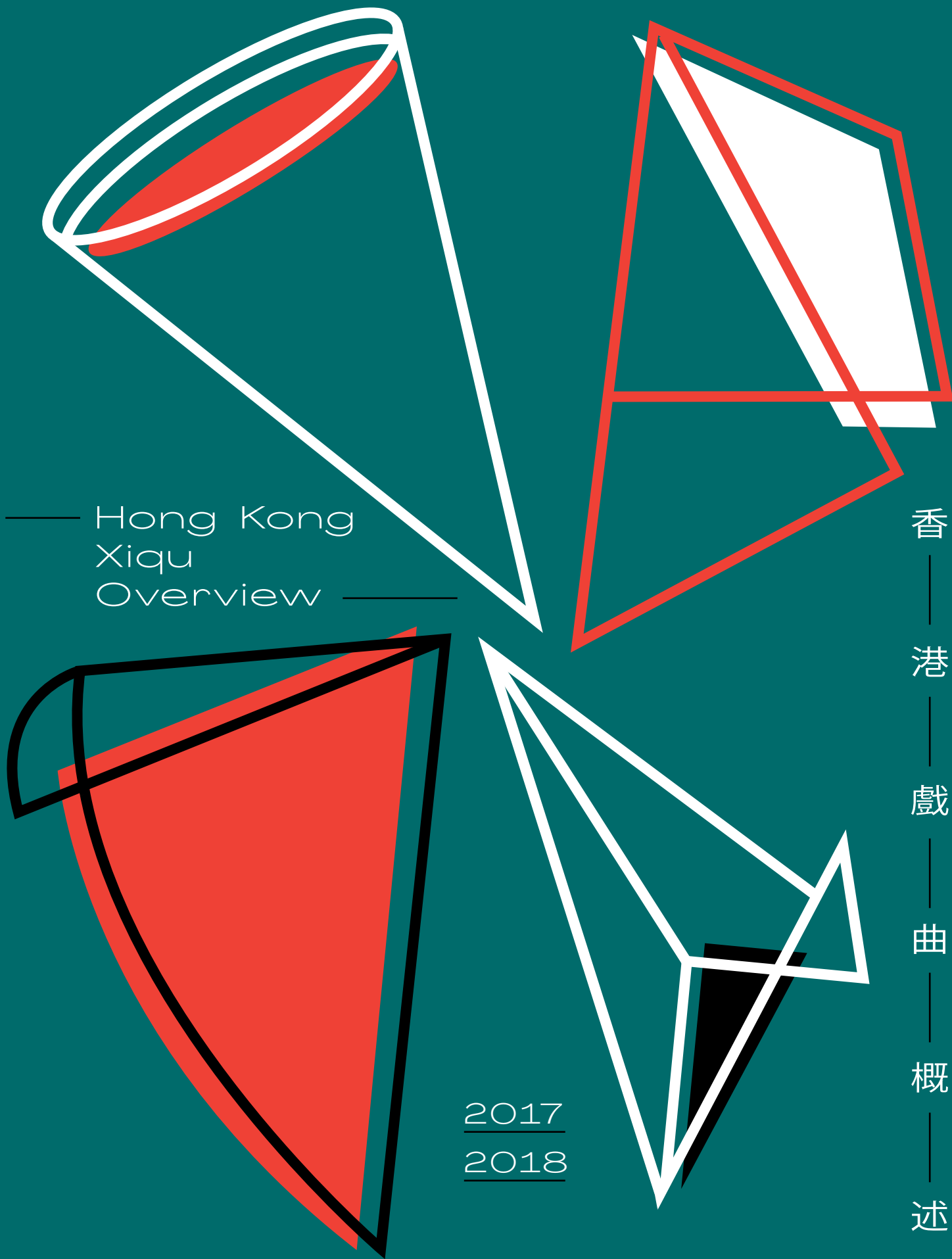
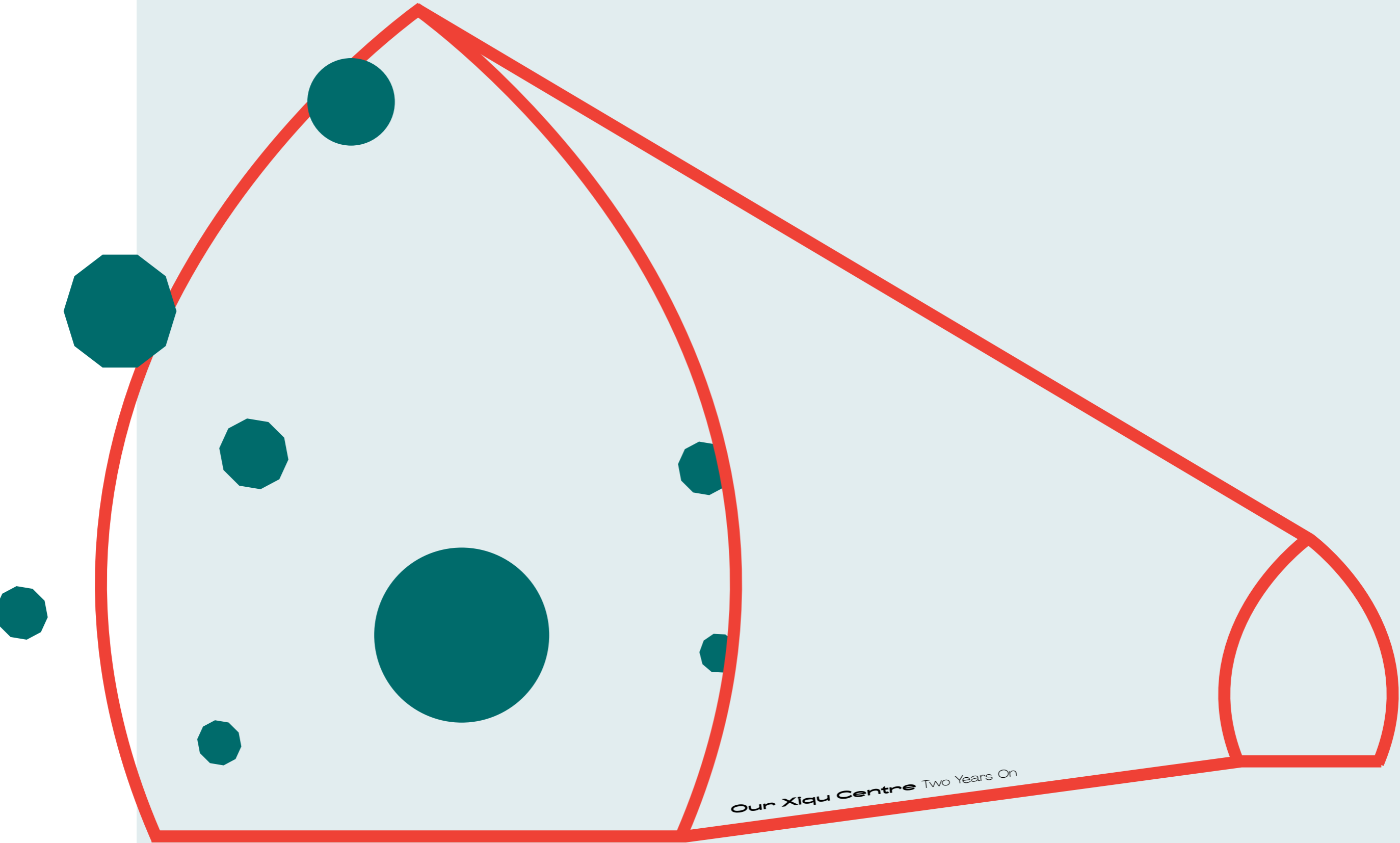


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Our Xiqu Centre Two Years On

Our Xiqu Centre

Two Years On

Text
Elbe Lau

Following the design competition held in 2012, the Xiqu Centre was finally completed and opened at the end of 2018, becoming the first performing arts venue in the West Kowloon Cultural District (WKCD). All sectors of society have high expectations for the Xiqu Centre, which is different from the typical Chinese opera performance venue. Renowned Cantonese opera actor Yuen Siu-fai even hopes that it will become an international hub for Chinese opera.

Since its opening, most of the programmes scheduled for the 2019/2020 season at the Xiqu Centre have been cancelled due to the social movement and the COVID-19 outbreak. It can be said that the Xiqu Centre has yet to officially operate under normal circumstances. I had the pleasure of interviewing Naomi Chung, Head of Xiqu, Performing Arts, of the West Kowloon Cultural District Authority (WKCDA). This piece attempts to provide a clearer picture of the context in which the establishment of the centre developed by examining various different facets, namely positioning, venue use, programme planning, commissioning, and research and conservation.

Positioning

The Xiqu Centre takes on the mission of promoting hundreds of Chinese opera genres, not just Cantonese opera. Consequently, its positioning has attracted the Chinese opera sector's attention. Chung admits that when she took up her post in 2011, there was no model for the Xiqu Centre to follow during its construction, since institutions of a similar nature did not exist in mainland China or Taiwan. "The construction of the Taiwan Traditional Theatre Center began at around the same time and [they] eventually opened before us in 2016. Meanwhile, the Shanghai Center of Chinese Operas is the administrative body of several troupes, and it has no large-scale physical facility to serve as a performance venue". Since the launch of the West Kowloon Bamboo Theatre in 2012, for which a stage was set up at the construction site of the current WKCD to hold shows and Chinese New Year's fairs, Chung has taken what she describes as a "step-by-step" approach in the development of the Xiqu Centre, listening to industry opinions while exploring feasible ways to move forward.



Naomi Chung — Photo: Ka Lam

According to the official website, the Xiqu Centre's goal is "to present the best traditional and contemporary xiqu from Hong Kong, China and around the world, [and] to provide a world-class platform for innovation and virtuosity". It is indeed true that many first-class productions have been showcased at the Xiqu Centre since its inception. Take the auspicious set pieces *Birthday of the God of Venus*¹ and *Prime Minister of Six States*, organised by the Chinese Artists Association of Hong Kong (CAAHK) and performed on opening day as an example—it was a historic occasion which saw three generations of elites from the local Cantonese opera scene come together. The inaugural performance, *The Reincarnation of Red Plum*, was a momentous and unprecedented affair—it saw Cantonese opera legend Pak Suet-sin serve as the artistic director, and celebrated veterans Connie Chan and Mui Suet-see star in the leading roles. Shortly after, the China Theatre Association Plum Blossom Award Art Troupe, which comprises prominent figures from numerous Chinese opera genres throughout the country, came to perform. Productions such as *Four Dreams in the Camellia Hall* by the Shanghai Kunqu Opera Troupe and *Dowager Xiao-Zhuang and Dorgon* by the GuoGuang Opera Company from Taiwan are high-calibre works. Meanwhile, *Li Yaxian* starring Sichuan opera diva Shen Tiemei is likewise eagerly anticipated despite having been rescheduled.

¹ It is also known as *Birthday Greetings by the Eight Immortals*.

Venue Use

The aspiration to create a world-class venue that presents top-notch programmes unfortunately has resulted in issues such as costly venue hire charges and the inability to alleviate the long-standing lack of government venues, over which the Xiqu Centre has faced criticism. Local arts organisations have constantly pointed out that the hire charges are unaffordable, while performances like amateur Cantonese opera concerts held by some of the hirers seem to deviate from the establishment's positioning. The Grand Theatre also once played host to the Hong Kong Repertory Theatre's musical *The Great Pretender*, which made people wonder whether the Xiqu Centre's venue use policy had any direction at all.

"There is extremely limited room for the reduction of venue hire charges," Chung says, with a visible sense of helplessness. Government subsidies are limited to land development and construction for the time being. It is hoped that the WKCD can break even through its operations, including the generation of income from its in-house eateries, the leasing of small retail spaces, and fundraising. Of course, the quality of the programmes offered must also be considered. While the Xiqu team headed by Chung advises the Venue Operation Department on the artistic competence of the Xiqu Centre's hirers, she emphasises that interdepartmental coordination is essential and financial needs must ultimately be taken into account.

The issue of using costly venue hire charges to cover operating costs is rooted in the original intention of developing the Xiqu Centre and the WKCD—to subsidise arts activities through commercial means such as real estate and retail. Nowadays, local Chinese opera productions that can turn a profit from box office receipts alone are few and far between. With the completion dates of the WKCD's real estate and commercial projects still in the distant future, is it really reasonable to subject the Xiqu Centre to a self-financing policy? And how will that be conducive to promoting the development of Chinese opera?

This interview has also led to another unexpected discovery: It turns out that many mainland Chinese troupes do not think that the Xiqu Centre's venue hire charges are particularly expensive. Generally speaking, mainland troupes still cherish the opportunity to perform in Hong Kong. It is believed that the number of hirers in this category will increase after the pandemic subsides. With the opening of the Xiqu Centre, it was hoped that a diversion effect would be achieved, thereby enabling small- and medium-sized local theatre companies to gain easier access to government venues, which are more economical. Unfortunately, this wish may never come true.

In response to the public's doubts about the utilisation rate of the Xiqu Centre, Chung reveals that from April 2019 to March 2020, the utilisation rate of the Grand Theatre exceeded 70 per cent, while that of the Tea House Theatre was even higher due to the Tea House Rising Stars Troupe's regular performances. When the Xiqu Centre was first established, a statement was made that venues would only be available for hire to Chinese opera groups during the trial period of the first year. From 2020 onwards, the remaining slots were released to non-Chinese opera groups at twice or more than twice the cost of Chinese opera programmes, thus keeping the policy of prioritising Chinese opera unchanged. The Leisure and Cultural Services Department (LCSD) has also implemented the priority venue hiring policy for Cantonese opera performances at venues such as Ko Shan Theatre and Yau Ma Tei Theatre. However, I have recently heard that overseas non-Chinese opera hirers have already made pencil bookings for the Xiqu Centre's Grand Theatre for the latter half of 2022. Hopefully, the Xiqu Centre will do its best to implement similar practices so as not to fall short of public expectations.¹ Balancing the constraints of high operating costs and consolidating the direction of development will be the WKCD's upcoming tasks.

Programme Planning

As an exclusive Chinese opera performance venue, programme planning is undoubtedly the focus of the Xiqu Centre's operations. In recent years, the majority of government-organised Chinese opera programmes in Hong Kong have been handled by the LCSD. Local arts groups submit their own proposals and obtain venue sponsorship as well as funding upon approval. Meanwhile, performance venues under the LCSD's management are also available for hire to arts groups. Unlike the LCSD, the Xiqu Centre does not use intermediary companies when presenting regional opera productions. "We make all the arrangements, from the artists' visa applications to accommodation pick-up and drop-off, so as to cater to the needs of each troupe on a more personal level". Chung has previously worked for the Hong Kong Chinese Orchestra and has extensive experience in planning large-scale performances. She hopes that her colleagues at the Xiqu team can also become personally involved, so that she can fully pass on her administrative experience.

As for programme selection, Chung makes it clear that the Xiqu Centre has deliberately taken a different route. The Chinese Opera Festival organised by the LCSD focuses on traditional plays, whereas experimental works are generally showcased on platforms such as the New Vision Arts Festival. Beijing Li Liuyi Theatre Studio's *The Heroine Trilogy*, and the small-scale production

¹ The Xiqu Centre's venue hire guidelines can be found here: <https://www.westkwoon.hk/tc/xiqu-centre/venue-hire-enquiries>

Sever, which fuses Peking opera, film, and electronic music, are prime examples of these performances that exist in small numbers. Although the artistic value of experimental Chinese opera is controversial, it is an important aspect of contemporary Chinese opera, and I believe it is crucial that an appropriate amount of such works be performed. “We are more willing to take risks,” Chung asserts. *Four Dreams in the Camellia Hall* by the Shanghai Kunqu Opera Troupe staged in May 2019 is a case in point. Typically, only *The Peony Pavilion* and *The Story of the Purple Hairpin* are featured, with the other two “dreams” performed as excerpts or sung at concerts. However, all four “dreams” were enacted in *Four Dreams in the Camellia Hall*, which can be considered a pioneering move. The Shanghai Kunqu Opera Troupe’s *The Chairs* and the Shanghai Yue Opera Group’s *Destiny of Rebirth*, both of which were cancelled due to the social movement, are also small-scale experimental theatre creations.

Chung emphasises the success of the Shanghai Pingtan Troupe’s *Gao Bowen performs Blossoms*—the play is an adaption of the Shanghai-dialect novel *Blossoms* by Jin Yucheng. Divided into four parts which were performed on consecutive nights, the seemingly unconventional production ended up with a full house. “The Chinese opera audience of Hong Kong is actually very broadminded!” praises Chung. Another programme which has been scheduled for 2021 is *The Dream of an Embroidered Robe* by the GuoGuang Opera Company, a cross-disciplinary



Gao Bowen performs Blossoms (2019) — Photo courtesy: WKCDA

collaboration between Kunqu and Japanese Noh. Alison M. Friedman, Artistic Director, Performing Arts, WKCDA, once stated that in addition to Chinese opera, she intends to select non-Chinese opera works that are inspired by the art form in the future. An English-language operatic version of *Madame White Snake* was staged in the 2019 edition of the Hong Kong Arts Festival—such programmes may also be presented at the Xiqu Centre in the future.

Chung says that she maintains close communication with the LCSD in order to avoid programming conflicts, thereby ensuring that viewers can enjoy a more diverse selection. This constructive communication between the two parties is heartening. In a similar vein as the LCSD, the Xiqu Centre plans to introduce shows featuring rare Chinese opera genres. *Shanxi Opera Excerpts*, which was forced to cancel earlier, is one example. Regional productions are full of distinct local flavour, and many have become stagecraft pioneers. When the programmes showcasing Xi opera from Jiangsu (Chinese Regional Opera of Jingnan in 2005), Liuzi opera from Shandong (“Chinese Operas with an Ancient Lineage” series in 2007), and Gan opera from Jiangxi (Chinese Opera Festival 2012) were presented in Hong Kong, they achieved both box office success and critical acclaim. It is natural for Hong Kong to act as a key supporter of Cantonese opera, but it should not ignore regional works either. Opportunities to perform such productions in Hong Kong can even aid in the survival of certain rare Chinese opera genres. It is hoped that Chung and her team will continue to discover more quality regional pieces and help broaden the horizons of local actors and audiences alike.

Commissioning

The Xiqu Centre has been embroiled in controversy since its establishment, but in all fairness, it has accomplished a few exceptional feats too. Among them, the experimental Cantonese opera *Farewell My Concubine* (New Adaptation), produced by the Xiqu Centre itself, impressed me the most. The changes made to the classic tale are bold but reasonable, while the characters—in particular the overlord—are rendered more human. This production won the Best Experimental Xiqu Award of 2017 at the China (Beijing) Performing Arts Expo, a recognition which I believe it truly deserves. The Xiqu Centre’s second experimental Cantonese opera, *Wenguang Explores the Valley*, was awarded Best Play in the Contemporary Small Theatre – Xiqu category at the 2019 Beijing New Arts and Culture Outstanding Theatre Showcase series. Keith Lai, a co-playwright, co-director, and actor in the production, also garnered the Best Actor award in the same category. This programme will be presented in Hong Kong in 2021 and is worth looking forward to. Determined to make experimental Chinese opera a trademark of the Xiqu Centre, Chung has arranged for such plays to tour Chinese-speaking territories, which I believe is a viable option.

Bamboo Theatre—the documentary feature commissioned by the Xiqu Centre that was nominated for multiple film awards—is another highlight of the past two years. Having shown his compassion for the plight of Chinese opera actors in his previous works *My Way* and *My Next Step*, this new offering from director Cheuk Cheung is steeped in humanity and sincere respect. Earnest and evocative, it also shines a light on the unsung heroes of the Cantonese opera industry.

Research and Conservation

Nurturing culture is also one of the Xiqu Centre's missions. Regrettably, the Chinese Opera Information Centre run by the Department of Music of the Chinese University of Hong Kong has closed due to insufficient funding. Professor Chan Sau-yan subsequently discussed with Chung the possibility of establishing a database of Cantonese opera libretti to collect different scripts for use by researchers and playwrights. Chung reveals that although the copyright procedures involved are complicated, she believes that a number of scripts can be made public within 2020. Allocating resources to create other collections will most likely enable the Xiqu Centre to serve its purpose more effectively.



Wenguang Explores the Valley (2020) — Photo courtesy: WKCD

Since its establishment, the Xiqu Centre has also occasionally played host to seminars, such as the Xiqu Centre Seminar Series co-organised with the CAAHK and the Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts, as well as the International Symposium on the Transmission of Cantonese Opera and Traditional Music co-organised with the Education University of Hong Kong. If the extra step of carrying out in-depth research and publishing on each individual topic is taken, there will be rewards beyond measure. The research/editing team of the Hong Kong Film Archive has compiled numerous monographs, while the Ko Shan Theatre's Cantonese Opera Education and Information Centre has conducted oral history interviews with performers of the art form, all of which have become precious cultural resources. These are examples that the Xiqu Centre can refer to. Inviting renowned mainland Chinese opera artists to talk about their ties to Hong Kong may also be a worthwhile project to pursue.

Conclusion

Managing the Xiqu Centre is easier said than done, a fact that can be easily deduced by observing the course that the WKCD has taken from its beginnings to the present. My opinions as a bystander are just empty words—only the staff involved in the Xiqu Centre's operations truly understand the actual difficulties. Hong Kong is an international metropolis where Chinese and Western cultures meet—and Cantonese opera, which originated in Guangdong, has a deep-seated connection with the city. Meanwhile, actors of different Chinese opera genres also especially cherish the opportunity to come here to conduct exchange activities. Consequently, the development of the local Chinese opera scene has a certain influence on the art form's overall advancement. I hope that all aspiring individuals will band together and work hand in hand with the Xiqu Centre to make the most of Hong Kong's advantages and create a brighter tomorrow.

Special thanks to Ms Bernice Chan for participating in the interview.

(Translated by Johnny Ko)

Elbe Lau

A full member of the International Association of Theatre Critics (Hong Kong), Elbe Lau is currently editor of the New Vision Arts Festival, and formerly English editor of the Hong Kong Film Archive. He is a member of the Chinese Traditional Performing Arts Panel, the Leisure and Cultural Services Department (2018-present).

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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

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

電郵 Email iatc@iatc.com.hk

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