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# Beijing showcases Cantonese Opera

Young Hong Kong-based actors to perform *Farewell My Concubine* at upcoming Spring For Chinese Arts festival

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**N**aomi Chung first watched Cantonese Opera as a child along with her parents in Hong Kong. But she can still recall the music performed with traditional Chinese instruments — such as cymbals, drums, the *erhu* and the *bangzi* — besides the actors' elaborate makeup, costumes and acrobatic techniques.

Recalling those days, she said: "Though Hong Kong is often associated with the image of a metropolitan city, Cantonese Opera has a large and stable fan base."

Now the head of Xiqu, performing arts, at Hong Kong's West Kowloon Cultural District Authority, Chung was in Beijing recently to participate in events linked to the upcoming Spring For Chinese Arts, an annual arts festival by the Tianqiao Performing Arts Center.

The festival, now in its third year, will feature 29 performances, including musicals, concerts and dance, as well as one forum and 10 public workshops on weekends, from April 1 to June 3.

An original Cantonese Opera show, *Farewell My Concubine*, performed by the Xiqu Centre of West Kowloon Cultural District and produced by Chung, will be staged on April 20-21 at the Tianqiao Performing Arts Center as part of the festival.

The show, featuring young Hong Kong-based Cantonese Opera actors, including Keith Lai as Xiang Yu and Janet Wong as Yu Ji, is adapted from a classic story set against the backdrop of the Han-Chu conflict (206-202 BC) in the final years of the Qin Dynasty.

In the story, Xiang Yu, the King of Chu, falls to the forces of Liu Bang, the King of Han. And, then, Xiang Yu and his beloved concubine Yu Ji meet for the last time.

The show, combining traditional Cantonese Opera techniques and contemporary stage and lighting design, showcases Cantonese Opera using different dialects, such as Guanhua, Mandarin and Cantonese.

Cantonese Opera, like many traditional Chinese operas, combines singing, martial arts and acting. And it attained a peak in the 1950s and 1960s.

Now, Cantonese Opera is performed mainly in the Cantonese dialect and is popular mostly in South China's Guangdong province and Hong Kong and Macao.



Cantonese Opera *Farewell My Concubine*. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY



A show brought by Peking Opera artists of Zhang Huoding Arts of the Cheng School Inheritance Center will be staged on May 6 in Beijing.



Dancer-choreographer Zhao Liang's contemporary dance piece, *The Tea Spell*.

In September 2009, UNESCO listed Cantonese Opera as oral and intangible heritage.

The idea of adapting *Farewell My Concubine* into a Cantonese Opera show took shape in 2016 as Chung was preparing to lead a group of young Cantonese Opera actors to participate in a theater festival in Shanghai, where the show was premiered.

The show was later staged in Hong Kong and Beijing.

Speaking about the show, Chung said: "Traditionally, Cantonese Opera pieces are very long, and could be four hours or more. But for the Shanghai festival, we trimmed

the piece to 90 minutes, which prompted good feedback from the audiences, especially the young.

"The feedback was beyond our expectations, as our goal was only to experiment with our ideas about Cantonese Opera and offer an opportunity to young Cantonese Opera actors."

Meanwhile, the Xiqu Centre of West Kowloon Cultural District along with the Shanghai Center of Chinese Operas, which is home to Shanghai-based traditional Chinese opera troupes, launched a festival in Hong Kong last year, which showcased performances by traditional Chinese opera artists from Shanghai

and Hong Kong, including Peking Opera artist Wang Peiyu.

*Farewell My Concubine* was also staged during the festival.

In a related development, a new venue for staging traditional Chinese operas is scheduled to open in Hong Kong's Victoria Harbour within about a year.

As for Chung's background and links with Cantonese Opera, she has very impressive credentials.

She graduated from the California Institute of the Arts in 1997 with a master's degree in fine arts, majoring in theater lighting design, and has worked with the Hong Kong Chi-

nese Orchestra — the only professional, full-sized Chinese orchestra in Hong Kong, founded in 1977 — for nearly 10 years. She learned Cantonese Opera from Law Kar-ying, 71, a veteran Hong Kong actor, who was originally a Cantonese Opera artist.

Law has acted in nearly 100 movies since the 1990s, such as *Crime Story* in 1993 along with Jackie Chan, and *Future X-Cops* with Andy Lau in 2010, but he said that his aspirations are rooted in Cantonese Opera.

As for the other highlights of the Spring For Chinese Arts festival, there will be a concert, in which the China Film Orchestra will perform music from Hong Kong films on April 1; a show by Peking Opera artists of the Zhang Huoding Arts of the Cheng School Inheritance Center on May 6; and three contemporary dance pieces — *Dreams of Zen*, *The Tea Spell* and *Escaping from the Temple* — performed and choreographed by Zhao Liang, over April 4 to 15.

Speaking about the festival, Li Jing, vice-director of the Tianqiao Performing Arts Center, said: "Every spring, we have artists from Hong Kong, Taiwan and the Chinese mainland to share the stage. It's a great opportunity for them to meet and communicate."