

Hong Kong Xiqu Overview



2023

香港戲曲概述 2023

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版面設計及排版
沛誠公司

Layout Design and Typeset
Amazing Source Company

網站
hkxiqu.hk

Website
hkxiqu.hk

國際標準書號
978-988-74613-9-5

ISBN
978-988-74613-9-5

版次 2025 年 12 月初版

First published in December 2025

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Supported by



香港藝術發展局
Hong Kong Arts Development Council 資助

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2023 Retrospective: The Chinese Artists Association of Hong Kong (Barwo) and Its Legacy

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The year 2023 marked the 70th anniversary of the Chinese Artists Association of Hong Kong, commonly referred to as “Barwo”. Established as Hong Kong’s premier Cantonese opera guild, Barwo was officially re-registered in July 1953, building upon the foundation of the Guangdong Barwo Cantonese Opera Professional Union’s Hong Kong branch. In December 2008, it further transitioned into a registered non-profit charitable organization. Barwo’s mission is to promote and preserve the traditional art of Cantonese opera. Initially, its focus was inward, primarily serving the needs of industry professionals. Over time, however, it has progressively expanded its scope, dedicating increasing resources to the promotion, preservation, and transmission of Cantonese opera to the wider community. In essence, Barwo has evolved from an internally focused guild to a comprehensive organization with outward-facing initiatives.¹

This article provides a three-part overview of Barwo’s activities in 2023, including: (1) the Yau Ma Tei Theatre Venue Partnership Scheme—Cantonese Opera Young Talent Performance Series, (2) the Barwo Cantonese Opera Academy, and (3) other significant milestones and events. It is noteworthy that 2023 straddled the terms of two leadership committees: the 39th Council under Chairperson Ms. Liza Wang and the 40th Council led by Chairperson Mr. Loong Koon Tin (stage name, also known as “Yuk Gor”). I interviewed Yuk Gor on 23 February 2025. During the interview, Yuk Gor shared his vision upon assuming the role of Chairperson and discussed Barwo’s new initiatives starting from 2023. The insights from this interview serve as valuable supplementary material for this article.

Part One: Yau Ma Tei Theatre Venue Partnership Scheme – Cantonese Opera Young Talent Performance Series

In 2012, Barwo launched the Yau Ma Tei Theatre Venue Partnership Scheme, also known as the “Cantonese Opera Young Talent Performance Series” (hereinafter referred to as the “Young Talent Program”). The program aims to nurture performing arts talents, encompassing not only onstage performers but also behind-the-scenes roles, with the goal of comprehensively cultivating the

¹ For further information, please visit the official Barwo website: <https://hkbarwo.com/zh/about>.

next generation of Cantonese opera practitioners. The program’s artistic directors are among Hong Kong’s most esteemed Cantonese opera artists, including Li Chi Kei, Yuen Siu Fai, Sun Kim Long, Law Ka Ying, and Loong Koon Tin. In 2020, the team was further strengthened by the addition of Wan Fai Yin, Wong Chiu Kwan, and Chan Ka Ming. Since its inception, the Young Talent Program has been successfully running for over a decade. The directors have generously and selflessly imparted their expertise, providing professional mentorship to young performers who then take the stage at the Yau Ma Tei Theatre. As Chairperson Liza Wang expressed, “This program has not only been successful but has also garnered widespread acclaim and positive feedback. It has trained a substantial number of young performers, playing a crucial role in revitalizing Cantonese opera.”²

In fact, Hong Kong audiences are likely well-acquainted with these performances, with many becoming loyal patrons who eagerly await the seasonal distribution of booklets containing performance schedules, from which they select their preferred shows to attend. In recent years, one of the most significant changes to the Young Talent Program has been the shift in performance venues. Beginning mid-2021, the original venue, Yau Ma Tei Theatre, underwent construction and expansion works, prompting performances to be relocated to the New Wing Auditorium of the Ko Shan Theatre. This move of venue naturally attracted new audiences from the To Kwa Wan district.³ Meanwhile, as the program matured over the years, it continued to introduce fresh faces to the performing teams and innovate its repertoire. Young performers are tasked not only with staging classic Cantonese opera works but also with reviving rare and lesser-known productions to maintain audience interest and engagement. The program’s 2023 activities spanned two performance seasons, with highlights including the 2022-23 season productions of *Formulaic Plays Excerpts*, *Full Moon over Grand Realm General*, and the 2023-24 season performance of *The Reunion by a White Hare*.⁴

In January 2023, the performance titled *Formulaic Plays Excerpts* was curated by the renowned Cantonese opera artist, Law Ka Ying (also known as “Hang Gor”), who served as the artistic director. Law meticulously designed the program to showcase young performers staging rarely seen traditional excerpts from Cantonese opera, such as *Testing His Loyal Wife*, *Sworn Brother and Sister*, *Three Trials of the Scholar’s Wife*, *Sworn Brotherhood by Breaking Arrows*, and *An Oath to Break Ties Forever*. These “excerpts” are often derived from well-loved classic operas and are characterized by specific storylines, performance techniques, rhythmic arrangements of gongs and drums, and even standardized singing styles and iconic lines of dialogue. Mastery of such excerpts is considered foundational for performers; those adept in a repertoire of these scenes can adapt their skills to a wide range of roles across full-length operas with finesse and confidence.

2 Liza Wang and Alisa Shum, *Rebranding of the Chinese Artists Association of Hong Kong*, Hong Kong: Joint Publishing (HK) Co. Ltd., 2023, p. 28.
3 *Beyond Seventy: 70th Anniversary of the CAAHK*. Hong Kong: Chinese Artists Association of Hong Kong, p. 5.
4 *Barwo Newsletter* (March 2023) Issue 115 and (September 2023) Issue 116, Hong Kong: Chinese Artists Association of Hong Kong.

It is worth noting that the mastery of traditional excerpts is not an endeavor that can be achieved overnight. Law placed great emphasis on the training of young performers, organizing script-reading sessions and dividing them into groups to rehearse scene by scene. This thorough preparation ensured that the emerging talents had ample time to absorb and refine the intricate details of each excerpt. Through the planning of *Formulaic Plays Excerpts*, Law’s dedication to mentoring and preserving the art form was evident. The performance also aligned seamlessly with one of the core missions of Barwo—to safeguard and preserve traditional techniques that are gradually fading into obscurity.



Stage Photo of *Formulaic Plays Excerpts: Sworn Brotherhood by Breaking Arrows* (4 January 2023)
(Image Source: The Chinese Artists Association of Hong Kong)

Additionally, *Full Moon over Grand Realm General*, directed by Artistic Director Chan Ka Ming, was staged in the same month (January 2023). Originally rooted in Fujian’s Puxian opera, this play was later adapted into Chaozhou opera, Peking opera, and Cantonese opera. Known for its rich comedic elements, the play has consistently delighted audiences, particularly with its humor-filled scenes like “Breaking into the Court” and “The Sedan Chair Incident”, where performers showcased their comedic timing and impressive stagecraft.

In its commitment to promoting Cantonese opera, Barwo considered not only the general audience’s enjoyment but also accessibility for diverse groups. For *Full Moon over Grand Realm General*, Barwo introduced a special “Accessible Performance,” offering free Cantonese-language audio description services to visually impaired audience members. With the aid of headphones, these individuals—especially those experiencing age-related vision loss—could listen to live narrations by audio describers, enabling them to grasp visual elements of the performance that they might otherwise miss. This innovative approach, described as “using the ears in place of the eyes”, allowed Barwo to enhance the inclusivity and reach of traditional Cantonese opera. By offering such services, Barwo demonstrated its commitment to broadening the appeal of Cantonese opera and fostering its appreciation among a wider and more diverse audience.



Stage Photo of *Full Moon over Grand Realm General* (8 January 2023) (Image Source: The Chinese Artists Association of Hong Kong)

For the 2023-2024 Young Talent Program, the opening production was the Cantonese opera *The Reunion by a White Hare*, directed by the Artistic Director, Sun Kim Long, and performed by emerging talents. Before the formal staging of the full production, traditional operatic pieces such as *The Eight Immortals Bestowing Longevity*, *Jumping the Official*, and *The Fairy Delivers a Child* were performed. This arrangement naturally aligns with the promotion and preservation of traditional Cantonese opera culture. The rising stars also actively participated in other Cantonese opera outreach activities organized by Barwo.

In mid-March 2023, Barwo collaborated with the Master's Program in Chinese Language and Literature at the University of Hong Kong to host a workshop titled *The Interplay Between Cantonese Opera Culture, Operatic Literature, and Hong Kong's Social Development*. Held at the Barwo Cantonese Opera Academy, the workshop featured staff and rising stars introducing Cantonese opera culture to university students. Topics included the roles of performers, makeup artistry, and costume design, with particular emphasis on how operatic literature has influenced Hong Kong's societal development.⁵

Overall, the guidance provided by the Artistic Director of the Young Talent Program extends beyond the teaching of performance techniques to fostering a profound understanding and expression of Cantonese opera culture. Under this mentorship, the program's performers have been able to demonstrate exceptional artistry on stage, truly embodying the essence of the art form and laying a solid foundation for the future growth and development of Cantonese opera.

5 *Barwo Newsletter* (September 2023) Issue 116

Part Two: The Barwo Cantonese Opera Academy

The Barwo Cantonese Opera Academy (hereinafter referred to as the “Academy”) was established in 1979 and launched its inaugural training program in 1980. Between 1980 and 1985, the Academy conducted three Cantonese opera courses, nurturing several outstanding graduates who remain active on stage today, including Liu Kwok Sum, Wai Chun Fai, Koi Ming Fai, Tang Mi Ling, Chong Yuen Sin, Chor Ling Yan, Pui Chun Hin, and Ngai Ching Wan. These individuals have since become pillars of the Cantonese opera community.⁶ In 1996, the Academy was registered as an independent company and successfully obtained charitable organization status. In the same year, it partnered with the School of Continuing Studies of The Chinese University of Hong Kong to introduce a “Certificate Program in Cantonese Opera Training”. By 1998, the Academy shifted its collaboration to the Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts (HKAPA), launching the “Cantonese Opera Training (Foundation, Intermediate, and Advanced) Certificate Program” to further elevate the professionalism of Cantonese opera education.⁷

Despite producing numerous professional performers over the years, some participants continued to view the Academy’s courses as leisure activities rather than a serious career path. To address this, then-chairperson Liza Wang spearheaded a comprehensive reform of the Academy in 2007. The most significant change involved shifting the target audience from adults to youth, alongside a systematic, standardized, and comprehensive upgrade of the curriculum. The Academy placed particular emphasis on creating more opportunities for students to perform publicly, thereby enhancing their stage experience and strengthening their foundations in Cantonese opera performance.

By 2023, the Academy’s “Youth Cantonese Opera Training Program” had reached its seventh cohort (2020–2024). Thanks to the tireless dedication of the program’s instructors, who consistently impart their knowledge and skills with great care, the Academy continues to nurture a new generation of young talents with promising potential for the Hong Kong performing arts scene.⁸

In 2023, students of the Academy had numerous opportunities to broaden their horizons. As early as March 2022, Barwo signed a memorandum of understanding with the University of Nottingham (Malaysia Campus) to jointly host a series of cultural exchange activities. In November of the same year, the two parties held their first online exchange event, during which students from Nottingham University participated in a live-streamed Cantonese opera appreciation program conducted in English in Hong Kong by young actors and an Australian *kungfu* master. During the post-performance interactive session, a band from Nottingham University performed the renowned Cantonese opera piece “Death in Fragrance” from *The Flower Princess*, accompanied by Hong Kong students who sang bilingually in Cantonese and English, fostering cross-regional artistic and cultural exchange.⁹

6 Liza Wang and Alisa Shum, *Rebranding of the Chinese Artists Association of Hong Kong*, p. 67.

7 Liza Wang and Alisa Shum, *Rebranding of the Chinese Artists Association of Hong Kong*, p. 20,22.

8 *Beyond Seventy*, p. 41.

9 *Barwo Newsletter* (March 2023) Issue 115.

Building on this foundation, the collaboration expanded further in 2023. The two institutions co-organized a five-day youth arts exchange program between the two regions. From 26 May to 29 May, staff of Barwo and students of the Academy acted as “Hong Kong Cultural Arts Ambassadors”, warmly welcoming students from Malaysia. The visiting students participated in a music exchange seminar at the Academy and attended various performances, including a *shengongxi* (ritual opera) celebrating Tin Hau’s birthday in Sai Kung and the Yeung Ming Cantonese Opera Troupe production of *Confidant by the Zither* at the Cultural Centre. Additionally, the visitors were given guided tours of several iconic Hong Kong cultural landmarks, including the Xiqu Centre, the M+ Museum, Tai Kwun, and The Peak, offering them a multifaceted and in-depth experience of Hong Kong’s performing arts and cultural heritage.

On 2 and 3 June, students and members from five organizations—Academy students, University of Nottingham students (from the Malaysia and Ningbo campuses), members of Kuala Lumpur’s Barwo, and Negeri Sembilan’s UNIQUE ART—came together to participate in a music and opera exchange performance. Academy graduates performed three classic opera excerpts: “Picking Up the Hairpin” from *The Purple Hairpin*, “Meeting on the City Wall” and “Stopping the Horse” from *The Silver-Marriage on Iron Horse*. Meanwhile, current students delivered a bilingual rendition of “Death in Fragrance” from *The Flower Princess*. Other participating organizations also presented musical performances. The planning and execution of this exchange program was no easy task, but its successful completion not only promoted Cantonese opera to a wider audience but also provided young performers with an invaluable opportunity to broaden their international perspectives.¹⁰

On 22 July 2023, the Academy organized and presented the “2022/23 Annual Course Showcase Performance” at the Ko Shan Theatre. The performance primarily featured students from the seventh cohort, with selected students from other cohorts also participating. The showcase included four excerpts from classic Cantonese operas: “Beating the Princess” from *The Golden Branch*, “Picking Up the Hairpin” from *The Purple Hairpin*, “Kneeling by the Pond with a Lamp on the Head” from *The Lioness Roar* and “Sacrificing the Child to Save the Orphan” from *The Orphan of Zhao*.¹¹ Later that year, on 26 November, Barwo was invited by the Leisure and Cultural Services Department to participate in “Cantonese Opera Day 2023”. Students who had previously performed the excerpt “Kneeling by the Pond with a Lamp on the Head” from *The Lioness Roars* reprised their roles. Under the guidance and mentorship of veteran opera artists, their interpretation of the characters reached a new level of refinement and maturity.¹²

¹⁰ *Beyond Seventy*, p. 5.

¹¹ *Barwo Newsletter* (September 2023) Issue 116

¹² *Barwo Newsletter* (March 2024) Issue 117, Hong Kong: Chinese Artists Association of Hong Kong.

Part Three: Highlights of Other Major Events

Since its establishment, Barwo has been dedicated to promoting Cantonese opera while also prioritizing the welfare of its members and fostering unity within the industry. Below are some major events from 2023 that illustrate these efforts.

From 6 to 8 January 2023, Barwo resumed its “Year-End Welfare and Medical Services” program, benefiting nearly 600 members. The initiative included the distribution of year-end red packets, membership fee collection, and contributions to the Longevity Fund. Additionally, Barwo arranged for a professional medical team to provide health check-ups and consultations, demonstrating its comprehensive care for members’ well-being.¹³

Barwo played a key role in the “Chinese Opera Festival 2023”, presenting the grand finale program “Bless This Land – Cantonese Opera Stage Performances at Victoria Park” from 23 September to 8 October 2023. The event featured a meticulously constructed large-scale bamboo theatre stage, recreating Hong Kong’s unique opera theatre culture. The performances offered audiences an immersive experience of this iconic traditional art form.¹⁴



Cantonese Opera Bamboo Theatre Stage at Victoria Park (Image Source: The Chinese Artists Association of Hong Kong)

The inauguration ceremony for Barwo’s 40th Executive Committee took place on 11 November 2023 at the Ko Shan Theatre. On the same day, Barwo celebrated the birthday of Master Hua Guang with a Cantonese opera performance titled “Grand Birthday Celebration at Fragrant Flower Mountain”. In collaboration with six affiliated groups—Administrative Group (Shen Wo Tong), Actors Group (Hong Kong Cantonese Opera Actors Limited), Music Group (Pu Fu Tong), Lighting and Scenery Group (Art Department Union), Costume and Props Group (Yi Za Xiang Union), Martial Arts Actors Association (Luan Wo Tong), and the Cantonese Opera Academy—Barwo

¹³ Barwo Newsletter (March 2023) Issue 115.
¹⁴ Additional information available on the official website of “Chinese Opera Festival 2023”: <https://www.cof.gov.hk/2023/en/blesthisland.html>.

arranged for experienced performers and emerging talents to share the stage. Highlights included traditional martial arts sequences such as “Guanyin Eighteen Transformations”, “Wei Tuo Pose”, “Dragon Subduing Pose” and “Tiger Taming Pose”.

Additionally, actors engaged with the audience by distributing blessed antique-style coins, a symbolic gesture of good fortune that generated enthusiastic responses. The event concluded on a high note with a performance of *The Fairy Delivers a Child* by Chairman Loong Koon Tin and renowned actress Nam Fung, showcasing their exceptional artistry and leaving a lasting impression on attendees.¹⁵



The Inauguration Ceremony for Barwo’s 40th Executive Committee (Image Source: The Chinese Artists Association of Hong Kong)

On 3 December 2023, Barwo introduced Cantonese opera to the international sports arena. At the invitation of the Hong Kong Squash Association, Barwo arranged for emerging performers to present excerpts from Cantonese opera at the “2023 TTI Milwaukee Hong Kong Squash Open” held at the Cultural Plaza of the Xiqu Centre in West Kowloon Cultural District. With dual-sided audience seating at the venue, performers adapted their stage movements to ensure spectators and athletes from around the world could fully appreciate the unique charm of Cantonese opera, a UNESCO-recognized intangible cultural heritage. This innovative collaboration between culture and sports left an indelible mark on the event.¹⁶

¹⁵ Barwo Newsletter (March 2024) Issue 117.

¹⁶ Barwo Newsletter (March 2024) Issue 117.

Conclusion: The Path of Preservation and Innovation in Cantonese Opera

In his interview with me, the newly appointed Chairman of Barwo, Yuk Gor, emphasized the importance of engaging with younger generations, particularly in inspiring their passion for traditional opera. As the most representative organization within the Cantonese opera industry, Barwo has established a systematic framework for artistic preservation and development. This spans from the rigorous four-year professional training provided by the Cantonese Opera Academy to the practical stage opportunities offered by the Young Talent Program. In recent years, the association has actively promoted the “mentorship model”, pairing experienced performers with emerging talents on stage. This approach allows young actors to gain firsthand insight into the essence of stage artistry by collaborating with experts.

As an old hand Artistic Director of the Young Talent Program, Yuk Gor has consistently upheld high standards in pursuit of artistic excellence. He places particular emphasis on training actors in fundamental skills. For example, he insists that performers break free from reliance on subtitles, mastering scripts by heart to deeply connect with the rhythm and emotions embedded in the lyrics. This meticulous professional discipline is a cornerstone in nurturing outstanding performing artists.¹⁷

Looking ahead, Barwo plans to adopt an increasingly open and proactive stance in promoting the development of Cantonese opera. Key initiatives include strengthening collaborations with government departments and cultural organizations to enhance the societal influence of Cantonese opera, expanding international cultural exchanges, and creating diversified performance platforms to provide broader opportunities for industry professionals. Additionally, the association aims to refine its talent cultivation mechanisms to ensure the sustainable preservation of this art form.¹⁸ This dual strategy of honoring tradition while embracing innovation will undoubtedly pave the way for a brighter future for Cantonese opera.

¹⁷ Interview with Mr. Loong Koon Tin, 23 February 2025.

¹⁸ *Barwo Newsletter* (September 2023) Issue 116

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