
New Stars of Cantonese Opera

The traditional art gets a life-giving boost from young devotees



By Rachel Cheung, Hilda Lee and Frances Sit



“I think now is the golden age of children’s Cantonese opera”

Following the rhythmic clashing of cymbals and steady beating of drums, the actor with a long beard and a hat with a flap on either side, walks to the front of the stage. He is playing a general in a patriotic historical drama. As the music fades, then stops, he lifts his leg, puts a hand on his hip, grabs one flap of the hat with the other hand – turns his piercing gaze on the audience and begins to sing.

This is a typical Cantonese opera performance and a glance at the audience in the Yau Ma Tei Theatre reveals a crowd of mainly middle-aged and elderly theatregoers.

This does not come as a surprise as Cantonese opera is popular among the older generations.

What might be more surprising though, is that under the heavy makeup are the faces of young actors in their early 20s and 30s.

Alan Tam Wing-lun, 20, is one of them. He fell in love with this traditional art when

his grandfather took him to a Cantonese opera performance when he was two years old. “I found the costumes very beautiful and the accessories were stunning as well. My favourite was the shoes worn by the Fa Daan [the female role in Cantonese opera],” Tam recalls. Tam began to learn Cantonese opera a year later. When he was 14, he joined a Cantonese opera troupe and began his lifelong career in Cantonese opera performance.

Tam, who took his Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education Examination this year, has always found it difficult to maintain a balance between Cantonese opera and academic studies. Ever since Secondary Two, he has only managed to sleep for two to four hours every day. Sometimes, he had to perform in the bamboo theatres on the outlying islands. By the time he got home, it was almost 4 a.m. in the morning. Then at 6 a.m., he had to get up for school.

Tam has often considered giving up on

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Cantonese opera because of the difficulties in balancing his pursuit of the art and his studies but, in the end, he persisted because he enjoys playing different characters and performing on stage. After graduating from secondary school, he decided to be a full time Cantonese opera singer.

Paris Wong Hau-wai is another fresh face in Cantonese opera. Wong, who is in his 30s, is currently studying for a Cantonese Opera Degree at the Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts. Unlike many male Cantonese opera performers, Wong plays the female role.

He originally encountered opposition from his mother, both for participating in Cantonese opera and for playing women's roles. But Wong managed to alter her perception with his determination and persistence. His enthusiasm for Cantonese opera also changed the views of his teachers and classmates in secondary school.

"They may still think Cantonese opera is old-fashioned but I think my performances have changed some others' impressions of Cantonese opera," says Wong.

"That's how I follow this path and gradually I will find people that support me. Persistence is very important."

The arrival of young actors like Wong and Tam on the Cantonese opera stage has changed the perception that it is just for older people. With more young people taking an interest, the future of this tradi-



Alan Tam Wing-lun



tional art may not be as bleak as we used to think.

Wong, who also teaches Cantonese opera in secondary schools, observes an increasing number of youngsters belonging to the Post-90s generation getting involved. He thinks this can be attributed to more promotion from the government and other organisations since Cantonese opera was declared an “Intangible Heritage” by UNESCO in 2009.

What is more, with Cantonese opera being adopted as a compulsory part of the Music syllabus in the Hong Kong New Senior Secondary Curriculum, there are now numerous courses on Cantonese opera

in primary and secondary schools. “I think now is the golden age of children’s Cantonese opera,” says Wong.

Though the number of students taking part in Cantonese opera is on the rise, the preservation of this traditional art form still faces challenges.

Learning Cantonese opera is still not the first preference for most parents when it comes to choosing extra-curricular activities. “When parents can afford to let their children join extra-curricular activities, they choose ballet, piano, violin, etc. Learning Cantonese opera is always at the bottom of the list,” Wong says.

There is still a long way to go when it

comes to promoting and preserving Cantonese opera in Hong Kong as western art forms are deeply entrenched. “When you compare the erhu with the violin, parents still think playing the violin is more elegant and superb. Violin still wins,” says Wong.

The key to the preservation of Cantonese opera is changing society’s perception of it. After all, it is not just a traditional art, it is also a gateway to Chinese culture and values.

Perhaps, through the collective efforts of the young faces of Cantonese opera, the beating of drums and clashing of cymbals will go on and on. ■

Edited by Lindy Wong