

Our Beloved “Happy Fruit” Lydia Sum

1. Introduction

The Shanghai-born entertainer joined the local show scene at a young age and enjoyed a glittering career spanning more than four decades. Many of her actions and thoughts were captured by the camera. Starting off with small parts, she played young maidservants, school girls, factory girls, newly weds, stay-at-home mums and mothers-in-law – the numerous roles she played grew through the generations. Her accomplishments as TV programme hostess and mistress of ceremonies are just as extraordinary, earning her affectionate nicknames such as “Sister Fei”, “Happy Fruit” and “Champion MC”. Her life not only reflects the development of show business in Hong Kong, but also depicts how the local generation who grew up in the post-war period struggled to succeed.

Artistes are intertwined with social culture: they act as an interactive medium between popular culture and the public. Pursuing the many inter-relations of popular culture, we interviewed Lydia’s family in Canada and also her friends and work colleagues in Hong Kong. We also searched in libraries and archives for texts, images and sounds that could identify Sum’s various personas in the public eye. We explored the cultural manifestation of her unique iconic status dating back to the 1960s.

2. Happy Fruit

Going to the cinema was a major form of entertainment in the 1960s. Amusing themes were all the rage as they helped to ease the harsh realities of life. The audience could relax and enjoy laughing at comedians such as Lydia Sum, Cheng Kwan-min, Tam Ping-man on the big screen. It was at this time that Lydia sowed the seeds for her “Happy Fruit” through the various roles she played. After joining TVB, the media began to refer to her as the “Happy Fruit”.

As television sets became a standard item in local homes in the 1970s, watching TV programmes soon took over as a favourite pastime. The variety show *EYT* met the general demand for an enjoyable dose of entertainment to round off a hard day’s work. Actors brought a spark to the show, and Lydia really stood out. Whether she was acting in comic sketches or performing as one of the “Four Golden Flowers”, Lydia delivered a sense of happiness.

Sum’s signature snigger was heard constantly in variety shows and her “Happy Fruit” image took off. Her laughter always rang out loud and clear in all the shows in which she appeared. She was always there to cheer on her co-performers and liven up the proceedings.

Lydia was a versatile artiste: she played different roles on TV and in films, and she hosted an array of programmes. All these roles strengthened her image as the “Happy Fruit”, while her own cheerful qualities in turn enriched this same image. The stars and friends who took part in *Fei Fei Inviting All Guests, Happy and Fun Concert* in 2000 are walking proof of how the “Happy Fruit” thrived and enjoyed a great deal of success.

Over the past 40 years, Lydia’s shrill laughter could be heard in every corner of Hong Kong. Her “Happy Fruit” image flourished, with the happy seeds which she sowed, becoming a source of positive energy for the working public.



Lydia Sum in a comedy sketch in *EYT*.
1970s



Stage costume
2000
Worn by Lydia Sum in her *Fei Fei Inviting
All Guests, Happy and Fun Concert*

3. Fei Fei (Fatty)

For the older generation, times were often harsh and material resources were scarce. Chubbiness was therefore looked upon as a good thing. Lydia auditioned at the Shaw Brothers (HK) Limited for a child actor part in 1960. Seeing the potential in Lydia's chubby yet sharp stature, film director Yueh Feng signed her up. In 1967 when TVB opened, Robert Chua recommended the naturally agile Lydia for the role of hostess for the variety show *EYT*. She began to be known as "Fei Fei" (Fatty). Her humorous acting, as well as her singing and dancing in "Lover's Duet" and the "Four Golden Flowers" all revealed her creativity, performing talent and deftness. "Fei Fei", a nickname without prejudice, spread quickly among her work colleagues, friends, the audience and the media.

While Lydia's "fatty" image was a source of cinematic amusement, it was more often an incarnation of a highly acrobatic performer. In addition to the "swords and blades" stunts on *EYT*, Lydia also demonstrated her ballet skills and even did the splits at the *Po Leung Kuk Charity Gala Fundraising Event* (1981). In TVB Anniversary Show 1987, viewers were excited yet amazed by Lydia's hard training and adept skills as she walked up stacks of eggs and pushed herself through a hula-hoop.

Over the years, Lydia Sum has been seen as a person who strived to achieve a breakthrough: a "fatty" who was agile and nimble; a gem of a different sort in a world that praises skinniness. Together with her signature dark-rimmed glasses and owl-like bouffant hairstyle, Lydia's lively "fatty" image will always be remembered.



Glasses

1990s

Lydia Sum began wearing glasses when she was in Primary Six. This pair of dark-rimmed glasses were frequently worn by Lydia Sum.



Wig

2007

Lydia Sum liked this full wig for its convenience.

4. Shi-nai (Family Woman)

Older generations would refer to women with children as “shi-nai”(family woman). Based on the traditional notion that “men make money and women look after the home”, “shi-nai's” played a crucial role in every family. They took care of the house, home-schooled the children and even helped to take care of the neighbour’s children if necessary. The term “shi-nai” was also used as an affectionate form of address in friendly neighbourhoods.

From the 1980s, the term “shi-nai” has been added with contents. It came to be used to describe those who sought petty gains and quick fortunes. In the films *Three Flowers of the Factory* (1967), *Four Gentlemanly Flowers* (1968) and *Lovely Husbands* (1969), Lydia played a factory girl, a teenage girl and a young married woman, respectively. Her roles changed with age, just as she did. She also took on parts as a “shi-nai” in films such as *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad World* (1987). These roles were an extension of her portrayal of the rapid-fire chatterbox image, depicted when playing the “Shanghai woman”, and at the same time, a reflection of the redefined “shi-nai” under economic advances – a woman who is fiercely protective of her family, demanding of her husband and children and longing for quick fortunes.

The economic downturn of Hong Kong during the millennium formed the backdrop to TV dramas such as *A Recipe for the Heart* (1997) and *Slim Chances* (2002). Lydia played a mother who persevered in pursuing her career and mentored her children in a unique way to enable them to face adversity and flourish in hard times.

Life is like a drama. The topic of “shi-nai” has been an essential theme in films and TV dramas. However society changes, and whatever new definition is given to the term, “shi-nai's” are still critical members of the family. They are stern but kind; they nag but they are meticulous; they worry for their children and family but they always look on the bright side. Lydia Sum’s portrayal of “shi-nai” characters successfully delivered to viewers the sense of warmth of a strict but loving mother.



Film costume
1987

Lydia Sum's costume in the film *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad World*.

5. Shanghai Woman

In the post-war period, Shanghainese migrants not only brought capital with them to set up factories and businesses, but also Shanghainese restaurants, barber shops, nightclubs and bathhouses, all of which mushroomed in Hong Kong. As the local elite group, the Shanghainese also symbolised advancement and high fashion. With ancestral home in Ningbo, Sum was born and raised in Shanghai. When Lydia moved to Hong Kong, she settled in North Point with her family, a district also known as “Little Shanghai”. The “Shanghainese” label seems to have stuck with Sum ever since.

Lydia played a woman who ironed clothes in Shanghai alongside other actors in the famous Cantonese film *The House of 72 Tenants* (1973). The realistic portrayals resonated with the general public. In 1979, Lydia played the leading role in *Shanghai Woman*, a comedy sketch aired on TVB's *EYT*. The comic segment enjoyed huge popularity for its depiction of the ethnical characteristics of the Shanghainese and the real social life in Hong Kong in the 1970s. Sum's outstanding acting won her yet another role as a Shanghai woman who lived in a public housing estate in the film *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad World* (1987). The depiction of the “Shanghai woman” was one of the many images which had become synonymous with Lydia in the public's eyes and it was also integral to her acting career.

While dialectal identities have blurred and the post-war “Shanghainese” lifestyle has faded, Sum's Shanghai woman image, just like the landmark of a city, still endures in people's hearts. Whenever the “Shanghai woman” is mentioned, the first association people make is usually with the rapid-fire chatterbox Lydia Sum.

6. Champion Mistress of Ceremonies

Lydia Sum was signed to TVB in 1967. She became a hostess for the variety show *EYT* and conducted interviews with famous icons such as martial arts superstar Bruce Lee, beloved

pop idol Connie Chan Po-chu and crown winner of the Hong Kong Princess Beauty Pageant Louise Lee. Sum also travelled overseas with the show to interview numerous celebrities and to attend major ceremonies, such as the inauguration ceremony of the Dominican Republic's President. *EYT* was the "training platform" for Lydia, thanks to which she grew and blossomed into a remarkable hostess and mistress of ceremonies for a number of major TV shows.

Talent and diligence took Lydia Sum to the next level of hosting. In 1977 she hosted the *Miss Hong Kong Pageant* alongside Ivan Ho, becoming the first female MC in the history of electronic media, helping to spice up the format by breaking into the male-dominated scene of pageant hosting. In the 30 years that followed, Lydia played host at almost all major functions, including the TV station's anniversaries, game shows, community and fundraising events, among others. She was tactful in cueing participants and skilful in maintaining the flow of the show. TV viewers were entirely captivated by her wonderful hosting skills.

Lydia Sum also made a superb talk show hostess. Her sincere attitude and insightful interviewing skills were pivotal in bringing out her guests' true emotions in popular talk shows such as *Behind Fame* (2002) and *Where are they now?*(2006).

As local electronic media have developed, large-scale live shows have become a channel for the dissemination of information and as such have come to be used by both public and private organizations alike. In such cases, the MC acts as a link between these organizations, the viewers and the recipients. Lydia Sum, as Hong Kong's champion hostess and MC, created an image not to be forgotten by the public.



Stage costume
2002

Lydia Sum hosted *TVB 35th Anniversary Special* in this dress.

7. Strong Woman

In the 1960s, Hong Kong was a male-dominated society. Opportunities for women in education, work and promotion were far worse than those for men. So-called "strong women" were only to be found in films. Sum began her acting career when the local film

industry was experiencing a period of boom. Lydia auditioned for a child's role when she was fifteen. Her dream came true when Shaw Brothers (HK) Limited signed her up in her debut film *When the Peach Blossoms Bloom* (1960). She worked hard on her Cantonese and took on roles ranging from the young to the funny, and also secondary roles, while gradually establishing her position in the film industry.

After joining TVB, Lydia's talent came into full play as a hostess on *EYT*. Her character in *I'm a Woman* (1979), "Chow Ling-di", was indeed a reflection of her own life, as "Ling-di" literally means "the next one is a brother" and "Tin-ha" (Sum's Chinese name) means "the last daughter". The role also portrayed someone who was as smart and knowledgeable as the real-life Lydia, who always outwitted men. In the 1970s, Sum established herself as a pivotal MC, playing hostess and MC for a number of major events. Thanks to her unique qualities, she took the leading roles in *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad World* (1987) and *Mother vs. Mother* (1988). In the TV drama *Slim Chances* (2002), Sum played a stern, strong-willed woman who struggled to stand on her own feet. In her real life, Sum worked very hard on her English to perfect her acting in the Singaporean sitcom *Living with Lydia* (2001). Her accomplishments in the performing industry were credited with numerous awards, given to her in Hong Kong and Singapore.

"Strong women" are more commonplace now that the social position of women has risen in Hong Kong. If the definition of "strong women" not only includes career achievements, but also persistence, professionalism, and continuous self-reliance in life, then Lydia's rise to stardom from minor roles, as well as her determination in life, were in fact a true example of a "strong woman".



A congratulation card with *EYT* artists' autographs
1988

8. Charity

When typhoon Wanda struck in 1962, the first major telethon for calamity relief was put together by Rediffusion Television, Rediffusion Radio, *Overseas Chinese Daily News* and the *Sing Tao Daily*. Since then, various organizations have used telethons as a channel for

fundraising. Popular artistes have played a crucial role in the opening ceremonies of major community facilities, campaigns and charity functions.

Hong Kong's first cross harbour tunnel commenced operation in 1972, and its opening ceremony was broadcast live on *EYT*. Lydia Sum rode through the tunnel in an antique convertible and became the first guest of honour to travel through the tunnel. Lydia also attended the opening of the Hung Hom train station when the ceremony was aired live on *EYT*.

Electronic media have been used as a channel for fundraising by organizations such as the Tung Wah Group of Hospitals, Po Leung Kuk, Pok Oi Hospital, Yan Chai Hospital and the Community Chest. Celebrity shows became a major source of appeal for donations. Lydia played her role as the mistress of ceremony for many of these telethons, in which she invited sponsorship from directors and cheered on performing guests. Her affinity and charm earned donations from all sectors of society. She sometimes performed stunts which let viewers willingly showed their generosity and warmly applauding.

In addition to participating in charitable functions, Lydia also took part in numerous benevolent or community events; she even acted as an endorser for a number of organizations. She was the "Caring Ambassador" for the "Restoring Eye Sight, Assisting the Poor" project of the Asian Foundation for the Prevention of Blindness, for example. Her efforts for the China Fund for the Handicapped, the Chinese Hospital of San Francisco and S.U.C.C.E.S.S. of Canada were also widely recognized. Mayor Samuel C. Sullivan of the city of Vancouver, in British Columbia, proclaimed 1 June 2008 as "MS FEI FEI DAY" to commemorate the significant contribution made by Sum to Vancouver over the years.

Artiste participation in community and charity events provides for a higher level of entertainment: celebrity popularity increases public awareness and participation. As a veteran participant at community and benevolent functions, Lydia's charitable image has lived on in the public's memory.



Lydia Sum participated in the *S.U.C.C.E.S.S. Millennium 2000 Fund Raising Gala*.
2000

9. Dear Friend

Hong Kong is a Chinese-dominant society with strong notions of the family and interpersonal relationships. Lydia Sum was a great friend to the people with whom she

worked. It was her endearing personality that helped her to achieve success in her performing life.

Lydia's career began with her audition to become a child actress, which was encouraged by her classmate's father, the boss of the Feng Huang Motion Picture Company. In the early 1960s, she became good friends with many film actors. The most famous alliance was the "Silver Mice Group", a group which she formed with Paul Chang Chung, Patrick Tse Yin, Willie Chan Chi-keung, Chen Hao, Chin Hsiang-lin and Alan Tang Kwong-wing. She also made good friends with Connie Chan Po-chu, Josephine Siao, Patsy Ka-ling, Nancy Sit, among other, as they appeared in the same films.

In the early 1970s, Sum met Roman Tam and formed a singing group with him, called "Lover's Duet". They performed on and toured around Southeast Asia. Sum and Tam remained good friends after the group split up. As a well-liked person, Lydia was acknowledged as a sworn mother by many younger artistes who worked with her. She bonded well with her friends and was a great host or companion at dinner parties, mahjong games and other leisure occasions. The genuine friendships gave Lydia a special edge in various programmes. TVB's *Where are they now?* (2006) was an interview show which followed in Lydia's footsteps to visit more than 20 of her friends in Taiwan, Thailand, Japan, Canada, and the US, among other locations. Her sincere and truthful image was shown on screen as her dear friends recalled fond memories of her.

Lydia respected the old, cherished her peers and guided the young – she valued her friends as dearly as her own family. These close connections which she enjoyed not only on screen but also behind the scenes, touched the hearts of the audience, who also regarded her as a dear friend and shared her emotions both on and off stage.



Stage costume

2006

Lydia Sum wore this costume when interviewing her close friend Patsy Ka-ling in TV programme *Where are they now?*