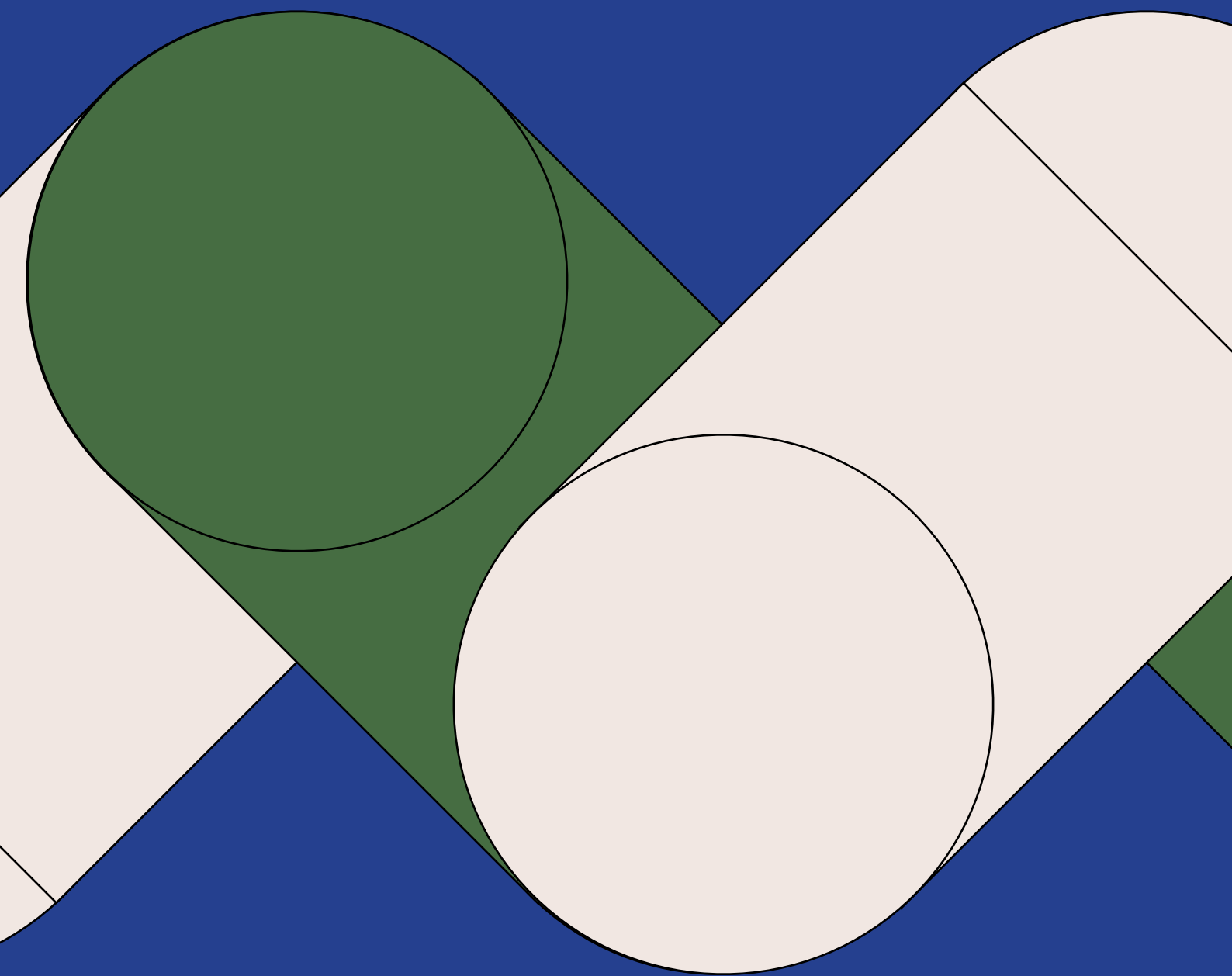


Keywords in Theatre for Young Audiences in Asia

by Simon Wong

Reflections, Thoughts and Inspirations from the ATYA Congress



A Pressing Need for Asian Theatre for Young Audiences

Asia has always been the most populous continent, with a population of approximately 4.2 billion, 0.8 billion of whom are under 18. This cohort accounts for more than the entire population of Europe (0.73 billion). Given the great number of young people, it is only natural that we see a huge demand for Theatre for Young Audiences (TYA). Questions that have been much discussed in the TYA sector include: How to import more quality TYA programmes to serve Asian societies? How to nurture outstanding professionals in Asia? How to establish a healthy Asian market? How should governments and the communities cooperate? How should different regions engage in exchange? These questions were the impetus for the founding and development of the Asian Alliance of Festivals and Theatres for Young Audiences (ATYA).

What is the ATYA Congress?

ATYA was founded in 2005. At that time, a number of arts festival coordinators from regions including Korea, Japan and Taiwan came together, wanting to share news of global trends in TYA development and to co-invite quality programmes in order to save on touring budgets. Afterwards, arts festivals and theatre companies from mainland China, Hong Kong, Singapore and the Philippines joined the ATYA. In the 2017 Congress held in Shanghai, members voted in favour of re-organising ATYA into an exchange platform for Asian TYA to connect with the rest of the world; they also made the annual congress a biennial event. Two focus regions are designated for each congress: while the organiser region for the meeting is automatically designated as the Asian region in focus, a non-Asian region is chosen as well. By drawing on practices from abroad and learning from the experiences of others, it is easier to understand the local scene and to enrich our discussions and discourse in order to anticipate the future of TYA in Asia. This is why the ATYA Congress has both Asian and non-Asian regions in focus.

The first congress following the re-structuring was held in the Jockey Club Creative Arts Centre in Shek Kip Mei, Hong Kong, on 2–4 August 2019. We had chosen the “Chinese-speaking regions” and Denmark as the expanded regions-in-focus. The Chinese-speaking regions included mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Macau and Singapore, from which we had invited representatives. We also hosted the “Keywords of International TYA Trends” seminar. Keynote speakers included Zang Ningbei (Shanghai), Dr Kim Sookhee (Seoul) and Ju Shu-ming (Kaohsiung). They provided knowledge about, and reflections on, TYA, and had the opportunity to exchange experiences and get to know each other. The organiser also presented excerpt performances from five young Hong Kong TYA companies. This provided opportunities for international TYA professionals to get to know the work of young companies from Hong Kong and the development trends for Hong Kong TYA companies, and for these up-and-coming artists to join ATYA events.

Why did we choose Denmark?

During the Cold War, there was much disparity between Eastern and Western Europe in terms of social development, and the development of children’s arts. Connections were maintained, but there was competition as well. TYA in Eastern Europe centred on children’s theatres, a system combining the theatre company and the physical theatre. This system was based on the Moscow State Puppet Theatre named after Sergey Obraztsov and the National Marionette Theatre in Prague, and so it focused on puppetry. Governments in Eastern Europe invited esteemed directors, playwrights, actors, puppet masters, child psychologists and sociologists to meet and found **theatres** to serve young audiences. On the other hand in Western Europe, independent and small **theatre companies** were at the heart of TYA, which operated through regional touring. This was in stark contrast to the situation in Eastern Europe, which had children’s theatres as “home bases”.

In the 1950s and 1960s, Yugoslavia, Romania, Czechoslovakia were influenced by the children's puppet theatre festival of Charleville-Mézières, France, founded during the Second World War, and began to host various **arts festivals**. In Eastern Europe, most children's festivals include awards to establish a work's authority, and for public children's theatres to gain audience acceptance. Western European children's festivals take a different approach; that is, to attract audiences with multiple programmes favoured by the market, mixing in less commercially competitive programmes of high quality (for example, those with deeper and less superficially entertaining subjects). By presenting the latter in the same festival, these programmes gain more exposure, which in turn makes the theatre companies that produce them more competitive.

As a country, Denmark exhibits characteristics of both Eastern and Western Europe, and it has been a pioneer in exploring social issues in TYA. As a capitalist state with a strong leaning towards social welfare, Danish society features strong ideas of social responsibility and has established a fairly well-developed arts and cultural funding and subsidy system. This includes development centres dedicated to researching and organising TYA; large-scale non-profit arts festivals, and a willingness to subsidise the box office with public funding, so that the general public can afford to watch quality programmes and the market can be expanded.

Lessons from Denmark

Peter Manscher, our keynote speaker from Denmark, is a veteran in Denmark's TYA. Through him, we received and understood three TYA keywords in Denmark's TYA: theatre companies, theatres, and arts festivals. As the international events coordinator at the Danish Aprilfestival, he invited 80 performing groups to the festival annually. Additionally, between 1985 and 2017, he worked for the Danish Centre of the International Organization of Theatre for Children and

Young People ASSITEJ (Association Internationale du Theatre pour l'Enfance et la Jeunesse), which has come to be known as the local children's theatre. The topic he shared with us was "On Planning Arts Festivals and Activities—How to Treat Children with Equality and Respect".



Keynote speaker: Peter Manscher (Denmark) — Photo courtesy: Ming Ri Institute for Arts Education

In 1986, Danish artists and academics began to perform for children in schools. They did not perform programmes that adapted fairy tales to entertain young audiences; instead, they had adopted social issues as subject matter for their productions. In their view, children are to take charge of society in the future, and they have the right to know what is happening in the world. The government neither interfered with nor subsidised these performances. From then on, TYA in Denmark turned away from its original flair for entertainment and the circus arts and worked towards having smaller, well-run companies staging performances of good quality and quantity. An environment like this attracted people from various backgrounds to TYA, who were willing to participate in its production.

Manscher mentioned that children are experts in feelings. Only they know what kinds of feelings are triggered when events happen and what kind of events produce meanings for them. When children ask questions, it is because they feel “curious” and genuinely wish to find answers. At such moments, they explore and search for meanings. In contrast, when an adult asks children questions, these questions often come with predetermined answers. During his speech, Manscher posed these questions for the audience’s reflection: Why is theatre focused on conveying pre-existing ideas? Should the theatre leave more room for exploration on the part of audiences?

TYA Keywords in Seoul: Subsidy, Research, Exchange

Dr Kim Sookhee from Seoul spoke on the topic of “Trends in Asian Theatre Development”, in the context of the concept and development of theatre for infants and toddlers. She presented three keywords: subsidy, research, and exchange. She pointed out that infants and toddlers not only spend time with family, but they also need exposure to the outside world and various art forms, and this is crucial from the ages of one to three when an infant’s imagination is most vibrant. Light and shadow, brightness and shades, colours, music,

installations, tactility, big and small physical movements, and changes in facial expression—all stimulate the growth of infants and toddlers.

To suit the needs of infant and toddler audiences, one must adjust stage performances in terms of sound volume, footsteps and energy level, making them all softer, and thus the number of people in any one audience is limited. As Dr Kim pointed out, it is difficult for performing arts companies to sustain themselves without public and commercial financial support. And so, questions of “how to **subsidise**” and “the proportion and principles for subsidy” are key. I strongly believe that, in addition to theatre for infants and toddlers, TYA for other age brackets face the same problem. In order for the theatre to create the largest impact and inspire and stimulate child development, it is crucial to tone down commercial elements, and this necessarily involves a certain ratio of public subsidy. There is an urgent need for more in-depth **studies** into how to establish the scope for funding and a fair subsidy system.

Dr Kim stressed that Asia cannot simply copy the past experience of Europe. Meanwhile, borders and cultural differences should not hinder the universal right of young audiences to appreciate the arts. She encourages her Asian colleagues and performing arts industry personnel to expand **exchange** and collaboration: to review both the quality and numbers of Asian TYA programmes, and, with help from the ATYA, initiate more studies and research on infant and toddler audiences so as to create Asia’s own theatre for infants, toddlers and children.

TYA Keywords in Kaohsiung: Quality, Suitability, Window

Ju Shu-ming, Director of the Kaohsiung Dot Go Children's Art Festival, reminded us that the biggest crisis the TYA market currently faces is that the industry is reluctant to leave its comfort zone. Its players follow the trend of large-scale performances, focusing on entertainment and the market without considering whether the performance energy and the performance area covered are appropriate, nor how to fulfil their educational responsibility and how to present profound and difficult topics to young people in an in-depth manner. These reminders immediately resonated with me: Relatively shallow programmes, a shortage of quality programmes, and a lack of ideal performance venues are the results of an industry unable to escape its comfort zone. This leads to three keywords: quality, suitability and window.

In the selection of **quality** programmes, what does an arts festival consider apart from entertainment value? Ju stressed that TYA is a simulation of life and not a playground. Whereas the story in a theatre may be fictional, the emotions are genuine. And when the audience witnesses a character overcoming challenges, this vial of "life potion" may be of use in a young person's life one day. When choosing a quality programme, we must consider it from the perspective of children. We need to take into account cognitive stages, as well as physical and sensory reactions to stimulations of colours, shapes, sounds and natural phenomena in different ages—and the amusement aspect in the art form.

Ju highlighted that children from Asia are different from children from the West. When selecting a programme, one must consider: Is it **suitable** for the physical and psychological needs of young local audiences? Does it **match** the market's spending power? Does it **suit** the size of the local theatres? Will it resonate with local children? Will it stimulate young people to think? Can it stimulate parents to move towards more **appropriate** parenting values? After all, it is the parents who purchase tickets.

As Ju suggested with a strong emphasis, while it is certainly possible to use the box office as a benchmark for children's arts festivals around the world, it is more important to allow local arts practitioners to have a glimpse of the world's best works through arts festivals, and to make these festivals **windows** through which local artists can be exposed to these works.



Keynote speakers (from left to right): Zang Ningbei (Shanghai), Dr Kim Soohkee (Seoul), Ju Shu-ming (Kaohsiung) — Photo courtesy: Ming Ri Institute for Arts Education

TYA Keywords in Shanghai: Professionalism, Theatres, Festive Spirit

Zang Ningbei, Executive Director of Ninedu Theatre, Shanghai, has joined over a hundred arts festivals around the world. In view of different degrees of professionalism in various places, he is convinced that **professionalism** of personnel in all roles, who must have a commitment to excellence in performance and a genuine respect for the audience, is of utmost importance on the path of developing TYA. Here we consolidate three final keywords: professionalism, theatres and the festive spirit.

In the past, children's theatres in mainland China were not designed with the height, size or sightline of children in mind. Mostly, theatres had adequate facilities, lavish furnishings and were multi-functional, but one could not call them **theatres** for young audiences.

Arts festivals in Western Europe strategise by presenting programmes intensively over a period of time, to generate a **festive spirit**. Filled with a sense of the occasion, people are more receptive to different types of performing arts productions and more esoteric and innovative performances. They will, in turn, become loyal audiences for children's theatre.

Spotlight Report on TYA in Chinese-Speaking Regions

Children's drama is the most popular type of performing arts in mainland China. Zang mentioned that, while the government has begun to pay attention to children's plays, in general the theatres are too big, with too many seats, and the scale of production is too lavish and commercially-driven. This sense of vanity might not serve children's growth. In recent years, children's theatre in mainland China has not balanced educating children and stimulating their psychological and mental developmental needs, and that arts festivals, theatres and companies with children in mind have proved inadequate. He pointed out

that the professional attitude of mainland stage workers leaves much to be desired, and the performances have not had the expected societal impact—in summary, much room for improvement.

TYA critic Hsieh Hung-wen from Taiwan pointed out that there are numerous companies filled with talented people in Taiwan's TYA sector. However, theatre companies are generally not adventurous, leaving commercial and large-scale productions to dominate the mainstream, while overlooking teenage audiences. There is no in-depth discussion on a societal level regarding how to devise a well-established funding system, nor on how to produce quality programmes. As the market becomes dominated by a handful of mega-companies, theatre companies in the community have begun to imitate the commercial mode of these mega-companies in exchange for recognition and subsidies, in turn compromising the quality of performances. This is a worrying situation.

Out of all the Chinese-speaking regions, Singapore hosts children's arts festivals the most frequently, and these festivals seem to be flourishing here the most. Caleb Lee, Co-Artistic Director of the local Five Stones Theatre, introduced many local theatre companies and arts festivals. He postulated that too many arts festivals and programmes are slotted in the same period. This leads to competition and a plethora of marketing promotions which overwhelm parents and lead to quality programmes being overshadowed.



Presenter: Caleb Lee (Singapore) — Photo courtesy: Ming Ri Institute for Arts Education

Theatre arts and TYA in Macau developed at a relatively slower pace than in other Chinese-speaking regions, but local artists should be proud of their achievements so far. Artistic director Pinky Chan and outreach and education director Mabina Choi from the Big Mouse Kids Drama Group have introduced many up-and-coming groups. However, the lack of formal venues and a short-sighted funding system are preventing theatre companies from long-term planning. The local arts scene, while close-knit and with ample exchange opportunities and room for collaboration, suffers from a lack of direction and lack of focus on TYA development.

In the Chinese-speaking world, Hong Kong was among the first regions to see performing arts groups in the community receive government funding and the successful training of stage practitioners. However, neither the government nor the community has carried out satisfactory research into TYA. In an explanation of Hong Kong's TYA before her talk, cultural researcher Miu Law categorised theatre organisations into five types: companies that focus on theatre **for** young audiences; companies with adult audiences that produce theatre **to** young audiences concurrently; companies that focus on adult audiences with a formidable theatre education department, which provides training for young performers; companies that produce theatre **by** and **with** young audiences, and educational theatres. In my view, the arts funding system in Hong Kong and its financial dexterity are robust. But a lack of supporting research means that resources are not put in the right place. Artistic teams and companies from different walks of life also lack exchange and collaboration, so it is difficult to provide proposals in unison to the government, and feedback from children and teenagers is wiped out altogether.

After the congress, I tried to compile the keywords for further analysis and proposals:

Research seems to be the most significant keyword in Chinese-speaking regions. Taiwan urgently needs studies on the subsidy mode of TYA, to establish criteria for subsidy so that theatre companies can break out of a commercial mode of operation through funding and subsidy; Singapore needs to study how to subsidise arts festivals and utilise the festive spirit, so that parents may get to know and choose **quality** programmes apart from the mainstream; Macau should study how to link up TYA and tourism, in order to make an impact in tourism and cultural development; Hong Kong needs to focus on making subsidy and funding better suit the needs of artist companies, and mainland China might focus on studying how official theatres can subsidise quality theatre companies in the community to lead them on the path to professionalism.

Another consensus concerned the pursuit of **quality** creative works. As arts festivals and theatres in mainland China are given their due weight, official children's theatres should play a larger role as a window to foster exchange and introduce quality programmes, in order to establish quality and professional theatre companies and works in the community. Perhaps the Singaporean government can provoke a festive spirit through encouraging programme shopping, and subsidise specific quality programmes in arts festivals. This could lead to establishing a wider TYA market that encompasses its local context as well as other countries in southeast Asia through exchange and collaboration. For Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macau, governments should initiate changes in the operation of public children's arts festivals to introduce more quality overseas programmes, so that they may become a window to nurture local professional companies and stimulate their growth and the creation of quality local programmes. Along with this, I advocate separating TYA from existing performing arts categorisations so that it can become its own art form eligible for funding; one which welcomes long-term planning to nurture excellent young artists and provide opportunities for growth.

Funding is the most contentious topic in the discussion of TYA, and its development is different in each Chinese-speaking region. All TYA, particularly theatre for infants and toddlers, must be subsidised and funded to a certain degree. One solution that might be suitable for all regions is to establish an authoritative arts development institution for funding TYA and, through this middle agent, build a funding system which closely maps professional needs. In mainland China, it follows that governmental theatres could be in charge; in Taiwan, children's theatre community development centres modelled after the ones in Denmark might be the way forward, in which these centres would be organisers premiering TYA programmes; Macau should consider long-term planning and develop a local TYA network; Singapore should build a funding system that looks into the future, and Hong Kong should

end the situation in which TYA is in competition for funding resources with other performing arts genres.

Theatres (physical venues) are another crucial element, which are important to see from a child's perspective, taking into account the size, distance from the stage, and seating height of the theatre to suit the physical and psychological needs of children, in order to provide suitable venues for the creation of quality children-centred productions. Mainland China was the first region in Asia to establish children's theatres. The design of theatres in the past no longer meets the needs of children today, and it has become a new trend to build suitable black box theatres. Many property developments and communities have community venues for cultural and entertainment use, which can be converted into black box theatres to benefit the development of local TYA. Taiwan, Macau, Singapore and Hong Kong need to catch up in terms of the development of TYA theatres and children's theatre development centres, in order to meet the future needs of society. Ultimately, one wishes that all regions in Asia will one day follow the example of Seoul in building such a facility as the Jongno Children's Arts Theatre, a theatre for children.

Collaboration is an important and pressing topic for Chinese-speaking and Asian regions. As Dr Kim Sookhee said, Asian institutions and practitioners must strengthen cooperation, and research into directions for TYA development, exchanging with and learning from each other.

A Conclusion Regarding TYA Keywords, Using the Imagination

Allow me to conclude on these keywords using my imagination: How can **theatre companies** be inspired and grow without **exchange** platforms in the Asian TYA sector, without **arts**

festivals as a **window** to see the world, and without **research** projects into TYA? Without these elements, it is a real challenge to create TYA **suitable** for local audiences. How can the government and business sector establish a **subsidy** and sponsorship mechanism—one which supports festivals with public finance, creates a passionate **festive spirit** and builds quality audiences? With quality TYA audiences, profound, difficult and less accessible works of art may inspire children, who will develop a caring for society, a calm, firm and rational attitude, and an inspiring spirit for the future. Societal values have to change and regulate the market, leading to increasing commercial sponsorships, in order for **theatre** for young audiences and more **quality** programmes to materialise. When society accepts TYA as a **profession**, perhaps theatre companies and theatres will achieve greater synergy; we will see **theatres** for young audiences bloom everywhere in Asia. Let art infuse children's lives and nurture their growth.

(Translated by Sherlock Lam)



Simon Wong

co-founded the Anonymity Dramatic Club in 1984, before leading its transformation into the independent, professional company, the Ming Ri Institute for Arts Education, for which he now serves as director. Since 1983, he has worked with Hong Kong Repertory Theatre and the School of Technical Arts of the Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts. In 1993, he was awarded an Asian Cultural Council grant to visit the US to study children's theatre and its development. In 1999, he was presented with the Drama Practitioner Annual Achievement Award by the Hong Kong Arts Development Council. For six consecutive years between 2008 and 2014, he was the programme director and coordinator for the Quality Education Fund's Thematic Network (QTN) on Drama in Education. In 2008, Wong was elected as a member of the Executive Committee of the UNIMA (Union Internationale de la Marionette), a non-governmental organisation affiliated with the UNESCO. He also chaired its Education, Development and Puppet Therapy subcommittee between 2012 and 2016. Wong is currently the secretary general of the Asian Alliance of Festivals and Theatres for Young Audiences (ATYA), continuing his lifelong mission of promoting the art of children's theatre, education theatre, and puppetry preservation and development.

香港戲劇概述 2019・2020

HONG KONG DRAMA OVERVIEW 2019 & 2020

版次 2022年6月初版

First published in June 2022

資助 香港藝術發展局

Supported by Hong Kong Arts Development Council

計劃統籌、編輯	陳國慧	Project Coordinator and Editor	Bernice Chan Kwok-wai
編輯	朱琮愛	Editor	Daisy Chu King-oi
執行編輯	楊寶霖、郭嘉棋*	Executive Editors	Yeung Po-lam, Kwok Ka-ki*
英文編輯	黃麒名	English Editor	Nicolette Wong Kei-ming
英文校對	Rose Hunter	English Proofreader	Rose Hunter
協作伙伴	香港戲劇協會 香港專業戲劇人同盟 香港教育劇場論壇	Partners	Hong Kong Federation of Drama Societies The Alliance of Theatre Professionals of Hong Kong Hong Kong Drama/Theatre and Education Forum
設計	TGIF	Design	TGIF

© 國際演藝評論家協會(香港分會)有限公司

© International Association of Theatre Critics (Hong Kong) Limited

版權所有，本書任何部分未經版權持有人許可，不得翻印、轉載或翻譯。

All rights reserved; no part of this book may be reproduced, cited or translated without the prior permission in writing of the copyright holder.

出版 Published by

國際演藝評論家協會(香港分會)有限公司 International Association of Theatre Critics (Hong Kong) Limited

香港九龍石硤尾白田街30號賽馬會創意藝術中心L3-06C室

L3-06C, Jockey Club Creative Arts Centre, 30 Pak Tin Street, Shek Kip Mei, Kowloon, Hong Kong

電話 Tel (852) 2974 0542

傳真 Fax

(852) 2974 0592

網址 Website www.iatc.com.hk

電郵 Email

iatc@iatc.com.hk

國際書號 ISBN 978-988-76137-6-3



International Association
of Theatre Critics (Hong Kong)
國際演藝評論家協會(香港分會)



香港藝術發展局
Hong Kong Arts Development Council

國際演藝評論家協會(香港分會)為藝發局資助團體
IATC (HK) is financially supported by the HKADC

香港藝術發展局全力支持藝術表達自由，本計劃內容並不反映本局意見。

Hong Kong Arts Development Council fully supports freedom of artistic expression. The views and opinions expressed in this project do not represent the stand of the Council.

*藝術製作人員實習計劃由香港藝術發展局資助 The Arts Production Internship Scheme is supported by the Hong Kong Arts Development Council