

Hong Kong Xiqu Overview

2023

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The Practice and Development of the Black Box Chinese Opera Festival at the Xiqu Centre of West Kowloon Cultural District

Written by: Arthur S.Y. Pang

Since its inception in 2017¹, the Black Box Chinese Opera Festival presented by the Xiqu Centre of the West Kowloon Cultural District has become an important annual event in Hong Kong's Chinese opera scene. With the exception of 2018, the festival has continued every year, establishing a space and platform for the development of small-scale "black box" Chinese opera performances in Hong Kong. The festival has not only gradually built up the reputation of this relatively new performance type in Hong Kong but has also developed into one of the Xiqu Centre's signature programs at the end of each year. This article aims to (1) review Xiqu Centre's process of organizing the Black Box Chinese Opera Festival in Hong Kong; (2) analyze the difficulties and limitations encountered during program planning by conducting interviews, as well as how the production teams overcame these challenges; (3) explore the stylistic characteristics demonstrated by the three commissioned small-scale Cantonese operas: *Farewell My Concubine* (New Adaptation), *Wenguang Explores the Valley*, and *The Imperial Decree*; (4) reflect on the impact of introducing experimental Chinese opera to Hong Kong.



Experimental Cantonese Opera *Wenguang Explores the Valley*
(Courtesy of the West Kowloon Cultural District Authority)

¹ It was originally named "Experimental Chinese Opera Series" (in 2017 and 2019) and was renamed to Black Box Chinese Opera Festival in 2020.

1. The Development of the Black Box Chinese Opera Festival

West Kowloon Cultural District's Xiqu Centre officially opened in 2019, but the District Authority has been organising different types of Chinese opera-related performances as early as 2012, showcasing their plans to develop various Chinese opera programmes. For example, the West Kowloon Bamboo Theatre was held in 2012, 2013 and 2014, which was an attempt to invite large theatre troupes to perform traditional productions in Hong Kong. The Rising Stars of Cantonese Opera Series held from 2014 to 2017, the Tea House Theatre Mockup in 2014, and the Tea House Theatre Taster Performances in 2015 and 2017 are all attempts to nurture young actors and served as the precursor to the later formation of the Tea House Rising Stars Troupe.

Activities directly related to the Black Box Chinese Opera Festival began in 2016 when West Kowloon held a joint performance of *The Ghost Seller* and *His Butterflies (Version 80)*, showcasing innovative productions from both local and overseas troupes. This also marked the beginning of the Xiqu Centre's exploration of the experimental theatre format. In December 2016, the Xiqu Centre's first commissioned piece, the experimental Cantonese opera *Farewell My Concubine* (New Adaptation), premiered at the Shanghai International Experimental Theatre Festival. The launch of the Experimental Chinese Opera Series in 2017 was a milestone, with the series showcasing experimental works from various opera genres. For convenience, all experimental Chinese opera performances presented by the West Kowloon Cultural District from 2016 to 2023 have been organised into the following table:^{2 3}

Programme	Year	Performance	Location	Produced by
<i>The Ghost Seller & His Butterflies (Version 80)</i>	2016	<i>The Ghost Seller</i>	Ko Shan Theatre New Wing Auditorium	GuoGuang Opera Company
		<i>His Butterflies (Version 80)</i>		Utopia Cantonese Opera Workshop
Experimental Chinese Opera Series	2017	Experimental Cantonese opera <i>Farewell to my Concubine</i> (New Adaptation)	HKREP Black Box	Xiqu Centre, West Kowloon Cultural District
		<i>Liyuan Opera Zhu Wen</i> (The Only Extant Version)		Experimental Theatre of Liyuan Opera of Fujian
		Experimental Huaiju Theatre <i>Kong Yiji</i> (New Adaptation)		Shanghai Huaiju Troupe
		Peking Opera and Kunqu Fusion <i>Chun Shuidu</i> (New Adaptation)		Commissioned by The Shanghai Center of Chinese Operas

2 The information was compiled based on the following webpage of the West Kowloon Cultural District: westk.hk/tc/events/bbcof2024?tab=%E6%AD%B7%E5%B9%B4%E5%9B%9E%A1%A7. Accessed on July 29, 2025.

3 To the best of the author's recollection, each edition of the Black Box Chinese Opera Festival (and the Experimental Chinese Opera Series) previously had a dedicated website that included content such as program descriptions, production teams, and messages from the producers. However, the West Kowloon Cultural District Authority has recently revamped its websites, and some of the Black Box Chinese Opera Festival websites are no longer available. It is quite regrettable that these resources are no longer accessible, as it benefitted research work and commentary efforts.

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Programme	Year	Performance	Location	Produced by
Experimental Chinese Opera Series 2019	2019	Experimental Cantonese opera <i>Farewell to my Concubine</i> (New Adaptation)	Xiqu Centre	Xiqu Centre, West Kowloon Cultural District
		Experimental Yue Opera <i>Destiny of Rebirth</i> [cancelled]		Shanghai Yue Opera House
		Experimental Kunqu Opera <i>The Chairs</i> [cancelled]		Shanghai Kunqu Opera Troupe
Black Box Chinese Opera Festival 2020	2020	Experimental Cantonese opera <i>Wenguang Explores the Valley</i>	Xiqu Centre	Xiqu Centre, West Kowloon Cultural District
		Experimental Cantonese opera <i>Farewell to my Concubine</i> (New Adaptation)		
Black Box Chinese Opera Festival 2021	2021	Experimental Cantonese opera <i>Wenguang Explores the Valley</i>	Xiqu Centre	Xiqu Centre, West Kowloon Cultural District
		Experimental Cantonese opera <i>Farewell to my Concubine</i> (New Adaptation)		
Black Box Chinese Opera Festival 2022	2022	Experimental Cantonese opera <i>Wenguang Explores the Valley</i>	Xiqu Centre	Xiqu Centre, West Kowloon Cultural District
		Experimental Cantonese opera <i>The Imperial Decree</i> (Preview)		
		Experimental Cantonese opera <i>Farewell to my Concubine</i> (New Adaptation)		
		Experimental Cantonese opera <i>Asura Judgement – Solo Performance</i>		
Black Box Chinese Opera Festival 2023	2023	Experimental Kunqu Opera <i>The Chairs</i>	Xiqu Centre	Shanghai Kunqu Opera Troupe
		Experimental Gaojia Opera <i>Sister A Da</i>		Jin Liansheng Gaojia Opera Troupe of Xiamen City
		Experimental Cantonese opera <i>The Imperial Decree</i> (Preview)		Xiqu Centre, West Kowloon Cultural District
		Experimental Cantonese opera <i>Wenguang Explores the Valley</i>		Xiqu Centre, West Kowloon Cultural District
		Experimental Cantonese opera <i>Farewell to my Concubine</i> (New Adaptation)		Xiqu Centre, West Kowloon Cultural District

As shown in the table above, West Kowloon had already intended to develop a platform for showcasing experimental theatre works from different regions as early as 2016. Around the same time, similar platforms for experimental theatre works have begun developing in Chinese Mainland cities and Taiwan. For instance, in 2013, the GuoGuang Opera Company in Taiwan started the “Great Dreams in Little Theatre” initiative, which was later taken over by Taiwan’s Center for Traditional Arts in 2017 and merged into a scheme called “Keep on Dreaming” in 2018. In 2014, Beijing’s Star Theatre hosted the first Xiqu Opera Black Box Festival, while The Shanghai Center of Chinese Operas launched the inaugural Shanghai International Experimental Theatre Festival in 2015. In contrast to the already well-established Chinese Opera Festival, which focuses primarily on showcasing various traditional opera performances, Hong Kong had yet to begin exploring the art form of experimental Chinese opera. Xiqu Centre claimed this as one of their main Chinese opera art forms, laying the foundation for its reputation for innovation.

Both Taiwanese and Hong Kong Troupes are involved in the joint performance of *The Ghost Seller & His Butterflies (Version 80)* in 2016. *The Ghost Seller* is one of the series produced by the GuoGuang Opera Company as part of the “Great Dreams in Little Theatre” initiative. It was created by young playwright Xing Benning and director Rui Song, featuring Chen Ching Ho, Hsieh Kuan Sheng, and Chen Fu Kuo in leading male roles. In contrast, *His Butterflies*, produced by the Utopia Cantonese Opera Workshop, was performed by seven graduates from different graduating classes of the Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts’ School of Chinese Opera. The programme was presented on Friday and Saturday evening, with both plays performed each evening. There was also a sharing session on Sunday afternoon hosted by the creative teams of both troupes.

The performances took place at the New Wing Auditorium of the Ko Shan Theatre, and after watching *The Ghost Seller*, Cheung Man-wai made the following observations, “The play incorporated interactive techniques to break the fourth wall. Venues like a three-sided small theatre or black box theatre would have been more ideal, as this aligns with the design intention of realising ‘great dreams’ in a ‘small theatre.’ This time, it was presented at Ko Shan Theatre, a proscenium-style, medium-sized theatre, so the audience viewed the performance from a distance, as if looking through a mirror frame. It was challenging to get the same interactions and lively atmosphere. It’s no wonder Jung Beau Shahn⁴ said [at the sharing session that the audience was] slow to warm up.”⁵

In 2017, the Xiqu Centre held its first Experimental Chinese Opera Series, featuring works including their own commission, experimental Cantonese opera *Farewell to My Concubine* (New Adaptation)⁶. Xiqu Centre also invited three troupes to perform in Hong Kong: the Liyuan Opera *Zhu Wen* (The Only

4 Jung Beau Shahn led the GuoGuang Opera Company to Hong Kong for this performance.

5 Cheung, Man-wai. “Waiting for an Opportunity.” *Hong Kong Economic Journal*, 10 May, 2016.

6 Experimental Cantonese opera *Farewell to My Concubine* premiered at the 2016 edition of the Shanghai International Experimental Theatre Festival.

Extant Version) from the Experimental Theatre of Liyuan Opera of Fujian, the experimental Huaiju Theatre *Kong Yiji* (New Adaptation) from the Shanghai Huaiju Troupe, and the Peking Opera and Kunqu Fusion *Chun Shuidu* (New Adaptation) from the Shanghai Theatre Arts Center. Totalling four performances, it was a considerable scale for a new initiative. The series was no longer held at Ko Shan Theatre but moved to the HKREP Black Box of the Hong Kong Repertory Theatre located inside Sheung Wan Civic Centre, reflecting thoughtful planning by the organisers.

In 2018, the Experimental Chinese Opera Series was suspended, likely due to preparations for the Xiqu Centre's opening at the end of that year. In 2019, the Xiqu Centre officially opened, and the Series was resumed. They even transformed one of the rehearsal rooms into a black box theatre specifically for the Series programmes. Unfortunately, due to social tensions, the scheduled performances by the Shanghai Kunqu Opera Troupe and the Shanghai Yue Opera House were cancelled, and only *Farewell to My Concubine* was performed.

From 2020 to 2022, the COVID-19 pandemic led to border controls that eliminated the possibility of troupes visiting Hong Kong. The 2020 and 2021 Black Box Chinese Opera Festivals consisted solely of the Xiqu Centre's own productions, including the experimental Cantonese opera *Farewell to My Concubine* (New Adaptation) and *Wenguang Explores the Valley*. In 2022, the Xiqu Centre premiered two new works: the experimental Cantonese opera *The Imperial Decree* (Preview) and *Asura Judgement* – Solo Performance. It wasn't until 2023, as social distancing measures and border controls gradually returned to normal, that visiting troupes, specifically the Shanghai Kunqu Opera Troupe and the Jin Liansheng Gaojia Opera Troupe of Xiamen City, participated in the Black Box Chinese Opera Festival, restoring the festival to its intended scale.

2. Prerequisites and Challenges of the Development of Experimental Chinese Opera

As stated above, the Xiqu Centre began exploring experimental Chinese opera as early as 2016. The author interviewed Naomi Chung about the early conception and challenges in exploring experimental Chinese opera at the Xiqu Centre. Naomi Chung joined the West Kowloon Cultural District Authority in 2011 and currently serves as the Head of Xiqu, Performing Arts. She produced many of West Kowloon Cultural District's early large-scale performing arts programs, including the West Kowloon Bamboo Theatre, Freespace Fest in 2012, and Xiqu Centre's Rising Stars of Cantonese Opera, among others. Additionally, she has played a crucial role in facilitating the Black Box Chinese Opera Festival and Xiqu Centre's commissioning of experimental Cantonese opera works.

According to Chung, the West Kowloon Cultural District Authority had already experimented with various program formats for future programming prior to the completion of the Xiqu Centre. These included West Kowloon Bamboo Theatre, with the format of a grand combined performance, inviting troupes from multiple cities to perform their signature performances, a tea house theatre mockup featuring various elements of Cantonese opera (including singing,

instrumental performances, classic singing styles⁷, and excerpt performances), as well as the 2016 joint production of *The Ghost Seller & His Butterflies (Version 80)*, which marked the initial attempt to introduce experimental black box Chinese opera.

Chung pointed out that the development of experimental Chinese opera in Hong Kong is based on three considerations. First, to grow an audience base without undermining the existing interests of the Chinese opera industry; second, to develop the creative abilities of young local artists; and lastly, to explore new types of programs and performance platforms. As a statutory organisation, Chung believes that Xiqu Centre should not compete with the industry for audiences but instead create new opportunities to nurture talent, foster new works and platforms to perform. She also shared that she first learned about experimental Chinese opera works from Chinese Mainland and Taiwan in 2015. And then, in 2016, the Xiqu Centre signed a memorandum of understanding with The Shanghai Center of Chinese Operas. As part of the collaboration, Xiqu Centre was requested to produce an experimental Cantonese opera to be performed in Shanghai. This resulted in the Xiqu Centre allocating resources to the development of experimental Chinese opera works.

The development of Xiqu Centre's own experimental Chinese opera has not been without challenges, as it requires balancing resource allocation and market conditions. The opera market in Hong Kong is predominantly Cantonese opera, with substantial audience attendance and program numbers. However, this has also led to dependence on box office revenue and on the industry's existing habits. A significant challenge when planning experimental Chinese opera programs is to avoid conflicts with the established interests of the industry, specifically by not competing for resources and audience members intended for traditional mainstage productions.

Chung mentioned that she faced numerous challenges in both the creative and production aspects of commissioning an experimental Chinese opera work. Since 2012, she began visiting various cities in the mainland to observe each region's opera performances. She observed that the young actors and creators demonstrate rich imagination and actively develop new stories, even exploring new narrative styles, performance methods, and stage technology. In contrast, some young actors in Hong Kong rarely engage with other performing arts and do not draw inspiration from outside their comfort zone, resulting in relatively limited creativity.

Cantonese opera performances in Hong Kong typically last about three hours, so condensing them to under 100 minutes poses a significant challenge for the creative team. Additionally, collaborating with modern stage technicians presents another difficulty. Beyond the storyline, the creative team must also consider stage effects, lighting design, sound, and visual elements during the process. To align with modern theatre practices, the creative team would need to organise discussions with lighting designers, music directors, and participate in producer

7 Classic singing style in Cantonese operatic songs 古腔 [guqiang]

meetings. The creative team would need to adapt its mode of working to separate technical roles. She also noted that the cost of producing experimental Chinese operas in Hong Kong is high, while income is limited. Each performance generally accommodates approximately 100 audience members, and the revenue generated hardly covers expenses, making it difficult to achieve sufficient returns.

In addition to the production-related issues raised by Chung, the general environmental factors and unforeseen circumstances over the past few years have also hindered the development of performing arts programs. From the social unrest in 2019 to the COVID-19 pandemic between 2020 and 2022, these events have made it impossible for foreign troupes to visit Hong Kong. In particular, pandemic-induced restrictions on performance venues have significantly affected performing arts programmes, seriously hindering the development of experimental Chinese opera at the Xiqu Centre that has just begun. Across the six editions of the Black Box Chinese Opera Festivals from 2017 to 2023, only the 2017 and 2023 editions successfully featured performances by visiting troupes, undoubtedly limiting the festival's program planning and growth.

Moreover, in 2023, the West Kowloon Cultural District Authority announced that it was facing a depleted cash flow⁸. The Authority's board chairman, Henry Tang, announced that over the past two years (i.e., 2021 to 2022), the Authority had taken measures to minimise expenditures, but it is projected that funding for the West Kowloon Cultural District will be exhausted by March 2025. Those who are attentive to programmes presented by the Xiqu Centre may have noticed that some programmes are no longer held, such as "Music in the Atrium" and Cantonese Opera Film Screenings. The cancellation of these programs undoubtedly reflects the financial difficulties faced by the West Kowloon Cultural District. Existing programs were also affected; the 2017 Experimental Chinese Opera Series featured three travelling troupes, while the 2023 Black Box Chinese Opera Festival only featured two. Reducing the participation of travelling troupes in turn weakened the overall significance of it being a festival.

In response to the aforementioned difficulties and challenges, the Xiqu Centre has adapted its approach to organising the Black Box Chinese Opera Festival. On one hand, Xiqu Centre encourages the creation of locally-produced experimental Cantonese opera works through commissioning artists, at the same time, encouraging young Cantonese opera creators and artists in Hong Kong to align with modern theatre production techniques. On the other hand, by inviting experimental Chinese opera works from other regions to perform in Hong Kong, Xiqu Centre aims to expand its influence without directly competing in the local market and can even facilitate exchanges among creators from different regions.

The Xiqu Centre's experimental Chinese opera team is relatively small, with lead performers often taking on multiple roles, such as directing and music arrangement. A small team makes touring overseas easy. For example, they

⁸ "West Kowloon Cultural District running out of cash". *Singtao Daily*, 18 August, 2023. <https://www.sheadline.com/society/3264380/>, accessed on 29 July, 2025.

have performed *Farewell to My Concubine* (New Adaptation), *Wenguang Explores the Valley*, and *The Imperial Decree* in various locations (including Tianjin, Singapore, Fujian, Taipei). Additionally, the team regularly participates in experimental Chinese opera festivals in Shanghai and Beijing and has won multiple awards. During periods of financial difficulty for the West Kowloon Cultural District Authority, this strategy of active touring has increased exposure to the Xiqu Centre's commissioned works, ensuring the continued growth of experimental Chinese opera with limited resources. For the newly established Xiqu Centre, having its own produced programs also serves the purpose of gradually building its reputation. The Xiqu Centre has also taken measures in response to the resource constraints faced by the Authority. The Black Box Chinese Opera Festival in 2023 was, in fact, sponsored by the Yam Kim Fai and Pak Suet Sin Charitable Foundation, which not only provided funding support but also reflected the recognition of the Xiqu Centre within the industry, positively impacting the continued development of experimental Chinese opera.

Chen Yun-fei believes that cultural institutions and the development of experimental Chinese opera in Taiwan are symbiotic, which is worth emulating. She pointed out that “Chinese opera is a niche within the performing arts market, and experimental Chinese operas, limited by their format and content, are a niche within that niche. These works require external resources more than others to sustain development... Moreover, a robust platform and mobilisation from artistic institutions are essential to promote such experimental Chinese operas to the public and increase visibility. At the same time, the ability to receive support from national-level organisations or socially significant charities would signify recognition, which helps elevate the reputation of the performers.”⁹

3. The Styles of the Xiqu Centre's Three Experimental Cantonese Operas¹⁰

Starting with the experimental Cantonese opera *Farewell to My Concubine* (New Adaptation), followed by *Wenguang Explores the Valley* (2020), and *The Imperial Decree* (2022), the core creative team for these three productions has always been centred around Naomi Chung, Lai Yiu-wai, and Janet Wong. This team has developed the following three experimental Cantonese opera works since 2016:

9 Chen, Yun-fei. “Heterogeneity of Opera – A commentary on 1/2 Q Theatre’s works.” *International Association of Theatre Critics (Hong Kong)*, 3 December, 2024, www.iatc.com.hk/doc/107577. Accessed 29 July, 2025.

10 This section discusses the experimental Cantonese opera created by Naomi Chung, Lai Yiu-wai and Janet Wong, excluding *Asura Judgement*. The Black Box Chinese Opera Festival premiered the experimental Cantonese opera *Asura Judgement* – solo performance, which was adapted by Law Kar Ying from his 2021 creation of the same name. The *Asura Judgement* (2021) was an adaption based on Akira Kurosawa’s film *Rashomon*, with a runtime of approximately three hours and featured 13 actors. The experimental Cantonese opera *Asura Judgement* – solo performance was commissioned by the Xiqu Centre, with Law Kar Ying as writer, director, and performer, Naomi Chung as producer, director and script editor.

	Naomi Chung	Lai Yiu-wai	Janet Wong
Experimental Cantonese opera <i>Farewell to my Concubine</i> (New Adaptation)	Producer	Script, Direction, Music Arrangement, Performer	Script, Direction, Music Arrangement, Performer
Experimental Cantonese opera <i>Wenguang Explores the Valley</i>	Producer, Direction	Script, Direction, Music Arrangement, Performer	Script, Direction, Music Arrangement, Performer
Experimental Cantonese opera <i>The Imperial Decree</i>	Producer, Direction	Script, Direction, Music Arrangement, Performer	Script, Direction, Music Arrangement, Performer

Across all three productions, aside from various explorations of performance techniques and trials with theatrical effects, we also see the creative team attempting to examine the intent of “Cantonese opera.” This exploration is particularly evident in the plays *Farewell to My Concubine* and *Wenguang Explores the Valley*, reflecting the creative team’s endeavour to “discuss drama through drama.”¹¹



Scene in Experimental Cantonese opera *Farewell to My Concubine*, where Xiang Yu carries his stable boy, a new idea by the creative team¹²
(Courtesy of West Kowloon Cultural District)

First, regarding *Farewell to My Concubine* (New Adaptation), the creator Lai Yiu-wai stated: “Through *Farewell to My Concubine*, I attempt to connect Cantonese opera from the past to the present and the future, in terms of performance style, stage design, costumes, percussion, language, music, and

¹¹ The saying “discuss drama through drama” is from the commentary on *Wenguang Explores the Valley* by Chu Siu-cheung. As seen in Chu, Siu-cheung. “The Mount Sumeru and Mustard Seed of *Wenguang Explores the Valley*.” *Medium*, 20 October, 2022, medium.com/@chusiuicheung/%E6%96%87%E5%BB%A3%E6%8E%A2%E8%B0%B7-%E7%9A%84%E9%A0%88%E5%BD%8C%E5%92%8C%E8%8A%A5%E5%AD%90%E6%9C%B1%E5%B0%91%E7%92%8B-f1a978a3b8f3. Accessed 29 July, 2025.

¹² Chung, Naomi. “Reflections on Cantonese Opera Creation and Realisation: Creativity, Practice, and Balance.” *Symposium for Hong Kong New Generations of Cantonese Opera Playwriting 2021 Proceedings*, edited by Leung Bo Wah, 2021, p. 55.

lighting—everything that the audience can see and hear—to serve as a means of passing the art form onwards. I hope to provide the audience in Shanghai (where *Farewell to My Concubine* premiered) with a more comprehensive Cantonese opera experience.”¹³ From his remarks, it is evident that performing abroad prompted him to incorporate elements reflecting the history of Cantonese opera. This is why *Farewell to My Concubine* unfolds from the past to the present. Starting with Xiang Yu’s opening scene *Return to the Camp*, where traditional routines such as approaching the “Four Doors” (four corners of the stage) and *tiaodajia* were accompanied by traditional percussion and singing in *guanhua*, the ancient official language. Then, starting from the scene, *The Song of Chu*, lyrics were sung in Cantonese, accompanied by *bangzi* and *erhuang*, folk and *nanyin* tunes, showcasing modern elements of Cantonese opera. Chen Yun-fei noted that this arrangement allows audiences to see a variety of performance elements, almost as if they were visiting an exhibition about the evolution of Cantonese opera at a museum¹⁴. Perhaps it is precisely because it was premiered outside of Hong Kong that it fueled the creative team’s desire to showcase the historical evolution of Cantonese opera.

Then comes *Wenguang Explores the Valley* in 2020. The creative team’s intention to explore the theme of “Cantonese opera” becomes even more evident in this opera. On the surface, it is an adaptation of the well-known legend of the Yang family generals, but in reality, the entire opera centres on the theme of inheritance. Through the characters’ perspectives on the Yang family’s signature spear tactics, legends associated with it, and ultimately, Yang Wenguang discovering a version of the tactics that belongs to him, the creative team pushes forward what they think constitutes “inheritance” and “innovation”.

At the end of the opera, the creative team emphasizes the theme of “first inheriting the artistry of the Yang family, then integrating various styles,” which can be interpreted as the team’s view on passing on and innovating with Cantonese opera: one must first learn the traditional practices, and then carve out one’s own path (echoing Yang Wenguang’s defeat of Wang Wen using the Yang Family tactics).¹⁵ The production of *Wenguang Explores the Valley* also incorporates more thoughtful stage effects, such as the use of LED screens and elements typical of modern plays, reflecting the team’s commitment not only to thematic exploration but also to experiment with techniques.

13 Lai, Yiu-wai. “Experimental Cantonese opera *Farewell to my Concubine*—A Unique Learning Experience.” *Hong Kong Theatre Yearbook 2016 (Dance, Xiqu, Drama)*, Hong Kong, International Association of Theatre Critics (Hong Kong) 2018, p.66.

14 Chen, Yun-fei. “Striving for Modernity—A critique of West Kowloon Cultural District’s *Farewell to My Concubine*.” *International Association of Theatre Critics (Hong Kong)*, 24 July, 2019, www.iatc.com.hk/doc/106059. Accessed 29 July, 2025.

15 Lai Yiu-wai also stated that *Wenguang Explores the Valley* is a trial to discuss opera through opera. As seen in: “Reflection on the Past: LED Displays Enrich Scenes, Experimental Theaters Broaden the Imagination of Traditional Opera.” *Ming Pao Our Lifestyle*, 24 Sept. 2021, ol.mingpao.com/ldy/cultureleisure/culture/20210924/1632421143412. Accessed 1 August, 2025.



Deaf dancer Jason Wong (left) as Rongfu in experimental Cantonese opera *The Imperial Decree*
(Courtesy of West Kowloon Cultural District)

In *The Imperial Decree* (2022), the creative team no longer explored the intent of Cantonese opera further. Instead, they tested out bold changes to performance techniques, incorporating elements of accessibility and inclusivity. During the performance, two sign language interpreters were assigned to provide interpretation services, enabling hard-of-hearing audience members to access information in another format in addition to subtitles. The cast also included deaf dancer Jason Wong, who portrayed Eunuch Rongfu and performed using sign language. While incorporating sign language as an expressive format to Cantonese opera is indeed new, it left us hoping that the team would take it further by integrating sign language with the existing expressive gestures and movements of Cantonese opera as a form of on-stage communication.^{16, 17}



Lee Oi Chung (left) and Chan Yuet Ying (right) providing theatrical interpretation for experimental Cantonese opera *The Imperial Decree*
(Courtesy of West Kowloon Cultural District Authority)

16 Commentaries related to the incorporation of accessibility in *The Imperial Decree*: “*The Imperial Decree Left Us Wanting for More: A New Attempt and Discussion on Accessiblility in Cantonese Opera.*” *Artistic Moments*, 27 October, 2022, artisticmoments.net/%e8%a1%a8%e6%bc%94%e8%97%9d%e8%a1%93/%e6%ac%b2%e9%80%9a%e4%b8%8d%e9%81%94%e6%b1%82%e8%80%8c%e4%b8%8d%e5%be%97%e7%9a%84%e5%a5%89%e5%a4%a9%e6%89%bf%e9%81%8b%e6%9c%89%e9%97%9c%e5%85%b1%e8%9e%8d%e9%80%9a%e9%81%94%e7%b2%b5%e5%8a%87%e7%9a%84/. Accessed 1 August, 2025.

17 Lam, Fan (林汾). “*Another Preview of The Imperial Decree: Accessibility and Creativity Still Work in Progress.*” *Artistic Moments*, 27 October, 2022, artisticmoments.net/表演藝術/再度預演的奉天承運仍可琢磨的通達與創新/, accessed on 1 August, 2025.

From the beginning, the three experimental Cantonese opera productions were commissioned not just for Hong Kong audiences, but also for audiences abroad (*Farewell to My Concubine* premiered in Shanghai in 2016). The Xiqu Centre ensured that each subsequent commissioned work would also be toured at experimental Chinese opera festivals in Beijing and Shanghai. This context may have motivated the creative team to explore the themes of passing on traditions of Cantonese opera. The author believes that if *The Imperial Decree* also focused on exploring the essence of Cantonese opera, it could form a trilogy of experimental production of Cantonese opera in Hong Kong. It would have tied together the themes of *Farewell to My Concubine*, which showcases the history of Cantonese opera, and *Wenguang Explores the Valley*, which discusses inheritance and the evolution of Cantonese opera. This would result in a more cohesive structure and marketing approach.

4. A Review of the Impact Brought by the Xiqu Centre’s Planning of the Black Box Chinese Opera Festival

Seven years have passed since the production of the first experimental Cantonese opera in 2016. Despite facing various adversities, the Xiqu Centre has persevered in establishing itself as a leader of experimental Chinese opera and has prompted the government to allocate resources for its development. The 2021 Policy Address announced, “in respect of Cantonese opera, we plan to provide additional support through the Cantonese Opera Development Fund for practitioners to enhance professional excellence and to pursue the continued expert training, as well as encourage creative productions, including creation of shorter pieces...”¹⁸ In 2022, the Cantonese Opera Development Fund introduced the “New Play Scheme for Short and Medium-Length Cantonese Opera” to provide funding¹⁹. The invitation to apply states that this scheme is for new works with a total performance duration of 70 to 100 minutes. The allocation of resources from the Cantonese Opera Development Fund will make it more favourable to develop new experimental operas in Hong Kong.²⁰

Furthermore, the Xiqu Centre’s systematic promotion of experimental Chinese opera has attracted the attention of art critics in recent years. For example, the International Association of Theatre Critics (Hong Kong) provided post-performance reviews²¹, while Artistic Moments published a total of four reviews about experimental Cantonese opera by the end of 2022. These included commentary on the effectiveness of the accessibility elements in *The Imperial*

18 *Policy Address 2021: Policy Initiatives of Home Affairs Bureau*, [LC Paper CB(4)77/2022(01)], Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Legislative Council, For Discussion on 14 February, 2022, p. 16, legco.gov.hk/yr2022/chinese/panels/ha/papers/ha20220214cb4-77-1-c.pdf. Accessed on 1 August, 2025.

19 The Cantonese Opera Development Fund launched the “New Play Scheme for Short and Medium-Length Cantonese Opera”, Cantonese Opera Development Fund, November, 2022, coac-codf.org.hk/filemanager/tc/pdf/%E6%8E%A8%E5%87%BA%E3%80%8C%E5%89%B5%E6%96%B0%E7%B2%B5%E5%8A%87%E6%BC%94%E5%87%BA%E8%A8%88%E5%8A%83%E2%80%94%E4%B8%AD%E7%9F%AD%E7%AF%87%E5%8A%87%E3%80%8D.pdf. Accessed on 1 August, 2025.

20 Xiqu Centre presented four new experimental Cantonese opera works in the Tea House Theatre in 2024. They are *Romance of Gold and Jade*, *Realm of Trance: Tian Hacks the Coffin*, *The Black Fox Mystery*, and *Chang’e’s Redemption*. The Cantonese Opera Development Fund sponsored all these works with the exception of *The Black Fox Mystery*. As these operas premiered in 2024, it exceeds the period of this review, thus, will not be discussed in this article.

21 Cheung, Ping Kuen, and Bernice Chan Kwok-wai. “Performance Review 116: Xiqu Centre’s Experimental Cantonese Opera *Farewell to My Concubine* (New Adaptation.)” *YouTube*, 10 Nov. 2020, www.youtube.com/watch?v=tELRqImI8h0. Accessed on 1 August, 2025.

*Decree*²², on the strategy and format of the Xiqu Centre’s Black Box Chinese Opera Festival²³, and reviews of the experimental Cantonese opera *Asura Judgement* – a solo performance.^{24, 25}

Experimenting with Chinese opera is not a new concept. Zuni Icosahedron has collaborated multiple times with Chinese opera performers, and the Leisure and Cultural Services Department has previously brought experimental Chinese opera productions to Hong Kong (such as *What Is Done Cannot Be Undone* in 2001, and experimental Chinese opera programs in the 2013 Chinese Opera Festival). However, the Xiqu Centre’s ongoing investment in presenting the Black Box Chinese Opera Festival and commissioning new productions has undoubtedly contributed to establishing this type of opera performance in Hong Kong. Recognition by the system, support from public resources, and attention from the community cannot be achieved without sustained efforts.

Finally, to conclude with Cheung Man-wai’s commentary on *The Imperial Decree*: “The Xiqu Centre’s black box Cantonese opera is truly special, as the Centre is currently the only platform that can fulfil the unique resources and conditions required, allowing them to take chances typical troupes cannot afford to. They are opening a new path for contemporary Cantonese opera. It came naturally, but the genre’s growth also relied on the creative team. They were trained over the past few years to deliver top performance and vitality.”²⁶ Cheung acknowledges the achievements of the Xiqu Centre team in promoting experimental Chinese opera. However, can this experimental work continue solely under the Xiqu Centre’s initiatives? Given the financial constraints faced by the West Kowloon Cultural District, how should such initiatives proceed? Is there room for the continued growth of experimental Chinese opera and Cantonese opera in Hong Kong? How will it grow and develop? These are topics worth our continued attention.

Lastly, special thanks to the West Kowloon Cultural District Authority for providing the photographs in this article, and to Ms Naomi Chung for the interview.

22 “*The Imperial Decree Left Us Wanting for More: A New Attempt and Discussion on Accessibility in Cantonese Opera.*” *Artistic Moments*, 27 October, 2022, [artisticmoments.net/%e8%a1%a8%e6%bc%94%e8%97%9d%e8%a1%93%e6%ac%b2%e9%80%9a%e4%b8%8d%e9%81%94%e6%b1%82%e8%80%8c%e4%b8%8d%e5%be%97%e7%9a%84%](http://artisticmoments.net/%e8%a1%a8%e6%bc%94%e8%97%9d%e8%a1%93%e6%ac%b2%e9%80%9a%e4%b8%8d%e9%81%94%e6%b1%82%e8%80%8c%e4%b8%8d%e5%be%97%e7%9a%84%e5%a5%89%e5%a4%a9%e6%89%bf%e9%81%8b%e6%9c%89%e9%97%9c%e5%85%b1%e8%9e%8d%e9%80%9a%e9%81%94%e7%b2%b5%e5%8a%87%e7%9a%84/). Accessed 1 August, 2025.

23 “*The Rise and Development of Hong Kong’s experimental Chinese Opera, Benchmarking with Experimentality.*” *Artistic Moments*, 21 November, 2022, artisticmoments.net/%e8%a1%a8%e6%bc%94%e8%97%9d%e8%a1%93%e4%bb%a5%e5%af%a6%e9%a9%97%e6%80%a7%e7%82%ba%e6%a8%99%e7%ab%bf%e6%80%9d%e8%80%83%e9%a6%99%e6%b8%af%e6%88%b2%e6%9b%b2%e5%b0%8f%e5%8a%87%e5%a0%b4%e7%9a%84%e8%b5%b7%e6%ad%a5%e5%92%8c%e7%99%bc%e5%b1%95. Accessed 1 August, 2025.

24 Lee Siu-yan. “*A Grand Play in a Small Theatre: The Premiere of Law Kar-ying’s Asura Judgement - Solo Performance.*” *Artistic Moments*, 23 December, 2022, artisticmoments.net/%e8%a1%a8%e6%bc%94%e8%97%9d%e8%a1%93%e5%a4%a7%e6%88%b2%e5%b0%8f%e5%8a%87%e5%a0%b4%e7%9c%8b%e7%be%85%e5%ae%b6%e8%b5%b1%e7%9a%84%e7%b2%b5%e5%8a%87%e7%8d%a8%e8%85%b3%e6%88%b2%e4%bf%ae%e7%be%85%e6%ae%bf%e9%a6%96%e6%bc%94. Accessed 1 August, 2025.

25 Lum Man-yeo. “*A Commentary of experimental Cantonese opera Asura Judgement – Other Solo Performances in the World.*” *Artistic Moments*, 29 December, 2022, artisticmoments.net/%e8%a1%a8%e6%bc%94%e8%97%9d%e8%a1%93%e5%b0%8f%e5%8a%87%e5%a0%b4%e7%b2%b5%e5%8a%87%e7%8d%a8%e8%85%b3%e6%88%b2%e4%bf%ae%e7%be%85%e6%ae%bf%e8%a9%95%e9%91%91%e7%b8%b1%e7%9b%ae%e4%b8%96%e7%95%8c%e5%8a%87%e5%a0%b4%e4%b8%8a%e7%9a%84%e7%8d%a8. Accessed 1 August, 2025.

26 Cheung Man-wai, “*Experimental Chinese Opera The Imperial Decree*”, *Hong Kong Economic Journal*, 22, November, 2022.