

Yu Kai, Cantonese Opera Master

Yu Kai was born Chak Yu-kai in 1938 to a family of Cantonese opera performers. His father, Chak Sin Chung, was known in the theatrical world for his portrayals of the *mou sang* (the male military role), while his mother, Chow Siu Ying, performed as the *siu sang* (the supporting male role) and the *lao dan* (old woman). By the age of four, Yu Kai had already started to learn from his parents the acrobatic arts, vocal skills, expressive eye movements and gestures of Cantonese opera, and he made his stage debut in 1945 when he appeared with his mother in *Lui Po and Diu Sim* at the Prince's Theatre as part of a show raising funds for disaster relief. His performance garnered a positive response, and when he was again given a warm reception by opera fans at appearances in Tai O and Cheung Chau, his parents decided to set up a new opera troupe especially to showcase his talents. They called it the Dan Shan Fung Opera Troupe, with the name taken from the line “a phoenix is born as its feathers mature”. Yu Kai lived up to his parents’ expectations, and their training efforts paid off. At the age of seven, Yu Kai appeared as a “gifted child” and co-performed *Poon Kam Lin Seducing Her Brother-in-law* (or *Mo Chung Kills His Brother's Wife*), *Third Madame Educates her Son*, *How Zhou Yu was Thrice Defeated* and other classics, together with his mother, winning great acclaim from audiences. He then went on tour, led by his parents, to places such as Macau and Guangzhou, gaining popularity among opera fans and earning himself the nickname “Yu Kai, the Gifted Child”.

To develop Yu Kai’s acrobatic and vocal skills, Chak Sin Chung arranged for him to receive personal training from several martial arts masters of Beijing opera, including Wong Fung Shan, Tin Kay Fong, Yuen Siu Tin and Kay Yuk Kun. The masters Chan Hon Chung and Lau Cham were also hired to teach him Chinese martial arts. To improve his vocal presentation, Lo Ka Chi, Cheung Sheng, Wong Yuet Sang and Law Bo Sang were commissioned to teach him Cantonese opera and Fung Hok Ting to teach him Beijing opera. This remarkable phalanx of trainers armed him with a range of strengths that laid the foundation for his hugely successful career and especially for his acrobatic performances in later years.

In 1947, Yu Kai's parents formed a new opera troupe that was named after him – the Yu Kai Opera Troupe – and gave him further opportunities to tour Guangdong, Hong Kong and Macau. By this time, Yu Kai had already mastered a number of opera skills, which he demonstrated by riding a cart in *The Joint Investiture of a Prime Minister by Six Kingdoms*, singing in *Why Don't You Return?* and performing a martial role in *Fong Sai Yuk Challenges the Boxing-Stage Champion*.

Yu Kai's excellent acting skills soon found favour among many patrons in Southeast Asia. In 1953, he was invited to perform in Singapore and Malaysia, and when he returned to Hong Kong for good in 1957 he greeted his old audience by performing the *man mou sang* (the principal male role) in his own unique style. In 1962, Yu Kai's theatrical career reached new heights when he took on the position of the *man mou sang* with the newly established Hing Hung Kai Opera Troupe, under the patronage of Ho Siu Po, and was partnered with Nam Hung as the *jing yan fa dan* (the principal female role). Other major performers in the troupe included Leung Seng Po, Lang Chi Pak, Connie Chan and Yam Bing Yee. The troupe made its debut with performances of *The Brave Young Ones Rising to Defend the Nation* at the Concert Hall of Hong Kong City Hall and then continued the sell-out run at the Prince's Theatre in Kowloon. During its 11 consecutive professional seasons, the troupe presented several innovative new plays, such as *A Beauty from the South Meets the Han Emperor*, *A Deadly Beauty Sheds Her Blood* and *Spring Breeze Blows to the Jade Gate*, all of which featured fight scenes where Yu Kai was frequently called upon to demonstrate his Beijing opera martial skills, with twin swords or twin spears, much to the delight of audiences.

In 1971, the Hing Hung Kai Opera Troupe and the Tai Lung Fung Opera Troupe shared the stage at the State Theatre in North Point in a double-bill system that saw one troupe star in the first half and the other in the second half of a programme. This new arrangement was warmly received by audiences and drove ticket sales to record highs over more than a decade of stage performances. The Hing Hung Kai Opera Troupe suspended its presentations in 1977, however, on the death of its patron Ho Siu Po. In 1983, Yu Kai and Nam Hung established the San Hing Hung Kai Opera Troupe and successfully performed in the Palladium Theatre in Mei Foo. Ten years later, in 1993, Yu Kai bade his official farewell to Cantonese opera with a

performance in a fundraising show that celebrated the 40th anniversary of the Chinese Artists Association of Hong Kong.

Alongside his stage performances, Yu Kai also appeared in a number of films. In 1948, his father adapted his stage work *Nazha's Adventures in the East Sea* for the cinema to produce a box office hit. Yu Kai was then in great demand among filmmakers. Over the next year, he starred in several movies, including *The Red Kid*, *Third Madame Educates her Son*, *The Orphan's Rescue* and *Kam Luo, the New Prime Minister*. They were all immensely popular, and Yu Kai was instantly transformed into both a stage and a screen idol. He reduced his film output during the 1950s when he was touring Singapore and Malaysia but returned to the silver screen in 1961 when he appeared in *Two Heroes*, an adaption of one of his biggest stage hits. It was another huge success, and Yu Kai continued to make films until his last production, *The Story of Fan Lei Fa*, in 1967.



Yu Kai Posing for the Opera *Why Don't You Return*

1940s

2010.10.580



A Scene from the Opera *The Brave Young Ones Rising to Defend the Nation*

1970s

2010.16.404



Postbill of the Dan Shan Fung Men and Women's Opera Troupe

Repertoire: *How Zhou Yu was Thrice Defeated*

1946

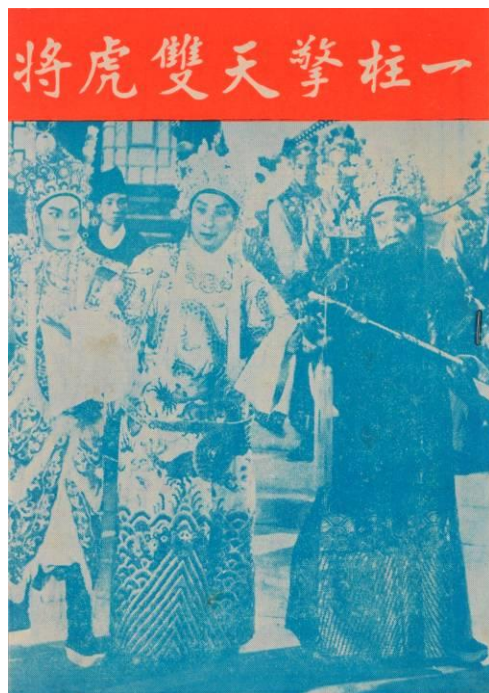
2010.10.673



Postbill of the 1st Performance of the Hing Hung Kai Opera Troupe
 Repertoire: *The Brave Young Ones Rising to Defend the Nation*

1962

2010.10.905



Special Film Issue of *Two Heroes*

Premiered on 3 December 1961

2010.10.1174

An Overview of Yu Kai's Cantonese Opera Collection

After he retired from the stage, Yu Kai was careful to preserve all the items connected with his operatic career, and then in 2009 he took the initiative to contact the Hong Kong Heritage Museum with the wish to donate these memorabilia. The hugely diverse array of over 2,000 items not only greatly enriches the museum's general Cantonese opera collection but also provides the most comprehensive resource for its studies of the *man mou sang* (the principal male role).

The memorabilia in Yu Kai's personal collection cover numerous aspects of the performing arts and can generally be divided into the following categories:

Cantonese opera costumes

The collection includes over 500 items – from full costumes, through headgear, boots and shoes, to props – all of which are in excellent condition. As Yu Kai mainly performed roles that involved acrobatics, the costumes, armour and suits worn by military generals and other warrior characters, such as archers and hunters, dominate the collection, but there are also examples of the *haiqing* (gown with a sloping collar) and the *mang* (python ceremonial robe). Overall, the garments range from scholarly to military costumes, including associated headgear and props, and reflect the brilliant stage charisma Yu Kai possessed in his heyday.

Librettos and postbills

Yu Kai played a part in many famous productions alongside many notable opera stars, and in his collection are around 200 librettos from his performances, including *The Brave Young Ones Rising to Defend the Nation* and *Spring Breeze Blows to the Jade Gate*. These are important materials that give us an insight into Yu Kai's performing skills. As he was a member of several different opera troupes, the postbills he kept also shed light on the history of Cantonese opera and the advertising methods used in the past.

Movie stills and special issues

Yu Kai made his silver screen debut in 1948 and went on to star in more than 70 films, including classics such as *The Orphan's Rescue*, *The Battle between Nazha and the Red Kid*, *Kam Luo*, *the New Prime Minister* and *Two Heroes*. His collection of memorabilia includes movie stills and special issues from these cinematic hits.

Magazines and photo albums

The collection also features a rich array of magazines and photo albums. Yu Kai set great store by everything that was related to his stage performances, and over the years he collected newspaper clippings, opera photos, portraits and slides, all of which help give a full account of his sparkling career in the performing arts.

Music Records

Yu Kai did not make many recordings of Cantonese opera music during his career, but his collection nevertheless includes some rare gems, including *A Beauty from the South Meets the Han Emperor*, also featuring Tam Sin Hung, *Grievances in the Palace of the Qing Dynasty* featuring Ng Kwan Lai, and *Sit Ting Shan and Fan Lei Fa*, which features Wan Fei Yin.

Others

What's more, the collection has a number of everyday snapshots of Yu Kai and photos of his father, Chak Sin Chung, and mother, Chow Siu Ying, as well as Cantonese opera sheet music.

All in all, this comprehensive collection serves as a valuable resource for the study both of Yu Kai's personal artistic career and of the development of Hong Kong Cantonese opera and films from the 1940s to the 1980s.



White Sequined Grand Armour and Martial Flag

Attire of *The Joint Investiture of a Prime Minister by Six Kingdoms*

1960s

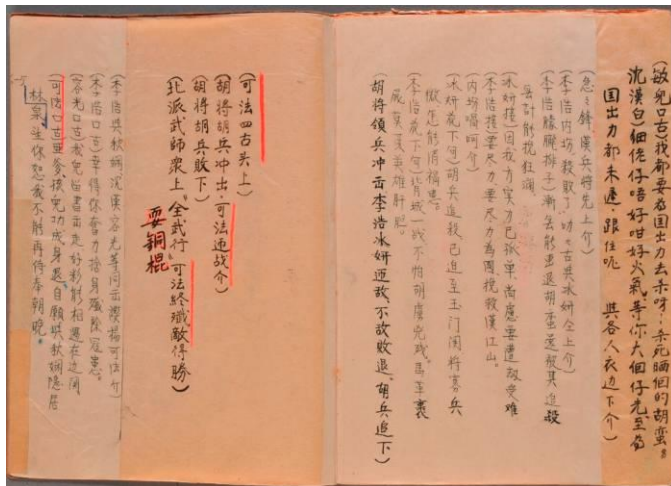
2010.10.203



Headgear for Marshal with Man-made Stones Set in a Nylon Support

1960s

2010.10.310



Stencil Print Libretto of the Hing Hung Kai Opera Troupe

Repertoire: *Spring Breeze Blows to the Jade Gate*

Yu Kai swinging his copper stick to repel the foreign enemies in the finale scene.

1965

2010.16.67



A Scene from the Movie *The War Baby*

1950

2010.16.724



A Scene from the Opera *The Sword*

1960s

2010.16.321



Chow Siu Ying, Yu Kai's Mother, Posing with Tang Bik Wan

Chow Siu Ying used to cross-dress as *siu sang* (the supporting male role) before acting as *lao dan* (old woman). She taught Yu Kai a lot of vocal and body gesture skills.

1961

2010.16.977