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Feature

Mak Siu-ha Painted Blood on the Peach Blossom Fan

Chan Sau-yan

1941

In the early morning of 8th December, by the time the Japanese aeroplanes were bombing Kai Tak Airport and the Royal Artillery barracks nearby, Mak Siu-ha had been staying overnight in the studios not far from Diamond Hill and was giving instructions for the filming of *Splitting Another Willow*, a movie he would never finish. The actors, cameramen and grips were panic-stricken, fearing that their nightmare had come true. Nanjing was raped four years ago, Canton had fallen a year after that. Would Hong Kong face a similar, or even worse, tragedy? Mr Mak had no choice but to abort the shooting, telling everybody to go home at once.

All the piers were besieged by a sea of people; everyone was trying to get to the Hong Kong side as soon as possible. 'Ground battle has erupted in the New Territories,' some cried, 'and the Japs are swiftly heading towards Kowloon!'

Having overcome innumerable hurdles, Siu-ha arrived at the Yung House on Robinson Road by nightfall. There he was greeted by the anxious Alice, his nominal sister, disciple in scriptwriting and lover. The two looked at each other in tearful eyes, holding each other's hands, maintaining a restless silence for a good while. They knew too well what was awaiting them.

They started a bonfire in the garden. With the help of the servants, Siu-ha's writings and those film reels that used to bide their time in the carport were put into the conflagration. They screeched in the flames for hours, as if they, as the heart and blood of their creator, were moaning for their untoward demise through his own hands. But their quantity was nonetheless overwhelming. For speeding up the process, the servants were urged to transport the rest to the shore and to dump them into the sea.

Such was the denouement of Siu-ha's decade-long endeavour to arouse his fellow Hong Kongers' patriotism and anti-Japan sentiment via his Cantonese operas, articles and films like *On the Eve of the Great Battle* (1937), *Silver Moon and Golden Star* (1937), *Three Thousand Women Stars* (1938), *The Woman General* (1939) and *The Blood-Stained Peach Blossom Fan* (1940). The Crown Colony would fall, he intuited, just like Beijing, Shanghai, Nanjing and Canton, and it was merely a matter of time. The annihilation of his anti-Japanese works was the only way to ensure the safety of Kit-wah, his wife, his children, Alice and the Yungs.

Nine days later, on the morning of 17th December, while hiding from an air raid in a garage not far from the Yung House, Alice and Siu-ha were hit by a bomb. Her leg was seriously wounded and he died at 10am after being sent to Queen Mary Hospital, at the age of thirty-seven. The two were then separated forever.

1989

Yung Sai-shing, my research partner, and I were introduced to Alice Yung (1910–1997) by Dr Wong Tak-wai of the University of Hong Kong in the summer of 1989. She was then aged nearly seventy-nine but in superb spirit. When she opened her two wooden trunks that had been sealed for nearly half a century, we gaped in amazement at Mak's manuscripts, scrapbooks, opera scripts, screenplays, photos and other belongings that she had managed to keep. We also voraciously listened to her reminiscence of the past.

Siu-ha was born to a wealthy and literate family in Canton in 1904. His father had created his fortune by trading silk products in India before he founded his business in Canton. As a gifted child, Siu-ha started schooling at five, learnt to paint at seven and devoted himself seriously to calligraphy, martial arts, music, drama and film as soon as he became a teenager. But the murder of his father by bandits prompted the downfall of his family. Upon graduation from the National Army Academy, he taught in schools and was later recruited to become a minor official. His refusal to take part in bribery or injustice prompted his resignation and his return to teaching. He and his brother Suet-fung co-founded a drama society they called New Sky Wind, which aimed at promoting patriotism by means of a reformed style of Cantonese opera.¹

The brothers and their families resettled in Hong Kong in around 1927. Siu-ha started writing scripts for some of the leading stars of Cantonese opera and also enrolled in the training programme offered by Hong Kong Film Company. He later played a role in *The Pain of Separation* (1931), a film written and directed by Lai Pak-hoi (1889–1955). Siu-ha joined the renowned Kok Sin Sing Company of Cantonese Opera in 1930, working under the opera and film superstar Sit Kok-sin (1904–1956) as the director of promotion and a librettist.² Three years later, he again collaborated with Lai in *Conscience* (1933), the first and only partial talking picture ever made in Hong Kong, as scriptwriter and director (co-directed with Chow Wing-loi).³ He soon became a sought-after film artist. In 1935, he was involved in nine films: in three as composer, in one as singer and actor, as actor in *Living* (directed by Shaw Runje, 1896–1975) that set the box-office record for the year and two other titles, as co-writer and actor in another one, and as director and writer in *A Half-Blossoming Rose*. A year later, he composed music, co-wrote the screenplay and

co-directed *Fragrant Rose*, which later became the first film the screening rights of which was bought by an American agency. He took part in the production of a total of 22 films throughout his life.⁴

While making films, Mak kept writing operas for Sit's troupe. Through a series of coincidence, he adopted Alice Yung as his protégée in 1933. As the Yungs were then a family of note and Cantonese operatic employees were discriminated as people of dubious moral, she used Yung Yi as her *nom de plume* for concealing her true identity. Before Hong Kong's fall, she had written about twenty operas, some in collaboration with Mak, and is regarded as the most prolific female librettist in the history of Cantonese opera. It was also during her creative career that she had developed a romance with Mak, then a married man with a boy and a girl, and was entangled in a hopeless love that would remain with her to her very last days.

1937

The Japanese kicked off their all-out invasion of China on 7th July. The Republic lost Beijing and Tianjin in August, Shanghai in November and the capital Nanjing on 13th December. Hong Kongers, under the wing of the United Kingdom, however managed to hide in the Crown Colony—their Elysium equivalent to the Peach Blossom Spring in Chinese folklore. While many continued to pamper themselves with all sorts of idle pleasure like horse racing, football games, dancing and gambling, artists of the movie industry had formed a united front. In August, Mak and four other major screenwriters put together *At This Crucial Juncture*, which was then co-directed by six top directors including Joseph Sunn Jue (1904–1987) and Ko Lei-hen (1890–1982). It also involved all the motion picture actors and actresses and over eight hundred extras and was premiered on 29th December and publicly released in the following year.⁵

Patriotic films had become the major trend; a total of 25 were produced within 1937. However, the Hong Kong government, under pressure from Japan, Britain's ally, increasingly tightened the censorship on the mass media, to the extent that the words 'Japan' and 'Japanese' were forbidden within the context of the war in China. On the one hand, it aimed at detaching Hong Kongers from the Japanese aggression and atrocities in China; on the other hand, it enabled many owners of movie companies to withdraw from the subject matter.

In order to promote National Salvation without interference from the wavering investors, Mak and the Yungs, together with their close friends, founded Tianxia Film Company. *Silver Moon and Golden Stars* was produced, portraying the entanglement of the members of a drama troupe in a web of love, patriotism, jealousy and hatred. Later came *On the Eve of the Great Battle* that told the predicament of the republic, which now faced a ferocious but unnameable foe. The following year, they

established Kai Wah Film Company. *Three Thousand Women Stars*, their production of 1938, had its satirical references camouflaged in a complicated social drama presented as a black comedy. The same year also saw an official ban on patriotic films.⁶ World War II erupted a year later.

1997

The Japanese occupation of Hong Kong had reduced the Yungs to poverty. Alice and her mother sold their old mansion and moved into a small flat in Kowloon after the war. While keeping Siu-ha's operatic collection in two wooden trunks, she took care of her mother and made their living by writing movie and broadcasting scripts as a freelancer, and by working in a clinic and in an amusement park. She could never forget about Siu-ha, her only lover throughout her life, even up to her last years. Yet her tone was always calm and stripped of passion whenever she relived the past, probably because she had already been hardened by those difficult years. 'It's such a pity,' she said to me every now and then, 'that he hasn't left behind any of his movies.' She passed away on 22nd March, at the age of 86.

2016

On 4th March I was invited to the Hong Kong Film Archive by Winnie Fu, Kwok Ching-ling and Yuen Tsz-ying to watch *The Blood-Stained Peach Blossom Fan*, a long-lost work written and directed by Mak in 1940, and has been recently re-discovered in the States.⁷ Deploying a plot that unfolds itself along a series of comic episodes within an urban Elysium—Peach Blossom Spring—which together expose Hong Kongers' 'couldn't-care-less' attitude towards the Japanese invasion of China and later leading to a tragic ending, I found every bit of the film deserves my appreciation.

1699

Peach Blossom Fan is a classical opera written by Kong Shangren (1648–1718), a Han-Chinese, during the early period of the Qing Dynasty. Through the portrayal of the unflinching love between Li Xiangjun (1624–1653; *xiang-jun* literally means 'fragrant lady'), a sing-song girl with exceptionally artistic and patriotic flair, and the lovesick, wavering scholar Hou Fangyu (1618–1655) which took place during the last years of the Ming Empire, Kong intended to find out 'who, and what events, at when and from where were responsible for the tumbling of my country.' It became a popular opera shortly after its completion in 1699 and thus angered the Manchu emperor. Kong, a civil servant then, was removed from his office in no time.⁸

1940

To avoid getting into troubles, Mak in this year had to evade a harsh censorship no less spiteful than what had preyed on Kong Shangren. Also, though they shared a common goal, Mak had a tougher task. China was then at the crossroads of life and death, but Hong Kong people had been intoxicated and hypnotised by the British. He knew perfectly well that presenting another story about ancient China succumbing to a barbarian onslaught wouldn't be effective any more—it was too much a cliché, and a subject matter too heavy for the merrymakers. He must rely on a breakthrough should he want to wake up his compatriots and also to skirt around the authorities. Punitive acts were not necessarily instigated by the police or their agents. Film artists, including Siu-ha himself, had from time to time been assaulted by Japanese spies and their hirelings.

The storyline of *The Blood-Stained Peach Blossom Fan* is composed of three themes, with four individual suitors' courtship of the same woman—Miss Perfume (played by Cheang Mang-ha, 1912–2000), a very much sought-after star of Cantonese opera—outlining the foreground. The quartet of wooers include Charlie Cheung (played by Cheng Sang, 1905– circa 1980), the future heir of a hotel and a graduate from an American university majoring in military aviation; Mr Chin (Chow Chi-sing, 1909–1956), the sycophantic manager of the hotel; Playwright (Chu Po-chuen), a clumsy and shy stutterer; and the Boss (Lam Kwun-shan, 1891–1964), the mean, apolitical and indifferent father of Charlie.

The patriotism—the second and underlying theme—demonstrated by Miss Perfume and Officer Chan (played by Yu Leung, 1914–1971), the fundraiser from the frontier in China, is a sharp contrast to the apathy of the wooers. Not only is Perfume making donations from time to time, she is also working towards the auction of her matrimony to raise money for the War Fund, and she at times also tries to motivate Charlie to join the Chinese air force, so as to make the most of his training and to thwart the Japanese. He however makes use of all kinds of ridiculous justification to evade the invitation. Similarly, his father, the Boss, also cites risible excuses to avoid making donations. To him, the recruitment of a new concubine is his priority.

The core theme, which has been subtly touched upon, is the restaging of the classical play *Peach Blossom Fan*, the adaptation of which is entrusted to Playwright. Having overheard that Perfume and Playwright need to find a fan to be used in the show, Boss confesses to Perfume that among his family treasure is exactly such a fan, the one scholar Hou had given Xiangjun as the emblem of love, which was bestowed on his family by one of the Manchu emperors. He is willing to offer it to Perfume, he says, if he would get her hand in marriage.

A number of comic episodes have been interpolated in the story, thus enabling a

jaunty unfoldment of the plot, and a camouflage of the patriotic message. Chin, the manager of the hotel, bullies a contemptible hillbilly by burning his trousers with a cigarette, later finds out that the man is no one but his boss; Playwright, the stutterer, tries to win Perfume's heart by pretending to sing a wooing song that is in fact sung by his buddy, Charlie, hiding behind the screen, before Playwright himself falls upon the screen and thus exposing the trick; for avoiding Officer Chan, Boss hides himself in Perfume's bathroom, is mistaken for a peeping Tom and is thus beaten up by his own son.

At the opening of the Auction Fete, audience of the film can catch a glimpse of those renowned musicians, like Lam Siu-lau (1917–1979; also a composer) and Ng Ka-fai, among others, of that era. Perfume then performs a sword dance redolent of that in the Beijing opera *Farewell My Concubine*,⁹ thus prelude the tragic denouement of the film. The downturn occurs in no time: Boss' young son (played by Cheng Kwan-min, 1917–1994) from the country reports to him that 'the enemies' have seized their home and committed innumerable atrocities against their families, and the bloodshed has ruined the peach blossom fan.

In fury and agitation, everybody present at the fete gather under the portrait of Dr Sun Yat-sen. Boss and Charlie regret their wrong doings and vow to sacrifice themselves for their motherland. The film ends with their singing of the *March of the Volunteers*.

2016

The Blood-Stained Peach Blossom Fan does not only contain Mak Siu-ha's camouflaged patriotism and persiflage, it is made of his intricate thoughts and selfless blood.

'They have found it.' Nearly twenty years after her death, at last I am able to tell her in my dream. 'Alice, they have found him, at last.'

Notes

¹ Wong Yin-ching, 'Chronicles of Mr Mak Siu-ha' and Mak Suet-fung, 'Before and After the Death of My Late Brother Siu-ha', *Memorial Journal For the 6th Anniversary of Mak Siu-ha's Martyrdom*, Hong Kong: Siu Sing Company, 1947, pp 3–4 and 9 (in Chinese).

² Yu Mo-wan, *Xianggang Dianying Shihua (Anecdotes of Hong Kong Cinema)*, Vol 2, Hong Kong: Sub-Culture Ltd, 1997, pp 7-8 (in Chinese); also see Chan Sau-yan, 'A Chronology of Mak Siu-ha', *Newsletter of the Chinese Opera Information Centre*, Issues 37 and 38, Hong Kong: Chinese Opera Information Centre of The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2012, p 13 (in Chinese).

³ Yu Mo-wan, *ibid*, pp 62-63.

- ⁴ Chan Sau-yan, see note 2, p 13.
- ⁵ Yu Mo-wan, see note 2, p 139.
- ⁶ Ibid, pp 199-200.
- ⁷ A second screening of the same film, hosted by Winnie Fu and May Ng of the Hong Kong Film Archive, was held 10 days later, in the enthusiastic presence of renowned Cantonese opera star Yuen Siu-fai along with researchers such as Prof Yu Siu-wah, Dr Lee Siu-yan, Dr Lum Man-ye, Dr Elaine Chan, Yuen Tsz-ying and the author of this article.
- ⁸ See the Wikipedia: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kong_Shangren
- ⁹ The concubine slits her own throat soon after the dance.

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.

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