount. The Auditorium is relatively new, as this modern performance venue only opened in 2000. The overall design is a mixture of traditional and modern elements. The venue has great facilities. The staircase in the lobby is unique and grand, and the theatre can seat over 1000 audiences. It is the perfect venue for filming. Liza Wang played an imperative role as its President in helping Barwo solve the issue with venue rental. She has supported many artist-in-residence promotional programmes organised by the Polytechnic University as one of their artists-in-residence. They have built a positive partnership and trust, which in turn lead to the university allowing an outside party to rent the venue during the pandemic.⁴

No boundaries for online programmes; Cantonese Opera stays enchanting as ever

Barwo Channel’s 47 episodes cover various aspects of the art of Cantonese opera, including singing, dialogues, gestures, actions, makeup and costume-wearing, virtual backgrounds and sets. They have covered everything you can think of. Episodes on singing demonstrate the different stylistic systems and performance features. They covered the aria style, including bangzi and erhuang in different speeds, fixed tunes and nanyin. Episodes on dialogues introduce the system of different speeches, explaining how performers express emotions by controlling the rhythm of their speech, such as the strength and speed. They demonstrated with poetic speech, rhythmic speech, doggerel and recital speech, showcasing exactly the saying by practitioners that dialogues are more important than singing in Cantonese opera. The episodes clearly illustrated how important dialogues are to Cantonese opera. Other than singing and dialogues, gestures and actions were featured in many episodes too, including acrobatic moves, hip and leg moves, water sleeves techniques, acting with the beard, and hair-swirling. There are also episodes explaining in depth the set performance formulas when a performer goes on stage. Other episodes talked about Southern style performance formulas such as dai ga, set martial arts routines, and other set plays such as “Blessing by the God of Fortune”, “Horse Matching” and “Announcing the Imperial Scholars”. The 34th episode is especially noteworthy, as this is the episode where famous performers Law Ka-ying and Loong Koon-tin act out the play “Brothers’ Vow by Biting onto Arrows”. This traditional set piece is rarely seen on stage these days, and its unique features include the large portion of speeches and set song lyrics, making this performance extra special to appreciate. As for actions, this portion is brilliant as expected. They showed every single detail of Southern style moves, that are characteristically direct and sturdy, by demonstrating hand moves and weapon action to the audiences.⁵

Barwo Channel has been popular with audiences over the world since their launch in March 2021. According to data listed in Barwo’s newsletter, as of 23 April 2021 -- not even two months since the programme started -- the episodes have garnered over 700 thousand views. Notably, the units on fixed tunes were the most popular, with over 70,000 views.⁶ The reason to creating Barwo Channel was to support the industry workers, to ensure they can continue working and earn a stable income. At the same time, it serves as an online communication tool to the general public. With the series of online demonstrations and learning materials, it allows audiences to learn more about Cantonese opera without being bounded by time and space. The channel

is actually massively beneficial to promoting and inheriting the traditional performance art form.

Barwo had to deploy a large amount of manpower during the filming process. The entire project involved hundreds of staff, so the producer had to spend extra effort into coordinating the division of labour to ensure fairness. The project was made possible due to the special financial support provided by the government during the pandemic, as well as the rare performance gap that Cantonese opera workers had. As put by Liza Wang, now that “information technology is so developed, making good use of the power of the online world can help us promote Cantonese opera to more audiences wider and farther, and help bring us closer to the younger generation. Maintaining the excellent traditions while integrating with the times is the constant challenge for the Cantonese opera industry. This is also the challenge Barwo, and I, as President face.”⁷ To conclude, Barwo Channel was a success because all the necessary factors worked out.

Learning Cantonese Opera through children’s eyes; Sparking more intrigue and fascination

Barwo has always been committed to expanding the Cantonese opera audience base. In addition to caring for loyal showgoing regulars, Barwo is also actively promoting Cantonese opera to children, aiming to cultivate their interest in watching Cantonese opera from an early age, thus ensuring that there will be an audience base who will continue to support Cantonese opera in the future. Barwo actively invests resources into producing family-friendly Cantonese opera activities. They have presented a series of creative Cantonese opera fairy tale specials before, adapting classic and well-known fairy tales such as *The Three Little Pigs* and *The North Wind and the Sun* into Cantonese opera programmes on stage. New work, *The Adventure of Autumn and Winter*, which was set to premiere in December 2020 was delayed due to the pandemic and finally showed in February 2021. The screenplay was written by young talent Lai Yiu-wai, and famous performer Yuen Siu-fai was invited to serve as Artistic Director, personally guiding a group of young talents to perform the work. The story starts with single father Lee Chor-ng and his son Autumn. Lee was remarried to Wang, and together, welcomed their daughter Winter. Autumn and Winter were close as siblings, but stepmother Wang disliked Autumn. One day, Winter got hurt, and Wang blamed Autumn for the accident. She punished him by asking him to fetch firewood from the mountains alone. Winter realised Autumn has not returned home after a long time, so she went into the mountains to look for him. There, she encountered a witch and black bear who ate children. In addition to watching the exciting adventure of Autumn and Winter, audiences can also participate in the subsequent interactive sessions arranged by Barwo to learn the basic artistic characteristics of Cantonese opera from the actors.

These Cantonese opera fairy tale performances targeting children audiences require a production team to write and rehearse the new works. To present the performances, both the Artistic Director and on and off-stage staff put in a lot of effort and energy. Though the production process is not easy, these programmes will be useful in promoting Cantonese opera and expanding the audience base in the long run. Other than organizing family-friendly Cantonese opera performances on stage, Barwo also collaborated with the Sing Fai Cantonese Opera Promotion Association to produce an e-book titled *Cantonese Opera*

for *Kids* to further educate young audiences about Cantonese opera.⁸ The book was released in December 2021. The content is short and concise, accompanied by various fun and vivid cartoon illustrations, attracting the interest of young readers. All the photos and video demonstrations in the book were taken with young performers. Such a careful attention to detail can make young readers feel relatable and become more engaged in learning.⁹

Young Cantonese opera performers can be a real deal

Cantonese Opera for Kids has less than 40 pages, but it actually already covers all the basic artistic characteristics of Cantonese Opera. The book starts with a short introduction of the historic development of Cantonese opera, then continues with singing, dialogues, gestures and actions. At the singing section, there is a special portion featuring Cantonese opera's unique musical score. It also included a mini version of the famous fixed tune "Song of a Barbaric Land" in the classic *Romance of the Phoenix Chamber*.¹⁰ As for gestures, using the section of the dan (female roles) as example, they included videos of the basic moves. This includes, the Cantonese style basic ending pose, finger, hand and first movements, the standing posture, walking poses etc. The young dan performer who was filmed executed these movements perfectly. The book also explains in detail the essence of Cantonese opera - the virtuality of performing. Performers often use abstract movements to simulate daily life, while also adding artistic and performative elements. Audiences need to learn this set of virtual stage language unique to Cantonese opera and use their imagination when watching a performance to truly understand everything that is happening on stage.

For example, the virtuality of time in Cantonese opera can be expressed by sounds and props. The sound of the night watchman's gong is used to signal the ticking of time, so characters know what time it is in that moment. The objects held by performers also have a deeper meaning. When a performer appears on the brightly lit stage holding a lantern, it means that the story takes place at night. Actions like opening doors, going up and down stairs, eating, drinking and sleeping, all can be perfectly captured and expressed through beautiful virtual movements. *Cantonese Opera for Kids* did not miss out on introducing the costumes and head pieces. They showed a large number of photos to educate readers to know more about different costumes, such as girls' dresses, men's robes, capes, ceremonial robes and armours. Lastly, there is a fictional child character in the book called "Interest". Interest asked Barwo's President, Liza Wang, in a childlike voice, whether there is any Cantonese opera suitable for kids to watch, and how to learn Cantonese opera. The book even added emoticons in their conversation, aimed to provide advanced information to readers in a fun and engaging way.

Conclusion: Face the pandemic with strength and agility; Flexibility brings new possibilities

Both Barwo Channel and the e-book *Cantonese Opera for Kids* showcase the strength of promoting Cantonese opera online. They are breathing new air into a traditional art form with modern technology. Through an online platform that

is not limited by distance, Cantonese opera can breakthrough the boundaries of space and time, so more audiences can learn and appreciate the unique cultural values and artistic charm this art form has. The learning materials are not just written in text, but also includes images and videos, enriching the sensory experience with visual and audio information. This not only will engage the audience's interest more, but it will also help them understand the materials more in-depth. For the younger generation who are so used to the online world, utilising online learning materials is like a natural instinct, meaning the entrance to learning this traditional art form is right by their doorstep. All in all, using online materials to promote Cantonese opera is not just a trend, but an innovating way to preserve and develop arts. Lastly, I would like to conclude this essay by borrowing Liza Wang's words during the launch ceremony of Barwo Channel: "We should be stronger, be united, and find a way out together. Even if this means we will face numerous difficulties. After passing the hurdles, as long as we continue to stay together, rebuild what we have -- our homes, our careers -- with the strong foundation and agility that Hong Kong has, we will definitely return even more prosperous!"¹¹

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 10. 《鳳閣恩仇未了情》的小曲〈胡地蠻歌〉
 11. Barwo Newsletter Issue 109, published in Hong Kong by The Chinese Artists Association of Hong Kong, January to March 2021

Image one: Online webpage of the Barwo Channel



Image two to three: Cover and inner page of E-book Cantonese Opera for Kids



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