

THE UNIVERSITY OF HONG KONG

IMPACT CASE HISTORY

Breathing New Life into an Art Form at Risk: Cantonese Opera

1. Summary

The HKU Cantonese Opera Education Research and Promotion Project conducted by Dr Dorothy Fung Ping Ng is an innovative project to integrate Cantonese Opera into the formal secondary school curriculum, specifically the Chinese Language, Chinese Literature and Liberal Studies, with a goal to guide students to appreciate and respect the culture of Cantonese Opera, and in turn to help preserve this traditional art form. The efforts of her team convinced the teachers of the value of Cantonese Opera and the success in the first 4 schools participating in a pilot project has led to more than 20 secondary schools integrating Cantonese opera into their curriculum. Dr Ng's work has also contributed to the increase in public interest in Cantonese Opera as an intangible Chinese cultural heritage.



2. Underpinning Research

Dr Dorothy Fung Ping Ng, Assistant Professor in the Faculty of Education, is concerned about the challenges facing Cantonese Opera, which is a Chinese cultural treasure that has become a fading art. The number of Cantonese Opera performances in bamboo shed theatres in Hong Kong has dwindled from 158 in 1970 to 34 in 2010. The traditional bamboo sheds where operas are performed and the accompanying communal rituals are also under threat.

Dr Ng aims to make a significant educational development in Hong Kong by integrating this cultural treasure into Chinese language education of the secondary school curriculum. There is more to Cantonese Opera than just the music; it has a strong basis in traditional Chinese literature, the Cantonese dialect and dance, and Chinese rituals. She started her work in the form of a seed project, called the “Seed Project of Cantonese Opera – Integrate Cantonese Opera in Education” (the “Seed Project”), in 2006. It involved professional training for secondary school teachers and the development of the curriculum as well as an assessment mechanism. This Seed Project was completed in 2009. The research component covered the following:

- (a) Research was conducted on the script of Tang Di Sheng, the renowned Cantonese Opera scriptwriter, in the context of the Chinese/Beijing history and culture. This was a collaborative research project with the Beijing Normal University, the research area being also an important one to the Mainland’s Education Department.
- (b) In the first stage of the project, four schools were involved, and a new teaching module was implemented in the junior secondary Chinese language curriculum. There were two sub-categories in this curriculum development, which were script study and performance study. For script study, famous Cantonese Opera scripts, such as “Princess Chang Ping” written by Tang Di Sheng, were used as study text. Students read and studied the scripts and learned about the language and cultural elements from the scripts. For performance study, students were taught by professional Cantonese Opera artists about basic movements and singing of Cantonese Opera. Basic ideas of make-up, costumes and technical arts were also introduced to the students. In the second stage of the project, arrangements were made for the students to watch Cantonese Opera performances both in theatres and in outdoor shed stages. Classroom data of both script and performance studies and student learning outcomes were reviewed. Research was also conducted on innovative teaching methods, such as Story Schema teaching and Play-reading pedagogy.
- (c) In-depth interviews and shadowing were done with Cantonese Opera artists.

The Seed Project generated 3 books, 3 refereed international journal articles, 1 book chapter, 10 international and regional conference presentations, and over 10 keynote speeches and invited lectures.

The success of the Seed Project led to significant donations and more grants, which enabled Dr Ng to extend the impact of her work to more schools and the community under a new project called “HKU Cantonese Opera Education Research and Promotion Project”, which was kicked off in the 2009-10 school year.

3. References to the Research

Key publications:

Ng, F.P., Chung, A.L.S. and Lam, J.W.I. (2009) 'Curriculum Development and Strategies: Integrate Cantonese Opera in Chinese Language Education in Hong Kong', *The International Journal of Learning*, Common Ground Publisher (peer-reviewed).

Ng, F.P., Chung, A.L.S., *The Art of Leung Sing Boh* (梁醒波傳: 亦慈亦俠亦詼諧), 2009, ET Press (in Chinese).

Ng, Dorothy F. P. and Lam, J. W. I. (2009) 'Teaching Cantonese Opera Script: Story Schema Approach', N. H. Salas and D. D. Peyton ed., *Reading: Assessment, Comprehension and Teaching*, Nova Science Publishers.

Ng, F. P. and Lam, J. W. I. (2009) 'Teaching of Reading Cantonese Opera Scripts for Hong Kong Secondary Students – Story Schema Approach', *Reading: Assessment, Comprehension and Teaching*, N.Y. Nova Science Publishers, Inc.

Ng, Dorothy F.P., Lam, J. W. I. & Choi, K. K. (2010) 'The Application of Free Web Tools to E-learning Platforms for Integrating Cantonese Opera into Hong Kong Chinese Language Education in the Era of Web 2.0', *The International Journal of Learning*, 16, 67-85 (peer-reviewed).

Ng, F.P., Wai-Sze Yeung (2011) 'Integrating Cantonese Opera: Students' Learning Outcomes and Assessment', *The International Journal of Learning*, 277-295 (peer-reviewed).

Selected external grant funding:

1. Integrated Cantonese Opera in Education: A Seed Grant

Funding Scheme: Cantonese Opera Development Fund
Principal Investigator: Dr Dorothy Fung Ping Ng
Period: 2006
Amount Awarded: HK\$300,000

2. Integrating Cantonese Opera on NSS Chinese Language Curriculum and Assessment: A Seed project (融合中國語文科新高中課程及評估計劃「粵劇小豆苗」)

Funding Scheme: Cantonese Opera Development Fund
Principal Investigator: Dr Dorothy Fung Ping Ng
Period: 2006-2008
Amount Awarded: HK\$200,000

3. Integrating Cantonese Opera on NSS Chinese Language Curriculum and Assessment: A Seed project (融合中國語文科新高中課程及評估計劃「粵劇小豆苗」)

Funding Scheme: Yam Pak Charitable Foundation
 Principal Investigator: Dr Dorothy Fung Ping Ng
 Period: 2007-2009
 Amount Awarded: HK\$2,000,000

4. Research on Interactive learning from presentations and demonstrations of Cantonese Opera Artists at collaborating schools (粵劇老倌到校現身說法的互動學習研究)

Funding Scheme: Cantonese Opera Development Fund
 Principal Investigator: Dr Dorothy Fung Ping Ng
 Period: 2007-2008
 Amount Awarded: HK\$150,000

4. Details of the Impact or Benefit

The “HKU Cantonese Opera Education Research and Promotion Project” has successfully incorporated Cantonese Opera into the senior secondary curriculum. Dr Ng and her team have developed curriculum materials, including multimedia teaching materials such as video clips of Cantonese Opera performances, teaching reference books such as *Princess Changping Classroom* (帝女花教室) and *Legend of the Purple Hairpin Classroom* (紫釵記教室), and a school-based evaluation system, so students can study Cantonese Opera as part of a formal syllabus rather than an extra-curricular activity. This ensures that it is taken seriously as a study option. The study of Cantonese Opera scripts not only enhances the students’ linguistic skills but also increases their cultural literacy.



In addition, through studying the local culture of Cantonese Opera in general and bamboo shed theatre in particular, students are exposed to learning experience in a novel situation, which helps them develop a broader aesthetic perspective and a critical understanding of different art forms. The learning activities aim at encouraging students to appreciate and treasure their own culture and traditional art forms, recognizing Cantonese Opera as an intangible cultural heritage and their social responsibility to preserve their own cultural heritage by participating actively in promoting its sustainability. The study of the ritual beliefs and worships of bamboo shed theatre can also help students analyze the values that are essential to human bonding in rural communities.

Since most teachers are not familiar with Cantonese Opera, workshops and seminars for teachers were organized to brief them about how to integrate it into the teaching of Chinese language and Liberal Studies. Meetings were also held with teachers to help them prepare joint school lesson plans.

Numerous web resource materials were created to facilitate teachers to develop their own teaching materials. For example, a blog based on the information gathered from shadowing Cantonese Opera artists introduces students to the backstage world of a shed theatre. Another blog was developed to serve as a web-based platform for teachers and students from different schools to interact and exchange experience. Furthermore, upon completion of the school-based curriculum, a joint-school-report meeting was organized for the participating schools to share and exchange their views and experience and to assess the learning outcomes.

The efforts of Dr Ng's team convinced the teachers of the value of Cantonese Opera and the success in the first 4 schools in the Seed Project has led to more than 20 secondary schools integrating Cantonese opera into their curriculum.

Dr Ng's team works closely with and provides support to the industry. They have collaborated with the Chinese Artist Association of Hong Kong and the Cantonese Opera Academy of Hong Kong Limited on the Action Research on Teaching Cantonese Opera Script Writing Project since 2009. They facilitate the teaching of Cantonese Opera scriptwriting course and systematize the curriculum.

A lot of efforts have been made to promote Cantonese Opera as a distinct part of southern Chinese cultural heritage in the community. In 2009, Dr Ng and her team published the biography of Leung Sing Boh, the renowned Cantonese Opera, movie and television artist, titled "The Art of Leung Sing Boh". The biography and the associated exhibition were very well received by the public. They were elected as the Top 10 News in Cantonese Opera Industry 2009 by RTHK Radio 5, and the biography was listed among the top 10 best sellers in Hong Kong (non-literature category) for two months in 2009.

In January 2013, one of the project outcomes relating to bamboo shed Cantonese Opera and school education, including an introductory video, was displayed at a roving

exhibition of the Lord Wilson Heritage Trust, starting at the Hong Kong Heritage Museum in Tsim Sha Tsui, which was hosted by the Home Affairs Bureau.

Dr Ng's work has made a significant contribution to reverse the trend of dwindling interest in Cantonese Opera, especially among young people, and inspire new generations to appreciate this traditional art form.

5. References to the Corroboration of Impact or Benefit

- **Honours and Awards:**

- The 3rd phase of the Seed Project in 2008/09 (with 11 partnering schools, benefiting more than 11,000 participants) was awarded the Bronze Award for Arts Education (Non-School Division) by the Hong Kong Arts Development Council in 2010. This award aims at according recognition to schools, organizations and arts practitioners who have distinguished achievement in arts education. The Panelists' opinion on the project was that it "successfully incorporates Cantonese Opera into the senior secondary curriculum. It is sound in strategy and structure with its wide coverage and emphasis in experience sharing. Cantonese Opera troupes demonstrate performances at school help students understand this intangible cultural heritage and deepen their understanding of Chinese culture".
- The biography titled "The Art of Leung Sing Boh" was listed in the top 10 best sellers in Hong Kong (non-literature category) for two months in 2009 and was awarded the 22nd Hong Kong Print Awards Distinguished Publishing Award, Genre (Biography) in 2010, which was jointly organized by the Graphic Arts Association of Hong Kong, Hong Kong Publishers Society, Trade Development Council, the Leisure and Cultural Services Department and the Hong Kong Productivity Council.
- The biography titled "The Art of Leung Sing Boh" and the associated exhibition were elected as the Top 10 News in Cantonese Opera Industry 2009 by RTHK Radio 5.
- In 2013, the HKU Cantonese Opera Education Research and Promotion Project was chosen as one of the 10 highlights of the Lord Wilson Heritage Trust celebrated at the 20th anniversary of the founding of the Trust.

- **Media Coverage:**

The project was reported in the news and other media for over 50 times over the years.

- **Membership of External Bodies:**

- As a result of the significant achievements of the project, Dr Ng was appointed by the Home Affairs Bureau of the HKSAR Government to serve as a member of the Arts Development Advisory Committee, the Intangible Cultural Heritage Advisory Committee, and the Cantonese Opera Advisory Committee.
- Dr Ng was also appointed as the honorary advisor of the Chinese Artist Association of Hong Kong.
- The Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts invited Dr Ng to be an External Panel Member for Internal Validation Exercise for four academic programmes offered by the Office of Chinese Traditional Theatre Programme in 2012.
- Dr Ng was invited by the Hong Kong Arts Development Council in 2012 as Assessment panelist for the Award for Arts Education (Non-school) of the Arts Development Awards 2011.
- She was also invited by the West Kowloon Cultural District Authority and the Chinese Artist Association of Hong Kong as Consultant to West Kowloon Bamboo Theatre in 2011 to 2012.