

Feature

Oral History Interview with Yu So-chow

Karen So

I was a big fan of Cantonese oldies when I was a child, and never tired of watching re-runs of my favourites *The Buddha's Palm* and *The Blonde-Haired Monster*. No doubt, the fantastical storyline and outlandish effects were delightful, but what captivated me most was the svelte and athletic figure of gorgeous leading lady Yu So-chow—and the habitual time-lag in her lip-synching.

A couple of years ago, Yu So-chow paid a visit to the Hong Kong Film Archive. It was my good fortune to catch a glimpse of her, and lo and behold, her stunning beauty has not faded one bit since she captured my heart on screen as a child.

Last year, 'Yu So-chow' made a comeback as a TV series character and became a household name once again. Isn't this proof of her enduring magic as a classic star?

Yu So-chow's birth name was Yu Xiaofeng. She was born in Shanghai, with ancestral roots in Beijing. When asked about her exact age, she gave a rather vague answer: 'Blame my mother, not me, for having a hazy memory. She wasn't sure if I was born in 1929 or 1930. When I asked her my time of birth, guess what her reply was? "I think you popped out of me just when our neighbour Mrs Wang was rinsing rice," was her ridiculous answer. How am I supposed to figure out when that was?'

A Chinese Opera Pedigree

Yu So-chow was born into a distinguished family of Chinese opera artists. Her father Yu Zhanyuan was a renowned *wusheng* (male lead in the martial arts school of Chinese opera). Master Yu founded The Chinese Operatic School in Hong Kong and was the revered mentor of the 'Seven Little Fortunes' [Translator's note: the legendary child acrobatic troupe that included Jackie Chan, Sammo Hung and Corey Yuen]. 'My grandfather Yu Yonghai specialised in playing *dahualian* ("painted face" playing mostly male roles with a strong character). My uncle Yu Zhanxian was a *laosheng* (elderly male role), so was my Aunt Yu Guifen, who studied under the tutelage of the *laosheng* master Yu Shuyan. My mother Yu Su Hongyan learned the art of *laosheng* from the Tan school. Her *tour de force* performance was the opera piece *Scolding Cao While Beating a Drum*. Her sister Su Xuefang also was a *laosheng*, but she learned her art from the Wang school. Even my two great uncles (on my paternal grandmother's side) were Beijing opera artists.

Their names were Chen Jirui and Chen Xiaomu respectively.

‘By the time I was eight, I’d already made my stage debut singing the opera excerpt *Beating the Flower Drum*. My father recognised my talent and hired a tutor from Beijing to coach me in the drama and singing parts. I was taught how to perform *Thirteen Sisters*. Another tutor was hired to teach me acrobatics. Both my father and one of my mentors Master Su put me under a strict regime of training: martial drills at the crack of dawn, followed by vocal practice throughout the afternoon.’

And so began Yu So-chow’s artistic career. Within a few years of performing at the Shanghai Gong Stage, she catapulted to stardom. Yu recalled: ‘I played Green Snake in *Legend of Madame White Snake*. It was a supporting role to the leading role of White Snake, played by a diva called Hong Yanjiao. For the scene in which Green Snake steals the imperial coffers, my father and Master Su jointly tailor-made an acrobatic sequence for me. It made me an overnight hit. Hong behaved like a prima donna when I stole the limelight, demanding the scene be cut.’ Master Yu was indignant, and signed his daughter up for the China Theatre to perform *The Taiping Rebellion*.

‘Our whole family moved into the dormitory located one floor above the backstage of the China Theatre. I had to get up at 7am or 8am to do my drills. Since I was offered the significant role of Hong Xuanjiao, I couldn’t let the troupe down. We put lots of effort into devising an impressive acrobatic sequence for episode one, but as soon as anyone came by to watch, we would pause right away. We didn’t want anyone to get wind of our choreography ideas. So we only practised while others were having lunch. Then in the evening, we would try out a sequence on stage, and the audience were satisfied. I had to perform scores of acrobatic moves with other actors, throwing weapons like spears or arrows back and forth to each other. I had by then made a name for myself as “Thirteen Fierce Spears”. After the curtain fell, we would have a late night snack and Father would start urging me to work on the choreography for the second episode. I ended up training three times a day on top of performing on stage every night,’ said Yu.

‘We were getting the hang of it, and even managed a sequence in which we arched back to slip a pair of swords into their sheaths, which we slung over our backs. That sequence always went smoothly, until one day, many important guests, such as Commander Yang and Soong Tse-ven descended upon the theatre. In fact the front four rows were filled with VIPs. The first one to go on stage lost his nerve when he saw so many top-ranking people, and missed his step. The second and third actors also failed. I was seventh in line, and I too panicked. Usually, the swords easily slipped into their sheaths, but I tried a few times and they didn’t go in. Father and Master were both watching me intently.

Father promptly picked up a cane and thwacked my bottom. I hurled the swords which fitted snugly into their sheaths. The audience all laughed. They muttered: he must be her old man, that's why he's hitting her even when she's on stage!' she said.

Spare the Rod and Spoil the Pupil

'The person I have the deepest memory of was my father. He was a most genial man at home but on stage or during training he was a tyrant. Once I played a role vanquished in combat. I was supposed to lead my four minions to circle the stage to symbolise my defeat. I did my round once, then twice. Actually, I'd forgotten from where I ought to have made my exit. Father played the general who was after me. When I made my third round, he came up behind me and thwacked me with a cane. I stopped short, and remembered which way to exit the stage.

'Father founded some kind of Beijing opera academy, and recruited over 40 pupils. These young apprentices were terrified of him. Yet, if he weren't so strict, how could they have achieved such fame and fortune? Look at Jackie Chan and Sammo Hung. They're international superstars! Then there's Corey Yuen. He's become a world-class director. And his other students also did pretty well,' said Yu.

Yu also recalled another amusing anecdote about Master Yu: 'The funniest thing about my father was, he loved being on stage, and was willing to play any role for free. Whenever he got some bit part to do a duel with me, he would be over the moon. But then, he couldn't rid himself of the habit of hitting me whenever I forgot my moves, and I ended up reminding him that we were shooting a film and not performing on stage!'

Touring North and South

'As our troupe gained recognition, we were invited by theatres from Suzhou, Kunming and many other cities. Father became hooked on playing boss. No sooner had our contract with the China Theatre expired than we embarked on our tour of China. Father became leader of the troupe in Suzhou. I followed him there, then onto Kunshan, Wuxi, and performed twice in Ningbo.

'A mob of students in exile had started to stir things up in those provinces. My mother got worried and protested: "We have to cancel the tour and go back to Shanghai." Father insisted: "No way. I already accepted an offer to go on tour with the troupe." Mother replied: "In that case, I'll just go back to Shanghai with Xiaofeng." After the two of us left, Father hired Yang Juping and Guo Yukun to join his gig in Nanjing. Guo was famous for his rendition of the Monkey King, while his wife Yang played a lovely *qingyi* (female role). Nonetheless, despite such a stellar cast, the interference of exiled

students made paying viewers avoid the theatre, and my father went bankrupt. He took the night train back to Shanghai and begged my mother to help: “I’ve made a big loss and am up to my neck in debt. You must let So-chow go on tour with me.” Mother retorted: “Don’t even think about it. How can I let her go in such dangerous times?” Father lost control and threatened us with weapons.’

Yu was a dutiful daughter, and persuaded her mother to take the whole family to Nanjing. She told her father: “I’m only performing for three nights.” He reassured us: “After you’ve made your appearance, we’ll go to Bengbu, Taierzhuang, Zaozhuang, all the way to Beijing. I’ll hire a Beijing tutor to teach you how to do drama scenes so that you’ll be well equipped to take leading roles. The roles you’re assigned now are not enough to make you a star.” That was how Mother and I were tricked into going to Nanjing.

‘I performed *Spider Demon’s Cave* on the first night. It involved a martial act swinging a stick and a “meteor firebrand”. The next night, I performed *Cotton Weaving*—a contemporary number that was a mishmash of Eastern and Western cultures, northern and southern operatic styles. I put on modish costumes and high heels to sing *laosheng* (elderly male role) and *laodan* (elderly female role), *bangzi* (opera from the Hebei region) with a dash of English song thrown in for good measure. On the last night, I opened the repertoire with *Red Maid* (an excerpt from *Romance of the West Chamber*) and performed *Assault on Sizhou City*. The audience were bowled over! Father grinned from ear to ear. No sooner had he recouped his investment and paid back his debts than he tricked us into touring other cities. From Zaozhuang to Bengbu, we drifted from one place to another like troubadours, performing for just three nights to one week at a time. When we finally reached Taierzhuang, we soon got ourselves into trouble,’ said Yu.

She continued: ‘I had turned 15 when we finally were ready to head for Beijing. We made a stop at Taierzhuang to change trains. After checking into an inn, we laid down some newspapers on the floor outside the entrance, and sat down to chill out in the summer heat. Just then, two men passed by and stared at me lewdly. I was naive and not smart like teenage girls nowadays. I smiled at them.’ That was enough to draw the attention of the men, who turned out to be Japanese foot soldiers on the hunt for young maidens to offer to their superiors.

‘They took me and Mother to a mansion. In one of the rooms was a Japanese Devil, lying on a bed. Mother entreated him: “Commander, we are just passing through this place. My daughter is on her way to study. She is only 13 or 14. She is still so young and doesn’t understand the ways of the world. What is the matter with you, Sir? Are you

not feeling well?” “hm,” he grunted. Mother said: “Why don’t you lie down as you here and rest? Let us run back to our troupe to bring some curiosities to entertain you. We won’t be long...” While humouring him, she shoved me out of the room. As soon as we got back to the inn, she told everyone to pack up, change into discreet night-travel gear and prepare to hop on the first train in the morning. Father, Mother, my brothers and I hid in a hill near the train station, which was a wise move as the two Japanese foot soldiers stomped around the station with torches looking for me. When they couldn’t find us, they left.

‘Father was worried sick. He was the first in line at the ticket counter but when dawn broke, the station got crowded. Father sat down on the floor to take a break, but before long, another Japanese man came over to speak to him. That was a time when the Japanese overran many parts of China. Father couldn’t understand a word so he just stood up and stared at him. The Japanese thought to himself: “Why isn’t this person responding when I’m talking to him?” and gave him a push. But Father was tougher than him. When the Japanese saw that he couldn’t make him budge, he got out a stick and kept thrashing my father. Our whole family went on our knees, crying and wailing. When he saw we outnumbered him, he ran away. As soon as the platform gates were open, we rushed in, fending off hordes of passengers. Father climbed onto the top of the train and lifted us up one by one. We hung on to each other closely. Actually we weren’t the only ones. There were many people who sat with us on the train top. Although our intended destination was Beijing, we had taken the wrong train, and ended up arriving back in Shanghai,’ Yu concluded.

Southbound for Hong Kong

Fate works in mysterious ways. Yu and her family had been back in Shanghai for less than a week before they were recruited to perform in Singapore. They received a warm welcome there. Soon after Yu’s return to China, she was offered the chance to make her debut on the silver screen with *The Heroine with Double Guns* (1949). She recalled:

‘I went to Suzhou and Huangshan for location shoots. I’d never mounted a horse before; I had to learn from scratch. If you can’t keep the horse under control, it would take advantage of you, running off to somewhere deep in the mountains. Once you can ride, it wouldn’t dare defy you. I was a real handful back then and I loved teasing the horse. At last I got bitten on my shoulder! The mark it left is still there.’ Despite the punishing training and ordeal she was put through, the little girl took only candies as her shooting fee, and ended up giving half of them to the crew!

‘After shooting this film, my godfather (Zhang Jingshou) invited me to join him for

dinner with Jiang Boying, boss of Great China Film Company. He greeted me enthusiastically: “I heard so much about you. You are a celebrity! Can I interest you to go to Hong Kong to make movies?” he offered.’

Thus, still in her early 20s, Yu So-chow found herself arriving in Hong Kong, accompanied by her mother. She made two films: *The Kung Fu Couple* (1949) and *The Revenge of the Great Swordsman* (1949).

‘That time I played smarter. I said I had no idea how much I would be paid. I wasn’t a good talker, so I asked my godfather. He offered me HK\$3,000 for one film, \$6,000 for two. That was a whole lot of money! I was thrilled to bits!’

After the films wrapped, she followed her mother to Kunming to perform Beijing opera again. She explained: ‘Our reason for going to Kunming was to help my uncle. My mother’s sister married a hotelier. We were invited to perform there to boost his business. In Kunming, the audience only longed to see my martial arts sequences. Once, a high-ranking Kuomintang officer came to see my performance, but I was scheduled to play *Imperial Concubine Yang*, a palace saga. Yet, to please him, I had to improvise lots of fight scenes. Can you imagine rendering the feminine beauty Yang as an action heroine? The crowd even demanded I show off my signature act of “fighting with eight and twelve spears”. What a farce it was!’

Not long afterwards, the Communists took Kunming and Yu came to settle in Hong Kong. Through the recommendation of her godfather Jiang Boying, she starred in the film *Fong Kong Heroine* (1950). She arranged for her parents to be reunited with her. ‘My father brought a whole entourage of opera artists, including *laosheng* (elderly male role), *dahualian* (painted face), *xiaohualian* (comedic role) as well as martial artists. We staged Beijing opera performances that comprised drama excerpts in the first half and action excerpts in the second half. We were successful beyond our own expectations. Soon enough, I received many offers to star in local films, but I told the producers: “I cannot speak Cantonese.” They said they would hire someone to dub over my voice. Initially the dubbing sounded weird until they found Lai Kwan-lin, whose dubbing voice was used thereafter. My schedule was frantic—easily wrapping a film in seven or even five days. For example, I’d shoot a martial version of the costume drama *Legend of Madame White Snake* in one studio, and walk over to the next studio to play a contemporary action heroine *Nightingale*. Once I was shooting a fight scene with Sek Kin around 4:30am or 5am. I was so exhausted I didn’t move my arm when his huge blade came sweeping down. Blood jetted out, and one could see the tendons splitting apart and bones sticking out. The tendons were throbbing. What a fearful sight! One of

my co-stars So Siu-tong came over to dress my wound with some Chinese ointment. Then, I soldiered on until I completed the shoot. It was pitiful,' she lamented.

'If you were to ask me which was my most memorable or favourite film, I'd say there was none! To be perfectly honest, some actors lived for the sake of art but I only became an artist for the sake of making a living. We used to shoot while the script was still being written. We never knew what next scene would be like. What kind of art is that?' she remarked.

A Fine Romance

Although Yu So-chow regrettably derived no sense of fulfilment from her illustrious but gruelling film career, she did find the love of her life in the same field. 'My late husband Mak Bing-wing already passed away 20 years ago. I first got to know him when we co-starred in *Meeting on the Weedy River* (1961). I noticed something really special about him. What ever happened on set, he just sat and waited until his turn. When his time was up, he just got up and left. He didn't care whether the shoot was completed or whether there was any other problem with the crew. Sometimes, I was pulling all-nighters to finish a shoot, and he soon lost patience waiting. I would tease him by saying: "Take it easy. I have eight mouths to feed at home." He retorted: "You have nine, including your own mutt-mouth." [Translator's note: 'nine' puns with 'dog' in Cantonese.] I freaked out. I thought to myself, don't ever get into a fight with me or I'll teach you a lesson. One day, we really had a fight, but surprisingly, he had sound martial art training, and I couldn't knock him down,' she recalled fondly.

'After some time, we started to dine out together. He loved to eat Shanghai hairy crabs so I bought him some. He easily could wolf down nine at a time. As we got to know each other, he would often drive me home. Eventually, he found out at which studio or location I was shooting, and came to see me. He was widowed, so he openly wooed me. Whenever I co-starred with Law Kim-long, Law always gave me a ride in his car. Once, Mak got wind of that and became jealous. He drove over and deliberately overtook Law's car, zigzagging on the road to draw my attention. I got annoyed and shouted at him. He crashed into a lamp post, and wrecked his car. I realised then that he was serious about me. Since he seemed devoted, I agreed to marry him. He had always treated me well. I still miss him after all these years,' she said wistfully. (Translated by Maggie Lee)

Editor's note: Yu So-chow now resides in San Francisco. In 2008, she made a tape recording of her oral history according to an outline provided by the Hong Kong Film Archive. This article was extracted from her recording. We are deeply grateful to Ms Yu for generously donated scores of rare photos to the HKFA.

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