

Hong Kong Xiqu Overview



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主編、行政統籌
蔡啟光

Editor and Administration Coordinator
Choi Kai-kwong

原文審訂
羅麗

Original Text Reviewer
Luo Li Lawly

英文翻譯
蔡啟光
吳樂怡

English Translator
Choi Kai-kwong
Lois Ng

英譯審訂
汪卿孫

Translation Reviewer
Teresa Wang

版面設計及排版
沛誠公司

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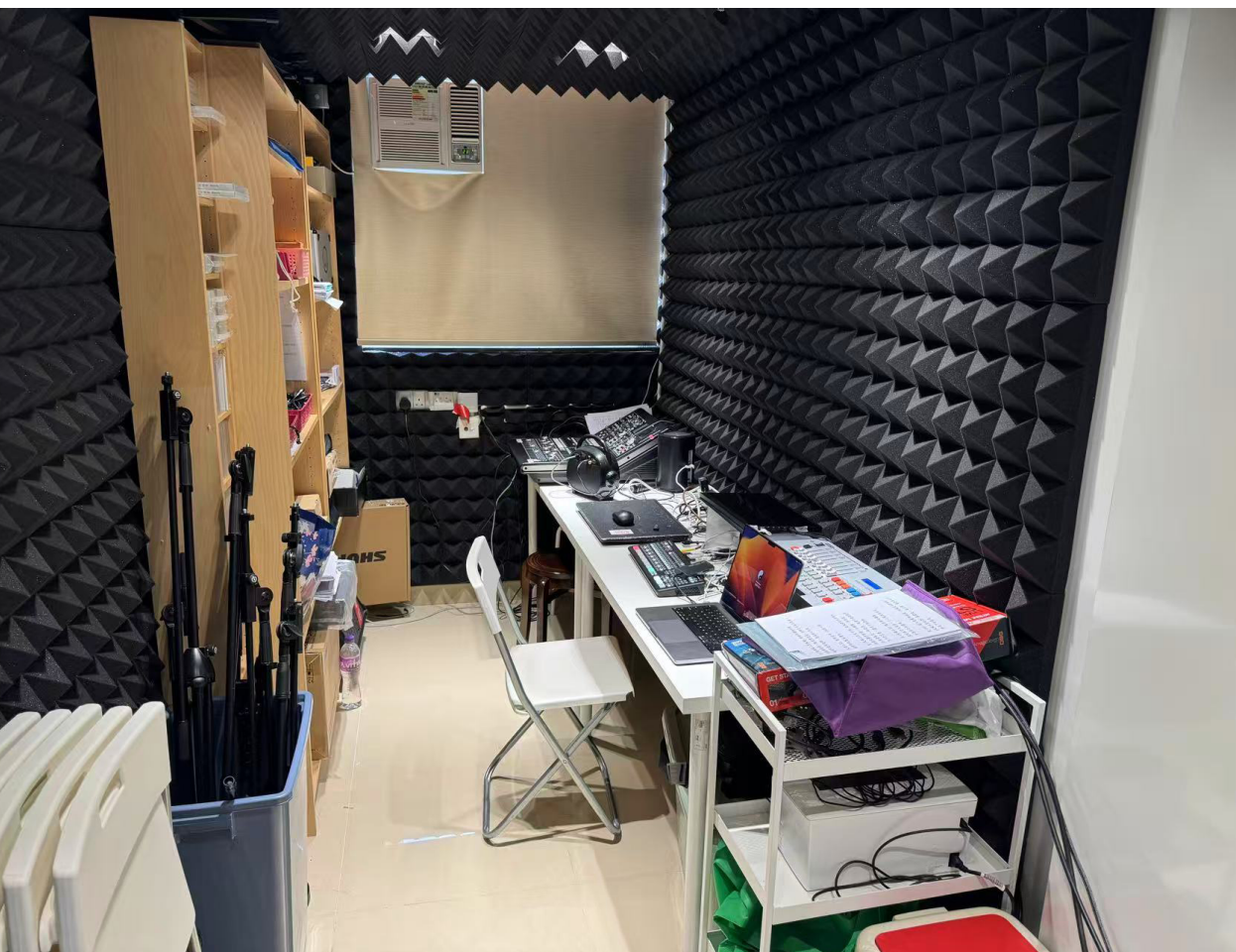
Small-scale Troupe-operated Performance Venues: A Case Study of the Xiqu Arts Salon

Written by: Choi Kai-kwong

During the pandemic, the government shut down all performance venues. The Hong Kong Xiqu Troupe thereby established and began operating its own small performance venue, the Xiqu Arts Salon, and started producing online live shows. This article explores the diverse efforts of the troupe and how a troupe-operated venue can open up new pathways for development.



The Stage of the Xiqu Arts Salon



The Control Room of the Xiqu Arts Salon

The pandemic brought all in-person Cantonese opera performances and promotional activities to a standstill. To continue promoting Cantonese opera and maintaining engagement with audiences during the theatre closures, Cantonese opera actress Dianna Tse Hue Ying and her husband, the renowned musician Ko Yun Hung, decided to venture into the digital sphere. They renovated a flat in a factory building, making it into a small performance venue and named it the “Xiqu Arts Salon”. This was where they began producing live shows.

The first live show premiered on 26 February 2022. In 2023, a total of 23 live broadcasts were presented on Wednesday evenings from 8:30 pm to around 10 pm on their YouTube channel, all hosted by Ko Yun Hung and Dianna Tse. The programmes can be grouped into four categories:

Cantonese Opera Performers’ Conversations

Veteran Cantonese opera performers and young actors were invited to share acting experiences and industry knowledge through informal discussions. For example, veteran performer Liu Kwok Sum was invited to reflect on his artistic journey and reveal his lesser-known personal aspects. In another episode, young actors Ng Lap Hei, Christie To Wing Sum, and Janet Wong Po Suen discussed various aspects of ritual performances for appeasing gods through interactive games.

Cross-disciplinary Collaborations

Artists from outside the Cantonese opera industry were invited for dialogues as well as on-the-spot collaborative performances, generating new ideas through synergy. One notable episode featured improvisational jamming with pop musician Annette Chien, experimenting with traditional melodies in operatic styles.

Music Masters Series

Distinguished musicians, such as plucked string master Lee Chi Hung and *huqin* performer Koo Sing Fai, were invited to exchange ideas and perform live demonstrations, exploring Cantonese music and opera from a music perspective. Wind instrument performer Chan Chi Chun also joined the performances as a guest host.



Behind the Scenes of a Live Performance



Interaction with Viewers on YouTube Live Streaming

“Re-storying the Play” Series

Under this series, attempts were made to reinterpret and reimagine existing Cantonese opera stories and characters from a different perspective, offering fresh insights to both performers and audience. Led by Dianna Tse, the scripts were written together with young actors Ng Lap Hei, Kwok Kai Fai, and Chow Lok Tung, with final editorial input from Dianna Tse and Ko Yun Hung. One representative work, *Where Is the Snake? The Snake Is There!* reworked the traditional narrative of *The Legend of the White Snake*, interrogating the question of the snake’s presence within the story.



The livestream performance of *Where’s the Snake? The Snake is Over There!* under the Re-storying the Play series was broadcast on 18 January 2023 from the Xiqu Arts Salon.

Sharings from three young performers who participated in the series:

Ng Lap Hei

As one of the three scriptwriters of the Re-storying the Play series, I collaborated with Ko Yun Hung and Dianna Tse Hue Ying on numerous livestream productions. The process expanded my creative space in scriptwriting, directing, and performance, while deepening my understanding of Cantonese opera.

Online productions require a brisk rhythm and concise structure, yet traditional Cantonese opera elements like singing and posture must also be retained. We continuously explored diverse subject matter and fresh entry points. In each episode, we invited different young performers to collaborate, gradually transforming Re-storying the Play into a platform that brings together emerging Cantonese opera practitioners.

The most memorable work for me was The White Snake, our first production in the series. We drew inspiration from the writings of Hong Kong literary figure

Liu Yichang and adapted elements from film and television. In a scene where Fa Hai tests Xu Xian, we made use of the rhythmic recitation of doggerel and the erhuang aria type, alternating between the two, then choreographed appropriate Cantonese opera postures with eerie lighting, creating tension while retaining the unique Cantonese cultural flavour. The production later expanded and was successfully staged at Kwai Tsing Theatre.

Every beginning is difficult. I treasure this creative journey and hope we will continue exploring new possibilities for Cantonese opera.

Kwok Kai Fai

As one of the scriptwriters of Xiqu Hong Kong's Re-storying the Play series, I experienced the immense potential of integrating cross-genre adaptation with operatic tradition in the livestream studio.

Two productions left a strong impression on me: Mr. Vampire: Encounter with a Ghost and Tang Bohu: The Bitter Tang Bohu.

In adapting Mr. Vampire, we confronted structural differences between film and Cantonese opera. While in films we can make use of editing and scene transitions, opera can't. We had to compress and combine different scenes for coherence. We retained the humour of the original while incorporating Southern-style singing, gestures, and action sequences. A romantic subplot between the female ghost and the character Qiu Sheng was added to heighten dramatic tension.

In Tang Bohu: The Bitter Tang Bohu, we reimagined Tang Bohu as a figure detached from fame and fortune, seeking only lifelong companionship with his beloved Shen Jiu-niang. One highlight was adapting his poem Eleven Linked Pearl Verses on Flowers and Moon and setting it to the fixed tune Evening Song of the Fisherman, which became the "theme song" of the production. Through livestream experimentation, we learnt ways to present classical material in a contemporary manner, hoping to introduce more young audiences to the distinctive characteristics of Cantonese opera.

For me, Re-storying the Play is not merely revisiting the classics, but refining emotional expression and seeking breakthroughs for operatic inheritance within the constraints of the livestream format.

Chow Lok Tung

Xiqu Hong Kong's Re-storying the Play was born during theatre closures amid the pandemic. It was a new path that we forged in adversity. After society gradually resumed normal operations, the arts sector began advocating for Cantonese opera productions with tighter pacing and shorter durations. Building on this momentum, we further developed our livestream works into stage productions, transforming them into innovative mid-length operas — an outcome we had not initially envisioned.

Our first production, The White Snake, staged at Kwai Tsing Theatre, was novel and engaging though somewhat youthful in execution. By the second production,

The Jade Lament • Revisited, staged at Ko Shan Theatre, significant progress was evident. The production received funding from the Cantonese Opera Development Fund and garnered encouraging audience response. We now look forward to our third work, We Are Not Wu Da and Pan Jinlian, returning to Kwai Tsing Theatre, in hopes of once again generating surprise and inspiration within the field.

Throughout the writing process, we constantly questioned ourselves: How deeply do we understand Cantonese opera? From fixed tunes and sentence structures to orchestration and dramatic architecture, we learned while writing, integrating scriptwriting and performance practice. Xiqu Arts Salon brought Lap Hei, Kai Fai, and me together, giving us the courage to act on our ideas, step beyond our comfort zones, and explore new possibilities for Cantonese opera.

序幕：
許家姑母：姪兒，為何你小時經常悶悶不樂？
許仙：一自遇蛇，宵宵惡夢，直至遇上她……

第一場：
許仙：我的仙女，有了你，惡夢都消失了！
素貞：什麼仙女？我們不過是凡夫俗子。

第二場：
清兒：姑爺惡夢連連，累你變憔悴了！
素貞：世上的美都有限期，包括愛情。

第三場：
許仙：因為你的話，我猜疑我的妻了。
發海：錯了，不是我的話，是你的心……

第四場：
許仙：我是在做夢，還是死了？
素貞：不知道，我趕著去盜草。

第五場：
清兒：姑爺睡在地上，還手舞足蹈？
素貞：或者是夢見什麼打鬥場面吧！

【重說·劇系列
舞台版】

白蛇

(新中篇劇)

第六場：
許仙：我要見法海和尚！
知客僧：法海方丈已於上月圓寂。
許仙：前日還在街上遇見他。
知客僧：你遇見的，一定是另外一個和尚。

《白蛇》為青靈宵劇團的新編作品，故事按傳統《白蛇傳》發展，但當中處處又透露著「不對勁」，一方面參考了已故香港文學作家劉以鬯先生的短篇小說《蛇》，一方面保留了《白蛇傳》中的《遊湖》、《盜草》等情節。

「院中無蛇。蛇在許仙腦中。」

許仙少時曾經被蛇咬過，留下了個酒盅般大的疤，為故事埋下伏線。長大後，一年清明於西湖邊遇上白素貞，兩人墮入愛河，喜結連理，開設藥店，生活幸福。以為一直也會相安無事，直至一天，許仙遇上法海，警告白素貞乃是蛇精，許仙不禁猶疑……

到底白蛇是凡人？是妖精？
許仙所懼怕的又是甚麼？

編劇：謝曉瑩、郭啟輝、吳立熙、周洛童

白素貞 - 謝曉瑩
許仙 - 梁振文
童年許仙、蛇妖、鶴童 - 吳立熙
艸翁、南極仙翁 - 沈栢銓
發海 - 郭啟輝
清兒 (丫鬢) - 周洛童
鹿童 - 張肇倫

Re-storying the Play Series: *The Legend of the White Snake* was expanded into a new mid-length production and was publicly staged at the Kwai Tsing Theatre on 28 and 29 December 2023.

Closing Remarks

Before each live broadcast held in the evening, preparations and rehearsals started in the afternoon. This was supported by several backstage staff in addition to the performers. As Hong Kong audiences were not yet accustomed to paying to watch online livestream content, production costs were covered by sponsors.

During the pandemic, livestream programmes helped the troupe maintain a connection with its existing audience, attract new viewers including those overseas, and broaden its audience base. The Re-storying the Play series provided young actors with opportunities to develop creative and performance skills, while the Xiqu Arts Salon became an incubation platform for new full-length productions.

After the pandemic, the Xiqu Arts Salon, continued to be operated as a venue by the Troupe on its own accord, and can be used not only to produce livestream programmes but also for outreach training, including workshops and courses.

During this time, although the Troupe resumed full-scale performances at external theatres, it continued to produce livestream programmes. The dual model of theatre performance and digital broadcasting works in complement, responding to the demands of the internet era of today.

Read more:

The website of the Hong Kong Xiqu Troupe
<https://www.hkxiqu.com>

The YouTube channel of the Hong Kong Xiqu Troupe
<https://youtube.com/@xiquhk>