

# Hong Kong Xiqu Overview

2023

# 香港戲曲概述 2023

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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  
978-988-74613-9-5

**ISBN**  
978-988-74613-9-5

版次 2025 年 12 月初版

First published in December 2025

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# *Chinese Opera Festival 2023 and the Promotion of Opera from Other Provinces*

**Written by: Dr Wong Yuet (Cantonese Opera Researcher)**

Reviewing the recent history of promoting non-local Chinese opera in Hong Kong, the year of 2010 stands out as a pivotal moment. The Leisure and Cultural Services Department (LCSD) of the HKSAR decided to restructure its approach by holding a Chinese Opera Festival annually, introducing regional operatic genres from different parts of Chinese Mainland under a unified promotional framework – “By presenting different regional operas from the Mainland in a coordinated and systematic manner, the Festival aims to showcase the richness of traditional Chinese opera and to establish Hong Kong as a platform for presenting Chinese operatic art to the world.” In addition, two underrepresented operatic genres, Zhengzi Opera and Fujian’s Puxian Opera, were staged in Hong Kong for the first time in 2010, contributing to enhance their visibility and support ongoing preservation efforts. In an interview, Chung Ling-hoi, then Deputy Director of LCSD, stated: “The purpose of selecting ancient operatic genres to participate in the Hong Kong Chinese Opera Festival is not only to broaden the horizons of Hong Kong audiences, but also to provide artists and troupes with opportunities for survival and development. It represents a modest yet meaningful effort by Hong Kong to protect ancient Chinese operatic traditions.” He further emphasized that the long-term selection of rare regional operas from the Mainland would form part of the HKSAR Government’s efforts to promote Chinese opera and traditional culture internationally.<sup>1</sup> The regular, site-specific presentation of traditional operas from Chinese Mainland, particularly the debut of rare and ancient genres, established the distinctive character of the Chinese Opera Festival. Since then, the Festival, presented by LCSD, has served as a vital bridge for operatic exchange between the Mainland and Hong Kong, showcasing both the historical depth and contemporary vitality of Chinese opera, and has become one of Hong Kong’s major cultural hallmarks.



<sup>1</sup> Zhang Xiao Lan, “Four Major Changes Achieved at the 2010 Hong Kong Chinese Opera Festival”. *China Cultural Daily*, 17 July 2010. P.3.

## 1. Overview of the 2023 Chinese Opera Festival

After a three-year hiatus due to COVID-19, the Chinese Opera Festival resumed in 2023, presenting a carefully curated lineup of nine distinctive opera productions. The festival brought together high-caliber troupes and artists representing seven major opera genres from Chinese Mainland, alongside local Hong Kong Cantonese opera troupes, allowing different genres to shine side by side. It marked the largest-scale opera event in Hong Kong since the pandemic. “The festival aims to showcase outstanding opera genres and productions with unique characteristics, presenting Hong Kong audiences with the depth and diversity of Chinese opera, broadening their artistic horizons, and enhancing their appreciation of opera performance,” claimed the LCSD.<sup>2</sup>

The 2023 Chinese Opera Festival ran from June to September, with performances at multiple venues including the Hong Kong Cultural Centre, Ko Shan Theatre, Xiqu Centre in the West Kowloon Cultural District, and Victoria Park. Under the theme “Inheriting Classics, Embracing Integration Across Sectors,” the festival offered a variety of formats, such as stage performances, lectures, artist talks, Chinese opera film screenings, and art exhibitions, allowing audiences to gain a deeper understanding of both traditional and contemporary Chinese opera.

The opening performance took place at the Grand Theatre of the Hong Kong Cultural Centre, featuring the Beijing Opera Troupe’s presentation of the *qingyi* style by master Zhang Junqiu. Classic Zhang-style works such as *Match Maker for Successful Candidate*, *Jinshan Temple*, *The Broken Bridge*, *Leifeng Pagoda*, and *Poetry Contest* highlighted the elegance of the *qingyi* style, while productions like *Battling Ma Chao* and *Offering a Humble Apology from The General Reconciles with the Prime Minister* showcased the literary and martial strengths of Beijing opera.

Following this, the Suzhou Kunqu Opera Theatre of Jiangsu Province brought *The Peony Pavilion* - The Youth Version to Hong Kong for the fourth time. Led by the original cast members Shen Fengying and Yu Jiulin, the performance captivated audiences with flowing water sleeves and melodious tunes, immersing them in the Kunqu aesthetic of deep emotion and character. All three performances were sold out, with the theatre opening all three tiers of seating, which was a remarkable achievement.<sup>3</sup> Centre for the Safeguarding of Qu Opera of Henan presented productions such as *Wedding in a Snowstorm* and *Roll Up in a Mat*, featuring stories close to everyday life. The *gaotaiqu* (“high stage singing”) conveyed a rustic charm and humorous quality that resonated with audiences. Wuhan Han Opera Theatre presented *The Universal Pagoda*, showcasing the delicate performance techniques of Han opera, while the Zhejiang Wu Opera Art Research Centre highlighted Wu opera’s unique style of “performing literary plays with a martial style” in *Legend of the White Snake* through martial choreography and high-pitched singing. Sichuan Opera Troupe’s

<sup>2</sup> Response obtained by the author via email interview with the LCSD

<sup>3</sup> “2023 Chinese Opera Festival | Youth Version of *The Peony Pavilion* Brilliantly Performed in Hong Kong, Classic Revived!” Su Xun Shikong, 1 August 2023, <https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1773025676808275100&wfr=spider&for=pc>

*Legend of the White Snake*, staged at Ko Shan Theatre, featured innovative arrangements of “literary scenes first, martial scenes later,” incorporating face-changing, rolling staff, and other spectacular skills, earning thunderous applause from the audience. *A Chronicle of Marriages for Peace*, led by Chen Zhilin, two-time Mei Lanfang Award winner, depicted the historical tale of Liu Bei’s marriage proposal, demonstrating the subtle humor and depth of Sichuan opera.<sup>4</sup> In Yue opera, Shaoxing Xiaobaihua Yue Opera Troupe, Ningbo Xiaobaihua Yue Opera Troupe, and Zhao Workshop jointly presented the “Plum Blossom Award Winners in Yue Opera” Eleven Plum Blossom Award Winners, including Wu Fenghua and Zhao Zhigang, performed classics such as *Dream of the Red Chamber* and *The Butterfly Lovers*, leaving Hong Kong Yue opera fans enthralled.<sup>5</sup> Local Cantonese opera highlighted the *wusheng* art specialty. Renowned performers Liu Kwok Sum, Lee Lung, Yuen Siu-fai, and Wan Fai Yin demonstrated the posture and expressive charm of Cantonese opera martial roles through productions such as *Six States Installation of Minister* and *Fighting for the Commander’s Position*.

The festival concluded with “Bless This Land - Cantonese Opera Showcase under the Bamboo Theatre at Victoria Park” during the Mid-Autumn period, held from 23 September to 8 October for 16 consecutive days at Victoria Park Football Pitch. “This is meant to be a significant moment of rejoicing which signals the end of the pandemic in Hong Kong.”<sup>6</sup> LCSD erected a large opera tent reflecting Hong Kong’s cultural characteristics, inviting the Barwo to perform traditional Cantonese opera repertory including *The Imperial Emperor of Heaven Holding Court*, *Eight Immortals Bestowing Longevity*, *A Fairy Returns Her Son to the Mortal Father*, and *Promoting to High Officialdom*. Other repertory performances included *Breaking the Arrow to Become Sworn Brothers* and *Fan Lihua Executing Her Son*, demonstrating Cantonese opera’s rich cultural heritage. Local troupes such as the Dragon and Phoenix Cantonese Opera Troupe and Spring Glory Cantonese Opera Workshop presented traditional pieces like *A Comedy of Mistaken Heroes* and *Havoc at Guang Chang Long*, blending traditional opera tent culture with modern stage technology, showcasing the vitality of Cantonese opera.

## 2. The Current State of Promotion and Challenges of Opera from Other Provinces in Hong Kong

The 2023 Chinese Opera Festival deliberately brought together different versions of *Legend of the White Snake* performed in multiple opera genres, and organised an opera arts lecture entitled “*Cross-genre Interpretations of the Legend of the White Snake*.” This enabled audiences to gain a comprehensive understanding of

4 Xun, Chao, “Sichuan Opera Legend of the White Snake Shines at the ‘Chinese Opera Festival’; Hong Kong Audiences Applaud,” *Cover News*, 1 July 2023, <https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1770178432108158330&wfr=spider&for=pc>

5 “Returning Home, Looking Forward to the Next Encounter – Shaoxing Xiaobaihua’s Successful Participation in the ‘Hong Kong Chinese Opera Festival 2023’,” Shaoxing Xiaobaihua Yue Opera Troupe, 8 August 2023, [https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s?\\_\\_biz=MzAwNDIyMzgzMw==&mid=2650090494&idx=1&sn=377f20eca77092bd6db404de8ac7a223&chksm=832eadc8b45924de08c958084f8b87d7a90eaab7b7831d6f58da8a4cb2e13f2e1c6ef9d247e9&scene=27](https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s?__biz=MzAwNDIyMzgzMw==&mid=2650090494&idx=1&sn=377f20eca77092bd6db404de8ac7a223&chksm=832eadc8b45924de08c958084f8b87d7a90eaab7b7831d6f58da8a4cb2e13f2e1c6ef9d247e9&scene=27)

6 Chinese Opera Festival 2023 Website, <https://www.cof.gov.hk/2023/sc/about.html>

how the same narrative is interpreted across different genres. At the same time, such cross-genre presentations built around a shared theme facilitated exchange and mutual learning among opera genres, contributing to the development of the local opera scene. Many audience members who attended the opera arts lecture reported having purchased tickets for all three *Legend of the White Snake* performances. During the pre-performance artist talks, they repeatedly engaged in comparative discussions on aspects such as the male portrayal of Green Snake in Sichuan opera and the distinctive face-changing techniques, in comparison with the *Broken Bridge* scenes in the Beijing opera and Wu opera versions. This reflects the audience's interest in performance techniques, characterisation, and narrative arrangement when the same work is interpreted across different opera genres.

The event, “*A Stellar Meet featuring Plum Blossom Award Winners in Yue Opera*” brought together a number of renowned Yue opera performers, who collaborated across troupes to present classic Yue opera repertory. The opening performance of *Dream of the Red Chamber* was almost sold out, attracting a large number of local Yue opera enthusiasts in Hong Kong. Prior to the performances, the LCSD also received numerous enquiries from audiences in different regions regarding the Yue opera productions, with some indicating that they would travel to Hong Kong specifically to attend the performances.

The 2023 Chinese Opera Festival also featured a rich range of extension activities. Taking artist talks and opera lectures as examples, the festival invited well-known opera performers and experienced speakers to engage in dialogue and exchange with audiences, resulting in a high level of interaction. At the artist talk “*Evergreen Peony Pavilion*”, performers from the youth version of *The Peony Pavilion*, Yu Jiulin and Shen Fengying, shared their creative journeys and performance insights, and demonstrated selected singing excerpts on site. This allowed younger audience members to experience the appeal of *The Peony Pavilion* at close range, deepening their understanding of the performers, the work itself, and even the opera genre as a whole. Lecturers at the opera talks also introduced key points for appreciation in advance, lowering the threshold for attending performances and encouraging audiences to enter the theatre. One particularly touching scene involved a father bringing his son, who was under ten years old, to attend a lecture. The child followed Ms. Cheung Lai-chun's explanations attentively while reading the *Peony Pavilion* script in his hands. To help Hong Kong audiences better understand opera genres they encounter less frequently, such as Henan Qu opera, performing troupes not only provided explanations and introductions during artist talks but also arranged demonstrations of techniques or vocal styles. For instance, during the Henan Qu opera artist talk, Ms. Fang Suzhen demonstrated water-sleeve techniques, while Mr. Yang Shuaixue demonstrated the “laughing technique” from *Xu Ce Running to the City Wall*. These demonstrations enabled audiences to grasp the distinctive performance features of the genre more efficiently.

In order to attract younger audiences, the Chinese Opera Festival also made use of online platforms and social media as emerging multimedia channels, producing engaging promotional videos and sharing visual quotations drawn from lectures and artist talks. These efforts sought to engage young people with Chinese opera from multiple angles. In addition, “*Bless This Land – Cantonese*

Opera Showcase under the Bamboo Theatre at Victoria Park” organised a series of student matinees and guided appreciation activities, aiming to cultivate younger generations’ interest in traditional opera and inject new vitality into the art form.

According to the LCSD, following the resumption of the Chinese Opera Festival in 2023 after the pandemic, ticket sales for performances by opera genres from other provinces were encouraging. These productions attracted not only local audiences but also visitors from other regions, and received highly positive audience feedback. This fully demonstrated the appeal of different opera genres and promoted cultural exchange and integration. Many audience members gained a deeper understanding and appreciation of regional opera genres through these performances and shared their reflections online, such as: “What I gained from this theatre-going experience was not only great spiritual enjoyment, but also continuous reflection on Cantonese opera”; “This is certainly not something every genre or troupe can achieve, but it is another outstanding production by Wu opera after *The World’s First Bridge*, namely *Mu Guiying Breaks the Heavenly Gate Formation*”; and “Qu opera helped me understand why opera is so moving—only when joy is sung from the heart can it become a living, breathing work of art with its own unique character.”<sup>7</sup>

Beyond the Chinese Opera Festival, the LCSD’s Audience Building Office, Venue Partnership Scheme, and Intangible Cultural Heritage Office have also made sustained efforts to promote opera culture. Through various activities and programmes, they seek to attract a broader audience, provide opportunities for the public to experience and appreciate different types of opera performances, and encourage community engagement and support for traditional culture, thereby laying a foundation for the promotion of Chinese culture.

As an international city where Chinese and Western cultures converge, Hong Kong’s operatic ecology can be characterised as one in which local Cantonese opera plays a leading role, supplemented by opera genres from other provinces. The promotion of opera from other provinces in Hong Kong relies largely on major platforms such as the Chinese Opera Festival, and tangible results have already been observed. Nevertheless, a number of challenges remain, as outlined below.

## 2.1 Linguistic and Cultural Barriers to Audience Understanding

Opera genres from other provinces are mostly performed in non-Cantonese dialects. As Cantonese is the primary language of Hong Kong audiences, difficulties in understanding dialogue and sung text, such as Suzhou dialect in Kunqu or the Shengzhou dialect in Yue opera, are inevitable. Even when performances are accompanied by Chinese and English surtitles, many expressions with strong local cultural connotations and specialised linguistic forms are difficult to convey accurately in Chinese, let alone in English. Given constraints of space and timing, surtitles often struggle to fully communicate the

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<sup>7</sup> Response obtained by the author via email interview with the LCSD

artistic essence and cultural depth of opera, which in turn affects the audience's viewing experience and reduces their willingness to go for performances by non-local opera genres.

In addition, performance narratives, dialogue, and vocal styles in opera from other provinces frequently incorporate regional folk symbols or historical allusions specific to the genre's place of origin. While such elements pose no difficulty for local audiences in their home regions, Hong Kong audiences often lack the relevant cultural background and therefore find it difficult to resonate with them. To fully understand such performances, audiences are required to undertake preparatory work, such as searching for background information online or attending pre-performance talks and lectures organised by the troupes. Compared with local opera genres, this demands greater time and effort and effectively increases the cost of theatre-going.

Although the core aesthetic principles of Chinese opera are broadly shared, the modes of presentation vary considerably across genres. Hong Kong audiences, who are accustomed to the performance style and narrative pacing of Cantonese opera, often approach the features of non-local genres with a sense of novelty, focusing on spectacular elements such as face-changing or fire-breathing. By contrast, they tend to show less patience for more stylised performance conventions, such as the high-pitched singing of Bangzi opera or the refined *shuimo* vocal style of Kunqu, resulting in a relatively low level of acceptance.

## 2.2 Constraints of the Performance Ecology

The opera audience in Hong Kong is predominantly middle-aged and elderly, with comparatively limited interest among younger demographics. This is not a challenge faced only by opera from other provinces – Cantonese opera encounters similar issues. However, as a local representative of intangible cultural heritage, Cantonese opera benefits from sustained government support and therefore maintains a relatively stable audience base. In contrast, opera genres from other provinces largely rely on short-term festivals and showcases, such as arts festivals or opera festivals, and lack mechanisms for long-term residency or touring in Hong Kong. Performances are often one-off or sporadic, making it difficult to cultivate a stable audience.

Reliance on short-term festival presentations also means that non-local opera troupes must bear relatively high travel and venue costs, leading to higher ticket prices. For some genres, large-scale repertory works, such as Kunqu productions of *The Peony Pavilion* or *The Palace of Eternal Life*, require performances over several consecutive days, resulting in even higher package ticket prices. Such costs may be beyond the means of ordinary households, further diminishing audiences' willingness to attend.

Moreover, compared with Cantonese opera, where leading *sheng* and *dan* performers often enjoy strong fan followings, opera genres from other provinces lack this advantage in Hong Kong. They also lack fan associations with close ties to local audiences, resulting in limited box-office support and fewer effective promotional channels.

### 3. Strategies for Promoting Opera from Other Provinces in Hong Kong and Reducing Audience Unfamiliarity

In response to the barriers to audience understanding caused by linguistic and cultural differences, several approaches may be adopted to facilitate greater accessibility to opera from other provinces.

#### 3.1 Expanding Surtitles Options and Introducing Explanatory Annotations

Improvements may be made to the current surtitle system by converting the simplified Chinese surtitles commonly provided by visiting opera troupes into traditional Chinese, and by offering Cantonese, Putonghua, and English surtitles simultaneously. This would allow local audiences to select surtitles according to their linguistic preferences, thereby facilitating comprehension of sung lyrics and spoken dialogue.

In addition, explanatory annotations could be incorporated into the surtitles to clarify region-specific cultural references appearing in the performances. Such annotations would help audiences better understand the cultural meanings embedded in the works. In particular, English surtitles could adopt a more literal translation approach supplemented with brief explanatory notes, which would help reduce cultural misinterpretation in cross-cultural transmission.<sup>8</sup>

#### 3.2 Lowering the Threshold through Digital Media

Virtual reality (VR) and other digital technologies can be developed to present background information on opera genres, including their historical development, regional cultural contexts, and distinctive performance conventions. These digital resources could be made available prior to performances to help audiences acquire foundational knowledge.

Such content could also be repurposed into short-form videos for dissemination on social media platforms, and integrated into the Chinese Opera Festival website, individual opera pages, promotional materials, and ticketing platforms via QR codes. This allows prospective audiences to access preparatory information conveniently, reducing the need for extensive independent research before attending performances and potentially enhancing purchase motivation of the tickets.

However, attention must be paid to the risks of “fragmentation” inherent in new media dissemination. While digital media enhances cross-cultural communication and expands the reach of traditional performing arts, it may also lead to superficial engagement or fragmented understanding. As noted by Song Junhua, new media functions as a “double-edged sword”: while it enhances

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<sup>8</sup> Wang Qunfeng, *A Study on the English Translation of Opera and Film Subtitles: Qinqiang Opera, Xiqu* Zhijia, no. 1 (2018), pp. 12–13.

the transnational dissemination of intangible cultural heritage, it also risks fragmenting meaning and diluting cultural depth if not used thoughtfully.<sup>9</sup>

### 3.3 Combining Audience Attraction with Gradual Cultural Immersion

On social media platforms, visually striking elements such as face-changing or fire-breathing can be used to attract attention and drive traffic. Subsequently, more structured and in-depth content, such as explanations of stylised performance techniques, can be gradually introduced. Initiatives such as hashtags like *#LearningKunquWaterSleeves* or *#WhoseHighPitchIsHigher* could encourage user-generated participation and interaction, allowing younger audiences to engage with opera in an accessible and playful manner. Through this approach of combining immediate visual appeal with progressive cultural immersion, audiences may gradually become familiar with the conventions and aesthetics of opera from other provinces, fostering deeper appreciation and long-term interest.

## 4. Addressing Environmental Constraints in the Promotion of Opera from Other Provinces in Hong Kong

The challenges faced by opera from other provinces in Hong Kong as a result of environmental constraints are complex and require long-term, multi-dimensional efforts to address. As the primary agents of performance, opera troupes can undertake a number of initiatives to enhance their visibility, broaden their audience base, and strengthen their presence in Hong Kong.

### 4.1 Leveraging the Strength of Chambers of Commerce and Hometown Associations

The most fundamental audience base for opera from other provinces in Hong Kong consists of communities that share the same linguistic and cultural origins as the genres themselves. These communities are often organised through chambers of commerce, hometown associations, and clan associations, which play a key role in maintaining emotional and cultural ties with their places of origin through festive activities, return visits, and community networking. “Cultural identity theory suggests that identity is multifaceted and dynamic, shaped not only by individual experience but also by broader social and political contexts.”<sup>10</sup>

For this reason, performances by home-region opera troupes often hold strong emotional significance for overseas or migrant communities. When such troupes visit Hong Kong, they are typically met with enthusiastic support

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<sup>9</sup> Song Junhua, “How the ‘Going Global’ of Intangible Cultural Heritage Can Deepen Exchanges and Mutual Learning among Civilizations,” *People’s Tribune*, no. 11 (2024), pp. 100–103.

<sup>10</sup> Zheng, Wanqing and Lai, Xiyuan, “The Dilemma of Identity: An Analysis of Multiple Identities among Hong Kong Residents,” *Contemporary Hong Kong and Macao Studies*, no. 1 (2017), pp. 195–222.

from compatriot associations, which actively facilitate publicity, audience mobilisation, and logistical coordination. In order to maintain ties with their place of origin and strengthen cultural identification among Hong Kong compatriots, performances by hometown opera troupes in Hong Kong have long been regarded as highly significant cultural events within these communities. Local supporters often spare no effort in promoting the development of their native operatic traditions and in facilitating visiting performances. A notable example is the first visit of the Ningbo Shaoxing Xiaobaihua Yue Opera Troupe to Hong Kong in 1990, which was initiated through the efforts of Ms. Kong Aiju, then chairperson of the Hong Kong Yue Opera Enthusiasts' Association. She actively coordinated between the two regions, assisted Ningbo performers in finding master instructors, refining stage names, and selecting repertoires, and personally contributed HKD 60,000 toward the troupe's costumes. Together with other prominent figures in Hong Kong, she also helped raise additional funds to support the troupe's visit.<sup>11</sup>



Coverage in Ningbo Daily, April 1990 (Image source: Haishu District Bureau of Culture, Radio, Television, Tourism and Sports, Ningbo).

During the 2023 Chinese Opera Festival, the strong support provided by hometown associations to the Yue Opera troupe was particularly evident. When the Shaoxing Xiaobaihua Yue Opera Troupe arrived in Hong Kong late at night, members of the Shaoxing Association in Hong Kong were still present to welcome them. The association continued to offer extensive assistance before and after the performances, actively participating in publicity efforts, audience outreach, and the organisation of autograph sessions. All three tiers of seating at the Hong Kong Cultural Centre Theatre were opened for sale, and the performances ultimately played to full houses, which is an achievement to which the contribution of hometown associations was indispensable. In media interviews, representatives of the Shaoxing Xiaobaihua Yue Opera Troupe repeatedly expressed their gratitude, noting that over more than thirty years and thirteen visits to Hong Kong, their success had relied not only on the support of

11 Ningbo-Shaoxing Yue Opera Xiaobaihua Sets Off for Hong Kong, Haishu District Bureau of Culture, Radio, Television, Tourism and Sports, Ningbo, 4 August 2023.

local audiences but also on the sustained assistance of the Shaoxing Association in Hong Kong and the Hong Kong Shanghai Opera Art Association.<sup>12</sup>

“Welcoming Spring with Fujian Gaojia Opera”, presented as part of the 2023–24 Eastern District Cultural Festival and organised by the Hong Kong Federation of Fujian Associations in collaboration with the Home Affairs Department and the Eastern District Office, invited the Quanzhou Gaojia Opera Heritage Centre to perform in Hong Kong. This initiative represented one of the most comprehensive showcases of Gaojia Opera works to date and highlighted the strong organisational capacity of the Fujian community.<sup>13</sup> By mobilising migrant networks and strengthening cooperation with hometown and commercial associations, the organisers emphasised themes such as “shared hometown identity” and “the promotion of regional customs” in their publicity strategies. This approach effectively resonated with Hong Kong residents of Fujian origin and proved to be an effective means of promoting opera from other provinces in Hong Kong.

## 4.2 Small Troupes Operating in a Lightweight Mode

At the Xiqu Centre Teahouse Theatre in West Kowloon, the Teahouse Rising Star Troupe promotes and popularizes Cantonese opera to visiting tourists through 90-minute small theatre performances.<sup>14</sup> One successful production, the *Imperial Decree*, toured Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and other cities, receiving high praise from local audiences, media, and critics.<sup>15</sup> The success of the production lies not only in its innovative approach to creation and performance within a traditional framework, but also in its small scale, short duration, few actors, and low cost, which makes it one of the performances that can be brought abroad. In recent years, Chaozhou opera has also adopted a model of a smaller scale, performing in collaboration with local cultural tourism venues such as scenic spots, museums, and community centres, achieving very positive results.<sup>16</sup> Provincial troupes intending to develop long-term in Hong Kong could consider these models by forming “two lead actors + local musicians” lightweight teams. For traditional full-length plays that best represent the characteristics of the genre, troupes can select short excerpts with fewer actors and simpler staging for regular performances in Hong Kong. Later, they may also create new works suited to this small-theatre format. Operating in a lightweight setup with a small-theatre approach and low ticket prices helps maintain the frequency of

12 “Polishing the Golden Name Card of Yue Opera! Shaoxing Xiaobaihua’s Charms Bloom on the Hong Kong Stage,” *Xinhua Daily Telegraph*, 6 August 2023, <https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1773461758586945415&wfr=spider&for=pc>

13 “Quanzhou Culture Shines on the Pearl of the Orient: Gaojia Opera Invited to Participate in the Chinese Opera Festival in Hong Kong,” *Quanzhou Evening News and Southeast Media*, in collaboration with the Quanzhou Municipal Bureau of Culture, Radio, Television and Tourism, 6 February 2024, [https://wlt.fujian.gov.cn/wldt/sxdt/202402/t20240206\\_6393170.htm](https://wlt.fujian.gov.cn/wldt/sxdt/202402/t20240206_6393170.htm)

14 Wang, Tianyi, “Falling in Love with Cantonese Opera While Having Tea,” *Guangming Online*, 18 April 2025, <https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1829703868621130036&wfr=spider&for=pc>

15 Kang, Xue, *The “Grand” Significance of Small-Theatre Opera: A Review of the Cantonese Opera Imperial Decree*, Jinan Cultural Centre (Jinan Institute of Artistic Creation), 22 January 2025, [https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s?\\_\\_biz=MzAwOTAyMjUyMw==&mid=2650274724&idx=3&sn=39e71c8c1ad14c6bda581bf693a94948&chksm=82522a4c9131fa44f9450958799f80c1d4414f483c0ca547fe6f9d28d7071b2d27211e4da9cd&scene=27](https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s?__biz=MzAwOTAyMjUyMw==&mid=2650274724&idx=3&sn=39e71c8c1ad14c6bda581bf693a94948&chksm=82522a4c9131fa44f9450958799f80c1d4414f483c0ca547fe6f9d28d7071b2d27211e4da9cd&scene=27).

16 Cai, Yehua, “Chen Lianzhong: Chaozhou Opera Is a Lifelong Love,” *Jieyang Daily*, Jieyang News Network, 30 December 2020, <https://www.jynews.net/newsWeb/toDetail?desId=126283>.

performances, cultivate a stable audience base, and reduce the cost of cultural promotion.

#### 4.3 Developing Derivative Products

The development of derivative products in Chinese opera has evolved from printed materials and commercial performances in the Ming and Qing dynasties, such as published scripts and court opera paintings, to technological innovations in the Republican era, including opera recordings and films, and further into contemporary digital and IP-based development, such as CDs, VCDs, DVDs, and merchandise related to opera performers. These forms have consistently kept pace with social demand and technological change. Since the 21st century, opera-related derivative products have increasingly shifted toward digitalisation, with rapid growth in digital cultural products, virtual performances, the integration of opera with designer toys, livestreamed opera, and short-form video dissemination. In October 2024, the Sichuan Academy of Arts released the *Sichuan Opera Vinyl Record Collection* as a digital collectible in the form of 3D blind boxes. All 8,000 units sold out within half a month, generating revenue of RMB 200,000. On 17 April 2025, the institute launched another digital cultural product, *Sichuan Opera Facial Masks: A Hundred Faces*, which sold out all 8,000 units within just 16 minutes, generating RMB 240,000 in sales.<sup>17</sup> Developing and marketing opera-related derivative products not only increases troupe income and reduces the operational costs of live performances, but also helps ensure that traditional opera remains viable amid ongoing media and technological transformation.



*The Cultural and Creative Product Sichuan Opera Facial Masks: A Hundred Faces* (Source: Sichuan Academy of Arts)

<sup>17</sup> “Sichuan Arts Research Institute Achieves New Results in the Development of Digital Cultural Products for Sichuan Opera,” Science and Education Division, Ministry of Culture and Tourism of the People’s Republic of China, 30 June 2025, [https://www.mct.gov.cn/preview/special/kygz/9550/202507/t20250721\\_961309.htm](https://www.mct.gov.cn/preview/special/kygz/9550/202507/t20250721_961309.htm)

## 4.4 Joint Performances with Cantonese Opera

From 3 to 5 August 2018, “A Tale of Two Genres - Xiqin Opera and Traditional Cantonese Opera” presented at the Hong Kong Xiqu Centre featured two genres sharing the same stage through related repertory.<sup>18</sup> This innovative format allowed audiences to experience the historical kinship between Xiqin Opera and ancient-style Cantonese opera firsthand.<sup>19</sup> Although Xiqin Opera, listed in 2021 as an endangered genre in Guangdong, is relatively little known in Hong Kong, the performances still achieved strong attendance. This success can be attributed in part to the box-office appeal of renowned Cantonese opera performers such as Law Ka-ying, Wan Fai Yin, and Sun Kim-long, as well as to promotional efforts including artist talks organised by the Leisure and Cultural Services Department. The experience of this joint production offers a valuable model: provincial opera genres can collaborate with Cantonese opera by presenting paired programmes in which each genre performs either complementary excerpts or full-length works. Such collaboration allows provincial opera to benefit from Cantonese opera’s established audience base and local appeal, while also fostering artistic exchange and mutual learning between different operatic traditions.

## 5 Establishing More Diversified and Sustainable Performance Mechanisms for Regional Opera

As an international city, Hong Kong is widely recognised for its cultural inclusiveness, and the Hong Kong government has long supported the promotion of diverse cultures and traditional performing arts. Since the inaugural Chinese Opera Festival in 2010, the LCSD has invested substantial resources each year to build an international platform for Chinese opera, promoting the preservation of rare regional genres and enhancing their global visibility. The festival has attracted large numbers of overseas and non-local audiences annually. However, for local audiences, performances of regional operas remain relatively limited in both variety and regularity. At present, there is still considerable room for greater institutional support and coordination to enhance their long-term development.

### 5.1 Drawing on the “Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macau Cantonese Opera Day” Model to Promote Greater Bay Area Touring

Using the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macau Greater Bay Area as a core platform, the establishment of a regional touring network would help address many of the practical difficulties faced by regional opera troupes when performing in Hong Kong, such as visa procedures and logistical constraints on transporting props and costumes. Such a touring mechanism would also leverage regional cultural integration to build a collaborative performance network across the Greater Bay Area. This would reduce operational costs, streamline administrative processes, and transform regional opera from an occasional “guest performance” into an integral component of the area’s multicultural artistic ecosystem.

18 Chinese Opera Festival 2018 official website, Hong Kong, <https://www.cof.gov.hk/2018/sc/xiqin.html>

19 Zhong, Zheping. “Xiqin Opera and Cantonese Opera: Using Ancient Singing Styles to Connect Hong Kong.” *Nanguo Hongdou*, no. 5, 2018, pp. 14–18.

## 5.2 Experimenting with Localized Adaptations of Hong Kong Narratives

Local stories naturally resonate more strongly with local audiences. Audiences are more willing to engage when narratives are rooted in familiar social and cultural contexts even when the performance form or language may be unfamiliar. Regional opera troupes could therefore collaborate with Hong Kong playwrights to adapt local stories, such as those related to Kowloon Walled City, Cheung Po Tsai, or Tung Wah charitable history, into operatic productions. Through such “localized storytelling,” regional opera can be introduced to audiences in a more accessible and relatable manner, allowing cultural exchange to take place organically.

## 5.3 Establishing Long-Term Residency and Support Mechanisms

While short-term festivals help raise visibility, long-term sustainability requires institutional support. The costs of living, rehearsal venues, and performance spaces in Hong Kong remain high, although small-scale troupes are able to operate in a lightweight and flexible manner as mentioned. Establishing funding schemes akin to an “Incubation Programme for Regional Opera” would help emerging troupes cover initial costs and develop stable performance schedules. With sustained support, regional opera could gradually move beyond occasional festival appearances and become an integral part of Hong Kong’s regular cultural landscape.

## 5.4 Integrating Regional Opera into Education Systems

As with Cantonese opera, cultivating future audiences for regional opera must begin with education. Drawing on existing initiatives such as “Cantonese Opera in Schools,” educational authorities could introduce regional opera content into primary and secondary curricula, enabling students to gain foundational knowledge of different regional traditions. Activities such as “Chinese Opera Map” workshops, facial-painting sessions, and hands-on experiences with traditional instruments can foster early interest and cultural awareness. At the tertiary level, support may be extended to student societies and research groups focusing on regional opera, such as “Chinese Opera Comparative Studies Societies”, fostering critical appreciation and scholarly engagement with the art form. Such initiatives would also encourage research into topics like the historical development of regional operas in Hong Kong, thereby promoting deeper academic inquiry and strengthening the integration of artistic practice with scholarly study.

## Conclusion

The Chinese Opera Festival not only presents a wide range of classic repertoires but also creates a platform for dialogue and innovation among regional cultures. Through the guidance of master artists, the presentation of virtuoso techniques,

and the dissemination of scholarly knowledge, the festival enables Hong Kong audiences to appreciate the depth and richness of Chinese opera while offering a model for the contemporary transmission and development of traditional culture. Traditional opera serves as a bridge between historical memory and modern aesthetic sensibilities, while regional operas, through their cross-regional and cross-cultural circulation, further expand the scope of cultural exchange across communities and territories. As scholars have noted, “the cross-cultural transmission of local opera inevitably encounters varying degrees of cultural tension and resistance. However, only by objectively assessing both its strengths and limitations, and by formulating targeted and systematic strategies, can new opportunities for sustainable development be created.”<sup>20</sup> In the Hong Kong context, the promotion of regional opera hinges on establishing a multi-dimensional framework encompassing cultural translation, community cultivation, art-form innovation, cost management, and institutional support. Such an approach not only respects the intrinsic characteristics of individual operatic genres but also fosters meaningful dialogue with Hong Kong’s urban cultural fabric. Through coordinated efforts across sectors, regional opera can move beyond episodic presentation and gradually take root as a dynamic and enduring component of the city’s cultural life.

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20 Tan, Zhijian. “Cross-Cultural Transmission Challenges and Strategic Analysis of Regional Opera under the ‘Belt and Road’ Perspective.” *Theatre Home*, no. 12, 2023, pp. 18–20.