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The Principal and the Second in Two Films Starring Yam Kim-fai and Fong Yim-fun

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Dream Duo

The Principal and the Second in Two Films Starring Yam Kim-fai and Fong Yim-fun

Yu Siu-wah and Li Siu-leung

Fong Yim-fun established the Sun Yim Yeung Opera Troupe in the 1950s, and specifically in 1952, she was elected as ‘Queen of Diva’ by readers of *Sounds of Entertainment* and the general public. Meanwhile, Yam Kim-fai was part of the almost inseparable ‘Yam-Pak’ duo with Pak Suet-sin and was one of the best-known names in the field. Having said that, she still collaborated frequently with Fong, both onstage and onscreen in many works that were to become classics of Cantonese opera. The partnership between these two great icons of Cantonese opera and cinema yielded a catalogue of cinematic gems¹, out of which we have chosen *A Beauty’s Flourishing Fragrance* (1955) and *Too Late for Divorce* (1956), as the basis for discussing their onscreen relationship. Before we start thinking about the unique ways Yam and Fong’s collaboration impacted on their dramatic and musical performance, we suppose there is one common understanding that we share: while Yam tended to retreat from the limelight and let her female co-stars take centre-stage, her star power and stage presence were rarely diminished.

The 1950s saw Fong at the height of her popularity, and quite understandably the marketing of her films relied heavily on her star image as well as her talents in singing and acting. However, things would have been different if her co-star wasn’t Yam. Considering that the two stars were both in their prime, both with established images and artistic prowess, how the movies chose to promote their collaboration becomes an interesting question to explore and discuss — who plays the lead: Yam or Fong? *A Beauty’s Flourishing Fragrance* (1955) is a black-and-white period drama set in the late Qing dynasty and early Republic. A second version was made in 1959 as a technicolor period picture, but has since been lost. *Too Late for Divorce*, on the other hand, is a modern drama.

A Beauty’s Flourishing Fragrance (1955)

Originally a Cantonese opera written and composed by Tong Tik-sang in 1952 for the Golden Phoenix Opera Troupe, *A Beauty’s Flourishing Fragrance* was adapted for the big screen twice in the 1950s by Yam and Fong. The two starred in the leading roles in both versions, which followed more or less the same story. The earlier film changed the setting to the early Republic and simplified parts of the plot, while the 1959 version stayed closer to the original opera with a more sophisticated plot (discussed in more detail below). The first film featured mostly *xiaoqu*-style tunes, while the music of the later picture relied mostly on *banghuang* delivery.

¹ According to Hong Kong Film Archive records, Yam and Fong co-starred in 24 pictures during the period between 1952 and 1959 (when Fong married and retired from both the stage and the silver screen).

The screenplay of the 1955 film was written by Lo Yu-kei. One of the earliest scenes in the film features the first chance encounter between the lovers, as the wealthy playboy Mang Kiu (Yam Kim-fai) meets the songstress Yim-hung (Fong Yim-fun) at a pleasure establishment. The highlight of the scene centres on Yim-hung's performance as she sings and plays the *pipa* with extreme grace and gentleness. Yim-hung is very much subjected to the 'male gaze' of director Wong Toi's camera as we are invited to adopt Mang's point of view, and to appreciate how beautiful Yim-hung looks and sings from multiple shot angles. Yet the question of 'gaze' is also richly complicated by the gender ambiguities presented. Touted as 'Theatre Fans' Lover', Yam cross-dresses as usual in a male part, and her performance creates an added sense of sexual *frisson* to the scene — should we interpret the gaze as inherently male (from the perspective of the male character Mang) or female (from the perspective of Yam's real-life identity)? *The Ballad of Mulan*, the folksong from the Northern Dynasties, exactly captures this paradox: 'Male hare fuss about, female hare feign befuddlement; a couple hares running along, how can you tell my sex?' ^{Editor's Note} Regardless of sexual and gender identities, it is perhaps one of the most beautiful performances of Fong ever captured onscreen aside from her work in Cantonese opera.

Fong gives a sensual performance where her vocal talents and stage presence are highlighted. While there is little question that the tune 'The Pipa Shields Half the Songstress's Face Who Sings Like a Twittering Oriole' was written by Wong Jyt-seng (who penned the film's musical score)², it is unclear whether Wong was also responsible for the lyrics as well:

Playing softly, face half-hidden in shyness and voice like an oriole
Flowers, wine and pleasure; poets enjoy themselves everywhere
They say flowers wilt after spring; yet the coldest frost fail to wilt the chrysanthemum
Gusty winds bully the willows weak; a true friend is hard to find (bridge)
Playing softly, with the moon hanging over us tonight
Sipping wine in front of the moon; enjoying ourselves in a beautiful night
Delicate fingers plucking pipa strings; lotus buds blossoming unsoiled
Singing, playing under the lamp; face half-hidden and turning back with a smile.

Fong's character Yim-hung sings this song at the point in the movie when she is at her peak: unmarried and desired, commanding the attentions of all the men in the bustling teahouse. Her cheerful confidence and slightly sentimental character are matched by the brightness of the *mise-en-scene*. Despite her renown for mastering high notes in her usual Cantonese opera *dan* roles (*fanxian erhuang melisma* being her signature style), Fong sings in an uncharacteristically low register, lending a warm glow to her voice that makes the song sound like an intimate lover's confession. The gentle sensuousness of the song is further enhanced by the vision of Yim-hung's

² Reference of the names of *xiaoqu* tunes is taken from Ho Wing-sze and James Wong (eds), *Yintan Tuyen: The Films of Fong Yim-fun*, Hong Kong: WINGS Workshop, 2010, p 152.

fingers cleverly plucking and playing her *pipa*, and her lovely eyes wandering around the room. The simple accompaniment by the rustic charm of the *pipa* and *nanhu* also adds to the overall texture of the tune. Apart from the music, the scene is also tinged with a subtle power that is especially affecting for Fong and Yam fans. While the camera is mostly focused on Fong's performance, Wong does not forget to linger over Yam's dashing image, who dressed handsomely in *changshan*, *magua* and finished off with a typical Chinese cap. Yam was similarly dressed in *The Story of Little Cabbage and Yeung Nai-mo* (1956; Little Cabbage played by Fong Yim-fun), and the look must have also inspired the iconic image of Anita Mui's character in Stanley Kwan's *Rouge* (1987). As Yam's character circles slowly around the *pipa*-playing Yim-hung, his gaze steady and unyielding, and the audience (male and/or female) are invited to share his delight in scrutinizing and appreciating this woman. As the tune ends and Yam sits next to Fong, their eyes meeting briefly, the cinematic effect is electrifying. Fong turns slightly with her back to Yam, embodying the last line of her song, 'face half-hidden and turning back with a smile', which is simply enchanting! Wong's direction fully captures the physical beauty and magnetism of both stars, as well as Fong's charismatic singing — unsurprisingly, the scene has time and again intoxicated Yam and Fong aficionados.

Another important scene features the couple in their private chamber after a night together. It is a scene filled with intimate gestures and touches — brushing one another's hair and whispering in each other's ears. Yet Yam and Fong never appear lustful or vulgar; instead they seem wholly natural and loving. Indeed, the effect would have been quite unimaginable if someone other than Yam had played the character of Mang. The interaction between the two stars is also enhanced by the music. Wong Jyt-seng rather ingeniously pieced together the song 'Encouraging My Lover' from three separate and distinct tunes, but the effect is so perfect and smooth that one could never tell. The three tunes were 'Lotus Fragrance' (composed by Wong and sung by Fong) and two other contemporary Mandarin songs: 'Remembrance of Autumn' (composed by Yao Min and sung by Yao Lee) and 'Minjiang Nocturne' (composed by Gao Jiansheng and sung by Wu Yingyin). The entire 'Encouraging My Lover' used Western instruments as accompaniment and a rhythm taken from dance music not unlike that of rumba, which is light and pleasant to the ear.

Xiaoqu tunes are employed throughout the entire film instead of the *banghuang*. The only exception occurs when Yim-hung is kicked out and she sings 'Painful Remembrance' in solo: *Heartbroken and in dire straits / Like a petal in the wind, tossed around at the end of spring / It is hard to expect pity in such a cruel world*. The melody of the tune is based on Wu Man-sum's 'Swallows' Return'.³ (As in many other pictures like *The Moonlight and Pipa of the Borderland*, *Misguided Love*, and *How Fifth Madam Chiu Went Far and Wide in Search of Her Husband*, Fong plays the role of a tragic songstress, with a pear-shaped *pipa* in hand.) In this scene, Fong plays a

³ This song was originally written for the film *Madame Butterfly* (1948), starring Cheung Ying and Mui Yee, and directed by Wong Toi. Its other names include 'The Swallows Have Returned but Not You' and 'Three Sorrows' (see Wong Chi-wah, *Qu Ci Shuang Jue: The Works of Hu Wensen*, Hong Kong: Joint Publishing, 2008, p 53).

concubine who is unjustly accused of being responsible for the death of her husband and therefore ousted from the family. As Fong begins singing the second verse — *Sorrow in my song, my bitterness unending / quietly hiding my grief while plucking the pipa strings*, the scene cuts to a shot of her wandering in the wilderness, singing to herself while clutching a moon zither. Dimly lit and framed as a long shot, the image highlights Fong's lonely figure, the emotional impact of which is further heightened by the evocative *kuhou* (bitter) *yifan* technique in Cantonese opera. With the moon zither as the focus of the frame, the director foreshadows the next scene he cuts to—the moon shining bright overhead as Fong sings: *The moon shines on the sleepless / Whose dreams are perturbed by woe, / Barely eking out my lowly existence / My anguish unspeakable / Twenty years have flown by / Yet I have no intentions to revisit the past*. The only existing copy of the film is flawed, and so the opening of the third scene is missing and consequently certain lyrics of the song as well. The image of the moon outside the window echoes and contrasts against the song at the start of the film: *With the moon hanging over us tonight / Sipping wine in front of the moon*. The film then flashes forward twenty years into the future, with the third verse of the song as background. By now Yim-hung is working as a housemaid for the famous singer Pak Ling-fa. The song is once again backed up by the sounds of *nanhu* and *pipa*, which merge seamlessly with Fong's hauntingly sad voice. The purpose of songs in this film is to act as an interlude. Like other songs in the film, which are mostly Cantonese *xiaoqu* and contemporary Mandarin tunes, the use of gongs and drums are simply diminished in 'Painful Remembrance', so as to avoid any aural association with Cantonese opera.

Sweet Dew on a Beautiful Flower (1959)

Four years later, in 1959, the film was remade with Yam and Fong in the starring roles again. The production was directed by Tso Kea and the rest of the cast was filled out by veteran actors such as Lan Chi-pak, Mak Bing-wing, Fung Wong Nui, and Yam Bing-ye. ⁴ The promotional material for the film also emphasised that the music was written by Tong Tik-sang. While no copies of the film have been made available, part of its original soundtrack (Tien Shing Recording; released in 1973) can be found online. From these excerpts it is not difficult to identify the differences in plot and music between the two versions. At the same time there is a Cantonese record by the name of *A Beauty's Flourishing Fragrance* that is widely circulated. Also composed by Tong (Lucky Recording), there are two separate versions by Yam (*pinghou*) and Fong (*zihou*). It is clear that the record has nothing to do with the 1955 movie, and should have been adapted from the music of the 1959 picture.

Compared to the previous version, the 1959 film makes some major changes to the plot. The male protagonist Mang Kiu (Yam Kim-fai) is the son of King Ning, and his wife Sin Yim-man (Fong Yim-fun) is wrongfully accused of having an affair with her brother-in-law Shum Lan-ling (Mak

⁴ See Kwok Ching-ling (ed), *Hong Kong Filmography Volume IV (1953-1959)*: Hong Kong Film Archive, 2003, p 294. Many audio-visual sources about this film have incorrectly cited information about the 1955 version.

Bing-wing). Later Mang is killed by a jealous songstress Kong Mong-ha (Yam Bing-ye), and Sin is blamed for the crime, resulting in her being kicked out of the family. Twenty years later, after being briefly reunited with her son Mang Ting (also played by Yam Kim-fai), Sin is arrested for the murder and convicted. Before she is to be drowned to death, her son arrives to bring his mother her last meal. She refuses the food and instead asks her son to pin a red flower on her, in memory of how her husband used to do the same thing every night. Although sentimental, the scene is relatively forward and suggestive for its time, a reflection of Tong Tik-sang's keenness to push boundaries and find new ways of expression. Musically however, the film is closer to the original stage version that Tong wrote in 1952, as it mostly uses gongs and drums to accompany its tunes. Apart from a handful of popular *xiaoqu* melodies like 'Time of Return', most of the sung music employs the *banghuang* delivery, such as the use of *yifan zhongban*, *erliu* and *nanyin*, fully embracing the film's roots in Cantonese opera.

This approach is markedly different from the 1955 picture, which mainly adopts popular *xiaoqu* tunes, making it a rarity in Fong's discography where she does not sing in her signature style of *fanxian erhuang* or *fanxian zhongban*. The fact that the same tale was retold in such a different way within a short period of five years, with a different historical setting and musical style, shows Fong's fondness for and commitment to the story. Much more can be explored and said about how the two versions compare, and no doubt this will be a fertile field for discussion in future scholarship.

Too Late for Divorce (1956)

The trilogy comprising *She Says "No!" to Marriage* (1951), *She Said "No!" to Marriage But Now She Says "Yes"* (1952) and *Too Late for Divorce* (1956) was an ideal star vehicle for Fong Yim-fun. Chronicling the protagonist Lee Yuk-lan's tumultuous love life and her ups and downs, the films live up to the words: *Looking back to the past / Who can recount my sorrows? / My great love was cut short / Now I'm at a loss as though in a dream.*⁵ The unpredictability of life and the tragedy of unfulfilled love are the major themes of the trilogy, befitting Fong's image as a tragic heroine.

She Said "No!" to Marriage But Now She Says "Yes" is unfortunately unavailable to audiences today. Nonetheless, the trilogy helmed by Chiang Wai-kwong is testament to the Cantonese film industry's creative power and commercial know-how in sequel and franchise production. The colloquial language used in the movie titles is also a reflection of the vitality and richness of Cantonese dialect, which is capable of being informal or even plebeian. The theme song to *She Says "No!" to Marriage* proved to be a runaway hit. Although it is unclear whether Wong Jyt-seng wrote the lyrics, what is apparent is that the song was adapted from Lam Ho-yin's 'The Song of Hundred Birds', a tune well-known to Cantonese opera fans. In fact, it is the tune to one of the most famous songs on the Yam-Pak record *How the Scholar Tong Pak-fu Won the Maid Chau-heung*, which opens:

⁵ Advertisement for *Too Late for Divorce*, see *Wah Kiu Yat Po*, 22 December 1956.

I worship / I worship / I sincerely worship and ask the gods ... (This verse was omitted in the 1957 movie).

In the first film of the trilogy, Yuk-lan fails to marry her painter lover Cheung Yiu-man (Cheung Wood-yau) as he is betrothed to Yuk-lan's best mate Chow Yin-ping (Chow Kwun-ling). Yuk-lan decides not to compete with her friend for Yiu-man's affections, and walks away from her lover. In the sequel, Yin-ping passes away due to a lung infection. While on her deathbed, she asks Yuk-lan to marry Yiu-man after her death, so then Yuk-lan could take care of her husband and her son, Kai. As the final installment of the trilogy opens, Yuk-lan and Kai (Bruce Lee) pay their respects at Yin-ping's grave, as Yuk-lan tells her friend that she has fulfilled her last wish. Yet Yuk-lan's promise to her late friend is also somewhat of a cross to bear, as the conservative social mores of the time do not look favorably on second marriages, and her new role as stepmother to Kai is also challenging. Soon tragedy strikes again as Yiu-man passes away from an accident. Yuk-lan's story is filled with the helpless irony of life, as she experiences full range of human emotion from happiness and love to desperation and despair. Fong proves to be the ideal actress for the role, conveying both the solemn dignity and tragic self-sacrifice that are so central to the character of Yuk-lan.

Yuk-lan hires a tutor Yam Tin-wah (Yam Kim-fai) for her stepson Kai. The former turns out to be a great fan of Yuk-lan, listening to her records all day and dreaming about his crush. The theme tune to the first movie is featured here again, as it is played from a phonograph player and also sung by Tin-wah as he plays the *qin*.

The scene where a deliriously sick Tin-wah daydreams about his affair with Yuk-lan is a brilliantly comedic and modernised inversion of *The Peony Pavilion*, where the gender roles are reversed with great effect. The flirtatious exchange between Tin-wah and Yuk-lan takes place largely through songs, and the use of Cantonese melodies and duets is a subtle way of conveying love and desire. Yam is perfect in the role of Tin-wah, an intellectual type who is so earnest and inexperienced he is almost 'dorky'. On the other hand, Fong commands the scene as she voices her thoughts and desires through the song, 'Chao Chao Lai Le', rendered at an exceptionally high pitch. The tune compares her young lover to a baby bird finding its voice:

Chirp, chirp, chirp

Cute little bird

He seems to say he won't come back

Don't waste your youthful days

You should learn new tunes and master the classics

As you begin to find your voice,

Fear not others' scornful jeers

Sing your heart out at the crack of dawn

Sing out, sing out, 'Chao Chao Lai Le'.

Shortly after, the couple launch into a duet in ‘The Misty Song’ where Yam opens with the lines: *Gazing with longing and insecurity at such breath-taking beauty / My heart flutters and I can’t take my eyes off you, with your reassuring presence by my side.* Thoroughly taken by Fong’s character, Yam’s Tin-wah epitomises the archetype of the shy youngster besotted by the charms of his older lover, and he even gets lovesick. Therefore, Fong sings: *Your pale countenance makes me worry / I come especially to offer comfort.* As a teacher and home-school tutor, Tin-wah is what Cantonese speakers may call a ‘useless scholar’ — someone who has no outstanding career or achievement to speak of, and spends his days obsessed over the songstress Yuk-lan. In his dream he asks Yuk-lan, ‘So would you say I’m your soulmate?’, to which she replies with well-practised ease, ‘Why, do I need to spell it out?’ Tin-wah’s response is classic ‘Yam-style’ — doe-eyed and dim-witted — as he says in all innocence, ‘I understand just about any other thing but when it comes to matters of the heart, I’m ever so stupid. You know, clever people often misinterpret things, so I’m asking if you like me or not.’ The fond daftness with which Yam plays her character is typical of her image as ‘Theatre Fans’ Lover’, as described in *Classic of Poetry: You mischievous boy / Who refuses to speak with me / You are the reason / I forego my meals.* Though in this case, one should perhaps substitute ‘mischievous boy’ with ‘mischievous girl’.

At the end of *Too Late for Divorce*, Yuk-lan rejects the love of Tin-wah and instead becomes a nun. Tin-wah follows her to the nunnery and sings his unrequited love to Yuk-lan, who hides behind closed doors. The duet lasts for 13 minutes, and begins with Yuk-lan singing the *xiaoqu* ‘Under the Cold Lamp’ before switching to *fanxian erhuang*, then another *xiaoqu*, and finally returning to ‘Under the Cold Lamp’. Afterwards, Tin-wah sings a couple of verses in *nanyin*, and then Yuk-lan comes in again with ‘Parting Swallows’, which Tin-wah later joins in. The final part of the tune has Yuk-lan singing in *yifan zhongban* and a *xiaoqu*. In other words, Fong plays the dominant role in the scene, singing far more than Yam.

Conclusion

In most of their 1950s collaborations, Fong played the lead and Yam often took up a secondary role. Fong had starred in a number of memorable female roles, including Mrs Ching in *A Forsaken Woman*, whose rejection of her three ineligible suitors and willful refusal to participate in patriarchal social customs were a direct and devastating critique of society’s oppression of women.⁶ Comparatively speaking, Yim-hung in *A Beauty’s Flourishing Fragrance* is a less overtly feminist character, but her strength is apparent in her ability to persist in the face of unsurmountable difficulty. On the other hand,

⁶ See the final scene (scene six) of the Cantonese opera *A Forsaken Woman*. For the original Chinese play and English translation, see Siu-leung Li (ed), *Anthology of Hong Kong Cantonese Opera: The Fong Yim Fun Volume*, Hong Kong: Infolink Publishing, 2014.

as pointed out by contemporary film reviews, her rich playboy lover Mang is far more weak-willed.⁷ Similarly, Tin-wah in *Too Late for Divorce* is also a book-smart, lovesick weakling. Traditionally in Chinese opera, the difference between the characters of Liang Shanbo (from *The Butterfly Lovers*) and Zhang Sheng (from Wang Shifu's *Romance of the Western Chamber*) is that Liang is an unaccomplished scholar whose love leads him to a tragic end, whilst Zhang wins Yingying's affections by scoring a government post and proposing a plan to defeat local bandits. In Yam and Fong's version of *The Butterfly Lovers*, the 1958 film entitled *The Tragic Story of Leung Shan-pak and Chuk Ying-toi*, much more emphasis is placed on Chuk Ying-toi's character, to the extent that it has more feminist overtones than the original opera. In the past, this has upset a number of Yam fans.⁸ Yet in actual fact, with performers as talented and important as Yam and Fong, it is meaningless to argue who steals the spotlight — Yam, the 'Theatre Fans' Lover', and Fong, the 'Queen of Diva', perfectly challenge and complement each other. In every meaning of the word, they make rival claims as an equal. (Translated by Rachel Ng)

Editor's Note

The excerpt was translated by Xah Lee: http://wordyenglish.com/poem/mulan_ballad.html

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⁷ Pao Kong-ping, *Review of A Beauty's Flourishing Fragrance*, *Hong Kong Commercial Daily*, 4 October 1959: 'Yam's character is an irresponsible man who cheats Fong's Yim-hung into marrying him. Lazy, complacent and foolish, he is a playboy rascal who does not deserve our pity'.

⁸ For example, writer Xin Qishi expressed great displeasure in the portrayal of Leung Shan-pak in *The Tragic Story of Leung Shan-pak and Chuk Ying-toi*. She believed that the screen time that Yam/Leung received was disproportionate and that it was wrong for the film to place the character in a secondary position. See Xin Qishi's essay collection: *Jian Bi Xi Xie*, Hong Kong: Su Yeh Publications, 1988, pp 21-23.