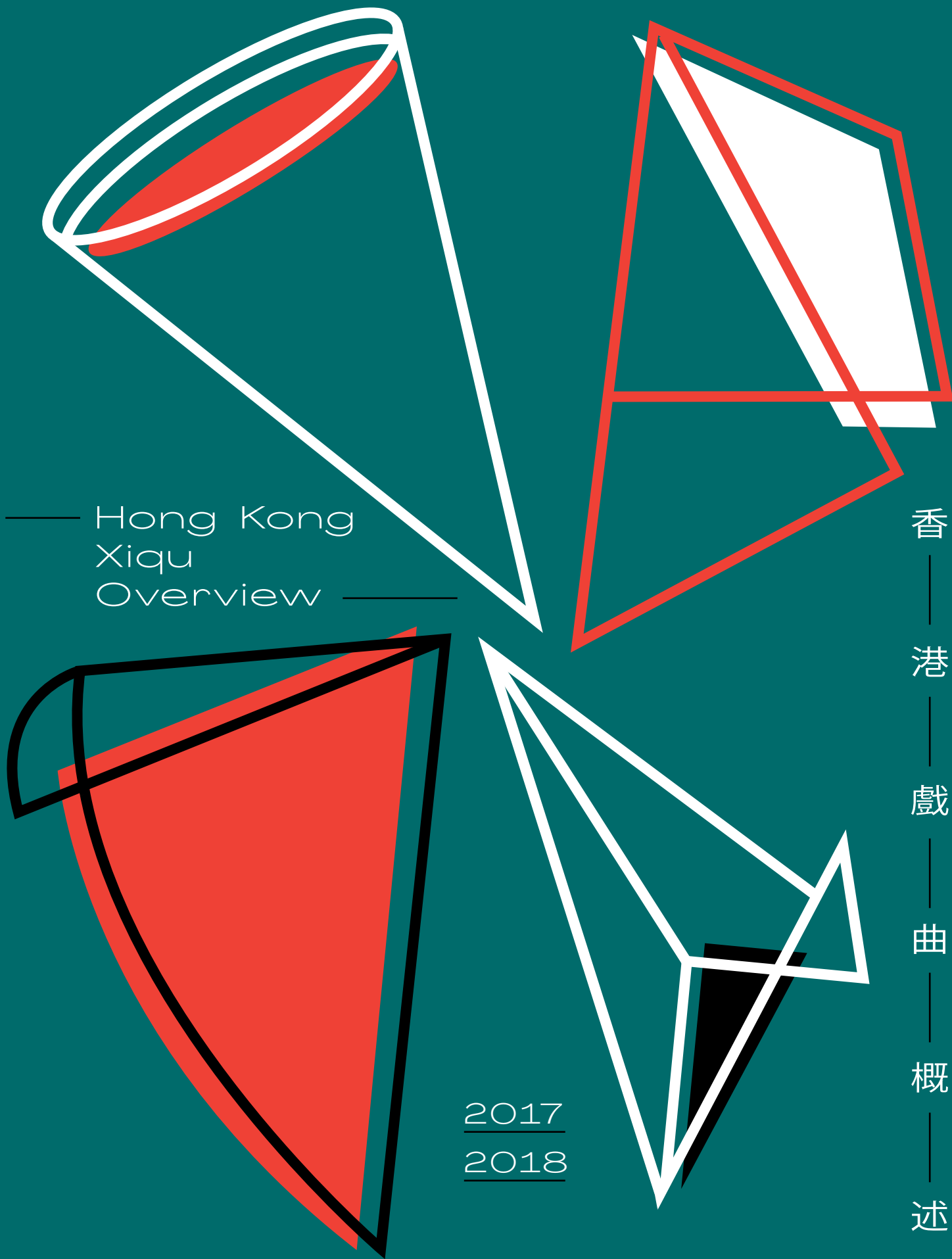


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The Experience and Challenges of Compiling  
an Oral History of Artists

*Oral History Series: Cantonese Opera Artists of the  
Chinese Artists Association of Hong Kong*

# The Experience and Challenges of Compiling an Oral History of Artists

*Oral History Series: Cantonese Opera Artists of the Chinese Artists Association of Hong Kong*

Text  
Alisa Shum

## The Significance of Oral History

It is an important responsibility of the Chinese Artists Association of Hong Kong (CAAHK) to collect and compile the oral history of Cantonese opera artists and practitioners, since it is one of the strategic objectives of the CAAHK's Cantonese Opera Heritage Plan.

The year 2009 was a pivotal year in the CAAHK's history. In addition to being successfully registered as a charitable organisation, the association submitted its proposal to the government for the revitalisation of a historic building, the North Kowloon Magistracy, as The CAAHK Cantonese Opera Culture Centre. It also announced the Cantonese Opera Heritage Plan in the same year. The plan outlines an overall plan of action for Cantonese opera heritage preservation in Hong Kong, with the CAAHK being one of the various stakeholders. The comprehensive implementation of Cantonese opera heritage preservation requires more than the efforts of the Cantonese opera circle; it also requires support from different organisations and individuals in Hong Kong, and can only be brought to fruition with sufficient resources and ongoing planning and enactment over time.

The Cantonese Opera Heritage Plan has four main goals, with specific strategic objectives associated with each goal:

Goal	Strategic objectives
Safeguarding traditional skills and crafts	<p>Strategy 1: To safeguard and preserve the traditional skills and crafts of Cantonese opera</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strengthen data collection and systematic research                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Collect related artefacts</li> <li>– Collect oral history from artists and practitioners</li> <li>– Document the singing styles and performance techniques of different schools</li> <li>– Conduct systematic research of Cantonese opera masters from different eras</li> <li>– Collect and research repertoires and librettos</li> <li>– Organise seminars and conferences calling for research papers</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Establish a data archive of Cantonese opera that is open to the public</li> <li>• Support the staging of Cantonese opera in bamboo theatres</li> <li>• Encourage the preservation of the rituals, conventional procedures and formulaic presentations of Cantonese opera</li> </ul>
Professional training	<p>Strategy 2: To build on the skills of Cantonese opera practitioners</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Establish a professional training centre or develop professional training programmes, so as to provide fundamental training for artists, musicians, playwrights and backstage crew</li> <li>• Provide advanced training for professional performers</li> <li>• Advocate to increase the number of rehearsal venues for Cantonese opera</li> </ul> <p>Strategy 3: To utilise effective administrative and management systems, and strengthen governance and administration in the industry</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Promote corporate governance management</li> <li>• Encourage young practitioners to participate in administrative work</li> <li>• Introduce a wide spectrum of professional consultation to provide advice for development in different sectors of Cantonese opera</li> <li>• Provide professional support in legal, financial and contractual matters, and enhance administration and management capacity in the industry</li> </ul>

Goal	Strategic objectives
Safeguarding traditional skills and crafts	<p>Strategy 4: To increase opportunities for practice and artistic development for Cantonese opera practitioners</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create more performance opportunities for young artists</li> <li>• Create opportunities for exchange with Chinese opera practitioners from different regions</li> </ul>
Market/audience development	<p>Strategy 5: To develop the market and audience for Cantonese opera</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Implement systematic market research for Cantonese opera</li> <li>• Strengthen the promotion of Cantonese opera programmes and present activities that spotlight the artistic and cultural merits of the genre</li> <li>• Provide training in teaching and presentation skills to artists and practitioners, so as to facilitate the promotion of Cantonese opera                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Audience development</li> <li>– Enhance public interest in Cantonese opera</li> <li>– Increase the audience's ability to appreciate Cantonese opera</li> <li>– Promotion through community education</li> <li>– Promotion among overseas audiences</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
Preservation of Cantonese opera	<p>Strategy 6: To create and present new works while preserving the traditional essence of Cantonese opera</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Organise playwriting programmes, and provide favourable conditions and resources for artists to create new works</li> <li>• Expand resources for the creation of high quality scripts and realisation of creative ideas</li> </ul>

Although the CAAHK's revitalisation proposal was not accepted by the government, the application process allowed us to investigate the development needs of Cantonese opera in Hong Kong. It also prompted the association to reexamine its strengths, weaknesses and opportunities, gaining a clearer perspective of its position, as well as the strategies offered in the Cantonese Opera Heritage Plan. Since the CAAHK is a community organisation with limited resources, the association has to devise and implement its heritage preservation strategies in accordance with its capabilities and strengths. *Oral History Series: Cantonese Opera Artists of the Chinese Artists Association of Hong Kong* is an important component of the CAAHK's heritage preservation plan.



*Oral History Series: Cantonese Opera Artists of the Chinese Artists Association of Hong Kong* — Photo courtesy: CAAHK

## Project Implementation

### 1) Funding

Any heritage preservation plan can only be implemented if there is available funding. In recent years, the major institutions and funds that offer funding to Cantonese opera preservation programmes (that are not oriented around stage performances) include: the Cantonese Opera Development Fund run by the Home Affairs Bureau; various funding programmes run by the Hong Kong Arts Development Council; the Lord Wilson Heritage Trust; and the Intangible Cultural Heritage Office of the Leisure and Cultural Services Department. After discussion among its board of directors, the CAAHK decided to apply to the Cantonese Opera Development Fund for funding of its oral history project. We are happy to have support from this fund that the three-book *Oral History Series* has been published, which serves as documentation of first-hand materials about Cantonese opera development.

## 2) Interviewees and interviewers

The CAAHK's biggest strength is its close ties to the industry. Therefore, during the conception of the oral history project, the board of directors quickly reached a consensus about interviewee selection. The interviewees for the three books in the *Oral History Series: Cantonese Opera Artists of the Chinese Artists Association of Hong Kong* include:

Performers	Book 1: Wong Kwan-lam, Chan Sing-tong, Ho Man-wun
	Book 2: Lee Heung-kam, Tam Sin-hung, Yam Bing-yee, Li Yun-shen, He Jiayao, Wong Sai-long
	Book 3: Ho Pak-kwong, Ng Chin-fung, Chan Suet-yim, Lee Fung-sing
Percussion-cum-accompaniment musicians	Book 1: Wong Toa, Mak Wai-man, Kong Shing, Leung Kuen
	Book 2: Man Chun
	Book 3: Yip Shu-kwan
Wardrobe	Book 1: Woo Kau
	Book 2: Chan Kwok-yuen
	Book 3: Wong Kwok-cheung
Martial arts choreographers	Book 1: Leung Siu-chung
	Book 3: Yuen Shing-chau
Backstage crew	Book 1: Leung Hiu-fai (stage manager)
	Book 2: Lai Jiu-wun (lighting and set)
	Book 3: Kwong Bing-chuen (lighting and set)
Administrators	Book 2: Wong Cheung (impresario)
	Book 3: Wong Siu-sang (impresario), Li Chi-kei (impresario and performer)

The interviewees for the oral history project include practitioners working in various onstage and backstage roles, since we sought to document the overall development of Cantonese opera. The CAAHK's board of directors believed more valuable information would be unearthed through interaction between fellow practitioners; therefore, we invited Cantonese opera veterans to be interviewers for the project. At the same time some of the subjects were not used to being interviewed, and it made for more fruitful dialogues to have them interviewed by their friends. The interviewers for the three books include: Wong Chiu-kwan, Li Chi-kei, Chan Wing-yee, Chan Hung-chun, Mak Wai-man, Sun Kim-long, Lau Wai-ming, and Law Ka-ying.

Some people asked if we might consider inviting Cantonese opera scholars and researchers to be interviewers for the project. After my experience in producing the three-book *Oral History Series*, I wholeheartedly concur with the CAAHK's board of directors' decision regarding interviewer selection. As I sat in on the conversations, I saw that many of the veteran artists being interviewed were of a rather introverted temperament, and they spoke more freely when the dialogue took the form of a casual chat with a friend. The interviews would have been less productive if they had been conducted by someone with whom the interviewees were not familiar. However, the professional knowledge of Cantonese opera scholars and researchers played a part in the project, as they were consulted regarding suggested questions. In addition to textual documentation, the CAAHK also recorded the interviews on video, which are available on the discs included with the books. The videos offer precious glimpses of the subjects and interviewers for readers and researchers who would like to witness the spark the conversations had on screen. Some of the interviewees were of advanced years at the time of the interviews, and they have since passed away. In capturing the charm of the Cantonese opera luminaries, the videos are also a tribute to our forerunners.

## 3) Editing, publication and distribution

Since the compilation of oral history is largely based on interviewees' recollections, efforts must be made to verify the accuracy of the information. Therefore, we invited Ms Cheung Man-shan, who at the time worked for the Chinese Opera Information Centre, the Chinese University of Hong Kong, to be the executive editor of the series. We were pleased and honoured to have Ms Cheung in this role. With her rigorous professionalism, she conducted extensive research and thorough crosschecking of the interview content, and provided meticulous annotations of the texts. I would like to take this opportunity to extend our thanks to Ms Cheung for her work.



Sun Kim-long (left) interviews Mak Wai-man — Photo courtesy: CAAHK



Wong Chiu-kwan (right) interviews Chan Suet-yim — Photo courtesy: CAAHK

The compilation of oral history is a quest to preserve first-hand materials about Cantonese opera, and to offer interested readers a better understanding of our industry and experiences. We also hope the materials will serve as first-hand data for researchers who undertake thematic organisation of and discourse on Cantonese opera development. Therefore, it is essential for the publication to be distributed. I would like to thank Ms Cheung again for connecting the CAAHK with the Chinese University of Hong Kong Press, which assists with distribution and makes the *Oral History Series* available in various bookstores in Hong Kong.

After our experience in producing the three-book *Oral History Series*, we are keenly aware of the importance and urgency of compiling historical materials. However, the CAAHK is a community organisation with limited resources, and we can only work at assembling first-hand materials about Cantonese opera piece by piece. We have to race against time to preserve the precious experiences and memories of seasoned artists. If there are sufficient resources available, and given the CAAHK's close relationships with industry practitioners, we believe that compilations and research projects led by the CAAHK will offer the most authentic accounts and glimpses of the industry.

(Translated by Nicolette Wong)

**Alisa Shum**

graduated with a Master of Philosophy from the University of Hong Kong, specialising in Chinese Literature and Drama. She also holds a postgraduate diploma in psychology. Since 1998, she has worked for many arts and cultural organisations in Hong Kong including the Hong Kong Arts Development Council, the Hong Kong Arts Centre, and the Hong Kong International Film Festival. In 2011, she joined the CAAHK as its chief executive. Apart from administration of the CAAHK and the Cantonese Opera Academy of Hong Kong, she also oversees the major preservation programme, the Yau Ma Tei Theatre Venue Partnership Scheme – Cantonese Opera Young Talent Showcase.

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Project Coordinator and Editor Bernice Chan Kwok-wai

文章統籌、編輯 張文珊

Content Coordinator and Editor Milky Cheung Man-shan

編輯 朱琮愛

Editor Daisy Chu King-oi

執行編輯 楊寶霖

Executive Editor Yeung Po-lam

助理編輯 郭嘉棋\*

Assistant Editor Kwok Ka-ki\*

英文編輯 黃麒名

English Editor Nicolette Wong Kei-ming

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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 <http://www.iatc.com.hk>

電郵 Email [iatc@iatc.com.hk](mailto:iatc@iatc.com.hk)

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