

Hong Kong Xiqu Overview 2020



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Supported by the Hong Kong Arts Development Council

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Publisher Centre for Cultural Research and
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First published June 2022 v1.0.0

ISBN 978-988-76025-5-2

Supported by



香港藝術發展局
Hong Kong Arts Development Council

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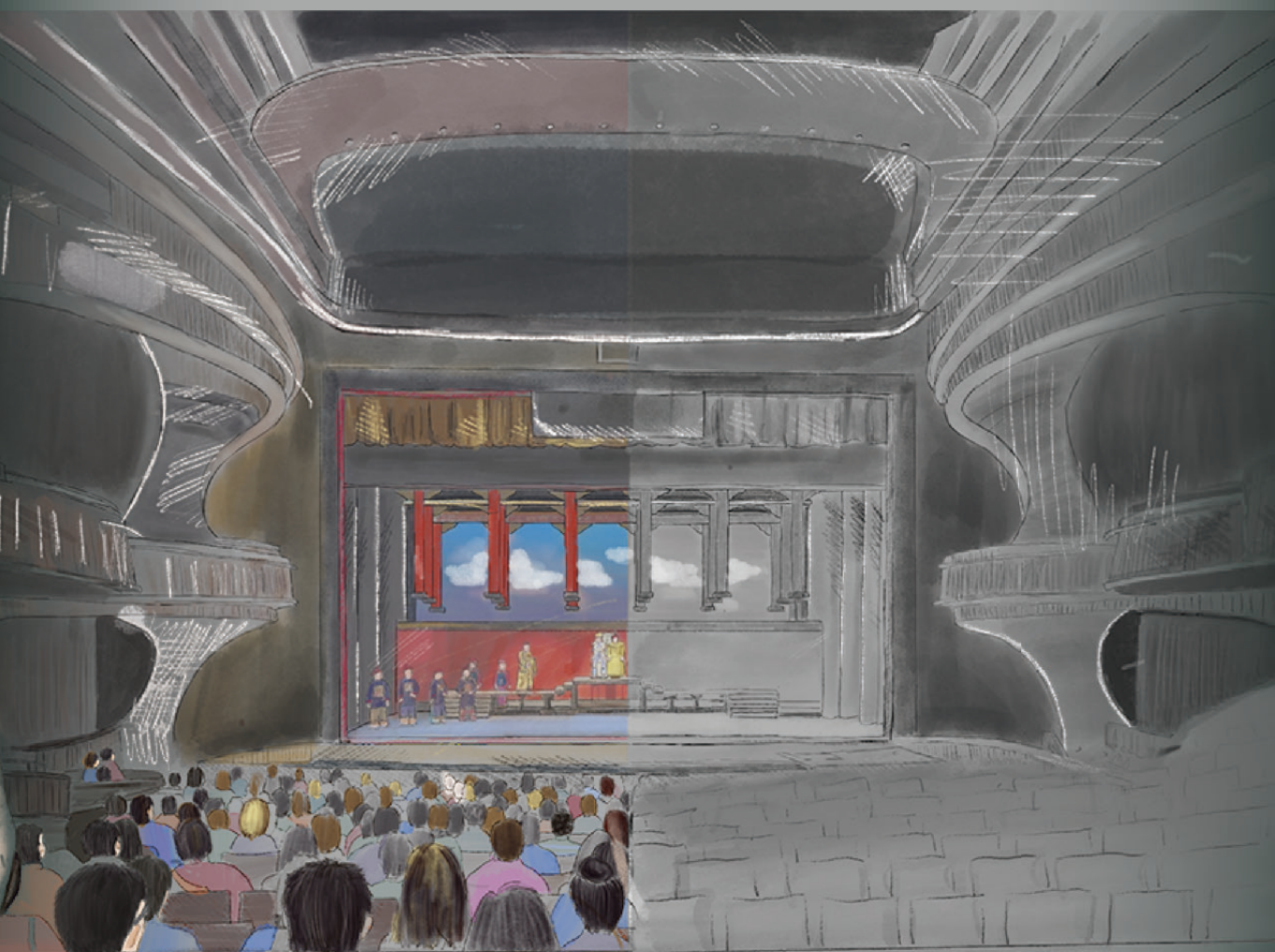
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Stability and Instability

Review of Chinese Opera Programming Strategies from the Vantage Point of 2020

Arthur S. Y. Pang

Looking back at the last decade of Hong Kong Chinese opera's artistic-administrative practices from 2020 the year of COVID-19 lockdown, Arthur Pang draws our attention to a sudden closure of a 10-year plus of stable existence of the traditional art form in this city. Chinese opera events in 2019 made Hong Kong feel jubilant for the vibrant performances on stage, the Chinese Opera Festival 2019 colored by the variety of regional Chinese operas presented, the grand opening of the long-awaited world-class Xiqu Centre.... All that predictable, uplifting movements dissolved into a prolonged unstable sequence of stop-motion since the first confirmed COVID-19 case in town in early 2020. Pang in this article first gives a quick overview of the recent history of the program presentations of regional Chinese operas in Hong Kong before contrasting the Chinese opera programs in 2019 and 2020 with respect to social stability and instability; and, viewing from the vantage point of 2020, mapping the strategies of programming regional Chinese operas of the Chinese Opera Festival and the Xiqu Centre.



Hong Kong has always been an active stage for Chinese opera. Not only Cantonese opera, other regional Chinese operas have been staged for years in Hong Kong. Extravaganzas of regional operas are organized by public as well as private presenters, where troupes or opera genres from various regions of China are invited to perform in Hong Kong.

One notable example of such shows was the Showcase of Chinese Regional Operas presented by the Hong Kong United Arts Entertainment Company Limited at the Sunbeam Theatre in the 1980s. At the 1986 showcase event, nine regional opera troupes from mainland China were invited. A variety of opera genres were presented, including Hunan opera, Shanxi opera, Yue opera from Shanghai, *Huangmeixi* from Anhui, Peking opera from Liaoning and others.¹ This is one of the examples in the last couple of decades of presenting a variety of regional Chinese opera genres in one event. The Hong Kong United Arts altogether did five rounds of showcases of Chinese regional operas. After that the agency went on to present several other Chinese operas extravaganzas such as the China Arts Festival (1992, 1994, 1996), and the 200th Anniversary of Hui Opera Troupes Arriving in Beijing (1990).²

Another example is the annual Chinese Opera Festival organized by the Hong Kong Urban Council in the 1970s. The Chinese Opera Festival was launched in 1978 at the Hong Kong City Hall Concert Hall, a ten-day gala event showcasing Peking opera, Yue opera and Cantonese opera.³ The festival were held for three consecutive years. The 1979 festival also presented Kunqu opera. A newspaper reported, “Tonight, the Chinese Opera Festival being held at the City Hall will stage a Kunqu opera show, a rare Chinese theatre

genre”⁴ This indicated that Kunqu opera was not regularly performed in Hong Kong at the time. Since the 1980s, Kunqu opera has been staged in Hong Kong more often. In November 1989, when the Hong Kong Cultural Centre was opened, amongst the grand programs in the multiple-week long celebration extravaganza was a showcase of all the six Kunqu opera troupes from China at that time.⁵ In 1997 the then Provisional Urban Council organized once again a Chinese Opera Festival presenting various regional Chinese opera genres. Over 40 Chinese opera troupes local and from mainland China were invited, with Peking opera, Kunqu opera and Cantonese opera taking up the core of the festival’s programs.⁶

It was not until 2010 that the Chinese Opera Festival was rebooted. The Leisure and Cultural Services Department (LCSD) of the Hong Kong SAR Government announced, “To promote and develop traditional Chinese opera, facilitate cultural exchange, and encourage cultural creativity, the LCSD will present the Chinese Opera Festival as a regular annual event to make Hong Kong the bridge and window exhibiting the art of Chinese opera to the rest of the world.”⁷ The 48-day Chinese Opera Festival 2010 took place from 4 June to 21 July, 12 opera troupes from Hong Kong and mainland China encompassing eight regional operas were invited, including Peking opera, Kunqu opera, Yue opera, Sichuan opera, Puxian opera, Zhengzi opera, Chaozhou opera and Cantonese opera. On top of the performances, there were activities like concerts of Cantonese operatic singing and other narrative singing genres, as well as talks and seminars. There were altogether over 60 events with a total number of audience attendance of over 50,000.⁸ Since then, the Chinese Opera Festival has been a notable event every summer and the largest

Chinese opera extravaganza of the decade.

2019 is a particularly bountiful year for regional opera events in Hong Kong. In addition to the annual Chinese Opera Festival, the year also marked the opening of the West Kowloon Cultural District Xiqu Centre after over 10 years of planning and preparation. The Xiqu Centre has positioned itself “Hong Kong’s first performing arts venue dedicated to promoting the rich heritage of Chinese opera.”⁹ A series of Chinese opera performances from expensive productions to small-scale experimental works of various Chinese regional opera genres were staged there in its opening year.

2020 saw an abrupt downturn of social conditions hitting hard the Hong Kong Chinese opera community (and that of the other performing arts). The sudden global spread of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020 (and that has lasted for more than two years at the time of writing) has made Chinese opera performances and related events almost totally frozen, as all public gathering of crowds in Hong Kong has been heavily restricted for lengthy periods since early 2020. Non-local Chinese opera troupes were not able to visit Hong Kong because of the imposition of COVID-19 lockdown laws. As such, 2020 turned out to be a convenient vantage point to conduct an overview of the programming strategies of both the newly launched Xiqu Centre and the long-standing LCSD in the past decade. 2020 virtually closed a chapter in the recent development history of Hong Kong Chinese opera as it changed radically the ecology of this industry. Reviewing the programming of regional Chinese operas by major presenters in this city in the relatively stable years from 2010 (debut of the reboot of the 1970s' Chinese Opera Festival) up to 2020 (outbreak of COVID-19) will be useful for rethinking

Chinese opera programming strategy and this traditional art form's existential situation in the post-COVID-19 era to come.

The Chinese Opera Festival 2010-2020

2020 was supposed to be the LCSD's Chinese Opera Festival stepping into its second decade of bringing to town a summer extravaganza of regional Chinese operas. Yet all the planned programs had to be cancelled because of the pandemic. The festival administrators' year-long effort of programming was wiped out. We shall give an overview of the festival's programs of regional Chinese operas from its inception in 2010 up to 2020 the first year of COVID-19 hit.

2020

The Chinese Opera Festival's Announcement: "In view of the latest situation of COVID-19, the Chinese Opera Festival (COF) scheduled to be held from June to August 2020 originally has been cancelled. The Leisure and Cultural Services Department organises the COF annually, inviting numerous professional arts groups from the Mainland to come to Hong Kong to offer audiences high-quality Chinese opera programmes in conjunction with local arts groups. Due to the pandemic and numerous uncertainties in global business travels, the LCSD and participating arts groups reached a consensus on cancelling the festival this year. See you at the 'Chinese Opera Festival 2021'!"

Peking Opera

2010

Theatre of Beijing
Jingkun Theatre and Peking Opera
Theatre of Hebei

2011

Shanghai Peking Opera Troupe
Jingkun Theatre and Peking Opera
Theatre of Hebei

2012

No. 1 Troupe of the China National
Peking Opera Company

2013

Tianjin Peking Opera Theatre

2014

Peking Opera Research Centre of
Hebei

2015

Shanghai Peking Opera Troupe
Jingkun Theatre and Shandong
Peking Opera Theatre
Peking Opera Theatre of Beijing

2016

Youth Troupe of the Peking Opera
Theatre of Beijing and Li Baochun
First Troupe of the China National
Peking Opera Company

2017

Peking Opera Theatre of Beijing and
First Troupe of the China National
Peking Opera Company
Jingkun Theatre & Shandong Peking
Opera Theatre

2018

Second Troupe of the China National
Peking Opera Company

2019

China National Peking Opera
Company and Shanghai Jingju
Theatre Company
Jingkun Theatre and Shandong
Peking Opera Theatre

Kunqu Opera

2010

Showcase of Outstanding Young Performers in Kunqu Opera

2011

Showcase of Kunqu Opera Classic Excerpts

Northern Kunqu Opera Theatre

2012

Suzhou Kunqu Opera Theatre of Jiangsu Province

Jingkun Theatre

2013

Shanghai Kunqu Opera Troupe

Jiangsu Kunqu Opera Theatre

2014

Jingkun Theatre and Northern Kunqu Opera Theatre

2015

Suzhou Kunqu Opera Theatre of Jiangsu and Su Opera Troupe

2016

Zhejiang Kunqu Opera Troupe

Shanghai Kunqu Opera Troupe

2017

Suzhou Kunqu Opera Theatre of Jiangsu

2018

Shanghai Kunqu Opera Troupe

2019

Jiangsu Kunqu Opera Theatre

Yue Opera

2010

Xiaobaihua Yue Opera Troupe of Shaoxing

2012

Xiaobaihua Troupe of Hangzhou Yue Opera Theatre

2014

Four Stylistic Schools of Xiaosheng Roles in Yue Opera

2017

Shanghai Yue Opera Group

2018

Xiaobaihua Yue Opera Troupe of Shaoxing

2019

Shanghai Yue Opera Group

Cantonese Opera

2010

Hon Fung Cantonese Opera
Institute

2011

The Last Emperor of Southern Tang
(New version)

2012

A New Cantonese Opera *Justice*
Bao

2013

A New Cantonese Opera *Battle at*
Wancheng

2014

A New Cantonese Opera
Investigation to Redress a Wrong

2015

A New Cantonese Opera *Her*
Majesty Wu Zetian

2016

Cantonese Opera *Sacrificing the Son*

2017

Enlightenment of the Goddess of
Mercy, Grand Birthday Celebration
at Mount Heung Fa by The Chinese
Artists Association of Hong Kong

A New Cantonese Opera *Battle of*
the Throne

2018

A Tale of Two Genres - Xiqin Opera
and Traditional Cantonese Opera
Cantonese Opera *The Return of*
Lady Wenji

2019

A New Cantonese Opera *A Love*
Poem Stained with Blood

Chiu Chow Opera

2010

Guangdong Chiu Chow Opera
Theatre Number Two Troupe and
Hong Kong Sun Hon Kwong Chiu
Chow Opera Troupe

2011

Guangdong Chiu Chow Opera
Theatre Number One Troupe and
Hong Kong Sun Hon Kwong Chiu
Chow Opera Troupe

Zhengzi Opera

2010

Zhengzi Opera Troupe of Lufeng
City of Guangdong

Sichuan Opera

2010

Sichuan Opera Theatre of Chengdu

2017

Chongqing Chuan Theatre

Puxian Opera

2010

Lisheng Opera Troupe of Fujian

2018

Fujian Puxian Theatre

Qí Opera

2011

Qí Opera Theatre of Hunan

2015

Centre for the Preservation of Qí
Opera of Hunan

Gaojia Opera

2011

Jin Liansheng Gaojia Opera Troupe
of Xiamen City

Huangmei Opera

2012

Anhui Huangmei Opera Theatre

Gezí Opera

2012

Tang Mei Yun Taiwanese Opera
Company

Gan Opera

2012

Gan Opera Theatre of Jiangxi
Province

Qinqiáng

2012

The Youth Experimental Theatre of
the Shaanxi Traditional Opera
Research Institute

2017

Shaanxi Traditional Opera Research
Institute and Xi'an Yisu Society

Sixián Opera

2013

Shijiazhuang Sixian Opera Troupe
of Hebei

Wu Opera

2013

Zhejiang Wu Opera Research Centre

2017

Zhejiang Wu Opera Research Centre

Xiang Opera

2013

Xiang Opera Theatre of Hunan

2017

Zhejiang Wu Opera Research
Centre

Diaoqiang

2013

Xinchang Diaoqiang Troupe of
Zhejiang

2018

Xinchang Diaoqiang Heritage
Protection and Development Centre
of Zhejiang

Yongjia Kunqu Opera

2011

Zhejiang Yongjia Kunqu Opera
Troupe

Dian Opera

2011

Yunnan Dian Opera Theatre

Liyuan Opera

2012

Experimental Theatre of Liyuan
Opera of Fujian

2019

Experimental Theatre of Liyuan
Opera of Fujian



Baizi Opera

2014

Haifeng Baizi Opera Troupe of
Guangdong

Yu Opera

2014

No.2 Troupe of Yu Opera Theatre of
Henan

Dacheng Opera

2015

Quanzhou Wu Tianyi Centre for
Dacheng Opera Heritage of Fujia

Qimen Mulian Opera

2015

Qimen Mulian Opera Troupe of
Anhui

Su Opera

2015

Suzhou Kunqu Opera Theatre of
Jiangsu and Su Opera Troupe

Shao Opera

2016

Shao Opera Art Research Institute
of Zhejiang

Daxianzi Opera

2016

Research Institute of Regional
Opera Legacy of Heze Municipal,
Shandong

Zaobang Opera

2016

Research Institute of Regional
Opera Legacy of Heze Municipal,
Shandong

Liangjiaxian Opera

2016

Research Institute of Regional
Opera Legacy of Heze Municipal,
Shandong

Dapingdiao Opera

2016

Research Institute of Regional Opera
Legacy of Heze Municipal,
Shandong



Shangdong Bangzi Opera

2016

Research Institute of Regional
Opera Legacy of Heze Municipal,
Shandong

Xiqin Opera

2018

A Tale of Two Genres - Xiqin Opera
and Traditional Cantonese Opera

Pingdiao Opera

2018

Pingdiao Art Heritage Centre of
Ninghai

Wanwanqiang Opera

2017

Shaanxi Traditional Opera Research
Institute and Xi'an Yisu Society

Meihu Opera

2017

Shaanxi Traditional Opera Research
Institute and Xi'an Yisu Society

Guanzhongdaoqing Opera

2017

Shaanxi Traditional Opera Research
Institute and Xi'an Yisu Society

Ou Opera

2019

Wenzhou Opera Research Institute

As shown in the above listing, the Chinese Opera Festival had staged 38 genres of regional Chinese operas since 2010. Among them, Peking opera, Kunqu opera and Cantonese opera were on the program every year (the Cantonese operas staged were mostly new works), followed by (Shanghai) Yue opera which appeared on the program for six years; the remaining genres were mostly staged for one or two years. 2017 was the year which saw the most genres staged (10 in total), while 2011 and 2019 had the least (six). In terms of genre selection, other than the popular genres such as Peking opera, Kunqu opera and Yue opera, the festival's programming tended to favor older genres such as Qinqiang, Puxian opera, Liyuan opera.

The Chinese Opera Festival 2020 was taken out by COVID-19. The LCSD announced the cancellation on 29 April on its official Facebook page and stating that it would return in 2021. The LCSD's 28 April press updates briefly mentioned that its programming had originally contracted numerous mainland Chinese as well as overseas performing arts groups.¹⁰ Contrasting with the

tumultuous 2020 “cancel year,” 2019 was liked a full-bloom last stand of the Chinese Opera Festival before the COVID-19 outbreak.

The Chinese Opera Festival 2019 opened with Peking opera. There were altogether six Peking opera shows. The first three programs were *The Boar Forest*, *The Great Beauty Xi Shi*, and *Mu Guiying Taking Command*. The latter two are representative works of grand master Mei Lanfang, and were performed at the festival by Yu Kuizhi and Li Shengsu. Yang Chi, disciple of renowned painted-face actor Yuan Shikai took the lead in the first act of *The Boar Forest*.

The other three shows were staged by the Shanghai Jingju Theatre Company. The first show included *Vermilion Birthmark* featuring Wang Peiyu, renowned female artist of the Yu (Shuyan) school of the old male role-type performance; followed by *Water Nymph of Sizhou City*, a woman warrior play; and *Red Mulberry Town*, a demanding work for the painted-face and old female role-type actors. The second show consisted of *Su San Escorted to Trial* and *Trial by Three Magistrates* from *Yu Tang Chun*, starring Shi Yihong of the Mei (Lanfang) school of female role-type performance, and *Wu Song Fighting in the Tavern*, a signature work of Gai Jiaotian. The last show was a full-length play *Seven Heroes and Five Gallants*, a crowd pleaser with seven actors sharing a series of extensive vocal passages as the selling point.

As for Kunqu opera, the Jiangsu Kunqu Opera Theatre presented one show of a full-length play *The Mistakes Caused by a Kite* and two shows of selected classic excerpts. The cast included renowned veteran actresses Shi Xiaomei, Hu Jinfang and Zhang Jidie, all Representative Bearers of Kunqu Opera as a National

Intangible Cultural Heritage and winners of the Plum Blossom Award. They performed excerpts from *The Peony Pavilion*, *The Legend of the Embroidered Coat*, and *The Iron Headgear*. The full-length *Mistakes Caused by a Kite* was performed by National Class One actor Qian Zhenrong with Plum Blossom Award winner Li Hongliang.

The Shanghai Yue Opera Group staged popular Yue operas with a star-studded cast including the vice president of the group Qian Huili [of the Xu (Yulan) school], director of Troupe One of the Group Fang Yafen [of the Yuan (Xuefen) school], Zhang Ruihong of the Fan (Ruijuan) school, Shan Yangping and Wang Zhiping both of the Wang (Wenjuan) school. Yue opera classics *Romance of the West Chamber*, *Meng Lijun*, *Tale of the West Garden* and *Southeast the Peacocks Fly* were staged.

Other than the above three major Chinese opera genres, the 2019 Festival also presented Liyuan opera and Ouju opera from Zhejiang. The Liyuan opera show was performed by the Experimental Theatre of Liyuan Opera of Fujian, which marked the second time that the troupe performed at the Chinese Opera Festival. LCSD's publicity highlighted the more than 800 years history of Liyuan opera, one of the oldest existing regional Chinese operas, as well as its repertoire of restored versions of old plays. Take for example the dialogues and lyrics in *Zhu Maichen* (version based on incomplete parts from ancient scripts), the old Fujian dialect and slangs were retained for this production.

Ouju opera was presented for the first time at the Chinese Opera Festival 2019. The promotion emphasized the delicate and subtle singing in the civil acts and the many special and unique techniques in the fighting

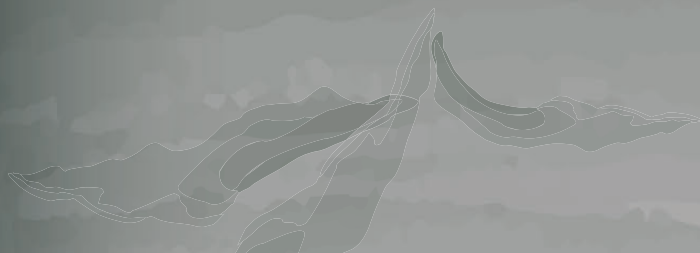
scenes.¹¹ Performed by the Wenzhou Opera Research Institute, the program consisted of both civil and martial plays including *The Legend of the White Snake*, *Killing a Dog to Admonish Her Husband* and *Gao Ji and Wu Sanchun*. The promotion video on the festival website showed that the selling points of the first two plays were the fighting skills and body movements, while *Gao Ji and Wu Sanchun* was romance drama. All three plays starred the popular Ouju opera actors Fang Rujiang and Cai Xiaoqiu. *The Legend of the White Snake* is a signature play of Fang Rujiang's.


It is notable that the 2019 Chinese Opera Festival co-organized with the newly opened Xiqu Centre several productions that were staged at the Grand Theatre of the Xiqu Centre. There was also a performer-audience “close proximity” small-scale production entitled *The Fragrance of Chrysanthemums and Orchids – A Close Encounter of Peking Opera and Kunqu Opera* at the Xiqu Centre Tea House Theatre. All three shows presented excerpts from Peking and Kunqu operas: *The Daughter of the Horse Trader*, *The Crossroads*, *The Pulley* and others. The cast included Tang Yuen-ha, Plum Blossom Award winner from Hong Kong, renowned Kunqu veteran Cai Zhengren from Shanghai, and Kunqu old male role-type actor Lu Yongchang. The Tea House Theatre is a small-sized theatre that provides around 100 seats with close proximity between the audience and the performers. The show's publicity spotlighted, “Staged in the intimate setting of the Xiqu Centre Tea House Theatre, the three performances in this mixed and diverse program offer audiences an up-close and unique experience of two of the most prominent xiqu genres: Peking opera commonly represented by chrysanthemum, and Kunqu, represented by orchids.”¹²



The Xiqu Centre, West Kowloon Cultural District: New Promotor of Chinese Opera Facing COVID-19

The Xiqu Centre, the first performance venue completed amongst those planned by the West Kowloon Cultural District,¹³ was officially opened in 2019, meaning that in addition to the LCSD's performing arts presentations throughout the year, there would be in the years to come more platforms and opportunities for regional Chinese operas to meet Hong Kong audiences. The Chairman of the WKCD Board Henry Tang said on the opening day of the Xiqu Centre, "I hope that the Xiqu Centre will be an important 'centre' where different regional Chinese operas will converge."¹⁴ In its opening year, the Xiqu Centre already presented many heavyweight regional opera performances in collaboration with the Chinese Opera Festival to create a sumptuous feast of Chinese opera shows.





The Xiqu Centre's Chinese Opera Presentations 2019 & 2020¹⁵

2019

Date

30 Dec 2018 – 6 Jan 2019

Performing Organization/Performer

The Chinese Artists Association of Hong Kong

Regional Opera

Cantonese opera

Program Title

Stage Dedication and Open Day Cantonese
Opera Performances

Date

21-30 Jan (no show on 24 Jan)

Performing Organization/Performer

Cast: Chan Po Chu, Mui Suet Sze,
Yau Sing Po, Liu Kwok Sum, Tam Wing
Lun, Wong Hai Wing, Leung Fei Tung

Regional Opera

Cantonese opera

Program Title

The Reincarnation of the Red Plum

Date

9 Feb – 1 Mar

Performing Organization/Performer

Hong Kong Cantonese Opera Chamber of Commerce

Regional Opera

Cantonese opera

Program Title

Spring Festival Showcase by the Hong Kong Cantonese Opera
Chamber of Commerce

Date

14-17 Mar

Performing Organization/Performer

China Theatre Association Plum Blossom Award Art Troupe

Regional Opera

Peking opera, Kun opera, Cantonese opera, Yue opera, Gannan
Tea-picking opera, Ping opera, Ou opera, Yuju opera

Program Title

A Master Selection of Peking Opera, Kunqu Opera, Cantonese
Opera and other Regional Operas

Date

2-5 May

Performing Organization/Performer

Shanghai Kunqu Opera Troupe

Regional Opera

Kunqu opera

Program Title

*Four Dreams in the Camellia Hall (A Pair of Purple
Hairpins, The Peony Pavilion, A Dream Under the
Southern Bough, The Tale of Handan)*

Date

30-31 Aug 30-31

Performing Organization/Performer

GuoGuang Opera Company

Regional Opera

Peking opera

Program Title

Dowager Xiao-Zhuang and Dorgon

Date

6-7 Sept [Cancelled]

Performing Organization/Performer

Hong Kong and Macau Intangible Cultural Heritage Research
Centre, Bak Yuk Ging Cantonese Opera Troupe of Macau,
Guangdong Cantonese Opera Theatre, Nanning Cantonese
Opera Troupe

Regional Opera

Cantonese opera

Program Title

Showcase of Classical Cantonese Opera Excerpts

Date
15 Sept

Performing Organization/Performer

Cast: Li Qiuyuan, Wang Kit Ching, Yuen Tak Cheong,
Jim Ho Fung, Tsai Chi Wei

Regional Opera

Cantonese opera

Program Title

Passing Down the Legacy: Cantonese
Opera Showcase

Date
6 Oct – 24 Nov

Performing Organization/Performer

Shanghai Kunqu Opera Troupe

Shanghai Yue Opera Group

Xiqu Centre (producing Experimental
Cantonese Opera *Farewell My Concubine*)

Regional Opera

Kunqu opera, Yue opera, Cantonese opera.

Program Title

Experimental Chinese Opera Series 2019

Date
15-17 Nov [Cancelled]

Performing Organization/Performer

Chongqing Chuanju Theatre

Regional Opera

Sichuan opera

Program Title

Li Yaxian

A Master Selection of Sichuan Opera Excerpts

Date

11-12 Dec 11 – 12 [Cancelled]

Performing Organization/Performer

Shanxi Jin Opera Theatre, Datong Beilu Bangzi
Opera Learning Centre, Jincheng Shangdang
Bangzi Opera Theatre, Linfen Small Plum
Blossoms Pu Opera Training Centre

Regional Opera

Jin opera, Beilu bangzi, Shangdang bangzi, Pu
opera

Program Title

Rare Classics: Shanxi Opera Excerpts

2020

Date

26-29 Aug [Cancelled]

Performing Organization/Performer

Shanghai Kunqu Opera Troupe

Regional Opera

Kunqu opera

Program Title

*Ringling the Palace Bell, The Story of the Jade
Hairpin, The Outburst of a Shrew*

Date

10 Oct - 15 Nov [Cancelled mostly]

Performing Organization/Performer

Shanghai Kunqu Opera Troupe

Shanghai Yue Opera Group

Jin Liansheng Gaojia Opera Troupe

Contemporary Legend Theatre

Xiqu Centre (producing Experimental Cantonese
opera *Farewell My Concubine* and *Wenguang
Explores the Valley*)

Regional Opera

Kunqu opera, Yue opera, Gaojia opera, Peking opera,
Cantonese opera

Program Title

Experimental Chinese Opera Festival 2020

[performances by the Shanghai Kunqu Opera Troupe, Shanghai Yue
Opera Group Troupe, Jin Liansheng Gaojia Opera Troupe and Hsing
Legend Youth Theatre cancelled]

In 2019, among the 11 performance events organized by the Xiqu Centre, six of them were Chinese opera shows, with 13 regional operas (Cantonese opera included). Similar to the Chinese Opera Festival organized by the LCSD, the Xiqu Centre has also been presenting significantly more Peking, Kunqu and Yue operas than the other regional genres, and featuring these three genres at an important position too.

The first regional opera performance staged at the Xiqu Centre was the Master Selection of Peking opera, Kunqu, Cantonese Opera and Mixed Xiqu Excerpts performed by the star-studded China Theatre Association Plum Blossom Award Art Troupe. Taking part in the extravaganza were 27 Plum Blossom Award winners and many of them were two or three-time winners. Among the performances were *Fleeing by Night*, a signature play of Pei Yanling performed by Pei herself; *Red Mulberry Town* performed by painted face actor Meng Guanglu, *Qin Qiong Inspects the Army* performed by male warrior actor Wang Ping, and *The Fourth Son Visits His Mother: Remembering His Mother at the Palace* performed by Zhang Fenglian and Zhang Xingyue. Kunqu opera performances included the “Calling Upon the Picture” scene from *The Peony Pavilion*, a signature play of the renowned master Cai Zhengren; the demanding military play *Lu Bu Breaking in the Horse* performed by Lin Weilin; “The Birth of a Son” from *Reunited by a White Hare* performed by Wang Fang; and “The Gift of a Sword” from *Princess Baihua* and “The Battle on the Water” from *The Legend of the White Snake* performed by renowned woman warrior performers Yang Fengyi and Gu Haohao, exhibiting their brilliant acrobatic skills together with Wang Zhenyi and Wu Shuang in supporting roles. The cast of this event encompassed the most outstanding Chinese opera actors from three generations from the

late 1970s (when China's open policy began) to the 2010s. In its opening year, the Xiqu Centre already featured an array of regional Chinese operas performed by a stellar cast from multiple generations.

Among the various regional operas staged, Gangnan Tea-Picking opera was the most rarely presented genre in Hong Kong; *Tang Er Tests His Wife* performed by Long Hong and Du Huan was a comedy accompanied in song and dance; Yue opera classic *He Wenxiu: Fortune-telling* was performed by Xiao Ya of the Yin (Ruijuan) school; Ping opera *Zhao Jintang: Reunited at the Rice Distribution* was performed by two-time Plum Blossom Award winner Zeng Zhaojuan; Ouju opera *The Legend of the White Snake: The Broken Bridge* performed by Fang Rujiang was also the signature play of Fang, who again performed the full-length version at the Chinese Opera Festival of the same year. Yuju opera *The Breezy Pavilion: The Lost Son* was performed by Li Shujian. All in all, the China Theatre Association Plum Blossom Award Art Troupe presented all-encompassing programs with both martial and civil plays, the selected excerpt classics featured solo performances of various role-type actors, zooming in on the artistry of the performing artists.

In early May 2019, Shanghai Kunqu Opera Troupe was invited to perform *Four Dreams in the Camellia Hall* at the Xiqu Centre. A renowned opera troupe of China, the Shanghai Kunqu Opera Troupe has been performing in Hong Kong since the 1980s, including three appearances at the Chinese Opera Festival. In late 2019, the troupe collaborated with the Chinese Artists Association of Hong Kong to perform the full-length version of *The Legend of the White Snake* at the China Shanghai International Arts Festival. In March when Gu Haohao, director of the troupe, performed in Hong Kong

with the Plum Blossom Arts Troupe, she said that the troupe would have visited Hong Kong three times in the same year and performed at the Xiqu Centre.¹⁶ As part of the agreement signed between the Xiqu Centre and the Shanghai Center of Chinese Operas in 2016,¹⁷ it is only natural that the Shanghai Kunqu Opera Troupe became the first Chinese opera troupe to perform at the Xiqu Centre.¹⁸

Ming Dynasty playwright Tang Xianzu's four works *A Pair of Purple Hairpins*, *The Peony Pavilion*, *A Dream Under the Southern Bough* and *The Tale of Handan*, collectively known as *Four Dreams in the Camellia Hall*. The Shanghai Kunqu Opera Troupe made a new, grand production of the four masterpieces for the commemoration of the 400th anniversary of the death of the playwright, which has been performed in China as well as abroad multiple times since 2016. At the Chinese Opera Festival 2016, the troupe presented a vocal concert of the *Four Dreams*, and the first time for the troupe to stage this full version in Hong Kong was at the Xiqu Centre in 2019. The cast included the three core actors of the troupe: Li An, Shen Yili and Wu Shuang. This also indicated that the programming direction of the Xiqu Centre has leaned toward big productions. Meanwhile, the Centre has another facet of programming toward the modern "little theatre" concept of productions.

After the Kunqu performances followed the Peking opera *Dowager Xiao-Zhuang and Dorgon* performed by the Guoguang Opera Company of Taiwan, starring Wei Hai-min and Tang Wen-hwa, the two principal actors of the company, together with Wen Yu-hang. The play was an original new work premiered in 2016. Unlike the troupes from mainland China which perform mostly traditional classics, Guoguang's recent creative direction

has produced mostly new works of large scale as well as studio style. For example, in 2016, Guoguang collaborated with Hong Kong's experimental theatre Zuni Icosahedron to stage the new Peking opera "little theatre" work *Lord Guan Yu on Stage*, and in the same year performed *The Ghost Seller* in collaboration with Xiqu Centre. In 2018, Guoguang staged *Sunlight After Snowfall*, a heavyweight new Peking opera work, with music accompaniment in western orchestral music performed by the Hong Kong Philharmonic Orchestra. Also notable is that Guoguang had not appeared at the Chinese Opera Festival prior to its shows in the opening year of the Xiqu Centre, and it was the first Chinese opera troupe that presented a full-length Peking opera at the Xiqu Centre.

In 2019, the Hong Kong SAR Government proposed the extradition bill to amend the Fugitive Offenders Ordinance. It sparked massive social protests, and many performing groups planning to perform in Hong Kong later in the year were affected. The Xiqu Centre had originally arranged the Shanghai Kunqu Opera Troupe, the Shanghai Yue Opera Group, the Chongqing Chuanju Theatre, and the four troupes from the Shanxi province to perform three programs in Hong Kong. It was forced to cancel all. The Xiqu Centre's original programming of bringing six regional operas to Hong Kong was reduced to only three.

Both the Shanghai Kunqu Opera Troupe and the Shanghai Yue Opera Group under the Shanghai Center of Chinese Operas were to take part in the *Experimental Chinese Opera Series*¹⁹ to perform the plays recommended by their parent institute: experimental Kunqu opera *The Chairs* and experimental Yue opera *Destiny of Rebirth*. The former is an adaptation of French theatre of the absurd playwright Eugène Ionesco's famous play of the

same name, starring Wu Shuang and Shen Yili. *Destiny of Rebirth*'s cast included Xi Yaqin, Wang Qin and Wang Rousang. The play used an "avant-garde production (that) blurs the boundary between stage and auditorium, inviting the audience to move among the performers and experience the plot from the perspective of those involved, in a fully immersive encounter" as selling point.²⁰

As for the Chongqing Chuanju Theatre, the original program plan was to stage *Li Yaxian* with Shen Tiemei (also director of the theatre) in the title role, and Sun Yongbo co-starring, as well as a selection of Sichuan opera excerpts in the vocal style of *gaoqiang* and *kunqiang*. Shen Tiemei is a (if not the) leading performing artist in Sichuan opera, three-time winner of the Plum Blossom Award. *Li Yaxian* is one of her signature plays. The work has been staged by the Chongqing Chuanju Theatre at Hong Kong's Chinese Opera Festival 2017.

Lastly is the program *Rare Classics: Shanxi Opera Excerpts* featuring four troupes from the Shanxi province to perform an array of Shanxi operas: Jin opera, Beilu bangzi, Shangdang bangzi and Pu opera, at the Xiqu Centre Tea House Theatre. The program can be taken as an indicator of Xiqu Centre's pluralistic vision in programming. In retrospective, the last Shanxi opera show in Hong Kong dated back to 2009 at the LCSD's Chinese Clapper Opera Series. Using the regional genres of bangzi operas as the theme, different bangzi operas from various parts of China were presented. Among them was a show dedicated to the four major families of Shanxi bangzi opera.²¹ Since then no bangzi opera performances had been staged at subsequent Chinese Opera Festivals.

Stepping into 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic caused big challenges to the Xiqu Centre that aimed at promoting

various regional Chinese operas. The Centre in this year had only few announced programs (see the listing above) and almost all those few had to be cancelled at the end of the day because of the pandemic lockdown. The planned (although unrealized) programs did show that the Xiqu Centre and the Shanghai Kunqu Opera Troupe had a close collaboration, as the Troupe had been invited to do big productions back-to-back in 2019 and 2020.

The last staged 2020 program by and at the Xiqu Centre was the “little theatre” event “Experimental Chinese Opera Festival 2020.” The festival’s originally scheduled series of performance events that included troupes from mainland China and Taiwan were compelled to be scaled down to the local productions of Xiqu Centre’s own *Farewell My Concubine* (New Version) and *Wenguang Explores the Valley* (Hong Kong premiere). Although the 2020 “little theatre” Festival was only held in a very limited way, it pointed to some significant aspects in the Xiqu Centre’s programming visions and strategies: alternative mode of performance to conventional opera-house style productions, representing a variety of Chinese regional operas, serving as a translocal hub for the presentations of Chinese operas.

Summary and Outlook

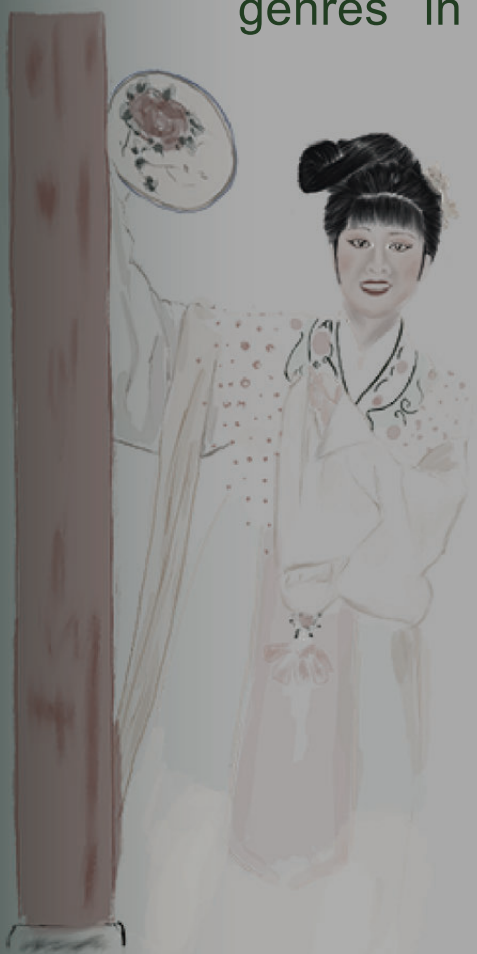
2019 and 2020 were two years in sharp contrast to the business operations of Hong Kong’s Chinese opera industry. In 2019, the Chinese Opera Festival and the Xiqu Centre formed the major promoters of Chinese operas. The troupes invited by both presenters were the choicest of the time with many renowned veteran masters

and actors in their prime, showcasing a brilliant array of Chinese regional opera genres and young and senior actors from multiple generations.

Similar to its programming in the last nine years, the Chinese Opera Festival 2019 featured Peking, Kunqu and Yue operas as the main body,²² complement with some rarely performed genres like Ouju opera, or genres with a very long history like Liuyuan opera. Likewise, the Xiqu Centre also took Peking, Kunqu and Yue operas as the staple genres, supplemented certain areas which the Chinese Opera Festival seldom touched; for example, the new “Peking opera in future tense” works of the Guoguang Opera Company from Taiwan, the little theatre oriented Experimental Chinese Opera Series 2019, and the Shanxi bangzi opera in Rare Classics: Shanxi opera excerpts.

As the chair of the WKCD Board Henry Tang said in his address at the opening ceremony of the Xiqu Centre on 30 December 2018, “There are 367 regional opera genres in China. The Xiqu Centre as the ultimate performance venue for Chinese operas in Hong Kong, it is my aspiration that all regional opera genres of the nation will be staged at the Xiqu Centre.”²³ Whether Tang’s claimed ambition will be realized is yet to be seen. We shall see how the Xiqu Centre’s programming strategies will unfold in the near future in response to the changing ecology for traditional performing arts.

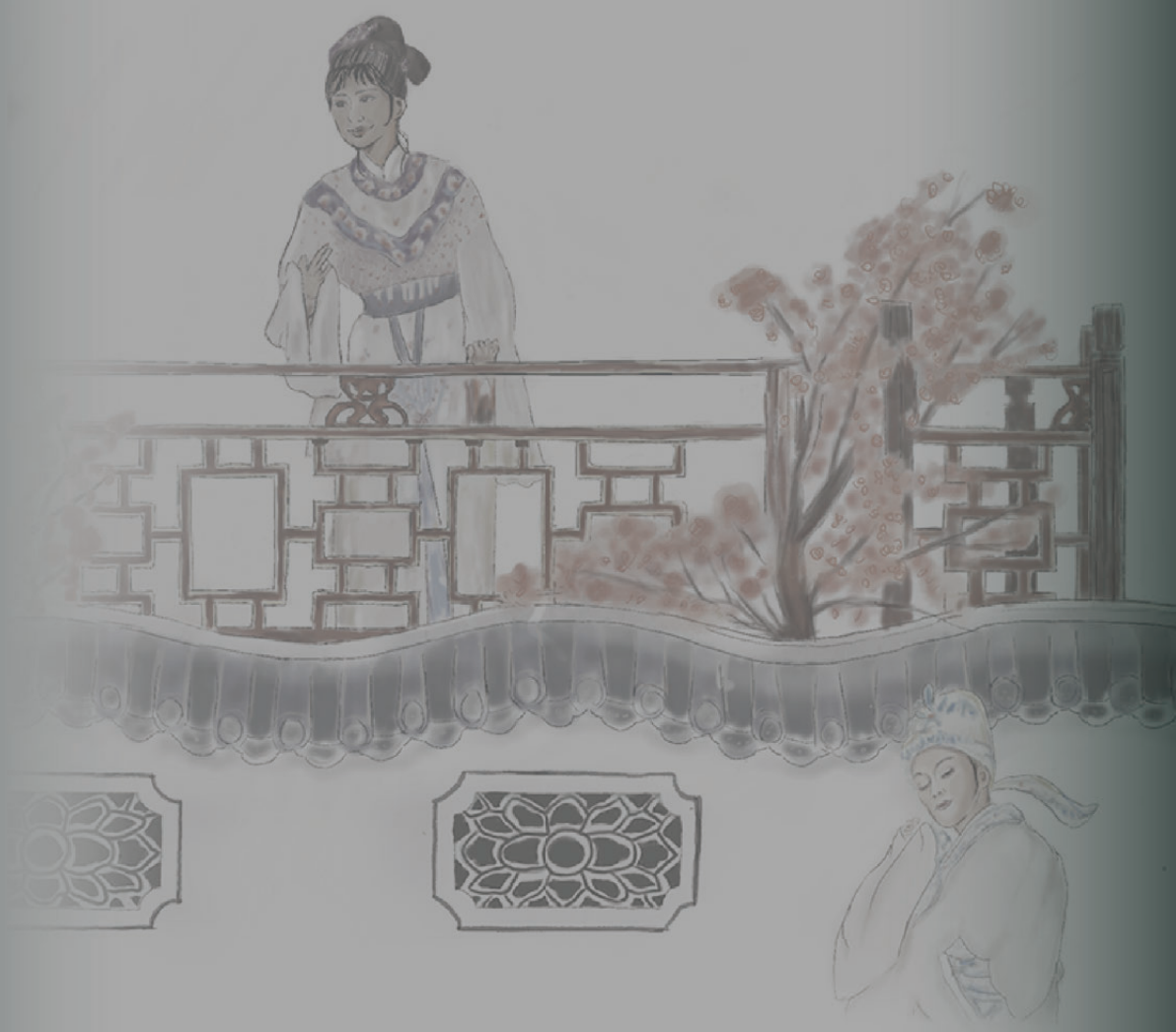
2020 was a year of continuous global pandemic hitting severely



the performing arts communities, putting Hong Kong Chinese opera in an almost frozen state. The unexpected changes and sudden impact to the local Chinese opera industry have compelled and propelled the practitioners and presenters to rethink their programming, production, and performance strategies and to respond promptly with new ideas and actions. The Xiqu Centre's conducting online little theatre symposiums hosted with demonstrations by mainland China and Taiwan troupes was an example. Such “walking on two legs” strategy – life shows cum virtual performances that has also been adopted by some local Cantonese opera troupes – may well be a tenable negotiated means to cope with the continuously mutating COVID-19 virus.

English Translation: Grace S. Y. Yee

Additional Translation: Siu Leung LI



Notes

- 1 “A Tremendous Variety of Chinese Opera Genres: Troupes from Many Provinces are Performing in Hong Kong,” *Wah Kiu Yat Po*, section 7, p. 4, 1 August 1986.
- 2 “About the Sunbeam Theatre,” Sunbeam Theatre official website, accessed 27 June 2021. [read more>>](#)
- 3 “Peking, Cantonese and Yue Operas at the Chinese Opera Festival,” *Wah Kiu Yat Po*, section 7, p. 1, 4 March 1978.
- 4 “The Chinese Opera Festival Presented by the Urban Council Will Stage Four Kunju Opera Excerpts Tonight at the Hong Kong City Hall,” *Wah Kiu Yat Po*, section 4, p. 4, 23 July, 1979.
- 5 *International Celebration of the Arts for the Grand Opening of the Hong Kong Cultural Centre: Programme and Ticketing Guide*, Hong Kong Urban Council, 1989, p. 42.
- 6 Cheung Man Shan, “Hong Kong Chinese Operas 2013: General Observations (Part I),” *Arts Criticism in Hong Kong*, 2015, accessed 27 June 2021. [read more>>](#)
- 7 “Chinese Opera Festival 2010,” HKSAR Government press release, 13 April 2010.
- 8 “Chinese Opera Festival Round Up: Audience Reviews Sharing,” HKSAR press release, 23 July 2010.
- 9 “Hong Kong’s World-Class Performing Arts Venue: The Xiqu Centre Opens to the Public,” West Kowloon Cultural District Authority press release, 20 January 2019, accessed 27 June 2021. [read more>>](#)
- 10 “Chinese Opera Festival 2020 Cancelled: See You Next Year,” Chinese Opera Festival Facebook page, accessed 27 June 2021. [read more>>](#) At the time of writing in late 2021, the LCSD had also announced the cancellation of the 2021 Chinese Opera Festival due to the continuous dire pandemic situation. See LCSD 28 April press updates, accessed 27 June 2021. [read more>>](#)
- 11 *Chinese Opera Festival 2019 Program Book*, Leisure and Cultural Services Department, 2019, p. 20.
- 12 *Ibid.*, p. 18.

- 13 “Performing arts venues of different types and scales (including the Xiqu Centre, the Freespace, the Art Park and the Lyric Theatre Complex) will be completed in phases. M+, a museum focusing on 20th and 21st century visual culture, and the Hong Kong Palace Museum showcasing the exquisite art and cultural collections of the Palace Museum, are also being built in the WKCD,” Home Affairs Bureau website, accessed 27 June 2021. [read more>>](#)
- 14 “Hong Kong’s World-Class Performing Arts Venue the Xiqu Centre Opens to the Public,” West Kowloon Cultural District website, accessed 28 Jan 2021. [read more>>](#)
- 15 Information in this listing is gathered from the West Kowloon Cultural District official website, accessed 27 June 2021. [read more>>](#)
- 16 “Shanghai and Hong Kong Collaborate to Stage a Kunqu-cum-Cantonese Opera Version of *The Legend of the White Snake*, Yangtze Delta Greater Bay Area Chinese Opera Exchange,” Wen Wei Po, A22 cultural section, 16 March 2019.
- 17 “Hong Kong’s Xiqu Centre Launches Exchanges and Collaboration with the Shanghai Center of Chinese Operas,” West Kowloon Cultural District official website, accessed 27 June 2021. [read more>>](#)
- 18 After the performance of the China Theatre Association Plum Blossom Award Art Troupe in March at the Xiqu Centre, the two Chinese opera troupes invited by the Xiqu Centre from outside of Hong Kong, the Shanghai Kunqu Opera Troupe (in May) and the Shanghai Pingtan Troupe (in May and June), are both administered under the Shanghai Center of Chinese Operas.
- 19 Among the performances in the Experimental Chinese Opera Series 2019 was a “little theatre” Cantonese opera *Farewell My Concubine* (New Adaptation) produced by the Xiqu Centre. Since 2017, the Xiqu Centre has been following the example of the little theatre Chinese opera performances held in Beijing and Shanghai for various experimental attempts. Each little theatre performance was about one hour normally with a cast of less than 10 performed in a space much smaller than that of a conventional theatre. In 2014, the first Contemporary Little Theatre Chinese Opera Arts Festival was held in Beijing, and the first Shanghai Little Theatre Chinese Opera Festival took place in 2015.

- 20 “Experimental Yue Opera Destiny of Rebirth by the Shanghai Yue Opera Group,” West Kowloon Cultural District official website, accessed 27 June 2021. [read more>>](#)
- 21 “Shanxi Opera Excerpts Will Be Staged at the End of August,” HKSAR Government press release, 15 July 2019, accessed 27 June 2021. [read more>>](#)
- 22 The cover design of the house program of the Chinese Opera Festival is built upon the four Chinese characters which refer to the four major regional opera genres featured.
- 23 A01 front page, Sing Pao Daily News, 31 Dec 2018, accessed 27 June 2021. [read more>>](#)

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