

Guangdong and Hong Kong Chiuchow opera troupes to stage three stunning performances at inaugural Chinese Culture Festival in June (with photos)

The Guangdong Chiu Chow Opera Theatre Number One Troupe and Sun Hon Kwong Chiu Chow Opera Troupe will collaborate again for three captivating Chiuchow opera performances at the inaugural Chinese Culture Festival (CCF), organised by the Leisure and Cultural Services Department (LCSD), in late June. The performance repertoire includes "Princess of Eastern Wu" featuring Zhang Yihuang, the recipient of the China Theatre Plum Blossom Award (Plum Blossom Award); "Poet Li Shangyin", a Plum Blossom Award-winning work performed by Lin Yanyun, and a selection of classic excerpts. These exceptional performances aim to showcase the unique musical style and artistic charm of Chiuchow opera, as well as to foster Chinese opera cultural exchanges and connections between Guangdong and Hong Kong. This programme is one of the highlights of the 12th Chinese Opera Festival.

Chiuchow opera is one of the three main regional operatic genres in Guangdong, and is especially popular in the Chaoshan and southern Fujian regions. The genre's repertory origins lie in South China's operatic plays and "zaju" (local variety show) of the Song and Yuan periods. It is a distinguished artistic genre, and is performed in the Chiuchow dialect that is characterised by vivid, affable dialogue and lyrics, making the performances highly accessible and enjoyable.

The first performance will begin with an excerpt "Mu Guiying's Marriage Proposal", followed by the classic play "Princess of Eastern Wu". The play is based on the love story between Sun Shangxiang and Liu Bei from "Romance of Three Kingdoms", which is filled with dramatic turns, and is still well loved by opera fans. Zhang Yihuang plays the role of Sun that made her the first female Chiuchow artist to win the Plum Blossom Award.

The second performance will start with an excerpt, "Snow at the Plum Pavilion", in which the aria "The duets at the Plum Pavilion" is a well-known classic in the Chaoshan regions. This will be followed by the new adaptation of the Chiuchow opera "Poet Li Shangyin", which is a Plum Blossom-winning work performed by Lin Yanyun, the Director of the Number One Troupe. Adapted from Yue opera "Poet Li Shangyin", Lin performs with a distinct scholarly charm, portraying Li as an intellectual in search of love, conscience, morality and justice. The stage setting is elegant and simple, bringing a new vision to the aesthetics of Chiuchow opera performances.

The last performance will be a selection of five excerpts with fascinating vocals and acting: "A Misunderstanding Caused by a Hairpin" will highlight 30 types of folding fan techniques which are skillfully integrated

with the characters and storyline. "Pawning His Wife" will break away from the tradition of conveying emotions with water sleeves, putting the female lead to the test of handling emotions. "The Sagacious Empress" and "Meeting at the Pavilion" will demonstrate the singing skills of Chiuchow opera by the performers to express the feelings and anguish of the characters. In "Wreaking Havoc in Kaifeng", the performer playing the laosheng role will showcase unique artistic techniques including beard maneuvering and flicking of long sleeves and hat wings, unleashing the artistic charm of Chiuchow opera.

Details of the three performances are as follows:

Date and time: June 28 (Friday), 7.30pm

Excerpt "Mu Guiying's Marriage Proposal"

Main cast: Wu Yimin, Lin Waimao

Synopsis: Yang Zongbao is escorting provisions for the army and happens to encounter Mu Guiying hunting. The two young people fall in love and pledge to spend their life together. Guiying throws down a formal challenge for suitors vying for her hand. The two also discuss strategies to break through enemy lines.

"Princess of Eastern Wu"

Main cast: Zhang Yihuang, Lin Chufa, Zheng Jianying, Lin Wuyan

Synopsis: Princess Sun Shangxiang is the sister of Sun Quan, a warlord holding the State of Eastern Wu. She has lofty ambitions and aspires to marry a hero who can save the people amidst hard times and put down rebels, which leads her to follow the Han warlord Liu Bei. By then, she is caught in a power struggle between her brother and Liu in a political marriage dilemma. She attempts to dissuade her husband from futile battles but her advice goes unheeded. Feeling that her lifelong hopes and pursuits are dashed, Shangxiang finally throws herself into the river.

Date and time: June 29 (Saturday), 7.30pm

Excerpt "Snow at the Plum Pavilion"

Main cast: Chen Chuyun, Lin Bifang

Synopsis: Su San is a famous courtesan. She and Wang Jinlong, a young man of noble birth, are lovers pledged to marry one day. Later, Wang is appointed Imperial Inspector. Su San suffers an unjust fate and is sent to prison. During the trial at court, Wang cannot bring himself to declare his new identity to Su San and revoke her wrongs. Judge Liu Bingyi discerns the hidden truth and orders the prison guards to take Su San to Meiting Pavilion in the freezing snow to test Wang's reaction.

"Poet Li Shangyin"

Main cast: Lin Yanyun, Zhan Chunxiang, Huang Yingwei

Synopsis: In the third year of the Kaicheng reign in the Tang dynasty, Li Shangyin has achieved high honours in the civil examinations. He happens to meet Wang Yunyan, the daughter of Wang Maoyuan, the regional military governor of Jingyuan. It is love at first sight. With the ascension of a new

emperor, Linghu Tao is tasked to purge dissidents, and plots to impeach Wang Maoyuan. He also wants Li to draft false accusations. Li, out of gratitude to his mentor, has already abandoned his hope for love, but when asked to do tasks at the expenses of his integrity and conscience, he refuses outright.

Date and time: June 30 (Sunday), 2.30pm

Main cast: Zhan Shaojun, Lin Yanyun, Huang Yingwei, Weng Songmei, Wang Meifang, Zhan Chunxiang

Excerpt "A Misunderstanding Caused by a Hairpin"

Synopsis: Hu Lian is a playboy. After spending the night at a brothel, he finds a golden hairpin at Long Sheng's doorsteps. Without bothering to find the truth, he accuses his younger sister of having an affair with Long. Back home, he goes on a rampage. Later, it is confirmed that the hairpin he found is actually brought from the brothel by himself. As a result, he faces criticism from his family members.

Excerpt "Pawning His Wife"

Synopsis: In a poor household in rural Zhejiang, a husband has failed many times to make a career for himself, which leads him to gambling and excessive drinking. His youngest son also suffers from a lingering illness. The husband then pawns his wife for three years in exchange for 100 silver coins. When the three years is up, the wife is dreaming of reuniting with her family, but her dream is not going to come true.

Excerpt "The Sagacious Empress"

Synopsis: For years, Empress Changsun has accompanied Emperor Taizong of Tang in his military campaigns, enduring hardships without even a candle to light their camp. In appreciation, the Emperor has a pair of dragon and phoenix candles made as a gift for her.

Excerpt "Meeting at the Pavilion"

Synopsis: Liang Shanbo has discovered that his good "brother" for years, Zhu Yingtai, is a woman. He goes to her family to propose marriage, but Yingtai has already been promised to someone else. The lovers meet at a pavilion, where they pour their hearts out.

Excerpt "Wreaking Havoc in Kaifeng"

Synopsis: Li Tianfu is the son of a minister. He kidnaps a woman commoner by force and is caught. Wang Zuo, the prefect of Kaifeng, takes him into custody. Li's mother goes on a rampage and demands that Wang release her son. Wang refuses to comply. Li's mother instructs her henchmen to secretly kill the plaintiff, but by accident, Li is stabbed and his blood is spilled in the courtroom.

Founded in 1958, the Guangdong Chiu Chow Opera Theatre Number One Troupe has created, adapted and performed a repertoire of outstanding and well-loved opera works. Over the years, the Troupe has given several touring performances in various countries and regions, including Cambodia, Vietnam, Thailand, Singapore, the United States, Australia and France, as well as Hong

Kong and many more.

The Sun Hon Kwong Chiu Chow Opera Troupe, formerly the Hon Kwong Chiu Chow Opera Troupe, was founded in 1959 and turned professional in 1987. Its repertoire totals nearly 100 productions. Its members consist of virtuosos in Chiuchow opera in Hong Kong. The troupe is keen to nurture young talent, and often collaborates with other troupes of Chiuchow opera in giving joint performances.

The three performances will be held at the Theatre of Ko Shan Theatre. Each performance will run for about two hours and 30 minutes, including an intermission of 15 minutes. Lyrics and dialogues are with Chinese and English surtitles. Tickets priced at \$180, \$280 and \$380 are now available at URB TIX (www.urbtix.hk). For telephone bookings, please call 3166 1288. For programme enquiries and concessionary schemes, please call 2268 7325 or visit www.ccf.gov.hk/en/programme/guangdong-chiu-chow-opera-theatre-number-one-troupe-and-sun-hon-kwong-chiu-chow-opera-troupe.

A meet-the-artists session entitled "The Artistic Features of Chiuchow Opera" (in Putonghua) will be held at 7.30pm on June 27 (Thursday) at AC2, Level 4, Administration Building, Hong Kong Cultural Centre. The speakers include Chiuchow opera performers Zhang Yihuang, Zhan Shaojun, Lin Yanyun and Lin Chufa, while Chinese opera researcher Chan Chun-miu will be the moderator. Admission is free and online registration is required (www.lcsd.gov.hk/CE/CulturalService/Programme/en/chinese_opera/programs_1716.html#tab_13_0). Limited seats are available on a first-come, first-served basis.

The CCF, presented by the Culture, Sports and Tourism Bureau and organised by the LCSD's Chinese Culture Promotion Office, aims to enhance the public's appreciation of Chinese culture and cultivate citizens' national identity and cultural confidence. The inaugural CCF will be held from June to September. Through different performing arts programmes in various forms and related extension activities, including selected programmes of the Chinese Opera Festival, exemplary local arts projects recognised by the China National Arts Fund, performing arts programmes from arts and cultural organisations, film screenings, exhibitions, talks and more, the festival allows members of the public and visitors to experience the broad and profound Chinese culture with a view to promoting Chinese culture and patriotic education as well as enhancing national identity amongst the people of Hong Kong, making contributions to the steadfast and successful implementation of "one country, two systems". For details, please visit the CCF website www.ccf.gov.hk.

The LCSD has long been promoting Chinese history and culture through organising an array of programmes and activities to enable the public to learn more about the broad and profound Chinese culture. For more information, please visit www.lcsd.gov.hk/en/ccpo/index.html.

