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主編、行政統籌
蔡啟光

Editor and Administration Coordinator
Choi Kai-kwong

原文審訂
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英文翻譯
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Catalina Yang

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Cantonese Opera Industry in the Post-Pandemic Era: Technology and Innovation

Written by: Dr. Chung Ming Yan, Fanny (Associate Professor, Academy of Music, School of Creative Arts, Hong Kong Baptist University)

Translated by: Catalina Yang

Background

The COVID-19 pandemic had a profound impact on industries worldwide. In response to public health concerns, many public activities were suspended, sending the global cultural and arts sector into a period of decline. Hong Kong's Cantonese opera scene was no exception, facing unprecedented challenges. In-depth research was conducted on the pandemic's impact on Cantonese opera, and the findings were documented in a book (Chung, 2023¹), with the aim of preserving a record of this historical moment.

As the pandemic gradually eased, most Cantonese opera troupes responded swiftly to resume activities, even turning the crisis into an opportunity. The extended period of disruption also catalyzed some “new norms” within the Cantonese opera community, especially advancements in relation to technological adaptation and experimentation. These innovations have touched on performance formats, artistic presentation, industry ecology, marketing strategies, and audience engagement. In order for these technologies and innovations to exert a long-term and positive impact on the transmission of Cantonese opera, continual exploration, reflection, and feedback from Cantonese opera troupes and practitioners are essential.

This article examines the post-pandemic application of technology in Cantonese opera, highlights emerging innovations, and analyzes practitioners' experiences and perspectives.

The Application of Modern Technology in Cantonese Opera

Cantonese opera, as a significant cultural and artistic treasure, was inscribed on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity (UNESCO, 2009). In modern society, the protection and safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage are regarded as a crucial international issue.

¹ Chung, F. M. Y. (2023). *Transmission of Hong Kong Cantonese Opera during the COVID-19 Crisis*. Hong Kong: Chung Hwa Book Co.

(Smith, 2006). The UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage emphasizes the importance of innovative strategies in cultural transmission, including the use of modern technology (UNESCO, 2003).

With the rapid development of artistic technologies, performing arts worldwide have undergone significant transformations, and Hong Kong's Cantonese opera has kept pace with these innovations. For example, the West Kowloon Cultural District recently introduced its first AI robot to participate in a Cantonese opera performance. In the show *Magic Tea House*, the AI robot mimicked the famous actor Law Ka-ying to tell a time-travel story, offering audiences an innovative Cantonese opera experience that successfully attracted many young viewers.

Similarly, the Yeung Ming Art Opera's *Ziqi and Boya* incorporated 3D floating technology to assist storytelling, projecting images of ghosts, clouds, and birds to create unique visual effects. This technology enhanced the emotional connection between Ziqi and Boya, breaking the boundaries of traditional presentation. Likewise, the Fung Cheung Hung Troupe's *Hua Mulan* integrated immersive technology into its performance, using 3D techniques to depict actor-stage interactions and creating a virtual environment that was both immersive and interactive, introducing a novel expressive form to this traditional art.

In 2024, research published in an international journal examined how the development of modern technology after the pandemic has influenced the transmission of Cantonese opera (Chung, 2024²). The study involved interviews with 86 stakeholders of the field, including actors, musicians, stage managers, technicians, martial arts instructors, troupe leaders, and administrators. The interviews explored participants' experiences and views with technology applied in Cantonese opera.

The findings show that the potential impact of pertaining technology in Cantonese opera can be categorized into four areas: audience expansion, artistic presentation enhancement, increased socio-economic value, and the appearance of new operational models.

1. Expanding the Cantonese Opera Audience

The study shows that technology helps broaden audiences by diversifying communication channels, artistic presentation modes, and marketing strategies, positively contributing to the heritage of Cantonese opera. Respondents generally agreed that showcasing performances on social media platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram effectively extends audience reach, including international viewers. Among younger generations, these platforms are especially influential. They see these channels as a useful entry point to engage young people who might never consider attending a live performance, gradually nurturing interest and appreciation.

2 Chung, F. M. Y. (2024). Utilising technology as a transmission strategy in intangible cultural heritage: The case of Cantonese opera performances. *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 30(2), 210–225. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13527258.2023.2284723>

However, some practitioners cautioned against over-investing in media and technological approaches solely to attract young audiences. They noted that interest in Cantonese opera often grows with age, suggesting that young people may not yet be ready to appreciate this traditional art. For instance, one practitioner recalled that previous generations predicted the decline of Cantonese opera due to an aging audience. Yet, more than sixty years later, Cantonese opera remains vibrant, demonstrating its enduring artistic value and resilience.

2. Enhancing Artistic Presentation

Practitioners also believe modern technology can significantly improve the clarity, accessibility, and overall appeal of Cantonese opera, making it more engaging and relevant to contemporary society.

For example, one interviewee shared his experience in a technologically integrated performance, noting that holographic projections of story-related imagery greatly enhanced audience comprehension and immersion. Another practitioner cited the classic *Reincarnation of the Red Plum*, noting that AI applications could enhance key scenes—such as Li Huiniang leaping from a coffin—without disrupting traditional elements.

Yet, some emphasized that the core elements and values of Cantonese opera must be preserved. While technology can enhance performance, the essence lies in traditional Cantonese operatic skills and musical structure, not dazzling stage effects. One interviewee recounted a VR-enhanced production that felt overly modernized, undermining the original artistic intent and historical context.

Overall, technology is a double-edged sword in enhancing artistic presentation. It can boost accessibility and appeal, but careful balance is required to ensure the essence of the Cantonese opera tradition is preserved, challenging practitioners to innovate while maintaining cultural integrity.

3. Increasing the Value of Cantonese Opera

Scholars note that economic value is a key outcome of cultural participation (Hewison, 2006). According to the Chief Executive's *2020 Policy Address*, the Hong Kong SAR government has invested resources to actively promote and support arts technology development, opening new economic pathways for the cultural sector.

However, most online Cantonese opera performances in Hong Kong are free, which limits sustainable income for the art form. Troupe leaders point out that ticket sales remain the primary source of revenue; without paid performances, it is difficult to sustain operations or pay practitioners. Moreover, encouraging audiences to pay for online content is challenging, as this habit is still not widespread. In addition, many of the audience are older and unfamiliar with online payment systems. While technology expands accessibility, enhancing economic returns through digital platforms remains a challenge.

Beyond economics, social value is another crucial outcome of cultural participation, as it provides communities access to cultural experiences (Bakhshi & Throsby, 2012). In the digital era, mediatization can increase engagement across different social groups (Jansson, 2013). A survey by the Hong Kong Arts Development Council (2018) found that only 5% of 15 to 24-year-olds had participated in Cantonese opera activities, with its primary audiences aged 45 to 74. Analysing the composition of the audience, it is found that many are retirees who are less formally educated. This survey reveals a significant age difference in the audience makeup of Cantonese opera and other art forms. It is the opinion of this study that technology, by expanding access, has created opportunities for diverse audiences to engage with Cantonese opera, enhancing social recognition and support for the art.

4. New Operational Models in the Cantonese Opera Industry

The pandemic prompted practitioners to rethink industry development, while technological advancement opened new opportunities. Some argued that relying solely on government funding no longer meets the diversified demands of the market. They suggested adopting profit-oriented business models to create sustainable revenue streams and retain young practitioners.

For instance, some young performers have adopted subscription-based platforms like Patreon, allowing audiences to enjoy ad-free full performances while supporting artists. These digital platforms enable direct interaction, sharing behind-the-scenes content, and strengthening audience engagement and loyalty. Practitioners can also generate sustainable income, supporting both livelihoods and professional development.

Conclusion

In summary, the pandemic has brought innovation and new opportunities to Cantonese opera. Technology has transformed performance, communication, and operational models, enhancing accessibility, social relevance, and audience engagement while social media and online performances have expanded audience reach, contributing to cultural transmission.

At the same time, it is essential to preserve the core elements and values of Cantonese opera. Feedbacks received in this study support the view that while technology enhances performance and audience interaction, over-reliance risks undermining traditional skills. Practitioners must balance innovation and tradition to safeguard the essence of Cantonese opera. In planning performances, careful integration of technology is crucial to maintain cultural meaning. Audience acclimatization and feedback are equally important. With ongoing efforts from all stakeholders, it is the hope that Cantonese opera can continue to thrive in contemporary society.

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