

Yu, Siu Wah, Chinese University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong

Hong Kong Cantonese Opera at Cultural Crossroads

At the end of 2009, Hong Kong was twice under the international lime light. Firstly, Cantonese opera, a popular music/drama genre sung in the local dialect, was recognized by UNESCO's as an Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH). Hong Kong shared the honor with Canton (Guangzhou) and Macau. Secondly, Professor Charles Gao Kun, the former CUHK vice chancellor, has been awarded the Nobel Prize in Physics. Joy and excitement notwithstanding, Hong Kong society somehow received the belated recognitions with some sense of frustrations. In its second decade as part of the People's Republic of China, the Hong Kong SAR is perhaps really at the crossroad culturally and socially. The haunting and anxious question is: Can Hong Kong maintain its international profile and at the same time cultural independency by staying within and without China? (Incidentally, this is also a focal point of argument in the recent controversy over the construction of the luxurious Express Rail Link in order to connect to the super rail system of Mainland China.) Since becoming part of China, Hong Kong has been struggling to maintain certain differences and characteristics within "the greater Chinese culture and identity," while simultaneously attempting to position itself as a 'born again' Chinese city. In this paper I would like to look into the ambivalent cultural and political position of Hong Kong by highlighting the musical, theatrical, and ideological differences between the Cantonese opera of Hong Kong and that performed in the Mainland, with respect to the much contested issue of ICH, a seemingly perfect opportunity for Hong Kong to integrate further with the Greater China. Hong Kong Cantonese opera is situated and examined in a condition that can be understood as "diasporic" and simultaneously geopolitically "interconnected" with the homeland, generating a politics of difference at the margins of the "great tradition" that paradoxically reclaims the "tradition."