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Feature

Cantonese Opera under Japanese Occupation and Postwar Cantonese Cinema

Wong Ha-pak

As I was scouting supplementary material for *Hong Kong Filmography Vol II*, I combed through some of the newspapers published between the end of 1941 and August 1945, a period that saw the suspension of local film production. Despite a handful of new Cantonese films, only old titles were available for public screening. Cantonese opera, on the contrary, remained vibrant at that time. The war did not stop the artists from performing on stage, leading to a wealth of new and diverse works. Below gives an overview of the Cantonese opera scene in Hong Kong under Japanese Occupation, and hence its relationship with the development of postwar Cantonese cinema.

Just over a month after Japanese Occupation, some of the cinema houses in Hong Kong already resumed Cantonese opera performances. Film production, however, came to a standstill. Many screen actors thus returned to the opera stage to make ends meet. Among them where Cheung Wood-yau, Cheang Mang-ha, Kwong Shan-siu, Lam Kwun-shan, as well as backstage talents Chu Tsi-kwai, Yu Leung, Wong Fook-hing, etc.

In the face of political turmoil, many stage and screen artists in Hong Kong fled to safety and made a living somewhere else. Some of them formed their own troupes to perform, mostly Cantonese opera, in Macau. Cantonese opera masters Sit Kok-sin, Sun Ma Si-tsang briefly lived in Macau, while Tam Lan-hing, Yam Kim-fai, Chan Yim-nung, Poon Yat On, Sheung Hoi Mui and others made a longer stay. Wong Fa-chit who used to work backstage became the programme manager of Teatro Cheng Peng; But Fu, Chow Sze-luk worked as writer and set designer respectively for the troupes. Playwrights Tsui Yeuk-ngoi and Fung Chi-fun, with the support of Liu Hap-wai, Auyeung Kim, etc, created an impressive repertoire of new works. The daily cinema listings in *Jornal Va Kio*, Macau's local newspaper gave a solid testament of how vibrant the Cantonese opera scene was at that time. Such information offers a way to understand the efforts the wartime Hong Kong stage and screen artists had made.

Cantonese opera: An influence on postwar cinema

In Hong Kong, some of the cinema houses that put on Cantonese opera performances during the Occupation were Meiji (originally Queen's but was renamed by the

Japanese forces), King's, Ko Shing, Po Hing and Oriental. On average there were two to three shows every day. From 1942 to August 1945, a rough figure of about 420 titles claiming to be 'new' or 'premiere' were performed in Hong Kong. By 'new' it meant new original works, adaptations of classics, or works that appeared just before the war started. The cinemas tried to attract the public by highlighting the originality of the programmes, and by the use of three-dimensional backdrop and eye-catching lighting design. It had been a very competitive scene at that time.

When the war was over, Cantonese film production gradually resumed. It appeared that the films between 1947 and '49 were under much influence of Cantonese opera, some of which displayed an obvious linkage with the wartime Cantonese operas. For example:

Wife in the Morning, Sister-in-Law at Night: adapted from a Cantonese opera written by Auyeung Kim, and performed by Ming Sing Opera Troupe (led by Auyeung and Yam Kim-fai, and was later restructured as Sun Sing Opera Troupe.) It was premiered on 6 August 1943 at Teatro Vitoria in Macau.

Flowers after the Storm: adapted from a Cantonese opera co-written by Chan Kung-hon and Yu Bing-yiu, and premiered on 9 July 1945 at Teatro Apollo, Macau. Produced by Tai Sheung Opera Troupe, it was re-staged at Ko Shing Theatre, Hong Kong on 10 October the same year.

Sex to Kill the Devil: adapted from Mok Chi-cheung's work of the same name. Premiered on 13 July 1943 at Ko Shing Theatre, this Sun Chung Wah Opera Troupe production was a box-office hit, and became the best-known work of the company. Lead actress Chung Shiu-lee rose to instant fame. She made an impression on both stage and screen with her reportedly 'erotic' performances.

Romance of Rome Palace: starring Chung Shiu-lee, and written and directed by But Fu. No indication has been found as to whether the film was an adaptation from Cantonese opera. On 12 January 1944, Tai Chung Kwok Opera Troupe performed for the first time at Ko Shing Theatre a work of the same name. It was written by Tong Tik-sang and directed by Yu Leung, with Chu Tsi-kwai as stage manager. Both the screen and the stage productions depicted a male protagonist on exile and caught in an affair with the Queen. Both works featured western period costumes.

Three novels by Ling Siu-sang, namely *Waving the Red Ribbon*, *Red Chamber in the Sea*, and *The Fickle Lady* were adapted into Cantonese opera during the war. The works were staged in both Hong Kong and Macau, followed by the film versions after the war. The stage and screen versions of *Waving the Red Ribbon* featured actor Luo Pinchao. Not all Cantonese operas were translated into film but their influence on some of the movies was not difficult to identify:

Where is the Lady's Home: written by Fung Chi-fun, produced by Ping On Opera

Troupe and premiered on 30 June 1942 at Meiji Theatre. A movie of the same name was released by the end of 1947. Written and directed by Lee Tit, the film told a story very similar to the opera version: two lovers were forced to separate because of their class difference, resulting in the tragedy of the female protagonist. In the beginning of 1948, Fung filed a lawsuit against the film for copyright infringement, but he lost the case.

The Story of Wong Fei-hung: written by Tong Tik-sang, staged by Chiu Wah Opera Troupe in September 1944. Tong the librettist had been creating works using the stories of martial artists Fong Sai-yuk and Wu Wai-kin. Two months before the show opened, the *wushu* troupe led by Lam Sai-wing's disciples had performed it at Oriental Theatre. On 8 October 1949, *The Story of Wong Fei-hung*, the film version based on the original novel by Chu Yu-chai, was released.

From stage to screen

As many opera artists fled for their lives after the fall, those who remained in Hong Kong, such as Yu Lai-zhen, Luo Pinchao, Lee Hoi-chuen, Chung Shiu-lee, Koo Tin-ng and Law Yim-hing, rose to take up a major role on stage. After the war, they turned to screen acting and became widely recognised. They were joined by more opera artists such as Chan Yim-nung, Wong Chin-sui and Pak Suet-sin who had continued to perform in Hong Kong and Macau during the war, and also child actors Yu Kai and Cheng Bik-ying.

The backstage talents participated in the Cantonese opera productions in Hong Kong and Macau included Fung Chi-fun, Tsui Yeuk-ngoi, Yuen Chun, Mok Chi-cheung, Suen Siu-ming, Sung Wah-man and emerging playwright Kwok Lam-fong, etc. There were also Lee Siu-wan and Tong Tik-sang who worked closely with the film circle after the war. They were prolific writers during the war years. In the autumn of 1943, they created a series of work for the troupes Kwong Wah and Yee King Tin; their new works were staged every two weeks. The duo also co-wrote *Orchid in the Empty Valley*.

During the war, Tong Tik-sang wrote or revised as many as 75 opera scripts. In June 1943, he created a number of new works back to back for Sun Sze Toi Opera Troupe: *The Story of Double Hammers*, *Flood in Sizhou*, *Zhan Zhao the Southern Hero*, *Dissolute Father and Sons*, etc. As a playwright, he paid much attention to spectacles. For example, in *Flames in Icebergs*, three-dimensional backdrop and lighting design were employed to give life to the titled burning icebergs.

Tong was keen on drawing inspiration from films. Four months after Cantonese film *A Couple Forever* was premiered in April 1943, he adapted it into a Cantonese opera and pioneered the use of 'cinematic set design' for the performance. His other

stage adaptations from films included *Madame Butterfly*, *Newcomers*, etc. One could also trace the influence of Mandarin cinema on *The Promiscuous Woman*, and *The Woman with Leprosy* that he wrote for Yee King Tin Troupe. Tong's sources of writing were so diverse that he not only rewrote literary classic *Thunderstorm* into opera, but also produced a wide array of new works, such as the action-packed *Nocturnal Robbery of the Double Hooks*, romantic melodrama *A Loner*, comedy *Adulteress*, costume epic *Leaving Zhaoguan in a Snowy Night*, and *An Excursion to Hell*, a work about the supernatural.

Business factors of film and stage productions

For the troupes, variety was the key to box-office success. They highlighted the different genres of their productions and their creative crossover. It is not uncommon to see taglines such as 'a brand new philosophical horror adventure', and the different elements they injected to the work such as acrobatics and cross-dressing. In *Legend of the White Snake* by Chiu Wah Opera Troupe, for instance, Luo Pinchao and Cheang Mang-ha cross-dressed to deliver in a highly entertaining manner the romance between the beautiful snake fairy and the timid scholar. With the limited material in hand, below offers a preliminary categorisation of the operas at that time:

Folklore and historical stories: *Lee Yuen-ba, the Giant Fighter*; *Fong Sai-yuk, the Unrivalled Boy*; *Wu Wai-kin Smashes the Engine Room*

Fantasy and horror: *Yeung Wing Combats the Seven Monsters*, *Burning of the Golden Dragon*, *A Ghostly Tale*

Erotic: *Sex to Kill the Devil*, *Monkey King Crushes the Spider Cave*, *Jungle Queen*

Martial arts: *The Chronicle of the Conquering Admiral*, *Shaolin Meets Wudang*, *The Ultimate Fight in Spring*

Melodrama: *The Orphan*, *The Widow*, *A Good Mother and a Hooker*

Comedy: *A Thief who Marries a Rich Woman*, *The Scary Wife*, *The Secret Recipe*

Adaptations from literature or film: *Yu, the Lady of Beauty*; *Fate in Tears and Laughter*, *Snow White*

Crime stories based on real-life cases: *Tragedy in Hee Wong Terrace and the Hanging of Kwan Lai-chun*, *A Murder Case in Guangzhou*

Some of these genres could be found also in the postwar Cantonese cinema, such as the horror and erotic films which were often condemned during that time for promoting pornography and superstition. Before the films *Charlie's Visit to Hell* and *A Devil Woman's Uproar in Hell*, wartime Cantonese operas *Lotus Pan's Visit to Hell* and *An Excursion to Hell* already saw the representation of the underworld. In fact, Cantonese opera originated from rural life, which was characterised by myths and a culture of worship. Drawing inspirations from such cultural practices would no doubt

create works that appealed to the masses. Cantonese films thus applied a similar formula as they also saw the demand from a majority of the working class at that time.

There was a close relationship between Cantonese opera and the emergence of Cantonese cinema. The two did not distance itself from one another as they developed over time. Instead, an even stronger mutual influence could be seen during the 1950s and 60s. The absence of Cantonese cinema during Japanese Occupation made Cantonese opera for once the only available theatrical entertainment in Cantonese. The opera artists were able to establish a close relationship with the audience as the industry prospered. This helped set the tone for Cantonese cinema to develop afterwards. For both Cantonese opera during the fall, and Cantonese cinema after the war, the environments they were facing were similar: both being highly competitive, and thus in need of popular appeal. It might be worthy of further investigation to see how postwar cinema referenced the ways Cantonese opera survived and developed its market under the Occupation. (Translated by Vivian Leong)

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Feature

From Lux Opera Troupe to Lux Film Co – A Study of Yu Lai-zhen's Strategy in Developing Her Performing Arts Career

Chan Hiu-ting

Known as the 'Queen of the Art of Dan' (the term *dan* meaning 'female leading actress' in Chinese opera), Yu Lai-zhen (1923–2004) reigned over the Hong Kong Cantonese opera scene throughout the 1950s and 60s. She bedazzled audiences on both the stage and silver screen with roles such as the headless empress, the supernatural beauty and the foot-binding heroine. Having lived with her parents in Singapore since childhood, Yu was already performing on stage all over the world at a young age, becoming an established artist especially in Singapore and Malaysia. Her first documented stage performance in Hong Kong was recorded in *Wah Kiu Yat Po* in May of 1942,[1] after which she based herself in the city to further her career until her retirement in 1967.

A look back at Yu's career reveals that her playwright husband, Lee Siu-wan, contributed much to her success as he was the creative mind behind many works in which she had the leading role. The tailor-made advantage meant that scripts melded with her performance style and enabled her to show off her unique singing and martial arts skills. Apart from being a talented writer, Lee was skilled in making administrative arrangements as well. After the war, he actively formed troupes to put on shows starring his wife. And when Yu ventured into film, he also adapted many of his popular works to the silver screen, including *Heartbreak Family* (1950), *The Season of Falling Petals* (1950) and *A King Speaks His Heart in the Cuckoo's Song* (1951), all of which became blockbusters. In 1959, the couple founded the self-financed Lux Film Co and produced numerous Cantonese opera fantasy films written by Lee and starring Yu. The husband-and-wife team rolled out more than 80 features in the eight short years following their company's establishment. Although many of Yu's contemporaries also formed their own troupes and founded their own film companies, Lux Film Co was ahead of the pack in terms of mode of production, as well as the number of features.

Features starring Yu were often produced according to a specific set of processes – Lee would first come up with a script for the stage which Yu performed with a troupe, then audience response would determine whether a film adaptation was to be made. Her most notable works, *The Crab Beauty* and *The Headless Empress Bears a Son*, were both stage productions which were made into movies due to their

financial success. *The Crab Beauty* was first performed in Southeast Asia by Lux Opera Troupe, after which its first instalment premiered in Hong Kong at Ko Shing Theatre on 6 August 1956. Its immense popularity led Lee to write another four instalments, allowing the production to run for an entire month, sometimes with matinee and evening performances taking place on the same day. The film adaptation (Parts One & Two) was shown at theatres eight months later in March of 1957.[2]

Lux Opera Troupe originally planned to build on the success of *The Crab Beauty* by launching another supernatural production, *The Headless Empress Bears a Son*, in September of 1956. The theatre, however, opposed the idea as they feared that audiences might find the word 'headless' inauspicious during the autumn season, making it unpopular.[3] Nonetheless, the film adaptation was screened in Hong Kong in September the following year (1957). Its box-office success proved that the curious audience did not really fear any taboos.[4] The film's newspaper advertisement dubbed it as the adaptation of 'the stage production which took Singapore by storm' and stated it as being 'scarier, more bizarre and moving than the original work'. Although there is no information indicating that the stage version of *The Headless Empress* was ever performed in Hong Kong, the advertisement revealed that the troupe had put the show on abroad.[5]

While Cantonese opera is an art, as a form of entertainment, it must also meet the audience's expectations and satisfy their desires. Testing the viewers' response to new productions on the stage first is indeed an effective means of deciding whether to create sequels or film adaptations – after actors perform a new work on stage, its plot can be 'refined' to create a Cantonese opera film suited to the audience's tastes. Before *The Crab Beauty* and *The Headless Empress Bears a Son* were brought to Hong Kong, both productions were performed in Southeast Asia, reaching larger audience numbers and a wider viewer demographic. Since they were already hugely successful abroad, both the troupe and film company saw them as works worth investing in for reruns. Furthermore, box-office performance of their big-screen adaptations would also be guaranteed. Lee always had a comprehensive marketing strategy for writing and producing his works – he was adept at working out the audience's likes and dislikes, as well as capturing the market's needs. Moreover, the founding of Lux Film Co most likely gave him more liberty in adapting his stage works to film. As for Yu, she was not only an all-rounded actress, but also a boss of the company – this double identity might have given her greater authority and freedom to develop her career as an artist.

An overview of Lux Film Co's Cantonese opera features indicates that the production team never skimped on special effects and film editing. It always worked hard to deliver stunning visuals which were fresh to the audience, while retaining the

traditional sound and artistic elements of Cantonese opera. Of course, the arrangements and handling of each film's plot, camera angles and backdrops always put Yu front and centre, highlighting her unique performance style in an effective manner. The film *Prince Tailone* (1961) serves as a good example – at the beginning of the movie, when Ling Ching-wan (played by Yam Kim-fai) leaves home to go to war, his wife, Wong Bo-shan (played by Yu Lai-zhen), does not want him to leave. The couple then perform a classic Cantonese opera act involving traditional techniques whereby the husband cuts his robe which his wife is clinging to in order to depart. Later on, when famine strikes the village, Wong willingly cuts out her own flesh to feed her adopted son. Fortunately, the Heavenly Mother takes pity on her and gives her a divine pill which enables her flesh to regenerate infinitely. From then on, she continues this unpleasant and painful practice for the next ten years to ensure that her adopted son has food to eat.[6] The first 'cut' is an expression of fidelity to the art of Cantonese opera, while the second 'cut' highlights Yu's unique artistic style – even though her contemporaries also portrayed the role of the loving wife and mother destined for misfortune, Yu's characters go through their trials and tribulations in particularly bizarre ways. As a matter of fact, every role that she has played can be associated with the word 'ruthlessness'. First of all, each character is subjected to brutal acts such as being beaten, having her eyes branded, decapitation or beheading which leave her severely wounded. She then reappears in odd and extremely ugly forms, often involving blood, pus, dishevelled hair or a bodiless head. In other words, the first layer of 'ruthlessness' refers to the ordeals each character experiences, while the second denotes the 'ruthlessness' with which the actress cast aside the typical image of the beautiful *dan* for her career, the thing which distinguished Yu from her contemporaries. It must also be noted that the element of 'ruthlessness' in her films is greatly enhanced by their supernatural and bizarre aspects. Returning to *Prince Tailone* as an example, if Wong Bo-shan did not receive the Heavenly Mother's divine help, she would not have been able to accomplish the odd act of relentlessly cutting off her own flesh over and over again.

In summary, the development of Yu Lai-zhen's performing arts career in Hong Kong was an all-rounded one, making her an accomplished actress on both the stage and the silver screen. In the context of Cantonese opera and film development in Hong Kong, the works by Lux Opera Troupe and Lux Film Co show that Yu, often labelled as the 'weirdest' and 'most ruthless' *dan* in history, has contributed tremendously to the introduction of the supernatural genre in both Cantonese opera stage productions and films. (Translated by Johnny Ko)

Notes:

1 Yu Lai-zhen starred alongside Cantonese opera legends Pak Kui-wing (1892–1974), Sun Ma Si-tsang (1916–1997) and Lee Hoi-chuen (1901–1965) in works such as *The Legend of Chung Mo-yim*, *The Eighth Yeung Sister's Quest to Retrieve the Golden Knife* and *The Story of Lau Kam-ting* under the Phoenix Troupe during her first years in Hong Kong. See *Wah Kiu Yat Po*, 1 May to 10 June 1942, p 4 (in Chinese).

2 *Ta Kung Pao*, 6 August to 10 September 1956, p 5 (in Chinese).

3 On 12 September 1956, *Wah Kiu Yat Po* advertised a new Lux Opera Troupe production to be played at Ko Shing Theatre, but a movie was shown in its place the following day. In the 'Chinese Opera Titbits' column of the same paper on 16 September 1956, it was mentioned that the theatre feared audiences would find *The Headless Empress Bears a Son* inauspicious and asked the troupe to put on a different show.

4 Veteran film critic, Yu Mo-wan, stated that the film was a huge hit in Hong Kong and even broke box-office records. See Yu Mo-wan, *Anecdotes of Hong Kong Cinema, Vol 5: The 1950s (Part Two)*, Hong Kong: Sub-Culture Ltd, 2001, p 102 (in Chinese).

5 *Wah Kiu Yat Po*, 18 September 1957, 3rd spread, p 2 (in Chinese).

6 *The Story of Muk Kwai-ying, Part One*, produced in 1959 by Lux's sister company, Lai Kwong, also featured similar elements. In the scene where Muk Kwai-ying (played by Yu Lai-zhen) becomes trapped in the Heavenly Gate Formation, while Yu expresses the character's desperation through the traditional techniques of 'gaau sha' (a mixture of footwork and body movement) and 'hair-flinging', a strange giant eagle (played by an uncredited actor) can be seen above her head. Such bizarre images are rarely seen in the works of other Cantonese opera stars.

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