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The Writer/Director in Focus III

Mok Hong-si in his Lan Kwong Tenure

Eric Tsang

An anecdote in the memoir of Wong Cheuk-hon, the founder of Lan Kwong Film Company tells the first afternoon when *Woman's Affairs* (1961), a Lan Kwong comedy directed by Mok Hong-si was publicly screened. As the story goes, Wong visited Victoria Theatre in Central to check on the box office himself. Arriving in the office, the boss heard loud rumbling sound from the cinema house above. It turned out to be the stomping feet of the audience, hugely amused and laughing incessantly. By then already recognised as 'The Great Comedy Writer', Mok successfully built a distinctive brand of comedy for Lan Kwong with this film.¹

In retrospective, 1960s could be regarded as the heyday of Mok's artistic career (from 1961 to 1967, he released at least eight titles every year while the year 1963 saw as many as fifteen titles.) His collaboration with Lan Kwong was particularly important. Lan Kwong was a major Cantonese film company during the time, and it seemed that Wong Cheuk-hon held Mok in high regard. In the wealth of 55 Lan Kwong's titles, 21 films were directed by Mok (Note that *Romance in the Air* (1963) was co-directed by Mok and Lo Yu-kei.) Not to mention Mok's contribution to Liberty Film, a Mandarin film company set up also by Wong before running Lan Kwong. Mok was asked to direct four titles, namely, *Princess of Sun Moon Lake* (1956), *Mother Dearest* (1956), *Lady Sings the Blues* (1957) and *Orphans of the Storm* (1959). In these films, actresses Lin Tsui and Ting Ying took their career-breaking roles. Lin later turned to Motion Picture and General Investment Co Ltd (MP & GI) which further groomed her to stardom. Ting remained to work extensively with Mok in Lan Kwong where she became the only principal actress. It is believed that Mok played a crucial role to Ting's successful transition from Mandarin to Cantonese cinemas.

Mok's 21 titles in Lan Kwong were mostly his signature modern comedy but he was versatile also in such genres as feature drama (*Madam Kam*, 1963), detective thriller (*The Elevator Murder Case*, 1960), urban action drama in 'Jane Bond' style (*Golden Butterfly, the Lady Thief*, 1965), and even his less adept costume drama, *The Flaming Mountain* (1962). Adapted from the classic literature *Journey to the West*, the

¹ Wong Cheuk-hon, *My Film Life: A Memoir of Wong Cheuk-hon*, Taipei: Wanxiang Book Co., Ltd, 1994, pp 142-143.

film was a co-production between Lan Kwong and Han Yang Film Company in South Korea, featuring movie stars from both sides. Hailed as the first Cantonese film in Eastman Color for the widescreen, the film may well be pioneering to the ‘South Korean fad’ nowadays.

In his comedies, Mok had a love of using mistaken or doubling identities as plot device to create a variety of slapstick. In *Three Love Affairs* (1963), Ting Ying the factory girl and Cheung Yee the driver fall in love at first sight. Without each other’s knowing, both are in fact ashamed of their humble background and thus impersonating a person of wealth. When both of them ask the same pair of friends (Yuen Lap-cheung and Chan Lap-bun) to be their parents to stage a family gathering, the film reaches its climax. Originally a gardener and a garbage woman, the old duo’s rather lame performance as rich people turns out to be nothing but a farce (thanks to the ludicrous acting of the veterans Yuen and Chan). In *The Student Prince* (1964), another apt example, Alan Tang is the son of a Southeast Asian sultan. He arrives Hong Kong to study but his father instructs him to conceal his origin. Mistaken as underprivileged, he is helped by his classmates to impersonate a rich man’s son to please Ting Ying’s parents. Set against the background of Hong Kong in the 60s during her rise to an industrial and international city, these storylines spoke very much to the then commoners’ aspiration to the upper class.

One more note to *The Student Prince*: It is not certain if the film borrowed anything from a much earlier American movie of the same name.² What we know is that Mok, a graduate from University of Shanghai, delved into the film world in his earlier years by working as a theatre house manager and a translator for an American film company. For this reason, he was knowledgeable about western movies.³ There is an interesting comparison made in the film that, Alan Tang, in the words of his female classmate, resembles Hollywood star Tony Curtis. It is also likely that the film was the first in Cantonese cinema to feature ‘expatriate school boy’ and ‘westernised school girl’ as the leading roles. Compared to the big-budget productions of Shaw Brothers and MP & GI, Lan Kwong’s films may seem less spectacular. But in *The Student Prince* one could appreciate how much Mok has achieved to re-create that particular school ambience (for example, all student characters neatly put on pristine uniforms and blazers.) I find it even more amazing to know that Mok was already 58 years old when directing this film. His age did not stop him from giving a convincing and rather fair depiction of young people. Arriving at the craze of youth films in the

² *The Student Prince* is an American Broadway musical premiered in 1924. In 1927, it was adapted into a black-and-white silent film; in 1954, the colour musical version was released.

³ I would like to acknowledge Enoch Tam for the information. In the 1930s, Mok Hong-si wrote and translated a number of articles about western movies. His writings were published in *Silverland* and *Dazhong Huabao* in Shanghai.

late 60s, *The Student Prince* also reminds us of the subsequent classics starring Leslie Cheung and Danny Chan.

After all, the omnipresent theme in Mok's films is always about womanhood in the new era. *Three Females* (1960), his directorial debut for Lan Kwong, depicts two contrasting female personas: the elder sister (Law Yim-hing) is a docile wife battered and betrayed by her husband; her auntie (Ku Mei) is a free spirit who believes in women's rights and plays mahjong all the time, leaving all the household chores to her husband. Ting Ying, the third heroine is thus exposed to the problems of both the traditional and urban gender roles. By the end of film, Mok seems to suggest a way to pursue the golden mean. In the subsequent *Three Love Affairs*, *Two City Girls* (1963), *Queen of the Tea House* (1965), and his last Lan Kwong title, *Four Sisters* (1966), he continued to offer close observations about women facing the challenges of work, marriage and family, building up a persona of a strong and independent working woman for Ting Ying.

Among these comedies, *Landlady and Tenant* (1966) is to me one of the most underrated. The story revolves around not only the protagonist Ah Chun, played by Ting Ying, but also her parents and a group of denizens sharing her parents' tenement house. The mutual support between the down-and-outs recalls such Cantonese classics as *In the Face of Demolition* (1953) directed by Li Tit. However, Mok gave a more contemporary take (Ting Ying seeks a saleslady job at Hong Kong Brands and Products Expo; Chu Kong styles himself as The Beatles and pretends to have returned from the UK.) In this film, Mok once again exhibited his strength in portraying supporting characters. One of the scenes sees a track shot through each of the cubicles in the night-time tenement house before arriving at the bunk bed by the corridor. From the upper bed, 'Crier' (Yu Ming) covertly reaches the lady hawker (Chan Chui-ping) sleeping below and holds her hand tightly. They start to make out but are soon spotted by the others. The tenants are not at all dismayed, bringing the duo more blessings than embarrassment. The film may seem just another tenement house drama but Mok turned it into an unorthodox, playful and passionate story. With such promising works, Mok is indeed a proven talent of his generation. (Translated by Vivian Leong)

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Dream Duo

Bullheaded Wing and Sassy Phoenix on the Silver Screen

Lum Man-yee

Mak Bing-wing (1915-1984), popularly nicknamed ‘Bullheaded Wing’, was the star *wenwusheng* (civil and military male role) of the Tai Lung Fung Opera Troupe. The fact that a reporter addressed Mak directly as Bullheaded Wing in a newspaper article in 1960 showed that his nickname was common knowledge, although the article gave no indication as to how the name was coined.¹ Fung Wong Nui ‘Lady Phoenix’ (1925-1992), a leading *huadan* (young female role), was the other half of the on-stage couple at the troupe. According to a newspaper article of 1970, Fung Wong Nui’s master teacher, Tsi Lan Nui ‘Lady Purple Orchid’ (1917-1991), rose to fame with her portrayal of sassy female roles and that the protégée had ‘inherited her artistry in its entirety’.²

If there is a common thread running through the classic titles in the repertoire of Tai Lung Fung Opera Troupe, it is that of Mak’s characters denouncing Fung Wong Nui’s as a sassy shrew and the latter rebuking by calling the former a bullheaded fool. Exchange of their verbal jabs may be conducted in either spoken or sung form. That being said, their collision of personalities is also suggested by the acting and not the words. The Cantonese term, *ngauzing* (Mandarin *niujing*) [loosely translated as ‘bullheaded’ for the purpose of this article], is specifically used to describe a man who is rash and wilful, while *diumaan* (Mandarin *diaoman*) refers to unruly and bratty girls, with both carrying the common trait of being unreasonable. These classic plays, include: *The Marshal’s Marriage* (premiered on 31 March 1960 at Prince’s Theatre in Kowloon; it was titled *Return from Battle for His Love* in the film version),³ *A Ten-Year Dream in Yangzhou* (premiered on 8 December 1960 at State Theatre on Hong Kong Island; it was titled *Ten Years Dream* in the film version),⁴ *The Impetuous General* (premiered on 15 November 1961 at Ko Sing Theatre on Hong Kong Island; it was titled *A Maid Commander-in-chief and a Rash General* in the film version),⁵ *A*

¹ Sing Koon, “‘Bullheaded Wing’ has a special skill or two’, *Ta Kung Pao*, 27 December 1960 (in Chinese).

² Ho Ho-lau, ‘Tsi Lan Nui and Leung Sing-po hold hands and reminisce about the past at Yam Dai-fun’s baby’s one-month celebration’, *Wah Kiu Yat Po*, 19 August 1979 (in Chinese).

³ Opera troupe’s advertisement in *Wah Kiu Yat Po*, 30 March 1960 (in Chinese); the Chinese title of the play and its film version are identical.

⁴ Opera troupe’s advertisement in *Wah Kiu Yat Po*, 8 December 1960 (in Chinese); the Chinese title of the play and its film version are identical.

⁵ Opera troupe’s advertisement in *Wah Kiu Yat Po*, 14 November 1961 (in Chinese) ; the Chinese title

Lady Prime Minister of Two Countries (premiered on 25 January 1963 at the Hong Kong City Hall on Hong Kong Island).⁶ In these plays, the male protagonist invariably has a blunt, hot-tempered streak. Despite being outwitted by the heroine, he can always win her heart with his devotion, bravery and strength. On the other hand, the heroine's sassiness is just a front. At heart, she is tender, thoughtful and resourceful, a secret female knight in armour who is ready to give up fame and power for love, a selfless wife who would even put up with sharing her man with another woman.

Romance of the Phoenix Chamber was remembered as the all-time favourite in the repertoire of the Tai Lung Fung Opera Troupe (its performance was premiered as one of the Hong Kong City Hall's opening events).⁷ Despite the absence of direct references to 'bullheadedness' or 'sassiness', the play gives Mak's barbarian general the occasion to display his rash behaviour while Fung Wong Nui's princess misbehaves and reveals her sassy persona during an episode of amnesia. No sooner, these plays were adapted for the big screen as 'period costume Cantonese musical films that exude a rich flavour of Cantonese opera'. With the exception of the later production, *Lady Prime Minister of Two Countries*, these Cantonese opera classics were adapted into films. It was the idea of Ho Siu-bo (active in the 1950s and 60s), owner and impresario of the Tai Lung Fung Opera Troupe and executive producer of his film company, Tai Lung Fung Co. Starring Mak and Fung Wong Nui alongside most of the original cast members, the film adaptations captured the sights and sounds of the iconic couple, Bullheaded Wing and Sassy Fung, on celluloid for future generations to savour.⁸

In all fairness, one cannot draw parallels between a live performance on the Cantonese opera stage and its adaptation on the silver screen. Factoring in the adoption of cinematic techniques and aesthetics such as camera movements and editing, the film version may not represent a faithful rendition of the original stylised movements and music of Cantonese opera. Still, excerpts from the film are more than adequate for a glimpse into the artistry of the two operatic masters. Using film adaptations of three Tai Lung Fung's classics as examples, this article explores the dynamics of the on-screen and stage couple, Mak Bing-wing and Fung Wong Nui, and how screenwriters and directors utilised Cantonese operatic techniques to create the picture-perfect on-screen couple, Bullheaded Wing and Sassy Phoenix.

of the play and its film version are identical.

⁶ Opera troupe's advertisement in *The Kung Sheung Daily News*, 20 January 1963 (in Chinese); the Chinese title of the play and its film version are identical.

⁷ Opera troupe's advertisement in *The Kung Sheung Daily News*, 10 March 1962 (in Chinese).

⁸ For the film's synopsis, cast and crew credits, see the Hong Kong Film Archive online catalogue.

1. 'Beating War Drums to Hasten the Bride' (*Return from Battle for His Love*, premiered on 24 February 1961)

As a bride, a woman should be allowed to take all the time she needs in getting ready for her wedding day. Yet, in *Return from Battle for His Love* (directed by Wong Hok-sing [1913-1994]), patience is not a virtue afforded to Koi Sai-ying (Mak Bing-wing), the impetuous and high-handed groom and general of the Kingdom of Cai. He beats the war drums to hasten the bride, Princess Phoenix of Song (Fung Wong Nui), threatening military consequences for acts of defiance. Such is bullheadedness at its worst. Unbeknownst to Koi, the princess was immediately smitten with the suitor and lost to him on purpose at the open contest to win her hand in marriage despite having the upper hand. For the princess, revenge is a dish best served cold. Assuming the persona of a sassy princess, she fusses over her make-up on her wedding day to take the haughty groom down a peg or two. Playwright Poon Yat-fan (1922-1985) (adapted for the screen by Poon Cheuk [1921-2003]) put his own twist and spin on the excerpt, 'Beating War Drums to Hasten the Commander', from the performance segment of a traditional play in the repertoire of Cantonese opera, 'Xue Pinggui Leaving His Humble Abode', offering an updated image of a bullheaded general and a sassy princess in his new interpretation.

'Xue Pinggui Leaving His Humble Abode' is an excerpt from *Xue Pinggui*. In it, Xue, who is ordered by the emperor to go on an expedition to Xiliang, is reluctant to bid farewell to his wife, Wang Baochuan. Wary of the delay, the general beats the war drums three times to summon the commander's immediate return to the barracks. Usually performed by a *xiaowu* (young military male) opposite a *huadan*, this excerpt was the signature work of Leng Yuk Lun (1897-1957), a *xiaowu* of the late Qing/early Republican period. One of the eighteen plays grouped under the title *Da paichang shiba ben* (Eighteen Formulaic Plays), *Xue Pinggui* was developed by a group of Guangdong based operatic players from the original work written by their northern counterparts, also drawing elements from the actual performances. 'Xue Pinggui Leaving His Humble Abode' is a *paichang* (formulaic scene, patternised performance segment).⁹ *Paichang xi* (formulaic plays) were developed by operatic players of the late Qing based on the existing repertoires of popular plays and standardised over time through repeated performances. *Paichang*'s components include a given set of

⁹ Editorial Board of *A Dictionary of Cantonese Opera* (ed), *A Dictionary of Cantonese Opera*, Guangzhou Publishing House, 2008, pp 60, 390, 597 (in Chinese); according to the reference, this excerpt was the signature work of Leng Yuk Lun, a *xiaowu* of the late Qing/early Republican period, but the credibility of the primary source needs further investigation and research; the libretto of *Xue Pinggui* is collected in Guangdong Branch of the China Theatre Association and the Research Section of the Chinese Drama and Opera Department of Culture, Guangdong Province (eds), *A Compilation of Traditional Cantonese Opera Repertoires*, Volume 4, internal publication, 1962 (in Chinese).

characters and plots, performance conventions, special mise-en-scène, percussive points, set tunes, singing styles and spoken parts for expressing situation-specific emotions and moods of a certain cast of characters.¹⁰

In 1952, mainland Chinese playwright Mo Zhiqin (1924-1966) adapted *Xue Pinggui Leaving His Humble Abode*, a libretto written in late Qing, and entered his version starring Lui Yuk-long (1917-1975) and Lang Junyu (1919-2010) at the National Traditional Opera Festival held in Beijing.¹¹ Later, the album of the same title, performed by Lo Ban-chiu (1912-2010) and Lang Junyu, was released by China Record Corporation (Catalogue number: 4-078809 A-B; collected in the RTHK music library in 1956 [Collection numbers: CA0002429-30, PT1841, PT2508, PT2709]).¹² Sun-Ma Si-tsang (1916-1997) and Ng Kwan-lai's (b 1930) cover of 'Xue Pinggui Leaving His Humble Abode' was included in the album, *Wang Baochuan*, released by Lucky Record (Catalogue number: LP177; collected in the RTHK music library in 1964 [Collection number: RTHK LP0001579-00]).¹³ Its librettist was none other than Poon Yat-fan, the playwright of *Return from Battle for His Love*; both versions feature the *paichang*, 'Beating War Drums to Hasten the Commander'. Below are excerpts of three *shuobai* (spoken parts) from Poon's recorded version:

First order from the general, demanding the commander of the advance unit Xue Pinggui to return to the barracks at once. If the commander does not report to the first round of drum beats, he shall receive 40 floggings. End of the order; report to barracks at once.

Second order from the general, summoning the commander of the advance unit to an audience at the base. If the commander does not report to the second round of drum beats, he shall receive 80 floggings. End of the order; this order must be obeyed.

Third order from the general; this order must be obeyed. If the commander does not report to the third round of drum beats, he will be beheaded!

It is apparent that Mak Bing-wing's *kuobai* (plain speech) in the film adaptation *Return from Battle for His Love* are lifted from 'Xue Pinggui Leaving His Humble Abode':

¹⁰ Guangdong Branch of the China Theatre Association and the Research Section of the Chinese Drama and Opera Department of Culture, Guangdong Province (eds), *A Collected Volume of Traditional Paichang in Cantonese Opera*, internal publication, 1962 (in Chinese); reprinted by the Guangzhou Research Institute of Creative Arts and Literature, 2008, pp 1-2 (in Chinese).

¹¹ Editorial Board of *A Dictionary of Cantonese Opera* (ed), op cit, p 60 (in Chinese).

¹² RTHK Top Ten Chinese Gold Songs Committee (ed), *Hong Kong Cantonese Album Collection Guide: Cantopop 20's-80's*. Hong Kong: Joint Publishing (HK) Co Ltd, 1998, p 375 (in Chinese).

¹³ *Ibid*, p 298 (in Chinese).

Maid, please inform the princess that the groom is here to escort her to the wedding in the groom's state. This is a military order to hasten the bride. If she fails to show up upon the first round of drum beats, she will receive 40 floggings as punishment; failing to show up upon the second round of drum beats, 80 floggings as punishment; failing to show up upon the third round of drum beats, beheading as punishment.

By ingeniously substituting 'hasten the commander' with 'hasten the bride', and shifting the context from a military to a domestic one, the bullheaded general executes his military manoeuvres to turn the tables on the princess. It is an example of borrowing and accommodating traditional *paichang*, which is different from the common practice of playwrights and screenwriters to simply create a copy. To those in the know, Lau Yuet-fung (1919-2003) had been the mastermind of the Tai Lung Fung Opera Troupe when it came to devising plots and scriptwriting. A third-ranking *xiaoseng* (subordinate young male role) in the troupe, he was familiar with the traditional *paichang* and was revered as the 'master of ideas'.

2. 'Wrecking the Royal Carriage' (a *paichang* from *Ten Years Dream*, premiered on 28 June 1961)

Surely it is audacious and savage that a woman purposely tears her clothes and accuses a man of assault. But such is an act played out in the *paichang*, 'Wrecking the Royal Carriage' and featured in the film adaptation, *Ten Years Dream* (penned by the screenwriter Lee Yuen-man based on the original story written by Tsui Tsi-long; directed by Fung Fung [1916-2000]) Knight-errant Lau Yuk-long (Mak Bing-wing), having immersed himself in scholarly pursuits, is appointed a magistrate after passing the imperial examinations. Ching Lai-man (Fung Wong Nui), a humble songstress, is adopted by a feudal lord and elevated to the status of a princess. When her sister is mistaken for a thief and tried at court, the princess storms the courtroom demanding the presiding judge, Lau, for her release. Lau stands his ground, refusing to bow down to the powerful royal. The two sides are at loggerheads, neither wanting to back down. Below is a transcription of their verbal sparring in the scene:

Ching Lai-man	[Singing] Smashing my phoenix crown [steps on the phoenix crown], tearing off my cloak [shatters the cloak]. Wait till I complain to my Lord of your bullying antics.
Lau Yuk-long	[Singing] Taking off my official gauze cap

[discarding the cap] and four-clawed dragon
robe [takes off the robe], I vow to uphold
justice.

The scene, with its lyrics and plotline, is a leaf taken out of ‘Wrecking the Royal Carriage’ from the traditional play in Cantonese opera, *Reunion with His Wife by the West River*. In the original play, *Guo Cuilian*, Empress of the Western Palace, who demands the release of her brother who is framed for murder, snatches Ma Guoliang’s official seal. When Ma forewarns about deferring the case to the imperial court, Guo flies into a rage.

Guo Cuilian [In panicking tone] Hey! I will not have you accuse me.
Smashing my phoenix crown, I will appeal to my Lord that you
took liberties with me and have you beheaded.

Ma Guoliang Or so you said.
[Guo takes off her crown, throws it on to the ground and
stomps on it to show Ma.]

Ma Guoliang [In panicking tone] Hey, watch me.
Stepping on my gauze cap and ripping it to shreds, I’ll lodge a
complaint of flirtation against you with my Lord and have you
beheaded.

Guo Cuilian Go on then.
[Ma discards his gauze cap and rips it to shreds]

Guo Cuilian [In panicking tone, cursing] I’ll smash my cloak and appeal to
my lord that you raped me and have you beheaded.
[Chasing; Guo smashes her cloak.]

Ma Guoliang [Furious] I will sue and complain. Tearing my four-clawed
dragon robe, I’ll lodge a complaint of flirtation against you
with my Lord and have you beheaded.
[*Shuibolang* (literally, ‘wave’, percussion pattern), Ma
removes his robe.]¹⁴

The excerpt, ‘Wrecking the Royal Carriage’, takes its title from the incident whereby Ma Guoliang orders to have the royal carriage wrecked.¹⁵ Veteran opera player Leng Sun Biu recalled in the early 1960s that the above scene was delivered in spoken

¹⁴ *A Collected Volume of Traditional Paichang in Cantonese Opera*, op cit, pp 50-52 (in Chinese).

¹⁵ *A Dictionary of Cantonese Opera* (ed), op cit, p 400 (in Chinese). In it, Ma Guoliang is referred to as Meng Guoliang.

form.¹⁶ For *Ten Years Dream* itself, each character is assigned one syllable in most instances and performed in an aria type known as *gunhua* (literally, ‘rolling flowers’). Through their rendition of the *paichang*, ‘Wrecking the Royal Carriage’, Mak and Fung Wong Nui breathed life into the bickering odd couple of the bullheaded magistrate and the sassy princess.

3. ‘Bass *gunhua*’ (an aria from *Romance of the Phoenix Chamber*, premiered on 8 August 1962)

‘The boat sails away, setting people ten and thousand mountains apart / To the south the birds fly away and back. When will the pair of lovebirds return?’ Opening *Romance of the Phoenix Chamber* (directed by Wong Hok-sing) is a soulful song belted out by the Jin general, Ye-lut Kwan-hung (Mak Bing-wing), bidding farewell to his lover, Princess Hung Luen of Southern Song (Fung Wong Nui), a token of his tenderness bursting with heartbreak and emotional overtures. In response, the princess sings gently, ‘No more tears, do not worry / Isn’t life like morning dew, of which separation is a part?’ Arguably one of the duo’s most popular hits, the theme song, ‘Barbarian Song of the Foreign Land’, became a household tune. It was unprecedented for a theme song to appear at the beginning of a Cantonese opera, which more often than not, is arranged at the finale. For example, the theme song ‘Double Suicide’ famously sets the scene for the final grand climax in the classic *The Flower Princess*.

As the lovers are singing their hearts out, they run into a gang of bandits and become separated amid the chaos. To make matters worse, the princess suffers a concussion resulting in a loss of memory. Afterwards, the unwitting commoner, Ngai, who is grieving over his lost daughter, saves and adopts Hung Luen. In her amnesiac state, the princess reveals her paradoxical persona—silly, sassy and boisterous. Just as Ye-lut is left dejected by his futile search for the princess, he is overjoyed when their paths cross again. However, not only is the princess regarding the man who stands before her as a stranger, she disputes his version of events and claims she is betrothed to another man, lashing out at him when the clueless general keeps pestering her. The plethora of emotions he is going through—from disappointment to passionate torment—is unleashed to the fullest to the *gunhua* aria.

For the screenwriter (Lee Yuen-man, adapting from the original story written by Tsui Tsi-long), his choice of the bass *gunhua* aria for the screen aptly fits the circumstances and moods. *Gunhua* is a kind of *sanban* (literally, ‘dispersed meter’, a musical form with free metre and irregular rhythm) that is attuned to the contents and

¹⁶ A *Collected Volume of Traditional Paichang in Cantonese Opera*, op cit, pp 50-52 (in Chinese).

moods of the characters. There are two modes of *gunhua*: *bangzi* and *erhuang* (two major Cantonese opera tune families). *Bangzi* is a robust style that displays passionate vigour, while *erhuang* subdued and subtle. In the scene, bass *gunhua* is performed in the mode of *bangzi* to express a deep sense of sorrow and indignation. ‘Bass *gunhua*’ aria typically begins with a heavy-stomping beat of the drum and does away with a ‘prelude’; the singing part follows immediately to heighten tension.¹⁷

When the princess confesses to not having an old lover but a fiancé, Mak, with a sunken heart, bellows, ‘*Aiyaya!*’, before launching into a torrent of intense emotional outbursts. ‘You claim not to know me, banishing my love to the raging waves.’ Starting off on a relatively high pitch, *aiyaya*, an exclamatory expression of displeasure, is sung in long-held notes to elicit a sigh of surprise, while the remaining of the seven-character couplet verses is delivered in a low-pitched voice. The concluding syllable ‘*ya*’, comes to a lingering end, giving way to a rapid instrumental segment of a percussion point and a short prelude (mi sol re mi do) for *bangzi gunhua*. Picking up pace, Mak gushes the seven-character couplet that follows, ‘Are you renegeing on your marriage promise? (*mo fei xu yi hui yuan meng*) / [Don’t you know it] Frets me into a delirium of rage? ([*ni zhi fou*] *ren dao kuang shi* [*hui ji qi*] *san fen nu* [*ya*])’). Here, his vigorous and robust tone, a stark contrast to that of the previous line, captures the essence, if not the very sound, of bullheadedness.

The second couplet of the *bangzi gunhua* is sung in the mode of *dahou* (literally ‘big voice’, voice type for strong male and martial characters) *bangzi gunhua*: ‘promise (Cantonese *mang4*, Mandarin *meng*)’, the last character of the first line in a level tone is sung in ‘do’, and the concluding character ‘rage (Cantonese *nou6*, Mandarin *nu*)’ in an oblique tone is sung in ‘sol’ with the syllable ‘*ya*’. In general, a *wenwusheng* sings in *pinghou* (literally ‘ordinary voice’, singing with natural voice without falsetto, vocal type for young male role and older female role). However, for *pinghou bangzi gunhua*, the ending note of an oblique tone is to be sung in ‘re’, while that of a level tone is to be sung in ‘do’.¹⁸ Adept in both civil and military manoeuvres, a *wenwusheng* is a *xiaosheng* (young civil male role) and a *xiaowu* (young military male role) rolled into one. The robust vocal tune of *dahou* (or *baqiang*, literally ‘forceful style of singing’) is not reserved for a *wusheng* (leading military male role) only. To imbue his role with mighty airs, a *xiaowu* may sung in

¹⁷ Chen Zhuoying, *A Study of the Writing of Cantonese Opera Libretti*, Guangzhou: Flower City Publishing House, 2007, pp 82-83 (in Chinese). Su Huiliang, Huang Jinzhou and Pan Bangzhen, *Banqiang of Cantonese Opera*, Guangzhou Yangcheng Evening News Publishing House, 2014, pp 99-100 (in Chinese).

¹⁸ Su Huiliang, Huang Jinzhou and Pan Bangzhen, *The Common Knowledge of Banqiang of Cantonese Opera*, Guangzhou Yangcheng Evening News Publishing House, 2011, pp 94-98 (in Chinese).

dahou as deemed fit. It is also befitting that the general Ye-lut Kwan-hung sings the last seven-character couplet in *dahou*, venting the rage and sorrow that lies within.

In the finale, the general reintroduces the theme song ‘Barbarian Song of the Foreign Land’ in an attempt to bring back memories of the princess. Paradoxically, Mak dexterously commands his vocal tune both in tenderness and passionate torment.

Now in the early 21st century, Yam Kim-fai (1913-1989), the celebrated female *wenwusheng* in the 1950s, is still someone we would remember with great relish. The classics of Yam and Pat Suet-sin (b 1928) have been staging for the last fifty years. Fong Yim-fun (b 1928) has always been the ‘Queen of *huadan*’. That said, Cantonese opera has many facets that are worth examining and appreciating, and from what we have observed, Mak Bing-wing and Fung Wong Nui are both venerated for their unique styles of singing and acting.

Mak Bing-wing’s stage and screen persona of a gallant and devoted tough guy serves as the polar opposite of the romantic, graceful scholar made famous by Yam Kim-fai. One a masculine male *wenwusheng* and the other his feminine female counterpart, the two famed Cantonese opera players represent the polar ends of the stage character spectrum. Similarly, Fung Wong Nui’s sassy but bright and forthright shrew and her antithesis, the elegant, gentle lady embodied by Fong Yim-fun, reflect the expansive range of leading *huadan* roles in Cantonese opera. With the aim of nurturing and fast-tracking future talent, the Chinese Artists Association of Hong Kong (guild of Cantonese opera practitioners in Hong Kong) has since 2012 implemented a scheme whereby seasoned opera artists serve as mentors to emerging talent in selecting, rehearsing and staging classics of Cantonese operatic repertoires under their guidance. Included as staples in the repertoires, the three signature titles featuring the on-screen couple, Mak Bing-wing and Fung Wong Nui, discussed in this article are a testament to the vital role that the duo played in the inheritance and development of Cantonese opera. (Translated by Agnes Lam)

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Music Example: 'Bass *bangzi gunhua*' followed by '*bangzi gunhua*'. Sung by Mak Bing-wing who plays Ye-lut Kwan-hung in the film.

An excerpt from the film adaptation of *Romance of the Phoenix Chamber* (premiered in 1962).

1=C

【沉腔滾花】中速

(鑼鼓) 𠄎 6. 6 6 [^] - 0 1 3 3 3 3 ^V 5 5 6 -
 哎 吔吔 你 聲 聲 不 把 檀 郎 認

3 3 5 6 ^V 6 2 5 6 6. 5 3 5 -
 忍 將 情 義 付 波 濤 (呀)

【梆子滾花】快速

(鑼鼓) (3 5 2 3 1) 3 6 6 5 6 6 1
 莫 非 蓄 意 毀 鴛 盟

6 6 2 5 2 2 ^V 0. 5 6 6 6 6 3 - 5 -
 知 否 人 到 狂 時 會 激 起 三 分 怒 (呀)

Aiyaya!

You claim not to know me, banishing my love to the raging waves.

Are you renegeing on your marriage promise?

Don't you know it frets me into a delirium of rage?