

The music culture of older adults in Cantonese operatic singing lessons

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ABSTRACT

Cantonese operatic singing, one of the regional opera forms in China, flourishes mainly in the southern province of Guangdong. By exploring the culture of Cantonese operatic singing, this study relates older people's music participation to a sense of collectivism, thereby contributing to the maintenance of interpersonal relationships and promoting successful ageing. The study also illustrates how the musical participation of older adults can be influenced by the lifecourse and ageing in terms of both vocal abilities and levels of participation. Data analysed through participation observation in two Cantonese operatic singing lessons identify the rituals and core values of Cantonese operatic singing lessons. The findings help to explain how this particular music genre interacts with ageing.

KEY WORDS– music, cultural capital, Cantonese opera, ageing, tastes, culture, rituals.

Introduction

Bourdieu's theory of cultural tastes asserts that individual preferences for certain cultural activities and lifestyles are consequential in maintaining social class. Bourdieu (1984: 169) conceptualised cultural taste as 'cultural capital' while regarding the social field as a multi-dimensional space of positions in which individuals are situated in accordance with their endowments of cultural, economic and social capital. Cultural capital, in addition to social capital and economic capital, is important in maintaining and reproducing one's social position. Many studies have focused on the link between cultural taste and reproduction of class stratification (*e.g.* DiMaggio and Mukhtar 2004). Several of these have viewed cultural taste as an important factor in social life (*e.g.* Lopez-Sintas and Katz-Gerro 2005). Others have examined the role of cultural taste in creating social networks (Lizardo 2006), forming identity (Côte 1996; Howard 2000) and maintaining group boundaries (Lamont and Molnar 2002).

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Musical taste, defined as the individual preference for a musical genre, is closely examined in this paper since, as Bourdieu (1984: 247) observed, musical taste ‘exemplifies the complex mix of symbolism, materiality and embodiment in cultural taste’, and it is an important indicator of cultural tastes in general (Peterson 2005). In particular, musical tastes are important tools for the negotiation of one’s social situation and the creation of social networks (DiMaggio 1987; Fiske 1987).

Academic studies of musical taste have been undertaken with regard to youth and popular music (Smith 2009). Wells and Hakanen (1991) examined the role of music in emotion management. Studies of sub-cultures have also been undertaken, in which music-related activity is described as a form of resistance (Hall and Jefferson 1976). There have also been studies examining the learning practices adopted by musicians (Green 2002). However, previous research has largely ignored the influence of age and lifecourse events on cultural taste (Harrison and Ryan 2012).

In contrast, this study explores music cultures among older people. Two specific questions are examined. First, how lessons in Cantonese operatic singing provide older adults with a means for developing social networks, building positive self-esteem and contributing to their wellbeing. Second, the study addresses the question of whether Cantonese operatic singing activities are influenced by circumstances specific to later life. The following section examines previous relevant studies relating to the first research question.

Past studies

Musical taste and social networks

Musical taste, social networks and ageing are interconnected. Following Bourdieu’s (1984) conceptualisation of cultural capital, musical taste can be seen as ‘the outcome of one’s location in the stratified social system, and musical tastes reinforce that position’ (Harrison and Ryan 2012: 651). This assertion is based on evidence that individuals adopt their musical taste from contact with school, friends and family (*e.g.* Bourdieu 1984; Bryson 1996; Coulangeon and Lemel 2007). Musical taste can be part of an individual’s skills and it can be used to negotiate social situations and interpersonal exchanges (DiMaggio 1987; Fiske 1987). Musical taste can become a form of portable knowledge used to present the self. It allows individuals to align with selected others and to differentiate themselves symbolically (Fiske 1987; Peterson 2005).

Moreover, taste patterns may contribute to maintaining health and ageing successfully (Agahi and Parker 2005). Studies on ageing and the body have

shown that health promotion through activity and increased participation in social and leisure activities can promote wellbeing and overall life satisfaction in older adults (Chung and Park 2008; Ekerdt 1986; Havighurst 1961; Katz 2000). Musical participation, in which taste is a key factor, is an important strategy for developing new friendships and sustaining networks in old age. 'Taste' is an important factor in promoting sociability (Erickson 1996; Lizardo 2006). As DiMaggio (1987) stated, cultural tastes provide common topics for conversation and facilitate the social gatherings necessary for friendships to grow. Cultural taste may provide the impetus for a social network, offering a basis for an individual to socialise with others who have similar tastes and allowing older adults to form replacement relationships as their networks reduce. Indeed, 'cultural tastes are neutral, but their uses are social' (DiMaggio 1987: 442).

To summarise, previous studies have indicated that musical tastes are important in old age for self-presentation, maintaining friendships, and maintaining physical and psychological health. At the same time, the above studies lead us to expect that there is a dynamic relationship between music, performance and social networks. The following section discusses how this dynamic relationship can be explored using an analysis of ritual and organisational cultures.

Rituals, culture and music participation

Ritual is a social phenomenon involving groups of people who have certain expectations in common (Bocock 1973). It is a form of communication that also should be understood within specific cultural contexts. Goffman (1956) has defined ritual as informal or secular activity, which represents the way an individual's acts have symbolic implications. By focusing on the micro level of immediate interaction in everyday life, the manifestation of ritual can be examined.

Collins's (2004) perceives rituals as a mechanism of mutual emotion and action that produces a shared reality. Rituals generate solidarity and symbols of group membership. Therefore, ritual can create culture as well as reinforcing existing culture. The experience of ritual gives rise to group motifs and enhances group solidarity. In this sense, the analysis of ritual can help us understand how solidarity and commitment to shared symbols can occur in a wide variety of situations. However, there is no consensus over the term 'culture' studies (Hopper 2007). In the present study, 'culture' is defined as 'a particular way of life which expresses certain meanings and values not only in art and learning, but also in institutions and ordinary behaviour. The analysis of culture, from such a definition, is the clarification of the meanings and values implicit and explicit in a particular way of life,

a particular culture' (Williams 1965, cited in Hebdige 1979: 6). Williams viewed culture as 'a common process of participation in the creation of meanings and values' (1974: 34). Within different cultural groups, there are ideas and values that reflect a shared lifestyle, interests, positions, *etc.* (Erikson 1996). Therefore, the study of the culture of Cantonese operatic singing lessons can reveal the relationships between its different elements and how people construct, articulate and interpret the meaning of this activity.

Finally, the concept of 'organisational culture' is used to understand the culture of Cantonese operatic singing lessons. As Simpson and Cacioppe (2001) have stated, an organisation's culture represents the core values that are shared by most of the organisation's members. Deal and Kennedy (1982) suggest that values are integral to organisational culture. These values determine how members define success and inform them about the principles of the organisation (Hofstede *et al.* 1990).

Heroes are persons who possess characteristics highly prized in the organisation culture and who thus are the role models that personify the core culture value of the organisation (Wilkins 1984), while rituals and rites show the members what kind of behaviour is expected of them. Rituals are the routines of everyday life in the organisation. Some members play the role of heroes, whereas others act as carriers to pass on the corporate values (Deal and Kennedy 1982). This approach can be used to study how the culture of Cantonese operatic singing lessons manifests itself with values, rituals and heroes.

In summary, both ritual analysis and studies of organisational culture can further an understanding of how this particular music genre and its associated activities contribute to the life satisfaction of older people. The following section examines the second research question: how is the musical participation of older adults influenced by the lifecourse and ageing in terms of both vocal abilities and levels of participation?

Ageing and participation in singing activities

Previous studies suggest that music participation and ageing are interrelated (Bruhn 2002). First, musical singing ability can change with age. An individual's vocal range begins to narrow towards the sixth decade of life. Songs written in lower keys allow older participants to continue singing with ease (Moore, Staum and Brotons 1992) and older people generally prefer slow tempos to medium tempos for singing (Moore Staum and Brotons 1992). However, a change in one's vocal ability does not necessarily coincide with biological age (Bruhn 2002). The study of professional singers' vocal

abilities illustrates that appropriate vocal exercises may help to delay the effects of ageing on vocal abilities (Sataloff 1992).

Second, physical ability also declines as people age and may inhibit participation in terms of both proficiency and the ability to perform in public. Third, personal life factors specific to old age may also influence music participation. These factors relate to the extent to which Cantonese operatic singing interacts with other areas of older adult's life. Lifecourse events such as retirement allow participants to have more time to engage in musical activities.

Cantonese operatic singing and ageing

Cantonese opera belongs to one of the regional operas in China, and it flourishes mainly in the Pearl River Delta, in the southern province of Guangdong, one of the most densely populated areas of China (Yung 1989). In Cantonese, operatic songs are referred to as *yue qu* (粵曲),¹ whereas in Hong Kong, Cantonese opera is known as *yue ju* (粵劇). The word *yue* refers to Guangdong province, and *qu* in Cantonese refers to 'song'. There are three voice types in contemporary Cantonese opera. *Ping hou* (平喉), used for male roles and occasionally for females, has a low pitch, whereas *zi hou* (子喉), used for female roles, is a falsetto, pitched an octave higher than *ping hou* (平喉). *Da hou* (大喉), used for male martial roles, is pitched between these two but *ping hou* (平喉) and *zi hou* (子喉) are used most frequently.

The status of Cantonese opera actors is traditionally associated with age as well as skills. In the past, Cantonese opera actors were assigned roles according to both qualifications and seniority. Even talented newcomers had to accept their position at the bottom of the pecking order simply because they were young newcomers (Tan 2010). The current study therefore hypothesises that age matters when it comes to the degree of respect one can earn in the world of Cantonese operatic singing.

Moreover, as a traditional Chinese music genre, collectivism is deeply embedded in the practice of Cantonese operatic singing (Liang 2001): Chinese people sing together to articulate a sense of collectivism. This leads us to predict that the activities centred on Cantonese operatic singing emphasise the maintenance of group solidarity and interpersonal relationships.

Cantonese operatic singing lessons

Contemporary operatic singing lessons can be traced back to *luo gu gui* (鑼鼓櫃), local amateur troupes (Liu 2001). *Luo gu gui* (鑼鼓櫃) were made up of groups of people who came from rural areas to form amateur Cantonese opera troupes in the early Qing Dynasty (1821–1850)

(Huang and Zeng 1992; Xia and Chen 1989). In the twentieth century, *luo gu gui* (鑼鼓櫃) slowly vanished, replaced by singing clubs and professionals offering voice lessons in Hong Kong instead (Chan 1991). Non-governmental organisations and opera aficionados organised Cantonese operatic singing lessons and other activities for Cantonese opera fans in the 1970s (Liu 2001). In the 1970s, popular music increased in popularity and Cantonese opera suffered a sharp decline. Nevertheless, singing clubs and singing lessons continued to flourish in Hong Kong, offering many types of lessons in Cantonese operatic singing. They can still be found today in almost every district in Hong Kong (Li 2010).

In the past, only those who wanted to become Cantonese opera singers or opera actors learned Cantonese operatic singing. This has changed in recent decades: many Cantonese opera lovers and amateur singers take Cantonese operatic singing lessons to learn vocal skills. It no longer requires years of strenuous and extensive training, and thus attracts many Cantonese opera lovers and older adults in particular (Liu 2001). The popularity of Cantonese operatic singing among older people therefore provides an opportunity to study the relationship between ageing and music activities.

Methodology

Two Cantonese operatic singing lesson courses attended by older adults provided the background for the study. One was organised by the Hong Kong Federation of Trade Unions (HKFTU) and the other by a professional singing club. The HKFTU, the largest labour organisation in Hong Kong, provides its members and the general public with a variety of leisure and cultural activities. This class is cheaper than other such courses organised by professional singing clubs. Many novices take this course before joining a singing club. It is a basic singing course that lasts for three months. This course is called class A. The other course is organised by a professional singing club. The teacher is a very well-known Cantonese operatic singing teacher in Hong Kong. The average singing experience of the participants in this course is over ten years. This course is called class B. These two courses were chosen to ensure that both novices and experienced students formed part of the study.

The author took part in both classes as a participant observer between March and May 2011. Neither course set any age limit on participation. The first class was attended on eight separate occasions and the second class four times. A concert given by participants of class B was attended, as well as the birthday carnival of the teacher of class B. The data were collected through interviews and through participant observation in the classes, practice

sessions, social gatherings and singing concerts. All of the interviews were semi-structured. The face-to-face interviews were conducted through general conversation in the field during lunch and dinner, which lasted for around an hour and a half following each lesson. Follow-up interviews via telephone and in person were also conducted between March 2011 and May 2013. These interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed. The participants were selected based on their willingness to talk and be interviewed. The language of communication was Cantonese. In total, 31 participants were interviewed, comprising 28 students, two teachers and an accompanist.

Grounded theory was selected as the specific research method in this study, thus allowing the development of a theory of Cantonese operatic singing that is grounded in the data itself (Charmaz 2006; Corbin and Strauss 1998). The choice of method was also based on Grossberg's (1995) view that a theory cannot be assumed to travel across any context, but should be context-specific. At an early stage of the research, general terms from the interviews were apprehended, such as *kai ju* (開局; 'practices with musical accompanists') or *shi fu* (師傅; 'teachers'), giving an understanding of the participants' meanings or actions. These terms allowed the data to be organised into categories. The data were then reassembled relating the categories to the context. Hypotheses were generated through the process of categorisation. Finally, a core category was retained which was related to the other categories. Thus, the analysis in this study is divided into four sections. To answer the first research question, the first two sections illustrate the rituals and the roles of participants in the classes. This analysis allows an understanding of how the people in this particular cultural group organise themselves and the way in which this particular music genre and its associated activities contribute to the life satisfaction of older people. The analysis also shows how the status of the participants is influenced by age and experience in addition to skill. The third section examines the satisfaction and benefits that the students gain by participating in the activities. To answer the second research question, the fourth section examines how the experiences of students of Cantonese operatic singing may differ due to alterations in physical health and personal factors brought on by advancing age.

Analysis of findings

There were approximately 20 students in class A and 30 students in class B. In both classes, 40 per cent of the students were men and 60 per cent were women. Both vocal teachers also played musical instruments such as the violin and the *erhu* (二胡) that accompanied the singing lessons, as well as

TABLE 1. Basic biographic information of the participants

Names	Age	Gender	Marital status	Occupational status	Singing experience (years)
Class A:					
Xue jie	60–70	Female	Married	Retired	> 10
Ting jie	50–60	Female	Married	Receptionist	7
Ellie	50–60	Female	Married	Retired	1
Bonnie	40–50	Female	Married	Home-maker	1–2
James	50–60	Male	Married	Retired	First time
Li ge ge	>70	Male	Married	Retired	3–5
Alex	50–60	Female	Married	Retired	> 1
Sam	50–60	Male	Married	Retired	1–2
Lee	50–60	Male	Married	Retired	> 1
Mrs Lee	50–60	Female	Married	Home-maker	1–2
Victoria	50–60	Female	Married	Home-maker	> 1
Samantha	50–60	Female	Married	Home-maker	> 1
Class B:					
Mui	60–70	Female	Married	Retired	> 20
Carman	40–50	Female	Married	Secretary	3
Ada	60–70	Female	Married	Retired	> 20
Kay	50–60	Female	Married	Retired	5
Susan	50–60	Female	Married	Retired	8
May	>70	Female	Married	Retired	> 20
Carrie	60–70	Female	Married	Retired	> 20
Li Hua	60–70	Female	Married	Home-maker	> 10
Fanny	50–60	Female	Married	Working in hospital	7
Joey	50–60	Female	Married	Retired	> 15
Ben	60–70	Male	Married	Retired	> 10
Eric	40–50	Male	Married	Retired	> 10
A Wei	50–60	Male	Married	Retired	> 10
Sarah	50–60	Female	Married	Housewife	10
Ling	60–70	Female	Married	Retired	> 1
Sophie	70–80	Female	Married	Retired	> 10

Note: All names are pseudonyms.

teaching students singing skills. There were accompanists playing a gong in both classes. Each class lasted for about two hours. In both class A (the course organised by HKFTU) and class B (the course organised by the singing club), all of the students were aged over 40 years.

The students in class A were relative beginners, compared with the students in class B.

Four types of rituals

On the basis of observation and interviews, four types of ritual were identified as prominent in Cantonese operatic singing lessons: conversation, musical inquiry, integration and performance. The following explains how

the students gave meanings to the rituals and how these meanings were communicated.

Rituals of conversation

In the singing classes, students gave each other nicknames based on their singing experience, and this behaviour reveals a hierarchy between the participants in the class. Collins (2004) has noted that degrees of friendship (*i.e.* solidarity), intimacy or respect can be revealed in minor conversational routines. Small details in these conversations distinguish strangers, people who know each other well and other people in the group. Changing the form of greetings and small talk is one way to illustrate the character of a social relationship. In class A, most of the students had been studying Cantonese operatic songs for one to two years. In their eyes, they had a similar singing experience. The participants used nicknames or English names such as *shi jie* (師姐; senior sister apprentice) or *shi xiong* (師兄; senior fellow apprentice).² Two students with seven and over ten years of experience were called Ting Jie (婷姐) and Xue Jie (雪姐),³ respectively. Sometimes other students also called them *da shi jie* (大師姐; senior sister apprentice). The above titles also imply family relations in the mentoring system. Xue Jie: ‘Why do we call each other fellow apprentices? Because we treat each other as brothers and sisters, we are just one big family’.

Although Xue Jie and Ting Jie are not the oldest among the students, they have the richest experience of singing Cantonese operatic songs. When one participant, Ellie, was referred to as *shi jie* (師姐; senior sister apprentice), she responded: ‘Don’t call me senior sister apprentice, I have only studied singing for about one year’. At the lunch gathering, Ting Jie explained: ‘All of you [the students] have a similar singing ability in terms of experience’. In addition to experience, age also matter in determining the level of respect one earns. Students aged above 70 are called *Li ge ge*⁴ (哥哥); *ge* (哥) means ‘brother’ or ‘senior’ in Chinese. The above title reflects people’s respect for older classmates.

In class B, most of the students had more than ten years of experience in singing, and they also called each other by nicknames or English names. Each student was accorded a mutual respect with regard to their study. There was no apparent hierarchy among the students in class B. The vocal teacher was called *shi fu* (師傅; master) or *shi gong* (師公; grand master). Mui, one of the students in class B, claimed: ‘He [the vocal teacher of class B] is called grand master, because some students have been taught by his students before. It is a kind of respect’.

In the past, people learned to sing Cantonese opera through apprenticeships. The first thing an opera apprentice learned was how to help the master

actor prepare for the day's work. Lave and Wenger (1991) suggest that such a learning process is a community of practice, which involves more than the technical knowledge and skill involved in singing and acting. Apprentices also participated in activities at multiple levels: the learning process encompassed a wide range of relationships. A newcomer went from being a novice to being a participant, and then finally became an adept or master. The authority of the master and relationships between apprentices varied dramatically across communities of practice.

Although this initial peripheral participation has been replaced by directive pedagogy in Cantonese operatic singing, the above description indicates that the social structure of the practice and its power relationships follow the conventions of traditional apprenticeships. The master is still the locus of authority, and the power relationships among apprentices are still determined by singing experience and age. As the conversational routines illustrate, master–apprentice relationships are asymmetrical. It is expected that the masters are in a position of authority and should be well respected by their students. There are also hierarchical relations between learners and experienced learners; apprentices not only learn singing from their master, they learn from other senior apprentices.

Rituals of musical inquiry

Rituals of musical inquiry refer to the vocal skills training. This ritual can include a large-class course, individual teaching and live practice. In the case of Cantonese operatic classes, both large-class courses and live practices are collective activities, and serve to maintain a collective identity. They also express the class hierarchy. Both class A and B are large-class courses, during which the vocal teachers demonstrate how to sing, and the students imitate the teachers' vocal styles and sing together. The vocal teacher of class A: 'When you sing alone, you have to develop your own style of singing, but when you sing with others, you have to follow the rhythm and melodies of the group'. Each time the vocal teacher of class A introduced new songs to the students, Ting Jie and Xue Jie, the senior sister apprentices, first demonstrated how to sing the new song. Xue Jie sometimes pointed out the mistakes of other fellows and provided useful tips for singing. This further reinforces their roles as senior sister apprentices. However, only senior fellow apprentices and teachers can point out others' mistakes in class, and deviation from this ritual creates tension. This follows the traditional Cantonese opera practice of stressing seniority, which granted privileges to members who were more experienced. Newcomers had to accept their position at the bottom of the pecking order despite possessing good vocal or acting skills. The most experienced actors usually had the final say in casting

(e.g. Liu 2001; Wen 2012). Also, teachers (masters) were just like fathers: they not only taught students singing skills, but also a range of other social skills (Liang 2001).

Although relationships between masters and their students are now more casual, teachers and senior fellow apprentices are still authoritative, particularly when they teach vocal skills. Xue Jie shared her personal experience at a lunch gathering: 'Although I have over ten years' experience of singing, I am a junior sister apprentice in my singing club. When I pointed out a mistake made by my senior sister apprentice, she rebuked me in anger. Master took her side. The musicians finally settled the debate by pointing out her mistakes'. Vocal teachers would feel angry in similar situations. The vocal teacher of class A: 'She [a student of another class] was so rude . . . I did not have enough time to practise the new songs and she shouted at me'. After the vocal teacher left, the musician told the other side of the story, saying, 'It was his fault. He made the same mistakes three times'.

Live practices are called *cao qu* (操曲; singing practices) or *kai ju* (開局; self-practising group) in Chinese. A group of students come to a singing club and sing with accompanists. Students sometimes go to Mainland China for live practices, because they are cheaper. According to Mui, the students meet twice a week at a club for four hours to practise and socialise. The club is divided into two parts: a studio and a sitting room. The studio is big enough for five or six musicians and the sitting room accommodates eight to ten people. The participants distribute the accompanists' printed music scores of the songs they chose, and then a 20-minute solo or duet performance follows. Other members waiting in the sitting room continue to chat, eat and listen to the music in the next room. A few of them warm up in the sitting room or in the corridor. Most of the participants wait until everyone is finished. One of the participants, usually the senior sister apprentice, is responsible for organising the practices: 'We practise singing at the singing club and socialise with one another. We usually stay until the last person has finished practising, and we have dinner together' (Mui). Mui emphasised that live music made a great difference.

Collins (2004) notes that not all rituals are successful. Failed rituals are easy to identify if there is a public announcement and widespread understanding that a ritual is being challenged and questioned. The ritual of live practice is not very successful in class A. Most of the students in class A seldom practise with accompanists. During the study period, there was only one occasion when Ting Jie and Xue Jie had singing practices. Several times during class A, the vocal teacher urged students to practise their skills at singing clubs. He regards this as an essential path to success: 'It is necessary for you to practise your skills. Time is limited in class. Secondary students cannot get a great grade without doing their homework. You cannot acquire

good singing skills without practice'. Xue Jie agrees with the teacher: 'You cannot make much improvement without singing with accompanists'. When asked the reasons why the participants did not join the practice, Ellie explained: 'It is too expensive. It is difficult for novices to sing with accompanists. I would be so embarrassed if I made mistakes'.

Rituals of integration

In the case of Cantonese operatic singing classes, examples of rituals of integration are the Chinese New Year carnival, a master's birthday celebration, annual ceremonies, and lunch and dinner gatherings after class. A major consequence of social rituals is that they can bind people together as a group, even binding divergent groups of people into a larger community. Lunch and dinner represent casual gatherings without formal protocol. Chinese New Year carnival and a master's birthday celebrations are more formal and large scale. Members of other classes are also invited to these events on some occasions.

There are lunch or dinner gatherings after every class. When the students ate lunch or dinner after class, more than half of the students in class A joined these gatherings. At such gatherings, students and teachers get to know one another better. They share their background and discuss news stories and health information. The gatherings are usually full of jokes and laughter. A sense of closeness is increased through eating and chatting. Many students enjoy the gatherings and consider it the most important part of the class. The gatherings also serve as informal settings for exchanging information. Participants share information about other classes, concerts and the norms of Cantonese operatic culture. In such gatherings, they also organise concerts, practices or other events. In a dinner given for the master's birthday celebration, hundreds of students attended, eating and talking or playing mah-jong. Accompanists were available to play music. Some of the students sang on stage before dinner. Divergent groups of students were bound together into a larger community: 'We are familiar with the students in other classes of the master. We see each other on many occasions, such as the master's birthday celebration carnival' (Mui).

In more formal and large-scale gatherings, there is also an apparent hierarchy among Cantonese opera singers. The teacher of class B indicated that he showed more respect for guests who are more experienced in singing Cantonese opera and for those who are older than him. He treated them with deference and greeted them first, even if they did not sing as well as he does. This is yet another indication that the status of a Cantonese opera singer is influenced by both experience and age.

Rituals of performance

Music performances are rituals. The collective focus and the attention on the singers make the experience at concerts more significant than just listening to the same music at home. This is not simply a matter of being seen by the public; rather, the interplay between the singers and the public creates a shared enthusiasm. The subjective ritual experience provides moments of collective emotion (Collins 2004). There are different types of operatic singing performances, ranging from the music performance in senior homes and recreational centres to city halls, from street performances to concerts. A large-scale performance, such as a singing concert, requires much more preparation. The concert usually lasts for three to four hours and about eight to ten students will perform at each concert. Tickets are usually distributed free of charge. Most of the time, students perform duets. Unlike Cantonese operatic performers, whose faces are painted white and who are dressed in traditional costumes, students in a concert will dress formally and use a lighter than normal make-up. They aim to look fashionable and elegant. Dressing up inspires a desire to perform. Xue Jie advised her colleagues to treat the performance as homework. Carman, a student in class B: 'I can dress up and look great. I enjoy singing in front of older people'.

The performances are usually organised by teachers or by senior sister apprentices and participation is voluntary. Only a few of the students in class A had any stage experience, whereas most of the students in class B had enjoyed this experience. According to Ting Jie, the cost of a performance is quite high, particularly concerts: 'To be glamorous, you have to spend thousands of dollars on buying dresses and getting make-up artists, renting a venue and paying for accompanists'. Bonnie said, 'I don't like performance. It costs too much, and I feel shy singing in front of the public'. Some students despised this kind of performance: 'I will not perform at concerts; students only do that to gratify their own vanity' (Susan, a student in class B).

Vocal teachers also have their own performances. For instance, the vocal teacher of class B held concerts once or twice a year. Cantonese operatic celebrities or the teachers may become sacred objects or hero symbols, in the same manner as Durkheim's (1965) political leaders became an emblem for the crowd. At a concert of the vocal teacher of class B, which I attended in May 2011, he was the centre of attention. The audience applauded loudly every time the teacher and his partners sang a new song. When the vocal teacher performed difficult parts well, the audience burst into an enthusiastic applause. The crowd cheered at the end of the concert. Some participants took photos of themselves with the teacher during the intermission.

The above descriptions show that ritual activities are abundant among students of Cantonese operatic singing lessons. The rituals have four major

functions: (a) they maintain identity and emotional attachment for the students; (b) they fulfil the task of musical training through different types of practice, and allow students to implement their pursuit of musical knowledge; (c) they provide the students with the experience of being the centre of attention, and this creates a sense of satisfaction for students; and (d) they maintain hierarchy and roles. The analysis of ritual also illustrates how musical taste is positively linked to social networks, which are particularly important in old age. The status of participants is influenced by age and experience in addition to skill.

As mentioned, some rituals are more successful than the others, in terms of the degree of involvement and the shared emotional focus. In class A, tension sometimes arose when teachers repeatedly urged others to join the rituals. Students in these situations sometimes responded with amusement or jokes, in the same manner that Goffman (1956) described among dispersed cosmopolitan groups. In these cases, there is less conformity and intensity. Students in class A emphasised that, for them, Cantonese operatic singing activities are a kind of leisure activity. They enjoy the freedom to determine how much time and money they spend on this leisure pursuit.

The roles played in a cultural group

In organisational studies of corporate culture there are two primary roles. Some individuals act as carriers of corporate values and heroic mythologies. Heroes are those who act as role models for other members to emulate (Deal and Kennedy 1982). The above concepts are applicable to this study.

Carriers

In the case of Cantonese operatic singing classes, vocal teachers and senior sister apprentices usually act as carriers of the values embedded in the culture. For example, the vocal teacher in class A urged students to engage in the activities that he perceives as important to the learning process. He also organised activities and asked students to join the lunch gatherings. Xue Jie, the senior sister apprentice, served as an intermediary by explaining the meaning and benefits of the rituals.

Heroes

Vocal teachers, senior sister apprentices and Cantonese operatic singers are role models for students to emulate. The hero symbols are created by memorable events, such as singing demonstrations and music performances.

The senior sister apprentices, Xue Jie and Ting Jie, are respected by other students in class A: 'Xue Jie and Ting Jie are experienced in singing. They sing very well' (Ellie).

Famous operatic singers are also perceived as heroes. James, a student of class A, said with appreciation, 'Ma Shi Zeng (馬師曾) was singing well. I would like to sing as well as he did, although it seems impossible'. The vocal teacher in class B was admired because of his singing ability: 'Master is much better than other teachers' (Carman). Mui commented: 'It is hard for you to surpass him [master] in singing, even if you start learning from now on and spend ten years on it'. In addition to rituals and roles, shared values were another core element of group culture.

Core value

Lifelong commitment is clearly demonstrated by the fact that many students spend years learning Cantonese operatic singing skills. Almost all of the students in class A and class B had participated in the same class over time, and most of the students in class B had attended the same class for more than ten years. Learning to sing is part of their lives. Students in both classes also emphasise that Cantonese operatic singing is a practice of lifelong learning. 'The pursuit of musical knowledge will never end. There is no graduation date for a Cantonese operatic singing class. I have spent over ten years learning the skills, and I am still working hard on it' (Xue Jie).

The other core value of Cantonese operatic singing lessons is enjoyable learning. Fun and happiness are two words mentioned many times by the students when they are asked to describe the class: 'The members are playful. We have a lot of fun in class. I am lucky to come here, and I enjoy spending time with them' (Bonnie). The vocal teacher of class B said: 'Cantonese operatic singing is a kind of folk art. In the eyes of the students, it is a leisure activity. Students have fun and enrich their lives through the learning process'.

Music participation's contribution to positive ageing

Past research has shown how music can improve the quality of people's personal and social lives, particularly for older people who are frail (Blacking 1995), through relaxation (Crozier 1997) and maintaining a sense of wellbeing (Sidell 1995). But less is known about why and how healthy older people make use of music in their daily lives. The current study has provided evidence that some older adults who enjoy good health also gain a sense of wellbeing and good health by engaging in the rituals of Cantonese operatic

singing lessons. Musical participation provides ways for students to maintain active ageing. Some of the students, such as Ellie, Kay and Ting Jie, had seldom sung or listened to Cantonese operatic songs before they first enrolled on the course. But the exhilaration of experiencing operatic singing gave them a sense of commitment to the activity. The leisure activities of operatic singing initially were their means for passing time and social interaction, but it had become an end in itself.

Satisfaction, wellbeing and health promotion

Students experienced three different types of satisfaction while participating in this activity: emotional closeness, a sense of achievement and relaxation. The positive atmosphere of the Cantonese operatic singing lessons and the related activities were highly valued by the students. Many expressed their appreciation for their colleagues and teachers: 'Our colleagues are very nice and funny. I feel very happy when we practise together' (Ellie). The pursuit of achievements or personal goals through participation in leisure activities in later life establishes a sense of personal accomplishment (Holahan 1988; Lawton 1993). Students in both operatic singing classes enjoyed their achievements in the learning process: 'I was scared to death to sing in front of other people in the past, my hands shook just uncontrollably. It is much better now. I have developed self-confidence in the process. That is great!' (Bonnie). Students in both classes also enjoyed singing operatic songs because it reduced stress and at the same time promoted relaxation: 'In the past, I was not interested in Cantonese operatic singing, but I have now discovered that Cantonese operatic songs lyrics are beautiful. I will imagine the stories when I sing the songs. I spend two to three hours a day practising. It makes me feeling good and relaxed' (Ellie). Many students regarded singing as a good exercise. Joey confirmed that singing exercises improved his respiratory system and benefited his physical health. Another student, Sarah, emphasised that classes helped her to maintain a healthy living style and that good health and body shape are important elements in singing. Musical tastes can promote wellbeing by developing social networks, creating satisfaction and maintaining health through organised activities.

Social resources and economic resources

In class B, some students have become singing teachers. Mui, who has taught Cantonese operatic singing for more than ten years, is one example. She wanted to keep improving her skills, and thus she joined the course again. In both classes, students exchanged not only information about operatic

singing but also about their health. They also help each other with practical tasks such as shopping and repairing computers. Creating new networks and sustaining friendship are important considerations in choosing leisure activities. When asked why they kept enrolling in the same class, more than half of the participants stated that it is because they made friends in the class.

Music participation and lifecourse

Through participating in musical activities, Cantonese operatic singing often becomes an important part of the lives of these students, and plays a vital role in defining their self-identity after retirement or in old age. Lifecourse events such as retirement allow participants to have more time to develop their interests. More than half of the students interviewed stated that they came to learn Cantonese operatic singing because they wanted an activity after their retirement. Ellie, a student of class A, is a retired teacher: 'I have retired and my child has already grown up. I have nothing to do at home, and want to kill time'. However, some lifecourse events also stop participants from music participation. For example, some classmates of the participants stopped learning Cantonese operatic singing to take care of their grandchildren while others left the course because they were not in good health.

Vocal abilities may change when people reach the sixth and seventh decades of life. Sophie is one such example. She first learned to sing in *zi hou* (子喉), which is used for female roles, a falsetto pitched an octave higher than *ping hou* (平喉). However, she was no longer able to reach such high notes when she reached the sixth decade of life. She accepted her master's advice and changed to singing in *ping hou* (平喉), which is used for male roles. But as Bruhn (2002) notes, the change of voice does not necessarily coincide with biological age. Many of the participants took good care of their singing voice and were able to keep singing in *zi hou* (子喉) when they reached the sixth decade of life.

Conclusion

This study has examined the relationships between musical taste, social networks and successful ageing. Past research has indicated that musical tastes are important in old age for maintaining friendships as well as promoting physical and psychological health, but little is known about the way this maintenance is obtained. This study contributes to earlier research by demonstrating that it is the rituals and cultures of particular musical

groups that relate older adult's music participation to a sense of collectivism, thereby contributing to the maintenance of interpersonal relationships and promoting successful ageing. Specifically, this study shows that the rituals of musical inquiry, integration and performance organised around musical tastes provide a place and time for older adults to meet and socialise. In parallel, the core values embedded in the culture allow the members to associate as a group and formed a sense of group identity, which offers a basis for creating and sustaining friendship networks. A sense of closeness and emotional attachment is developed within such cultural groups. Although some adults who are retired or living alone may have limited opportunities for social interaction, musical taste enables them to form replacement relationships as their social networks shrink. In effect, musical taste becomes a significant source of social resources.

This study also shows that the rituals and culture formed around musical tastes encourage sustainable physical and social activity levels. Rituals of musical inquiry and performance provide an opportunity for individuals to practise and perform in front of an audience, resulting in a sense of achievement and satisfaction for older adults. Particularly, the culture of Cantonese operatic lessons encourages members to enjoy and continue their musical practices. The lifelong and enjoyable pursuit of musical participation enables older adults to stay active. Singing is good exercise for the respiratory system and a form of relaxation. As such, musical taste promotes wellbeing and successful ageing.

Furthermore, this study has made a modest contribution towards an understanding of later life by elucidating the ways in which age, lifecourse and music participation interact. Lifecourse events such as retirement allow participants more time to develop their interests. Indeed, many participants were already retired, and their economic standing had been improved by retirement pensions and insurance plans. The stability of their economic status, and the availability of time, along with better health care and nutrition, allowed older people to develop activities like music participation later in life. However, vocal abilities and health conditions may decline with ageing, thereby influencing one's level of musical participation.

Finally, it should be noted that this study has focused on the active and sociable individuals who comprised the participants, and it neither explored the reasons why some individuals do not participate in group activities, nor considered the meanings attributed to culture and the activities among older people not involved in operatic singing. Future research could focus on less sociable and active music participants, and compare the role that music can play for individuals at different stages of life.

NOTES

- 1 Romanisation of the Chinese proper noun throughout this study is based on the *han yu pin yin* method, which is the official system for transcribing Chinese characters in China. The names of Chinese authors and participants are also romanised within this system unless they have other better-known names in English.
- 2 *Jie* means sister or senior in Chinese.
- 3 These two participant's names have been altered, but their original alias also has 'jie' at the back of the name.
- 4 This participant's name has been altered, but their original alias also has 'ge' at the back of the name.

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