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Tong Tik-sang: A Legendary Life of Cantonese Opera

陳守仁

Chan Sau-yan

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Programme

Tong Tik-sang: A Legendary Life of Cantonese Opera

Chan Sau-yan

Tong Tik-sang (1917-1959), the iconic playwright of Cantonese opera, is not only revered as the creator of masterworks like *The Floral Princess* (1957), *The Legend of Purple Hairpin* (1957), *The Regeneration in the Red-Plum Chamber* (1959), among many others, but is also known as a prolific librettist who has written over 440 operas throughout his short creative career of slightly over two decades. In 2017 when artists in the Cantonese opera circle (professionals and amateurs alike), students and scholars, together with the audiences and the general public, celebrate the centenary of his birth, few would doubt he is the most productive writer in the history of Chinese opera, and probably also in the history of world drama.

Tik-sang was probably born in Shanghai and had spent his youth in that restless metropolis before he resettled in Canton (Guangzhou) in around 1936, a year before the eruption of the Resistance War Against the Japanese Aggression in 1937. The Tongs, with their native homes in Tong Ka Wan, were then successful merchants, entrepreneurs, compradors and politicians in Shanghai during the pre-WW II era. One of Tik-sang's grand-uncles was Tang Shao-yi (1862-1938), the influential political figure of the Republic of China who was assassinated by the nationalists in 1938.

Tik-sang fled to Hong Kong in the summer or autumn of 1937, about a year before the fall of Guangzhou to the Japanese. There he found his cousin Tong Suet-hing (literally 'The Snowy Lady'; 1908-1955), a rising star of film and Cantonese opera, and her husband Sit Kok-sin (1904-1956), a superstar and owner of the Kok Sin Sing Opera Troupe. Tik-sang at once joined the troupe and worked as a copyist under those celebrity playwrights such as Mak Siu-ha (1904-1941), Fung Chi-fun (1907-1961), Lee Siu-wan (1916-2002) and Nam Hoi Sap Sam Long (literally 'The Thirteenth Son of the South Sea'; 1909-1984), and in September married Sit Kok-ching, the youngest sister of Kok-sin.¹

Creative Career

Under the guidance of his masters, sharing the Sits' connection as Kok-sin's brother-in-law and Suet-hing's cousin, benefitting from the golden era of 1930s Cantonese opera, and having studied many scripts found in the enormous collection of the opera troupe, Tik-sang's creative career burgeoned in no time. In October 1938 his first opera was staged and followed by two more in the next year. Altogether he had written eight plays before the fall of Hong Kong in December 1941, and two of them were adapted into screenplays.

Tik-sang stayed in Hong Kong during the Japanese occupation. After a divorce with Kok-sin's sister, he married Cheang Meng-ha (1912-2000), once a glamorous star of Cantonese opera and film, and an enthusiastic performer of Beijing opera. Inspired by her artistic expertise, and as a result of the untimely demise of Mak, and of the flight of some major scriptwriters (including Fung and The

¹ Chan Sau-yan, *Tong Tik-sang Chuangzuo Chuanqi (Tong Tik-sang: A Legendary Life of Cantonese Opera)*, Hong Kong: Infolink Publishing Ltd., 2016, pp3-9 (in Chinese).

Thirteenth Son) to Macau or Mainland China, Tik-sang had become a sought-after opera writer and had produced over 120 plays—about 30 per year in average before the end of 1945. His career further flourished in the 1950s when a number of master librettists resettled in Guangzhou to serve the People's Republic of China, and at the same time The Thirteenth Son suffered from mental depression. He wrote another 170 operas from 1950 to 1955. Having lost their pre-war fans, Kok-sin and Suet-hing left Hong Kong for Canton in 1954.

Those last five years of his life and career, 1955 to 1959, is regarded as the apogee, within which quantity gave way to quality. Reaping the harvest of his years-long endeavour to reform by modelling Cantonese opera on Western drama, movies and Chinese classical opera, he wrote numerous masterpieces in collaboration with the most talented composers and featuring the leading artists of the era. Among them was Pak Suet-sin (literally 'White Snow Angel'; born 1928), a disciple of Sit Kok-sin and Tong Suet-hing, who would later take off to become the *Diva par excellence* of the 1950s. Thanks to the dozens of articles written by Tik-sang from 1949 to 1959, nowadays one can trace those inspirational elements that had unleashed his creativity.

White Snow Angel

The summer of 1956 saw the founding of Sin Fung Ming ('Singing of the Celestial Phoenix') Opera Troupe under the leadership of Pak Suet-sin and Yam Kim-fai, respectively the Principal Female and Civil-cum-Military role actors, supported by some of the brightest stars of the other main roles, and inaugurated by *Dream of the Red Chamber* and *Tong Bak-fu Courts Autumn Fragrance*. Suet-sin's convincing portrayals of the two contrasting personages, the ill and lovesick Lam Doi-yuk and of Autumn Fragrance the jolly maid, had proved herself worthwhile. Perhaps, one wonders, it was in Suet-sin that Tik-sang had traced the silhouette of Suet-hing, his virtuosic and volatile cousin who had suddenly died in Canton in the summer of the previous year.

The same year also saw *The Dream in the Peony Pavilion*, Tong's first attempt in shaping a classical opera (dated 1598) into Cantonese opera. During the adaptation, in his own words, the plot had been simplified, the ancient text translated and fitted into Cantonese operatic tunes, and the whole process keeping him awake for days and nights. All these efforts were partly driven by Tong's absorption in the gist of the work—a living mind embodying unflinching love could surpass carnal death—but mainly by his appreciation of the artistic flair of Suet-sin, who, in his own words, had 'succeeded to merge her own soul with that of the heroine and eventually reincarnated her'.²

Again, *The Butterfly and Red Pear Blossoms* (early 1957) was inspired by Suet-sin. In the wake of Sit Kok-sin's shocking demise in Canton and the success of *The Dream in the Peony Pavilion*, Tik-sang for a while indulged in studying classical dramas, with the aim of 'finding another ancient beauty who could trigger Suet-sin's transformation'.³ Here, Tong presented to his audience an amazingly resigned plight that tortured an infatuated pair: for all their desires to meet with their dreamed idols, they were denied by the forces of life until the denouement. Again, Suet-sin, through her touching rendition of the ethereal poet-artiste, had not just impressed her audience, but also proselytised them to become her

² Ibid, p147.

³ Ibid, p150.

fans.

Forces of Life

The forces of life was certainly another major element that had sparked Tik-sang's ingenuity. He had experienced the atrocities of war, the tearing apart of families, divorce and loss of his beloved ones. Though throughout his career he had been received as a sought-after talent, he every now and then had lamented on his resigned solitude. He had always tried to promote Cantonese opera to an artistic level, but not everyone around him behaved like an artist. For making a living, he had been exhausted by excessive assignments. Mortified by those works of his which were produced for nothing more than monetary gains, he was uplifted by his masterpieces but at the same time disappointed by them for being financially unviable so as to free him from unwanted commissions. Unnoticeably, those urges for meeting urgent deadlines and for ploughing through the small hours were undermining his wit, not least his health.

Tik-sang found his own shadow in *The Legend of Purple Hairpin* (August 1957). With the entrance of the three scholars struggling for recognition, he let them sing aloud his own frustrations: 'This wayfarer is stuck in this capital city, attracted to the banner that announces the imperial exam; we three old buddies are yearning for success', 'This old scholar has a belly full of grudges, because I've long been grossly underrated...' and 'Amidst snakes and dragons, the genuine hero can hardly identify himself....'

Portraying the rise of a girl from roguishness to stardom, somewhat like George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion*, the opera *Cherries Ripened, Hearts Broken* (1953) features some aphoristic lines, somewhat carrying certain nuances, when the heroine sings: 'I perfectly understand if men don't have any desires, we women would be doomed to failure. In the absence of any covetous intention, no man would sacrifice his heart or blood for a woman.' Some wonder if he was experiencing a difficult situation.

Financially Tik-sang was almost an invalid. He was once detained in a police station for evading income and profit tax. Again in *The Legend of Purple Hairpin*, he sighed through the maid of the disgraced princess. There, no sooner had the chevalier in yellow robe given them money for easing their penury than those greedy ones exploited them with all kinds of excuses. Her line aptly summarised his own predicament: 'Those alms have been helplessly dissipated, the wretched are destined to remain money carriers'.

By summer 1959 Tik-sang had put under control his severe hypertension, the same ailment that had killed Kok-sin almost three years ago. At present his venture was *The Regeneration in the Red-Plum Chamber* to be premiered on 14 September, a date people would never forget. Suet-sin would play the audacious concubine striving for true love and undaunted by her murder by the jealous Prime Minister. Once again, the ghost's willpower would drive her to find new life in an ingénue, also portrayed by Suet-sin, and to reunite with the young scholar.

Sudden Death

On that evening at Lee Theatre, people said Tik-sang suddenly collapsed on a stalls seat at the time the

ghost first entered stage. He was whisked off to hospital but died in the early morning.⁴ Since then, it seems Cantonese opera has lost its soul, despite his masterpieces, both operas and film adaptations, have been restaged and rescreened over and over.

No doubt Tik-sang's over four hundred stories had been sourced from the traditional repertoire, classical dramas, Hollywood films, novels, Beijing and other regional opera genres, folk tales, folk narratives and spoken dramas, it was his admiration of Suet-sin, and probably also of Suet-hing, and his way of staring at his own survival that has breathed life into some of his best works.

A Lonely Call

During the past century we have witnessed, against the backdrop of a disquieting but great age, the growth of Tong Tik-sang, his sinuous life, his maturation and marvellous success along with the booming of Cantonese opera, his sacrifice of his life, his death, and the echoes of his works whilst Cantonese opera was travelling downhill from the 1960s to his centenary. Unlike in his heydays, Cantonese opera is no longer the major form of entertainment and its marginalisation is still in progress, amidst which his echoes remain just a lonely call, unless we speed up the process of making Cantonese opera a form of fine art.

Chan Sau-yan taught at the Music Department of the Chinese University of Hong Kong from 1987 to 2007. He founded the Cantonese Opera Research Programme and Chinese Opera Information Centre before moving to Wales, the United Kingdom, in 2008. He resettled in Hong Kong in 2015 and is now a writer and researcher.

⁴ Ibid, pp71-72.