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Exploring the Training Needs of Roles in Cantonese Opera from the Passing of the Great Masters

Written by: Dr. Huang Yue (Cantonese Opera Researcher)

From 2021 to 2022, Hong Kong's Cantonese Opera industry gradually recovered from the impacts of the COVID-19, but it was also the two-year period in which three great masters of Cantonese Opera, Yau Sing-po, Chan Ho-kau and Yam Bing-yi, passed away.

1 A Brief Account of the Passing of the Three Great Masters and Their Artistic Achievements

Yau Sing-po passed away on May 17, 2021 at the age of 89 in a hospital.¹ He was born in 1932 in Shunde, Guangdong Province. His father, Yau King-hung, was a male *huadan* in a Cantonese Opera troupe. Yau Sing-po grew up deeply influenced by it. At the age of six, he first set foot on the stage, and then studied under Chen Shaoxia², officially embarking on his career as a Cantonese opera performer.³ In the 1950s, Yau Sing-po settled in Hong Kong and was employed as a performer at the North Point Luna Park⁴. By the 1960s, Yau Sing-po had made a name for himself by performing in troupes such as Yau Lung, Ma Bo and Sun Fung Wong⁵, taking up the roles of *wen-wusheng*, *wusheng* and *laosheng*, as well as taking part in the launching of new opera productions.⁶ In the 1970s and 1980s, the Six Pillars, a system featuring the six major roles, was prevalent in Hong Kong's Cantonese Opera industry. In those days, the Cantonese Opera market also featured performances mainly of wits and beauties as *sheng* and *dan*. At that time, although Yau Sing-po frequently performed with all the major troupes in Hong Kong, his *chousheng* performances were the most popular and the most frequent among the Six Pillars. He did not remain a regular performer but often appeared in roles such as *wusheng* and *laodan*. In 1981, Yau Sing-po was trained and mentored by Peking Opera master Li Wanchun.⁷ By the 1990s, he had become one of the most popular Cantonese opera masters, with a record of over 200 performances a year.⁸ In February 1995, Yau Sing-po performed in a customized production of *Farewell My Concubine*, in which he played the role of *dahualien*, and was well received by the audience. It was rare at that time to be a leading actor in roles other than *sheng* and *dan*.⁹ In the new millennium, Yau Sing-po had not only participated in the performances of major troupes, but also organized a series of performances such as the “Yau Sing-po's Renowned Drama Elite Performance”¹⁰ at the Sunbeam Theatre in 2001, and “Revisiting a Fine Selection of Cantonese Opera” at the Yuen Long Theatre and the Sha Tin Town Hall in 2004.¹¹ Yau Sing-po's career in Cantonese Opera spanned more than 80 years and he portrayed countless classic characters, such as Yan Song in *Ten Charges Against Yan Song*, Jia Sidao in *The Reincarnation of a Beauty*, and the Yellow Robe in *The Tale of the Purple Hairpin*, all of whom were deeply rooted in the hearts of the people. His first plays include *Farewell My Concubine*, *Li Taibai*, *Lady Se Leading the Army*, *Towering Legends of the Three Kingdoms*, and *Emperor Lee Kwong*, which has been compiled into the *Complete Book of Cantonese Opera Performing Arts (Drama Volume)*.



Yau Sing-po playing Yuan Chonghuan in *Eternal Regret of the Late Ming Dynasty* in 1981.
(Photo provided by the monthly magazine of *Journey to Chinese Opera & Drama*)

Queen of *dan*, Chan Ho-kau passed away on July 23, 2021 at the age of 90 from cancer.¹² Born in 1930, Chan Ho-kau was deeply influenced by her father Chan Kai-hung, a renowned Cantonese musician who founded Sing Ping Music Club and Kwok Sing Opera Club. She was trained under Lan Fong Training School, then under Peking Opera's *wudan* Fen Juhua, along with Chan Po-chu and Siu Fong-fong.¹³ In the early days, Chan Ho-kau performed in Zhanjiang, Vietnam, Singapore, Malaysia and other places with renowned performers such as Luo Jianlang and Ho Fei-Fan, and gradually emerged as the third and second *huadan*. In the 1960s, Lam Kar-sing and Chan Ho-kau established the Cantonese Opera troupes, Hing Sun Sing (1962-1965) and Chung Sun Sing (1966-1993), which produced plays such as *The Sounds of Battle* and *A Chronicle Written in Blood*.¹⁴ Yuen Siu-fai also formed the Ho Siu Nin Troupe with Chan Ho-kau, and started to produce plays such as *The Return of Lady Wenji* and *Lu Mengzheng*.¹⁵ After the 2000s, Chan Ho-kau's participation in Cantonese Opera was drastically reduced due to health problems. Although the number of performances staged by her was limited, the standard of her performances remained the same. For example, she collaborated with Loong Koon-tin in *Azalea Mountain*, with Law Ka-ying in *The Warrior's Marriage* and *Coriolanus*, and starred in Yeung Chi-sum's new Cantonese operas *The Cosmic Mirror* and *Sacrificing the Son*, all of which were exceptional. In 2002, the Hong Kong Arts Festival launched a series of programmes titled "The Virtuosity of Chan Ho-kau", in which Chan performed in plays such as *The Revenge Battle*, *Zhu Bian Returns to Court*, *Love and Hatred*, *The Warrior's Marriage* and *The Return of Lady Wenji*, which summed up and acknowledged her lifelong artistry and



Chan Ho-kau's 2012 production of *Shen San Bai and Yun Niang* (Photo provided by the monthly magazine of *Journey to Chinese Opera & Drama*)



Yam Bing-yi in *New Edition of The Story of Burning Incense* in 2012 (Photo provided by the monthly magazine of *Journey to Chinese Opera & Drama*)

accomplishments in the field of Cantonese Opera.¹⁶

Yam Bing-yi, a renowned *erbang huadan*, or the supporting female lead, passed away on May 21, 2022, at the age of 91¹⁷. Born in 1931, Yam Bing-yi was the first cousin of the famous Cantonese opera singer Yam Kim-fai. Her childhood nickname, *sai nui*, or “younger daughter”, became Ms Sai Nui, a nickname given to her by people in the Cantonese opera industry. She grew up with Yam Kim-fai, where she immersed herself in the art of Cantonese Opera and Yam’s way of life. At the age of 11, she started her stage career in the South Bay Recreation Ground playing roles of the maids for the San Sing Cantonese Opera Troupe, and gradually became one of the supporting female lead roles alongside Yam.¹⁸ She was one of the Six Pillars of the Sin Fung Ming and Chor Fung Ming troupes, and later in Mui Suet-sze’s Hing Fung Ming and Fung Wo Ming troupes, she played an important role in supporting the younger generation. Although Yam Bing-yi had long been qualified to play the role of a leading *huadan*, she had always held on to her position as a supporting *huadan*.¹⁹ In April 1955, she and her husband, Sek Yin-tsi, formed the Yin Sun Sing Theatre Troupe to perform in Singapore in martial arts plays such as *Hong Xiguan Strikes Wudang Mountain*, in which she acted as the main *huadan*, one of the few performances in which she played a leading role. Yam Bing-yi participated in the debut performances of many renowned actresses such as Yam Kim-fai, Pak Suet-sin, Lam Kar-sing, etc. She portrayed classic Cantonese Opera characters such as Huan Sha in *The Book of Purple Hairpin*, Rui Lan in *Princess Chang Ping*, and Kwai Yuk-sheung in *The Revenge Battle*, and there is no other actress like her since.

The consecutive passing of three iconic Cantonese Opera masters between 2021 and 2022 is deeply saddening. At the same time, it raises serious concerns about the future of the performing arts. Especially important are the roles played by artists like Yau Sing-po, who excelled across roles; Chan Ho-kau, known for her elegance and poise as a *qingyi huadan*; and Yam Bing-yi, a quintessential supporting *huadan*. These are all crucial roles that must be preserved and passed on. This is an issue that deserves our close attention.

2 The Roles of *Chousheng* and Supporting *Huadan* in *Sheng-Dan*-centric Cantonese Operas: A Case Study of *The Purple Hairpin*

Since the 1930s, Cantonese opera has faced pressure from rising operating costs, prompting a streamlining of the traditional ten-role system—including roles such as *wusheng*, *zhengsheng*, *xiaosheng*, *xiaowu*, *zhengdan*, *huadan*, *gongjiao*, *zongsheng*, *jing*, and *chou*—into a simplified six-pillar system: *wen-wusheng*, leading *huadan*, *xiaosheng*, supporting *huadan*, *wusheng*, and *chousheng*.²⁰ It is important to note that these six pillars refer to positions within a troupe’s organizational structure, rather than strict role categories. On stage, each performer in a pillar role is often expected to master several roles to fulfil performance requirements. The establishment of the six-pillar system marked a shift towards *sheng* and *dan* roles as the core of Cantonese opera. Audience preferences and market-driven scriptwriting further solidified this trend. Today, *sheng-dan* focused productions dominate the Cantonese opera stage.

However, this shift has hindered the preservation and development of other roles, particularly in talent cultivation. In today’s Hong Kong, where young people interested in pursuing Cantonese opera are already few in number, most aspiring performers move toward *wen-wusheng* or lead *huadan* roles from the outset. As a result, other roles face a serious lack of successors. Yet even in classic *sheng-dan* operas, the contributions of other roles are indispensable. Take *The Purple Hairpin*, a well-loved *sheng-dan* classic made famous by Yam Kim-fai and Pak Suet-sin, the character, Yellow-robed Stranger, a *chou sheng* character, not only drives the plot but also enriches the overall theatrical texture. In the 1957 premiere at Lee Theatre²¹, the role was memorably portrayed by Leung Sing Poh, whose costume design and old Mandarin dialogue left a lasting impression. In the scene *Encountering the Knight by the Flowers*, his interplay with the heroine Huo Xiaoyu both highlighted her sorrow and provided comic relief at the right moment, preventing the stage atmosphere from becoming overly somber. His role was also crucial in moving the plot forward before and after the famous segment *The Sword and Hairpin Reunited*. Similarly, in *The Purple Hairpin*, the supporting *huadan* role of Huan Sha is a key figure throughout the production. Her job is to speak what the heroine cannot, and to act as a bridge between the stage and the audience’s emotional understanding. She stays close to the lead *huadan* on stage, providing coordination, rhythm, guidance, and support to the lead. In the scene *The Hairpin’s Shadow by the Lamp*, this character is even tasked with a “secret mission”: should the lead actress’s purple jade hairpin fail to fall on cue, it is the supporting *huadan* who must subtly remove and drop it to keep the story moving. A supporting *huadan* is not merely a lesser-known or less skilled performer. The role requires specialized training and attention to many nuanced details. Unfortunately, the importance of this role is often overlooked, and these subtle techniques are at risk of disappearing. In fact, some troupes have resorted to having the lead actress awkwardly remove and drop the hairpin herself, which is an unfortunate sign of the diminishing transmission of traditional stagecraft.

3 How Hong Kong Cantonese Opera Training Institutions Conduct Role Training

3.1 School of Chinese Opera, Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts

The School of Chinese Opera at the Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts was established in 2013. It is the world's first institution to offer a four-year Bachelor's degree programme with honours, majoring in "Chinese Opera Performance" and "Chinese Opera Music." The School provides three different programmes with varying durations and depth to qualified applicants: the Diploma in Cantonese Opera Foundations, the Professional Diploma in Cantonese Opera, and the Bachelor of Fine Arts (Honours) Degree in Chinese Opera. These programmes are divided into two main specialisations: Cantonese Opera Performance and Cantonese Opera Music. The newly established two-year Professional Diploma in Cantonese Opera offers an opportunity for professionals in the Cantonese Opera industry to enhance their skills. Meanwhile, the Diploma in Cantonese Opera Foundations and the Bachelor of Fine Arts (Honours) Degree in Chinese Opera are primarily for students who have obtained qualifications equivalent to the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education or other equivalent qualifications, aiming to nurture the next generation of talent for the Chinese cultural industry.

The Diploma in Cantonese Opera Foundations is a one-year full-time programme, designed to solidify students' foundational knowledge in Cantonese Opera. Upon graduation, students can continue to pursue the four-year full-time Bachelor of Fine Arts (Honours) Degree in Chinese Opera. Graduates may either enter the Cantonese Opera industry or opt to continue further studies. The School of Chinese Opera also offers the Youth Cantonese Opera Mentorship Programme, designed for teenagers aged 9 to 17. Graduates of this programme can apply for the full-time programmes at the School.

The School of Chinese Opera is equipped with various specialised teaching classrooms, rehearsal rooms, and facilities, providing students with high-quality spaces for lessons and practice. It also boasts a top-tier faculty, including winners of the Plum Blossom Award in Chinese Drama, PhD holders in music, and seasoned professionals. The School invites renowned actors, musicians, directors, and other industry experts to serve as guest artists, offering teaching and practical guidance according to students' learning needs.

The School's curriculum utilises self-developed teaching materials, implements staged assessments, offers elective courses in Peking and Kunqu opera, and organises masterclasses on opera productions. It strives to ensure that students receive structured, traditional Cantonese Opera performance art instruction within a modern educational framework. For example, in the four-year undergraduate programme, core courses include fundamental skills (acrobatic moves, waist and leg techniques, and weaponry skills), physical body movement (postures and formalized sequences), Cantonese opera singing, performance practice, repertoire studies, advanced character-specific opera repertoire, and graduation performances. Supporting subjects include Cantonese opera theory, Chinese opera and Chinese culture, the history of Cantonese opera, makeup and costume wearing, and other elective courses such as Chinese Opera pedagogy, Chinese opera research, traditional plays, an introduction to Peking and Kunqu opera, excerpts from Chinese operas, and Cantonese opera composition. In the Advanced Repertoire for Roles course, students practice and rehearse specific excerpts of opera plays associated with their character roles, learning acting skills, stage coordination, and



Students of the School of Chinese Opera at the HKAPA rehearse the Cantonese opera excerpt "*Catch Zhang Sanlang Alive*." (Photo provided by the School of Chinese Opera, Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts)



Students from the School of Chinese Opera at the Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts rehearsing the Cantonese opera excerpt "*Shatter the Marriage Challenge Sign*" from *Liu Jinding*. (Photo provided by the School of Chinese Opera, Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts)

character development techniques. The courses mainly focus on traditional opera excerpts or selected scenes from long plays, such as *Farewell at the Cavern*, *The Triple-forked Crossroad*, *Lo Faa Dong*, *The Story of Burning Incense: The Beating of the Deities*, and *Mu Guiying's Marriage Proposal*. The roles covered include *wusheng*, *xiaowu*, *wuchou*, *huamian*, *qingyi*, and *wudan*, among others. Additionally, the Role Studies course teaches students to identify and apply their character's traits, studying performance techniques, methods, and regulations specific to their roles. It also covers designing, evolving, composing, and interpreting characters, strengthening performance skills

aligned with character-specific traits, and distinguishing the core characteristics of each role. This course allows students to build a solid foundation for their future careers in Cantonese opera performances.

According to Professor Martin Lau, from the admissions interview to graduation, the School of Chinese Opera provides tailored instruction and guidance based on each student's foundational abilities and individual strengths, as well as career planning support. Building on core courses such as Fundamental Training, the School stages an annual performance titled *Gongs and Drums*, where all actors, musicians, and production crew members are students from the Academy. This production serves as a platform for students to apply what they have learned and showcase their achievements to audiences and the wider community. It also helps students become familiar with the demands and conventions of Cantonese opera stage performances, preparing them for professional careers after graduation. Regarding the repertoire, *Gongs and Drums* mainly features excerpted scenes tailored to each student's abilities. Recent notable productions include *Pearl Bay*, staged on 24-25 February 2023, written by Dr Boaz Chow, Lecturer at the School, and artistically directed by Associate Professor Ying Kamsha, as well as the classic full-length opera *Forty Years of Cherished Love*, performed on 30 June and 1 July 2023. *Pearl Bay* received funding from the 2024 China National Arts Fund - Cultural Exchange programme and toured cities across the Greater Bay Area from December 2024 to January 2025, providing a wider audience and industry professionals the opportunity to experience the talents of the School's students and graduates.

3.2 Cantonese Opera Academy of the Chinese Artists Association of Hong Kong (Barwo)

Established in 1980, the Cantonese Opera Academy is the educational branch of the Chinese Artists Association of Hong Kong (Barwo), providing professional training in Cantonese opera. The Academy is committed to nurturing the next generation of Cantonese opera artists and fostering the continued development of the art form.²² In response to market needs, the Academy restructured its curriculum in 2009 and launched a four-year Youth Training Programme for Cantonese Opera Performers, admitting students aged 13 to 20. In addition, the academy offers a skill enhancement programme aimed at improving the performance skills of current Cantonese opera actors. Since its establishment in 2009, the Course for Young Cantonese Opera Performers has graduated six cohorts of students. Upon graduation, students can either sit for exams to enter the “Yau Ma Tei Cantonese Opera Young Talent Showcase” or continue their studies at the Cantonese Opera School of the Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts. Alternatively, graduates may directly join Cantonese opera troupes, where they can continue learning while performing. According to the programme director, Mr. Lui Hung-kwong, more than 50% of the six graduating cohorts have gone on to become professional or semi-professional Cantonese opera performers. When new students enroll, they are typically grouped according to the traditional roles of *sheng* and *dan* performers. After an initial period of learning the basics, students who possess certain physical advantages, such as height advantages or vocal talents, or express a preference, may be trained in other roles, such as female students being trained in *sheng*. The academy offers courses in singing, basic skills, acrobatic moves, weaponry skills, and acting, primarily categorized by the male and female roles. However, specialized acting skills are taught during rehearsals, where teaching is tailored to each student's abilities. Each year, in July or August, there is a student showcase performance at the Ko Shan Theatre, where most performances are presented in the form of excerpts. The selected repertoire is based on the students'

skill levels, and after consultations with the students and instructors, suitable pieces are chosen. During this process, some students with a plumper physique may be better suited for playing *chou*, while others with a hoarse or gruff voice might be assigned to play bearded *laosheng*. If a student is interested in a specific type of performance, they may be taught specialized skills by a team of instructors consisting of Mr Liu Kwok-sum, Ms Chan Ka-ming, Ms Chan Wing-yee and Ms Lam Po-chu. They would rehearse corresponding pieces such as *Liulang Reprimands His Son*, *The Orphan of the Zhao's*, *Snatching the Flute*, *Catch Zhang Sanlang Alive*, *The Second Wife Spares the First Son*, *Diao Chan Worshipping the Moon — Expressing Loyalty*, *Chastising the Princess*, *Death of a Loyal Warrior — Killing His Own Son*. Students who already have a foundation in physical conditioning or martial arts may develop into roles requiring these skills, such as *xiaowu* or *wusheng* roles. Special practice sessions are arranged, with martial arts techniques taught by Mr. Lui Hung-kwong and other instructors, including those who have served as martial arts masters in troupes. Students also rehearse pieces like *The Outcast General*, *Splitting Mountains to Rescue Mother* and *The Lion's Pavilion*. There are also special training programmes funded by the Academy to allow outstanding students to continue their advanced training. For specific productions, renowned industry actors may be invited to provide specialized instruction, such as for *The Eighteen Transformations of Guanyin*. Graduates of the Course for Young Cantonese Opera Performers currently perform across professional troupes, covering a wide range of roles including *sheng*, *wu*, *laosheng*, *chou*, *zhengdan*, *huadan*, *gongjiao*, *jing*, and *chou*, demonstrating a well-rounded skill set.

3.3 Troupes Offering Cantonese Opera Courses for Children: Kim Sum and Sing Fai

In addition, other institutions that train professional Cantonese opera performers include Kim Sum Cantonese Opera Association and Sing Fai Cantonese Opera Promotion Association.

Founded by veteran *sheng* performer Ms. Leung Sum-yee, Kim Sum Cantonese Opera Association has been active in the field for 30 years as of 2024.²³ The troupe offers training courses for children, teenagers, and adults, including both professional and interest-based programmes. Children's classes are for beginners aged 6 to under 18, while youth classes are for those aged 15 to 25, or anyone aged 8 and above with some foundation. The curriculum covers vocal, foundation and acting training. Children's classes take place on Saturdays, while youth classes are held on Sundays, running through both the morning and afternoon. Students are not split by gender or role, and all members learn and rehearse together regardless of age. Additional courses are also occasionally offered in percussion, makeup, acrobatics and stylized movement. Students are also brought to theatres and bamboo theatres to observe live performances, with the goal of holistic training: "To provide well-rounded instruction in all the knowledge and techniques essential to Cantonese opera."²⁴

Leung, the Executive and Artistic Director remarked that there are few Cantonese opera idols in Hong Kong today. Many children are only interested in playing the refined lead roles in full traditional makeup and costume. As a result, many troupes and instructors tend to stage *sheng-dan* excerpt performances such as *Princess Changping: The Fragrant Sacrifice* and *Romance of the Phoenix Tower: Song of a Barbaric Land*. Typically, students only attend class once a week, so there is limited time for physical training. Few young people today are willing to endure the discomfort of head-binding or practise in

tall boots, making it rare to find students capable of performing physically demanding roles such as *xiaowu*. Occasionally, a particularly determined student who can withstand hardship emerges, and some of these have gone on to become professional performers.

The mission of the Kim Sum Cantonese Opera Association is to nurture the next generation of Cantonese opera performers and audiences. In recent years, student showcases by the children and youth classes have mostly featured well-known works by veteran artists, such as *Two Heroic Families*, *The Villain, the General and the Heroic Beauty*, *The Knight Errant's Adventure in the Palace*, *The Marshal's Marriage*, *Full Moon over Grand Realm*, *A Warring Couple*, *Beauty in Disguise*, and *Farewell, My Husband*. The adult classes, on the other hand, perform full-length productions such as *Fairy Honglun*, *Red Shoes Solves the Mystery Case*, and *Loyal to Love*. These longer productions allow students to become familiar with the complete backstage and onstage processes, easing the transition into professional performance. Moreover, full-length operas feature a broader range of roles, not only the Six Pillars, but also many secondary roles, providing more opportunities for students to rotate roles and accumulate stage experience.

Graduates of the Kim Sum Cantonese Opera Troupe who are now performing with professional troupes include female *wen-wusheng*, *daomadan*, *xiaowu*, and supporting *huadan*. Current trainees have also taken on roles such as *xiaohualian* and *choudan* and are assigned roles in accordance with the troupe's production needs.

Founded in 2003, the Sing Fai Cantonese Opera Promotion Association is committed to the study and promotion of traditional Cantonese opera, with the mission of nurturing future audiences and successors in the art. It became a registered charitable organization in May 2008. The Association offers training classes for children and youth, with beginner and intermediate children's classes held on Saturdays, and youth and advanced youth classes on Sundays. According to Chairperson Fong Suet-ying, these classes are divided into two levels based on ability rather than age; students may advance after mastering more complex techniques. The youngest current student is just two years old, while the oldest is 25. Most students begin by training in *sheng* or *dan* roles, and after voice changes during adolescence, they are reassigned to specific roles based on vocal and physical attributes. For instance, a boy who once played generals or imperial's sons-in-law may later be suited for *chousheng* and is encouraged to study videos of Leung Sing Poh as part of his tailored training for works like *Outcry in Governor Mei's Office*. Others develop a preference for *wusheng* and learn appropriate techniques and lines for operas such as *Returning to Shen Garden* and *Yang Jiye Strikes the Memorial Stele*. Some students are versatile enough to perform *xiaosheng*, *wusheng*, *laosheng*, and *hualian* roles, having played characters like the imperial consort's husband, Lu Deng, Xiao He, and Xiang Yu—with instructor Yeung Kin-wah even tailoring *The Qing Ding Pearl* specifically for one such student.

Chairperson Fong Suet-ying shared that she has written several Cantonese opera pieces suitable for youth performances, such as *Fighting for the Country*, in which she arranged for 100 children to appear on stage in the final scene to give as many students as possible the opportunity to perform. She also selects plays more appropriate for children and teenagers, assigning roles based on each student's level and characteristics. However, there are times when students are unwilling to accept their assigned roles, requiring repeated patient communication and coordination. For instance,

a female student once refused to perform in *Snatching the Flute*, as her parents also preferred their daughter not to take on the *caidan* role. Similarly, in the excerpt *Borrowing the Plantain Fan*, it was difficult to find students willing to portray Pigsy and the Bull Demon King, and at one point, the role of Monk was even performed in cross-dressing by a female student. To date, the Sing Fai Cantonese Opera Promotion Association has nurtured many students who have gone on to further their studies at the Academy for Performing Arts, become scriptwriters, or pursue research and performance in Cantonese music, truly ensuring that each student's talents are fully realized.

4 Source and Cultivation of Role-Specific Actors in Today's Cantonese Opera Troupes in Hong Kong

Currently, Cantonese opera troupes operating in Hong Kong face a shortage of supporting role performers beyond the core Six Pillars. It is not uncommon for secondary role actors or martial arts performers to perform in two productions in one evening. Even within the Six Pillars, there is a noticeable lack of new performers who can take on the roles of *chousheng* or *wusheng*. The suspension of performances during COVID-19 also led to a loss of talent. As the industry recovers, the need to nurture and replenish the next generation of performers has become increasingly pressing.

At present, most of the performers who take on roles other than *sheng* and *dan* come from several main sources:

One group includes graduates of training institutions who had already chosen their roles before formally entering the profession. As these performers received targeted training tailored to their chosen roles, including relevant skills, techniques, and theoretical knowledge, they were also given the opportunity to gain performance experience by appearing in excerpts or full-length plays during their studies. This solid foundation allows them to adapt more quickly to professional settings, establish a reputation, and secure stable performing opportunities and income, which in turn enables them to further refine their skills.

Another group consists of performers who entered the profession in the *sheng* or *dan* roles but, for various reasons, did not succeed in advancing. For livelihood reasons, they may shift to other roles. This transition is rarely easy, as their initial training did not cover the specific requirements of the new role. They often have to learn on the job, with guidance from senior performers or by taking adult courses to retrain. However, constraints such as time, energy, and income mean that their learning is often fragmented and focused only on immediate performance needs. While these skills may gradually accumulate, the lack of systematic training makes it difficult to build a strong foundation and achieve meaningful progress in the short term.

There are also supporting performers who have received only short-term training. Some of them, after gaining stage experience and building personal networks, may eventually move into specific roles. While they may have strong mimicry or adaptability skills, their technical foundation tends to be weak. As a result, their options for role specialization and the types of roles they can play remain limited, often confined to supporting parts.

In addition to local Hong Kong performers, there are also emerging artists from Guangdong and Guangxi who have received opera or martial arts training in their home provinces. These performers often have strong foundations in physical movement and

martial arts, but their vocal style and stage delivery may differ from local norms and preferences. How they integrate into Hong Kong troupes and win the recognition of local audiences and the box office is a subject worth further discussion.

5 Role Categorisation and Training of Students at the Cantonese Opera School of the Guangdong Vocational Academy of Art

The Cantonese Opera School of the Guangdong Vocational Academy of Art traces its origins to the Guangdong Cantonese Opera School and the Guangdong Dance School, both with a history spanning over half a century. The Guangdong Cantonese Opera School was founded in 1958 by Pak Kui-wing, known as the “supreme divo”, and resumed operation in 1971 under the leadership of Hung Sin Nui after a hiatus. In 2003, the school was relocated to Dali Town in Nanhai District, Foshan, and in 2012, it merged with the Guangdong Dance School to form the Guangdong Vocational College of Dance and Drama. In 2024, the institution was renamed the Guangdong Vocational Academy of Art.²⁵ The Cantonese Opera School currently offers two programmes: Cantonese opera performance and Cantonese opera music. The performance programme accepts students through three streams: three-year (for secondary school graduates), five-year (for junior secondary graduates), and eight-year (for primary school graduates) — all leading to a diploma.

Unlike the weekend training model of youth Cantonese opera programmes in Hong Kong, the Cantonese Opera School provides full-time vocational education, with students living on campus and attending classes from Monday to Friday. The youngest students at the Cantonese Opera School are as young as 12, while graduates are typically around 20 years of age. During their three- to eight-year full-time training in Cantonese opera performance, how students select their role and the nature of the training they receive are questions partially addressed in the school’s published eight-year integrated talent development programme.²⁶ In addition to general academic subjects, the curriculum includes core courses such as Basic Training (Years 1-4), Acrobatic Moves (Years 1-3), Stylised Movement (Years 1-4), Weaponry Techniques (Years 1-4), Vocal Technique (Years 1-7), Repertoire Studies (Years 3-5), and Xiqu Performance and Creative Practice (Years 6-7). Supplementary compulsory courses include Vocal Training (Years 1-2), Diction Training (Semester 1), Physical Conditioning (Semester 13), and Sight-Singing and Aural Skills (Year 2). In addition, elective extension courses are offered, such as Introduction to Xiqu Techniques (Year 3), History of Chinese Xiqu (Semester 14), Cantonese Opera Conventions (Semester 4), Xiqu Appreciation (Semester 13), and Cantonese Opera Structure (Semester 13). The final three academic years include integrated practice courses both on and off campus, culminating in a practicum placement during the final year. In this placement, students are assigned to professional Cantonese opera troupes with which the school collaborates, allowing them to gain hands-on performance experience. According to Vice President Wu Yun-fei, the Cantonese Opera School’s eight-year integrated programme admits 30 students at the age of 12 or 13. Upon admission, students are generally grouped by gender, males as *sheng* and females as *dan* role trainees, and begin with foundational courses such as Basic Training and Acrobatic Moves. By the third year, students have built a certain level of technical foundation, and male *sheng* have typically passed through the voice-change period and begun to develop stable vocal qualities. At this stage, they begin studying Cantonese opera repertoire. Through the process of learning repertoire and in consideration of each student’s individual characteristics and preferences, students begin to identify their roles during the three years of repertoire-focused training. In the years that follow, they continue to refine their skills and deepen their practical experience in their chosen

specialisation. The school also encourages students with the aptitude or interest to pursue less common roles. To support the transmission of these specialised roles, the school invites renowned performers from the industry to teach and assigns students specialising in rarer roles more prominent parts or a greater number of appearances in both on-campus and off-campus performances. In terms of internships and future employment, provincial and municipal professional troupes also tend to favour students trained in these specialised roles.

An example that supports Vice President Wu Yun-fei's remarks is post-2000 generation performer Mai Weiming, who now works with the Guangdong Cantonese Opera Troupe. A native of Shenzhen, Mai was admitted to the Cantonese Opera School in 2014. During a repertoire class taught by Liang Jianzhong, she volunteered to study *Snatching the Flute*, which marked the beginning of her training in the role of *caidan*. She later learnt the portrayal techniques of Lady Sun in *Picking Up the Jade Bracelet* under the tutelage of Sun Yiehong. While training and rehearsing, Mai discovered that she sang better in *pinghou* than in *zihou* and subsequently applied to the school to study *laodan* roles. The school arranged for veteran Li Hongtao, who has many years of experience performing *laodan* roles, to teach her *Yue Fei's Mother Tattoos*



Fundamental Skills Course at the Cantonese Opera School of the Guangdong Vocational Academy of Art (Photo by Huang Yue, 29 March 2024)



Fundamental Skills Course at the Cantonese Opera School of the Guangdong Vocational Academy of Art (Photo by Huang Yue, 29 March 2024)

Her Son. During the practical training of the 2019 Intermediate Class of Cantonese Opera Performance at Guangdong Cantonese Opera Theatre, Mai participated in the rehearsal and performance of the newly adapted mythological opera *Meeting on the Magpie Bridge*, where she portrayed the Queen Mother of the West. Her outstanding performance won acclaim from the audience. After graduation, she joined the Guangdong Cantonese Opera Troupe and now plays both *caidan* and *laodan* roles, performing prominent characters in a number of productions.²⁷

6 Recommendations for Strengthening Role Training in the Cantonese Opera Sector

In Hong Kong, *sheng-dan* repertoire dominates the performance market, while the performing arts of other roles are gradually fading. This calls for joint efforts from the Cantonese opera sector, government bodies, and the general public to preserve the art form. Notable initiatives include the “Wu Sheng Showcase” of the Chinese Xiqu Festival, Spring Glory Cantonese Opera Workshop’s “Showcase of Four Major Roles in Cantonese Opera”, and Euphonia’s “Transmission, Support, and Guidance”. However, the preservation of roles is a long-term endeavour that requires ongoing support and commitment. One exemplary initiative worth highlighting is “The Splendour of Cantonese Opera - Showcase of Guangdong Xiqu Roles”.

“The Splendour of Cantonese Opera” is a series of performances and academic seminars organised by the Department of Culture and Tourism of Guangdong Province and hosted by the Guangdong Art Institute. It was first held in 2015 with the theme of “The Splendour of Cantonese Opera - Exchange Performance of Classic Excerpts from Cantonese Opera and Regional Theatres of the Province”. At the 2017 seminar, Lai Hanyan, a first-class national playwright, suggested, “Theatre practitioners should know how to create focus and organise events for various operatic genres, and it is worthwhile to rank notable local actors behind closed doors, such as the Top Four *Dan* and the Top Four *Sheng* of Leizhou opera, and the Top Four *Dan* and Top Four *Sheng* of Zhanjiang Cantonese opera, and so on”.²⁸ In 2019, “The Splendour of Cantonese Opera” evolved into a Guangdong Xiqu role exhibition and competition. It has been held annually since, featuring two roles each year on a three-year cycle. Through these competitions, performers of various *xiqu* roles receive training, and exchanges and enhancement across different operatic genres are encouraged.²⁹ In 2019, the roles of *qingyi* and *chou* were featured, with 40 performers competing. Following four performances over three days, the “Top 10 *Qingyi*” and “Top 10 *Chou*” were selected through on-site scoring by nine senior industry experts. In subsequent years, the roles of *jing* and *wudan* were highlighted in 2021, *xiaosheng* and *huadan* in 2022, and *laosheng*, *laodan*, *wusheng*, and *wudan* in 2024—all of which were showcased and judged through competition.

“The Splendour of Cantonese Opera - Guangdong Xiqu Role Showcase” is a major event organised by the provincial cultural authority and presented by an arts research institute. It is widely recognised by the government, the industry, and audiences alike. The accolades awarded through this event carry significant weight in an actor’s artistic career and serve as meaningful recognition for performing troupes. This recognition motivates performers to refine their role-specific artistry, with some even venture beyond their original specialisations. For example, Li Weichong, originally trained in the *sheng* role, delivered a cross-role performance in *Li Kui Visits His Mother* and won first place in the *jing* category in the 2021 edition of “The Splendour of

Cantonese Opera.”³⁰

The ecology of the Cantonese opera industry and the organizational structures of opera troupes in Hong Kong differ significantly from those in Guangdong. The Guangdong model – by fostering greater intrinsic motivation among performers, encouraging the acquisition of role-type-specific skills, and enhancing enthusiasm through competition – offers valuable insights for Hong Kong. Such competitions could work best if they are initiated and organised by the Chinese Artists Association of Hong Kong. It would also be ideal if the competition is organised and promoted according to different role types. Hong Kong Cantonese opera performers should be encouraged to participate either individually or as troupe members. It will further enhance the fairness and credibility of the competitions if funding is sought through the Hong Kong Arts Development Council. Should the events prove successful over one or two editions and the operational mechanisms become well-established, an under-18 youth division could be introduced to encourage the next generation of performers to engage with role types beyond *sheng* and *dan*, in the hope of incorporating these role types into their curriculum.

Moreover, given the high cost of land in Hong Kong, the long-standing shortage of rehearsal venues poses a significant challenge. For performers of role types that typically involve less stage time and lower remuneration than *sheng* and *dan*, securing affordable rehearsal space is even more difficult. Some roles, such as *xiaowu*, require specific training in techniques like *gaotai manzi*, which require rehearsal rooms equipped with safety padding and sufficient ceiling height for throwing and catching props. These requirements often cannot be met by typical residential conversions. It is therefore recommended that the Xiqu Centre in the West Kowloon Cultural District or venues under the Leisure and Cultural Services Department offer rehearsal spaces equipped to meet the practice needs of these role types, with preferential rental arrangements for the Cantonese opera sector, to help alleviate the lack of training facilities for these specialised roles.

The recent passing of the three great masters has deepened our awareness of the importance of preserving and passing on the art of role-type-based performance in Cantonese opera, prompting new reflections. However, as the saying goes, “haste makes waste.” – progress requires sustained and collective effort from across the sector, including practitioners, scholars, audiences, the media, and the government. As stated in Zengguang Xianwen: “Do good deeds regardless of what the future holds.” What a person or institution can do each time does make a difference. Every choice dictates the final outcome.

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