

**Reviving Traditional Chinese Theatre Arts via  
the Chinese Opera Information Centre**

an Informational interview with Milky Cheung,  
Administrative Coordinator at the  
Chinese Opera Information Centre,  
Department of Music,  
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**Introduction**

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Chinese opera is a comprehensive performing art that combines music, singing, poetry, literature, dance, acrobatics and martial arts. With a history of over 800 years, traditional Chinese opera used to be one of the most popular forms of entertainment amongst all levels of society, ranging from the common people to the imperial court in China. Today, there are over 250 different styles of regional operas in China. Unfortunately, many traditional art forms are facing either direct or indirect threats to their survival, and Chinese opera is no exception. In the past few decades this traditional art form has suffered a drastic decline in popularity, and its current audience is limited to the older generation.

With the support of the Hong Kong Arts Development Council, the Chinese Opera Information Centre (COIC) was established in 2000 with the aim of giving a permanent home to a wealth of archival materials related to traditional Chinese opera. In terms of collection size and scope, the COIC currently holds about 1,500 titles of librettos, close to 300 titles of books, and over 2,000 items of opera plots, as well as over 2,500 titles of audio-visual materials, including live opera recordings, DVDs, CDs, and cassette tapes.

In the following interview, Milky Cheung, Administrative Coordinator at the COIC, discusses the reasons behind Chinese Opera's loss of popularity among the Hong Kong public, as well as her joy in serving as a cultural messenger who bridges the gap between the traditional Chinese arts and the younger generation.

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The following interview with Milky Cheung, Administrative Coordinator at the

Chinese Opera Information Center was conducted at the Centre on 22<sup>nd</sup> March, 2013.

***Patrick Lo (PL): Could we begin this interview by first introducing yourself, e.g., your training and background, and your major roles and duties at the Chinese Opera Information Centre (COIC)?***

Milky Cheung (MC): I started working for the Chinese Opera Information Centre (COIC)<sup>1</sup> at the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK)<sup>2</sup> in September 2005, right after I graduated with a bachelor's degree from the School of Journalism and Communication at CUHK. My main duties were to assist the administrator to manage the overall operations of the COIC. This is actually my eighth year working at the COIC. With reference to my educational background, in addition to my bachelor's degree in social sciences, I also obtained a master's degree in cultural management from CUHK.

Our Information Centre is open to the public. As a result, in many ways, COIC's functions and services are kind of similar to those of a small public library. For example, in addition to serving as an archive for Chinese opera materials, we also need to provide basic information and reference services to our users from both within and outside CUHK. We help them find information for their research, including topics ranging from Chinese operas being performed nowadays to the history and development of operatic works throughout different historical periods.

For me, the most interesting part of my job at the COIC is being able to take part in fieldwork, to go out to different theatres and other performance venues to collect all sorts of information and materials related to Chinese opera. In other words, I get to attend the actual opera performances on a regular basis. When I do, I bring back the information materials related to Chinese opera in various formats to the Centre, catalogue these materials, and make them part of the COIC collection.

Honestly speaking, being able to attend different live performances regularly, and bring back the information materials to the Centre is no doubt the most exciting part my job at COIC.

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<sup>1</sup> Chinese Opera Information Centre, Department of Music, The Chinese University of Hong Kong – Homepage. Available at: <http://corp.mus.cuhk.edu.hk/corp/html/indexE.htm>

<sup>2</sup> School of Journalism and Communication at the Chinese University of Hong Kong – Homepage. Available at: <http://www.com.cuhk.edu.hk/>

***PL: Could you tell me what kind of information materials you usually collect from the performance venues? Could you give some examples?***

MC: In addition to the printed materials, I also bring back to the Centre audio recordings or videos of the live performances. In other words, I go to different performance venues with a voice-recorder or even a video-camera, record the live performances of Chinese opera, and add these audio and visual recordings to the Centre's collection.

***PL: Do you need to have prior approval from the artists or from the performing groups prior to taping their performances?***

MC: Yes, we need to seek consent from performing groups before taping; especially as more and more people have become aware of copyright matters in recent years. Yet, sometimes it is a 'silent consent' rather than a black-and-white one. Actually, we have developed very close relationships with the artists and the performance groups as well as with the organizers over the years; as a result, they would not 'strictly forbid' us to record their live performances for most cases. Because they understand well that we are taping these performances for archival and preservation purposes and not for commercial use. Hence, they permit us to do so, although there is not any formal written agreement between us.

With reference to my fieldwork, in addition to taping the live performances, I also take photos at the performance venues, capturing what is happening offstage before, during and after the performances. Moreover, I actively collect other information materials from the performance venues and bring them back to the COIC for archival purposes. Chinese opera performance materials normally include performance posters, flyers, synopsis, and programme notes. These information materials are usually not available online or in other electronic formats. Because of this, the only way we can collect these materials is via actual fieldwork—to go out to the performance venues to collect and preserve them. Otherwise once the performance is over, most of these related materials would simply be gone forever.

Normally, one could find a large number of publications, magazines or even academic journals on Chinese opera at a regular public or academic library in Hong Kong; however, this is not always the case for materials like offstage or backstage photos, opera programme, plots, notes, synopsis, posters and flyers. COIC is unique in a

sense that it fills these gaps and complements the Chinese opera collections of other public and academic libraries in Hong Kong. You may say that our Centre specializes in collecting archival materials on Chinese opera in non-traditional formats.

***PL: Could you briefly describe the history of the COIC? For example, what were the original aims and purposes for establishing the COIC in the first place? Who were the founders of this COIC?***

MC: This Center is relatively new. Professor Chan Sau-Yan (陳守仁) was the founder of the COIC. Professor Chan worked at the CUHK Music Department until 2008. His main research interest was traditional Chinese music and Cantonese opera. At that time, he set up a research project with very minimal planning and resources. In short, at the early stage the collection was merely a storeroom for putting away all the original archive materials (in a large variety of formats) that Professor Chan and his team had collected over many decades, using a simple ad-hoc classification and arrangement system.

Later in 2000, the Hong Kong Arts and Development Council (HKADC)<sup>3</sup> was looking for someone or some local organization in Hong Kong to set up an archive for Chinese opera. Professor Chan successfully applied for project funding from HKADC for building an archive for Chinese opera in Hong Kong. Since Professor Chan had already collected all the archive materials, after receiving the project funding from the HKADC, it was only a matter of re-organizing the whole collection in a more logical and systematic order, including cataloguing the whole collection from scratch, and making it available to the public via the COIC.

The COIC was founded in 2000, so this year [2013] is our Centre's 13<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Over the years, we have gradually developed more professional ways to manage the Centre's functions and services. For example, we have developed a very simple online cataloguing / searching system, and against which our users could easily search for their desired materials, instead of relying on the old printed inventory list. With reference to our shelving arrangement, our classification scheme is a very simple inventory list number, and does not follow any international classification schemes. There are advantages as well as disadvantages with our in-house developed classification / filing system. Frequent visitors to the COIC can easily locate their desired materials by searching our simple online catalogue or by shelf

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<sup>3</sup> Hong Kong Arts Development Council – Homepage. Available at: <http://www.hkadc.org.hk/en/>

browsing. However, if you were using the Centre for the very first time, you would need to take some time to get accustomed to our in-house-developed shelving arrangement system.

***PL: Is the COIC part of the Chinese University (CUHK)? If that is the case, what were the reasons why the COIC founder did not simply donate the whole collection to the University Library, so that Library could look after the Centre's collection with affluent manpower and resources, instead of having to allocate additional funding and manpower to manage the COIC separately? Could you tell me what are the reasons behind this arrangement?***

MC: I think the main reason is to facilitate the overall administration and circulation of the whole COIC collection. As you understand, the [CUHK] University Library does not receive any extra funding or manpower for looking after this additional Chinese opera archive collection on an ongoing basis because there are new materials in different non-traditional printed formats being added to the collection every month. Another major reason was that the funding for the COIC project came directly from the HKADC. The mission of the HKADC is to promote the development of arts and arts education amongst the general public in Hong Kong, and . . . one of the HKADC's funding conditions was to make the COIC collection widely accessible to everyone in Hong Kong. If the COIC collection were kept at the University Library [at CUHK], its access would be restricted to the CUHK staff and students only. In that case, the public in Hong Kong would not be able to access the materials at all, and this would simply defeat the original purpose of establishing this COIC from HKADC's perspective. Moreover, a small number of our Centre's items are 3-dimensional artifacts and not traditional archive materials in printed format. Since the University Library is not a museum, they simply do not have the facilities and resources to look after these museum artifacts.

***PL: With reference to the COIC collection – what are the formats for a majority of the archive materials?***

MC: In terms of our Centre's collection, they are in a wide range of different formats—photo slides, printed photographs, videotapes, CDs, LP discs, performance posters, opera scores, opera synopsis, manuscripts, and interviews. In order to encourage access amongst our users, we have tried to make these materials available online as scanned images. In addition to that, we have also collected a small number of artifacts, e.g., a few stage props like footwear and opera costumes. As you can see,

our Centre's collection is rather multi-faceted.

***PL: So in other words, in addition to serving as an archive or information center, the COIC also takes up the role of a mini museum that collects 3-dimensional artifacts? If that is the case, do these 3-D objects create any problems for the Centre in terms of preservation, storage and cataloguing?***

MC: Yes, you are correct. But though we have such stage props and opera costumes in our collection, collecting 3-dimensional artifacts is not our main acquisition focus. In terms of 3-dimensional objects, we have collected no more than 10 items so far. In other words, our main focus still remains on the acquisition and preservation of the more traditional printed materials in 2-D format—opera advertisements, photographs, programme posters, notes, librettos, flyers, brochures, catalogues, and circulars.

***PL: Who are the majority of the COIC users? Are they mostly professors or students from CUHK Music Department? Or are they people from outside the CUHK? Do Chinese opera singers also come to find materials for research when they need to learn a new opera role?***

MC: I would say they are mostly academics or university students researching traditional Chinese operas. And I would say around 50% of our users come from CUHK, while the remaining 50% come from outside the University. But to my surprise, we do also receive quite a large number of overseas users, and they happen to be mostly Caucasian Americans, and not Chinese Americans. In fact, most of these overseas users come from the United States and Australia.

***PL: Can you describe the backgrounds of these COIC users from overseas?***

MC: They are usually researching something that is not directly related to Chinese opera. I think they are mostly people working in media or doing cross-media studies. For example, some of them might be working on some stage performance in their own country, and they want to compose a new piece of music with certain Chinese music elements. Since they do not know anything about Chinese opera, they therefore approach us to seek advice. In fact, some of these overseas users are anthropologists, and their main research interests are the early history and development of Chinese opera throughout different historical periods. Another popular topic amongst these overseas researchers is the history and design of

Chinese opera costumes, onstage makeup, and stage props.

***PL: Could you give examples of typical reference inquiries issued by the researchers or scholars from overseas?***

MC: Around 2010, I received an enquiry from an overseas researcher, a lecturer in music composition working on research for his Chinese Opera project, and he wanted to compose some singing dialogues that had Chinese music elements. And he told me that he specifically wanted traditional Cantonese opera. Because he himself did not know anything about Chinese opera, he brought to me one set of lyrics and asked me to verify it for him. As it turned out, it was a set of lyrics taken from a Kunqu opera (崑劇), but he mistook it for Cantonese opera. Since there are so many different styles of regional operas in China, he simply got confused. So he came to the Centre and asked me to pronounce the lyrics for him. That was how he further developed his ideas for his own music composition.

***PL: What is the size of the COIC collection?***

MC: We have about 1,500 titles of Chinese opera librettos, and close to 300 titles of books, as well as over 2,500 titles of audio-visual materials, including live opera recordings, DVDs, CDs, and cassette tapes. In addition to that, we also have a large collection of opera stage plots. An opera plot is a piece of paper with stage introductions for the actual performance that are usually posted backstage for all the performers and stage crew to follow. We have over 2,000 such opera plots, and many of them are already available in electronic format by intranet.

***PL: As you well know, there are many different styles of regional operas within China. So in addition to Cantonese opera, does the COIC also collect and archive other forms or styles of traditional operas from different regions in China?***

MC: Yes, according to the conditions set out by the fund / grant provider (HKADC), we also need to collect other styles of regional Chinese opera. However, since Hong Kong is within Canton province of China, and Cantonese opera is the main class of musical drama (traditional theatre arts) in the Canton area, it is only natural that the COIC collection is dominated by Cantonese-opera-related materials. But I should highlight that in addition to Cantonese opera, we also collect other styles of Chinese opera, such as Chaozhou opera (潮劇), Beijing / Peking opera (京劇), and Kunqu opera (崑劇).

***PL: Could you describe the highlights of the COIC collection?***

MC: One of the important archive collections of the Centre is the Yam Kim-Fai & Pak Suet-Sin Collection (任劍輝-白雪仙館藏), because they are original materials provided by the famous Cantonese opera singer Miss Pak Suet-sin (白雪仙). *The Flower Princess* (帝女花) is one of the most popular and influential Cantonese operas in Hong Kong, as well as overseas; and our Centre was very fortunate to archive Pak's original materials in the collection, including opera librettos, stage photos, and newspaper clippings—in fact, nearly all the original materials related to the opera *The Flower Princess*. In fact, a large number of such archive materials have already been digitized, so that users can access them online via their PCs, while the original materials have been archived in the Rare Book Room at the CUHK Main Library.

***PL: Do you actively go out to different performance venues to collect materials? Or you just wait for the materials to come to you instead?***

MC: This is a very good question. My job does not require me to go out to acquire materials, but out of my personal interest, I do go to different performance venues to collect the materials and add them to the collection as part of my daily routine. Throughout the years, I have developed very good relationships and networks with the people working in the Chinese opera business in Hong Kong. I sometimes just go to the performance venues to meet and socialize with them. So through our daily communication, I have a good idea of what is happening in the Chinese opera circle. Such close relationships and networks have no doubt facilitated collecting the archive materials for our Centre. I also derive a lot of joy from simply talking with the people working in the industry, and I think this is how our friendship kind of formed and developed over the years.

***PL: Which part(s) of your job at the COIC do you find most rewarding?***

MC: I am most happy when I am able to answer our users' enquiries satisfactorily or being able to help them locate their desired information materials. As you understand, we are not a 'proper archive'; we have neither the proper facilities nor the equipment to claim ourselves an archive. Judging from the limited resources and facilities available at this Centre, we could only call ourselves a 'reading room' with archive materials. Despite of such disadvantages, you will be surprised by the amount and scope of Chinese-opera-related materials that one could find at this



Centre.

For many undergraduate students, when they come to the COIC, most of them do not have any idea what they are looking for because they have had very little exposure to or almost no training and background in traditional Chinese opera. As a result, very often they cannot find any useful information for their assignments or projects. So one of my major responsibilities at the Centre is to assist our users to locate their desired information for their projects. I can tell you for sure that nothing would give me more joy and satisfaction than if what I do for these young people at the Centre could eventually lead them to develop an interest in our own local culture, and thereby slowly build a young audience for the future of Chinese opera.

In addition to serving as archivist / librarian / administrator for the Centre, I also see myself as a cultural messenger who bridges the gap between the traditional Chinese arts and the young generation in Hong Kong. Unlike Western classical music or European opera, Cantonese or traditional Chinese opera does not have a long history of research. [Research methods for] traditional Chinese opera are rather unorganized, contingent, and fragmented. Some scholars might even describe [its traditions] as being extremely 'organic' or 'hybrid'. So one of my core duties at the COIC is to guide our users to navigate through such hybrid treatments of information to look for their desired materials.

***PL: Since you have been working for the COIC for quite a long time as an administrator of this Centre, can you tell me if you are currently facing any technical difficulties or challenges?***

MC: Usually, when you ask about challenges faced by libraries, archives or information centres, I think most of them would tell you that their challenges or difficulties are related to either lack of manpower or funding shortage. But for me, the problem or main challenge lies with the core values of the people in Hong Kong. I mean the societal values or attitudes towards traditional Chinese culture amongst the public in Hong Kong, including both traditional Chinese music and Chinese opera. The issue lies in the fact whether people value traditional Chinese culture as an important asset or cultural heritage of Hong Kong. This is the most crucial question and also the origin of our problems.

I think the success of the archive is a collaborative effort of everybody in the society—regular citizens, government officials, arts administrators, researchers and

academics, as well as the people working in the performing arts circle—everyone needs to work together and support each other and get directly involved in organizing and participating in conferences, talks, and exhibitions to promote Chinese opera, so that it would not become an obsolete or dying art form. The role and responsibility of preserving and promoting Chinese opera as a cultural tradition should be shared by everyone of us in Hong Kong, and should not be placed merely on the COIC. Although we have the resources and the expertise here at the COIC, people must understand that what we could do alone is not enough.

***PL: So are you saying that traditional Chinese opera is underappreciated in Hong Kong? Why do you think that is the case? Do you think it is because the cultural norms, values, meanings, and symbols that Chinese traditional opera is based on are thought to be outdated, and seem to have not much relevance to the modern-day society in Hong Kong?***

MC: No, it is never outdated! The way to perform Chinese Operas is traditional while the core value of performing arts itself is contemporary and inspiring.

***PL: If it is not outdated, why you think Chinese opera is failing to attract the young generation in Hong Kong?***

MC: Oh! That is a big question. Why did I say Chinese opera is underappreciated in Hong Kong? I think it is because when you review the funding process for the research and promotion of Chinese opera in Hong Kong, there is almost no formal cultural policy issued by the local Government to support the development of this traditional Chinese art form under an ongoing basis. In Hong Kong, we do not have any central cultural organization that is devoted to the long-term preservation and promotion of Chinese opera and education about it.

As you probably know, many traditional art forms are facing either direct or indirect threats to their survival, regardless of their place of origin. Traditional Chinese opera used to be a very popular form of entertainment and is definitely of high literary and cultural values. Unfortunately, the local Hong Kong Government is undetermined about promoting this traditional art form with any solid and effective or appropriate long-term plans or policies.

***PL: [Based on your experience of] working for the COIC for 8 years, do you see any changes in terms of information-seeking behaviours or the information***

***needs amongst the users?***

MC: I myself have not witnessed any major differences. Though more and more people make enquiries via electronic means such as emails and facebook, it seems that traditional ways (in person, by phone, or by fax) are more popular and effective. Most of the research questions received at the COIC are related to the early history of Chinese opera, such as the costumes and onstage makeup for opera singers. And the one very 'hot' research topic amongst our young users is, *"Is Chinese opera facing a decline both in terms of governmental support and audience appreciation figures?"* Other research questions frequently asked by students in Hong Kong are, *"How can we revive traditional Chinese opera in Hong Kong?"* and *"How can we popularize traditional Chinese opera?"*

***PL: Is there anything else you wish to add before closing this interview?***

MC: To my knowledge, there are no other central archives like the COIC that has such a strong concentration of archival materials related to traditional Chinese opera. Even in Mainland China, they do not have such centralized information centres that are devoted to the preservation of archival materials related to this traditional art form. Although the COIC has a very rich and a rather comprehensive archive collection, there is still a lot of room for improvement, in terms of the Centre's operations and its facilities.

I remember one time when a senior citizen came to visit our Centre, he expressed to me his utmost disappointment when he discovered that the COIC is no more than just a large reading room filled with opera scores and books. The reason why he was so disappointed was because he came with the expectation that the OCIC (in terms of collection size, environments, user areas, displays, and facilities) would be similar to that of the Hong Kong Heritage Museum.<sup>4</sup> I can never forget what he said directly to me on that day, *"Wow! This Archive is so small! It is so small that it has only books and nothing else!"* He very much wanted to see Chinese opera costumes and other fancy stage props at our Centre. Unfortunately, nothing here at the Centre could satisfy him that day. I was very both upset and frustrated by his disappointment.

Because of the political separation from Communist China, Hong Kong is in fact a

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<sup>4</sup> Hong Kong Heritage Museum – Homepage. Available at:  
<http://www.heritagemuseum.gov.hk/eng/attractions/attractions.aspx>

unique place for conducting scholarly research on history and our local cultural heritage, because Hong Kong allows much greater freedom for political expression, artistic creation and scholarly research. Moreover, we are able to apply the more modern Western concepts and techniques to preserve these archival materials that represent such an important part of our own local heritage.

Traditional Chinese opera does not gain enough recognition and support from the public in Hong Kong. Government funding for supporting the ongoing development and education of such an art form is very limited and 'ad-hoc', i.e., without any solid and long-term policies. In terms of expertise, compared with other Western art forms, the people who have the knowledge and are capable of doing research or teaching in this field in Hong Kong are also very small in number. Despite such disadvantages and unfortunate circumstances, being able to successfully establish the COIC in Hong Kong is already a 'miracle' on its own.

I think it would be good if we could learn from the other Chinese music archives in Taiwan, as the Taiwanese Government has established several state-funded resources and institutes for supporting education and research on traditional Chinese opera, such as the National Repository of Cultural Heritage (國家文化資料庫)<sup>5</sup> and the National Centre for Traditional Arts (國立傳統藝術中心)<sup>6</sup>. Such institutions in Taiwan receive a generous amount of funding and support from the Central Government and Ministry of Culture to organize all sorts of activities and programmes to ensure the ongoing popularity and survival of traditional Chinese culture and art forms. Of course Taiwan is very different from Hong Kong, in terms of its population size, cultural atmosphere, and the amount of funding resources available. Despite that, we could still borrow ideas from them, since they are doing such a good job in preserving this traditional art form.

Although the COIC already possesses a rather rich archive collection, but the main questions / challenges shall remain as:

- *How to encourage the academics, researchers, opera lovers, university or even secondary school students to make good use of the Centre's collection*
  
- *For the COIC, how to effectively acquire and activate the materials on an ongoing, long-term basis*

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<sup>5</sup> National Repository of Cultural Heritage – Homepage. Available at: <http://nrch.moc.gov.tw/ccahome/>

<sup>6</sup> National Centre for Traditional Arts (國立傳統藝術中心) - Homepage. Available at: [http://www.ncfta.gov.tw/ncfta\\_ce/main/index.aspx](http://www.ncfta.gov.tw/ncfta_ce/main/index.aspx)

There is no tradition of Chinese opera practitioners and artists donating their personal belongings to a museum or archive before they pass away; mostly they want their personal belongings to be cremated with them, and this is basically the tradition. Given the limited manpower and resources available at the COIC, we simply do not have the time and manpower to go out to acquire everything that is available out there.

As small-scale as it may seem, COIC is a pioneer in collecting, preserving, cataloguing, analyzing and promoting the historical and cultural heritage of Chinese traditional theatre arts that all of us ought to be proud of. The COIC functions more than just a storeroom for a static collection of cultural archival materials for sheer entertainment purposes. It serves as a 'cultural hub' that offers endless possibilities, possibilities that include allowing us to better understand our own cultural past, as well as providing sources of inspiration for new and contemporary artistic endeavors. It is hoped that the COIC could continue to serve as a central repository for preserving, as well as promoting the documentation of, our cultural heritage of traditional Chinese theatre arts.

Photo 1. Main Entrance of the Chinese Opera Information Centre (COIC)

