

Splendour of Cantonese Opera: Masters Tong Tik Sang and Yam Kim Fai

Preface

Tong Tik-sang and Yam Kim Fai are two names that have long been revered by opera fans. One a playwright, the other an actress, both left a dazzling mark on the history of Cantonese opera, earning legendary status in the eyes of successive generations.

One of Cantonese opera's greatest and most prolific playwrights, Tong Tik-sang penned more than 400 scripts during his career. Tightly woven plots, vivid characters and moving story lines are the hallmarks of his work, and his evergreen plays have remained hugely popular throughout the years, bestowing a valuable legacy on the culture of Cantonese opera. An all-round talent with an enchanting voice who was loved for her beauty and artistry, Yam Kim Fai was one of the greatest opera performers of her era. In a career that spanned four decades, Yam appeared in countless plays, with her portrayals of witty sentimentalists and scholars finding particular appeal among female audiences and earning her the affectionate nickname the "Opera Fans' Lover". The contributions made by Yam on the stage and Tong behind the scenes were instrumental in promoting the glamorous art of Cantonese opera.

In commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the death of Tong and the 20th anniversary of the death of Yam, both of which fall in 2009, the museum has organised a special exhibition to highlight the outstanding achievements and contributions made by these two legends and pay public tribute to two of the greatest Cantonese opera artists of all time. We are honoured that the exhibition is being supported by the Yam Kim Fai and Pak Suet Sin Charitable Foundation Limited, Ms. Pak Suet Sin, Dr. David Chan, Ms. Lo Wai-luen, Ms. Cheung Man-wai, Ms. Chan Po-chu, Miss Mui Suet Sze, Ms. Fong Yim Fun, Ms. Ng Kwan Lai, Ms. Rosemary Tong, Mr. Patrick Ng, as well as fans of Yam Kim Fai and Pak Suet Sin. Their generosity in providing valuable collections and information has greatly enriched the content of the exhibition, and for that we would like to express our heartfelt gratitude to them.

As we look back on the accomplishments of these two masters of Cantonese opera, the museum also hopes to enhance public knowledge of this regional art form, so that local citizens and the Cantonese opera community can join hands in honouring and conserving this valuable part of our cultural heritage.

Tong Tik-sang

A Brief Biography of Tong Tik-sang

Tong Tik-sang is widely regarded as the greatest playwright to have graced the world of Cantonese opera. In a career that was cut tragically short, he wrote more than 400 scripts, many of which are noted for their beautiful rhetoric and in-depth depictions of the emotional lives of the characters.

Born Tong Kang-nian in 1917 in the city of Zhongshan in Guangdong Province, he moved to Hong Kong in 1937, where he joined the Kok Sin Sing Opera Troupe as a copyist working under Fung Chi-fun. The troupe included established opera stars such as Sheung Hoi Mui alongside its famous leader Sit Kok Sin, and Tong was exposed early on to the influence of renowned performers and playwrights. This laid a strong foundation for his career as a playwright, and it was in that same year that Tong wrote his first opera: entitled *The Consoling Lotus of Jiangcheng*, which featured Pak Kui Wing in the leading role.

Tong married Cheng Man-ha in 1942, and it was thanks to her that he gained a better understanding of Beijing opera. As a consequence, he started to combine elements of Beijing opera and dance into his Cantonese opera creations. During the occupation of Hong Kong by the Japanese, Tong wrote over 120 scripts, most of which were martial plays or adaptations of Beijing operas. Of these, his most memorable creations include *Runaway Lovers* and *White Poplar, Red Tears*.

In the time following the Japanese surrender up to 1949, Tong wrote more than 90 scripts, and it was during this period that he first worked with Fong Yim Fun, composing *Lady Man Returns to the Han People* especially for her. From 1950 to 1955, Tong penned over 170 scripts, among which are such extraordinary masterpieces as *The Story of Tung Siu Yuen*, *The Dream between Emperor Wu of Han and Lady Wai*, *A Forsaken Woman* and *The Swallow's Message*.

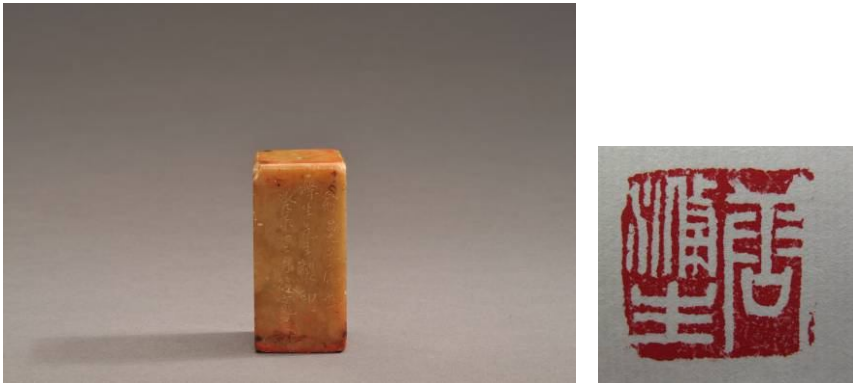
In 1956, Tong joined the local radio station Rediffusion, where he was responsible for script censorship and also for liaising with the Cantonese opera section on performances; he also participated in broadcasts of Cantonese opera.

The period from 1956 to 1959 saw Tong in the prime of his playwriting career. Working with the San Yim Yeung Opera Troupe led by Fong Yim Fun, the Sin Fung Ming Opera Troupe led by Pak Suet Sin and the Lai Sing Opera Troupe led by Ng Kwan Lai, he

completed around 40 plays, a relatively small number, but most of which became classics that are frequently performed on stage even today.

Quite a number of his operas were adapted into films that have also shown a lasting value. Following his first film script *The Tolling Bell* written in 1939, Tong participated in the production of approximately 100 films.

On the evening of 14 September 1959, while attending the premiere of *The Regeneration in the Red-Plum Chamber* at the Lee Theatre, Tong suffered a cerebral haemorrhage and fell unconscious. He was rushed to hospital but was certified dead the following day. He was just 42 years of age.



The Seal with Characters “Tong Tik-sang” Cut in Intaglio
1943
2010.42.2

Tailor-made Scripts

In Hong Kong at the time that Tong began his career, Cantonese opera scripts were written and confirmed after it had been decided which famous actors would be cast in the production. This limited playwrights to developing the plot in whatever way they want. Although Tong once described this as a difficult task, it in fact allowed him to cultivate a talent for composing tailor-made scripts.

During the occupation of Hong Kong by the Japanese, Tong composed quite a number of operas for Cheng Man-ha and Lo Ban Chiu that fully reflect his ability to write scripts for individual performers. Cheng was a famous Beijing opera dan (a female role) from Shanghai who was also an impressive dancer, so most of the scripts Tong wrote for her were adapted from Beijing operas, such as *The Flooding of Sizhou City* and *King Chu Bidding Farewell to His Concubine*. In contrast, the scripts he wrote for Lo, which included *Banchao* and *Emperor Chai Suen*, were primarily martial plays that allowed Lo to demonstrate his acting skills in the role of a siu mou (young martial artist role).

After the Sino-Japanese war, Tong continued to write scripts for performers such as Chan Kam Tong, Sit Kok Sin, Ma Sze Tsang, Hung Sin Nui and Fong Yim Fun. Tailoring roles to cater for the individual acting styles of these renowned opera stars, he gained great experience that helped him craft scripts specifically to suit other performers later on in his career. The performer who appeared most often in Tong's plays was Fong Yim Fun, one of the most renowned opera stars of the period. Having identified that her vocal style was characterised by heavy nasal tones and a sweet but sad voice, Tong considered Fong most suited to playing characters suffering great misery and sorrow, and he tailored a number of well-known characters especially for her, such as Lee Chui Fan in *A Forsaken Woman*, Tung Siu Yuen in *The Story of Tung Siu Yuen* and Dau Ngo in *Snow in June*.

Plays in which Tong and Pak Suet Sin worked together also gained particular recognition. Especially eloquent, Pak Suet Sin was recognised as an outstanding actress with excellent kai kou (recitation, vocal style, body gesture or motion as instructed in the script). With this in mind, Tong tailored a number of roles for her, such as Siu To Hung in *Red Strawberry and Broken Heart*, Yeung Chun Heung in *Triennial Mourning on the Bridge*, and Fuk Siu Yuk in *The Legend of Purple Hairpin*. These operas feature a great deal of kou bai (narration) and siu kuk (fixed tunes), which enabled Pak's talents to shine.

The plays Tong wrote for Ng Kwan Lai also illustrated his talent for composing tailor-made scripts. When Ng began her career in Cantonese opera, she attracted

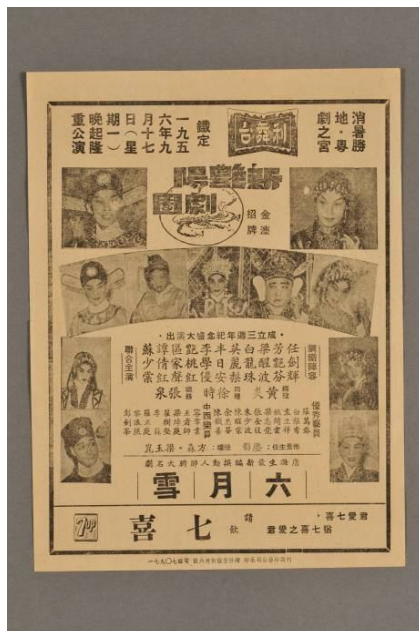
audiences with her image as a dao ma dan (the female martial role). Tong, however, realised that Ng had a gracious and beautiful voice as well as the advantage of an authentic ji hou (female falsetto singing in Cantonese opera). Recognising that she was more suited to playing the role of a tsing yi (a virtuous female role), he wrote *The Beauty's Grave* specifically for her. In the role of the sad and sorrowful Lam Yu Heung, Ng touched audiences with her grief-stricken, graceful singing, and from that moment on she was converted from a dao ma dan to a tsing yi.



A Scene from the Opera *The Story of Tung Siu Yuen*

1950

1996.133.606



Postbill of *Snow in June*

1956

1994.139.5



A Scene from the Opera *A Beauty's Grave*

1956

2003.31.1673

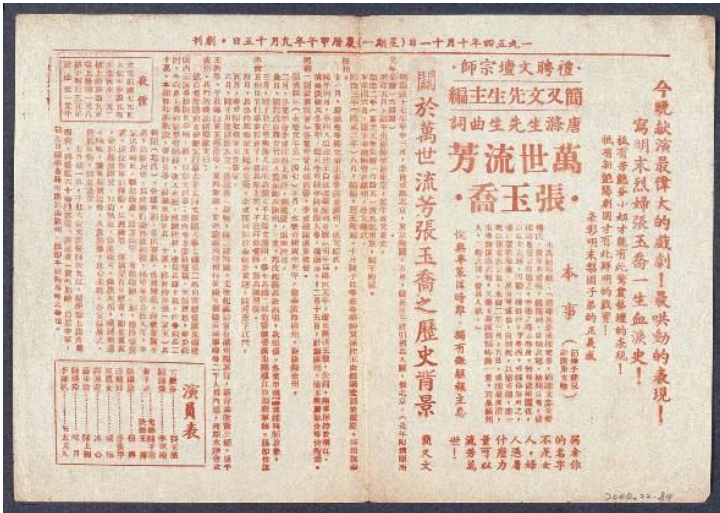
Fresh Appeal to a Wider Audience

One of Tong's great strengths was his ability to adapt films, famous works of Chinese and foreign literature and historical events successfully into operas by making the stories more structured and attractive to audiences. In 1954, he was involved in an adaptation of the opera *Lest We Forget Cheung Yuk Kiu*, featuring Fong Yim Fun, which marked a very important milestone in his career.

A work of both history and literature, the original story of *Lest We Forget Cheung Yuk Kiu* was written by Professor Jian Youwen of the University of Hong Kong. Jian's work had tremendous literary value, but he was not a playwright, and his text did not allow performers to fully demonstrate their abilities. When Fong Yim Fun invited Tong to adapt the story into a script with a tightly woven plot, Tong turned his efforts to the study of classical Chinese literature and his focus to the adaptation of Yuan operas, *za ke* (opera from the northern route) and legends from the Ming and Qing Dynasties into Cantonese operas. From 1955 to early 1956, Tong adapted two classical works, *The Romance of the Western Chamber* and *The Story of Pipa*, for the Lee Wing Wah Opera Troupe led by Pak Suet Sin. It was the start of a new direction in his writing. In 1956, he then adapted the Yuan opera *The Injustice Done to Dau Ngo* into *Snow in June* starring Fong Yim Fun. Enthusiastically received, his new version reflected the remarkable progress that Tong had made in adapting famous works of classical literature.

Later in 1956, Tong joined the Sin Fung Ming Opera Troupe, led by Pak Suet Sin, as chief scriptwriter. With their solid knowledge of Beijing and Kun operas, both Tong and Pak were committed to integrating the artistic elements and aesthetic spirit of these genres into Cantonese opera. Tong went on to adapt numerous classical literary works, including *The Dream in the Peony Pavilion*, *Butterfly* and *Red Pear Blossom*, *The Legend of Purple Hairpin* and *The Regeneration in the Red-Plum Chamber*. Noted for their profound, beautiful melodies and rhetoric, Tong's plays raised Cantonese opera to an even higher artistic level. Now in the prime of his playwriting career, Tong composed a number of scripts in this period that have continued to be treasured by later generations.

In addition to scripts of elegance and grace, Tong also composed a number of popular comedies, the most memorable of which include *Three Blessings in One House*, *The Eternal Peony*, *How the Scholar Tong Pak Fu Won the Maid Chau Heung* and *Flower Field Farce*.



Postbill of *Lest We Forget Cheung Yuk Kiu*
1954
2000.22.84



Postbill of *Flower Field Farce*
1957
1994.139.853

The Power of Language

Noted for their beautiful rhetoric and tightly woven plots, Tong's operas have enjoyed an enduring popularity from the time they were written up to the present day. Even now, the classic, elegant melodies and eloquent language in his plays can stir many emotions and memories in the general public. Not only did he write powerful oratory in his scripts, Tong also arranged every single kou bai (narration) and bong wong (aria-like pieces) with great care. What's more, he asked his musicians to come up with suitable siu kuk (fixed tunes) for his scripts. Working with the musicians in this way, Tong created a large number of works of lasting value.

One of the musicians that Tong worked with for many years was his very close friend Wong Yuet-sang. Their collaboration began as early as 1950 when they teamed up to compose the theme song *Shadows in the New Terrace* for the opera *The Story of Tung Siu Yuen*. They went on to compose many beautiful songs together, including *Blooming Beauty by the Silver Pond*, which featured in the film *Mysterious Murder*, *Tears in the Cantonese opera A Forsaken Woman* and *Fragrance of Festival on the Third Day of June in Snow in June*. For all of these songs, Tong first wrote the lyrics and explained the plot to Wong, who would then compose music to express the mood – joy, anger, sadness or happiness – that was called for. Two of the songs on which they collaborated are regarded very highly in particular. *The Death of Princess Cheung Ping* from the opera *Princess Cheung Ping* was adapted from the pipa song *The Thivats of Autumn* from the opera *Along the Strategic Pass*. With the melody and rhetoric written by Tong, the adaptation expresses a sense of filial piety and sadness that leads to a truly climactic passage, and the song continues to captivate even today. *The Reunion of Sword and Hairpin* from the opera *The Legend of Purple Hairpin* was adapted from *Night Moon over Xunyang*. Applying his talent for literary eloquence, Tong composed lyrics to convey both a sense of jealousy as well as romance that makes this the most enchanting song in that opera.



Record of *Princess Cheung Ping*

1961

1998.78.5

Conquering the Silver Screen

In 1939, Tong Tik-sang started to pen his first ever film script, *The Tolling Bell*, which was released in cinemas the following year. Embarking on a career on the silver screen himself, Tong also made his debut as an actor in the film. All in all, he was involved in about 100 films, working on original creations of Cantonese operas and also taking on the roles of playwright, director, lyricist and actor.

In 1950, Tong joined forces with Ho Chak-chong, the manager of the Astor Theatre, to establish Chak Sang Co. Motion Picture Service, which produced six films, including *The Story of Tung Siu Yuen*, *Mysterious Murder* and *A Half Moon Night*, all of which were adapted from Tong's Cantonese operas of the same names and starred Fong Yim Fun. Unfortunately, the company closed down in 1956 following operational difficulties.

Most of Tong's films focus on the subject of love. From his early contemporary films *I'm Crazy about You* and *Mysterious Murder*, through *Romance of Fuji Mountain* and *Sweet Dreams* of the middle period of his film career, up to his widely acclaimed costume dramas *Two Immortals at the Pavilion of the Moon*, *The Legend of Purple Hairpin* and *Princess Cheung Ping* in the later stages, love affairs stand at the heart of the action. Tong was very skilful at depicting the destiny of the leading characters, both male and female, in stories that involved adversity, obstruction, suspicion and sabotage by unscrupulous villains. Appealing to a wide audience with their intricately conceived plots that consistently ended with the lovers reunited and the villain punished, these romances often focused on love in the face of autocratic parents, the pursuit of free love and the value of fidelity. Tong also worked in other genres, making some realist films reflecting social conditions as well as historical and court dramas, but these make up only a small part of Tong's output.

Tong wrote over 400 Cantonese operas during his career but none of them was ever recorded. Fortunately, most of his classic scripts were adapted into films in which he retained the gestures, movements, actions and vocal presentation of the opera players. Tong also used production techniques derived from the stage and even directly incorporated settings from stage performances when shooting his films. As a result, his films have played an important role in preserving the art of Cantonese opera in Hong Kong.



Film Photo of Tong Tik-sang from *How the Sedan-carrier Raised the Bride*

1955

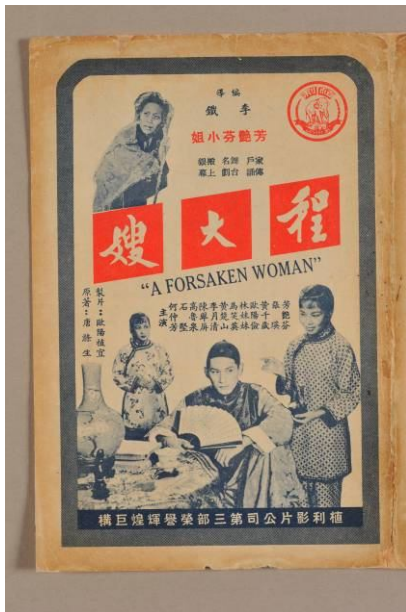
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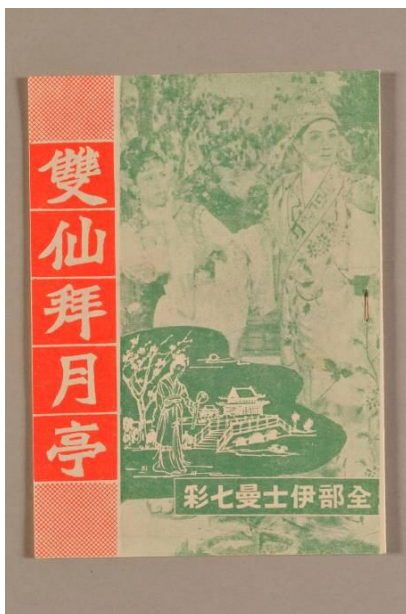
Special Film Issue of *The Lion's Roar*

Premiered on 30 June 1959

2007.25.156



Special Film Issue of *A Forsaken Woman*
 Premiered on 8 December 1954
 1995.47.64



Special Film Issue of *Two Immortals at the Pavilion of the Moon*
 Premiered on 30 December 1958
 2003.31.2983

Personal Interests

Alongside his prolific output as a playwright, Tong developed a wide range of interests and became a keen photographer, painter and calligrapher.

Having studied at the Shanghai Fine Art Academy in his younger days, Tong was a skilful artist. His paintings of opera figures were seen as early as the 1940s in advertisements for opera troupes that were published in local newspapers, and they were also frequently found up until the 1950s in special issues for opera troupes and postbills. His paintings for *Romance of Fuji Mountain* demonstrate what kinds of costumes, hairstyles and visual effects he had conceived for this opera. What's more, he always carefully planned the set design for his productions, and at the beginning of each scene in his scripts he would provide details of the stage settings and props that were required or even sketches for the set decorators to refer to. Tong was thus able to combine his interest in painting with his playwriting work.

Tong also took up calligraphy in the 1950s, but his work as a playwright was never far from his mind even as he practised copying ancient masterpieces. When in 1957 the premiere of *The Legend of Purple Hairpin* received very good reviews, with the production selling out over the next few days, Tong could nevertheless not conceal his anxiety and the nerves he was suffering in some of the sentences that he wrote as he practised his calligraphy at that time. Even away from the stage, this great and immensely successful playwright could never totally relax and escape from the huge pressure that he felt.

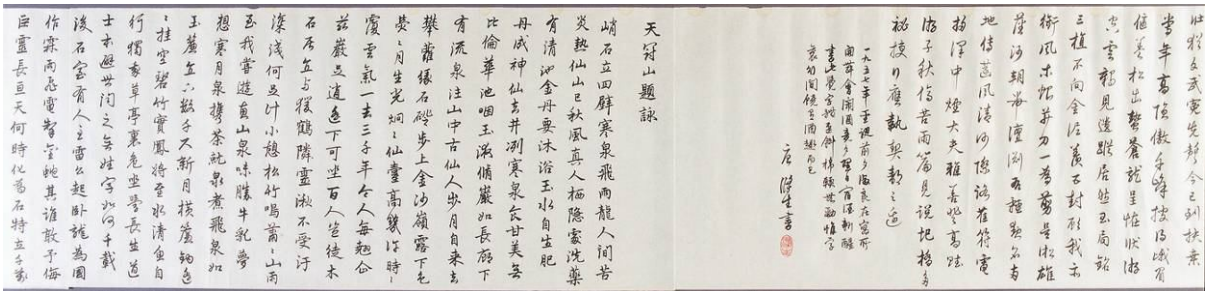


The Design Manuscript of Figure in *Romance of Fuji Mountain*
1953

2004.17.10



The Design Manuscript of Figures in *Lady Sheung Ngro in War*
1954
2004.17.19



Calligraphy by Tong Tik-sang
Handscroll, ink on paper
1957
2004.17.80

Yam Kim Fai

The Art of the Stage

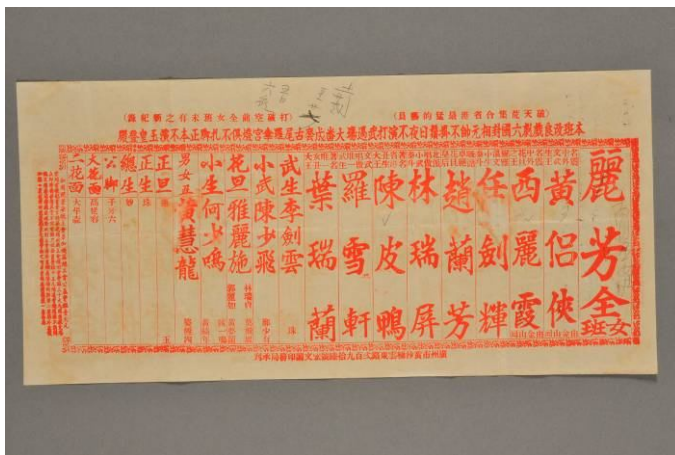
After starting his career in Cantonese opera as a copyist in the 1930s, it took Tong Tik-sang several years of hard work behind the scenes before he began to earn his reputation as one of the greatest playwrights to grace the world of Cantonese opera. During that same period, Yam Kim Fai was establishing herself as a major performer in a number of opera troupes thanks to her outstanding acting, which led to her being affectionately dubbed the “Opera Fans’ Lover”.

Born Yam Lai-cho in Hainan City in the province of Guangdong in 1913, and also known as Yam Yuen Yi, Yam Kim Fai started to learn Cantonese opera at the age of 14 from Siu Kiu Tin, an actress who specialised in the role of the *siu mou* (young martial artist role), and to take on male roles. She later became an apprentice of Wong Nui Hap, who was known as the female counterpart of Ma Sze Tsang, learning traditional plot, structure and form and developing her abilities to perform the plays of the Ma School. She then devoted much of her time to studying the martial operas of a *siu mou* called Kwai Ming Yeung, often going to the theatre to watch his performances.

After years of sustained effort as a minor cast member, Yam was promoted to the role of *man mou sang* (the principal male role). In the late 1930s, she went on to become the principal performer in a number of troupes, including the Mui Fa Ying Opera Troupe, the Kwan Fong Yim Ying Opera Troupe, the Kan Fa Yim Ying Opera Troupe and the Mui Fa Yim Ying Opera Troupe, all the while attracting a tremendous following in Guangzhou and Macau. She later established the San Sing Opera Troupe in Macau together with Chan Yim Nung and several other colleagues. For its second play, *The Dream of the Red Chamber*, the troupe invited Pak Suet Sin to act in the role of *yee bong fa dan* (the supporting female role). Enthusiastically received by audiences, the play was a great success and laid a strong foundation for the future co-operation between Yam and Pak. The San Sing Opera Troupe performed a number of plays in quick succession in Macau and became well-established there. Successfully developing her own acting style at the same time, Yam emerged as a popular Cantonese opera star of this era.

In 1945, the San Sing Opera Troupe presented its first play, *The Dream of the Red Chamber*, at the Central Theatre in Hong Kong, garnering a warm response from audiences. It was soon after this that Yam performed in an opera written by Tong Tik-sang – *White Poplar, Red Tears* – an event that marked the first ever co-operation

between Yam and Tong. The San Sing Opera Troupe was dissolved in 1950, and Yam then joined a number of different troupes, including the Kam Tim Fa Opera Troupe, the Tai Lung Fung Opera Troupe, the Kam Fung Ping Opera Troupe and the San Yim Yeung Opera Troupe, where she joined Fong Yim Fun and performed in many of Tong Tik-sang's famous plays. In 1953, Yam, Pak and Chan Kam Tong established the Hung Wan Opera Troupe, which commissioned Tong Tik-sang to pen most of its plays. Over the next few years Yam appeared frequently in a number of famous works by Tong for the Do Bo Opera Troupe and the Lee Wing Wah Opera Troupe. In 1956, Yam and Pak established the Sin Fung Ming Opera Troupe, where Yam drew on her skills to play the roles of witty sentimentalist and scholar as portrayed in the scripts of Tong Tik-sang. Now in the prime of her career, she attracted a large number of fans, who flocked to witness her wide repertoire and outstanding talent.



Advertisement of the Lai Fong Women Troupe
 1930s
 2006.49.962



Postbill for the Performances of the Kan Fa Yim Ying Women's Troupe at the Prince's Theatre

1937

2006.49.884



Postbill of the San Sing Opera Troupe

1946

1994.109.16

Yam Kim Fai on the Silver Screen

In addition to her enthusiasm for performing on the stage, Yam Kim Fai also developed a keen interest in the silver screen. She first became involved in the film industry in 1937 when she got a role in *A Mysterious Night*. But it was not until 1951 that she officially embarked on a film career with her appearance in *The Valiant Poon On Perplexed by Love*. From that time up to 1968, Yam starred in over 300 movies, all of which have proved valuable in preserving her great voice, beauty and artistry for later generations.

Yam's film career really took off between 1951 and 1955, a period in which she appeared in a total of 76 movies, most of which were costume comedies and some of which starred Yam in the leading female role. These films fully demonstrate Yam's talent as a comedian.

The years from 1956 to 1960 saw Yam enter the prime of her stage acting career. During this period, Tong Tik-sang composed a number of famous plays for the San Yim Yeung Opera Troupe, the Sin Fung Ming Opera Troupe and the Lai Sing Opera Troupe in which Yam took on a variety of roles, such as the destitute scholar or the talented young man from a wealthy or influential family. Many of the Cantonese operas in which she starred were later adapted for the screen. Capturing the essence of her stage art for generations to come, these films retain an immense cultural and heritage value.

In the 1960s, Hong Kong's film industry saw a surge in the popularity of martial arts fantasies. Embracing the necessary changes to her sentimental image and style, Yam starred in a number of these films, where she was able to demonstrate all the skills and techniques of the *siu mou* role that she had learned in her younger days. One of the most memorable of these martial arts films is *The Great Red Robe*, premiered in 1965, in which Yam played a high-spirited character with a smart appearance called Hoi Shui. With the fiery vocal style of a *siu mou* and an awe-struck gaze, Yam vividly conveyed the vigour and bravery of Hoi Shui in particular in a scene entitled *The Impeachment of Yim Sung* that provoked a tremendous response from her audience.

In 1964, Yam invested in the production of *Tragedy of a Poet King* with Pak Suet Sin. More than four years in the making, it was finally released in 1968 and proved to be the final film in Yam's illustrious big screen career.



Special Film Issue of *Lady General Fa Muk Lan*

Premiered on 29 December 1951

2007.25.161



Special Film Issue of *Butterfly and Red Pear Blossom*

Premiered on 16 September 1959

2007.25.157



Postbill of the Film *The Great Red Robe*

Premiered on 16 February 1965

2007.25.13

Nurturing the Next Generation

The sudden death of Tong Tik-sang in 1959 led to the tragic loss of play-writing talent on the Cantonese opera scene. As a result, the Sin Fung Ming Opera Troupe suspended its performances for a period of two years until 1961, when Yam Kim Fai returned to the stage to appear in the play *The New Legend of the White Snake*. After this, however, she started to step back from the stage, dedicating her time instead to nurturing the next generation of Cantonese opera performers.

In 1960, Yam took on Chan Po-chu as an apprentice, and this led her to focus her efforts, together with Pak Suet Sin, on training newcomers. Lung Kim Sang, Mui Suet Sze, Kong Suet Lo, Chu Kim Tang and Yin Suet Fun all studied under Yam and Pak, who had the idea of presenting them in a performance of *The Romance of the White Snake*. After teaching these apprentices the stylised movements, gaits, vocal presentation and dialogue of Cantonese opera, Yam and Pak established the Chor Fung Ming Opera Troupe especially for them. The troupe gave its premiere in Hong Kong in 1965 and enjoyed good success at the box office.

In 1968, the Sin Fung Ming Opera Troupe collaborated with the Chor Fung Ming Opera Troupe to present a number of Tong Tik-sang's plays. Seven years after her last performance, Yam's fans finally had the opportunity to experience her charming presence on stage once again. The performance of *Princess Cheung Ping* with Pak and the Chor Fung Ming Opera Troupe at the Lee Theatre in December 1969 brought the curtain down on Yam's stellar career.

Yam made one final appearance, appearing with Pak in the "June 18 Rainstorm" fund-raising concert in 1972, but this was to be her very last public performance.

After retiring from the stage, Yam enjoyed a happy and comfortable life, playing mahjong with her friends and travelling the world with her long-time partner and friend Pak. Yam passed away from an illness on 29 November 1989. She was 77 years of age.



Special Issue of the Debut of the Chor Fung Ming Opera Troupe

1965

2007.25.23



Special Issue of the Sin Fung Ming Opera Troupe and the Chor Fung Ming Opera Troupe

1969

2007.25.30



Yam Kim Fai and Lung Kim Sang in the Stage Adaptation of *The Legend of Purple Hairpin*

1968

2007.25.944