Traditional opera and young people: Cantonese opera as personal development

Wai Han Lo
Hang Seng Management College, Siu Lek Yuen, Shatin, N.T., Hong Kong

ABSTRACT
Cantonese opera, one of the regional opera forms in China, flourishes mainly in the southern province of Guangdong. By exploring the culture of Cantonese operatic singing, this study explores the role of traditional music in the lives of young people. Ethnography was chosen as the method of data collection and to describe the findings of the study. The rituals and core values of Cantonese operatic singing lessons were identified. The findings showed that musical tastes not only have sociability and performative components, they also have physical components. Young people construct the rituals of learning Cantonese opera as an important context for their personal development.

Introduction
Musical taste is important to young people in many ways. It provides relaxation and helps them search for independence and develop social networks (Brown & Hendee, 1989). Certain studies have suggested that children's participation in leisure activities and recreation contributes to their positive development (e.g. King et al., 2003; Larson & Verma, 1999). Different notions of self are constructed when people engage in different behaviour and activities. Leisure and entertainment-based activities provide opportunities to construct a sense of place in the world (Harris, 2001).

A wide array of studies has viewed cultural taste as an important factor in social life (e.g. López-Sintas & Katz-Gerro, 2005). Others examine the role of cultural taste in creating social networks (Lizardo, 2006), forming identity (Côté, 1996; Howard, 2000) and maintaining group boundaries (Lamont & Molnár, 2002). Bourdieu (1984) observed that musical taste 'exemplifies the complex mix of symbolism, materiality and embodiment in cultural taste', (p. 247) and it is an important indicator of cultural tastes in general (Peterson, 2005).

Music plays an important role in many young people, and there is also evidence that personal development is mediated by cultural tastes (Broh, 2002), however, the available data for after-school extracurricular activities is sparse and often flawed (Zaff et al., 2003), and previous studies of musical participation outside school are often bound with popular music (e.g. Lull, 1992; Smith, 2009). In contrast, this study examines the potential of cultural theory to recognize traditional music cultures as an important leisure form for personal growth of young people.
Traditional music is a valuable asset for local communities, an inheritance of continuity with the past (Tomlinson, 1999). However, traditional music lost its popularity in the face of foreign culture and modernity. This raises concerns among many scholars (e.g. Lo, 2015; Yu, 2001). Cantonese operatic singing is such example. Cantonese opera is one of the regional operas in China, and flourishes mainly in the Pearl River Delta, in the southern province of Guangdong, one of the most densely populated areas of China (Yung, 1989). Cantonese opera and operatic singing is very popular in Hong Kong in 1950s and 1960s (Li, 2010). From the 1970s, the rise of ‘pop music’ led to a sharp decline in the popularity of Cantonese opera. Using the ethnographic method of participant observation, this study can provide some insights into how this particular music genre contributes to the development of young people.

**Literature review**

**Musical tastes and young people**

There is a critical relationship between musical taste, and social network and personal development. According to Bourdieu’s (1984), musical taste can be conceptualized as ‘the outcome of one’s location in the stratified social system, and musical tastes reinforce that position’. Teachers, family and friends play a significant role in the development of one’s musical taste (e.g. Bourdieu, 1984; Bryson, 1996; Coulangeton & Lemel, 2007). Musical taste is important for an individual to negotiate social situations and one’s relations. It helps individuals to maintain their relations (DiMaggio, 1987; Fiske, 1987). Individuals use musical taste to manage their personal images. It helps them to differentiate themselves from others or align themselves with others symbolically (Fiske, 1987; Peterson, 2005).

Musical tastes is an umbrella term which allows different group to find their symbolic shapes for their social and spiritual hopes and discontents, and it enables a shifting nature of individual’s musical preference and the essential fluidity of particular cultural groups. Under postmodern conditions, individuals are linked together via shared interests. These groupings are referred as ‘communities of interest’ (Rojek, 1995).

Such communities have presented unique characteristics with the onset of the postmodern age. Individuals are regarded as active consumers whose choices reflect their notions of self-identity. Leisure may bring together individuals who share common interests from a wide range of social backgrounds (Hetherington, 1992).

Musical taste is also important to young people in personal development. It provides relaxation and helps them search for independence and develop social networks (Brown & Hendee, 1989). Certain studies have suggested that children’s participation in leisure activities and recreation contributes to their positive development (King et al., 2003; Larson & Verma, 1999). Different notions of self are constructed when people engage in different behaviour and activities. Leisure and entertainment-based activities provide opportunities to construct a sense of place in the world (Harris, 2001).

To summarize, past studies have indicated that musical tastes are important for young people in personal development, maintaining social networks and presenting themselves. The above studies lead us to believe that there are dynamics of interactions between music, social relationships and personal development in young age. The following section examines how this dynamic interaction can be explored by analysing the rituals and cultures.

**Rituals, culture and musical tastes**

Ritual is a social phenomenon (Bocock, 1973). Cultural values and orders are maintained and reinforced via ritual practices (Collins, 2004). In other words, rituals tell individuals the boundaries of the world and of the morality. Turner (1969) states that individuals examine the reality through the framework rituals created. Rituals can be perceived as a form of communication. Individuals have to embed in a specific cultural context so that they can make sense of the meanings.

Goffman (1956/1967) focus on micro-level of the interaction in everyday life. He suggested that ritual is informal activity, which illustrates the way people acts have symbolic implications. Collins’s (2004)
stated that rituals serve a function of group consolidation. It facilitates enhancement of group solidarity and communication among group member. People experience mutual action and share common cultural values through rituals. The existing culture is created and reinforced. The analysis of ritual can help us to examine analysing how unified a group is, and how much commitment individuals have to the group. However, can we perceive Cantonese operatic singing lessons as ritual?

Collins (2004) believed that rituals can be seen almost everywhere and can be universally applied. Since the mid-nineteenth century and the advent of mechanization, more and more people have been freed from the previous constraints of household and work and are able to enjoy more leisure time. Modern societies are dominated by specifically created rituals, such as games, sporting events and performances. These activities provide the ritual solidarity that was previously provided by religion, warfare or political ceremony. This implies that leisure activities, including Cantonese operatic singing, can be understood as ritual, and the culture around those activities can be studied by using ritual analysis.

To conceptualize the culture around Cantonese operatic singing activities, I use the word culture in much the same way as Raymond Williams (1965), who suggested that culture is ‘a particular way of life which expresses certain meanings and values not only in art and learning, but also in institutions and ordinary behaviour.’ The analysis of culture, from such a definition, is ‘the clarification of the meanings and values implicit and explicit in a particular way of life, a particular culture’ (Hebdige, 1979, p. 6). In the eyes of Williams, culture is ‘a common process of participation in the creation of meanings and values’. Lum (1996) sees culture as ‘the way people derive meanings, values and significance through interaction. Since Cantonese operatic singing lessons embody an ongoing act of communication through which people produce, maintain and transform values, symbols and social relations in society and culture, the study of the singing lessons in the youth groups reveals how people construct, articulate and interpret the meanings of this musical activities.

Finally, past studies of ‘organizational culture’ helps us to address the question of how the participants of Cantonese operatic singing lessons can create, maintain, and change the value and culture of them. Deal and Kennedy (1982) suggested that organizational culture includes values, heroes, rituals, heroes and carriers. Values are the basic beliefs that form the heart of organizational culture. They determine how members define ‘success’, and inform members about the principles of the organization. Rituals show the members what kind of behaviour is expected of them. These are the routines of everyday life in the organization. The corporate values are disseminated around the organization with the help of ‘hero’ figures, or storytelling, by which ‘carriers’ spread the information effectively throughout the network.

The basic values form the core of the culture, while the rituals are there to tell the members what they should or should not do. Some members play the role of heroes, whereas others act as carriers to pass on the corporate values. Although a different type of organization, Cantonese operatic singing lessons also contain values and rituals, and the participants also take on different roles within the existing culture. Therefore, the concepts applied to organizational culture can also be applied in this study.

To summarize, both the analysis of rituals and studies of organizational culture help us to understand how these musical activities are organized and how this particular musical genre contributes to the personal development of youth group. The research question is as follows: how Cantonese operatic singing lessons provide young people with a means for personal development and maintaining social networks.

**Cantonese operatic singing in Hong Kong**

Cantonese opera is China regional opera (Yung, 1989). Cantonese operatic singing is very popular in Hong Kong in 1950s and 1960s (Li, 2010), however, Hong Kong’s cultural policies under the rule of the colonial government were seen as disseminated and vague. Hong Kong has been described as a cultural desert or a barren rock (Wong et al., 1997). In primary and secondary schools, music is put in second place. The teachers have little knowledge of Chinese traditional music, and there is little scope for young people to appreciate and understand this music, including Cantonese operatic singing (Yu, 2001). The ‘May Fourth Movement’, which condemned elitist Chinese art and culture as outdated, also
had a significant effect on intellectuals (Yu, 2001). As a result, Hong Kong people were greatly influenced by western modernization. Although folk art and music is still commonly practiced among Hong Kong people, (Ng, Ma & Lu, 2006), young people in particular lost confidence in traditional art and music (Yu, 2001; Zheng, 2011). Traditional Chinese culture was not regarded as ‘high culture’ (Ma, 2001), and the notion of class division with operatic music, in this case Cantonese operatic singing, is less applicable in Hong Kong context.

After the return of Hong Kong to China, the Hong Kong Government has supported and encouraged this traditional form of folk art, and it has gradually regained respect (Li, 2010). Recently, Cantonese opera has been added to the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. The Hong Kong Government has allocated more resources to promote both Cantonese opera and Cantonese operatic singing. The Cantonese Opera Advisory Committee (COAC) was set up in 2004 to advise the government on policies related to the development, preservation and promotion of Cantonese opera in Hong Kong. Cantonese opera has also been integrated into the school curriculum. As young people develop a broader aesthetic perspective, some become more interested in these singing practices.

Methodology

I selected two Cantonese operatic singing lessons for this study. I attended the two classes as participant observer on 12 occasions in total between March 2011 and May 2012. The author also took part of the performances of participants and their social gatherings. The two courses I selected are organized by the private sector and all of the participants are less than 18 years old, which allowed me to understand the music participation of young people. Class B is organized by a singing club. The teacher is experienced in teaching Cantonese operatic singing and was one of the first to organize classes for young people to learn Cantonese operatic singing in Hong Kong. The students were aged between 8 and 18.

The other course I selected is a Cantonese opera course and Cantonese operatic singing is part of the course, namely Class A. It is one of the most famous organizations for teaching children Cantonese opera and has been cited as an example in a textbook. The course has an age limit on participation and does not offer any courses for secondary students. Many novices joined this course to learn Cantonese operatic singing. Studying these two classes allows the author to interview both novices and experienced students (see Table 1).

Data were collected via interviews and via participant observation in the lessons, singing performance and other gatherings. Ethnography can help to engage children's views. Atkinson (2001) argued that ethnography opens up an opportunity to see children's life experience as being contextualized by the societies and culture in which they live. Children themselves are regarded as active participants, hence ethnography is important in the social study of childhood.

The face-to-face interviews were semi-structured and conducted. Follow-up interviews were conducted between March 2011 and May 2012. These interviews were tape recorded and transcribed. As the children were engaged as informants in the semi-structured interviews, I obtained the children’s, teachers’ and parents’ consent. The children were asked directly whether they wanted to be interviewed. The teachers and parents also noticed my presence and gave their consent for the interview. The interviews were usually conducted with the children alone so that the discussion was more private and there was no pressure from outside. From my observation, the informants felt comfortable and spoke freely in front of me. The medium of communication was Cantonese. In total, I interviewed 38 informants including 24 students, 2 teachers, 2 helpers and 10 parents.

Analysis of the findings

Three types of rituals

Three types of rituals were identified in this study. They are rituals of inquiry, of integration and of performance.
Rituals of inquiry refer to vocal and acting skills training. Most of the young people learnt not only Cantonese operatic songs, but also fighting moves and acting skills. All of the courses for young people, except for Class B, are Cantonese opera classes. Mr Chan, teacher of Class B, invited Mr Ho to teach the students basic fighting moves and hand movement skills in another session. The rituals of inquiry for young people included not only singing but also acting and movement. This is important because it is more than training, it is also about the internalization and incorporation of culture within bodily practices.

The training for young people mainly consisted of large group classes. The founder of Class A said she would not hold individual classes because they are too expensive for children and adolescents. She also said, ‘People hold individual practices because they can earn more money, but I want to develop their team spirit’. Chan, teacher of Class B, said, ‘Students seldom join the live practices, because it is too expensive for them. Students only join the individual practices before the performance’.

The large-class courses involve both singing practices and fight movement training. The courses help students to develop a team spirit and self-discipline and maintain a collective identity. The students are required to do the same movements repeatedly, so that the skills become internalized through repetition. However, the training involves more than internalizing skills, it also shapes students’ consensual beliefs. Brownell (1995) argued that training in sports is not simply about repeating movements, it may also shape consensual beliefs through bodily discipline. Training in Cantonese opera, which is also more than the repetition of practices, has the same effect. Bourdieu (1977, p. 72) believed that practices can be defined as the process by which the external is incorporated into the internal and the internal is objectified as the external. In this case, the expression of a person by a voice of power or authority may become the unconscious principles that determine their movement through repetition.

In the case of Cantonese opera classes, students are required to follow instructions otherwise they will be scolded by the teacher or banished from practicing. It is a relatively tough training; for example, the stretching exercises can cause pain and the students sometimes shouted painfully and loudly when

Table 1. Basic biographical information of the informants.

| Names | Age | Sex | Singing experience |
|-------|-----|-----|--------------------|
| Class A |
| A Shi 阿詩 | 4 | F | >1 years |
| A Hang 阿恒 | 6 | M | 1 years |
| A Zhi 阿芷 | 6 | F | 2 years |
| A Nan 藍藍 | 9 | F | 5 years |
| Si Si 思思 | 9 | F | >1 years |
| Tian Tian 田田 | 9 | F | 2 years |
| A Feng 阿風 | 11 | F | 1–2 years |
| A Jing 阿靜 | 10 | F | 4 years |
| Xin Xin 欣欣 | 4 | F | 1 year |
| Yin 愜 | 6 | F | 6 years |
| Shuo 荊 | 8 | F | 3 |
| Le Le 樂樂 | 5 | F | >1 years |
| Qi Qi 琪琪 | 6 | F | 3 years |
| Yi Yi 一一 | 4 | M | >1 years |
| A Xin 阿辛 | 7 | M | 3 |
| A Da 阿達 | 6 | M | 1 |
| Class B |
| Hai 海 | 14 | F | 4 years |
| A Yi 阿儀 | 8 | F | 3–4 years |
| A Yun 阿雲 | 13 | F | 7 years |
| A Lun 阿倫 | 13 | M | 1 year |
| Ming 明 | 13 | M | 7 years |
| A Wen 阿雯 | 17 | F | 7 years |
| Cai Zai 蔡仔 | 18 | M | 10 years |
| John | 10 | M | >1 year |

*To respect the right of my informants’ to confidentiality, all names are pseudonymous.*
doing them. Indeed, some parents, such as Xin Xin’s mother, told me they let their children join the course because students develop endurance and self-discipline through the training process.

When I asked the students why they participated in the training, many of them told me they enjoyed it, even though it is tough. Qi Qi told me she enjoyed practicing with other classmates and she had many good friends there. Shan said, ‘I would like to learn more fight moves. It is interesting’. Tian Tian, meanwhile, believed that she learnt about Chinese culture though the training, although the concept of Chinese culture is rather ambiguous. When I asked ‘What is Chinese Culture?’ she answered with hesitation, ‘I can learn Cantonese pronunciation rules in the class; this is part of Chinese culture’.

Through the training, the students also developed a sense of group identity. Students in both classes were required to carry out the same set of movements in the skill-learning sessions. Students in Class A were also required to dress in uniform. In Class B, the students in the acting skills training sessions had to dress in uniform, although those who had joined only to practice vocal skills did not.

**Rituals of integration**

In the case of Class B, examples of rituals of integration are the Chinese New Year carnival and the master’s birthday celebration. The students seldom had lunch or dinner together after class, although they sometimes had tea in the break between classes because two classes would last for more than 4 h. During the tea break, they made jokes with one another and shared their food and drink. A sense of closeness can be created by eating and chatting together. Teacher Chan had many students of different ages. She held Chinese New Year carnival every year, and members of different classes joined the event together. This can bind divergent groups into a larger community. Hai shared that she enjoyed Chinese New Year carnival as it was full of fun and enjoyment. She had met many senior apprentices at the gatherings and they played together. It was a great time for her and she would like to have more such gatherings.

The students’ parents also had tea gatherings during every practice, which helped them to get to know one another. One of the parents told me they had quite close relationships because their children had been coming to the classes for a long time, and the parents always held gatherings.

Class A seldom had lunch and dinner gatherings, nor did they have Chinese New Year carnival, a master’s birthday celebration, or annual celebrations. However, they did have tea gatherings to celebrate after a performance. Such gatherings served as an informal celebration, and the teachers, the leader of a Cantonese opera club in China, or other famous Cantonese opera artists were invited to give a speech. I joined such a gathering once, and the speakers gave the students encouragement and positive feedback. The speaker also praised them for successfully transmitting their traditional heritage. It was an exhilarating moment that created a sense of satisfaction and cultural identity for the students.

**Rituals of performance**

The interplay between the singers and the crowd creates a shared enthusiasm. The subjective ritual experience provides moments of collective emotion (Collins, 2004). In the case of Class B, most of the students either participated in the operatic performance or the operatic singing performance, ranging from music performances in the city hall or school, to singing competitions and concerts every year.

The students in Class B always dressed in traditional costumes with traditional heavy make-up in both operatic performance and operatic singing performance. They sometimes also dressed in student uniform or formal dress with lighter make-up when performing Cantonese operatic singing. I attended a performance in which A Yun and Ming performed a duet on opera day. When they performed, A Yun and Ming became the center of attention. Before the performance started, there was a hush of attention. The audience clapped enthusiastically after the performance finished. Their excited friends and family members reached out to take photos of them. Those passing by also shared their excitement and some even stopped and asked to take a picture with them. It took half an hour until everyone had had a chance to take a photo with them.

As the students in Class A only performed Cantonese opera, they dressed in traditional costumes. I attended on of their performances. When the actors made a curtain call, the parents of all of the actors came up on stage. The parents shared their enthusiasm, pleasure and excitement at that moment.
Dressing up in traditional costumes also inspired others to learn Cantonese opera, because the opera artists look great in some of the students’ eyes. Yiyi said he loved to perform and thought he looked cool when he dressed up. The traditional costumes and make-up are also appealing to parents and their friends. When I attended the performance of Class A, I heard the person sat next to me say, ‘Wow! They look so cute and pretty.’

The performances are usually arranged by teachers. Participation is voluntary and the students have to find extra money to buy the costumes and join the practices. Because the cost is high, the teachers of both courses usually applied for subsidies from the government. Teacher Lee and teacher Chan of Class A and Class B told me they did not earn much from teaching the adolescents and organizing activities for them. Teacher Chan said, ‘The cost of organizing the activities is very high, but I can’t ask them to chip in much. I always have to bear the cost myself. I just want to give a helping hand in transmitting this traditional heritage.’ Teacher Lee said, ‘The funding from government is not much. I wish the performances could make up the balance. I can’t make money from this kind of performance, but I keep organizing them because students can learn a lot from performing.’

The performances of Class A and Class B were quite different. Teacher Chan, teacher of Class B, chose a traditional text for a Cantonese opera or operatic song performance. In the case of Class A, Teacher Lee wrote a new script for almost every performance. Otherwise, she reused one of her own scripts.

Teacher Lee said, ‘Cantonese opera is an excellent form of arts and culture, but people don’t know how to appreciate it. The rhythm and the pace of operatic music are too slow compared to modern music. The scripts of the plays are all about historical stories which they cannot relate to. The stories are not directly relevant to our daily lives. It is too difficult for people to understand the contents of such plays’. She wrote new songs with faster rhythms for student performances, and she wrote a new script talking about having the right attitude to work and school life, rather than writing historical stories about love between men and women, or national hatred. She believed it would influence both the parents and friends of the students, because they could understand the contents of the script. Nevertheless, she stressed that the performance was still a kind of Cantonese opera because it involved all of the important components. She was just trying to introduce new elements into Cantonese opera to make it more appealing to people in modern society.

According to Collins (2004), a mutual emotional experience and a common focus of attention are crucial elements for successful rituals. When I attended the performance of Class B, most of the audience was elders or older adults. The audience was humming songs together and gave a big round of applause after the performance. Most of the audience for Class A’s performances was children and young adults. They actively responded to the play, sometimes bursting into laughter and sometimes clapping loudly together. I asked Ming, a student in Class B, whether he would invite his friends to see his performance. ‘No!’ he said, ‘They don’t understand it (Cantonese opera). I seldom ask them to see my performance. I’m afraid they would get really bored.’

I asked the students of Class A the same question, but they responded differently. For instance, A da told me he had asked his friends and teachers to come and watch his performance and his friends found it very interesting. They were happy when they watched the show. He felt great because his teachers had praised him for his performance.

The ritual of performance for Class A is more appealing to children, adolescents and young adults, whereas the ritual of performance for Class B is more appealing to elders. Because new elements have been introduced to the performances of Class A, it is easier for a young audience to develop a mutual focus and common emotion. Although the elderly had listened to traditional Cantonese opera since they were young, they were more receptive to the latter.

The above findings show that the rituals serve the six functions: (a) they maintain identity and emotional attachment for the students; (b) they fulfill the task of training through different types of practice and allow students to implement their pursuit of artistic and musical knowledge; (c) they provide the students with the experience of being the center of attention, which creates a sense of satisfaction; (d) they maintain the group’s hierarchy and roles; (e) they can be used for educational purposes and (f) cultural connections. Students learn self-discipline through the repetition of practices and also
develop a sense of cultural identity through explicit orientation and speech. Not only did the students participate in the rituals, but their parents also engaged in the social interaction with other parents. The relationships between the students extend to the relationships between their parents.

The roles of members

To transmit the core values in corporate culture, Deal and Kennedy (1982) suggested that carriers transmit and explain the core values, whereas heroes act as role models for other members to emulate.

Carriers

The senior apprentices, teachers and helpers served as carriers. From my observation, the senior apprentices in both Class A and Class B helped to teach others the skills of movement and singing. When the junior apprentices started playing rather than listening to the teacher’s instruction and practices, the senior apprentices would shout at them and tell them to stop. Also, when the junior apprentices got hurt during practice, a senior apprentice would comfort him/her. I once saw A Yi fall over during practice, and A Yun and Hai immediately came to hug and comfort her.

The carriers were not only responsible for explaining the group’s values to the students, they also informed the parents about the core values of the course. In Class A, the parents acquired the core values of the course through email, conversation and observation. Teacher Lee also introduced a 15-min session to teach the students some important values at the end of the classes, and invited the parents to join in.

Heroes

Vocal teachers, senior sister apprentices and Cantonese operatic artists serve as role models for students to emulate. For instance, A Jing’s mother told me her daughter regarded Yum Kim Fai 任劍輝 and Pak Suet Sin 白雪仙, famous Cantonese opera artists, as her role models after she became fascinated by Cantonese opera. Teacher Lee was also a role model for A Jing, who told me she wanted to become a teacher of Cantonese opera like teacher Lee. It is interesting that the teachers not only acted as heroes for the students, they also acted as role models for the parents. For example, Xin Xin’s mother showed great appreciation for teacher Lee: ‘Teacher Lee has put much effort into teaching the students. She tries to use different teaching methods. I admire her perseverance and unconditional love for the students. I have learnt a lot from her.’ Ming’s mother showed her appreciation for the teaching and singing skills of Teacher Wu. Ming’s mother said, ‘Teacher Chan sings very well. Ming has been taught by other teachers, and teacher Chang is the best among them. She helps Ming to improve his singing techniques.’

Core values

In addition to rituals and roles, the core values of Cantonese opera classes for children and adolescents are that it is aesthetically pleasing, and involves serious learning and personal growth.

The value of opera as aesthetically pleasing is demonstrated by the fact that the teachers kept reminding the students that they would have better posture if they practiced more. ‘Good looking’ and ‘looking cool’ were mentioned many times when I asked them why they attended the class and practiced hard. ‘I love Cantonese opera, it makes me look cool’, said Yi Yi. The students looked excited when they dressed in traditional costume. Jing’s mother also took photos of the children during their practices and performance, and made a photo album for them.

The other core value is serious learning. Based on my observation, whenever students started playing and bursting into laughter, the teachers and the senior apprentice stopped them and asked them to continue their practice. If the students did not follow the instructions, the teachers shouted at them and even forbade them from practicing for a while. In addition to the practices, they were given tests to examine the skills they had learnt. Xin Xin’s mother said, ‘Their training is serious, which was not what I expected. My daughter practices at home after she has finished the class. She has also learnt ballet dancing. Compared to ballet, the Cantonese opera training is more serious.’ A Lan 阿藍 claimed, ‘Although
I am very tired after training, it is worth it. We have to practice seriously so that we can perform well. Teacher Lee often quoted the saying of one student, ‘Our students are not afraid of hardship and pain.’

Both courses emphasized that students can learn more than the skills of acting and singing. Class A had a slogan: ‘Cantonese opera is used as a tool, while the stage acts as a classroom.’ Teacher Lee also emphasized that Cantonese opera training can serve as whole-person education. It offers a wide variety of educational experience, including music training, physical education, and Chinese language and history education. Teacher Lee also wrote a new script about Chinese moral values and the students understood the importance of those values through their practice. Teacher Lee also introduced a 15-min session to share stories about moral values. In Class B, the teacher usually chose songs about Chinese history for students and asked them to learn the context of each song. She wanted them to learn Chinese moral values such as faithfulness, respect for parents, kindness and righteousness.

Musical participation contributes to personal development

Students have developed a sense of achievement and have personal growth in this study. The students developed a sense of closeness through the rituals of integration, practice and performance. ‘I had great fun at the Chinese New Year Banquet. I played with my fellow senior apprentices. It’s so great. I love it very much. It would be great if we could have more gatherings like that,’ Hai said. Yi Yi mentioned, ‘I have many good friends in the class. We practice together. We have great fun practicing and performing.’

Many students loved to perform in front of a crowd and developed a sense of achievement. As Collins (2004) pointed out, on-stage performance not only means being seen by the crowd, but a shared enthusiasm is also created by the continual interplay between the performers and the crowd. A Lan developed a sense of achievement through performance. She said, ‘I don’t like Cantonese opera, it’s boring. But I love to perform in front of a crowd. Although it’s tiring, I get satisfaction in the process.’ Hang also loved performing Cantonese opera. She told me that the most enjoyable moment was when everyone came out to make the curtain calls. Everyone clapped their hands and cheered for them.

‘I don’t like watching Cantonese opera, because it’s quite boring. I love performing Cantonese opera though. It’s exciting and I feel good when people clap loudly. I seldom listen to Cantonese operatic songs at home, I prefer listening to popular songs,’ said Ming. It was not only the children who felt great, their parents also got a sense of accomplishment. Ming’s mother told me she was very pleased to see her son’s improvement through his continual practicing.

The ritual of practice develops a sense of achievement. A Xi and A Xin did not like watching Cantonese opera, but they liked to learn the fight moves. A Xi said she loved to do ground sweeping most. She showed me the fight moves during our conversation. The students enjoyed practicing Cantonese opera. ‘We have a lot of fun in the class. I have many friends here and I love listening to Cantonese operatic songs,’ Tiantian said. ‘It’s amusing no matter whether I am practicing or performing,’ Hang said.

At the same time, A Yun had loved listening to Cantonese operatic songs and watching Cantonese opera since she was young. Her mother told me that A Yun wanted to become a teacher of Cantonese opera, and kept practicing hard to realize her dream. Xin Xin’s mother said, ‘The course helps my daughter learn independence. She is so young. I left her alone for a half-day practice and she did not ask to see me again during the process. The costumes of Cantonese opera include heavy make-up and a huge feathered headdress. The performers must feel itchy and uncomfortable wearing it. She put on the costume at three o’clock and had to wait until seven o’clock before she finally performed on stage. She learned to persevere.’ Yi Yi’s mother said to another parent, ‘My son improved his self-discipline in the course. Janice Ma (one of the helpers) put a lot of effort into teaching my son manners.’

Discussion and conclusions

The above findings showed that musical tastes not only have sociability and performative components, they also have physical components. Physical trainings and performances organized around musical tastes offer an opportunity for children to develop physical skills, and build up their confidence.
Young people construct the rituals of learning Cantonese opera as an important context for their personal development, where they can develop a positive sense of self through repeated practice and performances. As young students, they still have to pass through various developmental stages. Attending the Cantonese opera training or Cantonese operatic singing is more than just entertainment to them. They used the training and performance as tools to develop their skills and self-confidence. Although Cantonese opera and Cantonese operatic singing is regional folk art, the young students tended to regard it as the quintessence of Chinese culture, rather than regional folk art. Learning Cantonese opera or Cantonese operatic singing also expressed their ethnic identity, and they believed they could learn more about Chinese culture from the courses. They believed they played a role in retaining a part of Chinese culture.

The rituals themselves change in different social contexts and cultures. The rituals of inquiry and performance often include learning and performing both singing and acting skills, rather than singing skills alone. Young generation was more familiar with popular music and western music. Teacher Lee wrote a new Cantonese opera script to incorporate it as part of contemporary culture. Although this was quite successful, it required a trade-off. On the one hand, the students and their parents were eager to invite their friends or classmates to see the show, and they appreciated the performance. The performance was easier for the audience to appreciate because the rhythm was faster and the script more relevant to their daily lives. Those who learned the traditional form of Cantonese opera and Cantonese operatic songs in Class B were mocked by their friends and classmates when they shared their experience of singing Cantonese operatic songs.

On the other hand, certain artistic and creative aspects of Cantonese opera were lost in the adoption process. The singing styles that required more sophisticated skills and were esteemed by many singers have been replaced because children found them too boring. In short, the cultural practice of singing Cantonese operatic songs and performing Cantonese opera in this community reflects a negotiation between traditional and modern culture, whereby a regional folklore is being reframed into contemporary culture.

Note
1. Cantonese opera artists’ names are romanized using the Cantonese Pronunciation because they are better-known names.

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Notes on Contributor
Wai Han Lo is an assistant professor at the School of Communication, Hang Seng Management College. Her research interests include journalism, cultural studies and critical studies in mass communication. She has received research reward with Benjamin Ka Lu Cheng from AEJMC conference, and her work has been published in a range of peer-reviewed journals including Ageing and Society, Journalism & Mass communication Quarterly and Journalism Studies.

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