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Winter 2017



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Legends live on

Primary and secondary students are discovering a strong connection to their cultural roots when they have the opportunity to participate in Cantonese opera productions, writes **Sophia Lam**

With faces tightly set, the actors take a few rhythmic strides across the stage, pompoms in their headdresses quivering with each step, sequin gowns nearly sweeping the floor. In the background, a *suona* (Chinese double-reeded horn) screeches to the beat of a drum-cymbal ensemble.

It looks like any other day in the Sunbeam Theatre. Except all the actors on the stage are children, and this is the school hall of Fukien Secondary School Affiliated School.

The school's Cantonese opera team, is organised hand-in-hand with the Cha Duk Chang Children's Cantonese Opera Association, and came into being in 2013. Professional artists visit the school on a weekly basis. On top of opera appreciation tours and competitions, the biggest event every year is the annual performance in July which is open to all parents and pupils.

In this primary school, however, the study of the art extends beyond the 40 minutes on stage – it is a thread that strings together a sequence of apparently unrelated subjects.

According to the principal, Eva Charisa Hsu, the whole school takes part in the Cantonese opera programme in some way. "Chinese, English, music, visual art, physical education and culture and national education,

are all areas of study into which Cantonese opera can be integrated," she says.

And yes, English was also part of the plan.

"We were all shocked too, when one of the teachers suggested incorporating Cantonese opera into the English curriculum. We never thought it would work," Hsu says. "For instance, the rhetorical devices in the libretto – such as parallelism and repetition – could be teaching materials for language lessons."

After experimenting for the past two years, the school has finally worked out a way to allocate certain class hours in every subject to Cantonese opera without demanding too much effort from the teachers.

The Chinese folksong *Feng yang flower drums* is used to introduce the gongche notations and Chinese percussion instruments, including the metal idiophones.

At the beginning of the school year in September, the team starts recruiting members with only two factors taken into consideration: the child's interest, and his or her accuracy, in intonation and pronunciation. From October



Yang Lit-wah won the solo singing in last year's Cha Duk Chang interschool Cantonese Opera competition.



towards the end of the year, new members of the opera team have a go at the basic moves, such as stretching, water sleeves (emotive gesture of flicking loose sleeves) and rod turning.

The group's repertoire is created by Cha Duk Chang, its subject matter made relatable for children. "Instead of the love and hatred between grownups, the stories are often leavened with innocence and comedy," says Angela Chow Mei-chu, teacher in charge of the opera team.

Last summer, they performed a whimsical spinoff of the wartime classic *Lord of Six States*, which narrates the everyday plight of a cowardly boy. Snippets of historical facts about Su Qin, from the Warring States period, and Sin Si Wah Kong, sifu of the Cantonese opera industry, are scattered between the lines.

Through all the training over the years, Chow is able to see and appreciate aspects of Cantonese opera which are less obvious to the layman; for example, the immense amount of work that goes into perfecting the gestures. "The cartwheels move involves much more than flapping two flags around," she says. "The flags in fact represent the wheels. The key is to touch the tip of the flags to the ground in every rotation to make it look like a moving vehicle."

Yang Lit-wah has been on the team for four years. "At first I found the spear too heavy to swing around, but then the instructor tailor-made a lighter one for me," the Primary 4 pupil says.

Primary 6 pupil Cheng 's most memorable experience of her time on the team comes from when she portrayed protagonist Princess Chang Ping in *The Floral Princess*, which tells the tragic love story between the princess and Shixian. "The headdress was overwhelming and my makeup just wouldn't stop melting."



It would be wrong if the language of instruction [were to] cause [the pupils] to lose their Chinese 'roots'

EVA CHARISA HSU, PRINCIPAL, FUKIEN SECONDARY SCHOOL AFFILIATED SCHOOL



FRIDAY, DECEMBER 8, 2017



Photo: Fukien Secondary School Affiliated School

She first came to know Cantonese opera when she went to sing karaoke with her mother. The theme song from *The Floral Princess* blasted from the loudspeakers. "It got me hooked since then," she says.

Before she became the team's teacher in charge, Serena Li Yuen-yan didn't know much about the art form. "Now that I realise how different face colours represent different

roles, like red means courage and black is for [righteousness and honesty], I will definitely have more insights if I visit the Sunbeam Theatre again."

Despite being an English as medium-of-instruction school, where many parents pay more attention to the standard of English than Chinese, Chinese culture is still very much alive on the campus through various cultural activities.

Hsu herself grew up under British rule and studied at an English Catholic school. "My childhood [was] 'de-Chinese-ised'. Not a single lesson on Chinese idioms or history. We only learned instrumental Chinese vocabulary," she says. "Well, a culture must be doing something right to [last] as long as 5,000 years. There is so much wisdom we can find in China's culture.

"We established our school as an EMI school because we hoped our pupils could connect with the world, as well as bring China to the world. However, it would be wrong if the language of instruction [were to] cause them to lose their Chinese 'roots'."

Indeed, Hong Kong's roots – and where they lie – are oftentimes dubious, because of its post-colonial status.

Just before Hong Kong reached a watershed in its history in 1997, the Education Bureau – then the Education and Manpower Branch – came up with the proposal of infusing Chinese elements into the music curriculum of schools. And one of the suggested topics was Cantonese opera.

Professor Leung Bo-wah, now head of the Department of Cultural and Creative Arts at The Education University of Hong Kong, was one of the teachers who mulled over the proposal. He began to research how it might be achieved.

"When I was small, around seven years old, my grandma always played Cantonese operatic singing records in the afternoon while I was doing my

homework," Leung says. "The music entered my brain since then."

Leung headed the "Collaborative Project on Teaching Cantonese Opera in Primary and Secondary Schools", which spanned four years from 2009. The project earned him the prestigious Musical Rights Award from the International Music Council of Unesco in 2011.

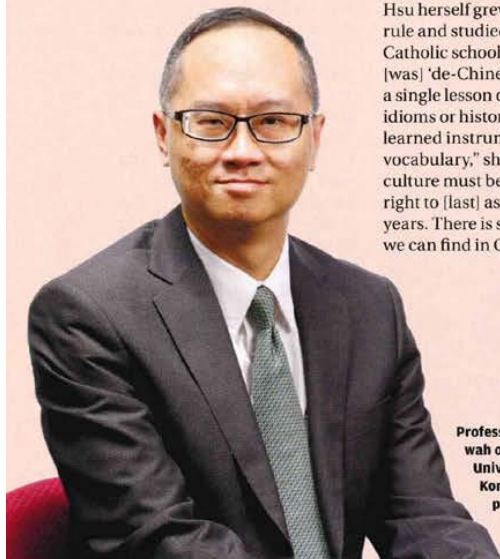
A key objective of the study was to see whether primary and secondary pupils would be motivated to learn Cantonese opera during music classes. The results were interesting: although primary pupils were "highly motivated", junior secondary pupils "tended not to prefer the genre" as much.

One of the main causes for this discrepancy is, according to Leung, "self-consciousness" among secondary pupils, triggered by peer labelling of the Chinese art form as "old-fashioned".

"Teenagers tend to seek their musical identity [between] the ages of 13 to 15," he says.

In his study, Leung recommended that the Education Bureau should encourage primary and secondary schools to offer Cantonese opera as an extra-curricular activity so pupils could encounter the art form from an early age, in view of the shortage of competent and suitable applicants for bachelor degree programmes in institutions such as the Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts. "No one can start learning the genre at 17 or 18 years old – it is too old. They have to start at around 10 to 11," he says.

While collaboration between professionals in the industry and music teachers is generally extolled as being the best way for teachers to learn the genre, this approach is not without its setbacks.



Professor Leung Bo-wah of The Education University of Hong Kong found that primary school pupils were keen to learn about Cantonese opera.

Leung observes that, while the artists have a positive impact on the planning of teaching materials, the teachers often regard the artists as supply teachers onto whom they can unload their teaching duties. "When the project is over, the teachers [are unable to] sustain teaching the genre," he says.

The limited knowledge and skills of music teachers is also holding back the integration of Cantonese opera into the formal syllabus. "Since they learned Western music first, even though many of them have the opportunity to learn about Chinese music, they tend to be biased that Western music is more advanced and systematic than Chinese music," he says.

"Diction is the most critical issue in Cantonese operatic singing," Leung says. Actors need to do the legwork, to look up literary and historical texts in order to have a solid grasp of the libretto, what's going on inside the character's mind, and – ultimately – to tell the story right. Pupils will inevitably learn more about Chinese culture through this hands-on inquiry process.

For Leung, the gist of music education is to enhance the life of every child. "Many music teachers tend to make the teaching very academic; they teach too much about music theory, music notation and music history," he says. "Actually, there are only three main activities in music, [which are]: listening, performing and creating."

In recent years, the government seems to be heralding its new set of initiatives in heritage preservation, with the blueprint laid out for the West Kowloon Xiqu Centre, this year, following the restoration of the Yaumatei Theatre and the Red Brick House into venues for Cantonese operatic performances back in 2009.

"Up to this moment, I am not sure how the centre is going to

help with educating the next generation in understanding the Cantonese opera," he says, suggesting the Xiqu Centre should collaborate with all primary and secondary schools as well as universities to promote the art.

For the girls in St. Paul's Convent School, they're getting in what seems to be "the right balance".

The promotion of Cantonese opera traverses three levels in this Catholic girls school. Starting from 2015, elements of the traditional art are sponged up in the formal curriculum. Form 1 to Form 2 pupils start from the basics – including carriages and speech types, such as the percussion accompanied *baklam* and *sibak* (poetic speech). If they're interested in learning more, there are weekly Diversified Interest Programmes after school, where they get to polish their movements and *xiqu* singing during these three-hour sessions.

Ship Lee, leading teacher of the Cantonese opera programme at the school, is confident that shards of the art form can be melded with the formal curriculum. The high literary value embedded in the art itself, according to Lee, renders it perfect for Chinese model texts.

One such example is the libretto by Tang Ti-sheng, which brims with flowery wordplay and rhetorical devices such as parallelism and metaphors.

Pupils get a taste of the tunes in the classic *qupai*, with tempos varying according to the mood of the person playing them, during music lessons.

And if the potential *daans* (female roles in Cantonese opera) decide to take things a step further, they can opt for the BTEC Level 3 Certificate Performing Arts (Music Theatre). Targeting Form 3 pupils, the course requires 180 learning hours within two

years. Participants are drilled in their vocals, choreographic movements as well as the accompanying music. A final evaluation is carried out based on the report of an external verifier.

This year, two pupils have enrolled in the BTEC training.

For one of the BTEC pupils, Meko Cheung Wing-ki, singing Cantonese opera is a way of paying tribute to her Hong Kong roots. "We should be proud of this only art form [on] the Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity by Unesco," she says. "Cantonese opera is performed in our own language. It is our own culture, our own heritage."

The former Latin dancer yearns to see more young faces in the auditorium, worried that "there will be no one filling up the theatre spaces [when] the elderly [audience] pass away someday.

"My heart aches for the actors. It's the same as how I would feel, if I were to dance to no one," she says.

Helen Yu Tian, who was born in mainland China and came to Hong Kong at 10, is fascinated by the bond between Chinese culture, Cantonese culture

and the zeitgeist of the time-honoured art form. "I want to dig out the root value of Hong Kong ... as I love to embrace the beauty of different cultures, especially their traditions, around the world," the Form 5 pupil says.

The Floral Princess, which is a staple on almost every Cantonese opera lover's playlist, also holds a special place in Yu's heart. On the surface, it is about the legend of Princess Chang Ping towards the fall of the Ming dynasty. But according to Yu, the play is in fact a reflection of Hong Kong's political situation and development at that point of time. "The theme explores the impulses created when the Western culture first met Chinese culture in Hong Kong," she says.

As a self-proclaimed "crazy fan" of *The Phantom of the Opera*, she has come to the conclusion that there is no difference in



Meko Cheung is often assigned male roles in Cantonese opera.

the interpretation of the love between the phantom and Christine, and that chronicled in Tang Xianzu's *The Peony Pavilion*. "After all, art is a way to express the language our soul speaks," she says.

Yu believes that no matter how Westernised Hong Kong is, with Chinese culture ingrained into every nook and cranny, it will always be a Chinese society. "Whenever people communicate with others in the Chinese language, the language connects them and their culture."

The two girls were galvanised by the school's 160th anniversary show in 2015, when the Cantonese opera team performed an excerpt from *A Regretful Story in the Tang Palace* – which tells the heart-wrenching tale of the two lovebirds, Emperor Xuanzong of Tang and Consort Yang – in front of the whole school.

"I was mesmerised by the beauty of this art – the singing, performing skills, facial expressions, hand movements, the story itself and the magnificent stage effect," Yu says, recalling the moment she first set eyes on Cantonese

opera. "I decided to become their successor that day."

But for Cheung, her interest in the performing art goes back a long way, to when she first saw posters outside the Sunbeam Theatre, a stone's throw from where she lived, which made her want to try on that striking make-up herself.

Behind all the glitz and glamour, however, are many nights of singing practice and line reciting at home.

It is particularly true for a 16-year old girl who has to act the part of a male adult from ancient China.

"I often receive roles where I fall in love with the female character and have to flirt with her, which is a huge challenge since I do not do that in reality," Cheung says. "I would say that interpreting the characters and bringing them to life are the most difficult parts for me."

Aside from the four hours of training in school per week, Cheung spends her spare time practising vocals at home and watching Cantonese opera in the theatres. "It's my way of self-learning. Through the



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MEKO CHEUNG WING-KI, ST PAUL'S CONVENT SCHOOL

exploration and comparison of different actor's strengths and weaknesses, I learned what to follow and what not to."

While split-kicks, flips, spins or swivelling her spears are right up her alley, thanks to her former dance training, the struggle to lower her pitch has been vexing. Still, she has risen to the challenge. "Instead of grumbling, which doesn't do any good really, I figure out ways to reach the note and practise daily," she says.

"Chinese opera is, unfortunately, slowly losing its colour with the renewal of generations – it is up to us to preserve this precious cultural activity with our own passion and effort," Cheung says.

Indeed, Cantonese opera could be an abstract art for some.

Ten out of 10 teenagers will pick pop songs over Cantonese opera pieces, she says. Her friends reflect that the music is either too loud, or they have no idea what the actors are doing on stage.

Seeing more and more contemporary elements added to the genre – an example being replacing erhu in the orchestra with the violin – Cheung sees the silver lining in the fusion of Eastern and Western musicality as a beckoning to young people.

"They [young people] will not find it old-fashioned once they have understood what this art is all about and the meaning that is expressed from within," she says.

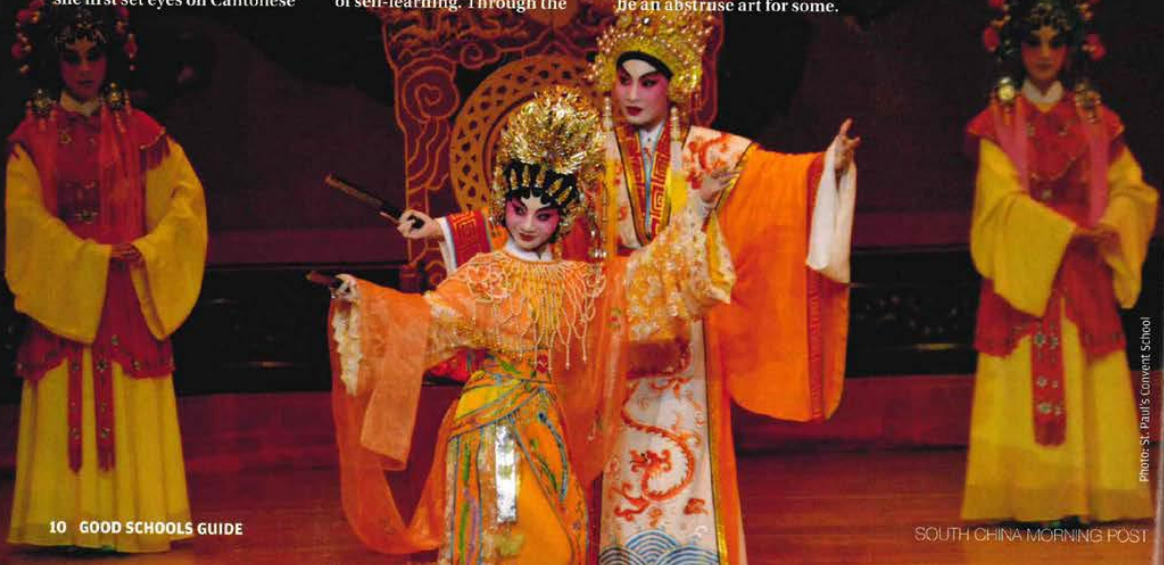


Photo: St. Paul's Convent School