The Majestic Stage: The Story of Cantonese Opera Theatres

Preface

A favourite symbol of local culture, Cantonese opera is a Chinese art form that is as refined as it is popular. From its origins as a street show at the start of British rule to its peak as a fixture on the stage in permanent, purpose-built theatres, Cantonese opera has been performed in a variety of venues, the evolution of which reflects social, population and economic developments in Hong Kong as well as the changes in leisure and entertainment that have taken place in the territory.

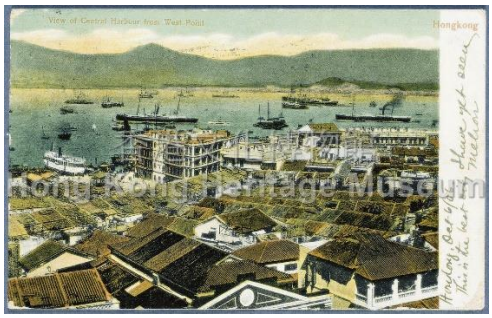
In 2004, Ms. Yuen Bik-fook, Beryl, former owner of the Tai Ping Theatre, approached the Leisure and Cultural Services Department with an initiative to donate the cultural relics from her theatre to the government. Comprising over 6,000 items, this treasure trove of memorabilia was eventually shared in 2006 between the Hong Kong Heritage Museum, the Hong Kong Museum of History and the Hong Kong Film Archive. The Heritage Museum took charge of more than 1,000 artefacts from the donation, and they have substantially enriched the museum's Cantonese opera collection. It was then that the museum came up with the idea for an exhibition on the development of Cantonese opera theatres.

In addition to showcasing the artefacts from the Tai Ping Theatre collection, the exhibition presents exhibits that the museum has retrieved from its original collection, other museums, the Government Records Service, Public Records Office and private collections. This comprehensive display introduces the changes and developments undergone by Cantonese opera theatres over the past 150 years while also illustrating the theatres' social functions, their relationship with Cantonese opera troupes, transformations in stage settings as well as current issues such as future performance venues.

As we look back on the development of Cantonese opera theatres, we hope to promote a wider interest in Cantonese opera and to encourage members of the public and fans of Cantonese opera alike to help conserve Hong Kong's cultural heritage with the aim of ensuring more prosperous times ahead for this highly important local art form.

At the Start of the British Rule

Cantonese opera is one of the traditional Chinese operas, which is a representative performing art of Guangdong and Guangxi as well as an emblem of local culture. In the early days, Cantonese opera was performed on the theatrical stage in temples or in temporary bamboo shed theatres. At the start of the British rule, there were street shows of Chinese operas usually in temporary bamboo shed theatres in the Central District. With the urban and economic development of Hong Kong under the British rule, the Chinese communities showed a stronger demand for leisure and entertainment. The entertainment business flourished in Sheung Wan and Western District. Purpose-built theatres were erected in these two districts with better equipped facilities than their bamboo counterparts and became important entertainment venues for the Chinese. According to historical records, there was a theatre specialized in Chinese opera on Hollywood Road, Hong Kong Island as early as 1853. In the 1860s, a number of theatres were completed one after another in Sheung Wan, including the Sing Ping Theatre, Tung Hing Theatre and Ko Shing Theatre. These theatres with over a thousand seats each helped to provide more entertainment choices for the Chinese.



In the foreground of this postcard is the Ko Shing Theatre
1890s
1996.12.52

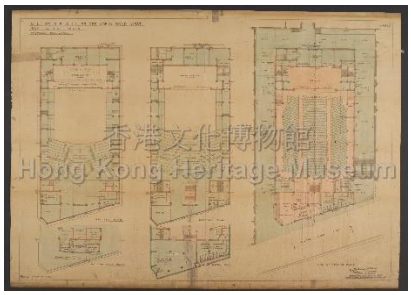
The Golden Age

At the start of the 20th century, Hong Kong's economy was booming and progressing. As its population was growing, the theatre business was developing rapidly. In 1904, the Tai Ping Theatre was opened in Western District, and it ran in equal fame with the Ko Shing Theatre and the Chung Hing Theatre (formerly known as Tung Hing Theatre) in Sheung Wan and Western District. In 1911, the Kau Yue Fong Theatre (also known as the New Theatre) was opened in Central. Popular and well established troupes in Hong Kong and Guangzhou such as Yan Sou Lin, Kwok Chung Hing and Chuk Wah Lin were invited to perform at these theatres. The appearance and performances of these troupes helped raising the artistic merit of Cantonese opera performances in Hong Kong.

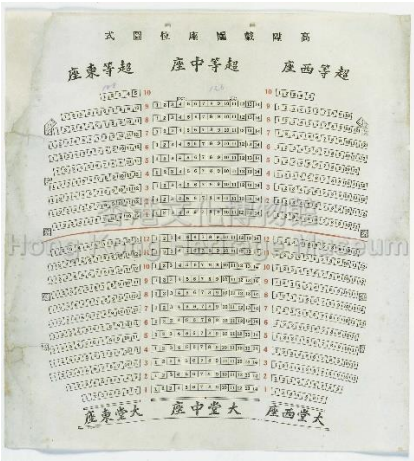
Due to the roaring population, the government reclaimed land from the Central and Western Districts, as well as from Wan Chai and Causeway Bay in several phases to solve the housing problem. With the gradual shift of population to the east of Hong Kong Island, more purpose-built theatres including the Hong Kong Grand Theatre and the Lee Theatre were erected on east Hong Kong Island. The demand for entertainment also grew with the rising population in the Kowloon Peninsula. The completion of the Astor Theatre, Pei Ho Theatre and Prince's Theatre served as new venues for Cantonese opera performances too.

After World War II, the film industry in Hong Kong started to prosper. Theatres were not places only for Cantonese opera performances but also for film showings. In order to maximize revenues, theatre proprietors tended to lease the venues to the more popular and larger-scale troupes because the theatres shared profit pro-rata with the troupes under rental agreement. As a result, the smaller-scale troupes could hardly have the opportunity to perform at theatres. Fortunately, from the 1950s to the 1960s, several amusement parks were opened such as the Lai Chi Kok

Amusement Park, Kai Tak Amusement Park and Tsuen Wan Amusement Park. The Cantonese opera stages inside these amusement parks provided ample performing opportunities for these smaller-scale troupes. In 1962, the Hong Kong City Hall was opened after reconstruction, which offered a much better venue for Cantonese opera troupes. Besides, with the development of new towns, the town halls and community halls there also served as a performing venue for Cantonese opera troupes.


香港文化博物館
Hong Kong Heritage Museum

Architectural Plan for Re-construction of Tai Ping Theatre
1931
2006.49.1574.2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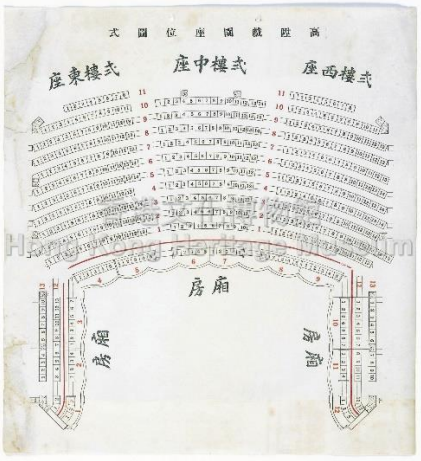
香港文化博物館
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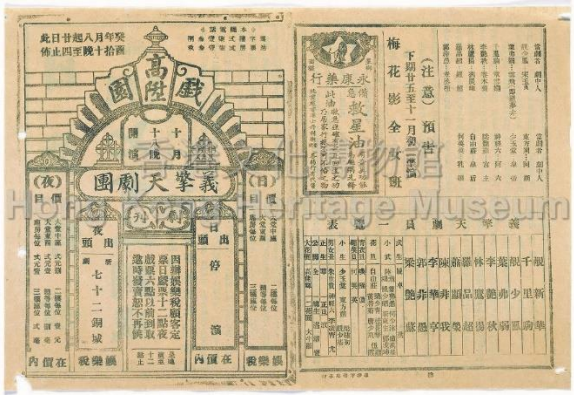
Seating Plans of the Ko Shing Theatre
1930s
2006.49.1466.29



Postbill for the Performance of Yi King Tin Opera Troupe at the Ko Shing Theatre

1913

2006.49.944

Prince's Theatre

1956

2003.31.909

Besides Acting

Besides providing entertainment to the Chinese, theatres also played an important role in Chinese communities' reception of foreign guests and fund-raising performances.

In 1869, the Duke of Edinburgh visited Hong Kong. The Chinese communities arranged a welcoming banquet for him at the Tung Hing Theatre and entertained him with Cantonese opera performances. In 1890, the Duke and Duchess of Connaught visited Hong Kong. The Chinese gentry and merchants welcomed them at the Ko Shing Theatre with a banquet, too. Traditional preludes of Cantonese opera like *The Congratulations of the eight Genii*, *Promotion* and *The Fairy Wife* were performed. Not only did the Chinese communities receive foreign guests at theatres, in 1936, Sir Andrew Caldecott, the then Governor of Hong Kong, invited Sir Frederick Leith-Ross during his visit in Hong Kong to watch Cantonese Opera Master Ma Sze Tsang perform the *Lady Precious Stream* at the Tai Ping Theatre. In 1966, Princess Margaret, Countess of Snowdon and Earl of Snowdon visited Hong Kong. The Cantonese opera *Princess Ping Yang* was performed for Her Royal Highness at the Lee Theatre, the most luxurious theatre of the time. Since both government officials and the upper class valued Cantonese opera highly as a local cultural emblem, the theatre played an important social role by serving as a place for receiving foreign guests.

The businessmen operating Cantonese opera theatres also actively participated in community charity, social relief work and even the Anti-Japanese War fundraising campaign. To support community charity, they reduced the rentals for charity shows by Cantonese opera troupes, or allowed charitable organizations to hold fundraising sale inside the theatres. For example, when four hospitals in Hong Kong and the Red Cross raised funds in the early 20th century, the Tai Ping Theatre offered

a cheap rental for Cantonese opera troupes to perform charity shows there.

Special Issue for Cantonese Opera in Honour of Her Royal Highness The Princess Margaret Countess of Snowdon and The Earl of Snowdon
1966
1996.44.82

Silk Banner to Soo Chow Mui for Her Charity Performance at the Lee Theatre
1938
2004.3.13

Thank You Letter from the "Chinese Welfare Relief Association" to Yuen Jim-fan, the Owner of the Tai Ping Theatre
1937
2006.49.368

Stage Settings

In the early days, Cantonese opera was usually performed in temporary bamboo shed theatres with a few facilities and without any stage settings. There was only a cloth to separate the frontstage and the backstage. The musicians were seated in front of the cloth. At both sides of the cloth a door curtain, called the "tiger gate cover", was hung through which performers entered or left the frontstage. During a performance, a chair on which a wooden sign with words like "garden" or "fortress" was placed to explain the setting of the story.

In the 1860s, a number of theatres were erected in Hong Kong. Cantonese opera performances started to move from temporary bamboo shed theatres to purpose-built theatres. Gradually, features of western opera houses were added in the theatrical architecture, and particular emphasis was placed on stage and sound effects. In the early 20th century, the women Cantonese opera troupes started to use soft backdrops. Fortress gates, gardens, palaces were painted on separate large-sized canvases, which were then suspended at centre backstage and could be replaced whenever the plot found it appropriate. The audience was much refreshed and amazed as a result. On the other hand, the women Cantonese opera troupes devised little light bulbs onto the stage backdrop and props in order to create a shiny and glittering effect on stage. From the 1920s to 1930s, Cantonese opera troupes made use of mechanical backdrops, lighting effects and various mechanical installations to allow swift changes of settings on stage. Cinematic techniques were also employed. The lighting and props in filmmaking were applied to the Cantonese opera stage, and the three-dimensional settings like mountains, trees and parlours which were commonly found in films were also adopted. Such extravagant stage settings were highlighted in their publicity to attract the audience. In the 1960s, stage art designers introduced net backdrops which were hung in front of the soft backdrops in order to increase the

depth of the stage scene. Since the 1970s, projected images have been introduced to enhance the sense of reality and perspective of the stage settings. With the application of computer technology, stage setting design has become more advanced and specialized in recent years, giving more colours and glamour to Cantonese opera performances.

香港文化博物館
Hong Kong Heritage Museum

Stage Setting Designs for *The Story of West Garden*, Scene One
1991
2009.13.3.1

香港文化博物館
Hong Kong Heritage Museum

Cantonese opera artist Ng Kwan Lai studies the set models
1950s
2003.31.728

Theatres and Opera Troupes

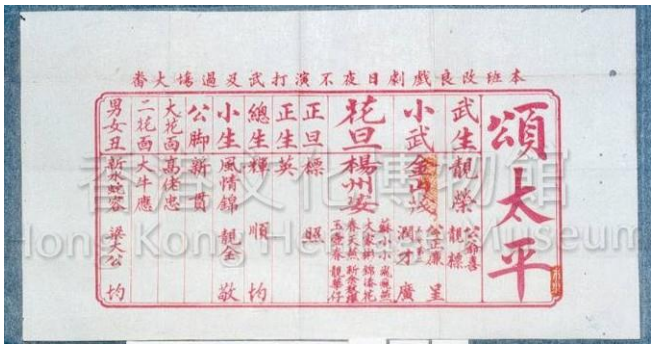
In the late 19th century, though there were only the Ko Shing Theatre, Tung Hing Theatre and Sing Ping Theatre on Hong Kong Island, competition among them was severe. At that time, the Ko Shing Theatre was situated on Queen's Road West with more passers-by, while the Tung Hing Theatre was located on the less convenient Market Street (now Po Hing Fong). The latter frequently cut down ticket prices or offered complimentary tea and refreshments in order to attract more patrons.

The keen competition among the theatres could be reflected by the big Cantonese opera casts that the theatre proprietors tried to invite. In the beginning, all theatre proprietors in Hong Kong invited opera troupes from Guangzhou. Later, in order to enhance the theatres' appeal and assure revenues, theatre proprietors became Cantonese opera troupes' proprietors as well, and they invited Cantonese opera performers to form the troupes. When the Tai Ping Theatre started business in the early 20th century, it competed fiercely with the Ko Shing Theatre. The Tai Ping Theatre owned several troupes, including Chung Tai Ping, Chuk Tai Ping, Wing Tai Ping, as well as the famous Tai Ping Yim Ying Women Troupe.

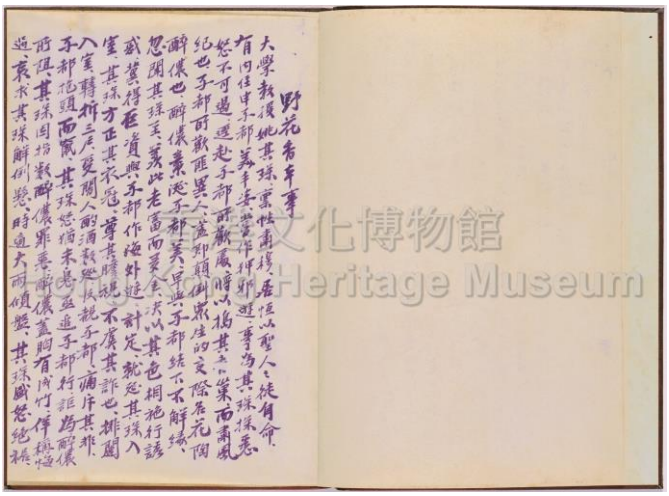
From the 1930s to the early 1940s, the Tai Ping Theatre invited Master Ma Sze Tsang to form Tai Ping Opera Troupe, and Ma wrote and performed a number of popular operas for the theatre. The Ko Shing Theatre invited Master Sit Kok Sin and his Kok Sin Sing Opera Troupe to be the theatre's in-house troupe. Competition between the two theatres, the two troupes and the two Cantonese opera stars reached its zenith during this period and was known as the glorious "Sit-Ma Rivalry" era. Despite the erection of other Cantonese opera theatres on Hong Kong Island and in Kowloon, severe competition was primarily between the Tai Ping Theatre and Ko Shing Theatre because of their physical proximity. So Tai Ping Opera Troupe and Kok Sin Sing Opera Troupe

seldom performed at their rivalling theatres. However, these two troupes would perform at the other theatres and appropriated revenues with the theatres.

During the Japanese Occupation Period (1941 to 1945), Sit Kok Sin and Ma Sze Tsang returned to Guangzhou, and so the “Sit-Ma Rivalry” era was over. It was the most difficult period for the theatre business in Hong Kong as many other Cantonese opera artists also left the city. After the war, celebrated Cantonese opera artists who had fled to the mainland and overseas gradually returned to Hong Kong. Together with the younger artists, they formed various troupes and performed at various theatres. Cantonese opera started to prosper again.



Advertisement of Chung Tai Ping Troupe
Early 20th century
1995.114.323



Clay Print Libretto of *Scent of Wild Flowers*

Written and Performed by Ma Sze Tsang

1934

2006.49.1239

Postbill for the Performance of Kok Sin Sing Opera Troupe at the Ko Shing Theatre

1940

1994.110.19

Decline and Prospect

After World War II, the film industry in Hong Kong started to prosper, and so did Cantonese opera films. The booming film industry attracted many Cantonese opera artists to appear on the screen. The low-priced film tickets appealed to the audience, and so the box office for live Cantonese opera performances dropped drastically. Together with the introduction of television, the Cantonese opera business went to its low tide in the late 1960s, and only few theatres specialized in Cantonese opera were running. From the 1970s to the 1980s, Hong Kong's economy and land prices rocketed. Many theatre proprietors sold their theatres for commercial or residential developments. Well-established Cantonese opera theatres like the Prince's Theatre, Ko Shing Theatre and Tai Ping Theatre were demolished one after the other.

Nowadays, only the Sunbeam Theatre is still specializing in Cantonese opera. Accommodating over a thousand seats, it is the venue for many renowned Cantonese opera troupes. In 1993, Chung Sun Sing Opera Troupe had a season of 38 consecutive full-house shows at the Sunbeam Theatre, and so the Theatre won the title of "Hong Kong's Grand Palace for Cantonese Opera". In 2007, the government decided to convert the Yau Ma Tei Theatre into a Chinese Opera Centre to serve as a new venue for Cantonese opera performances.

Also, the government has accepted a recommendation put forward by the Consultative Committee on the Core Arts and Cultural Facilities of the West Kowloon Cultural District to set up a Xiqu Centre in the West Kowloon Cultural District. In this Centre, theatres, as well as ancillary facilities such as rehearsal rooms and small exhibition halls, will be provided, opening a new chapter in the development of Cantonese opera performing venues.

Ticket for the Performance of Chung Sun Sing Opera Troupe at the Sunbeam Theatre

1974

1996.116.86

Poster for the Performances of Ming Chee Sing Opera Troupe at the Sunbeam Theatre

1992

1996.141.69

Customs of Cantonese Opera Troupes

The performing venues of Cantonese opera have developed from temporary bamboo shed theatres to purpose-built theatres and Chinese opera centres over the past hundred years. While purpose-built theatres have experienced a rise and fall with the urban development and the growing diversity of entertainment in Hong Kong, temporary bamboo shed theatres still remain a major venue for Cantonese opera nowadays. The setting of the bamboo shed theatres and many of the traditional customs of Cantonese opera troupes are still no different from those of the past.

The stage on the temporary bamboo shed theatre is sophisticatedly designed. The left backstage is called “the costume side”, designated mainly for storing costumes; the right backstage is called “the props side”, designated mainly for storing props. Along the backstage aisle are the dressing rooms for the main cast, while the general dressing rooms for the other performers are at the end of “the costume side”. The access from both sides of the backstage to the frontstage is known as “the tiger gate cover”. The opera outline is usually posted behind “the tiger gate cover” on “the props side” for performers’ and other staff’s quick reference. Although there are some minor adjustments to suit different venues, the basic stage set up remains the same.

In addition, a shrine for the theatrical patron god(s) must be set up on “the props side”. Master Huaguang, along with Masters Tian and Dou, and Master Zhang Wu, are the theatrical patron gods worshipped by the artists of Cantonese opera. Before performance, troupe members will offer incense to the shrine and at the frontstage and pray for blessing.

There is another traditional theatrical custom. On the first day of a series of performances by an opera troupe, the comedian-role will write with

his finger in cinnabar ink the Chinese characters meaning “Great Luck” on a pillar beside the shrine for the theatrical patron gods. Then the other performers will start make-up for the performance. It is required that the four strokes forming the square component in the Chinese character for “luck” cannot join together to form a “closed” square, otherwise the performers’ mouths will also be closed, which is a big taboo on stage. Sometimes the comedian-role will write these two Chinese characters all in one continued and unfragmented stroke, which means a continued business and a lifelong living.

Cheung Sha Wan Bamboo Shed Theatre of Ritual Performance
2000