

Virtuosity and Innovation: The Masterful Legacy of Lam Kar Sing

Early Training and Mentorship

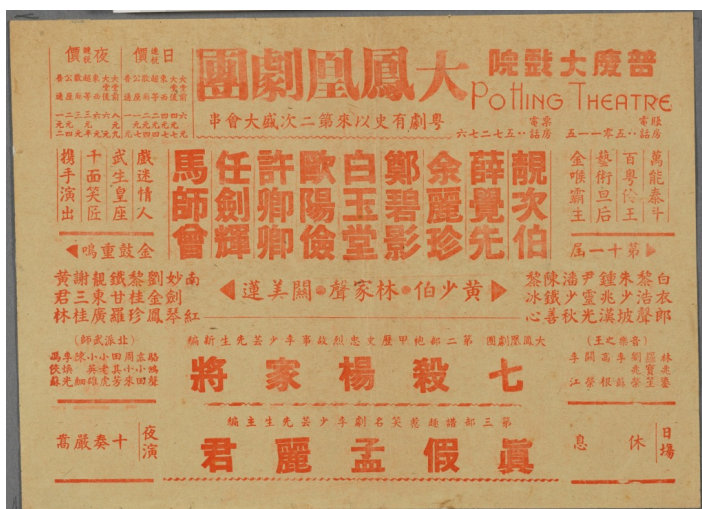
Born Lam Man Shun in Hong Kong in 1933, Lam Kar Sing developed a keen interest in Cantonese opera as a boy thanks to the influence of his father, an aficionado of the art form who often took Lam and his older sister, Man Nei, to see full opera performances as well as recitals of operatic arias. With the Japanese occupation of Hong Kong in 1941 that followed the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War, Lam stopped attending formal schooling and instead enrolled at the Rose Music Centre, where he learned to sing Cantonese opera arias and play the *yangqin* (Chinese dulcimer), before moving to Guangzhou with his father the next year. In 1944, he enrolled in Tang Chiu Lan Fong's Cantonese opera school to be trained in traditional plots, a formulaic performance that dates back to ancient China and in which the actors perform set routines from prompts and cues rather than from a prepared score. Lam made his stage debut just half a year after joining the school, an event that marked the beginning of a lifelong career in Cantonese opera. When the war finished in 1945, he returned to Hong Kong with his father and continued his training under several famous artists. Truly exhaustive in scope, his coaching now covered stylised fighting routines of the Northern School, martial arts, vocalisation skills as well as percussive point techniques as part of the ensemble. Lam was always able to assimilate the best aspects of the different stylistic schools, but perhaps the greatest influence came from Sit Kok Sin, a leading light in Cantonese opera at that time.

Lam first met Sit in 1949 when he accompanied the journalist Law Lai Ming on a visit to the maestro at his home. Offered the golden opportunity to accompany Sit by marking the percussive points during a singing session, he so impressed the maestro with his tempo control that Sit offered to take him as a pupil and teach him singing and acting skills. Lam was also given small roles when Sit performed with the Tai Fung Wong and Chun Sin Mei opera troupes, affording Lam the valuable experience

of seeing his mentor in action. Sit's stringent requirements for a perfect performance shaped Lam's expectations of what he wanted to achieve in his chosen art form.



Lecture Notes of Lan Fong Training School
 Repertoire: *Poon Kam Lin Teases Her Brother-in-law*
 Early 1940s
 2011.7.1116



Handbill of the Tai Fung Wong Opera Troupe
 Repertoire: *Ten Admonitions of Yim Sung*
 1951
 2004.34.37

A Young Actor's Rule of Thumb: 'Study, Practise, Perform and Diversify'

When the maestro Sit Kok Sin passed away in 1956, the impresario Madam Shing Doh Na formed the Kok Sing Opera Troupe in honour of this legend of his time and invited Lam to take up the role of *man mou sang* (the principal male role). With a stock repertoire consisting of Sit's classics, including *Flower and the Top Scholar*, *Why Don't You Return?* and *The Dream Encounter between Emperor of Han and Lady Wai*, the troupe won rave reviews and popular acclaim. The name Lam Kar Sing was also soon recognised as an up-and-coming young talent. In 1958, he joined the Bo Ding Opera Troupe as the *man mou sang* with Lee Bo Ying as his female counterpart. Together, the two of them created many audience favourites, with Lam's thespian versatility coming to the fore especially in *The Tragic Story of Leung Shan Pak and Chuk Ying Toi* and *The Story of Wong Bo Chuen*, as he demonstrated his capability in both civil and military roles. But although he was already the *man mou sang* in the modest Bo Ding troupe, he was keen to play the *siu sang* (the supporting male role) in troupes with stellar casts, including such luminaries as Tai Lung Fung and Sin Fung Ming, with the aim of gaining more experience and continuing his improvement. To this end, he conceived a rule of thumb for himself: 'study more, practise more, perform more and diversify more'.



Handbill of the Kok Sing Opera Troupe
 Repertoire: *The Legend of the White Snake*
 1957
 2000.4.65



A Scene from the Opera *The Regeneration in the Red-Plum Chamber*, Performed
 by the Sin Fung Ming Opera Troupe
 (From right) Lam Kar Sing and Leung Seng Po
 1959
 2011.7.699

At the Height of His Career

A new chapter in Lam's performing career was opened in 1962 when he and actress Chan Ho Kau became the *man mou sang* and *fa dan* (principal male and female roles) of the Hing Sun Sing Opera Troupe, a full-scale performing company. Tsui Tsi Long, a noted librettist and playwright at that time, wrote many new plays with roles that were specifically tailored for Lam and that were to form his best-known repertoire, including *The Sounds of Battle*, *Paragons of Heroism* and *Celestials Bestow Their Blessings*. However, Lam found that he could not pursue his vision of artistic excellence at the troupe, as it came into conflict with the impresario's commercial orientation, and he left after performing *The Two Heroes Thrice Claim the Phoenix Flute* in 1965.

The following year, Lam formed the Chung Sun Sing Opera Troupe with the impresario Yuen Yiu Hung, who shared his passion for promoting the legacy of Cantonese opera. Yuen encouraged him to implement a number of costly measures, such as full rehearsals and post-performance brainstorming sessions, with the aim of making each show better than the last. The troupe's highly successful productions included *A Chronicle Written in Blood*, *Torn between Love and Hate*, *A Warrior Couple Contending for Supremacy* and, perhaps most importantly, *Uproar in Jade Hall*, an original production that marked another breakthrough for Lam: playing a cross-gender role as a hero who disguises himself as a maid in order to be near the lady he loves, Lam exuded a vivacious, girlish charm that earned him great acclaim. 1966 was a socially turbulent year in Hong Kong, but the troupe still drew considerable audiences thanks to the well-written plots and librettos and the high production standards of their shows. Unfortunately, it was disbanded the following year when both good scripts and slots at performing venues fell into short supply.

Lam and Lee Bo Ying entered into a new partnership in 1968, forming the Kar Bo Opera Troupe, which endured for four years. During this time, Lam made another breakthrough on stage when he played the title role in *Lam Chung*, which called for a new characterisation and plenty of martial art skills – a persona that was far removed from the intellectual, debonair scholar that Lam had been associated with so far. It thus added a new character role to Lam's repertoire.

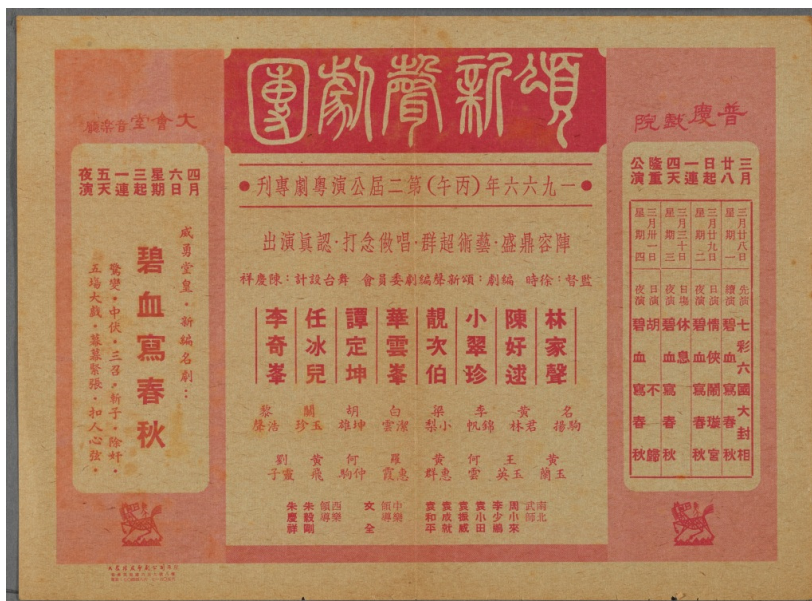
In the 1970s, Cantonese opera was buffeted by the emergence of new forms of entertainment. In a bid to inject new energy into the genre, Lam brought back the Chung Sun Sing Opera Troupe in 1971 as a platform for upholding and improving the art of Cantonese opera. Alongside his position as leader of the troupe, Lam played an active part in revising and creating scripts in order to expand the troupe's repertoire. Outstanding examples included *Chu Pin, A Loyal Minister of Sung* and *The Jade Disc*, which differed from previous versions as Lam introduced more martial arts into these 'civil' plays, *Bloody River*, which was given a new twist by the adoption of many elements of a drama production, as well as *Torn between Love and Vengeance*, a story of swordsmanship and chivalry, the fairytale *A Journey among Immortals* and the historical play *Lam Chung the Fugitive*. Chung Sun Sing folded when Lam retired from the stage in 1993, but it is still remembered as a leading name and highly influential troupe in the history of Cantonese opera.



Handbill of the Debut of the Hing Sun Sing Opera Troupe
Repertoire: *The Sounds of Battle*

1962

1994.139.787



Handbill of the Chung Sun Sing Opera Troupe
Repertoire: *A Chronicle Written in Blood*

1966

2000.4.70.2



Yellow Grand Armour Embroidered with Dragon Motifs

Worn by Lam in *The Sounds of Battle*.

1980 to 1990s

2011.7.1176

Lam on the Silver Screen

Lam began making films as early as 1947 in a career that was to span 20 years and over 300 appearances on the silver screen. To begin with, he played supporting roles but was rarely cast as a villain because his character always seemed to fit that of the well-mannered gentleman with a good heart. In 1958, when Fong Yim Fun, the leading diva of Cantonese Opera on stage and the silver screen, announced that she would star in a film version of *Why Don't You Return?* and handpicked Lam as the other protagonist of the story, Man Ping Sang, on grounds that she preferred an exponent of Sit Kok Sin's style, it caused a stir because it appeared to be a controversial choice. But when the film opened in the cinemas, it was a huge box office success and won critical acclaim. In the film version of *Princess Jade Lotus* later that year, Lam's interpretation of Cheung Yu, who vows to boil the sea till it dries so he can save his beloved, also received enthusiastic reviews, and from that point on he was always cast in the lead role.

As a film actor, Lam commanded a huge range of roles. He appeared in film versions of Chinese operas, costume musicals, action films involving martial arts, contemporary romances and dramas, comedies and tragedies, and he was able to create memorable characters – from a filial son to a chivalrous swordsman, from a paragon of a king to a gentlemanly scholar, from a valiant general to a loving man with a heart of gold or an honest and upright young man. His convincing characterisations won him a huge following, and his films often featured in the 'top ten' movies of the year. *The Secret Book* from 1962 even set a box office record as the highest earning film in Hong Kong of the preceding decade.

Many of Lam's film versions of Chinese operas, such as *Ten Years' Dream*, *The*

Invincible Yeung Generals, *Seven Woman Generals*, *The Sounds of Battle*, *Paragons of Heroism* and *A Warrior Couple Contending for Supremacy*, are still fondly remembered today. The martial scenes in several of his action pictures offer displays of the masterly skills that he wielded so confidently, including close combat, aerial leaps, riding and mime. His solid training, charisma and consummate talent are all captured perfectly on celluloid.

Despite his film successes, Lam still regarded Cantonese opera as his lifelong passion and, after making one last film in 1966, he announced his retirement from the silver screen to concentrate on the stage.



Special Film Issue of *The Sounds of Battle*

Premiered on 20 February 1963

2010.46.93



Special Film Issue of *Paragons of Heroism*

Premiered on 28 April 1964

2010.46.46

The Methodology of a Maestro

Lam's dedicated pursuit of excellence in Cantonese opera is encapsulated in his four-point principle that can be summed up as 'breadth, virtuosity, depth and innovation'.

For Lam, 'breadth' meant that the actor should keep his eyes and mind open and learn from different sources; he himself liked to watch other genres and sub-genres of traditional Chinese theatre, observing other actors in various roles in order to improve and augment his own performing idioms. Lam understood 'virtuosity' to be the continual exploration of every aspect of the art form in search of ways to improve, and he diligently pursued this goal throughout his career with the desire to make each libretto and each on-stage experience better than the last. In his concept of 'depth', Lam expected an actor to understand his stage persona in order to present a rounded character, while in his idea of 'innovation' he insisted on adding new ideas and acting methods to each performance.

The core of Chinese operatic performance consists of singing, acting, delivery lines as well as martial arts, and Lam never stopped practising these four technical aspects. He received singing lessons from many teachers throughout his career and never ceased his efforts to improve his vocal and tonal delivery; this involved breathing control, accuracy in pitch and tempo, the enunciation of each word, the design of vocal styles and the expression of emotions. The stringent standard he set for himself in this respect means his discography is limited to only around 30 albums, despite half a century of rich and diverse experience in the performing arts. In acting, Lam stressed that the groundwork had to be laid first, with the actor then working his way up from there; this involved creating gait and movements based on the storyline and paying particular attention to the hands, the body, the eyes and facial expressions. Following his mentor Sit Kok Sin's instruction, Lam closely observed the people he met in everyday life so that he could draw on true and vivid details when interpreting different characters. Delivery lines is known to be even more demanding than singing. The actor needs to have immaculate control over the speed, the rhythm, the volume

and the pitch of each enunciated phrase or word, and Lam took elocution lessons to refine his technique here. He also took the basic skills of martial arts highly seriously, making a point of practising two to three hours a day from the very outset of his career. He received training in both the Northern and Southern Schools of martial arts and was adept at incorporating them into his routines on stage.

In a career spanning close to 50 years, Lam not only continually sought to improve these four aspects of Chinese theatre, but he also made several revolutionary changes to the operatic tradition. For example, in the Chung Sun Sing Opera Troupe's performances at the Astor Theatre in 1966, he did away with the age-old theatrical convention of performing *The Joint Investiture of a Prime Minister by Six Kingdoms* to open the show, thus cutting back the duration of the production. He was also the first in the field to use projector-generated surtitles. Such innovative moves were so welcomed by audiences that other local Cantonese opera troupes soon followed suit. What's more, at the premiere of *Bo Yuk and Doi Yuk at the Red Chamber* in 1974, he decided to mark a scene change by dimming the lights rather than closing the curtains. He then adopted this innovation for the entire presentation of *Lam Chung the Fugitive* that was staged later that year. With no curtains drawn, there was no break between the scenes, and the audience could retain a perfect grip of the pulse of the drama as well as the natural emotional response.



Record Album Sleeve – *Crying at the Grave*, an aria taken from *Why Don't You Return?*

Sung by Lam Kar Sing and Lee Bo Ying

1970

1998.78.13



Lam Practicing His Martial Art Routines

1967

2010.28.213

A Legacy Upheld and Continued

When Cantonese opera was overshadowed by the rise of new, more modern forms of entertainment in Hong Kong in the 1970s and audiences started to dwindle, Lam took the inspired decision to sign a contract with Rediffusion Television to produce a Cantonese opera series. His idea was to ride on the fast-growing and highly popular medium of television not only to revive interest among former fans but also to introduce the genre to the uninitiated. It proved a highly successful move: the audience base was widened and more people were attracted to the theatre.

Alongside his concern for the local audience, Lam also worked hard to promote Cantonese opera on the international scene. He toured the United States with the Kwan Lun Opera Troupe as early as 1967, and he later led tours to Singapore in 1981 and North America in 1993. It was his proactive way of establishing Cantonese opera as a recognised art form within traditional Chinese theatre.

Lam retired from the stage in 1993 but continued to play an active role in promoting Cantonese opera by setting up the Lam Kar Sing Foundation, a collaborative channel that has allowed Lam to work with a variety of government departments, schools and social organisations. In recent years, he has also devoted his time to writing about and publishing his insights on performing on stage in order to ensure the continued existence and development of his beloved art form.

Lam's achievements and his contributions to the art of Cantonese opera have been widely appreciated and recognised by the community. He has been honoured on several occasions by the government of Hong Kong, both before and after 1997, and presented with many awards and accolades, in particular from the Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts, the Hong Kong Arts Development Council and the Chinese Society for Theatre Performance on the mainland.



Hong Kong TV Times No. 126

Report on Lam's Cantonese opera series on television.

1976

2010.28.174



House Programme of Cantonese Opera, the Festival of Asian Arts

Repertoire: *Chow Yu*

1976

2010.28.56

Partners in Life and in Art

Lam married Hung Tau Tzi (née Ngai Siu Ling), a fellow Cantonese opera performer, in 1962. Taking care of all domestic matters as well as troupe business so that he could concentrate on his stage performances, Hung was Lam's partner in life, in spirit and in art. Lam took great pride in telling people about her talents, in particular her costume designs: she first designed for him when he took on the role of Ga Ying Chung in *The Regeneration in the Red-Plum Chamber* in 1959, and she continued to take responsibility for most of his costumes in his subsequent career.

The two had been married for almost 50 years when Hung passed away in 2009. She had suffered health problems in her later years, as has Lam, but they remained perfect partners. Knowing that Cantonese opera was her husband's lifelong pursuit, Hung encouraged him to write and publish a book that would explain the methodology of his art before she passed away. It was her spiritual support that helped Lam to continue to build his own legacy while courageously meeting the challenges that life threw in his path.



Pak Suet Sin and Yam Kim Fai offer their wedding wishes to Lam Kar Sing and Hung Tau Tzi.

1962

2010.46.129