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Periphery matters : a cultural biography of Peking Opera in Hong Kong

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Chapter Five / Peking Opera and Cultural Politics: from the 1840s to the Present Liang Hanyong

Culture and politics are intimately connected. On the one hand, politics is cultural: Lane Crothers and Charles Lockhart have pointed out that culture has long been used as an important concept to explain political developments.²²⁶ On the other hand, culture can be political. According to Chin Wan, the politicization of culture, usually in the form of cultural policy, can be where politics both begins and ends: culture can be used as an instrument to consolidate and spread ideologies before a political act, and also to unify a community or nation after a political act.²²⁷ Culture can also be seen as an instrument in the political arena. For example, after the newly elected British Labour government led by Tony Blair brought up the notion of “creative industries” in 1997, culture soon became a frequently addressed topic among British politicians, who made it part of their political agenda.

In the introduction to *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance* (1997), Ackbar Abbas quotes Italo Calvino:

With cities, it is as with dreams: everything imaginable can be dreamed. But even the most unexpected dream is a rebus that conceals a desire or, its reverse, a fear.²²⁸

Taking the rebus metaphor, Abbas reflects on the cultural political situation in Hong Kong at the dawn of the handover of sovereignty from the UK to the PRC (hereafter “handover”) in 1997:

Cultural forms, too, can perhaps also be regarded as a rebus that projects a city’s desires and fears, although it is likely to be a rebus of a particularly complex kind.²²⁹

He claims that the complexity of defining Hong Kong’s culture lies in the fact that people overemphasize the city’s economic success when explaining its development. This in turn has stunted its cultural growth, by inhibiting bottom-up creative forces that could enable Hong Kong society to search for and establish its own culture in order to reinforce its city-building energy. Further to Abbas’ analysis, I note that the said complexity also lies in the political fact that Hong Kong’s governance has always been associated with, and co-determined by, more powerful sovereignties: China, the United Kingdom, and China again; and that these agents have played major roles in the cultural development of Hong Kong. In other words, cultural forms in Hong Kong can also be a means for the city’s various *rulers* through time to project *their* desires and fears for the city, from a top-down perspective.

²²⁶ Crothers & Lockhart 2000: xv.

²²⁷ Chin 2008: 9.

²²⁸ Calvino 1972: 44.

²²⁹ Abbas 1997: 1.

I will consider in this chapter the dynamics generated by various agents in the Hong Kong political arena from the turn of the twentieth century until today. Starting from the early colonial era in the 1840s, I will demonstrate how these constantly changing dynamics have shaped cultural developments in Hong Kong, with special attention to Peking Opera. I will then continue my narrative from the 1980s, when a revival of the genre occurred. This revival was signalled by the establishment of new Peking Opera troupes, and the notable government support received by these troupes, especially after the 1997 handover. I will then use the life story of Liang Hanyong 梁漢勇 (born 1960) and his troupe, the Hong Kong Youth of Chinese Opera College (*Xianggang Qingnian Jingju Xueyuan* 香港青年京劇學院, hereafter YCOC) as a case study to demonstrate how the Hong Kong government has supported Peking Opera through various institutional bodies, and how local troupes have benefited from this. Data will be drawn from government documents that address cultural development in Hong Kong, and from my fieldwork in 2009 and 2014.

By looking into the post-1997 government's motivation in promoting Peking Opera in Hong Kong, I found that an interesting cultural identity has been constructed. On the one hand, this subscribes to a Chinese-national discourse to view Peking Opera as a cultural symbol of the nation. On the other hand, it also produces local representations of this "national drama." This seemingly contrasting, national yet local identity makes Hong Kong a unique case in Peking Opera studies.

5.1 A look back: from the 1840s to the 1970s

Since the study of Hong Kong's culture rapidly developed in the 1990s, mainstream scholarship has tended to conduct its analysis using the three notions of the East, the West, and the local. Scholars often locate cultural expressions in Hong Kong as relative to this three-dimensional view, and classify them as pure or hybrid expressions of one or several of these dimensions.²³⁰ Seeing how common this framework has become, it is surprising that little discussion is found about the circumstances in which it emerged.

In my view, the emergence of this triple framework was greatly determined by the unique colonial experience of Hong Kong from the mid-nineteenth century. I have selected two periods in the political history of the city to illustrate my point. Firstly, I will discuss the collaborative and culturally tolerant approach of the British Colonial governments in Hong Kong at the turn of the twentieth century, and show how this created room for the survival and development of Chinese and local cultures. Secondly, I will discuss the completion of the new City Hall in 1962 and a massive riot in 1967, and analyse how these incidents affected the government's attitude toward supporting culture life in Hong Kong.

5.1.1 Collaborative coloniality

In *Hong Kong's History: State and Society Under Colonial Rule* (1999), editor Ngo Tak-wing summarizes scholarship on Hong Kong's colonial history into two conventional discourses: a mainstream discourse that emphasizes good policies by the British Colonial government to

²³⁰ See Abbas 1997; Lee 2002; Wu & Zhang 2002.

turn Hong Kong from a “barren rock” into a “capitalist metropolis,” and a Chinese nationalist discourse that features China’s influence on the city’s development.²³¹ He criticizes these two discourses for their ignorance of the complexity of colonial rule, and suggests revisiting the subject with a focus on the agencies of different social actors in shaping Hong Kong’s development in the colonial era.²³² Among the many examples in the book that support his argument, I would like to highlight the collaborative governing approach adopted by the Colonial government since the British gained sovereignty in Hong Kong in 1841, as it is a significant co-determinant of the development of local and Chinese cultural forms.

Collaboration between the British Colonial government and local Chinese settlers occurred since the First Opium War (1839-1842), which led to the cession of Hong Kong island to the U K. Some Hong Kong natives assisted the British in the war in the form of material supplies. After the British victory, Chinese settlers in Hong Kong, who were mostly refugees and opportunity-seeking merchants from the Chinese mainland and Southeast Asia, contributed to building the new colony as contractors and labourers. In reward, many of them were granted land and privileges in trade monopolies. Later on they were allowed to have businesses and residential areas exclusively for Chinese. Speculating on these material and social privileges, an elite local community of Chinese emerged.²³³ This Chinese elite – many of whom had been outcasts from the mainland – enjoyed privileges that they could never get in China, and the Colonial government saw this elite group as a valuable partner, for two reasons. Firstly, they needed these elites to mediate between them and the local Chinese population. Secondly, they needed the group’s trading networks on the Chinese mainland and Southeast Asia, since a major aim the British wished to pursue through their colonization of Hong Kong was to develop British trade in East and Southeast Asia. This mutual dependence of the Colonial government and the local Chinese elite resulted in a long collaborative relationship, which was much like a reproduction of earlier collaboration patterns in places like Batavia (present-day Jakarta) and Singapore. According to Law Wing-sang, the social role of the elite group grew from one in which they were simply members of the bourgeoisie to a role as leaders of the local Chinese community, and further to a situation in which they constituted one of the powerful voices in government at the turn of the twentieth century.²³⁴

At the same time, changes in British imperialist ideology further fostered the development of the local Chinese elite, and of local culture. According to Law, the British authorities gradually abandoned late-Victorian colonial perceptions of “mission” and “obligation,” and replaced them by the idea of a “voluntary association of free states in the form of a Commonwealth.”²³⁵ In Hong Kong this was reflected in the governing philosophy of Frederick Lugard (1858-1945) during his term as governor from 1907 to 1912, which saw close collaboration with the Chinese elites. He believed that colonial governance should not aim to create a class that was native in ethnicity but English in taste and culture. Rather, it was

²³¹ Ngo 1999: 1.

²³² *ibid.* 2.

²³³ Carroll 1999: 13-25.

²³⁴ Law 2009: 9-30.

²³⁵ Law 2009: 74-75; Thornton 1959; Eldridge 1973; Smith 1998.

to create a “nationality” that Hong Kong’s indigenous inhabitants were proud of.²³⁶ His philosophy was embodied in his culturally tolerant approach to policy making. Firstly, he consciously avoided a full-scale imposition of British culture. For example, he re-oriented the education system from a highly Anglican one to a secular one, in which English and Chinese (i.e. Cantonese) were both recognized as legitimate languages of instruction in schools. Secondly, he respected local culture. For example, when he established the (English-language) University of Hong Kong in 1911, he made sure the university was free from Anglicism from both cultural-moral and religious perspectives.²³⁷

In short, in Lugard’s eyes, replacing local culture with British culture was unnecessary, as he believed that his job as a colonizer was to establish a “Hong Kong identity” without compromising British colonialism. This was something of a conceptual breakthrough, as colonialism and nationalism were for the first time considered as each other’s precondition rather than as opposite discourses. From social and cultural perspective, this helped save local culture, which was partially Chinese, from being marginalized. Such a liberal colonial philosophy, which consciously and explicitly tolerated the development of local culture, also contrasts with the conventional image of Colonial government as marked by indirect rule and disengagement from social affairs that passively allowed for the development of local culture. Furthermore, we should note that Lugard’s culturally tolerant principles also included the promotion of traditional Chinese cultural values.²³⁸ In this light, traditional Chinese theatre would have a secure place in the local cultural scene, as it had long been a carrier of such values.

In fact, Lugard’s approach to local culture, which featured collaboration and minimal interference, was maintained by his successors up to the 1970s. In spite of fluctuations in their respective governing style and other changes in the political environment,²³⁹ they generally displayed considerable tolerance towards local cultural practices – unless these were seen to be opposing the colonizer’s authority or as having a negative impact on public order and security. One example of government interference in local cultural practices occurred in the 1950s, when government was concerned about the safety of the bamboo-built temporary stages used for outdoor Cantonese Opera performances, and thus passed a law to confine them.²⁴⁰

In contrast to this liberal attitude towards traditional Chinese theatre in Hong Kong, the cultural policies on the Chinese mainland were much more restrictive. As Colin Mackerras has pointed out, despite the support of Peking Opera for its national status, governments throughout the Qing dynasty, the Republican period and the PRC era watched traditional Chinese theatrical activities carefully for subversive or morally offensive materials. Censors

²³⁶ Law 2009: 69-70.

²³⁷ *ibid.* 68.

²³⁸ *ibid.* 110.

²³⁹ For example, Cecil Clementi (1875-1947) adopted a Chinese traditionalist approach during his term between 1925 and 1930, as a reaction to the radical Chinese nationalism on the mainland. See Law 2009: 106.

²⁴⁰ Chin 2008: 62.

would regularly attend performances, and they had the power to ban a play from the stage and close the theatre.²⁴¹

5.1.2 The new City Hall and the 1967 riot

One useful perspective to study the politicization of culture in a particular place is to look at government manipulation of public culture. By loosening or restricting public access to cultural forms, authorities can control the degree of public interaction with certain forms, and hence facilitate engagement with the forms the government desires. In the 1960s, two incidents clearly demonstrated how the British Colonial government shaped the cultural scene in Hong Kong through public access manipulation.

The first is the building project of the new City Hall. The old one had been built in 1869 and was exclusively for the European community in Hong Kong. It was torn down in 1947 to make way for the headquarters of the Hong Kong and Shanghai Banking Corporation, and was never rebuilt until a new City Hall plan came up in 1956. The new building was completed in 1962 and was the first official cultural venue in Hong Kong that was open for public use. This was significant for both cultural consumers and producers in the city. For the consumers – the public – the new City Hall provided them a space for more and better engagement with different cultural forms. For the producers – art groups including local Peking Opera schools – it provided a professional infrastructure to reach the public. This was exactly the case when the China Drama Academy held its annual performances in the City Hall in the 1960s.²⁴² In addition, public access to cultural events was further encouraged when the government began to subsidize them. For example, according to Chen Dawen, the first manager of the new City Hall, a series of Sunday Outreach Concerts were organized in the 1960s for which a ticket only cost one HKD (equal to twenty HKD today) after government subsidies.²⁴³

The second incident that reflected government manipulation of public access to culture was its reaction to a massive riot in 1967, which was spearheaded by local communists and provocateurs. Beginning as a strike at a plastic flower factory, the incident escalated to a massive public demonstration against social injustice. Local communists took this opportunity for an anti-colonial campaign, as an echoing response to the ongoing Cultural Revolution on the Chinese mainland, and the strike became a riot against British sovereignty. However, some critics agreed that the inability of the government to provide an acceptable social environment and to protect the civil rights of young adults and workers were the real reasons behind the riot. Derek Davies, the editor of the *Far Eastern Economic Review*, commented in 1967:

The point is that the young men who threw stones and bottles at the Police were not members of Hong Kong's abject poor from the tenement slums or from the shacks on the hillside; they were reasonably well-dressed misfits from Hong Kong's vaunted resettlement estates and

²⁴¹ Mackerras 1975: 91-92; Song & Huang 2013: 131.

²⁴² Qixiaofu 2009.

²⁴³ Chen 2007.

from the streets of Kowloon. Apart from the fact that we have an educational system in Hong Kong which pushes children aged 14 or below out on to the streets, and industrial legislation which forbids them to be employed until they are 16 (which provides us with a built-in gang of unemployed potential hooligans), the Hong Kong authorities have shown no signs of appreciating the self-evident fact that the discontent is part of a “Revolution of Rising Expectations” and that it is official efforts to improve the lot of society which have largely aroused those expectations.²⁴⁴

This comment is reaffirmed by Chen Dawen. As he remembers, the colonial government claimed in an evaluation report that the lack of leisure and cultural activities was one of the reasons that citizens were recruited by left-wing parties and caused the riot. As a response, the government decided to greatly increase the resources for leisure and cultural services as a means of civil education.²⁴⁵ In the same light, this increase in cultural resources further favoured the expansion of cultural access.

So how did the publicization of cultural access favour traditional Chinese theatre? In practice, this was reflected by government’s administration in cultural affairs. For example, a point system was introduced in 1973 to evaluate the priority for a proposed cultural event in securing a City Hall venue for the period the event requested. A score table was formulated by the City Hall’s administration for assessment. It contains several determining factors, with concrete rating yardsticks as well as the weighting of each factor in overall consideration (Table 5.1). The point of interest here lies in the nature of the proposed event (see item G in the table), which reveals that a performance of traditional Chinese theatre (termed “Chinese opera” in the table) would be granted the highest point-value in the most heavily weighted item in the system. Though this may appear to be a small detail, I believe that this strongly affirmed Colonial government’s support for traditional Chinese theatre through its cultural administration.

Despite this cultural administrative advantage to traditional Chinese theatre, government support was still biased towards Western forms of high art, according to Chin.²⁴⁶ With regard to local and Chinese art forms, the Colonial government maintained its minimal interference policy, which also meant minimal support. In other words, the fates of these cultural forms would be overwhelmingly determined by the market. And, as I have discussed in chapter four, these traditional Chinese theatrical genres lost out against movies and television in the entertainment market of the 1960s and 1970s.

²⁴⁴ Davids 1967: 510.

²⁴⁵ Chen 2007.

²⁴⁶ Chin 2008: 47.

Factor	Rating Scale	Weighting	
A. Last successful booking (Concert Hall)	1-2 months before date required	0	10
	3-4	1	
	5-6	2	
	7-8	3	
	9-10	4	
	11-12	5	
B. Last successful booking (Theatre)	1-2 months before date required	0	5
	3-4	1	
	5-6	2	
	7-8	3	
	9-10	4	
	11-12	5	
C. Numbers of dates booked during 12 months preceding date required (Concert Hall)	More than 8 days	0	10
	7-8 days	1	
	5-6	2	
	3-4	3	
	1-2	4	
	nil	5	
D. Numbers of dates booked during 12 months preceding date required (Theatre)	More than 8 days	0	5
	7-8 days	1	
	5-6	2	
	3-4	3	
	1-2	4	
	nil	5	
E. Attendance at last function	Below 50% of capacity	0	30
	51-60%	1	
	61-70%	2	
	71-80%	3	
	81-90%	4	
	91-100%	5	
F. Ability of hirer to organize	Very poor	0	20
	Poor	1	
	Fairly good	2	
	Good	3	
	Very good	4	
	Excellent	5	
G. Cultural content of proposed function	Meetings, conference, etc. unrelated to art	0	50
	Meetings, conference, etc. related to art	1	
	Variety shows, pop shows	2	
	Drama, musicals not in Chinese	3	
	Drama, musicals in Chinese	4	
	Serious music/Chinese opera/dance	5	
H. Artistic merit of proposed function	Very poor	0	30
	Poor	1	
	Fairly good	2	
	Good	3	
	Very good	4	
	Excellent	5	
I. "Debut" bonus: add 100 points			

Table 5.1 Replication of the score table used in the point system of City Hall's venue booking.²⁴⁷

²⁴⁷ Urban Council 1976.

5.2 The 1980s: Rebirth

As the above two incidents suggest, government intervention in local cultural affairs can be seen as a response to domestic social needs. At the same time, it can also be a political act in response to international affairs.²⁴⁸ The minimal interference policy to local and Chinese cultural forms, for instance, was itself very political. Provided that ideologies were affiliated with cultural expressions in many cases, the colonial government did not want to be viewed taking a side in any ideological issue by supporting or suppressing an art form.

The political agenda behind the government support of culture was demonstrated more explicitly in the early 1980s, when the British and Chinese governments began to negotiate in preparation for the 1997 handover. As a strategy to retain its colonial legacy, the British government invested in making Hong Kong a well-developed city during the years leading up to the handover, not just institutionally and economically but also culturally. As a result, the Colonial government began a massive wave of construction in cultural infrastructure and further increased its support of cultural activities in the city. In the following, I will discuss how it carried out this cultural agenda and how Peking Opera benefited from it.

5.2.1 A descriptive cultural policy

As Ho Chi Ping suggests, the Colonial government in this period carried out its cultural agenda by adopting a descriptive approach to cultural policy making.²⁴⁹ In John Pick's words:

A policy may be said to be descriptive in nature when it makes generally available knowledge of all the existing definitions and practices which hold general sway within the country. Such policies do not set fresh targets nor propose new systems, but aim merely to disseminate knowledge about existing practice and announce an intention of sustaining what already exists ... A policy in this form does not seek to impose a persuasive redefinition of art, nor does it seek to impose systems of control; it is indeed possible for different notions of art to exist simultaneously and for control to be vested in various different authorities by this system.²⁵⁰

In practice, a government first sets up abstract internal guidelines for officials to work with; freedom is allowed on how these cultural guidelines are put into practice. The actual enactments of these guidelines will then be reviewed constantly, with public opinion also taken into account. After a certain period of time, usually several years, the actual working experiences will then be summarized into a systematic policy.

The history of cultural policy making in colonial Hong Kong between 1962 – the year when the government started paying serious attention to cultural affairs – and 1997 can be divided into two phases. The first was from 1962 to 1977. The aforementioned cultural acts, after the completion of the new City Hall and the 1967 riot, were summarized into a cultural statement in 1977. Originally intended for internal reference only and not available to the public until 1993, the statement reaffirmed the government's responsibility for local cultural

²⁴⁸ *ibid.* 36.

²⁴⁹ Ho 2006.

²⁵⁰ Pick 1988: 110.

development as a “coordinator and catalyst, as a provider of the necessary infrastructure and as a promoter, providing where necessary, financial or other assistance to nurture budding artists or new art forms.”²⁵¹ This statement was then transformed into an internal policy in 1981, which contained seven points concerning the government’s role in local cultural development, but without concrete instructions on their enactment:

The existing policy for the promotion and development of the arts was laid down by the Executive Council in 1981. Under this policy, the government is to focus on the development of the performing arts through opportunities, and through partnership with the Municipal Councils,²⁵² to provide the necessary infrastructural support in terms of building cultural venues and offering performances opportunities for the various performing arts groups. Specifically, these objectives include:

1. The provision of the necessary venues and facilities for the performing arts;
2. The development of community activities for the general public;
3. The provision of training in the performing arts at the pre-vocational and vocational level;
4. The development of professional performance groups;
5. The achievement of the highest standards possible within the constraints of finance and available resources;
6. The establishment of the Advisory Council for the Performing Arts; and
7. General support and encouragement of performing arts organizations.²⁵³

Overlapping with the first phase, these seven points also served as the starting point for the second phase of the colonial cultural policy. These abstract guidelines were carried out in the following decade by existing official bodies and new ones established for the purpose. For example, the provision and management of cultural facilities was carried out by the Urban Council and the Regional Council; the establishment of the Council for the Performing Arts (CPA) in 1982 provided an advisory body; and the establishment of the Academy for Performing Arts in 1984 was responsible for the training of professional artists. Through the actual operations of these bodies, as well as discussions within society on these practices, the guidelines were constantly reviewed and amended. The working experiences of more than a decade were finally summed up in a publicly available policy paper of the Arts Policy Review Report, issued by the Recreation and Culture Branch, in 1993.

5.2.2 The rebirth of Peking Opera in Hong Kong

At the same time as the aggressive cultural development campaign, the Colonial government in the 1980s also loosened its ideological strictures, as in the abovementioned non-interference policy, on local and Chinese cultural forms, and began to include them in the official payroll for cultural affairs. It was in this environment that Peking Opera reoccupied a

²⁵¹ Hong Kong Government Secretariat: Broadcasting, Culture and Sport Bureau 1993: 1-2.

²⁵² “Municipal Councils” here refers to the Urban Council (established in 1936) and the Regional Council (established in 1986).

²⁵³ Hong Kong Government Secretariat: Broadcasting, Culture and Sport Bureau 1993: 4.

spot in the local cultural scene after the disbandment of the Opera training schools in the mid-1970s. Several new troupes were established. The first was the short-lived Hong Kong Peking Opera Troupe, which was formed in 1981 and disbanded in 1984.²⁵⁴ Others followed, such as the Hong Kong Jing Kun Arts Association (1986) and the Hong Kong Youth of Chinese Opera College (1995). There were also amateur groups, such as the Hong Kong Peking Opera Club (1989).

The operational basis of these newly formed troupes is a point of interest. Some amateur groups were organized like clubs on the Chinese mainland and outside China, in which a fixed group of members would gather regularly. Other, more professional troupes operated in a style that I would call “professional one-person-troupes”.²⁵⁵ Unlike the conventional way, in which a group would have a fixed, contracted crew of performers, musicians and back-stage workers, a “professional one-person-troupe” only consists of one or two full-time performers – usually the founder(s) – and a handful of administrative staff. Performing cast and crews were hired in a production-by-production basis, and most of them held permanent positions in troupes elsewhere. This operational model was not unique to Hong Kong, though. It was also adopted by Guo Xiaozhuang 郭小莊 in Taiwan, when she established the Small Ensemble of Elegant Voices (*Yayin Xiaoji* 雅音小集) in 1979, as a means to survive the then shrinking Peking Opera market on the island.²⁵⁶ Nevertheless, while Guo was still able to hire her crews from other state-owned troupes within Taiwan, performers in Hong Kong had to turn to mainland troupes and training schools.

Whether amateur or professional, these newly formed local troupes enjoyed increasing official support in the 1980s. They were given performing opportunities in government-organized cultural events. For example, right after its establishment the Hong Kong Peking Opera Troupe was invited by the Urban Council to perform in the Festival of Asian Arts, in the years 1981, 1982 and 1983.²⁵⁷ In addition, being non-profit organizations, these troupes received rental fee waivers for performing venues that were managed by the Urban Council and Regional Council. The rental fee waiver is significant, because it provides long-term passive support (as compared to the one-off and more random nature of performance invitations). In this way, the Colonial government could still maintain its “minimal interference” attitude to cultural affairs.

Later, toward the end of the 1980s, a more active attitude by the government in supporting traditional Chinese theatre was observed, in which the CPA began to consider cultural policy on traditional Chinese theatre as a separate category. In its annual report in the financial years of 1989 to 1991, it was reported that a working group on traditional Chinese theatre had been set up to “advise on how Cantonese and other forms of Chinese opera could

²⁵⁴ No information could be found up to this moment on why this troupe ceased to exist so soon. Another troupe with the same name was formed in 1997 by Ma Changli 馬長禮, the son of Ma Lianliang.

²⁵⁵ Unless otherwise specified, my use of the terms “professional” and “amateur” is vocational. They do not necessarily indicate the difference in artistic quality and seriousness between performers.

²⁵⁶ Guy 2005: 29-30.

²⁵⁷ See programme leaflets of the Festival of Asian Arts (1981-1983), published by the Urban Council.

be encouraged, and to decide on project grants for Chinese opera performances.”²⁵⁸ Accompanying the formation of the working group was, as suggested as the function of the group, the first grants to local Peking Opera troupes in 1990-1991. The Hong Kong Peking Opera Club was awarded a project grant for its annual performance, and The Hong Kong Jing Kun Arts Association was also awarded a matching grant after it had received a commercial sponsorship from a certain Xerox Corporation.²⁵⁹

5.3 Peking Opera and politics after 1997: a case study of Liang Hanyong and the YCOC

Following the 1997 handover, the cultural-political environment in Hong Kong changed. In the following section I will first briefly discuss how the post-1997 Hong Kong government formulates cultural policy. Then I will focus on how post-1997 cultural policy impacts Peking Opera. I will illustrate this with a case study of Liang Hanyong, who started his Peking Opera career in Hong Kong in 1995, when he formed the YCOC. The case of Liang is significant not only because he practiced Peking Opera in the years around the handover, but also because most of his activities with the YCOC were funded by the government. In other words, government support played a large role in establishing the troupe’s current status as one of the two active Peking Opera troupes in Hong Kong. In this sense, the case serves as a good example to illustrate how Peking Opera in contemporary Hong Kong has benefited from a further increase of government support after 1997.

5.3.1 Cultural policy after 1997

After the handover, Hong Kong became a Special Administrative Region of the PRC. A new Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) government was formed, headed by a Chief Executive. Despite the massive change in government structure, the descriptive approach to cultural policy remained. A new phase of policy-making began in 1997, when Tung Chee-hwa, the first Chief Executive, re-positioned Hong Kong’s culture with this rather abstract statement:

Ours (Hong Kong) is a cosmopolitan city. Our ability to embrace the cultures of east and west is one of the secrets of our success, shaping a unique social culture of our own. While we deepen our understanding of Chinese history and culture, we will continue to develop our own diverse cultural characteristics. China’s culture, like every other culture, is growing and changing as we journey forward into the 21st century. Hong Kong stands in a unique position in this process, able to act as the centre of exchange for China to learn about western cultures and for the world to learn about Chinese culture.²⁶⁰

²⁵⁸ Report of the Council for the Performing Arts (1989-1991): 9.

²⁵⁹ The Matching Grant Scheme was introduced in April 1990. Under the scheme, art groups that had obtained commercial sponsorship for their productions were eligible to be awarded a matching grant from the CPA.

²⁶⁰ 1997 Policy Address of Hong Kong: 111.

Setting up this general frame that emphasized a “cultural return” (*wenhua huigui* 文化回歸) to Chinese culture and a continuation of an “East meet West” cultural cosmopolitanism, the statement was then transformed to detailed programmes that were carried out by various government bodies, such as the Education Bureau, the Hong Kong Arts Development Council (ADC) and the Leisure and Cultural Services Department (LCSD). Again, these programmes were subjected to constant amendments based on the effectiveness of their operations and on public opinion. Finally, in 2003, the Culture and Heritage Commission summarized these years of administrative experience and submitted a Policy Recommendation Report. The 54-page report contained detailed policy suggestions that covered a wide range of cultural aspects, including Hong Kong’s cultural position, arts education, cultural facilities, resource deployment and institutional framework.

5.3.2 Liang Hanyong and the YCOC

The notion of “cultural return”, proposed by the HKSAR government, indeed changed the unfavorable market-driven environment for Chinese art forms. It also became the cultural-political context of Liang Hanyong’s Peking Opera career in Hong Kong. Born in Suzhou, China, Liang began his Peking Opera training in 1972, when he was twelve years old, at the Suzhou Peking Opera Troupe in Jiangsu province. This was during the Cultural Revolution, when traditional Peking Opera had been banned. Although the ban had loosened at the time, the so-called Revolutionary Model Opera (*geming yangban xi* 革命樣板戲) was still the dominant theatrical form. For this reason, Liang’s first few years of training focused exclusively on the eight most popular model opera plays, such as *Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy* (*Zhiqu Weihushan* 智取威虎山) and *The Legend of the Red Lantern* (*Hongdeng Ji* 紅燈記), although the generic performing skills required to perform these plays were similar to those needed for traditional plays. It was in 1978, after the end of Cultural Revolution in 1976, when the ban on traditional plays was removed, that Liang started to become acquainted with traditional plays.

At the time when Liang graduated from training school, Hong Kong was economically more developed than the Chinese mainland, and the living standard in Hong Kong was higher. Hoping to make more money, Liang headed to Hong Kong in 1982. During his first decade in Hong Kong, he worked in a factory, with no use for his professional training. In 1995, having learned that the leader of an amateur Peking Opera troupe in Hong Kong, Li Shaohua 李少華, was emigrating to Canada, he took this opportunity to take over the troupe and renamed it the Hong Kong Youth of Chinese Opera College. As he remembered when I interviewed him in 2014, he immediately faced a great challenge, because many of the group’s original members quit for various reasons. In response, Liang decided to abandon the troupe’s old amateur basis, and restructured it as a “professional one-person-troupe.” He released all members and kept only one administrative employee. When the opportunities to perform presented themselves, he would seek temporary assistance by qualified people who were available through his network on the mainland. From then on, he gradually gained a reputation as an active Peking Opera practitioner in Hong Kong. Evidence of this was the endorsement of his work by the

cultural support offices of the HKSAR government, which came in the form of constant funding.

5.3.3 Peking Opera under the post-1997 policy

5.3.3.1 The Arts Development Council

Under the post-1997 cultural policy, most cultural support measures were carried out by the Arts Development Council (ADC) and the Leisure and Cultural Services Department. The ADC was the product of CPA's reformation in 1995. As a statutory authority, the government grants the ADC the power to distribute a considerable portion of the annual government funding for cultural affairs. Cultural support from the ADC is mainly through organization-based and project-based direct funding.

Clearly, an increase in the ADC's funding for Peking Opera troupes and related projects means increased government support for the genre. Here are the ADC's financial data showing its funding to Peking Opera troupes and/or projects in Hong Kong from the financial years of 1994/95 to 2014/15. Rough equivalents of the funding amounts to US Dollars are also given for reference:

Year	Amount (HKD/USD)	Year	Amount (HKD/USD)
1994/95	87,000 / 11,230	2005/06	672,000 / 86,710
1995/96	129,000 / 16,650	2006/07	637,000 / 82,190
1996/97	251,000 / 32,390	2007/08	874,404 / 112,830
1997/98	652,000 / 84,130	2008/09	1,140,000 / 147,100
1998/99	540,000 / 69,680	2009/10	900,000 / 116,130
1999/2000	726,000 / 93,680	2010/11	900,000 / 116,130
2000/01	918,000 / 118,450	2011/12	1,286,603 / 166,010
2001/02	781,000 / 100,770	2012/13	998,000 / 128,770
2002/03	779,000 / 100,520	2013/14	1,050,000 / 135,480
2003/04	653,000 / 84,260	2014/15	1,050,000 / 135,480
2004/05	636,000 / 82,060		

Table 5.2. ADC's funding to local Peking Opera troupes/projects from the financial years of 1994/95 to 2014/15.²⁶¹

The more than tenfold increase is remarkable, even if we take inflation during these two decades into account. In particular, there is a large increase in total funding from 1996/97 to 1997/98. This was the year when a re-structuring of functional committees in the ADC occurred. A new traditional Chinese Theatre Committee (*xiqu weiyuanhui* 戲曲委員會) was formed and separated from the Drama and Traditional Performances Committee.²⁶² It was

²⁶¹ Source: Hong Kong Arts Development Council, Annual report (1994/95 – 2014/15).

²⁶² The working group for traditional Chinese theatre, which was formed in the year 1990-91, was structured

also after this reorganization that, for the first time, Peking Opera troupes were awarded “One Year Grants,” which were designed to provide more holistic support to art groups. Of course, this does not imply that the ADC only funded Peking Opera. In fact, Cantonese opera is still the traditional Chinese theatrical genre that receives the biggest portion of funding from the ADC, and some other forms such as Shaoxing Opera (*yueju* 越劇) are also funded occasionally. My point is to stress the noticeable increase of the government’s support of Peking Opera, in particular right after the HKSAR government’s proposal of the notion of a “cultural return”.

According to Liang, one significant highlight of the ADC’s funding to the YCOC was when they received a “Commissioned Projects Grant”. Under this grant scheme, the ADC funds projects that “aim to develop a favorable environment for local arts development.”²⁶³ A general description of the overall goal is given for each project, and art practitioners or groups are then invited to submit proposals and compete via open tendering. For instance, in 2008, the ADC initiated a “School *Xiqu* Education Project” under the scheme. Together with three Cantonese Opera troupes and two traditional Chinese puppetry troupes, the YCOC was chosen to carry out the project with a proposal to conduct Peking Opera training classes in primary and secondary schools.

According to Liang, four schools signed up for the programme out of a hundred invitations he had sent out. He developed a three-year teaching plan for each school, which was divided into three stages of training. The first was foundational skills, such as stage steps, body movements and basic martial arts moves with bare hands or prop weapons. In the second stage, he divided students into different groups according to role types and taught them associated skills. Once they were comfortable with their role types, Liang moved on to the third stage, in which several excerpt plays were rehearsed. Classes in each school were scheduled twice a week, at ninety minutes per class, after normal school time. The finale of this programme was a joint-school graduation performance, in which students from all four schools presented their learning outcomes in front of an audience. In particular, the majority did group performance of isolated skills, while some outstanding students were given the opportunity to perform the rehearsed excerpt plays in full make-up and costumes.

Despite the seemingly smooth completion of the programme, Liang considered it a failure, for two reasons. First was the small number of participating schools. As he pointed out, the amount of funding the ADC would actually give out for the project depended on the number of participating schools. Four was far fewer than he had expected, especially when he hoped for a higher budget to cover the costs of props, costumes, logistics for the classes, and production of the graduation performances. Secondly, he was concerned with the students’ lack of discipline. Compared to a traditional-style training school, Peking Opera teachers in recent decades possess far less power in disciplining their students according to Liang. For example, beating students would be seen as abuse nowadays. Also, the ADC advocated a leisurely nature of the programme, in which no serious in-class assessment was encouraged.

within the Drama and Traditional Performances Committee during ADC’s reformation in 1995.

²⁶³ <http://www.hkadc.org.hk/en/content/web.do?id=ff80818121cfed6e0121d3f97b1b0003>. Accessed on 10 June 2015.

Liang noted that this made it hard to ensure the students' commitment to training, and as a result, low class attendance in all four schools became a serious problem for the whole programme. Liang said that students would often skip classes with the excuse of being occupied by other academic subjects or other hobbies, slowing down class progress and causing administrative problems, as the attendance record was also a determining factor for the final funding amount. Facing these challenges, Liang decided to give up on school training activities after finishing this project in 2011.



Figure 5.1. Liang Hanyong tutoring secondary school students in a foundational skills class. (Photo by YCOC, 2008)

香港青年京劇學院主辦
仁濟醫院第二中學協辦

學校戲曲教育計劃(四) 「校園弘揚育京苗」聯校結業演出

藝術總監：梁漢勇
藝術顧問：羅家英 南鳳
音樂領導：李樹祥 吳鐵平



節目：基本功、形體身段、把子功、《賣水》及《拾玉鐲》片段

崑劇：《乾元山》

京劇：《貴妃醉酒》由香港青年京劇學院與上水惠州公立學校聯合演出

崑劇：《林冲夜奔》由香港青年京劇學院與大坑東宣道小學聯合演出

節目全長約2小時

日期：2011年9月24日(星期六) 時間：下午2時30分

場地：大埔文娛中心演奏廳

票價：HK\$40

節目查詢：9312 9578 (香港青年京劇學院)

門票現於各城市電腦售票處、網上及信用卡訂票熱線發售

設有六十歲或以上高齡人士、殘疾人士、全日制學生半價優惠

票務查詢：2734 9009

信用卡訂票電話：2111 5999

網上訂票：<http://www.urbtix.hk>

電郵地址：hkyco2006@yahoo.com.hk

 香港藝術發展局
Hong Kong Arts Development Council
藝發局資助計劃
This project is commissioned by the ADC

如遇特殊情況，主辦機構保留更換節目及表演者的權利

Figure 5.2. Poster of the graduation performance of YCOC's Peking Opera training programme in 2011.

5.3.3.2 The Leisure and Cultural Services Department

In terms of the amount of funding received, Liang engaged much more with the Leisure and Cultural Services Department (LCSD). This department was formed in 2000 as a department of the main government structure, to replace the Urban Council and the Regional Council. The LCSD inherited all powers and responsibilities of its predecessors in cultural and sports affairs. In addition to distributing government funding, it also manages cultural venues in Hong Kong. Therefore, besides offering direct funding to art groups, it also establishes venue-based funding schemes.

In particular, there are two funding schemes that have involved Peking Opera troupes as frequent participants. The first one is the Artist-in-Residence Scheme, which was first introduced by the Provisional Urban Council (a transitional government body between Urban Council and LCSD) in 1998, continued by LCSD, and ended in 2007. Under this scheme, via open tendering, selected individual arts practitioners and groups would be funded and assigned to a cultural venue for a period of time, where they would conduct their proposed activities. The residential basis of this scheme, according to the official phrasing, aimed to provide a more sustainable means of establishing artist(s)-community relationships, providing “opportunities for the community to gain insight into an artist’s work”.²⁶⁴ At the same time, from the artist’s perspective, the scheme provided a guarantee of regular, funded performing opportunities. This is particularly helpful for newly formed self-financed art groups to survive before they can build up a solid audience base.

This applies very much to Liang and YCOC in 1998. As a young Peking Opera troupe, it was one of the first recipients of funding from this scheme, and was assigned to a six-month residence in the Ngau Chi Wan Civil Centre, the main cultural venue of the East Kowloon area. There Liang conducted a programme that consisted of three courses in foundational skills and a graduation performance, which aimed to introduce Peking Opera to the community through personal learning experience. In the next four years, the troupe was re-selected by the LCSD as the artist-in-residence of the same venue, and Liang basically repeated the same programme every year. He also conducted short-term courses in a similar fashion with funding of the LCSD’s “Community Cultural Ambassador Scheme” (to which I will return below) in 2009, and as self-financed activities throughout the last decade. In the following section I will illustrate what the courses were like in terms of technical facts (class setting), production (selection of teaching staff) and consumption (background of participants).

Each short-term course focused on one of the following generic elements in Peking Opera performing: on the performing side, body movements and martial arts moves; on the musical side, a Chinese two-string fiddle used in Peking Opera called *jinghu* 京胡 and Chinese “gongs and drums” (*luogu* 鑼鼓). Each course consisted of around twenty classes of two hours each. It spanned three to six months, with the classes meeting weekly or twice a week. Targeting mainly people of working age in the community, classes were scheduled to start

²⁶⁴ Leisure and Cultural Services Department, 2002 Annual Report (<http://www.lcsd.gov.hk/dept/annual2002/en/cultural02.php>). Accessed on 15 June 2015.

after normal working hours, usually around seven or eight in the evening. In most cases, different courses within a programme were scheduled on different days of the week, so that Liang could teach all performing courses by himself. For the instruments courses, he turned to his network of Cantonese Opera musicians in Guangzhou, where he found some musicians who had received serious training in Peking Opera training schools, but then moved on to a career in Cantonese Opera troupes. I took part in some of these courses myself in 2008 and 2009.

The pedagogy of these courses can be summarised as numerous repetitions of the learning content by students after the instructor(s) and hand-to-hand coaching for refinements, with the use of notation in instruments courses depending largely on convention. For example in the Chinese gongs and drums course that I participated in 2009, the traditional notation, the *luogujing* 鑼鼓經, was really an unnecessary reference.²⁶⁵ Students did not learn how to read it, and the instructor only occasionally wrote down a rhythmic pattern in *luogujing* notation as some sort of notes that students could jot down and take home. On the contrary, numbered notation (Ziffersystem) was used extensively in the *jinghu* course. Students would learn to read it and play some basic accompanying melodies from it. However in either case, musical embellishments that are difficult to notate were still taught in the traditional means of oral transmission.

Some interesting observations can be made about the course participants. Firstly, among the usual twenty people in each class, middle-aged citizens formed the majority of participants, with the remaining part formed by young adults and teenagers. There were also occasional participants from older and younger age groups, including people in their sixties as well as primary school students. In terms of gender, female participants formed the majority: on average only two males were present. Apart from these general observations, the participants' artistic background was noteworthy: many of them had some degree of experience in Cantonese opera. Among this group of "experienced" participants, the majority were amateur performers who frequently engaged in Cantonese opera performances or operatic singing activities. A few were professionals. For example, when I participated in the Chinese percussion course in 2009, I became acquainted with a professional Cantonese Opera playwright named Mr. Liu. In an informal conversation, I asked him why he was taking the course, and he answered:

Percussion music in Peking Opera has become an integral part of Cantonese Opera's music. Learning this will help me a lot in writing scripts that are more compatible with the music.²⁶⁶

²⁶⁵ *Luogujing* is a traditional notation system for Chinese percussion, and is commonly used in traditional Chinese theatre. It uses Chinese characters, such as *cang* 倉 and *cai* 才. In light of the fact that a typical percussion ensemble in the theatre consists of four or more instruments, this system does not notate rhythms for each individual instrument. Instead, each character represents a certain combination of instruments, and the choice of character is based on a mimic of the resulting sound from that instruments combination. For example, *cang* represents the whole ensemble, and *cai* means all but the big gong (*dalu* 大鑼).

²⁶⁶ Mr. Liu (personal correspondence. 17 July 2009).

This comment reaffirms the close connection between Cantonese Opera and Peking Opera in Hong Kong. In my view, this connection may also have subtly influenced the choice of courses Liang decided to offer. By organizing these courses, he could include Cantonese Opera practitioners in his target groups, so that a high participation rate for the courses would be guaranteed. This also suggests that even with government support, Peking Opera in contemporary Hong Kong is also shaped by market forces. Activities were co-determined by commercial motives as much as by artistic motives.

Teaching and performing are the most effective ways of introducing a performing art when interactions are carried out through face-to-face encounters. As such, it may well be the case that the residential, single-venue nature of the Artist-in-Residence Scheme discouraged artists from conducting performing activities and, hence, self-limited the variety of activities available to respective communities. Provided that artists were expected to focus on their residence community, they would have to come up with new programmes constantly in order to keep the limited target audience entertained if they wanted to do performances. This is financially very difficult for most of the scheme recipients, because they are small to mid-sized, self-financed art groups. Alternatively, they would have to attract new audiences from outside their residence community, which was practically difficult and, moreover, not encouraged by the authorities if we consider the initial aim of the scheme.

The “Community Cultural Ambassador Scheme” (CCAS), introduced by the government to encourage performing activities in local communities, provided a solution for this dilemma. Also introduced by the Provisional Urban Council a year after the Artists-in-Residence Scheme, the CCAS is different in that individual art practitioners and groups are not obliged to conduct their activities at the same venue. On the contrary, they are expected to “conduct a wide range of outreach activities that are both educational and fun at various indoor and outdoor venues, including public spaces in the community.”²⁶⁷ Since 2004, YCOC has been a frequent participant in the scheme with its thematic performances. In the following section I will illustrate the organizational details of the performances, again, in terms of technical facts, production and consumption.

In most cases, YCOC’s programmes under the scheme were performing tours around local communities.²⁶⁸ They gave an average of fifteen performances within the funded period, usually two to three months. The tour covered a wide range of communities in terms of numbers – if we use the official 18-district division to define communities in Hong Kong, the tour in 2009 covered eleven districts with thirteen performances, and in 2014 the number went up to fifteen with twenty performances. Performances could be attended for free, and were held in community halls, which are government-managed venues for communities to gather and organize collective activities. Liang would set a theme for each tour, for instance, to introduce the audience to a particular role type or performer. For example, the four legendary female role performers, Mei Lanfang, Cheng Yanqiu 程砚秋, Xun Huisheng 荀慧生 and Shang Xiaoyun 尚小雲, were the themes from 2011 to 2014. A repertoire that

²⁶⁷ <http://www.lcsd.gov.hk/CE/CulturalService/ab/en/ccas.php>. Accessed on 15 June 2015.

²⁶⁸ The only exception was in 2009, in which YCOC also conducted four short-term courses.

consisted of several excerpts from the signature plays of each particular role type / performer would be set, and each performance would include several excerpts from the repertoire, forming a show of about two hours in length. Classical excerpts that featured fancy acrobatics were also included, as Liang thought this would be visually more appealing for the audience, who were mostly non-specialists.

Due to the “professional one-person-troupe” setting, Liang had to find all his performers, musicians and backstage crew from elsewhere. He recruited them from various sources, mainly on the Chinese mainland. Liang usually targeted junior performers in troupes or students in training schools, as they were the most likely to be available to work with another troupe for a period of time. Nevertheless, this also created an organizational limitation, because it meant that the tour could only be held in summer, since this was the only practical time for young performers to be away from their home troupes and schools. The second source was Peking Opera performers who had been trained in Hong Kong. Although few in number, there were some graduates from the four disbanded local training schools who had stayed in Hong Kong and practised Peking Opera on an amateur or freelance basis. For example, Li Juhua, mentioned in chapter 4, engaged frequently with YCOC. For the music ensemble, Liang usually looked to mainland Peking Opera troupes or training schools, but sometimes also to Hong Kong or mainland Cantonese Opera troupes for percussionists. The backstage crew was usually made up of volunteers, who were mostly former participants of the short-term courses.

With the cast assembled, all members would gather in Hong Kong several weeks prior to the first performance for rehearsals. Since the repertoire was made up of popular plays, the “temporary troupe” usually did not need much time to rehearse, especially since Liang always approached those who already knew the plays in the repertoire. In general, the staging of these community performances was in a conventional style, except that some stage practises were downscaled. For example, conventionally there would be four sidekick characters entering the stage before the entrance of main character, but Liang would usually use only two. According to Liang, this arrangement was necessary because of the limited production budget provided by the scheme, and the smaller stage size of the community halls compared to a normal Peking Opera stage.

Compared to the short-term courses, the community performances attracted a very different audience in terms of age, in which senior citizens dominated. The phenomenon was common on weekday performances, while a comparatively balanced distribution of age groups among audiences was seen in weekend performances. I also saw parents with children of primary school age in a few performances. In addition to the obvious time clash between the show time of weekdays performances and normal working hours, the dominance of senior citizens in the audience could also be explained by another reason. As Liang explained, there was a guideline in all community halls that no promotional materials could be distributed or put on before the day of performance. Because of this, he and his colleagues could only do publicity in the office of the district councillors, where many senior citizens would go seeking assistance on social affairs, or homes for the elderly. This directly resulted in the relatively high average age of the audiences. Also, unlike the short-term courses, the audiences were

more balanced in terms of gender.

At the same time, I observed a similarity between participants of short-term courses and community performances: in both settings, a considerable proportion of the audience had a certain background in Cantonese opera. In an informal conversation with Miss Lau, a temporary manager of the Shatin Wai Community Hall in the New Territories, after a performance in 2009, she told me that many of the audience there were also frequent spectators at Cantonese opera performances and operatic singing concerts held in the hall. This fact leads to an interesting comparison, in which a similar artistic background found in these two groups of participants both became their motivation to join YCOC's activities, while they acted on different assumptions. The course participants were aware of differences and similarities between the two genres, and this knowledge motivated them to join the courses. On the contrary, the senior citizens went to community performances because they could *not* differentiate between the two genres. Indeed, in the same conversation, the Community Hall manager also told me that many senior citizens came to the performance because they thought it was a Cantonese Opera performance. Such a misunderstanding was also observed in some other communities, when some audiences members told me that they had been invited by their friends to come to a Cantonese Opera performance. In other words, their motivation was generated by the combination of their preference for Cantonese Opera and their inability to distinguish it from Peking Opera. However, they did not seem bothered by the misunderstanding, as they appeared equally fond of this "new" form of entertainment. Their post-performance comments showed that they were actually amused by the acrobatic and the choreographed fighting scenes, as well as the performers' skill of scenario simulation.²⁶⁹ The language barrier was also overcome to a certain degree, as plots and lyrics were projected on a screen that was set up on one side of the stage. (See figure 5.4.)

²⁶⁹ Scenario simulation is a core presentation skill of Peking Opera, in which performers mimic certain scenarios with their body movements and simple props. For example, a performer walks along behind a flag, with a print of wheels on it, to represent riding a vehicle. Another involved a performer rolling an oar in his/her palm, and going up and down to represent a boat ride.



Figure 5.3. Before a YCOC community performance in Sai Ying Pun Community Complex, on Hong Kong Island. (Photo by the author. 11 December 2015)



Figure 5.4. The daughter of Liang Hanyong performed as Concubine Yang in *The Favorite Concubine Becomes Intoxicated* in the community performance. (Photo by the author. 11 December 2015)

5.3.3.3 Other activities of Liang

In addition to the abovementioned government-funded teaching and performing activities, Liang also engaged in private teaching. Again, most of his private students were professional or amateur Cantonese Opera performers, who wished to improve their foundational skills through what was called a more formulated training manner of Peking Opera, or to learn some specific skills that had been integrated into Cantonese Opera.

5.4 Performances by Chinese mainland troupes

The growth of Peking Opera activities produced by local troupes does not mean that performances given by Chinese mainland troupes are totally erased from the scene. Quite the opposite, mainland troupes have never stopped touring Hong Kong after the historical event by Mei Lanfang in 1922. For example, Cheng Yanqiu toured Hong Kong with his Harmonious Troupe (*Minghe She* 鳴和社) in 1923.²⁷⁰ Also recalled in chapter four was the original tour plan of Ma Lianliang, Zhang Junqiu and Yu Zhenfei at the end of 1948 before the unexpectedly long stay afterward. Moreover, many more performances by mainland troupes were documented in the second half of the twentieth century, on which I will elaborate later.

One main theme of the Peking Opera reform on the mainland after the establishment of the PRC was the institutionalization of troupes, by which I mean the establishment of state-owned troupes, at both national and provincial level, and the (re)allocation of performers into these troupes. Though high-profile performers were still an attraction to the audiences, they no longer constituted the cores of the troupes. Such institutionalization was also seen in mainland troupes' tours to Hong Kong in the mid-twentieth century, as advertisements of these tours on local newspapers suggest that the troupes, as a collective group, were featured instead of individual performers. For example, when the Troupe of Chinese Arts visited Hong Kong in 1956, the two leaders – Qiu Shengrong 裘盛戎 and Tan Fuying 譚富英, who were both star performers at the time – were seldom singled out and featured in publicity.²⁷¹ Another example was in 1963 when Ma Lianliang and Zhang Junqiu revisited Hong Kong, this time as members of the Peking Opera Theatre of Beijing.

As noted, the ban on traditional Peking Opera plays in the PRC was lifted in 1978. Performers began to pick up their profession again and the genre gradually revived, as did the “export” of Peking Opera performances by mainland troupes. An inventory of articles and advertisements in the *Great Achievement Magazine* shows that mainland troupes that toured Hong Kong from the 1980s include the China National Peking Opera Company (1979, 1993), the Shanghai Peking Opera Company (1982, 1987, 1992, 1994), the Tianjin Peking Opera Troupe (1986), the Tianjin Youth Peking Opera Troupe (1987, 1989, 1990, 1995), the Yunnan Peking Opera Troupe (1988), the Jiangsu Peking Opera Troupe (1988), the Shandong Peking Opera Troupe (1988), the Peking Opera Troupe of The Political Department of the Beijing Military Region (1988) and the Shenyang Peking Opera Troupe (1993). These tour

²⁷⁰ Li 2007: 307.

²⁷¹ *New Life Evening Post*, 11 and 20 June, 7 July 1956.

performances were mostly organized by private parties. First of all, they were organized by individual, wealthy Peking Opera lovers, such as the previously cited example of Shen Jicheng, Sun Lanting and Zhang Shankun in organizing Ma Lianliang's tour in 1948. After 1977, when the Hong Kong United Arts Entertainment Company Limited was established, it became the organizer of most tour performances from the mainland.

In addition to Hong Kong, the export of Peking Opera performances from the mainland was worldwide. However, in many parts of the world there was little follow-up in subsequent decades after the initial curiosity value of the revived Peking Opera had worn off. On the contrary, tour performances in Hong Kong maintained their regularity and indeed gradually gained government support. For example, the government-funded Hong Kong Arts Festival, which was first organized in 1973, started inviting mainland Peking Opera troupes in 1976.²⁷² Since then, mainland Peking Opera productions became an occasional highlight of the Festival. After 1997, they even became a regular programme, with the China National Peking Opera Company and the Shanghai Peking Opera Company being the two most frequent visitors. At present, mainland Peking Opera productions are mostly presented by the Hong Kong government in the Hong Kong Arts Festival and the Chinese Opera Festival, both held annually.

Especially before the 1970s, tour performances by mainland Peking Opera troupes were often major occasions in Hong Kong society. A review of local newspapers shows that public attention spiked and vigorous discussions on Peking Opera continued during the whole period of the tours. For example, *Wenhui Bao* 文匯報 (Wenwei Po) gave full coverage of the Shanghai Youth Peking Opera Troupe tour in 1961, reporting the troupe's schedule and the performers' daily activities, along with critical reviews and more general articles on the subject of Peking Opera.²⁷³ Even though general enthusiasm naturally waned once the tours were over, one could still find some media coverage, for instance, in cultural publications such as the *Great Achievement Magazine*. My personal experience in attending these tour performances from 2005 to 2013 also suggests that they still received good receptions, as attendance rates were high and I heard many positive comments from the spectators. In my view, there are two reasons for the success of these performances in maintaining good receptions. Firstly, they still served as sites of nostalgia for the considerable mainland immigrant population in Hong Kong. Secondly, the Hong Kong government made a great efforts in promoting them as a tourist attraction. For example, the two abovementioned art festivals are regularly featured by the Hong Kong Tourism Board.²⁷⁴

5.5 Post-1997 Hong Kong's national yet local identity

With reference to the rebirth of Peking Opera in the local cultural scene in the 1980s and a noticeable increase in government's support to the genre from the 1990s to the present, I

²⁷² <http://www.hk.artsfestival.org/tc/about-us/past-programmes/past-programmes-1973.html>. Accessed on 28 July 2015.

²⁷³ *Wenhui Bao*. 17 December 1961 to 18 January 1962.

²⁷⁴ <http://www.discoverhongkong.com/tc/see-do/arts-performance/highlight-events/index.jsp>. Accessed on 28 July 2015.

argue that the HKSAR government showed an ideology that values Peking Opera as a means to construct a “national yet local” identity of Hong Kong. On the one hand, they still shared the nationalizing discourse on Peking Opera, which was created by Chinese intellectuals in the early twentieth century. In other words, they still saw the genre as a representative of, or even an equivalent to, “Chinese culture”. It is noteworthy that their definition of “Chinese culture” is holistic, not to say abstract – neither traditional nor contemporary, neither authentic nor invented – and in fact a straightforward reference to the cultural essence of a nation-state.

One good example of such a subscription to the nationalizing discourse occurred when the newly formed HKSAR government brought up the aforesaid notion of “cultural return to China” as one of the major directions of local cultural development. The ADC responded immediately with the formation of the *Xiqu* Committee and a considerable increase of funding for Peking Opera activities. In addition, two other episodes in Liang’s career support my argument, reinforcing the impression of widespread subscription to the nationalizing discourse. The first was when Liang was conducting the school training programme with ADC funding. As he recalled, the ADC required a graduation performance as a final assessment of the quality of the current programme and future funding potential. The assessment team included both ADC officials and several professional Peking Opera performers from the Chinese mainland. Apparently the performance was badly reviewed by the professionals, mainly for the sub-standard performance by the students. Nevertheless, the ADC officials did not seem to find this much of a problem. They not only appreciated Liang’s work in introducing Peking Opera to primary and secondary school students, but also showed a positive attitude toward YCOC’s potential in receiving future grants.²⁷⁵ Such disregard by an official body for professional comments could, in my view, indeed be interpreted as reflecting an attitude that rates the symbolic value of Peking Opera in Hong Kong over the artistic quality of the presentation itself. In other words, Peking Opera was to them part of a national culture that needed to be introduced to the society, even at the cost of low performance standards. The second anecdote was more self-evident, in which a LCSD official said to Liang, in an opening ceremony of CCAS, that “the national drama has to be promoted in Hong Kong.”²⁷⁶

While displaying a cultural-nationalistic vision, in practice the government has shown a desire to distinguish “Chinese culture in Hong Kong” from “Chinese culture on the mainland” by stressing the differences in practice between these two places. In other words, while subscribing to the nationalizing discourse, which had emerged from the Chinese mainland throughout the twentieth century, it also tried to claim a certain degree of Hong Kong local identity. Here I quote again Tung Chee-hwa’s statement about Hong Kong’s cultural position in his first Policy Address in 1997, which offered a first glimpse into this dual approach:

While we deepen our understanding of Chinese history and culture, we will continue to develop our own diverse cultural characteristics ... Hong Kong stands in a unique position in this process,

²⁷⁵ Liang said that it was him who gave up applying for another similar grants because of the challenges faced.

²⁷⁶ Liang Hanyong (interview. 17 August 2014).

able to act as the centre of exchange for China to learn about western cultures and for the world to learn about Chinese culture.²⁷⁷

This positioning of a co-existence of “cultural return” and “cultural cosmopolitanism” was also seen in the organization of the Chinese Opera Festival. According to the official statement of this annual cultural event, which was first organized in 2010, one main motivation for the LCSD to organize it was to “profit from the geographical advantage of Hong Kong, and make it the centre of traditional Chinese drama in Asia.”²⁷⁸

One may find the above two quotes obscure – what is the “unique position” of Hong Kong? What is the “geographical advantage” of Hong Kong? In my view, such obscurity also reflects the government’s hesitation to make explicit claims about local identity. Its political affiliation with the People’s Republic gives it little room for an explicit claim. Therefore, while it kept stressing the cultural diversity of the city, due to its long exposure to European culture, it still positioned Chinese culture at the top of the cultural hierarchy. Nevertheless, the words of Wang Weimin, who supervised the LCSD for the programmes of the Chinese Opera Festival, may provide an explanation of the difference between practicing traditional Chinese theatre in Hong Kong and on the mainland in the contemporary era:

On the other hand, under the premise of “one country, two systems”, Hong Kong is a capitalist city. There is no government-operated troupe of traditional Chinese theatre, but a multi-dimensional cultural market that caters to the varied cultural demands of a multi-dimensional society ... Hong Kong is different from the Chinese mainland in the sense that there has not been any interference with the cultural field from political movements. For example, no frameworks are set by political ideologies, nor is there the influence by revolutionary model operas. It can be said that audiences of traditional Chinese theatre in Hong Kong value the art form according to universal values and aesthetics. Therefore, they appreciate any traditional Chinese theatrical genre that has real quality.²⁷⁹

In other words, in Wang’s view, compared with the highly politicized cultural environment in twentieth-century mainland China, a free, capitalist cultural market that is relatively free from political interference is an advantage that makes practicing and presenting traditional Chinese theatre in Hong Kong profoundly different from doing so on the mainland – even though this very political flexibility of the Hong Kong cultural climate gave Peking Opera a hard time in the 1960s and 1970s.

The articulation of two seemingly polarized identities in the same body at the same time – in this case national and local – is not entirely new in the realm of traditional Chinese theatre. Ashley Thorpe’s discussion of Ione Meyer’s Peking Opera performances in the UK highlights the hybridity of British-Chinese identity demonstrated by Meyer’s performing body. Borrowing Judith Butler’s poststructuralist theory of gender performance, he reads such

²⁷⁷ 1997 Policy Address of Hong Kong: 111.

²⁷⁸ Liao 2012: 8.

²⁷⁹ Wang 2013: 24.

hybridity as a deconstruction of the association of Peking Opera with Chinese identity, arguing that while the genre might be perceived by the Western public as a signifier of a relatively more stable and homogeneous Chinese identity, Meyer's performance challenges this by putting forth "the derivative nature of Chinese identity as fundamentally connected to the 'Other' [Western] within the self [Chinese]."²⁸⁰

This analysis is directly relevant to my research, in the sense that the notion of "local identity" may also be viewed as derivative in nature, and as unable to stand alone without the constructed reference to the "national". More importantly, homogeneous assumption of Chinese identity is challenged in both cases, albeit in different geographical frameworks. Thorpe's research focuses on a diaspora setting which is – given the white British identity of Meyer – set broadly within the intercontinental and intercultural framework of "orient" and "occident"; given the political affiliation of Hong Kong to the Chinese mainland, my work focuses on a more intimate, intra-China framework, and leads to the observation of the Hong Kong government's agenda to demonstrate "multi-Chineseness", by means of traditional Chinese theatre, within a homogeneous Chinese discourse. Also, Thorpe's discussion of the simultaneous building of various identities proceeds from a perspective of theatrical performativity, meaning that his analysis is based on Meyer's performance on stage (i.e. a Western body performing Chinese theatre). By contrast, my discussion proceeds from a paratheatrical perspective, showing how the Hong Kong government performed their identity by differentiating themselves from mainland conventions in practicing traditional Chinese theatre.

5.6 Conclusion

In *Performing Arts, The Economic Dilemma: a Study of Problems Common to Theater, Opera, Music, and Dance* (1966), William Baumol and William Bowen developed a model of "cost disease", which describes a phenomenon that involves a rise of salaries in jobs without a correspondent rise of labor productivity in some job markets, such as that of the performing arts. Even though their model is now half a century old, I believe it remains useful in considering the situation of Peking Opera in Hong Kong. Baumol and Bowen used this model to legitimize state funding for art activities, which should compensate for the rising cost of art productions.²⁸¹ This explanation for state funding was open to some criticisms. For example, some criticized them for ignoring the fact that art groups in modern days have actually adopted various labor-saving measures in order to cut down production costs²⁸² – such as the idea of "professional one-man-troupes" in the case of Peking Opera in Hong Kong. More importantly, Baumol and Bowen offered another perspective to justify state funding from the concept of "mixed commodities". According to them, "mixed commodities" are "goods and services whose characteristics are partly private, partly public."²⁸³ They then gave the example of public education, from which both individual consumers (students) and society as

²⁸⁰ Thorpe 2011a: 40.

²⁸¹ Baumol & Bowen 1966.

²⁸² Laing 2003: 315.

²⁸³ Baumol & Bowen 1966: 381.

a whole will benefit, and went further in an attempt to categorize performing arts as “mixed commodities”:

If the performing arts are mixed commodities which confer direct benefits on those who attend a performance but which also offer benefits to the community as a whole, government support of the arts might well be completely consistent with the desires of the entire community.²⁸⁴

Baumol and Bowen tried to justify this argument by giving four advantages that performing arts can bring to the society: prestige to the nation, conferment of attendants to other business, involvement of future generations, and educational contribution.²⁸⁵ From this perspective, in order to justify the Hong Kong government’s funding for Peking Opera, the question becomes: Does Peking Opera bring any advantage to Hong Kong society? If so, what are these advantages? In other words, what is the social value of Peking Opera that makes it worth government’s funding?

In this chapter I have illustrated how cultural politics in Hong Kong, from the early colonial era until today, have affected the development of Peking Opera in the city. Firstly, the liberal governance ideology of the Colonial government and the collaborative relationship between the government and the Chinese elite in Hong Kong set a relatively free cultural ground for Chinese art forms, different from a conventional vision of colonialism as bent on eradicating local forms. Then, from the construction of the new City Hall in the 1960s to the new cultural infrastructures and administrative measures by the Colonial government in the 1980s, official encouragement of public access to cultural activities also passively contributed to the survival and then the rebirth of Peking Opera. After 1997, under the notion of “cultural return”, the symbolic value of Peking Opera as a “national” culture was presented by the government as a social value, and this provided it with the legitimacy to actively fund this genre. My case study of Liang Hanyong and YCOC has illustrated how government sponsorship worked in practice through various government bodies, and how local Peking Opera troupes made use of this funding to promote the genre in local communities by different kinds of activities.

Nevertheless, my case study of Peking Opera in Hong Kong also shows that the post-1997 cultural position defined by the HKSAR government was not purely nationalistic, but also displayed a subtle claim of Hong Kong local identity. In fact, such a heterogenous Chinese identity was also shared by local Peking Opera practitioners. In the next chapter, we will see how Tang Yuen-ha, another active Peking Opera performer in Hong Kong, perceived Peking Opera in Hong Kong, and how this perception led her in a quest of a local way to present the genre.

²⁸⁴ *ibid.* 382.

²⁸⁵ *ibid.* 382-385.