

For discussion on
13 February 2009

Legislative Council Panel on Home Affairs

The Development of Cantonese Opera and other Chinese Xiqu and the Sunbeam Theatre as a Venue for Cantonese Opera Performances

Purpose

This paper sets out the Government's efforts in the development of Cantonese Opera and other Chinese Xiqu for Members' information and discussion.

Background

Policy objectives of developing Cantonese Opera and other Chinese Xiqu

2. As mentioned in the 2007-08 Policy Address by the Chief Executive, Cantonese Opera is a refined and popular art genre, as well as an emblem of our local culture. The Government is dedicated to the preservation, promotion and development of Cantonese Opera. We have set the following policy objectives to provide continued support to the preservation and development of Cantonese Opera –

- a) To develop performance venues for Cantonese Opera;
- b) To nurture Cantonese Opera professionals, preserve the tradition and promote creative works;
- c) To promote Cantonese Opera education, audience building and community participation;
- d) To foster cooperation among Guangdong, Hong Kong and Macao, and promote cultural exchange;

- e) To preserve the essence of Cantonese Opera and showcase treasures of our cultural heritage; and
- f) To promote Cantonese Opera as a major tourist attraction.

3. As regards the promotion of other Chinese Xiqu, the Government's objective is to provide the public with opportunities to experience and appreciate the diversity of the Chinese culture and arts, and to strengthen Hong Kong's role as an international cultural metropolis.

Our work in the promotion of Cantonese Opera

Establishment of the Cantonese Opera Advisory Committee

4. The Home Affairs Bureau (HAB) set up the Cantonese Opera Advisory Committee (COAC) in May 2004 to advise the Government on policies and issues in relation to the promotion, preservation, study and development of Cantonese Opera. While conceiving different projects to meet the specific needs in the development of Cantonese Opera, the COAC invites representatives with different expertise from the Cantonese Opera sector to join its working groups and offer advice. Public consultation sessions and focus group meetings have also been organised to gauge the views of the Cantonese Opera sector. The COAC has set up two sub-committees, namely the "Venue Sub-committee" and the "Preservation and Promotion Sub-committee", to underpin its work in the respective areas.

Establishment of the Cantonese Opera Development Fund

5. To tie in with the work of the COAC, the Cantonese Opera Development Fund (CODF) was established by the HAB in November 2005 to raise donations to provide funding support to programmes and activities on the study, promotion and sustainable development of Cantonese Opera. Managed by an Advisory Committee and an Executive Committee, the CODF has so far received over \$20 million, about \$17 million of which was granted over the past three years to support some 210 Cantonese Opera projects carried out by local organisations or individuals, including a three-year grant scheme for the Hong Kong Cantonese Opera

Troupe for New Talents. We plan to inject \$20 million into the CODF to further promote the development of Cantonese Opera in Hong Kong.

Establishment of the Programme and Development Committee and the Chinese Traditional Performing Arts Panel

6. Established by the Leisure and Cultural Services Department (LCSD) in January 2007, the Programme and Development Committee (PDC) is supported by six Art Form Panels (AFP), including the Chinese Traditional Performing Arts Panel which covers, inter alia, Cantonese Opera and other Chinese Xiqu. The PDC and AFPs are tasked to advise the LCSD on the strategies of performing arts programmes (including local, Mainland and overseas) and to formulate structured and sustainable strategies to identify and support the development of budding and small-scale performing arts groups.

Development of performance venues for Cantonese Opera

7. We are well aware of the Cantonese Opera sector's concerns over a permanent performance venue, and keep exchanging views with the sector (including the Chinese Artists Association of Hong Kong) on the matter. In the development plan for providing venues for Cantonese Opera, the Government has decided to develop the following venues of different scales to meet the needs of the Cantonese Opera and other Chinese Xiqu –

- a) A Xiqu Centre in the West Kowloon Cultural District (WKCD)
To solve the problem of a permanent performance venue, a Xiqu Centre dedicated to Cantonese Opera and other Chinese Xiqu is proposed to be built in the WKCD. The Centre will comprise a large theatre of 1 200 to 1 400 seats, a small theatre of 400 seats, and other practising and supporting facilities.
- b) Construction of an Annex Building for the Ko Shan Theatre
An Annex Building will be constructed for the Ko Shan Theatre comprising a medium-sized modern theatre of about 600 seats, large-scale rehearsal rooms and audio-recording studios. The Annex Building which is scheduled for completion in 2012,

together with the existing theatre of 1 031 seats, can be used for various purposes such as performances, training, rehearsals, and audio-visual production of Cantonese Opera. We expect that the existing and new theatres of the Ko Shan Theatre will produce a synergy effect to establish the Ko Shan Theatre as a dedicated venue for Cantonese Opera and other Chinese Xiqu.

c) Conversion of the Yau Ma Tei Theatre and the Red Brick Building into a Xiqu Activity Centre

The Yau Ma Tei Theatre and the Red Brick Building will be converted into a Xiqu Activity Centre with a small theatre of about 300 seats and two multi-purpose rooms to provide a venue for small-scale performances and operatic singing activities. The conversion project which is estimated to cost about \$190 million¹ is scheduled for commencement in 2009 and completion in 2011.

8. As a transitional arrangement before the completion of the WKCD's Xiqu Centre, the LCSD has been providing additional time slots at its venues for staging Cantonese Opera performances by implementing special measures for venue hiring, including –

a) The Cantonese Opera sector as an important “venue partner” of LCSD

With the support of the LCSD, the Cantonese Opera sector has taken part in the “Venue Partnership Scheme” from 2008-09 to 2011-12 and will be provided with a total of 118 days of time slots for performances at the Sha Tin Town Hall and the Tuen Mun Town Hall in 2009-10. The three-year scheme will be launched in full scale starting from April 2009, and some pilot programmes have already been implemented since the fourth quarter of 2008.

¹ The Panel on Home Affairs and the Public Works Subcommittee of the Finance Committee of the Legislative Council (LegCo) supported the project on 12 December 2008 and 21 January 2009 respectively. Application for funding will be submitted to the LegCo Finance Committee on 13 February 2009 to upgrade the project as a Category A project of the Capital Works Programme.

b) Further development of the Ko Shan Theatre as one of the major performance venues for Cantonese Opera

Since the implementation of the LCSD's "priority venue hiring policy for Cantonese Opera performances" at the Ko Shan Theatre in 2004, the number of organisations using the theatre for Cantonese Opera performances has been increasing year by year. In 2008, 149 Cantonese Opera performances and 106 Cantonese operatic concerts were staged in the theatre. The theatre can provide another 100 days or so of time slots for Cantonese Opera performances in 2009. The LCSD has been fine-tuning the policy in response to the development needs of the Cantonese Opera sector. At present, apart from full-length performances, excerpt performances are also accorded priority.

The LCSD has also kept improving the supporting facilities of the Ko Shan Theatre to cater for the needs of large-scale Cantonese Opera performances. Such measures include provision of additional toilet cubicles, dressing rooms, directional signboards, parking spaces, etc. It is also planned that a covered walkway leading to the theatre will be constructed, illuminated advertisement boxes to promote the performances be installed and current seats be replaced by more comfortable ones.

c) Reserving time slots at major performing arts venues in the urban areas and the New Territories

For 2009-10, the LCSD is going to provide an additional 44 days or so of reserved time slots at several major performing arts venues for priority hiring by Cantonese Opera troupes. These venues include the Hong Kong Cultural Centre, the Hong Kong City Hall, the Kwai Tsing Theatre, the Sha Tin Town Hall and the Tsuen Wan Town Hall. It also plans to increase the additional provision to about 70 days of times slots for Cantonese Opera performances starting from 2010-11. We are consulting the COAC, the Chinese Artists Association of Hong Kong and the Hong Kong Cantonese Opera Chamber of Commerce on the proposal. Apart from priority hiring of reserved time slots, Cantonese Opera troupes can continue to hire the 13 performing arts venues of the LCSD through ordinary booking.

The Sunbeam Theatre as a venue for Cantonese Opera performances

9. Apart from LCSD's performance venues, the Sunbeam Theatre is currently one of the major performance venues for the Cantonese Opera sector. In 2007, local troupes staged about 210 performances at the Sunbeam Theatre. The previous tenancy agreement between Funhill Ltd., the landlord of Sunbeam Theatre, and its operator, the Hong Kong United Arts Entertainment Co. Ltd. (HKUA), lasted between September 2005 and January 2009. The CODF allocated \$500,000 to support "Renovation of the Sunbeam Theatre" in September 2005. In addition, the LCSD granted \$2.5 million to the Hong Kong Arts Development Council (HKADC) between 2006 and 2008 in support of its Pilot Partnership Scheme on Xiqu Venue at the Sunbeam Theatre. The Scheme aimed to assist Cantonese Opera organisations (particularly the new entrants) in staging performances at the Sunbeam Theatre.

10. We are pleased to note that the landlord of Sunbeam Theatre has agreed to extend the tenancy with the HKUA for three years, which will allow sufficient time for the local professional troupes to migrate smoothly to LCSD's and other performance venues, and will provide an extra performance venue for the Cantonese Opera sector before completion of the Annex Building of the Ko Shan Theatre and the WKCD's Xiqu Centre.

11. The Government is very concerned about the tenancy renewal of Sunbeam Theatre, and has strived to facilitate the reaching of an agreement between the two sides. Indeed, as the HKUA cannot afford the increase in rental, we are actively seeking outside donations to make up for the rent. We will also through the HKADC provide subsidy to Cantonese Opera troupes hiring the Sunbeam Theatre, so as to minimise the impact of rental increase on these performing troupes.

Training of Cantonese Opera professionals, preservation of the tradition and promotion of creative works

12. To promote the continued development of Cantonese Opera, different organisations have been providing professional training and

implementing projects that promote both traditional and innovative plays through the following initiatives –

a) Supporting professional training courses

The Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts (HKAPA) started to offer a two-year full-time diploma programme in Cantonese Opera back in 1999. It has also offered a two-year full-time advanced diploma programme in Cantonese Opera since 2001. Starting from 2007-08, the HAB has allocated funds to support HKAPA's full-time and part-time evening programmes on Cantonese Opera. In addition, the HKADC has been providing funding support to the part-time evening courses in performance and other short courses conducted by the Cantonese Opera Academy of Hong Kong since 1996. Such funds have amounted to over \$8.5 million in aggregate.

b) Nurturing talents through provision of grants to Cantonese Opera troupes and individual performance projects

The CODF launched a three-year grant scheme “Hong Kong Cantonese Opera Troupe for New Talents” to enhance training for the new generation of the sector. A grant of \$3 million was approved to support the operation of the “Hong Kong Young Talent Cantonese Opera Troupe” for a period of three years starting from 2008. The CODF has since its establishment approved over \$7.8 million to sponsor over 150 productions performed by budding artists or jointly presented by master and budding artists.

Apart from providing continued support to performance projects and training activities for budding artists through “Project Grants”, the HKADC launched the “Multi Project Grant Scheme” in 2008-09 and will introduce the “Xiqu Internship Scheme” in 2009-10 with a view to supporting promising newcomers to participate in related arts activities for training and professional development. Moreover, the LCSD invites budding artists to take part in the District Cantonese Opera Parade and other free Cantonese Opera and operatic singing shows to enrich their experiences in performing.

c) Sponsoring traditional productions and commissioning outstanding creative works

For the preservation and reformation of Cantonese Opera, the LCSD, the HKADC and the CODF organise or sponsor presentations of both traditional and new productions. The HKADC will in 2009-10 launch the “Xiqu Playwright Mentoring and New Play Performance Project” to encourage writing of Xiqu plays and help promote the performance of new plays.

Promotion of Cantonese Opera education, audience building and community participation

13. The LCSD, the CODF and the HKADC organise or subsidise thematic and large-scale arts education, community promotion and audience development projects, such as the Xiqu Education in Schools Scheme, the Community Cultural Ambassador Scheme, the School Culture Day Scheme and the Cantonese Opera Promotion Scheme for the Youth and Community. They also support pilot educational research projects to provide reference cases to schools, e.g. the Research and Pilot Scheme on the Teaching of Cantonese Opera.

14. The progress made in respect of the curriculum development of Cantonese Opera and the provision of relevant teacher training is as follows –

- a) The Music Curriculum Guide (Primary 1 – Secondary 3) published by the Curriculum Development Council in 2003 has recommended that teachers should develop students’ music skills through the introduction of different types of music including Cantonese Opera. In order to enable teachers to acquire the knowledge and the learning and teaching skills of Cantonese Opera, the Education Bureau has kept organising various workshops and seminars on the learning and teaching of Cantonese Opera for primary and secondary teachers as well as producing relevant teaching materials for reference and use in primary and secondary schools.

- b) In the New Senior Secondary School Curriculum to be implemented in 2009, Cantonese Opera is included in the core and elective modules of the music curriculum. Students can also study Cantonese Opera and Cantonese operatic songs by taking certain elective modules under the Chinese Language and the Chinese Literature curricula. The learning experiences of “Aesthetic Development” under the New Senior Secondary School Curriculum will also help provide senior secondary students with opportunities to get to know and learn Cantonese Opera and other Chinese Xiqu.
- c) In the tertiary education sector, courses on Cantonese Opera or Xiqu are offered by the Chinese University of Hong Kong, the University of Hong Kong, the Hong Kong Baptist University, the Hong Kong Institute of Education and the HKAPA.

15. We have been facilitating and encouraging the sector to collaborate with the community in the promotion and development of Cantonese Opera. Established by the business community in 2007, the Cantonese Opera Advancement Association is intended to introduce innovative management and market promotion strategies to the sector. On the other hand, the Cantonese Opera Chamber of Commerce set up by major presenters of performances in January 2009 aims to improve the management and operation of professional Cantonese Opera troupes in Hong Kong.

Fostering Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao cooperation and promoting cultural exchange

16. The First Greater Pearl River Delta Cultural Cooperation Meeting was held in Hong Kong in November 2002. Guangdong, Hong Kong and Macao have agreed to enhance cooperation in the area of Cantonese Opera, and major collaboration projects include the Cantonese Opera Day, proposed inscription of Cantonese Opera on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, joint performances and organisation of the International Conference on Cantonese Opera. The three places successfully applied to the State Ministry of Culture in 2006 for the inclusion of Cantonese Opera into the first batch of heritage items

on the intangible cultural heritage list at national level. In September 2008, the Central Government supported the submission of inscribing Cantonese Opera on the UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation)'s Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. It is anticipated that the result will be announced in late 2009.

17. The HAB has extended its promotion efforts through the Beijing Office of the HKSAR Government and other overseas Economic and Trade Offices (ETO). In 2000, the Chinese Artists Association of Hong Kong was funded to take part in the Drama Festival of China in Beijing and the Arts Festival of China in Nanjing. In 2006, we again supported the Cantonese Opera sector in forming a delegation to perform in the Hong Kong Cultural & Heritage Celebrations in Vancouver, Canada. In October 2007, the Beijing Office invited the Chinese Artists Association of Hong Kong to stage performances of Cantonese Opera excerpts in Beijing in celebration of the 10th Anniversary of Hong Kong's reunification with China.

18. The New York ETO invited Ming Chee Sing Chinese Opera Company to stage two performances of Cantonese Opera excerpts and to promote the art of Cantonese Opera to local education institutions in New York in October 2008. The Commerce and Economic Development Bureau and the HAB sponsored Mr Johnnie To to participate in "Nuit Blanche" in Paris, France in October 2008, in which the Dawn Radiance Opera Troupe staged two performances of opera acrobatics on an outdoor bamboo stage.

Preserving the essence of Cantonese Opera and showcasing treasures of cultural heritage

19. The LCSD, the HKADC and the CODF support the preservation of Cantonese operatic antiquities and the study of the history or the publication of books of Cantonese Opera. They share the essence of Cantonese Opera with the public through the following channels –

- a) Collection and display of Cantonese operatic antiques and films
The Hong Kong Heritage Museum (HKHM) has a collection of over 20 000 items related to Cantonese Opera. In addition to displaying these heritage items in its Cantonese Opera Heritage Hall on a regular basis, the HKHM has organised from time to time thematic exhibitions, such as “Fong Yim Fun - Life & Work of a Female Cantonese Opera Artist” and “A Synthesis of Lyrical Excellence and Martial Agility - The Stage Art of Ng Kwan Lai”. There are also more than 270 Xiqu films (including Cantonese Opera films) in total kept by the Hong Kong Film Archive for public enjoyment.
- b) Preservation of traditional Paichang Xi and masterpieces of famous Cantonese Opera artists
While Paichang Xi is a prescribed form of Cantonese Opera performance, it has almost been lost with the passage of time. The LCSD has arranged a number of performances of Paichang Xi by troupes from Hong Kong and the Mainland where as HKHM has conducted thematic studies and kept records on this subject, and so far over 20 Paichang Xi have been recorded. The LCSD also organises performances of masterpieces by famous Cantonese Opera artists. With the consent of the artists and musicians, the HKHM will record at multi-angle such performances to fully reflect their artistic accomplishments for the reference of Cantonese Opera students.
- c) Establishment of the Xiqu Information Centre
The HKADC has supported the operation of the Chinese Opera Information Centre (COIC) of the Chinese University of Hong Kong since 2000. Funds in the region of \$4.6 million have been provided so far to support its administrative operation and individual projects. The COIC collects, organises and archives information on traditional Xiqu. It also maintains a website and provides telephone enquiry services.

Promoting Cantonese Opera as a major tourist attraction

20. Since 2002, the Hong Kong Tourism Board (HKTB) has launched the “Cultural Kaleidoscope” programme which includes the promotion of Cantonese Opera in response to the tourists’ interest in traditional culture. With the assistance of the HKHM, the HKTB organises guided tours every Saturday for tourists to enjoy Cantonese Opera performances, and these cultural tours have been very well received. The HKTB also puts on its website information on the current and coming Cantonese Opera performances in Hong Kong as well as the ticketing services available, and arranges coverage of the guided tours by overseas media.

21. To attract more tourists to enjoy the festive atmosphere in bamboo theatres and experience the local traditional culture, ritual performances of Cantonese Opera presented during traditional festivals (e.g. the Birthday of Tin Hau, the Birthday of Tam Kung and the Cheung Chau Bun Festival) are usually the highlights of the HKTB’s publicity programme. On top of this, the HKTB has initially agreed to carry out promotion to tourists regarding the “Yau Ma Tei Xiqu Activity Centre” which is expected to complete in 2011.

Resources expended on the promotion of Cantonese Opera

22. In the 2009-10 financial year, it is estimated that about \$33 million² will be expended on the promotion and development of Cantonese Opera. The total number of full-length and excerpt performances (excluding Cantonese operatic singing performances) organised by the LCSD or arts groups and presented in the 13 LCSD venues increased from 241 in 2005 to 367 in 2008, and the number of audience from about 150 000 to about 220 000. In 2009-10, the LCSD is planning to organise over 550 Cantonese Opera and Cantonese operatic singing performances, more than 200 of which will be ticketed programmes. This includes the Cantonese Opera performances under the “Venue Partnership Scheme”.

² The construction cost of performance venues for Cantonese Opera (e.g. the Yau Ma Tei Xiqu Activity Centre, the new annex of the Ko Shan Theatre and the large-scale Xiqu Centre in the WKCD) is not included.

Efforts in the promotion of other Chinese Xiqu

23. Both the LCSD and the HKADC support the promotion of other Chinese Xiqu and their work in this regard mainly includes –

a) Promotion of other Chinese Xiqu by the LCSD

The LCSD has been actively promoting other representative and valuable traditional Chinese Xiqu to the community, including inviting troupes specialised in Jing Opera, Qun Opera, Yue Opera, Chuan Opera and other regional theatrical genres to stage performances in Hong Kong. The LCSD also presents experimental Chinese Xiqu programmes, organises thematic seminars, appreciation classes and exhibitions on other Chinese Xiqu to attract young audience and enhance the appreciation ability of the audience. English and Chinese subtitles are available in all other Chinese Xiqu performances organised by the LCSD to attract local and overseas viewers.

In 2008-09, the LCSD plans to present over 100 performances of other Chinese Xiqu, more than 40 of which will be ticketed ones, to attract an estimated audience of 30 000. It is estimated that in 2009-10 such performances will be increased to over 110.

b) Support of the HKADC for the development of other Chinese Xiqu

Since its establishment, the HKADC has been providing support to the development of Chinese Xiqu genres (Jing Opera, Qun Opera, Yue Opera and Puppetry) other than Cantonese Opera. The HKADC has been supporting other Chinese Xiqu troupes through its “Administration Support Grant” (a one-year funding support on administrative expenses for an arts group) and later through its “One-Year Grant”. The HKADC has so far provided over \$8 million in support of groups of other Chinese Xiqu under the above grant schemes. There are also other different grant schemes through which funding support is provided to these Chinese Xiqu activities. The HKADC supports a total of ten art form groups and about \$7.2 million was

spent in 2008-09 to support Xiqu (including Cantonese Opera) activities where as about \$7.3 million is budgeted for 2009-10.

Way Forward

24. We will continue with our efforts in preserving, promoting and developing Cantonese Opera with a view to bringing it to the international arena, so that this important performing art genre of our local tradition can be enjoyed worldwide.

Home Affairs Bureau

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