

# Heritage and Integration—

A Study of Hong Kong Cantonese Opera Films



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# Content

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4	<b>Foreword</b>	May Ng
	<b>Essays</b>	
12	Between Pre-war Cantonese Opera and Cinema: Their Mutual Transformation and Aesthetic Issues in the Hong Kong Context	Law Kar
28	Clanging Gongs and Thundering Drums—The Dividing Line Between Musicals and Cantonese Opera Films	Po Fung
38	Interactivity Between Film and Cantonese Opera: The Aesthetics of Linearity in Chan Pei’s Movies Featuring Tang Bik-wan	Stephanie Ng
48	Stage-Screen Integration: Exploring the Art of Cantonese Opera Films	Sam Ho
62	Pleasure Houses, Despotism, and Resistance: On <i>Butterfly and Red Pear Blossom</i> and <i>The Legend of Purple Hairpin</i>	Grace Lau Yin-ping
72	Approaches in the Studies of Cantonese Opera Cinema	Lo Wai-luk
82	Yam Kim-fai’s Cross-gender Acting as Both Yingtai and Shanbo: A Study of Multiple Roles in <i>Liang-Zhu</i> Films	Yu Siu-wah
96	Wong Yuet-sang’s Modern-Costume Cantonese Film Songs: Exploring Further Possibilities for Cantonese Operatic Music	Lum Man-yee
108	Queen of Diva on the Silver Screen: On Fong Yim-fun’s Films	Lee Siu-yan

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- 120 The Preservation of Cantonese Operatic Music and Stage Movements in Films: *The Dream of a Decade in Yangzhou* Chan Sau-yan
- 130 Successor of Foot-binding Techniques and the 'Mui Vocal Style': Yu Lai-zhen, 'The Queen of the Art of *Dan*' Winnie Chan Hiu-ting
- 140 The 'Spring and Autumn' of Peking and Cantonese Traditions: Fen Ju Hua and *The Capture of the Evil Demons* Milky Cheung Man-shan

### **Oral History Interviews**

- 152 Luo Pinchao: Join the 'Handsome Master' Onscreen and Onstage Collated by Daphne Chan
- 164 Hung Sin Nui: Favoured Daughter of the Opera World Collated by Janice Chow
- 178 Cecilia Lee Fung-sing: Forging a Path in Film as a Greenhorn Collated by Doris Chiu & May Ng
- 190 Lee Yuen-man: Half a Century of Life in Cantonese Music Collated by Simpson Choi & May Ng
- 200 Poon Cheuk: The Banging Days of Musical Films with *Luogu* Collated by Wong Ha-pak
- 214 Choo Heng Cheong: Between the Strings Collated by Wong Ha-pak
- 228 Yuen Siu-fai: On the Categorisation of Cantonese opera films Collated by Hui Pui-lam

### **Appendix**

- 242 Table of *Paichang* (Formulaic Scenes) and *Gongjia* (Feats) in Cantonese Opera Films Collated by Yuen Tsz-ying & Milky Cheung Man-shan

- 260 **Acknowledgements**
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# Foreword

May Ng

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In an era lacking in material comforts and entertainment choices, Chinese opera had always been the most popular form of entertainment, one best-loved by the general populace. The art of opera had evolved gradually from ancient worship ceremonies. Through the actors' singing, acting, reciting and fencing, scene after scene of tragedies, comedies, separations and reunions were played out atop the red woven carpet stage. This art form also crossed the boundaries of social class: whether on a rustic open stage in some rural village, a fenced-in indoor area or in a grand hall at a celebration banquet, everyone in the audience could receive some spiritual comfort. The legendary stories, performed countless times over, gave substance to the love, hatred and desires projected by the audience. Quite a few of the stories have survived adaptations over the years and have thus escaped obsolescence. Classics can be passed on through the generations not only because it has intrinsic cultural, literary and artistic value but also because of the myriad of famous roles brought to life by generations of actors, who interpret the essence of the works through the mastery of their craft, making the operas worthy of repeated viewings, the stuff of dreams and fantasies. With gradual and repeated exposure, the cultural messages and sense of value of the plots of these operas have been branded into the minds of the audience, becoming evidence of our common identities.

However, with the importation of Western films over a hundred years ago, the status of opera, that once dominated the popular entertainment market, began to shake on its foundations. At the time, it can be said that the opera industry was hit from both inside and outside: not only must it defend against Western films that clearly had better production resources, it must also prevent the gradually burgeoning local film industry from stealing away its audience. At the time, the Cantonese opera industry in Southern China, specifically in the Guangdong and Hong Kong regions were facing the same issues. In the face of such competition for market share, the Cantonese opera industry decided to try to retain their audience by changing with the times, adding elements from Western films, plays and other media genres.

In contrast, during the silent film era, the plots for many Hong Kong films were drawn from folk tales, some of which were similar to the Cantonese operas performed on stage. Because at the time films were still silent, opera actors were not yet part of the system and therefore seldom appeared on screen. But during the 1930s when sound film technology was imported into China, quite a few of those actors naturally became darlings of the silver screen. The iconic Sit Kok-sin was a prime example. In 1926, he led the trend by establishing Feifei Film Company in Shanghai and producing silent film *Long Dip* (aka *The Shameless Girl*). In 1933, he cooperated with Shanghai's Unique Film Productions, producing a film version of his signature opera of the same name, *The White Gold Dragon*. The film was an international box office success and became a catalyst for the hot trend of opera stars appearing on the

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silver screen. From then on, the 'treasure chest' of Cantonese opera was yanked open and its contents poured out: the voices, appearances and artistry of opera stars glistened like jewels, no longer limited to the confines of the stage. Through the film medium, the art of opera was broadcast and exported overseas and preserved for the generations that follow, so that people may continue to appreciate the art form forever.

From the 1930s to 60s, different kinds of Cantonese opera films evolved in order to adapt to market demands and audience tastes. Because these films were so well-received by overseas Chinese populations, in a short 30 years Hong Kong produced about a thousand Cantonese opera films. These hold an important place in Hong Kong film history.

It must first be mentioned that the understanding of the term 'Cantonese opera films' in this book are in general based on the definitions and categorisations as set out by Hong Kong film scholar and former Research Coordinator at the Hong Kong Film Archive, Mr Yu Mo-wan in his essay 'Anecdotes of Hong Kong Cantonese Opera Films' written for *Cantonese Opera Film Retrospective*, published in 1987 for the 11th Hong Kong International Film Festival. Yu had defined 'Cantonese Opera Films' as 'films whose content is related to Cantonese opera'. There are six categories of such films: 'Cantonese Opera Documentaries' that record the realities of the art form; 'Cantonese Operatic Films' that blend the genres of Cantonese opera and film using film techniques; 'Cantonese Opera Musical Films' or 'Cantonese Opera Sing-song Films'<sup>1</sup> that do not include traditional actings or *paichang* (formulaic scenes) but features actors in Cantonese opera costumes and singing passages; 'Cantonese Opera Films in Modern Costumes' that feature actors in contemporary wardrobe singing Cantonese opera tunes in Cantonese opera stories; 'films with Cantonese Opera Highlight(s)' that feature highlight scenes from Cantonese operas within contemporary films and 'Cantonese Opera Collage Films' that are compilations of scenes from other Cantonese opera films.

At first, 'Cantonese opera films' attracted audiences with opera stars in leading roles. They took original characters from Cantonese opera classics (whether in Western wardrobe or Cantonese opera costume), select part of the plot and expand upon it, adding some of the signature famous tunes. Thus, most of them are categorised as 'Cantonese opera musical films' and 'Cantonese opera films (in modern costume)'. However, as most of the film footage has been lost, we are unable to determine how much of those films featured opera stars and how much *gongjia* (feats) were included. It was also popular at the time to insert 'play-within-a-film', incorporating scenes of opera stars performing highlights from Cantonese opera into contemporary films to satisfy opera fans. It is equally difficult to determine how complete those highlight scenes were. Although those Cantonese opera films only showed off the opera stars plying their craft in some scenes, it was enough to make those films very popular. The opera stars' performances were appreciated internationally via distribution of the films, comforting the souls of Chinese people roving overseas.

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<sup>1</sup> For this category, some authors prefer to translate the term as 'Cantonese opera sing-song films' while others prefer 'Cantonese opera musical films'. Out of respect for the authors, we are offering two different translations for the same category.

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After the war, Hong Kong's opera industry developed robustly, creating opportunities for numerous excellent Cantonese opera writers. Among them, Tong Tik-sang was the most accomplished. They garnered inspiration from classical literature, writing according to current human values and aesthetics, creating new Cantonese operas. Most of those works were suited for both the past and present. The producers, being astute businessmen, found quick-witted scriptwriters to change various elements in the stories: setting ancient stories in a modern urban environment, featuring opera stars out of their period costumes, in contemporary wardrobe and singing new tunes as they performed love and familial conflicts for the current generation. The audience enjoyed them just as much.

In the 1950s Mainland China exhibited numerous Chinese opera films with adapted tunes, such as Yue opera film *Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai* (1954), *Huangmei* opera film *Marriage of the Fairy Princess* (aka *Fairy Couple*, 1955). With the exceptional skills of top opera stars, together with the incorporation of anti-feudal ideas, content encouraging women's liberation and well-practised film techniques, these films became tremendously popular everywhere they were shown. The Hong Kong film industry, so good at catching up on trends, all began to imitate the production techniques of Mainland opera films. This sped up the evolution of Cantonese opera films that advertised the marvellous skills of the opera masters, which included more Cantonese opera elements. By this time, actors who were stars on stage and screen were no longer reluctant to show off more of their opera moves such as *shuixiu* (flowing sleeve flicking) and stylised steps on screen.

For example, The Union Film Enterprise Ltd made films that borrowed liberally from Mainland Chinese opera films. These included *Romance at the Western Chamber* (1956) and *The Precious Lotus Lamp* (1956). The latter film even started the trend of 'musical films with *luogu* (gong-and-drum)'. The clanging of percussion instruments and the operatic performances of the actors elevated Hong Kong's Cantonese opera films to another level. In the late 1950s to early 60s, quite a few famous opera troupes moved their signature operas onto the silver screen, and were tremendously well-received. Among them, Sin Fung Ming Opera Troupe's films maintain the original's elegant stage style, and emphasise elements such as lighting and camera movements and how they work together with the exciting performances by the actors, elevating the genre of Cantonese opera films. In addition, so many of the screen adaptations of the major operas emphasise showing off the acting and fencing skills of the opera stars. For today's audience, that is the real treasure.

Thereafter, Cantonese opera films that showed off *paichang* and *gongjia* continued to be realised. In some of the films, certain scenes were shot almost in a documentary style. Only by the end of the 1960s when Cantonese films began to become obsolete did production of Cantonese opera films slow down.

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As early as the Hong Kong International Film Festival's 1987 publication *Cantonese Opera Film Retrospective*, numerous different film scholars had been invited to study Hong Kong's Cantonese opera films. It was a pioneering study on that topic. Now, after over thirty years later, with the establishment of, and twenty-some years of hard work by, the Hong Kong Film Archive including the use of its collections—prints of films, publicity materials such as posters, music scores and handbills of the films' plot lines—the foundation for further study of Cantonese opera films has been established. Of special significance is the donation several years ago from Mr Jack Lee Fong, founder of San Francisco's Palace Theatre, of a number of precious prints of early films from the 1930s and 40s. It enabled us to personally witness Sit Kok-sin playing the title character in *The White Gold Dragon, Part Two* (1937) circulating among three women, singing Cantonese operatic tunes as he talks about rescuing China; as well as Ma Si-tsang, playing a detective in *Bitter Phoenix, Sorrowful Oriole* (principle photography completed in 1941; first exhibited in 1947), and in spite of its westernised visual and narrative style, Ma disguises himself as a beggar and sings his signature song 'Yu Hap-wan Expresses His Inner Feelings'. There are also 'play-within-a-film' scenes where Cantonese opera is performed in ancient vocal styles. The preservation of these scenes is undoubtedly very helpful in the clarification of the origins of Hong Kong's Cantonese opera films. Such topics have also been touched upon in the Archive's 'Early Cinematic Treasures Rediscovered' series of screenings and seminars.

This year marks the tenth anniversary of the inscription of Cantonese opera onto the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity by UNESCO. As Cantonese opera films are a main vehicle through which the essence of the art of Cantonese opera is preserved, we hope to build on previous studies (*Cantonese Opera Film Retrospective*, mentioned above, being a pioneering effort), and have invited numerous experts in the study and research of Hong Kong films and Cantonese opera films to explore various venues in this category.

In exploring the history and origins of Cantonese opera films, Law Kar focused on the evolution of Hong Kong Cantonese films in the formative period, investigating the interaction between the development of film themes and talent interchange. He specially mentioned the theory that early Hong Kong silent films were adapted from *wenmingxi* (civilised dramas), which further confirmed the relationship between early film and the *wenmingxi* of the time. In addition to untangling and organising the interactive relationship between early films and Cantonese opera, he also supplied information on several other early Cantonese films produced overseas, providing food for thought. Po Fung followed the trail to find how 1950s Mainland Chinese opera films inspired Hong Kong's Cantonese opera films, explored the characteristics of every stage of development of Hong Kong's Cantonese opera films as well

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as the origins of the ‘Cantonese opera films with heavy gong-and-drum’. He also analysed documents and image data to discover from publicity materials the production strategy of the Cantonese opera films of the era.

Historically, the aesthetics of Hong Kong Cantonese opera films is not a topic that many have touched upon. Stephanie Ng focused on studying director Chan Pei, an expert at making Cantonese opera sing-song films, exploring the tragedies and comedies that he made starring ‘Versatile Opera Queen’ Tang Bik-wan and how to express the Aesthetics of Linearity and *lianquti* (Literally ‘medleys of set tunes’) structure of opera through the language of film. Sam Ho explored how the camera stepped out onto the stage from the wings. He studied *Butterfly and Red Pear Blossom* (directed by Lee Tit, starring the Sin Fung Ming Opera Troupe, 1959), exploring how the director blended Western film language, opera aesthetics, film setting and camera movements to show off the craft of the actors and elevate the Cantonese opera film to another level.

Not only are Cantonese opera films merely a combination of performance art and film, they are also very closely related to literature. In the 1950s there were numerous Cantonese opera films on the topic of oppressed women. From a literature point of view, Grace Lau Yin-ping analysed the libretti from two Yam-Pak signature operas *Butterfly and Red Pear Blossom* and *The Legend of Purple Hairpin* that had been adapted from literary originals. Picking through and analysing the original works as well as various Cantonese opera versions adapted in different eras, she also pointed out the additional elements inserted into the film versions, sharing observations about the comparisons between the film and stage versions. Lo Wai-luk pointed out the essentials in explaining the several directions Cantonese opera film research is taking, including historical, cultural and aesthetic.

Numerous scholars began their explorations from the angles of music and art. In terms of music, Yu Siu-wah traced back the history of Hong Kong’s *Liang-Zhu (Butterfly Lovers)* films, and dissected the music treatment of music in *New Love Story of Leung Shan-pak and Chuk Ying-toi* (directed by Chan Pei, starring Yam Kim-fai as Chuk Ying-toi, 1951), a subject seldom studied. Lum Man-yee explored Cantonese music expert Wong Yuet-sang’s music for Cantonese opera film, and selected three of his works to analyse, finding how he injected European and American elements into Cantonese opera tunes. Lee Siu-yan traced the silver screen footprints of ‘Queen of Diva’ Fong Yim-fun, telling the story of her crossing the genres of stage and screen.

In addition to having preserved the vocal stylings and stage movements of the opera stars, Cantonese opera films also keep alive quite a few performances of those who have inherited the classical operatic traditions. Chan Sau-yan described in detail the singing



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passages from *Ten Years Dream* (1961) as well as the traditional use of *paichang*. Winnie Chan Hiu-ting introduces us to the vocal stylings and martial techniques—such as hair-swirling and bound-feet stilt work—of famous *wudan* (military female) star Yu Lai-zhen, letting us know her better in addition to her ‘Headless’ series of opera films. Milky Cheung Man-shan found a piece of history few people talk about, of famous Peking opera star Fen Ju Hua who came from Shanghai to Hong Kong to open her own school after the War, and described in detail how she, with her masterful skills as a Peking opera *wudan*, greatly enriched Hong Kong’s Cantonese opera and film industries.

In addition, we have excerpted the interviews of several Cantonese opera film masters in front of and behind the screen: Luo Pinchao (aka Lo Ban-chiu), Hung Sin Nui, Cecilia Lee Fung-sing, who had been active in the Hong Kong film industry at different times, talked about their respective developments in the film industry and their thoughts and feelings. Renowned lyricists Lee Yuen-man and Poon Cheuk, as well as acclaimed musician Choo Heng Cheong, shared tales of their entire careers in the Cantonese opera film industry, and also discussed the industry rules at great length. Yuen Siu-fai explored in detail the different categorisations of Hong Kong’s Cantonese opera films from an opera actor’s point of view.

The Film Archive has already published *Hong Kong Cantonese Opera Films of the 1950s and 1960s* in online 2004 and has made it available on the Archive’s website for free downloading. The Archive-published *Hong Kong Filmography* series also covers the category of Cantonese opera films. This time, we purposely forged a new path and engaged Yuen Tsz-ying and Miky Cheung Man-shan to edit the existing *paichang* and *gongjia* seen in the Cantonese opera films, in the hopes that readers might refer to the diagrams to find what they want to know. We also hope this might arouse interest in many people about the work that has been done in this area.

We sincerely thank all the filmmakers who have been interviewed, authors who have submitted essays, everyone who edited interviews and film lists, donors of film footage and other information, and copyright holders who have authorised us to publish photos and other data. Special gratitude goes to Prof Yuen Siu-fai. Not only did he submit himself to our interview, he took time out of his very busy schedule to visit us this July to help us with our study of *paichang* and *gongjia* in over a hundred Cantonese opera films. He also explained each of those on the spot, greatly increasing the knowledge of Cantonese opera films of the Archive’s Programming Unit and the staff working on this publication. Indubitably, it is of great help to us in the long term in our quest to promote Cantonese opera films.

(Translated by Roberta Chin)





# EASSYS

# Between Pre-war Cantonese Opera and Cinema: Their Mutual Transformation and Aesthetic Issues in the Hong Kong Context

Law Kar

## Foreword

The history of Cantonese opera can be traced back over three hundred years. Its performance was banned during the Qing Dynasty, so travelling opera troupes (known as the 'Red Boats') could only ply their craft by disguising Cantonese opera as Peking opera or by performing the genre in *guanhua* [Ed. note: Literally known as the 'official dialect', *guanhua* was influenced by the Zhongzhou phonetics; Zhongzhou refers to the Central Plains). At the end of the Qing Dynasty 'patriotic troupes' started to use stage plays to promote anti-Qing revolutions and performed so-called 'improved' Cantonese operas in Cantonese dialect. They reduced the amount of *luogu* (gong-and-drum) and music in the plays, and spoke more often than sang in order to preach and promote their message. At the same time, another kind of play, known as *wenmingxi* (civilised drama), appeared in various areas throughout Guangdong province, as well as Hong Kong and Macao. They were vernacular Chinese plays or 'new dramas', influenced and inspired by the productions of Shanghai's Spring Willow Society (Chunliu She). Its purpose is to remove the ideas of loyal patriots sacrificing for their countries, talented scholars flirting with gifted beauty, as well as numerous intoxicating songs for which traditional Cantonese opera is known for; and substituting narratives and plotlines relating to everyday social life. They 'speak' directly to the audience, criticising social conditions, stimulating the awareness of the audience so as to encourage revolution. This is one major revolutionary change in Cantonese opera at the beginning of the twentieth century, brought about by socio-political instability.

Traditional Cantonese opera had retained the habit of being performed in *Guanhua* until the 1920s; thereafter it was widely performed in the 'speech of Canton prefecture'. In the mid-1920s, Cantonese opera not only developed new plot lines, singing styles and movements, Western film and theatrical influences were adapted for storylines, music, set design and costumes; these were

brought about by competition between Cantonese opera and the emerging medium of film, as well as competition among the various Cantonese opera troupes. Meanwhile, the development and popularity of Cantonese talkies was due in large part to the songs and box office appeal of Cantonese opera actors and actresses. This increased the frequency of communication and interaction between the two media. During the 1920s and 30s, many Cantonese opera performers went on tour in Southeast Asia and the Americas. They became exposed to numerous international influences and also had to make changes to adapt to the tastes of different markets. Thus, '*Luogu* modern-spoken-Chinese drama' and 'Western Costumes Cantonese operas' came into being; some even inserted acrobatic performances and erotic dances into the stage plays.

In 1937, China began full resistance against the invading Japanese troops. In a call to unity, films, Cantonese opera and stage plays helped and supported each other to spread the message of working together to fight against the enemy. When Hong Kong fell under Japanese occupation, many opera performers escaped out of the territory. As local film production had ceased, Cantonese opera and Cantonese operatic songs became the main source of entertainment for the locals in their troubled existence, those who remained managed to eke out a living. After victory was declared, Cantonese opera and Cantonese films enjoyed rapid revivals; soon the market exploded with a wide array of new productions.

In addition to being an overview, in this essay I attempt to discuss more on the interaction of Cantonese opera and film in the early period when Cantonese film first appeared, and the time before and during the Japanese war, upon the foundation of study and research done by those who came before me. Used here, the term 'pre-war' refers to the period before Hong Kong's occupation by the Japanese. 'Cantonese opera' in this essay refers to those produced in both Guangdong province as well as Hong Kong; 'film' includes Western



Special thanks to the children of Lai Man-wai

One of Hong Kong's earliest fictional films, *Zhuang Zi Tests His Wife* (1914) may very well have been based on a *wenmingxi* (civilised play) of the same name that was performed by Ching Ping Lok Bak Wa Ket Society, rather than adapted from Cantonese opera.

films as well as those produced in Guangdong province, Hong Kong, Shanghai, and Cantonese films produced overseas.

## Ties Between Film and Theatre in Early Cinema

Let's first briefly discuss the relationship between early Hong Kong films and theatre. Some film historians with a stronger sense of nationalism emphasise that the birth of Hong Kong film is already related to Cantonese opera. Yu Mo-wan states that one of the earliest Hong Kong feature films, *Zhuang Zi Tests His Wife* (aka *Chuang Tzu Tests His Wife*, 1914), was adapted from the Cantonese opera story *The Butterfly Dream*, specifically the excerpt 'Fanning the Grave'; thus the conclusion that it was the earliest integration of Hong Kong film and Cantonese opera, and is the pioneer of the genre 'Cantonese opera film'.<sup>1</sup> Numerous academics refer to Yu's opinion and agree that *Zhuang Zi Tests His Wife* is

the first example of a 'Cantonese opera film'. However, Yu's theory is simply a bold assumption. 'Zhuang Zi Tests His Wife' is a folk tale that has been told for many years. Peking operas, Cantonese operas and *wenmingxi* have all adapted this story. Yu stated that it was adapted from the Cantonese opera but did not provide any evidence. Chung King-fai opposes that view, bringing up the fact that Lai Man-wai had rehearsed a *wenmingxi* by the same title.<sup>2</sup> Lai Man-wai and Leung Siu-bo joined Ching Ping Lok Bak Wa Ket Society way back when they were adolescents, which encouraged revolution through new plays. Later, Lai Man-wai, Lai Puk-hoi, Lo Wing-cheung and Leung Siu-bo then formed Yan Nghoh Gian (Others Mirror Myself) Drama Society, also performing Cantonese vernacular plays. The film *Zhuang Zi Tests His Wife* is a co-production between this theatre troupe and Huamei Film Company, made using the already-available actors, costumes, sets, props, as well as a script written by Lai Man-wai. As such, the genre of the film would most likely be *wenmingxi*, unlikely to have been



<sup>1</sup> Yu Mo-wan, *Xianggang Dianying Shihua (Anecdotes of Hong Kong Cinema—The Silent Film Era)*, Vol 1, 1896-1929, Hong Kong: Subculture Ltd, 1996, p 74 (in Chinese).

<sup>2</sup> Chung King-fai, 'Xianggang Huaju De Fazhan' ('The Development of Hong Kong Theatre'), in *Xianggang Shi Xinbian Zengdingban (Hong Kong History: New Perspectives)*, Vol 2 (Revised Edition), Wang Gungwu (ed), Hong Kong: Joint Publishing (Hong Kong) Co., Ltd., 2017, pp 691-692 (in Chinese).



adapted from the Cantonese opera. Claiming the film to be the earliest 'Cantonese opera film' is feared to be a misunderstanding.

From 1923, Hong Kong locals became increasingly active in forming their own companies and making their own films; I shall not list them here. But upon studying the historical records, those who participated in film production during that time were young people who loved this new medium of film. Among the activists, the Lai brothers, Leung Siu-bo, Lo Wing-cheung, Pang Nin, Moon Kwan Man-ching, Lu Juefei, Wong Chung-man have no ties to Cantonese opera. They are mostly influenced by Western films. Their productions are all scenic films, news footage, shorts about family life and scarcely any feature films. During the Canton-Hong Kong strike from 1925 to 1926, young Hongkongers determined to make a career in film usually shifted to Guangzhou to further their careers. This sped up the development of Guangzhou's film industry, but Hong Kong's was largely ignored. After the mega strike, the film industry recovered very slowly. Films shown in the cinemas were mostly foreign films or productions from Shanghai or Guangzhou. There was not even one locally-produced feature film shown until 1931. Thus in the 1920s, production activities representative of the Hong Kong film industry were exercises in learning the basics of Western film techniques: documentaries and records far more than presenting fiction in a dramatic way. The only theatrical experience these pioneers had, came from *wenmingxi* and not Cantonese opera.

## Changes to Cantonese Opera Under Western Influence

I shall briefly describe the changes to Cantonese opera since the 1920s. Because social order in the villages was poor, opera troupes were often blackmailed or robbed when they toured the countryside. Performances became concentrated in the three cities of Guangzhou, Hong Kong and Macao, forming the so-called 'Guangdong Hong Kong troupes'. Their main target audience were

city dwellers who see more new things on a daily basis, and are used to enjoying more varied entertainment. Cantonese opera revolutionised itself, making changes directed by urbanisation and modernisation. Plot lines no longer centred on emperors and generals, talented scholars and gifted beauty; with gradually more scripts rewritten to reflect life in the modern society. References were also drawn from Western stagecraft and Western film set design, changing the feel of the operas from abstract to realistic and even colourful and fantastic, in order to attract an audience.<sup>3</sup> Singing styles and stage movements became more individualised to the personality of each star performer. They became idols and gained enthusiastic followings. Newspapers, magazines, radio broadcasts and record sales supported one another and helped boost the popularity of the operas and films.<sup>4</sup> Cantonese opera evolved to become increasingly more commercial and colloquial, according to the demands of the market: for example, in 1938, star performers Liu Hap-wai, Tsang Sam-to, Chan Fei-nung formed Xin Chunqiu Opera Troupe. Their productions of 'new plays'—*Battle of Heavenly Gate*, *Zombies in a Thunderstorm*, *The Dragon Puts China under a Spell* and *Enemy Beasts Butcher Our City* advertised multisensory stimulation. The advertisement, designed by Mak Siu-ha, featured images of Roman gladiators and nude women, reminiscent of Western movies. When business was slow, some troupes even included hula dancing, trapdoors and fights, and leaned towards eroticism and violence. As early as the 1920s, Sit Kok-sin and Ma Si-tsang had been dissatisfied with the conservative backwardness of traditional Cantonese opera, and aggressively pushed for improvements and new changes. They were inspired by artistic and technological advances in Western film and theatre but stayed true to their roots. However, their aesthetic ideals span timescapes, as well as Eastern and Western culture.

As early as 1926, Sit Kok-sin, then 24 years old, established Feifei Film Company in Shanghai. The first production, which he wrote and directed, and co-starred



<sup>3</sup> Yung Sai-shing, 'Jinru Chengshi: Wuguangshise: 1920 Niandai Yueju Tanxi' ('Urbanisation: Colour and Light—Studies on 1920s' Cantonese Opera'), in *Yueju Guoji Yantao Hui Lunwenji (Proceedings of International Conference on Cantonese Opera)*, Vol 1, Chow Shi-shum and Cheng Ling-yan (eds), Hong Kong: Cantonese Opera Research programme, Department of Music, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2008, pp 85-93 (in Chinese).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, pp 94-96 (in Chinese); see also Yung Sai-shing, *Yue Yun Liu Sheng: Changpian Gongye Yu Guangdong Quyi, 1903-1953 (Echoes of Canton: The Record Industry and Cantonese Music, 1903-1953)*, Hong Kong: Cosmos Books Ltd., 2006 (in Chinese).





with his wife Tong Suet-hing, was *Long Dip* (aka *The Shameless Girl*, 1926). In 1925, Lai Man-wai went north to Shanghai and set up China Sun Motion Picture Co Ltd. A production was immediately released next year in 1926, which could be considered a pioneer move in the context of Hong Kong cinema. Sit's circumstances were even more difficult than Lai's: unlike Lai's China Sun, which was supported by shareholders and had a group of scriptwriters and other talents with whom to cooperate, Sit had to work under extreme budget constraints and struggle alone. All he had was his wife Tong Suet-hing, who at the time had a large network in Shanghai and was quite famous in the entertainment industry. *Long Dip* (aka *The Shameless Girl*) was released in December in two Shanghai cinemas. Unfortunately, it lacked box-office appeal, and every night Sit Kok-sin had to perform his 'signature Cantonese opera' onstage or Tong Suet-hing had to perform her Beijing/Cantonese songs to provide double entertainment in order to attract an audience.<sup>5</sup> Feifei did not produce any more films; however, Sit's film dreams were not yet over. He returned to Guangzhou, formed another troupe to perform Cantonese opera. Soon he took over leadership of the troupe, writing and acting. In 1930, after watching the American film *The Grand Duchess and the Waiter* (1926), he immediately asked Leung Kam-tong to adapt it into Western costume Cantonese opera *The White Gold Dragon*. The performance was an instant hit. At the same time, Hollywood talkies became popular in Shanghai, Guangzhou and Hong Kong; locally-produced talkies were also taking off. Sit established Southern Film Corporation in preparation for the trend; after discussion with Shanghai's Unique Film Productions, they co-produced the film version of *The White Gold Dragon*. It was released in 1933 and was a hit everywhere.<sup>6</sup> This was the start of the trend of opera performers going into film.

## Cantonese Opera Stars Pave the Way for Cantonese Films

In their youth, both Sit Kok-sin and Ma Si-tsang learned from Hollywood films. Sit adored the magnificent romantic comedies of Hollywood. His favorite was the well-dressed man-about-town stylings of the characters played by Adolphe Menjou, and often imitated his look as well as the atmospheres of his films. Ma Si-tsang loved Charlie Chaplin's portrayal of a destitute everyman, and the tragi-comical interpretation of his social critiques. He also liked Douglas Fairbanks's agile movements and comic techniques, and tried to combine those traits into his own performing style. In 1931, Ma began a performance tour to the America for two years. During that time, he saw the vibrant and fresh American film and theatrical scene, and was anxious to try his hand at filmmaking. At one point he worked with an American producer to make a film out of his performances, but after investing in the project he realised he had been cheated. Not only did the film never get made, Ma got himself heavily into debt. After returning to Hong Kong in 1933, he actively began to revolutionise Cantonese opera, and delved into the filmmaking world. In 1934 he invested in Quanqiu Film Company and made over a dozen films of his own performances, of which he wrote, directed and starred in at least nine Cantonese operas. All these have been recorded in Cantonese opera history and film history books, and will not be described individually here.

Sit and Ma have always been hailed as masters who have made great contributions to Cantonese opera. But their contributions to Cantonese films are more than merely in improving communications and exchange between Cantonese opera and Cantonese film. From the start they both understood the potential of talkies. In the early 1930s they were already involved and participating in the development of talkies. They are truly the pioneering heroes of Cantonese films.



<sup>5</sup> Ching May-bo, 'Cong Zhu Cibo Dao Xue Juexian: Shilun Yuequ Pinghou Zhi Queli' ('From Zhu Cibo to Xue Juexian : Some Preliminary Discussion on the Development of Male Vocals'), in *Nan Xue Bei Mei Guoji Xueshu Yantaohui Lunwenji (Proceedings of International Conference on Arts of Sit and Mei)*, Chan Sau-yan and Lio Mio Mei (eds), Hong Kong Association of Cantonese Opera Scholars, et al., 2018, pp 139-140 (in Chinese).

<sup>6</sup> Cantonese opera *The White Gold Dragon* was performed on stage as a Western costume piece. The industry looked askance at the scenes of men and women flirting and lyrics with what were considered to be crude, low-class, erotic and improper elements. Upon completion, the film was sent to Nanjing for government censorship. Because it was filmed in dialect, it was almost banned. After much discussion and some re-editing, the film was distributed; however, the government publications all gave the film very bad reviews. Two years later, the government-run newspaper *Guangzhou Ming Kao Daily News* in an essay 'Lun Yueyu Shengpian' ('A Discussion of Cantonese Talkies') reiterated the bad influences spread by that film, calling it a 'promotion of feudal sentiments, exposure of bourgeoisie ideas, subtly replete with low-class tastes.' See Jin Po, 'Lun Yueyu Shengpian' ('A Discussion of Cantonese Talkies'), *Guangzhou Ming Kao Daily News*, 11 November 1935, sheet 4, p 3 (in Chinese).

# 高陞戲園

●號九三壹七二話電房票●

半點九 半點七 半點兩 半點二十。間時映放。

仙五樓三 毫一座前 半毫座後 毫二樓二。目價夜日。

★片鉅聲有粵天一映放場四日一十月六曆農。

梨梨黃 姊妹妹 卿雪唐 先覺韓

## 「集下上龍金白」

完映場一

### 白金龍上下集本事

粵人張晉華，為星洲之像皮廠主，借其女玉娘，及○之乳母，來港遊覽，下榻白家飯店，是粵方言隔閡，頗感不便，幸乳母徐德人為之居間詳述。

飯店小主人白金龍，見○真不覺傾心，是日，適逢白家飯店舉行化裝舞會，白作西班牙化裝，周旋眾女賓間，晉華偕○至，經理即向白介紹，白欲與○舞，○拒之，離座至花園，白進○室，○夫憤，○亦反唇相譏，白雖遭○奚落，受羞之心，曾稍不減，夢魂顛倒，如醉如痴，既見侍者出入○室，因思欲接近○，余喬裝侍之，實無他策。

次日，景華尋與手來電，謂像皮價狂跌，促晉華返，○則遊興方濃，乃與○乳母暫留遠上。

○白既喬裝侍者，以善粵語，漸與○熟，○因不知其即飯店之小主人，蓋前夕跳舞會中，白御有面單也。

命乳母一日，侍者送眼罩至，○以除金龍疑，不苦贊於店主，乃收其贈針，出為金梭之，得乳母，便為功己，乳母欲將款歸，然無貨其家，實則為使白與○親近計也。

○乳母既歸，○正感寂寞，而前上之問白，○見黑影，○一夕數驚，不能安睡，乃命○德宜外以伴，翌○登門，見室外陳設如疑，尤可異者，白御次之贈針，甲為己物，於知疑白為藍，且經理來，破罵警余之，理以實

• 印承司公務印隆永 •

Special thanks to Mr Jack Lee Fong of Palace Theatre, San Francisco, USA

Shanghai's Unique Film Productions made the sound film adaptation of Cantonese opera star Sit Kok-sin's *The White Gold Dragon*, under the same name. It was hugely popular when it was released in 1933 across the region, and triggered a wave of opera stars to join the film industry. The picture shows the handbills promoting the double screening of *The White Gold Dragon* and *The White Gold Dragon, Part Two* (1937).

## Overseas and Local Cantonese Films Borrow from Cantonese Opera

From 1926 to 1929 Hong Kong film production ceased due to the mega Canton-Hong Kong strike. China Sun Motion Picture Co Ltd split into two. Lai Man-wai went North to Shanghai to re-establish China Sun while Lai Puk-hoi stayed in Hong Kong, where China Sun still had an office but had ceased film production. A number of filmmakers such as Leung Siu-bo, Chan Kwan-chiu, Lu Juefei, Sit Siu-wing and Wong Chung-man went to Guangzhou to continue their film careers. In 1928 Lai Puk-hoi resumed activity and set up a training centre for film actors. He established Hong Kong Motion Pictures Company with business magnate Lee Hysan and produced two silent films; but that same year Lee was assassinated. Production was delayed on the films and they were not released until 1930. In 1930, United Photoplay Service Limited was founded in Shanghai. They set up Studio No. 3 in Hong Kong, managed by Lai Puk-hoi; but the important roles of writer and director were given to Moon Kwan Man-ching. Their productions were all silent films. In 1932, Lai and his student Tong Sing-to began to organise China Sound and Silent Movies Production Company with the goal of moving towards making talkies. By then, attempts to develop China-made talkies began in Shanghai and Guangzhou. Between 1931 and 1936, Leung Siu-bo, Sit Siu-wing, Kwong Shan-siu, Tse Sing-nung, Lee Fa, Li Lai-lin, Lo Duen, Yam Wu-fa, among others, were attempting to transform from silent to sound films. Besides Leung Siu-bo and Sit Siu-wing, the rest were inexperienced in filmmaking. As a result, their finished works, *Invincible Devil of Love* (aka *Invincible Lover*, 1932), *Argument* (1933), *Iron Horse, Faithful Fowl* (1933), *Charming Prison in the Palace* (1933), *Shelling in Mountain Five Fingers* (1933), *Smash Suzhou Terrace* (1936) and *The Wife Leads* (1936) were mostly partially silent films<sup>7</sup> due to budgetary and technological constraints; and as such failed to impress the masses. The majority of the group then moved to Hong Kong to further their careers. It is worth noting

that the director Tse Sing-nung, and actors Sin Ying-nung, Tsi-hau Tsat, Auyeung Kim and Lam Kwun-shan of *Argument* were all Cantonese opera actors. Tam Yuk-lam and Xiao Yao Xian, leading actresses of *Invincible Lover* and *Iron Horse, Faithful Fowl* respectively, were both Cantonese opera stars. *Smash Suzhou Terrace* was the film version of a Cantonese opera starring Tsang Sam-to and Leng Siu-kai, adapted by opera scriptwriter Yam Wu-fa, with a few songs added, naturally. In those days, very few cast and crew had any film experience. Theatrical stage training had also only begun for a few years. Kwong Shan-siu, Lo Duen, Lee Fa, Lee Sun-fung and Li Lai-lin were recent graduates from drama academy and acting in film for the first time. Thus, the directing, writing and acting all contained elements of Cantonese opera and plays, and still could not avoid stiffness and lack of reality. According to Lo Duen's recollections, the actors all had a strong sense of the stage; their performances were formulaic and sometimes too exaggerated, and they were not used to facing the camera. Other criticisms include bad sound recording technique, of such poor quality that the singing scenes could not be clearly heard.<sup>8</sup>

Meanwhile in Hong Kong, in 1933 Lai's company as well as Lo Ken's Zhenyu Company actively experimented the production of talkies. Lo claimed to have access to the latest American sound recording facilities and studios. Unfortunately, *The Fool Pays Respects* ran into serious funding issues amidst production and Lo almost declared bankruptcy. This talkie paradoxically went silent forever. At the same time Lai Buk-hoi's China Sound and Silent Movies Production Company produced a full talkie *The Idiot's Wedding Night* (released in September 1933) and partial talkie *Conscience* (released in November 1933). Hong Kong had officially entered the talkies era. But their box-office sales and public appeal were far cries from *The White Gold Dragon*, a co-production between Sit Kok-sin and Shanghai's Unique Film Productions—mainly because of a lack of opera stars in leading roles and acclaimed plot lines. Thereafter, Hong Kong continued to produce talkies, with Cantonese opera stars



<sup>7</sup> According to Lee Yuen-man, composer-cum-lyricist of *Iron Horse, Faithful Fowl* (1933), only the singing parts had sound and the rest of the film was silent. See 'Lee Yuen-man: Half a Century of Life in Cantonese Music', interviewed by Law Wai-ming, collated by Simpson Choi and May Ng, 15 November 1994, pp 190-199 in this book.

<sup>8</sup> 'Ping *Tiema Zhenqin* Zhi Bianpai Yu Biaoyan' ('A Review of *Iron Horse, Faithful Fowl*'), *Yuehua Bao*, Guangzhou, 15 September 1933. As cited in *Zouchu Shanghai: Zaoqi Dianying De Linglei Jingguan* (*Outside Shanghai: An Alternative Perspective of Early Films*), Emilie Yeh, et al., (eds), Beijing: Peking University Press, 2016, p 355 (in Chinese). The essay was quite critical of the film, for example that the editing lacked logical reason, and attempting to attract an audience with nudity scenes.





The early Cantonese sound film *Blossom Time*, produced by Grandview Film Company in 1933 and directed by Joseph Sunn, starred opera star Sun Liang Chau (aka Kwan Tak-hing) and Wu Tip-ying. An English advertisement for its release in Hong Kong was published in *South China Morning Post* on 1 August 1934. It states that United Photoplay Service Co. was the distributor. The photo on the right shows a scene from the film: (from right) Sun Liang Chau, Wu Tip-ying.

being a necessary element. Pak Kui-wing, Sit Kok-sin, Ma Si-tsang, Sun Liang Chau (aka Sun Lan Chow and Kwan Tak-hing), Liu Hap-wai and Kwai Ming-yeung all became leading actors. In the early 1930s, there were already Chinese people attempting to make talkies in San Francisco. Financed by his father, cinematography and art aficionado Joseph Sunn (aka Chiu Shu-sun) attempted but failed to shoot a talkie. In 1933, he met Moon Kwan Man-ching, who was visiting the United States. Together, they formed Grandview Film Company Limited, financed by collective funds from Chinese businessmen. Hiring Hollywood sound recording technicians, they produced *Blossom Time* (1933). The subject of the film was the life of Cantonese opera performers onstage and behind the scenes. The leading actors were Cantonese opera stars performing in the United States at the time: Kwan Tak-hing and Wu Tip-ying (aka Wu Dip Ying). With songs, drama and humor, and fairly high standards in cinematography and sound recording, it was extremely popular in the Chinese communities in the Americas. When it was released in Hong Kong, Guangzhou and Southeast Asia starting in early 1934, it also enjoyed great popularity. The success of this film led the Chinese in San Francisco to produce another Cantonese film *Sum Hun* (aka *Heartache/s*, 1935, shown in Hong Kong under the title *Iron Blood, Fragrant Soul*), financed by businessman

Ng Yu-jat, produced by his 21-year-old daughter Esther Eng, filmed by a well-known Hollywood cinematographer and directed by experienced Chinese-American filmmaker Frank Tang. Hollywood actor Beal Wong and Cantonese opera star Wai Kim-fong were the male and female leads. Hollywood technicians also performed the post-production sound editing. Two of the reels showed an aerial battle and were filmed in colour. The film also featured Cantonese opera scenes. In 1935, when it was released in the Chinese communities in the United States, as well as Hong Kong, Guangzhou and Southeast Asia, the response was tremendous. The film was the result of close cooperation between Hollywood technology and Chinese/Chinese-American artists (of stage and screen). In 1933, a Thai Chinese team filmed the Cantonese talkie *Love Redeemed* in Bangkok. It was released in Hong Kong on December 17, 1933, even earlier than *Blossom Time* (January 1934).<sup>9</sup> It is said that the Thai royal family helped with the funding of, and equipment used in, this film. The cast included local singers and dancers as well as Cantonese opera actors of Chinese heritage. It is no coincidence that all the pioneering local and overseas talkies were in Cantonese—and utilised Cantonese opera talent and singing. It shows the magnitude of the influence of Cantonese opera in Chinese communities the world over.



<sup>9</sup> Advertisement of *Love Redeemed* (1933), *South China Morning Post*, 16 December 1933, p 7; advertisement of *Blossom Time* (1934), *South China Morning Post*, 8 January 1934, p 7.



An ad in *South China Morning Post* published on 16 December 1933 reveals that a Cantonese sound film set in Bangkok named *Love Redeemed* was screened in Hong Kong earlier than *Blossom Time*. The movie was shot by United Film Production Co. in Bangkok, Thailand, but there is no historical record of it and is worth seeking out.



## How Film and Theatre Changed During the War

In 1937, Hong Kong faced an all-out war against the Japanese. All Chinese people united against the common enemy. Opera performers and actors were impelled to do their parts: raising funds to help those on the frontlines and to help soldiers and refugees. From 1937 to 1939, numerous so-called ‘national defense’ films, plays, modern dramas and Cantonese operas were made with the theme of defending against the enemy and eradicating traitors. More than ever, talent and resources were used interchangeably among the media; even content and format became interactive and evolved among the genres. I had written about the full-fledged popularity, distortion and fall of ‘national defense’ films elsewhere, and will only additionally discuss here Hou Yao’s ‘change of direction’ situation and its interconnection with Cantonese opera. For many years, Hou Yao had been writing anti-Japanese essays and plays in China, and at one point even dedicated himself to the underground war effort. In the early 1930s he travelled south to Hong Kong to escape Japanese persecution, where he wrote and taught school for a living but continued to promote anti-Japanese activism. In 1937, he returned to writing and directing films, and starting with *Chu Gon in Mongolia* (1937), followed by *Storm Over Pacific* (1938), leading the trend in ‘national defense’ films. But after mid-1938, hard-line national defense films were actively prohibited by the governments of Hong Kong and Southeast Asia.

Filmmakers had to use more entertainment to disguise their messages. At that time, national defense films became less popular while feature films of folk tales were enjoying something of a renaissance. Even filmmakers who never shot costume period pieces such as Lo Duen, Lee Sun-fung and Ng Wui took inspiration from *The Water Margin* and folk stories to make costume period films about grassroots rising up to defend against draconian authority and evil powers. Hou Yao and his assistant Wan Hoi-ling turned to plot-lines that had been adapted into Cantonese operas for inspiration to re-adapt. They used opera stars to produce films like *Master Keung* (starring ensemble cast of movie and opera stars such as Lam Kwun-shan, Lam Mui-mui, Lau Hark-suen and Wu Meilun, 1939), *Incident in the Turtle Mountain* (starring Kwong Shan-siu, Wu Tip-lai, Leong Suet-fei and Lau Hark-suen, 1939), *The Filial Son and the Unworthy Mother* (starring Sun Ma Si-tsang, 1939), *Daughter vs. Stepmother* (starring Yuet Yee, 1939), etc. Hou also worked with Ma Si-tsang to adapt the Cantonese opera *Charming Hell*, in which Ma had starred, into *The Prodigal* (1939), but was slammed by cultural critics for ‘changing directions’ to make backwards-thinking, ‘politically unconscious’<sup>10</sup> films that are ‘in reverse gear’<sup>11</sup>. In those two years Hou Yao had tried his hardest to combine colloquial styles with the grassroots appeal of Cantonese opera in which to subtly express his message. He had said that folk tales could equally show positive energy, but that was not understood by those in power nor the cultural circle.<sup>12</sup>



<sup>10</sup> ‘Huanan Dianying Jie Chengxian Shuguang’ (‘First Ray of Light for South China Film Industry’), *Artland Biweekly*, No. 39, 1 October 1938 (in Chinese); Yan Meng, ‘Zhi Dianying Yishu Zhanyou’ (‘To Comrades of the Cinematic Art’), *Artland Biweekly*, No. 51, 1 April 1939 (in Chinese).

<sup>11</sup> Ren Bing, ‘Wo Yao Shuo De Ji Ju Hua’ (‘A Few Words I Would Like to Say’), *Artland Biweekly*, No. 51, 1 April 1939 (in Chinese).

<sup>12</sup> Hou Yao’s folk tale feature films were attacked by newspapers on both sides of the political spectrum. Kuomintang-friendly *Artland Biweekly* featured numerous reviews from October 1938 to May 1939 that harshly criticised Hao and his work, see note 10 and note 11; see also Pang Yin-nung, ‘Qingwu Xue Hou Yao Xiansheng Zheyang Nuli Qu Daoyan Minjian Gushi Yingpian’ (‘Don’t Follow Hou Yao’s Arduous Efforts in Directing Folktale Feature Films’), No. 53, 1 May 1939, p 1 (in Chinese).

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Special thanks to Mr Wong Han Min

After mid-1938, the appetite for national defence films started fading and folk tale movies started to gain popularity. Hou Yao and his assistant Wan Hoi-ling turned to Cantonese opera for ideas, adapting them into movies that featured opera stars. The above and below pictures are the handbills for *Incident in the Turtle Mountain* (1939) and *The Filial Son and the Unworthy Mother* (1939) respectively.



Unfortunately, the films have been lost and we cannot watch them today. But from the recently-found *The Blood-Stained Peach Blossom Fan* (1940, directed and screen-wrote by Mak Siu-ha and starring Lam Kwun-shan and Cheang Mang-ha), one can see a script that is a new retelling of a folk tale, from which can be developed a sarcastic view of the joy and sadness of the rich and powerful in times of social instability and the unfortunate victims of warfare.

Being at war forced the film and opera stars to directly face cruel reality and actively join the war effort. Their performances in films and operas became rousing. By the end of 1937, Sit and Ma had both joined the cast of *The Last Stand* (1938), produced by the South China Film Industry Workers recruiting all of its members. Ma Si-tsang had written an anti-Japanese play *The Flying General of the Dragon City* which he later made into a film. In January 1938, Sit Kok-sin performed in the 'national defense' Cantonese opera *The Han Moon Shines*

*over the Northwestern Frontier* to raise funds for the front-line first-aid teams. In the same year he and Ma joined forces to organise a fundraising effort for out-of-work members of The Chinese Artists Association. For the first time, the two of them performed *The Couple that Raises a War* together at Lee Theatre. At the end of 1938, The China Women Military Relief Association held a major fundraising fete at the football pitch of the Hong Kong Club. Dozens of opera and film stars participated: some sang opera songs, some played in a soccer match and some hosted the charity auction. In 1939, on the anniversary of the Marco Polo Bridge Incident, Sit and Ma both released proclamations in support of the war against the Japanese. In August 1939, the Association for the Development of Cantonese Opera and the Hong Kong Artists Union co-hosted a charity performance to fundraise for the victims of war. The two of them performed excerpts from *The Flying General of the Dragon City* and *The Final Victory*.<sup>13</sup>



Special thanks to Mr Jack Lee Fong of Palace Theatre, San Francisco, USA

An opera-within-an-opera scene from the film *The Blood-Stained Peach Blossom Fan* (1940), depicting female lead Cheang Mang-ha.



*The General of Dragon City* (1938) was adapted from a Ma Si-tsang Cantonese opera of the same name. (From right): Tam Lan-hing, Ma Si-tsang.



<sup>13</sup> See Ma Si-tsang, 'Qiqi Kangzhan Jianguo Jinian: Huanan Yueju Jie Juxing Guomin Gongyue Xuanshi Gao Qiaobao Shu' ('Memorial of the Second Sino-Japanese War and the Establishment of the Republic of China; Notice to Chinese People: South China Cantonese Opera Industry Organises the National Convention Oath') and Sit Kok-sin, 'Qiqi Gao Bahe Tongzhi' ('To Comrades in The Chinese Artists Association on "7 July"'), in *Artland Biweekly*, No. 58, 15 July 1939 (in Chinese). Evidence in this paragraph and the next are cited in Law Kar and Fran Bren, *Cong Xitai Dao Jiangtai Zaoqi Xianggang Xiju Ji Yanyi Huodong 1900-1941 (From Artform to Platform—Hong Kong Plays and Performances 1900-1941)*, Hong Kong: International Association of Theatre Critics (Hong Kong), 1999, pp 60-61.

During the war, the content and style of Cantonese opera transformed. Because the Hong Kong government forbade public promotion of anti-Japanese sentiments, the genre could only spread the word through indirect means, for example portraying an ancient counter-invasion battle to symbolise the present condition, or adapting an old opera and performing it in modern costumes as a metaphor for fighting the Japanese and capturing traitors. In this effort, Ma Si-tsang was most enthusiastic. He wrote a whole series of 'national defense' operas for showing in Hong Kong and Macao: *The End of the Traitors*, *Traitor Chin Goes to Hell*, *Give Me Back the Land of Han*, *Hong Chengchou*, *To Protect Your Country and Halt the Family Feuds*, *Ghost Wife*, etc.. Sit Kok-sin also performed, in Hong Kong and for the rear guard, *Fragrance of Blood on the Burnt Earth*, *Yue Fei*, *History of a Hero's Tears* and *Ten Thousand Miles Ahead* and wrote the patriotic plays of 'The Four Great Beauties': Xi Shi, Diaochan, Yang Guifei and Wang Zhaojun, preaching patriotism and loyalty to one's country over romantic love. Some of Sit and Ma's works during this era were made into films. Other casts and crews who were just as enthusiastic in their participation included: Kwan Tak-hing, Liu Hap-wai, Nam Hoi Sap-sam Long, Leng Siu-kai, Yam Wu-fa, etc.

In 1939, Kwan Tak-hing formed a rescue service team and toured three provinces in China, performing historical themed operas that have been injected with the new meaning to spread the message to unite against the enemy. In 1938, when Liu Hap-wai toured with his show in Guangdong province, the fighting raged tantalisingly close. As he escaped, he performed in temporary tents or abandoned temples and schools. Sets, costumes and musicians were kept to a bare minimum. Nam Hoi Sap-sam Long changed his romantic drama style to writing combative, anti-war plays. Practicing what he preached, he performed free of charge for the common people deep in the Guangxi province to propagate his message, and also took time to entertain the troops. At that time, other stars who toured their shows on the front-lines included Leng Siu-kai and Yam Wu-fa who had just returned from the United States. They combined American-style songs and dances, acrobatic scenes and

Cantonese operatic singing performances to create a variety show to entertain the troops, but were criticised for exploiting gimmicks and eroticism. In any case, due to the contemporary socio-political demands and limitations, war-time Cantonese operas and films blended patriotism with entertainment. Performance styles combined elements from different times and places, including Cantonese opera, plays, acrobatics and musicals in the same performance. In terms of aesthetics they were inconsistent and mixed-up; however, they were certainly full of energy.

## Cantonese Talkie Talents and Their Roots in Theatre

In the early and mid-1930s when Cantonese films were just starting to be made, only a few of the writing and directing talent came from the film industry. The majority came from the theatre: Cantonese opera and plays. Thus, in creation, production and performance, there is a natural lean towards theatre. On inspection of the film records and information of the time,<sup>14</sup> one can see that many films name Cantonese opera stars and well-known plays as the main audience attractions—but the plot line and scenes are newly created, without the original works' stylistic musical elements, such as the feats, singing and acting in Cantonese opera. Background of the stories and the actual performances are contemporary and realistic, retaining only a few singing passages and songs. The scriptwriters who often worked with the filmmakers are also closely related to Cantonese opera: Mak Siu-ha, Fung Chi-fun, Nam Hoi Sap-sam Long, Chan Tin-tsung, Ng Yat-siu, Hui Siu-kuk, Yam Wu-fa, etc. Directors included Runje Shaw, Lau Yim-kung, Tang Xiaodan, Fok Yin, Chan Pei, Lee Ying-yuen, Fung Chi-kong, Yeung Kung-leong, Hung Chung-ho, among others. Another school of productions had very few ties to Cantonese operas; instead they upheld the aesthetics and the edifying traditions of China Sun and United Photoplay Service. The main writer-cum-director was Lai Puk-Hoi. After Lai's retirement, his students—Tong Sing-to, Lee Tit, Wong Toi, Wu Ngai-sing and Shak Yau-yue, etc—continued his mission. Another major force



<sup>14</sup> Reference were drawn from Mary Wong Shuk-han (ed), *Hong Kong Filmography, Vol. 1, 1913-1941*, Hong Kong, Hong Kong Film Archive, 1997 and Po Fung (ed), *The Ultimate Guide to Hong Kong Film Director 1914-1978*, Hong Kong: Hong Kong Film Directors' Guild, 2018.



in that school were Lai Man-wai's frequent partners Hou Yao and his woman disciple Wan Hoi-ling. Also with them were Grandview Film Company's Joseph Sunn, Moon Kwan Man-ching, Lau Fong and Ouyang Yuqian's students Lo Duen, Ng Wui, Lee Sun-fung, Lee Fa, Tam Sun-fung, etc. They were more familiar with Western Theatre and film, and seldom worked with famed Cantonese opera actors. The focus was more about the sense of drama and the balance of the actors' performances. By the time the postwar era arrived, followed by the 1950s, the first group evolved into musicals and operatic films based on Cantonese opera performances, the theme of which was mass entertainment; the second group evolved into the so-called romantic/ethics/social realism films; using the drama to reflect issues of ordinary people, extending into social criticism and point out the path ahead; but that is another story. The practice of Cantonese film as the new medium to combine elements of plays and operas only lasted four or five years before war, and everything was thrown into chaos. We can only take a peek at them from the meagre surviving scraps of pre-war films.<sup>15</sup>

## Revisit the 'Theatre-film Amalgamation' in Pre-War Films

An excellent example is *The White Gold Dragon, Part Two* (1937), the continuation of Sit Kok-sin's debut film, *The White Gold Dragon*. It continued the upper-class love story in the European romantic style. The setting had moved from Hong Kong to Southeast Asia. Sit's stylings were just as spontaneously charming, a result of a combination of stage play movements and Hollywood star swagger. The plot referred to Hollywood films as well,<sup>16</sup> and the sets and lighting were modern and glamorous. The greater message, however, was that businessmen of Chinese heritage should do something for China in these times of trouble, and both the national and overseas front should unite to work for the well-being of 'your' fellow Chinese. Romance is great too but

one shouldn't forget about saving the nation. However, a union between the themes of romance and patriotism still seemed a bit forced back in that milieu; and most of the story was performed in everyday Cantonese speech, and only several singing passages in place of dialogue were featured. It is not quite a combination of Cantonese opera and film.

Mak Siu-ha's *The Blood-Stained Peach Blossom Fan* (1940) used the lead character Li Xiangjun and the peach blossom fan in Kong Shangren's *The Peach Blossom Fan* as a symbol for the unstable Hong Kong society in 1941, a sarcastic portrayal of the hot and cold sides of people who were still consumed with enjoying themselves when the nation was in trouble. The lead character Miss Perfume is an opera star pursued romantically by numerous suitors. The auction of the fan is a plot element that 'symbolises the present by anchoring in the past'. It is a good attempt in terms of creativity and dramatic value. Having kicked-start in Cantonese opera, Mak Siu-ha's creative sensibilities were closer to modern plays and films than to Cantonese opera. *Rivals in Love* (1939), starring Tam Lan-hing and Tsi Lo-lan, portrayed the rivalries and tangled relationship between mother and daughter. Besides inserting a few Cantonese songs, the film did not use any other Cantonese opera devices for which the two divas were known; however, the plot borrowed a scene from Oscar Wilde's *Lady Windermere's Fan*. Ma Si-tsang and Cheung Yuet-ye starred in *Bitter Phoenix, Sorrowful Oriole* (1941), which shared the title with one of Ma's very well-known Cantonese operas but was not an adaptation. Mok Hong-si re-wrote the script based on the style of Ma's character. Story-wise, the heroic beggar Yu Hap-wan transformed into a charming detective who enjoys high social status; however, rebellious and righteous in nature, he took the initiative to investigate a murder case, like the original character. He and Cheung Yuet-ye portrayed a quarrelsome couple whose relationship was borrowed from the Hollywood film *The Thin Man* (1934).<sup>17</sup> More than the first half



<sup>15</sup> The below mentioned nine Cantonese films were sourced by the Hong Kong Film Archive from the United States. They are the only surviving copies, all scattered overseas. Acknowledgements to the Archive for arranging special screenings and for inviting me to participate in the 'Early Cinematic treasures Rediscovered' seminar series, which made this study possible.

<sup>16</sup> According to May Ng's study, many scenes are found parallel with Hollywood film *Our Modern Maidens* (1929). See May Ng, 'The Love Battlefield, Business World and Foreign Influence in *The White Gold Dragon, Part Two*', in *Early Cinematic Treasures Rediscovered*, Winnie Fu and May Ng (eds), Hong Kong: Hong Kong Film Archive, 2015, pp 34-42 [Electronic Publication], [https://www.filmarchive.gov.hk/documents/2005525/2007294/EC\\_ebook\\_TC.pdf](https://www.filmarchive.gov.hk/documents/2005525/2007294/EC_ebook_TC.pdf).

<sup>17</sup> Quoted from the opinion of Sam Ho, '*The Thin Man* and the Bohemians: Discoveries in Pre-war Hong Kong Films', *Newsletter* (Issue 69), Hong Kong: Hong Kong Film Archive, August 2014, pp 5-9.





Special thanks to Mr Jack Lee Fong of Palace Theatre, San Francisco, USA

Despite starring Cantonese opera divas Tam Lan-hing and Tsi Lo-lan, the story in *Rivals in Love* (1939) did not relate much to Cantonese opera. This is a still depicting a show-within-a-show, in which Tsi Lo-lan is singing opera in her opera costume in the film.

of the film is all about the witty banter of the couple's relationship and sarcasm towards the upper classes. Then the murder happens, and Ma investigates.

The latter, smaller part of the film is about Ma finding the murderer and breaking the case with the help of a gang of beggars; the set changes to the slums, providing Ma an opportunity to sing the very popular theme song of his namesake Cantonese opera, and thus reconnecting the film to the opera again. That kind of stage play structure seemed forced but was fantastically unique and interesting, and could be considered an attempt at combining elements of Cantonese opera (characters and music) with contemporary film.

*The Light of Women* (1937) and *The Rich House* (1942) were both films about women fighting for personal independence. The leading female characters possessed strong senses of self, and therefore suffered greatly in this male-dominated society. The former film told its story in a realistic way, in line with the progressive films

of the 1930s. The tragic ending of the latter film referred to Hollywood film *Camille* (1936). Some scenes contained shades of Bohemian romance. It was clear the writers and directors of both films valued the artistic sense of the theatre, although their techniques of combining the essences of film and theatre were not yet mature enough. In *Follow Your Dream* (1941), besides letting Ko Lo-chuen and his group sing a few awkward phrases of Cantonese opera and inserting a song sung by Wu Mei-lun at the teahouse—both of which were very natural insertions—the influence of Cantonese opera cannot be traced at all. This was a realistic film about social and family affairs. It purposely cut down the drama to emphasise the sense of reality. The meaning of the film was very well articulated; only the mise-en-scène and the rhythm might be improved upon. As for Hou Yao's two 'national defense' films *Storm over Pacific* and *Fortress of Flesh and Blood* (1938), they were both full of impassioned patriotism. The films' styles naturally became broad-strokes, curt and direct. In terms of spatial relation and



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Ma Si-tsang's (right) detective character in *Bitter Phoenix, Sorrowful Oriole* (filmed in 1941, released in Hong Kong in 1947), as well as his bickering relationship with his wife, played by Cheung Yuet-ye (left), clearly borrows from the Hollywood film *The Thin Man* (1934).

battle scenes, the films borrowed from the theatre and the technique of mixing reality with abstractness makes for very interesting aesthetics.<sup>18</sup>

From these films, we see that the apparent influences were from Western films, plays, literature and local new art. The combinations of these influences perhaps even bested traditional Cantonese opera. While with Sit and Ma's films, Sit had his own sense of aesthetics while Ma worked with his writer and director to use his own image as the centre, and built around it with humorous movements, language and songs to poke fun at the social upper crust and extend sympathy to the lower classes; but those combinations also seemed forced.

## Conclusion

In an era with major social change such as the 1920s and 30s, Cantonese opera had to change to suit the tastes of times and be competitive in the market. Thus, from the operating system to content and style, everything continued to evolve. Formulaic elements in traditional performance diminished and began leaning towards films and stage plays. On the other hand, Cantonese talkies needed numerous actors and creative talent and had to get those resources from Cantonese opera. But the essence of Cantonese opera is in stylised abstract beauty in the poses and body movements, and the dramatic quality of singing instead of dialogue. These make it difficult to transition to realistic film images. Upon thorough study of the introductory materials of the films of that era, there were no real opera-style films made; even *The White Gold Dragon, Part Two* is just a graft of part operatic music and part film. The aesthetic value may be uneven. The interaction between pre-war

Cantonese opera and film is all about Cantonese opera borrowing technology and plot lines; while films borrowed the Cantonese opera stars and some of their songs.

From his youth, Sit Kok-sin apprenticed under Peking opera masters, studying and researching on the methods of combining the beauty of Southern and Northern operatic music, and then joining them with films. Even as war drew close, he was still determined to film Cantonese language, Mandarin and English versions of the Sit-style production of *Romance of the Western Chamber*. Unfortunately, he was unsuccessful in getting it done. From *The White Gold Dragon, Part Two* we see his signature of combining empathy and beauty from East and West. Unfortunately this path could not continue in times of war and chaos. After the war, his ability to perform was greatly reduced, to the extent that in spite of intentions he could no longer do anything. Luckily, after the war Tong Tik-sang inherited his sense of empathy and beauty, continuing his path, writing famous operas for Fong Yim-fun's, Yam Kim-fai and Pak Suet-sin's troupes. With cooperation from Lee Tit, he inserted the essence of operatic music into film, partially achieving Sit's dream of combining Southern and Northern styles with Chinese and Western theatre culture. On the other hand, Ma Si-tsang observed Peking opera and Western movies, developing his signature lively and humorous movements. He also studied the folk art of street side narrative singing and developed his own vocal style, which he used to poke fun at the rich and powerful and speak up for justice. He was sympathetic and righteous. He continued on this path; for example after the war, he starred with Hung Sin Nui in *The Judge Goes to Pieces* (1948) which showed a much more mature combination of film and opera. After that, he developed the genre of Cantonese musical comedy, which became extremely popular. He also dedicated



<sup>18</sup> Both films used colloquial means to spread the messages of patriotism and fighting the enemy. Under time and budget constraints, they were very creative in using film techniques; for example, boldly using a flat plain for composition. In a lecture on the film aesthetics of Hou Yao, Lau Yam analysed the spatial compositions of both these films. I am quoting his findings. The warfare action scenes contained some stylised elements. The handling was visible but the director simply chose to 'leave it there', which were most likely borrowed from theatre productions. See Lau Yam, 'Seminar: A Rare Self-portrait—On Hou Yao and Filmmaking in 1930s Hong Kong', Programme: Early Cinematic Treasures Rediscovered, Hong Kong: Hong Kong Film Archive, 11 April, 2015; see also Lau Yam, 'Exploitation of the Frame—The Aesthetic Lessons of Hou Yao's Pre-war Hong Kong Films', in *Early Cinematic Treasures Rediscovered*, Winnie Fu, May Ng (eds), Hong Kong: Hong Kong Film Archive, 2015, pp 58-65. [Electronic Publication] [https://www.filmarchive.hk/documents/2005525/2007294/EC\\_ebook\\_TC.pdf](https://www.filmarchive.hk/documents/2005525/2007294/EC_ebook_TC.pdf).





himself to improving Cantonese films and raising the standard of the performances. His contributions to both areas are outstanding.

But how will the tradition of Cantonese opera continue in this rapidly-changing society? This very difficult problem exists both in terms of aesthetics and marketability. No matter whether they return to the strictly formulaic, elegant traditional path of fictional lifestyle that reduces it to an art form for the minority, or move towards the modern direction of combining the elements of film, television and theatre to be relevant to real life, and so becoming a popular performance art, each alternative will experience considerable difficulty and limitations in attempting to put them into practice. As for the goal of maintaining the essence of traditional

opera and bringing it to greatness through film, there were several excellent examples in the 1950s and 60s but their successes were not sustained. Can a new path be forged today whereby the art of Cantonese opera will be enjoyed by all? We eagerly await the arrival of such a master!

(Translated by Roberta Chin)

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# Clanging Gongs and Thundering Drums The Dividing Line Between Musicals and Cantonese Opera Films

Po Fung

A regional form of Chinese performance art, Cantonese opera combines singing and dancing in the presentation of elaborately staged dramatic narratives. Once the dominant form of folk entertainment in Guangdong province, the Cantonese opera tradition was a major influence in the early Cantonese cinema of the 1930s. Countless Cantonese opera classics have been adapted to the silver screen, sometimes incorporating both the storylines and performance aesthetics of the art form. During the 1950s and 60s, the prestigious lineage and status of Cantonese opera continued with the voluminous production and box office success of Cantonese opera film adaptations. The late Mr Yu Mo-wan dubbed these productions ‘Cantonese Opera Films’, and further divided the genre into six categories, including ‘Cantonese Opera Documentaries’, ‘Cantonese Operatic Films’, ‘Cantonese Opera Musical Films’, ‘Cantonese Opera Films (in Modern Costumes)’, ‘Films with Cantonese Opera Highlight(s)’ and ‘Cantonese Opera Collage Films’.<sup>1</sup> After watching a number of Cantonese opera film productions, I observed how the various representations of Cantonese opera on film also reflected the evolution of this specific cinematic art form. This article will attempt to trace the threads and developments of Cantonese Opera cinema, based on observations of different films and available written records of the period.

## Elements of Cantonese Opera Transplanted into Pre-War Films

Cantonese cinema has shared a symbiotic relationship with Cantonese Opera from its inception:

*The White Gold Dragon* (1933), produced in Shanghai by Unique Film Productions, was widely regarded as one of the earliest Cantonese films. Adapted from the magnum opus of Cantonese opera star Sit Kok-sin, the film not only adopted the original storyline but also featured Cantonese opera singing performances.<sup>2</sup> Less than twenty Hong Kong films made prior to the Fall of Hong Kong during WWII have survived today. Many were based on Cantonese operas, employing a number of strategies to incorporate elements of the art form.

A common strategy was to adapt celebrated classics from the repertoire of Cantonese opera stars. But these adaptations did not aim to faithfully reproduce the original stage performances. The unique aesthetics and conventions of Cantonese opera were cast aside and performers delivered the dialogue using everyday speech, without even the traditional musical ensemble accompaniment. Only a token number of Cantonese opera songs from the original operas were performed in the film adaptations. The film adaptation of *Bitter Phoenix, Sorrowful Oriole* (completed in 1941; released in 1947) for example, had little in common with the original opera other than its title and Ma Si-Tsang’s celebrated performance of the Cantonese opera lament ‘Yu Hap-wan Expresses His Inner Feelings’. *The White Gold Dragon, Part Two* (1937), the sequel to *The White Gold Dragon* adopted a similar approach. Another strategy borrowed from the Hollywood genre of backstage musicals, where a Cantonese opera production was written into the narrative, allowing characters to perform authentic Cantonese opera scenes in full costume.



<sup>1</sup> Yu Mo-wan, ‘Xianggang Yueju Dianying Fazhan Shihua’ (‘Anecdotes of Hong Kong Cantonese Opera Films’), in *Cantonese Opera Film Retrospective* (The 11th Hong Kong International Film Festival Catalogue) (Revised Edition), Li Cheuk-to (ed), Hong Kong: Hong Kong Film Archive, 2003, p 18 (in Chinese). The writer takes issue with Mr Yu’s system of categorisation that will be further explored in the article.

<sup>2</sup> ‘I watched Sit Kok-sin’s *The White Gold Dragon*... thankfully the dialogues and sung conversations were performed in Cantonese...’, Ma Er: ‘Xue Juexian Zhi *Baijin Long*’ (‘Sit Kok-sin’s *The White Gold Dragon*’), in *The Social Daily News*, Shanghai, 20 October 1933 (in Chinese).



*Bitter Phoenix, Sorrowful Oriole* (1941) was adapted from a Ma Si-tsang Cantonese opera of the same name. In the film, Ma Si-tsang (middle) sings 'Yu Hap-wan Expresses His Inner Feelings', a Cantonese opera song that was wildly popular at one point.

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*The Light of Women* (1937) used the narrative device of a show-within-a-show to bring in a Cantonese opera stage performance. (Front row left to right): Lee Yi-nin, Kwong Shan-Siu



*The Light of Women* (1937), *Rivals in Love* (1939) and *Twin Sisters of the South* (1939), all adopted this approach. *The Goddess Helps the Bridge Builder* (aka *The Bridge Builder*, 1940), based on a classic folk tale 'Building the Luoyang Bridge', is noteworthy for being a period film in which some of the conversations are communicated musically. But the entire film was developed on the foundation of modern-spoken-Chinese theatre, without any of the stylised gestures and choreography specific to Cantonese opera. In retrospect, none of the surviving Hong Kong films made prior to 1941 showcased Cantonese opera in its full form in terms of singing, acting, reciting and fencing. After the war, film productions continued to employ the same strategies to incorporate elements of Cantonese opera. Not only were

productions that featured a story-within-story structure still being made, film adaptations of famous Cantonese operas continued to be standard practice. *Love with No Result* (1947) for example was adapted from the famous Cantonese opera of the same name that starred Sit Kok-sin. But the 1947 film was set in modern day; the characters delivered their lines in a naturalistic manner, with Cantonese opera songs inserted occasionally into the narrative. *The Story of Tung Siu-yuen* (1950), based on the opera written by Tong Tik-sang, managed to retain the original Qing dynasty setting. But once again, other than a few Cantonese opera song numbers, the performers mainly delivered their lines in a naturalistic manner.





In *Twin Sisters of the South* (1939), Wu Tip-ying's (middle) character writes and acts in *Wang Zhaojun*, which is a show-within-a-show.

### Post-War New Love Story of Leung Shan-pak and Chuk Ying-toi (1951) Pioneered 'All-singing' Musical Genre

The early 1950s marked an important turning point in the development of Cantonese opera cinema with the release of director Chan Pei's *New Love Story of Leung Shan-pak and Chuk Ying-toi* (1951). Films that featured singing performances existed in the pre-war era but what distinguished *New Love Story of Leung Shan-pak and Chuk Ying-toi* from its predecessors was that the film's dialogue was performed almost entirely through songs rather than spoken words.<sup>3</sup> Adopting a story-within-story structure, the film opens with a modern-day wedding banquet. The newlywed couple invokes the famous romantic folklore about the star-crossed lovers, Leung Shan-pak and Chuk Ying-toi. The dialogue in the modern scenes was delivered using everyday speech while period scenes set in ancient China, featured Cantonese opera-inflected singing performances. The film was boldly advertised as an 'all-singing film'.<sup>4</sup>

In the same year, Chan Pei directed, *Musical Third Master Sha* (1951), the first Cantonese 'sing-song film' that began its title with the modifier 'sing-song' (or 'musical'). As an all-singing musical, *Musical Third Master Sha* took the genre a step further by eliminating the modern setting and the story-within-story convention altogether; the entire narrative was set in the Qing era. The characters in the film recited all their lines in song, with the unique aesthetics and inflections of traditional operatic singing. Chan Pei's *New Love Story of Leung Shan-pak and Chuk Ying-toi* enjoyed the distinction of being the only entirely 'all-singing' musical produced at the time. Zi Zhen, columnist for Hong Kong newspaper *Ta Kung Pao*, acknowledged its historical significance in his 1956 article entitled 'On Cantonese Sing-song Film'.<sup>5</sup> Surveying the history of Hong Kong sing-song films, the essay identified many of the unique conventions adopted by the 'all-singing films' but also offered a critique: '... many of these productions focused solely on the singing performances to the detriment of the acting performances. The jarring disconnection between singing and acting compromised the artistic integrity and authenticity of the films.'



<sup>3</sup> Prior to *New Love Story of Leung Shan-pak and Chuk Ying-toi* (1951), the characters in *A Mysterious Night* (1937) had already been reciting all of their lines in song, i.e. recitatives. I previously deemed the former film a pioneering all-singing film; however, Dr Stephanie Ng provided evidence in her essay 'Yueju Yu Dianying De Huihui: Yueyu Gechangpian' ('The Bricolage of Cantonese Films: Cantonese All-singing Musicals') in *Film Art*, No 347, that in *Mysterious Night*, 'all of the lines of the characters were recited in song'. Ng also cited the essay published by the special publication of the film as further proof. Therefore *A Mysterious Night* is the true groundbreaker of the genre of 'all-singing musicals'. This seems to be the most established opinion considering all the available sources. I would like to express my gratitude to Dr Ng for her correction.

<sup>4</sup> See advertisement of *New Love Story of Leung Shan-pak and Chuk Ying-toi* (1951), *Wah Kiu Yat Po*, 3 September 1951, sheet 2, p 4 (in Chinese).

<sup>5</sup> Zi Zhen, 'Tan Yueyu Gechang-pian' ('On Cantonese Sing-song Film'), *Ta Kung Pao*, 24 July 1956, sheet 2, p 6 (in Chinese).



At the time, the musicals were faithful to the melodic and singing conventions of the Cantonese opera, but paid very little attention to the ‘acting’ conventions—the intricate gestures and choreography specific to the Cantonese opera art form. What was most notable about the Cantonese opera musical adaptations of the 1950s was their use of modern settings. Cantonese operas originally set in ancient times were presented in contemporary or modern costumes. Naturally, there were exceptions such as the period musical films *Leung Shan-pak’s Second Meeting with Chuk Ying-toi* (1952), starring Sun Ma Si-tsang and Tang Bik-wan.

### Cinematic Influences of Yue Opera Film *Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai* (1954)

April 1955 marked a dramatic decline in the number of musical productions with modern-day settings, due to the surge in popularity of musical films with period settings. Early into 1955, musicals such as *How Law-*

*buk Rescued His Mother (Musical)* (adapted from Tong Tik-sang’s Cantonese opera) and *Ms Chan’s Boat Chase* (starring Yam Kim-fai and Pak Suet-sin) were all still with modern-day settings. But the number of period musical productions saw a steady rise after April and the trend continued until 1956. The inflection point was the Hong Kong release of *Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai* on 16 December, 1954, a Yue opera film adaptation produced in Mainland China. The film went on to become a smash hit at the box office. ‘There was no end in sight for the successful run’ as the Cathay Theatre screened the film for 107 consecutive days, breaking all box office records previously set by any foreign or Mainland Chinese film released in Hong Kong during the same period.<sup>6</sup> The phenomenal success of *Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai* was of course the key factor responsible for the industry-wide shift towards period musical productions. However, as previously noted, despite their use of period settings and costumes, the musicals from this period continued to focus exclusively on the singing performances, recycling



The Yue opera film *Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai* (1954) was a box office hit in Hong Kong, leading many Hong Kong filmmakers to start making all-musical period films instead.



<sup>6</sup> Shu Don-lok, *Ken Guang Tuo Ying: Nanfang Yingye Ban Shiji De Daolu (Pioneer of Lights and Shadows: The Half Century Journey of Southern Film Corporation)*, cited in *Yindou Liushi (1950–2010) (Sixty years of Sil-Metropole: 1950–2010)*, Sil-Metropole Organisation Ltd. (ed), Hong Kong: Joint Publishing (Hong Kong) Co., Ltd., 2010, p 127 (in Chinese). Zi Zhen’s 1956 article also noted, ‘*Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai* (1954), the stage opera documentary broke all Hong Kong box office records’, *ibid*.

the same 'singing' or 'all-singing' slogans in their marketing campaigns to attract audiences.<sup>7</sup>

The stylised gestures and choreography of Cantonese opera were not entirely absent in all cases; some period musical adaptation began to feature the unique 'acting' conventions in particular scenes. For example, *Dirty Work for Chung Mo-Yim* (1955), starring Law Yim-hing, opens with the shot of a theatre stage, simulating the opening scene of the Yue opera film *Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai*. Law's character, Chung Mo-yim makes her entrance on stage, bearing stacks of firewood on her shoulders, her movements punctuated by *luogu* (gong-and-drum). The next scene returns to the standard format without the traditional gong-and-drum accompaniment.

The treatment of the battle sequence that appears midway through the film is even more noteworthy. The scene where Chung encounters bandit Tin Kwun (played by Lam Kar-sing) was shot on a hillside location. After a brief exchange, the heroine and the bandit confront each other in battle. The location suddenly cuts to an interior stage set, where Chung and Tian begin to duel with spears, performing the iconic movements and choreography of Cantonese opera stage battles, complete with gong-and-drum accompaniment. Defeated in battle, Tian beats a hasty retreat, and the film cuts back to the exterior hillside location.

The film used a series of awkward juxtaposition of shots between the two locations to showcase the virtuosic skills of the performers in opera-style battle sequence. However, the spare use of the Cantonese

opera 'acting' conventions reads merely as a nod rather than a true representation of Cantonese opera art form. The entire film is still essentially a musical; the gong-and-drum accompaniment is absent for the majority of the film's running time and the performers deliver their lines in the standard naturalistic manner. A film from this period that boasted 'authentic Cantonese opera-style "acting"' in its advertising campaign included *Love in a Dangerous City* (1955), starring Chan Fei-nung (a *dan* actor renowned for playing female roles).

An article published in the *Kung Sheung Evening News* at the time, described the film as follows: 'the debut production from Tiangong Film Company, written by Lee Sau-kei, co-directed by Lee Kai and Chin Tai-suk and starring renowned *dan* actor Chan Fei-nung, *Love in a Dangerous City* marks the first ever performance-based Cantonese opera documentary.... Audiences will be able to enjoy authentic performances derived from the regional art form, featuring traditional conventions, such as *lashan* (Literally 'pulling the mountains', i.e. hands down and push out arms in a wave-like motion), *zouyuantai* (treading circular routes on stage), *dashen* ('The Final Trial') and *cema guochang* (whipping the horse across the stage)... all executed to the highest standards.'<sup>8</sup> The promotional material clearly promised a film showcasing authentic stage performance movements and choreography. It is evident that *Love in a Dangerous City* appeared to have little impact on the industry. Adaptations of Cantonese opera musical films that focused solely on the singing performance conventions continued to be the standard.



<sup>7</sup> Examples of the period musical ad slogans (in Chinese) include: ad for *Dirty Work for Chung Mo-Yim* (1955): 'all-singing', *Wah Kiu Yat Po*, 12 July 1955, sheet 4, p 3; ad for *The Story of Chung Mo-yim* (1955): 'Folklore Epic Musical', *Wah Kiu Yat Po*, 12 July 1955, sheet 4, p 3; ad for *Love in a Dangerous City* (1955): 'Masterwork of the Cantonese Period Musical Genre', *Wah Kiu Yat Po*, 14 August 1955, sheet 4, p 2; ad for *Chan Sai-mei and Chun Heung-lin* (1955): 'A cast of true opera performers star in the classic morality tragedy', *Wah Kiu Yat Po*, 23 September 1955, sheet 4, p 2; ad for *Lady Red-Broom Elopes* (1955): 'All-singing', *Wah Kiu Yat Po*, 27 October 1955, sheet 4, p 3; Ad for *The Story of Lun Man-chui and Lee Chun-fa* (1955): 'Acclaimed All-singing Period Musical Adapted from Classic Folktale', *Wah Kiu Yat Po*, 27 October 1955, sheet 4, p 3; ad for *Incident in the Turtle Mountain* (1955): 'All-singing', *Wah Kiu Yat Po*, 17 November 1955, sheet 3, p 2; ad for *How Hung Ming Thrice Defeated Chow Yu* (1956): 'All-singing', *Wah Kiu Yat Po*, 16 February 1956, sheet 4, p 3; ad for *The Green Jade Hairpin* (1956): 'All-singing Musical', *Wah Kiu Yat Po*, 2 March 1956, sheet 3, p 2 and ad for *Lui Bo Captures Diu Sim* (1956): 'All-singing', *Wah Kiu Yat Po*, 28 June 1956, sheet 3, p 4.

<sup>8</sup> Ding Dong, 'Weicheng Jian Die Fahui Wutai Yishu' ('*Love in a Dangerous City*: Exploring the Full Potential of the Stage Arts'), *Kung Sheung Evening News*, 12 August 1955, p 3 (in Chinese).





## The Union Film: The Leap from *Romance at the Western Chamber* to *The Precious Lotus Lamp*

The Union Film Enterprise Ltd eventually broke new ground and presented authentic Cantonese opera performance conventions in its full form in a film adaptation. Ironically, the film studio was famous for taking a hard-line approach when it came to ‘keeping opera stars and film actors separated’. Union Film released its first musical, *Romance at the Western Chamber*, directed by Ng Wui on 26 February 1956. The film was notable for introducing a number of innovations, including the use of choral singing in the *nanyin* (Southern tunes) tradition as background and introduce the main characters in the capacity of an omniscient narrator. Later in the film, sung narration is used again to advance the plot, filling in details of the blossoming romance, and thereby cutting down the number of expository scenes.

After the debut of the groundbreaking *Romance at the Western Chamber*, The Union Film released its second period musical, *The Precious Lotus Lamp* on 29 June 1956. Again directed by Ng Wui, the sophomore feature took the genre a step further and fully embraced the Cantonese opera performance art form. An objective viewing of the film reveals the stark aesthetic shift with the simple addition of traditional gong-and-drum accompaniment on the soundtrack, accenting and punctuating the action and performances. *The Precious Lotus Lamp* has two fight sequences. In the beginning of the film, immortal God Yi Long (played by Siu Sun Kuen) confronts his sister, the Holy Mother of Mount Hua (played by Tsi Lo Lin) and eventually imprisons her. The second fight takes place towards the end of the film; the Holy Mother’s son, Chum-heung defeats God Yi Long and frees his mother. Both battle scenes are performed with the stylised movements and choreography, punctuated with traditional gong-and-drum accompaniment, faithfully observing the performance conventions of the Cantonese opera art form.

The film also features a less elaborate version of the original opera’s stage choreography for the moment Chum-heung cracks open the magic mountain to free his mother. Apart from the authentic representation of gesture, movement and acrobatic choreography, the delivery of the dialogue is also noticeably different with the use of gong-and-drum. In previous musical adaptations, the lines were delivered using everyday speech. The inclusion of the gong-and-drum accompaniment combines with the traditional ways of delivering dialogues such as *shibai* (versified speech), *dayinbai*, *yingxiongbai* (heroic speech), *kougu* (rhymed speech) and *bailan*, etc, bringing the art form to full fruition on the screen. Music scholar Yu Siu-wah noted: ‘Today’s composers, arrangers and producers often try to incorporate modern and Western influences into Chinese opera, including Cantonese opera. But once a composition eliminates the “gong-and-drum” (military scenes), it ceases to be Chinese opera music! It’s further proof that percussion is truly the foundation of Chinese opera music.’<sup>9</sup> The use of gong-and-drum in *The Precious Lotus Lamp* was significant because it represented the full embrace of the conventions of Cantonese opera and other Chinese opera art forms in Cantonese cinema. *The Precious Lotus Lamp* went on to become a box office success, as were the succession of Cantonese opera films that featured heavy gong-and-drum music, setting off the wave of making ‘enhanced’ period musicals.

## Transplantation of Stage Opera Documentaries

The previous sections outlined a few of the key developments in the representation of Cantonese opera in the cinematic medium. The following sections will trace the origins of key terms, to offer better insight into the evolution of the Cantonese opera film genre. As previously noted, prior to *The Precious Lotus Lamp*, ‘musical films’ was a blanket term used to describe Cantonese films incorporating music and songs, eventually evolving into the ‘all-singing musical film’ genre. In the case of *The Precious Lotus Lamp*, the special term, ‘stage opera documentary’ was used to market the film in



<sup>9</sup> Yu Siu-wah, ‘Ershi Shiji Chu De Yueju Yuedui Guannian: Taiping Xiyuan Wenxian De Qishi’ (‘Perspectives of Early Twentieth Century Cantonese Opera Musicians—Illuminations from Tai Ping Theatre Archives’), in *Xiyuan · Hongchuan · Yinghua: Yuanshi Zhencang Taiping Xiyuan Wenwu Yanjiu (A Study of the Tai Ping Theatre Collection)*, Hong Kong Heritage Museum working team, Yung Sai-shing (eds), Hong Kong: Hong Kong Heritage Museum, 2015, p 169 (in Chinese).



newspaper advertisements.<sup>10</sup> After digging through newspaper archives, I discovered that the term, ‘stage opera documentary’ did not originate with Cantonese opera films. It was first used to describe the Chinese opera films of the New China, first coined for promotional materials during the release of the film adaptation of the Yue opera, *Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai*. ‘New China’s first colour stage opera documentary, *Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai*, coming soon...’<sup>11</sup> Subsequent Mainland Chinese musical productions such as the *Huangmei* opera film *Marriage of the Fairy Princess* (aka *Fairy Couple*, 1955) and Cantonese opera film, *The Lost Kite* (1956), were both dubbed ‘stage opera art documentaries’ or simply ‘stage opera documentaries’<sup>12</sup> when they were released in Hong Kong. It should be noted that the term ‘stage opera art documentaries’ was used in a completely different application from today’s documentaries or documentation of live stage performances; the former involved complex shot lists and multiple takes until a director’s demands were met. To set them apart from previous musical productions, they were called ‘documentaries’ to emphasise the authentic representation of opera conventions.

After the release of the Yue opera film, *Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai*, the term ‘stage opera documentary’ was appropriated to promote Cantonese film productions. The 1955 production of *Love in a Dangerous City* advertised itself as ‘the first Cantonese opera stage performance documentary.’<sup>13</sup> During the promotional campaign for *The Precious Lotus Lamp*, Union Film marketed the film as ‘a groundbreaking musical’ because it possessed all the hallmarks of a ‘Cantonese opera stage performance documentary’.

In the article previously mentioned, ‘On Cantonese Musical Film Genre’, Zi Zhen noted that *The Precious Lotus Lamp* was a musical film that incorporated

authentic Cantonese opera stage performance conventions. He elevated it into a special class of musical, dubbing the film a ‘stage performance documentary’. ‘Isn’t *Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai*, the Mainland stage opera documentary that broke all Hong Kong box office records, after all, a musical?... What about the recently released Cantonese musical films *Romance at the Western Chamber* and *The Precious Lotus Lamp*, and the Mainland production *Marriage of the Fairy Princess* currently screening at the Cathay and Victoria? Aren’t they all musical films—all-singing musical films? Why are these films so popular? In blunt terms... because they invest careful attention to acting as well as the singing performances....’<sup>14</sup> At the time, the term ‘musical’ was already ascribed to an established genre in Cantonese cinema. Zi Zhen’s essay essentially transplants the ‘stage opera documentary’ genre into the ‘musical’ family. Zi Zhen made a distinction between the generic term ‘musical’ and the term ‘stage opera documentary’ to describe a special class of musical. Nevertheless in practice, ‘musical’ and ‘stage opera documentary’ are simply sub-genres that represented the two different approaches to the representation of Cantonese opera in cinema.

With this in mind, let us examine Tong Tik-sang’s 1957 letter to director, Lee Tit, which discusses the difficulties and challenges of adapting the Cantonese opera, *Butterfly and Red Pear Blossom*, to film: ‘(3) I am still unable to decide whether it should be in the form of a musical or a stage opera documentary. It’s my prerogative to seek inputs that are valuable and rare. If the documentary format is not used, that means the scene ‘Storming the Mansion’ could not be fully expressed.... At the same time, *Red Pear Blossom* had Pak Suet-sin performing some truly beautiful movements and [if the musical format is used] the final fan dance would lose so much. However, if the documentary style is used, that



<sup>10</sup> ‘Wutaiju Jilupian *Bao Lian Deng Yi Xian Fan Gushi*, Xie Chu Aiqing Zhendi’ (‘Stage Opera Documentary *The Precious Lotus Lamp*, A Love Story Between a Fairy and a Mortal’), *Wah Kiu Yat Po*, 23 June 1956, sheet 5, p 2 (in Chinese).

<sup>11</sup> ‘Dong Naojin Youxi Qing Kan Caisejian *Liangzhu*’ (‘Thought Provoking Exercise: Watching the Colour Film *Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai*’ [1954]), *Ta Kung Pao*, 7 December 1954, sheet 2, p 8 (in Chinese).

<sup>12</sup> ‘I’ve watched many stage opera documentaries, the one that touches me most is the Mainland production, *Marriage of the Fairy Princess* (1955).’, see Mui Yee, ‘*Tianxianpei Shi Wo Gandong*’ (‘*Marriage of the Fairy Princess* Touched Me’), *Ta Kung Pao*, 9 August 1956, sheet 2, p 6 (in Chinese); ‘The stage opera art documentary that Shanghai Film Studio scheduled to shoot in the third quarter of the year, *The Lost Kite* (1956) is all set to go into production. A test shoot was conducted on the 13th of this month....’, see ‘Caise Yueyu-pian *Sou Shuyuan Shi Pai*’ (‘Colour Cantonese Film *The Lost Kite* Conducted Test Shoot’), *Ta Kung Pao*, 24 July 1956, sheet 2, p 6 (in Chinese).

<sup>13</sup> See note 8.

<sup>14</sup> See note 5.



would mean the ‘beauty’ and ‘quiet’ atmosphere from “Stealing Glances at the Topsy Beau” to “Singing Praises to the Red Pear Blossom” would be ruined by the gong-and-drum. If it’s half-documentary and half-musical, the style will not be unified.<sup>15</sup> Tong Tik-sang clearly viewed the musical and stage opera documentary as two antithetical approaches.

## Emergence of the Cinematic Term ‘*Daluo Dagu*’

Apart from ‘stage performance documentary’, *The Precious Lotus Lamp* was also responsible for introducing the term ‘*daluo dagu*’ (heavy gong-and-drum) into the Cantonese cinema vernacular. ‘Heavy gong-and-drum’ has long been a term to describe the indispensable feature of Cantonese opera. But after its groundbreaking use in the film, *The Precious Lotus Lamp*, it became a regular feature of Cantonese cinema. In the article ‘*The Precious Lotus Lamp* is an Outstanding Opera’, published in *The Union Pictorial*, the writer under the pen name ‘Qi Xiangqian’ noted: ‘*The Precious Lotus Lamp* is a Cantonese opera stage performance documentary.... Faithful to the conventions of Cantonese opera, the classical lyrics and melodies of the film’s score, were performed entirely with traditional Chinese instruments, including gong-and-drum percussion, showcasing the unique aesthetics of authentic Cantonese music....’<sup>16</sup> The term ‘gong-and-drum’ was used mostly in newspaper ads. Released towards the end of 1956, *Goddess of the Moon* (1956) already used such terms as ‘all-singing’ and ‘heavy gong-and-drum’ in its advertising materials.<sup>17</sup> By 1957, films boasting of the use of ‘heavy gong-and-drum’ in conjunction with the byline ‘all-singing’ became standard practice.

Apart from ‘musical films’, ‘stage opera documentary’ and ‘heavy gong-and-drum’, another term, ‘operatic film’ emerged. The word ‘*xiqu*’ (Literally ‘stage play with song’, i.e. Chinese opera) has existed since antiquity. Curiously, the term ‘opera film’ did not enter into use in Hong Kong newspapers during the transitional period of 1956 and 1957. Instead, it appeared in Yang Jueshi’s 1959 article, ‘Marriage Between Chinese Opera and Film, Better be Mutually Compatible’, published in the local newspaper, *Ta Kung Pao*.<sup>18</sup> The term ‘opera film’ may have arrived late but is often referred to by researchers in recently years, probably due to the fact that the older term ‘opera stage documentary’ is somewhat misleading if not obsolete.

For instance, the research focus of Hong Kong International Film Festival 1987 was entitled ‘Cantonese Opera Film Retrospective’. Nevertheless, the term ‘Cantonese opera film’ should be understood in terms of both its general and specific applications. The term ‘Cantonese opera films’ in its broadest definition includes Cantonese musicals. But when applying its most narrow definition, ‘opera films’ and ‘musicals’ should be viewed as two opposing approaches. *The Precious Lotus Lamp* is the very definition of an ‘opera film’, one that completely embraces the Cantonese opera performance conventions—distinct from ‘musical films’ which tends to focus solely on the musical and singing performances while casting aside the rich gestures, movements, choreography, and acrobatics of Cantonese opera performance conventions. My use of the term ‘opera films’ in the section below not only doesn’t include musicals, but antithetical to the very notion of musicals.

In fact, researcher and historian Mr Ngok Ching was the first to point out the historical significance of *The Precious Lotus Lamp*: ‘The 1956 Union Film production of *The Precious Lotus Lamp*... is a Cantonese opera film with heavy gong-and-drum. A surprise hit with audiences, it



<sup>15</sup> Tong Tik-sang, ‘Zuozhe Duiyu Paishe Dieyinghongliji Zhi Chubu Yijian Shu’ (‘The Prefatory Letter of Suggestion from the Author on Filming *Butterfly and Red Pear Blossom*’), 20 February 1957, cited in *Tang Disheng Chuangzuo Chuanqi* (*The Creative Legend of Tong Tik-sang*), Chan Sau-yan, Hong Kong: Infolink Publishing Limited, 2016, pp 154-155 (in Chinese).

<sup>16</sup> Qi Xiangqian, ‘*Baoliandeng Shi Yi Bu Chuse De Geju*’ (‘*The Precious Lotus Lamp* is an Outstanding Opera’), in *The Union Pictorial*, No. 20, Liu Fang (ed), Hong Kong: The Union Pictorial Publishers, June 1957, pp 38-39 (in Chinese).

<sup>17</sup> See advertisement in *Ta Kung Pao*, 17 January 1957, sheet 2, p 5 (in Chinese).

<sup>18</sup> Yang Jueshi, ‘*Xiqu Dianying De Hunyin Zui Hao Shi Mendanghudui*’ (‘Marriage Between Chinese Opera and Film, Better be Mutually Compatible’), *Ta Kung Pao*, 16 September 1959, sheet 2, p 7 (in Chinese).

inspired competing film companies to produce a wave of similar Cantonese opera films<sup>19</sup>. Here I attempt to explain how *The Precious Lotus Lamp* shifted the overall aesthetic direction within the industry.

According to archival records, prior to *The Precious Lotus Lamp*, the iconic opera convention of using stylised movements and choreography to symbolically represent such acts as the riding of a horse, had only been represented on screen once in the production *Love in a Dangerous City*. Surveying the period musicals from 1955 onwards,<sup>20</sup> *The Three Trials of Yuk Tong Chun* (1955), *Lady Red-Broom Elopes* (1955), *Incident in the Turtle Mountain* (1955), *Romance at the Western Chamber*, *How Sit Ting-shan Thrice Angered Fan Lei-fa* (1956) and *King Oh Assassinates the King of Qin* (1956) all contained scenes that involved riding horses. Real horses were used in all cases; none of these films used the opera stage conventions to symbolically represent the riding of horses on screen.

*The Precious Lotus Lamp* did not contain any horse-riding sequences. But the film adaptation of *General Kwan Guards the Huarong Path Lau Bei Crosses the River*

*to Meet His Bride* (1957), released the following March, portrays a scene where General Kwan departs along Huarong road. Instead of climbing onto a real horse, the actor Leng Wah Hang performed the iconic stage movements and choreography to symbolically represent riding a horse, complete with a horsewhip and stable boy in tow. The appearance of this ‘invisible horse’ on screen is a perfect illustration of what set operatic films apart from period musicals. It represents a conceptual shift in terms of the art direction and aesthetic choices—transposing the stage performance conventions of Cantonese opera to the screen was no longer considered a poor substitute for the real thing.

## Conclusion

The release of *The Precious Lotus Lamp* marked a watershed moment, providing insight into how Cantonese opera conventions entered the Cantonese cinema vernacular. Due to the success of the film, a slew of standard musicals originally adapted from Cantonese operas were remade yet again as operatic films, including: *Why Not Return?* (1958), *Swallows Come Home*



After Leng Wah-hang replaced live horse riding with a special stage horse riding act in *General Kwan Guards the Huarong Path Lau Bei Crosses the River to Meet his Bride* (1957) (left), an increasing number of films began involving more such Cantonese operatic acts. For example, Fung Wong Nui also performed an outstanding horse riding act in *Lady General Fa Muk-lan* (1961) (right).



<sup>19</sup> See Ngok Ching, *Jinxiu Liyuan: 1950–1959 Xianggang Yueju (The Magnificent Pear Garden: Hong Kong Cantonese Operas 1950-1959)*, Hong Kong: Point Publishing Limited, 2005, p 372 (in Chinese).

<sup>20</sup> I have drew reference from films released in 1955, including: *How So Siu-mui Thrice Tested the Scholarship of Her Bridegroom*, *Dirty Work for Chung Mo-yim*, *The Precious Jade Fan*, *The Three Trials of Yuk Tong Chun*, *A King’s Revenge*, *Chan Sai-mei and Chun Heung-lin*, *Lady Red-broom Elopes*, *Incident in the Turtle Mountain*, as well as those released in 1956, including: *How Hung Ming Thrice Defeated Chow Yu*, *Romance at the Western Chamber*, *The Green Jade Hairpin*, *Suitors for the King’s Sister*, *The Male and Female Magistrate*, *How Sit Ting-shan Thrice Angered Fan Lei-fa*, *The Story of Chiu Fei-yin*, *The Romantic Monk*, *The Emperor and the Assassin*, *A Brave Girl Avenges Her Husband’s Death*, and *Lui Bo Captures Diu Sim*.







After renowned *wusheng* Lan Chi Pak starred in a number of Judge Bao movies, such as *Judge Bao's Three Trials: The Case of the Blood Stain* (1957), he became very popular and active in the film circle.

(1958), *Beauty Fades From Twelve Ladies' Bower* (1958), *Regret From the Spring Lantern and Feather Fan* (1959) and *The Jade Hairpin* (1962). The distinct differences between musicals and operatic films explain why so many Cantonese operas were essentially adapted to film twice within such a short time span. It is also notable that many actors not active during the musical film era found new opportunities with the advent of operatic films. Lan Chi Pak is a prime example. A Cantonese opera stage actor, famous for his *wusheng* (military male) roles, Lan had dabbled in film acting prior to 1956. But he had only a few film credits to his name despite the rise in the number of period musicals in production at the time. After the release of *The Precious Lotus Lamp*, Lan went onto enjoy a prolific film career and became a representative figure in Cantonese opera cinema circles.<sup>21</sup>

In summary, the development of Cantonese opera films can be traced to the first musicals made prior to the Fall of Hong Kong in 1941. After the war, Chan Pei's *New Love Story of Leung Shan-pak and Chuk Ying-toi* released in 1951, pioneered the genre of 'all-singing musical films'. In the beginning, the majority of all-singing films had modern settings. In 1955, the commercial success of the Yue opera film *Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai*, gave birth to a wave of all-singing period musical productions. In 1956, *The Precious Lotus Lamp* established the use of heavy gong-and-drum, fully integrating the conventions of traditional Cantonese opera, including singing, acting, reciting and fencing on film, that spawned a wave of full-fledged operatic films adaptations, cementing the unique status of *The Precious Lotus Lamp* in the history of Cantonese cinema.

(Author's note: My knowledge and understanding of Cantonese opera is limited. This article was made possible thanks to the generous assistance of Yung Sai-shing, Yu Siu-wah, Li Siu-leung, Lum Man-ye and Tong Ka-wai who provided invaluable insights into the art form that served as inspiration for this article. Any factual errors are due entirely due to my own shortcoming on the subject.)

(Translated by Sandy Ng)

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<sup>21</sup> I would like to take this opportunity to thank Prof Yung Sai-shing of National University of Singapore for enlightening me that it was because Lan Chi Pak acted in a series of Sun Luen Film Company, playing the character Judge Bao, that he became a highly sought-after artist and thereby kicked off an active film acting career.

# Interactivity Between Film and Cantonese Opera: The Aesthetics of Linearity in Chan Pei's Movies Featuring Tang Bik-wan

Stephanie Ng

As a type of cultural heritage, most studies and discussions about Cantonese opera focus on it as an art. But looking back at the 1950s and 60s, it was the same as film—apart from an art, it was more importantly also a form of popular entertainment. The interaction between film and Cantonese opera was not only about the adaptations of texts and the exchanges of talent on screen and behind the scenes;<sup>1</sup> there was also a deeper level of aesthetics and performance practice that influenced each other. Chan Pei was a pioneer in Hong Kong cinema, stage performance and the record industry; in the early years of Hong Kong talkies, Chan was already a director, and his path was one of popular entertainment.<sup>2</sup> He brought many opera divas onto the silver screen,<sup>3</sup> for example, he was the director of Yam Kim-fai's debut film as a leading actor, *The Valiant Poon on Perplexed by Love* (1951). But the actor who collaborated with Chan Pei the most was Tang Bik-wan; their works were well known for being wide-ranging and entertaining. This article attempts to examine, through

films directed by Chan and starring Tang, the interaction between Cantonese opera aesthetics and cinematic techniques that allows for both the achievement of diversity and entertainment, and can be completed within a short time limit.

## Chan Pei, Cantonese Opera and Film

Chan Pei, whose birth name is Chan Siu-lam, studied Cantonese opera and sang in some troupes;<sup>4</sup> after all, his father was Leng Chuen, a renowned *xiaowu* (young military male role). He was also given both traditional Chinese schooling and Western college education, and was active in drama performances during those times.<sup>5</sup> In the 1920s, Chan set up Mantianhong Company with friends and directed the film *Romances Are Not For Me*. Unfortunately, however, after it was completed there was the Canton-Hong Kong Strike, so the film was never released.<sup>6</sup> After this bump in the road, Chan turned to the record industry, working at different



<sup>1</sup> The author has previously written about pre-war interaction between Cantonese opera and film, mostly focusing on literary appropriation and the exchange in talent in both front and back stage. See Stephanie Ng, 'Chengshi Chuangyi: Yuequ, Yueju Yu Xinmeiti De Kuajie Hudong' ('Creativity in the City: Cross Boundary Interaction between Cantonese Opera Songs, Cantonese Opera and New Media'), in *Xianggang Yinyue De Qianshi Jinsheng—Xianggang Zaoqi Yinyue Fazhan Licheng 1930s-1950s (Music in a Bygone Era: Music Development in Hong Kong 1930s-1950s)*, Oliver Chou Kwong-chung (ed), Hong Kong: Joint Publishing (H.K.) Co., Ltd., 2017, pp 340-335 (in Chinese).

<sup>2</sup> Xin Youmeng, 'Shouchang Xinpai Ju De Chen Pi' ('Chan Pei the Pioneer of New Opera'), *Kung Sheung Evening News*, 8 July 1954, p 3 (in Chinese).

<sup>3</sup> 'Chen Pi De Dazhong Xiju' ('Chan Pei's Opera for the People'), *Artland Biweekly*, No. 65, Hong Kong, 1 January 1940 (in Chinese).

<sup>4</sup> See note 2; Yu Mo-wan, *Xianggang Dianying Shihua (Anecdotes of Hong Kong Cinema)*, Vol 4, Hong Kong: Sub-Culture Ltd, 2000, p 73 (in Chinese).

<sup>5</sup> Chan Pei, 'Wo De Shenghuo Guocheng Huiyi' ('Memories of My Life's Journey'), *Ling Sing*, No 214, 28 November 1937, p 5 (in Chinese); Qi Xi, 'Chen Pi Zaoxiang' ('Formation of Chan Pei'), *South China*, No 8, 1939, Nanyue Film Company Promotional Department (in Chinese).

<sup>6</sup> 'Chen Pi Yisheng Zai Yishu Jie' ('Chan Pei's Lifelong Career in the Arts'), *Artland Biweekly*, No. 63, Hong Kong, 1 December 1939 (in Chinese).

<sup>7</sup> Ibid; RTHK (Radio Television Hong Kong) Top Ten Chinese Gold Songs Awards Committee, *Xianggang Yueyu Changpian Shoucang Zhinan—Yueju Yuequ Getan Ershi Nian Zhi Bashi Niandai (The Collector's Guide for Hong Kong Cantonese Records: Cantonese Operatic Songs in 1920s-1980s)*, Hong Kong: Joint Publishing (H.K.) Co., Ltd., 1998, p 249 (in Chinese).





*A Mysterious Night* (1937): (from left) Kwan Ying-lin, Yip Yan-fu, Tsui Yan-sam, Yee Chau-sui



According to existing documents, *A Mysterious Night* is the very first all-singing musical film produced in Hong Kong, with up to 50 stars taking part. The picture shows the cover page of the film's brochure.

times as a recording technician, as well as occasionally making records,<sup>7</sup> for The New Moon Gramophone & Record Company, his own Huang Long Record Company and EMI.<sup>8</sup> So when talkies began emerging and Hong Kong's film industry began to take off, Chan Pei re-entered the film industry, after Sit Kok-sin invited him to act in, and assist in directing *The Fop* (1935). He then joined the Nanyue Film Company and became a director there. Chan believed the education level of Cantonese film audiences were not exceptionally high, and as such made the decision to make more comprehensible but humorous movies.<sup>9</sup> In addition, since he could sing, act, write and direct, he was able to understand each actor's skillset and grasp what the audience enjoyed, and as such his works were very well received by the public. His debut film, *The Pain of Separation* (1936), adapted from a renowned *nanyin* (Southern tunes) song and starring

opera divo Pak Kui-wing, was highly popular. From this point onwards, Chan's fate became intertwined with sing-song films, and his following movies were also box-office hits. Since Chan had met many Cantonese opera and record industry stars through his work, he was often able to invite these celebrities to star in films he directed, such as *An Abandoned Woman* (starring Kwai Ming-yeung, 1936), *The Witty Patriarch* (starring Ma Si-tsang and Tam Lan-hing, 1937), *Wife, Emperor!* (starring Cheung Yuet-ye, 1937), etc. He was even able to invite 50 stars who could all sing to take part in *A Mysterious Night* (1937), which followed the model of Western musicals in having all the lines in the film sung out,<sup>10</sup> creating a new paradigm in the Hong Kong film industry for 'all-singing films'. Unfortunately, since Chan's pre-war films were all lost, how he made flexible use of the aesthetics and performance practice of Cantonese opera in his films can only be examined through his post-war works.



<sup>8</sup> Chan Pei (in the name of Chan Siu-lam) made records for New Moon and Pathe, see Tianle Company (ed), *Xin Yue Di Wuliqi Qi Changpian Quben* (Score of New Moon, No 5-7) (in Chinese); See Note 7.

<sup>9</sup> Chan Pei, 'Dianying Ye Zhong Zhi Biandao Zhe Ying You Zhi Renshi' ('Knowledge Screenwriters and Directors in the Film Industry Ought to Have'), *Artland Biweekly*, No. 1, Hong Kong, February 1937, pp 5-6 (in Chinese); Liang Lushen, 'Chen Pi' ('Chan Pei'), *Artland Biweekly*, No. 20, Hong Kong, 15 December 1937 (in Chinese).

<sup>10</sup> Chan Pei, 'Fangxia Daoyan-tong Zhihou' ('After I Got Off the Director's Chair'), in *Nanyue Tekan: Shenmi Zhi Ye* (Nanyue Film Company Special Issue: *A Mysterious Night*) (in Chinese); advertisement of *A Mysterious Night* (1937), *The Tien Kwong Morning News*, 10 May 1937, p 1 (in Chinese).



Among the many actors who had worked with Chan Pei, his best collaborator was Tang Bik-wan; the two were always able to bring the spark out of each other. There are in total 29 films directed by Chan and starring Tang, most of them concentrated between 1955 and 1956 (17 films in this period), which is seen as the golden era of both of their film careers. These films spanned from comedies to tragedies, and from civil to military plays, to a mix of all of the above. Chan was innovative in his use of Chinese opera styles and cinema techniques, which allowed him to effectively capture Tang's versatility as an improvisational performer, as well as to make a large number of highly entertaining films within a short schedule. The following text will use the aesthetics of linearity in Chinese opera as an entry point to discuss the aesthetic attributes in the pair's works.

## Engaging with the Aesthetics of Linearity

The combination of points and lines is a standard aesthetic form in traditional Chinese art, whether in paintings, sculptures or architecture.<sup>11</sup> In discussing the four aesthetic features of the Chinese opera music structure, Zhang Zelun also mentions the 'Aesthetics of Linearity':<sup>12</sup> it is singular and horizontal;<sup>13</sup> a musical texture that comes from the same voice with multiple phonics.<sup>14</sup> This kind of linear beauty also evokes a kind of dynamic allurements, which when applied in film are

the tracking shots that Chan Pei uses so cleverly in his works. Sing-song films back in the day often recorded the songs before shooting. As such, the director is able to plan the shooting schedule according to the songs. Usually, first comes a tracking shot, before some medium shots or close-ups of the actors. Tracking shots are where the music really comes into the spotlight. Through the changes in the *lianquti* (Literally 'medleys of tunes')<sup>15</sup> and the content of the lyrics, medium shots and close-ups are edited in to build the pace of the visuals and the drama. But all this is only external; to truly encapsulate the aesthetic essence of Chinese opera, there must be an organic synthesis between the lyrical and the narrative; that is, to express the characters' inner emotions through external cinematic techniques, or as it's said in Chinese, to reach the heart through the eyes.<sup>16</sup> In *Silk Factory Girl* (1955), directed by Chan Pei, the first appearance of Tang Bik-wan's character Ching Tsi-heung is an example of cinematic manipulation that brings out the aesthetic essence of Chinese opera.

The structure of Chinese opera involves the special use of a theme as a line that threads the whole story together, with each scene a point along the line, and one central focus in each scene.<sup>17</sup> Ching Tsi-heung's first appearance introduces her character's background, and although the focus of the whole scene is on Tang's performance, it is Tsi-heung's lover, Ho Chun-tong (played by Chan Kam-tong) who in fact leads the audience into the film and this scene. Chun-tong is a



<sup>11</sup> Chen Yao, 'Xiqu Jiegou De Meixue Tezheng' ('Aesthetic Features in Chinese Opera Structures'), in *Xiqu Meixue Lunwenji (Chinese Opera Aesthetics Essay Collection)*, Zhang Geng, Gai Jiaotian, et al., Taipei: Danqing Tushu Youxian Gongsì, 1987, pp 1-3 (in Chinese).

<sup>12</sup> Zhang Zelun suggests the four aesthetic features of the Chinese opera music structure are the Aesthetics of Linearity, of Rhythm, of Individuality and of Entirety. See Zhang Zelun, *Zhongguo Xiqu Yinyue Gailun (An Introduction to Chinese Opera Music)*, Zhengzhou: Henan Renmin Chubanshe, 1993, pp 183-202 (in Chinese); as for how these four attributes are used in sing-song films, see Stephanie Ng, 'Yueju Yu Dianying De Huiliu: Yueyu Ge Changpian' ('The Bricolage of Cantonese Opera and Film: Cantonese Opera Sing-song Film'), in *Film Art*, No 6, Beijing, 2012, pp 132-139 (in Chinese).

<sup>13</sup> Zhang Zelun, *Zhongguo Xiqu Yinyue Gailun (An Introduction to Chinese Opera Music)*, *ibid*, p 186 (in Chinese).

<sup>14</sup> Yu Siu-wah, 'Ershiyi Shiji Zhongguo Xiqu Yinyue Qianjing' ('21st Century Outlook of Chinese Opera Music'), in *Zhongguo Xiqu Jie 2010 Yantao Hui Lunwenji: Zhongguo Chuantong Xiqu De Guoji Rentong Yu Ziwo Qiucun (Proceeding on Chinese Opera Festival 2010 Conference: The International Recognition and Self-Preservation of Chinese Traditional Opera Music)*, Yu Siu-wah (ed), Hong Kong: Department of Music, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2011, p 45 (in Chinese).

<sup>15</sup> Regarding the creative practices of *lianquti* in film music, see Stephanie Ng, 'Cong Gechang Xiju Kuitan Zhanhou Yueyu Dianying Gongye Zhizuo De Moshi' ('Examining the Production Mode in Post-War Cantonese Film Industry Through Sing-song Comedies'), in *Huayu Dianying Gongye: Fangfa Yu Lishi De Xin Tansuo (Rethinking Chinese Film Industry: New Histories New Methods)*, Emilie Yeh Yueh-Yu (ed), Beijing: Peking University Press, 2011, pp 246-254 (in Chinese).

<sup>16</sup> Regarding Chinese opera's emphasis on combining lyrical and narrative styles, see Su Guorong, *Zhongguo Ju Shi Meixue Fengge (Chinese Opera and Poetry Aesthetic Styles)*, Taipei: Danqing Tushu Youxian Gongsì, 1987, pp 11-20 (in Chinese); regarding discussions on camera work to create the aesthetics from *you-mu* (experiencing with the eyes) to *you-xin* (experiencing with the heart), see Lin Nien-tung, 'Zhongguo Dianying De Tedian' ('Characteristics of Chinese Film'), in *Zhongguo Dianying Meixue (Chinese Film Aesthetics)*, Taipei: Asian Culture Company, 1991, pp 117-120 (in Chinese).

<sup>17</sup> See note 11, pp 4-5 (in Chinese).





(Top to bottom, left to right): Director Chan Pei made use of tracking shots to create an aesthetic of linearity, linking the powerless lover Ho Chun-tong outside the window, and the impotent father inside the house, to bring out the tragic backstory of Ching Tsi-heung, whose mother died when she was young.

policeman, and he is on night shift when a wide shot captures him walking along a dark street towards Tsi-heung's home. Next to her front door there is a window, and the light from inside the house throws shadows of the lattice window onto the wall next to the house. The design of the window is simple, yet the meanings behind it are complex. It poetically visualises the film's emotions about the shadows of reality, while also subtly reflecting its theme—that is, Tsi-heung as a beacon of light in the darkness of her family. This is also the same window through which she later discovers the adultery of her stepmother; this scene's linear beauty is made complete by this very window. The opening scene starts with Chun-tong walking from screen left to screen right near the window—windows are different from walls and doors, they allow a sense of connection from outside the room to the inside. While neither the audience nor Chun-tong can see Tsi-heung, her voice first appears, singing a tragic song: *'Tears well up as I think of my sad life, heart filled with hate as I yearn for my parents'*. At this point, the camera cuts to Tsi-heung inside the house, where she continues singing: *'My poor mother is long gone, I secretly cry over memories of her appearance, her kind face etched into my heart.'*

A tracking shot then follows her from left to right, going from the foyer to the living room, where a picture of her mother can be seen. With the tracking shot providing a sense of continuation, and both Chun-tong and Tsi-heung move from screen left to screen right,<sup>18</sup> in addition to the editing choice of showing Tsi-heung's song before her image, the three elements merge to create a feeling of connection between the time/space of the outside and the inside. It also emotionally links Chun-tong, who is pining for Tsi-heung, to Tsi-heung inside the house. The dynamics between the audio and the visual combine organically with the emotions of the characters, creating a beautiful amalgamation of sentiment and scene.<sup>19</sup>

The abovementioned five lines of lyrics reveal that Tsi-heung's mother died when she was young. Her last line in the first sequence of the song, *'Heartless stepmother makes me suffer all the time'*, is the crux of the story: Tsi-heung's pain from being ill-treated by her stepmother is the root of the film's tragedy. The song is a *lianquti* made up of two different tunes, and the second sequence uncovers another reason for Tsi-heung's tragic life: she is angry at her father's cowardice. As the melody changes, the camera pans from right to left, from Tsi-heung in the living room to her father (played by Yee Chau-shui), who is deep in drunken sleep. The song continues here, *'Quiet anger at father's lack of wit or courage'*, as the camera moves in the opposite direction to the shot before, when it was showing the picture of Tsi-heung's mother. The opposing shots reflect the contrast in feelings Tsi-heung has towards her deceased mother and drunk father. When Tsi-heung continues to sing about *'allowing the tigress to dominate'*, the camera cuts to show both her father and Chun-tong outside the house; indicating that Chun-tong is also unable to bring her out of her situation, although Tsi-heung's suffering is mainly created by her father. She follows on with, *'Weak and pitiful little bird, forever living in hatred'*, as a tracking shot moves the picture from both Tsi-heung and her father, gradually to showing just her, a visual representation of her helplessness and loneliness created by her father's impotence. Here, the film cuts to a tracking shot from left to right, following Tsi-heung as she walks back towards her mother's picture, singing: *'I was the apple of your eye, but no one cares now; I wish and I will gladly follow my mother to heaven'*. As she finishes singing, the camera has pushed in for a close-up. The continuity in this part of the song differs from the first sequence in terms of its horizontal development. Here, the tracking shot moves in contrast with the first sequence of the song, reflecting the conflicted feelings of the character as she tries to contain her anger. Although none of the set operatic movements were employed in the whole scene, Chan Pei's emphasis on tracking shots with



<sup>18</sup> Cantonese opera performers enter and leave the stage from the left and right respectively, and therefore often follow choreographed movements from stage left to stage right. According to the author's observations of Chan Pei's works, his camera movements are also mostly left to right; this may be related to Cantonese opera stage practices.

<sup>19</sup> Merging scene and sentiment is an important trait in Chinese opera and art, see Han Youde, *Xiqu Biaoyan Meixue Tansuo (Exploring the Aesthetics of Chinese Opera Performances)*, Taipei: Danqing Tushu Youxian Gongsi, 1987, pp 269-277 (in Chinese); Huang Kebao, 'Xiqu Wutai Fengge' ('Styles of the Chinese Opera Stage'), in *Xiqu Meixue Lunwenji (Chinese Opera Aesthetics Essay Collection)*, Zhang Geng, Gai Jiaotian, et al., see note 11, pp 169-172 (in Chinese).





The many faces of 'Versatile Opera Queen' Tang Pik-wan in *Lady with a Silver and Bitter Tongue* (1956):



Dragonboat singer



Wedding chaperone



Taoist priest



Fortuneteller

beauty of linearity was complemented by the song lyrics, the *lianquti* melodies, the actor's performance and the set design. All these horizontal connections allowed a simple song to establish Ching Tsi-heung's emotional state at the start of the film, as well as the relationships between the key characters. The entire scene focuses on Tang Bik-wan's solo singing and her character's emotional development, allowing her a sufficient opportunity to put on display her performance skills. However, to really bring out just how multi-talented Tang Bik-wan was as a performer, one must turn to her comedy works.

### The Brilliance of Multiple Roles and the *Lianzhu* Narrative Structure

Cantonese culture is tightly linked with business; audiences of Cantonese opera believe it is only worth paying for if it has everything to offer, and by nature,

Chinese opera is about 'performance'.<sup>20</sup> 'Versatile Opera Queen' Tang Bik-wan was skilled in both the literary and martial arts, she could sing and act, as well as play male, female, comedic and tragic roles. To allow Tang put her talents to use, Chan Pei used *zhanghui* novels (in which each chapter usually begins with a couplet that sums it up) and the *lian-zhu*, or anadiplosis, style of narrative structure, which is commonly used in Chinese opera, to give Tang different performances in different settings. In the *lian-zhu* narrative structure, there is one central character threading the whole story together,<sup>21</sup> while in each act, a different main character will take the lead; and in this way, it also embodies the aforementioned aesthetic principle of lines and points. Chan Pei adapts this rotating main character concept to have Tang Bik-wan play the multiple roles herself, or have her character dress up as different people within the movie, to give Tang chances to show off her brilliance as a versatile actress. For



<sup>20</sup> Sun Chongtao, *Xiqu Shi Lun (Ten Chinese Opera Discussions)*, Taipei: Kuo Chia Publishing Co., 2005, p 36 (in Chinese).

<sup>21</sup> For more on *lian-zhu* style narrative structures, see Lin Nien-tung, 'Zhongguo Dianying Lilun Yanjiu Zhong Youguan Gudian Meixue Wenti De Tantai' ('Exploring Questions on Classical Aesthetics in Chinese Film Theory Research'), in *Zhongguo Dianying Meixue (Chinese Film Aesthetics)*, see note 16, p 57 (in Chinese).



example, in *Lady with a Silver and Bitter Tongue* (1956), Tang first shows up as a peasant who is mourning her deceased mother, before she cross-dresses as a man singing *longzhou* (dragon boat shaped woodblock) songs. Tang, playing the sharp tongued debater known as the Iron-beaked Hen, who lives with Ching Hau (played by Wong Cho-shan), then pulls her hair up in a bun and puts on a rural accent to pretend to be the wedding chaperone for Ching's mute daughter Ching-yee (played by Cheng Bik-ying). When Ching-yee's husband Chu Man-bun (Yam Kim-fai) discovers she is mute, Tang throws on a robe to pose as a Taoist priest, and later pretends to be a blind fortuneteller, all to help change Man-bo's heart about his new wife. The film uses the Iron-beaked Hen as the central character to string the story together, but in each act, the spotlight is not on a different character per se, just on the Iron-beaked Hen dressed as a different person. Each role is a point along the line of the story, where she helps to resolve her own and other people's problems.

Chan Pei was not only good at using Tang Bik-wan as a solo actor to produce great comedy, he also made clever use of the *lian Zhu* structure to give each member of an ensemble cast a chance to shine. *Iron-beaked Hen's Sudden Rise to Power* (1957) is a film starring two *sheng* (male) and two *dan* (female), with the Iron-beaked Hen (played by Tang Bik-wan) still its selling point, but this time, Tang is partnered up with Leung Sing-por. Leung, who is equally known for his improvised acts, plays Fatso Bo, a server at the Iron-beaked Hen's dessert restaurant in the film. The pair are together the central thread of the movie, as they dress up in different roles and create comedic material. As for the anti-feudalism drama that takes place in both movies, it is taken up by To Lok-yin (played by Leung Mo-sheung) and Yu Mei-yung (played by Chow Kwun-ling) in this film. Since this drama is part of the film's main subject, and the only section in which all four main characters come together, according to the operatic aesthetic principle 'alternation of low and high density',<sup>22</sup> this section is the climax. In all the other acts, only one or two of the four will take turns as the lead (see following chart).

**Table of Scenes of *Iron-beaked Hen's Sudden Rise to Power* (1957)**

Scene	Ching Hau writes a letter asking for help	Hiding in the City God Temple	Iron-beaked Hen, Fatso Bo help To Lok-yin and Yu Mei-yung get married				Getting Ching Hau out of trouble
			Meeting To Lok-yin and Yu Mei-yung while staying at the 'haunted house'	To Lok-yin and Yu Mei-yung's love story	Wedding Chaperone's bride swap	'Master' hosts the wedding	
Leading characters	Iron-beaked Hen, Fatso Bo	Iron-beaked Hen, Fatso Bo	Iron-beaked Hen, Fatso Bo	To Lok-yin, Yu Mei-yung	Iron-beaked Hen	Fatso Bo	Iron-beaked Hen, Fatso Bo
Song	'Dessert Partners', sung by Iron-beaked Hen, Fatso Bo			'Rendezvous after Sunset', sung by To Lok-yin, Yu Mei-yung; 'Expressing love in the haunted house' sung by To Lok-yin, Iron-beaked Hen, Fatso Bo		'Making Destiny', sung by Fatso Bo	'The Debts of Promiscuity' <sup>23</sup> sung by Fatso Bo, Ching Hau, Iron-beaked Hen, To Lok-yin, Yu Mei-yung, Ching Hau's wife



According to the abovementioned principle of detail distribution, the important parts of the drama must be given more details and descriptions, and the film's songs are mostly brought in at the climatic parts. The opening and closing acts are linked to the scene in the previous film, *Lady with a Silver and Bitter Tongue*, in which Ching Hau's family reconciles and allows the Iron-beaked Hen and Fatso Bo go on their journey. Songs also appear in these two acts, adding to the comedic element of the movie. The 'Hiding in the City God Temple' act is mostly comedy, while also serving to add depth to the characters. The four acts perfectly fit the standard storytelling structure of introduction, transition, twist, and conclusion; meanwhile the climatic act of 'Iron-beaked Hen, Fatso Bo help To Lok-yin and Yu Mei-yung get married' also feature these four structural elements. These two line-and-point structures echo each other, adding to the aesthetics of linearity in the film.

## Simple Sets and Fluid Spaces

Western art often places emphasis on realistic representations; this can be seen in the use of focal points in paintings to create a sense of dimension. Similarly in Western film, even on a flat screen, they take seriously the subjective effects of the depth of field. Beyond realism, Chinese art stresses even more on expressiveness and breaking through the limits of time, space, body and soul; it is about using artistic devices to undo the restrictions placed on us by nature.<sup>24</sup> As such, Chinese paintings will make use of blank space, and create shapes of objects through the abstract. Ink paintings of mountains and waterfalls on vertical scrolls are not after realism, but the emotional reflections of the painter after seeing the real view.<sup>25</sup> In horizontal handscrolls, on the other hand, paintings are created with a cavalier perspective instead of a fixed-point perspective, which allows the viewer to browse the painting's fluid spaces as they move along the scroll. In a similar way, Chan Pei gives himself the space, through simple set designs, to flexibly make use of pan

and tracking shots to present the main points of his story. *The Fairy Third Sister's Trip to the Secular World* (1959) is a great example of this.

The film, a love story between a fairy and mortal, is about fighting for the freedom to love. Most of the important scenes take place in a countryside setting. This countryside is not a particularly glamorous set, although it does have a little bridge over a bubbling stream and willows hanging over the water. But the most unique part of this set is its Z-shaped path, serving as a little slope in the woods. The path has different uses in different scenes. It first appears after Fairy Third Sister (played by Tang Bik-wan) and her lover, scholar Yeung Man-kui (Wong Chin-sui) finish watching lanterns. They chase each other out to the woods, as Third Sister picks up her intentionally dropped handkerchief, and then drops her feather fan—these moments takes place on the ground level. Third Sister then runs up to the bottom of the Z-shaped path, where she is on higher ground than Man-kui. The Z-shaped path looks here like a flat set, not a three-dimensional prop that creates perspective. Yet this flat Z-shaped line is able to give the background, which has scant few props, a dynamic feeling. With Third Sister above and Man-kui below, the high and low composition also reflects Third Sister's proactive position in this relationship, as well as her identity as an immortal from the heavens. In addition, it sets up an elegant space for the beautiful movements of Man-kui picking up the fan and Third Sister taking his fan to take place.

When Third Sister realises she is unable to avoid going back to the Heavenly Palace, she says her farewell in the same place. Again, the action begins on the ground level, and when Third Sister finishes singing her solo sad song, Chan Pei arranges for Man-kui to walk by the bottom of the Z-shaped path, passing in the yonder behind Third Sister. Under soft percussive *luogu* (gong-and-drum) music, the camera follows Third Sister as she walks up towards Man-kui. The pair then sing together as they walk up the Z-shaped sloped path, which Man-



<sup>22</sup> For more on this principle, See note 11, pp 8-9 (in Chinese).

<sup>23</sup> The film brochure does not list this song; the author of this article gave it the name.

<sup>24</sup> Han Youde, *Xiqu Biaoyan Meixue Tansuo* (*Exploring the Aesthetics of Chinese Opera Performances*), see note 19, pp 255-269 (in Chinese).

<sup>25</sup> Li Lincan, 'Beisong Shanshuihua Sixiang Tixi De Tanta' ('*Shan Shui* Painting in Northern Song Dynasty, The Exploration on the System of Thoughts'), in *Hsiung Shih Art Monthly*, *Hsiung Shih Art Monthly* Editorial Board (ed), No 136, June 1982, pp 37-40 (in Chinese).

In *The Fairy Third Sister's Trip to the Secular World* (1959), Chan Pei demonstrates his innovative use of one Z-shaped path to create different scenes.



Fairy Third Sister first meets Yeung Man-kui



'I swear never to let my beautiful wife go'



Heavenly Soldiers descend upon Earth to persuade Third Fairy Sister to return to the Heavenly Palace



Enlightened Gwong-dou ascends to the Heavenly Palace

kui describes as the Magpie Bridge (referencing the Cowherd and the Weaver Girl). Third Sister finally tells him that they will have to part ways, but as she tries to walk upwards to leave, Man-kui pulls her back down. The repeated motion indicates how much the pair are loath to leave each other. In the end, Third Sister is forced to reveal to Man-kui her immortal identity, and the camera follows them as they walk back down to the ground level while singing a song about immortals on Earth. Man-kui suggests he would die for love, but Third Sister stops him by tasking him with the responsibility of raising their son so he can rescue her from the Heavenly Palace later on. When they sing the last line of their farewell song, '*Will the skies tell us, when we will meet again*', Third Sister hurries up the Z-shaped path. Man-kui follows her up the bottom of the path, and when the pair reach the middle of it, they begin to sing the second sequence of the song. The camera holds them right in the middle of the screen, as this part focuses on Man-kui expressing to Third Sister how much he will miss her. He sings the last line in this

sequence: '*I swear never to let my beautiful wife go*', and after a set of parting motions, Third Sister pushes Man-kui away and leaves, ending the scene. With the camera following the pair through this simple Z-shaped path design, Chan Pei was able to employ the cavalier perspective of handscroll paintings in this scene, and effectively create the illusion of changing scenery within a limited space. As well, the movements through the space, while tallying with the aesthetics of linearity, allowed the audience to closely engage with the emotional states of the star-crossed couple.

The Z-shaped path is not only the site where Third Sister and Man-kui's love developed, it also symbolises the boundary between the heavens and earth, where Third Sister, her son Yeung Kwong-do (also played by Tang Bik-wan) and the gods go back together to the heavens. After some smoke effects, the gods come down to Earth to urge Third Sister to return to the Heavenly Palace. Heavenly Soldiers march down the Z-shaped

path, creating a striking visual effect of the screen being filled with gods. The scene with Third Sister and the two gods who are responsible for persuading her to leave takes place on the ground in front of the audience, after which the camera cuts to a medium shot and a long shot to end the dramatic, beautifully composed scene. Third Sister's son Kwong-do also appears from the top of the Z-shaped path as he tries to rescue his mother from the Heavenly Palace before he is 'enlightened'. He begins at the tip, looking off over the cliff, and the camera follows him as he sings and walks downwards. He stops at the bottom part of the path when the Earth God, who later enlightens the boy, jumps out from underground and appears in front of him. The pair sing a duet, through which Kwong-do finds out his mother's situation in the Heavenly Palace; here the camera pushes in closer to the pair to highlight the Kwong-do's rattled emotions. To save his mother, Kwong-do announces he is willing to sacrifice his own life. At this point, the Earth God chases after him left and right along the path and on the ground, trying to hit him. Kwong-do jumps off the path into the (unseen) river. After a while, a puff of smoke appears and a reborn Kwong-do appears on the path—the audience understands here that he emerges enlightened—as he begins to climb up the path to reach the Heavenly Palace. Apart from fashioning the 'stairway to heaven', Chan

Pei also created through the simple Z-shaped path a landscape composition with different levels of height. And with just the actors' movement along the path, complemented with Chan's camera movements, he was able to complete a shoot in the most efficient manner that creates the feeling of fluid space—through simplicity and the aesthetics of linearity.

## The Aesthetics of Linearity in the Interaction Between Cantonese Opera and Film

It is no coincidence that the films under Chan Pei and Tang Bik-wan's collaboration were more popular than others. The pair understood film and opera aesthetics, as well as audiences' likes and preferences. Based on the concept of linear aesthetics, they arranged narrative structures, actors, mise-en-scène, songs and set designs in ways that put on display the characters' emotions—a fruitful result of an organic integration between film and Cantonese opera. In fact, there is much more that can be discussed about the interaction between Cantonese opera and film, however due to the limited space, the discussion here could only focus on the 'Aesthetics of Linearity'; it is hoped that there will be more opportunities for further discussions in the near future.

(Translated by Diane To)

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# Stage-Screen Integration: Exploring the Art of Cantonese Opera Films

Sam Ho

Viewing *Butterfly and Red Pear Blossom* (1959) was one of the most profound experiences of my life in film. This Cantonese opera film gave this film lover with no knowledge of Cantonese opera a unique and amazing artistic experience. The film is not only rich in cinematic as well as opera qualities but also a unique integration of the two art forms, realising a compelling artistic experience not found in any other types of film.

Art is a human activity that evolves endlessly. Hong Kong cinema and Cantonese opera, in their respective evolutions, went through dramatic changes separately and in tandem, with interactions, competitions and mutual influences. Since the 1920s and 30s, Cantonese opera had been greatly shaped by impulses from Western, Chinese and Hong Kong films, leading to exciting new ways of expression. Hong Kong films, meanwhile, had always been extremely close to Cantonese opera in both creative and market terms.<sup>1</sup> In addition to Cantonese opera, other regional operas such as Kun, Yue and other operas have also deeply influenced Hong Kong films. Contributions by Peking opera were especially profound. The Hong Kong action aesthetic that had imparted lasting changes to world cinema came from Peking opera. From King Hu and Chang Cheh to Jackie Chan and Sammo Hung, the cinematic animation of stylised performance inspired by that art form from the north served as an important tent pole in Hong Kong film art. Interestingly, the influence of Peking opera over Hong Kong film was in part filtered through Cantonese opera's 'Northern style acrobatics'. Stars of both stage and screen such as Lam Kar-sing and Yu Lai-zhen have left indelible impressions on the silver screen with their expressionist action performances that can be traced back to Peking opera.

The Cantonese opera film *Butterfly and Red Pear Blossom* has a very special place in Hong Kong film history. It was released in 1959, at the peak of Hong Kong film's 1950s golden era, marked by tremendous accomplishments in both artistic and industry terms. Director Lee Tit, the golden boy of this golden era, was a renowned creative force known for his rigorous approach to filmmaking. Cantonese opera film was also going through exciting developments in the 1950s, which shall not be discussed here due to space limitations. Lee Tit immersed himself in this peak creative era and in the same year first completed the highly accomplished *The Legend of Purple Hairpin* (1959) before elevating his art even further, perfecting the interaction between opera and film with *Butterfly and Red Pear Blossom*. Both operas had been adapted from earlier stage versions by the Sin Fung Ming Opera Troupe.

Sin Fung Ming, under the leadership of diva Pak Suet-sin, had worked hard to elevate the artistic and cultural standards of Cantonese opera as a medium. This effort was in turn a response to the rapid urbanisation of Hong Kong and the subsequent audience demands for sophistication in the 1950s. Yet another factor to Sin Fung Ming's elevation of standards is librettist Tong Tik-sang, one of Cantonese opera's indelible geniuses. Not only was Tong extremely talented, he was also determined to elevate the literary quality in Cantonese opera. To this end, he researched and drew from Chinese literary classics to create erudite, elegant works. Tong and Sin Fung Ming became crucial factors of a phenomenon in the 1950s to add literary sophistication to Cantonese opera, which was partly in response to the improved education standards of



<sup>1</sup> Regarding the interaction between early Hong Kong cinema and Cantonese opera, see Yu Mo-wan, 'Xianggang Yueju-dianying Fazhan Shihua' ('Anecdotes of Hong Kong Cantonese Opera Films'), in *Cantonese Opera Film Retrospective (The 11th Hong Kong International Film Festival Catalogue)* (Revised Edition), Li Cheuk-to (ed), Hong Kong: Hong Kong Film Archive, 2003, pp 18-21 (in Chinese); Luo Li, *Yueju-dianying Shi (The History of Cantonese Opera Film)*, Beijing: China Theatre Press, 2007 (in Chinese).

the post-war Hong Kong and Southeast Asian population, raising the bar for the art of Cantonese opera.<sup>2</sup> Lee Tit plus Tong Tik-sang plus Sin Fung Ming: *Butterfly and Red Pear Blossom* is a masterpiece where the three art forms of opera, film and literature converge.

## Integrating Film and Opera

Until now, most studies in Cantonese opera films have focused on Cantonese opera. This has undoubtedly enhanced understanding of this unique film genre and broadened the scope of its appreciation and understanding. However, fewer comparisons are made from the perspective of film. I have taken this opportunity of the Hong Kong Film Archive's restoration of *Butterfly and Red Pear Blossom* and its screening and related exhibition, to celebrate the tenth anniversary of the inscription of Cantonese Opera onto Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, to launch an elementary foray into the artistry of Cantonese opera films, using *Butterfly and Red Pear Blossom* as a jumping-off point.<sup>3</sup>

Social realism and operatic expressionism are the two main paths of development of Hong Kong film aesthetic. They developed in parallel with each other, at the same time interacting with each other. Cantonese opera film was one of the ways in which they interacted. In moving opera onto the silver screen, film became more stylised, yet the formulaic movements and music of Cantonese opera often had to pull back to suit the realism demand of film. Thus, the interaction between Cantonese opera and film was a development fraught with coordination as well as conflict. From stage to screen, a project had to go through numerous and difficult decisions based on artistic or business considerations.

Business considerations included the length of the work, box office appeal of certain opera genres or opera stars, the attraction to different media and markets of specific plots or performances. Artistic considerations included the effect of different media and markets of specific plots or performances, the dramatic power of individual genre or actors in different media, the way different actors came across in different media, the way *mise-en-scène*,<sup>4</sup> editing and other features unique to film would work with movements, stylised facial expressions and other features unique to stage; how directors and librettists/scriptwriters expressed their creativity in different media, how creative teams worked together in different media, and so forth. Of course, even the business or artistic considerations themselves coordinated and conflicted with each other. For example, the box office appeal and artistic prowess of individual opera stars would affect a director or writer's creative decisions. It was often in the coordination and conflicts of such interactions that the magic of art was realised.

While adapting his work for the silver screen, Tong Tik-sang, the original librettist of *Butterfly and Red Pear Blossom*, experienced serious crossover difficulties. Five days after the original opera opened on stage, he wrote in an internally-circulated opinion memorandum, 'I am still unable to decide whether it should be in the form of a musical or a stage opera documentary.... If the documentary format is not used, that means the scene 'Storming the Mansion' could not be fully expressed.... At the same time, *Red Pear Blossom* had Pak Suet-sin performing some truly beautiful movements and [if the musical format is used] the final fan dance would lose so much. However, if the documentary style is used, that would mean the 'beauty' and 'quiet' atmosphere from "Stealing Glances at the Tipsy Beau" to "Singing Praises



<sup>2</sup> Regarding the development and evolution of Cantonese opera in the 1950s, see Chan Sau-yan, *Tang Disheng Chuangzuo Chuangqi (The Creative Legend of Tong Tik-sang)*, Hong Kong: Infolink Publishing Limited, 2016 (in Chinese); Lai Bojiang and Lai Yuxiang: *Tang Disheng (A Well-known Guangdong Opera Scenarist 1917-1959)*, Zhuhai: Zhuhai Press, 2007; Luo Li, *Yueju-dianying Shi (The History of Cantonese Opera Film)*, *ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> On this occasion, this author worked with the Hong Kong Film Archive in their preparation for the exhibition to view the collection of films. An admittedly limited number of films were viewed, but the selection was made in the hopes of being representative of the genre. The study focused mainly on six Cantonese opera film directors who were important or very productive, including Chan Pei, Chu Kea, Lung To, Cheung Wai-kwong, Wong Hok-sing and Lee Tit. We also tried to select films that were inclusive of the times, but due to our limited inventory we ended up screening films made mostly in the 1950s and early 60s. In terms of number of films and inclusivity of filmmakers, the scope of our research was lacking. But we believe that this exploration, which has just begun, provided us with an elementary understanding of the topic. It is our hope that the Hong Kong Film Archive and others with the same intention will continue this study.

<sup>4</sup> *Mise-en-scène* was originally a theatrical term. After it was adopted for use in film, its meaning changed slightly with the differences in the two media. Clearly, in this essay, the film usage of *mise-en-scène* is meant.

to the Red Pear Blossom” would be ruined by the *luogu* (gong-and-drum). If it’s half-documentary and half-musical, the style will not be unified.<sup>5</sup> Categories such as ‘musical’ and ‘documentary’ are terms determined later to facilitate understanding, and can mean different things to and evoke different feelings in different people. It is not my intention to discuss these here.<sup>6</sup> Meanwhile, it is as yet impossible to accurately determine exactly what Tong Tik-sang meant, but it can be understood to be a dilemma on adaptation style, between trying to preserve as much as possible the original Cantonese opera, against favoring film techniques.

This is a subject that has been debated vehemently since the beginning of film. For example, in the West, films adapted from stage plays often end up being criticised as ‘canned theatre’. It usually means that the adaptation was overly casual, even lazy, and lacking in filmic touches. This kind of film-centric purism is not entirely fair because the power of art is diverse and even boundless. It can affect its audience in a myriad of ways. If a ‘canned theatre’ film moves its audience, a lack of film sensibilities is not necessarily a flaw. This kind of criticism only becomes more complicated when applied to Cantonese opera films. Because techniques such as stylised body movements and facial expressions are important elements of Cantonese opera involving complex and restrained acting styles, adapting them to screen, due to the different media characteristics, would involve give-and-take decisions likely more difficult than adapting Western operas or musicals. In addition, there is a tradition in Cantonese opera of ‘writing for the performer’.<sup>7</sup> Individual actors each have their

unique artistic characteristics, and film has a certain responsibility to allow, even protect, their performances, whether from artistic or business angles. At the same time, to regard films from a pure Cantonese opera view is just as over-generalised and flawed. In his opinion memorandum, Tong Tik-sang laboured over the difficulties of adapting *Butterfly and Red Pear Blossom*, struggling about what to keep and what to discard; his struggles embodied the essence of the art of Cantonese opera films, a balancing act of integrating media.

The ‘half-documentary, half-musical’ concept mentioned by Tong, and the concern that ‘the styles would not be unified’ illustrated the hope of finding balance through integrating, and is also the focus of this essay to explore the art of Cantonese opera films.

## Crossing over Without Going on Stage

At its most basic, the ‘stage opera documentary’ style of ‘canned theatre’ involved a simple, even monotonous film technique: a straight-on shot, keeping the camera position and lens unchanged, with minimal editing, striving to keep unchanged the original essences of an opera performance. The origin of the infamous label in the Cantonese film era, ‘Wonton Noodle Director’<sup>8</sup> is related to this artistic motivation. From a film perspective, this method of cinema is too casual, lazy and irresponsible. From a Cantonese opera point of view, it is a sign of respect, aiming at conservation and the passing down of traditions. Cantonese opera has the cherished notion of *hudumen*, describing the doorway (*men* meaning ‘door’) between the backstage and stage



<sup>5</sup> Tong Tik-sang, ‘Zuozhe Duiyu Paishe *Dieyinghongliji* Zhi Chubu Yijian Shu’ (‘The Prefatory Letter of Suggestion from the Author on Filming *Butterfly and Red Pear Blossom*’), 20 February 1957, cited in *Tang Disheng Chuangzuo Chuanqi* (*The Creative Legend of Tong Tik-sang*), see note 2, pp 152-156 (in Chinese).

<sup>6</sup> Categorisations may sometimes lead to impassioned arguments. In fact, rules established after the fact are tools used to assist in understanding; different categorisations usually resulted from looking at the same things from different angles, each viewpoint serving a function. In fact, many categorisations in films are often not entirely accurate, made with business considerations. In the golden age of Cantonese opera cinema in the 1950s, genre guidelines were rather casual. For example, a film review of the time claimed that *Butterfly and Red Pear Blossom* (1959) was a ‘stage documentary’, see Ling Nanren, ‘*Dieyinghongliji* Shang Jia Zhi Zuo’ (‘*Butterfly and Red Pear Blossom*, an Excellent Work’), *The New Evening Post*, 22 September 1959 (in Chinese). The Union Film Enterprise Ltd’s *Romance at the Western Chamber* (1956) was categorised as a ‘major opera film production’ by a publication, see ‘Zhang Huoyou Tan Zhonglian De *Xixiangji*’ (‘Cheung Wood-yau Discusses The Union Film’s *Romance at the Western Chamber*’), *Special Publication for Love Without a Happy Ending*, 1956 (in Chinese). Hong Kong film researcher Yu Mo-wan in his 1987 essay ‘*Xianggang Yueju-dianying Fazhan Shihua*’ (‘Anecdotes of Hong Kong Cantonese Opera Films’), published in *Cantonese Opera Film Retrospective* (The 11th Hong Kong International Film Festival Catalogue), (Li Cheuk-to (ed), first published in 1987, (see Note 1, in Chinese), has more systematically sorted Cantonese opera films into six major categories.

<sup>7</sup> Lai Bojiang and Lai Yuxiang: *Tang Disheng* (*A Well-known Guangdong Opera Scenarist 1917-1959*), see Note 2, p 169 (in Chinese).

<sup>8</sup> The story of the ‘Wonton Noodle Director’ had circulated around the Cantonese film circles. Legend has it that a director called ‘Action’, then left to go eat a bowl of wonton noodles, letting the actors continue to play out the scene. Because the scene was so long, the director made it back from his noodle trip in time to call ‘Cut’ at the right time.



through which the actors pass. It is also a metaphoric gate that separates the world of reality and the world of art. It can be said that in the purest form of stage-play documentary, the camera stays on only one side of the *hudumen*, capturing the opera world of art from the world of reality.

But in the integration of stage and screen, *hudumen* is certainly not a barrier that forbids crossing. Realising the concept of 'half-documentary, half-musical', the camera often crosses the *hudumen* and becomes part of the Cantonese opera world, creating an artistic domain at once film and opera. When the Cantonese opera audience watches a staged performance, they look through the fourth wall of the stage to watch the actors perform within a pre-determined space. In every scene, their visual distance, the sizes of the set and actors and the speed at which they move are constant. Watching a film is different. Although in the cinema the distance between the audience and the screen remains the same throughout the film, in the same scene images can be composed differently, with various distances between the camera and the actors, so that the sizes of the people and the objects can look different on screen. With editing and special effects added to the mix, the length of each shot, the order in which shots are put together and the speed of the action can be altered, with profound effects on audience sensation and artistic experience.<sup>9</sup>

According to the limited observations by this author, there are not too many 'wonton noodle' scenes in Cantonese opera films. They are usually reserved for big-name stars singing their solos, when the emphasis is on individual performance. The tableau shot, a stable camera set up directly facing the subject, is most often used. The composition is straightforward and often symmetrical, retaining a theatrical feel. But in group scenes, the film's *mise-en-scène* would often jump to life. Even in early-1950s works, with their limited budgets, the camera would occasionally cross the *hudumen* for more cinematic effects.

A good example is *Musical Third Master Sha* (1951), directed by Chan Pei and starring Sun Ma Si-tsang in the title role. In the opening scene, a musical sequence was presented with skilful cinematic touches. Third Master Sha is first heard singing off screen as the camera pans to follow a maid, the shot effectively introducing the obviously wealthy family's residence before resting on Third Master Sha in a corner, singing while enjoying a massage by another female servant. Halfway through the song Chan Pei cuts to a garden seen from the inside, as a manservant hurries by; the camera pans to follow him as he makes a sharp turn in the garden and disappears behind the house and a flowering tree, his shadow seen through a window pane before making physical entrance, huffing and puffing. Later, he would sing a duet with Sun Ma in another shot. Then we cut away to Third Master's father rushing over angrily and chasing his son around a small table, telling him off in song until he runs Third Master out into the garden.... In this scene, the camera remains in a frontal position and does not officially climb on stage, but manages to achieve a sense of depth by taking advantage of the set, the cinematography and the blocking of actors. This is no bowl of 'wonton noodles'.

The camera may not have gone onstage, but had in fact crossed the *hudumen* in spirit. With the use of pan shots and editing, the film has ventured onto the theatrical world of opera. If we take the metaphor 'wonton noodle' along the path of linguistic evolution to mean 'sloppy production methods', this scene which so fluently uses film techniques might as well be considered a bowl of wonton noodles, topped with green vegetables and sided with braised beef brisket, a full and scrumptious meal!

As a whole, the film is rather consistent in style in its integration of stage and screen. Chan Pei had been derided as a typical 'wonton noodle director', but upon closer examination of his works, such as his *New Love Story of Leung Shan-pak and Chuk Ying-toi*, also made in 1951, one can readily see that he was definitely not



<sup>9</sup> Some of the above opinions were mentioned during a discussion among the staff at the Programming Unit of the Hong Kong Film Archive. Special thanks to Carmen Tsoi of the Programming Unit for taking notes, clarifying and expanding on my ideas.



In the scene in *Butterfly and Red Pear Blossom* (1959) where the scholar attempts to break into the mansion where the courtesan is, Lee Tit makes perfect use of frontal angles to show the inner struggles of the star-crossed lovers, creating an artistic atmosphere through the merger of Cantonese opera and film.



the kind of director to lock down a camera for a snack break. Just by looking at his work in the early 1950s and how fluently he animated film techniques within budget constraints, Chan deserves the title 'wonton noodles topped with green vegetables and sided with braised beef brisket director'! And in his later films in the late 1950s and early 60s, for example *Witness for the Prosecution* (1961), it is obvious that he had continued to evolve with the golden era of Cantonese films, his style growing ever richer, with ever more complicated mise-en-scène.<sup>10</sup>

### It Starts with the Tableau

A frontal camera setup most approximates the theatre audience's point of view and is therefore frequently used in Cantonese opera films, as the starting point from which other film techniques can spring. Many scenes begin with a tableau shot as more cinematic mise-en-scène are gradually introduced. Pan shots, discussed in the Sun Ma Si-tsang sequence above, are often used in Cantonese opera films, sometimes brilliantly. The pan shot is in fact an effective way to enter the opera world without actually crossing the *hudumen*. With it, the camera faces the set that represents the stage without changing positions, yet different environments

or backgrounds can be shown. Clearly, to achieve this effect, the view has to be narrowed and not include the entire set/stage so that the pan can be made from one part of the environment to another. Cantonese opera films were popular in the 1950s and 60s for the most part because they were cheap to make. Pan shots do not require a change in camera position and yet can provide different views or backgrounds, a low-cost and efficient solution. Changing the vista also creates visual variety and, more importantly, allows the director to use different backgrounds to tell stories or to generate meaning. On the other hand, the camera facing the set offers the audience a similar experience to watching a show on stage. A little bit of stage and a little bit of screen, the pan shot represents the best of both worlds.

Tableau shots and other frontal shots can be supplemented with other filmic techniques to create different effects. For example, with tracking movements or with the camera facing the subject not straight-on but at an angle, different interpretations of space and different visual experiences can be achieved. In addition, the altered images and composition can be a device to express various messages or references. Many directors would start a sequence with a tableau shot and in a



<sup>10</sup> During the research process, the Hong Kong Film Archive's Programming Unit counted the number of shots in some of the films. According to the tallied results of the Programming Unit's Michael Lau, in the early 1950s, Chan Pei directed *New Love Story of Leung Shan-pak and Chuk Ying-toi* (1951), which has about 182 shots. In the early 1960s, when he directed *Witness for the Prosecution* (1961) he used about 418 shots, more than double from ten years previous. One can see how the complexity has been elevated.



rhythmic ‘move, pause, move’ pattern: pan, stop for an actor’s performance, then pan again—sometimes in the opposite direction to get back into or near the starting position. With the proper music, this device can create a Peking opera-like or martial sequence-like ‘pause, fight, pause’ effect for sensorial or dramatic impact. This kind of expressionist device is the opposite of the social-realistic approach of many Cantonese films, bearing witness to the capacity of Hong Kong film for multi-faceted artistic expressions. Animations of the camera are also coordinated with editing, for example inserting a close-up can drastically alter the audience’s feelings for the scene. Directors with a strong sense of style, such as Cheung Wai-kwong or Wong Hok-sing, would even cross the *hudumen* and insert shots taken from inside the physical surroundings, for example close-ups with different backgrounds, reaction shots, shot-reverse-shots, over-the-shoulder shots and even shooting from the opposite direction, creating more nuanced perceptions.

Tableau shots can be used in very exciting ways with other filmic devices as the camera crosses the *hudumen*. A prime example is the ‘Storming the Mansion’ scene in *Butterfly and Red Pear Blossom*. In the balanced tableau shot, the male and female leads Chiu Yu-chau (played by Yam Kim-fai) and Tse So-chau (played by Pak Suet-sin) are separated by a wall. The handling of the spatial relationship is a balance between the abstract quality of Cantonese opera and the realism of film. The balanced composition contrasts with the imbalance of the characters’ emotions, their heart-wrenching cries and their very physical struggles with guards separating them with powerful long staffs highlighting the intensity of their passion. From the tableau, director Lee Tit cuts to other shots, timed rhythmically to the beat of the gong-and-drum, from wide shots to medium shots to close-ups. The cuts are in turn coordinated with camera movements like pans and dollies as well as blocking, as other actors enter in stylised opera movements, variously executing the four basic feats of Cantonese opera performance—*chang*, *zuo*, *nian* and *da* (singing, acting, reciting and fencing). Presented with a superb synchronising of image and sound, a soul-shattering situation unfolds. Lee Tit himself remembers, ‘As an example, “Storming the Mansion” can be described as “all guns blazing”. By the time we get to the lyrics “When one is sad one knows

no fear”, singing, reciting and action are happening all at once, further strengthening the characters’ state of mind.’<sup>11</sup> Lyricist Tong’s concern, as expressed in his opinion memorandum, that the scene “‘Storming the Mansion” could not be fully expressed’, has been completely eradicated by the careful and strategic animation of film-stage integration. The entire scene progresses in dramatic and stylistic coherence, its ‘half-documentary, half-musical’ style very ‘unified’.

In *Butterfly and Red Pear Blossom*, the tableau shot was used in other low-key, restrained but no less brilliant ways. Take the way the villain, a corrupt minister Wong Fu (played by Lan Chi Pak), is photographed as an example. He stands for power and majesty, but also a personification of corruption and decay. Lee Tit continuously frames him and his environs in the stately, balanced tableau shot. The regality of the composition accentuates the crookedness of officialdom. This device, the ironic use of a tableau shot to bring out the corruption of the rich and powerful, is often used in other Cantonese opera films. Cantonese operas and Cantonese films often feature the poor or suppressed Everyman as lead characters, painting officials or people in power in shades of distrust or even disgust. Framing these rich and powerful characters in tableau shot indicates their positions while also expressing suspicion or even contempt of such positions. Such nuanced employ of the cinematic apparatus serves as effective testament to the creativity of Cantonese opera films of the time and the artistic capacity of Cantonese films in general.

Many other examples abound of tableau shots used to subtly express power relationships. In Wong Hok-sing’s *Drums Along the Battlefield* (1963), the first shot is a tableau shot of an empty throne. The throne is the seat of the emperor, but he is just a young boy, assisted in every way by the wise princess, his elder sister. All through the film, the throne is photographed in tableau shots, bringing out the sister-brother relationship and the balance of power between them. The shot of the empty throne mentioned above, for example, is followed in the next scene as the boy emperor is helped onto the throne by the elder sister. He sits squarely in the centre of the seat, but through a pan shot, the tableau becomes an angled shot, implying the deficiency in his regal power. Later,



<sup>11</sup> Li Cheuk-to: ‘A Director Speaks: Li Tie On Opera Films’, in *Cantonese Opera Film Retrospective (The 11th Hong Kong International Film Festival Catalogue)* (Revised Edition), see note 1, pp 71-72.

his sister sits in the seat next to the throne. In the slightly angled tableau shot, she occupies the middle left of the screen, a more powerful, majestic position than her brother, seated on the mighty throne on the middle right. The message in this composition shows the relationship of power between the siblings, with also implications for sexual politics.

## Mise-en-scène and Editing

Wong Hok-sing was a Cantonese opera star before taking the movie helm, but he has a firm grip of filmic devices. His works often contain exciting realisation of film-opera integration. In *Drums Along the Battlefield*, a work with both drama and action, the filmic mise-en-scène works very well with the Cantonese opera performances, especially in the fight sequences. A variety of lenses, camera positions and camera movement accurately capture the actors individually or in group combat, set to the rhythmic percussions of the gong-and-drum and to great dramatic and sensual effect. The following year, the titled finale of *The Revenge Battle* (1964) is filmed against an expressionist background (hill-sized piles of skulls, flames and black smoke shooting out from different places). The camera actively enters, exits, pans and zooms, including a high-angle shot offering a view impossible for theater audiences. Combined with simple, inexpensive special effects, Wong expertly transforms the *paichang* art of Cantonese opera (performance practices that choreograph speech, gestures and feats with related percussion patterns and plots) to film.

From admittedly rough observations, Cantonese opera films made after 1959 have a more balanced interaction between stage and screen. There are far fewer 'wonton noodle' shots. Not only does the camera frequently cross the *hudumen*, with the help of mise-en-scène and editing, it often organically works in harmony with Cantonese opera artistry such as *shenduan* (stylised movements) and *guanmu* (eye expressions). It is likely that the expert use of filmic devices in the above Wong Hok-sing films from the 1960s is due, at least in part, to the masterly stage-screen integration exemplified in *Butterfly and Red Pear Blossom*.<sup>12</sup>

This integration is fully evident from the start of *Butterfly and Red Pear Blossom*. The first image in the prologue is a stone slab engraved with a poem. The poem itself is softly recited offscreen by the male lead Chiu Yu-chau, accompanied by opera music. Lee Tit then cuts to a close-up of the stone slab while the soft recital is taken over by the female lead. After she proclaims herself, 'Tse So-chau, of Yunyang', Lee cuts to a pan shot full of movement, following So-chau as she hurries to a monk and asks for Yu-chau's whereabouts. This prologue has a very filmic feel. Besides the two shots of the stone slab, Lee Tit uses mostly pan shots of different speeds to animate the sequence. He also inserts close-ups and over-the-shoulder shots to work with the entrances and exits of the characters, the final shot tying up the sequence with a quick pan, up to a lantern on the rafters. This prologue also has a vivid, though restrained, Cantonese opera touch. Although there is no singing or choreography, Pak Suet-sin, in the female lead role, plays the scene with understated Cantonese opera style. Her delivery of lines is just a shade more stylised than the conventional realism of film, her movements and mannerisms tinged with understated Cantonese opera forms. Interestingly, the performances of the other actors are tempered to different degrees of opera stylisation, with the two older characters the monk and the mother being quite natural while the younger characters, Yu-chau and the sister, acts in stylisation somewhere between that of So-chau and the mother. The integration and adjustments between film and opera are exercised from the very beginning.<sup>13</sup>

## Further Heightened

Art is heightened reality. Hollywood's naturalistic performance style is itself already heightened reality, and the performance by Pak Suet-sin in the prologue, infused with Cantonese opera style, is in turn further heightened, resulting in an artistic expression not found in regular movies.

Pak's opera artistry is on glorious display in the scene 'Stealing Glances at the Topsy Beau'. She pulls out all the stops to express in heightened style all the emotions of meeting her dream lover for the first time:



<sup>12</sup> It must be emphasised that this observation was made based on the experience of having viewed a limited number of films. It is believed there is much room for adjustment.

<sup>13</sup> It would have been a valuable exercise to be able to compare and contrast the film with the stage version. Regrettably this author had not had the opportunity to view a performance of *Butterfly and Red Pear Blossom* by Sin Fung Ming Opera Troupe at the time.



joy, ecstasy, shock, admiration, enchantment, worry and concern; acting with every part of her being including her fingers, even the pinky! Lee Tit's mise-en-scène matches perfectly with her *shenduan*, the choreographed body movements, with close-ups capturing her *guanmu*, stylised facial expressions. The director also cuts strategically to her chaperone, played by Leung Sing-por, who stands next to her; his expert stage and screen acting—he also performs skilfully with his fingers—complements and elevates Pak's performance to an even higher level.

One amazing characteristic of Cantonese opera films is that opera provides extra dimensions of artistic expression to film. What is so moving about 'Stealing Glances at the Topsy Beau' is due in great part to the expression of the actors going beyond Hollywood-style naturalistic acting, radiating elevated charm and artistic allure. Many other actors with dual stage-screen careers have their respective talents in exceptional expressions. Stars like *wusheng* (martial arts actor) Kwan Tak-hing and *wudan* (military female) Yu Lai-zhen as well as character actor Poon Yat On, who frequently cross-dresses to play female roles—sometimes to comic effect but sometimes entirely serious—all used their unique, personal interpretations of Cantonese opera art to add to the powers of expression and charm in the film.

Performance is part of the mise-en-scène in film, and the style of performance in *Butterfly and Red Pear Blossom* matches well with the other elements of the mise-en-scène. For example, at the beginning of the scene 'Meeting at the Gazebo', Chiu Yu-chau, played by Yam Kim-fai, is singing to himself in the garden. The sequence is designed with a decorative finesse seldom seen in Cantonese opera films. With beautifully-composed shots, agile camera movements and smooth, flowing editing, Lee Tit has orchestrated an exquisitely poetic moment. The 'beauty' and 'quiet' Tong Tik-sang had hoped to preserve have definitely remained and blossomed. Most interesting is the mise-en-scène when the butterfly in the title appears. 'Butterfly' was added

to the title of the opera because Tong felt the title *Red Pear Blossom* of the original would be 'overly elegant', and he proudly believed that 'the (new) title is definitely appropriate'<sup>14</sup>. This butterfly is at once a prop and a special effect. It seems to be endowed with supernatural powers, like Eros, the Greek god of love, bringing the male and female leads to their first face-to-face meeting. The mise-en-scène of that sequence takes on a poetic and even mystical function, the butterfly shot briefly in a high angle that opera viewers would not be able to see, looking down from the sky, as if the butterfly was looking at Yu-chau. It is an over-the-shoulder shot—over the butterfly's shoulder!

There is another high-angle shot in *Butterfly and Red Pear Blossom*. The first image of the final scene 'Fan Dance' is taken with the camera looking down vertically. It is the signature shot of Busby Berkeley, the father of early Hollywood musical extravaganzas. Lee Tit introduces the 'Fan Dance' with this shot, complete with Berkeley's geometric patterns, embellished with crisscrossing light and shadows, injecting a breath of fresh air into the *paichang* art of Cantonese opera.

## Sets and Lighting

'Meeting at the Gazebo' features outstanding sets and lighting, which is not unusual for *Butterfly and Red Pear Blossom*. According to director Lee Tit, whose company produced the film, its budget was HK\$120,000, one-and-a-half times that of the typical opera film of the time.<sup>15</sup> Li is renowned for his meticulous and demanding approach to filmmaking and his determined efforts for quality without consideration for budget can be seen in the professional design and set construction throughout the entire film and especially in three scenes of affectionate encounters between the lovers: 'Stealing Glances at the Topsy Beau', 'Meeting at the Gazebo' and 'Singing Praises to the Red Pear Blossom'. Lee captures the characters' psychology with delicate and stylised cinematography, portraying that heart-tugging love story with romantic and poetic brushstrokes.



<sup>14</sup> Tong Tik-sang: 'Wo Gaibian Honglaji De Dongji' ('My Motives for Adapting *The Red Pear Blossom*'), in a special publication on *Butterfly and Red Pear Blossom*, 1957, Hong Kong: Sin Fung Ming Opera Troupe, p 6, cited in Chan Sau-yan, *Tang Disheng Chuangzuo Chuanqi* (*The Creative Legend of Tong Tik-sang*), see Note 2, pp 150-152 (in Chinese).

<sup>15</sup> See Note 11.

<sup>16</sup> Leung Chan, *Xianggang Yingtan Hua Dangnian* (*Yesteryears of Hong Kong Cinema*), Hong Kong: The Hong Kong Literary Press Co Ltd, 1998, p 122 (in Chinese).





The butterflies that flutter about inside the pavilion in *Butterfly and Red Pear Blossom* (1959) act as matchmaker, threading together the golden couple who had been yearning for each other for a long time.





Lee Tit uses a Hollywood musical style to film his song-and-dance scenes in *Butterfly and Red Pear Blossom* (1959), injecting new energy into the 'Fan Dance' scene.



Strategic utilisation of sets and lighting can also be seen in other Cantonese opera films with lower budgets, evidencing the creative abilities of various directors and the artistic capacity of Cantonese film. Cheung Wai-kwong deserves special mention. He began his career in Cantonese opera as *kaixi shiye* (impresario's assistant in plot development). He then entered the film industry where he made a lot of Cantonese opera films, soon gaining the nickname 'God of Fortune Director' because most of his films were hits,<sup>16</sup> probably because of his ability to control production costs. It is clear that he is a filmmaker of talent. His works often feature exciting and stylised sequences while much the rest of the films, especially those made in the early and mid-1950s, were very simply shot. It is during high drama, romantic situations or moments of great emotional upheaval that Cheung would kick up the notch with stylisation. I had discussed this in another essay, 'He was a professional Cantonese film director and would not expend too much production cost on creating style in every one of his films. But when it is needed would tell his story with necessary glamor.'<sup>17</sup> Cheung Wai-kwong was a creator who knew how to strike a balance between art and business.

Although the scenes may have been shot simply, Cheung placed great importance in the sets, managing the visuals on a limited budget, using the relationship between the environment and the characters to reveal the plot or interpret emotion.<sup>18</sup> *That's for My Love* (1953) is a contemporary costume musical. It clearly was made with a limited budget but a singing scene at a spinsters' residence is stylishly presented, starting from inside the house and going to the backyard, creating a great sense of space. *The Fairy in the Picture* (1957) also did not have a high budget. In a story about a poor boy, the set is extremely simple; but in many scenes the background is visually organised to show depth of field and with beautiful composition. And because the story has a supernatural dimension, Cheung often adds expressionist touches to in his cinematography, projecting light and shadow designs in angled or geometric patterns. *Why Not*

*Return?* (1958) is adapted from Sit Kok-sin's signature play of the same Chinese title. The plot is simple, and with the exception of one martial scene, it is almost all singing from start to finish. Very complicated scenes or scenes featuring large groups of actors are absent. But each scene is played out in environments painstakingly laid out. Buildings, furnishings, plants, etc., are orchestrated with filmic sense of space, rich in depth, forming a variety of pleasing pictorial compositions despite the apparent lack of production expenses.

In the above films, Cheung's stylised mise-en-scènes 'employs different shot combinations including wide shots, medium shots, one-shots, two-shots, group shots, etc., to handle the relationship between characters and the environment; with rhythmic editing connecting segments to the beat, and in addition utilises some slight and some obvious pan shots and actor choreography to create a detailed sense of space.'<sup>19</sup>

Other Cantonese opera film directors also use sets and lighting with varying degrees of fluency. Lung To's works, for example, are usually low-budget. In his *The Stubborn Generations* (1960), he establishes a lively portrait of a family operating a cement shop in the first scene. Through an introduction from the dual business-residence arrangement of the set, the complex relationship among all three generations of the family is laid out in detail. Lung To has a delicate touch of design. He creates a sense of space by filming from the building's angled corners, giving dimension to the simple, even crude set. Chan Pei's *New Love Story of Leung Shan-pak and Chuk Ying-toi* also uses all kinds of oblique-angled designs to overcome the limitations of a low budget to make the surroundings look good on camera. And Chu Kea's *Swallows Come Home* (1958) uses rather simple camera movements, mainly with the set-facing frontal camera taking on active pan shots. But the film set is conceived and built with intricate design, with careful layouts both indoors and out, fittingly decorated with furnishings. The set is skilfully



<sup>17</sup> Sam Ho, 'Wu jia..... you jia!' ('To Wed...or Not to Wed!'), in *Ren Jianhui Duben (A Yam Kim-fai Reader)*, Michael Lam (ed), Hong Kong: The Hong Kong Film Archive, 2004, p 27 (in Chinese).

<sup>18</sup> Thanks to Priscilla Chan of the Programming Unit for being the first to bring up during a pre-exhibition discussion at the Film Archive the observation that Cheung Wai-kwong placed great importance on the sets.

<sup>19</sup> Sam Ho, 'Wu jia..... you jia!' ('To Wed... or Not to Wed!'), see Note 17, p 26 (in Chinese).





constructed and photographed with sense of depth and design, some scenes even making use of apricot flowers to bring out the plot. A song-montage sequence midway covers a span of eighteen years, detailing many changes through time and space. The female lead becomes poor, her home simple and rudimentary, yet shot with visual richness. These are directors who had to work with limited resources but managed to fabricate story spaces rich in design and narrative flair.

## Back on Stage, in Spirit

Maintaining a balance between stage and screen, many works fluent in cinematic articulation would end a scene, an act or the film with a touch of stage. Actors would be arranged to line up across the stage in a row, facing the audience as if making a curtain call. The camera would naturally shoot the scene straight on, recording the shot from the angle of the stage audience. It is a return to the opera stage, in spirit.

In fact, regardless of the fluency in cinematic articulation, lining up across the stage is a conventional practice in Cantonese opera films, especially at the conclusion of films. Yet directors, with their creative ingenuity, would garnish the convention with personal touches. At the end of Ma Si-tsang's *The Judge Goes to Pieces* (directed by Yeung Kung-leong, 1948), the trial is over and the various officials are leaving the courthouse. They stop at the door and, true to convention, line up in a row. The cheeky lawyer who has just taken the archaic judicial process to pieces (played by Ma Si-tsang) seems to have dropped something and suddenly squats down. The officials, by now shell-shocked by the lawyer, instinctively follow suit, squatting down in a circle, ending the film absurdly on a *non-sequitur*. Chan Pei's *Twelve Singing Beauties* (1952) concludes with actors lining up in a row and singing together. The audience are likely led to believe that the show will be over after the song, but then the actors leave the stage, one by one. Chan cuts to a medium shot. Male and female leads Yam Kim-fai and Pak Suet-sin sweetly gaze at each other and smile. Only then do the words 'The End' come up.

Another example is *The Festive Lantern* (directed by Wu Pang, 1960). When all the actors are lined up, the male and female leads take a few steps forward. The camera tracks up to meet them and stops on a two-shot. It then pans up quickly to the hanging lantern. The lantern gently turns and stops at a panel inscribed with the words 'The End'. Very creative! Lee Tit's *The Legend of Purple Hairpin* and Lung To's *The Colourful Water Chestnut* (1961) both end with actors line up in a row, but each develops into a finish featuring the closing of curtains, a subtle and self-reflexive touch while returning to the stage, also references the relationship between film and opera.

## Conclusion

All those clever ways of going back to the stage indicate that Cantonese opera film is a boundlessly creative genre. The interaction between artistic media has provided additional room for creativity to Hong Kong filmmakers. Different degrees of stage-screen integration have also enriched the creative arena of Hong Kong cinema. From Lee Tit, so active in organically incorporating Cantonese opera to film; to Cheung Wai-kwong, who selectively added stylistic flourishes to his works; to Wong Hok-sing, who so fluently 'film-ified' the opera art of *pichang* staging; to Lung To, who overcame budget limitations with a sharp artistic sense; to Chan Pei, whose cameras cleverly crossed the *hudumen* with orchestrated pan shots even in the early 1950s—Cantonese film directors worked hard to apply their individual and unique talents to find balances in business and art, realising the glorious multi-faceted development of Cantonese opera films.

The art experience is subjective. Different people are moved and inspired by different forms of expression. Artistic creativity is also subjective. Different artists employs different forms of expression to touch or move their audiences. The great master Bruce Lee was a wonderful actor in his childhood, but abandoned acting skills in favor of martial movements during his kung fu period, trading the dramatic for the sensorial. He





Lee Tit directed both the Sin Fung Ming's and Chor Fung Ming's versions of *The Legend of Purple Hairpin*. Here the actors are discussing the story during the filming of Lee Tit's Chor Fung Ming's version which was released in 1977: Mui Suet-si, Lung Kim Sung (1st and 2nd left in top photo) and Leung Sing-por (left in bottom photo).

revolutionised film performance, worldwide, in ways that parallel his father Lee Hoi-chuen and fellow Cantonese opera actors who enriched the performance capacity of Hong Kong film with the art of opera. In the process of stage-screen integration, the artistic energy of each individual medium is alternately raised or lowered. For instance, adapting an opera on film, most of the time the opera had to be shortened and choreographed staging had to be adjusted. Yet, the stylised body movements and facial expressions of opera can be magnified or intensified by *mise-en-scène* and editing. For film, the emphasis on the opera elements—the *chang* (singing), the *zuo* (acting), the *nian* (reciting) and the *da* (fencing)—means that room for story development would be reduced. Yet, as mentioned above, when film meets opera, the power of expression can be heightened.

Cantonese opera films are treasures of Hong Kong cinema as well as treasures of Hong Kong culture. This artistic medium is unique, yet multi-faceted, capable of vastly divergent artistic effects through different channels. They can be heavy on stage-screen interaction, or emphatic with cinematic articulation, or heavy on operatic expressions, or emphatic with narrative development, or heavy on drama, emphatic with singing, heavy on martial acrobatics, emphatic with emotions, heavy on sensorial enjoyment.... Any which individual way can touch or move an audience in its own way. Although Cantonese opera films have faded in popularity today, but with each medium experiencing drastic changes and development, we can hope for a new kind of cross-media integration to once again create unusual, unique art.

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(Translated by Roberta Chin)

**Sam Ho**, film researcher and former Programmer of the Hong Kong Film Archive.

# Pleasure Houses, Despotism, and Resistance: On *Butterfly and Red Pear Blossom* and *The Legend of Purple Hairpin*

Grace Lau Yin-ping

In the 1950s, as women in Hong Kong wielded more economic power than they previously had, and given that Cantonese opera audience were to a greater extent female, operas were therefore more often tragedies and melodramas that appealed to the tastes of the female members of the audience. *Butterfly and Red Pear Blossom* and *The Legend of Purple Hairpin* are two such examples. The two operas share parallels in that they depict *huadan* (young female) in pleasure houses being objectified and oppressed by despotic forces; but these characters stand up against all odds, presenting images of feminine strength that are self-reliant, resilient and bold.

## I. Pleasure Houses

Cantonese opera films of the 1950s often explored genres that addressed feminine concerns. *Butterfly and Red Pear Blossom* (1959) and *The Legend of Purple Hairpin* (1959) are both outstanding examples of *qinglou* dramas, i.e. dramas set in pleasure houses, depicting female resistance against tyrannical oppression. The Cantonese opera *Butterfly and Red Pear Blossom* was first performed by Sin Fung Ming Opera Troupe (Sin Fun Ming) in their third season's repertoire, premiering on 15

February 1957 and was later adapted into film in 1959. The film was directed by Lee Tit and starred Yam Kim-fai and Pak Suet-sin. *The Legend of Purple Hairpin*, on the other hand, was an opera piece debuted by Sin Fung Ming in their fifth season repertoire. It premiered onstage on 30 August 1957, and was adapted for the silver screen twice, first in 1959 and later in 1977. The record album was made and released in 1966.<sup>1</sup> The 1959 film was also directed by Lee Tit and once again starred Yam and Pak (Sin Fung Ming's version of *The Legend of Purple Hairpin*), whilst the 1977 version was directed by Lee Tit but starred Lung Kim Sung and Mui Suet-si (Chor Fung Ming's version of *The Legend of Purple Hairpin*). Both Cantonese operas were collaborations between Sin Fung Ming the Opera Troupe and Tong Tik-sang the playwright; between the years 1956 to 1959, they co-produced a total of 11 works.<sup>2</sup> According to the *1960 Hong Kong Year Book*, the Sin Fung Ming Opera Troupe 'either plays to a full house or not putting on shows at all.'<sup>3</sup> Their success was no doubt inextricably linked to Tong's penchant for crafting compelling plots,<sup>4</sup> as well as how rehearsals before public performances were taken with utmost seriousness.<sup>5</sup> The 8-minute dance with the feather fans at the end of *Butterfly and Red Pear Blossom* alone cost \$5,000 for costumes and rehearsal space rental—a fine example of the troupe's professionalism and dedication.<sup>6</sup>



<sup>1</sup> Chan Sau-yan, *Tang Disheng Yueju Jumu Gaishuo, Ren Bai Juan* (An Introduction to Tong Tik-sang's Cantonese Opera, Volume of Yam Kim-fai and Pak Suet-sin), Hong Kong: Infolink Publishing Limited, 2015, pp 121, 139 (in Chinese).

<sup>2</sup> 'Ren Jianhui, Bai Xuexian Cangpin Zhuanji' ('Special Edition on the Yam Kim-fai and Pak Suet-sin Collections'), *Xianggang Xiqu Tongxun* (Hong Kong Chinese Opera Newsletter, No 9, Hong Kong: Chinese Opera Information Centre, Department of Music, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 31 December 2004, p 10 (in Chinese).

<sup>3</sup> *1960 Hong Kong Year Book*, Vol 13, Hong Kong: *Wah Kiu Yat Po*, 1960, Section II, p 131 (in Chinese).

<sup>4</sup> Sham Ping Wo, 'Zhong Neirong, Qing Xingshi: Yueju De Lucheng' ('More on Content, Less in Format: The Journey of Cantonese Opera'), in *Sheng, Gang, Ao Yueju Yiren Zouguo De Lu: San Di Xuezhe Lun Yueju* (Journeys of Cantonese Opera Artists from Guangdong, Hong Kong and Macao—Commentaries on Cantonese Opera by Scholars from Three Regions), Chan Sau-yan, Lee Siu-yan and Tai Suk-yan (eds), Hong Kong: Infolink Publishing Limited, 2016, p 58 (in Chinese).

<sup>5</sup> Jack Ng, *Xieshi Yu Shuqing: Cong Yueyupian Dao Xinlangchao, 1949-1979* (Realism and Lyricism: From Cantonese Films to New Wave, 1949-1979), Hong Kong: Joint Publishing (Hong Kong) Co., Ltd., 2015, p 91 (in Chinese).

<sup>6</sup> Diangong, 'Ba-fenzhong Wudao Huale Wuqian-yuan, Dieyinghongliji Dahua Yinzhi' ('Spending 5,000 Dollars on 8 Minutes' Dance, Huge Expenditure on *Butterfly and Red Pear Blossom*'), *Ta Kung Pao*, Entertainment Page, 12 September 1959, sheet 2, p 7 (in Chinese).





Also written by Tong Tik-sang, the film version of *Butterfly and Red Pear Blossom* (1959) adds in the backstory of Tse So-chau being sold as a child, making the story more complete. (From left) Leung Sing-por, Pak Suet-sin, Fung Wai-man.

### 1. Ill-Fated Courtesans

The Cantonese opera *The Legend of Purple Hairpin* (premiered in 1957) is set in the Tang dynasty, based on *The Story of Huo Xiaoyu*, written by Jiang Fang (Tang dynasty),<sup>7</sup> and was subsequently adapted into *The Purple Hairpin* by Tang Xianzu (Ming dynasty).<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, the Cantonese opera *Butterfly and Red Pear Blossom* is set in the Song dynasty. Its adaptation by Tong Tik-sang was inspired by Zhang Shouqing's (Yuan dynasty) *The Tale of Red Pear Flower*<sup>9</sup> and Xu Fuzha's (Ming dynasty) *The Story of Red Jasmine*.<sup>10</sup> In the 1959 film adaptations of the two Cantonese operas, both their female protagonists Tse So-chau and Fok Siu-yuk end up in pleasure houses due to cruel twists of fate: So-chau is sold while Siu-yuk is converted into a fallen angel. In fact, the film version of *Butterfly and Red Pear Blossom* inserts a scene where So-chau is sold into prostitution. In the act 'Seek a Temporary Abode', So-chau is rescued by Lau Kung-do to escape the capital city *Bianjing* to stay at her aunt's house in *Yongqiu* county temporarily. Extra

details are added in the film version, such as how Chiu Yu-chau's good friend Chin Chai-tze is in fact So-chau's uncle, in addition to further narrate, So-chau's family history: her aunt recounts the harrowing tale of how So-chau was sold as prostitute by her mother's brother. Such additions help complete the story.

Siu-yuk's fate in *The Legend of Purple Hairpin* is not any better than that of So-chau being sold to a pleasure house. In his 1957 adaptation, Tong Tik-sang retains Siu-yuk's background as the daughter of Prince Fok, who has fallen on hard times and turns to prostitution, as depicted in *The Story of Huo Xiaoyu* (Tang dynasty). With reference to Sin Fung Ming's version of *The Legend of Purple Hairpin*, Madam Fok says in the scene 'Rendezvous in the Garden', 'The mother and the daughter have been deprived. And abandoned to stay in the old lord's house.', an indication of Siu-yuk's identity as a fallen royal, the concubine's daughter of Prince Fok. The clay-print libretti<sup>11</sup> of the opera is annotated as such: 'After Prince Fok's death', the elders of the family 'banished mother



<sup>7</sup> Jiang Fang, *Huo Xiaoyu Zhuan (The Story of Fok Siu-yuk)*, in *Taiping Guangji (Extensive Records of the Taiping Era)*, Li Fang, et al., (eds), Vol 487, Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1961, pp 4005-4011 (in Chinese).

<sup>8</sup> Tang Xianzu, *Zichaiji (The Purple Hairpin)*, Taipei: Taiwan Kai Ming Book Co., 1970 (in Chinese).

<sup>9</sup> Zhang Shouqing, *Xie Jinlian Shijiu Honglihua (The Tale of Red Pear Flower)*, in *Yuanqu Xuan (Selection of Yuan Plays)*, Zang Jinshu (ed), Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1979 (in Chinese).

<sup>10</sup> Xu Fuzha, *Hongliji (The Story of Red Jasmine)*, in *Ming-Qing Chuanqi Xuankan: Hongliji Xilouji (Selections Stories from Ming and Qing: The Story of Red Jasmine and The Story of the West Mansion)*, Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1988 (in Chinese).

<sup>11</sup> Yip Shiu-tuck (ed), annotated by Cheung Man-wai, Clay-print libretti: *Tang Disheng Xiqu Xinshang II: Zichaiji, Dieyinghongliji (Appreciation of Tong Tik-sang's Repertoire II: The Legend of Purple Hairpin, Butterfly and Red Pear Blossom)*, Hong Kong: Infolink Publishing Limited, 2016 (in Chinese).



and daughter to Shengye Quarter' due to their 'humble and depraved birth status'; 'they were sent to leave the family home' (p 48). This clearly suggests the timing of when Siu-yuk and her mother were driven away from their family home. However, in Yip edition<sup>12</sup> of *The Legend of Purple Hairpin*, the line is slightly different: 'abandoned and made to live in the deceased lord's house' (pp 46-47), and it is not something established in the clay-print libretti. The term 'the deceased lord's house' from the Yip edition is probably more appropriate than 'the old lord's house', as employed in the 1959 Sin Fung Ming film, since Siu-yuk and her mother were indeed banished after the Prince's passing. In the subsequent Chor Fung Ming's film version (1977), as well as the album recording of the opera (1966), the line is altered into 'the deceased lord's house', in line with the Yip edition. As mentioned in the clay-print libretti annotations, the elders 'banished mother and daughter to Shengye Quarter'; and Siu-yuk later also became a courtesan at the very place. In the clay-print libretti for the scene 'The Governor Declaring His Majesty's Decree', the Marshal reminds Siu-yuk of her inferior status: 'Never did I know [Prince Fok] has a daughter.... You're only a courtesan from the Shengye Quarter' (p 172). In *A Testifying on Yuan Zhen and Bai Juyi's Poems*, scholar Chen Yinke also suggests that 'Tang-dynasty courtesans often fabricated connections to high-born families.'<sup>13</sup> Whether Siu-yuk is truly the daughter of Prince Fok is a matter of no import, as it was common practice for Tang-dynasty courtesans to 'fabricate connections' and exaggerate their worth and status.

## 2. Objectification

In the film *Butterfly and Red Pear Blossom*, So-chau is a government courtesan. In the act 'A Date by Poetry',

So-chau goes to Puwan Temple to meet with Chiu Yu-chau, whom she has never met before. Yet before the rendezvous could transpire, she is taken away by the panderess and Shum Wing-sun to serve the Minister with wine at his official residence. In Act II 'Enjoy the Lantern and Chase the Vehicle' of the clay-print libretti of the opera, So-chau says to Wong Fu, 'I have to show up at the palace, at the Ministry of the Army and the Ministry of Rite' (p 209). As a government courtesan, So-chau clearly needs to attend many different events to drink with and serve government officials. In the 1959 film, So-chau says she is making a living out of singing and serving wine'; 'I came late because of my duties in the palace, I had also paid tributes to the other places of honour, My slow steps are hindering me from offering respect to everyone, I've been expected to serve wine and dine with them.' A government courtesan was a courtesan who moved within government official circles.<sup>14</sup> The origins of government courtesans can perhaps be traced to the Spring and Autumn Period, when Guan Zhong of the Qi State established the *nulu*, i.e. a harem.<sup>15</sup> In the section 'Strategies of Eastern Zhou' of *Strategies of the Warring States*, it is recorded that 'The Huan of Ch'i in his palace had seven open spaces, and in his female apartments seven hundred women'.<sup>16</sup> It is also the view expressed in *Jian Hu Ji, Part II* that the *nulu* established by the Qi State was a means to profiteer from prostitution, to 'collect money from such nightlife activities to enrich the nation's coffers.' This was 'the first instance of money earned from the sex trade'<sup>17</sup>, also known as the beginning of prostitution in China. Government courtesans were also employed to serve the army. *The Spring and Autumn Annals of Wu and Yue* contains descriptions of Du Nu Mountain, where Goujian, the Yue king, transported widows who had committed crimes to the mountain, 'to provide entertainment and



<sup>12</sup> Yip Shiu-tuck (ed), The Yip edited libretti: *Tang Disheng Xiqu Xinshang (Er) (Appreciation of Tong Tik-sang's Repertoire II)*, Hong Kong: Xianggang Zhoukan Chubanshe, 1987 (in Chinese).

<sup>13</sup> Chen Yinke, *Yuan-Bai Shijian Zheng Gao (A Testifying on Yuan Zhen and Bai Juyi's Poems)*, Shanghai: Shanghai Ancient Books Publishing House, 1978, pp 111-112 (in Chinese).

<sup>14</sup> Zheng Zhimin, *Xishuo Tang-ji (Recording of Tang Prostitutes in Detail)*, Taipei: Wenjin Chubanshe, 1997, p 36 (in Chinese).

<sup>15</sup> Liao Meiyun, *Tang-ji Yanjiu (Researches into Tang Female Entertainers and Prostitutes)*, Taipei: Taiwan Xuesheng Shuju, 1995, p 20 (in Chinese).

<sup>16</sup> Collated by Liu Xiang, 'Dong Zhou Ce' ('Strategies of Eastern Zhou'), Vol 1, *Zhan Guo Ce (Strategies of the Warring States)*, Shanghai: Shanghai Ancient Books Publishing House, 1985, p 15 (in Chinese).

<sup>17</sup> Chu Renhu *Jianhuji Xuji (Jianhuji Part II)*, in *Xu-Xiu Siku Quanshu (Continue Edition on Complete Books of the Four Imperial Repositories)*, *Xu-Xiu Siku Quanshu Bianzuan Weiyuanhui (Continue Edition on Complete Books of the Four Imperial Repositories Editorial Committee)* (ed), Zibu Xiaoshuojia Lei (Novellas and Stories of the Category of Masters and Philosophers), Shanghai: Shanghai Ancient Books Publishing House, 1995, p 522 (in Chinese).



consolation to scholars who are plagued with nostalgic thoughts.<sup>18</sup> This is confirmed in *Yue Jue Shu*, which states ‘Goujian provided entertainment to his soldiers and officers in such a way.’<sup>19</sup> It is also important to note that government courtesans were under the jurisdiction of the *jiaofang* (royal academy), as mentioned in *Yan Fan Lu* (Song dynasty): in the 2nd year of the *Kaiyuan* reign of the Tang dynasty, Emperor Xuanzong established the ‘*jiaofang*’.<sup>20</sup> The *jiaofang* was also recorded in ‘*Lezhi*’ (The Chapter of Court Music) of *History of Song*; it belonged to ‘*Yi Hui Court*’.<sup>21</sup> So-chau is one such example of a government courtesan, which were very commonplace in the Song dynasty. As recorded in *Gudong Suoji* (*Notes on Antiques and Cultural Objects*), ‘Emperor Taizong of Song defeated the Northern Han empire and seized their women’, and furthermore ordered that government courtesans service for unmarried officials.<sup>22</sup>

In the film *Butterfly and Red Pear Blossom*, So-chau is an ‘objectified’ government courtesan, as she is passed from one official to another as a ‘gift’, with no agency or power of her own to speak of. The cruelest example of this is when Wong Fu gifts her to the Jin Emissary so as to ‘keep [his] exalted position as High Minister’ (p 206, Act II ‘Enjoy the Lantern and Chase the Vehicle’ from the clay-print libretti). In the film, Leung Shi-shing says to the High Minister, ‘Only the prettiest woman deserves the title of Prima Donna. No one except Tse So-chau of House of Purple Jade could win the favour of the barbarian chief!’ So-chau is offered to the Jin Emissary as a commodity due to her beauty that has the nation in awe. Wong Fu speaks to So-chau in such way, ‘A nice flower is good for sale; a puny willow can be exploited by anyone.’ Indeed, the image of the ‘brittle willow branch’ exemplifies very well the objectification of the courtesan and the economy of exchange she is situated in. In the clay-print libretti of the act ‘Enjoy the Lantern and Chase the Vehicle’, Yu-

chau and So-chau hysterically howl and render, ‘Frail though the young willow of Zhang Tai may be, it refuses the casual embrace of strangers.’ (p 214). The *Zhang Tai* willow is a reference to *The Story of Liu* by Xu Yaozuo (Tang dynasty), in which the courtesan Liu is gifted to Li Sheng as though she were a piece of merchandise. During the An Lushan Rebellion, Liu had by then been ‘disfigured and her hair cut’, but was nonetheless captured by ethnic general Sha Chili. After many twists and turns, she was rescued with help from Xu Jun, and subsequently the emperor decreed that she was ‘to be returned to Han Yi’ following a petition submitted by Hou Xiyi.<sup>23</sup> Like Liu, So-chau is also traded around like an object when she is sent to the Jin Emissary ‘to the barbarians as gifts’ so that Wong can ‘keep [his] exalted position as High Minister’.

In So-chau’s plea to Lau Kung-do, we see the depth of her despair and sorrow as an objectified courtesan is laid bare. In *Butterfly and Red Pear Blossom*, So-chau says, ‘I lament I’ve been interned in this Residence, My life is at stake.’ The scene is framed with So-chau kneeling on the ground, as she looks up and pleads to Lau: ‘I don’t mind if I’ll die.’; ‘Only have bloody tears welling up in my eyes’, ‘Who’ll ever save me from this mire?’ The film even inserts an additional phrase—‘Amidst this violent misogyny’—in order to further highlight the cruelty in Wong’s decision to send So-chau to the Jin Emissary, and the callous inhumanity in which she is treated as she is passed over to the nation’s enemies. In a later scene, ‘Misunderstand Thrice in the Up and Down of Official Career’, Wong even tries to give So-chau to Yu-chau in an attempt to exonerate himself of his crimes. A messenger tells the High Minister, ‘The new Emperor has just been crowned in the new Capital, The bribery to the barbarians has been leaked out’ and that ‘The Commissioner is Chiu Yu-chau, the newly invested



<sup>18</sup> ‘Du Nu Shan’ (‘Solely Women’s Hill’) from *Wu Yue Chunqiu* (*The Spring and Autumn Annals of Wu and Yue*), cited in *Taiping Yulan* (*Readings of the Taiping Era*). See Li Fang, *Taiping Yulan* (*Readings of the Taiping Era*), Vol 47, Di Section 12, Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1960, p 226 (in Chinese).

<sup>19</sup> Yuan Kang and Wu Ping (eds), *Yue Jue Shu* (The Record of Yue), Vol 10, Shanghai: Shanghai Ancient Books Publishing House, 1985, p 63 (in Chinese).

<sup>20</sup> Written by Cheng Dachang, Wang Yunwu (ed), *Chengshi Yanfanlu* (*Evolving of Luxuriant Dew*), Vol 6, Taipei: Taiwan Commercial Press, 1975, p 10 (in Chinese).

<sup>21</sup> Toqto’a, et al., *Song Shi* (*History of Song*), Vol 142, Treatise 95, Court Music 17, Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1977, p 3358 (in Chinese).

<sup>22</sup> Written by Deng Zhicheng, Revised and Annotated by Deng Ke, *Gudong Suoji* (*Notes on Antiques and Cultural Objects*), Beijing: Cathay Bookshop, 1991, p 125.

<sup>23</sup> Xu Yaozuo, ‘Liushi Zhuan’ (‘The Story of Liu’), in *Taiping Guangji* (*Extensive Records of the Taiping Era*), Li Fang, et al., (eds), see note 7, Vol 485, pp 3995-3997 (in Chinese).

First Scholar!’ As a result, Wong Fu sells So-chau off once again in his hour of need, adhering to the advice from Lau Kung-do: ‘Present the most desired courtesan to Chiu in the hall...’; ‘We’ll repeat an old manoeuvre of centuries ago. A belle is capable of turning the tide.’ Although So-chau’s transfer into the hands of Yu-chau ultimately represents a happy ending for the lovers, it does not gloss over the transactional dynamics at play, nor the tragedy of a woman who has been treated as a mere piece of merchandise. So-chau is gifted away twice in the film: the first time a tragic experience as she is sent to the Jin Emissary, and the second time ending in happiness as she is reunited with her love Yu-chau. What these two parallel experiences—one happy, one sad—denote is the wretchedness of the fate of a courtesan, constantly objectified and traded between men of power.

### 3. The Inferiority Complex

While So-chau is a government courtesan, Siu-yuk works for a privately owned establishment. In the clay print libretti for the act ‘Breaking the Willow Branch at the Yangguan Pass’, Marshal Lou insults Siu-yuk, ‘I remember drinking and appreciating the flowers at the Shengye Quarter Liang Garden two years ago, and listening to the heart-breaking tune from Siu-yuk’s *pipa* lute.’ (p 80) Lau’s anecdote as a former client of Siu-yuk is a rude reminder of the fact that she is indeed a courtesan of Shengye Quarter. Prostitution has been recorded in ancient China since the Han dynasty. In the ‘Huo Zhi Biography’ from *Records of the Grand Historian*, Lady Zheng of Zhao ‘plays the *guqin*’ and ‘minds not whether her lovers are young or old, only that they are rich.’<sup>24</sup> The love story between Siu-yuk and Lee Yik is an affair between an imperial scholar and a courtesan. It is recorded in *Supplements to Tang History* that *jinshi* scholars who have passed their exams ‘have great feasts and parties in the pleasure houses by *Qujiang*, calling

them *Qujiang* Parties.’<sup>25</sup> Many prostitutes entertained and served wine at such occasions. As described in the ‘Preface’ of *Records of the Northern Ward*, at the parties and feasts hosted by *jinshi* scholars, courtesans ‘could waive identification processes and earn several times more money than they would usually get at the pleasure houses.’<sup>26</sup> Traditionally, courtesans often served at parties held during imperial examinations, and therefore there were many opportunities for them to meet and fall in love with imperial scholars.

In *The Legend of Purple Hairpin* (1959), Siu-yuk is overwhelmed by feelings of inferiority due to her lowly status as a prostitute. In the clay-print libretti for the act ‘The Governor Declaring His Majesty’s Decree’, the Marshal insults Siu-yuk as a ‘sick and vulgar fox’ (p. 173); while in the Yip edition he calls her a ‘whore’ (p. 123)—both highly provocative and insulting slurs. Siu-yuk does not think highly of herself either, as she refers to herself as ‘a tragic lady’ in a line she says to Lee Yik in the 1959 film: ‘The one who picked the hairpin meets a tragic lady. Yet the hairpin has become worthless, like the prices in Luoyang.’ In the clay-print libretti of the act ‘Picking Up a Jade Hairpin in a Lantern-lit Street; Rendezvous in the Garden’, Siu-yuk says ‘Haven’t you heard of the fallen flower of Luoyang?’ (p. 61). Here, ‘the fallen flower of Luoyang’ refers to the peonies. As recorded in *Shiwu Jiyuan (The Records of the Origins of Objects)*, the Empress Wu was visiting her gardens during a winter trip, and compelled the deity of flowers to hurry the blooming of the flowers. The one single flower that refused to bloom was the peony, which got exiled to Luoyang by the Empress.<sup>27</sup> In comparing herself to the peony, Siu-yuk is clearly identifying with its fall from grace, exemplifying her feelings of shame and self-pity. In both the Sin Fung Ming’s and Chor Fung Ming’s versions of *The Legend of Purple Hairpin* (1959, 1977), as well as the recorded version of the opera (1966), ‘A loser isn’t



<sup>24</sup> Sima Qian, ‘Huo Zhi Liezhuan’ (Huo Zhi Biography), *Shiji (Records of the Grand Historian)*, Vol 129, Section 69, Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1959, p 3271 (Chinese).

<sup>25</sup> Li Zhao, et al., *Tang Guo Shi Bu (The Supplementary on Tang History)*, in *Tang Guo Shi Bu & Yinhualu Omnibus (The Supplementary on Tang History & Tales of Repayment and Retribution Omnibus)*, Shanghai Ancient Books Publishing House (ed), Shanghai: Shanghai Ancient Books Publishing House, 1957, p 56 (in Chinese).

<sup>26</sup> Sun Qi, *Beiliji (Records of the Northern Ward)*, in Editorial *Jiaofang Ji & Bei Li Ji & Qinglou Ji Omnibus (Accounts of the Singsong Girls’ Quarters & Records of the Northern Ward & Selections from Pleasure Quarters Omnibus)*, Zhonghua Book Company Shanghai Bianji Suo (ed), Shanghai: Zhonghua Book Company, 1959, p 22 (in Chinese).

<sup>27</sup> Gao Cheng, ‘Mudan’ (‘Peony’), in *Shiwu Jiyuan (The Records of the Origins of Objects)*, Vol 10, Shanghai: Shanghai Ancient Books Publishing House, 1992, p 287 (in Chinese).







*The Legend of Purple Hairpin* was twice adapted into film; the above photo shows the 1959 Sin Fung Ming's version and the below photo shows the 1977 Chor Fung Ming's version.



good enough to match a high officer'. To say that she 'isn't good enough' is a strong indication of Siu-yuk's sense of shame, and also echoes Pak Suet-sin's claim that aspects of Siu-yuk's psychology is characterised by 'feelings of inferiority'<sup>28</sup> in her essay 'How I Studied and Interpreted the Character of Fok Siu-yuk'—an accurate and astute assessment.

Another way the feelings of shame and inferiority manifest is the use of sad lyrics during moments of joy. In 'Rendezvous in the Garden', Siu-yuk says to Lee Yik, 'I know I don't match up. Today you love me for my beauty, and I'm entrusted with kindness and integrity. But I'm afraid that one morning when my beauty fades, gratitude and love will both be gone. My love will have nothing to cling to, like an abandoned fan in autumn.' (p 66) This was lifted directly from *The Story of Fok Siu-yuk* (Tang dynasty) and kept in both the clay-print libretti and the Yip edition of the opera (pp 47-48), the two films (1959, 1977), as well as the record album (1966)—which is testament to its importance. Again, the sentence 'I know I don't match up' reaffirms Siu-yuk's low sense of self-worth. In the *1958 Hong Kong Year Book*, it is recorded that prostitution was widespread, and that 'almost all prostitutes were unwilling at heart', and were simply victims of circumstance.<sup>29</sup> The mistreatment of prostitutes and their feelings of shame as displayed in *The Legend of Purple Hairpin* (Sin Fung Ming's version) likely resonated among its audience. Many housewives and female workers found release and catharsis through the act of watching movies, as women were so often an oppressed and disrespected group in the domestic sphere as well as the contemporary society.<sup>30</sup>

## II. Despotism

In the films *Butterfly and Red Pear Blossom* and Sin Fung Ming's version of *The Legend of Purple Hairpin*, So-chau and Siu-yuk are both women of low social status who face oppression and intimidation from tyrannical forces. Marshal Lou of *The Legend of Purple Hairpin* is a military leader who controls the fates of many others. The title of Marshal first appeared in *Master Lu's Spring and Autumn Annals*<sup>31</sup>, and in the *Book of Han's* 'Table of Nobility Ranks and Government Offices', it is said that the Marshal was an office first established in the Qin dynasty, 'given a golden seal with purple ribbon, and in charge of military affairs.'<sup>32</sup> In the *Table of Government Offices Through History*, it is recorded that in the Qin dynasty, the Marshal was 'the highest ranking military officer in the nation.'<sup>33</sup> As the most powerful of all military officers in the country, Marshal Lou has little regard for the value of life, as he murders Chui Wan-ming and attempts to kill Fok Siu-yuk. In the Sin Fung Ming-version of *The Legend of Purple Hairpin*, Marshal Lou demands that Chui be the matchmaker for his daughter Lou Yin-jing and Lee Yik, but Chui refuses, 'I can't be a wicked matchmaker and do such unconscionable things.' The Marshal reacts with threats of violence: 'Don't you see that the beating sticks are all ready in the hall?' In the end, Marshal Lou himself beats Chui to death with a beating stick. The film captures the Marshal at an angle where he stares down at a bleeding Chui, his face impassive at the act of murder that he has just committed. The Marshal even forbids any mention of 'this old fellow's death' afterwards. This is a scene from the film that showcases the violence and tyranny in the character of the Marshal, which is later reinforced by his plan to kill Siu-yuk the same way with beating sticks. In the 1959 film, he even plots to 'pretend



<sup>28</sup> Oral account by Pak Suet-sin, Written by Michael Lam, 'Wo Zenyangqu Chuaimo Huo Xiaoyu De Renwu Xingge' ('How I Studied and Interpreted the Character of Fok Siu-yuk'), in *a special publication of the 5th Annual Performance of Sin Fung Ming Opera Troupe*, cited in *Cha Zi Yan Hong Kaibian: Liangchen Meijing Xian Feng Ming, Xian Nong Ben* (*Multiflorated Splendor: The Splendid Days of Sin Fung Ming, The Exquisite Edition*), Lo Wai-luen (ed), Hong Kong: Joint Publishing (H.K.) Co., Ltd., 2004 (in Chinese).

<sup>29</sup> *1958 Hong Kong Year Book*, Vol 11, Hong Kong: *Wah Kiu Yat Po*, 1958, Section II, p 100 (in Chinese).

<sup>30</sup> Xu Yifan, 'Yijiuwuba Xianggang Dianying Shichang' ('The Hong Kong Film Market of 1958'), 19 March 1959, *The New Evening Post*, cited in *Xianggang Dianying Shihua* (*Anecdotes of Hong Kong Films*, Vol 5, Yu Mo-wan, Hong Kong: Sub-Culture Ltd., 2001, p 135 (in Chinese).

<sup>31</sup> Lu Buwei, 'Meng Xia Ji' ('Biography of the Emperor in the First Month of Summer'), in *Lushi Chunqiu Xiaoshi* (*Collation and Notation on Master Lu's Spring and Autumn Annals*), Vol 4, Chen Qiyou (collated and annotated), Shanghai: Shanghai Ancient Books Publishing House, 1984, p 185 (in Chinese).

<sup>32</sup> Written by Ban Gu, annotated by Yan Shigu, 'Baiguan Gongqing Biao' ('Table of Nobility Ranks and Government Offices'), Table 7a, *Hanshu* (*Book of Han*), Vol 19 Part 1, Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1962, p 725 (in Chinese).

<sup>33</sup> Huang Benji, *Lidai Zhiguan Biao* (*Table of Government Offices Through History*), Shanghai: Zhonghua Book Company, 1965, p 25 (in Chinese).





In *The Legend of Purple Hairpin* (1959), Tong Tik-sang adds in an argument scene to show Fok Siu-yuk's gutsiness and disdain for the powerful. The picture shows the scene in which Pak Suet-sin crashes the wedding.

to start playing wedding music' to provoke a reaction from Siu-yuk, and entices her to his home in order to 'accuse her of trespassing', so then 'we can beat her to death.'

In *Butterfly and Red Pear Blossom*, Wong Fu is yet another representative of the forces of tyranny and cruelty in the story. Based on a real-life historical figure, Wong was a High Minister of the late Northern Song dynasty. *The History of Song* records that he was 'a flatterer with the gift of the gab', who formed an alliance with Leung Shi-shing, and 'became High Minister'.<sup>34</sup> Xu Fuzha (Ming dynasty) was the first to satirise Wong in *The Story of Red Jasmine*, and Tong Tik-sang later kept the character in his libretti for the Cantonese opera *Butterfly and Red Pear Blossom*, highlighting his lustfulness and brutality. In his initial appearance, Wong Fu declares, 'This grey-haired man is infatuated with youthful looks, a mansion has been built. Invitations have been sent for scouting a dozen belles.' (the film version of *Butterfly and Red Pear Blossom*). The High Minister, who still 'enjoys the company of beautiful ladies', has many concubines and mistresses. After Chiu Yu-chau earns the accolade of *Zhuangyuan*, i.e. the Number One scholar, and becomes a government official, he comes to arrest Wong and mocks him, 'Even the Emperor doesn't indulge in music or dance. Why is a Prime Minister pampering by

all kinds of entertainment?' (the film version of *Butterfly and Red Pear Blossom*).

Wong Fu represents the overwhelming despotism that So-chau has to fight against, and at the same time he is as vicious as Marshal Lou, as seen in his oppressive tactics against Fung Fei-yin, another courtesan. He sneers, 'I would like to see how that slip of a thing could endure the flogging!', and then announces, 'The merciless flogging will serve a demonstration' before ordering his people to 'beat her up!' (the film version of *Butterfly and Red Pear Blossom*). The camera hones in on a close-up of Fung as she gets hit and falls forward to the ground. Even Lau Kung-do looks away in pity and horror, highlighting the High Minister's brutality. Eventually Fung takes poison, so that she could 'die on the pillow', rather than give in to Wong's demands. Through a close-up of Fung as she kneels on the ground, looking up at a pitying Lau, the film emphasises her plight as well as the High Minister's cruelty and bullheadedness. Fung's fate is a warning and a mirror to So-chau: if she refuses to obey, she will end up the same way as Fung. In face of their adversaries, Marshal Lou and Wong Fu, So-chau and Siu-yuk find themselves confronting great forces of formidable oppression.



<sup>34</sup> Toqto'a, et al., 'Ning Xing' ('Flatterers'), see note 21, Vol 470, Biography 229, p 13681 (in Chinese).

### III. Resistance

Despite their lowly social status, courtesans often resisted bravely against despotism. Both Siu-yuk and So-chau display impressive reserves of courage and strength. In the Sin Fung Ming-version of the film *The Legend of Purple Hairpin*, the Yellow-Garbed Knight advises Siu-yuk to crash the party and fight for her husband: 'if Sap Long has never been unfaithful to you, then you are the wife of a top scholar.... You may even reclaim the name of your father, Fok the Prince, as well as the title of princess. You should wear the phoenix crown and put on the jade pendant, and make your majestic steps to Marshal Lou's residence. Have a debate to win back your husband.' Siu-yuk acts on his counsel, and her subsequent 'debate to win back [her] husband' is a scene that was a Tong Tik-sang original.<sup>35</sup> In doing so, he portrays Siu-yuk as a heroine who is not shy about fighting for her own happiness.<sup>36</sup> The Sin Fung Ming film uses the line, 'Have a debate to win back your husband', which is from the clay-print libretti ('Reunion of Sword and Hairpin', p 154). In the Yip edition however, the line differs slightly: 'present your reasons to win back your husband' ('Reunion of Sword and Hairpin', p 119). Both the Chor Fung Ming's film version and the 1966 record follow the Yip version of the line. Nonetheless, both versions of the line feature the idea of 'winning back' Siu-yuk's husband through a situation of conflict, highlighting therefore her fighting spirit.

In the clay-print libretti, this scene is named 'The Governor Declaring His Majesty's Decree' (p. 161), named after the same scene from Tang Xianzu's *The Purple Hairpin*. However, it was renamed to 'Debate to win back her husband' in the Yip edition (p 123). Indeed, unlike the Tang Xianzu version, the character of Governor Lau Gung Jai does not read out an imperial order at the end of the scene to resolve the conflict between the Marshal, Lee Yik and Siu-yuk, whereby the Marshal's powers are diminished, Lee Yik 'entitled Jixiandian Scholar', and Siu-yuk 'entitled Lady of Taiyuan Prefecture' (pp 2374-2375). In Tong Tik-sang's version (1957), the focus of the scene has shifted to Siu-yuk's fight for her husband, and therefore the renaming of the scene to 'Debate to

win back her husband' in the Yip edition is a more apt title. In the 1959 film, she argues ferociously for her case: 'Jealous woman fighting for husband strongly sustains life'. She also says, 'Don't you know that it's despicable when one seizes other's husband? Don't you know it's shameful when one relies on wealth to abuse power?' In the clay-print libretti, the second line was originally 'Don't you know that it's miserable when one relies on wealth to abuse power?' (*The Legend of Purple Hairpin*, 'The Governor Declaring His Majesty's Decree', p 173) In changing the single word 'miserable' to 'shameful' in the film dialogue, Siu-yuk's contempt for the Marshal's bullying ways are highlighted. As a female protagonist with a strong sense of principle, Siu-yuk is not afraid to despise the merely rich and powerful. In the Chor Fung Ming-version of the film, the 'shameful' line is retained to emphasise the aspects of strength and courage in Siu-yuk's character. Siu-yuk's fearless fight for her marriage is matched by Lee Yik's devoted love to his wife, and together the two characters prove that the strength of their love and their bond are invincible. In the clay-print libretti, Lee Yik says, 'May we perish together under the same beating rods.... May we be buried together for eternity.' (p 173) Siu-yuk and Lee Yik's devotion to each other impress and touch the Fourth Prince so much that he comes out in their support; only then are the two protagonists able to subvert existing power structures and triumph against the tyrannical.

In the film *Butterfly and Red Pear Blossom*, So-chau and Yu-chau's confrontation against Wong Fu happens in the scene 'A Door Apart' in the act 'Enjoy the Lantern and Chase the Vehicle', when the two protagonists find that 'an irremovable door of eternity has separated [them]' (clay-print libretti, p 126). In front of Wong, the lovers are not afraid to blurt out their affection towards each other, as So-chau says, 'My carnal self is detained, my fortune is uncertain. Though I might not be able to see you any more, I hereby declare I've already an affine of your family.' (the film version of *Butterfly and Red Pear Blossom*). She risks her life before the High Minister in order to devote herself to Yu-chau, wielding her undeniable love as a weapon against forces of tyranny despite the seeming hopelessness of her situation. In



<sup>35</sup> Michael Lam, 'The Lasting Sorrow of the Purple Hairpin', in *Cantonese Opera Film Retrospective* (The 11th Hong Kong International Film Festival Catalogue), Li Cheuk-to (ed), Hong Kong: Urban Council, 1987, p 41.

<sup>36</sup> Poon Po-chiu, *Wushinian Langun Paibian Tang Disheng Yueju Juben Wenxue Tanwei* (Fifty Years Striking at the Balustrade Study on Tong Tik-sang Cantonese Opera Script Literature), Hong Kong: Infolink Publishing Limited, 2009, p 83 (in Chinese).







In *The Legend of Purple Hairpin* (1959) and *Butterfly and Red Pear Blossom* (1959), the female protagonists who boldly stand up and fight for what they believe in found fans among the female audience at the time. This is a film still from *Butterfly and Red Pear Blossom*: (middle left to right) Leung Sing-por, Pak Suet-sin, Lan Chi Pak.

the last scene of the film 'Misunderstand Thrice in the Up and Down of Official Career', there are two important acts of resistance: firstly, So-chau making fun of Wong Fu; secondly, Yu-chau triumphing over the villainous. The film version of *Butterfly and Red Pear Blossom* augments the former by having So-chau pretend to refuse when the High Minister offers her as a gift to Yu-chau in exchange for his release: 'Why should I have to give up the Prime Minister, but to please that transient little First Scholar?' It is a little trick she plays on the High Minister as a light form of revenge. On the other hand, after he scores first honor in the imperial examinations, Yu-chau comes to investigate and arrest Wong Fu for treason as the 'Prefect of *Kaifeng*'. The characters undergo a reversal of fortune: 'I'm not going to confuse affection with justice. The felon is not allowed to override the law.' In the end we see

good triumph over evil, the weak triumph against the powerful, in a dazzling battle of wits.

In both Sin Fung Ming's film versions of *The Legend of Purple Hairpin* and *Butterfly and Red Pear Blossom*, the female protagonists find themselves at odds with oppressive powers despite their unassertive status as courtesans. Threatened by Marshal Lou and Wong Fu, both Siu-yuk and So-chau are fearless in their struggles and in their resistance. The immense strength of character displayed in the two women resonated with audiences of the 1950s, who were predominantly women, who had likewise faced oppression and exploitation in their daily encounters.

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(Translated by Rachel Ng)

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# Approaches in the Studies of Cantonese Opera Cinema

Lo Wai-luk

## Introduction

‘Cantonese opera film’ was a result of the merging of Cantonese opera and the film medium. The genre began to form with the advent of sound technology in the field of Chinese Cinema. This was a great paradigmatic shift. Since the 1930s, Hong Kong became the production centre of Cantonese films. Riding the waves of transformation in urban popular culture and the geopolitical landscape of Mainland China, Cantonese opera, with its timely emergence, became part of the fabric of Hong Kong history.

According to the Hong Kong film historian Yu Mo-wan, ‘Cantonese Opera Films’ includes ‘all films whose content related to Cantonese opera’. It is a very broad definition, and hence it is further divided into six categories, including ‘Cantonese Opera Documentaries’, ‘Cantonese Operatic Films’, ‘Cantonese Opera Musical Films’, ‘Cantonese Opera Films in Modern Costumes’, ‘Films with Cantonese Opera Highlight(s)’, ‘Cantonese Opera Collage Films’, all belong to the same family.<sup>1</sup> Cantonese opera film was the major genre in Cantonese cinema. In the 1940s and 50s, it accounted for about 30% of total production. The following table shows the number of Cantonese films and Cantonese opera films produced, and the ratio from the 1930s to the 70s:<sup>2</sup>

	Cantonese Films	Cantonese Opera Films	Ratio
1930s	378	91	24%
1940s	531	160	30%
1950s	1,519	515	34%
1960s	1,548	193	12%
1970s	171	3	2%

The production of Cantonese films in general, and Cantonese opera films in particular, fell drastically from the mid-1960s onwards. This is caused by the language policy of Singapore after her independence in 1965. Since then, no Cantonese films were allowed to be shown there, and Hong Kong Cantonese film production suffered from a shortage of capital.

In 1965, there were only four Cantonese opera films produced, and in the entire 1970s, there were only three, one of which, *Princess Chang Ping* (aka *Princess Cheung Ping*) was directed by John Woo in 1976. Recently there have been some discussions of John Woo’s version,<sup>3</sup> but not a great deal of discussion on the 1959 version by Tso Kea.

From the 1980s onwards, the genre disappeared in Hong Kong. This might have been due to changes in the cultural environment, but the reasons may be more complicated with deserve further examination. Moreover, in the Mainland, the production of Chinese opera film has been revitalised since the 1980s, possibly due to



<sup>1</sup> Yu Mo-wan, ‘Xianggang Yueju-dianying Fazhan Shihua’ (‘Anecdotes of Hong Kong Cantonese Opera Films’), in *Cantonese Opera Film Retrospective (The 11th Hong Kong International Film Festival Catalogue)*, Li Cheuk-to (ed), Hong Kong: Urban Council, 1987, p 18 (in Chinese).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, pp 18-21 (in Chinese).

<sup>3</sup> Yang Xiufeng, ‘Luanshi Yinyuan Jing Fengyu, Ganchangcunduan Cui Ren Lei — Qian Xi Wu Yusen Daoyan De Yueju-dianying *Dinuhua*’ (‘Love in the Unrested Time was Challenged, Sorrow Comes After the Remembrance: A Brief Analysis on John Woo’s Cantonese Opera Film *Princess Chang Ping*’), in *Yi Hai*, No 12, 2011, pp 73-74 (in Chinese); Qiao Yu, ‘Xi Ying Hudong, Yi Qing Dongren — Qian Xi Yueju-dianying *Dinuhua*’ (‘Interacting Between Film and Cantonese Opera: A Brief Analysis on *Princess Chang Ping*’), in *Home Drama*, No 7, 2013, pp 184-185 (in Chinese); Lulu, ‘Tan Yueju-dianying *Dinuhua* Zhong Xiqu Yu Dianying De Yishu Ronghe’ (‘The Fusion of Chinese Opera and Film in the Cantonese Opera Film *Princess Chang Ping*’), in *Home Drama*, No 3, 2014, pp 163-164 (in Chinese).

the renewed cultural thirst since the end of the Cultural Revolution. The momentum has been sustained in recent years, and in the Mainland, the form has reached the general public through television, and even through the production of animated films.

In terms of academic studies, Hong Kong Cantonese opera cinema aroused the interest of Hong Kong film critics and scholars as early as the 1980s. It was the subject of a retrospective at the 1987 Hong Kong International Film Festival.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, it was neglected in Mainland Chinese discourses of the history of Chinese cinema, or even of Chinese opera film. For example, it was not discussed in a major book on the history of Chinese opera film.<sup>5</sup> A history of Cantonese opera cinema was published in 2007 by a young Mainland scholar, but the discussion was descriptive, and primarily historical.<sup>6</sup>

In 2009, Cantonese opera was included as part of UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. Since then, there has been strong academic interest in the study of Cantonese opera. In particular, many papers, even books, have been produced on the scriptwriter and lyricist Tong Tik-sang, and the cross-dressing actress Yam Kim-fai.<sup>7</sup>

Yet, the achievements of Cantonese opera cinema are still not being properly addressed.

In June 2012, an international conference on Chinese opera cinema was held in Beijing. It was co-organised by the National Academy of Chinese Theatre Arts and the University of Chicago. However, there was not much discussion of Cantonese opera, and when it was discussed the attention was on the interplay of politics and film. The development of the form, and its aesthetic achievements, were not addressed.

Therefore, it is high time that we gather research forces to help bring attention to the form within the

artistic and aesthetic discourses in Chinese Cinema Studies.

There are several approaches in the studies of the Cantonese Opera Cinema, namely, 1) the historical approach; 2) the cultural studies approach; 3) the aesthetic approach. Whichever approach, the analytical and aesthetic experiential aspects are indispensable. We need to foster discussions by manipulating the artistic canons of film, drama and performance.

## Historical Approach: Development of a Form

One major task of the historical approach is to trace the trajectory of the development of the genre. The Hong Kong Film Archive has conducted a general survey of the filmography, which provides with the public the base for further enquiry. The first question to ask is: what are the significant steps that lead to the genre's maturity? In this process, what are the representative films, and what are the backgrounds of their productions.

Cantonese opera cinema played a major role in the development of Cantonese cinema. No sooner had sound arrived in Chinese cinema in the early 1930s, than film producers and Cantonese opera actors worked together to shoot films with elements of Cantonese opera. In fact, the first Cantonese film was an adaptation from a Cantonese opera. It was Sit Kok-sin's *The White Gold Dragon*, produced in 1933 in Shanghai by the Unique Film Productions, the predecessor of the Shaw & Sons Limited and Shaw Brothers (Hong Kong) Limited. It is said that after a successful run of the stage performance, Sit Kok-sin asked for Unique Film Productions' technical assistance to produce the film version of *The White Gold Dragon*, which is itself an adaptation from the Hollywood movie *The Grand Duchess and the Waiter* (1926)<sup>8</sup>. The drama is taken place in contemporary time, and the



<sup>4</sup> See note 1, p 21 (in Chinese).

<sup>5</sup> Gao Xiaojian. *Zhongguo Xiqu-dianying Shi (The History of Chinese Opera Film in China)*, Beijing: Cultural and Art Publishing House, 2005 (in Chinese).

<sup>6</sup> Luo Li, *Yueju-dianying Shi (The History of Cantonese Opera Film)*, Beijing: China Theatre Press, 2007 (in Chinese).

<sup>7</sup> Wong Shiu-hon (ed), *Changtian Luo Caixia: Ren Jianhui De Juyi Shijie (Yam Kim Fai, 1913-1989: Portrait of a Chinese Opera Performance Prodigy)*, Vol 1 & 2, Hong Kong: Joint Publishing (H.K.) Co., Ltd., 2009 (in Chinese); Wong Shiu-hon (ed), *Jingyan Yibai Nian: 2013 Jinian Ren Jianhui Nushi Bainian Danchen Yueju Yishu Guoji Yantaohui Lunwenji (Fascinated Charm for a Century: Proceedings of the 2013 International Seminar on Cantonese Opera in Memory of the Centenary of Madam Yam Kim Fai)*, Vol 1 & 2, Hong Kong: Chung Hwa Book Company (Hong Kong) Limited, 2013 (in Chinese).

<sup>8</sup> The movie is an adaptation of a Broadway play with the same name.



Special thanks to Mr Jack Lee Fong of Palace Theatre, San Francisco, USA

In 1933, the Shanghai Unique Film Productions adapted Sit Kok-sin's *The White Gold Dragon* into a film of the same name, in what became one of the earliest Cantonese films. The picture shows a scene in its sequel *The White Gold Dragon, Part Two* (1937): (from right) Sit Kok-sin, Wong Man-lei.

characters are wearing Westernised modern dresses, but they sing songs with the style of Cantonese opera. The juxtaposition of East and West suited the taste of the Chinese cinema goers of that time, when China was transforming from the tradition to the modern. This kind of cross media transplantation of cultural works is an interesting subject in cultural history study. The huge success of the film in Shanghai, Hong Kong, Southeast Asia, and Southern China motivated Unique Film Productions to set up the Hong Kong studio to make Cantonese films. From 1934 to 1941, Unique Film Productions' Hong Kong Studio produced 22 Cantonese films.

In the 1930s, the number of Hong Kong-produced films increased drastically and the region became an important production centre of Chinese films. This was especially so after 7 July 1937 when the full-scale Japanese invasion of China took place.

In the 1930s and 40s productions, songs are sung in the films, but they are insertions rather than convention. The Cantonese opera films at that time may be stories adapted from Cantonese opera, or films with songs sung in the style of Cantonese opera.

In the late 1940s and the early 50s, it seemed that filmmakers felt uncomfortable in transplanting the theatrical conventions of Cantonese opera completely into film. Therefore, we see many films shifting from

the opera mode to the dramatic mode. For example, *The Judge Goes to Pieces* (1948), directed by Yeung Kung-leong, was transformed from the Cantonese opera theatrical version to a drama with comic tone and mood. The film is basically a comedy with plenty of dialogue, but occasionally, there are recitative verses in rhyme. It shows very well that in the late 1940s, Cantonese opera stars and filmmakers did not have the courage to depict Cantonese opera on film directly, not to mention cinematically transplanting the opera conventions. This might be due to market considerations. The opera stars wanted to keep their theatre audience while they expanded into the film industry. It might also be due to the creative inadequacy in merging cinematic techniques with theatrical conventions. Therefore, what they did was to adapt the popular story and dramatic action into the film version to attract the audience. This perhaps is another example of the 'Real Mirror' theory propounded by the media scholar Herbert Marshall McLuhan—that the content of a new medium will borrow from that of the old.

Later the Hong Kong filmmakers created a form called 'sing-song films' (films with songs). The flow of the film is basically a spoken word drama but there are a few songs inserted into different parts of the film. The musical accompaniment is only partially transplanted from that of the theatrical performance. Generally, Silk and Bamboo instruments are used, and the characteristic percussion of Cantonese opera is done away with.



In her dissertation, Stephanie Ng writes about the production modes of sing-song films, and borrows from Levi-Strauss' cultural anthropology the word 'bricolage', to describe sing-song film.<sup>9</sup> The 1951 production of *New Love Story of Leung Shan-pak and Chuk Ying-toi* directed by Chan Pei, illustrates this very well. The film consists of more than 30 songs sung in traditional Cantonese opera style. Its dramatic structure is very interesting. The director creates a meta-film narrative to depict the legend with traditional costume by framing it with a contemporary wedding ceremony (Yam Kim-fai acts as a woman and in wedding dress). In the period-costume part, there are plenty of songs in the popular tone, sometimes with music, and sometimes not. The singing is accompanied by silk and bamboo instrument, and occasionally, the wooden percussion instrument *muyu* is used for rhythmic recitative verses. The acting is naturalistic and there are no Cantonese opera's theatrical conventions.

In the early 1950s, there were a great number of Cantonese opera films produced in Hong Kong, but they were mainly films with Cantonese opera songs, or films adapted from the Cantonese opera repertory. The sing-song film was the standard mode of Cantonese opera film before the mid-1950s. There were not many films actually merging the aesthetics of both the theatrical form and the film medium.

But in the late 1950s, there is a paradigmatic shift. We see a few Hong Kong directors employing sophisticated film language to depict opera conventions and performances, and creating a form that fuses with an aura of Cantonese opera, whose emotion flow is natural, cinematic, and aesthetic.

This may be due to the changing mode of production of Cantonese Cinema in the mid-1950s.

The establishment of The Union Film Enterprise Ltd in November 1952 represents a new form of co-operation of the production of Cantonese film. The partners of the company are major stars, directors, and producers who aspire to produce films with cultural value. After putting out works adapting from literary works of the New Culture Movement (*Family, Spring, Autumn*), works reflecting the social condition and ethical value (e.g., *In the Face of Demolition*, 1953), works adapting from Western literary classics (e.g., *An Orphan's Tragedy, Eternal Love, Anna*), they decided to produce film with traditional Chinese subject matter. In 1956, the director Ng Wui determinately employs convention of Cantonese opera in the film *The Precious Lotus Lamp*. He accompanies the entire film with Cantonese opera percussion and music, and the actors perform in the style of Cantonese opera. This bold act receives huge success. Subsequently, Ng Wui himself produces *The Dunce Attends a Birthday Party* (1956), and The Union Film produces two more sequels of *The Precious Lotus Lamp* in 1957 and 1958 respectively.



In *New Love Story of Leung Shan-pak and Chuk Ying-toi* (1951), Yam Kim-fai (left) and Wong Chiu-mo (right) play a newly wed couple.



In *The Dunce Attends a Birthday Party* (1956), the Dunce's new wife doesn't know whether to laugh or cry on their wedding night: (from left) Tsi Lo Lin, Leung Sing-por.



<sup>9</sup> Stephanie Ng, 'Modes of Production in Post-war Cantonese Cinema: Bricolage and Sing-song Comedy' (PhD thesis), Hong Kong: Hong Kong Baptist University, 2013.



The success of *The Precious Lotus Lamp* encourages others to produce films that merge the Cantonese opera convention with film language and cinematic mise-en-scène. Hence afterwards the form of Cantonese opera film is established.

Taking Sit Kok-sin's successful stage production of *The Love Parade* in the late 1930s, the Motion Picture and General Investment Co. Ltd. (MP & GI) invests big amount of money to produce its film version *My Kingdom for a Husband* (Tso Kea, 1957) with Cantonese opera percussion. The film uses fancy exotic costumes, property and sets. The music of the film deserves investigation because it is a kind of hybridisation of the traditional Cantonese opera music and popular tunes of the time. It is very successful, and the sequel *My Kingdom for a Honeymoon* is produced in 1958.

It is said that Fong Yim-fun decided to make the film versions of some of her theatrical performances, and began making opera films with fully-fledged Cantonese opera conventions in 1957. Perhaps she is thinking of making the best cinematic records of her representative works before retiring from performing, she invests big money to implement colour technology for her own company. The films she produces in the late 1950s includes *The Nymph of River Lo* (1957), *The Tragic Story of Leung Shan-pak and Chuk Ying-toi* (1958), *Princess Cheung Ping* (1959), and *Snow in June* (1959).

There was a significant development in Hong Kong Cantonese opera cinema during the 1950s. In terms of quantity, there were more than 500 films produced; and in terms of quality, the genre was transformed from a theatrically-based form to a cinematic form. Beginning with the story and dramatic action, then the songs and music, and later the convention in gesture, movement, and martial arts, the different aspects of Cantonese opera subsequently merged with the film language. The golden age of Cantonese opera cinema occurred from the late 1950s to the mid-1960s. It is extremely worthwhile to examine the aesthetic achievements of some of these signature productions using today's methodologies.

## Cultural Studies Approach: Messages and Significance in Context

Cantonese opera cinema was not just an art form; it was a cultural form. It was a major medium carry the cultural identity of the Cantonese speaking community, especially from the 1930s to the mid-1960s. Later, when Cantonese films were major content of the television stations, the genre had been sustaining the cultural memories of several generations of Hong Kong audience.

Therefore, it is natural for us to examine the relationship of Cantonese opera cinema to the socio-political context of Hong Kong.<sup>10</sup>

Cantonese opera and film were two of the most important forms of entertainment in post-war Hong Kong. As such, many opera stars began to participate in film production: Fong Yim-fun, Yam Kim-fai, Pak Suet-sin, Ma Si-tsang, Hung Sin Nui, Sun Ma Si-tsang, just to name just a few. During this time, they took part in film production not as opera performers, but as stars. Therefore, they did not mind if the films were performed in Cantonese opera convention or not. This phenomenon observes the golden rule of the cultural industry, where a celebrity of any field may cross over to another field to generate a larger audience. Moreover, from a community brought up in the environment of Cantonese opera, adaptation of theatrical versions of the Cantonese operas into films was another way to draw people to the cinemas. This explains why so many Cantonese opera performers appear in films before the genuine merging of the two forms.

Besides the operation of marketing in popular culture, there is another dimension that deserves our attention.

Recently, the interplay of Hong Kong film production and Mainland's opera films has been the topic of many studies.<sup>11</sup> In the mid-1950s, Cantonese opera actors became very serious in making Cantonese opera films. The underlying cultural and political messages deserve our investigation, against the background of the Cold War.



<sup>10</sup> For a brief description of the characteristics of cultural studies, we may refer to Ziauddin Sardar's *Introducing Cultural Studies*, London: Icon, 1997. The objective of cultural studies includes understanding culture in all its complex forms and analysing the social and political context in which culture manifests itself.

<sup>11</sup> Zhao Weifang, 'Wu-liushi Niandai Neidi Yu Xianggang Liangdi Dianying Hudong Ji Yingxiang Xin Tan' ('The Mainland and Hongkong Film from 1950s to 1960s'), *Contemporary Cinema*, No 12, Beijing, 2013, pp 73-78 (in Chinese).





The Yue opera film *Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai* (1954) stars Fan Ruijuan as Liang Shanbo (right) and Yuan Xuefen as Zhu Yingtai (left).

After the Korean War had ended (27 July 1953), the leftist Southern Film Corporation, which was the sole agent for importing films from the People's Republic of China, began to formulate strategy to generate a wider audience. They found that films with traditional subject matter may be more well-received by the Hong Kong audience, so they put great effort to market the Shanghai Yue opera film *Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai*. In 1954 *Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai* ran continuously for more than half a year in Hong Kong with an audience of over 500,000. Suggested by premier Zhou Enlai, the film was sent to the Geneva Peace Conference (from 26 April 1954 to 21 July 1954), and was shown to all the guests visiting China's exhibition hall.

The technical excellence of *Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai* was far more advanced, not only compared with Cantonese films, but also with Hong Kong films in general. The film was shot in colour (in fact it was the first colour film made after 1949), and the mise-en-scène was excellent.

The film represents the cultural achievement of the People's Republic of China. It helps China to successfully inviting famous Cantonese opera stars to go back to the Mainland. In mid-1950, Sit Kok-sin, Ma Si-tsang, Hung Sin Nui relocated themselves to Canton to actually participate

in Mainland's Cantonese opera development. Against the political background of the Cold War, and with their reputations among the Cantonese speaking audience, their acts had great political impact on the Hong Kong audience. Their act also generated cultural manifestation. Very soon, through the arrangement of Zhou Enlai, Ma and Hong lead the whole Cantonese Opera Theatre of Guangdong to Shanghai to shoot the colour Cantonese opera film *The Lost Kite* (1956). The film is shown in Hong Kong in 1957, with an audience over 500,000.

*Marriage of the Fairy Princess* (aka *Fairy Couple*) is another opera film with great impact to the Hong Kong audience. It is a black and white film, and the geo-cultural source is Anhui *Huangmei* opera. It is shown in Hong Kong in 1956, and, out of expectation, it is extremely popular, and the number of audience reaches more than 250,000. *Marriage of the Fairy Princess* is directed by the famous actor Shi Hui. Its film language reflects a new perspective on translating theatre performances to film with cinematic treatment.

The influence of *Huangmei diao* music on Hong Kong film is very great. Shaw Brothers took over it and produce a great number of films in the 1960s that hit not only in Hong Kong, but in Taiwan as well. The cultural and political implication of this deserve close study.

The successes of opera films imply that traditional Chinese culture is a significant binding force for the Hong Kong community. We may explain this with the perspective of Post-colonialism; we may also explain this as the subconscious negotiation of the Hong Kong audience to the cultural works from Mainland China. I would say that there are three layers in the cultural identity of Hong Kong audience: Chinese, China, Communism.<sup>12</sup> While those films showing contemporary subject matter of Mainland China cannot attract so large a Hong Kong audience, films with traditional Chinese cultural forms are well received.

## Aesthetic Approach

The transformation of Cantonese opera from stage to screen is a unique case in Chinese cultural history. Recently some academic interests have circled around the development of Cantonese opera in the changing media ecology.<sup>13</sup> This raises fundamental problems in media aesthetics, and related problems in comparative textual analyses, media adaptation, and spectatorships. Nevertheless, past attention given to the genre was not specifically focused on film aesthetics. As such, there are many excellent Cantonese opera films awaiting appraisal by critics and scholars.

Taking reference from extant films, and various previous studies, researcher may be able to identify representative works.<sup>14</sup> Then we may conduct subsequent analyses of Cantonese opera films with terms in dramaturgy, film aesthetics and traditional Chinese aesthetics, including different sub-genres (melodrama, comedy, tragedy, martial arts play), and different major artists (directors, performers, screen writers) of the genre. Through the systematic documentation of extant audio-visual materials, with reference to their cinematic

treatments, aesthetic achievements and cultural impact, a judgment of their relative significance in the cultural form is possible.

For those scholars whose interests are on the discussions of selected films, which may be textual, comparative, and aesthetic. There are four levels of analysis:

1. Textual differences between the stage version and the screen version(s);
2. Cinematic treatments and their significations in the cinematic texts of the selected films;
3. Applying traditional Chinese aesthetics to the discussion of the selected films;
4. Comparative aesthetic discussion of the selected films with the non-Cantonese opera films produced in Hong Kong, and with representative Mainland Chinese opera films of the same period.

The challenge of the aesthetic approach, against the background of contemporary scholarship, is on its interdisciplinary nature. How conventional concepts of film language, e.g., shot perspective, shot angle, montage, long take, mise-en-scène, and contemporary Western cinematic analyses and critical theories, can be juxtaposed, even merging, with traditional Chinese aesthetic concepts?

This is a big question, and there is no one solution. Different people may have different preferences with respect to their interests and training. At present we need to establish the framework of vocabulary that combines cinematic language and concepts drawn from traditional Chinese aesthetics. With such a framework, anyone may be able to assess the value of the cultural form to the contemporary world.



<sup>12</sup> Lo Wai-luk, 'Dianying Faxing Zuowei Wenhua Shijian – Shuo Nanfang Ken Guang Tuo Ying' ('Film Distribution as Cultural Practice: Southern Film Corporation as a Pioneer of Lights and Shadows'), in *Ken Guang Tuo Ying: Nanfang Yinye Ban Shiji De Daolu (Pioneer of Lights and Shadows: The Half Century Journey of Southern Film Corporation)*, Shu Don-lok, Hong Kong: MCCM Creations, pp 201-203 (in Chinese).

<sup>13</sup> Yung Sai-shing, *Xunmi Yueju Sheng Ying: Cong Hongchuan Dao Shuiyindeng (From Red Boat to Silver Screen: Visual and Sonic Culture of Cantonese Opera)*, Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 2012 (in Chinese); Chen Xiangyang, 'Xianggang Yueju-dianying: Xiqu De Qiege Yu Chongjian' ('Hong Kong Cantonese Opera Film: The Cutting and Reconstruction of Chinese Opera'), in *Film Art*, No 3 (No 356 in total), Beijing, 2014, pp 41-48 (in Chinese).

<sup>14</sup> Bernice Au Man-fung and Ye Yuyan, 'Zhanhou Xianggang Yueju Fazhan Huigu' ('Retrospective of Hong Kong Cantonese Opera Development in Post-war Period'), in *Xianggang Bahehuiguan Sishi Zhounian Jinian Tekan (The Chinese Artists Association of Hong Kong 40 Years' Establishment Catalogue)*, Hong Kong: The Chinese Artists Association of Hong Kong, 1993, p 63 (in Chinese); Luo Li, *Yueju-dianying Shi (The History of Cantonese Opera Film)*, see note 6.



In what follow, I want to briefly mention the idea from my late teacher Lin Nien-tung, and what I have done to follow his research approach.

In the early 1980s, Lin Nien-tung created the term '*jingyou*', and applied it to appreciate the aesthetic construction principle of films, and to understand the historical development of Chinese cinema.<sup>15</sup> The concept consists of two words. The first word '*jing*', means 'the lens', and the second word '*you*', originating from the Taoist philosophy, means 'journeying'. The term may include, though does not necessarily imply, camera movement. As such, it means 'experiencing through the lens', for the concept stresses the interplay of the viewer and the film. The concept's aesthetic foundation is empathy, and its Western philosophic counterpart is Phenomenology. It has two aspects, '*muyou*', (experiencing with the eye) and '*xinyou*' (experiencing with the heart). Unfortunately, Lin Nien-tung died in 1990 and did not have the chance to apply the concept of '*jingyou*' to more contemporary films, e.g., those of Wong Kar-wai, Ang Lee, and Ann Hui, and to Cantonese opera cinema, a significant aspects of Chinese film history. Shortly before my teacher's passing away, he told me that what he had been striving for in film research consisted of three aspects:<sup>16</sup>

1. Establish the vocabulary to discuss the aesthetics of Chinese cinema;
2. Incorporate the vitality of the traditional Chinese aesthetic system into modern film art;
3. Exploring the ontological relationship between technology advancement and traditional culture.

What my late teacher did was not just teaching and research of film art. His perspective and volition are cultural practices in line with Fei Hsiao-tung's idea of cultural consciousness.

As Lin's student, I share his vision, and have been applying traditional Chinese aesthetics to Chinese cinema

studies. After returning from New York to Hong Kong in the mid-1990s, I revisited Cantonese films of the 1950s and 1960s, and felt on screen their genuine sense of life.

Supplementing Lin Nien-tung's '*jingyou*', I have created the concepts of 'shot organisation', 'emotional rhythm', and '*jingyun*' (poetic charm of a shot) to film studies in general, and in Cantonese opera films in particular. Shot organisation has three aspects:

1. The placement of the camera, that is, the position and angle at which the director lets the audience watch the scene;
2. The combination of camera movement and mise-en-scène, and the sequential changes of the images from one frame to another;
3. The emotions and emotional rhythm caused by the editing of different shots, and their relationship to the scene.

'*Yun*' (Literally 'poetic charm') is the aesthetic principle of Confucianism. The concept of '*jingyun*', when fusing with Lin's concept of '*jingyou*', which is closely associated with Taoist aesthetics, may generate an aesthetic synergy that help further develop Chinese film aesthetics.

In Chinese aesthetics, the idea of '*qi yun shengdong*'—the object is so lively that there is an aura surrounding it—is regarded as the ideal in painting. In fact, it is the first principle of the six methods of painting formulated by Hsieh He in the fifth century. It is worth exploring how this concept is applied to a meaningful appreciation of Chinese films, as film is a visual medium as well.

'*Yun*' is aesthetical. We could say some works have the taste of '*yun*'. We would say somebody has '*yun*', which means his/her temperament has some kind of charm, with mobility and harmony. In general, we don't use '*yun*' to describe things which are agitating, violent and magnificent, and also not to describe kitsch or



<sup>15</sup> Lin Nien-tung, *Jing-you (Roaming Images)*, Hong Kong: Su Yeh Publications, 1985 (in Chinese).

<sup>16</sup> Lo Wai Luk, 'Bianji Houji' ('Editor Epilogue'), in *Lin Niantong Lunwenji (Collected Essays of Lin Nien-tung)*, Lo Wai-luk and Mary Wong Shuk-han (eds), Hong Kong: Subculture Ltd, 1996, p 330 (in Chinese).



pornography. 'yun' is also a technique, a different kind of art, with different meanings with different *yunzhi*. Music has *leyun*, a garden has *yuanyun*, so for film, maybe we could say *jingyun*.

In 2008, I conducted an in-depth aesthetic analysis of Lee Tit's *The Legend of Purple Hairpin* (1959) and *Butterfly and Red Pear Blossom* (1959).<sup>17</sup> The two films were written by Tong Tik-sang, and performed by Yam Kim-fai and Pak Suet-sin. It should be noted that the director Li Tit was also the producer himself. Although the two films were produced in black and white only, the film language was excellent. Both can be regarded as classics of the Chinese cinema.

In that analysis, I have applied the concept of 'qiyun', 'jingyun' to the discussion of the Cantonese films, and it works very well. From that study, it becomes quite clear that the aesthetic achievements of the Cantonese opera cinema in the late 1950s to mid-1960s deserve further discussion and investigation. I have also applied traditional Chinese aesthetic concepts to discuss Yam Kim-fai's performance, and it brings new perspective in the appreciation of acting in Cantonese opera cinema.<sup>18</sup> This perspective may even help us to understanding the acting in other genres.

## Conclusion

Cantonese opera cinema played a major role in the development of Cantonese cinema. Before the mid-1950s, there were many so-called 'sing-song films' containing Cantonese opera songs, but there were not that many

films which actually merged the aesthetics of both the theatrical form of opera and the film medium. In the late 1950s, however, we see Hong Kong directors employing sophisticated film language to depict opera conventions and performances, and creating a form that fuses with an aura of Cantonese opera, whose emotional flow is natural, cinematic, and aesthetic.

If we compare the aesthetics of the representative works produced in Hong Kong to the non-Cantonese opera films produced in Hong Kong at that time (e.g., *Huangmei diao* films) produced in Hong Kong, and with Mainland Chinese opera films, we may see the differences in their approaches to traditional Chinese aesthetics. We will be able to formulate the cultural statement made by Cantonese opera cinema against the existing narrative of Hong Kong cinema, and the grand narrative of Chinese cinema history. For example, through a comparative study of a Cantonese opera film *The Jade Hairpin*, directed by Chow Sze-luk in 1962, to a Shanghai Yue Opera version of the same title, directed by Wu Yonggang produced in the same year, we may analyse the differences in the aesthetic approach between Hong Kong Cantonese opera cinema and Mainland's operatic cinema.<sup>19</sup>

In the 1950s, the number of Cantonese opera films was increasing. Some commentators said that its emergence directly threatened the stage performances of the Cantonese opera, which, as shown by data, actually began its decline in the early 1950s.<sup>20</sup> Therefore, the emergence of Cantonese opera films is a cultural inheritance. They are important cultural materials, and some are even art treasures.



<sup>17</sup> Lo Wai-luk, 'Xianggang Yueju-dianying Meixue Xiangdu Chutan — Lun Li Tie Xiqu-dianying De Qing-yun' ('A Preliminary Study on the Aesthetics Perspectives of Hong Kong Cantonese Opera Films: On Lee Tit's Chinese Opera Films' *Qing-yun*'), in *Yueju Guoji Yantaohui Lunwenji (Proceedings of International Conference on Cantonese Opera, Vol 1)*, Chow Shi-shum and Cheng Ling-yan (eds), Hong Kong: Cantonese Opera Research programme, Department of Music, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, pp 205-217 (in Chinese).

<sup>18</sup> Lo Wai-luk, 'Zhenzhi Ziran, Yi Xing Xie Shen — Shuo Ren Jianhui Biaoyan Yishu' ('Being a Natural: Bringing Out the Essence Through Forms—On Performing Art of Yam Kim-fai') in *Changtian Luo Caixia: Ren Jianhui De Juyi Shijie (Yam Kim Fai, 1913-1989: Portrait of a Chinese Opera Performance Prodigy)*, Vol 1, Wong Shiu-hon (ed), see note 7, pp 390-404 (in Chinese); Lo Wai-luk, 'Fengliu Caizi Yu Hanzhi Shaonian: Ren Jianhui De Liang Zhang Lian' ('From Libertine Scholar to Honest Young Man: Two Faces of Yam Kim-fai'), in *Jingyan Yibai Nian: 2013 Jinian Ren Jianhui Nushi Bainian Danchen Yueju Yishu Guoji Yantaohui Lunwenji (Fascinated Charm for a Century: Proceedings of the 2013 International Seminar on Cantonese Opera in Memory of the Centenary of Madam Yam Kim Fai)*, Vol 2, Wong Shiu-hon (ed), see note 7, pp 293-305 (in Chinese).

<sup>19</sup> Chow Sze-luk directed a *Huangmei diao* film *The Female Prince* (1964) shortly before he passed away.

<sup>20</sup> Bernice Au Man-fung and Ye Yuyan, 'Zhanhou Xianggang Yueju Fazhan Huigu' ('Retrospective of Hong Kong Cantonese Opera Development in Post-war Period'), see note 14, p 63 (in Chinese).



In Hong Kong, filmmakers have not been producing Cantonese opera film since the late 1970s. It might be due to the changing cultural ecology with the emergence of contemporary Hong Kong urban popular culture. The future revival of the form may result from a change in the conception of the form's cultural position. Besides being a product of the entertainment business, it may also be a cultural product, representing the aesthetic achievements of Hong Kong. There may be Cantonese opera films produced as art films, experimental films, or documentaries. Hence, a study of the evolution, cultural significance, aesthetic achievements, and impact of

Hong Kong Cantonese opera cinema can contribute to the revival of the form, as a discourse, and, hopefully, as creative works.

The research on Cantonese opera cinema helps establish the form's cultural position in Hong Kong's cultural history. Furthermore, the aesthetic approach may make ways for Hong Kong films' aesthetic position in Chinese cinema history. During the golden period of Cantonese opera cinema, the aesthetic achievements of some works are excellent, and should be known.

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A poster of the Mainland Yue opera film *The Jade Hairpin* (1962)

# Yam Kim-fai's Cross-gender Acting as Both Yingtai and Shanbo: A Study of Multiple Roles in *Liang-Zhu* Films

Yu Siu-wah

Since the release of the Mainland-produced Shanghaiese Yue opera film *Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai* (colour, 1954), numerous outstanding portrayals of the lead characters Liang Shanbo ('Leung Shan-pak' in Cantonese) and Zhu Yingtai ('Chuk Ying-toi' in Cantonese) have each captured the hearts of generations of movie fans. That said, no one has accomplished the feat as brilliantly as Yam Kim-fai—because no other actress has played both roles of Zhu Yingtai and Liang Shanbo (also commonly known as 'The Butterfly Lovers' in the West) on film. The two films in which Yam was featured in, as we were saying, are *New Love Story of Leung Shan-pak and Chuk Ying-toi* (directed by Chan Pei, 1951) and *The Tragic Story of Leung Shan-pak and Chuk Ying-toi* (directed by Lee Tit, 1958). The former production was not inflected by the Shanghaiese Yue opera film, and demonstrated a conspicuous Hong Kong-style creativity; while numerous scenes in the latter, including Liang and Zhu crossing the single-plank bridge together, Yingtai's journey to her wedding and weeping at the grave, etc., are obviously shadowing the style of Shanghaiese Yue opera film—including scene composition, camera movements, as well as costumes and stylings of lead characters.

## A Brief History of Hong Kong-produced *Liang-Zhu* Films

Two Mainland's Chinese opera films in the 1950s—Shanghaiese Yue opera film *Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai*<sup>1</sup> and *Huangmei* opera film *Marriage of the Fairy Princess* (aka *Fairy Couple*, B&W, 1955)—were most significant in the fields of Chinese film, Chinese opera, Chinese politics and culture. Their influences in, and

inspiration to, Hong Kong cinema are also apparently visible. It is evident that in terms of scene-breakdown, use and details of shots, stills of character costumes and stylings, or even lyrics—both the Cantonese opera-styled *The Tragic Story of Leung Shan-pak and Chuk Ying-toi* and the Mandarin *Huangmei* opera-styled *The Love Eterne* (1963) referred to the Shanghaiese Yue opera film and appropriated it to their own privileged time and space. This is as plain as a historical fact. However, the unprecedented success of the two films (1958 and 1963) often cause scholars and fans to ignore the numerous other *Liang-Zhu* films made in the 1950s.

Yam Kim-fai is not the only actress to have acted in two *Liang-Zhu* films. Lu Fen, a star of Hong Kong's Amoy-dialect cinema led the role as Zhu Yingtai in both *Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai* (1952) and *Lian San Pak Chok Yin Tai* (1955). Meanwhile, Ivy Ling Po, well-known to the Hong Kong audience, is a special case in point. She played the maid Renxin in *Lian San Pak Chok Yin Tai*, the 1955 Amoy-dialect film starring Lu Fen, under the screen name Xiao Juan. Eight years later, under the screen name Ivy Ling Po, she played the brotherly role Liang in the Shaw Brothers' production *The Love Eterne* and mesmerised Chinese audiences in Hong Kong, Taiwan and Southeast Asia. In addition to Lu Fen, Yam Kim-fai and Ivy Ling Po (aka Xiao Juan), Yee Chau-shui and Leung Mo-sheung had also starred twice in the *Liang-Zhu* film series. Yee Chau-shui played the same character Shijiu, a boy servant attending to study, in two *Liang-Zhu* films: *The Butterfly Lovers, Part One and Part Two* (1948) and *New Love Story of Leung Shan-pak and Chuk Ying-toi* (1951). Leung Mo-sheung, following the path of Ivy Ling Po, first played Renxin in *New Love Story*



<sup>1</sup> For specific influences of Shanghaiese Yue opera film *Butterfly Lovers* (1953) on Hong Kong films, see Yu Siu-wah, 'Cong Si Ge Gang-chan *Liang-Zhu* Banben Kan Dalu Wenhua Zai Xianggang De Bentuhua' ('Observing the Localisation of Mainland Culture in Hong Kong from Four Hong Kong-produced *Liang-Zhu* Versions'), in *Zhongguo Yinyue Yanjiu Zai Xinshiji De Dingwei Guoji Xueshu Yantaohui Lunwenji* (*Proceeding on Chinese Music Research: New Perspectives in the 21st Century International Conference*), Music Department of The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Research Institute of Music of the China Research Academy of Arts, Society of Traditional Chinese Music (eds), Beijing: People's Music Publishing House, 2001, pp 1042-1058 (in Chinese).



of Leung Shan-pak and Chuk Ying-toi and four years later played the lead role Shanbo in *The Romance of Leung Shan-pak and Chuk Ying-toi* (opposite Cheng Bik-ying's Yingtai, 1955). Even veteran librettist Ng Yat-siu, touted as 'King of Songs' of the era, wrote the lyrics for two *Liang-Zhu* films in 1951 and 1958 respectively. Please see the table below for reference.

The shared acting experience between Ivy Ling Po and Leung Mo-sheung is intriguing. From playing Renxin, the personal maid, they leapt not to playing the

female lead Yingtai but instead as her lover Shanbo. This is not simply a cross-gender switch (known in operatic circles as 'crossing of role types'), it is also a cross-over in gender performances in film and popular culture. In a colloquial manner of speaking—'the maid didn't "rise above" to become the mistress. Voila! She became the husband instead'. It was a breakthrough in, and elevation of, identity, gender and social standing; in other words, the 'role shift' means leaping onto a completely different 'ladder', stepping into a completely different 'category'!



A handbill of Amoy-dialect film *Lian San Pak Chok Yin Tai* (1955): Lu Fen (left) who plays Liang Shanbo, and Jiang Fan (right) who plays Zhu Yingtai.



The handbill of the Chaozhou-dialect film, *Leung San Par Chok Ying Toi* (1963).



To facilitate further discussion, the table below chronicles some major *Liang-Zhu* films, either produced in Hong Kong or share with Hong Kong a close-knit relationship:

Hong Kong Premiere Date	Film Title	Director(s)	As Liang Shanbo, Zhu Yingtai <sup>2</sup>	As Shijiu, Renxin <sup>3</sup>	Music
11 & 26 September 1935	<i>The Butterfly Lovers, Part One and Part Two</i> (Cantonese)	Runje Shaw (aka Shao Zuiweng)	Luo Pinchao (aka Lo Ban-chiu), Tam Yuk-lam	Chu Ling-wan, Tsui Sau-fong (aka Tsui Yan-sum)	
16 & 22 September 1948	<i>The Butterfly Lovers, Part One and Part Two</i> (Cantonese)	Fung Chi-kong	Cheung Wood-yau, Hung Sin Nui	Yee Chau-shui, Tsi Po-to	
6 September 1951	<i>New Love Story of Leung Shan-pak and Chuk Ying-toi</i> (Cantonese)	Chan Pei	Wong Chiu-mo, Yam Kim-fai	Yee Chau-shui, Leung Mo-sheung	Music: Wong Che-si, Mak Siu-fung, Leung Ho-yin, Lee Ying-yeung
12 June 1952	<i>Leung Shan-pak's Second Meeting with Chuk Ying-toi</i> (Cantonese)	Chan Pei	Sun Ma Si-tsang, Tang Bik-wan	Auyeung Kim, Chan Lo-wah	Lyricist, Chu Ting-hok, Sin Kon-chi; Music: Wong Che-si, Leung Yu-fong, Chu Ngai-kong, Choi Kim-fui
12 October 1952	<i>Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai</i> (Amoy-dialect)	But Fu	Huang Shi, Lu Fen		
16 December 1954	<i>Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai</i> (Yue Opera)	Sang Hu, Huang Sha	Fan Ruijuan, Yuan Xuefen	Wei Xiaoyun (Sijiu), Lü Ruiying (Yinxin)	Composer: Liu Ruzeng; Music Performance: Music Team of Yueju Experimental Troupe, East China Opera Research Institute



<sup>2</sup> Translations varied in different films. In general, Liang Shanbo (Leung Shan-pak in Cantonese) is the main male character and Zhu Yingtai (Chuk Ying-toi in Cantonese) is the main female character.

<sup>3</sup> Translations varied in different films. In general, Shijiu (Si-kau in Cantonese) refers to the servant of Liang Shanbo, and Renxin (Yan-sum in Cantonese) refers to the maid of Zhu Yingtai.



3 August 1955	<i>Lian San Pak</i> <i>Chok Yin Tai</i> (Amoy-dialect)	Chow Sze-luk	Lu Fen, Jiang Fan	Li Ming, Xiao Juan (aka Ivy Ling Po) <sup>4</sup>	Music: Song Yun, Jin Mu; Lyricist: Li Junqing (aka Li Chun-ching), Hu Tong
10 August 1955	<i>The Romance of Leung Shan-pak and Chuk Ying-toi</i> (Cantonese)	Wong Tin-lam <sup>5</sup>	Leung Mo-sheung, Cheng Bik-ying	Hui Ying-ying, Lee Ngan (Yinxin)	Lyricist: Law Bo-sang
20 August 1958	<i>The Tragic Story of Leung Shan-pak and Chuk Ying-toi</i> (Cantonese)	Lee Tit	Yam Kim-fai, Fong Yim-fun	Chow Hoi-tong, Chan Ho-kau	Music: Lam Siu-lau, Wong Che-si, Wong Kei-ho, Lee So, Chu Ngai-kong, Lau Siu-wing, Lee Tik-sang, Leung Yu-fong; Lyricist: Ng Yat-siu; Score producer: Lam Siu-lau
4 April 1963	<i>The Love Eterne</i> (Mandarin)	Li Han-hsiang	Ivy Ling Po, Betty Loh Ti	Li Kun (Sijiu), Jen Chieh (Yinxin)	Composer: Zhou Lanping; Lyricist, Li Junqing
4 July 1963	<i>Leung San Par Chok Ying Toi</i> (Chaozhou-dialect) <sup>6</sup>	Yang Fan	Chong Suet-kuen, Shek Ling	Qiu Liqing, Cheng Shun-ying (Yinxin)	Composer: To Wah
25 December 1964	<i>The Romance of Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai</i> (Mandarin)	Yan Jun	Li Lihua, Lucilla You Min	Lydia Shum (Sijiu), Shum Chi-wah (Yinxin)	



<sup>4</sup> Composed in Fujianese *nanyin jinqiu*, see Wang Ying-fen, 'Shayu Guzhuangpian De Yinyue Yunyong: Yi Nanguan Wei Jiaodian' ('The Music of Amoy-dialect Period Films: The Case of *Nanguan*'), in *Xianggang Shayu Dianying Fangzong (The Amoy-dialect Films of Hong Kong)*, May Ng (ed), Hong Kong: Hong Kong Film Archive, 2012, pp 96-109 (in Chinese).

<sup>5</sup> Musical movies directed by Wong Tim-lam: (Mandarin films): *Songs of the Peach Blossom River* (starring Chung Ching, Lo Wei, Peter Chen Ho, 1956), *The Wild, Wild Rose* (starring Grace Chang, Chang Yang, 1960); Amoy-dialect film: *Shrews from Afar* (Starring Chong Sit Fong, Xiao Juan, 1958).

<sup>6</sup> Produced by Tung Shan Film Co., directed by Yeung Fan; written by Chen Binghua; composed by To Wah.

Hong Kong Premiere Date	Film Title	Director(s)	As Liang Shanbo, Zhu Yingtai	As Shijiu, Renxin	Music
13 August 1994	<i>The Lovers</i> (Cantonese)	Tsui Hark <sup>7</sup>	Nicky Wu Chi-lung, Charlie Young		Music: James Wong, Mark Lui, William Wu Wai-Lap, Raymond Wong; Theme Song 'The Butterfly Lovers Violin Concerto' (Composer: He Zhanhao, Chen Gang; Lyricist: James Wong); Soundtrack 'Yuanlai Shi Ni' ('It's You', adapted from <i>huangmeidiao</i> opera by James Wong; Lyricist: James Wong); Soundtrack 'Ni Ni Wo Wo' ('You You Me Me'; Composer: William Wu Wai-Lap; Lyricist: James Wong)
9 October 2008	<i>Butterfly Lovers</i> (Cantonese)	Jingle Ma Chor-sing	Wu Chun, Charlene Choi	Bonnie Xian (Yinxin)	Original Music: Chiu Tsang-hei, Ronald Fu; Theme song 'Xintiao Ru Ge' ('Heartbeat Cantabile') (Composer and Executive Producer: Chiu Tsang-hei; Lyricist: Lin Xi; Music Arranger: Ronald Fu Yuen-Wai); Film Music: 'The Butterfly Lovers Violin Concerto' (Composer: He Zhanhao, Chen Gang; Music production: Chang Jen-tsei)



<sup>7</sup> Tsui Hark's version of the *Butterfly Lovers* slightly twisted the original storyline—Shanbo has from early on discovered Yingtai's identity as a girl, and an extra scene is inserted where the two has had intimate relationship in a cave. The stage version *The Lover* (directed by Roy Szeto; written by Raymond To Kwok-wai; starring Tse Kwan-ho and Koi Ming-fai, 1998) drifted further away, the male-to-male relationship between Liang and Zhu forms the major core of the plot.







The song book (with music notation) of *New love story of Leung Shan-pak and Chuk Ying-toi* (1951), featuring Yam Kim-fai (as Zhu Yingtai) on the cover.



After playing Renxin in *New Love Story of Leung Shan-pak and Chuk Ying-toi* (1951), Leung Mo-sheung 'jumps ahead' to play Liang Shanbo in *The Romance of Leung Shan-pak and Chuk Ying-tai* (1955). The picture shows the film's brochure cover: (from left) Leung Mo-sheung, Cheng Bik-ying.

There were a total of six Hong Kong-produced *Liang-Zhu* films in the 1950s. Three more were made in the 1960s. It can be said that the 1950s and 60s were the golden age of *Liang-Zhu* films in Hong Kong. This era marked the first 20 years after the establishment of the People's Republic of China, two decades after Hong Kong's political and economic separation from Mainland China. Thirty years would pass before Tsui Hark, near the end of the century, would make *The Lovers* (1994) on the same theme. That was the final *Liang-Zhu* film of the 20th century. Was it a culmination of all the previous films and a suitably grand conclusion? It's a matter of debate. Perhaps the 21st-Century film can no longer abide by the old-fashioned opera versions of the *Liang-Zhu*, thus the birth of new works such as *The Martial Arts Butterfly Lovers* (2008).

Among Hong Kong films of that era, there are examples of different films made of the same story (with different casts). Even the same story, played by the same leads, was remade. An outstanding example is *A Beauty's Flourishing Fragrance* (1955) and *Sweet Dew on a Beautiful Flower* (1959), both sharing the same plot and Chinese film title, and both starring Yam Kim-fai and Fong Yim-fun.<sup>8</sup> A total of nine *Liang-Zhu* films came out of Hong Kong, a tiny British colony outside the Mainland Chinese border in the 1950s and 60s. This essay will focus on *New Love Story of Leung Shan-pak and Chuk Ying-toi*, with Yam starring as Yingtai, concentrating on how the film used songs and music to tell the story, and how the cross-gender performances were handled musically.<sup>9</sup>



<sup>8</sup> See Yu Siu-wah and Li Siu-leung, 'The Principal and the Second in Two Films Starring Yam Kim-fai and Fong Yim-fun', in *Newsletter*, Issue 78, Hong Kong: Hong Kong Film Archive, November 2016. <https://www.filmarchive.gov.hk/documents/2005525/2007343/e-78-more-translation.pdf>. Accessed on 17 September 2019; Yu Siu-wah, 'How Musical Tradition Evolves—A Case Study of Films Starring Fong Yim-fun and Sun Ma Si-tsang', in *Newsletter*, Issue 79, Hong Kong: Hong Kong Film Archive, February 2017. <https://www.filmarchive.gov.hk/documents/2005525/2007343/e-79-more-translation.pdf>. Accessed on 17 September 2019.

<sup>9</sup> The film's cross-gender performances referred to in this discussion is a different issue than the basic cross-gender character portrayals in the opera genre.

## The Myth Regarding Yam Kim-fai's Gender Identity Based on Audial/Visual Imagery<sup>10</sup>

In Cantonese opera, when male actors sing the roles of *xiaosheng* (young civil male), *wenwusheng* (civil and military male), *laosheng* (old male) and *chousheng* (male clown), they use their 'true voice' (natural vocal delivery), which the industry referred to as *pinghou*. But when male actors play female roles<sup>11</sup> they will sing in *false* to achieve *zihou* (female voice).<sup>12</sup> Interestingly, whether female actors sing in *zihou* or performing male roles in *pinghou*, they always sing in *false*. From the early 1900s until the 1960s, it was popular in the opera world for blind songstresses and female vocalists to perform solo singing from the male point of view in *pinghou* (male voice). Blind songstresses Yun Sum and Ngan Giu, and professional singers known for singing in *pinghou* such as Siu Ming Sing and Tsui Lau-sin, all sang from the male point of view. Their vocal range was slightly lower and therefore not songbird-like but also not specifically in the male range, resulting in a kind of beauty of ambivalence. That style was extremely popular for a time. But among all those women singing in *pinghou*, Yam Kim-fai's was more definitely a male voice. In addition, she was extremely convincing as a male character onstage with appropriate appearance and gestures. The audience/listeners seldom questioned her gender and identity.

### Yam Kim-fai as Yingtai in *New Love Story of Leung Shan-pak and Chuk Ying-toi*

When Yam Kim-fai dresses up as a woman on screen, it is usually for comic or sarcastic effect. *That's for My Love* (1953) is a classic example of Yam showing

her sensual feminine side. The fact that Yam has played Zhu Yingtai in a *Liang-zhu* film is out of expectation. According to current data, Yam first played Yingtai in the film *New Love Story of Leung Shan-pak and Chuk Ying-toi* (which premiered on 6 September 1951, with Wong Chiu-mo starring as Shanbo). Later that year, on 10 December, she starred with Kwai Ming-yeung (who played Shanbo) in Bo Fung Opera Troupe's Cantonese opera *New Love Story of Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai*.<sup>13</sup> Both the film and Cantonese opera shared the same Chinese title. In addition, both works shared the same lyricist, Ng Yat-siu, the 'Kings of Songs'. Thus, it can be deduced that numerous, musical elements in the Cantonese opera version are coincidentally similar, or even identical to the film version. I have not watched the Cantonese opera version, but it is unlikely that Ng Yat-siu would write a whole new libretto and arrange new scores for the same story in three short months.

In the film, Shanbo is played by Wong Chiu-mo, known as 'New Kwai Ming-yeung'. Yam Kim-fai had always looked upon Kwai as her idol, purposely learning his performance style. Having grasped the essence of his style, she was known among the opera circle as 'Female Kwai Ming-yeung'. In other words, the film starred both 'New Kwai Ming-yeung' and 'Female Kwai Ming-yeung'. The real Kwai Ming-yeung was a real titan in the world of Cantonese opera. Not only was he a tremendously popular player of *xiaowu* (young military male) in his day, he was also the representative character of Kwai style, one of the five major performance styles in Cantonese opera.

For this opportunity to act opposite her idol on stage, Yam made what must have been a difficult decision to give up her already successful reputation as a 'female *wenwusheng*' (civil and military male role played



<sup>10</sup> Regarding Miss Yam's portrayals of female *wenwusheng* (civil and military male), see Yung Sai-shing, 'Wenwu Gong Ti, Cixiong Tongzai: Tan Ren Jianhui De *Dahongpao*' ('As Warrior and Scholar, As Male and Female: On Yam Kim-fai's *The Great Red Robe*') and Michael Lam, 'Cong Zhu Yingtai Dao Liang Shanbo' ('From Chuk Ying-toi to Leung Shan-pak'), in *Ren Jianhui Duben (A Yam Kim-fai Reader)* (Second Edition), Michael Lam (ed), Hong Kong: Hong Kong Film Archive, 2005, pp 36-45, 80-86 (in Chinese). For details regarding cross-dressing and cross-gender performances, please refer to Li Siu-leung, *Cross-Dressing in Chinese Opera*, Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2003.

<sup>11</sup> Some more well-known Cantonese opera male actors playing female roles include Siu Lai-cheung, Chan Fei-nung, Lam Chiu-kwan, Chin Lei Kui, etc.; in Peking opera these actors are known as *qiandan*, the most famous of whom is Mei Lanfang.

<sup>12</sup> Actors playing male roles in Peking opera and Kun opera also sing in *false*, but they do not sing in *pinghou*. Their vocal range is high, close to that of woman's range, but occasionally with male voice characteristics mixed in. The attraction therein is the restrained, feeble image they project.

<sup>13</sup> Frederick Kwai (ed), *Yueju Guipai Chuangshiren, Jinpai Xiaowu Gui Mingyang (The Founder of Kwai School, Golden Xiaowu Kwai Ming-yeung)*, Hong Kong: Legend Enterprises Company Ltd., p 93 (in Chinese).



by a female performer), and transformed into a player of *dan* (female) roles to tackle the part of Zhu Yingtai. At the time, Kwai Ming-yeung enjoyed a much higher status than Yam in terms of seniority, qualifications and artistic achievement. In addition, his troupe, the Bo Fung Opera Troupe, already had its own resident cast. Yam was never a part of that troupe, and as such did not participate in its first and second seasons. It is said that the patron who brought about the collaboration between Yam and Kwai Ming-yeung—so they could perform together onstage—is the patron of Kwai’s troupe, famous Macau business mogul Ho Yin.<sup>14</sup>

For the troupe’s second season, the cast was joined by Pak Suet-sin. Yam Kim-fai only joined them for their third season to play the role she had performed with Wong Chiu-mo about three months ago on the film *New Love Story of Leung Shan-pak and Chuk Ying-toi*. Also, Pak, later Yam’s permanent partner in Sin Fung Ming Opera Troupe, played the role of her maid Renxin in the opera. One can only imagine how thrilled Yam must have been.<sup>15</sup> Other Cantonese operas produced by Bo Fung Opera Troupe, in which Yam had co-starred with Kwai Ming-yeung included *Mulan, the Girl who Went to War* and *The Frightened Anser Captures the Beauty’s Heart*.<sup>16</sup>

I first encountered *The Tragic Story of Leung Shan-pak and Chuk Ying-toi* (starring Fong Yim-fun as Yingtai), in which Yam Kim-fai starred as Liang Shanbo, and only many years later I watched her play Yingtai in the film *New Love Story of Leung Shan-pak and Chuk Ying-toi*. For me, it was a huge shock and confusion. When she weeps at the grave in male costumes, I was wondering whether Yam was playing Shanbo or Yingtai. I couldn’t understand how Shanbo would go to visit his own grave and mourn himself.

*New Love Story of Leung Shan-pak and Chuk Ying-toi* is divided into 29 scenes, probably due to the film

shooting conventions. An opera cannot possibly have so many scene changes on stage. The film uses the western-style wedding ceremony and reception as the story framework. As the plot advances, the guests ask the bride and groom about how they met and fell in love, allowing the couple the opportunity to set in motion, to introduce the *Liang-Zhu* story which was performed in period costume. This is perhaps the only film in which Yam wears a bridal gown! Thus, the use of Wagner’s ‘*Der Walkürenritt*’ (‘The Ride of the Valkyrie’) from Wagner’s opera *Die Walküre, Der Ring des Nibelungen* (*The Valkyrie, The Ring of the Nibelung*) in the first scene and ‘The Bridal Chorus’ from his opera *Lohengrin* is very appropriately western in style, providing a stark contrast to the classical Cantonese opera music in the period costume part of the film.

The Cantonese opera part of the film opens with the teacher (played by Ko Lo-chuen) singing a rhythmic *banyan* to teach the ‘Three Character Classic’, starting from the first verse ‘People at Birth’. Yingtai, Renxin (played by Leung Mo-sheung) and Zhu’s sister-in-law (played by Lam Mui-mui) engage in a musical conversation in the form of *xiaoqu* (short tunes) ‘New Four Seasons Flower’—narrating Yingtai’s desire to further her education in Hangzhou. The three of them then sing in *myu* (a free-metre narrative aria type with no accompaniment) and the tune ‘Selling Red Beans’ to continue the discussion. Even when Yingtai’s father (played by Ho Tai-so) and mother (played by Piu Wai-mui) join in, they continue to sing in the *myu* format. This scene between Yingtai and Renxin was filmed in 1951. Who could imagine that this pair of mistress and servant would soon be elevated in status? Both Leung Mo-sheung, four years hence in *The Romance of Leung Shan-pak and Chuk Ying-toi*<sup>17</sup> and Yam Kim-fai, seven years hence in *The tragic story of Leung Shan-pak and Chuk Ying-toi*, crossed the gender divide and transformed into the male lead Liang Shanbo!



<sup>14</sup> They started on 18 October 1951, with lead players Kwai Ming-yeung, Liu Hap-wai, Pak Yuk-tong, Law Lai-kuen, Cheng Bik-ying and Sek Yin-tsi, etc. they were later joined by Lee Hoi-chuen, Yee Chau-shui and Chan Kam-tong, etc. See Frederick Kwai (ed), *Yueju Guipai Chuangshiren, Jinpai Xiaowu Gui Mingyang (The Founder of Kwai School, Golden Xiaowu Kwai Ming-yeung)*, *ibid*, p 97 (in Chinese).

<sup>15</sup> As can be seen in the photograph in Frederick Kwai (ed), *Yueju Guipai Chuangshiren, Jinpai Xiaowu Gui Mingyang (The Founder of Kwai School, Golden Xiaowu Kwai Ming-yeung)*, see note 13, p 187 (in Chinese).

<sup>16</sup> See note 13, p 93 (in Chinese).

<sup>17</sup> This *Liang-Zhu* film features an all-female cast: Yingtai played by Cheng Bik-ying, Yin Hsin played by Lee Ngan, Shijiu played by Hui Ying-ying and Zhu’s Father played by Ma Siu-ying; directed by Wong Tin-lam, lyrics and music arranged by Law Po-sang.



In the films where Yam Kim-fai played young male roles, she had always utilised her voice according to the gender and role requirements. For example, at the beginning of the story, the singers use the *muyu* style of singing to discuss Yingtai's desire to leave home and study. When faced with much opposition, Yingtai sings that she will disguise herself as a boy. She sings in *zihou* the whole time, until she arrives at the line 'learn the ways of a gentleman, wait for my lover in the West Chamber'—then she changes to *pinghou* according to the story of the script. Thereafter, in the scenes such as when disguising herself as a blind fortune-teller man, meeting Liang Shanbo on her way to Hangzhou, becoming sworn brothers with Shanbo, living and studying in the same room for three years with Shanbo, as well as the ten-mile send-off, Yam sings with her *pinghou*. This continuity of course makes sense, because Yingtai at that time was disguised as a boy.

When Yingtai returns home, her parents are overjoyed to see her. At that time, in the eyes of her family, she has resumed her female identity. However, after discovering she has been betrothed to Ma Wencai, she sings 'Lament of Lady Zhao Jun' to resist against her parents—she still sings in *pinghou*! It must be pointed out, though, that Yingtai and Renxin are still wearing men's clothes. This scene is quite long, and is followed by three *xiaoqu*: 'Tiny Red Lantern', 'Nightingale under the Willow Tree' and 'Tulips'. Between the *xiaoqu* are numerous passages sung by various characters in *muyu* style. Yingtai and Renxin both sing in *pinghou* throughout the entire scene; not until the meeting in the pavilion that she changes back to *zihou*.

When I first watched this film, I had previously watched *The Tragic story of Leung Shan-pak and Chuk Ying-toi*, and was so completely confused by Yam Kim-fai's identities as Shanbo or Yingtai that I failed to notice the discrepancy. Until later, when I discovered this issue, I could not figure it out and was bothered by it. Yam is completely at ease with her young scholar portrayal. Her signature cross-gender performance, the young, gentle, handsome scholar, is tremendously well-loved by the audience. Her portrayal of the young female role

is also a very pleasant surprise. The audience preferred her cross-gender performances though – the gentle, handsome young scholar. Certainly, *pinghou* is her expertise, probably towards which she would gravitate naturally.

Director Chan Pei should have been perfectly clear on the numerous times Yam Kim-fai changes back and forth between her male and female roles in terms of appearance as well as between *pinghou* and *zihou*. In the film, Yam's *zihou* is dubbed over by Leung Mo-sik.<sup>18</sup> During the pre-production sound recording, it is technically not difficult to have the dubber sing in *zihou*, narrating the happenings after Yingtai returns home. Thus, having Yam sing that section in her *pinghou* during production seems intentional. Chan Pei and Yam herself would not have forgotten the crucially important gender indicators of vocal timbre and range. But after returning home, Yingtai (as a girl) still sings in *pinghou*. Could it be that they decided to satisfy the fans' desire and market demand for her *pinghou* and ignore the 'consistency' in vocal timbre? Regarding the overall dramatic effect of the visual and aural tracks, perhaps gender specialists will have a deeper insight.

Some critics believe, in this film 'even the dialogue has been replaced by singing; the plot, characters and their movements and all incidents are expressed through singing and *nianbai* (dialogue recitation)'.<sup>19</sup> In fact, the twenty-one period costume scenes in the film are all expressed through Cantonese opera-style singing and reciting. There is basically no plain dialogue. Only in the eight opening, intermittent and bookending scenes set in modern times contain dialogue. The music in the film *New Love Story of Leung Shan-pak and Chuk Ying-toi* is presented in the traditional Cantonese opera ways, but more intensely and consciously. In the film, the period costume portion is sung from beginning to end. After all, the publicity focused on the copious amounts of *xiaoqu*, *nanyin* (Southern tunes) and *banghuang*. Incorporating various kinds of music repertoire started to be trendy in Hong Kong film in the early 1950s. As to how 'even the dialogue has been replaced by singing', we must explore the relationship between *nianbai* and singing.



<sup>18</sup> Xia, Qiu and Er, 'Zhuangtai Qian Kong Que Ma Jinling Xiaoshou, Yinmu Shang Mei Qi Zheng Mengxia Fuyuan' ('At the Makeup Table, Hung Cheuk and Margarita Ma are Wan; Onscreen, Mui Yee and Cheang Mang-ha are Demobilised'), *Wen Wei Pao*, Hong Kong, 24 July 1951 (in Chinese).

<sup>19</sup> Natalia Chan, 'Nanzhuang Zhu Yingtai' ('Male Version's Zhu Yingtai'), *Hong Kong Economic Journal*, 15 November 2012, C07 (in Chinese).





In general, three forms of singing are used in this film. The first are the *xiaoqu*. These include pieces originally intended to be instrumental interludes, *paizi* (set instrumental tunes), Cantonese instrumental music and *xiaoqu* composed specifically for Cantonese opera, tunes originally sung in *guanhua* (official dialect similar to and earlier than Mandarin) and melodies from Mandarin popular songs. These relatively shorter tunes, of whatever origin, once they are sung in Cantonese, they become Cantonese opera-style *xiaoqu*. They are usually sung by the lead characters. Sometimes, numerous singers will sing one section each (of the same melody). One example is the song used in the scene 'Ten-Mile Send-Off at Long Pavilion'. 'Crazy World' is a Mandarin popular song sung by Zhou Xuan. The first verse (The 'A' line in the 'ABA' format) is sung six times, as follows (only the first line is written out below):

A1: (Yingtai: 'At my departure, some things are difficult to say')

A2: (Shanbo: 'A crescent moon is hard to make round')

B1: (Yingtai: 'Stop missing one another')

A3: (Shanbo: 'We ate and slept together')

A4: (Ying Hsin: 'Your luggage is at the door')

A5: (Shijiu: 'You're taking forever to say goodbye')

B2: (Yingtai: 'When we meet again next year')

A6: (Shanbo: 'Ancestors said goodbye at long pavilion')

Repeating a melody continuously will help the audience remember it, and make the overall vocal piece more coherent.

The second form of sung passage includes Cantonese narrative singing in various styles such as *nanyin*, *muyu*, *banyan*, *bailan* and 'Saltwater Songs' (applicable to the scenes where Shanbo and Yintai first encounter each other, and where Shijiu invites Renxin to chess match) that have long since been assimilated into the Cantonese opera music repertoire. It also includes shorter songs in styles such as *sanjiaodeng* (Literally 'three-legged stool') and *gunhua*. Among the above styles, only *nanyin* is longer and can become an important vocal passage for a lead actor; the rest are shorter and more upbeat short tunes, usually sung by the minor characters. For example, near the opening of the film, the teacher sings in the *banyan* style. The lyrics are more colloquial, the music is metered, and with instrumental interludes.

However, the overall delivery is rather close to that of spoken dialogue.

'I'll talk about "People at Birth" to teach you how to behave the way you were born.

How seldom do they listen so quietly, none of them making a sound.

Oh, why have the whole lot of rascals all fallen asleep?

As if their constitutions lack fire, everyone is dozing off.

Speaking of which, I want to doze off with them....'

The rhythm and beat of *muyu* are relatively freer, unmetered, the actor sings according to the inherent melodic contour and rhythm of the lyrics, with a clear sense of chanting and recitation. The last syllable in each line is prolonged; each line can have different numbers of words, as long as the up and down beats match the format:

Yingtai: Sister-in-law, why do you have such an evil mind and so anxiety-ridden? The Hangzhou man I speak of is a very nice gentleman.

Renxin: Miss has always yearned for higher education; whenever she talks about going to school in Hangzhou, she can think of nothing else.

Sister-in-Law: I say you girls are malcontents; you speak of going to study, but are actually going to meet with your boyfriends!

Renxin: What boyfriends? You can look for your own. We are pure as lotus, unlike you, who are married.

*Muyu*, like Cantonese opera's *gunhua*, has quite heavy chanting and reciting elements, but has no set rhythm (i.e., *sanban*). Each line is chanted according to its natural rhythm and inherent linguistic contour, usually with the last word prolonged with melisma. Although it is 'sung', the result is very similar to spoken dialogue. It is followed by lines sung to the melody of a Mandarin popular song 'Selling Red Beans', originally sung by Yao Lee:

Sister-in-Law: Hey! You dare to meddle in my business, you lowly person; who do you think you are?...

Renxin: I don't have to be anyone. It's your fault for talking down to others. I hate you most; you always take advantage of others.

Sister-in-law: And I say you're asking to be beaten.

Once the song is sung in Cantonese, it becomes a *xiaoqu*, complete with colloquial lyrics that are quite grass-root taste, almost like spoken dialogue, and full of Cantonese flavour.

With the exception of a few unmetred deliveries (e.g. *shouban* or *gunhua*) that are of free-form rhythm, the singing style of Cantonese opera has a clear system of meter (*dingban*). Among the formulae, the *sanjiaodeng*; it has clear rhythm and interludes, similar to the *banyan*. With different melodic characteristics, the delivery of these two categories are similar to spoken dialogue but they are sung, with a lighter, and faster rhythm. For example, when Renxin drags the blind man (played by Sin Kon-chi) into the Zhu family's yard, their dialogue starts with a *muyu* rhythm but when Yingtai's name is mentioned, they start a *sanjiaodeng* singing:

Blind Man: Ha, ha, your name is Jie Huami (literally 'bedazzle a flower'). What a beautiful name.

Yingtai: Sir, you are too kind. It is embarrassingly common.

Blind Man: My name is Yi Zhihua ('a flower'), will you bedazzle me?

Renxin: Wish for this in your dreams. I fear you may end up dead with nowhere to be buried.

The exchange continues in *muyu* style.

When Renxin escorts Yingtai, now disguised as the blind man, into the Zhu family living room, Yingtai's parents converse with Renxin in *sanjiaodeng* as well. They then continue in *xiaoqu* 'Working the Room' (melody from Mandarin pop song sung by Zhang Fan). Whereas before Yingtai and Renxin entered the room, Yingtai's parents had also been conversing with her uncle and aunt in *muyu*.

*Muyu*, *banyan*, *sanjiaodeng* and *gunhua* fall between metered and unmetred, and between sung and spoken dialogue. *Muyu* is sung without instrumental accompaniment.

*Gunhua* has a very short instrumental introductory phrase. Then the singer sings without any accompaniments. While the solo singing could be short or

long, the instrumental accompaniment could imitate the vocal lines and joins the solo voice at the final phrases. Lay people would have a hard time in distinguishing the different kinds of vocal delivery. It is unmetred but the rhythm of the vocal delivery corresponds to that of Cantonese speech. This is especially true when they hear a *muyu* segment or the solo part of a *gunhua*. Some believe it is spoken dialogue, some think it is a song and others categorise them all as narrative singing. The director, script writer and song-writers truly are experts at exploiting these long-practised deliveries for best effect. Their rich melodic and rhythmic varieties, with numerous different tempi and emotions, all serve the plot well. While this is a testament of the experience and skills of 'King of Song' Ng Yat-siu, the director's Cantonese opera background is equally important. The film production conditions in the early 1950s were quite basic, and there are parts of the image and sound editing that are rather crudely executed, but on the whole the film flows smoothly. The main reason for that is the extremely successful way in which the director handled the relationship between singing narratives and songs in this Cantonese opera-style film that mostly consists of musical elements. The film is a success in that sense.

The third kind of vocal delivery is the core of Cantonese opera, the *banghuang* (*bangzi* and *erhuang* styles) and *nanyin*<sup>20</sup> in various kinds of tempo and rhythms, the crucial repertoire through which the lead actors/actresses express emotions and show off their singing skills during the film's climax. When the other boys make fun of Yingtai's femininity and Shanbo steps up to stop them, their exchange is performed to the melody of 'Seeing Off My Lover Boy', an old-fashioned Cantonese opera song (originally sung in *guanhua*). Later, Renxin has a substantial vocal piece starting with singing the melody of the instrumental prelude of *nanyin*, then the *nanyin* section, *zhongban* in *fanxian* (reversed tuning) mode, and finally concludes with *gunhau* (the latter two belong to the *banghuang* category). In an ordinary *Liang-Zhu* stories, Renxin, Yingtai's maid, would not have such a substantial vocal passage. But because the actress in this film in that role is Leung Mo-sheung, a skilled singer who leapt into fame with her Sun Ma vocal style. It was Ng Yat-siu's intention by inserting this excerpt and



<sup>20</sup> *Nanyin* was not originally in the Cantonese opera repertoire, but had been incorporated into its music in the early 1920s. By the 1950s it was already a popular singing style in Cantonese opera with no less significance than *banghuang*.





'Ten Miles Send-off at Long Pavilion' in *New Love Story of Leung Shan-pak and Chuk Ying-toi* (1951) paints a picture of heartache and longing: (from left) Yam Kim-fai, Wong Chiu-mo.

giving it to the maid character to make this a vehicle for Leung. Four years hence, Leung would play the male lead character Shanbo, perhaps thanks to this opportunity.

In the latter half of the film, in the segment 'Ten Miles Send-off at Long Pavilion', Shanbo picks a flower and gives it to Yingtai to show his affection. He starts with the tune 'Running Horse': 'The flower is just a metaphor; there's so much sadness when you go away....' Then they continue with a duet where Shanbo and Yingtai sing to each other in *erhuang* mode. The last line is 'Unfortunately we are two men, with no women among us. All talk of love is in vain, since neither of us can become a woman in this lifetime'. They have become such good friends as classmates that they no longer seek female companions. Then Yingtai switches to *nanyin*. She offers to match Shanbo with her younger sister, and invites him to visit. Shanbo responds in *hechehua* (a type of *gunhua*): 'Sigh! Speak not of lakes or streams to one who once has seen the sea; without Mount Mo the clouds are meaningless'. These are his words of farewell. His awareness of the fact that he is in love with his male classmate came 47 years earlier than Raymond To Kwok-wai's stage play!

During 'Meeting at the Tower', Shanbo, Shijiu, Yingtai and Renxin sing the entire Cantonese instrumental piece ('Rain on the Banana Tree') from the joy of reuniting to Yingtai's last line: 'Alas, three years of deep love have become one mass of hate'. That is followed by

Yingtai and Shanbo each singing a verse in *zhongban* in *fanxian* mode, then they change to *gunhua* ornamental style to express the reality that the two of them will never be together. This is the third time the *banghuang* style is used in this film. In this scene, Yingtai sings in *zihou* in her duet with Shanbo.

Unlike in the staged opera, this film does not have the scene 'Shanbo on his Deathbed'. In the wedding banquet scene in modern costumes (scene 28 in the script), they simply mention that Shanbo died of illness. The final scene is the denouement created by Yam Kim-fai, Chan Pei and Ng Yat-siu. It needs to be specially pointed out, Yam is dressed as a male, singing in *pinghou* as she approaches Shanbo's grave. She is in the same gender as the scene when Shanbo sees her off at Long Pavilion. When Shanbo's spirit appears and hugs Yingtai, the image of two young men in each other's arms has caused critics to mention the gay eroticism.<sup>21</sup> This may have inspired Raymond To Kwok-wai's interpretation of the same-sex relationship between Shanbo and Yingtai in his stage play (1998) 47 years later.

In a trembling voice, Yingtai says, 'You, righteous Liang Shanbo, must forgive me, the un-righteous Zhu Yingtai'. The script specifies that the last three words must be delivered in the '*yifan* mode' in order to connect with the *xiaoqu* to be sung by Yingtai, to the melody of 'Inter-linked buckles': 'The twin flowers did not open,



<sup>21</sup> See note 20.





Zhu Yingtai, played by Yam Kim-fai (right) goes back to being female when she returns home, but continues to sing in *pinghou* and dress in male costume.



When Shanbo shows up and embraces Yingtai, who is dressed and singing as a man in the 'Weeping at the Grave' scene, it is as though two men are holding each other: (from left) Wong Chiu-mo, Yam Kim-fai.

I sigh about my pathetic life and the sunken stars....'—because this *xiaoqu* is in the *yifan* mode. The last line uses the same note (*he*, i.e. G) to connect directly to *kuhou* (bitter voice) *nanyin* style: 'I pity your death, and can't bear the waste of your talent.... (mourning)'. This kind of joining of music segments is an often-used 'connecting device' in Cantonese opera, Cantonese songs and *nanyin*, in use even today. *Kuohou nanyin* is the same as '*nanyin in yifan mode*'. From the last three words in the *yifan* mode, to 'Inter-linked Buckles' and to the *kuhou nanyin* style: all three are in the same *yifan* mode, so it is possible to smoothly flow from one to the other and sound as one. Before the musical change can be completed, this *nanyin* passage has four lines ('I remember three years of living together; the knotted red ribbon was never untied. This good flower has been awaiting you to pick; unfortunately, this good thing is too late in happening' [happy memories]) that signals change to a *zhengxian* (proper tuning). Later it changes back to *kuhou*: 'Three days late and you have sunken into a sea of regret....' (sadness). This is an example of modal change in Cantonese opera. In Cantonese opera, Cantonese

songs, *nanyin* and *muyu*, *zhengxian* is relatively neutral and optimistic; while the *yifan* mode is usually used to accompany pitiful, sad scenes. In *nanyin*, changing keys is done according to the emotional changes in the scene. Actors on stage can adapt according to the emotional flow of the scene. But in film, the soundtrack is pre-recorded before actual filming, so the mode must be pre-selected in order to fulfill the lyricist's requirements for each scene.

After Yingtai sings in *nanyin*, Shanbo appears at his own grave and sings the *xiaoqu* 'Weeping at the Grave' (also in *yifan* mode), which is borrowed from the title melody of Sit Kok-sin's opera *Why Don't You Return?*, to comfort Yam Kim-fai (Yingtai in male clothing): 'My love, your youthful cheeks, your full cheeks....'. Ng Yat-siu re-used the first line 'My love, your youthful cheeks, your full cheeks' as the ending. This is a traditional Chinese literary and musical device: Fish Biting its Own Tail!<sup>22</sup>

The two lovers express their affections to each other one last time, in the so-called *dizhu* ('pearl-drops')



<sup>22</sup> See Yu Siu-wah, *Le Zai Diancuo Zhong: Xianggang Yasu Yinyue Wenhua (Out of Chaos and Coincidence: Hong Kong Music Culture)*, Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 2001, pp 189-194 (in Chinese); Yu Siu Wah, 'The Fish Bites Its Tail in Sun Wenming's *Liu Bo Qu*', in *New Music in China and The C.C. Liu Collection at the University of Hong Kong*, Helen Woo (ed and comp), Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2005, pp 31-46.



*erhuang* style. It is a kind of *erhuang* in *yifan* mode. The 'pearl-drops' may refer to the three pauses in the interlude short lines, as if they are coming out drop by drop. It is similar to the interludes in *yifan nanyin's* 'paozhou vocal style'. Finally Yingtai sings in the *shigonghua* style: 'I want to become twin butterflies with you, to fly to paradise together'. Thus the period costume segment ends. It is another device often used in many Cantonese songs and operas to end with a *gunhua* style.

This 'Weeping at the Grave' segment has been carefully designed. The arrangement of singing styles, the contrast and connections between various kinds of music repertoires, are all standard Cantonese opera devices. Although the film does not use big gongs (high-rimmed gongs), big drums and big cymbals, from the music arrangement perspective, I feel that it definitely qualifies as a Cantonese opera film!

## Afterword

My original wish was to include in my discussion both *Liang-Zhu* films directed by Chan Pei (*New Love Story of Leung Shan-pak and Chuk Ying-toi*, 1951; and *Leung Shan-pak's Second Meeting with Chuk Ying-toi*, 1952), and both films for which Ng Yat-siu arranged the music and wrote lyrics (*New Love Story of Leung Shan-pak and Chuk Ying-toi*, 1951; and *The Tragic*

*Story of Leung Shan-pak and Chuk Ying-toi*, 1958). However, after having written over ten thousand words, I still have not completed my discussion of *New Love Story of Leung Shan-pak and Chuk Ying-toi*. I could only leave out the other *Liang-Zhu* films from my discussion in the interest of time and space. And because of that, I am unable to draw any conclusions. But at this point, I am already deeply aware that due to my crude understanding of the language of Cantonese opera music, I had misunderstood quite a bit of historical background and traditions of Cantonese opera at the operation level. I hope in the future I might make a further study of the relationship between Cantonese opera and Cantonese film. Critics have usually looked at these films from the point of view of film or attempted to match them against various theories of films. Few of them have a proper understanding of the language of Chinese opera music. Thus, their descriptions and discussions lean toward the film itself, with whom the lay person is familiar or would more easily understand—therefore ignoring the perspective of the Cantonese opera on stage (mainly Cantonese opera for Hong Kong). The four elements of opera, 'singing, acting, reciting and fencing' certainly must be adapted and transformed when moved from stage to screen. However, they all had been derived from traditions and practices from the stage, and did not just burst forth from a rock. Before we all try to agree on the definition of the term 'opera film', we must first have some basic knowledge of the operation and structure of Cantonese opera, as well as the practices and traditions of its music (singing and dialogue).

(Translated by Roberta Chin)

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# Wong Yuet-sang's Modern-Costume Cantonese Film Songs: Exploring Further Possibilities for Cantonese Operatic Music

Lum Man-yee

Among the Cantonese operas that we encounter today in Hong Kong, many are the signature works of famed opera artists from the 1950s, such as *Princess Cheung Ping* (aka *The Flower Princess*) and *The Legend of Purple Hairpin*, which are well-known to all. However, not all that glittered was gold, as Cantonese operas were in a slump at the time, having been severely challenged by the advent of motion pictures. In the early 1950s, there were more than 40 theatres in Hong Kong,<sup>1</sup> and yet according to newspaper adverts of the time, only two of them—Ko Shing Theatre and Astor (as Po Hing before 1957) Theatre—were regularly presenting Cantonese operas. Cinema had replaced Cantonese opera as the people's main source of entertainment in post-war Hong Kong. Many Cantonese opera performers joined the movie industry, and some Cantonese opera musicians worked in film music part-time, which not only allowed them to sustain a livelihood, but also allowed them new opportunities in the midst of a crisis.

Apart from providing melodic accompaniment for Cantonese films, Wong Yuet-sang also composed music and wrote lyrics. This article analyses three of the songs that Wong wrote for modern-costume Cantonese films, and the objectives are: (1) through 'Nostalgia' (from *Belle in Penang*, 1954), to explore how Wong integrates elements of Euro-American music into the singing passage of Cantonese opera; (2) through 'Beauties of the Miao Tribe' (from *The Rendezvous*, 1953), to examine how he makes use of excerpts from existing Cantonese operas to create new film music, and to discuss the intertextuality discourse in song lyrics; and (3) through 'Practise Session' (from *The Perfect Match*, 1952), to

analyse Wong's ideas on Cantonese operatic songs, as well as how he expresses the 'self' in the process of composing the Cantonese film songs.

## The Unattended Concert: An Ominous Sign

*Why, are you afraid that there wouldn't be any chance after you're discharged from hospital?*

*I am afraid there won't be a chance any more.*

When the Hong Kong Cultural Centre opened in November 1989, the Urban Council launched a month-long arts festival to celebrate its inauguration. As part of the programme, the 'Sixty Years of Guangdong Music' concert scheduled for the 27 November featured Wong Yuet-sang's solo performance of the Yu Lin-rearranged 'Autumnal Thoughts by the Dressing Table', which was to be accompanied by the Wang Kwong Chinese Orchestra and conducted by Tong Leung-tak.<sup>2</sup> Before a promotional radio appearance, Wong showed up to a tea gathering in a Chinese restaurant in Kowloon Tong where he told the radio programme host Ip Sai-hung, and seasoned media reporter Chu Lui, that he had gastric problems. As Chu recalled, Wong did not eat anything, save for some cold spicy chicken feet, and soon there was news that he was taken to hospital during rehearsal, and later diagnosed with terminal gastric cancer. When friends came to visit and express their sympathies, Wong replied, 'I am afraid there won't be a chance anymore.' Eventually he passed away in Baptist Hospital on 12 December 1989 at the age of 70.<sup>3</sup> According to Ip, who was responsible



<sup>1</sup> Stephanie Chung Po-yin, *Xianggong Yingshiye Bainian* (A Hundred Years of Hong Kong Film and Television), Hong Kong: Joint Publishing (Hong Kong) Co., Ltd., 2004, pp 162-163 (in Chinese).

<sup>2</sup> *International Celebration of the Arts: To Open The Hong Kong Cultural Centre: Programme Details and Booking Information: 5 November-6 December, 1989*, Hong Kong: Hong Kong Cultural Centre, 1989, p 23 (in Chinese).

<sup>3</sup> Chu Lui, 'Wang Yuesheng Wei'ai Xieshi' ('Wong Yuet-sang Passes from Gastric Cancer'), *Wah Kiu Yat Po*, 14 December 1989, p 33 (in Chinese).



The scene in *The Tender Age* (1957) in which Wong Yuet-sang plays the violin



The scene in *Forever Beloved* (1961) in which Wong Yuet-sang plays the *guzheng*

for the production of the concert, the event took place as scheduled. However, since no arrangement had been made for a replacement, Wong's performance was cancelled.<sup>4</sup>

## Cantonese Opera *Xiaoqu* (Short Tunes) on Screen

'Autumnal Thoughts by the Dressing Table' originated from a *pipa* tune from the Qing dynasty; Wong rearranged it into 'Fragrant Sacrifice' (aka 'Double Suicide'), the theme song of the Cantonese opera *Princess Cheung Ping*.<sup>5</sup> Written by Tong Tik-sang and first performed by the Sin Fung Ming Opera Troupe on 7 June 1957, *Princess Cheung Ping* was later given a full album release in 1960. 'Fragrant Sacrifice', sung by Yam Kim-fai and Pak Suet-sin, became an instant hit on the radio. One year prior to the release of the album, *Princess Cheung Ping* was adapted for the big screen, which

premiered on 30 June 1959. According to Yip Shiu-tuck, the film was not exactly a box office hit when it first came out. Instead, the popularity of the album fuelled film ticket sales to go through the roof.<sup>6</sup> In the 1960s and 70s, Yip shadowed Wong to learn songwriting from him, and as a result, Yip had the opportunity to work with Tong,<sup>7</sup> thereby witnessing firsthand how *Princess Cheung Ping* made history as one of the most iconic Cantonese operas ever produced in Hong Kong. Later, Lung Kim Sung and Mui Suet-si, Yam and Pak's disciples and stars of the Chor Fung Ming Cantonese Opera Troupe, also did a film version of the opera, which premiered in 1976.

Wong rearranged two *pipa* tunes from the late Qing dynasty. One is 'Autumnal Thoughts by the Dressing Table'; the other is 'Night Moon over Xunyang'. The latter was adapted into 'The Reunion of Sword and Hairpin', theme song of the Cantonese opera *The Legend of Purple Hairpin*. The song does not follow the traditional



<sup>4</sup> A WhatsApp inquiry made on 19 July 2019. Many thanks to Mr Ip Sai-hung for his prompt response.

<sup>5</sup> For more details regarding the rearrangement of 'Autumnal Thoughts by the Dressing Table', see Chan Sau-yan, *Yuequ De Xue He Chang: Wang Yuesheng Yuequ Jiaocheng (Learning and Singing Cantonese Opera Songs: A Course by Wong Yuet-sang)*, Third Edition, Hong Kong: Cantonese Opera Research Programme, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2007, pp 18-32 (in Chinese); Yu Siu-wah, 'Dinuhua De Yinyue' ('The Music of *The Flower Princess*'), in *Xinku Zhongcheng Hua Jinxiu: Pinwei Tang Disheng Dinuhua (A Splendid Flower Grows From Toil: An Appreciation of The Flower Princess by Tong Tik-sang)*, Lo Wai-luen (ed), Hong Kong: Joint Publishing (Hong Kong) Co., Ltd., 2009, pp 243-246 (in Chinese).

<sup>6</sup> Yip Shiu-tuck, 'Tang Disheng *Dinuhua* Juben Pingxi' ('Tong Tik-sang's *The Flower Princess* Playscript: A Commentary'), in *Princess Cheung Ping Classroom*, Ng Fung Ping, Chung Ling-sung, and Lam Wai Ip (eds). Hong Kong: Centre for Advancement of Chinese Language Education and Research, Faculty of Education, University of Hong Kong, 2008, pp 33-39 (in Chinese).

<sup>7</sup> Chan Sau-yan, *Yuequ De Xue He Chang: Wang Yuesheng Yuequ Jiaocheng (Learning and Singing Cantonese Opera Songs: A Course by Wong Yuet-sang)*, Third Edition, see note 5, p 7 (in Chinese).



convention of using *pengling* bells, low-pitched barrel drum, and *myu* (Literally wooden fish, a percussion instrument); rather it begins with a *pipa* introduction, before using *xiao* (flute) and other instruments to create a strong flavour of Chinese classical music. All in all, it is a refreshing change from what contemporary listeners would have been used to.

*The Legend of Purple Hairpin* was also written by Tong Tik-sang, and was first performed by the Sin Fung Ming Opera Troupe on 30 August, 1957. Its film version was released on 18 February 1959, starring Sin Fung Ming stars Yam and Pak. The main cast also participated in the album recording of the opera, which was released in 1966. A remake of the film appeared in 1977, featuring Yam and Pak's *protégés* who were also lead singers in the Chor Fung Ming Cantonese Opera Troupe. 'The Reunion of Sword and Hairpin' is one of Hong Kong's best-loved Cantonese opera songs, similar in popular and critical acclaim to 'Fragrant Sacrifice' of *Princess Cheung Ping*.

On top of these two rearranged songs, Wong composed a number of original *xiaoqu* (short tunes) for various Cantonese operas, such as 'Drops of Tears' (from *The Candlelit Wedding Night*, 1951); 'Tears of the Red Candle' (from *The Red Candle Becomes a Buddhist's Lantern*, 1951); 'Fragrance of Festival on the Third Day of June' (from *Snow in June*, 1956); 'Auspicious Signs' (from *Auspicious Signs*, 1957); and 'Picking Mulberries' (from *Lady Precious Stream*, 1957). However, *Princess Cheung Ping* and *The Legend of Purple Hairpin* were the only Cantonese operas that ever got made into films.

## Transforming Modern Film Songs into *Xiaoqu* in Cantonese Opera: Musical Modes and Forms

Wong wrote more songs for films than *xiaoqu* for Cantonese operas, and most of them for modern-costume Cantonese films. Cantonese operatic music follows a traditional framework, and it is immensely

challenging to apply Western-style modulation methods and musical forms to this genre. Modern-costume Cantonese films, however, provide a new medium for creativity and artistic expression. The film songs are often performed by Cantonese opera stars, and so when their operatic singing style blends with the song's Western musical elements, a new sensation is created. More significantly, when songs of this style are introduced into Cantonese operas, Cantonese operatic music began to acquire a new dimension. A case in point is 'Nostalgia', a musical number from a Cantonese film composed by Wong.

In the 'Biography of Wong Yuet-sang' published in 1992, Chan Sau-yan points out that Wong deploys Western techniques of modulating from minor to major modes (and vice versa) in order to reflect mood shifts in the lyrics of works such as 'Nostalgia', 'Belle in Penang' and 'Blooming Beauty by the Silver Pond'. This was so groundbreaking that Wong's peers and seniors in the industry such as Sit Kok-sin and Wan Chi-chung teasingly called him a 'heretic'.<sup>8</sup> Later, Wong Chi-wah argues that since 'Nostalgia' and 'Belle in Penang' adopt such modulation techniques, as well as the basic AABA form of pop music, they should be regarded as pop songs. He therefore objects to the classification of these two works as Cantonese operatic songs in the radio programme listings on *Wah Kiu Yat Po* (dated 28 March 1954). On the other hand, although 'Blooming Beauty by the Silver Pond' also employs modulation, it has a strong Cantonese *xiaoqu* flavour and is therefore not a pop song. The fact that it was later covered by pop singers was, according to Wong Chi-wah, another matter entirely.<sup>9</sup> Yet in his article he does not further elaborate on why 'Blooming Beauty by the Silver Pond' has such a distinctly *xiaoqu* flavour. In reality, who sings the song and how they choose to interpret it are the key.

With the release of the movie *Belle in Penang* on 21 March 1954, 'Nostalgia' was one of its numbers that became available to the public. According to the movie brochure and the information on the Lucky Records Co.'s



<sup>8</sup> Chan Sau-yan, *Yuequ De Xue He Chang: Wang Yuesheng Yuequ Jiaocheng (Learning and Singing Cantonese Opera Songs: A Course by Wong Yuet-sang)*, First Edition, Hong Kong: Cantonese Opera Research Programme, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 1992, p. 10 (in Chinese).

<sup>9</sup> Wong Chi-wah, 'Dianying Zhutiqu *Binchengyan* Chuanqi' ('The Legend of *Belle in Penang*'s Theme Song'), *Stand News*, 4 October 2016 (in Chinese). <https://thestandnews.com/culture/%E9%9B%BB%E5%BD%B1%E4%B8%BB%E9%A1%8C%E6%9B%B2%E6%AA%B3%E5%9F%8E%E8%89%B7-%E5%82%B3%E5%A5%87/>. Accessed on 19 July 2019.





album cover, Wong is both the composer and lyricist of 'Nostalgia'.<sup>10</sup> The song has a tango rhythm, and Fong Yim-fun sings in *lento tempo* in accordance with the musical score: '*Frolicking on the beach / The day's shadow is fading / The ebb and flow of the waves have soaked my swimsuit / We had such a good time that we didn't want to depart...*' The melody is impassioned and lingering, evoking the poignant and alluring mood of tango and yet it is used to complement a scene of blissful lovers chasing one another by the seaside. The lyrics are simple, direct, and without ornamentation. The singer's tender recounting of their happy days to her bed-ridden lover, combined with notes of her reluctance farewell, evoke a doubly sombre and mournful tone.

Wong uses the AABA form, which is a common form in jazz, and also widely adopted in pop music. Section A establishes the main melody of the song, and the second 'A section' enhances the audience's impression of this key melody. The B section is a bridge, which contrasts with the previous sections in terms of melody and lyrics, before returning to the A section for conclusion. The structure follows the common narrative structure of 'introduction—elucidation—transition—conclusion'. The A sections of 'Nostalgia' are all in D-minor, but its key switches to G-major in the B section.

If we simply consider its AABA form and modulation techniques, it is hardly controversial to classify the film song 'Nostalgia' as a pop song. However, there is room for debate when it is performed by the Cantonese opera actress Fong Yim-fun. As mentioned above, the person who interprets and sings the song is key. The manner in which a singer trained in this traditional art form vocalises, pronounces and articulates the lyrics will inevitably give 'Nostalgia' a Cantonese opera tang. As a matter of fact, there is no need to put a definitive label onto the song, whether it may be 'pop' or 'Cantonese opera'. Instead it may be more fruitful to observe the song's cultural-historical background, and appreciate its style and form as an interface between Cantonese operas and modern Cantonese films in the 1950s.

The Cantonese opera *Zhang Yuqiao: A Heroine*

*for All Time* was first performed on 12 April 1954. The opera was written by Kan You-man and adapted by Tong Tik-sang, with the title character played by Fong Yim-fun. Its theme song, 'A Smile Remembered for Eternity', was sung in Act Six. It uses the *xiaoqu* 'Nostalgia' in the *fanxian* mode to express Zhang's determination to serve her country despite the humiliation of having to re-marry a surrendered general. The musical modes commonly employed in Cantonese operas include the *zhengxian* (proper tuning) mode and *fanxian* (reversed tuning) mode. The former is roughly equivalent to C key in Western music, and the latter G key. In 'A Smile Remembered for Eternity', the A-sections of 'Nostalgia', which were originally in D-minor (and its relative major was F-major), are converted into the *fanxian* mode (close to G-major). The B-section remains in G-major, which means that after the modification, there is no more modulation in the song.

The musical form of the Cantonese opera version of 'Nostalgia' remains AABA, consistent with its soundtrack version:

A: *Harbouring pain in my heart / Wiping my tears behind others / Dawn is approaching as the light flickers / It is sad that my husband will never return*

A: *My fickleness is not because of greed / Nor am I ashamed about my ingratitude / Nothing will diminish my loyal devotion / I grieve and weep for my country*

B: *Looking up to the sky and vowing in tears / May I use my smile to restore the warriors' courage*

A: *Beholding the crescent moon / Silently shedding its light on this mortal world / If efforts to reclaim our land are in vain / It is shameful to drag out an ignoble existence*<sup>11</sup>

Western musical forms have not impacted the integration of 'Nostalgia' with Cantonese opera's beat patterns. The musical structure of the scene is: *xiaoqu* 'Nostalgia' in the *fanxian* mode [*zhongban* in the *yifan* mode] → *xiaoqu* 'Longing for Han' in the *shigong* mode → [*erhuang*].



<sup>10</sup> *Belle in Penang Film Brochure*, Singapore: Zhongnan Film Company. No page reference (in Chinese).

<sup>11</sup> Li Siu-leung (ed), *Fang Yanfen Wanshi Liufang Zhang Yuqiao: Yuan Juban Ji Daodu (Fong Yim-fun's Zhang Yuqiao—A Heroine for All Time: Original Playscript and Critical Commentary)*, Hong Kong: Joint Publishing (Hong Kong) Co., Ltd., 2011, p 97 (in Chinese).

From the case of ‘Nostalgia’, one can see that Cantonese *xiaoqu* is capable of blending harmoniously with not just Western tunes (e.g. ‘Song of White Hair’, arranged music and wrote lyrics by Ng Yat-siu and sung by Ho Fei-fan, incorporates ‘Bless Your Beautiful Hide’, a musical number from the Western film *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers*, 1954), but also the musical forms of jazz and Western pop songs.

## Transplanting Song Passage from Cantonese Opera into Film Soundtracks: The Poetic License

Among Wong’s most popular works are his original *xiaoqu*, as well as tunes adapted from the classical *pipa* canon. Conversely, his *bang* and *huang* compositions are not so much a matter of concern among his peers and audience. *Bang* and *huang* refer to *bangzi* and *erhuang* respectively—two foundational elements that serve as the musical cornerstones of Cantonese opera. While *xiaoqu* music has a melodic framework one has to follow, there is no such thing for *bang* and *huang* compositions. The singer has to refer to specifications such as sentence form, mode, ending note, and create the tune according to the speech-tones of lyrics. Wong arranged music and wrote lyrics for *bang* and *huang* Cantonese songs for many films, most of them modern-costume genre; he also set lyrics to existing tunes. ‘*Zhuanqu*’ (Literally ‘composing operatic songs’), as it was referred to in film credits, meant choosing the appropriate musical elements for a particular scene or song, such as *bangzi*, *erhuang*, *xiaoqu*, as well as *nanyin* (Southern tunes), and *muyu*, and subsequently arranging these elements into a piece of music before adding lyrics.

*The Rendezvous*, a story-within-a-story film, features a very cleverly written tune. According to a film magazine, this ‘Beauties of the Miao Tribe’ tune was arranged by Wong.<sup>12</sup> The story lacks a proper narrative structure, but the gist is: two Miao women make aggressive, physical sexual advances on a man visiting the region. The man is played by Ho Fei-fan, who sings while he dodges the advances and declares his devotion to Buddhist meditation in order to discourage the women’s indecent gestures. Yet the women are unrelenting, constantly touching the man’s hands and face—creating a comical effect. On the surface, the

tune seems like a *xiaoqu*, but in actual fact the *xiaoqu* has an additional line at the end, which is sung without instrumental accompaniment. It is a *gunhua* in *bangzi* mode, but this final line does not strictly follow the prosody of Cantonese operatic songs.

‘Dragon Soars, Phoenix Dances’ (*xiaoqu*)

Go away, why are you touching me so? Go away, why are you touching me so? Go away, don’t be so silly; oh, you keep pulling at me, stop pulling at me. You keep pulling. It’ll come off. Oh oh oh oh, stop touching me! You, you, you, don’t think that I’m that desperate, I’m scared, I’m scared, and I hate people coming at me. I am a Buddhist vegetarian down to the bottom of my heart, and we hate the touch of a woman. Why do you seem so hungry? Why do you all come at me like this? I wish you’d stop touching me like this; us Buddhists have to swear off all vices, and I recite ‘Namo Amitabha’ all day all night. I wish you would stop tempting me; I’ve spent half my life swearing off meat and vices, swearing off meat and vices, and reciting

[on the word ‘reciting’, switch straight to *gunhua*] (recites in a half-speech like and half song-like manner)

‘Namo Amitabha’.

The final line should be ‘reciting “Namo Amitabha”’, but Wong puts the word ‘reciting’ as the final syllable of the tune ‘Dragon Soars, Phoenix Dances’, and then followed by the Buddhist chanting ‘Namo Amitabha’. The word ‘reciting’ is sung only once, and so it appears in parenthesis before the *gunhua* line. This type of musical switch is marked out as ‘on a certain word, switch straight to...’, and the phrase ‘switch straight to’ means to not switch to gongs and drums, but rather to change the beat. As such, the *xiaoqu* and *gunhua* would be stitched together seamlessly. The Cantonese opera *The Red Candle Becomes a Buddhist’s Lantern* (premiered in 1951) also employs this method to switch from *xiaoqu* to *manban* mode.

Final line from new tune ‘Tears of the Red Candle’ in the *shigongxian* mode: I am ‘nursing’ a half-burnt candle in my bosom (on the word ‘bosom’, switch straight to *manban* mode) ... (A) bosom full of broken memories to end a restless night. The new tune ‘Tears of the Red Candle’ is also a Wong Yuet-sang original, arranged by



<sup>12</sup> *The Rendezvous Film Brochure*, Singapore: Zhongnan Film Company. No page reference (in Chinese).





The cover of the film brochure for *The Rendezvous* (1953)

**「佳人有約」主題曲**

• 唱主凡非何 • 曲撰生号王 •

(凡對韻唱) (南音) 今日佳人有約，我那裏執手牽西裝，唱曲唱後，莫道忙，(指佳人) 快些解開對皮鞋，各樣齊安當，我今日佳人有約，你話幾咁誇許，我對鏡梳妝，來鑲髮，嘅佳佳唔安當。

(轉二王下句) 因為佳人有約，不羨慕，平原無謂誤時光，至使佳人，盼望，呢夢風流錦繡，飛去相會，紅粧。(姑聽對韻唱)

(轉反調寶觀曲) 尺尺尺 尺尺尺 再細看，再細看  
乙尺工尺乙乙尺 尺乙尺士合士乙尺士  
共值相見 惜事放，風塵調調醉 潘安  
乙乙士合仁合士 工尺工工 乙尺乙尺  
心間喜 又嚟，呢齣執手 我 先往，  
尺乙乙乙尺  
味弄成異相，

(作繡綉狀) 尺乙乙乙 尺乙乙乙  
唱唱繡繡，唱唱繡繡，  
仁合士乙合  
重要即往。

「佳人有約」插曲之一  
**苗邦春色**  
王号生撰曲，何非凡主唱

(引子) 士五五乙五六五六五六五六五 尺工  
尺上尺工尺上尺工尺上  
士五乙五六五六五 士五五六五六五 尺上尺上尺上  
行開喇老你風咁聲，行開喇老你風咁聲，行開你咪喇  
乙上士 士尺尺上尺上尺上 上上上上上上上上 上  
咪咁聲，咪咁聲咪咁聲住我，你個個個老老老老老，上  
上上上上上上上上 上上上上上上上上 上上上上上  
咪咁聲咪咁聲咪咁聲，你你你咪咁聲我咁聲，怕見怕見最  
尺上上上 士工工上上上上上 士工工上上上上上  
情同生我，我食霜 最緊要開心、食霜 最慎女人孩、  
士工工上上上上上 士工工上 上上上上上 士士乙上  
你堆成堆老得咁似缺，你堆成堆老得咁似缺，我我我我我  
尺工反六五 士士乙上尺工尺工尺 士士乙上尺工上乙士  
成日風咁聲，余佛係要吃 齋，我長年長月口金鑊死，  
士士乙上尺工上上上 上上上上上上上上上 尺上尺上  
但願萬再請多請過我，我半 生 那 係  
食齊戒色食齊戒色全南編無列獨死



In one scene in *The Rendezvous*, Ho Fei-fan (middle) presses his hands together to reject the two 'Miao Tribe' women who were seducing him; this conjures up memories of his famous act in *The Romantic Monk*.

The score for the song 'Beauties of the Miao Tribe' in the brochure



Tong Tik-sang. In 1948, Ho Fei-fan performed in *The Romantic Monk* in Guangzhou with Cho Chau-wan, and almost immediately enjoyed a meteoric rise to fame; the image of him as the romantic monk has left an indelible impression in audience's minds. Three years later in 1951, Chan Kwun-hing wrote *The Mad Monk by the Sea*, co-performed by Ho and Tang Bik-wan. The line '... reciting *Namo Amitabha*' was actually lifted from the lower line of *changju gunhua* in the *yifan* mode of the theme song 'The Mad Monk by the Sea', and opera fans familiar with Ho's classics would no doubt appreciate the fascinating intertextual links at play.

[The lower line of *changju gunhua* in *yifan* mode]

Woe is love, woe is love, my woeful love like an execution ground; a beautiful woman in her devastation drowned. As a result of love I am in woe; woe is gratitude; woe is friendship; oh, how the smallest spark of feeling creates the greatest amount of woe! I swore love and allegiance to the Bodhisattva without any idea of my past, and now that I know the truth. What's the use of reciting 'Namo Amitabha'? Oh, what is the use of devoting myself to the Buddha?

Cantonese opera music places serious restrictions on tone pattern of *bangzi*, *erhuang* (*banghuang*) songs. All the lines of *banghuang* in the opera alternate between upper line and lower line, always in couplet form, and the final song passage ends with a lower line. The last word of the upper line has to be oblique tone, while its counterpart in the lower line should be level tone. Take the excerpt from 'The Mad Monk by the Sea' for example: its final line is 'Oh, what is the use of devoting myself to the Buddha? / *jung6 baai3 sam6 mo1 sai1 fong1 fat6 yu4 loi4?*' The syllable *loi4* is a level tone, and therefore fits in with the songwriting convention. However, 'Beauties of the Miao Tribe' borrows the penultimate line of 'The Mad Monk by the Sea', rather than its last: '... reciting "Namo Amitabha."' The end syllable, when pronounced conventionally, is level in tone (*to4*) but in 'The Mad Monk by the Sea', Ho changes the tone to *to5*, which is oblique. Level tones, while level, neither low nor high. Therefore, stipulating that end lines have to conclude with a level tone is because it gives off a feeling of stability and a sense of closure. On the other hand, oblique

tones connote instability and are therefore deemed inappropriate as an ending sound.

In 'Beauties of the Miao Tribe', Ho again changes the tone of the syllable *to4* to oblique, thereby creating a sense of unease in the conclusion. He plays a romantic monk who is plagued by temptations in the Miao lands. Despite his best efforts, pleading 'I wish you would stop tempting me' and calling on Buddhist chants to strengthen his resolve, his chant ends in an oblique tone disclosing his underlying anguish and doubt.

As a master of his craft, it would have been impossible for Wong to not notice that Ho has used an oblique tone in the final word of his end line. Perhaps because it was a film song, it could play more loosely with the rules? Or perhaps Wong wished to create a special effect? There is no way of knowing. However, as 'the author enters his own death, writing begins'. It is not wrong therefore to observe Wong's clever rule-breaking, and to interpret the final oblique sound of the Buddhist chant as the distress signal of a romantic monk in crisis.

## Wong's Idea on Cantonese Operatic Songs: Voiced through a Semi-autobiographical Character

Apart from being a composer and performer of music, Wong was also an educator, and his teaching funded most of his income. Since the 1940s, Wong had already started training Cantonese opera actors and singers, and since 1975 he had taught Cantonese operatic songs at the Department of Music of The Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK), the Cantonese Opera Academy of Hong Kong, and the Dharmasthiti Buddhist Institute.<sup>13</sup> In the radio programme 'Keep on Practising: Cantonese Opera-song Class' that was broadcast on RTHK Radio 5 between 1982 to 1984, Wong explained and demonstrated the intricacies of the art form, where mainstream listeners benefited immensely from the breadth of his knowledge. Three years after his death, Wong's lectures and teaching at CUHK was compiled for publication by Chan Sau-yan, which then became the standard beginner's guide to the subject.



<sup>13</sup> Chan Sau-yan, *Yuequ De Xue He Chang: Wang Yuesheng Yuequ Jiaocheng* (*Learning and Singing Cantonese Opera Songs: A Course by Wong Yuet-sang*), Third Edition, see note 5, pp 5-6, 11-13 (in Chinese).





In as early as *The Perfect Match*, which premiered 9 March 1952, Wong had already infused his insights regarding Cantonese operatic song singing practice in 'Practise Session'. The song was performed by Ho Fei-fan, playing a musician in the film. This film song is a first-hand resource documenting Wong's ideas and thoughts on Cantonese operatic song, but regrettably it has yet to receive the attention it deserves.

In merely 4 minutes 48 seconds, the song touches upon many aspects, including method, technique, purpose, and attitude, and even discusses *paihe* (using percussions to punctuate the beat and rhythm, and using melodic instruments to echo and respond to the sung melody) practices. The lyrics are Zen-like in their brevity and acuteness, and therefore it was fitting that they were performed by the 'romantic monk' Ho Fei-fan. The essence of song is poetry, and poetic language does not lend itself easily to interpretation, extrapolation, or discussion. Instead it helps to express the writer's innermost feelings, to release them at the lyrical moment. Such emotion is real and heartfelt, and their subject matters are what concern the writer most. Hence there is no need to expect a very systematic set of theories from this one song alone, nor is a systematic set of theories the only way to discuss or explore art and creativity. In traditional Chinese *shihua* (discourses on poetry), *cihua* (discourses on *ci* poetry) and *quhua* (discourses on drama), as well as comments in the upper margins and interlinear comments of *pingdian* commentary prove to be very piercing and insightful. Listeners can likewise try to glean from the song the issues and beliefs that hold most dear to Wong's heart.

'Practise Session' is sung by Ho's character as he attends a match-making session in the garden, with the purpose of announcing his identity and social status to his partner. Both parties have agreed to take the place of friends who were forced by their parents to attend the match-making, and so neither have stakes in the situation, nor do they care to make a good first impression—a battle of wits and words thereby ensues.

Lady: Of course I have no feelings for you! My father has no feelings for you either! He just covets your uncle's money!

Gentleman: Well, bad news! I don't have a dime to my name.

Lady: What do you do?

Gentleman: You don't say! Why, I'm proud to say I'm a famous musician.

Contemporary audiences who had bought the film brochure before attending the screening would have learnt that the song was arranged and lyrics was written by Wong Yuet-sang,<sup>14</sup> and most likely would have smiled in recognition during the scene above. Ho Fei-fan plays a man named Ho Wan-tin, who is delighted to reveal his profession and social status to the lady: 'a famous musician'. Wong had already played for superstar Siu Ming Sing as far back as the 1930s, and as he recalled, performers back then were revered as 'musicians'.<sup>15</sup> His fame was further boosted by popular original *xiaoqu* such as 'Blooming Beauty by the Silver Pond' and 'Tears of the Red Candle' before *The Perfect Match* was even released.

Since there is no apparent connection between Wong and the fictional character of Ho Wan-tin, this essay will treat the narrator's perspective in 'Practise Session' as semi-autobiographical. Ho Wan-tin sees that the girl is doubtful of his claims, and so decides to convey his insights and thoughts as a musician through his most comfortable medium: songs. Without any gongs or drums as an intro, Ho simply says, 'You don't believe me? I'll sing it out for you.' 'Listen up!', before belting out the *xiaoqu*, and despite the two changes in beat, the song never switches over to gongs and drums. The decision to omit the percussion helps create smoother transition between the singing scenes and other parts of the film. Having said that however, when the *xiaoqu* 'Knots in a Ring' is performed, the use of low-pitched barrel drums and *pengling* bells is retained; just as *buyu* (large wood block), *shadi* (small wood block) are used when singing



<sup>14</sup> *The Perfect Match Film Brochure*, p.8 (in Chinese).

<sup>15</sup> Chan Sau-yan, *Yuequ De Xue He Chang: Wang Yuesheng Yuequ Jiaocheng (Learning and Singing Cantonese Opera Songs: A Course by Wong Yuet-sang)*, Third Edition, see note 5, p 3 (in Chinese).





Through 'Practise Session' sung by Ho Fei-fan in *The Rendezvous* (1952), Wong Yuet-sang explains the essence of Cantonese opera singing

*zhongban* in *bangzi* mode and *manban* in *erhuang* mode,<sup>16</sup> so as to control the beat and the pace of the performance. Indeed, many modern-costume Cantonese films treat *bangzi* and *erhuang* tunes in the exact same way.

Below is a transcript of Wong Yuet-sang's 'Practise Session':

*Xiaoqu* 'Knots in a Ring'

On the matter of a good voice for singing, you can't rest day or night, you must practise those glottal and velar sounds, your words, and deploy your vocals clearly. In singing, it's important to differentiate between high and low notes, and you must practise your voice till all your notes are perfect. Hire musicians to harmonise their instruments with you, and your Cantonese operatic singing will become clearer and comprehensible. Anyway, keep on keep on practising, hire musicians to harmonise their instruments with you, and your Cantonese operatic singing will improve more easily. Without appropriate instruction, you'll find it tough to master singing.

[*zhongban* in *bangzi* mode]

A good singer should have class and poise, and should never, never fear constructive criticism. No matter how good your singing is, if you make faces during a

performance—scrunching your nose and twitching your mouth—you will never be allowed onstage. First, your enunciation should be crystal clear, your vocals should not be garbled, but on occasion you could afford to be mischievous and capricious. You should always find the emotion in the song, and inarticulation impedes the expression of feelings. Second, let's talk about *paihe*. If percussions fail to punctuate the beat and rhythm, melodic instruments fail to echo and respond to the sung melody, no matter how good your voice is, all your vocal acrobatics will be in vain, and result in

[*manban* in *erhuang* mode]

a half-baked work. One should know that an artistic career involves constant study, and the hardest thing is to invent a new vocal style that will become popular—it is crucial for the words to remain pleasant to the ear. Please don't laugh at my little tricks and techniques, I am willing to learn from the best.

The song suggests the programme name 'Keep on Practising Cantonese Operatic Song' was already seeded 30 years ago before its debut. Wong advises in the very beginning of the song, 'you can't rest day or night', and in a later verse, to 'keep on keep on practising'. In stressing the point twice, it is clear that the song's narrator/lyricist placed a lot of importance on practising to develop one's



<sup>16</sup> In traditional Chinese music (including opera music), beat is generally referred to as *banyan*. However, in Cantonese opera, *yan* is renamed as *ding* which is commonly known as *dingban*.



voice and vocals. In his radio programme, Wong argues that ‘enunciation’ is the utmost priority in Cantonese operatic singing:

What’s the one thing you should pay the most attention to when singing Cantonese opera? Your number-one concern should be applying force with both your lips and teeth, otherwise you won’t be able to enunciate! The audience won’t be able to hear what words you’re singing. Many people who listen to our music love to mull over the words and lyrics.<sup>17</sup>

Enunciation (the Chinese phrase literally means ‘to reveal words’) means to be able to articulate every word and line in the song lyrics clearly, to let the listener understand the song’s emotions and meanings through the words. This is also an idea espoused in ‘Practise Session’. As Wong suggests ‘*you must practise those “throat sounds” and “jaw sounds”, your words, and deploy your vocals clearly.*’ By ‘*those “throat sounds” and “jaw sounds”*’, the lyrics are also implicitly including sounds of the lips, teeth and tongue (together these comprise the ‘Five Sounds’ in Chinese operatic songs), as well as the ‘Four Exhalations’, which are four vowel-forming mouth-shapes: ‘wide-open mouth’, ‘slit-open mouth’, ‘both-lips-protruding mouth’, and ‘lower-lips-protruding mouth’.<sup>18</sup> The use of vocals is also related to enunciation, as Cantonese operatic singing requires the singer to create vocals and melody according to the speech-tone of every word—to match the vocals to each word, to not let vocals overshadow the words.<sup>19</sup>

Next, Wong mentions pitch: ‘*you must practise your voice till all your notes are perfect. Hire musicians to harmonise their instruments with you.*’ The ‘notes’ referred to here are different from the ‘Five Sounds’ outlined above, but instead, they are *gong, shang, jiao, zhi, and yu*. Naturally, there are more notes than these five in Cantonese music; they refer to the general idea of scale in music theory. Subsequently the method of practice is outlined in detail, which is to hire musicians for practice sessions. Enunciation and pitch are therefore the fundamentals of Cantonese operatic singing.

As the song switches to *zhongban*, the lyrics change focus to class, poise, as well as the singer’s attitude towards their craft, advising that they take criticism gracefully before emphasising again: ‘*your enunciation should be crystal clear.*’ The repetition underlines Wong’s fixation on enunciation. As he turns to the subject of vocals, Wong suggests that the singer could be ‘mischievous and capricious’, as long as they always try to ‘*find the emotion in the song.*’ He then points out that *paihe* has the power to make or break a performance, as poor *paihe* could ruin the best of singers. Finally, in the *erhuang* section, Wong touches on higher aspirations: inventing a new vocal style requires it to be melodious and also appealing to the listener. Only when one achieves mainstream popularity can a song or performance qualify as ‘successful’. Not only does Wong argue that ‘*an artistic career involves constant study,*’ he also says: ‘*Please don’t laugh at my little tricks and techniques.*’ The two lines highlight Wong’s belief that Cantonese operatic music was far more than a simple matter of craft, but a full-on artistic undertaking.

As a whole, ‘Practise Session’ is a comprehensive discourse from Wong on Cantonese operatic singing, from basic vocal exercises, the importance of enunciation, pitch, to poise, emotion, attitude towards learning, and even the invention of new styles. It is a cogent argument, coherent and logical in its development. Last but not least, the song presents the image of a musician/music teacher that is a truthful reflection of the song composer himself, as well as his ideals regarding the two roles. According to Cantonese opera and singing tradition, the singer often took the lead in the performance, while the accompanying instruments and musicians had to align, follow, complete and guide—so as to keep the spotlight on the singer.

However, singers often hired musicians to teach and guide them in vocal practice and to help them create the appropriate vocal stylings. Behind the successful vocals of great opera stars were most definitely efforts from great musicians as well. In the Cantonese opera and music industry, singers were accustomed to thanking accompanying musicians sincerely after every



<sup>17</sup> ‘Keep On Practising Cantonese Operatic Songs: *Erhuang*’, 21 April 1982, RTHK programmes online: <http://app4.rthk.hk/special/rthkmemory/details/artscritique/141>, accessed on 19 July 2019 (in Chinese).

<sup>18</sup> For details, see Xu Jing-cun (ed), *Xiqu Shengyue Jiaocheng (A Course on Xiqu and Vocal Music)*, Hunan Literature and Art Publishing House, 2001, pp 215-218 (in Chinese).

<sup>19</sup> For details on matching vocals to words, see Chan Sau-yan, *Yuequ De Xue He Chang: Wang Yuesheng Yuequ Jiaocheng (Learning and Singing Cantonese Opera Songs: A Course by Wong Yuet-sang)*, Third Edition, see note 5, p 36 (in Chinese).





performance. Yet musicians were rarely granted the chance to thank the audience personally, not to mention having their names published in brochures—the only exception being the musical lead. Musicians also earned significantly less than opera actors. In the first section of ‘Practise Session’, Wong points out the crucial role musicians play in helping singers to work on their pitch; in the second section he suggests that musicians affect the overall performance of a song; and when discussing inventing new vocal styles in the last section, he concludes, ‘*I am willing to learn from the best.*’ It is clear whom he means as ‘the best’; in many ways ‘Practise Session’ is Wong’s ultimate act of self-expression as an arranger and composer of Cantonese operatic music.

Wong’s self-expression in his work is characterised by a paradoxical sense of pride and woundedness. In the early 1950s, Wong was already the industry’s top musician and composer, but he still had to hustle for his living by working for the big stars: playing accompaniment for Cantonese operatic songs during the day, leading bands in nightclubs at night, even taking on extra teaching whenever he had the time. And yet many students rejected his critiques or even put on airs, which angered Wong so much that he often had no appetite for meals after class. Did this have anything to do with his subsequent gastric cancer, which proved to be fatal?<sup>20</sup> The line advising singers to ‘*never, never fear constructive criticism*’ was a gentle appeal to singers from Wong the musician.

## Concluding Remarks

Wong Yuet-sang created a good number of unique and original songs and most certainly made his mark in the world of modern-costume Cantonese films. His use of Western musical elements for songs intended for a Cantonese opera singer helped reinvent the star image of Fong Yim-fun, queen of Cantonese opera—not only

complementing the visual of her in a swimsuit in the film, but also presenting a vision of a contemporary modernity. By inserting singing passages of Cantonese opera into film, Wong brought characters from classical dramas to the silver screen, and also broke ranks with *banghuang* traditions by finishing his lines with an oblique tone to reflect the distress of the character. Through the creation of a semi-autobiographical film character, he expressed his innermost self as a musician, via a *banghuang* Cantonese song. Had Wong not been involved in writing songs for films but solely focused on composing music for Cantonese opera, such innovative ideas and works would not have existed.

‘Nostalgia’ is a popular classic. Almost half a century after its debut, it re-appeared in Stephen Chow’s *King of Comedy* (1999), with new lyrics from Brian Tse, a local comic book artist, and performed by pop singer Lau Yee-tat, who gives a sombre rendition that expresses the harsh lives of common folks and their yearnings. The song is down-to-earth, but not vulgar; as well as meaningful and invigorating. Indeed, it is so popular that many Hong Kong youths from the post-80s generation are able to hum a few lines when prompted.<sup>21</sup>

On the other hand, ‘Beauties of the Miao Tribe’ and ‘Practise Session’ are underrated gems, whose sterling qualities have been elaborated on in the previous paragraphs.

‘Autumnal Thoughts by the Dressing Table’ is Wong’s magnum opus, and the classic of Cantonese opera classics in Hong Kong. There is no chance now that the piece’s original cast of the 1989 concert will be able to deliver it again, but for great works of art such as this, there will always be ways it can be performed, perpetuated and preserved for posterity.

This article is a humble tribute to the memory of my respected grand-teacher Maestro Wong Yuet-sang.

(Translated by Rachel Ng)

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<sup>20</sup> Chan Sau-yan, *Yuequ De Xue He Chang: Wang Yuesheng Yuequ Jiaocheng (Learning and Singing Cantonese Opera Songs: A Course by Wong Yuet-sang)*, Third Edition, see note 5, p 11 (in Chinese).

<sup>21</sup> The song ‘Shit, I’m a Piece of Shit’ is featured in the film *King of Comedy* (1999).

# Queen of Diva on the Silver Screen: On Fong Yim-fun's Films

Lee Siu-yan

In the 1950s, Queen of Diva (aka Queen of *Huadan*) in Cantonese opera was none other than the renowned actress Fong Yim-fun. Fong was a prolific stage performer both in Hong Kong and abroad; she premiered in over a hundred Cantonese operas, as well as starred as lead in more than 140 movies. The sheer volume of her pioneering performances reflects not only Fong's dedication and commitment to her craft, but also how she established a rapport with the masses across different mediums.

In recent years, there had been a great deal of specialised studies and thematic publications focused on Fong as an individual performance artist: biographies such as *Biography of Fong Yim-fun and Her Performance in Operas* (1998) by Feng Zi and *The Legend of San Yim Yeung* (2008) by Ngok Ching; cultural and social studies such as 'The Cultural Phenomenon of Fong Yim-fun's Mournful Cantonese Operas from the 1950s' (2008) by Lee Siu-yan, *Fong Yim Fun's Cheung Yuk Kiu: A Heroine for All Time—Original Script and Reader* (2011) by Li Siu-leung; research on Cantonese Opera repertoire such as *Anthology of Hong Kong Cantonese Opera: The Fong Yim Fun Volume* (2014) by Li Siu-leung, and *The Repertoire of Fong Yim Feng: An Introduction of Tang Ti Sheng's Cantonese Opera, 1949-1954* (2017) by Lee Siu-yan. As for initial discussions of her films, volumes include *Yintan Tuyen: The Films of Fong Yim-fun* (2010) from Ho Wing-sze and James Wong. In comparison, there is still not yet a fully-fledged discussion of Fong Yim-fun's films,

especially in relation to the synthesis between Cantonese opera and film, i.e. Fong's Cantonese opera films.

## Fong Yim-fun

Fong Yim-fun migrated to Hong Kong from the Mainland as a child. Through an introduction from a friend, Fong's mother sent her, then an elementary student, to study opera performance under Guosheng School of Cantonese Opera.<sup>1</sup> In the 1940s, Fong was recruited as a performer by Cantonese opera troupes of different scales, performing venues were mainly towns and villages in Guangzhou and the Pearl River Delta. In 1948, she was the principal *huadan* (female lead) in the corps for Tai Lung Fung Opera Troupe, which toured in numerous theaters across Guangzhou. At the time she performed a good deal of new repertoires, of which *Worship of Tower Lui Fung* (1948) was the most marketable and sought-after.<sup>2</sup> The opera was co-written by Chan Kung-hon, Lo Shan, and Lo Dan, the three collectively known as Three Fools Dramatic Club. The story was based on the classic love story of Xu Xian and the white snake spirit Bai Suzhen. Fong delivered a breakout performance with her outstanding *manban* in *fanxian* (reversed tuning) *erhuang* mode<sup>3</sup> as Bai Suzhen in the last scene 'The Sacrifice at the Pagoda'. Her extraordinary singing talent would later come to define her own signature 'Fong Vocal Style'.



<sup>1</sup> Feng Zi, *Fang Yanfen Zhuan Ji Qi Xiqu Yishu (Biography of Fong Yim-fun and Her Performance in Operas)*, Hong Kong: Holdery Publishing Enterprises Ltd, p 15 (in Chinese). Chan Kai-hung was a Cantonese opera maestro. He is the father of *huadan* (young female) Chan Ho-kau. The Guosheng School of Cantonese Opera was a Cantonese opera school jointly founded by him and Li Shu-ming. See Chen Canggu, *Lingguan Liezhuan (Biographies of Chinese Opera Artists)*, Part 1, Hong Kong: Ma Kam Kee Book Store, circa 1955, pp 2-7, 25-28 (in Chinese).

<sup>2</sup> In 1958, Fong Yim-fun rehearsing on stage before her farewell performance, the show's title *Legend of the White Snake* was taken from the eponymous opera that launched Fong's career. See Feng Zi, *Fang Yanfen Zhuan Ji Qi Xiqu Yishu (Biography of Fong Yim-fun and Her Performance in Operas)*, *ibid*, p 31 (in Chinese).

<sup>3</sup> '*fanxian erhuang*': the full term is '*fanxian erhuang manban*', a type of *banshi* (beat form) in Cantonese opera music.



Fong Yim-fun's character styling in the Cantonese opera *Beauty in Disguise Conquering Hero's Heart*



Fong Yim-fun's character styling in the Cantonese opera *The Happy Marriage of Red Phoenix*

In 1949, Fong Yim-fun returned and settled in Hong Kong, continued pursuing her career in the performing arts. By 1959, she had premiered in over 120 new Cantonese operas on Hong Kong stages, setting a remarkable record that remains unbroken to this day.<sup>4</sup> That was an era when Fong was greatly admired both on stage and on screen. In 1952, she was elected 'The Queen of *Huadan* (prime female lead)' by Hong Kong newspaper *Amusement News*. Simultaneously, she co-starred with Sun Ma Si-tsang (dubbed 'The King of *Wenwusang*' [prime male lead]) and Leung Sing-por (dubbed 'The King of *Chousheng*' [prime male clown]); whether a period or contemporary film, 'The Three Champions of the Opera World' became one of the most

successful publicity-seeking gimmicks of all time. Their collaborative films include *Filial Piety That Moved the Heavens* (1952), *Another Chance for Love* (1953) or *Grand View Garden* (1954).<sup>5</sup> In 1953, Fong founded Zhili Film Company to produce her own major starring movies. In the same year, she arranged to set up her own opera company, San Yim Yeung Opera Troupe. The troupe debuted its performance in early 1954. From that point on whether on stage or in films, Fong's acting career went from strength to strength, and she premiered countless Cantonese operas and movies. The beginning of 1959, Fong travelled from afar to London to tie the knot, and announced her withdrawal from the entertainment industry.<sup>6</sup>



<sup>4</sup> Statistics on Fong Yim-fun's Cantonese opera premieres in Hong Kong can be found in Lee Siu-yan's 'Fang Yanfen Shouyan Yueju Liebiao' ('Fong Yim-fun's Premiere Cantonese Opera List') within the unpublished *Fang Yanfen Yueju De Lishi Yu Shehui Yanjiu (A Historical and Social Study of Fong Yim-fan's Cantonese Opera)* (PhD thesis), The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2011 (in Chinese). The paper also includes accounts of Fong's close working relationship with Tong Tik-sang. There are almost 100 original repertoires created by Tong specifically for Fong, making her the undisputed leading lady, with the most starring turns in Tong Tik-sang's operas. See Lee Siu-yan, *Tang Disheng Yueju Xuanlun: Fang Yanfen Shouben, 1949-1954 (The Repertoire of Fong Yim Feng: An Introduction of Tang Ti Sheng's Cantonese Opera, 1949-1954)*, Hong Kong: Infolink Publishing Limited, 2017, pp 242-245 (in Chinese).

<sup>5</sup> See advertisement of *Filial Piety That Moved the Heavens* (1952), *Wah Kiu Yat Po*, 28 August 1952, sheet 4, p 4 (in Chinese); advertisement of *Another Chance for Love* (1953), *Wah Kiu Yat Po*, 13 August 1953, sheet 4, p 1 (in Chinese); advertisement of *Grand View Garden* (1954), *Wah Kiu Yat Po*, 4 August 1954, sheet 4, p 3 (in Chinese).

<sup>6</sup> Feng Zi, *Fang Yanfen Zhuan Ji Qi Xiqu Yishu (Biography of Fong Yim-fun and Her Performance in Operas)*, see note 1, pp 43-45 (in Chinese).



In 1987, Fong remerged in years for a public charity performance. Mounting the stage in full regalia, she played to an audience in the soon-to-be demolished Lee Theatre. The next year, she recorded a non-commercial compilation of Cantonese operatic songs, 'A New Singing of Fong's Style'.<sup>7</sup> The repertoire included several of Fong's favorites, such as 'Lovers' Tears', 'Sorrow of the Luo River'<sup>8</sup> and 'Tung Siu-yuen'. In 1993, Fong recorded a second compilation of 'A New Singing of Fong Vocal Style', which included 'Lunar Love' and 'The Happy Marriage of Red Phoenix', among others. In 1990, she returned to the stage in Guangzhou after almost 40 years, and Fong performed at another Hong Kong charity show in 1994. In 1997, Fong raised funds for the University of Hong Kong by appearing in her latest public performance at the Grand Theatre of the Hong Kong Cultural Centre.

## Fong Yim-fun's Cinematic Work

The 1950s could be said to be a golden age of Hong Kong cinema. It was also the pinnacle for Cantonese opera films and musical films. 1,519 films produced in Hong Kong during the 1950s were Cantonese films, of which 515 were Cantonese opera films, accounting for about 34% of the total.<sup>9</sup> Not unlike many famous Cantonese opera stars from the 20th century, Fong Yim-fun performed both on stage and in films in Hong Kong during the 1950s. In just a decade's time, Fong starred in over a hundred movies,<sup>10</sup> which was quite a remarkable feat.

Fong Yim-fun's debut film was *The Flower Drops by the Red Chamber*, which premiered at five cinemas on 22 January 1950, including Hong Kong's Central Theatre and National Theatre. The film was produced by Tam Pak-yip and Ng Hing-wah, directed by Ng Wui, written by Chun Kim, and starring Pak Wan as the leading man. Other main cast includes Wong Cho-shan, Yip Ping, Tang Mei-mei, Lee Yuet-ching, Pak Lan, Kam Lo, Heung Hoi and Ma Siu-ying. At the time, in response to Fong Yim-fun's debut in her first film, there was a special mention of Fong in the newspaper's publicity materials:

Fong Yim-fun, touted as the 'alluring princess' on the Cantonese opera stage, first carved out a career in the arts in Guangzhou. For many years, she has enjoyed enduring popularity. Fong arrived to perform in Hong Kong recently, she was equally well-received on stage by opera fans, from collaborating with Chan Yin-tong to Ho Fei-fan, as well as of late with Chan Kam-tong. Fong's distinct and innovative vocal talent has seen her join the ranks of other singing prodigies, as well as being crowned 'The Queen of *Huadan*'. Her ascending stardom is unparalleled in this moment and there is no better time for Fong to make her leap to the silver screen. She has signed on with two production companies, Xingye and Dahua films. Her first starring film will be *The Flower Drops by the Red Chamber* based on the classic literary masterpiece *Dream of the Red Chamber*.<sup>11</sup>

*The Flower Drops by the Red Chamber* was a period drama, adapted from a chapter in *Dream of the Red Chamber*. Fong Yim-fun stars as the heroine of the film, Ching-man, who is a handmaid to Ka Bo-yuk.<sup>12</sup> The plot mainly revolves around the subtly blossoming relationship between the master and the servant.<sup>13</sup>



<sup>7</sup> Fong Yim-fun co-founded Kwan Fong Charitable Foundation with Maria Lee Tseng Chiu-kwan in 1984 and took part in the foundation's charity concert performance since 1987. See Wong Hoi-shan (ed), *Fanghua Cui Ying (Life and Art of Fong Yim-fun)*, Hong Kong: Kwan Fong Charitable Foundation, 1997 (in Chinese).

<sup>8</sup> Wan Chi-pang wrote Cantonese operatic tune 'Regrets and the River Lo', after being commissioned by Fong Yim-fun. They were adapted from Tong Tik-sang's *The Nymph of the River Lo* from the 1950s. *Hong Kong Chinese Opera Newsletter*, Issue 5, Hong Kong: Chinese Opera Information Centre, Department of Music, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 1 May, 2002, p 1 (in Chinese).

<sup>9</sup> Yu Mo-wan, 'Xianggang Yueju-dianying Fazhan Shihua' ('Anecdotes of Hong Kong Cantonese Opera Films'), in *Cantonese Opera Film Retrospective* (The 11th Hong Kong International Film Festival Catalogue) (Revised Edition), Li Cheuk-to (ed), Hong Kong: Hong Kong Film Archive, 2003, pp 18-19 (in Chinese).

<sup>10</sup> Ho Wing-sze and James Wong, *Yintan Tuyan: Fang Yanfen De Dianying (Becoming Famous in the Film Industry: The Films of Fong Yim-fun)*, Hong Kong: WINGS Workshop, 2010, pp 145-157 (in Chinese).

<sup>11</sup> 'Hualuo Honglou' ('*The Flower Drops by the Red Chamber*'), *Wah Kiu Yat Po*, 19 January 1950, sheet 4, p 2 (in Chinese).

<sup>12</sup> Fong Yim-fun later also starred in movies inspired by the classic *Dream of the Red Chamber*, she plays Lam Doi-yuk in both *Grand View Garden* (1954) and *The Tragic Death of Lam Doi-yuk* (1954), see advertisements in *Wah Kiu Yat Po*, 4 August 1954, sheet 4, p 3 (in Chinese); 9 September 1954, sheet 4, p 2 (in Chinese).

<sup>13</sup> Ho Wing-sze and James Wong, *Yintan Tuyan: Fang Yanfen De Dianying (Becoming Famous in the Film Industry: The Films of Fong Yim-fun)*, see note 10, pp 162-163 (in Chinese).



Although Fong had since expressed certain dissatisfaction with the production of the film,<sup>14</sup> it also encapsulated something unique. The film's narrative was not purely romantic; instead it aspired unmistakably towards its promotional message, of being 'a public "impeachment" of women oppression'.<sup>15</sup> It is very much a literary film, a growing fury against Chinese feudalism in the society. Fong's first foray on screen saw her playing a young woman oppressed by the feudal code of ethics. How was her rendition? Hong Kong film critics had this to say:

With *The Flower Drops by the Red Chamber*, Fong seized on a great opportunity to showcase her intrinsic acting talents. Industry members who have watched the test screening are unanimous: the film is a success, with outstanding performances in its musical numbers.<sup>16</sup>

This piece of review cemented a winning performance for Fong's screen debut at the box-office, earning her praise for her extraordinary vocals. The rating was endorsed by film veterans.

Interestingly, *The Flower Drops by the Red Chamber* had a rather unconventional premiere. Usually stars of a film would appear in person for its premiere at theatres, as was customary for publicity strategies at the time. However, when *The Flower Drops by the Red Chamber* premiered at the Central Theatre, such an advertisement was published by the newspapers:

Each screening will have a spectacular double billing, with special guests Lui Man-shing, Ching Ngok-wai and others giving a Spirit Music performance. Miss Lui Hung will also sing at the venue the same evening.<sup>17</sup>

Lui Man-shing was a prominent Cantonese opera performer and musician. He along with Ching Ngok-wai, Ho Tai-so and Wan Chi-chung were collectively referred

to as 'Four Kings of Spirit Music', and their musical style was dubbed as Spirit Music. Lui Hung was the daughter of Lui Man-shing, the true heir to her father's operatic singing styles. She was both an exceptional classical and contemporary Cantonese singer.<sup>18</sup> The doubled billing might have reflected Fong's busy schedule on the opera stage,<sup>19</sup> which prevented her attendance at the premiere. Lui Hung was therefore recruited to sing the movie's theme song live at the theatre as a publicity device. This arrangement indirectly marked the beginning of Fong's prolific life between stage and screen in the early 1950s. Fong Yim-fun's memories of her life lived between 'the opera stage and film set':

It was an extremely hectic schedule. When I woke up in the afternoon, I had to prepare for the operatic performance that night. And right after getting off stage, I would put on fresh makeup and rush over to the film studio for shooting till early hours of the morning.<sup>20</sup>

Fong Yim-fun's performance in *The Flower Drops by the Red Chamber* was also a subject of interest in overseas media. According to a Singapore newspaper's review 'Critical Appraisal of *The Flower Drops by the Red Chamber*', signed off with the name Qi, it described the performance of Fong as follows:

Fong plays the protagonist Ching-man. Although this is officially her first time on screen, the eminent Cantonese opera star has clearly carved out her position on the silver screen.<sup>21</sup>

This report from abroad not only showed that Fong's legendary operatic talents were already well-known overseas, it also suggested her popularity had effectively transitioned onto the silver screen; Fong's turn as a leading lady on screen brought her to an even wider audience, while garnering universal acclaim in a great deal of different countries.



<sup>14</sup> Feng Zi, *Fang Yanfen Zhuan Ji Qi Xiqu Yishu (Biography of Fong Yim-fun and Her Performance in Operas)*, see note 1, p 38 (in Chinese).

<sup>15</sup> See note 11.

<sup>16</sup> See note 11.

<sup>17</sup> See advertisement in *Wah Kiu Yat Po*, 23 January 1950, sheet 4, p 2 (in Chinese).

<sup>18</sup> Jingjun, 'Xiaoji Lu Hong' ('Narrative of Lui Hung'), *The Kung Sheung Evening News*, 14 April 1954, p 3 (in Chinese).

<sup>19</sup> According to advertisements in the press, Fong Yim-fun was working at that time with the Kam Tim Fa Opera Troupe, created by Chan Kam-tong, Wong Chin-sui and Law Lai-kuen. The production was the Cantonese opera *Lost in Desire* written by Tong Tik-sang and performed at the Ko Shing Theatre in Hong Kong, see *Wah Kiu Yat Po*, 19 January 1950, sheet 4, p 2 (in Chinese).

<sup>20</sup> Interview with Fong Yim-fun, 27 April 2007.

<sup>21</sup> Qi, 'Hualuo Honglou Guanhougan' ('The Review of *The Flower Drops by the Red Chamber*'), *Nanyang Siang Pau* (Singapore), 9 July 1950, p 7 (in Chinese).



Special thanks to the late Mr and Mrs Chan Kam Yuen

*In The Flower Drops by the Red Chamber* (1950), Fong Yim-fun (left) plays Ching-man, Pak Wan (right) plays Ka Bo-yuk.



*In The Story of Tung Siu-yuen* (1950), Fong Yim-fun (left) plays Tung Siu-yuen, Cheang Mang-ha plays Empress Dowager Xiaozhuang (1st right) and Wong Hok-sing plays Emperor Shunzhi (2nd right).

## Cantonese Opera Films

Shortly after starting in films, Fong Yim-fun began to adapt her seminal operatic performances into movies; the Cantonese opera *Tung Siu-yuen* was first of such adaptations.<sup>22</sup> This opera was one of many in the repertoires written by Tong Tik-sang for the Kam Tim Fa Opera Troupe, and the film adaptation premiered at the Po Hing Theatre ('Astor Theatre' after 1957) in Kowloon on the evening of 3 March 1950. As part of the promotional strategy, the film had in advance released a statement in the newspaper that appeared alongside the stage version premiere advertisement:

Chak Sang Co Motion Picture Services wins bidding war for the film's rights<sup>23</sup>

In the same year that *The Story of Tung Siu-yuen* premiered, Tong Tik-sang and the manager of Po Hing Theatre at the time, Ho Chak-chong, jointly founded the film company Chak Sang Co Motion Pictures Services, which was responsible for the film adaptation. The film

premiered at various cinemas around Hong Kong on 23 June, 1950.<sup>24</sup>

Ho produced the film *The Story of Tung Siu-yuen*, while Tong served as the screenwriter and director.<sup>25</sup> For the cast, Tong's wife, Cheang Mang-ha replaced Law Lai-kuen, who played the Empress Dowager Xiaozhuang in the Cantonese opera. Wong Hok-sing was casted as the Emperor Shunzhi, who was originally portrayed by Wong Chin-sui. Most of the other main cast came from the stage production and reprised their original roles. For example, Fong Yim-fun reprised her role as Tung Siu-yuen, Wong Chin-sui played the role of Mo Pik-Keung, Chan Kam-tong played Hung Sing-chau, Lee Hoi-chuen played Fo Yee the Eunuch and so on. Another aspect of the movie with special significance was that while the whole cast remained in Hong Kong, the film was released in Guangzhou at the end of 1950. *The Story of Tung Siu-yuen* was a rather unique example of the few Hong Kong films<sup>26</sup> that managed to secure public screenings in Mainland China at that time.<sup>27</sup>



<sup>22</sup> The original Chinese title of this opera has an alias in homophone, see Zhu Yongying, *Yueju Sanbai Ben (Three Hundred Librettos in Cantonese Opera)*, Part 4, Hong Kong, circa 1988, p 165 (in Chinese).

<sup>23</sup> See advertisement of *The Story of Tung Siu-yuen*, *Wah Kiu Yat Po*, 3 March 1950, sheet 4, p 4 (in Chinese).

<sup>24</sup> See advertisement of *The Story of Tung Siu-yuen*, *Wah Kiu Yat Po*, 23 June 1950, sheet 4, p 4 (in Chinese).

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> *Nanfang Daily*, Guangzhou, 1 December 1950 (in Chinese).

<sup>27</sup> Lee Siu-yan, *Tang Disheng Yueju Xuanlun: Fang Yanfen Shouben, 1949-1954 (The Repertoire of Fong Yim Feng: An Introduction of Tang Ti Sheng's Cantonese Opera, 1949-1954)*, see note 4, pp 23-24 (in Chinese).



The narrative of *The Story of Tung Siu-yuen* did not differ much from the Cantonese opera, mainly detailing the tragic experiences and advancement of Fong's protagonist, the famed Qinhuai courtesan Tung Siu-yen from the late Ming and early Qing dynasties. Under the thoughtful direction of Tong, Fong portrayed an exceptional woman who despite her fragility stood up to the powers that be. Although caught between power struggles of the early Qing court, she endured various humiliations, while remaining true to her people by urging the Qing Emperor to be kind to the Han people, but finally killed herself for love.<sup>28</sup>

However, the movie did not simply render the Cantonese operatic performance on screen. In *The Story of Tung Siu-yuen*, there was neither the ostentatious gongs nor drums typical of Cantonese operas, while the performing techniques such as singing, acting, reciting, fencing often used by veteran opera singers were also largely absent. Instead it employed various cinematic techniques, such as close-ups, voice-overs, location shooting, as well as lighting effects and sets with props to tell the story. More importantly, the film condensed the stage performance of more than four hours into an hour and a half, which made plot development and rhythm of the performances more crisp and on point. As for showcasing one of Fong's strengths—her vocal style—Fong only performed one solo in *The Story of Tung Siu-yuen* (lyrics by Tong, composition by Leung Yu-fong<sup>29</sup>).<sup>30</sup> *The Story of Tung Siu-yuen* was a great example of common approaches to film adaptations of that time, by condensing overall performance time, reducing operatic elements, while highlighting lead actors' singing talents.

In fact, it was rare to transpose Cantonese operas unchanged onto screen in Hong Kong films of the early 1950s. Take Fong Yim-fun as an example, for her film *The Story of Tung Siu-yuen*, the source material was significantly modified to a large extent; strictly speaking, it is not a true Cantonese opera film. In the epoch, it was popular to transform the original setting of the Cantonese opera into early Republic or modern era, such as the contemporary drama *A Buddhist Recluse for Fourteen Years* starring Fong.

Tong Tik-sang also created the Cantonese opera *A Buddhist Recluse for Fourteen Years* for the Kam Tim Fa Opera Troupe. The film adaptation premiered at the Po Hing Theatre in Kowloon on 30 October, 1950.<sup>31</sup> The story mainly described the blossoming relationship between Yu Yun-gei and poor scholar Wan Jeung, who fell in love and began living together. The celebrated don Lei Yik was from a wealthy family and also a good friend to Wan. However, Lei was unaware of the romance between Wan and Yu, whom he had admired for a long time. The genuine and sincere Lei took pity on Yu, after Wan was sent away for manslaughter due to a misguided plot by Yu's young handmaiden. The girl secretly in love with her mistress's lover Wan, set out to seduce him; a scheme that ended in her untimely death. Unbeknownst to Lei, Yu was already pregnant with child when his family took her in, leading to unexpected mayhem and devastation. The hopelessly muddled and impossibly complicated entanglements of a four-way love in the drama, which left death and wreckage in its wake, directly challenged traditional Chinese tenets and morality.<sup>32</sup>



<sup>28</sup> Lee Siu-yan, *Tang Disheng Yueju Xuanlun: Fang Yanfen Shouben, 1949-1954 (The Repertoire of Fong Yim Feng: An Introduction of Tang Ti Sheng's Cantonese Opera, 1949-1954)*, see note 4, pp 26-29 (in Chinese).

<sup>29</sup> The music creation in Cantonese opera is habitually called 'score producer', see Li Zijun (ed), *Jinyuefu Cipu: Zhongxi-duizhao (Modern Yuefu Librettos: In Chinese and Western Format, Part 1)*, Hong Kong: Ma Kam Kee Book Store, circa 1995, pp 98-99 (in Chinese).

<sup>30</sup> See Lee Siu-yan, *Tang Disheng Yueju Xuanlun: Fang Yanfen Shouben, 1949-1954 (The Repertoire of Fong Yim Feng: An Introduction of Tang Ti Sheng's Cantonese Opera)*, see note 4, pp 34-38 (in Chinese).

<sup>31</sup> See advertisement of *A Buddhist Recluse for Fourteen Years*, *Wah Kiu Yat Po*, 30 October, 1950 (in Chinese).

<sup>32</sup> See Lee Siu-yan, *Tang Disheng Yueju Xuanlun: Fang Yanfen Shouben, 1949-1954 (The Repertoire of Fong Yim Feng: An Introduction of Tang Ti Sheng's Cantonese Opera)*, see note 4, pp 85-88 (in Chinese).

There were in fact two adaptations of *A Buddhist Recluse for Fourteen Years*. The first was the B&W contemporary drama released on 7 April 1953. The advertisement for the film claimed that the screenplay was adapted from an original work of Tong's, but the film adaptation was even better:

**An opera sensation on stage is even more riveting as a film.**<sup>33</sup>

Flying Eagle Studio Co produced this adaptation of *A Buddhist Recluse for Fourteen Years*, with Luk Fei-hung serving as producer, Chow Sze-luk as director, and Law Bo-sang as composer-cum-lyricist. The main cast of the film includes Fong Yim-fun, Sun Ma Si-tsang, Leung Sing-por, Luk Fei-hung, Fung Wong Nui, Sai Kwa Pau, Lam Lo-ngok, Leung Yeuk-ngoi. Not only did the advertisement specify that the film included 'eight *xiaoqu* (short tunes)', but also that they were performed by 'five illustrious opera stars with golden voices', alongside the 'Three Champions of the Opera World' in a brand new melodrama' as special gimmicks to enhance its promotional effect. The three protagonists of the film: Fong Yim-fun, Sun Ma Si-tsang, and Leung Sing-por, were respectively elected in 1952 as 'The Queen of *Huadan*', 'The King of *Wenwusheng*' and 'The King of *Chousheng*',<sup>34</sup> while melodrama was Fong's forte.<sup>35</sup>

Although the contemporary plot of *A Buddhist Recluse for Fourteen Years* was sourced from a Cantonese opera, its performance was far from the original rendition on stage. Especially the imaginary abstractions emphasised by Cantonese opera were replaced by realism and more direct expressions. Of course, the film contained a number of Cantonese musical numbers, which served to highlight the stellar singing talents of the cast, as such it could be classified as a Cantonese opera musical film.

The other film adaptation of *A Buddhist Recluse for Fourteen Years* was a period drama in colour released on 1 May, 1958. This film produced by Tai Seng Film Company was a more faithful adaptation, using the opera *A Buddhist Recluse for Fourteen Years* as its blueprint. The film was produced by Kwan Kar-Pak, with Kwan Chi-Kin as production manager, Cheung Wai-kwong as writer and director, and Poon Yat-fan as lyricist. The main cast included Fong Yim-fun, Yam Kim-fai, Chan Ho-kau, Mak Bing-wing and Lee Hoi-chuen. Compared to the version from 1953, this colour rendition of *A Buddhist Recluse for Fourteen Years* retained relatively more elements of the original Cantonese opera in terms of setting and performance, which better exemplified an authentic Cantonese opera film.

From the opera stage to two film adaptations, *A Buddhist Recluse for Fourteen Years* not only demonstrated that the story had box office value, by attracting production companies to remake it into films again and again; on the other hand, its two adaptations set in different epochs illustrated the various explorations being made at the time in Hong Kong cinema, and Fong Yim-fun appeared very strategic in spearheading this movement.

In early 1953, the same year Fong founded her San Yim Yeung Opera Troupe, she also invested in establishing her own Film Company, Zhili Films Company. According to Fong, the main purpose of the company was to produce Cantonese opera films that she would star in:<sup>36</sup>



<sup>33</sup> See advertisement in *The Kung Sheung Daily News*, 7 April 1953, p 7 (in Chinese).

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> See Li Siu-yan, '1950 Niandai Fang Yanfen Kuqing Yueju De Wenhua Xianxiang' ('The Cultural Phenomenon of Fong Yim-fun's Mournful Cantonese Opera in 1950s') in *Yueju Guoji Yantaohui Lunwenji (Xia) (Proceedings of International Conference on Cantonese Opera, Part 2)*, Chow Shi Shum and Cheng Ling Yan (eds), Hong Kong: Cantonese Opera Research programme, Department of Music, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2008, pp 329-347 (in Chinese).

<sup>36</sup> See note 20.



No	Release Year	Film Title	Period	Year of Premiere by San Yim Yeung Opera Troupe <sup>37</sup>
1	1953	<i>A Cadet in Love's Battle</i>	Contemporary	
2	1954	<i>Belle in Penang</i>	Contemporary	
3	1954	<i>A Forsaken Woman</i>	Early Republican	1954
4	1955	<i>The Rich Girl and Her Double</i>	Contemporary	
5	1955	<i>A Beauty's Flourishing Fragrance (Distribution)</i>	Early Republican	
6	1956	<i>Phony Couples aka Heavenly Match (Distribution)</i>	Contemporary	
7	1956	<i>Feather Fan under Spring Lantern (Distribution)</i>	Early Republican	1954
8	1956	<i>Pleasure Daughter (Distribution)</i>	Contemporary	
9	1956	<i>The Story of Little Cabbage and Yeung Nai-mo (Distribution)</i>	Period (Musical)	
10	1956	<i>Moonlight</i>	Early Republican	
11	1956	<i>Son of A Noble Family (Distribution)</i>	Contemporary	
12	1956	<i>An Actress in War</i>	Contemporary	
13	1957	<i>Return on A Snowy Night (Distribution)</i>	Early Republican	
14	1957	<i>Loving Enemies</i>	Contemporary	
15	1957	<i>I Cannot Love You</i>	Early Republican	
16	1957	<i>Joyous Wedding</i>	Period (Chinese opera)	1957
17	1958	<i>The Sweepstakes Seller</i>	Contemporary	
18	1958	<i>Why Not Return?</i>	Period (Chinese opera)	
19	1958	<i>Her Prosperous but Selfish Husband (Distribution)</i>	Period (Chinese opera)	
20	1958	<i>The Tragic Story of Leung Shan-pak and Chuk Ying-toi</i>	Period (Chinese opera)	1955
21	1958	<i>The Amorous Emperor and The Sentimental Mang Lai-Kwan (Distribution)</i> <sup>38</sup>	Period (Chinese opera)	1957
22	1958	<i>How Third Madam Educated Her Son (Distribution)</i>	Period (Chinese opera)	
23	1958	<i>Madam Chun Heung-lin (Distribution)</i>	Period (Chinese opera)	
24	1958	<i>A Wife of Nobility Is Never Free (Distribution)</i>	Period (Chinese opera)	1955
25	1958	<i>Seven Filial Kin (Distribution)</i>	Period (Chinese opera)	
26	1959	<i>Twin Lotuses</i>	Period (Chinese opera)	
27	1959	<i>Blood, Love, Tears</i> <sup>39</sup>	Period (Chinese opera)	1954
28	1959	<i>The Beautiful Ghost's Grievance</i>	Early Republican	
29	1959	<i>Sweet Girl</i>	Period (Chinese opera)	
30	1959	<i>Misguided Love</i>	Period (Chinese opera)	
31	1959	<i>Follow the Husband (Distribution)</i>	Contemporary	





Tong Tik-sang wrote a lot of Cantonese opera librettos for Fong Yim-fun, and many of those were adapted into movies: The pictures above and below are respectively *Return on A Snowy Night* (1957) and *A Buddhist Recluse for Fourteen Years* (1958).



<sup>37</sup> Ngok Ching, *Xinyanyang Chuanqi (The Legend of San Yim Yeung)*, Hong Kong: Yue Qing Chuanbo, 2008, p 35 (in Chinese).

<sup>38</sup> Adapted from Cantonese opera *The Amorous Mang Lai-kwun*.

<sup>39</sup> Adapted from Cantonese opera *An Untimely Love Affair*.



From 1953 to 1959, Zhili Film Company participated in the production of 31 films starring Fong, including 14 period dramas, 10 contemporary films, and seven early Chinese Republic era films—which could be considered a hugely productive period. The founding films produced in the early days were mostly contemporary and early Chinese Republic era films. However, from the end of 1957, Zhili Film Company began to co-produce and distribute a greater number of period dramas, and all of them were operatic films.<sup>40</sup> Many were adapted from Chinese opera performances led by Fong at the San Yim Yeung Opera Troupe. These films were products of that critical synergy between San Yim Yeung Opera Troupe and Zhili Film Company. They brought together the stage and the screen, two crucial tools that effectively assisted Fong in attaining her creative ideals and evolving her artistic practice.<sup>41</sup>

From 1957, in addition to her own starring vehicles produced consecutively by Zhili, she began to collaborate with other film companies in making more Cantonese opera films, including many of her own master works. *The Nymph of the River Lo* (1957) was an adaptation of the Cantonese opera *Luo Shen* that premiered in 1956. The movie advertisements published in newspapers emphasised that this was ‘Fong Yim-fun and Yam Kim-

fai’s first big performance on film showcasing their diversity of talents from the opera stage’;<sup>42</sup> viewers only needed to ‘pay just over a dollar to watch these two legendary stars perform on screen!’<sup>43</sup> These promotional statements highlighted the efforts Fong and Yam readily invested in bringing Cantonese opera to the silver screen, so that more audience could experience and enjoy the craft of these two phenomenal performers through Cantonese opera films.<sup>44</sup>

At the time, Fong’s Cantonese opera films also included other repertoires, such as *Seven Filial Kin* (1958)<sup>45</sup> adapted from the classic opera *Jianghu shiba ben* (‘Eighteen Plays of Cantonese Opera’). Other film adaptations from Chinese operas were *Hung-neung, The Matchmaker* (1958),<sup>46</sup> *The Story of Yuk Tong Chun* (1958)<sup>47</sup>, *Kwai-chi Sues* (1959)<sup>48</sup> and *How Fifth Madam Chiu Went Far and Wide in Search for Her Husband* (1959)<sup>49</sup> as well as opera gems first performed by predecessor Sit Kok-sin in the 1920s and 1930s, such as the celebrated *Why Don’t you Return?*, *Sweet Girl* and *Misguided Love*.<sup>50</sup> On one hand, these films demonstrated Fong’s ability to perform classical operas, while showing the importance Fong placed on this cultural legacy. Fong made effective use of existing recorded media to preserve live classical opera.



<sup>40</sup> Ho Wing-sze and James Wong, *Yintan Tuyan: Fang Yanfen De Dianying (Becoming Famous in the Film Industry: The Films of Fong Yim-fun)*, see note 10, p 75 (in Chinese).

<sup>41</sup> Feng Zi, *Fang Yanfen Zhuan Ji Qi Xiqu Yishu (Biography of Fong Yim-fun and Her Performance in Operas)*, see note 1, pp 39-40 (in Chinese).

<sup>42</sup> See advertisement in *Wah Kiu Yat Po*, 1 November, 1957, sheet 6, p 4 (in Chinese).

<sup>43</sup> See advertisement in *Wah Kiu Yat Po*, 5 November, 1957, sheet 3, p 3 (in Chinese).

<sup>44</sup> Besides Zhili, many of Fong Yim-fun’s Cantonese operas premiered under her San Yim Yeung Opera Troupe at the time, were later adapted into films by other production companies in the late 1950s. Most of these starred Fong Yim-fun, such as the film *The Nymph of River Lo* (1957), *Radiant Phoenix* (1958), *Snow in June* (1959) and *The Story of Wong Bo-chuen* (1959), etc. All were Cantonese operas performed by Fong with the San Yim Yeung Opera Troupe, see San Yim Yeung Opera Troupe (ed), *Xinyanyang Jutuan 1957 Nian Yanchu Tekan (Special Issue for the San Yim Yeung Opera Troupe’s Performances in 1957)*, 1957 (in Chinese).

<sup>45</sup> Mak Siu-ha, *Guangdong Xiju Shilue (A Brief History of Guangdong Operas)*, in *Yueju Yanjiu Wenxuan (Essay Collection on Cantonese Opera Research)*, Part 1, Xie Binzhou and Chen Chaoping (eds), Guangzhou: Guangzhou Literary and Artistic Creation Research Institute, 2008, p 37 (in Chinese).

<sup>46</sup> Adapted from the *Xixiangji (The Romance in West Chamber)*, zaju by Yuan dynasty playwright Wang Shifu.

<sup>47</sup> Adapted from the novel by Feng Menglong from the Ming Dynasty, *Yutangchun Luonan Feng Fu (Yutangchun Reunites with Her Husband in Her Distress)*, also refers to the traditional Peking opera repertoire *Su San Qi Jie (Su San Escorted to Trial)*.

<sup>48</sup> Adapted from traditional Chinese Opera *The Story of Horse Selling*, aka *Surprise Reunions*.

<sup>49</sup> Adapted from *Pipaji (The Story of Lute)*, the *nanxi* by Gao Ming from the Yuan Dynasty.

<sup>50</sup> These Librettos were adapted to films starring Fong Yim-fun as lead in 1958 to 1959, for examples, *Why Not Return?* (1958), *Sweet Girl* (1959) and *Misguided Love* (1959).





Fong Yim-fun starred in many Cantonese opera films that were adapted from traditional opera librettos: The pictures above and below are respectively *Kwai-chi Sues* (1959) and *How Fifth Madam Chiu Went Far and Wide in Search of Her Husband* (1959).



## Summary

In the 1950s, many performing artists adapted Cantonese opera into films. However, it is worth noting that commercialisation and production techniques limited most of these films. For the most part, these adaptations failed to fully render the original Cantonese opera from stage to the screen. For example, an original four-hour stage performance was often condensed into an one-and-a-half-hour film. In the process of adapting Cantonese operas into films, the dialogues, vocals, movements and expressions all went through significant transformations; Chinese percussions used to lead the whole performance on stage, as well as lengthy vocal narration used to convey story, thoughts and emotions were also substantially reduced. Costume and makeup, postures, blocking and gestures, along with other essential operatic elements, were reduced or altered to various degrees. Besides, the stage's focus on imaginary abstractions had been greatly diminished.

Despite the copious alterations, these films did serve to preserve artistic performances to a certain extent through the help of film technology, which were widely circulated up till today. They became an important channel for future generations to understand the development of Cantonese opera. Take Fong Yim-fun's opera films as an example, not only did they enable her performances to reach a broader audience at the time, they also gave us the opportunity to still witness her craft on film today and reimagine her exquisite performance live on the opera stage, so that we can gain further understanding of Chinese opera through the lens of these cinematic opera film. In summary, Fong's films are important vectors of culture, a treasure trove for knowing, learning and researching the contemporary evolution of Cantonese opera.

(Translated by Hayli Chwang)

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# The Preservation of Cantonese Operatic Music and Stage Movements in Films: *The Dream of a Decade in Yangzhou*

Chan Sau-yan

In the wake of the death of the master playwright Tong Tik-sang, Tsui Tsi-long, then a minor-role actor aged 24, wrote his first Cantonese opera *The Dream of a Decade in Yangzhou* in 1960 to prove his rare talent. Due to its great success, it was made a film of the same title in the next year, starred by essentially the same cast of the stage premiere. Tsui subsequently wrote another half dozen operas, notably *Favours*, *Hatred and Endless Love of the Phoenix Chamber* (aka *The Princess in Distress*, 1962), *Battling in Thundering Drumming and Airs of Barbaric Pipes* (aka *The Sounds of Battle*, 1962) and *Merciless Sword Under Merciful Heaven* (1963), before his premature demise in 1965, at the age of 29. These three works, bearing styles similar to that of *The Dream of a Decade in Yangzhou*, were also adapted into films. While lacking the plotting and literary flair of Tong Tik-sang, Tsui did not focus on the refinement of his lyrics nor on the intricacy of the story details; instead, with the help of the veteran actor Lau Yuet-fung, he strived to fit *paichang* (formulaic scenes) and comic episodes into dramatic plots, thus achieving a return to the tradition that Tong had bypassed.<sup>1</sup>

## Film as Documentation

The screenplay of *Ten Years Dream* (1961) was written by Lee Yuen-man, whose habitual collaborator Pong Chow-wah rewrote the vocal and *shuobai* (speech) passages that keep only sporadically Tsui's original words. The cast features some of the most popular opera stars of the time, like Mak Bing-wing, Fung Wong Nui,

Lam Kar-sing, Lau Yuet-fung, Chan Ho-kau, Tam Lan-hing, Siu Sun Kuen and Danny Li (aka Li Kei-fung). The film was directed by Fung Fung and produced by Ho Siu-bo, impresario of the troupe that premiered the opera.

The documentary intention of the film is clearly stated in the opening credits: 'The entirety of percussion and vocal music' it carries is 'an adaptation from a well-known stage work'. However, taking into consideration the classification of Cantonese opera films proposed by the late film historian and researcher Yu Mo-wan, *Ten Years Dream* contains a fusion between 'Cantonese opera' and 'film as an expressive language', and is thus not a documentary per se.<sup>2</sup> That said, the opening of the film features a pair of drawn theatre drapes in the foreground, and except the finale, every new act is marked by the recapitulation of this setting.

While Tong Tik-sang's masterworks are mostly 'transplants' from the repertoire of classical Chinese opera, *The Dream of a Decade in Yangzhou's* plot is essentially original. In general, it is as dramatic and reasonable as Tong's operas, and maintaining the traditional personage framework of 'emperors, princes, generals, ministers, scholars and belles'. Like countless Chinese opera stories, including those by Tong, Tsui played with the notion of 'identity'<sup>3</sup> in the development of plotlines, in which a pair of blind lovers get separated in a turmoil, recover their sight, rise respectively to become a magistrate and a princess, confront each other in a court, pretend to remain blind in their reunion, and later collaborate to crush a coup.



<sup>1</sup> See Chan Sau-yan, *Tang Disheng Chuangzuo Chuanqi (The Creative Legend of Tong Tik-sang)*, Hong Kong: Infolink Publishing Limited, 2016, pp 11-12 (in Chinese).

<sup>2</sup> See Conclusion of the present article.

<sup>3</sup> Regarding 'identity plays' in Chinese opera, see Chan Sau-yan, "'Bian Ge Xi Bian Ge?': Cong Shenfen Ju Dao Zazhong Shenfen Ju — Fengge Enchou Weileqing" ("Who is Who in the Opera?": From Identity Play to Hybridised Identity Play — *Favours, Hatred and Endless Love of the Phoenix Chamber* (aka *The Princess in Distress*), in *Yueju Guoji Yantaohui Lunwenji (Proceedings of International Conference on Cantonese Opera, Vol 2*, Chow Shi-shum and Cheng Ling-yan (eds), Hong Kong: Cantonese Opera Research programme, Department of Music, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, pp 493-509 (in Chinese).



One of Tai Lung Fung Opera Troupe's all-time favourite acts, *The Dream of a Decade in Yangzhou*, was written by Tsui Tsi-long and premiered on stage in 1960. The next year, it was adapted for the silver screen by Lee Yuen-man, directed by Fung Fung.



In as much as the film version of *The Dream of a Decade in Yangzhou* adheres to Tsui's plot, Pong Chow-wah's lyrics replaced those long, frequent and melismatic passages of the opera. Since the film's vocal and speech passages feature some of the most popular forms and tunes of Cantonese opera, they can be used as model examples for students and researchers who are interested in analysing and studying the music and speech of Cantonese opera. Of the three families of vocal music in the genre, most of the sung passages in the film are set in *banhuang*;<sup>4</sup> there are seven passages of Tune and only one passage of Storytelling. The present article will cite and discuss some selected vocal passages as well as four forms of speech, namely, *bailan* (patter speech), *luogubai* (percussion speech), *kougu* (rhymed speech) and *yingxiongbai* (heroic speech).

The film's contribution to the preservation of Cantonese opera lies in the documentation of the singing and *shenduan* (stage movements) of Mak Bing-wing, Fung Wong Nui, Tam Lan-hing, Lam Kar-sing and Lau Yuet-fung, all outstanding artists of the 1950s and 60s. It especially achieves the preservation of a number of traditional Formulaic Scenes and Tunes, including 'Grand Inauguration' played at the opening credits,<sup>5</sup> 'Smashing the Sedan' in the scene where the princess challenges the magistrate, 'Fugitive Flight' when the young hero is travelling incognito, 'Besieged at the Gorge' sung by the same character, and 'Grappling in a Boat' when he stymies the bandit's assault.

Formulaic Scene is a family of building blocks in Cantonese opera. Among the hundreds of such scenes, each is identified by a certain dramatic situation to be unfolded by one or more characters via speech and singing, and through a sequence of stage movements accompanied by specified percussion patterns. Such dramatic situations—ranging from 'Killing One's Wife', 'Courtiers' Line-up and Entering the Court', 'Offering Advice to the Devious Emperor', 'Joining the Army' to 'Attacking the Four Castle Gates'—together with their speech, vocal, stage movement and percussion

episodes, respectively fall into formulaic patterns and can be borrowed for the portrayal of similar situations in different operas. In the pre-1930s when improvisatory plays prevailed, Formulaic Scenes and their variants were instrumental in the construction of Chinese opera frameworks. Since the preservation of such scenes relies on oral transmission, a significant number of them have ceased to exist in the course of the evolution of Cantonese opera during the past few decades.

### 'The Wayward Four', Patter Speech and 'Skyscapes of Falling Petals'

The story starts and ends within a pleasure house in Yangzhou, a city in central China about 300 kilometres northwest of Shanghai. During their leisure, eight young artistes enter the garden. Dancing and playing around, they cheerfully sing the tune 'The Wayward Four', a traditional *xiaoqu* (short tune) within the Tune Family. With a repeat of the four-phrase tune, the two stanzas of lyrics carry plenty of joy:

Our daily company gives us a joyful feel,<sup>6</sup>  
Like nightingales and swallows flying in free will.  
We girls are so slim!  
Our games are driving away the still.

While chasing each other, how elegant is our shrill!  
Bobbing and wobbling as if we were in a keel,  
Holding hands, our laughter echoes,  
Shaking off this inner corner's quiet and still.

No sooner have they finished their song than Eighth Aunt (played by Tam Lan-hing, the renowned comic-role artist) comes to curse them. By means of patter speech accompanied by the large rectangular woodblock, the plump owner of the pleasure house raps<sup>7</sup> out her anger:

You band of ghosts are evil,<sup>8</sup>  
And you are no longer kids.  
Instead of practising music,  
You waste time by fooling around.  
Your disgusting behaviour



<sup>4</sup> For the structural characteristics of *banqiang*, see Chan Sau-yan, 'Cantonese Opera', 2019, in *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Traditional Chinese Culture*, Chan Sin-wai (ed), forthcoming.

<sup>5</sup> Thus marking the 'inauguration' of the film.

<sup>6</sup> This translation intends to, as much as possible, keep the original rhyming scheme ([il] and [iu]) of the act.

<sup>7</sup> In effect, *bailan* recited in a quick tempo is not unlike Rap.

<sup>8</sup> My translations here and hereafter do not intend to keep the rhyming scheme.



Is instigating my whips.  
Once I am infuriated,  
I'll beat you up until you leap in pain.

As the girls are dodging Eighth Aunt's thrashing, Ching Sin-Man (played by Chan Ho-kau), her younger daughter, comes to call for a lull.

Sung Man-wah (played by Lam Kar-sing), the young general serving Prince Ngai Chung-yin, now gets to the pleasure house, leaving behind his duty of looking after a load of royal gifts to be offered to the emperor. By means of the tune 'Skyscapes of Falling Petals', he sings aloud his affection and expectations:

I don't lament in loneliness any more,  
For I am seeing my belle to relieve my anxieties.  
Having come here from the frontier,  
Always thinking of the slim beauty,  
I am pleased to see her again  
To end my lovesickness.  
Let me tidy up my robe and helmet  
As the precious moment is coming up.  
Having lost much weight because of her,  
Tired of longing for love in vain,  
I wish to erase all the past sadness.  
We shall chat and giggle in the fragrant boudoir  
Of Lai-man the charming beauty.  
My persistent passion drives us to become a couple,  
And I long for painting her eyebrows.

Yet nothing could be more heart-rending when he learns Ching Lai-man has lost her eyesight due to a vengeance inflicted on her. Lai-man also confesses that she is in love with a blind beau. In despair, Man-wah agrees to marry Sin-Man.

Jade Dragon, originally a righteous swordsman before his rival made him blind, informs his tempestuous brother, Jade Tiger, that Snow Lotus is the cure of his eyes. Knowing that this rare substance is among the royal gifts now in Prince Ngai's possession, Tiger is hatching up a scheme in view.

## Manban in Erhuang Mode

*Banqiang* (family), literally 'melo-rhythm' in Cantonese, is the predominant vocal component of Cantonese opera. It consists of around 50 forms, each identified by the musical mode, the number of syllables in each phrase and line, the tonal pattern of the lyrics, the pulse pattern, and by the ending notes of each phrase and line. The four musical modes each serves a dramatic function: *bangzi* mode specialises in portraying neutral, comical, hilarious, impatient and even indignant moods; *erhuang* mode inclines towards melancholy sentiments; *fanxian* mode features sad or angry outbursts; and *yifan* mode is strictly grievous if not doleful.<sup>9</sup>

Later into that night, Dragon and Lai-man's rendezvous takes place in the garden. Among their vocal and speech dialogues is the passage of *manban* in the mode of *erhuang*, within which are an Extended Line and an Eight-syllable Line, both popular *banqiang* forms used for lamenting:

[Extended Line of *manban* in the mode of *erhuang*]

(Lai-man) I can't help feeling restless during the return of  
spring,

(Dragon) Pitying each other, we exchange our bitter smiles,

(Lai-man) Reliving the past, I have endless regrets,

(Dragon) I have buried my sword that glitters no more,

(Lai-man) Having suffered plenty of ups and downs,

We both are left in abjection,

Our souls languishing.

[8-syllable Line of *manban* in the mode of *erhuang*]

(Dragon) I wish we were a pair of seagulls,

Never parting, but eternally in joyful company.

An exchange of gifts seals their betrothal. Lai-man reveals her proud disposition was responsible for her tragedy, and Dragon confesses that his stubborn character has cost him his eyesight.

Tiger materialises. He pushes the Snow Lotus into the hands of Dragon and Lai-man before disappearing. It transpires that Tiger has stolen the rare cure from the royal gifts that Man-wah is supposed to be guarding. Fearing that the prince would punish him for the dereliction of duties, Man-wah thwarts the soldiers and takes Sin-Man, Lai-man and Eighth Aunt to flee. Dragon and Lai-man get separated amidst the stampede.



<sup>9</sup> See note 4.



Jade Dragon (right), who is also blind, meets with Lai-man (middle) in the singing parlour's back garden. Jade Dragon's younger brother Jade Tiger (left) delivers them a Snow Lotus—a stolen royal food, to help cure their eye diseases. (From left): Lau Yuet-fung, Fung Wong Nui, Mak Bing-wing.

Lai-man has regained her vision during their refuge, but Eighth Aunt is intolerant of the austerities. After raiding a villager, Man-wah hands over the stolen goods to Sin-Man and vanishes. Sin-Man is arrested.

Lai-man, overwhelmed by anxieties, is spotted by Prince Ngai who happens to be scouting for pawns. Stunned by her beauty, Ngai adopts Lai-man to be his daughter, intending to offer her to the emperor for facilitating his upcoming coup. Out of the blue, Lai-man has become Princess Phoenix.

### *Gunhua* in the Mode of *Yifan* and Percussion Speech

Dragon has recovered his sight and become a righteous magistrate. The Commissioner's (played by Danny Li, aka Li Kei-fung) visit reveals to him that Prince Ngai has been plotting a treason.

Sin-Man is interrogated at Dragon's court. With a passage set to the two *banhuang* forms of *gunhua* in the mode of *yifan* sung in free rhythm, she defends herself:

[Extended Line of *gunhua* in the mode of *yifan*]

Getting into this unexpected trouble,  
No one would listen to my misery,  
Having survived the past disaster,  
I lament on my imminent fate,  
I am placed over a fire,  
How could my puniness look like a thief?  
Where did I get the muscle  
To waylay and raid?

[Regular Line of *gunhua* in the mode of *yifan*]

If you ask me why the gold was in my hands,  
I would say I have picked it up from the ground.

In furies, Dragon regards Sin-Man's self-defence as nonsense. The percussion speech he utters features lines punctuated by the percussion pattern '*decheng*':

(Dragon spits) Pei! (*decheng*)  
What a bold woman! (*decheng*)  
Spluttering nonsense, (*decheng*)  
Intending to distort the truth, (*decheng*)  
Without flogging, (*decheng*)  
You will never confess! (*decheng*)  
Guards! (*decheng*)  
Flog this woman criminal!



## Muyu Narrative

Eighth Aunt, now Princess Mother properly attired, rushes into Dragon's court. With a passage of *muyu* (Wooden Fish) Narrative, a vocal form of Storytelling sung in free rhythm, she accuses Dragon of wronging the innocent:

I'll report on you,  
Because you've wronged the innocent.  
Do you know how Sin-Man is related to me?  
There is no way you should treat her like a thief.  
My eldest daughter is the princess,  
His Highest the Prince will cover for us.  
I order you to release Sin-Man,  
Just back down if you are smart.  
Otherwise should my princess daughter come,  
You will have nowhere to hide.  
In case her tantrum is out of control,  
She'll certainly flatten your skull.

## Smashing the Sedan

The stalemated confrontation between Eighth Aunt and Dragon is aggravated by the arrival of Princess Phoenix. When facing each other, neither Dragon nor Lai-man recognises that the opponent was once the blind lover. Nor could either of them put the excessive arrogance aside.

Subsequent to a series of vehement argument, Lai-man attempts to pull rank but to no avail. Seeing Dragon is insisting on the conviction of her sister, she removes and tramples on her own headdress and robe, with a view to framing Dragon and invoking the prince's intervention. Though the scene involves no sedan chair, the dramatic sequence is derived from a Formulaic Scene entitled *Smashing the Sedan*, in which the Royal Highness also splinters her own sedan.

To kick off the scene, Lai-man dashes in, accompanied by the percussion pattern *Lak Lak* Drumming. In stage mandarin, she hurls insult at Dragon:

I am infuriated by what a mess you corrupt magistrate has created! Huh!

But Dragon prudently holds his temper:

This minor official had no knowledge of Your Highness' visit and thus has failed to offer you a proper welcome, please pardon me!

Eighth Aunt's repeated provocations lead to Lai-man's vitriolic outbursts, now sung in the *banqiang* form Quick *manban* in *bangzi* mode:

(Lai-man) I scold you dirty official, you are messing things up without a reason.

You arrest randomly, accusing groundlessly, overturning the truth.



Fung Wong Nui plays Princess Ching Lai-man, who destroys her own crown and performs a 'Smashing the Sedan' act in court.

(Eighth Aunt) Should you intend to live, follow our order, release the prisoner.

Otherwise, you can hardly survive, we'll bring a formal charge.

The three are then engaged in a row, in singing and rhymed speech. The latter features a number of short phrases in a line, whose last syllable must rhyme:<sup>10</sup>

(Dragon, sings *gunhua* in *baqiang* [agitated voice]) Pei! The criminal cannot be easily released, Because no one should ignore the nation's law and order! I must investigate this unsolved case, I can't release this suspect at my own will!

(Lai-man speaks rhymed speech) Dirty official, in the name of my affinity with His Highness, and in the name of my princess status, I order you to release the prisoner. Do you mean that I as a princess do not deserve to be her guarantor? (*Triple Grilling*)

(Eighth Aunt speaks rhymed speech) Dirty official, in the name of my status as a madam and as Princess Mother, I order you to release the suspect at once. Your defiance shows how brash you are! (*Triple Grilling*)

'Triple Grilling' is a short mimed *paichang* used in a confrontation. During the performance, accompanied by the percussion pattern Vanguard Cymbals played three times, the actress raises her hand thrice, respectively pointing at the right, left and right shoulder of Dragon, to symbolise her press for an answer to her interrogation. Unlike those characters who are often stupefied in indecision, Dragon the upright magistrate refuses to back off but stands his ground.

Subsequent to a fresh round of debate, during which Lai-man still fails to win the upper hand, she employs 'Water Waves', another mimed short *paichang*, while formulating her scheme. She then arrives at a decision:

(Sings Quick *zhongban* in *bangzi* mode) The cure comes in the nick of time.

(Sings *gunhua* in *bangzi* mode) Let me smash my headdress, (removes her headdress, chucks it on the floor, tramples it), strip off my silky robe, (removes, chucks and tramples her robe) I'll report to His Highest, telling him you have assaulted me.

The unbudgeable Dragon backfires on Lai-man:

(Sings Quick *zhongban* in *bangzi* mode) Hey! You shrew could never overwhelm this hero. (Sings *gunhua* in *bangzi* mode) I'll resign from my office, (removes his hat) undo my robe, (removes his robe) vowing to defend justice!

The standoff escalates until the arrival of Ngai the treacherous prince. Having sent Lai-man and Eighth Aunt back to his residence, he placates Dragon, promising him that he would take him to the emperor's court and promote him to a higher rank. Dragon acquiesces to this godsend.

## Fugitive Flight, Besieged at the Gorge, Grappling in a Boat

Sung Man-wah has become a Robin Hood-like outlaw and is now on the run. To feature his alertness and agility, he performs the Formulaic Scene known as 'Fugitive Flight'. The scene is shot against a setting that resembles an opera stage, where a piece of carpet is placed in the middle, thus rendering the essential documentary nature of the film.

Four lines of heroic speech, structurally (having five or seven syllables per line) and functionally (as self-introduction) identical to Poetic Speech but delivered in an agitated intonation, disclose Man-wah's perplexity:

My golden spear once dominated the river's east side.  
But this hero is now stranded in a mire.  
The past looks like a dream whenever I reminisce.  
Ahead of me are numerous ridges and castle gates! Alas!

He then sings a passage of Tune entitled 'Besieged at the Gorge', which is borrowed from the Formulaic Scene of the same title. No matter whether a gorge is involved, this Formulaic Scene is used whenever an army is checked and kept at bay by its enemies.



<sup>10</sup> This is not reflected in the translation. Please refer to the Chinese text cited in the Chinese version of this article.



Reliving the past,  
 Such sweetness and rancour are a mirage,  
 As if were petals falling in the blustering wind.  
 Trying to avoid reminiscence,  
 Blood and tears are mixed.  
 My nuptial bliss has been shattered,  
 Sorrow is filling my chest.  
 I'm in endless longing,  
 While fleeing to avoid capture.  
 Hearing the wheezes of the gale,  
 Startled by the swelling waves,  
 Would someone ferry me to the opposite shore?

Tiger, who has stolen the Snow Lotus and is now a bandit, sees Man-wah as his easy prey. Disguised as a boatman, he offers Man-wah his service. The two actors then collaborate in the performance of 'Grappling in a Boat', another Formulaic Scene. In the absence of a real boat, Tiger makes use of an oar and of the symbolic movements of boat rowing, and both actors apply abstract gestures and bodily movements to symbolise the wobbling of the boat. An altercation erupts in the form of patter speech in a quick tempo:

(Man-wah) Tell me, you fisherman,  
     Tell me, you fisherman,  
     Why the boat halts in the middle of the water?  
 (Tiger) Listen to me,  
     Listen to me,  
     This boat can't possibly move without  
     the fulfilment of the rule.  
 (Man-wah) What rule are you talking about? Please say it.  
 (Tiger) My service is guided by a rule.  
     Each commuter must surrender ten taels of gold in  
     exact.  
     The boat won't go if you offer a penny more than  
     that.  
     It also stops when you submit a penny less.  
     If you can't afford that,  
     Just leave your bundle behind.

The two engage in a grapple that results in a draw. With mutual respect, they exchange confessions and become sworn brothers and agree to raid the prince's boat that has docked nearby.

## Reunion and Denouement

Man-wah reunites with Sin-Man and Lai-man when he conducts a reconnaissance on the boat. After his departure, Tiger reunites with Dragon when he comes to survey the situation. Tiger takes Dragon to the pleasure house to see Lai-man. By the time the two meet, without knowing the new identities of each other, they individually pretend to remain blind so as not to hurt the lover. The truth is revealed in no time. Prince Ngai is arrested by the commissioner who pardons Man-wah. The seven personages then sing a passage in the *banqiang* form *sanjiaodeng* (Three-legged Stool) to conclude the film:

(Sin-Man) The moon has re-emerged upon the dispersal of  
     the clouds,  
     Our sorrows are gone as we happily reunite.  
 (Man-wah) We lovers celebrate our reunion,  
     Vowing to stay together forever.  
 (Lai-man) Thank God who has fixed our betrothals,  
     I am pleased to marry my beloved one.  
 (Dragon) Today is the first time I see my admirer,  
     It surprises me that we have already met.  
 (Eighth Aunt) I don't have to worry any more,  
     Because both of my sons-in-law will be honoured.  
 (Tiger) I stole the Snow Lotus,  
     Only for curing my brother's eyes.  
 (Commissioner) The past has vanished like smokes,  
     The treacherous one has been put away.  
 (Turning to the three men, sings *gunhua*) You three  
     have thwarted a treason,  
     Your endeavour deserves commendation.  
 (The seven together, sing *gunhua*) It resembles a dream of a  
     decade in Yangzhou,  
 (Dragon, Man-wah, Tiger, together speak) Our gratitude,  
     Your Highness!  
 (The seven together, sing *gunhua*) And the dream has  
     evaporated into clouds.





Lam Kar-sing (left) and Lau Yuet-fung (right) demonstrate a series of traditional Cantonese opera stage movement patterns and formulaic gestures: (top to bottom) 'Fugitive Flight', 'Grappling in a Boat' and a hand-to-hand *shouqiao* (a bridge hand duel).

## Conclusion

According to Yu Mo-wan, the huge collection of Cantonese opera films now housed in the Hong Kong Film Archive can be classified into six categories: (1) 'Cantonese Opera Documentaries' that straightly records a stage performance of an opera; (2) 'Cantonese Operatic Films' that presents a Cantonese opera with filming techniques and conventions; (3) 'Cantonese Opera Musical Films' that avoids Formulaic Scenes and stylistic movements but keeps the vocal and speech passages; (4) 'Cantonese Opera Films in Modern Costume' that usually feature an opera in modern costume;<sup>11</sup> (5) 'Films with Cantonese Opera Highlight(s)' that accommodates one or more Cantonese opera highlight(s) in the plot; and (6) 'Cantonese Opera Collage Films' that is composed of highlights from Cantonese opera films.<sup>12</sup>

Yet, as the subtitles of such films do not specify the types of vocal form, speech form, Formulaic Scene, stage movement or percussion pattern used in Cantonese opera, the exploration of such a treasure for education, research, transmission and promotion must depend on a tedious collaboration between scholars and practitioners.

Chan Sau-yan taught at the Department of Music of The Chinese University of Hong Kong from 1987 to 2007. After a sojourn of seven years in Wales, UK, he returned to Hong Kong in 2015. He is now a researcher, writer and volunteer. His publications consist of over 20 books on Cantonese opera.

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<sup>11</sup> Such a category contains ambiguities and deserves more thoughts. Perhaps it could be merged into category (3).

<sup>12</sup> Yu Mo-wan, 'Xianggang Yueju-dianying Fazhan Shihua' ('Anecdotes of Hong Kong Cantonese Opera Films'), in *Cantonese Opera Film Retrospective (The 11th Hong Kong International Film Festival Catalogue)* (Revised Edition), Li Cheuk-to (ed), Hong Kong: Hong Kong Film Archive, 2003, p 18 (in Chinese).

# Successor of Foot-binding Techniques and the ‘Mui Vocal Style’: Yu Lai-zhen, ‘The Queen of the Art of *Dan*’

Winnie Chan Hiu-ting

My take is actors should not continue walking in the old steps and seclude themselves, nor should they be fettered by old conventions. I’m very open to new reforms, ideas, music, and singing styles. This is why I go to see Western movies as well as Chaozhou opera and Peking opera on a regular basis. I’d reflect in silence afterwards, examining the performances to find where the actors’ strengths lie. When choosing between the old and the new, one must have an intrinsic and thorough understanding of the traditional art of Cantonese opera, so as to be able to preserve the merits of tradition, dispose of rotten habits, and benefit from the new.’

Yu Lai-zhen<sup>1</sup>

Hong Kong cinema has always been inseparable from Cantonese opera. The first motion picture made by a Hong Kong film company, *Zhuang Zi Tests His Wife* (aka *Chuang Tzu Tests His Wife*, 1914), is itself a silent B&W ‘Cantonese opera movie’ which is based on the act entitled ‘Grave Fanning’ from the stage production *Zhuang Zi’s Butterfly Dream*.<sup>2</sup> ‘Cantonese opera films’, as the name suggests, refers to cinematic works whose content is related to the traditional art form. Hong Kong is the main producer of such features. According to Yu Mo-wan, as a genre, ‘Cantonese Opera Films’ can only be regarded as a general term. Movies related to the art form can actually be divided into six categories, namely ‘Cantonese Opera Documentaries’, ‘Cantonese Operatic Films’, ‘Cantonese Opera Musical Films’, ‘Cantonese Opera Films in Modern Costumes’, ‘Films with Cantonese

Opera Highlight(s)’, and ‘Cantonese Opera Collage Films’.<sup>3</sup> Under the ‘Cantonese Opera Films’ umbrella, the ‘operatic films’ is unique in that it combines the elements of the traditional stage with those of cinema to the fullest, and is therefore able to preserve the actors’ artistry in their entirety. Renowned Cantonese opera actress Yu Lai-zhen, known as ‘The Queen of the Art of *Dan*’, was already showing promising talent in Hong Kong’s Cantonese opera scene in the early 1940s. She graced both the stage and the silver screen for more than 30 years before retiring in 1967. Yu’s singing technique and martial arts skills became the highlights of her performances ever since she made her acting debut in Hong Kong. In 1959, she founded Lux Film Company (hereinafter referred to as ‘Lux’) with her husband Lee Siu-wan. The couple established their own brand with motion pictures directed by Lee and starring Yu, making more than 80 movies in just eight years. Most of the Lux’s productions can be classified as ‘operatic films’ which feature a mix of poignant drama and action. In retrospect, these works are valuable records which serve the purpose to document the artistry of this celebrated actress.

## Yu Lai-zhen the Vocalist

When it comes to the fundamentals of ‘voice, looks, and showmanship’ required of performers, the first quality is especially important for Cantonese opera actors. While the way a person sounds—pleasant



<sup>1</sup> Xiao Ke, ‘Yu Lizhen Xiaojie De Jingyan Tan’ (‘Yu Lai-zhen Shares her Experience’), *Express News*, 18 August 1971 (in Chinese).

<sup>2</sup> Regarding the categorisation of *Zhuang Zi Tests His Wife* as ‘Cantonese opera movie’, see Yu Mo-wan, ‘Xianggang Yueju-dianying Fazhan Shihua’ (‘Anecdotes of Hong Kong Cantonese Opera Films’), in *Cantonese Opera Film Retrospective (The 11th Hong Kong International Film Festival Catalogue)* (Revised Edition), Li Cheuk-to (ed), Hong Kong: Hong Kong Film Archive, 2003, p 18 (in Chinese). However, Law Kar provides evidences that the film was adapted from the *wenmingxi* (civilised drama) of the same title, see Law Kar, ‘Between Pre-war Cantonese Opera and Cinema: Their Mutual Transformation and Aesthetic Issues in the Hong Kong Context’ in this book, pp 12-27.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*



or otherwise – may be determined by nature, apart from having an inherent gift, one can also work hard to hone their vocal ability. Chen Canggu, the author of *Biographies of Chinese Opera Artists*, is convinced that one of Yu Lai-zhen's strengths was that, she knew how to control her vocalisation and when to pause and take a breath while singing. 'Losing momentum is the worst thing that can happen when performing a song. In addition to being able to sustain vocal momentum, Yu Lai-zhen is able to master the articulation method and enunciates clearly. Her adeptness at catching her breath enables her to quickly replenish the air (*qi*) she has used up, giving her considerable endurance. She is therefore capable of handling long solos. This is the beauty of her vocal ability.'<sup>4</sup> A Cantonese opera actor's vocal ability can be judged by the way they use their voice. This is with reference to 'the prolonged notes at the end of a string of lyrics, where the voice, but not the words, is heard.'<sup>5</sup> This is an area in which artists can create their distinctive trademarks. Competence in this skill can help artists overcome their innate inadequacies, enable them to make innovative changes to their existing style, and even create their own unique styles. Yu was proficient in the 'Mui Vocal Style', created by the Cantonese opera actress Sheung Hoi Mui who enjoyed popularity in Hong Kong in the 1920s and 30s. It is best suited to the performance of woeful lyrics and melodies as it is especially effective in evoking melancholy. Sheung was once a member of the Kok Sin Sing Opera Troupe formed by renowned Cantonese opera actor Sit Kok-sin, and the two worked together for a long period of time. The 'Mui Vocal Style' proved to be very popular, with many imitating its techniques. Yu herself joined various troupes created by Sit, such as Kok Sin Sing and Kok Kwong,

on multiple occasions from 1946 to 1949. In December 1949, when Sit founded the Kok Wah Opera Troupe, he even put on performances in which both Yu and Sheung starred as leading ladies opposite the male protagonist.<sup>6</sup> The former once candidly declared her admiration for the latter during an interview, admitting that she walked a similar path in playing the tragic heroine. However, she stressed that she did not completely imitate her predecessor, because 'even though art originates in imitation, for something to stand the test of time, it must have an element of "individuality".'<sup>7</sup> As a matter of fact, the way Yu sang is also referred to by her own name—the 'Zhen Vocal Style'. A *Wah Kiu Yat Po* article published in the 1960s stated that 'Yu Lai-zhen has a remarkable voice and a flair for showmanship. She has developed unique vocals which industry insiders call the "Zhen Vocal Style".'<sup>8</sup>

In any case, Yu has been dubbed 'the true legitimate of the "Mui Vocal Style"' in the writings of many scholars and researchers. A review of the 'operatic films' she had starred in reveals that whenever she played a character who was mired in misfortune, opportunities arose for her to perform woeful numbers using the 'Mui Style'. Chen spoke highly of Yu's vocal ability, stating that 'her singing is very pleasant to the ears. She is especially capable of evoking poignancy in sorrowful songs, to which she adds delicate expressions, making her performances even more captivating. This is why she is the most successful at portraying the tragic heroine.'<sup>9</sup> Her performances featuring various traditional Cantonese opera modes, tempos, and melodies can be heard in the 'operatic films' she starred in. Through camera angle changes, the 'delicate expressions' which accompany her singing



<sup>4</sup> Chen Canggu, *Lingguan Liechuan (Biographies of Chinese Opera Artists)*, Vol 2, Hong Kong: Ma Kam Kee Book Store, circa 1956, p 14 (in Chinese).

<sup>5</sup> Oral accounted by Chan Fei-nung, collated by Yu Mo-wan, edited by Jackson Sum Kat-sing and Yu Mo-wan (first edition); Ng Wing-chung and Chan Chak-lui (eds), *Yueju Liushi Nian (Six Decades of Cantonese Opera)* (Revised Edition), Hong Kong: Cantonese Opera Research Programme, Department of Music, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2007, p 55 (in Chinese).

<sup>6</sup> Chan Hiu-ting, 'Yu Lizhen Wutai Yanchu Taiqi Biao 1946-1949' ('Timetable of Yu Lai-zhen's Stage Performances: 1946-1949'), *Wu Tou · Shenguai · Zajiao — Yishu Dan Hou Yu Lizhen (The Headless Empress, Supernatural Beauty, and Foot-binding Heroine — The Queen of the Art of Dan: Yu Lai-zhen)*, Hong Kong: Culture Plus, 2015, pp 253-262 (in Chinese).

<sup>7</sup> See note 1.

<sup>8</sup> 'Yu Lizhen Zhuyan *Suhou Jie Hongluo*' ('Yu Lai-zhen Stars in *Queen So Looses the Red Sack* [1957]'), *Wah Kiu Yat Po*, 26 November 1968, sheet 4, p 4 (in Chinese).

<sup>9</sup> See note 4.



*The Magic-Eyed Queen Spots the Prince, The Concluding Episode (1959): (from left) Lam Kar-sing, Yu Lai-zhen, and Yam Kim-fai.*

become even more apparent, enhancing the melancholic mood driven by the plot. Lux's *The Magic-Eyed Queen Spots the Prince, Part One and The Concluding Episode* (1959) and *Riot in the Palace* (1961) were directed by Chu Kea and written by Lee Siu-wan, with Leung Shan-yan and Cui Yam-yuk serving as the lyricist and cinematographer respectively. In *The Magic-eyed Queen Spots the Prince*, Yu plays the Queen Choi-luen of the East Palace who gives birth to a prince, whom the Concubine Kam-fung of the West Palace replaces with a dead baby. Yu's character is then framed for adultery, which results in her eyes being branded by fire and her subsequent abandonment on a barren mountain. In the scene where she is finally reunited with her son, the screenplay arranges for her to sing in the *yifan* mode with *muyu* (wooden fish, a wooden percussion instrument) accompaniment before Yam Kim-fai, who plays the prince, takes over with a mid-tempo number also in the *yifan* mode:

[*Yifan* mode with *muyu* accompaniment] The evil empress concubine made a switch and stole my beautiful baby. Her scheme to seize the throne shall not bear fruit so easily. When I became pregnant with another heir, she became consumed with jealousy and falsely accused me of committing adultery, leading to my exile into the

wilderness. She then sent the Emperor (King) to the realm beyond with a deadly dose of poison. After I gave birth to my baby, no one offered me any pity. Fortunately, a gorilla and a host of beasts came to my aid. I spent every moment yearning to clear my name and to save my son. The Holy Mother eventually appeared before me one night.

The four common modes used in Cantonese opera include *zhengxian/heche*, *fanxian/shangliuxian*, *yifanxian*, and *shigongxian*, with each representing different emotions.<sup>10</sup> The 'Mui Vocal Style' is effective in evoking sorrow, making it more suited to melancholic melodies. *Fanxian* and *yifanxian* go best with this style, and are also the modes which Yu sang most often. According to Chen Yixiang's explanation in *Exploration of Cantonese Opera*, *fanxian* is four tones lower than *zhengxian*. 'This mode is dull and gloomy, making it suitable for narration and lamenting.' Meanwhile, *yifanxian* is 'richly melancholic, and is thus apt for grieving and mourning'.<sup>11</sup> The base chords of *yifanxian* and *zhengxian* are originally identical and comprise *he* (sol) and *che* (re), but *shi* (la) and *gong* (mi) are changed to *yi* (ti) and *fan* (fa) in the former, hence its name. As the *yifanxian* mode can create a tragic atmosphere, it is also known as the 'woeful tone' and 'plum blossom style'.<sup>12</sup> Cantonese opera is an amalgamation of various musical families, the



<sup>10</sup> Wong Chuen-fung (ed), *Zhongguo Yinyue Daoshang (Listening to Chinese Music)*, Hong Kong: The Commercial Press (H.K.) Ltd., 2009, pp 124-126 (in Chinese).

<sup>11</sup> Chen Yixiang, *Yuequ Tansuo (Exploration of Cantonese Opera)*, Guangzhou: Guangzhou Chubanshe, 1995, pp 108-109 (in Chinese).

<sup>12</sup> See note 10.



three most common of which include *banqiang* family/variation of tempos (aria type), *geyao* (story-telling) and *qupai* (set tune). The above-mentioned *yifan* mode with temple block accompaniment can be classified as *geyao*, a *shuochang* (narrative singing) family which combines *shuobai* (speech) and *changqu* (singing). The biggest difference between *muyu* accompaniments and the widely known *nanyin* (Southern tunes) is that there is no music accompaniment in the former, which means that the actors sing a capella. When Yu sings in the *yifan* mode with temple block accompaniment, the despondence her character suffers in the face of plight is somewhat emphasised. It is also worth mentioning that after she and Yam finish their song in the film, Lam Kar-sing, who plays Yu's younger son, tags in with a *nanyin* melody. In addition to conveying the character's worry about his mother's safety from the storytelling perspective, it also sustains the dejected atmosphere of the entire film.

As for *Riot in the Palace*, Yu once again portrays the Empress Chiu-yee of the East Palace who falls prey to the villainous scheming of the Concubine To of the West Palace. She is initially sentenced to death by beheading, but ultimately rescued by a loyal court official. Yam plays the son (crown prince) of the virtuous empress. After mistakenly believing that his mother has died, he cries before her grave every day. Unable to bear hearing him mourn any longer, the Empress Chiu-yee of the East Palace finally emerges to meet him. The long shot and close-up were used to film this scene. It begins with a long shot to show the actors making their entrances and the environment in which they are situated. Viewers see a figure appearing from a cloud of smoke. As it gradually dissipates, they recognise that it is the Empress Chiu-yee of the East Palace played by Yu. She approaches the camera slowly, and then looks left to discover her weeping son hunched over a grave. As the entr'acte music featuring percussion pattern ends, the camera



Yu Lai-zhen as the headless ghost (pictured right) in *Riot in the Palace* (1961). The picture is a poster.



changes to a close-up and begins filming Yu singing the tune *Mourning for Autumn* (aka *Return of the Purple Clouds Ziyun hui*) in the *zhengxian* mode:

[*Mourning for Autumn*] My heart aches increasingly with my child's every whimper, beckoning his mother to return. He is exhausted and his voice is hoarse from weariness, from his daily visits to the mountainside grave. He seems to believe that we will only meet in the realm beyond. His eyes flood with tears as he drifts in a daze. Filled with sorrow, a trail of tears glistens. I shall go to his side and say, 'My sweet child'.

A film's ability to convey ideas to the audience is closely related to camera use. The distance between the viewers and the subject being filmed can give rise to various effects. In the above-mentioned scene, Yu appears with a headful of dishevelled long hair, wearing a white gown and carrying an exorcism staff. This look is typical of the ghosts featured in traditional opera, and is a perfect manifestation of the major life changes which the character is currently undergoing. Meanwhile, the use of the close-up enables the detailed capturing of Yu's facial expressions while singing her sorrowful number, enhancing the impact of her emotional performance. When she sings the line 'He is exhausted and his voice is hoarse from weariness', she has a mournful expression and teary eyes. Throughout the song, she appeases her heart by caressing her chest and gently wipes her tears. This close-up is especially effective in making the audience feel doubly sorry for the tragic character. After the actress finishes the lyrics 'I shall go to his side and say, "My sweet child"', the shot changes from a close-up to a long shot, showing the Empress Chiu-ye of the East Palace reuniting with her son at the grave, thereby facilitating plot progression.

Since her foray into cinema, Yu had become a regular in supernatural features. The 'operatic films' she starred in enabled the vocal artistry of traditional Cantonese opera to be retained, while the coexistence of the old and new could also be achieved through the skilled use of editing and special effects. *The Headless Empress Bears a Son, Part One and Part Two* (1957), produced by The United Film Company marked the first of a series of supernatural films in which Yu would assume the role of the headless heroine. In the story, the Empress Chan of the East Palace is set up by the Concubine Leung of the West Palace and falsely accused

of committing adultery. She is sentenced to execution by beheading, but her spirit remains in the land of the living. At the end of the film, she takes revenge on the Concubine Leung of the West Palace in her headless ghost form, eerily demanding, 'Give me back my head!' She then approaches the evil concubine Leung with an exorcism staff in hand and breaks into song to the melody of *Spring Light on South Island*:

Disaster will befall you, disaster indeed. You have caused me great suffering. Hand my head over. Give it back to me. I demand to have it back. Your mischief led to my beheading. For that, I will take you to the King of Hell (*Yanluo*) and have you tortured. I will drag you to the King of Hell and have you tortured. I will drag you to the King of Hell. You have sinned. You have sinned.

The film reel is then overlapped to show the head of the Empress Chan of the East Palace flying in mid-air. As it continues to hover, it condemns the villainess, 'It's too late to feel remorse!' She then continues with the song:

You have committed too many sins. It's high time you pay for what you did. You have inflicted pain on an innocent woman, seduced the emperor in an attempt to take his life, conspired to usurp the throne and seize the kingdom, and caused harm to thousands of loyalists. I have especially come to collect your life and to torture you, you wicked witch. Order Horse-Face and Ox-Head (the guardians of hell) to block the treacherous concubine's way.

After she finishes singing this part, two actors portraying the guardians of hell take their cue from the lyrics and appear from smoke, wearing an ox and horse mask respectively. They pick up a trident each and point them menacingly at the Concubine Leung of the West Palace. Later, the Empress Chan of the East Palace appears, with head intact, and forces the villainous concubine Leung to confess her sins in the presence of the emperor. She then reverts to her headless form and strangles her nemesis as well as her associates with her bare hands. With her adversary gone, the Empress Chan of the East Palace becomes her normal self again and bursts out laughing, 'Haha, haha, hahahaha...' This is a perfect demonstration of *sandajian* (triple laughs with percussion accompaniment) commonly used in Cantonese opera. The next scene takes place in the underworld, where everyone is appearing before the King of Hell. In addition to showing Yu's sorrowful facial expressions as she sings her heart out, the camera also reveals several



extras dressed in indigenous costume appearing spookily in the background. As the plot progresses, Yu and Fung Wong Nui, the actress who portrays the Concubine Leung of the West Palace, exchange dialogue in *bailan*, using the traditional Cantonese opera rhythmic speech mode to list each other's rights and wrongs. To sum up, 'operatic films' are the most reliable medium through which today's audiences can relive the vocal artistry of bygone Cantonese opera superstars.

## The Acrobatic 'Arts' of Yu Lai-zhen

For Yu Lai-zhen to be able to enjoy the reputation of 'The Queen of the Art of *Dan*' in the performing arts scene, her martial arts skills obviously had to be superior. Chen Canggu believed that a Cantonese opera actress has to be a 'quadruple threat' in order to be crowned queen. The four skills in question are 'the ability to perform *cai qiao* (the portrayal of foot-binding via stilt walking), swirl one's hair, put on armour, and portray a maid.'<sup>13</sup> The third and fourth requirements refer to character portrayal. When an actor plays the role of a general, he or she often has to wear armour. Thus, 'the ability to put on armour' is synonymous with martial arts competence. Meanwhile, 'the ability to portray a maid' can be interpreted as the aptitude in playing bubbly *xiaodan* (young female in supporting role). As for the first two prerequisites, they are traditional Cantonese opera techniques in which Yu was well versed. *Cai qiao* is also commonly known as 'foot-binding', a skill specific to actresses who portray foot-binding heroines on the stage. Chen had nothing but praise for Yu's ability to wear stilt shoes, believing that in the 1950s and 60s, 'the only Cantonese opera actresses who mastered foot-binding techniques were Yu Lai-zhen and Chan Yim-nung. Others who seemed competent were barely managing at best.'<sup>14</sup> From 1958 to 1960, Yu starred as the foot-binding protagonist in seven films, portraying valiant heroines adept at martial arts such as Liu Jinding, Mu Guiying, Fan Lihua, and He

Yufeng (aka 'Thirteenth Sister'). Having wielded swords and engaged in physical combat while wearing stilt shoes since her debut, her martial arts prowess was never inferior to that of her male co-stars. The screenplays of this series of films were all penned by Lee Siu-wan. Yu had considerable screen time in these motion pictures, while their respective plots suited her ability to act as well as civil and military plays, thereby enabling faithful and thorough documentation of her exceptional foot-binding skills. While watching a live Cantonese opera performance allows audiences to directly appreciate the actors' artistry, there is still a certain distance between the stage and the seats. Taking foot-binding techniques as an example, it is difficult for us to focus on the actors' tiny feet at close range. In contrast, 'operatic films' can depict their unique footwork to the fullest extent on the silver screen through the use of various shot types, camera angles, and film editing techniques. Cui Yam-yuk served as the cinematographer for *The Story of Lau Kam-ting* (1958) and *The Story of Muk Kwai-ying, Part One* (1959), both of which starred Yu as the protagonist. Coincidentally, viewers see her feet before her face as she makes her entrance in both works. Through the use of close-ups, the cinematographer keeps the audience's focus on the actress's *cai qiao* at all times.

In addition to being adept at *cai qiao*, Yu is also a master of hair-swirling, the last of the competencies which made her a 'quadruple threat'. This is an important skill for Cantonese opera actors to have and is most often performed near the end of live performances<sup>15</sup> to convey the physical or psychological trauma a character is undergoing or the overwhelming emotions he or she is experiencing. According to an explanation by male *dan* Chan Fei-nung, actors have to attach a ponytail to their hair before the performance. Male characters wear relatively thinner and shorter ones, while those worn by female characters tend to be more voluminous. Torso and neck strength are required to swing the hair in a circular



<sup>13</sup> Chen Canggu, 'Xiju Mantan (No 85): Jiben De Juyi' ('Discussion on Cantonese Opera (No 85): Basics of the Performance'), *Sing Tao Evening Post*, 25 July 1959, p 8 (in Chinese).

<sup>14</sup> Chen Canggu, 'Xiju Mantan (No 94): Jiben De Juyi' ('Discussion on Cantonese Opera (No 94): Basics of the Performance'), *Sing Tao Evening Post*, 3 August 1959, p 7 (in Chinese).

<sup>15</sup> The climax of a Cantonese opera play often occurs in the scenes leading up to the finale. Actors generally wait until this part to perform their unique skills to thank audiences for their support.



*The story of Lau Kam-ting (1958): (from left) Yam Kim-fai, Yu Lai-zhen, Yam Bing-ye, and Leung Sing-por.*



motion, and the movements must become increasingly fast.<sup>16</sup> Actors can perform this technique while standing or kneeling. Sometimes, they have to cross the stage or walk in circles on both knees while swirling their hair. The faster the movements, the more proficient the actor is in this skill. When Chan Fei-nung and Mini Lam talked about hair-swirling, they both brought up Yu by coincidence. The former specifically mentioned her by name, lauding her competence, while the latter stated that she was well versed in this technique. She believed that 'hair-swirling is a thrill to behold. Actors channel their anger into their hair, which they swing continuously in a circular motion to create a dizzying effect of seismic proportions.' She even joked that Yu might have had 'concerns about her head falling off' while practising this skill, which inspired her to create her signature role of the headless Empress of the East Palace. 'Then she would still be able to act even after her head drops to the ground.'<sup>17</sup> Renowned Hong Kong Cantonese opera actress Ng Kwan-lai and Yu were like sisters. The two formed the group Eight Peonies with six of their peers in the 1960s.<sup>18</sup> Its members held regular monthly gatherings and also performed together on the stage and screen frequently. Ng once talked about how Yu personally taught her the technique in an interview:

Hair-swirling? I'm really good at it! I can do it over 300 times. Yu Lai-zhen taught me how. In the beginning, I practised at home by tying up my own hair. I swung and swung and swung my head, and then tried it while walking in circles. The ponytails for female roles are longer, about four feet long. The ones for male roles are shorter. The amount of power you use in the swing is critical. You have to get it exactly right. Otherwise you'll be dizzy for days.

Ng and Yu's hair-swirling skills have always been widely praised. The reporter who wrote an article about it also said, 'When it comes to hair-swirling mastery, if Ng Kwan-lai declares herself second best, then only Yu Lai-zhen would have the audacity to claim the crown.'<sup>19</sup> Being able to swirl her ponytail more than 300 times actually already makes Ng a master of this art, so the fact that she conceded the throne to Yu proves that the latter was truly in a league of her own.

The newspaper advertisement for the film *The Story of Muk Kwai-ying, Part One* said, 'Yu Lai-zhen, the industry's top foot-binding heroine, will be showcasing a variety of martial arts skills and her hair-swirling technique in her stilt shoes.'<sup>20</sup> It specifically mentioned that Yu would perform hair-swirling in the movie. The story tells of how the likes of the titular character, played by Yu, her husband Yeung Chung-bo, and father-in-law Yeung Luk-long must break the Heaven-Gate Formation created by a warlock in their resistance against Liao troops. The formation is divided into different levels. While facing the 'Poisonous Dragon Formation', Muk Kwai-ying has to take on several monsters (portrayed by actors in costumes) on her own, but she eventually drives them to the brink of desperation. In this scene, a close-up is first used to show the poisonous dragon's hand holding a helmet. The shot then jumps to a close-up of Yu's character panicking because her helmet has been taken. Since an actor has to swing a fake ponytail during a hair-swirling performance, if he or she is wearing a helmet, it must be removed. Thus, this arrangement was a good way of rationalising what would follow. Three different camera angles were used to film Yu's hair-swirling performance, the first being a long shot close to eye level which excludes the actress's lower body from the frame.



<sup>16</sup> See note 5, p 65 (in Chinese).

<sup>17</sup> Mini Lam, 'Lingxing Yinxiang' ('Memories of Cantonese Opera Superstars'), in *Cantonese Opera Film Retrospective (The 11th Hong Kong International Film Festival Catalogue)* (Revised Edition), Li Cheuk-to (ed), see note 2, p 59 (in Chinese).

<sup>18</sup> Eight Peonies consisted of Fung Wong Nui (Red Peony), Patricia Lam Fung (Yellow Peony), Nan Hong (Green Peony), Tang Bik-wan (Blue Peony), Yu Lai-zhen (Purple Peony), Yu So-chow (Black Peony), Ng Kwan-lai (White Peony), and Law Yim-hing (Silver Peony).

<sup>19</sup> Xiao Feng, 'Wu Junli Xili-Xiwai De Moli' ('Ng Kwan-lai's Allure In and Out of Character'), *Modern C.O. Magazine*, Vol 05, July 2008, p 8 (in Chinese).

<sup>20</sup> See advertisement in *Wah Kiu Yat Po*, 25 February 1959, sheet 6, p 4 (in Chinese).



Yu Lai-zhen, also known as 'The Queen of the Art of Dan', showing off her foot-binding (left) and hair-swirling (right) technique in *The Story of Muk Kwai-ying, Part One* (1959). The cinematographer captured the performances from multiple angles to give the audience a comprehensive view.

It then jumps to a shot taken from a higher angle. At this point, Yu's whole body becomes clearly visible, enabling viewers to fully appreciate her hair-swirling movements as she walks in circles on her knees in an anticlockwise direction. The film even goes so far as to have a giant eagle monster hover above her, circling in mid-air in the same direction as the actress. Finally, the shot changes to a bird's eye shot to mimic the eagle monster's point of view. The audience is able to watch Yu walk three circles on her knees while swirling her ponytail from above on the silver screen, something which is basically impossible in a stage production. Therefore, the use of various shot

types and camera angles in 'operatic films' is able to give audiences a unique viewing experience. Furthermore, two other motion pictures produced by Lux, namely *Seven Phoenixes* (aka *Golden Phoenix and the Dragon*, 1961) and *The Battle Between the Seven Phoenixes and the Dragon* (1962), feature scenes in which Yu performs hair-swirling alongside six other actresses. They can be considered as thorough records of 'collective hair-swirling', over which Yu reigns supreme. Such spectacular performances are few and far between in today's Cantonese opera world.<sup>21</sup>

(Translated by Johnny Ko)

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<sup>21</sup> In the film *Seven Phoenixes* (aka *Golden Phoenix and Dragon*) (1961), the other six actresses who performed hair-swirling alongside Yu include Lee Suen, Fu Yung-lai, Hui Hing-hing, Yam Bing-yee, Leung Chui-fan, and Kam Ying-lin. Meanwhile, those in *The Battle Between the Seven Phoenixes and the Dragon* (1962) include Yam Bing-yee, Ying Lai-lei, Hui Hing-hing, Kam Ying-lin, Chan Wai-yu, and Cho Yim-Wan.



# The ‘Spring and Autumn’ of Peking and Cantonese Traditions: Fen Ju Hua and *The Capture of the Evil Demons*

Milky Cheung Man-shan

Officials in full regalia, talented ladies miming journeys on horsebacks.... Fen Ju Hua’s dazzling artistic legacy is forever immortalised on the silver screen, and it lives on through the many generations of artists that she trained in the Fragrance Harbour and beyond. After Hong Kong was liberated from Japanese occupation, to escape the political turmoil up north and to find a new lease of life, many polished Chinese opera artists from the Mainland moved south to the city. The migration of talents injected inspirational forces into Hong Kong’s recovering post-war entertainment industry, and among the artists who relocated was Fen Ju Hua. Fen was an eminent Peking opera *daomadan* (the ‘sword-wielding and riding’ military female role), and towards the end of the 1940s she operated a private Peking opera school in Hong Kong: the Spring and Autumn Drama School. Together with Yu Zhanyuan’s Hong Kong-China Drama Academy, Tang Di’s Eastern Drama Academy, and Ma Chengzhi’s troupe, Fen’s school was one of the ‘four major opera schools’ that discovered and trained many talented performers for the post-war film, television, and theatre industries in Hong Kong. As an individual, Fen herself was one of the most respected and prolific teachers in the Hong Kong Chinese opera and cinema worlds. For around half a century, she had coached many of the top talents in operatic arts and cinema, and among her students were Chan Ho-kau, famous *dan* (female role) capable of both civil and military roles; Choy Yim-heong, ‘Female Martial Champion of Singapore and Malaysia’; Shum Chi-wah, Connie Chan Po-chu, Josephine Siao Fong-fong of ‘Seven Princesses’ fame; John Lone from *The Last Emperor* (1987); as well as the esteemed film action choreographer Stephen Tung Wai. Fen devoted herself to her students, and her efforts to enrich local Cantonese opera and cinema with her knowledge of Peking opera were highly significant. Indeed, her contributions to the communication and symbiosis between Hong Kong opera

artists and film professionals, and between opera artists of Northern and Southern traditions, were incontestable.

The year 2019 marks the tenth anniversary of Cantonese opera being inscribed onto UNESCO’s list of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, simultaneously, it is the 25th year since Fen Ju Hua’s passing. As we take the opportunity to revisit *The Capture of the Evil Demons* (aka *Battle at Sizhou*), the 1962 film featuring an iconic lead performance by Fen, we subtly reflect on her pedagogical career in Hong Kong as mentor to a new generation of Chinese opera artists, as well as witness how Peking opera went beyond the pale and took root in the Cantonese-speaking regions in the second half of the 20th century, integrating itself in a myriad of art forms, including Cantonese opera and cinematic culture.

## Fen Ju Hua: A Life in Brief

Fen Ju Hua (1900-1994) was born in the province of Shandong, and was trained as a *wudan* (military female) and *huadan* (young female) in the Hebei *bangzi* (clapper) opera tradition. She later performed as a *daomadan* in Peking opera, and was particularly talented at *qiaogong* (the portrayal of foot-binding via stilt walking) and *tanzigong* (floor feats), earning her the title of another ‘Ambassador of Alluring Beauty’. In her earlier career, she studied under Niu Fenglan and her magnum opus include *Yin Yang River*, *Red Plum Pavilion*, *Sizhou City*, and *Daxi Huangzhuang*.

Fen was already one of the top names in Peking opera in Shanghai by the early 20th century. According to Yeung Ming, master of both Kun and Peking operas, Fen rose to fame alongside Xiao Yang Yuelou, Dai Qixia and Bai Yuyan in the 1920s and 30s. She appeared on the Gong Theatre with opera powerhouses such as

Xiao Yang Yuelou, Zhou Xinfang, and also acted with Gai Jiaotian at Shanghai's Tianchan Theatre.<sup>1</sup>

As an excellent physical actress, Fen was not only a fantastic *daomadan* of the Peking opera tradition, but also China's first action film heroine, having starred in *Lee Fee-fee the Heroine* (Unique Film Productions, 1925), one of China's earliest *wuxia* films, as early as 1925 in Shanghai. The film's promotional campaign described her as 'zooming across rooftops and jumping up walls', cementing her status as an iconic action star. Fen continued to participate actively in the films throughout the 1950s and 60s, not only performing in front of the camera but also advising on Chinese opera's action choreography. During this period she was involved in *General Chai and Lady Balsam* (1953), *Blood In Snow* (1956), *The Invincible Yeung Generals* (aka *Conqueress*, 1961), etc. She also played an active role behind the camera for numerous prominent films, for example coaching Linda Lin Dai's in her physical performance in the scene 'Meng Jiang Nü Crying before the Great Wall' in the Shaw Brothers classic *Les Belles* (1961), ingeniously translating Peking opera's stage movements and aesthetics into film acting.

## Fen and Her Extraordinary Feats

Fen was a naturally active and sporty child. As revealed by Fen's brilliant disciple Shum Chi-wah, Meng Xiaodong was once told her that when Fen used to visit Du Yueheng, she would 'jump and hop and do somersaults into the house'.<sup>2</sup> To practise her *yuantai gong* (treading circular routes on stage), Fen would fetch and carry water with her feet bound in a *qiao* (stilt shoes), along a rocky road. Such exercises allowed her to move in the *yuantai* style on flat surfaces with ease, and never did she break a sweat with acrobatic stunts, such as moving with her feet bound, performing headstands or flipping off from heights.

In 1959, Fen had an accident while performing one of her most famous operas, *Red Plum Pavilion*, at the Princess Theatre. Onstage was the usual set-up for the scene: three tables and two chairs stacked up on top of each other to allow Fen to showcase her signature

headstand stunt from a great height. She was supposed to close the act by doing a flip and landing on the stage floor, but when she did so, she was not aware that there had been a hole underneath the carpet by the edge of the table. When she landed, one of her toes slipped inside the hole and therefore she suffered from a sprain. Though she quickly realised something wrong had happened, she insisted on continuing to perform, but later had to seek medical assistance before curtain call due to the intensity of the pain. By that time she was already in her middle age, and the incident would mark the beginning of her retirement from the stage. Yet, as Shum Chi-wah recalls, Fen never stopped her training—before retiring to bed every night she would strap on a thick fabric belt, and she would also practise walking while doing a headstand, displaying almost inhuman levels of dedication and perseverance.<sup>3</sup>

## The Fen Clan and *The Capture of the Evil Demons*

In the 1950s and 60s, the Hong Kong entertainment industry was desperate for talent. Both Yu Zhanyuan's China Drama Academy and Fen Ju Hua's Spring and Autumn Drama School were legends in the film industry: both equally filled with great talents and well-respected. Hong Kong—China Drama Academy students were mostly men (though they also had female students such as Yuen Chau, Yuen Sum, Yuen Fu), and among them were the famous 'Seven Little Fortunes', a group consisting of members such as Yuen Lung (alias Sammo Hung), Yuen Lau (alias Jackie Chan), Yuen Biao, Corey Yuen, and Yuen Wah. The 'Seven Little Fortunes' were highly in demand in films and nightclubs for commercial performances, and at the same time, they were also actors, stuntmen, and action choreographers. Fen's students, on the other hand, were mostly women (though she accepted male students in the later period), among them talents such as the 'Seven Princesses'. Their performances were not always commercial in nature, and were usually held in venues such as the Princess Theatre, Lee Theatre, Astor Theatre and the Hong Kong City Hall. They also performed in movies through Fen's connections.



<sup>1</sup> 'Interview with Yeung Ming', interviewed by Milky Cheung Man-shan and Qi Qiuli, 25 August 2018.

<sup>2</sup> 'Interview with Shum Chi-wah', interviewed by Yuen Tsz-ying, Hong Kong Film Archive 'Oral History Project', 20 June 2018.

<sup>3</sup> Lin Qin, 'Fen Juhua Yanchu *Hongmeige* Heyi Hui Shang Zu' ('Behind Fen Juhua's Foot Injury at *Red Plum Pavilion* Performance'), *Ta Kung Pao*, 7 November 1959, sheet 2, p 7 (in Chinese); 'Interview with Shum Chi-wah', *ibid.*



Fen Ju Hua leads her disciples in an all-out display of Northern style techniques alongside several Cantonese opera superstars in *The Capture of the Evil Demons* (1962): (front row, from left) Chan Ho-kau, Lam Kar-sing, Fen Ju Hua, and Cheung Fei-yin (aka Cheung Lo-lo); (second row, from left) Ho King-fan, Chow Kwun-ling, Connie Chan Po-chu, Hung Tau Tsi, Man Lan, and Shum Chi-wah.

Both the ‘Seven Little Fortunes’ and the ‘Seven Princesses’ are still fondly remembered till this day. Trained since childhood, they had solid foundations in Peking opera and performance arts, and quickly became a new generation of talents that would represent Hong Kong opera and cinema in the second half of the 20th century. Speaking of the ‘Seven Little Fortunes’, many may remember the Alex Law-directed film *Painted Faces* (1988), in which their story is dramatised for the big screen. Sammo Hung plays his master Yu Zhanyuan, and the film revolves around the inspiring story of his Hong Kong-based Peking opera troupe as they struggle and persevere through adversities. On the other hand, Fen Ju Hua and her students gave all they had in their guts in their signature opera film *The Capture of the Evil Demons*, a classic of Hong Kong cinema in which Fen herself buckles on her own armour and performs. Not only does the film showcase Fen at the height of her artistic powers as a *daomadan*, it also mirrors the fruitful culmination of hard works of Peking opera artists who continue and contain their tradition and cultural legacy in Hong Kong. The film is a testament to the symbiosis between Chinese opera and cinema in Hong Kong since the 1950s, the extraordinary history of mutual respect and integration between Northern and Southern cultures.

Fen’s performance experience in Peking opera marked the first important highlight of her career. After moving to Hong Kong, on top of a budding film career, she devoted herself as a mentor passing on the gifts of operatic arts, which are all important milestones in her later career. In 1962 she formed Chun Chow Film Co. with Li Guoxiang, leader of a Peking opera troupe, and *The Capture of the Evil Demons* was their inaugural film production. Fen received support from Leung Sing-por and his wife Koo Man-kuen, with Koo participating as producer, while Leung and his daughters Man Lan and Leung Po-chu joining the cast. The film was helmed by Wong Hok-sing, one of the ‘ten major directors’ of the time, and the lyrics was written by Poon Cheuk, one of the greatest Cantonese opera lyricists—what a formidable cast and crew!

*The Capture of the Evil Demons* was based on the Peking opera classic, *Sizhou City* (which was also later adapted into the *wudan* classic *Hongqiao with the Pearl*). Based on a folk tale, the story tells a water demon who wreaks havoc on the human population, before being conquered by warriors from heaven. Some details are changed from the original story in the film, for example the evil spirit of water who causes the flooding in the original story is changed to a clam demon, and likewise, the character of the magistrate Chi Wuting is altered into the poor scholar Yan Yukai.





In *The Capture of the Evil Demons* (1962), the Clam Spirit portrayed by Chan Ho-kau becomes infatuated with Lam Kar-sing's character Yin Yuk-hoi. She abducts him to her underwater palace and forces him to marry her: (from left) Chan Ho-kau, Lam Kar-sing, Tam Ting-kwan, and Cheung Fei-yin (aka Cheung Lo-lo).



The Water Clan performing flag-waving in *The Capture of the Evil Demons*: (front row, from left) Ho King-fan and Chan Ho-kau.

In the film *The Capture of the Evil Demons*, Fen Ju Hua plays Madam Chiu, a powerful being who has trained for decades in the Purple Bamboo Cave, but she is advised by the Goddess of Mercy to cultivate good deeds in order to attain enlightenment. Chiu's disciple Choi So-fong (Man Lan) falls in love with Yin Yuk-hoi (Lam Kar-sing), and the two intend to marry, but unfortunately their plans are thwarted by the Clam Spirit (Chan Ho-kau), who too in love with Yan and decides to abduct him to her underwater home. Yan later snatches the water-parting pearl from the Clam Spirit by stealth and returns to the shore, but the demon floods Sizhou City out of anger and humiliation. Chiu disguises herself as a tea-seller, eventually capturing the Clam Spirit via an ingenious plan. For her heroic deeds she is made a deity herself.

## The Artistry and Skill of the Fen Clan

*Sizhou City* is a Peking opera classic, and Fen Ju Hua adapted it into an exciting Cantonese opera film with heavy gong-and-drum, where elements of both the Peking and Cantonese traditions meld together seamlessly in a feast for both the eyes and the ears. While the entire cast sing and perform Cantonese opera *banghuang*, *kougu* (rhymed speech), and traditional Cantonese tunes with fixed melodies, they also perform a variety of Northern-style stunts with blades, swords, as well as other martial choreography and *paichang* (formulaic scenes)—a supremely entertaining display of artistry and skill.

Fen plays the highly powerful Madam Chiu, who disguises herself as a tea-seller in the final act in order to challenge the water demon. She performs one of her most well-known stunts, 'carrying water buckets'—one of the few times it has been captured onscreen. This is a stunt originated in the classic Peking opera work *Yin Yang River*, where the *dan* would have to perform a series of demanding physical stunts, such as juggling fireballs and carrying two buckets via a shoulder pole with her feet bound ('carrying water buckets'). Famous Peking opera stars such as Xiao Cuihua and Dai Yixia excelled in such performances.

In the film, Fen not only does a flip while carrying the buckets, she also lets the shoulder pole swivel round on her shoulders and neck swiftly and smoothly, displaying an incredible level of technique. While carrying the buckets on her shoulders, she would strut around



Master Fen, who portrays Madam Jiu, performing her signature water bucket balancing acrobatics in the film.

the stage as the *huabangzi* is played, with her hands stretching to either side, palms facing down. Meanwhile she would do the *yunbu*, meaning that she would move sideways swiftly with her two feet pressed against each other, toe to toe, ankle to ankle. This kind of footwork required the opera artist to balance her body perfectly, without her feet ever leaving the ground. Fen's performance style is not overtly flashy, stripping away any extraneous movements and choosing not to bind her feet, but by sheer strength and core power of her waist, she maintains utmost balance and control. Even as she accelerates in her pacing around the stage, the two buckets never tip over and her footwork remain nimble and steady as ever—showing complete mastery over her craft.

Apart from Fen herself, the star-studded cast of *The Capture of the Evil Demons* features talents from the Fen Clan, including Lam Kar-sing, Man Lan, Chow Kwun-ling (aka Patricia Joe), Connie Chan Po-chu, etc. The pivotal role of the Clam Spirit was played by Fen's top disciple Chan Ho-kau, who makes an unforgettable entrance as she is filmed curled up seductively on a clam shell. Later in the scene at the underwater palace, she performs a beautiful, elegant ribbon dance in front of a cast of back-dancers waving the big flags of the underwater clan. In the climax where she floods Sizhou City, the director deliberately films Chan from a high angle to capture her performance as a heroine and the impressive way water gushes in to flood the city.<sup>4</sup>

Shum Chi-wah, one of Fen's closest apprentices, plays both the Monkey King and the Prawn Spirit.





Sum had studied a number of opera works under Fen, including *Fighting Ma Chao at Night*, *The Death of Zhou Yu*, *Cave of Water Curtain*, etc. During her early career she worked frequently with Connie Chan in fight sequences in works such as *Cave of Water Curtain*, *The Crossroads*, and *Shenting Ling*. Sum's performance style is at once lively and poised. According to her recollection, her role as a monkey required her to 'move constantly' while imitating the facial expressions and gestures of a monkey. She had to put the embarrassment behind her.<sup>5</sup>

Another highlight of the film was Cheung Fei-yin (aka Cheung Lo-lo), a prodigy performer of the Northern style, who played the Child of Wealth and the Little Turtle Spirit. Despite her young age, she makes a stunning entrance while juggling universe rings, even fighting against her senior Shum Chi-wah who plays Monkey King, her choreography clean and well-executed. Later Cheung plays the Little Turtle Spirit, her slight physique belying her sonorous voice and accomplished physical skills, delivering a vivid, lovable performance—especially her impressive double mallets and sweeping kicks. According to Cheung, the director of the film would guide her on matters of dialogue and modulate the intensity of her performance. As for the physical choreography, she simply repeated what she learnt on a day-to-day basis in school, where she and other students were divided in groups to practise on their own and supervised by Fen herself. Due to their diligent training, they were well-versed in the choreography and so they never felt nervous or particularly challenged performing weapon skills and routines in front of the camera.<sup>6</sup>



Two of Master Fen's disciples, Cheung Lo-lo (left) and Shum Chi-wah (right), portraying Nazha and Monkey King respectively. The two put on a spectacular spear fight in the film.



<sup>4</sup> In 1960s, Chan Ho-kau, a famous *dan* in Cantonese opera, was interviewed by Ms Cheang Mang-ha for a programme named 'Dramatic Career' for Radio Rediffusion (Hong Kong), in which she reminisced about her days learning her crafts from Master Fen. Back in the day, Leng Wah Hang, a respected veteran of the Cantonese opera scene who was famous for playing the female version of Lord Kwan, felt that Chan was a promising talent, and so introduced her to Fen. Chan therefore became Fen's first formally recruited apprentice. Initially Chan studied under Fen at her home, and the first thing she learnt was the *madangzi* (the horse-riding gesture) technique, before transferring to the *Chunqiuji Jingju Piaofang* (Spring and Autumn Peking Opera Amateur Troupe) to practise her core strength and footwork. According to Chan, studying under Fen allowed her to absorb the strengths of Peking opera to enhance her skills for Cantonese opera. She also eventually studied some of the Fen's most famous signature plays, such as *Yin Yang River*, *Red Plum Pavilion*, etc. See 'Interview with Shum Chi-wah', see note 2; Ling Wen, 'Yu Lin Jiasheng Tanxi-Lunyi' ('On Performing and Artistry with Lam Kar-sing'), <http://www.lamkarsing.hk/newsclip11.htm>. Accessed on 10 May 2019 (in Chinese). It is also worth noting that Chan and Lam Kar-sing share one of the most iconic scenes in Cantonese opera film history in the 'Valley of the Skulls' in *The Revenge Battle* (1964): the two perform a series of stunts, a breath-taking display of their incredible physical skills such as *shangyao* (holding the partner onto the waist), *chedahuo* (centripetal spin performed by two people holding heads), *shuaishuifa* (hair swirling), *jiaosha* (leg twirling), as well as the 'essence, vitality, and spirit' that are revered in traditional operatic performance. Beyond her stage performances, we can appreciate Chan's wonderful martial arts skills in films such as *Hero and Beauty* (1961), where she performs a double *madangzi* with Lam Dan.

<sup>5</sup> Apart from Shum Chi-wah, there was also another iconic, swashbuckling Monkey King in the Fen school: Connie Chan Po-chu. In the 1960s, the two actresses starred in *The Monkey King Stormed the Sea Palace* (1962), produced by the United Film Company, in which Chan played the titular character and Shum the Third Prince. The two perform a thrilling spear fight in the film, where their choreographies are swift, efficient and powerful. Both of their moves are neat.

<sup>6</sup> 'Interview with Cheung Lo-lo', interviewed by Yuen Tsz-ying, Hong Kong Film Archive 'Oral History Project', 16 November 2018 (in Chinese).



## Teaching Her Craft in Hong Kong

As Shum Chi-wah recalls, Fen was already over the age of 50 by the time she moved to Hong Kong from Shanghai, and was thinking of retiring from the stage. Yet when she arrived in Hong Kong she made such an impression on banker Li Guoxiang that she received support from him to perform Peking opera in Hong Kong. In addition, Jiang Ling, the well-known editor of *Sing Tao Daily*, was also an admirer of hers, and eagerly supported her in building and passing on traditional opera heritage in Hong Kong. At first, Fen did not anticipate becoming a teacher of Peking opera in Hong Kong as she was not confident in teaching children and did not speak any Cantonese. However, she changed her mind after encouragement from Jiang Ling and came to believe that the art of Peking opera could easily vanish if she did not pass on what she knew to the Cantonese locals.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, the transmission of artistic legacy is one of the ancient tenets of the opera tradition, a duty that students and performers could not shy away from. In 1966, when she was raising funds to build a school for her Spring and Autumn Drama School, Fen talks about her vision and philosophy, 'In the past few years, our school has encountered many, many challenges in its establishment and development, but eventually we overcame them. Through perseverance and belief, we have managed to raise seedlings up to trees, even in wind and rain... by now we have reached a stage where we feel that our school site is too small, thereby restricting our development and our capacity to accept and support children with interests and talents. We feel uneasy about this, like we have shirked our responsibilities as educators.'<sup>8</sup>

Before the formal establishment of the Spring and Autumn Drama School, it was called the 'Fen Ju Hua Opera Troupe' in its early days. Its first students paid to take lessons in Chinese dance or Peking opera, and among them were Chan Ho-kau, Connie Chan Po-chu, Maggie Li, Josephine Siao Fong-fong, etc. There were also a number of students who were recruited on an apprenticeship system, such as Shum Chi-wah. Later, after the Spring and Autumn Drama School was officially

established, Li Guoxiang was named the principal, and the school was run in a more operationalised, efficient manner. Fen initially only took on female students, but started accepting men as well into her school around 1962, which was when Chin Yuet-sang, Stephen Tung Wai, and Lam Ching-ying joined. The school moved sites several times due to their old building being torn down, from Peking Road in Tsim Sha Tsui to Hart Avenue and Kimberley Road. The school occupied two floors, one devoted to dramatic arts and the other to martial arts performances.

The Spring and Autumn School provided a platform for students to practise foundational training exercises for Peking opera. But how exactly did Fen train her talents—from the uninitiated and the beginners to the more seasoned artists in need of guidance and practice? Her classes followed the traditions of Peking opera training, and required that her students begin each morning by doing handstands against the wall for around the time it takes to burn a stick of incense, so as to strengthen their arms and build up core stability, which would prove very beneficial for their subsequent training in performing flips, somersaults, and falls. Afterwards students would be expected to pace around the stage, on top of doing basic drills such as stretching, doing the splits, lifting one's legs up, and doing kicks. They were only allowed breakfast after completing these practices. Throughout the whole process a system of 'collective responsibility' was implemented, whereby everyone was asked to perform the same actions, but if one student underperformed, then the teacher would punish the whole class. The students were therefore very well-behaved, and held high standards not only for themselves personally, but also for their class as a group.<sup>9</sup>

In Shum's recollections, during training she would get up at four every morning to do voice practices, and start to prepare breakfast at six before waking up Fen at seven. She would start her physical practices at nine. Other students in her class included Ho King-fan, So Siu-tong, and Jacky Man Chin-sui, etc. who were already of age by the time they entered the school. Therefore they lacked the flexibility that children's bodies have, and



<sup>7</sup> See note 2.

<sup>8</sup> Peng, 'Chunqiu Ju-xiao Xiayue Yan Jingju Choukuan, Fen Juhua Zuo Zhaodai Jizhe Chanshu Gaixiao Fazhan-daji' ('Spring and Autumn Opera School is going to perform a charitable Peking Opera next month, Fen Juhua presented the planning of the school development with the journalists yesterday'), *Wah Kiu Yat Po*, 28 May 1966, sheet 4, p 4 (in Chinese).

<sup>9</sup> See note 2.



Fen Ju Hua (middle) with four of her disciples: (from left) Shum Chi-wah, Lee Wai-chu, Chan Ho-kau, and Connie Chan Po-chu.



Special thanks to Ms Shum Chi-wah



Special thanks to Ms Shum Chi-wah

Master Fen's female disciples: (back row, from left) Connie Chan Po-chu, Ng King-lai, Hung Ling-ling, Shum Chi-wah, and Maggie Li. Cheung Lo-lo is the one in costume in the middle, while Siu Kuk-hung is the first one on the left in the front row.

would often cry out of pain when practising the splits. Although Fen often berated her students as *tusaizi* (a Northern-style term literally meaning 'naughty rabbits', but often used to mean 'brats') or *bendancang* (meaning 'idiots'), and at times even beat them using a rattan cane, her harsh actions were in fact a reflection of her conscientiousness as a teacher. In reality, she was often a kind teacher who never used full force when she beat or yelled at her students.<sup>10</sup>

In order to offer the best education possible for their students, the drama school arranged for teachers to mentor students according to their specialties. Fen herself supervised and took on the role of head teacher, but she also hired established teachers to train her students in special skills such as performing somersaults, weapon-training, ribbon-dancing, and acting, etc. Many Peking opera masters have taught at the Spring and Autumn Drama School, such as Li Shaopeng, Tsui Chung-hok, Tung Tsai-pao, Kwan Ching-leung, who taught Northern-style opera arts, as well as *huqin* master Cao Jinhu, who coached the students in vocals. Cheung Lo-lo remembers that the teachers would cater their teaching to suit each student's strengths and talents, and because she excelled at imitation, Fen boldly allowed her to try many different characters and roles, including *choudan* (female clown) and *wusheng* (military male). In *Axing of the Coffin*, Cheung had to perform with her feet bound, so Fen made her walk in bound feet from the moment she woke up in the morning to late at night. Cheung got so accustomed that eventually she could do somersaults with her feet bound.

## An Enduring Legacy

Legend has it that the father of Cantonese opera, Zhang Wu, was originally a performer from Hubei,

and that Cantonese opera has its roots in the vocal traditions of other provinces. In order to enhance their performances and stage presence, Cantonese opera artists often studied under Peking opera masters. Since the Northern School is all about 'freedom' and 'restraints', emphasising the aesthetics in physicality and presence, it somewhat complements the plain, martial arts-oriented Southern School. Therefore performances of Cantonese opera troupes were often promoted as 'taking on the Northern School', both as a promotional tactic and as a way to claim legitimacy and credibility for their craft. Indeed, Cantonese opera artists would continue to absorb the strengths of other traditions to develop the unique 'Southern vs. Northern' style, a fine exemplification of the Cantonese people's characteristic flexibility, adaptability and tolerance for other cultures.

A prime example is Sit Kok-sin, who began to feature in movies in Shanghai in the 20th century. He was an admirer of Peking and Kunqu operas, and one of the pioneers in introducing Northern martial arts, and Peking opera makeup and costume, into Cantonese opera. He advanced the ideas of 'uniting Northern and Southern operas as one performance art, and combining Chinese and Western dramas into one single genre. By leveraging their strengths and enabling them to complement one another, Chinese opera would emerge as an international theatrical genre, and the arts of our country would emerge as the most supreme form of art in the world'.<sup>11</sup> As part of his vision, he also advocated the experimentation of integrating Southern and Northern styles in performances. In the 1950s, with the support of renowned Peking opera artists such as Zhang Shuxian and Mrs Sun Yangnong, the Sun Fung Ming Opera Troupe took in the artistic techniques of Peking and Kunqu operas. Further, famous Cantonese opera artists such as Sun Ma Si-tsang and Hung Sin Nui<sup>12</sup> practised Peking



<sup>10</sup> 'Interview with Cheung Lo-lo, see note 6; Yeung Ming, 'You Pei Yanling Shuo Liyuan Shitu Qingyuan' ('The Bond in Apprenticeship in Chinese Opera with Pei Yanling'), in Chinese Opera Information Centre, Department of Music, The Chinese University of Hong Kong. <http://www.cuhkcoic.hk/?a=doc&id=13816> (in Chinese). Accessed on 22 April 2019.

<sup>11</sup> This essay was published in the original title 'Zixu' ('Preface') in the *Juexian Ji* (*Prose collection of Sit Kok-sin*) in 1930, and was republished in the title of 'Nanyou Zhi Qu' ('The Objectives of Travelling South') in *Juexian Ji: Juexian Luxing Jutuan Tekan* (*Prose Collection of Sit Kok-sin: Kok-sin Travelling Troupe Special Issue*) in 1936; cited in *Zhenshanmei: Xue Juexian Yishu Rensheng* (*The Art of Sit Kok-sin*), Yeung Chun Tong (ed), Hong Kong: University Museum and Art Gallery, The Hong Kong University, p 168 (in Chinese).

<sup>12</sup> Hung Sin Nui travelled from Hong Kong to Beijing in 1955 as a guest to National Day celebrations, during which time she met many famous Chinese opera masters and stars. Having had the opportunity to observe other genres of Chinese opera performed onstage, she felt as though she had 'become smarter all of a sudden, and began to have a new perspective on things, and gained a bit of understanding on how to observe and study problems'. See *Hongxiannu Riji* (*The Diary of Hung Sin Nui*), Hong Kong: Ji Wen Press, 1956 (in Chinese). Hung Sin Nui was passionate about her art, and not only sought to learn from great Peking opera and Kunqu masters such as Mei Lanfang, Yu Zhenfei, Cheng Yanqiu, and Yu Lianquan, but she also studied the Kunqu excerpt *Worldly Thoughts* under the great Zhu Chuanming, later adapting it into a Cantonese opera performance.





opera songs and Kunqu, and integrated various vocal techniques to create their own unique singing style.

As a national treasure of China with no lack of enthusiastic followers in Hong Kong, Peking opera still ultimately failed to be a mainstream drama genre in the city because of differences in language and culture. Many celebrated Peking and Kunqu opera artists (e.g. Ma Lianliang, Zhang Junqiu, Yu Zhenfei, Yang Baosen, Zhang Eyun) had performed in Hong Kong before, but only made a fleeting impact. Nonetheless, as a form of expression via body language, Peking opera-style dance-acting and choreography quickly transcended the boundaries of dialect and culture and found their way into local art performances. Despite the restricted market for Peking opera and the challenges they faced in solely relying on this art form to make a living, the artists who remained in Hong Kong were keenly adaptable to the changes in time and environment. They gradually switched from stage performers to coaches and teachers, and some of them even opted to pursue their careers on the silver screen, where their Peking opera skills could fit, thus enabling this art form to continue thriving in a new era and take root in Cantonese soil.

The Spring and Autumn Drama School laid a solid foundation for their students so that they could flexibly apply and demonstrate their skills in different media, fully realising the vision of 'acting as inseparable from technique and vice versa.' Through the fusion of practical groundwork and insights into the aesthetics of drama, their students could easily make inferences and widely apply what they have learned in different regional operas, films, TV shows, stunts and acrobatics, as well as other domains. All these are, without doubt, invaluable skills and experiences that benefit one for life.

It is said that in the journey of learning, it is difficult to encounter a committed and scrupulous teacher. *The*

*Capture of the Evil Demons* was the inaugural work of Chun Chow Film Co.. It was also a commemoration and demonstration of the Spring and Autumn Drama School's pedagogy. As the saying goes, life imitates art. Both Fen Ju Hua and her character in the film maintain their honour and dignity as teachers and were respected by their students. Although Fen was strict with her students, chastising and disciplining them when they made mistakes, such methods helped lay a strong foundation for developing their performing talents, and turned out to have a lasting beneficial effect. As a result, many of her students who made their names as performing artists often felt grateful to and revered Fen Ju Hua as their master.<sup>13</sup>

Fen Ju Hua was highly reputed in the opera world. She arrived at Hong Kong after the Second World War, took it upon herself the duty to educate the next generation of performers and talents, and nurtured countless of disciples. In one of the scenes in the film *The Capture of the Evil Demons*, Madam Chiu's followers enjoy themselves singing while practising and waving around their weapons. They sing of their hopes and feelings as disciples: 'We practise hard without stop, in the hopes that we fulfil our master's expectations.' At the end of the film, Chiu leaves the human world, having reached enlightenment through her good deeds. Looking serene, dressed in Taoist robes and holding a duster, she rises to the heavens to enjoy her eternal life in peace. All her disciples sing gladly, 'Praise our master's completion of good deeds, as she leaves us to join the heavens. A mere farewell is not enough to express how we feel; as tens of thousands of miles separate the immortals and men.' The scene is a wonderful reflection of Fen Ju Hua's real life: working silently and unassumingly for over half a century in Hong Kong, devoting herself unselfishly to one of China's most representative art forms so as to leave an enduring legacy for future generations.

(Translated by Rachel Ng)

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<sup>13</sup> 'A Dia Dabing Chuyu; Baozhu Nanwang Fen Juhua Jiaohui' ('Mui Suet-see Recovers from Grave Illness; Connie Chan Reminisces About Fen Ju Hua's Teachings'), see on.cc., [https://hk.on.cc/hk/bkn/cnt/entertainment/20160805/mobile/bkn-20160805173126296-0805\\_00862\\_001.html](https://hk.on.cc/hk/bkn/cnt/entertainment/20160805/mobile/bkn-20160805173126296-0805_00862_001.html). 5 August 2016 (in Chinese). Accessed on 30 April 2019; 'Huigang Wei Longnian Zhankai Xuanchuan, Zunlong Baiwang Fen Juhua, Yibiao Buwang Jiaoyang'en' ('Back in Hong Kong to Promote *Year of the Dragon*, John Lone Visits Fen Ju Hua as Expression of Gratitude'), *Wah Kiu Yat Po*, 13 November 1985, sheet 4, p 3 (in Chinese).





# ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEWS



# Luo Pinchao

## Join the ‘Handsome Master’ Onscreen and Onstage



Date: 13 October 1998, 25 April 2002

Venue: New York, U.S., Hong Kong Film Archive

Interviewers: Yuen Tsz-ying (1st interview);

Law Kar, Wong Hoi-shan (2nd interview)

Collated by Daphne Chan

Renowned Cantonese opera virtuoso Luo Pinchao (aka Lo Ban-chiu, 1912-2010), popularly dubbed ‘Uncle Kam’, dedicated his passionate life to the opera stage—to such an extent that he held the Guinness World Record for being the World’s oldest opera singer. He started his professional training on drama, Cantonese opera and Peking opera at the age of 12, and was the leading *xiaosheng* (young civil male) and *xiaowu* (young military male) at 18. Even when he reached his advanced years at age 93, he was still diligent and never slacking, leaving us numerous universally appreciated gems— including *The Butterfly Lovers*, *Luo Cheng Writing a Letter*, *If I Were King*, *Money*, *The Stallion with the Red Mane*, *The Story of Leung Tin-loi*, *Lin Chong*, *Jing Ke*, etc. His performances more than often achieved a *yin* and *yang* equilibrium, symbolising a perfect balance between masculine and feminine qualities; flexible in playing both the civilian and military roles, his execution delicate and profound. He is indeed a true master. Apart from continuously elevating his boundless artistry, Uncle Kam was also devoted to passing on the fruit of his painstaking efforts and enduring practice to the future generations, a classic example of a torchbearer who inherited the past and ushered in the new age. Two sessions of the Oral History interviews allow readers and fans to take a closer look into how Uncle Kam stretched his talents to the fullest, grew stronger amid adversity, broke new ground in one of the most traditional art forms, and became a highly respected and revered opera virtuoso. Last, but by no means least is, how did he merge the Northern and Southern schools of Chinese martial arts and aesthetically choreographed them in action movies. Let’s hear from Uncle Kam recounting the story of his life.



Luo Pinchao (middle), Law Kar (right), and Wong Hoi-shan (left).

## The Origin of the Legend

My birth name is Lo Shiu-kam. I was born in Guangzhou on 19 June 1912, and was a native of Nanhai. Growing up in a modest family, I was drawn to Cantonese opera because of my mother's positive influence. She was a fan. I had a tough childhood. I became an orphan after mother gave me up and left me. I studied in an orphanage and began my Cantonese opera training when I was 12. I was trained in the elementary class for two years, and was cast as the main role of Guo Ai in *Birthday Celebration of Guo Ziyi* because of my decent voice and appearance. Unfortunately, the class was dismissed later due to the lack of funds. My teacher took compassion on me and continued to teach me, refusing payment.

Later, I applied for and was admitted to the drama school founded by Beijing's well-known dramatists Ouyang Yuqian and Tang Huaqiu in Guangdong. Among my classmates were Ng Wui, Lee Yuet-ching, Lee Sun-fung, and together we studied drama, Cantonese opera, Peking opera as well as theories. Knowing that I had already received Cantonese opera training, my teacher asked me to focus on Peking opera. I have gained a lot of new knowledge, including how to play *luogu* (gongs and drums) and *xiansuo* (string instruments). When we studied drama, we performed in Mandarin instead of Cantonese. We were also required to speak Mandarin in the boarding school, where Cantonese were forbidden. We had Tang Huaqiu teaching us drama, and Zhou Baokui coaching us Peking opera. They were all terrific mentors.

After graduating from drama school, and due to political instability in the country, my teacher recommended me to further my study at The Chinese Artists Association, Guangzhou. Being an overachiever, I was responsible for passing on what I was taught to my fellow students. For my final exam, I sat for almost all subjects including *huadan* (young female), *xiaosheng*, *xiaowu*, *wusheng* (military male), *erhuamian* (painted-face), *gongjiao* (bearded old male), except for *chousheng* (male clown). I scored the highest in *xiaosheng*, and so my teacher recommended me playing the young male lead role. I was 18 years old then. I stayed on the red boat for more than two years, with the first year making lots of hard efforts in the *luohanban*, and the next year, hard work paid off and I was promoted to the *laoguanban* (a troupe with older or veteran Chinese opera artists) as a *xiaosheng*. What's even more encouraging was that I was admitted to the Kok Sin Sing Opera Troupe in the third year. I was extremely happy because I was a huge fan of Sit Kok-sin. After I left the troupe, the red boats were gradually phased out and converted into entertainment boats.



## Reminiscences on Cantonese Opera Circle in Guangzhou


Huangsha in Guangzhou resembled a film studio, or a large company, because peers in the field of Chinese opera all gathered there. There were 36 troupes, each consisted of as many as 70 to 90 people, headed by The Chinese Artists Association, Guangzhou, which was in charge of arranging performances with the purpose of fund raising, the members of the troupes acted together like an organised army. Many Cantonese opera stars mustered there, waiting for the 'boss' to gather and form new troupes. There were 36 troupes every year, topped by the Yan Shou Nin Opera Troupe which assembled the best performers. The remaining troupes were formed in a similar fashion.

Performers from rural touring troupes were less likely from Guangdong-Hong Kong troupes because their cast lacked the needed social influence and resources to compete with the troupes in Guangzhou. They would do anything for any performing opportunity, as long as they got paid, even at the risk of being injured, or worse, during the performance. The Guangdong-Hong Kong troupes emphasised the literary context in their performances, balancing between emotions and narration, and wielding both civil and military skills. During that time, *wenwusheng* (civil and military male) was very popular, the custom of having only one *xiaowu* or *wusheng* was no longer prevalent. In the past, every *hangdang* (a term used by the Cantonese opera profession, referring to the classification of roles and characters) had his or her own scripts and parts, and *shengdanxi* (male and female leads play) unfortunately, had been such a dominant trend that it lacked variety. For instance, *Baili Xi Reunited with His Wife* used to be a *wushengxi* play, while *Wang Yanzhang Grappling in a Boat* was an *erhualianxi* play, but these categorisations were barely in existence.

## Early Tumbles, But Success Comes After Hard Work

I was trained for old school opera genres, and it's somewhat different from that of the Guangdong-Hong Kong troupe in terms of techniques, make-up, gestures and performance. I needed to start learning all over again when I was in the Kok Sin Sing Opera Troupe. My application of make-up for previous Peking opera performances was very much unrefined. The rural touring troupes, for example, only used red, black and white. Large patches of red and white on a black painted face.... I looked even better without make-up on. I still remember when I arrived at the Guangdong-Hong Kong troupe, the first thing Sit Kok-sin said to me was, 'Oh lord! Who is this? You look so awful!' With an empty pocket, what could I wear? I wore one costume for multiple roles, awkwardly switching from civil to military characters with the same costume on. Emperor should wear an embroidered robe, and it's totally inappropriate to wear an official robe instead. At that time, I performed in the daytime show, playing Sit's role. He performed three days every week. For each show, after I performed the first half until 4pm, he would then go on stage to perform the theme song, such as *Marriage Made in Heaven* and the 'Mourning Song' in *Telling Off Mui the Provincial Magistrate*.





I remember there was an opera called *Power and Sword*, starring Chan Kam-tong as the *wenwusheng*, and me as a *xiaosheng*, playing the emperor in the piece. The day before, we met up to discuss the opera at the Haizhu Theatre, which later became the People's Theatre. They gave me a tiny songbook which didn't have any songs for me. An evil minister plots against the emperor, who escapes. A couple saves the emperor, who gives them a royal marriage blessing when he returns to power in the end. When we performed it, I was facing the audience and Sit Kok-sin had his back to them. The audience could see me, they couldn't his face. 'I bestow upon you this precious seven-star sword, you can go home and get married now'. 'Thank you, my king.' At that point, he should be walking on scene, but he didn't. He just stood there. 'What? That's it?' Not using his *zihou* (falsetto voice), he commanded: 'Sing!' The script had nothing for me, what was I supposed to sing? The audience could tell he was scolding me, and they started laughing: 'He doesn't understand.' I sat there, helpless, while he made Law Ka-bo's father Law Ka-shu start playing the gong-and-drum music. The percussion started, but I still had nothing to sing. What was I to sing? There was nothing in the script. Luckily, the quick-witted Chan Kam-tong saved my skin—he went, 'Oh, follow me...' and grabbed Sit Kok-sin's hand, entering the scene together.

Sit Kok-sin was really angry: 'Anything Luo Pinchao is in, I'm out!' He yanked off his hairpiece and threw it onto the stage. The curtains weren't closed yet, as I sat there stunned, not knowing how to deal with the situation. The audience was also shocked, laughing and scoffing. It took a long while before the curtains were closed; it was most humiliating. The next day I didn't dare see him, but I couldn't hide forever. I saw him on the third day and he was still really angry. He called Siu Sun Shan over: 'Come here, whatever he's in, I'm out.' He took off his hairpiece. Oh dear, the next scene was him as well; the stage manager yelled, 'Keep going, sing a song!' But that person didn't understand what was going on, so he just kept playing piece after piece of music. Siu Sun Shan lived up to his manager reputation though, he said, 'Don't be like this, he's a top trainee at The Chinese Artists' Association. Blasting him means blasting The Chinese Artists' Association, that's not good to The Chinese Artists' Association, don't be this way.'

So then I went over and said, 'I'm so sorry, Fifth Brother, I'm really so sorry. I ruined your show and made you lose face.' 'I didn't lose face, you lost face.' 'I know I did wrong, what should I do next time?' 'Just sing.' In fact I knew I should have just sung, but I wasn't good at thinking on my feet. The classic staging can involve singing or not, I could have just pulled out a few random lines to extend the emperor's blessings and walk on scene; that would've been the smart thing to do. He said, 'Being stupid is not going to work. Look at your face, you can't do your makeup like me either.' His makeup looked beautiful, with perfectly formed eyebrows... more modern makeup, with Max Factor powder. I used the brand 'Sam Fung', as well as other traditional powder cakes, and the difference was huge.

My wardrobe was old fashioned, my makeup was old fashioned; I could only sing. I said, 'Fifth Brother', you know, you have actually praised me before.' 'What? When did I ever praise you?' 'You don't remember? At The Chinese Artists' Association. Before I graduated,



they invited you as a guest teacher. You picked a student you thought was most outstanding to perform opposite you, and you chose me to fight in the Northern style with you.’ He taught us the Northern style and praised me saying, ‘Young man, very good, you will definitely rise up.’ ‘Now that really got me ‘leaping’... across the floor.’ He said, ‘That was you? Should’ve said so earlier.’ How could I have? He said, ‘Work hard and polish your skills. You should learn carefully from me how to do your makeup.’ He also ordered his wardrobe master, ‘Whatever he wants, let him use it. Don’t make me lose face.’ He had a lot of costumes and piles of garments he never used. He could afford the money to get some good stuff, but at the time I didn’t have any money and couldn’t buy anything like that. So at this point in time, being provided with such a great set of wardrobe and with me learning his makeup skills, things started to change.

At first, when the women audience saw me they were surprised: ‘Who is this, why’s he so ugly?’ They’d lower their heads to look at the house programme, and not at me. Back then it wasn’t like now, with so many lights; there was only one light and no special lighting. I thought, oh dear, why aren’t the audience looking at me? ‘Of course they won’t look at you, look at yourself—your movements aren’t like Sit Kok-sin and your makeup looks bad.’ After that was made clear to me, I started watching Sit Kok-sin’s movements, his eyes, his mouth shape, how he sang, and started becoming more like him. By the fourth day, when we performed the fourth time, the responses of the ladies were much better when they saw me entering the stage.

## Making His Name with Scene Debut *The Butterfly Lovers*

After Sit Kok-sin went to Shanghai, Yip Fut-yeuk referred me to join ‘Qing Tian’, a troupe led by Chin Lei Kui. I became sworn brothers with Leng Siu-fung, Leng Sun Wah and Yip Fut-yeuk, and together we formed ‘Yi Qian Tian’, meaning we swore our brotherhood on the occasion of forming the troupe. By that time, I have already transformed, with a brand new image quite similar to Sit Kok-sin. Many troupe members were already 40 to 50 years old, but with their excellent acting skills, they attracted masses of audience. They also let me sing new songs and try many new things, as well as giving me plenty of opportunities to perform.

Leng Siu-fung was the leading *xiaosheng* at that time, while I took the role of *xiaowu*. His acting style was different from Sin Kok-sin. I carefully observed and emulated his expressions and demeanor. I was originally cast as Shijiu in *The Butterfly Lovers*, As Leng Siu-fung’s stamina declined after he started to quit smoking, he gave up his role as Liang Shanbo and needed a replacement. Since I had performed in every show and was very familiar with the script, so they said, ‘Let “Little Kam” have a try, see how it goes.’ I was called ‘Little Kam’ because I was then only 21 years old. Chin Lei Kui had a brief read-through with me, which was from the scene ‘Eighteen-li Farewell’. I remembered all the lines very well and was chosen to replace Leng as Liang. I delivered a confident and natural performance effortlessly, and was recognised by Runje Shaw, founder of Unique Film Productions.



Luo Pinchao portraying Ha Tsing-seong, a rebel fighting against the Japanese, in *Storm over Pacific* (1938).

Special thanks to Mr Jack Lee Fong of Palace Theatre, San Francisco, USA

I was working with Tam Yuk-lam in Hanoi, Vietnam, Sun Liang Chau (Kwan Tak-hing) invited me to perform in the daytime performance of *The Butterfly Lovers*, with him as *xiaowu* and me as *xiaosheng*. When Unique Film Productions made the film version *The Butterfly Lovers, Part One and Part Two* (1935), they cast me as Leung Shan-pak, Tam Yuk-lam as Chuk Ying-toi, and Tsui Yan-sum as Yan-sum. Shaw thought very highly of this film, not only did he hold test screenings at King's Theatre, the film was also screened for a week at Queen's Theatre. Back in those days, these two theatres only screened first-rate Hollywood films where Cantonese films were never given the same opportunity. The reaction from the audience was overwhelming. Thanks to the excellent publicity campaign and reputation achieved through word-of-mouth, Tam and I shot to fame with this screen debut, and went on to make a sequel.

As a newcomer in terms of film acting, I was paid HK\$300 per day, which was considered remunerative. It was neither a formal Cantonese opera film nor period film, but was adapted and set in the early Republican China. We wore Mandarin hats and Cheongsam, the movie sets were meticulously built, and the shooting period lasted for almost a month. It was a big-budget production directed by Shaw himself, featuring cinematographer Chow Sze-luk who later became a successful film director. We shot in Nanyang Studio and sounds were merely recorded on the set. Unlike what we have now, it was a large bamboo stick hanging in front of your face. You had to do sound testing over and over again until you fed up with it. It didn't work if you speak too softly, and the boom operator always shouted: 'Hey! Too soft. Speak louder!'





One of the films I was cast in was *A Lady of Canton* (aka *A Woman of Guangzhou*, 1936), and it was awarded by the Film Censorship Authority for its social consciousness and positive impact on the society, since it inspired people to provide relief supplies and raise fund for the refugees. I didn't receive the award because I was not told about it and I was always out of town.

### The Experiences of Shooting Anti-war Films

Since the time I started to work on films, I performed Cantonese opera by night, and shot films by day, working both on stage and on screen. Later the Shaw Brothers Ltd invited me to Singapore to perform at the amusement parks, and I went for several years. In around 1938, when the Japanese invaded China, they wanted me to come back to Hong Kong to shoot some anti-war films, including a film about the land force which was titled *Storm over Pacific* (aka *Incident in the Pacific*, 1938) and directed by Hou Yao. When the novel version of this film was published in the newspaper, it became a sensation, a powerful vehicle for anti-war sentiment. I also acted in *Shaking Heaven and Earth* (1938) which was about the air force. There were no singing numbers in these films, and even if there were soundtracks, they were not Cantonese opera songs. Take Hou Yao's *Incident in the Pacific* as an example, with I playing the violin, the song was sung by the character played by Lee Yi-nin: Why the moon waxes and wanes / I love it when you are full / I love it when you are crescent. There was also a theme song in *Shaking Heaven and Earth* and it was sung in Mandarin as well.

By that time I was also starring in some other 'folk-tale' films. There were almost ten of them, none of them were Cantonese opera but typical dramas. My previous experience in



*Mysterious Murder, Part One* (1951): (from left) Luo Pinchao and Fong Yim-fun.



The cover of the film brochure for *If I Were King* (1948): (from left) Luo Pinchao and Yung Siu-yi.



The cover of the film brochure for *The Handsome Master* (1949), in which Luo Pinchao's character, Si Kim-ching, suffers at the hands of villains. He is rescued by a doctor and transforms into the superhero-like 'The Handsome Master'.

drama performance made me a suitable candidate for acting in dramatic films—they didn't have a penchant for overly expressive facial gestures as broadly employed in Cantonese opera. I was also cast in *The Ghost* (aka *The Lady Ghost*, 1939), etc., which was a product of American influences.

At the time, I had a few classmates who were in the same company as me. For example, Lau Hark-Suen was my classmate at the Cantonese Opera Actors Training School run by The Chinese Artists Association, Guangzhou. He was a *chousheng*, and later found success playing villains in movies. At the time, there were several directors under Unique Film Productions, while Ku Wen-chung and Chow Sze-luk were cameramen, and Chan Yoke-mui was the sound operator, in charge of recording audio. There was a man who always wore dark glasses—I forget his name [*Ed. note*: it may be Jackson Sum Kat-sing], but he had Tse Yik-chi as an assistant. I was essentially the star of the company. In terms of human resources, Runme Shaw oversaw the finances.

At the time, Lam So would sign me up for films. If there were suitable scripts, then he'd agree; many of these I was partnered up with Yung Siu-yi. Among the actresses I partnered up with, I have particularly deep impressions of Lee Yi-nin. She was the more serious one, always reaching out to me early on to talk about the scripts, the dialogue; we would study them together and also have long discussions with director Hou Yao.



## Making a Living Acting After Hong Kong Falls

Soon after that, the Pacific War broke out. All film productions were suspended after the fall of Hong Kong. In around 1940 to 1941, I was cast in several films, one of which was *The Lady Pear-Blossom*, playing opposite Tam Lan-hing and Lam Mui-mui. The film was more than half way through completing but was never finished. The shooting of another Cantonese opera film *Sea of Lanterns and the Display of Fireworks* also went awry after the filming had commenced. The formation of Cantonese opera troupes also halted momentarily, but soon they were required to resume performing— because the Japanese wanted to create an illusion of stability and peace. But the fact was, under such circumstance, no one was willing to perform. Who would? Not to mention that I had played in anti-war films, and was awarded by the British when I was in Singapore for performing in Cantonese opera titles that promote resistance against Japan. The period films I acted in were a reflection of contemporary society. In addition, I also worked with fundraising organisations. In the name of charity, we promoted sports (we would wear make-up as Cao Cao's entourage and played in football matches against Han dynasty's team), charity shows and boxing competitions. We sold flowers and role-played as beggars to attract social attention. Although the Japanese didn't do anything against me, I was still so worried that I would put prop tridents and guns near the windows, in case someone came to attack me and I was prepared to fight to death. Fortunately, nothing bad really happened.

After a while, I had no choice but to perform again. The title was *A Family*. I thought to myself: 'Who wants to be a family with the Japanese?' It really killed me inside to perform and sing in that play because I was very patriotic, how could I sing such songs in front of the Japanese? So I didn't memorise the lyrics, and I sang whatever came to my mind. I didn't even know what I had sung, but as long as it was not what was written in the script, my conscience felt a little bit better. When things went quiet down, I started to perform some traditional plays such as *Wong Fei-fu's Rebellion* again at Alhambra Theatre alongside Tsang Sam-to and Cho Chau-wan. After the troupe was dismissed, I formed the Kwong Wah Opera Troupe with Yu Lai-zhen and Lee Hoi-chuen. 'Kwong Wah', meaning restoring China, was my way to secretly express my hope to fight back. We kept performing and the audience kept coming back. The Japanese didn't interfere. Most of the audience were from the grass-root class, many were hawkers with very few rich people. We didn't perform *wenxi* (civil plays), but mostly *wuxi* (military plays) such as *The Water Margin*, *Cheng Yaojin* and *Heroes in Sui and Tang Dynasties*. Later, we performed *Luo Cheng Writing a Letter* and it became a hit. I received a thundering ovation every time I came on stage. After Sit Kok-sin passed away, all Northern schools actors from Shanghai came under my wings. We fought against each other on stage. I used *da* (fencing), *chang* (singing) and *zuo* (acting) to showcase my skills. After fighting for half an hour, I stood on one foot, wrote a blood letter with a single spear, and sang a lengthy tune. The audience were captivated.



## After the War

After the war, Wong Yim formed himself a troupe. I had also formed the Hung Fung Opera Troupe with Ah Fong (Fong Yim-fun) and others, and worked with many popular *huadan* (young female). The film industry did not resume until around 1947, and I played in quite a lot of films. *Where Shall We Meet Again?* (1950), co-starring Tsi Lo Lin, was a progressive literary film. I also acted in *Blood, Rouge, and Tears* (1950) alongside Siu Yin Fei, *Mysterious Murder, Part One and Part Two* (1951) alongside Fong Yim-fun, and *Waving the Red Ribbon* (1948) alongside Yung Siu-yi; they were all *wenxi* (civil plays) that left me with a deeper impression. *If I Were King* (1948) was written by Tong Tik-sang, who probably shared with me the same sentiment that was loathing the Chinese Nationalist Party for their degeneration and corruption. Set in the ancient period, Tong placed great emphasis on the corrupted character in the film, who is the King's maternal uncle; he was in fact indirectly alluding to the then Soong Tse-ven. *The Handsome Master* (1949) was originally written by U Ki-ping (aka Yu Kei-ping). It was a very modern film, with exceptional make-up and costume (such as the signature leather boots) and a character as strong as Superman after taking the 'power pills'. *Luo Cheng Writing a Letter*, a stage documentary, [*Ed note: referring to the except Luo Cheng Writing a Letter in The Dragon is Teased by the Beautiful Phoenix, 1948*] was made following the huge success of the original opera play of the same name. My other works include opera films such as *Lui Bo's Trick on Due Sim* (1949), and *wuxia* films such as *Seven Shaolin Heroes' Five Ventures into Mount Emei, Part One and Part Two* (1950) and *The Three Battles Between White Eye-Brows and White Chrysanthemum* (1950), etc.

People in the film circle at that time like Lee Ching, Ng Cho-fan, Cheung Ying, Cheung Wood-yau, Ng Wui, Chu Hak, Lo Duen and myself believed that there should be an organisation for the film industry, so that Cantonese opera film actors could unite and support each other, call for meetings and raise funds. We formed the 'South China Film Industry Workers Union', and we successfully raised fund to produce *Kaleidoscope* (1950). There were ten stories in the series, but the one that I starred in was entitled 'Under the Banyan Tree' (aka 'Rumours') and it was lost.

My last film was a Cantonese opera documentary directed by Lo Duen and was screened in Guangzhou. There were three stories. One of them was *Feng Yi Pavilion*, in which I played the role of Lui Bo; as for the other two, one was directed by Pak Kui-wing and the other was Man Kok-fei's *Flour Vat*. [*Ed. note: The first two were included in Butterfly Beauty, 1959, and the last was included in An Ideal Couple, 1960.*]



## The Difference Between Southern & Northern Schools; The Integration of Film & Stage

Guangdong *Nanquan* (Southern fist) is the foundation of the Southern school style. It features strong and firm movements and gestures, even the outlook of an actor is different from that of the Peking opera. Legend has it that someone fled to a 'red boat' and became a mess cook. When he saw the performers practising *wushu* (martial arts), he thought they were doing it all wrong, and started teaching them what he knew. Troupe members back then were always bullied by local gangsters, so everyone had to know some basic *wushu* to protect themselves. They were all male *huadan* with basic training, who laid the foundation of the Southern school style. It had its specific vocal style but was also influenced by *guanhua* (stage Mandarin). When Li Wenmao started a revolution in the Qionghua Guild, people were all influenced by Hong Xiuquan and *Tiandihui* (Society of the Heaven and the Earth) to resist against the Qing government. Local bullies were everywhere, and opera performances were all suspended. Consequently, all actors who knew *wushu* formed troops and joined the resistance, led by second painted face Li Wenmao. That being so, all Cantonese opera performances were banned in Guangdong, including dramas using venacular Cantonese and *longzhou* ('dragon boat') style. The remaining male *huadan*, who were rather womanish and 'spoke with an effeminate voice', had nothing to do when there were no performances.

Some government officials from other provinces became the Viceroy of Liangguang, and they brought own their own troupes to Guangdong. These performers would not go back to their homeland after coming to the prosperous Guangzhou. When more and more of them resided in Guangzhou as the next Viceroy of Liangguang brought in new blood, they set up a guild hall at the 'Fourth Decoration Archway'. Those male *huadan* who were left with no job had no other choice but to beg for their shelter, and they came to learn the non-standard Mandarin from them in order to communicate. Their dialect was also influenced by the then Guangxi Gui opera. During the early years of the Republic of China and against the background of the Dr Sun Yat-sen's revolution, they made use of those *chousheng*, who were extremely eloquent but could only speak Cantonese, to promote the revolution by performing *shulaibao* or *shubailan* (rhythmic storytelling). People were captivated by these performances and realised it was Cantonese language they were using. Gradually all performances were switched to half Cantonese, half Mandarin. Chu Chi-pak's *Paying Nocturnal Mourning to White Lotus* was one example. Soon after, Sit Kok-sin and other troupes also used Cantonese to perform. As of now, there is still a 'traceable trail' left in the way of how some Cantonese opera actors perform.

Sit Kok-sin was a big part of the reforms of Cantonese opera. He was a versatile actor excelled at both Peking and Cantonese operas. There was a period in which he chose to prioritise Peking opera because anything new to the general audience would have its appeal. People was drawn to it when they saw Northern school martial arts styles in Cantonese



opera. But such sensation was only transient because Cantonese opera is irreplaceable. After all, Peking opera and Cantonese opera are different, each has its own unique style. We could fuse and blend the martial arts choreography of the Southern and Northern schools, but merging vocal styles is more tricky, you could not do it by force. It's a fact that Peking opera has a strong accent. I tried to mix the Southern and Northern vocal styles, twisted it a little bit, but no one could actually tell when they listen to my singing, only that it sounds tasteful to their ears.

The martial arts I used in films was originated from Cantonese opera. At that time, very few Southern people would play an extra. There was a group of 'Northern school folks' performing with me. We added some Southern school elements into the performance, say our kick and fist styles, but when it came to sword and spear, we still preferred following the Northern school. The Northern school group had a 'lead', for example, Simon Yuen Siu-tin or Tin Kei-fong, who would fight with me for me to work out some ideas; I also relayed to them the director's requirements. We paid them extra for specific fight scenes. They could share their ideas—we would use their ideas if they were deemed fit, otherwise we would alternate a bit I was the leader in the troupe, and they had to obey me. However, we were all brothers and there was a great rapport between us. Due to effective communication, we felt comfortable fighting each other when designing choreography.

There were many people who have worked with me in the troupes, including Yuen Siu-tin, Chow Siu-loi, Tin Kei-fong, Kwok Hung-bun and 'Little Tiger' (Siu Lo Fu). Many of them later became martial artists or martial arts choreographer in the film industry. After Sit Kok-sin passed away, I recruited all of them because we needed antagonists in fight scenes. You could not fight on your own, especially when Southern school fight scenes were usually very short and not as exciting as Peking opera, it would be much more impressive with these actors performing together.

(Translated by Jane Ching)



# Hung Sin Nui

## Favoured Daughter of the Opera World



Date: 5 February, 1998

Venue: City Garden Hotel Hong Kong, North Point

Interviewers: Donna Chu, Winnie Fu

Collated by Janice Chow

**H**ung Sin Nui (1927-2013) first set foot on stage in 1939, and it has been 80 years since! Hung had weathered many a storm during her eventful life that would be impossible to summarise. However, her story might be best encapsulated by the word ‘resilience’. Whether on stage or on camera, at the peak of her stardom or in obscurity during the Cultural Revolution—whatever state she is in (her son Ma Ding-shing once described Hung as being broken in health, mostly a ‘receptacle for medicines’; but as soon as she stepped out of that *hudumen* (stage door), she was transformed into an astonishing display of will and perseverance), Hung was steadfast in raising the bar of Cantonese opera and constantly evolving the art form. She created the ‘Nui Vocal Style’ and deconstructed its mysteries: “*zizheng*” is to articulate the lyrics in a clear and rounded out manner with harmonious blending with the melody; while “*qiangyuan*” is the seamless transitions between words, essentially transitions without edges and that leave no traces.... It is all about mastering the thoughts and emotions within the lyrics, and assimilating them into your vocal style; it also about daring to breakthrough the original style of interpretation, and not be limited by established melodies and tunes.’<sup>1</sup> Hung remained in her later years an active proponent for the development and continuing legacy of Cantonese opera, as well as cultivating mentees and young talent. Hung was a tireless advocate of the arts to the end.

<sup>1</sup> Excerpted from Hung Sin Nu, ‘Tan Yueju De Changgong’ (‘On Cantonese Opera Singing’), *Hongdou Yingcai (The Splendor of Hongdou)*, Guangzhou: Guangdong People’s Publishing House, 1998, p 40 (in Chinese).



## Childhood Years

I am native to Guangdong Kaiping, and I was born on 25 December 1927. My dad was an overseas Chinese businessman, who ran pharmacies and wine shops abroad in countries such as the United States. They were not small-scale businesses at all. I had many brothers and sisters; there were about a dozen of us, and I was the youngest.

Childhood life had its happy moments. Like the others, I spent bulk of my time studying, going to school. During the summer and winter vacations, my father would bring all of his children back to his hometown. He hoped that we would acclimate to the country lifestyle. After the War of Resistance [*Ed. note: Second Sino-Japanese War from 1937*], the 'Japanese Devils' invaded and came to Guangzhou. We couldn't stay there any longer and had to flee, moving from place to place. We first fled to the rural areas and then to Macao. I resumed my studies in Macao, while I was also employed as child labour. The war at the time affected many places, and my father had to declare bankruptcy. After that, I could no longer continue with my studies and my mother asked me to go apprentice as a performer with my aunt.

My family has a history in the performance arts. My grandfather was an outstanding *xusheng* (bearded male), known as Sing Ga Nam; my uncle was a famous *xiaowu* (young military male), named Leng Siu-kai; my younger aunt and mentor was Ho Fu-lin; and from the 'Kwong' side of my father's family, there was our great uncle (paternal grand-uncle), Kwong Sun-wah.<sup>2</sup> He was not only an exceptional artist, but also a significant contributor to the advancement of Cantonese opera. He felt that artists of Cantonese opera were scattered at the time, with no means to self-organise, and as a result were often bullied. He deliberated with my father about this dilemma and the two went about raising funds to establish what would become the 'The Chinese Artists Association'. The association was formerly known as 'Qionghua Guild' which was subsequently burnt down. Led by my great uncle Kwong, the site was rebuilt into The Chinese Artists Association. In terms of the historical development of Cantonese opera, it is worth commemorating this important predecessor. He did a lot of appreciable things for the Cantonese Opera world and fought for many rightful benefits on behalf of his peers.

<sup>2</sup> According to the Hung Sin Nui and Ma Si-tsang memoir, written by their son Ma Ding-cheong, Kwong Sun-wah was the paternal cousin of Hung's father (see Ma Ding-cheong, *Ma Shizeng Yu Hong Xiannu (Ma Si-tsang and Hung Sin Nui)*, Vol 1, Hong Kong: Zhonghua Baike Chubanshe, p155 (in Chinese). But Hung alternately referred to Kwong as her paternal grandfather's older brother and younger brother during the interview. According to *Yongheng De Guanghui (Eternal Radiance)*, a compilation of interviews with film veterans conducted by the writer, Kwong was the older brother of Hung's paternal grandfather. See Cheung Wai, *Yongheng De Guanghui (Eternal Radiance)*, Hong Kong: Chuangjian Wenku, 1990, p 94 (in Chinese). In this excerpt, based on Hung's original account, Kwong was dubbed the older brother of her paternal grandfather.



## Father's Opposition to a Career Start in the Performing Arts

My father firmly believed in pursuing a respectable career as a businessman. He learned while on the job since he was young. However, he felt that he lacked the opportunities for academic pursuits, and hoped to give his children the chance to study further. He would put as much earnings as he could into his children's education, except using part of it sponsoring his relatives financially. Many of my brothers and sisters studied at Peking University and abroad in Japan. The worst must have been me, but I couldn't blame myself for that, because Japanese imperialists were invading China at the time. Although we were fortunate enough to avoid vast separations and loss, our family had fallen on hard times. Finally, I had to switch my studies for training in the performance arts. At the time, my father expressed his disapproval of my new path. He said to me that 'to succeed as a performer, is not to succeed in life'. I didn't fully grasp the 'rigid dichotomy' between life in the performing arts and personal fulfilments; I only knew that once I made the decision to become an actress, I had to succeed both as a performer and as a fulfilled person. My resolution might have partly been due my mother's lowly status as a 'concubine' in the family, who had only given birth to three daughters and no sons. So I hoped that by becoming a success both in the arts and in life, I could make my mother proud.


## Starting from *Meixiang*, the Minor Roles

At the time, my uncle had just returned from the United States and intended to form a new troupe, the Shing Sou Lin Opera Troupe. Before the troupe was established, I first had to learn the basic proficiencies at his home, in order to prepare for my debut on stage; it was the summer of 1938, around July and August. I had been training for a few months only before I performed for the first time during the Spring Festival; so it was in the lunar new year of 1939 that I officially set foot on stage.

As a novice, it was natural for me to perform in chorus roles such as girl servants or ladies-in-waiting at court. And we were always the first to face the audience on stage. In the Cantonese opera world, it was a convention for every new troupe to perform the classic opera *Joint Appointment of a Minister by the Six States*, which starred many peripheral characters. I was a servant responsible for carrying the lanterns on stage, alongside my partner Leung Yin-fong; I performed with the stage name Siu Yin Hung chosen by Ho Fu-lin. Leung Yin-fong and I worked together for more than a year, and we became great friends both on and off the stage. We were always coupled together during performances, because both our age and height were about the same.

When the Shing Sou Lin Opera Troupe finally disbanded, we were scattered to the four winds. After the Second Sino-Japanese War, I returned to Hong Kong and by chance learnt of a person from Guangzhou called Fong Yim-fun—who turned out to be none other than my best friend Leung Yin-fong! I had to go visit her immediately. Even today, our relationship remains close. We don't see each other as much, but the feelings are still intact.





There were many opportunities in the past for young performers to rise through the ranks a little faster. At that time, I felt that if I didn't work hard enough, others would catch up to me. It wasn't great to be relegated to only performing chorus roles on a daily basis, and I struggled internally, thinking I would not survive on earning only two dollars a day! Although meals were provided in the troupe, it was increasingly disheartening to play these little characters every day. In short, there were many motivators for upward momentum, in order to pursue progress in my craft, and I had good opportunities. During my time at the Shing Sou Lin Opera Troupe, there was a huge break of about two weeks every six months. The troupe master and lead actors would use this time for 'moonlighting', and earn some extra money. At that time, my mentor would take me to Guangzhouwan (today's Zhanjiang) to perform. And other senior actors would join us. There was Leng Siu-fung, who was the *wenwusheng* (civil and military male). And Man Kok-fei would play the *xiaosheng* (young civil male), while Ho Fu-lin would be the *zhengyin huadan* (leading female). Although I did not play any important roles yet, I was given lines in the performances.

During this period, 'Third Brother' Leng Siu-fung took a liking to me. I was responsible for serving my mentor, but also the cast of leading actors in the troupe... cooking running errands and so on. It wasn't long since I left home, where I never had to cook before. What was I to do? Fortunately, Third Brother said to me: 'Child, you know next to nothing. Just learn to do better next time'. From that time, I knew that I had an ally in Third Brother, who helped me out from time to time, and I was happy to get to know him. Ever since, he taught me how to sing and work with tempo, as his singing was technically very good. In the end, Third Brother became more of my mentor in practice than my master Ho Fu-lin. And I still regard myself as his disciple and respect him greatly as such till this day.

## The Origin of 'Hung Sin Nui'

At that time, Third brother felt that my stage name did not sound natural to the ears, and advised me to adopt a different one. I also wasn't enamored with my stage name 'Siu Yin Hung'. He said that the troupe had a production called *Hongxian Steals the Box*, and within the story was a character named 'Hung Sin Nui'. Hung is a faithful maid, very loyal and devoted to her master. In the story, Hung discovers that her master's enemy somehow gets hold of their war plan and keeps it inside a box. That night, she decides to infiltrate the enemy's stronghold and steal back the box. Hung was a skilled and patriotic fighter, willing to lend a hand to those fighting for the country and its people. That was why Third Brother chose 'Hung Sin Nui' as my new stage name, which I liked much better. The written characters in that name came to hold a lot of personal meaning for me. 'Hung' and 'Sin' both share the character component '糸', which represents the self, symbolising a person working hard to become 'Hung' (Literally 'successful'). I was penniless when I started working, which coincided with the component '白' meaning blank, and '水' (Literally 'water') means money colloquially. For me, it signifies working from scratch to eventually reaching that moment when wealth would spring! The last character '女', resembles a person sitting cross-legged with open arms; for me it




signifies achieving financial freedom, when I could finally live comfortably. It was something I envisioned as a child (about 12 years old), which I continued to live by for decades. 'Work is a necessity for man' and wealth should not be understood purely in economic terms. I think it should also refer to the 'source' (as in sources of water) of work that gives us purpose and meaning.

## First Encounter with Ma Si-tsang

An actor does not only 'sing', his entire performance should be regarded as a whole. Third Brother did teach me to sing, and I learnt singing by listening to various other performers when I was young, but it was always just about singing. At the age of 14 or 15 when Hong Kong fell to occupation, I followed my mentor to Guangzhouwan to join the Tai Ping Opera Troupe. The pillar of the troupe (i.e.: the principal actor) was none other than the celebrated performer Ma Si-tsang. Ma's singing was in a class of his own, even though it was described as the 'beggar's tone'. I disagreed. I believe that he created unique and diverse vocal tones according to different characters. For example, in *Bitter Phoenix, Sorrowful Oriole*, he was only casted as beggar in a non-singing role. However, he was determined to reinvent the character into a righteous and honest person; since Ma understood both literature and music, in a stroke of genius, he composed a two-versed song that he requested to perform on stage. Most performers would sing with a *zhongban*, which Ma did, but he also crafted a particular 'beggar's tone' that was witty, lively and deft, fully expressing his character's spirit and temperament. 'Ma Vocal Style', the signature style that he established, was not created in isolation, but inspired by thoughts and emotions of the characters he portrayed. I have much respect and admiration for Mr Ma Si-tsang. And because of the performances that year, I had been in touch with him more frequently. While under his osmotic influence I picked up his particular vocal styling. Of course, there were obvious differences in how it was expressed through a woman from that of a man; I performed in a lyrical way that incorporated the vernacular and elements of everyday life, hence, the audience found easily relatable. On the other hand, I also inherited the clear articulation from my mentor Leng Siu-fung. Third Brother's voice was hoarse, but his articulation of every word is clear and somehow transparent. I learnt from him to 'enunciate' in my singing.

After the victory in 1945, we returned to Hong Kong from the Mainland. A veteran performer said that my singing style was good, but my delivery was still 'unrefined' and not cultivated enough. That was the first time someone had given me artistic advice. At the time, I was only 18 or 19 years old, I had no idea about anything. Back home, I would embark on an intensive period of studies in the Chinese classics such as 'The Analects of Confucius in Four Volumes' and *The Songs of Chu*, in order to set a solid foundation for myself. At that time, I also studied with a Peking opera teacher for three years, to learn how to play archetypal roles from Peking opera such as *xiaodan* (young female in supporting role) and *qingyi* (virtuous female).



My entrance into Cantonese opera with the Tai Ping Opera Troupe was invaluable. Performances with Ma Si-tsang were very diverse. Initially, I would imitate him off-stage and then slowly I began to inject emotions into my characters the way he did. Also, whenever Ma performed with my aunt and advisor (Ho Fu-lin), I would take note of all the feedback he gave her, and I felt really blessed to have had those rare opportunities. There were also many other expert performers present, such as Pak Yuk-tong, which I had the pleasure of performing with several times. He used to call me the 'Hung little chick'. The strength these veteran performers imparted on me was powerful. Even when I made mistakes, they were always generous with me.

## Leaving Tai Ping Opera Troupe and Ventured Outside

I met a person who was equally passionate about Cantonese opera—Mr Ho Yin, who invited me to join another troupe. It was my first venture leaving Tai Ping Opera Troupe, but I had already been dreaming of this opportunity for a long time. Having shadowed Ma for quite a while, I had developed a pretty solid understanding of his compositions, vocal styles and narratives (all written by himself), at a level that would be difficult to break new ground. At the same time, I was afraid to suddenly leave behind a working troupe, which I had built a foundation from and developed a close rapport with. Therefore I requested the head honcho to show me a script first, especially late scripts had become a standard practice. Sometimes scripts for the night's performance only arrived that same morning, or even in the afternoon. I was constantly petrified that I couldn't rehearse the tunes well enough, thus letting the audience down. I also wasn't the biggest fan of improvisation. Before each performance, I would always be inseparable from my script, whether walking, sitting or staying up late reading it over. As a result, problems with my nerves, as well as digestive issues started around this time. The head honcho respected my request and handed me the script almost a week earlier than normal practice. The script title was *A God-favoured Diva*, written by Chan Kwun-hing, which included its own theme song. I never really sung theme songs during my time at the Tai Ping Opera Troupe. The closest were very long arrangements written by Ma, all with a *zhongban* in *erhuang* mode. However, this theme song had *xiaoqu* and tunes in *erhuang* mode and was in *zhongban*, concluded with another *xiaoqu*. I had never come across such an arrangement before. I asked for help from Fung Wah [*Ed. note*: Cantonese Music Maestro], in order to adapt the theme song of 'A God-favoured Diva' to my singing. It took two to three days to finally figure out how I should handle this tricky piece, and it became 'A God-favoured Diva' as we know it today. I remember that on the night of its performance, the theatre was astonishingly quiet; everyone in the theatre was listening to my performance attentively, and the newspaper next day wrote about the emergence of the unique 'Hung Vocal Style' created by Hung Sin Nui.



Ma Si-tsang as Sung Sai-kit and Hung Sin Nui as Madam Tong in *The Judge Goes to Pieces* (1948).




'The Song of Chan Yuen-yuen' segment of *Kaleidoscope* (1950): (from left) Ma Si-tsang, Hung Sin Nui, and Sit Kok-sin.

## New Challenges: Foray into Film and Music Recordings

I was fortunate to have the admiration, support and endorsement by the Hong Kong audience for my performances. I had to tell myself that I made it; I was a success on the stage. Soon after, a film company (Zhongguo Film Company) approached me to shoot a film at Yung Hwa Motion Pictures Studios. The film's title was *I'm Crazy About You* (1947). It broke box office records in Hong Kong, with all screenings sold out for an entire month! Then, another producer asked me to play in *Unforgettable Love* (Jinyin Film Company, 1947). Of course, the offer came purely from the popularity of my stage performances. I really liked the film *Unforgettable Love*. I played a tragic starlet on the stage, who experiences a life full of heartbreak and deceptions, as well as the pathos of separation from her husband and daughter. Such misfortunes to be played by me, a girl barely in her twenties, and to make things even more complex it was a play within a play—all things considered I am happy with the final result. So here I was shooting both of these films concurrently at the same studio. Between them, *I'm Crazy About You* had a better reception due to its lively plotlines and a winning dash of theatricality; while *Unforgettable Love*, a tragedy with actors in Western period costumes, did not resonate as much with the audience.

The director of *Unforgettable Love* was So Yi (co-directed by Chu Kea). He was a very experienced veteran director, and became a great inspiration to me. In 1947, I recorded music for the first time, for the track 'Give Me Back the Land of Han' and the theme to *Unforgettable Love*. It was also the year I shot my first movies, *I'm Crazy About You* and *Unforgettable Love*. Neither endeavours elicited much fear from me, I was very natural and at ease when I was in position for the camera. The first scene I shot on film was of my character pining for her husband and weeping despondently. Uncle So (So Yi) told me not to be afraid. And I answered him: 'I am not afraid at all'. I finished this shot by putting up an unforced performance. So and other directors who worked with me appreciated my professionalism. They liked that I was serious, punctual and never left early. I would wait patiently on set, and my performances remained natural and relaxed. I had a period where I preferred making movies to performing on stage. The reason was that stage performances happened in real





time, such that I would not be able to notice nor have anyone tell me, if there were any issues with the performance; but with film there would be test screenings. Good or bad, it was all there at one glance, and if I found something that did not work, I could ask the director to reshoot the scene, and he was receptive to me. This was because I had been so diligent in my work, and they usually agreed that it was not great and would eventually shoot it again. Film as a medium was a clear and transparent mirror I could hold up to my craft, from which I constantly sought progress and evolution.

## Juggling Film and Opera Projects

At that time, my opera projects were looked after by stage managers, and for films, I had movie agents. They would arrange my schedules and showed me potential scripts. If I didn't like it, I told them that I would not do it. In terms of filming, there was a daily schedule I would follow. Today I would go to Yung Hwa, then tomorrow would be The Sai Kwong Studio, and then Grandview Studios the day after tomorrow.... I didn't really like this 'mode' of doing things. Of course, it taught me a lot, and was also lucrative financially speaking; but I didn't enjoy it. I didn't believe art should be made like this. At that time, there were plays without scripts; even some directors did not actually shoot with scripts. Instead, we would receive a piece of paper to look over at the last minute. However, I did film a script that I was very happy with. The film was called *Five Sisters* (Lingfeng Film Company, 1951), directed by Chun Kim. I really liked this film, because a script was made available to me early on to get to know the story. I didn't like churning out works haphazardly.

The film industry had practised for a long time transposing Cantonese opera performances direct from stage to camera. Majority of films just placed performers singing around a table in front of different settings, with some operas even being sung by a single actor! I think that a movie should always be cinematic, with how it is visualised, the mise-en-scène, the tacit connection between people and the emotional exchange. It should not be so rough and sloppy. I could not get used to it, and I preferred not to shoot these kinds of productions at all. Later, I joined the The Union Film Enterprise Ltd, whose mottos were 'clean productions', 'no mass-produced slipshod works', 'meticulous attitude', and 'be socially responsible'. And I couldn't agree more. I asked myself what societal impact would we have to produce inexplicable and uninspired works? For the audience, films need to be artistic and entertaining, but also well balanced. Despite my income being around 65% less than before when I signed onto Union Film, I felt better for it. I would rather make good art.

I enjoyed very much collaborating with professionally rigorous directors at Union Films, such as Chow Sze-luk, whose cinematography was quite remarkable. He started out as a photographer, who later became a film director; camerawork was definitely his strength over storytelling. Union Film had quite a few outstanding directors. For example, there was Lee Sun-fung with his unique style. Ng Wui and Chun Kim were also very good. Chun in particular was daring with fresh ideas.




A photo of Hung Sin Nui's character in the Cantonese opera play *Madame Butterfly*.

## The Establishment of Chun Sin Mei Opera Troupe

Chun Sin Mei Opera Troupe was established in 1952 (some claim it was in 1951). At the time, I felt that others could not fulfill my pursuit for something higher. I hoped that as an actor I would be given a completed screenplay, so that I could read, examine, explore, rehearse and ruminate on how to play out the scenes. As such, I could arrive at a comprehensive understanding of the story. However, no producers would comply to the requests I made at that time; so I tried to be my own boss. Since I did not have much money, I used my salary as starting capital, and then I went about recruiting people on my own. 'Chun Sin Mei' was in many ways, the realisation of my life's pursuit. Eventually, I enlisted the help of the accomplished Ma Si-tsang, as well as Sit Kok-sin, another performer I greatly admired. I believed they were my perfect guides to shaping Cantonese opera, and they shared in my vision for its craft. The first production we staged was *Madame Butterfly*. Since it was a foreign opera, the set, scenery and costumes all had to be painstakingly researched and impeccably produced from scratch. So I went to Japan to 'borrow and adapt Ideas', and looked at the way they decorated their shrines and home Interiors. Japanese dwellings were mostly wooden houses, with a beautiful garden-style design. We gathered many reference pictures and passed it onto a production designer to realise it, and the costumes were also inspired by real clothing samples we bought. After the script was finished, rehearsals began. I invited several directors from The Union Film to assist at the rehearsals. (The performance drew influence from film.)<sup>3</sup> There were shots of gambling and other movie clips that blended with the performance to good effect. I was standing at one side singing during the screening. The audience liked the stage and cinematic effects produced, including me. The performance was sold out for two weeks straight since its debut.

Following this success, we produced *Tragedy in the Qing Palace*. In the performance that year, Fung Wong Nui guest starred in a small, but excellent cameo. In addition, we had many powerhouse performers, such as Auyeung Kim, Hui Ying-sau etc. Ma took the role of

<sup>3</sup> See Ma Ding-cheong: *Ma Shizeng Yu Hong Xiannu (Ma Si-tsang and Hung Sin Nui)*, ibid, p 206 (in Chinese).



Li Lianying, and Sit our 'Fifth Brother' played Emperor Guangxu; Fung played the Empress Dowager Cixi, I played Consort Zhen, and Nam Hung was casted as Consort Jin. All the performances were well executed and the show was another box-office hit. However, Sit left for Guangzhou afterwards, and I also felt quite depleted. Although Chun Sin Mei still continued to produce various plays and operas, it was not as smooth sailing as before. Subsequently there was the production *Pound of Flesh*, adapted from Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, as well as *Lady Zhaojun Going Beyond the Great Wall*. The production of *Lady Zhaojun Going Beyond the Great Wall* was not that exceptional, but its theme song managed to survive till today, and that was no easy feat.

## Joining 'Great Wall'

I signed a long-term contract with 'Great Wall' (The Great Wall Movie Enterprises Ltd) in 1954. During this period, I made the Mandarin language film, *It So Happens to a Woman* (directed by Li Pingqian, 1955). I thought my Mandarin was not so bad, but they found someone to play as vocal talent for me. I did offer to let the production keep my fee if I could use my own voice.... The 'Great Wall' was already an established studio, with the various departments much more organised. Therefore, I preferred to stay there. And it didn't matter if I only shot two films a year. However, I had not given up on Cantonese opera deep down.

## My Return to the Mainland Caused a Sensation

The reason for (returning to the Mainland) was that I felt frustrated in Hong Kong; I felt there was no more room to grow creatively if I stayed. Even today, I still feel the same way. Over the years, no matter how hard I worked, or how many people I had reached out to, I never felt I achieved what I wanted creatively. Although the results were not bad, I was exhausted from the effort and finding it increasingly difficult to create, so in the end I simply focused on making movies. When filming at 'Great Wall', I met many people who came from the Mainland. I heard them say that the situation there was not as bad as imagined, so I asked to go back. Once I returned, I saw for myself that everything was fine; there were spaces for rehearsing, as well as scripts and directors.

Officially, I returned on 14 December, 1955. I was excited for all the possibilities of being back to develop creatively. At that time, the provincial leader declared to me: 'Cantonese opera needs you', so I went back to Cantonese opera again. At the same time, I requested to continue with my filmmaking, and the leader also allowed me to shoot one movie a year. During this period, I starred in *The Lost Kite* (produced by Shanghai Film Studio, released in Hong Kong in 1957) and *Guan Hanqing* (co-produced by Haiyen Film Studio and Pearl River Film Studio, released in Hong Kong in 1961). What I value most was not the success of these films, but that they were the result of collaborating with the more mature and evolved 'Red School' of art, which was only possible after my return.



## Pointers from Mainland Masters and the More Evolved ‘Hung School’

After I went back, I continued my intensive study as before. At that time, there were many opportunities for me to learn in the Mainland. I had many illustrious teachers, such as Mei Lanfang, Cheng Yanqiu, Yu Zhenfei, Zhu Chuanming etc. There was also Zhou Xiaoyan who taught me for a lesson, and Li Shaochun who trained me in swordplay. The main thing was that whatever it was I wanted to learn, they would be able to teach me. Once, after the Premier Zhou Enlai saw my performance in *The Lost Kite*, he enquired whether I came from films. I replied, ‘Yes’ He said that I played well, but reminded me that performing on stage vastly differed from acting on camera. He suggested trying for a more overstated approach. So I went to ask for guidance from my teachers Mei and Cheng. When I ask others for their advice, I never felt shy or embarrassed, and it was the one thing over the years, which enabled me to learn so much from others.

On the stage, I had portrayed many different characters. For example, I played a number of courtesans, including Lee Heung Kwan (titular character in *The Legend of Lee Heung Kwan*, directed by Chor Yuen in 1990), Cui Yingniang (in *Bitter Phoenix, Sorrowful Oriole*), Bai Ruyan, Chiu Kwai-ying (in *The Story of the Burning Incense*). Among others, *Beating the Gods* was made into a film in 1959, which was included in *Butterfly Beauty* together with the excerpts *Feng Yi Pavilion*, *Releasing Son at the Hall* and *Butterfly Beauty*. None of these characters actually prostituted themselves, but each had a unique personality. Such as Cui being a loyal and upstanding person with a cheerful disposition; Chiu was timid, but extremely knowledgeable in literature, and hopelessly infatuated, although I found her rather foolish.... There existed much dissimilarity within the same archetypical character. In addition, I also loved very much the characters Madam Tong (in *The Judge Goes to Pieces*), and Wang Zhaojun (in *Lady Zhaojun Going Beyond the Great Wall* among others.

The happiest thing for me was that I could return to the Mainland for over 40 years. Where I had the chance to read more philosophical texts, to learn more, and listen more to works from different people. Such that I could slowly refine a unique set of characteristics to my art that truly belonged to me. It is also my hope that young performers learn to make their characters the starting points for any performance, and not just themselves. In the beginning, I too often tried to start from myself, such as in my performance of *The Judge Goes to Pieces* in the early years. I was only twenty years old and characters I played back then were rather egocentric, but in fact it was just who I was at the time.





Chui Lin (played by Hung Sin Nui) and Cheung Yat-man (played by Li Feilong) performing 'Love in the First Encounter' in *The Lost Kite* (1956).



Hung Sin Nui (left) and Ma Si-tsang (right) in 'Butterfly Couple' (taken from the Cantonese opera play *Guan Hanqing*), one of the four operatic excerpts in *Butterfly Beauty* (1959).



*The Legend of Lee Heung Kwan* (1990) is an important work of the 'Red School'. In addition to portraying the titular character, Hung Sin Nui also took on the role of artistic director. She is pictured here with Law Ka-bo.



## Period of Artistic Suspension

Naturally I felt rather dejected at the time! (referring to the early years of the Cultural Revolution) However, it did not affect my enterprising spirit. During this period, I continued to practise my craft whenever I can. In short, the audience needed me. I also needed the audience. I never gave up hope that the time would come to perform for an audience again. I was confident! When I finally returned to my creative work again, I was overjoyed to be entirely in my element again. It would have been 1980 when I began to work again.

When it all resumed, I returned to work in Hong Kong. I was ecstatic at the time. I was even more excited about playing in 1981's production of *Lady Zhaojun*. I loved this performance because it was especially adapted by Master Cao Yu to show a real side of Zhaojun, as requested by Premier Zhou. At the time, I collaborated with Qin Zhongying (renowned Cantonese opera dramaturge) to produce this performance in *Lady Zhaojun*. The emotional interplay within this work was very complex indeed.

## Founding the Hongdou Cantonese Opera Troupe

Hongdou Cantonese Opera Troupe of Guangzhou (premiered in 1990 in Guangzhou) has done well for seven years now. I spent the first few years grooming and cultivating the troupe, about four to five years; and then another year travelling around with a few satellite teams. The whole journey from conception till now took more than a decade; some people in Hongdou have since matured and can now take care of themselves.

I can't do this work (preserving the art of Cantonese opera) alone, because it is a multi-disciplinary art, it would be impossible to accomplish without the support of an entire team. My hope is to pass on the fine traditions of Cantonese opera to future generations, and the purpose of this legacy is for the art to live on and evolve. Of course, the process of development will most certainly bring new breakthroughs, which are different from what came before. For example, my 'Praise of Lychees' was formerly called 'Selling Lychees'. I had discussed with my colleague the lyricist about rewriting the song, the whole song was actually describing the lychees, praising the lychees, and also applauding the gardener who cultivated the lychees; so I thought that the word 'sell' should be removed from the song's title, such that it would work in a dramatic scene even if I was not 'selling lychees'. However, people might object to this as steering away from the original.... 'Alike' is the bone (or essence) inside, but it must add something new. Besides inheriting something, there must also be evolution and breakthroughs—without rendering Cantonese opera as a form unfathomable.



## Film and Theatre Complement Each Other Well

I think that film and theatre are not mutually exclusive, that the two actually complement each other. If a stage performance is done well, its movie adaptation will also be good; if the film is well done, the expressions of the characters' inner worlds will be richer.

I believe Cantonese opera has its own dialect, and the dialect created its own melodies, which are different from melodies of other operas. Such as those we used to sing: *erhuang* in stage Mandarin, *hanju (handiao)*, and even *gaoqiang*. In particular, I must emphasise that one must practise diligently; otherwise you will lose the artistic dexterities in bringing the characters you play to life. If it is a contemporary drama, it is only the format that differs; but the singing, creation, performance, the hand, eye, and footwork must still be preserved. If fledgling performers can pay more attention to these aspects, then no matter how Cantonese opera changes, it will still retain its identity. After all, in a hundred years, I hope that it would have evolved somewhat! I trust you hope that too.

[*Note:* The Hong Kong Film Archive's '50 Years of Stardom: A Tribute to Hung Sin Nui' was held in 1998, where ten of Hung's most seminal works were screened. Hung not only accepted the invitation to the event's opening ceremony, but also to an interview for our Oral History Project, leaving behind a precious historical record of her life and work. Hung passed away in Guangzhou on 8 December 2013.]

(Translated by Hayli Hwang)

# Cecilia Lee Fung-sing

## Forging a Path in Film as a Greenhorn



Date: 19 April 2001, 27 July 2016

Venue: Hong Kong Film Archive

Interviewers: Yuen Tsz-ying (1st interview),  
Winnie Fu and Po Fung (2nd interview)

Collated by Doris Chiu and May Ng

Cecilia Lee Fung-sing, who is adept at playing the *wenwusheng* (civil and military male) in Cantonese opera films, entered the film industry because of a recruitment advertisement. During the first few years of her career, she played a miscellaneous range of characters with varying amounts of screen time. It can be said that she had not yet found the type of role which suited her best. Consequently, she was unable to make a name for herself even after forming her own company. Under the encouragement of her predecessors, Lee resolved to become a Cantonese opera film actress and began practising stage postures, movements, and singing techniques as a greenhorn at the age of 23. After years of tireless hard work, she ultimately succeeded in making the transition and became a renowned female *wenwusheng* in the Cantonese opera film circle. Over the years, she has starred in countless features alongside many big names, including Yam Kim-fai, Tang Bik-wan, Yu Lai-zhen, Ng Kwan-lai, Lam Kar-sing, and Yu Kai. With her imposing yet dashing image, she finally became a household name and gained her rightful place in the movie industry. In this interview, she talked about her learning journey, her collaborations with a number of renowned Cantonese opera actors, and the processes involved in shooting Cantonese opera films. Throughout our chat, she repeatedly mentioned how grateful she was to several of her predecessors for giving her career a boost and mentoring her, which went to show that even though Lee did not join a troupe from a young age and worked her way up, she adhered strictly to the industry's tradition of respecting one's teachers.



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I was born on 6 May 1933, but it says '1931' on my birth certificate and ID card. This is because I had to escape the war at the time. Claiming to be a bit older made everything a little more convenient. That's why my actual birth year is different from the one printed on my ID card.

When it comes to my name, there's quite a story to tell too. I have a total of four names. My real name is Lau Kin-ling, which was given to me by my grandfather on my mother's side. As I was born prematurely, he named me so out of auspiciousness. However, on my ID card, it reads: Leung Bo-woon. Why is this so? Allow me to explain! I was born in Heshan and came to Hong Kong with my mother when I was seven years old. We lived in the big house where she worked as a maid—15 Robinson Road, the residence of Mr Li Xingqu.

After the fall of Hong Kong, we returned to our home in the Mainland. We then came back after peace was restored. Because the city was in ruins and life was difficult, I sought refuge with a family that went by the surname Leung. In order to repay their kindness, I accepted them as my foster parents. Subsequently, my name was changed to 'Leung Bo-woon'.

Later, when I became a part of the film industry, I adopted the stage name 'Lee Heung-ying. All my friends in the industry have been calling me Ah Heung ever since. Finally, when I began making appearances as a female *wenwusheng* in 1961, the producer Mr Lee Yan bestowed the name 'Lee Fung-sing' upon me. This is why I have four names in total.

## A Performing Arts Career Born from a Recruitment Advertisement

My foray into the world of cinema basically began because of a recruitment ad. I've loved Cantonese opera and movies since I was a child. I was very interested in acting. I happened to come across an actor recruitment ad by Evergreen Motion Picture Company, so I went for an interview—that was in 1952. At the time, I had to perform a dialogue from *Thunderstorm*. Thanks to my love for acting and my uninhibited performance, I ended up being one of the actors who got hired. When I signed the contract, it was originally only for one year, but I secretly added an extra stroke to the character 'one' and made it two years.




A photo of her character in *Honour Thy Father and Mother* (1953), a film which was made in the early days of her career when she went by the name Lee Heung-ying.

My first film was *The Heroic Dog* (1953). The year was 1953 and it was my very first movie shoot. I only had three lines, and they were said to a dog called Ah Choi. The plot is about a swordsman who roams the lands with Ah Choi to free the weak from oppression. I played a village woman. My three lines were: 'Ah Choi, be quiet, go back inside.' Those three lines paved the way for my future acting career.

After that, I had a role in *Honour Thy Father and Mother* (1953). Later, I was given the opportunity to be part of a blockbuster starring 'The Three Champions',<sup>1</sup> the cast of which included Fong Yim-fun, Sun Ma Si-tsang, Leung Sing-por, and Fung Wong Nui. The film was called *Grand View Garden* (1954) and I was lucky enough to be cast in the role of Sit Bo-chai. The movie is set in contemporary times. I was ecstatic, but also felt wretched at the same time, because the company didn't provide me with that many costumes—only a couple at most. However, my character needed a lot of fancy clothes. For example, I already needed two evening dresses for Grandmother Ka's birthday celebration and the scene of Bo-chai's engagement. Since I didn't have any money to buy clothes, my mother borrowed \$500 from her wealthy boss. Looking back now, my mother was very good to my brother and me. My father passed away when I was just a toddler and she raised the two of us on her own. Even though life was hard, she did everything in her power to fulfil our needs.

<sup>1</sup> In 1952, *Amusement News* held a poll in which Sun Ma Si-tsang, Fong Yim-fun, and Leung Sing-por were voted 'The King of *Wenwusheng* (prime male lead)', 'The Queen of *Huadan* (prime female lead)', and 'The King of *Chousheng* (prime male clown)' respectively. Later, an advertisement for a film dubbed them as 'The Three Champions' to draw in the crowds. Refer to the advertisement for *Grand View Garden* in *Wah Kiu Yat Po*, 4 August 1954, sheet 4, p 3 (in Chinese).



During my early days at Evergreen, I often played flirtatious or elderly characters, but I didn't mind. At the time, I was already very happy as long as I had the chance to perform. I didn't stay at the company for long. I starred as the female lead in about a dozen films there, playing both the protagonist and villain. Nevertheless, nothing much came of them. I later shot *The Pear Flower Washed by Rain* (1954), an adaptation of Tong Tik-sang's famous drama, in which I portrayed the same character as she aged from 16 to 60. I'd just begun to come to grips with acting then. After this movie wrapped, I had a role in *An Actress's Struggle* (1955) before leaving Evergreen.

I left Evergreen to seek other development opportunities. Fortunately, I crossed paths with Fung Chi-kong and Sister Bik (Tang Bik-wan). They often worked together. *Man Widow* (1955) starring Tang Bik-wan, for instance, was directed by Fung Chi-kong. At the time, Cantonese opera films and drama features were separate domains. Directors the likes of Fung Chi-kong, Wong Hok-sing, and Chu Kea made a lot of movies starring Cantonese opera actors, while Lee Sun-fung and Ng Wui shot numerous motion pictures for The Union Film Enterprise Ltd. The boundaries were clearly defined. During this period, I also played female characters in quite a number of films, the more memorable of which include *Forever and Ever* (1955) and *Mother-in-Law* (1956). Sun Ma Si-tsang, Tang Bik-wan, and Law Yim-hing were among the actors I worked with.

## Forming Her Own Film Company

I once set up my own film company. The group of people I worked closely with and myself pooled our money together to establish Liuliu Film Company (Literally 'Liuliu' means 'double six'). In Chinese culture, the numbers three and six symbolise infinite possibilities. This is why we named the company 'Liuliu'. Instead of being remunerated as actors, we profited from selling our films abroad. The most important markets were the United States, Vietnam, and Singapore. Back then, the costs of making a movie were in the range of low to mid five figures. We could make whatever we wanted and had to do everything ourselves single-handedly. The majority of the shooting was done on location. We all banded together to make our company successful.

*The Two Generations* (1960), in which Ha Wa and I co-invested, was one of the films that were made during this era. This feature is based on Ngai Mun's 'airwave novel' and it cost us \$6,000 to obtain the rights. This was very impressive at that time, as the price of an entire floor of a building was just over \$10,000. As a matter of fact, this film was adapted from the Hollywood motion picture *Imitation of Life* (1959). I played two different characters in the film—a mother and a hooligan. It's very touching and it did well at the box office, but we didn't make much money. These were also the final female roles I portrayed on film. After we finished shooting this movie, some people suggested that I cross-dress, ditch the name Lee Heung-ying, and employ the gimmick of claiming to be a female *wenwusheng* who had come back from Vietnam. I was completely clueless about how this would work. After making the switch, there were companies paying me to star in their films, so I felt I didn't have to finance my own movie.



## The Cross-Dressing Debut that Led to an On-Screen Partnership with Yu So-chow

My first portrayal of a male character was in *Leung Hung-yuk's Victory at Wong Tin Tong* (1961), in which I starred opposite Yu So-chow as Hon Sai-chung. Because it was my first time cross-dressing playing a male character, I had no idea what I was doing. For example, when I was performing the basics such as *lashan* (Literally 'pulling the mountains', i.e. hands down and push out arms in a wave-like motion), my hand and arm movements were all over the place; it was a horrific sight. Then there was a scene in which I had to 'hang the sword at the gate' (according to the plotlines, the imperial sword is forbidden in town). What was the appropriate physical feat for that? I was at a loss and on the verge of breaking into tears. Tam Lan-hing couldn't stand seeing me like that and taught me how I should 'handle' the sword. In fact, she taught me a lot of things. I'm very grateful to her.


I worked with Yu So-chow again in *Fire Dragon Array* (aka *The Combat Between the Fire Dragon and the Two Generals*, 1962), but my artistry had yet to take shape. I was also cast in *Madame Wild Rose* (aka *The Hero and the Concubine*, 1962), an adaptation of a stage play for which Chan Kam-tong is well known. How was a woman like myself going to portray such a macho role? Chan Kam-tong's shoes aren't easy to fill. To this day, no one can pull off his iconic roles. He's a truly fantastic actor. I was over the moon to be given a part in this blockbuster by Kowloon Film Company which featured Fung Wong Nui and Tang Bik-wan. I really had to train hard for this film. Thankfully, Simon Yuen Siu-tin and Qi Caifen offered to teach me Northern style Cantonese opera.

## Countless Collaborations with Yu Lai-zhen

I acted in a number of films for various companies, with the majority produced by Lux Film Company. My collaborations with them originated in the film *Prince White Ape* (aka *Prince White-ape and His Mother*, 1963) starring Lam Kar-sing. Since then, I made many movies for Lux, working with the likes of Yam Kim-fai, Tang Bik-wan, Law Yim-hing, Yu So-chow, and Lee Bo-ying. I was also in quite a few features with Yu Kai, including *Three Queens' Assassination of the Prince, Part One and Part Two* (1964). Because Yu Lai-zhen was already on Lux's payroll, they hired *xiaosheng* (young civil male) who demanded a relatively inexpensive salary. I didn't ask for much remuneration—only \$2,000 at the most. They felt it was an appropriate wage, so they had me on board.

I also collaborated with Yu Lai-zhen on countless occasions, but working with her was very challenging, because cost saving was always the priority. Scenes accompanied by *luogu*





(gong-and-drum), in which actors fight in grand armour are often very time-consuming to shoot. She made a lot of films with such sequences; most of them were about the Empresses of the East Palace and West Palace. I helped her out with the last one (referring to *Teaching the Son to Slay the Emperor*, aka *The Plot*, 1967) as well. The thing I remember most is that the big fight scene in that movie actually took 48 hours to shoot. It was a scene which only featured fighting. At the time, we liked shooting those scenes accompanied by gongs and drums. We recorded the singing parts first. We only had one day to record all the songs for the whole movie, then we lip-synced on set. However, the stage movements and dialogue had to be performed to a live accompaniment. Therefore, we acted the scenes in the presence of percussionists. So, it's different from the singing. Yu So-chow was gorgeous and well-versed in *gongjia* (feats), but she didn't know how to sing, so she had ghost singers dub her parts. The most important thing is that viewers were fine with this and were willing to watch her films.

Yu Lai-zhen once advised me not to do Cantonese opera stage plays. She said that I'd lose my audience if I did, because even though I'm a woman, I can still come across as being masculine and suave on the silver screen. However, once I step on a real stage, the audience may even stop watching my movies, because you need to be the real deal to act in a play. Despite her warning, I ended up doing a few stage productions.

## Rise to Fame and a Never-Ending Supply of Film Contracts

Starting from 1963, I shot a lot of films. I worked on two features almost every month a year. I received offers from numerous studios, such as Tai Seng Film Company and Kowloon Film Company. Acting in one or two of their motion pictures a year was more than enough. Those were some of my happier times.

In addition, I've also had the experience of working with The United Film Company. Chan Cheuk-sang was the boss of the company. This man was very passionate about movies. He liked being the director, as well as the producer. He did everything himself. He was a perfect gentleman, but his lack of experience as a director led many people to bully him, which I couldn't stand. We called him 'Wong Tai Sin' (a deity known for granting you what you ask for). If you asked him for a deposit before filming commenced, he'd give it to you. Of course, he never owed actors any remuneration. Chan Cheuk-sang made a lot of movies. He was very smart: when he noticed that a film was particularly successful, he'd quickly start production on two more that were similar in nature. *Sister Yeung* (aka *Trouble in the Palace*, 1963) and *Operation Woods* (aka *An Hero's Tears*, 1964) are cases in point. He capitalised on winning formulae such as employing the same actors or an all-female cast.



## Gritting Her Teeth Through the Gruelling Practice of Stage Movements


I didn't start practising the splits until I was in my 20s. There was obviously a certain degree of difficulty, but that didn't mean it was impossible. All I had to do was bear the pain. I didn't begin training with a troupe as a child. I came onto the Cantonese opera film scene as a greenhorn. I only started practising *shenduan* (stage movements) and *gonjia* (feats) at the age of 23. This was definitely no easy feat for a grown-up. Back then, I'd run to the lawn of the India Club on Gascoigne Road every morning. First, I'd do vocal training with my sisters. Then I'd practise basic skills such as footwork techniques, *zouyuantai* (treading in circular routes), and *shuixiu* (flowing sleeve flicking). In the afternoon, I'd practise Northern style Cantonese opera techniques under the tutelage of several renowned masters. Simon Yuen Siu-tin taught me how to *zouyuantai*; Qi Yukun focused on training my stance and footwork; Han Yingjie tutored me on *madangzi* (horse-riding gestures) and movements; and Kwan Ching-leung helped me master flag-waving techniques. To be frank, practising things like the splits, hip twisting, and kicking at that age was very difficult. That's why Sek Kin used to call me the 'Daredevil Third Brother' (the nickname of Shi Xiu, a character in *Water Margin*). Nevertheless, in order to gain a foothold in the film industry, the only option was to grit my teeth and endure the pain. I practised for years and years, regardless of the circumstances.



Cecilia Lee Fung-sing (right) and Seung-Goon Yuk (left) practising the standing splits.



Splits practice: (from left) Seung-Goon Yuk, Ng Ming-choi, Tin Yin-yung, Tin Mei-yung, and Cecilia Lee Fung-sing.



My financial situation at the time actually didn't allow me to take that many lessons, but they all did it for free and didn't mention money. As for my Southern style Cantonese opera techniques, they were passed down to me by my first master, Lee Bo-lun. Meanwhile, Master Wong To was the first person who helped me with vocal training. Lau Siu-wing became my mentor at a later stage—whenever I received a script, he'd come to help me practise. Master Ho Hoi-ki also helped me with my singing.

I think the most important key to being a female *sheng* lies in the voice, because when it comes to the fundamentals of voice, looks, and showmanship required of Cantonese opera actors, voice comes first. Since it's something that we're born with, inadequacies in this aspect will render you unable to sing on stage at all. As for looks, basically everyone appears attractive after applying makeup, no matter if you're portraying a male or female character. Showmanship, meanwhile, depends on whether you have the perseverance and diligence to practise.

Chest binding is the most crucial aspect to cross-dressing, and it's extremely uncomfortable. When wearing grand armour, you need to bind your chest and put on two cotton robes underneath in order to look mighty. Film shoots were punishing back then. To save money, we'd make a film in seven days, which often meant being on set for more than 40 hours at a time.

## It Takes a Village to Make a Film

The gongs and drums were recorded live at a film shoot as we needed to perform stage movements to the accompaniments. If a retake was needed, we'd have to redo the sequence from the top. The accompanists would also have to play that excerpt again to make editing possible. For some of the more difficult manoeuvres, you'd use a top shot and have the stunt double wear your costume, so that the audience would not know that you used a stunt double. Sometimes, even if your manoeuvres were performed by a stunt double, you still had to know how they were done. For example, if we were pretending to jump from a height, we'd have to feign the initial actions before taking the second shot, in which our stunt doubles would jump down 10 or 20 feet in our stead. The two shots would then be edited together. Editing was very important to our performance. After the entire movie was edited, the sound would be added.

Martial arts choreographers had an equally important role when it came to the filming of fight scenes. Before shooting such scenes, they'd hold a rehearsal to show us how the sequences would play out. There was logic behind everything; it wasn't just blind hitting. Whenever a fight scene was filmed, the director would tell the martial arts choreographer what he wanted. The martial arts choreographer would then come up with a sequence and show it to the director. After that, the director would make some suggestions, decide the camera angles, and make up for any flaws with additional shots to ensure perfection. As you can see, it takes a village to make a film.



## Gratitude for Her Mentors' Support

Come to think of it, there are three mentors whom I must thank for making my cinematic career possible. The first is renowned producer Chu Tsi-kwai. I recall that Evergreen originally wasn't going to hire me after my interview, but then I heard an imposing man say this to Mr Cheng Sang, the owner of Evergreen: 'Even though she has a flat face, she's a diamond in the rough. Give her a chance!' It was because of this that the company brought me on board. I later discovered that the person who gave me this precious opportunity was Chu Tsi-kwai. I'm truly grateful to him.

The second person I have to thank is director Fung Chi-kong, whom I called 'Third Brother'. He appreciated my craft and we became close friends. I'll never forget the advice and support he gave me throughout my career. Although we called him Third Brother, he was in fact the fifth oldest of ten brothers. He was somewhat of an academic as he received good education. He was quite intrepid; nothing could stop him from doing what he wanted. He also learnt from many directors, so he was by no means a greenhorn. You could say that he had a very solid foundation. He had a younger brother whom everyone knew—the screenwriter Fung Yat-wai.

Fung Chi-kong made countless exceptional films. He began recommending me to his bosses ever since I acted in Evergreen's *An Actress's Struggle* in 1954. 'How about giving Lee Heung-ying a role?' he'd ask them. He went on to recommend Lee Heung-ying for numerous movies, even those not directed by him. He truly appreciated my talent. I'm very grateful for his support, all the thought he put into helping me advance my career, and every opportunity he fought for on my behalf. Even at my current age, I feel like I still owe him something.

The third individual whom I've always regarded as a mentor is Ms Tang Bik-wan, also known as the 'Versatile Opera Queen'. She was incredibly kind to me. I was the supporting actress in a number of her films during my early days in the industry, when I still played female roles. She often encouraged me to explore other avenues. Back then, I'd been in more than a dozen films portraying female characters, but nothing much came of them. I was stuck in the middle. Tang Bik-wan suggested that I switch to being a *wenwusheng* since modern musical films were all the rage at the time anyway. Later, when she saw that I'd successfully reinvented myself, she gave me a career boost by willingly taking on the secondary male role in several films to allow me to shine. She was so selfless and gracious. This is why I always tell people, 'Without Tang Bik-wan, there'd be no Lee Fung-sing.'

I worked with numerous veterans in my cinematic career. I wasn't very well educated, nor did I receive training in a troupe since I was little. Nonetheless, they were all very happy to teach me. 'Sixth Brother' Mak Bing-wing, for example, offered me a lot of guidance because he noticed that I was in numerous films with Yu So-chow. I benefited tremendously from it—it was something that money couldn't buy. Poon Yat On, Auyeung Kim, and Leung Sing-por were also very willing to teach me.





A photo of her character in *Leung Hung-yuk's Victory at Wong Tin Tong* (1961), in which she portrayed a male role for the first time.



A photo of her in male attire.



Cecilia Lee Fung-sing owes much of her success to Tang Bik-wan. She not only encouraged her to become a *wenwusheng*, but also played secondary roles in a number of Lee's films to let her shine. With the support of her predecessor, Lee ultimately made a name for herself in the film industry. The photo is from *Sister Yeung* (1963): (front row, from left) Cecilia Lee Fung-sing, Fung Wong Nui, and Tang Bik-wan; (second row, from left) Ka Chui-fung, Kam Ying-lin, Lee Hong-kum, and Chan Pei Mui.



## Superstardom and Role Diversity

When it comes to acting tips, I personally don't really have any. I initially entered the industry just to subsist; I'd never thought about becoming a star. When the company gave me a job, I was already very satisfied. Later, I felt that I should show professionalism and enjoy my job as an actor. Upon receiving a script, I tried to think of ways to portray a character as best as possible. If I couldn't do it, I'd ask my masters, such as Simon Yuen Siu-tin and Qi Yukun, to teach me.

I dare not say that I have any masterpieces in my decades-long career in film. However, I do have my favourites and those in which I think I portrayed the characters well. The ones where I played female roles include *The Two Generations*, *Eight Errant Ladies, Part One and Part Two* (1962), *The Pear Flower Washed by Rain* (1954), and *Floating Life* (1996). Meanwhile, *Snatch Soul Flag, Part One and The Concluding Episode* (1963), *A Broken Sword, Part One and Part Two* (1963), *The Dragon Sword at the Bottom of the Sea, Part One and Part Two* (1964), and *The Infatuating Palm* (1966), all are *wuxia* features in which I portrayed male characters. As for operatic films, I like *Madame Wild Rose*. My performance in this film put me in the good graces of the audience. I really like *The Ambitious Prince* (1965) as well. I've also acted in drama films such as *A Funny Match* (aka *The Fake Lover*, 1963), in which I played a gentleman. I enjoy portraying rebellious, intimidating, benevolent, and individualistic characters. I also like playing generals and excerpts such as 'Barging into the Palace'.

After filming *Teaching the Son to Slay the Emperor* in 1966, I went to places such as Singapore and Malaysia to perform in concerts. I even got married in Malaysia later. I immigrated to Australia in 1991 and have been actively promoting Cantonese opera there ever since. I hope to acquaint more Australians with Chinese culture.

(Translated by Johnny Ko)



In *The Ambitious Prince* (1965), the Crown Prince Kam Lun (played by Cecilia Lee Fung-sing) is ultimately united with the Princess Hundred Flowers (played by Ng Kwan-lai) after many trials and tribulations. (Front row, from left) Siu Sun Kuen, Cecilia Lee Fung-sing, Ng Kwan-lai, and Kam Ying-lin. Yuen Chau is holding a flag in the back row on the right.



A photo of her character in *Teaching the Son to Slay the Emperor* (1966), her last Cantonese opera film.



# Lee Yuen-man

## Half a Century of Life in Cantonese Music



Date: 15 November 1994

Venue: Hong Kong Motion Picture Producers' Association

Interviewer: Law Wai-ming

Collated by Simpson Choi and May Ng

Lee Yuen-man (1911-1997) started to write Cantonese operatic music in the late 1920s. He assumed the role of instructor at Sushe, a music society in Guangzhou before the War, and founded both a music hall and cabaret night club after the War. The Cantonese opera veteran had spent years honing his skills and was finally able to strut his stuff after his post-war relocation to Hong Kong. As a start, he established the Yongye Film Company where he took up the role of a producer. He subsequently wrote lyrics for film studios such as The Union Film Enterprise Ltd and Motion Picture and General Investment Co Ltd (MP & GI),<sup>1</sup> rising from a commoner who crafted tunes to someone who garnered respect from the greatest opera performers (he was revered as 'Elder Brother Yuen-man'). Apart from making film adaptations of popular opera repertoires including *The Romantic Monk* and *Swallows Come Home*, Lee wrote the original Cantonese opera film *The 12 Hairpins and the 12 Balustrades* (aka *Twelve Beauties*, 1964), allowing him opportunities to collaborate with numerous Cantonese opera veterans. With his long illustrious career invariably linked to Cantonese opera, Cantonese operatic music and Cantonese opera films, Lee had deep affinity for the art form. On the day of the interview, he even hummed a few lines from the original operatic tune 'Whither Spring': *The nature is dressed in green/ I tread on the fallen petals/ Searching for spring alone by myself/ Whither spring?/ Spring is in the river/ The withered flowers and wild willows mock me for wandering around.* His passion in music was visibly expressed through his voice and gestures.

<sup>1</sup> Lee Yuen-man co-wrote some of his lyrics, most regularly collaborating with Poon Cheuk and Pong Chow-wah. Details can be found using the 'Hong Kong Film Search' function on the Hong Kong Film Archive website.



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## Songwriting Debut at the Age of 16 and Signature Pieces

I was born in Guangzhou on 24 July 1911. My father is a jade merchant who imports from Burma (now known as Myanmar) to Guangzhou. My early schooling was at an elementary school, and I later studied jurisprudence, a university-level subject. I have been passionate about music since childhood, though an interest not shared by my father and brothers who were all businessmen. I dabbled in Cantonese operatic tunes around 13 years old and started composing at the age of 16. Some like-minded musician friends and I got together and we experimented mainly for the sake of just having fun. Initially, we held amateur sessions where musicians provided instrumental accompaniment to Cantonese operatic singing. But I later joined the music unit of the Athletic Association for the Citizens of Guangzhou, and started performing singing for the city's official radio channel. We played music and discussed some of the selections too. Two of my works written in Guangzhou, 'Whither Spring' and 'Ascending the Tower on Double Ninth Day', gained considerable popularity. 'Whither Spring' was sung by a handful of different artists in Hong Kong back in the 1920s and 30s, since it had been aired on the radio in Guangzhou and reached many listeners across the region. 'Ascending the Tower on Double Ninth Day', on the other hand, was less popular among singers or performers.

## Hired as Instructor at Sushe, a Music Society in Guangzhou

Later on I joined Sushe, which was quite reputable in Guangzhou back then. Its Recreation Unit virtually recruited all the talented musicians in the city. Roughly between the year 1929 and 1930, the Chinese Music Study Section of the Guangzhou Public Hall under the Department of Education, started hiring instructors that were relatively well-known and proficient both in music theories and techniques. Among them included the late Liu Tianyi, Wang Wenyong and Lai Shousan, who specialised in teaching operatic singing. There were some twenty-odd music instructors who were quite established at the time, and I was one of them. What did we teach? We mostly taught singing techniques, as well as Hong Kong folk orchestral music for festivities and funerals. The inclusion of *suona* (Chinese double-reeded horn) was always a nice touch. As of now, there are still many students who continue to participate in folk orchestras.

Members of the Chinese music society also included Nancy Chan who later rose to stardom in the film industry. Although she was an instructor as well as a society member of the Recreation Unit, she mainly performed and not much into teaching. I also participated in Cantonese operatic performances at Sushe in which Chan took on lead roles and I played minor supporting roles. Other famed performers in lead roles included Leong Wai-yuk who mentored under Sit Kok-sin. After I moved to Hong Kong in 1949, I only acquainted several of the members again such as Law Bo-sang. Nancy Chan by then was close to retirement from the film business and hardly made public appearances.



## Working in Film Music in Guangzhou

I was only 19 or 20 years old in the year 1930. During that period Lee Tit was assistant director at Asia Sound Film Company while Kwong Tsan was sound engineer, having just returned from Shanghai. Both later made a name for themselves in the Hong Kong market. Asia Sound Film Company had produced two films at the time; they were mostly silent except for some songs. One of the two films made was *Iron Horse, Faithful Fowl* (1933) starring Siu Yiu Sin (aka Luk Siu-sin). One of the co-stars was former child star Sit Siu-wing, the younger brother of our previous Chairman Sit Siu-cheong; Sit Siu-wing was somewhat famous in Shanghai but less so in Hong Kong. The second film was *Modern Tears* (1934), starring 'The King of *Chousheng*' (prime male clown) Yip Fut-yeuk. The female lead was Sun Nei-nga, wife of Lui Man-shing. Those were the only films made by Asia Sound Film Company, both directed by Leung Siu-po. I was responsible for music and composition, writing new lyrics for existing Chinese tunes brought over from Shanghai. This became the start of my career in films.

Later in Guangzhou, I wrote a tune for *A Rosy Dream of the Tang Dynasty Court* (1935) that starred Nancy Chan as the imperial consort Yang Guifei. At that time she had not yet acted in such Mandarin films as *Hua Mu Lan* (aka *Maiden in Armour*, 1939). As mentioned earlier I was in Guangzhou; there were several soundtracks and I only wrote one of them without being remunerated. Since I didn't see composing as a job, I wasn't paid for a couple of my original songs. The other two songs were written by Chairman of Sushe Yik Kim-chuen, an old gentleman with great reputation, and Sing Hin-sam, a renowned master in Chinese ancient music who was also a music broadcaster at the city's official radio channel.



A photo taken with Lee Tit (middle) and Wu Pang (left).



## Vibrant Post-war Guangzhou Music Scene and Opening of Music Venues

I left Guangzhou at around age 24 and 25. While I was in Chongqing, I did an overseas broadcast of Cantonese operatic music at the Central Broadcasting System once. As I was a businessman then, I did not spend a lot of time in Sichuan, and was travelling across Yunnan, Guizhou, and Guangxi. I had more opportunities to perform around 1941 when I was in Shaoguan. I was working at a Guangdong provincial enterprise which ran a drama troupe. I was both the troupe's director and backstage supervisor, and acted in the drama *Wild Rose*. There were hardly any drama groups in Shaoguan then. I also organised an amateur student association with members all having regular jobs. We often had programme broadcasts at the radio station. Hui Sai-cheong, a fairly famous personality in the Shaoguan music scene, also joined us. He is in fact the father of Michael Hui and Sam Hui. Sam Hui was not even born yet and Michael Hui was just a baby. Kwan Tak-hing had a drama troupe under his name with performances held at the Qujiang Theatre. There were hardly any musicians in Shaoguan then, and members of our amateur student association would provide them with melodic accompaniment voluntarily, sometimes using gongs and drums.

The post-war Cantonese opera scene in Guangzhou was very much vibrant, even more so than Hong Kong. We were not in Guangzhou during the War, and after the War, artists such as Sun Ma Si-tsang, Fong Yim-fun and Ho Fei-fan returned. There were plenty of singing talents, and I co-founded a music hall with renowned musician Leung Yee-chung. We brought together a large assembly of talents, recruiting performers such as Cheung Yuet-ye, King Sin, Lee Siu-fong and Chan Kam-hung. Chan is fairly popular in Hong Kong now. Tsui Lau-sin was in Hong Kong then and I also invited her to perform in Guangzhou. I initially co-founded a music hall in Shibafu, Guangzhou with Leung Yee-chung, and later on founded a cabaret night club opposite Haizhu Theatre at Changti Avenue. Our charges were high, comparable to best seat tickets for performances by the likes of veteran artists such as Sun Ma Si-tsang and Fong Yim-fun. This is because the night club features not only Cantonese operatic songs but an assortment of entertainment including popular music, dance, traditional music and 'Spirit Music' (such as 'The Special Express') performed by the Lui Man-shing, Wan Chi-chung, Ching Ngok-wai and Ho Tai-so, the so-called 'Legendary Four'. The performances were quite rousing especially accompanied by Ching Ngok-wai, the 'King of Drums'.

The nightclub drew a lively crowd, and it was often fully-packed as we offered a variety of acts including magic and juggling. This is why it was a 'night club' as it featured more than just Cantonese operatic music and singing. We continued to operate until the curfew was enforced. The night club was forced to close as there was no electricity supply at the time near liberation. I then moved to Hong Kong in 1949.



## Film Production After Relocation to Hong Kong in Late 1940s

I had no expertise other than music, singing and composing. I was not a good businessman. My father was a jade merchant and his business jeopardised after relocating to Hong Kong. I took on the role of producer for *Silent Dream* (1949) directed by Ng Wui before I came to Hong Kong. Hung Keung and I subsequently co-founded Yongye Film Company and produced *Black Heaven* (also as composer, 1950). Later on, Lin Kam took over and Yongye produced a few more films. We continued to have collaborations [*Ed note*: Lee was lyricist and consultant to *The Neglected Wife* (1951) and wrote music for *Drifting Swallow* (1951)]. As a company shareholder, I took up the role of a producer in *Red Rose, the Songstress* (aka *Fragrant Quilt*, 1952) starring Siu Yin Fei (also a shareholder) and directed by Chun Kim; I acted in the same role as a producer in Lee Tit's *Her Unrequited Love* (aka *A Ten-year Love*, 1955). The box office was decent enough but we hardly made a profit. They were not musical films either. *Black Heaven* is set in the Republic era while *Red Rose, the Songstress* is a modern-costume film without any tunes.

I started writing lyrics in around 1951 or 1952. The first filmmaker that I acquainted was Lee Tit; however, my very first collaborator in Hong Kong was Ng Wui, followed by Lee Tit, and then Chun Kim. I also worked with numerous other directors including 'Uncle Pang' (Wu Pang). I started off with writing lyrics, and later helped with screenplay writing. The Union Film Enterprise Ltd was the first studio commissioning me to write all the soundtracks for the entire film. I first wrote for their trilogy *Family* (1953), *Spring* (1953) and *Autumn* (1954). I later on wrote every single song for the following productions by Union Film: *The Precious Lotus Lamp* (1956), *The Precious Lotus Lamp, the Sequel* (1957) and *The Precious Lotus Lamp, Part Three* (1958) [*Ed. note*: Lee and Poon Cheuk collaborated in the three aforementioned films and the earlier *Romance at the Western Chamber* (1956), also produced by Union Film]. I even scripted the screenplay for *The Precious Lotus Lamp*, which inspired me to write more subsequently.

I also wrote lyrics for MP & GI's production [*Ed. note*: refer to International Films Distributing Agency], *Fire* (1956), and penned the scripts for two musical films starring Law Yim-hing and Ho Fei-fan respectively [*Ed. note*: Lee wrote *My Kingdom for a Husband*, (aka *The Romance of Jade Hall, Part One*, 1957) and its sequel, *My Kingdom for a Honeymoon* (aka *The Romance of Jade Hall, Part Two*, 1958) for Law, and *Prince of Thieves* and its sequel (1958) for Ho]. I also scripted *The Romantic Monk* (1956) and *The Story of Sima Sheung-yu* (1957) produced by the film company [*Ed. note*: Yuzhou Film Company] that Ho Fei-fan established. Leung Sing-por also owned a company [*Ed. note*: Tat Fung Movie Enterprises Co.] which produced *Bo Ding and Pearl* (1958) and a film called something like 'Cuckoo's Spirit' [*Ed. note*: Likely referring to *Cuckoo's Spirit in March* (1959)].

Law Kim-long also established a company in 1961 and produced films in Taiwan. It was not very successful due to difficulties in cooperation between different parties. I was the location shooting manager when he went filming in Taiwan. The director was Lung To who did go to Taiwan but hired another local director [*Ed. note*: Shen Chiang]. The cast included





*My Kingdom for a Husband* (1957) is one of the films by Motion Picture and General Investment Co. Ltd. (MP & GI) for which Lee Yuen-man served as lyricist: (from left) Tam Lan-hing, Law Yim-hing, Yuen Lap-cheung, Ng Tung, and Lam So.



*Bo Ding and Pearl* (1958): (from left) Lau Hark-suen, Law Kim-long, Man Lan, and Leung Sing-por.



*Swallows Come Home*, a libretto by Tong Tik-sang, graced the silver screen twice. The 1958 period costume version starred (from left): Yam Kim-fai and Fong Yim-fun, with Lee Yuen-man and Poon Cheuk being the lyricists.

Law Kim-long in the lead role as well as Leung Sing-por and Patricia Lam Fung, who also came along to shoot in Taiwan. The film was conceived because of the box office success of *The Greatest Civil War on Earth* (1961) in both Taiwan and Hong Kong. Law planned to make a similar film in a hybridised style mixing Mandarin and Cantonese. However, both the film itself and the Hong Kong box office were not successful [Ed. note: likely referring to *Family of Four Seas* (aka *The World is a Big Family*, 1963)]. He originally planned to shoot a *wuxia* film but it did not materialise.

Filmmaking was not my main vocation though. I mainly wrote lyrics for films. I wrote so many screenplays that some escaped my mind already. Some were adaptations of masterpieces by Tong Tik-sang such as: *Returning on a Snowy Night* (1957); *Stormy Night* (aka *Returning Home on a Snowy Night*, 1962), *The Swallow Comes Home* (1958), and *The Swallow's Message* (1959). I also adapted *The Romantic Monk* and *The Story of Sima Sheung-yu*, both starring Ho Fei-fan. The film *The 12 Hairpins and the 12 Balustrades* is an original work of mine.

## Workflow of Adapting Cantonese Opera into a Film

The very first step in adapting a Cantonese opera into film is to attend its stage performance. Tong Tik-sang, Lee Siu-wan and Poon Yat-fan were all established masters. Those who approached me for film adaptations would send me two tickets, and I usually went



with a company. After I attended the performance and gained more insight, I would prepare the scene breaks for discussion with both the producer and director, seeking their approval. The script's quality tends to be a fairly accurate gauge of the audience's reaction. However, attending the performance is still better because the audience's immediate responses indicate which parts of the script are preferred and to be kept. Conversely, there may be dull segments. If a certain *nanyin* (Southern tunes) segment was so long that the audience fell asleep, it should certainly be cut. These must be experienced first-hand. I was fortunate enough to have help from many people, some of which are famous. Both Poon Cheuk and Pong Chow-wah are well-respected experts nowadays. So is Zhong Jinpei who owns a record company [Ed. note: He later co-founded Fung Hang Record Limited with Lee]. That being said, first things first, we would have a script, either it's original or penned by other screenwriters. Around six or seven of us would discuss in detail the plotline and identify its problem and weakness. After smoothing the story with approval from the producer and director, we prepare the scene breaks for further discussion. The next step is to divide up responsibilities for songwriting based on scenes. You may write a segment of *banghuang* while I am responsible for a *xiaoqu* (short tunes). As the editor-in-chief, I also wrote some of the lyrics. After further corrections, revisions and reading through in its entirety, the script



*The Swallow's Message* (1959): (from left) Tang Bik-wan, Chan Kam-tong, Fung Wong Nui, Lam Kar-sing, Tam Sin-hung, and Poon Yat On.




will be transcribed properly. My scripts are never messy. Every single word is properly transcribed for viewing by the producer, director, and actor. Actors back then must read the script thoroughly before deciding on taking the role. Our remuneration at that time tended to be low. I only received \$100 for writing one song while for writing an entire screenplay like *The Precious Lotus Lamp*, our rates were only \$1,500.

I am a mere songwriter by profession and did not expect to command respect. However, people would not look down on me and all the renowned masters addressed me with respect including Sun Ma Si-tsang, Fong Yim-fun, Ho Fei-fan and Yam Kim-fai and Pak Suet-sin. Fortunately, people in the business tended to be polite; otherwise I might have quitted already. I wrote screenplays for a considerable amount of famed opera artists and opera troupes—including Leung Sing-por, Ho Fei-fan, Mak Bing-wing, Law Kim-long and the Tai Lung Fung Opera Troupe. From the perspective of an opera troupe, they had faith in my screenplays and that the audience would like my works. If my screenplays didn't sell, people would have said something like, 'Huh! Lee Yuen-man is such as a "box office poison". Don't include him.' Besides knowing the audience's preference, I worked with many directors and it is also important to know their temperaments. Cheung Wai-kwong, for example, would call you around 2am to 3am on a whim. You would be in trouble if you were already asleep.

I also used to follow the filming process. Director Ng Wui had very high demands for his musical films, and audio was recorded on location during filming, making it quite costly as a group of musicians waited in standby. As songwriters, we may be required to make revisions if he was dissatisfied with some of the lines, and audio has to be recorded again immediately. It became a challenge when there were many changes. I worked overnight continuously, sometimes for ten nights in a row. He may make comments and demand changes on the different kinds of *banshi* (grouping of rhythm and beat) such as *sanjiaodeng* (three-legged stool), *gunhua* and *erhuang*. Changes must be made immediately on the spot, making it a difficult and anxious task requiring quick wit. I once had five people following me during audio recording on location. Even Pak Man-biu was involved in a group of scenes. Leung Shan-yan, a fairly famous and prolific Cantonese opera screenwriter, also helped me at times to follow up in these situations.

If the adaptation screenwriter is not equipped with deep knowledge of Cantonese opera, it is often difficult to maintain its authentic flavour. As a veteran in both drama and Cantonese opera, I am in the know and would like to share an incident. There was the Cantonese opera *Lovers' Tears* (the namesake film was released in 1958) written by Lee Siu-wan that was based on the story of 'Zhou Ren Sacrificing His Wife'. It was a hit thanks to the great story. Ho Siu-bo asked me to write the adaptation. Since Chow Sze-luk was the director, so the scene breaks were prepared separately by another crew member. Scene breaks are very important as dialogues and songs are arranged based on each of the scenes. They intended to cut the final scene 'The Final Trial' that featured Fong Yim-fun dressed as a male. The scene was an audience favourite, or what we termed as 'a scene that sells'. The writer decided to cut the scene, however. When asked why on the decision, he replied: 'This makes no sense—a female top scholar in the imperial examination who is in a final trial of her husband. How could any





female be a top scholar? This makes no sense.’ In fact, a female becoming top scholar is a well-known and not uncommon plot in Cantonese operas. Cantonese operas do take artistic liberties. Eventually Lee Siu-wan, Sit Siu-cheong and I met with director Chow Sze-luk to discuss on this matter. We persuaded him in keeping the scene. Cutting the scene would have been detrimental to the film, and the film turned out to be profitable.

## On Production of Cantonese Films

There were two types of films at the time. Films may have its audio recorded live on location. When we first made films in the 1950s, there were not as many microphones, and audio was recorded by one large microphone hung on top. Percussions are further away while other music is closer with the vocals even closer to this one single microphone. There were more microphones available later on. For a Cantonese film entirely consisting of singing, all the singing was often recorded in advance. The length of film stock for a typical film is more than 8,000 feet. A musical film may record up to 6,000 feet of songs, some range from 4,000 to 5,000 feet. After the recording of songs, the director and assistant director will determine the scene breaks and shooting schedule based on the songs. This was common back then, and audio recording live on location was rare due to it being more costly.

Later on, Mandarin films had bigger budgets and were made more professionally. Perhaps because of the production quality, the audience preferred Mandarin films. It was more difficult for Cantonese films to sell overseas, and production budget had to be slashed. Hong Kong constituted only a portion of the revenue, with the rest dependent on the overseas market mainly from Singapore and Malaysia. Other than Singapore and Malaysia, the remaining was from the Americas. In the past, a major and sizable portion of revenue for Mandarin films stemmed from the Taiwan market.

## The Late Acquaintance of Ma Si-tsang

I did write Cantonese opera once, and it was *Tragedy in the Qing Palace* by Ma Si-tsang who performed with Hung Sin Nui at the Ko Shing Theatre [*Ed. note:* in the year 1953]. I was called to help him write a theme song, and we exchanged opinions on the scene breaks. He was living at Happy Valley then, and rented a room for me at a hotel to discuss on the scenes and the theme songs. I wrote a few major tunes for him. After the collaboration, he was close to returning to Mainland. He gave me a boost in my career as I was unknown in Hong Kong at the time.

The show was performed at Ko Shing Theatre, and I wrote him some *xiaoqu* and conceived ideas about the scenes. I am very grateful for something he said. Unbeknownst to me, he was close to leaving Hong Kong by then. We met at a tea restaurant, and he remarked: ‘Lee Yuen-man, I wish we met earlier in my life.’ And to which I replied: ‘No, it is me who wish to make your acquaintance earlier. I would not need to wander so long had I known you earlier.’ We laughed at this exchange, because we realise that our tastes in music are similar when we discuss about Cantonese operas.

# Poon Cheuk

## The Banging Days of Musical Films with *Luogu*



Date: 13 May 1998

Venue: Residence of Poon Cheuk

Interviewers: Donna Chu, Yuen Tsz-ying

Collated by Wong Ha-pak

In the early 1950s, Poon Cheuk (1921-2003) began a career in writing Cantonese opera songs, before fate ushered him into the film circle where he started writing lyrics for films. His first work was featured in *Romance at the Western Chamber* (1956), produced by The Union Film Enterprise Ltd. In the same year, he also wrote songs for *The Precious Lotus Lamp*,<sup>1</sup> which pioneered the genre of all-singing musical films with the accompaniment of *luogu* (gong-and-drum), or Chinese percussion,<sup>2</sup> which were essentially movies inspired by Cantonese opera music. In the following decade, this type of musical films with gong-and-drum became a huge trend. Poon himself was at the core of the musical talent behind the genre; apart from writing songs, he also wrote musical screenplays and adapted Cantonese opera pieces for film, making him a key witness of the wax and wane of the musical film genre in Hong Kong. In the early 1960s, he also wrote music for many *wuxia* films, heightening tense moments of movies with his dramatic music. Up until he left the movie industry in 1968, he had taken part in the production of more than 170 films. In this interview, Poon had mentioned once and again the interactions between investors, directors and Cantonese opera veterans during the production of these movies back in the day. Since film directors were often unfamiliar with the characteristics of Cantonese opera singing, acting and musical arrangements, Poon would have to be on set during filming, which meant a life of long, overnight hours. As he reveals, the process of adapting

<sup>1</sup> Poon Cheuk co-wrote some of his soundtracks, Lee Yuen-man was among his many collaborators for over a decade. Details can be found using the 'Hong Kong Film Search' function on the Hong Kong Film Archive website.

<sup>2</sup> The term originated from a marketing campaign used at the time. Poon Cheuk was referring to Cantonese opera films that featured live gong-and-drum accompaniment, traditional stage movements and choreography; similar to a sub-genre of 'operatic films', a term coined by researcher Yu Mo-wan.

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Cantonese opera from the stage to the silver screen is no simple feat; it requires a musician to understand film language, in order to adapt and arrange the play well. As Poon points out, screenwriters for musical films not only needed a foundation in Chinese culture and music, they also required an understanding of the director's methods as well as a producer's intuition to be able to complete a good film.

### Loo Kah-chi Networked Me to Ma Si-tsang, Who Was Then Looking for a Film Songwriter

I was born in 1921 in the rural Shunde county township of Chonghe, my ancestral hometown. I grew up in Daliang, Shunde and went to school there. My grandfather and father were both well-known figures; scholar-literati of their time. My father had four wives and I was the youngest son, borne by the youngest wife. But my father passed away when I was just a few years old. I studied Chinese literature but I was never taught by him. I actually learned everything from my two brothers of the same mother. They didn't really teach me per se; they started school much earlier than me so I would eavesdrop and learn from them when they recited and created poetry with their classmates at home.

When I was really young and my father was still around, our family was better off, since he was a scholar-gentry. After he died, it was our mother who brought us up, providing for us and nurturing us. I studied from primary to secondary school at the Shunde Agricultural School of Guangdong Province, until the Japanese military invasion when I was in senior high ended my schooling days. That's when I came to Hong Kong, where I tried to enter military school; but I failed to qualify, because I was colour blind. The year before Hong Kong fell, I went back to the mainland, where I stayed until returning to Hong Kong in 1949.

When I first came to Hong Kong, I couldn't find work. I stayed with my nephew, a tailor specialising in Western women clothing. His clientele included some wealthy ladies, and through this network I got to know Lo Kar-wong, the brother of the revered musician Loo Kah-chi (aka Lo Ka-chi). At the time, Lo Kar-wong often played music at the radio station, and when he complained about not having any songs to sing, my nephew suggested I write him some songs. I used to play music in school, mostly strings, such as the violin and *yangqin* (Chinese hammered dulcimer), although I also could play the *dizi* (Chinese bamboo flute). So I wrote a few songs and showed Loo Kah-chi. He thought my lyrics were pretty good, but that I didn't know the rules of melody writing yet. After some editing by him, my first song 'Autumn Sentiments' was played on the radio, and he told me to keep at it.

At the time, Nam Sing Record Co., managed by Lo, invited me to write lyrics for four songs. When I was done, the four songs became the first to be studio recorded by the



company. They include 'Crying Swallow', 'Orphan Tears' sung by Cheung Suet-ying and Lo Kar-wong, 'The Woe of the Pilgrim' sung by Sun Chi-hing, and 'Mourning the Fallen Petals as the Simurgh Departs' sung by Li Xiangrong and Lee Wai.

The songs I wrote then would have to go through Loo Kah-chi, who would review and edit them. Gradually I started to earn a name for myself in the music circle, and my work gained recognition. After big name singers such as Leung Ying, Lee Wai and Cheung Yuet-ye, etc., sang my songs, other singers who came to Hong Kong from the Mainland started looking me up to write songs for them. Lee Siu-fong is one of them. In those days, I would be at some song stage every night, chatting with a large group of music industry friends. There were a few of these song stages then, such as Go Sing Cabaret, Lin Heung Cabaret and Tim Nam Cabaret.

Later, I entered the film circle and starting writing Cantonese songs after Ma Si-tsang and his friends formed the Cantonese opera group Chun Sin Mei Opera Troupe and produced the piece *Injustice in the Qing Palace*. [Ed. note: In March 1954, the drama group debuted the piece under the title *Tragedy in the Qing Palace*.] At the time, Ma Si-tsang asked Loo Kah-chi to find him a songwriter. Loo told him there were people who could write songs, but he wasn't sure if they could write Cantonese opera. Ma was decidedly confident, however, that the knowledge of song writing would be enough; everything else such as instructions to performers he could help with.

And that's when Loo brought me into it. Ma Si-tsang sent me to work at a hotel in Wanchai, where he paid the bills for my room, tea and meals. He came to check on my progress every night, and gave me guidance on how to write written instructions to performers on the script and construct each scene to continue the story on. At the time, The Union Film (The Union Film Enterprise Ltd), which Ma was involved with, had already been established. I began to help the company write songs for their films and got to meet even more people from the film circle, and that's how I became involved.

## Writing Musical Films; Spending Every Night on Set

After The Union Film was founded, it made movies such as *Family* (1953), *Spring* (1953) and *Autumn* (1954) that were all very popular. But they thought using songs only to accompany the movie was not enough. Ng Wui had a chat with us, saying that he was thinking about having a whole film of song and music, and asked if we thought that was doable. I said, 'Well of course it is!' At first, it was just the few of us having a casual chat, but what came out of it was *The Precious Lotus Lamp* which became a surprise hit. And from there, we continued making more.





*Drums Along the Battlefield* (1963): Chan Ho-kau as Princess Jade of Zhao and Lam Kar-sing as Ha Ching-wan.



The Skull Valley scene in *The Revenge Battle* (1964): (from left) Kwan Hoi-shan, Poon Yat On, Chan Ho-kau, and Lam Kar-sing.

In the early years of ancient period movies, the actors all used typical movements; they didn't involve any element of Cantonese opera stage action at all. Before *The Precious Lotus Lamp*, there was *Romance at the Western Chamber*, which was already a song and music piece, but Hung Sin Nui's movements were not choreographed in any way. Whereas *The Precious Lotus Lamp* was filmed using full operatic action choreography, opening the door to the 'musical film with gong-and-drum'. Since the movie sold so well, we made two more sequels [Ed. note: Released in 1957 and 1958]. By then, other producers saw how popular this genre was and all rushed to hire opera veterans to help them make movies. As for me, I took part in many films from then on, such as *The Princess's Messenger* (1958).

At some point, someone mentioned trying out a modern look, so Motion Picture and General Investment Co Ltd (MP & GI) Cantonese film division came to me asking if I could write these movies in modern settings. And that's how *My Kingdom for a Husband* (1957) and *The Prince's Romantic Affairs* (1958, produced by Jinmen Film Company) were developed. The actors donned modern day costumes, or even Western garments, yet the songs and music were still in Cantonese opera style. These musical films with gong-and-drum have songs from beginning to end; later on they evolved essentially into documentaries of stage performances, as the entire method of stage performance was moved onto the silver screen. That included, for example, *Drums Along the Battlefield* (aka *Battling Sounds*, 1963) and *The Revenge Battle* (aka *The Pitiless Sword*, 1964), both of which I adapted. [Ed. note: The 'stage performance documentary' referenced here differs from today's general definition of the stage performance documentary.]



Apart from Wong Hok-sing and Lung To, the directors back then only knew how to work a camera, but they had no understanding at all of the distinctive characteristics of Cantonese opera. So they would request us musicians to follow the shoots on set, or find some opera veterans to do it, like when we got Siu Sun Kuen to follow the shoot for *The Precious Lotus Lamp*; he ended up also playing the role of God Yi Long, and later brought on Pak Man-biu to help. The directors never knew much about music either; if they're unclear on a song's phrasing, how could they figure out when to use which camera? That's why we always had to be on set to help. We received every night's schedule and show up for the shoots. It was quite hard work: at 3pm we would get in for the shoot, which would last until sunrise, after which we would go to *yumcha*. We'd finish *yumcha* around 8am, go home and sleep until about 10am, and then get up to eat more, and do more scripting until 3pm, when the schedule would repeat. This went on for a few years, until the popularity of musical films started dwindling in the late 1960s.

Some people blame the oversaturation of these musical films for the genre's downfall—but they can't put it all on us. At the time, we had support from the film company bosses to make films, who would consult us on which opera veterans to hire. And since we had such backing of the bosses, we didn't dare fool around with the movies. Back then, the oversaturation really came from those who only had \$10,000 or \$20,000 of capital in hand and tried to make it work. They could only afford to hire less expensive librettists, and produced what's called 'seven-day fresh' movies. [*Ed. note: This refers to low quality, roughly made films that take just a week to produce.*] Many of the opera veterans only took on these seven-day fresh movies because it was linked to some personal favour they weren't able to turn down. But these films were able to survive because they were musicals with opera stars in them, and so foreign distributors were willing to buy them. Some of them were in fact first sold overseas, and only began filming after receiving the ten, twenty thousand dollars.

In terms of local distribution, in the 1960s there were four Cantonese film theatre circuits, including 'New York and Great World', led by New York and Great World Theatres. Following that there were 'Kam Ling and National', led by Kam Ling and National Theatres; 'Globe and Tai Ping', led by Globe and Tai Ping Theatres, and 'Fourth Circuit', led by Central and Palace Theatres. Each of these four theatres circuits would want at least 16 movies per month, and if there wasn't enough supply, they wouldn't be able to meet the demand. As such, the cinema operators took all the movies being made, whether they were of a quality production or not.



## Most Cantonese Opera Actors Brought Their Long-time Musician-collaborators to Recording Sessions

In the early days, I charged Union Film \$1,500 for each musical screenplay I wrote, which could buy seven or eight taels of gold then. When I became an independent writer later on, I charged \$2,500, which was worth almost 10 taels of gold. My fee wasn't particularly high, and though it certainly wasn't low, I had a lot of expenses. In those few years, my wife had not come to Hong Kong yet, so I just rented a hotel room long term, staying in to write the whole time, instead of at home. My friends would visit me there, and I would always pay for our food and drinks, so my expenses added up.

In those years, when someone launched a movie production, we would introduce many of the musicians to work on the movie. The bosses let us make those hiring decisions; At times, there were some who weren't competent, but I still looked after them and took them on. Later, our band expanded to 27, 28 people, excluding the musicians brought in by the opera stars. Once, someone said to me, "I can't read music, what should I do?" I told him to sit on the side and just pretend to play the instrument, so he got paid anyway. That was the moment when silent was more expressive than all words ever spoken!

Back then, Leung Sing-por wanted to make his daughter Man Lan show respect famous, so he put money in to produce the movie *Many Happy Returns* (1960). Apart from Man Lan, it also starred Sun Ma Si-tsang and Ho Fei-fan. When I heard about this, I said, 'Oh no! How will we do the music?' That's because Sun Ma Si-tsang wanted to bring on musician Wan Chi-chung, who insisted on using his own musicians; while Ho Fei-fan had his own crew as well, which included Chan Siu and Chan Man-tat. Meanwhile, Man Lan was also going to sing, and she had her own musicians, such as Choo Heng Cheong and Chu Ngai-Kong (originally named Chu Chi-hsiang). Of course we had to show respect to the opera veterans. Adding to that chaos, the filmmakers wanted it to be an East-meets-West fusion, so we had to bring on a group of Western musicians and create a film score that spanned from classical Chinese to modern pop. To make this happen, I brought on Joseph Koo, who wasn't famous yet. Just think, four groups of musicians, dozens of individuals all put together. But Leung Sing-por didn't care about the cost of this, since all he wanted was to make Man Lan the next big thing.

The cost of making a movie back then was never set, but at the very least you would need \$70,000 to \$80,000. You could get about \$20,000 to \$30,000 in advance from overseas distributors, and the remainder you could usually borrow from the Hong Kong cinema operators. At the time, you could even borrow money for the actual film reels, so it was really easy for anyone to become the boss of a film company. As for movie investors, there were many different types of people, from businessmen to construction firm owners. If they were industry outsiders, they usually hired a producer to handle the movie. Of course,



there were plenty of official film production companies as well, such as Tai Seng Film Company owned by the Kwan family, which also operated cinemas. [Ed. note: The company was founded by brothers Kwan Kar-pak and Kwan Kar-yu in 1951.] As for Shun Yee Film Co, its boss ran a construction business, while Tai Lung Fung Opera Troupe founder Ho Siu-bo later started making movies as well (after founding Tai Lung Fung Film Co).

This aside, some movie directors also started becoming bosses of their own films, for example Chu Kea, as well as Lee Tit, who made *The Legend of Purple Hairpin* (1959) under his own company (Hawks Film Company). Lee Siu-wan's company (Lux Film Company) was backed by Tai Seng Film Company. He took up screenwriting and his wife Yu Lai-zhen would be the leading lady in the movies. With the support of the cinema operators, he often had new movies on hand. Meanwhile, Fong Yim-fun also ran a company of her own—Zhili Film Company.


## Making Music for *Wuxia* Movies

I worked with many different film companies, so many I can't remember them all. Basically I worked on movies for all four theatre circuits, and I worked with Tai Seng as well, though not many times, because Lee Siu-wan's movies largely filled the demand in their cinemas. And I rarely worked for the so-called 'one-hit companies' [Ed. note: referring to companies that were formed to produce only one film each], which folded after making just one film. At the time I had a strong relationship with a network of people in the film and music industries. When musical films were at their height of popularity, Cantonese opera stage shows plunged in production, because everyone was worried they couldn't sell tickets, or that no opera star would take part especially they would be paid a lot more working in film.

I also worked with Hong Kong Film Company, mainly writing accompanying music for their movies. The company didn't initially come to me, mainly due to the issue of cost; the boss Law Bun thought I was too expensive. Law was a businessman, not from the film industry. He established Hong Kong Film Company with its inaugural production *The Secret Book, Part One* (1961). Law at first assumed songwriting for movies was a very simple task, and offered me about \$100 per song. I was charging \$500 per song then, so I refused. But later, when director Chan Lit-bun failed to find anyone to write music for a film, he came back to me.

He explained that he had two requests for the film's music. One was the accompanying music for the appearance of the 'Ghost King', while the other piece of music was for the monk chanting his prayers, which would be used to highlight his powers. There was even one scene in which the two pieces of music were used in the fight of mystical powers between the two characters! So I told him, 'If you use those people, there's no way they can help you make the music you want. If you don't mind my price tag, come to me any time and I'll help.' He immediately responded that he had already persuaded his boss to hire me. I also said it





wouldn't work with just two or three musicians; just for the power battle scene we used eight *suonas* (Chinese double-reeded horn). The effect we tried to achieve with that was to start off with the sonorous sound of all eight *suonas*, which then slowly became six, before fading into four, then two. The sound goes from strong to weak, and eventually disappears, showing the downfall of the Ghost King; this is music one can only write if there is an understanding of the story. In the end, I helped them record a soundtrack that was distinctly different from what they had before. After Law Bun heard it, he said, 'You bastard really have a style! [Ed. note: Poon's first work for Hong Kong Film Company was on the movie *The Azure Blood and the Golden Pin, Part One* (1963).] After that, the company just came straight to me for its movie music, such as *The Ghost with Six Fingers, Part One* (1965).

## Enjoyed Partnership with Lee Yuen-man for over a Decade

In those days, not many people would write musical scripts and songs; just Lee Yuen-man and I. The other people were either screenwriters or song writers. Because of this, whenever we walked on set, people treated us like directors, bringing us chairs to sit on, while production assistants would fetch us coffee and tea. In return, we gave them \$1.5 for late night snacks or \$2 for a meal.

From the 1950s to the 60s, Lee and I worked together for about 10 years, until we split up around 1962. We had collaborated for a long time, but his business was not doing well, so he suggested we go our separate ways. At the same time, we both had our families with us, which meant we did not need to spend money on renting hotel rooms long term anymore, and went home to write instead. I didn't mind this; I simply thought, nothing lasts forever! As Lee didn't want to write much anymore, I got Pong Chow-wah to help. Pong started off with Kwan Tsi-lung's opera troupe at Lai Chi Kok Amusement Park, so when we gave him some songs to write we didn't really talk about fees. But when payday came, we gave him a hundred dollars or so. He later jumped ship and gradually made a name on his own.

## Understanding Music, Writing and Filming

Nowadays people respectfully call us 'uncle', but in truth, we don't deserve this kind of honour. There's an old Chinese saying about how as long as you can learn the 300 Tang poems by heart, even if you can't recite, you can still steal something out of it. That we can write a lot, and write well, simply comes from the fact that we've done it for so long. We have simply failed enough to succeed. Of course, the experience garnered over time helps us understand what makes a good script, and this isn't easy, because a good film isn't just about development, conflict, climax and closure. As a scriptwriter, there are principles you have to stand by whether it's a historical story, a folktale or a pure creation of the imagination. For example, in writing a historical film, it seems straightforward, as you just need to follow



the one storyline. But how to create a good climax, that requires brains. Or if you want to straighten what path was bent, then you have to straighten it with proper reason. You can write stories like *Guan Yunzhang Battles Yuchi Gong* or even *Gandhi Meets Xi Shi*, that's no problem as long as you can make the logic work.

However if you twist your plot too much, people will criticise your story as gratuitous or over the top. Guan Gong and Yuchi Gong came from wholly different eras, thousands of years apart, how could they have had a battle? So the writer made it a celestial story about Emperor Ming of Tang visiting the Moon Palace, but comes upon Guan Gong guarding the South Heaven Gates, whom refuses to let the Emperor in on the basis that he is a mortal. When the two are arguing, along comes Yuchi Gong, who is a from the Tang dynasty, and tries to explain to Guan Gong that the man he's refusing entry to is the descendant of the Emperor Taizong of Tang, so he should be let in. Guan Gong stands his ground, and so the two fight. A plot twist must be well plotted: a film cannot do without a climax or entertaining elements, but it would do even worse without logic. How you write a story relies on the brains of the screenwriter, but it must be logical.

Becoming a screenwriter, especially for musicals, requires a few qualifications: 1) a foundation in Chinese culture; 2) a gift in music; 3) a director's mind; 4) a producer's intuition. This is because without the cultural learning, one simply cannot write. And if you can write but have no talent in music, you can't write songs. Meanwhile, a director's mind is needed to know how to film the story, which camera angle to use, whether something becomes repetitive. As for a producer's intuition, that comes down to the need to cover costs: how will this movie make money?

The writing and eventual story will certainly differ. For example, when I wrote *The Crab Beauty* (1957), the Shun Yee Film Co's boss asked me to write in a scene where the ship sinks and everyone is overboard. But the cost of that was just too big. For one, that ship is an emperor's ship, it must be magnificent with new coats of paint; and if everyone is to fall overboard, wetting all their costumes, that would be another chunk of the budget gone. In another example, when I wrote *The Romantic Monk* (1956), I had Lam Doi-yuk singing about her voyage to the Ka mansion, how she arrives at the courtyard in a sedan chair. Ho Fei-fan said my one line of lyric cost him \$5,000, because they had to shoot outdoors in Yuen Long for a whole day, with a large group of assistants and baggage porters. And of course, they had to procure a sedan chair. Another line sings about listening to orioles chirping from under the shade of a tree. When they filmed this scene, they let free 500 sparrows, and not a single one of them ended up in frame. So then they got some white pigeons and tied a string to their feet. At the time, they didn't dare change the meaning of what I wrote, and they were willing to give it a big budget since the story was a major one in Ho Fei-fan's repertoire, the film was directed by Chun Kim, and it was a debut film for Yuzhou Film Company.



The poster for *The Romantic Monk* (1956).

## Writing a Song for ‘Eight Peonies’

Back then, any ghost singer we hired was of a high standard. For example, Cheung Ying got Kan Wing-tong as a vocal substitute; Patricia Lam Fung had Chan Wai-ling, aka the Sun Pak Suet-sin, sing for her; and Leung Bik-yuk sang for Tsi Lo Lin. Yu So-chow didn't sing songs on film back then, but she did have Lai Kwan-lin (the wife of producer Wong Tit-hung) dub her dialogue. In fact, Yu So-chow had only ever sung a few lines of Cantonese opera for a fundraiser for the *Wah Kiu Yat Po*. At the time, a reporter asked me to write a song for the ‘Eight Peonies’ (who were stage sisters Yu So-chow, Ng Kwan-lai, Law Yim-hing, Fung Wong Nui, Tang Bik-wan, Yu Lai-zhen, Nam Hung, and Patricia Lam Fung.) It had to be a song for eight people, and I was even asked to write it under the theme of ‘Save the children by Sponsoring their Education’. I told the reporter, ‘Sure, just buy me a ruler first.’ When he asked why, I said I would have to first measure how good each of the peonies was before I decide how many lines to give them. I then added, ‘No matter how I write this, they’re going to fight over it. I know them very well.’ In the end, during rehearsal, the first thing out of Fung Wong Nui was, ‘That’s all I’m singing? They can just do it themselves!’ Tang Bik-wan was also upset, while



Ng Kwan-lai complained that their roles were like ‘warts on a mouse’, meaning there’s simply no way they could get big. As for Yu So-chow, I knew she couldn’t sing Cantonese opera, so I told her to speak in Shanghainese and gave her a few lines of dialogue. In that song, she and Fung Wong Nui played lovers. In my memory, there was only ever this one song that had all eight peonies singing together.

In the film circle, the directors I collaborated more with include Chu Kea, Wong Hok-sing and Fung Chi-kong. Wu Pang was mostly filming Wong Fei-hung movies, and those didn’t have songs! I worked with him on one movie, though—*Mother and Son Met in the Tunnel* (aka *Meeting Mother in the Land of Death*, 1963). In that movie, only two songs were written by me; one sung by Tang Bik-wan, the other sung by Chan Ho-kau.

Back then, someone joked about how Tang Bik-wan’s company (Baobao Film Company) never came to me for songs, because I was too expensive. But one day Tang’s husband Lui Wai-chow invited me to dinner out of the blue. He wanted me to write two songs. I asked, ‘Don’t I cost too much?’ He said, ‘It’s about worth, you’re not expensive. You’ve got the goods!’ He explained the song was for *Mother and Son Met in the Tunnel*, for Tang to sing. And I thought to myself, ‘Ah Bik finally wants to sing my songs!’ Of course, we were friends, so it didn’t matter! I actually ended up writing two songs for the film.

## New Twists for Old Plots Make Great Stories

At the time, among the directors with a sharp eye for detail in terms of directing and framing, Lee Sun-fung and Lee Tit were more outstanding compared with the others. Like Chu Kei—he usually would just start with a long shot, and then push in for a close-up. In *With A Song to Grudge* (aka *Emperor Han Lured by the Romantic Tune*, 1962), you first see the massive golden palace, then all the actors walk in singing, then Lam Kar-sing sits down, and then the camera goes in for a close-up. Every first shot is the same for him.

In terms of actors, the ones from The Union Film were more outstanding. As for Lam Kar-sing, he had great attitude: meticulous, hardworking, willing to put in the effort. He learned his art from Sit Kok-sin, so everyone respected him for that. He learned well from his master, and was thoughtful and diligent in his work.

In terms of personal projects that left an impression—I can’t really remember! There wasn’t any magnum opus to speak of. I recall in the early days a lot of musicals were adapted by me, such as *Sweet Girl* (1959), *The Moonlight and Pipa of the Borderland* (1959) and *Madame Wild Rose* (aka *The Hero and the Concubine*, 1962), which I will say was done pretty well. As for later movies, such as *The Country and a Beauty* (aka *The Empire and the Beauty*, 1964) and *With A Song to Grudge* (1962), I put more time and effort into writing these. *The Story of Heroine Fan Lei-fa* (aka *Fan Lei-fa, the Female General*, 1968) even had a big band with dozens of musicians as accompaniment, starring Yu Kai and Connie Chan Po-chu. It was the last film I wrote the screenplay for.





The Demonic Formation battle in *The Story of Heroine Fan Lei-fa* (1968): Connie Chan Po-chu (middle left) and Shum Chi-wah (middle right).

It's hard to sum up in a short sentence the reasons for the decline of musical films and operatic films. But the biggest problem was if they didn't sell overseas, then you couldn't make the movie. That aside, the audience got tired of them after watching so many. If you were to shoot another one now, it would be hard to say whether it could be a box office hit. It's too difficult: there's a lack of screenwriters and the plots are old now. As for trying to give old plots a new twist, you'd have to put a lot of effort into thinking up a way to make it work. I really admire Nam Hoi Sap-sam Long's perspective on this: he says today's screenwriters think only the kaleidoscope of modern day stories are good stories, while classics are not. But he disagrees with this, saying that the audience wants something they don't know, something they haven't seen. And you can see modern day issues everywhere today; there's no need to stage a play to show people that. What the audience want is to see what life was like back in the day; when today's people see shows about that, that's how they learn what it was like then. Taking old stories and refreshing them with new elements of entertainment can make for great scripts. At the same time, a good script also needs to be able to underline the theme.




## Starting a Career in Film Music, and Going Back into Stage Opera

Working as a screenwriter was no doubt just to make a living. But I did enjoy it; after all I learned some music in school and I loved Cantonese opera. When I was around 10 years old, I would sneak out of home to go watch operas nearby—back then Mak Bing-wing was performing nearby. I didn't have money for a ticket so I would just wait around until the show had only an hour left to go, and the person at the door would let those waiting in to watch the rest of it.

When I first came to Hong Kong as a kid, we would go to Ko Shing Theatre to watch the Five Kings. Who were the Five Kings? *wenwusheng* (civil and military male), Sit Kok-sin; *xiaoseng* (young civil male), Pak Kui-wing; *wusheng* (military male), Leng Wing; *chousheng* (male clown), Liu Hap-wai; and *huadan* (young female), Siu Lai-cheung. They sang at Ko Shing Theatre, where it cost \$3.6 for front row seats. We bought the cheapest tickets available, for 20 cents a seat on the third floor. I was already interested in Cantonese opera back then.

I first started writing accompanying songs for movies, and later when full musicals became popular in the film industry, I started adapting Cantonese opera stage scripts for movies. I was so busy writing screenplays and musical movies that I never had time to write operas. But there was a real lack in writing talent for Cantonese opera at the time, as Tong Tik-sang had passed away and Lee Siu-wan had no time; so there was only Leung Shan-yan holding the fort. When Tai Lung Fung Opera Troupe was founded, Tsui Tsi-long started writing stage plays, but he too later passed away. Ho Siu-bo had on hand several opera troupes, but suffered from a lack of plays, and so he invited me to help. At first I told him straight up that I didn't know how to write Cantonese operas, but he insisted, and even brought me out to tea for a chat with Lam Kar-sing, Chu Sau-ying and Chan Kam-tong. I said no again when they continued to try and talk me into it, explaining that I didn't know the rules of opera and that I wasn't even familiar with the scenes and sets. But they insisted that they would help me, so I finally agreed to try. My first play was written for Lam Kar-sing, *The Pavilion Above the Pond Gets the First Moonlight*. [Ed. note: Hing Sun Sing Opera Troupe debuted this piece at Ko Sing Theatre on 16 November 1964.]

Of course I was in charge of coming up with the plot, but as for how each scene took place, I needed their help since I wasn't familiar with the structures of Cantonese opera. With film you can use different camera angles and editing techniques to change scenes, but it's different for a stage opera, which involves changing costumes and make-up, etc. After the scenes were set, I would then write the songs, and let them take a look. If there was something not quite right, they would guide me to the right place. Since Ho Siu-bo was running quite a few troupes, and there weren't enough people to write plays, I continued writing more.



Cantonese opera pieces were at the time around four hours long, generally split into six scenes. But the time it took for writing a play greatly varied; sometimes if I was stuck on a plot twist, it could take months to finish. I was writing both screenplays and stage plays at the same time, but there weren't so many stage plays I had to write in a year; opera troupes mostly just performed new pieces at the new year, early summer and in autumn.

In 1971, I stopped writing even Cantonese operas, and decided to retire. But then Chan Kam-tong asked me for help again, because he had founded the Kam Tim Fa Opera Troupe and wanted me to give his disciples some support. So I wrote *The Battle of the Qiu River* for them. Originally the story was called *Vengeance in the Battle of Qiu River*, but I changed it to *The Battle of the Qiu River*. [Ed. note: Kam Tim Fa Opera Troupe debuted the piece on 8 June, 1973 at Sunbeam Theatre, under the name *Vengeance Resolved in the Qiu River Battle*.] In 1973, I officially retired.

(Translated by Diane To)

# Choo Heng Cheong

## Between the Strings



Date: 1 August 2018

Venue: Hong Kong Film Archive

Interviewers: Leonard Wong Shing-chuen, Yuen Tsz-ying  
and May Ng

Collated by Wong Ha-pak

Choo Heng Cheong (aka Chu Hing-cheung) was born in Malaya (now Malaysia) into a Cantonese music family. By the age of 13 he was already the music leader. He began learning to play musical instruments at a young age, and is especially adept at the violin, *guzheng*, *erhu*, *zhutiqin* and saxophone. He plays both Chinese and Western instruments, with a repertoire spanning from ancient to modern music. In 1959, Choo moved to Hong Kong and immediately began working in Cantonese opera musical film productions, doing singing practice with opera stars, providing melodic accompaniments and directing them in singing tunes. From his debut piece *Butterfly and Red Pear Blossom* (1959) to *The Legend of Purple Hairpin* in 1977, he has worked on almost 40 films. Maestro Chu is well past 90 years old now, yet his memories of the past decades of work are still clear. During the interview, he described in detail how he began a career in music before the war and how he came to Hong Kong subsequently to further develop his profession. From the stage to film to albums, he switched deftly between different media as a musician. In particular, he contributed hugely in adapting Cantonese operas into musical films—when compared to creating a show for stage, the two modes of expression are definitely two poles apart. It involves first recording the songs, then filming the action, and the music must match the film's rhythm, so that the opera stars are able to belt out real emotions to fit the roles. After eight decades of honing his musical skills, Choo continues today to guide the younger generations in their musical journeys, while pushing himself to continue improving.





A photo taken with his eldest brother Chu Ngai-kong (right) and second eldest brother Chu Siu-cheung (left).

## Growing up Around Opera Troupes

On 11 September, 1927, I was born in the staff quarters of a cinema in Ipoh, Malaya's state of Parek. My family is native to Guangdong Dongguan. There were seven children in our family, and I was number seven. My eldest and second sisters were both in opera, while my third sister is Chu Sau-ying. Number four was my brother Chu Chi-hsiang, who later took the stage name Chu Ngai-kong. The fifth was again a sister—Chu Sau-hing, and the sixth another brother—Chu Siu-cheung. Then came me. We grew up around an opera troupe. My uncle Chu Hung was a musician, a famous *sanshou* (third leading musician). My father Chu Ga-lok was also a *sanshou*, playing the two-stringed *erxian* and the big cymbal.

My elder sisters started playing *meixiang* (supporting female roles) from a young age, and the boys played the gongs and cymbals; our whole family had to work to make a living. My sworn father knew how to play a lot of ancient instruments and he taught them all to my big brother. When I was about 13, my big brother then taught me everything he learned from our sworn father. That is, to sing *daqiang* (a vocal style which originates from the *yiyangqiang* of Jiangxi), to study the set pieces of *Joint Appointment of a Minister of Six States* and *A Fairy Delivers Her Son to the Mortal Father*. At that time, to work in music you had to know all these ancient music styles and pieces.

I started working before I even graduated primary school. In 1935, Pak Yuk-tong, Chan Gong Nü and Tam Sau-zhen came to perform in Malaya. I was about nine then, when I was hired for a bit part as Pak Yuk-tong's minion. Around 1936 to 1937, Luo Pinchao (aka Lo Ban-chiu) formed his own Chao Hua Opera Troupe and toured to Malaya, where I also joined him on stage. As for becoming a musician, informally it began around 1936, when I was still studying at private school. Someone needed hands to play the gongs and clappers in a small town's performance, so I was roped in to do it for about a fortnight. I missed a lot of school, so I ended up studying very little. At the end of 1939, when I was about 13, I started leading the musicians, mainly playing the violin and *erxian*, but I also played some wind instruments, such as the bamboo flute. At the time, among the *wenwusheng* (civil and military male) actors who came over from Hong Kong, I got to work with Sun Ma Si-tsang. I also worked with performers such as Yee Chau-shui, Tong Pak-ming, etc.



## Arriving in Hong Kong and Joining the Film Industry

I was in Ipoh in 1941 when the Japanese military invaded, and there was no more opera. Later, to calm people's minds, the Japanese set up a temporary puppet government and reopened the amusement parks, which ran opera shows. I went back to work at an amusement park, both at the tea stands and the opera troupes. Because of the war, some Hong Kong opera stars such as Chan Pei Mui stayed in Malaya for some time, while some singers such as Tsui Lau-sin went there to perform. In the 1950s, I was already working in Singapore, which basically had three 'worlds': Happy World, Great World and New World. [Ed. note: All three were amusement parks that ran opera shows.] I worked at Happy World, and when Sit Kok-sin came to perform in 1952, I had the chance to work with him.

I didn't move to Hong Kong until 1959, though my brother was already working there at the time. I had actually worked with many Hong Kong opera stars before then, and they had often said to me, 'Ah Fun (nickname), you are great at your music, why don't you go to Hong Kong? Your brother is already there.' There was actually a political factor to this, since only people aged 30 or above were allowed to move to Hong Kong. I was about 31 when I went. After I arrived, my brother said he was creating music for a movie and told me to practise the *guzheng* for it. So I practised every day, teaching myself for only about half a year before we recorded it. That was the movie, *Butterfly and Red Pear Blossom*, the first Hong Kong film I was involved with.

Afterwards, I played a lot of music for movies, such as *The Stubborn Generations* (1960) and *Rescue at the West River* (1960), for which I mainly played the *erhu*. In *Uproar in Jade Hall* (1967) I played the violin. In reality, I had to play all kinds of instruments. I had a soprano saxophone; they are usually straight in shape, but mine was curved like the other saxes. It was as small as a lobster and I played it just like a 'pipe' (*houguan*). I used it in several films, mostly for older styles of music, such as the later *The Legend of Purple Hairpin* (1977).

## Seamless Collaboration with Sin Fung Ming

In 1960 I began playing music for the Sin Fung Ming Opera Troupe, working on album recordings as well. In *Princess Cheung Ping* (aka *The Flower Princess*) (album released in 1961), I played the *guzheng*; the film version (1959) had already been released by the time I'd arrived in Hong Kong so I was not a part of that. My brother played the *erxian*, I played the *zhutiqin* and Uncle B (Wan Chi-chung) played the violin. Not long after I joined, Uncle B moved to the US, so the record company often reached out to me to play the violin and *erhu* for them, such as in *The Reincarnation of Red Plum* and *The Legend of the Purple Hairpin* [Ed. note: The two albums were released in 1963 and 1966 respectively], though I also occasionally played the *guzheng*.



A photo taken in 1947.



A photo taken with Chan Siu-fung (left) and Leung So-kam (middle) in 1951.



Movies by Yam Kim-fai and Pak Suet-sin always involved me, thanks to Sister Pak who made the order to have me onboard to do the music in any movie starring her. Connie Chan Po-chu and Lam Kar-sing also specifically requested to have me in their movies too. Lam Kar-sing would call and ask if I had received the full deposit, and only when I said I had, would he agree to the movie. It was like that back then, they would ask if I was doing the music for the movie, and only if I was, would they take it on.

I was also part of the movie *The Tragedy of a Poet King* (1968) which had hired a few songwriters, including the musician, Yu Lun. Later, Yip Shiu-tuck's song 'Journey to Surrender' became really popular after it was released in an album, so they brought Yip back to help adapt *The Tragedy of a Poet King* into Cantonese opera. This was a case in which the movie came first, before the opera. In the 1970s, I took part in *Laugh in the Sleeve* (1975), *Princess Chang Ping* (aka *Princess Cheung Ping*, 1976) and *The Legend of Purple Hairpin*.

## Playing Accompaniment on Set and Music Dubbing

At the time, I began to help actors rehearse their songs. One is Law Yim-hing, who would talk to me after receiving her script. She would say, 'Ah Fun, the movie has a "new saint"!', which meant there was a new melody in it. After receiving the script, I would help think about how the songs should be sung, so we didn't have to waste too much time during the recordings. Before filming, we would record the actors singing first, and then shoot the actions.

Previously, recording sessions would involve a microphone being hung up in the middle of the studio, which would capture the audio of the entire group. If there is a big choral part, it could become pretty funny because, for example, Poon Yat On was often told his voice stood out too much, so we would have to re-record the segment. Even after another recording, his voice still stood out more than anyone else. He would say, 'You're joking! I was already being very "quiet".' Even when he tones down his voice, his voice is still highly visible.

We would also play accompaniment on set. For example, during the shoot when it reaches the line, 'I'm heading there now, I'm going to war now', the actors on sets would then act and play out the fight scenes; and when it comes to the songs, they would play the previously recorded soundtracks. During the first line of the lyrics, the actors would be given hint ahead about the second line, one after another, etc.—it was really easy to shoot and totally different from stage shows as the film sets are extremely quiet. When you get to the songs you play the recordings.

When the scene involves actions and steps—for example, if the actors are required by the script to walk towards the door—the musicians would start playing the percussion, leading the actors towards the door. People in the industry term it 'scene tailing'. When it's time for a song or *shubailan* (recitation of pater speech), we stop the percussion and go back to playing the recordings. And if shortly after they need more percussion, we would re-continue before the action starts again on set. That's how we filmed these movies.





In 1954, Hung Sin Nui (back row, 7th left) went to Malaya to perform live in conjunction with the screening of her film. Others in the photo include Chu Ngai-kong (back row, 6th left), Chu Siu-cheung (back row, 8th left), Fan Chung-kau (back row, 5th right), Sin Ying-nung (back row, 1st right), Choo Heng Cheong (front row, 3rd left), and Leung Tsat-so (front row, 4th left).




Yam Kim-fai (2nd right) and Pak Suet-sin have always thought highly of Choo Heng Cheong (left). The photo is of him playing the *guzheng* at the rehearsal of the play *The Reincarnation of Red Plum* for the Sin Fung Ming Opera Troupe.



A photo taken with long-term collaborator Lam Kar-sing (right) in 1960.



A photo taken in 1965 with Law Yim-hing (right), with whom he frequently practised singing.



Another example would be the snow scenes, and *pipa* music is used as accompaniments, which in the Cantonese opera is termed '*diaoping*' [Ed. note: Certain insiders of the film circle are of the view that the technical term originates from English 'dubbing']. The music is added on top afterwards. During audio recording, film clips would be shown to the musicians, while the director instructs them where to start playing, when to pause and at which point the notes ends. That's how I would follow directions and end the notes at the appropriate time.

At the time, I also made music for Mandarin films. For example, during a horseracing scene, I rehearsed first with the conductor. After counting '1, 2, 3, 4...' the race started, and we had to finish in one take. You knew that there would be no second take. I had to end the notes as soon as I saw the conductor's concluding hand gesture. The music was to complement the visuals, which was called 'incidental music'. In another circumstance, when the *huadan* (young female) has to play the *guzheng* but can't actually play it, we film her silently playing; as the musician, I would then play according to her hand movements. I would simply 'tail' the scene. When she plucks the strings, I follow. That's how a song is produced. As long as she looks the part, I could make the music work to suit the atmosphere.

I also made music for *huangmei* opera films, such as those starring Ivy Ling Po and Betty Loh Ti. We often played for up to six hours, and that would be almost enough time to finish recording music of one film. The best was something like *The Love Eterne* (1963). Its music is lengthy but repetitive, which at the time was a popular trend in film music. Ivy sang her own songs, while Betty had a ghost singer. If the actors couldn't sing very well, they would arrange a ghost singer—who would record the songs to be played out during the filming.

## Adjusting Music and *Paichang* (Formulaic Scenes) for Films

Although opera stars all had training in on-stage feats, there would still be a martial arts coordinator to direct the positioning and movements if there was a fight scene in the film, all taken very seriously. As for all the basic *paichang* (formulaic scenes), the actors would handle them at their discretion, unless there was some special arrangement, such as the need to 'turn' more at this point, or more percussion at that point, etc. Basically it was very simple. For example, there was a *xiaoqu* (short tune) in *Drums Along the Battlefield* (aka *Battling Sounds*, 1963), which came about as they wanted to add a *xiaoqu* to accompany the actor's swordplay scene. Then I would be there to assist creatively.

Back in the day when we did the traditional operas, at night we at most would play *wenluo* (a kind of percussive instrument); the matinee programme would include the *Jianghu shiba ben* ('Eighteen Plays of Cantonese Opera')—the earliest repertoire that was frequently performed—which played *gaobianluo* (a kind of percussive instrument) instead. Sit Kok-sin brought in the *jingluobo* (Peking opera gongs and cymbals). Nowadays fight scenes in Cantonese opera mostly employ the acrobatics and martial arts style of Peking opera,



specifically the Northern school techniques; rarely do you see the Southern style being performed, and Peking style *luogu* (percussion instruments) are used as accompaniment—unless it's in the *Dawang* opera style, then they would use Cantonese opera percussion *gaobianluo* to go with Southern style fighting. This is similar to the usage in *paichangxi*.

There are some *paichang* that are exceptionally dull, so instead of following the full length of the stage shows, they would change it up in the film version. During shooting, original song rhythms would remain unchanged unless the director uses his discretion to make demands, such as: 'If you sing in this way, it will waste a lot of film. Can you sing faster, or cut out a couple of lines?' Likewise, short tunes in Cantonese opera are usually rearranged for movies. For example, *Love in the Red Chamber* (1968) originally didn't have the song *The Chance Meeting When Plucking the Prunes*; the whole scene was supposed to be *koubai* (plain speech) only. When making the album, taking the consideration that the audience wanted to hear songs, they felt the need to turn the *koubai* into a more musical scene. In film, there were alterations, especially with the timing—often they would have to sing faster.


However, some gong-and-drum scenes in the Cantonese opera films, such as *The Great Red Robe* (aka *The Red Robe*, 1965), and scenes of major court trials, such as *The Three Trials of Yuk Tong Chun* (aka *The Three Tests of Yu Tangchun*, 1955) are really treasures. The later generations should really take time to witness the feats of the opera veterans: such as the number of stairs they climbed, from which direction they descend, how they stepped into position and conducted the trial. A lot of these traditional 'routines' are now a lost art, but were fortunately captured in films. Films are the only medium through which we can actually be given a second chance to witness all these.

## Unison Between Music and Atmosphere

We musicians are very precise in terms of our choice of instruments. In traditional *paichang*, we used the "'hard bowed" ensemble', such as *erxian*, *tiqin*, *gaobianlou*, *houguan*, small size *houguan*, all are ancient instruments. For example, songs in *The Legend of Purple Hairpin* used different kinds of music, which the audience perhaps overlook when watching the movie. When the film arrives at the tune 'Flower Moon Light of Spring River', there were melodic accompaniments using *guzheng*, *pipa*, *nanhu* and *xiao*.

My crew of musicians included Kan Wing-tong, Lee So, Tang Chi-ming, Ho Hoi-ki, and Law Ching-ting. At the time Law was the most popular, being the only one who could play the *pipa*. Compared with the instrumental sections (the accompanying band) for stage operas, fewer musicians are used for the movies. For a successful movie, however, music is crucial. In Cantonese opera, traditional music takes the 'genre' seriously; if it's a sad scene, there can't be chirpy music, since the atmosphere and the scene have to complement each other. It's the same with albums as with movies. Even though it's pre-recorded, when we record, the emotions are all there—the singers will sing their hearts out until tears streams down their faces, so as to breathe life into the character. For example, if it's a torture scene in jail, then they have to be able to sing the pain out, otherwise it wouldn't be realistic. Or if the character is starving, then they have to speak in a weak whisper. That's how it's performed.





It's true that music has made a lot of progress nowadays. It used to be that those playing the "hard bowed" ensemble' would just play the same until the end. But in the late 1940s when the *guzheng* and *pipa* were introduced into Guangdong music, it really enriched the whole scene. Guangdong music really encompasses everything: if something works in Chaozhou music, it will get absorbed; whatever works in Mandarin songs, we'll take it up. In the later days, a lot of new *xiaoqu* (short tunes) emerged, such as Wong Yuet-sang's little *xiaoqu*. Those are so wonderful to the ears, like 'Swallow in the Snow', and 'Blooming Beauty by the Silver Pond' (later transformed into 'Lotus Fragrance').

*Love in the Red Chamber* (1968), in which I took part in, starred Connie Chan Po-chu and Nam Hung. I used all the musical numbers from the opera in the film. Connie had trained with me since she was young. Her original teacher was a singer, but Yam Kim-fai told her, 'This style of singing is not right for opera. You should go to Ah Fun.' When working on songs with me, Yam had always said that the pacing of opera had to be learned from a master within the industry. Methods of melisma taught by others just aren't suitable for Cantonese opera.

Fung Bo-bo and Nancy Sit Kar-yin also practised with me singing from the musical score; Josephine Siao Fong-fong did as well, but less so. I have clear memories of her working on *Hu-Du-Men* (1996), in which she had a few lines of *shibai* (versified speech) to read. She came to my home, carrying a sword, saying she wanted to learn a few lines of *shibai*, like those of *yingxiongbai* (heroic speech) So I taught her how to say it literally, but she said, 'No, I have to really learn this; the use of voice is different.' She meant that there is a difference when one uses their voice without engaging the diaphragm. She had to sing it while performing a sword dance. To be able to do both properly, she had to engage her 'chi' in the diaphragm. I took the liberty to teach her how to say her few lines that way.

## On Remuneration

In the early days of making music for movies, I was paid per movie. For interlude songs in a film, for example, a few short tunes, each musician would get \$40 and we would usually be done in an hour or so. If we worked the whole musical film, the band leader would get \$70, and the other musicians would get \$60.

In the 1960s, it became an hourly wage, thanks to Brother Cheung (Sun Ma Si-tsang). For one of his movies, we agreed to show up at 2pm, but he still hadn't shown up at 8pm. After he finally appeared, it took just 15 minutes to finish. So our pay became hourly. Typically we earned \$10 or so for an hour, though the pay was better for Mandarin films. For example, *Huangmei diao* films for the Shaw Brothers would earn us \$20 an hour. And that doubled after midnight, which at the time was incredible pay.



He began helping Connie Chan Po-chu (left) with vocal training shortly after settling in Hong Kong. The photo was taken at the rooftop of Chan Fei-nung's Cantonese opera academy in 1960.



He was involved in the music production for *Love in the Red Chamber* (1968) starring Connie Chan Po-chu. The photo is a film still: (from left) Nam Hung and Connie Chan Po-chu.



## Even Veterans Must Learn

I have had the chance to work with Sit Kok-sin in the 1950s. He was always punctual, memorised all the songs, and was a strong actor, so working with him was really a great experience. For example, in a scene where someone would take a drink to honour him, even though there was no wine, all his movements were meticulously acted out as though he was doing it for real. At the same time, he was familiar with all the *huadan*'s repertoire as well.

I remember in 1984, Sun Ma Si-tsang picked Victoria Tseng Hui to play opposite him in an opera for his troupe. She was so scared of him that she always kept her distance. Sun Ma said to her, 'Come closer, and when I sing, just look at me. You can do anything to my face. Don't think of me as Sun Ma, think of me as your husband.' Later on, because she had rhythmic problems in her singing, he told her, 'Forget everything you've learned. Now that you're working with me, you need to go take classes with Ah Fun.' So she brought some scores to my home for lessons. She had just arrived from the Mainland, and said she couldn't afford my \$500-per-class fee. I said, 'Don't worry, just come anyway.' And so I taught her to sing for free.

Among the film directors, Wong Hok-sing had a background in opera; he was better at directing those films, because he was familiar with the sets and scenes. So if scenes needed to be cut, usually he would be the go-to guy. If an opera needs to be cut shorter, it takes some skills, and many filmmakers conducted their own research. For example, some would learn from Western movies; Uncle Por (Leung Sing-por) definitely watched a lot of Western movies. This is the powerful thing about Guangdong people—whatever they deem suitable, they'll adopt it for their own use. Sometimes being too conservative is just not helpful.

To make a movie, there are a lot of areas that require thorough consideration. The actors and directors all have their own opinions, so we have to gather all of it and work together. When Lam Kar-sing started putting a movie together, he would already have an idea of what he wants, but he would still seek views from others, gathering ideas and writing them down. This is good move; artists should do this, rather than stubbornly stick to their own ideas. For example, some people told me, I play so much music, but if I don't scrutinise my own work, there could be areas in which I've become rough without realising it. So now I always ask, 'Ah Chuen (Leonard Wong Shing-chuen), did I play too deafening the other day?' Who cares how big a star you are, you still have to watch other people perform. Whether it's a good performance or not, there is always something to learn from it. I enjoy watching foreign musicians play solos, and how they can make such beautifully sonorous music. When I get home I'll pick up my own violin and try things out. There's no end point in art, you have to keep reassessing yourself and learn to listen.



## A Whole Family of Performers

My sister Sau-ying had been playing female supporting role in Cantonese opera since she was little, so how come she became so good at playing cross-dressing male roles later? At the time there was a troupe lacking in actors, and she was asked to play the 'Bandit King'. She said she didn't know how, so the troupe leader taught her and she continued on. After gaining all that experience, she became well versed in both male and female roles. It's just like us musicians; no one plays just one instrument. If you want to play the *suona*, then you learn from the band's seniors all the tricks. That's the key.

Sau-ying came to Hong Kong already in 1948 and later went on a performing tour in Vietnam and Malaya, until she returned to Hong Kong in 1962. When Poon Yat On passed away, Hing Sun Sing Opera Troupe needed someone to play the *chousheng* (male clown role), so I said to Hung Tau Tsi (the wife of Lam Kar-sing), 'Do you dare? My elder sister can do it.' My sister started off playing *chousheng*, but from then on people just kept asking her to play the same role. She also worked in films, such as in the movie *Rose As a Go-Between*, starring Nam Hung and Chong Suet-kuen. [Ed. note: It referred to the film released in 1965 under the name *Double Weddings* (aka *Let's Get Married*), which was adapted from a Ping opera titled *Rose As a Go-Between*.] Later she joined Chor Fung Ming Cantonese Opera Troupe because Chor Fung Ming was touring in the States without Leung Sing-por—perhaps Leung was busy—so they asked my sister to play the role as his substitute. She had seen him act before, and just followed his style; she was able to learn because of her solid foundation.

Elder brother Chi-hsiang was very studious, and changed his name to Ngai-kong to motivate himself to reach for more. He worked very hard to learn all the time, and there was never any moment to spare between practicing the piano, violin, wind instruments. He even sifted through old records to figure out the songs. His brain was filled with music, and not only was he fluent in ancient music, modern music and Western music, he was also able to integrate them to create new melodies. Just give him a desk and he can write new music. It was Lee So who later encouraged him to start writing songs, and his debut piece was *Dream of the West Chamber*, with lyrics written by Tong Tik-sang.

As for lengthier short tunes, I have to sing my praise for my elder brother Ngai-kong. It's very difficult to write lengthy short tunes, it's a lot more than a few lines, and most amazingly, he managed to finish a whole tune in a single night. For example, when he wrote the theme song to the *Favours, Hatred and Endless Love of the Phoenix Chamber* (aka *The Princess in Distress*), if he finished it too soon, Fung Wong Nui would say, 'Ah Dai, is this something





Chu Ngai-kong composed 'Barbarian Song of the Foreign Land/ Barbarian Song of Mongolia' for the Cantonese opera play *Favours, Hatred and Endless Love of the Phoenix Chamber*, which premiered at Hong Kong City Hall in 1962. The photo is of Choo Heng Cheong (left) and his eldest brother Chu Ngai-kong (right).

perfunctory, convenient and lazily made?' Who would have guessed that after the song was released, everyone was singing it because of its catchiness. He also wrote songs for Sin Fung Ming Opera Troupe's *New Legend of the White Snake*, as well as Hing Sun Sing Opera Troupe's *Battling in Thundering Drumming and Airs of Barbaric Pipes*. As for my second eldest brother Chu Siu-cheung, he was skilled as a *zhangban* (principal percussionist); when he grew up, he also played the saxophone, *suona* and the three-stringed *sanxian*, though he did not write any songs.

(Translated by Diane To)

# Yuen Siu-fai

## On the Categorisation of Cantonese Opera Films



Date: 27 July 2018

Venue: Hong Kong Film Archive

Interviewers: Yuen Tsz-ying, May Ng

Collated by: Hui Pui-lam

Born in 1945, famed Cantonese opera artist Yuen Siu-fai made his debut in films as a child prodigy at the tender age of seven. During his film career, he worked with numerous famous Mandarin and Cantonese film directors including Doe Ching, Griffin Yue Feng, Wu Pang, Lee Tit, Ng Wui, Chun Kim and Yeung Kung-leong. In addition to films, Yuen was also active in television and radio. He joined the Television Broadcasts Limited (TVB) in the 1970s, and was featured in the household variety shows such as 'Enjoy Yourself Tonight'. Since the 1980s, Yuen became host of Cantonese opera programmes at the Radio Television Hong Kong (RTHK). During his rich and prolific career spanning more than six decades, Yuen remains passionate and dedicated to Cantonese opera.

Since a youngster, Yuen became the disciple of his first master, the male *huadan* (young female) actor Sun Ting Heung Yiu (aka New Ting Heung-yiu). As an established child star, he continued to hone his crafts under the tutelage of masters Leng Siu-fung and Simon Yuen Siu-tin. Yuen became a disciple of the renowned opera star Mak Bing-wing at age 16, and worked with numerous Cantonese opera masters. Yuen previously distinguished the three stages of progress in Chinese opera: heritage, development and creations. As he established the Group of Hong Kong Experimental Cantonese Opera with Yau Sing-po and Leung Hon-wai in 1971, it was a progressive step towards both creations and heritage. The group introduced diversity and different genres of repertoires to the Cantonese opera circle, which was at the time dominated by the romantic love genre focused almost solely on romance between young scholars and beautiful females. During the heydays of Cantonese opera films in Hong Kong between the 1950s and 60s, Yuen starred in many of those films. As a veteran knowledgeable in both Cantonese opera and films, Yuen has substantial insights into the definitions of Cantonese opera films, the interactions between Cantonese opera and films, as well as film being a medium to pass on the heritage of Cantonese operatic arts. Let's hear from Yuen.



Yuen Siu-fai portraying the titular character in the Cantonese opera play *The Death of Zhou Yu*.



Yuen Siu-fai portraying Lu Shike in the Cantonese opera play *Tomb of the Fragrant Gown*.

**Q: How do you define Cantonese opera films?**

**A:** There are over 300 genres of Chinese operas still extant. As for categorisation, the main criterion is the dialect. We are performing Cantonese operas, which are operas sung in the dialect of Guangdong (Canton). Within the Guangdong province, there are also Chaozhou opera, Hoi Luk Fung operas (*Baizi* and *Zhengzi* operas sung in the 'official dialect' of the Central plains in the areas of Haifeng and Lufeng), *Han* operas and *Xiqin* Operas. Since Cantonese operas need more cast/crew members, and exert a wider influence (even to Guangxi), it becomes the representative genre for the entire Guangdong province and was identified as 'Cantonese opera'. Essentially speaking, there were no operas from Guangdong in its earliest days. Our early operas originated from elsewhere and were not sung in Cantonese until later.

The two major systems of *banqiang* musical structure, *bangzi* and *erhuang*, form the backbone of Cantonese opera. Therefore, some may label a film as Cantonese opera film if there are *luogu* (gong-and-drum) music, *erhuang*, or tunes sung in *zhongban*. For the average audience, films with elements of Cantonese opera were typically regarded as 'Cantonese opera films'. However, the Cantonese opera world will not readily classify films with some gong-and-drum music here and there and a segment of *erhuang* as 'Cantonese opera films'.

I am of the opinion that Chinese opera films could be categorised as a film genre. Films with stronger elements of Chinese opera could be called Chinese opera films, such as *Huangmei diao* opera and Chaozhou opera films. They simply originated from different provinces and were sung with different dialects. If a Chinese opera film includes elements of Cantonese opera such as *bangzi* or *erhuang*, it could be called a Cantonese opera film and I am not against such labelling. However, the line distinguishing whether a film is a Cantonese opera film or not could be blurry.

**Q: What are some of the further sub-categorisations under Cantonese opera films?**

**A:** In my opinion, Cantonese opera films could be further categorised into musical films and musical films with gong-and-drum. However, the statement about Hong Kong having stage documentary is not very well-grounded. Musical films refers to having Cantonese



Yuen Siu-fai as Nazha in his child star days.




A photo of Yuen Siu-fai's character in the film *Palace* (1961).

opera elements in their singing parts, such as having a segment of *muyu* or *gunhua* singing, or traditional *xiaoqu* (short tunes)—but are filmed without gong and drum music. It is similar in nature with other musical films and should therefore be classified as such. An example would be a film not adapted from Chinese operas; the plot and dialogue are already in place and the film features famous Cantonese opera artists. Some investors may consider it a good idea to shoot a musical similar to a Cantonese opera, and include some singing passages. There are many such musical films. Musical films with *luogu* are literally musical films with singing performances accompanied by gongs and drums. The actors perform with *shenduan* (stylised movements) similar to performing in a Chinese opera, even if they are in Western-style costumes. This genre is closer to Cantonese operas and the majority of such films are in period costumes. There is another category—excerpt performances are inserted into films that contain Cantonese opera elements. The inserted excerpt performances are literally stage documentary as they are authentic stage performances. These films could be categorised as films with Cantonese opera elements.

**Q:** Do you think there are stage documentaries in Hong Kong?

**A:** If we are speaking about Cantonese films from Hong Kong, I have never seen a formal stage documentary. There are certainly numerous Cantonese opera films with elements of Cantonese opera. However, a true stage documentary should meet the following three criteria: having a dustpan-shaped three-sided set; the camera position within a field of 180° with no reverse cut; and that the actor's actions, choreographed movements, *koubai* (plain speech) and singing should be in authentic Chinese opera style. Every single detail on stage is to be captured. There are several reasons for my statement on Hong Kong having no stage documentary. First, Cantonese operas during





the 1950s and 60s tend to be over four hours in length. As this is too long for films, the work will be trimmed by the film director and screenwriter prior to shooting. Therefore, the film script is all but certain to be different from the stage version. The second factor is the director's approach. The director may have particular ideas after reading the screenplay: 'The film is good, but this scene is unreasonable and I want to change it.' Some changes are even contrary to the original opera in nature. In addition, film bosses may think that some elements have box office appeal and request to have them incorporated into the screenplay.

In addition to script changes, the stage design and costumes in films are different as well. Many film directors and producers consider stage sets to be simple and primitive. How could a palace be so small? A gold and majestic palace is built on set instead. However, how could a Chinese opera actor walk on the set with proper Chinese opera footwork? The actor walks into the majestic palace with a normal stride, yet sings in authentic operatic style afterwards. This is somewhat strange for the audience. There are also demands from the director in filming. The actor may have finished performing a segment of *gunhua* singing with spirit which is abruptly followed by movie dialogues like 'Have you had your meal yet today?' and 'No, I just finished drinking tea.' The atmosphere is extremely different when compared to the stage.

The *gongjia* (feats) and hand gestures in these films are not identical with those on stage even if the film is adapted from classic Cantonese opera excerpts. Films need to take into account camera angles, and each film director may have different sentiments towards Cantonese opera, opening up to different interpretations on the same work. Taking films adapted from Tai Lung Fung Opera Troupe's repertoires as an example, stage makeup may be used. The script, however, is trimmed extensively when adapted into a film. The dustpan-shaped three-sided set is not used. As for the stylised movements of actors, they may not all stem from Chinese operas. You could say that they are closer to a documentary of stage work because 80 percent of the stylised movements are from Chinese operas.

Someone reminded me that there might have been one or two Cantonese opera stage documentaries decades ago that were shot based on stage performances. I am not sure as I was not able to find them. However, I have yet to watch a proper Cantonese opera stage documentary from Hong Kong. There were indeed many films with numerous Chinese opera elements but the outcome could be awkwardly funny. For example, to play a stable boy leading his horse, an actor may perform a series of somersaults accompanied by a fanfare of gongs and drums as if on stage. After a series of percussion, he/she suddenly appears on the back of a real horse. This is downright funny and defies explanations.

*Goddess of Mercy Celebrates Her Birthday at Heung Fa Shan* (aka *The Night of Opera*, 1966) is initially a true dramatic stage documentary. It was a fundraiser performance by the Chinese Artists Association of Hong Kong (to celebrate the birthday of Wah Kwong, the patron saint of Cantonese opera) and the entire sector took part in the show.



*Goddess of Mercy Celebrates Her Birthday at Heung Fa Shan* (1966) documents the spectacular performance of *Goddess of Mercy Attains Enlightenment and Birthday Extravaganza at Fragrant Hill* by an ensemble of Cantonese opera superstars, as well as the display of high difficulty manoeuvres such as the human pyramid and forming human chains by the disciples of The Chinese Artists Association of Hong Kong.

The film rights was sold to a film company with the stage performance made into a documentary. However, after being edited into a film, *Goddess of Mercy Celebrates Her Birthday at Heung Fa Shan* becomes somewhat incomplete.

**Q:** Is a film considered stage opera documentary only when a stage performance is filmed?

**A:** Stage opera documentary is not necessarily filmed on stage. As long as it meets the aforementioned criteria, the film could be shot on set. There had been many stage documentaries from Mainland including Peking operas. A stage was not built, but every movement by the actors is rooted in Chinese opera. Therefore, they could be considered stage documentaries. For Cantonese operas, the excerpt performance 'Butterfly Beauty' (Mainland version 1958, Hong Kong version 1959), featuring Hung Sin Nui and Ma Si-tsang and filmed in Mainland, is close to being a stage documentary with a dustpan-shaped three-sided set and no reverse shots. Hung Sin Nui later planned *The Legend of Lee Heung Kwan* (1990) which I also participated in. Hung Sin Nui considered it a documentary for future generations and students of hers to learn from. It is a very important work of hers. In this film directed by Chor Yuen, however, both camera angles and the set are not based on the stage design. Although it is not a complete stage documentary, actors performed with stylised movements and footwork identical to those on stage. It could be considered a stage documentary but only barely so.

**Q:** What are the differences between stage actors and film actors?

**A:** Take the facial expression of actors as an example. If you could just imagine the size of their eyes seen on stage by the audience, and the same set of eyes seen in a close-up


shot on the silver screen. Many Chinese opera actors used facial expressions on stage when they first starred in films, and the effect was not ideal. Their expressions become less rooted in Chinese opera once they get used to the film medium. During the era of black and white films, stage makeup does not look well on films and film makeup is applied instead. For aesthetic effects, actors still wear stage costumes with tightened hair ribbon used for hairstyling and to lift the outer corner of the eyes. *Huadan* (young female) will not wear hair extensions, but the eyebrow will be raised slightly upward as there are close-up shots in films and makeup requirements are higher.

**Q:** Another characteristic of Cantonese opera films is that a song featured in the film version of a stage work may not be the same song performed on stage. Yet another song may appear on the audio recording of the same work. How did this come about?

**A:** Yes. The stage performance may involve a group of people while the film version involves another group and the audio recording involves a third group. We therefore have the interesting situation of having three versions for the same work. Take songs as an example, the trend at the time is that a song featured in a Cantonese opera film may not be the same song from a stage performance. After a record company acquired the copyright, the company may find a songwriter to write several more songs. The songs featured in the film are rarely sung on actual stage performances. I can list several examples here. For the work *A Buddhist Recluse for Fourteen Years*, the songs sung on stage were written by Tong Tik-sang, but the songs in the record were re-written



The cast and crew of *The Legend of Lee Heung Kwan* (1990): (from left) Yuen Siu-fai, Wan Fei-yin, Chor Yuen (director), Law Ka-bo, Michael Lai (producer), and Hung Sin Nui



by Ng Yat-siu. In the film *Snow in June*, the stage version of the excerpt 'Embroidering a Fragrant Pouch' was written by Tong Tik-sang. The recording version, however, was written by Ng Yat-siu.


The length of stage performances is another reason for trimming to be necessary. There would be modifications in addition to trimming for reasons unbeknownst to me. It should be unrelated to copyright issues because the same situation appears in which both stage and film versions belong to the same company. Take the Tai Lung Fung Opera Troupe as an example. A screenwriter is hired to write the work that is later adapted into a film. There will be more expenses if another person is hired to write additional material, and it is better to give the screenwriter more copyright fees. The concept of copyright did not really apply to the Chinese opera circle then. There is copyright law nowadays but not in the past. If you wrote a Chinese opera that was sold to me, you would not be entitled to any profit I made. This is actually quite unreasonable.

On the contrary, the influence on Cantonese opera stage works is greater from audio recordings than from films. We often joked on this as 'coffee blended with milk tea'. People gradually forget what the earliest work is like. This is because of the LP (Long Play) records. A popular song in a best-selling album may be played at home repeatedly for the whole day, yet a stage performance will not be attended on a daily basis. People already forgot about the original stage performance, and were dissatisfied if a song from the record is missing in the stage performance. Therefore, the stage performance has to include the song from the record. The song 'Embroidering a Fragrant Pouch' is a perfect example. It is always featured in *Snow in June*. In some extreme cases, works from two troupes were mixed together. For example, whenever *The Romantic Monk* is performed nowadays, it will also feature the scene 'Fantasy of Heaven of Parting Sorrow' from *Dream of the Red Chamber*.

**Q:** Can you talk about the process of recording music for Cantonese opera films?

**A:** In addition to director and screenwriter, making a Cantonese opera film also requires a composer and lyricist because the screenwriter may not necessarily know how to compose and write lyrics. This is really a team effort involving the screenwriter with frequent collaborators in composing and music accompaniment. With filmmaking techniques then, songs are recorded in advance and played back while shooting for performers to lip-sync on location. There was no live music then, and pre-recording has its pros and cons. The advantage is standardisation with the right music rhythm and no fluctuations in volumes. However, the emotions that emanated from a recording may be different to those from a movie scene. In a recording, the actor faces a microphone instead of having interactions with another actor. An experienced actor will be able to handle the situation but someone with less experience may be at a disadvantage. The emotions conveyed in a recording may be different from the actual performance while filming.





After a song recording, the actors will not memorise it by heart and will simply wait for cues from prompters on site. Performers may glance towards the prompter during shooting. Clever actors may cover this without the audience noticing. It could be funny at times. Actors may not get enough sleep during a tight schedule, and a male actor may open his mouth but a female voice appeared instead. Sometimes an actor is singing and is on the verge of lip-syncing another actor's line. The actor's mouth is opened while realising 'Oh no!'. Some may pretend to wipe away tears or use hand gestures to cover up. Honestly speaking, there were indeed instances of shoddy filmmaking but let's not make generalisations like those are 'Cantonese junk films of low-quality'. I often say the same thing: 'What you consider a low-quality film, let's see if you could make a better one.' Resources including technology were limited then. Films shot under such resource constraints are quite decent already.

**Q: Is gong-and-drum music also pre-recorded like other music?**

**A:** Gong-and-drum music is an important element of Cantonese opera. Other music may stop but not so for gong-and-drum music which continues throughout. Gong-and-drum music is basically percussion music that is mandatory whether the scenes are focused on drama or martial arts performances. In a song performance, accompaniment music and gong-and-drum music are inseparable and will be recorded together. However, gong-and-drum musicians are usually on location during shooting. For example, there may be a scene focused on martial arts and movements. Prior to shooting, the size of the venue, instructions from martial arts choreographer, exact action sequences are all uncertain. As the length of gong-and-drum music could not be estimated, they have to be performed on location. Actors tend to have their own ensemble of gong-and-drum music. The musicians are busy as well and may have schedule conflicts.

**Q: Are the music ensembles for recording in Cantonese opera films similar in size when compared to those playing for Cantonese opera performances on stage?**

**A:** The size of the music ensemble for recording in Cantonese opera films tends to be larger than those playing for stage performances. For stage performances, the cost is naturally higher as the musicians need to play every night. Recording for a film takes only one day and requires only one day of salary expenses. The pay for recording in film is understandably higher but only marginally so, and a larger ensemble is therefore possible. In addition, there was no multi-track recording in those days. It was single track recording and it takes ten musicians to perform ten musical instruments. Therefore, the size of music ensemble in recording for film is larger than those in opera troupes.

There are no conductors in Chinese operas, and there is no such role as music director in Cantonese opera films. For *Belle in Penang* (1954), as an example, Wong Yuet-sang composed the songs and everyone simply started playing together without a music director.



**Q: Is there any instance in which a Cantonese opera is adapted from a Cantonese opera film?**

**A:** For Cantonese operas adapted from a film, I could only think of *The Tragedy of a Poet King* (1968). On the other hand, there were numerous Cantonese operas adapted from Western movies. Many great screenwriters often watched Western movies including Tong Tik-sang. He would adapt stories from Western movies into Cantonese operas.

**Q: During the 1930s, some actors in Cantonese opera films did not wear period costumes and wore only modern clothes. What was the reason?**

**A:** In as early as the 1930s, Sit Kok-sin already sensed that the advent of films may render Cantonese opera obsolete. Therefore, he did not wear period costumes in films. His instinct proved to be true eventually. There are more investments into films than Cantonese operas. Cantonese opera performers get paid more with less effort required in films than in Cantonese operas. Body doubles could be used in films. When a scene is not performed well enough, films allow multiple takes but it is not an option for Cantonese operas. Another critical disadvantage is that stage costumes are costly and a huge expenditure for actors whereas film costumes are provided by film companies. Therefore a lot of famed opera artists ventured into films instead. In addition, people during the post-war era in the 1940s to 50s are generally poor. If I am a fan of Yam Kim-fai and wanted to see her performance, how much does it cost to buy a ticket? During the 1950s when I first entered the film business, the most expensive seats cost \$8.90. Even the cheapest seats cost more than a dollar. Seats on the third floor will not be too affordable either. It only costs several dimes, however, to see Yam on screen. Seeing Yam on screen, albeit not the actual person, is satisfying enough for the audience.

**Q: During the 1950s to 60s, Chinese opera films such as *Marriage of the Fairy Princess* (aka *Fairy Couple*, 1955) from Mainland China were shown from time to time. Did these works provide inspiration for the Cantonese opera circle in Hong Kong?**

**A:** People in the business would certainly watch these films and possibly duplicate their ideas. Do you know how many films about 'The Butterfly Lovers' were made after the release of the Yue opera film *Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai* (1954)? There were about six or seven. In addition to films, Mainland China is friendly towards Chinese opera during that time. Old repertoire could be performed. Many famous and veteran performers were still around. Opera troupes from the Mainland also performed in Hong Kong from time to time. When the Peking opera troupe visited Hong Kong then, they were not required to perform new programmes or to serve political interests. Old programmes could be performed in its original glory. I consider those times the golden era of Chinese opera with plenty of growth and diversity.



**Q: As a long-standing collaborator with the Tai Lung Fung Opera Troupe, can you talk about how the Tai Lung Fung Opera Troupe was formed?**

**A:** During the 1950s and 60s, many Chinese opera performers make films instead, and there were not enough performers to form a troupe. Therefore, the theatres that show Chinese opera performances lend money to troupe leaders in order to form a troupe. In fact, this is how Tai Lung Fung Opera Troupe was established. Tai Lung Fung Opera Troupe leader Ho Siu-bo had a conversation with Cheng Huen, manager of the Hong Kong Grand Theatre. Although Ho only had eight dollars with him at the time, the theatre believed in him. In addition, the theatre was willing to lend money to the troupe leader because ticket revenue would go to the theatre first before the troupe received its share. That was how the Tai Lung Fung was established. Still there was a consistent lack of opera artists. The theatres turned into film theatres instead with the contract lasting for one whole year. Not even one day could be released for Chinese opera performances, and theatres ceased to be performance venues for Chinese operas.

Ho Siu-bo is smart and determined with business acumen. The group including Chan Kam-tong, my master Mak Bing-wing, Fung Wong Nui, Cheng Bik-ying, and Wong Kam-oi collaborated numerous times before without achieving breakthrough success. When Ho decides to form a troupe, he recruits this group of performers as well as Tam Lan-hing, Lam Kar-sing and Chan Ho-kau, thus forming the Tai Lung Fung troupe. At its earliest stage, the troupe was called 'Tai Fung Wong', and the first programme is *The Perfect Match* performed at the Hong Kong Grand Theatre. All the performances are sold out. Tickets were not sold in advance then, and we would only know how well the tickets were selling on the day of performance. With ongoing success, the troupe decides to continue performing. The first person who objects to the troupe's name is Fung Wong Nui: 'The troupe's name "Tai Fung Wong" seems to suggest that it belongs to me. One or two programmes would not matter. But people may object if we continue—the troupe features not just me but many performers'. Therefore, it is renamed 'Tai Lung Fung' in its second edition. The strength of this group is that everyone works hard. Some may be of advanced age already but no one slacks off. The troupe leader had high demands as well, and would watch the performances every day. He would come up and argue whenever things are below standard. Regardless of how renowned the performer is, Ho would voice out if the performance is not good or shoddy. The troupe is collectively very serious about their work. To be honest, scripts are always produced under tight deadlines and some are inferior in quality. However, if the performers are good, they could weave their magic with their craft and make the performance work. The audiences in those days are focused on watching the performers, and rarely walk out of the theatre complaining on the script's lack of logic. They tend to focus on the performance of specific actors instead: 'This scene is dynamite' or 'This scene is funny'. The Tai Lung Fung Opera Troupe is very united and full of spirit. These factors lead to their wild success including a string of hit movies.



Directing Cantonese opera films is second nature to Wong Hok-sing as he is trained in the craft. The photo is of him in costume for a play.

Tai Lung Fung adopted the strategy of infusing elements from old programmes into new ones. One of the producers, Lau Yuet-fung, made tremendous contributions. He had been a Cantonese opera veteran for a long time and entered the business probably even earlier than my master. He toured extensively in rural areas and foreign cities, and often came across scripts. He is a walking treasure trove of ideas whenever ideas run dry, and recommended on what programmes could be performed or modified. As a result, many old *paichang* (formulaic scenes) were retained in new programmes.

**Q:** Having starred in so many Cantonese opera films, which director was particularly memorable for you?

**A:** Wong Hok-sing (aka Wong Kam-yan) used to be a Cantonese opera actor, and was among the first batch of graduates from the Cantonese Opera training programme of the Chinese Artists Association, Guangzhou. We are of the impression that Wong's talents are far more than what he had demonstrated. There were many difficult situations back then. A set was built and shooting takes around one day. What will happen if shooting is behind schedule? The boss says: 'If you could not finish tonight, I will have to jump off the roof tomorrow. You just have to finish it.' Wong is a nice person and would acquiesce: 'Okay, forget it. I will finish it (on time).' Wong's films are actually quite good technically with plenty of shots. Unfortunately, he always ended up with bosses focused more on meeting the schedule. Many directors are truly knowledgeable about Cantonese operas. For example, Lung To and Lee Tit love to watch Cantonese operas. Some may be interested in but not necessarily familiar with Cantonese operas.

**Q:** You starred in *The Legend of Lee Heung Kwan* which was filmed in Mainland. Can you summarise and compare the differences in making Cantonese opera films between the two places based on the experience?

**A:** *The Legend of Lee Heung Kwan* was filmed in Guangzhou. I was initially hesitant when Hung Sin Nui first invited me because there were many things on the rise in Mainland at the time that I was not accustomed to. When we had a phone conversation, I said: 'Madam Nui, we have not worked together for decades. I become very traditional now.' This is because of the fact that I was a young lad when she first met me. 'I am not receptive towards many new things, so you should perhaps consider thoroughly before asking me.'





Yam Kim-fai's splendid portrayal of Hoi Shui has been preserved for posterity in *The Great Red Robe* (1965).

She said: 'No—I am very traditional as well. You need not worry as there are no new elements in this film.' Therefore, I felt reassured enough to be in the film. Hung Sin Nui is overall in charge of *The Legend of Lee Heung Kwan*. The film is made authentically based on the original programme. Even when some of the *koubai* in the script felt awkward, she did not make changes. Chor Yuen is the director, and the filmmaking approach was not too different from that in Hong Kong. Directing, lighting, cinematography, and other responsibilities were identical to those in Hong Kong. The filming process was different of course, and there was afternoon napping. As a leader, Hung Sin Nui would speak from time to time which was in line with the local practice then.

**Q:** Can you summarise on the importance of Cantonese opera films?

**A:** Cantonese opera films preserves the essence and glorious moments of Chinese opera actors for the future generation to appreciate and to learn from. Film is one of the important media in maintaining the heritage of Cantonese opera. While we are imparting knowledge to younger artists, we hope they would watch the performances from veterans. Otherwise, these artists remain names only. Many people nowadays never saw Yam Kim-fai perform on stage in person. To be honest, what other ways are there? Although the *paichang* (formal scenes) and *gongjia* (feats) in films are incomplete, these fragments are quite precious. As these artists passed away already, we have no way to appreciate their stage performances in person. We have seen excellent performances by respected veterans; the point is, you are not able to witness it no matter how much praise we lavished upon it. People in the business would feel that an on-screen performance by a veteran performer is diminished somewhat as there are no live gong-and-drum music as well as audience. However, it is still by the performer no less. There are several films that I often encourage people to watch. Yam Kim-fai's performance as Hoi Shui in *The Great Red Robe* (aka *The Red Robe*, 1965) is unparalleled while the film medium is only able to showcase 70 percent of her full artistic capability. Just imagine how extraordinary it would be at 100 percent. Also, Lan Chi Pak's *gongjia* and hand gestures in the key scene of *An Immortal Refuses Love* (1958), and his performance in the role of Grand Councillor Yim Sung in *The Great Red Robe* are excellent. For those who never witnessed his live performance, watching the film is quite good already and certainly better than not having seen it at all. There is no need to watch the entire film. Watching a certain scene by an actor is more than enough.

(Translated by Richard Lee)





# APPENDIX

# Table of *Paichang* (Formulaic Scenes) and *Gongjia* (Feats) in Cantonese Opera Films

Collated by Yuen Tsz-ying and Milky Cheung Man-shan

There are many facets to performing Cantonese opera: singing, acting, reciting, fencing.... In fact, all performing arts genres require skill methods. Historically many Cantonese opera stars were known for their signature moves, such as Chan Yim-nung's acrobatics on clay pots with bound feet, Kwan Tak-hing's mastery of the whip, Xing Xing Zai's ability to do multiple, consecutive somersaults, etc. Although these are legendary tales passed around in the opera world, unfortunately there have been no existing records of these extraordinary talents. According to the late, respected film researcher Yu Mo-wan, over 1,000 of the existing Cantonese films in Hong Kong are related to Cantonese opera, which help preserve the best of traditional opera techniques and the repertoire of famous performers. Its contribution to the conservation of the art of Cantonese opera is priceless. The following list features the *paichang* (formulaic scenes) and *gongjia* (feats) in the action scenes of Hong Kong Cantonese opera films. It is hoped that further work and research on the subject can be enhanced: Firstly, by providing basic reference information for readers who may be interested in finding more about the art of Cantonese opera. Secondly, to widen the horizons of the budding Cantonese opera artists through Cantonese opera films, and encourage them to learn from the veterans regarding their charisma, the pursuit of accuracy in performance and the full control of their bearing.

It is worth noting that for many of the Cantonese opera masters featured, such as Pak Yuk-tong, Pak Kui-wing, Lui Yuk-long, Fung Keng-wah, Luo Pinchao (aka Lo Ban-Chiu), few of their Cantonese opera films remain. For that they are invaluable and our records here provide an essential reference for readers and researchers.

The Cantonese opera feats in the films were often affected by factors such as the sets and requirements from the directors, and so they often deviate from the actual performance onstage. Nonetheless, it is still worthwhile for audience to appreciate the essence through the cinematic version. Cantonese opera is one of the most sophisticated art forms, and this table serves as a starting point in exploring the subject. There may therefore be errors or imperfections, and we welcome feedback and suggestions for corrections.

Lastly, we would like to extend our deepest gratitude to Professor Yuen Siu-fai, a veteran Cantonese opera performer, for his invaluable comments on the following table.

## Explanatory Notes:

1. This table was compiled based on existing footage information, with the purpose of recording and organising information about important *paichang* and feats in Hong Kong Cantonese opera films, so as to provide reliable research references for readers.
2. Cantonese opera *paichang* and feats are a treasure trove of artistic expression accumulated over many years by generations of opera performers through their extensive experience onstage. Therefore there are many schools of thoughts and styles, and industry veterans and scholars have wide-ranging definitions and approaches to taxonomy. For easy reading, this table classifies basic performative gestures or series of actions that are unrelated to the dramatic context as 'feats', for example *shuaishuifa* (hair-swirling) and *jiaosha* (leg twirling), etc. *Paichang*, on the other hand, is a unit of performance that condenses the essence of a traditional Cantonese opera play. It can stand alone as a performance or it can be combined with other *paichang* routines. A *paichang* routine has standard rules and conventions with regards to its plot, story setting, stage mise-en-scène, use of percussion instruments, music, singing style, and performance style. Examples of *paichang* include *Mu Guiying Takes Command* and *Testing His Loyal Wife*.
3. This table only records *paichang* and feats in Cantonese opera films; none of the plays-within-plays are featured.
4. The feats listed are mainly ones performed by Cantonese opera artists. Occasionally some of the more challenging stunts may be performed by stuntmen, but these will not be described in detail in the table.



Item	Film Title	Release Date	Production Company	Director	<i>Paichang, Gongjia, Skill Sets</i>
1	<b><i>The Precious Lotus Lamp</i></b>	1956.6.29	The Union Film Enterprise Ltd	Ng Wui	'Rescuing His Mother': Lam Kar-sing (as Chum-heung) and Siu Sun Kuen (as God Yi Long) fight each other using a mountain axe and a three-pointed, double-edged blade respectively. Lam performs various feats such as spins, flying kicks, and somersaults, and also uses his axe to rescue his mother by breaking her out of captivity under the mountain.
2	<b><i>Kwan-ti, God of War</i></b>	1956.12.29	Lixing Film Company	Joseph Sunn (aka Chiu Shu-sun), Moon Kwan Man-ching	'Night Reading of the <i>Spring and Autumn Annals</i> ': Accompanied by stuntmen Yuen Shing-chau and Chan Kam-ying, Kwan Tak-hing (as Kwan Yu) makes an appearance in the midst of percussion music. Yuen and Chan hold a gauze lantern and the Green Dragon Crescent Blade respectively, and the three characters criss-cross across the stage in a triangular formation, modelled after <i>zousimen paichang</i> (walking through four doors), while performing in <i>guqiang</i> (classic singing style). With his bearded look, Kwan strikes a <i>sipingma</i> (quadrilateral level stance), displaying the posture and gait unique to the character of Kwan Yu. Kwan Tak-hing also performs techniques from traditional Cantonese opera to show the intensity of emotion: rolling his eyes to show 'three whites', and puffing his cheeks.
3	<b><i>Tricking the Marquess with Beacon Fires</i></b>	1957.2.9	Tai Seng Film Company	Wong Hok-sing (aka Wong Kam-yan)	Finale scene: Sun Ma Si-tsang (as Crown Prince Yau-kau) fights against stuntman Simon Yuen Siu-tin, performing <i>xiaokuaiqiang</i> (fast-moving spear fight) and <i>dangzi</i> (group stage fight).
4	<b><i>General Kwan Guards the Huarong Path Lau Bei Crosses the River to Meet His Bride</i></b>	1957.3.8	Baohua Film Company	Yeung Kung-leong, Ling Wan	In the opening scene Leung Siu-chung (King of Somersaults) flips his way onto his horse, and 'Female Lord Kwan' Leng Wah Hang (as Kwan Wan-cheung) moves in triangular formation with Zhou Cang and Guan Ping, displaying the <i>zousimen paichang</i> (walking through four doors) that is classically associated with the character, as she recites and sings in ancient <i>manban</i> in stage Mandarin). The mask of Zhou Cang has been painted in the <i>xiasifu</i> style, which is typical of Southern Cantonese opera traditions. Leng Wah Hang waves a big blade, performs <i>doukui</i> (helmet shaking), and poses with the Green Dragon Crescent Blade.
5	<b><i>The Crab Beauty, Part One</i></b>	1957.3.17	Shun Yee Film Co	Chu Kea	Breaking the Formation: Ho King-fan (as Lo Fu), while grasping his polearm, is thrown off his stumbling horse, thereby landing his <i>cheshen</i> (continuous spinning) pose on one leg. Meanwhile Yu Lai-zhen (as Crab Spirit) performs 'cross spears' and the 'backward spear combats', as well as feats such as <i>dakao yuantai</i> (treading circular routes on stage in grand armour) and <i>cheshen</i> (continuous spinning).

Item	Film Title	Release Date	Production Company	Director	<i>Paichang, Gongjia, Skill Sets</i>
⑥	<i>Tale of Two Kingdoms</i> (Orig Title: <i>Farewell to Concubine Yu</i> )	1957.5.1	Lap Tat Film Co	Chu Kea	'Farewell My Concubine': Tang Bik-wan (as Concubine Yu) dances with her sword and performs with double swords. 'Hong Slits His Throat By River Wu': Kwan Tak-hing (as Hong Yu) holds a polearm and poses in <i>sipingma</i> (quadrilateral level stance) while singing in <i>guqiang</i> (classic style) with his stable boy. He also performs <i>dasixing</i> (fighting solo) with four other stuntmen.
7	<i>How Chan Kung Reprimanded Cho</i>	1957.5.2	Hesheng Film Company	Lau Hark-suen	Lau Hark-suen, playing Cho Cho, performs <i>guanmu</i> (eye expressions) such as 'glaring' and 'showing "four whites"'. "
8	<i>How Old Master Keung Crossed the River</i>	1957.7.10	Dongnan Film Enterprise Company	Fung Fung	Opening sequence: modelled after the <i>paichang</i> of 'Joint Appointment of a Minister of Six States', the sequence features a series of feats involving palace lights, feathered fans and embroidered umbrella; Choi Yim-heung (as Queen Keung), Chun Siu-lei (as Tan Kei) performing <i>tuiche</i> (pushing a carriage); and Siu Sun Kuen (as Uncle Mei) and Fung Keng-wah (as Seung Yung) performing <i>zuoche</i> (carriage-riding). 'Search for the Crown Prince': Fung gives a fine display of traditional posture and stage presence befitting a <i>wusheng</i> (military male), including <i>rankou</i> feat (stroking and flicking of the fake beard).
9	<i>The Successful Scholar</i> (aka <i>Mistaken Sacrifice Offerings</i> )	1957.7.25	Baohua Film Company	Chan Pei	'Breaking in the Horse': Lam Kar-sing (as Chow Yu-bo), riding his stumbling horse, performs 'falling off his horse', as well as other feats such as kicking his T-shaped belt, performing a <i>cheshen</i> (continuous spinning) on one foot, and flips. Sun Ma Si-tsang (as Law Kam-kwun) pulls the reins of his horse.
10	<i>Fan Lei-fa Delivers a Son in the Golden-Light Formation</i> (aka <i>The Unsightly Yeung Fan Reincarnates</i> )	1958.2.4	Zhongyi Film Company	Wu Pang	Modelled after the <i>paichang</i> of 'Taking Command', Ng Kwan-lai (as Fan Lei-fa) wears a general's armour and is welcomed into the military tent, banging drums followed. The opening battle scene: Kwan Tak-hing (as Yeung Fan) showcases his pole-wielding techniques while striking a <i>sipingma</i> pose (quadrilateral level stance).
11	<i>The Story of Lau Kam-ting</i> (aka <i>Lau Kam-ting</i> )	1958.3.7	The United Film Company	Wong Hok-sing	'Siege of the City': Yu Lai-zhen (as Lau Kam-ting) performs a series of feats on bound feet, such as skipping and <i>dakao luoyao</i> (backbend in grand armour). 'Fight Against the Fire Dragon Formation': Yu Lai-zhen performs the <i>cheshen</i> (continuous spinning) feat on one leg.



⑥ Kwan Tak-hing executing the quadrilateral level stance.

12	<i>A Patriot's Sword</i>	1958.5.1	Jackie Film Co	Yeung Kung-leong	'Murder in the Temple': Sun Ma Si-tsang (as Ng Hon) sings in the style of Peking opera while performing a feat of drawing his sword.
13	<i>An Immortal Refuses Love</i>	1958.5.14	Tianhua Film Company	Kwan Man-ching	'Snow Wraps the Pass of Lan and the Horse Hesitates to Go': Lan Chi Pak (as Hon Yu) performs 'falling off his stumbling horse', which include a series of feats such as bending backward, back bend, taking short and quick steps, and knee-walking.
14	<i>Bugles of War</i>	1958.6.5	Kong Ngee Motion Picture Production Company	Poon Bing-kuen	Battle scene: Molly Wu Kar (as Lily Princess) does a diagonal body rotation while dressed in armour with her feet bound and holding a big blade. Both her and So Siu-tong (Koi Tin-hung) perform <i>dangzi</i> (group stage fight), and So also showcases his layout flips and <i>shuaishuifa</i> (hair-swirling) techniques while standing upright.
⑮	<i>Tan Kei in the Meat Hill (Remake)</i>	1958.8.8	Yulin Film Co., Hong Kong	Fung Fung	Law Kar-kuen (as King Zhou of Shang) is dressed and painted in the style of the Shanghai-style Peking Opera, and his entrance is marked by a series of <i>guanmu</i> (eye expressions) and character-entrance poses. Lau Siu-man (as So Wu) performs a <i>paichang</i> similar to 'Flag Ceremony for Dispatching the Troops'. Chun Siu-lei (as Tan Kei) bends her waist backward as she drinks from her goblet of wine.
16	<i>How Leung Hung-yuk's War Drum Caused the Jin Troops to Retreat</i>	1956.8.16	Dongfang Film Company	Wong Hok-sing	Battle scene: Ng Kwan-lai (as Leung Hung-yuk) waves a big marine flag and showcases techniques as jumping over the flag and receiving the flag from the back. Sun Ma Si-tsang (as Hon Sai-chung) engages in combat with stuntmen such as Chow Siu-loi, performing feats such as one-on-one fighting ( <i>dakuaiqiang</i> ), high overhead somersaults, backflips, and other acrobatic movements.
17	<i>Tan Kei's Death by Fire</i>	1958.10.30	Yulin Film Co., Hong Kong	Fung Fung	'Bi Gan's Heart Gouged Out': After his heart is gouged out, Siu Sun Kuen (as Bi Gan) rides his horse and on the way, displays his horsewhip techniques. In 'Barging into the Palace', Lan Chi Pak (as Grand Tutor Man) enters the scene accompanied by percussion instruments and poses on one leg. After offering his respect to the heavens and the earth, he strikes the <i>chuangsi</i> (in the gesture of self-sacrifice) pose.



⑮ King Zhou's appearance.



⑮ Drinking wine while bending backwards

Item	Film Title	Release Date	Production Company	Director	<i>Paichang, Gongjia, Skill Sets</i>
18	<i>Fourth Brother Yeung Visits His Mother</i>	1959.1.14	Lux Film Company	Wong Hok-sing	In the opening scene, Sun Ma Si-tsang (as Fourth Brother) and Sek Yin-tsi (as Fifth Brother) enter dressed in full armour and striking a martial pose. In his first battle scene, Sek performs <i>dangzi</i> (group stage fight).
19	<i>How Red Kid Rescued His Mother from the Crystal Palace</i> (aka <i>How Monkey King Wreaked Havoc in the Heavenly Palace</i> )	1959.1.28	The United Film Company	Chan Cheuk-sang	'Wreaking Havoc in Heaven': Lam Kar-sing (as Monkey King) kicks a spear and performs various feats such as flying kicks, side-kicks, flips, and <i>cheshen</i> (continuous spinning) on one foot, on top of performing with double mallets. Finale scene: Chan Ho-kau (as Jade Princess) performs <i>dangzi</i> (group stage fight) and spear-kicking.
20	<i>The Legend of Purple Hairpin</i>	1959.2.18	Hawks Film Company	Lee Tit	Leung Sing-por (as Fourth Lord) enters dressed as the 'Yellow-Garbed Knight', showcasing his <i>shuixiu</i> technique (flowing sleeve flicking). Finale scene: Leung returns his sword to his sheath and dislodges his helmet. Lan Chi Pak (as Minister Lo) paces on knees and takes short and quick steps.
①	<i>The Story of Muk Kwai-ying, Part One</i> (aka <i>The Story of Yeung Chung-bo (colour), Muk Kwai-ying</i> )	1959.2.25	Liguang Film Company	Wong Hok-sing	'Liulang Executing His Son': Yu Lai-zhen (as Muk Kwai-ying) enters the scene dressed in grand armour and striking a back bend pose in bound feet. 'Breaking the Heavenly Gate Formation': Yu displays her <i>caiqiao</i> (stilt walking) technique, and performs other feats such as <i>jiaosha</i> (leg twirling) and <i>shuaishuifa</i> (hair-swirling) while kneeling down and moving round.
22	<i>The Story of Muk Kwai-ying, Part Two</i> (aka <i>Woman General (Colour)</i> )	1959.3.12	Liguang Film Company	Wong Hok-sing	'Siege of the City': Yu Lai-zhen (as Muk Kwai-ying), dressed in grand armour, showcases feats such as <i>caiqiao</i> (stilt walking), <i>cheshen</i> (continuous spinning) and back bending bound feet. The camera zooms in to a close-up of her footwork.
23	<i>Sweet Girl</i>	1959.4.8	Zhili Film Company	Wong Hok-sing	In the opening scene, Fong Yim-fun (as Mui Am-heung) does a dance with double swords. In the final scene, Law Kim-long (as Ngai Chiu-yan) performs <i>dangzi</i> (group stage fight), and the stuntmen do overhead somersaults. Law flips before landing on a pose, doing a <i>qiangbei</i> (stretch, throw and fall in gesture of defeat); Fong does <i>dangzi</i> while in armour.
24	<i>The Maid Who Led an Expedition to Conquer Xiliao</i>	1959.4.24	Lux Film Company	Wong Hok-sing	Talent performance scene: Sek Yin-tsi (as Yang Kar-fu) showcases his spear techniques. Battle scene: Sek Yin-tsi, Lam Kar-sing (as Yang Karpau) and the stuntmen perform <i>dangzi</i> (group stage fight), while Simon Yuen Siu-tin performs the <i>xuanzi</i> (whirlwind somersault).





Item	Film Title	Release Date	Production Company	Director	<i>Paichang, Gongjia, Skill Sets</i>
25	<i>The Story of Wong Bo-chuen</i>	1959.6.10	Tai Seng Film Company	Tso Kea	Fong Yim-fun (as Wong Bo-chuen) and Poon Yat On (as Prime Minister Wong Wan) co-star in the <i>paichang</i> of 'Beating Hands'.
26	<i>Butterfly Beauty Episode One: Feng Yi Pavilion</i>	1959.10.14	Hong Tu Film Co.	Collective Collaboration	Luo Pinchao (aka Lo Ban-chiu, as Lui Bo) performs in <i>Feng Yi Pavilion</i> in the style of a traditional <i>paichang</i> , but sings and recites in vernacular Cantonese, thereby injecting new life into a traditional drama.
27	<i>Butterfly Beauty Episode Three: Releasing Son at the Hall</i>	1959.10.14	Hong Tu Film Co.	Collective Collaboration	Pak Kui-wing (as Lau Yin-cheung) and Lang Junyu (as Lau's second wife) sing <i>muyu</i> (wood-block beat) tunes and chant <i>bailan</i> (patter speech), while retaining the style and structure of traditional stage performance.
28	<i>Mo Chung Fights the Tiger</i>	1959.10.22	Xiongfeng Film Company	Wong Hok-sing	Sun Ma Si-tsang (as Mo Chung) performs in a <i>paichang</i> modelled after 'Killing the Tiger', and techniques such as <i>qiangbei</i> (stretch, throw and fall in gesture of defeat) and sweeping kicks. He and Fung Wong Nui (as Poon Kam-lin) also perform in the 'Killing His Sister-in-Law' <i>paichang</i> . 'At the Lion Pavilion': Sun Ma Si-tsang enters the scene accompanied by percussion instruments and performs the <i>chantai</i> (sliding across the table) feat. He then engages in hand-to-hand combat with Chan Kam-tong (as Saimoon Hing), whereby both actors perform feats such as the <i>hutiao</i> (tiger leap) and the <i>jiaosha</i> (leg twirling).
29	<i>The Double-Speared Luk Man-lung</i>	1959.12.9	Lap Tat Film Co	Chu Kea	Battle scene: Kei Siu-ying (as Luk Man-lung) showcases her skills involves adept wielding of the double spears against the eight mallets with pose on one leg.
30	<i>On Luk-shan Pays Nocturnal Sacrifice to Imperial Concubine Yeung's Tomb</i>	1959.12.31	The United Film Company	Chan Cheuk-sang	'Birthday Celebration': over ten stuntmen perform somersaults. 'On Luk-shan Rebellion': Sun Ma Si-tsang (as On Luk-shan) and Danny Li (aka Lee Kei-fung, as Chan Yuen-lai) battle each other in grand armour, while stuntmen Leung Siu-chung, Liang Xiaohui, and Yang Gu Zai perform with blades and double blades and spears.
31	<i>Fan Lei-fa</i>	1960.2.26	Lux Film Company	Wong Hok-sing	Battle scene: Yu Lai-zhen (as Fan Lei-fa) performs <i>dangzi</i> (group stage fight) in bound feet while dressed in grand armour. Her prodigious 'bound-feet' feats are in full display, such as her <i>tiaobu</i> (skipping).



28 Sliding across the table

32	<i>Lady Racketeer</i>	1960.3.16	Ruiyun Film Company	Chu Kea	'Chase After Lau Bei': Chan Kam-tong (as Chow Yu) enters the scene dressed in grand armour and accompanied by percussion instruments, and performs feats such as <i>lashan</i> (Literally 'pulling the mountains', i.e. hands down and push out arms in a wave-like motion) and <i>lingzi</i> (grabbing the pheasant feathers on the headgear)
33	<i>How Nazha Rescued His Mother from the Snake Mountain</i>	1960.5.10	Oversea Chinese Film Co	Wong Fung	In the scene where Ku Yee-fung (as God Erlang's Heaven Hound) performs the feat of crash landing on the table from a jump as he steals Lee Ching's tower.
34	<i>The Heroines' Queen</i>	1960.8.30	Xieli Film Company	Wu Pang	Battle scene: Chan Kam-tong (as Kwan Shan-suet) performs <i>dangzi</i> (group stage fight) and engages in a spear fight with stuntmen of the Northern school. Lam Kau (as Kwan Shan-yuet) performs <i>shuaishuijia</i> (hair-swirling), flag-waving, and offhand staff-wielding, as well as other martial feats such as the tiger leap, the forward flip, the tiger-crouch, and sweeping kicks, before engaging in a <i>shigun</i> (hand-to-hand combat with poles for ten times) and single blade and spear combat with stuntmen. Simon Yuen Siu-tin jumps over a big flag, and executes other feats such as the <i>zouzhen</i> (a series of quick attack using spear) and <i>dadunpai</i> (hitting shields).
35	<i>An Ideal Couple: Drowning Seven Armies</i>	1960.10.26	Hong Tu Film Co.	Collective Collaboration	Sun Chu, known as the 'living Lord Kwan', plays Kwan Yu and performs eye techniques such as 'glaring' and 'downcast eyes', as well as other feats such as leading his horse, patting his horse, and reading his book. Lo Kai-kwong (as Kwan Ping) leads his horse, and in the 'water battle' scene he performs the <i>shangyao</i> feat (holding the partner onto the waist).
36	<i>An Ideal Couple: Snatching an Umbrella</i>	1960.10.26	Hong Tu Film Co.	Collective Collaboration	Lui Yuk-long (as Chiang Sai-lung) and Lam Siu-kwan (as Wong Shui-lan) showcase their umbrella-turning technique.
37	<i>Patriotic Heroine</i>	1960.12.9	Tai Seng Film Company	Chu Kea	In the opening scene, Ng Kwan-lai (as Kwok Ying-neung) performs feats with a spear. In the battle scene, Law Kim-long (as Wai Chuen-chung) does a <i>cheshen</i> (continuous spinning) on one foot and fights against stuntmen of the Northern school.
38	<i>Return from Battle for His Love</i>	1961.2.24	Tai Lung Fung Film Co	Wong Hok-sing	Battle scene: Fung Wong Nui (as Princess Phoenix of Song) lifts up Lam Kar-sing (as Prince Invincible of Han) to perform a <i>shangyao</i> (holding the partner onto the waist) <i>cheshen</i> (continuous spinning).



33 Crash landing on the table from a jump

39	<i>Prince Tailone</i>	1961.3.1	Lux Film Company	Chu Kea	Modelled after the 'Xue Pinggui Leaving His Humble Abode' <i>paichang</i> , Yam Kim-fai (as Ling Ching-wan), dressed in armour, performs jumps and spinning moves on one leg, while Yu Lai-zhen (as Wong Bo-shan) swirls her hair.
④①	<i>Ten Years Dream</i>	1961.6.28	Tai Lung Fung Film Co	Fung Fung	Modelled after the 'Grappling in a Boat' <i>paichang</i> , Lam Kar-sing (as Sung Man-wah) first performs the feat of <i>zoubian</i> ('Fugitive Flight'), before later doing a <i>dangzhou</i> ('Boat Rowing') move with Lau Yuet-fung (as Lau Yuk-fu) and engaging in a hand-to-hand <i>shouqiao</i> (a bridge hand duel) with him.
41	<i>Hero and Beauty</i>	1961.7.13	Tiande Film Company	Wong Hok-sing	Opening credits: Chan Ho-kau (as Princess) and Lam Dan (as Princess Fung-ye) perform <i>madangzi</i> (horse-riding gesture) together.
42	<i>Holy Snake and Flying Tiger</i>	1961.7.26	Lux Film Company	Chu Kea	To prevent an evil concubine from entering the palace, Lam Kar-sing (as Prince Pang-fei) performs with a pair of golden 'truncheons', followed by the move of <i>chanyi</i> (jumping high in the air and landing on top of a chair). 'Keeping the Son in Bondage': Lam kneels on the floor and swirls his hair, while Yu Lai-zhen (as Queen Fung-ping) performs with her water sleeves. In the scene where the characters retreat in defeat, Lam executes a <i>cheshen</i> (continuous spinning) on one foot, as well as other feats such as diagonal body rotation and landing on a split.
43	<i>Meeting on the Weedy River</i>	1961.8.2	Golden Horse Film Co, Chaoming Film Company	Wong Fung	In the opening, Leung Sing-por (as Ching Ao-kam) moves forward with a military token, he spins on one leg and performs a <i>lashan</i> (Literally 'pulling the mountains', i.e. hands down and push out arms in a wave-like motion) under the percussion accompaniment of <i>sigutou</i> . Meanwhile, stuntmen bear and wave flags offhand. In the battle scene, Mak Bing-wing (as Sit Ting-shan) engages in combat with stuntmen, who then perform various flips and rolls, while Chow Siu-loi perform a tiger leap before then doing a cartwheel and landing in a tiger crouch.
44	<i>Seven Phoenixes</i>	1961.8.23	Lux Film Company	Wong Hok-sing	'Siege of the City': seven performers swirl their hair at the same time. Yu Lai-zhen (as Kam Tai-fung) swirls her hair while making her way through a throng of people, displaying her skillful mastery of the <i>jiaosha</i> (leg twirling) feat. Yam Kim-fai (as Mang Kau-lung) swirls her hair, and Yu performs a spin on one leg while wielding a seven-star sword.



④① Modelled after the 'Grappling in a Boat' *paichang*.



④① A bridge hand duel

Item	Film Title	Release Date	Production Company	Director	<i>Paichang, Gongjia, Skill Sets</i>
45	<i>The General and the Tyrant</i>	1961.9.6	Tao Yuen Motion Picture Development Company	Fung Fung	Assassination scene: Yam Kim-fai (as Si Ching-wan) and Leung Sing-por (as Lui Chen-sing) fight each other using sword and blade.
46	<i>The Chilly River Pass</i>	1961.10.4	Lap Tat Film Co	Chu Kea	The opening scene is modelled after the 'The Rainbow Pass' <i>paichang</i> , as So Siu-tong (as Sit Ting-shan) and Law Yim-hing (as Fan Lei-fa) engage in a spear fight against each other whilst wearing grand armour, showcasing their weaponry skills with the 'tiger spear'. In the defeat scene, So performs 'falling off his stumbling horse', and afterwards executes a series of feats, including diagonal body rotation, the splits, and the <i>cheshen</i> (continuous spinning) on one leg, etc.
47	<i>Tik Ching the Hero</i>	1961.10.18	Flying Eagle Studio Co	Chu Kea	Battle scene: Luk Fei-hung (as Lau Hing) leads his horse, while Yam Kim-fai (as Tik Ching) gets on the horse while wielding a big blade, and then doing a <i>sipingdama</i> (quadrilateral level stance) pose.
48	<i>In the Palace</i>	1961.10.25	Lux Film Company	Wong Hok-sing	'Siege of the City': Yu Lai-zhen (as Empress Kame-ye) perform <i>dangzi</i> (group stage fight) with stuntmen Kwan Ching-liang and Chui Chung-hok for two minutes straight, without pause. 'Palace Search': dressed in grand armour, Yu gives one, then another look while touching the feathers on her headdress, before doing a <i>cheshen</i> (continuous spinning).
49	<i>Lui Bo</i>	1961.11.02	Tai Seng Film Company	Wong Fung	'Three Warriors' Fight with Lui Bo': Yu So-chow (as Lui Bo) and Yu Zhanyuan (as Kwan Yu) engage in a spectacular fight, moving fluidly and quickly. After Lui is defeated, Leung Siu-chung plays his stable boy who leads Lui to exit the scene on horseback, before then leading Ng Kwan-lai (as Diu Sim) to enter.
50	<i>Three Battles to Secure Peace for Nation</i>	1961.11.8	Shun Yee Film Co	Wong Hok-sing	Siu Chung-kwan (as But Mo) enters the scene having been defeated in a fight. He glances towards the gate twice before striking a <i>sipingma</i> pose (quadrilateral level stance), and then performs feats such as the <i>cheshen</i> (continuous spinning) and flying kicks. Battle scene: Lam Kar-sing (as Fung Sum-ming) and Chan Ho-kau (as Ai Yuet-ying) do a <i>qiangjiazi</i> (crossing spears) and sing a <i>xiaoqu</i> (short tunes) together, before then performing a <i>dangzi</i> (group stage fight).
51	<i>Leung Hung-yuk's Victory at Wong Tin Tong</i>	1961.11.15	Kuen Wah Film Co	Fung Chi-kong	Battle scene: Cecilia Lee Fung-sing (as Hon Sai-chung) waves a banner, engages in <i>dangzi</i> (group stage fight) with stuntmen, and displays her swordsmanship and shield skills.



52	<b>Two Heroes</b>	1961.12.3	Shanxing Film Company	Chan Cheuk-sang	Modelling after the 'A Blood Oath Sworn' <i>paichang</i> , Yu Kai (as Keung Yuen-lung) fires an arrow on one foot, fights one-on-one with Mak Bing-wing (as Hon Chung-yin), demonstrating a range of Southern style stage weapon skills. 'Siege of the City' scene: Yu engages in <i>dangzi</i> (group stage fight) with stuntmen, and performs <i>dakuaiqiang</i> (intensive spear fights) displays a dexterous use of the spear when combating against martial artist Kwan Ching-liang, with a series of maneuvers and movements involving the back, neck and waist.
53	<b>Lady General Fa Muk-lan</b>	1961.12.13	Baida Film Company	Wong Hok-sing	'Contest Between Father and Daughter': Pak Lung-chu (as Fa Wu) and Fung Wong Nui (as Fa Muk-lan) fight sword-to-sword. 'Journeying to the Capital City': Fung and Hui Ying-sau (as Fa Fook) show their horsethip technique.
54	<b>Lodging a Complaint Before the Imperial Court by the Young Amazons</b>	1961.12.13	Lap Tat Film Co	Chu Kea	Mak Bing-wing (as Kau Chun) and Lee Hong-kum (as Queen Poon) perform the feats of the model after the 'Smashing the Sedan' <i>paichang</i> , including <i>sanpi</i> (Triple Grilling) and removing the phoenix coronet.
55	<b>The Invincible Yeung Generals</b>	1961.12.20	Shun Yee Film Co	Wong Hok-sing	Lam Kar-sing (as Yeung Man-kwong) performs in a scene based on the 'Taking Command' <i>paichang</i> . Battle scene: The stable boy lead the way, while Yu So-chow (as Muk Kwai-ying) and Lam Kar-sing each engages in fights with stuntmen; and Cheung Lo-lo (as Yeung Kam-fa) shows her rapid spear combat feats. 'Breaking the Five-Dragon Formation': Yu So-chow shows her mastery of spear kicking, martial arts routines, and spear wielding with double short staffs. Lam, Shum Chi-wah (as Prince Golden Qilin) and Chan Ho-kau (as Princess Hundred-Flower) perform a three-way fight.



52 Firing an arrow on one foot



52 Spear wielding



55 Spear kicking



55 Spear wielding with double short staffs

Item	Film Title	Release Date	Production Company	Director	<i>Paichang, Gongjia, Skill Sets</i>
56	<i>Wonder Boy</i>	1961.12.28	Po Fung Film Co	Fung Fung	After the 'Trial by Three Magistrates', Pak Yuk-tong (as Minister Chao) questions Fung Wong Nui (as Madam Lee Choi) alone, showing different <i>guanmu</i> (eye expressions) and hand gestures.
57	<i>The Heroes and the Beauty</i>	1962.1.1	Tai Lung Fung Film Co	Wong Hok-sing	Battle scene: Lam Kar-sing (as Chiu Yuk-lung) and Chan Kam-tong (as Ching Kam-lung) showcase feats such as <i>qiangbei</i> (stretch, throw and fall in gesture of defeat), <i>dangzi</i> (group stage fight), and waving a big flag.
58	<i>How Chung Mo-yim Conquered the West</i>	1962.1.5	The United Film Company	Yeung Kung-leong, Chan Cheuk-sang	In the opening scene, Sun Ma Si-tsang (as King Xuan of Qi), makes his appearance carrying a horsewhip under the percussion accompaniment of <i>sigutou</i> ; he shoots an arrow on one leg. 'Conquering the West': Yu So-chow (as Chung Mo-yim), dressed in grand armour, enters accompanied by stable boy.
59	<i>Two Generals in Contention for a Wife</i>	1962.1.11	Baobao Film Company	Chan Pei, Lee Sau-kei	'Attacking the Kingdom of Qi': Under the percussion accompaniment of <i>sigutou</i> , Chan Yin-tong (as King of Chu) makes his first appearance in style striking a pose; he then perform weapon skills together with Yam Kim-fai (as Suen Ying-mo). 'Sneaking into the Imperial Court': Yam Bing-yee (as Princess Choi-yin) displays her double-sword skills.
60	<i>A Child Was Born Under Bridge</i>	1962.1.17	Chaoming Film Company	Wong Fung	'The Flooding of Jinshan Temple': emulating the stage performance style of 'Flooding the Jinshan Temple' from the Peking opera <i>The Legend of The White Snake</i> , and with the accompaniment of <i>paizi</i> (set tune), Josephine Siao Fong-fong (as Siu-ching) and Yu So-chow (as Pak So-ching) demonstrate their boat-rowing feat; Yu also displays a wide range of Northern school acrobatic techniques such as spear kicking, double-sword juggling and tiger crouching. Josephine Siao Fong-fong performs flips and showcases her spear techniques.



56 Pak Yuk-tong performing eye expressions and hand gestures

Item	Film Title	Release Date	Production Company	Director	<i>Paichang, Gongjia, Skill Sets</i>
61	<i>The Capture of the Evil Demons</i>	1962.2.14	Chun Chow Film Co.	Wong Hok-sing	In the opening scene, Cheung Lo-lo (as the Child of Wealth) spins her Nazha wheel; she also poses before her spear fight with Shum Chi-wah (as Monkey King). 'Betrothal Martial Arts Contest': Chan Ho-kau (as Clam Spirit) and Lam Kar-sing (as Yin Yuk-hoi) demonstrate <i>chedahuo</i> (centripetal spin performed by two people holding hands), and also fight against each other using Northern style techniques such as flying kicks, <i>jiaosha</i> (leg twirling), and <i>qiangbei</i> (stretch, throw and fall in gesture of defeat). Battle scene: Chan swings a flag together with other aquatic creatures. In a scene adapted from Peking opera <i>Yin Yang River</i> , Fen Ju Hua (as Madam Chiu) showcases her superb balancing skills in carrying water buckets, and displays various stage movements such as <i>huabangzi</i> and <i>zouyuantai</i> (treading circling route on stage).
62	<i>War Crisis</i> (aka <i>Beauty in a lost city / Beauty in a Fallen city</i> )	1962.3.8	The Sky Dragon Film Co.	Wong Hok-sing	Modelled after the 'Duel between the Dragon and the Tiger' <i>paichang</i> , Mak Bing-wing (as Prince of Parrot Kingdom) fights against Poon Yat On (as King of Golden Eagle Kingdom), demonstrating different spear-fighting methods, including 'the cross', 'three spears', and 'quick spear'.
63	<i>Riot in the Palace</i>	1962.3.15	Lux Film Company	Wong Hok-sing	'Keeping the Son in Bondage' scene: Lan Chi Pak (as Sima Sheung-ye) and Yam Kim-fai (as Sima King-tin) demonstrate the feats of the modelled <i>paichang</i> 'Keeping the Son in Bondage'. 'Uproar in the Palace': Yu Lai-zhen (as Princess Bik-shan), armed with a truncheon, crash landing on the table from a jump.
64	<i>Princess Chui-wan</i>	1962.4.4	Lux Film Company	Wong Hok-sing	Battle scene: Stable boy does somersaults. Lam Kar-sing (as Sit Hau-chi), dressed in grand armour, brandishes his horsewhip and spear as he sings.
65	<i>A Kingdom for a Smile</i>	1962.4.11	Yulin Film Co., HK	Wong Hok-sing	'Counselling Emperor You of Zhou': While presenting his three memorials to the emperor, Lan Chi-pak (as Cheng Pak-yau) performs the feats of knee walking, manipulating the ivory slate, and beard flinging. Battle scene: Lam Kar-sing (as Bo Hung-tak) engages in fights, does a <i>cheshen</i> (continuous spinning) on one leg, and performs whirlwind somersault; he carries Patricia Lam Fung (as Bo Chi) by the waist during battle.



65 Manipulating the ivory slate



65 Beard-flinging and knee-walking



65 Onto the waist, holding the maiden with one arm as the hero prepares for battle

Item	Film Title	Release Date	Production Company	Director	<i>Paichang, Gongjia, Skill Sets</i>
66	<i>Law Shing at the Gate</i>	1962.5.2	Lux Film Company	Chu Kea	'Beating up Law Shing': Lan Chi Pak (as Wai Chikung) holds the horse, and Yam Kim-fai (as Law Shing) gets on the horse. After losing the battle, Yam writes on a parchment on one leg.
67	<i>The Jade Hairpin</i> (aka <i>The Emerald Hairpin</i> )	1962.5.3	Dragon & Phoenix Co	Chow Sze-luk	After he receives a letter from home, Lan Chi-pak (as Lee Ting-fu) exhibits his whip-cracking on horseback.
68	<i>A Maid Commander-in-chief and a Rash General</i>	1962.5.17	Tai Lung Fung Film Co	Wong Hok-sing	Battle scene: Mak Bing-wing (as Lau Siu-tin) and Fung Wong Nui (as Man Chui-kwan) fight one-on-one, demonstrating feats such as helmet picking, discarding back pennants, and armour-doffing; Mak performs <i>shuaishuifa</i> (hair-swirling) and Fung does a <i>cheshen</i> (continuous spinning). Then Mak shows off his whirlwind somersaults, <i>qiangbei</i> (stretch, throw and fall in gesture of defeat, and Fung twirls her body while holding Mak up by the waist; Mak loses the fight and is lifted up by four people.
69	<i>Two Hunters in a Pursuit</i>	1962.5.23	Kwong Ming Film Co	Lung To	'Military Contest at Imperial Court': Yu So-chow (as Man Cheuk-fai) and Chan Kam-tong (as Mo Chihung) perform a hand-to-hand Peking opera style <i>shouqiao</i> (a bridge hand duel) and then fight each other with swords.
70	<i>Twin's Trouble</i>	1962.6.6	Flying Eagle Studio Co	Chu Kea	'Battle of Meng Yun Guan': Yam kim-fai (as Tik Lung) performs spear play; spear-fights with Lau Yuet-fung (as Tuen Hung) outside the city gate; and fights one-on-one with Law Yim-hing (as Tuen Hung-yuk).
71	<i>The Heroic Battle</i>	1962.6.20	Xinyanhong Film Company	Chu Kea	'Martial Arts Contest': Tam Sin-hung (as Wan Chau-hung) spear fights with Connie Chan Pochu (as Wan Hau-man), performing <i>cheshen</i> (continuous spinning) on one leg and handling tiger spears. 'Preparing for Battle': Tam, dressed in grand armour, waves her horsewhip and spear, while the stable boy displays his skills of leading a horse for her. Battle scene: Chan spear-fights against stuntmen with shields; So Siu-tong (as Law Yan-fu) and Tam swirl their hair after being defeated; Connie Chan jumps on one foot and does a split.
72	<i>How Nazha Shattered Heaven to Save His Mother</i>	1962.7.11	Lux Film Company	Wong Hok-sing	'Nazha Fights with His Father': Siu Kam-lo (as Jinzha) performs <i>guobei</i> (over-back) and Lam Kar-sing (as Nazha) shows off his flying kick and side kick skills.



68 Helmet picking



68 Discarding of back pennants



68 Armour-doffing



Item	Film Title	Release Date	Production Company	Director	<i>Paichang, Gongjia, Skill Sets</i>
73	<i>Nazha and Crimson Child</i>	1962.8.22	Lux Film Company	Wong Hok-sing	In the opening scene, Lam Kar-sing (as Nazha) performs feats with a spear and a Nazha wheel.
74	<i>When Ngok Fei Was Born</i>	1962.9.27	Baobao Film Company	Wu Pang	'Martial Arts Practice': Yu Kai (as Ngok Fei) displays his skills of handling a pair of spears. 'Challenging the Prince': Yu and Sek Yin-tsi (as Chai Kwai) spear-fight with each other.
75	<i>The Birth of Stone Child</i>	1962.10.18	The Sky Dragon Film Co.	Wong Hok-sing	'Military Contest at Imperial Court': Wielding a crescent blade sabre, Sek Yin-tsi (as Twelfth Imperial Protector) fights with a spear-wielding Lam Kar-sing (as Lam Sau-tin); Sek Yin-tsi also spear-fights with three stuntmen and perform <i>dangzi</i> (group stage fight).
76	<i>Madame Wild Rose</i> (aka <i>The Hero and the Concubine</i> )	1962.11.7	Kowloon Film Company	Fung Chi-kong	Expulsion scene: Cecilia Lee Fung-sing (as Yee-fui) performs <i>jiaosha</i> (leg twirling) while holding a split and wrapping her legs with her arms. 'Coercing the Emperor to Join the Monastery': Lee does a skyward sole kick.
77	<i>An Agnostic and Sagacious Intercession</i> (aka <i>Kinship Is the Strongest Bond</i> )	1962.11.14	Wing Sun Film Co	Chu Kea	In the opening scene, Lan Chi-pak (as Chiu Hong) rides on a carriage and demonstrates his <i>rankou</i> feat (stroking and flicking of the fake beard). Modelling after the 'Killing the Wife' <i>paichang</i> : Mak Bing-wing (as Chiu Ka-fu) and Fung Wong Nui (as Sung Yuk-lei) perform the 'side by side spin', <i>shangyao</i> (holding the partner onto the waist), <i>luoyao</i> (backbend), and also feats such as <i>chedahuo</i> (centripetal spin performed by two people holding hands) and <i>shuaishuifa</i> (hair-swirling). Mak also jumps over a chair. 'Duel between Brothers': Mak Bing-wing and Mak Sin-sing (as Chiu Ka-lung) fight against each other using a range of martial arts skills in grand armour, plus other acrobatic techniques, including helmet picking, discarding of back pennants, <i>chedahuo</i> and <i>chaobengzi</i> (whirlwind somersaults launched by a partner).



77 Hair-swirling



77 Centripetal spin, performed by two people holding hands



77 Backbend



77 Side by side spin



Item	Film Title	Release Date	Production Company	Director	<i>Paichang, Gongjia, Skill Sets</i>
78	<i>Knight of the Victory Marked Flag</i>	1962.11.21	Wah Shing Motion Picture Co	Wong Hok-sing	Finale scene: Cheung Lo-lo (as Tau Wan-ying) and Mak Bing-wing (as Tau Sing-loi) fight against stuntmen using Northern martial arts techniques; Mak waves the big flag and Chan Ho-kau (as To Siu-yin) swings the fire stick.
79	<i>Rendezvous at Baidi City</i>	1962.12.20	Tai Seng Film Company	Lung To	Martial arts practice scene: Yu Kai (as Si Hon-chung) displays his skills of using a golden mallet.
80	<i>The Battle Between the Seven Phoenixes and the Dragon</i>	1962.12.29	Lux Film Company	Wong Hok-sing	'Killing the Prince in the Imperial Court': Lan Chi-pak (as King Yuet of Yin) and Lam Kar-sing (as Yin Tsi-hung) perform the feat of <i>shazi</i> (filicide). 'Stealing the Corpse': Lam carries a long axe. 'Seven Princesses Entering the City': The seven princesses swirl their hair in unison, and Yu Lai-zhen (as Yin Ching-mui) weaves herself in between other characters while swirling her hair. After losing the battle, Prince Yin Tsi-hung has no choice but turn into a stable boy. In this role, Lam demonstrates feats such as the tiger leap, the tiger crouch and <i>qiangbei</i> (stretch, throw and fall in gesture of defeat).
81	<i>The Royal Cat and His Opponents</i> (aka <i>A Wild Battle</i> )	1963.1.10	The United Film Company	Chan Cheuk-sang	'Performing at Imperial Court': Yu Kai (as Pak Yuk-tong) brandishes his sabre blade.
82	<i>Drums Along the Battlefield</i> (aka <i>Battling Sounds</i> )	1963.2.20	Tai Lung Fung Film Company	Wong Hok-sing	Battle scene: Lam Kar-sing (as Ha Ching-wan) performs <i>shuaishuifa</i> (hair-swirling) and does <i>xuanzi</i> (whirlwind somersault).
83	<i>Sister Yeung</i> (aka <i>Trouble in the Palace</i> )	1963.4.18	The United Film Company	Chan Cheuk-sang	'Defeated in Battle': Cecilia Lee Fung-sing (as Emperor Renzong of Song) performs <i>dangzi</i> (group stage fight) and a <i>cheshen</i> (continuous spinning) on one leg. 'Visiting the Barracks': Fung Wong Nui (as Eighth Sister Yeung) is led by a stable boy (played by stuntman Leung Siu-chung), who displays floor feats such as the tiger crouch, sweeping kicks and whirlwind somersault. 'Mayhem at the Imperial Court': Fung beats Lee, picking her helmet, discarding her back pennants, and doffing her armour; Lee does a split, performs <i>jiaosha</i> (leg twirling) and <i>shuaishuifa</i> (hair-swirling).



82 Whirlwind somersault

84	<b><i>The Little Girl Avenges Her Brother's Death</i></b>	1963.5.17	Lap Tat Film Co	Chu Kea	'Killing his Sister-in-law': Yu So-chow (as Lam Ying-ngo) performs <i>jiaosha</i> (leg twirling), and Lee Hong-kam (as Cheung Oi-wan) swirls her hair.
85	<b><i>The Rainbow</i></b> (aka <b><i>Happy Ending</i></b> )	1963.6.25	Tai Seng Film Company	Chu Kea	Battle scene: Yu Kai (as Lau Yan) does tiger leap before landing on a split, and performs a range of other feats, including offhand spear-spinning, body moves to deflect spear attacks, and spear-wielding around the waist.
86	<b><i>The Prince and Two Queens</i></b>	1963.7.11	Lux Film Company	Wong Hok-sing	Battle scene: Yu Lai-zhen (as Lam King-yuk) and Lam Kar-sing (as Crown Prince Lung-cheung) fight against each other as mother and son in grand armour. They pose with spears before performing feats such as helmet picking and discarding back pennants.
87	<b><i>Love and Hatred for Sixteen Years</i></b>	1963.10.16	Jackie Film Co	Fung Chi-kong	'Search for the Prince': modelled after the 'Xiao He Chases after Han Xin' <i>paichang</i> , Lan Chi-pak (as Yuen On) flings his beard, performs the <i>sandajian</i> feat (triple laughs with percussion accompaniment), and showcases his kneel-walking techniques.
88	<b><i>No Return Without Victory</i></b> (aka <b><i>Determination</i></b> )	1963.11.20	Wing Fung Motion Picture Co	Chu Kea	Battle scene: Yu So-chow (as Ko Hap-lan), dressed in armour, fights against stuntmen with a red tassel spear, strikes an imposing pose under the <i>sigutou</i> percussion accompaniment, and performs a leg split.
89	<b><i>The Lotus Lamp</i></b>	1963.11.27	Lux Film Company	Chu Kea	'Rescuing His Mother': Yu Kai (as Chum-heung) waves a water flag and fights against four knights with an axe, strikes a pose and breaks open the mountain.
90	<b><i>Sit's Achievement</i></b>	1964.2.12	Lux Film Company	Chu Kea	'Practising Martial Arts': Yu Kai (as Sit Ting-shan) brandishes a sword. 'Rescuing Father': Yu fights with several stuntmen.



83 Stable boy leading a horse



83 Tiger couch

Item	Film Title	Release Date	Production Company	Director	<i>Paichang, Gongjia, Skill Sets</i>
⑨1	<b><i>The Revenge Battle</i></b> (aka <i>The Pitiless Sword</i> )	1964.4.28	Lap Shun Motion Picture Co	Wong Hok-sing	Final battle scene: Lam Kar-sing (as Wai Chung-fai) and Chan Ho-kau (as Lui To-chi) perform <i>chedahuo</i> (centripetal spin performed by two people holding hands), a double <i>jiaosha</i> (leg twirling), and <i>shuaishuifa</i> (hair-swirling).
92	<b><i>The Country and a Beauty</i></b> (aka <i>The Empire and the Beauty</i> )	1964.5.13	Kowloon Film Company	Fung Chi-kong	'Siege of the City' at the end: Cecilia Lee Fung-sing (as Au Chin, the king of Yue), dressed in grand armour, performs a <i>cheshen</i> (continuous spinning) on one leg, as well as the <i>jiangshiwo</i> (fall straight onto the back) ) feat.
93	<b><i>The Ambitious Prince</i></b>	1965.2.1	Tai Seng Film Company	Wong Fung	Battle scene: Female stuntman Yuen Chau (as stable girl) waves a big flag, and performs backflips, whirlwind somersaults and tiger crouches. Dressed in grand armour, Ng Kwan-lai (as Princess Hundred Flowers) makes her appearance carrying a horsewhip and a spear; Yuen waves the big flag, and Ng fights in grand armour. 'Defeat in Battle': Cecilia Lee Fung-sing (as Crown Prince Kam Lun), has her helmet, back pennants and armour removed by Ng, and performs the <i>wulong jiaozhu</i> (continuous body rolling with leg twirling in the gesture of defense or struggling against death) and hair-swirling feats.
⑨4	<b><i>The Great Red Robe</i></b> (aka <i>The Red Robe</i> )	1965.2.16	Flying Eagle Studio Co	Wong Hok-sing	When making his first appearance on stage, Yam kim-fai (as Hoi Shui) shows his <i>shuixiu</i> (flowing sleeves flicking) and robe-kicking techniques, alongside his <i>sanmian loubai quanmu</i> (eye techniques showing the 'three whites'). 'Pressing for Immediate Release of Son': Yam performs martial arts with circle techniques while Lan Chi-pak (as Yim Sung) displays characteristic gazes, performs the <i>rankou</i> (stroking and flicking of the fake beard) feat and stands on one leg.



⑨1 Holding the partner onto the waist



⑨1 Centripetal spin performed by two people holding hands



⑨4 Showing 'three whites'



⑨4 Beard-flinging



Item	Film Title	Release Date	Production Company	Director	<i>Paichang, Gongjia, Skill Sets</i>
95	<b><i>A Lady Prime Minister of Two Countries</i></b>	1966.1.20	Kam Wah Film Co	Wong Hok-sing	Modelled after the 'Monastery of Sweet Dew' <i>paichang</i> , Mak Bing-wing (as Ling Wan-ngan) dons a grand armour and shows his <i>chuangtang</i> ('Barging into the Court Room') technique.
96	<b><i>Goddess of Mercy Celebrates Her Birthday at Heung Fa Shan</i></b> (aka <b><i>The Night of the Opera Stars</i></b> )	1966.12.1	Chi Luen Film Company Limited	Wong Hok-sing	'Birthday Celebration at Heung Fa Shan': Fung Wong Nui (as Fairy) leads the fairy dance team, presenting the words, <i>tian, xia, tai, ping</i> (peace to the world). Stuntmen from Luanyu School perform an acrobatic show with stunts such as the human pyramid, <i>qiedashan</i> ('building a mountain'), dragon-boat rowing, and forming human chains, together with other acrobatic techniques such as whirlwind somersaults, cartwheels, and flipping off stairs. Chan Kam-tong (as Wai To) displays the 'general-in-chief Wai To pose'.
97	<b><i>Love and War</i></b> (aka <b><i>Who Should Be the Commander-in-Chief?</i></b> )	1967.3.1	Lux Film Company	Wong Hok-sing	After his defeat, Lam Kar-sing (as Sheung-kung Wan-tin) writes on a parchment whilst standing on one leg.
98	<b><i>Flag of Pearls</i></b> (aka <b><i>Colourful Pearl Flag</i></b> )	1968.2.28	Tin Wah Film Co	Chu Kea	'Breaking the Formation' (finale scene): Lee Kui-on (as Princess Sheung-yeung) demonstrates the skills of spear-kicking and handles two sabres simultaneously. Stuntmen perform aerial somersaults, and the 'snake-skin shedding' style of spear techniques.
99	<b><i>The Story of Heroine Fan Lei-fa</i></b> (aka <b><i>Fan Lei-fa, the Female General</i></b> )	1968.3.13	Kin Lee Film Co	Fung Chi-kong	'Smashing the Flames Formation': Yu Kai (as Sit Ting-shan) brandishes a bronze pole. 'Shattering the Evil Gate Formation': Connie Chan Po-chu (as Fan Lei-fa) makes her first appearance, wearing grand armour and brandishing her horsewhip and spear.
100	<b><i>The Legend of Purple Hairpin</i></b>	1977.2.12	Golden Phoenix Films	Lee Tit	Final scene: Leung Sing-por (as The Fourth High Lord) draws his sword, and removes his helmet. Lan Chi Pak (as Grand Marshal Lo) demonstrates his kneel-walking skills and paces in quick and short steps.

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