

LCQ11: Promotion of Cantonese Opera development

Following is a question by the Hon Priscilla Leung and a written reply by the Secretary for Home Affairs, Mr Tsang Tak-sing, in the Legislative Council today (January 7):

Question:

With the joint effort of Guangdong, Hong Kong and Macao, the Chinese Ministry of Culture, in September last year, applied to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation for the inscription of Cantonese opera onto the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity ("the inscription"). Furthermore, as an agreement on tenancy renewal has yet to be reached between the tenant and landlord of the Sunbeam Theatre in North Point, this large-scale performance venue for Cantonese opera may soon disappear. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

- (a) of the current policies to support the work of inscription by the Chinese Ministry of Culture, and to facilitate the sustainable development of Cantonese opera;
- (b) whether it will consider proposing options to the landlord and tenant concerned in respect of tenancy renewal for the Sunbeam Theatre, so as to preserve this performance venue for Cantonese opera with historic value; if not, of the reasons for that;
- (c) whether it will consider converting the Yau Ma Tei Fruit Market into a world-class large-scale Cantonese opera theatre, as well as converting the Yau Ma Tei Theatre into an academy of Cantonese opera, so as to nurture professionals and talents in the field; if not, of the reasons for that; and
- (d) given that many amateur artists and audience of Cantonese opera gather around Temple Street and the "Banyan Tree" in Yau Ma Tei, whether the Government will study the adoption of a targeted approach to promote and develop the culture of Cantonese opera in the area; if not, of the reasons for that?

Reply:

President,

(a) Cantonese Opera is an emblem of Hong Kong's local culture and its preservation and development are very important. In collaboration with the Guangdong and Macao cultural authorities, we successfully enlisted the Central People's Government's support in September 2008 for applying to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) for inscription of Cantonese Opera on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. The application is being vetted by the UNESCO and the result is expected to be announced before the end of 2009.

To support the preservation and development of Cantonese Opera, the Government has set the following directions and targets: (a) to develop performing venues for Cantonese Opera; (b) to promote Cantonese Opera education, audience building and community participation; (c) to provide training to Cantonese Opera professionals, preserve the tradition and promote creative works; (d) to foster cooperation among Guangdong, Hong Kong and Macao, and promote cultural exchange; (e) to preserve the essence of Cantonese Opera and showcase treasures of our cultural heritage; and (f) to promote Cantonese Opera as a major tourist attraction.

In May 2004, the Home Affairs Bureau (HAB) set up the Cantonese Opera Advisory Committee (COAC) to advise the Government on issues related to the promotion, preservation, study and development of Cantonese Opera. We also established the Cantonese Opera Development Fund (CODF) in November 2005. So far, about HK\$17 million has been approved to support over 210 applications, including a three-year grant scheme for the Hong Kong Cantonese Opera Troupe for New Talents.

To provide performance venues for Cantonese Opera in the long run, the Government will develop venues of different scales to meet the development needs of Cantonese Opera. The relevant projects include conversion of the Yau Ma Tei Theatre and the Red Brick Building into a Xiqu Activity Centre with a small theatre (about 300 seats and scheduled for completion in 2011); construction of an Annex Building of the Ko Shan Theatre (scheduled for completion in 2012) comprising a medium-sized theatre (about 600 seats), large-scale rehearsal rooms and

audio-recording studios; and building a large-scale theatre (about 1,200 to 1,400 seats), a small-sized theatre (about 400 seats) and practising facilities in the Xiqu Centre (scheduled for completion in 2014-15) in the West Kowloon Cultural District (WKCD).

In the short run, we will provide more time slots for Cantonese Opera performances at the major performing arts venues of the Leisure and Cultural Services Department (LCSD). These include (a) supporting the Cantonese Opera sector to take part in the "Venue Partnership Scheme" in the Sha Tin Town Hall and the Tuen Mun Town Hall from 2008-09 to 2011-12; (b) continuing the implementation of priority venue hiring policy for Cantonese Opera performances in Ko Shan Theatre; and (c) planning to implement priority venue hiring policy in phases starting from 2009-10 for Cantonese Opera troupes at several major LCSD venues. We are consulting with the COAC and the Chinese Artists Association of Hong Kong (CAAHK) on the proposed item (c).

The Hong Kong Heritage Museum is also committed to collecting and preserving the artifacts and archival materials in relation to Cantonese Opera. The Museum has developed a collection of over 20,000 items of artifacts regarding Cantonese Opera. A Cantonese Opera Heritage Hall has been set up in the Museum since its opening in 2000. In addition, the Museum has been documenting systematically traditional Paichang Xi of Cantonese Opera since 2001.

We shall continue to support the development of Cantonese Opera through different forms and channels. For example, the LCSD supports about 500 Cantonese Opera performances each year; the Hong Kong Arts Development Council (HKADC) continues to fund Cantonese Opera projects; and the HAB provides funding support to the Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts (HKAPA) in support of its Cantonese Opera training programmes. Overall, the amount of resources deployed for developing Cantonese Opera for 2008-09 is around \$30 million.

(b) Since early last year, the HAB has initiated to discuss with the landlord on the tenancy renewal of the Sunbeam Theatre and has requested the landlord to give consideration to renewing the tenancy. The Government appreciates the landlord's continuous contribution to the development of Cantonese Opera in the past and will consider seeking sponsorship and devising appropriate subsidy schemes to assist the Sunbeam Theatre to continue to operate at a reasonable market rental level.

(c) Regarding Hon Priscilla Leung's proposed conversion of the Yau Ma Tei Fruit Market into a world-class large-scale Cantonese Opera theatre, the Government has planned to construct a Xiqu Centre of international standards and scale in the neighbouring WKCD. The Xiqu Centre will house a large-scale theatre (about 1,200 to 1,400 seats) and is scheduled for completion in 2014-15.

Concerning the suggestion of converting the Yau Ma Tei Theatre into a Cantonese Opera academy, we will turn the Yau Ma Tei Theatre into a small-sized theatre to be used mainly by budding Cantonese Opera artists having considered such factors as the structures, designs and scales of the two historic buildings (i.e. the Yau Ma Tei Theatre and the Red Brick Building) of the project. We have consulted with the COAC, the CAAHK and the Community Building Committee of the Yau Tsim Mong District Council about the scope and design of this works project. In fact, both the converted theatre and the multi-purpose activity rooms inside the neighbouring Red Brick Building can be used for training purpose. The conversion works were supported by the Home Affairs Panel of the Legislative Council at its meeting on December 12, 2008.

Furthermore, the HKAPA offered early in 1999 a two-year full-time diploma programme in Cantonese Opera. It has also offered a two-year full-time advanced diploma programme in Cantonese Opera since 2001. Starting from 2007-08, the HAB has allocated funds to the HKAPA to support its full-time and part-time evening programmes on Cantonese Opera including performance, music accompaniment, creative writing and research. In addition, the HKADC has subsidised the Cantonese Opera Academy of Hong Kong's part-time evening courses in performance and other short courses since 1996. In short, the Government has provided support to formal professional training on Cantonese Opera through the established mechanism.

(d) The Chief Executive has stated in the 2007 Policy Address that the Government will provide a permanent performance venue for the Cantonese Opera sector in Yau Ma Tei. Our present plan is to convert the two historic buildings (i.e. the Yau Ma Tei Theatre and the Red Brick Building) into a Xiqu Activity Centre. We shall consult the sector and the relevant local organisations to see how the Xiqu Activity Centre can, upon its completion, complement with the community and the cultural

and arts activities taking place in the vicinity, such as the WKCD and the open areas in Temple Street and "Banyan Tree" in Yau Ma Tei where we can find traditional Cantonese operatic singing performances, in order to further promote the overall development of Cantonese Opera.

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