

## A Destined Relationship: Deng Fen and Hong Kong

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In the history of modern Chinese painting, Deng Fen (1894-1964) (Plate 1), a painter from Guangdong, is no doubt a prodigy that stood out in the art world. Not only was he accomplished in both calligraphy and painting, but he also excelled in poetry, verses and Cantonese opera, even mastering the art of kernel carving (Plate 2). Such an exquisitely multi-talented artist like Deng Fen was unquestionably a rarity in the Chinese art world of the modern era. Travelling

Plate 1

A photo of Deng Fen.



around Guangzhou, Hong Kong and Macau, Deng was very active in both the art and opera circles, contributing significantly to the promotion of traditional Chinese painting and Cantonese opera. As a much unbridled and ebullient liberal, he has also left behind quite a number of intriguing and fascinating tales. Settling in Hong Kong at last, Deng unexpectedly passed away on a dark and stormy night in 1964. In this sense, he was also considered a Hong Kong painter and his remarkable achievement in calligraphy, Cantonese opera, poetry and literature should be further recognized.

Deng Fen, courtesy name being Songxian and pseudonyms Tanshu, Congxin Xiansheng and Erbu Jushi etc., was born in the Nanhai District in Guangdong while his ancestral home was in Gaomi in Shandong. He was the eldest son of Deng Cizhi, a renowned poet and literati. First as a student of the painter Dong Yikui and later that of Zhang Zenong, Deng practiced traditional Chinese landscape painting and flower-and-bird painting, as well as modelled his figure paintings after Tan Yunbo. While he was once apprenticed under Li Ruiqing (pseudonym being Qing Daoren) for calligraphy, his style could be traced all the way back to Mi Fu and the others in the Song dynasty. In his early years, Deng used to teach at a number of schools and normal institutes in Guangdong. In 1921, he was recommended by Gao Qifeng to participate in the “Art Exhibition of Guangdong Province,” where he immediately received enormous attention from fellow artists. Invited by Huang Huiwen, the Minister of Education of Guangdong Province then, he represented the Guangdong “Chinese Painting Research Society” to attend the “First National Art Exhibition” held in Shanghai in 1929. Later, he also took part in the “West Lake Exposition” held in Hangzhou in Zhejiang Province and worked in the art department at the Exposition. In 1933, Deng was appointed by Li Yanshan, the Headmaster of Guangzhou Municipal College of Art, as Professor of Chinese Painting. All these experiences helped build up his reputation in the art circle. After the Second World War, Deng no longer served in public organizations; instead, he concentrated on his arts career, roaming around Guangdong, Hong Kong and Macau while leaving us with many masterpieces and tales of his unique artistic career.

Focusing on the period in which Deng Fen stayed in Hong Kong, this article mainly elaborates on his achievement in painting and opera. In fact, as early as in 1919, Deng already took up residence at Hong Kong Gallery, where he also met his wife Liu Xiu (Plate 3). In 1923, together with various Guangdong painters such as Zhao Haogong, Pan Zhizhong, Huang Shaomei, Lu Zhenhuan, Huang Junbi and Huang Bore, he founded the Guihai Painting Cooperative in Guangzhou with a view to reviving traditional Chinese painting. In 1925, the Cooperative was reorganized as the “Chinese



Plate 2  
Kernel seals carved by  
Deng Fen.

## Plate 3

Liu Xiu, Deng Fen's wife.  
Photo taken at Ou Si  
Kong Ju.



Painting Research Society” and its Hong Kong chapter was set up in the following year by Deng Fen, Deng Erya and Pan Dawei. With as many as 182 members, this branch became the most large-scale organization specializing in the creation and research of Chinese paintings in Guangdong. On New Year’s Day of that year, the intoxicated Deng painted the invaluable masterpiece, *Zhong Kui Snatches Little Demons* (Plate 4). Subsequently, he also composed his most well-known Cantonese opera aria, *Illusion of the Red Chamber*, and completed a painting with the same title. In June 1928, Du Qizhang, Chairman of “Hong Kong Chinese Painting, Calligraphy and Literary Society,” assisted Hong Kong Fei Fei Pharmaceutical Company in publishing an advertising and arts magazine titled *Fei Fei Hua Bao*. Deng and a couple of other painters were invited to be the art editors. In 1935, the “Hong Kong Literature and Arts School” was established and Deng was appointed as Professor of Chinese Painting.

Following the Japanese invasion of China, the Second Sino-Japanese War broke out in 1937, prompting a lot of Chinese painters and calligraphers to flee to Hong Kong. On September 28, Deng also arrived in Hong Kong by SS *Sai On*. First staying in Stag Hotel on Queen’s Road in Central, he later moved to Zhou Zhizhen’s mansion located at Shan Pin Terrace. That year, he joined an art gathering with Huang Junbi, Lu Zishu and Li Yanshan, who were also residing in Hong Kong at the time. On November 19, Deng painted a lady for Li Yanshan’s album leaf, which was in imitation of Kugua Heshan’s (Shitao) work. In August 1938, along with Yu Zhongjia and Shen Zhongqiang etc., he met Zhang Daqian at the Lee Gardens. On September 3, he brought his son, Chi-iok, to visit Zhang’s art exhibition and entertained Zhang and his family members at the Golden Dragon Restaurant. On September 7, the two masters spent the entire night together and said their farewells at the Queen’s Cafe. In 1933, Deng joined “Xiuhai Tang of Seal Carving,



Plate 4

Deng Fen, *Zhong Kui Snatches Little Demons*, 1926. Ink and color on paper, hanging scroll, 123.5x58.2 cm. Collection of Hong Kong Museum of Art (FA86.12). Allegedly Deng's most exceptional work, it vividly depicts the scene in which a huge hand is stretched out from the sky, grabbing unsettled little demons which are scurrying on the ground. In the painting, Zhong Kui, looking indistinct yet formidable, emerges in the sky and hides his face behind a handheld fan while the little demons are all moving and struggling in various directions in great fear. Deng reportedly made reference to the bloody edible frogs flayed alive when he was painting. There was also a long poem written at the bottom of the scroll: "Indulging in his wine, Zhongnan Jinshi hid behind a fan with a smile. Curious about the demons, he peeked and let the screaming ones flee. Little devils, escaping in haste, wore faces of green, yellow, crimson and black; roared and howled with fury, laughter and tears. Who's good and who's bad in a world of turmoil? These devils knew neither respect nor justice; honor nor righteousness. Day after day, haunted by the desire of power after power; rolling, fighting, struggling in disgrace. Zhong Kui, overlooking from behind, stretched out his giant hand from the sky; grasped and gobbled the filthy demons dry, before all the rustling and murmuring died. By the intoxicated Fen near the stove." In the 1920s, warlords were dividing the country and people were having a tough time. Deng's work, depicting Zhong Kui as a heroic figure that vanquishes evil beings, is both satirical and realistic. In addition to the unique presentation and the lively colors, the brushwork is done with dexterity, conveying a kind of romanticized modern aroma. Essentially, it is a revolutionary departure from the traditional style of Chinese painting.

Photo supplied by the Hong Kong Museum of Art.

Painting and Calligraphy” founded by seal-carver Jian Jinglun, and served as a tutor of Chinese painting there. In the same year, he moved to Macau.

Around April in 1941, Deng moved back to Hong Kong and resided temporarily on the second floor of “Man Luen Choon,” a Chinese art supply store in Wing Kut Street in Central run by his friend Lee Kwan-cheung. On December 18, the Japanese troops landed on Hong Kong Island and subsequently began the Japanese occupation of Hong Kong. It was a period of turmoil where robberies were rampant. Deng’s residence on Hennessy Road was once robbed and he almost lost the jade pendant he had often been wearing. After the pendant was recovered, he invited Feng Kanghou, a seal-carver who was living in Hong Kong at the time, to turn it into a seal and engrave on it “Huan Pei Lou” (literally meaning “the return of the jade pendant”). This was also the story behind the naming of his studio, “Huan Pei Lou.” In summer 1942, Deng and a group of famous Cantonese and Peking opera artists including Sit Kok-sin (Xue Juejian), Mei Lanfang and other famous film actors and actresses including Hu Die and Ng Cho-fan etc. were forced to join a “Guangzhou visiting tour” organized by the Japanese military government then. Upon their return to Hong Kong, Deng, Sit and Mei painted *Three Friends of Winter* together at Sit’s place, “Kok Lu”, on Fuk Kwan Road in Wanchai, expressing their innocence and unyielding attitude towards the incident (Plate 5). By the end of that year, Deng moved to Macau again before settling in Guangzhou in 1943. After the victory over Japan, he went back to Macau and stayed there for most of the time until 1953. Travelling frequently between Hong Kong and Macau, he still actively participated in various activities in the art circle.

#### Plate 5

Deng Fen, Sit Kok-sin and Mei Lanfang, *Three Friends of Winter*, 1942. Deng, Sit and Mei painted *Three Friends of Winter* together at Sit’s place, “Kok Lu,” to express their innocence and declare their stance. Deng also wrote, “Who would be speaking for my loyal heart this winter? I have known these gentlemen for longer than I remember. Rare as the spring breeze blowing for the first time, we become three merry friends of a lifetime. Ping-hoi paints the bamboo and Wanhua sketches the plum trees. I draw the pines while inscribing these lines. At Kok Lu in the summer of *renwu* year.”



In 1947, together with Zhao Shao'ang and Yang Shanshen, Deng held a fan painting exhibition in Hong Kong. As a matter of fact, he had been quite close to these second generation masters from the Lingnan School of painting as well as a couple of others like Situ Qi. Not only did they always paint together, but they also gave their artworks to each other out of courtesy. (Plates 6, 7 and 8) At that time, Deng had already been regarded as a first-class painter alongside Zhang Daqian, Xu Beihong and Huang Junbi etc. In December 1948, Zhang Daqian came to Hong Kong for another solo exhibition. Dwelling on Argyle Street, he had a great time with fellow artist friends such as Deng Fen, Zhang Xiangning and Jian Qinzhai etc. (Plate 9) On January 29 and 30, 1949, Lau Siu-lui of Hong Kong Jiuhuatang organized an exhibition of Deng Fen's painting and calligraphy at his "Center of Modern Chinese Painting and Calligraphy," which was introduced by many art critics on the newspaper. In the same year, Lau presented another exhibition titled "Masterpieces by Contemporary Painters" at the Center, showcasing artworks by Deng Fen, Gao Jianfu and Li Yanshan and so forth. It was also the year when Zhang Daqian paid a short visit to Macau, after which he returned to Hong Kong and temporarily stayed in Jian Qinzhai's "Qinshi Zhai." Before Zhang headed back Sichuan, Deng Fen went to Hong Kong from Macau and introduced to Zhang his son, Deng Chi-iok. Zhang greeted the two with a batch of painting materials as well as a painting titled *Recalling Old Dreams at Mount Luofu*. In 1951, Deng met with Lau Siu-lui at Jiuhuatang and imitated *Brocade Woven by Zhinü* by Zhou Wenju, a painter from the Five Dynasties period, out of memory. In fact, since the 50s, Deng had spent most of his time in Hong Kong in spite of his frequent travelling between Hong Kong and Macau. In 1954, while he was dwelling in Stag Hotel, he painted *Ladies Picking Vetch* and gave it to the Hong Kong collector Auyeung Shiu-lun. In 1955, invited by the owner of "Luk Yu Tea House," he created *White Birds*. The next year, he painted a vertical scroll titled *Buddha of Infinite Life* (Plate 10) and presented it to Lau Siu-lui as a gift. In 1957, he took part in the "Fundraising Exhibition for the Campus Expansion Project of Lingnan Middle School" in Man Yee Building on Hong Kong Island. In 1958, having taken in a new female student, Chou Qiyun, from Hong Kong, he invited prominent friends to celebrate the occasion at Golden City Restaurant. It was a spectacular and much discussed ceremony. In late 1950s, he was residing in 13 O'Brien Road. As in 1960, he initiated the "Exhibition of Bonsai, Chinese Painting and Calligraphy" with more than thirty people from the arts and literary sectors including Gao Zhengbai and Huang Bore etc. In that autumn, Deng also took Chan Ping-kwong from Hong Kong as his student and taught him calligraphy at Shouru Tang in Yuen Long. In May 1962, Deng Fen's solo exhibition was held at St. John's Cathedral (Plate 11). In fact, during the 60s, the art scene in Hong Kong was flourishing with the exploration of new styles and artistic pursuits. New Ink Painting as pioneered by Lui Shou-kwan, which emphasized the reinvention of pictorial treatments and materials as well as semi-abstract and abstract styles, was one of the examples. Nonetheless, Deng, who was more prone to traditional arts, did not seem to accept this trend. One day, during an art gathering in Lin Heung Tea House in Central, Deng allegedly said to Lui in public, "What is abstract painting? It is merely catching public attention without making a real impact. I am here in the mood for painting and speaking to the divine. You should be humble

Plate 6 (top)

From left: Zhao Shao'ang,  
Deng Fen, Yang Shanshen

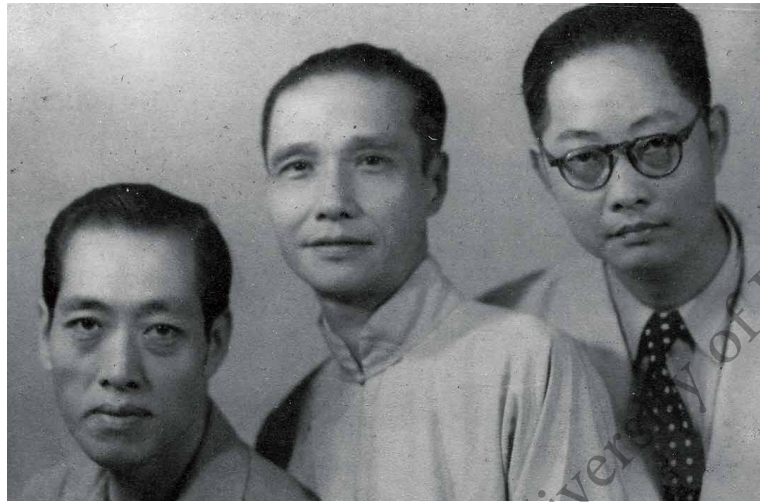


Plate 7 (bottom left)

Deng Fen painted *Budai Monk* for Yang Shanshen, 1954. Ink and color on paper, 72x38 cm. Published as Plate 31 in *Retrospective of Deng Fen* by Municipal Council of Macau, 1997.

Plate 8 (bottom right)

Deng Fen painted *Dragonflies Fluttering to a Lady's Jade Hairpin* for Yang Shanshen, 1963. Ink and color on paper. Collection of Hong Kong Le Zhai. This painting showcases Deng's remarkable achievement in female figure painting, in which was also the genre he most excelled. In the painting, every strand of the beautiful lady's hair is depicted exquisitely and meticulously while the swift and fluent lines constitute her curvy body and graceful posture. The dragonflies look vivid with significant details as well.

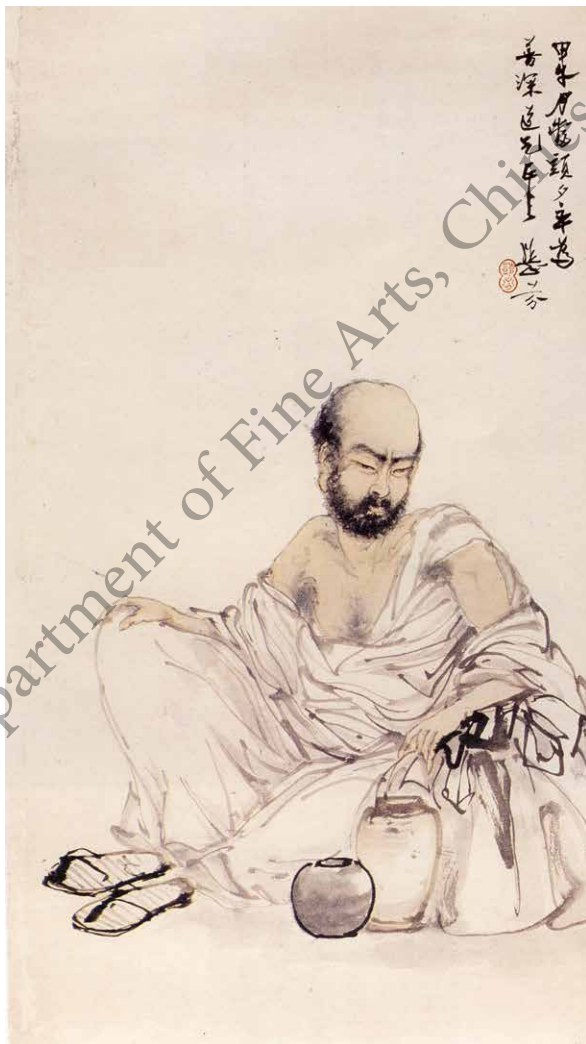




Plate 9

Deng Fen with artist friends at a literary gathering at Xiuhai Tang in 1948. From left to right: Liu Hap-wai, Zhang Junhua, Zhang Daqian, Jian Qinzhai, Deng Fen, Yu Kuangfu, Lei Junshi and Zhang Xiangning.

and respectful in front of all these extraordinary artworks lest you've gone too far." Embarrassed by Deng's words, Lui was left blushing awkwardly.

Deng liked to linger at the typhoon shelters around Causeway Bay in Hong Kong. At that time, there were ships and boats on which people drank tea and dined, wrote poems, listened to Chinese opera and chanted. Indeed, Deng had created quite many poems and paintings that described and depicted these amusement gatherings at typhoon shelters (Plate 12). Similar to other painters who had moved to Hong Kong at later times like Huang Bore and Lui Shou-kwan, Deng also enjoyed wandering around Hong Kong and sketching the local landscape (Plate 13). However, it should be noted that Deng, the opium lover, used to spend rather lavishly in singing houses and dance halls. To support his somewhat extravagant life, apart from selling paintings in Guangzhou, Hong Kong and Macau, he also relied upon a number of patrons who ardently commissioned him to complete different works of art. In Hong Kong, Lau Siu-lui, the owner of Jiuhuatang who ran a business of framing, mounting and trading calligraphic works and paintings, was one of these patrons. Not only did he found the "Centre of Modern Chinese Painting and Calligraphy" to exhibit works by renowned masters, but he also had a habit of inviting and commissioning artists to write and paint on some specific-sized paper in a certain form, building up his own "Taiyilou Collection of Chinese Painting and Calligraphy." Consisting of nearly a thousand pieces of works by numerous notable modern calligraphers and painters including Deng Fen, most of the batch has been donated to the Hong Kong Museum of Art (Plate 14) while some of it can also be seen in other public and private collections (Plate 15). Another one who helped Deng Fen a lot was Lee Kwan-cheung, the owner of the Chinese art supply store Man Luen Choon where Deng had once took up residence. As for Deng's late years in Hong Kong, his sponsors also included Huo Baocai, the former General Manager of Bank of Canton, Auyeung Shiu-lun who was a proprietor of a gold shop, Au Chun-



Plate 10 (left)

Deng Fen painted *Buddha of Infinite Life* for Lau Siu-lui, the owner of Jiuhuatang, 1955. Ink and color on paper, hanging scroll. 84x34 cm. Collection of Hong Kong Museum of Art, donated by Taiyilou (TY90.131). Arhat painting is another genre which Deng mastered. The rather exotic looks of the arhats, with fair hair and beards, were actually inspired by the South Asians he saw in Hong Kong. Either bowing his head reading or sitting on the floor without shoes, the three arhats are in different postures but one that echo each other's. The draperies of their clothes are outlined with "curl-head nail textural strokes" in light ink tone and painted in a style that resembles that of Chen Hongshou and Ding Yungeng from the late-Ming dynasty. This is representative piece of arhat painting by Deng. Photo supplied by the Hong Kong Museum of Art.

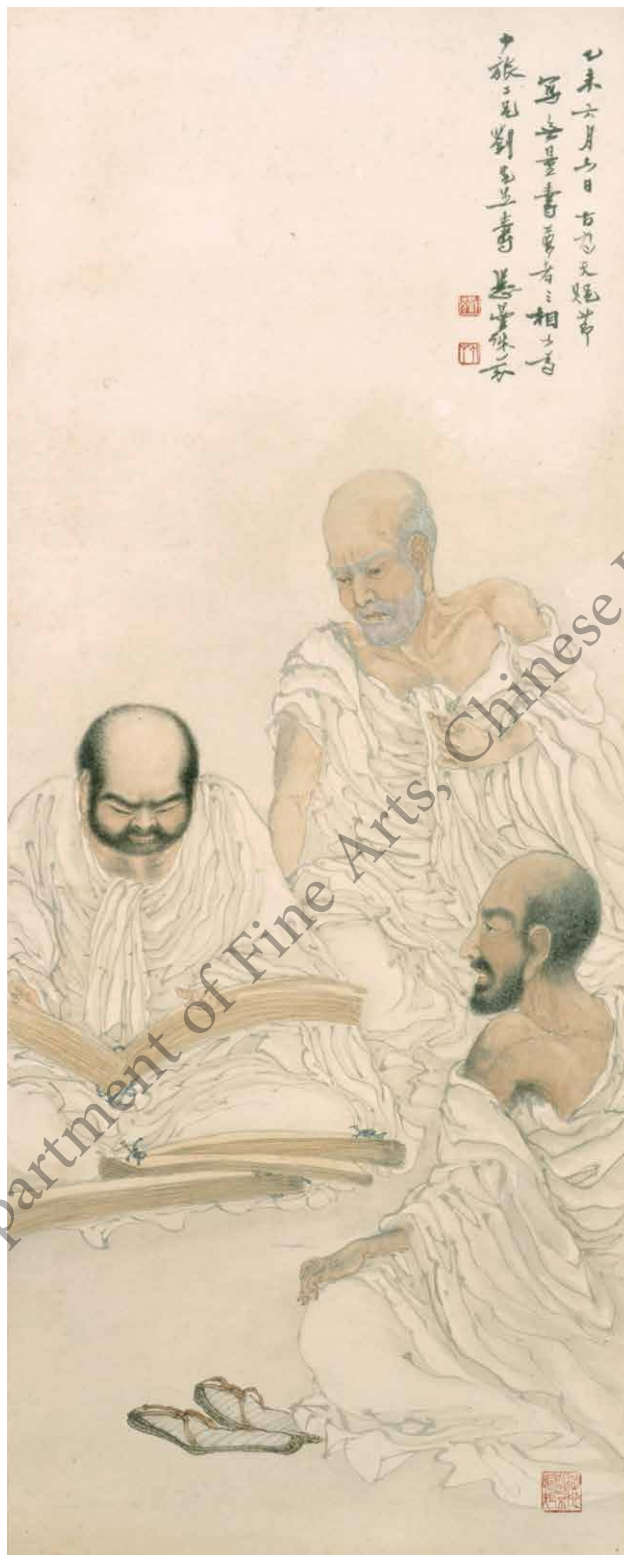


Plate 11 (right)

Deng Fen and his student Chou Qiyun (second from left) at the exhibition venue, St. John's Cathedral.

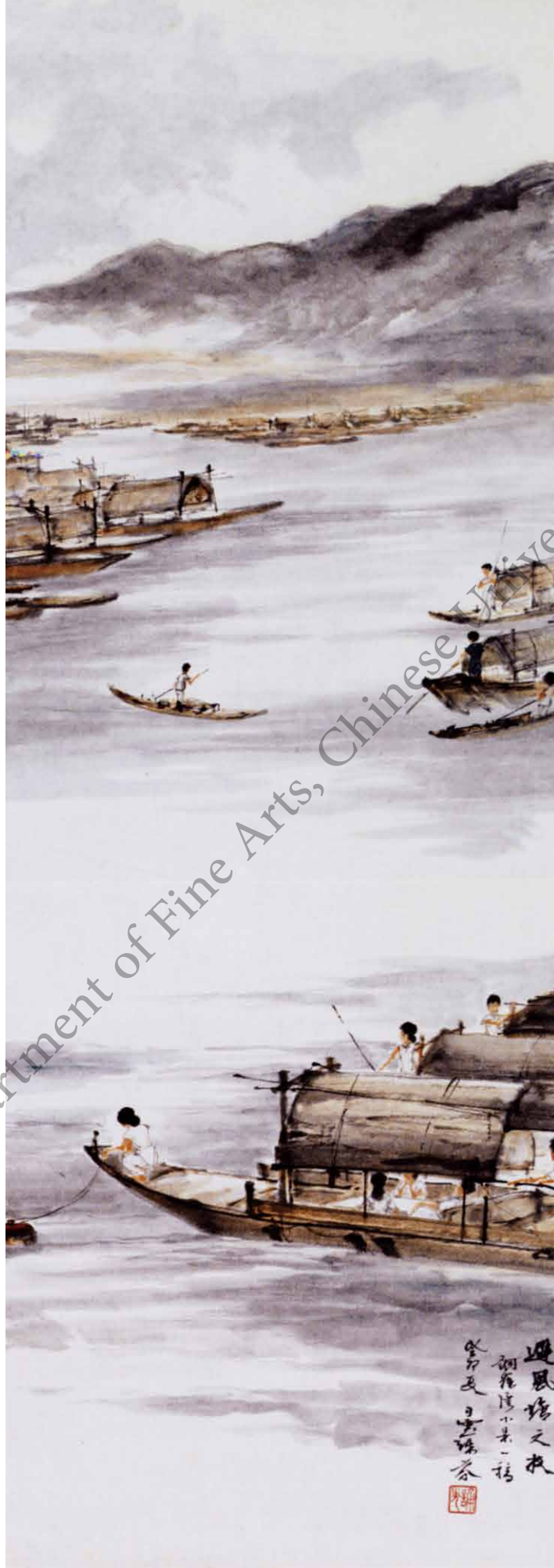


Plate 12

Deng Fen, *Night Scene of the Typhoon Shelter at Causeway Bay*, 1963. Ink and color on paper. Collection of Hong Kong Museum of Art. Since Deng moved to Hong Kong, he had been hanging around the pleasure boats at the typhoon shelters. Consequently, many of his artworks and poetry also revolve around these typhoon shelters. This painting, featuring people dressed in modern clothing, suggests some spontaneous but tender use of the brushes. Not only is it imbued with a deep sense of reality, but it also reflects Deng's life in Hong Kong during his later years.

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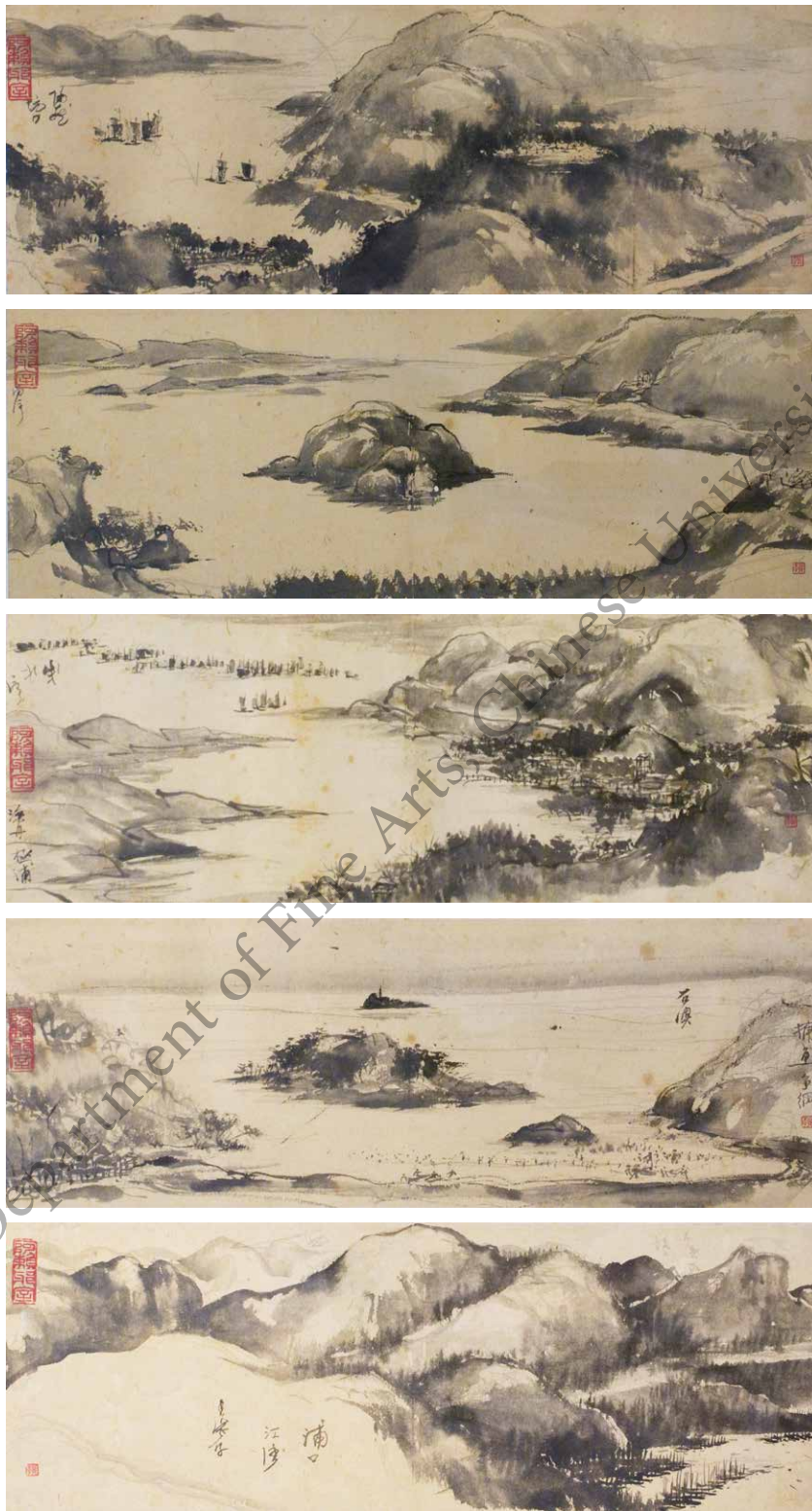


Plate 13

Deng Fen, *Hong Kong Landscape*. Ink on paper, handscroll. Collection of Lau Kwai. After residing in Hong Kong, Deng, following artists such as Huang Bore and Lui Shoukwan, also liked to take the beautiful landscape of Hong Kong as the subject of his paintings. With his spontaneous yet expressive brushwork and ink washes, this handscroll realistically depicts the scenery of Hang Hau, Repulse Bay, Aberdeen and Shek O in Hong Kong with a touch of life sketching.

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拾缺披殘附日車，又携難火水之涯。  
南飛寄語無枝鶴，四海如今已一家。  
喬木天涯窈窕春，當年避地久依人。  
少今不復傷離索，却喜吾居必有耕。  
杖目承平物候新，此身無恙是能貧。  
平生不解嗟來意，又遍牆間乞祭人。  
此作後居漫寫，至三截以應。

少旅吾兄法家劉先生兩正  
戊子六月墨殊錄  
杏楊閣雜稿

Plate 14

Deng Fen, *Poem in Running Script*, 1948.

Ink on paper, vertical scroll. 109.5x30.5 cm.

Collection of Hong Kong Museum of Art, donated by Taiyilou (TY90.133).

Written for Lau Siu-lui, the owner of Jiuhuatang, this piece of work is full of vigor and fluency with a naturalistic flavor, which also denotes the typical style of Deng Fen's calligraphy.

Photo supplied by the Hong Kong Museum of Art.

Plate 15

Deng Fen, *Maple Leaves and Reed Flowers Rustling in Autumn Wind*, 1947. Ink and color on paper. 104x37 cm. Collection of Chan Ping-kwong, Deng Fen's student. Published as Plate 24 in *Retrospective of Deng Fen* by Municipal Council of Macau, 1997.

It was completed by Deng at Ou Si Kong Ju and later exhibited at Lau Siu-lui's Center of Modern Chinese Painting and Calligraphy. In the painting, a lady is sitting in a boat playing *pipa* in a leisurely manner. The bamboo, with distinctive layers of ink wash and leaves that spread to various directions, carries the very essence of Chinese calligraphy. With reference to the manuscript kept by Lau Kwai (Plate 19), this painting also shows Deng's close observation of those Chinese musicians in the Cantonese opera circle.





Plate 16

Deng Fen, *Seven-character Couplet in Running Script*, 1962. Ink on paper, hanging scroll. Collection of Hong Kong Le Zhai. This couplet was written for Auyeung Shiu-lun, a proprietor of a gold shop who supported Deng's living during his later years in Hong Kong.



Plate 17

Deng Fen, *Zhong Kui Welcoming Fortune*, 1963. Ink and color on paper, hanging scroll. Collection of Hong Kong Le Zhai. Featuring one of the most common subject matter in Deng Fen's work, Zhong Kui, this piece of work was also painted for the Auyeung Shiu-lun, a proprietor a gold shop. Standing at ease and carrying a sword, Zhong Kui, which was drawn with bold lines, was welcoming a flying bat in the painting. The pictorial connotation carries the blessing of bringing fortune to home. Besides, it is noted that Deng also liked to portray other Buddhist figures and deities like Immortal Dongfang Shuo and Lady Magu sending tributaries to celebrate longevity, etc. in his work.



Plate 18

Deng Fen, *Six-character Couplet in Running Script*, 1963. Ink on paper. Collection of Chan Pingkwong, Deng Fen's student. Published as Plate 83 in *Retrospective of Deng Fen* by Municipal Council of Macau, 1997. It was written for Au Chunhung, who ran a funeral parlor business and often invited Deng to paint at his home. During Deng's later years, Au was another patron of his living in Hong Kong.



hung who was one of the proprietors of a funeral parlor and Pan Zhaoxian from the literary circle etc. They frequently invited Deng to stay and paint at their abode. A large part of Auyeung Shiu-lun's collections (Plates 16 and 17) as well as Au Chun-hung's (Plate 18) have now been acquired by the Hong Kong Museum of Art or retained by individual private collectors. To a certain extent, how Deng Fen got along with these patrons also demonstrated the kind of special relationship amongst artists, collectors as well as calligraphy and art lovers in the early-mid 20<sup>th</sup> century.

In addition to his achievements in painting, Deng also extended his art to Cantonese opera to which he made significant contributions. Familiar with music and tone patterns as a whole, he wrote his own songs as well as the lyrics. Having spent adequate time in singing houses and dance halls, he paid close attention to the wide range of graceful postures and gestures adopted by the actresses and dancers. His observation was then incorporated into his remarkably acclaimed and unique painting of female figures. Lau Kwai, the grandson-in-law of Deng Fen, possesses a number of Deng's plain-drawing (*baimiao*) manuscripts which precisely depict beautiful ladies playing *guzhen* (Chinese zither), *xiao* (flute), and *pipa* (Chinese lute), dancing about, picking lotus seeds and strolling around gardens gracefully (Plates 19, 20, 21, 22, 23). It is apparent that Deng did

Plate 19 (left)

Deng Fen's plain-drawing manuscript, depicting a beautiful lady playing *pipa*. Ink on paper. Collection of Lau Kwai. As Deng Fen's grandson-in-law, Mr. Lau is holding a large collection of Deng's manuscripts, documents, photos and seals etc. Many of these manuscripts even contain valuable remarks and written notes on hand gestures, coloring, lines made by Deng.



Plate 20 (right)

Deng Fen's plain-drawing manuscript, depicting a beautiful lady playing *guzhen*. Ink on paper. Collection of Lau Kwai.

carefully study the movements and facial expressions of the individuals before he painted. Hence, under his brushes, the female subjects are not only meticulously portrayed in a sense that every strand of hair is delicately handled, but they also become a faithful representation of reality which carry in them some sort of contemporary temperament (Plates 24 and 25).

Furthermore, since Deng was skilled and active in Cantonese opera, he had forged strong bonds with a great many eminent actors and actresses as well as rendered immense support to them. Although their activities then were not totally confined to Hong Kong, due to the frequent



Plate 21 (top left)

Deng Fen's plain-drawing manuscript, depicting beautiful ladies playing *xiao*. Ink on paper. Collection of Lau Kwai.



Plate 22 (right)

Deng Fen's plain-drawing manuscript, *Holding the Waistband of A Dress and Making Love Knots*, depicting a beautiful lady dancing about elegantly. Ink and color on paper. Collection of Lau Kwai.

Plate 23 (bottom left)

Deng Fen's plain-drawing manuscript, depicting beautiful ladies picking lotus seeds and playing *xiao*. Ink on paper. Collection of Lau Kwai.



自拈裙帶結同心  
癸卯端陽墨痕芬擬稿

contact amongst Guangdong, Hong Kong and Macau, these opera artists from time to time performed in Tai Ping Theatre, Tao Yuen Restaurant and Kam Ling Restaurant etc. around Shek Tong Tsui, cultivating the famous scene of *tong sai fung yuet* (literary meaning “amusing and graceful gatherings at Shek Tong Tsui”). In 1924, Deng participated in the “Second Exhibition of the Guihai Painting Cooperative” and “Exhibition of the Tian Ma Society” in Shanghai. He started to befriend a Cantonese opera actor called Sit Ping-hoi. Apart from teaching Sit vocal styles, calligraphy and painting, Deng also composed songs for his most representative play. For instance, in the play *Lady Xi Shi*, the song *juanxun-fang* was written by Deng. Considering that “Pinghai” did not sound impressive enough, Deng even suggested the stage name “Kok-sin” to Sit, literally meaning “having foresight” (Plate 26). In the second half of 1929, Sit formed the “Kok Sin Sing Opera Troupe” and the two of them became much closer to each other. In 1942, Deng Fen, Sit Kok-sin and the Peking opera master Mei Lanfang were forced to join a “Guangzhou visiting tour” organized by the Japanese military government. Upon returning to Hong Kong, they painted *Three Friends of Winter* (Plate 5) together at Sit’s place, “Kok Lu,” to declare their stance. Deng and Sit remained trusted friends until the latter passed away in Guangzhou in 1956. An article written by Deng, “Sit Kok-sin and I,” was included in the commemorative book for Sit.

On one occasion, Deng Fen incidentally heard a young Cantonese opera artist called Deng Manwei, who later adopted the stage name *Xiaomingxing* (Little Star), sing and found her voice extremely mesmerizing. Both as Nanhai natives bearing the same surname, Deng Fen and Deng Manwei later on treated each other as siblings. Once, Deng Fen painted *Portrait of A Beauty Playing Pipa* for Deng Manwei as well as gave her *Farewell at Yong Men and Farewell Song of the Wanderer*, two songs written and sung by himself, as presents. In 1926, Deng composed his most widely acclaimed Cantonese opera aria, *Illusion of the Red Chamber*, and finished a same-titled painting (Plate 27). He travelled around Jiangnan in 1928 and performed the aria in Shanghai. Later, Shanghai New Moon Gramophone Company released a record for him and Deng kept performing the song every once in a while afterward (Plate 28). In 1935, Tsui Lau-sin, an emerging star from Kau U Fong on Hong Kong Island, performed in Macau. Marveled at the talented Tsui’s performance, Deng decided to offer her *Illusion of the Red Chamber*. Going over the music and tapping the rhythm together, it was said that Deng imparted two lines of the aria to Tsui on an opium couch every night. Later, when Tsui recorded the song and released a record through Columbia Phonograph Company, she became hugely popular and the record had sold 500,000 copies, which also built a great reputation for her “Lau-sin singing style” (Plate 29). In fact, Deng had painted *Dream Writing* to depict this event. Set in Liwan in Guangzhou, the scroll features a portrayal of Tsui Lau-sin and a scene in which she was taught about the aria nearby an opium couch (Plate 30). The scroll had been a private collection in Hong Kong for many years and it was exhibited at the Hong Kong Museum of Art once. Currently, it is held by a public art museum in the United States.



Plate 24

Deng Fen, *Picking Tea*, 1954. Ink and color on paper, hanging scroll. 110.5x50 cm. Collection of Hong Kong Museum of Art (FA89.7). Dressed in modern workwear, the two ladies in the painting look all gentle and radiant while picking tea in a tranquil garden that shimmers with meticulous brush work and details. The colors gradually change from dark to light subtle tonal gradations and ultimately, some old trees and the mountains emerge in the haze from afar. As a traditional painter, Deng showcases his outstanding landscape painting skills as well as a kind of modern spirit in this painting. Photo supplied by the Hong Kong Museum of Art.



Plate 25

Deng Fen, *Picking Lotus Seeds*, 1954. Ink and Color on paper. 40x98 cm. Collection of Ho Shu-kei. Published as Plate 29 in *Retrospective of Deng Fen* by Municipal Council of Macau, 1997. Typical of Deng's beauty paintings, the ladies in this work are both gracefully portrayed and of elegant proportions. Meanwhile, the lotus flowers, shaded with bold ink wash, rendered with linear configurations and perfectly spaced out, fully manifest Deng's representative style of painting lotuses and his unique pictorial manipulation.



Plate 26

A photo of Sit Ping-hoi (for whom Deng Fen later created the stage name "Kok-sin") circa mid-1920s.

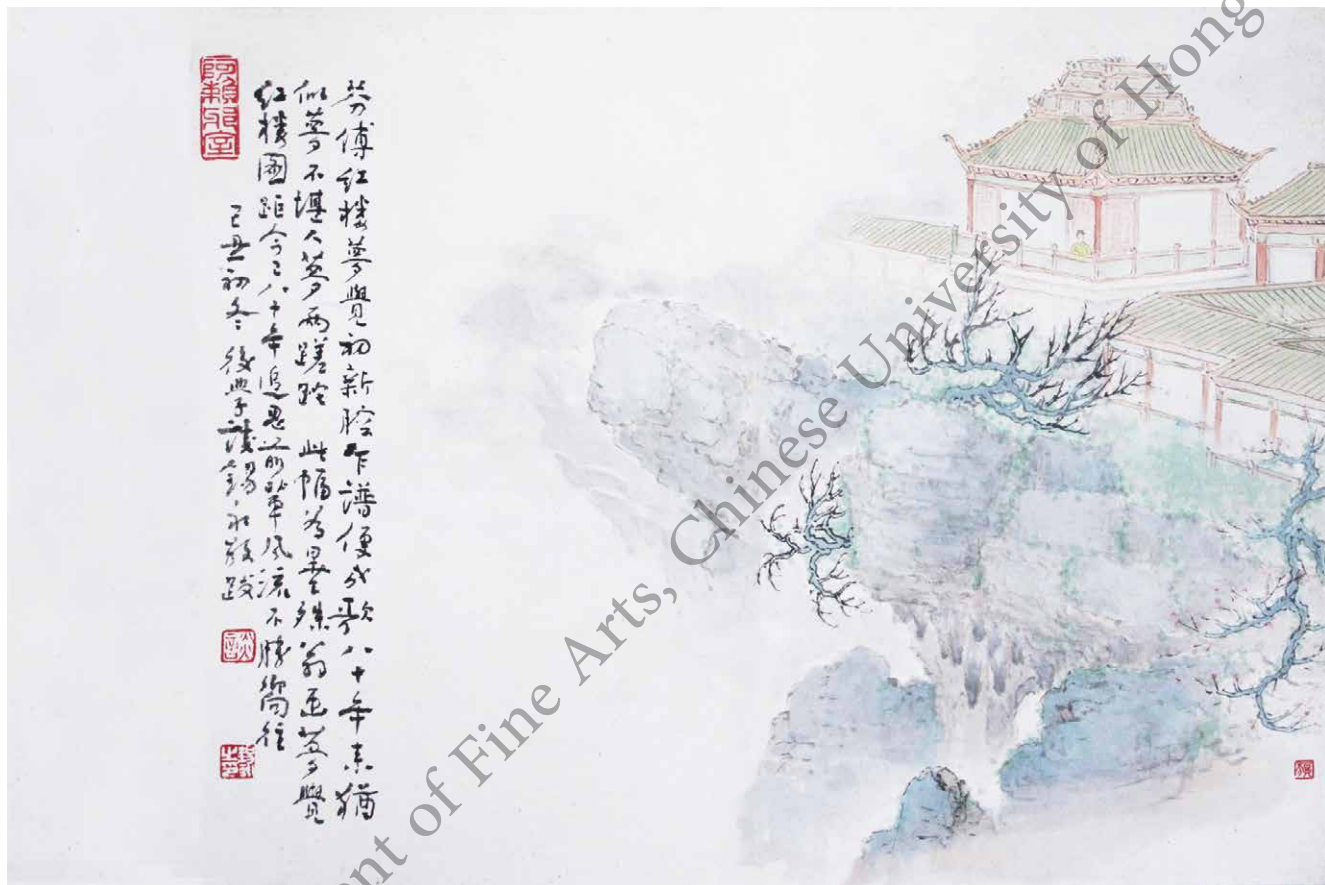


Plate 27

Deng Fen, *Illusion of the Red Chamber*. Postscript written by Tam Shek-wing. Depicting a beautiful lady sitting alone in a lofty pavilion built by the cliff, this light-colored painting conveys a sense of emptiness and desolation, which echoes the original Cantonese opera aria that carries the same title. As one of the existing versions of *Illusion of the Red Chamber*, it has been affectionately kept by Mr. Lau Kwai for several decades. Whether or not this is the original work painted by Deng Fen in 1926 remains unknown, but this painting undoubtedly proves the close relationship between Deng and the art of Cantonese opera as well as reminds us of the intriguing tale of him imparting this much renowned aria to Tang Manwei (stage name "Xiaomingxing") and Tsui Lau-sin.



Plate 28 (left)

Deng Fen performing  
*Illusion of the Red  
Chamber* at Jin Yue Fu in  
Hong Kong in 1960.

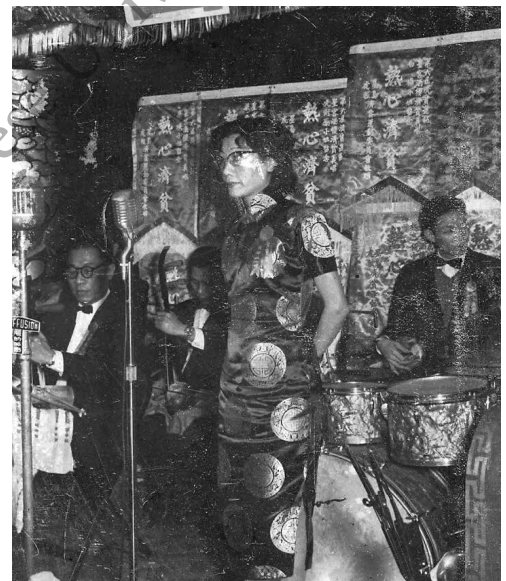


Plate 29 (right)

Tsui Lau-sin performing  
*Illusion of the Red  
Chamber*.



Plate 31

Deng Fen, *Bathing the Horse* (detail), 1940. Ink and color on paper, horizontal scroll. Collection of Hong Kong Le Zhai. Deng painted this for Wong So, the husband of his goddaughter Yam Kim-fai. (Yam and Wong had a brief marriage before they got divorced.) In the painting, a person is bathing a horse by the river; the fabric folds and ruffles are outlined by nail-head and rat-tail strokes while the horse is naturally shaded by Chinese white pigment powder diluted with water. Injecting a sense of modernity into the traditional style, it showcases Deng's excellent achievement in animal paintings.





Plate 30

Deng Fen, *Dream Writing* (detail), late 1930s. Ink and color on paper, handscroll. Fusing altogether landscape, flower and figure paintings, this magnum opus effortlessly summarizes Deng Fen's immense talents and is of the utmost importance in the study of his art, his career as well his relationship with the Cantonese opera circle. At the beginning of the scroll, Deng first inscribed the title and a poem before depicting the peaceful scenery of Liwan in Guangzhou with some delicate brushwork, conveying a sense of lyricism. The houses and architecture are captured in fine details and arranged in palpable layers, which fully demonstrates Deng's impeccable skills in presenting the reality. A stunning portrait of the prominent Cantonese opera actress, Tsui Lau-sin, follows. Meticulously drawn with a touch of realism, it reflects the flawless complexion of Tsui's. Alongside the portrait, the acclaimed Cantonese opera aria composed by Deng, *Illusion of the Red Chamber*, is beautifully transcribed in its entirety in small regular script (*xiaokai*). In the next section, in front of a folding screen adorned with lotus pond artwork, a man is holding a smoking pipe and half-lying on an opium couch while a woman is playing *guqian* by his side. The man is allegedly Deng Fen himself, as he recalled the memory of imparting *Illusion of the Red Chamber* to Tsui Lau-sin in Macau while painting this scroll. The last two sections respectively depict people viewing bunches of bright chrysanthemum and enjoying a feast in a neatly furnished house. The bright colors are carefully applied and the settings are considerably realistic, as all characters in the scroll are dressed in their modern wear. Not only is it a spectacular integration of various forms and subject matters of art including the visual portrayal of beauty, flowers, towers, pavilions and landscape as well as calligraphy and Cantonese opera, but it also duly reflects daily snippets of Deng's life in terms of composing, painting, writing poetry and singing. The scroll is currently held by Saint Louis Art Museum in the United States.

Plate 32 (left)

Photo of Deng Fen and his goddaughter Yam Kim-fai at Bak Sheut-sin's birthday banquet. Taken at Hong Kong Ying King Restaurant on April 26, 1960.

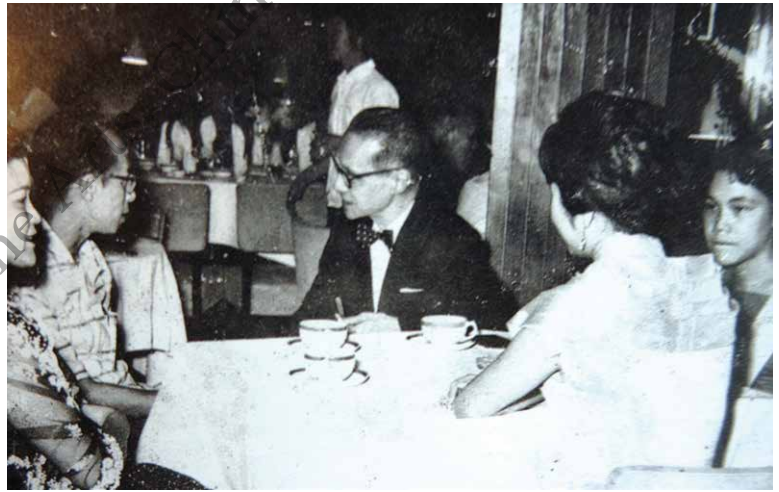


Plate 33 (right)

From left: Chou Qiyun (Deng Fen's student), "Nanhai Shisanlang" Jiang Feng, Deng Fen, Bak Sheut-sin.



Plate 34

Deng Fen playing music with students, Situ Zhen and Situ Yu, at the typhoon shelter.



Plate 35 (top right)  
A photo of Deng Fen with students, Situ Zhen and Situ Yu, as well as the Cantonese opera celebrity Feng Hua.



Plate 36 (middle right)  
A photo of Deng Fen with students, Situ Zhen and Situ Yu, taken at the singing house Xin Yue Fu.



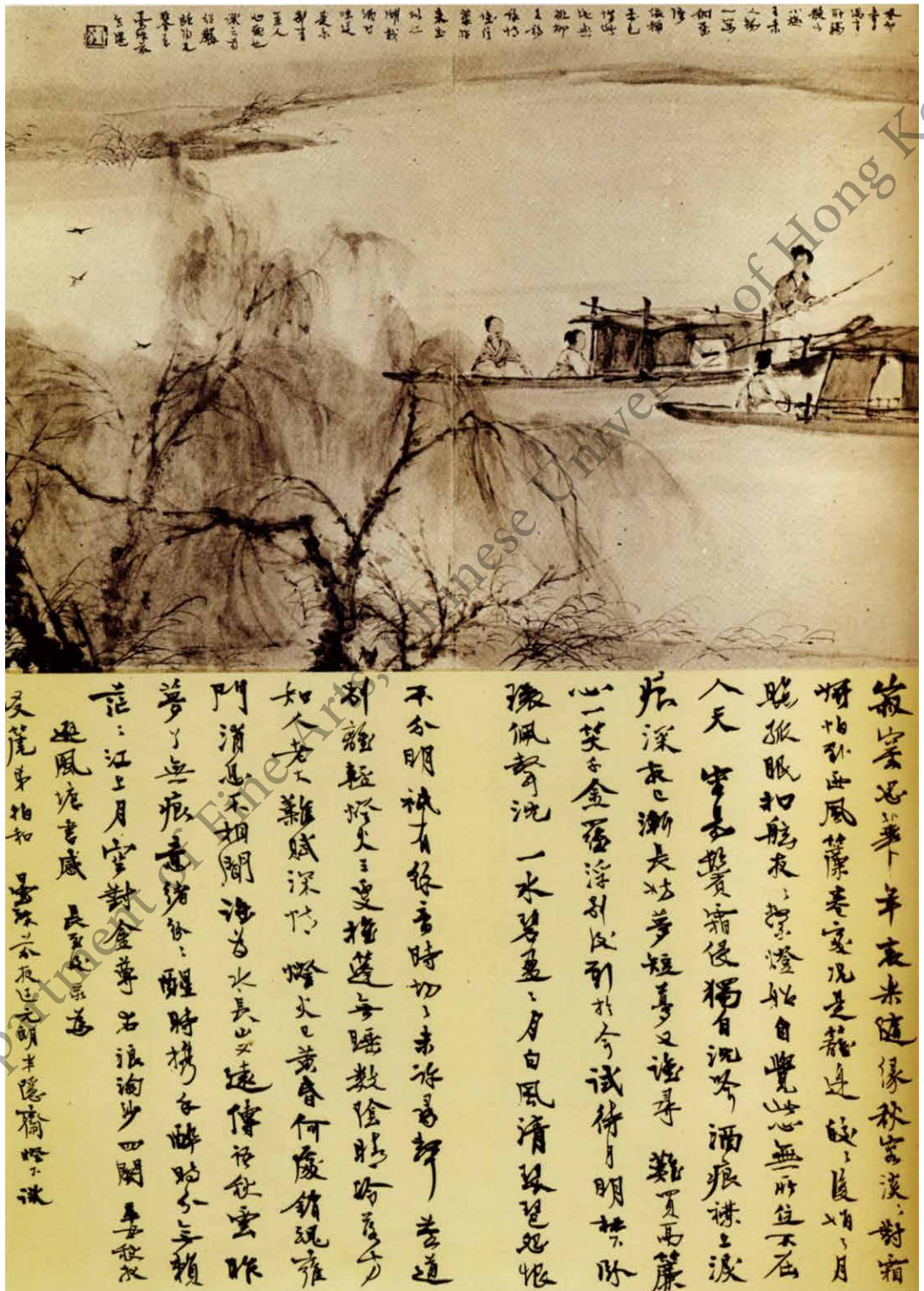
Plate 37 (left)  
*Frolicking Birds* (detail), one of the paintings given to Situ Zhen by Deng Fen. Ink and color on paper. This painting was later passed to Ng Siu-chung, the *tai chi* master who has added an inscription to it. Proficient in painting flowers and birds, Deng modelled his style after masters from the Yangzhou school such as Li Shan, Luo Pin and Hua Yan etc. in the late-Qing period all the way up to Yun Shouping from the early-Qing and Chen Chun from the Ming dynasty. He was also renowned for his “three-strokes-a-bird” technique, meaning that he could bring the birds to life in merely several strokes. This painting vividly portrays the birds hopping up and down with energy, which could be compared to Deng’s sketch of sparrows held by Mr. Lau Kwai (Plate 38).



Plate 38 (bottom right)  
Deng Fen’s sketch of sparrows.

Plate 39

Deng Fen, *Reflections and Self-inscription on Typhoon Shelter* (detail), 1963. Completed at Ban Yin Zhai in Yuen Long for Auyeung Shiu-lun, this painting by Deng incorporates poetry that used to be chanted with his student, Chen Youchi. It depicts a group of people singing in pleasure boats along the riverside, which was also a realistic portrayal of Deng Fen's life in his later years. The poem, carrying a deep sense of melancholy, seems to have foreshadowed his forthcoming demise.



Deng had established a close rapport with the Cantonese opera circle in Hong Kong. During the Japanese occupation of Hong Kong, many celebrated Cantonese opera artists escaped to Macau. Yam Kim-fai, Bak Sheut-sin, Lang Chi-bak and Au-yeung Kim etc. subsequently formed New Voice Opera Troupe there, of which Deng was a big fan. Later, Deng even became Yam's godfather and once painted *Bathing the Horse* for her ex-husband, Wong So. The painting is now a private collection in Hong Kong (Plate 31). The friendships between Deng and Yam, Bak, Nanhai Shisanlang, Lu Wencheng and Feng Hua lasted a lifetime (Plates 32 and 33). After Deng moved back to Hong Kong in his later years, he often hung around the typhoon shelters and provided a lot of support for the young artists including the Situ sisters, Situ Zhen and Situ Yu. Besides writing songs for them, he also introduced them to perform at different singing houses such as Jin Yue Fu founded by Feng Hua (Plates 34, 35 and 36) as well as presented them with his own works. Amongst those paintings given to Situ Zhen, *Frolicking Birds* fully demonstrates Deng's distinctive "three-strokes-a-bird" technique (Plate 37). As Situ Zhen later passed the painting to Ng Siu-chung, Ng proceeded to add an inscription to it. Also on the subject of birds, another Deng's sketch of sparrows kept by Lau Kwai can also serve as a reference (Plate 38). In his later years, it is noted that Deng had written a considerable amount of poetry over his night walks at the typhoon shelters and done a number of paintings of the shelters themselves (Plate 39), which are all highly valuable.

Deng was proficient in painting all kinds of figures, flowers and animals, especially ladies, Arhats, Buddhist figures and deities like Zhong Kui, Dongfang Shuo and Lady Magu, birds, lotuses and horses. Nevertheless, as he never set up an art school to formally recruit students, there were only several of his successors, which included his son, Deng Chi-iok (1921-1997), who had thoroughly inherited Deng's artistic talents and skills. As for Chan Ping-kwong (1938-), he started learning painting from Deng since 1960. Excelled in painting birds, lotuses and bamboos, Chan is also adept at calligraphy and he is able to create his own style. The female student Chou Qiyun followed Deng in the late 50s. Her subtle and sublime brushwork undoubtedly comes from Deng. Yu Kuangfu (1918-1980) became Deng's student in 1938. He spent his later years in Hong Kong and figure painting was his best kind of work. Shen Houshao (1914-?), daughter of the painter Shen Zhongqiang, taking advantage of her family background, learnt from Deng mainly before 1956 but her style had not been strongly influenced. Yu Zhongjia (1908-1941) was a prominent bamboo carver who was particularly good at carving fan frames. It was rumored that Deng had imparted the art of carving to Yu as well as written poetry and painted for him.

Around July and August in 1964, Deng fell ill and was admitted to Tung Wah Eastern Hospital along Eastern Hospital Road in Causeway Bay. During the hospitalized period, he murmured the following gloomy lines: "Should the Yellow Mountains be crossed sometime, may past friendships, be those with the alive or with the dead, last until the end of time." It was also said that he

showed a poem to his friends, which reads: “It has been months since I stuck in this bed, gaunt and pale like a wise turtle. Even if I could reincarnate, I could hardly repay all the kindness that people have bestowed on me. The life of an old man need not be lingered on.” As if he already predicted his imminent death.

Tangled hair, murmuring alone, tears fell on the chest after getting drunk—the night is getting long yet dreams remain short, who are you looking for therein?

Distant hearts, precious smiles, farewells at Luofu till now—I’m trying to sleep underneath the bright moon, with all the sounds of jade disks become silent and fade away.

- Two stanzas from *Reflections on Typhoon Shelter*

Rare, they say, as one lives to the age of seventy,  
Wandering around with confusion and self-deception, I feel shame to call myself Congxin (fulfill my heart).

Longevity, they say, as one lives to the age of a hundred,  
Pondering when he shall be awakened from a fleeting dream in spring.

On September 10, 1964, Typhoon Sally struck Hong Kong, bringing damaging winds and heavy rainfall everywhere. Deng Fen, the Nanhai prodigy who spent his legendary life exploring the art world with a free mind and his exceptional talent, passed away at 5 a.m. that day. Silently and serenely, his destined relationship with Hong Kong also came to an end with bidding farewell to the red dust and awakening from all worldly dreams, as the city embraced this grandmaster for the very last time.

(Postscript: The year 2014 marked the 120<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of Deng Fen. It was originally planned that an exhibition showcasing works by Mei Lanfang, Sit Kok-sin and Deng Fen would be organized. Unfortunately, this did not happen due to various reasons. In 2015, “Exhibition of Deng Fen’s Original Works and Documents” was held in Macau and *The Arts of Deng Fen from Nanhai* edited by Mr. Lau Kwai and his “Deng Fen Art Foundation” was published. Apart from paying tribute to the extraordinary master artist with this article, I would also like to thank Mr. Lau Kwai for offering me the opportunity to view the original paintings by Deng Fen as well as providing me with plenty of useful documents and information.)

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