

Arts awards

Building on HSBC's deep-rooted ties to the community, The Hongkong Bank Foundation helps build a richer life for local people. **Yasmin Ghahremani** checks out some of its most colourful projects

AS A CHILD, Ng Kar-min hated Cantonese opera. To her, it was 'old-fashioned and boring'. But all that changed when, aged 14, she was asked to go to a performance to celebrate her mother's birthday. Ng obliged and fell in love with the spectacle before her: the singing, the percussion, the costumes and most of all the stage movements stylised like martial arts.

More than a decade later that passion has become her profession. Ng has just finished a four-year programme in Cantonese Opera at The Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts (APA), where she put her 'martial arts' interest to work playing male characters. She has performed in London, Berlin and Guangzhou, and still harbours strong ambitions.

'When I step onto the stage I can forget myself and become another person,' she enthuses. 'And I really enjoy getting a good response from the audience.'

But Ng would not be where she is today without The Hongkong Bank Foundation scholarship she received – part of a broad range of local development initiatives supported by HSBC through the foundation. She and fellow student Cheng Wing-mui – who always performs as a female opposite Ng – each received HK\$130,000 to cover expenses for the APA's two-year Advanced Diploma Programme in Cantonese Opera.

Each year the foundation donates more than HK\$30m to the community. Education is one of the key pillars of its work, and arts schemes in particular play an important role.

'We look for opportunities for educational diversity because Hong Kong is an international city,' says Kathy Wong, secretary of the advisory committee at The Hongkong Bank Foundation. 'Many parents put much emphasis on academic achievement, but there are also other things in life that are important.'

The foundation's involvement with the APA's Cantonese Opera programme began with

Below: an academy member performs on stage. A HK\$1.1m donation to the academy bought more than 300 tailor-made costumes

the programme's inception four years ago. As the academy set up the programme, it sought funds to buy the elaborate costumes and props used in Cantonese opera. The foundation stepped in with a HK\$1.1m donation. That money bought more than 300 tailor-made costumes, 350 head-dresses and 800-plus accessories.

'If we hadn't had the donation, we would have had to hire the costumes,' explains Sian Yeung, programme administrator for the academy's Chinese Traditional Theatre Programme. 'As an example, a female dress costs around HK\$1,000 to hire for one evening so we would have had to spend at least a few thousand dollars per night just on costumes.'

In 2001, the APA applied for and won foundation support for two scholarships for local 'mature' students over 25. Such students are particularly needy because they often don't have the financial support of their families, and must buck established norms. Cheng, for instance, says her parents were very worried about her when she gave up her profession as an accountant to pursue her real love. 'Accounting is very dull,' she says. 'But Cantonese opera is so interesting and colourful.'

Cheng and Ng both have the admiration of the foundation. 'It takes great commitment and courage for them to devote themselves to this art,' says Wong. 'It's not easy to find people who are both talented and interested in devoting their time.'

Cantonese opera students are not the only APA students to benefit from the foundation. Students in the disciplines of dance, drama, music and technical arts get to take part in the HK\$550,000-a-year Mainland-Hong Kong Exchange programme. Hong Kong participants are sent on short trips to mainland China during their summer or winter holidays to study with masters in traditional arts. In fact, APA dance students recently won second prize in a Chinese dance contest in Chengdu, thanks to





the programme. But the scheme also helps Chinese students wishing to study in Hong Kong. Three mainland students each year receive full, one-year scholarships to study at the academy in the disciplines of dance, music and Cantonese opera.

'We try to recruit Chinese students in areas where local talents are not readily available,' says Yeung. 'For instance, a male ballet dancer or a double bass player.'

Outside of the APA, the foundation is involved in other local arts education initiatives. For example, it provides discount tickets for students to attend the Hong Kong Arts Festival so that young people can be exposed to the work of international artists. It is also working with the Arts Development Council on a programme that promotes creativity by integrating arts education with primary and secondary school curricula.

In the first three-year phase of the project, professional artists helped schools develop extra-curricular arts activities. The second phase, which is ongoing, integrates the arts with other subject matters so that, for

Students dressed in vibrantly coloured costumes stage a range of traditional Cantonese opera

instance, a history teacher may use drama to teach a certain lesson.

The foundation has built a HK\$7.85m teaching centre for early-childhood learning in Tai Po and a HK\$4.5m learning centre for troubled youths at the Hui Chung Sing Memorial School. It has helped more than 230 teachers become accredited sports coaches, and every year

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provides more than 300 scholarships in subjects ranging from business to social work.

'We try to identify education elements in sectors in Hong Kong that need support,' says Wong. No single charitable organisation can handle every community need. But by targeting specific programmes with a clear local benefit, the foundation hopes to make Hong Kong a better place for everyone to live. ■

For more information on the foundation, including funding guidelines, visit the website, www.hongkongbankfoundation.org