

Education

Katie Hung

FOLLOWING THE OPENING of the Xiqu Centre last month, a three-year education program, the DH Chen Foundation – West Kowloon Tea House student matinees, is starting to promote the culture of *xiqu*, or Chinese traditional theater, which integrates music, literature, martial arts and dance, at its Tea House Theatre.

Aimed at secondary one to four students, the free program is expected to host 80 performances with a seating capacity of 200 until 2021. Thirty-six schools have since applied to participate.

The near three-hour program includes a tour of the new venue.

A traditional Cantonese opera can generally last for several hours but this one-hour matinee incorporates certain themes of *xiqu*, including Cantonese opera dramatizations from the *Princess Cheung Ping's Fragrant Sacrifice* to performances from Chinese music ensembles.

An MC of the show interacts and teaches audience members about its history, and traditional values such as filial piety before each short sketch.

This segmented structure aims to provide a full experience to audience members with different interests and backgrounds, said Louis Yu, the executive director of performing arts of the West Kowloon Cultural District Authority.

"The goal of the Tea House Theatre performance and the student matinee, is to give people a



good first impression of *xiqu*.

"We hope students would not react in a reluctant manner upon hearing the words Cantonese opera or *xiqu*. At the very least, we hope they will become even more intrigued after watching, and I think if we achieve that, that's already the first step to success."

It was only when Kitty Wong, a secondary four student from Pooi To Middle School, went to watch Cantonese opera for the second time, did she start to appreciate this type of art.

"I was in primary school when I first watched Cantonese opera at Ko Shan Theatre. The venue

New eyes on old culture



was incredibly large and we sat in the back. Unfortunately, I couldn't understand the story fully because there were no subtitles, and frankly speaking, I just felt a bit bored," she said.

"But this time, it was a very different experience because the MC would explain the history and the content before each performance. They even had subtitles. Even if I couldn't understand the lyrics, I could still follow along and understand the story by reading."

The school's Chinese teacher, Janet So, said *xiqu* is usually taught in schools as a form of music rather than as literature.

She believes teaching the culture of *xiqu* wouldn't be too difficult to achieve in the classroom. However, the real limitation lies under a number of factors, including the lack of live music, costumes, lighting and a venue, of which the school is not able to fully cover.

Pooi To Middle School principal Constance Cheung hopes that there will be more programs in the future that will open a path for adolescents to become more involved with the traditional performing arts.

She said, "I noticed that the performers were also very young. It's important for the veterans to pass the torch to the next generation and teach them their skills. And it would be even better if the students could eventually join the industry after showing an appreciation of the art."

The concept of the Tea House Theatre is geared towards attracting new audience members like students, tourists and locals, who have never watched *xiqu*.

"New audience members doesn't necessarily mean young people," said Yu. "Many who are aged 40 or 50, have yet to watch *xiqu*, and to us, they're considered to be a part of our new audience as well."

In a survey conducted in 2015 to 2016, he found that a large majority of the audience had cast stereotypes on Cantonese opera, labeling it as old-fashioned and that fans of *xiqu* were all elderly.

One of the reasons could be because they would always showcase performances at specific venues. "Those venues have a particular group of audience. So new audience members would think 'I am not going to watch because that venue is for an elderly audience,' or they wouldn't go because there is an image attached to it," said Yu.

With its contemporary architectural design, the Xiqu Centre is thus on a mission to win the hearts of a new audience.

"Increasing the number of people watching *xiqu* in the 21st century is our most ambitious goal. The architecture, space allocation and performance programs are all done in an effort to attract members of the public to the Xiqu Centre," said Yu.

Apart from its free student matinees, people can buy tickets to their 90-minute Tea House Theatre program which includes dim sum and tea. It is held seven times a week, and hosts a different MC than of the student matinees.

School applications for the student matinee program are open all year round.

Teachers can also register for a free *xiqu* cultural training workshop at learning@wkeda.hk which will be held on March 30.

katie.hung@singtaonewscorp.com





Seminar
Embarking On Your Journey To Ivy League

Meeting with the Top Asia University Admissions Consultant and successful entrepreneur, Mr Duc Luu who will share his insights on admissions trends and students' success stories!

Join Us Next Saturday!
9 March (Sat) | 2-3pm
theDesk, 20/F, Leighton Centre
77 Leighton Road
Causeway Bay
FREE ADMISSION

More Details & RSVP Here



Give yourself The Edge®
Causeway Bay 2972 2555 • Mong Kok 2783 7100
www.theedge.com.hk

Founder of The Edge
BA, Yale University
MBA, UChicago