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Technologizing the Vernacular: Cantonese Opera Films through *The Legend of Purple Hairpin*

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**Technologizing the Vernacular:
Cantonese Opera Films through *The Legend of Purple Hairpin***

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Abstract

This essay studies the interaction of film and traditional Cantonese stage through the genre of Cantonese opera films. It attempts to examine the relation of the two media as well as the nexus of opera films with Hong Kong society and culture. Technologizing the vernacular is homage to Walter Ong's technologizing of the word in which he argues that the rise of technologies, such as writing, print and electronic media, have generated new ways of consciousness. This essay argues that in Hong Kong context, this new consciousness can be fathomed through Cantonese opera films. The essay recognizes a technologizing effect traditional stage has undergone in a modern context traversed with different force relations and dominated by the increasing presence and penetration of technologies. The mechanization of Cantonese opera is, however, accompanied by a compensatory excess of expressivity in the 1950s. The heavy pathos and exaggerated performance siphons off abstraction attendant on mechanization. Opera films, particularly those composed by Tong Tik-sang for the troupe Sin Fung Ming, strike a psychic resonance in Hong Kong culture and society. The mode of expression specific to opera, the emphasis on and all-round development of sentiment, has deep repercussions on post-war Hong Kong bogged down with war trauma, poverty, population inflation, and housing shortages. They have demonstrated as well their ties with other aspects of Hong Kong culture. The essay argues that film's role in representing the mode of expression specific to opera should in no case be discredited. A case study has been conducted of *The Legend of Purple Hairpin* (Zi Chai Ji, 1959).

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This essay¹ studies the interaction of film and traditional Cantonese stage through the unique genre of Cantonese opera films. The genre's rapid rise, expansion and decline² within the span of two decades have made the effort to examine the relation of the two media as well as with Hong Kong society and culture worthwhile. Though no longer produced in contemporary Hong Kong cinema³, opera films form a substantial stratum of the collective memory of Hong Kong in the 1950s, referenced, for instance, in Fruit Chan's *Little Cheung* (Xi Lu Xiang, 1999). An homage to the eponymous *The Kid* (1950) in its Chinese title, which stars the then little Bruce Lee, *Little Cheung* pays respect as well to Sun Ma Si Tsang, one of the most versatile, prolific and popular opera stars in the 1950s. The main plot of the street-wise little Cheung and his friendship with the new Mainland immigrant is interwoven with glimpses of Sun Ma Si Tsang's opera performance replayed on TV and reports chronicling his subsequent death and his family rankle over the will in 1997.

Shot from the perspective of a child, the film represents Hong Kong at the grassroots level as well as the city's debate over the new Mainland immigrant problem attendant on the handover. To some extent, Sun Ma's appearance and clips of the opera reruns, triggered by his health condition, is coincidental with the 1997 deadline, but the intentionality of links between *Little Cheung* and a vernacular way of life and expression symbolized by Sun Ma and Bruce Lee is unmistakable, marked, for instance, by the character Cheung in their names which forms a wedge of the trio. The realistic nature of the time frame for the Sun Ma plot

¹ Two types of spelling system have been adopted in this essay. I have used the Cantonese spelling system for names and organizations from Hong Kong. In designated cases, the English names of personalities, Fruit Chan, Bruce Lee, John Woo, have been kept since they have been recognized as such. The system of Pinyin has been used for other names, titles or associations. As to the translation of primary Chinese sources into English, unless indicated otherwise, all translations are mine.

² According to Yu Mo-wan, opera films amount to 515 in the decade of 1950s alone. The production of Cantonese opera films tapers off thereafter with a hundred odd in the 1960s and only three in the 1970s. After 1990 it comes to a complete halt. See Yu Mo-wan, *A Historical Account of Hong Kong Cinema* Vol. 4, Hong Kong: Subculture, 2000, p19

³ *The Legend of Lee Heung Kwan* (Li Xiangjun, 1990) by Chor Yuen is the last opera film made. See Sek Kei, "Chor Yuen: A Cross-Border Romantic Director" in Kwok Tsing-ning & Lam Tin-wan (eds.) *The Director Chor Yuen*, Hong Kong: Hong Kong Film Archive, 2006, p64

and its progression towards a destined end of death mirrors the mood of doom permeating films adapting similar strategies of the period, most notably Wayne Wang's *Chinese Box* (1997). *Little Cheung* ranks as well among the plethora of films that search for times lost, Stanley Kwan's *Rouge* (Yan Zhi Kou, 1988), Wong Kar-wai's *Days of Being Wild* (A Fei Zheng Zhuan, 1990) and *In the Mood for Love* (Hua Yang Nian Hua, 2000) and so on. The backward glance of nostalgia, triggered by an awareness of the historically intense and culturally critical present of the handover, renders nostalgic films strong allegories of identity seeking. A palimpsest text juxtaposing contemporary little Cheung and his new immigrant friend in 1990s Hong Kong with Hong Kong in the 1950s, the film is a thinly-veiled allegory of identity seeking. *Little Cheung* additionally indicates a number of issues pertinent to this essay, the grassroots nature of Cantonese opera; the periphery status of the vernacular art form and expression; and unevenness between native Hong Kongers and Mainland immigrant represented symbolically by the division of different language cinemas back in the 1950s.

Though no longer produced on celluloid, Cantonese opera is still entertained in the city's theatres, its city hall auditoriums, in ritual contexts in the outlying areas of Hong Kong or on late night TV reruns. A vernacular art form that dates back to as early as the Ming dynasty (1368-1644), Cantonese opera has undergone substantial changes over the years. While it is not the intention of this essay to chronicle these changes, it is pertinent to point out that one most notable catalyst of these changes is the mutual borrowing and illumination of different media, traditional stage, Western drama and film. This essay is an effort to study the impact of film technology on traditional stage through studying Cantonese opera films produced in the 1950s Hong Kong. A regional opera that gets its appellation from the Cantonese vernacular, a dialect native to Hong Kong and in parts of neighboring Guangdong and Guangxi provinces, the opera has a number of specificities: a heavy tendency to loan tunes and lyrics from outside sources, a greater number of musical instruments (when compared with Peking opera), and the preponderant use of percussion music. But it also

shares a number of commonalities with Peking opera in terms of repertoire, formulaic performance and symbolic acting protocols.

This essay is very concerned with the transformation of a native art form under the impact of mechanical reproduction. My use of the vernacular is inspired by the writings of a number of scholars⁴, when they argue the study of cinema should be situated within the context of urban culture and modernity. While this essay attempts to study cinema in its cultural context, its specific take relates more to the notion of a local art form, its expression and translation with other media, most notably film, than that of an alternative form of modernism. The primary object of study is the opera film, *The Legend of Purple Hairpin* (Zi Chai Ji, 1959, hereafter *Hairpin*). Technologizing the vernacular is homage to Walter Ong's technologizing of the word in which he argues that the rise of technologies, such as writing, print and electronic media, have generated new ways of consciousness. In Hong Kong context, this new consciousness can be fathomed through the filming of Cantonese opera, which involves such ramifications as the following: the reduction from the three dimensions of the stage to two dimensions of the film; the impact of magnification; the reduction of flesh and blood actors into mere shadows; the construction of dramatic relations through shot/counter shot, and so on.

The mechanization of Cantonese opera is, however, accompanied by a compensatory excess of expressivity, a dimension missing in Ong's medium aesthetics. The heavy pathos and exaggerated performance, aided by the soothing quality of the music which tides the spectator over the course of the film, siphons off abstraction attendant on mechanization. Therefore, the essay ultimately differs from Ong's medium-oriented approach in its supplement of culture and film history. In other words, the essay is concerned with a

⁴ The concept of the vernacular has been inspired by writing on cinema and modernity. Among the writings that argue for situating the study of cinema in the context of modernity are: Miriam Hansen, "The mass production of the senses: classical cinema as vernacular modernism" in Christine Gledhill ed. *Reinventing Film Studies*; Zhang Zhen, *An Amorous History of the Silver Screen: Shanghai Cinema 1896-1937*, Chicago: Chicago UP, 2005; Ben Singer, *Melodrama and Modernity: Early Sensational Cinema and its Contexts*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2001; Anne Friedberg, *Window Shopping: Cinema and the Postmodern*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993.

technologizing effect traditional stage has undergone in a modern context traversed with different force relations and dominated by the increasing presence and penetration of technologies. The crux of the essay lies in how inter-media illumination and clash, particularly between opera and film, has facilitated an increasingly uplifting effort in traditional Cantonese stage representation, and which has been sidelined by a compensatory emphasis on pathos. Unevenness and disparateness is a salient feature of these opera films.

The relation of film and Cantonese opera dates back to the very beginning, upon film's entry to Hong Kong context⁵. But no copies of early opera films exist to gauge the initial interaction of film and opera, so the recognition ultimately stands only as signposts, with their commonality stopping at a shared story, opera music and stars. Reports of factors for the success of opera films in the film journal *Ling Xing* reveals, the specific interaction between film and opera is tied to the salient feature of the Cantonese vernacular when the first Cantonese sound film albeit made in Shanghai, *The White Gold Dragon* (Bai Jin Long, 1933, hereafter “*Dragon*”) became successful in Cantonese speaking community⁶. *The Mourning of the Chaste Tree Flower* (Qi Jing Hua, 1933), a production in Hong Kong soil by the same company that made *Dragon*, Tianyi, is a follow up to capitalize the success of the latter in Cantonese speaking Guangzhou and Southeast Asia⁷. In both instances, the popularity of Cantonese opera is the business strategy with which Tianyi attempts to open up film market overseas. At the same time, the advent of sound technology is a strategy Tianyi does not want to miss latching on to open up new market away from the stranglehold of Shanghai where the company was being squeezed out of business by the concerted effort of other film companies⁸. Tianyi's contingent business acumen unexpectedly hits upon a gold

⁵ The commonly cited evidences are the first film short, *Zhuangzi Tests His Wife* (Zhuangzi Shi Qi, 1913) and the first feature made by a Hong Kong company, *Rouge* (Yanzhi 1917), are adapted from Cantonese opera. An early sound film on Hong Kong soil, *The Mourning of the Chaste Tree Flower* (Qi Jing Hua, 1933), is from the same source and stars the Cantonese opera star Pak Kwiu-wing.

⁶ An Opera Fan Huang, *Ling Xing*, 2nd Anniversary special edition, Guangzhou, 1932

⁷ See Yu Mowan, *A Historical Account of Hong Kong Cinema* Vol. 2, Hong Kong: Subculture, 1997, p72

⁸ Ibid, p72

mine, which subsequent Cantonese film companies turn out to exploit substantially in decades to come.

Dragon has Sit Kok-sin, the opera star playing the male lead, speaking and singing in the Cantonese vernacular but clothed in Western attire. The craze for dialect films it helps initiate in Canton, Hong Kong and Cantonese-speaking communities in Singapore and Malaysia shows the marketability of capitalizing local art form which has already in its possession a crop of clout-wielding stars, a stable repertoire, an established segment of the market. Film's wrestle with the local stage sees protracted resistance from the latter, indeed film is severely exploited by the former by virtue of its heretofore established status. The relative facileness of making opera films, most being documentaries of stage performance synched with pre-recorded music, accounts for the massive number of the genre, and many turn out to be shoddy products and often produced at alarmingly quick speed, usually within seven days⁹.

Opera films, particularly those composed by Tong Tik-sang for the troupe Sin Fung Ming, strike a psychic resonance in Hong Kong culture and society. The mode of expression specific to opera, the emphasis on and all-round development of sentiment, has deep repercussions on post-war Hong Kong bogged down with war trauma, poverty, population inflation, and housing shortages. Indeed, the image of the tear saturated and sorrow-racked faces of Yam Kim-fai and Pak Suet-sin, the leading male (female impersonated) and female characters and their sad love story in *Hairpin* is an icon of the era. But film's role in representing the mode of expression specific to opera, particularly the close-up, should in no case be discredited. To paraphrase Epstein's conceptualization of film's specificity, the close-up has magnified the depiction of sentiment by the impact of proximity. In addition, comparison of the film *Hairpin* with its remake in 1977 and John Woo's *Princess Changping* (Di Nu Hua) in 1976 indicates that film's technologizing touch detracts the expressive quality of traditional stage. The shortening of the opera conventions and singing to fit film's

⁹ See Chang, Che, *In Retrospect: Thirty Years of Hong Kong Cinema*, Hong Kong: Joint Publishing, 1989, p4-5

time format and emphasis on narrative coherence, for instance, have led to a reduction of opera's expressive specificity.

The Impact of Writing and Film on Cantonese Opera before the 1950s

The transformation of Cantonese opera from an art marked by orality to one increasingly organized by literacy is the first step towards technologizing the vernacular. In his by now seminal work on art in the age of mechanical reproduction, Walter Benjamin has indicated that the most powerful impact mechanical reproduction has on art is the destruction of the aura. Benjamin defines aura as the distance unique to an artwork, the specific time and space that puts a piece of work on the altar of art. The dissolution of the spatial and temporal specificity of the art has brought about the liquidation of tradition, but this at the same time enables mass-produced art to be enjoyed and/or appropriated by an ever increasing number of people. Benjamin's pronouncement belies a strong conviction in the democratic potential of mechanically reproduced art. To certain extent, Benjamin's prediction is born out by the case of Cantonese opera films which have made the opera accessible to a wider stratum of the population and subsequent generations far removed from its ambience. The observation and personal testimony of the impact of mechanically reproduced opera by a renowned local film critic, Sek Kei, are indicative. He says:

Without records, radio, films or the press, the opera should not have penetrated deep into the community and indeed, broken down the barriers of dialectical differences, enabling the national acceptance of some opera plays among the people as a whole and among overseas Chinese community. ... I must explain that I have never had a liking for or knowledge of Cantonese or Chinese opera. However, they became an ineradicable part of my youth through radio and cinema¹⁰.

¹⁰ See Sek Kei, "Thoughts on Chinese Opera and Cantonese Opera Film" in *Cantonese Opera Film Retrospective*, Hong Kong: Urban Council (Rev. edition), 2003, p14, original translation

Sek Kei displays here his belief in the cultural nationalism of opera films, but what interests me most about the statement is his allusion to the ubiquity of technologically reproduced operas in post-war Hong Kong.

The application of Benjamin to Hong Kong context, however, should be made with an important twist. Indeed, opera films have propagated traditional opera, but at the same time an obverse movement, an increasing intellectualization of the opera is taking place¹¹. A popular form of entertainment, traditional Cantonese opera has many qualities of orality a la Walter Ong. Ong's definition of primary culture is one "untouched by any knowledge of writing or print"¹² This, however, is not applicable to the context of Cantonese opera, since writing has been in existence in China since about 1500 BC. But Ong also remarks that strictly primary oral culture does not exist today, but its traces and mindset can still exist in cultures traversed with the imprint of writing and other technologies. Chinese operas, among which Cantonese opera is one offshoot, originate from ritual song and dance, an oral and communal form before the advent of writing. While ages of development and maturity have seen them develop and make adjustment to changing historical needs, Chinese operas still retain features of orality. For instance, Ong says in an oral culture, "knowledge, once acquired, had to be constantly repeated or it would be lost: fixed, formulaic thought patterns were essential for wisdom and effective administration"¹³. But this does not mean that an oral culture has no originality of its own, rather originality lies in "managing a particular interaction with this audience at this time – at every telling the story has to be introduced uniquely into a unique situation, for in oral cultures an audience must be brought to respond,

¹¹ A number of scholars have touched on the intellectualization of Cantonese opera, for instance Chan Sau-yan, 1988, p33-44; Lai Kin 1993, p202-7; Yip Siao-dek 1993, p88; So Yong, 1993, p77; Yung Sai-shing has brought up the transformation of Cantonese opera from orality to literacy in his review for Chan Sau-yan's book. But his application is limited to the transformation of script and improvisatory performance in response to Chan's book, while this chapter is more concerned with the interaction between film and opera. See Yung Sai-shing, *Anthropologizing Opera: A Preliminary Study*, 1997, p275-84

¹² Walter Ong. *Orality and Literacy: the Technologizing of the Word*, London; New York: Methuen, 1982, p11

¹³ *Ibid*, p24

often vigorous”¹⁴. Ong also indicates that human beings in an oral culture “do not ‘study’. ... They learn by apprenticeship ... by discipleship, which is a kind of apprenticeship, by listening, by repeating what they hear, by mastering proverbs and ways of combining and recombining them, by assimilating other formulary materials, by participation in a kind of corporate retrospection – not by study in the strict sense”¹⁵.

Cantonese opera has qualities conforming to the abovementioned features of orality. Its performance, for instance, relies for guidelines on a stable pool of stories, 18 fixed pool of old repertoire from around the Reign of Qianlong (1722 and 1735) in Qing Dynasty up to the 18 new repertoire pool with the founding of the professional institution of Cantonese opera in Canton (1889)¹⁶ to which new additions are made since the 1920s when script writing was professionalized. Not wishing to go into detail over the transformation intervening between the old and new 18 repertoires, it is worth pointing out that the old pool of repertoire originates from Kunqu opera, the then prevalent literati opera, while the new is related to the rise of what is now the Peking opera. But whichever type, the repertoire features story outlines transmitted orally from one generation to the next. Following established story patterns does not mean, however, originality does not exist on Cantonese stage, rather, creative and spontaneous performance is up to the performer in actual performance. Indeed, improvisation is a marking feature of the opera, in ritual context even to this day¹⁷. Opera actor training is done through the system of apprenticeship or discipleship, with the disciple emulating conscientiously the skills and conduct of the master. A grassroots entertainment form, the opera embodies the vernacularizing trend marked in the transition from the literati Kunqu opera to the popular Peking opera. The vernacularizing trend manifests itself in the adoption of the local vernacular, the setting up of professional institutions, taking up performance practices and music styles of regional flavor and so on. Before the construction

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ Mai, Xiaoxia. *A History of the Development of Cantonese Opera*. Photoreprint of Min Guo 29 [1940] ed. published by Zhongguo Wen Hua Xie Jin Hui, Hongkong, p21

¹⁷ Chan, Sau-yan. *Studies of Cantonese Opera in Hong Kong*, Hong Kong: Wide Angle Press, 1988, p52

of modern theatres, Cantonese opera was performed on religious occasions or village festivities to a motley composition of mostly illiterate population or as forms of entertainment for the rich on festive occasions. The context of performance is a shanty shed composed of a raised podium and bamboo scaffolds constructed in an open space or in the family of the rich.

With opera's entry into the modern context, teahouses, and then purposely constructed theatres since mid-19th century, a series of changes begins to take place, signposting the first stride towards technologizing the opera. The example of Sit Kok-sin, the opera star in *Dragon* and his reforms are exemplary. Before the times of Sit and his script writers, Cantonese opera stars rely on its repertoire for guidelines in their performance. Improvisation is a prominent feature in these performances. Studies of improvisation by Chan Sau-yan indicate it can occur in a number of ways. It refers to the fleshing out, based on pre-written framework, of varied components such as acting, singing, speech delivery and stage movements. But it encompasses as well the addition of elements not existent in the pre-written material¹⁸. No doubt, the improvisatory mode is conducive to a dynamic interaction between performers and audience, but it is also liable to erratic performance and irregularity from one to the next. The emergence of scripts and efforts towards regularity and preparedness thus constitute a tendency of the restructuring mode characteristic of technology and industrial organization.

Sit's demand for a script and careful rehearsals before actual performance is indicative of an effort for regularity and precision, a mentality triggered and made possible by the impact of script writing. Writing, according to Ong, has been so internalized now as to have ceased being a technology to some of us. But it is a technology by virtue of the fact that it uses tools such as paper and styli to record fleeting speech¹⁹. In transcribing what is aural and evanescent to the paper, writing is to effect a fundamental impact on the psyche, which is relayed on by the letterpress print that locks letters into separate spaces of silent visuality.

¹⁸ Chan, Sau-yan. *Improvisation in Cantonese Operatic Music*, PhD dissertation, University of Pittsburg, 1986, P114-5

¹⁹ Ong, p81-2

Writing makes our thoughts exact and gives rise to a consciousness restructuring. The practice of script-writing by Sit and his contemporaries is one stride towards technologizing the vernacular, earning him the reputation of a strict and cautious performer. Sit's strict and cautious attitude amounts to be a resistance against improvisatory acting, which Sit's one time disciple, Pak Suet-sin would later inherit and uphold. Other measures taken by Sit, toning up performance environment by doing away the distracting presence and activity of hawking vendors is illustrative of the attempt to be in gear with the mode of quietude and concentration attendant on writing and reading, and which is characteristic as well of theatre ambience. Sit encourages as well the uniformity of costume and makeup with opera's temporal setting, character type, personality, etc., belying a belief in close correlation between surface and interiority.

On the other hand, Sit's baptism in the 1920s cosmopolitan Shanghai gets him acquainted with varied media and forms of performance, equipping him with an urban sensibility. The emergence of writing and print culture cannot be separated from the birth of cities, but I regard Sit's stay in Shanghai more in the experiential realm. The film journal *Ling Xing* has recorded that, during his stay in Shanghai, Sit dabbled in amusement park, frequented Peking opera performances, set up a film company, and directed and produced a film entitled *Wonton Butterfly* (Lang Die, 1923?)²⁰. Sit's cosmopolitan stay sees him exposed to film, which triggers a number of ramifications. The looped translation of *Dragon*, from Hollywood to Cantonese stage then back to the celluloid in the Cantonese dialect, is symptomatic. The bustling film culture in the 1920s' Shanghai makes Sit see film's enormous marketability and a fountainhead for renovation. Sit is merited as well for his credible rendition of singing, brilliant execution of movements and gestures, nice make-up, etc, which is mixed with inspirations from film, Peking opera and Kunqu opera in the attempt to sharpen opera's competitive edge. Sit's move to incorporate props for the opera is rupture from the acting protocols and conventions of traditional stage renowned for the scarcity of props and

²⁰ An Opera Fan Huang, *Ling Xing* Special Edition, p18-9

symbolic performance, but they are strategies inspired by the need to enhance opera's commercial draw.

Having mapped out the nexus between opera, script-writing and film, I do not intend, of course, to isolate them or to indicate that the relation between them is linear or strictly functional. Indeed, Cantonese opera is exposed as well to the imprints of Western drama, both in its acting style and prop setup. Its interaction with the gramophone is another shoot of mutual combustion with technology. Opera stars, including the major stars for *Hairpin*, Pak Suet-sin, Yam Kim-fai, Leong Sing-bo, Leang Chi-pak, have all recorded albums, particularly in conjunction with their opera hits, *Hairpin*, *Princess Changping*, *Butterfly and Red Pear Blossoms* (Die Ying Hong Li Ji, 1959), to name a few. The persona propagated by their records should in no case be underestimated. But given this area is being researched²¹, and the special nature of opera films, this essay is ultimately more interested in the intersection of the two media, film and opera.

Technologizing Cantonese Opera: Tong Tik-sang and Sin Fung Ming

The decoding of Sin Fung Ming, the operas under the aegis of Tong Tik-sang and their filmed versions should be viewed against the backdrop of the abovementioned historical and cultural ambience. The convention of scriptwriting, first practiced by the composers for the troupes headed by Sit or other of his contemporaries, has become a profession by the time Tong Tik-sang, one of the most if not *the* most gifted composer, debuted as an opera librettist in the late 1930s. Sit's script writer for a time and the second generation of Cantonese opera composers, Tong adds a further dimension of erudition through the construction of palimpsest texts juxtaposing history with contemporary Hong Kong. Tong's plays in Sin Fung Ming are either adapted from Yuan or Ming dynasty play, such as *Hairpin*, or from folklore or legend such as *Fairies from the Ninth Heaven* (Jiu Tian Xuan Nu). Tong's

²¹ Yung Sai-shing's *Cantonese Operatic Arts on Gramophone* is one initial attempt to excavate their interaction, Hong Kong: Tian Di, 2006

touching hand materializes in a number of ways, writing lyrics for librettos, selecting apposite music type, adapting opera structures, and so on.

Contrary to his contemporary librettist, Tong employs classical Chinese writing in the linguistic expressions and structure of the lyrics, bespeaking versatility in ancient Chinese literature. Classical Chinese, with its strict demand of metrics, rhyme scheme, obscure references, and so on, is traditionally associated with the elite. The lyrics structure of *Hairpin*, for instance, are organized in the rhymed pattern of five or seven words and densely packed with florid expressions aiming to sculpt images of classical beauty and grace. The heaviness of his lyrics has reputedly brought comprehension problems to the largely semi-literate or illiterate opera audience, conversely intimating the intellectualization of Cantonese opera²². A perusal of Tong's operas in Sin Fung Ming uncovers they have good coherence and an awareness of causality between events. Modern sensibility exudes from Tong's scripts, as for instance the candor with which the characters in *Hairpin* deal with their desire.

But Tong's versatility spills over literature, encompassing music, painting, and film. He has directed five films, including *Blood-stained Red Shoes I & 2* (Hong Ling Yang, 1951), a family melodrama representing feudal oppression and budding female desire marked by brilliant display of light and dark chiaroscuro. His virtuoso in drama and film facilitates the translatability of operas to films and is a factor for the subsequent adaptations onto screen by later directors. Lee Tit, the director of *Hairpin* has stated succinctly of this quality, "[o]ne of the best things about Tong Tik-sang was that he knew as much about drama as he did about writing lyrics; he knew how to structure an opera, but he also knew filmic decoupage. Any director would have a head start if Tong Tik-sang was the scriptwriter ... (as) he was always shortening his lyrics and he was careful to give the performers plenty to do; very rarely would he let an actor simply stand there and sing. He understood that in a film, vocals need to be complemented by gestures, postures and so on."²³ In the picture painted by Lee, Tong is a

²² Wu, Shumei in *Pak Suet-sin*, RTHK, 2005/12/31

²³ Lee Tit, "A Director Speaks: Lee Tit on Opera Films" in *Cantonese opera Film Retrospective*, Hong Kong: Urban Council (Rev. edition), 2003, p72, original translation

learned strategist with a prescience of how to best manage and maneuver his moves in the proper position to execute his vision of filmizing traditional stage and dramatizing film.

But Tong does not only engage in uplifting opera through the sole role of script-writer, he has a vision of mobilizing intellectuals to reform traditional stage. By the time Tong wrote his most accomplished librettos in the late 1950s, the call to modernize Cantonese opera to boost its commercial marketability is as urgent as outcries against vulgarizing traditional stage at the expense of its artistic value. Tong's call for more active participation from cultural workers and critics alike in traditional Cantonese stage is an effort to marshal forces to sophisticate the art form. Tong's statement printed on *Wenhui Daily* in 1958 is the manifesto to this end²⁴. Relating the significant position of Cantonese opera, its long history and popularity as a composite art form in South China, Tong comments on its sad state with scant attention from other cultural workers and how opera professionals have to struggle in a state of unwarranted "solitude" with a discursive forum for the "critiques and discussions of opera art sorely needed in Hong Kong's newspapers". In the attempt to engage more people to uplift the opera, Tong condemns the outdated performance and management practices of some troupes. He vehemently opposes the vulgarization trend embodied by the incorporation of "superstitious and promiscuous stuff" and "the incoherent use of cheap music from Euro-American countries". Tong's opposition to outdated practices and the indiscriminate use of music from outside sources conversely indicate the necessity of updating opera practice, not excluding the need of borrowing from Euro-American sources, but that it should be incorporated *coherently*, a proposition born out by, for instance, his film *Sweet Dreams* (Hua Dou Qi Meng, 1955). Tong believes as well concerted efforts from the varied disciplines of music, fine arts, literature, etc, should be conducted to steer Cantonese opera on to "a healthy and prosperous course". The healthy course of Cantonese opera, according to Tong, resides in the setting of a good goal, which is "to remove old customs and beliefs and to instruct the populace".

²⁴ Tong Tik-sang, "Tong Tik-sang's Call to the Art Circle for Concerted Effort to Steer Cantonese Opera to the Course of Healthy Prosperity", *Wenhui Daily* on 13th of November, 1958, p4

Tong's statement represents a conscious opera professional who sees intellectuals as spearheads of reform and wields art as weapons of instruction. The statement delineates above all else a modernist, highlighting the concerns and factors characteristic of the debate surrounding modernism, the clash between art and commerce (incorporated in the opposition against the indiscriminate use of western music for commercial considerations), the nature of art in the age of mechanical reproduction, and the pull between ancient/modern, East/West etc.

Tong's aspiration puts him in the rank of 'progressive' ideals espoused by intellectual film people of the decade, most notably Union, a major Cantonese film company that has impacted local filmmaking scene in the decade and subsequent Cantonese filmmaking. Tong's idea of wielding opera to instruct the masses is in tune with the goals of Union. Union's director cum actor, Ng Cho-fan voices the goal of Union in this way, "[f]ilm is ... a form of art impacting hugely on social conscience. But some people have kept to their old conventions and neglected their social responsibility, leading to the low quality of Cantonese films and slump in business index... the establishment of Union is an attempt to save the ailing Cantonese industry. ... Our goal is to upgrade the artistic quality of Cantonese films, to make the industry grow and get the industry out of sluggishness."²⁵ Upgrading local art almost unanimously involves doing away with old conventions and upholding the instrumental and pedagogical nature of art.

Straddling the riddance of old conventions and the pedagogic nature of art seems paradoxical, but some dissection uncovers their connection for these people. Old conventions used in these contexts involves primarily three significations: first, the practice of filmmaking, or stage in the case of Tong, follows prior established rules and entrenched set; second, the propagation of feudal paternalist beliefs and superstitious stuff; and third, careless and indiscriminate art making. The upholding of the pedagogic nature of filmmaking indicates, on the other hand, the inculcation and propagation of a different set of values and ideology. Union's values and ideology are best represented in films such as its debut trilogies, *Family*

²⁵ Ng Cho-fan. "Remark on the Fifth Anniversary of Union", *Union Pictorial*, Issue 25, 1957, p2

(Jia, 1953), *Spring* (Chun, 1953), *Autumn* (Qiu, 1954), as well as *In the Face of Demolition* (Wei Lou Chun Xiao, 1953) and *Father is Back* (Huo Ku You Lan, 1961). While the debut trilogies deal with the theme of anti-feudalism, embodied in the opposition against arranged marriage, the critiques of bigoted patriarchs and the espousal of science, rationality and free love, the latter two films uphold the belief of communal spirit and the value of a new paternalism. The slogan of the Ng Cho-fan character in *In the Face of Demolition*, “I live for everyone and everyone lives for me”, is the communitarian motto and spirit gluing the disparate demographic makeup and tiding the population over the poverty stricken era after the war. The protective shield of the father in *Father is Back*, sheltering the daughter from the leering clutch of city loafers and dandies in Hong Kong’s increasingly citified scape, giving proper education to the boy and earning livelihood for the family, cannot be stressed enough.

Therefore, Union’s opposition against old conventions are not voices of revolutionizing art practices, but rather the articulation of a set of values and apposite practices attuned to Hong Kong context. Tong maps a continuum with Union values and ideology through the treatment of anti-feudal oppression and the pursuit of free love. But as the analysis of *Hairpin* at the end of this essay reveals, Tong goes further, grappling head-on with female desire. If Tong’s operas and Union production are constantly didactic, they take up the self-appointed responsibility of modernizing art practices in the local art scene. The modernizing measures turn out to be renovating efforts through borrowing from disparate sources with an eye to the local context, past/present, north/south, and east/west. The loan and borrowing in Cantonese stage is thus piecemeal and sporadic, writing a script based on a play from ancient China, composing a Cantonese lyric to a melody from Japan or Europe, pillaging martial arts movement from the Northern martial arts school, and so on. Consequently, unevenness marks Cantonese opera, a feature *Hairpin* bears out. Hong Kong in the 1950s makes recourse to these sources possible and welcoming. The influx of Mainland refugees including film and other cultural workers from Shanghai consequent with the wars have activated the local art scene with Kunqu and Peking operas, and the increasing cultural and cinematic alliance with foreign countries exposes the city to outside art practices.

The regional culture of Hong Kong is increasingly subject to the flows and imprints of forces from Shanghai, Southeast Asian countries, Japan and the West. In this ambience, the touch of technology is increasingly connected to electronic media, radio and film. Film as a form of technology is related to a number of factors, film shooting, editing and projection all involve machines and technology in addition to the inscription of raw materials on celluloid. The representation of art through the mode of mechanical production has entailed a mode of narration illustrated by classical Hollywood cinema, which David Bordwell, Kristine Thompson and Janet Staiger has outlined. I am not saying, of course, classical Hollywood cinema has been imported wholesale to Hong Kong context or that classical Hollywood mode of narration is the only universal mode, but rather an organizational mode reminiscent of the Ford-Taylor industrial mode of production and classical Hollywood mode of narration plays a role in standardizing certain Cantonese opera management and performance strategy. Besides, with the founding of Union in 1952, local fledgling film industry was firmly on its way to being institutionalized. Union's efforts in this respective include: setting up a stable work team of directors and actors; and the establishment of actor training sector schooling future film actors. Union's proactive effort is relayed by the entry of two transnational studios, MP&GI and Shaw Brothers in the mid and late 1950s, the virtual integration of production, distribution and exhibition of both studios being a big stride toward further institutionalization. The flourishing of discursive forums, the film page of major newspapers, and journals, *Union Pictorials*, *Great Wall Pictorial*, Shaw Brothers's *Southern Screen*, MP&GI's *International Screen*, etc, is an additional factor coming to shape a burgeoning film culture. In other words, film has been institutionalized by the time Tong wrote his best operas.

Tong's elitist stance encounters the opera cum film star Pak Suet-sin bent on reforming Cantonese traditional stage following the establishment of the opera troupe Sin Fung Ming in 1956. The result is history. Reforming the opera, for Sin Fung Ming as well as its predecessors like Sit, involves adopting a series of uplifting measures to boost its commercial viability. Art for the sake of commerce is undoubtedly abhorrent to a modernist. Yet with the permeation of mechanically reproduced art which brings it within close

proximity of the consumer, indeed as close as the home as Benjamin reminds us, the distance of traditional art has to be bridged somehow, hence modernists' ambivalent attitude. One route to proximity is through adapting practices that are considered modern. From the denotations of new, fashion, and in vogue, modern comes to be associated with Western art as well as non-local High art such as Peking opera which, though is originally a popular art form, has been elevated to the status of high art with its recognition of the status of official opera during Qing dynasty (1644-1911). Besides the notion of a modern troupe management with a system of clear role designation and distribution, the troupe's practice of renovated stage design is modeled after the stage design and acting of western drama, and the borrowing of performance skills from Western drama and film as well as Peking and Kunqu opera. As to Pak, the records of the nine Sin Fung Ming performances present a diligent performer impresario who attends to each detail to execute a good performance. The focus of scholarship on the strict demand Pak places on the performer and rehearsals, the unsparing effort she makes to achieve the desired props setup, the vehement opposition against improvisatory performance, and the massive trouble she goes to honing her performance skills, etc, has made her a legendary figure.²⁶

Their cooperation sees Tong taking charge of script-writing and melody selecting and Pak most other aspects including stage execution, character selection, performance, stage setup, and so on. In addition, Pak employs a Peking opera specialist, a disciple of the well-known Peking opera performer Mei Lanfang, to supervise the component of martial arts/acrobatic combat as well as gestures and movements for the troupe. Pak the performer sharpens her performance skills through learning from the movements and gestures of Kunqu and Peking opera, elements of modern dance, and western acting protocols. Pak's performance skills display a functional connection to traditional stage complemented by the relational imprints of other art forms. Debuting on stage at the age of 13, Pak has 20 years of

²⁶ Tso Fung et al. "Pak Suet-sin" in Lo Wai-luen (ed.) *Brilliant Purples and Bright Reds: Sin Fung Ming in its Prime*. Vol. 3, p68; *Pak Suet-sin*, RTHK, 2005/12/31; Yip Siao-dek & Lai Kin. "Pak Suet-sin's Contribution to Cantonese Opera – Thoughts on *The New Madam White Snake* and *Tragedy of the Poet King*" in Lai Kin (ed.). *An Oral History of Cantonese Opera*, 1993, p191-202

stage performance to her credits by the year of 1959. But records of her thoughts on how she acts a character through becoming one is reminiscent of naturalist acting espoused by western drama and film. Reviews of the troupe's opera performances have included comments such as the following: "the three-dimensional stage design which has enhanced the realist feel"²⁷, "the realist depiction of Pak's character"²⁸; "Pak's meticulous attention to singing, gestures and movement and costume to convey a realist feel"²⁹, etc. The sense of realism reiterated by different reviewers here refers to stage verisimilitude, and the portrayal of a credible character befitting her class, status and personality. It highlights a mode of stage setup and acting native to western stage but alien to Cantonese stage noted for symbolic acting.

The effort with which both Tong and Pak engages to uplift Cantonese opera is facilitated by their versatility respectively. Like Tong, Pak has a career spanning film and stage. Other major cast in Sin Fung Ming, Yam Kim-fai, Leong Sing-bo and Leang Chi-pak, all straddle film and stage. The amphibian careers of the major cast in Sin Fung Ming bespeak a flexible mode of adaptation to the marketable medium. It signifies as well the possibility of capitalizing the most marketable to 'salvage' the endangered, an engagement the troupe is certainly positioned to make. But it symbolizes above all film's indispensability to the local art scene and its performers. In this sense, Sin Fung Ming and its stage productions constitute a last-ditch effort to wrestle opera from the increasingly encroachment of film. Starting literally upon film's entry into Hong Kong context, the battle of the two media gets its first manifestation in the in/famous incident of the division of opera and film stars³⁰. Subsequent screen reproduction of Sin Fung Ming operas³¹ symbolizes film's

²⁷ Anonymous, "The Stage Setup in *Gold-Braided Fan*" in Lo Wai-luen (ed.) *Brilliant Purples and Bright Reds: Sin Fung Ming in its Prime* Vol. 3, p8; A Hu, "Looking Back and Forward: On Sin Fung Ming's Stage Works" in *Brilliant Purples and Bright Reds: Sin Fung Ming in its Prime*. Vol. 1, p74

²⁸ Hong Yip: "On *Butterfly and Red Pear Blossom*", in Lo Wai-luen (ed.) *Brilliant Purples and Bright Reds: Sin Fung Ming in its Prime* Vol. III, p9

²⁹ A Hu, "Looking Back and Forward: On Sin Fung Ming's Stage Works" in *Brilliant Purples and Bright Reds: Sin Fung Ming in its Prime*. Vol. 1, p73

³⁰ According to Lo Dun, the division of the opera stars and the film stars was triggered by a direct row between the film actor Ng Cho-fan and the opera star, Sun Ma Si Tsang over Sun Ma's procrastination at the dawn of the

amazing market value and its power of propagation, enabling it to be a chief medium through which many get to know traditional art. It signifies as well film's power of embalming the opera at its most florescent moment before its tapering off to turgidity and subsequent death.

The florescence of Sin Fung Ming has generated renewed hope for traditional stage, but very unfortunately to many the hope was dashed with the untimely and premature death of the librettist Tong in 1959. With the exit of Pak and Yam from stage after a charity performance in 1972, proceeded by a stage performance in 1961 and an appearance in the heretofore most expansive Cantonese film *The Tragedy of the Poet King* (Li Houzhu, 1968), the legend of Sin Fung Ming quickly evanesced. Sin Fung Ming and its works, however, indicate the operas are already saturated with a filmic imaginary. The subsequent filming of Sin Fung Ming operas is a calculated move from the burgeoning film industry to capitalize the splash the troupe makes. Fundamentally, the broad and deep reach mechanically reproduced art, or opera films can make is the bandwagon opera people cannot afford to miss. As Pak reveals in queries to motivation for the making of *Tragedy of the Poet King*, of which she is the producer as well as plays the female lead³², the making of the film is attributable to her reputed "insatiable appetite for new things" and a desire to "catch up with the times"³³. Pak's statement amounts to claiming film has become increasingly dominant in her times. In other words, the eclipse of opera to the rising dominance of film has already been inscribed in Sin Fung Ming operas by the time of Tong's death.

A Case Study: *The Legend of Purple Hairpin*

A case study of a Sin Fung Ming opera film, *Hairpin*, is conducted below with the intention to unravel the layered relation between Cantonese opera and film as well as the nexus of Sin

1950s. Lo Dun, "Lo Dun: Films of My Era" in Kwok Tsing-ning (ed.) *Monographs of Hong Kong Film Veterans I: Hong Kong: Here I Come*, Hong Kong Film Archive, 2000, p130. But the division really embodies a wrestle of the two media.

³¹ Their productions total 21 in the year of 1959 alone, according to Yu Mo-wan, *A Historical Account of Hong Kong Cinema* Vol. 4, 2000, p179

³² The film costs 1.2 million to produce and is the most expensive film up to date.

³³ *Pak Suet-sin*, RTHK, 2005/12/31

Fung Ming works with Hong Kong culture and society. A reproduction of the eponymous opera penned by Tong Tik-sang that features a stable cast of stars from Sin Fung Ming, *Hairpin* is made after the stage performance has caused a huge stir, triggering the director to attempt combining traditional stage and film³⁴. A veteran director having to his credits up to date a long list of films including the all time Cantonese classics *In the Face of Demolition*, *Eternal Love* (Tian Chang Di Jiu, 1955) and *Father is Back*, Lee is as much a virtuoso in film as in the traditional stage. Recognizing opera has “its own style, properties, performance and conventions”³⁵, Lee sets out to capture and reproduce it on celluloid. The construction of spatial and dramatic relations through shot/reverse shot evinces Lee’s filmic versatility, but the film ultimately comes across as a virtual celluloid copy of its stage sister. Sequence segmentation follows closely opera scenes. The priority being the preservation of an old stage form³⁶, the camera is positioned to capture the performance of the leading characters. The film employs predominantly full- and medium- shots, presumably to capture more realistically the actor(s) performing on stage. As a result, it strikes one with the feel of camera-rooted-ness and a disintegration of the characters with the background. But medium-shots and close ups have been employed for scenes of intense drama. Overall, unevenness is a marking feature of the film. Symbolic acting of the General contrasts strongly with the more spontaneous acting of the leading male and female character. Formulaic qualities stand out: clear and stark delineation of good and evil, a cliché scholar and courtesan love-at-first-sight story, and a wishful happy ending. But the chemistry and brilliant performance of the leading male and female characters endows the film with interesting rumination. On the other hand, the less than amateur quality of some extras and the occasional failure of music synching inject the film with a Hollywood B movie feel.

Nonetheless, the film has a number of salient features relevant to the art scene of Hong Kong: 1) that female desire, an off-shoot from intellectuals’ concerns with the freedom

³⁴ Lee, Tit. “On Shooting *Legend of the Purple Hairpin*” *Da Gong Bao Newspaper*, Feb 21, 1959, p6

³⁵ Ibid

³⁶ Ibid

of love, charts narrative trajectory; 2) that pathos, made excessive by Tong's all-round semantic and narrative sculpting and Pak's exaggerated performance is magnified by filmic representation, aiding the motif of female subjectivity. Pathos strikes as well resonance in 1950s Hong Kong; and 3) film conventions have led to the shortening of singing, a core component of opera's expressivity, giving rise to a de-sentimentalizing effect.

Hairpin is originally a legend from Tang Dynasty (618-907), which is adapted into a play by the well-known playwright of Ming dynasty, Tang Xianzu, on which Tong Tik-sang's version is modeled. The first of Sin Fung Ming operas on celluloid, *Hairpin* is the love of a scholar and a courtesan who unite after a series of carefully laid-out intervening trials and tribulations. The story of a scholar Li Yi (played by Yam Kim-fai) and the courtesan Huo Xiaoyu (played by Pak Suet-sin), *Hairpin* subjects the preponderant part to Huo's suffering and the price she is willing to pay for her husband exiled to an outlying border province not long after their consummation. The exile is the general's scheme to alienate the couple and secure Li for his daughter whose accidental encounter with the latter makes him her object of desire. Nonetheless, Huo has no knowledge of the plot and waits for Li to return, all the while pawning all her valuables to support the family including an aged mother and a senior colleague of Li's, and gradually pining away under the labor of love. Huo's three-year wait would be in futile, as Li is trapped into an imminent marriage with the general's daughter upon immediate return, but the timely albeit unexpected appearance of a yellow-robed intruder steers narrative thrust to the expected outcome. With the advice of the yellow-robed stranger who later turns out to be senior to the general, Huo manages to out-wit the general and win back her husband on the day of the latter's forced wedding with the daughter.

Hairpin is upfront with the concern of female desire to the point that it constitutes the film's narrative unconscious. The film starts with the scholar intending to seek pleasure, but only five minutes into the film, upon their first encounter, it has the courtesan cast the first look. The relay of looks exchanged is rendered with brilliant shot/reverse shot, each registering the shocking recognition of desire. At the same time, the relay of looks configures the courtesan as the one that looks as well as returns the look. Narrative thrust after their

consummation is centered on how far the courtesan is willing to go to secure the scholar, going through long hard sufferings during his exile with no news whatsoever (his letters are all intercepted by the general). The virtues of faith, responsibility and passive wait make the courtesan worthy of the scholar, but they threaten as well to endow her with a passive quality, which is soon deflated by her bravery and smartness, qualities demonstrated in the penultimate scene of Huo confronting and outwitting the general and winning back her husband. Not only the courtesan, but the general's daughter eyes the scholar as a desired object, an attraction ignited before the meeting of the scholar and the courtesan, which is represented as well by a POV shot from the daughter's perspective. The daughter's desire duly transmutes into the father's despotism against which the courtesan stands the test, so that in the end the love between the scholar and the courtesan is a battle of desire between the two females.

Lee Pik-hwa, a well-known Hong Kong writer, once remarks how the scene featuring love between a scholar and his courtesan upon their first meeting strikes her as unexpectedly promiscuous³⁷. What strikes Lee as so shocking is the outspoken nature with which the couple handles the sentiment of love, which according to Li is nonetheless grounded in the purity of their sentiment. But the shocking impact of the promiscuity is not so much in the literary depiction as the *visibility* of that naked desire in the film version. No doubt, the theme of female desire underlines all of Tong's works in *Sin Fung Ming*, a motif externally motivated by his tailor-making operas to Pak and Yam³⁸. It, on the other hand, relies on the skills of the performer for execution, with which the pair is more than competently equipped. Like Peking opera or other regional operas, traditional Cantonese stage relies on four skills: singing, narration, gestures/movements, and combat/marital arts skills for rendition. How well-versed a performer is in the skills and how properly-executed they are become the gauge to assess the performance of an opera star. The acquisition and

³⁷ Lee, Pik Hwa. "Pure Sentiment beyond Promiscuity" in *Tong Tik-sang Operas Vol.2* (introduced. & compiled by Yip Siao-dek), 1986, p3

³⁸ Mike, Text in Lo Wai-luen (ed.) *Brilliant Purples and Bright Reds: Sin Fung Ming in its Prime*. Vol. 1, 1995, p97

mellowness of the skills requires years of training and practice, as a result, opera stars enjoy high prestige. The honor traditionally accorded to opera stars gets eloquent manifestation in *Hairpin* in which the camera is pulled towards their performance underlining their centripetal role in traditional stage. The four skills are displayed in permuting combinations in accordance to role type, personality, class, etc, and in congruence with opera genres. In an opera featuring a love story between a scholar and a courtesan, performance lies in the depiction of a heavy dose of sentiment through balanced combination of requisite skills. The skills of singing, narration, gestures and movements predominate in a genre like this, with singing and narration a vehicle of narrative development in addition to being signifiers of expressivity. Gestures and movements complement singing and narration with a veneer of expressivity. Pak's representation of an ancient beauty through brilliant singing and narration is complemented with graceful gestures and movement. At the same time, Yam is so practiced in the requisite performance skills that she embodies the handsome and tender scholar in all operas of the same genre. In other words, the performance skills of Pak and Yam are honed to such an extent that they are encoded in the character.

But the depiction of desire has been magnified to the extent of shocking, which no doubt is related to film's role. The sharp visuality of desire has such an impact on the senses that it overwhelms. Under the scrutiny of camera lens, Yam and Pak come to acquire a personality and their screen appearance become photogenic. Photogenic, according to Epstein, refers to "an aspect of things, beings, or souls whose moral character is enhanced by filmic reproduction" and is a specific property of film³⁹. Epstein believes film, or to be more specific the close-up, can endow animation to an object or a being, making it liquid and mobile. Epstein explains how an object becomes an object essence through the close range animating hand of the camera through the example of a revolver in this way. He says, "(a) close-up of the revolver is no longer a revolver, it is the revolver character, in other words the impulse toward or remorse for crime, failure, suicide. It is as dark as the temptations of the

³⁹ Epstein, Jean. "On Certain Characteristics of the Photogenic" in Richard Abel (ed.) *French Film Theory and Criticism: A History and Anthology 1907-1939* Vol. I, 1988, p314

night, bright as the gleam of gold lusted after, taciturn as passion, squat, brutal, heavy, cold, wary, menacing. It has a temperament, habits, memories, a will, a soul."⁴⁰ The scene representing the lovers' initial meeting is done predominantly with full- and medium- shots, which no doubt is motivated by the consideration of capturing opera performance with minimal intervention. Indeed, these shots initiate the spectator into the world of traditional opera stage, even if not entirely. But the close ups showing the testing and revelation of mutual desire push the sentiment to the point of stark exposure. Indeed, the close up of the looks of desire ignited upon the lovers' first meeting comes to endow the sentiment with an impulse towards union and consummation.

The close-up highlights the performance skills of Pak and Yam, making their screen-performance very photogenic. Viewed in this light, the image of the tear-saturated face of the lovers signifying overloaded sentiment owes the resonance of their sorrow to film's enlivening role as well, making their image an icon of the society at that time. Arguably, Pak's performance does not rank as *the* best in the female performer role type, indeed her acting occasionally strikes some critics as too exaggerated and singing shrill, especially towards the latter stage of her career⁴¹. But very interestingly, the pinch of exaggeration in Pak's singing, narration and expression affords exactly the needed element to make opera and performance "photogenic". Critics have deservedly applauded the natural and versatile acting of Yam Kim-fai and other opera performers, but Pak's stylization has illuminated the screen cooperation with Yam. Tong's intricate linguistic craftsmanship is coupled with a narrative of carefully contrived plot toward the depiction of excessive sentiment, but they have not deflated the formulaic nature of a scholar-meets-courtesan story. Pak's exaggeration turns out to be a compensatory ploy offsetting the nondescript story and the sheen of erudition afforded by Tong's linguistics. Indeed, sentiment is so overloaded visually that it blots out verbal narrativity and comes to stand as pure icons of expressivity.

⁴⁰ Ibid, p317

⁴¹ Sek Kei, "Thoughts on Chinese Opera and Cantonese Opera Film" in *Cantonese Opera Film Retrospective*, 2003, p13; Lam Muei-muei, "Impressions of Opera Stars" p62

The pursuit of free love and female desire is a link Tong has with Union's goal of the anti-patriarchal and anti-feudal stance. Union's goal is allegorized in *Hairpin*, the reviews of which upon the film's release situate the relationship of the scholar and the courtesan in the context of "the abuse of power to persecute faithful love in feudal society"⁴². The handling of desire in *Hairpin* ultimately comes as more upfront than Union, of which ethical dramas, such as its debut trilogy *Family, Spring and Autumn*, represent the impossibility rather than the fulfillment of desire. Indeed, Union's debut ethical dramas attend more to incompetent patriarchs and the contested values of Confucian ethics in the changing configurations of socio-historical context and human relations than female subjectivity. The representation of a strong female character is foregrounded in *Hairpin*, the female lead supports the family and the colleague after the husband's departure. The external motivation for the strong female character is related to Pak, but it forms as well a symptomatic intimation of the presence and status of women in the work sphere. In the Cantonese opera circle, Pak is not the only woman to head troupes. Influential female opera stars, Yam Kim-fai, Fong Yim-fun, Tang Pik-wan, all have headed opera troupes. Film and opera cross route again as the reputation of female opera stars is tantamount to clout in the film scene, enabling them to reach the established broad base of audience through screen appearance or participating in film productions via owning a film company, becoming a producer, a director, etc. In this picture, economic independence and established public visibility tip the scale to women's concerns and subjectivity.

Techologizing the vernacular also curtails a de-sentimentalizing effect brought about by the shortening of elaborate gestures, movements and singing in considerations for film's narrative coherence and the time format of a feature film. Excessive pathos, though still existent in Tong's original script, no longer possess the resonance in the 1977 remake. The desire of the lovers ignited by their first meeting has lost its luminosity. The use of camera, however, demonstrates more fluidity in the remake. In both instances, the loss of personality

⁴² Lo, Ning, "Review of Legend of the Purple Hairpin" *Da Gong Bao Newspaper*, Feb 23, 1959, p6; Tian Ri, "Hail to The Legend of Purple Hairpin!" *Wen Hui Bao Newspaper*, Feb 25, 1959, p7

is related to the performance skills of the new generation of opera stars. No doubt, the excruciating slow tempo of opera films places strong demand on performance skills. Whether an actor can hold up to the camera and sustain the preponderance of the tempo becomes severe test. Music undoubtedly is a gel, ushering the audience into the opera world, smoothing transition, spanning over uneven elements as well as sustaining the long duration of singing. But even this component has been shortened. The fluidity or mellowness underlining the gestures and movements of Pak and Yam is missing in the remake featuring a new crop of opera performers, in addition to the heavily mannered style of singing and narration. On the other hand, the loss of versatility in opera performance skills, particularly by virtue of the characters' conscientious effort to emulate heavy-handedly from their masters, is indicator itself of the rarity of opera performance training and acquisition.

Though shot by the same director, the remake is apparently done with a changed context of production and reception in view, in which narration is prioritized over performance. The remake of another of Tong's 1959 opera films, *Princess Changping*, by the action director John Woo in 1976, serves as a good case in point. In Woo's version, actors are no longer the magnet performers who attract the camera with their performance, rather, they have become an element of the raw materials before the director to be deployed in the right position. Woo's fluent use and movement of the camera in the opening scene subjects all elements including the characters to pieces of a picture in the making. The remake's smoothing of the original's many missing elements and character delineation is matched with a concern with weaving a coherent and well-related plot which the 1959 version has to ignore in the attempt to better document stage performance. In addition, expressive movements and singing in *Princess Changping* have been drastically shortened, significantly reducing the dimension of expressivity marking traditional stage. As Woo states he realizes "the significance of the *image* in a film... so involved opera stage conventions such as gestures and movements, even stage steps can be edited or omitted."⁴³ Compared with the 1959 version, the 1976 remake

⁴³ Woo, John. "The Veil of *Princess ChangPing*" in Lo Wai-luen (ed.) *Brilliant Purples and Bright Reds: Sin Fung Ming in its Prime*. Vol. 3, 1995, p127, italics mine

has cut down severely on the singing component to match the film's tempo. What comes across after the dual hand of the camera and editing is a de-sentimentalizing effect.

By way of conclusion, this essay studies the interaction of Cantonese opera with film through Tong's opera films, particularly *Hairpin*. Recognizing the shift Cantonese opera has undergone under the play of consecutively writing (script) and film, the essay identifies a technologizing effect, an increasingly intellectualizing trend. In the 1950s Hong Kong, the trend is offset by the depiction of excessive pathos, and by the 1970s, it manifests a de-sentimentalizing effect brought about by the loss of versatility in opera performance skills as well as the considerations given to film conventions.

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