

CITATION FOR  
DR CHAN SHUK-LEUNG, GBS  
DOCTOR OF SOCIAL SCIENCE, *honoris causa*

Mr Chairman,

Dr Chan Shuk-leung, better known by her stage name, Pak Suet-sin, is among the most distinguished Cantonese opera artists, famous for her performances, including the acclaimed singing style she developed. Dedicated to the development of the traditional performing art, she has nurtured generations of talent to ensure the continued transmission of Cantonese opera.

The ninth child in a family of Cantonese opera artists, her father Mr Pak Kui-wing, was hailed as the best *siusang* (young male role) of his generation. Often referred to as ‘Miss Ninth’ in operatic circles, she was apprentice to the versatile Cantonese opera master Mr Sit Kok-sin at the age of 13 and got her first stage role a year later. She humbly declined the female lead, opting to play a supporting role instead. Her first encounter with Ms Yam Kim-fai that same year set the stage for the future Yam-Pak legend.

Ms Yam Kim-fai and Dr Chan played the roles of *manmousang* (male lead) and *jingyan faadan* (female lead), respectively, after forming the opera troupe Sin Fung Ming in 1956. At that time, Cantonese opera was in decline and was not considered a serious art form. The Sin Fung Ming Opera Troupe successfully transformed the traditional art form from entertainment for the masses to a sophisticated aesthetic performance. It brought together the top Cantonese opera practitioners of the era, including talented lyricist and playwright Mr Tong Tik-sang as scriptwriter, and iconic stars in warrior and comedic roles, namely Mr Lang Chi-pak and Mr Leung Sing-bo. To cater for both refined and popular tastes, Mr Tong produced a variety of Cantonese operas. He adapted many dramas (*zajus*) from the Yuan dynasty and operas (*xiqu*s) from the Ming and Qing dynasties to create countless classics containing rhetorical dialogues and lyrics that showcase the elegance and grace of Chinese literature.

Other than focusing on these productions, Dr Chan strove to perfect her artistic skills, studying under famous masters; in particular Ms Hu Ying, who was the wife of Mr Sun Yangnong, a former apprentice of Peking opera master Mr Mei Lanfang. To enhance appreciation and elevate the artistic value of Cantonese opera, Dr Chan recomposed famous *Kunqu* screenplays, such as *Peony Pavilion*, by incorporating elements from Peking opera and *Kunqu* into Cantonese opera performances, and placing renewed emphasis on performance steps and movements, such as the flicking of sleeves. She succeeded in revolutionising and innovating Cantonese opera, which gained its rightful place as a refined art form.

Led by Dr Chan, the Sin Fung Ming Opera Troupe was meticulous in all aspects of performance: from venues, stage sets, props and costume design to music, vocals and gestures, and each play rehearsed multiple times. All these elements came together to produce an extraordinarily refined performance that thrilled audiences.

Well known for her earnestness and eagerness to learn, Dr Chan conscientiously studied scripts and the original text of masterpieces. She never failed to impress the audience with her stellar performance, be it in the role of Du Liniang, Princess Changping, Huo Xiaoyu or Li Huiniang. An erudite and multitalented artist, Dr Chan has a deep appreciation of literature and the performing arts, from both the East and West. She has been hailed as ‘the innovator of Cantonese opera’ for her pioneering steps to integrate an eclectic range of elements into productions. She is known for her outstanding achievements, especially in revitalising Cantonese opera, as well as her emphasis on matching vocal styles with the characters to create an artistic rendition of the roles.

“Yam-Pak”, a cultural icon in Hong Kong, is still discussed with great respect. Every play they performed was considered a classic – *Awakening in the Peony Pavilion*, *Legend of the Butterfly and Pear Blossom*, *Princess Cheung Ping*, *The Purple Hairpin*, and *The Reincarnation of Red Plum*. However, with the sudden passing of Mr Tong Tik-sang in 1959, the duo made a conscious decision to step back from the limelight.

Although she retired from the stage, Dr Chan has enthusiastically taught the skills and art of Cantonese opera. She takes pride in seeing her students’ achievements and the flourishing of the artform. In 1960, the duo recruited dancers for *Madame White Snake*, 12 of whom became their apprentices. In 1963, they created the opera troupe Chor Fung Ming (New Born Phoenix). They carefully nurtured this group of successors and took care of everything, including lodging.

Driven by her desire to promote Cantonese opera, Dr Chan took a hands-on approach to teaching, stage design and personnel matters. It came as no surprise that the music and stage sets of Chor Fung Ming surpassed even those of Sin Fung Ming. She once said, "People give up their homes to relieve hardship; I am willing to abandon the family to rescue the play." Passionate and selfless, her wish is to lay the groundwork for future generations so that they could outshine even the legendary Cantonese opera stars.

A year after Ms Yam’s passing in 1989, Dr Chan established the Yam Pak Charitable Foundation to honour Ms Yam, who said “what’s taken from society should be used for society”. The Foundation invests in Cantonese opera productions and supports research on its artistic value, with the aim of promoting Cantonese opera culture. It also provides support for the elderly and children.

In memory of Ms Yam, from 2004 to 2019, under the auspices of the Foundation, Dr Chan invited Ms Loong Kim-sang, Ms Chan Po-chu and Ms Mui Suet-see to rejuvenate famous plays by Sin Fung Ming. Even in her late 70s, Dr Chan took on the role of artistic director. Their iteration of masterpieces to pay tribute to Ms Yam attracted new audiences by infusing contemporary aesthetic elements to make Cantonese opera more relevant and accessible to modern audiences.

Dr Chan’s contribution to Cantonese opera is highly respected by different sectors of the community. She was awarded an Honorary Fellowship by The Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts in 1996, an Honorary Doctor of Arts by The University of Hong Kong in

2004 and by Hong Kong Shue Yan University in 2014, and an Honorary Doctor of Literature by The Chinese University of Hong Kong in 2017. Dr Chan also received Lifetime Achievement Awards at the 20th Hong Kong Film Awards and from the Hong Kong Arts Development Council in 2001 and 2008, respectively. In 2013, The Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government awarded the Gold Bauhinia Star to Dr Chan. She is the only person in the entertainment industry to have received this honour.

Mr Chairman, Dr Chan has shown an unwavering commitment to the promotion and innovation of Cantonese opera and has put great effort into nurturing youth to sustain and proliferate this traditional art, which was eventually inscribed on the list of UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. On behalf of The Education University of Hong Kong, it is my pleasure and privilege to present Dr Chan Shuk-leung, and request that you confer on her the degree of Doctor of Social Sciences, *honoris causa*.