



YU Lai-zhen 余麗珍 (1923–2004.3.4)

Actress

A native of Kaiping County, Guangdong Province, Yu was brought up in Singapore. Having cultivated a deep interest in Cantonese opera from an early age, she started learning to perform at the age of 13. By 16, Yu was already a rising new star on the opera stage and was a well-known name among overseas Chinese communities in Southeast Asia and in the US. In 1942, Yu performed as a female principal for the Fung Wong Opera Troupe in titles including *Fisherman's Girl Sells Water Chestnut* and *Chan Sai-mei Denies His Wife* (with Pak Kui-wing). In 1943, Yu and Luo Pinchao formed the Kwong Wah Opera Troupe to perform Cantonese operas. They worked with other performers including Lan Chi Pak, Lee Hoi-chuen, Wu Dip Nui and Cui Tsi-chiu, and the troupe's debut programme was *The Prince Who Loves a Slave*. In the same year, Yu appeared in *Farewell to My Lady* a highlight of which she was seen performing for the first time *cai qiao* (the portrayal of foot-binding via stilt walking). After the war, Yu became the headline performer of troupes including Tai Fung Wong Opera Troupe and Lai Chun Fa Opera Troupe, and formed the Lux Opera Troupe.

Yu was a master in performing traditional Cantonese opera repertoires and feats. For her artistic excellence, she was lauded as 'The Queen of the Art of *Dan*'. Her stage successes included *The Sparrow's Pavilion*, *The Cuckoo's Soul in March* and *The Crab Beauty*.

Yu first appeared on the screen in 1947 in an adaptation of *Cuckoo's Spirit in March*. Together with her husband—renowned librettist Lee Siu-wan—she founded the Lux Film Production Company in 1959, producing mainly opera films. The company produced over 90 films between 1959 and 1967, including *Riot in the Temple* (1960), *Seven Phoenixes* (1961), *Riot in the Palace* (1962), *A Girl Named Leng Chau-mei* (Part 1 & 2, 1963), *Four Children* (Part 1 & 2, 1964), and *A Half Bed Space* (1964). After the founding of Lux, Yu concentrated on filmmaking instead of the stage. Lux's productions helped preserve many traditional *paichang* (formulaic scenes), *gongjia* (feats) and acrobatic techniques that define the art of Cantonese opera. Her most famous screen appearances were in *A King Speaks His Heart in the Cuckoo's Song* (1951), *The Impeachment of Yim Sung* (1952), *The Emperor's Nocturnal Sacrifice* (1952) and *The Headless Empress Bears a Son* (Part 1-3, 1957). Her last appearance on the screen was in *Teaching the Son to Slay the Emperor* (1967). All in all, Yu starred in over 140 feature films.

Yu was also known as one of the 'Eight Peonies'—a group of famous opera actresses which included Tang Bik-wan, Law Yim-hing, Fung Wong Nui, Ng Kwan-lai and others. After her retirement in 1968, she emigrated to Canada. She passed away in 2004.
