

Developing the 21st Century Chinese Opera Performing Artist

Professor Martin LAU
Dean, School of Chinese Opera

I'm going to begin by debunking a few myths about Chinese opera – Cantonese opera education. And then, we'll talk a little bit about us and our curriculum and what we hope our graduates will become when they leave our programme.

Myths debunked

So as far as Cantonese opera myths, I'll debunk a few myths really quickly.

Myth #1

“The best way to learn Cantonese opera is through the Master/Apprentice model.”

Now, the traditional Master/Apprentice model included living with the master; and I think, for everyone of us, I think, will be impossible today to imagine our students living with us to learn anything at all. So the question is why the dichotomy? For institutions, we can actually be the best of both worlds. We can actually provide some of the best of the Master/Apprentice model, but at the same time, we can also offer things that the tertiary institution would have that in traditional teaching method might not.

Myth #2

“I can enter the Cantonese opera industry without a tertiary education.”

Yes. Sure, but ... With the tertiary education, you also get systematic foundation training, job readiness, alumni network, and access to things that you may not get if you were to get into the industry by yourself.

Myth #3

“I don't think there is a high demand for Cantonese opera performing artists...”

Well... That's definitely not true and here are the facts. Every year, there are over 1,500 performances in Hong Kong in Cantonese opera and the relative income of a Cantonese opera artist beginning entry level work is higher than most entry level jobs. Also, there's a strong support and funding from different sources, such as the government, the donors, and the community.

So, if we look at these myths, then we understand that some things are only perceptions. As we look at ourselves, the School of Chinese Opera, how do we tackle this?

Our Mission

Our mission is to aspire to provide students a platform to learn a traditional art form while enhancing the curriculum through innovative, interdisciplinary, and global-focused education.

Okay, that's great. We have a mission. But what does that mean exactly?

We deliver an innovative and holistic curriculum for our cohort (students) as they develop into the 21st century Chinese opera performing artists. So through our curriculum, through our core programmes, we nurture our new students in an educational ecosystem and allow them to grow into 21st century Chinese opera performing artists.

Our Programmes

So, a brief look really, at the programmes that we offer at the School of Chinese Opera. We offer BFA (Bachelor of Fine Arts) programme in Chinese Opera in both Cantonese Opera Music and Performance. I want to stress this importantly because most people when they think of Cantonese Opera performance, that's what they of – right, the performance and the actors on stage. But the School actually has a performance and a music stream. So, actually we have degrees in both Cantonese Opera Music and Cantonese Opera Performance. We also have an Advance Diploma in Cantonese Opera as well as a Diploma in Cantonese Opera Foundations.

So, onto what we teach.

Our curriculum

TGIF – Thank God it's Friday. Well, this is probably an easier way for us to remember but it's not Friday today. But bear with me.

So our curriculum. "T" stands for technology and innovation. "G" stands for gateway. "I" stands for interdisciplinary and "F" stands for foundations.

Technology and Innovation

So really quickly on technology and innovation – exploring innovative technologies for data recording and student assessment, and enhancing the learner experience. So on this picture, you see one of our lecturers is actually doing a demonstration on a motion capture so as to determine injury impacts and what notes from acrobatics. We also use virtual reality in Cantonese opera, as well as, again, the motion capture there, to demonstrate, to attract interests, as well as to show our students that there are different ways of presenting Cantonese opera.

(Video clip presentation)

Really quickly I'm going to show you what we have actually called, Jimmy. Jimmy is the skeleton on the right actually. So this is a virtual reality, sorry, not a virtual reality, a motion capture of an actual practice and the little lines down there are impact points as well as statistics. So we are actually teaching and assessing using technologies such as motion capture and audio capture.

Gateways

What do we mean by gateways – Providing access gateway for our cohorts (students) to the industry and community through master classes, visiting artists, internships, community outreach, and global exchanges.

This is actually an actual photo of two students that went to an internship at RTHK (Radio Station Hong Kong) Station 2 Radio as part of their reflective practice. They actually had to present after their internship what they were doing there and what they have learned there.

So we can provide actually different opportunities such as this and also master classes. A little promotion. Maestro Choo Heng-cheong (朱慶祥), he will actually be at HKAPA on Saturday, this Saturday (25 April 2021), for a master class for our students as well as alumni. It's open for the public. If you are interested, you're welcome to join us.

Also, visiting artists – Ms Wan Fei-yin (尹飛燕), on the bottom right Mr Sun Kim-long (新劍郎, also known as Mo Yu-tin), and you also see Ms Lisa Wang from Barwo (八和會館 The Chinese Artists Association of Hong Kong). So, we have very close connection with the industry.

Also, some more photos of community engagement and on the top right hand corner actually is a very interesting photo. This was actually a photo of a performance, a cultural outreach, at an elementary school in Oberlin, USA. Oberlin is actually the home of the Oberlin Conservatoire which is the oldest conservatoire in America. Our students actually went on a cultural exchange there to attend classes as well as sharing Cantonese opera to the world.

Interdisciplinary

A photo here of a collaboration between the School of Chinese Opera and School of Music with Master Yuen Siu-fai (阮兆輝) was a new rendition of traditional pieces arranged through the School of Music. Also, some photos on interdisciplinary. At the bottom right hand corner is actually an interesting photo because it's actually an instructor from the School of Drama, alumni from the School of Drama, that actually teaches courses here for us at the School of Chinese Opera. Again, some (photos) using technologies. You see on the upper right hand corner, streaming for our classes.

Foundation

And then of course, back to the basics, foundation. We deliver core Chinese opera foundation work using both traditional and, as you saw all earlier, innovative pedagogical methods. So real quick, some pictures, and then I'm going to run a video for everybody to enjoy.

(Video clip presentation)

Now this is an interesting video because it shows our foundation work, but at the same time, also the music is written and played by our Music students. So please enjoy this. ... Don't try this at home.

Our Graduates

So, aspiration for our graduates. The School of Chinese Opera accepts applicants and from there, they enter our programme – into our programme where through an innovative curriculum, we nurture them in an ecosystem that is designed for them to grow. From there, we hope as they graduate and leave the Academy, they become 21st century Chinese opera performing artists. And then at the same time – it goes both ways – as an alumni, they are also encouraged to come back to our big family and work with us and work with our students.