

Hong Kong Xiqu Overview



2021 – 2022

香港戲曲概述 2021-2022

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The Reappearance of Chiu Chow Opera in Hong Kong During the Pandemic

Written by: Choi Kai-kwong (Researcher of bamboo theatre culture)

Due to border closures and epidemic prevention measures during the pandemic, Chiu Chow opera troupes from the Mainland were unable to perform in Hong Kong. However, this situation created an opportunity for local Chiu Chow opera troupes to reassemble and perform at the Yu Lan Festival after a thirty-year hiatus. In fact, since the establishment of the Hong Kong Chaoren Culture & Arts Promotion Association in 2011, Chiu Chow opera performances have been organised several times a year in Hong Kong. This article examines the current situation and issues surrounding the legacy of Chiu Chow opera in Hong Kong following the decline of local troupes.

Resurgence of Local Troupes Post-decline

The pandemic carried on to 2021 and 2022, and the border remained closed, preventing Mainland Chiu Chow opera troupes from coming to Hong Kong. During this time, the Leisure and Cultural Services Department required Yu Lan Festival events to be held at its venues. To be granted venue usage, event organisers are asked to incorporate traditional opera elements. Therefore, some festival organisers discussed strategies with local Chiu Chow opera troupe owners.

For many years, Sun Tin Ngai Chiu Chow Opera Troupe had arranged Chiu Chow opera performances for the Mongkok Chiu Kiu Yu Lan Festival. They located veteran local actors and musicians from decades ago and assembled a temporary troupe comprising five generations of Chiu Chow opera workers, ranging from retired senior performers to young amateur enthusiasts. The group rehearsed for several days leading up to the performance.

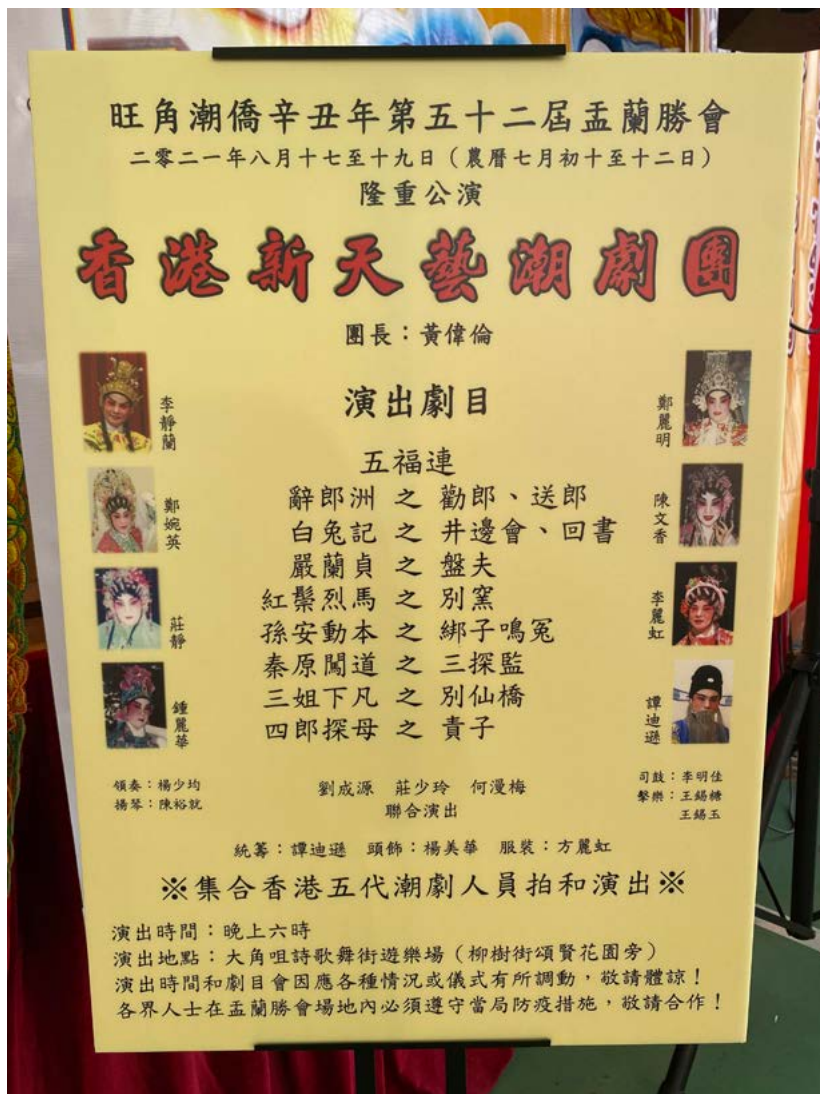
The Mongkok Chiu Kiu Yu Lan Festival was held from August 17 to 19, 2021 (10th to 12th of the seventh lunar month) at the Sycamore Street Playground in Tai Kok Tsui. Over three consecutive nights, 11 Chiu Chow opera excerpts were performed, each lasting at least half an hour. This was the only Chiu Chow opera performance during the Yu Lan Festival over the two years of the pandemic. It also marked the first time in nearly thirty years that a local Chiu Chow opera troupe had performed.

There were a total of 11 performers, each taking on multiple roles, and 17 backstage crew members, including the troupe leader, coordinator, musicians, costume and headpiece artists, stage supervisor, and programme designer.¹

¹ “Mainland Opera Troupes Unable to Perform in Hong Kong Due to the Pandemic, Local Chiu Chow Opera Troupes Return to the Yu Lan Stage.” *Hong Kong Commercial Daily*, August 22, 2021.



The bamboo theatre for Chiu Chow Opera performances at the Mongkok Chiu Kiu Yu Lan Festival in 2021



A performance poster of the Chiu Chow opera at the Mongkok Chiu Kiu Yu Lan Festival in 2021

In 2022, the temporary crew reassembled under the name Sun Hon Kwong Chiu Chow Opera Troupe and performed at two Yu Lan Festivals. They were the Tai Kong Po, Pat Heung, Kam Tin Chiu Kiu Yu Lan Festival held from August 7 to 9, 2022 (10th to 12th of the seventh lunar month) at the Tin Tak Kung Temple Plaza in Tai Kong Po, and the Cheung Sha Wan Chiu Chow Yu Lan Festival held from August 24 to 26, 2022 (27th to 29th of the seventh lunar month) at the Po On Road Playground in Sham Shui Po.

Each festival featured three nights of performances: two nights of full-length operas “*Chen San and Wu Niang*” and “*Filing a Prosecution Against Her Husband*”, and one night of opera excerpts.



Chiu Chow Opera “*Eight Immortals Bestowing Longevity*” (taken at the Cheung Sha Wan Chiu Chow Yu Lan Festival in 2022)



Chiu Chow Opera “*A Fairy Returns Her Son to the Mortal Father*” (taken at the Cheung Sha Wan Chiu Chow Yu Lan Festival in 2022)

In addition, the Hong Kong Chaoren Culture & Arts Promotion Association performed at the Buddhist Sam Kok Mar Tou Yu Lan Festival from August 21 to 23, 2022 (the 24th to 26th of the seventh lunar month) at the Sun Yat Sen Memorial Park Playground in Sheung Wan, as Sun Sing Ngai Chiu Chow Opera Troupe. The three-night program included the full-length operas “*Golden Flower Lady* (Part I)”, “*Golden Flower Lady* (Part II)”, and “*The Silk Handkerchief*”.



Hong Kong Chaoren Culture & Arts Promotion Association performing at the Sam Kok Mar Tou Yu Lan Festival in 2022

Hong Kong Chaoren Culture & Arts Promotion Association

The Hong Kong Chaoren Culture & Arts Promotion Association is a non-profit Chiu Chow opera performance group established in 2011 and registered as a charitable organisation in 2021. With over ten years of performance experience, the Association receives annual funding from District Councils or commissions from the Home Affairs Department to stage public Chiu Chow opera performances at Sunbeam Theatre, Hong Kong City Hall, and community halls. These performances are free for local Chiu Chow residents and the general public to enjoy.



A performance poster of the Hong Kong Chaoren Culture & Arts Promotion Association at Sunbeam Theatre

The Association currently has more than ten performers and nearly ten musicians, most of whom migrated from the Chaozhou-Shantou region to Hong Kong years ago and later resumed their passion for Chiu Chow opera and music after retirement. The chairperson, Ms. Lam Suet Wan, has loved Chiu Chow culture since childhood and studied under Ms. Zheng Jianying, a National Class One Performer from the Guangdong Chiu Chow Opera Theatre, specialising in qingyi roles. The artistic director, Ms Eva Chan, was born into a Chiu Chow opera family and, after graduating from the Shantou Xiqu School, became a performer with the Guangdong Chiu Chow Opera Theatre Number Two Troupe.

Musicians gather every Friday afternoon to evening for music practice at the Association's venue, and every Saturday afternoon to evening for joint rehearsals with performers. Before public performances, the frequency of rehearsals increases.

In 2019, with authorisation from the Guangdong Chiu Chow Opera Theatre, the Association established a Chiu Chow Opera Heritage Centre. Currently, they focus on cultivating interest among the grandchildren of members and aim to eventually open recruitment to young people to train and pass on the art of Chiu Chow opera in Hong Kong.

Return of Mainland Troupes After the Pandemic

In 2023, following the pandemic and the reopening of borders, Yu Lan Festival Chiu Chow opera performances resumed their pre-pandemic state. Local Chiu Chow opera troupe leaders once again invited folk troupes from Chaozhou, Shantou, and Fujian to perform in Hong Kong.

As for the Hong Kong Chaoren Culture & Arts Promotion Association, they continue to hold several community performances of Chiu Chow opera each year, a practice that was maintained from before the pandemic.

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