

*Biopower of Artists: Training Logics of Cantonese Opera as Cultural Heritage
in Hong Kong*

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Abstract

We live, according to Foucauldian theorists, in a power relations, where we understand our individual opportunities and limitations as such an insightful way to open up the problem of self, with which to afford people in constant productive positions with practical knowledge in survival. How do artists be subjected for disciplinary in the politics of art sustainability? In what way artists are being trained to rationalize dominate discourse of new knowledge for sustainable development? With what consequences for the performing art knowledge system when huge amount of government fund is flowing in? These questions set a framework of analysis in the Cantonese Operatic art industry in Hong Kong, and its current institutional changes to teacher-student relationship in tertiary education. Along with the development of Foucauldian studies, Nikolas Rose attempts to analysis power relationship in a way to revitalize the creative and active life by “governing at a distance”. This research aims to shed light on this arm’s length governing concept in the power relationship between the government, the realm of discipleship, the new educational system and their trained artists. This paper found that the younger generations of artists are subjected to be “saviours” and "experts" for the fading Chinese heritage yet remain half-fledged as far as concerned by the industry. At the time when the traditional group is resisting by the emerging artists, power is reasserting itself through the ‘modernized’ ideals of knowledge that render 'incapacitated' experts on subsidies, hindering the sustainable development of the tradition heritage.

Keywords: Heritage Management, Performing Art, Biopower

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Introduction

When it comes to heritage art, we tend to assume that the sustainable development gets worse as the arts industry is lack of government funding for conservation. Our heritage art, especially performing art suffers from business failures as the cost of artist and production keep rising for live performance. This is the Baumol's theory of cost disease, stressing that the rise of wages in live performers cannot produce more shows in the given time, so problematic so that the inflation of ticket price fails to catch up with the rise of production cost. Due to the limitation of mass production technically, government support is essential and crucial for its sustainable development. But that's not the case for everyone. This research includes observation and interview data analysis that can inform political economy and its funding mechanism to respond to heritage art management in Cantonese opera.

Scholars have been studying the opportunities and constraints of government interventions, and I would like to share insights in an emerging group of artist in the old art form of Cantonese opera. Most research on performing arts as cultural heritage for conservation and management in the past decade focused on the facilitation of participatory practices (Diettrich, 2015) , performing arts heritage for cultural tourism (Man-U, 2019), changes of performing arts heritage genres (Creutzenberg, 2019), performing art in heritage sites (Kelvin Ka Hou Leong, 2022), it's not capturing the full spectrum of what is happening in the risk of performing arts as cultural heritage – skills and knowledge. I instead to ask how has political support of systematic pedagogy of Cantonese opera required the price of integrated/complete knowledge about artists? In line with the inquiry on cost disease theory, institutionalization of heritage arts education, and government intervention with the governing tools of public funding, this research aims to shed light on what is so special about skills and knowledge of Cantonese operatic artists in the rupture of logics of training system and institutional rules.

In his lecture series of 1977-1978 *Security, Territory, Population*, Foucault questioned “‘how to govern oneself, how to be governed, by whom should we accept to be governed, how to be the best possible governor?’” (Foucault, 2007, p. 88). His inquiries set the momentum for a rationalization process for this study amidst of developmental discourse of heritage arts sustainability in the period of Hong Kong de-colonialization at the turn of the 21st century. In his process of investigation, Foucault began with biopower that consists of two basic modes: the disciplining of the individual person and the regulatory control of the community (Hardt, & Negri, 1998, p. 313; Foucault, 1978, p. 139). The former is expanded to educational system of Cantonese opera for continuous productivity. It affects artists' actions in various levels of adaptability in foreseeable adversity, where the fading Chinese heritage culture was emphasized. The latter is about the construction of discourse in the system of arts education. Giddens argues that people have ‘tacit’ or ‘practical’ knowledge about foreseeable risks; this recognises the implicit knowledge people already have about power and social realities (Giddens, 1996, p. 162). Foucault made it clear that “the population is not conceived of as a collection of subjects of right, nor as a set of hands making up the workforce; it is analysed as a set of elements that, form part of the general system of living being, and on the other hand, may provide a hold for concerted interventions” (Foucault, 2007, p. 297). As such, the behavioral changes between the emerging and existing artists are discussed to explain resistance and conflicts that hinder the sustainable development of Cantonese opera. For Rose, the major problem for advanced government in the 21st century is to balance between state security and subject's autonomy in the government-society relations; “enabling state and responsible citizens, based upon the strengthening of the natural bonds of community could settle the issue” (Rose, 1999, p. 186). The discussion concludes that the mechanisms of

security for heritage conservation and the construction of “talent pool” for productivity is misplaced. It results in a tactic intervention that challenge the heritage practice of production (technology of production) and results in the devastation of artistic skills and legendary repertoires.

Biopower in Arts Education

Prior to the sovereignty change in 1997, the British colonial government initiated a cultural democratization effort in the 1970s, vigorously promoting performing arts, especially those of Western origin. Cantonese opera was not put on the altar, excluded from systematically development in the public funding mechanism. At the turn of the century, the Hong Kong government started to focus on Chinese arts and culture, aiming to address the legacy of tradition opera, its challenges of succession and audience decline in particular. This institutional disciplinary initiated by the statutory bodies of government extended far end of the social network through micro-mechanisms. There were three apparatuses in this discussion; the Urban Council, the municipal council in Hong Kong responsible for public service in Hong Kong during the colonial era, the Arts Development Council subsidised "Cantonese Opera Training Courses" for community groups in 1996 (The Chinese Artists Association of Hong Kong), and the Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts launched a diploma program in 1999. After all, the authority of the Education Bureau included Cantonese opera in the school's "Music Curriculum Guide" in 2003. They have incorporated traditional opera into formal education with an attempt to "audience expansion". The institutional system of reward and punishment followed through the government's Cantonese Opera Advisory Committee & Cantonese Opera Development Fund established to invest resource in “talent tool”. provide funding resources to operatic activities. The government moved from descriptive policy to prescriptive one in the perennial debate about cultivation for Chinese culture, subsequently refrained the traditional opera for sustainability from the threat of modernization.

However, the policy's effectiveness has been less than satisfactory. According to the official report prior to the social distancing measures were implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic (Hong Kong Arts Development Council, 2018), the audience for traditional opera programs is mostly composed of retirees, with the lowest proportion of teenagers aged 15 to 24. In terms of talent cultivation, both professional Cantonese opera schools in the private sector and the School of Chinese Opera at the Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts have been facing a general shortage of enrolments (Hong Kong Audit Commission, 2016). Renowned veteran artist Franco Yuen Siu-fai candidly commented on the government's approach, and said, "too much public funding, but they don't understand the industry (Leung, 2020, p. 54)" pointing out that the generous subsidies have exceeded the industry's capacity and resulted in negative consequences. In other words, the government's substantial funding support drags the debates into a deeper state of chaos, whereas inheritance and conservation of the Cantonese opera have become a thorny issue widely discussed in the industry and academia.

Practical Knowledge and Discipleship

Classical ballet and Italian opera in the West and Kabuki and Cantonese opera in the East are known for its charismatic group of the arts. According to Weber, charismatic group works and produces in the situation that is total antithesis of “routine,” of organized social institutions and relations. Charismatic authority is formally contrasted with “rational” authorities (Weber,

1947, p. 332). Interestingly, we found that the emerging charismatic group in Cantonese opera had a strong desire to transform the routine of industrial discipline to the more institutional framework, where efficiency, company competence and political economy become systemic needs to resist the “rigid” teaching and disciplined practice in master-disciple relationship, where life-long and in-group commitments are in a tight-knit. In the face of existing professionals, this emerging charismatic group ages 30 to 40 believe in government interventions and rules are the best way to safeguard cultural heritage arts. Power of institutionalism thus runs through the knowledge system, and the generation of a desire to conform to the training mechanism that this knowledge establishes. Both the old and the new charismatic groups have loyalty in heritage art, but striking vision differences in their exigencies of the disciplinary authority.

The public subsidy for young upcoming artists has an effect of destruction of heritage regulations. Michel Foucault coined the term ‘biopower’ to refer to “the ways in which power manifests itself in the form of daily practices and routines through which individuals engage in self-surveillance and self-discipline, and thereby subjugate themselves (Pylypa, 1998)”. When discipleship is being ‘modernized’ for the social and cultural in the discourse of heritage conservation, the new training logic that turns young artists to occupy main roles in classic repertoires shortly after a few school years manifests the new training practice in academia is inclusive and “amiable”. In this respect Mr. Danny Li Chi-kei, a prominent performer and renowned artistic director/producer, shared his concerns:

Opportunities come easier now because few people learn. As a rule, everyone starts from a low level, and only those who are capable are qualified to rise to the leading role step by step. Even Mr. Lam Ka-sing Lam, the Cantonese opera master, diligently practiced with fellows nine hours a day, six days a week. There is a problem with the learning attitude of new students now, and I am very worried about it. (Barwo Cantonese Opera Artists Oral History Series III, p. 68)

Discipleship forms an exclusive group and artist’s identity is given by the masters only because through which the disciples are compensated by unlimited liability in the master-disciple relation. Life-long commitments in the established skills and aesthetics are altogether being challenged by the new elite identity in social relation, and the willingness of young individuals to pursue Cantonese opera as a lifelong career has significantly declined, unless the government provides security by the establishment of a signature opera company for Hong Kong. The obsession with the big troupe has referred to the Metropolitan Opera House in New York or The Paris Opera in France. They train themselves to be target oriented mentally and working with limited liability practically, in such a tactic to survive in the unforeseeable future of prospects, where they see themselves being “suffered” from despotism and hierarchy. As the only mass buyer of operatic productions in town, Government becomes far more accountable in a bureaucratic system, largely because they are won over the clear rules and procedural rationality in it to actualize their ideal ‘modernized’ heritage of traditional opera.

Discourse of Regulatory by Charismatic Groups

With increased government investment and the subsequent expansion of on-job performing fee, new emerging artists from academia can defeat the artists in once major roles in the plays. Applying Foucault’s rationalization process in power relation where power and resistance interplay, it could be argued that at the time when the traditional charismatic group

is resisting by the young bled, power is reasserting itself through the 'modernized' ideals of knowledge that render 'incapacitated' experts. In other words, the institutional changes take special care of new faces, thus has resulted from the creation of four forms of discourse.

First, unsustainability governance for the arts. In order to meet top-down goals to construct the 'talent pool' in a short period of time, the society is shaped and channeled by the short-cut training technology, it is manifested in the changing structure of production. On the contrary, most of the troupes compete with each other and flock to hiring new stars for on-job performance allowance to reduce cost, because the "new stars" perform on government allowance. Prominent artist and Professor Franco Yuen Siu-fai's observes the quality of performances has suffered, "some actors are standing in their wages, not in the play." Young artists are hired more often to perform, inducing to them rush between jobs, sacrificing rehearsal time and sometimes performing without adequate preparation. An artist-informant on second rank, similar to the role of soloist in the classical ballet, details her experience in our interview,

I have tried rehearsing with them, and the rehearsal time is not only long but, when their abilities are not sufficient for leading roles, it often falls on experienced individuals like me (the second-rank artist, similar to the soloists in the classical ballet) to accommodate them, simplifying acting movement to a level they can handle. If the government heavily subsidizes newcomers, it not only neglects the growth of individuals but also impedes their progress.

This mismatch between the quantity and quality of performances echoes the phenomenon of audiences being "scared away" from attending Cantonese opera performances.

Second, the newly bled artists perceive the Cantonese operatic art as cultural heritage rather than show business, giving them a powerful sense of class consciousness in an elite class. Cantonese opera is now often described as a 'heritage' in so far as cultural identity and high-end status are acquired, and social inclusion is considered to be achieved through participation in Cantonese opera. In an interview, Paris Wong Hau-wai, a graduate of the Film programme of the Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts (APA), expressed that he continued learning Cantonese opera at the APA, hoping to become main female character through studying the degree programme. Mitche Choi, a graduate from the University College London with a degree in Linguistics. She aimed to become professional male character after studying at the Academy.

On the contrary, another informant who trained in traditional methods expressed, "nowadays, newcomers don't start from the bottom. The academies train them in major classic plays, focusing on roles centred around Dan and Sheng (leading female and male characters). They graduate after learning for several years. This differs from our apprenticeship system, where both main and supporting roles are trained. Comparatively, they have fewer performance opportunities. They are not willing to take on leading roles, neglecting to learn other secondary roles, and don't see the necessity of starting from the bottom." The education and promotion of Chinese heritage is now regarded as a self-evident manifestation of loyalty and roles of preservers, but increasingly it is the enticing beeline of heritage management, aided by the iconic status.

Biopower refers to a form of political support or cultural policies in this study that revolves around young artists to entail four truth discourses about the essential character of "savior"

for Cantonese opera in the new century. First, the Cantonese opera as cultural heritage is part of the political economy. Strategies for government intervention upon the industry has turned rational. Second, the sustainable development of Cantonese opera needs scientific management and efficiency in respond to the needs of global discourse of sustainable development for heritage performing art, instead of “letting it dies” in "action lag". Two critical aspects involved respectively are what degree the artists should be regulated, and by whom they should be disciplined. Third, master-disciple relation is subjected as a key issue to be disciplined in its training procedure and learning habit, as such, this institutional change allows the new science of heritage management come into exist. Fourth, the younger generations of artists are subjected to be “saviors” and "experts" for the fading Chinese heritage yet remain half-fledged as far as concerned by the industry. Finally, new charismatic group works on themselves to gain credential from the academia may have to be equipped with greater competencies in the discipleship to sustain the identity formulation and technology of self.

The political support of systematic pedagogy of Cantonese opera required the price of complete knowledge about artists, I see the new charismatic group as central to our understanding of heritage conservation of tradition culture of art, even so the enabler of the aesthetic intelligence and artistry. This perspective can be said to resemble the concept of knowledge capitalism and adaptive skills not limited to performing productions but the restoration technology for practical knowledge in forms of oral history, performance archive, records of affective interpretation and analysis delivery by the traditional masters, who are growing old in the rupture of logics of training system and institutional rules.

Conclusion

At the turn of the century, the Hong Kong government initially focused on education and training, aiming to address the challenges of succession and audience decline in the traditional opera. The government intervenes at the distance through heavy load of public subsidy for young and new artists has an effect of ‘incapacitated’ expertise, it is even more extensive to influence traditional regulations, rules and practices in training and identity formulation. The industry sees the institutional changes as government’s special care for new faces. In midst of the elite class consciousness with systematic education and prestige social status, emerging artists have more short-term performance opportunities in major roles and plays than disciples from the apprenticeship system, yet being excluded from the heritage custom and charismatic kinship. The creative vibe and process for heritage conservation is being shape to embrace a combinatorial view of traditional heritage art, new artists with adaptable skills look for various elements to achieve “newness in legacy” to demonstrate the configurations of skills and knowledge that not only fall on aesthetic culture but the creativity of tradition. In the power and knowledge relation of performing art, the new skills as such lead and shape the audience’s expectation to a broaden horizon.

The heritage art industry takes on new cultural traits, behaviour patterns, educational measures, and creates new trainer-learner structures in social as a result. As Foucault suggested knowledge is largely produced to create a type of group (body) for the social needs. They way Foucault put it is the new charismatic group of artists is socially constructed to safeguard the heritage art conservation process. The regulation is part of a long evolution on creativity in the relation of knowledge and subsidized market that allow flexibility “between elements in order to make up new beings, bodies, concepts, products, or things” (Bartels & Bencherki, 2013, p.1). The question of what makes the training logic rational is

central to heritage art management. The seeming fragmentation between the new and the existing artists are both versatile makers of the traditional legacy. Paradoxically, the heavy load of public subsidy demands for sustainability risks destroying its breeding grounds.

Despite of the increase of academic trained artists, who have strong desire and interest in leading roles only, affect the development of heritage tradition, while the secondary and minor roles in the plays are being deserted. For these reasons, reduction of big scale production of traditional repertories will be apparent in the foreseeable future. Meanwhile the increase of small-scale production with simplified version of traditional repertories come into exist. The increase of operatic workshops and training courses for amateurs is conceivable on the community level can be expected to sustain role of heritage artists, thus entrepreneurial skills for small and mid-size troupes are an essence for sustainability.

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