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Post-war Cantonese Pulp Fiction and Cinema

羅卡

Law Kar

從芳艷芬與新馬師曾的電影看粵劇過渡到時裝電影的音樂傳統

How Musical Tradition Evolves

—A Case Study of Films Starring Fong Yim-fun and Sun Ma Si-tsang

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Early Cinematic Treasures Rediscovered ③

Post-war Cantonese Pulp Fiction and Cinema

Law Kar

The entire nation of China celebrated in August 1945 as Japan announced its surrender. After suffering through the Japanese Occupation, Guangzhou and Hong Kong began their process of post-war reconstruction. Although social problems were rife in the midst of confusion and chaos, people were nonetheless relieved that the war was over, and thus demand for popular entertainment spiked. Indeed, from 1945, Cantonese opera houses and concert halls in Guangzhou, Hong Kong and Macau were often filled to the brim nightly, prompting the government to drastically raise entertainment taxes and theatres to increase ticket prices at this opportune time. Lee Ngaw, a radio storyteller in Guangzhou, took listeners by storm in the region with his ‘Airwave Novels’. That being said, the abundant releases of Hollywood pictures were also highly welcomed by audiences in the three cities. Since film productions require a certain amount of financial investment and technical support, the local film industry did not recover until mid-to-late 1946.

In 1947, there was a total of 89 Cantonese and Mandarin productions in Hong Kong, but this number quickly rose to 143 by the next year. With the expansion of the entertainment industry, newspapers and magazines which published entertainment news and serialised pulp fiction also entered a period of exciting growth. Radio stations started to broadcast a great deal of Cantonese operas and tunes, as well as stories and fictional works. Many films therefore were adapted from sources such as Cantonese operas, pulp fictions and ‘Airwave Novels’; and in turn some of these popular novels and movies were made into Cantonese operas. This synergistic exchange among different mediums propelled one another’s growth and development.

Pulp fiction in China has had a long and rich history. Having originated in Shanghai, the genre was firmly established by the end of the Qing dynasty and the beginning of the Republic era. It reached greater heights and dimensions during the post-war period, where its distribution and influence extended to Chinese-speaking populations in Southern China as well as Southeast Asia. Before and after the Sino-Japanese War and the civil war between the Communists and the Nationalists, many Mainland intellectuals moved to Hong Kong, and continued their mission of using the arts to spread patriotic ideas via the local print media.

On the other hand, a number of immigrant writers made a living through serialised novels in local newspapers, and started to also publish more mainstream, popular ‘Shanghai-style’ serials, essays, and commentaries.

Combined with the Hong Kong ‘Cantonese-style’ pulp fictions and articles, such writing began to populate the supplement pages of local papers, forming a distinct and unique culture. Local novels were more audacious and casual, employing elements such as erotic romance, detective story, *wuxia* and violence as plot devices. Writers used a mixture of Classical Chinese, vernacular Chinese and spoken Cantonese (i.e. the so-called ‘saam kap dai’ style) and did not avoid using vulgar slangs phrases. Hence they were considered unsuitable for ‘proper’ newspapers, and so were mostly serialised in tabloids that

focused on the eclectic and the eccentric, as well as minor news items intended to shock and titillate. The most popular of these serial novels were compiled and published as booklets. This business model continued to be popular with readers until the 1960s and 70s.

During the turbulent years of the Civil War, Hong Kong people felt unsettled and looked for distractions and catharsis, especially in the form of pulp novels. The entertainment industry prospered during the years 1946 to 1950, and because of their shared language and interest, Cantonese pulp novels were often adapted into Cantonese films. In recent years, the Hong Kong Film Archive has acquired some previously lost local films from the 1930s and 1940s, a number of which were adaptations of contemporary pulp novels. The writers who penned some of these original novels include Ling Siu-sang (whose real name is Wai Chun-tso), who specialised in erotic romance in *Sing Pao Daily News*, Yi Hung-sang (whose real name is U Ki-ping) and Ko Hung. Apart from 'My Surname's Ko', Ko also had other pseudonyms: as Hui Tak, he wrote detective thrillers in *New Life Evening Post*; as Shi Tak, he wrote exotic novels; and as Broker Lai he penned the social novel *The Diary of a Broker*. Another famous pulp fiction writer is Mong Wan (whose real name is Cheung Man-bing), who made his name even before the war.

All these Cantonese writers have lived and worked in Hong Kong for a long time, and their works have a strong sense of Southern Cantonese culture as well as distinctive features of Hong Kong city life. However, back in the day, many respected intellectuals would look down on their pulp novels as frivolous and meaningless, and even criticised them as 'low-classed, toxic vulgarism'. For now this essay only focuses on briefly introducing the adapted cinematic works of several popular writers and the characteristics of such films.

Ling Siu-sang

Ling Siu-sang wrote erotic novels in the traditional literary style (commonly referred to as the 'School of Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies') with plain Classical Chinese. His stories often centre on men and women living in the urban metropolis seduced by sex and materialism, who fall prey to decadence and perversion. His novels, set in a world of complicated, abnormal relationships, are filled with twists and turns, dramatic highs, as well as lowly smut that borders on erotica. He was truly adept at engineering very complex plots. While he often repeated the same tropes and plot points, stretching his novels to over 300 chapters, he nonetheless managed to amass many readers to follow each of his chapters on a daily basis, making him a huge hit in the 1940s and 1950s.

His claim to fame was the pre-war work *Red Chamber in the Sea*, the rights of which were immediately snapped up for film adaptation. Unfortunately it never made it to the big screen as Hong Kong was soon occupied by Japanese forces before the studio could start production. After the war, the rights were transferred to Wong Toi, who both directed and re-wrote the story. The film was split into two separate sequels and were released in July and October 1947 respectively. It was said that they were both box office hits, although all copies of the films have been lost. I have had the opportunity to see *The Evil Mind* (1947) however, which is another Ling original. Yet the story failed to impress me as the adaptation was confusingly written and hard to keep up with. Ling's stories were highly complex in

terms of plot and character development, with idiosyncratic twists and turns, making them ideal for consumption in small chunks in the serial format, but extremely challenging to translate into a coherent script for a two-hour feature. Perhaps due to his popularity, Ling's other adapted works of 1947 include *The Fickle Lady* and *The Romantic Thief White Chrysanthemum*. The next year also saw the releases of *Waving Red Belt* and *Wealth is like a Dream*, both penned by the then up-and-coming new talent, Chun Kim. Unfortunately, none of these films are available today.

Yi Hung-sang

Yi Hung-sang made a name for himself as an emerging screenwriter in the 1930s, but only found true popularity after the war. In the year of 1948 alone, five of his serialised works in *Sing Pao Daily News* were adapted for the big screen, such as *The Crazy Match-maker*, *Mysterious Mind of Woman* and *End to the Song*, *Death to the Soul*. The latter two films also featured Yi as co-writer. As testament to his popular success, a further five film adaptations were released in 1949, including *To Kill the Love*. Yi excelled at mid-length novels that are around 30 chapters in length. His characters and plots were clear cut, and the scenes were relatively simple but dramatic, which lent themselves well to the medium of film. Adaptations of Yi's works therefore tended to be more successful. He wrote in a variety of genres; apart from romance and erotica he also dabbled in suspense, horror and thriller novels.

Often borrowing from Hollywood films, Yi wrote *Ghost Woman of the Old Mansion* (1949) in the style of a Western horror movie, exploring the macabre, chilling theme of coming back from the dead. In *The Seventh Stranger* (1951), a sci-fi film, Yi tells the story of a girl who loses her sense of self after taking a special drug and changing her appearance—a plot inspired by the Hollywood production of *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1932).

In his novel *The Crazy Match-maker*, Yi satirises the loss of social order and moral direction in post-war Hong Kong, mixing a sense of absurdity with the erotic.

The film adaptation, however, takes a more didactic approach, losing much of the subversion of the novel. Nonetheless, it remains a solid piece of cinema with a good script and commendable direction. *To Kill the Love* (1949) was a relatively faithful but not particularly successful adaptation. The story describes two sisters who take turns marrying the same man. The cowardice of the husband is juxtaposed against the strength of the two women, highlighting the burdens and plights of women in post-war society, as well as their lack of future opportunities. Combining Yi's aptitudes for depicting both new Western concepts and traditional values about love and family, the story is a potent mixture of sentimentalism and social commentary; at the same time, it is appropriately understated and realistic, focusing on local themes and the society at large. Many of its strengths were well-translated into the film. However, the 'repressed modernism' in the film is something worth exploring further.

Ko Hung

The prolific and talented Ko Hung wrote under many different pseudonyms. Adopting the 'saam kap dai' style, he excelled at writing erotica, suspense, detective fiction, as well as social satire; and seemed

to have the Midas touch in making everything he wrote interesting and readable. He created the crime-busting detective Sima Fu, as well as the worldly, street-wise Broker Lai, with his thrilling adventures in love and business. Both were main characters in his serialised full-length novels, and were also adapted for the silver screen several times. Sima Fu was featured in *Coming Back to Life in a Dead Body* (1947), *Return of the Black Hero* (1948), and *Sima Fu's Encounter with the Honey Gang* (1949); while the life of Broker Lai was dramatised in *Broker Lai*, *The Adventures of Broker Lai and the Smart Fei-Tian Nan*, and *The Misarranged Love Trap* (all released in 1950).

Ko's longstanding popularity, which lasted from the post-war period to the 1970s, can be attributed to not only his robust writing, but also his piercing and unique insights into human nature, as well as his mastery over a variety of styles. Even works that he wrote for leisure are still immensely readable. By now there has been quite a lot of research into Ko's oeuvre, and his status has very much been elevated to that of a writer who enjoys both mainstream popularity as well as literary respect. The aforementioned films are not part of the Archive's collection, but *The Adventures of Broker Lai and the Smart Fei-Tian Nan* and *The Misarranged Love Trap* were shown in the Hong Kong International Film Festival in 1985, and garnered enthusiastic response. Their success is largely in debt to the writer/director Mok Hong-si, who used the characters but rewrote the plots. Mok also removed many of the erotic scenes, psychological struggles and subplots about cut-throat business competition, and instead enhanced the situational comedy and the satirical emphasis on people and relationships. This way, Mok remained faithful to the light comedic tone of Ko's mockery.

Mong Wan

Another popular pulp fiction writer is Mong Wan, who had been active in the Hong Kong literary scene since he was a young man. He later started writing serial novels in the papers, and also participated in screenwriting work for film studios, thereby completing his transition into a 'mainstream popular writer'. At the end of the 1930s, he was extremely well-known for his pulp novel *The Black Knight*, and subsequently he released *Poor Souls*, which attained both commercial and critical success. He wrote the adapted screenplay for both novels — *Poor Souls*, directed by Lee Tit, was made in 1940; and *The Black Knight*, helmed by Chan Hang-yin, in 1941. Both films are unfortunately lost, but Lo Duen's *Follow Your Dream* (1941) is clearly modelled after *Poor Souls* in its portrayal of the frustration, homesickness and patriotism among young Mainland intellectuals having moved to Hong Kong, and the bonds they form with people of different classes while living together in close quarters. Later, Lo would go on to co-write *In the Face of Demolition* (1953) with Chan Wan, which is also a variation of *Poor Souls* — another demonstration of the influence Mong's original story holds.

After the war, in October 1945, Mong Wan resumed writing for the papers, and also worked on a number of films. First he collaborated with Cho Kei to write and direct *The Young Couple* (1947), then he wrote and directed *The Black Hero and Lee Ching-mei* (1948). The latter film was released in direct competition with *Return of the Black Hero* (an adaptation of the novel *Sima Fu Case Files*). Mong Wan even sued *Return of the Black Hero* for violating copyright, which suggests how fiercely he defended his own intellectual property rights. Adapted from his namesake novel, *A Poor Lover's Tear* (1948) is an

interesting story with vivid characters which is far from mundane. The main characters played by Pak Yin and Cheang Mang-ha are not typical of contemporary female characters who suffer in silence. They are womanly and attractive, but also hold their own when dealing with and scheming against men — a representation very much ahead of its times. Mong passed away in 1959, but was quite prolific during his lifetime. In the 1950s, his stories continued to be adapted by famous writers and directors like Chun Kim and Tso Kea. Mong's long-reaching influence therefore cannot easily be summed up; he was most definitely more than just a 'pulp writer'.

One of my strongest impressions so far after studying the Archive's new collection of post-war (and some pre-war) Hong Kong Cantonese films is that, even though serialised novels were often branded as 'pulp fiction', this literary form also offered great potential for expression and exploration. As post-war Hong Kong society was somewhat thrown off-course, and moral values were being challenged in an overwhelmingly materialistic environment, a great number of pulp stories with explicit content emerged.

As newspapers and magazines did not have to submit their publications to the censor, they had the freedom to write about sex, violence, perversion and evil in ways that would become the selling point of such pulp novels. If a pulp writer had the insights and the talent to express, he or she would have the potential to explore parts of human nature more directly and realistically than traditional 'literary novels'. However, when these stories were translated onscreen, they were often neutered because films were restricted by the authorities and stricter moral codes. As a result, the film versions usually only adopt the characters and broader narrative arcs, while the psychological detail, shock factor and subversive power of the originals are all dismissed. Even though both mediums are popular entertainment, Cantonese films are geared towards family audiences and going to the cinema is often a communal activity, whereas tabloids can be read in private and consumed relatively quickly. Therefore in the transition from novel to film, stories are refashioned in a far more conservative way. Later, in the 1960s, with the emergence of a new generation of audiences with different viewing habits, film censorship relaxed and Hong Kong films were gradually allowed more freedom of expression. (Translated by Rachel Ng)

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Dream Duo

How Musical Tradition Evolves —A Case Study of Films Starring Fong Yim-fun and Sun Ma Si-tsang

Yu Siu-wah

When discussing Sister Fong (Fong Yim-fun), Sister Yam (Yam Kim-fai) or Brother Cheung (his real name being Tang Wing-cheung, aka Sun Ma Si-tsang / Sun Ma Chai) in the *Dream Duo* series, we always run into the same problem—it is never easy to determine who their most regular collaborators are! This is because they have all worked with a number of *xiaoshengs* (male leads) and *huadans* (female leads) both onstage and onscreen. When illustrious Cantonese opera artists star in films, we may easily jump to the conclusion that the works concerned are either adaptations of stage classics or inundated with *xiqu* (sung drama) pieces. However, history tells us that this is not the case. Fong, for example, has been in twice as many contemporary features than period ones (see below for details). This essay will focus on examining the contemporary films starring Fong and Sun in the early 1950s.

From Fong's filmography tabulated by year (see Table 1), one notices that with the exception of Fong's two earliest films in 1950 (i.e. *The Flower Drops by the Red Chamber* and *The Story of Tung Siu-yuen*), all other films featuring the actress between 1951 and 1956 were in contemporary or Early Republican settings. She literally stopped acting in period Cantonese opera films during those six years, only returning to the genre in late 1957, when the shooting of *The Nymph of River Lo* commenced. She then went on to star in 42 Cantonese opera movies over the next two years, until her retirement from show business in 1959.

Table 1: Fong Yim-fun's Filmography by Year¹

| | Period/Cantonese Opera | Contemporary | Early Republican | Others |
|------|---------------------------|--------------|------------------|-----------------------|
| 1950 | 2 | 1 | - | - |
| 1951 | - | 2 | - | - |
| 1952 | - | 21 | - | 1 (Western period) |
| 1953 | - | 23 | 1 | - |
| 1954 | - | 10 | 2 | - |
| 1955 | - | 13 | 3 | - |
| 1956 | - | 9 | 3 | 1 (Hui tribe costume) |
| 1957 | 3 | 4 | 2 | - |
| 1958 | 24 | 2 | 1 | - |
| 1959 | 15 | 2 | 1 | - |
| | 44 | 87 | 13 | 2 |

¹ Taken from the table 'Fong Yim-fun's Filmography by Year'. Ho Wing-sze and James Wong (eds.), *Yintan Tuyen: The Films of Fong Yim-fun*, Hong Kong: WINGS Workshop, 2010, pp 145-157 (in Chinese).

Between 1950 and 1959, Fong appeared in a total of 146 motion pictures, predominately in contemporary films. Among them, 87 were in contemporary settings, 44 were period films which is approximately half of the former. Around a dozen were set in Early Republican. The 15 works she co-starred with Sun were made between 1952 and 1954, the years during which the actress was most active in contemporary films. The sole period feature the duo worked on together was *The Amorous Emperor and the Sentimental Mang Lai-kwan* (1958.9.17), their final collaboration.²

Table 2: Films Co-starring Fong Yim-fun and Sun Ma Si-tsang³

| Title | Premiere Date | Co-starring | Setting | Director/Screenwriter |
|---|---------------|--|--------------|-----------------------------------|
| Filial Piety that Moved the Heavens | 1952.8.28 | ‘Three Champions’ (i.e. Fong Yim-fun, Sun Ma Si-tsang and Leung Sing-po) | Contemporary | Poon Bing-kuen |
| Radiant Love | 1952.8.28 | Wong Chiu-mo | Contemporary | Chu Kea |
| Joyous Reunion | 1952.9.19 | Wong Chiu-mo | Contemporary | Chu Kea |
| Joys of Love on a Spring Night | 1953.1.1 | ‘Three Champions’ | Contemporary | Poon Bing-kuen/ Ng Dan |
| Happy Wedding | 1953.2.18 | Yee Chau-shui | Contemporary | Chow Sze-luk |
| A Scholar’s Love Song | 1953.3.5 | ‘Three Champions’ | Contemporary | But Fu |
| A Buddhist Recluse for 14 Years | 1953.4.6 | ‘Three Champions’ | Contemporary | Chow Sze-luk / Lee Sau-kei |
| Another Chance for Love | 1953.8.13 | ‘Three Champions’ | Contemporary | Chow Sze-luk / Cheung Kwan-loi |
| The Swallows’ Return | 1953.9.20 | ‘Three Champions’ | Contemporary | Chow Sze-luk / Lo Yu-kei |
| Unexpected Luck | 1953.10.8 | ‘Three Champions’ | Contemporary | Chow Sze-luk / Leong Sum |
| An Expectant Mother | 1953.11.7 | ‘Three Champions’ | Contemporary | Poon Bing-kuen |
| A Family of Eight in One Bed | 1954.1.14 | ‘Three Champions’ | Contemporary | Poon Bing-kuen / Ngai Mung |
| Grand View Garden | 1954.8.4 | ‘Three Champions’ | Contemporary | Mok Hong-si / Lo Yu-kei |
| The Tragic Death of Lam Doi-yuk (Grand View Garden, Pt. 2) | 1954.9.9 | ‘Three Champions’ | Contemporary | Mok Hong-si / Lo Yu-kei |
| The Amorous Emperor and the Sentimental Mang Lai-kwan | 1958.9.17 | Lam Kar-sing | Period | Lung To |

² Fong and Sun had worked together on stage before acting opposite each other in film. This influenced their performances in motion pictures starring the pair to a certain degree, and should be discussed in a separate essay.

³ *Yintan Tuyen: The Films of Fong Yim-fun*, op cit, pp145-157 (in Chinese).

‘Three Champions of the Opera World’ and Collaborations between Sun and Fong

In 1952, Fong, Sun, and Leung Sing-po were named ‘The Three Champions of the Opera World’ for their respective roles as *huadan*, *wenwusheng* (male lead in both civil and martial roles), and *chousheng* (male comedian) by the magazine *Sounds of Entertainment*. The three worked closely with each other since then. Sun and Fong collaborated the most often in 1953, starring in eight films together. Meanwhile, from 1952 to 1954, Leung appeared in all but three motion pictures featuring the duo (see Table 2).

Many film actors of the 1950s were also Cantonese opera artists, with ‘Three Champions’ being the most representative. This prestigious title became the selling point of productions involving the trio, and although it was earned with their superior singing skills, refined stage movements, and intricate hand gestures, over 90 percent of the films they appeared in were set in modern times. This meant that they did not get to show off their brilliant craftsmanship, let alone their shiny suits of armour in warring scenes accompanied by gongs and drums.

Some say it was a commercial consideration that the three avoided period films in the early 1950s. If they had brought all their onstage glory—the singing, acting, recitation and acrobatics together with heavy armour and warrior costume—to the silver screen, audiences who normally watched live performances would flock to the cinema instead, thereby affecting theatre ticket sales. This may have been true to a certain extent as period Cantonese opera films, although not completely non-existent, were indeed outnumbered by contemporary musical movies in the early 1950s (see Table 1). It was not until the mid-to-late 1950s that the ‘taboo’ of making such motion pictures began to wane.

From the two tables above, it can be seen that Fong started adapting her stage repertoire to film in the several years (1957-1959) leading up to her retirement from show business, starring in numerous Cantonese opera films to document her artistic ability. At the time, she was rarely seen working with Sun on the silver screen. *The Amorous Emperor and the Sentimental Mang Lai-kwan* (1958) was their final collaboration, their sole period feature together which saw them return to their roots—Cantonese opera! If only this adept dream duo, a winning combo on both the stage and silver screen, had continued their partnership until the late 1950s, then we would be seeing more of them when reminiscing about the Cantonese opera films of Hong Kong cinema today.

For the movies starring Fong, a contemporary (or Early Republican) and a period version can be made using the same plot. The same goes for the music featured—the same *xiaoqu* (sung melody) can be used in a Cantonese opera stage production and a film set in modern or ancient times. The style of the accompanying music, the arrangement, as well as the instruments used, would determine the overall musical style. This is what we meant by musical packaging. ‘Fragrant Water Lily’, sung by Fong in *Mysterious Murder* (1951), is taken from ‘Blooming Beauty by the Silver Pond’ which remains well-known today. It is accompanied entirely by Western instruments, and is generally regarded as a pop song. However, it is actually borrowed from a *xiaoqu* sung in the first scene of *The Ten-year Dream* (1950), a Cantonese opera which Tong Tik-sang wrote for Fong. The melody, penned by Wong

Yuet-sang, took on the guise of ‘Fragrant Water Lily’ in the motion picture, *Mysterious Murder*.⁴

The eponymous original theme which Wong wrote for *Belle in Penang* (1954), a film starring Fong, is a rumba song. The insert song ‘Nostalgia’, meanwhile, is a piece of tango music. The latter, again, originates from a stage production featuring Fong—*The Immortal Zhang Yuqiao* (1954). It was repackaged with Western accompaniment and rhythm for the motion picture, thus becoming a pop song.⁵ Teresa Teng went on to re-record ‘Belle in Penang’ in the 1980s, reviving the song’s popularity. All discourse on Cantonese popular music in Hong Kong cites Sam Hui as the pioneer, neglecting Fong and Wong as the trailblazing contributors to the field.

Unable to show off their theatrical talent in contemporary films, the ‘Three Champions’ could only display their vocal prowess by singing *xiaodiao* (small tunes), *puzi* (short instrumental pieces), Cantonese covers of Mandarin pop songs, as well as *banghuang* (aria types) and *nanyin* (southern tunes) excerpts from Cantonese opera plays. The fact that these songs were accompanied entirely by Western musical instruments, without the use of Chinese drums and gongs, is a clear indication of an attempt to break off all associations with Cantonese opera. In the following passages, we will examine the contemporary films starring Fong and Sun using *Another Chance for Love* (1953) and *The Swallows’ Return* (1953) as examples.

***Another Chance for Love* (1953.8.13)**

People who are interested in Hong Kong’s historic buildings will love this film! Not only will they recognise the flying buttresses unique to the roof of State Theatre in North Point, but they will also find the words ‘Empire Theatre’ faintly printed on the sign instead, much to their surprise. As a matter of fact, this is historically correct: Empire Theatre opened in December 1952 and closed down in 1957, while *Another Chance for Love* premiered on August 13, 1953. The premise reopened in 1959 following extensive renovations as State Theatre, with its iconic roof retained.

In the film, Fong plays White Lotus, a songstress at a nightclub who falls in love with Lee Siu-ching (played by Sun), the son of a distinguished family. Leung plays the nightclub owner who courts White Lotus, while Chow Kwun-ling (aka Patricia Joe) plays Chong Chau-ha, Lee’s younger cousin and admirer. Lee leaves White Lotus at the behest of his austere father (played by Wong Cho-shan) and marries Chong. Afterwards, he encounters White Lotus again and the two reignite their interrupted romance. As the birth of Chong’s baby draws near, she pleads with White Lotus to stop seeing her husband. Lee arrives on the scene and Chong ends up falling to the ground in an ensuing fight. Suffering from blood loss, Chong entrusts her new born baby to White Lotus before her last breath.

Cheung Kwan-loi adapted the novel by Kwong Hoi-leung to film, with Chow Sze-luk serving as director and Lee Yuen-man penning all of the seven insert songs featured. The melody of ‘The Warbler’s First Cry at Dawn’, the number Fong sings at the nightclub shortly after the film’s opening, is

⁴ Lee Siu-yan, ‘A Historical and Social Study of Fong Yim-fan’s Cantonese Opera,’ Hong Kong: 2011, pp 27-31 (CUHK PhD dissertation).

⁵ Ibid pp 94-96.

taken from Wu Yingyin's Mandarin pop song, 'Couple at Loggerheads'. The second song, 'Searching for Lotus', sung by Sun after his character fails to find his old lover upon returning to Hong Kong, is a *nanyin* song which has been cut down to about five minutes due to its excessive duration ('My heart is torn / Darling, where are you?...My eyes now welled up with tears). The motion pictures starring Sun, be them period or contemporary, were rarely devoid of *nanyin* songs as they are what he is known for. Meanwhile, the main theme, which shares the film's title, is a schmaltzy duet sung by the pair during an outing in the countryside after White Lotus and Lee rekindle their love. *Nanyang Business Daily* describes the tune as 'deserving of merits' (1954.10.17). In fact, it was the embodiment of the typical abridged Cantonese opera song which was popular at the time: An excerpt of a Mandarin pop song (likely from Zhou Xuan's repertoire), which has been given new lyrics, starts off the number. It is then followed by an *erhuang* passage, and concludes with a melodic line taken from 'Shanghai Nights' (another one of Zhou's hits) which is cut short because of its length. This was a common phenomenon among insert songs featured in Cantonese films.

The scenes in which Lee and his cousin are wed, and subsequently consummate their marriage, are worth discussing. When the two get married, there is neither Chinese nor Western wedding music playing in the background. The only thing that can be heard is the officiant telling the bride to bow to her in-laws, much like how funeral attendees are instructed to pay respects to the deceased!⁶ The marriage officiant's monotonous tone, together with the lack of background music, foreshadows the tragedy that is about to occur. This stroke of genius generated much dramatic tension.

When the bride is rebuffed for offering to help the groom undress in the bedroom, she begs him to tell her what is on his mind. The performance delivered by Sun in this heart-wrenching scene rivals his *nanyin* singing. The dialogue certainly sounds ridiculous today, but it is probably the most amusing 'declaration of rejection' one has ever heard:

Bride: My dear cousin, don't drink anymore. You can tell me what's bothering you. Why drink your sorrows away?

Groom: It's unspeakable!

Bride: Why is it so?

Groom: I don't want to talk about it. You'll get upset. What's the point?

Bride: It's alright. You can tell me.

Groom: You want me to tell you? Then I'll tell you the truth. I don't love you at all!

Bride: Oh! If you don't love me, why did you marry me?

Groom: Circumstances forced me to do so.

(Bride falls onto the bed crying)

Groom: There's... there's no use getting upset. Don't cry. I understand that I won't be able to see White Lotus anymore. I don't even know where she is. I hope to transfer my love for her onto you from tonight onwards. All I ask is that you look after my parents well. There's no need to feel sad! We can rest now!

⁶ The marriage officiant calls the bride by a different name. The reason is yet unknown and remains to be discovered.

(The bedroom lights go out)

Seriously?

White Lotus resumes her life as a songstress to make ends meet, and is seen singing ‘Heartbreaker’ at the nightclub. The number sounds like a Mandarin pop song by Wu Yingyin which was reworked to become ‘The Long and Gruelling Night’ in the Amoy dialect film, *My Beloved Husband* (1959).⁷ The patrons of the nightclub dance to Hawaiian music, which is an accurate reflection of the times. This has strong connections to the background track in the movie’s finale (read below for further details). The owner of the nightclub (played by Leung) tries to win White Lotus’ love by pleasing her mother. He sings the comedic tune ‘Modern Proposal’ before heading out to propose to White Lotus. With lyrics the likes of ‘I’ll shout without fear of losing my moustache. I’d rather sacrifice it by shaving...’, the song is on a par with his classic, ‘A Bachelor’s Love Affair’. The lines, ‘You are my soul! You are my lifeblood!’, which he sings while asking for White Lotus’ hand in marriage, would usually make the stomach turn, but Leung’s narcissism and over confidence come across naturally. Unbeknownst to him, White Lotus has already made up with Lee. She sneaks off while he continues his one-man show in an even funnier performance, truly living up to his title as ‘The King of *Chousheng*’.

The film’s ending is rather confusing. Lee and White Lotus ‘solemnly’ place flowers on Chong’s grave to a relaxing waltz version (triple time) of *Auld Lang Syne* using slide guitar, an instrument iconic of Hawaiian music! The supposed tragic atmosphere yields utterly to sarcasm here. It appears that *Auld Lang Syne* was extremely popular in the early 1950s. Otherwise, director Chow Sze-luk must have loved it very much to have used it three times! The aforementioned closing track (the same version, in fact) was also featured in *The Swallows’ Return*.

***The Swallows’ Return* (1953.9.20)**

About five weeks after the public screening of *Another Chance for Love*, The ‘Three Champions’ collaborated in another contemporary motion picture titled *The Swallows’ Return*, also directed by Chow Sze-luk. It was originally a Cantonese opera play, but the film version barely resembles the stage production. Fong plays the character Luk Sheung-hing, the lover of Lui Wai-leung (played by Luk Fei-hung). Lui goes on a business trip to the Philippines to sell tape recorders. The ship he is travelling on sinks and news of his death arrives. Luk’s older brother (played by Leung) and sister-in-law (played by Au Hon-kei) then set her up with Lee On-ning (played by Sun), the son of a shipping company’s owner, and the two marry. Luk is unable to forget her previous love, which puts a strain on the couple’s relationship. Lee takes to drinking and sings the riotous insert song, ‘Woman’, which contains lyrics such as ‘Walk a little, drink a little...’ Lui is in fact still alive. When he returns to Hong Kong, Luk visits him at the hotel on that very same night, deepening her husband’s misunderstanding. Lee ousts his wife from their home, only allowing her to come back once a year on Mid-Autumn Festival to see their

⁷ ‘The Music in 1950s Amoy-dialect Films: An Indicator of Cultural Interactions in Hong Kong’. May Ng (ed.). *The Amoy-dialect Films of Hong Kong*: Hong Kong, Hong Kong Film Archive, 2012, pp 110-126. The transcription in cipher notation of the Amoy-dialect insert song is attached, see pp 120-122 (in Chinese).

son, Tin-shing (played by Cheng Wai-sum), hence explaining the film's title. Moreover, Luk is forbidden to tell Tin-shing that she is his mother and assumes the identity of his wet nurse instead, so one can only imagine her plight!

It so happens that Lui has switched on a tape recorder just before Luk's visit. Their conversation is documented, and their innocence is proved thanks to the recording. This use of the tape recorder to signify modernisation was three years ahead of *Songs of the Peach Blossom River* (1956; starring Chung Ching and Lo Wei). Luk turns to her brother for help after being driven out of her home and becomes a wet nurse to make a living, unable to breastfeed her own daughter. This subplot gives rise to scenes of Leung's character looking after his niece for his sister, as well as some moments between the siblings.

Zhou Xuan's well-known 'Song of Four Seasons' and 'Blooming Flowers and the Full Moon' are given Cantonese lyrics and used as insert songs in the film. Of course, it would not be complete without *nanyin* excerpts sung by Sun. 'The Bright Moon Shines on Joy and Grief', which features the 'Three Champions' and Luk Fei-hung, is also a *nanyin* melody. After each character sings a few lines, Leung takes over, at which point the song shifts to the *banyan* style. Such matching of role-type with musical style is often employed in Cantonese opera—because Leung is a *chousheng*, this switch serves to match his easy-going and comical role.

Parts of the plot, development, and even music of *Another Chance for Love* (1953) are also present, or perhaps repeated, in other motion pictures starring Fong. In the opening of *Too Late for Divorce* (1956), a collaboration between Fong and Yam, the former's character pays respects at a grave with a young child entrusted to her by a friend—this could definitely have picked up from where *Another Chance for Love* left off and become its sequel.⁸

The storylines of the stage productions for which Fong is most renowned are often quite similar. It is entirely plausible for audiences to think that *A Buddhist Recluse for 14 Years* (1953 [modern version]; 1958 [period version]), *The Swallows' Return* (1953 [modern version]; 1958 [period version]), *When Beauty Fades from Twelve Ladies' Tower* (1954 [modern version]; 1958 [period version]), and *A Beauty's Flourishing Fragrance* (1955 [Early Republican version]; 1959 [period version]) are all derived from the same source, or fundamentally different versions of the same film. To be frank, it would be somewhat unreasonable to expect the 140-odd films in which Fong appears all have completely different plots. It is inevitable that stories revolve around themes such as generational love and feuds, the separation of lovers, the disappearance of the male lead, the marriage of the female lead to someone other than her true love, misunderstandings between husband and wife, the loss of a life, or family estrangement. There are also instances where the separated protagonists' offsprings become lovers, and mother-daughter/father-daughter conflicts arise when the parent attempts to separate them, or where a child hurls insults at his or her mother without knowing her true identity (in *The Swallows' Return* and *A Beauty's Flourishing Fragrance*), or where the mother ultimately seeks extrication by

⁸ This film should belong to a series of films directed by Chiang Wai-Kwong which includes *She Says "No" to Marriage* (1951) and *She Said "No" to Marriage but Now She Says "Yes"* (1952), and has nothing to do with Chow Sze-luk. Please refer to the essay 'The Principal and the Second in Two Films Starring Yam Kim-fai and Fong Yim-fun' by Yu Siu-wah and Li Siu-leung in *HKFA Newsletter*, Issue 78 (November 2016), pp 9-14 (English version in *e-Newsletter*).

becoming a nun, but is reunited with her child at the end of the film, or where the lovers are separated for all eternity (in *Too Late for Divorce*). Another commonly used plotline is cousins getting married after their parents reconcile or the misunderstanding between two families is cleared up. Nevertheless, playing the role of the mother who endures humiliation and raises her child while concealing her identity is Fong's forte.

Conclusion

Because more than half of the actors in 1950s Cantonese cinema were Cantonese opera artists, it is no surprise that the phenomenon whereby the Cantonese opera music was transferred to the silver screen was predominant. During the process, the two mediums naturally interacted with and influenced each other, blurring the lines between the two at times. However, Cantonese opera play and film remain two related but entirely different art forms. While, as a matter of course, Hong Kong cinema welcomed Cantonese opera artists with open arms and turned them into movie stars, they did not make use of the whole package (i.e. showed off what they were best at). The Chinese gongs and drums, *paizi* tunes, and Northern *dadiao* sung in Central plain accent of traditional Cantonese opera are obviously unsuitable for use in films with contemporary settings. On the other hand, the melodies of *xiaodiao*, *puzi*, and *xiaoqu* are similar to pop songs, and can be accompanied by Western or Chinese instruments. Consequently, they can be transformed into insert songs for film without drawing strong associations with Cantonese opera. However, the contemporary films starring Fong and Sun do have close ties with Cantonese opera due to the presence of *banghuang* and *nanyin* melodies. Compared with pop songs, these two styles have a slower tempo, are more melismatic and relatively static. Their existence is essential despite the fact that they are often chopped to bits due to their excessive duration.⁹ Performing *nanyin* and *banghuang* is what these two Cantonese opera superstars are best known for and is the most powerful box office draw.

As a result, whether Sun is wearing a shirt and trousers or a double-breasted suit and bowtie, and whether Fong is wearing a Western evening gown or a suit, they are seen singing the various musical styles (i.e. *xiaoqu*, *nanyin* and *banghuang*) of Cantonese opera in a nightclub, a grand hotel or anywhere else. Although the music grossly mismatches the visual images, costumes, and occasions, moviegoers have accepted it without question for half a century. And while they tried to remove traces of Cantonese opera by replacing Chinese instruments with Western ones and getting rid of the gongs and drums, *nanyin* and *banghuang* melodies could not be disposed of. That is the musical tradition when the adaptation of Cantonese opera plays into contemporary films is concerned. (Translated by Johnny Ko)

⁹ *Nanyin* is a kind of Cantonese narrative singing that combines speaking and singing, and not originally a part of Cantonese opera music. It was incorporated into the art form starting from 1910s, and has since become an indispensable music component. For further details, please refer to the essay by this author 'A Mass Collection of Twentieth Century Cantonese Opera Works,' in Chan Sau-yan, Lee Siu-yan, Dai Shu-yan & Ho Bak-kei (eds.). *Shu Pu Xian Ge: Early Twentieth Century Publications and Studies on Cantonese Operatic Music*, Hong Kong: Hong Kong Association of Cantonese Opera Scholars, 2015, pp7-35 (in Chinese).

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