

LCQ8: Promoting development of Cantonese opera

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Following is a question by the Hon Albert Ho and a written reply by the Secretary for Home Affairs, Dr Patrick Ho, in the Legislative Council today (June 28):

Question:

It has been reported that Cantonese opera bodies claim that there has been a lack of adequate support for the development of Cantonese opera in Hong Kong, and Ko Shan Theatre, which the Government plans to use for Cantonese opera performances, is not a satisfactory performance venue for Cantonese opera. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council :

(a) whether it has reviewed the effectiveness of its measures to promote the development of Cantonese opera; if it has, of the outcome; and

(b) whether it has studied the provision of a permanent performance venue for Cantonese opera in other locations, such as the West Kowloon Cultural District; if so, of the details of the study; if not, the reasons for that ?

Reply:

Madam President,

The Government has been promoting the development of Cantonese opera mainly through the work of the Leisure and Cultural Services Department (LCSD), the Cantonese Opera Advisory Committee (COAC) and the Hong Kong Arts Development Council (HKADC). The Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts (HKAPA) and the Cantonese Opera Academy of Hong Kong under the Chinese Artists Association of Hong Kong have also contributed by providing training to groom Cantonese opera artists and organising related activities. In response to part (a) of the question, the respective efforts and contributions of these institutions are described in the following.

On a regular basis, LCSD stages Cantonese opera performances in LCSD performing arts venues. Apart from regular presentations, LCSD also supports the development of Cantonese opera in the following ways -

- Commissioning new works to enrich the repertoire of Cantonese opera;
- Art appreciation and education activities such as seminars, lectures and workshops, arranged before and after each performance;
- Organising the annual District Cantonese Opera Parade to promote budding Cantonese opera artists and groups at district venues;
- Organising audience-building schemes at schools and in the community that feature Cantonese opera troupes and artists. These will include the Community Cultural Ambassador Scheme, the Programme Partnership Scheme and the School Culture Day Scheme;
- Supporting Cantonese opera activities including Cantonese opera training classes and performances through the provision of free LCSD venues or rental subsidy/reduction at these venues;
- Raising community awareness of this art form, including designating the last Sunday of each November as Cantonese Opera Day since 2003 and organising Cantonese opera performance on that day.

From 2001 to 2006, LCSD staged Cantonese opera performances to an average audience size of 152,000 every year. In 2005-06, the total number of audience at LCSD Cantonese opera presentations reached 177,334, rising from 121,880 in 2001-02.

Apart from this positive indicator in rising audience number, the scoring of Cantonese opera as a preferred art form in LCSD's tracking survey also confirms the effectiveness of the Department's efforts in promoting this art form. According to the Opinion Survey Report on LCSD Performing Arts Activities conducted in 2004, 16.3% of the audience surveyed chose Cantonese opera over the other art forms as their preferred art form, as compared to a score of 7.8% in 2001. It is clear that there is increased awareness and interest in this art form. In the same survey, the majority of audience (83%) also gave a good rating to the Cantonese opera programmes presented by LCSD.

Reckoning the need to provide further momentum and focus to the promotion and

development of this art form, the Home Affairs Bureau established the Cantonese Opera Advisory Committee (COAC) in May 2004 and entrust it with the responsibility to provide advice to the Government on promoting interest in and training of Cantonese opera; facilitating co-operation between the Cantonese opera sector and other organisations (including the HKADC and the HKAPA); mobilising participation of different sectors in promoting this art form; supporting exchanges with other regions, in particular, co-operation with the Pearl River Delta region; examining, preserving and studying the history and heritage of this art form; assisting in exploring financial resources for this art form and considering ways to promote social recognition and status of this art form.

To ensure that the promotional and developmental measures that the COAC adopts are effective, we have appointed members from a wide spectrum who are familiar with this art form and are devoted to its preservation and development. They include practising Cantonese opera artists, playwrights, performing group organisers, educationalists, and other professionals who have been actively involved in the preservation and development of this art form.

Over the past two-year term of the COAC, the Committee initiated the setting up of the Cantonese Opera Development Fund (CODF) in November 2005 to provide financial support to the development of this art form. Since its inception, CODF has already secured around \$12 million in donations. Through the CODF, the Committee has been able to support researches related to the development of this art form and activities and projects that help to promote and develop it. The Fund invites applications once every three months and in the first round of invitations in the first quarter of 2006, 18 projects have been approved. They include applications to support performances, youth cultural exchange and training programmes, publications on Cantonese opera and operatic songs, training programmes for playwrights, operatic singing competition, seminars on this art form, school performance tours and workshops, and sponsorship to student tickets. The Fund has also made a donation of \$500,000 to the refurbishment of Sunbeam Theatre in 2005 in support of its re-opening as a popular performance venue for Cantonese opera. For these successful applicants, it is a requirement of support that they have to submit an evaluation report on the outcome and effectiveness of their project for the CODF Committee to consider. Further, they are also asked to participate in sharing sessions to report on their projects for the purpose of review.

Apart from working through CODF, the Committee has also successfully negotiated

with LCSD more flexible booking arrangements at LCSD venues to facilitate Cantonese opera performances. Through its Venue Sub-committee, Promotions Sub-committee and Preservation Sub-committee, COAC has been championing for a permanent performance venue for Cantonese opera after the expiry of the lease of Sunbeam Theatre, conducting studies on the setting up of a Hong Kong Cantonese Opera Troupe to help new artists, supporting projects to promote the art form in tertiary institutions, laying the ground for a Cantonese opera and Cantonese operatic singing public examination, and systematic archival of materials related to this art form.

The Committee has constantly reviewed the effectiveness of its work. As recent as May 29, the Committee staged a large-scale open consultation meeting on the work of the Committee that drew an attendance of around 150. The feedback from attendees confirmed the direction of the Committee's work and its effectiveness.

The Xiqu Art Form Group is the group responsible for promoting the development of Cantonese opera at HKADC. The Council has supported various projects of this art form from performance, script-writing to school projects and community projects. From 2001-06, HKADC funded 109 projects related to Cantonese opera. It is a requirement of HKADC supported projects to submit an assessment report after project completion. According to HKADC, all these projects have proved to be effective in promoting the art form.

Regarding part (b) of the question, while quite a number of practising artists in the sector have commented that they do not consider Ko Shan Theatre a good performance venue for Cantonese opera, it is still the LCSD venue with the highest booking rate for Cantonese opera performances. At the COAC open consultation meeting on May 29, some attendees from the sector expressed support for using the Theatre for Cantonese opera performance especially after the completion of improvement works.

Ko Shan Theatre aside, the Home Affairs Bureau, in consultation with LCSD, is actively exploring all possible options to provide a permanent performance venue for Cantonese opera acceptable to the sector after the expiry of the lease of Sunbeam Theatre in August 2009. We shall discuss with the sector as soon as possible once detailed proposals have been worked out. As regards the provision of a permanent performance venue for this art form at the future West Kowloon Cultural District, the Performing Arts and Tourism Advisory Group under the Consultative Committee on

the Core Arts and Cultural Facilities of the West Kowloon Cultural District has been in continuous dialogue with the Cantonese opera sector. Three focus group meetings have been held to ascertain their needs with a view to formulating the Advisory Group's advice to be submitted to Government later this year.

In the recently released Report of the Committee on Performing Arts, it has also confirmed that the Cantonese opera is an important, unique and indigenous art form in Hong Kong and Cantonese opera artists and groups also face similar problems of inadequate support as those in other art forms. It is a recommendation in the report that LCSD should continue to promote this art form through staging more performances and audience building activities, and the needs of budding artists of Cantonese opera should be duly considered in the new scheme to support budding artists to be introduced by the HKADC, both in terms of funding support and venue support. Cantonese opera companies are also welcome to respond to the newly proposed Venue Partnership Scheme to be operated at LCSD-venues. The Report also affirms the Committee's support to the work of the COAC in negotiating more flexible venue arrangements for Cantonese opera performances at LCSD venues, continued efforts in the search for a permanent performance venue for this art form and studying the establishment of a government-funded Cantonese opera group for Hong Kong. The Home Affairs Bureau has accepted all the recommendations in this Report.

Ends/Wednesday, June 28, 2006

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