

THE SOCIAL IMPACT OF PERFORMING ARTS

Nurturing Artistic Citizenship: Chinese Opera and Its Social Impact

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Hello and thank you everyone for joining me today as I will present to you, “Nurturing Artistic Citizenship: Chinese Opera and its Social Impact.”

My name is Martin Lau. I’m the Dean of the School of Chinese Opera.

To begin our topic today, talking about the social impact, the first thing I think we need to look at, for Cantonese Opera and for the sake of this presentation, I will be using Cantonese Opera and Chinese Opera interchangeably.

About Cantonese Opera

Cantonese opera, or 粵劇 (Yueju) as it’s known in China, is an operatic art form that incorporates acting, singing, music, acrobatics using the Cantonese vernacular. In recognition of its cultural and historical value, Cantonese opera was inscribed in 2009 onto the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) representative list of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) items.

The School of Chinese Opera (SCO) is the first and only accredited programme in the world that offers Bachelor of Fine Arts (Honours) degree in Chinese Opera, a Diploma in Cantonese Opera Foundations, and we will also be offering in the coming year, a new Professional Diploma in Cantonese Opera.

Tertiary Programme Overview

Here’s a quick overview of our programmes.

Again, we have a four-year Bachelor in Fine Arts programme pitched at QF Level 5. We will be having a Professional Diploma in Cantonese Opera. We will be launching that in the Academic Year 2023/24. That’s a two-year programme pitched at QF Level 4. Then we also currently have a Diploma in Cantonese Opera Foundations, one-year, QF Level 4 programme that targets local and non-local post-secondary students.

Continued and Extended Learning Programmes

Alongside of these tertiary programmes, the School of Chinese Opera also has continued and extended learning programmes. It’s part of our Cantonese opera development initiative.

Cantonese Opera Youth Programme is a programme from 9 to 17 (years old) that we are offering weekly to students that may have an interest in extracurricular activities in Cantonese opera. The Cantonese Opera Continued and Extended Learning Programme itself is for adult learners with background in Cantonese opera or even for beginners.

SCO Mission Statement

Here is part of our SCO mission.

The mission statement for the School of Chinese Opera is that “we aspire to continue to providing students a platform to learn a traditional art form, while enhancing the curriculum through innovative, interdisciplinary and global-focused education.”

Attributes

What we hope to achieve with our curriculum and our students, is that they learn transferrable life skills, such as communications, business fundamentals, etc. The poster you see on the left is a poster of a graduate project a few years ago. It’s part of what we teach – project-based business fundamentals. The students have to run the projects themselves. They have to learn how to achieve funding. They also have to do their own budgeting, production – plan everything out themselves. This is part of what we do here at the School of Chinese Opera.

We also hope to promote artistic ambassadorship. As we said earlier, Cantonese opera is of course a UNESCO ICH item. The idea of promoting Cantonese opera is of course very important. Really, at the end, we want them to be critical artistic citizens where they can use their art form that they learn here at HKAPA and share with everybody in the community as well as build their own career.

Local Social Impact

When we look at Cantonese opera in particular, it has a very significant local social impact. As I spoke earlier, Cantonese opera is in the Cantonese vernacular; with Cantonese as a primary mode of delivery, it’s very in grain and embedded in the region. Cantonese Opera has existed since the 1600s and reached its golden age in 1920s - 1950s. It has served as the key cultural leisure activity for the traditional festivals and villages across the Guangdong, Hong Kong, and Macau regions. Recent studies in Guangdong, Hong Kong and Macau had supported the conclusion that it is still very popular among the older generation as the social leisure activity of choice. It’s an opportunity for people to group together and to have a sense of community.

SCO Local Opportunities

And part of what we do here at the School of Chinese Opera is that we engage our students for these local opportunities aside from working as professionals and working alumni, some of the things that we do here at the School of Chinese Opera. The picture here you see is our students interning at RTHK (Radio Television Hong Kong) Radio 5. They learn how the radio station works. And through these presentations that they were presenting back to our faculties and staff, they learnt that there is a huge community in Hong Kong that still loves Cantonese opera. There is a great opportunity for younger generations to perpetuate this love and at the same time share Cantonese opera with the community.

We also have the West Kowloon Cultural District. We have internships there with the Tea House. The Young Academy Cantonese Opera Troupe which is the subsidiary of the HKAPA offers opportunities for our students and alumni to engage with the community as well as to engage with schools, to do short productions, and to educate the public on Cantonese opera.

Global Social impact

If we look at the global social impact of Cantonese opera, it's also a very unique thing. Chinese opera has a community engagement mechanism and cultural leisure activity for Chinese living abroad. SCO has offered opportunities in the past, pre-pandemic of course, to engage and learn more about the cultural significance of Chinese opera in these communities. There were in a national touring and cultural exchange.

Visit to New York

I'm going to show you some pictures here of things that the School, and the students and the faculty have done in the past. We visited a Chinese opera enthusiast in New York in 2019. We were very fortunate to be able to go to New York to do this community and cultural engagement. And then when we came back, the pandemic hit so since then we haven't been able to fly anywhere. I think this is something that we all hope we'll have an opportunity to do this again. We visited this Chinese opera enthusiast in a place called "The China Music Club" and this Club has about a hundred years of history. It was first established when a bunch of Chinese immigrants immigrated to New York and they used Cantonese opera as a way for them to group together in the community and to reminisce about their home. This kind of the social impact that the School of Chinese Opera is trying to teach and impart on the younger generation that Cantonese opera is a part of our culture, is a part of their history. Through this exchange, we hope that our students can understand more about what they are trying to do - in that sense, help them perform better on stage.

Visit to Oberlin

Also, on that trip, we swung around to Oberlin and the Oberlin Conservatoire is the oldest Western music conservatoire in the United States. We went to Oberlin, into the town. Aside from doing cultural exchange there and performing at the Oberlin Conservatoire, we also visited the local elementary school. These are the kids there, and at the bottom a group picture of our team with all the kids, kindergarten to Grade 6. We also showed them the rudimentaries of spear wielding. They enjoyed it very much. It's an opportunity to be an artistic ambassador where we can share a local, Hong Kong art form and engage with the world.

Alumni Engagement

After all of this talk about global citizenship, I want to give you a real example of an artistic citizen - Ms Karen Wang, the young lady in pink on the left that's facing the kids. She is an alumna and graduate of the School of Chinese Opera. This is one of her trips where she went to Nepal in 2019 to low-income families and villages to share Cantonese opera with the world. And through these things we can see that there is a huge impact arts and performing arts can do - to encourage the kids to be happier, to build community; and for Cantonese opera, as a way of a Hong Kong local art form to be presented on the world stage.

Summary

To recap, SCO strives to provide opportunities for students to be engaged with the community. We recognized that the social impact of Chinese Opera reaches well beyond stage performance. We encourage our students to be global artistic citizens.

Thank you very much for joining me today for our presentation and have a great rest of the day.