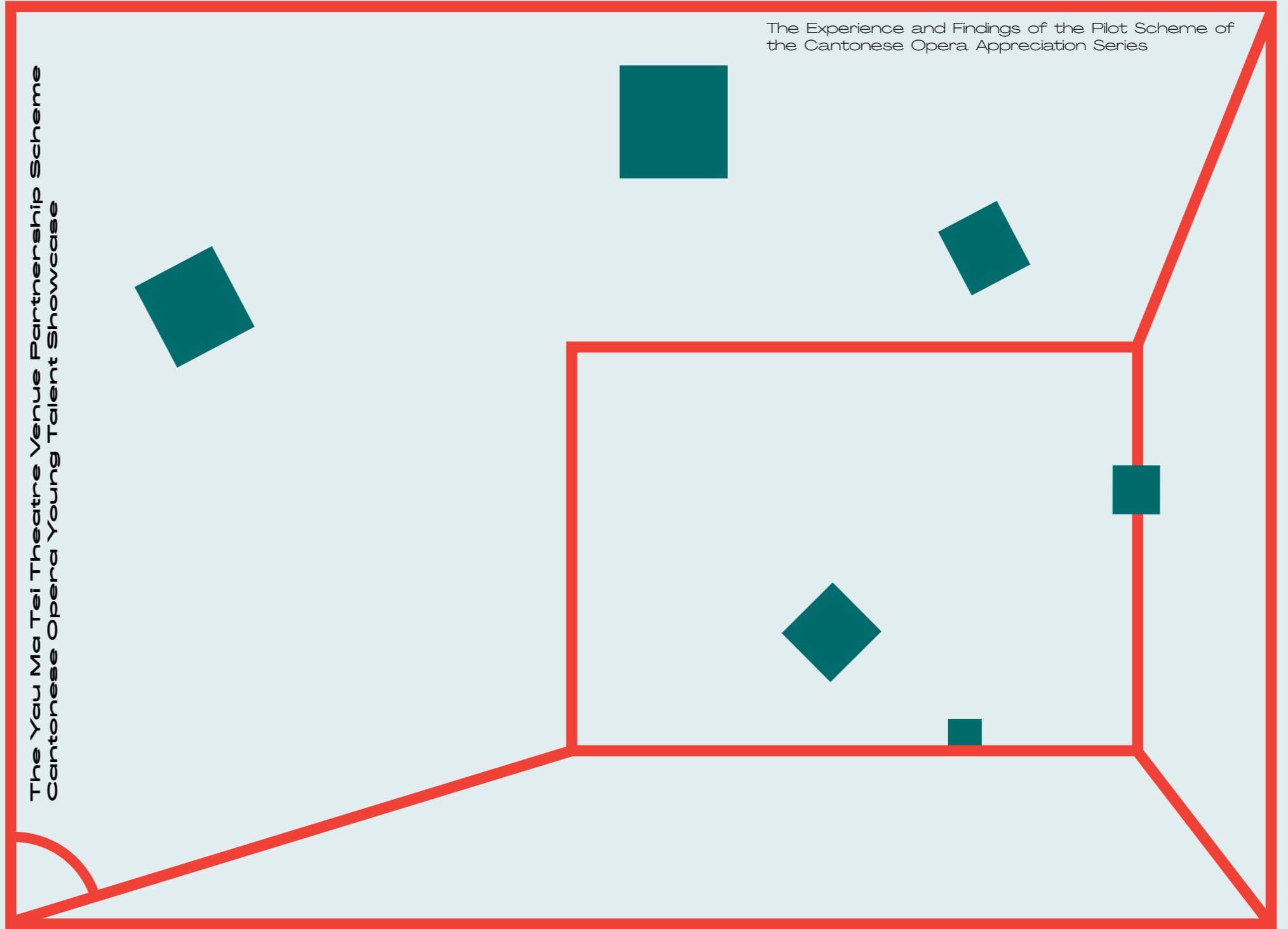


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The Yau Ma Tei Theatre Venue Partnership Scheme Cantonese Opera Young Talent Showcase

The Experience and Findings of the Pilot Scheme of the Cantonese Opera Appreciation Series

Text

The Chinese Artists Association of Hong Kong (Written by Alisa Shum)

The Cantonese Opera Appreciation Series as a Value-added Programme

On 18 July 2012, the Chinese Artists Association of Hong Kong (CAAHK), under the helm of chairperson Liza Wang, officially launched the Yau Ma Tei Theatre Venue Partnership Scheme – Cantonese Opera Young Talent Showcase (the Showcase). Under the generous guidance of five artistic directors at the time, namely Danny Li Chi-kei, Yuen Siu-fai, Sun Kim-long, Law Ka-ying, and Lung Koon-tin (as of 2020, there are eight artistic directors, since Wan Fai-yin, Wong Chiu-kwan, and Chan Ka-ming have joined the aforementioned maestros in leading the Showcase), the Showcase participants presented frequent performances at the Yau Ma Tei Theatre, turning a new page in the development of Cantonese opera in Hong Kong. The Venue Partnership Scheme, which is run by the Leisure and Cultural Services Department (LCSD), was implemented as a three-year scheme. At the time of writing, the Showcase is in the third round of the Yau Ma Tei Theatre Venue Partnership Scheme, and it is entering its ninth year.

Apart from support from the LCSD, the Showcase is made possible thanks to funding from the Cantonese Opera Fund run by the Home Affairs Bureau. As funding applications are assessed on an annual basis, we have to reexamine the directions and key focuses of the Showcase when we submit our application each year. In the early stages, the Cantonese Opera Appreciation Series was not part of the Showcase; the series was launched several years after the Showcase's inauguration, and when we had gained a clearer view of its (the Showcase's) position and functions. The main function of the Showcase is to nurture new talents for various onstage and backstage roles (mainly through performances and different training programmes). It also has three value-added functions: 1) education, 2) community promotion, and 3) audience development. It was only feasible for us to develop these three value-added functions after the main function of the Showcase had begun

to take effect, and there were available resources for other endeavours. Therefore, the Cantonese Opera Appreciation Series was launched when the Showcase was in its sixth year.

The Birth of the Cantonese Opera Appreciation Series

Regarding the planning of the Cantonese Opera Appreciation Series, one question arose during our discussion about programme selection with the artistic directors: In what ways would the series be distinguished from other community promotion programmes? In cases of similar programmes overseas, the producers present arts programmes that bring the community together (for example, programmes that explore the issues and characteristics of the community, and which invite members of the community to take part in the production), with a view to enhancing community solidarity and competitiveness. However, Cantonese opera is an artistic genre with established forms and performance techniques, and it offers less flexibility in handling contemporary subjects than drama. Nevertheless, we pondered whether the series and our audience development programmes would overlap in certain areas.

Over the past few years we have made it our mission to always stride ahead. During the first year, we experimented with presenting different kinds of programmes under the Cantonese Opera Appreciation Series. This allowed us to gauge the response from the market and the audience, so as to adjust directions for our future development. With impassioned input from Yuen Siu-fai, Sun Kim-long and Law Ka-ying—seasoned artists of impeccable skill and creativity as well as a childlike sense of wonder—we launched several programmes under the Cantonese Appreciation Series:

Tribute to Tong Tik-sang on the 100th anniversary of his birth – classics appreciation

- *The Butterfly and Red Pear Blossoms*: “Stealing Glances at the Topsy Beau, Encounter at the Pavilion”; *The Ten-Year Dream*: “Breaking into the Palace”
(Artistic director: Yuen Siu-fai)
- *The Moon Pavilion*: “Encounter in the Wilderness” and “At the Orchid Garden”
(Artistic director: Sun Kim-long)

Cantonese opera for family audiences

- Adaptations of Chinese folklore: *Wanying's Steppfather Guards the Tower*, *Wang Xiang Lies Down on the Ice to Fetch Carp for His Stepmother*
(Artistic director: Yuen Siu-fai; playwright: Chow Ka-yee)
- Cantonese opera for children: *Three Little Pigs*, *The North Wind and the Sun*
(Artistic director: Law Ka-ying; playwrights: Eliza Li, Lee Ship)

In addition to opera excerpt performances, the programmes featured guided appreciation sessions. These included expert talks by Yuen Siu-fai and Sun Kim-long, who shared their insights into the unique brilliance of Tong Tik-sang's scripts; a scholarly talk by Principal Poon Po-chiu on the 24 stories of filial piety, and a cross-disciplinary presentation by Uncle Child, whose retelling of fairy tales enlivened the atmosphere. In addition to the joy of watching a Cantonese opera performance, these programmes were designed to offer further information and education to the audience. The pilot scheme increased the workload for the artistic directors, and particularly for the production team. Yet our efforts were not in vain, as these experiments shed light on future directions for the Cantonese Opera Appreciation Series and our audience development programmes.

Findings

Audience response and box office are the strongest indicators of a programme's success, while the audience's immediate reaction is the most direct response to the performance. As I sat in the auditorium, I watched the show and the audience at the same time. I was always moved by the audience's passionate response at the end of the performance, and I felt that our efforts had been worthwhile. However, the box office and attendance of our free programmes was another story. Free tickets were given out for the Cantonese Opera Appreciation Series performances, and the number of tickets distributed tended to exceed the actual number of seats available (for instance, we would distribute 350 to 400 tickets if the venue had an audience capacity of 300, assuming that some ticket holders would not attend the show). However, these programmes recorded an attendance rate of only 60 to 70 per cent. Apart from the abovementioned indicators of audience response and attendance, we also took into consideration reviews by the public (newspapers, online media, and social media), and reports by assessors of the series.

Overall, the Cantonese Opera Appreciation Series performances were well-received among audiences and critics, though there was certainly room for improvement. Human resources were a primary concern, since the planning and production of the year's programmes put our colleagues' capability to the test. When it comes to producing a series of stage works—especially when they include newly created works (new programmes)—there is a considerable amount of coordination involved. It takes a lot of trial and error to institute effective labour planning so that we can be efficient in staging high quality productions. I would like to take this opportunity to thank my teammates again (Yuko Cheung, Almen Tang, David Chow, Crystal Cheung and Lydia Wong). In addition, the preferences of the artistic directors are a decisive factor in shaping the shows' atmosphere and pacing. There is a great deal for us to learn regarding how to meet the expectations of audiences of different backgrounds and age groups.



Adaptation of Chinese folklore: *Wang Xiang Lies Down on the Ice to Fetch Carp for His Stepmother* (2017)
— Photo courtesy: CAAHK



Cantonese opera for children: *The North Wind and the Sun* (2017)— Photo courtesy: CAAHK

Further Exploration

At the same time, the pilot scheme has led us to the following reflections:

1. The Cantonese Opera Appreciation Series and our audience development programmes have different positions and directions.
2. Through the Cantonese Opera Appreciation Series, we hope that in addition to enjoying Cantonese opera performances, the audience will have first hand experience and learn more about the vibrant community of Yau Ma Tei. Yau Ma Tei has long been a haven for Cantonese opera artists and organisations. There are many opera singing performances (at the Temple Street Night Market), and various shops and venues related to traditional arts and crafts as well as culture and religion in the area. The Red Brick Building next to the Yau Ma Tei Theatre is a historic building. As a local art form, Cantonese opera is an essential part, and a highlight of, the community. In 2020, we successfully launched the community promotion programme "Here we walk, There we watch". This outreach programme features the historical story of *Generals of the Yang Family* as its theme. For the first stop of the appreciation tour, the guide takes participants to the Tin Hau Temple at Public Square Street (where there is a depiction of the *Generals of the Yang Family* on the temple roof; the guide also gives an introduction about ritualistic Cantonese opera performances in the annual Tin Hau Festival). The next stop is the CAAHK's Sun Wo Tong (editor's note: now Po Fook Tong) located in the Ping On Building (the office of the CAAHA's music department, where the Showcase talents give a vocal performance of "Yang Wulang Saving His Younger Brother" for tour participants). On the last stop of the tour, the participants return to the Yau Ma Tei Theatre to watch a performance of "Waylaying the Horse", an opera excerpt based on the story of the *Generals of the Yang Family*.
3. The objective of our audience development programmes is to expand the audience base for Cantonese opera, and enhance the audience's ability to appreciate this art form. To this end, we present different thematic programmes that cater to the tastes and interests of different audience segments. They include works adapted from fairy tales for family audiences; opera excerpt performances with guided appreciation regarding historical and cultural themes for audiences who are interested in learning about diverse topics, and opera excerpt performances with guided appreciation designed to enhance the audience's understanding of Cantonese opera.

4. For our audience development programmes, we will continue to explore possibilities for crossover with other dramatic genres and artistic media. This will not only bring new artistic experiences to our performers, but also draw audiences of other artistic disciplines to Cantonese opera.

5. If there are ampler resources (in terms of finances and labour), we hope to:

- Conduct systematic market and audience surveys to gather further data about audiences and their preferences, as well as their theatre-going and ticket-purchasing habits, in order to curate and plan our programmes with more specific focuses.
- Expand our collaboration with partners from different fields to achieve greater synergy, so as to present the art of Cantonese opera to different audiences.

The promotion of Cantonese opera has a long road ahead. We believe we will meet many advocates and lovers of the art form along the way, and we will work together to bring this local art form to wider audiences.

(Translated by Nicolette Wong)

The Chinese Artists Association of Hong Kong (CAAHK)

was founded in the Qing dynasty during the reign of Emperor Guangxu (1875-1908), and it has long been a professional organisation for Cantonese opera performers in the Guangdong Province. In 1953, the CAAHK was registered in Hong Kong. In 2009, the association was registered as a charitable organisation. The CAAHK aims to develop the art of traditional Cantonese opera, arouse interest in the art among the public, and promote the professional development of performers and practitioners as well as the preservation of their crafts and skills. The CAAHK is also devoted to nurturing young talent. In 1980, the Cantonese Opera Academy of Hong Kong was established. The Cantonese Opera Academy of Hong Kong Limited was later registered as a charitable organisation in 1996.

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