

Hong Kong Xiqu Overview

2023

香港戲曲概述 2023

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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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Attempting Cantonese Opera Research and Innovation: The Hong Kong Jockey Club Mao Chun Fai Innovative Works in Theatre Scheme

Written by: Dr. Sammi Yu (Director of The Hong Kong Jockey Club Mao Chun Fai Innovative Works in Theatre Scheme)

Project Background

Sponsored by The Hong Kong Jockey Club Charities Trust and presented by the Hong Kong & Macau Intangible Cultural Heritage Research Centre, “The Hong Kong Jockey Club Mao Chun Fai Innovative Works in Theatre Scheme” is officially launched on May 13, 2022 and has received widespread attention locally and abroad. The scheme is a three-year research and creation project aimed at exploring creativity in Cantonese opera. Through Mao Chun-fai’s extensive knowledge of directing, creation, and talent cultivation, along with his rich experience in Chinese and Western performance practices, the project will mark a new chapter in the development of traditional Cantonese opera. The scheme will cultivate a new generation of well-rounded Cantonese opera talents, while presenting innovative creations that resonate with contemporary audiences and expand the Cantonese opera audience base, allowing this intangible cultural heritage to continue to grow and develop.

To explore career path options for the new generation of Cantonese opera performers, Professor Mao Chun-fai suggested two research directions for this project. The first is to “reimagine classics”, which aims to explore how Cantonese opera can further evolve through its traditions and to introduce its artistic essence to new audiences with modernised performance techniques. The second direction is to explore “cross-border innovation”. A seasoned professional in both Chinese and foreign art cultures, Professor Mao Chun-fai is able to combine the essence of both worlds to explore innovative possibilities through bold attempts. *I am Waiting for You, Love* is an experiment of the first direction, and *The Girl Who Dreams to Save the World* is an example of exploration of the second direction.

Project Philosophy

The scheme launched with its first talk, titled “Let Hong Kong Shine with Innovation in Theatre Works.” In the talk, Professor Mao Chun-fai shared his

50 years of stage experience, which made him clearly aware of the necessary stages and unchanging facts about artistic creation—that is, to learn, practice, and develop. Professor Mao first started by sharing his thoughts on learning. He pointed out that no matter which art form, drama or opera, one needs to focus and put in effort to excel in it. Regardless of the learning method, a solid foundation will always be useful. Dramatic acting has its own fundamental skill set, and Chinese operatic performance requires different skills. For example, the basic singing, gestures, dialogue, and actions must be learned well. Understanding and being familiar with these skills is not enough. One must master them to have the ability to demonstrate the essence of the traditional art form. It is very difficult to train Cantonese opera talent in Hong Kong, but at the same time, there are many young people who also want to learn more and perform on stage. They all know they must learn and study, and that laying a solid foundation is vital to becoming a professional. I noticed that most young Cantonese opera actors nowadays are constantly learning and striving for improvement. This is a positive phenomenon that should not be dismissed.

In the second part of the talk, Professor Mao focused on practice. He pointed out that only through persistent practice and accumulation of experience can actors gradually reach a certain artistic level. No matter how hard the journey is, whether successful or unsuccessful, practising will teach actors to know themselves better and to seek improvement. Hong Kong's Cantonese opera has been revitalised since it was recognised as an intangible cultural heritage by UNESCO. Especially over the past 10 years, the HKSAR Government has invested substantial resources to provide the industry with opportunities to practice. In terms of hardware, there are the Yau Ma Tei Theatre, the Ko Shan Theatre and the Xiqu Centre of the West Kowloon Cultural District. In terms of software, through different schemes and performance funding from various organizations, young actors are offered an array of opportunities to practice, allowing them to accumulate experience in performing. However, experience is not just about quantity; quality matters too.

The future development of Cantonese opera was discussed during the last part of the talk. Professor Mao believes that only performances with vitality can be sustained, and one of the key factors of sustainability is creativity. Both inheriting and innovating art require creativity because it can affect content, form, technique, style, and more. Any successful performing artist will understand how important creativity is, as it allows them to truly enjoy the creative process. However, the development of Hong Kong Cantonese opera has been relatively dull and lacks creativity. Many actors rely on classic plays created by their predecessors as their main performance material, and new works that are presented occasionally are often short-lived and fail to become new classics. Some say it is impossible to recreate masterpieces by famous masters such as Yam Kim Fai, Pak Suet Sin, Fong Yim Fun, and Lam Kar-sing, but these famous actors are not playwrights. So what is the issue? Is it because Cantonese opera works cannot keep up with the times, and no one has presented new works that resonate with today's audiences? This is something the scheme must address. The question that needs to be asked is: "What kind of Cantonese opera stage do we need now?"

Professor Mao also shared some of his views. Nowadays, people's lifestyles and habits are very different. Technology takes the lead in our work and life. People cannot be separated from their mobile phones, computers, televisions, the Internet, etc. In addition, the world has been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic in the past few years. Live performances have been giving way, and performers even have to rely on technology in order to perform. This change led many people to say that technology will dominate the future of the performing arts. Professor Mao hopes that this will not become the case. He agrees that technology will bring many possibilities, but he also believes that art presented on stage, with the focus on people, cannot be lost. The theater is a space for physical communication between people, and performing arts are the best demonstration of this human instinct. Japanese director Tadashi Suzuki has proposed a theory of animal energy in theater to combat the problematic trend of "virtual" theatres.

If we recognise the value of theater, then what do we hope for the future of Cantonese opera? Should it serve as pure entertainment, or should we believe in the uniqueness of Cantonese opera among other Chinese operas and aim for achieving a higher artistic standard? Or should we make it an innovative performing art form that satisfies all audiences who are passionate about live theatre? Professor Mao shared his love and respect for Chinese opera, citing the influence of performances by renowned masters he admired since childhood, such as Pak Kui-wing, Luo Pinchao, and Cho Yau-wan of Cantonese opera, Ma Lianliang, Zhou Xinfang, and Qiu Shengrong of Peking opera, and Yuan Xuefen of Shanghai Yue opera. He believes that if Hong Kong's traditional Cantonese opera continues to captivate audiences, there will be room for this art form's sustainable development.

Professor Mao advocates for innovation and change in Cantonese opera, as today's audiences have diverse options and thus, different expectations. He argues that we need to see innovation in both form and content. There are many issues that warrant discussion regarding research and creation, and it is impossible to cover all these topics in an article. However, one key issue is that the idea that the value of Cantonese opera lies solely in tradition and should not be changed is misguided. We should build on the success of past masters such as Sit Kok-sin, Ma Si-tsang and Pak Kui-wing while boldly integrating cultural essences from both East and West. By honouring past legacies and adapting their spirit to innovate, we can create a bright future for Cantonese opera.

Project Objectives

"The Hong Kong Jockey Club Mao Chun Fai Innovative Works in Theatre Scheme" is designed to advance goals that Professor Mao believes are valuable and aligned with the current ecosystem of Cantonese opera in Hong Kong. First, promote the creativity of Cantonese opera. This traditional art form is worthy of continued research and exploration beyond regular performances. This project aims to unite a group of dedicated professionals in the industry to explore how to

elevate Cantonese opera. However, there must be a willingness to change some of the industry's habits and outdated practices that stifle artistic progress. This includes reluctance in paying extra effort and time to rehearse and improve. Second, the scheme emphasizes exploring innovation, which is crucial for the long-term development of Cantonese opera. Nowadays, people are exposed to a wide range of cross-cultural and interdisciplinary arts, which provide rich opportunities for innovation in Cantonese opera. Hong Kong, the hub of cultural exchange between the East and West, is uniquely positioned to nurture this creativity of merging cultures and creating a new look for Cantonese opera. Lastly, the scheme aims to highlight the societal role of Cantonese opera. If we truly value and respect Cantonese opera as part of Hong Kong's traditional culture, it is our responsibility to ensure it has a meaningful impact on society. Theatre art can serve as a public cultural classroom. A quality curriculum would benefit everyone, while a poor one would hinder cultural advancement for which no slogan can save the development of this traditional art form. Professor Mao hopes that innovations in the theatre will help promote Hong Kong.

Performance Phase One

Following the project launch, from the beginning of January to March 20, 2023, Professor Mao assembled a team to rehearse for the first phase of the performance. The lineup included Loong Koon-tin and Tang Mi-ling, the leading actors of *I am Waiting for You, Love* and Lai Yiu-wai, Leung Fei-tung, Fu Shu-wang, Liang Zhenwen, and Ng Lap-hei, the leading actors of *The Girl Who Dreams to Save the World*. Notably, the creative team comprised not only actors. It was important to also include screenwriters, musicians and production staff. Before rehearsals began, Professor Mao devoted a lot of time to researching and revising the scripts with Jason Kong for *I am Waiting for You, Love* and Lai Yiu-wai for *The Girl Who Dreams to Save the World*. At the same time, *gaochu* master Li Cheung-ming and drama performance coach Mandy Yiu also joined the team from the start to support the arduous task of initial research and creation. The scheme's organiser, Hong Kong & Macau Intangible Cultural Heritage Research Centre, provided efficient administrative support, such as planning crew schedules, arranging rehearsal venues, coordinating with The Hong Kong Jockey Club's requirements, inviting guests, preparing for the next round of lectures and documentary filming, and promoting and recruiting audiences. It is not easy to assemble a team that shares such a commitment to artistic excellence and is willing to collaborate fully with the artistic director's vision. Many of these tasks are often overlooked in current Cantonese opera productions due to budget constraints, directly affecting the production quality.



Rehearsal of *I am Waiting for You, Love*



Rehearsal of *The Girl Who Dreams to Save the World*

Before the first performance, the scheme also conducted two large-scale seminars at two universities in Hong Kong. The second seminar of this scheme, “Past to the Present: My Journey to Pursue Creativity,” was successfully held on February 7, 2023, at the Sir Run Run Shaw Hall of the Chinese University of Hong Kong. The third seminar was held on March 14 of the same year, when Professor Mao visited his alma mater, Hong Kong Baptist University¹, to share his insights on the challenges and opportunities of modernizing opera and drama with students. The discussion was based on the seminar theme “Great Drama Conquers the Heart—Hong Kong-Made Opera and Drama.” Dr. Melanie Lee, Director of Alumni Affairs, and her team also attended the event to show their support for Professor Mao, an alumnus with whom they have established a long-term relationship. In addition, the HKBU Alumni Association of the Greater Bay Area is also a supporting organization for the sharing event. Founding President Dr. Vincent Ho (Communication) led representatives of the alumni association to attend the event and participated in the dialogue with Professor Mao on the stage. Alumni in the Greater Bay Area watched Professor Mao’s wonderful sharing in real time.



Seminar at Hong Kong Baptist University

On March 22, 2023, at 3 p.m., a Cantonese opera creative process showcase, the first phase of “The Hong Kong Jockey Club Mao Chun Fai Innovative Works in Theatre Scheme”, was held at the Hong Kong Jockey Club Amphitheatre at HKAPA. The showcase consists of three parts: a staged reading of “The First

¹ <https://www.hkapa.edu/honorary-awardee/doctorate/fredric-mao-chun-fai-doctorate>
Professor Mao obtained his Master of Fine Arts Degree in Theatre Arts from the University of Iowa, USA after graduating in English Literature from Hong Kong Baptist College.

Dream” (第一個夢) from the innovative Cantonese opera *The Girl Who Dreams to Save the World*, a singing-in-costume demonstration performance of the scene “Farewell at the Cavern” from the classic Cantonese opera *Pinggui and Baochuan*, and a Seminar by Professor Mao on the topic of “Creative Development of Hong Kong’s Cantonese Opera.” Ms. Ho Wing-see, Chief Curator, Dr Iona Sham, Principal Assistant Secretary, and Ms. Shirley Cheung, Senior Manager of the Culture, Sports and Tourism Bureau; Ms. Winnie Yip, Executive Manager of Charities (Arts, Culture, Heritage and Talent Development), and Ms. Queenie Lau, Deputy Executive Manager, Charities of the Hong Kong Jockey Club; and Dr. Sammi Yu, Head of General Secretary, Hong Kong and Macau Intangible Cultural Heritage Research Centre, joined the event together with over 100 secondary school students and faculty staff. On the day, participants interacted with each other, and the staged reading of *The Girl Who Dreams to Save the World* offered a whole new experience for the young audience, proving that traditional Cantonese opera can also be interesting and modern.



Showcase performance at the Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts

Well-known Cantonese opera actors Loong Koon-tin and his long-time co-star Tang Mi-ling performed the scene “Farewell at the Cavern” from the classic opera *Pinggui and Baochuan*. Professor Mao applied his extensive directing and stage experience to enhance the traditional storyline with new performance techniques, allowing the audience to appreciate not only the authentic Cantonese opera performance but also the added depth of character development. Following the performances, Professor Mao delivered the fourth seminar, “Creative Development of Hong Kong’s Cantonese Opera,” sharing insights into his creative process and exploring potential avenues for innovation in Cantonese opera.

Performance Phase Two

After completing the first phase, Professor Mao promptly began preparations for the second phase. The Scheme would like to extend heartfelt gratitude to all actors and musicians who dedicated significant time from May 16 to July 7, 2023, to intensive rehearsals for “Farewell at the Cavern” of *Pinggui and Baochuan* and *The Girl Who Dreams to Save the World*. The concept of “Farewell at the Cavern” was from the director, Professor Mao, who co-adapted the screenplay with young playwright Jason Kong. The story follows Xue Pinggui, who, after receiving Wang Baochuan’s tossed embroidered ball, becomes her husband. Xue is given the chance to become the Governor of the Palace Guards after successfully taming the red-maned steed, but is betrayed by Wang Yun, his father-in-law. Instead, he is appointed as a scout and ordered to lead a squadron to calm a rebel at Xiliang, leaving immediately. Before his departure, Xue returns to the cavern to bid his wife farewell, both in tears. This excerpt is the “classic recreation” portion of The Hong Kong Jockey Club Mao Chun Fai Innovative Works in Theatre Scheme. Cantonese opera stars Loong Koon-tin and Tang Mi-ling were invited to perform the excerpt. The adaptation by Mao and Kong not only provides modern audiences with a nostalgic taste of traditional opera but also offers a new perspective on classic stories.

The Girl Who Dreams to Save the World, adapted from Bertolt Brecht’s “The Visions of Simone Machard,” is translated and directed by Professor Mao. He also co-adapted with young actor and playwright Lai Yiu-wai. Set against the historical backdrop of the Japanese invasion of China, the protagonist is a young female worker who often imagines herself as the fire genie, Yang Paifeng, one of the characters in the strong the Generals of the Yang Family, fighting to save her country and people. Part of the Cantonese opera creative process showcase, this is an innovative new work that displays Mao and Lai’s exploration of blending Cantonese opera with modern theatrical elements.

As the scheme’s artistic director and producer, I have noted that rallying multitudes at one’s call has been a recurring theme. Despite delays caused by various uncontrollable factors, strong community support and understanding have enabled us to present our work. I believe that a lasting artistic classic requires a strong team. This project is not about individual branding but rather about collaboratively expanding the boundaries of this art form and discovering “new” versions of ourselves with the effort of industry workers under the expert guidance of Professor Mao’s broad artistic vision and extensive practical experience. “Farewell at the Cavern” of *Pinggui and Baochuan* is a testament to the hard work of all participants in the scheme. Everyone gave all they could in this journey of nearly a hundred sessions of researching, analysing, discussing, rehearsing, creating, experimenting, recording, fine-tuning, recreating, and seeking review, making the creative process as enriching as the performances. The administrative team also tirelessly supported the artistic director’s vision, handling a range of dull logistical tasks, including coordinating, planning, liaising, comparisons, documenting, confirming, executing, filing, and reporting to ensure smooth operations.

While rehearsals were in full swing, public seminars remained a priority. On June 9, 2023, Professor Mao visited Hong Kong Bluebell College (HKBC) for the fifth seminar aimed at over 100 secondary students. The topic of this lecture was “Inheritance and Innovation in the New Era.” Many HKBC students expressed that they had never attended a Cantonese opera performance. Professor Mao took the opportunity to explain to the students the history of Cantonese opera in Hong Kong, its development, and its current situation, hoping to pique their interest in developing hobbies and fostering holistic development, thereby enhancing their knowledge and appreciation of local culture.

Pre-performance Video Recording

To allow the entire team to more intuitively review rehearsal results and compile performance materials, the project filmed “Farewell at the Cavern” of *Pinggui and Baochuan* and *The Girl Who Dreams to Save the World* at a professional recording studio from July 10 to 12, 2023. Professor Mao sought to identify areas for improvement across various aspects before moving the performance to the stage, including sound effects, costumes, singing, acting, and dramatic tension in the script, etc. The effort paid off, as after the Cantonese opera showcase, the team received multiple thank-you letters from audience members. For example, a representative from the women’s association, WINGS Hong Kong, said, “Professor Mao infused each production with creativity like always and is dedicated to preserving traditional Cantonese opera with innovative methods. We particularly appreciate the cross-disciplinary performance style created by Professor Mao and the young Cantonese opera talents. Association members unanimously praised the performance, believing that Hong Kong should continue to innovate in order to preserve and pass on the local traditional performing arts culture.”

Making the Documentary

One of the most valuable aspects of this project would be the various documentary footage captured at different times and locations throughout the creative process. There are a total of eight episodes in the first year: Episode 1, “The Start of the Project”; Episode 2, “Professor Mao’s Lecture - The Foundation of a Stage Production, The Script”; Episode 3, “Professor Mao’s Lecture - The Director’s Role”; Episode 4, “Professor Mao’s Lecture - The Production and Market of Stage Performances”; Episode 5, “Professor Mao’s Lecture - Stage Performance”; Episode 6, “Conversation with Professor Mao: Jason Kong and Lai Yiu-wai”; Episode 7, “Seminars at CUHK & HKBU”; and Episode 8, “Rehearsal and Showcase of the Creative Process of a Cantonese Opera Production.”

The documentaries filmed in the second year were even more substantial. A total of 16 episodes were produced centered around *I am Waiting for You, Love*: Episode 1, “Special Starring - Loong Koon-tin”; Episode 2, “Special

Starring - Tang Mi-ling”; Episode 3, “Co-screenwriter - Jason Kong”; Episode 4, “Costume Design - Mandy Tam”; Episode 5, “Set Design - Ricky Chan”; Episode 6, “Lighting Design - Billy Chan”; Episode 7, “Artistic Director - Mao Chun-fai”; Episode 8, “Audience Interviews,” and so on.

The aim of these documentaries is to serve as a valuable resource for future talent creating Cantonese opera, preserving Professor Mao’s guidance and the educational significance of the project. Chinese Opera is a complex form of performing arts, including Cantonese opera, one of its branches. The documentary’s format can capture Cantonese opera’s complexity, enabling it to be passed down. Coupled with clear descriptions, it can also engage the audience’s interest. Documentaries, informative in nature, are often utilized in educational settings, enriching knowledge and understanding.

Acknowledgements

To close, I would like to extend my heartfelt thanks to everyone involved in this project. Your contributions are invaluable to its success, and I also express my sincere gratitude to The Hong Kong Jockey Club Charities Trust for its staunch support of the project. We will continue to strive for excellence in creating lasting classics, and I encourage everyone to keep spurring us on as we move forward.

Remarks

Please refer to the project's official website for updates after 2023:
<https://www.jcmaotheatre.com.hk>

Documentaries of the project are uploaded to YouTube:
<https://www.youtube.com/@jcmaotheatre/videos>